

# THE CRACKED BLACK CROCK-POT

A HEARTWARMING TALE OF COURAGE AND FRIENDSHIP AND COMING OF AGE AND  
OTHER CUTE STUFF LIKE THAT BY CORY POULSON

*Vaguely based on what may or may not be an almost partially true story.  
Any resemblances to fictitious people—living, dead, or undead—are purely coincidental.*

**CAUTION: This story contains scenes of extreme  
graphic stupidity. Reader discretion is advised.**

PG	Painfully Grotesque
	Some Content May Not Be Suitable For Sentient Beings

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## **I: Potpourri**

**or**

## **What The...?!**

It was a dark and stormy night.

“Blasted potpourri,” Bob muttered under his breath as he shoved through the outer doors into Flor-Mart. “And I had to miss a party to get the stupid stuff.”

He started rooting through the shelves, searching for the potpourri, but couldn’t seem to find any. Looking for one of those annoying people who wore that vest saying ‘How may I help you?’ he growled, “If Mom wanted it so bad, she could’ve gotten it herself! Blast blankety-blank...”

Just then he spotted one of those vests on the back of a short, wiry fellow. “Hey, mister, can you give me a hand?” he called.

The assistant turned. He had eyes that were too big and a grin that made him look slightly mad, and his voice had a distinctly foreign accent, though Bob couldn’t really place it. “How may I help you?”

*Great. One of those. He probably couldn’t find the front of the store.* “Uh, yeah, I need to find the potpourri.”

One would’ve thought the little fellow had been hit on the head with a hammer; his eyes widened and his jaw dropped so hard it looked like it must’ve hurt. “You...want...*potpourri*?” he whispered incredulously.

“Uh...yeah, you know, the stuff you boil to make the house smell good? You got any?”

“Potpourri,” the little man whispered again, almost to himself. “You... You’re *him!* But...but you’re so *young!*”

Bob was really starting to think this guy was a nut case. “I’m fifteen,” Bob said. “I think it’s legal to buy potpourri at that age.”

Shaking his head wonderingly, the assistant led him to the potpourri. “Here it is,” he said, still staring at Bob as if he couldn’t believe he really existed.

“Uh...thanks,” Bob said, quickly snatching up a bag of potpourri.

The little man’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “Be *careful!*” he blurted, holding out his hands as though Bob were handling a bomb. “That’s priceless!”

“Right,” Bob said carefully, slowly backing away. “I’ll...uh...go buy this now...uh...bye.” He turned and quickly disappeared.

The little assistant stared after him, scratching his head. Soon a customer approached and asked, “Excuse me, where can I find the...”

“Shut up,” the assistant snapped, still staring after Bob. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he murmured, “Houston, we have a problem,” and vanished into thin air.

Meanwhile, Bob was stuck behind one of those people every other shopper dreads—the old lady with more things than should have been physically possible to fit into a single shopping cart, and who always paid with checks—and wrote about as fast as cold tar running uphill in the winter.

Finally, though, the old lady was finished, and as sixteen store assistants came to help her and her mountain of groceries to her car Bob set the potpourri on the counter. The cashier, chewing each word through a two-inch wad of bubble gum, asked, “That all?” She might have been pretty, if the gum hadn’t made her look like a cow chewing cud.

“Yeah,” Bob said, glancing back one last time at the candy. Then, remembering his model airplane at home, he grabbed a nearby bottle of Krazy-Gloo and tossed it down beside the potpourri. “Well, this too.”

The cashier smiled at him—the gum had turned her teeth purple, and Bob momentarily wanted to gag—and took his money. She seemed to have a little trouble counting his change, and Bob felt himself growing angry. Blast it, if it wasn’t crazy assistants and Grandma buying out the whole store, it was a cashier who couldn’t count! “Oh, keep the change,” he finally said, making a beeline for the doors.

“Gee, thanks, sweetie!” she called after him, probably loud enough for the whole store to hear.

Gritting his teeth, Bob burst out of the doors, at the same time stuffing the Krazy-Gloo into his back pocket. In his impatience, he failed to notice the huge, lavishly gilded Rolls Royce coming at him at alarming speed. Moments before impact someone screamed, and Bob glanced up. His eyes fastened on the bright headlights as they closed in on him.

Then all was just a blinding white flash.

He awoke with the sun glaring in his eyes and a horrible pounding in his head. Wincing and blinking away the glare, he stood, looking around. The car was gone. So was Flor-Mart. As a matter of fact, *everything* appeared to be gone. All there was around him was empty, barren desert.

On a chest-high rock next to him was a lizard. Bob stared at it, and it stared right back, its tongue flicking in and out. “What the devil...?” the lizard muttered.

Bob blinked. Had that lizard just...talked?

“What are you staring at?” the lizard growled. “You frightened away my lunch, thank you very much.”

Bob’s jaw worked up and down, but it took a few moments for the sounds to finally come out. “Uh...where am I?”

“Where do you think, stupid?” the lizard snapped. “Houston, you idiot; where else?”

Bob looked around at the desert surrounding him. “Houston? Uh...man, I must’ve taken a bad blow to the head...”

“Bad blow to the head?” the lizard asked. “Huh, figures. How did you get here, anyway? You some sort of apprentice wizard, gone and fouled up a spell?” He chuckled to himself as he crawled away.

“Hey, wait a second!” Bob shouted. “What the heck’s going on here?”

“I *told* you he was too young!” said a familiar voice behind him.

Bob whirled to see the crazy Flor-Mart assistant. With him was a tall, ancient-looking man dressed in brown robes and carrying a staff. He had a long, white beard, a tall pointed hat, and was severely cross-eyed. “You!” Bob exclaimed, pointing at the smaller man.

The older fellow was stroking his beard. “Yes, he is rather young, but he’ll do.”

“Do for *what?!*” Bob burst out. “Look, grandpa, who are you? Where am I? What the...”

“Calm down, calm down,” said the old man. “I will explain. My name is Gandarph, not Grandpa, and this is my assistant Pilsbury. I am a wizard.”

That was too much. “Yeah, and I’m Alice in Wonderland,” Bob drawled.

“No, Alice, you’re in Houston.”

“Bob! And no, I’m not in Houston, I’m probably lying unconscious in a hospital, and I hope I hurry and wake up so you two crackpots will vanish!”

Pilsbury gasped. “He knows about the cracked pot!”

Bob felt like strangling the man. “Yeah, there are two of them standing right in front of me!”

Pilsbury’s expression was a little awed. “Is he having a vision?” he whispered to Gandarph.

“No, I don’t think so,” Gandarph replied. “Listen, there are a few things I must explain.”

“I’ll say!”

“No, I will; you don’t really know much about it. Anyway, Alice...”

“Bob!”

“Whatever. You have on your person a very valuable item, one that we must use to destroy the Dark Lord who threatens our world with destruction.”

“A valuable item?”

“Yes. The Magic Dust.”

Bob stared at him blankly. “Magic dust.”

Gandarph, nodding, pointed at the package Bob was still holding in his hand.

Bob glanced down at the package, and then looked back up. “Potpourri?”

With a smile Gandarph said, “Exactly. The Dark Lord you have already met, as he tried to destroy you with his noisy black beast.”

Bob hesitated. “Noisy black... You mean the Rolls Royce?”

“Is that what it’s called? Whatever. Anyway, its driver was the Dark Lord. His name,”

Gandarph’s voice dropped dramatically, “is Willy.” As he said the name Pilsbury shuddered.

“There is only one thing that can destroy Willy—the Magic Dust.”

Bob was trying not to laugh. “Okay. Right. So here’s your dust.” He extended the potpourri toward Gandarph. “Now take me home!”

“Oh, no, no, I am unworthy to bear Willy’s Bane!” Gandarph exclaimed. “You alone can

bear the burden. You see, I would take that potpourri with the intent to do good—but through me, it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine!”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Great. Just great.”

“Now, before we can go to the Bronx to find Willy, we must...”

“The Bronx?!”

“Yes. As I was saying, we must first find the Cracked Black Crock-Pot, for that is the instrument we must use to prepare Willy’s Bane. Well! There’s no sense in standing around here all day; let’s be off!”

“Off to where?” Bob asked as the old man started walking.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a black bird. “We will follow this crow!” With a heave he threw the bird into the air.

Almost immediately lightning lanced out of the clear blue sky, and the bird was struck dead, falling to the ground right at Bob’s feet. An evil-looking man carrying a skull-topped scepter appeared, bending down and picking up the dead crow. “I’ve always wanted one of these,” he said, and then walked away.

Gandarph sniffed. “Oh, bother the bird, follow the road!”

Ten miles down the dusty road Bob was feeling very tired, Pilsbury was continuously complaining of blisters forming on his feet, and not only that, it was beginning to grow dark.

“Why don’t we stop for a while?” Pilsbury suggested hopefully.

“No, we must press on!” Gandarph replied. “Time is of the essence!”

“Well, can we at least call a taxi?” Bob said sarcastically.

Gandarph stopped short, his eyes widening. “Of course! Why didn’t *I* think of that? Taxi!

Taxi!”

*This guy is nuttier than a fruitcake*, thought Bob. But then a yellow taxi cab sped up to them, coming to a screeching halt near them. “Yeah, where to, bud?” asked the driver, spitting a well-chewed cigar butt onto the ground.

Gandarph climbed in, and Bob hesitantly followed suit, with Pilsbury bringing up the rear. “How far can you go?” Gandarph asked.

“I only go as far as Vegas, bud.”

Gandarph shrugged. “Very well, Las Vegas will do.”

“Vegas!” Bob exclaimed. “What am I *doing*? I need to get home!” But his words were drowned out by the roar of the engine.

## **II: The Great Detour of Destiny**

**or**

### **Hell's Angels**

“There’s someone approaching from behind,” Pilsbury said as dawn began to creep over the horizon. The taxi had been speeding down the narrow dirt road all night, and now was having to dodge occasional wagons and pedestrians.

Gandarph looked out the rear window, and his face went pale. “Oh, no,” he breathed. “The Nine.”

“What?” Bob asked groggily, not quite awake.

“We seem to have a problem,” Gandarph replied, pointing.

Bob looked out the window. Behind them, nine burly, bearded, and heavily tattooed men in black leather jackets were pursuing them, riding big, noisy black motorcycles. “Who are they?”

Gandarph looked grim. “Some of the most feared minions of Willy—the Black Riders, also known as Hell’s Angels.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Bob muttered, rubbing his face.

The taxi driver looked very nervous. “Look, pal,” he said, “I didn’t bargain for no Hell’s Angels. I’m just gonna let you out here, okay?”

“I’m afraid,” said Gandarph, “that if you stop they will catch up to us, and they will not spare you. Your best hope, sir, is to outrun them.”

“I can’t outrun Harleys, man!”

“You’d better try.”

The driver gunned it, and clouds of dust were kicked into the faces of the oncoming Hell’s

Angels as the tires squealed.

He was right, though. He couldn't outrun Harleys. The Black Riders drew up alongside the taxi, banging into it and grinning fiercely, brandishing what looked suspiciously like Uzis.

"Faster!" Gandarph cried.

"You're a wizard, right?" Bob shouted. "Well, wizard them!"

Gandarph blinked. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Let me see..."

Just then a burst of submachine gun fire ripped into Bob's door, making it pop open. Almost at the same moment they entered a narrow canyon, and the door caught on a jutting rock. It was ripped off and sent careening back right into the luckless face of one of the Black Riders.

They soon left the canyon, and ahead Bob could see a fork in the road. Running alongside the right fork was a deep trench. The driver aimed for the left fork, and right about then Gandarph let loose with a powerful spell. Brightly colored sparks filled the cab, and erratic explosions ripped through the road behind them—and in front of them.

The driver wrenched the wheel sharply to avoid one of the explosions, and all three of his passengers were thrown right out the missing door to tumble into the trench. As they did one of the Black Riders hit a pothole created by the explosion, and he was thrown high into the air to land on the hood of the cab. Cab and Hell's Angels careened down the left fork, leaving the three very dusty travelers alone in the trench.

Gandarph climbed to his feet and peered down the road. "Well. That spell got a little out of control, I'm afraid."

"A *little?!?*" Bob exclaimed.

"Well, we're safe; the Black Riders are still after the cab. But we'd better leave; they'll surely return when they find we're not in the taxi any longer." He climbed from the trench and

headed down the right fork of the road.

“Hey, isn’t Vegas that way?” asked Pilsbury, pointing to the left fork.

“Yes,” replied Gandarph, “but so are the Nine.”

“Oh. Right. Well, where does this road go?”

“It goes to Vegas, but in a more roundabout route. It goes through Tombstone.”

Pilsbury’s face went white as a sheet. “Y... You’re joking! That place means death!”

Gandarph shrugged. “They’re peculiar people, but we won’t have any trouble. Come along.”

They traveled toward Tombstone, staying away from the road. They saw no more signs of the Black Riders.

“Well, we’re almost there,” said Gandarph, gesturing at a sign. It was a rickety sign, barely standing, and the words ‘Tombstone, five miles ahead—doin’ great!’ were barely legible.

Bob peered ahead, but couldn’t see the town. They trudged on, until finally they caught sight of Tombstone. It appeared to be no more than a collection of wooden shacks and drifting tumbleweeds, the main attraction of the town being a large saloon in the center. The sheriff’s office was on the edge of town, but it looked abandoned. Despite the arid climate and apparent lack of water, the street was thick with gooey mud. Cowboys were swaggering through the slop, fingering their pistols and eyeing the newcomers with open suspicion.

Gandarph headed straight for the saloon. “I need a bit of refreshment,” he said.

“No, Gandarph, let’s just get going!” pleaded Pilsbury.

“No, no, all is well; we’ll be fine.” He pushed through the swinging doors into the saloon, and Pilsbury and Bob reluctantly followed. Pilsbury, though, was knocked to the ground as a man was thrown through the doors.

“An’ stay out!” roared the bartender, a huge fellow who looked like an Olympic weightlifter.

Gandarph was already seated at the bar when Bob and Pilsbury joined him. “What’ll it be?” the bartender was asking the old wizard.

Gandarph tapped his chin as he thought, and then said, “Strawberry lemonade, please.”

The bartender’s eyebrows arched a bit, but he said, “Comin’ right up,” and plunked a tall glass down in front of the wizard.

Gandarph peered at the brownish liquid. “Strangest looking lemonade I’ve ever seen,” he murmured, and took a little sip. Making a face, he said, “Goodness, that burns going down! Are you sure the strawberries were fresh?”

The bartender put both meaty hands on the counter and stared balefully at Gandarph. “You complainin’ about my establishment?”

Gandarph quickly shook his head. “No, no, of course not! It *does* have a rather fascinating flavor...” He took a long swig. Immediately he started coughing, spewing the drink all over an ugly cowboy sitting beside him.

The ugly cowboy stood, his face hard as stone. “You callin’ me out, greenhorn?” he growled.

Gandarph shook his head. “Oh, no, just having a drink.”

The cowboy sneered. “I say yer a coward.”

Gandarph blinked uncertainly. “Oh? Well, we’re all entitled to our opinions, I suppose...”

“I say yer nothin’ but a yellow-bellied, lilly-livered, thumb-suckin,’ saddle-wettin’ tenderfoot!”

“Well, goodness, I don’t see why...”

“Shaddup!” the cowboy snapped. He widened his stance, holding his hands over the guns strapped to his sides. “Draw, greenhorn.”

Gandarph began patting his robes. “Dear me, I think I’ve lost my pencil…”

The cowboy’s hands dropped to his guns and began to draw them, but at that moment a burst of gunfire from the doorway knocked one of the ugly cowboy’s guns from his hands.

“Drop the other one, Bad Bart,” said a disturbingly familiar voice from the doorway. As Bad Bart obeyed, Bob stared at the newcomer incredulously, not quite sure he believed what he was seeing.

The newcomer walked up to the bar, replacing his guns. “Well, hello there, pilgrim,” he said to Gandarph, offering the wizard his hand. “Name’s Duke. *The Duke.*”

“Glad to meet you, Duke the Duke,” replied Gandarph, shaking Duke’s hand. “Kind of you to intervene. I’m afraid there was a misunderstanding…”

Just then Bad Bart dropped to his knees, grabbing for his guns, but Duke pulled out his six-gun and calmly said, “I wouldn’t do that, Bart. Now get out of here before I decide to decorate your skull with lead!”

Bad Bart scowled darkly and scuttled out of the saloon.

Turning back to Gandarph, Duke said, “So, where you folks headed?”

“To Vegas,” Gandarph replied. “We’re trying to save the world.”

“Really! Well, now, that’s interesting. Mind if I join you?”

“No, no, not at all, you’re welcome,” said Gandarph.

“Great! Well, let’s get a move on!”

### **III: Vegas**

**or**

### **Poor Yorick**

Vegas was a squat, muddy town, full of straw huts and broken-down wooden shacks, not unlike Tombstone. “Just what are you here for, pilgrim?” asked Duke as they entered a bar at the edge of town.

Gandarph, absently shaking mud from his foot, replied, “We’re here to rescue a fellow named Yorick.”

“Yorick!” Pilsbury exclaimed. “What on earth do we need *him* for?”

“Well, he *is* a good fighter,” said Gandarph. “And besides, he’s the only man alive who knows where the Cracked Black Crock-Pot is.”

“I’ve heard of this Yorick feller,” said Duke. “I heard say he killed Wild Bill Clinton, Dr. Holiday, M.D., Robert Redford, and three innocent bystanders all at once! With a crossbow!”

Gandarph nodded. “Well, yes, that’s right. Anyway, those three innocent bystanders you mentioned are the reason he’s here in Vegas.”

Duke nodded. “He’s in Jail. He didn’t even get to collect the \$200 reward.”

“He’s being held in Bubba’s Palace,” said Gandarph. “Owned and operated by the notorious pair, Bubba Fett and Bubba the Hutt. It won’t be easy.”

“The Brothers Bubba,” moaned Pilsbury. “This is suicide! I mean...I could lose my membership in Bubba’s Chili Emporium! Not to mention my life!”

“We must all make sacrifices,” Gandarph said consolingly. “We need Yorick, though.”

Duke nodded again. "I think you're right, pilgrim. What's your plan?"

"My plan... Uh, yes, the plan... Um..."

Pilsbury had a resigned look on his face. "Don't tell me you forgot your plan."

"Of course not," Gandarph said loftily. "I just haven't made one yet, that's all."

"Great," sighed Pilsbury.

Gandarph stared at Pilsbury with poorly concealed irritation. "I just came up with one. You will blow up the Chili Emporium, and during the ensuing chaos we will free Yorick."

Pilsbury's face filled with stark horror. "Blow up the Emporium! You're mad!"

Gandarph poked Pilsbury's stomach, and Pilsbury gave an involuntary giggle. "Do it now, Pilsbury."

"I *told* you never to do that again!" Pilsbury protested.

Gandarph held up his finger threateningly.

"All right, all right!" Pilsbury exclaimed. "I'm going!"

Duke watched as Pilsbury left. "Are you sure he'll be able to do it?"

"Trust me," said Gandarph. "There's no better man with explosives than Pilsbury. He is the inventor of the Screaming Iron Biscuit Bomb, which has killed or maimed hundreds of innocent cooks all over the world!"

"Um... shouldn't we make the rest of the plan before he blows up this Emporium place?" asked Bob tentatively.

Gandarph shrugged. "We have plenty of time. He's going to have to go all over town buying dynamite from various shady dealers before he's ready."

"Well, then," said Duke, "I'm gonna wet my whistle. Anyone for a good stiff shot of carrot juice on the rocks?"

As they were ordering their drinks—Bob asked for a Fruitopia, and wasn't sure whether or not to be surprised when the waiter plunked one down in front of him—a short, skinny boy entered the bar. He was dressed in rough, poorly-cut robes, was caked with mud, and looked like he'd been traveling for a while. The boy went to the bartender and said, "A drink of your finest."

The bartender looked suspicious. "Show me your money."

The boy jiggled a little purse at his belt. "Copper, my friend." The bartender nodded and handed him a glass, and the boy turned and said, "And the same to any who'll join me in a toast!"

A nearby patron, wearing a black hood, said, "Let's hear your toast, little man."

"We drink to a special man, my friends," the boy said. "A man who has seen the inside of the dungeons of Aqua at Bubba's Palace and lived to tell the tale."

"Then you drink to me, my little friend. I have seen those dungeons."

The boy took a step forward. "A carpenter? A blacksmith? A stonecutter, perhaps? But a prisoner?"

"I never said I was a prisoner." The man lowered his hood, revealing a swarthy face. "If you had stuck to the woods, Rat, you may have stood a chance."

The boy swallowed hard, nodding as he slowly backed away. "You're right."

Drawing his sword, the cloaked man headed for the boy. Just then the sound of a pistol cocking, loud in the little bar, was heard. "I wouldn't do that, mister," said Duke.

The cloaked man now looked worried. "This boy is an escaped prisoner!" he exclaimed. "If the Bubbas heard you prevented his arrest, you would never be able to buy chili here again!"

"I'm not too concerned about that right now," Duke drawled. "Now, just what did the boy do that deserved prison?"

“He said the chili needed more salt!”

Gandarph scratched his head. “You know, I’ve always thought that myself.”

The cloaked man looked positively scandalized. “Why, you (censored) little (censored)! How *dare* you!”

Duke waved his pistol. “You can just get the (censored) out of here before I blow the (censored) out of you.”

The cloaked man, furious, retorted, “Why you (censored)! Why should I be afraid of you and your (censored) little stick?”

“Because I said so, (censored),” replied Duke. He holstered his gun. “Now get the (censored) back in your (censored) seat and leave the boy alone.”

The cloaked man’s face was turning purple. “You (censored) (censored) (censored)! Why should I (censored) (censored) do anything you (censored) (censored) (censored) say? Do you (censored) (censored) know who I (censored) am? (Censored) (censored) (censored) (censored) (censored) (censored) (censored) (censored)!”

Gandarph’s eyes were wide by that time. “Whoa.”

Suddenly the cloaked man lunged at Duke, his blade held high, but a shocking detonation reverberated through the room, and the sword clattered from the cloaked man’s hand. Eyes wild, the man fled from the bar. Duke turned back to his table and took up his carrot juice.

The boy came to their table. Closer up, he looked to be a few years older than Bob.

“Um...thanks, mister.”

“No problem, son,” said Duke.

Gandarph looked at the boy speculatively. “My lad, you were a prisoner in Aqua?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy replied.

“Perhaps you could help us. There is a man there—Yorick—we are trying to free.”

“Yorick?” The boy’s face brightened. “Why, he was my cellmate—helped me escape! I’m your man!” He stuck out his hand. “Name’s Philip. Philip the Rat. What do you need me to do?”

Gandarph looked at him seriously. “Go back into the dungeons of Aqua, Philip Philip the Rat.”

“Okay, forget it!” Rat turned to leave, but Duke grabbed him and hauled him back. “No, no, wait a minute!” cried Rat. “You don’t know what it’s like in there! And it’s constantly patrolled by the AquaMarines! It was only by a miracle I escaped! Once in a lifetime! I wouldn’t go back there to save my own mother—even if I knew who she was!”

“You owe Yorick—and us—your life,” Gandarph reminded him.

Rat rolled his eyes. “Oh, all right. But if I get caught again, it’s your fault!”

“I’ll accept full responsibility.”

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Rat muttered quietly to himself as he slowly crawled through the smelly sewer system underneath the dungeons. “I’m a young man, you know!” he said. “I’ve got prospects! My cellmate was insane, and a murderer, but he respected me!”

Finally he made it back into his old cell, and began to carry out his part of The Plan.

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Meanwhile, as Gandarph and his companions waited in a small hollow near the dungeons, Bob drifted off into much-needed sleep. He was tired of this whole thing, and just thinking about it made him even more tired.

It seemed like only moments later when a deafening explosion shook the ground, and in the center of the city a great fireball rose into the air. “Ha!” said Duke. “The chili factory!”

“Let’s go!” cried Gandarph.

“No, wait!” Bob exclaimed, grabbing him. “We have to wait until *after* the guards have left the dungeons!”

Gandarph blinked. “Oh. Oh, yes.”

Pretty soon the palace guards, the dreaded AquaMarines, were streaming out of the palace doors. They were odd-looking men, completely blue and somewhat translucent, looking eerily like man-shaped liquid. When they were gone, Gandarph headed for the gates. Bob and Duke followed, and the three of them vanished into the black tunnels of Aqua.

After about an hour, they were still wandering about in total darkness. “Where are we?” Bob hissed urgently.

Gandarph looked bewildered. “Well...I’m not entirely sure...”

“Great! How are we supposed to find Yorick?”

“Uh...”

“Freeze!” bellowed the hard voice of an AquaMarine from behind them.

Pulling at his collar, Gandarph said, “Little warm in here for that, I’m afraid...Oh. Oh, dear, you weren’t supposed to see us!”

The AquaMarine blinked uncertainly. “I wasn’t?”

“Oh, no, of course not—that would ruin The Plan!”

“The Plan! Well—gee, mister, I’m sorry! I’ll just set here and pretend I didn’t see you, okay?”

Gandarph patted the AquaMarine’s arm. “Good lad. You do that, and we’ll continue with The Plan. No one has to know about this little slip-up.”

“Right.”

“By the way, do you know where we could find a prisoner named Yorick?” asked Gandarph.

“Oh! Yorick was executed yesterday.”

Gandarph looked extremely crestfallen. “Executed? Alas, poor Yorick!”

“You’d better escape while you still can,” said the obliging AquaMarine.

“Right. Of course.”

As the three intruders continued down the hallway, Bob whispered, “I thought we were dead for sure!”

Gandarph winked. “The Farce can have a strong influence on the weak-minded.”

“The...Farce?”

“Yes, Alice, the Farce. Now then—on to the depot!”

“Depot?” echoed Bob as he followed Gandarph. “And my name’s not Alice!”

“Whatever.”

## **IV: The End**

**or**

## **The...End?**

Their flight was short-lived, for not fifty paces down the hallway they drew up short as a dry, mechanical voice echoed through the corridors. “We are WillyCorp!” the voice bellowed. “Do not fear us! You will become one with WillyCorp! Your technology will become ours! Resistance is futile!”

Gandarph, Bob, and Duke suddenly found themselves surrounded by AquaMarines as lights flashed on all through the corridors. A tall, leering man was with them, squinting at them through inch-thick lenses. Gandarph gasped. “Willy!” he exclaimed.

“The one and only,” Willy replied with a sneer. “Your little misadventure is at an end, fool!”

Gandarph shook his head adamantly. “No, no, we weren’t supposed to meet you yet!”

“Sorry, old boy,” said Willy. “I got tired of waiting.”

“But we don’t even have the Cracked Black Crock-Pot! We can’t win now!”

“Exactly. The story would take too long if I let you go gallivanting through the country after that stupid pot.” Willy grinned. “Stories are always so much shorter when the bad guy wins.”

“But it isn’t supposed to happen that way!”

“Well, look at it this way,” said Willy. “If the good guy wins, the story is considered ordinary mainstream material. But since I will win, this story will be a ‘literary’ work—unhappy ending, vague, confusing, depressing...you get the picture. And if the author would lace it with foul expletives and sexual innuendos—and perhaps an adulterous situation or two—this may even

become a prizewinning story someday!” He pulled a small handgun from his hip pocket and pointed it at Bob. “Prepare to be assimilated, Roger!”

“What?!” Bob cried. “That’s not my name!”

“It’s Alice,” Gandarph said helpfully.

Willy shrugged. “Whatever.” He pulled the trigger.

And then Bob woke up.

At first he didn’t open his eyes; he just let the feeling sink in. None of it had been real! What a bunch of nonsense! What a...

A sickeningly familiar voice interrupted his thoughts. “Wake up, Alice! Pillsbury’s back!”

**V: Okay, maybe not**

**or**

**Blankety-blank-blank...**

Groaning, Bob rolled over and sat up just as Pilsbury scrambled over a mound of dirt into their camp. A deafening explosion shook the ground, and in the center of the city a great fireball rose into the air. “Ha!” said Duke. “The chili factory!”

“Let’s go!” cried Gandarph.

“No, wait!” Bob exclaimed, grabbing him. “We have to wait until *after* the guards have left the Palace!” He suddenly got the strangest sense of *dèjà vu*.

Gandarph blinked. “Oh. Oh, yes.”

Pretty soon the palace guards, the dreaded AquaMarines, were streaming out of the palace doors. They were odd-looking men, completely blue and somewhat translucent, looking eerily like man-shaped liquid. When they were gone, Gandarph headed for the gates...

...the *dèjà vu* was growing more and more alarming...

...but then the wizard stopped short. “Blast!” he exclaimed. “They left sixty men to guard the gates!”

Bob sighed in relief. “Okay, good.”

Gandarph stared at him. “Good?”

“Uh...I mean, now what do we do?”

“We need a diversion...a diversion...” Gandarph sat down, thinking.

Only a moment later Bob heard someone shouting, and he peered around the rock at the

gates. Two men were pushing a third man, standing in a wheelbarrow, who was wearing a long black cloak. “There will be no survivors!” the man in the wheelbarrow was shouting. Then he burst into flame, and the sixty AquaMarines scattered with cries of alarm.

Gandarph, who was also watching, smiled. “What a convenient diversion! Come along!”

They arrived as the three men confronted the last guard, the only one who had not fled—not an AquaMarine, but the same man Duke had chased out of the bar. “Give us the gate key,” the first man, who was dressed all in black, said.

“I have no gate key,” the guard replied.

The second man nodded his head toward the third, a huge brute of a man. “Tear his arms off.”

The guard hastily pulled a key from his shirt. “Oh, you mean this gate key.”

-----

“Quickly!” hissed Rat, shaking Yorick. The lanky man came awake with a start, his fist smashing into Rat’s jaw.

As Rat sprawled backward, Yorick realized who he was. “Rat! What are you doing here? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” muttered Rat. “This is what I get for coming back to get you. Look, we’re gonna spring you, got it? Hurry up!” Just then he felt the ground tremble from the explosion. “It’s time!”

Yorick stood, but then paused. “Guards!” he hissed, just as the door swung open.

Two AquaMarines were there, escorting a short, fat priest—Friar Muck, one of the few humans who had access to the prisons, who always blessed the prisoners before they were executed.

“Die!” cried Yorick.

“Who, me?” cried Rat.

“Calm yourselves, my sons!” exclaimed the priest, and the guards went to grab the two men.

Yorick and Rat swung their fists at the guards, dropping them both in their tracks. As they did Friar Muck made a few strange gestures and said, “Bless you, my sons.”

“Show us the way out!” commanded Yorick, brandishing one of the dropped AquaBlades.

The friar’s eyes widened a bit. “Uh...uh...”

Yorick pointed the AquaBlade right at the Friar’s nose. “I sense you have a concern. Will you share your feelings with me?”

Friar Muck swallowed hard. “I’m not supposed to help prisoners escape.”

“Thank you explaining that, Friar. Now, me getting out will keep me from being executed. Do you think being executed is fun?”

“Uh...no.”

“You’re right, it isn’t. Now, do you think getting this AquaBlade rammed up your nose would be fun?”

“Uh...no.”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t. Now, the only way to avoid both of those unpleasant situations is for you to show me the way out. Friar Muck, will you show me the way out of the dungeons of Aqua?”

“Uh...sure, son, sure.”

-----

“Where are we?” Bob hissed urgently.

Gandarph looked bewildered. “Well...I’m not entirely sure...”

“Great! How are we supposed to find Yorick?”

“Uh...”

“Freeze!” bellowed the hard voice of an AquaMarine.

Pulling at his collar, Gandarph said, “Little warm in here for that, I’m afraid... Oh. Oh, dear, you weren’t supposed to see us!”

The AquaMarine blinked uncertainly. “I wasn’t?”

“Oh, no, of course not—that would ruin The Plan!”

“The Plan! Well—gee, mister, I’m sorry! I’ll just...”

...The *dèjà vu* was back! Bob started to sweat...

“...have to ruin your plan!” The Aqua Marine raised his AquaBlade. “You’re under arrest!”

Bob sighed in relief. “Thank heaven!”

“What?” Gandarph demanded, looking at him incredulously.

“Uh...I mean...Oh, no!”

Gandarph nodded. “That’s better.” Turning back, he waved his hand in front of the AquaMarine’s face. “You don’t need to see his identification.”

The AquaMarine looked perplexed. “I didn’t ask for it.”

“These aren’t the droids you’re looking for.”

“Droids?”

“Move along.”

“Move along?”

“Thank you.” Gandarph patted the AquaMarine’s arm. “Good lad.”

The guard scowled. “Now wait a second! You think you’re some kind of Jedi, waving your hand around like that? Mind tricks don’t work on me—only money!”

“Oh!” Gandarph said. He pulled a bag of coins from his pocket. “In that case, here. You never saw us, right?”

“Right!” the AquaMarine agreed, taking the bag.

As the three intruders continued down the hallway, Bob whispered, “I thought we were dead for...!” He caught himself, and then said, “Uh...I thought we were goners!”

Gandarph winked. “The...”

Bob immediately raised his hand to silence Gandarph. “if you say the word ‘farce’ even once, I’ll rip your lungs out!”

“Uh...okay. Well then—on to the...”

“Or ‘depot!’” snapped Bob.

Gandarph looked curious. “You’re behaving very strangely of late.”

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“Hey, Muck, can you hurry it up?” Yorick waved the AquaBlade at the fat little friar.

Muck was huffing and puffing like a bellows. “I’m trying. I’m not as young and spry as I used to be, you know!”

“Well, all right, you can walk now, I guess.”

“Bless you, my so...gaa!” Suddenly Muck ran head-on into Gandarph as they both rounded a corner at the same time.

“Hey!” Gandarph cried at the fat friar, raising his fists. “Have at you, fiend! I...Oh. Hello, Yorick.”

“Gandarph!” Yorick exclaimed. “I should have known you were behind this!”

“We’ll exchange pleasantries later,” Gandarph said. “For now, let’s get out of here. Vegas isn’t a very safe place for us right now.”

## VI: Thieves and Spies

or

### This Story's Getting Way Out Of Control

Some time later, the six adventurers were leaving Vegas far behind. They had left Friar Muck tied up in the hallway, and had made a harrowing escape that was (as the whole trip had been thus far), a long series of mishaps, close calls, and blatant stupidity that we, for the moment, have neither time for nor interest in.

“Well?” Gandarph asked Yorick excitedly once Vegas was out of sight.

Yorick looked at him blankly. “Well, what?”

“Well, where is it?”

“What?”

“The Cracked Black Crock-Pot! You’re the only man alive who knows where it is! That’s the reason we rescued you!”

“Oh.” Yorick coughed uncomfortably. “Uh...”

Bob rolled his eyes, not really surprised. “You don’t know where it is, do you?”

“Uh...not *exactly* where.” Noticing Gandarph’s crushed look, he said, “But I do know someone who *does*. But I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

“Well, who is he?” Gandarph said impatiently.

“His name is at’La. Uhternee at’La.”

Pilsbury gasped incredulously. “Uhternee at’La! You must be insane!”

“An attorney?” Bob asked blankly.

“Yes,” Gandarph said darkly. “I’m sure you’ve heard of him. He’s a master thief. Wherever

he goes, money magically flies out of other people's pockets and into his."

"We'll be lucky to get out of his lair with our clothes still on!" Pilsbury wailed.

Yorick shrugged. "I didn't think you'd like it. But he's the only one who knows where the Pot is, I swear."

Gandarph nodded resolutely. "Then we must go to him. Lead on, Yorick!"

The lair of the dreaded Uhterne at'La was not far down the road. The entrance, forbidding in every way, was a dark tunnel leading into the side of a small mountain. "It looks like the lair of an Uhterne," Gandarph muttered distastefully. "They love dark, damp places like this."

"There are more than one?" asked Bob.

"Oh, yes, the Uhternees are an infestation that no one has yet found a way to be rid of," replied Gandarph. "Uhterne at'La is the most feared and most devious of them all, though. Few who enter his lair leave with their sanity and pocketbooks intact."

Bob gulped as he followed Gandarph and Yorick into the dark cave.

At the rear of the cave was a large, polished oak door, and beside it was a plaque that read 'UHTERNEE AT'LA: Injury? Divorce? Pet peeve? This is the place for you! Our fast, friendly service will make your former problems seem trivial by comparison!'

Gandarph took a deep breath. "This is it. Be sure you listen to the fine print." He turned the doorknob and pushed, stepping into the room beyond.

The room they found themselves in was opulently decorated; everything in sight was gilded with gold or silver, even the suit of the portly, beady-eyed man sitting behind the massive desk in the center of the room. "Welcome, friends!" he boomed, and the door shut with a bang behind the profusely sweating Pilsbury. "What can I do you for? Need some legal advice? Going

through a divorce? Don't like the way your neighbor washes his car? I can help you<sup>1</sup>!”

Gandarph, determined to get to the point, stepped forward. “We need to find the Cracked Black Crock-Pot,” he declared.

“Well!” boomed Uhternee at'La. “Now that's a special case, that is<sup>2</sup>! And I'm the perfect<sup>3</sup> man to help you!”

“You know where it is?” asked Gandarph excitedly.

“Yes! And I'll tell you—but first things first! That'll be \$11,326.75<sup>4</sup>.”

Gandarph blinked. “But... The fate of the entire *world* depends on us finding that pot!”

“Oh!” at'La's eyes gleamed. “In that case, I'm afraid I'll have to make that price \$22,326.75<sup>5</sup>.”

“But we don't have that kind of money!” Bob exclaimed.

“I also accept blood money<sup>6</sup>,” at'La responded smoothly. “Got any of that?”

“We don't have *any* money!”

“Wonderful!” beamed at'La. “In that case, I will be perfectly willing to handle your bankruptcy case for a special one-time fee of \$8,177.94<sup>7</sup>.”

“That's it!” Gandarph exploded. “We'll find the Cracked Black Crock-Pot ourselves!” He whirled and stormed to the door, but when he pulled on the handle it wouldn't budge. “Let me

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<sup>1</sup> For a minor fee amounting to no less than ten times your current net worth, plus expenses, which include, but are not limited to, all meals I might incur within the next five years, a new suit, some cough drops, a few packages of breath mints, and a red Corvette for my Great Aunt Susie.

<sup>2</sup> And will undoubtedly incur additional expenses!

<sup>3</sup> This term is subjective. We cannot be held responsible for any dissatisfaction resulting from any difference of opinion regarding the precise meaning of this term.

<sup>4</sup> Plus expenses.

<sup>5</sup> Plus expenses.

<sup>6</sup> As long as no one finds out. If, by any chance, someone does, then I had nothing to do with it, and everything is entirely your fault.

<sup>7</sup> Thereafter the fee will be increased to \$9,177.94, plus expenses, to be charged whenever I feel like it.

out!” he bellowed.

Uhternee at’La smiled thinly. “I’m afraid I can’t let you out until I’ve collected my fee.”

Gandarph looked at him incredulously. “Fee?”

“Certainly. My time, unlike yours, is worth money. I charge \$1,564.23<sup>8</sup> for a consultation fee.”

Duke drew his pistol and pointed it straight at Uhternee’s head. “The bullet I’m about to plant between your eyes is worth exactly \$1,564.23<sup>9</sup>. Are you sure you want your consultation fee?”

At’La smiled magnanimously. “I normally charge double when my personal safety is compromised in any way<sup>10</sup>, but I suppose I can find it in my heart to let you have this consultation for free<sup>11</sup>.”

The door opened.

Once back outside, Pilsbury whirled to Yorick. “Well, *that* was a fine adventure! Now what? How are we supposed to find the Cracked Black Crock-Pot *now*?”

Yorick looked uneasy. “Well, there *is* one other person who knows where the Pot is. But I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

“Wonderful,” sighed Bob. “Who is it this time? Some mass murderer?”

“His name is Strangler,” replied Yorick. “He’s a highwayman.”

“I knew it,” Bob muttered.

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<sup>8</sup> Plus expenses.

<sup>9</sup> Plus expenses.

<sup>10</sup> Including, but not limited to, the dangers inherent to getting out of bed, staying in bed, leaving home, not leaving home, eating too much, not eating enough, breathing polluted air, not breathing at all, and the ever-present possibility of invasion by little green men from Mars.

<sup>11</sup> Excepting any of your personal belongings that may have mysteriously found their way into my pockets during your visit. We cannot be responsible for any lost or stolen items.

“We’ll find him in the Kremlin.”

Gandarph glanced at the road. “The Kremlin? That’s not far from here.”

“Yes,” agreed Yorick. “It’s in Tokyo, just a few miles up the road.”

“The Kremlin?” Bob demanded. “In Tokyo? The Kremlin is in Moscow!”

“Oh, posh,” Gandarph said. “You need to brush up on your geography. Come along now, off we go!”

Shaking his head, Bob followed the ragtag group down the road.

They arrived at Tokyo about two hours later. It, like Vegas, was not much more than a large collection of ramshackle wooden huts. Nothing even remotely resembling Russian architecture could be seen—or Japanese, for that matter. “See?” Bob said triumphantly. “No Kremlin.”

“Nonsense!” Gandarph exclaimed. “I know it’s here!”

“I think we’d be able to see it if it...”

“Aha!” cried Yorick. “There it is!” He pointed down the street to a rickety old tavern. A sign above the door, hanging limply by one rope, read *The Kremlin*.

Gandarph beamed. “Wonderful! I was a bit thirsty, anyway.”

“Not another bar,” Bob groaned.

They all trooped into the Kremlin, which was vacant save for one stick-thin, fidgety little fellow with a bulging Adam’s apple and nervous tics in both eyes. He was sitting in the corner, sipping a large drink of a putrid yellow-green color that was giving off faint sparks.

“That’s him,” Yorick muttered to Gandarph.

Gandarph, though, was already headed to the bar. “Bartender!” he called. “I’ll have a large chocolate milk!”

The bartender looked at him with one eyebrow raised, and then plunked a large glass of the same liquid Strangler was drinking in front of him. Gandarph peered at it closely and started to say something, but then he thought better of it and just took a small sip of the drink. Immediately he coughed, and a shower of sparks flew from his mouth and scattered over the bar.

“Um...thank you,” Gandarph said, and then turned and headed for Strangler, sitting across the table from him.

“Whatcha want?” Strangler asked before any of them could say anything.

“Well, my good fellow,” said Gandarph, his eyes a little blurry, “we’re looking for the Cracked Black Crock-Pot, and I believe you know where it is.”

“Yeah, what of it?” the little man asked sourly.

“Would you mind telling us?” Steam was beginning to leak from Gandarph’s ears.

Strangler scowled. “Yeah, maybe I would mind!”

Duke scowled right back, resting his hand on the butt of his gun. “What was that?” he asked. “I didn’t quite hear you, pardner.”

“It’s in Denver,” Strangler said immediately.

“Denver!” cried Gandarph. “Wonderful! Where in Denver, my good fellow?” He started to raise the mug to his lips again, but then he glanced down at it, hesitated, and lowered it back to the table.

“Just take the main road right into town,” said Strangler. “It’s hidden under the floorboards of the Lamé Pony Tavern.”

Gandarph smiled. “Excellent! Thank you, my good man!” Again he raised the mug, but again he decided against it and set it back down. “Well, we must be off now.” Standing, he turned to leave.

“Wait,” said Strangler. “I have one more thing to say.”

Gandarph turned back. “Yes?”

Quite suddenly Strangler leaped up onto the table, his eyes bulging maniacally. “I’m not really Strangler!” he cried. “I am BillyBobiskov Barnakoskovich, the notorious Russian spy! I have just tricked all of you! The Pot isn’t in Denver at all, but on the way there you and all of your friends will be ambushed by a band of fiendish assassins hired by Willy himself! Hahahahahaha!!! You are no match for the awesome intellect of BillyBobiskov Barnakoskovich, the notorious Russian spy!” With that he leaped down from the table and sped out the door.

“Oh, dear,” said Gandarph, looking crestfallen. “This isn’t good. It isn’t good at all.” Then he shrugged. “Well, I suppose there’s no help for it. Come, off to Denver!” He started to leave, and the others trailed after him.

Bob watched them for a moment, and then ran to Gandarph, grabbing his sleeve. “Wait!” he exclaimed. “Do you mean we’re still going to go to Denver?”

“Of course,” Gandarph replied.

“But *why*?”

“Because,” Gandarph explained patiently, “we were tricked by BillyBobiskov Barnakoskovich, the notorious Russian spy.”

“What?!”

“We couldn’t possibly know about the band of fiendish assassins lying in wait to kill us,” said Gandarph. “Why *wouldn’t* we go?”

Bob almost hit him. “But we *do* know about the assassins!” he cried. “BillyBobiskov just *told* us about them! We don’t *have* to walk into the trap; we can avoid it!”

Gandarph thought hard, his brow furrowed. “But...we were tricked!” he said.

“We *know* about the trick!” Bob howled.

Gandarph continued to concentrate, and gradually the light of understanding dawned in his eyes. “Ah!” he cried. “Alice, my boy, you are a genius! A pure genius! But of course! Why didn’t *I* think of that?”

Bob sighed in resignation. “I was wondering that myself.”

“Well, this is all very bad, still,” said Gandarph. “We can avoid the ambush, but we still don’t know where the Pot is!”

Yorick looked uneasy. “Well, there *is* one other other person who knows where the Pot is. But I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

“*Another* person knows?” Bob demanded.

“Oh, yes. But he’s definitely the only other other person who knows where it is,” replied Yorick. “And I’m not sure he’s really even a ‘person,’ to be honest.”

“Well, out with it!” cried Gandarph.

“His name…” Yorick paused for dramatic emphasis, and the creepy music in the background swelled a little before becoming suddenly quiet, “is Frosty.”

“Frosty!” cried Pilsbury in despair. “Not Frosty the Abominable Snowman!”

“The same,” Yorick confirmed.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” sighed Gandarph. “I happen to know where to find Frosty. Come along.”

As they left the Kremlin and started trudging down the road, though, Yorick suddenly stopped, his eyes widening. “Wait!” he cried excitedly. “I just had the most brilliant idea!”

“I can hardly wait,” muttered Bob.

“I know how to defeat Willy!” said Yorick, growing more excited by the moment. “I know

how to defeat him *right now!* And we can do it *without* the Cracked Black Crock-Pot!”

“Really?” Gandarph asked, also growing excited. “Are you sure?”

“Of course! It’s so stupidly simple I can’t believe we didn’t think of it before! It’s so *easy!* It’s so ridiculously *easy!*” Sweat was breaking out on his forehead, and he was gesticulating wildly, unable to contain his euphoria.

“Well?” demanded Gandarph. “Well? How do we do it?”

“It’s so obvious!” Yorick exclaimed. “All we have to do is…” He suddenly stopped short, his eyes going wide, and without another sound he collapsed into the mud.

“Yorick!” cried Gandarph, dropping to his knees beside the fallen man and checking him. Rat also knelt, his face stunned.

After a moment, Gandarph sighed heavily and drew his hands away from Yorick. “Dead,” he reported grimly.

“What happened?” Bob asked. “Why did he just fall over dead like that?”

Gandarph shook his head wearily. “I’m afraid our friend Yorick has suffered a stroke of genius.”

Bob blinked, staring down at Yorick. “A stroke of…uh… I don’t get it.”

“The idea he had was so incredibly intelligent that his brain couldn’t handle it, and it shut itself down. It’s very dangerous to think too hard, you know.”

Bob looked around at the others. “Oh. I see. That explains everything that goes on around here, I guess.”

“Well, there is nothing to do but press on,” sighed Gandarph. “Let’s bury him and be on our way.”

“And hope that there isn’t another other other other person who knows where the Pot is,”

said Duke gravely.

## VII: Frosty's Tale

or

### Will's Will

Frosty the Abominable Snowman lived in New York City. Oddly enough, New York actually *looked* like New York—except it was buried in more than a hundred feet of snow and ice. It was heavily reminiscent of the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, complete with the ice-encrusted Statue of Liberty. The only thing was, it wasn't cold—it was blazing hot, as a matter of fact.

“Why isn't the snow melting?” Bob wondered aloud.

“Oh, that,” Gandarph said. “It's fake.”

“Fake?”

“Sure. You wouldn't expect *real* snow in this part of the world! Frosty decorated it like this to make it feel more like home.”

“Uh...where's his home, exactly?”

“Panama. He moved out when it was leveled by a glacier.”

“Um...yeah, okay.” Bob tried not to think about it.

The Statue of Liberty turned out to be Frosty's lair. Gandarph led them straight to it, and all the while Pilsbury cast wide-eyed, frightened glances all around him. Duke rubbed his palms against the butts of his pistols, squinting as he studied the statue.

A large, uneven doorway had been carved into the statue, and into this jagged hole Gandarph bravely led his small band of intrepid explorers. “All right, men!” cried Gandarph. “Be ready for anything—and set your blasters at stun! I want them alive!”

“But, Captain!” protested Pilsbury. “Stun rays are useless against the Gworplorians!”

Gandarph struck a heroic pose. “Never fear, my stalwart companions, for I...”

“Hold it!” exclaimed Bob. “What the heck are you talking about?”

Duke had one eyebrow raised. “Hey...what’s a Gworplorian?”

Gandarph blinked, and then rummaged in his pocket, producing a badly-worn little book. He opened it and examined it for a moment, and then grunted. “Oh, I see...Wrong script. Sorry.” He tossed the little book aside. “Now, where was I...” He fished another little book from his pocket and squinted at it.

Pilsbury rolled his eyes. “I didn’t *think* that sounded right.”

“Ah!” said Gandarph. “Here we are.” He took a deep breath and shouted, “Fee, fie, foe, fum!” Then he frowned. “Oh, wait. That’s not my line.”

“Fee, fie, foe, fum!” rumbled a booming voice from somewhere inside the statue. “I smell the blood of an Englishman! Be he alive, or be he dead, I’ll grind his bones to make my bread!”

Rat immediately scurried behind Duke, and Pilsbury began to whimper. Gandarph patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Pilsbury. None of us are British.”

Just then a monstrous form emerged from the back of the statue. Bob wasn’t sure whether to be frightened or not, because Frosty the Abominable Snowman was, indeed, a snowman—complete with corncob pipe and button nose. He was also about twenty feet tall. “Who goes?” the behemoth cried, sliding toward Gandarph.

“I am Captain Quirk of the USS Exitprise!” replied Gandarph. “Now...oh, wait. Sorry. I am Gandarph, the wandering wizard, and these are my companions.”

“Gandarph!” boomed Frosty. “As in Gandarph in the Gray Flannel Robe, who defeated the nasty and nefarious Sarooman of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcloak?”

Gandarph looked confused. “Uh...well...I’m not sure what you...Well, heck, why not? Yes,

that is I!”

“Then welcome!” Frosty boomed, throwing his stick-arms wide. Then he bent over, peering around Duke at the cowering Rat. “Are you sure you aren’t English?” he growled.

“Uh...French,” Rat replied.

Frosty looked disappointed as he straightened. “Oh, well. What can I do for you all?”

“We are on a vital mission, and are in need of your assistance,” said Gandarph. “We are looking for the Cracked Black Crock-Pot.”

“Ah, the Pot,” rumbled Frosty. “If you seek the Pot, then you must be on a mission against Willy, the Enemy.”

“That we are,” confirmed Gandarph. “We have Willy’s Bane, and he who was chosen to bear it.” He motioned to Bob. “Meet Alice, the last hope of the world.”

Bob scowled. “My name is Bob!”

“Whatever.”

Frosty tapped his chin. “Well, I can tell you where the Pot is,” he said slowly, “but you must act with haste, for the time is drawing near when Willy will acquire a nearly invincible army.”

Gandarph looked troubled. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“An army of the undead, I fear. They cannot be killed, for they are already dead. Once Willy gains this army, he will sweep the world, and none will be able to stand against him.”

Totally flabbergasted, Gandarph said, “But how is this possible?”

Frosty leaned forward, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper. “It is possible because of Willy’s father, Will.”

“Willy’s father?”

“Precisely. Will has always had an army of undead, but he’s never had much of an

inclination toward world domination. Only Will's own will can control the undead."

"But if that is so, how will Willy use Will's undead?"

"Because," said Frosty grimly, "of Will's will."

"His will?"

"Yes. In his will, Will stated that when he turned 67.8 years old, his undead army would be granted to Willy—along with the only power that can control them."

"No!" Gandarph gasped. "Will Will's will will Willy Will's will?"

Frosty nodded gravely. "It will. And with Will's will willing Willy Will's will, Willy, with Will's will, will control the undead."

"Wait, just you hold on there, pardner," said Duke. "You lost me. What exactly is Will's will willing Willy?"

"Will's will," replied Frosty.

"Oh. I get it. So with Will's will, Willy will..."

"All right, enough already!" Bob burst out. "I think we get the point!"

Frosty nodded. "Indeed. Anyway, as I was saying—time is running short. I will tell you where to find the Pot, and once you get it you must go to the Bronx to defeat Willy. But beware, for Willy's lair is guarded by a Fierce Beast, and you must defeat it before you can confront Willy himself."

Pilsbury's already pale face was now pasty white. "Uh...what kind of beast?"

"A fierce one. I already told you."

"Well, yes," said Gandarph, "but what *kind* of Fierce Beast?"

Frosty wiped at his brow, as if the very thought made him sweat. "The beast is known as Smog. It has the body of a lion, the claws of a bear, the wings of a parakeet, the tail of a

kangaroo, the toenails of an Italian waitress, and the heads of a politician and a used-car salesman. It used to have the head of a lawyer, as well, but it had to remove it when Uhterneer at'La sued it for giving his profession a negative connotation.”

Bob, who was beginning to take these things in stride, just rolled his eyes. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me. So how do we get the Pot?”

“Well,” said Frosty, rubbing his hands briskly, “it’s bound to be a very dangerous and adventure-filled escapade! First you must travel to Chicago, where you will have to speak with Rappin’ Robin in the ’Hood and his infamous gang of Married Men.”

“Rappin’ Robin in the ’Hood?” squeaked Pilsbury. “He’s the most wanted crime lord in history! Why...he’s a deadly and merciless killer! He routinely tortures people to death with his music—it’s second in horribleness only to that of the dreaded Boot-Scootin’ Boogeyman!”

“Oh!” said Frosty. “I hadn’t thought of him! Pity.”

Bob frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Um...nothing. Anyway, if Rappin’ Robin in the ’Hood doesn’t kill you, he’ll give you directions to find the hidden lair of the Sand Witches in Palm Springs.”

“The Sand Witches!” Pilsbury exclaimed. “But they’re the leaders of the Extremist Male-Hater Feminist movement! They eat middle-class white males for lunch! We won’t have a chance!”

Frosty was looking rather pleased. “Indeed! That ought to be interesting. Anyway, the Sand Witches, if they don’t eat you, will give you tickets. Take them to the land of Nomer.”

At this Gandarph looked relieved. “Well! At least that won’t be so bad. The people of Nomer are a peaceful folk—they seek Information, Understanding, and Direction. Surely they won’t hinder us.”

“Don’t be too pleased,” Frosty warned. “The tickets are for the Miss Nomer Beauty Pageant.”

Pilsbury’s eyes widened with horror. “No!” he blurted. “No, you can’t make me go! The Miss Nomer Beauty Pageant is the most boring pageant known to man—many people have died of premature old age from watching that pageant!”

“Well, you have to watch it,” said Frosty. “Now listen carefully. When Miss Nomer is crowned, pay careful attention to her three attendants—Miss Informed, Miss Understood, and Miss Directed. When they stand next to each other, their dresses will form a map. This map will show you the way to the Pot—deep in the secret fortress of the Scare Bears.”

“NOOOOOO!!!” Pilsbury wailed. “Not the Scare Bears!”

“Oh, they’re not so bad,” said Frosty. “They scare because they care.”

Gandarph looked dubious. “This promises to be a very dangerous trip. We must leave immediately.”

“Oh, yes!” agreed Frosty. “And don’t worry, I made sure I made your trip sufficiently long to give me time to return the Pot to the Scare Bears before you reach their fortress, if by some miracle you live that long.”

Bob stared at Frosty. “Return it? What do you mean, return it?”

“Oh—well...nothing.”

Duke’s eyebrows were knitted together in thought. “Hold on there, pilgrim,” he said in a dangerous voice. “You mean *you’ve* got the Pot?”

“Uh...oh, me and my big mouth,” Frosty sighed. “Yeah, it’s in the back. I borrowed it to make some soup.”

“And you were going to make us travel around the whole world to find it?” Bob exclaimed.

“Um...yeah.” Frosty, looking a bit like a child receiving a scolding, stared at the ground.

“Actually, I was rather hoping you wouldn’t survive the trip.”

At this Rat finally stepped out from behind Duke. “You were *trying* to get us killed?” he demanded.

“Well...yeah. I *am* abominable, after all.”

“All right,” Gandarph said firmly, “hand it over.”

“Well...” Frosty said in an evasive tone, “that would be the problem, now wouldn’t it? See, I wanted you to get killed so you wouldn’t find out...” He turned around and shuffled to the back of his lair, and in a few moments returned—carrying two halves of a large black Crock-Pot. “I kinda broke it.”

Gandarph was aghast. “You...you *broke* the Cracked Black Crock-Pot?!” he shrieked. “Now what do we do? Now how do we stop Willy and his horde of undead?”

“Uh...well...yeah, sorry. Hey, in my own defense, the Pot *was* already cracked.”

Gandarph smacked his forehead. “Blast! Now what do we do? It’s broken! How can we mix Willy’s Bane in a broken pot?”

“But I *do* have some good news!” Frosty said brightly. “I just saved a bunch of money on my car insurance by switching to Guy-Ko!”

Gandarph perked up. “Really? Do you think fifteen minutes or less could save *me* fifteen percent or more? My current plan is truly horrendous.”

Bob, who had been thinking (and, mercifully, missing the last part of the conversation), suddenly asked, “Does Willy’s Bane...uh, the potpourri...have to be cooked, or just mixed?”

Gandarph glanced at him. “Just mixed in warm water. Why?”

“Well, could we just glue the Pot back together?”

“Glue it? Oh, no, no, no, Alice. Glue won’t stick to the Pot. It’s magical, you know.”

“Are you sure?” He pulled the Krazy-Gloo from his back pocket. “This stuff will stick to anything.”

Pilsbury laughed. “Glue the Pot back together? That’s crazy!”

“Well,” said Gandarph, “sometimes the kraziest ideas are the best.”

Duke nodded. “What have we got to lose?”

“You’re absolutely right, Duke the Duke,” declared Gandarph. “Alice, crazy or not, we will try your Krazy-Gloo.”

Much to everyone’s surprise, the Krazy-Gloo *did* stick to the Pot, and in short order it was again whole. “Marvelous!” exclaimed Frosty. “Can I finish my soup now?”

“No!” Gandarph exclaimed. “No soup for you!”

“Hey!” exclaimed Frosty, holding his hands up defensively. “No harm in asking.”

“Now that we have the Pot,” said Gandarph, “we must journey to the Bronx, and there we must confront Willy once and for all!”

## VIII: The LUSR™

or

### Closed Captioned for the Hero-Impaired

Once again Bob and his companions found themselves trudging down a dusty road. “Let’s call a taxi,” Gandarph said brightly.

“No!” Pilsbury and Bob both shouted at once.

Gandarph sighed. “I had a feeling you’d say that. Well, the Bronx is a long way from here, so we’d best pick up the pace a bit.”

Duke was squinting into the distance. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

Shading his eyes, Gandarph peered at the object of Duke’s question—a bright glow coming from some rocks about a hundred yards ahead, just off the side of the road. “Hmm, that’s a good question, Duke the Duke.”

“Thanks,” said Duke.

Fingering his beard, Gandarph said, “Perhaps it is another band of fiendish assassins lying in wait to kill us.”

Rat skidded to a halt. “I just remembered a very pressing engagement I have in that direction,” he said, pointing back the way they had come.

“Now, Philip Philip the Rat,” said Gandarph, “don’t be a ninny. No band of fiendish assassins would dare attack us now that we have the Pot.”

“Why not?”

“Well...uh...Oh, wait, I got that all wrong. I meant to say that now that the Pot in is our possession, we’ll be doubly likely to be attacked by bands of fiendish assassins.”

“Bye,” said Rat.

Duke grabbed him by the collar. “Hold on there, son,” he said. “I don’t think it’s a band of fiendish assassins.”

“What makes you so sure?” Rat demanded, trying to wriggle out of his grasp.

“Why would a band of fiendish assassins lying in wait to kill us have a super-bright light we can see from miles away?”

Rat paused, considering that. “Oh. You know, you’re right.”

Duke nodded and resumed walking. Gandarph, hurrying after him, said, “Good thinking, Duke the Duke. You’re absolutely right. The very worst they could be is a band of extremely inept assassins lying in wait to kill us.”

Rat let out a whimper, but one look from Duke convinced him to keep going.

As they were drawing closer to the light it vanished, and suddenly four figures dressed in skin-tight spandex leaped from among the rocks and spread across the road. “Halt!” one of them cried, holding up his hand.

“I knew it!” Rat whimpered.

“Never fear, my lad!” the man cried, pointing one finger in the air and putting his other fist on his hip. “For we are not, as you may mistakenly believe, a band of fiendish assassins lying in wait to kill you! We are the LUSR!™”

Pilsbury blinked. “The what?”

“The LUSR™—short for the League of Useless Superhero Rejects™. I am their leader—ImmobileMan™!”

Bob’s brow wrinkled. “Why do you call yourselves the ‘useless’ superheroes?”

“Because our powers are useless,” said ImmobileMan™ with a shrug. “When I sense danger,

all of my joints immediately lock up, rendering me completely immobile. I mean, you can't even make a decent action figure of me." He gestured to the man next to him. "This is IllumiDude™, whom you no doubt saw as you were approaching. His power makes him light up like a beacon when he needs stealth."

Bob nodded. "Uh-huh. IllumiDude, is it?"

"No," corrected ImmobileMan™. "It's IllumiDude™."

"That's what I said."

"You forgot the '™'."

"Uh...right. Sorry."

Duke tipped his hat to the woman. "Well, hello there, little lady. And who might you be?"

ImmobileMan™ introduced her. "This is Slugwoman™. Her power is the ability to turn into a common garden slug."

Bob shrugged. "Well, that doesn't sound *too* useless. It could come in handy to be that small, couldn't it? I mean, for spying and stuff?"

Slugwoman™ smiled wryly. "It could, except that when I turn into a slug it only lasts an hour, and while I'm changed I also have the mind of a slug—not much use for anything."

"Oh," said Bob.

"And this," said ImmobileMan™, pointing to the last man, "is RetroElectro™. He can summon lightning—but not intentionally, and it only strikes himself. It's kind of dangerous to be around him, because you never know when a bolt of lightning is going to just come down and fry him."

Bob took a step backward. "Well...he'd have to be immune to electricity, then, wouldn't he? He'd be dead otherwise."

RetroElectro™ shook his head. “I’m afraid not. It hasn’t killed me yet, but once I was in a coma for two weeks—until another bolt of lightning woke me up.”

“Wow,” said Gandarph. “Well...you *are* pretty useless, aren’t you?”

ImmobileMan™ sighed. “Yeah. We are.”

“Useless or not, she's pretty,” Rat whispered loudly in Bob's ear, elbowing him slyly in the ribs and glancing at Slugwoman™. Bob politely covered his derisive snort with a cough. He had to admit that Rat was right, but the thought of her turning into a slug simply wasn’t pleasant.

“So what do you folks want?” asked Duke.

“Well,” said IllumiDude™, “you appear to be on some sort of mission, and we were wondering if you required any assistance.”

Gandarph glanced at RetroElectro™ a bit nervously. “Um...well, we’re going to destroy Willy™...I mean, Willy. What kind of assistance could you offer, exactly?”

IllumiDude™ brightened. “A diversion!” he exclaimed.

“Yes!” cried ImmobileMan™. “Yes, precisely! A diversion!” He pointed ahead. “LUSR™! Go!”

Immediately all four of them began running southeast. “Um...” Gandarph said, pointing northwest, “Willy lives in that direction...”

“Shush!” Pilsbury hissed. “Now’s our chance. Let’s get out of here!”

But before Bob and his companions could so much as move a muscle, disaster struck for the LUSR™. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, a huge black dragon plummeted from the sky directly toward the four wannabe superheroes. ImmobileMan™ immediately went stiff as a board and toppled over into the dirt, and IllumiDude™ lit up like a Roman candle as he fled, shrieking, “They’re everywhere!” at the top of his lungs.

“No!” gasped Gandarph. “It’s the Bad Luck Dragon and its heinous master, He Whose Name I Can’t Remember!”

Bob stared. “Hey, that dragon looks like a Rottweiler!”

The Bad Luck Dragon was about to pounce on the helpless ImmobileMan™, but at that moment a flock of quail shot out of a nearby bush, startling the dragon so badly that it wheeled right into the ground, getting a gaping mouthful of dirt and throwing its heinous master into another bush.

He Whose Name Gandarph Couldn’t Remember began picking himself out of the bush, muttering indignantly. The dragon recovered its balance, spitting out the dirt and nearly braining its heinous master with a large rock as it did so, and then it lunged vengefully at Slugwoman™. It grabbed her with its massive clawed paw and was about to eat her, but just as it started to bite down she turned into a slug, and the Bad Luck Dragon’s jaws clamped firmly over its own paw. It let out a horrible screech and dropped the slug into the dirt. Now extremely angry, the dragon bent down and noisily slurped Slugwoman™ (and a great deal more dirt) off the ground and swallowed her. Limping slightly, it followed its heinous master, but it had only gone a few feet when it tripped on a rock and fell face-first into the dirt once again.

The dragon’s heinous master was striding toward the cowering RetroElectro™, holding aloft what looked suspiciously like a magic wand. He was disgustingly ugly, with an extremely long nose that was covered with hairy warts and boils, and what few teeth he had were made of solid gold. One eye was covered with a black patch, and the other was swollen almost completely shut. A steel hook was fixed to the severed stump of his left arm, and it soon became evident that he also had a peg leg. “Hello, Hairy,” he said in a sinister whisper.

“Get away from me, MoldyWart!” squeaked RetroElectro™.

“Oh!” said Gandarph. “That’s what his name is.”

“Join me or die like all the others, choking on dead air and foul water!” hissed MoldyWart.

“Never!” said RetroElectro™. “You killed my father!”

MoldyWart’s smile was insidious. “No, Hairy. I *am* your...”

“No!” Bob shouted, cutting MoldyWart off. “Say anything you want—anything at all, but not that! I just can’t take that right now!”

MoldyWart looked confused. “Uh...um...uh...okay.” Turning back to RetroElectro™, he said, “Together we could rule the galaxy as...”

“Don’t say it!” Bob screamed.

“*Fine!*” MoldyWart bellowed back at him. Facing RetroElectro™ once again, he snarled, “Look, you and I may share some genetic code, but that’s beside the point!” He gave Bob a quick, scathing glance. “Just come over to the dark side already!”

“I’ll never join you!” shouted RetroElectro™.

“Then you will die!” Raising the wand, he descended on RetroElectro™, intent on inflicting bodily harm. Just as he reached him, though, a bright streak of lightning lanced from the clear sky and struck them both. MoldyWart was flung away, and his body slowly dissolved into a fine green mist as his last scream echoed from the surrounding hills.

The blast sent MoldyWart’s wand directly up the Bad Luck Dragon’s nose, and the creature reared back, letting loose a massive sneeze that covered ImmobileMan™’s inert form in sticky goo. The dragon staggered backward drunkenly, shook its head to clear it, and then charged directly at Bob with an enraged hiss. It tripped again, but soon righted itself and continued the charge.

Ten feet from where Bob and Rat stood frozen in helpless fear, the Bad Luck Dragon came to

a sudden halt. It stood still, its eyes bulging from its head, coughed a few times, and then tipped over into the dirt, dead.

“That was fortunate,” remarked Gandarph from a safe distance away.

“Run of bad luck?” Bob suggested blandly, staring at the dragon’s body.

“No,” said Rat, a tear glistening in his eye. “A cute indigestion.”

A low groan caught their attention. RetroElectro™ lay where he was, staring up at the sky with a stunned look on his face. Slowly he reached up and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead, revealing a lightning-shaped scar that had been etched into his skin by the blast.

Bob snapped his fingers and pointed at RetroElectro™. “Yeah. I *totally* saw that one coming.”

After several hours of walking, leaving what remained of the LUSR™ behind to ‘regroup’ at the nearest tavern, Pilsbury said, “Maybe we *should* call a taxi.” He wiped some sweat from his brow.

Rat, who was panting heavily, said, “Yeah, maybe we should. How far is it to WillyCorp, anyway? And don’t just say ‘really far.’”

“Well,” said Gandarph, “actually, it’s about—oh—twenty-five hundred miles from here, or so.”

Rat stopped dead in his tracks. “WHAT?!” he shrieked. “*HOW* far?!”

“I told you the Bronx was a long way from here. But reaching the Bronx is only the first part. To reach WillyCorp...” He stopped suddenly as his stomach gave a loud rumble. “Goodness. Um... Tell you what. I’ll explain what we’ll have to do to reach WillyCorp over a nice lunch.”

“Where are we going to get lunch out here?” Bob asked.

Gandarph pointed ahead. “Well, right there, of course—the Restaurant at the End of the Chapter.”

Bob looked, and to his shock saw that a restaurant had appeared in the middle of the road ahead. “Where the blazes did *that* come from?”

“It’s the end of this chapter,” Gandarph explained. “That’s when the restaurant comes. Now, let’s eat!”

## **IX: The Fierce Beast**

**or**

### **Speak Softly And Carry A Big Gun**

The Restaurant at the End of the Chapter was a run-down, grimy-looking place, and a large chalkboard nailed to the front door said, ‘Today’s Special: Spinal Cordon Bleu and a large Pepsi-Bismol, only \$4.99.’

Bob, as he entered, realized that he hadn’t eaten for quite a while—but the vomitous stench wafting from the kitchens didn’t exactly whet his appetite. Gandarph picked an empty table—which wasn’t difficult, as they were all empty—and sat down. “Waiter!” he called.

A large, depressed-looking man with an enormous hunchback approached them. “I’m Quasi-Articulate, and I’ll be your waiter,” he mumbled.

“I’ll have the special,” Gandarph declared, looking at a menu. “But what’s the Mildly Alkaline Aqueous Fluid Containing Erythrocytes, Leukocytes, and Platelets Sauce?”

“You don’t want to know,” mumbled Quasi-Articulate.

“Um...okay.”

“There’s...uh...nothing else on the menu,” Rat said, peering closely at it.

“There isn’t anything else,” mumbled Quasi-Articulate.

“Oh. I...uh...I’ll pass, then.”

There was a general rumble of agreement from Bob, Duke, and Pilsbury, so Quasi-Articulate nodded. “One special, coming right up,” he mumbled.

As the waiter shuffled away, Gandarph said, “Anyway, back to what I was saying about WillyCorp. The final path will be three-fold. To enter the Bronx, we must pass through the

dreaded Takslah Mire, which is infested with Sadistic Odditers and is fed by the poisonous waters of Lake Eerie.”

“Lake Erie?” asked Bob.

“No. Lake Eerie.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said ‘Erie.’ It’s actually Lake Eerie—there’s an extra ‘e’ at the beginning.”

“All right!” Bob burst out. “How do you know how what I’m saying is spelled?”

Gandarph blinked, looking as though the answer should be perfectly obvious. “Why, the script, of course,” he said, pulling the ratty little book from his pocket and wagging it back and forth before replacing it.

“Script? But you weren’t even looking at it!”

“Well, duh!” Gandarph said, somehow rolling his eyes in opposite directions. “It’s not like I’d jump into something like this without studying the script!”

Bob just stared.

“Now, as I was saying—no more interruptions, now!—let me see... Oh, yes. Once in the Bronx, we will have to traverse a dark and fearsome jungle which is home to entire colonies of hyper-evolved bureaucrats who spin impassable webs of red tape, and which is patrolled by vicious packs of mutant tech-support personnel. Finally, we will make our way through a horrendous maze built entirely of license agreements, filled with all manner of deadly pitfalls to ensnare the unwary, which surrounds Willy Corp itself. In order to enter the final door, we will have to read the WillyCorp General License Agreement aloud—which will take weeks in and of itself.”

“I’m not liking the sound of this,” Rat said nervously.

“Lunch is served,” Quasi-Articulate mumbled, dumping a large plate of pasty gray-and-red goop in front of Gandarph. “That’ll be \$4.99, plus gratuity.”

“Gratuity?” asked Gandarph.

Quasi-Articulate pointed to some fine print at the bottom of the menu, and Gandarph read it aloud. “A gratuity of 80,000,000% will be added for parties of 1 or more.” He blinked. “What does that come to?”

“\$3,992,000.00.”

Gandarph swallowed hard. “Um...are you sure about that figure?”

“Yeah,” mumbled the hunchback. “Well, mostly. I’m not too good at math, but that’s what I’m charging anyway.”

“I...uh...don’t have that much money.”

Quasi-Articulate let out a long sigh. “Fine,” he mumbled. “I’ll go call the cops.”

“Oh! No, don’t be hasty! Uh...put it on my tab.”

“You don’t have one,” Quasi-Articulate mumbled.

“How do you know?”

“Because only I have a tab here.”

“Oh. Well...put it on your tab, then.”

Quasi-Articulate raised one eyebrow. “My tab?” he mumbled. “Why would I do that?”

“Well,” said Gandarph, “it doesn’t really matter *where* the money comes from, as long as you’re paid, does it?”

Quasi-Articulate blinked, thinking it over, and finally he mumbled, “I guess not.”

“Good. Go ahead and give yourself a nice tip, too.”

“Okay.” Quasi-Articulate sighed again and shuffled away.

Gandarph picked up his Pepsi-Bismol, which was a nasty brownish shade of pink, and started to raise it to his lips. He hesitated, though, and gave it a good long look. Then he glanced down at his plate of Spinal Cordon Bleu, and he set the cup back down. “You know, maybe we’d better just be on our way.”

“My thought exactly,” said Rat, who was holding his nose.

Once outside the restaurant, the entire establishment simply vanished into thin air. “Well!” said Gandarph. “Let’s flag down a taxi and be on our way to the Bronx.”

“Forget the taxi,” Bob said with a roll of his eyes. “Let’s flag down the next passing Star Destroyer.”

“Oh, I’m afraid those charge far too much for us to afford...” Gandarph stopped, his eyes widening. “Wait a moment,” he said. “We don’t need a taxi! I have a brilliant plan—I’ll summon Shadow-Fax!”

Bob looked away. “I don’t want to know,” he muttered.

Gandarph let out a shrill, high-pitched whistle that nearly shattered Bob’s eardrums. “Ouch!” Bob cried, clapping his hands over his ears.

Gandarph smiled. “Ah, here he comes!”

Bob was afraid to look, but he did anyway, and to his astonishment saw a giant fax machine galloping over a nearby hill. It paused, rearing up on its hind end and letting out a loud ring tone as the wind played through its telephone cord. “Please, no, please,” Bob prayed. “Don’t let us do what I think we’re about to do.”

“Everyone climb in!” Gandarph cried as Shadow-Fax came to a screeching halt next to him. “We’ll simply fax ourselves to WillyCorp, thereby avoiding the Three-fold Path!”

Bob hung back as the others began clambering into the Shadow-Fax. “Come on, Alice!” said

Gandarph. “I want to send us all at once, because having to send twice will run up my phone bill!”

Bob had never been faxed anywhere before, but the sensation was not *completely* unpleasant. First he was sliding into the black interior of Shadow-Fax, and the next thing he knew he was being belched out of another giant fax machine.

He found himself standing in a huge reception room. It was empty save for himself and his companions, but at the far end there was a large window beside a pair of stainless-steel doors. “Is this WillyCorp?” Rat asked nervously.

Gandarph looked around. “Yes, yes, this is definitely WillyCorp, Philip Philip the Rat. Be on guard; we could meet the Fierce Beast at any moment.”

“Let’s head for those doors,” said Duke.

The approached the doors cautiously, but as they drew close the Fierce Beast appeared, rearing its ugly heads inside the window next to the doors. “Halt!” cried the politician. “We are Smog!”

“We will tell you how to defeat us,” said the used-car salesman, “but know this! One of us always tells the truth, and one of us always lies!”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right. You both always lie.”

The used-car salesman blinked, and then turned to the politician. “How did he know?” he whispered.

“Quiet!” the politician hissed back. Then he cleared his throat, and said, “All right! Whoso approacheth the Door of Willy-Corp must...uh...must answer me...uh...must answer three questions!”

“You’re saying it wrong, stupid,” said the used-car salesman. “And to think I voted for you.”

“Shut up!” snapped the politician. He looked back at Gandarph. “What is your name?”

Gandarph drew himself up to his full height. “Gandarph!”

“What is your quest?”

“To destroy Willy!”

“What is your favorite pasta?”

Gandarph blinked, and then said, “Uh...spaghetti.”

“You may pass! But first you must view a 30-second paid advertisement!”

Abruptly a screen hidden in the wall appeared. Loud music began playing, and words began to scroll across the screen:

Tune in tonight for another thrilling episode of *Gnashville Star!* Don’t miss the weeping and wailing by massive balls of hot gas! Tonight at 7:00 PM!

And you won’t want to miss tonight’s episode of *American Idolatry!* Who needs a golden calf? Sacrifice your spare time tonight, also at 7:00 PM!

When it was finished the screen vanished. The doors swung silently open, and Gandarph passed through.

Rat grinned. “Hey, that’s easy!” He walked confidently up to the window. “Ask your questions, Door-Keeper; I’m not afraid!”

“What is your name?” demanded the used-car salesman.

“Philip the Rat!”

“What is your quest?”

“To destroy Willy!”

“What is your favorite color?”

“Fettuccini Alfredo!” Rat said promptly. Then he paused. “Uh...I mean...”

But it was too late for poor Rat. “Ha!” cried the politician. “You are hereby sentenced to an eternity in the complaint department of Willy-Corp!”

“No!” Rat screamed, just as a hole opened up in the floor beneath him. Rat’s lingering scream was cut off as the hole closed again.

“Next!” barked the used-car salesman.

Duke stepped up to the window. “What is your name?” the politician demanded.

“The Duke.”

“What is your quest?”

“This.” Duke pulled out both guns, pulled both triggers, and silenced both heads forever.

Duke blew the smoke still drifting from the ends of his barrels and then holstered the guns.

“Let’s go, boys.”

Bob blinked, staring at the now-empty window. “At least one member of this company is useful,” he said to himself as he followed Duke through the doors.

Gandarph was waiting beyond the doors for them. “Where’s Philip Philip the Rat?” he asked.

“He got a new job,” Duke said blandly.

“Oh! I wasn’t aware he was even applying here. Well, anyway, Willy’s conference-room is just ahead, and with any luck he’ll be in it.” He took the Pot to a nearby restroom and emerged a moment later, the Pot filled with warm water. “Alice, prepare the Magic Dust!”

Bob dumped the package of potpourri into the Cracked Black Crock-Pot, and Gandarph pulled a long wooden spoon from his pocket and stirred reverently. “So...am I done now?” Bob

asked.

“Oh, no, no, no!” Gandarph cried, handing the Pot to him. “You must now throw Willy’s Bane upon Willy!” Turning to the conference-room, he said, “Onward!” and marched toward it.

## **X: The End (No, Really, I'm Serious This Time)**

**or**

### **Bug-Eyed Bandicoots**

When Gandarph burst into the conference-room, they found the room empty save for one man—a man Bob instantly recognized as Willy, for he looked just the same as he had in his dream. “Gandarph!” cried Willy, surprise evident in his voice. “How did you get past the Fierce Beast?”

“Simple!” said Gandarph triumphantly. “I answered its three questions, and it let me pass!”

Willy groaned. “Oh, I’ve got to stop letting it watch that movie!”

“No worries, hombre,” drawled Duke. “I put a couple slugs into its brains, so it won’t be watching any more movies.”

Willy looked shocked. “You killed the Fierce Beast? But...but...Smog was supposed to be invincible!” He suddenly snapped his fingers. “At’La! Removing one of the heads must have rendered the Fierce Beast mortal! I’ll sue for this!”

“You won’t get the chance,” said Gandarph. “Alice, the potpourri!”

Bob advanced on Willy with the Cracked Black Crock-Pot, and Willy backed away fearfully.

“Now, hold on!” he said. “Can’t we all just get along?”

“I’m afraid not,” growled Bob, raising the Pot.

“Stop!” cried a high-pitched, nasal voice. Bob glanced back, and to his shock saw a whole crowd of people streaming through the conference-room doors.

“Drop that potpourri!” The nasal speaker was a short, fat, balding man of about forty, who was glaring at Bob through a pair of pink horn-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a tie-dyed T-

shirt that had the words ‘Make Love, Not Sense’ written in bold letters across the front. “We cannot allow you to continue!”

Bob stared at the small man, and said, “Who the heck are you?”

“My name is Sunflower,” the man replied. “And I told you to drop that pot!” He threw a large brick, which smashed into the Cracked Black Crock-Pot, shattering it and spilling the potpourri all over the floor. Willy chortled gleefully.

Gandarph gasped. “No! Willy’s Bane!” Whirling toward Sunflower, he exclaimed, “Do you realize what you’ve done?!”

“Yes,” Sunflower said smugly. “I’ve destroyed your evil instrument of middle-class-white-male oppression.”

“What?! Willy’s going to take over the world now, you fool! Who are you people, anyway?”

“We are the EALUOIAEFPWHSCPAJAEETB!”

“The what?” Bob asked blankly.

“The Enlightened And Liberated Union Of Intelligent And Environmentally-Friendly People Who Hate Stinking Capitalist Pigs And Just About Everything Else Too Because. But you may call us the EALU for short.”

“Um...okay...so why don’t you want us to destroy Willy?”

“Because,” Sunflower said deprecatingly, “we are the EALU.”

“But what does that mean, exactly?”

The little man smiled broadly. “Folks, let’s tell them our mission statement!”

All of the people behind Sunflower began chanting. *“We are violently opposed to war! We will not tolerate intolerance! We hate people who hate other people! We will exercise our freedom of speech by forcing our views upon all who do not agree with us, and if they don’t like*

*it we will sue them!”*

Sunflower spread his hands. “There you have it. We can’t allow you to destroy Willy, because that would be an act of aggression—not to mention it would violate his civil rights.” Behind him, the rest of the EALU began chanting, “*Free Willy! Free Willy! Free Willy!*”

“What rights?” Gandarph exclaimed. “Since when is taking over the world a civil right?”

“Look, you can’t just start knocking off all of the people who want to take over the world, you know. It’s not nice.”

“Nice?!” Bob blurted. “But taking over the world with an army of undead *is?*”

Sunflower frowned. “Now, look, what he does is his own problem. It’s not our place to go destroying people because we don’t like their life’s ambitions. His conscience will be the one that’s guilty, not yours, you stinking middle-class-white-American-capitalist-male-Republican.”

“But...”

“No buts!” Sunflower said sternly. “Now come on; off to Weedstock with you!”

Suddenly Bob got an idea. “But Sunflower, we’re environmentally-friendly, too! We weren’t trying to save *human* lives by destroying him.”

Sunflower’s brow creased. “Huh?”

“We were trying to save the Blue-Spotted Bug-Eyed Bavarian Bandicoot.”

Sunflower looked confused. “The what?”

“It’s a very rare endangered species,” Bob said earnestly. “They’re almost extinct, you know.”

“Oh? Really? But how will destroying Willy save them?”

“Well, it’s simple, really,” said Bob. “You see, WillyCorp was built right on top of the last remaining nest of Bug-Eyed Bandicoots, and they’ve been forced to migrate elsewhere.”

At that an angry muttering rippled through the crowd of EALU members.

“And not only that,” Bob added, “the Bug-Eyed Bandicoots are severely allergic to undead!”

Sunflower gasped. “How awful!” His face took on an ugly glower, and he stared balefully at Willy. “You heartless upper-class-environmentally-unfriendly-white-industrialist-male-capitalist! Get him, boys!”

Willy held up his hands pleadingly. “No! Wait!”

But it was too late. The band of rabid (literally; quite a few of them were actually foaming at the mouth) EALU members swarmed over him, piling on him like starving wolves tearing at a freshly-killed moose.

“That’ll teach him,” Sunflower said in a satisfied tone.

Gandarph, who was watching the EALU members gleefully pounding Willy to pulp with morbid fascination, said, “Sunflower, I thought you were opposed to violence.”

Sunflower shrugged. “Well, this is different. We have to protect the environment, you know. As long as he was only terrorizing and killing other people it was fine, but forcing poor defenseless bandicoots out of their homes—that’s another matter entirely. Excuse me, but I’d like a shot at him myself.” He dove head-first into the dogpile.

At length the EALU finished with Willy and left the room. Gandarph gingerly examined Willy’s remains, and finally said, “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it! The EALU destroyed Willy *without* the Magic Dust! How is this possible?”

Bob sighed. “I guess that old saying is true.”

“What old saying?”

“Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.”

Gandarph blinked, and then nodded soberly. “Too true, too true.”

Glancing around the room, Pilsbury said, “So...uh...now what do we do?”

Gandarph hesitated, and then pulled the ratty little script-book from his pocket. He examined it, hesitated again, and then said, “Um...I don’t know. That last thing Alice said is where the script ends.”

Bob stared at the little book. “Is what I said really in there?” He snatched it from Gandarph and read the last line. “Never underestimate the...Holy smokes, it really *is* there!”

Duke touched the brim of his hat. “Well, pilgrims, I reckon it’s time for me to ride off into the sunset.”

“Oh, that’s a nice touch,” Gandarph said, taking his script back from Bob and replacing it in his pocket. “Goodbye, Duke the Duke, and many thanks for your assistance.”

“Sure thing, pilgrim.”

As Duke rode off into the sunset (where the horse came from was a mystery), Pilsbury absently tapped his fingers together. “Well...I suppose I’d best get back to my kitchen, then.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Gandarph. “Off you go.”

Once Pilsbury was gone, Gandarph and Bob glanced at each other. “Well,” Gandarph said vaguely, “um...I suppose...” He paused, and then fished another script from his pocket. “Maybe this one has a clearer ending.” He flipped through it, and then said, “Um...let’s see...My task here is finished, so...ah, here we are. I’ve got the sail across the sea now.” He looked up at Bob. “Best wishes, Alice. I must be off.”

“Wait!” Bob cried, but it was too late. Gandarph abruptly vanished in a puff of smoke.

Bob, alone now, stood staring around the room. “Hello?” he called tentatively. “Hello? Anyone? Bob here. What about me?”

Silence.

“What about me?” Bob shouted. “What about me?!”

More silence.

Bob’s shoulders slumped. “Great,” he muttered. “I’m stuck here forever.”

Suddenly, though, he noticed that Gandarph had dropped one of his scripts. Picking it up, he turned to the last page. “And he lived happily ever after, to the end of his days.” He grunted sourly. “Yeah, whatever.”

THE END

thank heaven...

No minorities were oppressed in the making of this story.