

GAMEHENDGE

A Novel



By William Hrdina

Based on *The Man Who Stepped
Into Yesterday* by Trey Anastasio

THE SETLIST

SET I:

Kung>

McGrupp

Narration

Lizards

Llama

Tela>Narration>Tela

Wilson

PQITE

AC/DC Bag

Set II:

Narration

Harpua

Narration

Colonel Forbin's Ascent>Icculus>Fly Famous Mockingbird

Narration>

The Oh Kee Pah Ceremony

The Sloth

Possam>

Kung

McGrupp Reprise

Written, with love, for Phish.

That is: Trey Anastasio, Mike Gordon, Page McConnell, and Jon Fishman.

I hope this effort is always seen in the light of respect and admiration I have for the original work.

Every word of this book was written with the following 6 recordings playing (very loudly) on a loop: TMWSIY thesis tape and the 3/12/88, 10/13/91, 3/22/93, 6/26/94, and 7/8/94 live 'canon' performances of Gamehendge.

I would also like to thank the authors of "The Phish Companion" and the Mockingbird Foundation for publishing it. It is a book I've referred to hundreds of times over the years and proved to be an invaluable resource to writing this book- it's my real life Helping Friendly Book- and a really great charitable foundation taboot..

SET ONE

KUNG >

...We can stage a runaway golf cart marathon...

STAND UP!

STAND UP AND KUNG!

McGRUPP AND THE WATCHFUL HORSEMASTERS

Once upon a time, there was a meager shepherd named Fluff, who oversaw a tiny flock of llama. After a long day of shepherding, Fluff reached his destination, a broad piece of green pasture bordering the bright blue water of the Baltic Sea.

For years Fluff had been coming to this spot. It was one of his absolute favorite places. Further buoying his mood was the presence of his son Henrietta. This was an unusual treat, Fluff usually had to do all of the shepherding on his own. Henrietta was named after his great-grandmother, but he only went by Henry. Calling him Henrietta generally led to fighting and bloody noses.

The sun was setting on the horizon when Fluff and Henry arrived on the beach. They'd been walking all day, and the first thing Henry did was yank off his tunic and dive into the cool water.

"Come on in! The water is wonderful." Henry coaxed.

But Fluff did not follow his son. He wasn't going to leave his flock unattended. Unlike most of the people in his village, Fluff wasn't a natural shepherd. He had to work very hard at it. For some reason, the llama could pick up on Fluff's lack of skills. They were always wandering off and putting themselves in perilous situations. Fluff took the carelessness of the llamas personally. He could often be heard muttering to himself about their nefarious plots to commit llamacide.

The water proved to be too enticing to ignore completely, so Fluff took off his boots and rolled up the legs of his pants. He stood with his back to Henry and watched while his fluffy charges wandered around on the hill, munching lazily on the grass.

After a while, Henry came out of the water and father and son worked together to set up camp for the night. The biggest benefit of herding llamas was their ability to carry the camping equipment. The biggest problem with herding llamas was retrieving all of the equipment when it came time to set up camp. The process took most of a half an hour, and, as usual, Fluff and Henry had to set up the tent in the flickering light of the campfire. Once the llamas were unloaded, Henry walked a large circle around the herd, carrying a substantial ball of twine and feeding it out behind him. The twine was dipped in the scent of a mule- a scent the llamas seemed to hate more than anything else in the world. Oddly, it was also known to keep away laser beams. Once the line was laid down, the llama wouldn't come within 5 feet of the barrier.

With camp made, and the llama barrier established, father and son sat down by the fire to eat supper. From a backpack, Fluff took out a number of thin strips of salted Multi-Beast. He laid the strips directly on the flaming logs- and in seconds- the air was filled with the sweet smell of cooking meat. Cautiously, Fluff snagged a piece from the fire, blew on it, and munched it down like a slice of bacon.

“Delicious.” Fluff proclaimed.

Henry was leaning back on a large log he’d dragged over from a nearby copse of trees. His hands were wrapped behind his head. For a long time they sat in silence, each left to his own contemplations.

After a while, Henry said, “Hey Dad, tell me a story.”

Fluff’s eyebrows rose- he’d been expecting this.

“You want me to tell you a story?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, how about the story of Fee?”

“No. I don’t want to hear about Fee. That’s a kid’s story.”

“It’s got the bit about slicing the nipple- that part is pretty gnarly.”

“Sure- that part is good. But it’s a love story. I don’t want to hear that kind of story. I want to hear an adventure story.”

Fluff nodded. “Why do I feel like there’s something specific you want to hear?”

Henry didn’t reply. He just grinned sheepishly.

“How old are you now? Twelve?” Fluff asked.

“I’m thirteen.”

“Thirteen? Already? Time does keep on ticking, ticking, ticking into the future... doesn’t it?”

“Ayup.” Henry agreed.

“Well, I guess thirteen is old enough. But I want you to say it.”

Henry took a deep breath. “Dad, I want you to tell me the story of Gamehendge.”

“You’re sure you’re ready? It’s not necessarily the happiest story. I’ll tell you this much- I don’t want to hear you waking up in the middle of the night and crying. It’s been a long day and I need my beauty sleep.”

Henry frowned. “I haven’t cried in two years- and when I did- I’d just broken my arm!”

“Alright, alright- you’re a big boy now. I hear you. So I guess I should start at the very beginning.”

NARRATION

Once upon a time, there was a Colonel. His name was Forbin, Trey Forbin. No one ever used his first name. He was just Forbin. Or, sometimes, The Colonel.

On this particular once upon a time, Colonel Forbin was standing in front of his bathroom mirror, shaving with a razor that’d seen better days.

Nothing about the shaving process was as easy as it was in his youth. His face, once smooth as a baby’s bottom- was now a plateau of deep wrinkles. All of the years spent standing in the sun (he’d been stationed in Middle-Eastern deserts for the majority of this military service) had dried his skin into the texture of a raisin. He used his free hand to pull the skin taut. Sometimes, his fingers slipped in the lather of the shaving cream and he cut himself. He wasn’t really old- only 56- but his body felt 80- and his spirit felt at least twice that. Ever since his retirement- he’d stopped living- and was waiting to die.

Sitting on the bathmat next to the Colonel was Forbin’s best friend and main reason for getting out of bed in the morning- his fleet-hound named McGrupp. McGrupp looked up at his master and waited patiently for him to finish his morning ablutions. A smart dog,

McGrupp knew exactly what followed shaving- his morning walk. The only thing he liked more than the morning walk- was the evening walk.

Forbin was moving slower than normal. His eyes kept glancing over to the door.

“McGrupp, I’m not sure if we’re going to be able to take the normal route today.”

“Why not?” McGrupp didn’t ask.

“You know why not. Don’t look at me like I’m a coward.”

McGrupp continued to wait patiently to be taken for a walk.

“I fought in the Vietnam war- almost. And I commanded a whole Brigade in the Gulf war- 4,000 soldiers. I know it was a rear guard- but the rear guard is important too.”

He paused, unsure if he was trying to convince the dog, or himself.

“I know I retired in 2004. How was I supposed to know what was coming? Why do you keep looking at me like that?” He asked the dog.

McGrupp chuffed softly in reply.

“Fine. You want to walk your normal route- then we’ll walk the normal route. But if that thing is still there- I don’t know what we’re going to do. It’s funny- I don’t know if I’m more afraid that it’s as crazy as it seems- or that it will turn out to not be crazy at all. I have to admit, I am badly in need of some adventure. Our lives are so boring. Every day is just like the day before- and it’s been that way since I quit the army.”

Mcgrupp got up and walked towards the door. For him, every walkie was a cavalcade of smells- each one better than the last.

Forbin followed Mcgrupp, taking the dog’s leash from its place on a hook by the door. McGrupp waited patiently while Forbin knelt down next to him and attached it to the dog’s collar. Forbin held the extra-long leash loosely in one hand- it wasn’t really necessary- but it was a requirement according to the housing association rules in his neighborhood.

“Gotta follow the rules- or that SOB Floyd will write me another ticket for walking you without a leash. My pension isn’t rich enough to take the hit. Please forgive me the indignity.”

Tapping his pocket, Forbin confirmed he had his keys and led them out into the day. The sun was shining, but a cool breeze offset the heat. The Colonel smiled at the weather. He took a deep breath.

“Smells like Italy- Firenze.”

McGrupp intently sniffed at the mailbox. There were a number of peemails to read. Forbin allowed the dog to do his thing- he wasn’t in a hurry. In fact, he kind of hoped the dog would spend all morning just sniffing away at the mailbox- and not walking any closer to the strangeness they’d discovered in the park.

While the dog attempted to sniff every square foot of the outdoors, Forbin’s head kept turning right and left- his brow furrowed deeply.

“You sure you don’t want to go left today? Might be a bit of an adventure in that- don’t you think?”

Going left meant not walking through the park. Going left, meant he wouldn’t know if it was still there.

“Stop sniffing that mailbox and let’s go.”

Forbin tugged lightly at the leash- he’d gotten a bit of unexpected courage and he knew he had to get moving or he’d lose it.

Surprised at Forbin’s sudden input into where they went, McGrupp followed obediently along with his master- following him when he turned right- on their normal route towards the park.

The road continued straight for about 200 yards, and then it curved down around a hill. At the bottom of the hill was the park. McGrupp had personally urinated on three-quarters of the trees along the half mile circle of the trail.

When he'd first seen the object- he and McGrupp were about half-way down the trail- at the furthest point from civilization.

The Rhombus.

Black as Kubrick's monolith.

About seven feet high and ten feet across.

The Rhombus.

It was just... sitting there.

One day there was no Rhombus in the park, the next, there was. Even on the day of its arrival, the plants around the rhombus were not disturbed. If massive geometric shape was placed by people at the far end of the park- they must've been dropped from a helicopter.

"I know I imagined the Rhombus. It can't possibly be real. Can it?"

As usual, McGrupp paid Forbin little mind. He was busy scanning the sector for un-urinated upon trees and even more crucially, the tiny poofy-tailed dogs with the remarkable ability to run up and down trees.

"Well, if it is there- then I bet other people will be able to see it this time. I still think that kid was screwing with us when he said he couldn't see the Rhombus. It was right there in front of his face. People just don't respect their elders the way they did when I was a kid."

Forbin slowed his pace to a near crawl in the 20 yards leading up to the bend- the bend where the Rhombus would be revealed again- or not. He took his time, examining the summer foliage. He discovered a small bunch of lilies growing wild amongst the weeds. Forbin bent and took a deep breath.

Then he sneezed- a mighty explosion. McGrupp wasn't expecting the outburst and jumped in surprise.

Forbin laughed. "It's okay old boy. Just a sneeze."

The dog's jumpiness made him reflect on his own. He stopped, lolly-gagging for a few more seconds before he took a deep breath and walked around the corner, staring down at his shoes until he was completely around the bend.

He looked up, and the Rhombus was there.

Forbin quit smoking cigarettes ten years earlier. But he always kept a pack stashed in the refrigerator. Every year he would find the pack and throw it out. Inevitably, the next time Forbin entered a gas station, he asked for another pack to replace the discarded one. It went into the fridge and was forgotten for another year.

Before walking out the door, he took the cigarettes out of the fridge with a pack of matches and stuck them in his pocket. Forbin took one out, snapped a match alight, and lit it. He took a long drag. The cherry lit up bright in the morning sun.

"I don't believe it."

Forbin came closer. The Rhombus waited. When he was about five feet away, he thought he heard something- whatever it was- it wasn't very loud. The Colonel cocked his head- listening. McGrupp did likewise. He could hear music coming from the Rhombus like a stereo speaker. For about half a cigarette Forbin just stood still- listening to the faint music and taking in the surreal presence of the great black Rhombus. He took one last long drag, dropped the cigarette onto the ground and ground the butt into the ground with his shoe. Once he was sure every bit of the fire was out, he bent and stuck the remains in his pocket. Then he started talking hesitant steps towards the large shape.

Every step closer the duo came to the Rhombus, the louder the music grew. Eventually, Forbin and McGrupp were standing with their noses nearly touching it. Forbin stared into the Rhombus- after a few minutes he thought he could make out a door, suspended in the middle. From a distance, the Rhombus was a bottomless black- but from up close- you could see through the darkness- to the doorway. The music was light, airy, inviting.

Forbin's hand lifted slowly. It passed through the previously solid-looking Rhombus without any resistance. He felt for the doorknob and it felt solid under his hand.

"You sure you want to do this?" He asked McGrupp.

Before the dog could answer, they stepped completely into the Rhombus... and passed through the door.

No one was watching. But if they were, they would've seen Colonel Forbin and McGrupp simply vanish into thin air- never to be seen again.

LIZARDS

Colonel Forbin and McGrupp walked through the door and found themselves standing at the far end of a long corridor. The hallway was filled with light- but there was no visible source.

"This is a bit odd isn't it?" Forbin said.

He looked back over his shoulder- and then he looked forward again. His face, previously red with excitement, was suddenly a bit ashen. The only thing Forbin saw when he looked backwards was a gauzy haze. New Jersey was gone.

Probably for the best.

"So what do you think McGrupp, should we keep going?"

In lieu of an answer, the dog bolted forward towards the end of the corridor. Hurrying behind, Forbin stared past the animal to a breathtaking view of a mountain ringed in clouds. The mountain was crooked, yet it rose precipitously up- it was the kind of geological structure you only saw in the Fantasy section of your local bookstore.

Undeterred by the strangeness of the situation, McGrupp sprinted straight out and into the new world without missing a stride. His nose was filled with a cacophony of intriguing smells- most of which he'd never encountered.

Forbin's approach wasn't as foolhardy as his canine partner's. He stopped with his feet still standing on the Formica tiled corridor. With just one single step further, he would be fully immersed into what appeared to be a completely different reality.

"McGrupp?" He called, hesitant. "You there?"

A single bark came back to him. The acoustics were strange- the bark seemed to bubble through an invisible barrier at the end of the tunnel before reaching Forbin's ears. He felt his body straighten up to attention. It was a reflex.

The Colonel took a long, deep breath... and stepped into the other side.

Colonel Forbin's ears popped and he emerged onto a trail in the middle of a forest. The first thing he saw was McGrupp. The dog was waiting for him about twenty feet away, his tail wagging. Curious to see if they could go back, the Colonel turned around and looked to see if the corridor was still there.

It wasn't. Instead of the blank hallway, there was now an unpaved trail lined with a hand-made stone wall. A man sitting 10 feet directly behind them was leaning up against it.

"Good morning." The man said.

Colonel Forbin leapt into the air like someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of his pants.

“Ah! Good Lord man! You scared me half to death.”

“Oh... well... sorry mister. Didn't mean to startle you. Just sending my greetings. Saw you just kind of pop into existence there- you wouldn't, by any chance, be here to get rid of Wilson?”

“Uh, no- I don't think so.”

“You aren't his buddy are you?”

“I don't know anyone named Wilson.”

“Well, that's a relief.” He said, “I didn't think you were from the same place- no divided sky.” The man said, a bit cryptically.

Forbin looked the man up and down. A large conical helmet sat on his head. The helmet had a thick mesh visor, but it was pulled up. The face beneath was young and strong- and maybe a little vacuous. The man looked like many of the kids Forbin had under his command before he retired from the Army.

Beneath Rutherford's helmet was a full suit of armor. Metal sleeves covered his arms, a heavy-looking breastplate adorned with an exotic-looking wolf covered his chest and his legs were armored too. Even the man's feet were covered with metal spikes. A very large, very heavy looking sword hung from the man's belt.

Unlike the armor Forbin was used to seeing in museums- this man's armor was pretty gnarly- full of dents and dirt and scratches. If this man had a traditional squire charged with taking care of the knight's equipment, he was clearly doing a piss-poor job.

“What are you supposed to be- on break from the Renaissance Faire?” Forbin asked.

“I'm afraid not. My name is Rutherford the Brave.”

Forbin reached out his hand. “Nice to meet you. I am Colonel Forbin.”

Rutherford shook Forbin's hand enthusiastically.

“Nice to meet you Colonel. Are you a military man?”

“Yes sir, thirty years in. So what are you doing out here in the woods?” Forbin asked.

“I am on a quest.”

“No kidding? What kind of quest?”

“I am on a quest to save my people from the fate that lies before them.”

“And what fate is that?”

“I fear our clumsy end is perilously near.”

“I don't understand.”

A creature came galloping past. It had 6 legs and was all furry- like a six-legged green teddy bear.

Terrified, Forbin pointed and yelled, “What's that?” His hand was scrabbling at his waist, looking for a firearm that wasn't there.

“Probably just a deer- or maybe a Multi-Beast. Why? What'd you think it was? The elusive and dangerous, Carini?” Rutherford gave a sharp yap of laughter.

Forbin looked at Rutherford with a puzzled expression.

It took a minute, but Rutherford finally understood.

“Wait a minute- you said you weren't from here. So you don't even know what a Carini is- do you?” Rutherford laughed some more.

Then he changed the subject.

“You know, there's an underground revolution brewing.”

“A what?”

“A revolution. It’s part of my quest to save my people. We’re going to rise up and overthrow Wilson. Oh, wait. I should go back. I didn’t tell you who we are yet. My people are called the Lizards. We’re an ancient race of people. For generations and generations we lived in total peace and harmony with nature. We recycled, didn’t eat non-sustainable fish, we exercised, helped each other out. But that was the old days, now we’re a race practically extinct from doing things smart people don’t do.”

“Wait, hang on. What do you mean by that?”

“By what?”

“By that line. You’re saying you guys are practically extinct and that the reason you’re almost extinct is because you do things smart people don’t do.”

“That’s how it is now, yes.”

“But you were talking about yourselves in the past a second ago.”

“Back then we did smart things- we lived in peace and harmony with nature.”

“Oh, okay, so you don’t do smart things now- back then you did.”

“Correct- now you’re seeing the Forrest through the trees.”

“And so now you’re starting a revolution?”

“Yeah, some of us Lizards don’t like the way Wilson does things. No, wait. That’s not really right. All of the Lizards don’t like the way Wilson does things, but only a few of us are doing anything about it. Like I said- most of the Lizards are dumb now.”

“So this Wilson guy- he’s bad news, huh?”

“Well of course. He’s a tyrant. He stole The Book from us.”

“What book?”

“What book? Why, THE book of course. The Helping Friendly Book. It was given to the Lizard people by The Great and Knowledgeable Icculus. It was the Helping Friendly book that allowed us to live in peace an harmony with nature.”

“And a guy named Icculus gave you this book?”

“Yes. The Great and Knowledgeable Icculus. He’s the god who lives at the top of that enormous mountain just outside of town.” Rutherford pointed at the gigantic mountain towering to the east.

“And what did the book do for you?”

“The Helping Friendly Book possessed the ancient secrets- of eternal joy and never-ending splendor.”

“Eternal joy and never-ending splendor?”

“Yup. The trick is to surrender to the flow.”

“The flow?”

“Yeah. You know. The vibration of life. The universal dub. The groove, the syncopation- the flow baby! Dig it!”

“But... wait. You just said you were part of a revolution. How is fighting a revolution surrendering to the flow?”

“Well. It’s oppression- isn’t it.”

“It sounds to be, yes.”

“Well, then, there’s your answer.”

“What?”

“It’s oppression. You can’t surrender to the flow of oppression.”

“Oh. Okay. I didn’t know. That’s not what you said before.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t.”

“Okay, maybe not directly, but it was implied- in the subtext. We have to have the book in order to surrender to the flow properly. No book- no flow. Right now, Wilson has the book. He keeps it locked away in a high tower. I should probably let Errand explain all of this to you. He’s talks prettier than anyone else in the camp.”

A tiny grin twitched in the corner of Forbin’s mouth and then evaporated, by sheer force of will.

Rutherford didn’t notice. He continued, “I don’t always talk so good. I don’t think so good either. But Errand says it makes me Brave. That’s my name, Rutherford the Brave.”

“So you mentioned.”

“Do you want to come with me? I guess I can take you to see the rest of the revolutionaries. Our camp is pretty far, but we can make it by nightfall if we hurry.”

Forbin hesitated. He looked down at McGrupp.

“What do you think boy?”

McGrupp just sat there, the very tip of his tail twitched slightly.

“Well, I reckon there’s no harm in coming along with you. Will you tell me more about your people on the way?”

“Of course.”

“Then let’s get going.”

“Fantastic.” Rutherford said, smiling broadly.

Together, the two men and one dog headed off. McGrupp ran out front and the two men trailed behind. Rutherford’s armor and Forbin’s age combined to make their speed about equal.

“Tell me more about this Wilson guy.” Colonel Forbin prompted after a few minutes of silence.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. King Wilson. Well, let’s see, he’s not from here. That’s probably the biggest thing. He’s not one of us Lizards. He’s like you, from a land far, far away. Everyone remembers the night he showed up. It was the Night of the Divided Sky- the most ill-ported night of the year.

“Why do you call it the Night of the Divided Sky?”

“If you ever saw it- you’d understand. On the Night of the Divided Sky there is a storm unlike any other we experience all year. The thunder goes on for hours, and it rains so much, all of the rivers overflow their banks and there’s lighting everywhere. You can sit and read by it at midnight there’s so much light. Sometimes- you’d swear you were witnessing the end of the world.”

“Sounds like quite a storm.”

“It’s something else all right.” Rutherford agreed. “So anyway, Wilson came here on the Night of the Divided Sky. He found us, the Lizards, living in peace and harmony with nature- which- at the time of his arrival, meant huddling under tarps and waiting for the massive storm to end. If that sounds like we weren’t happy- you’d be wrong. Because on the Night of the Divided Sky it was our tradition to gather together under our shelters and tell our favorite stories- all of us Lizards would get together and vote on which stories we wanted to hear. Even though it was scary because of the crazy weather, for lots of folks, the Divided Sky is one of the best nights of the year. I remember a little girl named Esther was in the middle of a really classic story about her adventures during the previous year’s Divided Sky when Wilson first showed up. In the story, Esther gets accosted by joggers, swept up in a storm, and finally killed by a puppet with a homicidal streak. It wasn’t her best day- but it’s a great story.”

“How could she tell it if she died?”

“She recovered- but that’s a whole different story. Anyway, she was telling the story, but before she could even get to the part where she was captured by the evil puppet, Esther stopped talking. A really weird look crossed her face. She lifted her arm and pointed at something behind us. We all turned to see what she was staring at. It turned out to be a stranger, a man who called himself Wilson. That first night, he was very friendly. He told us he was a traveler. He said in his former life he was something called an ‘arms dealer.’ He told us he wanted to learn about the Lizards. So we told him about the Helping Friendly Book and Icculus and the very next day, he stole the book and enslaved us. Then, he set us to work cutting down the trees and made us construct the city of Prussia on top of their graves.”

“Graves- whose graves?”

“The graves of the trees. I told you- we lived in peace and harmony with nature- we saw the trees as our brothers. When we had The Book- the Lizards would never have cut down the trees. If you used a little effort- you could usually find a tree somewhere already knocked down- whether because of wind or old age or whatever. But we needed the book to keep it all in balance. When we had The Book- everything was great. But Wilson took it and without it- we simply lack the will to resist.”

“So you’re all slaves?”

“Most of us. I’m an exception. They call me Rutherford the Brave because I don’t have that problem. I am very brave. I have the will to resist.”

They walked along in silence for a while, heading steadily uphill. Most of the time, the forest was closed in around them, cutting off any view of their larger surroundings. But for one long minute, the forest cleared away and Forbin could see a wide expanse- easily a few hundred miles.

To the northwest, Forbin spied a long, jagged scar in the ground. He was far away, but the gouge still ran almost from horizon to horizon.

“What happened there?” Forbin pointed at the gouge.

“What?”

“That massive valley- over there.” He pointed some more.

“Oh, yeah, that’s the Weekapaugh Groove. It happened when Halley’s Comet crashed about 1000 years ago.”

“I bet you’re glad you weren’t here when that happened- must’ve been quite the mess.” Forbin said.

“Yeah, probably.”

For ten minutes a low rumbling sound had been slowly increasing in volume. Now, Forbin could finally see the source of the sound.

It was a raging river.

Forbin stopped at the river’s edge along with McGrupp. Man and dog looked at the fast running current. There was no way they were going to try to cross. Rutherford, being known much more for his bravery than his flights of intellectualism, didn’t even slow down. He walked out into the river, and, because he was wearing a suit of armor, promptly sunk.

Forbin’s bushy brow furrowed. A small scar on his forehead, the only damage he sustained in ‘the war,’ crinkled. His mouth opened, closed, opened again.

Bubbles broke the surface of the deep green water and were whisked away with the current.

Forbin leaned forward, squinting. There was no sign of Rutherford- only intermittent streams of bubbles. Time passed, the bubbles slowed, then stopped. Once or twice Forbin put a foot forward, it squished in the loamy slime that served as a beach.

He did not go in after Rutherford. Armor is heavy and Rutherford was humongous. McGrupp stared at the water and whined softly.

“I know McGrupp- but I can’t swim. What can I do?”

Llama

“Wake up Rocka William!” Demanded the thick-necked guard named Josie Wales.

“Huh? What?” Rocka William demanded, grumbling and nearly falling off of the chair balanced precariously beneath him. Rocka William was one of The Evil King Wilson’s messengers- and he’d been having a nice nap in the corner of the messenger dispatch office.

Disappointed he didn’t fall- Josie decided to lend a hand. He kicked the chair leg. It immediately shot out from underneath Rocka William and dumped him unceremoniously onto the floor.

“Shouldn’t be sleeping on the job you lazy git.” Josie said.

“Oh yeah, like your job’s so hard.” Rocka William mumbled, getting up and rubbing his butt. “I think you broke my ass bone.”

“I’ll break your ass bone.” Josie threatened. He dropped a sealed envelope onto the ground in front of Rocka William so he had to bend down again to pick it up.

When Rocka William bent over to get it, he received a smack on the back of his head.

“Cut it out Josie. Are you going to be a jerk your entire life?”

“I might. But you’re not going to have any life left if you don’t hurry. A spotted striper dropped that letter off an hour ago already- I’m sure Wilson is anxious to get it and he’ll be none too happy you waited an hour before bringing it up.”

“You just gave it to me!” Rocka William protested.

“Yeah. That’s really rough buddy. Too bad that’s your problem- I’m not the messenger.”

Cackling cruelly, Josie wandered out of the room, leaving Rocka William alone with the envelope. Not wasting another second, the messenger ran out of his shack next to the main gate of Prussia and headed towards the center of town- the location of Wilson’s castle. Even if Rocka William didn’t go there five times a day, it would be easy to find. The castle was ten times larger than any of the surrounding buildings. It was a pretty standard castle, constructed of large slabs of stone with a general lack of windows and a silent, squat, imposing nature. The exception was a tall tower, reaching up 100 feet above the next highest roof.

Rocka William ran through the dirty streets of Prussia, jumping over the piles of garbage and dodging the numerous disabled beggars who practically lined the streets. Many of them lost their limbs building Wilson’s castle. Very few were brave enough to attest to it.

When he got to the front gate of the castle, he was out of breath and sweat matted his back. Rocka William was a hairy guy- it only took temperatures a few degrees above freezing to get him sweating.

“Slow down there boy.” Demanded Demand, the castle guard.

“I can’t. Josie gave me this message an hour late and he intends to try to fob off the lateness on me.”

It was well known around Prussia that there was no love loss between Demand and Josie.

“You want me to box his ears?”

“If you can do it under some pretext that wasn’t me putting you up to it- most certainly- but I don’t want my spleen torn out for it.”

“Fair enough. Take a deep breath and go up the stairs slow. If Wilson catches you this out of breath- he’ll want to know why you’re so winded. You don’t want to get his hackles up. Word is he’s in a foul mood today.”

“That’s a novelty then.” Rocka William laughed and headed inside.

The hallways were narrow- and crowded. Every few steps he had his foot stepped on or was effectively body-checked into the wall by any number of obnoxious men- and a few women- messengers held very little respect among the castle-dwellers. In spite of these hardships, Rocka William did his best to wind through the hostile people and make his way up to the room which stood guard over the tower.

Wilson’s throne room.

Four guards stood in front of the door. As always, their weapons were drawn. By Wilson’s dictate, the door guards weren’t even issued scabbards. None of the men gave Rocka William a second glance. They saw him all the time.

“Be careful- he’s in a bad mood.” One of them whispered- too quiet for Rocka William to make out who’d said it.

Rocka William took a deep breath and opened the door.

The throne room was a surprisingly stark place. There were tapestries hanging on the wall, each of them illustrating one of Wilson’s ‘achievements.’ There was one depicting Wilson capturing his pet llama Lou. There was another with Wilson holding the Helping Friendly Book over his head while much smaller people leapt up at it and never rose higher than Wilson’s belt. A third showed him taking an axe to the first tree cut down to create the city of Prussia. In the center of the room was the throne. In contrast to the Spartan lack of any other furniture- the throne was plush- just looking at it made most people want to take a nap.

Wilson was ensconced on his comfy throne, deep in conversation with Lou, his pet llama.

Lou wasn’t just your standard llama, with the woolly fur, fuzzy neck, and passing resemblance to a camel. Lou was packing his very own personal missile system. Designed personally by Wilson, Lou’s pack carried four small, surface-to-anything missiles and a small caliber machine gun. Wilson never loaded the machine gun, the noise was very distressful to Lou- but it made the rig look extra-wicked.

Because his palavers with Lou were private, Wilson was alone in the room with none of the normal hangers-on or sycophants. Wilson liked to hear the sound of his own voice- and often remarked to whoever was listening how much he liked it when it echoed around the cavernous throne room. Rocka William stood by the door and waited for the King to stop ranting.

It took about ten seconds for Wilson to realize Rocka William was in the room. When he realized the messenger was there, he howled in anger. Literally. He howled like a wolf.

“How long have you been standing there?” He demanded. “Are you spying on me?”

“No sir, Benevolent King Wilson, Sir. During a previous audience you requested my peon-ness should never interrupt you when you were pontificating with Lou. So I held my tongue Sire. A thousand pardons.”

“Fine- what do you want?”

Rocka William held the letter up.

“Yes, I understand what it is you idiot. Give it to me and then wait by the door in case I need to reply.”

Rocka William hurried to Wilson and handed him the envelope. Then he turned away and allowed a frown. Leaving quickly was always preferable to being made to wait. Waiting was often dangerous. Rocka William could see the spinning of the invisible roulette wheel of his fate.

He watched Wilson open the envelope, first snapping the thick wax seal in half. He took out a single piece of paper from the envelope. Rocka William's eyes followed Wilson's as they scanned the page. The invisible roulette wheel slowed, the little white ball was falling directly into the slots painted black- with tiny metaphorical skulls and crossbones. It was written all over Wilson's face.

"I can't believe it!" Wilson growled.

Then, with the same casualness of a burp in private- Wilson tapped a button on the arm of his throne.

Lou gave a llama growl of surprise as the pack on his back suddenly activated. One of the rockets fired and 'rocketed' across the room- and directly into Rocka William. The explosion was small, but powerful. The resulting mess spread Rocka William all over the walls and even onto the ceiling. At the sound, the guards came rushing in.

Plainly ignoring the blood and gore all over one corner of the throne room, Wilson said, "Lou, it's very clear to me what we have to do next. It shames me. A good accountant is hard to find. Oh, and Lou, remind me to charge up the AC/DC Bag. I think we'll be needing his services quite a bit over the next few weeks."

At the back of Wilson's throne room there is a thick wooden door. On the other side was the circular staircase leading up to the room at the top of the castle's one high tower. The room only contains a single item: a book. But it isn't just any book, it's The Book. The Helping Friendly Book. The secret to living in peace and harmony with nature- The book of Icculus.

At Wilson's words- the book shuddered- just the teeniest bit.

TELA>

Colonel Forbin stared at the water where Rutherford used to be, a look of frustration on his face. When McGrupp started whining and pushing his body against his leg, Forbin knelt down on one knee and rubbed the dog's head and neck.

"It's okay McGrupp, there's nothing you could've done to help, no reason to feel bad about yourself."

The dog wasn't whining about the water-logged knight- he was concerned with the massive hairy beast who'd come up behind them with the silence of a whisper. The creature was over ten feet tall when walking on all fours- and was covered with a thick matted purple fur. It was so tall, McGrupp couldn't even see the woman riding on the creature's back.

"Oh, please don't tell me he did it again." The woman said, following Forbin's gaze to the water.

Forbin whirled around, surprised and wide-eyed with fright.

Standing before him was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The Colonel's mouth dropped and his eyes glazed over. All thought came crashing to a halt while his brain absorbed and attempted to process the level of attraction he felt toward this woman, who was, he realized, riding a massive hairy beast who was, against all sense, mostly purple. At first, he hadn't even seen the giant creature he was so taken with the woman.

“Did he jump in there?” The woman asked.

Forbin could not speak- his gaze was fixed on her face- her hair, the little dimples at the corners of her mouth, her arresting sky blue eyes...

“Yo! Hey! Pay attention! Rutherford? Rutherford the Brave... did walk into the river again?” The woman yelled, she was looking at Forbin like he was harboring a mental deficiency of one sort or another.

Forbin blinked. Blinked again.

Finally, he answered, “Yes.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the massive hairy creature reached up, took the woman off of its back, and set her down on the ground in front of Forbin. Then, it leapt into the lake and disappeared underneath the water, leaving Forbin and the strange woman all alone.

Colonel Forbin watched the animal dive into the water- and immediately turned back to her.

The woman recognized Forbin’s facial expression. She’d seen it on lots of men- almost every one she ever encountered. A grin came onto her face. It was the grin one sees on the lips of a cat- along with the cream.

“May I have the honor of your name?” Forbin asked.

“Tela,” Answered Tela, “and my hairy companion is known as the Unit Monster. But don’t be afraid- the monster thing is mostly hot air- he’s actually quite nice so long as you’re not fighting with him.”

“A genuine pleasure to meet you.” Forbin said. Then, with a sheepish grin, he sort of bowed. Then, thinking the gesture insufficient, he took her hand- and kissed the back of it. He said, “My name is Colonel Trey Forbin, but please just call me Colonel.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Colonel.” Tela purred.

Forbin got to his feet. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“You said ‘again’- has he fallen into this water before?” He asked, desperate to restart the conversation.

Tela groaned. “Five times since last year. He forgets about his armor because he’s always wearing it. I’ve seen him without it- he’s actually quite a skilled swimmer. He’s just not particularly bright.” Tela’s hair was braided into a long pony tail and she tossed it over her shoulder.

“I hadn’t noticed.” Forbin responded, trying to be polite.

With a splash, the Unit Monster came up from the water with Rutherford’s limp body precariously balanced on its back. Forbin and Tela gave the creature room. It came out of the water and gently deposited Rutherford onto the muddy bank of the river.

“We need to turn him over.” Tela said.

The creature reached down with its muzzle and rolled the knight onto his stomach. Tela rushed to Rutherford’s side and began unbuckling the leather straps holding the two halves of his armor together. Her fingers were quick and practiced. Before long, she was pulling the back half of the armor away and beating madly on Rutherford’s back. All at once he vomited up a massive torrent of river water and gasped himself back to life.

“You could’ve warned me.” Rutherford said to Forbin once he’d gotten had a few moments to get his wind back.

“How was I supposed to know the river was deep?” Forbin protested.

Rutherford laughed. “Oh yeah, you’re not from here. I keep forgetting.”

Tela and Forbin exchanged a look.

Meanwhile, the Unit Monster was standing about 5 feet away when it decided it needed to give a good shake. Like a giant dog, the creature shook the excess water out of its purple

fur. This caused gallons of water to get all over the Rutherford, Tela and Forbin. It was so much water, none of them had any choice but to laugh at the sheer volume of it.

Forbin rushed to Tela's side and did his best to protect her from the deluge. Tela didn't care about getting wet, but she let Forbin take her under his arm. The degree that Forbin was smitten was plain- even to Rutherford.

Rutherford recognized Tela was a beautiful woman, but he'd always been attracted to rugged guys with facial hair and muscles- and so was impervious to Tela's considerable charms. Still, there could be no doubt- the Forbin had it bad. Rutherford resisted the urge to make fun of him- he knew almost all men fell immediately under Tela's sway.

Colonel Forbin thought he heard music playing when he saw her- the world took on a pink tinge and seemed to slow down. He felt the goofy, drugged look on his face, and could think only of flowers and candy...

NARRATION>

"Ah man, this isn't going to be a kissing book is it?" Henry asked his father Fluff.
"Shut up kid, that's a different story- you wanna get sued?"

TELA

The merriment and lovey-dovey feelings came to an abrupt end when five men appeared on the far side of the shore. They were all riding Multi-Beasts- six legged creatures with green fur- about half the size of the Unit Monster. They were heavily armored and armed, visibly carrying swords, knives, and nasty looking spears.

"All of you there! Halt!" Demanded the man in front- his helmet was just a tad higher than the other men- which Forbin, a military man, immediately recognized as the authority of his rank.

"Oh damn." Tela muttered.

"Who are they?" Forbin asked.

"Wilson's guards- they must've been following me. We can't let them take us- it'll be the Bag for us all."

"So do you want to run like wimpy cowards- or should we stay and fight like warriors and Lizards?" Rutherford asked.

No question his preference.

"Both, we can't fight well from here on the riverbank- we need to get into the trees- take away the maneuverability of the Multi-Beasts." Tela said.

Forbin gave the woman a look of appreciation. She was gorgeous and she had a fine grasp of military strategy. If it was possible, the moony look on his face indicated he was even more infatuated with her.

The three of them turned and ran into the trees with the Unit Monster guarding their flank. Forbin chanced a glance backwards and saw the five Multi-Beasts wading confidently into the water. Unlike Rutherford- these creatures weren't going to sink. Instead, they crossed the river rapidly, all six legs churning up the water behind them like boat motors.

"They're fast- we have to hurry." Forbin said.

"Of course they're fast- they're Multi-Beasts." Rutherford answered.

“The trees are thickest this way.” Tela pointed, and cut to the right.

It was a wise strategy. The pursuing guards followed them into the thick trees and found they were unable to maneuver effectively. In seconds, Rutherford, Tela, and the Unit Monster each circled back, picked out a guard, and took them down. Forbin watched with cold admiration while Tela deftly intercepted one of the guards. She used a tree as a launching pad flew up into the air and cut the guard’s throat- all in one fluid motion. Excited, Colonel Forbin started searching around his immediate vicinity for a chunk of wood large enough to use as a weapon.

All of a sudden, the guards were outnumbered- and judging from their cries of dismay and panic, they’d decided Wilson wasn’t paying enough cash to justify getting killed. Sadly for them, it was too late- Rutherford slashed one with his sword and the Unit Monster killed the other with his massive paws.

“Why did you kill those guards? What did they want?” Forbin asked when their group reformed amidst the dead bodies.

“They worked for Wilson- it doesn’t matter what they wanted- it would’ve ended with us being arrested and killed. We’re revolutionaries. I wouldn’t think it’d come as a surprise to you that Wilson, the despot, frowns on revolutionary activities. Now, if you don’t mind, Tela and I need to get going back to the camp.”

“You can’t just leave me standing here. What if someone tries to blame me for this?” Forbin swept his arm in the general direction of the guard’s gored bodies.

“He’s got a good point.” Tela agreed.

“Okay. You don’t think Errand will string us up for bringing him now- after we killed the guards?”

“One doesn’t really have anything to do with the other.” Tela said.

Rutherford appeared to try to ponder this statement- but he obviously wasn’t getting very far.

“Okay Tela- if you say so.” He smiled- glad he didn’t have to try to think anymore.

Tela gave Forbin a nod and a wink. His heart skipped a beat. She might’ve well have hit him over the head with a brick. A breeze suddenly kicked up and his nostrils were filled with a very pleasant blast of fresh air- the wind from beyond the mountains. The sun shone in the sky a skosh brighter.

“Unit, you can carry Colonel Forbin and I.” Tela said, scratching the top of the Unit Monster’s head.

In response the Unit Monster knelt down to facilitate climbing onto its thickly furred back. Tela and Forbin got up onto the creature. Once they were mounted, Tela said, “Rutherford- why don’t you take the Multi-Beast who was smart enough to throw its rider. We can always use more Calvary.”

“True enough.” Rutherford agreed. He went and hopped onto the Multi-Beast who seemed to understand its lot in life was to carry people around.

Once everyone was situated, they started towards the rebel camp. Forbin was quite pleasantly pressed up against Tela- and the rocking of the Unit Monster made the whole affair pleasantly lewd.

In order to get his mind from... other things, Colonel Forbin began asking Tela questions.

“So how did you end up on the back of a purple furry creature talking to a guy from another world on your way to a rebel camp?”

“I was born in the shadow of Wilson’s castle. My mother was a washer-woman. I don’t know who my father is. I asked plenty of times over the years, but she’d always refuse to talk about it. Now she’s dead, and I suppose I’ll never know who he is.”

“I’m so sorry, how did your mother die?”

“It was about ten years ago- and her death was entirely the fault of Wilson. My mom was down at the river doing her job, washing the clothes, when her foot slipped and she went down into the water. When she fell, she tore the shirt she was holding. You wouldn’t think it was a big deal. But, it turned out, the shirt was Wilson’s favorite- he’d been wearing it every day for the previous week. Because Prussia is full of spies, it soon got back to Wilson that his favorite shirt was torn- he had her killed.”

“Wilson killed her just because she tore his shirt?” Forbin asked, horrified.

“Yup. Or rather, he didn’t kill her- he’s too cowardly for that. The AC/DC Bag actually took her life- as if there’s a difference. My mother was killed for no good reason and I was left an orphan. To make things worse, I was then forced to take over my mother’s job washing clothes. For eight years I slaved down at the river, rubbing Wilson’s clothes on the rocks. One day, while I was scrubbing, I heard some people talking. They said they’d been hearing rumors about a small group of revolutionaries out in the woods. The one conversation was all I had to hear. The next night, I waited until everyone was asleep and snuck away from the castle. It took me a couple of weeks, but eventually I discovered the ‘revolutionaries’ were actually just 2 guys- Rutherford the Brave and Errand Wolfe. He’s our leader- you’ll meet him when we get into camp. For the first 6 months the whole revolution consisted of just the three of us. About a year and a half ago we gained an invaluable ally. Wilson’s accountant, a guy named Palmer- he started sending us envelopes full of cash. We used the money to do put on a few revolutionary actions, and since then, our numbers have grown significantly. We’ve grown, but not enough for us to pose a credible threat to Wilson and his guards. We need to fight. It’s crazy how many Lizards are willing to just put up with the oppression. There are even some folk who say we’re better off with Wilson in charge.”

“It’s like that where I came from too. I was a Colonel in the US Army. We had to fight many times in order to preserve our freedoms- and then at some point- we lost our way...” For the first time Forbin was unaware of Tela’s body pressed against him- his face was distant.

“Maybe it’s a disease- a plague inherent in life itself.”

“Maybe.”

“You know what really sucks? I bet the answer is in The Helping Friendly Book- but we can’t look because Wilson stole it.” Tela said.

“We’re here.” Rutherford said- pointing ahead.

The big knight had ridden up next to them on his Multi-Beast and Forbin hadn’t noticed. The sound of his voice startled him immensely- he nearly fell off of the back of the Unit Monster. At the last second, Tela reached out and yanked him back to stability. To Forbin’s embarrassment and excitement- he ended up in a heap in her lap, the side of his face smashed up against her “hot elf on the front cover of a Fantasy novel” breasts.

The Unit Monster came to a halt.

Tela looked down and said, “You can get down now Colonel Forbin.”

His face now beet red, Forbin did his best to gather together some dignity while he climbed down from the creature’s back. He almost made it, but at the last second, his hand slipped and he fell backward- square onto his ass. He landed with a ‘hrumph’ of expelled air.

Seconds later, Tela’s head appeared. She looked down and asked,

“Are you alright?”

Forbin got up, again, and dusted himself off. The Unit Monster was making a sound the Colonel recognized as laughter.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” Forbin said. He could feel the flush in his face and he stared down at his feet- not wanting to meet the eyes of his new friends.

“You need to be careful getting off of the ol’ Unit Monster.” Rutherford advised.

Tela dismounted the creature with the grace of a ballerina. She landed nimbly next to Forbin.

She reached out, squeezed his arm. “Relax sweetheart- everybody takes a tumble once in a while.” She whispered, and then, so quickly he wasn’t sure it really happened- she gave him a kiss on his lips.

She laughed at the look on Forbin’s face, grabbed Rutherford in one hand, Forbin in the other- and dragged the men to talk to Errand Wolfe- leader of the revolutionaries.

WILSON

The revolutionary camp reminded Colonel Forbin of the kind of summer camp parents used to send their kids to in the 50’s. There was a series of crudely built cabins situated in a rough semi-circle. Visible beyond the cabins was a larger collection of tents. Beyond the tents were an archery range and a series of roughly circular patches of ground Forbin assumed were somehow used for training- either with swords or maybe just hand-to-hand combat.

“Errand Wolfe should be around here somewhere I think.” Tela said.

Their little band walked together toward to the largest of the cabins. Two very angry, very strong looking gentlemen were guarding the cabin entrance- they carried spears. When Tela and company approached, the spears crossed in front of the door.

“Errand Wolfe is not to be disturbed.” Said the guard on the right.

“Hey, Dave- relax. It’s me. Tela. Errand will see us.”

“Errand Wolfe is not to be disturbed.” The guard repeated.

“Oh, for crying out loud. Hey! Errand! Get out here- me and Rutherford are back and your goons won’t let us in.” Tela yelled at the front door.

For a long moment there was silence- and then the door swung open. A man walked out. His most distinctive quality was his almost pathological lack of distinctive qualities. Errand Wolfe had a plain face, the kind you forgot ten minutes after seeing it. He was of average height and was younger than Forbin- but not by all that much- he looked to be in his mid-forties.

He said, “Come in.” And walked back into the cabin.

Tela, Forbin and Rutherford followed. The Unit Monster stayed outside- the only cabin he was allowed to enter was Tela’s. The cabin was gloomy and filled with shadows. It was badly in need of a good sweeping. Errand Wolfe had made himself comfortable in a large chair at the head of a long wooden table.

“Errand, I have just returned from rescuing our friend Rutherford again.”

“What happened?”

“He fell into the river again.” Tela said. The tone in her voice was that of a mother reporting a child’s folly to the father in a 1950’s sitcom.

“Oh Rutherford, are you ever going to learn?” Errand asked, laughing amiably.

“I know. I know. I’m an idiot.” Forbin said, looking sheepishly at his feet.

“Oh now, none of that Rutherford. You are the bravest and the strongest amongst us- you are the beating heart of this revolution. That doesn’t cease to be true just because you have a hard time with the concept of buoyancy.”

Rutherford stood up a little straighter from the praise.

“What’s with the guards on the door?” Tela asked, motioning over her shoulder. “And for that matter- what’s with the guards in here?” She indicated the four guards who’d taken up position around Errand’s chair.

They glowered at her.

“I’ve gotten word through the grapevine- we’ve got a spy in our midst.”

“Who?” Tela demanded. “They must be killed at once.”

“I don’t know. But I’m not going to trust just one guard- I figure with four- the three can protect me from the traitor.”

“Good thinking.” Tela said. “I am glad you are safe. But now I must introduce you to someone Rutherford met in the woods. His name is Colonel Forbin.”

Forbin stepped forward from behind Rutherford. Errand Wolfe stared at Forbin for a very long time. The Colonel’s face revealed nothing. He just stood and stared back, the two men’s eyes locked in an unspoken test of will.

“You aren’t from around here.” Errand Wolfe said.

“No sir. I come from a land called America.”

If Errand Wolfe was even listening- he showed no sign.

“And why shouldn’t I have you killed right now?” He asked.

“Because that’d be stupid.” Forbin responded. “I represent no threat to you. In fact, I want to help you. I’m not fan of tyrants- I’ve actually overthrown one you know- Saddam Hussein. He was a right bastard.”

“That’s what Wilson said when he first arrived- ‘I just want to help.’ Of course, back then, we were all so naïve- it didn’t even occur to us he could be a threat. I’d like to believe I’ve learned a few things since then.”

“I don’t know much about Wilson beyond what Tela and Rutherford have told me, but it sounds like he’s the type of guy who needs some revolutionaries to overthrow him.”

“Plus, he’s nuttier than a fruitcake.” Tela added.

“I’m hungry- it is nearly supper. Let’s go eat, and afterwards, I will tell you the story of what drew me out here to the forest- the injustice that my heart yearns to revenge.”

They ate a delicious meal of roast something or other- it tasted like pork to Colonel Forbin. There were all kinds of fruits and cheeses- it was a nice spread.

“You guys eat well for a ragtag band of folks in the woods.”

“We are well funded.” Errand Wolfe said, a tad cryptically.

Forbin remembered Tela saying something about a guy named Palmer.

By the time the meal was over, the sun was down. All the revolutionaries walked from the dining table to a large fire built in the center of the semi-circle of cabins. After a few minutes of chattering conversation, Errand Wolfe climbed up on a boulder. As soon as he did, everyone got quiet. Once he had complete silence, Errand began to tell his story.

“Once upon a time, I had a son. His name was Roger. He was the kind of kid every parent dreams of having. His life began in tragedy- my wife died delivering him. Some may have developed resentments towards such a child- but to me- his survival just made him all the more precious. He was an easy boy to love. Smart, eager to please and quick to lend a hand when one was needed. For me, the sun pretty much rose and set with Roger. He was pretty good at everything he tried- but his one true love was the hackey sack. You know the game?”

Forbin admitted he did not. There wasn't very much hackey sack in the US military.

Errand Wolfe reached into the pocket of his vest and removed a small leather sack/ball. He tossed it to Forbin who caught it easily. The hackey sack was soft- he could feel the small beads that filled the inside.

"That was Roger's hackey sack. He used to play with it for hours, doing tricks. The idea is you cannot use your hands and the game is to kick the sack in the air and try to keep it from hitting the ground. Forbin tossed the hackey sack back towards Errand Wolfe. Instead of catching it, he used his chest to block the throw. When it had almost hit the ground, he snapped out his foot and deftly caught it. Then Errand Wolfe snapped his foot up and the hackey sack soared back up into the air. He kicked it successively on his instep, his knee- and on the outside of his foot. He flipped it back into the air, stalled it on his forehead, and then let it drop again to rest on the top of his foot.

"Roger was the best Lizard alive at this game. Sometimes it looked like he was making the hackey sack float in the air."

Tela and Rutherford both nodded their agreement. Errand Wolfe wasn't exaggerating- Roger was amazing at hackey sack.

"One day, Wilson put up posters all over Prussia- there was going to be a hackey sack competition- and the winner would get a small sack of gold. Not enough to retire on- but all of us Lizards were pretty poor- that sack of gold meant we weren't going to have to worry about eating for a while. And there was no doubt, from the minute the posters went up- Roger was going to win."

"He was that good?"

"He was indeed. The day of the competition, a whole ton of Lizards showed up to watch. The atmosphere was like a circus. It was really fun. Everywhere you went there were people playing hackey sack and eating food- a band even set up on the side of the competition field. They were great- I can even remember their name. 'Blackwood Convention.' Anyway, the competition started, and of course, Roger sailed right through to the finals.

"He goes up against the last kid- and he just destroys the poor guy. It wasn't even competitive. Roger was good no matter what- but he was in especially fine form that day. I don't think Icculus could've taken him. I was elated- I could already taste the food the winnings would put on our table. Everyone was cheering and a few people hoisted Roger up onto their shoulders and were parading him around. And then, out of the blue, Wilson himself stands up and demands silence. He says Roger has done very well, but he has one more match to win before he can collect his reward. Right then and there, my heart sank- Wilson had pulled this kind of shenanigan before, promising a prize he had no intention of delivering. Every Lizard at the competition knew what was coming next. Wilson announced Roger must out-hackey him in order to get the money."

"Was Wilson good at hackey sack?" Forbin asked.

"No. That's the whole point. He knew- as we all knew- all he had to do to win- was to play. No judge would ever say he lost a round- let alone a whole match- doing so guaranteed an immediate trip to the AC/DC Bag. My heart sank even further when I saw Roger wasn't going to just accept defeat. He was a good kid Roger- he had a keen sense of justice- and wasn't willing to look the other way in the face of tyranny. It was only by his brave example I was able to stand up against Wilson myself when... it was all over. You see, instead of just doing his thing and letting Wilson be declared the victor even though everyone would know it was total shazbot- Roger wouldn't go along. He stood up and said,

“You know what King Wilson? You are a real disappointment. You’re this horrible tyrant- but then you had this contest- so for a while I was thinking maybe you weren’t the most terrible person in Gamehendge. But now, after you pull this ridiculous move- you’ve got me back thinking that you’re the worst one. I must inquire Wilson, can you still have fun?”

Wilson stared at my boy with crazy hatred in his eyes.

“What did you just ask me?” He demanded. I tried to run to Roger’s aid- but a bunch of Wilson’s goons held me back.

“I theorized you were the worst person in Gamehendge and then I asked if you were still capable of just having a good time. Thus the question, can you still have fun?”

“Oh my boy. Fun? You want to know if I can have fun? I’ll show you fun. I’ll show you the hootenanny of your life! You will be hung this very day- before the fall of night. In fact, guards, seize him, I think we shall go there straight away- no need to muck about with the paperwork associated with imprisonment.”

Roger didn’t even try to run. He let them take him. Twenty minutes later, my son Roger was dead. He went from triumph- to death- in less than one half hour- and all at the whim of a madman.”

Errand Wolfe stopped talking. There were tears flowing down his cheeks. Everyone just stood in silence. Forbin was moved by the look of heartbroken sorrow on the rebel leader’s face. But, the sorrow wasn’t alone- when Errand opened his eyes- you could see rage too- it was etched in his corneas- an angry red light. After a little while, he looked up again and finished.

“That is my story. I am an angry man. If I could, I would go off into the forest and never look back. But I cannot. I cannot because my son would not want me to. My son was brave- so I will be brave. I will stay and fight Wilson to my last breath. And when he is dead I will stuff my son’s hackey sack into his dead mouth so his ghost may choke on it for eternity.”

“I will help you. I am a slayer of tyrants.” Forbin said, his voice low, serious.

“You are to be made welcome here with us. You will be given a tent for yourself and your animal. Welcome Colonel Forbin, may our victory be sweet.”

Punch You in the Eye

Everything was going so well.

Mr. Palmer, the Chief Financial Officer for the entire land of Gamehendge and Wilson’s personal accountant- sat in his office, looking out the window, and gloating. On his desk was an envelope full of money. It was Wilson’s money, but like so much money before it- the whole stack was going to Errand Wolfe and the rebels out in the forest. The irony was just too juicy. When the rubber hit the road, Wilson was funding the very rebellion destined to bring him to his knees.

Embezzling from Wilson wasn’t particularly difficult. He showed very little interest in fiscal policy- he just wanted things- and Palmer was just there to tell him if he could afford them. If he couldn’t, it was Wilson’s standard response to raise taxes immediately until he could afford to acquire whatever was striking his fancy that month. The garbage dumps of Prussia held many piles of remains- each one representing the detritus of Wilson’s forgotten obsessions.

All of which meant- the treasury was ripe for picking- and Palmer helped himself on a regular basis. In the beginning, he took immense care in his thievery. He painstakingly altered records, transferred funds and created ledgers full of fake charges and debits- all to hide the money being filtered off to fund the rebellion. But, as the months passed and Wilson never showed any sign of catching on, Palmer became more complacent. It was obvious no one was minding the store. Wilson wasn't ever going to check up on the status of accounts- so Palmer stopped faking the records and just took whatever amount Errand Wolfe needed- and gave it no further thought.

In addition to the funds he stole for the rebellion, he also took money to facilitate his rather out-of-control collection of small elephant figurines. He'd never actually seen an elephant- but for some reason, there was a preponderance of elephant figurines in the shops of Prussia. One day, Palmer bought one on a whim and stuck it on his dresser. It looked lonely, so he bought it a friend. Things got out of hand from there.

He was so comfortable in his safety he'd actually stopped worrying about getting caught altogether. So when a group of ten accountants crashed into his office without an invitation- the only weapons at hand were elephant figurines- and although accountants are not the toughest people- it would take more than a small figurine in the shape of a pachyderm to stop them all.

Trying to cover his fear, Palmer leapt to his feet waving one arm wildly while, with the other hand, he slid the envelope full of money into a drawer.

"What are you doing here? I am the King's accountant- you have no right to enter my office." He projecting a confidence and authority he didn't really feel.

"Button up Palmer- we know what you've been up to." said the lead auditor. He brandished a very sharp pencil only inches from Palmer's eye.

He had no choice but to put up his arms and retreat into the corner where he was covered by three accountants armed with staplers.

Within five minutes, Palmer knew he was screwed. The lead auditor- his name turned out to be Shafty- found the envelope full of money in his drawer. Palmer immediately regretted writing Errand Wolfe's name right on the envelope.

"How did you know?" Palmer asked once Shafty had collected enough evidence to prove Palmer's guilt beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"One of your own ratted you out."

"Who!" Palmer demanded, his face growing red with anger.

"Careful there buddy- don't want you to blow a gasket before the AC/DC Bag gets a chance to give you the old jiggy feet."

"Who did it? Who's the traitor?"

Shafty got up into Palmer's face. He could smell the pickles from the sandwich he'd eaten for lunch.

Shafty said, quietly, "See, now- that's just gotta be terrible for you- because I'm not going to tell you who the traitor is. I'm not going to say a word. And you'll go to your death not knowing who sold you up the river." The auditor giggled like a loon- and then knocked Palmer unconscious with a sock filled with quarters.

When Palmer woke he had a pounding headache. As an added bonus, he was locked in a cell in the castle dungeon.

"Wilson, some day I'll kill you till you die. Oh, Wilson, I'll punch you in the eye." he mumbled, shaking his fist absently at the ceiling.

There are many different kinds of cells. The modern cell for a non-violent offender- for instance- is a humane- if constraining- place to spend an afternoon. Get all thoughts of that

kind of a cell out of your head. Think a great deal dingier. Let your head fill with thoughts of medieval torture chambers and the dankest pits of human suffering. The walls were covered with the grime of years of sweat and tears and the floor was coated with rat poop. The room's only light trickled through the bars of a tiny window. This was also where the moldy bread was delivered- once every few days. And there wasn't much of it. Palmer sat on the moldy floor with his head in his hands. He sat and he thought about how miserable he was.

"Cheer up Palmer." He told himself, "You'll soon be dead."

Back at the rebel camp, Forbin woke up from a satisfying nap. McGrupp woke up with him- and immediately began pawing at the flap of the tent.

"You gotta go potty?" Forbin asked, unzipping the flap.

McGrupp jumped out of the tent and ran about 10 feet before unleashing a two minute stream of urine onto the forest floor.

"You really had to go!" Forbin laughed, and walked out into the woods for his own morning constitutional.

Walking back, Forbin absently scratched a mosquito bite on his ass and looked around at the magnificent beauty of the trees all around him. They grew hundreds of feet tall and their leaves were a green so bright- they were almost psychedelic. All of a sudden, a small spotted creature about the size of a squirrel went scampering past. McGrupp wasn't going to let such a rudeness pass- and the dog immediately gave chase. At first, Forbin hissed for the dog to leave the animal alone- but then he realized where the creature was headed- Tela's cabin. Colonel Forbin wasn't about to miss an opportunity to see Tela, especially since she'd conceivably still be in her nightclothes.

Sure enough, McGrupp chased the little spotted creature right up to Tela's front door. When it ducked through a hole near the cabin's door, McGrupp started barking at it in protest. Forbin made a half-hearted attempt to silence his dog.

After a few moments, Tela opened her door- her eyes looking bleary from sleep. Forbin saw nothing but elegance in the way every mussed hair stuck out into the air. She was wearing a filmy camisole and a pair of silken pants. Just being in her presence lowered Forbin's IQ by nearly half.

"I'm sorry to bother you Tela. McGrupp got a bead on one of those critters that are always coming and going from your cabin."

"You mean the spotted stripers?" Tela asked, pointing to a cage in the corner. Several of the little guys were inside. McGrupp made a beeline for the cage, sat down and stared up at it the way fat people stare at a steak and lobster buffet.

"Those are them." He agreed.

"Well, he got in safe and sound..." Tela said, clearly wanting to dismiss Forbin.

Only Forbin didn't want to be dismissed. He was interested in her being half-naked- but he was also curious about what the spotted stripers were for.

"What are the spotted stripers for?"

No better way to find out than to ask.

"Uh, they're messengers. We Lizards use them all the time to pass secret messages"

"Did you just get a secret message?"

"Uh..."

For a moment, Tela looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Then, she smiled- and not just any smile- it was a sultry, seductive smile.

“Oh Colonel Forbin- we both know you didn’t come over here to ask about some silly spotted stripers.” She leered at him in exactly the way she did in his imaginings.

She also tugged on her camisole so it slid across her breasts, exposing a few additional inches of cleavage. Forbin tried, but was unable to mask his naked lust for her.

“You are the most stunningly beautiful creature I have seen in all of Gamehendge.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” She said, shifting her posture so her thigh almost pressed up against his.

“Tela...”

‘I love you’ were going to be the next (ridiculous) words out of Forbin’s mouth. But he was mercifully interrupted by a pounding on the door. Then it just popped open.

“Come quick- something terrible has happened!” Rutherford said, and then ran back out of the cabin.

Tela was out the door like a shot. Forbin watched her go for a minute and then hurried behind her. They shifted down 3 cabins and arrived in front of Errand Wolfe’s. Forbin walked in front of the door to go inside and had to dive out of the way. A chair just missed him- it flew past and onto the front lawn, one of the chair legs cracking off in the process.

“Wasn’t throwing that at you.” Errand Wolfe muttered, before picking up another chair and breaking this one against the wall.

“In the name of Icculus- what happened?” Tela asked. She looked concerned.

“What happened? What happened? The unthinkable. That’s what.”

“Please tell us!” Rutherford begged. “I won’t be able to think of it- you just said so.”

Errand stared at Rutherford, and for a second, Forbin thought Errand might strike the much larger man for saying such a stupid thing. But he just sighed.

“Palmer. He’s been captured and thrown in the dungeon. They’re going to try him tomorrow- and he will be hung.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.” Was the general consensus- offered up by everyone in the room in one form or another.

Rutherford, recognizing the look of confusion on Forbin’s face, explained, “Palmer was the guy who got us the money to eat and live out here and grow the movement. Without the money- I’m afraid everything is just going to fall apart.”

“And they’re going to hang this guy?”

“Yup.”

“Well, then don’t you think we should mount some kind of rescue mission?”

“What’s the point? Out here, he’s just another mouth to feed. He’s better off getting hung.”

Forbin shut up. It was becoming clear to him why these people were so easily enslaved. They had no sense of taking the offensive. Heavily discouraged, he slumped in his chair and listened as the Lizard Standing Delegation debated and rejected one solution after another. After two hours, he got up and quietly walked away. Palmer was going to die- and there wasn’t a single thing the Lizards were going to do to stop it.

AC/DC BAG

On the morning of his execution, Palmer woke up early. He didn’t wake up because he wanted to wring every last moment from the time left he had to live- he woke up from a

coughing fit brought on by the damp and the cold and the rat feces. Eventually, he was able to regain control of his respiratory system. He sat up and shifted around so his back was leaning up against the wall. Then he waited.

While he sat, Palmer tried to think about good things. But he couldn't think of any. Not even thinking about his miniature elephant figurines could cheer him. He was going to be killed- the revolution was losing its only source of funding- and it was all because of some cowardly traitor. All Palmer ever wanted to do was collect figurines and overthrow a dictator. He didn't want to hang. And if he had to- he certainly didn't want to hang at the hands of an SOB like Wilson.

To the empty cell he said, "Who would've thought it? That's where I am. No future at all." Tears ran down his cheeks.

About an hour later, Palmer heard approaching footsteps. The door was unbolted and four guards entered the cell. They all wore identical scowls on their faces and they were clearly not interested in having a conversation.

"Get up."

Palmer got up. His hands were tied behind his back and a cloth bag was pulled over his head. There were holes cut out for the eyes and the thick burlap had a crude grin painted onto it. The effect was meant to reduce the macabre act of moving a prisoner to the hanging stage- but in practice- the crazy smile on the burlap, combined with the terrified eyes of the prisoner peeking out from within the burlap- served to be far more disturbing than the prisoner's face alone.

With a sword pushed against his back, Palmer was led out of the dungeon and into a Multi-Beast drawn cart. It wasn't much of a conveyance- it was just a cage on wheels. And not a cheap one either- this cage was made from thick iron bars- and the door was held shut with a large padlock. As he was brought out and loaded onto the cart, Palmer searched all around, hoping to catch a glimpse of the revolutionaries. One of the things holding him together in the cell was the possibility they were going to try to rescue him before Wilson got a chance to hang him.

He saw no one.

At least, no one friendly. There were plenty of people who took a moment to throw something at him. Usually it was rocks, sometimes it was refuse. Palmer was at least grateful there were no monkeys about- they tended to throw their feces. He reflected that it wasn't personal. After all, no one even knew it was him- he was just a guy in a cage- and yet everyone felt justified in chucking things at him. Palmer could remember the time before Wilson. In those times, the Lizards would never have thought to throw things at people.

As the cage made its way through the streets to the hanging square, Palmer looked around at the city with the fresh eyes of the nearly dead. It wasn't a very pleasant place. All of the buildings were crude- thrown together without any clear plan or craftsmanship. The people who weren't throwing things at him all looked as miserable as he felt. The roads weren't well made either- and he kept getting knocked over sideways when the cart hit one of the numerous holes. Several times Palmer knocked his head pretty hard on the iron bars.

Hanging Square- located just outside of Wilson's castle- was packed from one end to the other. It was always crowded during a hanging. The prurient interests of the population were part of it- but a larger factor was the common knowledge that Wilson had agents and spies throughout the crowd. These spies were there to take notice of people who missed more than one or two hangings in a row. All citizens of Prussia were expected to contribute.

In the center of the square was a raised wooden platform where the hanging actually took place. It was made of wood and covered in bird poop. Wilson was there, smiling madly. The AC/DC Bag was there too.

The AC/DC Bag, like Lou's missile system, was designed by Wilson. It was a robot with only one purpose- to pull the lever- releasing the trap door and dropping the condemned to their death by a broken neck when they were lucky- by asphyxiation when they weren't. The AC/DC Bag was humanoid in shape, with wide, square shoulders. Its arms were comparatively tiny- which would've been funny if the skinny little arms didn't cause people to die. There was a large, black bag over the robot's head- presumably to guard its anonymity. A plug came out of the AC/DC Bag's foot. The plug was paired with an extension cord. The cord snaked across the square and into an alley where a smoky generator chugged along, providing the necessary electricity.

"Ah, how nice of you to join us..." Wilson started.

Then, he paused, while one of the guards reached into the cage and pulled off the mask covering the accountant's head.

"Mr. Palmer!" Wilson proclaimed, raising both arms up over his head like Palmer had just won the big big prize.

A hiss of shock ran through the crowd. Mr. Palmer was generally considered above reproach- it was like seeing Mother Theresa or Gandhi. Murmurs of conjecture ran through the crowd as everyone tried to guess what Palmer could've done to find himself facing the AC/DC Bag. A few of the figurine vendors in the crowd wondered if he'd somehow gotten into debt because of his elephants- they uniformly mourned the thought of losing him as a customer.

The guards dragged Palmer up the stairs to the hanging platform. He tried his best to look brave, but his legs were shaking so badly he thought he might fall.

One of the guards shook his shoulder, "Get a hold of yourself boy- if you fall- the crowd will fall on you and tear you to bits- that's far worse than a quick snap."

Trying to understand what was keeping him from at least attempting to run away, Palmer found himself working hard to climb to the top of the stairs and walk to the trap door. He stood still while the noose was pulled over his head and tugged tight around his neck. The rope was scratchy.

Wilson spoke to the crowd.

"People of Prussia. This person- Mr. Palmer- has been caught red handed participating in one of the most heinous crimes one can perpetrate."

"He made it with a llama?" asked a random voice in the crowd.

This got a hearty laugh all around. The only one who didn't think it was funny was Palmer. He can be forgiven his loss of sense of humor.

Wilson waited for the rabble to quiet down before continuing. "I'm afraid it's something far worse than giving unnatural attention to a llama. Our dear Mr. Palmer, one of the most trusted citizens in Prussia- has been caught diverting hard-given tax funds to the terrorist training camps in the woods outside of Prussia. My auditors tell me he's been funding them for months and months- we don't know how far back the subterfuge goes. So, people of Prussia- I stand here before you with an offer of apology. Several times over the past years I've been forced to raise taxes on you, the humble Lizards, in order to keep Prussia running tip-top. It turns out- all of these increases might've been avoided if it wasn't for the man standing before you- about to pay the ultimate price for his crimes. Frankly, ladies and gentlemen- I think he's getting off pretty easy getting the AC/DC Bag. The terrorists out in

the forest have been living like Kings while the rest of you struggle to feed yourselves and your many, filthy children.”

Wilson paused and took a card out of his pocket. He smiled at the crowd, the waited patiently.

He read the card, “As it is written in the Helping Friendly Book- it isn’t very nice to kill someone- I think we can all agree these little gatherings aren’t the most pleasant of experiences. But they are necessary to keep order and live in peace and harmony with nature. Thus, we have introduced the AC/DC Bag. A fully automated hanging machine run by electricity and morally bound to no one. When I press this button a random number generator starts picking numbers between 1 and 3. When it gets a 3, the trapdoor opens. All hail the glory of the FUTURE!”

This last part came with a crescendo of volume- the gathered crowd clapped and cheered. The spies watched carefully to see who wasn’t cheering with the requisite gusto.

While the crowd cheered, Palmer said to Wilson, “I want my final wish.”

“What?” Wilson asked, leaning closer to hear over the crowd.

“My final wish. I want it.”

“Who said you get a final wish?”

“Everyone gets a final wish.” Palmer said, reasonably.

“Fine. But if your wish is to be acquitted- you can forget it.”

“Nope. I want to know who ratted me out. Who’s the rebel traitor?”

Wilson grinned. He made an exaggerated face of deep thought. He put his hands on his temples and said, “Ah, I see, Mr. Palmer is concerned with the thousand dollar question. Just like Roger- he’s a crazy little kid.”

“I need to know who put me here. I *deserve* to know.”

Wilson clicked off the microphone and turned to Palmer, he spoke quietly into his own shoulder, “Alright then, I don’t want to waste any more of these good people’s time on your much deserved punishment. Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you what you want to know. But first, you’re going to kiss my feet and beg for forgiveness. You’re going to acknowledge that you and the rebels have been the cause of all of the Lizard’s economic suffering of late. And then, and only then, will I tell you what you want to know.”

“Fine.” Palmer said.

He would yell out the name as soon as he heard it- and he would be avenged.

For five minutes Palmer confessed to a number of untrue crimes. His main concern was to direct any legitimate anger the people might feel towards himself- and away from Errand Wolfe and the revolutionaries. He even confessed to his elephant figurine collection.

When he was done, he found himself pelted again with rocks and vegetables. The people had remarkably good aim- none came close to Wilson, who was standing only seven feet away. Once the pelting dwindled to a halt, Wilson walked over to Palmer and got right up next to his ear before whispering the name of the traitor in his ear.

As soon as the name was out of his mouth, Wilson reached out and hit the button activating the AC/DC Bag. A red light on the robot’s chest blinked twice, and the trapdoor under Palmer’s feet opened. He dropped about four feet before the noose snapped taut and broke the revolutionary accountant’s neck.

The shock on Palmer’s face at learning the name of the traitor was obvious to the entire crowd gathered to watch the hanging- although they didn’t know the source of his shock.

Palmer's last word, spoken only milliseconds before his neck snapped, was the name of the traitor. The person responsible for bringing the revolution to its knees. The name was...

Tela.

Sadly, no one heard him.

SET II

NARRATION

It was a month after the tragic loss of Palmer.

Forbin couldn't take it anymore. The Lizard revolutionaries could scarcely be bothered to get up out of their bunks. Even Tela did nothing but mope around- she was so sad all the time- Forbin never got a chance to tell her about his increasingly frustrated feelings for her. The intriguing sense of urgency- the buzz of energy he felt the first night when Errand Wolfe told the story of the death of Roger- was completely gone.

The intervening weeks were spent learning to ride a Multi-Beast and generally working some muscle back into his aging frame. He did this as much to prepare for the upcoming weeks as to try to have a body worthy of Tela when she eventually came out of her funk.

Forbin decided he needed to start taking things into his own hands. If the Lizards couldn't figure out how to improve their situation- then Forbin would help them. He would show them the way. It seemed to him- they were really over-thinking the whole affair. Since his first day in Gamehendge, everyone told him basically the same story: The only way Wilson would ever be defeated was if he no longer possessed the Helping Friendly Book. This made the objective fairly straight forward. The Lizards needed to get the book back. Forbin struggled to understand how starting a revolution in the forest mattered when all you had to do was get one person up into Wilson's tower- and the whole thing was over. They didn't need to engage in a war, they only needed to capture the flag.

An experienced war-fighter, Forbin understood he needed on-the-ground intelligence regarding how tightly the book was guarded. He asked everyone in the camp- but the best they could do were gross approximations- and when pressed- none of them had been in Prussia in over a year- so they couldn't really say what was happening there. Forbin decided it was necessary to go himself. He got directions to Prussia from Rutherford, borrowed a Multi-Beast, and was on his way.

Nobody bothered Colonel Forbin at the gates of Prussia. He just strolled right in and the guards didn't give him a second look. He had a story prepared if he'd been forced to tell it- but thankfully- no one asked.

It wasn't a very believable story.

Once he was inside the walls of Prussia, it was a cinch to find the castle- the one tall tower was visible everywhere- like Icculus' mountain to the east. Forbin looked around at the grubby and desperate people shuffling around him. He avoided their eyes- there was no point in drawing attention. Even though he was keeping a low profile, it was impossible not to notice how haggard everyone looked.

Before going to the castle, Forbin had an errand to run. Just before he left the revolutionary camp, he'd had a brief conversation with Rutherford. The knight approached a little sheepishly.

"Um, excuse me, Colonel?"

"What's up Rutherford?"

"I was wondering. Um, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, what do you need?"

“Take this,” Rutherford said, putting some money into Forbin’s hand, “and go to the market square. There’s going to be a whole bunch of different vendors all over the place- but the one you want has a green flag out in front. It’ll say, “My Left Toe.” Don’t go anywhere else- you never know what kind of meat you’ll get from some of those places. While you’re there- I want you to buy two meat sandwiches. Get one for yourself and have them wrap the other one up. Tell them the to-go sandwich is for me and they’ll put extra meat on them both. Before you eat it- and before you stick mine in a safe place- go over to the side of the table and just lather on the sauce- it is the most delicious stuff in the world.”

Forbin took the money and put it into his pocket.

“No problem. One meat sandwich. I should be back by tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait- I love those sandwiches.” Rutherford said, smiling for the first time since Palmer’s death.

Not sure where exactly the market was located, Forbin wandered around the city streets for a while, hoping to chance upon the market square. Eventually, he got a whiff of cooking on the wind and he followed it to his destination. The closer he got, the greater the variety of smells wafting through the air- most of them quite tantalizing.

After a few minutes, he emerged into the square and was a bit astonished at what he found. The entire area was packed with people- all of them selling something. In addition to food, vendors were selling handmade clothing, jewelry, paintings, oils, balms and bumper stickers (which were weird because there were no cars in Prussia- presumably they put them on the back of their multi-beast drawn carts). All of them were dressed in crazy clothes- bright cloth and wacky patterns sewn together in with no real discernable pattern. Everyone was yelling, trying to draw attention to their wares. It made for a mad cacophony of sound and movement- something about the scene brought a grin to Forbin’s lips.

Moving slowly, trying to take everything in, Forbin jostled his way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of vendors and customers. At times, the scent of the Lizards around him overwhelmed the smells of the food. When this happened, the look on Forbin’s face made it pretty clear- the smell wasn’t pleasant. Eventually, he came across the green flag with “My Left Toe” written on it. There was a line. Forbin got in it and waited. It moved swiftly- and in a few minutes the Colonel was standing in front of a massively fat guy with a blood stained apron and a wide, cheery smile.

“Uh, yes, I would like to get two meat sandwiches- one for here and one to go. And I was told to tell you the to-go one is for Rutherford the Brave.”

The big man took a double take. His eyes sought out Forbin’s- he was searching for any sign Forbin wasn’t Rutherford’s friend- but instead- a threat.

Evidently, the man saw what he wanted to see, because he asked, “Is Rutherford well?”

“He’s hanging in there- been tough the past month.” Forbin responded.

The cook nodded his understanding and went to get the sandwiches.

When they were prepared, the cook came back to the counter and laid down two large sandwiches. Rutherford wasn’t kidding- these sandwiches had twice as much meat as the one’s purchased by the people in front of him.

“If this is for Rutherford- he’s going to want some sauce.” The cook turned back and ordered his son to go and fetch it.

The boy went to a cart set up behind the stall and pulled off a small jar. Forbin couldn’t help notice he didn’t use his bare hands- he used a pair of heavy metal tongs. That was the moment Forbin decided he was going to pass on the sauce. He watched as the cook averted his eyes and nose and poured a healthy amount of the sauce onto the meat. When he was

finished, his son immediately capped the jar and returned it to its place on the cart. The cook set the sandwiches on the table.

“We used to keep the sauce out all the time, but a kid accidentally spilled some on himself and had to go to the hospital.”

“What is it?”

“It’s made from the merciless insanity peppers of Quetzlzacatenango.”

“They’re hot?”

“I told ya, the kid had to go to the hospital.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“To Rutherford- they are. I only keep it around because I know he loves it. By the way, tell him Faht says ‘hello.’”

“I’ll tell him.”

Forbin took the sandwiches and stowed Rutherford’s in his sack. When he tried to pay for them, Faht put his hand over Forbin’s and shook his head.

“Rutherford is a very brave man. Let these sandwiches be my small, inadequate contribution to your, um, cause.” Faht grinned.

Forbin grinned back. “Be seeing you.” He said.

Forbin waited until he was outside the crowded confines of the square to try his sandwich. It smelled delicious.

But the taste! It was like bacon- times 1000. Forbin’s eyes briefly rolled up into the whites and his mouth filled with so much saliva he found himself drooling from both corners of his mouth. For a moment his entire body was literally shut down while every neuron in the pleasure center of Forbin’s brain fired at the same time. His toes curled from the taste of the meat.

Then he felt a tapping on his shoulder and it yanked him out of his reverie.

“Excuse me, but you aren’t from here- are you?”

Forbin- immediately conscious of the drool running down his face- laughed and looked away. “Excuse me. I must look like a freak. It’s just this sandwich- it is phenomenal.”

Lacking a napkin, Forbin was forced to wipe his mouth on his sleeve.

For the first time, Colonel Forbin actually looked at the person he was addressing. It was a man. He was short, wearing a garish crown, and followed by a llama- with missiles and a machine gun- in addition to a small retinue of guards looking on from behind.

Forbin realized he was standing in front of the evil tyrant King Wilson. He couldn’t believe his dumb luck.

“I ask you again. Are you from here?” Wilson repeated.

“Uh, no sir.” Forbin said.

“Where are you from?”

“America.”

“You came through a rhombus?”

Forbin stared. “Yes.”

“When did you get here?”

“Yesterday.” Forbin replied, without any discernable pause.

Wilson nodded. “I’ve met a few people from your universe. I personally arrived here after being attacked by a really big white beach ball.”

“A beach ball?”

“Yes. It came flying down out of the sky and came squashing down on top of me. I blacked out- and when I came to- I was here. Of course, the place I was before here wasn’t exactly normal either. Everyone had a number and you could never find out who was

actually in charge. The beach ball attacked me when I was trying to escape. When I woke up, I found myself here among the Lizards. At the time, they were savages.”

“Savages? Like did they practice cannibalism or something?”

“No. Nothing as interesting as that. They were inert- living the same way for thousands of years. No progress. No innovation. Just generation after generation growing up and dying while history stood still.”

“And that’s bad.”

“Of course that’s bad. What’s the point of living if you’re going to end up in the same place you were when you started? You see, I’m like Columbus.”

“Columbus made himself a king?”

Wilson laughed. “Silly boy. Columbus wrote that he could completely subjugate the continent.”

“When did he write that?” Forbin asked.

“On the first day he landed in what he thought was India.” (This is true.) “I think there’s something about human nature you just haven’t wrapped your head around. It’s odd to me you haven’t figured this out yet.”

“I think I know a little something about human nature. I’ve led troops into battle. I’ve seen the savagery we’re capable of. But we do good things too. Not enough. But we do good things too.” Forbin said.

“Now listen boy...”

“I am not a boy. I’m at least ten years older than you are.” Forbin corrected.

“I am a king. To me, even the oldest man is but a boy.”

Forbin smiled. It wasn’t a genuine smile. It was the same smile he’d given a thousand times over the years when faced with egomaniacal superiors in the Army. Sometimes it was better to shut your mouth and not get squashed.

Wilson let Forbin off the hook. Instead of launching a llama missile at him, he decided to clue in this new arrival to his kingdom.

He said, “You want to know about human nature? I’ll tell you about human nature. I’ll tell you the story of Harpua- the meanest dog who ever lived.”

Wilson took Colonel Forbin by the elbow and walked him into a nearby pub with all of his guards in tow. The pub was crowded with patrons drinking, even though it was early in the afternoon. In the back of the pub was a fireplace with a crackling fire. A stew pot hung over it. Thankfully, Wilson didn’t try to bring his llama into the pub with them. Having a piece of heavy ordinance around while you were being entertained by a tyrant- it was all a bit much.

They sat down at a table by the fire and Wilson told his story.

HARPUA

Oom pa pa, Oom pa paaaaa-aaaaa...

“Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jimmy. Like the Lizards, Jimmy lived in a town situated at the bottom of a massive mountain. Some people even say Jimmy lived in Prussia- but other scholars dispute the claim. There were two things in the universe Jimmy loved more than anything else. The first was music, and the second was his cat.

On this particular day, Jimmy was hanging out in his room. The walls were covered in posters from all of his favorite bands. Jimmy lay in bed. He’s feet were up and his hands

were linked behind his head. Enormous headphones covered his ears. Even 20 feet away, you could hear the music being transmitted into Jimmy's head. This was as it should be.

Lying next to Jimmy was his cat- his marvelous, wonderful, stupendous fluffy cat. Jimmy's eyes were closed and he was just totally jamming out- his foot pumping in time with the music, causing the bed frame to squeak slightly. His mother heard those squeaks and interpreted them differently. Thankfully, she never had the gumption to ask Jimmy about it.

Jimmy's stereo was shuffling between a number of his favorite albums. The list included, *Waiting for Columbus*, *Exile on Main Street*, *Quadraphenia*, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Thriller*, *The White Album*, *Remain in the Light*, and *Loaded*. The music soothed the angst in Jimmy's soul, and the rush of it and the presence of his beloved cat combined to inspire a change in Jimmy's heart. He was happy. In that moment, it felt like everything was right with the world.

Sadly, Jimmy was wrong.

What Jimmy didn't know- was that there was a man standing above the town, glaring down with icy black hatred in his heart. The man's name was Mr. Minor. At one time, Mr. Minor managed a milk factory, but after an unfortunate mishap with a mouse that climbed into one of the bottles to take a nap- Mr. Minor was fired from his job.

It turned out the person who found the bottle of milk wasn't just any person. It was Little Lila Sue- the mayor's daughter. You can imagine the fit she threw when she tilted back the bottle of milk and felt the drowned snout of a mouse bump against her tongue. To say she freaked out would be an understatement. The mayor fired Mr. Minor personally- in front of about 20 reporters, before Mr. Minor's real boss, Mr. Fikus, even had a chance.

Things spiraled downhill from there.

When he still lived in town, Mr. Minor used to enjoy going for walks. But after the mouse incident, people started calling him names everywhere he went. Names like: Milky Minor and Mousey Minor and Milky the Mousey Minor. He didn't like it when people called him names.

He would say, "Hey you don't call me that! I'll kill you!"

No one believed him. They just chuckled at crazy old Mr. Minor and walked away, often casting one last taunting cry of 'Milky Mouse'- just do be mean.

Mr. Minor would sit in his small hovel of a home and stare at the wall and think about how angry he was. No one in town believed it, but Mr. Minor had a limit to how much abuse he would endure- and he was quickly reaching his limit.

The core of his anger, the little nugget of fire that eventually emerged into a fully consuming conflagration- was the simple fact he had no way to know about the bottle. He shipped thousands of bottles. His job was the overall running of the plant operations. Making sure there was inventory- and insuring the machinery was working and the shipping was functioning properly and the paychecks were getting paid. Macro-level stuff. He hired people to look at the trees. His job was to keep an eye on the forest. Mr. Minor wasn't responsible for looking at every single individual bottle. The person responsible for the bottle was Harry- he was the quality control engineer. If everyone was going to get mad at anyone- it should've been him. But did they fire Harry? Nope. He didn't even get a reprimand.

For a long time, Mr. Minor didn't really care about anyone or anything. And all the while, his anger grew. And the angrier he got- the more people enjoyed taunting him. It was a snake, eating a burrito.

But then Harpua showed up. And everything changed.

It happened in the dead of night. Mr. Minor was fast asleep, a scowl on his face, when a loud noise outside yanked him back to consciousness.

“Wazzat?” He asked.

He went to the window and peered outside. But the window was too dirty. Mr. Minor couldn’t see. So he went to his front door and pulled it open and went outside.

“Who’s there?” He demanded.

But there was no reply. It was a dark night- the moon’s light was mostly hidden behind clouds. The noise came again, and this time, Mr. Minor was able to place it. It was the sound of rakes and shovels getting knocked over in the shed. By what- Mr. Minor didn’t know- but he had every intention of finding out.

He took a moment to muster up some courage, before grabbing the door handles and pulling them open.

“What are you doing?” He roared.

A terrified mewling- high-pitched and pathetic- was the only reply.

Mr. Minor found himself looking down at what was, even in the dark corner of the shed, clearly the ugliest puppy he’d ever laid eyes on. For a minute, he wasn’t even sure it was a dog- he thought it might be some sort of mutant hairless gerbil or maybe a cat that got ran over by a car. Twice.

“What are you?” He asked, bending over and squinting into the darkness.

He was pretty sure it was a dog.

Just to be sure, he went out, closed the shed again, hurried into the house and grabbed a lantern. He came back to the shed, lantern held high, and opened the doors again. The dog was still there, looking up at him with a pathetic look of uncompromising fear.

It was a dog. And it was ugly. It only had hair in tufts- even as the little puppy it clearly was. It also had very, very large paws- they were practically as big as the ugly guy’s head. Mr. Minor knew immediately, this dog wasn’t big now, but before long, it would be.

Mr. Minor stared down at this funky looking dog and felt moved. This was the thing in the world he would love. He would name the dog Harpua, and his love for the animal would be the rock upon which he built his palace of hate.

A month later, after a particularly vicious taunting from a couple of teenagers and the 74-year-old Ms. Greenberg, Mr. Minor moved out of town and up into the mountains.

Every night, right after the sun set, he would walk out onto an outcropping of rock and stare down at the town. He would watch the people moving about in the streets in their carts and buggies and Mr. Minor would hold his dog Harpua and just rant and rave like a loon- the only things hearing him were the moon and Harpua. Every slight he could remember, real or imagined, would just go rushing through Mr. Minor’s head and out of his mouth- a torrent of hate.

Harpua, a good dog (in his own vicious and hateful way)- grew to hate the people of the town as much as his master. Together, day by day, they built a pyramid of hate and anger and Harpua grew and grew until he was half as big as a horse- and twice as vicious as a marmot. The dog, already horrendously ugly, developed a habit of chewing its own measly tufts of fur, so that Harpua’s scaly skin was covered in sores. Harpua would then chew on the sores. Then it got really gross.

Mr. Minor didn’t care- he rubbed Harpua’s pus-coated head and kissed his hairless cheeks- he loved the dog as much as he hated everyone else who existed in the universe. Together, this nightmare team would wreak havoc on the hapless victims in the town below. He needed only to get the opportunity.

For years, he dithered in his anger. Mr. Minor just lived up on the mountain and got stranger and stranger- and meaner and more spiteful. And Harpua did his best to copy his master's example- he'd taken to killing the wildlife in the forest surrounding the house and bringing the carcasses home to a gleeful Mr. Minor.

One day, Harpua brought home a deer almost twice as big as he was. When Mr. Minor came out to meet him- the dog was literally covered in blood and gore from head to tail. Instead of cleaning the dog up or properly dressing the deer- Mr. Minor went and got a knife and he and Harpua danced and played in the blood like a couple of people at a Roman orgy.

After an hour of this mad cavorting, Mr. Minor looked down at the town. He saw himself reflected in the dog's eye- and he knew what he had to do. The time had come- to bring the hate down.

It was at this same time that Jimmy was laying on his bed. Petting his cat. He'd taken his headphones off so he could concentrate all of his attention on the little fella.

Jimmy said, "The day you were born I knew you were made for me. I lifted you out of your mother's little thing there- all covered in goo. I held you up and I said: This is the cat I will name...

That special name...

Because I know! It came to me in a dream... the name came to me in a dream and I knew- I knew it that day I woke up from my dreaming... you'd go through life with me. And I looked into your eyes. Into your little kitty eyes, and I remember the day when I was dreaming. And I say you will go through life...

...with the name...

The moniker, the label, you are the one I will call,
POSTERNUTBAG!!!!!!!"

Doo-doo-da-doo-doo... Doo-doo-da-doo-doo... da-doooooo-da-da-doo...

Posternutbag wasn't particularly interested in Jimmy's interest. Posternutbag wanted to go outside. So, using kitty telepathy, Posternutbag told Jimmy, "I want to go outside."

"Okay Posternutbag." Jimmy agreed.

Jimmy opened the door and let the cat outside. He almost followed Posternutbag, the day was warm and the sun was still shining. But at the last minute, he decided not to go. He wanted to listen to a little bit more music first. He went back to his bedroom, put on his headphones, and didn't hear a thing that followed.

Outside, on the front lawn, Posternutbag the cat stretched out for a couple of minutes, charging his kitty batteries in the late afternoon sun. He was considering taking a catnap when he spied a mouse by the house across the street. Adorable little fluffy little Posternutbag loved to kill mice. So rapt was Posternutbag's attention on the mouse by the house- he didn't notice the blood-soaked dog in the road with his crazy blood-soaked owner coming right behind until it was far too late.

Harpua's attention on Posternutbag was equal to the cat's on the mouse- and a deep, truck-growl came from far down in the dog's chest. The cat froze at the sound- every hair on Posternutbag's body suddenly sticking straight out- turning Posternutbag into a furry looking marshmallow.

Knowing there was no choice but to fight- Posternutbag coiled his body in a deadly arch- and tore through the air at Harpua. He hoped to get a good scratch in on the dog's scabby, dead-looking eyes- and then make a run for it.

Alas, the deadly arch was simply not deadly enough. With a single snap of his mighty jaws, the horrible monsterdog Harpua tore Posternutbag in two while Mr. Minor cheered him on.

“Look. The storm’s gone.” Jimmy said, looking absently out the window- his headphones still blaring in his ears.

His daydream was interrupted by the arrival of his father, Dad. Jimmy took off his headphones.

“Jimmy?” Dad said.

“Yes Dad?”

“Jimmy I have bad news.”

“What is it Dad?”

“You know your cat? Poster?”

“You mean, Posternutbag?”

“Yeah, him. Um. I don’t know how to tell you this.”

“Tell me what Dad?”

“Your cat, Posternutbag...”

“Yes.”

“Your cat died!”

“What!”

“Poster is dead.”

“No.” Jimmy declared, his voice flat.

“Poster is dead.”

“Please stop saying it.”

“Poster’s sooo dead.”

“You’ve to be kidding me!”

“But don’t worry- we’ll get you a new pet.”

“What kind of a pet?”

“How about a goldfish?”

“I. Don’t. Want. A. Goldfish!!”

“No goldfish?”

“I don’t want a goldfish.”

“Then what?”

“I want...” Jimmy said, a fire of hatred igniting in his heart, thinking of the revenge he would seek when the time was right, “a dog.”

NARRATION- Leaving Wilson and leaving for Icculus

Wilson finished the story of Harpua and stared at Forbin, a look of expectation etched on his face.

“Uh. Heavy.” Forbin said. He didn’t know what he was supposed to say.

“You’re not kidding.” Wilson agreed.

McGrupp had a very complex reaction to the story- but he didn’t choose to share it with Wilson or the Colonel.

“Well, thank you for your story, but, um, I should probably get going.” Forbin said, hoping he would be cut loose.

“No, it’s good. I have stuff to do too. I just love telling that story. Keep your nose clean Colonel Forbin- and your time in Prussia will be pleasant. Have a good day.”

Forbin shook his hand. He didn’t want to- but he didn’t really see how he had a choice. They walked out of the pub and back into the light of the afternoon.

Wilson approached his llama. “Come along Lou” he said, ruffling the llama’s fur. He kissed the animal on the forehead and led it away.

Unconsciously, Colonel Forbin held his breath until the evil King Wilson disappeared around the corner with his small army of guards. Once he was gone, Forbin let out his breath in a long hiss. Wilson had crazy eyes. He’d seen those sorts of eyes before- and the person who possessed them was always a nutter.

Once he was convinced it was safe to continue, Forbin led McGrupp to the castle. It was the one impressive structure in Prussia. The rest of the place was pretty much a dump, but the castle looked sturdy and imposing. The tower was enormous.

“You’d have to grow wings.” He told McGrupp. “You could certainly get someone up there- but they could never get down again. He could send an endless torrent of guards up the stairs- and you’d have to fight them all, one at a time.

Colonel Forbin felt a wave of defeat and sadness sweep over him. There was no way he was ever going to be able to pull it off.

“Come on McGrupp, let’s go home.” He moped.

He wasn’t 200 yards away when it became obvious why Wilson was so willing to let him off with a story about a killer dog.

There was a rally being held. Forbin heard the chant:

“WILLSON!”

And then two thumps- some massive-sounding bass instrument intoning, da-dum, da-dum. And then,

“WILLLLLLLSON!”

And the two thumps again. Da-dum. Da-Dum.

“WILLLLLLLLSOOOONNNN!”

The chanting grew louder. Scary loud. It was the sound of many people- all of them trying to not be the least enthusiastic voice in the crowd. Being the least enthusiastic was not a trait Wilson allowed to flourish- and you never knew when he’d be in the mood to make an example of someone.

The chanting just made Forbin walk faster. Navigating in Gamehendge was actually pretty easy because you could always see the one massive mountain towering over the town and everything else- Icculus’s mountain. Vegas is the same way at night- the huge spotlight on the Luxor Pyramid acts as a constant navigational beacon.

It hit him in a flash. The mountain. The answer had been staring him in the face.

Forbin made a beeline for “out of town.”

An hour later, he’d reunited with the Multi-Beast he’d left tied to a tree by a long tether provided by Rutherford. With a sigh of relief, Forbin climbed up onto the creature and rode for camp, excited by his latest plan.

As soon as he got back, Forbin stopped by Rutherford’s cabin. He found the knight laying on his bed, dressed in his armor.

“Did you get it?” Rutherford asked.

Forbin could hear him trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. He took the sandwich out of his bag and offered it to Rutherford. The knight took it like he was being offered King Arthur’s sword. He immediately took it to his small dining table and unwrapped it from the paper. The smell of the sauce filled the cabin and caused Forbin’s eyes to grow red.

All Colonel Forbin could do was watch while Rutherford took the sandwich and ate it in two large bites. He chewed a few times and then swallowed the whole thing at once. For a long couple of seconds he stood there breathing through his nose. Then he let out a noise

unlike any Forbin ever heard before- it was the combination of a cry of joy and a scream of pain- but suppressed, and forced to leak out of a tightly sealed vessel. It made Forbin step back- unsure if Rutherford was going to simply explode. The knight's entire body started to shake- his armor rattling like a cart full of pans on a bumpy road. Rutherford came out of his chair and down onto one knee. He pounded his fists into the ground, all the while making his weird hissing noise.

This continued for about a minute, and finally tapered off. When Rutherford looked up at Colonel Forbin, his eyes were completely bloodshot. It didn't seem impossible he'd had at least a minor aneurism. The big man fell over onto his side.

"That is just the absolute best sandwich." Rutherford gasped, grinning through eyes filled with tears.

All Forbin could do was laugh. He left the brave knight to recover from his culinary delicacy and went to tell Tela about his idea.

He found her in her cabin.

"Guess who I just met?"

"I don't know- David Bowie?"

"No, not David Bowie. Wilson. I went into Prussia and of all the people in the city- he picks me out as a stranger."

"And what did he do?"

"He told me a story."

"Really? What story did he tell you?"

"He said it was the story of Harpua."

Tela nodded. "Makes sense."

"You know the story?"

"Yeah, I know it. I think every Lizard knows it."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. The story of Harpua was written in The Helping Friendly Book. I feel like there's an important warning in there somewhere- but no one can remember what it is."

"Nobody?"

"We didn't see a need to remember it- it was written down in the book. The Helping Friendly Book's a really great book- a book that contains all of the knowledge inherent in the universe. All we needed to do was open it- and we'd find out whatever we wanted to know. So whenever we had a question- we just looked up the answer. My mother used to tell me about it- before Wilson had her killed."

"So the book really is the key to all of this. Losing it to Wilson- it brought you guys to your knees."

"Exactly. It messed us up. Big time."

"So if you got the book back- then you'd be free?"

"Sure- the book is the key to Wilson's power. Without the book- all of the Lizards could be free. But we can't get it."

"Well, the bad news is... you're right. I went there and took a good look. The tower is too high- if you were discovered- there's no way to escape. I don't think you'll ever be able to go and steal it."

"Okay. Then what's the good news?"

"The good news is- I know who can."

"Who?"

"Who else? Icculus. I am going to climb the mountain and ask for his help."

“But- we don’t really even know if Icculus exists. He could just be the figment of legend- like the pig-beast Guyute.”

“Maybe. But he might be real. Somebody had to have written the Helping Friendly Book. And if he is real- he’ll be able to tell me how to fix this.”

“You’re going to go by yourself?”

“Nope. I’ll bring McGrupp.”

“You’ll need some waders- you have to cross through a swamp to get to the mountain. It’s horribly nasty and encircles the entire mountain- so you can’t even take the long way around to avoid it. It’s really treacherous- I don’t think you should go. You should stay here- Errand Wolfe is in charge. He got us this far. He just needs some time to formulate a new plan. You have to be patient.”

“No. This has to end. Wilson is a tyrant.”

Forbin could see her accept his resignation. As she did so, her bearing towards him changed. Her physicality was suddenly directed at Colonel Forbin in a way he was incapable of dismissing. She got up out of her chair and walked to him, straddled him.

“If you really do have your heart so dead set on going- you have to make me one promise.” She said into his ear.

“What?” Forbin asked.

“You have to promise me you will come to me first if you get the book. You can’t tell another soul. Come straight to me- can you do that?” She pushed against him.

Forbin hesitated- it seemed like he should bring the book to Errand Wolfe first if he was in charge- Forbin’s military training balked at not following the chain of command.

Tela leaned back- made like she was going to get up.

“Promise?” She asked again.

She would get up if he didn’t. The last thing Colonel Forbin wanted was for her to get up. He promised.

“Excellent.” Tela purred, and kissed him.

The next morning Colonel Forbin wandered out of Tela’s cabin with McGrupp in tow. His face was completely shell-shocked- his grin spread from ear to ear. He felt disconnected from his own body- but at the same time- he felt terrific. He felt like he could bound up Icculus’s mountain in three or four monster strides.

Before he left the cabin, Tela made him promise a second time to come straight back to her. She told him she had some more loving just waiting for his return. Forbin’s second affirmation came without any hesitation.

He spent about twenty minutes gathering basic supplies. Once he had everything he thought he would need, Colonel Forbin left the camp without saying a word to anyone. He didn’t want any company beyond McGrupp. Besides, the only one who could conceivably help him was Rutherford and while he was a terrific guy- he was also a guy who went swimming while wearing a full suit of armor.

The day was warm, with a cool breeze, so the walking was quite pleasant. For a full day he hiked, making camp with McGrupp and sleeping underneath the stars. On the second day, he went for about two hours before hitting the edge of the swamp.

“Well buddy, looks like this is the end of the easy part. We’re going to have to walk across to the other side of this swamp. I’m afraid it’s too deep for you to walk through, so I’m going to have to carry you. I’ll do my best to keep you as comfortable as possible. So you be a good dog okay?”

McGrupp wasn’t thrilled with the idea, but he decided he had no choice but to go along. He stood patiently still while Forbin put on the waders and created a little pouch-like area

for McGrupp to lean his butt. Still trying to settle the dog into a comfortable spot, Forbin waded out into the water and started walking.

For seven interminably long hours Forbin waded through the muck of the swamp with McGrupp hiked up over his shoulder. Every once and a while they would find a spongy piece of ground on which to rest for a few minutes- but if he remained in one place too long, the ground he was standing on would literally sink back into the swamp.

The entire time Forbin kept expecting some horrible monster to erupt out of the water or for some sort of quickmud to suck him down into the darkness. But nothing dramatic like that happened. Forbin squooshed his way through the swamp- miserable and scared the entire time- and that was it.

With a sigh of relief, Forbin stepped up out of the muck of the swamp and back onto dry land. He returned McGrupp back to earth. The dog looked up at him and woofed pleasantly. If Forbin didn't know better- he'd think McGrupp just thanked him for the ride. Chuckling to himself, he looked up and felt his eyes widen.

It was a truly a big-ass mountain.

COLONEL FORBIN'S ASCENT>ICCOLUS>FLY FAMOUS MOCKINGBIRD

Colonel Forbin decided to camp at the bottom of the mountain and begin his ascent first thing in the morning. He found a small clearing in the middle of a fairy circle of trees. Forbin pitched their tent in the center of the clearing while McGrupp peed a perimeter around their campsite. Both dog and Colonel slept soundly. Forbin had a big grin plastered on his face the next morning when he and McGrupp started up the mountain- but after a few hundred feet, the grin was gone. He turned around and looked back at the ground. It was still very close- and Forbin was already feeling exhausted. He realized the climb was going to be harder than he thought. Craning his neck to see the top of the mountain, Forbin's face was blank for several long seconds before lighting with a thin, determined smile.

"Come on McGrupp, let's get shakin'. I don't suppose you'll be able to come with me all the way to the top, but surely you can come up a good ways. You ready for an adventure?" He tried to keep the panting out of his voice- but it was there.

For his part, McGrupp had no hesitation. The woods covering the mountain smelled far wilder than anything the dog had smelled in months. Going upward was like climbing into a buffet of succulent varmints. McGrupp was all in.

The lower part of the mountain was covered in boulders, massive rocks cast out of the earth as the mountain rose into the air. Forbin wound his way among these boulders singing songs. At first, he sang softly, so softly McGrupp would sometimes lose the melody. But as they left the civilized forest behind, his voice grew louder. Eventually, McGrupp could stray as much as a quarter of a mile away and still be able to hear Forbin's straining vocal cords. The songs weren't in key, but Forbin made up for his lack of skill with an overabundance of enthusiasm.

The way forward was difficult and exhausting, but not without its rewards. By the end of the first day, he and McGrupp were above the tree line. The whole of Gamehendge spread out below him. He could even see the Weekapaugh Groove far off in the distance. While Forbin admired the view, McGrupp was busy hunting. The Colonel was thinking

about what he was going to do for food when his trusty hound came bounding up with two rabbit-like creatures in his mouth. He dropped the animals at Forbin's feet.

"Did you catch us some dinner?" Forbin asked, laughing and scratching the dog's head and haunches enthusiastically. The dog's tail wagged back and forth like a metronome keeping time to speed metal.

The Colonel made a fire, dressed and cooked the rabbit-like animals. He split them equally with McGrupp and both man and dog went to sleep with a full belly. It continued like this for three days as they climbed higher and higher up the mountain together. On the afternoon of the third day, Forbin all of a sudden stopped and pointed.

"Will you look at that!" Forbin said, smacking his lips.

They'd come across a bush laden with a plump looking fruit. It reminded Forbin of an oversized peach. He pulled one off the bush and bit into it- refusing to even entertain the possibility it could be poisonous. The fruit tasted like the fabled ambrosia of Greek myth. It was sweet and the skin of the fruit seemed to melt on his tongue into something not entirely unlike a liquid Jolly Rancher.

There were a lot of bad things in Gamehedge- but when things were good- they were really good. This made him think of Tela and their time together. Forbin was 52- Tela made him feel 17- she definitely counted as one of the really good things.

Then, several things happened- all at once. McGrupp started barking and snarling at something directly in front of them. Curious to see what was drawing the dog's ire, Forbin stared into the thick copse of bushes. He had just enough time to realize a rock was coming directly at his head before it hit him square between the eyes. The last thing Forbin heard as he descended into darkness was the furious barks of McGrupp and another creature as well- it sounded like a bear.

Then there was darkness.

Colonel Forbin woke up to terror. He returned to consciousness with a terrible headache and when he opened his eyes he was met with the frantic barking of a hideously massive dog. It was trying to get to Forbin- and it nearly had him. The dog was close enough he could feel the heat of its breath on his face. Foam whipped from the madly barking dog's jaws, splattering onto the walls of the cave. Its teeth- a seemingly endless row of razor sharp fangs- clacked together audibly with every deep and menacing bark. The dog strained at its leash. If there was anything it wanted to do more than eat Colonel Forbin for lunch- it wasn't letting on.

"Not yet." Ordered a voice in a strong, commanding tone.

Forbin's eyes tracked towards it. The person talking stepped forward into the Colonel's range of vision. It was a guy in his mid-twenties.

"Hello there Mr. Trespassing on my mountain."

"This isn't your mountain, this is Icculus's mountain." Forbin replied.

"No. *That's* Icculus's mountain." The guy corrected, pointing higher up the slope. "The area down here- it's mine. And you came here uninvited and quite frankly, you don't even seem to be very remorseful about it- which worries me. And since I don't like being worried- I think I'll just release my dog and get this over with."

Forbin looked around the cave desperately.

And couldn't believe what he saw piled up in the corner of the cave.

Albums. Record albums. And not just any old crap music. These were rock records, 60's and 70's rock records- the good stuff. Zeppelin- The Velvet Underground- The Beatles- Bowie- Hendrix- The Stones. This wasn't just music- this was Colonel Forbin's

music. He had almost every album he saw in his own personal collection. The ones he didn't have- he wanted.

This, in turn, reminded Colonel Forbin of Wilson's story of Harpua, and all at once, he knew the identity of his captor.

"Wait! I've heard about you. Your name is Jimmy, right?"

Jimmy hesitated. It'd been a long time since someone had spoken his name.

"You are, aren't you?" Forbin pressed. "The evil king Wilson told me about you. About what that dog did to your cat. I think he said its name was..."

Jimmy reached down and put his fingers over Forbin's mouth.

"Don't say my cat's name. It is sacred."

Forbin decided not to test Jimmy on this point.

"So if you're Jimmy, then this must be your dog. Well, I must say, you've done an absolutely first rate job of raising a monster revenge dog there Jimmy."

"His name is Handbillfruitsack. He's a killer."

Handbillfruitsack lunged suddenly at Forbin and nearly ripped his face off- Jimmy pulled the animal short at the last second. Handbillfruitsack turned towards Jimmy- scowling with fury at being denied his prey.

"Where's my dog? Where's McGrupp?" Forbin asked- realizing his own pet was nowhere to be seen.

"I have him tied up outside. Don't worry. He's fine for now. I always let Handbillfruitsack kill the owner first."

Somehow, Colonel Forbin didn't find this sentiment particularly comforting.

"Look man. Nobody with such good taste in music can be all bad. Can't you just see your way clear to let me go?"

Jimmy looked at Colonel Forbin distrustfully. "What do you mean I have good taste in music?"

"I can see your records over there. You have a ton of good stuff. I grew up on late 60's to mid-70's rock and roll."

"You know this music?"

"Are you kidding? For a lot of those albums- I know every single note."

Jimmy walked over to his records and picked one up. It was The Beatles- Revolver. He held it up to Forbin.

"Name me three songs off of this record." Jimmy said.

Forbin actually laughed- causing Handbillfruitsack to renew his efforts to eat a chunk of the Colonel's head.

Once Forbin recovered from nearly getting decapitated again, he said, "I can name you the first three. The album starts with *Taxman*- goes to *Eleanor Rigby* and then *I'm Only Sleeping*. It closes with the groundbreaking *Tomorrow Never Knows*. C'mon man- give me a hard one."

Jimmy smiled.

"Handbillfruitsack, SIT!" He commanded.

The dog sat.

"You calm down now. We're not going to eat this one." He told the dog.

Handbillfruitsack looked doubtfully from Jimmy to Forbin and back.

"I'm serious. This guy's alright. We're going to let him and his dog through without any further hassle. You think you can forgive me? I'll give you a special dinner anyway."

The dog's tail wagged, resigned.

Once he was sure Handbillfruitsack understood he was not to attack their visitors, Jimmy reached down and untied Forbin's wrists. While he did so, he said, "I have to ask- why were you climbing the mountain in the first place?"

"I wasn't lying. I didn't even know you and Handbillfruitsack were up here. All I'm doing is passing through. I'm trying to get to Icculus."

"The Great and Knowledgeable Icculus?"

"The very one."

"What do you want with him?"

"I need his help. Have you ever met him- does he really exist?" Forbin asked.

"I don't really have the slightest idea. I know I've heard some strange noises coming from up there every now and then- but that doesn't really prove anything. Assuming he is up there- what help do you think he can do for you?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure. I guess I'm hoping he can somehow get back the Helping Friendly Book for the Lizards."

"I'm not sure they deserve the book."

"Why not?"

"Well. I've had a lot of time up here. When I first left Prussia- it was entirely to get my revenge on Mr. Minor and his ugly dog Harpua. But, after a while, I realized it wasn't really Mr. Minor's fault. Not really. It was the Lizards. They drove him out of town. They were mean to him and teased him ceaselessly. I'm not sure people like that deserve to know all of the knowledge inherent in nature. We were innocent once, and when we weren't corrupted, it was easy to remain that way. But corruption is a box you can't close once it's been opened."

"A Pandora's box?"

"I don't know what that means."

"Never mind."

Jimmy looked at Forbin with annoyance- he was out of practice at dealing with humanity. "Anyway, the point is, I don't think Icculus is going to return The Book to you. Icculus wrote it- he gave it to the Lizards to take care of- and they didn't do it. They totally blew it. Why would he help you?"

"It sounds like you know more about Icculus than you're admitting."

"No. It's just sense."

Forbin just nodded. He wasn't the kind of guy who sat around and thought about consequences. Especially in the way Jimmy was talking. To Forbin, if you can do something, you do it. If you get shot down, you do something else, but in the meantime, you don't just sit around and think of reasons something won't work- you assume it will work- until it doesn't. In Forbin's humble opinion, only failure should cause a course correction, not fear of failure.

He changed the subject. "Do you think I could go and see my dog? I know you said he's okay, but I'm worried about him. Like you, my dog is my only true friend."

"I hear that brother." Jimmy agreed. "Don't mind me man, I told you, you're free to go. You're free to stay too- I'll be cooking supper soon."

"Let me go check on McGrupp and we can talk about it." Forbin said, getting up and walking to the entrance of the cave.

Jimmy made no move to stop him.

McGrupp started woofing and wagging his tail with excitement when he saw Colonel Forbin approaching.

"Hey there buddy!" Forbin exclaimed, bending over and getting a thorough face-licking.

Forbin reached down and untied the dog. Immediately McGrupp ran to the treeline and took a big dump. The animal had always been courteous about his pooping. He then proceeded to squirt on every tree in the vicinity with visible satisfaction.

They ended up staying for dinner. Both Forbin and Jimmy enjoyed being able to converse freely about his record collection and his immense love of music. As the two men bonded over Jimmy Page and John Lennon, the dogs ended up playing together- to Forbin's amazement. It was a very nice visit, and Colonel Forbin was a little sad to leave.

After leaving Jimmy's camp, it took another week of climbing from sunrise to sunset before the mountain's summit finally came into sight. Food remained no problem. Up as high as they were, the animals weren't even afraid of people- which made for easy killin'. The food was supplemented by ice cold water from the plentiful streams that wound their way down the mountain.

Almost every day of the climb Forbin tried to convince McGrupp to stay and wait- but the dog wasn't having it. On three separate occasions Forbin patted the dog on the head, said goodbye, and climbed up a relatively vertical rock face. Forbin was a slow climber- his age forced him to work with methodical precision. Maybe because of his glacial pace, all three times, McGrupp was waiting for him when he got to the top.

"How are you doing this?" Forbin asked after the third iteration of the trick.

McGrupp grinned his doggy grin, but that was all. After the third time, Forbin just gave up and accepted the dog was going with him the full distance.

It was around dusk on the seventh night when the whole mountain started to vibrate and shake.

"Oh great, earthquake." Forbin said out loud, trying, in vain, to find somewhere to take shelter.

The vibrations continued, growing stronger and more violent. Thunder began to rumble through an otherwise cloudless sky. At the sound of the thunder- the birds in the trees all erupted into flight at once, the cloud of their bodies momentarily casting a shadow over the entire face of the mountain.

When the shadow cleared, there was a loud crack of shattering stone- massive boulders began falling out of the face of the mountain. They spun lazily through the air and landed distressingly close to Forbin. Every impact was marked by a meaty thump, bringing to mind how fragile the human body is in the face of hard, unyielding boulders. A little panicked, Forbin stared upwards, trying to gauge where the next rock was going to fall. The air was filled with small stones and rock dust- and it was almost impossible to see.

Then Forbin noticed something odd. The falling boulders were leaving holes- and the holes were starting to look like a face. The two largest holes formed the eye sockets- and other smaller holes formed the mouth and cheeks and then- at some hard to define point- the rock changed its character. It became less like rock- and more like play-doh. As if by magic, the face of a wise old man with a big white beard emerged.

Icculus- the Prophet stood before his eyes.

The Great and Knowledgeable Icculus spoke very slowly. The weight of centuries of thought thrummed through every syllable.

Icculus said, "Colonel Forbin, I know why you've come here. And I'll help you with your quest to gain the knowledge that you lack."

"You will?"

"Sure."

"Really?"

"Sure. Why not? Shouldn't I help you?"

“Uh.” Forbin was shocked. Somehow he thought this conversation was going to be more difficult. “Yes?”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, you should help me.”

“I know. That’s what I said.”

“Wilson has the Helping Friendly Book.”

“I know that too.”

Forbin opened his mouth to say something else.

“Don’t bother.” Icculus interrupted. “You’re not going to tell me anything I don’t already know- I don’t want to sound arrogant or anything, but I am the Great and Knowledgeable Icculus after all.”

“Fair enough. Then how are you going to help me?”

“I’m going to get a buddy of mine to do you a favor.”

“Who?”

“The Famous Mockingbird.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“Sorry.”

“Now, I’m going to send the Famous Mockingbird to get back the book, but first I have to warn you: All knowledge seeming innocent and pure- becomes a deadly weapon in the hands of avarice and greed.”

Colonel Forbin only half heard Icculus’s warning. He was thinking about how happy Tela would be when he set the Helping Friendly Book down in front of her. He was thinking about all of the wonderful things she might do him in appreciation. Icculus knew Forbin wasn’t really listening- but it wasn’t Icculus’s place to interfere. The contradiction in the fact he was already helping Forbin wasn’t lost on the God of the Mountain- he just didn’t care- he saw consistency as the hobgoblin of little minds.

Off in the distance, a bird flew into sight. It was coming straight for them at an incredible speed. The bird was clothed in a garishly bright green plumage. Its neck was circled with gold and the feathers shone psychedelically in the sun. From far away, the Famous Mockingbird looked huge- but as it got closer- it seemed to shrink. The Mockingbird flew around the summit of the mountain once, and then rocketed down towards the small, far away dot of Prussia.

A creature of another dimension, the Famous Mockingbird first met Icculus in college- they were both interested in music and quickly hit it off as friends. Whenever Icculus requested his help, the Famous Mockingbird was happy to lend a hand even though most of the time Icculus just wanted the bird to bring him a pizza. The bird flew down toward the city of Prussia. It wasn’t far, and in seconds he’d swept down low and was banking in toward the castle. The Mockingbird was immensely powerful- it could’ve broke in and out of the castle tower by breaking straight through the wall. But what, the Mockingbird wondered, would be the fun in that?

Instead of the direct approach, the bird swooped directly over a door guard’s head, nearly knocking off his metal helmet. The guard let out a yelp of surprise and after taking a futile swipe at the air far behind the bird’s actual location, decided to just play dumb and pretend he didn’t see the bird enter the castle in the first place. The Famous Mockingbird fluttered briefly to a halt once it was inside, taking refuge on the head of stuffed Multi-Beast hanging on the wall. Once he plotted his route, the Mockingbird leapt off of the head and flew through the corridors directly into Wilson’s throne room.

Wilson was there, sitting on his throne and pondering the mysteries of the universe with his llama, Lou. When the bird erupted into his chamber, Wilson mistook its larcenous intentions for murderous ones. He rolled out of his throne and made a leaping grab for Lou's rocket launcher. He pushed the button and three mini-cruise missiles erupted from the llama's arsenal. They shot across the room followed by a loud whistling. The Mockingbird saw them coming and the missiles exploded harmlessly behind the impossibly fast bird.

Furious, Wilson sounded the alarm, yelling wildly for his guards. The Famous Mockingbird wasted no time- it blew through the door to the tower and was spinning up the spiral staircase on his way to get the book before Wilson could get out a syllable. The room at the top of the staircase was small and only held two items, the book and the pedestal it sat upon. Without wasting any time, the Mockingbird grabbed the book in its beak. Again, the Mockingbird could've blown straight through the wall and escaped, but instead, it started back down the spiral staircase. By this time, there was a full contingent of guards posted at the bottom with as many running up the stairs as could manage in the small space. The Famous Mockingbird made no attempt to avoid the first guard- instead- the bird lowered its head and plowed directly into the guard's chest.

The impact lifted the guard up off of his feet and backwards into the guy directly behind him. This started a domino trail of men falling backwards down the hard stone circular staircase. The Mockingbird laughed- it was having a great time. The bird erupted back out of the stairway, and Wilson immediately launched his last llama missile. This one also missed the bird, but before it was destroyed, it swerved and plowed into one of the guards instead- sending bits of guard flying everywhere. The Famous Mockingbird flew out an open window. Several of the castle guards tried to shoot him down with flaming arrows- but they all missed- badly. One landed in a barn and caught it on fire. It was only the quick work of a stable hand named Walfredo that kept the building from burning to the ground.

All Wilson and his cronies could do was watch as the bird faded away into the north eastern sky.

Back on Icculus's mountain, Forbin sat alone on a rock, waiting for the bird to return. The wise and ancient face of Icculus was gone, leaving nothing but a stunning view of the surrounding lands. Wilson couldn't help wondering if Icculus's great insight into the world wasn't related somehow to the view he saw every day. The trees looked like blades of grass and even the tallest hills were mere bumps in the earth.

Forbin was admiring the scenery when the Famous Mockingbird appeared on the horizon and dropped the Helping Friendly Book at Forbin's feet. He bent down and picked it up. The book was surprisingly thin for a tome fabled to hold all of the knowledge inherent in the universe. There was a very strong temptation to sit down and read the book from cover to cover before he took a step- but Forbin decided to wait. There would be plenty of time to study it later- now that Wilson didn't hold the book- everything was going to work out fine. Which goes to show, you're never too old to be naïve.

And so it was that Colonel Trey Forbin, retired Army officer, a man who only months earlier had been unable to think of a really legitimate reason to get out of bed in the morning, recovered the most sacred and special book in all of Gamehendge with the help of a god- and a Mockingbird from another dimension.

Even McGrupp was impressed.

Narration

Colonel Forbin walked through the camp with his head up and a sly grin on his lips. The Helping Friendly Book was safely stowed in his backpack. McGrupp padded along next to his master, his tail wagging enthusiastically. McGrupp liked the revolutionary camp- everyone was nice to him and fed him illicit treats on a regular basis. Forbin remained faithful to his promise to Tela, instead of taking the Helping Friendly Book to Errand Wolfe- he headed straight for her cabin. It was very early in the morning and no one was really around, so Forbin wasn't forced to lie to anyone about where he'd been or what he'd been doing.

A sense of profound accomplishment filled every fiber of Forbin's being. His involvement with the Iraq War notwithstanding, Colonel Forbin's entire life felt like a series of profound disappointments. He'd never really seen combat, had never really made much of a difference in anyone's life. He had no children with his ex-wife, had no one to love- except McGrupp.

Until he discovered Gamehendge and the Lizards, Colonel Forbin felt like a total loser. But no more. Things had changed. During the walk home, Forbin found he was filled with pride and giddiness to show the book to Tela. He credited her with the awakening of his libido and his love for life. In his mind, she deserved most of the credit. If it wasn't for Tela, he didn't think he would've had the gumption to climb the mountain. Because of her, he'd accomplished something. He'd climbed Icculus's mountain, found a way to turn Jimmy to his side and got the book from a real live deity- not bad for a retired Colonel.

He'd been feeling so terrific, Forbin was disturbed to realize he had a very negative- very strange feeling rising up in his stomach as he approached Tela's cabin. The feeling got distinctly worse when the door came into view. It was hanging askew, only one hinge still attached.

"Tela!" Forbin yelled, and began running towards her cabin. McGrupp ran along beside him, barking madly.

Colonel Forbin was thinking she had to be safe. No matter how it looked, she had to be safe. She had the Unit Monster to protect her. Surely the Unit Monster would be able to repel any force trying to do Tela harm.

Except, even before he stepped foot into the cabin, he could see the tufts of purple fur. The closer he came the clearer it was- the Unit Monster was dead. His head was twisted around backwards, and a small trickle of green fluid was dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

"Tela!" Forbin yelled, yanking the door off of its one remaining hinge and casting it aside.

Colonel Forbin entered the cabin- and couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Errand Wolfe was in the cabin- a look of cold satisfaction etched on his face. Except Forbin didn't have any real interest in Errand at that moment. His entire attention was taken with Rutherford the Brave. The giant knight was lowering Tela to the ground. Tears were in his eyes and his enormous hands were locked around her neck. Her face was a sick and uneven purple. Her eyes, her beautiful eyes, were bulged out and the blood vessels were broken. There was no life in them. None at all.

For a second, Forbin thought he must be mistaken. Rutherford didn't strangle her to death in her own cabin. He must've found her and for some reason carried her back by her neck. Maybe it was a Lizard custom they never mentioned to him.

In the split second of standing there- Forbin remembered the first time he'd laid eyes on Tela- the ride on the back of the Unit Monster- the night she took him to her bed. And now she was dead, her lifeless body motionless on the ground. So many feelings were rushing through Colonel Forbin at once- he couldn't make heads or tails of them.

"She's a traitor." Errand Wolfe hissed.

Everything in Forbin's world went a deep shade of red. Without even thinking, he went to strike Errand Wolfe- but before he could- he was struck down to the ground by Rutherford.

"Don't!" The knight yelled. "It's the truth. She admitted it."

"I don't..." Forbin started, and closed his mouth.

Everything in Colonel Forbin's being rebelled against the information. But the pain was in Rutherford's eyes. He wasn't happy about what he'd just done.

"I was walking in the forest and I saw one of Tela's spotted stripers. It was being chased by a skelton."

"A what?"

"A skelton- it's a sleek animal- like a fox. Anyway, this skelton had just caught up to this poor spotted striper and with one clean grab, snapped the little sucker's neck. Honestly, that's just the way of nature- but I wanted to recover the message. I scared the skelton away and grabbed the message. I couldn't believe what it said. It was from Wilson, it was confirming where I was going to be tomorrow- he was going to capture me- and he probably would've done it- and all because of Tela. I told Errand and we knew what we had to do. We confronted Tela- and she admitted it. The Unit Monster attacked me- but I broke his neck and well you saw what happened to Tela." The big man pointed down at Tela's dead body.

"But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did she betray you?"

"We don't know."

"You didn't ask her? You didn't want to know why?"

"Oh, we want to know. But do you really think we could believe whatever story she told us? Tela had no reason to be honest about her motives."

"So you didn't even bother asking- and now you'll never know."

"Ah. There's where you're wrong. There's a way to find out what really happened."

"How? She's dead. How can you possibly find out?"

Errand Wolfe grinned. It was ghoulish.

"Oh Kee Pah." He said.

The Oh Kee Pah Ceremony

Colonel Forbin was heartbroken. His feelings of dejection and sadness completely overwhelmed any ability he might have had to resist Tela's killers. He'd mostly forgotten about the book in his pack.

He followed lamely behind Errand Wolfe and Rutherford the Brave as they led him out of the main part of the camp and into the surrounding forest. After about ten minutes, they stopped on the edge of a small clearing. Rutherford cast about for a few seconds before he

found what he was looking for- a rope. He took up the rope and pulled. A large piece of the ground lifted up on hidden hinges, revealing a hole underneath.

“You just sit down, we’ll get everything ready.” Rutherford said, flipping the trapdoor all the way open.

Like an automaton, Forbin followed Rutherford’s instructions. He sat in the grass and watched as the knight made several trips back and forth to the hole, bringing chunks of wood and branches with each trip.

Once they’d built a pyre in the middle of the hole, they flipped the larger trapdoor shut, but opened a smaller one. Before long, there was a steady trickle of smoke escaping through the small hole.

The big trapdoor popped up and Rutherford said, “Okay, we’re ready.”

Forbin went over to the hole and dropped inside. The atmosphere was already thick with smoke and Forbin began to cough. He felt Rutherford’s hand gently pounding his back.

“Try to relax Colonel. Sit down against the wall and just breath slow and easy. Your body will adjust. It’s important you keep your eyes open. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” Forbin acknowledged.

“Good.” Rutherford moved a few feet away and sat down.

Errand Wolfe said, “We ask you Icculus, to show us the reason Tela betrayed us. We call upon you.”

Then Errand and Rutherford began to chant together.

“Rich in minerals, rich in firth, carry well ye martin lad, fervent fourth, now fervent fifth, forever a realm we cry. Be it ever so voraciously alternate. We call upon your pulse. Can we stand? Can we stare? We can stage a runaway golf cart marathon!”

They repeated the incantation- over and over- for hours. The only movement came when Errand Wolfe dropped another hunk of wood onto the fire.

The smoke filling the hole just helped the water flow more freely from Colonel Forbin’s eyes. He made a half-hearted attempt to contribute to the chant, but mostly he didn’t. Mostly, he just sat in the thick cloying smoke and felt profoundly sad.

About three hours later- something finally began to happen. Through the dark, swirling smoke, Colonel Forbin started to see objects. At first they were just phantoms, hints at a substance emerging from the smoke. With painful slowness, the vision came into view. He realized 2 things at roughly the same time. First, he was looking at Prussia, and second, they were following someone- and that someone was Tela. Colonel Forbin shifted his weight forward and stared into the smoke. He took his fingers and pinched his eyes open. He didn’t want to miss a moment of his beloved’s reincarnation. He didn’t care if they were going to watch her betrayal- he was just happy to see her moving about in a non-dead fashion.

Forbin’s view of the action was from a bird’s eye perspective- so he could see the disaster coming. Tela was dressed all in black and was followed closely by the Unit Monster. She was bent down, moving with her back to the wall. The Unit Monster was also doing its best to be stealthy- and all things considered- it was doing a good job. However, the sight of a creature as big as the Unit Monster up on tip-toes was enough to elicit a snort of laughter from Forbin. He felt bad for laughing- but even in his sadness- he had to admit it was funny. He noticed something else too- even though the scene was taking place at night- he could see everything like it was daytime.

Tela was in an alleyway. In about ten feet it would connect with a main road. Standing on that main road was Wilson and his pet llama Lou.

“Wait, I remember this day! This was the last time Tela set foot in Prussia. Remember Rutherford? She told us she was nearly captured by Wilson that day- she said she escaped by running up onto the rooftops. This was back in the days when we had to go and pick up payments from Palmer directly. We weren’t big enough to have delivery service yet.”

Through the thick haze of smoke still visible on the periphery of the room, Colonel Forbin could see Rutherford nodding with solemn acknowledgement.

“I remember.” He said.

“So this was what? About a year ago?” Errand asked.

“That sounds about right.” Rutherford agreed.

“Shut up- I’m trying to watch this.” Forbin grumbled- he wasn’t interested in listening to the Director’s commentary.

They watched as Tela lurked along the wall to a corner- the Unit Monster close to her side. She peeked- and pulled back, her eyes wide. They could see Wilson approaching- his sword drawn, his missile wielding llama Lou in tow.

“Teeeeeeela?” Wilson taunted. “Big purrrrple Unit Monsssstter!”

Forbin realized the vision had picked up with a chase already in progress.

Wilson looked back at Lou and pressed a button on his belt. A single missile shot out of the llama’s weapon’s system and streaked across the alley and into the corner of the building. The explosion knocked Tela flat onto her face and knocked the Unit Monster unconscious.

Tela recovered her senses about the same time Wilson came around the corner. As soon as she saw him, she turned to run. Even dazed from the explosion, she was lightning quick. Tela was up and running before Wilson could do more than issue a gurgle of protest.

“Meddlesome girl.” He complained, and took off in pursuit.

To Forbin’s surprise, Tela jumped and actually yanked herself up onto the roof of a nearby store. Without looking back, she took off across the rooftops.

It took Wilson a few seconds to scurry up onto the back of Lou and then onto the roof himself. He ran after her. Tela had a good head start, but Forbin could see she only had a few hundred yards before she ran out of anywhere to go. Every time there was an opportunity to go higher, Tela took it- soon she was running two or three stories above the street, leaping from one building to the next over mostly narrow gaps.

Wilson was deceptively fast himself- every time he scurried up a level he gained a few steps and by the time Tela ran out of running space, he was only a few feet behind her. She looked back over her shoulder and saw her cushion was gone. The gap between the two buildings was far- too far. She needed to change direction- but there was nowhere to go.

“No!!” Tela yelled in frustration and dropped to the ground, sliding like she was trying to steal second base.

She didn’t expect her momentum to carry her as far as it did. Instead of stopping at the edge of the rooftop, she slid over it- her hands grabbing the ledge and barely saving her from a fall to the cobblestone street below. She lost a shoe- it spiraled lazily to the ground far below her.

A second later, Wilson’s face appeared. He stared down at her.

“Why don’t you just kill me?” Tela asked, defiant.

“I don’t want to kill you. I don’t want to harm you at all.”

“What do you mean?” Tela asked, surprised.

“Your mother, Tela. I knew your mother. Very well. It was really a tragedy about the shirt.”

“What do you mean?” Tela asked, barely aware of the fact she was hanging from a ledge.

“Tela, I am your father.”

“Nooo!” Tela cried- and let go.

Wilson dove onto his stomach and managed to catch Tela’s wrist at the last possible moment. He used the parabolic arc of his catching her to toss her bodily back up onto the roof. He climbed to his feet, reached down, and dug his fingers into his daughter’s arms. She allowed herself to be dragged back to her feet.

He gave her a single, bone jarring shake before speaking directly into her face. “Tela. Listen to me. I am not going to hurt you. You are my daughter.”

“I’m not your daughter. I hate you!” Tela screamed in his face.

“You are my child. I am your father.”

Tela didn’t even try to escape. She just sunk back to the ground and just lay down on her side, sobbing. Her hands stung. She felt something snap deep down inside. Wilson was telling the truth. He *was* her Father. It explained the way her mother always acted when she brought up her father’s identity. She would get so angry- as if Tela was asking an unreasonable question. All of her energy drained out of her body. She was just tears and pain.

Wilson stood and watched his daughter weeping. After a while, it slowed down, just a little, and he took the opportunity to interject a thought.

“Tela, You’re not thinking about what being my daughter means. It means you’re in line to be my successor. I am tired of being alone with no one but Lou to talk to. I’m telling you the truth because I am ready to bring on an intern of sorts- someone to carry on the legacy when I’m gone. I know you think I’m a monster. But I’m just a man. I have a bit of a problem with my temper, I’m big enough to admit that much. But I don’t want to be seen as a tyrant. But you have to understand- the road to progress is fraught with peril- and it takes a strong hand to till the ship. I know I am an outsider here. I know without the Helping Friendly Book your people would’ve overthrown me long ago. But you- you’re the bridge between my people and yours. With your help, together, the two of us could rule Gamehendge- as a team.”

Wilson reached out to Tela.

There was a long time where he just stood there- his hand extended. But, eventually, she took it. He helped her to her feet.

And the vision broke apart.

“No!” Colonel Forbin protested. He wasn’t prepared for it to be over.

“Make it come back.” He demanded.

“Sorry Colonel. It’s over. The ceremony has ended.” Rutherford said.

The men climbed out of the smoke-hole. It was still light- but the sun had marched most of its way across the sky.

They walked back to the camp in total silence. Once it came into view, Errand Wolfe realized they’d made an error. There was a crowd gathered around Tela’s cabin.

“We didn’t do anything with Tela’s body.” Rutherford said.

“We say nothing. Our revolutionary brethren have been through enough- I don’t know if their spirits can take the news of Tela’s treachery.”

“So what do we say?” Rutherford asked.

They’d stopped walking.

“We tell everyone Tela was killed by what we assume to be one of Wilson’s death squads. We’ll say we found her and were trying to pursue her killers- that is where we were. We didn’t catch anyone- nor did we ever get a clear view of the perpetrators. No mentioning Tela is Wilson’s daughter either. When Wilson has fallen- we will tell the truth,

but until then- we cannot afford the truth to be known. If only we had some good news to offset this horrible days events.”

“Actually, in the trauma of Tela’s death- I let it slip my mind- but there is good news.”

“What?” Errand Wolfe asked.

The desperation in his face made it clear, Errand Wolfe needed to hear good news as bad as anyone.

“Wait two minutes- let’s go meet the others- and then I’ll share.”

“What could possibly good news in the light of all of this?” Rutherford asked.

“You’ll see.”

For the first few minutes after their arrival- nothing productive was achieved. Everyone at the camp was working from the assumption Rutherford and Errand had been killed in the attack on Tela since they were nowhere to be found. When the Lizards saw their leader was still alive- they all had to come around and give them a hug. A few of the Lizards even hugged Forbin.

Once the hugging was completed, Errand Wolfe told everyone his made up story about their attempt at tracking the killers. He actually wept tears as he talked of Tela’s bravery and leadership and beauty. Forbin thought the tears might even be genuine- but with Errand Wolfe- it was a little difficult to tell.

At the end of his explanation, Errand Wolfe finished by introducing Colonel Forbin (as if everyone didn’t know him already).

In lieu of a speech- he didn’t know what he’d say anyway, Forbin removed the pack he wore on his back and opened the soft leather flap. He took the Helping Friendly Book out of the bag and dropped it on the ground at Errand’s feet.

“Is that?” Rutherford’s eyes bugged out of his head. He was doing a little dance- it looked like he had to pee.

“It is.”

“How long have you had it?”

“I just got it. I’d just arrived back from Icculus’s mountain... when we discovered Tela’s body and went and chased after the killers.” Forbin said, doing a good job of keeping any sarcasm out of his voice.

Errand Wolfe didn’t even notice. All he could see was the Book. No, not the book, THE BOOK.

“But how?” He whispered.

“Icculus. I climbed the mountain.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Rutherford knelt down and touched a single finger to the book. He mouthed the words of the title silently, like a penitent in prayer.

The Helping Friendly Book.

For Errand Wolfe- the entire world receded at the sight. From the moment the AC/DC Bag dropped his son Roger to his death, Errand’s entire life was geared around somehow regaining possession of the Helping Friendly Book. And now, against all logical odds, it was sitting in front of him. Without the book- Wilson was vulnerable. The reason the traitorous Lizards stayed with Wilson was because they believed the book wouldn’t allow itself to remain in the hands of a truly evil man. If Wilson didn’t have the book anymore- and Errand Wolfe did- they would follow him. He didn’t think that said much for the intelligence of his citizens- but his best friend and strongest fighter had a tendency to go swimming with his armor on- so... he was used to it.

Errand felt something else too. Something he knew was probably dangerous. Because when he thought about taking control of Prussia- of overthrowing Wilson- he could feel the heft of the power. Just thinking about it was intoxicating. No longer would he live in fear of death- from the moment he overthrew Wilson- it would be Errand Wolfe- King of Lizards- who would go from hunter to hunted. His eyes narrowed as he thought about all of the times over the past years he'd dreamt of revenge on those who'd wronged him- and of course, the rest of the Lizards too. Errand wasn't so far gone yet he didn't include them.

There were an awful lot of things to consider- and he didn't want to mull them over with the entire camp staring. He put on an enormous smile- the kind used car salesmen give before they sell you a car with a motor being held together more by faith than physics..

He said, "My fellow Lizards. This is truly an historic- yet profoundly sad day. There will be much discussion in the near future, but for now you'll have to forgive me, I am going to need a few minutes with my closest advisors to decide our next move. We will develop a plan and be back in about fifteen minutes."

It took a bit longer.

Colonel Forbin felt a profound sense of defeat. He'd come to this bizarre land, he'd met these people. He thought he was doing right- making a difference. But the woman he loved was a traitor and a liar- and she was dead. It left a hole in his chest he could feel physically. And now, Errand Wolfe was acting all squirrely.

Still, he walked with Rutherford to Errand Wolfe's cabin. It was the three of them, and an awful lot of the more Neanderthal looking Lizard revolutionaries. They sat down around a large table.

Now that they were inside and away from the eyes of the entire group, Errand Wolfe's demeanor changed considerably. He turned to Colonel Forbin and glared with an intimidating intensity.

"So tell me Colonel Forbin, how is it that you came to be in possession of the book?"

"I told you, Icculus got it back."

"And I heard you. Now I am asking for specifics. How did Icculus get the book?"

"He sent a bird to get it."

"A bird?"

"Yeah. Icculus called it The Famous Mockingbird."

There was a collective gasp in the room.

"Really?" Errand said, looking a little incredulous.

"Yeah."

"That's interesting because The Famous Mockingbird is just a myth."

"From what I heard, you thought Icculus might be a myth too- but I talked to him."

"So you say."

"Would it help if I actually produced the bird?"

Errand laughed. "It certainly wouldn't hurt."

"Icculus said you might be suspicious. With the bird's permission- I've had him in my backpack since I started climbing down the mountain."

"He's in your backpack?"

Forbin laughed. "Yeah. You know, it's funny, I told Icculus I wouldn't need the bird. I said, 'I'm bringing them the one thing they need to win- I'm bringing them the Helping Friendly Book- why would they be suspicious?' but Icculus insisted. And now I see why."

Errand Wolfe didn't even care enough about what Forbin was saying to be offended. He had one thought in his mind- if the bird could steal the book once- it could do it again.

Errand Wolfe wasn't going to let that happen. The Helping Friendly Book was his now, he wouldn't be giving it up or losing it- to anybody.

"If you have the bird, produce it." Errand demanded.

Forbin was beginning to feel uneasy. He thought giving them back the book would make things better- instead, he was being interrogated like *he* was the one who'd killed Tela. A little reluctantly, he opened his backpack, reached into another dimension, and gently pulled out the bird.

Errand Wolfe sat forward in his seat, his eyes squinting in concentration.

"And is that the Famous Mockingbird?"

"Am I the famous mockingbird?" The mockingbird mocked.

"It's certainly lippy."

"And you're certainly a dumbass." The bird retorted.

"That's him." Forbin confirmed.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be listening to a bird talk to me in such a condescending manner."

It was a pretext- and a thin one- but no one stopped Errand Wolfe when he reached across the table and grabbed the Famous Mockingbird. It squawked in protest, but it didn't bite or put up much of a fight. It wasn't really scared- it couldn't be killed or hurt. But, it could be contained- an annoyance- but only that. The Famous Mockingbird allowed itself to be slathered with glue and attached to a stick- the sensation was kind of interesting.

"Can't have you flying away." Errand said, pulling out a number of rubber bands and wrapping them around the bird and the stick.

"Why are you doing that?" Forbin asked. He didn't like the looks he was getting from the Neanderthals just for asking a question.

"If this bird can steal the book from Wilson- he can steal it from us. We need to keep an eye on him. Plus, we can't have him going around blabbing to everyone what we're going to do next."

"What are we going to do next?"

"What'd'ya mean? We're going to have Wilson killed."

"You're going to kill Wilson?" Colonel Forbin asked.

He was a bit surprised. If killing Wilson was an option, it seemed like the kind of thing the revolutionaries would've already done.

"No, I'm not going to kill Wilson." Errand said, his tone indicating, 'I would've done it already if I could kill him.' He continued, "We need a professional. But now that we have the book- the professionals will work for us."

"Gamehendge has professional killers?"

"No. We've told you- the Lizards are a race of people practically extinct from doing things smart people don't do."

"Yeah, but when you said it the last time- you meant the opposite. You said it meant you do stupid things now."

"I did, that's true. But this time, I meant we, the revolutionary Lizards, we don't do stupid things."

"I'm beginning to think you should retire that phrase."

"Maybe you're right. Anyway, Prussia is lousy with assassins. They're mercenaries with only one code- no killing

the guy with the Helping Friendly Book. But even with the entire guild at our fingertips, there's only one guy crazy enough to kill a King- even a King without his precious book."

"What's this guy's name?"

“They call him the Sloth.”

THE SLOTH

Going into Prussia wasn't a minor thing when you were Rutherford the Brave and Errand Wolfe- their faces were the two most recognizable and wanted in all of Gamehendge. Just strolling into town wasn't an option. But at the same time, they needed to be identifiable by the hoodlum scum they needed to file past in order to get to see the Sloth.

After a long discussion, where, once or twice, Errand seemed to come very close to slapping Rutherford, they decided it would be best to dress as vagabonds to get into the city. Nobody ever looks at the homeless and indigent- and there was so much of it in Prussia- they would be a single flea on the back of a mangy hound dog.

Draped from head to toe in rags, a group of five revolutionary beggars- Errand, Rutherford, Forbin, and two redshirt guards, made their way to Prussia's gates. McGrupp stayed behind at the camp. Forbin wasn't happy about leaving his faithful dog behind- but if they were imprisoned, he didn't want to have to worry about the dog's welfare.

As was the beggar tradition, they arrived at the town gates at dawn. There were several hundred vagrants wandering around. Some of them had the disconnected eyes of the completely insane- others looked quite content with their lot in life. Forbin paid them little mind, he concentrated on remaining as close to the crowd's center as possible. The more people Wilson's guards would have to get through to get to him- the better.

As with his first entrance into the city- Forbin's apprehension was mostly unnecessary. The word of Tela's death had yet to get back to Wilson so there were no special warnings or alerts. Of course, Wilson's loss of the Helping Friendly Book was covered up- so nobody knew about that either. All the guards who'd seen the theft had already been put to death for treason.

For the blissfully ignorant guards at the gate, it was just another day. With their customary looks of disgust, the gates were opened and the vagrants allowed in. After the majority of the people were inside, the gates were arbitrarily slammed shut again. No further rabble would be allowed inside until the next day. Errand Wolfe and the revolutionaries all entered without any hassle.

They made their way into where all the vendors were setting up for the day. Forbin recognized Faht, the cook working at 'My Left Toe.' Faht didn't notice them approaching, his concentration was on a massive slab of meat he was carving down into individual sized portions. Flies buzzed lazily around his head.

Without looking up he said, "We're not open yet. Go get another half-hour's sleep and then come back.

"Good morning, Faht." Errand Wolfe said.

Faht's head jerked up like he'd been electrocuted.

"Errand?"

Errand Wolfe gave him a look that said, "Can you please not use my name!"

Looking flustered, Faht set down his cleaver and, wiping his hands on his apron, hurried up to the counter.

"It's good to see you sir." Faht said in a much more subdued voice. "What can I do for you?"

“Hey Faht. I actually come bearing the most remarkable news. Everything has changed. We have the Book. Wait 24 hours- and then we’ll need your help getting the word out. Till then you must remain totally silent.”

Faht’s eyes were wide with wonder, “You really got it?”

Errand Wolfe grinned.

“What else can I do?” Faht asked.

“I need to know where I can find... HIM.”

There was only one man among all the Lizards you could refer to in such a way- without needing to use his name or give any further information.

“You’re going to use him?” Faht asked.

Errand Wolfe nodded.

“It’s what Wilson deserves. Okay, last I heard, The Sloth is at Nectar’s pretty much every night. You can probably find him there.”

“Thanks.” Errand said.

The men shook hands using the secret handshake of the Lizard revolutionaries- you’d probably recognize it as ‘the hand jive.’ As Forbin and company walked away, Faht held up his fist in the air in the universal sign of resistance.

“Oh boy, we get to go to Nectar’s.” Rutherford grinned.

He was happy, because Nectar’s was the scariest bar in all of Prussia- and going there was an easy way to demonstrate the Brave part of his surname. All such bravado holds a kernel of insecurity at its core- although Rutherford was certainly not bright enough to pick up on it.

They arrived at Nectar’s a few minutes later. From the outside, the place looked fine- maybe a little rundown. But when they opened the door- it was like an alehouse from the 1300’s. The smell was singularly unique- a combination of sweat, blood, vomit, and spilled liquor. To call it unpleasant would be profoundly kind- to call it putrid- would be about right.

“Seriously? We’re going in here?” Forbin asked when Rutherford took a deep breath and went inside.

Errand made an “after you” gesture. Forbin followed Rutherford- amazed at how quickly things had gone completely to hell in a hand basket. He missed Tela.

The inside of Nectar’s was reflective of the smell. A long bar took up one entire wall. It was still early in the morning, so most of the stools were empty, but a few men were slouched over their drinks. These were people stuck to the bottom of the shoe of existence- dirty, angry and surly men with beady eyes and permanently fixed frowns. Forbin’s eyes drifted across these men and tried to imagine any of them being more dangerous than Wilson.

“There he is.” Rutherford said, indicating the far corner table. They walked over. Every set of eyes in the place was on them- and none of the looks were pleasant. These men weren’t fond of Wilson- although many of them would work for him from time to time, when the money was right. But they weren’t revolutionaries either. These men were mercenaries- like Boba Fett- they worked only for themselves.

They weren’t joiners.

“I feel like I’m in the cantina scene from Star Wars- but this guy’s no Han Solo.” Forbin muttered, mostly to himself.

The back corner table was immersed in shadows, so it was difficult to make The Sloth out until they got very close.

“Excuse me, Mr. Sloth. Uh, do you mind if we sit down for a minute? We have some business we’d like to discuss with you.” Errand said.

For the first time, Errand’s voice held a note of deference.

“You’re Errand Wolfe.”

This was not a question.

“Yes sir.”

“You’re leading that band of clown revolutionaries out in the forest.”

“Yes sir.”

“Sit.”

They all sat.

Once they were seated, Forbin took a long look at the man known as The Sloth. He had olive skin, a thin, weasel-like face with a sharply pointed nose bridged over a pencil thin mustache that crossed his face and abruptly turned into sideburns on the far side of his cheeks. His black hair was slicked straight back with some kind of grease and his eyebrows were bushy enough to house a pair of sparrows. Almost grotesquely thin, Forbin found himself questioning The Sloth’s ferocious reputation. But after thinking about it for a while, he’d known guys like The Sloth in the Army- guys who didn’t look like much- until they got into a fight.

“We’d like to hire you.” Errand Wolfe said.

“To do what?”

“We have some wet work that needs doing.”

“Tela?”

Errand Wolfe looked at The Sloth- shocked.

“Why would we need wet work on Tela?”

“She’s a traitor to your cause. Jeez, don’t tell me you don’t know- that’s been common knowledge for three or four months now.”

“We knew- we just didn’t know anyone else did. She’s been handled. What we need you for- is a job that is much.... Bigger.”

“Please don’t say you want me to kill Wilson. You know better- I won’t kill anyone in possession of the Helping Friendly Book.”

“What if he no longer had possession of the book?”

“That would certainly change things.” The Sloth got a suspicious look on his face. “Wait a minute, I heard a rumor about an incident at the castle a day or so ago- something about a bird getting loose and reeking havoc- you’re not telling me...”

Errand Wolfe took the book out of his pack and set held it out so The Sloth could see it. He didn’t dare set it down on the table for fear of staining it with Icculus only knew what.

The Sloth was suddenly on the move- and Forbin got a glimpse of what made the man so dangerous- he was lightning quick- nobody at the table even realized he was planning to get up- and he was already on his feet. To everyone’s surprise, he didn’t attack. Instead, the Sloth bowed deeply to Forbin, Errand, and Rutherford.

“I owe you all a great apology. I dismissed you and your friends as clowns- dummies who were out in the woods doing very little but making yourselves feel better. And yet, somehow, you have gained possession of the book- a trick I myself contemplated many times. I couldn’t figure out how to do it. By the item you hold in your hands, I take it you came up with a plan.”

Rutherford said, “It was Colonel Forbin. He climbed up the mountain and met Icculus. Icculus sent the Famous Mockingbird to steal back the book.”

“You climbed the mountain?” The Sloth asked.

“Yeah.” Forbin confirmed.

“Out of curiosity- did you meet anyone on your journey?”

“You wouldn’t be referring to Jimmy would you?”

“I would. Not too many people know he’s up there. I believe you really did climb the mountain. Amazing. You’re an old guy- that’s quite an accomplishment.”

“I wasn’t alone. I had my dog McGrupp with me.”

“You climbed Icculus’s mountain- with a dog?”

“Wow. Hey Errand Wolfe- who is this guy? And why haven’t you put him in charge yet?” The Sloth asked.

Errand Wolfe laughed- but then he shot Colonel Forbin a look he didn’t like one bit- it was the kind of look indicative of future violence. Once again, doubt crossed Forbin’s mind. Once again, he started to worry- maybe he shouldn’t be helping the Lizards if it meant helping Errand Wolfe too.

“So then, I assume the guy you want me to kill is Wilson.”

“Yup.”

“I can do that.”

“I know you can.”

“It’s gonna cost an awful lot of money.”

“I assumed. It’s worth it. And as King- I’ll have plenty of funds to pay you with.”

“What do you want me to do? Slice off his nipples with a piece of paper? A guy like Wilson- you can’t just walk up and stab him with a sword. I guess you could- but if you do it that way I think you’d get strung up. Not only that- you’d probably make the guy a martyr and the next thing you know everyone will talk about what a great ruler he was. You want to kill a guy like Wilson- you gotta take him out old school.”

“Tell me more of the old school.” Errand Wolfe said, his eyes eager, his hand unconsciously stroking the HFBook now safely restored to his satchel.

“My father Greasy Fiseek taught me everything I know about assassinating. When I was little, he would sit me on his knee and he would tell me the stories of the first group of assassins- a group called ‘The Hashishim.’ They were led by a crazy cat named Hassan I Sabbah. He pulled this trick on people- he made them think they’d go to heaven if they killed for him- he rigged up this chemical cocktail- and then when they woke up all wasted- he’d have women and stuff and everyone would say they were visiting heaven- and if they killed for Hassan- they’d get to spend eternity with all this great food and these beautiful women to bang. When the people came to- they’d do whatever Hassan said. Because of his trick- Hassan was able to gain 100% loyalty from all his people. They always killed their targets in their beds- while they were asleep. If you set a guard- Hassan would have enough of them secretly working for him that they’d kill the others- and then get you.

But what made Hassan I Sabbah my father’s favorite assassin was that he always gave a warning the day before. The night before the murder, a different assassin would plant three daggers into the pillow around the victim’s head. So you’d wake up- and you’d see these daggers- and you knew- you were dead. You might walk around and breathe for 24 more hours, but you were dead. We should do that to Wilson. That- and we’ll take a piece of paper- and slice his nipple.”

The Sloth had a very unappealing smile on his face as he said the bit about the nipple. Forbin wondered what it was about the Lizards and nipples- they seemed a bit obsessed.

“Screw that. Just stab him. Wilson is nuts- no telling what he’ll do if we give him a chance to be scared.” Errand Wolfe countered.

The Sloth considered this.

Finally, he said, "I see the wisdom of your point of view. We will kill him on the first night. But we will still plant the daggers around his head."

"Yeah, do that to him." Errand Wolfe said- a thin, humorless grin stretched wide across his face.

"Then we have a deal." The Sloth grinned.

"Excellent. Now go forth and kill that tyrant bastard."

Errand Wolfe was bouncing up and down with excitement.

They left the bar once the deal was struck, and to Forbin's surprise, they didn't stay in Prussia. Instead, they left the city and started back towards the revolutionary camp. When Colonel Forbin asked why they were essentially running away, Errand Wolfe said he wanted to enter the city of Prussia with the entire retinue of Lizard Revolutionaries.

"This was a group effort and the group should have the glory." Errand Wolfe proclaimed with a grand flair that made it seem like he was just trying out the line for a later public address.

The only part of Errand Wolfe's plan Forbin liked, was the fact he was going to be reunited with McGrupp. As soon as he could manage, Forbin wandered off with his dog. While they strolled for the last time through the woods around the revolutionary camp, Forbin had a long, one-sided conversation with McGrupp about how cowardly it was to send The Sloth to kill Wilson.

"If it was my son who'd been killed- and I held the Helping Friendly Book- there's no way I would let anyone else kill Wilson. I would insist on the privilege. I'm not even from here and I want the chance to do it."

If McGrupp had an opinion on the subject, he wasn't talking.

Then Forbin talked about Tela- and how much he missed her- and how he wished she wasn't secretly working for Wilson the entire time. Forbin knew he'd been played. Tela used the oldest and most powerful weapons in the world to effectively hoodwink him: sex and desire.

Again no comment from the dog.

"You know what I like best about you McGrupp?" Forbin asked, "It's your highly developed conversation skills."

For his part, McGrupp's favorite thing about Forbin- was his highly developed ability to feed him dinner.

By the time Forbin returned from his walk, the entire revolutionary army was gathered in the clearing and Errand Wolfe was climbing up onto a tree stump to speak.

Most of the speech was a catch-up. He talked about Forbin climbing up on the mountain and getting the book- but somehow, he made it sound like he should really be the one who got the credit. He talked again about the tragic death of Tela at the hand of Wilson's unidentified assassin- and finally, he talked about The Sloth.

When he got to the part where they hired an assassin and left town, Errand Wolfe used the exact line, "This was a group effort and the group should have the glory." The only difference was the second time he said it, he added a little flip of the wrist at the end of his hand gesticulation.

Forbin noticed this- and again fought off a distinct feeling of unease.

The rest of the Lizards felt no such compunctions. They cheered Errand Wolfe wildly-praising his name with almost religious fervor. Forbin watched this, and his unease grew even more. Icculus had warned him. And now, before Wilson was even dead- he was seeing hints of what he'd warned him about. The Lizards weren't pure anymore. They weren't necessarily going to be able to handle living in peace and harmony in nature

anymore. After all, Errand Wolfe wasn't even reading the Helping Friendly Book. He'd had possession of it for several hours- even during the long Multi-Beast ride to and from Prussia- he never even cracked the book's spine.

Yet, when Forbin asked for the book to read, Errand Wolfe refused to hand it over.

"You're not a Lizard. You can't handle what's in here- I'm afraid if you read the book it'll turn you into someone like Wilson- I'm not willing to take a chance."

Forbin had already read the first several chapters of the book on the climb down the mountain- and he in no way wanted to be Wilson- in fact, every sentence rang true- it was like the words were deliberately written to echo with his own experience.

There were two phrases that stuck out in his memory, "It's not all good, it just all is, and take care of your ass, for it bears you." Was one. The other was, "Whatever you do, take care of your shoes."

There was much more of course- so much more. Forbin thought about how many bazillions of copies of the Helping Friendly Book he could sell if he could somehow get it back to America. He could use it to start a religion or something. Forbin felt a strong twinge and was forced to admit- maybe it *was* best if he didn't mess too much with the book. The twinge hadn't been there when he gave the book to Errand Wolfe the first time- it was as if the suggestion of the danger of the book made it dangerous. Forbin inherently understood this must be exactly what Icculus was talking about.

Once Errand Wolfe finished his speech, everyone began rushing around, tearing down the camp and getting ready to leave for what they all assumed would be the last time.

For almost everyone this was true- they would never again see the revolutionary camp, but there were a few, many years later, who returned, determined to overthrow a different leader- but for most of the same reasons.

Deep in the night, The Sloth and five of his best assassin's assistants silently made their way into Wilson's castle. They had to kill a few random guards along the way, but each was dispatched before any alarm could be raised. The castle was actually down a large contingent of good guards- all killed as witnesses to the theft of the Helping Friendly Book. The Sloth and his men were scumbags, but Greasy Fiseek was a great teacher- and the Sloth was, for all his Slothiness- a really good student.

The Sloth raced up the stairs to the second floor. On the way he encountered only a single guard- the guy opened his mouth to call out the alarm- but The Sloth launched a dagger from out of his sleeve and silenced him before he could make a sound. Ten seconds later he was standing outside the door to Wilson's bedchamber. He made a series of hand gestures. When he was finished, his assistants nodded their understanding. The Sloth put his hand on the door handle and yanked it open.

He made a beeline for the bed. He saw the movement of the guards heading in his direction, but he ignored them. His focus was on Wilson. He held his father's dagger firmly in one fist and a piece of paper in the other. On the periphery, his assistants brought down the guards one by one- this was why they were here- to protect The Sloth's back while he dispatched the principal target.

The assassin strode directly up onto Wilson's bed and stood astride the tyrant. Wilson came awake to find the tip of The Sloth's blade centimeters from his eyeball.

"Don't you move your Kingship." The Sloth said.

Wilson liked to sleep in just his royal drawers, so his chest was exposed. The Sloth's paper wielding hand swept through the air and cleanly bifurcated Wilson's nipple. The dictator howled in pain. The Sloth no longer cared, in mere moments- his evil ass would be dead. The paper zipped through the air again and sliced Wilson's other nipple, bringing on another shout of pain.

The Sloth brought his lips very close to the King's ear. He spoke in a whisper.

"Wilson, King of Prussia, I lay this hate on you! Wilson, do the Lizards- make it all trune for you?" And then he planted his father's dagger straight into Wilson's heart.

In seconds, the Evil King Wilson was dead.

Looking down at the body, The Sloth murmured, "I always said someday I'd kill you till you die- and now, I've done it." He grinned.

The Sloth jumped down from the bed and signaled his assistants to plant their own daggers. Knowing there would be plenty of time to celebrate later, The Sloth signaled his men to retreat and exit the castle. Like shadows, they melted into the night.

It was Wilson's chamber maid Izabella who discovered the body.

Entering into Wilson's private bedchamber, she couldn't help feeling a little twinge of optimistic hope. The bodies of the guard's strewn about the castle like cordwood were a hint something untoward could've happened to Wilson- a prospect that brightened Izabella's day considerably. When she discovered Wilson, he was exactly as The Sloth and his men had left him, with one dagger in his throat, one in his heart, and three buried in the pillow around his head.

Izabella generated a sound of genuine pleasure that stood in stark contrast to the horror and gore of a murdered corpse.

To add to the incongruity, the woman began to dance around.

And then she spit on Wilson's dead body.

She went to the window and threw back the curtains. She leaned her head out of the window and screamed at the top of her lungs...

HA HA HA HA!!!

Tela's mother wasn't the only woman to have an unwanted child by Wilson.

Izabella had a little girl, now eleven, who was the result of an unwanted tryst with the ruthless tyrant. The incidents had occurred numerous times, but she'd only been caught pregnant once, thank Icculus.

Izabella wasn't satisfied knowing the man was dead. She wanted all of Gamehendge to know- so she took hold of the King's sheets, dragged him across the floor to the window, and with a great deal of effort, flipped his body up and out. It tumbled down into the Hanging Square below.

The AC/DC bag was set up directly below Wilson's window. He liked to look down at the electric hangman- it made him feel safe. What it didn't do- was soften Wilson's landing. He tumbled several times and landed head first directly on top of the robotic hangman. The impact snapped his neck back and broke both arms and one leg in the process of destroying the AC/DC bag. If Wilson was only dead before, now he was really, really dead.

With a smile of satisfaction, Izabella looked down at the body and the ruins of the hangman's platform and came away from the window. She gathered the three daggers from the pillow and hid them in her clothes- she knew they'd be priceless on the black market- every criminal in Prussia would pay big bucks to gain possession of one of Wilson's assassination daggers.

About five minutes after Izabella chucked his body out the window, Errand Wolfe and the revolutionaries arrived at Prussia's gates. There were only four guards and over 50

revolutionaries. It took moments to overpower them and storm into the city. They discovered no further resistance. Most of the townspeople were flooding into the main square next to the castle.

Wilson's body was discovered by a woman named Suzy who worked the square selling biscuits. She heard Izabella's HA HA HA HA and came to see the cause. Suzy was one of Prussia's biggest gossips- it took her only seconds before she started the news circulating through the castle rumor network. Within a minute, cries could be heard erupting around the city, "Wilson is dead! Wilson is dead!"

They weren't cries of despair either.

The cheers and declarations were ambrosia to Errand Wolfe's ears. He was so excited, so proud, you'd think he'd either 1) climbed the mountain himself and got the Helping Friendly Book back or 2) Killed Wilson himself. He'd actually done neither. He'd actually done nothing. But somehow- to Errand Wolfe- he'd done both. And because he thought he had- his followers did too- and so did all of the random Prussian Lizards they met as they made their own way towards the main square. Before they could reach the square, the gathering crowd of Lizards picked Errand Wolfe up onto their shoulders. There was a brief attempt to lift Rutherford as well, but a very firm look from Errand Wolfe kept the brave Knight's feet on the ground.

All Forbin could do was go along with the fast moving crowd and make sure he didn't lose McGrupp in the chaos. As soon as he got the opportunity, Colonel Forbin ducked into a small dead-end alley with McGrupp tight on his heels. He leaned against the wall and took a break.

Colonel Forbin watched as the Lizards of Prussia passed by the alley. There was a rising sense of frenzy permeating the air- Forbin found the feeling scary- it wouldn't take much to turn the crowd ugly. McGrupp didn't like it either. He leaned against Forbin's leg and growled softly. The Colonel knelt down next to his companion and scratched him on the head. McGrupp leaned his whole weight against the one human in the world he truly loved.

"I don't know how much longer we're going to stay around here." Forbin told the dog. "I have a sinking feeling these people are trading one Wilson for another. So if I decide to move on- you think you'd be up for another adventure?"

McGrupp wagged his tail ferociously. He didn't like the city. It smelled like pee- the human kind. Ugh. The forest was much better.

"Okay, I want to see how all of this plays out- and then we're out of here. But first, we're going to hang out here a bit longer until the madness of this crowd dies down a little bit. We're not from here and I know from my military history- rebellious mobs are very rarely kind to outsiders."

All of which was fine for the dog. He just liked getting scratchings.

Forbin and McGrupp ended up staying where they were for four hours. Finally, the din leveled off a bit and Colonel Forbin went out in search of something to eat.

Talking to Faht later that afternoon, Forbin learned everyone wanted to inaugurate Errand Wolfe the new King right there on the spot- literally standing on the wreckage of Wilson and the AC/DC Bag. But Errand Wolfe insisted the ceremony be done properly, with the somber nobility due the coronation of a King. As such, there would be an 8 hour delay so the close followers of Wilson could be rounded up and- more likely than not- have their heads chopped off. You see, even though he wasn't officially King yet, Errand Wolfe immediately decreed the absolute banning of hangings as a barbaric and cruel practice. Beheadings, Errand Wolfe would be heard to say on quite a few occasions, were much more modern.

Colonel Forbin told the cook he'd be leaving that night and Faht was kind enough to stock him up with as many sandwiches as he could stick in his sack. He gave some scraps to McGrupp too- which made him the dog's newest best friend. He licked the cook's chubby face and wagged his tail so hard he practically knocked himself over.

For only having 8 hours of preparation, even Forbin had to admit Errand Wolfe put on a pretty great show. Watching him lap up the adulation of the crowd, it occurred to Colonel Forbin it had all come together so well because this was something Errand spent a great deal of time thinking about. Probably more time than he spent actually doing anything to better the situation of the Lizard people.

Although he was subconsciously hoping it would happen, Colonel Forbin didn't think Errand Wolfe would go so far as to thank him by name during the coronation. Errand wasn't the kind of guy to give credit where credit was due.

However, he was floored when Errand Wolfe said, "And finally I couldn't take it anymore. I put on my hiking shoes and I waded through the horrible swamp and climbed to the very top of Icculus's mountain and begged him to return the Helping Friendly Book to us. And he did!" Errand held the book out to the crowd. They erupted in a frenzy of applause at the sight of it. He then took the Famous Mockingbird out. Icculus sent this creature- The Famous Mockingbird- to fetch the book for me and now Wilson is dead and thanks to me, peace and harmony can return to Gamehendge."

Colonel Forbin had a vision of himself. He was locked in a cell. It was cold. McGrupp was gone- probably dead- probably in front of Forbin- just to be cruel. The food would be moldy- and there would be rats. This was going to be his life if he didn't leave- immediately. He looked down. Loyal McGrupp sat right next to him, his fuzzy head leaning against Forbin's thigh. Forbin's face was full of sadness. He looked old.

"Okay buddy, time to skedaddle."

Forbin got up and slipped away. He walked straight out of the gates of Prussia and into the forest. He was heading in the general direction of the mountain- with no real plan- he thought he'd hang out with Jimmy for a few days and listen to records. McGrupp would have someone to play with- which was a bonus.

But then, in the middle of the trail, he came across a sphere. It was about the same size as the rhombus- just as totally black and just as mysterious. Colonel Forbin looked around. He and McGrupp were totally alone.

Off in the distance he could see the flickering light coming from the massive bonfire in the middle of Prussia- a bonfire stoked by the 'Lizard traitors' who'd been closest to Wilson during his long regime. He was glad to be far enough away to not have to smell it.

Full of sadness, Colonel Forbin turned and walked away from the Lizards forever. The last thing he heard as he stepped through the door suspended within the flat black sphere was the chant they'd taken up- echoing to his ears from over the wall surrounding Prussia.

The chanted,

ERRRRAND!

ERRRRRRRANNNNND!

ERRRRRRRRRRRANNNNNNNNNND!

POSSUM

Icculus sat on his place on top of the mountain. He was smiling. An enlightened being, there was nothing in the universe capable of removing his smile. He'd warned Forbin about the power inherent in The Helping Friendly Book. He tried to explain you couldn't put toothpaste back in the tube. But Forbin didn't get it- he went ahead and did his best to cram it in there.

Which was fine.

Icculus knew, in time, they'd either figure it out- or they wouldn't. It wasn't his job to figure it out for them. Sure, he'd written the book- and with it the Lizards lived in peace and harmony with nature for untold millennia. It was nice- it was innocent and blissed out. But it was also stagnant. In life, shit happens. It was, for Icculus, part of the sacred quadrangle of BOY MAN GOD SHIT. Or put another way. Childhood. Adulthood. Death- and possibly, rebirth- but maybe not. Maybe shit was just that- decomposed energy.

The whole thing made Icculus think about the story of the Possum.

The story goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a possum. He didn't have a formal name, because he was a possum. What this possum did have- was a flair for the dramatic. This particular possum liked to live life on the edge. He was the Evil Kneivel of possums. As soon as this Possum learned to hang upside down from his tail- he made it his mission to hang from the highest branch in the tallest tree. His friends all thought he was nuts. His parents always told him he was going to get himself killed. Our little daredevil possum never listened. He loved to hang upside down from branches. When it was really windy, and the breeze was whipping everything around, he would let the swaying branch give him some momentum and he'd fling himself up and into space.

The possum was never happier than he was during those fleeting seconds where he was arcing up into the sky, feeling weightless. But then he'd then crash back into the trees and grab madly for handholds. He was good- and he always managed to get a hold of something- a branch or a clump of leaves- before he plummeted all the way down to his untimely death.

For a while, tail flinging was enough. But eventually it got old and daredevil possum went looking for a new thrill. Something *really* crazy. He took to wandering further and further away from his home tree looking for the Big Fun.

It was on one of these long excursions that daredevil possum discovered cars. Now that was something to get a possum's blood pumping. When he told his parents- they basically disowned him. His mother couldn't live with the heartache she knew was coming.

At first, the possum just sat in trees next to the road and watched the massive machines as they went lumbering by. Just being in their presence was exciting- the very ground shook as they flew past. Daredevil possum was a thrill-seeker- eventually, it wasn't exciting enough to just watch. He wanted to get closer. He wanted more danger. He wanted to interact. This was how our possum found himself standing carefully on the center yellow line while 2 cars passed him on either side. The adrenaline rush was unlike anything the possum had ever imagined. He was hooked. He no longer even bothered going home- he ate plants around the road- and insects were plentiful because of all the garbage cast off from the cars- it littered the forest around the road.

The daredevil possum would never forget the moment he realized he could actually affect the trajectory of the cars on the road. It was a crazy moment, because he thought he was going to get killed. He'd waited too long- the car was going to plow into him and he knew he wasn't going to live through it. Disaster was immanent. But then there was an eruption of noise and the car swerved wildly to one side and missed daredevil possum

completely. He was terrified- it took every bit of his strength to get to the side of the road before collapsing into the inevitable fetal 'play dead' position.

Panting, he lay there- even more excited than the time he'd been out tree flinging on a windy day and only managed to catch a branch at the very bottom of the tree. He'd come to rest only inches above the unforgiving earth.

If he was hooked before- now it was total obsession. He never looked back- even for a second. The small strip of road actually gained a bit of a reputation with the locals- they came to refer to it as possum alley. They didn't know it was always the same possum. To them, all possums look alike.

Until, one day, quite unexpectedly, daredevil possum met a certain Mr. Bob Weaver. Bob wasn't paying attention to his driving- he was switching songs on his iPod. But to be fair- even if he was paying attention- there wasn't anything he could've done- the daredevil possum was cutting it far too close.

Bob squashed that possum dead.

His end, as they say, was the road.

Ain't no truth in action, less you believe in it anyway.

Icculus laughed, and dissolved back into the mountain, to watch what happened next- he had no doubt whatever it was- it'd be entertaining.

MCGRUPP (REPRISE)

A shepherd named Fluff and his son Henry sat by a fire on the shores of the Baltic Sea. They looked out at the inky water and contemplated the tale told.

"And that, my son, is the story of Colonel Forbin and Gamehendge." Fluff finished.

"So that's when the wars started?"

"Yup. A few hundred years worth. You know the problem with revolution?"

"What?"

"Another word for revolution- is roll. And what rolls?"

"Donuts?"

"Exactly. And donuts go round and round- but when you eat them, you always end up where you started. The Helping Friendly Book was lost for ages. Until, eventually, it popped up again."

"That was when that band found it? The guys from Vermont with the weird name. And they made the story into songs so people wouldn't forget."

"Yup. And while they went through great tribulations- they ultimately played their instruments with their hearts and their minds and they made their world a better place and healed Gamehendge in the process. It took a couple of generations. But, in time, we were able to return to living in peace and harmony with nature- just like the Lizards so many years ago."

So then that's it? We just live like this for eternity?"

"Well yeah..."

"Why do I think there's a 'but' coming?" Henry asked, reacting to his father's clear reluctance.

"But..." Fluff smiled, "this is Phish. Even when it's over- it's not necessarily over. There's always the encore. And that's a very joyful thing indeed."

THE END

Why I Love Phish- A Mini-Essay by the author

Two occurrences changed everything for my heretofore Deadhead self. They both happened at my first Phish show ever- at the UIC pavilion on November 11, 1994.

First was the Harpua. My first show- they played Harpua! And it wasn't just a regular Harpua we got. It was the "Thanksgiving version" of the song- where Posternutbag meets his untimely end by falling into a lava filled crack in the earth- caused by an angry red hate beam from the old man who raises Harpua in the normal version of the story. It was epic and featured the VERY FIRST glowstick war. (A fact I didn't find out for like 10 years- when I read it in one of the Pharmer's Almanacs) The glowsticks were supplied by the band- a decision I often wonder if they regretted considering how many I've seen bounce off the band in the years since.

The second thing was Purple Rain. I didn't know Phish covered Prince's Purple Rain- this was in the days before the ubiquitous internet, instant setlists, and Couch Tour. Kuroda was on lights and the whole UIC pavilion was lit up purple and Fishman played a vacuum solo near the end of it and I just stood there and just stared up at these four guys and I thought- I'm going to follow this band around and see them as many times as I can, for as long as I can.

And I have- closing in on 80 times at the time of this writing.

It's one of the smartest decisions I've ever made.