

# How Noah lost His Ark

THE kidnapping of  
LYSHEEM of CAVVITOX of  
LYSHANDRIK of CARRINDOX  
of LYVITTUS of CASSIMOY.



# E. J. Ellison

*BONUS: 99 pages of hitherto secret Nevergate arcana*

**W**elcome to the Chronicler's mailing list signup bonus. The opening act of your reward is the first eleven\* chapters of *How Noah Lost His Ark*. Currently, this story is a long novella on its way to becoming a short-ish novel.

Presumably, you've read *The Luck of Madonna 13* and have met the heroic 250 year old wyvern named Lysheem. In *Noah*, Lysheem is a teenager, so this is kinda-sorta her origin story.

The second act of your signup bonus is a bunch of hitherto unrevealed Nevergate arcana.

It's okay to be surprised.

~ *The Chronicler, April 2023*

\* Coincidentally or not, eleven is the first multi-digit prime number. It is also a repdigit. Go figure.

# HOW NOAH LOST HIS ARK

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O :: HAMMERS OF GOD

The sudden departure of the Nevergates on November 20, 2285 is thought by many to be the death knell for the technological and commercial ecology of the planet Earth in the late 23rd century. However, Sir Mikhail Vickers argues persuasively in his 2288 essay, “Zero to Minus 330 Years in 24 Hours” in *Skywatch Daily* that the so-called “Moment of Clarity” when a coordinated cryptovirus attack killed off the entire population of communication satellites was an even more disastrous hit to the crumbling politicoeconomic climate. The result of these two “Hammers of God” was profound.

Less than a decade later WorldGov had been replaced by a concoction of every form of political construction invented during the entire history of human civilization: the Thinning had begun.

“Slow down, your highnesses! This is training, not combat. Notice your stance and your pivot, Princess Mitzi. Only defend inside your bodyline, Princess Zelda; you’re wasting whole milliseconds that could be spent counterpunching.”

“Yes, Master Stick,” said both twins at almost the same instant. Their mouths were opening for a further comment when a bellowed alert interrupted the proceedings.

“Avast, me hearties. Alien vessel ahoy!” The rich and commanding voice should have emerged from an oversized, barrel-chested body with oversized vocal cords. But didn’t.

Master Stick spun, embarrassed at being snuck up on by the ancient ro-tund midget who actually owned the big voice. One quick look at the appar-ent escapee from a costume party for taste-challenged whack-jobs told her he’d need maximum humoring today. “Did you lose your crown again, Your Majesty?” inquired Master Stick, tongue wryly in cheek.

Before the roly-poly gentleman with the gold-painted pith helmet could respond, the svelte, golden-skinned Princess Zelda answered for him. “He didn’t lose it again, Master Stick. This is his new crown substitute. Perfect for our sunny days, don’t you think? He’s let himself get a little too pink. Gramper let us put the real crown in a safe place up in the castle where it will be harder for the servants to lose.” She winked at Master Stick (there were no servants and never had been, but their grandfather’s connections with reality had become wildly intermittent).

His Majesty made a face. “Why are you silly females talking about hats and crowns when an alien watercraft is about to sail past the point? I spied it from the royal castle and came here right away to warn Goldy. I sense pi-raticals ... or worse. A floating Trojan Horse wouldn’t be out of the question.”

‘King’ Rinkle was sitting on his goat shaped Ride-A-Boy that he called Bilbil for no reason his granddaughters had ever been able to pry out of him.

All they knew was that the amazingly agile mechanical goat had been his ventriloquist’s dummy during his “happy times” with the Happy Islands Car-nival, that had come to an abrupt end some years ago.

They could almost recite his tale of the unhappy ending while sleeping. As their Gramper told it most of the time, the troupe had fallen apart after the leader, ‘Queen’ Maxissima Ngwame, visited a Soul Train Tour event at Hildi’s castle, where she got a Free Pass to Nirvana. It was during the Happy Islands Carnival’s long-running engagement there and she became instantly enraptured by Errigaspovarrial the Buddha. After meditating on the matter for an entire day, she took a free Soul Bus to the Nirvatanamo Nevergate complex on Old Cuba. Two days later she had departed the Earth for eter-nal blissstate in Nirvana. Suddenly leaderless, the troupe dissolved and went their separate ways.

After several years of random wandering made increasingly difficult by his more frequent bouts of self-referential *Dementia trumpophilia*<sup>1</sup>, Rinkle made his way to the island where his two ‘granddaughters’ lived in a castle. In his “high times” the Lesser Antilles volcanic island called Montserrat was a place he frequently visited aboard The Big Blue Pearl, his 60-foot self-sail-ing cat. The princesses humored him by calling him by his stage name, King Rinkle (his birth name was Edrinkle Jones). Rinkle humored them by calling them Princesses. With the painful confiscation of the yacht during a time he didn’t want to think about very deeply, he was left with only its tender, the Blue Pearl Again. These days, with no audiences to entertain, he most often eschewed the concentration required to ‘throw’ his aging voice. Instead of words, he would more likely cause the goat to make entertaining noises: belches and upchucks in several styles and degrees, and a truly encyclopedic array of attention-getting wind-breakages.

Back in the present, all eight eyes turned toward Rendezvous Bay, which as bays go, was not particularly large, nor particularly bay-like. But it had a nice beach, and back up from the beach a dozen nice thatch-roofed bamboo

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1 :: *Legendary neo-psychiatrist Sigmund Freud* <sup>7</sup> coined the phrase *Demen-tia trumpophilia* in his 2216 TED XXIII lecture series, *The Megalomaniac Love-in Pandemic*. “In summary, it is a thoroughly modern condition wherein the ego, the superego and the id become involved in a veritable arms race of chaotic misintegration ... or dare I say ‘anticognitive adorational dysmesh-ment’. The term says it all.”

cottages that were rarely occupied in recent years. After the world stopped and the Thinning began, few adventurous folk made their way to Montserrat anymore. Further up the hill behind the cottages was a paved rectangle with painted lines demarcating one-half of a basketball court. The backboard and pole had been salvaged from the abandoned Saint Joan Academy, but the net had been fashioned from woven seagrass by Master Stick herself. This was where the viewers were currently viewing.

“Watch closely now, my People,” said Rinkle in his best kingly voice, with special emphasis on People. “Let your eyes follow the pier out to The Laughing Crab and beyond, steering them to the left of Redonda and Nevis in the haze. Be not distracted. Any second now and you should see its fat nose coming past the point. Be sharp!”

Master Stick and the two ‘princesses’ shared exaggerated eye-rolls. All three had become masters of the fine art of indulging King Rinkle during his ‘royal’ moments; during the other times when he was just an old oysterman, such coddling was not required. So they waited. One minute, two minutes, five. No boat, ship or watercraft of any sort.

Master Stick appeared to study an imaginary timepiece on her wrist. “Oh no, Your Majesty. I’m late again. Lord Goldstein will be angry if I don’t get down to the Crab and get ready for the afternoon rush. Sorry, but I need to go. Your Princesses can stay here and keep up the watch with you. Excellent session today, Princesses.”

The princesses bowed to Master Stick. Princess Mitzi gave her twin a gentle elbow to the ribs, which in their twinnish nonverbal language served as a Level Two Knowing Wink, which might be translated as: someday we will show Master Stick a surprise or two.

Master Stick had already turned away to leap into the air, spread her great wings and swoop down toward the bar and eatery at the end of the pier.

Princess Zelda gave her twin a gentle elbow to the elbow. Translation: Don’t you just hate it that dear Master Stick can fly like that?

Adjusting his position on Bilbil’s saddle, King Rinkle blinked, his erratic mind making a sudden right turn. What mattered now was that it was time to rake up a bucket of fresh oysters for Goldy ... and check on the crab meat and oysters in the smokehouse. A better idea occurred to him: today, eschew the

raking and just check the smoker. Besides, he’d left his favorite rake back at the castle. Without a word to his granddaughters, he spun his mount around and headed down the path that ran around the backs of the cottages and ended at the smokehouse.

Master Stick entered The Laughing Crab from the kitchen door, just missing the arrival of a most remarkable watercraft into Rendevous Bay’s view space. It slowed to a stop, then dropped anchor a couple miles offshore. After a brief interval a small aircraft departed its rear deck and made a bee-line for the beach and The Laughing Crab.



## 2 :: WALKING ON TIPTOES

In the opinion of the Crab's lone customer, there's nothing like lobster tails to lighten up your mood when you're feeling a little low. But he would also opine that lobster tails are also an excellent celebratory meal when things are looking up ... as they were at this moment. Noah was dipping a forkload of his fifth lobster tail into a bowl of thick sauce and wondering what is was about this sauce that gave it such a mood-elevating quality ... a quality that went above and beyond mere toothsome-ness. Maybe the unique tang of goat butter? The bite of Jamaican rum? Would he have guessed that the secret ingredient in Smoky's special jerk seasoning was juice of legendary herb known as Emerald Full Monty? Probably not.

"So — it's really Noah now, right?" Gabriel "Smoky" (or "Goldy") Goldstein grinned. He and "Noah" went all the way back to their Casino Royale days in Belize, when the much slimmer, unbearded and unrobed version of the man across from him was a former pit boss and serial hustler who went by the name Jules Borth. "So um, Noah, havin' any luck getting customers to your floating alien zoo these days? Good luck getting any from Montserrat; people-wise, we're running on empty here. Have been ever since the Nevergates went away."

"Hot in here," said Noah, ignoring the comment while wiping his brow with the white sleeve of his robe.

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but we of the Caribbean hoi polloi haven't quite got the hang of wrapping ourselves in ankle-length fancycloth when we go out for lobster."

"I would ordinarily agree, old friend, but this particular fancycloth has integral cooling. It's also got built-in mosquito abatement."

"Ahh," said Goldstein. "So it was the sauce, huh? Kinda sneaks up on people."

Noah didn't answer until he had followed his latest mouthful with a generous tankard-emptying swig of sangria. "New enterprises are always rife

with minor difficulties. As are old enterprises during times of chaotic upheaval like these."

This was hardly new information to Goldstein, but instead of responding he waved his battered straw cowboy hat at something behind Noah. "Hey Stick!" he bellowed. "Can we trouble you to mix us a fresh jug of sangria? And when you bring it out, bring us a couple of those Royal Castro Emeralds, too."

"Sure, LG. Your wish is my command."

Noah was suddenly more fascinated with Stick's voice than the lobster. It was female but not feminine, youthful, but not juvenile. And it had a subtle accent he couldn't place. Definitely not even enough salty Caribbean lilt to season his lobster tails. Noah mentally smiled at his absurdist tack on similes, but he truly prided himself in his mental library of accents. Would he have guessed that the owner of that voice would be more than seven feet tall? Or have wings? And a tail? In this singular instance, he had good reason to hope for exactly all those unlikelies, although he wouldn't have tempted the fates by saying that out loud.

"Noah, I'd like you to push your eyeballs back into their sockets and say hello to my wyvern assistant: Lysheem of Cavvito of Lyshandrik of Carrfindoy of Lyvittus of Cassimoy. She's the only person left on this island who's darker than me."

The scene of Noah's pleasant semi-surprise was a shack-like tropical eatery that was formerly famous with Dunnigan clanfolk and their guests. Many of these customers had gated from exotic planets to the Clans' bamboo castle overlooking Little Bay just for a feast of those legendary crustaceans. Another occasional arrival through that same Nevergate had been the illustrious wyvern whose friendship with Goldstein went back to the early NavaTek days three decades ago. Cavvito, sometimes called the "Dawnhammer," had hired Goldstein as NavaTek's first non-Navajo/non-wyvern employee. The world's only ex-Securitan, Oxford-educated semi-pro power forward described his NavaTek work in Tsaile as "a highly improbable example of overqualification meeting underemployment head on." What he never mentioned was the pay that made spending his days and nights as a cybersecurity guard entirely worthwhile. Eventually, Goldstein found his way back

to the island of his birth, where he built The Laughing Crab on an abandoned pier in Rendezvous Bay, near the northern tip of Montserrat's leeward side.

Before the recent nastiness that had already turned the planet's progress clock back at least a hundred years, The Laughing Crab had earned a measure of culinary fame for its outsized homegrown spiny caribbean lobsters. With native lobsters having been harvested to near extinction over the last century, a generous grant from the Clans had helped create a burgeoning population in the waters of this nearly abandoned island nation. With the Soufriere Hills volcano's periodic disruptions having confined its spews to the lower half of the island in recent centuries, only the occasional hurricanes had despoiled The Laughing Crab and its small collection of thatch-roofed cottages.

At the moment, Rendezvous Bay was the picture postcard for the Emerald Isle and its unspoiled tropical splendor.

"Oh my gooshness," said Noah through a mouthful of half-masticated lobster. He heaved his bulk up from the chair and thrust out a hairy tanned arm ending in an outsized hand. "I hope it is not a gross breach of etiquette not to address you with all your names, um, Lysheem. As my beard gets longer and whiter, my memory gets shorter and dimmer. And please forgive me if I gawk at you for a moment ... I have never actually met a person of your, um, legendary species<sup>2</sup>."

With her right hand swathed in bandages, Lysheem ignored the offered hand and performed something like a curtsy instead. "During my three years on Montserrat, Mr Noah, the only human who has not gawked at me is Lord Goldstein here. He knew my father, and he has graciously provided me with both accommodation and employment suited to my limited skills."

Smoky grinned. "Lysheem is far too modest. She has developed notable skill at wrestling sea creatures up out of our local waters. If I didn't know better, I'd think she had a religious aversion to using anything but my ancient longboat to tend to the deep traps out past the reef; amazing free diver, that

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2 :: For readers not yet familiar with The Luck of Madonna 13, modern wyverns are a created species developed at the Clans Dunningans' Institute for Advanced Lifeform Research during the early decades of the 23rd century. Their brief history has been fraught with controversy.

one. Besides a disturbing propensity for beating me in one-on-one basketball contests due to her unfair advantages of youth, height and dexterity, her only real character flaw is a somewhat over-adventurous nature. Just yesterday she wrestled a spiny dogfish — a type of small shark we have around here — that was banging on one of our lobster cages and upsetting the occupants. Curious little puppy learned the Lesson of the Curious Cat, but its broiled filets will be quite tasty. That one's in a coldbox now, but it got a measure of revenge before it died. My assistant learned about their poisonous stingers the hard way. Not deadly, but painful enough to teach wariness and earn the victor another nice bandage."

Lysheem grimaced. "Enough about my misadventures ... if you don't mind, Lord Goldstein." Time for the subject matter to do a one-eighty. "Is that your big boat out there, Mr Noah?" She definitely did not want to talk about the other shark adventure that had cost her five pounds of leg flesh and her Standard Toolbelt. That ugly bull shark was probably still cruising around the neighborhood with her teleblade stuck in its right eye and her wand and toolbelt in its belly. It been less than a week since the incident, and she was only now starting to realize just how isolated she had become: the teleblade was the only way she could communicate with Dryll, the wyvern satellite brain up there in some mysterious black orbit ... and somehow immune to the attacks of Dark Monday. It made Lysheem both angry and embarrassed to think about it, much less hear about it. And more irksome than either of those emotions was the sudden loneliness and isolation. It had been Dryll that broke the news less than a week after her arrival that she was now the only wyvern on the planet. Dryll had been her daily companion since she got stranded here and now even Dryll was out of reach.

She felt a dark spiral circling her mood and tightening. Bad enough to get trapped in that depression shit when she was by herself, but with humans around ...

A voice interrupted the mood. "Um, ah, Lord Goldstein, do I have your permission to invite Lysheem to join us for a brief exposition about the Ark?" Noah's eyes had not left Lysheem, a pointed gaze she found disconcerting when she noticed it. Even so, she was curious about the Ark.

Goldstein made a show of looking at the empty bar, then the empty dining room. “Well, it’s not our policy here at The Laughing Crab to allow normal-sized employees to fraternize with customers ... but for employees that are seven-foot-two and still growing, I make an exception. Pull up a chair, Stick.”

Lysheem curtsied, dragged a chair away from the nearest empty table, flipped it around and sat with her crossed arms resting on the back of the frame. She leaned her head forward and decided to show Noah that two could play the gaping game. Cavvitoy would have advised against baiting an unknown human, but he was far away and the Noah character irritated her.

Noah noticed her exaggerated goggle-eyed stare and said, “Ah, you find my majestic chin-whiskers fascinating, eh? Frankly, you don’t want a beard, trust me on that. It is a magnet for unseemly clumps of food and small vermin, and an overall annoyance, but it’s what the folk of this region expect a Noah to look like.”

“Is a Noah some kind of famous Caribbean character that everybody but me knows about?” wondered Lysheem innocently. She certainly didn’t recall any Noah from her schooling at Wyvern Home in the Chuska Mountains.

Noah chuckled in a way that made his beard perform a perky two-step. “Um, I suppose that is true ... at least in this region. If I can hazard a wild guess, your wyvern schooling out there in the desert surrounded by tame Indians did not include much about comparative religions in human history.”

“Exactly nothing. Should it have?” countered Lysheem, unable to keep an irritated frown from her face.

“Forgive me if I offended you Lysheem. Historically, the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean region were, um, ‘strongly encouraged’ to adopt the religious traditions of the European colonials who conquered them by force of arms and disease. A rude practice to modern eyes, of course. Still, ancient beliefs — even when forcibly adopted — are not automatically erased by the floods of time. The biblical tale of Noah and his Ark falls into the un-erased category. Do you care to hear more?”

Lysheem forced her facial muscles into what she hoped was something like rapt fascination and nodded.

“Well, then, here is a, um, capsule summary. In the words of a popular translation of the Christian bible, ‘Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on the earth at the time.’ A religious skeptic might see Noah as merely a favored lackey of the Hebrew prime deity, but the possibly mythical 600-year-old became famous to readers of biblical epics for constructing a large boat called an Ark. This was at the request of his deity, who urged him to fill it with mating pairs of beasts and be ready to float away when the deity caused a Great Flood to wipe out the preponderance of humans who had evinced unsatisfactory religious worship practices ... that is to say, all humans but Noah and his extended family.”

Lysheem frowned. “So that boat out there is a modern replica that’s full of animals? Kind of like a zoo?” Lysheem had no patience for silly old human myths, but the big clumsy-looking boat with the unusual wooden skin had captured her interest.

“Be patient, Stick. Just guessing here, but if you keep Noah’s tankard filled ...”

Noah downed his remaining sangria in one gulp and held the vessel out for a refill. Lysheem dutifully — if not altogether graciously — poured. “Your sangria makes an excellent storytelling lubricant, young lady. In particular, you are to be commended for your unstinting application of rum. I assure you that your diligent attention to, um, Lord Goldstein’s suggestion, will pay informational dividends. But of course, seeing my remarkable replica with your own eyes would be even better. We are doing some minor refurbishing and hull upgrades at the moment, but in a couple days, I shall have one of our shuttlecraft bring the two of you out for a special VIP tour.”

“Very generous of you, Noah,” said Goldstein. Lysheem couldn’t resist adding, “And righteous, too.” Noah didn’t seem to notice her sarcasm, but Lord G gave her one of his looks. Probably best to just shut up and listen.

The delicate clack of a pony walking on tiptoes interrupted the conversation.



The interruptor was not a pony but a Ride-A-Boy in the shape of a robust male goat minus the “junk” that one would expect on a flesh and blood billy. Its short-haired coat was currently stuck in fluorescent yellow Look-At-Me mode. Sturdy, outsized horns spread out on both sides of its head like artful handlebars and were fitted with controls that regulated its movements. The berobed fellow in the saddle adjusted those controls and brought the device to a stop next to the table.

Goldstein spoke without turning his head. “Do I detect the approach of His Royal Highness, the eminent King Rinkle ... mounted on his royal steed Bilbil?” He made a show of sniffing. “And has King Rinkle been raiding the smokehouse? The oysters, perhaps?”

“Your nose becomes you, Goldy ... although I fear that that assessment applies only to its sensory capabilities and not to its aesthetics. My royal curiosity having been aroused, I brought this prime selection of smoked mollusks for this hirsute crustacean eater. In all candor, I am hoping to bribe him into revealing information about his strange vessel. We kingly types are fond of revealing information.” Rinkle chuckled.

“Is that supposed to be a joke, Emperor Rinkle-toes? Or is it merely a demonstration of your lame sense of humor?” The reedy voice that spoke those words seemed to emerge from the mouth of the mechanical goat.

“Pish-tish, Bilbil. Keep that up and I won’t let you loose with the nannies anymore,” boomed the little man dressed in a costume you might have imagined on old England’s King Henry VIII — if Henry had been under 5 feet tall and shaped like an apple perched atop a pair of jointed lollipop sticks. For this occasion he was attired in a green and magenta striped doublet over an aqua codpiece over leggings of fluorescent orange. Wrapped around his shoulders was a mantle of royal purple fringed with rope made of shiny silver tinsel. The black canvas high-top Keds might have looked out of place on a less singular figure.

Goldstein was impressed. Not only was King Rinkle dressed up for the occasion, his ventriloquism was in top form. Usually it was just farts and belches. “Clever of you, King Rinkle. But in the interest of full disclosure, don’t you think it would be fair to warn our guest that your basting sauce is reputed to function as a truth serum?”

“Truth? Hah! Overrated, indeed. In my experience most people automatically tell the truth ... even if they have to make it up. Hardly a coinage one might take to the bank. So forget truth: I would be satisfied with a few wayward facts dribbled from this nameless varlet’s mouth.”

“Well, um, Your Royal Highness, I am called Noah at the moment and you may be comforted to know that I am only a part-time varlet.” Noah paused a moment to study the wrinkled sunburned face for signs of ... of what? That he was being made fun of by this clearly off-kilter has-been of an obese dwarf? Not likely, but if so, it was harmless fun. So he continued, his Maximum Serious face on display. “A person of your wisdom and experience, King Rinkle, may not be surprised to know that I have been offered many a toothsome bribe, although never has the currency been molluscular.” Noah reached toward the metal bucket hanging from Bilbil’s left horn, saying, “Of course, I will need to test a sample of the currency, before ...”

The goat backed away, saying gruffly, “We’ve heard that trick before, Sir Varlet.”

“Yes, indeed, Sir Noah,” added King Rinkle. “You may be surprised to learn that many usually honorable folk don’t even think twice before attempting to fleece a goat.” The faux goat made a ratchety groan, but said nothing. “However, I am a reckless in my generosity and will agree in advance to an exchange of one fact for one oyster. Both Master Stick here and your old friend Goldy can attest to my unassailable honor. Can we trade a tasty fact for a tasty smoked oyster?”

Noah chuckled and essayed a grin so wide that a clot of unswallowed lobster leaked from his mouth. Lysheem caught Noah’s eye, winked and pointed a finger to the area in his beard where the clot had come to rest. A facetious quip hung on the end of her tongue, then dissolved unquipped. Her father should be happy, she grumbled to herself, since he was always saying

something about discretion and valor and that she would do well to adjust her sometimes capricious behavior in the direction of discretion.

Noah dabbed at his beard with his bib and nodded to King Rinkle. “I would not dare to impugn your honor, so here is my fact-in-advance. You see, um, your, um, fame precedes you, Your Royal Highness. You are the illustrious ventriloquist, teller of fortunes and master of playing card trickery who toured with the Happy Islands Carnival for quite a long time. And the fame of your Ride-A-Boy preceded even you. I remember the buzz when it made its heroic high velocity escape when those Chinkapin rebels tried to kidnap its young rider — little Macadamia Shah, wasn’t it? The Secretary General’s youngest daughter, I believe. Who would have guessed a common Ride-A-Boy would be so capable?”

Noah paused, possibly waiting for a response.

Bilbil made one. “Little Macadamia Shah was a spoiled little twit,” grumbled the goat. “She would go off and leave chunks of uneaten caramel lollipops stuck in my coat. Plus, she would insist that I fart around people she wanted to offend. This was her favorite variety.” A loud staccato put-put-put-put emanated from the vicinity of the Ride-A-Boy’s tail. “A thoroughly horrible brat! If she were here right now, she probably would have wanted me to offend you, Sir Noah. So consider that last one was for you ... a phantom demand from Her Twitty Ladyship.”

The words Noah was planning to say next got stalled on the way to his tongue. After a few seconds he made one of those well-we’re-certainly-having-fun-today fake grins, cleared his throat and continued as if the goat had never spoken.

“So-o-o-o ... those rumors that it was a setup to, shall we say, recharge the Secretary General’s waning popularity after his failed ‘war’ against the Clans Dunnigan, were most likely planted by the opposition. So they say. Or even propagated by the redoubtable Dunnigans. At least that’s my takeaway from the affair.

“You wouldn’t have noticed me, but I personally witnessed your kingly performances in several venues: Cancun, San Juan, Kingston and Curacao come to mind. Oh, and at Hildi’s Palace, too.”

Noah’s brow furrowed and he continued. “I was truly quite saddened to hear that the troupe had disbanded. You should also know that I never believed the scurrilous rumors that you were all undercover WorldGov agents. What kind of sense would that make, after all?”

The Laughing Crab suddenly went silent. Only the sounds of wavelets lapping up on the beach penetrated the void. King Rinkle’s smile underwent several abrupt adjustments in close succession and his mouth opened and shut three times before allowing words to emerge. The faux Noah was not unknown to him, but under a different name. And for a brief time at Hildi’s Palace, he had been the butt of many a snide jest.

His shoulders slumped and he made a deep sigh. “I fear there is no escape from either unpleasant memories or vicious rumors. But you, Sir Noah, have gone beyond the minimum fact, and thus earned this entire bountiful bucket of beauteous bivalves.”

Rinkle lifted the bucket from Bilbil’s horn, bowed and held it out for Noah. At exactly the perfect moment, the mechanical goat’s hind legs made a prodigious upward lurch, launching King Rinkle’s body from the saddle and into the air. The bucket’s contents spewed out in a savory, smoky spray, distributing themselves evenly over Noah’s face and beard. Before anyone could shout, shriek, curse or exclaim, an extended, richly nuanced instance of fartsmanship entered the fray.

Lysheem scrunched her lips together and bit her tongue: hysterical laughter right now could hardly be considered proper behavior.

Goldstein squelched a guffaw he feared might erupt into an uncontrollable fit.

When the clatters, shatters, splashes and clunks came to an end, the portly fellow who has been thrust face first onto the table turned his head and shouted, “Bad Bilbil! Very very bad Bilbil! Shame on you, you silly mechanical goat! Don’t think for an instant that this ungenerous act will go unpunished!”

Noah wiped gooey oysters off his face, paused to stuff some into his mouth, chewed for a few seconds, gulped and then began to laugh. It was a hearty laugh, a booming laugh every bit as meaty as his person. Half-masticated particles filled The Laughing Crab with a mist redolent of smoke and

spice, but no one seemed to notice. Taking their cue from the sole customer present, Smoky and Stick added to the chorus of guffaws, chortles and belly laughs. The quiet departure of King Rinkle and Bilbil was barely noticed.

When an ambiguous silence finally took over, Noah focused his attention on retrieving and devouring the remaining undevoured morsels. He finally looked up, an undecipherable expression on his face, his eyes shifting from Smoky to Lysheem and back, as if waiting for a comment. Finally he spoke in a quiet voice: “I think the term *touché* might apply here. Whatever else might be said about King Rinkle, his skills have not diminished by so much as a single delectable oyster. The man is truly a genius.”

## 4 :: STRAIGHT UP

In Lysheem’s opinion, the full story of Noah’s late 23rd century Ark that followed the oyster incident was larded with puffery and fluffery, and contained only the bare minimum of what might be facts. It continued through three jugs of fresh sangria and six cigars. Night was well under way, a thunderstorm had come and gone, and Lysheem was bored. Noah and Smoky were thoroughly “in their cups,” an old English term for intoxication that Lord Goldstein had shared with her one languid evening after he gently escorted two brawling, rum-soaked customers from the Crab.

After escaping for a powder room visit, she left the two humans to their drunken reminiscing and sought refuge in the kitchen. When Noah showed no signs of departing, she brought out a bowl of smoked crab with spicy goat cheese, coconut chips and a fresh jug of sangria enhanced with a triple measure of rum. With any luck, both of them would pass out soon.

Lysheem’s wyvern constitution had been designed to have dynamic immunity capabilities: it could detect various toxins and make biochemical adjustments to neutralize them once their nature had been ‘learned’. Toxins included alcohol and its the inebriating effects. For a wyvern, getting drunk and loud and sloppy and foolish and stupid would have to be achieved by some method other than ethyl alcohol. Which is not to say that the youths of Wyvern Home — herself included — hadn’t tried to override their biology.

But that was then. Now she stood at the kitchen window gazing out at the bay and practiced blowing dense smoke rings at the droopy moon. Between rings, she soberly considered what she’d learned about the modern Noah’s ‘Ark’.

First, it was nothing more than a waterborne traveling circus, but a boring one. Its main entertainment offerings were the alien species that mostly just sat in their cages, looked weird and did nothing. Popular exceptions were a pair of Cametto-5 dragons and a Fearsomious bandersnatchi (that’s what Lysheem heard — Noah was slurring his words by then). Noah described “his

aquatic creation” in glowingly general terms with much arm-waving (that special artform practiced by hucksters throughout time and space). At one point, Lord G had innocently said, “Oh that zoo. Isn’t that the one they called the Pan-Universes Emporium of Living Wonders when it occupied half a level of Hildi’s Palace?”

As had all other teens growing up at Wyvern Home, Lysheem had heard of Hildi’s Palace in the western Caribbean. It sat naked in the water, jutting up from a reef called Dinero Dinero somewhere between the CenAm eastern coastline and the Cayman Islands. During Cavvitoy’s rigorous combat flying and hand-to-hand drills, he’d regularly threatened to send lazy malcontents to Hildi’s Palace as a punishment, where they’d be forced to labor in the underwater coral mines. The Dawnhammer’s pix of happy humans frolicking in the lagoons next to the 100-story mirrored transpaque pyramid made the punishment look a lot like a tropical vacation.

Alas (Noah’s term), all was not happiness on the Misteriosa Bank these days. Since Hildi’s assassination in 2271, her palace had been in steady decline, which explained how Noah had been able to pick up his zoo on the cheap. The fact that he bragged about his dealmaking acumen just reconfirmed Lysheem’s opinion that he was a blowhard human jerk and not up to the standards burned into her brain by her life experiences with Lord Goldstein ... and before coming to Montserrat, with her human ‘uncles’ Diogenes and Shavvender Goss.

Tired of blowing smoke rings and annoyed with the two sloshed humans, Lysheem walked outside to the end of the pier. Should she or shouldn’t she treat herself to a relaxing late night flight? She should. In fact, she would do a flyover of Noah’s ark and check it out for herself.

The gentle onshore breeze skimmed past her, cool on her hairless slate gray skin. What would it be like to be a hairbody like that Noah jerk? Probably annoying ... he’d said as much about his beard, hadn’t he? She chided herself for letting an irksome human interfere with a pleasant clear night laced with the soothing scents of sea and shore under a blanket of shimmering stars.

Anytime the wind was blowing from the south there was no escape from the sulphury stench from the conical neighbor in the middle of the island,

the Soufriere Hills stratovolcano. Its last eruption with violent ashflows was a decade ago according to Smoky, and the bottom of the cone still festered and spewed smoke and steam. But at night it was dangerously beautiful to fly over with all the glowing blobs of every shade of red and orange against the cooled and cooling black lava. With the light breeze — a forerunner of the cooling tradewinds season — coming down from the northeast, tonight would be a good night for a volcano flyover. Probably more interesting than Fatty Whitebeard’s stupid boat.

Not wanting to attract the attention of any stray eyes, she dove off the end of the pier, popped out her wings and skimmed over the water. Her dark shape was just a moving shadow laced with flickers of moonlight. Her plan was to stay low past the north arc of the bay, then gain altitude in wide loops until she was high enough to head south over Silver Hill and on to the volcano. She had just crested Silver Hill when she changed her mind. The lights on the Ark had drawn her like a moth to a bonfire.

After an hour of aerial surveillance, one fact was clear: Fatty Whitebeard was a liar, not just a blowhard. What kind of zoo flies large numbers of ‘customers’ out to it in big rented carryalls at midnight. She watched the stream of aircraft come in from the west, where the islands that WorldGov called the Greater Caribs were located. They were specks when she first noticed them approaching the Ark, flying low in a string. As they got closer she could see they were NavaTex Twelve-Eighteen transport craft, all with Kingston Flyboy Rentals painted on their black roofs in fluorescent yellow letters. They slowed to a hover parallel to the Ark’s port side with the leading craft adjacent to the open foredeck. Given all this new activity, her wisest course would be to head back to Rendevous Bay before anybody noticed her. But being a teenager, wise wasn’t yet fully integrated into her being.

Instead, Lysheem gained altitude and flew lazy, mile-diameter circles a thousand feet overhead and watched. At some signal, the first craft slid sideways and dropped down to the deck. The hatch opened and a large load of ‘customers’ was escorted under armed guard to a tin-roof shack on the foredeck. Interesting: must be an elevator or a stairwell inside, since there was no way to cram that many people into a box like that. When it was unloaded, the aircraft lifted off and was replaced by the second. Same routine. When

the tenth had discharged its load, all departed for the west at high speed. Her Caribbean geography was sketchy, but Hispaniola and Jamaica were out that way somewhere. That much she knew because some of the volcano scientists lived on one or the other of those islands when they weren't on duty.

With the transports — and the danger — gone, the bat-winged observer decided to zero in on what she originally flew out here to inspect. The main structure on the deck was a simple long rectangle. It had sides of the same wooden planks as the hull and a simple gable roof covered with the same kind of corrugated silver metal that roofed many of the abandoned buildings on Montserrat. Cheap to build, cheap to rebuild, LG had said during their first tour of Little Bay, which was full of roofs like that. With each circle she flew she took in a little more detail.

Was it smart to fly lower to get a better look at the front? Smart or not, Lysheem swooped lower, flattening into a glide no more than a hundred feet above the water. Now she could observe the un-simple part of the Ark: the imposing facade on the front end that looked like quarried stone with an arched portal. Over the entry was a curved sign that said “Noah’s Pan-Galactic Ark” in florid lettering that glowed with lights that changed colors through the whole rainbow spectrum. A pair of massive-looking fluted stone columns with curly capitals supported an entry gate made of curly ironwork. Two rows of potted palms flanked a small entry plaza. Although it might be fancy to some eyes, cheesy was the word that sprang to Lysheem’s mind. Definitely wasn’t coming out to this place for a visit.

She was debating with herself whether to come in closer when a distant flying thing registered in her peripheral vision. Some sort of small flier was headed this way from her island. Lord G didn’t have a flier so it was probably Fatty Whitebeard’s. Time to circle up some extra altitude.

Even at two thousand feet, the craft was one she recognized: a NavaTek Four-Eight. A tiny bloom of pride swelled her heart: Noah might be a jerk, but he had good taste in vehicles. What NavaTek called a PUV (Personal Utility Vehicle) settled on the rear deck. Two uniformed guards hustled from the shadows at the back of the main building and opened the main hatch. One helped Fatty Whitebeard out of his seat, but he needed both to support him as he wobbled toward the big building.

Nothing more to see here, mumbled Lysheem. She swung around toward Rendezvous Bay so quickly that she missed the part where Noah and the two men stopped for an intense discussion. One pointed to an unfolded slate, the other pointed straight up.



Lysheem was very young when she asked her father why he slept like a bat when almost everybody else slept in beds. He just smiled, patted her head and told her a story about the time before the creation of Wyvern Home when all 641 wyverns on Earth had to hide in an abandoned uranium mine. Pure water being rare and precious in that place, hanging from their tails with their wings wrapped around them saved a lot of water that might otherwise be wasted to launder bedding.

She remembered putting on her scrunchy-girl face and saying that's a story only a stupid hairhead would believe (hairhead was a pejorative term for humans that was currently popular amongst her peers). What Cavvitoy said after that she remembered to this very day. Word for word.

"I think your skepticism proves beyond a doubt that little Sheemie is not a stupid hairhead. But there are at least two other possible reasons little Sheemie might consider. One, sleeping upside down makes oxygen-rich night-blood flow into your brain, making you a little smarter every night. Two, hanging from your tail makes it stronger so that you can do excellent tail tricks ... assuming you practice the tricks, of course."

Lysheem had adopted her father's sleeping practice that very night and still did. Even at the ripe old age of 17.

She woke to the music of an early morning downpour that washed an Ark dream right out of her head. Unwrapping her wings, she stretched her muscles and launched her day with a dozen tail-ups to the timber bamboo crossbeam. On the last rep she grabbed the crossbeam with her hands and performed two dozen pull-ups before dropping to the floor. Memories from yesterday seemed to come back with the predawn glimmer. She put Noah and his ark entirely out of her mind: it would be a good day to be early at the Crab and get coffee going: Lord G was going to be hungover. And he'd made another big fake candle, so there'd be one on each side of the door in honor of Zooka Day. She'd known Zooka was supposedly the Guiding Light of the

Metaverse, but he'd 'retired to the Metaverse' centuries ago. His birthday was January 20 in some 20th century year or the other, so way more than two candles would be necessary to properly celebrate his birthday. When she'd put her question to LG last week, he'd given her one of those looks. "Your father would want me to say you need to figure it out by yourself. But I'm not your father, so I'll tell you ... sometime in the next year. Maybe."

Her brain delivered the necessary data in nanoseconds. "Dark Monday," she said. "So it's Zooka's second birthday since all the satellites got hacked. Bye bye Metaverse." Lysheem closed her eyes and thought for a minute. "I still miss the Metaverse ... but I miss Dryll more. I may need to murder a thousand sharks to get even."

"I'm sure that'd do it," Goldstein said wryly. "How about some one-on-one to take your mind off shark murder. Give you a chance to gloat again."

Now Zooka Day was actually here. This year the twin princesses<sup>3</sup> had been 'hired' to paint the big sawed-off pontubes in the style of some ancient artist whose technique involved making colorful abstract messes. For something called a 'job' the princesses had had far too much fun, thought Lysheem with a touch of envy. Still, their impromptu paint fight had involved laugh out loud moments while it lasted. But that fun was now several days old and all that remained were the memories embedded in their artistic works now flanking the Crab's doors.

Lord Goldstein's first words of the day as he stared at his mug were, "Coffee you can cut with a meat cleaver ... just what I needed this morning. Thanks Stick. You're a prize. Kind of embarrassed about getting sloshed with Jules — Jules Borth is Noah's real name. Did I make a total ass of myself?"

Lysheem ignored the question and asked one of her own. "Is that ship out there really the alien zoo he says it is? And is that what a Noah should look like? All that white facial and head hair?"

.....  
 3 :: *Mitzi and Zelda, the twin 'princesses' — and Rinkle's 'granddaughters' — revealed to Lysheem that they were born during the Twinning Craze to the so-called "Virgin King Baudelaire" of the short-lived pre-WorldGov monarchy of Even Newer South Wales. Lysheem believed them for less than a second. Her human godparents had been born during the 21st century pod-birthing fad and there was no way the faux princesses could look so young while being so old.*

“Well, I’ve seen old paintings of biblical Noahs that had that hairy look. But it’s a new look for Jules. Did I mention I saw the alien zoo it was at Hil-di’s Palace? Bunch of us NavaTek people went down there for a weekend one time. One-of-a-kind experience, that zoo ... definitely worth a visit. I can believe he bought it on the cheap, though. The Jules I knew in Belize was more of a wheeler-dealer guy than an operator guy. Always looking for a angle and a big, fast score. Got some hush-hush offer and dropped out of sight about ten years ago, just before I decided to retire from what I was doing back then and come back here to build the Crab. I had no idea he’d just drop in, although he was always a big fan of lobster ...” Goldstein went silent and just sat with his eyes closed, his hands around the steaming mug. After a few minutes, Lysheem figured she’d gotten all the answer she was going to get. No point waiting for more.

For an instant she wondered if this would be a good time to ask him what he’d retired from doing for the bazillionth time. She shook her head and shrugged. Most likely he’d just say some equivalent of “Nah, that was then, this is now. Now is way better than then.”

In the kitchen she started prepping for today’s main event: the weekly ‘conference’ of sciencey types still working at the volcano observatory in the foothills east of Lime Kiln beach. No lobster for those cheapers: just their usual spicy crab boil with flaming skewers of mountain chicken (a tropical toad the size of a small chicken), red onions and three kinds of peppers.

It was late before the group climbed back into their big airbus and headed out. Later when the scullery work was done, she finally wrapped her tail over the crossbeam and was asleep in a minute. She didn’t hear the hiss that came a few hours later, or feel the sting on her exposed arm. Or hear the men in black that wrapped her up in a net. They’d been quick and efficient except for one small problem: her tail refused to uncurl itself from the beam. She woke for an instant from a jag of pain, but fell back into unconsciousness when something heavy slammed into her head.

Lysheem’s nose woke up first: complex scents, mostly unfamiliar. She sniffed again: details now. Complex like a rainforest, but on the opposite end of the pleasantness spectrum. Maybe like a manure bazaar where dung-merchants sold festering shit from every known source, she mused, knowing no such bazaar existed. Also too hot in this place. The implications triggered a momentary freak-out: not her cottage. She snapped her eyes open then snapped them shut. A cage. Dim light, metal bars, no ceiling fan. She was sitting her butt. On musty straw. She stood up, fell down, face first. Her ankles were bound. Hands, too. Hurts: head, tail. Sounds: muffled footsteps, mumbling voices. Faraway, now closer.

“Time to come fully awake and pay attention, Lysheem of Cavvitoy of Lyshandrik of Carrfindoy of Lyvittus of Cassimoy. If it’s any consolation, I’m sorry about your tail. According to my, um, harvesting crew, it declined to unwind after the trunk took effect on the rest of your body. Since the crew was under extreme time pressure due the client’s imminent arrival ... well, sometimes suboptimality occurs. However, my expert on your species assures me that it will soon grow back to its former length.”

The voice belonged to Noah/Jules Borth. Sensory and memory fragments began to coalesce into shapes and suppositions. The most preposterous at that instant was that the fat hairbody had kidnapped her. Most likely she was now in the zoo. All the “why” questions came together in her head. At the front of the line was: why would anybody want to kidnap a teenage wyvern? At that moment she realized she was also a totally naked teenage wyvern. Maybe she should instruct her body to display some skinclothes ... or at least a big, pulsing finger gesture flashing on and off on her naked belly. Nah, that would be the kind of misguided fun thing Cavvitoy would have said was just pissing on your own shoes instead of the enemy’s shoes. And trying to go stealth when they were staring at her would be equally dumb. It was Noah’s show right now: she would wait.

After some seconds, Noah chuckled, a sound that felt like ants crawling around her face trying to find her ears. “I can almost hear your mental machinery, my dear. You have oh so many questions already and you’ve barely regained consciousness. Trust me: I will endeavor to answer them as soon as you meet the gentleman next to me.”

Almost as curious as outraged now, Lysheem got to her feet as gracefully as possible with bound feet. She wanted to be able to tower over whatever ‘gentleman’ was out there beyond the bars. Opening her eyes, she squinted at the source of the sound. “Somebody has cut off his Noah beard ... hair, too. Too many vermin? Smoked oysters starting to rot?”

The clean faced Noah with the close-cropped curly black hair made an ambiguous smirk and ignored her snide comment. “This gentleman is Phineas T Barnstork ... which he claims is his actual name. Mr Barnstork, this is the only daughter of Lord Cavittoy ... the so-called Dawnhammer.”

Lysheem looked through the bars at a human that (given her limited exposure to humans) was the very definition of medium-ness: medium height, medium build, undistinguished head shape and facial features. His slicked down hair was medium brown and medium thick. Should the rivulets of perspiration streaming down his medium pale face count as a feature? Probably not. But he’d sure be cooler not wearing the heavy dark blue overcoat and thick boots.

The Medium Man opened his mouth to speak, but Lysheem’s tongue was quicker on the draw. “If you’ll forgive a teenage wyvern’s humble opinion, Mr Barnworm, you’d be a lot cooler wearing what I’m wearing here in Mr Fake Noah’s steaming shithole.”

P T Barnstork’s mouth made no response while his medium brown eyes gave Lysheem a full, top-to-bottom inspection. “You have your father’s facial structure. And something of his, shall we say, presence. Poise, coolness, unflappability and a somewhat acerbic wit ... those terms could all apply. Impressive man, Cavittoy, if I can use that term for a bioneered non-human. We were disappointed that he declined to cooperate with our initiative.”

Lysheem said nothing. While Medium Man was talking, Lysheem noticed the freaky thing behind him. Humanoid? Not really. Giant bug. Built like an upright bluish black insect a few inches taller than Medium Man and

twice as wide. Cockroach from Hell sort of thing. It had four hairy arms, two hairy legs and a blocky half-egg of a head with a pair of antennae. A band of something metallic was wrapped around it about where its bug eyes should be. A neck joint, but no neck ... and no discernable nose or ears. Or genitalia. Some kind of maw with sort of anemone-like globs at the ends of mini-arms on each side, probably for grabbing food to cram in its mouth. She suppressed a quiver of distaste and decided to pretend it wasn’t there.

Medium Man was still talking to her. “Commander Borth tells me that you became stranded on that tiny island when the Clans Dunnigan removed the Nevergates. You may not know that the so-called Dunnigan Retreat only pertained to Earth. My planet, Nondescripto, has any number of Nevergates, all functioning to spec. Amazing that the process of instantaneous matter transfer across the universes — once almost absurdly science fictional — has become something we non-Earthlings all happily take for granted. But I digress. If you choose to come with me when I return home very shortly, you’ll be able to rejoin your father and all the other wyverns on their new planet. It’s a choice you’ll not have here.”

Lysheem squelched an acrid comment. Did this little man think she was an idiot? If she could choose, why was she bound hand and foot in a stinking cage? Besides, everybody knew about the mysterious rogue Nevergate. What had her father called it? The All Caribbean Freeboy Nevergate? Some kind of stealth submarine thing that WorldGov had ignored and the Dunnigans couldn’t control ... or at least didn’t bother with. If Medium Man was coming and going from Nondescripto — which had a reputation as a lawless, anything goes planet — he had to be using the Freeboy Nevergate. Bingo! The Freeboy Nevergate was probably hiding somewhere in this stinking Ark. Hard to believe, but if not here, somewhere very close.

She let that idea rattle around in her head for a few instants. Maybe she should go with him. That particular “maybe” lasted something less than a second; anything her father had declined was something she would decline, too. He was the master of having excellent reasons for his actions. Inside her brain, other threads entwined themselves into knots and nodes that insisted on being acknowledged.

“Where did the zoo go, Mr Noah?”

“Why do you think it went anywhere, Lysheem?”

“Oh, for starters maybe because this cage I’m in was occupied until very recently by something that left its stench behind. A weird stench.” She sniffed and pointed to the far corner at a large pile of fresh straw. “Its toilet was in that corner. Also, LG remembers you as a wheeler-dealer, not an operator, so you probably just sold it and gated the creatures somewhere far away already. And last night your guards stuffed ten carryalls crammed with dark people into a shack on your fake Ark’s foredeck. Herded ‘em right past the cheesy ‘Pan Galactic Ark’ entry gates with the rainbow sign. So not midnight customers on a special tour. Oh, and you dumped your Noah disguise ... if I didn’t already mention that.”

“She is as you claimed, Commander Borth,” said Barnstork, his medium face sporting a satisfied expression. “I’ve seen — and heard — enough. You may have her crated for transport while we attend to the details. And be sure to use adequate insulation ... winter there, you know.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” shouted Lysheem. “You, Mister Borth, promised to answer my questions. Now would be a good time.”

“Well, I’m afraid I must disappoint you, Lysheem. Call me an evil breaker-of-promises if that will make you feel better. Mr Barnstork and I have urgent matters that require our attention. You have become a product in a transaction — chattel — which nullifies any and all rights you might have previously claimed for yourself. Same as the indentured individuals you observed. They were refugees from a violent civil war on one of the Great Caribs. By now they are beginning to work off their indentures to their new masters at the Sanswelloo townstead on Onedinket ... and are thankful they are still alive and still have all their limbs.” The former Noah removed a small projectile device from his pocket and aimed it at Lysheem.

Barnstork placed a hand on his arm. “Hold a moment, Commander Borth. As your client, the wyvern’s questions represent aspects of due diligence that I curtailed to accommodate *your* urgencies, not mine. Answer her most important question before injecting your insomnolation compound.”

Noah/Borth rolled his eyes. Barnstork was a smart man, but entirely ignorant of the urgencies, which were entirely real. Still, he was not inclined to call a halt to the charge placement. And there was the money, held against

the bug’s creepy ventral side by a pair of its four arms. He’d seen it already: a valise full of genuine platinum ozols from Plethora. Perfect medium of exchange in this new era when WorldGov teros had become the incredible shrinking currency. This magnificent fee was well worth a minor delay; he would just talk very fast, then enjoy a moment of pleasure by shooting this annoying creature. “Very well. I will answer a single question. But I will call the crating crew first to save time.”

Barnstork nodded, Borth stepped aside and spoke terse words into a com.

Lysheem put a frightened expression on her face (something she wished she’d done earlier; Cavvitoy had always said males tend to underestimate females that act frightened), then calmed herself and did some accelerated thinking. This shitstorm had gotten entirely out of hand and she needed to do something game-changing. She decided what question she’d ask Noah, but the real most important question was one she’d never ask. That was: what did either of these jerks know about wyvern adaptive metabolism and ‘special wiring’? Cavvitoy had always said that the only humans that knew our innermost biological secrets were the Dunnigans who worked at the Prototype Center. Their Biax SI [Synthetic Intelligence] that did most of the species bioengineering, was alive but not human. What she still recalled verbatim was, “Garden variety humans think we’re built just like them, but with wings and a silly tail, so let them think that.” She’d just have to trust in their ignorance.

Borth turned around. “Ask your question and be quick.”

“What made you come to The Laughing Crab?”

“That’s almost too easy. You.”

“That’s not a real answer, Mr Borth. You’d never even seen me until the day before yesterday.”

Borth made a sly smile. “Your reputation preceded you. Reports of a huge bat-like creature terrorizing the treasure hunters digging around the ruins of New Plymouth have been in the Antilles scuttlebutt loop for months. The most popular theories are a vampire, an alien or a WorldGov experiment that escaped from a lab.” Borth shrugged his meaty shoulders and made a face that Lysheem translated as, “What can I say? You’re an idiot.”

“Very foolish of you drawing attention to yourself like that. People fear what they don’t understand ... and fears are always more buzzworthy than truth. But the confirmation of what you actually are came from the crew at the volcano observatory. The Laughing Crab and your boss Smoky are held in high repute among certain of the remaining people on Montserrat; those particular people had been served food by you and gotten inebriated with Smoky numerous times. The word ‘wyvern’ came up multiple times. They even said you did juggling tricks using your tail and a pair of coconuts. Pure juvenile silliness. But a potentially profitable silliness for me. And since Smoky and I are old acquaintances, a confirmation visit was in order.”

“Did your ‘harvesting crew’ hurt Smoky?” Lysheem felt stupid to a record-setting degree, but thinking she might have put LG at risk put fire in her eyes.

“Only what he brought on himself by resisting, um, your detainment. He was there to greet our flier. He protested too vigorously, almost damaging two of the crew somehow. I’m sure he’s recovered by now; the crew chief had to shoot him with one of these ... but only one hypload. That information qualified as an extra answer, by the way. Sweet dreams, young wyvern.”

Three quick hisses from Borth’s device, three brief jags of pain in her abdomen. She looked down to see three little silver darts sticking out of her belly in a neat row. Without even thinking, she plucked them out with her bound hands, raised her arms to throw all three back at Borth. As her awkward two-fisted began, she wobbled, suddenly woozy. Then crumpled, unconsciousness, the darts falling unthrown to the straw. All in about five seconds. She didn’t hear the cell door creaking open, didn’t feel the ungentle hands that lifted her and hauled her away.

“Take her below to the staging room for the Number 1 platform. Be sure to use a #8 crate and insert maximum thermal insulation into the pockets.” Borth had spoken to the crew chief, a muscular bare-chested man with extensive tattoos depicting plump women in various states of undress. “There’s a good supply in the crate room. And since Mr Barnstork insists on a final inspection of the merchandise, don’t seal the lid until he signs off. And no unnecessary, um, ‘funny business’ while the subject is unconscious. You know the rules.”

Turning to Barnstork, he said, “She’ll be out at least until you’re back at Highgate Falls. Three hyp-darts is the same dosage the dragons got, way more than enough to be certain she won’t cause any problems. The dragons are probably still slumbering away in flaming, swooping dragon dreamland. Now let’s all go to my office down below and conclude our business. Don’t forget your bug valet.”



Lysheem's senses began to notice things before her conscious mind emerged from the triple dose of wildlife pacifier. A human wouldn't be noticing anything for hours, but her wyvern biology knew how to cheat, having automatically synthesized neutralizing molecules during her first shot back in her cottage.

Her nose first noticed the absence of rank stench, then a faint aroma of something like pine needles, like the ponderosas on the bluff above Wyvern Home. She suppressed a scowl: more like some kind of air freshener. Still, a brief pang of homesickness jolted through her brain before she abandoned the possibility that her captors had charitably — and magically — taken her back to the Chuska Mountains. The pang of homesickness morphed into anger, but she quelled the urge to do something that would probably turn out poorly.

Instead, she listened. Her ears logged a murmur of voices that gradually were classified by her thinking brain: three male humans, mixed timbres and inflections, Carib lilt, none corresponding to either Borth or Barnstork.

Should she do something or continue to feign a drugged sleep? She needed more data. She risked micromovements of her hands and feet. Result inconclusive: not enough movement to know for certain whether or not her hands and feet were still bound. As she was thinking about things she could possibly do, she became aware of several messages from her skin almost simultaneously. First was general coolness combined with moderate humidity. Second was that her wings, butt and tail told her she was lying on something cold and hard, like a tile floor. Third was the sensation of something tracing a gentle trail down her naked torso, starting at her neck and working its way south. In other circumstances it might have tickled. It paused just past her navel.

"Hey, get over here, ya know. Gotta make sure she's still out before we take our bonuses." It was a rough male voice with a Caribbean lilt. And it was close.

"But Borth said ..." This was a different voice, a little fearful or maybe just whiny.

"Yah, mon. I heard. He said 'unnecessary'. He's getting rich selling whatever kinda thing this is ... so any little bonus we take before the Ark blows, ya know ... well, I say it's necessary. Any arguments? But maybe we tape her wrists and her mouth, so bring the tape."

"No argument, me. Got it, mon," said another voice.

The second voice said, "You went back and got that? Piece of tail?"

Lewd chuckles in three variations.

Lysheem's nose confirmed her guess: three male bodies that stunk like the cage she'd been in. Except now they were also spewing human male pheromones. This was going to get ugly fast. No time for micromovement tests. She'd just have to go with battlerage — her first time ever in a non-training situation — and see what happens.

"Yah, mon. I unwound it, which wasn't so easy, ya know. So that makes me first in line. But here, watch this ...."

The observers didn't get to watch.

To Lysheem's suddenly accelerated senses, everything that happened next was a slow motion dance of violence. To her would-be victimizers she was a blur of skinny black limbs. That kind of speed should have been impossible except by superheroes with superpowers.

Since all three were standing in a row, with their torsos bent forward to feast their eyes, her first move was a half-roll away from their legs to give her tail room to work. Even 18 inches shorter and bandaged on its end, it was long enough to whip around their collective ankles and strong enough to pull. Three very surprised upended bodies slammed onto the floor, their skulls making hollow thumping sounds. Unwinding her tail, she uncoiled into the air and landed with her feet in two diaphragms. Two oomphs.

She leaped again and the tattooed guy who was still holding the end of her tail got two feet slammed into his diaphragm. Another oomph. While three open mouths made gasping sounds, the blur tore the shirt off the nearest perp and ripped the back into three strips, which she stuffed into the still gasping mouths. The short guy donated his tape.

Gags secure, she did the mental thing that took her out of battlerage mode. Battlerage sucked up a lot of energy that she might need. This particular emergency was over anyway ... or at least put on hold. She stood

looking down and unwound the bandage on her hand, which had made the mouth-stuffing more awkward than necessary. She studied the puncture site on her hand and the little x-cut to bleed out the spiny dogfish poison. Nice purplish scars: almost healed already. Feeling more fully her physical self now, she considered her next move.

Punishing Borth and Barnstork was high on her list, but not as high as dealing with the three stunned assholes in front of her. Would their immediate futures require them to walk or crawl? Probably not. Cavvitoy had always harped on the value of quickly disabling an opponent, so ... Six crunched knee joints and three stifled screams later she considered the minimum work done. The writhing and arm-waving was inconvenient, but tape would solve the arm-waving. Writhing she could tolerate. Next question: would they all fit into the crate they'd been stuffing insulex panels into?

A quick strip search, yielded three foot-long sheath knives and Tattoo's dart gun. Plus a pile of assorted garments she piled on top of her abandoned bandage. With the human vipers naked and defanged, she announced her plan. "Surprise, surprise, assholes. You're about to get to know each other much better than you ever thought possible." Two hisses from the dart gun and all but Tattoo were on their way to slumberland. While Tattoo's face was twisted by the pain from his mangled joints, Lysheem dropped the two sleepers into the crate, one on top of the other.

Tattoo watched, pop-eyed, as the skinny black alien hefted his mates over her head and dropped them into the crate meant for her. With each thunk he winced, glad it wasn't him being dropped from ten feet up. But how was that even possible? What kind of alien monster was this thing?

Tattoo whooped when he landed. Unlike his two mates, he knew what was coming and held his head tilted up and his body rigid. The gag stifled his scream from the jouncing his ruined knees took, but he knew it could have been worse: if all he got was a headache from his head slamming back on Jo-Jo's face and probably smashing his nose, he was the lucky one. Lysheem patted his shaved head, winked and seemed to be studying the clumsy tattoos of bulbous women all over his muscular torso and arms.

Finally, she spoke. "So, Whitey with the clunky chubbo tats. Listen up. You're on top because I've got a few things I'm curious about and you act

like the dickhead in charge. If you nod vigorously, I'll assume you're going to give me truthful answers and I'll ungag you ... plus, I'll resist letting my tail stub do something you really won't want your mates to hear about. But if you make even this big of a ruckus (she pinched her fingers together to indicate how big a ruckus would qualify as punishable) or if I detect a lie, you will start losing body parts, starting with ... oh, I'll just let you guess. And my stub here will go crazy on you." To emphasize the last point, Lysheem jammed the stub under Tattoo's chin and got eyeball to eyeball, showing him her best crazy-eyed, teeth-bared "I'm-your-worst-black-alien-nightmare" look. When he tried to look away, she stepped back and shrugged. "But if you don't nod, I'll just shoot one of these darts into a really sensitive spot ... if I have my human anatomy right. While you're out I'll slice one of those blubbery — 'babes' would you call them? — off your manly chest with your very own knife as my little keepsake. Maybe make it into a cigar holder ... best conversation starter ever. But that'll happen later.

"Meanwhile, I'll close the lid on this crate and wait around for somebody who's more cooperative. You get all that? Do I need to give you extra time for it to sink in?"

Whitey shook his head, then nodded. Lysheem removed the gag and in a few minutes, had a few answers. Enough for the beginnings of a plan ... assuming Noah and his client would be kind enough to stay away for a while longer. Then she gagged him again, shot him with a sleep dart and flipped the lid on the crate.

Time to get dressed. Although he was tallest, Tattoo's cargo pants were way too short, way too loose and needed surgery to accommodate her tail. But the pockets might come in handy. And his belt cinched up around her waist and gave her places to hang the weapons. No time for reworking a shirt to accommodate wings, she stayed shoeless and topless. If she encountered any humans during the next phase, it could be advantageous to know where their gaze would go first.

Before departing, she gave the room a quick visual once-over. Not a fancy place. Walls were some kind of gray stuff with an orange-peel texture. Not even self-healing: lots of minor dents and patches. No place in Wyvern Home

looked so ... what was the right word? Hammered? Unloved? Rundown? Not even in the fabratories.

A big closed door on the end wall had an illuminated sign over the lintel that said PLATFORM 1. Instead of gray, this sliding door was a particularly ugly shade of pale orange and had its share of scratches and dings. A somewhat smaller door on the left wall had a sign that said SUPPLIES. On the opposite wall was a large evermetal panel with the letters UC stamped into it. The door they'd probably hauled her through was opposite the PLATFORM 1 door at the other end of the room, a slider that was currently open. She looked at the pile of clothes and bandage. Pretty obvious clue to Borth that crating her hadn't quite gone according to plan. Best to disappear such obvious clues. With no better repository, she stuffed them into the UC receptacle and jogged out of the room and up the corridor.

Coming all the way down from battlerage took longer than she remembered. She'd left the room of her emancipation feeling directed and powerful, but two minutes later those feelings had morphed into exhaustion and confusion. She was also lost in a corridor somewhere on the platform level of the submarine known as the All Caribbean Freeboy Nevergate. At least that was her best guess.

It would be a good time to sit and let her system normalize. The wide corridor had lots of doors, but she didn't really want to open them at random looking for a safe place to sit. She needed to get to someplace Tattoo had called Nexus, where she would find the chamber with the big freight elevator that hooked up with a big hatch in the Ark's hull by some kind of tube, which was probably how all those 'indentures' had come down here for gating to somewhere on Onedinket. And she needed to sneak up there and somehow get into the Ark's bilge where the explosive charges were being placed — or already had been, placed: Tattoo wasn't sure. When triggered, they would blow out the bottom. Goodbye Ark.

Nothing wrong with that, but she needed something to take out the Freeboy Nevergate, which was her real enemy. Sitting wouldn't get her there, so she kept walking and hoping that the post-battlerage haze would wear off sooner rather than later. And that her 'plan' would soon start looking better than it did right now.

She came to a node in the corridor — a wide spot with a lightbar on the ceiling with the word "TENDERS" in the middle flanked by red arrows pointing in opposite directions. To the left was an alcove containing a recessed hatch with a speedwheel in the middle and an illuminated sign that said "Orca Starboard." Across from it was an identical hatch except the sign said "Orca Port." Her inner Curious Button had been pushed. She was scratching her head and wondering if she had enough time to explore when distant footsteps made the decision for her.

Inside, with her ear to the hatch door, she listened for the footsteps to go past. But the door was too thick: no sound came through at all. She hadn't spun the speedwheel to lock the hatch, so possibly whoever was walking past might notice some kind of wrongness.

Lysheem made a mental grimace. Yeah, if they didn't notice a wrongness here, they were sure going to notice a major wrongness when they opened the crate to find three sleeping stooges and no precious wyvern. How long before all of Borth's lackeys were swarming all over everywhere looking for her missing self? Two minutes? Maybe as much as five if some were still getting the Ark ready to blow? She decided she had time to see what kind of tender thing the Orca Starboard was.

Ten seconds later she was standing on a sort of moving ramp. When the piece of floor had started moving, she almost leaped back into the passage, but didn't. How can you find out stuff if you resist every surprise you bump into? Timidity is not the Wyvern Way, as Cavvitoy had said far too many times. The moving ramp disappeared at a landing, evidently a floor below where she started. Behind her was an ordinary looking door with a speedwheel. Straight ahead a dozen feet was a wall. Between where she stood and that far wall was a transparent circular piece of floor with a recessed speedwheel. On the wall was a diagram. The diagram was clear enough: the tender named Orca Starboard was a miniature 6-passenger submarine. The thick window looked down into a short tube to similar hatch set into the Orca's top. Some kind of sea-lock.

Her post-battlerage haze was clearing. She could probably escape in this thing. Right now. She'd piloted all sorts of aircraft: how different could a sea-going craft be? But they probably wouldn't even chase her ... at least not in this big Freeboy sub with the Ark still attached by some kind of external harness ... assuming Tattoo hadn't lied to her about that. Then the haze cleared some more. Escaping now would be a non-solution. Borth and Barnstork — and the big creepy insect-thing — would still be free to pursue her ... as long as she was alive. And they would. Pretty much had to. That would mean she'd spend the rest of her life expecting Fatty Nobear or Mister Medium to appear any time and around any corner. Nope.

Back at the first hatch, she swung the door open with as much suddenness she could muster, battlerage on the tip of her mental tongue. Anybody on the other side of it better be ready for a nasty surprise.

Nobody there to be surprised. She stepped through, stopped, listened for footsteps in the corridor. No footsteps, not even echoes. Time to go.

The Nexus was right where Tattoo had said it was. It was a large-ish circular space with a massive outer door with a speedwheel in its center, currently fully open. A square structure that looked temporary somehow, sat in the middle of the space. Its top went through the ceiling, which also looked temporary. Supposedly this connected to the Ark. It had elevator doors that were closed, but they didn't go to her destination anyway so she didn't bother to push the two buttons in the panel. Lysheem tried to imagine what sort of process would be involved in sealing the Freeboy off from the Ark and quickly gave up; mechanical engineering was not her thing.

Where she needed to go was through the square hole in the ceiling to the right of the elevator. At the moment a foldable metal ladder went up into a not-quite-dark space. Interesting. One of Borth's crewboys was probably still up there. If so, he might be a handy source of information to supplement what she'd gotten from Tattoo.

Seeing no immediate pursuit behind her, she watched and listened. Somewhere up there was a vague moving light source and an intermittent thumping sound. Was he coming this way? No place to hide in this chamber, so up the ladder she went.

She stuck her head through the gap for a quick lookaround, then popped it back to consider what she saw. First, the ladder was hooked over the lip of the hole. Very temporary. Second, third and fourth were the people in whatever dark and dank space this was on the Ark. Not one guy, three. So she was outnumbered again. They all wore lightbands around their foreheads, which was the only illumination. And unlike the last three, these wore uniforms and had backpacks, which could be handy for the execution of her "plan," if she could use that term for the loose aggregation of wishes and nice-to-haves rolling around in her brain. And except for their holstered sidearms, they didn't look any more dangerous than the trio in the crate. Since they seemed intent on whatever they were doing, they might not notice somebody dark

sneaking up on them. The last thing Lysheem expected the three to do was suddenly spin around and point weapons at the shadowy somebody sneaking up on them.

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A sign was hanging from a nail on the door of The Laughing Crab. Usually the sign said “CLOSED: GONE FISHING,” which was locally known to mean that Smoky had gone over the hill to Little Bay for supplies. Except today, “FISHING” was crossed out with drippy stripes of sepia cuttlefish ink. Above it was “HUNTING,” also in drippy sepia.

It was mid-morning by the time Mr Laughing Crab had loaded the shark he kept in the boathouse with weapons. He did not look like the man his wyvern charge called Lord Goldstein or LG, the casual proprietor of a place almost nobody patronized these days, the guy who dressed in baggy shorts and vintage jungle print shirts and who didn't seem to care about the state of the world except smoking a good cigar, fishing, eating and living his life on 'island time'.

Today that guy was somebody else. Outfitted in skintight shadowgear that was crusted with weapons and mysterious devices, LG now looked exactly like the Securitan black-ops agent he'd spent five years of his much younger life being. That was during the bad old days, the time he refused to talk to Lysheem about, but it was also the reason Lysheem's father had sent her to Rendezvous Bay during that sudden little war over Nevergates that had bloomed somewhere up around the Clans Dunnigan castles.

The Home guard had caught a trio of saddlestick-riding 'knights' from Lord Bellicarie's flying castle<sup>4</sup> in Wyvern Home airspace while the wyvern troops with their battleriders were busy removing other human obstacles to the upcoming migration. The intruders were treated with great courtesy ... and one of them survived interrogation long enough to confess that Cavi-

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<sup>4</sup> :: In a 2277 Follywood Fortnightly post, Cassius Bolivarro describes Ferdinand “Lord” Bellicarie in glowing terms. “Imagine a commanding figure in a naval-inspired dress uniform of crisp white duck with gold-fringed epaulettes, gold buttons and an impressive spangulary. August and majestic, he is the rampant lion at the helm of Castle Ommergard, his massive aerial pentagon. This is the Bellicarie who has brought the unparalleled spectacle of his ‘Aerial Ballet for Dragons, Sky Monkeys and ‘34 Ford’ to rapt audiences in every ticket-buying corner of the planet. By comparison, legendary impresario P.T. Barnum’s famed circus was a pony ride for toddlers.”

toy's daughter was the actual target. So he'd sent her to a safe place where she'd be under the wing of one of the few humans not named Dunnigan that he knew was both highly lethal and highly trustworthy.

Goldstein gritted his teeth. He'd failed Cavvitoy's trust and he'd need to be lucky to undo that failure. Thanks to the tiny pocket of Paradise he'd tucked his life into, he'd let himself get lazy, his instincts flabby. When Borth's flier tripped his sensors and woke him up last night, he wasn't even suspicious. It had gotten vetted yesterday, after all. And when it landed on the beach with lights blazing he still wasn't suspicious. That was hardly what anybody would do if they were trying to sneak into his protected domain. When the hatch opened and the uniformed young man popped out with a big white box tied up with ribbons and a red bow, he let down his guard even further.

“Are you Mr Goldstein, sir?” said the hulky fellow striding toward him with the box. He wore a casual uniform of tan cargo shorts, a matching shirt and a floppy straw hat with an orange headband that said “Noah's Pan-Galactic Ark.” Goldstein nodded.

“Mr Borth wanted you to have this in appreciation of your hospitality yesterday ... so this is for you.” He held out the box, “Careful, it's heavy, sir.” Holding that box and wondering what was in it were the last things he remembered until he woke up this morning, flat on his back on the sand. No box, no Master Stick and a sore spot on his arm where they'd shot him with some kind of instant knockout sedative.

Propelled by a mix of adrenaline and rage, with a side order of chagrin topped with an acrid dollop of self-loathing, Goldstein studied the signs of activity. Most of the evidence was the three pairs of footprints between the beach and the cabins, and lots of sand tracked onto the plank floor of Lysheem's unit. Plus a small puddle of dried blood. The conclusion was too obvious: Borth had sent his minions to kidnap her. It made zero sense on the surface, but the Borth he'd known wouldn't take an action like that unless there was money involved. Big money. The answers were in that silly wooden boat anchored a couple miles offshore. The self he had kept buried for all these years was clawing its way up from a hidden compartment in his persona: with any luck, Borth was in for a big surprise.

Goldstein got a big surprise first.



He'd piloted his shark as fast and as deep as he could to avoid visual detection from the deck of the Ark. His route looped south around the headland that separated Rendezvous Bay from Little Bay, then northeast toward the island of Nevis, which would allow him to approach from the aft end of the Ark. He even made a semi-rigorous effort at mimicking the way the real big sharks traveled in these waters; cruising sort of aimlessly at around 5 knots, with occasional sprints, then back to cruising speed. He slowed as he approached the Ark, its thick keel and rounded hull readily visible to both eyeballs and instruments. What he hadn't expected was the sub-structure below the hull. Something nonmetallic that matched the color of the hull, probably one of those printed nanofiber structures. That was surprise number one.

Surprise number two was what this odd structure was connected to: something dark, very large, vaguely ray-shaped and right beneath him. A blurry form — semi-cloaked maybe? — but familiar in a half-remembered, something from a coffee-table-holo-of-naval-disasters sort of way. Something clicked: WorldGov awarding a controversial contract to SudAm5, a tech alliance of former South American states for a vastly over budget demonstration project. The result was the most celebrated naval sea trial disaster of the century. Was this hazy dark shape the Garota de Ipanema, the 'super-sub' prototype that was lost all the way back in ... what, sometime around 2210?

Another pair of eyes was piggy-backing on the shark's sensors. This pair of eyes had no doubts about what they were seeing. Zero. A mental switch emplaced decades ago altered states. A message from one part of a brain made a transit to another, triggering an array of dormant neuromechanisms. A neurochip with stored data on thousands of underwater vessels made comparisons. Five seconds later, the Grade 5 target had been identified at 75% certainty, crossing a minimum veracity threshold: Agent Honey\$uckle was activated. Did it matter that few — if any — living humans cared about the Grade 5 target anymore? Not to Agent Honey\$uckle. The mission was the Mission.

They'd have to know what they were looking for to see him. So he hoped. Smoky Goldstein was counting on the VOT in his shadowsuit still working well enough to confuse anybody that looked directly at him into thinking he was a blurry something he actually wasn't in a place he actually wasn't. Visual Obfuscation Technology, the geeks in his unit's support crew called it. He'd lost the gadget that told it what to look like and where to appear, so his suit was permanently stuck in its default: Dancing Outsized Creature from Hell mode.

Thanks to the shadowsuit's geckopads, he'd been able to scale the square shaft of the Ark's rudder and was now contemplating the vessel's rear deck from behind the Four Eight flier. Empty. His memory wasn't clear on what various types of security cams would actually display when they detected his shadowsuit's DOCH mode, but whatever they picked up, it wouldn't be for long. Three long strides took him from the flier to the back of the building.

There he paused, considered a moment and turned back around to study the Four Eight. His years as a cybersecurity guy at NavaTek came back to him in a rush. The need to walk over to it and tap into the security access port under the lightband was almost a compulsion. Did he dare to give into it? He did. Borth wouldn't be needing it again. Be a real shame if a beauty like that had to go down with the ship.

Goldstein's WyTeq language skills were a little rusty, so accomplishing his little tweaks took longer than he'd hoped. But he figured that anything under five minutes wouldn't be a disaster. So 274 seconds from start to finish was gravy.

The rear entrance to the Ark was a very old-school sliding door of the type often found on barns. He'd the same type of thing in a living museum of medieval farmsteads somewhere in one of the old pre WorldGov Eurostates. Austria, maybe. The only differences were the materials and the methods of working them. The Ark's door was a wood-grain marine composite like

the hull and decking material. Good performance, but they were what you'd use if you only cared about looking authentic from a hundred feet away. He reached up, made a little hop, just enough to touch the top of the door: probably around ten feet high. Standard basketball rim height. It hung from a metal channel attached to the building. The rollers would let slide to the left far enough to accommodate something as wide as it was tall. No lock, just a black metal latch mechanism, simple thing like the one on his smokehouse door. No visible lock. He slowly thumbed the thumb-pad, the latch lever lifted, so no lock from the inside. A glob of of the stickeroo he'd been chewing went in the slot to keep the lever from falling back down. No noise of activity inside, but he squatted and waited. If they wanted to shoot, most of him wouldn't be where 86% of run-of-the-mill security personnel would place their first shot.

His wait wasn't quite Securitan reg, but probably long enough. He pushed at the door with his the weapon iin his right hand, moving it a couple inches: not silent, but not squeaky or metal-on-metal. He risked a quick glance through the crack. Muted, misty light from two rows of skylights in the gable roof near the ridge beam, maybe 50 feet overhead. Not an imposing space. Rows of metal-barred cages on each side of a central corridor. Same thing on the second level, but cages not as deep to make room for a peripheral walkway. As a zoo, this was prosaic at best, bargain basement primitive at worst. Nothing like the creature presentation at Hildi's Palace.

At the far end were wide stairwells on either side of the entry arch. His nose told him the sanitary facilities for the cells did not include flush toilets. Not a rustle, whir, hiss, growl, slither, footfall or any other sound that he would associate with activity ... and life. Time to move.

Staying next to the left row of cages, mil-grade Skotke in right hand, goggs in place, Goldstein moved low and slow. Smells varied from cage to cage, but not the emptiness. There had been mediapanel on each cage but now just the pristine places on the bars of each cage where they'd been mounted. Scatters and mounds of straw remained from the last occupants. Just past the stairwells at the end of the corridor, an arched portal opened into a lobby ... or anteroom or crowd staging area.

He reached the stairwell on his side of the corridor and listened. His tongue tapped a place on his palate. Even amplified now, there was only a faint, vaguely mechanical chuffing sound from below, heavily muffled. A pump? Maybe a bilge pump? Hardly a surprise in a tub like this, he thought. He cocked his head toward the staircase leading upstairs. Nothing but a whisper of circulating air. Had Stick even been in here? No way to tell. Yet. Goldstein postponed a possibly fateful up or down decision by deciding to explore the anteroom first.

Emptiness, but more visible evidence of recent abandonment than the cages. The faux wood floor had squares, rectangles and circles of unworn brighter-ness, which Smoky surmised represented the former locations of display units. Far above were the same skylights, but perhaps halfway to the floor level was an open grid of black metal channels which probably had held lightheads. He gave the anteroom another quick circuit with his eyes: again, emptiness. For about ten seconds he thought of opening the Gov-mandated vomitory front doors before deciding it would be a total waste of time ... and time seemed to be closing in around him. He needed a clue to Stick's whereabouts and right now he was clueless. Under his shadowhood he rolled his eyes. He'd been lazy, hoping for excellent clues to leap out of the emptiness, bow and present themselves to him on a cue card in luminous bold letters. Lame and careless, so far. Time to get serious.

Getting down on all fours under the arch, he got his eyes as close to the floor as possible. Activating all four fingerlights of his left hand, he aimed them down the zoo corridor. Glints of reflection from something tiny and granular made something that could be a ragged line near the middle of the floor. Or not. He squinted, adjusting the play of light from his fingertips. Maybe, just maybe ...

Back on his feet, he removed a glove to give his skin a chance to test his emerging idea. In the middle of the floor, grains of sand. He gently patted the floor, tracing the sparse, intermittent trail of sand grains. No evidence of it on the first treads in the left stairwell: not down, not up.

He crawled over to the right stairwell, felt around with his hand. A few grains pressed into his palm on the second tread of the descending flight, right in the middle. He took the stairs two at a time in the ghostlight of his

goggs. Were they genuine sands from trespassers on his Rendezvous Bay, his 'personal protectorate'? Goldstein would wring the truth out of whichever dickhead was responsible for sandtracking and wyvern-napping violations. Unfortunately or not, it would be the general, not the privates who would pay the worst. Borth better be ready for a personal trainwreck.

Goldstein gave himself the mental equivalent of a bracing slap to the face; he was getting way ahead of himself. Dangerous and dumb; he knew better.

The stairwell opened into another corridor flanked with cages. Under what had been the lobby upstairs was a smaller alcove with a octagonal kiosk in the middle. There had been media panels on the eight faces, but those were gone, rectangles of brighter yellow paint the only remaining evidence of their presence. His memory automatically tried to recall if there had been a kiosk like this when he saw the zoo at Hildi's Palace. Some place in his brain he called his Overmind was irritated by this side trip into history, so he looked at the floor to distract it.

Bits of straw reminded him to check out the corridor and the cages down here. Feeling a heightened sense of urgency kick in, he jogged the corridor to the stern end. These cages were wider than the ones on the main floor. Same mounds and scatters of straw, different odors. Larger seeming. Midway on the right, one of the cages seemed different. Unlike the others, the straw had been mussed near the cage door. Also bits of straw tracked outside, obviously since the original occupants had been taken elsewhere. And footprints, copious and from different feet.

He dropped to the floor again. Inside his mask, his lips curled in a rueful grimace: grains of sand by the door. And just inside the cage where the straw was mussed, more sand. And something else. He reached an arm through the bars toward the suspicious glint. Fingers rummaged lightly, playing the straw like an air piano. Found a piece of un-straw where only straw and sand should rightfully be. Kept rummaging, found another. And another. He held them up, growled in silence: same kind of darts as the one he'd plucked out of his arm this morning.

Nothing he else he could do here, so he stood and looked past the kiosk to the sturdy folding partition he'd noticed before. Whatever was behind it was his next stop.

The Blue Pearl Again, King Rinkle's Italian-made longboat, rarely emerged from its covered slip in the old, mostly abandoned Little Bay Yacht Harbor. At least with Rinkle at the controls. Mostly it waited patiently. Sometimes it might while away an hour or two exchanging adventures with the former Montserrat Prime Minister's long catboat in the next berth. More likely it would chat with the cigarboat on the other side with the name Havana Moon-shot emblazoned across its stern. Being a former high speed, low freeboard cigar-runner, its adventures were vastly more lurid.

Rinkle's granddaughters sometimes used the Blue Pearl Again to cruise down the coast in search of something interesting to do in the mostly abandoned coastal hamlets to the south. If the weather was particularly nice they might venture as far as Lime Kiln Beach where they'd tie up at the ramshackle pier and spend an afternoon at Mili's Moonface Cafe, drinking rum coolers and flirting with the young men who belonged to the Howling Wind, a club of kitesurfers and ne'er-do-well vagabond types from various islands who still coalesced here from time to time. These young men inevitably found the 'princesses' to be charming, fetchingly nubile and excessively coy. Had they known the actual age of the twin princesses they might have behaved with somewhat more deference. Today, coastal jaunts were out of the question for Mitzi and Zelda: they had confined themselves to the top floor of Bambalooza, their name for King Rinkle's castle. Work to do.

Compared to the castles of virtually any other royal family, King Rinkle's castle was most noteworthy by (1) its minuscularity and (2) its construction. In fairness, it was somewhat larger and substantially more imaginative than Little Bay's National Capitol building. Its site up on the hill had magnificent views of the water. More castle-like than castle in appearance, it was built entirely of treated bamboo, a demonstration project sponsored by the Clans Dunnigan when they established an office on the island some decades prior, along with a Nevergate of modest throughput. When the Clans and

the Nevergates suddenly disappeared, the king and his princesses claimed it, thanks to papers they were given that matched a document on file in the office of the Prime Minister, Gaylord Venable. Venable was not available to dispute it as he had ‘gone visiting’ on very short notice to the Nirvatanamo Nevergate complex on one of the Greater Caribs the previous year and had not returned. It was widely thought by ungenerous residents that he might have acquired a Free Pass and gated to Nirvana to escape certain over-vigorous assertions of graft, corruption and unsubtle extramarital activities.

King Rinkle had not delved much into the structure of his new castle and confined himself to the guest areas on the second floor, which he had claimed as his “royal suite.” Not generally a fan of stairs if he had to navigate them on his own legs, his agile and sure-footed Ride-A-Boy made the broad spiral staircase up from the public areas a non-event.

For the princesses, the Bambalooza was love at first sight. Anybody who knew them would expect them to be curious and clever explorers. But it was like a tropical bamboo version of “old home week” for them. Their exploration of every room, nook and cranny revealed secrets even a master burglar wouldn’t have been able to plumb. The most potentially useful of these secrets was the vault.

It was on the first floor next to the empty rectangle that had housed the castle’s Nevergate platform. Next to it was the surprisingly spacious unisex lavatory, which was more like a boutique than a bathroom. Whatever furniture had occupied the center of the room was gone, but the nearly life-sized holographic portrait on the far wall remained. “Dunnigans, right? The four originals?” wondered Zelda.

“Right.” Mitzi nodded, then frowned and blinked. “Was that marble bust of Sigmund Freud on the white fluted column there a second ago?”

Zelda shook her head and erupted into hysterical laughter, followed a half-second later by Mitzi. “Perfect place to almost pee your pants in, eh twinster?”

“Yup. You wanna pick the Siggy lock, or should I?”

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As elsewhere on the planet, the Nirvana Exodus had lured away many of Montserrat’s less affluent residents. Even some of the shopowners, educators and innkeepers had fallen under the spell of the “spiritual blue light”

that sometimes emanated from the head of the rotund anthropoid who called himself Errigaspo varrial. He was quickly dubbed by some mediot as the ‘Buddha fom Nirvana’, even though he never once claimed to be anything other than an emissary to Earth from his home world of Nihurrvannashama. In his capacity as emissary, he was able to offer Free Passes good for endless bliss to any who desired them. Millions flocked to his various Soul Train Tours, further depleting the planet’s shrinking human population.

None of this mattered at the moment to King Rinkle, who had work to do. The Blue Pearl Again had crossed the channel and was now idling next to the Ark’s stern on the port side of the massive rudder. The few locals who had seen this name on the sleek longboat’s transom generally assumed it was aptly named for its sleek pearlescent Prussian blue hull. If asked, Rinkle might nod. Or shrug. Or adopt his madman face. Or sometimes he might say something like, “Excellent guess, but actually the name is an homage to an albino woman I once knew who arranged to have her entire epidermis tattooed this exact color. Pearl, was her name, of course. And she married a man whose name was this exact shade of Prussian.”

Today Rinkle’s usual sense of whimsy was oscillating. The still rotund but now deadly serious fellow was on a long awaited mission. His Highness was currently using a water torch to cut a salty hole in the stern of the Ark, three feet above the waterline. He attached a piece of tape to the cutout and tilted it gently, hoping to avoid noise ... and was almost successful. With any luck, the dull clatter wouldn’t set off any alarms. With an equal amount of luck, the hole would be just large enough for he and Bilbil to climb inside. Bilbil leaped cleanly through, not even grazing a horn. Rinkle was a tighter fit. In all fairness, none of his training had required his portly person to squeeze through holes.

It was no accident that the hole turned out to be a shortcut into the empty stern anchor chain locker. The hatch into the bilge was also visible, another non-accident. A third non-accident was the Blue Pearl Again backing away from the Ark’s stern and then cruising on autopilot — and very, very slowly — in the direction of Rendezvous Bay. He wouldn’t need it again.

Opening that hatch and getting through it was the easiest task so far. Easy, yes: silent, no. The squealy hinge-noises were not unlike the protests

a piglet will make after being torn from its mother's teat. But the timing was good. Five minutes earlier and they would have encountered the three well-armed persons who had been tucking packets of explosives under the plank walkway fastened to the massive laminated keel. That mission accomplished, this trio had been instructed to escort the strange intruder described to them as Master Stick to a location in the 'downbelow unit', the one they were required to address with the code name Mondschwester<sup>5</sup>.

Except for a pale glow in the floor next to a large dark floor-to-ceiling square structure, the bilge was dark. In this gloomy setting the blinking red lights on the explosives made their locales stand out like little crimson lighthouses. Rinkle activated the luminous hidden in his crown, which aside from this and other unexpected utilities, was a pastiche of neo-baroque design motifs that would make the dictionary definition of "kitsch" hang its head in shame. Seemingly unconcerned with the inherent dangers of handling high explosives without a bomb suit, Rinkle waddled to the nearest red glow, detached the packet and studied it long enough to identify its probable chemistry. Just for fun, he mentally calculated its destructive capabilities, which he concluded were noteworthy. Nodding to himself, he opened a hatch in Bilbil's flank and tucked it inside. Then he moved on to the next, collecting six in all.

King Rinkle brushed his hands together<sup>6</sup> in that timeless gesture meaning "well that's quite nicely done." It might have been premature, but Rinkle's Agent Honey\$uckle persona was not inclined to quibble over trifles of probability. Instead, he waddled briskly to the square protruding thing. Up close, he could see that it appeared to go through the hull and into the target, just like it was supposed to. No surprise there. He clambered over several ribs while inspecting it for unexpected openings. He stopped at the glow-

5 :: Not one of Commander Borth's crewmembers had ever troubled themselves to translate the German name Mondschwester into English (Moon Sister). The simple reason was that excess curiosity was known to have dangerous consequences.

6 :: Some gesturologists have attributed the origin of that ubiquitous gesture to none other than the masculine God of several ancient religions. It was during the time of Earth's Creation, and when the Almighty was satisfied with his efforts, he brushed his great hands together in satisfaction for a job well done. Unbeknowns to the Deity, several stray crumbs fell from his fingers and into the sea. These crumbs later became known to human geographers as the Cape Verde Islands.

ing square opening to the left, the one with the ladder still in place. He had expected the Borth minions to remove it in preparation for final preparations, but it was still here. This was surprising, but maybe his limited available mothlings become distracted by something and had not followed the bomb-placers. The stream of intel from the princesses had been somewhat erratic, possibly due to their glancingly unprofessional fascination with the wyvern. As Rinkle, he could certainly empathize with that: Master Stick was a remarkable creature ... and only 17 years old if the data were correct. As Agent Honey\$uckle, however, his mission-think would find such breaches chastisable. But later, perhaps.

Flesh goats have been known to climb trees and sheer cliffs. Bilbil, although a mere mechanoid, had no difficulty descending the ladder. Rinkle's descent was less facile, which he attributed to his necessary overabundant girth. This triggered a surmise that the estimable Santa Claus himself had probably banished ladders from his North Pole complex for the same reason ... although possibly blaming insurance and safety issues instead of rotundity.



Three doors occupied the wall behind the folded partition. The center one had to be the elevator, so Goldstein investigated the smaller doors flanking it first. Two closets. On the right was a near-empty janitorial closet, judging from the shelving, the stains on the floor, the hooks on the walls, a utility sink ... and the refreshing disinfectant aroma. All that remained was a worn out corn broom. Goldstein tested the water from the tap, then drank his fill.

Behind the door on the left was a much larger room that included a walk-in coolbox that occupied the entire left wall. The back wall was floor-to-ceiling shelving and lockers, while the right wall had four hard-wired industrial MenuMasters and a small steel countertop. The shelves were still occupied with a few bowls, beakers and small implements. Goldstein idly wondered what sorts of exotic alien cuisine these MenuMasters had concocted for the zoo's occupants.

The elevator had the usual two buttons. Goldstein pushed the down button. Nothing happened. He jammed the button repeatedly. Still nothing. Frustrated, he jammed the up button. To his surprise, the doors slid aside. He stepped inside the well-used cab. The walls were covered with protective pads, the floor was some kind of resilient gray material, much wounded. Had Lysheem been in this? No immediate way to tell. He turned to the control panel. Just the same two buttons. He followed a hunch and pressed both buttons at the same time. The doors closed and the cab began to descend. Possibilities were still running through his head when the cab stopped and the doors started opening. He dropped to a crouch under the control panel. He expected something to happen and waited, favorite weapon in position. And waited more, his sound booster coming up with only the sound of amplified emptiness. When the doors were almost closed, he wedged a foot in to stop them.

"Nice boots," said the voice from the other side of the door. Had he not heard the voice, the pair of black seven-fingered hands poking through the

gap from the other side would have been enough of an identity clue. As the doors began to reopen, the voice said, "Come on in and join the party, LG. If you decide not to shoot me, you can help me figure out what to do with the green turds on the floor. I had to toss them through that bilge hole up there ... one of them made a clumsy landing."

"Nice work, Stick. At the next Laughing Crab board meeting, I'll propose a salary boost for you. Of course the board might also impose a penalty for scaring the shit out of the proprietor, so the raise might not fund your retirement."

The pair stood in the Nexus and contemplated each other. "In the interest of propriety, you probably oughta put on a shirt. Maybe one of your victims would make a donation."

"Hah! After my first encounter with Borth's boys I decided to stay half-naked for future defensive purposes, if a situation popped up again. Worked, too. When these three spotted me up there in the Ark's bilge, all six eyes went immediately to my chest. It was like the'd never seen such tiny tits before. They also made the mistake of pointing slivershots at me instead of those little guns that shoot knockout darts. They'd been on coms, so I knew they wouldn't shoot and damage Borth's precious wyvern property. Borth is selling me to some guy from Nondescripto who probably wants to try to clone me. He said Cavvitoy turned him down. Anyway, I disabled this bunch the same way I took down the first three. These lads were so busy studying my chest they didn't see my tail creeping along the floor ... it's really dark up there. Not sure how long they'll be out, but I was just about to tape their mouths shut when you showed up."

"Next time I see Cavvitoy, I'm gonna tell him I've hired you to protect yourself."

Lysheem made a grim smile, but otherwise ignored the compliment. She was glad to have his company. "So what's with the towering ninja rig? Cosplay event I didn't know about?"

Goldstein made a lip-zipping gesture. "Later. Let's hide your busted up body harvest somewhere out of the way. Then we gotta talk. I got a bad feeling about all this."

“Okay, but I know how we can get out of here: couple mini-subz I found while snooping. Oh, and did you know this thing’s a Nevergate?”

“Excellent intel on the mini-subz. After my little shark ride, was pretty sure this is the legendary All-Caribbean Freeboy Nevergate. WorldGov bleeding edge submarine prototype that supposedly sank on its maiden sea-trial. Gov got three contraband Nevergates somehow and used the sub for whatever for half a century, I guess. Got lazy and let pirates capture it about ten years ago. Woulda never given Borth credit for that much boldness. But carcass stowing first: talk second.”

TO BE CONTINUED