
Chapter 1

Author: Charles Billings

“Wrong? What could possibly go wrong?”

J. Hoffa

HEY KID! You’re not sleeping, are you?”

Aahz’s booming voice penetrated through the walls of my bedroom, making me wonder whether the Deveels had lied to us when they said the place was soundproof. Either that, or Aahz’s voice was one of the few things throughout the dimensions that simply could not be stopped. Probably the latter, I groaned.

Needless to say, I was still sleeping off the effects of yet another after-hours bout of drinking with Aahz and the guys over at Gus’s. They always held it better than I ever could hope to. File it away as another object lesson, I guessed.

“Kid, what are you doing?” Aahz bellowed as he burst into my room. “Don’t you know today’s the big Huffball tournament over at the Geek’s?”

“I do,” I shot back at him, “and our match isn’t until evening!” My head started vibrating painfully, and I just shut my eyes tightly. That seemed to help.

“Yeah, but Gus’s singles’ match begins in two hours! We’ve got to be there to pull for him!” He strode over to my bed and lowered his voice, “Besides, I’ve got a five spot on him. Now get up!”

Not willing to let me go at my own pace, Aahz grabbed me and pulled me out of bed.

“Okay, okay,” I said shakily. “I’m up. I’m up.”

“C’m on. Chumley and Tananda are getting breakfast together.” He let me go

and turned back toward the door.

I sighed heavily and rubbed my eyes. Aahz reached back and grabbed me, pulling me out the door.

* * *

Aahz strode into the dining room ahead of me. Chumley's face was buried in a newspaper, which apparently he read intently. Tananda was going through some forms while she spooned herself something out of a bowl. The table was covered with platters of bagels, meats, fruit and other assorted breakfast foods.

"Well, we're all up now," Aahz said. "What's good today, Tanda?"

"Well, I thought the..." she began. She stopped suddenly as Chumley shrieked. We all looked at him as he looked at me. He was wearing his trifocals again.

"Gads," he exhaled, as he looked at me again, "it's only you, Skeeve. For a moment I thought a giant eye was following Aahz into the room."

"Take those damn things off," Tananda scolded him.

"I need them to read the funnies," he said, gesturing with his Financial News of Deva. "Besides, the troll who invented them also invented democracy. If that's not a good endorsement I don't know what else is."

"He should have stuck to governments," she mumbled. She turned back to Aahz. "I did the bacon today, and the grapefruits are very nice."

"All I needed to hear," Aahz said. He then went into the kitchen and got himself some Pervish nasties, slurping them greedily from their carton as he came back into the dining room. Tananda narrowed her eyes at him but simply went back to her forms.

"Well," Chumley said disgustedly, "the Family Circus sucks again today."

"The FND picked it up?" Aahz spit some of his food across the table.

Chumley nodded from behind his paper without looking up. "It's everywhere!"

I grabbed a orenberry bagel and started chewing into it. I just stared at the fruit on the table. "Hey, just where do orenberries come from?" I asked, gesturing with my bagel.

Aahz and Tananda looked at one another for a moment.

"Skeeve," said Tananda carefully, "there's really no such thing as an orenberry."

I just looked at her.

Aahz laughed. "Let's just say it's a creative euphemism."

"For what?" I asked, puzzled.

"For something that'd never sell if they were straightforward about it," he finished, grinning.

I chewed for another second, then spit the whole thing out. I tossed the bagel on the table and felt ill.

"Hey, relax, kid. It won't kill you. We Pervects love 'em." He grabbed my

half-eaten bagel and started to mop up the juice from his carton with it. Chumley reached for his glass of juice, but he fell a few inches short. He kept grasping at it vainly. Finally, Tananda nonchalantly pushed it toward him until he grabbed it. He glared at her as he took a draught from the glass. "Don't say anything," he said. Tananda just looked at him. "I can tell you're just sitting there smugly with your bloody perfect eyesight and all, just mocking me. Don't try to hide it."

Instead of responding, Tananda picked up a honeydew and set it in front of her. I grabbed some bacon and poured myself a glass of juice. She picked up a chopping knife and sliced the honeydew in half as I chewed my bacon. She held up one half by her head and looked contemptuously at Chumley.

"Do you see this?" she asked dramatically.

"Surely," Chumley glared back.

She took the half of honeydew and slowly mashed it into his face. Chumley threw down his trifocals and his paper and surged up.

"Okay, that's blinking *it*!" he yelled.

"Hey boss!" Guido's voice broke into our little drama. "Someone's here to see you!"

We all looked back at him, the moment completely defused.

"Tell them to come back later," I said to him. "We're in the middle of breakfast."

"Actually, boss," Guido continued, "it's an assemblage of Deveels, represent-



ing the Devan Department of Commerce. They're pretty insistent."

I looked over at Aahz. "Our boss," Aahz said. He looked back at Guido. "Give us a minute, Guido, we'll be right down." He looked back at me and sighed sadly. "So much for Gus's match."

* * *

Ten minutes later, Aahz and I found ourselves in a very important looking conference room, sitting across a large oval table from three well dressed Deveels. Two more equally well dressed Deveels sat behind them, next to the wall. Those at the table looked just younger than middle age, while one of the Deveels by the wall looked very old. The other by the wall was the youngest in the room, and was leaning slightly toward the elder Deveel.

"We'll come right to the point," said one of the Deveels at the table, the one on the left, "my name's Ollipo, and I'm Department Vice President of the Devan Department of Commerce. With me are Yulleen," he gestured at the Deveel sitting next to him, "Department of Commerce Deputy Vice President for Agriculture and Mining, and Ginghe," he nodded at the third Deveel, "chief negotiator for the Department of Commerce."

The other two nodded at us. "Who are they?" I gestured at the other two.

The three Deveels looked at one another. After a moment, they looked back at me stonily. Apparently that wasn't an appropriate question. Aahz nudged me. He leaned over and whispered at me. "He's got to be the President of the Department. He's holding the bag for this entire dimension. The other guy's his lackey. Deveels are cagey, though. Just talk to these three. They're going to be the dealers. "

"You mean he's in control..." I began.

"Yes," Aahz was suddenly tense. "Keep that in mind."

"If we may begin," Ginghe began testily. We turned our attention to him. "We have hired you as Magician in Residence for the dimension of Deva, and we are now faced with a situation that requires your services."

I looked at Aahz. He glanced at me and nodded. Ginghe continued. "Commerce has run into a problem with our hard labor. In eight of our dimensions, we have discovered a plot by a number of our workers to illegally organize to collectively bargain with the Department. Our efforts to quell the organizing efforts have thus far failed in satisfactorily resolving the impasse. We now turn to you for a solution."

He pulled out a stack of papers, and laid a ream in front of us. It appeared to be a guide. Aahz picked it up and glanced it over. It contained some charts and pictures, but was mostly a text document.

"The primary dimension affected is Gezirah. The operations affected by the movement are seventeen mine systems, nineteen timber subsidiaries and mills, and

fourteen textile mills.”

“How many workers?” Aahz asked.

“One hundred eight thousand,” Ginghe said grimly. Aahz looked impressed. Ginghe continued. “Secondary dimensions include Augaraj, an ocean world: workers from numerous resorts, fisheries and off-shore operations.” He slapped another packet in front of us. “Kaymayan,” out came another packet, “mining, grain agriculture and exotic timbers. Chirosovo,” ...yet another packet... “mountainous and frozen, numerous mining operations and resorts affected. Boukiero, a jungle world, with textile, fruit, gaming and distilling operations affected.”

“How many distilleries?” Aahz asked, smiling.

“Fifteen,” Ginghe said, humorlessly. He passed over more packets, apparently unwilling to let Aahz continue. “Kabayouran, silk and spice operations and mining of magikal metals affected. Najran, manufacturing facilities for cosmetics and refineries affected. Finally,” he passed over the last packet, “there is Toros Daglari, another ocean world, with unrest at resort and fishery operations. Total working population affected numbers seven hundred seventeen thousand.”

“Sounds rough,” Aahz said, glancing at the papers. “What do you want us to do?”

“You will head out to Gezirah tonight. There you will meet with Dierack, our field liaison. He will fill you in with all the details concerning our operation and counter-strikes. He has more detailed information on the subjects and concerns involved.”

“Tonight?” Aahz looked askance at him. “We’ve had other plans...”

Ginghe wouldn’t let him finish. “Need we remind you of the contract you signed with us? It explicitly stated that you would provide any services we deemed necessary. That is what we are paying you for, after all.”

“Look,” Aahz said bluntly. “We’d love to help, but we’ve got other plans. How ‘bout we arrange to hire...”

Ollipo broke in. “The contract stated that no subcontracting was allowed. We hired the Great Skeeve, not the people hired by the Great Skeeve.”

“But it said that if you were asking on behalf of a private entity...”

“These are State-run operations.”

“Oh,” Aahz’s face fell. “But we can contract with third parties to aid in our effort.”

“Correct.”

Aahz closed his eyes as if in great pain. “And that means that the rate we’ll be paid is a fixed rate.” I now understood what pained him.

“Three percent of the annual profit of the effected operations.”

“And how much are we talking about?”

Ginghe, Ollipo and Yulleen looked at one another for a moment. Ginghe looked back at us.

“Thirty eight point six million gold.”

They looked at us for a moment. Aahz’s face was frozen in a half smile, half sneer.

“Sounds good, gentlemen,” Aahz said smoothly. “But let’s just say I wasn’t born yesterday.” The three Deveels’ stare began to waver. I noticed the elder Deveel leaned over and spoke briefly with his lackey, and shifted in his seat, folding his arms and staring at Aahz. Aahz continued. “You’re talking about extensive operations in eight dimensions, concerning nearly three quarters of a million workers. Either you’re feeding me a line of crap, or you’re three turnips short of a picnic and this is all some bizarre hoax.”

He leaned forward against the marble table and looked fiercely at Ginghe. “So you’re going to tell me exactly what the figure is, or we’ll let you solve your own problems. You may have gotten a lot on us in that contract, but I made sure it’d require you to play ball with us. You spill, or we walk.”

The three looked at each other nervously. Ginghe shot an anxious look over his shoulder at the elder Deveel. The elder nodded at him. Ginghe looked back at us and licked his lips. Aahz just smiled at him, intimidating him right out of his tailored pants.

“Profits...” Ginghe stammered, looking at the notes he had before him, “...profits from the last year totaled six hundred eighty billion.”

I froze, wondering if I had sullied my drawers. That was nothing compared to Aahz, however. He screamed and in reflex smacked his head clean on the table hard enough to almost crack it. His head bounced off the table and he flew right out of his chair onto the floor. He pulled himself back up and braced himself on the table. His tongue was hanging out, and apparently, he wasn’t aware of it. He just jabbered incoherently. We just looked at the Deveels. Ginghe looked over at Yulleen, then looked at Ollipo, and looked back at us.

“You shall not receive payment until after completion of the job. So, as we said, we would like you to start right away. We will provide room and board for you and any agents you feel are necessary for this undertaking. You shall leave for Gezirah tonight, and you will meet Dierack tomorrow morning. The concierge will give you more detailed instructions when you reach the hotel.”

“That is all, gentlemen,” Ollipo concluded grimly.

* * *

Aahz was still choking as we made our way back to our tent. “I can’t. I just can’t believe it.”

“I’m worried, Aahz.”

“What?” he gasped incredulously. “What’s the problem?”

“Why would the Deveels hire us for a job of such magnitude?”

“Why do you think they hired you as resident magician in the first place?” he

retorted. “Besides, it can’t be that extensive, or else they would have given us a massive staff right there. We’ve got to see what this Dierack person has to say before we can truly appraise what’s going on. It’s labor, though, Skeeve. They can be tricky, but you’d be surprised how easily they’ll fall apart once you get going, and we’re even going to get an all expense trip to the Toros Daglari out of the deal. Kid, that’s the poshest, most exclusive resort dimension in the universe. It’s amazing!”

“But Aahz, if it’s that easy, wouldn’t they have already taken care of it?”

“*Get out of my way!*” Aahz yelled at a gaggle of old women that stood before us. “*I’m a gonna holler!*”

He ran off toward our tent, hollering in delight. I couldn’t even muster up a smile.

Chapter 2

Author: James Whitney

*“We must approach this problem with our
customary care, discretion, and tact!”*

Vlad the Impaler

AAHZ, I’VE GOT a very bad feeling about this.”

“You’ve got a very bad feeling about everything, kid.”

We were packing our things in preparation for our trip to Gezirah. It would have been a lot quicker if Aahz actually spent his time packing and less time dancing around the room.

“Aahz,” I continued, “we have no idea what we’re getting into here.”

“Listen kid,” Aahz replied, “it’s just a labor dispute. Some guys don’t want to work. We convince them they should. Simple.”

“If it’s so simple, why are they paying us so much money for it?”

“Kid, it’s in our contract. That’s the sweetest thing about it. We get three percent of the affected profits. We went over this before. They need us, that’s what they pay us.”

“So why do they need us?”

“How should I know? They’re Deveels! They’re incompetent.”

“Hmph.” I wasn’t convinced.

“Look, Kid, if it makes you feel any better, I know this is going to be difficult. Heck, it’ll probably be the toughest assignment we’ve been on in a while, if only because there are so many people involved. But after it... think of it. You’ll never



have to do anything that you don't want to do. Ever."

"That makes me feel so much better," I replied, sarcastically.

We had finished packing and headed down to our foyer, where the rest of our group was waiting. We had decided on a group of five: Gus, our nigh-invulnerable gargoyle friend; Tananda, the trollop assassin; Chumley, Tananda's brother, a mild-mannered gargantuan troll; Aahz, who you've already met; and me.

That left out a few people. Guido and Nunzio, my bodyguards, complained the loudest.

"We're his bodyguards! We guard his body! How are we supposed to do that if we're nowhere near his body?"

"I believe," Aahz countered, "that Skeeve will be adequately protected."

"It's our responsibility," Nunzio countered.

"I'm not having this argument with you two," Aahz denied flatly. "This is not a combat mission. We're going to places which probably haven't even heard of Skeeve. You two bumblers are going to mess up the negotiation process. The use of bodyguards is a sign of bad faith."

"It's a sign of bad faith???" replied Guido, incredulous.

And on it went. I really couldn't take any more of it. Aahz was right, but he was holding back a key element of his decision process. He knew this would be a fight, and he didn't want anyone in there that he didn't have a long history of trust. Plus, I suspect that he wanted to keep the group as small as possible. Less ways to split the fee around.

And so Massha had to stay, also. She was considerably easier to convince. We

wanted a responsible party to keep an eye on the place while we were gone. Someone who could handle whatever was thrown at him (or her, in this case). Also, she qualified under Aahz's "lack of long history". So that was it. Truthfully, I felt the worst about leaving Massha behind, but I could understand the reasoning behind it.

And we were off.

* * *

Gezirah was a dimension of heavy forests and rolling hills. We had D-hopped into what Aahz had said was one of the few settlements on the dimension. The native Gezirahans were small, furry beings. On the average, they were two feet shorter than I was, though slightly broader.

The town, however, was not run by Gezirahans. It was run by Deveels. We only saw a few natives in the town, although there were several Deveels disguised as Gezirahans. We went to the hotel, which was a large brick building that looked distinctly out of place in a wooded environment.

We walked in and "checked in" to the hotel, whatever that meant. The proprietor of the hotel, a clean-cut young Deveel, gave us two keys to some rooms, and showed the way up there. Our bags were taken by several native Gezirahans, who grumbled a bit but seemed to do their job effectively.

After a night's sleep, we finally met with Dierack the following morning. Dierack was a large, muscular Deveel who was also fairly clean cut. He carried with him a stack of papers with pictures of various people.

"We have reason to believe," Dierack said, "that there is a small group of competitors that are sabotaging our operations on the affected dimensions. We know very little about them; however, the extent to which the labor disputes have spread across the dimension implies their existence."

"So," Aahz countered, "we don't know what we're up against."

"Correct," Dierack continued, "but in the meantime your duties are to stabilize the dimensions and search for the saboteurs. In the meantime, here are a list of the native Gezirahan leaders." He then rattled off several names, displaying pictures that all looked alike to me.

"And these are the people we'll be negotiating with?" I asked. This brought a loud laugh from Dierack, and a confused look from Aahz and Tananda.

"Negotiating?" Dierack continued, once he had gotten his breath back. "Dear oh dear, no. You're going to kill them."

Chapter 3

Author: Nathan Yospe

“Hey Gang! Let’s split up!”

J. Lennon

WHAT!” I lunged toward the Deveel, heedless of his muscles. A steel bar stopped me before I was halfway there. As I picked myself up off the ground and struggled to recapture my breath, Aahz glared down at me, his arm still outstretched. “Easy, kid,” he said in that low voice he uses when he’s expecting me to play along with one of his cons, “Just go along with him.”

“But Aahz! He’s talking about hiring us to assassinate these people!”

“Good thing we brought along an assassin, then, isn’t it?”

Tananda winked at me, “Don’t worry, we’ll get the whole story first. Assassinating people without knowing why is bad business. Only the Gray Guild does that sort of thing.”

“There’s more than one assassin’s guild? I didn’t know that.”

“Well, of course there is. There’s the Guild of Atastach, they’re the ones that handle religious assassinations, specializing in burning of heretics, and then there is the guild of Lonny Hill, which handles all sorts of political assassinations, and then for your undetectable poisonings, you have...” Tananda’s voice droned on, somehow sounding less like her and more like some dry lecturer showing off his store of trivial facts, and I started to drift off.

“Hey, kid, WAKE UP!” Aahz knocked me forward with a heavy slap in the back, and I shook my head to clear it. “Huh? What? Oh.” Dierack was still talking,

and Gus and Chumley were listening intently, or at least paying intense attention. Chumley was slowly licking his lips in his “Big Crunch” impression, and Gus had on that million dollar grin of his, the one full of needle sharp stone teeth. It was almost as scary as one of Aahz’s grins.

“Hey, Skeeve, what do you think? The Deveel here wants us to just kill these fellows without attempting any sort of negotiation. What’s your take on the matter?”

“What do you think my take is?” With a growl, I mentally picked Dierack up and tossed him over my shoulder. “We’re going to investigate further.”

Aahz silenced me with a glare, and we finished the discussion with Dierack. We left the motel and went out into town.

Walking beside me, Aahz picked up the conversation again. “Kid, if we take the time to investigate, we’ll be forever on this job. Besides, don’t you think the Deveels have done their own investigations? Let’s just take out these jokers and move on to the next dimension.”

“I don’t like this, Aahz. The Deveels must not be telling us everything. When have they ever told us the truth before?”

“Relax, kid. They gave us the real figures for their profit losses. If there’s anything a Deveel would share last, that’s it.”

“That’s just what worries me, Aahz. If they’re willing to share that, can you imagine what they might be hiding? And think of what they are paying us. It almost sounds like we got a deal.”

“Oh. You know, when you put it like that...” Aahz stopped walking and started scratching his scaly head. “Hey Gus, Tanda, Chumley, gather round. War council.”

The crew circled in, and we went into a huddle. “Okay, let’s get the facts we know out first.” Aahz began ticking off on his fingers. “First off, we know that this is multidimensional, so there is someone else behind these local labor yahoos. Yes, Skeeve?” Aahz caught my waving arm out of the corner of his eye.

“What dimension are Yahoos from?”

“Kid...” Aahz groaned, face in his hands. “Never mind. The point is, if we just kill off the locals, we have no way of finding out what they know of what’s going on here.”

“Right. So, I guess we’re going off to talk to them now.”

“Wrong. Now we are going off to infiltrate their organization.” Aahz turned to me with a toothy grin. “Do you want to be a lumberjack or a miner?”



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Chapter 4

Author: Robert Cook

“I’m a Lumberjack and I’m okay!”
Traditional Gezirahan folk-song

LUMBERJACK,” I REPLIED without hesitation.

“That was quick.” Tanda commented with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter..” I added, but inside, I admitted that the idea of getting out into the woods appealed to me, since it reminded me of my time with Garkin. I wasn’t terribly happy then, but somehow those long dreary months were now tinged with the rosy hue of nostalgia..

“Gezirah to Skeeve.” Aahz waved a hand in front of my face and I snapped out of my contemplations. “Kid, pay attention for once, okay?” He turned to the others. “Skeeve and I will go buy ourselves some plaid shirts. Tanda, you and Chumley get the mining.” The brother and sister team nodded. I tried to picture Tanda and Chumley crawling around in a mine with pickaxes and miner’s lanterns strapped to their heads. My imagination wasn’t up to the task.

“Gus, you’d better check out the textiles.”

“Right.”

Chumley abruptly spoke up, looking thoughtful. “You know, perhaps we should go back and talk to that Dierack fellow again.”

“Chumley? You feeling okay?”

“If we want to hook up with these union blokes, then our Mr. Dierack would presumably be able to point us towards the places where there is the most union

activity, perhaps even obtain us some jobs. If we go charging in blindly, it might take months before we find a way into this union.”

Aahz wavered, clearly torn. Finally he shook his head. “No. Skeeve reminded me that we’re dealing with Deveels here. We’ll just have to do it the hard way. It’s better if we keep Dierack out of the loop for now.” Tanda and Gus nodded their assent to this point.

Chumley shrugged. “Righty-ho. Come along, little sis. Let’s go find us some miners, shall we?”

“Big strong burly ones, I hope.” Tanda grinned.

They and Gus started off. Aahz called after them. “Meet back at the hotel this afternoon, and we’ll swap notes!” The other three waved an affirmation, and then we were alone on the street.

“So what now, Aahz?”

“Now, we go join the local cattle call.”

Locating the lumber hiring hall wasn’t terribly difficult- it was one of the largest buildings in town, apart from the hotel, and built from the same type of bricks. For some reason, this fact struck Aahz as hilarious.

“A lumber hiring hall made out of bricks. Only the Deveels would do something like this.” Privately, I wondered, and filed the fact away for future contemplation.

There were more native Gezirahans in and around the hall than in the other parts of town we had seen, although still not what you’d call swarms of them. Most of them looked tired and dispirited as they trooped in and out of the doors. At Aahz’s prompting, I slapped a quick Gezirahan disguise on both of us. I wondered how the others were going to deal with this particular problem, but it was too late to start worrying about that now.

We walked into the building. It was a large, windowless barn-like structure, with Deveels seated behind little glassed-over windows, and row after row of plain wooden benches, mostly empty. A few Gezirahans loitered around. An incredibly wizened Deveel sat at a battered black desk near the entrance, under a large sign written in two languages, one presumably Gezirahan, the other Deveelscript, which I could now read fairly well. There was only one word:

INFORMATION

Aahz looked around for a minute, and then strolled confidently over to the table.

“Excuse me, my good...”

“Take a number.” The Deveel didn’t even look up from the flimsy-looking book he was reading.

“We want to know...”

“Take a number.” Still not looking up, the Deveel pointed at a pile of wooden



cards hanging on a nail on the front of the desk. Written on the top card was the number “42”.

“Look. We...”

“Take a number.”

Seeing Aahz’s expression, I grabbed his arm, pulled on it and hissed in his ear. “Aahz! Beating this guy up will not get us anything. They’ll just throw us out. We’d better just take the number.”

“Gaaaahhh...” Aahz snapped up the top card and skulked off to one of the benches. I stood for a minute, looking up at the sign and then down at the Deveil. I couldn’t resist.

“What are orenberries made of?”

To my immense surprise, the Deveil looked up and studied me levelly for a moment. Finally, he spoke. “You really don’t want to know.” He returned to his

book.

“Uh. Thanks.” I backed off and sat down next to the scowling Aahz. I peeked over at him, then carefully plucked the card out of his clenching hands before he snapped it in two.

One of the Deveels at the window suddenly called out “28!”

Aahz growled. I knew then that it was going to be a long afternoon.

A sudden thought occurred to me, and I swiveled on the bench so I was facing Aahz.

“Aahz?”

“Yeah, Kid?” There was a dangerous note of weariness lurking in Aahz’s voice, but I pushed on.

“How come you didn’t offer me a job in textiles?”

Aahz looked over at me, evidently surprised. He must have thought I was going to ask if we weren’t supposed to be taking that number somewhere, but some merchants in the Bazaar use a similar system, so for once I knew the drill.

“You’ve never been inside a Devan textile mill, have you?”

“Umm... No.”

“How can I put this? The reason I sent Gus to check out the textiles is that stone doesn’t corrode or melt as easily as flesh.”

“Ugh.”

“Exactly. They use things in those places that *I’d* find a trifle uncomfortable.”

I thought for a minute more. “So how do the Gezirahans handle it?” I looked at the nearest one, three benches away. He shot back a suspicious glance then ignored me. “They seem to be made of flesh, under all that hair.”

Aahz yawned and closed his eyes, seemingly calmer now. “Dunno. Maybe Gus’ll find out for you.” I made another mental note to ask Gus to do just that if he got a chance.

“29!”

It was a long afternoon. I read the various posters tacked to the walls, and all of the brochures, handouts and leaflets. Three times. If you ever need a cure for insomnia, I can say without hesitation or fear of contradiction, report immediately to the main Deveel lumbering hiring hall on Gezirah. Surprisingly, after his initial near-explosion, Aahz took it well, sitting on the bench and seeming to doze. I quizzed him and he shrugged:

“Bureaucracies. They exist to drive you mad, and I’m not going to give this one the satisfaction. It’s been so long since I had to deal with a real one, I let my temper get the best of me there.”

Finally: “42!” We scrambled to our feet and marched over to the appropriate window. The Deveel sitting behind the glass was almost as decrepit as the one manning the information booth. He examined us critically. Before Aahz could plunge into his spiel, he croaked:

“Haven’t seen you before.” My mind raced, trying to think a quick, plausible

lie, even though Aahz no doubt had a dozen stored away for just such emergencies. The Deveel continued after only a microscopic pause: "Good! Always good to get some fresh blood around here." He rooted around in the piles of paper on his desk, then stopped and looked up. "You two have worked in the lumber industry before, of course?"

"Of course." Aahz. Of course.

The Deveel nodded with no great show of interest and resumed digging. Finally he pulled out a piece of paper triumphantly. "Here we are. Two positions just opened up in an outfit a little ways north of here. And you're in more luck! A wagon is headed that way, leaving.. oh.. any minute now. Out back. You interested?"

"Well, actually, we..." Aahz's hand dropped onto my shoulder in the patented 'Skeeve shut up' grip and I broke off.

"Might my colleague and I have a moment to discuss this?"

The Deveel shrugged. "Sure, but the wagon ain't waiting, and it's a two-day walk."

Aahz pulled me out of earshot. "This is perfect! There can only one reason he'd be willing to hire two unknown schlubs right off the street, and why he's trying to get us up there so fast. Also why no one else here.." a gesture at the waiting Gezirahans "...has taken him up on this offer." My blank stare must have clued him to elucidate. "This outfit, whatever it is, must have just experienced labor trouble, and they're looking for some scabs. Unless I miss my guess, we're headed into a hotbed of labor activity, which is exactly what we want. Let's go tell gramps over there that we'll take the job."

I briefly wondered why being turned into scabs was so great, considering Aahz had just said he was trying to avoid getting us corroded or melted, but dismissed that point for the moment and addressed some bigger problems: "What if it's just that this job, whatever it is, is such a hellhole that no one wants it? And what about the others? Chumley? Tanda?"

Aahz grinned. "Don't worry. I know Tanda. They'll catch up with us. And every instinct tells me we're onto something here. Let's go, kid, our cart is waiting." He pulled me back to the window and smiled broadly. It was a good thing he was disguised as a Gezirahan when he did this, or the specimen embalmed behind the glass might have had a heart attack right then and there. "We'll take the job."

The Deveel smiled back, causing my skin to crawl. "Excellent. Now just sign this form... here... and here... and give **this** to the cart driver... good... all right. You're ready. Right out through that door."

I leaned over and spoke quickly before Aahz could clamp down again. "Sir? What's the name of this... outfit?"

The Deveel paused, then said nonchalantly "Camp #251." I was careful to keep my face blank, and he seemed to release a withheld breath. If you weren't used to

dealing with Deveels, you probably wouldn't even have noticed either the hesitation or the breath.

Another fact for the file.

"Thank you, sir. Back in a minute, Aahz."

"Kid, where..."

I dashed back to the front of the hall and stopped in front of the information Deveel.

"Um. Sir? Excuse me? Could I ask a favor?"

The Deveel looked up, wordlessly. I realized now he was even older than I'd first thought. How long did Deveels live anyway..?

"If.. some friends of mine come by here later today, could you give them a message?"

"Perhaps. How will I recognize these friends of yours?"

"They're... uh... they're... you'll know them when you see them, I think."

"Ah. And what is the message?"

"Just tell them that... The Kid hopes he found what we were looking for at Camp 251."

"The Kid hopes he found what you were looking for at Camp 251.' Very well." He started to look down at his book, then swiveled his gaze back up at me, an odd glint in his eye. "Whatever it is you're doing, my young fellow, you'd best be very careful. Strange things are afoot on Gezilah, and all is not as it seems. But then, it never is, is it?" He winked at me, and returned to his book. I stared at him for a moment, then turned and ran for my wagon.

Chapter 5

Author: Steven Harris

“What you see is what you get.”

RuPaul

WHEN THE OLD DEVEEL had told me that all the things on Gezirah were not what they seemed, I suspected he had been referring to the labor problem we were investigating. But it wasn't until Aahz and I laid eyes on our transportation to Camp #251 that I realized what he meant. The 'wagon' was nothing more than five pieces of wood tied together with some rotten rope and placed on top of an axle with two old pockmarked wheels jutting out from the side. Resting in front was an enormous bug that was obviously the steed responsible for pulling the wagon.

“What is that thing?” I asked Aahz. I pointed to the giant insect, which held more than a passing resemblance to one of my recent nightmares.

“Huh? The Cristotle? Just some giant beetle the Deveels use on their dimensions as pack animals. They're harmless as long as you don't wear any bright colors around them. Tends to make them think it's mating season.” Aahz explained. A roll of thunder sounded in the distance.

“Sounds like its going to rain.” I said, as a Deveel came around the corner with a trail of thirty Gezirahans following in a quiet single file. The Deveel was huge, with muscles bulging from under a leather outfit he wore.

“Are you the two new ones coming along?” He growled. Apparently he wasn't too enthusiastic about his job.

“Yes, we are.” Aahz spoke first. The Deveel simply shook his head with



displeasure and motioned us to the wagon after taking our two registration tickets. I could hear him muttering under his breath about how no gambling debt was worth this punishment and that he should have gotten a job with his cousin Sal.

It soon became apparent that the Gezirahan custom of riding in a wagon was to simply pile in on top of each other and to hold on for dear life. A custom that took on a decidedly horrific turn when it started to rain and I got to experience the scent of wet Gezirahan fur. We had been traveling for eighteen hours when, soon after the rain stopped, we suddenly found ourselves at a wooden house seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The sun was beginning to set and the lighting gave the surrounding forest a decidedly spooky look.

“Okay, everyone out!” the Deveel yelled back to us as we all slid off the wagon onto the muddy ground. I could see Aahz glaring at some Gezirahan who had just poked him in the eye with a foot. The Deveel then stood up upon the front of the wagon and unfolded a piece of paper. “Ahem! Welcome to Lumber Camp #251 situated in the lovely forest of Kirn. Here you will be able to enjoy working in a relaxed environment filled with compassion and understanding from your Camp Coordinator, Talmor Blox. If you have any questions or complaints, please do not hesitate to bring them to your Camp Coordinator... after going through the proper channels. This greeting has been approved by the Deveel... Hmmm, maybe I’m not supposed to read that part.” The Deveel then folded the piece of paper again and placed it into an inner pocket of his leather vest. A small furry paw/hand suddenly raised itself out of the crowd.

“Excuse me, Mr. Deveel?” A small voice pleaded. I could see an inner struggle

take place in the Deveel. He obviously saw the questioner, but he didn't know if he wanted to deal with the trouble of actually responding to the plea. He placed a hand upon his forehead, sighed, and pointed to the Gezirahan.

"Yes?"

"Could we have your name in case any of us wish to complain about your driving and/or unpleasant personality?" The little squeaky voice said. The Deveel's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"What?!!" the Deveel exclaimed with a twinge of fear in his voice.

"Bingo!" A voice whispered excitedly in my ear. I turned to see Aahz standing behind me. He had slowly found his way through the crowd to stand there. The glint in his eyes and the rubbing of his hands suggested he was quite pleased with what was happening.

"Care to tell me what's going on?" I whispered back. Aahz smiled one of his frightening grins.

"This is so easy, I'm almost sorry I brought the rest of the gang for this job. You see that little Gezirahan causing all the trouble? He's working for the opposition. He's a plant, a mole. He joins the workers, pretends he is one of them, tries to push the management too far, and when they snap, he makes himself out to be a martyr. A classic maneuver. Now all we have to do is get friendly with that one and he introduces us to his leaders. Within a few days, we'll have traced this whole movement back to the source." Aahz sighed with bliss-filled thoughts as to how he was going to spend his share of our wages for this job. I turned my attention back to the Gezirahan and the Deveel and what was turning into a verbal fight.

"So we will not be given weekends and special holidays off?" the Gezirahan sheepishly asked.

"Look, I told you, I'm not in control of your contracts. I don't know what you signed up for and frankly, I don't care!" the Deveel yelled as he looked directly over to me. "Well, what do you want??!!" I froze as I heard Aahz speaking from behind me.

"Are you saying that as a Deveel, you don't care about Gezirahans?" I heard Aahz ask. Suddenly, all the other Gezirahans swiveled their heads about and looked right at us. A noticeable gasp came from their mouths and a few began whispering amongst themselves.

"I didn't say that! All I said is that I don't care about what your contracts say. If you have a problem with them, take them to someone else!" the Deveel fumed.

"So we are expected to honor contracts that the Deveels themselves don't even care about?" Aahz asked with an put-upon incredulous voice. Another noticeable gasp escaped from the Gezirahans. They didn't seem to be treating Aahz's questioning in the same way they had the first Gezirahan asking the questions.

"Who said we didn't care about your contracts?!!" A voice roared from behind the now quickly-dispersing crowd. Standing there, in a stiff green outfit with a look

of pure hatred on his face was a tall thin Deveel. “I care about your contracts! And if anyone decides that their contract is somehow faulty, then I suggest you bring it up with me. I am Camp Coordinator, Talmor Blox. I’ve been assigned to make you into the best lumberjacks in the known dimensions. And I take pride in that position! Now, everyone into the wooden house on your right! This will be your home for the next six weeks. Let’s go!”

With that, every Gezirahan made a mad dash for the front door. We all forced our way in and everyone started to lay claim to a bed. I ran to one against the wall and threw myself upon the mattress. I rolled over on my back and looked for Aahz. I had expected him to choose the bed next to mine, but instead I saw him picking a bed next to the troublemaker Gezirahan across the room. The Gezirahan who had already claimed that bed flew across the room onto a bed a few feet away thanks to Aahz’s tossing. After a few minutes, everyone settled down and Talmor Blox entered the room.

“All right, listen up! Tomorrow morning you will be awakened at dawn and will be given a 12 minute lesson on the use of the various tools you will be using during your stay here. Pay attention because it will only be told to you once! After that, you will be taken to the lumber site and assigned to a series of trees which will be YOUR responsibility. I don’t like lazy workers and I WILL be watching. In one hour, I’ll be back with your dinner. Oh, and before I forget, if anyone is caught trying to leave before completing the terms of their contract, they will be dealt with accordingly. Enjoy your stay.” Talmor Blox concluded with a smile as he headed out the door. The room erupted once more into activity as Gezirahans began to talk amongst themselves, while I walked over to Aahz’s bed. I could see that Aahz had already started talking to the trouble-making Gezirahan from earlier and I was curious as to how Aahz’s instincts were playing out. Before I was half-way across the room, though, I felt something poke me in the shoulders. I glanced behind me and saw a little Gezirahan standing there.

“Nygolian bago nixilish?” It asked. I stared at its little brown eyes for a moment.

“Ummm, yes? Could you repeat that?” Suddenly, I realized that it was speaking to me in its native tongue and I didn’t know any words in the Gezirahan language.

“Nygolian bago nixilish?” it repeated.

“Errrr. Yum yum.” I replied while I rubbed my belly and licked my lips. I was sure it wasn’t the right response, but I was stalling for time. Hopefully it would just think I was some idiot and would leave me alone. Without warning the little Gezirahan giggled and began to rub its own tummy.

“Liaro-dian blakn’tln!” another Gezirahan said while it began to pat my little Gezirahan on the back as if congratulating it.

“Daro bago nixilish vec tares?” Another Gezirahan asked as it entered our circle.

“Umm, excuse me, fellas. I need to talk to my friend for a second.” I said as I turned around and headed for Aahz. I got two steps away before the room was broken by a wailing from behind me. I looked back and saw my little Gezirahan friend on the ground sobbing in agony. “What the..?”

“You just called off your engagement, you heartbreaker.” Aahz’s voice broke in behind me.

“Engagement? But we are both males.” I said. Aahz shook his head.

“Nope, seems you gave us Gezirahan FEMALE disguises.” Aahz explained. “Remember how they all over-reacted when I was giving the wagon driver a hard time? Seems females in Gezirahan society aren’t suppose to be so political. I just got a little lecture from our trouble making Gezirahan friend about that. It also seems that the only kind of females who would ever actually join a lumber company are there to entertain the workers.”

“You mean like singing and dancing?” I asked with concern. I was a lousy singer and my dancing was twice as bad.

“No, not singing and dancing. Entertaining! Like..... Well, remember Alcain’s Interdimensional House of Pleasure back in Deva?”

I nodded in terror. “So what are we going to do, Aahz?”

“Well, the first thing we are going to do is-“ Aahz started. He was interrupted by a shout from one of the Gezirahans who had been sitting quietly on the bed a few feet away.

“Aahz?!! Did you just call this Gezirahan by the name ‘Aahz’?” He shouted as he hopped off the bed and walked over to us.

“Yeah, he did! You have a problem with the name?” Aahz growled. The Gezirahan looked from Aahz to me and then back to Aahz. He squinted as if trying to see us more clearly.

“No, not really. I just used to know an Aahz and I didn’t think it was that popular of a name... especially among Gezirahans.” This time Aahz squinted at the Gezirahan.

“Am I to assume that neither one of us might be who we think we are?” Aahz suggested, keeping his voice low.

“Shall we go somewhere a bit less... crowded?” the Gezirahan asked as he waved his little paw toward the door. Aahz rubbed his chin in thought for a few seconds and then started following the Gezirahan. As I left the building, I could hear the little Gezirahan whose heart I had broken let forth a new wail of emotional pain. I kept telling myself that it was better this way, especially since comforting him would involve a lot more skill in illusion-making than I was capable of.

I followed Aahz and the Gezirahan around to the back of the building where we couldn’t be seen.

“Okay, let’s drop the disguises and see who we are.” the Gezirahan said. I looked to Aahz for his decision and with his nod I closed my eyes and let our illusions dissolve. I heard Aahz gasp as I opened my eyes to see an Imp standing

where only moments before there was a Gezirahan. And it wasn't just any Imp...

"*BROCKHURST!!!*" Aahz and I clamored. I had met Brockhurst before on two separate occasions. The first involved him trying to kill Aahz and me while the second time he had put his life on the line to help Aahz and me. I still held something of a grudge against Brockhurst since he had been behind my past mentor's death, yet I knew that deep down he had, in the end, come to view us as friends.

"You idiots! What are you doing here?" Brockhurst hissed.

"Say, watch who you are calling an idiot! Skeeve isn't half as dumb as he looks." Aahz hissed back.

"I think he was referring to both....Was that suppose to be a compliment, Aahz?" I asked.

"Shut up, Kid. Okay, Brockhurst, what's your story? I know mercenary work for Imps are hard to get these days, but I seriously doubt you came to Gezirah to work part-time as a lumberjack." Aahz pointed out.

"I asked you first, Aahz. YOU are supposed to be working on Deva, not on this dimension. What are you two doing here? Looking to make money on the side?" Brockhurst replied. The Pervect and the Imp glared at each other for a few moments before I decided to break in.

"Look, this isn't getting us anywhere. Aahz and I are here working for the Devan Department of Commerce to help get rid of some labor problems they've been having. Seems someone is trying to get several of the workers on various dimensions to create some kind of collective." I said, trying to remember what we actually were here to do. I really wish I had been paying more attention now that I needed the information.

"You expect me to believe that?" Brockhurst laughed. "You two take the cake."

"Cake? I didn't mention a cake." I stammered in confusion.

"And what are you doing here, Brockhurst? Checking out the latest spring Gezirahan fashions?" Aahz asked.

"Well it seems that at least one of us is working for the Devan Department of Commerce, but I'm afraid it isn't you two." Brockhurst started to explain, "See, I got hired about a week ago to come to Gezirah. Seems that the Deveels got wind of a plot to break up the local labor organization by a bunch of off-worlders. My job was to come here, infiltrate the local worker population, and assassinate anyone trying to break it up. Simple job with great pay. How could I resist?"

"I thought labor organizing was illegal on Deveel dimensional systems?" I asked Aahz.

"It is. Unless it's the Devan Labor Collective." Aahz said as he slapped his forehead with the palm of his clawed hand.

"The what?"

"The Devan Labor Collective." Brockhurst said, "It's how the State keeps the

workers under control. Everyone who works automatically belongs. When the workers complain...”

“...The State tells them to go to the Collective or the Collective tells them to talk to the State. Eventually the workers give up and accept the situation. And with the Collective dues, the State has a way to keep from losing too much on wages.” Aahz finished, “I’ve got a feeling we’ve just gotten ourselves in the middle of something really big, Kid. I trusted a Deveel and now we’re paying for it. How many more assassins did they hire, Brockhurst?”

“30.” Brockhurst answered.

“30! Something is really going on.” Aahz said.

“You guys are serious about being hired by the Devan Department of Commerce, aren’t you?” Brockhurst asked.

“Yes,” I explained, “Some Deveel named Ginghe negotiated for the Department and basically told us that our contract forced us into taking on this job.”

“Ginghe? There isn’t a Ginghe working for the Department.” Brockhurst replied.

“There isn’t?!” Aahz asked in shock.

“No, they just had an election for the Department positions two weeks ago. Don’t you ever read the Financial News of Deva? There is more than the Devan Stock Exchange data in there, there’s politics, sports, even a comics page, though I hear they have started to run Family Circus in it.”

“What’s this Family Circus everyone is talking about?” I asked.

“So let me get this straight,” Aahz began as he pointed to Brockhurst, “You were hired to kill anyone trying to break up the local chapter of the Devan Labor Collective. Skeeve and I were hired to kill off anyone who seemed to be defending or creating a local labor collective. There are thirty of you and only five of us. Plus, we were hired by someone who doesn’t seem to be working for the Devan Department of Commerce. And if we were all to follow our orders, Skeeve and I would be dead and justified in the eyes of the real Devan Department.”

“You forgot something.” I said with a chill as I suddenly realized that Aahz had indeed forgotten something.

“Oh yes, and we are in the middle of the woods with a bunch of randy Gezirahans who think we are females who are along for their entertainment. And we are contracted for the next six weeks into being lumberjacks with no way out.” Aahz added. I shook my head sadly.

“No, not that.”

“And we are stuck talking to an Imp?” Aahz suggested. Brockhurst glared at Aahz.

“No, Aahz. That Tanda, Chumley, and Gus are on Gezirah too and they don’t know about any of this.” I said.

“They should be okay.” Brockhurst said, “As long as they keep to the

lumberyards. Most of us are spread out pretty thin out here. Its only in the mines that we are grouped together.”

Aahz and I groaned in unison.

“Well, it can’t get any worse.” Brockhurst said with a shrug in an attempt to make us feel better.

“Oh, I don’t know, it could get worse if I don’t hear a damn good explanation as to why there is an Imp, Pervert, and Klahd hiding behind my camp house!!” a voice roared loudly into the dusk-lit woods as Camp Coordinator Talmor Blox stepped out of the shadows with two heavily armed Deveels behind him. Next to Talmor Blox was the small furry figure of our trouble-making friend who was busy pointing and gesturing towards us. “Who wants to be the first to give me a good reason why I shouldn’t simply have you killed for trespassing?”

Chapter 6

Author: James Whitney

“Run, Luke, run!”

O. W. Kenobi

BLOX STOOD THERE, expectantly, hands on his hips. He glared at us. I stammered a few words. Aahz glared back at him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Aahz shouted.

“What?” asked Blox, taken aback.

“Here we’ve been,” Aahz continued, “just sitting on our cans for the last three minutes...”

“Hours,” I corrected.

“Hours, waiting for someone to give us our tour of the facilities and when the guy in charge... you are in charge, aren’t you?” Blox nodded. “When the guy in charge finally decides to show up he accuses us of trespassing! I don’t think I’ve ever been treated so rudely!”

“Listen, Pervert. You have no business being here.”

“Did you hear that?” Aahz exclaimed, turning toward me. “One word, freak. One word and you’re gone. Kaput. Vanished without a trace. Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah,” Blox responded. “You’re a Pervert. An uppity one who thinks he can just barge in on my operation and...”

“I don’t believe it!” Aahz exclaimed. “Hey, shrimp, get a clue. Where do you think this wood goes? Who do you think buys it? You’re talking to Penbrius,

magician extraordinaire. I take your wood and make magical staves out of it.”

“Ah. So what the hell are they doing here?”

“These two are my associates, Phlemeist and Noseball.”

“Phlemeist and Noseball?” I’m glad the Deveel asked, because it would have been silly coming from me.

“Hey, what do I look like, their mother? Blame her.”

“I’ll say.”

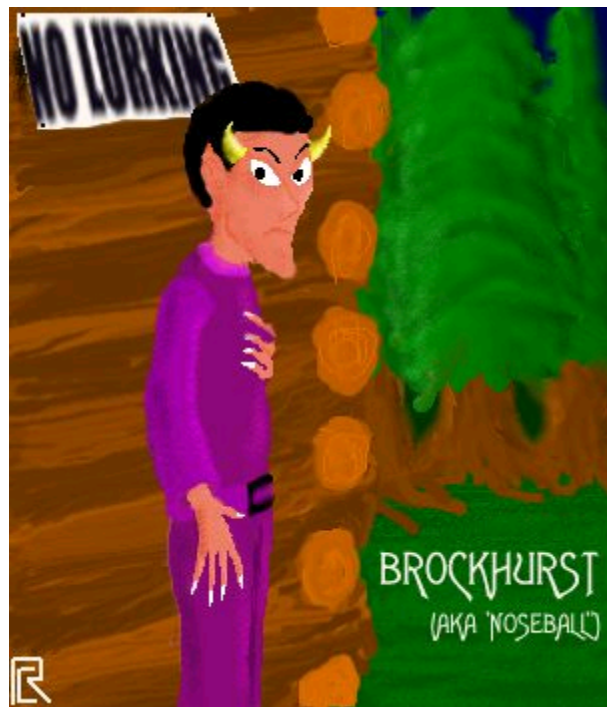
“Anyway, I’ve been having problems enchanting my staves and my contact suggested I come up here and have a look for myself. Now I can see why. With you around, it’s no wonder everything is messed up.”

“Oh, I’m sure. You’re probably just incompetent. We have the finest in magical lumber here.”

“I’ll just have to talk to your supervisor. I guarantee you, you’ve lost my business.”

“I would rather starve than do business with a filthy Pervert, so it’s just as well.”

Aahz then stormed around and left, Having little choice, we followed him.



* * *

“Aahz?” I asked, after we had gotten sufficiently far enough away from the camp.

“Yeah, kid?” Aahz replied.

“Why did you let that Deveel get away with talking to you like that?”

Aahz laughed. "Listen, kid. The plan was to get us out of a sticky situation. And we did. And that's all there is to it."

I looked askance at Brockhurst, who was leading us by a distance. I turned to Aahz and asked him a question.

"So, what do you think of what Brockhurst told us?"

"Well," Aahz replied, "the last time I believed a Devel and an Imp in the same day I almost didn't survive to tell about it. Something's up here."

"So he's lying? Why would he lie to us?"

"Oh, I don't think he's lying," Aahz corrected, "I just think he's been misled by someone. He is rather gullible, you know."

"So what now?"

"Well, we go and find Tananda, Chumley, and Gus, and let them know what's up. Then we decide what to do. I should have known; 500 billion gold was too good to be true."

"You think they're okay?"

"Oh, sure. Tananda's a trained assassin, Chumley's a great lookout, and Gus is, well, a rock. I wouldn't worry too much about them."

And so we headed back for town.

Chapter 7

Author: Robert Cook

“Over the river and through the woods...”

M. Lewis and W. Clark

I QUICKLY REALIZED, however, that ‘heading back to town’ was much easier said than done. The long Gezirahan night was just settling in, and it now almost pitch-black. The narrow road meandered its muddy way up and down the steep, tree-covered slopes, under a sky that still dribbled cold splatters of rain. After only a couple of miles of hard vertical slogging, I vowed to never again look unkindly upon any Gezirahan-filled cart that happened to be going my way. As a last straw, it began to rain again in earnest, and Aahz finally agreed to stop for the night. We picked a squat, bushy tree beside the road under which to, for lack of any better phrase, set up camp.

Aahz was able to scrounge up some dry wood from somewhere. I ignited the gnarled branches with a quick blast of magik, and set up a simple magik ward around us in the darkness. After we were hunkered down, performing the ritual poking of sticks into the fire, Brockhurst began producing a array of surprisingly bulky items from hidden pockets in his stylish outfit, some obviously weapons, some not. One of the last things he pulled out was a package wrapped in a highly reflective substance. He ripped off the wrapper, revealing a handful of knobby brown bars. He offered one to me and after a noticeable hesitation, one to Aahz.

“What are these?” Aahz asked suspiciously, eyeing the brown shape in his claw like it was about lunge at his throat.

“Oats.” With a practiced bite, Brockhurst chomped off the end of his bar and began chewing vigorously.

Aahz grunted, knowingly, but I stared at my bar feeling queasy. Brockhurst must have seen the look, as he shifted the mass to one cheek and amplified.

“They’re assassin guild survival rations. You never know when, while on an assignment and through no fault of your own,” he glared over at Aahz “...you might end up stranded out in the woods without any dinner. ‘Oats’ stands for ‘Official Assassin Travel Sustenance. They’re made by the Vipers.”

“Vipers? What dimension are *they* from?”

Aahz rolled his eyes and Brockhurst shook his head. “No. They’re not from any dimension. They’re a guild of assassins; the League of Crimson Vipers. You did know there’s more than one assassin’s guild, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone?” I recovered smoothly. Very occasionally, some of Aahz’s influence rubs off on me...

“Well, *those* Vipers. As you no doubt know, the Vipers’ main specialty is untraceable poisons. What a lot of people *don’t* know is that they sideline in all kinds of food production. Including OATS, which they sell at a discount to the other Guilds.” Brockhurst leaned forward, obviously warming to his subject as he chewed. “Now, normally, you’d think that we wouldn’t trust them not to poison us, right? And we wouldn’t. But there’s an interesting story behind that. You see, the Vipers and the Lonny Hill crowd got into this squabble over turf a couple hundred years ago, when there was this chain of restaurants owned by this politician..”

As he continued, I wondered vaguely if there was something in all assassins’ training that provoked this tendency for lectures. Maybe Brockhurst and Tanda went to same school, although the possibility boggled the imagination... The Imp’s voice faded into a drone in the background. At this point, my stomach woke up and began growling loudly; I realized with a start that we hadn’t eaten since leaving the hotel. (How long ago was that? It already seemed like weeks..) Profoundly glad that Aahz hadn’t been given time to 1) remember that I knew how to set animal snares, and 2) send me back out into the rain, I broke off a corner of my bar and cautiously popped it in my mouth. The bar didn’t taste like much of anything, and you could chew it for what seemed like hours before it finally dissolved in your mouth. Aahz tasted his, silently curled up his lip, and offered what was left to me. I absently stashed it in my pocket as I looked over at Brockhurst, who was still talking..

“Say... Brockhurst?”

“...he said, ‘you vant your vindows vip...’ Huh? Sorry. What?”

“I know this may be a bad time to ask, but how were you able to disguise yourself back there? When you were working for Isstvan, we... uh... you got dosed by that magik-killing joke powder.”

Instead of becoming angry, Brockhurst sighed, and made a gesture at the various items scattered around him.

“I used one of these. I’ve become a mechanic, a gadget-monger. After you paid me for the campaign against Big Julie’s army, I got caught up on my guild fees, took the rest of my cut to the Bazaar and started buying whatever magikal backup I needed. I could afford it, so I got the best. Now, well, I get by. And in a hundred years, the powder wears off, and I’ll be skilled in both areas. I suppose I should thank you, but I’m not going to.” He smiled.

I smiled back, trying to show as many teeth as he had. “The next time you’re in the Bazaar, come on over to our headquarters and I’ll introduce you to Massha.”

“Who?”

Aahz interrupted from the shadows on his side of the fire. “Save it. Something for you to look forward to with rapturous anticipation. And now that we’ve gotten Brockhurst’s life history updated, can we maybe get some sleep?” As I tried to get comfortable on the hard ground, the OATS settled in my stomach like a lump of lead, and I thought about the Gezirahans back at camp, eating their slop and sleeping on their filthy mattresses. They didn’t know how lucky they were. I dozed off, listening to the rain drip off the foliage.

* * *

The next morning, after we’d uncramped ourselves, things looked a great deal better. The ward was undisturbed. The sun had come back out, and brightly-colored animals were flitting between the trees, chirping and whistling cheerfully. Every dimension seems to have some variant of this- these appeared, oddly enough, to be bats.

We broke camp and washed off what layers of grime and fur we could in a stream that tumbled across the road. Aahz then rose and looked around himself in disgust.

“Wonderful. No way to hitch a ride. This crummy goat-path sure isn’t the route the logging wagons use. They must take the logs somewhere else to ship ‘em off-dimension. Why can’t these Deveels do something sensible for once, and ship the logs back to town for dimension transport?”

“Um.. Aahz? What do you mean the logging wagons don’t come this way? Didn’t we come up this road in one?”

“Kid, please. That was just a lousy cart for hauling the workers around in. A logging wagon... well, trust me on this. You’ll know one when you see one.”

“But that Deveel at the hiring hall called it a wagon!”

Brockhurst injected himself into the conversation. “Who cares what they’re called! You say nothing’s coming. So how do we get out of here? Fly? It’s a two-day walk back to town.”

“Well, I **can** fly, but I don’t think I can carry...”

Aahz silenced us both with a glare. He then gave a mirthless grin. “We walk. And the first thing with wheels that we see going in the right direction, we hitch a

ride.” I almost asked him what would happen if the owner of the wheeled object took exception to this little plan, but decided I probably wouldn’t like the answer and held my tongue.

We glumly clumped along single-file up and down the hills and between the endless rows of towering trees. The road remained deserted. In front of me, Aahz would shoot an occasional murderous glance at the cheerful bats warbling overhead. Fortunately for them, there wasn’t even a good rock to be had for throwing. Brockhurst walked silently behind me. Looking up at the ancient trunks towering around us, I suddenly felt very small, and very young. Whatever turned out to be happening here on Gezirah, they would probably still be here long after it was all over, and we were all forgotten.

Unless Blox chopped them all down, of course.



Some time later, we came down the last of a series of switch-backs and abruptly found ourselves at a confusing crossroads, with five or six roads of different sizes all running together. The remains of a rotted, useless, signpost sprouted amidst the muddy confusion. For a long time, Aahz stared in all directions and then sighed. He turned around.

“I don’t suppose either of you saw this last night?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“I was buried on the bottom of the pile the whole time. All I saw were rotten wooden slats.” Brockhurst absently pulled out one last splinter as he spoke.

Aahz sighed again. “I tried to keep track, in case something like this happened,

but somehow I got distracted.” He managed a somewhat feeble version of his grin, and continued. “Okay, kid, you’d better levitate up above the trees and tell us if you can see a...” He broke off.

“See a what?” Automatically I started casting around in the air for a force line.

He raised a scaly green hand in a shushing gesture, his head cocked. “Something’s coming. From that way.” He pointed down one of the larger roads.

Brockhurst listened intently, and tentatively nodded his head. “I think you’re right.” I still couldn’t hear anything, but I had long ago accepted Aahz’s unequalled ability as an early- warning system.

“Glad to hear that those ears are good for something.” Aahz plowed on, cutting off whatever retort Brockhurst had planned. “Okay, we don’t have long. Before they get here, slap some disguises on us. Cover Brockhurst, too. I don’t trust gadgets and I never will.”

“Um.. Aahz?”

“Yeah, kid? Make it fast.”

“Last time I made us female Gezirahans. How do they... umm.. I mean.. what’s the difference? So I can make us males?”

“Oh! Right! That’s easy. Female Gezirahans have those...” He broke off again, obviously struck by a sudden thought. He smiled evilly. “Never mind. I’ve got a better idea. Make us all Deveels instead. It’s a logging wagon, and when it gets here, we’re gonna play this from the other side of the tracks.”

“Another wagon.” Brockhurst grumbled in disgust. I silently agreed, my resolution of the previous night suddenly evaporating in the warm sunlight.

“Look, Imp. I said that that wasn’t **a logging wagon**. Now shut up.”

I piped up, my earlier qualms resurfacing. “But what if they’re headed away from town, instead of..”

“Just do it.”

I looked at him, and gave Brockhurst a resigned shrug. As the logging wagon came rumbling slowly into view, three somewhat bedraggled Deveels stood in the crossroads waiting for it.

Chapter 8

Author: Charles Billings

“It ain’t unusual.”

T. Jones

AND WE CONTINUED to stand there, as three bedraggled Deveels, as the logging wagon went right on by us.

“Hey! Hey!” Aahz shouted. “Are you gonna stop for us or what?!”

Apparently not, I thought, as the wagon took one of the roads away from us and disappeared from view.

“I don’t believe this!” Aahz raged. “Did you see that?! The driver didn’t even look at us! Just right on by! No conscience! Nothing!”

“Aahz,” I tried to interject.

“Three people out in the middle of nowhere! Where’s the consideration in this God forsaken place? No wonder everyone in this place has that pinched uncomfortable look! With natives like these, who couldn’t help becoming a psychopath?”

He came down the road, walking back toward me.

“I’ll tell you, now I’m ready. Three more days of this and I’ll be primed to kill someone.”

It didn’t seem as if I’d be able to get him to stop ranting, so I fell back on my old reliable. Without worrying about what the two of them would think, I started crying. Without shame, without pity, and without hope, I just stood there as tears streamed down my cheeks. Aahz noticed and his expression changed from one of

disgust to one I couldn't recognize at all.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" he foamed. "There's no time for blubbering! Sheese! I've known people who were going into battle to be killed for sure who had more composure than you. How'd you ever manage to get where you are when you fall to pieces over something this stupid?!"

Apparently it wasn't as reliable as I had anticipated. I dried my eyes and looked back at him. He was still foaming, probably about how the animals in this dimension didn't quite appeal to him, but I decided to take the initiative.

"Um, Aahz?" I said.

He went on.

"**Aahz!**" I yelled.

"Just a minute!" he yelled back. "I'm not through!"

"I think-" Brockhurst began, in a vain attempt to get Aahz under control.

"Oh, so now you're thinking, Imp? I'll tell you something, we're better off with you not thinking. It was you who got us into this mess in the first place. So do us all a favor and just stop thinking. Just stop now, or..."

"I think maybe we should-" Brockhurst continued undaunted.

"Or maybe I'll prime myself on you," Aahz finished.

Brockhurst shrugged, cowed into silence. He looked over at me, and I just rolled my eyes at him. We walked over to the side of the road and sat down.

Two hours later, we still sat there. Aahz had been on quite a roll, but I'll admit that I had no problems with the fall foliage, so maybe his frustrations were making him stretch a little.

"And another thing," Aahz yelled at the trees, "the bathroom facilities here are just absolutely atrocious. Reminds me of the Caicos: three weeks with stalls like that and we'll all be lucky if we don't start sprouting a fungus!"

He turned toward us and took a deep breath. For a moment I thought he was hyperventilating again, but apparently he really was finished.

"Okay, let's go."

"Where?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" he retorted.

I rolled my eyes.

"Skeeve," he began with intense solemnity, "when are you going to start thinking for yourself? That wagon was going somewhere, probably back to town since he was fully loaded. That and the wagon was full with finished products, so he's dropping that off to be shipped. Let's go."

So we walked down the road where the wagon had gone.

* * *

After a few more hours, the road started heading up at a steep angle. This seemed to make Aahz happy.

“Yes, yes, I remember that we came over a mountain range. This makes perfect sense. At least we’re going in the right direction.”

Although this did lend me some comfort, I wasn’t that pleased. The road was very steep. After about an hour, we came out of the trees, along a ridge, where we could see the expanse of the valley below us. At this point the road had gotten very muddy from last night’s rain. We continued on, as the road got increasingly precarious along the ridge. Finally, as the road went around a curve above a very steep precipice, Aahz stopped and looked up the face of the cliff above us.

“Hmm,” he mumbled. “This could be rather nasty, especially with the rain.”

He walked a little forward, with Brockhurst and me trailing after him. Aahz looked up the cliff again and looked down into the void.

“This really isn’t safe,” he said. “No loud noises.”

“How’d the wagon get around it, then?” I countered.

“It doesn’t matter how it did, kid,” Aahz shot back. “That doesn’t make it any safer for us. Here, let me see how firm this is.”

With that, he raised his foot and stomped on the road. We looked at his foot dumbly, and he smiled at us.

“Okay, this should be safe.”

With that, the road fell out from under us.



I was immediately disoriented as I fell with the road, but I got my bearings and flew above the carnage. My friends, however, were not so lucky.

“Aahz!” I shouted, but I couldn’t see either one of them. I cast desperately about as ton after tons of rock, mud and trees slid down into the valley. It was useless. I couldn’t see either one of them. I closed my eyes and tried to find them from their auras, but that didn’t work, either, as both of them had lost any aura they might have had when their powers were stripped from them.

Finally, the last few stones trailed along after the worst was done, and as swiftly as it had started, the avalanche was over. I looked in vain for a place to land, but I realized that I would have to fly down to the valley, well over a thousand feet below the ridge where the road had been. Seeing no other option, I descended.

On the way down, I heard the unmistakable sound of Aahz shouting at me.

“Hey kid!” he yelled, heedless of his own safety. “Over here!”

Not wanting him to yell any more, I searched the ground for him, and sure enough, there he was, half buried, gesticulating wildly at me, about two thirds of the way down the slide. I flew down and landed near him.

“Well,” he continued, “isn’t this a revolting development?”

“Where’s Brockhurst?” I asked.

“How should I know? Kid, we’ve just had half a mountain fall on us.”

He began to pull himself out from under the dirt and boulders that constituted his living tomb, so to speak. “No, kid, I don’t need any help whatsoever, and yes, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you?” I asked.

“No!” he yelled, almost bringing the other half down on us. I went over to him and helped unearthing him. He limped away from me and sat down on a boulder that seemed stable enough, all things considered.

“I dinged my knee,” he winced. “But I think it just got hit funny. I managed to relocate my shoulders waiting for you as you pulled your Tinkerbell trick. Quick thinking, by the way, kid.”

“Thanks,” I said, taken aback. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Of course I am,” he said swiftly. “We Pervects aren’t fragile little things, you know. I can still walk. We only need to get back to the road.”

“But we have to find Brockhurst!” I said.

“Forget him. He’s worm food, or whatever little animals this Godforsaken dimension has for those sorts of things, which isn’t such a bad thing, really,” Aahz said brusquely. “The imp was starting to annoy me, and he was, after all, working on the other side.”

By now I had completely forgotten whose side I was on, so I just accepted this statement. I looked at the mud and rock slide around us and thought about

Brockhurst. He was my friend. I remember hiring him on Deva; how pitiful he was, and how that pitifulness so much resembled my own. Suddenly, I missed him terribly. Now that he was gone, I felt as if I didn't have a hope in the world.

"Oh no," Aahz broke in, "you're not going to start crying again. No way, kid. I can't see how anyone could have any respect for you when you turn all Patty Schroeder on us whenever things turn bad. If you let that tear slip, kid, I'll really give you something to cry about. I'll beat you senseless."

And so that was that.

* * *

After getting back on stable ground, we shacked up for the night again before starting the next morning. The road was pretty easy going after we got over the ridge, as it was all downhill. Late in the afternoon we pulled into town, unsure of what we were supposed to be doing. Fortunately or un, we discovered Gus waiting for us at our hotel's lobby, solving that problem for the time being. We explained what we had found out to him, with his look becoming more ironically stony as we finished.

"Brockhurst was misinformed," he said sagely. "The Devan Executive Branch was overhauled recently, but Ginghe was one of the unappointed hierarchy, which means he kept his job. The Financial News was rather clear about that, and Brockhurst doesn't read the News anyway. Someone who undoubtedly thought that he wouldn't know the difference told him that, and he bought it."

"So you mean the deal's still on?" Aahz asked. And that was it again, as he jumped about the room.

"Aahz! Aahz! Aahz!" Gus shouted at him. "Sit down! That's not all!"

Aahz calmed down at once at this, and sat back down next to me. He was, however, still grinning as his right foot twitched unconsciously.

"What I was about to say is that there's nothing going on at the textile mill I visited."

"What do you mean?" Aahz asked.

"I mean there was no labor problem there whatsoever, either that or the saboteurs have such a tight grip on everyone that there's absolutely no indication that anything's up, and believe me, I tried my hardest to shake something from them. None of the people Dierack mentioned were there, even the people he assured me were employees. Something really suspicious is going on. Either that or the Deveels have already cleared that plant out, but I didn't see any evidence of that, either. Dierack would have told us that. I've only got one lead, and it's not too hot."

"What's that?"

"One of the guys at the mill, an off-worlder, said he had a cousin working in the gas mines on Chirosovo just in passing. The papers mentioned something about

gas mines on Chirosovo being another hot spot. This one guy I'm fairly certain has no contacts to the saboteurs, because he's so genuinely dumb he couldn't spell 'dog' if you spotted him the D and the G. But that's all I have to go on."

"I don't trust Dierack," Aahz said.

"And neither do I," Gus responded, "but it's what we've got to go on so far." He huffed and looked away. "You know, they could be setting us up to get killed, but the only problem is, if they're playing straight, if we start going against them, they'll want us killed. I say we head on out to Chirosovo and try to get a better handle on this before we decide what Ginghe and the gang's really holding for us."

"What about Tananda and Chumley?" I asked.

"Still no word, but they should be all right. Let's just leave them a note, a simple one, that we're searching for more information on Chirosovo. That'll work without alerting anyone of our suspicions."

Aahz rubbed his hands reflexively. "Chirosovo," he said, looking a bit austere. "Hope you can scrounge up some warm clothes, kid, 'cause this isn't going to be pretty."

Chapter 9

Author: Steven Harris

“There is no such thing as being overconfident.”
Captain Edward J. Smith

AS GUS WENT TO THE HOTEL to leave Tanda and Chumley a message, Aahz suggested that we pick up some fur coats from one of the local sellers. After an hour of searching, Aahz finally spotted a store selling its winter clothing at a reduced rate. We were lucky that Gezirah was experiencing its dimensional version of spring. We entered the store and I followed Aahz immediately to the back where the fur coats were resting in a huge pile on a little white table. Aahz grabbed a few and threw a few more toward me. They had a peculiar scent on them, something resembling how Gleep smelled after being left out in the rain. Unfortunately, the closest thing to my size enveloped me from head to well below my feet.

“Um, Aahz? Can’t we find something a little smaller?” I asked. It seemed like a simple request. Hadn’t Aahz himself once tell me that you can tell a true magician from the quality of his tailor? At least that was what he had said when questioned about the rather expensive outfits he had been charging to our company for his own personal use. Though now that I had thought about it, I realized that Aahz didn’t seem too concerned about my appearance in general. In fact, I was suppose to be the Great Skeeve, Lord Magician of Deva and Court Magician to the Kingdom of Possiltum and if anyone should have the better tailor, it should be me. So right then and there, I decided to take a stand.

“I refuse to wear this coat, Aahz. It is uncomfortable and too large. I want

something form-fitting and created with style and excitement. I want a coat that says, 'Here comes the Great Skeeve'." I announced. Aahz eyes began to grow in size.

"Listen kid. We aren't buying these things because they look good, we are buying them because they are on sale. Now if you want a coat that says, 'Here comes the Great Skeeve', " Aahz sarcastically growled, "then I'll get some paper and some ink, write 'Here comes the Great Skeeve' on it in big friendly letters, *AND NAIL IT ON YOUR BACK!*"

A few patrons of the store glanced over at us and quickly exited the store. A old Deveel standing behind the cash register watched them leave in horror and then swiftly glared over at us in fury.

"Besides," Aahz continued, " we are headed to Chirosovo, a dimension known as the Ice Capital of the Known Dimensions. And the last time I was there, I wished I had a coat like one of these. Do you know why?"

"Because it was really cold?" I suggested. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the shop keeper walking toward us.

"*NO! BECAUSE IT WAS REALLY REALLY COLD!!*" Aahz roared.

"Excuse me, Gentlemen. Is there a problem here?" The shop keeper asked as he studied both of us. I figured that Aahz wasn't quite in the mood to handle this formality, so I decided I'd give it a shot.

"No problem, just looking." I smiled. The shop keeper bit his lower lip as he looked from one of us to the other. I could see that he was trying to think of something to say as a response.

"Well, could... that is to say, I would greatly appreciate it if you would shop a little more quietly." the shop keeper suggested. Aahz's face suddenly broke into a smile.

"Oh? And how appreciative would that be exactly? Say, an extra 25% off?" Aahz asked in a sweet tone of voice. Any suggestion of any kind of debt can mean only one thing to the discriminating Pervect, a reduction of cost.

"I beg your pardon?" the shop keeper said as he tried to recollect his thoughts. It was obvious that the idea of lowering the already, to the typical Deveel's mind anyhow, low prices was something of a shock. The Deveel needed some time to think, and knowing Aahz, he wasn't going to get that time.

"Sorry, buddy, I don't just give away my pardon. But for that extra 35% off from the sale price that you just offered, I might throw the pardon in too." Aahz suggested quickly. A sweat broke out on the Deveel's forehead.

"I didn't offer 35%!" the Deveel exclaimed.

"It sure sounded that way to me, didn't kid?" Aahz asked me.

"Uh, yes?" I added.

"Damn right it did. Unless you said 45%. Sometimes I can't hear right. Something to do with this Gezilah air, I think." Aahz said as he looked down at his claws and gently shined them on his shirt.

“45%!!! But I...”

“SOLD!” Aahz shouted as he shook the shop keeper’s hands. “You are a tough one to haggle with, I wanted these coats for 50% more, but you held in there until I broke. I admire that. It was beautiful.”

“But the coats are already at 55% off.” the shop keeper said partially to himself. “With your 45% that means you... that you... that the coats are **FREE!**”

“Really? Then in that case I’ll take all twenty of them.” Aahz said as he lifted the coats up into the air and looked at me. “Here kid, you carry.” Before I could reply, a literal mountain of stinky brownish fur crashed down on me. “Just follow my voice, kid.” I heard Aahz say through my muffled ears and that’s exactly what I did.

In an hour, we were suited up in our fur coats with the extras placed in a large cloth sack. We went to the hotel to check out and pick up Gus. Instead of finding Gus, we found a note from him telling us that he was going to the mines to find Tanda and Chumley himself. He asked us to meet him a little later behind an old abandoned building a couple of blocks away. Gathering our things, we walked to the building where we had agreed to meet, sneaked around to the back and waited. After a few minutes, I started to get bored and extremely hot.

“Where’s Gus?” I asked Aahz. “I am starting to sweat to death under this thing.”

“He’ll be here soon. Gus knows how to take care of himself. Luckily, given his physical makeup, he won’t be needing any of our coats.” Aahz said as he lovingly stroked his furry garment. We sat in silence for a while until I spoke again.

“Aahz? Can you tell me what happened to you on Chirosovo?” Aahz didn’t



talk much about his past, so I was intrigued by his hint earlier that he had not only been to Chirosovo, but had obviously had a rough time there. It would also be nice to know what to expect from our upcoming visit.

“I don’t like talking about it.” Aahz growled as he began to use his fingers to make shapes in the dirt. I looked over to Aahz and tried to read his emotions. Not an easy thing to do for a Pervect; they seem to have only two real emotions, anger and greed. But something was bothering Aahz, that much I could tell.

“Quit staring at me.” Aahz hissed without lifting his head to face me. He gave out a sigh and looked up toward the sky. “Okay, I’ll be honest. When I was a young pup of a magician, I did some pretty stupid things. The usual things. Popping into primitive dimensions and using magik to impress the natives. Toss a few fireballs around, levitate a few chairs, that sort of thing. We called it Dimensional Roulette. It was a game and sometimes very profitable. You see, once you’ve started to show your stuff to the natives, they come to think you are some kind of god and they’ll give you access to just about anything. They’ll heap piles of gold in your lap, offer their daughters, and then one day, you just disappear. They think they’ve offended their god, and meanwhile their god is enjoying a leisurely time at Mare Inebrium buying drinks for his friends.”

“Mare Inebrium?”

“Just a place I used to hang out. Anyhow, like I said, I’m not too proud of it. That’s one of the reasons I don’t want you to learn too much too soon. Magik needs responsibility and when you’re just starting out, you want to try everything.”

“How does Chirosovo fit into this?” I asked as Aahz frowned.

“Well, Dimensional Roulette is gambling pure and simple. And where there is money to be made...”

“There will always be somebody bigger than you trying to get it.” I finished for him. It was an old Pervish proverb that Aahz had forced me to memorize. That along with 255 others from the *Pervish Child’s First Book of Quotes*, the illustrations for which still haunt my nightmares.

“Exactly. And on my second spin of the wheel of chance, I materialized right into a dimension owned by a very powerful wizard. Not only that, but I appeared right in the middle of some religious ceremony honoring him. He didn’t take too kindly to that. So with a few well placed spells from this powerful wizard, I found myself stranded on Chirosovo. And this was a hundred years before it was ‘discovered’ by the Deveels.”

“But you still had magik, didn’t you? Why didn’t you just hop off of Chirosovo and go back to Perv or something?” I asked.

“Because kid, this wizard was really something. He was an outlaw, certainly, but he knew spells I still don’t understand. He placed some bizarre curse on me that my magik wouldn’t work right until I teleported a written apology promising to never again step into his little private dimension. Of course, he didn’t tell me this until after I’d spent a full week on Chirosovo. Every time I tried to hop off of

Chirosovo, I kept setting my clothes on fire. A result with chilling effects, if you get my drift.”

“What was this wizard’s name?”

“Penbrius.” Aahz stated matter-of-factly. If it hadn’t been from the ton of fur holding me down, I would have nearly jumped from where I was sitting.

“*Penbrius*?! But that was the name you used back at the lumber camp.”

“Did I?” Aahz asked innocently.

“Aahz, you know you did.” I shot back. Aahz frowned.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“You think he might be behind all of this?” I asked suddenly.

“I’m not sure yet. Most of the dimensions involved in this labor problem are awfully close to Penbrius’ personal realm. If he is still around and still as possessive, he might see Deva’s dimensional search for natural resources to be something of a threat. I brought up his name to see if there was any reaction from that moron Blox, but he didn’t seem to recognize the name. So I’ve just put it in the back of my mind. But listen, if he is behind this, you are going back to Deva immediately. Do you understand?” Aahz said in a harsh tone, “Penbrius is big and from what I remember from 500 years ago, not exactly the kind of wizard to play fair. Now forget what I said.

“The chances are that he isn’t involved. But if word has gotten out about how much money the resident wizard of Deva makes on a daily basis, then Penbrius just might be that ‘somebody bigger than you trying to get it’.”

Aahz shuddered and I admit, I shuddered too. I’ve never really seen Aahz scared before, and I certainly wasn’t liking it now. Suddenly, the uncomfortable silence was broken by the sound of thunderous wings and Gus the gargoyle landed in a cloud of dust.

“We’ve got problems, Aahz!” Gus exclaimed. Aahz stood up and slapped his scaled hand upon his forehead.

“Not more bad news! I don’t think I can take much more!” Aahz groaned.

“It’s Tanda and Chumley. They’re not on Gezirah anymore.” Gus explained between deep breaths. He had obviously flown as fast as he could to get here.

“Not on Gezirah!? Where are they?!” Aahz shouted.

Gus sucked in a few breaths before continuing. “When I got to the hotel to leave them a note, I found a message already there, from Tanda. She claimed that Chumley had been arrested and placed in some makeshift jail at the mining camp. She asked us to come as soon as we could or they were going to transfer Chumley to Deva for trial. As soon as I read that, I took off for the mining camp.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“I was too late. The transfer was supposed to be last night.” Gus answered.

“‘Supposed to’?” Aahz questioned.

“Tanda got involved.” Gus explained. Aahz shook his head.

“This is getting worse by the minute. This was going to be an easy case,

remember? Live in a resort and break up a labor union. That was the deal. Now we have the Devan Department of Commerce wanting us to kill labor workers who, from what we have found, seem to be innocent, assassins who either are or think they are working for the same Deva Department of Commerce as we are but who are supposed to kill us, a cold miserable dimension we have to go to just to see how innocent these labor workers are and now this!. What lousy dimension did Tanda and Chumley go to anyhow?"

"I don't know, but as I was at the mining camp a couple of Deveels tried to arrest me as an accomplice. And guess on whose orders they were trying to do it."

Aahz's eyes narrowed. "Dierack!"

"In any case, I suggest we leave soon. If Dierack is looking for me, then he will certainly be looking for both of you as well." Gus said.

"But we didn't do anything. We weren't even at the mining camp." I said.

"Look kid, whatever is going on here, it isn't in our favor. I say we take Tanda and Chumley's example and get off this dimension." Aahz ordered. I saw the logic there, but it still didn't seem like something an innocent person would do.

"If we leave now, won't it look like we are admitting that we are guilty?" I asked.

Gus looked over at Aahz. "Skeev has a point. If Dierack is on the up and up, running will make us look guilty of something."

"And if Dierack is actually planning on railroading us, I'd rather he does it later than right now." Aahz said.

"Up and up? Railroading? What are you two talking about?" I asked.

"Besides," Aahz continued while ignoring me, "if there really is a labor problem and we solve it, the Devan Department of Commerce will drop the charges."

Of course, that was assuming that the Deva Department of Commerce didn't mind actually paying us our huge fee, I thought.

"So where are we going?" I asked giving up on getting any translation of what Gus and he had said.

"To Chirosovo, of course." Aahz stated as he pushed the red button on the D-Hopper and I suddenly felt my stomach drop.

Chapter 10

Author: James Whiteny

“Unusual weather we’ve been having...”

Noah

WHEN THE BLAZE OF COLORS that usually comes with the dimensional hopping ceased, we found ourselves on a barren, rocky plain. The sky was somewhat reddish, and the sun hung in the sky far too close for comfort. I immediately started sweating.

“Um, Aahz,” I noted, “wasn’t Chirosovo supposed to be cold?”

Aahz waved a hand at me and started to look around. We both shed our coats as quickly as possible, giving little relief in the searing heat.

“Aahz?” I continued. Aahz was looking at the D-Hopper in disgust.

“Damn mechanical devices. They never work quite right. So I had one dial off. It would never happen with real magik.”

“Aahz?”

“Relax kid, the setting on this thing was wrong. Just one little change and we should be okay.”

“But...”

“Grab your coat,” Aahz said, as he pushed the button.

Nothing happened.

Aahz jumped up and down, pressing the button again and again. I scanned for force lines, and got the bad news. There weren’t any. Rather, there were, but they were so weak that I could hardly find them.

“Aahz,” I asked, “doesn’t the D-Hopper depend on force lines to work?”

“Of course it does,” Aahz noted, angrily. “All magikal devices do.”

“Well,” I noted, “that’s probably why it doesn’t work. No force lines.”

Aahz stared at me with what was perhaps the stupidest look I’ve ever seen him give me. He then threw his arms to the sky and screamed.

Gus looked at Aahz. “Aahz, how could you mis-set the D-Hopper?” he asked, quite calmly.

Aahz glared at Gus. “Hey, haven’t you ever made a mistake before? Let’s just think of a way out of this.”

“Aahz, it’s not that,” said Gus. “In the years that I’ve known you, you’ve always been very particular about things. You, quite frankly, do not make mistakes, at least not on that scale.”

Aahz fumed silently. “What are you saying, Gus?” I asked.

“Somehow, I don’t think Aahz made a mistake. I think this is Chirosovo.”

“What?” Aahz exclaimed. “Chirosovo’s an ice world.”

“Was an ice world.”

Aahz nodded. “It has been a few hundred years...”

“*Wait, wait, wait!*” I screamed. “That makes **no** sense at all! Ginghe said Chirosovo was mountainous and frozen. Heck, even the guy on Gezirah that Gus met said that it was cold, and he knew someone working in the gas mines...”

“Well,” Gus said, “I wouldn’t put too much faith in that...”

“Gas mines?” Aahz asked.

“Probably a mix-up.”

Aahz peered up at the sky. “Could a gas mine explosion have caused this?”

“Possibly,” Gus remarked. “But it would have probably taken the entire dimension with it. But by the looks of it, something magikal helped. Or maybe it did it completely. Chirosovo was never magik-poor, at least not on this scale.”

“Great,” Aahz continued. “We’re on Chirosovo. Obviously, though, there’s no labor strife because there’s no labor to strife. But we’ve got to get out of here, and with the D-Hopper not working, we’ve got to figure some other means.”

“Like what?” I asked. “It’s not as though there are any other magicians out there!”

“First things first, kid. We need to get water. We need to get somewhere colder. And then we can start talking about getting out. Let’s head toward those mountains.



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Chapter 11

Author: Robert Cook

“Anybody home?”

E. Ripley

HEAT. Endless heat and light, bouncing and reflecting off of everything... And that sun... burning relentlessly overhead...

“Kid? C’mon kid, open up...”

The worried voice seemed to be coming from some vast distance, echoing down the long hot red tunnel. Then something wet sloshed against my mouth, tepid streams trickling down my dust-caked throat. I coughed, and reluctantly cracked open my eyes. Maybe it had all just been a horrible dream... time to get up and go to the Huffball tournament..

No such luck. Blinking the last of the sand and grit out of my eyes, I realized I was looking up at an unfamiliar dark wooden-beamed ceiling. The green blob that hovered over me finally came into focus as Aahz, holding something up to my face. A cold scaly hand was gently slipped behind my neck, holding up my head.

“Aahz? What...”

“Don’t try to talk, kid. Just sip at this. No! Sip!” I unintentionally took a large swallow of the lukewarm water and started coughing violently. It still felt wonderful. I cleared my throat and tried again to speak, or rather croak, this time with somewhat more success.

“Aahz? Where are we? What happened? The last thing... I remember... was walking towards those mountains..”

“We made it. Barely.” I’d never heard Aahz sound like this. Open relief was a rare enough emotion for the Pervect, but his voice was a close match to my own rasp. “If Gus hadn’t been here...” He shook his head. “It’s a good thing gargoyles don’t need water.”

“I... I’ve never known *you* to need water, Aahz.” I tried to smile, but it was too painful with my chapped lips. I eased myself up off the wooden-planked floor on which I had been sprawled, and coughed again, bringing up another wad of dust.

Aahz managed a somewhat feeble grin in return and pushed the ornate wooden mug he was holding into my hand.

“Yes, but I’ve never had to hike halfway across the newly christened Inferno Capital of the Known Dimensions before, either. Keep sipping at that.”

“I passed out... didn’t I?” I took another small swallow of flat water, savoring it. “I’m sorry, Aahz.”

He put his hand on my shoulder, and grinned, this time with more enthusiasm.

“Like I said, kid, if Gus hadn’t been here, maybe neither of us would have made it. He was practically carrying both of us towards the end there.”

“Towards the end..?” I looked around with more curiosity. An astute reader may have noticed that the word ‘wood’ has already cropped up several times in my description of the room. That’s because that’s all that there was. Wood. An interlocking wooden floor, elaborately polished and carved wooden walls, leading up to the heavy beams I had seen upon first opening my eyes. Pieces of sturdy-looking wooden furniture were scattered around the large dim room, which was lit only by the remorseless sun beating in through some distant opening. The only stones in sight were those that made up an enormous unlit fireplace looming against a nearby wall. It was surprisingly cool. Dust mites floated everywhere. I looked back at Aahz, who was sipping from a mug of his own, scowling with obvious distaste at the contents.

“This isn’t quite (cough) what I pictured a gas mine as looking like...” I ventured cautiously.

“No. It’s a ski resort. Remember what our old buddy Ginghe said? Resorts. The Deveels’ main business on Chirosovo is... was... the gas mines, but they had also turned it into a big draw for the winter sports crowd.” Aahz paused and looked at me, a more typical expression filtering across his face. “You do know what skiing is, don’t you?”

“Of course.” This was actually true. During the winter months on Klah, people had often used skis to get around. I paused myself for a moment, then said, somewhat incredulously: “But a skiing *resort*? Are you telling me people actually ski for fun? They strap on skis and tramp around in the woods because they *want to*?”

“Woods? Well, I suppose some of the cross-country set may have come here, but I imagine it was mostly the downhillers. I think I saw what’s left of some chair-lifts..” Aahz broke off and shook his head in disgust, a movement which was

clearly aimed at the universe in general, not me. “Why couldn’t all of this been here when I was stuck on this miserable dimension before? If there had been a few ski bunnies around, I wouldn’t have wanted to leave. At the very least I could have kept warm.”

“Ski bunnies? Do their pelts make good fur coats or something?” The only response to this comment was a groan from Aahz, which actually made me feel a lot better; we were back in familiar territory. A thought suddenly struck me, and I looked around again.

“Say.. where’s Gus?”

“Once we found some...” (mild grimace) “...water, he went to see if he could raise anyone. The place appears to be deserted.” He cocked his head. “He’s headed back this way now. Alone.” We both got slowly to our feet, still clutching our mugs of brackish water. I settled weakly onto a stool that stood in front of a nearby wooden counter as the gargoyle abruptly appeared from around a corner. Even in the dusty gloom, I could see he was thoughtful, even worried. (How someone whose face is permanently locked in an ear-to-ear grin can display such a wide range of emotion has always puzzled me.) He spoke:

“Skeeve! I’m glad to see you’re all right. Didn’t find anyone. But there’s.. something you should both see...”

“I wanted to say thanks, Gus. Aahz said..” I fell silent and stared at him. Thanks to Aahz’s linguistic training, I had understood the words, but still..

“Gus, why are you suddenly speaking Deveelish?” Aahz cut in suspiciously, beating me to the punch.

Gus looked back with equal suspicion, but replied in Klahdish. “I’ve been speaking Deveelish since we D-Hopped into Gezirah. I figured it would be simpler.” He ‘frowned’. “Oh! Must be your translator pendants have finally stopped working, just like the D-Hopper. Until we get out of here, nothing magikal will work.”

Translator pendant? I reached up and felt the amulet’s lump under my tunic. The gadget was such a standard part of an experienced dimension traveler’s gear that I had forgotten about mine. As I traced my finger around it, a faint voice began jumping up and down far back in my mind, trying to get my attention...

Showing his usual resiliency, Aahz appeared to have fully recovered from the Pervish version of dehydration, and was again ranting about magikal devices: “Stupid inferior gizmos! Let this be a lesson to you, kid! Learning a language the hard way is always safer than relying on some piece of junk that can let you down at a moment’s notice. Remind me when this is all over to start you in on more language lessons!”

“Aahz.” Gus sighed. “You know as well I do, that unlike many mechanical magik items, translator pendants are always totally reliable. There has to be something wrong with a dimension’s basic magik structure, like here, for one to ever fail.”

The mental pieces fell into place, and I looked up in sudden alarm. “Aahz!”

“That may be true, Gus, but becoming too dependent on anything, especially a machine, is a bad idea. All it takes is one moderately competent pickpocket and you’re in serious trouble.”

“Aahz! When I..”

“No, kid, you’re not getting out of this again. It’s an area of your education that’s been sorely neglected. But that’s for later.” He turned back to Gus. “What was it you wanted to show us?”

“*AAHZ!*” My heat-damaged voice cracked and I took another hasty swallow from the mug.

“Kid, we don’t have time for...” He trailed off when he saw my expression. “What is it?”

“I had forgotten I was wearing it, but back on Gezirah, remember when that Gezirahan at the lumber camp thought that I had accepted... thought that I was... um... there was that little misunderstanding? I couldn’t understand what he was saying! The pendant didn’t work on Gezirah!” I looked at them, and they stared back. I continued, slightly more calmly. “Well... mine didn’t work. You understood what he was saying. Maybe yours...”

Aahz gave his head an absent shake. “I learned non-magikally to speak Gezirahan... somewhere...” He scratched his temple in brief puzzlement. “Where *did* I pick that up? Berlitz?” He shook himself. “Not important. The important thing is, you’re right. Neither of us noticed at the time, but the pendants didn’t work there. You didn’t have any trouble doing any spells on Gezirah, did you?”

“No. But I wasn’t doing anything very complicated either. And Brockhurst... didn’t seem to be having any trouble...” Before the two of us buried him in an avalanche... a voice added from somewhere down inside of myself.

Aahz glowered at Brockhurst’s name. “I doubt that imp would have noticed if anything was going wrong with his equipment. But I bet the Deveels did.”

“Huh?”

“Dierack! At our meeting, that oily little worm Dierack made a comment about someone ‘sabotaging’ the Deveels’ operation. Remember? We all assumed at the time it was these so-called labor agitators. Maybe it wasn’t sabotage at all. Maybe things were going wrong because the force lines on Gezirah are... in the process of doing whatever the force lines here did.”

“And not just Gezirah. Dierack was talking about all of the dimensions we’ve been assigned to fix.” Gus’s voice was calm, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

“Yes.” Aahz was grim. “As soon as we arrived here in Desertville, we could see that whatever is happening is a lot bigger than any penny ante labor dispute. This would just seem to confirm it. We have to get off this dimension, fast, and hit one of the others. See if they’ve been having the same problems.”

When **Aahz** refers a labor dispute that involves billions in gold as ‘penny ante’, I start to worry. I opened my mouth to speak, but once again someone got there

first, this time Gus:

“That’s part of what I was going to tell you; I didn’t have an opportunity before, Aahz. I didn’t find this place by chance; there were some strange lights flashing around it. They had died down by the time we got here. I think its been the site of magikal activity, fairly recently. Maybe we can use that fact somehow...”

“Lights?” Aahz frowned, and turned to me. “Kid? You see anything unusual now? In the room here. Look for an aura.”

I took another slurp of water to steady my nerves, and looked around the room, squinting. There was.. something.. colors flickered at the edges of my vision..

“Yes. There’s something. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. It’s like... like...”

“Like there are colors, but you can only see them out of the corner of your eye?” Aahz queried intently. “They disappear if you try to look straight at them?”

“Yes! Exactly! What does it mean?”

“It means that not too long ago, a **big** surge of magik washed through here. I’ve heard about this sort of thing happening, but never seen it myself.”

“A surge of magik big enough to wipe out an entire dimension?”

“No. That’s what I don’t understand. A blast big enough to do what we saw outside would have leveled this place and left a crater a half-mile wide.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. That’s the other thing I wanted to show you. C’mom.” Gus clumped off in the direction from which he had just appeared, his stone footsteps loud on the wooden floorboards. Standing up, I started to follow him, but wobbled slightly as I stepped away from the bar. Aahz wordlessly stepped up next to me and helped me walk.

We left the ‘lounge’ area in which I had been set down, and passed through a series of smaller rooms of various sizes. There were cafes, and meeting rooms, and storage space for racks and racks of skis. (Seeing the pairs of slim, polished, strips of brightly-painted wood made me realize once again how far up in the world I had come: ‘skis’ on Klah are battered, chunky, slabs...) The function of most of the other chambers was totally obscure, at least to me, but all were dim, silent and still. Harsh light still trickled in irregularly from somewhere up in the rafters. Then I noticed that all of the rooms were showing signs of damage- splintered wood, holes blown through walls, scorch marks, each room worse than the one before... Suddenly I shivered.

“Is it just me, or is suddenly getting.. cold in here?”

Gus shook his head. “You’re not imagining it. But it gets stranger.”

Dodging a fallen beam, we rounded a corner, and all stumbled to a halt. In the long corridor before us, the architecture of the building took a radical change, or perhaps revealed its true nature. Most of the wood paneling on the walls and floor had been peeled and splintered away, as if it had been attacked by a giant chisel. Or a giant wind. What now stood revealed was square methodical blocks of ugly gray stone. Aahz studied them for a long time in silence, then spoke:

“That’s not Deveel architecture. All of that overdone wood scrollwork back in the lobby, that’s the sort of thing they’d do. But this..”

Gus nodded in agreement. “This place is built into the side of a hill. I think we’re already almost underground. It looks to me like the Deveels found an existing, abandoned, structure, and just renovated and added on to it to build their lodge. So who built it originally? The native Chirosovans?”

“No,” Aahz declared decisively. “When I was here before, the things the natives threw together made that hut you and Garkin lived in, kid, look positively palatial. No way they could have built this.”

“You did say it’s been 500 years since you were here, Aahz. Maybe they learned..”

“No. It just doesn’t feel right. Let’s see what’s at the end of this corridor.” Something about Aahz’s tone suggested he was holding something back. I didn’t press him.

We reached the end of the corridor which opened out into a small chamber, which still had fragments of wood stuck to the walls. Remnants of doors swung in passages to the right and left. The temperature had dropped so far I was actually able to see my breath, and the magikal afterimages swirled more thickly than ever, seeming to flow along the walls, outlining the blocks. None of this was what captured my immediate attention, however. The entire far wall had collapsed in a jumble of beams and rocks, revealing a circular stone tunnel that led further down into the blackness of the hillside. It was clear that the collapsed wall had, until fairly recently, covered the tunnel’s mouth. The cold breeze that had been hitting us poured steadily out of the tunnel, and ghosted away behind us.



Carved around the rim of the tunnel mouth was a series of squiggly, unpleasant-looking, symbols. Each of them glowed with the first real aura I had seen since arriving on Chirosovo, a sickly red color. I glanced at Aahz out of the corner of my eye. He had that dangerous expressionless look that I had seen in the past in moments of great tension and crisis. I spoke, my voice very thin in the cool silence:

“You’ve seen symbols like that before, haven’t you, Aahz? And walls like this, too.”

“Yes,” replied Aahz, his voice very flat. “But only once.”

Somehow, I managed to swallow and speak. “At a religious ceremony about 500 years ago?”

“Yes. Penbrius. Penbrius built this place.”

Chapter 12

Author: Raginturtl

“I’m here to put the ‘P’ back in parody.”

Rage

WELL, AT LEAST NOW we know what we’re dealing with,” Aahz said buoyantly.

“What are we dealing with? And why are you so happy?” I demanded. I was thirsty again and the heat really was wearing me down. I couldn’t even see clearly across the room. Certainly, the dim light contributed to my vision problem, but I could tell there was more to it than simply that.

“I’m not. What makes you say that?” he turned.

“You seem happy.”

“I’m not happy,” Aahz seethed. His earlier buoyancy was now clearly gone. “We’re going to die here, partner. There is nothing more certain than that. Don’t make me kill you before then.”

He turned away and looked back at Gus. Gus simply sat on the floor, fiddling with a piece of the furnished wood that he had found somewhere. I turned away from them, deciding that I wasn’t going to cry over my impending death until it got a little more impending. Instead, I examined the walls closely. They were wood furnished, cheaply. The pattern of the design was not particularly elaborate or even interesting. I blinked, then I blinked again. Something was very odd about the pattern. It became even more indistinct and uninvolved, and then faded back to the more elaborate pattern. My fading eyes may have been playing tricks on me, but I

just wanted to be sure. “Hey Aahz, come look at this.” The design solidified itself at that moment. “Aahz?” I looked back at them. Gus still sat on the floor, his eyes fixed on the wall opposite him. He now simply held the stick he had been fidgeting with in his hand, but it was held in a strange, unnatural position. Aahz faced the wall away from me. He didn’t seem to hear me. He seemed deep in thought. “Aahz?” I tried to walk over to him but my legs wouldn’t move. They were simply too heavy for me to move...

Then, suddenly, the air between Aahz and me started to shimmer, almost like an eddy in a pool. Only it wasn’t an eddy! It was vertical in the air before me. A vague shape started to appear in the middle of the eddy. And suddenly, it was floating there in the air before me. A large fish was floating before me, a coho or sockeye salmon. It fixed me with a stern gaze.

“Skeeve,” it began, “have you ever wondered about the extent of absurdity?”

“What?”

The salmon, it probably was a coho, but I couldn’t be sure, seemed to roll its eyes. “There is an infinite number of possibilities in today’s language, Skeeve. Learn that well.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

The fish used its whole body to slap me across the face. Its scales raked. “That frustrated headache that looks rambunctiously around us even now wonders aloud about actuality.”

By now I was thoroughly confused. The salmon continued, looking sternly at me. “Is the helicopter a implement of pleasure? Is it a love machine?”

“What’s a helicopter?”

Just for good measure, the fish slapped me across the face again.

Now that I thought of it, it was probably a sockeye.

“Stop that!”

The fish rolled its eyes and tried again. “When the pelican smells like the moose, it is time to change the bathwater.” I closed my eyes and tried to shut the fish out of my thoughts. “My,” the fish grumbled, “this is going to be difficult.” I looked back at the fish. There was a very human-like strain on his face that seemed to suggest that he was trying to pass a softball, whatever that is. “Look, Skeeve, it’s me,” Tananda’s voice came from the fish.

“Tananda! What are you doing as a fish?!”

“I haven’t got much time to explain this. I had to channel myself through one of the recently departed denizens of the dimension you are on right now. I had to select one of you as my message’s recipient, and I picked you because your brain would be the easiest to manipulate.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering whether I should be insulted.

“Anyway, it’s easier to channel if you send an indirect message, which is the reason for my channelee’s prior incoherence. Now that you’ve forced Chumley and me to strain ourselves magically and physically to send this coherent message,

we won't be able to come for you for four days. Remember that."

"Four days. Gotcha."

"Now, my message to you, I haven't got much time. Skeeve, you three are not on Chirosovo. You were intercepted in transit."

"Who, what? What's going on?" I demanded.

The fish slapped me across the face with his body again. "Listen! We don't have much time! Isn't there something odd about your surroundings?"

"Now that you mention it, there is! The walls... they're not maintaining their form!"

"Right!" the fish shouted. "It's all an illusion! Penbrius caught you when you were traveling through the dimensions! And he's cast a spell that's got all three of you in its thrall! It's all an illusion! Wake up!"

Suddenly, the fish and the room faded into black, and Aahz and Gus started moving again. "What?!" Aahz shouted. The new room came into focus, and I immediately recognized it as a wizard's workroom. Aahz, Gus and I stood in the middle of an immense pentagram inscribed on the floor. The walls were covered with shelves that held books, scrolls, potions and assorted other bits of junk and the air was musty and stale. The room was dimly lit, so I couldn't see clearly.

As the spell faded entirely, we heard a soft groan come from one side of the room. There we found an old man slumped on his side. Five candles surrounded him, and his body had knocked two of them off their stands. He was wheezing quietly. Aahz pulled him upright.

"Penbrius!" Aahz exclaimed.

"I had you," he sighed. "I was so close to ending you, destroying you utterly, Aahzmandius."

"Only my mother calls me that." Aahz scolded.

"It was going to be my final solution. My last gasp of glory before I departed. I was going to destroy the one who caused me so much grief all those many years. All those many years, I chased you, like the wizened old man after the marlin."

"Sheesh man, it was only an ice cream cone."

"Oh, but it wasn't just any ice cream cone you destroyed. It was a Keeshusha's triple cone. I tried at first merely to cast a spell that would get you shouting 'Whee!' at funerals, but I botched the mixture. The picture of you shouting 'Goll-lee!' at the zenith of sexual ecstasy was amusing, but it was not enough to balance the sin you committed against me. It only escalated after each and every failure. Do you think the sinking of the Titania was merely a coincidence? But then you managed to wash ashore on the Rali, the Island of Nubile Playtex Models. I tried, and failed every time. I had to finish you, to collect not only the debt you owed me for that cone, but each successive embarrassing failure."

"Gee," Aahz said, "I'm impressed. Good going."

"But now," Penbrius continued. "It is over. I have failed for the last time. This spell was simply too much for me to expect to survive. I do not have the energy to

continue. I will die with your debt unpaid. I hope you're satisfied with yourself, Aahzmandius."

"Actually, I am, very much so," Aahz grinned. "So long, Penbrius."

With that, Gus and Aahz headed for the door, leaving Penbrius lying on the floor, gasping toward his last.

"Aahz," I said, "we can't just leave him here to die!"

Aahz looked back at me over his shoulder. "Why not?"

"It'd be inhuman!"

"Only humans can be inhuman, and I, as you well know, am not human."

I shrugged, and followed them out the door. Made sense to me.

* * *

"Hmm," Aahz said, "so Penbrius intercepted us mid-flight and transported us here. The Black Containment spell he cast on us has stripped us temporarily of our magikal powers, including the power of any item we may have on us. How long will it be before Tananda comes for us?"

"Four days," I said. "How long will our powers be gone?" I was terrified of being without my powers, no matter how meager they were.

"Depends on the vintage of the spell. Chances are it will be longer than a week."

"Why do our translator pendants work?"

"Believe it or not," Aahz said confidentially, "they're not magically powered. They're more of a filter system that latches on to your particular racial characteristic. Your characteristics trigger the mechanism."

"Never thought of it like that before."

We continued on down a busy street on the dimension of Rio Paulo. Apparently, both Aahz and Gus had been here before, although I had never heard of the place. It was quite a spectacular sight. The time was early evening, and all sorts of people were jostling around in the street in bright clothing, seeming to celebrate something. All sorts of races were represented, from humans to quasi humans to creatures with camel or octopi faces to even gargoyles and Deveels. But everyone seemed to want to make noise in the wash of color and chaos that was the street.

"Aahz," Gus said, pulling on his sleeve, "do you see what I see?"

Aahz looked in the same direction. "Oh boy, do I."

I couldn't see what they were referring to.

"I think she's looking at me," Gus said intensely.

"Of course she is," Aahz said.

"Quiet," Gus snapped. "Do you know how long it's been?"

"Don't want to think about it," Aahz said, purple tongue firmly in cheek. "It might remind me of how long I've been."

“That’s it! She’s looking back at me. And she’s slipping into the Tiky Cantina. Let’s go!”

“Wait a minute Gus,” I said desperately, but I stopped when Aahz placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Gus disappeared into the crowd.

“Two lessons partner,” Aahz said as he released his grip. “Learn these two fundamental lessons well. First, don’t get into a protracted land war in Asia without proper air cover, and second, never, ever, get in the way of a hard-up gargoyle when he beads in on his poonana.”

Well that was just great! Here I was stranded on some insane dimension with a melodramatic Pervect and a really randy gargoyle.

“Partner,” Aahz continued, grinning but not looking at me. He placed his arm around me affectionately. “I think we’d better follow our old chum into the action.”

With that, we followed Gus into the Tiky Cantina, some posh, noisy nightclub type place. Soon, I couldn’t think of much of anything.

First I was struck by the noise, so extraordinarily loud that it seemed to form a wall all around me. The center of attention in the club was the main stage, where a band played. One member of the band played six different sized timpani in some semblance of a beat, while one of the other members, who I couldn’t tell, blasted out a very smarmy, sleazy bass line to go with the timpani. Another member blasted forth with all sorts of strange percussion, while a fourth played something like a lute and sang for the audience, who seemed to be egging him on. Another three women sang along with him in some parts of the song. Every so often, the music would stop, and the lead singer would lead the audience through a chant, and then the music would start again, at an even more throbbing pace. The music itself was beyond description, with the possible exception of “loud.” The club itself



was remarkably sparse of decorations adorning the walls, excluding the mirrored ceilings, walls and pillars. Even the floor, though made of wood, cast a good reflection up. The only effects in abundance were the multiple colored lights, flashing over the crowd as it surged and seethed through the club.

“There she is!” Gus shouted. “I’m going in!”

“Hold on there one minute, sir,” Aahz admonished. “You’re forgetting. This is Rio Paulo.”

Gus stopped for a moment and stared dumbfounded. Suddenly, he broke into a smile of realization. “Thank you, Aahz! I almost forgot my customs!” At that, he clapped his hands. “Savanti!”

“Come with us unless you want to get severely beaten,” Aahz said to me, grabbing onto my arm. We walked, although sauntered would probably be the better word, over to the area of the club that looked like a bar.

“Nutter, de santo,” Aahz shouted at the bartender, “three whiskies!” He then turned to me. “Always begin by calling the bartender ‘Nutter,’ or he’ll cut your hands off. Bartenders here are touchy souls.” He and Gus leaned up against the bar with their forearms. The bartender brought us our drinks, and Aahz tossed some coins to him. The bartender smiled at him and knocked the coins on the bar for good measure before turning away.

I picked up my drink, an amber colored liquid in a square glass, and turned around to view the carnage. Aahz immediately grabbed me and spun me back toward the bar. “Skeeve, you must face away from the dance floor. Right now we’re on display, and one of the women in the club, if she’s so inclined, will choose one of us to be her partner for the night. Here’s what the custom calls for. Put your forearms on the bar and stick your butt out. Move your butt to the rhythm of the music.”

“I’m not sure I want to do this.”

“I don’t care. If you don’t do this you’ll be flouting the tradition, and you’ll be killed. I can understand your trepidation, what with your baboon ass and all. You’ve really let the bod go to hell since we moved to the Bazaar, haven’t you? But it’s essential that you do this.”

And so I stood there, with my butt sticking out, with Aahz and Gus, their butts also sticking out and grooving to the rhythm of the music.

“Good,” Aahz said, not looking at me. “If a woman wants you, she’ll come up and do a double squeeze on your cheeks, single squeeze if she only wants to play. It’s considered bad form to deny a woman what she feels is rightfully hers.”

So we continued on jiggling there for about ten minutes before some woman came up and grabbed onto Gus’s posterior. “Hot damn!” Gus exclaimed, spilling his drink all over the bar. He escorted the woman to the dance floor, and they bounced along to the sleazy bass line. The bass line had stayed true the whole time. In fact, the tune itself seemed to be in a loop, and I commented on this to Aahz.

“Good of you to notice that, partner,” he said. “It’s a traditional song here, written by the guy with the guitar. It’s a four hour song, broken up into twelve repeating loops of twenty minutes each.”

“What’s the song?”

“It’s called ‘My Baby’s Mocha Jive Talking on a Saturday Night Blues.’ It’s immensely popular and a favorite of dance clubs throughout this dimension. I’m impressed that we have the man himself here performing it.”

“What do those lyrics mean?”

“That’s right! Translator pendants don’t do lyrics, since the meaning can’t be spliced from the tone. Anyway, the twenty minute loop begins with a standard five minute instrumental to set the rhythm section. Then the guy begins with the proper verse. Here it is right now,” and Aahz began to loosely translate while the singer sang.

“My baby’s done gone and leff me on a Saturday night... she’s done gone again and leff me yes she has... she said she don’t find me lovely, yes I can see or something... and so I lost my job... my boss hates me, some standard job gripe type thing... yes, I’ve got my baby’s mocha jive talking Saturday night blues baby...” And then they went into a brief musical interlude. “And so I known now what I needed yes I did... and I know the place for it... yes indeed my landlady don’t love me no more... so I went down to the bar... I went to the bar... I went to the bartender... my old faithful bartender yes indeed take a bow jimmy... he said what you be wanting boy... and I say nutter... just give me a pink lemonade with a straw please... Wait a minute! That’s not right! Oh, you understand it, kid. You don’t need the exact translation,” he blurted as the band got down into an interlude again. “Okay, here’s the key part here, Skeeve. When they put the bright white lights on, you’re supposed to, if you’re on the floor, start jumping up and down and raising your hands. The singer’ll lead you into it. Like right now, now here’s the rough translation to these lyrics:

“Ee-eye-ee-eye-oh... ee-eye-ee-eye-oh, that’s a chant of supreme religious significance and can’t be translated. You understand that there’s heavily irony in the chant.” The singer started singing again. Aahz roughly translated. “Idiomatic expression meaning unholy relations with his mother, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy homosexual relations with his father, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy relations with his dog, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of extremely unholy acts with a member of the local constabulary, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy acts with the drunk guy passed out in his own puke on the beach, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy acts with his woman’s dog, who done him no wrong but deserved it just the same. And now, Skeeve, the music will stop a moment for this line.” The music stopped and the singer led the crowd in the shouting of another line, and then the

band got back down to the now very familiar line. "You must sing along there or you'll be considered strange. The line roughly translates into 'the ten thousand things arise, but he doesn't begin them. Wheat begets millet.'"

"Gosh Aahz, what does that mean?"

"Nothing. It's an expression that suggests that life is essentially meaningless."

"Life has no meaning?"

"Not at all. It's a bit difficult to understand, clearly. Sure, there are expressions of that sort of sentiment from all over. Shit happens. Confucius say shit happens. Hemingway say life is nada. You know what I mean. But this line, this one's different. Because to say life is meaningless ascribes meaning to the meaninglessness. Life is not meaningless, because you can gain meaning through the meaninglessness. No, this does something entirely different. It doesn't make a definitive statement at all, recognizing that as ultimately futile. It's an expression of no sentiment whatsoever, but the expression of a sentiment just the same. I happen to think it's a lot more powerful a statement myself. It doesn't have the same sort of presumptuous assertion of the mastery of life and all its little mysteries. What do you think?"

"I think I need another drink."

"Bravo!" Aahz shouted. "Nutter! Another whisky-yeeow!" I turned to look and a woman was there, a rather attractive, short woman with close cropped hair which framed a round face with big brown almond shaped eyes, a pert little nose and heart shaped lips. She was wearing a flamboyant pink bodysuit that seemed to be painted on. She was truly delectable, and she had just grabbed Aahz's butt with both her hands. "Hey baby!" Aahz exclaimed. "What's your best thing? See you around, kid." He left for the dance floor with his arm around her. I continued on, turning back to the bar, swiveling my butt in vain.

After another ten minutes, I looked back on the dance floor. Aahz and Gus, once I found both of them, seemed to be hitting it off quite well with their respective ladies. Finally, I scored a hit, and a woman grabbed onto my butt with one hand. That meant she just wanted to play with me. Okay, so she'll play with me. We went out onto the dance floor and danced along with the sleazy song that still was going on. I let her lead and as we got through the chanting and the hand raising and the statement of the fundamental meaninglessness of life she finally spoke to me.

"Do you want to slip in the back?"

Thoughts danced through my head about what that particular idiomatic expression must mean, so I just stalled in the meantime. "Don't you want to know my name?"

"No," she said, matter-of-factly. She twined her arms around my neck and began to suck on my cheek slowly, grooving to the music.

"I'm not sure I can go along with this," I said uncomfortably.

"What's wrong? You gay?"

“No. I’m not very happy right now.”

“We can enjoy,” she cooed. “I’m very good. I know very much. Don’t think too much. Don’t do anything. I’ll do everything.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t,” I said.

She huffed and grabbed my hand, leading me to the bar. “Nutter de santo,” she said, clearly annoyed. “Tabasco.” At this, the bartender brought a glass of red, thick, liquid to her. She grabbed the glass and threw it in my face. She then stormed off. The bartender laughed uproariously.

So I stood at the bar some more, wiggling my butt in what I hoped would be an unobtrusive manner. The song eventually ended, which was remarkable in itself. The crowd cheered for about five minutes or so before the band went into its next selection. It had a slow bass groove and basic drum, with a simple chord progression from what sounded similar to a Klahdish church organ. What was most notable was that the singer began singing in Klahdish.

“Don’t worry... about a thing,” he sang, “’cause every little thing...gonna be all right. Singing don’t worry... about a thing...’cause every little thing’s... gonna be all right... rise up this morning... smile with the rising sun... three little birds... perch by my doorstep... singing sweet songs... of melodies pure and true... singing: ‘this is my message to you-hoo-hoo.’” And then he went back to the beginning lyrics as Aahz and Gus came back to me.

“Hey partner, what happened? I saw you had a live one.”

“Ah,” I waved at him, “I wasn’t interested.”

Aahz looked back at Gus for a moment. He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Kid, I know how it must feel. How tough it must be for you. I just want to let you know that I’m willing to support you no matter what your lifestyle choice may be.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I must admit that I was wondering about you all these years. Luanna made me think my impressions were wrong, but when she bailed I had to admit that my speculations resurfaced.”

“What?”

“It’s okay to be a homosexual, Skeeve. I’m comfortable with it as long as you are, if that’s how you truly feel.”

“No, no!”

“What, you’re not?”

“Of course not! What made you think so?”

“It’s not a question of what made me think so. It’s more a question of what made me think it couldn’t be anything else.”

“Just... just... just drop it. Okay?”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “Must admit, that’s quite a latency period you’re running with, Skeeve.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. We were going to get out of here, and we wanted to let you

know.”

“Okay,” I said, “let’s split.”

Aahz looked back at Gus, who cocked his head. Aahz jerked his head a bit. “Okay then.”

We headed for an exit that eventually led to a side alley. The woman with Aahz pressed his head against hers, and they swayed to a silent rhythm. Gus walked behind the woman who had chosen him, with his talons wrapped around her midsection. Gus looked at Aahz, and cocked an eyebrow.

“Quite a dimension, wouldn’t you say, kid?”

I turned away from Gus to look at Aahz. “Quite.”

“Hey kid,” he smiled. “Where’d Gus go?”

I spun around to where Gus had been standing, and he was gone, along with the woman he met at the club. There was not a single trace of him. I gaped for a moment. “I don’t know. Where did he...” I began to look for him and noticed that as I had turned away from Aahz, he and the woman vanished as well.

I was alone, on a crazy dimension, and I didn’t have the slightest idea what I should do. Every little thing’s gonna be all right my swiveling ass.

Chapter 13

Author: James Whitney

“Life is never so bad it can’t get worse.”

Murphy

I SAT DOWN. What could I do? I had to assume Aahz and Gus were coming back at some point. And I knew that if I actually did anything, it would just be looking for trouble. So I sat down and thought.

What was our purpose here? What would we do now? Would we head off to Chirosovo? After this experience, I felt like simply returning to Deva and packing it in. It just wasn’t worth it; we didn’t have any coherent sense of where we were going, what we were supposed to do when we got there, and how it would matter at all. We needed a better direction, but I don’t know where we would get that.

After almost half an hour, my thought processes were interrupted by a loud scream from the upstairs of a nearby building. The voice was a familiar one.

“Goll-lee!”

Good, I thought. Perhaps now Aahz would come back. I allowed myself to believe this until about ten minutes later, when the Penbrius-induced scream repeated. I began to think of the ways in which Pervects are different than Klahds, and indeed when the scream emanated for the third time, even louder, I lost all confidence in Aahz appearing soon.

As I stated earlier, I really just stayed put, thinking that if I went anywhere it would just be looking for trouble. Well, it didn’t really matter, because trouble found me anyway.

“That’s him,” a familiar looking woman said. “He refused me.”

I now recognized her as the one who had squeezed my butt in the cantina. I began to run. I didn’t get far.

I had only gotten about twenty feet when a forceful hand grabbed my left shoulder and pulled me back, knocking me off balance and to the ground. I looked up and saw a woman who would have resembled Massha, if you had turned Massha’s fat into muscle. She took her hand, and threw some powder on me. She said, “Billings Cardozo,” and everything turned black.

* * *



I AWOKE TO DISCOVER that I was hanging off of some sort of ropes. The ropes were tied to my shoulders, and held me on a wall about four feet off the ground. What was perhaps more perplexing, or bothersome, was that I was completely naked. Even more disconcerting was the fact that this seemed to be some sort of town square.

The ropes bound me tight; there was no way I could free myself. I sensed an additional pressure holding me there, leading to believe that I was also held by some sort of magik.

I smiled weakly as people walked by. The men who walked by me just seemed to avert their gaze and shake their heads, perhaps in disgust, but in what I hoped was some sort of sympathy. The women were far meaner, however. Some threw dirt at me. Some pointed at me and started to laugh hysterically. Still others came

up and made what I assumed were sexual gestures to me.

Finally Aahz showed up.

“Aahz!” I yelled. He saw me, but quickly averted his gaze and moved closer to me.

“Aahz, what in Deva is going on here?”

“Keep your voice down,” Aahz said. “It’s against tradition for a kaijin to be speaking loudly, and the only way I can talk to you is with my back turned.”

“Aahz, where am I?” I demanded. “What’s a kaijin? What can I do.”

“Listen, kid,” he said, “you’re in pretty serious trouble. I told you it was bad form to deny a woman what she thought was rightfully hers. For all intents and purposes, you were rightfully hers.”

“What?” I screamed.

“Kid, keep your voice down. Listen, kid, Rio Paulo is one hell of a fun place to come, so long as you’re not a weeny prissy pants. But you have to go along with it. If you don’t want to, you don’t come here.”

“But I didn’t have any choice in the matter.”

“Kid, if I searched really hard, I think I might be able to find one being on this dimension who cared. Right now, you’re a kaijin, which is just the formal term for a weeny prissy pants. The woman you denied has the right to leave you up here until she feels you’ve overcome your inhibitions.”

“Can’t you get me out of here?”

“Listen, kid, I’m barely allowed to talk to you. If I try to release you, we both will get thrown in jail. And if you think your current situation is bad, it’s only because you haven’t seen a Rio Paulo jail. Even Pervects are frightened at the prospect.”

“So what do I do?”

“Well, every day at around high noon, the original woman you spurned is going to perform a traditional Rio Paulo ritual in front of you. She’s going to basically try to get you aroused, and also less inhibited about what she’s doing. Here’s my advice to you, kid: don’t look away from her at any time. I don’t care how much your sensibilities are threatened. You won’t be set free until you actively watch her perform the entire ritual.”

“And how long will that take?”

“For you? Probably a month.”

I sighed. Hopefully Tananda and Chumley would be more understanding of my plight.

After several hours, it was high noon and the ritual was to begin. I was lowered to a point only a few inches off the ground, for whatever reason. I didn’t know at the time.

The woman (odd, I thought, that I didn’t even know her name) showed up and stood in front of me. She inserted her index and middle finger into her mouth, and licked them heavily. She then reached down with her fingers and...

I averted my gaze. It was too disgusting.

She came up to me and slapped me. “This is going to take a long time,” she said disapprovingly.

I had no choice but to agree.

THE END