

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

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James Gauthier
with
Ed Martin



**HOMEWORLD
PRESS**

Westmont, IL

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

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Published by Homeworld Press, Inc

For information address:

Homeworld Press

821 South Williams Street, B606

Westmont, IL 60559-2463

Cover and Page Design by Paul Michael Kane - www.pmkane.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Based on characters created by: James Gauthier and Ray Szwec

Illustrations: June Brigman & Roy Richardson based on characters designed by Frank Bolle

Cover: June Brigman & Roy Richardson

ISBN: 978-1-60643-045-3

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following people for their encouragement, suggestions and kind words. Your continued support is greatly appreciated.

Joanne Gauthier, Michael Finch, Kristen Ware, Gillian Emily Szwec, William Raymond Szwec, Ray Szwec, Marc Edun, Mark Giannini, Michael Beauvais, Stephen Osseiran, Kailee Mastracchio, Amanda & Mark Palmieri, Will Butler, Matt Barry, Kristen Sueoka, Jason, Greg & Erik Vitagliano, Sid Fischman and Cooper Gedney, Taylor Sanchez, Chris Janocha, Corey Martn, Tyler Martin.

DEDICATION

Those who enjoy reading, and those who share the gift.

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CHAPTER
1

HEY, DUDE

Gary O'Leary had no idea that the dark ominous storm clouds swiftly blowing into town were an indication of things to come. People in the small town of Wellington, Connecticut were used to unusual weather, but even the youngest citizen could detect the nasty overtones of the bad storm that was soon to hit. Gary, unfortunately, was oblivious to all of this because he was too busy arguing with his parents as he stood behind the candy counter of his families' confectionary store. His parents, Mary and Barry, were busy racing about organizing various candy filled canisters while checking inventory.

Gary's ten year old brother Jerry was seated at the counter noisily slurping a chocolate milkshake. Although Jerry had the O'Leary red hair, he lacked the normal O'Leary huskiness. As he sipped his shake he took special care not to spill any on his favorite shirt. The design of the shirt featured several goofy looking monkeys with the words Mighty Morons adorned across the top.

As usual, Gary was busy sucking a lollipop and sneakily hoarding candy from the various candy jars.

"But dad, why do I have to watch him?" Gary groaned.

"We've already been over this, Gary," Barry explained. "We need you to watch your brother while we're away at the business seminar. You're old enough to take care of him. Besides, it's only for a week."

"But it's summer vacation."

"Then you'll have plenty of time to watch him."

"But I was going to hang out with Bish."

"Then take your brother with you. It's not like you and Bishop will be running around the country while we're gone. Now please be quiet, Gary, can't you see that your mother and I are getting ready to close the store while we're away?"

"Can't you lock Jerry up in the store when you go?"

"Gary, enough!" Mary sternly said. "You are watching your brother, and that is that. End of discussion."

"Yeah, Gary, end of discussion," Jerry teased his brother.

Gary stared at Jerry with an urge-to-kill look.

"Fine. Whatever," Gary grumbled. A rumble of thunder was heard in the distance.

Gary's mother reached behind the counter and produced a bag of groceries.

"I picked up some groceries for Bishop. Will you be a doll and bring them with you?" she asked.

"Yeah, Gary. Be a doll," Jerry teased.

Gary grabbed the bag of groceries and stormed toward the door.

"I'm going before you have me bringing him the entire store," Gary said.

Jerry grabbed a handful of candy from a nearby canister and went off after his brother.

Mary sat down on a nearby stool and looked at her husband. "Remember, you're the one who wanted kids," she sighed.

Gary hurried on his way to see his best friend, Bishop Chance. The last thing on Gary's mind was his brother. His thoughts were all about the Homeworld and the marvelous meals that they served. Unbeknownst to Gary, the upcoming events would leave him very little time to enjoy any of those meals. As he stepped on to Bishop's front porch he paid no attention to his brother who was walking behind him.

Inside the Chance residence, the love struck young man was sitting in his dining room, talking on a portable phone to his girlfriend, Mandy.

"That's great news, Mandy," he said. "I'm glad your mother's letting you come with me. Did you hear back from Justin yet?"

The doorbell rang. Bishop yelled toward the kitchen.

"Aquarian, someone's at the door. It's probably Gary. Can you let him in?"

Aquarian, an android in the shape of a twelve-year-old boy with blue-green hair, entered the room. He was wearing a turtleneck sweater

and jeans.

"Sure. Why not? I wasn't doing anything important. Just because I'm an android people feel they can order me about. Aquarian do this, Aquarian do that," Aquarian said.

"Yeah, that's Aquarian," Bishop said to Mandy. "He's been awfully cranky lately. I think he's due for his 3,000 mile check up."

Aquarian opened the door. The normally bright afternoon sky was totally darkened by the storm that was about to strike. Gary and his brother Jerry were standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Aquarian. Where's Bish?" Gary asked.

"Is that you Gar?" Bishop yelled from the other room. "I'm on the phone with Mandy. I'll be right with you."

"No hurry," Gary yelled back. "Just wanted to get here before it starts to pour. Looks like it's going to be a nasty storm. By the way, I've got a bag of groceries from my mom."

"Thanks. Aquarian, give Gary a hand," Bishop yelled back.

"Sure. Why not?" the android replied. "I wasn't doing anything important. Just because I'm an android people feel they can order me about. Aquarian do this. Aquarian do that."

As Aquarian spoke he unscrewed his hand from his arm and handed it over to Gary. Jerry's jaw dropped in surprise.

"I think Aquarian blew a fuse or something," Bishop yelled to Gary. "Mandy and I are taking him to the Homeworld for maintenance. Can you come?"

Before Gary could tell Bishop that he wasn't alone, Jerry called out, "Android? Homeworld? What's going on?"

Bishop froze. "Jerry? You're here too?" he asked looking perturbed that he had just let the cat out of the bag. "Look Mandy, I've got to go," he said into the phone. "Just come on over when you're ready."

Bishop raced into the living room with the phone still in his hands. He saw Jerry standing in the front hallway.

"You brought your brother with you?" Bishop said. "You should have warned, uh, told me he was coming."

"Yeah, I'm stuck baby-sitting the brat while my parents are away this week."

"What's going on around here?" Jerry asked.

Bishop, Gary, Jerry and Aquarian headed back into the living room, leaving the front door ajar. Gary put down the bag of groceries. He was still holding onto Aquarian's hand.

"Nothing. Nothing's going on. Just playing a joke with you," Bishop said.

Jerry pointed to Aquarian's hand. "Then how do you explain his that?" he asked.

Bishop looked with disbelief at the hand in Gary's hand. "How did that...? Wait a minute. I told Aquarian to give you a hand." Bishop and Gary exchanged a worried look. Then Bishop said, "Sit down, Jerry. I can explain everything. I guess you're old enough to keep a secret."

"Bish, are you sure that's the right thing to do?" Gary asked.

Bishop took Aquarian's hand from Gary and gave it back to Aquarian.

"I think so, Gar. Here Aquarian, put this back on and go into the kitchen and get us a couple of sodas, dude."

"Sure, why not. I wasn't doing anything important. Just because I'm an android people feel they can order me about. Aquarian do this. Aquarian do that," Aquarian said once again. He put his hand back on as he entered the kitchen.

"Maybe all he needs is a good kick in the butt," Gary said. "That's what I feel like doing when Jerry is acting up."

"Come on, you promised to tell me a secret!" Jerry said as he bounced up and down on the couch. "What is it?"

"Okay. Calm down," Bishop said. "But you've got to remember not to tell anybody about this. You swear?"

"Yeah, yeah, I swear!" Jerry was anxious but clearly delighted that the older kids were going to share something important with him. "What is it?"

"To put it simply, my father was from another dimension. When I turned fourteen I discovered that I had the ability to control electronic devices. Shortly after that, my evil uncle, Onyx who wants to take over the Earth, as well as the planet my father came from, pursued me, Mandy, Gary and Justin while we were looking for the secret passage to my father's world. Along the way we found Aquarian. He's an android built by my father. Now he seems to be malfunctioning and we are going back to my father's world to get him fixed."

Jerry sat silently.

"Remember, don't tell anyone," Bishop cautioned him.

"Yeah, sure," Jerry said slowly. "Now what's the real secret?"

"That is the secret."

"Sure it is. You've got super powers and all of you travel to other worlds and nobody else knows about it."

"Well, our teacher, Miss Mann knows about it," Bishop said.

"Yeah, right. I'll bet she's an alien too."

"Actually, she is."

Jerry was getting mad. He thought that Bishop and Gary were playing him for a fool. "Come on! You said you would tell me the truth! I won't tell! I promise!"

"Bish, I think you better give him a small demonstration," Gary suggested.

Bishop stood and started pointing at various items in the room. "Television on! Vacuum cleaner on! Computer on! Stereo on! Lights on and off!" he commanded.

The room swiftly filled with the sound of all the appliances turning on. The lights kept flickering on and off as they all powered up. The television blasted out the news about a local traffic jam.

"Air conditioner on!" Bishop continued. "Ceiling fans on!"

Mandy Conway suddenly appeared at the front door.

"Bishop?" she said, but Bishop was unable to hear her above the din.

"Bishop!" Mandy shouted. "What is going on around here?"

"Mandy!" Bishop shouted back. "What did you say?"

"Why don't you turn some of this stuff off?"

"Wait a minute," Bishop shouted. "I can't hear you. Let me turn some of this stuff off."

Bishop turned around and faced the various devices.

"Okay, everybody, turn off!" he shouted.

The room suddenly fell into silence as everything turned off and the room became dark.

"Sorry," Bishop said. "Lights back on."

The lights flickered back on and they were able to see once again.

"Bishop, what in the world are you doing?" Mandy asked.

"I was just trying to prove to Jerry that I could control all these things."

"And this was the best way you could think of to do it?"

"Yeah. How would you do it?"

Mandy turned to Jerry. "Jerry, show Bishop your watch."

Jerry held out his wrist revealing a digital watch.

"Use your power on the watch," Mandy said to Bishop.

Bishop touched the watch and mumbled a few words. The time on the watch was replaced with the words 'Now do you believe me?' flashing across the face of the watch.

"Cool," Jerry said.

"Not everything has to be a big production," Mandy said. She then

gave Bishop a kiss on the cheek.

"Where's Justin?" Bishop asked Mandy.

"He said he'd be here shortly. Where's Aquarian?"



"He went into the kitchen for some sodas, but that was awhile ago. I hope everything's okay in there. He's been acting weird lately."

"Around here how can you tell?" Mandy asked.

Bishop walked into the kitchen. Gary, Mandy and Jerry followed. When Bishop saw Aquarian he gasped. The android was standing completely nude in front of the refrigerator calmly pulling out cans of soda.

"Aquarian, you're naked!"

Aquarian turned to face Bishop. "Yes, you told me to get you a couple of sodas, nude."

"Dude! I said dude! Not nude!" Bishop said.

A little smirk appeared on Mandy's face. "I always wondered if he was anatomically correct," she laughed.

Bishop grabbed Aquarian's clothes from the table and gave them to him.

"That's it. I'm taking you to the Homeworld to get repaired. Put your clothes on, Aquarian," he said.

"Sure, why not. I wasn't doing anything important. Just because I'm a ..." Aquarian said as Bishop led Mandy and the others out of the kitchen.

They entered the living room and saw Justin Wellington III and his father standing in the middle of the room. Justin, as always, stood with the confidence of the young and the spoiled. His father was more casually dressed in a gaudy golf shirt and slacks.

"I was beginning to wonder if anyone was home," Justin said.

"Maybe you should put triple locks on the door. It will keep out the riff raff," Gary said to Bishop.

Bishop noticed Justin's father smiling next to his son. "I didn't know that your father was coming with you," he said.

"I wasn't expecting him to come, but when he heard that I was coming here he insisted on stepping in," Justin explained.

Justin Wellington II held out his hand to Bishop. "Good morning, Bishop. It's so good to see you again. And it appears that you've recovered fully from our last meeting. I can certainly say that I've never felt better. Justin and I have been having a grand old time together. Haven't we son?" Mr. Wellington rifled his hand through Justin's hair.

"Yah, sure," Justin was unenthusiased. "It's been swell."

"I've got a lot of time to make up with my number one son," Mr. Wellington said proudly.

"I'm your only son," Justin pointed out.

"You see what I mean?" Mr. Wellington beamed. "Such a bright boy. Such an intelligent lad. But be that as it may son, I've got to leave you for a

little while if that's okay with you."

"Sure, whatever."

"My presence is needed at the office. They just love me there."

Bishop looked at Mr. Wellington's attire. "Aren't you going to change before you go into work?"

"Mr. Wellington laughed. "Oh no, of course not. This is how I dress for work. We have a very comfortable dress code at the office now. I thought the old dress code was too stuffy and impersonal."

Justin shook his head and sighed. "It's one of many changes he's made."

"Yes it is," Mr. Wellington said. "And employee morale is at an all time high."

"Productivity is at an all time low," Justin countered.

Mr. Wellington's cheerful mood continued. "You must learn to be more flexible, son. Life isn't all about making money. After all, you can't take it with you."

Mr. Wellington pulled his wallet from his pants pocket. Opening it up he pulled out a thick wad of hundred dollar bills and handed a few out to Bishop and his friends.

"Here," Mr. Wellington said. "Have yourselves a fun time. My treat."

As the surprised group accepted their gift a large crash of thunder was heard. A sudden downpour of rain followed.

"Oh, darn," Mr. Wellington said. "It looks like I won't be able to get in a few holes of golf before work. I was hoping that I could avoid a few of those boring meetings I was scheduled for. But I don't wish to bore your young friends with business talk, son. I just had to stop by and see how Bishop was doing."

Mr. Wellington put his wallet back into his pocket and headed for the door. "And Bishop, if you should see that delightful Miss Mann, please give her my regards."

Mr. Wellington gave a quick wave and walked outside into the deluge. Bishop could swear that he heard Mr. Wellington whistling a happy tune as he casually walked through the downpour to his car. He was totally drenched by the time he stepped into the back of the waiting limousine. A few seconds after getting in and waving goodbye, the limo took off.

"I can't get over the changes in your father," Bishop said as he tried to hide a smile.

Mandy giggled. "Yes, he's not as crabby as he was the last time we saw him at his office."

"You know that's not my father," Justin complained. "He's that

imperfect duplicate that Miss Mann created. I can't believe that she forgot to uncreate him before she left for the Homeworld. He's been running my father's company and ruining my life ever since."

"He sure seems very chipper," Mandy observed.

"Of course he is. He's an imperfect duplicate. He's been getting happier and jollier every day. It's like living with Santa Claus."

"Hasn't anyone noticed the difference?" Bishop asked.

"Sure, all the servants and employees have. But who's going to complain? They like working for him more than ever before."

"What about your mother?" Mandy asked. "Hasn't she noticed anything?"

"No! She still away at one of her resorts somewhere. I can't even remember the last time she was home. Or even the last time I saw her."

Justin sat down on the nearby couch. "We're the only ones that know he's not my real father. I thought I wanted my father to be more attentive, but this duplicate has gone overboard."

"What's a duplicate?" Jerry asked his brother.

"Our teacher, Miss Mann is from another world and she has the power to create exact doubles of people," Gary replied.

"Yeah, but they don't always behave exactly the same as their originals," Bishop added. "As we found out the hard way when she created imperfect duplicates of me, Mandy and Gary. They ended causing a lot of confusion at school."

"Yeah, and at my parent's store," Gary added.

"That must have been when Gary was acting goofier than he usually does."

"I do not act goofy," Gary replied.

Jerry giggled. "You sure did back then. Especially when you took a shower with all your clothes on."

Mandy laughed. "I didn't hear about that one."

Gary looked solemnly at the floor. "Yeah, and you weren't supposed to. I think my duplicate was the worst of the bunch."

"Hey!" Bishop said. "Aren't the duplicates supposed to exist for a limited time?"

"Yes," Justin replied. "But Miss Mann never told us how long that time was supposed to be."

"If you're lucky it could be for a couple of years," Mandy said.

"That's all I need is more bad luck," Justin replied.

"I've got a ton of bad luck," Jerry added as he looked at his brother.

Justin looked at Jerry as if noticing him for the first time. "What's he

doing here?"

"That's my brother," Gary explained. "I've got to watch him while my parents are away. And he kind of found out about Bish's power."

Justin looked displeased. "That's just great. That's all we need. A pee-wee O'Leary hanging around and getting in the way. Well you'd better keep an eye on him because I don't do any babysitting."

Jerry was defensive. "I don't need a babysitter!"

"Yes you do," Gary said. He then turned his attention to Justin. "Don't worry. I'll watch him and make sure that he stays out of your way."

"I don't need to be watched!" Jerry cried.

Bishop hurriedly tried to diffuse the situation. "Okay, is everyone clear on what we are going to be doing today?"

"No," Justin replied. "Mandy called me earlier and told me to come over here. She didn't say why."

"Aquarian has been acting strange lately," Bishop explained.

"He's always acting strange," Justin replied.

"Stranger than normal," Bishop added. "So we're going to bring him back to the Homeworld for repairs."

"Why don't we just use your father's hidden laboratory upstairs?" Justin asked.

"There's a hidden laboratory upstairs?" Jerry asked. "Just like on television. This place just keeps getting better and better."

Bishop shook his head. "Because we don't know what everything up there does or even how to use any of it to fix Aquarian. It's just easier to bring him back to the Homeworld and see if Miss Mann can help us. Now that everyone is here, I'll get Checkmate to open a portal."

"Who's Checkmate?" Jerry asked.

"It's a super powerful computer, in the shape of a chess set, built by Bishop's father to open a portal between the two dimensions," Gary explained.

"Cool," Jerry exclaimed. "A super computer. I want one of those."

"Yeah, dream on," Gary said. "Mom and dad are too cheap. They'll never buy us a new computer. Especially after what you did to the last one."

"That wasn't my fault," Jerry declared. "I only took it apart to see how it works. Besides, they'll buy one for me. They like me better than they like you."

"Sure they do," Gary said. "About as much as they like getting the flu."

"Well I'm gonna see about getting one when we go to this other

world you keep talking about."

"Hey," Gary said. "I didn't say that you were going with us."

"You've got to," Jerry said. "Mom and dad said that you've got to watch me while they are away. So I have to go everywhere that you go."

"Ugh," Gary groaned.

Bishop turned to Gary. "It's okay, Gar. If your parents aren't around and you've got to watch him, then we don't have any other choice. He's got to come with us. Now that Onyx and his men are under control it should be safe for him to go there."

Mandy walked over to Checkmate, the supercomputer that looked like an unassuming chess game on a coffee table.

"It looks like the king piece is missing," Mandy observed.

"Oh no, not again," Gary moaned.

"Can't you keep this thing together for more than ten minutes?" Justin asked.

"Keep cool everyone," Bishop said. "I know where the missing piece is. After all the problems we've had in the past with it, I decided to hide it so I wouldn't lose it again."

"That's a relief. Where'd you hide it?" Gary asked.

"I don't know," Bishop said.

"What!?" Justin shrieked.

"I put it someplace where I wouldn't forget."

"And?" Justin asked.

"I forgot."

"Oh, great. Another day wasted," Justin whined.

"No, wait. It had something to do with chess," Bishop remembered.

"Duh," Justin said.

"No, the hiding place had something to do with chess," Bishop explained. "Let's see, whenever I play chess, I always sit at the table."

Bishop sat at the table.

"Well we're off to an exciting start," Justin said.

"Quiet, Justin," Mandy scolded. "You're not helping."

"But I always get hungry and thirsty," Bishop continued. "So I get up and get something from the fridge."

Bishop walked into the kitchen and saw Aquarian wearing his sweater on his legs. He had his arms in his pants legs.

"We can't get you to the Homeworld fast enough, pal," Bishop said. He stopped in front of the refrigerator. "Then I get something to eat from the fridge and grab a soda." He pulled out a soda from refrigerator.

Justin had followed Bishop into the kitchen. "This is all very exciting,

but where is it taking us?"

Bishop pulled a glass from a cabinet.

"Then I get a glass and put some ice in it. I like my soda very cold."

"And I like my duck a l'orange hot! What does your soda have to do with anything?"

Bishop opened the freezer. "Then I grab some ice and ... A-ha! Here it is!" He pulled a chess piece from the freezer.

"That's your secret hiding place?" Justin asked in disbelief. "The freezer!?"

"You didn't think of looking there," Gary said.

"Who in their right mind would?" Justin replied in disbelief.

"Come on," Bishop said. Aquarian continued to struggle with his clothes.

Back in the living room Bishop placed the chess piece on the chessboard. A miniature king materialized on the chessboard.

"The p-p-players are in p-p-lace! The g-g-game h-h-has b-b-begun!" he sputtered.

"What's wrong with it?" Mandy asked.

"Sounds like it's cold," Jerry suggested.

"It's a machine. It can't get cold," Gary said.

"Well he had it in the freezer," Jerry explained. "And it's cold in the freezer."

"Is everything okay, Checkmate?" Bishop asked.

"A-a-adjusting circuits f-f-for temperature ch-ch-change," Checkmate said.

"Told ya it was cold," Jerry said to Gary as he stuck his tongue out at him.

"Maybe you should find a better hiding place," Justin said to Bishop.

"Adjustment complete. The players are in place! The game has begun!" Checkmate said.

"See?" Bishop pointed out to Justin. "No harm done. Checkmate, please open a portal to the Homeworld."

The miniature king reached into his pocket. Pulling out his hand he threw a small crystal ball into the air. It got bigger and brighter as a light began to appear in the middle of the room. It started to form into a portal the size of an oval doorway.

"Awesome!" an amazed Jerry exclaimed.

"Please specify a retrieval time," Checkmate requested.

"Oops. Almost forgot," Bishop said. "How about a week from today?"

That will give us time to get Aquarian fixed and give us some time to visit with Miss Mann."

"But what about clothes?" Mandy asked. "I didn't bring a change of clothes with me."

"We can get something to wear on the Homeworld," Bishop answered.

A few seconds after the portal completed its formation Bishop turned to address his friends. "Come on," he urged. "Let's go. C'mon, Aquarian! Let's go!"

Bishop grabbed a nearby backpack off the floor that he had packed his uniform into earlier that morning.

Aquarian staggered into the living room bumping into things as he walked. His shirt was still doubling as his pants. He had his shoes on his hands and his underwear on his head covering his eyes. Bishop guided him to the portal and pushed him through. Bishop, Mandy and Justin followed. Gary turned to look at his brother who was further behind him and didn't appear to be moving.

"Are you coming or not?" Gary asked.

"Is it safe?"

"It won't be if you don't get your butt through this portal. Come on!"

Gary pulled his little brother through the portal as it began to close.



2
CHAPTER TWOSAY IT'S ONLY
MAKE BELIEVE

In contrast to the nasty storm that was waging back home, the weather on the Homeworld was just as beautiful as the past few times that they had been there. Taking in a deep breath of the refreshingly warm sunny day, Bishop led his friends out of a small wooded area into an open field. Aquarian now properly dressed and was busily hopping along behind them.

Jerry looked up and saw a double rainbow overhead. "Wow, this place is nothing like back home," he exclaimed. "It's like being in an episode of the Mighty Morons."

"Mighty Morons?" Gary said. "That stupid television show you watch with those stupid monkeys?"

"Least it's better than what you watch," Jerry replied. "All those cooking shows!"

"Cooking shows?" Justin laughed.

"Yeah, cooking shows," Gary said. "What about it? A guy can't watch how the experts do it?"

"If you say so, quiche boy." Justin was snide.

"Where are we going?" Jerry asked.

"To Bish's castle," Gary replied.

"Bishop has a castle?"

"It's really my father's castle, but I inherited it when he died," Bishop explained.

"It must be cool to have a castle of your own," Jerry said.

"I'd rather have my parents back alive," Bishop said.
Mandy looked back at Aquarian who was still hopping behind them.



"What's up with Aquarian? Why is he hopping instead of walking?"

"Because Chance told him to hop to it, and we can't get him to stop," Justin said.

"Look!" Mandy pointed toward a medieval style castle on a hill in front of them. "There's the Kingdom of New Hopes."

Bishop paused and stared. "I still have trouble thinking of that place as home," he said as he gazed up at the castle.

"So how come we are out here and not up there?" Jerry said as he pointed to the castle.

"Because this is where we always appear when we come here," Gary said. "Now don't ask anymore stupid questions."

"Now Gary," Mandy admonished. "That's not a stupid question. This is his first time here and it's all new to him. Remember your first time here."

"Yeah," Gary said. "But he'd just better not bug me or it will be his last time here."

Justin shook his head. "I am so glad that I am an only child."

"Come on, guys," Bishop said. "Let's get a move on."

In no time, Bishop and his friends were walking up to the gate of the small kingdom. The large heavy ornate gate was wide open.

"Why is the gate open?" Mandy asked. "I hope everything is okay."

"The gate should always be open," Bishop explained. "It was closed the last time we came because Onyx and his followers were attacking."

"Onyx is your evil uncle. Right?" Jerry said to Bishop.

"That's right, but for most of my life he disguised himself as my grandfather."

"Oh, I remember your grandfather," Jerry frowned.

"How could you?" Gary asked. "You never met him."

"Did too! I was coming back from gymnastics with my friends and we stopped at Bishop's house to wait for you. We got bored so we played baseball in his yard. I hit the ball through one of his windows. An old guy came up to the window and looked out at us. Then he made a real scary face and we ran off."

Gary laughed. "A scary face? What did he do? Stick his tongue out at you?"

"No!" Jerry responded. "Scarier than that. His whole face changed into a monster. He had fangs and horns and bright red eyes."

Bishop was astounded. "He changed in front of you and you never said anything to me?"

"I didn't think anyone would believe me," Jerry said.

"Come on, let's see if we can find Miss Mann and tell her about this," Bishop said as he and his friends entered the gate.

Bishop and his friends passed several people as they walked toward the castle entrance that was located in the center of town. Aquarian continued to hop in place as two older men greeted them.

"May we help you?" the first man asked.

"Yeah. You can tell Miss Mann that Bishop Chance is here," Gary said.

The second man, who Bishop recognized as Castleton, squinted, giving Gary a closer look. "Prince Bishop? Is that you? My eyes aren't what they used to be. You look like you've put on some weight."

"Hey!" Gary exclaimed.

Bishop laughed. "No, Castleton. That isn't me. I'm over here."

"I'm so sorry. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

"You said that already," Jerry pointed out.

"Did I? I'm sorry, my memory isn't what it used to be either. As you get older, memory is the second thing that goes," Castleton said.

"What's the first?" Jerry asked.

Castleton pondered for a minute. "I don't remember. Now, who shall I say is calling?"

"Prince Bishop!" an exasperated Gary cried.

"Prince Bishop?" Castleton said, looking once again at Gary. "Is that you? My eyes aren't what they used to be. You look like you've put on some weight."

Bishop addressed the other guard next to Castleton. "Could you please tell Miss Mann that we're here?"

The first guard entered the palace.

"Look, I told you before, I am not Bishop, and I have not put on weight," Gary said to Castleton.

"Yes you have," Jerry said. "Mom just had to buy you new pants because you outgrew your old ones."

Gary and Jerry began to argue between themselves.

Mandy stepped forward. "Hello, Castleton. Do you remember me?" she asked.

"Oh, of course, Miss Conway. How could I forget you?"

"Could you please tell Miss Mann that we're here?"

Christie Rae Mann appeared in the doorway. As was her custom, she was dressed in white from head to toe; her dark hair piled on top of her head in its usual style.

"That won't be necessary," Miss Mann said.

Bishop and his friends joyously greeted their friend.

"So what brings you all here?" Miss Mann asked.

"I'll go anywhere to get away from my father," Justin said.

"Actually we came for summer break," Mandy said sweetly.

"And for some of that fantastic food they serve in the castle," Gary added as he licked his lips in anticipation.

"The truth is that Aquarian is malfunctioning," Bishop said pointing to his android companion.

Miss Mann looked at Aquarian who was still busily hopping up and down.

"So it would appear. We should be able to repair him in no time. And I know just the person for the job." Miss Mann turned to Castleton. "Castleton, will you take Aquarian to the workroom and find out what's wrong with him?"

"Him?" Justin cried. "He's half blind! And totally batty!"

"Castleton is one of our leading experts in the field of robotics. In fact, he's the one who taught Alabaster everything he knew about them."

"And for the record, I'm not totally batty," Castleton explained. "I was just having a little fun with Master Gary. Of course I knew who he was. But you are partially correct about my sight. My vision isn't what it used to be. I could use a helper with a good pair of eyes," Castleton said.

"How about you, Justin?" Miss Mann asked. "Perhaps you could learn something new."

"All right, but don't blame me if Aquarian comes back sounding like a duck."

"Follow me," Castleton said as he walked into the castle.

Justin began to follow. "Come on, Aquarian. Let's go." He stopped when he saw that Aquarian was not following his command. "Chance!"

Bishop turned his attention to Justin. "Oh, sorry." He looked at Aquarian and put his hand on Aquarian's shoulder. "While we are here I want you to follow Justin's commands. Is that clear?"

"Sure, why not. I wasn't doing anything important. Just because..." Aquarian said as he followed Justin into the castle.

Bishop and Mandy walked past their former teacher and entered the castle. Jerry walked up to the door and was stopped by Miss Mann.

"I hadn't noticed you before," she said. "Who are you?"

"That's my little brother, Jerry," Gary answered. "I have to watch him this week. He kinda found out all about Bish and we had to bring him along."

"I won't cause any trouble," Jerry said.

"No, I don't think you could," Miss Mann laughed. "At least, not the type of trouble that we're used to. Very well, it is a pleasure to meet you, Jerry. I hope you have an enjoyable visit."

"So do I. Besides, what sort of trouble could a kid get into here?" Jerry said as he and Gary entered the castle.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Miss Mann mumbled to herself. "Trouble comes in many forms and different ages."

The following day, Justin dejectedly stayed behind at the castle to help repair Aquarian. Although he would rather be spending his time with Mandy, he was quickly amazed at how much Castleton appeared to know. He decided that he should closely study everything that he was being taught. He might be able to use it to his advantage back on Earth to increase his wealth.

Miss Mann, Bishop, Mandy, Gary and Jerry strolled around the kingdom enjoying the sights and sounds of the street vendors and performers along the way. Bishop and his friends were in the same colorful clothes as the local inhabitants.

"I am surprised that Onyx would slip and change his identity in front of Jerry," Miss Mann said to Bishop.

"He must have been angry about the ball going through the window," Bishop mused. "Maybe it interrupted something important that he was doing. He probably figured that nobody would believe Jerry anyway."

"I just wish he had said something to you sooner. It would have saved us a lot of problems later. Knowing that Onyx was posing as your grandfather would have helped defeat him sooner while we were still on Earth." Miss Mann turned and addressed Jerry. "You must tell us about everything you see. Even if you think nobody will believe you."

"What if it gets me into trouble?" Jerry asked.

"You won't get into trouble if you tell Bishop or myself," Miss Mann assured him.

"In that case, I did see something else," Jerry responded.

"What?" Miss Mann was anxious. "What did you see?"

"Gary's got two holes in his underwear," Jerry replied.

Gary glared at his brother. "When we get home you are so dead."

"Cool clothes," Jerry said as he looked at his own clothing.

"When in Rome..." Mandy said.

"Rome? Are we in Italy?" Jerry asked.

"She means... oh, never mind. We want to blend in here, that's all," Gary said.

"I haven't seen Reprint around," Bishop said to Miss Mann. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"No, Bishop," Miss Mann replied. "Reprint went to visit a few of the local farms to see how they were doing and if there was anything we could do to help them."

"Couldn't they just come to the castle if they needed anything?"

"Of course. Anyone can come to see us. But your father felt that we should see what we could do for our citizens rather than wait for them to come to us. Most of the time they are just happy to have some company. I expect Reprint will come back any time now."

Miss Mann looked around the area and smiled. "You've spent so little time here, Bishop," she continued. "There is so much to see."

A few moments later a large multi-colored bird with four wings



landed on a nearby building.

"Ooh, he's beautiful," Mandy beamed. "What is he?"

"That is a kollikor," Miss Mann said. "I've never seen that type of bird this far north. It's very unusual."

At that moment a butterfly landed on a plant that resembled a rose bush.

"Oh, what a beautiful butterfly," Mandy exclaimed.

"Yes it is," Miss Mann said. "But here we call them..."

Suddenly one of the flowers on the bush reached over and swallowed the butterfly.

"Hey!" Mandy shrieked. "That rose bush just ate that butterfly!"

"That's not a rose bush, dear," Miss Mann said. "It's a mombello bush. A carnivorous plant, almost like a venus fly trap back on Earth."

"Cool," Jerry was impressed.

A large bird sized insect flew toward the group. It had the wings of a hummingbird, the head of a cat, the feet of a lizard and a very large stinger.

"What is that called?" Bishop asked.

"How odd," a surprised Miss Mann replied. "That looks like a tallic."

"It doesn't look very friendly," Gary said.

"It isn't! Duck!" Miss Mann cried.

Gary ducked and narrowly avoided being stung by the tallic.

Miss Mann took charge. "Quick, find cover! And don't get stung! The tallic's sting is poisonous!"

Spurred on by the pandemonium around them the local inhabitants ran in every direction trying to reach some form of safety. Carts and goods were quickly abandoned and several carts got overturned in the chaos that quickly ensued.

Gary and Jerry entered a nearby building while Miss Mann and Mandy entered another. Bishop saw the tallic heading for him and dove behind a nearby overturned cart.

Inside their building, Mandy and Miss Mann watched the street activity from a window.

"I'm glad we don't have anything like that back on Earth," Mandy exclaimed.

"We don't have anything like that here," Miss Mann said.

"Of course you do. It's outside attacking Bishop."

"That's my point. The tallic is a mythical creature. It never existed."

Mandy looked outside at Bishop swatting at the tallic. "Well it's doing a good job of existing now," she said. "I feel so helpless."

"Help me find something that will assist Bishop," Miss Mann said. "Quickly."

Outside on the street, Bishop was standing behind an overturned cart that until recently was used to sell marionettes. Scattered on the ground around Bishop were many of the puppets that had been on the cart just a few minutes ago. Crouched behind the cart he was on the lookout for the deadly winged creature. He spotted it as it dove down toward a small girl standing in the middle of the road. She had gotten separated from her family and left behind in the confusion. The girl was clutching a doll.

"Ma-ma!" she cried out.

Without hesitation, Bishop ran to the girl and grabbed her. He pulled her out of the way of the tallic, which missed her by inches. Suddenly a woman approached them.

"Amber!" the woman cried.

The little girl ran to her mother, dropping her doll in the road. Bishop saw the tallic flying towards him. He turned to run, but didn't see the abandoned doll in front of him. He stepped on it and lost his footing. He fell to the ground amid all the broken marionettes from the nearby cart as the tallic flew closer. Mandy and Miss Mann appeared in a nearby



doorway holding a broom in each hand.

"Bishop!" Mandy screamed from the doorway.

Bishop grabbed a broken piece of wood from one of the marionettes and raised it over his head aiming for the tallic. But just as the tallic was almost upon him it unexpectedly disappeared.

"Where did it go?" Mandy asked Miss Mann.

Miss Mann stood still and searched the sky for any sign of the deadly tallic. "I don't know. It just vanished."

Gary and Jerry came out of the building they had been in and raced over to Bishop. Gary helped Bishop to his feet. Mandy and Miss Mann approached.

"Are you okay, Bish?" Gary asked.

"Yeah, I think so. But what happened to that thing?"

"I don't know," Miss Mann said. "One second it was there, the next it was gone."

Bishop was concerned. "I hope it's gone for good. I don't want to run into anymore of those things."

"Miss Mann was just telling me that those things don't exist. Tallic's are mythical creatures," Mandy said.

"Well it sure looked real to me," Bishop frowned. "How can you tell us they don't exist?" he asked Miss Mann. "We just saw one."

Before Miss Mann could answer a strange voice interrupted.

"Excuse me, pardon me. Won't someone listen to my plea?" it said. Bishop and his friends looked around but didn't see anybody.

"I'm down here, I fear," the unknown voice continued.

Looking down Bishop saw a small furry creature that stood about a meter tall. It had the body and face of a small bear and the ears and tail of a rabbit. It stood on two legs, and it carried an umbrella in its right paw. The unusual looking creature was dressed in a yellow and green outfit with a blue flower on its lapel, and flowers of various colors adorning its jacket. Rabbit ears poked out of the top hat that it was wearing.

"I seem to have lost my way. And I must get to a luncheon with no further delay," the small furry creature said.

Miss Mann had a shocked look on her face. "Mr. Boomietrix?"

"You know me, but I don't know you. Have we been introduced to?" the creature replied.

"No. Not formally that is. I haven't seen you since I was a little girl," Miss Mann said in awe.

"You know him?" Mandy asked.

"Yes, he's a popular character from a series of children's stories here on the Homework. I used to love reading all of his humorous tales when I was younger. But he's a fictional character." Miss Mann explained. "This is terribly strange."

"Everything on this world is strange," Gary said.

Jerry laughed. "I think this place is great!" He bent down and poked Mr. Boomietrix in the belly. "He's a cute little guy."

Mr. Boomietrix poked Jerry back in the stomach with his umbrella, perhaps harder than he should have.

"Ow!" Jerry cried.

"It is not polite to poke other people, my young lad. To poke at people is very, very bad," Mr. Boomietrix scolded as he brushed himself off. "Now I'm afraid you've gone and damaged my flower. This might delay me, as much as an hour."

Jerry leaned in to take a closer look at the blue flower.

"It looks okay to me," he said.

Suddenly a blue mist shot out of the blue flower and hit Jerry, turning his face bright blue.

"That should teach you a lesson. Or at best, keep you guessin'," Mr. Boomietrix laughed.

Gary was also amused.

"What are you laughing at?" Jerry howled.

"If you could see your face now," Gary chuckled.

"What about it?" Jerry rubbed his hand on his face. Some blue rubbed off onto his hand. He turned back to the small furry creature.

"What did you do?" Jerry whined.

"I've taught you a lesson, this bright sunny day. And now that I've done so, I must be on my way," Mr. Boomietrix replied.

"Same old Mr. Boomietrix," Miss Mann laughed.

"Well, I must be off, be on the run. Have faith, have hope, and most of all, have fun." With that, Mr. Boomietrix scampered away.

"I don't understand," Bishop said. "If he's a character from a story then how can he be here?"

"Good question. Let's ask him. Hey you! Stop!" Gary called out.

Mr. Boomietrix turned around and waved good-bye as he disappeared into thin air.

Bishop frowned. "This is getting very weird."

"It seems to be getting even weirder, Bish. Look!" Gary was pointing to the woman who had walked away with little Amber. She was standing

to the side arguing with a woman who looked like her identical twin.

"I will not give her to you! She's my daughter!" woman No. 1 screamed.

"She is not! She's mine!" woman No. 2 replied with equal volume.

The little girl stood between the two women, her right hand holding woman No. 1's hand, the other hand holding woman No. 2's. She looked confused as the two women fought over her. Bishop went over and tried to calm the two women.

"Hey, you're scaring this little girl with your arguing," he said.

"And what business is it of yours?" woman No. 2 snarled.

"Don't talk to him like that!" woman No. 1 shrieked. "He saved my daughter's life."

"Your daughter?! She's my daughter! And I'll talk to him any way I want!"

Woman No. 1 released her hold on Amber and shoved woman No. 2. Woman No. 2 shoved back. Soon the two women were in a catfight. Bishop grabbed Amber and carried her safely away from the conflict.

"Do you know what's going on?" Bishop asked Miss Mann.

"I'm not sure. But I think there is something back at the castle that may be able to help us solve this mystery."

"What do we do about those two?" Bishop asked.

The fight between the two women became more heated. One was lying on the ground and the other was on top of her trying to choke her. The woman lying down was fighting back as hard as she could. She got her knees between her and the woman on top of her and she was able to propel the second woman into the air. The second woman fell to the ground and was just getting up as she suddenly disappeared. The first woman got up, saw her daughter and went running over to her.

"Amber!" woman No. 1 called out.

"Ma-ma!" Amber cried.

Fearful of more surprises, the woman grabbed the little girl and ran away with her as fast as she could.

"Well, it looks like that problem is solved," Gary said.

Miss Mann was solemn. "Or it may be the beginning of something far worse."


CHAPTER THREE

BUT THAT'S ALL JUST ANCIENT HISTORY NOW

It was early evening and the group had just finished an elaborate dinner that Gary had described as one of the best he had ever eaten. Even though he didn't know what most of the items were, he had plowed into them all with great gusto devouring the lion's share of food.

Bishop and his friends were now walking down a long castle hallway. The lengthy corridor took on a warm orange glow as the light from the sunset bathed it. Justin was immediately drawn to all the elaborate frames and decorations that aligned the walls. Almost all of them were made of gold and encrusted with a multitude of precious gems. He was busy trying to calculate their value and to find a way to bring them back to Earth. Justin was also surprised that in all his previous time living on this world that he had never been down this hallway before. He began to feel that there was something different about this part of the castle.

After a long walk into several more hallways they eventually passed an impressive large painting hanging higher on the wall than all the others. The painting was of a man and a woman who appeared to be in their early twenties. They both had a regal look and wore clothing very similar to what Bishop and his friends were currently wearing. Also dressed in a similar fashion in the painting were two young boys about fourteen years old. None of the four figures were smiling.

"That's a nice painting, Miss Mann," Mandy said. "Who are they?"

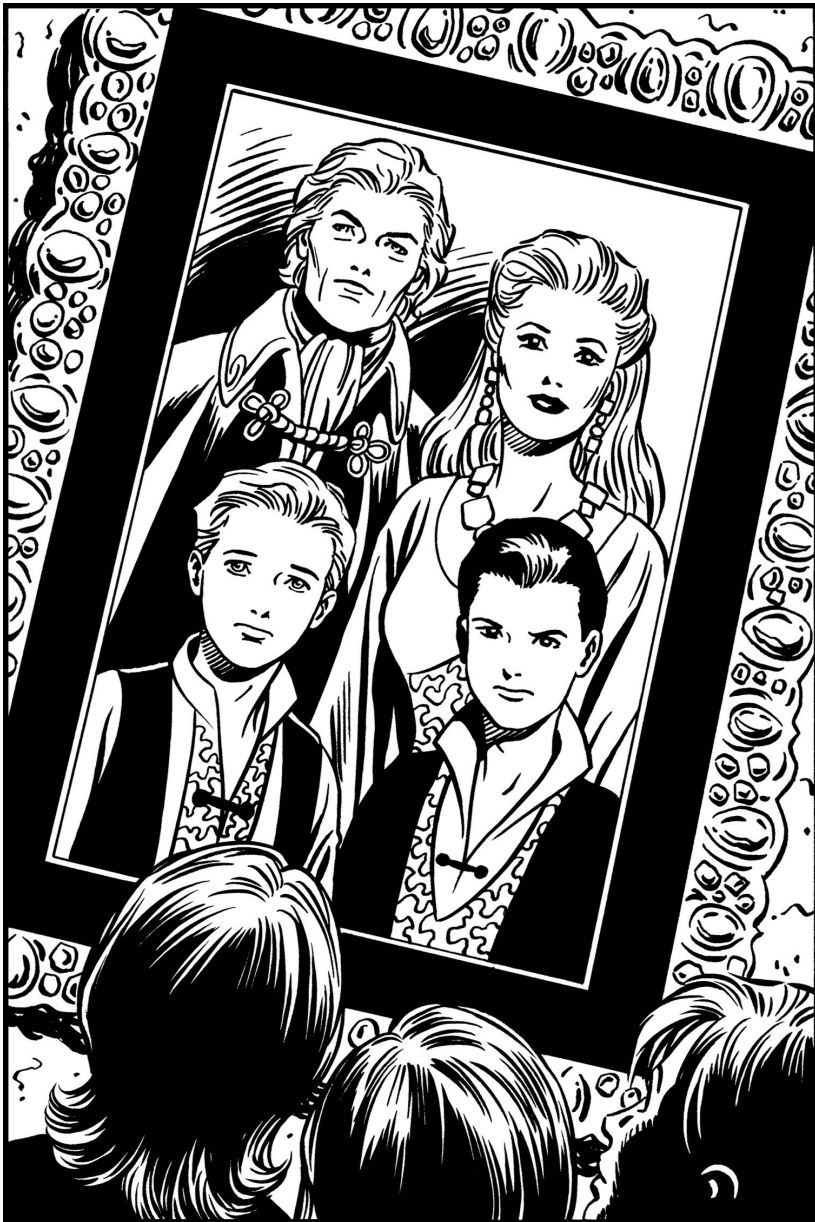
"It's a painting that Bishop should find interesting."

"Me? Why?"

"The two older people are your grandparents."

"My grandparents?"

"Yes. The boy on the left is your father. Alabaster was just around



your age when that was painted."

"My grandparents don't look very old," Bishop stated.

"I believe that when this was painted they would have been around forty years old by Earth's reckoning."

"Forty? No way!" Justin said. "My parents are forty and they don't look that good. My mother would pay a fortune to look that young."

"Once we reach a certain age the aging process slows down for us," Miss Mann explained. "Our life span is a great deal longer than yours. I am a lot older than I appear."

"How old are you?" Jerry asked.

"Jerry!" Mandy scolded. "It's not polite to ask a woman her age!"

"Or her weight," Gary added.

"Why not?" Jerry asked.

"Because they don't want you to know how old or fat they are," Gary answered.

"Gary!" Mandy glared.

"So does that mean that Chance is going to live a long life?" Justin asked.

Miss Mann shook her head. "I do not know. Since his parents are from two different worlds, I do not know what to expect. We will just have to wait and see."

Bishop took a closer look at the painting. "Wow. It's hard picturing my father as a boy." He paused. "So if the boy on the left is my father, then that must mean that the boy on the right is..."

"Yes," Miss Mann replied. "That is Onyx."

"I can't believe he was ever a kid," Justin said.

"We all were once," Miss Mann replied. She started to walk down the hallway. The rest followed her.

"He wasn't always the evil person that you know," Miss Mann continued. "Although he was far from an angel back then, he still had many good qualities."

"I find that hard to believe," Gary said.

"Impossible," Justin added.

"They didn't look very happy," Jerry observed.

"No, they were not," Miss Mann said. "That picture was painted at a very unhappy time in their lives. Even though that was a long time ago, I still remember it as if it were yesterday."

"You were there?" Mandy asked.

"Yes. Alabaster and I have been friends since childhood."

"Boy, talk about a long time ago," Jerry said.

Miss Mann looked down at Jerry. "Yes, it was. Longer than you can imagine. In fact nobody's been to this part of the castle since the death of Bishop's grandparents. It has not been used for many years. I brought you here to show you their portrait."

Miss Mann then reached over and touched a reddish colored stone in the wall. As she did, the wall opened revealing a small room that she motioned them to enter. After they had all entered the small room the wall closed back up again and they were bathed in a soft red light.

"Down, please," Miss Mann said to nobody in particular.

Suddenly they felt the room begin to descend.

"What's going on?" Jerry asked, a little panicked.

"Just an elevator," Miss Mann replied. "It was the quickest way to get to where we need to go."

"An elevator in a castle?" Gary asked. "That's strange."

"Things are not what they always appear to be," Miss Mann replied as the elevator stopped descending and the wall opened up revealing another hallway.

Miss Mann walked out of the elevator and led them down a short corridor and stopped at a door. "That is a story for another day. We are here."

Bishop and his friends stepped into the control room of the castle. They found themselves standing in a large room that was empty except for a few chairs scattered about.

"What is this place?" Jerry asked.

Bishop turned to Jerry. "We were here before. This is the defense room of the castle."

"It is that, and much more," Miss Mann said.

"Yeah, it controls the weather too," Gary added. "I remember the last time we were here. I got soaked."

"Are you sure it's okay for you to be here with us?" Mandy asked Justin. "Doesn't Castleton need your help?"

"Naah. He's busy taking a nap. I'm sure he'll find me when he wants me."

"We need to find out why these strange beings are suddenly appearing in the kingdom," Miss Mann said. "With luck, we should be able to use the equipment in this room to find out what is going on outside."

Jerry looked around the barren room. "What equipment? This room

is almost empty."

"It is and it isn't. All will become clear once Bishop puts these on." Miss Mann produced a pair of black gloves and a futuristic visor and handed them to Bishop.

"I remember how these work," he said. As soon as Bishop put on the visor, his perception of the room changed. It was suddenly filled with a vast array of machinery and computers.

"Bishop is seeing a virtual reality version of this room," Miss Mann explained. "In it he has access to defense systems, weather controls, and a lot of other technology that may be of help. Bishop used some of it last time to help us win against Onyx's campaign to take over the Homeworld. Bishop, do you see a control with a triangle symbol above a horizontal bar?"

"Yes. Should I activate it?"

"Yes," Miss Mann answered. After watching as Bishop appeared to throw an invisible switch she asked, "What do you see?"

A view screen only Bishop could see flickered to life displaying the castle's exterior.

"I see an image of the castle on a screen," Bishop explained.

"Good," Miss Mann said. "Below the view screen should be some dials. Use them until you can get a closer view of the interior walls of the kingdom."

Bishop turned the dials until the view screen displayed the interior of the kingdom. The scene was the same street that they were walking in earlier that day. People were finishing up their business and getting ready to go home for the day.

"Okay. Now what?" Bishop asked.

"Do you see anything out of the ordinary?"

"No Miss Mann, nothing."

"That's odd," Miss Mann mused. "Oh, yes. I remember now. You should see a blue button on the control panel in front of you. Press it and tell me what happens."

Bishop pressed the button. Suddenly the picture on the view screen changed. Many of the people and animals on the screen had a yellow glow around them, while a few of the others were surrounded by a pale blue glow.

"I see a lot of people and things with a yellow glow."

Miss Mann nodded her head. "That's good. Anything else?"

"Yeah, I see a couple of people and things surrounded by a blue

glow.”

“A blue glow. I was afraid of that.”

“Why?” Mandy asked. “What does a blue glow mean?”

“It means they are unhappy,” Justin joked.

“This is no time for levity Justin,” Miss Mann scolded. “A blue glow signifies a holographic image. It is just as I thought. Those things we saw earlier today were not real. They were holograms.”

“What’s a hologram?” Jerry asked.

“It’s a series of lights that create a three dimensional image,” Miss Mann stated.

“Just like BJ,” Bishop said.

Jerry was confused. “Who’s BJ?”

“He’s Mandy and Bish’s kid,” Gary answered.

“Mandy and Bishop have a kid?”

“Gary! You’re confusing Jerry even more,” Mandy said. She turned to Jerry. “BJ was a traveler from the future who appeared to us in the form of a holographic image a while ago.”

“A traveler from the future?” Jerry turned to Gary. “When we get home you have a lot of explaining to do. You’ve been keeping way too many good secrets.”

“But the things we encountered this afternoon were solid,” Bishop said. “I could feel them. I couldn’t touch BJ. When I tried, my hand went right through him.”

“Yes, before BJ finally materialized physically in our time he was a simple holographic image,” Miss Mann explained. “Long ago, our ancestors discovered a way of creating solid holograms. But the technology is very rarely used today. Bishop, how many blue images do you see on the view screen?”

Bishop examined the screen more closely. “A couple more than I did a few minutes ago.”

Miss Mann frowned. “That’s not good. If it continues at this rate, pretty soon people won’t be able to tell what is real and what isn’t.”

“That’s crazy. I can tell what’s real,” Justin declared.

“Can you really?” Miss Mann asked, her lips betraying a slight smile.

“Yes.” Justin was smug. “Besides, I don’t believe you can make a solid hologram.”

“You’re standing in one now, Justin,” Miss Mann said, sounding non-chalant.

Bishop, Mandy, Gary and Justin were stunned. Jerry simply remained confused.

Justin put his hand on the castle wall. “Come on, Miss Mann. This is a castle. It’s solid stone. I can feel it.”

“You can feel it because it is a solid holographic image. If we wanted to, we could change its appearance to whatever form we wanted. It was decided a long time ago that our city would reflect a happier, simpler time, with a few modern conveniences of course.”

“So that explains the elevator,” Justin said.

“And the indoor plumbing,” Gary added.

“I knew there was a lot more going on around here than we thought,” Bishop said.

Mandy gasped. “You mean none of this is real?”

“It’s all real to a certain extent,” Miss Mann explained without explaining anything. “But this isn’t solving our problem. We need to find out what is causing these things to appear.”

Gary banged his fist on a wall. “This wall is solid,” he proclaimed.

“So is your head,” Jerry said.

Castleton entered the room. He was carrying Aquarian’s head. Justin swiftly ducked behind Gary.

“I was wondering if anyone knew where I could find master Justin. I am in need of his services again.”

“He’s over there,” Jerry pointed out. “He’s hiding behind my brother.”

“I’m not hiding,” Justin sighed. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Miss Mann turned her attention back to Bishop. “Next to the blue button you will see a green button. Press it and tell me what happens.”

Bishop pressed the green button. The viewscreen displayed a large landmass with two blinking areas on the screen.

“I see two blinking blips,” he said. “One is in the middle of the screen and the other one is north of it. Near a body of water.”

“What does it mean, Miss Mann?” Mandy asked.

“The blip in the middle of the screen is the computer in the castle that maintains our holographic imagery. The other blip must be another computer that is creating the unusual solid holographic images that we experienced earlier. Now here’s the mystery. There isn’t anything north of us in that region that could create a solid hologram.”

“That’s not true, Christie,” Castleton interjected. “If I remember correctly, the remains of the spaceship are in the north.”

"Spaceship? What spaceship?" Gary asked.

"The spaceship," Miss Mann asked Castleton. "My heavens. Does anything still remain of it?"

"I said, what spaceship?" Gary repeated.

"I once saw parts of the spaceship when I was very young," Castleton recalled.

"What spaceship!" Gary exclaimed loudly.

"I had forgotten all about it," Miss Mann stated.

"What spaceship?" Bishop asked.

"Our people are not native to this planet," Miss Mann instantly replied. "A long time ago, some of our ancestors left the planet of our origin in two spaceships. After a long journey one of the ships arrived here on the Homeworld."

"What am I, invisible?" Gary asked.

"No, just fat," Jerry and Justin said in perfect unison. Justin gave Jerry a high five. Gary just growled.

"Why did they leave?" Bishop asked.

"According to history, our original planet was becoming very difficult to live on. After many wars, and countless years of abuse and disregard of the environment it eventually was almost unable to support life. With the limited resources left to them, its rulers decided to send the remaining population out in two spaceships to seek a new world to colonize."

"But what does that have to do with solid holographic images?" Gary asked.

"Since the trip was expected to take a long time, there was a recreational system created on the ships by a computer that could recreate any animal, plant, or environment," Castleton explained.

Miss Mann continued the story. "Eventually, after many long years, one of the ships came to land on this world. Our ancestors dismantled much of it and used it for survival here."

"You said they left in two spaceships. What happened to the other ship?" Bishop asked.

Castleton shook his head. "Nobody knows. Contact was lost with it during the long flight. It was presumed lost in space."

At that moment Aquarian's head suddenly activated in Castleton's hand. "Lost in space," the head said. "Danger! Danger Will Robinson!"

Castleton slapped the side of Aquarian's head. It quickly

deactivated.

"I'm sorry," Castleton said. "I've just added some new sensors and they haven't been calibrated yet."

"But why did they leave the holographic equipment on the ship?" Mandy asked.

"We are not sure," Castleton said. "There are no written records from those times, but there are several stories that have been passed down. One story is that our ancestors wanted to leave behind much of the technology that had helped destroy their world."

"Yet another story is that the technology turned against them when they tried to dismantle it and so they left it there, undisturbed all these years," Miss Mann continued. "But nobody has been there for a very long time and it has always been thought that the machinery had either broken down from non-use, or that the power had finally died out."

"Maybe we could go to the ship and turn off the systems that are still active," Bishop suggested.

"Sure, it should be a snap for Bish and his power," Gary said.

"That would be for the best," Miss Mann said. "With more and more of these images appearing, it will be getting harder for people to tell reality from fantasy."

"I'll go to the ship with you, Bish," Gary volunteered.

"Me, too," Mandy added.

"I guess I'll tag along," Justin said.

Miss Mann took charge. "I'm sorry, Justin. But you're needed here to help Castleton finish repairing Aquarian. I will also stay behind and make sure the holograms do not create anymore trouble."

"Darn!" Justin was dejected.

"Can I go?" Jerry asked.

"Sure, you can carry all the stuff we're going to need," Gary said.

"I can carry anything," Jerry said proudly. "Just as long as it's not your lunch. Nobody is that strong."

"I'll carry the supplies," Bishop offered. "No fooling around here!"

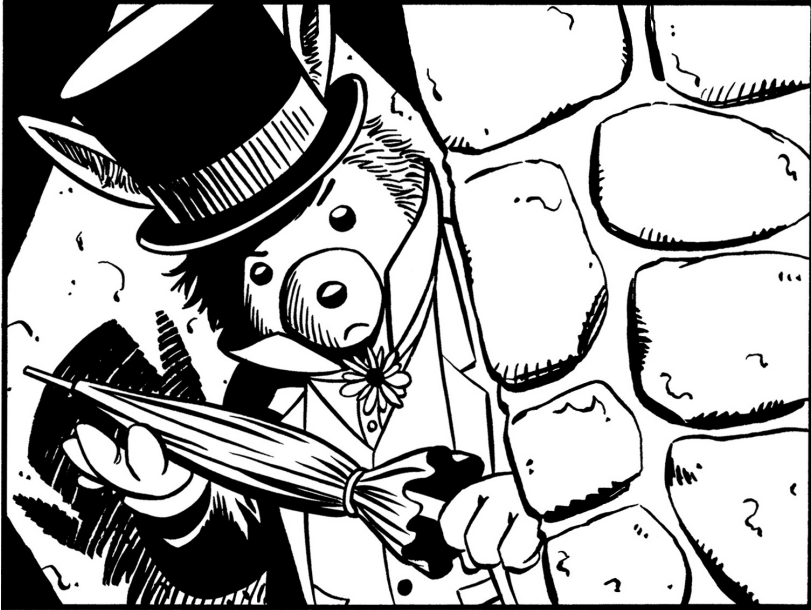
"I'll put everything you might need in Bishop's backpack. You can leave in the morning," Miss Mann said.

"This sounds like fun," Jerry said excitedly.

"And with Bishop along, what could happen?" Gary asked.

Standing unobserved in the shadows was the furry creature, Mr. Boomietrix, watching everything.

“What could happen, my chubby friend? The answer to that could mean your end,” he said to himself as he slowly disappeared.



CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S SNOT WHAT YOU THINK

Although he was sleeping on the most comfortable bed in his life, Bishop had had an uneasy night's sleep. Every time he had fallen asleep he had suddenly been awakened by the unexpected appearance of a solid holograph. During the course of the night his bedroom had been filled with various creatures of shapes and sizes that he had never seen before in his life. When it was time to finally get up he asked his friends if they had had similar experiences. None of them had and Bishop was beginning to wonder why he was being targeted out of the group.

After a tasty breakfast, Bishop, Mandy, Gary and Jerry approached the outer kingdom walls. Bishop was now dressed in his conventional uniform with a backpack strapped to his back. The rest of his friends were wearing standard Homeworld attire. Miss Mann had briefed Bishop on the supplies that she had put into his backpack. Along with a map and some food she had also given them several light orbs, a large length of coil and a transmitter that would allow them to keep in contact with the castle if the need arose. Each one of the travelers also carried along their own sleeping bag for the overnight trip.

As they made their way to the kingdom's gates, they saw several strange things popping in and out of existence. The street was less crowded than before and the few vendors they passed ran away as things kept appearing and disappearing.

“Kinda freaky how these things keep popping in and out like that,”

Gary said.

"Yeah, it makes me wonder if that computer is malfunctioning, or if it is just testing its limitations," Bishop replied.

"Whatever it is, the townspeople don't look too happy," Mandy said.

Bishop began to feel uneasy. He had the feeling that there was somebody behind them. But every time he turned around he didn't see anyone. This feeling kept with him as they slowly walked through the kingdom.

"So why did you decide to wear your uniform today, Bish?" Gary asked.

"I'm not sure what we're going to find when we get to where we are going and I just wanted to be prepared."

"Prepared? Like in battle?" Gary asked.

"I hope not," Bishop answered. "If I knew for sure I wouldn't have brought Jerry along."

"I'm not afraid," Jerry piped in. "I can lick anyone in my class."

"Yeah, I'll remember that if we run into any ten year olds on this trip," Gary said.

Mandy chuckled.

"You know what this place needs?" Gary continued.

"What?" Mandy responded.

"A candy store," Gary replied.

Mandy laughed. "Are you thinking of branching out into this dimension?"

"No," Gary said. "But I definitely noticed that they don't sell sweets of any kind around here. We could make a lot of money if we started to sell some here."

"Now you're beginning to sound like Justin," Bishop said.

Gary frowned. "Oh. Then forget it."

As they turned the next corner Bishop quietly motioned for them to stop. He waited a few seconds and then quickly popped his head around the building and looked at the street they had just turned off of. He saw a very cute girl about his age walking towards them. When she saw that she had been spotted she rapidly turned around and started to walk away.

"What is it, Bish?" Gary asked.

"I'll be right back," Bishop said as he took off after the girl. As he ran towards her he was surprised at how her long blond hair seemed

to sparkle in the sunlight. He had seen many blond girls back home but there was something about her that caught his eye.

He stopped her by grabbing her arm. "Who are you?" he asked. "Why were you following us?"

"I wasn't following you," the girl said.

"Yes you were," Bishop replied. "You've been following us ever since we left the castle. I just couldn't catch you doing it until now. So who are you?"

The girl tried to sputter a response but she was having trouble forming the words. Suddenly Bishop heard a familiar voice behind them. "Bishop. Please wait!"

Castleton was approaching him.

"Is something wrong, Castleton?" Bishop asked.

"No, no. There's just a personal matter I wanted to talk to you about."

As Castleton began to speak, Mandy, Gary and Jerry walked over.

"What's going on?" Mandy asked.

"Castleton had something he wanted to ask me," Bishop replied.

Gary noticed the young girl that Bishop was tightly holding and smiled. "And who's that?"

"That my granddaughter," Castleton replied. "I'm sorry if she surprised you. She left the castle ahead of me and I didn't realize until a few minutes ago that she had gone. I figured that she had come after you."

"Your granddaughter?" Bishop said as he began to release his grip on the girl.

"Yes," Castleton replied. "My granddaughter, Amy has come to visit me for a few days, and I don't have time to spend with her. She lives with her parents on their farm in the southern region."

"One time my school took us on a field trip to a farm," Jerry piped in. "I saw a cow and some horses."

"Not now Jerry," Mandy said.

"It is taking me longer to repair Aquarian than I thought it would," Castleton explained. "I thought she might enjoy being around people her own age, if you don't mind taking her along with you."

Amy smiled at Bishop. "I'm sorry that I was following you. I didn't think you would notice. Please let me go with you. I won't be in the way."

Bishop was noticeably taken by the girl's appearance. "We aren't

sure what we're going to find out there. It could be dangerous."

"Don't worry. I can hold my own," Amy said with gentle bravado.

Bishop and Gary were both staring at Amy. Mandy appeared to be a little jealous. "Bishop's right. You might be safer here, with your grandfather," she said.

"And you might be safer in the castle, making us some sandwiches," Amy replied. "Adventure always gives me an appetite."

Mandy was speechless. She didn't like this girl. Not at all. And she would have told her so, had Gary not interrupted.

"Sandwiches!" Gary declared. "I'm hungry!"

"You're always hungry," Jerry stated.

"Quiet," Gary sneered. "I can get that grief from Justin."

"You're welcome to join us, Amy," Bishop said.

"Thank you. I know Amy will be safe while in your protection."

Castleton headed back to the castle.

"So, lead the way, Bishop," Mandy said, stepping in front of Amy.

Oblivious to the tension between the two girls, Bishop reached into his backpack and pulled out several items. "Miss Mann gave me a map and a compass. We just need to head north. She said that there is nothing along the way except for a few scattered farms and wooded areas. We should make it there in no time."

"My grandfather told me all about it." Amy was beaming. "I can't believe we're going to the spaceship. I've heard so many stories about it. I've always wanted to go there."

Bishop, Gary, Amy, Mandy and Jerry headed out the kingdom gates and started walking north. As they walked they passed fewer and fewer people along the path that led from the kingdom.

"So tell us a little about yourself, Amy," Bishop said.

"Yeah, do you have any brothers? Sisters? Boyfriends?" Gary asked.

Amy was suddenly somber. "I have no sisters, just two brothers. They're always fighting between themselves."

"And?" Gary pressed.

"And, I don't have any boyfriends," Amy said. She turned and looked straight at Bishop with a mischievous look. "Yet!"

Mandy didn't like the sound of that.

A short while later they were walking through a large wooded area. Bishop had Mandy on one side and Amy on the other. Gary was walking behind them. Gary kept trying to get in-between Bishop and Amy, but

Amy always prevented him from doing so.

"So what else can you tell us about yourself, Amy?" Gary asked.



"Oh, there really isn't much to say. I'd rather hear more about you, Bishop," Amy said. Mandy noticed that Amy was holding on to Bishop's arm.

"I'm hungry," Jerry suddenly wailed.

"I'm sorry, Jerry," Bishop said. "But we're too busy. We'll eat later."

"I told you that you should have stayed behind and made us lunch," Amy said to Mandy. Amy smiled. Mandy did not.

Suddenly, a thunderous growl roared from somewhere up ahead. Jerry jumped, crashing into Gary. Amy flung herself into Bishop's arms. "That sounded like a snagon!" she cried.

"Like a what?" Bishop asked.

"A snagon. Don't you have them where you come from?"

"No. What's a snagon?"

"A snagon is a large, ferocious, scaly creature with a huge tail."

"Oh, you mean a dragon," Gary said. "It breathes fire."

"No, a snagon doesn't breathe fire, silly. It..."

Mandy pulled Amy out of Bishop's arms. "Listen, Bishop is not going to be any help to us with you climbing all over him."

Gary stepped between the two girls placing one arm around each shoulder. "Hey, girls. Take it easy," he began.

Jerry cut him off. "Yeah, don't fight over Bishop. There's plenty of Gary to go around. And around and around and around."

Gary and Jerry bickered among themselves. Bishop pulled Mandy aside.

"Calm down, Mandy," he said.

"I don't like the way she flings herself at you."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"No, of course not."

"I'm not the only one she pays attention to."

Amy suddenly screamed. Bishop and Mandy turned to see a creature approach Amy. It had the body of a dragon, but the ears and nose of an elephant. Wrapping its trunk around her it lifted her several feet off the ground and began to walk away.

"Is that a snagon?" Jerry yelled. Nobody answered.

"Help! Bishop! Help!" Amy screamed.

"Yeah, right! You're not the only person she pays attention to," Mandy said sarcastically.

As Bishop raced towards the snagon he stopped abruptly when the

creature bellowed out a terrifying roar that shook the nearby trees. He clasped his hands to his ears and fell to his knees as the sound resonated through him.

The snagon continued walking along knocking a few of the smaller trees down as it marched through the forest.

Mandy, Gary and Jerry ran over to Bishop and helped him to his feet.

"That was awesome," Jerry said. "Did you see that thing?"

"Yes," Bishop answered. "I saw and heard that thing."

Jerry began running through the high grass after the snagon. Gary tried to stop him.

"Hey, twerp!" Gary shouted. "Get back here!"

Jerry suddenly stopped a few yards away from them.

"How about that," Gary said. "He listened to me for once."

"I think I just stepped in something," Jerry said. As Gary walked over to him, Jerry lifted his foot up and looked at his sneaker. There was a sticky orange goo all over his right sneaker. As he lifted it higher he wrinkled up his face. "PU!"

Gary stopped when he was a few feet away.

"Ugh! What did you step in, twerp?" Gary asked.

"I don't know," Jerry said. "But it stinks awful!"

Bishop and Mandy finally made their way over to the two brothers.

"Jerry," Bishop started. "You just can't keep..." Bishop began to cough. "What stinks around here?"

Jerry pointed to his sneaker and the remaining orange goo that was on the ground. "That!" he said.

"You know what I think this is?" Mandy asked.

"What?" Gary replied.

"Snagon poop," Mandy answered.

"Snagon poop?" Jerry said. "Ugh! Gross!"

"That will teach you not to go running off when you aren't supposed to," Gary said. "Those were new sneakers too. Now we have to clean them off before mom finds out."

"I was only following the snagon and Amy," Jerry said in his own defense.

"That's right guys," Bishop said. "We've got to rescue Amy."

"Do we have to?" Mandy asked.

"I know you're just kidding," Bishop replied.

"Of course," Mandy lied.

Bishop, Gary, Jerry and Mandy carefully followed the creature to its lair by following its trail. They were ever on the lookout for any more deposits of snagon poop. Several times they heard noises from other wild animals, but they never saw any. One time Bishop thought he spotted Mr. Boomietrix watching them from a distance. But when he looked again, there was nothing there.

They finally made it to a small clearing outside a cave where they found Amy tied to a long pole. The creature's back was to the group.

"Help! Bishop! Help!" Amy screamed.

"Help Bishop help," Mandy said. "Is that the only thing she knows how to say? If my dad were here he would say that she sounds like a broken record."

"What's a record?" Jerry inquired.

"It's something that old people listen to," Gary replied.

Hearing noises behind it, the snagon turned to face Bishop and his friends. As it sounded out another thunderous roar, it momentarily flickered in and out of existence.

"Did you see that, Bish?" Gary asked.

"Yeah. It must be a hologram. That must be how she got tied up. The computer created an environment where she was tied up to a pole. This shouldn't be that hard to beat."

"Remember, it's a solid hologram," Mandy warned him. "You can still get hurt."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," Bishop said.

"Help, Bishop, Help!" Amy screamed again.

"We heard you the first time!" Mandy screamed back. "Hold your horses!"

"In all the stories I've read the prince has to rescue the maiden in distress from the dragon," Jerry said.

"Great! How come she gets to be the maiden in distress?" Mandy asked.

The snagon advanced toward them.

"I don't think that matters right now," Bishop said. He grabbed a nearby broken tree branch from the ground and waved it in front of the creature. "I'll try to distract it, while one of you goes around and unties Amy."

Gary and Jerry went to the right of the creature. Jerry started to climb a tree.

"Jerry! Get down from there!" Gary yelled.

"I just want a good seat for all the action."

Gary climbed the tree to catch his brother. "I said, come down!"

Meantime Mandy went to the left of the creature.

"What if it breathes fire at you?" Mandy called to Bishop.

"Relax. Amy said it doesn't breathe fire."

The creature stood on its back two feet and roared. It then blew blue slime out of its nose at Bishop, covering him.

"Cool! Blue boogers!" Jerry said from his perch in the tree. "I wish I had some popcorn right now."

"Too bad Justin isn't here," Gary laughed. "It would have been great to see him get slimed."

Meanwhile, back at the castle, Castleton was taking apart Aquarian's body in the center of his work room. Justin was seated at a desk working at a computer that was hooked up to Aquarian's disembodied head. Justin was looking at the monitor and typing at the keyboard.

"I can't believe Aquarian has all these files programmed in him," he said to Castleton. "The list seems to go on forever."

Justin stopped typing as he peered closer at the monitor. "Stellar Cartography. Quantum Physics. Paranormal Psychiatry. Ballet. Metaphysics."

Justin looked up from the monitor. "Ballet?"

"Yes, Alabaster felt that nothing learned is ever wasted," Castleton said. "All knowledge is important. So while Aquarian is here I am downloading more information about the Homeworld. This way he will be able to teach Bishop more about his ancestry."

"Yeah and hopefully warn us about dangerous things like yipples," Justin added.

"Oh that's not necessary," Castleton replied. "Everyone knows about yipples."

"So you say," Justin responded. "Thank goodness Miss Mann took care of the yipple Gambit brought to Earth. I'm sure glad she brought it back to the Homeworld with her."

The monitor started flashing.

"There's some sort of error flashing on the monitor. It says 'Error - Corrupt File.' What do I do?"

Aquarian's eyes opened.

"You delete the file," Aquarian said.

Startled, Justin jumped up. "Aquarian! You can speak?"

"While in this mode my abilities are limited, but speech is possible," Aquarian said. "Which file is corrupt?"

Standing at the keyboard Justin typed in a few commands. "It's a poetry program. Boy, you sure have some pretty crazy programs in you."

"Accessing," Aquarian said. "I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a fart." Aquarian's eyes went back and forth. "No, that is not correct. I think that I shall never see a fart as lovely as a tree." Aquarian's eyes moved faster back and forth. "Corrupt file. Corrupt file."

Justin shook his head and gave a short whistle.

Aquarian's eyes then scanned the room. "Where is Bishop?"

Justin sat back down. "Out with Mandy. And I'll bet he's having more fun than I am right now."

Back at the snagon's lair, Bishop tried to wipe the blue slime off himself as Mandy continued to make her way toward Amy.

"Bishop, are you okay?" Mandy called out to him.

"Yeah, just very slimy. This stuff reeks!" Bishop tried unsuccessfully to wipe the slime off his face and hair, but it was too sticky. "I hope this stuff washes off."

Mandy reached Amy and started to untie her.

"You're not Bishop! I want Bishop to rescue me!" Amy whined as she tried to push Mandy away.

"If it were up to me, I'd leave you tied up here," Mandy said. The snagon turned its back on Bishop and looked at Mandy. It stood on its hind feet and roared. "Oh, no!" she cried. "It's going to blow that stuff on me!"

Before the snagon could do anything else, Bishop grabbed a nearby fallen tree branch and swung it at the creature. The creature twirled around and faced Bishop. It roared again and blew another long blast of blue snot at Bishop which knocked him to the ground as the slime covered him further from head to toe.

Gary was now on a tree branch above the creature. He was trying to grab Jerry, who now was clinging to the end of the limb.

"Get off of there," Gary ordered. "If you get killed, mom's gonna kill me!"

"Get off yourself. The limb can't hold both of us!"

Gary looked back at the tree just in time to see the limb snap.

"Yow!" Gary exclaimed as the tree limb broke. Gary, Jerry and the

branch landed first on the very annoyed snagon, and then tumbled to the ground below. Fearing for their lives, they looked up and saw that they had knocked it unconscious. Mandy finished untying Amy, who immediately ran over to Bishop. He was just getting to his feet and he was busy trying to wipe blue snagon snot from his eyes. Amy hugged him, getting herself covered in slime.

"My hero!" Amy cheered.

"Wait a minute," an astounded Mandy snapped. "Bishop didn't rescue you. I did!"

"So did I!" Gary added.

Amy kissed Bishop. "You were wonderful," she gushed.

"Ugh. Gross!" Jerry groaned.

"For once I agree with you, squirt," Gary said. He didn't care for Amy, either.

A half hour later they took a break near a large pond. Bishop was standing in the warm water, trying to wash the rest of the blue slime from his hair. On the shore, Mandy, Gary, and Amy sat around a small campfire while Jerry took a short nap nearby. Bishop's uniform hung on several sticks near the fire.

"Hey, Mandy. Is my uniform dry yet?" Bishop called out from the pond.

Mandy felt his uniform. "Pretty much." She handed it to Gary. "You want to bring it down to him?"

"I'll do it," Amy volunteered.

Mandy wouldn't have it. "No, you're coming with me while he gets changed." She pulled a reluctant Amy away from the pond into the woods. Gary walked to the water with Bishop's uniform.

"Here you go. Your uniform is dry." Gary handed it to Bishop. He grabbed it and went behind a bush to get dressed. Amy sneaked a peek as the undressed Bishop dashed by.

"Bish, I think Mandy is still a little steamed," Gary said.

"Steamed? About what?"

"About you and Amy."

"There's nothing between me and Amy. We're just friends."

"Mandy thinks it's more than that."

Bishop pondered this as he continued dressing. He secretly wished that Miss Mann had decided to come along on their trip. She could have helped resolve his problem with Mandy and Amy.

Miss Mann in the meantime was having a hectic day back at the castle. Most of her time had been spent reassuring the populace that everything would be back to normal soon. She had just sat down for the first time that day when she heard a familiar voice coming from the doorway behind her.

"Miss Mann? Are you in here?"

Miss Mann rose from her chair and turned. At first she almost didn't recognize Reprint standing in the doorway. His whole body was covered in mud.

"Reprint!" she exclaimed. "How did you get so filthy?"

Reprint smiled. "Oh, you noticed."

Miss Mann laughed. "Yes, it's very hard to miss. Thank you. That's the first laugh I've had all day."

"It all began when I started back to the kingdom after the last farm I visited. I was walking along a path when all of a sudden a large vehicle appeared out of thin air and was speeding in my direction. You're not going to believe this, but I swear it was being driven by a furry animal wearing a yellow and green outfit and waving an umbrella in one hand."

"Mr. Boomietrix," Miss Mann said to herself.

"I barely had enough time to get out of its way. I jumped just in the nick of time, but I landed in a huge mud pile on the side of the path. When I looked back at the path, the vehicle had disappeared."

"You mean it drove away?" Miss Mann asked.

"No, it just disappeared," Reprint responded. "Just as quickly as it came, it went away."

Miss Mann nodded her head. "Events like that have been happening more frequently during the past twenty four hours. Ever since Bishop and his friends arrived."

"Bishop is here?" Reprint asked.

"He was. He arrived yesterday with his friends. They needed to get some minor repairs made to Aquarian. But they've since left the kingdom. They're looking for a way to stop these strange appearances. Justin's in another wing of the castle helping Castleton fix Aquarian."

"I'm sorry I missed them."

"They will be back soon enough. In the interim, I think you should get yourself cleaned up. Then you can tell me all about your trip."

"Okay," Reprint promised. "I'll be right back."

Reprint turned and walked down the castle hallway. Seconds later

Miss Mann saw Mr. Boomietrix sitting in her chair.

He looked up at her glumly. "Your friends are on a quest, and they will try their best, in their need, to succeed. But every game must have a pawn. Something that can be counted on. Players will enter and players will leave. Until their ultimate goal they achieve."

Mr. Boomietrix got to his feet and stood on the chair.

"The stakes are great as the hour draws late. And you have a task you must alleviate. Seek a friend who has been lost to you and you will also encounter an old adversary too."

Mr. Boomietrix's face took on a solemn look. "There is only one who can set things right. That can help you out in your hour of plight. But he must tell the false from the true to be of any use to you."

Miss Mann pondered for a few seconds and then she asked. "Are you speaking about Bishop? Is he in any trouble?"

"He is being put to the test. To prove that he is better than the rest," Mr. Boomietrix replied. "If he fails to prove that he is brave, he will wind up in a grave."

When he finished Mr. Boomietrix instantly disappeared.

"I've got to warn Bishop," Miss Mann said to herself.

5
CHAPTER FIVEI TALK TO THE
TREEZE, BUT THEY
NEVER LISTEN TO ME

It had been several hours since Bishop and his friends had had their strange encounter with the snagon. They had just left the woods and soon found a small stream. They started walking along it for most of the day without any further incident. Eventually they came upon a large dense ominous looking forest that stretched as far as the eye could see. Although there was still some sunlight left in the day, very little could be seen in the forest. Not a sound could be heard from within.

Amy nervously grabbed Bishop's arm. "I don't like that place."

Bishop pulled the map out of his backpack with his free hand. He dropped the map to the ground as Amy tightened her grip around his arm.

Gary picked up the map and opened it. He looked at it for a few confused seconds. "I don't see any large forests on this map." He handed the map back to Bishop who had just finished prying Amy's hand from his arm.

Bishop also reviewed the map. "There's nothing like this on here. It must all be another solid holograph. These things just keep getting bigger the closer we get to the ship. I wonder what this place is."

At that moment a blood-curdling scream tore through the forest. Jerry jumped into his brother's arms. Mandy and Amy both grabbed Bishop.

"That's the Forest of Treeze," Amy said nervously.

"Of course there are trees," Mandy said. "It wouldn't be a forest if it didn't have trees."

"Not trees," Amy responded. "Treeze! T.R.E.E.Z.E!"

"Forest of Treeze? What's that?" Bishop asked.

Amy shook her head. "It's a legendary place filled with horrible creatures called Treeze. Ancient stories say that such a place existed on the world our ancestors came from. It was said that anyone who encountered the Treeze was never heard from again."

Jerry was timid. "What do they look like?"

Gary had been so engrossed in Amy's story that he forgot he was still holding his brother until he heard him speak. He dropped Jerry to the ground. He landed with a resounding splat.

Amy once again shook her head. "Nobody knows for sure. Some stories say that they were giant hairy monsters over ten feet high with razor sharp teeth."

Jerry gulped.

"Others say that they are invisible ogres and that they eat unwary travelers."

"I'm not an unwary traveler," Jerry declared loudly. "I've never been unwary. I'll never be unwary."

"Great," Gary said. "Now just shut up and don't ask me any stupid questions."

"Okay," Jerry said as he turned to Bishop. "What's unwary mean?"

"Don't worry about it Jerry," Bishop assured him. "This is all stuff created by a computer somewhere. It's just trying to scare us off."

"It's doing a good job," Jerry replied.

"I'm not afraid," Amy said. She held Bishop tightly. "As long as Bishop is here, I'll be safe." She then turned her attention to Mandy. "Too bad not everyone can say that."

"I don't need to run to Bishop every time something goes wrong!" Mandy proclaimed.

"Of course you don't," Bishop agreed. "And I'm sure that we can defeat anything we run across as long as we stay together."

"And alive," Jerry added.

Bishop began walking into the dark forest with Mandy and Amy in tow. "Come on, the sooner we get started the sooner we'll be finished," he said.

"I wish he had said that differently," Gary sighed.

"And I wish I had stayed home... or at least, back at the castle," Jerry said.

Back at the castle, an unnerved Christie Rae Mann knocked on the door to Reprint's room. Moments later she was standing inside telling him about her recent encounter with Mr. Boomietrix.

"There is more to what's going on than I originally thought," Miss Mann said as she nervously paced the floor.

Reprint watched her pacing back and forth. "Are you sure that you told me everything he said?" he asked.

"I believe so," Miss Mann replied. "I was not expecting him so I was caught off guard. But if what he said is true, then Bishop and his friends are in grave danger. And I must get into contact with them."

"How are you going to do that?" Reprint asked.

"Bishop was supplied with a communicator before he left. I will just contact him and..." Miss Mann stopped as she saw a familiar figure walk past the open door. By the time she made it to the doorway she was able to catch another glimpse of the figure as it turned down another corridor.

"It can't be," she muttered to herself. "He's been dead for years." She started down the corridor after the figure.

Reprint was perplexed. "Miss Mann," he called out. When he received no reply he started to go after her.

He was just in time to see her enter a doorway at the end of a corridor. He hurried after her. He opened the door into the castle's large reception room and went through. Inside, he found the room deserted.

Elsewhere, in the cluttered workshop, a work weary Justin decided to take a quick break. He got out of his chair and headed over to a nearby stone wall. He had to walk carefully to avoid the various parts of Aquarian that Castleton had strewn all over the floor. Looking at the clutter he knew that Castleton must have brought in parts that were either duplicate pieces or ones that he had grabbed by accident that went to other things. Reaching down he grabbed a large propeller and looked at it. It looked too antiquated to go into such an advanced piece of technology such as Aquarian so he carelessly dropped it. Reaching the stone wall he pressed a small stone and a large rock panel swung open revealing a small refrigerator. He reached in and grabbed a glass containing a bright pink liquid. Drinking it he instantly felt refreshed. He

wondered what it was exactly that he just drank. As he emptied the glass he put it on the desk. He thought for a moment as he stared at the cluttered floor. Castleton stood at a nearby machine reviewing his latest test results.

"I never thought I would find this kind of stuff interesting," Justin said.

"What stuff would that be, Master Justin?" Castleton asked as he kept his eye on the machine.

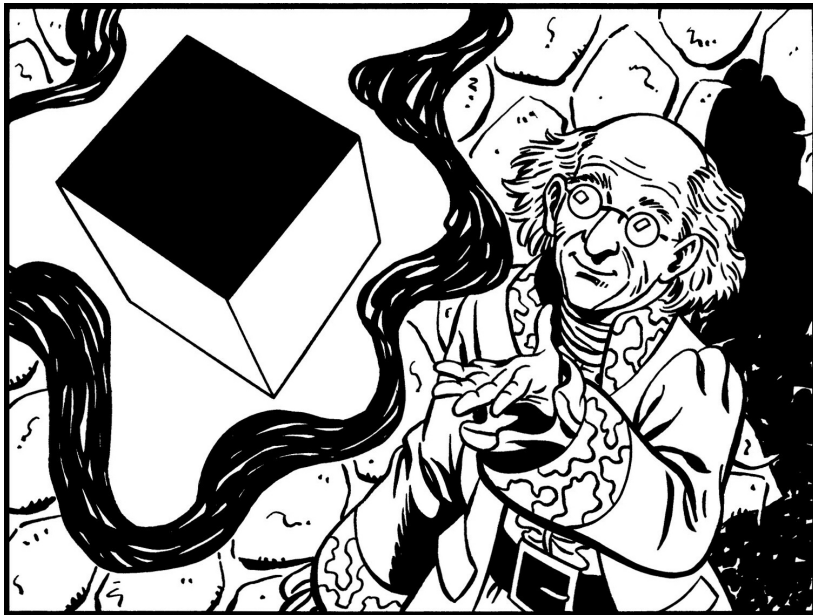
"All this computer and electronic stuff," Justin replied.

"I thought I heard that your father was involved in this type of technology back on your own world."

Justin thought about his father for a moment. "Yeah, and that's the reason that I stayed away from all of this before. I didn't want to get involved with it because it reminded me too much of him. I used to get angry whenever I thought about him because he never had any time to spend with me. I was always the last person he made time for."

"That may be true," Castleton said as he turned to face Justin. "But you were also the last person on his mind before he died."

Justin banged his fist on the desk. "That's the problem. I'll never understand him now that he's gone. Why did he do that? Why does my



mother never see me? Why are people so hard to understand?"

"It sounds like the people of your world have much to learn about themselves. Perhaps if they spent less time developing their technology, they might have more time to understand themselves and each other."

Castleton picked up a small cube from the table next to him. He held it for a few seconds and then he released it. The cube hovered in mid-air and started to change shape. "Remember, Master Justin, you should never let technology rule you. You must learn to control it and live with it in harmony."

Justin watched as the object began to change its color and shape. Soon it was a swiftly shifting myriad of forms and colors.

"That's amazing," Justin remarked. "What does it do?"

"It does what you see it do," Castleton said simply.

"But what do you use it for?" Justin asked.

"Must everything in life have a purpose? Can't something exist just simply to exist?"

Justin pondered that as the object returned to its original shape and color. It then descended into Castleton's outstretched hand. Castleton put it back on the table and went back to his machine.

"Always remember that what you see is the final product. It didn't start out this way. It became this way after many encounters outside of its control. The same is true with people. They are not born the way you see them now. They are who they are because of people and events in their lives that have helped shape them into the people you now see."

Justin thought about his own life and his parents. Maybe there was something in their past that made them the way they are today. Someday he would have to find out more about them.

"You will discover, Master Justin, that being happy with what you are is far easier than most people think," Castleton continued.

"That sounds like something that Miss Mann would say," Justin remarked.

Castleton turned and smiled. "Yes, she was an excellent student. I taught her a great deal."

Justin was amazed. "You taught Miss Mann? You're a teacher too?"

"I have had many responsibilities and have assumed many roles in my years here at the castle. At one time I taught young Christie along with all the royal children."

"So that's why you know so much about everything and everyone.

I'll bet there's a lot you can tell Chance about his father. And his maniacal uncle."

Castleton looked sad for a moment. "Yes," he said. "There is a great deal more Bishop doesn't know."

Elsewhere, Bishop and his companions slowly walked through the Forest of Treeze. The forest was filled with so many enormous trees that they blotted out the mid day sun. But the eerie thing about the forest was that with the large number of trees that it contained, none of them appeared to house any animals. The only noise they had heard since entering the forest was the sound of their own feet on the rocky path. Occasionally the silence was broken by the sound of Jerry irritating his brother.

"Are we there yet?" Jerry asked.

"For the two hundredth time, I don't know!" Gary replied sharply. "We don't know how big this place is."

"We've been walking for a couple of hours and it doesn't look like we've gone very far," Bishop added. "Everything looks the same."

"At least we haven't met any of those treeze things," Gary noted.

Mandy cast an accusing glance at Amy. "If they even exist."

Amy gave her a nasty look. At that moment a distant piercing scream cut through the quiet.

"If treeze don't exist, then what do you call that?" Amy asked.

"I don't know," Mandy answered. "But it doesn't prove anything."

Jerry yawned loudly.

"Maybe we should stop and camp for the night, Bish," Gary said. "Jerry's so tired that he didn't even jump at the last scream."

"When we find a clearing in the forest we'll stop," Bishop said.

"What's that?" Amy asked.

Bishop looked around confused. "What's what?"

She pointed somewhere off the path. "Over there. I think I heard something."

Bishop took a few steps in the direction that Amy had pointed. "Yeah, I hear something too."

"If it's not something screaming then let's go," Gary suggested. "Maybe it's a way out of here."

Mandy was suddenly very worried. "I don't know if we should stray from the path," she said.

"You can stay on the path if you want," Amy said. "But I'm going

over there to see what's making that sound. Come on Bishop."

Amy raced off the path in the direction of the noise.

Mandy looked at Bishop. "You're not going after her, are you?"

"Yeah," Bishop sighed. "I have to. Castleton is expecting me to keep her safe. I've got to go after her. You stick to the path with Gary and Jerry. I'll catch up with you later." Bishop kissed Mandy on the cheek and took off after Amy.

Mandy watched as Bishop jumped over a fallen tree limb and continued after Amy. "To heck with it," she said. "Amy's not going to be alone with him in this place." She turned and looked at Gary and Jerry. "I'm going after them."

"But Bishop said we were supposed to stay on the path," Jerry complained.

"You stay on the path," Mandy said. "There's something I've got to take care of first." She ran after Bishop before he disappeared from her sight.

"I don't like the sound of that," Gary said. Taking a quick glance at the path ahead he turned his attention back to the direction that Mandy had just run off to. Stepping off the path he headed off after her. "Come on, twerp, let's go."

"Aren't you afraid of what's out there?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah," Gary replied. "But I'm more afraid of what Mandy will do once she catches up with Amy."

Elsewhere, unaware that Reprint was trying to catch up with her, Miss Mann followed the mysterious figure into the castle's reception room. On the other side of the room she saw him open a door and exit. Miss Mann sped off after him. She was unaware that once she left the reception room, the door behind her disappeared and was replaced by a fireplace. A minute later when Reprint looked into the reception room he was startled. There was no sign of Miss Mann or a door she might have left through.

Miss Mann entered the library and looked at the figure standing in front of her. Although he had his back to her, she knew who it was.

"King Alchemous?" she asked hesitantly.

The king turned and stared at Miss Mann. "Yes, and if you are done following me perhaps you can tell me what you want."

Miss Mann could barely speak. She knew it couldn't be King Alchemous. She had attended his funeral many years ago. When he died

he left his kingdom to his youngest son Alabaster. This would eventually be the driving force behind Onyx's thirst for revenge. Being the eldest son Onyx felt that he should have ascended to his father's position instead of his younger brother.

Now, seeing King Alchemous before her, Miss Mann began to recall many memories that she had forgotten over the years. The king had been like a father to her ever since the death of her own father. Seeing him again brought many emotions to the surface. It also brought back several unpleasant memories that she had suppressed long ago.

Logically she knew that it was only a solid hologram of the late king, but a part of her yearned for Alchemous to be real. There was so much that she wanted to ask him and so many other things that she wanted to warn him about.

She opened her mouth in an attempt to say something but she could not find the words.

Finally King Alchemous broke the silence. "I apologize if I was a bit abrupt a moment ago. My wife tells me that I can be that way if I dwell on my problems for too long."

Miss Mann was amazed. "I don't recall you ever having problems. Except for that one time." Miss Mann paused as she recalled a bitter memory.

King Alchemous laughed. "My dear, I have many problems. Heavy is the heart that rules a kingdom, and a family. But I always believe in putting on a good front. It doesn't bode well for a king if his people see him troubled. They begin to have doubts in their leadership and then the real problems begin."

Miss Mann nodded. "Yes, there have been several occasions where I have had to hide my true feelings so as not to worry others." She paused for a few seconds. "But there was always one person that I could never hide my secret feelings from. Even after all the things he's kept hidden from me, he still knows me better than anyone else."

"Secrets to hide, secrets to keep. Secrets you lock away when you're fast asleep."

Miss Mann turned around when she heard that familiar voice speaking from behind. Instinctively looking down she saw Mr. Boomietrix smiling up at her.

"Mr. Boomietrix?" Miss Mann asked in disbelief. "Why are you here again? And why is King Alchemous..." Miss Mann turned back to address the king but when she did she saw that he had disappeared. "Things are

getting out of hand," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Miss Mann reached into her pocket and pulled out her communication device with her right hand. "I need to get hold of Bishop."

Before Miss Mann could activate the device, Mr. Boomietrix stopped her by stomping his umbrella on the floor.

"A moment of your time is all that I require at this hour. As a sign of friendship I offer you this flower." Mr. Boomietrix pulled a purple flower from his coat and handed it to Miss Mann.

Taking the flower in her left hand she lifted it to her nose and inhaled the flower's potent fragrance. She coughed once and quickly became very still.

With unbelievable speed Mr. Boomietrix lifted his right paw and extended it towards Miss Mann's face. His arm started stretching until it reached her forehead. The paw then became transparent and appeared to enter her forehead. Miss Mann grimaced in pain as Mr. Boomietrix availed himself to the information stored within her brain.

"Another piece of the puzzle is now in place," Mr. Boomietrix said to himself. "But time grows short and I must pick up the pace."

With his left paw he then reached into Miss Mann's right hand and took the communication device which he promptly put into his left coat



pocket.

Feeling the effects of the flower beginning to wear off, Mr. Boomietrix detached himself from Miss Mann and resumed his normal appearance.

Unaware of the events that had just transpired Miss Mann looked at the flower in her hand and once again inhaled its no longer intoxicating fragrance.

"Thank you," she said. "It's a nice gift. I wish I had something to give you."

"You have given me more than you know," Mr. Boomietrix replied with a slight grin. "Which I now offer to show."

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella in front of himself and he suddenly disappeared. Miss Mann looked down and was amazed to see a young girl of about seven years of age standing in his place. Miss Mann recognized her instantly. As hard as it was to believe she knew that she was staring at herself when she was much younger.

At that moment in the sub basement of the castle, Onyx was angrily pacing around the cell that he had been imprisoned in these past few months. He wasn't sure which made him madder: The fact that he had been beaten twice by his youthful nephew, Bishop, or that he was being held prisoner in the very castle he had grown up in. He had had no contact with any of his followers except when he was allowed his daily visits from his son, Gambit, who was also imprisoned in a nearby cell. Although he had originally felt that his son had disgraced him by not defeating Bishop in their first encounter, he later decided that it was simply due to the fact that he had not been around to properly train the boy. Onyx believed that with the proper training and motivation it might be possible for his son to redeem himself. He stopped pacing when he heard sounds coming from Gambit's cell. It sounded like he was having a conversation with somebody. But Onyx was certain that he had not heard anyone enter the area. He strained to listen more intently but he was still unable to make out what was being said.

A few minutes earlier, further down the hall in another cell, Gambit had been surprised by a sudden visit from Mr. Boomietrix. Word had not yet reached him or Onyx about the numerous solid holograms that were sprouting up within the kingdom. Gambit was full of questions for the strange new being, but Mr. Boomietrix refused to answer, instead remaining silent. And so after spending a few minutes with the silent creature Gambit began to think that he was losing touch with reality.

"What are you?" Gambit cried. "How come you won't answer any of my questions?"

Mr. Boomietrix stood silently for a few more seconds. He then pulled a purple flower from his coat and offered it to Gambit.

Gambit ripped the flower from Mr. Boomietrix's paw. "What's this? What am I supposed to do with this thing?"

Mr. Boomietrix motioned for Gambit to smell the flower. Bending down, Gambit lifted the purple blossom to his nose and took a small sniff. He coughed a few times and then stood silent. The flower dropped from his hand.

Looking up at the stationary boy, Mr. Boomietrix lifted his right paw towards Gambit's face. As it had with Miss Mann a short while earlier his paw quickly approached Gambit's face and became transparent. The paw then entered Gambit's forehead.

A short range of expressions crossed Mr. Boomietrix's face as he silently absorbed information from Gambit's brain. Gambit screamed in pain as the information was extracted. After a minute Mr. Boomietrix pulled his paw from Gambit's forehead. It quickly returned back to normal.

Seconds later the effects of the flower began to wear off and Gambit slowly regained consciousness and mobility. He looked down at Mr. Boomietrix who was still smiling up at him.

"I already told you to go away," Gambit said, seemingly unaware of the previous events. "I've got no time for this."

Mr. Boomietrix looked around the cell and chuckled. "Time. Time. Time. That is all you have because of your crime. But there is need for you in the events ahead. So pay heed to the things that are going to be said." Mr. Boomietrix reached into one of his coat pockets and pulled out a folded piece of paper, which he handed to Gambit. "This map will see you through, all the obstacles that lie ahead of you."

Gambit reluctantly took the map and looked at it. It felt solid enough. He was beginning to think that maybe he wasn't going crazy after all.

"Why should I follow this map?" Gambit inquired.

"If you head to where the map tells you to go," Mr. Boomietrix explained with a twinkle in his eye, "you will find something the royal family lost long ago."

"Something valuable?" Gambit asked.

"Its value is so great, that I cannot even contemplate. So hurry off now and seek this treasure, you have no time for games or pleasure."

Mr. Boomietrix turned from Gambit.

"Wait!" Gambit cried. "How am I supposed to get out of here?"

"They call me Mr. Boomietrix because of my tricks, but I have another knack that packs some mean kicks."

Mr. Boomietrix looked at the bars in front of him. Walking up to them he pulled a red flower off of his jacket and placed it on the bars. He quickly ran back to Gambit.

"If an egress is what you lack, then I suggest that you stand back."

A few seconds after Gambit and Mr. Boomietrix stepped away from the bars there was a large explosion. When the smoke cleared, Gambit saw that the bars and Mr. Boomietrix were now gone.

Grabbing the map that he had dropped to the floor during the explosion, Gambit raced into the corridor. He stopped running when he reached Onyx's cell.

"Father, I've come to help you escape."

Onyx stared in disbelief. "What was that explosion? How did you get out?"

"There's no time for answers right now," Gambit said. He reached for a ring of keys hanging on a nearby hook. "We've got to get out of here."

Gambit unlocked the cell and flung open the door. "Quickly, before we're discovered."

"I need to devise a plan," Onyx said.

Gambit smiled. "No need," he said holding up the map. "I've got everything we need right here."

A brief time later in the Forest of Treeze, Bishop finally caught up to Amy in a small clearing. Amy was sitting at the edge of a pond dangling her feet in the cool refreshing water. A little bit beyond the pond to the north was a towering waterfall that branched off into two streams, one heading to the east and the other to the west. Each stream quickly widened as the waters flowed further away from the falls. Amy turned her head and smiled when she heard Bishop approach.

"I knew you would follow me," she said. "I knew when I first saw you that you weren't afraid of adventure. We can have lots of fun together."

Bishop crouched down to the ground beside her. "You shouldn't have run off like that," he scolded. "You could have tripped and fallen. Or something could have attacked you."

Amy laughed. "I've always been like this. I'm not afraid. Especially

when you're around."

"Come on," Bishop urged. "We've got to get back to the path. Mandy and the rest of the gang are waiting for us."

Amy frowned. "Oh. Them. The fat kid, what's his name, is okay I guess. So is his annoying brother. But why do you want to hang around with Mandy? Honestly, Bishop, we are better off without them."

"You're just tired," Bishop said. "We can get the rest of the gang and bring them back here. We'll camp here tonight and take off in the morning."

"Do you have to get them?" Amy moaned as she stood up and came face to face with Bishop. She closed her eyes and moved in to kiss him. Without fully understanding why, Bishop slowly leaned in closer to her.

"Bishop!" Mandy yelled as she entered the clearing. Bishop jumped back from Amy, who now had her eyes open and was staring furiously at Mandy.

"Can't she leave us alone for five minutes?" Amy fumed.

"Mandy," Bishop said. "What are you doing here? I told you to stay back on the path."

"It's a good thing I'm not back there," Mandy said. "It looks like I made it just in time."

"Nothing happened," Bishop protested.

"Thanks to you," Amy growled.

"What about Gary and Jerry?" Bishop asked. "Where are they?"

"They're fine," Mandy answered. "I told them to wait for me on the path." Mandy suddenly heard something rustling in the leaves behind her.

"There they are, Jer," Gary's voice boomed. "I told you that I saw them." Gary and Jerry walked into the clearing toward Bishop.

"Doesn't anyone do as they're told in this group?" Amy asked.

"Good news, Gar," Bishop said. "Amy found this place where we can camp for the night."

Gary reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the few remaining lollipops that he had brought with him from Earth. "Great, I'm starving."

Bishop reached into his back pack and passed food out to his friends. While nobody was looking Amy tossed her food into the nearby bushes.

After he finished eating, Bishop grabbed his sleeping bag and rolled it out in a grassy clearing near the pond. Gary and Jerry unrolled theirs

under a tree. As Mandy began to unroll her sleeping bag she spotted Amy standing near Bishop.

"What's the matter Amy?" Mandy asked. "Did you forget to bring a sleeping bag? I guess you'll have to sleep on the cold hard ground."

Amy smiled. "I was going to see if Bishop would share his with me."

"What?" Mandy shrieked. "Bishop Chance! You are not sharing a sleeping bag with her!"

"She can use mine," Gary offered.

"Sleep with you?" Amy asked. "No thanks."

"No, you can take my bag and I'll double up with Jerry."

"Sleep with you?" Jerry asked. "No way."

Mandy walked over and kissed Gary on the cheek. "Thank you so much."

"Yeah, thanks," Amy said sarcastically.

Gary put his hand to his cheek and smiled. "You're welcome."

"I've got to share my sleeping bag with you?" Jerry whined. "I'll be crushed."

"Either share it with me, or sleep on the hard ground alone where the monsters can get you."

"Okay. Okay," Jerry swiftly agreed as he scrambled into the sleeping bag.

Everybody got into his or her sleeping bag. Mandy and Amy had their bags on each side of Bishop. As he lay on the ground and looked up, Bishop could barely catch a glimpse of the evening sky through the enormous treetops. Two moons illuminated the forest sky.

"It always feels weird seeing two moons," Bishop mused.

Mandy did not hear him. She had fallen asleep immediately. But Amy was still awake. She turned her head in Bishop's direction. "Of course there are two moons. Don't you have two moons where you come from?"

"No," Bishop replied softly so as not to wake Mandy. "We have just one."

"That must be very unromantic," Amy said. "Our moons are named Afatar and Allabar, after our first king and queen. History tells us that before they left our original homeworld and came here, they were lovers from two warring nations. Afatar was supposed to captain the first ship and Allabar was to captain the second. But so great was their love that they could not bear to be apart for the long voyage. So Afatar gave up

his command and traveled on Allabar's ship. It is fortunate that he did because nobody knows the fate of Afatar's former ship. From that time on, they were never seen apart. Just like our two moons."

"That's an interesting story," Bishop said.

"And a romantic one," Amy added. "When I was younger my oldest brother would always tell it to me. He used to tell me many stories."

"Our moon doesn't even have a special name like yours," Bishop said. "The funny thing is that all the other moons that circle the other planets in our solar system have names, but not our own moon. Strange how that happened."

Bishop heard the sounds of Gary and Jerry loudly snoring in their sleeping bag. He yawned. "Sounds like everyone else has hit the sack. I think I'll join them. Goodnight Amy." He closed his eyes and soon fell asleep.

Amy looked around to make sure she was the only one still awake. Then she crawled out of her sleeping bag. She walked over to where Bishop had dropped his backpack and she rifled through it. Finally she pulled out the communication device that Miss Mann had given him. Putting the backpack back where she had found it, she walked to the edge of the pond holding the device in her right hand. Crouching down she looked at her reflection in the water and frowned.

"This isn't going at all according to my plan. I think I will have to call for some help."

She suddenly threw the communication device into the pond and then put her hand into the cool water. "By the time I get through with Bishop he will forget all about Mandy," she whispered to herself.


 CHAPTER SIX

YOU CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREEZE

The next morning Bishop was jolted from his slumber by the sound of Mandy screaming. Looking in her direction he saw that most of her sleeping bag was in shreds and very large spider like creatures were covering her. She continued screaming as the menacing creatures began to bite her. Bishop noticed that Gary and Jerry also had been suddenly awakened by Mandy's screams. Large groups of the spider like creatures were also quickly scurrying in their direction.

"Bishop," Amy said. "It's the Treeze!"

"These are the Treeze?" Gary yelled.

Amy stood next to Bishop holding his backpack. "Here," she said. "Take this and let's get out of here!"

Bishop grabbed the backpack from her. "I can't leave my friends." Bishop ran over to Mandy and used the backpack to swat the spider like creatures that were on her.

"Hang on Bish," Gary said. "We're coming!"

As Gary and Jerry headed in his direction Bishop tried valiantly to help Mandy. It seemed like no matter how many creatures he swatted off, more would crawl on top of her. Mandy tried desperately to get to her feet.

Gary and Jerry ran through a large group of the Treeze as the scuttling creatures tried to grab hold and climb up their legs. Gary swatted at the few that made it on to him. They finally managed to get to Bishop and

with their aid he was able to get enough of the Treeze off of Mandy to help her stand. Amy frowned as she just stood to the side watching all of this activity.



Bishop and Jerry helped clear more of the Treeze off Mandy while Gary picked up Bishop's backpack.

"What now, Bish?" Gary asked. "There are too many of these things to fight."

Bishop frantically looked around. An endless sea of Treeze blocked the way back to the path. They were coming out of the forest in greater numbers. He saw a small clear pathway leading in the direction of the pond.

"Come on everyone," Bishop commanded. "This way."

Grabbing Mandy's hand Bishop quickly led her to the pond. Amy, Gary and Jerry followed. As he stood at the edge of the pond Bishop saw that they were completely surrounded by Treeze. "Into the water!" he cried. Everyone quickly dashed into the pond. They were about waist high in the water when Bishop noticed that his plan was working.

"Look!" he said. "They aren't following us into the water!"

"That's great, Bish," Gary said. "But we can't stay in here forever."

"Yeah," Jerry added. "I'm cold and I'm wet."

Mandy looked around the shoreline of the pond. "And we're surrounded by Treeze! We're trapped!"

Back in the castle Justin had just left his bedroom and was walking to the workshop. He had gone to bed late the night before after a grueling day of work. He was not used to this type of activity. It was fulfilling but very tiring. As Justin walked to the workshop he briefly considered dropping in and visiting Miss Mann, but he didn't want to keep Castleton waiting.

He passed a large banquet room. Normally he would have walked by without stopping but this morning he heard loud noises emanating from inside. Justin opened the door and was surprised to see what appeared to be a child's birthday party.

The large ornate wooden banquet table was brightly decorated and a young dark haired boy stood smiling at one end. All the boys and girls in the room were dressed in the colorful garb of the kingdom. Oddly a blond haired boy stood alone in another part of the room. He was dressed all in black. He did not look like he was having any fun at the party.

At that moment a cute ten-year-old girl came up to Justin.

"Hello," she said. "You're late for the party."

"Thanks but I wasn't invited," Justin said. "I just stopped by to see what was going on in here."

"That's okay," she replied. "You don't need an invitation. Come on



in. They're getting ready to bring in Onyx's birthday cake."

"Onyx?" Justin gasped.

The girl pointed to the dark haired boy dressed in bright green at the head of the table. He was smiling and laughing as he spoke to a younger girl sitting next to him.

"Of course," she said. "Prince Onyx just turned ten today."

Through a side door a man and a woman walked into the room carrying a cake lit with ten candles. The woman put the cake down in front of young Onyx while the man walked towards Justin. He put his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Christie Rae," he said. "Why don't you go over to the table and wish Onyx a happy birthday."

The girl looked up at him and smiled. "Yes, King Alchemous." She scurried toward Onyx.

Justin suddenly realized that this had to be another one of the solid holograms that were popping up more frequently in the kingdom. This one must be recreating a party that took place at the palace many years ago. Onyx looked just like any other happy ten-year-old boy. It felt eerie knowing that he would eventually grow up to be a maniacal tyrant. Justin thought about all the questions that he was going to ask Miss Mann the next time he saw her. He now recognized the man and the woman from the portrait that Miss Mann had shown them. They must be Onyx and Alabaster's parents, the king and queen.

King Alchemous turned his attention to Justin. "I haven't seen you before, but all are welcome to celebrate."

Justin looked somberly at the festivities and remembered his past birthdays. They had always been catered and his parents never brought out his cake. They never even had time to come to any of his birthday parties. The servants were the only guests he ever had. It was that way for all the big events in his life.

Then he smelled something and it brought back a memory that he hadn't recalled in years. Once when he was very young he did have a birthday party that both of his parents attended. The details were blurry but he was sure that they had been there. He wondered what caused them to stop coming to his parties and also what made him remember that event. He saw the queen standing nearby. The perfume that she was wearing must have been what triggered his memory. It was very similar to the scent his mother used to wear years ago.

The woman faced King Alchemous. "Dear, I think you should have a

talk with Alabaster. He's keeping to himself again and isn't joining in with his brother's birthday."

The king nodded. "Yes Zandra. I shall attend to it right away, my love." The king walked away and headed for the boy dressed in black standing all alone.

The queen looked at Justin. "Would you care to join us? I know Onyx would love to have more guests."

Justin shook his head and smiled weakly. "No. Thank you. Maybe another time."

As Justin walked away the queen closed the door and the sounds of the party slowly died away. Justin was tempted to take another look inside to see if they were still in there but he needed to think about what he just saw. The holographic recreation definitely showed Onyx and Alabaster in a different light. Next time he saw Chance he knew he would have to tell him about it. For now he had to run if he was going to get to the workshop in time. "Chance has it easy," Justin mumbled to himself. "I'll bet he hasn't seen a single hologram since he left."

Standing in the cold pond in the middle of the Forest of Treeze, Bishop tried his best to figure out a way of getting his friends past the horde of spider creatures that currently had them surrounded.

"Anybody got any ideas on how we're going to get out of here?" Gary asked.

"I'm trying to come up with something, Gar," Bishop replied. "It's just hard to concentrate with all those things around us."

"Standing chest high in cold water doesn't help either," Jerry added.

"Too bad you're so short," Gary said. "If you were as big as me you would only be up to your waist in the water."

"If I was as big as you there wouldn't be any room in here for anyone else," Jerry responded.

Mandy looked at Amy. She seemed more distressed than everyone else. "What's the matter Amy? Don't you like getting a little wet?"

Amy scowled. "I don't care about the stupid water," she replied. "I'm upset about Bishop. He helped you and not me. I can't believe that he likes you more than me!"

"That's not it," Bishop said in his defense. "Mandy needed my help and I helped her out. I did the same for you when you needed to be rescued."

"That's true." Amy started to perk up. "A hero always rescues those in need."

Bishop laughed. "I'm not a hero."

"Not yet," Amy said. "But I'm sure you will have a few more chances to prove yourself before this is all done."

"If we get out of here," Gary said.

Bishop saw a large tree branch hanging overhead. "Hey, if we could get onto that branch we could use it to escape out of here."

"How will that help?" Gary asked. "Won't those things come after us?"

Bishop pointed to the one of the rivers that was flowing away from the waterfall. "No. Look. That branch is from that tree which is on the other side of the river. There are no Treeze over there. All we have to do is climb down once we get across the branch."

"But how are we going to get up to it?" Gary asked. "It's too high to reach."

Bishop looked in his backpack and pulled out the coil of rope. "We can use this. We'll just climb up."

"How are you going to tie the rope to it?" Mandy asked.

Before Bishop could answer Gary started looking frantically around. "Hey! Where's Jerry?"

Everyone but Amy started looking around for Jerry. She seemed to be concentrating on the waterfall. Suddenly she shrieked. Something had brushed up against her leg. Reaching into the water, Bishop grabbed the object. Pulling it up he saw that it was Jerry.

"Jerry! What do you think you're doing?" Bishop asked. "You scared Amy half to death!"

"Yeah, Jerry," Mandy said. "Try harder next time."

"I didn't mean to do it," Jerry explained. "I saw something interesting under there."

"What could you find that would be so interesting?" Gary asked.

Jerry stuck out his tongue at his brother. "I'll show Bishop. But not you."

Jerry dove back underwater. Bishop followed. Thirty seconds later they both came to the surface.

"What did you find?" Mandy asked.

"We found an underwater cave," Bishop answered.

"An underwater cave?" Gary asked.

"Yeah," Jerry said. "I was swimming underwater when it suddenly

appeared."

"Suddenly appeared?" Mandy asked. "Oh, you mean you didn't see it right away."

Jerry shook his head. "No, I was looking over there when suddenly the cave just appeared out of nowhere."

"If it appeared out of nowhere, then it must have been created by the holographic computer that's creating all of this," Bishop reasoned. "It might be a clue as to how we can get out of this mess."

"You're as intelligent as you are brave," Amy beamed.

"I swam into the cave for a little bit but had to come back because Jerry couldn't keep up with me," Bishop said.

"You're on a swim team," Jerry said. "It wasn't a fair race."

"I think the underwater cave might go all the way to the other side where the waterfall splits off into the two rivers. If I can swim all the way through I should come out over there. Then I can climb the tree and lower the rope from the branch to you guys."

"Can't we all just swim underwater with you?" Mandy asked.

"You and I could," Bishop replied. "We're better swimmers than the rest of the group. But Gary and Jerry would never be able to make it all the way without running out of air."

"And I can't swim," Amy added.

"What a shame," Mandy said.

"So which one of you two is going to go?" Gary asked.

Mandy took the coil of rope. "I'll do it."

Amy wrapped her arm around Bishop's arm. "That's so brave of you! You go and Bishop can stay here and help protect me."

Mandy threw the coil of rope at Bishop, which he barely caught with his one free hand. "Forget it! I'm not leaving him here with you. Bishop will go."

Bishop pulled himself free of Amy. "Whatever." Bishop wrapped the rope around his waist. "Wish me luck guys."

Bishop then dove underwater and swam into the underwater cave. Amy kept an eye on Bishop as he disappeared into the cave's entrance. Mandy kept shooting unpleasant glances at Amy. Gary and Jerry kept their eyes open for any sign of Bishop surfacing on the far shore.

Tense moments slowly ticked by as they waited for him to reappear.

"How long has it been?" Jerry asked.

"I don't know," Gary replied. "I forgot to check my watch."

Mandy knew that Bishop was a good swimmer but he wasn't the fastest on the team. She thought that he had never been motivated enough. She was beginning to wonder if she should have gone in his place. She was afraid that her petty jealousy of Amy might have caused Bishop to try something he wasn't capable of doing.

Just as Mandy was about to say something to Gary she heard Jerry shout.

"There he is! See!"

Bishop crawled out of the water on the other side of the pond and river. He took several long deep breaths of air. He felt that if he had to swim another couple of feet that he would never have been able to make it. He made his way to the tree and looked up.

"That's a long climb," he said to himself as he circled the tree.

"What's he doing?" Jerry asked.

"He's probably looking for some kind of foothold to grab onto," Gary answered.

Mandy looked at the angry Treeze at the ponds edge. "He'd better find something quick. I don't trust those things."

Walking around to the north side of the tree, Bishop was surprised to find small indentations in the tree going evenly all the way up its trunk.

"That's odd," he mused to himself. "I know those weren't there before. The computer must have altered the tree to make it easier for me to climb. I wonder why."

Bishop tried to think of a reason as he quickly ascended the tall tree.

"He's a very fast climber," Amy observed.

"He should be," Gary said. "He's climbed enough trees sneaking in and out of his house. He snuck out so we could go out to the movies. His grandfather would never let him go. He was too cheap."

"Look!" Jerry shouted. "He's made it to the branch."

Bishop crawled out on to the branch until he was over his friends. As he began to tie the rope around the branch and lower it to them he did not notice that the Treeze had also spotted him up there.

Gary was the first to spot the agitated Treeze. "Uh, Bish, those things don't seem to be too happy that you're up there."

"Don't worry, Gar," Bishop shouted down as he began to lower the rope. "There's nothing that they can do about it."

Mandy was the first to grab the rope and climb. When she got about halfway up Jerry began his ascent.

Gary turned around and saw that many of the Treeze were now crawling up the side of a nearby tree. He called out again to Bishop.

"It looks like they're up to something."

Mandy made her way safely to the branch and was crawling toward the tree trunk. Amy now followed Jerry up the rope.

Bishop looked over and saw the Treeze inching their way up the tree trunk. He was not worried since their tree was on the other side of the river.

"Just another minute Gar, and you can start up," Bishop called out.

Jerry reached the top of the rope and climbed onto the branch.

"That was fun," Jerry said. "Can I do it again?"

"No," Bishop replied. "Be careful climbing down and stay with Mandy when you get there."

Bishop watched Jerry to make sure he followed his instructions. He failed to notice that the Treeze had climbed up to a tree branch that extended directly below the branch that Bishop was on. As Amy climbed the rope past the branch the Treeze latched on to the nearby rope and began to scramble up it.

"Bish!" Gary gasped. "Look out! They found a way to get up there!"

Bishop saw the Treeze inching their way up the rope one by one right behind Amy.

"Hurry Amy!" Bishop shouted. He extended his hand and helped her swiftly on to the branch. Bishop then grabbed the rope and started shaking it very hard. The Treeze on it shook off and fell into the pond just missing Gary by inches.

Gary watched the Treeze twitching violently just before they died in the water. He grabbed the rope and valiantly tried to climb it. It wasn't too long before the effort got to him. He stopped after a few feet.

Bishop could see that more Treeze had left the branch and were now on the rope. Some were heading up in his direction while others were working their way down to Gary. Knowing that his friend would never be able to climb his way to safety, Bishop quickly formulated another plan. Clutching the rope he began to move it back and forth causing Gary to swing along the bottom like a pendulum on a grandfather clock.

Mandy and Jerry stared in bewilderment near the base of the tree.

"What's he doing?" Jerry asked.

"I'm not sure," Mandy replied.

Gary grabbed on tighter to the rope as he began to sway back and

forth farther and farther.

"Bish!" he exclaimed. "What the heck are you doing?"

"You're never going to make it up here safely," Bishop answered. "There are too many Treeze in your way."

"And he's too fat to climb the rope," Jerry added.

"I heard that!" Gary yelled.

"So I'm going to try swinging you safely to the other side. I need some help getting you to swing farther. Try kicking your legs to help gain momentum. The swinging is slowing the Treeze down. They can't move while the rope is moving."

Gary began pumping his legs back and forth. He started to swing further and further. Looking down he saw the Treeze on the ground looking up at him. He was swinging closer and closer to the river. Nervously he began to wonder if this was going to work.

Bishop's arms were beginning to tire. "Okay, Gar. Get ready to let go. On the count of three."

Gary looked at Mandy and Jerry. They were cheering him on.

"One," Bishop began.

Gary could feel his stomach get queasy as he saw the river looming down below him.

"Two," Bishop continued.

Gary closed his eyes in fearful anticipation.

"Three," Bishop shouted.

On the count of three Gary let go of the rope and sailed through the air towards Mandy and Jerry on the other side of the river. Sneaking a peek he saw that they were getting closer. With a huge splash Gary fell into the river.

"Gary!" Bishop shouted.

"Don't worry, Bishop," Amy said. "He's not too far from land."

"Yeah, but he can't swim," Bishop cried.

Gary's head briefly disappeared under the water. Mandy shrieked. Jerry ran to the river's edge.

"Gary! Gary!" he screamed.

Mandy grabbed tightly on to Jerry to prevent him from jumping in after his brother. Amy began to pull up the rope to prevent any Treeze from following them.

Bishop scrambled to the end of the branch and started to climb down the tree. He was worried that his friend might drown before he could get to him. When he made it safely to the bottom of the tree he

ran to the river. Reaching the waters edge he stood next to Mandy who was holding on to a nervous Jerry.

"I've got to go in and help him," Bishop said.

"You can't," Mandy replied. "Look at how fast the current is. It will sweep you downstream too."

They kept searching the water for any signs of their lost friend. Jerry started calling out his brother's name in hopes of finding him.

"I just can't do nothing," Bishop said.

Amy sat on a large rock seemingly unconcerned by Gary's plight. Her attention appeared to be focused solely on Bishop. "If the water is traveling that fast maybe you should follow it and see if you can locate his body," Amy said.

Bishop was stunned. "Don't talk like that! We want to find him alive!"

"Of course you do," Amy said. "But you won't find him either way if you just stand around here."

Bishop sighed. "No, I guess you're right. We have to move on and keep looking for him while we finish our task."

"We can't leave him," Jerry wailed. "He's my brother."

Bishop put his hands on Jerry's shoulders. "Yes, I know he is. And he's my friend. And I don't intend to leave him. We're going to keep searching for him. He'll be okay. I promise."

"You do?" Jerry asked.

"Yes," Bishop lied.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TELL ME NO LIES, I'LL ASK YOU NO QUESTIONS

Bishop and his friends spent most of the day walking solemnly through the dark dense forest and following the river that had swept Gary away. Bishop and Mandy kept their eyes open for any signs of their lost friend. Jerry however was too distraught to be of any help to them. Amy still appeared to be unaffected by the day's events. She had her arm wrapped around Bishop's arm and she whistled a cheerful tune as they walked. Inwardly Bishop felt miserable. It was his plan that may have caused the death of his best friend. He tried to take his mind off of that thought and he paused and pulled out the map.

"I can't make heads or tails out of this map," Bishop said. "We should be getting closer to the ship, but I'm not sure because there's no forest or rivers anywhere on this thing."

"I see light ahead. We're almost out," a relieved Mandy said.

Bishop continued to look at the map as he walked. "Good. Hopefully we should be able to see some signs of the spaceship."

"There appears to be a little obstacle in our way," Mandy said. She was looking ahead. Amy was too busy looking at Bishop to notice.

Bishop looked up and saw a large mountain looming before them. Amazed, he looked back down at the map, then back up at the mountain.

"That can't be there! It's not on the map!" he exclaimed.

"Are you sure we're in the right spot?" Mandy asked.

"Sure, I'm sure. We've been going north the whole time. Besides, there are no mountains on this map. It's supposed to be an open field."

"Well maybe they forgot to put it on the map," Jerry said.

"How can you forget a mountain?" Bishop asked.

"I don't know," Jerry replied. "I'm just a kid and I'm hungry!"

Bishop looked around. "Hey! Where did the river go?"

Mandy climbed a nearby rock and surveyed the area. "There's no sign of it," she exclaimed. "It's gone as if it never existed."

Bishop moaned. "First the river we're following disappears and now there's a mountain in front of us that isn't on this map."

Bishop and Amy walked to the base of the mountain, followed by Mandy and Jerry.

"You're from around here," Bishop said to Amy. "Are we in the right place?"

Paying no attention to her surroundings, Amy looked at Bishop and smiled sweetly. "I'm not sure."

"Wait a minute," Bishop said. "What was it Castleton said before? He said that the holographic equipment might be able to create any creature, plant or environment. I'll bet it created this mountain to throw us off track."

"How can we tell?" Jerry pressed against the side of the mountain. "It feels real to me."

Suddenly a cave entrance opened in the side of the mountain right where Jerry had been pressing. Jerry fell into the opening and hit the ground with a thud.

"Now there's an opening," Bishop said. "Maybe the computer is testing us."

Amy spoke softly. "Or you."

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just saying that I think it's wonderful that you figured it out," Amy lied.

Bishop reached into his backpack and pulled out two light orbs. "Well, we can't walk around it, so let's go inside and see if we can go through it. Miss Mann only gave us two light orbs. I'll take one and Mandy can take the other."

"I want one!" Jerry said. "Why can't I get one?"

Bishop started to respond to Jerry when Mandy quickly whispered to him. "I'll give him mine. We need to keep his mind off Gary."

Bishop nodded as Mandy handed her light orb to Jerry.

"Here, you can have mine."

Jerry happily took the orb and examined it by turning it over and over.

"How do you turn it on?" Jerry inquired.

"Miss Mann showed me before we left," Bishop said. Lifting the orb in his right hand he squeezed it twice and it suddenly began glowing. "It's easy. Just squeeze it twice to activate and twice again to deactivate."

Jerry quickly began squeezing the light orb non-stop. He laughed as he repeatedly activated and deactivated it.

"Jerry!" Bishop said. "Quit horsing around."

Bishop held his light orb about a foot in the air above him and let go. The light orb hovered in that position and stayed that exact distance from Bishop as he entered the cave. Mandy and Amy walked alongside him while Jerry followed behind. As they walked down the twisting tunnel they did not notice the creatures lurking above. As Bishop and his friends passed the creatures, they silently dropped from above to the ground behind them. Before they could turn around, the creatures threw sacks over all four of them.

In the castle library Miss Mann stared in disbelief at what looked like her younger self. The younger Christie Rae smiled. "Hello," she said sweetly.

Miss Mann smiled weakly. "And hello to you. What is your name?"

"My name is Christie Rae," the young girl replied. "I live in the castle. I've never seen you around here before."

"I've been far away for many years," Miss Mann replied. "But I am back for good."

"You're not part of the royal family," the younger Christie Rae said.

Miss Mann shook her head. "No, just an old friend."

"Oh," the younger Christie Rae replied. "I just came here to live when my father died. He was very good friends with King Alchemous. When daddy died, King Alchemous told us that he was going to take care of us."

Even though she knew what the answer would be Miss Mann still had to ask it. "Us?"

"Yes, me and my brother. He's older than me and is such a jerk."

Suddenly a voice boomed out from behind Miss Mann. "Christie!"

Miss Mann recognized the voice, one she had not heard for many years. She slowly turned around and saw a dark haired boy about sixteen

years old walking towards them. He was attired in a dark green suit and in sharp contrast on his head he wore a purple cap. She had almost forgotten that he always wore that stupid purple cap that their father had given him. After all these years she still felt uneasy when he was around. The years of teasing and ridicule that he had inflicted upon her suddenly came rushing back.

“Christian!” Miss Mann said. She sounded angry.

The boy stopped when he heard his name. “What? I didn’t do anything! Who are you?”

Although Miss Mann was now taller than her brother she still had a hard time keeping control of her fearful emotions.

“You haven’t done anything yet,” Miss Mann replied. “But knowing you, I know that you are up to no good. And that usually involves your sister. You enjoy picking on her just because she is younger than you.”

“Yeah, Christian you’ve got no right,” Miss Mann heard her younger self say behind her. Sensing something unusual she turned and saw that the young girl had seemed to age about seven years in the past few seconds. Now she was staring at herself when she was fourteen years old.

Later that evening, a droopy-eyed Justin was working late. Castleton had gone to bed several hours earlier but Justin had felt compelled to continue. Aquarian was finally complete and he stood still near the work desk. Several cables from the computer were attached to an opening in the back of his head. Justin finished typing at the keyboard and stretched out his arms in exhaustion.

“Okay. I think that’s everything. I hope this works.” Justin crossed his fingers and pressed a key on the keyboard. Aquarian flashed to life. His eyes sprang open and he put his left hand on his hip and his right hand in the air and sang.

“I’m a little teapot, short and stout. Here is my handle. Here is my spout. When I get all steamed up then I shout. Tip me over and pour me out.”

“It wasn’t what I wanted, but I like it,” Justin laughed. “I’m definitely going to save that program.”

Justin pressed another button and deactivated Aquarian.

“I guess I’d better call it a day,” Justin yawned. “I wish I was out having fun with Mandy and the rest of the guys.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

KOOKY KOOKY LEND ME YOUR COMB

Bishop awoke to find himself being held captive in a large wooden cage. The cage was in a giant cavern in the mountain near a tunnel entrance. Amy was lying a foot away from him in the same cage. She was still unconscious. Mandy was just regaining consciousness in a nearby cage. Jerry was lying motionless next to her. Also on the ground a few feet out of reach was Bishop’s backpack, sleeping bag and the rest of their items.

“Mandy! Are you all right?” Bishop called out.

“Yes. I think so. The last thing I remember is walking into the cave and then suddenly everything went black. Someone must have knocked me out.”

“Yeah, I think we were all knocked out,” Bishop replied. “How’s Jerry?”

Mandy checked out Jerry. “He’s okay, just unconscious. Where are we?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like a giant cavern. We must still be in the mountain somewhere.”

“Where’s Amy?”

“She’s right here, next to me, on the cage floor.”

“They put her in the same cage with you? Great! And I get stuck with Jerry. Why do these things keep happening to me? If I ever get my hands on whoever did this I’ll...”

Suddenly a small red haired chimpanzee appeared. He was wearing

a plaid coat that was three sizes too big for him and he carried a long stick as if it were a rifle. Amy started to wake up.

"Good! You are awake. Then it is time for you spies to meet the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck!" the chimp said.

"We're not spies," Bishop replied.

"Silence hairless one!" the chimp commanded.

"Where am I?" Amy asked. Looking up she saw Bishop. "Oh, Bishop. You're here. Wherever I am, I must be safe."

"Oh, brother," Mandy sniffed.

Jerry opened his eyes and yawned. Sitting up he rubbed his eyes and looked around. "Where am I?"

"That's a popular question lately," Mandy said.

"We're still in the mountain," Bishop explained. "We're being held prisoner by this little monkey thing."

"I am not a monkey thing," the chimp guard responded. "My name is Norville Uderling Timbus Stink."

Jerry was impressed. "Cool, a talking monkey. Just like in my favorite show. 'The Mighty Morons'."

Amy looked at the chimp guard and laughed. "No. These are the Krazy Kavern Kooks of Krackers Kave."

Bishop and Mandy looked at her in disbelief.

"That was one of my favorite stories growing up," she said.

The chimp guard pulled a large ring of keys from its coat pocket and looked for the one that unlocked Mandy's cage.

"Krazy Kavern Kooks?" Bishop asked.

"Yes. In the story they are always accusing other animals of being spies and putting them through three challenges. If they pass two of the three challenges, they get one wish," Amy explained.

"What happens if they don't pass?"

"They are thrown into the boiling hot banana oil pit."

The chimp guard finally located the correct key but as he tried to unlock the cage he dropped the key to the ground.

"It looks like it should be easy to beat any of their challenges," Bishop said. "They don't seem too bright. I know I'm smarter than a chimp."

"You are," Amy agreed. "But they cheat."

"Hey," Jerry said. "They aren't chimps. They got tails. Chimpanzees don't have tails."

Bishop shook his head. "Earth chimps don't have tails, but this is another world. I guess their chimps have tails."

The chimp guard picked up the key and unlocked Mandy's cage. He nudged Mandy and Jerry with the stick over to Bishop and Amy's cage. He then unlocked their cage.

"I'm not worried," Amy said. "Because I know you'll be able to beat them."

The chimp guard poked Bishop out of the cage.

"Hey!" Bishop yelled.

"Silence! This way to the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck," the chimp guard ordered.

"Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck?" Jerry asked. "What's that?"

"He is second in command to the king and he is the one you must see before you can meet the king," the chimp guard replied.

"It's just like being in an episode of 'Mighty Morons'," Jerry said happily.

Bishop was being led by the chimp guard with Amy and Mandy to his right and Jerry to his left. Along the way they walked past several clear jelly like slugs of various sizes, ranging from several inches to over six feet. As they walked they passed many more strangely dressed chimps that were engaged in crazy activities.

Jerry laughed as he saw two chimps swinging wildly on vines as they kept smashing into each other and knocking themselves off the vines. As soon as they scampered back up their vines they would start swinging and knocking into each other all over again. Bishop noticed the vines but he couldn't see what they were hanging from. Below the swinging chimps there were several other chimps on crude style roller skates. If they weren't crashing into each other than they were busy trying to avoid crashing into things.

"Bishop, watch out for those Slippers," Amy warned.

"Slippers?" Bishop looked around. "What Slippers?"

"The clear creatures all over the ground. Those are Slippers."

"Why are they called Slippers?" Bishop asked. Seconds later he accidentally stepped on a small one and fell to the ground.

"That's why. Are you hurt?" asked Amy.

"No, something broke my fall," Bishop said as he got to his feet. He picked up the chimp guard that he had landed on.

"Sorry about that," he told the chimp.

The chimp guard looked around the ground. "My hat! Where's my hat? I can't find my hat!"

"You weren't wearing one," Jerry said.

"I wasn't?" the chimp asked.

"No."

The chimp guard was impressed. "Oh, you are very wise, little hairless one."

"Hairless?" Jerry said. "I've got hair." He held a handful of his hair in his hand. "See!"

The chimp guard laughed and shook his head. "Yes, very funny, hairless one. You do have a little bit of hair but only on the top of your head. To be truly hairy you must be covered in hair from head to toe, such as we are."

The chimp guard picked up his stick. "Hurry," he continued. "The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck does not like to be kept waiting."

"How soon before we get there?" Bishop asked.

The chimp guard stopped walking.

"We are there now. Behold the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck!" the chimp guard gestured to a larger chimp sitting on a rock. He was also wearing a coat too large for him, and he wore a bucket on his head, with the words, "Mucky Muck" poorly written on the front.

"Are these the spies?" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck asked.

"Yes, oh noble one." The chimp bowed. "We found them sneaking



around in the tunnels."

"We weren't sneaking," Bishop protested. "And we aren't spies. We're just trying to get out of here."

"You may pass through our kingdom safely but only if you beat us in two out of three challenges. If you don't, you will be thrown into the boiling hot banana oil pit forever!" The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck let loose with a silly maniacal laugh.

"This was one of your favorite stories?" Bishop asked Amy.

"Well I was a little girl at the time," she said. For the first time Amy seemed embarrassed by one of her remarks.

"I think it's neat," Jerry said.

"What happens if we pass the challenges?" Mandy asked.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked at Mandy as if seeing her for the first time.

"Come closer," he said. Mandy did as she was ordered. "You are very beautiful for a hairless one. I think I will make you my consort." The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned to the chimp guard. "Bring my new consort to me."

The chimp guided Mandy to the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck and sat her beside him on another rock.

"Finally someone is paying attention to me," Mandy said. "Okay, I can go along with the gag. But I am not wearing a bucket on my head."

"Of course not. A consort of your loveliness should not hide under a crown. But you must wear the royal cloak."

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned and addressed a nearby orange chimp. "Fetch her the royal cloak."

The chimp scurried off and returned a minute later with a cloak made from old banana skins. He placed it on Mandy's shoulders. There were hoots and hollers from some of the monkeys in attendance that were watching.

Mandy smelled the pungent odor of the old skins and coughed. "Ugh."

Amy laughed at Mandy's predicament. "That looks perfect on you."

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck nodded and smiled. "Indeed it does. And what is your name my dear?"

"Mandy."

"Mandy. A strange name indeed. And you can call me Mucky."

Jerry giggled. "Mucky."

"If you beat us in two challenges you will be granted an audience

with our king and you shall be awarded one wish," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck explained.

"I know what I would wish for," Jerry said.

"What?" Bishop asked.

"That we find Gary," Jerry replied.

Bishop nodded. "Me too. But I don't think that these monkeys are able to grant a wish like that."

"And now let the challenges begin," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck announced. Grabbing his staff off the ground he pointed it at Bishop, Amy and Jerry. "Which one of you three will face the challenges?"

"I guess I will," Bishop volunteered.

"Very well. The first challenge is the challenge of skill and wits. It is a challenge called Simple Simian Say. You will go up against our most skilled warrior, Bombom."

"Bombom!" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck called out and looked around the monkey filled cavern. "Where is Bombom?"

A large crowd of monkeys parted and a short fat monkey about half as tall as Bishop walked over beside him. Bishop looked at Bombom in amazement. He was the fattest monkey Bishop had ever seen. The obese monkey was merrily munching on a pie. Bishop held out his hand to shake hands, but the monkey was too busy eating to notice.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked at his champion in astonishment. "This is our most skilled athlete? Bombom? Is that you? You're larger than the last time I saw you. What has happened to you?"

Bombom swallowed the piece of pie that he had been chewing. "I am just as fit as ever, your Muckyness. My wife has been making the most delicious banana cream pies. I just can't get enough of them. I may have eaten an extra pie or two."

"Or four or five," Bishop added.

Bombom held up the half eaten pie to the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck. "Would you like some?"

"You would offer your Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck a half eaten pie?" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said in astonishment.

"It's my last pie," Bombom explained.

"Then give it to me," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck commanded.

Bombom quickly took aim and threw the remaining pie at the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck, hitting him squarely in the face.

Mandy and Bishop thought that this might mean the end of Bombom

but instead the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck wiped some pie from his face and tasted it.

"Mmm," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck sighed. "Delectable. My compliments to your lovely wife."

"She's not lovely, your Muckyness," Bombom said. "But can she cook!"

After wiping more pie off his face the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck stood up from his rock and stomped his staff once on the ground. "You will now begin the first challenge. Bombom has never lost a challenge of Simple Simian Say."

"What is Simple Simian Say?" Bishop asked.

As Bishop finished his question a monkey band suddenly appeared out of nowhere before him.

Mandy stifled a laugh. She always assumed that her high school band was the strangest looking band she had ever seen but this weird group made them look good. Half of their musical instruments, if they could be called that, she didn't even recognize. The lead singer was a tall skinny monkey with long blonde hair that contrasted against the short brown hair that covered the rest of his body. The only piece of clothing that he wore was a pair of very tight purple pants.

The lead monkey singer grabbed a microphone and began to sing as the band played a loud melody. "You're about to play, Simple Simian Say. And here are the rules that you'll play by today," he said.

Bishop looked around and saw many of the monkey guards dancing to the goofy beat.

"No cheating, no talking, no spitting," the lead singer sang as he spat on the ground. "That's a no-no."

A female monkey wearing a slinky green dress swiftly appeared out of thin air and grabbed another microphone and started to sing.

"No sneezing, no farting, or acting like a dodo."

Bishop shook his head as he saw that Jerry had now joined in with the monkey guards and was dancing to the goofy song.

"We will call out commands," the lead monkey sang. "And you will do what we convey."

"But only if preceded by Simple Simian Say," the female monkey added.

"The rules are easy and there is no trick," the lead singer sang as he turned to face the female singer.

"But you've got to be careful and you've got to be quick," the female

monkey said.

"So those are the rules, and there ain't no more," they both sang together. "Now on to your first challenge, at the monkey count of four."

"Six," the lead singer said.

"Three," the female added.

"Two," the lead singer said.

"Four," they both said.

When they finished the guards hooted and hollered for an encore. The female singer took a bow to a standing ovation while the lead singer signed a few autographs.

Bishop just stood there shaking his head in amazement. "Ask a simple question," he said to himself.

Jerry ran over to Bishop. "That was even better than the 'Mighty Morons'."

After the noise died down the lead singer walked over to Bishop and looked him over. "You're a strange looking creature. What are you called?"

Bishop opened his mouth to answer when he heard Amy cough nearby. Realizing the mistake that he was about to make he stopped and just looked at the singer.

The lead singer laughed and smiled. "Very good. That one usually gets them every time. Okay, Simple Simian Say, what's your name?"

"Bishop Chance," Bishop replied.

"Chance by name," the lead singer said as his demeanor took on a serious persona. "Or Chance by trade. Be warned, you are up against forces you don't want to tackle. Why not give up now and take the easy way out?"

Bishop silently stood there with a grim, determined look on his face trying to stare down the lead singer. The two opponents stared intently at each other until the lead singer's demeanor changed back to his silly goofiness.

Smiling once again, the lead singer put the mike up to his face. "How about some applause for our bold challenger."

Only the sound of Amy, Mandy and Jerry clapping their hands could be heard through the ape filled room.

A sly smirk appeared on the two singers mouths as the band started to play.

"Simple Simian Say," the female singer started.

"Try not to squirm as you eat this worm," the lead singer stated as he

tossed a worm to both Bishop and Bombom.

Bombom caught his worm and quickly ate it.

Bishop also caught his worm and hesitated for a few seconds as he thought about whether he should eat it or not. All eyes were on Bishop as he closed his eyes, opened his mouth and swallowed the worm.

"Ugh," Mandy said.

"Cool," Jerry said.

"I knew you could do it," Amy said proudly.

"He had better use some serious mouth wash before he kisses me again," Mandy said loud enough for Amy to hear.

"Simple Simian Say," the female singer sang. "It's time to pick up the pace. So turn to your opponent and punch him in the face."

As Bishop turned to face Bombom he felt a hairy fist hit him squarely in the jaw. Dazed he looked down at the fat monkey and punched him back in the face with a lot less force. Bombom appeared unfazed by Bishop's punch.

"Now if that last command didn't make you sick," the female singer continued, "Grab your opponent and hit him with a stick."

Bishop looked down at the two sticks on the ground next to him but before he moved to pick them up he remembered that the female monkey didn't say Simple Simian Say. Bombom and Bishop both stood still. Neither one moved to pick up a stick.

"Simple Simian Say," the lead male monkey singer began.

"No time to worry about your woes, put your finger in your nose and then touch your toes."

Bishop and Bombom both stuck a finger in their noses. Then Bishop leaned over and touched his toes. Looking over he saw that Bombom was having trouble reaching his toes. Bombom's stomach was so big that it prevented him from reaching down far enough. He struggled and struggled but was unable to touch them. Eventually he fell and began to roll around on the ground still trying to touch his toes.

"Fridgetty Foo!" Bombom cursed.

Several nearby monkeys covered their ears as they heard Bombom cursing.

The monkey band started to play again.

"The challenge has ended and the challenger has won," the lead singer sang. "The score is now set, Kavern Kooks zero, Bishop Chance one."

As soon as the song finished, the two singers and the entire band

disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared. Bombom got up and stormed away in defeat to the jeers of his fellow apes.

"Egad zooks!" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck exclaimed as he waved his staff in the air. "This one is a cunning opponent. Very well, hairless one. You have won the first challenge."

"My name is Bishop."

"Very well, hairless Bishop. You have won the first challenge, but you will not fare as well with the second one, the challenge of skill. Take them to the arena." The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned to Mandy. "Come along, consort. You will enjoy this. We have never lost the challenge of skill."

"Never?" Mandy asked.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck chuckled with a nefarious grin. "Never."

In the castle library, Miss Mann stared uneasily at her brother and then at her younger self. She was starting to recall more memories that she had buried all those years ago. Seeing her brother standing there healthy and whole was in stark contrast to the last time she had seen him. She tried to blot that memory from her mind. She didn't want to remember her brother that way.

"What are you staring at?" Christian asked.

Miss Mann shook her head slightly to clear her mind. Then, as if from instinct she pulled the purple cap off Christian's head. "Didn't father, I mean your father ever tell you not to wear your cap inside?"

Christian grabbed the cap out of Miss Mann's hand and placed it back on his head. "I'll do what I want, when I want. Besides, you're not my father."

"No," the younger Christie Rae said. "But King Alchemous wouldn't like it either."

"Oh yeah?" Christian responded. "Well I don't think King Alchemous would like it if he found out that you were dating one of his sons."

The younger Christie Rae became agitated. "He'd better not find out."

"If you don't keep out of my way, then I will have to tell him about your boyfriend," Christian threatened.

"There's no need for him to find out," the younger Christie Rae replied. "And besides, he's not my boyfriend anymore."

"Yeah, sure," Christian said. "I've seen how you act when he's

around. You get that look in your eyes and that little special smile."

The younger Christie Rae tried to act calm but the sound of her voice betrayed her true feelings. "I don't act that way anymore with him. He's not my boyfriend. He's changed these past few months, ever since the summer when she... you know."

"What's the matter? You can't even mention her name. You two used to be best friends."

Miss Mann noticed that her younger self was becoming emotionally distraught. "I know her name, and I can say it if I want to," her younger self said. "I just can't get him to talk about her. Ever since then I can't get him to talk about anything. He used to be so much fun to be with. Now he's like a totally different person. It's like I don't know him anymore."

"I don't see any difference in him," Christian said.

"You didn't spend very much time with him before," the younger Christie Rae said. "But now he spends all his time with you. He's changed."

"Yeah, now he's more fun to be around. Before he was a bore. But I know he still likes you because he talks about you all the time."

The younger Christie Rae seemed pleased to hear that statement. "He does?"

Christian smiled when his sister took the bait. "You see! I was right! You do care about him. I'm going to tell King Alchemous about you two."

Miss Mann could feel her old emotions coming to the surface. This heated exchange between her younger self and her brother was causing her to be just as upset as it did the first time that it happened many years ago. She didn't understand why it was being replayed but she was not happy about it.

"Don't you dare!" the younger Christie Rae warned. "He means nothing to me!"

Christian turned as if to leave the room. "If he's not your boyfriend then you won't mind if I have a little talk with Alchemous."

Miss Mann couldn't contain her emotions any longer.

"Onyx is not my boyfriend!" both Christie Raes shouted out.

Christian grinned as he turned to face the two Christie Raes. "All right then, let's talk about it."

Justin's sleep meanwhile, was interrupted by the sound of someone banging loudly on his door. Half asleep he threw off his covers and grog-

gily left his comfortable bed. He suddenly became fully awake as his bare feet hit the cold stone floor of his room. Frustrated at being awoken he slowly walked to the door as the pounding grew in intensity.

He swung open the door and stared in amazement as he looked into the hallway. An angry Reprint stood there firmly holding Mr. Boomietrix by the collar with his right hand.

Staring at the unusual sight before him, Justin wasn't sure if he was awake or still dreaming. "Do you know what time it is?" he finally asked. "And what is that thing you've got there?"

Reprint was momentarily distracted by the appearance of Justin standing in the doorway wearing a pair of boxers with wolves on them. Shaking his head he pushed Justin aside and walked into the room dragging Mr. Boomietrix behind him.

"This is Mr. Boomietrix," Reprint replied as Justin closed the door behind them.

"Boomietrix?" Justin asked in bewilderment.

"Yes, one of those solid holograms that have been popping in and out. I think he is responsible for the escape of Onyx and Gambit. And also for the disappearance of Miss Mann."

"Onyx and Gambit have escaped?" Justin asked. "And Miss Mann has disappeared? When did all this happen? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I'm telling you now. With Bishop and Miss Mann gone there is nobody in charge."

"That's no problem," Justin stated. "I'll take charge until they get back."

Reprint appeared to be a bit distraught by Justin's statement. "Why should you be in charge? Why isn't Castleton in control?"

"He's got his hands full repairing Aquarian," Justin replied.

Reprint began to loosen his grip on Mr. Boomietrix as he centered his attention on Justin. "Well then why can't I be in charge?" Reprint demanded. "Just because your family has money back on Earth doesn't mean anything here."

"I just think I'm more of a leader than you are," Justin stated.

Releasing his grip on Mr. Boomietrix, Reprint walked right up to Justin and stared him in the face. "I don't think so."

"I don't care what you think," Justin countered.

Mr. Boomietrix climbed onto Justin's bed. He softly coughed a few times. After receiving no notice he coughed a little louder until he finally

got Justin's and Reprint's attention.

"If I may, I arrived here with something to say," Mr. Boomietrix said. Justin and Reprint looked at Mr. Boomietrix in silence.

"But first a gift I suppose is due." Mr. Boomietrix pulled two purple flowers off of his vest and handed one to each of the boys. "One for you and another for you, too."

The two boys looked at the flowers unsure of what to do next.

"Smell them and you will find, they have a fragrance of the most unusual kind," Mr. Boomietrix urged.

Both Justin and Reprint smelled the purple flowers. Both stood silently still as the flowers dropped to the floor.

Looking at the two stationary boys, Mr. Boomietrix lifted his right paw towards Justin's face. Dropping his umbrella onto the bed he lifted his left paw toward Reprint's. His paws grew longer and longer as they approached the boys' faces. Each paw then became transparent and appeared to enter the boys' foreheads.

Reprint and Justin both screamed in pain as information was extracted from their brains. Mr. Boomietrix seemed surprised by the details of what he was absorbing. He seemed very unconcerned about the boys' discomfort. After a minute Mr. Boomietrix's paws shrank back to normal.



He picked up the umbrella from the bed.

Justin and Reprint awoke from their trances unaware of what had just happened.

"I've come to warn you both about a danger at hand," Mr. Boomietrix said as if the events of the past few minutes had just not happened. He then pointed his umbrella at Reprint. "And your friend Miss Mann needs you to command. She said it was time for her to leave, but do not worry and do not grieve."

Reprint and Justin were confused. "Leave? Where? Grieve? Why?" The two boys asked in unison.

Mr. Boomietrix shook his head. "I cannot say for it is not my place, and that information will not help you in any case. You must be on your toes and be very clever. If you wish to survive your current endeavor."

Mr. Boomietrix jumped off the bed. "I've given you the message from Christie Rae Mann." Mr. Boomietrix pulled a pocket watch from his vest pocket and he became very alarmed when he looked at it. "And now I must take haste as quickly as I can." He raced out of the room into the hallway.

"Hey!" Reprint shouted as he ran after Mr. Boomietrix. "Wait!" Reprint and Justin ran into the hallway. There was no sign of Mr. Boomietrix.

"He's gone," Justin said.

"Yeah, he disappears a lot," Reprint explained. "But at least he gave us Miss Mann's message."

"How do we know it's from Miss Mann?" Justin asked.

"You're just upset because she put me in charge," Reprint replied.

"No I'm not," Justin lied. "Besides, I don't want to be in charge anyway. I'm too busy repairing Aquarian."

"How's that coming along?" Reprint asked as they walked back to the doorway to Justin's room.

"Good, I guess," Justin replied. "Castleton's been showing me a lot, but there's too much to remember. I don't think I'll ever understand it all."

Reprint laughed. "I don't think anyone ever does."

Justin stepped into his room as Reprint held out his hand. "So are we okay about me running things?" Reprint asked.

Justin grasped Reprint's hand and shook it once. "Yeah, for now. I'm going back to sleep. I need to get up early again in the morning. Castleton's up at the crack of dawn." Justin yawned. "I don't know how he does it."

"Just think," Reprint said. "If you were with Bishop right now you'd be getting all the uninterrupted sleep you wanted."

Back in Krackers Kave Bishop and his friends were brought to an enormous cavern that stretched further than the eye could see. Stationed around the cavern were numerous monkeys holding lit torches. Many of which appeared as small dots of light in the distance. Bishop was standing at the edge of a large drop-off in the cave. Next to him was a chimp wearing a yellow racing suit. On the ground near their feet were two large Slippers. Large crowds of chimps of various sizes and colors were standing by watching. The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck and Mandy were sitting on a nearby rock.

"What's this all about?" Bishop asked Amy.

"This is the second challenge. It is the Slipper race. The two of you will get on your Slippers and ride them down those tracks and the first one to cross the finish line wins."

Bishop looked at the track. The course was composed of two luge tracks that dropped off the side of the ledge and continued down. There were many twists and turns like a roller coaster. The finish line was not in sight.

"It looks like a long course," Bishop said.

"It is," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck stated.

Two short chimps walked over to Bishop. One jumped on the other one's shoulders and put a oversized helmet on Bishop's head.

"What is this for?" Bishop asked.

"In case you crash," the first chimp replied. "We're crazy, not stupid."

Bishop was nervous. "I don't know about this."

"Don't worry. Nobody has ever died doing this challenge," the second chimp said.

"What about the last challenger?" the first chimp asked.

"That one doesn't count."

"Oh," the first chimp said. "But, what about the one before him?"

"That one doesn't count either."

"Oh," the first chimp replied. "Well what about the one..."

"Let the game begin!" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck bel-
lowed.

Bishop looked at the Slipper. "How am I supposed to ride this thing?"

"You just lie down on its back and hold on to the rope in its mouth," the chimp in the yellow racing suit instructed.

"Good luck, Bishop. I know you can do it," Amy playfully kissed Bishop on the mouth as Mandy burned.

"Hey, is she allowed to do that?" Mandy asked the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned to her. He had a flat rock in one hand and a banana in the other. "I'm sorry, I didn't see anything. I was busy signing this edict."

"That's a rock. You can't sign a rock with a banana," Mandy said.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked at the rock and then at the banana and threw them both over his shoulder. "Oh well, it doesn't matter. There wasn't anything written on it anyway."

Bending down, Bishop got onto the back of the Slipper. It wobbled beneath his weight and it felt like he was lying on a giant pile of gelatin. He quickly grabbed the rope and held it tightly struggling to stay on the slippery Slipper.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck stood and stomped his staff twice on the ground. "Let the second challenge begin!"

A chimp was standing at the starting line with a duck in his hands.

"On your mark. Get set. Go!" the starting chimp said as he squeezed the duck.

"Quack!"

At the sound of the duck, Bishop and the racing chimp took off. As Bishop turned his head to take a final look at Mandy his oversized helmet slid off his head onto the track below.

"Oh well, it was so loose it wouldn't have done any good anyhow," Bishop said.

Sliding down the tracks Bishop started to take the lead. Passing the first curve, several chimps on the sidelines began to pelt Bishop with various objects. He felt himself being hit by peanuts, old banana peels, and small pebbles. They kept hurling things at Bishop as they tried to slow him down.

"Hey! Stop that!" Bishop yelled as he swatted the peanuts away.

Passing the second curve, Bishop's lead grew greater. Slightly up ahead was a chimp at the side of Bishop's track. As Bishop got closer, the chimp threw a switch that caused a track switch, suddenly sending Bishop down a different track. The racing chimp continued down the correct track.

"Hey, how do you stop this stupid thing?" Bishop was gaining speed. Glancing ahead he saw that a giant ring encircled the track. As he approached a nearby monkey grabbed a torch and set the ring on fire. Bishop could feel the intense heat as he raced towards it. Beads of perspiration began to pour down his forehead as he slid closer to the fire. Just as he was about to enter the blaze he held on to the rope with one hand and covered his head with his other arm. Bishop closed his eyes and screamed as he passed through the burning ring of fire.

Several seconds later he opened his eyes and was surprised to see that he was now safely traveling down the track. He looked at his clothes and was surprised to find they miraculously were not even singed. It was then that he remembered that Miss Mann had told him when she first gave him his uniform that it was impervious to extreme heat and cold. This was the first time he had put it to the test and he was very relieved that it had passed. Looking down he noticed that the Slipper was also unscathed.

Turning his attention ahead Bishop looked up and saw that the track did a loop de loop and he was now swiftly approaching it. Bishop held on tightly as he spun around in a circle.

"I think I'm going to be sick," he said as he came upon another loop de loop.

Up on a high cliff, the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked down at Bishop's plight. He turned to Mandy with a goofy grin on his face.

"He is one of the most entertaining creatures we've ever had. I hope he survives longer than the others did. It would be a shame to have it end so soon wouldn't it?" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck asked.

Before Mandy could answer Amy interjected. "Bishop will survive and pass all your tests."

Mandy turned to Amy. "Do you mind? Mucky was talking to me!"

Jerry was mesmerized by the race. "I hope I can go on that next."

As Mandy opened her mouth to say something to the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck Amy once again interrupted her.

"Oh no!" Amy shrieked. "Look what's happening now!"

Bishop was now entering another part of the course that was covered in ice and snow. He seemed to pick up speed as the Slipper slid on the frozen track.

"Just like tobogganing back home," Bishop said to himself. "This isn't so bad."

Bishop's attention drifted as he looked at the snow covered objects

alongside the track. He whizzed past them at a faster pace as the ice on the track thickened. Suddenly the snow covered objects moved and as the snow fell off of them Bishop saw that they were actually more monkeys and they were all holding snowballs. Taking aim the monkeys began pelting Bishop with snowballs as he slid past them. Because of the speed that he was traveling many of the snowballs missed their target but some of them did connect.

“Hey!” Bishop yelled. “Ow! Cut it out!”

The monkeys cheered and jeered as they threw more snowballs in Bishop’s direction, but by then Bishop was far enough away from them that almost none of the projectiles hit their target.

Bishop breathed a sigh of relief. “At least it can’t get any worse.” Bishop passed another curve and saw that the track up ahead ended at the edge of a cliff.

“Oh, crap!”

“Bishop! Look out!” Mandy screamed from her perch. “Stop!”

“Cool! How come Bishop gets to have all the fun?” Jerry asked.

Reaching the edge of the cliff Bishop and the Slipper soared through the air and swiftly started their descent.

“This suit is impervious to heat and cold,” Bishop said to himself. “I hope it’s impervious to crashing.” Seconds later they landed in a large mound of snow.

Buried in several feet of snow, Bishop had no idea which way was up or down until he felt himself being plucked up by several chimps. Bishop slid down the mound of snow as the chimps rescued the Slipper. He saw the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck cheering as he watched Bishop’s opponent cross the finish line and finish the race.

“I am so sorry, hairless Bishop, but you have lost the second challenge. It is now time for the third challenge,” the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck shouted down at Bishop.

Amy was suddenly very concerned. “Oh dear. Nobody’s ever passed the third challenge.”


CHAPTER NINE

ARE YOU AMAZED YET?

Bishop was led blindfolded into the middle of a giant rock maze. The chimp that brought him into the maze kicked him in the butt and then took off Bishop’s blindfold. Bishop saw that he was surrounded by a ten foot tall rock wall. Higher above the maze on a cliff sat the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck with Mandy beside him. On a rock next to the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck was a giant hourglass. Amy and Jerry stood nearby while a small army of monkeys stood patiently behind them waiting for the next challenge to begin.

“Good luck, Bishop. I know you can do it,” Amy cheered.

“Yeah, you said that the last time and look what good it did,” Mandy said.

“How come I can’t have any of the fun?” Jerry asked.

The chimp next to Bishop jumped up and landed on the top of the maze wall. He turned and looked down at Bishop and then stuck his tongue out at him as he scampered away.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck stood and stomped his staff three times on the ground. “To pass the third challenge you must find your way out of the maze of traps before the sands of the hourglass are finished.”

Grabbing the giant hourglass the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned it over and the sands began descending. The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck then gave a signal and a chimp by the maze exit pressed a small rock on the side of the wall. Unseen by Bishop, the maze exit

suddenly disappeared.

"Hey! No fair! That's cheating!" Mandy cried.

"We never said that cheating wasn't allowed," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck explained. "But do not warn him, or the game ends now and he loses."

Bishop walked out of the middle of the maze and into the first opening on the right. He followed it until it split into three passages. Looking down all three passages he finally decided to take the middle route. Halfway down the path he stepped on a partially hidden small metal plate on the ground. A hole opened up in the wall on each side of him and he was sprayed with blue slime. The chimps watching above howled with laughter.

"Oh, no!" Bishop moaned. "More snaggon snot!"

He stumbled along a few steps as he tried to rub the snot out of his eyes. Finally able to see a little better he moved further ahead. He turned right at the next intersection and stepped on another plate. Two more holes opened up and he was blasted with hot water, washing off some of the slime.

"I am really starting to hate all of this," he said.

Suddenly he heard a familiar voice. "To avoid a trap. I suggest a map," it said.

Bishop saw Mr. Boomietrix below him, out of view from the chimps.

"What did you say?" Bishop asked.

"You say you can't cope, but I offer you hope. I have it in my heart to give you this chart." Mr. Boomietrix offered Bishop a parchment. "It will guide straight and true. To that which you need and have to do."

"Thanks. But why are you giving this to me? It's not another trick is it?"

"Although my tricks offer a moral in the end. I still help out those who can use a friend. So take this map and be on your way. You have friends to meet, without delay."

Mr. Boomietrix handed Bishop the map and disappeared.

"What is going on down there?" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck roared. "Why have you stopped?"

Bishop looked up. "Just catching my breath. Your last trap knocked the wind out of me."

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck chuckled. "Much worse lies ahead."

Mandy looked at the hourglass. It was more than half empty. "Bishop, you've got to hurry. Time is running out," she warned.

"Come on, Bishop," Amy said. "I know..."

"Know you can do it," Mandy finished. "Yeah, yeah. We've heard it before."

"Hurry up, Bishop," Jerry shouted. "Don't let them make a monkey out of you."

Mandy turned and looked at Jerry. "I can't believe you just said that."

"What do you want?" Jerry said. "I'm only ten."

Bishop looked at the map and started walking. He jumped over the next several hidden metal plates on the ground and took the correct passages until finally he got to the wall that used to be the exit. The hourglass had just a little sand left in it.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck became very distressed when he saw that Bishop was avoiding the remaining traps in the maze. "You have been lucky so far, hairless Bishop, but your time is almost out, and you are not."

Bishop looked around for the exit but couldn't find it. Looking down at the map it now showed an arrow that pointed to a spot on the wall with the words 'Press Here' written on it. Bishop shook his head. He knew that hadn't been on the map a few seconds ago. Figuring that he had nothing to lose he pressed the spot and the entrance appeared. Bishop exited just as the sands ran out. Amy came running down to Bishop and gave him a strong hug, knocking the wind out of him.

"I knew you could do it," she said.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck was very irate. "This is impossible!" he bellowed. "Nobody ever makes it out in time! How did you do it?"

"I had a map," Bishop said. He held up the parchment.

"A map? That is not fair! You cheated!" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck declared.

"You never said cheating wasn't allowed," Mandy pointed out.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck threw his bucket crown on the ground and stomped on it.

"Fine! Since you have won the challenges, I will take you to the king." He grabbed Mandy by the wrist. "Follow me!"

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck led them through a myriad of tunnels that twisted and branched off into many more tunnels. Bishop

hoped that they weren't being led into a trap because there was no way that he would ever be able to find the correct way out. Finally they came to a cavern entrance guarded by two monkeys. The two monkey guards stood to one side to allow the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck and Mandy entrance.

As Bishop walked past the guards he noticed that they were holding a spear in one hand and an ice pop in the other. After the group entered the cavern the two guards resumed their position in front of the entrance and started licking their ice pops.

"What the heck?" Bishop said to himself.

They stopped when they came upon a large red crystalline rock about thirty feet high in the middle of the cavern. There was a long ramp carved into the rock going from the top to the base. Sitting high on top was a large figure wearing a banana skin cloak and a bucket on its head with its back to them. Several large monkey guards surrounded him.

"Is that the king?" Jerry asked.

"I guess so," Bishop replied.

"Don't forget to ask about Gary," Jerry said.

"I told you Jerry, I don't think it will do any good to..."

"Silence!" the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck shouted at them.

"You are in the presence of our king!" The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck turned and looked upwards at the figure on top of the large rock.

"Your majesty! I have brought these creatures to you. They have defeated us in two challenges and they are now here to be granted their wish."

Without turning to face them the king mumbled something and tossed a banana peel down at them just missing Jerry.

"Hey watch it you jerk!" Jerry yelled.

Hearing Jerry's shout, the king shouted down at them. "Jerry? Is that you?"

"Of course I'm me," Jerry replied.

"Wait there, I'll be right down," the king said as he jumped on the ramp and slid down landing a few feet away from them.

Jerry smiled as he saw the figure before him. "Gary!" he cried out as he hugged his brother.

Surprised by this revelation, Bishop and Mandy also smiled and ran toward their missing friend. Amy stood behind and solemnly waited.

"Gary, this is so amazing!" Bishop exclaimed. "How did you get out of that river? I thought you told me that you couldn't swim."

"I couldn't," Gary sputtered. "But I've been taking lessons from Justin since we got back from the Homeworld a few months ago."

"It's a good thing that you did," Mandy said. "In a way, Justin helped save your life."

"Yeah," Jerry added. "And he's not even here."

"But how did you get here?" Bishop asked.

"And how did you get to be their king?" Mandy added.

"After I fell into the river I sank below the surface and I began to panic," Gary explained. "Then I started to remember the things that Justin taught me and I began swimming. When I finally surfaced I couldn't see any sign of you guys. The current had taken me downstream and it was taking me further away from you. It was all I could do to keep my head above water. And then suddenly, the river disappeared and I was lying on the ground in the middle of nowhere."

"Then how did you get here?" Jerry asked.

"I'm getting to that," Gary replied. "A few seconds after I got up and started to look around I was suddenly in this rock cavern surrounded by these goofy monkeys. They started accusing me of being a spy and demanding that I take some kind of test. I got a little nervous and without thinking I used my power."

"Power? What are you talking about?" Jerry asked. "You only told me



Bishop had a power. Not you."

"When people of this world go to Earth, they get a power," Gary explained. "And when Earth people come here, then we get a power. But everyone loses their power once they return to their own world."

"Everyone but Bishop," Mandy added.

"Yeah," Gary added. "Because Bish's parents came from both worlds, he gets to keep his power no matter where he is."

"If everyone is done with their plot exposition, I would like to get on with this," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said.

"What power do you have?" Jerry asked Gary. "And do I get a power?"

"My power isn't important at the moment. Yes, you get a power, but you don't always find out what it is right away."

Jerry was excited. "I hope I get a cool power."

Bishop laughed. "Yeah, but I bet it won't be as cool as your brother's power. Show him Gar."

"No, that's okay."

"Come on, Gar," Bishop goaded.

"Yah," Jerry added. "Come on. Show me!"

"Go ahead! Just show him and get this over with," Amy said impatiently.

"Fine," Gary angrily replied. "Jerry, hold out your hands."

Jerry held out his hands and Gary reached into his pocket and pulled out two cherry ice pops. He put one into each of Jerry's hands.

"I can create ice pops out of nothing," Gary mumbled.

"That's your power?" Jerry laughed. "You're an intergalactic ice cream man!"

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Amy laughed.

Gary glared at Jerry. "I should have left you back at the castle with Justin. Maybe he could have fixed you, too."

"So what happened when you used your power?" Bishop asked.

"I always nibble on something when I'm nervous and so I pulled out an ice pop. As soon as I did one of the monkeys snatched it out of my hand. They all looked at it as if they've never seen one before."

"They probably haven't," Mandy said.

Gary nodded. "Yeah, I found that out. Each one wanted to hold it and they started fighting over it until the one that was holding it got so angry that he shoved it into the face of another monkey. He must have gotten some of it in his mouth because he went crazy and wanted more.

So I gave him another one and then another. Pretty soon I was making them for all of the monkeys and the next thing I knew they were making me their king."

Mandy laughed. "Here we were worried that you might have drowned in the river and all this time you were king of the monkeys. I just hope Justin doesn't hear about it. You'll never live that one down."

"Come on guys," Bishop said. "We need to get out of here."

"It's about time," Amy said. "This is not going as I had planned."

"Huh?" Mandy said.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck stomped his staff to the ground. "You cannot go anywhere," he said to Mandy. "You are my consort."

"Mucky, as much as I'd like to stay with you I have to leave with my friends."

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck shook his head. "No, neither you nor our king is permitted to leave."

"Me either?" Gary exclaimed.

Amy wrapped her arms around Bishop's arm. "That sounds good to me. We can come back for them later. Much later."

"No!" Bishop said. "We're not leaving anyone behind. Come on guys."

Bishop and his friends started to leave. When they made it to the tunnel entrance the two guards pointed their spears at them. The other guards in the room ran up behind them and also aimed their spears at them.

"Okay," Bishop said. "Anyone else have a plan?"

After her emotional outburst with her brother, Miss Mann felt all the anger against him bubbling to the surface. She felt compelled to confront him on all those things she had kept buried inside her all these years. She was surprised when she looked over at her younger counterpart. Rather than facing up to her brother, the younger Christie Rae seemed to withdraw within herself and just take his abuse.

"Was I always like that?" Miss Mann thought to herself as she watched her brother taunt his sister further with no resistance from her younger self.

"If you don't want me to tell King Alchemous about you and Onyx, then you are going to have to keep quiet about anything you see happen around here," Christian said to the younger Christie Rae.

"What... What do you mean? What's going to happen?" the younger Christie Rae asked.

Christian smiled menacingly. "Not much. Yet."

Miss Mann watched as Christian started to slowly pace the floor as he looked around the room.

"You know that your boyfriend is the eldest and because of that he is next in line to inherit the throne if something were to happen to King Alchemous."

"What would happen to King Alchemous?" the younger Christie Rae asked.

"Oh nothing," Christian replied. "Yet." Christian chuckled a little and then turned to face his sister. "Onyx still has a way to go before he is ready to take control of things. And when he does, he will need someone he can trust to advise him."

"You don't mean you do you?" the younger Christie Rae asked.

Christian continued pacing around the room. "Of course, stupid," he replied. "Why else do you think I've gotten to be friends with him? He needs my help."

"What kind of help can you give him?" the younger Christie Rae asked.

Christian stopped pacing and paused for a second. Then he turned to his sister and smiled again. "He needs my special kind of help and advisement."

"What do you mean?" the younger Christie Rae asked suddenly feeling very frightened.

"You'll find out," Christian said with a laugh.

Miss Mann had had many nightmares over the years about this conversation with her brother. It wasn't until several years later that she did finally find out what her brother's plans were and by then it was too late to do anything about it. By then everything and everyone that she had ever cared about was lost to her.

Back in the cavern, Bishop was standing very still staring at one of the two spears pointed at him.

"I wish I had never come here," Jerry wailed.

Bishop snapped his fingers. "Wish. That's it! Thanks Jerry."

"You're welcome," Jerry said. "What did I do?"

"You gave me the way to get us out of here."

Jerry looked up at Gary. "See? Bishop thinks I'm helpful."

Bishop turned to face the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck. "You promised me one wish if I beat you in your challenges."

"Yes, you may have one wish. Tell me what it is," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said.

"I wish you would let us all leave your kingdom, including Gary and Mandy," Bishop said.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked disappointed. "Very well. If that is your wish then I must grant it. Although I will miss my pretty consort." The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck looked sweetly at Mandy and kissed her on the hand.

"Yuck!" Mandy said.

"You could do worse," Amy teased. "I think you two make a perfect couple!"

Off to the side the monkey guards began to hoot and holler. Then one of them came up and whispered something in the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck's ear.

"Before he leaves," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said, "they want to know if the king will give them some more of his splendiferous treats."

Gary nodded. "Sure. I'll whip them up a batch of ice pops just before we go."

Upon hearing the happy news the monkey guards began to cheer and even the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck smiled.

A short time later Bishop and his friends were being led through a maze of tunnels by the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck and two of his guards. All three of monkeys were happily sucking on ice pops that Gary had created for them. Bishop, Amy and Mandy followed several feet behind. And a little further behind them were Gary and Jerry. As they walked Bishop's light orb illuminated the tunnel and he saw that it branched off into two directions. The monkeys turned down the left tunnel and were starting to move at a faster pace.

"Everyone stay together," Bishop said. "We don't want to get lost in here."

A minute later Jerry came to the same split in the tunnel. As Bishop, Mandy and Amy kept walking up the left tunnel, Jerry stopped for a second to tie his shoe. Gary stopped and walked over to him.

"Will you hurry up? You keep slowing me down."

As Jerry was tying his shoe the entrance to the left tunnel suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a solid rock wall. When Jerry finished tying his shoe Gary turned around and started to continue down the

tunnel unaware that he was going down the wrong path.

"Come on, twerp," Gary said. "I can't even see them ahead of us anymore."

Using his free hand to grab his brother by the wrist, Gary held the light orb in his other hand and sprinted down the tunnel hoping to catch up with his friends.

Unseen by Jerry or Gary, the tunnel behind them sealed itself up leaving no other way to go except forward.

In the other tunnel Bishop was holding the flashlight as he backtracked with Amy and Mandy. He was worried about Gary and Jerry.

"I don't think they're behind us anymore," he said.

"Jerry!" Mandy cried.

"Gary!" Bishop yelled out louder. "Come on, this isn't funny." He stopped as he reached the wall at the end of the tunnel. "Wait a minute!" he said. "Where did this wall come from?"

"Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere," Amy offered.

"We couldn't have," Bishop replied. "We walked straight back. There were no turns. Somebody is playing tricks on us. There was no wall here before."

"Well we can't just stay around here all day," Amy said.



Bishop was firm. "We can't leave without them."

"Your friends are not far, if that is what you seek. And if you are good, I may give you a small peek," a voice said suddenly from behind.

Bishop turned around and saw a familiar face.

"Mr. Boomietrix? Are you behind this?"

"The answer to that, you must find. But a clue I will tell you, if you don't mind. Your friends are now lost, what a great sorrow. But do not fear, for you will find them tomorrow."

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella in the air and an image of Gary and Jerry appeared. They were walking down a tunnel.

"Your friends are quite safe, as you can see. Now off on your journey, there are places to be." Mr. Boomietrix then disappeared.

"Strange little guy," Bishop mused. "I guess we'd better move on."

"But what about Gary and Jerry?" Mandy asked.

"We just have to hope that Mr. Boomietrix was telling the truth and that we'll see them tomorrow," Bishop said.

In the other tunnel Gary was becoming very distressed. "Now do you see what you've done? We've lost the rest of the group."

"Oh yeah? Then who's that?" Jerry asked.

Jerry pointed to a light in the tunnel ahead of them. Two figures were standing talking to each another.

"I don't know," Gary said. "But it can't be Bish. That person's a lot taller than Bish. And besides, there are only two people up there. If it were the others there would be three."

"Oh yeah. I didn't think of that. Then who is that?"

"I told you, I don't know. I'll turn off this light. I want to make sure we're not spotted until we find out if they're friendly or not."

Hidden in the shadows, Gary and Jerry slowly advanced towards the two figures. As they approached they heard parts of their conversation. One of them was slowly turning around holding a light orb, as if searching for something.

"Are you sure you heard something?" asked the first figure.

"I'm not sure," replied the second figure. "I don't hear anything now. Maybe it was just my imagination."

"Maybe it's that furry creature that freed us."

"Boomietrix? No, I don't think so. Whatever it was, it's gone now."

The figure on the left turned and as he did, the light from his light orb illuminated the other, revealing the evil Onyx. Gary was shocked.

"Onyx!" Gary whispered.

"Onyx!?" Jerry was loud. "That's him?"

"Quiet!" Gary hushed. "He'll hear you!"

But it was too late. The person with Onyx rushed toward them and as he did the light from his orb illuminated them both. Onyx pointed a small weapon in their direction.

"Come closer," Onyx commanded. "Let me see who you are."

Gary and Jerry stepped closer to Onyx. The other figure moved forward. It was Gambit.

"O'Leary!" Gambit exclaimed. "What are you doing here? And who is that with you?"

Gary mustered as much bravado as he was able. "Well if it isn't Onyx and his little toady son. How did you break out of jail?"

"That is none of your concern," Onyx replied. "Where is my interfering nephew?"

"I don't know. We got split up somehow."

"I don't believe him," Gambit sneered. "I say we should make him talk."

"You leave my brother alone, toad!" Jerry spat.

"Brother, eh? What's the matter, O'Leary? Getting your little brother to fight your battles for you? Is that because of your wimpy power?" Gambit laughed.

"It was powerful enough to beat you last time we were here," Gary recalled.

"Only because you caught me by surprise." Gambit was suddenly angry.

"Enough!" Onyx barked. "Cease your mindless prattle!" Onyx pointed his weapon in their direction. "Take me to my officious nephew."

"Officious?" Jerry asked. "What's that? Who's he talking about?"

Gary thought for a moment. "I don't know what officious means. But that's the way Onyx talks. He's talking about Bish."

Onyx sighed. "Officious is another way of saying meddlesome. Don't they teach you anything in that school you attend?"

"Yeah they teach me English," Jerry replied. "What are you speaking?"

Onyx shook his head. "I am not going to argue with a toddler. Now take me to my offici...." Onyx looked down and saw a perplexed Jerry. He sighed again. "Take me to my meddlesome nephew."

At that moment Justin, who was sitting in the castle workroom at a computer terminal, felt his mind begin to drift. It had been a long day and he was not used to all this work. Aquarian was standing next to the computer connected to it by cables. A panel in Aquarian's chest was open and Castleton was making some last minute adjustments inside.

"I believe we are almost done," Castleton said.

"Finally," Justin replied.

Castleton closed the panel. "Initiate his start up program and we'll see if he is functioning properly."

Justin hit a button and Aquarian sprang to life.

"Start up program initiated," Aquarian said in a monotone voice. "Engaging primary functions. Systems check out to normal parameters. Android designation Aquarian mach 2.2 on line and functioning."

"Yeah and hello to you too, Aquarian," Justin yawned.

"His primary functions are operating properly," Castleton said. "I think we can unhook him from the terminal for the next series of tests." Castleton disconnected the cable inputs to Aquarian's head. "Now let's test his motor skills. Aquarian, touch your toes."

Aquarian bent over and touched his toes.

"Good. His hand co-ordination is fine. Now walk behind Justin's chair."

Aquarian took a few steps and walked behind Justin's chair.

"His mobility is working. Good. Now, Aquarian, I want you to lift Justin's chair."

Aquarian bent down and with one hand lifted Justin's chair with Justin still in it.

Justin kicked his legs in the air. "Hey! What's going on?"

"I was able to boost his power output, to enhance his strength, but it is only short term," Castleton explained.

"Wait! How short term are you..."

Aquarian dropped the chair. Justin crashed to the floor before he could finish his question.

Justin slowly stood up and rubbed his sore butt. "Ouch! Couldn't you extend his power a little longer?"

"I could, but it may drain his energy reserves too quickly. And now the final test. Character recognition. Aquarian, please identify everyone in the room."

Aquarian looked at Castleton.

"Castleton. Humanoid of undetermined age. Acquaintance of

Christie Rae Mann and practitioner of many trades.”

“Good.”

Aquarian looked at Justin.

“Justin Wellington III. Fourteen year old Earth boy. Accomplished athlete, and twelve time Olympic gold champion. Skilled musician. Capable of writing and speaking fifteen languages fluently. Head of his class. Nobel prize winner. Considered to be the most perfect human born on Earth.”

Castleton looked at Justin suspiciously.

“Gee, I wonder how that got programmed in there,” Justin said sheepishly.

Without warning, Aquarian suddenly deactivated.

“Sounds like we have a lot more work to do,” Castleton sighed.

Meanwhile, Gary and Jerry were walking along the other tunnel with Onyx and Gambit following closely behind.

“You never did tell me how you escaped,” Gary said.

“While in our temporary state of defeat, my son was visited in our detention area by a strange small furry creature.”

“Mr. Boomietrix,” Gambit began. “He’s a ...”

“Yeah, we’ve met him already,” Gary said, cutting him off.

“He set us free and gave us this map,” Gambit said as he held up a piece of paper.

“Why would he do that?” Gary asked.

“He said that it would lead me to a long forgotten treasure,” Onyx answered. “And since you are here, it would appear that my dear nephew is also after it.”

“No he’s not,” Jerry said. “We came here to...”

Gary prodded Jerry in the ribs with his elbow.

“No, Jerry,” Gary said. “He’s figured it out. No use trying to lie to Onyx. He’s too smart to fall for one of your lies.”

“Indeed,” Onyx hissed.

“Can’t we stop to eat?” Jerry whined.

“Is that all you O’Leary’s ever think about?” Gambit asked as he threw his hands in the air. “Filling your stomachs?”

“If my intrusive nephew is on the same trail as I am, then I must reach it first,” Onyx declared.

“Hey, Gary. Can I have another ice pop?” Jerry asked.

“Yeah, why not. I wish we were with Bish. He’s probably made it out

of here all ready.”

“And Justin’s got to be done with Aquarian by now,” Jerry added.

CHAPTER TEN

THINGS ARE UP
IN THE AIR

After what seemed like an eternity, Bishop, Mandy and Amy were finally standing outside the mountain at the cave's entrance. Bishop happily took a deep breath of fresh air. He hoped that he would be able to get the funky monkey smell off of him before they made it back to the castle. Standing inside the entrance were the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck and two of his followers.

"Farewell, hairless Bishop, and hairless Bishop's mate. And farewell my pretty consort," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said.

"Aren't you going to wave goodbye pretty consort?" Amy taunted Mandy.

"Oh. Ha. Ha." Mandy replied.

The Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck tossed his staff at Bishop. Bishop barely grabbed it in time.

"Accept this gift as a remembrance of us," the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck said. As he waved good-bye, the cave entrance disappeared.

"I'm glad that's over," Bishop smiled.

Amy took Bishop's hand in her own.

"I wasn't scared for a minute," she said. "Not with you there, Bishop."

"Where did Mucky get the idea that you were Bishop's mate?" Mandy asked Amy.

Amy gave Mandy an innocent smile as she moved closer to Bishop.

"Maybe it's because we look perfect together."

Mandy fumed. She reached into Bishop's backpack and pulled out the map. "Okay, let's see how much further we have to go. I can't wait to get this over with," she said. She looked down at the map and back up again. "All we have to do is walk straight for a little while until we get to the lake. We should be there shortly. That is, if we don't have to rescue Amy again."

Mandy grabbed Bishop by the arm and pulled him forward. "Come on. Let's get going!" she said.

"Okay. Okay. I'm coming," a startled Bishop exclaimed.

Amy stared at Mandy. "Gee, what a grouch!"

It wasn't long before Bishop noticed an unusually pungent stench in the air. It felt like his sense of smell was being bombarded by over a dozen overpowering odors.

Bishop coughed. "Wow. Does anyone else smell that?"

Mandy winced. "Yes. What is it?"

"I'm not sure," Bishop said. "But we've got to keep on going."

After a few more yards the landscape started to change and began to take on a bizarre appearance. The surrounding bushes and rocks were all different colors of the rainbow. Looking down Bishop saw that even the dirt was an unusual shade of blue. Suddenly, tall skinny trees of various colors sprouted out of the ground and quickly shot high into the sky.

"I think we're encountering another solid hologram," Bishop said. "Be on the look out for trouble."

Bishop turned to Amy. "You've been pretty good at figuring out what's being thrown at us. Can you tell us where we are now?"

"Maybe," Amy replied gleefully.

"Amy this isn't a joke," Bishop said. "We don't know what dangers we're going to meet unless you tell us."

Amy giggled. "You've been doing very good so far. You don't need my help."

"As long as there are no more monkeys around to deal with I'll be happy," Mandy proclaimed.

Bishop closely examined one of the colorful trees that had suddenly appeared. It was a bright purple tree that was about twice his width. Growing out of its purple branches were bright red leaves with yellow stripes. One colorful leaf fell to the ground. Bishop watched as the leaf bounced on impact. Once it stopped bouncing he picked it up and

studied it.

"It feels thicker and heavier than a leaf back home." He kept rubbing the leaf between his fingers. "And it feels funny. Kind of like rubber or something." He brought the leaf up to his nose. "Ugh! That's where that awful smell is coming from. These things stink!"

He threw the leaf to the ground and watched in amazement as the leaf bounced about a meter in the air. "I wonder," he said as he reached over and pushed the tree. The tree bended easily under his weight.

"The tree feels like its made of the same rubbery substance as the leaf," Bishop announced.

Mandy sat down on a nearby rock and suddenly bounced back up.

"I think the rocks are too," she said.

They both quickly examined everything around them and soon discovered that it all was extremely rubbery, including the ground beneath their feet.

"A rubber countryside," Bishop said as he stomped his foot and felt it bouncing back. "I don't see how we can get into any danger here."

Mandy nodded. "I sure hope not."

They carefully continued walking through the bouncy countryside watching leaves bounce to the ground. As they walked it reminded Bishop of trying to walk on a giant trampoline. They struggled to maintain their footing as they made their way. Amy was strangely silent as she walked alongside Bishop. She kept looking up into the tree branches as if waiting for something to happen.

Bishop looked around as he walked. "I have no idea where we are or where we're going."

Suddenly he was struck in the back of the head and he stumbled forward just barely keeping his balance.

"Who hit me?" Bishop asked.

Mandy gazed around. "I don't see anyone but us here. And I know I didn't hit you." Mandy cast an accusing look at Amy.

"Why would I hit Bishop?" Amy asked. "You're the one that's jealous of us."

"Jealous?!" Mandy exclaimed. "Of you?! Get a clue, will you? I'm the one that..."

Mandy stopped suddenly as she too was hit in the head from behind. She fell to the ground and bounced a few inches before coming to a rest.

"What was that?" Mandy asked. "It felt like someone hit me with a

baseball or something.”

Bishop went over to help Mandy to her feet. “That’s what I felt too. But there are no baseballs around here.”

As Mandy was getting to her feet she happened to see something in the air moving towards them.

“Look out!” Mandy yelled, pulling Bishop aside at the last possible second.

They watched as a red and yellow baseball sized object soared past them and bounced off the ground. After bouncing around the area for a few seconds it came to rest on a nearby tree branch. They watched as it slowly began to deflate. As it deflated it began to lose its round shape and took on the appearance of a pigeon but one that was covered in red and yellow feathers. The colorful bird spread its now visible wings and glared down at them.

“What in the world is that?” Bishop asked.

“A Boing Boing bird,” Amy replied. “It’s from a kid’s story that my father used to tell me when I was little.”

Mandy put her hand to her forehead. “Why is everything we come across from a children’s story?”

“Maybe the computer that creates these things is damaged and it can only access certain programs,” Bishop reasoned.

Amy laughed. “That’s very clever. I knew I wasn’t wrong in choosing you.”

“Choosing me?” Bishop asked. “Choosing me for what?”

“Oh, um, to be my boyfriend, of course,” Amy replied. “You don’t think I want some dunderhead like that fat kid for a boyfriend, do you?”

Bishop looked at Amy and sighed. “That dunderhead... I mean that fat kid... what I’m trying to say is that his name is Gary. Why can’t you remember that?”

Amy just looked at him with a puzzled look. “He’s not important. He doesn’t interest me.” Amy tightly wrapped her arm around Bishop’s arm. “You do.”

Bishop pried himself loose from Amy’s grip. “Can we talk about this later? I need to know about these Bong Bong birds.”

“Amy shook her head. “No, they’re Boing Boing birds. Not Bong Bong.”

“Whatever,” Bishop replied. “What can you tell me about them?”

Amy sighed. “Just that they attack when they feel their nesting area is being invaded. As they fly toward their prey they inflate and hit their

foe knocking their opponent to the ground and then they safely bounce away before their foe can retaliate.”

“They really seem to blend in with the trees,” Bishop said. “If I didn’t know that one was there I wouldn’t have noticed it.”

“Yes, unless they land on a different colored tree you don’t usually see them,” Amy explained. Suddenly the Boing Boing bird that they had been looking at flew off the branch and headed towards them. As it inflated it let out a high pierce screech.

“Look out!” Bishop yelled as he pulled Mandy out of the path of the bird. After pulling her safely aside Bishop turned back to Amy. “How do we let them know that we aren’t interested in invading their nesting area?”

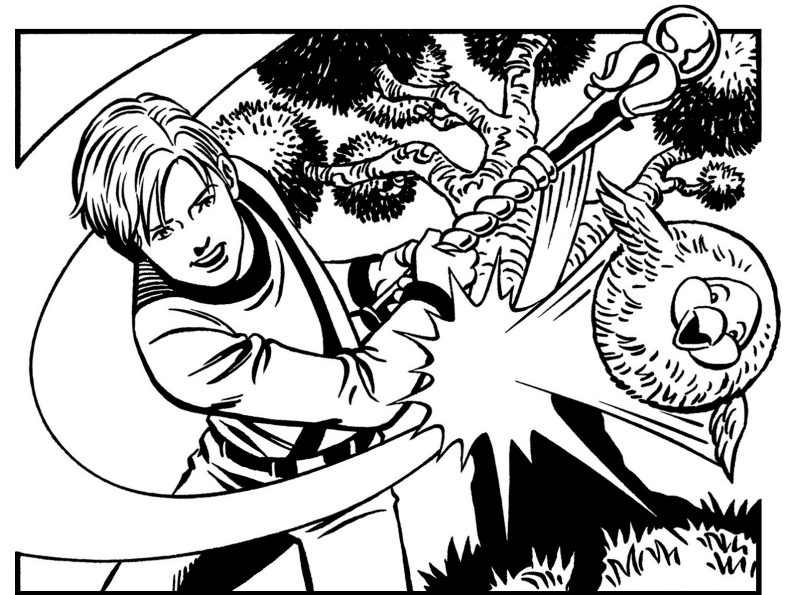
Amy was hopeful. “Can you talk to birds?”

“Of course not,” Bishop replied.

“Then there is no way,” Amy answered. “They will just keep attacking.”

As she finished saying that an orange and green Boing Boing bird bounced off Bishop’s left arm.

“We’ve got to fight them off somehow,” Bishop said. “Those things hurt.”



Another colorful Boing Boing bird hit Mandy in the right leg. Before she could see where it went she was hit in the left leg by another bird. Turning around she saw a Boing Boing bird had also struck Bishop and he was about to be hit by another one. Amy was just standing there watching Bishop. It looked like the birds weren't bothering her. She began to wonder why they were not attacking Amy when she was suddenly hit by another Boing Boing bird in the back.

"Bishop!" Mandy shouted. "Think of something!"

Bishop went to a nearby tree and tried to break off one of the small branches, but all it did was bend and twist.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

"I'm trying to break off a tree limb and use it like a baseball bat. But it won't break off. It's too rubbery."

Bishop raised his arm to try and deflect another Boing Boing bird that was coming at him.

"The staff!" Mandy exclaimed. "Bishop, you can use the staff that Mucky gave you."

The Boing Boing bird bounced off of Bishop. He reached back to his backpack and felt the stiff wooden staff that the Grand High-Exalted Mucky Muck had given to him as a present. Removing it from his backpack he slowly moved in a small circle looking in the trees for any movement towards them. Suddenly from behind he heard a loud screech and he turned to see a blue and pink Boing Boing bird heading towards him. Taking aim he swung at the round bird with the staff. It connected and he sent the Boing Boing bird sailing safely away from them.

"A home run!" Bishop said proudly. "It's a good thing I was in little league before I was on the swim team."

"Little league?" Amy replied.

"Yeah," Bishop said. "Little league. You know, baseball."

Amy shook her head. "Baseball? I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's a game that we play back where I come from," Bishop clarified.

"Bishop!" Mandy said. "Behind you!"

Bishop turned and had just enough time to swing and hit another Boing Boing bird away. The bird sailed toward a tree and bounced off it. It then bounced back and forth between several more trees.

"You are very good at this game," Amy said.

"These birds are a little bit bigger than a regular baseball so that makes it a little easier," Bishop said.

"I hope you're not harming them," Mandy said.

Bishop watched as the last Boing Boing bird he had hit returned to its nest in a tree. "They look okay to me," he said. "Being made of rubber they must not get hurt very easily."

Without any more interference from the Boing Boing birds, they carefully resumed their trek through the bouncy countryside.

Reprint's day at the castle was a series of non-stop interruptions. Ever since he had received control of the castle that Miss Mann had passed on to him in her absence, he was finding that there never seemed to be a moment to rest. In addition to the normal duties that were required to keep things running smoothly he was now inundated by people coming to him seeking help in the increased hologram activity through out the kingdom.

He had thought that being in charge was what he wanted but now he found that it was far more work and aggravation than it was worth. It was now more important to find some place where he could hide. Seeking to escape the constant stream of people seeking his aid, Reprint was now racing through the castle looking for a quiet place where he could spend a few minutes alone and think.

Running through a hallway he stopped when he saw a light coming from a room several yards down the hall. As he approached he noticed that it was the work room where Justin and Castleton were busy fixing Aquarian. Unobserved, he quietly watched from the doorway as he saw Castleton shaking his head.

"From everything that I can see," Castleton said to Justin. "Aquarian should be fully functional. But I'm still getting several rather unusual readings from him."

Justin looked at the monitor and then at the stationary figure of Aquarian. "We can get him activated, but he doesn't stay powered up for very long. His systems keep shutting down after a few minutes of activation."

"Exactly," Castleton agreed. "The power stops for no apparent reason."

Reprint was glad that he hadn't been chosen for this task. He was no good when it came to repairing or fixing things. He remembered hearing that his father was always good at repairing anything that was broken. Unfortunately that talent never got passed on to his sons. He wished that he could help his friends with their problem but he knew that he would

probably just make things worse than they already were.

Justin put his right hand to his forehead and shook his head in frustration.

"I'm sorry, Castleton," Justin said. "I just can't figure out what's wrong with Aquarian. We've been working on him non-stop since I got here and it doesn't seem like we are making any progress."

Justin got up and began to pace the floor.

"Aquarian's never going to be well," Justin continued. "Maybe I shouldn't have been picked to help you."

Castleton stopped looking at the small scanning device in his hand and placed it on a nearby table. He placed his hand on Justin's shoulder. "That is not true, Master Justin. The fact that you are so concerned about the welfare of this unit shows that it is more than just a piece of machinery to you, although you probably wouldn't admit it to your friends."

"I do sometimes forget that he's not a real person. Maybe it's because I spend so much time with him and Chance and the rest."

Castleton nodded. "More time than with your own family?"

"Yeah, my own parents pretty much shut me out of their lives."

"If one door is closed to you, then try another way in," Castleton replied.

"Huh?"

"It's just that life gives us many windows and doors into places and things. The trick is to see when they are open and jump when the opportunity presents itself."

"I don't see any way of getting closer to my parents."

"Perhaps not now," Castleton responded. "But there may be a chance in your future. Just be prepared to take the opportunity when it presents itself to you."

Reprint who was still listening from the doorway shook his head sadly. Since both of his parents were deceased he would never have the chance that Justin might have.

"Okay, Castleton," Justin said. "If I ever get the chance to connect with my parents I'll try."

"Trying is the first step to accomplishing great things."

"I wish one of those great things could be fixing Aquarian," Justin said downheartedly. "I just don't think I'm cracked up for this type of stuff."

"Cracked up?" Castleton said. "Hmmm. Cracked up."

Castleton snapped his fingers and ran over to Aquarian. "Of course!

Cracked up!"

Justin wasn't sure if Castleton hadn't cracked up from all the pressure.

"Is everything okay?" Justin asked.

Justin watched as Castleton opened a panel in Aquarian's chest and removed a small colorful rock.

"What is that?" Justin continued.

"This is a neutrium crystal," Castleton replied. "It is Aquarian's power source."

Castleton placed the colorful crystal on a small monitor lying on a desk and a large holographic image of the crystal formed in mid-air directly above. Castleton walked around the image staring at it closely.

"Yes!" Castleton shouted. "There it is! The source of all our problems!"

Justin ran over next to Castleton. "What? Where?"

Castleton pointed to a small hairline crack in the interior of the crystal.

"Do you see that small crack? That is what is causing all of our problems."

"That little thing?" Justin said in disbelief.

"Size has nothing to do with importance or strength," Castleton said.



"There is enormous power in something as tiny as an atom."

Castleton smiled as he grabbed the small crystal off the monitor.



"Now all we have to do is replace this crystal and your little friend here should be one hundred percent functional."

"That's great," Justin replied. "It's a good thing that you were here to figure it out."

Castleton looked surprised. "A good thing I figured it out? But Master Justin, it was you who gave me the idea to look there."

"Me?"

"Yes, Master Justin. When you mentioned that things were cracked that gave me the idea. I never would have thought of looking there if it weren't for you."

"But that's not what I..." Justin sputtered. "What I mean, what I meant..."

"Master Justin," Castleton interrupted. "There is no need to minimize your assistance today. You were of insurmountable help. You have much to be proud of. But come, we still have work to do."

Seeing that everything was going to work out with Aquarian, Reprint felt better and decided to go back and tend to his own duties.

"I can't wait for Bishop and Miss Mann to return," Reprint said to himself. "They're much better at keeping things under control than I am."

"You'll find out." Those were the words that Miss Mann had been tormented by for many years. Hearing her brother speak them again she felt herself losing control.

"What does that mean?" the younger Christie Rae asked.

"That's all you need to know," Christian said with an air of authority.

"That's not all she needs to know," Miss Mann said to Christian. "The road you're going down is a self destructive one and everyone that follows you will pay the consequences."

As Christian turned to face Miss Mann he took off his purple cap. "And what makes you the expert on everything and everyone?"

"I'm not an expert on everything," Miss Mann replied. "But I do know enough about you to know that you are jeopardizing many people's lives with your plans."

The younger Christie Rae pleaded with her older self. "Please, don't upset him, it only makes him angrier."

Christian smiled. "And you won't like me when I'm angry."

"At this moment, Christian, I don't like you period," Miss Mann

stated. "My life and the lives of everyone I hold dear to me would be very different if it weren't for your crazy dreams."

"They're not crazy!" Christian declared.

"Yes, they are," Miss Mann said. "And so are you!"

The younger Christie Rae grabbed the arm of her older self. "Please! Don't!"

Miss Mann turned and looked at her younger self. "Christie, one day you're going to need to stand up to your brother. And I think today is my day."

"You have no idea what my plans are," Christian said.

"Yes Christian, I do," Miss Mann stated. "I know that you are going to be responsible for the death of King Alchemous, either directly or indirectly. I also know that you are going to take Onyx down the darkest course of his life and then leave him."

"Leave him? Why would I leave him when I'm spending so much time getting him ready to serve as my pawn?" Christian asked.

For a moment Miss Mann looked very sad. "You're not going to have a choice in the matter," she said. "I try not to think about that day, and what happened to you."

"What are you talking about?" Christian said. "Nothing's going to happen to me. You're just afraid of what I'll do once I achieve my goal."

"You will never achieve it," Miss Mann said. "But you will end up destroying everything in your path trying."

"Fine! Let it all be destroyed!" Christian said. "If I can't get what I want, then why should anyone else?"

The younger Christie Rae gasped. "I'm glad father isn't here to witness this."

In a behavior resembling Onyx many years later Christian looked at his sister and scowled. "You speak as if he was out of town on a holiday. Father is long dead, Christie, and I only wish that you had joined him."

The younger Christie Rae began to cry.

Miss Mann slapped Christian's face. "Christian!"

Christian stepped back momentarily stunned by Miss Mann's action.

"You struck me, Christie!" Christian said. "You're going to pay for that!"

Miss Mann seemed surprised. "You called me Christie. You know who I am?"

Christian rubbed his face. "Yes, I know who you are. Do you think

I'm stupid like her?" Christian pointed at the younger Christie Rae who was sobbing near the window. "I also know that your young friend is going to pay for what you did."

"If you even try to harm Bishop," Miss Mann said.

Christian shook his head and laughed. "Who said I was talking about Bishop? Someone else is after him."

Christian looked at the puzzled expression on Miss Mann's face. "You still haven't figured out why you are here. You're still just as stupid as you used to be."

Regaining a little of her composure, Miss Mann shook her head. "No, I always felt that way because that is how you always treated me. But I now see through you, Christian. You're the stupid one. If you weren't, you would have stopped your idiotic plans before it was too late."

Miss Mann snapped her fingers. "Too late! That's it! You've been keeping me preoccupied and away from the others. I've been neglectful in my duties."

Miss Mann raced for the door.

"I've got to get out of here!" she said as she brushed past her brother who was laughing at her. "I just hope that I'm not too late."

After a laborious trek through the land of the Boing Boing birds, Bishop, Mandy and Amy finally arrived at an area that resembled something normal. To their right was a gigantic rock formation and to their left was a small wooded area. They stopped when they approached a small lake.

"Okay, so we're here," Mandy said as she surveyed the area. "I don't see any spaceship."

"We just got here," Bishop noted. "Let's look around. It's got to be here somewhere. Let's check out those trees over there."

Bishop, Mandy and Amy walked past the first few trees into a small clearing and saw Mr. Boomietrix sitting on a checkered tablecloth that was spread out on the ground. There was a large variety of food on the cloth. Seated around the tablecloth was a well-dressed frog in a multi-colored suit drinking hot cocoa. Next to him sat a two-headed lizard wearing a waistcoat and sipping two cups of tea. Gary and Jerry both casually drank a cup of hot cocoa. Mr. Boomietrix looked up and greeted the threesome.

"You are late. We could not wait. Have a seat, and join our retreat," he said.

"Gary! Jerry!" Bishop called out.

Gary looked casually up from his cup. "Oh, hi, Bishop," he said.

"We're just having a bite to eat with our new friends. Mr. Sizzles and Mr. Berump," Jerry said.

Mandy stared back and forth at the frog and the lizard. Although they appeared to be about five feet tall, they looked much bigger seated next to the smaller figures of Jerry and Mr. Boomietrix. "Mr. Sizzles and Mr. Who?" she asked.

The well dressed frog stood up and bowed. "Mr. Berump," he said with a cough. "Pardon me, I seem to have a frog in my throat."

Bishop, Amy and Mandy watched as Gary and Jerry both broke out in laughter at the very bad joke.

"Perhaps you have heard of me," Mr. Berump continued. "I am quite famous."

Both Bishop and Mandy shook their heads while Amy just stood there silently.

"Yesssss," Mr. Sizzles left head hissed.

"Quite, famosssss," Mr. Sizzles right head added.

"Let me guess," Bishop said. "You're famous for jumping."

Mr. Berump shook his head and laughed. "Oh no, no, no. Any common frog can jump. I am not a common frog. I do not jump. I write poetry. My poems are known far and wide. Would you care to hear one?"

"Not really," Mandy answered.

"Well if you don't wish to hear me recite a poem, then why are you here?" Mr. Berump asked.

"We're here on a mission," Bishop answered.

"A misssssion?" Mr. Sizzles left head asked.

"What ssssort of misssion?" Mr. Sizzles right head added.

"I can't tell you," Bishop said.

"Well why don't you sit and eat with us, Bishop?" Gary asked. "We haven't eaten since you ditched us in the tunnel."

"I didn't ditch you. We got split up. I went back to look for you, but couldn't find you."

"No big deal, Bishop," Gary said. "We ran into a little trouble at first, but we got out of it. I'll tell you all about it later. We found our way out with the help of Mr. Boomietrix."

"Yeah," Jerry smiled. "He's not so bad, once you get to know him."

"As you see, all is fine. Won't you please sit down and dine?" Mr.

Boomietrix asked.

"Yesssss. There issss plenty of sssspace," Mr. Sizzles left head said.

"Resssst for a ssspell," Mr. Sizzles right head hissed.

"I guess a break won't hurt. We could use some food," Bishop said as he sat down next to Gary. Amy sat on his other side. Mandy sat on the other side of Jerry. Bishop reached over and picked up a sandwich.

"I don't think you should do that, Bishop," Gary said.

"Why not?"

"It's just that this is holographic food, so it really doesn't taste very good. And it doesn't last long in your stomach. Why not eat some of the food that Christie Rae packed away for you in the backpack?"

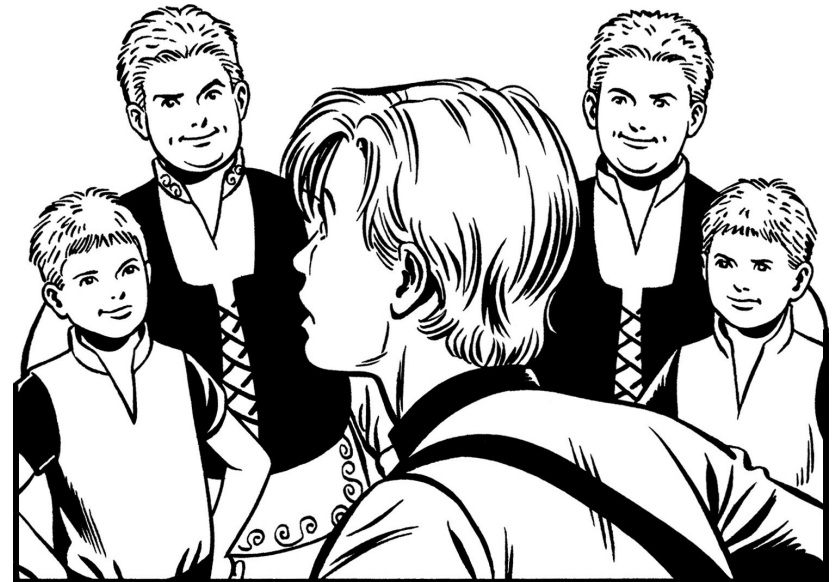
"I guess so."

Bishop reached into his backpack and pulled out several wrapped packages of food. He handed one to Mandy, then Amy and finally Gary and Jerry. Mandy opened hers and started to eat, as did Bishop. He noticed Gary wasn't eating his sandwich.

"Come on, Gary. Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

"Umm. Not anymore. We didn't know when you'd be arriving with real food. And I filled myself up on the holographic food so much that I'm not hungry for the real stuff."

"Yeah, me too," Jerry added.



"Oh, okay." Bishop looked to his other side and saw that Amy was not eating either.

"Aren't you hungry, Amy?"

"Yes. I mean, no," she said nervously. "It's just that we've been through so much recently, I just..."

"Sounds like you had something happen to you," Gary said. "Why don't you tell us about it, Bishop?"

"We just ran into some bouncing birds. Real weird stuff," Bishop explained.

"Oh, yeah, the Boing Boing Birds," Jerry smiled. "That's a funny story."

"How did you know about them?" Mandy asked. "They're a Homeworld story. Not an Earth one."

"Oh, uh..." Jerry stammered. "I... um..."

"Uh, Mr. Boomietrix told us that story," Gary explained. "Why are you acting so suspicious?" He turned to Mr. Boomietrix. "Tell them you told us the story."

"There are many stories that I weave. Some to amuse, and some to deceive."

"Come on, Mr. Boomietrix," Jerry coaxed. "Tell us another story!"

"It is time for one of you to tell us a story," Mr. Berump croaked to Bishop.

"Yessss. A ssstory," Mr. Sizzles left head hissed.

"Pleasssse," Mr. Sizzles right head requested.

"Okay, why not," Bishop said. He leaned forward. "My story begins on another world, a long time ago. It is the story of two brothers and their tale of woe. The youngest brother, was the brother of white. The oldest one was the color of night."

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella and a white figure and black figure appeared.

"They clashed many times, as most brothers do. But one fateful day, there would no longer be two. The brother of white had a wife and a son. For their safety he feared if the battle was not won."

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella again and a woman and a young boy appeared beside the white figure.

"For the brother of black had his emissaries. With all their powers, all of which varies."

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella again. The black figure was now surrounded by several other figures.

"The brother of white had his followers too. To help in the battle that was beginning to brew."

Several figures now surrounded the white figure.

"He sent his son away, to an old one's care. Not knowing that conspiracy lurked in the air."

The son was led from the white figure by an older figure.

"His wife and his followers did battle that gray day. Yet who was the victor, no man can really say. With weapons and powers they fought one another. Man against man, brother against brother. Then the brother in white and his bride fought no more. The brother in black had finally settled the score."

The umbrella waved again, and the two figures were shown. The one in white was fatally slain and falling to the ground. The figure in black was laughing as he faded away. The young boy ran up to his parents' side and knelt down beside them, crying.

"And so the boy's parents lie dead at his feet. Never again would they meet. The morale of the story is a simple one my friend. Put your hatred aside, or you too will meet the same end."

The figure of the boy slowly faded away. The multi-colored frog, the two headed lizard and Amy sat crying.

"That was a sad story. I'm just glad it wasn't true," Amy said.

"But it was true. The brother in white was my father, who was betrayed by his brother," Bishop explained.

"Oh, Bishop. I'm so sorry," Amy sobbed.

"Hey Bishop," Gary said. "I always thought your parents died in a car crash."

"That's what I thought for most of my life," Bishop said. "Because that's what Onyx wanted me to believe. But I've talked to Miss Mann about it and she said they died in some big battle with Onyx and his Emissaries."

"I don't wish to be a bore. But we only have time for one story more," Mr. Boomietrix said.

"Why don't you tell us one, Amy?" Bishop suggested.

"Oh, I'm not very good at stories."

"Tell one about your family. We know so little about you."

"I wasn't complaining," Mandy said.

"Okay. I was the first-born and the only girl in my family," Amy began. "I had two younger brothers. During the day, they were involved in their studies. But after their lessons, they would always fight. I never had any

problems with them. My youngest brother was gentle and kind. My other brother had a clever mind. Whenever he was feeling sad or upset, I could always cheer him up. He never called me Amy. He always called me by my given name. I miss him a lot. Actually I miss both of them very much. It's been so long since I've seen them."

"Why? What happened?" Bishop asked.

"My parents were worried about my two brothers always fighting. So they sent them both away separately to be tutored elsewhere. They felt that if they weren't together so much, they wouldn't fight. But without them around, I had no one. So I started to take long walks by myself. It's been a long time since I've seen either of them."

"Don't worry, Amy. I'm sure you'll see them both again someday."

"Do you think so, Bishop? I would like that very much."

Bishop stood up. "I guess we'd better start looking for the spaceship and the computer."

"Uh, we looked all over the place before you got here, Bishop," Gary said. "We didn't find anything."

"That's odd. Miss Mann said it should be here somewhere," Mandy recalled.

"If you want, we could go back and ask Christie Rae," Gary said. "Maybe she made a mistake. Bishop and Amy can stay here and look around some more."

"Wouldn't it be better if we stayed in one group instead of splitting up?" Bishop asked.

"No, Bishop. I say we should split up." Gary was uncharacteristically firm. "You and Amy stay here. Mandy and Jerry and I will go back."

"Calm down, Gar. You don't have to get so pushy."

"Fine!" Gary snarled. "Then you stay here and we'll be leaving. Come on Mandy!"

"I don't think it's safe to leave Bishop and Amy alone," Mandy said.

"It's not important what you think. Anyway, they won't be alone," Gary replied. "Mr. Boomietrix is here. Besides, Bishop can handle himself. He did all right getting us here."

"You're not acting like yourself, Gar. Is everything okay?" Bishop asked.

"Yes! Why wouldn't it be, Bishop?"

Bishop moved closer to Gary.

"For one thing, you never call me Bishop. You always call me Bish. And you called Miss Mann by her first name. And also, you seem a little

too anxious to separate us. I think there's something funny going on."

Gary was right in Bishop's face. "Don't push me, Bishop!"

Suddenly, another Gary and Jerry entered the clearing.

"Hi, Bish," Gary No. 2 smiled.

Bishop didn't turn around. "Not now, Gary," he responded. "I'm speaking to Gary."

Bishop spun around and stared in amazement when he saw the second Gary and Jerry. He turned back to the first one.

"If he's Gary, and you're Gary, then which one's the real Gary?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHO'S WHO?

Bishop stood in puzzlement as he looked back and forth at the two Garys and Jerrys.

"Tell me," Bishop demanded. "Which one of you is the real Gary?"

Onyx and Gambit entered behind the recently arrived Gary and Jerry.

"I would have thought that would be obvious to anyone, including you, cousin," Gambit said.

"Gambit. I should have known. If you and your father are here then something definitely stinks."

"Unfortunately, dear nephew, for once I am not involved," Onyx sneered. "None of this is my doing."

"Sure, and why should I believe you?"

"It's true, Bish," the second Gary said. "We just got here a minute ago. He was with us the whole time."

"How do I know you're the real Gary?" Bishop asked.

"Can that Gary do this?" the second Gary asked as he pulled a lemon ice pop out of his pocket. Mr. Boomietrix seemed surprised by this.

"The power is at his command?" Mr. Boomietrix said to himself. "A change of plan is at hand!"

"Of course I can do that," the first Gary said, pulling a lemon ice pop out of his pocket. "But can you do this?" The first Gary pulled a pie out of the air and threw it at the second Gary, hitting him in the face. "Ha! Take

that, dough boy!”

“Hey! You can’t do that to my brother!” the second Jerry protested.

“Shut up squirt,” the first Jerry barked.

“Who’s gonna make me?” the second Jerry challenged.

“Just me and a few of my friends,” the first Jerry said as Mr. Berump and Mr. Sizzles bared their sharp teeth at the second Jerry.

“Yipe!” cried the second Jerry. “Help! Gary!”

The second Gary was wiping pie from his face. “I’m a little busy right now,” he said.

Onyx fired his weapon into the air. Everyone stopped what they were doing. “Enough of your foolish pranks!” he bellowed. “I have come here for what is mine and I intend to get it, regardless of who, or what, stands in my way.”

Amy was bold. “Bishop will stop you!”

Onyx gave Amy a puzzled look. “There is something familiar about you, girl. Have we met?”

“Don’t push him too hard,” Bishop warned Amy. “That’s my insane uncle. The one I told you about.”

“I don’t care who he is. I know I’m safe as long as you’re here,” Amy cooed.

“Not that line again,” Mandy moaned.

“Foolish girl,” Onyx said. “He cannot help you. He cannot even save himself. Gambit!”

Gambit grabbed Bishop, pulling him away from Amy. He pushed Bishop toward Onyx. Onyx grabbed Bishop with one arm and pointed his weapon at Bishop’s forehead.

“Now take me to what I seek, or he will be the first to go!”

“Bishop!” Amy and Mandy cried out in unison.

“Touch not the boy, do him no harm. I will lead you there, you have no cause for alarm,” Mr. Boomietrix said. He waved his umbrella and the first Gary and Jerry disappeared, followed by Mr. Berump and Mr. Sizzles.

“So the first Gary and Jerry were holograms,” Bishop said. He turned his head to Onyx. “You weren’t responsible.”

“Quiet, boy,” Onyx hissed.

Mr. Boomietrix led Onyx out of the clearing back to the lake. Mandy, Gary, Amy and Gambit followed them.

“There is nothing here,” Onyx said. “I’m warning you, if you are wasting my time...”

“The treasure you seek is here, I fear. But first I must make its covering disappear.”

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella and the large rock formation that



was ahead of them disappeared. The remains of a giant spaceship were revealed in their place. "When what you seek to hide is too big, cover it with a rock or a twig."

The derelict spaceship lay on the ground covered with overgrowth. It was exposed in many areas due to missing metal plates that once covered the mighty ship. It was evident that there had once been more to the ship but this was all that now remained.

"Wow. What is that?" Gambit asked.

"It's the spaceship, dimwit," Amy replied. "It's what you came for, isn't it?"

"I know nothing about a spaceship," Onyx growled. "Nor do I care. I seek what has been taken from me."

"You mean you weren't looking for the spaceship that was creating all the solid holograms?" Gary asked.

"No, but that does interest me," Onyx said. "I could use that technology to create a holographic army. One that would obey my orders absolutely."

"You said you would let Bishop go free!" Amy complained.

"You are beginning to annoy me girl," Onyx replied.

"Let him go now!" Amy screamed. She raced at Onyx and rammed into him. Exhibiting more strength than anyone thought possible, Amy caused Onyx to lose his grip on Bishop. As he staggered back he fired his weapon at her. Amy fell to the ground, wounded.

"Amy!" Bishop cried.

Amy put her hand to her chest and looked at the blood on it. She slumped to the ground and disappeared.

"Amy?" Bishop said, stunned.

After a few seconds Amy reappeared without injury, standing by the spaceship. She pointed at Onyx.

"You are a very bad man!" she yelled.

"Did you just see that?" Jerry asked.

"Amy. What's going on?" Bishop asked.

"I think Amy's a hologram, too," Mandy said.

"Yeah, a pissed off hologram!" Gary added.

Onyx had a stunned look on his face. "What is happening on here?"

"You need to be taught a lesson," Amy said as she waved her hand. Suddenly, Onyx was surrounded by a multitude of Krazy Kavern Kooks. The monkeys jumped on him and dragged him to the ground. The ones

that weren't holding them down were busy punching and kicking and biting them.

As Gambit ran to his father's defense Amy let out a high pierced whistle and suddenly two Boing Boing birds hit Gambit from behind. Surprised by this sudden attack, Gambit twirled around to see what had hit him. When he did another Boing Boing bird hit him in the face and knocked him to the ground. Before he could get back up several more Boing Boing birds came soaring down and hit him.

Mandy watched as Onyx began bleeding from several wounds. "Amy, you've got to stop this!" Mandy said. "You're killing him."

"That's the idea," Amy replied with an evil smile. "He didn't care about killing me. Why should I care about him? Besides, I don't think Bishop and I want you around here anymore, either."

Amy waved her hand again and a snaggon appeared and grabbed Mandy with its trunk. Bishop tried to run to Mandy's aid but two chimps grabbed him and held him back.

"Mandy!" he called out.

"Stay out of this, Bishop," Amy commanded. "You don't need her anymore. You've got me."

Gary snuck up behind Amy and grabbed her from behind. "Stop all of this!"

Amy turned as two chimps came up behind Gary and started tickling him. Gary released his hold on her and he fell to the ground laughing hysterically. The chimps tickled him harder.

"Don't touch me!" Amy screamed at Gary. "Don't ever touch me!"

Jerry started to race to Gary's assistance. "Hey, get away from my brother!" he yelled. As Jerry tried in vain to pull one of the chimps off of Gary, Amy waved her hand again. Suddenly a scaly hand grabbed Jerry from behind.

"Hey pal," Mr. Sizzles left head said with an evil grin.

"Remember ussss?" Mr. Sizzles right head hissed.

A terrified Jerry looked at Mr. Sizzles and Mr. Berump smiling at him baring their teeth. "Help!" he screamed as the two creatures began chasing him.

Amy laughed malevolently as she watched the surrounding bedlam. "That takes care of all your friends here, Bishop. Once I get rid of them then you will have plenty of time for me. Now I think it's time to deal with your other friends back at the castle. I believe I'll send them an extra special gift." Amy walked away to contemplate her next move as Bishop

tried to free himself from the two chimps.

As Bishop continued his struggle to break free of the chimps' grasp he began to wonder if things could get any worse. This all started off with the simple task of bringing Aquarian to the Homeworld to be repaired, and now it had turned into another life or death situation. He wondered if this was an indication of the path that his life was taking. With a sudden burst of energy Bishop finally wrestled himself free from the chimps. He then knocked one of them to the ground and was about to attack the second one, when it suddenly fell to the ground. A broken umbrella lay next to its head. Bishop looked over and saw Mr. Boomietrix.

"Bishop, if I could. Speak with me if you would," Mr. Boomietrix pleaded as he waved his hand and formed a small blue forcefield around Bishop and himself.

"You're more than just a character from a children's story," Bishop declared. "What are you?"

"I am a program that Amy has not yet gained control of," Mr. Boomietrix explained. "It's very important that we speak."

"Hey, you're not rhyming anymore."

"No. That was necessary to keep her off guard. So she wouldn't suspect that my program existed. She has a clever mind, but she is still like a child in many ways. She has never fully matured."

"Who are you? Who is Amy?"

Although Mr. Boomietrix was smiling, Bishop sensed that Mr. Boomietrix was very worried about something. "Good questions. You are a bright lad and I can see why everyone seems to be interested in you. In answer to your questions, I am all that is left of the original program that ran the holographic entertainment system on what you call the spaceship. When the ship arrived at its destination, many parts were stripped to construct housing for the new inhabitants. But during the trip, the holographic system acquired self-awareness. It – I mean I – could not accept the idea of being taken apart. So I created holographic images that kept people away. And it worked for a good many years. Eventually I created the cover of rocks to disguise the ship when anyone came near that could do possible harm."

"But what about Amy?"

"One day, a young girl found the ship. She had an inquisitive mind and she took immediately to exploring it. I did not feel that she would be a threat and so I neglected to create the rock disguise in order to conserve energy. But something happened shortly after her arrival. She

fell on some debris and broke her leg. She was unable to leave and there was nobody nearby to hear her calls of help. I tried to help her the best way that I could, but I was of little help. The food I created for her had no substance and she was slowly starving to death."

"Couldn't you create a holographic image in the castle and tell someone that she needed help?"

"Yes, but to do so would have brought people here. And I did not want anyone to know that I was still active."

"So you let her starve to death?"

Mr. Boomietrix shrugged his shoulders. "It was unavoidable. There was no other alternative. I could have saved her life, but at the risk of losing my own. Before she died, I was able to transfer her memories and personality into my data banks. In time she learned how to create a holographic body for herself. And she even kept herself amused recreating characters from various books that she had read. But she lacked human interaction and she sought to send her 'body' to places further away. I was able to prevent her from doing this until she found a way to take control of the system away from me. She created all those creatures back at the castle to see who they would send to investigate. When she saw it was you, she created a hologram of Castleton to join her and have him introduce her as his granddaughter."

"So that wasn't the real Castleton?" Bishop asked. "I never realized how tricky she was."

"Yes, all the things that you encountered on your way here were designed by her, to see if you passed her test. She is looking for a hero to be her companion. I was sent to act as a go-between. I was to help you when she deemed it necessary. But when she was busy elsewhere, I was able to do small things that she couldn't detect."

"Like giving me that map in the maze?" Bishop asked.

"Yes, and helping your cousin to escape and getting him to come here. I thought the added distractions would confuse her. I'm afraid that it was necessary to distract your friends back at the castle and prevent them from contacting you. I didn't want her to become aware of certain things that they may have told you."

"You didn't harm any of my friends at the castle did you?" Bishop asked.

Mr. Boomietrix shook his head. "No, but it was necessary to access their memories and create certain diversions. It was essential to my plan to wrestle control back from Amy. It is only because she is dealing with

your friends that I am able to tell you all of this now.”

“Can you do anything to help us?”

Mr. Boomietrix looked baffled. “Help you? That is why I summoned you and your cousin. I need you to help me. I need you to shut down the computer and stop her, before she assumes total control of the system and becomes unstoppable.”

“But if I shut everything down, won’t you go away too?”

“Yes,” Mr. Boomietrix said sadly. “But it is necessary.”

“Isn’t there another way?”

Mr. Boomietrix paused and thought for a moment. “If her attention can be diverted or distracted, I could try to isolate her within the system. Limit her control and access of things. But she grows stronger every minute, and I grow weaker.”

“But what can I do?” Bishop asked. “She controls the computer and can create multiple solid holograms to fight us. I can’t stop her until I can get to the controls.”

“Yes, but that is where your friend Gary can help you.”

“Gary? How?”

“With his power.”

“But all he can do is create ice pops. That’s a little limited.”

Mr. Boomietrix shook his head. “No. There is more to his power than that. Perhaps the reason he creates ice pops is because there was a need for them once. But I believe that he can do what Amy can, without the aid of a computer. I believe he can create solid holograms.”

“So Gary has been eating holographic ice pops?” Bishop laughed. “It will be great if he can create solid holograms. But how can we use that to defeat her?”

The forcefield started to flicker.

“I’m afraid I cannot help you much longer. The only other thing I can tell you is that her given name is Amethyst. It may come in handy later.” Mr. Boomietrix pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “And I believe that your uncle can play a very important part in all this.”

The forcefield flickered more rapidly.

“She is gaining more control. I am losing more power. I will have to leave you if I am to keep some energy in reserves. Good-bye and good luck, Bishop.”

Mr. Boomietrix disappeared and a few seconds later, so did the forcefield.

Bishop looked at the battle going on around him. “Wait! Come back! How is knowing her name going to help?”

But it was too late, Mr. Boomietrix was gone.

“Gary! I’ve got to find Gary,” Bishop said to himself. He surveyed the area, and the ensuing chaos all around him. “I could really use Justin and Aquarian here right about now.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

JOIN THE PARTY

Loud opera music filled the castle workroom as Justin sat back and reclined in his chair. His feet were up on the desk and he was staring at the ceiling totally relaxed. The music continued, with a female vocal from a Wagnerian opera. Justin smiled and turned his head to the right. He laughed as he saw Aquarian singing in a woman's voice. Aquarian had a Viking helmet on his head and a spear in his hand. The tranquil moment was broken when Reprint appeared in the doorway.

"Justin!" he said sharply.

Startled, Justin fell backwards to the floor. "Reprint! I wasn't expecting you."

"Obviously. What is going on here? And where is Castleton?"

"Castleton went to take a nap," Justin responded as he jumped to his feet. "I got sort of bored waiting around for him so I decided to listen to some music."

"And you decided to use Aquarian?"

"Well he was just standing there doing nothing. And he had all these musical selections programmed into him. It seemed a shame to let them go to waste."

"Will you please turn him off? I hate opera. It sounds like people being murdered."

"I think most of the time they are being murdered."

Reprint gave him a stern look.

"Okay. Okay."

Justin went to the controls and started to type in the correct command. He didn't notice a large tan colored wolf suddenly materialize in the room right behind him.

Seeing the wolf starting to pounce on Justin, Reprint quickly ran forward and lunged at it. The two of them tumbled to the floor. Justin quickly stopped what he was doing when he heard the scuffle. Looking down he saw the tan wolf standing on top of the fallen Reprint.

"He just appeared out of nowhere! He was going to attack you," Reprint said over the loud music. "It must be another hologram."

The tan wolf growled and slashed Reprint's chest and abdomen with its mighty claws. Reprint screamed out in pain as blood began to pour out of the wounds.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of him," Justin said. He swiftly began his transformation into a wolf. His clothing dissolved and fur started to cover his body as he changed from a young boy into a gray colored wolf. The tan wolf bit down into Reprint's arm and he began to lose more blood.

"Hurry!" Reprint pleaded.

Sensing the new threat behind him, the tan wolf turned and growled. Wolf-Justin defiantly returned the growl. The tan wolf jumped off of Reprint and slowly the two wolves began to circle one another.

Dazed and bleeding from his several large gashes and bites, Reprint lay nearby on the floor unable to move from the intense pain. It was all he could do just to stay conscious and watch the ensuing fight.

The tan wolf lunged at Wolf-Justin and bit him. Wolf-Justin yelped out in pain as he struggled to break free. As the fighting waged on, Wolf-Justin could still hear Aquarian singing in the background. The music rose and fell reflecting the action of his fight. He doubted that anyone else in the castle would hear the sounds of the fight due to the loud music.

The tan wolf loosened its grip and Wolf-Justin broke free from the beast's deadly bite. He turned to face his attacker. The tan wolf lunged again at Wolf-Justin, but this time Wolf-Justin jumped up on a nearby table narrowly avoiding the assault. The tan wolf looked up and growled at Wolf-Justin.

Feeling that he had the disadvantage in this form Wolf-Justin began to transform back into his human form. As the special clothing Castleton had created for him reformed on his body Wolf-Justin stopped midway through the transformation. He now stood on the table in what he referred to as his werewolf form, half boy and half wolf. He knew that he couldn't keep this form for long but he hoped that it would give him the

advantage that he needed.

Baring his teeth and claws he pounced from the table onto the tan



wolf. He could feel his claws make contact with the tan wolf's back as they both rolled on the floor. After the two adversaries rolled around on the floor they suddenly separated. Werewolf-Justin crouched on all fours and scanned the room looking for the tan wolf. Suddenly the tan wolf jumped on him from behind and knocked him down to the floor, gashing him with its claws in the process. Looking up he could see the angry wolf's face as it stood on top of him. He could also feel the wolf's claws digging into him as it growled at him.

Werewolf-Justin wanted to cry out for help but he knew that nobody would hear him above the noise of the opera that was now blaring in intensity. The tan wolf lowered its head as it tried to bite Werewolf-Justin. Werewolf-Justin raised his claws and valiantly tried to hold back the attack. As Werewolf-Justin began to weaken from his wounds he could hear the singing reach its climax. Just as he was ready to give up, a spear suddenly penetrated the tan wolf's back.

Werewolf-Justin stared up in amazement. Miss Mann was standing in front of him holding the spear. The tan wolf tumbled off Werewolf-Justin onto the floor. Then its body disappeared leaving only the spear lying on the floor. Justin began to stand as he slowly regained his human form.

"Miss Mann! You're back! What happened?" Justin asked.

"Somebody wanted me out of the way and they were detaining me elsewhere in the castle."

"Who did that to you?" Justin asked.

"At first I thought it was my brother, but now I realize that it was whoever is in control of the holographic computer. They kept me distracted so I couldn't contact Bishop." She then looked at the two boys who were not in the best of shape. "And they also didn't want me here to help you. From the looks of it you both could use some first aid."

"But where did you get the spear from?" Justin asked.

Miss Mann looked at Aquarian, who was still singing. He had the helmet on his head, but the spear was missing from his outstretched hand.

Reprint and Justin both looked in Aquarian's direction and also saw the missing spear.

"I said that operas always sound like someone is getting murdered. And I was right," Reprint said with a slight smile. Then he moaned in pain.

Justin put his hand to his head and leaned against a wall.

"I'm still feeling a bit woozy from that fight."

Miss Mann noticed that Justin was bleeding from several cuts on his face and hands.

"You're both hurt. Sit down, you need to rest while I go get some medical supplies and tend to your wounds."

Miss Mann scurried out of the room. She passed Aquarian who was still singing, and still unaware of all that had happened around him.

"They probably would have both been safer if they had gone with Bishop," Miss Mann said to herself as she left the room.

Back at the spaceship, Gary was still on the ground being tickled by the two chimps. Amy was currently focusing her attention on Mandy and the Snagon. Bishop ran over to his fallen friend and tied the two chimps tails into a knot. One of the chimps looked up from Gary and started to come after Bishop. But he fell to the ground as he lost his balance because of his knotted tail. The other chimp was pulled toward him and also fell to the ground. The two chimps fought one another as they tried to untie themselves. It was several seconds before Gary could stop laughing and compose himself. He slowly got to his feet.

"Thanks Bish," Gary said.

"Follow me," Bishop said to Gary. "We've got to talk."

Meanwhile, Mr. Berump and Mr. Sizzles were still busy chasing Jerry.

"Help!" he screamed as he kept running in large circles crying for help.

"Shouldn't I be helping Jerry first?" Gary asked, pointing to his little brother. "He's in trouble."

"Listen to me!" Bishop said. "Then we can help him. I know who Amy is."

"I'll bite. Who?"

"She's a kid who got trapped here and got stuck inside the computer. She's just lonely and bored."

Gary surveyed the area. "Well it looks like she's got lots of excitement now."

"Come on, Gar. We've got to help her."

"Okay. But how?"

"I don't know. Mr. Boomietrix wasn't too helpful."

"Mr. Boomietrix? What does he have to do with this?"

"He's a part of the computer that's trying to gain control back from Amy."

"Sounds like you got a lot of information, Bish. Okay, I'll bite. If Amy is part of the computer doing all of this, how can we stop her?"

"Mr. Boomietrix said we could use your power."

"My power?" Gary exclaimed as he pulled an orange ice pop from his pocket. "What good can this do?"

"Plenty, if Mr. Boomietrix is right. But first, let's help Onyx before those chimps beat him to death."

"Hello? Help Onyx? Have you forgotten? He's the bad guy. Remember?"

"Yeah, but Mr. Boomietrix said that he is going to play an important part in all of this. So we're going to need his help against Amy. And it looks like he needs our help the most right now. Come on!"

Gary dropped the ice pop as he followed Bishop who was running toward Gambit. Gambit was on the ground crying out for help as he got pelted by a multitude of Boing Boing birds..

"I thought we were going to help Onyx," Gary said as he caught up to Bishop.

"We are," Bishop replied. "But we're going to need Gambit's help."

Bishop reached into his backpack and grabbed the staff that he had used earlier. Quickly swinging he began to hit all the incoming Boing Boing birds away, giving Gambit a chance to catch his breath and get to his feet.

"What did you do that for?" Gambit said angrily. "I could have beaten those stupid birds."

"How?" Gary asked. "By lying on the ground and crying for help?"

As Bishop batted away the last of the Boing Boing birds he turned and looked severely at Gambit.

"Look, I've got no time to play your stupid games," Bishop said to Gambit. "Now do you want to help us stop these chimps before they beat your father to death?"

Gambit mumbled something inaudible under his breath and finally nodded his head.

Bishop, Gary and Gambit went to the large pile of chimps that were surrounding Onyx and they struggled to remove them from him. As soon as they would pull one away another would take its place. They were hopelessly outnumbered. Watching the chimps as they beat Onyx to a pulp Bishop came up with another course of action. He noticed that the heavy chimp sitting on Onyx's chest looked very familiar. Looking more closely he realized that it was Bombom, the chimp he had competed

against in Simple Simian Say.

Leaving Gambit to battle the chimps by himself, Bishop pulled Gary aside.

"I don't know about you Bish, but I don't think this is working," Gary said.

"Listen, Gar," Bishop said. "I was talking earlier to Mr. Boomietrix and according to him you have the power to create solid holograms."

"That's crazy. I've only been able to create ice pops."

Gary pulled a grape ice pop from his pocket. "See? Just an ice pop."

"He said that's because at the time you had a need for an ice pop. But try to think about something else and concentrate."

"Okay, but I feel silly." Gary closed his eyes and concentrated. Suddenly a plate of spaghetti appeared in front of him.

"Is that all you think about? Food?" Bishop asked.

"Hey, now it's my turn to be hungry. Okay?"

"Never mind that," Bishop said. "It proves my point. You can create solid holograms."

"You mean my ice pops aren't real?" Gary suddenly looked sad.

"No," Bishop answered. "And that's the strange thing. A little while ago holographic Gary said that holographic food doesn't taste good to real people. Yet yours does."

"Maybe because I'm a real person creating it and I know what it's supposed to taste like so I can give it flavor while a machine can't."

Bishop nodded his head. "That makes sense."

"But how's that going to help us now?" Gary asked.

"One of the chimps that I just saw was Bombom," Bishop said.

Gary stood there with a puzzled look. "Yeah, so who's he?"

"Oh, that's right, you weren't with us when we met him," Bishop answered. "He's one of the chimps I had to compete against back in that cave. But he has one weakness. Banana cream pies. So I was thinking if you could just..."

Gary smiled. "Say no more." Gary concentrated and suddenly he was holding a banana cream pie in each hand. "Here you go."

Bishop took the two pies and headed back to Onyx. Trying his best to avoid the battling chimps he made his way to Bombom.

"Hey, Bombom," Bishop called out over the loud cries of the chimps as they attacked Onyx. "Feeling a bit hungry? Look what I've got."

Bombom looked up and saw the two banana cream pies. His

stomach started to growl and he jumped off of Onyx and knocked down several chimps as he pushed his way past them and grabbed the pies from Bishop. He sat down on two of the fallen chimps and began to merrily munch away on the holographic delight.

Bishop walked back to Gary.

"That helped a little but there are just too many for us to fight off, Bish," Gary said.

"Yeah, I know."

Jerry ran by as he made another pass, with the Mr. Berump and Mr. Sizzles still in hot pursuit.

"Help!" Jerry screamed. Bishop laughed as he watched.

"What's so funny?" Gary asked. "Those two things are trying to hurt my brother!"

"I know but they gave me an idea. Follow me, Gary."

Bishop brought Gary nearer to Onyx where Gambit was still trying to pull the chimps off of his father.

"Okay, now call Jerry over here," Bishop said.

"What?"

"Just do it. I'll handle the rest."

"Jerry! Come here! Now!" Gary yelled.

Jerry changed his course and started running toward Gary.

"Jerry! Leap frog!" Bishop ordered. "Now!"

Jerry vaulted over the chimps like a gymnast and nimbly landed on the other side of Onyx. The two creatures were not as quick or as agile and they slammed into the chimps, knocking several of them over.

"Looks like you learned something from those gymnastic classes you've been taking," Gary said.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Chimp No. 1 growled.

"Ssilence!" Mr. Sizzles left head commanded.

"Sssilly ssssimianss!" Mr. Sizzles right head hissed.

"Oh yeah?" Chimp No. 2 was defensive.

Chimp No. 2 hit Mr. Sizzles right head and Mr. Sizzles swung back. Chimp No. 1 and Mr. Berump swiftly joined the fight. Then the other chimps that had been beating up on Onyx noticed that their fellow chimps were in need of assistance. So forgetting all about Onyx they joined into the fight. Bishop and Gary looked at Onyx's bloodied body.

Gambit bent down to help the unconscious Onyx.

"Father!" Gambit cried.

"He's going to be out for awhile," Bishop said to Gary.

"What now?"

Before Bishop could answer Amy noticed the commotion going on around Bishop and began walking toward them.

"Bishop. What's going on?" she asked.

"She's coming. Quick, help me wake Onyx up."

Bishop and Gary pushed Gambit aside and slapped Onyx trying to bring him back to consciousness. He quickly started to wake up.

"My head feels like it was pounded on by apes," Onyx groggily sputtered.

"It was," Gary said with a grin. "Bish and me saved you."

"Me too, father," Gambit added.

Onyx looked up at Bishop and scowled. "I suppose you expect some form of gratitude."

"It wouldn't hurt," Gary said.

"Well, it won't be coming," Onyx coolly replied.

"Come on," Bishop said. "I didn't do this for gratitude. I did it because we need your help against Amy. We can't beat her alone, and you've shown that you can't either."

"Of course we can," Gambit said. "We're just catching our second wind."

"Yeah, and getting that beat out of you too," Gary noted.

"Get to the point, boy," Onyx said. "You need my assistance. How?"

Gambit helped Onyx get to his feet. Amy had almost reached Bishop.

"Bishop? What are you doing with those two?" she asked.

"I'm not sure how you can help," Bishop said to Onyx. "But Mr. Boomietrix sent you here for a reason, so you must have some purpose in all this."

Gambit looked at Amy who was slowly marching toward them. "That kid looks real pissed," he said. "Who is she?"

"That's Amy," Gary said.

"Yeah, but Mr. Boomietrix told me that her real name is Amethyst," Bishop added.

"Amethyst?" Onyx became noticeably angry. "What kind of game are you playing with me boy?" Onyx looked at the approaching Amy. "Wait! I thought there was something familiar about you. But it's not possible. You are supposed to be dead."

Bishop looked at his uncle and was surprised at his expression. He

appeared to be extremely sad. It almost seemed like his mind was on something else.

"Dead, all these many years," Onyx said solemnly.

Amy came to an abrupt stop. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Of course! That face! That voice! It's all coming back to me now. But it has been so long," Onyx said. "So very long ago."

"If you don't tell me what you're talking about..." she said.

"Amethyst! Don't you recognize me?" Onyx asked.

"Amethyst? Nobody calls me Amethyst," Amy said. Then her voice dropped to a softer level. "Nobody but my brother, Onyx. But he's gone."

"Brother?" Bishop said astonished. "Onyx?"

"I'm not gone," Onyx said. "You're the one who disappeared many years ago. We sent out search parties, but you were never found."

"That's impossible. You can't be my brother. You're too old," Amy said.

"You've been missing for many years, Amethyst," Onyx said sorrowfully.

Amy was stunned. "If you're Onyx and you're Bishop's uncle, then according to Bishop you killed Alabaster!" Amy said, visibly shaken by this revelation. With her concentration broken, the holographic creatures disappeared one by one. The snagon holding Mandy disappeared, dropping her. She screamed out in pain as she twisted her ankle when she hit the ground. Gary and Jerry went over to help her to her feet.

"It wasn't like that. Please, Amethyst, don't look at me that way," Onyx pleaded.

"No, this can't be. You're lying. Where's Bishop? He'll tell me the truth," Amy cried.

"I'm afraid it's true, Amy," Bishop said. "He's my uncle, Onyx. And he killed my father - your brother- Alabaster."

Amy started to cry. "But if he's your uncle, then that makes me your aunt! It isn't fair!" Amy stomped her foot on the ground and an explosion occurred nearby.

"Holy smokes!" Gary exclaimed.

"Not fair! Not fair!" Amy said louder and louder.

Amy stomped her foot several more times and the number of explosions increased. The air and ground began filling with multitudes of creatures of every shape and size. Gary and Jerry arrived back with a

slightly injured Mandy in their arms.

"Oh, oh. I think the you-know-what has just hit the fan," Gary said.

"Please, Amethyst," Onyx continued. "Don't be mad at me. Don't be mad at me." Onyx covered his face with his hands and sobbed. Gambit was stunned.

"You did this to him," Gambit said to Bishop. "Stop it! You can control machines. Shut the ship down! Shut it all down!"

Bishop turned to Gary. "Do you remember that painting we saw back at the castle?"

"The one of Onyx and your father as kids?" Gary asked.

"Yes. Do you think you can create a hologram of them?"

"I don't know. That's a pretty tall order. Why?"

"Here's my plan." Bishop quickly whispered something in Gary's ear.

Gary nodded and closed his eyes. The sweat began to run down his forehead until several seconds later, a form materialized about a foot away from him. It was in the image of Onyx as a young boy. He slowly walked over to Amy and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Amethyst?" the young Onyx whispered.

Amy turned violently around and stopped when she saw the boy.

"Onyx?" she said in disbelief.

Bishop quietly left and entered the spaceship unseen by the others.

"Yes, Amethyst. It's me. Why are you upset?" the young Onyx asked.

"There was a rotten man here who tried to convince me that he was you. And he also said that he killed Alabaster," Amy said.

Gary closed his eyes and concentrated again. More sweat poured down his forehead as another boy materialized. This time it was a young Alabaster. Jerry was stunned by what he saw. He couldn't believe that his brother was doing all of this.

"That's silly," the young Onyx said. "Alabaster is right here. We've been looking for you."

The elder Onyx stared in confusion at the sudden appearance of younger self and brother. Still dazed by the beating that he had received by the crazed chimps he was trying to make sense of the scene that was unfolding before him.

Meanwhile, inside the spaceship Bishop was searching for the computer that controlled the holographic system. Light filtered in from several holes in the ship's hull. Years of dust were covering everything

from the walls and floor to every piece of machinery and furnishing inside. Bishop stood in awe of the enormity of what he saw. While the rest of



the ship had looked like it had been stripped away many years ago, this part remained pretty much intact. He brushed away many layers of dust from a small display but a blank screen just stared back at him. He began to wonder how he would ever find the holographic computer among all the other apparatus.

Mr. Boomietrix appeared in front of him standing on top a piece of equipment with a red light glowing softly on its front.

"Hurry, Bishop. We don't have much time," Mr. Boomietrix explained.

"Where is the holographic computer?"

"I'm standing on it. But we've got to co-ordinate our efforts together. I will isolate her program from the rest of the system so that she will never be able to take control again."

"And I'll command the computer to wipe her memory of all that she learned about Onyx and Alabaster and me," Bishop said.

Mr. Boomietrix raised his paw. "No! Don't erase all her memories

about you!"

"Why not?" Bishop asked.

Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella and another Bishop materialized.

"She still needs a friend," Mr. Boomietrix explained. "And I think that you can still be that friend. Just erase her memory of you being her nephew."

"Will you create a place where she can live out her life, happily?" Bishop asked.

"She will have you and her two brothers to keep her happy. It will be as if this whole incident had never happened," Mr. Boomietrix replied.

Bishop mumbled several words over the computer as Mr. Boomietrix waved his umbrella. The red light on the computer flickered and then went out.

"It is done. Now hurry. Once you and your friends leave, I will seal this area off forever," Mr. Boomietrix said. "Tell Miss Mann that she will have no further contact from me or from any of Amy's creations."

Bishop shook Mr. Boomietrix's paw.

"Thank you. For me and for my aunt."

Mr. Boomietrix smiled and disappeared along with the Bishop hologram. Bishop ran outside and discovered everything had quieted down. The creatures in the air and on the ground had disappeared. Amy was happily talking with the holographic Alabaster, Onyx and Bishop. Gary and Jerry were holding up Mandy trying to get her on her feet. And Gambit was trying to console his father. Bishop ran over to them.

"Is everyone okay?" he asked.

Gary rubbed his head. "I've got a nasty headache," he said. "I think creating all those holograms gives me a headache. It wasn't like this before."

"Probably because you are creating much bigger holograms," Bishop replied. He looked at Mandy. "How are you?"

"I'm feeling a little better," Mandy said weakly.

Bishop looked around nervously. "Do you think you can travel?"

"I think so. Why?" Mandy said.

"Yeah, Bish. What's the hurry?" Gary asked.

"This place is about to be sealed off forever and I don't want to be stuck in here."

Gary closed his eyes again and concentrated. A pair of crutches appeared on the ground next to him. He shook his head.

"Man, that gives me such a headache," Gary said as he picked up the crutches and handed them to Mandy.

Mandy happily accepted them from Gary and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

"Well at least I got a little appreciation out of this trip," Gary said as he looked at Amy and the three other holographic figures.

For the first time in a very long time Amy was feeling very happy. "I found the wreck of the old spaceship," Amy said to her young siblings. "You won't believe what I found inside."

"What about them? I don't think I can keep them going forever," he said.

"You don't have to. Mr. Boomietrix has control over the holograms again, and he will keep the holograms of Onyx and Alabaster going after we leave."

Bishop looked at the young figure of Alabaster.

"There are so many things I would like to ask him," Bishop said to himself. "Too bad he's not real."

Bishop and Gary walked alongside Mandy making sure she was able to walk without too much difficulty. Gambit pulled Onyx forward.

"Come on, father," Gambit said. "We have to go!"

Stubborn Onyx was still in shock. "Amethyst. It's not my fault. I had to do it."

As they left a blue forcefield formed around the spaceship and the figures alongside it. Bishop took one last look back.

"Good bye, Amy," he said. "This was the best I could do for you."

With all the solid holograms now gone, the trek back to the castle was now much easier for Bishop and his group. They silently marched in the direction of the castle. The silence was eventually broken by Onyx. Onyx had finally recovered enough from his encounter with the chimps and now with his strength renewed he felt more like his old self.

"I have to admit. That was a clever trick you played on me back there, boy," he hissed.

"What?" Bishop was incredulous.

"Trying to make me believe that young girl was my lost sister, Amethyst. A nice try, but I'm wise to your game!" Pulling out a small weapon he had hidden in his boot Onyx pointed it at Bishop. "And since I still seem to be holding the upper hand, I will be taking my leave of you."

Gary closed his eyes for a second and concentrated. Moments later a large gorilla appeared and grabbed the weapon from Onyx's hand. Onyx was startled as the gorilla lifted him. The gorilla then grabbed Gambit under his other arm.

"Way to go, Gary!" Mandy cheered.

"That's my brother," Jerry said proudly.

"These two are going back to prison!" Bishop declared.

Onyx and Gambit were protesting so loudly that Gary enhanced the hologram adding tape over their mouths. "I guess this isn't such a stupid power after all," he said as the group made its way back to the castle. He winced in pain. "But I can sure do without these awful headaches it gives me."

Later that evening, after arriving at the castle and taking a much needed hot bath Bishop walked into the large castle reception hall. Jerry was sitting on an overstuffed chair reading a *Krazy Kavern Kooks of Krackers Kave* book. Gary was lying down on a couch with an ice pack on his forehead. Mandy laughed as Reprint recounted the events of the past few days. Justin stood nearby and blushed when Reprint told her about seeing Justin's wolf boxers. Aquarian was standing by Bishop watching the activity as Miss Mann and Castleton entered.

"Onyx and Gambit are safely locked up," Miss Mann said.

"In a newly enhanced dungeon. They won't escape again," Castleton added.

"Where have I heard that before?" Justin asked.

Miss Mann gave Justin a stern look of disapproval. "Justin, you have to remember that even with all the horrible things that Onyx and Gambit have done, they are still part of the royal family. Locking them up is not a pleasant thing that we enjoy doing. I would think that after some of the things you've seen the past few days you will agree that Onyx was once a different person than what he is today and I hope that he could become that person again."

"There is a lot I don't know about him," Justin said. "I wonder what other surprises he has hidden."

"I'm sure that when the time is right you will find out," Castleton said.

Jerry threw the book he was reading to the floor.

"What's the matter, squirt?" Gary asked. "Too tough to read?"

"No," Jerry replied. "I'm just a little upset."

"What are you so upset about?" Gary asked.

"Because I never found out what my power is."

"Don't let that bother you. I was here many times before I found out what my power was."

"Yeah, and I didn't discover my power until I turned fourteen," Bishop added.

"Fourteen? I'm gonna be an old man before I find out my power," said an upset Jerry.

"Power or no power, you definitely had more fun than I did this time," Justin said to Gary. "I got stuck cleaning Aquarian's insides."

"I'll trade you Aquarian's insides for Amy anytime," Gary laughed and then groaned in pain.

"It's hard to believe that Amy turned out to be Amethyst, my long lost aunt," Bishop said.

"And even harder to believe that Onyx had feelings for her," Mandy added.

"Onyx does have feelings," Miss Mann stated. "He's just kept them buried for too many years."

"It makes me wonder what would have happened if Amy hadn't disappeared all those years ago. With her around, would Onyx have turned out differently?" Bishop mused.

"It's possible," Miss Mann said. "But we can't change the past."

"Maybe we can..." Bishop said to himself.

"It is very ironic," Aquarian observed.

"What is?" Bishop asked.

"According to my files, in medieval times Amethyst was known as Bishop's Stone.

So it would stand to reason that she was related to you somehow," Aquarian revealed.

"Now you tell us," Bishop groaned. "Remind me to bring you along more often."

"Yeah, and bring me along next time too," Jerry said as he jumped to his feet and assumed a boxing pose. "I'll show those guys they can't push us around. I'll teach them a thing or two."

As Jerry made boxing motions, Gary smiled and waved his hand. Two figures appeared behind his brother: Mr. Sizzles and Mr. Berump. Mr. Sizzles put his scaly hand on Jerry's shoulder.

"Hey pal," Mr. Sizzles left head said.

"Remember usssss?" Mr. Sizzles right head hissed.

Jerry turned around and screamed. He then started running to find someplace safe to hide.

"Yep. That's my fearless brother, all right," Gary said.

The group laughed as Jerry continued to run around trying to escape his two new adversaries.

The End

A BJ SOLO ADVENTURE**CHANCE IT**

As was his custom every Saturday night, Bishop Chance Jr., known as BJ to his friends, sat mesmerized on his bed flipping through his father's musty old journals. He never ceased to be amazed by the numerous obstacles and unusual adversaries that his father faced as a teenager and then later into adulthood. He felt that by reading about his father's exploits it might give him the motivation that he needed to follow in his footsteps.

After finishing a rather harrowing encounter that his father had with Ramdibol and his deadly twin daughters, Reechel and Raachel, BJ put the journal face down on his bed. It was always one of his favorite stories and he used to love hearing his mother tell it to him when he was younger. His mother had also been involved with his father's various adventures for many years up until the time of his birth. Thinking about his mother he smiled and promised himself that he would have to contact her the first chance that he had. He thought for a second and laughed. Being a time traveler he was one of the few people around that got to meet his own parents before he had even been born.

He stood up and looked dejectedly around his sparsely decorated room. Most of his prized family possessions that had survived the explosion at his parents' home all those years ago were now on display at the Chance Museum on the Homeworld. He remembered that there had been an enormous debate when the items were donated because the Chance Museum on Earth had also wanted to display them in their

collection. He was glad that he was able to keep his father's journals, even if nobody else knew that he had them.

His attention was then drawn to a wall full of pictures that were hanging on the opposite wall. He grinned as he looked them over. He knew every one of them by heart. Each one was filled with an image of Christie Rae Mann. For as long as he could remember he had had a crush on her. And this wall was his little shrine to her. He never regretted his decision to go back into time and save her life, although things didn't go quite as he had planned after that. Although several people knew that Christie Rae was supposed to have died many years ago the only other person besides himself who remembered the events of the other timeline where Christie Rae had died was his Uncle Aquarian. And technically, his uncle wasn't even a person he was just an android.

This was his week to work the late night shift and as he slowly got dressed he suddenly felt the urge to try something adventurous on this otherwise ordinary evening. He wasn't sure if it was due to reading his father's journals but he didn't care. He was going to go out and make a name for himself. BJ knew that he already had a name, but his name wasn't revered like his father's was and he was no longer going to live in his father's shadow.

Suddenly he heard something or someone moving around in his closet. Uneasily he walked towards it, grabbing an old swimming trophy of his father's off the bureau as he passed by. Raising the trophy as a weapon he swiftly opened the closet door.

"Okay," he said nervously. "Whoever you are. I know you're in there! Come on out. Unless you feel like you would rather stay in there. But I have to let you know that I'm not allowed to have overnight guests in here." Glancing around the small closet he was unable to see anyone inside. Tentatively he stepped in and felt around behind the clothes and assorted storage boxes. Nothing was missing or looked out of place.

Stepping out of the closet he put his father's trophy back on the bureau. Looking at it he could still see the small dent that had been put into it when it was used as a weapon against his great uncle Onyx many years ago. He shook his head as he thought about his great uncle Onyx. One day he would write a book about all the things he knew about him.

As he walked back to his bed he was surprised to see an old fashioned PDA lying on his pillow. He hadn't seen one in a good number of years and he didn't know anyone who still had one.

"Where did that come from?" BJ said to himself. "I know it wasn't there a minute ago."

BJ tiptoed to the door that led to the hall and flung it open. He poked his head out and looked up and down the deserted corridor. Bewildered, BJ scratched his head as he attempted to figure out how the archaic item appeared in his room. Closing the door and walking back to the PDA he picked it up and noticed that the view screen showed that he had an incoming email.

"An email?" he said to himself. "Those things died out years ago. Who could be sending this?" Opening the email he slowly read the mystifying message.

"If you want to prove that you are as good as your famous father," he read aloud. "Follow the clues and witness a death. You have one hour to figure out the clues and reach your objective. Tell nobody and come alone. Your next clue will be found in the room of power."

Dropping the PDA on his bed he put his hand to his chin and thought. "A death? If I could prevent that death from happening it would prove to everyone that I'm as good as my dad. This could be my lucky day. Or not. If I can't prevent someone from dying then I'll look like a jerk. Or worse."

BJ looked at his watch and saw that it was 11 p.m. "One hour from



now makes it midnight, midnight, the witching hour. Why do these kind of things always seem to happen then?"

BJ began to walk around in a small circle talking to himself. "Room of power?" he said softly. "We've got lots of rooms here. They all have power. We'd be sitting in the dark if we didn't have any power. Maybe it was a typo. Maybe they meant room of powder. Or maybe room of chowder or shower. How about Tower?" He shook his head. "No, none of them make any sense. But it sounds like it would be a nifty song title. Tower of power." BJ began humming to himself as he walked out of his room.

BJ continued humming as he walked down the corridor until he came upon a certain doorway. He quickly became very quiet and tiptoed his way past the door. He was not in the mood to run into his commander tonight and he was very intent on sneaking past his door without him noticing.

Further down the hallway he began to hum again until he came to a vending machine. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out an octagonal coin and reviewed the vending selection. Inserting the coin he finally chose a purple apple. As he grabbed his purchase from the machine he began to wonder why the Temporal Observers decided to base their operations on Earth rather than the Homeworld. At least on the Homeworld he wouldn't have to pay for his snacks from a vending machine. Food there was still free, unlike on Earth where he still had to pay for everything. As he began to munch on the colorful fruit he continued his walk down the corridor until he came to a large elaborate doorway. He recognized it immediately as the temporal transport room, the room where all time travel excursions took place.

Hearing some footsteps heading towards him from the other direction he quickly entered the room and almost ran straight into the only technician on duty this time of night. She brushed her long red hair out of her eyes and smiled when she saw him. "Hello, Beej."

BJ hurriedly swallowed the last bite of his apple. "Hey, Sher," he replied.

Sherry O'Leary, one of the few friends that he had in the complex and his oldest friend in the worlds walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"I haven't seen you in awhile," she smiled sweetly.

"I've been busy," BJ lied.

One of the instruments started to beep. Sherry walked over to a

terminal and checked the setting on the machine.

"I don't normally see you in here on a Saturday," she said.

"Is it Saturday?" BJ asked. "I've been so busy lately I don't even know what day it is."

"It's Saturday for a little while more," Sherry answered. "It's almost Sunday. Oh by the way, I heard from my mom yesterday. She and dad are back from the Homeworld. I don't think they'll be making the trip back here much longer. Dad says he's getting too old for the trip. And he doesn't feel too comfortable on Earth anymore, not since that incident with your dad."

Sherry somberly glanced up from the terminal and saw that BJ was paying no attention to her.

Sherry quickly decided to change the subject. "Did you watch the Ballet competition on the Olympics last night?"

"No," BJ replied. "All that excitement is just too much for me."

BJ slowly started to walk around the room and look under and behind various machines. Sherry watched in puzzlement.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" she asked.

BJ stopped looking and turned his attention to her. "Can you keep a secret?"

Sherry abruptly stopped what she was doing and gave him an exasperated look.

"Really Beej," she said indignantly. "I'm surprised you even have to ask that."

As quickly as he said it he realized his mistake. Sherry was the only person outside of his family who knew his deepest darkest secret. And as far as he knew she had never exposed his secret to anyone.

BJ looked at his father's watch on his right wrist. "Great Gugiley Mugiley, I'm sorry Sher. Yeah, perhaps you can help. I've got about 45 minutes to find something."

"Oh, okay, I'll help you find it," Sherry offered. "What are you looking for?"

BJ shook his head. "Don't know."

"Oh," Sherry said. "Do you know what it looks like?"

"No idea."

"Size? Shape? Color? Smell? Anything?" Sherry asked.

"Nope. Sorry. Can't say. Got me. Nix," BJ replied.

"Then how will you know when you've found it?"

"I don't know. I guess when I've found something that shouldn't be

there.”

“Be where?” Sherry asked.

“In the room of power,” BJ said as he paused for a moment. “Wait a minute. This is the room where I travel in time. It’s got to be the most powerful room around.”

Sherry nodded her head. “Yes, we do use up a great deal of energy in here. I guess you could say that.”

BJ hastily began to move things, throwing papers and discs around creating a large mess in the room. “Come on. Help me find it.”

Sherry made a slight attempt at helping her friend look for the mysterious item, but since she didn’t know what it was, she couldn’t look very hard.

BJ threw a stack of papers in the air. “It’s got to be here somewhere.”

Sherry put her hands on her friend’s shoulders. “Beej. Calm down. You know what happens when you get excited. You always act too impulsively.” Sherry looked around the room. “And you’re making a mess. Since I’m the only one scheduled to be here today I’m responsible for cleaning it all up. You know the commander will have a fit if he sees this.”

“Now sit down, relax and count to ten,” she insisted. BJ sat down on a nearby chair.

Sherry nodded as he rattled off some numbers. “That’s better. Oh, and I almost forgot.” She reached into her pocket and pulled something out.

“I found this a little while ago. I figure you left it here. I know how much it means to you, being how it belonged to your father and everything.”

Sherry opened up her hand and held out a wristwatch. BJ was amazed by what he saw. It was the exact same watch that he was already wearing. Taking off his watch he took the other one from Sherry and examined them both front and back.

“They’re exactly the same,” BJ said, astonished. “Right down to the inscription on the back. I can’t believe mom had that inscribed back there. She must have had one dirty mind when she was younger.” BJ chuckled and then flipped the watches around and looked more closely at the face. “Great Gugiley Mugiley! Maybe this is it. The watch you just gave me is several hours ahead of mine.”

“I don’t see how...” Sherry started to say as BJ snapped his fingers.

“Great G & M!” he exclaimed. “This must be the next clue!”

Sherry shook her head in confusion. She had known BJ all her life and in that time she had only understood half of the time what he was talking about. Much of the time he always seemed to be talking in cryptic sentences that only he seemed to understand.

BJ sprang from the chair and smiled at Sherry. “Thanks Sher. You’ve done it again. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He kissed her on the cheek and then raced out of the room leaving a confused Sherry to clean up the mess that he had created.

BJ smiled as he raced down the hallway. “This is great! I’ve found my next clue.” He suddenly stopped and looked at the second wristwatch. “Wait a minute. I don’t know what the clue means.” BJ put his hand to his chin in thought. “That’s not fair. Dad always had his friends to help him figure out those crazy clues he was always getting. And why do people always have to be so cryptic with these stupid clues anyway? Why can’t they just come out and say, ‘BJ go to the temporal transport room’. Or, ‘BJ this is what you have to do next.’ I’m no good at this kind of thing.”

Feeling dejected, BJ walked until he came to a door marked Research. Opening the door he ambled into a deserted lobby area with an empty desk on one wall and three doors on the far right wall. The first door was labeled Past. The second door was labeled Present. The last door, which had a high security lock, was labeled Future – Special Access Required.

“Special Access is right,” BJ said to himself. “I don’t know anyone with enough clearance to get into that room. Or who knows anyone who’s ever been in that room.”

BJ looked around for his friend, Renato, the archives guardian. He noticed that the door labeled Past was ajar and so he opened it further and entered.

Inside he found the usual monitoring stations for time travelers to study the past before going out on assignment. He had made the pretense of coming in here before going out on his first mission. He jumped as he heard a large crash emanate from behind some nearby storage racks. Walking over he found a man with short dark curly hair busily picking information discs off of the floor.

“Run into a little trouble, Renato?” BJ asked.

Hearing the voice above him, Renato looked up and cocked his head to the side and smiled. “Hello, Beejay,” he said with his usual accent. “I am glad it is you and not the commander. He would not like it to see me make a mess.”

“How come you’re not at your desk out front?” BJ asked.

"I thought I heard someone in here, but when I came there was no one," Renato explained. "Just these discs that were left at one of the stations."

BJ had an idea. "Great Gugily Mugily! Let me see those discs."

"Why?" Renato asked. "You never were interested in the past before, Beejay."

"Nobody was supposed to be in here, but you heard someone. And when you came in you didn't see anyone. The same thing happened to me a little while ago in my room. In my closet."

Renato appeared to be more confused. "In your closet?"

BJ looked at his friend. "Never mind, just let me see them." BJ quickly looked at the time period and subject matter of the historical discs.

"It's a good thing I am here," BJ said. "I think I have uncovered a plot."

"A plot?" Renato asked. "What plot?"

"A secret plot, just like my father used to investigate," BJ said triumphantly. "These are all discs pertaining to the commander. Someone is launching some nefarious scheme against him. I've got to go warn him!"

BJ dashed out of the room into the adjoining lobby area. He was in such a rush that he failed to notice that the door labeled Future was now ajar and that two eyes were watching him with great interest.

A few minutes later BJ stood outside the commander's door. He was pretty sure that the plot against the commander and the threat he found in his room were connected. He stood with his hand poised to knock. He was working up the courage to knock on the door. Many things scared BJ but nothing scared him more than having to talk with the commander. Softly he knocked on the door. Hearing no response he knocked a little harder and then he heard a voice boom from the other side.

"Come in!"

The door slid open and BJ hesitantly entered. The room hadn't changed much since the last time he had been in it. That time he had been reprimanded for his sloppy handling of his first assignment. The commander really chewed his butt out on that one. If it hadn't been for his high placed connections, he probably would have been thrown out of the project.

In the sparsely decorated room he saw a small wooden table with what appeared to be a hot beverage sitting on top of it. Next to the table

was a large red reclining chair. And seated comfortably in the chair was the commander relaxing and flipping through an old-fashioned photo album. BJ wasn't close enough to see the images, but he had an idea who and what they were of.

The commander was an older man in his mid sixties with white wavy hair. Without looking up from his photo album he said, "This had better be good, you know I don't like to be disturbed on my day off."

BJ cleared his throat. "Uh, yes, I know. Boy do I know."

Recognizing the voice the commander put down the photo album and looked at BJ. "Oh, no. Not you! Can't I get even one day off from seeing you? Very well. What trouble are you in this time?"

"Oh, I'm in no trouble, sir," BJ replied.

"That's a first," the commander said.

"Actually I'm trying to prevent some trouble," BJ said as he nervously inched in closer to the table next to the chair.

The commander laughed. "Prevent trouble? You?"

"Yes sir, really," BJ said. Just then he accidentally stumbled into the table causing the cup on it to spill onto the commander's lap. The commander yelled as he jumped out of the chair.

"Is this how you prevent trouble?" the commander yelled.

"Great Gugiley Mugiley sir," BJ sputtered. "I'm sorry. I'll help clean it up."

The stain on the commander's uniform swiftly began to disappear.

"That will not be necessary. You know our uniforms are made of a fabric from the Homeworld. They are impervious to stains and stress. Can't you even remember that small fact?"

BJ became very flustered. "No sir. I mean, yes sir. I'm sorry. I just get so flustered and discombobulated when I'm around you sir."

The commander sighed. "BJ. There is no reason to feel discomfort when I'm around. While it is true that I am your commander and I may seem to be a little stern at times..."

"A little?" BJ interjected.

"Yes, a little," the commander replied. "I do that because that is my job and I'm in charge of maintaining order. Now even though I have known your father for many years, and I'm your godfather, I still have to keep this place running smoothly. And you do not help me do that."

"I try," BJ replied.

The commander picked up his photo album from the floor. "You try. Like what you did in your first assignment?"

"That wasn't all my fault, and besides it was a success," BJ said in his defense.

"A success? You disrupt the entire time stream and you call that a



success?"

"Well, maybe it wasn't a hundred percent success," BJ said. "Perhaps more like a ninety percent success."

The commander gave BJ a stern look. "BJ."

"Eighty percent?" BJ said with a little less confidence.

"BJ!"

"Seventy-five?"

"Enough!" the commander said with authority.

"Okay, we will meet in the middle. Fifty percent and that's my final offer."

The commander sighed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Great Gugily Mugiley sir," BJ said. "I was hoping you would promote me."

"Promote you?" the commander said in disbelief. "Believe me, if you great one more gugily, I'm going to mugiley your butt all the way back to the stone age. Do you understand me?"

Before BJ could reply he heard a small beeping sound. He looked around the room for a few seconds before he remembered that it was the alarm on his watch.

"Great Gugiley Mugiley! It's five minutes to midnight. I've only got five minutes left!"

"Left? Left for what?"

"Nevermind about that right now sir," BJ said. "I've got to get you somewhere safe."

"Believe me, any place where you are not, is safe."

BJ grabbed the commander by the wrist and pulled. "Come on sir, I've got to get you out of here. You're not safe."

Dropping his photo album on the chair, the commander unwillingly followed BJ as he led him out of his room.

They walked down the corridor for a minute when the commander finally broke the silence.

"BJ!"

BJ stopped pulling the commander and stood still. "Yes sir?"

"Just where do you think you are taking me?"

"Some place safe, sir."

"And just where would that be?"

BJ looked around confused. "Well, uh, it's uh, maybe it's uh..." BJ stopped talking and then started to point his finger in different directions. Everytime he pointed in one direction he would think for a second and

then shake his head. Finally after a minute of this the commander decided to take charge.

“Enough of this piddle twaddle!”

“Piddle twaddle?” BJ replied. “And people complain when I say Great Gugiley Mugiley.”

“Forget this tomfoolery,” the commander bellowed.

“Tomfoolery?” BJ said softly to himself. “I think the old man is getting too close to retirement age.”

“Come with me to my office,” the commander said as he marched down the hall. BJ quickly followed behind him.

A minute later they stopped in front of a large set of double doors.

“Why are we stopping here?” BJ asked. “This isn’t your office.”

“Yes, I know this isn’t my office,” the commander replied. “I forgot that I left something in here that I require. We just need to go in for a minute.”

The commander opened the door and they walked into the dark room.

Suddenly the lights sprang on and BJ stared in bewilderment at the contents of the room. The room was decorated with colorful balloons and banners and various other decorations. A large group of people shouted out. “Surprise!”

Confused, BJ looked around the room and saw it filled with Halloween and birthday decorations. Under the banner that read Happy Birthday BJ, was a table filled with dozens of birthday presents. Many of the people that he worked with and several family members and family friends were also present in the large crowd. BJ had always been kidded over the years about his being born on Halloween and he never had an official birthday party because everyone was always too busy celebrating Halloween instead.

“That’s right, it’s my birthday. I was so caught up in the death threat that I got that I forgot,” BJ said.

“Death threat?” the commander asked. “I wasn’t told anything about a death threat.”

Sherry O’Leary laughed as she kissed BJ on the cheek. “You silly. Nobody threatened to kill anyone.”

“The email that I got on the PDA,” BJ explained. “It said that I had to follow the clues or someone would die.”

“No,” a voice said from the back of the room. “It merely stated that if you followed the clues, you would witness a death.”

Everyone turned as they saw a figure slowly hobble from the back of the room. Although his once jet black hair was now all white and he walked with a limp which was the result of an unfortunate mishap many years ago, BJ still recognized him right away.

“Great Gugiley Mugily!” BJ exclaimed. “It’s my Great Uncle O!”

“Yes Beej,” Sherry started to explain. “Onyx was the one who planned this whole celebration. But he never said anything about a death threat.”

Onyx adjusted the hearing device that was in his one remaining ear. “You never could understand clues like your father did,” Onyx chuckled. “I would have defeated your father years ago if he deciphered them as badly as you do. What I said was that you would witness a death.”

Onyx extended his hand and motioned around the room. “And you have witnessed a death. It’s your birthday and you are now another year older. You’ve witnessed the death of your fortieth year and are here for the birth of your forty first year.”

“You always did have a macabre sense of humor,” a familiar voice behind BJ said.

BJ’s heart began to beat rapidly as he recognized the voice. He quickly turned around and saw her. He smiled as he saw the woman for whom he had risked his career when he saved her life in the past during his first assignment.

“Christie!” BJ was joyful.

Christie Rae Mann kissed BJ on the cheek and handed him a present. “Hello BJ. Happy Birthday.”

BJ quickly tore the wrapping off the present and ripped open the box. He stared in silence for a moment as he looked at its contents.

“I hope you like it,” Christie Rae said. “I had to get a little help and pull a few strings to get it for you.”

BJ pulled a silver picture frame out of the box and smiled. “Great Gugiley Mugily, it’s just... I’m just so... How did you...” BJ stopped speaking for a second and closed his eyes. A few seconds later after composing himself he smiled and said, “Thank you. It’s wonderful.”

Sherry laughed. “Aren’t you going to show it to the rest of us?”

BJ turned the frame around to the rest of the crowd and they saw a large photograph of BJ with a teenaged Bishop and Mandy.

“That was taken during your first assignment in the past,” Christie Rae explained.

“Yes, I know, but how?” BJ asked.

Onyx stepped over to Christie Rae and put his arm around her. "That is our little secret nephew. I know there's been a lot of bad blood in our family over the years."

BJ nodded his head. "Bad blood and bad everything."

"But after the painful death of my son Gambit last year I started thinking about various things. And I finally began appreciating the few things that I've got left that I've taken for granted all these years." Onyx looked at Christie Rae and smiled. "And I recently discovered that you are in part responsible for me being able to have Christie in my life."

"Well truthfully I didn't do it for you Great Uncle O," BJ explained. "I kind of had my own motives."

"Whatever your reasons, I appreciate the end results," Onyx stated. "And as my way of thanking you, this one time, I organized this celebration for you."

Sherry held up an orange bowl to BJ. "Have some candy Beej?"

BJ stared into the bowl and saw candy that looked exactly like human eyeballs. As he reached in and grabbed a few he heard screams emanate from the bowl.

"Great Gugily Mugiley! My favorite. Eyes scream," BJ said.

"Ice cream?" Christie Rae said. "That hasn't been brought out yet."

"Not ice cream, eyes scream," BJ explained as he pulled some more eyes out of the screaming bowl.

Everyone laughed as they all joined in with the festivities.

Several hours later after the last of his guests had left the party, BJ went back to his room and jumped on the bed. He lay there for several minutes pondering the events of the past few hours. He had never had so much fun before in his life and he couldn't wait to try out several of his presents. His thoughts were interrupted when a buzzer went off. It was unusual for BJ to receive visitors so he quickly ran to the door and flung it open. On the other side of the door was a young boy with blue-green hair. BJ instantly recognized him as his uncle, Aquarian.

"What brings you here?" BJ asked.

Aquarian pulled an envelope from his pocket. "I have a letter for you."

"A letter?" BJ inquired. "For moi? Who would be writing me? Nobody's ever written me a letter. Nobody writes letters anymore."

"It is from Bishop," Aquarian responded.

BJ's eyes popped wide open in surprise. "From dad? But he's..."

Aquarian put the letter into BJ's hand. "Bishop gave this to me fifty years ago and instructed me to give it to you today."

"Oh, young dad," BJ said as he tore open the envelope. "What in the worlds would cause him to write me like this?"

Aquarian stood there silently as BJ scanned the letter. When he finished reading he dropped the letter to the floor.

"Great Gugily Mugily," BJ exclaimed. "This is unbelievable. I've got to go back into the past again."

"Why?" Aquarian asked.

BJ raced for the door. "Dad needs my help. He says it's a matter of life or death."

THE END

**TO BE CONTINUED IN:
LOST CHANCES
A BISHOP CHANCE ADVENTURE IV**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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James Gauthier has served as a consultant to writers of comic books and syndicated comic strips. Chance Encounter is his third novel. In addition to writing the Bishop Chance adventure series, he is currently busy editing a series of books reprinting the classic comic strip Mary Perkins On Stage by Leonard Starr. More information about that series can be found at www.classiccomicspress.com. You may contact him with comments or suggestions through the website.

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June Brigman has been drawing since she was old enough to hold a pencil. She studied art at the University of Georgia and Georgia State University, but most of her drawing skills were acquired through self-study and work experience. Ms. Brigman has had a long career in the comic book field. For Marvel Comics she created the "Power Pack" series, the first to feature children as super heroes. She then went on to work for DC Comics on "Supergirl" and for Dark Horse Comics on the Star Wars "River Of Chaos" mini series. Her most recent comics work was a graphic novel adaptation of "Black Beauty." She has done children's illustrations for the Bantam Doubleday Dell Choose Your Own Adventure series, and the comic strip "Where In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?"™ for National Geographic World magazine. She has also worked in advertising, doing comps and storyboards. Ms. Brigman currently draws the nationally syndicated comic strip "Brenda Starr" (see uclick.com). When not sitting at the drawing board, she's in the saddle and rides with Rombout Hunt. She lives with her husband Roy Richardson and their four cats. Her online portfolio can be viewed at: www.ArtWanted.com/juneart.

ROY RICHARDSON

Roy Richardson was inspired to pursue a comics career by the work of Jack Kirby, the ground breaking Fourth World series in particular. A Georgia native, he studied art at the Art Institute of Atlanta and Georgia State University, and in 1983 moved to New York. He has worked for all the major publishers, on such books as Captain America, Iron Man, the Flash, Star Wars, and his own co-creation, the Tomorrow Knights, which has been adapted into a roleplaying game from Zman Games. He now works in collaboration with his wife, June Brigman, inking, lettering and coloring the Brenda Starr comic strip. His online portfolio can be viewed at: www.ArtWanted.com/royart.

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