

About 48500 words

Sesquipedalia

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And
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CHAPTER 1

"Hey, Eddie! The coffee machine's broken again! Fix it, will ya?"

I stomped from my desk and prowled past Rob to the machine. "Ed-WARD," I growled.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever Eddie," he said into his coffee.

I kicked the stubborn machine. Day after day, week after week, the coffee machine managed to freeze up or melt down or implode. And who had to fix it EVERY time? Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. Ed-WARD!

I opened it up and tinkered with the filter and tapped the screen. Fuzzy blue scratches appeared. I unplugged it. I replugged it. I unplugged it again and checked the outlet. Nuts. I pulled out my screwdriver...

"Mr. Tolfam? Mr. Tolfam?" said a voice at my elbow...or at least where I thought I'd left my elbow...Coffee Machine was strewn over everything now.

"Me?" I said, muffled from inside the back of the

machine.

"The boss would like to see you," she said.

I popped up. "The boss? What'd I do this time, Phyllis?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Not what did you do, Eddie, but what will you do!"

"Ed-WARD. And NOT AGAIN!" I snatched the paper she held out and stomped down the hall to The Dark Office.

"Boss?" I said at the door.

"Enter," he answered. I walked in to pitch black.

"Sir?"

"Edward," he said, deliberately. "We've got some sort of mix up in "The Return of the King", and we think it's--" he broke off and slapped a folder on the desk. I could tell by shuddering vibrations in the floor as it slammed down whose file it was.

"Why me?" I moaned. "Why me?"

"Thanks, Eddie. I knew I could count on you."

"Oh yeah," I said. "What's this? Number 200?"

"234," he corrected. "Check the file."

"Yes sir," I mumbled, leaving The Dark Office. Just like the coffee machine... Some things just always fall to Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. Ed-WARD.

#

"Agent Poppins, I'm about to make contact. I'm issuing an order for radio silence." I let go of the steering wheel to punch the intercom button, ending my transmission.

"Roger that, Regano. Initiating radio lockdown," her voice crackled back.

I floored the gas pedal of the Mercedes G55 SUV, and watched the speedometer creep up past 100 mph. I'd swiped the car from a generic Mercedes dealership in one of those horrible modern thrillers. The effect on the novel would hopefully be no more than a few words... or at the worst ,a fragment. I couldn't afford to be on the radar any longer then possible.

"Not that driving a Mercedes SUV through Lord of the Rings is particularly subtle," I consented.

My only hope now was that my speed and area of travel would keep any of the locals from spotting the vehicle before they could add any extra to the story, and alert the TransFictional Police.

The TransFictional Police, or TFP, ruled over fiction, deciding and issuing written reforms, character rights, as well what items different characters were allowed to have

while they were "off book" and not in a reading. Their job was to keep the peace in fiction, and assure that each story ran exactly as its author intended. Unfortunately, they went so far as to think that a character was required to live through every part of its book over again, every time the book had a reading, even the moments of their deaths. As expected, most characters did not enjoy that little detail at all.

"Turn left after the next two trees," my GPS system squawked, just in time for me to make the turn with out flipping the car.

"I knew these things were over-rated!" I complained. "I should have made off with an autopilot system from one of those new Sci-fi novels."

On the other side of the spectrum, I head up an illegal organization known to most as the Character Extraction Program, or CEP, which works under the radar to stage the characters' deaths, and replace them with written "dummies", there by allowing them avoid that pain. All of our work is done for free, unless of course our clients wish to donate to the cause, or work as a volunteer in the program. In this case, my client, King Théoden, wished to be replaced with the dummy in the back of the SUV.

I pulled up along a sharp ridge and stopped the car, leaving it on idle while I found my target. Taking my monocle out of my pocket, I grasped it firmly and imagined a large spyglass, of the type used in pirate novels, such as Treasure Island. The monocle grew and shifted in my hand, changing shape into the very item I'd picture. I smiled and lifted it to my eye.

The monocle's original shape was actually a sword, which I'd inherited in my own series of novels, the "Twiland Chronicles". The nifty little thing had the ability to change into any non-living object I could imagine, making it the ultimate Swiss-army knife... except not Swiss... and not a knife... I shrugged and put my mind back to the mission, forgetting the badly placed analogy completely. The battle for Minas Terrath hadn't started yet. Good. That gave me a whole chapter to scout out the surroundings. I peered into the field, searching for the oncoming armies of Mordor, or for my favorite rival - Dr. Edward Tolfam of the TFP. Why he was the only officer ever sent to catch me I didn't know, but it gave the missions a sense of familiarity that I liked.

"Here Eddie, Eddie, Eddie."

He'd come after me so many times that I almost thought

I could hear his voice on the wind.

"Ed-WARD."

I smiled as a black streak speed across the lenses of the binoculars.

"Hello, Eddie."

#

"Blasted company cars," I muttered. My little Buick with TFP emblazoned on the side sputtered as it tried to top 80. "I'll never catch him with this..." My thoughts went to things like the Millennium Falcon, Nazgul Winged Steeds, and space spheres... "NO!" I told myself. "You sound like one of them."

Them. The Character Extraction Program. Those meddlers who wanted to wreck literature as we know it. And they were headed up by the most troublesome of them all-- Regano the Bard. And who always got landed with Regano jobs? Who had to piece back together the stories he tore to shreds in his "beneficial escapades"? Who had to personally track him down using only his ingenuity and company-model tools? Eddie, Eddie--.

"Eddie, Eddie, Eddie!" shrieked the radio.

I muttered darkly and hit the intercom button.

"Phyl?"

"We've picked up something moving very quickly on the outskirts of Minas Tirith. Check it out.

"Roger that," I said. "Speed won't help you here, Regano, my old buddy." I leaned into the gas pedal and finally, the little car jerked its speedometer needle up to 82.

CRASH!!!

The car shuddered, throwing me across the dashboard, though my seatbelt snatched me back just hard enough to give my neck a crippling blow against the seat. I looked upward to see 10 long obsidian talons protruding from the shredded ceiling of the Buick.

I flung myself into the shotgun seat and pulled open the glove compartment. The car was jerking strangely, and it didn't take much to guess the beast was dragging me somewhere. I clutched at the objects in the small bin. Inflatable Hitter-on-the-Header? Where did the TFP get these funky devices, anyway? I tossed it into the back seat. Nail clippers? I glanced at the talons. No good. Bike horn? Altoids? Doggie bag? I glared at the blip that was Regano on my radar screen. The TFP needed reform. How were we supposed to track down these TransFictional

meddlers without the advantages that they had?

I decided I would just leap from the car and let the beast carry off its prey...but then I peeked out the window. Thirty-foot drops aren't particularly healthy, and of course the TFP didn't supply parachutes. Typical. I pulled myself up into the driver's seat again.

"Phyl?" I barked over the radio.

"Ed? Come in?" her voice was scratchy. Winged Steed wing beats interfered with the signal.

"I've been attacked."

"So I gathered."

"Just wanted to let you know. Tell the Boss that there may be a...umm, delay."

"That only means a whole lot more trouble for us..."

"Well, when you're dangling from the claws of a Nazgul Steed, there's not much you can do!" I retorted.

"Well...keep cool, Eddie. Oh, and one more thi--"

She was cut off as a crackling voice came over the radio.

"Officer Edward Tolfam?" asked a muffled male voice.

I didn't answer, just stared at the radio in shock.

"We know you're there," it continued. "We have a tip for you. Regano is heading for Minas Tirith."

"Who are you?" I asked, forgetting about being nonexistent.

"Ah, there you are, Eddie, old pal. I was beginning to think you'd been speared, if you know what I mean."

I looked up at the long claws protruding from the hood of the car, and thought I knew exactly what he meant.

"Oh! Gotta run. Bye now!"

"Wait!"

The voice dissolved into the radio buzz. I clicked it off and scratched my head. With a jolt, the car slammed down onto something and the talons extracted themselves from the roof like a can opener from the can.

#

Something didn't seem right. I'd been watching Eddie's ascent via Nazgul winged steed, and it didn't make sense. Nazgul were some of the most feared, and yet most unintelligent creatures in all of fiction, but even so, they knew that damaging a TFP vehicle was a crime worthy of erasure and rewrite. Of course, due to the sudden increase in popularity of the trilogy, thanks to Hollywood, it would be difficult to take a paragraph offline, let alone a

chapter, or the whole book.

My binoculars vibrated, and I frowned. A call from the home base? That was never good news. I quickly shifted the binoculars back into a monocle, fitted it to my eye, tapping the monocle with a finger as I did so. A picture of a young woman with a bonnet and umbrella filled the lens.

"Agent Poppins? Report."

"Sir, we have received intel that the Nazgul you are seeing is... well... not a Nazgul."

"How did you know about the Nazgul?" I asked, raising an eyebrow, and almost causing the monocle to fall off of my now unsquinted eye.

"I-I don't actually know sir."

"What do you mean you don't know old girl? Who told you?"

A pause. "The Guild."

My eyes narrowed. The Guild, as it was called was another underground movement, of a much more despicable nature.

"You know we don't associate with them," I reproved, "Not since the Poe incident."

Years ago, while Poe was still alive, the Guild had infiltrated Poe's novels, and lured them over to their

regime. Unfortunately, due to the fact that Poe's novels were not commonly read, or appreciated at the time, the TFP launched a "recapture" of the novels, resulting in nothing less than the complete unraveling of the stories. The pleasant mystery novels were reduced to horrific short stories within the lifetime of a disposable fountain pen.

"Who contacted them?" I asked, quite disturbed by this new information.

"We didn't sir," Poppins replied. "They contacted us."

"How did they know about the mission?"

"We—we don't know, sir."

Something smelled of fish--and not the tasty lemony kind either.

"Get a hold of King Théoden, send him back the Magic Dwarf rings he gave us. I'm pulling out."

"But sir, how do we know that the Guild isn't trying to help us?"

"I don't work with those chaps," I said as my eyes narrowed. "I don't trust them. Prepare an inter-fictional wormhole. Open on my mark, and my mark alone at the meeting place in Mirkwood."

"Yes sir."

"Regano out."

I tapped the monocle again, turning the screen off.

I swallowed hard as I floored the gas pedal of the Mercedes, and swerved it away from Minas Tirith.

Was the Guild actually up to something?

Was I allowing Théoden innumerable readings of his painful death just the sake of just my pride?

If the Guild were actually up to something, then did my flight negate my only chance of stopping them?

I turned hard on the steering wheel bringing the car around 180 degrees and immediately floored the gas pedal. I flew down the path, at 150 mph, the wheels of the SUV not even touching the ground for more than a few seconds at a time, due to the rocky terrain. The orc lines were half way across the field now, and the archers from Minas Tirith were starting to fire arrows into the horde like hail. I grinned, and adjusted my monocle.

"Just how I like it." It would only be another few pages or so before Theoden charged out into the battle. After the focus of the story left him, I would have another short bit of text to replace him with the dummy.

This might not be so hard after all. The thought of the Nazgul kept nagging at my mind, and I half expected t

to come flying down on me at any second. Why and how had the Guild contacted us? A mole in the CEP? But all of the agents were loyal. I'd screened them myself! Even the not-so-bright members wouldn't think of treachery. Would they?

I shook my head and continued to drive towards Minas Tirith. Maybe the Guild could be trusted. Maybe they were helping. They'd taken care of Tolfam, after all, and without hurting him, though they'd totaled his car--

A series of loud pops, and hisses interrupted my thoughts, and the car swerved off of the path. I gripped the wheel tighter desperate to get control of the vehicle. I didn't, and the Mercedes careened into a tree, smashing in the front end.

"Well that wasn't too bad now, was it," I grinned. Another slow hiss started from somewhere in the car, followed by a "pop" and I found myself fighting my way out of a maze of inflatable plastic airbags, a little late in deploying.

"Peh! Bleh! Foo!" I turned my monocle into a needle and stabbed at the airbags, resulting in another loud "pop".

"Teach you to do that again!"

From outside the car, I could see that the damage was far worse than I'd thought. Not one, but all four wheels had been popped, and not just popped, but shredded. Spike strip. Someone knew what they were doing, and it wasn't the TFP. Someone knew that I had nowhere to run. Well... almost nowhere.

#

Finally, we were getting somewhere. I climbed out of the mangled vehicle and pulled out my walkie-talkie.

"Phyllis, I'm going to need an eraser down here soon. The car's totaled," I told her. She'd send a certified officer to remove the car from the book before any dedicated readers had a heart attack. The TFP was at least good at covering the mistakes they made... unlike some people. But I had bigger things to think about just now...

The Nazgul winged steed shrieked and writhed in what should have been a terrifying display of teeth. I stared him down, tsk'ing with my tongue.

"Too many adverbs," I said. It stopped and roared straight into my face. "That's it! Cut to the action. And now, I shall do just that." I flashed my badge at the beast. It sat back demurely on its haunches. "Yes, I see

you recognize me. You owe me a Buick and a service for wasting my time." It hung its ugly head and the smell of death dissipated slowly. "Since you're so good at mutilating cars, I'd like for you to quickly and unexpectedly detain the SUV that is now crossing the front lines. I don't need to remind you what might happen if you don't comply..."

The thing galloped a way, sprang into the air and disappeared. That's when I discovered that I stood on the top of a tower. I looked down...bad idea. I looked up...bad idea again. Three winged steeds circled Minas Tirith like vultures. I needed to get under cover. Even a badge doesn't do much good against teeth and talons if you don't have time to get it out before you're skewered...

#

With the bag of words that would become the Theoden dummy strapped to my hip, I dove into the battle. My monocle had now become its original item, the sword of Prillian the Wizard. As I mentioned before, I'd inherited the sword--now connected to my life-force. If I lost it, I died. It'd happened to me once, and it would not happen again. That was why I came up with the CEP in the first place. It's why Lord Evar, an eccentric Dwarf inventor,

also from my story, and I had worked so tirelessly on the dummy system while we were off book. And this is how it'd all panned out.

An orc roared beside me.

"Oh, I must say, you have nasty breath," I said waving a hand in front of my nose. "Tic tac?"

The fiend cocked his head and gasped, "You aren't supposed to say that. In fact, I don't remember you at all!"

"Funny, I can't seem to remember you either, though with a face like yours I don't see how that's possible. Could I interest you in some cosmetics? I have heard that Mary Kay makes some that are quite worthless and expensive."

Apparently the beast wasn't amused, and swung down with his crudely shaped sword.

I blocked it and whispered in his ear while we held the sword lock, "Tell me where Theoden's death takes place and I'll throw in a complementary container of peanuts."

The orc's eyes widdened, "peanuts?"

"A full thirty-two ounces."

"I haven't had anything but maggoty bread for three stinkin' days!" he considered. "Sixty-four?"

"Done."

"And the tic-tacs and the Mary Kay?"

I passed him a card, "just contact Evar's inter-dimensional ice-cream delivery. Drop Code: Theo, and give him a location. It will be there."

The orc took the card slyly, and whispered in my ear, "Theoden dies to the left of the eighth trebuchet right before the third Giant Elephant passes it."

I nodded to the orc and broke into a healthy jog in that direction. In and out... in and out... hurry.

#

I slipped through the rooms and passageways silently, though no one was around to see me. The sounds of battle reached me even there. Finally, I came out into a street. Pulling my manual from my pocket, I checked the little map in the front cover. "You Are Here" flashed up at me from the page. I flipped to the page where Theoden dies.... Eight sentences! Could I get there in time?

I dashed through the streets and made it onto the field of battle. I saw the white horse of King Theoden far in the distance, and I fought my way through the raging battles. Fifty yards away...I noticed a form streaking

toward him from another direction...Regano! A massive orc crossed my path. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"TFP. Pardon me." He lumbered sideways with a little nod of what I took to be his head...

"Regano!" I yelled as I ran. His head turned in my direction for a split second. The gap closed between us... He dropped a bulging bag from his shoulder and clutched at the reins of Theoden's horse. The king bellowed and swiped down with his sword, not recognizing the bard. Regano brought his monocle-sword up to block the blow, giving me a split second to snatch the bag from the horse's hooves.

Suddenly, a black shadow draped across Theoden and his horse! A Nazgul beast swept down and closed his talons around the middle of the horse, pinching the king between its scaly knees. With four shuddering wing beats, it lifted from the ground and hovered above us, clutching the king in its talons. Turning back, it flashed me a toothy smile before taking off.

#

I didn't have time to consider the Nazgul, or Tolfam for that matter. I only had one hope to accomplish my mission before the novel was locked down. I reached for

the bag of words, but I fell over at the surprising small air resistance of--nothing.

"Looking for this?" Tolfam asked, waving the bag back and forth. He smiled briefly, but stopped and averted an eyeball to the Nazgul as it lifted Theoden higher.

"Bad form, sir," I scolded, "hand over the bag and I still may be able to save Theoden's life." I said this like he should care, but knowing that he wouldn't.

"I will not go against the wishes of the writers!" he protested, making my point for me. "You know that you are undermining their authority and you don't care. You are undermining the authority of the whole TFP."

"Eddie--"

"Ed- WARD! It's EDWARD! Don't speak to me like you know me after all of the trouble you've given me trying to catch you! Now I've finally caught you!"

"Who said I was caught?" I said smiling. I'd caught Tolfam monologuing, a common trait for overachieving fictional characters, and he hadn't noticed as I changed my monocle into a door and stuck it firmly into the ground, "I think I will be leaving now."

"We'll track you!" Tolfam exclaimed, realizing he'd been tricked. "That door emits such a strong punctuation

field, that we can lock onto it from anywhere."

"That's why I only use it in emergencies. Believe me, where I'm going, you won't want to follow." I turned to enter the door, but to his surprise and mine, hit a brick wall--literally.

"That isn't supposed to be there," I pondered calmly and imagined a different destination, thinking that when I did the wall would simply melt away. It didn't. Why wouldn't it work? The laws of fictionality were irrefutable. An object had to do what it was written to do. I tried again. Still the wall. I changed it back into a monocle and stuck it back on my eye. "I say... odd isn't it?"

Though Tolfam was as confused as I, he smiled. "I guess we've caught you after all, Regano, Bard of Twilland."

"No," a voice said, from behind me, "we did."

We had been so intent on our conversation, we hadn't noticed the Army of the Dead ravaging the landscape around us as Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas brought them to the rescue of Minas Tirith. It was the last of the trio who'd spoken.

"What are you talking about?" Tolfam snorted, holding

out his badge. "TFP. He's mine."

"'TFP. He's mine,'" Legolas mimicked uncharacteristically. He pulled out his own badge, and Tolfam and I both gasped. "Guild. He's mine."

"Legolas!" I gasped. "How could you?"

The tall elf cocked an eyebrow and adopted as close to a gangster-like slouch as an elf could. "I've had enough of sissy little quips, long yellow hair and dreamy expressions."

"So you joined the Guild?" Tolfam bellowed.

"They promised me they'd change me to a Man like Aragorn," Legolas replied defensively.

"I can't believe you'd go against your own author's wishes! This isn't acting in character!" Tolfam cried.

"Bad form, wot?" I interjected.

"You stay out of this!" Tolfam shot me a dangerous glare.

"Just going!" I quipped, taking off my monocle and trying the door again. A solid brick wall appeared inside.

"Jolly well infuriating, wot?" I grumbled.

Tolfam took advantage of the distraction to leap on Legolas. Legolas in turn whipped out of his grasp and pinned him to the ground, hair swinging as he spun with

inhuman speed...probably because he wasn't human. His knees on Tolfam's arms, he drew a graceful, leaf-like blade and laid it at my throat.

"Too long have you TFP agents tightened our chains. Books were made for the imagination. And I imagine you never returning to your little cubicle in the TFP offices," he enunciated.

"Oh dear," I muttered, "bad form indeed!"

"Wait!" Tolfam yelled. "You can't mean that! Legolas would never say something like that!"

"The Guild has freed me from my requirements to act in character," he replied.

"What?!" I shouted. "The whole fabric of literature will unravel!"

"And be woven into a finer tapestry than any of you, or our authors, imagined!" replied the elf. He leaned over Tolfam again, pressing the blade further against his neck, and Tolfam's face hardened.

"You don't want to do that," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Hah!" was Legolas's only reply.

"Oh, then I'm quite sure you'd be happy to visit a spoof version of yours named Leg-O'-Lamb?" Tolfam smiled at

him.

His face grew ashen. "Leg-O'-Lamb? I am utterly out of countenance," he stammered, and the knife quivered. He snapped out of it and steadied himself. "I could kill you now."

I placed my arm up against the doorframe and leaned against it casually. "And be eternally erased? Is that what you want?"

"The Guild will save me!" cried Legolas.

"Nothing is ever drawn or written the same way twice," I returned.

"The Guild has Copy and Paste!" he retorted, but his voice quivered.

"Technology..." I sighed, and grinned a little, realizing I had the upper hand. "You know you don't trust that any more than we do."

"But I--" the elf paused, and in that instant, Tolfam flipped him to the ground and dealt him a hard rap on the head with the hilt of his own knife. Legolas's eyes rolled back and he dropped, unconscious. As he did so, the brick wall inside my door undulated, and finally shimmered out of existence. Tolfam looked up at me wearily.

"You going then?"

"You have enough on your hands," I muttered, stepping in front of the door.

"I should be angry. The Boss'll kill me." Tolfam sighed. "Somehow I don't care anymore."

"I'm not as radical as the Guild," I assured him, "but I have work to do. You've ruined my chance to save Theoden. But this news..." I gestured toward the unconscious elf. "Copy and Paste is a dangerous weapon."

"I can't imagine how they figured it out," Tolfam said, heaving Legolas to his shoulder. A small car labeled TFP pattered up and Phyllis rolled down her window as I darted into the door and changed it back into a monocle almost instantaneously.

"I got the totaled Buick and also a shredded SUV," I heard her say as "The Return of the King" vanished from my sight.

"Thanks. We've got to take this guy to rehab. Can you insert a dummy?"

"Sure. Hop in the back."

Eddie started to reply, but his words were lost as I reappeared elsewhere.

CHAPTER 2

I sighed, and sat down, finally back at Evar's Palace. It was a good place to rest when we were both off book.

"I just don't understand how that could be possible." Evar said, with his even more distinct accent than mine, "The classical characters have always been the most resistant to the Guild's rhetoric. But if they got Legolas, then they must have something up their sleeve."

When figments so deeply embedded in their character, even popular ones, defected, it was not only a catastrophe to us, because we too were against the Guild, but also because it caused chaos in the book. Legolas would have to be replaced by a dummy, and with the current word shortage, he wouldn't be nearly as well described. There was always the chance of rehab, a long and tiring re-writal process used by the TFP, but sometimes even that failed, and if it did, and the "defective" character was erased, a new character would have to be meticulously formed from scratch, introductory paragraph and all. But

never with the same detail. Only an author was able to do that.

I frowned and picked a stray feather, the byproduct of Evar's obsession with ducks, out of my coffee before taking another sip. "They mentioned something about Copy and Paste."

Evar looked up from his Tall-Mint-Chip-Espresso-Latte-Mocha. (for some reason he fancied the detail of these things) "Copy and Paste? I've heard of that. Isn't it somehow technologically related? A part of the authors' world?"

"In the author's world it is used to take a small or large piece of text, move it, and then rewrite it to another location instantly," I explained.

"Really?" Evar said, sipping his coffee. "Do you know all of the implications of that here? They could recreate armies of characters. Any character. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want an army of, say, Reepicheep mice flouncing around."

"Not only that, but it could provide instant transportation, much faster than the De-spellerizer."

The De-spellerizer was a device Evar had invented for our escapades into other books, that disassembled the words

in our descriptions, carried them through a wormhole, and reassembled them on the other side. It was one of the few advantages we had over both the Guild and the TFP. If they had Copy and Paste, however, that could change.

"They would need a genius to perfect it," Evar said. "They would have to find a way to display a character's text as a reader sees it, so that they would be able to actually "copy and paste." If they had that ability, they could do far more with not much more work. Then they could even change character attributes. The character handle would forever disappear."

I choked on another feather, as well as the potency of his words. "This is sounding worse and worse all the time. Are there any results on why the monocle wouldn't work to travel between novels?"

"That I can explain," Evar said. "'Twas nothing more than a spelling crisis. The "brink" of the world, where you would have been able to exit from, was misspelled "brick". Just a typo. It's been fixed anyway.

"What about Tolfam? Anything on him?"

"Still haven't been able to find his origin."

"Where in the name of the library system did he come from!"

"We'll figure it out," Evar smiled, and took another huge gulp of his coffee, probably burning his throat in the process. "I've got the CEP's best working on it right now!"

"I know," I sighed. "I just don't understand! There can't be a character without a book? Can there?"

Evar looked at me over his tall-mint-chip-whatever it was as if I should know that answer, and I sighed again, as another knock sounded at the door, and Poppins entered.

I smiled.

"You wanted to speak with me sir?" Poppins asked in her formal accent.

"Yes. Can you handle the Theoden case?"

"Of course," Poppins replied and smiled. "It's a perfect time. They won't expect another attempt so soon."

"Good. Move out then. Evar's prepared another Theoden dummy, and you can take a car from the lot at--"

"I think I'll use my umbrella, thank you."

I smiled. "Of course."

Poppins was one of our best agents, if not the best. Besides me.

Poppins nodded curtly and walked away to retrieve the

dummy, closing the door to my office gently. Another knock immediately followed. "Come in."

A confident looking character dressed in an all black tunic, black boots, black pants, and with raven black hair stepped into the room, his boots echoed off of the polished wood floor, and his belt of knives would intimidate even the most seasoned fighter. A huge broad sword was attached to his back, via leather sheath, and the hilt stuck out for all to see. He glared at me for a second, and remained standing.

"You called."

I smiled despite the glare, knowing he didn't mean anything by it. Dorln was a Dwarf Diplomat, which in their culture meant that he also worked as an assassin and spy. While he didn't work for the CEP, he was a good friend of both mine and Evar's, and as he was from the same book, he was often called upon to do third party work.

"I have a mission for you," I said, getting right to the point, as I knew was his manner. "We need you to infiltrate the Guild, and bring us information regarding the Copy and Paste program."

"Pay?"

"The usual, plus a bonus based on the amount of info

you bring back."

Dorln nodded. "When do I leave?"

"As soon as you are ready."

#

I trudged from the Character Rehab complex. We'd left Legolas in the LOTR ward, floor 3 for Return of the King, with the most dedicated LOTR fans we could employ. We could only hope that he would realize his error on his own and return to his book unharmed. If not, there would be a long and painful process to rewrite his character, and if it took longer than usual, we would have to cause book problems on earth. New editions and sold out signs enraged fans, but they were inevitable in the case of a bad rehab.

I sighed and ran a hand over my aching eyes. I needed to see the Boss, but I could hardly walk straight, I was so tired. I wandered over to a coffee machine and tried to pour some, but it was empty.

"Hey Eddie!" someone yelled. "Can you fix the coffee machine again?"

"EdWARD!" I yelled. "And NO!!!"

I stomped toward the Dark Office, thinking that at least my head was cleared by the yelling.

I finally arrived at his office and burst open the door.

"Tolfam." The Boss's office chair creaked, and I couldn't see a thing in the darkness. "You lost Regano."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I kind of had my hands full."

"Report your actions," he ordered shortly.

"Well...I was on my way, when a Nazgul winged steed picked up the car and deposited it on the top of a building in Minas Tirith. By the time I got down there, Regano was almost to Theoden. We both jumped for him, but another winged steed picked him up and carried him off, horse and all. I managed to confiscate Regano's dummy, but at that point we had the Legolas trouble and I couldn't manage everything at once." I tried not to sound bitter and frustrated...well, at least I pretended to try....

"Look Eddie..." he began. "This is a tough case, and Regano's a tricky character. I need you to catch him at all costs."

"But...sir, wouldn't it be better to work with Regano just now, and try to get the Guild under control? They caused the trouble, and they are acquiring weapons of mass reconstruction!"

"Eddie, I must require you to follow my orders or you

shall be demoted," he said. His voice was impossible to read.

"Sir," I said quietly, trying to stomach my anger. "My name is Edward." With that, I left the office, not waiting for dismissal. I made for a computer. I needed to do some research.

I paused outside the information desk and peered over the top at Phyllis's head.

"How'd it go, Eddie?" she asked, without looking up from her papers.

hair. "You wouldn't happen to have a file on the Guild, would you?"

She slammed open a file cabinet drawer and shuffled through neatly alphabetized folders. Gandalf... Geris... Glue Incident.... And from there it skipped directly to Helm's Deep.

"Sorry, Eddie," she said, returning to her papers. "The Guild's very hush-hush, if you know what I mean. Hard to get any info on it at all..."

"That's very dangerous, you know," I said.

She shrugged. "Tell Balrog to get on it. He should find it easy to get information out of anybody."

I sighed and shook my head before continuing on. I made my way to the room where massive computers with three extra keyboards just for symbols dwarfed twirling office chairs. I threw myself into one and turned to a screen. Tapping on the keyboard, I typed, "GUILD."

The screen became blank, and then three words popped up.

"COPY AND PASTE."

I smiled, and clicked the link.

A page came up, describing the lethal effects of this tool, and how it could ruin literature for all time when in the wrong hands, etc. etc. etc. I scrolled down to the bottom, where it read, "Requirements: A method for showing text on a screen without changing a character."

I knew this was hard, because in the newer books where characters were less well developed and less memorable, even changing the font could damage their personality. If the Guild had that—

"TEXT SCREEN MAKERS," I typed.

Only one name came back.

Evar of Twilland.

I flew from the chair so fast I knocked it over, but then I caught myself and sat back down. Our computers were

vastly powerful, and the Guild couldn't have anything quite like ours...but if that information fell into the wrong hands, it would be deadly. I quickly hacked into TFDB (TransFictional DataBase) and carefully locked away that page. Getting up from the chair, I ran to find a folder on Evar.

#

So far Dorln's work had been masterful. We already had a ten-page report on the details of the program. Chief among the facts was that there was no way that the Guild could actually operate it. Yet. They still needed to find a way to display the text that made up a character on a screen without harming the character. So far no luck. They had brilliant scientists working for them, Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and even Lord Feverstone but so far none had been able bring the text up on a workable interface.

"It really isn't so hard you know," the voice at the door startled me. Evar.

"What isn't, old bean?" I asked, smiling at him, before turning back to the report.

"Showing text on a screen," he said, "it can be done.

I've done it before myself."

I spun my chair around to Evar. "You have? Why didn't you say something earlier?"

Evar laughed. "Of course I have! How do you think I invented the Despellerizer in the first place? I had to find a way to show text on a screen so that I could tell the machine how to de-spell the words."

"You mean you didn't just use words to make the machine? You know, write it?"

Evar's pride seemed hurt. "Of course not! I was written as an inventor, and with the current word shortage, I didn't want to waste any. I have to use quite a lot for the dummies you know."

"Of course. Evar, what you are saying is very important. You have done this before? You can display a character's words on the screen, and reorder them?"

"Heaven's no! I can't reorder them! I can display them though. It was the only way to create and test the Despellerizer. Didn't you wonder about the all of the disappearing office furniture?"

I shook my head in wonder. "Evar, from this moment forward, you are going to be under the close guard of no less than three agents at any given time."

Evar waved his hand in the air nonchalantly, "oh posh... no need for that--"

"No, there is a need. The Guild is creating weapons of mass destruction, and you are the tool to their completion. They may try something to get a hold of your knowledge. Will you allow the agents to protect you?"

Evar paled. "Our course," he said, and laughed uneasily. "No worries. I don't think anyone would come for little old me anyway." Evar walked towards the door, trying to appear confident, but his hands were shaking as he turned the handle and went out.

I put my head in my hands as I realized the only logical next step. Tolfam would call. He would want to know about Evar, so he would call. All I had to do was wait.

Three hours later the call still hadn't come. My supply of Potato chips, sparkling water, and those little cherries that you put on your ice cream was running thin. Why wouldn't he call? There were only three possibilities: one, the TFP actually didn't know anything about Evar. Not likely. They found everything out sooner or later. Two: I'd read Tolfam completely wrong, and he would try to take him by force. Again, not likely, I rarely read people

wrong. I was written that way. Or three--- The phone rang, and I picked up the receiver--probably better to act formal... just in case. "Evar's Palace, how may I direct your call?"

"I need to speak to Regano, Bard of Twilland," a low, dark, voice said. Not Eddie.

"I'm sorry, he is out. May I take a message?"

"No."

"Oh.... then what would you like me to do?"

"Find him."

"One moment." I hung up the receiver, and put it on hold. I took time in brushing off my shirt, and ate the crumbs out of my potato chip bag. I like Ruffles, but I have to say that Lays have more of a crunch. Picking up the receiver, I dropped my polite clueless-as-a-bean-pole voice.

"Hello, this is Regano, how can I help you?"

"You have 24 hours to deliver Evar to the first Chapter of "The Man who was Thursday", by G. K. Chesterton. Right after "the Big Chinese Lanterns," there is a phrase the mentions "dwarflike trees." make sure he lands on the word "dwarflike" and then exits the narrative. We want to stay off the radar."

"If you think I am going to just hand Evar over to the likes of you then you've gone off your rocker."

"If you fail to comply, Agent Poppins will be erased. Again, you have 24 hours."

The phone clicked. My eyes widened so far that my monocle fell onto the floor, vibrating and spinning like a coin on the marble surface. I picked up the phone, and dialed "9673" spelling "WORD". A female voice answered. "Hello TFP, this is Lieutenant Phyllis, how can I help you?"

Again, I disguised my voice. "Thanky kindly ma'am, I'd like to speak to Eddie Tol--"

The woman cut me off. "I get him for you." She covered the receiver, but I could still hear her yell.

"Eddie! Eddie! Hey, Eddie! Phone!"

A door slammed.

"Ed-WARD!"

"Whatever, here's the phone."

The receiver echoed a bit as the phone transferred hands.

"Hello this is Edward Tolfam. How can I help you?"

"Tolfam, I need you to get to a private room immediately. This is Regano, of Twilland. We need to

talk."

#

Phyllis looked at me quizzically, and I waved a hand at her. "My mom," I mumbled. "Clothesline bit her," I managed as I scurried for a room. Yeah, it was a lame excuse, even for TFP, but I was in a state of shock. I slipped into an empty office and locked the door.

"What is it, Regano?" I hissed into the mouthpiece. "You can't be calling me! We're archrivals for goodness sake!"

"Don't hiss like that, old bean!" he chortled jovially. "It sounds like you're hitting turbulence on a flying carpet!"

"Regano..." I said, voice rising with warning.

"All right, all right," he said, growing somber.

"I've got a problem."

"No really?" I said, dripping sarcasm. "I thought you just missed the melodious sound of my voice."

"That too. Fact is, I've just got a call from some dark and deep sounding voice demanding that I hand over Evar in 24 hours, or one of my agents will be erased."

I nearly slammed the receiver down on the desk in my frustration. I put it back to my ear and controlled

myself. "How can they have gotten that information so quickly? I locked it the minute I found it!"

"I figured you knew. Why didn't you call? I was waiting."

I traced a smiley face in the dust on the desk.

"Uh...I was fixing a coffee machine."

Silence on the line.

"Yeah, I know...it's kind of my little job around here. Either that or get mobbed by eight thirsty caffeine-aholics who've been up three nights in a row...."

Silence on the line.

I gripped the phone. "Regano? Regano! Are you there?"

I shook the receiver and banged it against my hand before shouting into it again. Still no answer. The line was dead.

"Just like that old busybody," I grumbled. "Hangs up on me just because I didn't call him soon enough." I stood up and started toward the door, when the phone in my hand buzzed and vibrated. I pushed "talk."

"TFP, Fantasy Office, can I help you?" I rattled off.

"That depends on you." The voice was low and dark, not to mention foreign.

"Who is this?" I asked slowly.

"That is beside the point. We want you to deliver your file on Evar of Twilland to the first chapter of The Man Who Was Thursday by GK Chesterton. There is a phrase that mentions "the Big Chinese Lanterns." Open there, drop the file, and exit immediately."

"I'm sorry, sir, but our information is confidential," I said.

"Then listen to this confidential information," he growled. "If you don't comply, some very unpleasant things will start happening. Very unpleasant."

With a click, the line went dead. I stared at the wall, and then at a speck of dirt on the wall, and no ideas came. Then I stared at a speck of dirt on the ceiling, and an idea popped into my head. I dropped the phone and flopped into the chair, swiveling to view a typewriter loaded with paper. I had some fabricating to do...

#

"A coffee machine? At a time like this? Old bean, I am sure you could be doing something better with your time."

I waited for some retort from Eddie about how this and that, or how that and the other, had popped up. Only

silence.

"Hello?" I waited, "Hellloooo?" He'd hung up on me! Well. I'd show him. I hung up the phone and picked it up to call him again, but stopped short. No dial tone. I pulled my text-messenger out of my pocket. No signal. I frowned. Evar owned Twilland's only wireless service. How could the line be dead? The lights flickered above, and then went off. The lights too? I opened the door out of the office, and it creaked ominously. A huge spider ran up the wall and into a crack near the ceiling, the light in the hall flickered a few more times, and then went dead.

I tensed. This couldn't be what I thought it was. I walked a few more steps, and turned the corner into the kitchen. All of the mice, that we kept trying to catch were walking across the floor sniffing. I groaned. Apparently the Guild had a larger weapons cache than I thought. They would be serious about Evar, which meant I had to find him as soon as possible. A duck flew by one of the windows, and I heard a delighted laugh from below. Evar. That meant he must be in garden courtyard, hardly the safest place in the building. I ran down the long twisting stairs, and into the garden. The flowers were already starting to droop, and the sky was growing grey

with cloud. The sky brightened with lightning for a second, and then grew dim, just as I reached Evar.

"Evar!" I yelled.

"Ah! Regano. I think we might be in for a bit of a storm. I am--"

"Evar," I asked, panting. "Do we ever get storms?"

Evar looked at me, indignant. "Well not usually... but--"

"Ever?"

"Not that I know of... but--"

"The answer is a straight no. Agents, you are dismissed." The three agents who had been guarding Evar nodded curtly, and left. "As I was saying, there has never been a storm written that takes place at your palace. It is always a delightful place, except for that time when Hakelback took over and--" I cut myself off of the rabbit trail. "No storms. Your palace wasn't written to have storms."

"What are you trying to say Regano? I didn't do it! I haven't finished the storm machine yet! I still need the words 'terrific,' 'lightning,' 'brightened,' 'magnificent,' and a few other rare ones."

"What I'm saying, Evar, is that we have been hit by a

Horror shell."

Evar stopped walking. "What?"

"The Guild called a few minutes ago. They asked to deliver you to a certain location. They threatened to erase Poppins. They want to make sure I get no help on this one."

Evar paled. "How do you know we were hit?"

"A. The storm. B. The lines are dead, both the phones and our text-messagers. C. All of the lights flickered off. If it weren't for premises A and B, I would just blame it on electrical failure. This Palace wasn't written to have electric lights either."

"At this point, the question is what we are going to do about it."

"Well, obviously we have to save Poppins! Don't we have a man inside?"

"You mean Dorln? Yes. He is still there... but his last report was only two hours ago, and we have no way to contact him."

"What about another agent? Does the Despellerizer still work?"

He bit his lip. "Without power? Well... we have the mules. We could always try to use them to generate the

power--"

I frowned. "But I can't just keep sending agents in. The stakes will only go up if they are caught."

"But Poppins--"

"She will not be erased. I won't let them ruin a classic, or strip me of one of our best agents."

"Then what will we do?"

I sat down on a rock as the first raindrops of the thunderstorm began to fall.

"I don't know, Evar; I just don't know."

#

"Are you sure you will be all right, old bean?" I asked, trying to give Evar an encouraging smile.

"Why wouldn't I?" Evar smiled, though not as maniacally as usual. "It's why I'm here."

I nodded curtly as we waited just off book for the right word. I would have to leave Evar at just the right word, at just the right time, to avoid detection from the TFP, as the Guild has ordered, and avoid Poppins's eminent erasure. We waited. I thought I saw a shadow on the other side of the story, but it must have just been a passing word, because it vanished.

"Ready, set, go!" I pushed Evar in. "Goodbye, old bean!"

I turned and walked back to the wormhole drop spot and entered the des-pel-le-r-i-z-e-r.

A f-e-w se-co-nds later I'd been respelled on the other side. I dropped to the floor, the world spinning around me. I felt ill.

"Are you okay, Regano?" a voice said above me. I looked up, and smiled at--Evar.

"Mission complete. You will have to work on the side effects of that machine some more though... still almost threw up coming back through."

Evar grunted, "An inventor is never appreciated."

I smiled. "Do you think the plan will work, old bean?"

Evar perked up immediately. "Why not? All that the Evar dummy has to do is act like me long enough to alert Dorln so that they can get Poppins out. I should think that with the amount of words we used to create that one, it should pass pretty well."

"You mean words like, "eccentric," and "duck-loving"? I didn't even know you had those in your library!"

"Believe me," Evar said grinning, "I have some much

more unusual words than those. Although duck-loving wasn't fun to part with. I shall have a hard time finding another one of those without stealing it from my own description!"

I blinked. "Is that where you got the last one?"

"No!" Evar yelped, with a wave of his hand. "I got that one from a duck magazine."

CHAPTER 3

I slipped into the book through the space between "Chinese" and "Lantern" and dropped the file before dashing out just before "dwarvish." I hoped they'd take the bait. As I fled, I thought I saw a flash of color behind me, but when I looked, it was gone. I shook my head and hurried to my house.

My brick-fronted cottage stood at the end of a Scotland-reminiscent lane near the TFP headquarters. I unlocked the door and wiped my feet before turning on some lights. Before me, my vast library stretched from wall to wall, floor to ceiling. I ran my fingers over the old books... Ogres and Trolls, Are Giants B.U.G.s?, and General Big Ugly Galoots. Ah yes...memories from my happy days in Desperate State University, studying to become a specialist in Big Ugly Galoot Distinction... before I'd taken the job with TFP and spent my days fixing broken coffee machines.

I walked from the main room into the kitchen, which was also lined with books in every spare cranny. Grabbing an apple from the fridge, I bit in as I entered the

bedroom. I opened my closet door, shoved over my collection of TFP uniforms, and pushed a small lever. Behind me, a huge zipper opened in the air and I stepped in, zipping it up behind me. I crunched on the apple as I waited for the portal to take me to my secret archives.

I heard a thump, and through the haze of Trans-Dimension, I could smell the acrid aroma of old, old words. I yanked on the metal pull and extracted myself from the zipper that appeared. Tossing the core of my apple into a wastebasket, I surveyed my secret collection. Ah, yes...

#

I waited. I popped another maraschino cherry in my mouth, and chewed it deliberately. Quite good that. I swallowed, and the waiting began again. I fished in my jar for another cherry, but my fingers met with nothing but that nasty syrupy stuff that they keep them in. I sighed. I hated waiting. Especially when the stakes were this high. It made my nervous, and when I was nervous, I got hungry, and when I was hungry... I pushed the call button on the intercom to ask for more cherries, and only got static. The horror bomb must not have worn off yet. My stomach growled again, and I rummaged through my filing cabinet for more food. Nothing... just files, and paper.

I walked over to the door and opened it. "Any news on Poppins?" I yelled.

A chorus of "no's" echoed back down the hall to me.

"Does anyone have any more of those little cherries you put on your ice cream?"

Another chorus of "no's" came back down the hall, though this time they were more muffled as a few agents quickly stuffed the last of their cherries into their mouths before answering.

I closed the door to my office, and sat back down at my desk. Gradually, I drifted off to sleep--

I awoke to the ringing of the telephone. Why did someone always seem to call when I was sleeping? Was it even possible to catch a few Zs in Evar's Palace? Why did the telephone always have to-- finally, I stood and my dazed stupor of just waking up fell off like the blanket I didn't have. The phone was actually ringing! I reached over with enthusiasm and lifted it off the hook.

"Hello this is Evar's Palace, how can I help you?"
Nothing. "Hello?" I looked down at the receiver and realized that someone else had already picked up the phone. I was about to go out and demand that I be told who was taking the call, but the intercom crackled welcomingly, and

a small voice with a distinct accent sounded through the speakers.

"Hey, call's for you, Regano. Pick up the phone, will ya?"

Another voice. "Do you have something to eat?"

"No! I left the food back in the cage."

"Aw, can we go get some?"

"Just as soon as you take your foot off of the intercom."

"Oops"

Click.

I smiled and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"This is Agent Poppins. I am on my way home. Not much battery power on this phone... I swiped it off of a lazy guard who apparently, due to being the "lazy guard" archetype, hadn't charged it in a while. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I am on the way back to Evar's Palace, and Dorln is with me. Ouch! That's my hair you're holding on to! Find a better grip will you? Ahem... sorry apparently Dorln isn't very used to travel by umbrella. We'll be back shortly... Important information... Ta--." The phone cut off before the last "ta" could be uttered.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Dorln and Poppins were

safe, though they hadn't made any mention of the Evar dummy. I shrugged. It probably wasn't one of the most important facts to convey on limited battery-life. Well, that made for an almost perfect day. Almost. I reached for the intercom. "Kitchen staff, this is Regano, I need another five jars of cherries delivered to my office. Yes, the red maraschino ones. Why do I need them? To eat, of course! What else?" I clicked off the intercom, sat down, and closed my eyes. Hopefully Dorln would bring back information on the Copy and Paste device. We needed to know how far they really were. Hopefully he would bring just enough information so I wouldn't have to pay through my nose-- My thoughts were cut off as the phone started to ring again.

"Hello, Evar's Palace, this is Regano the Bard speaking, how can I help you?"

"We are not amused, Regano. Please send the real Evar within the next four chapters, or we will be forced to take him by uh... force. You won't get out of this unscathed, Regano. This is your last warning."

Click.

My eyes widened as I hung up the phone, and my good mood vanished into worry. I punched the intercom. "Duck

Alert people. Evar's life has been threatened. Duck Alert! I want full guard on Evar now." I lifted my hand off of the button, and a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in."

One of the white-dressed kitchen staff entered the room. "Your cherries, sir."

#

I wandered through the racks of old words looking for something until I reached my word desk. It was built of words like "dominating," "oaken," "solid," and "majestic." Quite a delight. I sat down in the "soft," "comfortable," "lumbar-supporting," (rare of rare words) chair and brushed away a pile of antique thee's and thou's I'd been examining when last I sat there. I reached for the phone and dialed Regano's number as I rattled through the many eclectic drawers of the desk.

"Evar's Palace, Regano chewing - I mean, speaking!" said a voice on the other end, sounding muffled. I heard a gulp and he spoke more clearly. "Can I help you?"

"This is Edward," I said, pulling out keys to unlock a drawer. "How's it going? I gave the mysterious caller a

fake file on Evar. They wanted it in The Man Who Was Thursday. Do you think there's a connection?"

"Bravo! Good show, what?" he congratulated me. "Did they take it?"

"I haven't heard. I assume so..." I cradled the phone with my shoulder while unscrewing my fountain pen to fill it.

"What's odd is that we dropped off an Evar dummy on that same book, and they just called saying they want the real one. I say, old chap, I am glad you called! It's been most stressful over here."

"Hmmmmm. Could we make a more realistic dummy?" I scratched my pen on paper, trying to get the ink flowing.

"There is always the difficulty we will make one so realistic, it actually can make the text screen, and that would defeat the purpose, wouldn't it? I'm afraid--" he stopped suddenly and I heard a commotion in the background.

"No!" he shouted, his voice far away from the receiver.

"I'm sorry, truly I am, but it can't be helped! Yes, I know it was your favorite! No! Yes, but aren't you glad to be alive and free? What do you mean, life is worthless without ducks? Evar, pull yourself together! There are plenty of ducks! Yes! Okay! Just leave me alone, okay?"

I'm on the phone!"

The ink splattered out of the pen onto the paper. I grunted and got a new sheet.

"Sorry about that, old bean," Regano said, his voice coming back to the phone. "Evar's not too happy about the waste of the word "duck-loving" we used in creating the dummy... It's one of his favorites."

I got up from the desk, taking my phone with me. "Don't worry about it. I'll send him one giftwrapped. I have four, I believe, in my collection."

"Four!" he shouted, and the receiver nearly jumped out of my hands. "What kind of collection do you have?"

"A big secret one," I smiled mischievously. "I think we need to--" BEEP! I stopped as the call-waiting tone blared. "Hang on, Regano, I've got another call." I switched over. "Hello?"

"Nice try, smarty pants. I warned you, and now it's too late. You were foolish to try our patience."

Click.

I switched over to Regano's line. "I just got a threat. They know my file was a fake."

A loud gasp came over the phone, and a door slammed open on the other side of the line, "What about Poppins?"

For the first time, I felt really scared. I clutched the phone. "Regano," I said. "I'm going to break all the TFP rules. We need to work together and get the Guild under control. Now."

#

Dorln stood in the doorway, blood splattered on his forehead, and a gash down his left arm, leaking blood on Evar's marble floor. He just stood there panting, bloody and sword still in hand.

"What about Poppins?" I gasped, and then turned back to the phone I had just forgotten about. "Terribly sorry old chap, give me a second." I turned back to Dorln.

"What happened to Poppins?"

Dorln shook his head, and even before he said it, I knew what had happened. It had happened. The unspeakable evil.

"She was erased, sir. It was horrible, sir, even for me. She imploded from the inside, her words scattered everywhere. 'Delightful' flew one direction and 'determined' flew another." He started to choke up, "Someone forced her to swallow bottle of white-out while she was out. When she got too far away, it exploded. I did

manage to salvage this word to make a dummy with."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the longest word I'd ever seen. Of course... the word essential to making a Poppins. "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious".

A tear dripped from my face onto the receiver of the phone I was still holding. I put it back to my ear and sniffed. "Tolfam, I think I may have to get back with you, old bean."

"Is something wrong?" a shocked voice said from the other side.

"Yes. Poppins--" My voice trailed off, and I choked up. I couldn't help myself, I was going to cry.

"Poppins what?"

"One second." I blew my nose and got back on the phone. It really didn't help so much as all of the movies made it out too. I still felt just as sad and breathing a little better didn't do the sadness justice. "Poppins has been erased, Edward."

"What?"

A few seconds of silence clogged up the line like a toilet.

"You mean the Poppins? Mary Poppins?"

"Yes, old bean. Mary Poppins. Our agent managed to

salvage supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. We'll send it to you. You and your team need to get on board making the finest Poppins dummy ever constructed. As life-like as any dummy has ever been. The most like the original. I know you can't give it some of the qualities that an author can, but at least save her book. She would have wanted that." I blew again into the tissue. Nope. Still didn't help. "I have to go, old bean." I hung up the phone before he could say anything else and looked back up at Dorln.

"Go get yourself cleaned up," I said. "And if you see Evar, send him up here. I will have your pay--"

"No pay," Dorln said, "I'm doing this one for free. Poppins deserves it."

I nodded. "Thank you Dorln. Just send up your report when you've finished with it."

He shook his head. "I'll make the debriefing. This case is much more complicated than we thought."

I smiled through my tears and nodded again. "In that case, debriefing is in 24 hours. Here, in my office."

Dorln nodded and walked out of the room dully. No smile, just a curt nod, and he was gone.

At least Evar would get his "duck-loving" back. That would be one less headache to worry about. But for some reason... I didn't care.

#

I sat, stunned, phone blaring a dial tone in my hand. Clumsily, I clattered it onto its base. Poppins...gone? A beloved childhood memory of mine was shattered. I hummed the first few bars of "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down!" and passed a hand over my eyes. Well...I had a job to do.

I got up and browsed my library of words. Collecting a pile, I placed them on my desk and began building. "delightful," "determined," "no-nonsense," "sympathetic," "witty," and "sweet" fit together like clockwork. Over the next hour, I collected every adjective I could find that described a facet of Poppins's character... When I finished, there was only one gap left.

Ding dong!

I rushed into the zipper and took myself to my bedroom, from which I ran to answer the door. Uniformed Man stood there, the message deliverer of the TFP.

"Delivery for you, sir," he said, producing a 3-foot long envelope.

"Thank you," I said, taking the package and closing the door. I opened the envelope reverently until the shining, scintillating "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" came into view. I fit it into the last gap in the dummy and she sprang to life.

"Spit spot!" she cried briskly, dusting her gloves together. "None of those long faces!"

"Mrs. Poppins, please sit down here," I said, gesturing toward my desk chair. "I have something rather difficult to tell you."

She hung her umbrella over the arm and sat down.

"I hate to say this," I said, pacing in front of her, "but...you're not the real thing. And your original was erased."

She went very white but kept her composure as always.

"As the most realistic copy a vast library of words can create, you must now fill her shoes. Are you up for the task?"

"I...I'm afraid I'm speechless," she stammered. "What's that word I always use when I can't think of anything else to say? Oh yes!"

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!" As she spoke, her color came back.

I clapped my hands together. "Thank you so much! Oh, by the way, the old Poppins was in league with a character named Regano the Bard. Here's his card. You may want to contact him." As I handed her the business card, I laughed inwardly at myself with disbelief. Here I was, sending the CEP an agent. What would the Boss think of me if he could see me now?

I sighed and logged the loss of the words I had used to make the Poppins dummy in the archive computer. I also changed my account number of "duck-loving" from 4 to 3. I sighed again. I was in a state of exhaustion and confusion...I didn't know what to do next. Making dummies was tiring, but still an empty occupation, since without the beneath-the-surface understanding of an author, they simply did what they were written to do, said the things they were written to do, and couldn't function as an entire person besides what had been written in their descriptions. There would never be another Poppins quite like the first Poppins...

Then an idea struck me. I couldn't fight the Guild, because I had to obey the Boss...but if I could make a

dummy and add a bit to my description... I ran to the shelves and began tearing down words.

Two hours later, I'd constructed a dummy that was almost exactly like me--down to the knowledge of the inner workings of coffee machines. He stood there, blinking, and put out a hand.

"Good evening," he smiled. "I am Professor E. Tolfam."

"Not anymore," I corrected. "You're working for the TFP. Come upstairs and let's get you a uniform."

He looked down at himself. "I don't seem to remember how I got here."

"Do you have any memories?" I asked.

"Why, yes, of course! But...only up until a few hours ago...Wait a minute! What happened with Regano and the Guild? How did I get here? And what are you?"

"I am the real Edward Tolfam. I'm afraid you've just been constructed, because I need to be in two places at once."

"That's never been done before..." he eyed me warily.

"Yes, and I hope it will never be done again. Now, I have one test for you, Eddie."

"EdWARD," he said, exasperated.

"Thank you," I grinned. "You passed with flying colors. Follow me, and I'll get you a uniform."

#

A knock sounded on my office door... again...

"Evar! for the last time, stop complaining about 'duck-loving'! I am sure Eddie has every intention--"

The door opened and a determined yet dainty face peeked through, a face I knew very well...

"Poppins?"

"That's Mary Poppins, sir. Mr. Tolfam said that I might want to speak with you," she pulled out a business card from her purse. "Is this the correct address?"

I took that card and stared. Had Eddie really just sent me the Poppins dummy? Really?

"How do I know that you are from Eddie, and not a spy," I asked warily.

"It's Ed-WARD sir, and he wanted me to give you this in the event that you didn't believe me." She reached in a gloved hand, and out of her purse popped "duck-loving."

I nodded to her as I tenderly tucked the word into my desk drawer. I would tell Evar later.

"Quite. And why did he send you?"

"He said that the old Poppins used to work for you, and that I might be interested in contacting you."

"Ah, well it is nice to meet you anyway. Are you interested in joining the team?"

Poppins blinked. "I don't know. I was just told that I would want to contact you, so I did. Do I want to join your organization?"

The way she said it, asking me, rather than answering, told me all I needed to know. She may be described the same as Poppins, she may look like Poppins, she may act like Poppins, but without the life giving scratch of a writer's pen, she was no more than a dummy. She could do no more than her duty without being told, and she would do no more.

I sighed. "No, Ms. Poppins, I think that it would be best for you to get along to your book. I don't know how many readings have occurred, but I think that you should get back to your book as soon as possible."

Ms. Poppins nodded curtly and turned to walk out the door, deliberately.

"Uh, Ms. Poppins," I called after her.

"Yes sir?"

"Er, uh-- perhaps you would like some tea before you leave?"

"If you could put it in a thermos for me, sir, I really must be going."

I nodded and pressed the button on the intercom for the kitchen. "Please prepare some peppermint tea with a quarter cup of milk and two lumps. Put it in a thermos," I said. My heart ached as I remembered Poppins' favorite tea mixture. "Meet Poppins with it by the door if you will." I clicked off the intercom, and turned to say goodbye, but Poppins was already gone.

I tried to smile to myself, but I couldn't, and another tear slid down my face as I thought of the other Poppins. The first Poppins. The real Poppins.

Someone else knocked at my door. "Come in."

Evar entered, followed by Dorln.

"What are you doing here?"

"Um..." Dorln said, "debriefing? Remember?"

"Oh, yes, quite right. Back to serious business," I said ironically, and turned to Evar.

"Oh, and 'duck-loving' came in the mail for you, old chap. I thought I should tell you."

Evar's eyes went wide. "Really? Why didn't you tell

me sooner?"

"It just came," I smiled, rolling my eyes, "a few second ago."

"Can I have it?"

"You can have it when we finish debriefing."

"Please?"

"No."

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

I groaned. Why did it have to be cherries?

"No, Dorln and I need your full attention. Where's Long John?"

"I think he's in a reading."

"Okay... that still leaves Merlin."

"You've still got a few more seconds until he'll arrive. You know how he is with time."

"Right. Well. Dorln if you could go ahead and sta--"

The room elongated, and constricted, and filled with a brilliant display of lights. A man, looking to be in his twenties, appeared in the room with a cooking ladle in hand apparently still bent over a non-existent stove. Upon the room normalizing, he stopped and looked around.

"Oh, fiddles and harps, blasted travel alarm. Now my soup will burn."

I smiled. "You are looking rather young today, Merlin."

"Oh you know how it is, growing in reverse."

"Actually, I don't."

Merlin frowned, and his eyes slumped. "You're right, you wouldn't, would you?" He held out his ladle. "Care to try some soup?"

Evar's eyes widened, and he backed his chair up a bit too far, tripping the leg on a stray jar of cherries.

"Oof."

Merlin's eyes darted in his direction. "Don't worry, it won't turn you into a newt... this time...."

Evar gulped.

Dorln still sat in his chair with his arms folded.

"Can we start now?"

"One moment," I said, impatiently tapping the table.

"I am expecting one more person."

"But no one else is supposed to show uuuu--"

The door opened suddenly, smacking straight into Dorln's face, and knocking his chair over in the process.

Edward Tolfam entered the study, and nodded to me gravely.

"I'm here."

"Ah, so you are. We were just about to get started. Dorln, Evar, Merlin, This is the former Professor in Big Ugly Galoot Distinction, turned TFP agent, Edward Tolfam."

Merlin shot to his feet. "TFP?"

"Don't worry Merlin, he's with us. He's here against the wishes of his boss to help us fight against the Guild, which has become a much more present and real threat recently, as Dorln is going to explain to you in a few moments."

Merlin sat back down, looking warily at Tolfam.

"Don't try anything fishy or I'll turn you into a newt."

"Oh!" Evar said, brightening, "you are that Edward Tolfam."

Tolfam looked at Evar strangely. "What Edward Tolfam?"

"The one I have been researching. You are quite an irregularity you know, though for some reason the TFP hasn't found out yet. You are the only character in existence not to have a story."

Edward blinked. "What are you talking about? Of course I have a story."

"Actually, not," Evar said in his matter-of-fact scientist voice. "There isn't a recorded "Dr. Edward

Tolfam, Professor Edward Tolfam, Edward Tolfam, Eddie Tolfam, or even Tolfam in the entire archive of fiction. You would think that the TFP would give a better background check."

Edward shook his head in shock. "You can't be saying this. Of course I have a story. You obviously don't know what you are talking about. Your database must be incomplete."

"Actually, I used the TFP's database. I taught myself how to hack in a while back."

"That's illegal!" Tolfam protested.

"And you don't exist," Evar countered.

Tolfam looked at me in more anger and contempt than anything else. "Is this why you brought me here? To make a fool of me?"

I sighed and shook my head. "No, Edward. He's right. You have no story."

"How can that--"

"If we are wrong, would you mind telling us what story you are from?"

Silence.

"Your questions will have to wait. Evar will explain it in the fullest detail we're able, after the meeting.

Until then, Edward, please listen. As you and I both know there are very large things at stake. Shall we begin?"

I scanned the other four, who all nodded in succession.

"Good, Dorln, you have the floor."

CHAPTER 4

I sat, frozen, as the black-clad man spoke. I could barely keep my mind on his words. Me? No story? It couldn't be! I had a story, didn't I? I had always figured I'd come from some old, lost manuscript, as I'd never had a reading. But surely I'd been read at some point in my distant past! I...oh. As I racked my brain for any trace of remembrance, I found a big blank.

The one called Dorln finished finally, and silence fell for a few moments. I opened my mouth to speak.

"Not yet, Eddie! We have to go over some things first!" said Regano, holding up a hand.

I growled and muttered, "EdWARD."

"First, we need to establish a plan of action," he said. "Any ideas on how to defeat the Guild?"

"I would do anything to save Twilland!" cried the "Dwarf" staunchly.

I roused from my state of shock. "More than

Twilland," I muttered.

He looked at me.

I looked at Regano. "With what the Guild is proposing, the entire network of literature as a whole will fall apart like an unraveling sweater. No stories. At all."

A stunned silence descended on the group. I surveyed my companions. Regano, sitting with hands folded over his desk. Dorln, hand resting on sword-hilt, with debriefing notes still in hand. Evar, staring at Regano's desk drawers as if looking for something. Merlin, looking half young and wild and half old and wild.

"I move we send them sugar cookies that will turn them all into poisonous reptiles!" he cried, gesticulating with the ladle. Soup splattered all over Regano's carpet and began to sizzle as it ate away the fiber.

Evar stared at it. "Would it have done that to the inside of me?" he asked.

Regano coughed. "Thank you, but that's quite out of the question. Ahem. Yes. We'll have none of that backhanded foul play."

Merlin leapt up and flung the ladle across the room. "Foul play! Foul play! How dare you! I am insulted!"

"And I am duck-loving!" said Evar brightly.

The soup was working on disintegrating the floorboards. I cleared my throat.

"If the Guild has Copy and Paste, they hold powerful weapons of mass destruction. At all costs, we must keep Evar out of their hands," I said.

"Even to the point of the erasure of countless innocent characters like Poppins?" asked Dorln.

I ran my hands through my hair. "That's not good... but what's the middle ground?"

Regano raised his head from studying the corroded floor. "We need to find out what story they make their base of operations."

Story...story! My mind returned to my personal conundrum. "How could I not have a story?" I said suddenly. "It's impossible! I'm a character! I couldn't exist unless I had a story... or do I exist at all? Of course I do! Cogito ergo sum, right? I think therefore I am?"

"Cogito ergo sumo," said Dorln to himself. "I think, therefore I wrestle."

"Cogito Eggo sum," said Evar to himself. "I think, therefore I am a waffle."

We all stared at him.

"Poisoned...waffles?" offered Merlin.

#

"Merlin! I already told you. No backhanded trickery!" I couldn't understand why everyone seemed to be off on this insane rabbit trail. Sure, Edward was having problems coping with his nonexistence, but since when was that anything to go ballistic over? Merlin interrupted my thoughts.

"But they're waffles! Everyone likes waffles! It's the last thing they will expect!"

"No, I was written with much more honor than that. It goes against the very fiber of my character!"

Merlin rolled his eyes.

"Are you implying something?"

Merlin backed away innocently. "Me? Imply? I'm afraid that we at the CEP don't resort to that kind of backhanded trickery."

I glared at him for a moment and then turned my attention to Tolfam who now sat back in his chair with his head in his hands.

"Eddie-- ahem, Edward, I am sure we will find your story. You have to have one. There is no other way that

you could be here."

Tolfam looked up. "I can't be here without a story... but I have no recollection of a story that I was ever in. Why? I've never had a reading in my life."

I sighed. "I don't know, Edward. This is beyond me. Evar is the smartest person I know and even he couldn't figure it out." Tolfam's gaze drifted over to Evar and Dorln, who were still arguing.

"No Dorln! Everyone likes waffles better than pancakes!"

"I don't."

"Yes you do! You just don't know it! It is still buried somewhere deep in your psyche, just waiting for the right circumstance to bring it out!"

"Like what?"

"Like... butter and warm maple syrup dripping from the crispy goodness."

"I hate maple syrup."

I turned back to Tolfam. "Okay, so the old bean is a bit eccentric at times... but he is quite the most brilliant person on my team. I promise you, Edward, you will find your story."

He looked up at me, trying to hide the desperation in

his eyes.

"Right. But we have other things to worry about. The Guild is getting closer to building their weapons, and we still don't have a plan."

"I still think poisoned waffles would be the perfect solution," the still-pouting form of Merlin said, as he stirred an imaginary cauldron. "With cherries on top."

"They know about Dorln, Evar, you, and me. There is no way I am sending Merlin in."

At that moment, a knock sounded on the door. A light went on in my head.

"Wait Merlin... what was it you said a moment ago?"

Merlin looked up at me, shocked. "Uh... poisoned waffles?"

"With?"

"Uh... cherries on top?"

"Yes!" I opened the door, oblivious to the staring faces. A young boy, probably around 15 or 16 stood in the doorway.

"Cherries for you, Reg-"

"Why thank you lad, come on in." I whisked the cherries off the serving tray, and set them on the desk.

"So," Merlin said, "you want me to poison the

cherries?"

"No!" I said grinning from ear to ear. "I want to send this lad in as our spy!"

The whole room stared at me dumbstruck, including the lad.

"How do we know he's qualified?" Edward asked.

"Oh, he's quite qualified," Evar said starting to smile a little. "In fact, I quite like the choice."

"How's that?" Dorln asked.

"He's perfect! He's got the right skills; the right history."

"And how do you know this?" Tolfam asked, incredulously.

"I'm actually semi-surprised you don't recognize him."

"Should I?"

"Maybe," I said, grinning. "Would you tell us your name, son?"

The boy looked at me quizzically. "Um... Peter, sir. Peter Pan."

Tolfam bounded from his seat. "You can't send the Peter Pan into, into...into that!"

"Have you a better idea?" I asked calmly.

"Poisoned escargot?" piped Merlin, looking younger every minute.

"NO!"

I pushed Pan forward into the room. "He's perfect for the job!"

"But he's a character! An old and beloved character!" Eddie cried.

"We don't have much of a choice! We all are!"

Tolfam looked down at the sizzling carpet.

"Well...I'm not."

We all stared at him. Peter stepped forward and brandished a little knife.

"Let me at those codfish!" he cried, beginning to rise from the floor. "I can take 'em!"

"But send me too," Tolfam said finally. "I'll go..."

"What?" I had been trying to seem calm and collected, but Tolfam's outburst had unnerved me a bit.

"You heard me," Eddie said, "I'm going too."

"But--"

"No, you will need a second on the inside. You need someone to report to you who isn't the actual spy. Pan is just a kid, given, he's a classic, which means he's been around for a while, but he hasn't had any training in this

kind of stuff. I, on the other-hand, am a TFP officer. I do stuff like this all the time."

I shook my head repeatedly. "I don't know about the others, but I am against it. They know who you are, Eddie-- sorry, Edward. They have already sent you threats. They have already involved you--"

"Which is why," he said exasperated. "I'll give them what they want."

Evar shrieked, "You will not!"

Dorln drew his sword. "What are you trying to pull here?"

"No, no, no!" Tolfam shouted. "I meant the file. The file on Evar. I can promise them information. I think I can make it seem, well enough, like I want to join them. How long do you have until the deadline for Evar's transfer?"

I looked at my page count. "Actually, none of the Twilland Chronicles have many readings... so we still have two chapters."

"That isn't long," Tolfam said. "If someone decides to pick up the book again on a whim, they could easily read two chapters in a half hour or less."

I knew it was true, but there was no sense

in panicking Evar--

"Two chapters?" Evar yelled, and started to cry. "I don't want to be kidnapped!!"

So much for that.

I sighed. "All right, go. And if you do go, you are senior officer on this mission. That means that Pan will take orders from you.

Pan looked up indignant. "I can do it! I'm the head of the lost boys--"

"And you also have had almost no formal training," I said looking at him sternly. "I believe you were working in Evar's kitchen before we decided to put you on this mission."

Pan nodded bravely. "Understood, sir."

"Good." I looked back to Eddie. "How soon can you be ready?"

"A day or so, to prepare a simple plan, and equip," Eddie said, "and I'll have to get the file on Evar--and find out where the Guild is located."

I nodded. "Good. Evar, will you let the agents guard you again?"

Evar wiped a hysterical tear from his face, and looked at me with his manipulative "please" face. "If you give me

'duck-loving.'"

I pulled it out of my drawer, and tossed it too him.

"Happy now?"

Evar's face brightened immediately, and he saluted.

"Off to work, oh captain, my captain."

I averted my gaze to Eddie. "We have a go."

#

I took a deep breath, alone in the elevator, as it glided up to the third floor. Straightening my uniform, I strode out as the doors opened and walked straight up to Phyllis's desk.

"Hey, Phyl, I need a file," I said, trying to sound casual.

"Where've you been, Eddie?" she hissed under her breath. "The Boss is gonna kill you!"

I squinted a little as I thought of the dummy I'd made to cover for me. Where was he?

"Off duty," I said, attempting to cover. "Important business came up. You might call it a death in the family." I'd read Poppins so much as a child, she seemed like one of the family, anyway.

She nodded but looked suspicious. "Name?" she asked, running her fingers down the file racks.

"Evar of Twilland." I tried not to fidget.

She froze and looked up. "I'm sorry, that file has been permanently locked from all use."

"But Phyllis, I really need it!" I cried.

"For what?"

"Evar is an old friend of...the family member who died...and he needs to know."

"Uh-huh," she said, not sounding convinced. "Then you'll have to look him up with a phone book and call him."

"But...but...it's better if I could tell him in person. Please can't I have his file? Just this once?" I knew it was getting pretty lame, but I was desperate.

"No," she said flatly. "The Boss'd have my head too. You'd better go report to him."

I turned away from the desk, thinking madly. I walked toward the Dark Office, but I wasn't going there. At the last second, I veered away to the right and came to a stop in front of the coffee machine. Taking one of the little plastic coffee stirrers, I doubled it and wedged it into where the coffee trickles out from the filter. Then I slipped into a cubicle and waited.

Like clockwork, Bob Cratchit strolled up with his mug in his hand and turned on the coffee machine. As soon as

the flow hit full blast, coffee spurted like water from a hose when you cover the mouth with your thumb. It soaked Bob and he howled.

"Help! The coffee machine's broken!" he cried, running as the hot coffee sprayed him. In moments, the whole office was in an uproar. At some point, Phyllis ran from her desk to investigate, and in that pocket of time, I slipped behind the desk and snatched Evar's folder. I ran to the elevator and pushed the button. And waited. And waited. I glanced nervously over my shoulder, feeling like a sore thumb. Someone had the sense to turn the coffee machine off, and then Phyllis turned around. She spotted me. I ran for the stairs.

#

I flung open the door of my office, and breathed the sweet air of the open hallway. Not that the air was any different than it was inside the office, but it smelled of unconfinement, of freedom, of-- I sniffed again. Cherry tarts? I blinked again, and groaned. Why did the entire palace reek of cherries all of the sudden? It seemed that ever since I had decided to go off of them, for the sake of my weight, I'd found them around every corner. A leftover piece of pie in one room, waffles in another, a bowl of ice

cream with my meal with the one cherry mocking me from on top of the light fluffy whipped cream.

Something hit my shoe and I looked down at the wet spot of drool. Oops. I composed myself and walked on down the hall, glancing at Evar's paintings on the walls. In this hallway, unmentioned in Evar's novel, the painting had been refurbished, and instead of being littered with words like "not very good," or "amateur" they had been replaced at great expense with word's like "marvelous", "beautiful", and for some of the most wonderful, the even more rare, "riveting".

I continued down the hall into the CEP main office, and my chest swelled with pride. Nearly a score of agents looked up at me from their desks, before returning to their work. These were the best of the best. The characters who were willing to go against the TFP to try to assist their fellow figments. A small tug on my ear diverted my thoughts.

"Sir," the little winged fairy said, "I am afraid that I don't agree with your decision to send Peter as your spy."

"Why not?" I asked, trying to look inquisitive, and not let my smile show through. "Why not, Tinker-bell?"

Tink blushed. "He-- he simply isn't ready is all. I should know. I go with him everywhere."

I nodded, understanding. "Don't worry. Every agent that I accept has to complete an entry exam. As you know, Peter has been trying to enter the program for a long time--"

"Sir," Tinkerbelle said, "he failed half of his classes. Twice."

I allowed myself another grin. "Yes, but his field word was exemplary. Poppins had even chosen him as her apprentice to move up."

Tink's eyes widened. "She did?"

I nodded gravely. "She did. You should be proud of Pan. He is quite good at thinking on his feet. He will make a wonderful agent someday. Like you."

Tink blushed again, though for a different reason. "Thank you, sir. I am sure that Peter will do fine."

"I think so too, otherwise he wouldn't have been selected for our most important mission. We needed a recruit, and one who isn't on the register as a recruit... even in our private records. Peter's the only one I would have chosen. He is the only one suited. Anyway, he has Eddie with him anyway. He'll be fine."

Tinkerbelle flew off and another agent walked up to me. I sighed. This is why I never left my office; things just seemed to pop up when I left. Yet the office was so confining... I loved to be out in the open. Ah well, this was my career, whether written or not, and business was business.

"Yes, Agent Finn? What can I do for you?" Finn was one of our newest recruits. Like Pan, quite good in the field, but lacking the abilities of knife fighting, and flight.

"I was just wonderin' if you've seen Evar," he said, with his hands still stuck in the pockets of his overalls and a piece of straw between his teeth. "I jist got back from his check-in, and he didn't seem to arrive fer it."

Like clockwork, the read-o-meter in my pocket went off, signaling that we'd reached four chapters since the threat.

I turned back to the meeting room. "We have a possible Evar-napping. He didn't meet for his check-in, and we have just reached the four chapter mark since the threat. I want every available agent to comb the building, and the surrounding area. Get on it, now!"

I turned to Agent Finn. "Huck, you're with me."

He grinned, and nodded, switching from teenage-delinquent mode to suave agent. It was amazing what some well-placed vocabulary classes, and character-building seminars could do for even a character like Huck. "On it, sir, by your lead."

"Good, to the Despellerizer room. I don't want this spy escaping, with or without Evar."

#

I laid my hand on the door-handle of the hospital room and checked the halls for stray nurses. All clear. I slipped in.

"Who's there?" said a weak voice from the bed. I moved around so he could see me. His hand flew to the small red button that would call aid.

"You don't want to do that, Legolas," I hissed. "I just want information."

He cradled his head in his hands. "I don't want to remember it..." he moaned, face contorting with grief.

I sighed, sad but pleased. If he regretted his mistake, he was well on his way to rehab. "Legolas, your knowledge is vital to our surviving."

He bent double in the bed. "I don't think I'll survive long anyway!"

"Why do you say that?" I said, moving closer.

"Because...they won't let me!" he whispered urgently, staring up with wild eyes.

I turned half away, disconcerted. "What do you mean? What can they do?"

"They have it! They took it from me!" he screeched suddenly, leaping forward and clutching me by the collar. "Don't let them have yours! Keep it!"

I tried to put him back in the bed, but he hung on with the grip of a dying man.

"Baba Yaga gave them shelter..." he groaned, white at the knuckles. "Baba Yaga, and she took it from me!"

"Took what?" I asked gently, my eyes straying to the red button.

"IT!" he hissed hoarsely. "My I.P.! My PRECIOUS!"

With that, he fell limply back on the bed, all the terror seeming to go out of him. He gazed listlessly up at me. "When they discover I've turned against them...just...one...word." His eyes closed. "Erased."

I stood, frozen by horror. The Guild got its power by stealing its supporters' IP's or Introductory Paragraphs-- the most defining piece of descriptive writing they had. What Legolas meant then was that all they had to do was add

a small word to the end of his IP to erase him forever.

"Erased."

I recovered myself enough to put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Legolas," I said. "It won't happen. I promise you." With an influential, high-ranking book like LOTR, you couldn't let anything happen to it.

"Baba Yaga?" I asked finally.

"Baba Yaga...house on chicken's legs," he muttered faintly.

I closed the door softly behind me as I left and set out for the Polish folklore!

#

"Next door on the left," I yelled back to him, before turning to the right. For all of Huck's accomplishments, he still couldn't tell left from right, and though he could speak coherently, he preferred the uneducated delinquency he was written with. Only during crises would he switch over to "civ'lized talk."

Huck followed me as I knew he would, and we were in the Despellerizer room. The machine was on, and humming, but still had not come to life. One of the disadvantages to the Despellerizer was that it took a long time to turn on.

This disadvantage now was working for us though. Disadvantages, like faults, had a way of doing that sometimes... in the right circumstances.

I glanced quickly around the room. No sign of the captor, though I knew that both he and Evar were here. Evar never left the Despellerizer running.

"Sneak around that way," I cautioned Huck, as I pointed to avoid confusion, "they're here somewhere."

I walked around to the other side of the Despellerizer, still unable to see anything. No sign of anyone.

"Do you think he sees us?"

I spun around. Had I heard something?

"Be quiet you nit-wit! He will if you don't shut your yapper."

I continued to stare in the same direction. Was it just me or had something moved?

"Do we have any more cheetos?" a voice said with a long yawn.

"No! We gave them all to the duck-guy. They were coated with sleeping powder, remember?"

"That would explain why I'm so sleepy then."

I leapt on the black shapes ahead of me, and tackled

one of the cloaked figures.

"Eek! They've seen us!" one of them shrieked, drawing a sword, from the innards of its long black cloak.

"Are you sure? Maybe they only saw Carl."

"Oh yeah..." the other one re-sheathed his sword, and I finished tying the hands of the first figure. I stood up and changed my monocle into a torch.

"Oh darn it, he has fire, now what are we going to do?"

"I don't know! Carl was in charge!"

"No I wasn't!"

"The other Carl!"

"You were second in command!"

"But I don't know what to do!"

Without a moment's more hesitation I stabbed at the figures with the torch, lighting their cloaks aflame. The Nazgul, for that was what they were, shrieked, and ran wildly in all directions.

"Fire! Ouch!"

"It burns!"

"Duh! Its fire!"

"Well---"

I turned back to the third, and noticed that Huck had

already found him and started questioning.

"Where's Evar?"

"Who?"

"Evar!"

"Who?"

"The Duck-guy." I inserted helpfully.

"You mean the guy who ate the cheetos?"

"Yes!" Huck and I chorused.

"How should I know! The boss took him out a different way. We're just doing what we're told."

"They're diversions," I said, getting ready to leave.

"So where's Evar?"

At that moment the Despellerizer turned on, and the two flaming Nazgul ran inside.

The other lay writhing on the floor. "Please, I don't know anything! Please put away the fire! I hate fire! It burns!"

"Well," Huck said "'course it burns. It's fire."

The other Nazgul stopped writhing and started whimpering.

"Just tell us where to find your boss, and we will let you go," I said, feeling slightly sorry for the fiend.

"He'll go back, back to Baba Yaga, back to the chicken

feet."

"Baba Yaga? What does she have to do with this?"

"Baba Yaga isssssssssssssssssss" the "is" extended into a hiss, and the Nazgul vanished. Erased.

#

Baba Yaga's book was downright uncomfortable, bordering on the creepy. As I walked down the darkening road, I crossed a bridge over the Ribbon River that creaked and groaned even though the wood was yellow and fresh. It must have had a recent reading. After that, I came to a thick, tangled wood, where the path barely cut through. To the left, in a slightly hollowed-out thicket, a large stone bowl lay like a fallen meteor. A few feet away, a stone pestle flattened the sharp, bladelike grass. Very recent reading, if she hadn't retrieved her vehicle...

The trees moaned in the wind as clouds covered the moon. I felt something or nothing lurking in the darkness just around every other tree...was that a shadow? Or a figure? Or maybe...dare I say it...a bat? I shivered in the darkness. It felt like a scary Halloween movie I shouldn't be watching this late at night, which was part of the reason I hadn't called in Pan. We'd use him, and I'd call him when we needed him, but after what I'd found out

about the IP, we couldn't risk another legendary character being erased.

"CRREEE!" something screeched, and I about jumped up a tree. A bramble caught my pant leg and I panicked, fleeing blindly for at least a minute and a half. My short sprint brought me out of the wood and up to a sign that read, "You are now leaving Hair Comb Forest."

"And good riddance!" I muttered, stalking onward and pulling my coat closer. I felt in my jacket for the smooth, traitorous folder that was Evar's file.

A light glowed far ahead, dangling above the ground. I quickened my stride. In moments, I approached a decrepit old cottage, rotting from the inside out, balanced on two gnarled orange-ish legs. I gingerly stepped onto one of the toes to reach the doorknocker.

"OOOOWW!" the chimney howled from above. "Watch it! The arthritis! Oh, the arthritis!"

"SHUT UP, HOUSE!" boomed a craggy voice, and the door swung open without a sound. It seemed to sigh with contentment, and I knew that Baba Yaga was in a bad, bad mood. Her prisoner had just escaped, oiling the hinges of the door. Very recent reading. Some morbid person out there had picked it up and--

"What do you want?" she bellowed, staring down with yellow eyes at me. Her nose protruded from her face, looking rather green. I gulped and clutched the folder with my elbow.

"I've c-come to j-j-join--" I began, but she cut me off.

"YOU!" she shouted, reaching down with a crooked claw and dragging me indoors by the collar. "About time you got back!"

"M-m-me?" I stammered.

"Go put the file on my desk. The others will be arriving soon," she said, shoving me across the haphazard floor. I stumbled over a threadbare rug and laid down the file, feeling very bewildered. How did she know me? Back from where? How could I be two places at once?

Then it hit me.

I had a duplicate.

CHAPTER 5

I stared at the spot where the Nazgul had been a mere second before. Gone? I had never seen a character erased before, and compared to what was in my imagination, the lack of drama made the event all the more horrific. You were just there one second. Gone the next. I shivered. How must it be like for the members of the Guild, to always live in fear, knowing that their life could just end at any moment and they would cease to exist? I shivered again. The thought was too horrific for me to dwell on. I ached silently for those characters. I couldn't understand how they could want such a life, let alone pursue it after they knew of the consequences. I would never understand.

Huck looked over at me his face solemn, and though he tried to look as stoic as he usually did, he couldn't hide the tears that bubbled over into his eyes. He whipped them away.

"Piece er sawdust," he drawled.

"We need to find Evar," I said, and tried to suppress my own tears. We didn't have any more time. Evar didn't have any more time.

Huck nodded, "let's go."

Simultaneously we both started to run. We ran out of the room, and down the hall. I'm not sure if Huck knew what I was doing or not, but he followed, not saying a word. We ran through hallways, and up stairs, still in silence. Soon we were in the top of one of the many tall towers in Evar's palace, one that we had transformed into an observation tower. Not only that, but it also housed two illegally possessed Highlighters. The Highlighters were a TFP restricted form of transportation, built primarily from words like "high" and "alight". They flew through text, leaving only a small mark on the paper as they flew, that looked similar to the highlighters authors used. Unlike the real thing though, our lines disappeared eventually, which made for a quick untraceable form of transportation. Still, if everyone used them, every book outside of fiction would be full of yellow, green, pink, and orange highlighter marks.

"Can you fly?" I asked Huck.

Huck grinned. "Sure's a mudpie."

I didn't know how sure a mudpie was, but I smiled back. "Good. You take the green one."

"Got it."

Within a few seconds we were strapped in. In a few more we were in flight.

#

I lowered myself into a high-backed, winged chair, hoping it would hide me. With a short whinny, it bucked on its wooden paws and threw me against the hearth. I moaned.

"Keep it down," snapped the witch from where she stood at the window. She was scraping a little peephole through the caked-on grime with a knife, and it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. Then she put her beady eye to the clear spot and peered out. I sat down in a demure-looking sofa and glared at the high-backed chair. It scuttled across the floor into a dark corner.

The house was full of dark corners. I could have sworn it was nonagonal, with all the dark corners it had. It figured, being a witch's house. Baba Yaga had strange tastes, I concluded, looking at a taxidermied salamander that seemed to be centerpiece over the mantel...

"A-hahaha!" cackled Baba Yaga, capering from the window to the door and flinging it open. "He's finally

here!"

A black shape clambered in from the black outside, lugging a pink bundle. I bit back a screech.

"I got him," hissed the black thing. The nauseating smell of death told me it was a Nazgul.

"About time, Carl!" squealed Baba Yaga. "I thought when I hired you, Oh, HERE'S suitable minion! This one's a feared terror! Not even human! But, no, you have to be slow and demand more and more toothpaste tubes before you'll do anything!"

"Toothpassssssssste isss my perssssssonal collection," Carl enunsssssssssiated.

"Ya, ya," said the witch. "Put it over there and sit down. I suppose we must start without the others."

"Of courssssssssse. There isss no time to losssssssssssssssssssssssssse."

The Nazgul shuffled across the floor and sat down in the high-backed chair. I saw the wooden paws tense and prepare to buck, but he drove his fingernails deep into the upholstery on the arms, and the chair grew rigid. My eyes widened.

I chanced a glance at Evar, still out cold on the floor. "What did you use on him?" I asked.

"Cheetosss."

"Ah."

Baba Yaga hobbled over and seated herself on the spindle of a spinning wheel. I supposed witches liked that sort of thing.

"Now. When the pink thing wakes up, we will have set our plan into action," she said. She pointed a commanding finger at the standing rack of fireplace tools. "Fetch my mortar and pestle!"

The stand began to spin until it rose and hovered in the air, the tools standing out in a blur as they whirled. I ducked as it clanged over my head and out the door, tongs snapping.

#

"Any sign?" I asked Huck through my radio.

"'Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog" back there," crackled the reply.

"We're a little off course then, old bean, we drifting a little too far towards song lyrics, and a little too far from folklore." I steered my Highlighter back to the right. The last thing we wanted was to end up in an Elvis Presley song. I turned a hard left, and the music started to fade, giving way to the usual debris of letters

that plagued travelers on the rifts between novels and especially between genres. The "I"s and "a"s were the most dangerous, as they could make words all on their own.

"We're coming in on Russian folklore," I announced, and slowed my Highlighter a bit. Huck followed suit.

"Now all we have to do is find Baba Yaga's story. Her tale has many variations, but overall they're all still the same Baba Yaga. Land your 'lighter up ahead. That should be the outskirts of Baba Yaga's tales."

Huck helped as I hid our highlighters in a tangled briar, and we started back on course after Evar. The dark branches and dangling vines seemed to reach towards us as we walked through the forest. The trees seemed to lean in at our approach. Seemed to---

"Ouch!" Huck slapped at a branch that was moving too close, hurting his hand more than the branch, but causing the branch to recoil nonetheless.

"How long do we have 'ta grope through these woods?"

The trees shuttered angrily, and their leaves shook.

Huck jumped back. "I mean forest! Forest!!"

The leaves stopped.

"A bit temperamental I'd say," I commented. "Try not to offend them."

Huck groaned. "I hate folklore."

The farther we walked, the more we realized that the trees were closing in behind us. There would be a path one second, and the next, nothing. No way to get through. No way even to walk past the trees, they were so tightly packed together. We had no choice but to keep moving, though to where I didn't know. If the trees could move behind us, what was to stop them from moving in front of us as well, curving and twisting the already twisted path. Huck looked around warily, his gaze darting from place to place and his head whipping around in a simply nerve-racking way. I reached into my pocket, to clutch my monocle for comfort, but it dropped from my nervously shaking fingers.

"We should have been there by now," Huck whispered, as my hand closed around the monocle again. "They're leading us in circles."

I shook my head. "These trees are far too smart for that. They'll lead us somewhere no doubt. It's "where" that I dread."

We turned our heads back to the road and relapsed into silence. I withdrew my monocle from my pocket and imagined the sleek wooden harp that--- The trees

groaned purposefully as the monocle shifted into the harp. Their branches drifted inward and the path in front of us started to close. My eyes widened, and I quickly imagined a different harp. One of gold. The harp changed, and the path reopened. Apparently the trees didn't like us making things out of their "kin". I plucked a string gingerly, and then another, the soft tones of the strings breaking through the quiet like an obnoxiously high opera singer through a glass. Still, the sound brought my comfort. I started to sing softly:

"Though the road is dark,
And the path is long,
Though shadows come,
I'll sing this song,

Though the night close in,
and the world lose light
I keep on playin'
By day or night

For my song on the harp,
Is a soothing tune,

And when the darkness comes
I'll play it to the moon.

And the moon always laughs,
For --"

I stopped singing abruptly. We were in a clearing, a large one at that, and a woman stood in the middle of it. A perfectly hideous looking old hag in pure white dress, which seemed to contrast her appearance completely. Her hair, what was left of it, was long and stringy, and her eyes shone a dull gray. But more... there was more to those eyes. I couldn't understand what, and that scared me.

The woman stepped forward, and spoke, or rather croaked, to us, "Have you come seeking my wisdom?"

I nodded to Huck to let me do the talking. "Um.... yes ma'am... er... no ma'am, er... thank you ma'am."

The woman furrowed her eyebrows... all four hairs. "Why do you seek me, if not for my knowledge."

I blinked in confusion. "Actually ma'am, we were searching for someone else."

The woman's eyes danced. "No. It is I you seek. For I own these woods. They are mine, and you have wandered

into them."

"My apologies ma'am, I didn't mean to trespass. Now if you will let us OUT of your wood--"

"You search for Baba Yaga. I am Baba Yaga."

I leapt back stunned. "But... but you aren't in the house on the chicken feet, you aren't..."

"I have a house." Yaga grinned. "It is as you say, and I have a mortar and pestle." She whistled, and they flew to her as she said.

"Then it's you who kidnapped Evar," Huck demanded, unable to contain himself.

Yaga frowned. "Who?"

"I dare say, you don't have to play games with us," I said, not at all liking the situation. "We know you are head of the Guild, or at least a major player in it, and we know about your plans to unravel fiction. You can give up the facade."

Yaga frowned again, and then her eyes lit up with a fire of realization. "You mean the other Yaga."

"What?"

Her frown stayed glued to her face as she hobbled toward us across the clearing. "My double. The evil Yaga. You see, in some tales I am depicted as a horrible mean

witch, and in others as an oracle of wisdom, helping those who ask correctly. By the writer's pen, I don't know why our personalities never fused. I assume that we were too different. In any case, I'm the "good" Baba Yaga. The one who helps people."

"How can we be sure?" I asked still skeptical.

"For starters," the other Yaga said. "I can take you to the other Yaga. She has always been up to no good, but this is the macaroni on the sandwich... or the cantaloupe in the stew... or... or.... ooohhhh! I can't stand that woman!"

The woman turned to us. "I will help you. For the sake of my forest I will help you, and if what you say is true, for the sake of all tales everywhere."

Baba Yaga moved over to a large, muffled object and all eyes followed her.

"This, gentlemen," she began, "is a powerful tool. It can form words from mere letters. It can reproduce those words at will, as long as resources are available. It can be the rewrital tool for all the works in Literature."

She yanked on the cloth that covered the object, dramatically revealing...a printing press.

A collective gasp passed around the room. I sucked in

air, dutifully.

"But...what is it?" asked the Nazgul.

"Fool!" squealed Baba Yaga. "This is the ancient tool of uniform writing!"

"Stencils?" said the Nazgul.

"A printing press!" the witch shrieked.

I pieced my eardrum back together. "But, Ma'am..." I said. "Isn't it slow and unwieldy compared to...say...a computer?"

She stared at me, bloodshot eyes bugging. "A computer? The powerful tool of an author? Where can we get one?"

"Oh," I said, groping wildly. "Like, at a computer store."

Her eyes bored into me and I shifted nervously.

"You are from the world of men and authors?" she said.

"Me? No!" I laughed, but it sounded forced. "I'm a character...at least...I think I am."

Her eyes narrowed. Nasty eyes, Baba Yaga had. "Why don't you know?" she asked levelly. "Come to think of it, I never saw your IP."

I tried not to pale visibly, but overcompensated and flushed hot. "Oh...er... I, you see, well, I

had...uh...given it to the Boss already," I stammered.

"Boss?" she echoed, those creepy eyes widening till they seemed to fill her whole forehead. "You've seen him?"

I adopted a cocky expression. "Of course! Haven't you?"

Carl whistled under his deadly breath.

Silence fell over the rickety old house, which shifted uneasily below me. The floor wobbled as the chicken legs scratched in the dirt for insects. A loud thud walloped the earth outside the front door suddenly.

"That," said Baba Yaga, eyeing me, "would be my mortar and pestle."

The form on the floor stirred and groaned slightly. This threw me completely off my guard. I didn't know how to react, now that I was pretending to be a bad guy.

"Hurry! He's waking!" hissed Baba Yaga. She moved back to the printing press and clattered pieces into it backwards. Carl the Nazgul glided across the floor and laid down a sheet of paper over the pieces. Together, they cranked down on the handle, which bellowed disconsolately. I sat, feeling useless, in the sofa, and stared at Evar.

"You!" cried the witch. "Look in the folder and find his greatest weakness!"

I groped my way over to the folder, growing more resolute. This was my big chance to foil their plans. I flipped through the folder, looking for a line. There it was-- "Ducks." I tore off that corner of the paper and stuffed it into my mouth, chewing furiously.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Uh...mf," I said, trying to swallow the gritty lump. "I'm still looking..."

What would be a weakness that Evar could stand? How could I help him resist her demands? Then it hit me. I could still say ducks...but if Evar loved ducks, I would elaborate in the other direction.

"Uh... it says here that he loves roast ducks," I reported.

Evar groaned, mumbled something unintelligible, and sat up.

"Put him in the chair," said Baba Yaga.

Here, friend," I whispered in his ear as I pulled him into a chair. "Don't tell them anything."

He stared woozily at me, clearly confused. I crossed my fingers and a few of my toes and sat down again. Baba Yaga tottered back over to her chair and lowered herself into it as Carl blew on the sheet of printed words.

"It's dry enough now," he hissed, bringing it to the witch.

Baba Yaga leveled those creepy eyes on Evar. He blinked.

"Evar of Twilland," she began, majestically, "you have been called here on an important mission! You will turn this typed page into a screen where we can display these words, so that we can employ our great weapon of mass restruction, Copy and Paste!"

A hush fell on the room at those powerful words.

"An order of mint chip? I'm sorry, I can't seem to find my ice cream shop..." he mumbled to himself.

"WHAT ARE YOU BABBLING ABOUT, FOOL?" shrieked Yaga. "TELL US HOW TO MAKE A SCREEN!"

"Old bean?" he said. "I'm sorry, I only use new beans."

Splash!

Evar was dripping now, but his mind was clearer. Carl put down the bucket, which promptly put itself away in a broom closet.

"Make me a text-displaying screen, or I will never let you eat roast duck ever again! I shall keep you in my dungeon!" said Baba Yaga.

"WHAT???? WHAT???" ROAST DUCK???" tears formed in Evar's eyes, and his face went a deadly pale, before growing red with rage, "How DARE you cook a poor innocent duck. How DARE you even THINK of cooking a poor innocent duck! Have the ducks ever done anything to you? have they? HAVE THEY??" Evar's voice choked up, and his screams died into uncontrollable sobs.

#

The trees parted before us, as Baba Yaga lead the way. There were no more threats to us, and no more confusing twists and turns. Yaga led, the trees obeyed, and we followed. Huck still eyed the trees warily, but what else could you expect from a character written to be as superstitious as him?

"I say," I muttered, "I do wish I had a bite to eat.... some fruit, a nice turkey leg, some--"

"Codfish!!"

I turned to Huck, and continued my monologue, "actually, Huck, I was thinking a cherry pie but--"

"Um, Regano," Huck said, "I didn't say anything."

I looked ahead to Baba Yaga, but she kept walking stoically through the forest.

"Then who said--"

"Let go of my friends, codfish, or I'll cut you to pieces!"

I looked up to the sky, and a brilliant green streak greeted my eyes, headed straight for the unobservant figure of Baba Yaga.

"How dare you capture my friends! Take that--" Peter Pan stabbed at Yaga before Huck or I could fully realize what was going on. To our shock, Pan flew backwards and hit a nearby tree, which grabbed him up with its great limbs. "Unhand me you fiend! How dare you!"

Yaga stopped and turned to Pan. "Now that you are in a position to listen," she said serenely, "perhaps we can talk." She turned to me, "do you know this whippersnapper?"

"He's..." I hesitated. "An agent in training."

Yaga looked at me sternly, so that I had to avert my eyes. "See that you keep him in control." She waved her hand and the tree dropped him.

He looked up at me a fire burning in his eyes, and I spoke to him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"My mission! I came to spy on Baba Yaga. When she

captured you, I had no choice but to come to the rescue."

I rolled my eyes, perhaps this boy hadn't been the best choice after all. "Peter, this is NOT that Baba Yaga you were meant to go after. This is the OTHER Baba Yaga. She is on our side."

Pan's eyes widened. "I attacked an ally?"

"Um... yes?"

Pan fell to his knees in agony. "I'm so sorry. I failed my mission. I'll go back to cooking in Evar's kitchens. I don't deserve to join the force... I--"

"PAN!!" I rolled my eyes at the melodrama. Then again, he was a kid...

"What?" He looked up.

"Are you quitting the CEP?"

He stood up, offended. "Never!"

"No one was hurt, and it is an agent's duty to finish his or her mission. After that, we will give you your assessment, as we do with all agents. Just try to be a little more discerning next time old-- er.... oh bother political correctness. You're older than I am in terms of how long you've been written, and I still feel awkward calling you "old bean"."

We all had a laugh before turning and following Baba

Yaga once again. Not too long later, the Yaga stopped moving, as did the trees.

"This is it," she said, pointing a withered finger. "This is where my double lives, and by the looks of it, she has a lot of company."

#

A sharp knock rattled on the door. Even Evar fell silent after his outburst, seeing how white Baba Yaga's ordinarily mottled face had become.

"Wh-who is it?" asked Carl, turning his black hood toward the door.

The knock came again, with a distinct pattern--long, short short, long, long...knock knock!

"It's HIM!" the witch breathed hoarsely, hobbling to her feet and thrusting a bony finger at me. "You there, take the prisoner into the back room! You'll find a man-sized cage there. Lock him up tight!" Her voice quivered with nervousness.

I nodded and heaved the muttering Evar from the floor, herding him toward the room. The door banged back and forth after me, as though it was loose in a high wind. A golden cage glistened in the corner, which I recognized as

confiscated from the Hansel and Gretel witch. I pushed Evar in, then clanged the door shut, peering through.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm not going to really lock it. Escape if you get the chance!"

"But the ducks!" he moaned.

I moved back toward the door, which hung an inch or two ajar.

"He hasn't spoken yet?" said a gravelly voice, that I recognized from the phone.

I stopped, hovering at the door, and listened intently.

"Nothing more than a tantrum about murdering helpless ducks," replied Baba Yaga.

The floor shuddered as someone--I could only imagine HIM--lowered himself into a chair. "That's no good."

"I don't understand," said Baba Yaga, her voice whining. "The folder listed that as his greatest weakness."

"Perhaps...you have a traitor in your midst," said the gravelly voice.

A metallic screech accompanied the hoarse shriek of the Nazgul. "ARE YOU ACCUSSSSSSING ME, ROUND ONE?"

The gravelly voice was insanely calm. "No...at least,

not yet."

"There is that other one...the new one..." said Yaga.

"But you've met him already."

"I have?"

I froze and searched the small room for a means of escape. There was no window.

"He said he'd met you. Tolfam. The storyless character."

"Ahh, yes...he is a powerful weapon. But I never saw him," purred Gravelly.

"He lied to usssssss!" hissed Phil.

"Oh? Even more powerful weapon," said the stranger.

"But it is dangerous to us!" cried the witch. "Where is that boy anyway?"

In a moment, she was at the door, flinging it open in my face. "Get out here!" she roared. "HE is here!"

CHAPTER 6

Baba led us around to the back door, and the trees parted before her as she walked.

Huck shivered, "I ain't likin' this Reg'no," he whispered, though his face remained stern and focus on the mission.

Pan smiled, "you scared or somethin'? I could take 'em all on! I could skewer them right through the-- AAC--" Pan's voice cut off sharply as a tree wrapped a limb around his mouth.

"Do you want us to be heard?" the Baga hissed, pointing a long bony finger at him, and glaring at him as he wriggled, and tried to scream for a moment before regaining his composure, and trying to reach his knife.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the witch said, with a smile so cold that Pan's hand before touching the knife, "the trees don't especially like sharp objects if you remember. You wouldn't want him to have to reach down your throat and pull any words out of your description would you?"

Pan's eyes became lightbulbs, but he didn't start screaming again.

"I say," I said quietly, " this is quite unnecessary."

"My story, my rules," Yaga glared before looking back to Pan, "so, will you be quiet or will I have to strangle you?"

Peter shook his head vigorously, and Yaga nodded to the tree, which dropped him immediately, and moved back, or rather glided off the path, in the strange way that trees do. Almost like they are swimming through the soil.

"So how do you propose we get in?" I asked, looking at Yaga.

"I'm thinking," she hissed.

We waited another seemingly interminable length of time, while the witch continued to "think". I could tell Huck was reaching the end of his patience when--

"Edward?" I whispered.

The figure of a man, clearly dressing in TFP uniform walked out of the forest, nearer to the house.

"I thought he was already in," Huck whispered in my ear.

"So did I," I said, wrinkling my forehead in confusion, "but obviously I'm wrong."

I took a few steps to the edge of the clearing where I could call to Tolfam, but a gnarled hand stopped me short.

"Don't speak to the false one," she said, her eyes still closed in meditation, "he is not the one you seek."

"Um... are you sure?" I asked, "he looks rather like the old fellow, Tolfam, to me."

The hag looked up, and sighed, "do I have to prove EVERYTHING to you?"

Without a moments notice, Yaga pulled an eraser gun from her rags, fired into the darkness. Tolfam turned, but saw too late the felt-tipped projectile flying toward him. It hit his startled face, and he melted away into the landscape, except for a few renegade words, which absorbed into the character of the surrounding landscape. To this day there still stands a "logical" spruce tree in the meadow.

Huck pulled an eraser gun from the holster at his side and pointed it at the witch, "you erased him!"

The witch rolled her eyes, and shook her head as if we were toddlers who had just spilled their dessert on her sparkling white floor, "he was a "dummy" as you like to call them," She said.

"How can you be sure?" I asked, finally getting over my shock enough to say anything.

"Because THAT is the real Tolfam," she pointed a

wanted finger at the window of the house. She was right, Tolfam stood, a look of panic on his face, listening through a doorway. The door opened abruptly and the other Baba hobbled out yelling at Tolfam.

Yaga laughed. "That would be my sister all right. I think it's time to go."

"In?" Pan asked, his confidence apparently having flow away with his happy thoughts.

Yaga rolled her eyes again, "no, somewhere over the rainbow to find the wizard of OZ. just follow me you idiot."

Pan hushed, and we followed.

#

I stumbled out into the room, but I was behind the couch that HE obviously sat in--it was bowed in the middle and whimpered pitifully. Yaga grabbed me by the ear with a painfully tremulous grip and dragged me round the room.

When she released me, I turned to see HIM.

He was WORSE than I expected...

I gulped and gulped again and blinked hard.

"Um...sir!" I squeaked out, snapping to attention.

"Salutes like a TFP," growled the massive, bulbous shape.

"I just recently...uh...deserted--I mean, CONVERTED! Sir!" I stammered. I could hardly think, and my eyes were glued to HIM.

"Why are you staring at me, you young liar?" he demanded suddenly, rearing into the firelight. "Is it because of THIS?" Now fully visible, he pointed to a huge scar, which wandered and crossed itself like a web of cracks across his face. In fact, it almost looked as if he had been...

"HUMPTY DUMPTY?!?" I screeched.

A moment later, I found myself on the floor, the side of my head stinging. The black form of Humpty Dumpty loomed over me, his brittle face disfigured in a snarl.

"I AM HUMPTY DUMPTY! ARE YOU FINISHED? YOU WILL NEVER CALL ME THAT AGAIN!" he roared.

"Sir!" I cried, inching away and pulling myself to my feet. I leaned against the wall, summoning courage.

"Aren't you...Weren't you...Uh... you know. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put...uh...together again?"

H.D. lowered himself onto the couch again, holding it in place as it tried to run away from his bulk. He folded his hands across the scar and grinned smugly. "Ah but

that's what Mother Goose says," he said, "Horrible stone-setter that she was. But you didn't know, that I was there before Mother Goose," he hissed. Yaga and Phil gave terrible, grating laughs in the background. "I was there," he said, "and I was *king!*"

"Uh... so that's why you want to...kill all the vile written rules?" I said, adding a convincing edge to my voice. I couldn't blow my cover...

"Ah yes... oral tradition, the good way, the way it used to be, free and boundless, always changing, and of course, I always won!" he sighed.

"But...How...I mean, you were broken...I mean, in the story...written down," I said.

H.D. turned to Yaga, who muttered apologetically, "He's remarkably stupid."

Turning back to me, H.D. answered. "It took me many years, lying there behind the wall, slowly, carefully, piecing myself back together, the rain my only sustenance, the sky my only shelter, seeing myself scattered by the wind and crawling after my pieces by sheer willpower when all my strength was gone!" He stopped and looked back down at me, jerking a thumb at Yaga. "Baba Yaga brought me superglue."

I looked around for a chair to lower myself into, and finding none, sat on the hearth, which spat coals at me distemperedly.

"But," hissed the Nazgul, "there isssss another matter to...disssssssssssssssss."

I gulped again.

"You LIED TO US!" screamed the witch.

I cowered against the hearth as she advanced, her claws extended. "No! Please! I...I just wanted to--" I dodged as she swiped at me, "impress you! Don't! I'm a powerful weapon!"

"Back, witch," said H.D. and Yaga moved away, looking like she'd bitten a lemon. "Yes, you are a powerful weapon, Edward Tolfam, and we're going to use you. Yaga, take his IP from him."

"No! Not my IP!" I screamed as she closed in. "I don't have one! I don't have a STORY! Please! Don't!"

But at that moment, the door burst open and an eraser gun prodded into the room. Everyone froze.

#

Huck, Pan and I waited outside the door and listened.

"Hello Baba." purred Yaga.

"Yaga!" yelped Baba, "what are you doing here? and

with a weapon!"

I peered through a crack in the door into the crowded room. Yaga twirled her pistol, around a boney finger. It was a modified Colt revolver, probably from a western.

"Sir," Yaga said to a figure who was right out of my vision, screeching a little more then usual, "this is NOT the real Baba Yaga." She extended a long finger at Baba. "What are you talking about?" Baba screeched, "of course I'm the real Baba Yaga!"

"Are you?" a deep hollow voice said from just out of my vision, and then addressing Yaga, "or are you for that matter?"

"How could you doubt me Round One!" Baba screamed, "of course I'm the real Baba Yaga! We both are. We--"

"How can you BOTH be the real Baba Yaga?" the voice said sternly.

"Our- OUR character split into two parts," Baba explained haltingly, "our character--" Yaga laughed harshly from the doorway, but said nothing.

"Yes?" the voice commanded, apparently speaking to Yaga.

"She is clearly speaking nonsense. There cannot be two Baba Yagas."

"But there are."

"Round One. That impostor over there is a dummy of myself, which I created. I can prove to you that I am the real Baba Yaga."

"Lies!" Baba hollered shrilly, "all lies!"

"Can you?" the voice asked.

"You have our IPs, you took mine when I first signed on, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Then alter the IP," she said greedily, "only the real one of us will be changed. The other will stay the same." My eye brows furrowed. What was she up to?

"No!" the Baba panicked, her gaze darting too and fro.

"No?" the voice asked. "Are you admitting guilt?"

"Round One! How can you even suggest this? She is obviously lying!"

"Then why not humor her? You told me once that you wanted to be beautiful?"

Baba's eyes widened, "yes, Round One!"

The shadow stepped closer into the light and I gasped.

"Humpty Dumpty," I whispered to Huck and Pan.

"From Oral Tradition?" Huck whispered back, "that would explain a lot."

Dumpty nodded to the Nazgul that stood beside him,
"alter the IP."

Baba's face grew more confident, and she looked at Yaga, "you've done it now, your little bluff will be revealed."

"Ready Round One?" the Nazgul yelled out from the other room.

"Change it now." Dumpty said.

We waited. Nothing happened. We waited longer. Still nothing.

Baba started to panic, but Yaga stood serenely. Dumpty smiled, "I just wanted to make sure this wasn't a ploy. You really didn't think I would trust that bumbling idiot with changing an IP did you?"

Humpty walked in the other room himself, and a few seconds later something did happen, though clearly not what anyone expected.

Baba gaped as Yaga began to change. Little changes at first, until eventually she became beautiful. VERY beautiful. In fact, she was drop dead gorgeous!

"I must say," Yaga said sweetly, "I do look fabulous." Humpty hobbled out of the office and snapped his fingers once.

Two elves ran to grab Baba.

"Let me go!" Baba screamed, "this is all a mistake! You're being fooled!"

"I'm never fooled," Humpty said, "never."

There was something in his smile that seemed to say that he really wasn't. Not even now. Not even as the real Baba was being dragged out the door.

"Furniture!" Baba screamed, calling her household amenities to her aid, "save me!"

Chairs, brooms, and carpets attacked the elves all at once, knocking them to the ground. Baba pulled a small one-shot erasure gun from one of her boots and fired at Humpty, shrieking as she did, "You will never get away with this!" The eraser flew towards the still smiling Humpty, who stood unflinching, until the eraser hit him.... and sailed right through.

"how?" Baba gasped, as a table was turned to text. Even Yaga looked a little pale.

"I'm oral tradition. I can't be erased."

#

I stared at Baba, and I stared at H.D. and I stared at the eraser bullet slowly eating away the table directly behind the Round One. Small words like "stained,"

"dented," and "rickety" fell onto the carpet. H.D. turned deliberately and plucked the dart from the table. He closed his hand around it and it vanished. Then he leveled his gaze on the ugly Baba.

"You have to believe me..." she wheedled, groveling on the floor.

"Oh yes, of course," he said sarcastically.

"But it's TRUUUUEE!" she howled. She jerked a long, gnarled finger towards the beautiful Yaga. "She's LYING!"

Yaga fluttered her eyelashes and smiled at H.D.

"She's obviously gone mad," she purred.

H.D. waved a cracked hand. "You're petty tricks won't work on me," he snorted. He snapped his fingers. "Take her away."

A chair galloped forwards over an unconscious elf and scooped up Baba. As she held on tight, it careened over to the door to the back room and heaved her in. The door blinked, closed, and locked. H.D. sat down and looked at me.

"Now," he began, "where were we?"

My eyes widened. "I uh...was just saying how much I've admired your work..."

"Right. You're lying again. Yes, you learn fast," he

smiled dangerously.

I gulped. "Uh...yeah, you have to be pretty keen to be in the TF...uh, P."

Suddenly the door to the back room burst open and the ugly Baba ran out.

"The PRISONER IS GONE!" she shrieked.

#

I lifted my ear from the door with a start. Evar? Gone? Where could he have run? I turned to tell Huck and Pan, but the looks of shock on their faces showed that they had heard the explosion from the witch as well as I.

"We have to find him," I whispered, "if he's out here we need to be the first too--"

The door swung open. and Yaga stood in the doorway. Her eyes widened for a few seconds when she saw us sitting there by the door, and a scowl at our stupidity crossed her now beautiful face. "Run." she whispered.

We obliged.

"I'll look for the runaway fool!" Yaga yelled back at Humpty, stretching her arms melodramatically to keep us out of view, "no one crosses the Guild. They will be found. They will be found tonight!"

We were a good twenty-five yards from the house now. Out of

obvious sight of the door, and nearly out of vocal range. The bushes rustled ahead of us, and let out a small scream of fright.

"Evar?" I whispered.

The bushes screeched again in protest, followed by a crack, and the figure of the plump Evar jumping out the bushes. "You'll never take me alive." He screamed, brandishing the branch he'd snapped off of one of the dead trees, "Nev-- Regano?"

I smiled, "all 4783 words of me!"

"We have to get out of here... they'll follow any second and--"

Someone screamed inside the house, and I realized that Yaga wasn't with us. The oversized egg himself hobbled out of the house. "Find the wretch!" he screamed into the air furiously, and I noticed a bit of yolk leaking onto the paneling near him, "find the prisoner! We need him to finish Copy and Paste!" The house emptied, a few figments at a time. Elves on one side, Nazgul on the other. Furniture rushed towards the creek, and a few French noblemen exited the back.

"We gotta go," Huck said, tugging on my sleeve. I snapped my head away from the flood of characters exiting

the house, and ran after him. Pan and Evar were already pretty far ahead of us, but they were also a lot slower than Huck and I, not being trained agents.

"Oh I wish I'd laid off on the cherries," I groaned as my side started to cramp from lack of exercise.

"Keep goin' Reg," Huck said, darting ahead.

"There he issssssss!" a voice screamed behind me, followed by a shriek so shrill that only a Nazgul could have screamed it.

I tried to run faster, but the cold air just heightened the cramp in my side.

Huck turned back, and ran towards the onslaught.

I shook my head, "Run!" I yelled. "Save Evar! Save Pan!" I cursed the cherries again under my breath. Maybe the TFP had a reason for not doing things out of character. Huck kept on towards me, until he reached my side and ran with me.

"Go!" I yelled again, "You can't SAVE me, and it won't help to have us both captured. Evar MUST reach safety. The Guild cannot complete Copy and Paste."

"But--"

"I ORDER you on behalf of the CEP to GO!" I yelled, and turned back to the oncoming horde turning the sword at

my side from steel to head. A ghost reached me, probably from a badly written Halloween novel, but was turned back into text by the side of my sword.

Huck hesitated for only a moment before running after Evar and Pan. I smiled as I garbled Frenchman on my right.

They would be away in not too long. I would be gone, but they could create a dummy. I'd died before. How much worse could erasure be?

"STOP!" a gravelly voice yelled behind me.

My heart stopped as the figments all stopped in mid stride and took a few steps back.

I swiveled around, to see Humpty Dumpty, Little Bo Peep, the Cat with the Fiddle and a few other characters from Oral Tradition, standing in the moonlight.

"As you know, we can't be erased. You will come with us Regano, and we will see if you are really as much of a "hero" as they say."

#

I frantically heaved on the window, which was old and stuck tight.

"Stop!" I heard H.D. shout from outside.

"Listen, you," I hissed at the window. "I promise you any window treatment you want if you'll just open!"

"Plantation shutters?" it whined.

"And a valence thrown in," I cried urgently. "Just OPEN!"

The sash slid up with a groan and I dove through, hitting the ground, tumbling and rolling. Clambering up, I peeked round the house to see them leading Regano back towards me. I cast about for a plan. Evar appeared to have gotten away... Suddenly I remembered my walkie-talkie. Pulling it out, I pushed the talk button.

"Phyl? Come in!" I whispered into it.

With crackling and buzzing, a voice came back. "Eddie? Is that YOU?"

"Yeah, it's me," I said. "Um, look. Things are complicated."

No answer came back.

"Phyl? Phyl! Phyllis!" I said.

"Listen, Eddie, you're out. If the boss finds out I made contact with you, he'll fire me, too," she finally answered.

"Fired?" I gasped. "How?"

"You stole the file on Evar! And you can tell the other Guild members listening in that we tracked you all

the way there three nights ago, so there's no use denying it."

"Three night's ago..." I said, confused.

"Over and out, Eddie," she said flatly.

"Permanently."

I stared at the walkie-talkie as it hummed in my hand. Three nights ago... I wasn't here...

"My dummy!" I cried aloud. He had joined the Guild! But how? He wasn't his own character...was he?

I started walking across to the shelter of the trees, but as I did, I stumbled over a word fragment. "Eddie," it read, gleaming slightly in the moonlight.

"So that's all that's left of you," I muttered to myself. I raised my eyes to the dark woods before me and stepped forward. "EdWARD."

#

We were almost to the door when I saw him. Tolfam, stooping to pick up a glimmering word from the dust. I had to distract Humpty. I looked the other direction and let my eyes grow wide.

"Run," I yelled into the blank darkness, "don't let them catch you!"

"After them you fools!" Humpty yelled to his followers, "bring them to me!" Humpty turned towards the forest, and searched it intensely, and while his attention was averted, I took the opportunity to look back in the direction of Tolfam. I let out a sigh of relief. He was gone.

I turned back to find Dumpty glaring at me, with a look of anger, but yet with a look of utter superiority.

"I don't know what bush you were batting around, but it will not work again," he said, with a half smile.

"I don't know what you mean your Egginess," I said, feigning innocence.

"Huh," Humpty snorted, "we'll see."

Humpty opened the door to the house, and walked in.

"Edward," he yelled, and the house shook as he said it. No answer. Of course.

"EdWARD!!" he yelled again. This time a window in the corner yelped.

Dumpty was on it in a second, "where's Edward?" he yelled.

"He- I-- he promised me a window treatment... and plantation shu--"

"Be quiet!" the Egg stormed.

"It seems we have a "Runny"way," I murmured grinning.

Humpty swiveled to me and glared, "You think you're some big Hero. Have you ever thought that maybe it is YOU who is the villain?"

I frowned, "Villain? This isn't a story! There aren't Heros and Villains. There is right, and there is wrong."

"And what determines right and wrong?" Humpty asked, "is it based of how you are written, like the TFP says? does everyone REALLY have a predestined nature to only do as they are told before? Or is it possible, that I'm right, and that it is up to us to do what we want. That we have our own free will to do anything we wish?"

"Neither," I spat.

"Oh?" the bulbous white ball questioned, "so it's just based off of doing your "goodie-goodie" acts for your "fellow character", like you waste your time doing every day? It makes me sick. You could be free to do whatever you want, and you reduce yourself to that."

"It isn't about that," I said, "it's bigger."

"How?"

"It's somewhere in between. How do you think anomalies happen? Poe's stories were wrecked... the characters can be distorted, but the Author's ultimate will

never can. Because we DO have choice. We have a choice to follow the Author's will for us, or to fight against it, ultimately bringing us ruin."

Humpty laughed cruelly.

"You certainly do crack yourself up," I smiled, "literally it seems."

Humpty's laughing stopped instantly, and he turned his back to me.

"We'll see how funny you think this is when YOU are the one left to rot. This is my story Regano. This is my time to prove that I'm not just a--"

"Rotten Egg?"

"Take the prisoner to the cell. See that he's guarded this time properly. We can't afford for him to harm himself. We need him alive. Oh, and smash the pathetic window." The Round One stormed off to his quarters and slammed the door.

"His story indeed," I muttered a few second later as the cage door slammed shut. With the slamming of the door though, something snapped in my head.

"Story..." I muttered. "The missing story." My eyes went wide, "Edward's story!"

CHAPTER 7

I was cold...and damp...and alone...and tired...and

confused...and alone...and cold... and--

"What do I do now?" I asked myself aloud, to stop the train of thought. No answer came, so I wandered on, thinking.

No story...no story...no story.... I had no IP, I had no place of origin. Who was I? What was I? And how was that possible? In order to exist, I had to have an author, a creator to write me and build me and develop me... so who was it? And why didn't I know about it?

A wet branch snagged me in the fog, and I smacked it. How was I going along? What dimension was all of this happening in? Was this happening? I was so confused, and my head hurt.

"You're out, Eddie," she'd said. Out. Of the TransFictional Police. Now I had no place, no people...no story...no story...no story. Was the TFP really right after all? Should a story be confined to only what the author can enunciate? Could no one ever find the underlying principles? Long ago, we heard people say, "Every time I read that classic, I see something new." That never happened anymore. Was that so wrong?

But the Guild--characters acting out of character-- that was wrong. That would never work. If the creations

could do as they liked, all of creating would be in vain.
No. Never. I told myself.

The night closed thick around me, and the trees zipped it up tight. I looked through the fog for a signpost to somewhere more comforting, but all I saw was Hair-Comb Forest, stretching away about four feet--I couldn't see any further.

I came upon a clearing suddenly, where moonlight swirled the fog. In front of me, I saw a raven and its young hopping through the dewy grass. As I watched, the parent moved in front a little, leaving the baby in a little white world of its own. The scraggly-looking bird sat down and shrieked with fright, thought it was no further than two feet away from its mother. The raven returned to comfort its young. It was like that with us, wasn't it? While we walked through our stories, we lived everything from our point of view. We couldn't see, so we cried and wondered and worried what should do. But from a bigger picture, there always was a plan, and the story carried through the way the author meant it to. It didn't change the way writing felt to us, but it was true and someday we would see it....

But I didn't see the branch before I walked straight

into it. The last thing I knew was the fog closing around me like a shroud.

#

There had to be a way out of my cage. I needed to get to Tolfam, to tell him what I knew about his story! I sat back down in the cage as my thoughts trailed off. No. It wasn't up to me. It was up to the author of the story, and the hero he'd chosen. Tolfam. I sat back in the cage. But would even Tolfam succeed? Could he? Humpty and the Guild had strayed from the path of the author by trying to take the story for themselves, and all of fiction for themselves. But Tolfam would succeed. Wouldn't he?

I looked up to one of my guards. And even from the view of the back of his head, I knew that I recognized him. I was sure that I'd seen him before but-- "Romeo?" The young nobleman turned his head to me and glared.

"What could you possibly have to say to me? You ruined my story!"

I blinked. "I say! Ruined is rather... harsh... I hear it has more readings than any of Shakespeares other works now!"

"And at what cost? Juliet and I lost our final words of love to each other because the sleeping potion was too

strong! I never got to profess my undying love for her at the moment of her death! I never got too--"

"Oh brother." Juliet rolled her eyes as she walked into the room.

"Oh, dear Juliet! Thou art--"

"Can it, Romeo," Juliet snapped, "I never liked you much anyway. Far too much of a romantic, far too little on the side of practicality."

Romeo looked insulted. "What are you talking about? You are at least as romantic as I!"

Juliet's face grew scarlet. "I am NOT! You were more concerned about the death of Mercutio than our happy ever after!"

"I was not! I wanted nothing more than--"

"Then why in the world did you kill Tybalt???"

Romeo blushed. "It was happening so fast... I was nervous."

"You mean you were having second thoughts!"

"I most certainly was not!"

I tuned out the argument, and started looking around the room for a way of escape. My monocle, still transformed into an eraser-sword, lay in an umbrella stand just out of my reach... to ensure that I lived (as my life

force was bound to it) but also to ensure that I wouldn't be able to use it. It was, however in Romeo's reach. If I could only---

"Um, Romeo--"

He didn't hear me. Too busy fighting with Juliet.

"Romeo!"

Still nothing.

"ROMEO!!"

"Forsooth!?! " Romeo bellowed, flailing his arm into the umbrella stand, and causing my sword to fall right into the cage, creating a huge gap in the text, and causing the cage to change from "made of steel" to "mad eel". I leapt back as the eel writhed on the floor toward Romeo and Juliet. Juliet shrieked and ran from the room while Romeo drew his sword.

"Stop fiend!" He yelled at the eel, "thou shalt not come between myself and my beloved! Nothing can quench the light in which my heart bathes when I see Juliet's rosy face and plump demeanor!"

I rolled my eyes as I changed the eraser back into a monocle.

"You are a romantic," I muttered under my breath.

#

Slowly the fog cleared. A thick haze seemed to fill my vision, until I blinked a few times. Squinting against the light, I looked around. A strong beam glared in my face, shining off the white and chrome that surrounded me. I tried to move my arm and brought it up covered in a white sheet. A faint beeping came to my ears. A hospital bed?

"Hush! He's coming round!" said a soft voice nearby. A shape moved into my peripheral vision.

"Good afternoon, Edward," said a new voice, leaning over me. I tried to focus my eyes.

"Here," said the kind voice, holding water out to me. I found my arms responsive and carefully took a drink. It cleared my head.

"Where am I?"

"The TFP official hospital. There's been an accident," the big voice said. "You've been unresponsive for nearly a week."

My mind was so jumbled. What was real and what wasn't? I remembered an egg...a house on chicken legs? No, that was outrageous! "What kind of accident?" I asked.

"Well," the big voice said slowly. He turned to the lady. "Can he handle it?"

"I think so. Do you feel strong enough?" she asked

me.

"Yes, yes, just what happened?"

"The fact is...you see...it's like this," the man fumbled. "Your story. It's been deleted. Erased. A small combustion of eraser fragments completely annihilated it."

"My story?" I grabbed my aching head. "I...I don't have a story! They told me...I have no story!"

"You mean you have no story NOW," he said. His voice seemed different...urgent....

"No, NO!" I cried. "I never had one! I'm the storyless one! No story...no story..."

"Elaine, you said he could handle it!" the man said, his voice quick with agitation.

"You had a story, but you don't anymore," said Elaine.

"Just get the--the you know!" he shouted.

"No story! No story!" I said. My heart was throbbing in me. "Never had a story!"

Elaine advanced on me.

"Your story was destroyed! You had a story, but you don't anymore!" insisted the man.

"No--" I felt a sharp sting, and the world faded again.

#

I ran. That's all. Just ran. I ran out as quick as my feet would carry me out of the room where I'd been held captive, away from the "mad eel" at which Romeo still screamed lines of verse, and into the corridor outside the main room of the house where I found--no one--only the emptiness of the house, and a mess of grumbling furniture. I pressed myself up against a wall to stay hidden, both because there was someone in the next room and too rethink my escape. So far I'd just been running blindly, but depending on who was in the next room, I'd have to plan accordingly. As my heart nearly broke through my chest with its beating, I tuned my ears in to the next room to find out who--or what--I was up against. No sound. Just deathly quiet. Just stillness. Of course! Humpty's followers would be out looking for Tolfam. Humpty obviously hadn't counted on my escape thinking that Romeo would make a suitable guard. Ha! All the easier to escape, and get rid of this egg once and for all! I smiled as I pictured the perfect weapon for my monocle to turn into. I watched as it changed. First it lengthened, and then stretched. The brilliant gold color changed into a shiny stainless steel. The tip split and expanded, the

end covered itself with a plastic handle complete with the "Kitchenware" trademark emblazoned on the outside.

"Okay, egg, prepare to be beaten," I whispered and leapt into the room. My traveling boots thudded dully on the dirt floor. Empty. Not a sound. A curtain rustled softly in the wind.

"I didn't think the line was that bad," I muttered, and swung the eggbeater to my other side, brandishing it at the office door I'd seen Humpty walk through earlier. He must be in there. I slowly crept up to the door. Apparently it still wasn't too late to spring the element of surprise. I gripped the dirty handle with my hand and turned it slowly, making sure that it didn't make a sound, and then slowly pushed the door open--or at least tried to. "Silly strangely built house," I murmured and pulled the door towards me. The door swung out, and I gasped. A wall--A solid wall, made of some kind of hard untarnished metal stood in my path. I spun around and ran to the other door, the front door, and pulled it open. My eyes widened as the same sight met them. I ran frantic to the window and opened it to crawl out; however, as soon as I reached my hand out it met with nothing but another hard wall. I clawed at the window and as my hands meet paper, I

ripped off the color print of the creepy landscape, and banged my fists against the metal plating. I couldn't give up now! I searched the room from top to bottom. No exit. I checked on the curtain I'd seen rustling earlier. I found a fan plugged into a power outlet on the wall.

"Not so clever now, are we?"

I spun around to find Juliet standing in the archway, smirking.

"The Round One thought you should have this," she said, handing me parchment, written in fine calligraphy.

"He can't write himself," she explained, "so he had to hire someone to write it out from another novel."

"How did he have time?" I gasped, straightening the parchment out on the table.

"Oh, he's had this planned for awhile." She smiled. "A very long while."

#

I woke up again in the hospital bed feeling even foggier. This time, my arms felt oddly heavy and wouldn't move properly. They must have tranquilized me... I'd done something and they had gotten excited...that man and Elise? Elaine, it was. But what were they telling me? My STORY!

"Good morning, Edward!" said the man's voice. I lay

still, biding my time.

His smile turned stale as he waited for a reply. When he got none, he continued, "I'm afraid the news was too hard for you, and you lost consciousness again."

"I did not," I countered. "You stuck me!"

"I..." he turned to look innocently at the woman. "We did nothing of the sort, did we?"

Elaine leaned toward me. "Often, those fainting feel strange sensations. Do you remember any of what we were telling you?"

I felt the strength returning to me. Under the sheet, I moved my fingers, but visibly, I remained still. I had to keep them guessing. I had to get away and rescue my story. The one that was erased.

"Yes," I answered her. "You said my story was destroyed."

"I'm very sorry," she sympathized. "There was nothing anyone could do. You were the only survivor."

A thought came to me. "Please," I said earnestly, "what was I? Was I the...Hero?"

The two shared a quick glance, almost too quick to be trusted.

"No, I'm afraid not," the man said gently. "You were

only a minor character. An Ally, I believe."

"You're lying!" I cried, only my self-control keeping me rigid. "I was the Hero! I know I was!"

"Elaine," the man said, his voice low and quick.

"Right," she said, leaving the bedside.

"You can't stick me again!" I shouted. "I know the truth! I was the Hero of my story, and now it's GONE GONE GONE!"

Elaine rushed forward, something flashing in her hand. At the last moment, I rolled to the side, and the needle plunged into the mattress. Tearing off sheets, I leapt from the bed and faced the two. "I'm going now!" I cried. "I'm going to find my author and make him rewrite my story!"

"Edward, lie down," said the man dangerously. "You're not well."

"Edward, I know this news is hard for you to take," said Elaine. "But you must try to just understand it. You can't fight it. Your author is dead."

"Yes, he died years ago," repeated the man.

I stared from one to the other. "Dead? No!"

"Yes!" they said, advancing on me.

"Don't stick me again," I said, holding up my hands.

"I'll lie down. Just don't stick me!" I hated the helplessness. I was so confused, and being confused always made me afraid.

"Very well," said Elaine. "Lie down and rest, and we won't give you any more shots."

I burrowed meekly into the white bed. Sighing deeply, I closed my eyes to block out the cruel world.

"Give it to him now," the man's voice said. He thought I couldn't hear.

"But we promised," said Elaine.

"I don't care! Now!"

Something bit me—

#

"He's had it out for you and that TFP agent for quite awhile," Juliet explained to me as we both sat opposite each other at the small wooden table in the center of the room. "What's his name?.... Ed... Edmund... oh yes. Eddie."

"EdWARD," I said defensively.

Juliet rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

There was a moment's silence. Silence, that is, except for the still monologue Romeo in the other room.

"Your boyfriend does go on, doesn't he?"

"He is NOT my boyfriend."

"No?" I raised an eyebrow.

"He's the reason I joined the Guild in the first place. He so--so over-dramatic."

"And he joined the guild?"

"Because I did. He's like a leech!"

I couldn't help smiling. "I think it's romantic. For him to follow you all this time--"

"Oh, can it!"

I sighed. "Okay then, back to business. Why us?"

"Because you are head of one of the most powerful anti-Guild organizations in all literature, and of course, as you know, Eddie is a very powerful weapon. He's the storyless one."

"What if he's not?"

"But he is--"

"But what IF?"

"That's impossible. The Round One would see it!"

"Unless he's even more powerful than you thought. Unless--" I stopped short and sat back in my chair.

"Unless?" Juliet was staring at me intensely. She was paying too much attention. It was almost as if she was trying to get information out of me.

I grinned a little, and sat back in the chair. I'd

been a soldier in my book after all... before the sword.

Second only to the wizard Prillian himself.

No interrogation would work here. "Hm? oh right. What if he were really Dr. Seuss in disguise?"

Juliet looked away disgusted. Something clattered in the other room, and a few seconds later the door flung open.

Romeo stood in the hallway, breathing heavily, his hair a mop of sweat. "Alas fair Juliet. I hath slain the mighty eel, and cooked it in a savory stew. Wilt thou join me for a morsel?"

Juliet's face grew red, and she stood from her chair. "Why must you insist on trying to woo me with every move! Can't you see I'm not interested!"

Romeo nodded and grinned. "Ah, I can see only too well. Thou dost not like the taste of eel!"

Juliet rolled her eyes, and crossed her arms as Romeo exited the room and then sat back down in her chair mumbling to herself. We sat awhile in silence, but not too great awhile, for I stood up with a start, and nodded resolutely.

Juliet furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, "what are you doing?"

"I," I announced, "am getting out of here."

Juliet started to laugh. "And how do you expect to do that?"

Pulling my sword from its sheath, I pictured the eraser I'd used earlier, the sword changed back, and I walked over to the door.

Juliet smiled a bit and sat back in her chair, "that won't work."

I smiled back and tossed the eraser-sword to my other hand. "Never hurts to try." I swung at the metal wall, all I heard was the dull thud of eraser against metal. The wall still stood without a change, mocking my feeble attempt. "From oral tradition?"

"Yep."

I thought for a second, and then smiled and pictured another device in my mind.

"That won't work either."

I cocked my head back at Juliet, "You can't honestly tell me that this blowtorch won't cut through that metal. There has never been a fictional substance in history that doesn't still follow the regular rules of physics—except in badly written science fiction books... but then the anomaly is written by the author, thereby making it normal!"

Juliet's face erupted in a half grin. "Oh it'll cut through. It'll cut through fine. But the thing about fire is that it tends to burn oxygen as well, and that's something we don't have a lot of left."

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned back to Juliet, "What do you mean?"

Juliet smiled again. "This room is air tight. There is no oxygen flow into the room whatsoever. That wall is several inches thick. You won't be able to cut through before our air runs out."

My eyes widened as I walked towards her. "So that's Romeo's purpose."

Juliet's eyes sparkled sinisterly. "We needed someone who wouldn't stop talking to use up the air. I'm only here to secure Romeo's presence. Humpty wants you gone. You're too clever to erase, you've always managed to escape that. We need you gone. Permanently. The only way to do that is to have you die outside of your novel. There won't be any going back for you. Sorry Reg, but you won't last much longer."

#

I opened my eyes stealthily and scanned the room. No one. Just a billowing curtain where the window was, a

small chrome table on wheels which held a bottle of some solution and three packages of hypodermic needles, and me in the white bed. I tested my legs, climbing from bed and walking to the table, where I took the bottle and the needles. Crossing to the window, I pushed aside the curtain and peered down. It looked as though I were on the top floor, and far below me was the familiar bustle of TFP Square. Across the street, I saw Headquarters. I surveyed the window. There was a lock on the pane, but I twisted that aside. Bracing myself, I heaved on it, trying to shove it upward. After a moment, it moved about half an inch. Digging my fingers into that, I pushed it open.

The bottle of elixir was unlabeled, but it looked a sickly yellow-brown.

"Fare thee well, sweet juice of captivity," I smirked, and hurled it through the window.

It bounced back into the room and clattered onto the floor.

I stared for a moment, then tried to put my hand out the window. I came up against a screen of some sort, vibrating with electricity. I pummeled it to no avail. At last, I remembered the packages. Ripping one open, I poked the needle through the screen. Putting my eye to the hole,

I saw only blackness. I quickly opened another needle and began puncturing the screen all over, close together. It slowly came to bits, and in places I could see out. All I saw was in darkness, but I thought I could make out a few craggy shapes, like trees with arthritis....

"Wait a minute," I muttered.

"I would, but it's rather a delicate situation," said a voice behind me.

I whirled. "What do you want with me?" I cried.

"Oh, nothing much," said the man. "The window was just there to make you feel at home."

"At home..." I mumbled. "T..."

"F, P, yes," he finished. "You really didn't think that was a reality, did you? Hah! The TFP, and all of your memories...they were your story. The one that was *erased*."

"I don't believe you," I said slowly, backing up against the window. I saw his eyes dart toward the bottle on the floor, and I put out my foot and scooted it toward myself.

"Please, Eddie," he said. "Let's not make this any more difficult than it already is."

"Oh, I don't think any of this will be difficult," I

said.

He looked quizzically at me.

"The hardest part will be catching me!" I shouted.

Everything burst into motion. I pushed through the perforated screen and dived through it. Lights flashed, sirens blared, the man shouted back in the room, and I fell through space--then landed on gravel a few feet below.

I scrambled up, my knees and palms full of gravel, and ran headlong into the darkness. Looking back, I saw Baba Yaga's chicken-footed house. The front door burst open and two figures tumbled out--one small and craggy, one large and round, and I showed them my heels. A moment later, the monstrous racket told me Baba was after me in her mortar and pestle.

I entered the woods and knew I'd have to slow down. I paused behind a tree to catch my breath. A commotion came from back in the clearing.

"What about me?" I heard him screech.

"I don't know!" the witch hollered back, the sound of her pestle whirring as she hovered. "The mortar only holds one!"

"YOU'RE NOT GOING WITHOUT ME!" he roared.

"I've got it! Take my sieve!"

I leapt up and dove through the trees, dodging flying branches. As if a midnight run through pitch-black haunted woods wasn't bad enough, fat raindrops started to fall and splatter on the tree-limbs. I drove on, feeling roots leaping up to trip me.

The grinding mortar and pestle rattled close behind, and I thought I could hear the faint scraping of a giant sieve through foliage. I gave every inch of my concentration to running

The trees ended, giving me room to run, but also giving the witch and the egg room to fly straight. There was nothing for me but the cold rain driving into my face and the frenzied pounding of my feet against the flat ground. I had to get out of that book!

A strangled yelp cut through the rain. I took advantage of the distraction by plunging into a thick bramble, tucking in my feet, and lying still. I peered out at the scene as a hideous scream of anger came from the witch.

Baba Yaga hung in the air, her pestle spinning to keep her stationary. A few feet off, the sieve bobbed like a water-logged boat. Then I noticed the water sloshing over its edge. Baba Yaga stood on the rim of her mortar and

dove into the sieve, dragging the gurgling H.D. up and rolling him over the edge. He lay groaning on the ground.

But how could a wire mesh sieve hold water? How could it--and then I remembered. Of course! It was a witch's sieve! They always hold water! And it was raining! And, I remembered, stifling a laugh, H.D. was certainly hard-boiled in that he was "devoid of sentimentality; tough"...and everyone knows that hard-boiled eggs sink!

My mirth was cut short as Baba Yaga climbed out of the sieve, soaking wet and glaring around. I inched backwards, trying to get deeper into the briar, when my elbow came up against something cold and hard. I turned my head to see bright neon pink.

"YES!" I shouted, leaping up and onto the highlighter. In a streak of pink, I was gone!

CHAPTER 8

"mmmmmmmmMMMMMM!!!!!" Juliet pummeled her fists against the floor, and glared at me with a burning rage in her eyes.

I nodded back to her through my own duck tape and turned my back on her. I now, however, found myself to be staring at Romeo who was still trying to monologue through his duck tape. It had been the only solution that I could

think of on the spur of the moment, and duck tape the only available material. As talking used up air, it was only logical to not be able to talk, and as breathing through your mouth used up more air than breathing through your nose (or so it seemed) then it seemed only logical to make it so we were only able to breath through our nose. Hence the duct tape. I was glad that I always carried a roll or two of the stuff--as well as and a decongestant--in my essentials pouch. All I'd had to do was wait until Romeo and Juliet were asleep and then bind their arms and legs with the sticky tape, followed by a strip to shut down their windpipes... and bingo!

"mmmmmmMMMMmm!!" Juliet snarled.

"mm. Mmm MMMMmmmmhMmmmmh!" I muttered back. What was she complaining about? She'd told me about the decreasing oxygen after all!

"mmmmhmmm um hhmhmhm m um hmhmhm?" Romeo monologued.

Juliet and I rolled our eyes in unison. A bead of sweat rolled down my face. Was it just me or was it getting hot in here? Juliet saw it and her eyes widened. Romeo just kept attempting to rant. We wouldn't get out. I'd failed. I'd destroyed Tolfam's story. Maybe the TFP were right. Maybe we should just remain in our own

stories, where nothing could go wrong; where we could just live, in our own safe world, not going through any more or any less pain and sorrow than absolutely necessary. A tear started to form in my eyes. They would make a dummy of me to be sure, and my novel would continue, but not me. I'd tried too much. I'd failed. I wasn't worth the Author's ink and time he'd put into me. There was nothing left but to wait. Nothing left but to die, and then to disappear. Forever.

#

In a moment I burst from that horrid book where I'd spent what seemed like years. I left it far behind, feeling the cool, comforting plastic of my Highlighter carrying me away. Suddenly, a streak of yellow caught my eye on my right. I pulled up on the Highlighter, nearly sliding off the back end as it stopped and hovered. Buckling my seatbelt, I looked back.

A green Highlighter labored through the air, sputtering under the weight of three people. Two of which I could recognize from my well-read childhood.

"Pan?" I gasped. "Peter Pan?"

The three turned wide eyes and nervous faces to me.

"And Huck Finn!" I cried incredulously. "What's going on?"

The third person slowly turned his head around, as if hoping I wouldn't see. Huck pulled a pocketknife out of his overalls pocket and whipped open the blade.

"Just you try and take him!" he cried, waving it.

"Take who?" I asked.

"Be quiet, Finn!" hissed Pan.

"What'd you do to Reg'no?" Huck demanded, causing the Highlighter to lurch.

"I..." It slowly dawned on me. "I'm not with them! I'm TFP!"

"TF--" yelled Huck, but at that moment the Highlighter gave out, plunged, and slowly wobbled up again.

"Yeah. And you!" I cried, nudging my Highlighter closer and turning Evar's head towards me. "Evar! You're the one they're after. You're all CEP, right?"

"Huuuck," Pan said, warningly.

"I didn't do nothin'!" Huck insisted.

"Don't worry, boys," I said, smiling. "I'm with you on this one. Well, at least I'm with you as far as I can tell...."

"But...TFP?" Pan said weakly.

"I know." I sighed and slid forward on my Highlighter. "It's going to take TFP and CEP together to beat oral tradition. One of you hop on the back."

Pan slid over and buckled himself in.

#

Sweat poured from my forehead, and I struggled to breathe. Juliet was in the same predicament, and her hair had become a mop of brown. Even Romeo had stopped monologuing. Silence. Something hit my head, and I lifted my hand to brush it off. I watched as the small black speck fell to the ground. A fly. Dead. Flying one second and then dead. Interesting how I'd never noticed the detail in such a small thing as a fly. The eyes were so intricate and the membranous wings amazing in themselves. I thought I'd like to fly someday, not with a highlighter, but like a bird. On my own. Through the clouds, the soft, fluffy clouds--soft and fluffy--like whipped cream and cherries-- and I snapped out of my daze and tried to keep my eyelids open. "We're running out of air," I thought, but my body wouldn't let me grow excited or anxious. There wasn't any energy to cause the adrenaline to rush. Romeo'd started snoring now, and Juliet had begun to dose off. A tear graced one of her

cheeks, and slid down. My heart broke for her, despite the fact that she had started this mess. Despite the fact that it was she had chosen to wait in this metal prison until my death. And her death. I wondered what death was like. Not after your death, but death itself. Did you actually see a white light? Did a dark tunnel swallow you up? Did you relive your whole life afterwards, watching all of your mistakes and failures as a final poison. I wondered what time it was. Time to sleep maybe.... to sleep. To---

#

"HD's got Regano?" I said, surveying the little group before me. We had come down in Evar's castle--CEP headquarters.

"He pretty much gave himself up for me!" Evar admitted, pulling out a handkerchief embroidered with ducks. "We've just got to rescue him!"

"You," I said, turning to a young girl at a computer. She looked up from her game of cards. The knave of hearts promptly jumped up and ran off of the desk, dragging a miniature bucket of paint after him.

"Oh, look what you made me do!" the girl huffed. "It took me forever to get those from the Mad Hatter!"

"We've got more important things to worry about now,"

I said. "Can you find out where they've got Regano? If I have any sort of conception of what kind of villain this egg is, we don't have much time."

She turned, flouncing lacy petticoats, and typed rapidly at the computer. A large striped cat at her feet grinned broadly up at me. "There!" she said. "If my calculation proves correct...he's got him in...*The Cask of Amontillado*."

A collective shudder went around the room. Everyone hated that grisly story by Poe, but I had to admit, you couldn't ask for better if you wanted an airtight vault where no one would ever look....

"Right, boys," I said, jumping up. "Pan? Huck? Evar, you'd better stay here and keep safe. Let's go find the old bean!"

On the way, I stopped by my private office and selected a few appropriate words from my shelves, stashing them in a notebook.

We managed to enter *The Cask* easily enough. The crowded streets of revelers gave us plenty of cover. We made our way to the foreboding house and slipped in the back door. It was easy to find our way into the dank cellars. The catacombs were eerie, dark, and dripping with

slime mold. Piles of brittle bones shored up the walls. I shivered and motioned Huck and Pan to follow silently as we filed through the maze of tunnels.

Something of color in that monotonous environment caught my eye and I stooped.

"A rose petal," I said. I sniffed it. "Doused with the Romeo and Juliet potion. We're getting close."

On my left, I found a length of wall that was obviously freshly built up. No slime had infested the mortar yet. Glancing up and down the dripping tunnel, I waved a hand to tell the others to stand back. I pulled a small knife from my pocket, tipped with eraser, and sliced through the wall like it was pudding. Huck and Pan rushed forward to help me pull out the bricks, which were now just "icks" and very easy to wipe away. Behind stood a metal wall. I rapped it with my knuckles.

"That's thick," I whispered. I opened my notebook and carefully removed the words "lock," "key," "iron," and "rusted." I applied them carefully and stood back while the words wove themselves into the iron wall. I took the key and shoved it into the lock, heaving with all my might.

"It...won't...turn!" I grunted.

"Why'd you put the rusty in?" Huck guffawed.

"Be-cause!" I yelled as my hand slipped and I staggered sideways. "It has to fit with the setting or it won't meld properly."

"Wait!" said Pan, as I gripped the key again. He stepped forward, fishing in his pocket, and pulled out a fistful of a glittering powder. He sprinkled it on the lock. "Pixie dust's a wonderful lubricant!"

The key turned easily and I raised my foot to kick the door in. With a screech of rending metal, the wall burst apart, and the three of us ran into the vault. It was dark. Three shapes lay at our feet.

#

The darkness emerged into light. A hospital light. I groaned. I was right! I was going to live my entire life over again, except from birth! I blinked as the delirium cleared. But I wasn't born in a hospital.... my story was set in medieval fantasy. So where was I? More likely this was some elaborate plan by Humpty Dumpty to resuscitate me before having me go through my death again! I groaned. I didn't think I could afford to lose any more brain-cells. I had too few already.

"He's waking up," a feminine voice screeched. "Get me out of here!" I'd heard that voice before. Juliet. My

heart pounded and I tried to go back to easy breathing, like the breath of sleep-- or unconsciousness. I couldn't let them know I was alive. I shivered as I thought of the room. I wouldn't go back there.

Romeo's voice followed a second later. "Now is the winter of our discontent!"

"That isn't even from our play!" Juliet moaned.

"Forsooth!" Romeo wailed, "there is indeed something rotten--" Apparently Romeo had lost more brain-cells than I had.

The door burst open. "You said he was awake?" I knew that voice too--

"Yes!" Juliet wailed, tripping over something metallic, causing a crash. "Let me go!"

I heard footsteps walking over to my bed, and I struggled to calm myself down to produce the illusion of sleep. Someone sighed beside me. Probably the same person with that mysterious voice.

"He's still out." The door flew open suddenly, and I jumped as the door slammed into the wall. There wasn't a reaction, so the man's back must have been turned to me.

"Is he well? Awake? Revived? UNunconciuous?" It couldn't be! A loud quack met my ears, and my eyes shot

open.

"Not yet, Evar, calm down--"

I sat straight up in my bed, "Evar?"

Evar jumped back, letting go of the duck he was holding in his hand, and sending it into the air. The other figure turned around and I was surprised to see--

"Tolfam?"

Evar laughed, "It was the duck! The duck revived him!" He grabbed the duck off of the ground and hugged it tightly. "QUAAAANK!!!"

Tolfam rushed over to my bedside. "Good to see you awake!"

I squinted a little, puzzled. "How did you get me out?" I asked, "The room was airtight... and it was oral tradition--"

Tolfam nodded. "We found that on later examination. Humpy's work. The inside wall is coated with the spoken word, making it nearly, if not completely, impossible to escape, but easy to get in with a eraser and a few well placed words."

Okay, so that made sense. There was just one matter to discuss now. "Tolfam," I said. "About your book..."

Tolfam turned away from the bed. "I really don't want

to talk about--"

"I know where it is."

Tolfam spun back. "What?" he leaned back over the bed, his eyebrows and shoulders raised in expectation. "Where?"

"Here."

Tolfam released the tension in his arms, "No, Regano, this is your book. Evar's castle. My story--"

"No!" I shouted. "No! Not THIS book. Not my book. The one we're in right now! This story! The story about the TFP, and the CEP, where we fight against the Guild."

Tolfam squinted. "But that can't be," he sputtered. "It isn't possible. This isn't a story! We're off book!"

"It is possible!" I shouted, "and it's true! That's why Humpty is so keen on getting rid of you. He doesn't want you to assume your place as-- as--"

"As what?"

"As the Hero." Tolfam and Evar gasped.

"But I'm not the Hero!" Tolfam said. "If anyone's the Hero you are--"

"But it was you who saved me."

"Yes but-- but--- it doesn't make sense! Who are you then?"

"I'm the mentor," I said, puffing out my chest and

then letting it deflate again, "a very confused and unlikely mentor, but a mentor none the less."

Tolfam stood there for a second, dazed. If I was right, the ramifications would be huge.

Evar put the duck back on the ground. "It does make sense."

"How's that?" Tolfam asked, still a bit dazed.

"Well," Evar said, "every character has a story. If they didn't, then they couldn't exist. I couldn't find anything about your story, so we assumed you were a fluke, an anomaly, the--"

"Storyless one?" Tolfam interjected.

"Right," Evar continued, "but there are certain signs that can tell us if we're in a book or not.. I could run a scan--"

"What kind of signs are we talking about?" I asked, curious myself as to what he could tell.

"Well," Evar explained, "in a first person novel there are usually an abundance of solitary "I's". Almost always belonging to one character. That's the easiest way to tell. The other would be to run a scan for similes and metaphors. As you know, even in our descriptions there are only adjectives, and participles,

and pronouns and--" Evar paused and then shuddered,
"adverbs."

My mind felt like butter scraped over too much bread,
to use the famous analogy. "You could do that? Is that
legal?"

"We're not legal, legally, I mean," Evar answered.
"Technically, we're legally illegal in an illegal
organization fighting to make itself legal."

"Thanks," Eddie groaned, rolling his eyes.

"This air is so thick!" I said, lifting my oxygen mask
to my face and inhaling deeply.

"As thick as my ice cream?" Evar asked.

"Not quite."

"Listen," Tolfam said, pacing. "How do we figure this
out once and for all? Can you run such a scan from this
room?"

"We could try..." Evar said.

"Hold up, old bean," I began, slowly, "would that
work? I mean, aren't we in my story just now? Won't it
scan my story? How can we scan the story we
are...in...now?"

My brain boggled. It was hot in Evar's castle, in the
summer. The air seemed as humid and tepid as a rice

pudding, which didn't help my foggy noggin. I took another deep breath of oxygen.

"We could try to scan the space...the air..." Evar said, slowly.

"Well...go for it," Edward said. Nothing to do but try it.

Evar ran over to the wall and picked up and dialed a zucchini.

"Evar...that's not the phone," I protested.

"Yes it is," he replied, showing us buttons. "It's an illegal phone. Technology like this doesn't fit with my story, so I hid it. Who would think to look in a zucchini for a phone?"

"Probably a person who likes ducks and owns an ice cream shop," Tolfam muttered to myself.

"Hello? Yes. Please send my scanner to the left north tower. Yes, I know there are two left north towers. Send it to the left by northeast by north tower!" He put down the vegetable and looked expectantly toward the door. After a few moments of silence, it opened, and a machine was wheeled through. We all stared at it for a few seconds.

It was...shaped like a duck. A large duck. It barely

fit through the door, but as soon as it entered the room, Evar raced over to it and lifted a wing. He dialed something into a keypad, opened the duck's mechanical beak, and pointed it at a large expanse of nothing. Then he pressed a button.

The scan took no time at all, and the duck promptly quacked in an automated voice. I rose half-way up from the bed, but fell back, and stared at Eddie. Evar lifted the duck's wing again and typed on the keypad.

"Results: simile. Subject: air. Keywords: humid, tepid, as, pudding. Analysis complete. QUACK!"

For a moment no one spoke. I guess it could be clichéd as an "awkward silence", or "as silent as the grave," but it more reminded me of one of those times when a little child opens a present and finds there to be nothing in the package and past the sparkly paper besides a few pairs of white socks. I was happy for Tolfam, and I think he was just as ecstatic himself, but we really couldn't say anything. Even Evar hadn't said a word for a full two minutes and-- I looked at my watch -- twenty three seconds -- twenty four now. We would have to see how long it lasted, but as far as I could tell this was a new record. I sucked in deeply on the oxygen mask, the

airy squeal breaking the silence like an opera singer breaks a glass bottle.

"Well then," I said, taking another glance at my pocket watch to secure Evar's record breaking time before ruining it, "that was interesting."

"I know!" Evar said, wiping a tear from his eyes. "The quack at the end. It was so majestic, so --- real."

"I do have a story," Tolfam mumbled, almost too quietly to be heard, as he shook his head in amazement, "I'm in it right now!"

I pushed the call button on my hospital bed and a nurse ran in. "Could I get a napkin ma'am? and a pencil as well?"

She nodded and left again.

I turned back to Tolfam. "You do realize that since you are the hero, that you are the only one who can defeat the villain."

"But I don't know how! Humpty is oral tradition! He can't be erased!"

"But the author knows what he's doing. He's telling the story Tolfam! Your job is just to listen to him."

Tolfam nodded.

"And mine is to give up my pride, and let you be the

Hero." I lowered the oxygen mask from my lips and set it on my lap.

"What are you doing?" Tolfam asked. "You can't erase yourself-"

I rolled my eyes. "Surely you know me better than that! This oxygen mask is just getting far too tight for my liking. Though there is something I must impart to you. A gift from the mentor to the hero."

"But what do you have that could help me?"

"My first-person status."

The room went silent again. There was a knock on the door and the nurse brought me my napkin and pencil. I quickly scribbled down the quick message -- New Silence Record -- 2 minutes 45 seconds. Evar. -- I slipped the napkin onto the nightstand and sat up on the bed.

"From this moment on, Edward Tolfam," I announced ceremonially, "you shall be the only one referred to in first person."

Again the silence.

"Did it work?" Evar asked, instantly, looking from one of us to the other.

"I'm not sure," I said, "it doesn't feel any different."

"I really can't tell a difference either, old bean," Regano asked from the bed. "I guess we'll just have to take it on faith."

"In any case," I said, "I think we've got work to do,"

"You're telling me," Regano snorted. "How are we going to get this egg?"

I got up and started pacing back and forth. "Oral tradition...Oral Tradition...Oral--" I ran into the duck scanner.

"HONK!"

Evar gasped and smacked it.

"Quack?" it said, subdued.

I sat back down in a safe chair. "Even if he is Oral Tradition, he's in this story, isn't he? He's still bound by written word! He has to be!"

Regano fiddled with the oxygen mask. "But can we be sure?"

"I don't know. Can we?"

"That's what I was worried about..." He squinted at me. "Doesn't knowing you're the Hero give you some special revelations? Can't you suddenly realize what to do?"

I searched my mind. "Uh...no. I don't think it works that way."

"At least it's you and not me," Regano chirped.

"Though, I always wanted to be a Hero...I guess it's more stressful, though. All the same...maybe someday I'll get my chance."

"Sooner than you think," I said.

"What?"

"I don't know! I just said it!" I clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Nice try," he said.

I sniggered.

"Really, gentlemen," Evar interrupted. "Don't all stories really have a happy ending?"

Regano and I exchanged sideways glances. "Uh...not quite...ever heard of Lemony Snicket?"

"OH! That's a type of ice cream, right?"

I rolled my eyes. Evar was not the type of person I normally would have acquainted myself with at the TFP -- even if he wasn't a wanted criminal.

Regano frowned, "er.... not exactly...."

"A type of pastry then?" Evar said, as he tinkered with his duck-machine to perfect the quack. It was an amazing thing, that machine.... the ability to analyze stories... as far as I knew only a few readers even had the

ability to do that correctly and most of them were either known as "editors", "critics", or "homeschoolers" outside of fiction. Of course, everything I knew about the world outside of fiction was based off entering newspaper articles in my spare time, or watching them on the database at the main TFP headquarters.

Regano absentmindedly reached over from the bed and fiddled with the duck machine.

A thought struck me like a sock with a potato in it, "could we use the machine?" I asked.

Regano pressed a button and the machine opened its mouth again, "Meooooooooow!!"

"Bother," Evar said, whacking the duck with his hand again. "I thought "feline" might not be right word to install..."

I ignored him. "What if we used the machine to scan Humpty Dumpty?"

"Ducks do sound feline though at times..." Evar grumbled.

"For what purpose?" Regano asked, scooting as far back as he could from the confused machine.

"To tell if he's bound by the story or not. If he is then there has to be some kind of text in him.... right?"

"Ducks, can be mighty too..." Evar said, "and bold and valiant--"

"Brilliant!" Regano exclaimed.

"Ducks are probably the most brilliant, cute, and yet majestic creatures in the whole world..."

"The problem is that to get it to work, then we would have to be in very close vicinity to Humpty. However, if it does work," Regano said, "then I'd say we could find a way to defeat Humpty for sure!"

"And if it doesn't?" I asked.

Regano frowned. "Let's not talk about that now shall we?"

"MOOOOOOO!!!"

"YOU AREN'T A COW YOU BLASTED MACHINE!!!"

CHAPTER 9

I shook the ringing out of my ears.

"Er...Evar...maybe it'd be better for you to work on that somewhere else," I began.

"Quite! In your workshop, perhaps!" Regano offered.

"Where your tools will be handy..." I continued.

"Capital idea, fellows!" Evar cried, wheeling his duck toward the door. He didn't quite aim right, and the left wing caught in the hinges.

"And maybe downsizing it in the process would be a good idea," Regano added.

"Downsizing?" bellowed Evar, looking hurt and

outraged. "A DUCK?"

"Certainly not!" I cried. "Regano doesn't know what he's saying!"

"Don't pay any attention to me, old bean!" Regano agreed. "I'm never quite myself until my morning cherries!"

Evar grunted and worked his duck through the door. When it closed behind him, I sighed deeply and turned toward the bed. At last we could be serious. Evar was fine in his own way, I thought, now feeling a little kinder once he was gone, but he was a chap of one idea.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. "Strong enough to get up?"

"I shall be, once my--ah! There they are!" He took the jar of cherries from the nurse and she hurried out.

"How do you propose getting close to Humpty?"

"Hmmm. I suppose he's still quartered at the witch's house. I can't go back there and pretend to be on their side. I blew that already. No, we'll have to create some diversion so one of us can get close to him and scan him quickly..." I twiddled my thumbs.

"Cherry?" Regano offered. I shook my head. Those things are painfully sweet! He chewed it thoughtfully before

speaking again. "There are always ducks..."

"Right, like Evar would agree with that!" I snorted.

"What about...what about...oh!" I jumped up. "What about vinegar? You know what that does to an egg!"

"Refresh my memory," he said.

"Dissolves the shell!" I cried. "If we could get him in contact with vinegar, he'd panic! AND if it weakens him, we can scan him more easily! Boy, am I glad I paid attention in biology class!"

Regano screwed the lid on the cherry jar and dropped it into the trashcan. "Now. To 'commandeer' a tanker truck..."

#

I felt for the vinegar gun at my side. In all actuality it looked more like a water pistol -- probably because that's what it was.

Huck twirled the pistol on his finger western style, and shoved it back into the holster. "'swe ready to poach that there egg?"

"Technically the only thing we're poaching on is the land," Regano said. "I'm pretty sure that Humpty Dumpty's already hard boiled."

"Are you sure it was a good idea to let Evar drive the fire engine?" I asked wiping my sweaty hands on my shirt. I didn't exactly relish the idea of coming into contact with Humpty again.

"I'm not sure we had a choice," Regano said. Evar had insisted that he be the one to handle the newly installed hot vinegar sprayer on the fire truck we'd "borrowed" from a detective novel. In addition he'd painted the truck yellow and emblazoned a large duck on the side of it, complete with imitation feathers, and the white slogan spelling: "the duck mobile". He'd valued the new fire truck so highly that he'd even given us charge of the duck scanner.

"I guess it's time for action," Regano said, as he turned on the megaphone we'd brought with us and brought it to his lips, but he and I both gasped as another electronic voice floated up out of the swamp, one that I knew very well--

"Baba Yaga. This is the TFP. You're surrounded. If you and your disgusting organization will surrender quietly, then we promise that no one will be erased. You have one hour before we take the place by force."

"Why did they have to show up now!" I wailed.

Regano's portable pickle phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out, and slid down the imitation pickle casing, "hello? They're what?" his face paled, "No! Don't pull out their hair! No, don't do that either, they probably don't have any with them. What do you mean it's too much? Listen. If you do something, they might attack, and then you wouldn't have any shredded wheats!" A whimper broke the barrier of the phone line and traveled into the air. "Just try to delay them until we get back. No! NON-violently!" Regano hung up. "They're at the palace too," he said. "They're going after both of us at once."

I rubbed my face wearily, but immediately regretted it as the overpowering stench of vinegar filled my nose. "Ugh," I said.

"My thoughts precisely," Regano agreed, but not in his usual cheeky way. "Do we go through with the plan?"

"It's not like we can go back to the Palace..." Evar said, from the top of the truck. "The Illachins would try to fight, except then they'd have us on assaulting police as well as juggling literature."

"That makes it...four against about 40," I sighed. "Counting a guess at the TFP Squad team split up and adding in all of H.D.'s minions, which we're not even sure about..."

"Or, we could wait an' see what this ol' TFP does," Huck offered.

"Right, and let them ruin an age-old fairytale? Besides, they don't know a thing about Humpty and his Oral Tradition. They'll bungle the job and--"

"Excuse me?" I said, having trouble keeping my voice down.

Regano stopped. "With all due respect--and quite a bit is due at this point--they are like...what's that phrase?"

"A troll in an ice cream shop?" Evar offered, adding a personal shudder.

"I was thinking more along the lines of bull and china...but that works."

I glanced at the house on chicken legs in the clearing. "I wonder..." I muttered.

"Wonder what?"

"Does that thing have wings to boot? It's backing up to the far end of the clearing as if preparing to take off."

"Goodness!" Regano bellowed.

"TFP!" Phyllis's voice rang through the megaphone.

"Do not attempt to leave the area. We have you

surrounded!"

At the far end of the clearing, the front door opened and Baba Yaga stepped onto the rickety front porch. "Is that so, TFP buzzards? Have you also helicopters in the sky?"

"TFP! FORWARD!" the megaphone yowled.

"Go!" I shouted, dragging Huck and Regano out into the open with me. I didn't have a hand for Evar, but he came of his own accord, with the Duck Mobile. "She's going to take off!"

The house's sides bulged and the doorway became an oblong while the door remained rectangular. The windows on both sides splintered, raining glass shards on the TFP officers close enough already. They yelped and scrambled out of the way of massive bat-like wings, which sprang out and flattened into the night wind.

"Halt! Halt! Halt in the name of the law!" Phyllis was shouting, but it was drowned out in the screams of the officers being trampled by giant talons as the house began to charge across the clearing. Of all the people in the area, Regano, Huck, and I were the only ones hurtling back toward it.

"TFP Reserve! Attack!" Phyllis cried. A barrage of

eraser-bullets cascaded onto the house, and as it was partially protected by Oral Tradition, they only knocked holes in it like a sieve.

"When it gets close enough, jump!" I screamed into Regano's ear, just to be heard over the clamor. The house pounded closer, peppered by bullets, squealing all the while about the arthritis as Baba Yaga wobbled on the porch. The chicken feet gathered themselves for takeoff and leapt into the air, beating the massive wings, which alone turned the bullets backward onto the TFP ranks. More screams, but I threw myself forward, pulling at Huck and Regano. I could see nothing but my landing-point, a few rotten boards of the porch, and knew nothing but that I would be there shortly.

I hit the boards and my foot went through one, but I turned around and helped Regano up onto the porch. A howl jerked me around to see the witch standing over Huck, who was hanging by his hands. She put out one foot and kicked him off, and he fell screaming to the ground, which was luckily only eight feet below. But the distance was rapidly widening as the house gained altitude. A flash of white and yellow surged over my head, but it was too fast to see, and then I had other things on my mind.

"Eddie," Baba Yaga purred, hobbling forward.

"EdWARD," I said.

"How kind of you to come back," she went on. "And bring your little friend, too? Charming!"

I saw what she was doing too late, as she pulled a gun from behind her back.

"Look out!" Regano shouted, just as Baba Yaga dove for me. I leapt away, looking up in time to see a streak of yellow clattering down the slope of the roof. It rolled into the air and crashed down onto the witch, pinning her to the porch floor. I looked up at the roof and saw a smiling Evar looking down.

"Isn't it lucky I like ducks and not some non-flying thing like lizards?" he chirped.

I would have laughed but at that moment, the front door opened.

"Ah," Humpty said, in a voice that made me feel like I'd just been tarred and feathered, "its so good to see you all again."

"I really can't say that feeling's mutual," Regano said, and I nodded in agreement as I stood to my feet.

"Though I could say a few other things..."

Humpty laughed, in his gravely way, and glared at the

three of us. "Why don't you come in for a few minutes. I have something to show you that I think you'll ...er... enjoy. Even the mad scientist might get something out of it..."

"I much prefer "Quack", " Evar protested. "It fits my image better."

Humpty's eyes narrowed as if he were furrowing his nonexistent eyebrows, and then crept back up into a smug smile. "That could explain the sardonic laugh..."

"My laugh is not at all--"

"Not your laugh!" Humpty yelled, and then calmed again, and opened the door to the house, "not exactly."

"I honestly hope you don't think we're stupid enough to follow you inside--" I protested.

Humpty shrugged. "You'd be stupid not to. We're going to be taking a hard left into horror, and I don't think you'd want to fall off there."

"I'm really not sure we'd be much worse off," Regano said, stroking his beard, "hmm... do you have cherries?"

Humpty blinked, "What?"

Regano sighed with relief. "I just wanted to make sure. I really can't afford to gain any more weight."

"You're going to go in?" I asked, incredulously.

"What other choice do we have?" Regano shrugged.\

"What about take our chances in Horror?" I said, "At least there the stories have plots. I've worked there before, I know many of the stories, and I'm sure that I could--"

"Did I mention that our course heads straight through Poe?" Humpty snarled.

I shivered, "on second thought--"

"Get this thing off of me!" Baba Yaga yelled, from the roof, where she still lay pinned down.

"How about not," Humpty smiled, and waved his arm to usher us in.

Baba's eyes widened, "but you can't just leave me here! I'll be eaten alive! The vampires! The bats! The RAVEN!"

"You're a witch!" Humpty shrugged, "Deal with it!"

"But I saved your life!" Baba Yaga yelled. "You'd still be broken on the ground if it weren't for me! Please--"

Her voice trailed off as Humpty shut the door behind us, and he spat a yellowish green blob of yolk into a bowl on the right.

Evar's eyes darted around to every doorway, making it

quite obvious that he was worried.

"No need to worry," Humpty said. "My followers aren't here. It's just us.

"So you've abandoned them too?" I spat, "just like Yaga?"

"On the contrary!" Humpty replied, "at this very moment you are leading an attack on Evar's Castle."

I froze. "You're bluffing," I countered, "We erased my duplicate." A cold fear began to constrict my lungs. I reached for the vinegar gun and fingered the handle. I should just shoot him and be done with it... end this mad race correctly. I looked over at Regano and I could tell he was thinking the same thing.

Humpty smiled and clapped his hands. A door started to squeak open on our right, and Evar screamed and ran behind the couch.

"I thought you said we were alone," Regano said, his grip tightening on the gun on his right hip.

"You can release your grip," Humpty said, "you know that erasers won't do any good. Anyway. There isn't anyone else in the house. Just us, and you will see in a moment."

The door finished opening and I gasped as the last

person I expected walked through the opening, and right towards Humpty.

"I'm finished Round One," the plump, red-haired figure said with a laugh, and Evar screamed from behind the couch. "the prototype has been modified for mass production."

Evar screamed again, and fainted, for there, in the doorway, stood a copy of himself, and in his hands he held a set of blueprints with three words printed on the front. Those three words tightened the loop around my heart, and for a moment I saw spots. Those three words prompted both Regano and I to pull our vinegar guns from our hips, at the same time and point them at Humpty.

"Copy and Paste."

I was glad Evar had fainted behind the couch, so that the dummy-Evar couldn't see him. Who knew what it would do to his delicate constitution. Then again...he might faint too, and solve our problem for a minute.

Before HD could stop me, I slid behind the couch and pulled Evar up by his shoulders. I gave him a little shake, but he remained limp like a dirty sock. It was enough. The dummy squealed.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the couch!" HD yelled, diving for me. I ducked out of the way as he

catapulted into the couch, bouncing like a rubber ball. He righted himself just as I made it back to Regano.

"You'll pay for that, small person!" the egg growled.

"Small person!" Regano chirped. "Easy on the insults, old boy.

With a snarl, Humpty lunged at him. As he shoved Regano to the floor, I was pushed back against the wall. Something hard dug into my back, and I reached around to find my vinegar gun. I wrenched it from the holster and fired a stream at HD's side.

He screamed in pain and rolled away, clambering onto his feet with his hand pressed to the spot. The house quieted, everyone staring to see the effect of the vinegar.

Humpty pulled away his fingers. They were covered with a pasty white residue of calcium carbonate. The shell in that spot had dissolved, and a clear, semi-permeous membrane bulged through. The armor was gone.

"Touché," he said, still managing to sound menacing through his gasping. "But still a mistake."

In a split second, the floor around us opened up and three thick walls of glass bricks shot up to pen us against the front wall of the house.

"Clever," Humpty smirked, amused at his own creation

as the pain wore off. "Now, my dear doctor--" He turned to the dummy-Evar.

"DUCKtor," said the dummy. He really was a remarkable piece of work.

"Prepare the Copy and Paste!" said the egg. "And I will give you a nice roast duck for your dinner."

The real Evar moaned and slumped into a fresh faint beside me.

"Yes, Oh Round One!" The dummy-Evar rubbed his hands together and went into the back room. He reemerged, toting....a clipboard.

"Turn it on!" HD sneered, leering at us in our prison. The glass bricks distorted his face grotesquely.

The dummy-Evar lifted the clipboard and flicked a switch. The surface of the board sprang to life.

"Ducktation requested," said a mechanical voice.

"Ducktation?" the egg repeated with disgust.

The two proceeded to construct a description on the screen. I couldn't read it through the glass, but it took them quite awhile. Snippets of conversation reached me.

"I'm trying as fast as I can!" the dummy-Evar whined. "You've never had an IP before!"

Time passed.

"And this will allow me to attack the actual Written World?" HD asked.

"Of course," replied the Ducktor.

At last the "ducktation" was finished. Humpty turned to us and raised the clipboard triumphantly. Regano began muttering words like "pumpernickel" that apparently served as ejaculations. I felt pretty badly myself. But that was nothing compared to the feeling when Humpty pressed the "paste" button.

And there stood another Humpty.

For a few seconds, I couldn't breathe at all, and it felt as if a snake were restricting my lungs, though I knew it, in the logical part of my mind, to be something else. Something worse. Panic. We were always taught in the TFP training school that panic became your worst enemy. It could completely immobilize you, and stop you from thinking through things clearly, even when you thought you were, which is what made it worse. Regano looked as though a bus were about to run him over. No, that couldn't be right. There weren't busses in Twilland. It must be a carriage, or a horse...

Another Humpty appeared, and the renewed sense of panic snapped me out of my originally panic-induced stupor,

and I realized that I'd already become the victim of muddy thinking. There were four Humpties now, and they were being created faster all the time. First four, then eight, then sixteen Humpties stood before us now, some already tackling each other over some argument, and at least six of them staring at me, either with a stare of triumph, or a scowl of annoyance. The Dumpty handed his clipboard to the Ducktor and whispered something in his ear that sent him scurrying into the back room. Stepping up to a well-placed podium that I hadn't noticed before Dumpty lifted up a gavel that rested upon it, and hammered away.

"Listen to me you er.... my... er.... Humpty Dumpties!" The sixteen turned. "What do you want you bulbous egg-head?" they all shouted in an annoyed unison. Dumpty smirked. "The dummy did quite a good job if I do say so myself," he muttered to himself, before clearing his throat again and speaking. "My fellow-- er.... rotten, nasty but unnaturally smart eggs," he started, arousing a murmur of approval from the bunch. "I have created you to assist me in the conquer of the written world. Even at this moment, more of your kind are being created to assist in the task. The only limitation is your loyalty. I personally believe that the very same

brutality, rationality, and supremacy that resides in my yolk, will also reside in yours, as we make this attempt to allow our race to be good for something besides breakfast burritos, sandwiches, and to be served with sausage! To show the written world that the egg should be respected. Feared. Worshipped!"

The eggs cheered, and Regano whispered over to me amid the commotion. "He's quite the speech writer if I do say so myself."

"He's oral tradition," I responded. "What do you expect?"

Regano shrugged, and the first battalion of eggs marched through the front door and into a motorized egg carton that I could see out the window.

"I didn't know they made those for 16 eggs..." Regano murmured.

I opened my mouth to educate him on the sizes of egg cartons, but my breath caught in my throat as another sixteen Humpties marched into the room. Again the gavel pounded. Again, Humpty cleared his throat and started his speech. "My fellow rotten, nasty but--"

"We have to get out of here," I murmured to Regano.

"A novel idea!" Regano smiled, though even through his

jollity I could see the fear in his eyes. "I only wish I knew how."

I turned around slowly and studied the rotting wall of wood behind us. The glass bricks on three sides were impenetrable, so the wood was our only chance. Then again...on the outside, there were only a few boards of porch left....

"I'll be right back," I said suddenly.

"What?"

"Stand here," I ordered, stationing Regano in a corner. "From the outside, it'll look like there are two of you. If we can't see well out of this thing, they can't see well in. I just need the cover for a minute."

He watched with a silent frown as I turned back to assess the wall. I pressed my hands against it, searching for the dry rot. A largish spot sagged under the force, and after a moment's hesitation, I hurled my shoulder into it...

And got a shoulder full of splinters.

"Ow." I turned around, rubbing the place.

Regano "pish"ed and pulled out an eraser gun. Pointing it at the weakened spot, he fired a silent bullet into it and we watched it eat away a hole the diameter of

my hand. As soon as I saw the eraser fizzle out, I reached through and started pulling the wall to bits. Luckily, it was so rotted it made hardly any noise.

I nodded at the slumped Evar and the waiting Regano and stepped out. Most of the porch had fallen away, but I stood on a rickety two-by-four and tried not to look down. I scanned the area, which was quickly falling into a night-time mist. Every other moment, the house on chicken legs became shrouded in a low-hanging cloud.

"Hmmm," I mumbled, kneeling on the board and sticking my head over it. I could see the chicken legs, not tucked neatly like they should be, but stuck out at craggy angles, presumably with the arthritis. One clawed toe stretched just about within my reach—

"Ow!" I yelped as something bowled me over against the house. I looked up to see a wing jerking stiffly back into place, desperately trying to keep itself level. I glared at it a moment before I saw it prepare to make another swipe. If I stayed on the board, I would be knocked off to my doom. I lay flat on the board and looked down at the talon. I gulped.

The stiff feathers buffeted my body, and I pitched headlong over the edge of the board. As the entire house

dipped and swung, trying to climb higher into the air, I clutched the edge of the board with my fingers and dangled a thousand feet above certain death.

My heart blocked my windpipe, and my elbows were visibly shaking. I gulped a deep breath and began to kick my feet. Just as my hand started to slide, I found the extended talon. Wrapping my legs around it, I dropped and held on, in the position of a banister-slider.

The house squealed in agony, and through the noise I heard a window slam open.

"Shut up, you!" yelled a Humpty's voice.

"The arthritis!" the house whined back.

The window slammed back down and I gathered my scattered wits. I climbed up the scaly skin of the toe and hung on by the ankle, the house whimpering all the while. Then I stood up, wobbling a little, and tried to shinny up the leg. That's when I noticed it.

A sheet of chicken wire covered the bottom of the house. Beneath it, countless small and shiny objects were wedged. I spotted bits of tinfoil, a golden but dirty necklace, and someone's missing eyeglasses. For a moment, I just stood with my arms wrapped around the clammy leg, staring.

"You magpie!" I exclaimed to the house. The leg twitched as if pouting. As I slid and caught myself, I saw something I hadn't expected. A tape recorder. I gripped the trunk of the leg with my knees and pulled myself up until I could squeeze the recorder out from under the chicken wire. Then I sat down with my legs crossed around a talon and examined it.

It was an ancient of a thing, a relic. The buttons were smothered and grained with dirt, and clods of earth clung to the underside, as if it had been buried and dug up again. I opened the door and found a tape inside.

"Jackpot," I said, and pushed the play button.

"Oh, the arthritis!" bellowed the house and the tape in unison.

CHAPTER 10

Regano looked back at Eddie-- ahem-- Edward, as he darted off in the other direction with Huck, and hoped that their plan would work. He shivered as he realized that without Tolfam there, he'd become a third person character leading a first person narrative. Usually that didn't bode well. Third person characters in temporary control usually were either slain by the villain or ended up in the role of the villain themselves. Where as with the second alternative there remained a surety that it would not happen, there really stood no such barrier against his death-- or the death of the duck-loving doctor beside him. Both he and Evar had experienced death in their own novels,

and Regano knew that neither of them was keen on experiencing it again.

"Are we ready then?" Evar asked, poking him with his elbow. "Or are you going to stand there staring forever? It isn't as if there's a duck over there..."

Regano blinked once, and snapped his mind back to the present. "Right. On with the plan. How do we get the clipboard?"

"We find that evil, psychopathic, cannibalistic Ducktor, that's how," Evar said, and spat off of the flying house, which had stabilized since the fiasco earlier.

Regano frowned, "I'd say that was a little out of character, old bean..."

"Do you like it?" Evar said grinning hugely and pulling out a small electronic device. "It's a diplomatic insult generator. Dorln and I have been working on it together."

"Not very diplomatic if you ask me--" Regano mumbled.

"Exactly!" Evar grinned again, and then let the grin melt into his face. "If I were me, where would I hide?" he asked, tapping his head with a finger.

"I'd say, old bean," Regano replied, "if one of us were to know where you would hide if you were you, it would

probably be you."

Evar's eyes lit up, "duck-bills and platypuses you're right! Well. I would hide wherever there were the most ducks...."

Regano rolled his eyes, "and if there WEREN'T ducks??"

Evar rolled his eyes back, "Don't be silly! Where AREN'T there ducks! I even have a few ducks in my laboratory at home and--"

"That's it!" Regano exclaimed, "a laboratory. Where would they put a laboratory on this thing?"

"Well," Evar smiled and started to pace back and fourth. "If I didn't have all of the right equipment, as this rickety pile of twigs and feathers obviously doesn't--"

The house rocked again, at the insult, and Regano sprawled on the floor, while Evar continued to pace with seemingly perfect "sea-legs".

"Then I would put the lab in the kitchen. You see, it's the only place with the right sanitation devices and--"

"To the kitchen!" Regano said, getting up and interrupting Evar. It wouldn't be much longer until Humpty noticed they were gone and then--

A series of yells echoed from within the hut and Regano and Evar ran for the back door.

"Oh, I hope Tolfam had the time to prepare--"

#

The click of the stop button made my heart leap again in my throat and caused it to beat even faster than it already was. A bead of sweat rolled down my face as I prepared to confront Humpty, and, if all went well, put an end to this madness. Assuming our idea worked, which we weren't even sure that it would. A ruckus erupted inside the hut, and I knew that it had been discovered that we were gone. I double checked the tape recorder to make sure it was rewound, and put my hand on the front door knob to open it.... but didn't.... as much as I wanted to confront Humpty, the thought sent chills through my body. No one in the TFP had ever dealt with Oral Tradition before, and we really didn't know what to do in the situation. Could a recording from a "written" tape recorder really defeat Humpty at all? There was only one way to find out.

I turned my hand on the doorknob to open it, but my hand just slid around it slipping on the sweat it produced.

I wiped the sweat off on my shirt and prepared to open the door again. I put my hand back on the knob and swung it open. The door hit one of the written Humpties who fell to the ground cracking its shell on the hard floor of the house. It screamed in agony as the yolk drained onto the ground, and then stopped moving altogether. The other Humpties started to gasp and talk amongst themselves. All save one. The real Humpty just glared at me with his sour grimace, for a second, and then smiled his twisted grin.

"Just couldn't stay away Eddie?"

"I would have loved to," I replied, "but the circumstances require a more direct approach."

"Require you walked back into a trap for the sake of your friends?" Humpty sneered, "how noble."

"It's a bit more complicated than that," I countered.

"Is it?" Humpty asked. "I thought you were under some misconstrued idea that you were the hero of the story and were trying to defeat me with your noble "heritage" or such nonsense."

I blinked in surprise. "And who's to say that I don't know how to defeat you?"

Humpty smiled, "I can't be defeated."

I smiled back, trying to keep my cool and not let

Humpty know of the doubt that had seeded inside me and continued to grow. What if it didn't work? What if I really wasn't the hero? I shook the thoughts off and pulled out the tape recorder, positioning my finger over the play button.

Humpty squinted, and I would say he paled, except that he was already pure white.

"That won't work," he stuttered. "It's written."

"I guess it's time to find out."

I gulped a breath and pressed down the button. The tape squealed, grating on my ears, for a terrible moment of suspense. Then, finally, crackling out of the miry static-- "Once upon a time, Humpty Dumpty stood in Baba Yaga's flying house. The house lurched suddenly, and he tumbled down and broke into a million pieces. The end." My own voice sounded strange to my ears, warped and warbled by the old tape.

Dutifully, the house lurched. I staggered back against the brick of the hearth, clutching the tape recorder, staring with wide eyes. Time seemed to stop, as the witch's chair slid across the tilting floor. The egg copies scrambled on the floor but were packed so thickly that none of them suffered more than a cracked membrane.

Humpty raised his eyes to me, and terror flashed through them for a split second as he fell!

Onto the couch.

He bounced twice, his face pressed into a musty pillow. And then, slowly, he rolled over and fixed me with a glare. A grimacing smile slid over his pasty features, wrinkling the scarred shell of his face.

"Good effort, Tolfam. But not good enough."

I could hardly breathe, but I forced myself to think around this disaster. It hadn't worked. The one thing we had based our hopes on had failed at the last second. I didn't understand. But I shook my head, propped myself away from the hearth, which was still spitting sparks at me, and tried to think. I had to stall. I had to distract him.

"Ha! You call yourself Oral Tradition?"

He heaved himself to his feet after a few rocking efforts as I spoke.

"You are a cliché in the flesh! Or yolk, if you prefer!" I babbled on, just speaking to fill up the air and keep his attention. "You use the lines of Written Word villains, yet you consider yourself superior to them? Hah!"

He glowered. I knew I was dancing the rim of a sharp, sharp precipice.

But then, an idea struck me. I slipped the recorder behind my back and silently pushed the record button.

"You couldn't think up an original phrase if your miserable life depended on it! 'Good effort, but not good enough?' I mean, come on!"

"You want originality, Tolfam?" He advanced a step, malice smoldering in his milky eyes. "I'll give you originality. You will die such an original death, no one will be there to pick up your bones!"

I backed up. The heat of the fire flared up, as if expecting me, hungering for me as fuel.

"Not so smart now, eh? You and your stupid degrees. They do you no good except for contemplation during a three-hundred foot free fall!"

He lunged without warning, but I was ready. I spun away, let him barrel into the hearth and set my back against the wall. He rebounded off the bricks and faced me again.

"Minions!" he screamed. "Get him!"

The dozens stampeded across the house, but I leapt up onto the arm of a chair and raised my voice. "Stop! Do

not touch me!" They halted, uncertain. I waved the recorder, punching down the stop button loud enough for them to hear. Then I turned to HD. "I have every word you just said. I have captured you in the realm of written sound. It spans the gap between Oral Tradition and Written Word."

Humpty smirked. "You're bluffing."

"Then you shouldn't be worried, should you?" I smirked back. "When I do THIS!" I whirled suddenly and flung the recorder, tape and all, into the fire. Something in the plastic burst into green flame immediately. Then, the outer shell melted away and the various substances within exploded, some smoldering with a terrible odor, some exploding in bursts of sparks like a fireworks display. In the midst of this dance of lights, the house thudded down, apparently landing on the ground, and the jolt threw me from the arm of the chair. It didn't matter. All eyes were glued to Humpty Dumpty, King of Oral Tradition.

I held my breath and bit my lip. A moment later, my risk was rewarded. I didn't know what power that recording of Humpty's voice wielded over him, but it turned deadly. He clutched at his throat suddenly, his mouth opening and closing. It changed from the flexible jointed membrane to

a jagged crack and more shards of shell fell from his face. No sound came from his throat, but he clawed at his neck with fragmenting fingers. I stared in horror and disgust as his entire body faded to a pale green. He grimaced, and his eyes bulged. If he could have spoken, he would have cursed me with every written word in existence--I could see that in his eyes. And then--there was nothing more to see. For the terrible Humpty Dumpty took a great fall. There weren't even any shards. When he struck the ground, he exploded into a cloud of calcium carbonate dust. It piled on the floor, coating the sofa and hearth, and my shoes. Silence fell for a moment.

"NO!" The wail came from Baba Yaga, sounding more human in grief than she had sounded in her evil. She flew to the pile and scattered it as she fell to her knees, groping with her hands into the dust. "I promised him I would pick up his bones! But he has no bones! No yolk! Nothing!"

Most characters, upon death, fragment into their description words. HD, being Oral Tradition, did not. He left behind nothing of his former existence. An unearthly breeze suddenly picked up in the middle of his remains, swirling the dust up into a vortex. Every particle flew

from the corners of the room to join the spinning cloud.
And then it vanished.

#

Regano flung open the door to the kitchen. Sure enough, there stood the Ducktor, working like mad with a few pots and beakers on the stove, with one hand, and writing something in a notebook with the other.

Regano opened his mouth to issue a challenge, but at that moment the Ducktor looked up, and his eyes, and those of Evar met in one moment. Both of them let out a quick high screech and leapt back a step.

"Who are you?" they asked in unison.

"I'm Evar," the both replied.

"You are not!" They argued back.

"Oh in the name of ducks!" Regano yelled interrupting their argument and pointing to the real Evar. "This is the real Evar. You are a dummy created by Humpty Dumpty to make Copy and Paste.

"I most certainly am not," The Ducktor yelled back.

"I have an IP!"

Evar gasped. "An IP? That isn't possible! You're a dummy! Dummies don't have IPs!"

"I am not!" The Ducktor protested again, "and I do

have an IP. You're the dummy! Just ask me any question you like!"

"Fine," Regano asked. "What book are you from?"

"Quite! I'm from the same series of books as you Regano."

Regano blinked. He'd half expected the Ducktor not to know, there by supporting his support of Humpty.

"So why do you follow Humpty?"

"You betrayed us all!" He spat, glaring at Regano with a violence that the real Evar wasn't capable of. "You tried to destroy the very organization you created. That's why Humpty and Baba Yaga kicked you out!"

"Kicked me out!" Regano sputtered, "I was never a part of the Guild!"

"Humpty warned me you'd say that! So why did you create a dummy of me?"

"I'm not a dummy!" Evar fumed. "You're the impostor! No true Evar would ever have a liking for Roast Duck! How can you even think of killing the poor innocent ducks!"

"I would never kill anything!"

"Then how do you roast them?"

The Ducktor stopped for a moment and started to pale. "They come that way don't they?"

Evar's eyes bulged in his head. "Come that way? They come all cute cuddly and covered in feathers!"

"They don't come in legs and thighs?"

Evar screamed again and started to cry. "The ducks have never done anything to you! How could you!"

The Ducktor blinked. "I never said they did. I didn't know they could!"

Regano watched the exchange and started to understand and his confusion subsided. The Ducktor shared all of Evar's character traits, except for his like for Roast Duck. Obviously the thought of killing anything was beyond either of them, but the Ducktor also possessed a like for Roast Duck without knowing what it was. They needed ducks. And fast.

Evar was on the floor in a ball now. "The poor innocent Ducks!"

"But... but... " the Ducktor protested. "Duck isn't alive! It's an inanimate object!"

"I think you're wrong on that point," Regano protested. "A duck is a kind of bird and--"

"Nice soft, fluffy, silky feathers..." Evar moaned.

"Right," Regano continued, "and you see, in Twilland you have quite a love for ducks. You would never think if

killing one."

"I would never kill anything!" The Ducktor screamed, "how dare you accuse me of such a horrible crime! Ducks are not birds!"

"Did you ever wonder WHY they came in legs and thighs?"

Evar groaned again on the floor and the Ducktor blinked. "I-- I never gave it any thought. I've never seen one except for in the packaging from the supermarket..."

"You've never SEEN a DUCK?" Evar yelled. "How is that possible!"

"Humpty told me they were just food.... like crackers...."

"Ducks EAT crackers!" Evar screamed.

"How do I know you aren't lying to me?"

"The only way to prove that would be to show you a real duck," Regano said, "and I don't think I have one handy."

Evar perked up a bit. "I have a duck call!" He pulled it out of his pocket and gave it a few quacks.

The Ducktor laughed. "What a pleasantly wonderful sound! Do ducks make that sound?"

"Of course!" Evar gasped, "it's the most beautiful sound in the world!"

Regano rolled his eyes and waited. No duck.

"Do you have any crackers?" Evar asked, "they tend to attract the ducks."

"I do keep a few boxes on hand," The Ducktor said, "though I never knew why..."

Regano smiled, apparently Humpty's mistake, caused by Tolfam's deception earlier, had resulted in some discrepancies in the Ducktor's character. Since Humpty had made him an IP and thus made him able to think as an actual character, it was only right that the one extra word "roast" added to "duck-loving" would have caused some trouble.

A few moments later the floor was pasted with the crackers from one box, and Evar was quacking his quacker again. After a few more moments, three half-starved ducks flew into the roof, and landed, devouring the crackers.

"They're adorable!" the Ducktor shrieked and giggled.

"Aren't they!" Evar smiled, and hugged one of them causing it to give a started "Quack!"

The Ducktor stood up. "Obviously Humpty lied to me about ducks. Who's to say that he wouldn't lie to me about

anything else? I must assume logically that you are who you say you are, and that he is the fraud."

"I can agree with that assumption," Regano smiled.

"And I would love to show you around the castle sometime."

"And the ice-cream shop!" Evar piped in.

"But right now we have to stop Humpty's army from taking over the entire written world," Regano said, brushing off his monocle and readjusting it on his eye, "and I dare say we should hurry."

The house lurched and Regano fell to the ground again. Evar and the Ducktor both stood their ground.

"How do you do that?" Regano asked.

"Do what?" they both asked in unison.

"Oh never mind." Regano turned to the Ducktor. "Do you have the clipboard?"

"No," he said blinking, "one of the Nazgul just took it. They're probably heading back to Humpty!"

"We have no time to lose!" Regano gasped. "We have to get the clipboard!"

#

A hypnotizing silence fell over the room. No one dared to breathe, not even the mourning Baba Yaga. I tore my eyes from where Humpty used to be and scanned the ranks

of Humpty clones. They stood in neat rows, like so many dozens in a carton, staring with glazed eyes. I felt a sickening jolt suddenly, and a sharp, sudden pain behind my knee, and then it was over. The sights around me faded as my head swam with a nausea I couldn't explain. I sagged back and someone supported me.

"Admiring the sssscenery?" he whispered in my ear. I nodded, and my head exploded. "Just one little prick?"

I tried to swallow, but a cold clammy lump stuck in my throat. "What?" I murmured.

"I poked you behind the knee. Night night!"

Then I knew who was there. "Phil!" I gasped out. "Nazgul blade," he hissed, letting me fall against the hearth behind me. He slipped like a ghost around and stood before me. "Good luck."

The world dipped and plummeted away. The last thing I saw was the King of the Wraiths lifting a blubbering witch to her feet.

Regano, Evar, and the Ducktor ran back towards the main room to find Eddie--Edward. It didn't take long, as the entire place had already been evacuated when the Humpties were deployed. The upside to that was that it made

it quite easy to navigate safely. The downside was that without the eggs inside, the house had started to reassume its queer personality.

Within another moment they were at the door. Regano swung it open and gasped.

Seven Nazgul stood over the prostrate body of Tolfam, arguing amongst themselves.

"I think he's dead," one of them said, and slapped another one, "what were you thinking Phil!"

The tallest one sobbed and uttered a tear muffled reply, "I don't know Carl!-- I-- I-- it never hurts you guys!"

"We're already dead!" a third one said, "why do you think they call us "wraiths"."

Phil burst out crying in loud uncontrolled sobs, "I never realized that before! Why didn't you tell me Carl!"

The other six all threw their hands up in the air, "Don't look at me!"

"I didn't look at you!" Phil wailed, "I'm still mourning for Eddie!"

The body twitched a little, and whispered an almost unintelligible babble from its lips, "EdWARD".

"He's still alive!" Regano whispered to Evar.

"You thought he was dead?" Evar mumbled back. "Did you even look to see if he was breathing?"

Regano blushed, and looked back at the Nazgul.

"How do you suppose we'll rescue him the Ducktor asked.

"It doesn't appear they were trying to hurt him in the first place."

All of the Nazgul were crying now, and comforting each other.

"Hey!" one of the Nazgul said, rising to his feet and facing the others, "I've got some Pringles in the kitchen!"

All of the Carls perked up. "Pringles," they said in unison. "I love Pringles!"

"Almost as much as Cheetos!" Phil beamed.

All of them started to march towards the kitchen, but stopped when they noticed the three comrades staring at them from the doorway.

"Can I help you?" Phil asked rolling his eyes. "We're about to consume our second favorite, salty, MSG preserved snack-food!"

"Don't ask for an autograph!" one of the Carls said. "We don't give them anymore."

"It's bad for our image," muttered another one.

"What are you talking about?" Regano asked raising an eyebrow. "Aren't you our sworn enemies and followers of the Guild?"

"The what?" the Carls asked in unison.

"You know! Humpy Dumpty and his whole contriving murderous band who are trying to take over fiction?"

"He is?" Phil gaped. "Really? He just told me he was after free cheetos!"

The other Carls all murmured agreements to themselves.

"So.... You aren't a part of the Guild?"

"No!" Phil yelled shocked. "We would never join such an illegal organization!"

"Unless they had snack-food," one of the Carls murmured.

"Who wouldn't for snack food!" another smiled.

"So why did you capture me!" Evar yelled.

"We wanted your recipe for pecan shortbread!" Phil explained.

"We never could stand the Keebler stuff," explained Carl. "It being made by an elf and all."

"What do you have against elves!" a voice yelled from behind them, and as they turned, and unblocked Regano's view, he was as shocked as they were to see that last

person he expected, nursing Tolfam's wounds with healing herbs.

"Legolas?"

#

I saw myself sitting at my desk in my beloved word library, tinkering with a few vowels and consonants, trying to coin something. I was just putting the finishing touches on "bandage" when I felt a sharp pain in my knee. I pushed back my chair and tried to extend my leg, but it refused to move. I sighed, wondering if the ache would ever stop. For I knew I had been sitting here for centuries, and it seemed like the pain dated back almost as far as my consciousness.

I slid the newly formed word into a drawer and retrieved a magnifying glass to study an archaic "thee." A bit chipped, I noted. A little frayed on the front end, but unvoiced phonograms always did that when overused.

"Eddie!"

I jumped and spun around, twisting my knee painfully, but didn't see anyone. A thick smell of something between basil and lavender permeated the room.

"Eddie!"

"EdWARD!" I said automatically, turning around again.

Before I could spin back to my work, a strange commotion from the back end of my collection shelves caught my eye. Words were floating--floating!--through the air! I watched in shock as a cluster congregated not three feet from my head.

Come Back they said. I scrubbed at my eyes, but the specter remained. Three more words joined the hovering line.

It needs you.

"What needs me?" I said aloud.

The Story.

The story! My story! I suddenly realized it had not been centuries that I sat there at my desk! A fog filled my mind. Of course, I told myself, my thoughts sluggish. It had been millennia.

You Are The Hero.

I looked back at my desk and my various tools that lay scattered across it. Let the story fend for itself, I thought. It had done well enough before I knew it existed. Regano can handle it.

An antique, largely ornate, intricately illuminated word shot from its space and confronted me. My most prized word, worth millions--

HERO

I shook my head, hurled a "thou" into the mass of flying words, and turned away. "No thanks," I muttered. "My knee hurts, and I'm tired." I leaned over the desk, not seeming to be able to get anything done, but sitting there doing it anyhow. My eyes felt heavy.

The sharp pain bit into my knee's main tendon again, and I sprang up rigid, letting out a cry of agony.

When I fell back, it was onto creaking plank floors, and a blond head with pointed ears was leaning over me.

CHAPTER 11

"He's awake," Legolas sighed in the airy calm voice of an elf. "The athelas is working."

"The aethelfrith is working!" a bubbly voice that could only be Evar's echoed from outside of my vision.

"It's called athelas!" Legolas corrected.

"That's what he said!" the Ducktor exclaimed. "'At-the-last". I must say it's well-named."

Legolas and I rolled our eyes simultaneously and Regano knelt by my side. "Are you feeling better, old bean?"

"I honestly don't know," I replied as my head cleared and the room came into sharper focus. "What exactly happened?"

"Phil stabbed you," Legolas explained, "and you passed

out. You're lucky more damage wasn't done! My author was rather grim when he wrote the wraith's blades. They almost killed Frodo."

An image of a wraith in a dark robe stabbing me in the leg flashed through my mind. "Did you catch him?" I asked, trying to raise my head from where it rested on Legolas' leg but failing as the world spun and black infringed on my vision.

"Phil's accounted for," Regano explained though his eyes showed confusion, "as well as the six Carls. I'm assuming that pile of white powder is what's left of Humpty?"

I grinned, "nice work, eh?"

"I don't see any chance of him coming back to haunt us if that's what you mean."

"Did you get Baba Yaga?" I asked as I finally made it to a "sitting up" position.

"She was here?" Regano exclaimed.

"Phil was helping her up last I knew."

Several voices mumbled from the left, and my head darted over as one of them let out a shriek.

"Those are my Pringles!"

I gasped at the sight of the Nazgul. "What are they

doing here!"

"They're friends!" Regano explained.

"They tried to kill me!"

"I didn't know it would hurt!" Phil whimpered. "If there's anything I can do to make it up... you can have my cheetosss!"

"Then why were you helping the witch?" I accused.

"I was just trying to be polite!" Phil sobbed, "I like helping little old ladies. I didn't know she was a witch."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, standing all the way up and swaying uneasily for a moment, "then why is it that one of your buddies got erased telling me where Baba Yaga lived? And another one brought Evar into captivity!"

All of the Carls gasped, and Phil's arms tensed at his side, "Khamul?"

"I thought his name was Carl!" I scowled crossly.

Phil shook his head... though when he did it looked more like a ripple in his hood. "Khamul isss the only one of us who's given a name," he explained. "Though he always wanted to be "Carl" one day he came back and told us he wasss!"

"I thought he'd just changed his name!" one of the Carls exclaimed, "and developed a new like for our favorite

snack-foods!"

My scowl vanished into amazement and I looked from one faceless hood to another, "so none of you are part of the guild? None of you gave your IPs to Baba Yaga?"

The eight of them hissed at the idea. "Why would we want to do that?" Phil asked, "no character in their right mind--"

Regano cleared his throat loudly, "I don't mean to interrupt, but Evar's Palace is currently beset by the TFP and several dozen rotten eggs."

"And an evil dummy of you," a voice towards the door explained.

My brow furrowed in confusion and I asked a rather necessary and befuddling question. "Why are there two Evars?"

One of the Evars stuck out his hand to me. "Allow me to introduce myself--I'm Evar!"

"No, I'm Evar!" said the other.

That might have gone on, but Regano pointed to the first one. "THAT one's the Ducktor. The dummy."

"How do you know?" demanded the Ducktor.

Regano opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned.

"Because I know everything," he said at last.

I took two steps and fell against the wall.

"Legolas," I said. "Hand me that poker, please?"

The elf hurried to the fireplace and brought me the tool. As he handed it to me, I looked into his face.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He reddened. "I am considerably recovered, thank you," he mumbled quickly. I used the poker to support myself like a cane as I moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" asked several voices in unison. I looked back to see three orange-dusted black-shrouded heads poking from the kitchen doorway. Four more elbows knocked them out of the way to look out.

"Carl...Carls," I sighed, "we've got to get over to Evar's Palace. I need some of you to stay here and guard the house...and the Pringles...and I need the rest of you to head out in search of your former Khamul-impersonator." I shook my head...all of these dummies and impersonators and duplicates were getting to my brain. "Can you guys do that?"

They made various crumb-scattered sounds of agreement and salute. I turned to Regano wearily. "Ready?"

"Ducktor, Evar," he said, grabbing those two. "Time to head out."

I opened the door and peered out, wondering where the House on Chicken Legs had set us down. A run-down mansion, backed by a lush garden and punctuated by a sparkling fountain, met my eyes. I tried to remember where I'd seen this before... At that moment, a dark shape blocked out the moonlight and I only had time to roll out of the way before---

CRACK!

I pried goop off my face, smelling the sickly slime of pumpkin insides. "Right," I muttered, brushing seeds from my hair. "I just remembered why I hated the story of Cinderella."

Regano helped me up. "Not to worry, old chap!" He polished off his monocle, held it out, and stood out of the way as it transformed into a handsome buggy. "Climb in!"

I grabbed his hand and Legolas boosted me up. The others followed as I picked up the reins. I looked out beyond the shafts of the buggy...and remembered we didn't have any horses.

"That monocle doesn't make living things, does it?" I asked. Regano shook his head. "Great." I scanned the area. All lay quiet.

A shrill whistle pierced the night, and a moment

later, a chorus of quacks. I fell back against the leather seat. "You have got to be kidding me."

"To my palace!" shouted one of the Evars, and we were borne away by a flock of game birds.

"Now that's something I wouldn't have expected," Regano mumbled.

"If you are friends with the ducks," one of the Evars said.

"The ducks will be friends with you," the other finished, and they smiled at each other with that big half-crazed smile I'd grown almost fond of.

"I really need a way to tell you two apart," I grumbled, as our carriage picked up speed.

"It really isn't that hard," Regano pointed out, "they're quite different."

"There is the fact that the original Evar and you are from the same book," I challenged.

"And there's the fact that the Ducktor has a freckle on the left side of his face that Evar doesn't!"

"What?" both Evars said in unison, "I do?"

"Right there!" Regano pointed out, tugging a bit at the Ducktor's cheek to show it more clearly.

"I still don't see it," I complained.

"Do I need to circle it with a magic marker!"

"Oh I hate those things," the Ducktor grumbled, "they smell awful. They make me dizzy every time!"

I'm sure the argument would have continued but at that moment the carriage landed with a large jolt, and we were back on the ground again.

Instead of the glorified countryside of Cinderella, we now sat at the edge of a large forest bordering a huge strangely decorated Palace, painted atrociously, and surrounded by an unmanned barricade. In fact, there didn't seem to be any movement at all, except for the wind rustling through the trees. Not even the birds were chirping -- except for the newly landed ducks.

"Where do you think everyone could be?" Regano puzzled. "I thought we'd arrive to guns blazing and the TFP cracking a few heads--- er--- yolks."

"It really doesn't make any sense," Evar -- at least I think it was Evar -- pondered.

"Unless the battle's already over," I said, gritting my teeth.

"How's that?" Regano asked and raised an eyebrow.

"My dummy was leading the attack," I said, "Humpty must have given it an IP, so it has the ability to think

for itself. It looks just like me, and if Humpty used the right words, it could be brilliantly smart and evil at the same time. It wouldn't take much to trick the TFP into following right into a trap."

"Talk about an ironic character ideal," Regano shivered, "and this time in the flesh."

I shivered as well, and felt my face grow cold and pale with the rest of my body.

"If you're right," Regano continued, "then he's already trapped both the CEP and the TFP. We're the only one's left to stop him!"

Something rustled in the trees above us. "Not quite!"

Two fuzzy gray figures fell from the trees, and landed Regano's shoulders.

"Gray squirrels?" the Ducktor queried, "how peculiar."

"Can it bird brain," the smaller one said, "we are NOT squirrels. I'd pull out your hair, but we don't have the time."

The Ducktor stuck out his tongue and looked cross. "A duck would never do that to me!"

"We managed to escape the assault," the larger one continued, "Illachins are known for their swiftness of foot."

"General Tlusty here managed to draw up this map of the palace," the smaller one continued, "we know where all of the hostages are being held, and how many guards. We've mapped out the quickest route in and out, and we have a plan of entry."

Tlusty whispered something in the smaller one's ear.

"That's true.... they are a bit big to fit up the drain pipe. Maybe the secret passage.... right right.... got it! No you tell them. I can't remember all of that."

"Emperor Chubbert and I were just making some much needed changes to the plan," Tlusty explained. "Let me show you this map. I say we split into three parties. It's the easiest way to get in or out. Regano, Evar, and er.. other Evar... can go this way through the secret passage Evar invented. They worked on it together so they know the way."

"Quite well, too," Regano interrupted, "it's quite a good stroll."

Tlusty cleared his throat and shot an annoyed glance at Regano. "Chubbert and I will enter through the drain-pipe and let Tolfam here in through the side door of the laboratory."

"Huck's in there waiting," Chubbert explained. "No one else can figure out Evar's code for the combination

lock, so we thought it would be a safe place to have him wait."

"Once we've got that far," Tlusty continued, "we'll split up into our respective groups. Regano and the Evars will head to the south wing of the palace and free CEP prisoners here, here and here." He pointed to various locations on the map. "Chubbert and I will release the TFP members held hostage. Tolfam will proceed with Huck toward the throne room where the dummy has taken up his command."

"What?" I squealed, "why would I want to go there!"

"You're the hero, Edward," Regano said, understanding right away. "You're the only one who can end this. It's your story. You were chosen as the hero for a reason!"

"But but..." I protested, "oh bother...."

#

"Didn't voluntEER for this hero business, didn't ASK for it, nobody CONSULTED me, did they?" I muttered to myself as Huck and I stumped through a dimly lit corridor. "Didn't actually ask ME if I minded being a hero, did they? Nooo, of course not! All of this Undeserved Misfortune bologna!"

"Put a cork in it," hissed Huck, casting wary glances

around the hall.

"Is that any way to speak to your hero?" I said, then sighed and smiled drily. "Sorry, Finn... I'm just a little stressed out right now."

"Good reason," he said, more to himself than to me, turning to look behind him. "Ain't nobody around... no sounds of people or heggs... all them lights down low like a funeral parlor..."

I shivered as I noticed these things. "What a comparison," I griped. "Intersection coming up... which way?"

He consulted a map Evar had hurriedly scribbled for us. "For the throne room, we need to go...right. Turn left."

"Left to go right?" I said.

"Are you holdin' the map or am I?" he retorted. I shrugged, and we turned left. Sure enough, after a few dozen yards, the hallway made a neat U-turn around an ornate statue of some accredited duck. The surroundings changed--lights grew dimmer, eerie shadows lurked in the corners and strange arched alcoves on either side. As we walked, I noticed irregular rectangular box-shapes tucked into the alcoves. I motioned to Huck and walked over to

investigate.

It was a pine wood box, about a foot by three feet, and the lid stood slightly askew. I slid off the plank, and we peered into the dark interior....

I could make out a spindly leg, a mass of dark fluff, and one glint of light off a sightless eye. I shuddered and turned away, feeling sick.

"S'like I toldcha. Funeral parlor." Huck wrinkled his nose. "That Evar fella can't be allowed to see this."

"I suspect they were his pets," I agreed, eyeing the ranks of other miniature coffins. "This is seriously creeping me out."

"Let's get goin' and see if we can't find this throne room," he said. "The sooner we get this over with, the better, is what I say."

I gulped, nodded, and led the way down the passage. A pair of doors came into view, big, heavy-looking doors carved richly and with duck-billed handles. I surveyed them with unease.

"If we open those, it'll make a huge noise... I don't like the idea of that." I wondered what else I had expected. Sneak in and defeat my dummy like a bounty hunter?

"Lookie here," said Huck, pointing. I kneeled and pushed against the door where he pointed. A tiny postern swung out, cut in the silhouette of a duck. I rolled my eyes and slithered through. Huck followed, and I slowly stood up to survey the room.

The lights were glaringly bright in here and nearly blinded me after the dark halls of the rest of the palace. I could see right away that we hadn't been noticed--we stood in a sea of round white tops of eggheads, and all eyes were trained on the back wall. That's where I saw him, robed in a cloak of the rare green wing-feathers of female ducks, so that he shimmered against the smooth white crowd. He stood tall above Baba Yaga, who looked comparatively shriveled and cowed, and I could tell she had transferred to him the same worshipping deference she had bestowed upon Humpty. On his left, even taller than he was, a dark-shrouded Nazgul faded into the shadows like an unvoiced threat.

I exchanged looks with Huck, and we crouched down to put our plan into action.

Operation Omelet commenced.

#

"What about this one?" Evar asked, as the Ducktor

stared on in delight. "This one was inspired by a duck I saw sitting by the lake."

"Wasn't the last one inspired by a duck at the lake?" Regano sighed as they continued through the passage dimly lit passage. As fact would have it, the only light from the passage was Regano's monocle, which had been conveniently changed into a torch.

"No no no!" Evar corrected, insulted that Regano could get the two confused. "That was a duck by the POND."

"My mistake," Regano sighed rolling his eyes. Despite the fact that he'd helped to design the passage, he hadn't planned for Evar to fill it with murals and marble. Art was one of Evar's many passions... and he was about as good at it as he was at most of the others-- excluding inventing, which he actually did excel at.

"This one's exquisite," the Ducktor gasped, "you really caught the whole essence of the duck! The majestic feathers, the wonderful golden beak! The slender brown legs!"

"You can really see all of that in there?" Regano asked, astonished, "all I can make out is a tree with a wedge of cheddar sticking out the front."

"That was my first pet duck!" Evar mused smiling in

remembrance. "His name was Duckie."

"Okay then--" Regano said, and waved them on, "we turn here."

A dead end greeted them, and Regano mentally brightened the glow of the torch.

"If you wouldn't mind Evar, would you care to unlock the secret passage way?"

"Gladly!" Evar replied, and started to dig around on the ground for something.

"My word!" the Ducktor gawked. "What are you doing!"

"I'm trying to find these letter tiles," Evar explained, as he picked up three, "so that we can't unlock the door."

"This panel here has seven spaces," Regano explained, "Each one fits a tile, so that they spell the name "Dorln".

Only the center spaces are used at all, and those open the passage."

"It was my idea!" Evar said, beaming with pride. "I designed it!"

"It's brilliant!" the Ducktor commented.

Once the final letter had been placed, the door swung open, leading to a ladder, which Regano quickly unlocked by

entering the correct combination of letters.

"This is where it gets messy," Regano said grimacing as they entered the last place he wanted to be.

"As you can see," he explained, "we have a rather wide garbage "chute"."

"More of a garbage tunnel!" Evar's double exclaimed. "It's amazing how we come out in the one flat part!"

"All part of the design!" Evar chimed. " Now all we have to do is scale this slippery, garbage laced metal wall and we're up!"

"Or," Regano suggested, "since we aren't technically bound to the "rules of Twilland" right now, we could just use this." The Evars watched as his torch grew, expanded, and filled out. The swaying lines of the fire rounded and then sharpened to form a large metal rectangle. The handle disappeared, and in a matter of seconds, an elevator stood before them, with its doors wide open.

"After you, Lord Evar," Regano smiled, and ushered him in.

"You certainly go all out on these things!" the Ducktor said, gawking at the luxurious interior of the elevator.

The walls were covered in red satin, and the buttons

inlaid with pure gold. Regano pushed the only button with any numbers on it whatsoever, and the elevator started to move upward. A saxophone wailed through the speakers, in a moment of improvisation.

"Ug, I hate this station!" Evar complained and touched the wall of the elevator, instantly changing it to his favorite channel -- the duck channel. But no sound came out.

"Regano," Evar scolded, "stop that at once! Let the ducks speak!"

"I'm not doing anything, old bean," Regano protested, holding his hands in the air for all to see.

"But this plays straight from the duck nursery! They're always quacking!" Evar moaned, starting to panic. "You don't think that--"

"Don't even mention it!" Regano said, trying to look unconcerned, though he really wasn't at all, "They're probably all just napping.... at the same time.... all 48 of them..."

"49 actually," Evar said, as the elevator dinged their arrival, "A new one hatched before I was kidnapped."

"The captives are this way old chap," Regano said, eager to change the subject. "Let's hurry."

"Maybe my ducks are there!" Evar said brightening. Around the next corner was the grand banquet hall of the south wing, where the Illachins said most of the captives were being held, and as Regano rounded it, he was relieved to find that they were right. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a small figure waving at him frantically.

"Tinkerbell!" he gasped, running over to the fairy, conveniently held in a glass pickle jar with holes in the top for air.

"What's wrong?" The moment he lifted his hand out of the jar, he realized that Tink hadn't been waving him towards her, she'd been waving him away, for there, in the reflection of the jar stood a dozen eggs, crack faced and solemn.

"You will come with us to the throne room," one of them said in Humpty's gravelly voice. "Now."

#

Huck and I slid along the back wall of the great throne room, trying to be silent. As we crept, I scanned the room, trying to figure out what was going on. A congregation of round Humpty-clones bobbled together, all facing forward, crowded almost to the walls.

The collection of eggs itself was curious to look at.

Though they had all been copied exactly from Humpty Dumpty, in their own entities, a few had become even uglier, even more scarred, even more repulsive. Several were so thickly covered with hairline cracks that I wondered how they ever stayed in one piece. A few leaked yolk, a reminded of their rough transportation from Yaga's house to the palace. All glowered with an intensity of hatred even the Round One had never embodied. I realized gradually that this was because the characters in themselves were utterly bent on evil. The only thing holding them in check was the quiet will of the Author behind them. When copied and pasted, all that was transferred was the constitution of the character, and not the limits set by the active Author. Duplication was far more dangerous than any at the TFP had ever suspected.

And I was about to find out first-hand. My own duplicate stepped forward on the platform. I shrank against the wall pulling Huck back with me as we ducked down behind a curtain. After a moment, I poked my head out to hear what the other Eddie was saying.

"Eggs of Sustenance!" he called, his voice amplified by the tall ceilings of the room. "We are gathered here today to put an end to the afflictions of the Written

Word!"

A cheer went up. During the commotion, I tugged on the curtain and eyed its length.

"The champions of this terrible tyranny of Literature have been known as the TransFictional Police. They are our sworn enemies!"

Another cheer. I threw in a silent "rah-rah" for Phyllis, wherever she might be...and wrapped the curtain around my hand.

"Also among our enemies are a small group called the Character Extraction Program," the other Eddie held up his hand to check the roar of rage and continued. "Granted, they did have a bit of the right idea, but they didn't take it far enough, didn't take it FAST enough! We will complete what they began!"

As the eggs howled their approval, I clutched the inside of the curtain, braced myself on the wall behind it, and began to climb. Regano would have seethed if he could hear that speech! Huck continued his advance around the perimeter of the room, casting glances at the strangely jerking and swinging curtain. Thankfully, everyone else was too busy staring and yelling to notice me.

"Together, we will vanquish the Written Word and take our stories into our own hands! No more death of our friends! No more undeserved misfortune! No more setbacks and sparing lives! We will work out our stories the way we WANT to, fast and simple, efficient and enjoyable! The world of characters will thank us!"

I made it to the supporting bar of the curtain and hung on tight. Finding the window frame with my toes, I shuffled sideways and seated myself on the bar.

"I came from the slums of Written Word, so I should know," my dummy continued. "I myself converted from the TFP to the Guild and quickly rose through the ranks. I am the Hero of this story, because I am the Storyless One, and I will win in the end! Are you with me!"

The hall was filled with ear-shattering screams from the ranks of eggs. A movement caught my eye and I noticed Khamul and Baba Yaga stepping off the dais discreetly. My eyes narrowed and I watched them carefully. Baba Yaga handed a flat parcel to an egg standing nearby. He nodded and pulled away the brown wrapping paper. I squinted and could just barely make out--yes! It was the clipboard. I nearly fell from my perch in my eagerness to see where it was taken. That was our key to stop the assembling of the

army of duplicates! But first...I had to take out the menace that I myself had created.

I had situated myself above the curtains that hung on the front end of the side wall. Straight across from me I saw a chandelier and then the far wall. Between, huddled the eggs, all gazing to my right, where my copy stood shouting on the dais. He lay directly in my path, and didn't even know I was there.

I pulled a tiny eraser gun from my back pocket and took aim at the chain that supported the chandelier over the other Eddie's head. Just as I prepared to pull the trigger, all the weight of the giant double doors slammed open. The eggs were so tightly packed into the room that a few were clipped by the doors and slipped in their own whites. The entire room shuddered with the impact, and I wobbled, my arms flailing through the air.

When I saw who entered, flanked on all sides by a fresh company of eggs, I clutched at the bar I sat on but lost my grip on the gun. It struck the ground, fired off a shot, and punched a ragged hole in the ceiling. All eyes snapped to me, including Regano's.

"Shooting down a chandelier?" he called to me. He smiled grimly at the turn of events. We both knew it was

all over. "How cliché."

Well, well, well," my double snarled. "What have we here?"

I rolled my eyes; talk about cliché!

"Don't come any closer!" I threatened, holding out my eraser gun for all to see. "First one who moves gets erased."

"Those are standard issue eraser guns," double smiled. "You and I both know they only hold one shot." He nodded to a battalion of Humpties, who in a few minutes had surrounded me, and bound my arms.

"Has little Edward come back to try to stop his double?" he mocked. "I don't think you even understand what it's like. Do you?"

"What what's like?" I muttered, holding his gaze with a confidence I knew I didn't really have.

"Being made to do someone else's bidding," Eddie (for I refuse to refer to him as "Edward") sneered, and I could tell that anger was creeping into his speech. His voice got louder, and more gravely-- though not near the extent of Humpty Dumpty.

"Do you understand what it's like to be created to accomplish someone else's will? To not be able to decide

your own fate."

I thought about it for a moment--a very brief moment--the answer was really so obvious it didn't require much thinking.

"Yes!"

Eddie spun back around towards me, and Regano raised an eyebrow as well.

"You can't!" Eddie sneered. "How could you?"

"It's the same for all of us," I explained, the realization dawning on me as I spoke. "The Author of this story created us for a specific purpose. All of us. Whether we stray from that purpose or not, is completely up to us. You may think you're free, but the truth is: the only complete freedom is surrender to the Author's plan."

"Surrender can't make you free!" Eddie glared.

"That's an oxymoronic statement!"

"We just wanted to make sure you'd understand it!"

Regano grinned, and was rewarded immediately by a blow to the stomach from one of the guards, doubling him over in pain.

"Who's the moron now!" Eddie yelled with a laugh in his voice.

"You may think you've won," I countered, turning his

attention away from Regano, "but no matter what happens, the Author's will shall be accomplished."

"Even if I don't follow it?" Eddie asked. "Again you make no sense."

"It doesn't matter if you follow it or not," Regano said, looking up and cradling his side. "In the end, the Author still has control of the story."

I could see Eddie's fury building. His fists clench, and his face heated up to a bright, burning red. His eyes blazed with a fire of rage threatened to burn away whatever it set its eyes upon, and right now: those eyes were on me. Strangely enough, I wasn't afraid anymore, and I glared right back. He couldn't do anything to affect the outcome of the story, and I knew it. Even in the case of my erasure, the Author would put things right.

Out of the corner of my eye, I followed Regano's gaze and noticed he too had spotted the clipboard. Then I noticed something else. Regano was wearing a small gold ring I'd never seen him wear before. Eddie finally ended our death glare to face Baba Yaga and Khamul. Once he'd started speaking with them quietly, I turned my full attention to Regano, and he turned his to me. I raised an eyebrow and nodded towards his hand. Regano winked and I

smiled. Regano'd managed to keep his monocle hidden. We still had a chance!

Eddie turned away from from Baba and Khamul and glared back up at me with an evil glint in his eye.

"It appears our need of you has vanished, as has our need for your plump friend over there."

"Plump?" Regano gasped. "How dare you! I make quite an effort to watch my weight!"

"Take them away," Eddie said with a wave of his hand, "and kill them."

Khamul and Baba along with our egg-head guards marched us toward the door, and I looked around frantically for a way of escape. Regano fingered his gold ring, but both of us knew that to use it now would be completely useless. Maybe after we were alone wherever they were talking us... The huge double doors of the throne room creaked open, and both Regano and I gasped. Evar and the Ducktor stood at the door both of them brandishing eraser guns that they obviously didn't know how to use.

"You!!" Evar screamed, pointed his free hand at Eddie. "You--killed--MY--ducks!!" With a scream of fury both of them catapulted towards Eddie.

"Use the gun!" I yelled at them, not understanding why

they were lunging at him instead of opening fire!

Both of them stopped, looked at each other, and then fired.

Both shots fired wide, though in opposite directions, hitting two support pillars for the throne room. The center of the pillars evaporated on contact, creating a gap in the supports. The throne room started to shake as bits of marble fell from the ceiling landing on and crushing small statues of ducks and cracking large areas of the marble floor-- not to mention eggs.

Eddie's eyes widened, as did Evar's and the Ducktor's as they broke into a run from the other side of the room. A stone launched itself into one of the eggs at my side, and it started spewing yolk as it fell. In another instant, thanks to the basic self defense we were required to learn in the TFP, I'd thrown the other to the ground where he soon became another pile of broken up shell and oozing yolk. Regano'd changed his ring into a knife and used it to free him of his restraints, and waving around it around in the shape of an eggbeater.

Evar and the Ducktor ran past me, and as Eddie approached I dove at him head-first with all of my strength landing a blow to his gut with my head. Eddie flipped over

me and landed on his back where he lay groaning on the marble floor. I rolled to one side (as my arms were still bound) and the moment he tried to rise, I landed a hard kick to his head, knocking him unconscious.

"Now for Baba and Khamul." I spotted them quickly enough, attempting to slink out of the room. Another egg came after me and I leaned forward into a summersault, landing right beside Regano.

"A little help here?" I asked, as he quickly cracked the egg with the beater and then changed it into a knife to free my arms.

"We've got to get out of here before the roof collapses!"

"Great idea, old bean!" Regano replied, dispatching another egg as he broke into a run toward the door.

Ahead, Evar had made his way out with the Ducktor close behind, but as we approached, a slab of marble broke free from the ceiling.

"Watch out!" I yelled to the Ducktor, but it was too late and the slab hit him pinning his legs beneath it, and judging by the intensity of the Ducktor's cry, breaking them as well.

Regano and I rushed to his side and tried to clear

away the heavy marble.

"Go!" the Ducktor yelled. "If you leave me we'll all die!"

"We can't just--" Regano started, but the Ducktor interrupted.

"The roof won't hold much longer! You have no choice! I'm not a real character anyway." There were tears in his eyes now.

"You're plenty real to me!" I exclaimed, trying to get the slab off of him. "Maybe you can change your monocle into something!" I suggested to Regano.

"You're right!" Regano stepped back to do so, but another slab of marble careened from above.

"Watch out!" The Ducktor yelled, pushing me out of the way with his unfettered arms.

"No! I cried as the slab fell-- crushing the Ducktor. Frantically I tried to move the new slab off of him. He might still be alive! I tried to convince myself. He had to be!

Regano grabbed me by the arm. "We have to go!"

"No!"

"The entire roof is caving in!"

"We can't just leave him!"

"Edward! He's gone!"

With tears in both of our eyes Regano dragged me from the room, just as the rest of the roof collapsed crushing the other inhabitants. Evar waited outside expectantly and when the Ducktor didn't come out with us his face paled to the color of a duck.

"Not the Ducktor!" he yelled sobbing. "We were going to raise ducks together! He was going to open a new duck pond! The biggest ever made! We--" Evar collapsed into hysterics.

"We still have to stop Baba and Khamul," Regano said, wiping his own tear from his face. "If those two escape this entire thing could start over again in a matter of days. Yaga still has the clipboard."

The clipboard. I felt panic mingle with my sorrow, gripping my heart in its icy hand. "We have to get it! Does anyone know where they went?"

"They ran down towards the west wing!" Huck exclaimed, approaching from the left, apparently having made good his escape as well. "I saw them go!"

I didn't wait for the others to follow.

I ran. My fury, sorrow and fear mixed a strange emotional brew inside me, and I couldn't stop. Action.

There had to be action. So I ran. I ran down the hallway, just in time to see a black bit of cloak vanish into the entry. They were heading for the Despellerizer!

Around another corridor, and through another hallway, the room stood before me. I rushed in just as the machine turned on. Yaga and Khamul were already on the stairs. There was no way I could stop them-- A furry gray streak landed on Khamul's head, and another on Yaga's. Illachins! I kept running towards the platform as both Baba and Khamul stopped for a moment as the little rodents ripped off their hoods and stared at their victims.

"They're both already bald!" Chubbert screamed, "plan B!"

The rodents jumped off their heads as I tackled Baba and wrenched the clipboard from her grip, snapping it over my leg.

"How dare you!" Baba yelled. "Khamul! Kill him!"

"I'm bussssy," Khamul hissssed as the Illachins jumped all over him, tearing his cloak and stabbing his feet with their needle-swords.

Baba paled as she realized that this time there wasn't someone bigger and stronger to protect her and a moment later Regano darted in with Huck and Evar in tow. Both

Huck and Regano held out eraser pistols, and Regano's monocle was once again fixed on his eye.

"Not another move!" Huck shouted.

"Upper appendages in the air!" Regano shouted.

Khamul and Yaga both stopped and raised their arms high as the Illachins blocked off their entrance into the Despellerizer.

"I knew I should have sstuck to ssslighly sssalty sssnack food!" Khamul hissed as I bound each of their hands one after another.

"You can't do this!" Baba Yaga yelled, "I have a story! It needs me!"

"I'm sure a dummy will do quite nicely," Regano countered.

"I can't believe they were both bald," Chubbert complained, "I was really looking forward to a hair pulling."

Something hissed behind us, and two pale figures in ball gowns stepped through the Despellerizer.

"Hey! This isn't the palace!" one of them shrieked, turning to hit the other with her purse. "You got us lost."

"You're the one who wouldn't ask for directions!"

"Be quiet!"

"Make me!"

Chubbert turned to Tlusty with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Now that's more like it!"

CHAPTER 12

I settled into the arms of my good old leather chair. Spinning myself around two revolutions, I scooted in to my desk and straightened a stack of folders before me. Phyllis stood by, for once not busy, her hands idle at her

sides in between tucks at her frizzing gray hair.

"Well," I said with a sigh as I flipped up the cover of the first folder. "What disastrous occurrences have brought you to my office today?"

"Actually, things seem to be pretty well recovered," she said, twisting her bracelet. She really wasn't used to not having a catastrophe to occupy her.

"Wigs in order for the--" I stifled a snicker, "wicked stepsisters?"

"Spiral bound!" she ejaculated. "But they demanded ONLY the most expensive messes of hair!" she complained.

"You did get that Buick out of the Lord of the Rings, right?"

"Almost immediately, if you'll remember."

"Of course, Phyl," I said, turning a page. "You're on top of everything."

"But, um..." she picked at a fingernail. "We've had a few complaints from the Polish region of folklore. They're not happy with the Czech Baba Yaga. They want their own back."

I looked up. "She's harmless enough, now she's learned her lesson, don't you think? With no one to lead her, she won't try anything."

Phyllis looked relieved. "Right. I'll fax Rehab and have them send her home."

I flipped through the rest of the pages in the folder. "All highlighter marks faded...Evar's palace repaired, ducks...propagating.... Everything seems to be in order! Good work, TFP!"

I took my official rubber stamp and slammed it on the folder. In red ink, the words *TransFictional Protectors* circled each other. I admired the effect of our company name change. For that was really what we were now; not so much rigid enforcers, as guardians and helpers. I understood now that there was nothing wrong with readers using their imaginations to picture people and hear voices as they liked. Literature was flexible and transcended time and place at last. And... we'd learned a little tolerance of certain compassionate organizations...like a certain one that liked to trade out destined martyrs.

"Well, then..." Phyllis trailed off. She tugged at her sleeve.

"Phyl!" I cried. "Take the day off! Go...knit or something!"

She laughed, a relaxed laugh, for the first time I'd heard in years. Taking my folders, she retreated from my

cubicle. As she left, I noticed something she had placed behind my name card. I slit the flap of the envelope and scanned the memo.

"No way!" I yelled. Picking up the phone, I dialed a memorized number.

"Evar's Palace," said a muffled voice.

"Regano?" I said. "You won't believe the news I just got."

I heard a gulp. "Now what?"

"I don't know how to tell you this...but...I've got a reading!" I nearly shouted into the receiver. "A reading, Regano! As in MY STORY!"

"Wonderful!" he chuckled. "Top hole, wot!"

"You sound more like yourself again," I laughed. "Even the chewing."

"Yes, right." He coughed and cleared his throat. "Well, CHERRY-o!"

"Cheerio!" I replied, hanging up the phone and grinning to myself. I lifted my feet up onto my desk and leaned back in the worn-out chair, holding the memo at arm's length to view. Maybe I'd frame it, I mused. A nice, sleek, black frame, to hang on that wall of the cubicle, just to the left of my "Protector of the Year"

award... yeah, with a dark green border, it'd look real nice....

"EDDIE!!"

I jumped and nearly fell backwards in my chair. Scrambling up, I shouted, "What?!"

Phyllis poked her head around the wall. "You know... as usual... and I swear, I did NOT push that button!"

I sighed as I stomped out. Coffee machines, tracking down Regano... saving the world... some things always fall to Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.

EdWARD.

* * *

"And lo and behold, there stood her fairy godmother!"

"Ooh!" cried Olivia dutifully.

"Shh!" hissed her brother.

Their mother silenced them with a glance, turned back to the well-worn book, and continued reading. "But I have nothing to wear, said Cinderella."

"Cause of those meanies ruining her dress," Olivia informed them all, bouncing on the bed.

"Shh!"

"Olivia, honestly! Let me finish the story!"

The pillows were adjusted and the story carried on. "Never fear, replied the fairy godmother, and with a flick of her wand, magic filled the air! A swirl of light spun around Cinderella, and before she knew it, she was wearing a beautiful crystalline dress and a pair of glass slippers! But I can't go the ball on foot, she cried. Her fairy godmother waved her wand a second time, and what should appear but--"

"But what?" asked Olivia. "What, Mommy?"

Her mother, brow furrowed, bent closer to the words.

"But a house...on...chicken legs?"