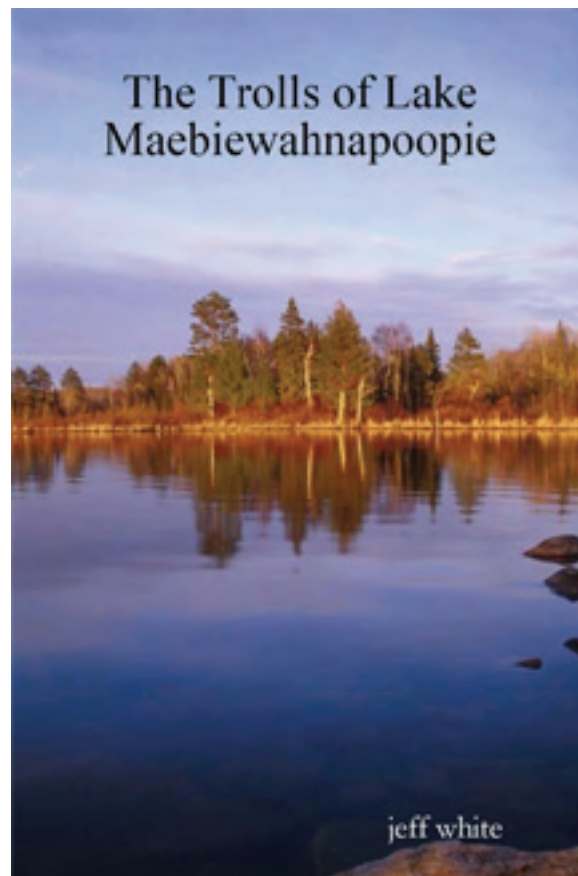


The Trolls of Lake Maebiewahnapoopie



A novel by

jeff white

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Prologue: A Long Time Ago

In the middle of the dimly lit cave sat a creature named Brumvack.

Brumvack was king of the trolls. His subjects, an even dozen of them, sat on boulders staring dully at him, as though he were a television set.

Though trolls are known to be extremely stupid creatures, one in every generation is born with the intelligence of, say, a politician, or even a little better. Brumvack was the smart troll of his generation. He got what he wanted by tricking the other trolls, by lying to them, by turning them against one another. Early in his long life, he had become the king troll.

(Though, actually, the translation “king” is only an approximate one. In the troll language, the actual word means something like “having the disagreeable odor of decomposing fat.”)

So his name and title is not so much “King Brumvack” as it is “Brumvack the Rancid”).

Traditionally, the troll who could belch the loudest got to be king. Brumvack, though his belches were very convincing, was not the loudest belcher amongst the Rabid Band. The loudest was a troll by the name of Schmooze-glutton, but Schmooze-glutton was stupid even for a troll. He was no match for the wily Brumvack.

Brumvack was huge. He looked like an unbalanced pile of rocks with a skin condition. Mold grew under his armpits and in his belly button. When Brumvack spoke, the trolls listened.

“Big uurrngh trouble (cough)” Brumvack snorted. His speech always sounded like that, with coughs and wheezes and voluminous throat-clearings and snot wipings. He thought they made him sound distinguished. “(Snort) It is the time aargh of the big (wheeze) sleep.”

Brumvack was a smart leader: smart, at least, for a troll. He knew that his subjects would get bored if he made speeches, and that they would rebel if he simply gave them orders. For that reason, he told them long, rambling stories, rich in troll history and tradition. The stories pointed directly toward what he wanted them to do, but the trolls never seemed to realize this. The correct course of action, upon hearing the story, simply seemed obvious to any right-thinking troll.

This is the story Brumvack told that cold afternoon, minus all the bodily interruptions, and with the language cleaned up a bit:

We, the Rabid Band Trolls, have lived under Lake Borack since the age of the dinosaurs. (Back then, of course, the lake had not been called Maebiewahnapoopie, but “Borack,” which was the troll’s word for “big stinking body of water.” Notice the similarity to the name “Brumvack,” which means, simply, “big stinking body.” But let’s allow Brumvack to continue).

At that time, we had a tremendous underground city underneath the lake, and we sent excursions up every couple of weeks to catch the bone-headed dinosaur fish. Though we are known to be gluttons of the worst sort (the trolls murmured approval at the compliment) one bone-headed fish could feed the bunch of us for three or four days. On feast days, of course, we could consume a whole fish in an afternoon, but there were leftovers for cold sandwiches afterwards.

It was a happy time for the Rabid Band. It was the good life. We spent our days guzzling beer and our evenings sitting around a bonfire. We held nightly belching contests. Our numbers were such that we could fight each other with

our big troll clubs every month or so, and still enough would survive that things didn't get lonely.

The Rabid Band existed in such splendor for millions of years. Good times, though, always end. It began to get cold. The dinosaurs became sluggish, and slowly died. The bone-headed fish, though they lived longer than the creatures of the land, eventually became extinct as well. Great sheets of ice covered the land. The trolls of the Rabid Band, used to eating the bone-headed fish whenever we wished, began to starve.

Trolls (Brumvack continued) are underground creatures. Even when fishing, we only poke our big noses out of the water to catch a breath. (At the mention of their big noses, the trolls grunted with approval. Brumvack was appealing to their vanity.) Now that the lake offers no food except the puny mudfish, though, we are driven to the surface to hunt. We chip our way out of the ice, kill an occasional woolly mammoth, and survive the best we can. Food is severely rationed. Even wood for the bonfire is scarce. We, once the great and powerful Rabid Band, are forced to eat meager portions of cold mammoth, stare at the ashes of our now-small fires, and dream of the good old days when food was plentiful, the beer flowed copiously, and we had enough

energy to spar with our big wooden clubs. Now, though, many die of cold and hunger, until this pitiful band that you see before you is all that is left.

The time has come, my stinky friends (more murmurs of approval) for the Big Sleep.

If the trolls had taken the time to think about it, which they didn't, they would have agreed that it was time for hibernation. Trolls could not comfortably exist in an ice age. Brumvack, being the leader he was, made his point through his story that it was time to sleep their way through the cold centuries of winter.

The eloquently told story was all it took to get them headed to their rock piles. They knew in their guts that it was time. One by one, they got up from around the meager fire and went to their own corners of the cave. There, they buried themselves in the boulders of their beds, determined to sleep until better times. Brumvack himself went to his bed, and piled his own boulders atop his still form. Soon enough, the cave was filled with the snorts and rumblings of sleep.

Brumvack's plan, as far as he himself was concerned, was working perfectly. As soon as he was sure that his comrades were asleep, he quietly unplied the rocks from his ponderous self. He

was going to have a little party. With all the other trolls out of commission for the next few hundred years, there was plenty for him. He tiptoed through the network of the cave, helping himself to the other troll's food. He sat in front of the fire, and began munching on the first of many mudfish.

But then he had a thought: what if one of the trolls woke up, and saw him munching on his food? That would surely lead to mayhem of a rather bloody sort. As quietly as he could, then, he crept into the colder reaches of the cave where the trolls were sleeping. He collected every club he could find. These, he set by the fire and continued eating.

Brumvack had a feast. He ate mudfish, gills and all, and chewed for a while on an old mammoth bone. He sat by the bonfire he had made from every last scrap of wood. He drained the last keg of beer, one stone mugful at a time.

“Stupid (burp) trolls,” he said, imagining his new life without all those extra mouths to feed, without all the groaning and complaining, without the smells of their stinking bodies in the cave. It was going to be a nice few hundred years, he thought, living here alone while the others slept.

The fire was losing its brilliant heat. Brumvack grunted, shrugged his massive shoulders, and threw a few clubs on the fire.

It was a marvelous three days. Brumvack ate all he wanted. His stomach was full for the first time in years. He drank mugfuls of beer. He was, for the first time in months, warm all the way to his bones.

Eventually, though, the time came when Brumvack was sitting in front of a pile of glowing ashes, with no more food to eat and no more clubs for the fire. He once again felt the uncomfortable rumblings of hunger in his belly. He didn't have enough energy to try to catch any mudfish. It occurred to him that he couldn't bring down a mammoth alone, and certainly couldn't without a club to wield. He should have thought to hold back his own club, at least, from the fire.

Brumvack was alone in the world, with only his hazy green belches to keep him company. "Aargh, bother, (burp) piffle," he said, and slowly lumbered to his feet. He went to his rock pile, where he slowly buried himself and went to sleep.

Chapter 1. Present Day: Lone Tree

A sense of unease was building in the town by the lake. No one could say exactly what was wrong, but the people seemed to be holding their breath, expecting something to happen. It had something to do with the end of summer and the onset of fall, perhaps, but it was more than that as well. The populace was eating out less, and getting home early. Windows were locked and doors were bolted. Shades were drawn, and at night only the dull bluish lights of television sets behind them gave evidence that the town was alive at all.

A creature never before seen by the eyes of man felt the unease, and was borne onto the streets. A silent creature. A creature that drove a yellow Chevy Cavalier.

It was Ferdy Chicken.

Ferdy Chicken was intent upon saving the town from doom in whatever form. If the residents of Lone Tree had looked out of their windows, which they didn't, they would have seen Ferdy patrolling the quiet streets. The car was yellow, it was American-made, it had an orange chicken painted on the hood: it was the Ferdy-mobile.

Chapter 2. Present Day: The Trolls

The cave was in an uproar.

Schmooze-glutton had awoken first. His stomach was rumbling from hunger after centuries of sleep, and brought him awake like an alarm clock. He grunted, made a face, and waved away the nasty green fumes that wafted out of his mouth. Over the years, various fungi had taken up residence there. His tongue felt like a loaf of moldy bread.

Schmooze-glutton sat up in his rocky bed. His brain swam slowly awake. He felt awful. His arms and legs were like lead weights; his joints creaked when he moved. While Schmooze-glutton couldn't articulate his problem, he knew what it was: sleep is hard on a body. Especially sleep that lasts hundreds of years.

Eventually, however, the empty feeling in his gut overcame the sluggishness of his brain, and Schmooze-glutton got out of bed. It was a chore un-piling all the rocks he had buried himself in, but he managed it with the stubbornness that trolls bring to most operations. His muscles felt weak, though, and he was only barely able to remove the last rock from his lap. He could see that he had lost a lot of weight. The skin covering his belly, where before it could barely contain his bulging gut, now hung loosely to his knees. His tree-trunk legs were now little but bone covered with more folds of loose skin. He needed some food.

It was Schmooze-glutton's angry yell that shook the rest of the trolls awake. He had gone to the hollowed-out rock where he kept his food, and found it empty. Though he clearly remembered that he had set aside a few mudfish for when he awoke, they were now gone, as was the mammoth bone he had been saving. He stared at the empty rock in disbelief for about a minute and a half. Anger built up inside him with a slow trembling intensity. There was only one way to relieve the anger within him: to strike back at whoever or whatever had taken his last few morsels of food. He went to the corner of his room to fetch his club.

The reader knows, of course, that his club wasn't there either.

When Schmooze-glutton discovered the fact of his missing club, his eyes grew wide in disbelief. He was angry, in fact livid,

but now none of that anger had anywhere to go. Where he wanted to vent his anger onto somebody's head via his club, now his anger just bounced around inside his diminished frame, looking for a way out. Some of it found a way out when Schmooze-glutton opened his mouth; it poured out of him in a scream that shook the cave walls. More of it came out as Schmooze-glutton jumped up and down, shaking the caverns and loosening small overhead rocks. More of it came out as he ran up and down the length of the cave, still screaming. When that didn't satisfy, he grabbed a rock and pounded the floor with it. Still unsatisfied, he pounded his head on the floor, then further pounded his head with the rock. He screamed again.

Schmooze-glutton was a very angry troll.

The other trolls, perturbed by all the commotion, slowly came to life as well. As they un-piled themselves from their beds, they found a similar emptiness in their larders and weapons stores. Before long, all the trolls had joined in with Schmooze-glutton's ranting cacophony. Oh, the unfairness! Much yelling and head-bashing ensued. The ground shook with it.

The only one who wasn't awake was Brumvack, their leader. He slept through much of the commotion, snoring away and dreaming peacefully. After his feast of his last waking days, he could have slept another century. Only when another of the

trolls—perhaps it was Schmatzenbladder, a short but stout troll known for his strength—flung a rock that bounced off the top of Brumvack’s head did he stir to life. As soon as the rock careened off of his head and broke against the wall behind him, Brumvack sat up and eyed the mayhem about him. But he didn’t join the fray. Ordinarily, getting hit by a rock—even accidentally—would have been met with swift retribution. Brumvack knew that he should leap out of bed, grab a rock of his own, and use it to pound the guilty party. Payback was important to a leader. But still he sat in his bed. Though he hadn’t been awake at the beginning of all this madness, he had a pretty good idea what the others were on about. He vaguely remembered his last days awake, alone and well fed and comfortable.

Finally, he roused himself. If he was going to stay out of trouble, he’d better get busy. The first order of business was to look to his own empty larder, his own empty weapons rack, and to feign surprise. “AAARGH,” he yelled. “Where’s my stuff?” He joined in the screaming, the foot-stomping, the head-pounding. Especially the head-pounding. If he didn’t look pretty bruised up when he was done—at least as bruised up as the rest—the other trolls would look at him skeptically. Wasn’t he as mad as everyone else? Wasn’t he prepared to defend his honor as a troll? Did he perhaps know something that the others didn’t? His

leadership would be challenged. It hurt, pounding his head against the cave floor without the energy of anger behind it, but it was necessary.

After a good couple hours of violence, the trolls were exhausted. They sat in disarray around the cavern, breathing heavily and grunting their helplessness. Brumvack saw his opportunity to bring them to order.

“Auuugh (burp) snivel,” he said. “We’ve got to arrrgh go up and (cough) wring the necks of whoever got our (wheeze) stuff.”

The walls of the cave rang with the noises of assent from the trolls. Brumvack spoke of troll honor, and of taking the enemy before the break of the morning sun, and of making the enemy pay for breaking into troll territory. It was necessary to tell them these stories, because without a clear mission they were likely to forget where they were going along the way. Trolls’ stomachs often spoke more loudly than their brains. Especially after their long slumber, they were likely to wander off alone, leave the band. Where would Brumvack be without them? A leader, with no followers?

With his speech, Brumvack had the trolls once again at a fever pitch of excitement, but this time it was controlled, directed. They were going up to the lake, to the shore if necessary, to find the culprits. To find them and, if possible, to eat them.

Chapter 3. The Discovery of the New World

The trolls made their way to the lake.

This requires a bit of explanation. Though the trolls were known, fully, as The Rabid Band of Lake Borack, and were colloquially thought to live underneath that lake, in fact they lived under the hills that bordered the lake on the north side. The only entrance to their caverns, however, was at the bottom of the lake itself.

Lake Borack was a deep lake, and since the days of the dinosaurs, it had been a cold one. In order to reach the caverns of the Rabid Band, one had to swim deep in that cold water and into a small underwater cavern. If one swam into that cavern a few hundred yards (where it was totally dark even in the strongest noon sunlight) it eventually widened and broadened. A hundred yards or so further, the rock ceiling of the cavern rose above the water's

surface. Only here was there any air for whatever creature had swum so far.

Further in, the ground rose up above the level of the water, a beach rising up from an underground lake.

While technically this underground lake was a part of Lake Borack, the trolls had a different name for it. They called it “Dark Water.” Above Dark Water was no endless sky, but a dome of granite that has never seen the sun.

Still, one could dimly see. The walls of the cavern were laced with phosphorescent minerals that faintly glowed, revealing this lower world of the trolls. But it was no picnic down there. There wasn't enough light to read by, and the cave was a constant 56 degrees Fahrenheit: not warm enough to be comfortable unless one was a cold-blooded cave fish, or a troll with layers and layers of insulating blubber.

The trolls didn't like this cavern; it held a cool dampness that tended to encourage the growth of mold upon their most tender parts. They preferred the dryer caverns under the hills, where there was no water, and where cracks in the earth vented the smoke from their fires.

Or, at least that's what they'd tell you. The truth was darker: the trolls were afraid of a giant creature supposed to inhabit that underground lake. No one had ever seen this creature, or at least

seen the whole of it. At most, a lone troll has on occasion reported seeing a hump of its back curl along the surface of the water.

This creature had had a name once, though it had been lost generations before. None of the trolls living through the last centuries had been brave enough to speak its name, and so it had been lost. Now, they just called it the Dark Water Horror. And it was horrible. There were tales of smaller trolls being eaten whole. That was of no assurance to the larger trolls, because there were also tales of trolls being ripped apart and eaten, delicately, one limb at a time.

The fattest of the trolls, Obeast, had once found a long, cylindrical object a few feet from shore that he supposed might be a tooth of the creature. While no one could prove that it had come from the Dark Water Horror, still, it gave them pause. It hung on a wall in the main troll cavern. Brumvack had placed it there as a warning to the younger trolls: the world is a dangerous place. Be careful. You're safer here with us. The legend was clear: if any troll went alone to the underwater lake, he was likely to be eaten. Better to remain with one's cave mates. There was safety in numbers.

Brumvack himself assumed that if there ever had been a Dark Water Horror, it had gone the way of the dinosaurs. Probably, in fact, it had *been* a dinosaur, whose bones were now at the bottom

of the lake somewhere. Surely, no trolls had mysteriously disappeared for a long while. But he didn't tell the others of these thoughts. It was helpful as a leader to keep his subjects in fear. It was a way to control them.

In any case, on that day the trolls were too angry to be scared, or perhaps too hungry to care. They roared from the caves where they lived downward toward Dark Water. They waded into that water with none of the toe-testing and gingerly steps that usually accompanied the task. They were driven. Brumvack, to keep them in their state of frenzy, emitted a foodwhoop, a high yell of the hunt that shook the stone walls and echoed eerily around the cavern.

The thirteen trolls of the Rabid Band swam out into the water, splashing and grunting and taking the deep breaths necessary to swimming the length of the underwater cavern that would give them entrance to the lake itself.

It was a sight to see, that baker's dozen of bulging bodies cutting through the water, even though those bodies bulged less belligerently than they had before the Big Sleep.

Their excitement, however, was short lived. Even before they reached the surface of the lake, they could see that their world had changed. The lake wasn't covered in great sheets of ice any

more, thankfully, but there were other problems. The biggest problem was that the water was clean. No longer was it green with the slime of the bone-headed dinosaur fish, or brown with the silt of the mudfish. It was clean and crystal clear and it tasted terrible. The trolls shrank at the first sight of it. But they steeled themselves and swam to the surface.

One at a time, first Brumvack and then Schmooze-glutton and then all the rest, poked their noses above the surface of the water. As soon as they did so, all the energy of revenge and hunger—and even the energy of proud troll honor—left them. Twenty six troll eyes scanned the horizon, and for a moment they couldn't even breathe.

The world, like the water, had changed.

Long ago, of course, the land had been lush with a dinosaur-studded jungle. They had survived the change of climate to a frozen wasteland that only the occasional woolly mammoth inhabited. That had been bad, but this was worse. Instead of the great icy plains stretching into the distance, they saw nothing but houses and buildings.

Of course, trolls didn't know they were houses and buildings; all they could see were boxy structures that grew everywhere, like giant square toadstools. They looked unnatural. Brumvack had no doubt that they would turn out to be poisonous.

Still, though the other trolls shrank back in horror from what they saw, he urged them forward. “Let’s (wheeze) see what else is here,” he said, and motioned them to swim a little closer to shore.

The next things they saw were more horrible than the cubical mushrooms: giant beetles with round feet, which raced along in search of food. Those beetles looked menacing. They were too small as individuals to eat trolls, but the trolls knew how insects worked: a whole group of them would work together to chase a troll, to surround it, to take it down. The trolls had seen the giant insects of the Pleistocene, but these were huge. They whined and thrummed as they ran.

And closer, there right on the lakefront, was a final horror too terrible to contemplate: two-legged creatures, like trolls, though these were much different than any troll they had ever seen. They were smaller, wimpier, and much, much uglier.

As the trolls took in this view of their new world, they each felt a lurch in their stomachs. Where they had hoped that their hibernation would deliver them to a world more like the dinosaur age, instead it had given them this: a world too radically different from the one they thought they knew. And those two-legged creatures: what was that about? Were they the new breed of trolls, living on top of the earth, instead of underneath it? If so, something

had gone badly wrong in their breeding. They were short, skinny, and terribly small-brained creatures. If this is what the grand race of trolls had become, they wanted no part of it.

Brumvack, treading water for one last look, got the attention of the others with a small burp. He signaled them to return to the cave. There, they would regroup. The world had changed. Brumvack sensed that they had no business up on the land until they had completed further investigation.

“No stopping along the way,” he said. “It might (snort) be dangerous.”

Chapter 4. Photographic Evidence

If Lori Bradshaw hadn't been on the scene, no one would have known that something strange was happening. Lori was the photographer for the *Gazelles Gazette*, the weekly newspaper of Lone Tree High School. As the photographer, it was Lori's mission to capture some event—*any* event—happening at the school that might look educational.

That afternoon, she had been outside with Mrs. Nielsbohr's science class. The students were collecting various plant and insect life from Lake Maebiewahnapoopie. Lori snapped pictures of scientists at work: Michael Dewey holding a dragonfly in a threatening way in front of Jennifer Thompson's nose, Jennifer Thompson wrapping seaweed around Michael Dewey's head, and Mrs. Nielsbohr standing at the lakeside with a look of cool scientific rationality upon her face, as if she had just eaten a lemon.

This was Lori's usual fare as the photographer for the school paper. She often felt like an anthropologist, studying another culture. The students that surrounded her didn't have animal bones pierced through their noses, like some ancient tribe in the *National Geographic* magazine, but in every other way they seemed like people who might have evolved on a different continent. Lori was a teenager herself, of course, but she must have been missing some basic teenager gene. The students at Lone Tree High would do whatever they would do, little of it seeming to befit something called "public education," and Lori would record it for posterity.

Her photographs were the hit of the paper, usually, perhaps because the students didn't like to read.

Lori had no idea, of course, how much of a splash her current photographs would make. It wasn't Michael Dewey or Jennifer Thompson that people would be looking at, though: it would be the objects in the background that caught people's attention. The faces rising up out of the lake.

Lori didn't notice anything unusual about the photographs until she got back to her empty journalism classroom and started processing them at the computer. But she noticed something odd about them as soon as she saw the first one on her screen.

The first photograph was the one that featured the dragonfly. There was Michael Dewey, with his fingers in Jennifer Thompson's face. That wasn't new. But what Lori hadn't noticed before was the lake behind them. She could see something breaking the surface of the water, right there between Michael's big head and Jennifer's carefully hair sprayed bangs. It looked for all the world like stones rising up out of shallow water, but Lori knew that wasn't possible: the lake was terribly deep. Deep enough that when the mayor had sunk his boat last month during his Labor Day outing, it had never been recovered. They had called in National Guard divers to go down and get a rope on it and winch it to the surface, but they hadn't been able to reach the bottom of the lake and had given up. Lori herself had covered the story.

She clicked on the next photograph. It was the one with the seaweed forming a slimy halo on Michael Dewey's head. The two high school students were in somewhat different poses, but this photograph, too, featured the stones—or whatever they were—rising up from the lake. In this shot, however, something seemed different. She clicked on the first photo again and arranged the two side-by-side on the screen to compare them. Yes, something *was* different. In the first photo, there were five of the stones. In the second photo, there were six.

Lori enlarged the second photo, until it took up the entire screen. The stones appeared larger, of course, but what struck Lori was how regularly shaped they were. Surely logs, or garbage bags, or whatever else might be floating in the lake, would look more...random...than these looked. She selected just the area of the photograph that held the lake-borne objects, and stretched it to fill the screen.

When she did, Lori sat back in awe. The image was a little blurry at this level of enlargement. No fine detail was present. But she didn't need any fine detail to see that the objects weren't rocks, and they weren't some debris that happened to be floating along as she snapped the picture. These were faces looking back at her. Broad-nosed faces with wide eyes, much bigger than human faces. Most of the faces rose above the water at about chin level, though the one in front revealed a thick neck and just a hint of broad, broad shoulders. One face on the left revealed just the top of the head down to the eyes looking out over the water. And look! Behind that one was a seventh object, surely another head, just breaking the surface.

It was the eyes, though, that got her. The eyes of that first creature, especially. Where some of the creatures were looking slightly away, that one in front seemed to be staring right at her.

For a moment, as she looked back at him, she felt pinned to her chair.

Lori jumped an inch out of her seat when the bell rang, releasing the creature's hold on her. She shuddered a bit, then quickly clicked the photographs off the screen. In a few seconds, a group of students would be wading into the room, followed by Mr. Thorndyke, her journalism teacher. She didn't want to share her find with them. Not yet. They would see it soon enough, when it appeared in the paper.

Chapter 5. Slimegobbler Finds a Stash

The trolls were stung by the new above-ground reality. But their short look at the world had left them shaken, not stirred. No matter what had happened on the surface during the past few hundred years, they remained trolls. This meant that the primary thing on their mind was eating. Brumvack had ordered them back to the cave, but food was on their mind. They hadn't eaten, after all, in centuries. Also, of course, Brumvack had originally urged them out of the cave with tales of food, and even a foodwhoop or two.

After they left the surface of the lake, they swam downwards toward the cave entrance. Inevitably, however, their stomachs had other ideas. If they weren't able to hunt on land, maybe they could find something to eat in the lake. The bone-headed dinosaur fish

were long gone, but perhaps they could come up with a few mudfish for supper.

Slimegobbler was the first to break ranks. He was dimwitted even for a troll, and so probably couldn't be blamed. It's doubtful, given his empty stomach, that he even remembered Brumvack's orders. Oreo and Oleo, the two youngest trolls (and twins) followed him. Oreo and Oleo were both smart, and surely remembered their instructions. But when they swam off after Slimegobbler, no one was too surprised. Younger trolls often looked for trouble, and these two were worse than some.

Brumvack was livid, of course, at this blatant disregard of his authority. His mind turned to punishments for the three trolls. He thought of schemes to force them to return, or, barring that, locking them out of the cave. Leave them at the mercy of the Dark Water Horror! That would teach them.

It was when Obeast followed those three that Brumvack gave up any ideas of keeping the rest of the Rabid Band in line. Trolls, Brumvack reflected, don't think too well at the best of times, and when they are hungry is far from the best of times. There is no trying to convince them that Brumvack knows best when their stomachs are telling them differently. With a burst of motion from his powerful legs, he swam ahead of the group. There, he stopped in the water and turned around. He pantomimed finding something

to eat, and motioned the others to follow Slimegobbler. If they were going off in their own direction, it was better that they thought it was Brumvack's idea.

Together, the trolls searched for food.

Something, Brumvack noted, really had gone badly wrong with the lake. Not only was the water clean, something had gone wrong with the fish as well. Mudfish, though not nearly so filling and tasty as the bone-headed dinosaur fish, were at least edible. The new and improved mudfish, though, were bright and silvery, difficult to catch, and tasted bad besides. They didn't have enough bones to give a satisfying crunch, nor did they taste of the black sediment at the bottom of the lake. Still, in their hunger, each of the trolls wolfed down a few of them. They swallowed them whole, so as to minimize their taste.

While most of the trolls were chasing after the silvery bright fish, though, Slimegobbler dove deep into the lake. There, he made a discovery. It was the shell of a large creature, apparently dead. Inside this shell, he found a big red and white box filled to the top with food. As soon as he opened the box, an oily exudation entered the water. It excited Slimegobbler's taste buds, promising as it did a delicious taste of slightly decomposing food. Within

seconds, each of the trolls nosed their way into the area, much as sharks would as they caught the scent of blood.

The first to arrive was Droolmeister. He, of course, didn't stop to eat; he was smarter than that. Instead, he grabbed the box and began swimming away with it. Before he got far, however, Slimegobbler took hold of it. The two engaged in a tug of war. The box, however, couldn't withstand such treatment. Soon, it broke between the two trolls, sending food in all directions. This left Slimegobbler and Droolmeister holding, respectively, a red box and a white lid, while the rest of the trolls surrounded them and inhaled the food that was floating off in every direction. They were so hungry, and the new fish had been so unsatisfying, and this new food was so indescribably wonderful.

There was something else about this new food as well: it didn't try to swim away from the grasping hands of the trolls. That was a new experience. Even the bone-headed dinosaur fish, though somewhat sluggish, tried to escape from the trolls. This food, though, just floated there in front of them. They could grab it and eat it as they wished. Nor was it so tasteless and disgusting as the new breed of fish. In fact, it was delectable. Though trolls, especially hungry trolls, don't tend to chew their food well, they enjoyed every bite of it. It was too soon gone, leaving only the dismembered red and white box.

The trolls had too little experience in this new world to know what they were eating. Their stash might have interested a few people in town, however. Slimegobbler had discovered, without knowing what it was, the mayor's boat deep in the bottom of the lake. Within it was his hoard of Labor Day hot dogs in a large plastic cooler. They were a few weeks old now, those hot dogs, but the cold water of the deep lake had kept them fresh, mostly. They had only a slight taint of botulism to give them that extra flavorful zest that the trolls so enjoyed.

Chapter 6. Lone Tree High School

The Gazelles Gazette was published, as it always was, on Friday. Usually, this was an occurrence that no one much noticed. The students picked up a copy on their way to their first hour class, looked at it rather than their textbooks during that class, then left it on their desk, or the floor, or somewhere along the hallway to their next class. The only person who particularly noted its publication, then, was Miss Kimberlane, the high school janitor, when she had to pick up 500 or so of the 600 copy print run through the course of the day.

This week was different. Lori Bradshaw, proud of her photographic journalism, had quietly arranged that 2000 copies be printed. This was rather easy; she just told the printer that Mr. Thorndyke had ordered extras. She also ensured that the paper was well distributed. She got up early that morning, early enough to

place copies of the paper in the coffee shops and convenience stores. As people made their way to work, they picked up a copy. Never in the history of the high school had the *Gazelles Gazette* made such a splash. It was a special edition, the first ever for the paper.

The paper wasn't anything too impressive: it was only a single sheet of newsprint, folded twice. But the contents of the paper certainly garnered people's attention. The lead headline shouted out LAKE MAEBIEWAHNAPOOPIE MONSTERS in a font that spanned the front page. Underneath the headline were two black and white snapshots. The first was the enlarged shot of the six monsters, with the pate of a seventh rippling up out of the water. The second was enlarged even more, and showed the first monster, the one that stared directly into the camera. His visage was somewhat blurry, but still his features were plainly evident.

Underneath the photographs was the copy, written by Herman Munson, the student editor himself:

Lone Tree (GGNS): Thursday afternoon, a *Gazelles Gazette* journalist discovered a mystery living in the depths of Lake Maebiewahnapoopie, and brought back with her photographic evidence to prove it.

Appropriately enough, the mystery was discovered during a biology field trip conducted by Mrs. Nielsbohr's fifth hour

class. The above photos, which reveal a previously unknown life form that evidently lives within the lake, were taken during that class. An interview with Mrs. Nielsbohr brought forth two interesting facts. First, she said that the point of the field trip was to discover the plant and animal life native to the lake's biome. Secondly, she confirmed that these creatures were previously unknown, and that the word "monster" might well be applied to them. "Honestly," she is quoted as saying, upon seeing the photographs. "I've never seen anything like it. They're little monsters, is what they are"

Only the size of the creatures, evidently, is now debatable. While Mrs. Nielsbohr refers to them as "little" monsters, the distance at which they were photographed would tend to support the idea that the creatures are quite large....

The article went on from there, but few read it. They saw the photographs that were obviously taken at the lake just a hundred yards or so from the schoolhouse, and that was enough for them. Nearly everyone at school had a copy before first period. Few remained in the school building once they had seen the photos. Instead, they hit the doors and walked down to the lake, hoping for the creatures' reemergence.

At first, they stood peering over the waves and chattered excitedly. A few pointed. Even though they didn't see anything coming up out of the water—no action for the present—they

weren't about to go back into the school building. It was a nice fall day; the morning was crisp but not cold. The sun shown down from a blue sky, and more than that, there was an excitement in the air such as rarely happened on an ordinary school day. Something was living in the lake! Right here in Lone Tree! Most of the students, after having a look and assuring themselves that no creature was currently showing itself, sat down on the grass. They clumped together in little groups, talking and joking and waiting expectantly. If something was going to happen, they didn't want to miss it.

Thus, when the first period bell rang, there was a surprising dearth of students in the school. The teachers, wearily exiting the staff lounge with their morning coffee, walked the nearly-empty hallways as they made their way to class.

They had no idea where their students were, of course. As much as the average teacher exhorts his or her students to read, most teachers don't read much themselves. None had read the school paper. Instead, they wondered amongst themselves what had happened: wasn't there a full contingent of students there earlier? What had happened to them all? Was there an assembly this morning? That couldn't be right, could it? Had anyone heard Principal Klieglight make an announcement?

When they arrived in their classrooms, they found at most two or three students staring back at them. These were the students who also didn't read. Or, possibly, they were students who were too well socialized to show any interest in the world around them. When Mr. Berryola, a math teacher, found so few students in his classroom, he had no idea how to proceed. He was the first teacher to pick up his phone to call the office. "I have only three students in my room," he said into the receiver. "What am I supposed to do?" Other teachers called in for instructions as well, but they weren't as quick as Mr. Berryola. They were put on hold.

Principal Klieglight himself fielded the call from Mr. Berryola. Like all principals, Klieglight liked to hear his own voice. Unlike most principals, however, he was sensitive to the effects that his words had on others. He didn't like to see people squirming, frowning, and grimacing while he was speaking to them, and so was most comfortable talking on the phone, where he could still hear his own voice but didn't have to see people's reactions. He liked the phone.

Here is a transcript from that call:

Mr. Berryola: This is Mr. Berryola from the math department. I have only three students in my room. What am I supposed to do?

Principal Klieglight: I feel sure that you'll bring your class to a fruition of educational activity. Time on task! That's the ticket.

Mr. Berryola: Perhaps you didn't understand my question. What exactly am I supposed to do with my class? You can't expect me to teach with only three students in the room!

Principal Klieglight: I'm sure you understand, Mr. Pinkberry, that sound educational practices contain no room for sloughing, no sir! Those students shouldn't be roaming the halls on passes. No passes! No excuses! It takes a firm hand, shall I say a...a fatherly hand.

Mr. Berryola: I don't think you understand, sir. I didn't allow them to leave...they just never showed up. Perhaps there is an epidemic of some sort...no! Wait a minute! Is this Saturday? No, no that's not right. Is there an assembly today?

Principal Klieglight: Mr. Crayolaberry, I feel sure that this problem will be worked out successfully if you and I could just sit down with all the parties concerned...perhaps a conference call...these students need our guidance. The parents, of course, might feel at a loss to control the students as well. Let's see, just

what was the name of the boy you called me about?
Was it the Williams boy?

Mr. Berryola: No, no, I called to tell you that I have only three students in my classroom.

Principal Klieglight: Oh, I remember now. The Williams boy, yes. I know his father. We play a round at the club every now and then. I feel sure that we'll be able to work something out. Why don't I call him in for a visit? Better yet, a conference call between the three of us. We'll get this straightened out! Nip it in the bud, I always say. Don't let the problem get so out of hand that it's too late to sink the ship! Now, Miss Rumbolt, if you'll excuse me....

Mr. Berryola. I'm not Miss Rumbolt. This is Mr. Berryola.

Principal Klieglight: Oh yes! So it is! Now, Mr. Pinkberry, what seems to be the problem?

After three such calls, Principal Klieglight felt a little dazed. If only his teachers could organize themselves! Organization, that was it. Honestly! It was like talking with eight year olds! Before he became a principal, Klieglight had taught eight year olds, so he knew exactly what he was talking about. He had experienced exactly the same sorts of difficulties when he tried to talk with

them. “Organization,” he had always told his second grade students. “Organization and discipline, that’s the ticket!” But they had responded to this wisdom no better than his teachers did. If only they could organize their minds, he thought, bring a little discipline to their thinking! If they could only listen to themselves! My!

Ms. Blandishment, the school secretary, looked patiently on while Principal Klieglight stormed around his office with his fist in the air. Although he took pains to appear calm and unruffled in front of his teachers and students, there was a lot of this posturing and agonizing in the office. She was used to it. He would gesture at a lamp, then at a potted plant, firmly instructing it in Right Thinking. Right Thinking was something Ms. Blandishment had heard much about in her years at the school.

Principal Klieglight, with a final shake of his fist, finished his tirade. His fist relaxed as he saw Ms. Blandishment. He looked guiltily about the room for a moment.

“Now, where was I?” he asked.

Ms. Blandishment was happy to answer. “You were just trying to get the students back into the building, sir.”

“Into the building? Of course they’re in the building!” He consulted his watch. “My, yes, they’re in the building. It’s quarter to nine! School hours! My students know where they are to be

during school hours, yes sir! You bet they do!” Then he looked sheepish for a moment, and said, “Unless...this isn’t Saturday, is it?”

Ms. Blandishment shook her head.

“No! No, of course it’s not Saturday, or I wouldn’t be here, would I? No, of course I wouldn’t be. Not that I don’t work the occasional weekend, you understand.” He considered for a moment, then a self-satisfied grin came upon his face. “If it *were* Saturday, *you* wouldn’t be here, now would you, Ms. Blandishment? Well, now that that’s settled, I believe I’ll take a short coffee break. Or maybe a Diet Coke. That’s the ticket!”

He headed toward the door of his office, but Ms. Blandishment repeated her concern. “The students, Principal Klieglight. The students.”

“Oh yes. The students.” Principal Klieglight looked confused for just a moment. “Which students were those?”

“The students who are still outside. They’ve gone out to see this...this beast of the lake, I’m afraid.”

“Come now, Ms. Blandishment, there’s no call to be afraid of the beast! No call at all.” He considered for a moment. “What beast would that be, by the way?”

“I didn’t say I was afraid of the beast, I said that I was afraid that the students have skipped school to see the beast. The beast in the lake. This one.” She handed him a copy of the school paper.

Klieglight took the paper, rolled it up, and waved it around his head. “No student of mine is going to miss class!” he said. “Who is it? I shall call his parents immediately.”

“It’s not a single student, Principal Klieglight. It is very nearly all of the students.”

“All of the students? Well, what are they doing? Where are they? Why aren’t they in school? No time for shirking! Time on task!” He slapped the rolled paper onto his desk for emphasis.

“They’re all by the lake, Principal Klieglight.” She gestured to his window. Outside, the students were milling about on the grass. They looked to be settling in for the morning.

“Well, we’ll see about that, won’t we?” He began pacing about his office. He was gearing up, Ms. Blandishment could see, for another assault on the lampshades and potted plants.

“Perhaps the P. A. system, sir.”

“Oh yes! That’s the ticket. The P. A. system! Beautiful, Ms. Blandishment, beautiful.”

Klieglight strode toward the I9000 Central Communications Nexus on one wall of his office. It was quite a system, the I9000. It was a floor-to-ceiling installation, 4 feet wide and 9 feet high,

made of sturdy white plastic and chrome. It had been his first purchase as principal. From here, he could speak with anyone inside or outside the school, and he often did. He picked up the microphone, pushed the green activation button, and flicked the red switch he had personally labeled VOICE OF GOD with a Dymo labeler. It was the switch that routed his announcement to every speaker, in or out of the building. It was his favorite.

Finally, he lifted the microphone, fingered the on button, and pulled it to his lips. “Fellow students!” He lowered the microphone and thought for a moment, “Now, that’s not right, is it?” He raised the microphone and began again. “Students!”

Finally, he was set for some principal action. “It has come to my attention that very few of you are in school. Stop whatever it is you are doing, and come to school immediately! There shall be no second warnings!”

Principal Klieglight put down the microphone. “That will take care of that!” he said with a satisfied smile. He again joined Ms. Blandishment by the window. The students, apparently unfazed by his announcement, remained much as before. “Any time now,” Principal Klieglight said, “they’ll be coming inside. My word is gospel around here.” He stood a moment longer, trying to hold his confident smile in the face of the students’ indifference.

After a moment, he looked nervously at Ms. Blandishment, then coughed into his hand. He took his eyeglasses from his breast pocket, breathed on them, shined them up a bit with a handkerchief, and put them on. He looked out the window again. Still, the students idled upon the hillside.

Principal Klieglight tried to figure out how long it would take his announcement to reach the ears of the students. "Let's see," he whispered to himself. "The speed of sound is...hmmm...times...let's see, a hundred yards or so...carry the one...drat. Story problems!" He gave up, thinking that surely he had been engaged in the problem long enough that the sound should have reached them by now.

Still, there was no action on the part of the students. One, he noticed, was strumming a guitar. A Frisbee sailed lightly on the breeze, catching an updraft. He thought he heard laughter, even at this distance.

Maybe, he thought, the P. A. system was on the fritz. They weren't acting on his orders simply because they hadn't heard them! But a school day without the buffer of the P.A. system was too horrible a scenario to contemplate. He quickly pushed the idea from his mind.

Another glance out the window showed a couple of students throwing rocks into the lake. The sight galled him. It looked for

all the world as if they were on a picnic! On a school day! Principal Klieglight seethed at this breach of his personal authority. He felt a new resolve to address the problem.

“Well, we’ll see about this, won’t we?” he announced to Ms. Blandishment, who was no longer beside him. A phone had rung in the outer office. This time, he let her get it. He had spoken with enough teachers that morning. If they couldn’t bring a little organization and discipline to their minds, he was going to have nothing to do with them. Besides, he had other things on his mind. There was some principal action to be undertaken at this school, and he was just the man for the job.

Klieglight marched back to the I9000. He pushed the green activation button, picked up the mike, toggled the VOICE OF GOD switch, and fingered the on button on the mike. “Fellow students!” he boomed. “This is quite enough! Show yourselves! Er, report to your classes at once! Suspension proceedings will begin immediately! There will be no second warnings!”

This second warning was cut short by Ms. Blandishment, who was standing in his office door with the telephone receiver in her hand. She was gesticulating wildly, and forming silent words in an exaggerated fashion. He couldn’t tell what she was saying, but he didn’t spend much time trying to decipher it. All the world was veering toward chaos.

“All right! All right! I’ll talk to them!” he said. “Do I have to do everything around here? When are these teachers going to become self-sufficient?” He put down the microphone and stalked to the phone on his desk. He picked it up.

“Look,” he said into the receiver, “I’m quite busy now, and don’t have time to solve every problem. Organization and discipline! That’s the ticket! Time on task! No shirking! No passes! No excuses!”

As it turned out, however, Klieglight wasn’t talking to another of his teachers. He wasn’t on an inside line at all. He was on an outside line. This gave him pause. He was speaking, he now knew, on a line that was connected somewhere in the real world. The thought gave Klieglight the shivers. He didn’t have to shiver very long, however, because someone was shrieking at him.

The mayor. Principal Klieglight would recognize his voice anywhere. His shivers gave way to the shakes.

“Klieglight!” the mayor yelled. The mayor was in his usual form. To the voters of Lone Tree, Mayor King was the most reasonable man in the world. His voice was so calm and mellow, he could talk a cow out of a flank steak. Those who worked with him every day, however, knew him to be quite different. The mayor, when there were no voters about, was a screamer. Ms.

Blandishment, from the remove of Principal Klieglight's door, could hear him on the phone.

"Klieglight!" the mayor repeated. "This may be your last day as principal of Lone Tree High School, but I want you to spend that last day picking up and destroying every copy of that newspaper of yours. Panic! There's panic in the streets! Of *my* city! Do you understand me? Get it done. Now!"

"Certainly, sir," said Principal Klieglight. "Certainly. Absolutely. Right away. I'll get right on it. Only...."

Ms. Blandishment heard the voice of the mayor go up a notch. "Only? *Only???*"

"Only...which newspaper would that be, sir?"

It took a few heated minutes, the mayor's voice rising through the octaves past the normal male register, but finally he led Principal Klieglight to understand it was the *Gazelles Gazette* that was the root of the problem. An article in the paper was causing an uproar about town...something about a monastery on the lake. Klieglight knew of no monastery in the area, but he vowed to find it.

"Yes sir. Right away sir. I am to find the monastery and destroy it." His mind was such a whirl of activity, it didn't even occur to him that destroying a monastery wasn't usually held to be

within the purview of a high school administrator. “I’ll do it, brick by brick if necessary.”

Ms. Blandishment took it upon herself at this point to aid Principal Klieglight. From the sound of things, it might be her last chance to do so. She went to his desk and retrieved the newspaper that she had handed him earlier. She unrolled it, stuck it in front of his nose, and pointed to the photographs on the front page.

The poor man took the paper from her with a trembling hand. He had been accosted from all sides this morning, and was about at the end of his reserves. He looked at the photographs that appeared in front of him on the page. His voice, ordinarily a nice strong baritone, sounded like that of a child. “What,” he asked, “what is this?”

Finally, everything fell together for him. Monsters! There were monsters in Lake Maebiewahnpoopie! His lower lip trembled a bit.

Klieglight, stunned to silence, stood there, the paper in one hand and the phone receiver in the other. He stammered. He stuttered a bit. Neither of these behaviors befitted a man in his position, but he was helpless to stop them. Finally, he gripped the phone tightly and asked one last question. “You say this paper came from our school?”

The mayor, Ms. Blandishment could tell, had had enough. His voice raised one final, impossible notch. “Every copy, Klieglight. Every copy. Retrieved and destroyed. By the end of the day! Sooner!” He hung up with a sound like a pistol shot, leaving Principal Klieglight paralyzed where he stood.

In the end, Ms. Blandishment took the receiver from him and guided him into his chair. “You just sit down here for a little while, and I’ll bring you a Diet Coke,” she said. A Diet Coke was often required to calm the nerves of Principal Klieglight.

“Get...” he said meaninglessly and hopelessly. “Need to g g get.... retrieve....destroy....um....”

“Let’s just have a nice Diet Coke,” Ms. Blandishment repeated. “Then we can start tracking down those newspapers.”

Principal Klieglight held up the paper in his hand. “Hmmm? G g g get? Monastery?”

“See?” Ms. Blandishment said. “You’re already on your way! You already have your first copy! Less than six hundred to go!”

Chapter 7. Elsewhere in Lone Tree

Ferdy Chicken was in his garage, his head buried deep in the engine compartment of his Chevy Cavalier. His yellow Cavalier, with the orange chicken painted on the hood.

The car wouldn't start. Every time he turned the key, it gave a sluggish "rurr rurr" sound, followed by a metallic clank. It was that clank that most bothered Ferdy. It sounded fatal, somehow, as if the car were dropping some vital part onto the concrete floor. It wasn't, of course. Ferdy had checked. There were no car parts of any description on the floor. There soon would be, however. It obviously needed a major overhaul. He started to take off the air filter.

He hadn't seen the school newspaper. He was unaware that the sense of unease he had felt had finally erupted into an actual threat.

Had he known of the trolls, he would have burst into action. His garage had a wall-sized aerial photograph of Lone Tree, taken from such a height that each house appeared to be the size of a quarter. Of course, some folks had larger quarters than others. Maybe fifty-cent pieces. His own quarters, he noted, were more the size of a nickel. “Ah, never mind,” Ferdy said. He shook his head.

Whatever the size of people’s quarters...uh, houses, Ferdy had an eagle’s eye view...or maybe a chicken’s eye view? Not, he thought, not a chicken’s eye view, because chickens couldn’t fly worth a crap.... He shook his head again.

Had he known of the threat, he would have used this chicken hawk’s-eye view of Lone Tree to map out appropriate escape routes for the town’s citizens. Just in case. That was Ferdy’s motto: Just In Case. If the nature of the emergency warranted it, he could use the red phone on his desk to call the mayor’s office with these plans.

Also, he would have checked and rechecked his equipment. “Rope—check. Tripwire—check. Grappling hook—check.” Ever since he had been a child, Ferdy Chicken had wanted a grappling hook, and now he had one. It was the centerpiece of his arsenal. In case of a terrorist attack, he would be ready with his grappling hook.

In fact, had he known of the trolls, he would have gone all the way, and readied his grappling hook for action. Except then, he'd only have two items to check. "Rope with grappling hook tied onto the end of it—check. Tripwire—check." Somehow, that didn't sound so impressive. So, he kept the rope separate from the grappling hook for as long as possible. Perhaps, he thought, he'd have to think of another useful item of equipment. One should always have at least three items of equipment. He remembered, from his distant past, the Superhero Motto: "Be prepared." No, wait, that was the Boy Scout Motto. But it was a good idea for superheroes to be prepared as well. Just In Case.

Yes, had Ferdy Chicken known of the trolls, he would be prepared. As it was, however, he was a superhero with car trouble. A Chevy Cavalier, though it might be a good sensible family car, was not the ideal car for a superhero. Especially when it wasn't running. The air filter, now free of the engine, hit the garage floor. "Clank." Ferdy Chicken reached for the spark plug wires. He didn't know how to fix an engine, but he knew enough to take a few of its pieces apart. If he took enough parts off, surely he would be able to see where the trouble was.

Someday, he hoped, he would be settled into the job of superhero sufficiently that the mayor would buy him a car. A Mercedes, an Audi, an Infiniti, he didn't care what it was. Just a

hot car that he could drive around while he was saving people. Something that wouldn't break down. Some kind of sports coupe.

Ferdy Chicken stopped and lifted his head. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Yes, a coupe would be ideal. Every chicken, he pondered, should have a coupe.

Chapter 8. Schmoozeglutton Offers the Challenge

The trolls were restless. None of them felt quite right. They had eaten, but had eaten too little. Or perhaps they had eaten too much. Their bellies, because they hadn't been full for centuries, or perhaps because of the strange new food, were rumbling and grumbling. All of the trolls were burping and belching. They sat around, dazed from hunger. Or, possibly from overeating.

Brumvack sat on the largest rock in the common area of the cave, surrounded by the rest. Some sat on rocks of their own; others lay on the stone floor of the cave, moaning their boredom and frustration. They were remembering the good old days, the feast days. They were remembering the beer that had once flowed so generously, and now was gone. Amid all this complaining, Brumvack knew, he would be wise to make his leadership known. Though trolls live only to eat, fight, and complain, too much

complaining wasn't a good sign. They would only get more restless. Too, there was the fact that Slimegobbler, and then Oreo and Oleo, hadn't followed his orders on their earlier outing. He would have to make an example of them.

“Aaarghh,” he snarled, getting the attention of the Rabid Band. Slowly, the trolls turned their dull attention toward him. The ones lying on the floor sat up and faced him, all except Schnottweiper, who as usual couldn't be bothered with social niceties. Brumvack tossed a rock in his direction. “Aaarghh!” Brumvack repeated. “Schnottweiper!” With an exaggerated sigh, Schnottweiper sat up. He rolled his eyes. This angered Brumvack, but no one else noticed. Brumvack let it go. But he would keep an eye on Schnottweiper. He mentally put him on the same list as Slimegobbler, Oreo, and Oleo. His list was getting longer.

Brumvack had prepared a short speech, which he proceeded to give. “Aarghh (sniff).” He wiped a big hand across his nose. “Many things (cough) have changed since we went into the big uuuurrrrgherer sleep.”

There were burps and grunts of assent from the trolls. They really weren't feeling well. Now that they weren't distracting themselves with their complaints, they felt even worse. They were having a hard time focusing their vision. Deep rumblings proceeded from their bellies.

“We need,” Brumvack continued, “to (buurrrup) be careful (belch) about these new troll-creatures.” They were the stuff of nightmares, those small creatures. Skinny, wimpy, unfit for the honorable name of troll. Troll-pretenders, is what they were. “They look (wheeze) dangerous to me. And they’re (here Brumvack’s body shook with the memory of it) *ugly*. Ugly, ugly, (braaaaaaapapap) UGLY!” The trolls nodded their agreement. They belched and farted. Three or four of them shook involuntarily. Droolmeister took it into his mind to whack himself on the head, repeating “ugly ugly ugly” with each whack.

Schmooze-glutton spoke first “Let’s go get ‘em.”

There was a general hubbub of agreement with this notion. “Whack them with clubs!” said one. “Throw rocks at them!” said another. “Let’s EAT them,” offered a third.

Brumvack waited for a moment before raising his hand. If he stopped their commentary too quickly, they wouldn’t feel heard. If he let them go on too long, however, he’d lose his audience, and hence his authority.

“Aaaarggh I think,” he began again, “that we should (burrup) take it slow. We’ll (wheeze) watch them for a while.” Brumvack hit his fist on his palm for emphasis. “Find out how many rocks they have.” There was another smack of his massive fist into his equally massive hand. “How many clubs.”

Had Brumvack been thinking more carefully, he never would have suggested this. It probably was the best idea, attempting to understand the unknown before storming the beach and eating everything in sight, but it wasn't the troll way. The troll way was to lash out. Storm first, ask questions later, if there was anyone left to ask. This was obvious to him as soon as he spoke, because the trolls that surrounded him were having one of two responses. Some were looking a little confused, as if the idea of observing rather than attacking wasn't an idea that could be understood by a troll brain. Those that did understand the idea, however, were indignant. They muttered about troll honor. "Who's bigger, us or them?" one asked. Obeast said "Let's see them stand up against this," gesturing at the rack where his club should have been standing. He had forgotten that it had disappeared sometime during his long sleep. "Well, how about this then?" he said, making a fist.

Brumvack knew that his idea was an unpopular one. Having spoken, however, Brumvack couldn't back down. There had been enough backing down! An image of the trolls swimming away against his direct orders once again crossed his mind, and he sneered at Slimegobbler. No more backing down! Maybe he'd have to bang a couple of heads to get them to listen, but he was in a mood to bang some heads anyway. "AAAaaaaarggh!" he

snorted. “We watch. We can survive on fish for a while longer.” The fish, of course, were not the delectable food they had once been. Mudfish had been a step down, and now the mudfish were silver and fast and nearly tasteless. The trolls reminded Brumvack of this, vociferously.

Things were going quite badly for Brumvack. He clenched his fists. He swore to himself that Slimegobbler, who had begun all this mood of rebellion, would pay. “AAAAAAAarrgggh!” he yelled again. “We wait. We need to make (grrrrrrrrerer) new clubs. Rearm (burp) ourselves.” This was another good idea, but also another that the trolls didn’t want to hear. The complaining and posturing grew louder. Slimegobbler said, “If my dad could see us now, talking instead of fighting, he’d roll over in his grave.”

Brumvack was just about to get up and pound Slimegobbler a good one, but just then the whole of the Rabid Band was interrupted with a belch of authority: “BurrUP. Just One Minute.”

For a moment, no one knew who had spoken. As the trolls looked around the room, however, it quickly became evident that it was Schmoozeglutton. He was sitting up straight and quietly staring at Brumvack. Shortly, all the hubbub stopped. Everyone looked at Schmoozeglutton. Was there going to be a face-off? They looked at Brumvack. Everyone could see he was caught off guard. Brumvack narrowed his eyes and glared at

Schmooze-glutton. He sat up taller. He weighed his thoughts for a moment. Then he spoke: “Schmooze-glutton,” said Brumvack, “You are dumber than a rock.”

For a troll, having one’s intelligence compared to that of a rock wasn’t all bad. In Schmooze-glutton’s case, it was in fact true. Schmooze-glutton was proud of his big, dense head, and would tell you so when he got the chance. The trolls could see that Brumvack had chosen to try to defuse the situation.

Schmooze-glutton was in no mood to be humored, however. “Brumvack,” he replied, “You smell like fresh flowers.”

The trolls gasped. No one could believe that he had said such a thing. They half expected Brumvack to stand up and take a whack at Schmooze-glutton, maybe knock his head clean off his body. No one would have been surprised had he done so. But Brumvack was determined to uphold tradition. When a leader was challenged, he was expected to show how tough his skin was. Still, all held their breath for a moment, and only released it when it was clear that Brumvack would remain seated on his rock. Everyone was impressed. Few were the leaders who could abide a swipe about their floral scent.

But Brumvack was ready with a reply. There would be no more coddling of Schmooze-glutton, the trolls could see. The gloves were off. “Schmooze-glutton,” Brumvack said, “your

mother had to help your father lift his club.” More gasps from the trolls. Trolls were likely to say any sort of nasty thing to one another, but mothers were usually off-limits.

Schmooze-glutton sat and smoldered over that one. He felt his blood rising within him. It was obvious to everyone that he was going to erupt any minute. Would he give in to his anger and take a swing at Brumvack, or would he remain calm enough to gibe him with another scorcher? The trolls analyzed the possibilities. The general consensus was that Brumvack would probably win a duel of words; he was smart. But Schmooze-glutton, they were sure, would win if the two began fighting. He was clearly the larger of the two. He had probably 100 pounds on Brumvack.

It seemed for a moment as though Schmooze-glutton had decided on another smoking gibe or a comment. Then, slowly, he began raising his massive self from his rock, and it was clear that he was going to make Brumvack pay, perhaps with a kick in the teeth. As it turned out, however, he did neither. Instead, he stood up with as much quiet dignity as he could muster. Even the trolls, who had known Schmooze-glutton all his life, were awed by the sight of him standing to his full height.

“BrumVACK!” Schmooze-glutton intoned. The walls of the cave reverberated with the words; a few loose pebbles fell from

cracks in the ceiling. All the trolls watched him with fascination and fear. Schmoozeglutton took a deep breath and continued: “I OFFER THE CHALLENGE!”

Shocked expressions erupted on the faces of every troll in the room. Even Brumvack looked surprised. It was the tradition that any troll could find his way into a leadership position of the Rabid Band merely by offering the challenge. The challenge, of course, was a belching contest, but the words “belching contest” didn’t do justice to the challenge. Trolls held belching contests all the time. The challenge, however, was a belching contest to end all belching contests. It was not a pretty sight. It was enough to turn even the cast-iron stomachs of trolls. It was a ghastly business, the challenge, so ghastly that it had passed from regular practice. There hadn’t been a challenge since the days of the dinosaurs. It was a practice so disgusting that only base, unevolved trolls would consider using it. Surely no modern troll would stoop to such vile behavior. Still, it officially remained the law of the Rabid Band, and the law would be upheld. Every troll in the room looked forward to it with morbid anticipation.

The stage for the challenge was the same central cave in which the trolls spent most of their time; only the configuration of the room was different. Ordinarily, there was one central rock that

the king of the trolls sat on. It was a throne of sorts, a big round rock loosely surrounded by smaller rocks upon which the others sat. During the challenge, the throne rock was moved to one end of the cave. At the other end of the cave, toward the entrance, was another large rock that was ordinarily unused. These would be the pedestals upon which the combatants would sit. The other rocks were placed in such a way that the trolls could get a good view of the proceedings, and yet be relatively safe from any flying debris. It took the trolls no time at all to arrange the cave in such a fashion. Ordinarily, asking them to work together is to invite quarrel and orneriness. With such a sight ahead of them as the challenge, however, they worked with a clocklike precision. No one needed to tell anyone what to do, and no one sat back to watch the others do the work. They simply went about the business of preparing the festivities. The only time that they began to quibble was when they jostled for a space from which to observe. Even this infighting wasn't as bad as one might think. Some trolls felt a need to see things up close, no matter the consequences. Others, lacking the stomach for it, were willing to let those trolls have the good seats in favor of seats that would be less likely to be in the splash zone.

Soon, everything was set. Brumvack and Schmoozeglutton sat on the rocks at opposite ends of the cave. They were both very

quiet, which all the other trolls could hear because for once they were very quiet as well. The two combatants were carefully controlling their breathing, so that the usual stray burps couldn't escape their mouths. They would need every last bit of gut-air to win the competition.

Since Schmooze-glutton had offered the challenge, he was the first to go. He sat very still, almost in meditation, collecting air and energy. He held his breath. One minute went by, then another. A third minute passed. The trolls sat in strained anticipation. Suddenly, when no one thought they could stand it any longer, the most disgusting sound any had ever heard escaped from Schmooze-glutton's lips. It was the opening salvo of the competition, and was a whirlwind of sound and motion: BRRRRRRRRROUWHOWWBUCKETETOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU GHPDOWWWPDRRRRRROUgher.

The trolls made noises of disgust and admiration. Those who had sat too close were beginning to question their eagerness, as rank air gave them a twinge of nausea. Yet they knew that the worst was yet to come.

It was Brumvack's turn. He didn't take three minutes to warm up to his burp; he didn't have to. As soon as the gale had died down and everyone was paying attention, he let fly with a noise that reverberated deep into the earth:

PACKETACKETOOWWWWWPACKETOWWWWWPAC
KETOWWWWWWWWWBRUMMBRUMMMM-
PACKETOWWWWWERERER!

A couple of the larger stalactites fell from the ceiling and smashed onto the floor. This was one of the consequences of the challenge: anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves sitting underneath a loose stalactite might be impaled. All the trolls looked up at the ceiling, hoping that if it wasn't solid, at least it would hold directly above them.

But the falling stalactites had only punctuated the end of the belch; the results of the belch were still before them, in the form of a bluish-green cloud that reached all the way across the room to Schmoozeglutton. Schmoozeglutton swayed on his rock as if he had been hit by mustard gas. Other trolls, closer to the middle of the cloud—what they called “the kill zone”—felt woozy.

The entire gallery was impressed with this effort of Brumvack. It appeared that over the centuries, he had been practicing. Was he now a better belcher than Schmoozeglutton? Would he win the challenge? It appeared that he might.

The challenge wasn't over yet, however. Schmoozeglutton, not about to be outdone, was gearing up for another go. He made horrible faces. He braced himself against the rock wall behind him so that he wouldn't go tumbling over backwards with the release of

his belch. He sucked in air, swallowing it until he could swallow no more. The trolls shrank onto their rocks as they watched him, afraid of what would happen when he let go.

Finally, he did. The sound reverberating off the walls was deafening. The trolls—even the ones in the very front row—shut their eyes and ducked under their forearms. Barely digested bits of fish and hot dogs splattered around the cave: BROWWWWWDIGGADIGGAROWWWWROWWWOWW WTOOOKADOWWWWROWWWBOOOKABOOKADOWW WOWWOWWW (and here there was just a moment of silence, when everyone thought it was finally over, but it wasn't, quite): OWW!

The trolls groaned in agony. A couple of them threw up their lunch. Schnottblower, Scnottweiper's younger brother, was on the floor, out cold. Gasbag, the smallest of the trolls, crept out of the room, shocked and dismayed to be living with this bunch. The rest, especially those who hadn't been hit by the brunt of the chunks that had flown about the cave, counted themselves lucky.

Everyone thought that surely this would be the winning belch, that Brumvack would admit defeat. But he was still sitting on his rock of a throne, preparing himself to answer this latest salvo. The trolls groaned in anticipation. Would this never end? It had seemed like good entertainment for a while, but now it was

getting ugly. Schmatzenbladder announced, “I declare a draw!” but everyone ignored him. They knew it wasn’t over until it was over.

Brumvack swallowed air. He trembled upon his rock. He pushed out his big gut to expand it, then contracted it again. He could outbelch Schmoozeglutton, he was sure of it. It was all in the physics of it: put air under pressure, and you can do almost anything. He crossed his eyes. All the trolls tried to make themselves as small as possible, instinctively making themselves as difficult a target as they could. They dreaded what might be brewing in Brumvack’s gut. The king troll made horrible faces as gas pains ripped through his innards, preparing for their outward rush. Finally, he knew he was ready. He could contain that mad outrush of air no longer. Brumvack opened the cavern of his mouth and let loose with it: (burp).

All was silent in the cave. Everyone had been prepared for the worst, but all they had gotten was one tiny, barely audible burp. They held their breath. Was this all that was coming? Those who had closed their eyes were afraid to open them.

For himself, Brumvack had a look of horror on his face. His eyes, from their crossed position, swiveled back to front. What? All that work, and all that had come of it was this bare release of a small burp? The horror of it!

When it was obvious that no more was forthcoming, the trolls finally relaxed. Obeast let loose with a deep laugh, and Slimegobbler joined him. Oreo and Oleo got up and did a little “We just survived the end of the world” dance. Schnottweiper tended to his brother, still out cold on the floor of the cave.

Schmoozeglutton was exhausted from all his work, but he had a smile of pride on his face. He stood, a bit shakily, to face his new subjects.

“I (burrUP) win.” He pointed to the entrance of the cave. “It is a new world out there. I say we go and make it ours. Tonight.”

The trolls who could still stand did so. They paid homage to their new leader with grunts and salutes all around.

Soon, they would be going again to the surface of this world, this time onto the land. They had a new leader, they were again in charge of their own trollish destiny, they were going to face this new world and find a way to triumph over it. They let out a collective war-whoop and prepared for the trip up top. Come nightfall, they would take this new world by storm.

All, that is, except Brumvack. Brumvack sat despondently on his rock for a short while, watching the preparations. All the trolls ignored him, in favor of this madness of Schmoozeglutton’s. They’ll pay, Brumvack thought, for their recklessness. He even thought of saying so, but when he cleared his throat to speak, no

one listened. He would have to keep his own counsel from now on.

Brumvack slid off his rock and went into the lower depths of the cave.

Chapter 9. Klieglight's Quest

Principal Klieglight looked haggard. His face slumped with fatigue. He sat at his office desk behind piles of the school newspaper and several crumpled Diet Coke cans. Ms. Blandishment had counted the newspapers as he brought them in: there were 561 copies of the paper on his desk.

The first 150 copies had been easy. Ms. Blandishment had given him his first copy, of course, and she had retrieved 149 copies from distribution bins placed around the school. Principal Klieglight himself had prised 367 copies from the hands of students standing around the lake, and another 42 had been collected from students and teachers within the school itself. Two copies, inexplicably, had been nailed to Principal Klieglight's office door while he was outside.

Ms. Blandishment had said, and Mr. Thorndyke had confirmed, that only 600 copies of the paper were printed each week. That meant that there were 39 copies of the paper still out there. That seemed a pretty small number, but Principal Klieglight knew better. Any one of those 39 copies could end up in the Mayor's hands. Any one of those 39 copies could spell his doom. What would Principal Klieglight be without the word "Principal" in front of his name? That was the question that kept niggling at the corner of his mind, keeping him distracted from the task at hand. Just "Klieglight"? "Mr. Klieglight?" He groaned.

"There there," Ms. Blandishment crooned. She patted his shoulder. "It'll be okay. There are only 39 more copies to find. That should be easy. We just need to figure out where they are!"

Principal Klieglight groaned again. He had looked everywhere. He had stalked every hallway and entered every classroom in the building. He had blustered at every student by the lake, not even bothering to roust them from the grassy hill and toward their classes, but just snatching the newspapers from them. There would be time to get them into their classes later, but that would require a master plan. He wasn't thinking well enough to manage a master plan at this point: he had newspapers to worry about. He had his future as the principal of Lone Tree High to consider. And he had his stomach to take care of. His stomach

had been roiling all morning, ever since the mayor had called. Maybe, he thought, another Diet Coke would help.

Ms. Blandishment had an idea. “Maybe,” she said, “The janitor has already thrown some of the papers away!”

Her idea, however, was met with nothing but silence. Principal Klieglight moaned and lowered his head onto his desk. He put a hand up to his head, perhaps because of his headache, or perhaps just because he didn’t want anyone seeing his bald spot. Then, however, he lifted his head, and his eyes refocused a bit. “I have an idea,” he said. “Maybe, just maybe, the janitor has already thrown some of the papers away!”

“Now that’s a good idea,” said Ms. Blandishment. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

This new idea gave Principal Klieglight the energy to stand up from his desk and walk across the room to the I9000 Central Communications Nexus. He pushed the green activation button and flicked the VOICE OF GOD switch. He could do this in his sleep, he ruminated. It was one of the principal skills he had mastered early on. He picked up the microphone and fingered the on button.

“Fellow students!” he boomed. “If any of you has seen our janitor, Mr. ...um...Mr. ...” He released the button on the microphone for a moment and scratched his head.

“Miss Kimberlane, sir,” offered Ms. Blandishment.

“Now see here, Ms. Blandishment. I’m the Principal! And I’m not a Miss at all! Not most days, anyhow. In fact, never! Never have I been a Miss. Klieglight is the name...not Kimberwhatsis! And don’t interrupt me when I’m on the P.A.! How many times have I told you that? Now, where was I?”

“You were trying to call the janitor, sir.”

“Oh right. Of course! Of course I was!” He pulled the microphone to his lips, and once again pushed the button.

“Fellow students!” he said again. “It has been known for some time that many of you, or possibly just a few of you, or at least, might we say, ONE of you...”

“The janitor, sir” said Ms. Blandishment.

“I know that!” Principal Klieglight screeched. He glared at her for a short moment, but then stopped and closed his eyes. He relaxed his shoulders. He exhaled. He took a deep breath. He seemed to have made some kind of internal decision. Finally, he smiled. He once again lifted the microphone, pushed the button, and spoke. Now, his voice held a smooth tenor. He was the picture of a calm, well-educated rationality.

“Fellow students,” he said. “It has come to my attention that Ms. Blandishment requires the services of our janitor, Mr. ...um...the janitor. If anyone has seen him, please forward him

or...reroute him...or um...direct him, that's it! Direct him! To the principal's office!" His voice once again began reveal a bit of strain. "Immediately!"

Principal Klieglight had only barely gotten back behind his desk when a small woman with long blond hair came in the office.

"Miss Kimberlane reporting as requested, sir," she said.

"Ah yes. Miss Kimberlane. Now. What was it that you wished to see me about?"

The woman pursed her lips for a moment. "I believe you wished to see me, sir."

"Of course, of course. You'll have to forgive me, I've been a bit busy this morning. It's not an easy task, as you might imagine, steering the cruise ship of a high school safely through the shark-infested waters of learning."

"Cruise ship, sir?" Miss Kimberlane asked.

"Well, it's not a cruise ship exactly, is it?" Principal Klieglight said. "There is very little cruising here. Time on task! That's the ticket! Perhaps it's more of a, say, a pirate ship! That's it! A pirate ship, with lots of...slaves.... Each of them uh....slaving... in the galley! That's it! Each of my students is a slave, each with an oar in his hand. Well, obviously, this is a coeducation institution, so I guess that would more appropriately

be ‘his or her hand.’ Yes! Equal opportunity slavery!” Principal Klieglight summed up his argument for her: “Time on task, a cruise ship, equal opportunity slavery, a steady hand.” He smiled and clasped his hands together in a self-satisfied manner.

The woman just looked at him. Principal Klieglight noted that she looked a bit confused. Perhaps she wasn’t following his argument. Perhaps his metaphor had been a bit too grand. Not everyone, Principal Klieglight had noted, could follow his more abstruse expositions. “It’s only a pirate ship so far as the slavery is concerned,” he amended, carefully. “We’re not actually engaged in piracy! No no! We proudly teach our students to live and work within the traditions of American capitalism! We engage in no actual piracy whatsoever! I’m sure you’ll agree!” Principal Klieglight faltered for a moment as he saw the eyebrows of the woman in front of him curling upwards. In confusion? In judgment? Klieglight couldn’t tell. He looked toward Ms. Blandishment for support.

“You were going to inquire about the newspapers, sir.”

A look of panic flashed across the face of the principal. This woman was from the newspaper? He had thought she looked vaguely familiar. A member of the press, here in his office, unannounced? Today, of all days? Had she already seen the students, loitering by the lake and not in their classes? Had she

taken photographs? That was all he needed, on top of his current troubles. When the mayor saw the exposé, he would be calling again, this time with questions that Principal Klieglight wouldn't want to answer.

Within seconds, however, Principal Klieglight wiped the look of panic from his face. Years as a principal had taught him that the best expression to face the world with—even the world of the fourth estate—was a noncommittal one, a slightly vacant one. With a well-practiced effort, he donned that mask.

He smiled. "I'm so very sorry, but I'm unable to submit to an interview right at the moment." Principal Klieglight got a far away look in his eye, and said, "As you can imagine, it is quite difficult steering the cruise ship of a high school through the shark infested waters...pirate ship! Pirate ship!" He raised his finger at her. "But we've been over this already, haven't we? You can't entrap me with your wily journalistic questions! No sir! I'm not just any yokel fresh from the turnip truck! I've been around the block a time or two!" But the reporter evidently wasn't buying it. She had her innocent act down pretty well, Klieglight had to admit that. Clearly, it was time for a different tactic. With a sudden finger in her face, he percussively asked, "Do you have a warrant?"

The woman shook her head. She looked bewildered. That was just a little too much for Klieglight. He narrowed his eyes at her, then said, decisively, “No comment!”

“Sir, Miss Kimberlane is not from the newspaper. She’s our janitor. You were going to ask her about the newspapers we’re trying to collect.”

“Oh yes! Quite right! Quite right! I’m sorry, Miss...Miss...uh, miss. I didn’t recognize you for a moment. I apologize. However, as you can see, we’re very busy here. Actually, I don’t have time to speak with you at the moment, because, you see, I’m trying to collect every paper that this school has ever published, ever, in the history of the school. Every one of them! I’m only missing....” Here he reached for the pad of paper on his desk “...39 copies! So, as you can see, we’re far too busy to speak about...that...that thing...that you needed to see me about. As Ms. Blandishment has indicated, I need to speak with the janitor! He should be coming at any moment. I called him...” he glanced at his watch, then at the clock on the wall, and then back to his watch. “Perhaps a short while ago. Perhaps not. In any case, he’ll be here soon! When I shout, people ask how to jump! Um...high! How high to jump? Yes!”

Miss Kimberlane folded her mouth into a perplexed frown. She seemed unsure how to proceed. She backed toward the door,

shook her head slightly, said, “Oh...kay,” then quickly turned to go.

Ms. Blandishment took her by the elbow before she could scoot out the door.

“Miss Kimberlane, dear, the principal was wondering if you might have picked up any copies of the school paper. Perhaps you’ve thrown some away?”

The blond woman nodded. “I start throwing them away as soon as I see them. It takes me all day to throw them away. People leave them everywhere. They’re a fire hazard.”

Ms. Blandishment smiled. “That’s perfect. Now, how many do you think you might have thrown away?”

Miss Kimberlane shrugged. “I dunno. Probably a hundred and fifty, maybe a couple hundred.”

“Aha!” Principal Klieglight shrieked. “Finally! We finally have an answer! Not an exact answer, but at least the beginnings of an answer! I always say that an estimate is halfway to the right answer! I used to teach math, you know. Second grade math! Second graders estimate almost everything! Sometimes, that has to be good enough!” He scribbled furiously on his little scrap of paper. “Let’s see...Five hundred sixty one plus one hundred fifty....hmmm...one, um...eleven carry the one...um....” He suddenly stopped with a satisfied grin on his face. “711! We now

have at least seven hundred and eleven out of the six hundred papers printed! Let's see, that leaves..." He again worked the numbers with his pencil. "That leaves, um, a negative one hundred and eleven still to find! Now we're getting somewhere! Now, where is that blasted janitor?"

It was Ms. Blandishment who finally thought through the logic of the problem that they were facing. The phrase that acted as the sword for the Gordian knot of the newspapers was this: How, exactly, did the mayor end up with a copy of the newspaper in the first place?

And if he had one, how many other people in town had one? She exited to the outer office, and made a phone call to the printer.

This is how the mayor came to have a copy of the *Gazelles Gazette*, if the curious reader wishes to know: Victoria Moon King, the mayor's wife, led a rather lavish lifestyle. Every morning, she took what she called her "constitutional." She didn't know what a constitutional was, exactly, but to her it sounded nice and governmental. Her constitutional involved a walk to the local salon. There, she received her daily shampoo and hair style.

On this day, her stylist, ever on the lookout for topics of conversation that might net her a large tip, asked the town's first lady if she had heard about "the business up at the lake."

"Moon Lake, would that be?" Victoria Moon King asked. "Why no, I haven't."

The hairdresser, ever helpful, handed her a copy of the school paper, which of course Lori Bradshaw had delivered that morning before school, to the salon as well as, the reader will remember, the grocery stores, the bank, the Laundromat, and other businesses about town.

Unfortunately, the hairdresser received no tip that day. Immediately upon seeing the paper, Victoria Moon King screamed and fainted dead away. She was out for perhaps five minutes before she came to, picked up her purse, and, with a towel still draped about her head and the school paper still clutched in her hand, left to see the Mayor. The ambulance that the hairstylist called hadn't even arrived before she was out the door of the salon and halfway down the street.

Truth be told, Victoria Moon King made several trips per week to city hall. She had advice to offer, was all. Good advice. Womanly advice. Much of her womanly advice was about Lake Maebiewahnapoopie. Such a name, she thought, was sure to drag down the town like an anchor.

“Maebiewahnapoopie,” of course, is a fine name, with a proud history and tradition. In the Sioux language, it means “lake of the buffalo fish,” because of the fossilized bone headed fish that they had found there the first time they passed through. (Though historians still argue about this. Some side with those who suggest that Maebiewahnapoopie means “lake of buffalo water,” and was named for the uncomfortable feeling the Indians had in their bellies after they drank it).

Victoria Moon King, however, was not interested in the historical argument. She simply thought the name undignified, and she knew just what it should be called instead: Moon Lake.

Mayor King, in fact, had proposed this new name in his State of the City address the year before. He suggested that Lake Maebiewahnapoopie should from here on in be referred to as Moon Lake, because that body of water was so deep that all you could ever see in it was the reflection of the moon. (He hadn’t, at that point, sunk his boat in the lake, otherwise he would surely have avoided talking about what one might see in its depths).

Mayor King’s adversaries quickly pointed out that his wife’s maiden name had maybe more to do with the name change than the mayor’s sense of poetry, and that however beautiful the name Moon Lake might be, the town already sported a Moon Plaza (complete with a statue of the matron of the family, Henrietta

Kojak Moon), a Moon Park, and a Moon Room in the local historical museum. Weren't these enough Moons?

Whatever the controversies, however, the lake has continued to be called Lake Maebiewahnapoopie, except by Victoria Moon King.

Oh this day, Victoria Moon King had marched into her husband's office, paper in hand, to give a little womanly advice that the Mayor, if he valued his peace of mind, should strongly consider.

The mayor, coincidentally, had already received a copy of the newspaper by one of his aides. The aide had been in a near panic as he had handed Mayor King the sheet. The mayor, though, used to the histrionics of his staff, hadn't yet looked at it. "For God's sake, just calm down," he told the young man. Just leave it on the desk there. Whatever it is, it can wait." The aide had set it on the corner of his desk, where it remained as Victoria Moon King stormed his office.

She wasn't fully in the room before she began. "Have you seen what they've done to my lake?" she screeched.

"Now now, dear, what lake would that be?" the mayor asked.

"Moon Lake, you idiot," she said. By then, of course, she had fully arrived in his office, and the first thing she saw was the

paper on the corner of his desk. “So! So you HAVE seen it. What, may I ask, have you done about it?”

“Seen what, my love? I haven’t seen anything.” He looked a little lost. “What lake?”

“MOON Lake!” she repeated. She shook the crumpled paper in her hands in front of his face, then snatched the paper from his desk and shook it as well.

“Now dear...OUCH!” said the mayor. Victoria Moon King, from time to time, liked to place her stiletto heel firmly onto his foot. This was one of those times.

“Please,” said the mayor, the voice of reason. “Calm down. Start at the beginning. What are they doing to your lake?”

Victoria Moon King’s voice was reaching convulsive limits. “Haven’t you even looked at the paper?”

“Of course! Of course I looked at the paper. I read the paper first thing every morning. As the mayor of this town, it’s my responsibility to keep abreast of the news! I keep my thumb firmly on the pulse of Lone Tree 24 hours a day! Uh, what paper?”

“This paper, you idiot!” Victoria Moon King unfurled the paper from the salon and held it in front of his face. He pushed it away. Now dear!”

But Victoria Moon King was insistent. She pushed it back in front of his face, and this time he saw the creatures looking out

from the middle of the lake. The eyes of the lead creature bored into him.

“Wha...wha...what is that?” We’ll forgive the mayor the bit of drool that appeared in the corner of his mouth with his question.

Victoria Moon King looked at the picture herself. “It’s...it’s...” but Mayor King didn’t get to hear what it was, because Victoria Moon King had, once again, passed out. She slumped across his desk, the paper still gripped tightly in her hand.

The mayor knew what he had to do. He had to track down this story. He had to put a stop to it. He pried the paper out of his wife’s cold hand. Whoever had printed this story would pay. As a servant of the government, he supported a free press, but this was ridiculous!

Of course, we know whose office he called. Well, we know the second office he called. First, he called the *Lone Tree Sentinel*, the town newspaper, but of course no one there knew what he was talking about. None of them, evidently, read any paper but their own. Only after he worked through three or four editors at the *Sentinel* did he take a second look at the paper in front of him and learn that it had come not from the *Sentinel*, but from the *Gazelles Gazette*.

We also know what he said once he got Principal Klieglight on the phone. And, we know that Principal Klieglight took the mayor at his word that he'd better round up some newspapers if he wanted to keep his job. Finally, we know that eventually Ms. Blandishment had asked, somewhat innocently, "Where did Mayor King get a copy of the paper?"

And though we've known for some time that there are indeed newspapers all over town, only now do we hear the low guttural noise from Principal Klieglight as he puts the facts together and comes to that knowledge himself. This low guttural noise is interrupted only by Ms. Blandishment poking her head into his office with a bit of news: "I just called the printer; he says that Mr. Thorndyke ordered 2000 copies of the paper. He said it was supposed to be a special edition." The only other sounds we hear are those of Principal Klieglight's head repeatedly hitting his desk: thump thump thump.

For Principal Klieglight, this was turning into a very long day.

Finally, however, he stood up, rubbed absently at his forehead, which now had a sizeable red dot right in its center. He took a deep breath, straightened his tie, and set out into the town to collect those papers.

Set out, that is, right after he steeled himself with another Diet Coke.

Chapter 10. Brumvack Cogitates

Brumvack sat in a tiny room in the very lower reaches of the cave. None of the trolls had ventured down here for centuries. Without benefit of their sleep-induced diet, in fact, none of them would have fit through its narrow passages.

Above him, the trolls were preparing for their journey topside. “Let ‘em go,” Brumvack said to himself. “They’ll pay.”

Brumvack sat against a stalagmite, still stinging from his embarrassing performance during the challenge. His eyes crossed as he thought of the smug look on Schmoozeglutton’s face after Brumvack’s last belch failed to materialize. What, he wondered, could he do to get back at that sorry excuse for a troll? In fact, against all of the trolls? They had given their allegiance to Schmoozeglutton with nary a look of sorritude toward Brumvack.

Treason! It was treason! Had they no appreciation for the centuries of leadership he had provided?

Brumvack sighed, and wrapped his arms around his fickle stomach, and fell into a fitful sleep.

Only a few hours later, he woke to the sounds of perfect quiet above him. So that was it. They were gone. He harrumphed a final grunt. He belched. “Stupid trolls,” he said.

But then a small grin appeared, inch by inch, across Brumvack’s scowling visage. The trolls were gone. The trolls were gone! An idea slowly formed in his mind. As the fragments of the idea came together into a coherent whole, he beamed. Retribution, he knew, was at hand.

Chapter 11. The Trolls Emerge

It was late evening. The sun had gone down, and low clouds scudded across the sky, giving everything the look of a black-and-white photograph.

Lone Tree, never a bustling metropolis, had mostly shut down for the night. The town's citizens, never an ostentatious bunch, sat behind locked doors and bolted windows, letting the radiation from their TV screens soothe away the indignities of another work week.

The school newspaper had caused quite a stir for most of the morning, of course, but that was just because people needed something to talk about, to complain about, to have an opinion about. No one was truly worried. If there were creatures in the lake, surely the town newspaper would have covered it. Heck, CBS News would have covered it! They would have had vans full

of television cameras all over town, awaiting the next appearance of the monsters, beaming their ugly visages all over the country at the speed of light.

Clearly, that wasn't happening. Here they were, sitting in front of their TV sets through the course of a long evening, and they heard nothing but "All is well, all is well, here's something new to amuse and distract you. Everything is Under Control."

Surely, come next week, the hoax of the photographs would be revealed, the high school prankster would make a public apology, and the situation would blow over. By this time next week, no one would remember the monsters of the lake. There would be something new to talk about and complain about and to have an opinion about.

So no one was ready when the Lake Maebiewahnappoie monsters actually arrived.

Schmoozeglutton was the first to reach the surface of the water. He raised his head slowly out of the murk, and looked upon the silence around him. He took a deep breath, both to refresh his lungs after the long swim, and to relish a peaceful moment. The water surrounding him was calm, with only an expanding ring where he had broken the surface. The shoreline ahead of him seemed equally calm. There was none of the commotion of daily

activity: he had been right to think that night would be a better time to chart this new territory.

And, truth be told, there was none of the chaos that came with a cave full of trolls. Though it would surely be only be a few seconds before the rest of the trolls broke the surface, Schmoozeglutton enjoyed those few seconds.

It had been a long few hours. Schmoozeglutton had always been put off by Brumvack's style of leadership, which mostly consisted of allowing the trolls to do whatever they wished, however they wished. Everything happened willy-nilly. There was no order. No precision. No military exactitude. Schmoozeglutton was of the opinion that trolls, when out in the world, should work as a team. Not as a bunch of individuals, each acting on his own impulses, but as a finely-tuned machine. If they were all walking in the same direction anyway, why not march? If they were swimming, why not swim in formation? Trolls, Schmoozeglutton considered, were fearsome beasts. Or, at least, they had the potential to be fearsome beasts. But no one would fear this bunch. The Rabid Band, after centuries of Brumvack's leadership, were a bunch of lumbering oafs, tripping and shoving and japing with each other, each distractible from the task at hand by the smallest of impulses.

He had tried to bring order to the troops. He had tried to line them up as they left the cave, to make them stand there at attention as he laid out the mission, to send them into the lower lagoon one after another, a precision reconnaissance force. But they would have nothing of it. It was a high time for trolls, hungry and restless after years of sleep, the new food simmering noisily in their bellies, the excitement of a new world and a new leader. It wasn't that they were unwilling to follow his orders; they just didn't have his finer understanding of the possibilities. To them, it was all a big game. They stood there, when they were supposed to be at attention, goofing and jibing and elbowing each other.

Finally, he had given up. He had dived into the lagoon not so much to lead the trolls to victory, but just to have a moment of peace. They would follow, he knew, each in their own slovenly way.

Yes, Brumvack had spoiled them, all right. Schmoozeglutton seethed. But oh well. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. There was nothing for it now. It would take time to bring order to this bunch.

Soon, the other trolls began to break the surface. Schmatzenbladder came first. His head came out of the water up to his eyeballs. Without disturbing the water around him, he

scanned the horizon. When he saw that there was nothing requiring his immediate attention, he came more fully out of the water, and pulled on his long earlobes to empty his ears. Schmatzenbladder, Schmooze-glutton noted, was always sensitive about his ears.

Schmooze-glutton figured that one way to begin to bring a military order to his troops would be to conduct a head count. When Schmatzenbladder was done fussing with his ears, he nodded at him and intoned, with gravity, “One.”

Oreo and Oleo popped up next. They were already roughhousing in the water, shoving and splashing each other, but Schmooze-glutton put a stop to that with a belch of disapproval. He glared at each of them as he continued his head count. “Two. Uh, three.”

Bilgewater was next. He came up with a spray of water in all directions. He had a look of panic in his eyes as he took a deep breath of welcome air. Schmooze-glutton rolled his eyes. Clearly, Bilgewater had forgotten to grab a lungful of air before he left the underground cave. Stupid trolls, Schmooze-glutton thought. It was going to be tough, being a leader of this bunch. “Three,” he said. “No, uh, four.” He repeated the number with more surety: “Four.”

Suddenly, three trolls rose to the surface at once. It was Obeast, Schnottweiper, and Biledumper. Schmooze-glutton felt his

brain momentarily seize up as he juggled numbers. “Four, no five, uh... seven...uh...six...uh...eight?.” He stopped. This was difficult. Why couldn’t the Rabid Band do anything with control, with decorum, with a little bit of class? It was Brumvack, he knew, who had allowed these trolls to do everything in a slapdash fashion. Anything went, with Brumvack.

His rule would be different. But this, Schmooze-glutton had already seen, was no time to start a new regimen of orderliness. Time was short. When the current emergency had been dealt with, he would have his work cut out for him.

He shook his head and started anew. He nodded once again at Schmatzenbladder. “One.”

He looked to Oreo and Oleo. “Two...” But just then, Slimegobbler rose up next to next to Schmatzenbladder. Schmooze-glutton glared at him for a moment, thought of naming Slimegobbler as number three, but then Oleo was supposed to be number three.... With a smooth precision that surprised even him, he quickly counted Oleo as number three, Bilgewater as number four, and Obeast as number five. His brain was in the groove now. He could feel it. The numbers were coming, coming, coming, and even in the right order. Schnottweiper, he called out, was number six. Biledumper was seven, which made Slimegobbler number nine. Wait! Wait! Number ten. Eight! He slowed for just a

moment to sort that out, but didn't get far before Droolmeister showed up, nose first, just in front of Slimegobbler, throwing the whole mess into confusion.

Schmoozeglutton looked at the sky in a patient, pleading way. He weighed his options. As he saw it, he could begin the count anew, admittedly a project with a some chance of failure, or he could fake it and pretend that he had completed the count to his satisfaction.

He looked at the trolls as he considered this quandary for a moment. He could see that they were beginning to get restless. "OKAY," he said. "Everybody's here."

The words were just barely out of this mouth when Schnottblower splashed to the surface. All of the trolls look at him, then back to Schmoozeglutton.

Schmoozeglutton took a deep breath. He held his temper. This, he now knew, was going to be the hardest part of being a leader: holding his temper. He pursed his lips for a moment. He pretended to be deep in thought, preparing his remarks as their leader, biding time for any more trolls to appear. He considered counting to ten to pass a few more seconds, then dismissed the idea. Counting hadn't ever been his strong suit. Still, he waited another long moment. The trolls looked at him expectantly, but he

didn't say anything for yet another moment. Finally, he once again spoke: "Okay. Everybody's here."

Gasbag, as if on cue, emerged directly in front of Schmooze-glutton. Schmooze-glutton snapped. He batted at Gasbag's head a couple of times, only vaguely hearing the voice in the back of his mind that said "Hold your temper, hold your temper, hold your temper...." When the voice finally stilled, he grabbed Gasbag's big ears and pushed his head under water. He held it there for a full minute, and then another minute. He held it for a third minute, until that smallest of the trolls began to flail his arms and legs in the water.

Only when bubbles started rising from Gasbag's nose and mouth did Schmooze-glutton lift him out of the water to the level of his shoulders. Gasbag tried to shake his head to clear water from his nose, but of course his ears were still pinned between Schmooze-glutton's thumbs and index fingers. He gasped at the air.

Schmooze-glutton looked him in the eye for a moment and whispered, fiercely, "Are you ready to give your leader his personal space?"

Gasbag managed to nod his head slightly up and down even against the viselike pressure of Schmooze-glutton's grasp. Schmooze-glutton looked deeply into his eyes for another moment,

perhaps with a final look of warning, then pushed him backwards, releasing him. Gasbag, with relief but also fear in his eyes, looked at Schmooze-glutton and then ducked under the water. He swam under water for a few yards, then reappeared next to Schnottweiper.

“Okay,” Schmooze-glutton said with a long-suffering sigh. He felt a little bad about going crazy like that, but surely he couldn’t be blamed. These trolls, he was discovering, were morons. Very tedious morons. Fat, smelly, tedious, stupid.... But he stopped himself.

Schmooze-glutton set his jaw. He paused for a moment, considered once again trying for a head count, and then decided against it. “Okay. Everybody’s here.” He shrank back a little, daring a newly appearing head to contradict him. When it didn’t, he went cautiously ahead. “Everybody listen up!” he said, and gave such a belch that it echoed across the surface of the lake. It must have been hidden deep within the recesses of his gut not to have been expelled during the challenge. He wiped his arm across his nose so as to be rid of any hangers-on, then continued. “Be back at the lake before the sun returns. Foodwhoop. Let’s go.”

Now, the attentive reader knows that we’ve heard the word “foodwhoop” before. In this case, however, the word has a slightly different meaning. This time, it wasn’t a cry of the hunt, but a

reminder to the trolls that they were on their honor to let others know of any sizeable portions of food they found. Schmoozeglutton saying “foodwhoop” was a warning that if they were caught with a stash of food they hadn’t told the others about, they would be strung up by their heels and used for bait.

Then, he set off, sure that the others would follow.

To look at a troll, one wouldn’t think they it could do much in water but sink like a rock. They were in fact quite agile swimmers, though. Through the latter decades of their lives (minus the time they had spent in the Big Sleep), they had developed sufficient grace in the water to catch mudfish. As soon as Schmoozeglutton gave the word, they swam to shore in a rough bunch with amazing speed.

It was on land that trolls became more sluggish. Once they were within a few yards from shore, their bulk got the better of them and they trudged more deliberately. Still, it wasn’t long before all of them were out of the water and congregating on the grassy shore.

Chapter 12. Fred Chickweed Delivers a Pizza

For Fred Chickweed, the only middle-aged pizza delivery boy in Lone Tree, it had been a long night. Friday nights were always long nights, for a pizza delivery boy, especially if that pizza delivery boy was in his forties, somewhat overweight (though not as overweight as he appeared in the three layers of clothes he inevitably wore), and didn't truly have the modicum of social skills necessary to the job of showing up at a stranger's house and asking for a ten dollar bill in exchange for a pizza.

Families, Fred noted, often arrived at home hungry on Fridays, as they did every day, but something about it being Friday meant that they didn't feel a need to cook for themselves. Young men and women, just because it was Friday night, often got together for movies and pizza, which as often as not required Fred and his services. Parties seemed to spontaneously erupt on Friday

nights, eventually resulting in wired, hungry people. Fred, because he had never been invited to that sort of party, resented being asked to bring the pizza and stand outside on the porch with all the noises of merriment and mayhem wafting out from within.

Truthfully, Fred would rather have had a morning shift as a pizza delivery boy, when the orders were few and far between, and only the occasional lonely housewife would have him come by with one of Petey's Perfect Pizza Pies to get her through the day. Alas, however, it was not to be. Friday night it was.

Fridays, Fred noted, arrived with a distressing regularity.

This Friday, however, didn't stretch out to all hours of the night. At about 8:30, Fred was sent to deliver a pizza to an unusual location: Lone Tree High School. Specifically, the principal's office. That was a first. So far as he knew, no one inhabited the high school after 3:00 or so, especially on a Friday.

He hoped it wasn't a prank call, which was the bane of any pizza delivery boy, but especially bothered Fred. He never knew if the prank was a general one—just one of an endless litany of phone pranks that everyone of a certain age seemed to think funny—or if it was a prank intended specifically for him. To make him look foolish. Clueless. The butt of the joke.

Once or twice a year, he would be asked to deliver a pizza to an obviously empty house. A house, say, with a For Sale sign in front, and no furniture inside. As he stood ringing the doorbell of such a house, Fred always felt like an idiot. He always wondered if there was a hidden camera, perhaps behind a bush or a lamp post.

On occasion, too, he would be asked to deliver a pizza to an address that didn't exist. A prank? A clerical error on the part of the order taker? A legitimate order placed by a hungry, yet confused, person? One never knew. Nevertheless, there he was, driving a Petey's Perfect Pizza Pie van up and down the street, looking for an address that he would never find. It always left him wondering if the caller were inside one of the surrounding houses, chuckling behind the curtains.

Fred, it must be said, was slightly paranoid. If we're to be fair, however, we'll note that throughout the course of his life, Fred had acquired by fair means the knowledge that paranoia sometimes suited reality better than did the healthier states of mind. He hadn't had an easy childhood, Fred Chickweed.

The high school? On a Friday night? He considered the likelihood that this was another of those prank calls. Those calls, in fact, came only rarely, but that didn't stop them from constantly weighing on his mind.

Yet, there was nothing for it. He was just a pizza delivery boy. It was his destiny to deliver pizzas. Or, if not his destiny, at least it was his job. He delivered pizzas; he had no control over whether or not anyone was there to receive them.

This time, as Fred drove along the lakeshore toward the high school, he was pleasantly surprised. The school, though most of it looked awfully dark, showed some sign of human habitation. As he pulled the big yellow Petey's van into the student parking lot, he saw faint lights coming through the windows of the main doors. The central office. He considered parking in one of the spaces reserved for students, but instead, feigning confidence, pulled right into the bus lane.

“How do you get rid of a high school graduate standing on your front porch?” It was a joke Fred sometimes heard. The answer? “You pay for the pizza.” Ha ha, Fred thought. Ha ha hah.

It felt funny, approaching his old alma mater. He hadn't been in the building for...what? Twenty years? No, more than that. More like twenty five years. A quarter of a century!

He got out of the van and headed toward the door.

As he walked, pizza in hand, Fred looked upon the brick façade of the building. Truly, he didn't remember much about his

time here. He had been a quiet student, mostly invisible to his peers, and equally invisible to his teachers. He evidently hadn't learned enough there to get a better job than delivering pizzas, he pondered, though he had gotten mostly As and Bs in his high school career. And, truthfully, he didn't remember much of what they had taught him. If landing a good job required the knowledge one might gain in high school, they were right not to hire him. Trigonometry? He barely remembered what the word signified, much less what that mathematics described. Still, he could see not remembering trigonometry after all these years. When had he had an opportunity to use it? Never, that was when. Or "the Exports of Many Lands," which seemed to be the sole interest of his history teacher, Miss...well, he didn't remember her name either.

But Fred also didn't remember the stuff one might think one would remember. The practical stuff. If Mr. Fairlane could see his car now, in pieces that were strewn about the floor of his garage, he might reconsider the B he had given Fred in auto shop.

Well, at least he remembered Mr. Fairlane's name, he noted. Which was more than he could say about Miss Exports of Many Lands.

Oh well. There was nothing for it now. There was pizza to deliver, right through those double doors. What now? Should he

just knock, as if this were someone's house? Should he march right in? It was a public building, after all.

Once upon a time, Fred pondered, delivering pizzas had seemed glamorous. But that had been many years ago. Maybe it was the school itself that prompted the memory. Then, back in the dark ages when he went to high school, delivering pizzas had been the one light in his life. He had been sure, then, that it would be enough light to drive the rest of the darkness away. He had been fifteen years old, and the first one he knew to have a driver's license. He had acquired it due to a hardship clause, because he was the only person in his family, after the accident at his dad's plant, to be bringing in any money. He had left this very building every day after school, driving off in his dad's old Chevy with a change maker belted to his waist. He didn't get to keep much of the money...it was needed for the house payment...but still he had more money than his few friends did. And the keys to the car. And an excuse to stay out late. He had felt very grown up then, very worldly, as only a...well, as only a pizza delivery boy...could.

Now, of course, he was well into his third decade as a pizza delivery boy, and making about the same amount of money. Where his slim earnings had been enough to cover the house payment when he was a boy, they barely paid the rent these days.

Moreover, it just wasn't fun any more. Pizza. Followed by another pizza. Followed by an endless round of pizzas, each one much like the pizza before. And, if for some reason an interesting pizza might come through the chute, which it never did, it was still Friday night. He signed in exhaustion, and pulled the handle of the big metal door.

It was locked.

Fred Chickweed looked behind him, scanning for cameras. But he didn't see anything except the yard lights of the school. They weren't bright, those lights, but they were bright enough to illuminate the large lawn that bordered the school, and that sloped downward to the lake. If there were someone filming him, it was from a distance. Perhaps they wouldn't be able to photograph any personally identifying details. He sighed again, and turned back to the door. He knocked loudly.

Still nothing. The office light was definitely on, however. He could see it through the wire-meshed windows set in the door. Probably, he thought, the lights were left on through the weekend as a security measure. They didn't necessarily indicate that someone was there to receive his pizza.

But then he saw a shadow moved across the floor. There was definitely someone there. His mood lifted an infinitesimal bit. He knocked again.

This time, a haggard-looking man emerged. He stood at his office door, looking (if Fred was reading him correctly) a little scared. Nevertheless, Fred held up the pizza box. It was the universal sign for “Your food is here, come give me some cash and I’ll be on my way.”

The man in the rumpled suit stumbled forward and opened the door for him. He waved him in, while he peered out the door, scanning the horizon.

Something within Fred responded to this. Responded strongly enough, in fact, that he did something he had learned long ago to avoid: he spoke a sentence outside of his regular pizza patter. “Are you afraid of cameras too?”

“Oh God, you don’t know the half of it,” replied the man. “Who knows what they’ll photograph next!”

“Right,” said Fred. He looked at the order slip taped to the pizza box. “Principal...Klieglight is it?”

The man stood up a bit straighter. “Principal Klieglight, at your service!” he said. He gave a little salute. Then he said, inexplicably, “I’m just glad you’re not the mayor!”

Fred puzzled over that comment for a moment, but couldn’t make sense of it. This, however, was not an unusual situation for him, so he got to business.

“I brought your pizza,” he said, once again holding up the box in front of him.

Klieglight looked confused for a moment. Fred suddenly felt sure that this had been a prank after all. That was a good one, wasn't it: calling in a pizza order, pretending to be a high school principal. Hilarious. A stitch. But then Klieglight brightened. “Oh! Right! I remember ordering a pizza. I'm starved. Famished. I've been about town all day collecting papers.”

“Wow,” said Fred, impressed. “When I was in school, the students had to hand in their papers themselves.”

A light bulb seemed to turn on over Principal Klieglight's head. “That sure would simplify things, wouldn't it? I hadn't thought of that.” He brightened again. “But I've done rather well. I suppose I have 1500 papers or so. Maybe 1600! Though only 600, of course, were actually printed.” He gave a giddy, half-mad laugh. “I wonder how many are left?” He laughed again, his eyeballs bulging a bit with every harsh syllable. Then he stopped laughing and shook his head, confused by his own math problem. “To tell the truth, I don't know what's up or down right at the moment.” He repeated his earlier phrase: “I'm famished.”

The principal stopped and thought for a moment, then asked, “You wouldn't have a Diet Coke, would you?”

Fred shook his head. “Only the pizza.”

That woke something within Principal Klieglight. “Pizza? That sounds good. You wouldn’t mind sharing it with me, would you?” He said it again: “I’m famished”

Fred shrugged. “Actually, I brought the whole thing for you. That’s usually the way it works.”

Principal Klieglight crinkled his forehead.

Fred, in an attempt to be helpful, said, “I guess I am a little hungry, though.”

“Good, good! Fine!” said Principal Klieglight. Come right on in my office, won’t you, Mr.... ah...Mr....”

“Chickweed, sir,” said Fred. “Fred Chickweed.” He extended his hand, the one not carrying the pizza, to shake. Unfortunately, it was the left hand. Principal Klieglight stuck out his right hand, looked confused for a moment, then stuck out his left hand. Fred took an awkward moment to transfer the pizza to his left hand so he could proffer his right.

Principal Klieglight, with much evident relief, took that hand and shook it vigorously. “Ah yes. Mr. Chickpea,” he said. Pleased to meet you.”

“Chickweed, sir,” offered Fred.

Fred Chickweed, as he was shaking this man’s hand, suddenly wished that Klieglight had been around during his tenure as a high school student. Who knows what he might have

accomplished, with such a kindred spirit in charge. Perhaps he would have been somebody.

Principal Klieglight dropped the handshake and took the pizza from Fred. “Why don’t we go right into my office, Mr. Garbanzo Bean? I’ll grab us some paper plates.”

As Principal Klieglight walked toward his office, Fred noticed that his suit, ill-fitting enough to begin with, was not just rumpled, but actually looked as if he had slept in it. That gave him another warm moment of recognition. It wasn’t just every man who wore his clothes to bed, ready for anything that might arise. Though Fred couldn’t think of what kinds of emergencies might arise for a high school principal, he well knew the sorts of personal emergencies that befell him. He had more than once woken up, only barely functioning in the world, and was glad that at least he was already dressed. He followed Klieglight into his office.

Principal Klieglight set the pizza on the desk, and then began poking around the office. He checked in his middle desk drawer, then the filing cabinet. “There must be some paper plates here somewhere,” he said, as he looked behind a rather tall potted plant. Fred, though, didn’t care about paper plates. Fred was drawn to the unbalanced pile of newspapers strewn across the desk.

He would later think back on this moment as a turning point in his life. The moment had a gravity of destiny about it,

somehow. The rest of the world quieted as a thrum of anticipation hummed in the air around him. The room seemed to darken, except for a tunnel of light between him and the desk. Fred floated down that tunnel, blissfully unaware of the drab surroundings that had come to define his world over the past years.

When he reached the desk, he didn't see any of the detritus that tends to accumulate upon an administrator's workspace. He didn't notice, for instance, any of the many absentee reports, the notepads with "From the Desk of Principal Klieglight" printed on the top, or the perhaps dozen Diet Coke empties. At that moment, Fred could see nothing but an upturned *Gazelles Gazette*. All he could see—nearly a full day after everyone else in town had had a good long gander—was those stony heads staring back at him with those stony eyes. He picked up the paper with both hands, and held it before him at eye level.

As he gazed upon the paper, Fred Chickweed felt himself wake up. It was as if upon the paper were printed some holy icon. He experienced a sort of communion, as he never had previously with anything consisting of newsprint. His legs strengthened beneath him. His heart started beating, perhaps for the first time in years. Adrenaline coursed through his body, bringing his brain out of a full decade of gauzily aware numbness. This was his moment:

the moment that the world, and his mission within it, finally, finally came to clarity.

And none too soon. He was still staring at the photograph when his awareness of the outside world once again kicked in. Principal Klieglight, having given up on finding any paper plates behind the potted plant, was staring out the window. His jaw hung slack for a moment as he stared. “Now what exactly,” he said, “do you suppose *that* is?”

Out the window facing the lake, Fred could make out a dark shape lumbering toward the school. The top fifth of the dark shape, he noted, looked not unlike the stony creature in the photograph. This was the final key that unlocked the secrets of the universe for Fred.

Principal Klieglight turned to face the aging pizza delivery boy, and said, “Have you ever in your life seen such a thing?”

But Principal Klieglight found that he was talking not to a pizza delivery boy, but to an empty space where once a pizza delivery boy had stood. Fred was gone. The only sign that anyone had been there at all was the pizza, still on the desk in front of him, and the sound of the big metal doors of the school shutting on automatic hinges.

Chapter 13. Brumvack's Retribution

Brumvack, now the only troll in a cave once filled to the brim with massive, stinking bodies, stalked from one end of trolls' living quarters to the other. He was on a mission. The first step of the mission was to find the biggest, roundest rock in the place.

Brumvack picked up the largest rock from Schnottweiper's bed, a beach-ball sized rock that made him grunt to lift it. It was pretty round, he thought, but it was awfully small. Too small, surely, for the job he had in mind. He tossed it back, and kept searching. The perfect rock was here somewhere, he knew.

Brumvack's vision was simplicity itself: he, the recently deposed leader, would show those traitorous trolls a thing or two: he would lock them out of their ancestral home. Let them stew over that for a while. Let them find their own cave! Or let them figure out how to live on land! Or, better, let them be eaten by the

Dark Water Horror, if such a thing still existed. Brumvack didn't care.

The trolls' cave had only one entrance: that at the depths of the lake. That made it a pretty simple operation to lock them out. All he had to do was block off that one entrance. A simple operation: the right rock would do it. A sizeable rock would plug up the entrance tighter than a cork. One sufficiently round would make it even easier. All he would have to do is to roll the rock down to the beach, and ease it into the water. From there, given the steep drop-off, the right rock would roll of its own accord into the narrow cavern that connected Dark Water to the lake itself. The trolls, upon their return, would then be unable to swim through that cavern. They would find only a blocked entrance. And then, his retribution would be complete. They would know who had done this to them. They would know that they had made a mistake in deposing him. At that moment, they would realize the truth: that they had needed him all along.

It was a slam-dunk solution. The trolls would be locked out of the safety of the cave that they had been so eager to leave. Brumvack himself would have plenty of time and space, with no smelly and complaining cave-mates. And, best of all, justice would be served.

Choosing the appropriate rock, Brumvack thought, was the hardest job ahead of him. From there on, it would be clear sailing. He peered into Obeast's bed, but those were all too small too. Obeast, Brumvack remembered, didn't like big rocks for his bed; he said they hurt his back. "Pansy," Brumvack muttered, as he continued his search.

The rock Brumvack finally chose wasn't as round as he had hoped. Nor was it quite as big as he had hoped. It did have the advantage, however, of being relatively close to that long stretch of underground beach leading down to Dark Water. It was a rock with one flat side that the trolls had often used in the days of the bone-headed dinosaur fish. Those fish...(and here Brumvack tilted up his considerable head and stared at the ceiling as he allowed himself a moment of pining for the good old days)...those fish had been too large to bring into the troll's living quarters. Rather, they had had to be dragged up on shore and hacked up with the trolls' one stone hatchet. This was the rock that had come to be used as a work surface, a sort of cutting board, for the project.

While it was perfect for a cutting board, it wasn't so perfect for a door plugger-upper. With that one flat side, Brumvack thought, it wouldn't be as easy as he had hoped to put it in place. Impatiently, he backed up and eyed the thing again. It did have

that one flat side, but the rest of it was pretty round. Well, reasonably round. Well, sort of roundish, in an unevenly oblong, flat-sided kind of way. But never mind! This was no time for nitpicking! This was time for action!

Brumvack put his massive body to work on the project. The rock, once it had been loosened from its time-cemented spot, rolled rather easily. Rolled rather easily, at least, until it didn't any more: once he had rolled it halfway over, the flat side was of course flush with the ground, and showed little inclination to roll further. But Brumvack put his shoulder into it, gave a massive heave with his tree-trunk legs, and managed to budge it. The edge of the rock lifted an inch, then two inches, a final third inch, then toppled over once again onto its roundish side. Then, it was easy to lean into it and give it another push until it had rolled a complete turn and was on its flat side again. He had moved it! He had only managed perhaps ten feet, but he had moved it. Another six or seven rolls, and it would be at the water's edge.

Brumvack collapsed against the rock and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. This was work! Too much like work! He felt a little dizzy, in fact. Dizzy from the physical labor after so many centuries of hibernation? Dizzy with hunger? He didn't know. But his dizziness cleared up quite a bit when the thought of the trolls returning to the cave came across his mind.

“Traitors,” he grumbled, then burped. Brumvack twitched his head backwards at the smell of the air escaping his lips. It smelled something like three-day-old fish and rotten eggs. Something, Brumvack knew, was going badly wrong deep within his belly. That new food, as tasty as it had been, wasn’t settling well.

Brumvack waved away the burp with his massive hand and sighed. “What a world,” he said, “what a world.”

But again that thought of the trolls came to him. He imagined them marching up the beach, full of whatever they had eaten after a successful hunt, and sneering at him as they passed. Schmooze-glutton would be the last to go by, with a smug look that Brumvack would love to smack right off of his face. And then Brumvack settled into that same fantasy that had accompanied his entire childhood: if only he were a little bigger. If only he were a little more troll-like.

He sighed. It wasn’t easy to be the smartest troll. True superiority, he knew, wasn’t easy to live with. It was true: the trolls resented his brilliance. They resented his leadership skills. That was why they had left him behind. He was a reminder to them of all they wanted to be, and never could. So, they made a big show of respecting only physical size and massive belches: those things that could make them feel adequate.

But he wasn't in a mood to ponder the relative volume of belches. That was what had gotten him into this mess. The thought gave him the energy to put his shoulder once again to the boulder. He'd lock them out if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter 14. The Trolls in Lone Tree

The trolls, once they hit the shore, knew they were in trouble. Once the water no longer buoyed them, they felt weak and sluggish.

They hadn't been feeling well, of course, since Schmooze-glutton had woken them from the Big Sleep. They were hungry. The little bit of food they had eaten had helped for a short bit, but was now churning in their bellies. Something was definitely wrong there. It was the hot dogs, they were sure, though trolls didn't know the word for what they had eaten. The problem, they sensed, lay in the fact that the food had been dead for an over-long time. The fish, though difficult to catch, at least proved their state of "alive" by becoming dead as they were eaten. Thus, they were fresh as they hit the troll's bellies. This already long-dead food didn't seem to be good for them.

In any case, the food wasn't settling well, even in the trolls' cast iron bellies. Ordinarily, trolls could digest anything, food or not: fish entrails, mastodon marrow, the yeasty sediment that collected at the bottom of their beer kegs. The bodily noises that accompany the life of any troll—those noises that are at once the bane to the trolls' social lives and yet their primary delight—had doubled, then trebled, in intensity. The ordinary burps and belches that the trolls so enjoyed punctuating their conversations with were now a bit too powerful, both in volume and in scent.

And their muscles, already weakened by their long hibernation, seemed to be further weakened. Just why, they couldn't identify: was it the stress of awaking in a new, strange world? Or was it the harrowing experience of sitting through Schmooze-glutton's challenge? Or, perhaps it was simply the fact that they hadn't truly had much exercise since they were walking these very plains in search of a woolly mammoth. Were their muscles simply unused to working?

Just as the trolls knew nothing of hot dogs, they knew nothing, either, about botulism and its accompanying nerve toxins. If someone had been able to explain the effects of botulism, however, it would have come as no news to them. They were already beginning to feel its effects. In addition to the weakness in

their muscles, they had a hard time focusing their eyes, and their already heavy eyelids seemed intent on closing.

Of course, trolls are stubborn and hardy creatures, so they weren't about to give up on their decided plan of action. But the residents of Lone Tree can count themselves lucky that the trolls weren't at their best. Where healthy trolls might, upon reaching land, have tried to kill and/or eat anything that moved, now they were more tenuous. Where in ordinary circumstances the trolls might have set after people, household pets, and the occasional automobile, in fact the casualties were much lighter. They consisted, if you can excuse the odd trampled garden and felled stop sign, of a small pack of poodles, one aging horse, and a pizza delivery van.

For right now, though, all that was ahead of them.

For right now, it was enough to walk upon the land, as they hadn't since it had been covered to the horizon in nothing but ice and snow.

Despite their queasy, tender stomachs, and despite the fact that their skin hung loosely on their frames after losing their layers of blubber, and despite the fact that none of the trolls were entirely comfortable yet following a new leader, they were a grand sight. A dozen trolls slogging out of the waves and up onto the land was something no one in this world had ever seen. As they left the

water, a dozen troll bodies stopped and stood fully erect in this new world, shedding water, smelling the air with their big troll noses, and taking in the sights that were before them. They looked in every direction, not in defense but in the calm knowledge that this world would soon be theirs.

In Schmooze-glutton's eyes were the lights of victory. It had been a tough few hours, yes, but now that the trolls were ashore and looking to the future, the larger picture was coming into focus. He was now the leader of the Rabid Band, and this was going to be their finest hour. Brumvack—too careful, too self-assured, too smart for his own good—was a thing of the past. Let him pout in the cave if that's what he wanted.

Schmooze-glutton looked over his subjects. They were a sorry bunch, he knew. A ragtag group of trolls if ever there was one. He had his work cut out for him to make them into a well-oiled machine of trollish terror. On top of that, they were anxious, they each felt sick to the stomach and light in the head, they were in serious need of some food that in all probability their bellies wouldn't be ready for.

But, for all of that, they were ready to face this new world. Maybe within the span of a generation, Schmooze-glutton thought, they would once again be a large and happily destructive troupe of trolls that would once again reflect the true dignity and power held

within the name “Rabid Band.” Let tonight, he thought, be a worthy beginning.

Where Brumvack would surely have chosen this time to make a speech, tell a lengthy story that no one really wanted to hear, and grapple with ornery individuals for a slippery sense of control, Schmoozeglutton went for the simple approach. He opened his mouth and said two final words: “Let’s go.”

The once-great Rabid Band, the last few iterations of the once-grand species of troll, walked forth with a sense of purpose and a spirit of discovery.

Chapter 15. Ferdy Chicken Answers the Call

Fred Chickweed was out the door of the high school in twelve seconds flat. It wasn't Fred Chickweed that entered the Petey's Perfect Pizza Pies van, however. It was a different creature entirely. It was a whole different order of creature. The personality of Fred Chickweed was subsumed, stored for another day when pizza delivery was the first order of business. The first order of business tonight was far more important than any pizza delivery.

As Fred left the building, he tore off the top layer of his three layers of clothing. He ripped the worn oxford shirt from his body, not bothering to finger loose the buttons. Rather, the buttons tore off of their threads and sailed into the night. They fell like a short squall of rain to the sidewalk, though Fred wasn't waiting around to hear them fall. He was still running, tugging loose the large

yellow cape attached to his neckline and tucked into his baggy jeans. Soon enough, he dropped his jeans as well, tripping for only a moment as he pushed them down his legs and over his booted feet. Thus was revealed his lumpy Spandex body suit. Orange. Hunter's orange.

This was no mere superhero, this was a rock star. Well, an aging rock star. A somewhat overweight rock star. But he had the adrenaline and the passion and the sheer knowledge—not to mention the guts—to do what had to be done. To save the day. To rescue this town from its own passive ignorance.

Thus, it wasn't Fred Chickweed that entered the Petey's Perfect Pizza Pie van, but Ferdy Chicken, in all his fowl glory.

Ferdy turned the key in the ignition; the pizza van roared to life. He wished desperately that he were behind the wheel of the Ferdymobile. Here he was, involved in the first actual emergency of his superhero career, and he was without his own car. It would have been so satisfying to race down the road with his custom car, the orange chicken on the hood resplendent in its simple, powerful lines that bespoke grace and crime fighting acumen and simple good taste. But, alas, it was not to be. When the time comes to stand up and be counted, one drives the vehicle that is available. The Petey's Perfect Pizza Pie van would have to do. He cranked

the gear lever into the D position, and squealed away into the night.

The average superhero, Ferdy considered, might have turned the van around to meet the creatures of the lake face to face. That, however, would be wrong. One must not go into battle unprepared. Wasn't his motto Be Prepared? Wait, no, that was the Boy Scout motto. But not any less good advice for all of that. His motto was Just In Case. And that's just the plan of action he intended to put forward. There would be no pell-mell rush to meet the unknown. He would do three things: first, he would drive to his secret lair. Second, he would map out the probable route that these creatures would take on his wall-sized chicken hawk's-eye view of Lone Tree. Third, he would call that information into the mayor on red phone. Then, he would check his gear. Wait, that was four things. Okay, he would do four things. Then, he would meet the creatures of the lake head-on. Wait, that was five things. Okay! Five things. He would do five things.

The van careened down the streets of town. The mostly empty streets of town, thankfully, because while Fred Chickweed was a careful middle-aged man with a good driving record, Ferdy Chicken was enlivened with a sense of purpose that managed to ignore the rules of the road that Fred would have insisted upon.

Rules such as stopping at red octagonal signs, for instance, and not driving on the sidewalk.

In record time, then, Ferdy Chicken arrived at his secret base, which on a normal day wouldn't be considered a secret base so much as it would be thought of as Fred Chickweed's mobile home.

He pulled into the driveway with a screech of the brakes. The van rocked on its mainframe. Ferdy pushed the gear lever back to its P position, then, leaving the van running, ran to his garage.

"Let's see," said Ferdy to himself. The first order of business on his list was to, um, call the mayor? No...check his gear? No...oh wait! The first order of business was to drive to his secret lair. That had already been accomplished. On to the second order of business!

He walked over to his wall-sized chicken hawk's-eye-view of Lone Tree, carefully sidestepping the many car parts strewn across the floor. He extracted some previously prepared push-pins from a tin on the workbench, each carefully labeled "Bad Guy" with a little flag made out of red tape. Then, he pondered the map.

The newspaper had suggested that these creatures lived in the lake. That wasn't a Known, at this point, but it was a pretty good guess. Certainly, they were in the water at the time the photographs had been taken. Just as certainly, they had been

coming from the direction of the lake when Principal Klieglight had seen them outside his window. Fred stuck the red pin in the middle of the bluish span on the left side of his map. He stuck another Bad Guy flag next to the school. Why not? It wasn't ideal, of course, because clearly these creatures were mobile in nature. They wouldn't stay in the same place forever. Still, the map had a purpose, and it was fulfilling that purpose now. All he could do was to get as accurate a picture as he could.

Now, let's see, Fred thought. The photograph in the paper had seemed to show six creatures, possibly seven. Was that the extent of them? Only seven creatures? Ferdy Chicken thought not. That would have been too lucky a snapshot. Surely, there were other creatures outside of the frame, or possibly still underwater. But how many more? That was the question. Twice as many? Three times? For all Ferdy knew, there might be twelve times as many. There might be a hundred or better! There might be a gross! Ferdy chicken remembered the ugliness of the creatures in the photograph, and chuckled to himself at his own small pun.

The question regarding the total number of creatures, Fred considered, was an impossible one to answer. An easier question would be, how many pins did he have in his hand? The curious reader will be intrigued to know that, through chance or fate or the

mysterious mathematical equivalencies of a conscious universe, Ferdy Chicken had created an exact dozen Bad Guy pins before he had run out of red tape. These, he pushed into the photograph at various points along the beach, centering around the lawn that surrounded Lone Tree High School.

The only question left was where would the creatures go from here?

The town, from Ferdy's chicken hawk's-eye view, looked something like a squared-off target. The center of that target, the bull's eye, was not a circle but another square: Mosquehenna Park. The more recently named Moon Park. It was where Lone Tree had gotten its name: in the very center of that park was a single Oak tree, the largest anyone had ever seen. It had been there when the town was founded, and it was going to be there, the locals all thought, when the last of them was gone. It was the one constant in all of their lives, that tree.

Interestingly, all manner of trees grew rather well in Lone Tree's climate: Maples, Oaks, even the occasional Larch, but none of them made it more than a foot or two into the air before they were chopped down. The residents were firm in their conviction that there could only be a single tree in Lone Tree, and they knew which one it was going to be. Outside the city limits, and even at the edges of the lake, people allowed nature to take its course, but

within the city limits there was only one tree, and the Oak that presided over Moon Park was it. It stood in the exact center of the park, a round pupil centered in a square grassy iris. From Ferdy's perspective in his garage, the eyeball of the park stared at him. It seemed to be daring him, somehow. And Ferdy knew, intuitively, that this was where the creatures were headed. They might make a circuitous path through the various streets of town, but there was no doubt about it: this was where they would end up.

Ferdy Chicken picked up the red phone.

Chapter 16. Gasbag Proves his Bravery

Trolls were never fully comfortable above the earth's surface; they preferred the darker spaces offered by their extensive caverns. Additionally, they didn't like weather. Wind, sun, rain, all were over-stimulating to the average troll. Their sensibilities were too tender for them to be comfortable as the weather accosted them at its whim with stray bits of air or water or heat. For trolls, used to their dank and smelly cave, even fresh air was a challenge.

The trolls were pleased to note, however, that at least that one thing had improved in this world on the surface: the air wasn't so fresh as it had been in former days. Where once it had been crisp and cold, now the air was an interesting cocktail of things that the trolls didn't know about, but nevertheless appreciated: the slightly rancid smells of fast food, wisps of dumpster odor, and also the

nice black smell of hydrocarbon emissions. The trolls found these to be vaguely homey.

Additionally, the darkness of night was more comfortable for the trolls. They were unused to the light of the sun. The initial shock that they had experienced that morning was considerably lessened now, as night settled over the town.

That didn't mean, however, that they were prepared for what they found there.

The town, from the perspective of the lake, had seemed small. Its mushroom houses sprawled like a fungus over the surrounding hillsides, but had definite boundaries. From within the town, the trolls couldn't see those boundaries. The further into town they strode, the bigger it seemed.

The houses themselves, from their new vantage point, no longer looked like mushrooms. Rather, they were regular and blocky constructions. The trolls couldn't figure out what they were. Some glowed from within, with a faint eerie blue light. Some seemed to be breathing with eternal exhalations. Were these living things? Were they perhaps huge land turtles, evolved over the millennia? The trolls didn't know. Nor did they want to find out. But the houses, at least, seemed not to be moving. As large as they were, they must be very slow-moving creatures at best. Still, they bore watching.

The cars were of more concern. The trolls saw the occasional car, off on a distant street, with its bright eyes lighting the road in front of it, its whine terrorizing the night. Thankfully, none had come close to them. The trolls determined to stay clear of cars. Evolution, they could see, had turned insects into these huge, ungainly creatures, but unlike the turtles, the cars were *fast*. If they took it into their minds to attack the trolls, they would be on top of them before anyone knew it. Schmoozeglutton warned everyone to listen for the cars' whiny voices. He for one was glad that the cars hadn't learned to be quiet as they hunted. How many of them, he wondered, would it take to bring down a troll? Not many, he was sure. Three cars, max, could have a troll surrounded in no time.

Of course, there were dead cars, too, alongside the road. Or sleeping? The trolls didn't know. Certainly, there wasn't any of the snoring and wheezing that accompanied troll sleep. Even dead, though, the cars were worthy of caution.

Schmoozeglutton, as he came upon the first dead car, could see its glassy eyes, the maw of its grilled mouth, and its tough carapace. It was a terrifying sight. The insects of the dinosaur age had been no bigger than a troll's big toe: plenty big enough to give a troll the heebie-jeebies as it crawled into his bed, but not big enough to do more damage than to leave a red itchy bite. These

bugs, though, were fearsome beasts. Schmoozeglutton strode well clear of the dead car, and the others followed his example.

As they began to pass more of the dead insects, however, some of the trolls began to feel braver. The young trolls, with their insatiable curiosity, wanted to see the beasts close up. The older trolls, wise in their ways, were leery of these big bugs. Sure, they looked dead, but then again they were creatures that the trolls had no experience with. Perhaps they were lying in wait. Perhaps they were baiting the trolls into doing something stupid, into getting too close, only to be snapped apart by a big metal-toothed maw. But this wisdom shared by the older trolls was no match for the bravery and stupidity of youth. The younger trolls wandered a bit closer to every dead car that they passed.

Obeast, the biggest of the trolls but no less a kid for all that, was the first to try to goad a car into attacking him. As he walked by the small blue car, he slowed. He sneered at the car as he passed, then stopped and glared at it full on. The car didn't respond. Obeast gave it a short belch of disapproval. The car did nothing.

Was it really dead, that car? Schmoozeglutton pondered the possibilities. It might be dead, of course, but possibly it was just waiting for the ideal moment to snag one of Obeast's limbs and drag him off into the bushes—and, as big as Obeast was and as

small as the car was, Schmooze-glutton wasn't sure that it couldn't do it. Certainly, if it couldn't, there were other cars nearby. Schmooze-glutton could envision the lot of them joining in the feeding frenzy that would surely ensue.

A part of Schmooze-glutton was tempted to call a halt to this madness of Obeast's. As the leader of the Rabid Band, he supposed it was his duty to keep his subjects safe, even those big dumb teenager trolls like Obeast. Another part of his mind shushed that more careful thought, thinking that there might be something useful to be learned from this experiment, even if it did cost the troupe one of its younger members. One of its younger and fatter and dumber members, Schmooze-glutton reminded himself. In a third part of his mind (and here Schmooze-glutton was about tapped out...he found it hard, under normal circumstances, to concentrate on even a single idea, much less three at once) Schmooze-glutton knew that it would be difficult to dissuade Obeast from his chosen course in any case: how could you stop a troll bent on stupidity? He could order him to stop, but would he? If he didn't, would he, Schmooze-glutton, be willing to back it up with a fight? Under ordinary circumstances, of course he would. He would love a fight. Pounding some sense into Obeast was one of the things he had looked forward to as leader. But this was no time for infighting. The trolls, if they got to

arguing amongst each other, might well find themselves victim to a larger danger in this new world. Who knew what they were facing?

Thus, the responsibility of leadership began to weigh on Schmooze-glutton.

It wasn't long, of course, before the other trolls got into the act of facing down the car. Two more trolls, Bilgewater and Biledumper, stalked around to the far side of the car and struck similar postures. They stood on an expanse of lawn (just as likely to be eaten by a big turtle house behind them, Schmooze-glutton thought, as the car they were challenging). The two trolls expanded their chests and squared their shoulders and narrowed their eyes. The car just sat there, though Schmooze-glutton wasn't sure he didn't see a small gleam in its glassy eye.

He thought again of trying to stop this assault on the car, but Schmooze-glutton knew that it was too late. He was more likely to be able to stop a single troll, even Obeast, than he was the three of them. At this point, too many egos were involved.

Obeast, not to be outdone by his smaller kindred, hurled an insult at the car, an insult common to trolls: "You couldn't burp with a belly full of beer," he said in dark, barely audible tones.

At this, the other trolls readied for the attack that would surely follow. Slimegobbler and Schnottblower picked up rocks as big as their sizeable hands, and held them at the ready.

This was getting out of hand, Schmooze-glutton thought. It was no longer a case of simply losing Obeast to this creature. This was coming to look like a mob scene. If the cars decided to join the trolls in a mob scene, Schmooze-glutton sensed who would win. There were cars everywhere. “Okay, that’s enough,” he said, quietly but with authority.

But his quiet authority wasn’t enough. As a counterpoint to the aura of menace that had been building, Oreo and Oleo crept in front of the car, right in front of its dead eyes, and did a little hula move. They had barely got their hips moving before they lost their nerve and ran across the lawn behind Bilgewater, but their little move had been enough to break the spell.

Droolmeister let loose with a small chuckle at the twins’ charades.

It was Gasbag, surprisingly, who really showed the trolls the nature of these bugs. Usually, Gasbag was on the periphery of whatever trollish antics were happening within the Rabid Band. But this time, he took a central role. With brave steps, he walked right up to the car. As he neared it, Schmooze-glutton felt a tightening in his belly. Then, as if the car were nothing but a dead

mastodon, Gasbag reached his hand out over it. All eyes were on him as he carefully extended his index finger. Then, with purpose, he lowered that extended finger until it rested upon the car's shiny carapace. He rested it there as he looked into the eyes of the trolls around him. Then, he took his finger away, shrugged his shoulders, and returned to the group. Obeast suppressed an unconscious shudder at that: he had been brave, but he wasn't about to touch the ugly blue bug.

“Okay,” Schmooze-glutton said. It was past time that he reclaim his authority. “The cars are dead. We know that much, thanks to Gasbag here.” Gasbag had never been complimented in front of the group; he reddened and looked at his toes. “Let's get going. Explore this place. Don't forget: be back at the lake when the sun returns. Don't forget: foodwhoop.”

Then Schmooze-glutton left the trolls with some last words: “We're the last of the Rabid Band.” Here he took a deep breath and stood a bit straighter. “They'll remember what happens tonight for a long, long time. Let's make it good.”

The trolls, each of them, took their own deep breaths of the dark air of night, and marched off to find their new destiny.

Chapter 17. Schmatzenbladder and the Canine Menace

Schmatzenbladder was the first to come face to face with some of the more horrible aspects of this new reality. At first, he walked down a wide avenue, but as he looked upon the sleeping houses, he began to feel horribly exposed. He was the first of the trolls to discover the pleasures of alleys. When he saw one opening up off the street, he ducked into it, and immediately felt better. He didn't know what fences were, but he could certainly see them rising on either side of him, much like the comforting walls of a well-ordered cave. Once there, he relaxed his shoulders and slowed his pace.

With his newfound sense of safety, his mind turned to more basic matters. He sniffed the night air for something that might interest his gurgling belly. There was quite a *mélange* of odors in this new world. The alley harbored garbage cans every 30 or 40

yards, each of which held some rank, interesting smell. He would remember those, he thought, for later. Those garbage cans held great promise, but they didn't hold what he was looking for now. Right now, some fresh meat would suit just fine.

Another few yards down the alley, a waft of breeze brought with it just what he was searching for: the smell of some sort of creature. Some sort of dinner. He stopped and got a nose full of the smell: it was coming from still further ahead.

The odor led him halfway down the long alley. There, he found a yard with a wooden fence that was so high that even he, no small troll, couldn't see over it. His nose, however, was acute. He knew that the creature was there. Several creatures, in fact. He rested his hand against the fence and took a deep, quiet inhalation. He picked up four, then five, then six distinct odors: small animals, he now knew, small and furry. Warm-blooded, more like mastodons than dinosaur fish. He could hear their quick, light breath as they inhaled and exhaled in their easy, contented sleep. Any one of them, surely, wouldn't be enough to fill a troll's belly, but he was betting that the six of them together might make a nice appetizer.

How to get to them? He tested the strength of the fence with his hand. It bent against his weight, but only slightly. He was sure he could put his muscle to it and push it over, but should he?

Probably, that would lead the little animals to panic. If he scared them, he might lose them. They were likely to be faster than he was. He took a few quiet steps further down the fence line, his fingers slightly touching each wooden panel as he went by it. These wooden panels were interesting. Each slat of the fence was like a club, really, that had been shaved down on two sides, and then connected with other clubs. This was a use for clubs that he hadn't considered: you could entrap animals with them. Keep them alive and penned up, ready for one's dining pleasure. He'd have to remember that. Explain it to the others.

Then he saw it. One of the slats was broken along the bottom fence-line. The missing piece left a nose-sized hole. Schmatzenbladder peered into the dark around him, and, thinking himself alone, stealthily lowered himself to his knees, and put his nose right near that hole.

Oh, yes. The smell was intoxicating. Uninterrupted by the fence itself, particles of scent rose and swirled about the yard. They were deep smells, and rank ones. They made his mouth water. He could smell the breath of the little creatures, breath that was soured with their recent meal. Further odors came from deep within their fur. There were the bright, tangy scents of their pee, and the dark and humid scents of their poop. It was glorious. This first smell of fresh food since he had wakened...how many hours

ago now?...made him weak in the knees. His heart raced. He swallowed down the juices that flowed into his mouth. Slowly and quietly, so as not to awaken his dinner, he exhaled, and breathed in those scents once again.

What Schmatzenbladder couldn't know, and what I feel duty-bound to tell the reader, is that the troll had homed in on perhaps the best guarded, most sensitive installation in town. It was Victoria Moon King's Poodle Emporium, a kennel of sorts that housed only poodles of pure breeding. Pets could stay overnight while their families were away, or come for an afternoon of combing and grooming, replete with hair-ribbons and fingernail painting. It was open to the public, were any member of the public to own a poodle of sufficient heritage, which none did. Victoria Moon King had found that only her own six poodles were of suitable parentage to live in her Poodle Emporium. The emporium was a summer home for doggies, with lace curtains and air conditioning and indoor-outdoor carpeting and six small upholstered couches, one per poodle, upon which the dogs could put up their feet at the end of a trying day.

The poodles enjoyed their Emporium. They liked stretching out next to their poodle-sized pool. They regaled in stalking the perimeter of their fenced compound, keeping the neighbors in line with their sharp voices. Now, they slept the sleep of the truly

pampered, each with their painted toenails tucked daintily into the corner of a poodle-sized davenport.

Had Schmatzenbladder known this, perhaps he would have passed by that one yard. Surely it wasn't worth the trouble that it would cause him. But Schmatzenbladder was a troll. His stomach spoke before his brain, and more loudly. When he smelled something that might be dinner, it short-circuited any thoughts of caution.

Unfortunately for Schmatzenbladder, there on his knees with his nose to the ground and his butt up in the air, he wasn't the only one interested in the smells emanating from the Poodle Emporium. Also intoxicated by the smells was Bomber, a local Rottweiler mix who had an erotic interest in the dogs behind this fence. He was sure that he could make a fine breed of puppy with one of the poodles who lived there. Any one of them. Or possibly all of them. This was an interest that, in fact, had spawned the tall, tall fence itself: in prior months, Bomber had regularly visited these poodles. In the dark of night, he had more than once jumped over the then-shorter fence and made his intentions known.

Victoria Moon King, of course, was horrified by such a prospect, given that Bomber was on the order of seventeen times

larger than her precious poodles, and also of course just a dog of ill breeding.

Bomber, however, on this night had been distracted from the charms of poodle scent by a new scent. And, he noticed, the owner of the new scent was bent over in a somewhat delicate position. A position that exposed a part of the anatomy that, truth be told, no creature wants to be visited by anything either as wet or as cold as a healthy Rottweiler's nose.

In some distant part of his brain, Bomber knew this. But Bomber's instincts were more keen than any civilizing voice within him could shout down. This new creature, with its host of tantalizing scents, was too much for Bomber, and he knew just how to satisfy those instincts.

Schmatzenbladder, of course, couldn't know what it was that was sniffing at his nether regions, but the effect of that cold nose was immediate. Schmatzenbladder grunted in surprise even as he jerked forward in a motion of panic. In his wake, he left a troll-sized hole in the fence surrounding Victoria Moon King's Poodle Emporium.

What happened next was too much for Schmatzenbladder, with his slow-witted brain, to fathom. Suddenly, he was halfway through the fence that held the small animals. Immediately upon his entry, a battery of flood lights near the house turned on. Just as

immediately, the animals were roused from their sleep, and were animated into a raucous bouncing chorus of yelps and yips and yaps and the skittering of claws upon the boards of their kennel. The six small creatures surrounded him, yipping and barking and baring their small sharp teeth. Schmatzenbladder had an urge toward retreat, but then again there was some unknown creature behind him, a creature with a large snout and an unknown agenda. He couldn't very well back up, with who knew what destiny awaiting him there. If he was going to be eaten, he didn't want to lose his most tender parts first. Schmatzenbladder didn't want to move forward, and he didn't want to move backward. He was immobilized by his confusion and fear.

Unbeknownst to Schmatzenbladder, with the advent of the lights also came the ringing of an alarm deep in the Mayor's house. Upon hearing the alarm, Victoria Moon King went to the sliding glass door and pulled aside the drapes to see what was troubling her babies.

Victoria Moon King saw the entire tableau laid out in front of her in sharp relief. It was a scene of mayhem. In her shocked forebrain, Victoria Moon King saw everything as if it were caught in mid-motion. There were her dogs: Tippy and Tuppy, Fluffy and Froofie, and Buffy and Boopsie, each caught in mid-yap.

There was the Emporium, laid out perfectly according to the plans that she had delivered to the architect as soon as her husband had won the mayoral race. Except now the perfect layout was marred by a huge hole in the fence. And poking halfway through that hole was one of those...one of those...those beasts. Those beasts that came from.... But for the third time that day, Victoria Moon King screamed and passed out, pulling down the drapes that she still clutched in her hands.

Mayor King, not unused to his wife's little screams, spoke from the next room, where he was reading the paper. "Yes, dear? What is it now?" In answer, of course, he heard only the sound of the drapes being pulled from their rod, and his wife crumpling to the floor. This was something else that Mayor King was used to, but the muffled sounds of her fainting incited more panic within him than did her screams. She always returned to consciousness in a foul mood, and with the notion that Mayor King had failed her again in some way that he couldn't fathom.

He appeared in the room with his newspaper in hand, a finger keeping his page. He saw his wife on the floor, and heard the dogs yipping and yapping and yiping in the back yard. This, too, was not atypical; local boys loved to hang out in the alley and torture his wife's helpless dogs with their taunts.

Mayor King, being the man of action that he was, stepped over the body of his wife and opened the sliding door. “Get away, you juvenile brigands!” he shouted. “You shameless desperados!” This was intended to tell those kids what for, of course, but its larger purpose was to placate Victoria Moon King, were she to wake up. Better to be taking belated action than none at all.

But Mayor King’s words were heard by no one. In fact, all he saw was an empty back yard with a section of fence missing. Schmatzenbladder was gone. From his position halfway through the fence, he had frozen as the bank of lights had come on, but he wasn’t about to stick around after Victoria Moon King’s scream. He had never experienced such a thing. He didn’t know what the light was, but in his imagination it was not unlike the eye of a huge creature opening upon the night. A creature, say, such as the Dark Water Horror. The scream—the piercing cry of a creature about to descend upon its prey?—was a catalyst that solidified fear into action. He stood straight up, further splintering the fence. He ducked back down the alley, followed by the poodles, which yapped and jumped about his feet like a cloud of pesky mosquitoes.

Bomber, proud of his reputation as the largest dog on the block, found himself too faint-hearted to deal with Schmatzenbladder, once the troll stood and towered above him.

He backed away with his shoulders hunched and his bobbed tail tucked as far as possible between his legs.

Schmatzenbladder scooted away from the scene of the crime as quietly as he could. He stuck to the shadows, tiptoeing with exaggerated steps. But there was no quietude in an alley with Tippy and Tuppy and Fluffy and Froofy and Buffy and Boopsie in it, growling and yapping their displeasure and righteousness. Looking at the little buggers now, Schmatzenbladder couldn't believe that he had once found their odor to be appetizing. They were nasty little creatures, all mouth and no brains. Give him a fish any day: fish, at least, remained quiet and stoic as you ate them.

Though he could see that the poodles were creatures of very little brain, he nevertheless tried to reason with them. First, he glared at them, as he had seen Brumvack do to quiet his cave-mates. If that had any effect at all, it was only to animate them further. Next, he implored them (still padding down the alley as fast as possible) with a finger to his lips, and as quiet a "shhh" sound as he could make. This, too, didn't show any signs of quelling their behavior. Schmatzenbladder stole a look behind him to see what might be following. Nothing yet, thankfully, but the yapping of the dogs was sure to alert the mighty huntress to their location.

Having failed at diplomacy with the poodles, Schmatzenbladder decided to take stronger measures. On his next step forward, he tried to step on one of the dogs with his large foot. The poodle skipped away, heedless. He tried to stomp another, as if it were a little bug, which as far as he was concerned wasn't far from the truth. But it got away too. The little blighters were fast on their feet, Schmatzenbladder had to give them that. He stomped a third time, but again the poodle squirted out from under his foot, and took a bite at his ankle.

Schmatzenbladder took a different tactic: he swooped his long arm down to catch a poodle. This was easier, because rather than trying to escape his grasping hand, the dogs leapt forward and took a nip at his fingers. Schmatzenbladder missed his grab, but nonetheless came back with a poodle firmly affixed to his forefinger. He tried to shake it loose, but the poodle hung on for dear life. Finally, he grabbed the scruff of its neck with his other hand. This improved nothing at all, because while the poodle was biting him, at least it was relatively quiet. Now, Schmatzenbladder found himself with a yapping, squirming poodle in his hand. His first impulse was to throw it, but he sensed that it was a boomerang poodle: wherever he threw it, it was likely to come back.

He pondered for another moment how to get rid of the poodle, and how to quiet it. But he had little time to think, because

unexpectedly a yellow stream of liquid arced from the fuzzy creature, spilling down Schmatzenbladder's front. Had he stopped to think about it, he would have considered that it was not that big of deal to have a dog peeing on him. But he didn't stop to think. Rather, with this new sensation of warm liquid guttering down his front, he panicked. He tossed the creature in his mouth and swallowed it whole.

The poodle did not go down easily. Its coarse, dry fur stuck in his throat, threatening to keep the poodle from going down. That would be a pathetic end to a troll, wouldn't it? Choked to death on a meal smaller even than a mudfish. On the other hand, mudfish at least slithered into one's gullet in a satisfying way. There was no slithering, Schmatzenbladder learned, with poodles. It stuck in his throat like a bale of cotton.

Finally, though, he choked it down. It was a relief, not having a dog in his hand any longer, or holding fiercely to his finger with its fangs. It was also a mild relief to have reduced the noise level by one sixth. In a moment of no-thought, Schmatzenbladder scooped up poodle after poodle, accomplishing the same reduction in noise with each heavy swallow.

There were four poodles, then three, then two. Finally, there was a single poodle dancing around his ankles. That poodle gave a final yap, then, not hearing any yips or yipes in response,

discovered that it was alone. That last poodle looked around for just a moment, and, catching not a single glance of its brothers and sisters, decided better than to continue its current plan of action, and scooted back to the Emporium.

Schmatzenbladder, relieved to have quieted the throng around him, tiptoed quickly to the end of the alley. When he arrived at the street, he had the choice of turning left or right: further into the city or back toward the cave. He didn't even think about the choice. He was in no way ready to move forward. There was little room in his mind for any thoughts other than returning home. He had had enough of this new world. He slipped down the street as quickly as he could, belching up occasional balls of wiry fur.

Chapter 18. Ferdy Chicken Stays the Course

Ferdy Chicken held the frayed end of the phone cord in his hand.

The phone cord that was connected to the red phone.

“Well,” he thought, “this is embarrassing.”

He had picked up the receiver, hot to call the mayor’s office, and heard the calm tones of absolutely nothing in the earpiece. Instead of the mayor eagerly answering the phone and awaiting word on the worsening situation, there was no sound at all. No dial tone, no ring ordinarily associated with this communication device, no operator. He had picked up the phone from the desktop and shaken it a bit, the receiver still clutched at his ear, and still heard nothing. Then, he had traced the cord from the phone’s base to the wall socket, only to find that the phone wasn’t connected to anything. Instead, the cord hung impotently behind the desk. Only

when he held the frayed end in front of his face did he remember that the phone had never been hooked up. He had bought it at the neighbor's garage sale and set it on the desk. He had fully intended to get it hooked up, in fact had fully intended to replace its frayed cord with a new one and *then* get it hooked it up. But he never had.

All this time, where he had fantasized that the mayor was reachable at a moment's notice, in fact he wasn't. Ferdy Chicken was alone in the world, cut off from its greater happenings, unable to send his most important communication.

He supposed, now that he thought about it, that the mayor wouldn't have been in his office anyway. Surely, this late in the evening, the mayor was already home, probably in his pajamas, watching the nightly news. News which would no doubt share nothing of real import, of real threat.

Being a superhero, Ferdy Chicken mused, was not without its difficulties. A marginalized superhero, more so. Where any superhero worth his salt should be able to contact the city fathers at the touch of a button, Ferdy Chicken hadn't yet proved himself, and so wasn't welcome in the mayor's office. The frayed end of the phone cord reminded him of that little scenario, as well.

The episode at the mayor's office had gone badly. He had shown up in full regalia, cape and all, knowing that the man himself would want to shake his hand and thank him for his work on behalf of Lone Tree, and would consider Ferdy's request for a direct phone line.

In the end, of course, he hadn't even seen the mayor. He hadn't gotten any farther than the outer office before the mayor's secretary had called the police. "There's a weird guy here, in tights and a cape. He says he's a fervid chicken, or something."

"Ferdy..." he had corrected her, even as she was speaking to the cops. "Ferdy Chicken." In the end, he had exited the city building before the police had come to haul him away, first through the office door and then down an empty hall, and finally through a bathroom window onto the street. It was no good having one's picture in the paper, as a superhero, unless one was being handed a medal by the mayor. If he was going to leave an impression on the residents of Lone Tree, he didn't want it to be the image of him being led away from the mayor's office in handcuffs.

Instead, he had slunk home, in the shadows of hedges and alleys. But where the average man might have given up after such an experience, hung up his suit, returned to a normal life, Ferdy didn't give up. His time at the mayor's office, as bad as it had

been, enlivened him toward to a vision of a day when he wouldn't have to be embarrassed to be seen walking the streets of town dressed as a chicken. He determined then that he would prove himself. He would haul in some threat. He would, some day, be the hero of the hour.

In a town the size of Lone Tree, of course, there were few real threats. It was a pretty quiet place, mostly. Ferdy looked at the frayed end of the phone cord one last time, and felt his spirits sinking. But where Fred Chickweed would have allowed his eroding spirits to drag him down, to discard his chosen course, to quit in the face of daunting odds, Ferdy Chicken would have none of it. For Ferdy Chicken, there was still hope. There was still a chance, however slim. Ferdy Chicken was no quitter. The monsters of the lake would be his route to the top. He set down the base of the phone on the desk, and set the handset carefully into its cradle. Someday, he was sure, he would have a direct line to the mayor. Until then, he'd have to make do with what he had.

Ferdy Chicken pulled the notepad next to the nonworking phone toward him, and retrieved a stub of pencil from the drawer. Quickly, he penned a note:

Mayor King:
Monsters headed toward Moon Pk. Meet you there when the crime is solved.
Your first citizen,
Ferdy Chicken

Ferdy Chicken's handwriting, it must be said, wasn't good. The term "chicken scratches," though it might be literally true, glorified the markings upon the page. He abbreviated the "Park" in Moon Park to Pk., and, having run out of room on his one line note, hyphenated 'solved' so that half of the word appeared on the line below. "Sol-ved." "Until the crime is sol-ved." He tucked the note into his right work boot. He was nearly ready.

The only thing left was to check his equipment. He had always wanted to check his equipment. He had done so through countless dry runs, but this time, it was not a drill. This time, it was for real. With the air of a competent man competently doing his work with competence, he stalked over to the footlocker underneath his workbench. He twirled the combination lock to the right and to the left, 36-54-17, managing to unlock it on his first attempt. He took it from the hasp and opened the lid. Before him lay a superhero's treasure: the tools of the trade.

He pulled out a length of rope. "Rope: check!" Next, the tripwire. "Tripwire: check!" And, holy of holies, his grappling hook. "Grappling hook: check!" Then, with the smooth motions of continual practice, he tied the end of the rope to the grappling hook's large metallic eye. "Rope with grappling hook attached to it: check!"

He was ready to go. Ferdy Chicken gathered up his equipment in his arms, and flew the coop.

Chapter 19. The Trolls Discover the Joys of Shopping

Obeast, who had been looking at trolls his whole life, now saw a troll he had never seen before.

He was striding along the middle of a downtown street when he saw him. He and Bilgewater and Biledumper, having found common ground in facing down the big blue bug, had formed a small knot of trolls, and headed off on their own. They came to the business section of town, which the residents referred to as “downtown,” though that term glorified the few old buildings.

What downtown Lone Tree supported was largely gone since the mall in Elmsburg had opened. Most residents, when they wanted to buy something, would take off for the big city. The two or three blocks of downtown that survived the opening of the mall closed up shop by late afternoon on Friday. There was little happening by the time the trolls came through.

Bilgewater and Biledumper, like Schmatzenbladder, had discovered alleys, and particularly the joy of dumpsters. The rank smells confounded and intrigued them, especially so when they learned that they could open the lids of the dumpsters and release the smells out into the air. The restaurant dumpsters were especially fragrant. When they discovered the dumpsters behind the Chinese restaurant, they oohed and aahed as they opened each new lid. Once the lid was open, they would take a deep breath and swoon at the heavenly odors. They wanted nothing more than to reach into the dumpster and discover whatever it was that reeked so. Wanted nothing more than that, that is, except to heed the call of the next dumpster. They were like kids in a candy store. The next smell, whatever it was, held the possibility of being even better than the one in front of them. As that next smell called to them, they would slam shut the lid of the current dumpster and run toward the next. There, they would skid to a stop in anticipation of the next grand opening.

Obeast, however, not so likely to be drawn in by cheap thrills, had wandered on, and now found himself face to face with this strange troll.

This was the weird part: the troll was inside one of the big boxy structures. There was a wall in front of Obeast, like a cave wall except that *he could see through it*. He could see that troll

standing in front of him, except how could he see him when there was a wall between the two of them? It was as if the wall were made of a thin sheet of ice. But of course Obeast was smart enough to know that you couldn't make walls out of thin sheets of ice. They would melt! He shook his head to clear it of the dreamlike image, but when he opened his eyes, the clear wall was still there in front of him, and yes, there was the new troll inside the structure, staring back at him.

Late on a Friday night in a dying town, no one was there to see Obeast staring at himself in the window of the darkened department store.

Obeast considered himself to be something of an aesthete among trolls; he knew what to look for in attractive troll bodies. That highly developed sense told him that this was a very ugly troll. Ugly, and no doubt dangerous. The troll did, however, have an impressive girth. It was not, Obeast could sense, be one to be trifled with.

Fear was rising within his belly. He used that fear to fuel a fierce scowl. Any of the Rabid Band would have been intimidated by Obeast's scowl, but this one wasn't. Immediately, it scowled back, and with as much ferocity.

Obeast wished he had a club. His hand twitched at the thought. He was ready to take a swing at something, but there

were no clubs at hand. He looked around him for a good substitute. He didn't find anything resembling a club, but just up the sidewalk from his position, there was a flower bed with a few sizeable rocks in it. He sidled that direction, keeping an eye on his new nemesis. The other troll must have seen the rocks as well, because he was heading toward them just as quickly. Then Obeast had an idea: the troll he was facing was all alone. But he, Obeast, wasn't alone. Even this big ugly troll would be no match for him and his friends. He turned his head and called. "Bilgewater! Biledumper! I need help!"

Then he reached down and grabbed a rock.

By the time he stood and looked back at the strange troll, it had picked up a rock as well. Fortunately, Bilgewater and Biledumper were heading in his direction. "We've got company," he said, as the two joined him, and nodded toward the ugly troll in the window.

Now, he noted, the new troll had called a couple of friends as well. This caused a jolt of panic to go through Obeast. Instinctively, he reared back and threw the rock directly at the head of the first beast.

In the swift moment that the rock sailed toward the window, Obeast noted that the friends of this new enemy, oddly enough, looked like Bilgewater and Biledumper. Where would an ugly

troll like him get a couple of such good looking friends? And why would his friends look so much like his, Obeast's, friends? But he didn't have time to ponder the question before the rock hit the window and the whole world exploded.

It turned out not to be the whole world. Only the wall in front of them had exploded. But it certainly exploded with a loud, jangly crash.

Obeast was no stranger to throwing rocks. He had regularly thrown rocks at trolls. Those rocks resulted in an "Ouch!" or an "Aargh!" or an "I'll get you, you fathead!" If he missed, the throwing of the rock resulted in the sharp crack of hitting the cave wall or the dull thud of hitting the cave floor. Never had Obeast heard a noise like the sound of the wall crashing to the sidewalk in thin, jagged sheets. He looked around him, to see who else might have heard the noise. Thankfully, no one was there.

Thankfully, too, the three trolls he had been facing disappeared. The noise must have scared them off.

The fact that the trolls had been inside this structure, though, brought home an interesting thought: were these caves? Above-ground caves? The smashed wall in front of him certainly made it look that way. Smashing the wall had opened up a huge cavern in front of him, albeit a cluttered one. It was a cavern full of shelves

and racks, all covered with piles of stuff. Obviously, these trolls lacked the good taste to keep a cave clear and broad and open, with only occasional rocks for sitting and weapons racks for storage.

Obeast pondered for a moment. If these boxy structures *were* caves, then surely there would be a few clubs in there, stored away by its inhabitants. And food. Maybe a few mudfish! Maybe a mastodon shank or two! A voice in the back of his mind cautioned him against moving into a cave with who-knew how many inhabitants, but his hand surely itched for a club to wield, and his stomach surely growled for some decent food. He shared this thought with Bilgewater and Biledumper, then said “C’mon. Let’s check this out.” He took a few hesitant steps forward, then crawled through the broken window.

This cave, if that was what it was, wasn’t anything like a troll cave. It certainly was huge: its walls were far apart, and it had high ceilings. There wasn’t much light in this part of the cave, but small fires burned toward the back. Obeast had seen these fires about town as well: they burned brightly on top of big wooden poles. Strange, the way these new creatures were smart enough to build fires, but not smart enough to put them on the ground, where you could cook with them, or get warm sitting next to them.

Bilgewater and Biledumper, following him into the cavern, made no small amount of noise. Glass crunched underneath their feet. Biledumper said “Ouch!,” and then “Hey! Stop pushing!” Bilgewater, not to be corrected, offered an exasperated, “What? What? What did I do?” Biledumper was ready with an answer: “Whaddaya think, you stupid moron?” but he didn’t get to finish his statement before he was quieted by Obeast. The bigger troll glared at the two, then raised his finger to his lips in a “be quiet” gesture. This reconnaissance mission, Obeast sensed, would have to be undertaken with the utmost caution. It wouldn’t do to have a dozen or more trolls descend on them as they were raiding their cave. Especially that ugly fat troll Obeast had first seen. The thought of that troll staring at him from inside the cavern would give him nightmares, he was sure. Nightmares in which that ugly troll would chase him through endless dreamscapes, never to be outrun. Obeast suppressed a small shudder.

Having shushed his compatriots toward quietude, Obeast turned and took a step forward. Took a step right into a display of pots and pans. The display wasn’t as tall as Obeast, but it was pretty tall. It came to his chest, tall enough that when the pots and pans clanked into each other, then fell to the floor, the ensuing metallic crash rivaled the breaking of the window. Obeast shrank

into himself. He raised his shoulders to his ears and squinched shut his eyes.

Finally, the commotion abated.

When Obeast opened his eyes, he stared into the darkness around him. His nerves twitched and jumped at every perceived motion. Whatever trolls lived in this cave, he thought, were surely now headed this way. They couldn't ignore such a commotion. Obeast looked at the other two trolls with a disapproving stare.

"Hey, it's not my fault," said Biledumper. "You're the one who's running into stuff."

That eased Obeast's disapproval not at all. He glowered at Biledumper. "If you hadn't been so noisy, I would have watched where I was going," he whispered.

Biledumper was ready with a response, but Obeast shushed him once again. "Never mind. They already know we're here. Let's move. Be quick about it." He moved off in an exaggerated tiptoe toward the sporting goods section, still scanning the room for any sign of the strange trolls. Bilgewater and Biledumper followed him noisily. He turned to them with a final warning: "But be *quiet* about it."

Obeast had a moment of fright when he saw two of the wimpy, skinny land trolls on his left. They stood stock still, and

looked upon the world with eyes that didn't blink. Obeast froze, and motioned for Bilgewater and Biledumper to do the same. Had they already been seen?

Obeast's mind was a whirl of activity. What were these land trolls doing here? Was this their cave? But if that was true, why did he see the big ugly troll—a regular troll, no small land troll—in the window? That beast, though it was plenty ugly, at least was a respectable troll. Not like these small, pale creatures.

Then the thought occurred to him that this whole town was full of these above-ground caves. Each of them, surely, was inhabited by these land trolls.

They sure were creepy looking, land trolls. Especially creepy was how still they were. Were they sleeping? With their eyes open, and standing up?

Obeast suppressed a shudder that crept up his spine. The land trolls were so small. So pale. So skinny. It wouldn't do to let them think that he was afraid of them. But he was. His rational mind argued that such creatures surely couldn't hurt a troll such as himself, but they still gave him the shivers.

It was preternatural, the way they stood there, not even moving. They both stood in front of him in awkward positions, staring into the distance over his shoulder. Oddly, he noted, they had a steel rod holding them up.

Obeast weighed his options. If these land trolls were asleep, perhaps they could backtrack and leave the above-ground cave without being noticed. But then, they would miss out on whatever food they might find. Instead, he opted for a tactic of surprise.

With a sudden lurch forward, he rushed at the beast on the left.

As he hit, the land troll toppled over. It crashed to the floor, Obeast on top of it. No sound escaped from its lips, but its head gave a hollow crunch as it hit. Both of its arms broke off and skittered along the floor.

Obeast, atop the pathetic creature, looked around him. The back of the land-trolls skull was crushed, but its face retained a look of calm absence. He got to his feet and shook himself involuntarily.

The land troll still didn't move. It just lay there with its arms unattached and its legs bent upward in an awkward position.

Obeast picked up one of the creature's arms. Though it was no longer attached to the body, it stood rigidly at attention, its fingers pointing vaguely into the reaches of the cave.

Then it hit him: this troll wasn't real!

"Hey guys!" he said. His voice boomed with its more accustomed timber. Whispering, though clearly a good idea, was hard to remember. "Look! Fake trolls!"

The three examined the creature on the ground, and then the one standing next to it. Once they knew the truth, it was obvious: of course these trolls weren't real. No wonder they had stood so still.

It occurred to him to wonder why these fake trolls had been created. It would be embarrassing enough, they thought, to be such a pale specimen of troll. One wouldn't think they would make copies of themselves to stand around the above-ground cave. What was the point of that? Was this art, perhaps? Or maybe they were intended to scare away intruders? If so, they had very nearly worked. Had they been standing in the window, probably Obeast would have tried to make himself small, and passed on by. Certainly, they were scary looking creatures, real or not.

Whatever their purpose, the two fake land trolls wore tiny pieces of cloth over their chests and hips. One wore tiny pinkish-purple pieces, and one wore tiny bright green pieces. A sign underneath the still-standing one, though the trolls couldn't read it, said, "Bikini Clearance! Half Off!" They shook their head in amazement at the little scraps of cloth encircling the beasts.

The trolls, now that they knew the creatures weren't real, gave in to their shudders. These creatures, if they ever came upon a live one, bore watching. They had known that they were small and ugly; now they knew that they had strange customs as well.

Obeast was the first to find any truly useful treasure. At first, he thought he had come across a hoard of dinosaur eggs, and his mouth watered. As he picked one up ready to gobble it down, however, he started to wonder. Was it really an egg? He thought perhaps not. It was perfectly round, for one thing. Its shell was leathery, like a dinosaur egg, but it had no give to it. He smacked it against a metal shelf, trying to crack the shell. When it didn't crack, he held it to his ear. He heard nothing inside it.

Bilgewater, too, found something useful. He stood in front of an entire rack full of wooden sticks that held a familiar shape. "Hey, look at these!" he said to Biledumper. "Clubs!" He picked out one of the longer ones. It was pretty short compared to his old club, and didn't have enough heft for his personal liking, but the wood was nice and solid, and it had a good grip on it. It was closer to a club than anything he had recently held. He tried it out by taking a swing at Biledumper's lumpy cranium. It landed with a satisfying crunch.

"Ouch!" yelled Biledumper.

Obeast looked up from his dinosaur egg and turned to the two trolls. "Be quiet, yous twos," he hissed.

But Biledumper didn't even hear Obeast. Scowling at Bilgewater, he grabbed his own club from the rack. It was a much

shorter club than Bilgewater's, but it was red, and made of metal. He swung it backhanded in a short arc toward Bilgewater's head. It made a satisfying "Kong" sound as it hit his temple.

"OUCH!" yelled Bilgewater. "I'll get you, Biledumper,"

Obeast interrupted the two with a loud belch of disapproval. Bilgewater and Biledumper could tell he meant business. Both turned to him. They could see the whites of his eyes surrounding his smoldering gray irises. "I said BE QUIET!" he yelled. "Can't you see that there are *trolls* here, ready to attack us at any minute? If you keep yelling," he said, then caught himself and finished with a whisper: "If you keep yelling, they'll know exactly where we are."

But Bilgewater would have none of that logic. "He just smacked me with a club!" he said indignantly.

Biledumper scowled. "You hit me first, you moron."

Bilgewater responded with every bit of the innocence he felt. "I was just testing out these new clubs! I *had* to hit something!"

"Next time, hit a rock. That hurt!"

Bilgewater, still all innocence, raised his hands and pantomimed looking around him in every direction. "Are there any rocks here? Do you see any rocks? There are no rocks! I hit the closest thing to a rock I could find: your skull!"

Biledumper gritted his teeth crookedly and glared at Bilgewater. He waved his bat in the air with menace.

“That’s enough, both of you!” Obeast whispered fiercely. He shot his eyes around the room, on the lookout for that ugly troll, who surely was behind any one of these store shelves, preparing to leap out and pound them into the floor.

And, out of the corner of his eye, he did catch a glimpse of that big ugly troll, looking at him from behind another box of dinosaur eggs. The troll stared at him, first with surprise and then with fear in his eyes.

Without thinking, Obeast threw the dinosaur egg at him in a hard, overhand motion. Once again, the world exploded around them.

The astute reader knows, of course, that there was no troll at all in the building other than the three trolls exploring it. Obeast had seen his reflection again, this time in a three way mirror. The reader also knows that no department store, even a decrepit and dying one in the middle of small town America, carries anything like dinosaur eggs. Obeast had discovered not dinosaur eggs but softballs. And, of course, the world still wasn’t exploding, though to the trolls the sound of breaking glass was so striking and foreign that they could be excused for thinking so.

The middle mirror, which had once held an image of Obeast himself, was now in pieces on the floor, shattered into variously sized polygons of sharp glass. When the troll in question went over to examine it, he saw many small images of himself within the pieces of glass on the floor. This was odd, but he didn't have any time to consider the whys of that before he looked up and saw two more of the ugly trolls right in front of him. One stood to his left, and another to his right. Again with the energy of unconsidered panic, he clenched his fist and attempted to deck the troll to his right. As his arm thrust forward, the world, as it seemed to be doing with some regularity, exploded around him.

It took a while to discern the principle of mirror images, but eventually the three trolls figured it out. Obeast was finally able to put together that the two friends of his nemesis looked like Bilgewater and Biledumper because they *were* Bilgewater and Biledumper. And, the ugly troll was ugly simply because it looked like him. Once he had that figured out, the world became a more comfortable place. There weren't trolls surrounding them in every direction.

Obeast, though mirrors were still new and remained a little spooky, nevertheless enjoyed posing in front of the one remaining glass in the three way mirror. He crossed his arms, admiring his big belly (though it wasn't nearly as big as it would be once he

started eating regularly again). He raised and turned his head, admiring his strong jaw and double chin. He smiled gaudily, admiring his strong yellow teeth.

It wasn't long, however, before Biledumper pushed him from in front of the mirror. He had been standing behind Obeast, trying to catch a glimpse of himself. What fun! He had seen Obeast since he was just a small troll, and of course he had grown up looking at Bilgewater, his best friend. But he had never seen himself. He had never seen how big and greenish and ugly he looked. How the mold in his armpits and on the underside of his belly gave him such a distinguished air. How masculine he looked. He stood up straight and puffed out his chest.

But then Obeast pushed back. He wasn't done evaluating his own sturdy form. The two wrestled for position in front of the mirror.

Bilgewater, seeing the two posing to admire themselves, had an idea. He retrieved the bikini top from the one mannequin still standing, then crowded the two trolls out of the way so he could have his own look in the mirror. Once there, he stretched the colorful fuchsia string from the mannequin across his front. It made a line from one side of his chest to the other, the two tiny cups not reaching far enough to cover anything like what they were intended to.

When he got a good look at himself in the mirror, Bilgewater blushed a deep crimson. His cheeks grew to be a color not unlike the color of the swimsuit. He lowered the bikini top immediately, then tossed it aside. He made a small whistling sound and wandered off, hoping that the two trolls would be enraptured enough by their own forms in the mirror that they hadn't noticed his. But his hopes were in vain, if the deep smirks that the two shared were any indication.

He tried to distract them before they had a chance to say anything. "Uh...I think we oughta go."

When the two trolls showed little indication of moving, he reached back into his mind for a good reason to leave the store, and couldn't come up with one. But his stomach growled right then, adding its two cents. Bilgewater, grateful for his stomach's interruption, said, "I'm hungry. I don't think there's any food here."

"Okay," said Obeast. The thought of food gave him the impetus to move forward as well. "I'm gonna grab one of those clubs, though."

As he walked to the rack, however, his mind returned to the dinosaur eggs. He veered toward them, and picked up another one. Again, he hit it against the metal shelf, where it thudded dully. He showed it to Biledumper.

“What do you think this is?” he asked.

“It made a pretty good hole in that picture-shower over there,” said Biledumper. Maybe it’s a fake rock.”

Fake rocks! Whatever the limitations of these land trolls, they were awfully clever beasts, thought Obeast. The Rabid Band had thrown rocks for generations, but hadn’t once thought of trying to make artificial ones.

He looked at the dozens of fake round rocks before him. They fit the hand nicely, he thought.

“You two grab some clubs if you want. I’m gonna take some of these.” He picked up as many of the smooth rocks as he could carry. Pretty soon, his face was nearly hidden behind a pyramid of softballs balanced against his chest and left arm.

Bilgewater and Biledumper retrieved the clubs they had chosen.

“You’d better get a longer club than that,” Bilgewater said as he saw Biledumper pick up his short metal club.

“I like this one,” Biledumper said, a little defensively. Then he added, with a little bit of a grin, “I like the sound it makes against someone’s head.” He imitated the sound: “*Kong!*” Bilgewater scowled at him, and faked a lunge toward him, but then he smiled too. “It did make a pretty cool sound, didn’t it? *Kong!* Made my head sound as hollow as a gourd.”

The trolls shared a comfortable chuckle, then moved on.

But the trolls weren't done in the store quite yet. On their way out, they hit the menswear department. There, they found some more of the fake wimpy trolls. One of these had on a nice oxford shirt, and a bright red tie. The trolls didn't much care for the shirt, but Bilgewater was struck by the tie. He thought it gave even the wimpy troll a look of suavity and distinguishment. Certainly, it looked more masculine than the purple string he had stretched across his chest. He examined the tie a bit, then loosed its knot. He yanked it over the head of the mannequin, then stretched it to fit over his own head.

Now, a troll's neck is quite a bit larger than the average human's, but it wasn't so large that the tie didn't fit, even if it was quite a bit shorter than *GQ* would likely recommend. It hung crookedly down his chest. Bilgewater was faintly embarrassed as he looked down at himself, but before he ripped off the tie he found another three way mirror to check himself out.

These mirrors, he thought, were pretty cool. Perhaps later they could retrieve one for use in their cave. That would have to wait, however. For now, it was enough to look at versions of himself standing in every direction around him, and admire his new tie. He fussed with the knot a little to straighten it. It wasn't as clean and tight as it had been on the fake troll, but still, its

suavity and distinguishment were intact. He nodded to himself in approval. He'd just wear this tie, he decided. It would make him stand apart from the average troll.

Then the three trolls were on their way. They stepped out of the broken window, Obeast losing only two or three of his fake rocks from the pile precariously balanced against his chest. Once again, they headed down the street.

Chapter 20. Brumvack Learns the Consequences of Jobs Half-Done

Brumvack lay in an exhausted pile on the shore of Dark Water. His limbs were splayed in every direction. He felt weak in the knees, fluttery in the belly, and empty in the head.

But he was satisfied.

The rock, nowhere near as round as it had first appeared, had been nothing but trouble as he had attempted to plug up the hole at the bottom of the lake. Difficult to maneuver on land, it was doubly difficult in the water. Once it was deep in the underground lagoon, it was nearly impossible: he could barely see, his fingers were numb with cold, the lake's bottom gave no foothold. Brumvack had no lever, and no place to stand. And no knowledge of Greek antiquity.

But he had finally parked the cutting board rock in place. Well, more or less in place. Surely, it would be enough to keep those life-sucking trolls out of his cave.

His cave! Yes, it was now his, Brumvack's, cave. He had claimed it as his own. If the trolls wanted to pretend that Schmoozeglutton was their leader, well bully for them. He, Brumvack, would remain their actual leader, in power, and in the ancestral caves that were his by divine right. Any troll who thought differently—and evidently they all did—could stay out of that home for as long as they liked. Let them join the creatures of the land, if that's what they wanted.

Brumvack sighed in exhaustion and contentment. He could see little from his resting place other than the dimly fluorescent ceiling above him, and even that was beginning to swim a little as his heartbeat slowed and his breathing returned to something like normal after his exertions with the rock. He closed his eyes, and meditated upon how nice it would be to finally be alone. To have nothing to see but rocks and stalactites. To have nothing to hear but the gentle lapping of Dark Water upon the shore, as he was hearing now. Well, gentle lapping plus a small splashing sound off in the distance. What could that be? Brumvack didn't know, but he readily dismissed it. It was just a little splish splash of a noise. Surely, with the constant clamor that life amongst trolls held, he

just wasn't used to the small noises that constantly echoed through this underground world. He raised his arms and legs in a satisfying stretch, sighed again, and collapsed into an even more contented posture.

And, for a few moments or many, he slept.

It was a single drip of water upon the bridge of his nose that woke him. "Whazzat?" he mumbled sleepily, squinching his eyes and furrowing his forehead. There were places in the lower reaches of the caves where occasionally water dripped through the rocky ceiling, but he was unaware of any leaks here on the beach of Dark Water. He rubbed at his nose with his beefy hand, then settled further into the gravelly shore for another siesta. Just as he exhaled another long sigh, another drop of water fell, this time on his bull-like neck.

Brumvack pursed his lips, and ventured open his left eye to have a look around.

Schmatzenbladder stood directly over him, peering down with a heavy scowl. Brumvack started, opening both eyes now, and emitted a bit of a panicked "Waahh!" sound. Then he said, "How...(burp)...how did you get in?"

Now, Brumvack is a smart troll, but even smart trolls occasionally say something before thinking it through completely.

Had he had time to formulate the perfect response, it wouldn't have been "How did you get in," that question implying as it did his own guilt in blocking the door. But it was too late. The question was already out.

"AHA!" boomed the troll above him. Now, Schmatzenbladder was something of a thick-headed troll, but even a thick-headed troll is capable of occasional leaps of deductive logic. "So you DID lock Schmatzenbladder out!"

"I...er...I..." responded Brumvack. Ordinarily quick with an excuse, Brumvack couldn't formulate a thought, much less a sentence communicating that thought. The sight of Schmatzenbladder had left him struck dumb. Each "I..." and "...er..." made him look all the more guilty, he knew, but he was helpless to stop himself. His own failure at deflecting his guilt left him even more bamboozled. He strengthened his resolve, he concentrated his thoughts, he coordinated his brain and his tongue. He started again. "I...er...I...."

"You one no good troll!" boomed Schmatzenbladder. He gripped Brumvack by his bicep, and lifted him to a standing position. He went to the trouble of standing him up only so that he would be able to push him down again. He did so, with a forceful two-handed shove that landed Brumvack on his tailbone. "Oof!" cried the deposed leader, and "Ouch!" He crab walked backwards,

away from his short but stout nemesis. In the back of his mind, a voice suggested itself: “Now doesn’t this just figure.”

All through Brumvack’s life, he had been able to talk his way out of his problems. Brumvack was a good fighter next to the average biped, but he wasn’t good enough to take on any of the Rabid Band. Now, caught half asleep and fully tongue-tied, he found himself in dire straits. He wouldn’t, he knew, be able to deflect Schmatzenbladder’s anger physically: there were no clubs at hand, and he was in no position to get in a good toss with a rock. If he was going to survive, he’d have to talk his way out of his predicament. “Look here!” he said. “You can’t...um...I...er....”

“YOU ONE NO GOOD TROLL!” Schmatzenbladder boomed, even more loudly than before. “No good! No good!” His mouth, stretched to its widest, could still only barely contain the words. His body bent nearly double with the effort. When words proved themselves insufficient to his anger, he kicked at Brumvack’s receding form. “NO GOOD!” he repeated as his foot connected with Brumvack’s shin.

Brumvack let loose with a yowl of pain. “Look!” he shouted. “I didn’t mean....”

But Schmatzenbladder would have none of it. “Schmatzenbladder not listening!” he said. “Schmatzenbladder listen to Brumvack quite enough! Schmatzenbladder listen to

Brumvack never again!” He kicked at the retreating form one more time, then stood, trying to form words that just wouldn’t come. He had been saving up things to say to Brumvack for a few centuries now, but none of them would resolve into coherence. Such are our lost opportunities.

Finally, with eyes wide, Schmatzenbladder screamed out his frustration and rage. The frustration he had felt with the nasty dog-creatures, the fear he had felt as he had tried to enter the cave against a nearly immovable rock, the anger he felt as he confronted Brumvack with his villainy, all poured forth. It wasn’t a coherent comment, but it served. It was a single long syllable that rang out and echoed through the caverns of the cave: “Oooooooooohhhhhh!” As he excreted the syllable, his eyes widened even more.

Finally, having said everything he wanted to say, he glared at Brumvack with finality, uttered a “Hmmp!” and turned on his heel. He strode back into Dark Water, plunged to its depths, and was gone.

Brumvack, who had been seeing the final scenes of his life playing out before his very eyes, collapsed against the rocky beach. He had never been so relieved to see the backside of a troll as he was to see Schmatzenbladder’s. He knew, however, that the relief would have to be a momentary one. If he was going to survive the

day, he'd better get busy. Plugging up the hole had been a bit of a game before: a satisfying pastime to avenge himself against his cave mates. Now, however, plugging up the hole was imperative. If he didn't plug it up, and soon...and permanently...the trolls would return to avenge him back. The adrenaline from Schmatzenbladder's attack was still coursing through his veins, but Schmatzenbladder's attack would be nothing compared to an attack undertaken by a dozen of the nastiest trolls in the business. There were no trolls, Brumvack knew, like the Rabid Band, and he didn't want to be on the receiving end of their anger.

He needed to get the hold plugged up, and he needed to do it now. He needed to find a large, round rock. No compromises this time. No almost big enough rock would do. No almost round enough rock would do. This time, he was playing for keeps.

Chapter 21. Ferdy Chicken Meets the Threat Face to Face

Schnottblower, Schnottweiper and Droolmeister strode down a country lane on the outskirts of town. Where Schmatzenbladder had turned toward the ritzier side of town, and Obeast and crew had gone straight downtown, these three veered off toward an area where the houses were spaced further apart and the paved roads gave way to dirt. Schnottblower, particularly, had felt himself pale as Obeast had faced down the big blue bug. He had been ready to pick up a rock and stand with his brothers to defend troll honor, but he had been awfully glad to let the rock drop when Gasbag had proved the bug to be dead. For himself, he was happy to pick a route through town that seemed to have little traffic. One dead car had been more than enough for him. He didn't want to face a live one. The live ones, whining and scurrying their way along whatever mad path they were inclined toward, scared the bejeezuz

out of him. Even from a distance, they seemed bent on nothing but trouble, and for his part, Schnottblower was happy to leave them alone.

It was ironic, then, that Schnottblower was the first one to face down a living, breathing, bright-eyed vehicle. A vehicle bigger, even, than the blue bug that Obeast had stared down. Much bigger, in fact. This bug was monstrous, nearly as tall as a troll, and with a strangely mottled carapace.

Schnottblower of course had no point of reference for any sort of vehicle, much less the particular van that was suddenly careening toward him. Equally, he had no referent for fast food, or any sort of human food, really, other than decomposing hot dogs. Certainly, he didn't recognize the advertising on the side of the creature as representing a pizza. And even if he had known that the growling insect that approached the trio was not an entity unto itself, but was in actuality a mode of transportation being controlled from within by one of the land trolls, he wouldn't have been able to understand that the land troll in question considered himself to be not an ordinary human but a human subtly altered at the genetic level to hold the best traits of that most noble of birds, the chicken. And not just any chicken, either, but a chicken resplendent in orange tights and a yellow cape. A chicken with all the pluck and verve of your typical barnyard fowl, though smarter

and taller and altogether grander, even if he was a bit hunched at the shoulders, a bit thin in the hair, and a bit big in the belly. A chicken, we might add, with enough evolutionary chutzpah to know the value of a good pair of hiking boots.

“Aha!” said that chicken as he caught sight of the trio of Lake Maebiewahnappooie Monsters in the middle of the road. He had just taken a corner on two wheels, flying past yet another stop sign. When the tires of the van once again achieved full contact with the pavement, and when the steering wheel was once again more or less centered, Ferdy had taken aim the monsters that stood directly ahead. They were huge creatures, gray in color, gray at least in the moonlight. They had stout forms, with solid legs and big bellies, wide shoulders and large heads. They looked like creatures out of an ordinary human’s nightmares, but for Ferdy, they were a dream come true. Finally, he had a purpose in life. Finally, he would be able to prove his worth. He only wished that his mother were still around to see him in his moment of glory. He slapped his booted foot down onto the accelerator, and felt the van surge forward.

And here, time seemed to stretch out. Within the spaces of that time, Fred Chickweed observed his mother coming out of the depths of his mind. She was trying to tell him something, something that she had often told him during the trials of his

teenage years: one couldn't, she had so often said, go in two directions at once. She was right, he now knew. One couldn't go in two directions at once. One couldn't both deliver pizzas, for instance, and hunt monsters. It had to be one or the other. The monster hunter who tried to walk the occasional pizza pie onto someone's front stoop was a monster hunter bound for failure. One had to make one's choices, in this life. One had to take the slow road going nowhere, or the fast lane of fame. He, Ferdy, had been going down that slow road far too long. It was time to take charge, to leap up the evolutionary ladder, to make something of himself using all the gifts that he had been given but which were being sloughed away day after day as he peddled pizzas.

But why was she coming to him now, after he had already made his decision? But the answer to that question appeared as he neared the creatures, and they scattered. One shucked off to the left, another to the right, while a third remained in the middle of the road, offering his challenge to Ferdy to come on if he was comin'. His mother, he was sure, was telling him that he couldn't aim for a trio of monsters; if he tried to run down all of them, he would lose all of them. Better to pick one and make sure he got that one. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Yes, that was it. One couldn't go in two directions at once. In fact, Ferdy now found, he could go Marge Chickweed one better: one

couldn't go in three directions at once, either. He picked a monster—why not the one in the middle?—and decided that whatever happened, he wouldn't let it out of his sights. That monster was his.

This moment—having the monsters directly ahead of him, at least one of which would not get away—was a moment that Ferdy had been sure would happen. From the first glimpse of them in the newspaper, he was sure that this very moment was written in the fabric of his personal fate. And yet, he had also been sure that it *wouldn't* happen. Nothing in his life had happened as he had known it would. He hadn't met that right someone. He hadn't had the three children: twin girls and a younger son. He hadn't become the chief of police, able to save the town's citizens from the bad apples amongst them, but instead had been driven underground into a life of quiet desperation and vain hopes. So much had seemed to stack up against him.

And, yet, here it was happening. It hadn't happened with the calm assurance that he had envisioned, though. Sure that the trolls would head directly to the park, he had gone off in that direction with a van full of superhero equipment and a pizza warmer full of undelivered pizzas. He had gone with a body full of adrenaline and a mind full of ideas. And a gas tank, unfortunately, decidedly low on fuel. But there was no time to think about gas at a time like

this: this was his calling. He could only trust that his van would get him where he needed to go. What sort of universe would provide him, finally, with an answer to his longing, and yet not provide him with the necessary transportation?

And yet, every minute that he didn't find the monsters stretched into an hour of worry, of frustration, of existential unease. The monsters hadn't been at the park. Ferdy had stopped the van, its headlights aimed at its central tree. No monsters. He had driven around the park, not once but three times, and still no sight of the monsters. A superhero rarely had enough actual data upon which to make his decisions; he had to be able to trust his gut. Ferdy's gut had told him strongly that the Lake Maebiewahnapoopie Monsters would be arriving at the town's single tree in Mosquehenna Park. Ferdy Chicken had never known a superhero to be amiss in his gut instincts, but it appeared that *he* was. Could it be that he was no superhero? Or perhaps these moments of indecision were left out of the average superhero biography. In any case, he had been left with a question: What was the next step?

He had mentally returned to the chicken hawk's-eye-view of Lone Tree on his wall at home. Quickly, he placed himself in the center of it, right at the park's boundaries. From there, he laid out a rational and logical search pattern, starting from the bull's eye

that was the park and moving outward in concentric rings. Surely, the monsters wouldn't be able to get past the city limits before he tracked them down if only he used his scientifically attuned mind to outwit them. The right search pattern would lead him to them in no time at all. He was sure of it.

But Ferdy's poor mind wasn't up to any sort of scientific rationality, as it turned out. He found that he couldn't concentrate on any single idea for more than a second or two before his mind made a random jump to something that may or may not be helpful. His body, truth be told, wasn't up for it either. His nerves were jumpy and his muscles twitched. Asking his organism to calmly cooperate in this most dire and exciting of times was too much. So Ferdy once again floored the accelerator and careened down the street, taking corners as the whim struck him, sometimes on less than all four wheels. Perhaps, he thought, some more irrational or even cosmic intelligence would take over, and lead him where he needed to be.

And hadn't it? Here he was, a man with a plan, a man with a van, a tan man with a plan and a fan and a pizza pan, a can-do tan man with a bran muffin and a cran-apple flan and a chickeny clan.... Ferdy Chicken removed his hands from the wheel and held his temples. He stopped himself. He shook his head. "Enough of the bouncy brain," he told himself. He forced himself

to concentrate on the work ahead of him. The work that was even now standing before him, setting its stance and raising a fist in his direction.

Truth be told, it took Schnottblower some amount of time to unfreeze his locked knees as he saw the van hurtling toward him. He stood in the middle of the street, more like a boulder than a troll, and the van screamed its approach. Schnottweiper, he saw out of the corner of his eye, was ducking his head and loping toward a grassy lawn. Droolmeister, similarly, had taken three big steps and vaulted over a short ranch-style fence on the other side of the road. Both of these trolls, Schnottblower thought, must have better survival instincts than he, because all he could do was stand there staring into the hot white eyes of the rapidly approaching beast. Time seemed to stretch out for Schnottblower, who had time to note each chrome tooth as the creature neared, scowling in its hunger and rage. No matter how hungry this beast was, however, and no matter how many shiny teeth Schnottblower could see would be tearing into his flesh unless he moved out of its way, his knees remained locked. His ankles refused to respond. His feet seemed joined to the ground.

The only part of his body that he could move at all, Schnottblower discovered, was his right arm. His punching arm. He held out his arm out in front of him, extending his mighty fist.

While it might seem to an outside observer that Schnottblower was winding up for a good old Rabid Band roundhouse wallop, Schnottblower himself felt differently. He didn't seem to be in charge of his own actions. Rather, he felt like a character in someone else's movie. He wanted to run, to join Schnottweiper on the side of the road, to hurl something at the van to stop its inexorable approach. But he was helpless to do anything but stand there, his fist held firmly in front of him at the end of his stiff arm. He made a sort of extended "OOOooooooooohhh" sound as he stood there stoically awaiting the van. He wondered if this was his end. He wondered what kind of story the others would tell about his demise. Would he end up sounding like a hero, facing down this monstrous screaming beast? Or as a martyr, saving his friends from certain doom? Or would he simply be seen as an idiot, too stupid to stand out of the way of an oncoming predator?

In order to give this moment its due, to preserve the scene of a suddenly fragile troll facing down his worst nightmare, and also the scene of a suddenly inspired superhero facing down the terror

of the lake and also the terror of his mother's ghost, and to give the reader the delicious and frustrating feeling that accompanies a cheap cliffhanger ending, the chapter ends here.

The author, sadly, wonders if this is his end as well. Will he, a middle-aged man confronting his own mortality, live to write another book? What story will the world tell about his demise? Will he end up sounding like a hero, relating this tale of the monsters that had hereto now been censored in the mainstream media and the consciousness of America? Or as a martyr, doing such work for little reward and no money? Or will he simply be seen as an idiot, giving in to cheap authorial tactics such as the cliffhanger ending, which has brought fame and ignominy to so many writers before him?

The reader, though, is asked to look away from the author's shameful intrusion. Instead, he or she is asked to focus, if possible, on that scene in the outskirts of Lone Tree, where poor Schnottblower is standing in the middle of a street with his arm extended for his appointment with an onrushing van. Or poor Ferdy Chicken, held in a stranglehold between quiet desperation and a last, incautious lunge toward action and meaning and, finally, relevance, with his booted foot mashing the accelerator to the floor and his eyes wide with unbelieving hope.

Chapter 22. Oreo and Oleo Find Moon Park

The trolls, to a beast, were beginning to feel a little woozy, a little unstable, a little cross-eyed from the hotdogs they had eaten. Botulism, as the reader surely knows, is serious business. While trolls are hardy creatures, and have some amount of immunity to various bacteria that might wipe out whole human populations, certainly the toxins within their bodies were making themselves known.

It's bad to be sick, of course. It's worse to be sick while away from the comforts of home: one's own rocky bed, one's own dank atmosphere, rich with the strongly aromatic exudations of other trolls, one's own...well, one's own people. When you're sick and not at your best, you want to be able to look around and notice that others, though they might not be sick, are rather miserable anyway. It was difficult enough walking upon the land,

with all its potential for over-stimulation; their sickness only made it worse. And, though the dark of night was preferable to daylight, the dark of night wasn't what it had been in the days of the mastodon: now, the night was pierced by the lights of town. Those lights, in addition to the fact that they glared uncomfortably in the eyes of the trolls, revealed all manner of things that the trolls didn't want to see.

Still, trolls have it within them to be indomitable. At least for the present, they were able to put their discomforts behind them. They could ignore their rumbling guts for the time being. They made efforts to walk in straight lines, unimpeded by the occasional bouts of dizziness. They focused their attention in such a way that their eyes only rarely showed them two objects when they were actually looking at one. Trolls, through the millennia of their evolution as the toughest customers on the planet, had learned to ignore all sorts of unpleasanties when they had to.

Oreo and Oleo, though, were different. Where most of the trolls were uncomfortable, they were not. They delighted in the fact that their bodies weren't working as they normally did. With the confidence that comes with youth, they knew that they were indestructible. No troll throughout history, they knew, had ever died of disease or illness. Perhaps their constitutions were strong, or maybe their lives were exciting and violence-prone enough that

none of them lived long enough to really get sick. In either case, Oreo and Oleo weren't worried. When they felt the botulism brewing within them, they thought it was a hoot. They particularly enjoyed the new sensations of dizziness. They zigzagged down the street in an exaggerated fashion, showing off for each other how they could be knocked nearly over by their spinning heads and churning guts, but still remain upright. It was great fun, they thought, to weeble and wobble but not fall down.

They had noticed, however, that the street was awfully hard. Young trolls often have skinned knees, Oreo and Oleo more than most. They moved off of the street and into the grass in a rare moment of caution.

This grass was interesting to them. Where the dinosaur age had sported a lush jungle, and the ice age a flat white wasteland, the grass seemed to lie somewhere between the two. It was green like the jungle, but flat like the ice-scarred plains. It looked for all the world like a huge expanse of mold growing upon the land. A huge expanse, they noted, upon which a single tree reached toward the sky: the beginnings of a new jungle? But the grass felt good beneath their feet, and had an interesting if somewhat fresh smell.

The trolls didn't get much time to examine the grass, however, before a surprising thing happened. Now, trolls always enjoy the various sounds that their bodies make. Under the duress

of botulism, their bodies strained and gurgled with even more interesting noises. Trolls, as we know, always derive a sort of smug satisfaction from their digestive system's ability to produce gaseous green belches; young trolls all the more so. Oleo, though, was shocked speechless when one of these belches coincidentally accompanied a hiccup. This combination produced not just a small green cloud, but an actual ring of green haze—a smoke ring, except green—that leapt from his mouth of its own accord, then wafted away on the slight breeze.

Oreo saw it too. “Whoa,” he said, impressed to the point of almost religious ecstasy. Both of the trolls stood on the grass at the edge of the park trying to replicate this feat, but to no avail. They produced lots of belches, a few hiccups, and no small amount of aromatic green gas, but no further smoke rings.

This didn't depress Oleo's mood, however. Once it was clear that he wouldn't be able to control his smoke ring production—clearly, smoke rings were a rare bestowal of providence—he walked over to Oreo and put his arm around his shoulder in a comradely way. “Listen,” he said, then belched. He waved away the green fumes—he had had his fun with them—then extended his hand, palm up, out in front of him. He looked Oreo right in the eye. “Listen,” he repeated. His tone was grave. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

Oreo counted. “One, two, three...uh, four, five, six. Six!” he answered with gravity. After a moment, though, a look of confusion crept across his face, followed by an embarrassed grin. No troll, of course, had six fingers. He refocused on his twin brother’s hand, then said, “Three? No wait.” He reached out and grabbed Oleo’s hand by the wrist. He willed his eyes to show him the truth, and counted again. “One, two, three, four, five, six.” He glared at Oleo’s hand in consternation. He refocused his eyes. This was a more difficult problem than he thought it would be. But then the appropriate problem solving tactic occurred to him. He grabbed Oleo’s first finger and bent it painfully backwards. “One!” he said.

“Ouch!” cried Oleo, but he was still grinning.

Oreo proceeded apace. He bent down a second finger, “Two!”

He was about to bend down the third standing finger when Oleo crumpled into laughter. Oreo had begun to laugh as well.

“Three! Three fingers!” cried Oreo through his chuckles. But Oleo was so lost in his laughter that he could no longer stand up straight. With his arm around his brother’s shoulder, he swooned. Oreo tried to prop him up, but he overcompensated for his brother’s large mass and the two dropped to the grass in a heap.

They didn't even try to stand up. Instead, they both rolled over onto their backs, their dizziness having gotten the better of them. As they lay there, they enjoyed the slowly spinning crazy-quilt of patterns in the sky. Dizziness, Oreo thought, was a mighty fine thing.

Deeply satisfied, his eyes followed the arcs of the stars that swam across his vision. This, he thought, was the life. Here above ground, there were interesting things to experience, even if the fresh air did leave you feeling like you might faint. But, he thought, he could get used to that. Suddenly, Oreo felt fully alive. He felt hopeful about the future. He felt, oddly enough, as if he had found his true home. For the first time in his life, he was deeply satisfied.

He sighed into the night. These thoughts, he knew, couldn't be communicated with any fullness. That didn't bother him, though. His heart was full. Oreo took a deep breath and exclaimed his newfound joy across the grassy sward: "Three!" he said. "Three fingers!"

Chapter 23. A New Regular at the Outlaw Saloon

The Black Hat Man's Odiferous Honky Tonk and Outlaw Saloon straddled the city limits of Lone Tree. It was an old pole barn with warped siding and flaking paint that stood as an edifice decrying every bit of decency that the town could muster. It smelled of stale beer and staler cigarette smoke and the staler yet bodily byproducts of its inhabitants' diet: bar pretzels, antelope jerky, and pickled eggs.

Gasbag, when he found the place, felt immediately at home.

It may interest to the reader to note that it was a younger of the trolls who found the Black Hat Man's establishment. Where the older and supposedly wiser trolls were sniffing out doggies and dumpsters and department stores, Gasbag had a more lofty sensibility. His sense of aesthetics was more subtle and more

tasteful than any mere lapdog or conglomeration of human refuse could satisfy.

It was the music that first intrigued him. At first, he didn't even know where the sounds were coming from: the building had no lit sign, and the windows were darkened with years of smoke accumulation, but what Gasbag couldn't see he could hear. The twanging of a guitar, the melancholy voice of life gone wrong, the vague hopes encapsulated in the open road, an open bottle, the slightly open eyes of a nearly used up woman: these sounds resonated with Gasbag. They plucked at the strings of his heart. With tears stinging the corners of his eyes, Gasbag made his way toward the source of those sad sounds, those desperate melodies.

The saloon had a front door, of course, but it was rarely unlocked, even during peak business hours. The regulars all parked their pickup trucks, those who could still drive, in the back, and had long ago developed the habit of entering through the back door. Anyone who showed up at the front door was no regular, and was thus treated with suspicion. The cops, on their rare forays into the saloon, always used the front door, and the rare tourists of course used the front door, both in the entering and in the rapid departure. Still, every now and again the Black Hat Man would open the front door, once the sun went down. He propped it open

with a five gallon bucket full of bottle caps to let the building breathe a little.

Tonight, that open door allowed the sounds of the jukebox and the buzz and rumble of human conversation out into the night. For Gasbag, these sounds were the sounds of home. As he approached the decrepit building, the establishment's unique aroma added to the glorious sensory experience. As he reached the front stoop, Gasbag could see dimly through the haze of smoke and the dim light to recognize, right in front of him, the array of people propped up against the bar: short beings, skinny, with strange costumes of cotton and leather and denim. Of course Gasbag knew nothing of the people's language or custom, he knew nothing about the use of clothing, he knew nothing about cigarettes or cowboy hats or electric guitars, but he certainly knew about beer, and perhaps that was enough to bridge the cultural divide. As he looked upon these people, he suddenly knew that he had been lonely all his life. These people, land trolls or not, were *his* people.

The inhabitants of the saloon, of course, were nowhere near as open and accepting as Gasbag. To have anyone show up at the front door was usually bad news, and this monstrous creature—a bit taller and a bit wider than the doorway itself, with somewhat greenish leathery skin and a frightening lack of hair and a mouth

wide enough to ingest the bar's smaller inhabitants without trouble—looked like bad news indeed.

To be fair, though, the inhabitants of the Black Hat Man's Odiferous Honky-Tonk and Outlaw Saloon were less afraid than the typical resident of Lone Tree might have been. They didn't call the cops (of course), nor the National Guard. They didn't saunter over to the trolls with their chests puffed out and their thumbs in their hip pockets like old-time cowboys ready to draw. They didn't say, "You ain't from around here, are ya boy?" as others from town might have been inspired to do. And, though the folks at the bar tended to be amongst the better armed in town, they didn't leap to their feet to retrieve the shotguns from the gun racks in the back windows of their pickups. But Gasbag showing up at the door certainly got their attention. Over the space of perhaps 20 seconds, everyone in the room came to be aware of his hulking presence. When he tentatively ducked his head and edged sideways through the door, there was a single point in time when everything stopped, as if a conductor in the room had dropped his baton. The rumble of conversation ceased. Someone pulled the plug on the jukebox. Only one reedy voice broke the silence with an unsubtle and inebriated whisper. "Now just what on gawd's green earth is that?"

The Black Hat Man himself, having just poured yet another pitcher of beer for a patron at the end of the bar, stood, pitcher in hand, and eyed Gasbag. The troll in question now stood inside the door, and looked shyly around the dark, cavernous spaces of the bar.

Somewhere in the back of Gasbag's head, he noted the loss of the soulful music that had originally drawn him to the place. But his forebrain was too overwhelmed by sense data, or perhaps it was simply social anxiety disorder, to wonder about that. The smell of the place was nearly overwhelming in its hominess. The land trolls here, though they were pitifully small, had a robust scent about them, of cigarettes and perspiration and digestive systems bested by too much beer and pickled eggs. Gasbag felt a great pain of recognition welling up within him. He wanted to fall to his knees in gratitude.

Instead, he took a few more tentative steps forward. Everyone in the bar had now turned on their stools, and looked at him with their rheumy eyes. Behind those eyes was some amount of fear, of course, but also a certain amount of knowing indifference. Those eyes communicated the fact that they had seen too much of the world already, and that they wouldn't be surprised by whatever they saw next. Gasbag, full of grief and empathy and hope and gratitude, opened his mouth to thank them for being

there, for having him into their nice dank cave, for their insistence that though it wasn't easy being a land troll, trollish values still thrived.

Of course, Gasbag's throat was too tight with longing to be able to get out all these words. He, like all trolls, was more of a strong silent type, and probably wouldn't have been able to line up the words in a straight line anyhow. Brumvack was the troll with the true gift of speech. Then there was the fact that these people wouldn't have been able to understand the troll language in any case. The barrage of snorting and wheezing sounds that accompanied troll speech might have been the straw that broke the action on their shotguns. So, Gasbag was probably fortunate that when he opened his mouth none of the few words he could muster came forth. Instead, a mass of botulism-ridden effluvium erupted from the depths of his belly in a greenish belch. It wasn't a belch that would have won any challenges, but it wasn't too bad, either.

It was the Black Hat Man himself who broke the spell of silence under which the population of the bar comported themselves. The Black Hat Man would serve the occasional stranger who might show up in the bar, but no one else would interact with that person unless the Black Hat Man gave his tacit approval. He showed his approval by buying the stranger a drink. Once that drink was bought, the stranger was a stranger no more.

He was a part of the bunch, a regular at the Outlaw Saloon. A regular, even if only an honorary one. A regular, even if he hadn't done the hard work of showing up every day to earn the title. When Gasbag let loose with the greenish belch, the Black Hat Man knew with his uncanny sense that this...this man, however deformed the ravages of the world might have left him, was one of theirs. Before the last wisp of gut-air had left Gasbag's mouth, the Black Hat Man replied: "Nice one." With a slightly shaking hand, he proffered across the bar the pitcher that he had already poured for someone else.

The patrons on either side gave Gasbag some room as he stepped forward and delicately grasped the pitcher. Though they showed some amount of trepidation to be so close to him, the tension had already begun to seep out of the room like a released sigh. Gratefully, Gasbag tipped the pitcher into his mouth and downed it. Downed it, as if it were no more than a pint. Which, given the relativities of scale, it might as well have been. This action punctured whatever pockets of tension that might have remained. The regulars at the Black Hat Man's Odiferous Honky Tonk and Outlaw Saloon appreciated someone who appreciated beer.

The beer was a surprise to Gasbag. Trollish beer is rich and dark and heavy with floating gobs of fermented plant material and

whatnot. This beer had none of that. Instead, it was bright and tangy and (and here Gasbag slobbered a bit on his tongue, searching for just the right descriptor) nearly tasteless. But it was refreshing nonetheless, and he was grateful for it. He belched again, this time more from the beer than the botulism, and once again the Black Hat Man said, “Nice one.” And this time, all the patrons lined up along the bar lifted their own glasses, their own pitchers, and repeated the mantra: “Nice One!”

Gasbag set his pitcher back down on the bar, and the Black Hat Man moved to refill it. Before he had even started the tap, though, an older man with a white wisp of a beard and a couple of missing teeth held up his half-empty pitcher to Gasbag, urging him to drink. Before he had downed that, a young woman, following the old man’s example, offered hers as well. Gasbag drank them both with a newfound thirst and a great deal of gratitude.

Sensing that Gasbag was new to the country, and surely would have only foreign currency, the patrons of the bar bought all the beer he could drink. Someone plugged in the juke box again, and filled it with enough quarters to last the night. When it was obvious that Gasbag was hungry as well as thirsty, The Black Hat Man filled and refilled bowls of bar pretzels, and emptied the gallon jar of its pickled eggs. He even broke out the fifty pound bag of peanuts that he ordinarily saved for Thanksgiving, which

the patrons shared amongst themselves as if it truly were that holiday. Gasbag ate the lion's share of the peanuts, shells and all.

As the night progressed, it came to take on a dreamlike quality. Gasbag reflected that it had been an awfully hard day in the life of a troll. He had been rudely awakened from the Big Sleep, he had been nearly drowned by Schmoozeglutton, he had barely survived the barbarism of his fellow trolls with their graphic custom of the challenge. Gasbag was perfectly comfortable letting out the occasional belch, and tonight had only cemented the notion that on occasion a bit of gas can ease social relations. But there was a point at which belching became uncivilized. Obscene, even. Maybe it was the point at which one's food started to fly out of one's mouth and into the far corners of the room. Maybe it was the point at which even strong-stomached trolls began to pass out. Wherever one drew that line, though, that line had been crossed—crossed with a vengeance—on this day. A day of infamy, it was, when the indecencies of former generations of trolls were allowed a comeback amongst a generation that on a better day would have considered themselves to be above such things.

And, of course, there was that big blue bug that Gasbag had faced down. If that didn't deserve a beer, what did? He had been pretty sure that the bug was dead, or he wouldn't have touched it. But being pretty sure wasn't enough to keep his heart steady in his

chest as he had reached out his arm, not knowing if he would pull back an arm or a stump. He shuddered at the memory. He downed another pitcher of beer, grateful to be alive and glad to have found these new friends.

The patrons of the bar were by now competing with each other to impress their guest. One older guy, dignified in a leather vest and a cowboy hat, tried to show Gasbag how to play darts, but his hands were too big to really control the delicate projectiles. A stringy woman, a tough old broad with skinny hips and leathery skin, asked Gasbag to dance, and even got him to move a bit to that slow, sad music that he found so evocative of his finest sense of being. Gasbag was sure that the twanging guitar on the jukebox uttered meaningful syllables, if he could but understand them. The guitar had a language.

He was becoming less certain, however, of the language capabilities of the land trolls. He could certainly see them opening their mouths, and hear the odd noises they uttered, but he wasn't so sure that the noises accreted toward anything like meaning. If it was a language, surely the folks wouldn't need to gesticulate so wildly as they spoke. Certainly, though, these creatures had their own quaint culture and traditions. Even if they didn't hold any conscious intelligence, he felt friendly toward them. He thought of telling them so, but, given their simple-minded ways, that seemed

a little silly. And then, of course, there was the fact that his tongue was starting to feel a little disconnected from the back of his throat, a known side-effect of good trollish beer and evidently one that came too with this light tangy yellow version. So Gasbag just smiled and raised his pitcher and nodded his head slightly. This, they understood perfectly.

For the first time in years, a sense of liveliness and goodwill infused this most battered of establishments. In the space of an hour or two, a sort of creative energy overcame the place, an energy that insisted upon the breaking out of the beer steins from their glass case behind the bar, that insisted that the juke box be turned up past the Black Hat Man's strict limit, even that, after a point, the juke box be turned off for a soulful and evocative version of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

They were down to 28 bottles when an eerie call echoed across the land. A foodwhoop. Gasbag would recognize it anywhere. He had been raised to follow the sound of a foodwhoop since he was small. No troll refused the call of a foodwhoop. Still, he felt conflicted. It didn't seem fair that it should come just when he was beginning to settle in. But tradition—or maybe it was just habit—was strong amongst trolls, and before the foodwhoop had

echoed its last, the newest regular of The Black Hat Man's Odiferous Honky Tonk and Outlaw Saloon stood up to leave.

The patrons watched him go. They had lived long lives of gain and loss, heavy on the loss. They accepted with a depressed and resigned version of equanimity the fact that he had to leave. But they knew, somehow, that after tonight nothing would be exactly the same. After tonight, the Outlaw Saloon would lose a little of its shine. After tonight, they had little to look forward to for the too-long remainder of their lives.

Interlude, Part I: A Long Time Ago: Schnottweiper's Practical Joke

When last we visited Schnottblower, he was facing nearly certain doom in the form of an onrushing pizza delivery van. If any readers out there have been worrying about him, though, they need worry no longer. The author knows the sense of unease brought by living in a world that plays hide and seek with the little bits of truth necessary to one's sense of well-being. He knows how difficult it is to maintain hope and faith as we try to build a home in that unknowable universe. He knows how frustrating can be the vicissitudes of a storytelling arc. Rather than cynically continuing to use those basics of our existence as a dramatic device, the author will simply let the reader in on the fact that Schnottblower easily survives the run in with the Petey's Perfect Pizza Pies van. As determined as Ferdy Chicken was to keep

Schnottblower in his sights, he didn't reach the frozen-in-his-tracks troll, but was forced to a stop mere inches from that troll's outstretched fist.

If any readers might have known Schnottblower through his long life, rather than waiting until the author began telling his story, they wouldn't have worried about him in the first place. They would know—if not with their minds then in their bellies—that he would be just fine. They wouldn't know that because Schnottblower is a particularly clever beast, because he's not. They wouldn't know that because he was the biggest and strongest of the trolls, because he's not that either. They wouldn't know that because they believed trolls to be watched over by some monstrous form of guardian angel, either. So far as anyone could tell, the trolls, when they got themselves into a scrape, were pretty much on their own.

They would, however, know that there was a pattern in Schnottblower's life: whenever he wasn't the equal of the situation he found himself in, which was often, Schnottweiper, his older brother, was on call to help him out.

It all started when Schnottweiper saved Schnottblower from the Dark Water Horror. For the Schnott brothers, this was a pivotal experience. And, as sometimes happens with pivotal

experiences, especially when they're full of secrets, they never talked about it. With anyone. Even with each other.

The drama started one late night, long, long ago. In the dinosaur age, in fact. On that late night, all of the trolls were asleep except Schnottweiper and Schnottblower. As the other trolls snored and grunted around them, the brothers snuck through the caves and down to the shores of Dark Water.

It was Schnottweiper's idea, of course. It was always Schnottweiper who had the ideas. Schnottweiper, back in the day, was quite the idea man. Of course, that meant that it was up to Schnottblower to do the actual work. And, as often as not, to be left holding the bag when it was time to assign blame.

Here's how it happened: the Rabid Band, earlier that morning, had caught and hauled in not one but two boneheaded dinosaur fish. The first had been eaten in an orgy of consumption by the trolls. Trolls, it must be said, are always on the lookout for an excuse to party, and having a whole extra fish in the larder was reason enough. The trolls ate the large fish, and left the small one down on the beach. "Small," though, is only useful as a relative term when it came to bone-headed dinosaur fish. The smallest of them would feed a band of trolls for a fortnight or better, at least it would were they not so gluttonous. In any case, the small fish was

laid out on the beach next to the cutting board rock. Sometime the next morning, the trolls would return to the carcass and dress it out.

Schnottweiper had been there when the trolls dressed out the first one. He had seen Brumvack hack open the fish's white belly with the stone hatchet, and had seen all the gushy stuff come out. That was his favorite part of the operation, the gushy stuff. But he had also awaited Brumvack's habit of opening the fish's stomach. Before actually yanking the guts out the fish, Brumvack always hacked open its stomach. He just liked to see what it had been eating before its early demise. Over the years, he had done this with many fish. When he cut open their stomachs, their dietary preferences were laid out before him.

Brumvack attributed this habit to what he called his "scientifically-attuned intellect," which meant nothing to the rest of the trolls except that Brumvack was a pretentious idiot. Schnottweiper, though, having seen Brumvack's stomach-opening operation perhaps a hundred times, had come to find it interesting as well. He reasoned that he must have a scientifery turned-up intellack himself.

This time, when the stomach of the bone-headed dinosaur fish was cut open, an outward rush of dead crawdads spilled to the floor of the cave. More like lobsters, really, those crawdads of the Pleistocene.

The trolls watched as a couple dozen lobster-sized crawdads fell to a pile on the floor. When the last crawdad had fallen, they raised their voice in a chorus: “Eeew.” It was their standard line.

Brumvack scowled at them. He was about to make a comment about their lack of intellectual curiosity, but he didn’t get a chance to open his mouth before a lump of flesh curled out from the fish’s stomach and landed at Brumvack’s feet. With a jolt of panic, he skipped back a step. Only when his feet were well clear did he take time to examine what had slithered out from the stomach of the fish: a dead eel. It was a sickly white color, with a green tinge upon its scales.

Schmoozeglutton laughed. “Thought that eel might bite, didja?” he asked.

“Shut up!” Brumvack said, but Schmoozeglutton just laughed again. “Maybe it’s a toe-eating eel,” he chided.

“Shut up!” Brumvack repeated. He faked a lunge for Schmoozeglutton, hoping to get him to jump as he had done. But Schmoozeglutton stood firm. Angry and embarrassed, Brumvack picked up the eel by the tail, swung it once around his massive form, and then smacked Schmoozeglutton upside the head with it. The eel caught the larger troll across the jowls, leaving a smear of jellied flesh along his jaw. A stink of slightly digested eel filled the air.

“Anyone else need a little dose?” Brumvack threatened, still holding the eel in front of him. It hung from his fist like a flaccid club. “Anyone need a little reminder of the respect that is due Brumvack the Rancid?”

The trolls, eyes wide, shook their heads. All except Schmoozeglutton, who just glowered at Brumvack. So long as he was silent about it, though, Brumvack allowed his glower. He’d rather not get into a fight with Schmoozeglutton, who was as fat and strong as they come. So long as Schmoozeglutton knew who was boss, he was happy.

Schnottweiper, during all of this commotion, found himself turned inward. He felt strangely distant from the happenings around him. Ordinarily, he loved it when an altercation erupted between cave mates, especially if one of the participants was Brumvack. This time, though, it seemed more like he was in a movie than in his actual life. This time, as he had watched Brumvack cut open the sizeable stomach of the fish, and had seen what came out, especially the surprising eel, he wondered what else one could possibly find inside the stomach of a fish. What if something even more surprising were to emerge? What if, say, a certain troll’s club were to be discovered inside the fish?

In his mind's eye, he saw the scenario laid out before him: Brumvack slicing open the fish's white belly, all eyes upon him. Brumvack locating the fish's stomach, and hacking it open with his hatchet. Brumvack watching with scientific detachment as a pile of crawdads poured out. And then, amazingly, Brumvack's club would pop out as well! It would fall to the leader's feet with a wooden clonk. How the Rabid Band would howl in laughter! Schnottweiper knew it would be a hoot.

Brumvack, of course, would immediately recognize his own club, and so would everybody else. It was smaller than the average club, for one thing, and also unique in that Brumvack had assiduously carved a series of three holes into its length. Those holes, everyone knew, made it smart like heck when it connected with their thick hides. Brumvack didn't pull out his club often, but when he did the trolls were wary. If he was angered, Brumvack wasn't above smacking someone with that club in a way light enough to do little real damage, but hard enough to leave a red welt and the imprint of those three circles across a troll's backside. It was humiliating, of course, getting smacked by the leader of the Rabid Band in front of your friends, but it was worse to have to go around for the next day or two with small red circles on your butt. You didn't want to sit down after getting smacked by Brumvack's

club, but the pain of sitting was often more bearable than the chortling and pointing of one's peers.

It was just the right club, then, to “magically” appear in the fish's guts. And he, Schnottweiper, was just the troll to do it. It would be a simple operation, he was sure, to get the club into the fish's stomach: he would simply push the club down the fish's throat. Easy! Then, he would sit back and await the fireworks

But what would Brumvack do when he discovered it? Schnottweiper's imagination filled in those gaps, too. Brumvack's eyes, he was sure, would widen in surprise, then narrow in suspicion. He would pick up the club, as if he couldn't believe his eyes, and weigh it in his hand. Then, after confirming the club's solidity, he would turn his gaze to the gallery of trolls surrounding him. One of them would no doubt be complicit in the foul deed.

If Schnottweiper did this thing, he would have to make sure he wasn't the one that Brumvack focused upon. Once Brumvack retrieved his club from the guts of the fish, he would want to make good use of it. Better that Schnottweiper didn't find himself at the wrong end of Brumvack's swinging arm.

Perhaps, he thought, he could steal Brumvack's club, and then make it look like Schnottblower had done it.

Older brothers, if the reader is wondering, are always hatching such plans; it goes with the territory.

During a lull in the uneventful afternoon, a plan coalesced in Schnottweiper's mind. The trolls were in the common room of the cave, some sitting, some lying about in uncoordinated heaps on the floor. Everyone was full-bellied and complaining and drowsy. They didn't much notice when Schnottweiper got up and whispered in a casual way to Schmoozeglutton: "I've seen Schnottblower sneaking into Brumvack's cave twice in the last two days." Brumvack's cave, of course, was strictly off limits to the other trolls. Schnottweiper continued: "I wonder what kind of trouble he might be finding."

Schmoozeglutton, as Schnottweiper knew, was very interested in all plans that might be hatching around Brumvack. Schnottweiper, then, wasn't surprised when Schmoozeglutton took this piece of intelligence to heart. Schmoozeglutton in fact wasted no time asking the other trolls about what they might know about Schnottblower being in Brumvack's cave. Before the end of the day, everyone in the Rabid Band had heard the story: Schnottblower was sneaking into Brumvack's cave for some unknown but no doubt troubling reason. He must be hatching something. There would be trouble when Brumvack found out about that. Brumvack liked to make an example of trolls like Schnottblower. The trolls vaguely looked forward to

Schnottblower's outing as a troublemaker. In a world without television sets, this was the local entertainment.

As he watched Schmooze-glutton unwittingly set the trap for Schnottblower, Schnottweiper grinned to himself in anticipation. His plan was working. It was all he could do to while away the long afternoon until he could snatch Brumvack's club and begin the operation in earnest.

Late that night, when he was sure that the trolls were asleep, Schnottweiper got out of his bed and went to his brother's rock pile. He nudged him awake.

"You awake?" he asked.

Schnottblower, never a sound sleeper in those days, jerked himself up to a sitting position and glanced around the cave in every direction. He relaxed, but only slightly, when he saw Schnottweiper sitting next to his bed.

"You wanna have some fun?" Schnottweiper asked.

"Um. Okay," answered Schnottblower. "I guess so."

So, Schnottweiper proceeded to lay out the plan, beginning with Schnottblower sneaking into Brumvack's cave and lifting his club, and ending with the two placing the club inside the bone-headed dinosaur fish that was laid out on the beach of Dark Water.

Schnottblower was cautious. Even in the face of his brother's superior will, he thought there were lots of things to consider before he blindly took his part in the act. He filled the air with questions: how could he get his hands on the club without Brumvack waking up and pounding him? How would they get down to the beach without being seen? What about the Dark Water Horror? How would they get the club into the fish anyway? What made him so sure that Brumvack wouldn't be able to figure out who it was that had taken his club? Brumvack, as everyone knew, was a sly and wily troll.

But Schnottweiper waved away this litany of questions. "C'mon," he said. "It'll be fun."

So Schnottblower had reluctantly left his rocky bed, following Schnottweiper. Together, they snuck through the common room of the cave, and then to the mouth of Brumvack's cave. There, they could hear Brumvack snoring away. Schnottweiper knew that Brumvack had a belly full of fish and beer, and assumed that he had a head full of self-satisfied thoughts. Brumvack's dreams, he imagined, were full of conquest and fair trollish maidens, and other kingly delights. It was clear to him that when Brumvack was in such a state, relieving him of his club would be simplicity itself: Schnottblower would tiptoe over to the

weapons rack that sat near Brumvack's rock pile. He would lift the club, and then the two would be on their way.

In actual practice, of course, the job was more difficult. Brumvack's tummy was indeed full of fish and beer, but his dreams weren't full of maidens. His dreams were full of fear. Fear, mostly, that his subjects were revolting. And not just revolting in the smelly sense, but revolting in the sense that they were plotting to relieve Brumvack of his position and his power. Fear that he would be revealed for what he was: small, smart, and smooth. In other words, un-troll-like in every way. Unfit to be a leader.

In the course of the long night, Brumvack's right hand had reached out and grasped the hilt of his club. It was a sort of pacifier, a way to calm his mind through the course of his fevered dreams.

Schnottblower, under Schnottweiper's watchful eye, had crept into Brumvack's cave. He had listened to the wheezing and snoring of his leader, and tried to decode the few words that Brumvack mumbled in his sleep. He crouched in the dark, waiting for his eyes to adjust from the brightness of the fire in the common room. When he could see better, he crawled toward Brumvack's rock pile. He saw his club there in his weapons rack, and was about to snatch it and run, but then he noticed Brumvack's big

beefy hand holding onto its grip. He felt his heart stop, thinking of how close he had come to grabbing onto the club and running with it while Brumvack himself clung to its grip. Schnottblower had screwed up his courage to enter the shadows of Brumvack's cave. He wanted to appear brave in front of his brother. But no amount of courage was going to help him now. He skulked back out to the common room, where Schnottweiper was waiting in the shadows.

"I can't get it," he said quietly.

"What do you mean you can't get it?" Schnottweiper hissed. "You just walk in there and grab it! It's simple! There isn't a self-respecting troll alive that couldn't do it! Except...maybe you."

Schnottblower shrank back. He was torn. Part of him wanted to just go in there and do as Schnottweiper said. He wanted to be brave just once in his life. Brave like Schnottweiper. Just march on in and grab the club and be done with it. Brumvack was asleep, after all. What were the chances that he might wake up? But when he returned in his mind to Brumvack's slab of a hand clutching the club, he knew he couldn't do it.

"If it's so simple, you do it, then."

Schnottweiper glowered. He saw that he had been pushed into a corner. "All right then, I will! I'll just go in there and take it! I'll walk right in there as if I had the smallest bit of trollish bravery, and I'll take that club! See if I don't!"

So Schnottweiper slunk into the cave himself. When his eyes adjusted and he was able to discern the layout, his righteous anger boiled away and left him feeling helpless. Brumvack, restless in his sleep, had rolled onto his side. As he did so, he had pulled the club into his rocky bed with him. He still gripped its haft tightly. As Schnottweiper watched, the club twitched a bit in response to whatever foe Brumvack was smiting in his sleep. If he woke up to find Schnottweiper in his inner sanctum, he pondered, it wouldn't be pretty. The club in his hand would be put to immediate use. When that happened, little red circles would be the least of Schnottweiper's worries.

Schnottweiper turned and crept back toward the common area, where Schnottblower waited. As he imagined Schnottblower's look of contempt, however—Schnottweiper as it turned out was no braver than his younger brother—he halted. He gazed up toward the ceiling of the cave. Stuck. He was stuck. He was stuck between Brumvack the mighty ruler, and Schnottblower the wimpy brother. What a position he found himself in! How did this always happen? He set his teeth and scowled. He'd have to get that club, or he'd never hear the end of it. He crept back towards Brumvack's bed.

Soon, Schnottweiper was on his hands and knees at the corner of Brumvack's rock pit of a bed. He listened to the leader's

mucous breathing, watched his twitchy fingers on the club, observed the muscles that worked in his forearm. Could he do this? Could he really do it? Cautiously, he extended his hand out toward Brumvack's club.

Brumvack, though, was restless. He shifted his weight, snuggling his shoulders deeper into the rocks of his bed. Schnottweiper cringed, willing himself to hold still, even though he was mere inches from Brumvack the Rancid. He focused on his breathing, making it as even and as quiet as he could. Brumvack snorted to clear his nose, then sneezed enough of a sneeze to wake the whole cave. Schnottweiper knew they were done for, that the whole of the Rabid Band would be piling in upon them.

But no one woke. Brumvack, after his sneeze, sighed deeply and settled more comfortably to sleep. He even—and here Schnottweiper's eyes lit up—let go of his club.

This was Schnottweiper's moment, he knew. It was now or never. With a quick snatch, he put his hand on the club and pulled it toward him.

He wasn't quite quick enough, however. Brumvack, evidently deciding in some dream world that he still required his club at hand, reached out and grabbed it again. Only he didn't, quite. What he grabbed instead, thinking it was his club, was

Schnottweiper's forearm. The forearm of the hand that now held Brumvack's club.

Schnottweiper froze. He had been caught. Caught! Of all the miserable moments in his life, this topped the list. If only Schnottblower hadn't manipulated him into trying to steal Brumvack's club. Surely Brumvack had been awake this whole time, and was toying with the two. Toying with the Schnott brothers. And it was he, Schnottweiper, as usual, caught with the goods. His instincts told him to yank his arm back and run, but his instincts were silenced by the fear in his heart. He was frozen to the spot. Only his mouth seemed to be in working order.

"It was Schnottblower's idea!" he cried. He invented details as he spoke. "He woke me up! He told me to come grab your club! He...um...he said...um...he said that it was an emergency! Yeah, that's right, an emergency!"

But of course, the troll caves were quiet. Clearly, there was no emergency.

"I mean, there wasn't *really* an emergency...." But that didn't sound good. Now, he was contradicting himself. "I mean, there might be an emergency...in the near future...." He considered for a moment. "I'll bet, now that I think of it, that Schnottblower was just trying to get me in trouble. That's it. Schnottblower was trying to get me in trouble. And that's

why...that's why...that's why I have your club in my hand. Not my fault, that's all I'm trying to say. Schnottblower. Schnottblower's fault."

But through all of Schnottweiper's confession, Brumvack slept. When it finally became obvious to Schnottweiper that Brumvack wasn't hearing his words—but that he might if he didn't shut up—he quieted. He even allowed himself a small sigh of relief. He hadn't been caught. Hadn't been caught *yet*, he amended. However much relief he might be feeling, Brumvack still grasped his forearm.

"He thinks," Schnottweiper finally considered, "that my arm is his club." The edges of the panic wore away. In its place, his anger reasserted itself. If Schnottblower had merely done what he had been told to do, he, Schnottweiper, wouldn't be in this situation now. Stuck in Brumvack's room. He was just a few yards away from the safety of the main cave. He could see it clearly through Brumvack's arch of a doorway. But that place of safety might as well be miles away. Here he was, stuck in a cave with Brumvack holding onto his wrist, and it was all Schnottblower's fault! He curled his lip against his anger.

But, he decided, anger would have to wait. If he wanted to see the new day, he'd better get his arm away from Brumvack, and get out of the room of the Rancid.

Once the operation was underway, it seemed simple enough. With his left hand, Schnottweiper removed Brumvack's club from his right hand. This, he set on the sandy floor of the cave. Then, slowly, he pried Brumvack's fingers loose from his forearm. As delicately as any transplant surgeon, he replaced those grasping fingers onto Brumvack's own forearm.

"There's your club, Brumvack," he whispered. "Don't hit anything too hard with it. It might hurt." Then, with a grunt of panicky humor, he rose to a crouch, grabbed hold of the club, and crept out of the cave.

When he saw Schnottblower standing in the shadows, he was tempted to smack him with the newly acquired weapon. But Schnottweiper was smarter than that. If he was going to pull off his plan, he'd have to keep his anger in check. There would be time to seek vengeance later. Schnottblower, he remembered, was going to catch the blame for this whole fiasco.

He smiled and shook his head and took a deep breath. He held the club out in front of him. "I got it," he said. "Piece of cake."

Schnottblower, however, was beside himself. He was dancing from foot to foot like a toddler troll who has to go to the bathroom. "Did he wake up? I heard voices!"

Schnottweiper wondered just how much Schnottblower might have heard. His confession to Brumvack, after all, had named names for this foul deed, and Schnottblower's name was at the top of the list.

With as much gruff confidence as he could muster, he lied again: "Naw, the pretty boy was just talking in his sleep." He held up the club and repeated his assertion: "Piece of cake." He took the arm of his brother, and led him down to Dark Water.

It was one of those portentous moments that physical beings, locked within the boundaries of time, think about only in hindsight. What if Schnottweiper hadn't been present that morning at the gutting of the fish? What if he had not managed to extract Brumvack's club from his sleeping form? What if, what if, what if he hadn't led his brother to face his near-demise at the hands of the Dark Water Horror?

Interlude, Part II: A Long Time Ago: The Dark Water Horror

Schnottweiper, with Brumvack's club in hand, emerged into the lower cavern that held Dark Water. Schnottblower, already feeling that the trip had been too much, tagged behind. He wanted to return to his rocky bed. He had had enough adventure. But Schnottweiper, he knew, wouldn't be pleased by his retreat. He'd have to make his own way through the maze of dark crevices that made up the troll caves. Ordinarily, the darkness of the caverns was comforting, but tonight, with Brumvack surely about to wake at any moment, he didn't want to be discovered skulking through the dark and rocky corridors. Darkness wasn't so great, when one started thinking about who might be lurking within those shadows.

The trip down to the beach was a short one. As they progressed, the natural luminescence of the cave walls increased,

the air became more humid and cool, the gentle slap of the waves of Dark Water against the shore more pronounced. Soon, they emerged onto the beach itself. Schnottblower, though he still wished he was in his bed, relaxed his shoulders. They were unlikely to be discovered, now that they weren't in the main troll caves. Here, if they made noise, if they tripped and fell, say, and let out with a surprised grunt, they'd be unlikely to be heard. It seemed to Schnottblower that perhaps the most difficult part of the operation—getting the club itself—was behind them. All that remained was to slide the club down the fish's throat and into its gullet, and they could call it a night.

Schnottweiper, too, felt some amount of satisfaction, now that he had Brumvack's club in hand. It had been a long afternoon for Schnottweiper, with all his planning and conniving. He too looked forward to the sleep that would come when this operation was over, when he could look back with satisfaction on a job well done. A quick slip of a club down the mouth of the fish was all it would take to put the job behind him. Then, he would wait for the fireworks.

The fish was laid out on the beach, between the cutting board rock and the shore. Schnottblower found his eyes drawn to its morbid details: its eyes had glazed over until they were a sightless milky opalescence; its skin, though drying, gleamed with a slimy

coating. Its mouth was halfway open, as if it had died gasping for air. The bone-headed dinosaur fish always gave Schnottblower the willies, especially when they were drug up on land and plopped heavily upon the rocky shore. Even dead, the fish looked hungry for revenge.

Schnottweiper, for his part, was busily pacing up and down the length of the fish. He gave it the once-over with a measuring eye. Stopping near the head of the fish, he looked at Schnottblower and said, "This oughta be easy enough." He grabbed onto the fish's lower jaw, and worked it on its hinges a couple of times. "Piece a cake," he said. "Hold its mouth open for me, willya?"

Schnottblower, though, didn't want to touch it. Lying on the beach, there, like a snail pulled bodily from its shell, the sight of the fish made him shudder. He especially didn't want to touch its mouth. What if it wasn't truly dead, but only mostly dead? Those teeth were sharp. They could take a troll's fingers in one gasping snap. He had been through enough tonight, he thought, without losing any fingers. He looked askance at Schnottweiper. He smiled weakly, and shook his head.

This, of course, wasn't the answer Schnottweiper was looking for. He raised his hands in frustration, made a small noise of contempt, and readied himself for a speech on the loyalty of

brotherhood, on the honor of troll-kind, on the tough reputation of the Rabid Band, none of which contained any room for squeamishness. But, looking at Schnottblower before him, twirling his toe in dirt, he gave up. He just didn't have the energy for it.

With a longsuffering sigh, Schnottweiper dropped his hands. He'd have to lead by example, he could see. Holding the club at the ready, he reached down and opened the mouth of the fish himself.

Even with its mouth held open, though, Schnottweiper found that he couldn't guide the club past the fish's wide bands of bony teeth. He tried three or four different positions, each time grasping the fish's jaw with a firmer hand, each time discovering a position of slightly more leverage with the club. Each time, he opened the fish's mouth ever wider; each time, he struggled more valiantly with the club. He wrestled and snorted and maneuvered, but made little headway. It was a frustrating enterprise: if he was in a good position to brace the fish's mouth, he lost leverage with the club. A good stance with the club left him helpless to manipulate the fish's lower jaw.

Perhaps, he thought, he'd have to take this one step at a time.

Schnottweiper dropped the club at his feet, then took a couple of steps and stood near the fish's gills. From there, he pulled open

the fish's jaw with both hands. Schnottblower could hear tendons pulling, whether of the fish or of his brother he couldn't be sure. Each time Schnottweiper pulled on the fish's jaw, its eyes seemed to bulge a little. For that matter, Schnottweiper's did too.

Eventually, the mouth of the fish was open about as far as possible. "There," Schnottweiper said, satisfied. In a rush of motion, he let go of the fish's jaw, grabbed the club, and stuffed it into the fish's oral cavity, but he wasn't very far into the operation before the fish's mouth began to close with a cadaverous slowness. By the time its teeth had closed firmly on the club, he had only made eight inches or so of progress.

Schnottweiper's patience was beginning to wane. Or maybe his confidence was beginning to flag. This was no one-troll job, he could see. He looked pleadingly at Schnottblower. He raised his eyebrows in a silent question: "Now will you open its mouth, help me out here?"

Schnottblower's answer was just as silent but just as definitive. He shrugged a bit, bent one knee slightly inward, and bit his thumbnail. He made a small grimace behind his thumb. He didn't want to touch the fish's lips.

Schnottweiper exploded. "What are you good for anyway? Jeez! It's just a fish! It's just a dead fish! If I would have known I

was going to do this whole job by myself, I never would have invited you!”

Schnottblower ducked his head even further in apology, but he remained adamant: Fish’s lips were out. Yucky fish. Yucky lips. Cold lips. Rubbery lips. Well, maybe they were rubbery. He wasn’t going to find out. No.

“Honestly,” cried Schnottweiper (a word he had gotten from his dearly departed grandmother) “I don’t know why I put up with you! You’re a....you’re a...” But for the third time that night he reined in his anger. They were in too deep to quit now, and it was clear that he wasn’t going to be able to operate alone. He took a deep breath, and began again. “Okay,” he said to Schnottblower. “I’ll hold open its mouth, and you push the club in.”

Schnottblower wasn’t so sure that he wanted to do that, either. Those teeth were huge, and if he was manning the club, his fingers...his hands...his arms! might be fish bait. In his imagination, he saw the fish struggling to fight the insertion of the club, only to suddenly suck it inwards, sucking his extremities right in there with it. He looked from the fish to Schnottweiper, then back to the fish. He wanted for all the world to return to his bed. Again, though, the thought of Brumvack waking, missing his club, and stalking the halls in search of retribution returned to his mind. He’d have to stay here. And, if he had to stay here, he’d

better help. Given the choice, working the club was more palatable than holding on to the fish's rubbery lips. "Okay," he said, nodding his head. He reached for the club.

Soon, Schnottblower was standing in front of the fish, holding the club at the ready. Schnottweiper had already planted his feet in position, and was grasping the fish's lower jaw.

"Ready?" Schnottweiper asked.

Schnottblower stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth in concentration. He nodded.

Schnottweiper pulled open the fish's mouth.

Schnottblower, careful to keep his fingers well clear, guided the club past the fish's long rows of pointy teeth. So far, so good. He'd already made more progress than Schnottweiper alone had managed. As the rough wood passed along the tissues of the fish's mouth, it made a wet, slippery sound that made him shiver. He squinted his eyes against the sound of it, and pushed the club further.

"Push!" urged Schnottweiper. "Push!"

Schnottblower pushed the club harder, gaining a couple more inches. It was now a foot or more into the fish's mouth. But every inch, of course, brought his fingers that much closer to the fish's menacing teeth. He gave the club another anemic push.

Schnottweiper growled in frustration. He let go of the fish's lower jaw and stood erect, glaring at his brother. He reached toward the club.

Schnottblower gratefully released hold of the club, and withdrew a few feet as Schnottweiper wrestled with it. He watched as his older brother grasped the club with both hands and gave a series of heaves, putting his weight into each forward motion. Each thrust gained perhaps a couple inches. After each thrust, Schnottweiper would retreat a few inches and then thrust again. Every time Schnottweiper made any headway down the fish's throat, it sounded to Schnottblower as if the fish were gagging on the club. He felt a little like gagging himself. He backed further away in an effort to keep the noises from vibrating so viscerally through him.

A few of the fish's teeth gave way under the strain of Schnottweiper's exertions. Every couple of thrusts, a new tooth buckled and fell to the stony beach. But forward progress, Schnottblower could tell, was nearing an end. With a lot of sweating and groaning and swearing, Schnottweiper had managed to force the club another ten or twelve inches into the great fish's gullet, but it was becoming obvious that it would go no further.

Schnottweiper, with a scream of frustration, gave a final great shove. He put his back into it, and even put his prodigious belly

into it. He yelled out an “Aaargh” that echoed down the length of the water and back.

The club responded to this effort. With a noise of internal structures shifting and breaking, the club thrust another six inches into the gullet of the fish.

It took a moment for Schnottweiper to process what had happened. He stood for a moment, staring at the club. Something in the throat of the fish had given way. Suddenly, there was more of the club inside the fish than outside. With a grunt of satisfaction, he grabbed the club and manhandled it further. Suddenly, he was making real progress. With one long push, he got the club another foot inside the fish’s mouth.

At this point, only about a quarter of the club’s length stuck out of the mouth of the fish. The fish, thought Schnottweiper, now looked like a troll choking on a mastodon bone. Sensing success, Schnottweiper proceeded with gusto. As he pushed, he shared a look of enthusiasm with Schnottblower.

And here we come to the image that was riveted to Schnottweiper’s imagination for years afterward: Schnottblower, his younger brother, was standing stock still. He wasn’t paying attention to the operation with the fish at all, but instead faced Dark Water. His fist was clenched, raised in a defensive posture.

But though his fist might have been ready, the rest of him wasn't. He was stuck in his tracks. His lower lip quivered slightly, moistened by a bit of drool that leaked from his weakly held mouth.

But Schnottweiper didn't rest his gaze upon his brother for long. What captured his attention was the creature that loomed immediately in front of Schnottblower. The creature, whatever it was, was shedding water as it emerged from the underground lake. Its hindquarters were in fact still in the water. It was huge, a big-in-the-middle-and-small-at-both-ends sort of creature, though Schnottweiper couldn't get a good look at its still-submerged tail. It was purple, mostly, though its skin was mottled with raised blue spots that looked like outgrowths of a virulent mold. Where the spots weren't, the beast gave off a purplish light that glowed faintly from within. But its jaws were what Schnottweiper fixated upon. Its gaping jaws, with row after row of dirty crystalline teeth, each nearly as long as his own forearm.

The long muscular neck of the beast moved sinuously as the creature eyed Schnottblower. Schnottweiper sensed that it was tensing for a forward thrust, a pounce, a kill.

Schnottweiper, as he stood there watching his brother face down this beast, this Dark Water Horror, had a sort of conversion experience. He went from being frustrated and resentful of his

younger brother to feeling an upwelling of fondness and care for him. Here he was, having brought his younger brother down to the beach in the middle of the night, the beach that everyone knew housed this Horror of the Dark Water, and now his brother was about to lose his life to that beast. He felt a rush of self-loathing rise up from his heart, a loathing all the more bitter as he remembered that he, Schnottweiper, had arranged that Schnottblower was to take the blame for the operation. This small and helpless troll before him, how could anyone think he would do such a terrible thing! His brother! His poor brother! He had to save his brother! With a superhuman and even supertrollian rush of energy, he pulled Brumvack's club from the mouth of the fish. It came forth, covered with blood and a milky, translucent slime, with a long wet schlurp of a noise. He wielded the club in front of him as if it were an extension of his own body. The energy within him informed him of just the correct warrior posture and samurai style and sumo grace that would bring down this monster of the deep. He leapt forward, then leapt again, then leapt yet again until he was even with Schnottblower. With a quick shove, he pushed his brother aside. Schnottblower fell to the rocky beach, hard, catching himself on his left hip and his left elbow. He didn't see his older brother hitting the head of the Dark Water Horror with his blunt instrument.

When the club found its target, the beast of the lake let loose with a guttural scream. A gout of bluish blood erupted from its forehead, then ran down its face. Its eel-like tongue slurped out of its mouth, tasting the blood that rushed down its chin and covered its long, long teeth.

Schnottweiper swung again. He swung blindly, wildly, but accurately. With a jarring crash that rattled his bones, he hit one of those long crystalline teeth, loosing it from the mouth of the attacking monster.

The Dark Water Horror was furious at this onslaught. Never before had any of its prey fought back. But the pain in its head, and particularly the pain of its now-missing tooth, brought a spear of clarity into its otherwise confused brain: it must retreat. Retreat, and find its vengeance on some better day. Clearly, two of these beasts were too much to handle. It would have to wait until there was only one. It backed off quickly, smoothly lowering its body into the depths of Dark Water. Before long, there was only an expanding ring of wavelets to show that it had ever been.

There was a span of silence as Schnottweiper considered what had just happened. The silence didn't last long, however. Schnottblower was trying to get his attention.

"My elbow hurts," he said. He held up his arm pathetically to show the bloodied joint.

Schnottweiper didn't want to hear about his elbow. "I just saved you from that monster! The Dark Water Horror!" Schnottweiper said. "You coulda been kilt!"

Schnottblower looked at him a bit dumbly. "But my elbow hurts," he said. "It's bleeding." Evidently, the Dark Water Horror had been too much for him. Its visage had been pushed out of his mind, a vision too horrible to contemplate. All he could think about was his elbow.

"My butt hurts too." He rubbed at his hip with a confused look on his face. "Why did you push me?"

Schnottweiper saw that his younger brother still had a gleam of spittle on his lower lip. Its image put him back in the mind of his conversion experience. His heart melted a little bit. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I pushed you."

He grabbed onto Schnottblower's hand. He said it again. "I'm sorry." He stuck Brumvack's club under his arm, and led Schnottblower as quietly as he could away from Dark Water. He led him upwards into the troll's smoky caverns, past Brumvack's room, and through the common area. He led him to his own bed, then tucked him in by dropping one of the larger rocks onto his stomach. "You'll feel better in the morning," he said. "It'll be as if it never happened."

"My elbow hurts," said Schnottblower.

“Go to sleep,” answered Schnottweiper.

“What if I have bad dreams?” Schnottblower asked.

Schnottweiper sighed another of many sighs that would follow him through the course of his days. “If you have bad dreams,” he said, “wake me up. I’ll make sure you’re okay.”

And then, embarrassed that some other troll might wake and hear him, he hummed a little lullaby until he heard the snort and gurgle of his brother’s fitful sleep.

Before Schnottweiper went to bed, he returned Brumvack’s club to the leader’s weapons rack. Brumvack’s dreams, fortunately, had resolved into a temporary peace; he snored soundly when Schnottweiper snuck into his cave. The operation of returning the club was as simple as procuring it should have been. It was still gooey and scaly with fish slime, but Schnottweiper wasn’t about to return to Dark Water to wash it off. Brumvack would have to make of it what he would.

In this way, Schnottweiper became Schnottblower’s protector. Whenever Schnottblower wasn’t up to the dangers that faced him, which was often, Schnottweiper was there to save him. When a mastodon was within a foot of goring him with one of its monstrous tusks, Schnottweiper was there to put that mastodon down with a brain-bashing swipe of his club. When Schnottblower

was surrounded by trilobites at the edge of Lake Borack and thought he was going to die, Schnottweiper was there to take his hand and lead him into deeper, safer water. When Slimegobbler insisted that Schnottblower give up proprietorship of his favorite sitting rock, Schnottweiper took his brother's case as his own, and faced down Slimegobbler in a brawl that left both trolls bruised and sore for a week. After that, though, no one in the Rabid Band challenged Schnottblower, knowing that Schnottweiper would have his back.

This, of course, is what guilt does to any of us: We begin to feel responsible for another's well-being, often to their detriment. Schnottblower, after centuries of having Schnottweiper take on his personal challenges, couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. This, in turn, led Schnottweiper to be all the more careful to take on the forces in the world that might threaten his younger brother. His younger and dumber and weaker brother. His helpless, inept, and now overconfident brother, willing to lumber his way into any ridiculous situation because he knew that somehow it always worked out in the end.

Schnottweiper's conversion experience didn't last long, of course. Over the next months, his insight into the loving and supportive nature of brotherhood, of fondness for his younger brother, gave way to resentment. Schnottblower was an 800 pound

ball and chain, bound firmly to Schnottweiper's ankle. He was Schnottblower's personal protector, bound to watch over him, destined to take the part of keeping him safe from the world and from himself.

Schnottweiper even came to the point where he forgot how it had all come about. Were you to ask him, "Did you ever nearly get your brother killed?" he would answer "Of course not. I save his bacon nearly every day." But his role in Schnottblower's life had become such a part of the fabric of his reality that he never questioned it. It was his destiny to keep Schnottblower safe from his own clumsiness and stupidity and distorted self-concept. Or, if not his destiny, it was his job.

And now, all these centuries later, now in this brave new world not of mastodons but of land trolls and huge metallic insects and untold other dangers, Schnottblower was again facing down a charging creature. A big yellow bug with a pizza painted on its side. Once again, Schnottblower stood locked in place with his fist extended feebly in front of him. And once again, Schnottweiper leapt forward to save him. He looked about for a suitable weapon, and, finding none, looked for a tree from which to harvest one. He found a tree, a ten foot tall tree with a square trunk and a single red octagonal leaf. "Odd trees, here," he thought, but he didn't have

time to consider the nature of the trees. He broke off the tree at its roots, and hefted it in his hands.

“Yes,” he thought, “this will work.” He swung his new club around his head a couple of times, then roared into the street to face the onrushing insect. Moments before that big bug could reach his brother, Schnottweiper was there to once again save the day. He whirled the club upwards in a wind-up, then smashed it down onto beast, just above its shining yellow eyes, a killing blow. The blood of the bug sprayed upwards in a long arc, greenish-white and hot. The monster howled its agony, then died.

Schnottweiper tried to yank his new club free. It had felt good having a weapon in his hands again. He wanted to keep it, and of course it was never a bad idea to strike a final blow, just to ensure that one’s prey was dead and not merely stunned. But his new club was firmly lodged in the forehead of the beast, not to be removed. Schnottweiper reluctantly let it go. He had the sense that they’d better leave before any of the bug’s hive-mates might appear.

“Let’s go,” he said to Schnottblower. His brother, as if waking from a bad dream, shook his head to clear it. He followed Schnottweiper. Soon, the two caught up with Droolmeister at the end of the block. Then, the three of them ran off together in a slow jog. This new world, they had learned, was dangerous.

But the news wasn't all bad. Though the world was proving itself to be an unpredictable and treacherous place, the trolls had so far showed that they had the mastery necessary to conquer it. They loped on, hoping to reconnect with the rest of the Rabid Band.

Ferdy Chicken, through the course of the altercation, had been a little surprised to see the stop sign. His attention had been snared by the beast in the middle of the road, and suddenly out of the corner of his eye a stop sign swung in a tight arc toward him. He had been ignoring stop signs for an hour or two now; at this point the stop signs seemed to be fighting back.

In his long life, Ferdy had noted that sometimes he found problems, and sometimes problems found him. This seemed to be an example of the latter. One moment, he was rushing headlong toward his destiny, a destiny in the form of a Lake Maebiewahnapoopie Monster who evidently didn't know much about the energetic potential of a pizza van. He fully intended to take out that monster, at the expense of the van if necessary. Desperate to prove his worth to an uncaring town, he had it in his mind to haul in a trophy. Dead or alive. Maybe that would be the deed that would get him initiated into the Crime-Fighting Hall of Large Accomplishments.

The next moment, though, there was a stop sign winging its way toward him. Before he had much time to puzzle that out, the windshield before him exploded into a milky vista of cracked glass. Moments later, it sagged and slumped onto the dashboard, revealing the fact that the stop sign was still buried up to the “O” in the hood of the van. A geyser of radiator fluid surged upwards around the gash it had made, then it too fell away, leaving nothing but an up-rushing cloud of steam. As Ferdy sat there in wonderment over this loss of the engine’s vital fluids, the motor chugged twice, and then once, and then died.

“No,” Ferdy Chicken said quietly, to himself and to anyone else who might be listening. “Please no.” The Ferdymobile was out of commission, and now this substitute Ferdymobile was going up in smoke as well.

And the monsters of the lake were loping away from him at high speed.

Ferdy Chicken crowed out a short prayer to the Chicken in Charge, then cranked on the starter of the van. It chugged sluggishly for a time, but it was obvious even to Ferdy, who had earned a B in auto shop and remembered absolutely nothing about cars, that it wasn’t going to start. This van wasn’t going anywhere. He would have to proceed on foot.

Chapter 24. Schmooze-glutton Discovers a Meal

Schmooze-glutton hunkered down behind a couple bales of hay. A good span ahead of him stood one of the ugliest creatures he had ever seen. It was a big beast. It wasn't as tall as a troll, but possibly it was as heavy as a troll. The creature had a beer keg of a chest, and stood on four legs. Those legs, though, weren't good solid legs like those of a troll. Instead, they were weak and spindly-looking, especially the front two. The beast had a head that was mostly nose. And the worst thing was that the creature had no comfortable slabs of body fat, no layer of blubber, no reserves of lard. Schmooze-glutton could see its muscles working under its hide.

It looked like no creature he had ever seen. For Schmooze-glutton, it was another sign that the world had moved on. Land trolls, big blue bugs, and now this.

Schmooze-glutton had gone in search of some dinner. Not just something to eat, but some actual dinner. He wanted to bag a creature big enough that everyone would be able to join the feast. He took it as a good sign that he thought of food at a time like this: surely it was a leaderly impulse. He, the new king of the Rabid Band, held a sense of responsibility toward his cave mates. His subjects.

What he'd really hoped for was a nice big woolly mammoth. That would be just the thing to drag back to the troll caves, he thought. Not only would it feed everyone, it would have the added benefit of putting Brumvack in his place. It would be a pleasure to piece out a mastodon, haul it into the common room of the caves, and sit down to eat. Brumvack would either have to beg for a piece of meat that he hadn't helped hunt, or go hungry. That would show him. It would be the just the thing to cement Schmooze-glutton's victory.

But, no matter how much ground he covered, he hadn't come across a woolly mammoth. Mammoths, of course, had always been sparse on the ground. Perhaps the land trolls, as they had moved into the area, had killed and eaten the last of them. Certainly, he had seen no sign of one. No scat, no footprint, nothing.

He did, however, find the beast that stood before him now. It wasn't nearly so large as a mammoth, but it was pretty big. It

chomped at the short plants at its feet, grinding each bite with its teeth.

It was an awfully ugly creature, though. Where mastodons were good looking beasts, with large heads and large bellies and good, solid, troll-like legs, this creature looked pretty pathetic.

Schmoozeglutton shook his head. It was going to be awfully easy to slide into depression, he could see. The world, he sensed, was no longer worthy of him and the other members of the Rabid Band. Trolls, as everyone knew, were the high point of creation, the world's most robust and cultured inhabitants. Since the trolls had deprived the world of their influence, things had gone badly to seed. This creature in front of him was proof of that.

But Schmoozeglutton squared his shoulders and set his jaw and took a deep breath. He was the leader of the Rabid Band. As that leader, surely he could steer the world back onto its tracks. He could **MAKE A DIFFERENCE**. He could whip the Rabid Band into shape, and show the world the meaning of true dignity.

The beast before him, it was true, wasn't a good omen. Was this what had become of the woolly mammoth? Once a fine shaggy beast, and now this? The creature before him was skinny and pathetic. Its bones showed underneath its hide. It was woolly, but only in a single stripe that ran from its high forehead down the back of its neck. And, Schmoozeglutton added, its tail. What was

the sense in that? A short haired mammoth with a wooly tail? But this was no mammoth. Where the mammoth had a big head, this had a small one, though its nose was admittedly large and attractive. Even with the nose, though, it was obviously a creature of very little cranial capacity. Its eyes weren't clear. And those skinny little legs! Schmooze-glutton couldn't get over its legs. How could they even hold up the beast? And, given that they were holding it up, how could the beast abide itself? If he had legs like that, skinny little legs underneath his big troll body, he would remain in the troll cave, unwilling to be seen upon the surface of the world.

But, for all of that, the creature looked to have meat on its bones. For now, given the trolls' state of advanced hunger, that would have to do. He watched the creature, pondering how best to bring it down.

What Schmooze-glutton had found was in fact something that the town's residents were vaguely embarrassed about themselves. It was the aging horse of the former sheriff. The former sheriff was also something they were embarrassed about, because through the 20 years of his retirement, he had become senile enough that he believed himself still to hold office. He rode his horse around town in his sheriffy way, his badge pinned upside down on his big

floppy cowboy hat, his gun, which no one had the heart to take away from him, stuck in the waistband of his baggy old-man pants. When he was having a particularly bad day, he would stand in the middle of one of the town's busier intersections and bring traffic to a snarled standstill as he attempted to direct traffic against the lights. Other days, he would march up and down main street, writing parking tickets from a pad of paper that said "Margie Mae's Grocery List" at the top of each sheet. No one knew who Margie Mae might be, though people certainly wondered. And the town's citizens still talked of the day the sheriff had ridden his flea-bitten nag at the front of Henrietta Kojak-Moon's funeral procession, shooting his gun in the air and hollering "God Bless America!" thinking he was leading a Fourth of July parade. How he came to that notion was beyond anyone's ken, being that it was late October, snow was falling, and everyone involved had assumed an appropriately somber mood. Still, to the sheriff, it was his country's birthday, and he was going to do his level best to excite the town's residents into a patriotic fervor.

In any case, the former sheriff's mare, old-in-the-tooth and a little mangy in the coat, stood before Schmoozeglutton, half-heartedly cropping the sparse grass behind his house. Schmoozeglutton himself, from his vantage point behind the round bales, wondered how best to drop this beast and get it to the cave.

What he needed, of course, was a club. His hand itched for a club. Or a rock. But a quick perusal of the yard showed no rocks of sufficient size.

Schmooze-glutton pondered a moment. Would it be safe to try to take down this beast on his own, in any case? Truly, he didn't have any idea what the capabilities of the creature were. It seemed pretty tame, right at the moment. Lame, even. Evidently, its teeth were made for eating small plants, rather than tearing into trolls. It looked to have hard little feet, though. If it started kicking it sure might hurt.

What it boiled down to was this: it would look awfully good if he could bring in this kill on his own. It wasn't a mammoth, but it was a sizeable enough beast that the others would be impressed.

On the other hand, it would do him no good to attempt to kill the beast on his own, and then find that it had some onerous defense mechanism that would leave him gasping, say with one of those hard little feet in his belly. Should he let out a foodwhoop, call in the others to help bring down this creature?

Neither answer seemed like the perfect one. If he called the trolls, they would forget, in the ensuing circus of activity, that it was he, their leader, who had been looking out for them and hunting some food. But, clubless and even rockless, he had little hope of killing the beast on his own. Should he sneak away, come

back with a new club, and hope that the beast was still here? Surely, it couldn't travel very far on those little bird-like legs.

Schmoozeglutton grumbled to himself. He was a troll of action. He hated sitting around and pondering things, even when that seemed like the leaderly thing to do.

A moment later, a turning of the breeze took the opportunity of decision away from him. Schmoozeglutton's odor, as pleasant as it was, was a shocking new thing in the horse's world. With a shuddering exhalation, the horse lifted his head and reared up a bit. It pranced a couple of steps backwards, working its nostrils and its ears. Finally, it snorted deeply—sounding almost like a troll, Schmoozeglutton thought in wonder—and galloped off at a pace that the troll would never have thought possible.

Schmoozeglutton was a practiced hunter. He knew better than to simply chase the beast. In fact, he could now see that it might be able to run faster even than a troll. Instead, he watched it for a time from behind the bales. He gave it time to gain a little distance, then ran at an angle to the horse's trajectory, keeping a nearby outbuilding between him and the horse's line of sight. He eyed the horse from around a corner, then, when he was sure the horse was looking away, ducked and ran to the side of a big turtle house, hoping not to wake it. There was one thing you could say

about these big turtle houses: they provided some good cover for hunting. Trolls, as they lumbered across the icy plains, had stood out awfully clearly to the great woolly mammoths. This was far superior.

In this way, moving from house to house, he followed the horse into town. At the right moment, perhaps when the beast tired, or when it was cornered, he would be able to make his kill.

Chapter 25. Mrs. O’Leary Burns Up the Phone Lines

Mrs. Jonathon O’Leary rubbed at her eyes. She sat on her lumpy couch in the back room, trying to peer through the snow on the television screen enough to make sense of the program. The reception was poor enough that she wasn’t sure if she was watching a rerun of a sitcom, or maybe it was a baseball game.

It had been a long night.

A long day and a long night.

Why, the last half hour was the first time the phone had stopped ringing all day.

She looked at the clock on the mantle. It was nearly 11:00. People wouldn’t be calling now, except possibly Mabel, who, ever since she had hit 70, couldn’t sleep a wink.

The first call of the day had been Victoria Moon King’s stylist, a chatty and gossipy woman who liked to be the first to

report any juicy tidbit. She informed Mrs. O'Leary about the first lady's fainting spell, along with the supposition that she had a food allergy, maybe peanut butter, or gluten, or maybe it was unfertilized eggs. Her own nephew was allergic to vegetable oil. Can you imagine? The faint was a bit of news, though anyone who knew Victoria Moon King knew that she had the occasional fainting spell. But a food allergy? Ridiculous. Mrs. O'Leary used her long-practiced probing techniques to get at the truth. A question here, a little misdirection there, a bit of flattery here, an intuitive leap there. In this way, she was able to isolate the school paper as the culprit for today's faint.

She didn't get out much, Mrs. O'Leary. She was pretty much housebound, since Mr. O'Leary had met his maker, taking their '64 Dodge Dart with him. But she had contacts all over town, and she made use of them to get some insight into the newspaper in question. It was the photographs, she eventually learned. Mrs. O'Malley was able to tell her that much. Mrs. O'Malley had gotten a copy of the school paper at the grocery store, and was happy to describe the photographs in detail. Of course, this description was intermixed with Mrs. O'Malley's opinion that the end of the world, finally, had come close enough that even the newspapers couldn't ignore it. These creatures, she was sure, were those that had been prophesied by Nostradamus. Or maybe it was

Revelations. She couldn't remember where she had read it exactly, but she was clear that these were the "Posse of Darque Men come to Smite our Idle-Borne Age." Mrs. O'Malley had brought in all of her nine cats and awaited the smiting with righteous glee.

Helga Weissstrüdel, another caller, had a copy of the paper as well. She had dismissed it out of hand, though, as a ploy on the part of the students to avoid the hard work that school, well-accomplished, brought, and slack off for yet another day of their lives. The administration of the school had likely been complicit in the act; for one thing the students weren't likely able to write well enough to put out the paper on their own, and besides such a diversion was just what the principal needed to avoid questions about plummeting test scores. Miss Weissstrüdel had been a high school English teacher for 45 years, and she knew what she was talking about.

Mrs. O'Leary followed up Miss Weissstrüdel's call with a call to Marianne Wilson. Marianne had no opinion about the photographs, but was properly concerned about Victoria Moon King, who wasn't acting at all well since her husband had tried to rise above his station by running for Mayor. And won the office, mores' the pity, though Lord knows he got it more because of his connections with the Moons than because he was a King. Clearly, it was a case of him taking his last name too closely to heart; alas,

he wasn't the first King to do so. The Kings might think they're royalty, but when Mayor King's grandfather had moved here, he didn't have a dime to his name, or a pocket to stick it in that didn't have a hole in it. They had made their fortune selling fertilizer. Did Mrs. O'Leary know that? Fertilizer! Mayor King had never done an honest day's work in his life. He had it made in the shade, simply because his forebears had followed cows around all day with a wagon and a shovel. Not one of the Kings, in fact, had ever done an honest day's work; they just waited until nature happened, and scooped it up and sold it to some poor schmuck who didn't have the sense to scoop up his own fertilizer. And, as if that wasn't enough, they didn't pay the local farmers a dime, and after all wasn't it them who were feeding the cows? And anyway wasn't it was the cows that had done the real work in the first place? And here Mayor King was following in his family's footsteps, only now the cows were citizens and taxpayers, doing all the work and paying Mayor King to do nothing except stand there with a shovel. Victoria Moon King, the poor girl, didn't have a chance. It's no wonder she'd gotten so uppity, trying to make that man feel like a King when the only job he was qualified for was dunging out a barn.

On top of these happenings about town, there was a smattering of the usual fare: Annie Wentworth called to tell her

that she had seen old John Manganeli sailing through a stop sign as if it weren't there at all, yet another indication that he shouldn't be driving in the first place, how old was he anyway? Shouldn't there be an age limit, at least for men, who aged so much more precipitously than women? And besides, after he missed the stop sign he swerved down the road outside her house, swerved just as if he had been drunk, and maybe he was, and nearly ran over Millie Tucker *on the sidewalk*. When are they gonna do something? Caroline Frincham called to say that she was having a terrible pain in her legs, she probably had a blood clot, and her no good son still hadn't come over to help her with her garden. She had called him three times and every time he said he would be right over but he never came and she hoped he would at least have the decency to feel bad when he found her, dead on the sidewalk from a blood clot on the brain, and with a dandelion in her hand, pulled all the way to the root like she always did because those dandelions, once they got ahold of your yard, sure didn't let go, and it was a good thing that she would pull that dandelion even if it did kill her, because her son, if he came at all, would just have sprayed some weed killer on the thing, and turned it all brown and ugly, but it would be back full grown in a couple weeks, see if it wasn't, and what's more spreading seeds like wildfire. Johanna Harrison had called to report that she had seen Mark David—again—in the

grocery store with a woman who was not his wife. When was she—the wife—going to wake up and face facts and put a leash on that man? And who did the other woman think she was anyway, coming to their God-fearing town to prey on men who wouldn't have her in the first place if their heads were on straight, which they never were?

Mrs. O'Leary, in other words, was a nexus of information. She didn't get around much, but all signals went through her, then were amplified and sent on.

Another of those signals was the fact that the principal up at the high school had been seen about town in the late afternoon and evening, asking after the school newspapers—the newspapers she had been hearing about all day, now—and taking all the copies that remained. She had heard that not just once but three times, from three different people. What, she wondered, could that mean? Surely, those photographs held some truth that most of the folks in town were choosing to ignore.

And now, as if the long day and long night weren't enough, her TV reception was going all akilter, nothing but snow and the occasional ghost floating through the middle of it. Maybe it was a hitter on his fourth ball and taking his base, or maybe it was Klinger walking from one end of the compound to another in his

dress. She couldn't tell, and the distorted sound from the set wasn't giving her any clues.

She hoped that the reception would improve, of course, but she wasn't about to go out into the back yard and give the aerial a wiggle. Not after dark.

She peered out the window at the aerial in question. It rose above a disused barn. It would be easy enough, were it daylight, to tromp out there and turn the crank a bit, but she made it a practice to wiggle the aerial only before twilight. That sheriff next door was a hazard. Had been a hazard, in fact, as long as she had lived there, and that went back to the time when he really was a sheriff. If he saw her out there after dark, he'd like as not to shoot her with that six-gun of his, and only afterwards stop to ask if she was a trespasser. Why, if half the stories she had heard about that man were true....

The phone rang again. Mrs. O'Leary looked at the phone, then at the clock on the mantle. It was 11:15. No doubt, it was Mabel. Mabel went to bed religiously at 9:30, but of course could never get to sleep, what with all the noise the neighbors made, all the frightening stories on the news, all the things she had to worry about herself ever since Ed had died.

Mrs. O'Leary turned down the sound on the set and picked up the phone. "Hello, Mabel," she said. "Couldn't get to sleep?"

But it wasn't Mabel. It was Gayle Donaldson, from across town. "Sorry to bother you so late, dear," offered Mrs. Donaldson. It was a fake apology, no doubt about it; Gayle never felt apologetic to anyone. She'd call at three in the morning, if that's what it occurred to her to do. But, she didn't call very often, and she always had an interesting tidbit or two to proffer regarding some well-known name on the ritzier side of town.

"Oh! Hello Gayle!" said Mrs. O'Leary. "How nice to hear from you! I was just sitting here thinking of you!"

"Oh, I know," replied Mrs. Donaldson. "And I you. We really must get together sometime." Of course, both ladies knew that they would do no such thing.

"I'm calling," said Mrs. Donaldson, "to ask if you know anything about Victoria Moon King. I'm awfully worried about her. She came home this afternoon looking perfectly awful. She looked for all the world like she had just gotten out of the shower in some cheap motel room. Her hair was messed up, you know how she likes to keep it so nice, and she was still carrying the towel!"

"It's interesting that you should mention that, because I did hear about a small fainting episode this morning in the salon."

"Fainting, is it? Goodness."

Mrs. O’Leary thought she might cast out a hook, see what she could catch. “I heard it was from looking at the paper. You know, those monsters.”

“Now don’t be ridiculous, dear. Only a man has the power to make a girl swoon so. Though I do admit that Victoria is a bit on the conservative side for such romantic trysts. Maybe she’s having a midlife crisis.”

“Romance?” asked Mrs. O’Leary. She wasn’t surprised to hear it. Not because Victoria Moon King was likely involved with any man, but because Gayle Donaldson saw Harlequin visions of epic romance in every circumstance. Gayle was married to a fabulously wealthy man, but he was almost never home, preferring the business climate in New York, or maybe it was just the weather he preferred. In any case, he left Gayle to sit at home with little to do other than to read the perhaps two dozen series romance novels that showed up in her mailbox every month. Romance was everywhere, for Gayle. Everywhere, that is, except in her own life.

“Anyway,” said Mrs. Donaldson, “I do know that the man in question is now stalking her.”

“Stalking?” replied Mrs. O’Leary. She was on auto-pilot now, repeating key words every now and again to show that she was listening, even though she wasn’t. She was losing interest in the story. It was so obviously off-base. Still, she wanted to keep

Gayle on the line. A telling detail might be in the offing, if she listened long enough.

“Yes, stalking. Evidently, he was spying on her from the alley behind their house. Then, in a fit of passion, he broke his way through their very fence! It was quite a manly display. Though it was a bit gauche, if you want my opinion.”

“Busted through the fence, you say?” said Mrs. O’Leary. That was interesting. A real-life, verifiable fact, that. “There’s a hole in their fence, then?”

“I heard,” said Mrs. Donaldson in a conspiratorial whisper, “that he’s Swedish.” Her tone suggested that nothing more need be said.

“Well, goodness,” said Mrs. O’Leary. “Swedish.”

But she was finished listening to Mrs. Donaldson. Surely, there wasn’t really a paramour in Victoria Moon King’s closet, Swedish or not. Therefore, the hole in the fence must have been made by something else. One of those creatures from the newspaper, perhaps, that the high school principal was so concerned about? One of Mrs. O’Malley’s Darque Men? She wondered how she might receive verification of the hole in the fence, perhaps get some dimensions. She excused herself to Mrs. Donaldson—the teapot was starting to squeal in the kitchen, she said—then hung up.

Who could she call, this late at night? Who might have any knowledge of Victoria Moon King's fence? Or, barring that, could go have a look at said fence? Her mind raced through possibilities. Though it was, she considered, getting awfully late to be calling anyone.

She looked at the clock again. Almost 11:30.

And this, dear reader, is an important detail. Mrs. O'Leary looked at the clock on her mantle at 11:26 p.m. on Friday night, when, were this a more ordinary night in front of the TV, her attention would no doubt have been drawn to her window, where a dark shadow appeared for a hanging instant and then was gone.

It was Schmoozeglutton.

She wouldn't find his footprints until early the following morning.

Chapter 26. Ferdy Chicken Rides Again

Ferdy Chicken was a little dazed. He sat in the driver's seat of the pizza delivery van, looking out the windshield. Or, what once had been the windshield. Now, the glass sagged in a sheet upon the dash, broken into a billion little squares.

The monsters were already moving beyond his range of sight, dark as it was. He knew where they were headed, though: they were going to Moon Park, which lay a couple miles directly ahead.

Moon Park! Of course they were going to Moon Park. He had known it all along, hadn't he? He should have trusted his instincts, he now knew. He should have remained in the park. He could have set up a blind there, and simply lay in wait for them. He could have set his tripwire. He could have figured out a use for his grappling hook. The park, of course, had no buildings to scale, but surely a grappling hook could be used for other purposes. Just

what purposes he couldn't imagine, but he could have found one. It was no use having a grappling hook if you never used it.

Now, though, he was a chicken without a ride. The Lake Maebiewahnapoopie monsters would get there well before he would, get there and leave, possibly, before he ever arrived. This was a circumstance he so often found himself in: a day late and a dollar short. It was depressing.

He glumly opened the driver's side door, and exited the now defunct vehicle. He'd have to hoof it.

Ferdy Chicken opened the back door of the van to retrieve his tools. He picked up his long coil of rope and slung it over his shoulder. The grappling hook bounced gently off of his ribcage as he did so. His tripwire, though, was a different story. During the course of his mad search for the creatures, his trip wire had slid around in the rear compartment of the van, and was now snarled beyond use. When he picked it up by one end and pulled, the snarl tightened into a knot. He pulled at the knot, but it only became tighter.

This, as it turned out, was a good thing. Ferdy believed that he had no immediate use for his grappling hook. Had he thought about it, there was no immediate use for a tripwire, either. He carried it simply because it was a tool of the superhero trade. No superhero, he thought, should be without a tripwire. But while he

had no real use for a tripwire at the moment, he will very soon have use for a snarled length of woven filament. The snarl, in addition to the ugly knot which so vexed our hero, had also created a taut but flexible loop, which Ferdy would have at hand just at the moment when a horse inexplicably and fortuitously trotted by.

But of course Ferdy Chicken didn't have the benefit of this authorial tidbit. The tripwire, in its snarled state, just brought more frustration to an already frustrating situation. Here he was, in a hurry to get somewhere—finally, he had somewhere to go, he was no longer hero without a calling—and the equipment he had spent so long preparing had gone afoul. It just wasn't fair. The very moment the town needed him—finally needed him—everything conspired against his success. If his car had been running, everything would have been fine. His car was equipped with a double-knobbed expandable no snarl tripwire storage device that prevented just this sort of accident from occurring. What foresight he had shown in inventing such a thing! If only he had evidenced just a bit more foresight. Then, he could have invented a *portable* double-knobbed expandable no snarl tripwire storage device!

In any case, if he had been driving the Ferdymobile—if fate hadn't brought him to this particular end—he would already be following those monsters. He would be on the trail, not standing around and fussing with his equipment. But no, he had been

driving a pizza delivery van. A pizza delivery van, he noted, that was DOA in the middle of the road. More than that, its hood had been impaled with a stop sign. How was he going to tell his boss about that one?

He fiddled with the knotted tripwire. It was looking more hopeless all the time. He was tempted to just toss it aside. Forget it ever existed. But, he reminded himself, superheroes don't give up. What if, against all odds, he did make it to the park, only to find that the situation called for a tripwire? How would he feel then? He'd feel like a failure, he knew, a feeling that was far too common in his life already. He renewed his concentration on the knot.

It was just this collision of events that led Ferdy Chicken to be standing there, holding a large loop of a tangled tripwire, just as the former sheriff's horse came trotting down the middle of the street.

Ferdy's reaction was immediate. "If only I had a rope," he said to himself, "I could catch that horse and chase after those monsters."

The next thought through his head was this: "Oh, I do have a rope. It's right here on my shoulder. If only I didn't have my

hands full. Maybe then I would have time to grab my rope, tie it into a lasso, and catch this horse.”

One might think that this retinue of self-defeating thoughts might continue for some time, but in truth things were moving too fast. The last thought through Ferdy’s forebrain was an incomplete one: “Dang, that horse is moving fast. I’d better do something or I’m gonna...”

Before he could finish the thought, before he could offer up yet another internal excuse for his myriad failures, Ferdy Chicken stepped from behind the van, twirling the loopy end of his tripwire around his head. He had no practice with a lasso, but with unconscious ease he tossed the loop into the air. He saw with slow-motion clarity the loop sailing ahead of the horse’s trajectory, then settling around its head, then tightening around the steed’s neck. What a throw! What a lovely throw! And on his first try! No rodeo star, Ferdy Chicken thought, could have accomplished the feat with as much grace.

When time sped up again, Ferdy Chicken was jerked off his feet. The tripwire, secure around the horse’s neck, was also secure around Ferdy’s left wrist. It tightened painfully as he was dragged down the dirt road.

Ferdy’s mind couldn’t process what had happened. He had never before been dragged down the road by a horse. He tried to

formulate the perfect response to such a situation. Feebly, his mind proffered a word: stop. But that wasn't exactly right, was it? He concentrated, as much as a man being dragged bodily by his wrist can concentrate, and thankfully the correct word emerged: whoa. Whoa, yes, that was it. He opened his mouth to yell out the word, but by the time he had his brain and his tongue coordinated, the horse, shaking its head and snorting, had come to a stop on its own.

Shakily, Ferdy Chicken got to his feet. He blinked his eyes a couple of times. He managed, with effort, to untangle his wrist from the tripwire. Then, he considered the horse.

One might think that the mare, already panicked by the scent of a troll, would be more panicked having been caught by a man in lumpy orange spandex. And indeed, she showed signs of distress. Her eyes were wild, her nostrils dilated with her heavy breathing. But if Ferdy Chicken had little experience with horses specifically, he knew animals. He was better with animals than he would ever be with people. "There there," he cooed. "Shhhhhhhhh. It'll be okay."

As he mumbled whispers of comfort to the horse, he led her backwards a few feet, then reached down to pick up his rope and grappling hook that lay in a dusty heap on the road. Still making calming noises, he led her toward a pickup that was parked in front

of a ranch house. With the makeshift reins in one hand and his other hand resting on the mare's back, he stepped up onto the pickup's rear bumper. Then, with a smooth motion, he pulled himself up and threw his leg over her side. The horse skittered away from the truck, but Ferdy Chicken was solid on his mount.

It was never easy riding a horse bareback. Ferdy Chicken, in fact, hadn't spent much time on a saddled horse. But, he knew, it was just the sort of thing that a superhero must be prepared to do.

"Giddy up," Ferdy commanded.

Evidently, the horse didn't know the word. Or, perhaps she had heard it too much in her long life to be willing to listen now. In any case, she stood stubbornly where she was in the middle of the street. But Ferdy had more than one trick up his sleeve. He kicked both heels into her flanks.

This worked better than he had expected. The horse, despite her advanced years and poor constitution, leapt forward. Before long, she was at a swift canter.

Though there had been an unexpected detour in the proceedings, Ferdy Chicken was once again on the trail of the trolls. And this time, he knew just where he would find them.

As he rode along, his cape fluttered behind him like a flag in a stiff breeze. Had folks been watching, which none were, they would have seen that yellow cape, emblazoned with a big red F,

flowing behind him. That cape announced to the world the glory that is possible when one adopts the philosophy and grace inherent in a barnyard fowl.

Schmooze-glutton saw all this from behind a tall fence. He hadn't been happy to see that his hunt had been joined by one of the land trolls. As he watched the land troll handily snare his prey, his instincts clashed within him. Part of him wanted to pound the land troll and re-engage the hunt, but another part of him admitted that he would rather not come face to face with a land troll, even as small and weak as they were, on this first foray upon the land. Maybe Brumvack had been right: maybe it would be better to watch them for a while, see what kind of clubs they had. These warring thoughts kept him behind the fence, watching instead of acting.

And then, he also had to admit that the land troll had some gumption. He couldn't believe his eyes when it actually got up on top of the beast.

This was a trick for which Schmooze-glutton had a good deal of admiration. He himself had never tried to get atop an animal, though he had seen it done. Slimegobbler was the one amongst the Rabid Band known for finding his way on top of the occasional beast.

It had happened by accident, as perhaps all great moments do. The Rabid Band, one afternoon back in the ice ages, had been facing down a big bull mastodon. It had surprised them as they were tracking a much smaller mastodon—one they were more likely to be able to bring down. As the bull stood in front of them in a threatening way, breathing great gusts of steam into the cold air, they stood in a pack. Each troll held his club firmly in hand. Each troll waved his big arms. Each troll yelled at the top of his big voice. This spectacle, they hoped, would intimidate the bull into backing away.

The mastodon, however, was not to be intimidated. Instead, it had blared a trumpet call through its sizeable nose, then charged. More than one troll thought he had just seen his last great hunt.

Such a fate was not to be, however. Slimegobbler, in front of the bunch, and with his club at the ready, ran forward and met the beast. The mastodon hit him, at speed, taking its best shot at trampling the troll under its big flat feet.

The mastodon hadn't yet mastered the art of trampling, however. For a mastodon, though, there are many ways of injuring those smaller and less fortunate. As it ran toward Slimegobbler, the big beast shook its head, meaning to gore the troll in front of him with its massive tusks.

Slimegobbler didn't get gored, but he did catch the brunt of the tusk's momentum. It hit the inside of his thigh, launching him into the air. With a grunt, he lost his club in midair, then landed belly first on the mastodon's back. As he hit, the air whoofed out of his lungs. The trolls saw his breath leave his body in an icy cloud.

Slimegobbler was stunned. He couldn't tell what had happened. Raggedly, he gasped for breath, but his chest was tight, and no air entered. Dazedly, he looked around him. The world turned in dizzying directions.

The mastodon, for its part, was looking wildly about, in search of the creature that had so recently been standing in front of it. It bucked and jived and turned in mad circles. Slimegobbler held onto the pelt of the mastodon as it rocketed left and then right. He grabbed handfuls of the mastodon's long reddish coat and twisted it around his fists. Slowly, he was coming to sense his position and his peril.

The rest of the trolls watched, slack-jawed, as Slimegobbler played out his final minutes. Slimegobbler, they knew from their extensive experience with bull mastodons, was a goner. He wouldn't be the first troll to fall victim to these mighty beasts.

Slimegobbler, though, didn't share their despair. He was breathing again, the air cold in his lungs. He was able once again

to look around him and make sense of the world, even if it was from a perspective quite a bit loftier than what he was used to. One thing he saw was his friends quite a ways down below, standing in a huddle and looking worriedly at him. His first impulse was to yell out a feeble “HELP”, but as he noted that all eyes were upon him, he reconsidered.

It was a rare event that a troll was able to maintain an audience. To Slimegobbler, it was clear that this was his moment. He had always been a performer at heart, and now was his chance to shine. He squelched the panic within him. Instead of a plaintive cry, he said, “Hey guys, watch this!” Then, as he held on to fistfuls of the mastodon’s long reddish hair, he raised himself up to a sitting position on the back of the mighty beast.

The mastodon, still raging, finally noticed that its foe was atop it. It shook its shaggy head, and once again bucked a time or two, trying to dislodge its rider. When that didn’t work, it trumpeted and ran full bore toward the east. Before it got too far, it pivoted on two legs and ran to the west. As it thundered past the trolls, they felt little icy pellets that sprayed up from its feet as it ran.

Even against the force of this display, though, Slimegobbler was able maintain his seat. He even kicked at the beast a little,

pretending that he was the one controlling its berserker movements.

And then, Slimegobbler had another idea. Once he had weathered yet another 180 degree turn—the turns were the worst—he raised himself up and, still squatting, got his feet underneath him. Then, as the beast made its mad dash in front of the trolls, he let go of its hairy pelt and stood atop the mastodon, riding it like a surfer. He waved his arms wildly enough that he managed to keep his balance for a short time. When the beast made its next crazy turn, Slimegobbler skidded off its back and landed on his feet.

The trolls were flabbergasted. They were amazed. They were stupefied. Together, they erupted into a roar of approval for their cave mate.

Slimegobbler made a small bow, then went to pick up his club from the snow-blown ground. All the while, the trolls yelled their approval and shook their fists in the air. But Slimegobbler didn't have long to enjoy their admiration before the mastodon made another of its bugle calls, bringing the trolls back to reality.

If the mastodon had been mad before, it was furious now. It was almost as if it sensed the trolls had gained some victory. Once again, it stood in front of the bunch, stomping the ground and shaking its massive head. It snorted its anger.

If the mastodon wanted a fight, though, this day it would be disappointed. The trolls, giving up on their prey for the day, backed off, and made their way back to their cave. They felt changed, somehow, by Slimegobbler's feat. They felt as if they had gained one more notch of control over the wild world.

Through the years, more than one troll had attempted to ride a mastodon. More than one, too, had found himself pummeled into the ground. Several had gotten onto the back of one of the beasts, but none had accomplished it with the panache that Slimegobbler had showed. Mastodon riding, as exciting and dangerous as it was, eventually became not an activity but a memory, and most only remembered that first mastodon ride. Slimegobbler's ride. For his efforts, Slimegobbler was afforded a special position within the troupe of trolls: he was called Beastmaster.

And here in front of him, on a much later day in a much different world, Schmooze-glutton had seen another beastmaster. One of the land trolls had repeated Slimegobbler's feat. The fact built within him a sense of respect for these land trolls. As small and wimpy as they were, still they weren't afraid to get on the back of a wild animal.

And, he noted, that animal was now once again trotting away from him. Almost running away from him. With a sense of panic,

Schmoozeglutton emerged from behind the fence and ran after it. He was determined to make this kill his own, land troll or not.

But the beast was moving awfully fast, and Schmoozeglutton was losing faith that he alone could catch it. With just a bit of disappointment, he called in the assistance of the others. He took a deep breath, pointed his head to the sky, and let out with a long, long foodwhoop.

It was a sound that this world had never heard.

Chapter 27. Brumvack Learns a Thing or Two

Brumvack sat, alone, in the middle of the dimly lit cave. He was exhausted and defeated. He had been through the troll caves half a dozen times since his unexpected altercation with Schmatzenbladder. His repeated searches, however, had yielded nothing in the way of a large, round rock suitable for blocking the door. And, incidentally, had yielded no food. He was getting very hungry. The trolls, typically, had eaten every last scrap, leaving him nothing.

This thought of Brumvack's, of course, was not true. In fact, Brumvack was the one who had eaten the last of the troll's food, when the rest of the trolls had drifted off into the Big Sleep. But Brumvack refused to acknowledge that memory. What good was it to be a leader, if you couldn't create your own reality? Besides, that had happened centuries ago!

He was hungry, though. Even if he found the perfect rock at this point, he wasn't sure he would be up to maneuvering it into place. His muscles shook with hunger. He had nearly used up the last of his energy placing the cutting board rock at the bottom of Dark Water. And it of course had been quite a bit smaller than the rock needed to do the job right.

Still, he hoped, however faintly, for a rock that was spherical enough that it would roll itself into place. The right rock, pushed to the water's edge, would follow gravity's downward pull and end up right where it needed to be. He could see it in his mind's eye.

The hope of finding that rock, however, was coming to seem more and more futile. His repeated wanderings through the cave had had been fruitless. There were no rocks of sufficient size anywhere in the cave. They were all too big, or too small. None was just right. And none, it seemed, were all that round, either.

He sat upon his throne, and pondered the problem.

He sat upon *Schmoozeglutton's* throne, he amended to himself with a scowl. It was his throne no longer. Schmoozeglutton had won it, by rights of the challenge. According to troll tradition, Brumvack had no right to be sitting on the throne at all. If Schmoozeglutton were to return and see him sitting on the rock he had belched his way toward winning, he would pound him a good one. Brumvack knew it was true,

because it was what he himself would have done in the same situation.

Not that it mattered. If Schmoozeglutton returned, the rest of the Rabid Band would follow. All, by now, would have heard Schmatzenbladder's tale. They would know his treachery, and they would tear him to bits.

Brumvack's forehead creased as he worked the angles of the problem. How could he block the entrance to the troll caves? No matter how he posed the question, there seemed no way to solve it. The right rock would do it, but the right rock wasn't available. What else could he use?

But as long as he sat and thought about it, Brumvack couldn't come to an answer. Nothing, he knew, was big enough, or round enough, or solid enough—rocklike enough—to work.

He began to feel hopeless. There was no way he was going to be able to block the door.

An unblocked door, though, left him open to the barrage of a dozen angry trolls.

And, now that Brumvack was facing facts, he had to admit that most of the trolls wouldn't be mad just because he had tried to lock them out. Most of them had hundreds of years of resentment built up against him. He might as well face it: he was toast. He could hide in the lower reaches of the cave, but they'd find him

eventually, starving and pathetic. It was a tragic tale, he knew, and he was the tragic hero in the middle of it.

He might as well, he thought, sit here on Schmooze-glutton's rock of a throne. It would be his final act of defiance. Yes, that was it: defiance. This would be his final message to the trolls: I am your true leader. Even if you rip me apart and feed me to the fish, I'm going to sit here on Schmooze-glutton's throne until the end.

It was a fine throne, too. The biggest and best of the sitting rocks that peppered the floor of the common cave. Over the centuries, it had been smoothed to fit Brumvack's shape perfectly. When he balanced himself (a bit precariously, he admitted) atop its spherical form, he sat higher than any of the other trolls. They sat on their much smaller rocks, clearly trolls of lesser status. But his rock, through the centuries, had given him an air of authority, of regality, of easy superiority.

He caressed the throne with his open palm. It was a motion of gratitude. Yes, this had been a fine rock from which to wield power, large and round as it was. He patted it a couple of times.

Then, with his open hand still held above the rock, Brumvack stopped. Something—some small fact—had caught in his mind. A small and seemingly meaningless fact. It niggled at his brain, much like a piece of mastodon sinew caught between

one's teeth. It wasn't pleasant, but it couldn't be ignored. Hmm.... Something he had just been thinking.... Rock. Large. Round. Oh! That was it! Round! Round rock! Large round rock! He stared at the throne underneath him, as if really seeing it for the first time in years. The perfect rock for barring the door *was* in the troll caves, and he was sitting on it!

What an idiot he had been! He had been searching for a large, round rock, and all he had seen, during his several passes through the cave, was a throne! One can't plug up an underwater cavern with a kingly throne. But certainly one could plug it up with a large, round rock. The answer was there the whole time! Right in front of his eyes! Well, right under his butt.

He slid off the throne, suddenly energized by his discovery. If only, he thought, he had the time to move this rock down to the beach. If only. Would the trolls remain above-ground long enough for him to complete his operation? Or, having heard from Schmatzenbladder, were they even now returning to the lake?

But Brumvack's leaderly ability took over. It silenced the questions. He couldn't focus on the return of the trolls. He had no control over them. He would have to focus on the task at hand. Time would have to take care of itself. He put his shoulder to the rock of a throne, and began pushing.

Compared to the cutting board rock, the throne was huge, as heavy a thing as Brumvack had ever tried to move. But its most important characteristic—roundness—served Brumvack well. Though it was heavy, it wasn't as ungainly as a rock with one flat side would inevitably be. It rolled slowly but steadily under the pressure from his taut muscles.

“Interesting,” thought Brumvack. He had never moved the rock before. When one had a cave full of trolls to order about at one's whim, after all, why should he have moved it? But, even alone, he was doing well. The rock was almost preternaturally round. Perfect, he knew, for the task at hand. He imagined it rolling, as if it had a life of its own, down the rocky beach of Dark Water, down into the water itself, down down down into the entrance of the troll cave. It wouldn't stop, he knew, until it had plugged up that entrance as tight as tight could be. There wasn't a troll in creation that would be able to budge it, once it was seated in place. He knew this not just with his imagination, but with a calm inner sense. It would happen that way because it was *right* that it should happen that way. It would happen that way because fate had woven it into the fabric of history. The trolls would return, all right, and they'd find themselves locked out. Schmoozeglutton, the new leader of the Rabid Band, would be the first to try to move the rock. He would be the first to note that the

rock would not budge. He would be the first to realize that his challenge had been in vain. And, just before Schmooze-glutton ran out of air, he would recognize the rock. He would know, just before the last minutes of his pitiful life, that Brumvack had bested him, that the cavern was blocked by his own newly-won throne.

The thought gave Brumvack all the energy he needed to keep the rock in motion.

Soon enough, the rock was in position at the edge of Dark Water. Brumvack held it in place with both arms, and with his heels dug into the beach. He was going to let it go soon, but he wanted the moment to have some gravity to it. He would let it roll after a moment of thoughtful silence.

It had been a bit of a chore getting the rock down to the beach, Brumvack mused. It had required some smarts, which Brumvack had in abundance, and a no small amount of strength, which Brumvack found within himself despite his growing hunger. It had also required the removal of three stalagmites, which had been possible due to Brumvack's advanced knowledge of physics: if you smash a heavy rock into something enough times, it will break.

Brumvack admired the rock for another moment before letting it go, before watching it roll into the waves, accumulating

speed, and corking up the opening below. It was a beautiful rock. A large, beautiful rock. A large, round, beautiful throne of a rock. He smiled to himself. He congratulated himself on having the presence of mind, the physical strength, the sheer brainpower necessary to coming to this point in his life. He was going to serve his comeuppance to the trolls. Then, he was going to go out and get something to eat. Then, he was going to enjoy the rest of his days, alone, with no boorish cave mates for company.

Brumvack let go of the rock.

Just as he had predicted, it began rolling. It was slow at first, but steady. As Brumvack watched, it parted the small waves of Dark Water, and began its descent. Just as he had predicted, it gained speed quickly. It was so satisfying when one's thought experiment proved to be so accurate. The downward-rolling rock was a beautiful sight.

Soon, it was submerged entirely, though a roil on the surface of Dark Water illustrated its continued forward motion. Brumvack let out an exhalation of pleasure. It was a job well done. In a few moments, he would hear some sound, some geological rumble of completion, as the rock rolled neatly into place. He would wait until he heard that sound, he thought, just to be sure. Or perhaps, he thought, he would trust that the universe was working just as it was supposed to, and go out to get a bite to eat. Maybe catch a few

of the small silvery fish. Maybe even venture out upon the land, and see what was available there.

But then Brumvack experienced another of those niggling thoughts. Food. Something about food. His stomach gurgled at the thought of it. Yes, food would be good. Just as soon as the rock had firmly closed off the entrance to the cave, he'd leave the cave and get some food.

Wait, though. Wait. If the cave was closed up...if the doorway was plugged.... Comprehension dawned on Brumvack's unbelieving face. Once the rock had reached its destination, it would be between him and any hope for his dinner. He let out a roar and yelled "Stop! Stop that rock!" as if the rock might choose to stop of its own accord, or as if there might be trolls about eager to do his bidding.

It was his final order, and one that fell not just on deaf ears, but no ears at all.

Brumvack splashed into the lagoon of Dark Water. He had to stop the rock before it reached its destination. He had to get something to eat. He needed some food. A bit of sustenance. Was that too much to ask? Just a little dinner?

As he reached deeper water and began to splash around in a panicked effort at swimming, a thought came to him: "You're not as smart as you thought you were, are you?"

He took a gulp of air, and descended into the depths of Dark Water. He tried to push the thought away, tried to ignore it, tried to turn it into something he could live with. But he failed at every attempt. Not so smart. Not so smart.

With a tympanic, underwater vibration, Brumvack heard the sound of the rock hitting home, blocking the doorway to the troll caves forever.

He didn't have time to process that fully, though, before the he saw an undefined dark shape swimming quickly toward him. Were the trolls back? But no, this was too large to be a troll. Whatever it was, it swam with grace and menace. It swam with its mouth agape, showing its dark crystalline teeth. "Oh my gosh, it does exist," Brumvack thought. Suddenly, every bit of strength left his arms and legs. He could no longer swim. He couldn't even flail. He floated under the water in shocked disbelief. "So," he thought, "the Dark Water Horror." Scenes played through his mind, scenes of the trolls being afraid of this Horror, and he, Brumvack, cynically fanning those fears.

Brumvack was running out of air. Also, he was running out of time. Also, he was running out of strategies to push a final thought out of his mind: "Maybe I'm not so smart as I thought I was."

And with that realization making its way across Brumvack's forebrain—not so smart, not so smart, not so smart—the jaws of the Dark Water Horror closed upon him.

Chapter 28. The Trolls Reunite

The night held a cool breeze. It wasn't cold, but the coolness held within it a taste of the cold that would come with winter. A scythe of a moon hung overhead. It was shortly after midnight, and the town had mostly shut itself down. The streets were quiet. The trolls stalked the maze of town, heading toward the locus of Schmooze-glutton's foodwhoop. For trolls, 95 percent of the day was for goofing off. The other 5 percent was reserved for work. When it was time to work, there was no funny business. A foodwhoop, an indication that dinner was in the offing, was a signal to get to work. Though trolls appeared to be quite cumbersome beasts, they were able to move through the streets of town with a silent intensity.

Schnottweiper and Schnottblower and Droolmeister were the first to respond, being the closest. When they heard the

foodwhoop, they stopped in their tracks, realizing that whoever had made the foodwhoop was behind them, and heading their direction. The three trolls stood, Schnottweiper with a newly harvested stop sign resting on his shoulder. These odd trees made darned fine clubs, in his estimation, and he had uprooted the next one he had found. He'd love to have his old club back, but this was a good substitute.

Ferdy Chicken, as he rode along on the horse, had caught occasional glimpses of his quarry in front of him. They remained in the road, and every now and again would enter and then leave one of the cones of light cast by the streetlights. As the eerie call of the foodwhoop sounded behind him, Ferdy saw the trio of trolls slow, then stop. Two blocks ahead. They were only two blocks ahead. He spurred the horse's flanks with his hiking boots, urging her ever forward.

When the trolls were only half a block away, Ferdy called "Whoa" to the horse and pulled on the makeshift reins. This was his moment. He didn't know exactly how he was going to face down these creatures, but face them down he was. He'd had enough of floundering around, unsure of what to do, his quarry always outside of his grasp. Finally, he knew just where they were, and he was going to make them pay. He was going to make

his stand, right here and right now. He was going to prove his superhero mettle.

By this point, of course, the three trolls had heard the cloppity-cloppity-clop of the horse's hooves as it thundered down the middle of the avenue. They turned and looked, and immediately sensed that this was the reason for the foodwhoop. The horse with its rider made for a fearsome shadow running through the night. But where Schmooze-glutton had seen the land troll mount the horse, the rest of the trolls didn't have the benefit of his experience. They thought that the horse and rider were a single entity: a four-legged, two-armed, two-headed beast. As it approached, ever more strange details made themselves known: The creature had hair on its lower body and strange multi-colored plumage on its upper body. It seemed to be half mammal and half bird. Half mammal, half bird, all strange.

But this strangeness was no news to them: they had seen no end of strange things since they had awoken to this new world.

Ferdy commanded the horse to slow again, in a slightly louder voice. "Whoa," he said, and yanked threateningly on the knotted tripwire. But the horse was in full panic mode by now, and wasn't going to stop. Before Ferdy knew it, he had ridden right through the middle of the small knot of trolls in the street.

The trolls were as shocked as Ferdy. As the horse pounded its way between the Schnott brothers and Droolmeister, the trolls gave a collective gasp. The creature's head—its tallest head—loomed above even their massive forms. Surely it would be a test of their trollish hunting tactics. Schmooze-glutton had obviously spent a fair amount of time identifying the largest and fiercest of the land's fauna. This creature, whatever it was, would make for a fine dinner, a welcome break to their centuries-long fast that had previously been broken in a less than satisfactory way with the hot dogs. When the trolls recovered from the shock of the creature running right past them, they began following it, first at a jog and then at an all-out run. Soon, Schmooze-glutton came running up behind them, taking his position in the rear as befit the leader of the Rabid Band.

The other trolls began to arrive as well. The foodwhoop had pulled them from all directions. They arrived by ones and twos and threes, seamlessly joining the growing formation of hunters. As more trolls came, the group fanned out. Schmooze-glutton kept his position in the rear; from this anchor, the others spread to the left and to the right. They surrounded the beast in three directions. It ran, and they ran behind it and beside it. There was no way that it was going to escape. Soon, the trolls knew, they would close in on their prey, and the beast would be theirs. Dinner on the hoof.

With a snort of fear, the horse ran ever faster.

Chapter 29. Ferdy Chicken Utilizes his Tools

Ferdy Chicken, of course, was happy to have finally engaged in the chase. Unfortunately, though, at the moment he seemed to be the one being chased. What had started out as a good way to follow the trolls—to jump on a horse and ride it toward his destiny—was now working against him. Unlike the Ferdymobile, or even the pizza delivery van, the horse seemed to have a mind of her own. Once he had gotten atop of her, she did what she wanted to, and what she seemed to want was run from the monsters. That was exactly the opposite of what Ferdy had wanted, which was for the *monsters* to run from *him*.

What he needed to do now was to stop the horse. She, however, had other ideas. She was in fact running all the faster as the number of monsters increased. All Ferdy's yelling of "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" was going in one ear and out the other. All the

tugging and then yanking on the tripwire around her neck was for naught. Further, as the horse ran ever faster, Ferdy's seat became all the more uncertain. The movement of the horse underneath him bobbed and jounced him every which direction, threatening to dismount him. Now, he held the tripwire only with his right hand, while he gripped her mane with his left. It was all he could do to keep his seat.

But while it wouldn't do to be thrown from the horse at top speed, it wouldn't do to remain atop her either, if all he was accomplishing was leaving his prey behind. He looked behind him and could only barely make out the bodies of trolls on the chase. He was outrunning them! His quarry! His one chance to prove himself!

Ferdy Chicken considered jumping from the horse in order to face down these creatures, but he sensed he was moving too fast. Almost surely, he wouldn't be able to land on his feet at this speed. And, though the trolls did seem to be falling behind, they weren't *that* far behind. He didn't want to be lying on the ground with a busted leg when they caught up with him.

No, there had to be a way to slow this horse. Evidently, it didn't know the "Whoa!" command. Nor did it respond to him pulling at the reins. Well, that wasn't too surprising. Ferdy didn't know a lot about riding, but he knew enough to remember that a

horse's bit went into its mouth, not just around its neck. Was there some way of getting the tripwire into the horse's mouth?

Ferdy Chicken, holding on for dear life, once again appraised his situation. His position atop this horse, he knew, was tenuous. He didn't think he could reach the horse's mouth from the saddle position even at the best of times, and this was far from the best of times. He'd have to find another way of slowing the horse. The traditional method—pulling on the reins—wasn't working.

What else could he use to stop this rampaging steed? One thing he could do, he guessed, was to try to use his cape as a makeshift parachute. Perhaps he could generate enough wind resistance to slow down the horse's rampage enough that he could safely jump off. As a child, he had sometimes held his coat above his shoulders, arms in sleeves and hands in pockets, to let the wind buffet him. Could he do that with his cape?

Maybe. But it would have to be a two-handed operation. Ferdy Chicken wasn't about to let go of the horse's mane. It was the only thing keeping him steady. Well, somewhat steady. Well, a little bit steady, in a jouncy trouncy bouncy sort of unbalanced way.

Ferdy Chicken mentally went through the list of the options available to him. He had his superhero equipment. Surely it

would be sufficient to win out in any situation. His tripwire was already being used. What else did he have at hand?

In a satisfying flash, the answer came to him. It came in the form of an image, an image of a boat's anchor. That imagined anchor, he knew, held a startling similarity to the grappling hook attached to his rope. Grappling hooks, he knew, were used for throwing upwards in order to scale buildings. But a grappling hook, he now considered, could be used much like an anchor.

How ingenious! he thought. How creative! Here he thought he had been carrying around a grappling hook, when all this time he had also been carrying around an anchor! A land anchor, he amended to himself, which would surely stop a form of land transportation just as a water anchor would stop a form of water transportation! It was a brilliant solution. He would throw the anchor overboard, stop the horse, and then dismount to face down those beasts of the lake. A crackerjack solution. A solution worthy of the worthiest of superheroes. A worthy solution worth millions. A worthwhile solution worthy of the worthiness of the worthiest of the worthwhile. "Worthful?" Ferdy Chicken whispered to himself. He crinkled his forehead and said it again, out loud this time: "Worthful?" It didn't sound quite right. But he was sure he had the right idea. "Never mind," he told himself. "Just never

mind. I am worthful, even if it isn't a word! I am worthful! I am!"

With those words, our worthful superhero switched his grip on the horse's mane to his right hand, freeing his left. He shook loose the loop of rope from his shoulder. He readied the rope, holding its coil in his left hand. He prepared for the moment when he would toss it to the grass below.

Just as he was about to let it go, however, Ferdy Chicken stopped himself. Just in time, too. He had nearly tossed the anchor overboard! If you tossed an anchor off the side of the boat, it would simply sink, and the boat would continue on. No, one had to *tie the rope to the boat*. Only then would a dropped anchor stop the boat's forward motion.

"Boy, that was a close one," thought Ferdy. "I'm glad I had my wits about me."

Just at that moment, Ferdy Chicken saw a softball flying past his left ear. He knew what a softball looked like, Lord knew, because he was a member of the Petey's Perfect Pizza Pies corporate softball team. Not that he ever left the bench. The ball flew on ahead of him, then bounced on the pavement and rolled down the street.

A softball?

Suddenly, something pounded him on his right shoulder blade. It stung. The muscles of his back formed a little knot where it had hit. Another softball? It sure felt like it could have been.

Then, Ferdy heard the smack of yet another softball hitting the hindquarters of his mount. The horse surged forward, neighing a sound of fear into the night. Though Ferdy wouldn't have thought it possible, the horse ran even faster.

“Nasty buggers!” Ferdy whispered. “Throwing softballs! Pffuh!” But he didn't have time right at the moment to think about the monsters and their choice of ammunition. He had to get on with his plan to stop the horse.

He had just come to the hard part of the operation. He'd have to tie the rope to himself, which would no doubt require two hands. Moreover, he'd have to do it while maintaining his balance on this wild-eyed horse. Instinctively, he lowered his upper body against the horse's back and neck. He wanted, he sensed with his gut if not his mind, to have the lowest possible center of gravity. He tensed his legs in a viselike grip around the horse's barrel chest. Then, slowly, he loosened his grip on the horse's mane. With concentration and care, he held the rope behind his back with his left hand, and grabbed its free end with his right. Through all this, the horse galloped on.

As he rode, Ferdy Chicken pulled the rope around himself, then laid the grappling hook and the coil of rope between his legs and underneath his stomach. That left two hands free to tie a good solid knot. Or at least a granny knot. He did so as quickly as he could, then, with relief, once again grabbed two handfuls of the horse's mane. He breathed deeply. The trickiest part of the operation was done, and he still remained atop the horse. In his crouched position, the long flowing hairs of the mare's mane whipped his face. This horse, he noted, was moving awfully fast. Faster, surely, than the design limits of the average nag.

But he didn't have long to ponder this notion before the horse gave a magnificent leap. Ferdy Chicken hung in midair. The horse hung in midair slightly below him. The distance between Ferdy's rear end and the horse's back increased. Ferdy grasped the coarse hair in his hand ever more tightly, and held on.

Time seemed to stop.

Then, in a rush, time started up again with a vengeance. The horse's front legs hit the ground. As they did, Ferdy left his midair position and slammed, hard, onto the back of the mare. He didn't alight there, however; instead, he hit her and then bounced. Immediately, he was in the air again, feeling a total loss of control. Just as the horse's back feet once again made contact with the ground, he slammed downward again, though this time he landed

slightly off-center. The horse, oblivious to the troubles of its rider, was once again running madly into the night. Every step of its gait bounced Ferdy further from center, further from a comfortable sense of balance. Though he maintained a grip on the horse's mane, he was nearly bounced off her back. His left leg was underneath steed's belly; the muscles in his arms burned as he held on. He could almost hear, or at least he imagined he could almost hear, the sigh of each passing blade of grass as it called to him.

The only thing that stood between Ferdy and the ground was his grip on a few hundred neck hairs. He maintained that grip, then grabbed again at his tripwire. Between the two, he managed with a final titanic effort to pull himself back up onto the horse.

Ferdy Chicken wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but things were moving too fast for that. For one thing, he was about to lose the rope that had been stowed underneath him. Fortunately, the grappling hook had snagged a spare loop of tripwire, and was within Ferdy's reach. But the rope itself was dangling down the horse's left side and along his own left leg. Its end dragged along the ground, with who knew what consequences. If the horse tripped, as fast as it was running, Ferdy wasn't sure what might happen. He sensed that it wouldn't be pretty, though. Loosing his grip on the tripwire reins, he grabbed the rope with his left hand and coiled it as best he could.

What an operation! One simple leap of the horse had nearly undone the whole business. Why had she jumped in the first place? Ferdy Chicken glanced behind him, but all he could see was the grass he had heard calling to him. Beyond that, a small row of bushes stood darkly in the night.

Ferdy puzzled over the bushes for a moment, then realized where he was: he had reached the park. The horse had leapt over the curb and the bushes that encircled the park's east boundary. Mosquehenna Park. Moon Park. Ferdy Chicken's final destination. The grass rushed along underneath them as the horse ran ever forward. Ferdy imagined that the blades of grass were still calling to him. Rest, they said. Wouldn't you like to rest? Wouldn't you like to leave the back of this mad beast and simply rest?

But no. This was no time to give in to the call of the grass. This was Ferdy Chicken's time. It was Ferdy Chicken's place. The time and place in which his final confrontation with the beasts of the lake would play itself out. And, Ferdy was proud to say, he was prepared. It was the superhero motto, wasn't it? Be prepared? No, wait, that was the Boy Scout motto. But Ferdy was prepared in any case. The grappling hook/anchor was ready. He gripped the coil of rope in his left hand. More importantly, the rope was now tied to something. It was now a fully functional anchor. All

he would have to do would be to toss it behind him, and his task would be complete. The horse would stop, the beasts of the lake would catch up with him, and the showdown would begin. His calling as a superhero would be complete as he protected the town from these Monsters of Lake Maebiewahnappooie. They were his Joker. His Green Goblin. His Lex Luthor.

And now, the time was upon him. With a bit of a cowboy swagger, he swung the grappling hook around his head. He swung it once, then twice, then three times. On the third swing, he let it fly. The grappling hook reached for the sky, trailing the rope behind it. It arced upwards, then downwards, then bit into the ground like the anchor it was.

As the reader might have already predicted, the grappling hook did not stop the horse. The horse, still running for its life, continued on unabated. The grappling hook certainly had a slowing effect on Ferdy Chicken, however. As soon as its claw hit the dirt, the rope connecting it and Ferdy Chicken became immediately taut. So fast that he didn't even have time to process the pain of it, the rope tightened around his middle and snatched him from his seat. He was in the air for a moment, straining at the end of the rope, but the laws of gravity and inertia soon took over. Without pity, they slammed him bodily to the ground.

When he hit, Ferdy Chicken suffered a concussion that would leave him a bit dazed for the next day or two. Right at that moment, however, Ferdy was unable to ponder dazedness, because for the next four hours, he would remain unconscious. His body lay in the grass, totally inert except for a small trail of blood leaking out of his nose and down his cheek.

It would be daybreak before he would once again look upon Lone Tree, and by then, Lone Tree would be a different place.

Chapter 30. The Trolls Catch Up

The trolls arrived at the park to find their prey already dead.

Oddly, the creature had broken into two pieces before it expired. The trolls found the colorful bird-like portion first, and the four-legged beast afterwards. This, they thought very odd. They mumbled amongst themselves about it until Slimegobbler voiced the question out loud: “What could have sliced the creature in two like this?”

Schmooze-glutton didn't understand the trolls' confusion at first. “Sliced?” He looked from the rider to the horse. He saw nothing that had been sliced.

“Yeah,” said Slimegobbler. “The top part of the creature from the bottom part of the creature. This orange and yellow part from that brown part.”

“Ah,” said Schmooze-glutton, finally understanding. He explained to the others that what they had been hunting was not a single creature but two creatures. He relayed the story of chasing the horse, only to have his hunt intercepted by this land troll, who had gotten atop it and ridden it away. Comprehension dawned in the eyes of the trolls. They weren’t looking down upon the bird half of a crazily evolved two-armed four-legged two-headed creature, they were looking simply at a land troll and some anemic descendant of a mammoth.

Now that their vision had adjusted, they could see that the birdlike creature was in fact a land troll. Its coloration was still a shock, but it was indeed a land troll with the usual configuration: two arms, two legs, a single head. It was dead, though, by some mechanism they didn’t understand. Surely one of Obeast’s fake rocks wouldn’t have killed this creature? But maybe it had. Land trolls didn’t have a very strong constitution, that much was obvious. The four legged beast, which lay a hundred yards or so beyond the land troll, was equally dead, and equally more familiar in its form. It, too, however, was no mastodon. The shape wasn’t right. The proportions were off. All in all, evolution seemed to have taken some nasty turns during the trolls’ Big Sleep.

And how did this creature die? Also by a well-thrown fake rock? The trolls were puzzled. And also a little disturbed.

What the reader knows that the trolls didn't was that the former sheriff's horse was old and decrepit; she wasn't in any shape to be running full tilt from anything, much less these bad smelling monsters who wanted to eat her. The mare's poor old heart had given out shortly after Ferdy made his crash landing. She had had a good life, the former sheriff's mare, though unfortunately the former sheriff could no longer remember her name. (Unfortunately, the author has been similarly unable to turn up the name of the mare. He might have invented one, but truth-telling is an important value. Had he simply made up a name, the reader would be correct in looking skeptically upon other facts presented in the story). The former sheriff's mare had marched in parades, led posses into the woods, and had once been decorated as First Horse when Lone Tree had needed an equine hero. The sheriff, back when his faculties had been more acute, had once said that the town hadn't voted for him as sheriff; they just liked his horse. He may have been right about that. In any case, that First Horse was now dead on the lawn of Moon Park, a victim of age and changing times and a ticker that couldn't take one more shock.

For the trolls, of course, this state of events was somewhat anticlimactic. They had yearned for a hunt, and had even engaged in the lion's share of a hunt. But a hunt without a kill is no hunt at

all. The trolls stood staring at the two creatures, both looking small in their inanimate state, and shrugged.

A pathetic land troll, and a rather puny descendent of the once-mighty mastodon. It was a poor showing. Their imaginations had been caught by the four-legged, two-armed, two-headed beast, but now that magic had been revealed as a trick, and they were disappointed.

And, they were further disappointed to find, they didn't feel hungry any more. They certainly weren't going to eat a land troll, and the mastodon-beast wasn't truly all that appetizing, either. There just wasn't much meat on its bones. Then there was the fact that their tummies were still tender from the hot dogs. Come to think of it, they were still feeling woozy from that experience. Dizzy, even.

For the trolls, most everything in this world had been a disappointment. This unexpected end to their hunt was another disappointment on that long list.

But where the dead before them had lost their shine, the park did sport another object that drew their eyes: the single tree that stood grandly in its center.

Once upon a time, the trolls knew, this land had been a lush jungle. This one tree, standing against the night's horizon, looked

to be the brave beginnings of yet another jungle. The sight awed them. To a troll, the Rabid Band was drawn to it.

One thing the trolls had missed during their excursions upon the land, of course, was good solid clubs. Clubs, the jungle had offered in abundance. Oh, they could see that Bilgewater and Biledumper had some small versions of clubs. They could see Schnottweiper's stop sign club. But none of them had good old traditional clubs—clubs with some heft to them. The first order of business, then, was to harvest a set of clubs from the tree.

The trolls went to work with a passion. Schmooze-glutton, as the leader, climbed into the tree's crotch and began breaking off limbs. These, individual trolls took away to work on. They removed the leaves and stripped the smaller branches. They broke what remained into a club of just the right length. Then, with care, each took his new club and began scraping it against a rock. The goal was to remove the bark, and to smooth the wood a bit. Create a good handgrip.

Within a couple of hours, each troll had a weapon in hand. A rough weapon, but a weapon nonetheless. Once they had seen some use, the clubs would mold themselves to the trolls' fists. They would become smoother and harder. A club, as any troll knew, only improved with use.

After this operation, there was little left of the tree. What remained was a single trunk that stood perhaps seven feet high, surrounded by the detritus of limbs and sticks and leaves. The trolls felt a little remiss at having razed the only extant jungle, but they figured that where there was one tree, there would soon be others.

When the trolls were once again armed, they sat down in a rough circle to tell the stories of their adventures. After all, they were well away from any big turtle houses, and it seemed as if the giant metallic insects, those few that were still alive, had quieted and gone to sleep. There wasn't a land troll in sight, other than the dead one they had earlier been chasing. It seemed safe enough to sit and share their tales. They'd enjoy the cool of the night. When daybreak neared, they'd make their way toward home.

A few had items for show and tell. A few had makeshift clubs they had picked up along the way. Bilgewater allowed Biledumper to hit his head with his metal bat, so that the other trolls could appreciate the resounding "*kong*" sound that it made. Obeast passed around a couple of his remaining fake rocks, so that everyone could have a closer look. Bilgewater showed off his item of manly apparel. The trolls understood clubs, and they even understood fake rocks—though that was a stretch—but they were

skeptical about Bilgewater's tie. What was it good for? Nothing. That was what it was good for. But Bilgewater stubbornly kept the tie hanging limply down his chest.

All the trolls had tales to tell. Adventures to relate. Knowledge to share.

A few of the trolls examined Gasbag closely when it was his turn, suspicious that he was acting a bit tipsy. But this they put out of their mind. Surely, these land trolls weren't smart enough and cultured enough to make their own beer. Perhaps Gasbag, being so young, was just dazed by his experiences in this new world. Gasbag, for his part, told them about his adventures with the land trolls, though few believed him. Surely even land trolls had enough self-respect that they would have tossed Gasbag out of their above-ground cave, if not beaten him senseless with their konging clubs.

Gasbag kept to himself the fact that these land trolls did indeed have their own version of beer. And the music. He kept the music to himself, too. The music was too close to his heart to want to share it with the group. All those sad songs would replay themselves over in his mind for the rest of his life, he knew. None of these other trolls would understand, though, and he wouldn't try to make them understand. The old sad songs with their twang of desire and hunger constituted a language that spoke only to him.

Gasbag wasn't about to share that intimacy with those who wouldn't understand or appreciate it.

In all, it was a heartfelt reunion. The trolls were happy to see each other, happy to once again be part of a band. They reveled in stories and laughter. They remembered their experiences with big blue bugs and fake land trolls and row after row of dumpsters.

Schmatzenbladder saved his tale for last. It was a tale of horror, involving boomerang poodles, and a story of treachery, involving traitorous leaders. The trolls weren't so sure they believed his story of the poodles—it seemed too strange, too far out, even for this world. But they all believed with a dark hard certainty in their hearts his tale about Brumvack attempting to block the single entrance to their cave.

And so it was that after a brief respite for tale-telling and knowledge sharing, the trolls once again roused to life. Schmooze-glutton, livid that Brumvack had proven himself to be such a coward, stood and exhorted them to rise to the occasion of a final battle, The Rabid Band vs. Brumvack.

The trolls stood as he spoke.

“We owe it to ourselves as self-respecting trolls to draw the line here,” Schmooze-glutton said, pointing to the ground at his feet. When the trolls looked to his feet questioningly, he waved his

hands in negation. “Not *here* here. Not here by this tree. Here at this moment in history, when our former leader has shown his true colors.”

With that, the trolls raised their new clubs on high, yelled a war cry into the breaking of the day, and ran headlong back toward the lake.

Chapter 31. Lone Tree Learns the Truth

Lone Tree was in an uproar.

This was a town, of course, that wasn't conditioned to any state approaching uproar. Apart from a short parade on the Fourth of July, which consisted mostly of the former sheriff on his mangy horse followed by the out-of-step and out-of-rhythm high school marching band, a few floats sponsored by local businesses, and as many cars older than, say, 1960 as could still be driven, townsfolk didn't congregate much. They preferred it that way.

This morning, however, was different. The town was out, in force. People were on their front lawns. People were in the streets. People, particularly, were gathering on that large lakeside lawn that abutted the high school. They wanted to have another look for those monsters. Where yesterday they had used news of the monsters as conversation fodder and then written off the story,

today they felt differently. There had been no small amount of disruption throughout town during the night. Teenage vandals were one hypothesis, but others were beginning to take seriously the notion that these monsters might actually exist. Mrs. Jonathon O'Leary, for her part, had found Schmoozeglutton's tracks outside her back window. She was a one-woman marketing firm, Mrs. Jonathon O'Leary. Her phone tree extended deeply into the neighborhoods of Lone Tree, an aorta flowing with the lifeblood of any small town: gossip and conspiracy theories and other small tidbits of information. She called women all over town; they called others. Those others called their friends, too, and before long the talk of the town was monsters. Monsters in the lake.

These monsters, thrummed the informal wire service operated by Mrs. O'Leary, were responsible for all sorts of ills. The Mayor's home had been vandalized. A downtown business had been broken into and robbed. A pizza van had been smashed beyond recognition. One enterprising man suddenly found family heirlooms missing: his grandmother's gold necklace, and her wooden box of silverware, and her 1873 Colt Peacemaker revolver. He hoped to collect on his loss. Perhaps worst of all, the town's namesake, its symbol of Great American Heartland goodness and purity, the single tree that gracefully shaded Moon Park, had been destroyed.

Not everyone believed these stories of monsters, of course. The more sophisticated of the townsfolk would hear nothing of that theory. These people were also afraid, though. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to develop the cover story of the monsters for their as yet unknown agenda.

Others were simply livid about the tree. Someone had to be pretty low to go chopping down an innocent tree just to get the residents of Lone Tree to stand up and pay attention. Someone low, and someone disrespectful of tradition. And thus those residents returned to the teenage vandal theory. The teenagers in town were always catching the rap, of course, and this had been true for as many generations as had lived in the town. Yesterday's teenagers were the ones making today's accusations.

Whatever one's theory, though, everyone was talking. Talking to themselves, and talking to each other. Talking to people in the street. Talking, especially, amongst themselves as they looked out over the still waters of Lake Maebiewahnappoobie.

Principal Klieglight had been the first to have arrived at the lake. He had set up on the lawn, awaiting the arrival of his students. Unlike everyone else in town, Principle Klieglight wasn't concerned with the monsters in the lake. They, in fact, had left his mind completely. His sleep had been overrun by dire

images from his short but frenzied dreams. These dreams featured apathetic students, a mayor on the march, and sorcerer's apprentice newspapers, which reproduced every time he tore one in half.

Today, though, was going to be different. Principal Klieglight was determined to be seen as a man of action. Today, he was going to get those students into their classrooms. No more messing around. If he was going to lose his job on this day, then at least he was going to go down with his ship. He was going to stand at the helm of his cruise ship—pirate ship!—and steer it through the shark-infested waters of learning. There would be no more shirking. No more excuses. Those students were going to be in the school, on time, and tending to their studies. They were going to do so if it was the last thing that Principal Klieglight last accomplished as principal. As, he knew, it may well be.

The townspeople who came to the lake could see that he was outfitted for the job, though what job exactly they didn't know. When he had awoken that morning, he had pulled off his slept-in suit and instead donned a safari outfit: khaki pants, a chambray shirt, the cowboy boots he ordinarily reserved for the Fourth of July parade, and a pith helmet. The pith helmet had belonged to Harry S. Truman himself, the man who had sold it to him had said. HST, another man of action. As Klieglight had donned the helmet that morning, he had looked in the mirror. Yes, he looked

decisive. Solemn. Grim, even. A man to be reckoned with, he thought, as he tightened the plastic strap under his chin.

As he stood in front of the mirror, Principal Klieglight knew that he was preparing for battle. A battle for his principalship. He was dressed for the part. Though, instead of an elephant gun, he had his megaphone. And, he had assured himself, the megaphone was equipped with fresh batteries. He frowned one last time in the mirror, holding the grip of the megaphone (the megaphone he conceived as a portable I900 Central Communications Nexus) in his hand. As a test, he raised the bullhorn to his lips, squeezed the trigger, and said “Fellow students!” in a booming voice. He jumped at its loudness; the mirror in front of him vibrated in its frame. Yes, this would be just the ticket.

Thus dressed for success, and with a fresh 12 pack of Diet Coke for support, Principal Klieglight had arrived on the grassy sward leading down to the lake. No students had yet arrived, but when they did he would be ready for them. He marched up and down on the grass outside his office in a tightly held formation of one. With each pass, he used the megaphone to intone “Fellow students! Return to class at once! It’s not just a good idea...it’s the law!” Then, he would make a 180 degree turn, and begin again. On occasion, he would depart from his script with an ad-libbed “Organization and discipline, that’s the ticket!” or “No

shirking! No excuses! No passes!” or “There shall be no second warnings!”

Eventually, of course, other townspeople began to arrive. Some were indeed students. They looked to Principal Klieglight with some amount of interest—what was he up to now?—but with no amount of obeisance. They weren’t about to go into the school, and truth be told they weren’t exactly sure that that was what he was on about. Perhaps he was engaged in some sort of political theatre.

Klieglight, for his part, kept at his work. He didn’t break stride. Clearly, the students weren’t heading toward the school as they heard him, and so it was best if he pretended not to see them. It was difficult to appear as a man of action if everyone ignored you. Best, he thought, to ignore them first.

In this way, with quarter-hourly Diet Coke breaks, Principal Klieglight worked away the first couple hours of the day.

Mayor King, too, found his way to the lake.

It had been a long night for Mayor King. First, the police had shown up to have a look at his back fence. Mayor King, he had reminded himself, was the commander in chief of the local cops. Or chief commander? Something like that. In any case, he was their boss. For the benefit of his employees, he had tried to act the

part. This was made difficult by Victoria Moon King, who demanded of the police more than they could possibly give: that they dust the fence for fingerprints, that they retrieve every one of her babies unscathed (only one of them, Boopsie, had so far escaped the many monsterly marauders), that they get their best detectives and the chief of police on the case. “And be quick about it,” she added. She offered to fire them, to ruin them, to skin them alive if they didn’t comply. Mayor King, while in front of his troops, had wanted to appear to be in charge, but there was no topping Victoria Moon King, except to say “And be quick about it!” as she finished, which of course she had already said.

The cops, of course, were only the beginning. After they had written up their reports and left, Victoria Moon King had grilled him at length about what he knew about the monsters. “You may think that I’m stupid,” she had said, “but you’d be wrong. You may think that I don’t know anything of your top secret city operations, with your code words and city surveillance and intelligence operations, but I do.”

Mayor King, to whom honest answers were not a given, can be congratulated on answering as honestly as he knew how to. With her every statement, he asked, innocently, “Top secret?” “Code words?” “Intelligence?”

“You can’t pull any ‘state secret’ tomfoolery with me, mister,” replied Victoria Moon King. “You’re going to tell me everything you know about those monsters.”

But Mayor King knew nothing, except for what he had read in the paper.

This, Victoria Moon King had finally believed. “I knew you never read that paper,” she said. “A mayor at least ought to read the paper from his own town, don’t you think? His own town’s paper? I don’t know what would happen if I wasn’t on you every minute of the day.”

In this way, Mayor King’s difficult day had funneled into a difficult evening, which in turn funneled into a sleep every bit as restless as Principal Klieglight’s. In the morning, he half-groggily went to fetch the morning paper on his porch, only to find a note tucked into the screen door. He read the note, halting at the more abstruse bits—or maybe it was just the handwriting: Major...uh mayor King, monsters headed toward Moon...uh Moon Pk? Meet you there when the crime is sol-ved. Sol-ved? Oh, solved. Your first...citizen, Freddy...Freddy Chicken?

When he returned to the kitchen with the newspaper and the note, he asked Victory Moon King if she knew a Mr. Chicken.

“Mr. Chicken?” she asked

“Um,” he said, looking at the small piece of paper in his hand. “Freddy Chicken.”

“Freddy Chicken?? She said. “You’re off your crock.”

“Well, I received a note,” he said. “It claims to be from a Freddy Chicken. He says the monsters are at Moon something-or-other.”

Victoria Moon King looked over his shoulder at the note. “Moon Lake! They’re at Moon Lake!”

“Moon Lake?” asked Mayor King. “There is no Moon Lake! He must be talking about Moon Park.”

“I’ll have you know that there IS a Moon Lake!” Victoria Moon King said sharply as she pounded her bare heel onto the top of his bare foot.

“Ouch!” cried Mayor King. “Now dear...”

“Don’t ‘dear’ me, mister. The town may not know it yet, but there is a Moon Lake, and you’d better make it official! I’d say you have about...what...two years to get that accomplished, Mister Single Term Mayor?”

“Single Term Mayor” was what she called him when she was angry. It meant, first, that he’d better straighten up. Secondly, it was a reminder that without her family name he was nothing. Unelectable at least, and likely unemployable.

But she wasn't done yet. "Obviously," she continued, "at least one of our citizens is ahead of the game, and recognizes the power of the Moon legacy! At least this Freddy Chicken knows that there's a Moon Lake! Unlike my own husband! Who would have thought such a thing, that my own husband doesn't know of Moon Lake!" She gave a final crushing twist with her heel. "A lake discovered by my own forebears!"

Mayor King, in different circumstances, might have argued the historical accuracy of this factoid, but this clearly wasn't the day for academic discussions. Instead, he had gotten dressed and limped toward Moon...toward Lake Maebiewahnappooie. He, too, had no thought of monsters. Whatever his wife had seen in the back yard and thought to be monsters, he knew better. There was no end to the woman's imagination, especially when fueled by the rest of the town's paranoia. Mayor King also had no thought that once he reached the lake he might meet someone named Freddy Chicken. Surely, were there a Mr. Chicken in town, he would have heard of him. Obviously, it was a fake name. A fake name, he pondered, possibly in the form of a trap. Maybe it was some wily journalist's way of baiting him. But no matter. Mayor King had survived a decade of marriage; no human-made traps any longer held fear for him.

What he did intend to do was put the kibosh on this monster nonsense. Nip it in the bud. It was making him crazy, it was making his wife crazy, it was making the town crazy. Crazy, that's all it was.

And Klieglight, of course, had been the beginning of it all. He knew what he was going to do about Klieglight, oh yes he did. He was going to get rid of Klieglight once and for all. And then he was going to sweet-talk his voters into seeing the light, forgetting these monsters, opening their eyes. Maybe, if he did so, they'd appreciate it so much that they *would* reelect him to a second term. That would show her.

Another arrival at the lakeside was Lori Bradshaw, the photographer for the high school paper. Lori had had a stimulating and exasperating 24 hours, as she discovered the power of photographic journalism to communicate a story and incite comment. It amazed her how much a few pictures could change the town's focus. It also amazed her, though, just how jaded and skeptical people were. The townspeople were so insular. They refused to consider anything outside of their safe, preapproved universe...a universe too small to contain anything like these monsters of the lake.

Today, Lori thought she might do a follow-up story. This time, though, she was going to get it on videotape. Video, she had learned in her journalism class, was much harder to fake than photographs. If she could get some good footage of the monsters, folks would have a more difficult time explaining it away as mere trickery. She brought along Herman Munson—the newspaper’s editor—to run the camera. She thought she would try her hand at the roving reporter role, in front of the camera with microphone in hand.

When Lori and Herman arrived at the school, they were shocked to see the number of people that were congregating. They thought that they were here to collect more photographic evidence of the trolls...and they still might...but they could also see that there was another story entirely to be had. Lori’s photographs, evidently, had had more power than she had given them credit for. Where the excitement yesterday had seemed to die down about the time the school day ended and the students drifted away, many students—and not a few townspeople—had arrived for another day of lakeside vigil.

“Let’s start with Klieglight,” she said to Herman. “See what we can find out.”

The two made their way through the crowd toward the man in the pith helmet.

Principal Klieglight wasn't feeling well. His tummy hurt, just as it had yesterday, but worse. It gurgled and fumed at him with every step he took, threatening to boil over. He'd have to stop in a moment or two and soothe it with another Diet Coke. But that thought was interrupted by the sight of the reporter—the same one he had sparred with yesterday in his office?—coming toward him, this time with a cameraman. He redoubled his efforts to march in a straight line, to exhort his students to return to school, and ignore anyone who was ignoring him. And, of course, ignore the camera. It would be better if he appeared to any viewers as a man with a mission, a high school principal on the job, a mighty hunter with his elephant gun...er, megaphone...shooting at the cruise ships as he swam with the sharks. Something like that. The metaphor seemed to mix all the more as he considered it. He couldn't keep his head straight.

Klieglight took a deep breath, depressed the trigger of the megaphone, and tried to concentrate on his words: “Fellow students! This is quite enough! It is now...” Klieglight consulted his watch. “Nine twenty seven! School started...let's see...45, 47, uh 52? Um...nearly an hour ago! Perhaps more! Suspension proceedings will proceed...um...happen...right away! This is

your education we're talking about here! The only one you're cheating is yourself!!!”

That last sentence, he thought, had a nice ring to it. He hoped that it was one that would be caught on camera. Not that he wanted to appear on camera. Lord no. What if the mayor saw it? What would he think? Klieglight, outside of the school, during school hours! And all these students out here too!

“Now listen here, you students!” he exclaimed, first without benefit of the megaphone, and then with it. “There shall be...”

But his last sentence died out as he noticed the reporter's microphone in front of his face. She was looking at him intently, expecting him to say something. It would have to be something decisive, he decided. Yes. Decidedly decisive.

“Um, yes?” he said

Lori Bradshaw repeated her question. “Can you tell our viewers, Principal Klieglight, just what you're hoping to accomplish here this morning? What brings you out here on a weekend? Are you hoping to catch a glimpse of the monsters of the lake that we read about in the paper yesterday?”

Klieglight felt a panic rising up within him. “I categorically deny any knowledge of any papers. There were no papers released from my school. Any papers that are found must be considered to

be nonexistent.” The stern look on his face, he hoped, would show that he meant business.

“Nonexistent, sir?” Lori asked.

Principal Klieglight licked his lips. This woman was quite a bit more on the ball than she had been yesterday. A little taller, too, he thought. And, she had dyed her hair. “Well, perhaps not nonexistent,” he amended. “But at least ill-advised. And probably a forgery. Yes, that’s it. Any papers that are found are sure to be forgeries.” He smiled now, in a concerned but self-assured fashion. He had practiced that smile for years.

“Can you tell us, sir, why you are calling on the students to enter the school?”

“Of course!” Klieglight said. “Of course I can. I was only hoping that you would ask me that question. It is now...” he consulted his watch again. “Nine thirty on the dot. School started at 8:30. As I’m sure you can figure out for yourself, that’s a good deal more than an hour of class time wasted. No shirking! No excuses!”

“I guess that’s exactly an hour,” Lori commented.

“No passes!” said Principal Klieglight.

“Right...” said Lori. Klieglight took it as an agreement. She seemed to be warming to his argument.

Principal Klieglight looked into the distance over Lori's shoulder. "I'm sure you know," he said, "that bringing up our young people takes a firm hand. Shall we say...a fatherly hand."

But Lori had heard all this before. It was a standard line at any school function. She changed tactics. "It was reported that few students attended school yesterday, but were instead milling about out here by the lake."

"Not my fault!" Principal Klieglight piped. "You may remember that we had a little incident with the school paper yesterday...."

"The paper that doesn't exist?"

"Yes, that's the one." Klieglight's voice began to take on the hint of a whine. "I spent the whole day tracking down those papers. I was all over town, far too busy to see that the students were in school. The only place I didn't get to was the monastery." He thought for a moment, then offered another excuse: "Up until yesterday, you see, I didn't even know that we *had* a monastery here in Lone Tree!"

Lori didn't know how a monastery might figure into it, but she let it pass. "But today?"

"Today, I am definitely not too busy to see that the students are in school. I got here first thing, well before school started, to begin my work. I've been using this megaphone until I'm blue in

the face! I've been instructing them every minute to get into the school. I'm a firm believer that students should be in school." And here, Principal Klieglight waxed a bit philosophical. "One might even say that the very definition of the word 'student' requires that he or she attend school."

When Lori didn't respond to that, Klieglight returned to a more concrete approach. "In class. On time. With their materials. Yes sir, that's the ticket. They should be in school every day, no absences, no tardies, no excuses." He paused a moment, then added, "No passes!"

Suddenly a perplexed look crossed his face. "Unless...is this Saturday?"

Lori assured him that it was indeed Saturday.

Principal Klieglight's face fell. Nothing seemed to be going his way. There was always some curve ball thrown in his direction. If only reality would order itself, he might be able to accomplish something.

To the camera, Klieglight's thoughts looked only like a dazed confusion. He wasn't dazed for long, though, before he was accosted from behind by the mayor.

"Klieglight!" said the man, red-faced and blustering. He put a fist in the principal's face. "I'm blaming you for this! Look at this! It's madness! There are people milling around everywhere,

and it's all because of your paper!" Mayor King had planned a long speech to Klieglight, laying out an argument full of years of failures and identifying his exact role in the newspaper debacle, but the urge behind the words wouldn't be held back. Instead of his careful speech, Mayor King yelled, with growing glee, "You're fired! You're fired! You're fired!" Then he stomped off.

But Mayor King only made it three steps before he returned for another salvo. "You're fired! And don't even bother to ask for your job back, because you're fired for good!"

Principal Klieglight had no response. He had been expecting something much like this, but now that it was happening he couldn't even process it. He fumbled for something to say, but could come up with nothing but a few loose smacks of his lips.

Fortunately for Klieglight, however, fate intervened. Lori was there, arching an eyebrow to her cameraman and launching a question at Mayor King.

"Mayor King, can you tell us why exactly you're firing Principal Klieglight here, and in public?"

Mayor King's eyes grew wide. He hadn't even realized that there was a reporter in the vicinity, and here she was accosting him. His eyes grew even wider when he noted the cameraman behind her. "Why, um, why..." he said, then collected himself. "I wouldn't dream of firing the principal. It's...it's um not even

within my authority to fire the principal. That would be a job for the school board, you know.” He shook an admonishing finger in the reporter’s face, as if this was a fact she should have known. His face grew redder. His voice cracked a bit, but soon he modulated it toward the calm tones necessary to working with the electorate. “You may know my wife, Victoria Moon King. She’s the president of the school board. It would be her authority alone to fire Principal Klieglight here.” He smiled weakly. Klieglight, beside him, smiled weakly as well, and nodded in agreement. The two men looked like young children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“Were there a firing,” Lori asked, “would it have to do with the school newspaper that was published yesterday?”

“I disavow any knowledge of a school newspaper,” Principal Klieglight responded.

“And might it have to do with the cover story regarding the monsters of the lake?” Lori pushed.

“I disavow any knowledge of monsters,” Mayor King stated. “Not in my city, there aren’t monsters,”

But Lori, though new to this form of reporting, was quick on her feet. “There are rumors, Mayor King, that your administration is not collecting tax revenues from these monsters.”

The mayor puffed out his chest. “I categorically deny the assertion that the monsters are not paying taxes. Everyone, including the monsters, must pay their fair share.”

“So there are monsters in Lone Tree?”

“As I’ve stated,” said Mayor King, beginning to get flustered, “I disavow any knowledge of monsters. I can state unequivocally, however, that the monsters are paying taxes.”

Mayor King had only barely gotten out the sentence when someone pushed a small dog into his arms. It was Boopsie.

“You know very well that there are monsters in this town,” Victoria Moon King said to her husband.

Mayor King responded by smiling into the camera with an assured, mayoral gaze. “As I’ve previously stated, there are no monsters in Lone Tree. My office has done an in-depth analysis...Ouch!”

Victoria Moon King removed her heel from the mayor’s foot. “You’ve seen for yourself the wreckage they’ve left in our back yard.”

Lori jumped in. “Wreckage, ma’am?”

Victoria Moon King preened a bit for the camera. “Why yes. Several of the monsters flattened my back fence last night, and destroyed my Poodle Emporium.”

The mayor piped in. “I deny any knowledge of a Poodle Emporium,” he said. In response, Boopsie let out a little “Arf!” and nipped at the end of his nose with her small sharp teeth.

Victoria Moon King, however, was not to be stilled. “I hear,” she added, “that they’ve vandalized other places of business around town.” Then she looked directly into the camera and stated, “Apparently, they live in Moon Lake.”

“Moon Lake?” asked Lori.

The mayor jumped in at once. “My wife...well, you see, my wife has a personal affliction...um...affiliation?...with the lake. She knows very well that the lake’s true name is Lake Mosquehenna.”

“Lake Mosquehenna?” Lori repeated.

“No no,” said the mayor, and chuckled in a way that he hoped would be mildly self-deprecating. “Of course I meant Mosquehenna Park. I mean Moon Park.

“Moon Park?” Lori said.

“Moon LAKE,” insisted Victoria Moon King. “Its proper name is Moon Lake. Not this...” (and here she gave a small shiver) “Maebiewahnappooie nonsense. It is the first plank of my husband’s mayorship that the name of the lake must be Moon Lake.”

“Oh, I’d hardly say that, dear,” cautioned Mayor King. “You’ll remember that we decided that crime should be our first order of business, *then* the lake.” He smiled through the entire sentence, glancing every now and again at the citizens that were beginning to surround them.

Through this entire exchange, Principal Klieglight was getting more and more tense. He wanted nothing more than to escape. Escape the reporter, escape the mayor, escape the school board president, Victoria Moon King. His stomach felt a bit like Mount Vesuvius. Or perhaps it was Krakatoa. Hot lava churned within him. But then, while Lori and Mayor King and Victoria Moon King were having their back-and-forth, Klieglight saw something that no one else saw.

Even though he had seen them the previous night through his office window, the sight of the monsters rising up from the lake, shedding water as they strode up the beach, filled him with fear and awe. Each of the monsters held a large club at the ready.

The worst of it was that no one besides him was paying attention. Everyone was concentrating their attention on the reporter, and upon the town’s first couple.

“Someone should warn them,” Principal Klieglight thought to himself.

Then, with a start, he realized that that someone should be him. He was, after all, a respected citizen. He was the one guiding the cruise ship. The play had already been written, and this was his role. The props had already been handed out, and here he was, the man with the megaphone. He looked out upon his audience, felt the fear of appearing before them quavering within his already tortured belly.

The monsters were now clear of the lake, and were heading toward them.

Principal Klieglight raised the megaphone to his lips and depressed the trigger. But then it occurred to him that he didn't know his lines. Here he was in the final act, and he didn't know his lines! And there was no one to feed him any lines. He would have to ad lib.

The only thing it occurred to Klieglight to say was this: "Now hear this, now hear this. Incoming at 12:00. Incoming at 12:00. All hands, abandon ship. All hands, abandon ship."

He didn't know where those words came from. Perhaps they were from some late night movie he had watched in a particularly insomniac night. It was no matter, though, because he didn't say them. He couldn't say them. His throat seemed to be locked. His tongue lay useless in his mouth. Even his breath wouldn't free itself, but sat inert in his lungs. His lines were dead on arrival.

And now, the monsters were running toward the throng, clubs raised in the air. A woman toward the back of the crowd saw them and screamed. This led other people to look; soon, the whole crowd erupted as a mass into panic and confusion. People ran in every direction. Others screamed and ducked for cover.

Victoria Moon King fainted dead away. Her husband, still cradling Boopsie, knelt and patted her hand. “Now, now, dear,” he said, but of course she didn’t hear him.

And still the monsters came.

Lori Bradshaw, her reporter’s instincts as finely tuned as any professional’s, even though she was only a high school student, kept her calm. Even as Herman panned the panicking crowd and got as clean a shot as he could of the monsters of Lake Maebiewahnapoopie, she ad-libbed some newsy lines, “Folks, we’re seeing the monsters of the lake now. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but rest assured that we’ll be here to cover it.” She was unsure whether or not her words, even with the microphone, would be heard over the cacophony of the crowd.

Still, Klieglight sensed within him his central role in the play. It was up to him to take command in this most dire of circumstances. His megaphone was at the ready, its trigger already engaged. Perhaps he could calm this throng. His eyes were wide,

his cheeks red with the weight of his role. Or maybe only red with the realization that at this historic moment, he still didn't know what to say. Surely lines from some half-remembered late late show would not suffice.

But then, at that final moment, the perfect words did come. 16 words. The words arrived, better late than never, and even ordered themselves, ready to be spoken. 16 words. Klieglight had never been so grateful as he was at that moment. Inspiration was a rare thing in Principal Klieglight's life, but in this most dire of moments, it had arrived in the form of the perfect 16 words. Words that might calm the crowd. Words that might stop the beasts. Words that might bring order to the chaos. Principal Klieglight felt blessed to have received them.

The trolls were nearing the crowd. A couple had started swinging their clubs. It was now or never.

Unfortunately, Klieglight's line, as perfect as it was, wasn't delivered as he had hoped. Instead, when he opened his mouth, his poor stomach gave way. The abuse it had taken over the past two days had taken its toll, as heavy intake of diet soda inevitably will. Gasses that had been churning and building pressure for the past couple of hours suddenly leapt free from the confinement of his gut, and he let loose with a belch—amplified by the megaphone in

front of his lips—that would have embarrassed even the folks at the Black Hat Man’s Odiferous Honky Tonk and Outlaw Saloon:

BRUUUUUURUUUUUMMMMMCUDDACUDDACUDD
ABROOOOOOOOOOOOOOMHILDABRUMMMBRUMMMM
CUDDACUDDACUDDABRUMMMMmmmm.

The trolls, to a beast, stopped in their tracks.

To be fair, the trolls had experienced an awfully long couple of days since they had wakened from the Big Sleep. They had returned to consciousness after centuries of sleep to empty larders and empty weapons racks. They had experienced the inglorious challenge that had given them a new leader. They had walked upon the land for the first time in hundreds of years, only to find it dramatically changed from the world they thought they knew. They had dealt with big blue bugs and big turtle houses and no end of strange land-troll constructions. Then, for the past few hours, they had tried and failed to remove the rock with which Brumvack—their cowardly former leader—had blocked up the entrance to their ancestral caves. Now, they were exhausted. Exhausted and scared. Exhausted, and scared, and hungry. And, they were beginning to understand, homeless.

As a last resort, they had stormed the beach, determined to win themselves a new home.

If they hadn't been exhausted and scared and hungry and homeless, they might not have been so immediately impressed with Klieglight's belch. They might not have felt it resound so deeply within their spirits. They might not have latched onto it as the one thing that might bring them peace, and possibly a bit of food, and perhaps a cave in which to sleep.

As it was, however, exhausted and scared and hungry and homeless, they took Klieglight's belch to heart. They stopped in their tracks as they heard it, they felt it echo in their hearts. This land troll was offering to be their leader. And, from the look of things, he had the largest above-ground cave in town.

They stumbled over themselves to get nearer to this one ray of hope in an awfully dim world. They walked closer, stepping over the occasional land troll who had fallen in the panic.

Lori Bradshaw and Herman Munson stepped back to get a better view with the camera. The remaining citizens stepped well back. Mayor King, still clutching Boopsie to his chest, anemically dragged Victoria Moon King off to the side by one arm. That left Principal Klieglight alone, on center stage. Alone, that is, until the monsters of the lake surrounded him.

Principal Klieglight, of course, felt no comfort as the trolls paid him obeisance with their raised clubs. He was overcome with

the outgassing of their fetid breath, the texture of their moldy hides, the mere presence of their hulking forms.

The author supposes that the average reader will forgive Principal Klieglight for believing that he was being not adulated, but attacked.

As the trolls pressed ever more tightly around him, Klieglight felt a stab of fear slice up through his belly. As he did every time such a thing happened, which was often, he reached for a space of safety. He longed for the place that had offered him solace every day of his working life, and through a good many of his personal failures as well: the defenses of his principal's office.

First with a couple of steps in that direction, and then with a stumbling run, he headed in that direction.

For Principal Klieglight, however, even his office offered no escape. The trolls were more than willing to follow wherever he chose to lead them. As the man in the pith helmet ran toward the school, the trolls gladly followed.

Chapter 32. Ferdy Chicken Gives Up

Ferdy Chicken dreamt that he was Wile E. Coyote. In the dream, he was falling from some impossibly high rock formation. Falling, falling, falling. Strangely, while he fell, he also observed himself falling. His second body stood atop that same formation, peering down. Down, down, down. He felt his cape fluttering around him, he watched it waving in the breeze of freefall.

Though in the dream he fell and fell and fell—he hadn't yet hit ground—he already felt the pain of having hit. His head ached as if it were twice its normal size, which of course it wasn't, which could only mean that he felt pain that was actually bigger than his body. His butt—the first point of impact—hurt so much that it was numb. The pain up and down his back promised a long, dreadful recovery. But still he fell.

Falling. Falling. Before he hit the ground, he pulled out a little white sign on a stick that said, “What just happened?” And then he put that sign away and pulled out another one that said, simply, “Boom.”

From his perspective on top of the rock formation, Ferdy could see the little cloud of desert dust that his body created as it hit.

“He faw down an’ go boom,” someone said in his dream. Boom, boom, boom. Falling, falling, falling.

The dream was a good sign, actually. It was a step up from the pure nonpresence of his previous unconscious state. But it hurt more.

Still, he fell. Down, down, down.

The sun was up for a good hour before Ferdy Chicken awoke to the day. “Oohhh,” he said. He hurt all over, and that was before he started moving. When he tried to move, he hurt even more. “Oohhhh....”

“Oohhhhh....”

Eventually, Ferdy stopped saying “Oh.” But it was a difficult transition.

Some time after that, he sat up. Another difficult transition.

Looking around him, Ferdy could see that the monsters of the lake were no longer at the park. One more missed opportunity in a life already overly full of missed opportunities. And, he could see that Moon Park's single tree had been destroyed. Now, it was a central bare trunk surrounded by a circular collection of refuse: branches, twigs, and leaves. As he gazed up at the tree through bleary and pain-blurred eyes, he gave up every last bit of hope he had once carried. The very name of the town—Lone Tree—had been taken from that grand old oak, and now it was gone. He probably couldn't catch the monsters now, but even if he did, the town would feel that he had betrayed them. The town's population might forgive many trespasses, but they wouldn't forgive this, and it was his fault.

It was his first time out as a superhero, and he had failed.

Then, Ferdy saw the horse. It lay on its side, perhaps 50 yards away. Dead, if Ferdy's guess was right. That old horse had sacrificed her life for him, for her town, for the hope that Lone Tree would survive this threat. Worse, in Ferdy Chicken's clumsy hands, she had sacrificed herself for nothing. "Sorry, old girl," he said. "I guess we gave it our best shot."

Ferdy stood and tried to take a step toward the horse. But he couldn't move. The rope was still tied around his middle, the

grappling hook still secured quite solidly in the ground behind him. Ferdy Chicken took the rope in his hands, and, painfully, step by step, followed the length of it back to the anchor that had stopped him so suddenly. Two of its claws were sunk to the hilt into the lawn of the park. He grabbed onto a free claw and pried it out of the ground.

“I guess that wasn’t such a good idea,” he noted. “Land anchors!” Like so many things, land anchors had seemed like a good idea at the time. He felt the long line of bruise just under his rib cage. The grappling hook had stopped him, all right. Nearly cut him in two, was what it did.

And it wasn’t just his middle that hurt. His head hurt, his shoulders hurt, his arms hurt, his back hurt, his pelvis hurt, his legs hurt. The pain so crammed the phone lines of his nervous system that at first he couldn’t tell if his feet hurt or not. He stood there for a moment with his eyes closed and listened very intently to the messages his body was sending him. He didn’t have to listen for long before he received the call from his lowest extremities: yes, his feet hurt too.

Working the knot in the rope tied around his middle, he surveyed the wreckage. When he had worked it loose, he dropped the rope, hook and all, to the ground.

And, while he was at it, he pulled the cape over his head and dropped it to the ground as well. Then, he pushed the orange spandex tights off his hips, and rolled them down his legs. He was wearing running shorts underneath the spandex for just this reason: he figured that someday the time would come when he would have to leave behind his chicken costume in order to protect his identity. He hadn't thought that it would happen in the face of failure, however. He sat, took off his boots, and removed the tights. Now, balled up, they looked like an orange Nerf football. He threw the football in no particular direction...just away.

He knew that it was time to give up on this Ferdy Chicken nonsense. He wasn't fooling anyone. He couldn't fool even himself any longer. No, he wasn't a superhero, he was just a balding middle-aged man with no prospects. He was just a pizza delivery boy.

A failed pizza delivery boy, he amended. He had totaled the pizza delivery van in his attempts to chase down the monsters. Now how was he going to explain that to his boss? He'd have to come up with a pretty good story. Jobs weren't easy to get in Lone Tree, but it looked like he might be in need of a new one.

And if that weren't bad enough, there were still undelivered pizzas in the van. Ferdy let out the air in his lungs in a long exhalation of hopelessness. Totaling the van, he had thought,

might cost him his job, but the truth was that at Petey's, people regularly lost their jobs just because they failed to get a pizza to a customer. If they were late, if they couldn't find the address, if they ran out of gas before they arrived, they often didn't get a second chance. There were, what, 5 or 6 pizzas still in the van? That would surely add up to an axing, even if the van weren't smashed to oblivion.

Almost surely, he'd have to get another job.

But...what? Every year or two, Fred Chickweed decided that he was worthy of some better job, but such thoughts only netted him enough energy to apply for a single position, or maybe two, before he'd give up. Too much rejection in the marketplace led him only to believe all the more forcefully that he had no hope for anything except the job he now held. And, if that were true, he'd better get to delivering those pizzas.

But that thought, too, sucked every bit of energy out of him. Sucked it right out of his feet and into the earth. He couldn't face those people all these hours after they had ordered their pizzas. Their pizzas wouldn't be fresh and piping hot like the commercial claimed. It wasn't easy delivering a pizza ten minutes late, much less hours and hours late.

Still, there was nothing for it. It was time to drop this nonsense of the Chicken. And, if that was true, he better get back to being a Chickweed.

Ferdy looked again at the oak. His town's lone tree. Now, it was nothing but a good solid trunk squatting against the horizon. With that icon gone, what other fundamental things would change? Last night, he had been a pizza delivery boy. Then, he had been a short-time superhero. This morning, he was once again a pizza delivery boy. Between those fleeting spaces of time, much had changed. One thinks that a single day of one's life will follow much as the previous many days had, but that's not true, is it? Things can change as fast as all get out. Ephemeral, that's what life is. Ephemeral, sometimes catastrophic, and also full of long, boring hours when you think that nothing will ever change. Except then it does.

Ferdy picked up his chicken suit and his grappling hook. It wouldn't do to leave these things just lying about. Someone would find them. Maybe, they'd be able to trace them back to him. He might find himself being blamed for the horse, for the tree, for the whole rotten mess.

He headed toward the east entrance of the park, toward the pizza delivery van. Toward his old life. Along the way, he stowed his tights, his cape, and his grappling hook under a largish juniper

bush. He'd collect them later, he thought, and dispose of them more properly.

Chapter 33. Schmoozeglutton Ponders the Fickle Finger of Fate

Schmoozeglutton stood on the grass outside the school. He watched his cave mates follow their new leader into his above-ground cave. Just a few minutes ago, they had been his subjects, and now they were merely his cave mates. Worse, they were cave mates without an actual cave to be mates within.

How could things have slipped away from him so quickly? How had he lost his leadership position? He had been fated for leadership, hadn't he? He had easily bested Brumvack in the challenge. He had shown leadership ability through the troll's foray into town. He had gotten them all something to eat, albeit something that none of them truly wanted to eat. Only this few hours later, however, the world had conspired against him and

taken his leadership position from him. It wasn't fair. How could such a thing have happened?

What had happened, of course, was Brumvack. He had blocked the entrance to the troll caves.

It was Schmooze-glutton himself that had discovered that fact. He had been leading the trolls as they returned from their night of exploration. The Rabid Band had followed him as he swam down to the depths of the lake. They had followed him through the small passage that opened up to the underground cavern of Dark Water. Then, they had piled into him when he came to the end of that passage...the end that was supposed to be Dark Water, and instead was something much more solid. Painfully solid.

“What happened?” Schmooze-glutton had thought as his head hit the rock. He didn't have time to think through that problem, though, because immediately Obeast ran into him, banging his head into the rock again. He had only barely recovered his wits from that before Biledumper piled into the both of them. With every hit, pain exploded in Schmooze-glutton's head, and a small burst of bubbles erupted from his mouth.

Finally, though, things calmed enough that Schmooze-glutton could stop to think through his situation. What was this rock doing here? What had happened?

But he didn't have to think for long before the answer came in rush of certainty: Brumvack had happened. Schmatzenbladder was right: Brumvack had sealed off the entrance to the troll caves.

"I'll kill 'im," Schmooze-glutton swore to himself. He pushed at the rock to clear it away, to find Brumvack and pummel him into the ground. He would pummel him by himself for a bit, then he would let the other trolls at him for some more pummeling. Then, if the job weren't done, he'd pummel him on his own for a while longer.

Only the rock that blocked his path wouldn't move.

The trolls had worked at the rock through the early part of the morning. Because the entrance itself was so small, only three at a time could push at the boulder that Brumvack had rolled into the entrance. Those three would push and heave and pry at the boulder with their newly-formed clubs, then they would give way to the next group of three. The first group would return to the surface, gasp out a few breaths of stale air, then return for another go. The rock, however, was adamant: it wasn't going to move.

That rock, unbudged, left the trolls without a home.

Schmooze-glutton knew that the trolls couldn't exist out in the open world. They would have to find a new troll cave. That, however, they couldn't do without first getting some food. The exertions of the night, then especially of the futile operations on

the boulder, had left the Rabid Band exhausted and hungry. Even that wimpy mammoth creature in the park was starting to look good.

Also, they'd need a protected space in which to grab some sleep. The trolls weren't used to the many exertions that had been necessary since they had awoken in this new world. Perhaps, he thought, they could find an abandoned above-ground cave, or one without too many land trolls to vanquish. It was a scary business, though, vanquishing land trolls. Surely, in their beleaguered state, they couldn't take on the whole town.

The whole town, however, had been exactly what they had seen when they gave up on the rock. The whole town, it seemed, was standing on the hill overlooking the lake.

Treading water, the entire Rabid Band had looked upon the land trolls with dismay. How could they return to the wimpy mammoth creature, their only hope of dinner, with all these land-trolls patrolling the area?

They'd have to fight, Schmoozeglutton considered.

Schmoozeglutton frowned at the thought. Were his troops in better order, they could no doubt take on even this huge bunch of land trolls. But his troops were far from tiptop shape. They were tired and hungry and grumpy, in no mood to follow the orders that he could give them as their war-leader.

Schmooze-glutton shook his head. Woe to any troll, he thought, to whom befell the decisions of leadership.

Schmooze-glutton, looking out over his subjects, each in a pathetic state of hunger and hopelessness, braced himself for his chosen course. He felt a sinking in his belly as he did so. He knew that when the trolls stormed the beach, the Rabid Band would probably lose a member or two. Or, maybe, they'd all die this day. But he didn't see any choice.

Schmooze-glutton, standing on the grass, pondered his fate. He had lost none of his troops in the fight. In fact, there had been no fight. He remembered raising his club to the sky. He remembered saying, "Let's get 'em." He even remembered the feelings that welled from his heart as he and the rest of the Rabid Band swam toward their destiny, whatever it might be: stoicism and hope and a remembrance of the good old days when mayhem was the rule.

But of course their attack had never manifested. The trolls had just begun to get their clubs swinging when one of the land trolls had *challenged* him! Challenged Schmooze-glutton! And without even announcing the challenge, as of course any civilized troll would be honor-bound to do.

This land troll, Schmooze-glutton now thought, was a wily player, a sly opponent, a cheat! And there Schmooze-glutton had stood, dumbly, while he had done it! The land troll had won the challenge before Schmooze-glutton had even known what was happening!

Schmooze-glutton smoldered over that one. He had been the leader of the Rabid Band for what...a day? And already his loyal subjects had deserted him for a single cheap shot from a land troll?

Schmooze-glutton had to admit that the land troll had belched quite grandly. The volume! He had heard the belch with his ears, of course, but he had also felt it deep in his chest. But that was no excuse. It was a trick! A cheap trick! With a little preparation, surely he would be able to outbelch a land troll.

But no. Instead of action—instead of drawing one of his belches from deep in his gut—he had just stood there, flabbergasted. Surely no troll leader in memory had been caught off guard in such a fashion.

For a brief moment, a sliver of doubt entered Schmooze-glutton's mind: what if he wasn't the leader he thought he was?

Schmooze-glutton burned. How had things gone so badly wrong? And so quickly? Had a troll leader ever met such a precipitous end? Did the trolls have no honor? He was the

mightiest of the trolls, and had been bested by a mere land troll. Further, the trolls that had known him all his life had followed that land troll without a second thought into his above-ground cave.

For a long moment, Schmooze-glutton stood alone on the grass. Finally, though, he took a deep breath. There was no going back to the troll caves, now that Brumvack had locked them up tight. Also, there was no surviving this strange new world without his fellow trolls. He wouldn't be able to hunt alone; he wouldn't be able to secure a new cave without help.

Schmooze-glutton knew that he couldn't make it on his own. It was a lesson that Brumvack had failed to learn: he needed the company of his kind. Through a throat thick with hatred and longing and grief, Schmooze-glutton swallowed his pride. He followed his one-time Band of trolls into this new cave.

Chapter 34. Fred Chickweed Searches for a Pencil

Fred Chickweed. A man with a mission.

The mission was to deliver the six pizzas that he had rescued from the delivery van.

The pizzas were cold—he had checked—and certainly were past their 30 minute delivery window. Additionally, the toppings were all a little piled up on one end of their crusts, having slid slightly off the pizzas during his confrontation with the stop sign. But when a pizza was ordered, a pizza must be delivered, and Fred was determined to get the job done.

He wasn't looking forward to doing so, however. Fred Chickweed was a man who, as much as possible, avoided confrontation, and he had plenty of personal knowledge about the confrontations resulting from late pizza delivery. Usually, these deliveries were, say, 10 or possibly 15 minutes late; today's pizzas,

he recalled, were supposed to have delivered yesterday. He hoped that people would be understanding. Perhaps when he showed up on foot, people would take pity on him. Surely they would be able to see that he was bruised and sore, unable to move at top speed.

The first delivery, the pizza box on top of the pile, went to the house in front of him. 1842 Heartland Drive. It was just down the road from the high school. He had been planning to stop here, he remembered, after the delivery to Principal Klieglight. As he observed from the sidewalk, however, Fred could see that no one was home. At least, there wasn't any obvious indication that someone was home. Well, the front door was open. But he couldn't hear any noises from inside. Any noises, that is, other than a radio playing popular music far too loudly. Certainly, he couldn't see anyone inside the house. Well, there was the woman who looked like she was vacuuming. But surely she was the maid, or something, not the owner. Not the person who had ordered the pizza. No, he wouldn't be able to complete this delivery. He turned away, and kept walking down the street.

Each pizza box had a sales slip taped to its top. Each sales slip had a small box printed on its lower corner. It was the "undeliverable" form. On that form, there were several small checkboxes, each stating a reason that the pizza was undeliverable. "Incorrect address," said one. "Incorrect order," said another. "No

one home,” said a third. That was the box that Ferdy would check: no one home. Maybe, he thought, he could check a box on each of the order forms. That way, he wouldn’t even have to walk all over town. In his battered state, that would be quite a relief, wouldn’t it?

What would his boss think, if he came back with not one but six undeliverable pizzas? Certainly, that was a high number. Most nights, there were no undeliverable pizzas. The occasional night saw one pizza returned undeliverable; on a rare night, there might be two. But was six statistically impossible? Of course not. Ferdy began to plan out the boxes he would check on each slip. Maybe this pizza here had been made incorrectly. They had ordered sausage and received anchovies (Fred shuddered at the thought of anchovies. Even after 30 plus years of delivering pizzas, he couldn’t stomach the thought of anchovies). Maybe this one here had the wrong address: he had found the street, but no such address existed.

The idea was to make the stories believable. With enough detail, in Fred’s estimation, any story would be believable.

In the meantime, he needed a pencil. He’d have to get this box checked off: Undeliverable: no one home. He kept a pencil atop the sun visor in the van, but of course the van wasn’t with him. Where else could he get a pencil?

He could buy one at a store, he thought. But the closest store was a good mile and a half away. Fred's hand strayed to his hip pocket. Which was empty. Where was his wallet? Had he left it in the van?

But no, of course he hadn't left it in the van. He had left it in his jeans. The jeans that he had shed on the sidewalk in front of the high school.

This thought disconcerted Fred Chickweed. Disconcerted him quite a bit. Someone, he realized, might steal his wallet. Worse than that, though, they might find his wallet and use it to identify him. He could see the newspaper headline now: *Pizza Delivery Boy Streaks Through Lone Tree*. That would spell the end of Fred's career for sure: what was he doing delivering pizzas with no pants on?

He'd better, he thought, get to the high school.

Fred's mind turned to Principal Klieglight. He had been a kindred spirit, hadn't he? Principal Klieglight would surely understand a man who had lost his pants through the course of a harrowing night on the job. And, what's more, he might have a pencil. Surely, a high school would have any number of pencils. He wondered if, perchance, Principal Klieglight might be at the school on a Saturday morning.

The high school, noted Fred, was only a few blocks away. He headed in that direction, itching to retrieve his wallet before anyone else did. And, he hoped, he'd be able to borrow a pencil from Principal Klieglight.

Chapter 35. The Trolls Check Out an Above-Ground Cave

The trolls quite liked their new leader's cave. It seemed dark and homey. It was a bit too regular for their taste: cave walls shouldn't be perpendicular to a flat floor; they shouldn't meet at ninety degree angles. But for an above-ground cave, it seemed pretty nice.

The smell, though, would take some work. Almost overpoweringly, the air had a fresh clean scent about it. Underneath that, though, the trolls could sense the lurking odors of slightly rotting food and unclean bodies, so they knew that the above-ground cave wasn't beyond redemption. Give it time, and its natural odors would take over, and the place might almost come to seem as nice as their own caves. They stood in the entryway, trying not to call attention to their uncomfortable sniffing. It wouldn't do to be disrespectful of the land-trolls' cave, at least on

this first visit. They looked around the large room that opened up from the metal doors they had entered, then peered down the long, dark hallways. Down each hallway, they spotted even larger rooms. Their new leader, had he not immediately locked himself in his personal quarters, would have been able to describe for them the function of these rooms: one was a cafeteria, the other was the library.

Yes, this was a fine troll cave. Lots of long corridors, some big rooms. And, now that their eyes were adjusting from the glare outside, they could see a number of smaller rooms adjoining the long corridors.

Their new leader must be a very powerful land troll, they thought, to protect this above-ground cave. Very powerful, and with a large, large band. But where was this band? They couldn't see a single land troll.

All evidence pointed to the fact that land trolls weren't very smart. Here was another piece of data pointing to that hypothesis: they had this nice dank cave, and they spent the day outside, where it was bright and fresh-smelling and altogether too stimulating.

The trolls were getting awfully hungry. Their bodies, after the exertion of trying to budge the rock with which Brumvack had sealed their cave, were shaking with hunger. Surely their new

leader recognized this. Why had he left them alone in their hour of need?

Schmoozeglutton sensed their dissatisfaction. This, he thought, could play right into his hands. “Maybe he’s waiting for us to *ask* for some food.”

This made none of the trolls happy. In earlier days of troll history, troll leaders had controlled the food supply. Brumvack’s quarters, in fact, had once been “The Food Room,” where previous leaders had stored away the Rabid Band’s consumables, and would dole them out—or not—depending upon their pleasure or whim. Trolls, when they got hungry, would have to ask for food, which the leader might or might not provide.

Long before Brumvack happened on the scene, though, the common trolls—ancestors of the Rabid Band—had revolted, killed their leader, and distributed the food equally. Ever since, every troll had his own food stores.

Schmoozeglutton didn’t really suppose that this land troll might be hoarding a room full of food. He was merely sowing dissatisfaction. He was already plotting his return to power. Maybe he’d challenge the land troll as he had Brumvack, or maybe he’d just urge the trolls to stage a revolt. It wouldn’t take much right now, he thought, to push the Rabid Band into a frenzy of dissatisfaction. Everyone was hungry and tired and edging toward

cranky. And surely the land troll, despite his obvious political power, was as fragile as he looked. Schmoozeglutton wondered what else he could say to nudge the band toward action.

He didn't have to wonder for long, though, because Obeast soon spoke up. He was the fattest of the trolls, and the one least immune to pangs of hunger. Where food was involved, he was quick to make compromises. He said, "Well, if he wants us to ask, then let's ask!"

The other trolls, though, would have nothing of it. There was a collective growl of anger led by the older trolls, wise to the perils of leaders who had too much power.

"I'm not begging anyone for food!" said Schmatzenbladder self-righteously.

"Yeah!" said two or three others.

"If he's gonna make me beg, I'm gonna pound him!" said Schmatzenbladder.

"Yeah!" said six or seven others.

Schmatzenbladder was enjoying this. It was rare event when anyone listened to him. Now, they were listening and even agreeing. He stuck his fist up in the air and shook it angrily. "This troll, for one, will get on his knees to no puny land troll!"

"Yeah!" said all of the trolls at once. "Yeah!"

The mood of the Rabid Band had changed in an instant. In a non-reflective and anxious moment, they had been manipulated into accepting this new land troll as their leader. Now that they could see what kind of troll he was, however, they were quickly losing interest in being led. Begging for food? They'd have none of that. They had a *right* to food!

Schmatzenbladder filled his lungs. He had never been the center of such excitement before. "If he's gonna hoard the food, we're gonna have to stand up for trolls everywhere and show him what's right!" There were more assertions of agreement from the trolls. Schmatzenbladder was bringing them to a fever pitch of excitement.

Schmoozeglutton figured he'd better get aboard this train before it left the station. Interrupting Schmatzenbladder, he laid out a plan: "Let's go in there and take what's ours!"

With a roar, the whole of the Rabid Band rushed in a mass toward Principal Klieglight's door.

Chapter 36. Fred Chickweed Delivers Some Pizzas

As Fred Chickweed neared the high school, he saw people of all stripes amassing on its great lawn. What was going on here? The citizens of town must be wise to the presence of the trolls, he thought, to congregate so publically. Before he was seen, he left the sidewalk and hid behind a corner of the school. From that vantage point, he peered out at the crowd.

Fred didn't like what he saw. Most of the people were congregating around a person that Fred quickly recognized as Mayor King. They appeared angry. It looked to Fred like they were shouting questions at their leader, and that he wasn't providing the answers they were seeking.

Fred experienced a moment of empathy. He knew what it was like to have unhappy people gang up on you.

He also knew, however, that the mayor often insulated himself from such meetings. Once, he himself had shown up in Mayor King's office. He had been ready to announce himself, to assure Mayor King that he was on the job, a chicken in charge. But he hadn't even been able to see the mayor; the mayor's secretary was as far as he had gotten.

It was just as well. Had Mayor King welcomed him as he had hoped, he would now be disappointed in Ferdy Chicken. Disappointed at best. At worst, he would know who was personally to blame for the fiasco of the night before. A real threat had arrived in Lone Tree, and Ferdy Chicken had done nothing.

Just last night, Ferdy had visited Mayor King's house. That had given him an opportunity to meet the mayor without the intercession of his secretary, but even then he hadn't followed through. He had stood on the mayor's front porch for a full minute, considering the act of ringing his doorbell and delivering his news of the monsters. He had thought that it would be grand to introduce himself, finally, to the mayor. To announce himself as Ferdy Chicken, ON THE CASE.

Mayor King, he knew, might not have believed him right at that moment, but afterwards, when the monsters had been rounded up and no one but Ferdy was there to take credit for the job, the mayor surely would want to shake his hand and give him the keys

to the city and...well, maybe offer him a job as chief superhero in charge of Maebiewahnapoopie Monsters and Other Threats to the Peace. Buy him a car. Provide him with all the superhero equipment he could think to ask for.

Fred shook his head. Even last night, experiencing the thrill of discovery of the monsters, and in thrall to his supposed role in the world, he hadn't been brave enough to ring Mayor King's doorbell. Instead, he had taken the note out of his boot and poked it into the screen door.

Now, standing against the brick wall of the school and peering out at the throng of disgruntled citizens, he was glad he had not rang that doorbell. He was glad that had chickened out. It was a lesson he would remember. If ever in the future he thought himself capable, he would remember this moment.

Better not to announce oneself, eh? Better to remain in the shadows. That way, when you failed, no one would know it was you. No one would point and hoot. No one would speak your name as they recited the town's annals of infamy.

No, Fred would know better next time. Next time, there would be no public announcements. Not that there had been any public announcements this time. But it had been a close thing. His forefinger had been within an inch of buzzing Mayor King's doorbell. Within an inch, and within seconds.

Fred peered further around the corner of the school. Yes, there were his pants, still in a loose heap on the sidewalk. Hopefully, his wallet would still be in the back pocket of those pants. All these people on the lawn of the high school presented a problem, though. If he was going to be claiming his wallet, he didn't want a bunch of people seeing him. Should he just return to his pizza delivery? But though that thought held a sort of temptation, he dismissed it. He really needed to get his wallet before someone else did. Also, if he managed to get a pencil from Principal Klieglight, he could mark these boxes and be done with it. Both plans, though, required that he get to the front door of the school. He would be exposed.

Suddenly, the image of Principal Klieglight peering out the front door of the school the night before came to him. He held a haunted appearance, that man, which Fred recognized. With a bolt of inspiration, Fred realized that Principal Klieglight would be just as uncomfortable with this group of citizens on the school grounds as he was. The fact of their presence would be something, like a fear of cameras, that united the two. It would be nice, he thought, to talk with Principal Klieglight about the various discomforts of living in the modern age: cameras, mobs of citizens on your front lawn, delivering pizzas to grumpy, self-righteous people.

The thought gave him the goad he needed to duck as low as possible—not easy, carrying half a dozen pizzas—and head for the door.

Things were really piling up on Mayor King. First, he had been accosted unexpectedly by a reporter. Then, his wife had spoken out of turn, on camera. Worse, she had then passed out at the sight of the monsters. That left him with too many conflicting responsibilities: he had to hold Boopsie, he had to try to rouse his wife, and now the town's citizens were demanding that he *do something* about these monsters.

“Do what?” he asked them from a position crouched next to his wife's still form. “Just what exactly do you think I should do?”

The citizens of Lone Tree didn't know what he should do either, but they certainly expected more out of their leader than to be as helpless as they were.

Fred wasn't all the way to the door before someone noticed him. It was a short man at the edge of the crowd.

“Look!” he shouted, pointing at Fred. The mob did look. Fred returned their look with wide eyes. He had been caught. And then, Fred saw that there was a *cameraman* on the lawn. Now, everyone in town would know that he was still trying to deliver last

night's pizzas. Whatever story he might have banged together to explain these pizzas had now been shot down by one too many prying cameras. Surely, the footage of him, without his pants and still carrying these pizzas, would make its way to his boss.

Fred didn't know what to do but keep going. He was nearing his pants. His first thought was to pick them up off the sidewalk as he walked by. If he was smooth about it, perhaps no one would notice. But then, the camera returned to his mind. If people watched the footage over and over on the news, surely they would be analyzing every detail. Better, he thought, to pretend that they weren't his pants. If someone asked, he could look around him and say, "Pants? What pants?" Or he could comment, with a casual disregard upon seeing a pair of grown men's pants on stoop of a public building, "Not my pants, not mine, nosirree not my pants." Perhaps no one would relate this pair of blue jeans—a pair of blue jeans sized to a rather short and somewhat stocky man—with the rather short and stocky man who stood there with no pants on. Instead of grabbing his jeans, he fished out his wallet—thankfully, it remained in the hip pocket—and moved on. He laid his wallet on top of his load of pizza boxes. With only a few more steps, he was at the school doors.

Mercifully, they were unlocked.

Mr. Klieglight cowered under his desk. Cowered, that is, under what had once been his desk. Now, it was the desk of whoever the high school principal might be: not him. The monsters were banging on his office door. Well, banging on what had once been his office door. It shuddered on its hinges with every hit. At any moment, he was sure, the door would give way, and he would be at the mercy of the monsters.

“Help!” he yelled pathetically. “Help!”

But he knew no one would hear him. He was alone in the school. Ordinarily, at least a few diehard students would be in the school, even on a day as exciting and drama-filled as this one. But, alas, it was Saturday. Saturday! Even Ms. Blandishment didn’t work on Saturday.

It was hopeless.

But then, suddenly, the noise of the monsters trying to break into his office ceased. Had they given up? Were they looking for another way to get at him? Were they even now plotting against him, trying to manipulate him into leaving his office and walking into their trap?

Maybe. But he wasn’t going to fall for it. No sir. He wasn’t leaving his office for anything. He was gonna sit right here under his desk.

He let out another yell for help. He expanded his lungs as much as he could in the cramped position under the desk, and yelled again.

Fred Chickweed heard the yell for help. He knew immediately that it was Principal Klieglight. But he also knew that he could do nothing for him. The man was lost, a victim to these monsters. And that was true because he, Fred Chickweed, was lost as well.

He had entered the school, thinking it a safe haven from the mass of people outside. But as soon as he had entered the foyer, he knew that this was no haven. Instead, it was full of the monsters. They had been pummeling Principal Klieglight's office door, and now they were going to pummel him. First one monster had broken off the attack on the door, then a few more, then all of them. As each one turned, it stared at him. As each one stared, it *sniffed* at him. Fred seemed to be very attractive to these monsters.

Fred pondered that little fact. These monsters, from the look of them, were carnivores. And he, he knew, was meat.

They had wanted to eat Principal Klieglight, and now they wanted to eat him.

As he stood staring back at those dozen pairs of eyes, he knew that he was a goner. They'd get Principal Klieglight

eventually, he knew, but for right now, Principal Klieglight was behind a locked door, and he was not.

The monsters took a step closer to him and sniffed again. They took another step. Still, they sniffed. They took a third step.

Fred Chickweed was in no way prepared to fight these monsters. He didn't have Ferdy Chicken's tools of the trade. He also didn't have Ferdy Chicken's chutzpah, his crazed ego, his willingness to engage evil in any form. He wasn't Ferdy Chicken, he was just Fred Chickweed, an aging pizza delivery boy.

But then he had a thought. An engaging thought. A hopeful thought. "I," he thought, "am a pizza delivery boy. A pizza delivery boy!" With a flash of insight, he looked to the half dozen pizzas that he was carrying. Maybe, just maybe, the monsters didn't want to eat him so badly as they wanted to eat these pizzas!

Pushing his wallet into his back pocket, Fred knelt and set the pizzas onto the floor.

The trolls didn't know what to make of this. They narrowed their eyes at him, and halted their forward movement. One in particular caught Fred's eye. It was the biggest of the monsters. This one, thought Fred, was his entrée into the bunch. Fred was always able to pick out the hungriest person in any group to which he delivered a pizza. The hungriest one, in Fred's experience, was always the most cooperative.

“Easy there, Champ,” said Fred. Fred was in his element, now. If there was one thing he knew, it was how to deliver pizza. With hands that shook only slightly, he took the first pizza box and opened it. He tore the top flap off of the box, leaving the pizza on the serving tray of the box’s bottom. This he set on the floor. Then, with a well aimed thrust, he pushed it across the tiled foyer toward the biggest of the monsters.

The monster picked up the box that had slid to a stop at his feet. He picked it up and smelled the pizza.

If its heavy salivation was any indication, Fred thought, the monster liked what it smelled.

Quickly, Fred opened the next box. This, he pushed across the length of the foyer as well. As it slid, the monsters it neared took a step backwards. They stared suspiciously at the box, then looked to the largest of the monsters once again. None of them picked up the pizza.

Fred returned to the first monster, the one holding the pizza.

“C’mon,” he said. “Try a bite. It’s good.” He got no response.

Fred chastised himself for trying to talk with these monsters. Clearly, they had no language. Or, if they did, it wasn’t English. Instead of talking, he opened up the next box and took a slice from it.

Anchovies.

Fred's tongue thickened at the thought of eating this pizza festooned with little fish. But, he thought, this was no time to be picky. Fred took a large bite and started chewing. He made great efforts to smile through the vile taste. Fish. Salty fish. Little tiny salty fish. His gag reflex engaged, but he denied it as he swallowed. He smiled again, and rubbed his tummy. "Yum," he said.

The biggest of the monsters looked from Fred to the box he held in his big slab of a hand. Then, with a dexterity that surprised Fred, he took a slice of pizza—pepperoni—out of his own box. He didn't eat it like Fred had, though. He didn't eat it like anyone Fred had ever known. For whatever reason known only to monsters, it carefully rolled up the slice of pizza until it looked like a crescent roll. This, he dropped whole onto his tongue.

All eyes were on the monster. Fred's eyes, and also the eyes of the other monsters. Would he like this new food?

The answer to the question came in the form of Obeast rolling up another slice of pizza, and popping it, too, into his mouth. He made noises of appreciation as he chewed.

Now, the other trolls couldn't get to the open box on the floor fast enough. If this was good food, they knew, Obeast was likely to eat it all before they had a chance to sample it. Three trolls

reached the box at the same time, and had a short tug-of-war with it before the pizza fell to the tiles of the foyer.

No matter, though. The trolls were happy to eat it off the floor. Biledumper tossed the now-empty box aside and sat down with the others. Following Obeast's lead, the trolls rolled up slices of pizza and began eating.

Fred, for his part, was happy to set aside the slice of anchovy pizza. He continued opening boxes and pushing them across the floor. Soon, all of the creatures were sitting in rough circles about the room. They surrounded the pizza boxes, rolling up slices of this new food and ingesting them noisily. They particularly enjoyed, Fred noted, the anchovies.

Mr. Klieglight didn't know what was happening. He only knew that his heart was beating faster than it ever had, that the silence was an even greater agony than the pounding on his door, that if he was a goner he wished they would just hurry up the job and get it over with. His time under the desk had brought him to a realization: he had nothing to live for, really. He had lost the only thing that was important to him: his principalship. Maybe he should just open the door and let the monsters have their way with him.

But even at this desperate moment, his survival instincts kicked in. “Help!” he yelled out again. He banged on the metal underside of the desk. It thundered a noise even louder than his voice. “Help!!!”

Fred Chickweed did help. While the monsters were enjoying their breakfast of cold pizza, he scurried to Principal Klieglight’s door.

“Unlock the door!” he whispered fiercely. “If we hurry, we can escape before the pizza runs out!”

Mr. Klieglight heard the directive. He had no idea what it meant. Was this a trick? It seemed unlikely, but Mr. Klieglight knew that he was no longer thinking very clearly. The last couple of days had just about worn him out. If the monsters were trying to trick him, so be it. He was tired. So tired.

Klieglight unbent himself and crawled out from underneath the desk. He stood, but was erect only for a moment before he fell once again to the floor. Cramped under his desk as he had been, his legs had fallen asleep. Completely asleep. He tried to stand again, but it was no use. Gumby legs. He had Gumby legs. When he tried to use them as one uses legs—to stand on, or to walk with, they were useless. Painfully, he dragged his legs behind him as he crawled, lobster-fashion, to the office door and unlocked it.

Chapter 37. The Trolls Bar the Door

The trolls were lying flat out on the floor of the foyer. The land trolls had left, which was fine with the trolls because that left all of the pizza for them. They had enjoyed this new food. It was excellent. There hadn't been enough of it...they could have continued eating for hours...but it was quite a bit more than they had eaten since the Big Sleep. For the moment, they allowed it to be enough. This new cave was dark, and it was peaceful, and that, too, was for the moment enough.

“Ahhh,” said Obeast.

“Ahhh,” said Schmatzenbladder.

All of the trolls, through their exertions with the rock at the bottom of the lake, had been getting awfully hungry. Obeast, the most prone toward feeling hunger, had been the first to taste this new food, and perhaps the most appreciative. Schmatzenbladder,

too, though he had eaten more than most trolls in the last little while, was happy for the new food. He was tired of having doggie breath.

Now, the pizza boxes empty, they lay back and enjoyed the moment.

“This place is pretty nice, for an above-ground cave,” Bilgewater said.

“Nice and roomy,” echoed Biledumper.

“Strange that there aren’t any land trolls here,” said Slimegobbler.

“Just us,” said Droolmeister

“Just the Rabid Band,” said Schnottweiper

“Say...” said Schmoozeglutton. He had been thinking. Thinking of how Brumvack had locked them out of their ancestral caves.

“What if...” Schmoozeglutton continued.

Schmatzenbladder finished his sentence for him. “What if we lock the *land* trolls out of *this* cave?”

It took the trolls no time at all to get up and roam the halls and find something with which to bar the door. There were no large, round rocks here. But they managed to bar the only entrance they knew to this above-ground cave. Before they were done, they had used the secretary’s desk, the principal’s desk, 37 student

desks, 3 library carousels, one stainless steel cafeteria serving station, an entire set of the Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 easels, and 17 basketballs.

When they were done, the whole of the Rabid Band stood and looked their handiwork.

“Hey,” said Schmoozeglutton. “Good trick.”

Chapter 38. Fred Chickweed Saves the Day

Fred Chickweed emerged from the dark school, blinking. He held Principal Klieglight at his side, supporting his weight. The man's legs were still tingly and rubbery from having fallen asleep.

Before Fred knew what was happening, someone had asked him a question. He blinked again, then saw a microphone in front of his face. He stared at it dumbly. After a moment, the person repeated the question.

“Can you tell our audience, sir, how you defeated the monsters?”

“Um,” said Fred.

“And can you tell us how you rescued Principal Klieglight, here?”

“*Mister* Klieglight,” answered Mr. Klieglight.

“Yes,” said Lori. “Can you tell us how you rescued Mr. Klieglight?”

“Um,” repeated Fred.

Lori turned to the camera. “Ladies and gentlemen, our hero is still in a bit of shock, having single-handedly taken on the monsters of Lake Maebiewahnapoopie.”

Finally, Fred’s tongue loosened a bit, and he proffered an answer that he thought would clarify everything.

“I am a pizza delivery boy,” he said.

Lori turned back to him and asked, “A pizza delivery boy?” She again poked the microphone toward him.

“I...um...I...” said Fred. “I gave them some pizza.”

“And can you tell us how it felt, single-handedly facing down these monsters?” Lori asked.

“I...I think they’re still hungry,” replied Fred.

Lori turned to the man propped against Fred’s shoulder. “Mr. Klieglight. Do you have anything to add?”

Mr. Klieglight blinked in the sun. He couldn’t quite see the woman who was interviewing him, but he sensed that this was his moment. Perhaps, if he said just the right thing on TV, this whole mess would straighten itself out. If so, perhaps the mayor would reinstate him to his principalship. He’d have to be careful,

though...this reporter was a wily one. He'd have to keep his metaphors straight.

“I think what Mr. Garbanzo Bean here is trying to say...”

But Fred interrupted him. “Chickweed, sir.”

Mr. Klieglight started again. “I think what Mr. Chickpea here is trying to say is that organization and discipline are the keys to running a clean pirate ship. Otherwise, sharks will infest the learning.”

Here Fred interrupted. “Really,” he insisted. “I think they’re still hungry.”

But Mr. Klieglight was not to be interrupted in his moment of verbal triumph. He was beginning to feel the stirrings of something in his belly. This was going to work out fine. All he had to do was say the right thing. Just the right turn of phrase had pulled him from many a precipice. “Right!” said Klieglight. “The sharks are hungry! Hungry for knowledge! And thirsty, too! We must do our best to feed their thirst for knowledge! Fatherly hands!”

“Fatherly hands?” asked Lori.

“Thirsty sharks eat fatherly hands!” exclaimed Mr. Klieglight.

Lori turned once again to Fred. “Are you indicating that the monsters are only tamed for the moment, having eaten your pizzas?”

“We really should get them more food,” said Fred. “They’re pretty peaceful when they’re eating.” When no one moved, Fred added, “I think we should hurry.”

Mr. Klieglight was quick to agree. “Time on task!” he yelled. “That’s the ticket!”

Taking Fred at his word that the trolls were still hungry, and that they wouldn’t perpetrate any acts of violence if fed, a plan was hatched to get them more pizza. Petey himself stepped up, happy for some free advertising, and delivered another 60 of his Perfect Pizza Pies in the back of his station wagon.

Miraculously, he wasn’t upset about the van. Where Fred had thought that he would be yelled at, fired, and possibly sued, instead his boss emerged from the station wagon with his hand outthrust, ready to congratulate Fred on a job well done. “Capital!” he whispered to Fred as he shook his hand. “This is going to increase our business tenfold! Capital! How does it feel to be a hero? I have to say, I never saw it in you, but you’ve saved the day! And boosted the business of Petey’s besides!”

Before Petey could effuse too much, however, Fred disentangled himself from his grasp, and from the attentions of the reporter. He walked to the station wagon, bent to pick up a stack of ten pizzas, and took it upon himself to deliver them. Strangely, he couldn't access the front door of the school, but it wasn't long before someone stepped out of the crowd with a ring of keys on her belt. It was Miss Kimberlane, the janitor. She led Fred to a side door near the cafeteria, and held it open as he entered the school.

Only afterwards, after the trolls were sated from a full meal of Petey's Perfect Pizza Pies and snoozing with loud grumbly snores and snorts, after everyone had pretty much gone home, and after Fred had spent a sore weekend recovering from his long night of superhero endeavors, did he realize that he had delivered his last pizza.

Epilogue: The Trolls of Lone Tree High

And so, dear reader, we come to the end of our story. The trolls, having lost one home, have found their way to a new one. The town of Lone Tree, once a small town little worthy of comment, had an exciting 24 hours that almost no one knew about until afterwards, and now is once again a small town little worthy of comment. Now, however, it sports the Lone Tree Monster Museum, a zoo of sorts that houses a dozen trolls. A few thousand people a year come through town to visit the museum, where they tour the grounds and read educational signage and watch the beasts on closed-circuit television. Very occasionally, someone catches a glimpse of a live troll; these few folks are allowed the opportunity to buy an exclusive t-shirt. The shirt featured a harrowing portrait of Schmooze-glutton on the front, and a few words on the back: “I have seen a monster.” The t-shirts, among other items, were

available for sale at *Moon's Monster Emporium*, a new business on the shore of the lake.

At first, it had been unclear that the town was going to allow the trolls to remain in the school. In fact, a town meeting was called to order on that Saturday afternoon expressly to discuss the problem of ejecting the trolls. Fred Chickweed attended that meeting; before things had progressed too far, he piped up with the opinion that the trolls were for the moment contained; perhaps they should just leave them there. After all, they didn't want monsters having free reign on the streets. Lone Tree High thus became a zoo, which folks had to admit wasn't too much of a change.

The creation of the Museum, of course, left Principal Klieglight without a job. The residents of Lone Tree, though, realized that a work history consisting of elementary school teaching followed by a position in public school administration left Klieglight thoroughly unprepared for the real world. They took pity on him, and hired him to be the manager of the new facility. And, recognizing that behind every manager must be a person who actually knows what is going on, they hired Ms. Blandishment to be his assistant.

Mr. Klieglight, now on a Wednesday through Sunday schedule, would remain in his newly-fortified office during

business hours, regaling visitors with facts about the monsters over his I9000 Communications Nexus:

“Ladies and gentlemen, fellow students, and children of all ages. What you see before you are creatures heretofore unknown to man. Scientists refer to them as Troglodytes Maebiewahnapoopicus. They are nocturnal creatures, awake at night and largely quiescent during the day. While their natural diet is presumed to be carnivorous, they seem quite content to eat hamburgers and tater tots. Please remain behind the fence at all times; these monsters are presumed to be dangerous.”

At first, Klieglight was unhappy that he was no longer principal. Soon, however, he began to take to his new position. Ultimately, he found that he preferred trolls to children. The tourists, he found, inhabited not too much lower a standard of intelligence and comportment than his former students.

Mr. Klieglight hired the high school cafeteria lady, as well. Monsters, she informed him, needed to eat more than just pizza. The cafeteria was perfectly suited to rolling out hundreds of burgers a day, or thin Salisbury steaks with lumpy gravy, or chicken nuggets. They already had a dozen 50 pound bags of tater tots in the freezer, and a delivery system in place to acquire more. It was unclear whether the trolls appreciated these different foods, or whether they just loved the ketchup that the cafeteria lady used

in abundance. For the trolls, ketchup became a food group unto itself. This, the cafeteria lady was just fine with. For her, ketchup was a vegetable.

There was one thing, though, that the trolls wouldn't eat. No matter how much ketchup she poured over them, the trolls wouldn't touch her cafeteria hot dogs.

The cafeteria lady wasn't fully comfortable with the eating habits of the trolls, who in their long lives hadn't learned many table manners. Armed with her two foot long spatula, however, she took them in hand and straightened them up to teenage standards. It wasn't much of a stretch.

Miss Kimberlane, the school's janitor, was hired as well. At first, it was thought that her services wouldn't be required; the trolls preferred a place not too neatly kept. It soon became obvious, however, that the humans visiting the Lone Tree Monster Museum created more than enough refuse to keep her busy, and more.

Lori Bradshaw's video journalism did indeed make it to the small screen. A clip of Mayor King holding onto Boopsie and declaring that there were no monsters in Lone Tree, followed by a clip of the monsters of Lone Tree, ran in a continuous loop for a full news cycle. Before long, the town's citizens rose up and

recalled Mayor King. In his place, they installed the hero of the day, Fred Chickweed. If a man was practical enough to deliver pizzas, it was heard said, then he was better suited to a leadership position than the yahoo currently in office.

Those of us who know Fred Chickweed will suspect that he won't be more than a single term mayor himself, but who knows? Lesser men have made whole careers out of public service. In any case, he will be mayor for more than long enough to reroute a portion of the law enforcement budget toward installing a red phone in his office, buying a sports car, and having an orange chicken painted on its hood. He's already thumbing through car magazines.

Lori Bradshaw was offered a job at the *Lone Tree Sentinel*. It was the paper's policy to employ only high school graduates, but on the other hand they didn't want to be scooped again by a high school student with no journalism credentials. Better to hire her outright. Lori started off with a bang by writing an editorial wondering if Moon Park should be renamed to its old moniker, Mosquehenna Park. Weren't there enough Moons already?

The spirit of the column carried as far as The Black Hat Man's Odiferous Honky Tonk and Outlaw Saloon, where the regulars took it upon themselves to rename the town as well: they called it Lone Stump.

While the residents of Lone Tree thought that they had caged the trolls within the school, the trolls felt otherwise. In their estimation, they had tricked the townspeople out of the biggest above-ground cave in town. For the trolls, it was a sign of their obvious superiority to the puny creatures of the land. One sign of many.

For the most part, they enjoyed their new above-ground cave. It had obviously been built for those who enjoy dark, smelly places. They especially enjoyed the library. There, they dumped over the shelves of books, and created their beds amongst them. Book piles weren't as classical as rock piles for sleeping, but they were more comfortable. They grudgingly admitted that the land trolls must be smart to have so many books. Land troll or not, you could bury yourself in a pile of books and sleep soundly for hours at a time. Schmoozeglutton found a book called Unabridged Dictionary that made a mighty fine pillow. And also a good weapon.

At first, the trolls considered the above-ground cave to be temporary quarters. As time passed, however, they began to consider it to be their home. As they fought their little in-battles that were the lifeblood of any band of trolls, the brick walls became less regular. Once-unmarred walls came to have troll-

sized holes within them. The school, over time, became ever more cave-like, ever more smelly, ever more comfortable. And the food was excellent.

They never saw the land troll that was nominally their leader. He preferred to rule, evidently, from a distance. But while they never saw him, they heard his powerful voice every now and again. It came from everywhere, echoing up and down the corridors of the above-ground cave.

Schmoozeglutton was ever on the lookout for this land troll. He tried to maintain a ready supply of gut-air for the moment that he saw him. It was difficult, containing the mother of all belches within himself, ever unreleased. It made him walk with a bit of a stiff gait. Also, it interfered with his digestion. But Schmoozeglutton had what it took to be a leader. All he needed was the opportunity to win back that position. The time would come, he knew. Woe to the land troll when Schmoozeglutton had the chance to challenge him.

The Rabid Band was happy with their new leader, though. It wasn't such a bad thing, they thought, having a leader who was mostly absent. Brumvack had left a bad taste in their mouths. They were beginning to see how readily he had manipulated them, how cynically he had bent them to his will.

The trolls, in their new home, became ever more fat and lethargic. Soon, they had regained all the pounds they had lost through the course of the Big Sleep. Regained those, and then some. They liked it that way. It turned out that a high school is the ideal environment for trolls. It provided almost no intellectual stimulation. It encouraged boredom and somnolence. Its dank, unfriendly atmosphere created just the aura of oppression craved by creatures who had spent centuries underground.

The trolls, it must be said, have more tough times ahead of them. If they stopped to think about it, which they didn't, they would realize that their lifespan is far longer than that of the creatures they are now counting on to take care of them. They would realize that they are a dying breed, the last known band of trolls in a world once rich with troll-kind. They would realize, for gosh sakes, that there wasn't a female troll amongst them, and so the chances of propagating their species was remote. Perhaps it will someday occur to them that they should be exploring whatever underground world they can discover for others like themselves. Perhaps they will someday come to understand that because they inhabit a zoo, with every one of their needs seen to by others, they will become weak, that their culture will be shredded, that their hold on dignity will be threatened.

But for now, the trolls are happy. Where once they sat around the central room of their cave eating slabs of bone-headed dinosaur fish, they now sit in the dimly-lit cafeteria of the school, eating all manner of institutional food. Their bellies are just as full, their eyes have that same satisfied glazed-over look, and their dreams are small, manageable ones, of trolls fights and beer nights and belching contests.

The reader might almost imagine that they are as happy as they ever were in their pre-ice age existence. Indeed, though their surroundings are different, in every other way the trolls look much as they ever did.

Except for the ketchup stains.