

Captain Quark and the Time Cheaters

Donald Trump's Favorite Sci-Fi Novel — NOT!!

by

William Shatspeare



1.Ø1

A corsair closed in on a remote island. Landing parties assembled, received orders, and, bristling with steel, swarmed into small boats.

Islanders gathered on the beach. Infants wailed as fear stiffened their mothers' arms. A group edged forward to greet the mysterious intruders.

Storm waves washed the rowboats ashore. Sailors leaped into the surf and, clashing and cursing, hauled their crafts onto the sand. Ignoring the parley, they cast their eyes seaward.

Through a spyglass, the skipper studied the brigands as they clustered landward of the boats. Lowering the glass, he issued a command and then resumed observations.

An emissary shuffled forward. Eyeing his approach, the pirates drew their swords. The man pleaded, "Peace! We welcome you!" At the same instant, explosions rent the air. Spouts of flame burst from cannons and impacts rocked the beach.

Amidst the islanders' screams, the pirates launched a fearsome assault. The buccaneers ransacked the island. Ultimately, discerning a dearth of booty the raiders quit the island and resumed their quest for new worlds, new peoples, and the hidden paths to legendary riches...

2.01

August 15, 2721, 3:15pm

"...I'll bet that's not what you read in high school." Maxwell Muddle, professor of history at Santa Barbara College, surveyed the amphitheater. Some of the faces registered alarm. Dr. Muddle, in his early forties, balding, but otherwise sound of mind and body, had a tendency to call on his students. Worse, he often did so without posing a discernible question. Gesturing to the top of the amphitheater, Muddle hazarded, "But that's why you're in college, isn't it? To learn the truth?"

A fit of coughing broke out. Muddle scowled at the culprit, a graduate student named Angellica de Claire. Gellie was outfitted in a striped blouse, comfy leggings and black boots. Angellica had cinched her hair into a ponytail save for a springy lock that dangled in front of her left eye. She countered Muddle's frown with an exaggerated smile.

Accustomed to taunts of this sort from his teaching assistant, Muddle responded in kind. Clapping a hand over his heart, he crooned, "Thank you ever so much, Gellie. What would I do without you?"

Sensing Muddle's sarcasm Angellica blipped out her tongue.

Over scattered chuckles, Muddle ignored Gellie's parry in favor of pursuing his elusive point. "Ironic as it may seem, the truth is..." He arched an eyebrow to emphasize the significance of his next statement, "...there is no such thing as truth."

Pausing to roll up his sleeves Muddle observed the effect his remark had produced. As he hoped, his comment created a stir that, as the moments ticked by, escalated into an agitated buzz. Drawing on long experience Muddle often instigated a climate of disciplined rowdiness as a way of sparking interest in his lectures. He called out over the hubbub, "I repeat, if it's truth you're after, don't bother searching for it in history books."

This statement achieved the agreeable result—to Muddle's ear—of arousing even greater rancor among his students. The uproar provided Muddle with an excuse to amplify his next thought. Filling his lungs, he cried, "And, in case you were wondering...the truth remains elusive because all historical facts are open to endless interpretations!" Muddle flung his arms wide, "Indeed, there are as many interpretations of history as there are interpreters. For some, the fall of Rhome was a disaster. For others..." He pumped a fist, "...a triumph!"

Muddle held his tongue to give his students time to ruminate. During the lull, Muddle swatted a spot of chalk on his slacks before posing a weighty question, "So, my fine young scholars, how do we know if one interpretation of history is better than another? Hmmm? Are all truths equal, or are some truths more equal than others?" Wandering to the front of the lecture dais Muddle splayed his hands, "Anyone care to comment?"

Intimidated by the cavernous lecture hall, the students shrank silent as snails into their seats. Muddle sympathized. If he was in their shoes, he would do the same.

Being a requirement for most majors Muddle's Western Civ classes usually filled

to the rafters. Although high enrollments had made him the darling of administrators Muddle's popularity also had drawbacks. He often had nightmares about drowning in oceans of unmarked papers.

Muddle's question dangled. Being an opponent of torture Muddle decided to answer it himself. "You know those old chestnuts about wooden teeth and coonskin caps?" Muddle wagged his head to add a finer shade of balance to his next comment, "Let's just say those versions of history don't hew as close to truth as one might wish."

The professor grinned in anticipation of his next thought; a sales pitch that he always delivered on the first day of class, "That..." Muddle beamed, "...is why it's so important to study history!"

The fact that Muddle loved his work was a secret to no one. Students often grumbled about his exams, but few complained about his lectures. Even Muddle's most disenchanting students would often concede that Muddle had a flair for making mind-numbing drivel, like history, come to life.

Muddle's eyes sparkled as he drew the disparate threads of his lecture together, "When you begin to look closely, you will see that history is full of surprises. And most surprising of all..." He delayed half a beat for emphasis, "...is that history changes."

Gleefully, Muddle noted the consternation on his students' faces. "Surely..." Muddle bopped his forehead, "...if history is naught but a transcription of past events, then it can't change! ...*Can it?*"

As he prepared to dissect this mystery Muddle noticed an odd character seated in the amphitheater. It was not uncommon for students to attend class wearing all sorts of costumes. SBC was situated on a dazzling stretch of the Pacific coast and students often attended lectures sporting little more than bathing togs. But this guy was different. To begin with, the mystery man looked like he made a living by crawling through cobwebby caves. Nor, Muddle noted wryly, did Mr. Mysterioso blow much cash on dry cleaning. In response to Muddle's gaze, the mystery man tugged his fedora down to cover his whiskery face.

Muddle tried not to stare. Strange as it seemed the mystery man could be just like any other student. SBC had recently launched a number of special degree programs for mid-career professionals. Muddle cajoled himself. Grubby or not, the mystery man probably had as much right to be in his classroom as anyone.

Speaking of classrooms, Muddle suddenly recalled that he was in the midst of a lecture. Thanks to the mystery man Muddle had completely lost his train of thought. *Hmmm... Where was I? I remember something about the Rhoman Empire and then...Aww, nuts!*

Muddle castigated himself, "*You idiot! When will you learn? If you've got to daydream, do it in your office!!*"

As a means of buying time Muddle tapped the microphone that was clipped to his shirt collar. The mike, as Muddle knew only too well, was in perfect working order and transformed his finger taps into ear-splitting thunderclaps, "Ka-THUNK! UNK-UNK!!"

While his students howled in fright, Muddle skittered to the lectern and riffled through his notes. Muddle soon found the point where he had drifted from his prepared comments. Seeing that it would be a simple matter to get his lecture back on track, Muddle heaved a sigh. "So..." the absent-minded professor recommenced, "...do you remember all that talk about truth?" The devilish gleam rekindled in Muddle's eyes,

"Well, if you study history carefully enough, you'll quickly discover that it contains no truth whatsoever!"

Muddle's students shifted in their seats. Why their professor should be so elated about his field's grievous shortcomings was a real puzzler.

Aware that he was skating on thin ice, Muddle added, "Once you delve into the illusions of orthodox history—such as, who deserves credit for discovering America—you will understand how the past can change, because..." Muddle's pulse quickened, "...*you* will have changed it!"

Muddle fell back a step and held his breath. He had dropped his bombshell. The professor exhaled slowly and agonizingly. Down and down sank his chest and with it went Muddle's hopes. Instead of erupting into riotous applause Muddle's students looked singularly unimpressed. Muddle imagined that he could hear crickets chirping in the amphitheater.

He sighed. Some things never change. Muddle encountered the same reaction whenever he trotted out his blockbuster theory of *Historical Transitivity*.

Crickets...

The gist of Muddle's theory was simple but provocative. Interpretations of the past often change when priorities shift in the present. Wars, dynasties, even entire historical epochs were forever falling in and out of historical fashion. With that in mind, historical transitivity asserted that the past was just as malleable as the present.

If Muddle's theory had stopped there, he might have been able to generate enough polite interest to assuage his damaged ego. But Muddle insisted on adding another wrinkle that, as far as his students were concerned, pitched Muddle and his theory into the abyss of certifiable insanity.

Ever the optimist, Muddle was convinced that, with the right tools, he could do more than change the way that people *interpret* history. Muddle believed that, via the magic of historical transitivity, he would—somehow, some day!—find a way to alter the very course of human history. For Muddle, history was not a lifeless record of bygone events. Muddle believed that history contained all of the answers to humanity's most vexing problems. All he had to do was identify the key turning points in history and then find a way to change their outcomes...*for the better!!*

Before he could finish that thought, Muddle noticed that Gellie had turned an odd shade of green. Her mouth fell open and she hoisted a shaky finger toward the classroom's flatscreen.

Being philosophically opposed to teaching with computer gadgetry Muddle rarely even glanced at the flatscreen. A screensaver typically scrolled innocuous Faux News teasers throughout Muddle's low-tech lectures. Muddle was on the verge of shooshing Gellie outside for a breath of fresh air when he noticed similar expressions throughout the amphitheater. Curious, Muddle turned to examine the screen. What he saw nearly knocked him on his can.

Instead of Faux News blurbs, the SmartScreen displayed the mind-blowing image of a vast spacecraft descending over Washington, DC. Muddle guessed that the ship must be upwards of a kilometer—perhaps even two—in diameter. The ship was tall enough to hover a dozen meters above the White House, while, at its topmost curve, it was obscured by low-flying clouds. Though he found the idea bewildering, Muddle couldn't help thinking that the spacecraft bore an uncanny resemblance to a colossal

bike wheel. The wheel rotated at a modest pace, which drew attention to its sorry state of repair. In addition to being woefully out of true a majority of the ship's spokes were either broken or missing.

As Muddle tallied the wheelcraft's list of shocking defects, a column of purple light sputtered to life at its base. The purple beam struck the White House and, for one anxious moment, Muddle feared that it might vaporize the old plantation villa. But, instead of destroying the White House, the beam popped, fizzled and then conveyed three opaque forms to the rooftop.

The first figure to emerge from the beam was a large, orange humanoid. In addition to having sunset orange skin the alien's body was shaped like an overripe citrus. The orange blob's head was topped by candy floss hair and his doughy face was accented by a triple-double chin. The alien was just as pudgy below the neck as he was above. He wore a suit of armor—which would have been intimidating if the alien's marshmallowy flesh didn't protrude through its seams.

Following the dough ball a shirtless weasel wearing camo slacks stepped out of the beam. Without a shirt, it was evident that the weasel had undergone extensive cybernetic modification. There were sensors, metallic sinew and electric motors operating throughout the critter's torso. The weasel's eyes were sharp and accusing.

The third figure to step out of the beam was a spindly, self-conscious geek. The nerd was outfitted in a black scuba suit that was bedazzled with the moniker, "The Plumber!" Comically, the plumber also toted a toilet plunger over his shoulder much as a sentry would bear a rifle.

An object unspooled from the wheelcraft. When it dropped low enough, the weasel caught it, flipped a switch on its base and then spoke into it with a heavy east European accent, "Tisd, Tisd. Von, doo, tree. Ees vorking, eh? De mick?"

Loud speakers installed in the wheelcraft's hull blasted the weasel's mike test out to a ten block radius of the White House. The dough ball assured the weasel that he was indeed holding a hot mike.

"Hokay." The weasel passed the mike to the dough ball, "You spick in de mick."

The orange blob snatched the mike from the rodent's hand. Only then did Muddle notice that the dough ball's hands were laughably tiny. In an abortive attempt to conceal this shortcoming, the blob had sheathed his right hand with a golden gauntlet. Even with the gauntlet, the poor guy had to use both hands to hold the mike. Gazing out over a swelling sea of spectators, the dough ball sneered, "Greetings, Earthlings!"

When he spoke, the blob scowled so much that Muddle wondered if his tongue had gone rancid, "Today, you have the honor of being addressed by the most awesome bazillionaire in the Infiniverse!"

Muddle blinked, "Did that guy just say he's...?"

"That's right," The blob cut Muddle off, "You never thought you would be so lucky, did you?" To encourage audience feedback, the dough ball raised his right arm in an alarming approximation of a Nutzi salute.

There were gasps from Muddle's students. Not believing his eyes, Muddle turned to Gellie, "Is this some kind of joke...?"

"That's right..." The orange blob resumed, "...today you have the great good fortune—and I mean the really amazing fortune—of being addressed by the most amazing speaker who's ever set foot in this shithole country." The dough ball

encouraged the crowd to shower him with affection, "Throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart. Which not everyone has. I can assure you."

In response to a signal from the blob, the weasel and Plumber began whapping out a drumroll on their thighs.

The dough ball soaked up a few more moments of adulation before braying, "...Get ready to be amazed, Earthlings. Cuz, I am the one! The only!! **URANUS BLOWHARD!!!**

There was a confused silence. Practically everyone on Earth expected the speaker to confess that he was a poker-faced comedian rather than a nincompoop named Uranus, but that didn't happen.

"No doubt..." Blowhard wagged a teensy finger at the White House crowd, "...you are wondering, 'Why is this sex-pot bazillionaire wasting time on losers like us?'" Blowhard didn't wait for his audience to register the insult, "The answer is that I have come here to help you."

Uh, oh! Muddle's skin crawled, *What's this guy up to?*

"At great personal cost, I have come here..." Blowhard droned hypnotically, "...to build border walls, badmouth immigrants, commit high crimes and misdemeanors and, generally speaking, do everything I can to Make Amerrica Great Again. "

No sooner had Blowhard uttered those altruistic sentiments than an infectious chant began to emanate from the wheelcraft.

"MAGA...MAGA...MAGA..."

Without knowing why, the crowd outside the White House felt a burning urge to chant.

"MAGA! MAGA! MAGA!"

Like pistons in an engine, Muddle's students took up the chant.

"MAGA!! MAGA!! MAGA!!"

Like a fast-moving pandemic, people in every corner of the USA suddenly started babbling.

"MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!"

Feeling queasier by the moment, Muddle tried to dismiss his students, but his fare-thee-wells were drowned out by his students' deafening cheers.

"MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!"

2.02

August 15, 2124, 3:48pm

Clutching a wad of lecture notes Muddle unlocked his office door and nudged it open. The office, furnished in tasteful hardwood, was deplorably overstuffed with straggling heaps of junk--or what Muddle preferred to describe as valuable historical artifacts. Despite the best efforts of a first-rate ventilation system, a musty-attic smell pervaded the room.

After tossing the lecture notes on his desk Muddle plopped into a chair, unlocked a secure side drawer and shuffled through its contents: a multitude of brownish prescription bottles. Sifting through the containers Muddle eventually located a bottle in which a few tablets rattled. He wrestled with its cap. When the cap wouldn't budge Muddle scrutinized the label to see if the bottle was, in fact, worth opening.

Snick...

A bank of fluorescent lights flickered to life overhead.

"Hey, Max, it might help if you had some light." Muddle turned to discover Angellica's bright eyes peeping around his door. She inquired, "Mind if I come in?"

"No. Not at all, Gellie, come right in." Muddle waved toward a wingback chair that was occupied by a teetering stack of newspapers. "Don't mind the papers, Gellie. I'm just going to recycle them."

Angellica rolled her eyes and tipped the papers to the floor before flouncing sideways into the wingback. "So..." Angellica gushed, "What did you make of that whole 'MAGA, MAGA, MAGA' thing?"

"Ugh..." Muddle winced as his headache spiked, "It was like a bad dream."

"*Like a bad dream?* Is that all you have to say, Max?" Angellica swung her feet to the floor and scooted her chair closer to Muddle's, "C'mon, Max! You can do better than that. I mean..." She slapped Muddle's knee, "Do you think Blowhard's MAGA mania could have anything to do with that dopey theory of yours?" Gellie threw back her head and roared with laughter, "Wouldn't that be hilarious, Max? I mean, you could finally say that your crackpot theory isn't the dumbest thing since self-igniting matches."

"Wha-...!" Muddle clutched a hand to his heart, "Crackpot theory...!?"

Before Muddle could say any more, there was a heavy knock on his door, "BANG! BANG! BANG!"

Muddle and Gellie exchanged looks.

The visitor knocked again with greater urgency, "BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!" and then inquired, "Hello? Is anyone in there?" The voice, though growly and bear-like, also bore a note of good cheer, "Ahoy! I seek an audience with Professor Maxwell Muddle. Is this his place of work?" The visitor pounded again—this time nearly hard enough to bash the door off its hinges, "BANG!!! BANG!!! BANG!!!"

Fearing that the visitor's door-knocking might soon bring the roof down, Muddle sang out, "Uhh, hello? Whom, may I ask, is calling?"

"Ah, good!" The cheery voice boomed, "Er...If it's not too much trouble, professor,

would you mind opening the door?"

Muddle cringed, "Well, I...don't usually open the door to strangers. Especially strangers who sound like bears. I hope you understand."

"Ah, yes." The thundering voice conceded, "I get that a lot. To put your mind at ease, professor, I can assure you that I am not a bear. Also, I have been given a password that should convince you of my good intentions. Would you like to hear it?"

A password? Muddle glanced at Gellie. She shrugged, "Either way, you don't have to open the door, Max."

Seeing the sense in Gellie's feedback, Muddle shouted to the caller, "Okay, my good man. Please tell me your password."

"Ah, good...just...one moment..." There was a short pause followed by a sequence of growly grunts and groans. The next thing Muddle heard was the creepy sound of a bear panting beneath his door. The visitor puffed, "...I do apologize, professor, but my visit must remain a closely-guarded secret. Would you mind if I whispered the password into your ear?"

"Oh...ugh!" Muddle recoiled at the thought of a grizzly bear nuzzling his ear. Instead, he threw caution to the wind and, in spite of a frownie face from Gellie, opened his office door. To Muddle's lasting surprise, he found a huge viking lying horizontally in the hallway.

The viking beamed, "Professor Muddle! We meet at last. I am Thud, the God of Thunder." The viking tried to hug Muddle, but was thwarted by the Lilliputian doorframe. Following the failed hug, Thud inquired, "Professor, would you mind if I entered your office?"

"Oh..." Muddle fell back a step and compared the viking's shoulders to the doorway, "Sure, Thud. If you can squeeze through, be my guest."

"Ha-ha! Not to worry professor." Thud paused to direct a smile at Gellie, "As you might guess, I encounter this problem a lot, so..." The viking wheezed, "...I get plenty of practice."

Thud was wearing a Minnesota Vikings jersey. As he wriggled through the doorway, the thunder god's labors were accompanied by the sound of shredding fabric. By the time he finished, Thud's jersey was in tatters.

Once inside Muddle's office, Thud sat cross-legged to keep his head below the ceiling tiles. Assessing the sorry state of his jersey, Thud addressed Gellie, "Dear lady, would you care for a souvenir?"

"Excuse me?" Gellie blinked.

"My jersey." Thud indicated his demolished shirt, "Women find me irresistible and they are ecstatic whenever I remove my clothing, so..." Thud whisked the jersey over his head, "...I am always happy to oblige." Every muscle in Thud's torso rippled like corded steel.

"Ach! No, please!" Gellie averted her eyes, "Look, Thud, that's kind of you, but I have a boyfriend, and he may not be a Norse god, but..." Gellie's eyes gleamed at the thought of her beau's antique slide rule collection, "...he's my guy."

"Nonsense!" Ignoring everything Gellie had just said, the viking balled up his shirt and tossed it to her, "I am Thud, the God of Thunder. No woman can resist me. You see?" Thud struck a pose and gazed rapturously at himself.

Gellie frowned at the jersey and, when Thud wasn't looking, tossed it aside.

Sensing the opportunity, Gellie made a beeline for the door, "It's been a pleasure gentlemen, but I've got to go."

"Wha-at?" Muddle's voice cracked, "Aw, come on Gellie. Can't you stay? I mean..." He gestured toward Thud, "Please!!"

"Professor?" Thud stopped flexing long enough to interpose, "I believe your associate is correct. It would be best to keep our conversation private."

"See, Max?" Gellie suppressed a giggle, "You don't want me eavesdropping on your man-cave bidniss, do ya'?" Gellie managed to get one foot out the door before Muddle bounded across the room and caught her by the shoulder.

Panting into Gellie's ear, Muddle pleaded, "Gellie, I...I really wish you would stay."

Deaf to his request, Gellie waved farewell to Thud, "See ya' later, big guy. It's been a pleasure."

"Dear lady," Thud blew a kiss, "The pleasure has been all mine."

Gellie pretended to catch Thud's kiss and then, as Muddle pressed close, wiped her hand on his shirt.

"Gellie, please!" Muddle whined, "You can't leave me alone with this guy!"

"Max," Gellie jabbed a finger into his chest, "Don't you think it's a little strange that only blippets after Uranus Blowhole arrives...?"

"*Blowhard*," Muddle corrected.

"Who cares?" Gellie retorted, "Think, Max! There's gotta be some connection..." She thrust Muddle back into his office, "...and it's your job to figure out what it is."

As Muddle stumbled backward, Thud snagged him by the shirt collar, "Gotcha, professor!" Hoisting Muddle like a prize fish, Thud beamed, "Guess who won the Asgardian fishing contest three years running?"

"Hah!" Gellie admired Thud's trophy, "See ya' later, Max! Oh, and, Thud...?" She winked, "...not if I see you first, pal!" Without awaiting a reply, Gellie vanished like a Republican on tax day.

Meanwhile...

Shillary Claptrap was scribbling memos when a column of purple light erupted in the Oval Office. Out stepped Uranus Blowhard. The blob had traded his battle armor for an ill-fitting business suit.

"So, if it isn't Crooked Shillary," Blowhard sneered, "Still up to no good, I'll bet."

"Ha!" Claptrap countered, "The scummy pot badmouths the kettle." She raked a reproachful eye over the blob, "You don't have the necessary clearance for Oval Office visits, Blowhard, so I suggest you clear out."

"Necessary clearance? Ha!" Blowhard plopped down on a settee, "Did you have the necessary clearance for that email server of yours?"

"Very funny." Claptrap glowered, "You play dirty, Blowhard. I'll give you that."

"Speaking of which..." Blowhard snapped his fingers and his sidekick, Igor Lutin, popped out of another purple transport beam, "...Igor has reviewed the vote tallies from

your so-called..." He twiddled his fingers, "...popular election. And, as I suspected, Igor has discovered a number of alarming irregularities..."

"Da!" The little weasel chimed in, "I spot chitting mile 'vay."

"Chitting?" Claptrap rounded, "Don't be ridiculous. I crushed Dimbulb Tramp by three million votes."

"So? You admit it!" Uranus swatted Lutin's arm, "See? I told you we would catch her out, didn't I?"

"Da." Lutin acceded, "Yoo zay, zhe zay."

"What are you babbling about?" Claptrap ticked off a few of her unprecedented electoral achievements, "I am the first woman to be elected US President, the American people love me and I am sending thank-you cards to everyone who helped Shillary '*The Hotrod!*' Claptrap pull off such an historic victory."

"The people love you?! Don't make me laugh!" Blowhard scoffed, "There's no way you could get that many votes without cheating."

"How dare you?" Claptrap was aghast, "I won the election fair and square."

"That's a lie!" Blowhard pointed at a stack of documents that Lutin was carrying, "You only won because millions of illegal aliens stuffed ballot boxes for you."

"Hogwash!" Claptrap steamed, "Let me see that report."

"Nyet! Nyet!" Lutin tucked the documents behind his back.

"Not so fast, Shillary," The blob struggled to his feet, "Igor and I have just had a meeting with the Supreme Court. We all agreed that you are as crooked as a dog's hind leg."

"But..." President Claptrap appealed to the heavens, "...the Supreme Court has no jurisdiction..."

"Put a cork in it!" Blowhard barked, "Everyone agrees that my scheme is vastly preferable to having you in the White House."

Claptrap was thunderstruck, "...your scheme?"

Blowhard whipped an envelope out of an inner pocket and slapped it on Claptrap's desk, "Read it and weep, Shillary..." The blob savored each word like a bacon-wrapped weenie, "*Yuhh fi-yuhhed!*"

2.03

August 15, 2124, 4:23pm

Thud smiled at his prize fish, "Gotcha, Professor! Now where shall I put you?"

"Dccchhnnn...plzzzz...", Muddle choked as his collar cut into his throat.

"Oh, of course!" The thunder god released Muddle and the professor crumpled to the floor.

Concerned by Muddle's lassitude, Thud tried to deliver a bracing whack on the professor's back. However, Muddle saw the brute coming and skittered out of range. "Forggchet it, Thud," Muddle rasped, "I'm fine. Juccht fine." When his windpipe eventually snapped back into shape, Muddle struggled into his chair and urged Thud to sit in the furthest corner of his office, "I think you'll find...hack-ack...that's the most comfortable... hack-ack...seat I have..."

"Thanks anyway, professor..." Thud demurred, "...but none of your chairs are equal to the challenge. If you don't mind..." Just as he had done in the hallway, Thud stretched out horizontally, "...this is the safest way for me to repose in a dollhouse."

Muddle raised an eyebrow, but elected not to comment, "...so, Thud...what can I d-...?"

"Hold it right there, professor..." Thud cut in, "I'll wager you are wondering why I'm here. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, okay." Muddle bobbed his head, "You are the first Nordic god who has ever dropped in on my office hours. I can't wait to learn what would occasion a visit from someone of your eminence."

"HA-HA!!" Thud chuckled, "That is kind of you to say, professor. However, the honor is entirely mine." Feeling duty-bound to reciprocate, Thud placed a hand over his heart and pronounced, "And you, Professor Muddle, are the first teacher with whom I have ever discussed anything but lost homework."

Muddle smiled. The oversized puppy was difficult to dislike. Duplicating the god's good cheer, Muddle invited, "Okay, Thud. Enlighten me..." The professor steeped his fingers, "...how can I be of assistance?"

"Ah!" The god tapped his nose, "Time for brass tracks, eh, professor?" Thud unsnapped the thigh pocket of his cargo pants and produced a travel-weary envelope. Holding the crinkled missive between thumb and forefinger, Thud presented it to Muddle.

The plot thickens!

Muddle's expression remained blasé, but his heart pounded. Hoping that the message would shed more light on Thud's unusual visit, Muddle accepted the envelope. But, before he even resettled in his chair, Muddle frowned and tried to return the letter, "Sorry, big guy, but you've delivered this to the wrong person. This letter is addressed to..." Muddle stifled a snicker, "...Dr. Stephen Strangelove."

"No, professor!" Thud drew back as if the letter was made of rotten fish, "That letter is yours to keep."

"Hmm..." Muddle tried to trick the thunder god into reclaiming the envelope, "...okay, Thud, but I just noticed my shoelace is untied. Would you mind holding the envelope until I re-tie it?"

"I am sorry professor..." Thud wagged a finger, "...but my supersister, the Black Window, cautioned me against that very ploy." The god shook his head, "Nothing you can say will convince me to reclaim that letter. I'm sorry."

Muddle gazed at the envelope. "Well..." He fussed, "...what am I supposed to do with it?"

"I beg you, professor." Thud exhorted, "Read the letter. Though I cannot join your adventure, I am here to help you make the best possible start."

Muddle's eyes flitted between Thud and the missive. Though worse for wear, the envelope was made of a lustrous paper that added a certain gravitas to the dispatch. The professor shot one final glance at Thud and then reached for his letter opener. After slicing open the envelope, Muddle drew out a card that felt more like balsa wood than paper. The card's outer face was devoid of markings.

When he opened it, Muddle was surprised to find nothing but splotches of ink. Not knowing what else to do, Muddle touched one of the ink spots and then, before his very eyes, the ink began to swirl and dance.

Watching the ink cavort, Thud advised, "Do not be alarmed, professor. The sender thought it best to encrypt the message."

Muddle peered at Thud, "Encrypt?"

Thud nodded, "Give it a blippet."

No sooner had Thud spoken than the ink began to resolve into a flowery script, "Ah..." Muddle settled a pair of reading glasses on his nose, "...here we go."

Thud gazed warmly at the text as if at an old friend. "It is a remarkable form of encryption. No one has ever cracked the code because retrolactic splatter only decrypts when the person who is responsible for the mess tries to clean it up."

If anything, Thud's explanation only confused Muddle more. Setting aside the enigma of spilled milk encryption, the professor focused on the card's now-legible message:

Dear Dr. Strangelove,

Universes are colliding. There is a great disturbance in the Farce. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it. And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.

I hereby summon you to the Council of Ozland. The Council will take place this evening at the Crossroads of Humanity...

Muddle gawked at Thud, "Council of Ozland? Crossroads of Humanity? What is this?"

Thud shook his head, "Please read the entire message, professor."

Seeing little alternative, Muddle huffed and then resumed reading:

...We believe that you hold the key to resolving this cosmic crisis. I implore you to attend tonight's Council. We must act swiftly, or all will be lost!

Sincerely,

Lady Galahadriel & Co.

Muddle re-read the message and then looked Thud square in the eye, "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, professor! It is no joke." Thud replied, "I should have thought Uranus Blowhard's untimely arrival would have made that obvious."

"What?" Muddle gasped, "You mean, this has something to do with Blowhard?"

"Oh, dash it...!" Thud groaned, "...they told me not to divulge that. I am such a dunderhead!" He cracked a meaty fist against his skull.

"Easy, big fella!" Muddle winced at the knuckle marks on Thud's forehead, "Just forget it. Okay? I won't, uhh....Hmm... Hang on a sekk..."

Silence.

Muddle reflected on the circumstances surrounding Thud's visit and suddenly experienced an "Aha! moment." His eyes flew wide, "Now I get it! The '*they*' you just referred to is the Scavengers, isn't it?"

Thud turned a whiter shade of pale, "...uh...I...uhhh...."

Muddle was too caught up in his excitement to register Thud's woe, "What a great idea! The Scavengers are going swoop in and save the day! Oh, what a relief!!"

Muddle soon noticed that the Thunder god's complexion had morphed from rosy to green. "Hey, Thud." Muddle prodded, "What's up? You look like there's been a death in the family."

Thud winced when Muddle raised the issue of family mortality. Stiffening his upper lip, Thud blubbered, "Sniff-sniff. It is ironic that you should mention deaths in the family, professor, because..." Thud's voice cracked, "...because..."

"Oh, no...!" Muddle clapped a hand over his mouth, "I'm so sorry, Thud. Is...it your brother? What's his name...Loogi? Has he pretended to die again?"

"Would that it were so, professor." Thud sobbed, "Unfortunately, Loogi is in perfect health. No..." The hulking Norge clambered into a sitting position and produced a god-sized pocket tissue, "...death has not claimed any *single* member of my family. Rather, death has robbed me of my entire superfamily. The Scavengers are..." Thud trailed off, "...no more..."

"What?" Muddle flew out of his chair, "Nooo!! The Scavengers can't have disbanded! They're the earth's most profitable heroes, aren't they? I thought the Scavengers had sworn to combat evil to eternity and beyond!!"

"Bah!" Thud flipped his hand, "That's all a PR smokescreen. The truth is we can't stand each other." The god's voice gnarled with wrath, "And the Iron Maiden is worst of a bad bunch!" He mocked, "'Ooooh, look at me. I'm rich. I'm good looking. I can count to a thousand...' Aaarrgghh!" Thud pounded an imaginary Iron Maiden into the dirt.

Muddle refused to give up, "C'mon Thud. Couldn't you reunite long enough to kick Blowhard's butt and then go back to hating each other?"

"No!" Thud growled, "It can't be done. I've tried, but it's no use. The Scavengers will not answer the call. Not this time." Wistfully, he added, "Perhaps...nevermore..."

"So..." Muddle clutched two handfuls of hair, "...the Scavengers refuse to battle an intergalactic tyrant, and *I'm* the next card in your rolodex?"

Thud's brow furrowed, "What's a rolodex?"

"Doesn't matter." Muddle flopped face first across his desk. Without lifting his mouth from the desktop, he garbled, "My point is that I have nothing—and I mean NOTHING!—to offer in the fight against Uranus Blowhard. Why come to me?"

"Actually, professor..." Thud parried, "...that is not true. Remember what Lady G said, You..." Thud rumbled his voice, "...*hold the key!*"

"The key?" Muddle kept his face mashed on his desk, "What key? I don't have any key."

"But that's where you're wrong, professor..." Thud ransacked his memory. As he did so, waves of heat radiated from the god's overtaxed brain until... "Ah, yes! The Black Window said the 'key' is something you wrote."

"What...?" Muddle perked up, "Something...I...wrote, you say? Wow. Did the Black Window say anything...else...?"

"Hmmm..." Thud summoned every watt of brain power in his cranium, "...the Black Window said something about...a...a hyperbolic nativity," Thud shrugged, "...but it didn't make sense, so I didn't mention it..."

"Hyperbolic nativity...?" Muddle's heart thumped. *Could it be?!?* Smelling a rat Muddle scanned the room for hidden cameras. Seeing nothing untoward Muddle waded in ever so gently, "Sooo, Thud...do you think the Black Window might have said something like 'historical transitivity?'"

"Hysterical transistery? Hmmm..." Thud stroked his chin, "Noooo...I don't think so..."

"Transitivity, you...er... great guy...!" Muddle barely bit off the insult in time. He took a deep breath before trusting his voice again, "Admittedly, transitivity doesn't exactly roll off the tongue..."

"No! It doesn't, but..." the thunder god hedged, "...it's not the sort of word you'd easily forget, is it?"

"No..." Muddle's voice cracked, "...no, it isn't"

"Well, that settles it!" Thud boomed, "Now that you mention it, I clearly recall that the Black Window subscribes to your theory of horizontal relativity. If..." Thud deferred to Muddle, "...that means anything to you, professor."

"Oh, yes..." Muddle sniffled, "Yes, it does." With that, Muddle rose to his feet and pronounced, "After giving the matter all due consideration, I have decided to attend tonight's Council of Ozland."

"Hooray!!" Thud whooped, "You have no idea how happy that makes me, professor."

Strutting around like he had just won the Monaco Grand Prix, Muddle beamed at Thud, "So, where is this Crossroads of Humanity, anyway?"

"Ah, how could I forget?" Thud rattled the loose screws in his head, "The Crossroads of Humanity, my dear professor.." He swung a hand skyward, "... is located on the moon."

Muddle choked, "On the moon!!!!"

"Indeed." Thud chuckled Muddle playfully on the chin, "And the best part is that I have personally arranged your transportation..."

Meanwhile...

Back in the Oval Office, there was a knock on the door.

Blowhard sang out, "En-Tahhh!!"

The geeky plumber poked his head through the door, "You called, sir?"

"Da." Lutin beckoned, "Vee spick you, Edfarrht."

As he shambled over to Blowhard's desk, the Plumber stammered, "Hey, Igor, it's not a big deal or anything, but would you please stop calling me Edfarrht?"

"Vat?" Lutin blinked, "I zay, Edfarrht. Ees problem?"

The Plumber wrung his hands, "Look, Igor, I don't mind if you call me Edward, or Snowjob, but please don't call me Edfarrht. Okay?"

Lutin was lost, "You zay Edfarrht ees problem?"

Snowjob nodded, "Yes, it's embarrassing when you call me Edfarrht."

"Ah, zo..." The weasel struggled to wrap his head around the problem, "I zay Edfarrht? Ees feex?"

"No, no, no...!"

"Enough!" Blowhard interrupted, "No one cares, Edfart. Now take a seat." As Snowjob settled into a chair, Blowhard got straight down to business, "Igor tells me you're the best plumber in the business."

"Da." Lutin broke in, "Edfarrht ees beast. Trust, Igor. He know."

"Course, I trust you." Blowhard patted the rodent's head, "I never make a move without you, do I?"

"Da. Doan moof teel I feex."

"Edfart, I have a very important job for you." Blowhard directed Snowjob's attention to a door several meters from his desk, "The toilet in the executive washroom is woefully inadequate. I need you to install an upgrade."

"Inadequate, sir?" Snowjob cringed, "How so?"

"Let me put it like this..." Blowhard laid his cards on the table, "...I eat twelve full meals per day, Edfart. So, when it's howdy-doodly time I need a high-capacity fixture. Get it?"

"Oh..." Snowjob looked confused, "...but you know I'm not *that* kind of plumber, don't you?"

Blowhard stared daggers at Snowjob, "Igor told me that you have the necessary skills to handle this job, Edfart. Are you saying Igor is wrong?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Snowjob saw Igor slash a finger across his throat.

"No!" Snowjob shrieked, "I would never say that! Of course, I can handle the job. You can count on me!"

"Good." Blowhard shifted his attention to other matters, "You need to get right on this, Edfart. I haven't saddled up all day and it's almost high noon. Capish?"

"Sir!" Snowjob bolted to his feet, "Yes, sir! I'll have that toidy flowing like Victoria Falls before you can say, Deep State Conspiracy!" Then Snowjob raced over to the washroom, flung the door wide and dove headfirst into the commode.

2.04

August 15, 2124, 6:47pm

Concealed in an evergreen thicket, Gellie waited for Muddle to emerge. From her current position, Gellie could monitor the lights in Muddle's office while also keeping an eye on his preferred exit. The exit opened onto SBC's central quad. The quad's extraordinary vista daily inspired students to sunbathe, play volleyball, throw frisbees—anything but study. So much for academics at Santa Barbara College.

Gellie could only guess what Muddle was up to. More than once she had been tempted to scale the wall outside his office—a tricky maneuver due to the building's smooth adobe surface. In the past, Gellie had routinely spied on Muddle that way. But, wacky as this day had been, Gellie feared that Muddle would choose this of all days to notice a pair of prying eyes outside his window. Curious as she was, Gellie decided that patience would net the greatest gains.

As the sun sank, a dreamy glow spread over the campus. A cool breeze, pungent with coastal eucalyptus, wafted from the beach. Gellie snuggled inside her overcoat to stave off the chill. The zephyr also bore the rumble of high-tide breakers pounding the beach. Following a long afternoon of ceaseless observation, Gellie was on the verge of drifting off when Muddle finally burst out of his building.

Instantly on full alert, Gellie produced a pair of opera glasses. Remaining tucked in the bushes, she muttered, "Sooo, Max...why the sudden hurry?" Following a peek over her shoulder, she added, "You didn't even switch off the lights in your office. Hmm. That isn't the Max Muddle I know."

In the distance, Muddle veered off the sidewalk onto a path that angled directly to the library. Peering through her field glasses, Gellie remained hidden until Muddle had nearly crossed the quad. When she judged that Muddle had accumulated a sufficient head start, Gellie tucked her binoculars away and stepped out of the bushes. Wary of remaining unnoticed, she set off in hot pursuit of her quarry.

Gellie noted that Muddle was traveling light: at present he only toted a slim briefcase. Also, cool as the day had become, Muddle's sleeves were still cuffed to his elbows. Gellie reflected, *Feeling the heat, Max? I wonder who else is on your tail?*

As she hastened across the quad, Gellie was surprised to see Muddle mount the steps into the library. She muttered under her breath, "What's this, Max? A detour?"

Sprinting to close distance, Gellie's dark clothing and exceptional speed rendered her as invisible as a raptor flitting beneath the moon. When she arrived at the library, Gellie skipped up the steps two at a time.

Like many of SBC's buildings, a wealthy alumnus had financed the library's construction. In gratitude, SBC had christened the building with its benefactor's melodious name. In addition to gratifying egos, personalizing buildings also enhanced patron generosity. What well-heeled narcissist could tolerate having their name emblazoned on an eyesore? Consequently, SBC was swarming with architectural gems,

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