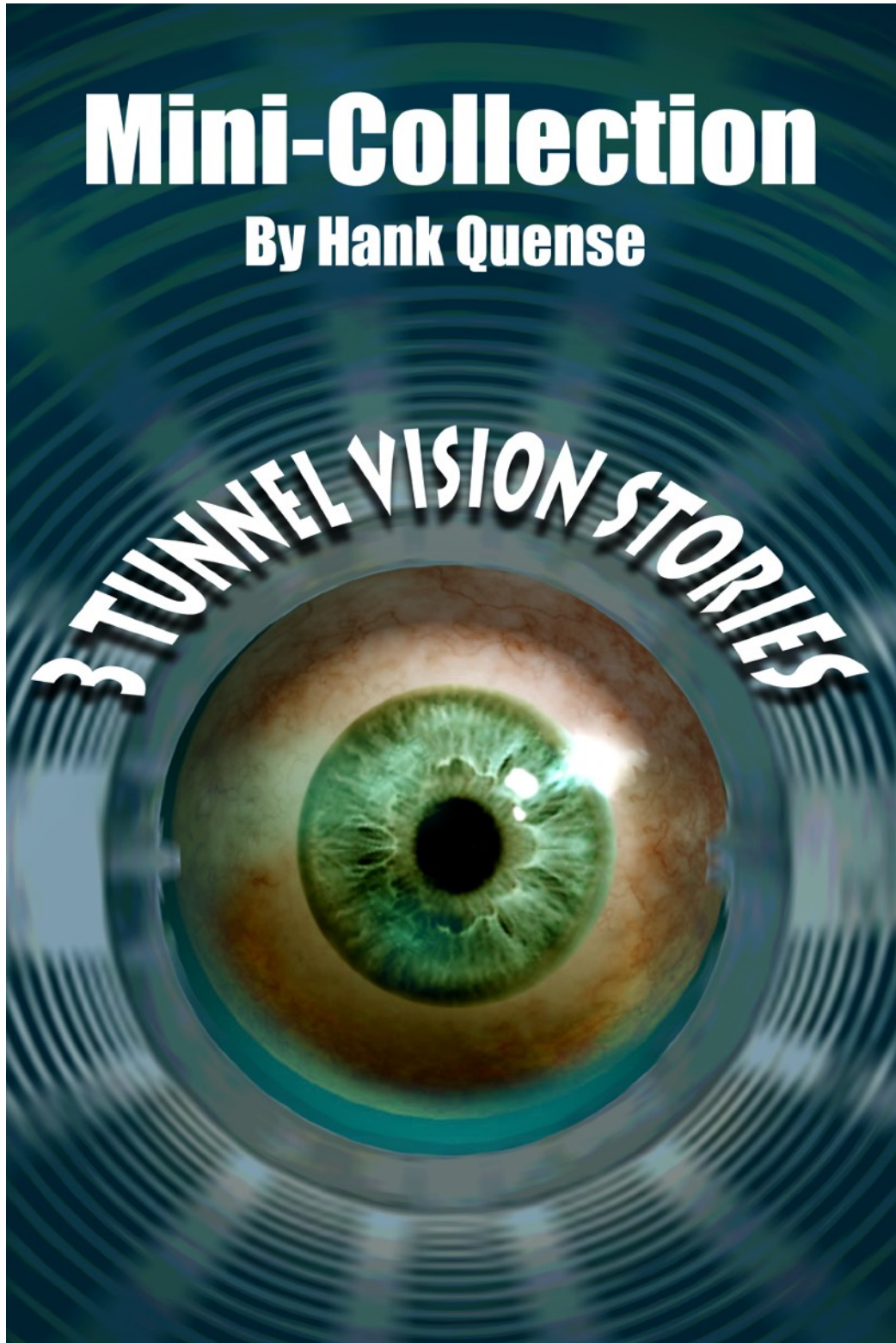


Mini-Collection

By Hank Quense

3 TUNNEL VISION STORIES



Mini-Collection of Short Stories

By Hank Quense

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SAVING THE SHORE

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Frido knew he had to save his beloved shore, but he didn't know how. He set a cup of tea in front of the wizard Mamzer who stared at the wall and

wove his hands through his long white beard. Frido sighed. Mamzer wasn't his wizard of first choice, but he was the only one who had responded to the help-wanted ad. Mamzer's resume indicated he had been semiretired for years and Frido couldn't find out if that was voluntary or forced. Despite that concern, Frido was desperate and he needed wizardly help.

Mamzer's preoccupation increased Frido's nervousness. This morning's meeting could decide the fate of the Shore and he needed Mamzer awake and alert. Frido cleared his throat, but the stoop-shouldered, large-paunched old man continued to stare into the distance as if in a trance.

A knock on the door startled Frido. Before he could respond, the round door opened and a tall elf-maiden entered. "I seek the wizard Mamzer," she said. "My name is Dementia." Her green eyes glared defiantly around the room as if daring Frido to challenge her. She had pretty features and shoulder-length silver hair.

"Come in, my dear." Mamzer broke out of his trance and smiled at Dementia. "Sit down." Dementia approached the table and dropped her bow and arrow and a leather-encased harp.

"I'll get another cup of tea," Frido said and left the room. When he returned, a fierce-looking dwarf had walked through the door.

"You Mamzer?" the dwarf asked. Broad nostrils filled the space over a small mouth.

"Indeed, I am," Mamzer replied.

"Name's Gimlet." He tossed a large war ax in the corner but kept wearing his helmet with a straw-littered spider web stretched between the two horns. He tucked his henna-colored beard into his belt, glanced at the cup Frido carried and said, "None of that colored water for me, boy. Fetch an ale."

"Gimlet, that half-pint is our host, not a servant." Mamzer chuckled. "Frido is the mayor of the Shore and we're all here to help him."

Frido gave Dementia her tea and ran off again. When he returned, he handed Gimlet an ale. The dwarf was the same height as Frido but twice as wide.

Gimlet drained the mug in one gulp. "Who's this?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and thrust his chin at Dementia.

"Dementia," Mamzer said. "She just graduated from Bard and Beautician Trade School and will record our quest for posterity."

Gimlet smiled at the elf and wiggled his ears. They lay amidst a tangle of brown hair that stuck out from beneath his helmet.

Dementia pulled a face but otherwise ignored the dwarf.

"Let's all sit down and discuss our mission," Mamzer said.

Frido sat down but couldn't keep still. He squirmed from anxiety and excitement. There was so much at stake.

"By way of background," Mamzer said, "the Shore has existed virtually unchanged for centuries. Frido's ancestor, the famous what's-his-name, went on a quest, saved the world from evil and ensured the preservation of the Shore. Now all is threatened. Frido, tell us about the problem."

"It's yuks." Frido cleared his throat twice before continuing. "There's a gang of them approaching the Shore. They're building roads using black stuff. Asphalt they call it."

"Road's ain't bad," Gimlet said. "They help you get to wherever you gotta go."

"I agree," Frido replied. "The roads will help our farmers get their produce to market a lot faster. But it's not just the roads. The yuks plan to build houses alongside the roads. They'll have to cut down thousands of trees to build those houses and an influx of new residents will change the character of the Shore. They also plan to build a gambling casino."

"Who's doing this?" Dementia asked.

"The yuk leader is named Freddie Mac. My bailiff says he runs a big loan-sharking operation and is using the profits to build the roads."

"You're the mayor. Don't let 'em build anything." Gimlet gave a savage nod with his head.

"I told Freddie Mac I won't issue permits for the houses, but he doesn't care. My problem, you see, isn't the roads or the casino. It's the houses. We need the casino to provide jobs. Jobs will keep our young people from leaving the Shore."

"Nonsense." Mamzer tapped a knuckle on the table. "With yuks, one must take a firm stand. Don't let them set foot in the Shore. Don't let them cut down a single tree. That's why we're here. To stop the desecration of the Shore."

Frido grimaced. Mamzer had decided his mission in life was to preserve the Shore unchanged. Like Freddie Mac, the wizard refused to listen to Frido.

"This ain't a big problem," Gimlet said. "Round up the local militia and drive the yuks to the other side of the Puce Mountains. I'll help 'cause I love to fight yuks."

Frido gawked at the dwarf, alarmed by his ferociousness. "The Shore doesn't have a militia or any weapons."

"With a bit of gold, I can get fifty armed relatives and finish off the yuks in no time."

"Fighting never solves a problem." Frido fidgeted on his chair.

Gimlet rolled his eyes.

"The Shore runs on principles of peacefulness," Frido added, "not violence."

"So, let me summarize," Mamzer said. "To protect the Shore from the yuks, we will employ magic. That will satisfy the half-pint's abhorrence with violence."

"You have enough magical power to stop the yuks?" Dementia gave Mamzer a questioning look.

"No, but that is why we're here. To go on a quest to acquire a powerful magical artifact."

"Ain't no artifacts left," Gimlet said.

Mamzer straightened his shoulders and stared at the dwarf. "I have discovered the location of such an artifact."

"Hah!" Gimlet responded.

"I've spent years researching this very artifact."

"And then I suppose someone told you where it is?" Gimlet cocked an eye at the wizard.

"Er . . . that merely validated my research."

"What is it that we seek?" Dementia asked.

"A set of rings. There are five of them but we only need to obtain four, because Frido has the fifth one hanging on over his fireplace."

"I do?" Frido turned to look at the black metal ring. It had hung there as far back as he could remember.

"Fetch it and we'll take a look," Mamzer said.

Frido pulled his chair to the fireplace, stood on it and took down the ring. He ran a finger over the smooth cold surface. He gave it to Dementia.

"Made from pure mithril," Mamzer said. "It's black instead of silver because of a spell cast when it was made."

"What do these runes say?" Dementia handed the ring to Mamzer.

Mamzer held the ring up to the light and peered at it. "Improper use of this device can cause stomach cramps, nose bleeding and/or dizziness. Bah! Standard warning label for a Class III artifact."

"So tell me, Mamzer, why do we need a smelly dwarf?" Dementia removed her harp from its case and softly plucked the strings.

"The other rings are in the possession of a dragon," Mamzer replied. "A doughty dwarf axman may come in handy, even if the dragon is old and feeble."

"Goin' onna quest with an elf-maiden should be lively," Gimlet said.

"Puleez! When was the last time you took a bath?"

"Two months ago."

"Really? That recently?" Dementia arched an eyebrow.

"Fell inna river but I got all wet and that's what counts, ain't it?"

Accompanied by her harp, Dementia sang in a deep voice:

*"He got all wet,
But not on a bet.
Dare I a hope*

The dwarf used soap?"

"Soap! Soap's for sissies."

"Your attention please," Mamzer said. "We must leave immediately so that we can return before the yuks do irreparable harm to the Shore."

Frido thought of the Shore as a rare, delicate shrub; his Shore-shrub. His job as mayor was to protect and nurture the plant. He had mixed feelings about the quest and about the help he was getting since Mamzer wanted all yuk activity stopped, and then there was Gimlet. The dwarf oozed violence and that made Frido very apprehensive. All in all, the Shore-shrub now stood in a foot of brackish water.

#

Ten days later, Frido lurked in the shadows of a narrow tunnel and observed Wygga, a red and gold dragon. Very little armor scale remained on her thin, gaunt body. She slept on her treasure pile: several gold coins, trinkets, brass flagons gone green with age, broken plates and well-chewed bones. A coal fire blazed in a hearth carved into the rock wall and a pile of coal lumps sat alongside the fireplace. Coal smoke permeated the cave, tickling his nose. Frido struggled to suppress a fatal sneeze.

On the wall opposite, four rings dangled from five pegs arranged in two rows. The top row had three pegs with an empty middle one. Frido was surprised the dragon didn't hear his pounding heart. Mamzer's plan called for the other three to enter the main tunnel and distract Wygga so Frido could filch the rings. The plan sounded good when he was outside the cave but now he had serious doubts about it, and the longer he waited, the more flawed the plan seemed.

"Whazzat?" Wygga's head came up, cocked to one side.

Frido heard distant, muffled voices.

"Thieves!" Wygga stood up. "I'll teach them a lesson." She limped to the coal pile, grabbed a mouthful and swallowed. "Ugh!" Wygga shuddered as she slithered into the main tunnel.

As soon as her head disappeared, Frido slipped out of the tunnel and crossed to the ring wall. He gathered himself into a crouch and sprang up. He missed the lower rings by a good margin. Frantic, he glanced around the cave.

"I thought we were supposed to meet a dragon," Frido heard Gimlet say. "This one is just an overgrown lizard."

Wygga roared. Frido wondered if it was from indignation or indigestion. Only the tip of her tail now remained visible.

"Hey!" Dementia said. "You told us the dragon didn't have any fire left. So why is smoke coming out of her mouth?"

"Uh-oh," Mamzer said.

Frido found a broken spear shaft.

Dementia sang:

*"I don't mind sticks and stones,
Or even broken bones,
But I don't like toast,
And I won't be a roast."*

"That ain't funny, girl," Gimlet said.

"Let me know how this turns out," Dementia yelled. "I'm leaving."

"Flee!" Mamzer screamed. "Flee for your lives."

Frido retrieved the lower rings using the spear shaft. His elation at his partial success deflated when he peeked at Wygga and saw her tail moving backward. He jumped and the shaft touched an upper ring. It rocked back and forth.

Frido jumped again and missed.

Wygga's rump backed out of the tunnel.

"Where'd the lizard get to?" Gimlet yelled. "There she is. Here's a rock for your treasure pile, frog-face."

After an angry yelp, Wygga completely disappeared into the tunnel.

"Come now," Mamzer said. "A dragon this old can't still be flammable. Move forward you two. I'll be right behind you."

"Hey!" Gimlet said. "What's she doin' now?"

"Out of my way!" Dementia screeched.

"Flee!" Mamzer screamed. "Flee for your lives."

Frido tried again. He knocked a ring off its peg and snatched it out of mid-air. Wygga's hind legs reappeared in the cave. He took a gulp of smoky air and leaped. He hit the ring harder than he wanted to and it soared off the peg. Frido reached for it, but it was too far away and it landed with a metallic clank.

"Who's there?" Wygga roared. "Another thief?"

Frido, with three rings looped over his forearm, chased the fourth. He snatched the rolling ring and ran towards the escape tunnel. From the corner of his eye, he saw Wygga's head turn in his direction. He dove behind a boulder just as Wygga belched a ball of fire. The flames passed over his head to blacken the wall behind him. Frido scrambled to his feet and ran. He reached the tunnel entrance a moment before another blast of flame engulfed it.

#

Back from the quest, Mamzer laid out the five rings on Frido's kitchen table. In addition to the black one, the others were colored red, yellow, blue and green. Frido cooked a slab of bacon in a skillet and filled the room with its aroma.

"Now what happens," Gimlet asked.

"I'm not sure." Mamzer stoked his chin.

"You have the rings, so use them." Dementia ran a comb through her hair, removing the detritus of life on a quest.

"The rings are inert until I can properly configure them."

"So what's the problem?" Gimlet asked.

"Frido didn't fetch the owner's manual. As a consequence of his partial retrieval, I have to use trial and error to find the proper set up."

"There wasn't any book in Wygga's den." Frido slammed the skillet on the stove.

"How long will this take?" Dementia asked.

"These things can't be rushed, you see. I'm dealing with an artifact of extraordinary power and I must use caution."

"I better see Freddie Mac and try to gain some time." Frido sighed in disappointment. Despite a successful three-week quest, they still didn't have any means to dissuade the yuk from destroying the Shore. He pictured his Shore-shrub still in brackish water and infested with mites.

#

Frido walked towards his office in the central market area of the Shore. Ancient oak, elm and plane trees shaded the lane and a gentle breeze blew against his back bringing smells from the beach and the fishing piers. He nodded to every one he saw, all of them half-pints. Produce, meat and fish stalls lined the streets in the market area. In front of two open-air restaurants, folks ate breakfast, drank tea, read newspapers and gossiped. Under the yuk plans, this pleasant and bucolic atmosphere would be replaced by mobs of mixed races.

Frido entered the borough hall and made his way to his office in the rear. He heard the harsh voice of Freddie Mac browbeating his bailiff. A second squeaky voice puzzled him.

"There he is," the bailiff said, pointing at Frido just before fleeing the building.

"Hey! Ya little runt!" Freddie Mac's booming voice reverberated through the building. "Ya finally come to yer senses?"

Frido sat down in his office and sighed. Today promised to be long and wearisome

Freddie Mac filled the doorway. As always, the raw ugliness of the yuk shocked Frido. His eyes, black with red irises, radiated cruelty. Green-skinned and huge with a massive bald head, Freddie Mac wore only canvas pants. Clumps of black hair dotted his powerful chest and thick arms. "I brang me girl friend on account of because she ain't never seen a half-pint before and I was tellin' her how good they taste when cooked proper."

Freddie Mac walked into the office and took a seat while Frido gaped at the girl friend. As tall and as wide as Freddie Mac, she carried a large leather purse on a shoulder strap and wore a short-sleeved white blouse with a black mini-skirt. The skimpy outfit left acres of skin exposed, all of it bulging with muscles and a few patches of black stubble. She flipped a hand through her long blond wig and chirped, "Me name's Fannie Mae. Pleased to meetcha." She slouched past Freddie Mac and wiggled into an empty chair by a round window with a view of a brook and a stand of silver birches. The chair groaned in protest.

"Aww," she cooed. "He's too cute to cook. Look! He's got furry feet. Betcha my sisters'd love one of 'em." She elbowed Freddie Mac while giggling.

"Ya gonna give me buildin' permits?" Freddie Mac asked.

"No. Your plan to build houses will destroy the character of the Shore."

"Don't care wot happens to the Shore. I can make a pile of money from rentin' the houses."

"I like the idea of the roads, and the casino will provide a lot of jobs, but the houses cannot be allowed." Frido folded his arms across his chest. "They will increase the population and the pollution." Frido hoped his voice carried more conviction than he felt.

"Freddie Mac needs the rent money," Fannie Mae took a foot-long rasp from her purse and filed her three-inch nails, "'cause I'm expensive."

"The Shore will fight."

"Fight, shmight. The Shore don't got any troops and I ain't changin' plans 'cause a bunch of midgets get mad."

"We have allies, you know."

"The dwarf and the elf?" Freddie sneered at Frido. "And Mamzer? I'm surprised the old fool never blew off a foot wid a spell."

Frido's stomach clenched like a fist. How did Freddie Mac know so much about the others? The yuk must have spies keeping watch on his house.

Freddie Mac waved a hand and gave Frido a grin. "I was hopin' ya would play ball. I bet the next mayor'll be happy to work wid me."

"You plan to assassinate me?" Frido had trouble breathing.

"Naw. Ain't gonna waste a prime candidate by killin' him. Gotta much better plan."

Frido felt slightly better that Freddie Mac didn't plan a murder. "Wh . . . what plan?"

"Fannie Mae's got five unmarried sisters, see. All moochin' off me. I'm gonna kidnap ya and throw ya inna room wid all of 'em. Ya don't get out 'til ya pick one of 'em to marry. To live happily ever after."

"Or not." Fannie Mae exploded into laughter.

Frido could only gape at the pair of yuks as he shuddered at their hideous plan.

"But don't get yer hopes up," Freddie Mac said. "Fannie Mae's the only pretty one in the bunch. Her sisters are real ugly."

"Ain't this a great plan?" Fannie Mae asked. "It'll be the third sister we get rid of." She draped an arm over Freddie Mac's shoulder. "Maybe we can get him to marry two of 'em."

"Wotta gal." Freddie Mac pounded her on the back. "Brains and good looks."

The yuks stood up and walked toward the door. Freddie Mac paused and said, "Some night, real soon, I'm gonna come and get ya. Ya should pack a bag so's ya ready."

Howling with glee, they left Frido shaking with trepidation.

The outer leaves on the Shore-shrub turned black and curled up.

#

When Frido returned home, a dejected Mamzer shuffled the rings around the kitchen table.

"How'd the meeting go?" Dementia asked.

"Terrible. Freddie Mac won't give up on the houses."

"That's good," Gimlet said. "Now I'll get a shot at carving some yuk heads."

"He also promised to kidnap me some night and make me marry a yuk gal." Frido shuddered at the thought.

"That's terrible!" Dementia said.

"Yeah," Gimlet added. "With a yuk wife, you're probably gonna die of food poisoning 'cause they ain't too good at cookin'. He patted the blade of his ax. "But I'll make sure you don't end up with a yuk bride."

"Any progress?" Frido asked the wizard.

"I'm still taking the measure of the artifact to compensate for the lack of an operating manual. I feel it is time I experimented with various configurations." He stood and walked to the wood pile where he grabbed a birch log. He balanced the log on one end and slid the rings over it.

"What are you doin'?" Gimlet asked.

"I'll try a tower configuration. The log keeps the ring tower from sliding apart. If this doesn't work, I'll try something else." He flapped his hands at his companions. "Stand back. I need quiet." Mamzer pushed up the sleeves of his robe. Frown lines filled his forehead. He closed his eyes and said in a loud, commanding voice. "Begin!"

He squinted with one eye at the rings. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes again and held his arms outstretched, "I command you to respond to me."

The rings squirmed and rotated slightly.

"Hah!" Mamzer assumed a smug look.

A wisp of smoke rose from the log.

"What's it doing?" Frido felt the hair on his neck rise. He didn't fancy a kitchen fire.

"Shush. The rings are adapting themselves to my style of leadersh--"

The log ignited into a pillar of flames, setting fire to a ceiling beam. Frido grabbed a pot of tea and threw the liquid at the blaze, extinguishing part of the fire and drenching Mamzer. Dementia grabbed a towel and beat out the rest of the flames.

Frido coughed from the stink of burning wood and scalded tea. "You almost burned down my home," he snarled at Mamzer who stood with his head thrown back as if examining the ceiling.

"Nonsense. This beam is hardly scorched."

"Why're you standin' like that?" Gimlet asked.

"I have a nose bleed."

"Any more testing gets done outside," Frido said. "And we don't have much time. My bailiff told me the construction crews are close to the Shore border."

#

Mamzer spent the next day experimenting. Despite the loss of blood, he persevered through eight configurations. In that eighth one, he built a peg board to resemble the wall in Wygga's cave. The ensuing explosion brought the Shore fire wagon rushing to Frido's house.

At last, a weary, pale Mamzer dumped the rings on Frido's kitchen table and announced, "Without the owner's manual, I'm stymied. I can't build the proper configuration."

"Without the rings, we can't follow our plan to use magic to stop the yuks," Dementia said.

"To stop yuks, you need dwarfs, not magic," Gimlet said. "How many yuks are there?"

"My bailiff says about eighty."

Gimlet bit his lip and pulled his beard. "How many fingers of ten?"

"Eight," Frido replied.

"Hmm. It'll take me about two hours to hack through that many. I gotta negotiate with 'em before the battle."

"Whatever for?" Dementia cocked her head and looked at the dwarf.

"I'll be needin' a potty break. All that red stuff drippin' and sloshin' around works just like water, you know."

Frido ignored Gimlet's battle plans. The fate of his Shore depended upon the two opposite powers balancing each other. Both advocated unacceptable conditions and Frido had hoped to negotiate a compromise position. Without the rings, the Shore was at the mercy of the money-grubbing Freddie Mac.

His musings were interrupted by a sound from the door. When he opened it, his heart jumped into his throat. Wygga stuck her gray-whiskered snout through the opening. Her breath stank of coal. Tongues of flame licked her lips and tendrils of smoke drifted upward. "Well. The whole gang of thieves."

"Flee!" Mamzer screamed. "Flee for your lives." The wizard jumped out of his chair. "Er, Frido? Where's the back door?"

Frido groaned. As if the situation wasn't bad enough, now he faced an angry dragon looking for retribution. If he was lucky, only his house would get burned down.

"Stop yelling," Wygga said to Mamzer. "I came for my rings. If I get them back, I'll let everyone live."

"Might as well give them back," Mamzer said, "we can't use them."

"Of course you can't," Wygga said. "You need the entire set before you can use them. One would think a wizard would know that before he stole them."

Frido's eyebrows shot up and suddenly he couldn't get enough air. Possibly, the answer to the Shore's problems blocked his doorway. He counted to ten to calm his nerves, cleared his throat and said, "If you had all five rings, would you know how to use them?"

"Certainly. Alas, I can't find a black ring to complete the set. I'm sure it's been destroyed."

Frido gestured to the others to stop muttering. "What would you do if you found the fifth ring?"

"First, I'd fix my rheumatism and my arthritis. Then I'd move my den to someplace warmer. That cave under the mountain never gets warm no matter how much coal I burn in the fireplace."

Frido walked to the table, picked up the black ring and held it over his head for Wygga to see. "Perhaps we can do a deal."

Frido hoped he had found the necessary ingredient to bring the opposite forces back into balance. Trusting a dragon was risky, but Wygga couldn't make the situation worse than it already was.

Some of the insects on the Shore-shrub fell into the water.

#

Frido, his three companions and Wygga, each carrying one of the rings, set out the next morning. Mild weather and blue sky would have made for a pleasant walk except Frido was too nervous and depressed to notice the weather. If Freddie Mac or Mamzer won the day, his Shore would lose. A stalemate between the antagonists was his only hope.

A half-mile from the river border of the Shore, they heard the thud of axes. The smell of wood smoke drifted along on a mild breeze. From the

crest of a rise that overlooked the river, they saw a mob of yuks working on the road. Large cauldrons of black stew bubbled over fires and emitted an acrid stench. Freddie Mac roared orders and Fannie Mae, wearing a red wig, flirted with the workers.

"We better assemble the rings," Wygga said. She twisted the yellow one and it clicked open. Mamzer gawked at it. Wygga looped the yellow ring through the blue and back rings and snapped it shut. Instantly, the three rings formed a rigid structure. The dragon opened the green ring, looped it through both the black and red rings and closed it. The rings now formed a solid, two-rowed configuration. She handed it back to Mamzer and said, "After you use it, I'll take it apart and carry it back to my den."

"Now you see why I needed the owner's manual," Mamzer said to Frido. Frido snorted.

"How do I cast a spell without getting a nosebleed?" Mamzer asked.

"You're safe now that it is put together."

"Let me talk to the yuks before you do anything," Frido said, as he set out down the rise.

"Enough with the talk," Gimlet said, "let's kick some yuk butt."

Frido approached the river and called out in what he hoped was a stern voice, "Cease your activities. If you come closer, you will suffer the consequences."

"Hey! Ya wanna fight, do ya?" Freddie Mac's mouth curled into a sneer. "Even gotta dragon, I see. Looks like it should be inna old-timer's home 'stead of bein' out where it can get hurt." He turned to his workers. "Get yer weapons. We gonna have some fun."

The yuks responded with laughter and good-natured pushing and shoving. They fetched spears and curved swords from tents scattered among the trees and formed into two platoons, each forty strong. Fannie Mae walked through the ranks, improving morale.

"This ring thingee better work," Dementia said.

"Build up a belly fire," Mamzer told Wygga, "just in case."

"I can't. I ran out of coal."

"There's plenty of wood around," Mamzer replied. "It's fibrous and will do wonders for your digestive track."

"Wood does taste better but it doesn't burn hot enough. I won't be able to snort fire today."

Alarmed at the sight of armed yuks, Frido made it back up the rise in a state of agitation. His mouth was so dry, he didn't think he'd be able to talk. The situation had taken a nasty turn and threatened to careen out of control. He had a potential massacre on his hands and he was included in the folks getting massacred.

"Iffen this spell don't work, I got me a big problem," Gimlet said.

"Aww, is dwarfy afraid of the big bad yuks?" Dementia asked.

"Naw, I didn't get to ask about the potty break."

Freddie Mac ordered his yuks forward. Fannie Mac blew kisses to the troops as they marched past her.

"Iffen Mamzer don't do somethin' quick," Gimlet told Frido, "you're gonna see more trouble than you ever dreamed of."

"Cast a spell!" Frido cried out.

"Do it," Wygga said.

"Now!" Dementia shouted.

"Good thing you got a dwarf with you. Dwarfs always get wizards outta the messes they make." Gimlet spit on the blade of his ax and wiped it around with his hand.

Dementia wailed:

*"He spits on his ax,
Before he gives whacks.
The dwarf's a pig, and,
Certainly not a prig."*

"Iffen I knew what 'prig' meant, I'd probably get mad at you." Gimlet took a few warm-up swings.

"Well, I guess it's time." Mamzer held the rings over his head and mumbled.

"Out loud," Wygga said. "The rings won't take silent orders."

"Cast a spell!" Frido screamed in a cracked voice. "The yuks are almost at the bridge."

"I command you --"

"In Elvish B," Wygga said.

"What?"

"The rings will only obey to commands in the Elvish B language."

"Umm . . . Flarish . . er . . .sturath . . . warieth . . . lertans . . . herazernt."

"Fool!" Wygga roared. "You said, 'Cast a spell and make it brown.' What kind of magic is that?"

"Look!" Dementia pointed towards the yuks.

Starting at the bridge and moving away from the Shore, the black surface of the road turned light brown. The yuks sank in the material up to their ankles. The front ranks fell forward when they tried to march in the gunk. When they pulled their faces out of the sticky surface, it covered their noses, mouths and eyes. They worked themselves into sitting positions and stuffed handfuls of road into their mouths.

"What did you do?" Frido asked Mamzer.

"He turned the road into marzipan dough," Wygga said. "It's made out of almond paste and sugar."

A red-faced Mamzer looked at his feet and shook his head.

Freddie Mac roared and cursed at his troops who ignored him.

Fannie Mae scooped up a handful of road and crammed it into Freddie Mac's mouth. "Shaddup and eat," she said.

"I'm gonna sneak up and slaughter a few yuks," Gimlet said. "Be right back."

"No you're not," Frido said. "Our problem is over."

"Wot're you talkin' about." Gimlet cast a furious look at Frido. "When they finish eatin' they'll attack us."

"No, they won't." Frido shook his head. "When they finish, they'll be sick to their stomachs and their teeth will hurt. We don't have to worry about the yuks for a while."

"My apologies, Frido," Mamzer said. "I didn't think anyone here would have the wit to divine the subtleties of my plan to disable the yuks without violence."

"Hah!" Dementia keened:

*"The wiz says it was carefully planned,
As plain as a face in front of a hand.
He made some sticky brown stuff,
To show us the yuks ain't all that tough."*

"Enough with the songs, already," Mamzer snarled.

Frido sighed with relief and anguish. Relief that the situation had ended without violence. Anguish because now the Shore faced slow death from the lack of change. His Shore-shrub stood in rocky, unfertile soil.

#

The next morning, Frido sat in his office contemplating the complexities of saving the Shore. Last night, Mamzer, embarrassed by his spell casting, had announced a five-year sabbatical and left. Dementia and Gimlet also left the Shore at the same time. The yuks were now unopposed.

Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae burst into the office.

Frido's heart thumped in his chest.

"Ya gotta help us." Freddie Mac's face contorted in pain.

"Yeah, it's all yer fault." Fannie Mae held a hand against one cheek.

Frido frowned as he studied the faces of the two yuks. "You look different."

"We gotta get our teeth pulled," Freddie Mac said. "Quick. And all me guys got the same problem."

"It's 'cause of that mucky magic." Fannie Mae grimaced in pain as she spoke. "That sweet stuff rotted our teeth. Please help us."

Frido felt the hair on the his neck and feet stand up. The yuks needed his help! The salvation of the Shore was at hand. "Why should I help you?"

"It's the nice thing to do." Fannie Mae whined and looked like she was about to cry.

"Perhaps," Frido said, "if we agreed on your construction projects?"

Freddie Mac glared at him. "Dat's blackmail, ya little runt."

"Drop the houses. Build just the roads and the casino. No deal, no teeth pullers."

Freddie Mac started to argue until Fannie Mae punched his arm. "Do it."

"And I don't marry her sisters." Frido pointed to Fannie Mae.

"I'm gonna go bankrupt," Freddie Mac moaned.

Frido ordered his bailiff to escort the two yuks to the closest teeth puller.

He sat back in his chair and relaxed for the first time in days.

The Shore-shrub, bursting with yellow blooms, sat in a fertile flower bed.

An hour later, the two yuks came back. "How about ya let me put up a few buildings for stores and shops. I gotta get some rent money."

Frido's eyes widen in surprise. A few shops would offer more jobs and may even attract visitors to the Shore. Especially with the new roads in place to ease travel.

"That strikes me as a good idea."

"Good. 'Cause then we gotta way to stop her sisters from moochin' off me." Freddie Mac looked pleased.

"What's that?" Frido exhaled.

"Me sisters're gonna open fast food restaurants inna new shops," Fannie Mae beamed.

Frido ran through the names of available doctors in the Shore. The list wasn't long enough, he decided, to handle an epidemic of food poisoning cases.

Some of the Shore-shrub's leaves turned yellow.

LUCY IN LOVE

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Lucy — nee Lucrezia Borgia — sat her desk in the small office. Besides the desk and chair, the Spartan workplace contained a battered file cabinet and a droopy potted plant. Through the plate glass front window she watched people hustle past on the sidewalks of Manhattan's Upper West Side. The window needed cleaning and, like the Italians in the 1500's, so did many of the pedestrians.

In the rear office, her father, Pope Alexander VI — a.k.a. Rodrigo Borgia — fussed around, nervous about the first day of business because Satan had expressed an interest in the operation and wanted reports. Satan hated

failure, and as Pope, Alex had demonstrated success in only one area; raising money to wage wars.

A short, skinny man in jeans, a tattered sweat shirt and a baseball cap with a white NY on it, stopped to look at the sign in the window that read Malevolent Money Management. He squinted through the glass and saw her. She waved at him.

Seconds later, he stood in front of her desk and said, "You do loans?" Despite the warmth of the late spring weather, he shivered beneath his sweat shirt.

"Yes, we do, and we have very competitive rates."

"I need money." The man spoke in a croaky voice.

"Your name?"

"Juan Gomez."

Lucy punched a number into the phone. "I have a client who wants a loan. Are you available to speak with him?"

"Send him in," Alex said.

"Follow me, please." Lucy stood and smoothed the old-fashioned pleated skirt she wore, the most modern garment she could find in Hell's wardrobe department. She simply had to go shopping. She opened the door and stood aside for the client to enter. "This is Mr. Gomez," she said to Alex before she took a seat to watch how Alex dealt with his first client.

Gomez stood at the door, shocked by the sight of Alex who wore a white cassock and had a full beard that reached below his chest. It reminded people of a squirrel's nest. Alex had a beak of a nose so great that in profile he resembled a bird of prey. Lucy wanted him to wear a business suit but Alex refused, saying that as a Pope, he was entitled to wear the white cassock.

"Good day, Mr. Gutierrez," Alex said.

"Gomez."

Lucy silently groaned as Alex blinked, frowned and said, "Our standard loan is five thousand dollars for three years. Do you understand?"

Gomez nodded.

"Do you have any collateral, Mr. Gonzelvels?"

"Gomez. No I don't."

"Gomez, you say. I thought I had a meeting with Gonzelvels." Alex looked at Lucy. "Where is he?"

"There is no Gonzelvels." She shook her fist at Alex. "There's just Mr. Gomez."

Alex started and turned away from Lucy's glare. "Well. With no collateral, I'm afraid we'll have to apply our top interest rate to this loan." Alex extracted a sheet of paper from a folder. "Your payments," he read, "calculated at one percent interest, will be \$141.04 per month." Reaching

into a drawer, he took out a blank contract and filled it in. "Look this over carefully. Our company is very adamant about on-time monthly payments."

Gomez glanced through the paper.

"If you'll sign," Alex gave him a toothy smile, "my assistant will write a check in your name for five big ones."

"I don't get cash?"

"Of course not. If we kept large amounts of cash in the office, every criminal in Northern Manhattan would be lined up outside our door to steal it."

Gomez sighed and, with a shaky hand, scrawled an illegible signature.

Lucy took him to her desk and typed a check. "This is drawn on Diablo Off-Shore Trust Company in the Bahamas." Diablo – run by dead bankers -- was Hell's biggest money launderer. It generated a ton of cash for other ventures. "Have a nice day, Mr. Gomez."

Gomez looked euphoric as he took the check and left.

Lucy sat back in her chair pondering the remote chances of Gomez ever making a payment. The fine print – exceptionally fine print -- in the contract stipulated the loss of his soul if he was late with a payment. Satan insisted that the condition be added to all contracts issued by his realm. It was part of his Ambivalent Truthfulness campaign designed to counter Heaven's propaganda about Hell's deceit.

She sensed a presence in the office and felt a tendril of trepidation. She focused her eyes on a building across 73rd Street while scanning the room with her peripheral vision. For an instant, she glimpsed a pair of small wings. A cherub! Just opened and already Heaven spied on the loan office.

#

Lucy stood in front of a full length mirror in her apartment above the loan office. The Real Estate Division, staffed by late industry executives and experts, owned the three-story town house and made it available for Alex's operation. The Division had grown into the biggest slumlord in the city and produced a steady stream of souls because of the late rent payment provision in its leases.

She twisted in different directions to get a better look at the clinging, low cut dress that came from Sak's Fifth Avenue. Earlier, Lucy had gone on a midnight shopping spree at the closed and locked up store and came home with six shopping bags of new clothes. She liked the contrast between the black material, her dark blonde hair and her olive complexion.

Her elation over the new clothes clashed with her uneasiness about the loan operation. Alex gave out twelve loans in the first day. Every one of them went to people who were alcoholics or drug addicts destined for Hell

with or without a loan. She had warned Alex this was the wrong neighborhood, but he refused to listen to advice from a woman.

Click. Bang. "Damn!"

The noise came from Alex's apartment upstairs. The apartments contained shotgun-style rooms, each room behind the other with the kitchen in the rear and a living room in the front.

The annoying thing about the loan operation was that it was her idea. She touted it as a guaranteed way to improve Hell's market share in souls. She presented it to Satan who put Alex in charge because she was only a woman.

Click. Bang. "Hells Bells!"

Her father must be hitting golf balls in the kitchen, trying to pitch them into the front room.

She looked back at the mirror and giggled. The men in Renaissance Italy would go crazy if they saw her. The spaghetti straps alone would have the Inquisition sniffing around. The Renaissance! What a wasted life she had back then. Married for the first time before her boobs had blossomed. Married twice after that. Each marriage had been arranged by her father as part of a treaty designed to strengthen the Papacy's temporal powers. Her husbands weren't bad men but she never loved any of them. Her father always ended the marriages, legally or fatally, so he could use her as a bargaining chip in another alliance.

Click. "Yes! . . . Uh-oh."

The sound of a breaking window was followed by a metallic thump and a howling car alarm. More of Alex's irresponsibility. She had to give him credit for constancy.

After Alex had died, Satan appointed him Hell's chief-of-staff to piss-off Heaven at the joint meetings that took place every hundred years. Alex, dressed in papal regalia, always outraged Heaven's emissaries. She had ended up in Hell because of Alex's insistence. He had her appointed as Satan's personal secretary.

She sighed. If nothing else happened during her time here, she hoped some guy would make love to her. If it happened, it would be the first time a man made love to her instead of taking his pleasure. All she had ever experienced were contrived arrangements between a woman and a guy.

#

The next morning, Lucy sat at her desk dressed in a short skirt and a tight sweater. The blue of the sweater matched her eyes.

The door opened and a tubby man in a wrinkled suit entered. Lucy smiled at him until he pulled out a badge and flashed it in her face. "Gafney. Buildin' Inspector. You gotta CO?"

"A what?"

"Certificate of Occupancy. You gotta have one of them to legally open a business. Let's see it."

"We misplaced it." Lucy gave him a dejected look and batted her eyes.

He ignored her and examined the ceiling. "No sprinklers. No smoke detectors." He barged into Alex's office without knocking. He disregarded Alex who sat at his desk reading Penthouse magazine. "No emergency exit."

"Who is this cretin?" Alex said.

"This is Mr. Gafney, a building inspector. It seems our office doesn't pass his inspection."

Alex raised an eyebrow.

"That's right, lady. I'm shuttin' you down until you get the work done."

"Umm, perhaps Mr. Gafney could use a loan." She gave Alex a warning look. "At very low interest rates."

Gaffney looked at her with a quizzical expression on his face.

Alex looked at her with an astonished expression on his face.

"How much and how low?" Gafney asked.

"Let's say five thousand for five years at one percent interest?" Lucy ignored her father's openmouthed stare.

"One percent interest." Gafney rubbed his chin. "I can get a lot more than that by investing the five thou."

"Oh." Lucy put a hand on Gafney's arm. "You men are so clever. How do you come with these money schemes so fast?"

Alex recovered, opened a folder and ran a finger down a page. "That comes out to \$85.47 a month repayment." He took out a blank contract.

"I'm sure we don't need a contract with Mr. Gafney." Lucy made a face at her father behind Gafney's back. "A handshake is all we need to do business with a man like him."

"I don't see any buildin' violations." Gafney gave her a wink. "I'll mail you a CO when I get back to my office."

"If you'll come to my desk, I'll give you a check. Made out to 'cash' of course."

At her desk, Lucy wrote out the check while saying, "How did you know we were open?"

"Funny thing. I gotta phone call about your business."

"Really. Who called?"

"Don't know. It was anonymous."

Lucy mouthed swear words much favored by Renaissance Romans.

"Whoever it was must have used a cell phone inna church."

"Why's that?"

"I could hear this singin' in the background. It was . . . that chantin' stuff."

"Gregorian chant?" Lucy's anxiety grew.

"Yeah, that's the stuff." He accepted the check from Lucy. "Thanks for the loan," he said on his way to the door. "See you next year."

Lucy slammed her palm on her desk as soon as Gafney closed the door. Heaven wanted to close them down. Why? Heaven should be more worried about the real estate business or Hell's money laundering in its Caribbean banks. They were much more dangerous to Heaven's market share as were the deceased lawyers who managed to clandestinely alter contracts with soul-binding clauses. Not to mention the late-lamented ministers who preached Reformed Satanism as an alternative to the boredom of Heaven. What was so important about this obscure loan operation?

"Lucy, my dear," Alex said from the doorway. "You just bribed an official. Bribery is a man's work and it is unseemly for a woman to do it."

"Unseemly?" Lucy counted to ten, then turned and glared at her father. "What's unseemly is your bias towards women."

#

While Lucy read the New York Times the next morning, Alex practiced his putting on his office rug. He regularly played on Hell's golf course. Carved into the side of an active volcano, the course – nineteen miles, six holes, par 525 – featured bubbling lava pits instead of sand traps.

Two beefy men walked in. They wore jeans, t-shirts and tattoos. One looked to be in his thirties and the other in his twenties.

"May I help you?"

"Yeah, stay out of the way," the older one said while scanning the office. "Over there." He pointed to Alex's door.

"Wait," Lucy said. "You don't have an appointment."

They crashed into the office and she heard one say, "Time to retire, old man."

Lucy heard Alex's putter hit the wall. She grabbed the phone and dialed 666.

"Special Services. Beelzebub speaking."

"Bubba? It's Lucy. I need four imps right away."

"What's going on?"

"Two thugs are beating up Alex."

"Alex, huh? How about I send the imps tomorrow?"

"If they're not here in thirty-seconds, I'm calling the boss."

"Just joking. They're on their way."

The imps arrived as Lucy hung up. Each of the three-foot hairless, jade green creatures had a set of teeth that would make a piranha jealous. "This way." She led them into Alex's office just as the young thug punched Alex in the gut. Alex, already sporting a black eye, folded up and groaned. "Leave the guy in the white dress alone, but get the other two."

One imp jumped on younger man's shoulders and tried to pull off his scalp. The second imp bit his buttocks. The man roared and reached up to get the imp away from his head, but only succeeded in getting his hand bitten. He tripped, bounced off a wall and collapsed in a heap.

The other two imps attacked the second man and grabbed mouthfuls of bicep and thigh. The thug screamed, released Alex and tumbled to the ground.

Alex smoothed his cassock as if nothing had happened.

"That's enough for now." Lucy positioned the imps to attack again and said to the younger man. "Who sent you?"

The guy said nothing.

"You better tell me now." Lucy smiled. "Because, after an imp rips out your throat, you won't be able to."

An imp leaned closer and sniffed the man's throat.

"We don't know who he is."

"Yeah," the second one added. "He comes up to us and gives us five hundred to do the job. Didn't tell us his name and we didn't ask."

"What did he look like?"

"Weird." The younger one said.

"Yeah. Really tall. About six-six."

"And he had his head shaved."

Lucy crossed her arms and took a deep breath.

"He had these strange eyes," the older one said. "Like they had lights behind them, or somethin'."

"Yeah, it hurt your eyes to look at his."

Lucy's irritation climbed. Michael, Heaven's war-chief. But why? She nudged the young one with a toe. "You two can leave. Make sure you don't come back."

Alex crossed the room, picked up his putter and examined it. "I was sure those ruffians had bent it."

Lucy went back to her desk. "I want you guys to stick around," she told the imps. "Catch the cherub that's spying on us." She sensed that more trouble was on the way, for still unknown reasons. The use of violence by Heaven shocked her. Was nothing sacred anymore?

A few minutes later, one of the imps squawked, jumped onto a file cabinet and leaped in the air. He fell to the floor holding a cherub by its leg. The angel had a Mohawk cut, wore a black leather jacket covered with metal studs and looked more scared than tough.

Lucy stared at the figure and said, "Why is Michael doing this?"

"I'm not telling you." The angel scoffed.

"All you cherubim act like male gangsters these days. Let's see how tough you are after I make you look like a girlie cherub. I'll put a dress and

panty hose on you. Add some lipstick and eyeliner and let you go. I'm sure your punk friends will be very interested in how you got that way."

"No!" The cherub's eyes became as big as billiard balls. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Lucy shrugged. "I will unless you tell me what I want to know."

The angel sighed and said, "Michael was ordered to get that guy who used to be Pope."

"Alex? Why?"

"He was the worst pope in history."

"Well, that's true." Alex spent most of his time as Pope auctioning Church offices and selling Papal Indulgences to raise money to fight wars against other Italian city-states. When not involved with those schemes, he found time to impregnate a few of Rome's prostitutes.

"He betrayed Heaven and broke his vows. Michael has to mess up whatever he's doing. Maybe even destroy the guy."

"Michael hired thugs to beat up Alex. Since when does Heaven allow him to commit crimes?"

"Michael was told to do whatever he had to do."

"Let him go," Lucy told the imps. So now she knew. Alex's sordid past came back to haunt him. Heaven wanted revenge for all of Alex's nasty deeds while he ruled the Vatican and much of Italy. That wasn't really surprising. The shocker was the methods Heaven used to retaliate.

#

Taking a lunch break, Lucy left the office and walked to nearby Central Park. On the way, she stopped at an Italian deli and bought a chunk of salami, some mortadella and a wedge of provolone cheese. She carried an uncorked half-bottle of Chianti wine in a paper sack. Underneath many of the trees in the park, masses of red and yellow tulips waved in a slight May breeze. Jonquils, in a riot of colors, grew everywhere, giving the park a festive look.

She found a bench, sat down, fished a pocket knife out of the sack and cut a slice of salami. The spicy taste and aroma brought back memories of sitting in the ducal gardens in Ferrara. That happy earlier time contrasted with her present foreboding. She wasn't going to be around long enough to have an affair. Just her luck to finally get back here only long enough to get a taste of life without any time to enjoy it.

Alex's loan operation was turning out to be a disaster. Not only was Heaven out to screw it up, but everyone who applied for a loan was certain to go to Hell without any help from Alex. When Satan visited the shop tomorrow for a status report, he was sure to spot this flaw.

She needed a plan to rescue the loan venture. It was the only way she could stay around long enough to have an affair. The first step would be get rid of her father so Michael would stop interfering. How was she going to do that without insulting Alex? The man had an enormous ego, even though there was no reason for him to have one. Her only hope was to convince Satan that her original business model was better than Alex's. She didn't think her chances were too good.

#

Lucy barely made it back to the office before three uniformed officers from NYPD burst in.

"Where's the dogs?" The first cop looked pugnacious.

"Dogs?" Lucy was taken back. "What dogs?"

"Listen. We have two guys who were mauled by dogs. They're inna hospital gettin' sewed up and they gave this address as where it happened. Now, where're the dogs?"

"There are no dogs here. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Search the shop," he ordered the other two. He had a weary expression, as if he didn't expect any cooperation.

Lucy turned toward Alex's office. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a man in a suit walk in from the street and wave to the cops. A detective she assumed as she hustled into Alex's office and said, "These policemen are looking for dogs."

"Dogs?" Alex blinked. "How absurd! I hate dogs. I'm a cat person."

"Where do you live?" the first cop asked.

"Upstairs," Lucy said.

"We gotta look."

"My key is in my desk. I'll get it for you." She brushed passed the detective, opened a drawer and handed the key to the officer who said, "C'mon. We'll search the apartments." All three left.

She sat down and looked at the detective. He looked at her. Both stared into the other's eyes.

Lucy felt dizzy. Her stomach lurched and her groin tingled. The guy reminded her of the first crush she had as a ten-year-old. She wondered whatever happened to that young nobleman.

The detective grew pale and put a hand on the file cabinet as if steadying himself.

Lucy took a couple of deep breaths to slow down her back-flipping heart. This guy was IT. He was tall and slender with a slight bulge at his gut. He had brown hair and eyes and even, white teeth. His features were more rugged than handsome. And he didn't wear a wedding ring.

The guy looked as if someone had clubbed him in the back of the head.

Lucy had to act before he got away. She smiled and said, "The answer to your two questions are 'No' and 'Yes'."

He frowned. "What --" He cleared his throat. "-- questions? You're not talking about the dogs, are you?"

"No, I'm not. Your first question is, 'Are you busy tonight?' and the second is, 'Want to have dinner with me?'"

He frowned again.

Lucy experienced a pang of despair. Maybe she had been too forward with him. "Unless you're busy. Or don't want to have dinner with me."

"No. . . I mean yes. . . Wait. I'm not busy and I'd love to take you to dinner."

"Pick me up at seven? What's your name?"

"Vinny Risotto. Seven is fine. What's your name?"

"Lucy Borgia."

They exchanged pleasantries until the cops returned.

"Ain't no dogs up there," the one in charge said to Vinny. "No water bowls and no dog food in the closets. Know what I think?"

"Tell me," Vinny said.

"Those two jokers busted into someone's house and got chewed up by guard dogs. They gave us this address to throw us off. We gotta ask them some more questions before they leave the hospital."

"I think you're right. Let's go," Vinny said. He followed the cops out the door but paused before shutting it and turned to Lucy. "See you later."

Lucy blew him a kiss.

#

Lucy lay in bed in Vinny's apartment in Manhattan's Inwood section. He slept alongside her. Lucy beamed at the memory of a great evening. Vinny was the first man she ever met who believed that sex was something to be enjoyed by both partners. She had never experienced an orgasm with her three husbands and tonight she had two.

She had worn a slinky red dress and exotic underwear, clothes that would have gotten her burned at the stake in the 1500's. In Chinatown, they dined on steamed vegetable dumplings, Szechwan shrimp, and Hunan chicken. Afterwards, they bought a bottle of wine and went to Vinny's apartment.

Vinny, divorced and without any children, faced one of life's turning points. Next month, he would have twenty years with NYPD and he planned to retire, but wasn't sure what to do after that.

Her mood shifted when she thought about Alex and the problems with his loan venture. She wanted to stay here and spend more time – a lot more time – with Vinny, but this assignment was about to end. Tomorrow, when Satan found out that Michael harassed Alex and that Alex handed out loans

to dubious clients, they would both be back in Hell. Her only chance to remain here was to convince Satan that the operation failed because of Alex's intransigence in following a woman's advice. But, how could she persuade him to let her run the loan business? If she explained how to operate it successfully, his instinct would be to put another man in charge.

She pulled the blankets up to her chin. Face it. Tonight was her last night on Earth. Nothing was going to change that. Maybe she should wake up Vinny and have some more fun. It would be her last opportunity for at least another millennium.

A sudden idea made her sit up in bed. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. If the boss let her stay here to run the operation, maybe she could have another child. The thought of motherhood brought a flood of emotions she hadn't felt in so long she forgot she had ever experienced them.

The possibility of another child fortified her determination to stay here. She had to convince Satan that modern times called for modern methods, like women in charge. If it worked, she had a shot at true love, happiness and motherhood; a combination worth fighting for.

She ticked off on her fingers what she wanted from Satan tomorrow. First, permission to run the loan business according to her original design. Second, no male supervision. Third, at least forty years on earth.

Now, that was a set of objectives worth fighting for.

Just in case she was unsuccessful in reaching her goals, she shook Vinny's shoulder.

#

Satan showed up before the shop opened.

He acknowledged Lucy with a nod and walked into Alex's office. He was dressed casually in slacks, a knit shirt and sneakers with a red cape draped across his shoulders. Satan reserved the red suit, horns, tail and pitchfork for formal occasions like the meetings with Heaven. Tall and well-built, he looked ordinary except for his eyes that frequently acted like miniature black holes, sucking up light. When in a good mood like now, his face was visible, but when his anger grew so did the darkness. Enraged, his head and upper torso would be hidden in a black cloud.

She followed him into the office.

"I'm glad you're here, Master," Alex said. "My loan store is a unqualified success."

"Really?" Satan chuckled. "With your record, claims of success make me nervous."

Alex nodded.

Lucy sighed. Her father always played the sycophant.

"Look at this." Alex picked up a sheath of papers. "Thirty signed contracts. I'll wager not one of them makes all the payments on time."

"Hmm. Most surprising. I suppose Lucy is responsible for this success?"

Alex almost choked. "She's nothing but a clerk. I tell you, my business plan is brilliantly coming to fruition." A red-faced Alex picked up his putter and ran his hand down the shaft.

All three jumped when the front window shattered inward and four sticks of dynamite with burning fuses rolled across the floor.

"That's an awfully big firecracker," Alex said just before the dynamite exploded.

Once the smoke cleared, Lucy saw the blast had destroyed the office.

Alex sobbed. His white cassock was a smoldering rag and the contracts were ashes. His putter was wrapped around a lamp stand. He picked it up and tried to straighten it. He threw it to the ground in disgust. "My favorite putter." He looked crest-fallen

Satan stared at Alex for a few moments. "I think the pressure of the job is getting to you, Alex. Why don't you go play a few rounds of golf?"

"You're right. These times are treacherous compared to the simple days in Rome." Alex cheered up. "Lucy can clean up." He disappeared.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Lucy noticed that the explosion had ripped off her clothes. She was naked while Satan's clothes were untouched. "A gentleman would offer me his cape until I can get more clothes."

"What happened here." Satan handed her the cape.

"Michael did this."

"Michael? Why would that underachiever do this?"

"Heaven hates Alex for all the wicked things he did while he was Pope. It ordered Michael to sabotage anything Alex does on earth."

"I don't believe it. Heaven is migrating towards lawlessness while we're moving into legitimate businesses . . . well, semi-legitimate businesses."

"I'll be right back," Lucy said. "Don't go away. We have to talk about this loan business."

When she returned in slacks and a blouse, she said, "All of Alex's contracts were useless. Those people would have ended up in your domain anyway. I know how to make this loan business impact on your market share."

"You always were a lot smarter than your father." Satan paced the office, kicking debris out of his way. "All right. I'll send somebody else up here. You fill him in."

"No." She held her breath.

"No?" Satan was so shocked he stopped pacing and stared at her with his mouth open.

"It's my plan." Lucy stood with her hands on her hips. "I want to run it."

"You're a woman."

"It's the twenty-first century. Women run corporations now. Women are judges, police officers, lawyers, soldiers, politicians. Women can do anything they want and I want to run a business. This business."

"How droll."

"Well?" Lucy could barely contain her excitement. She almost bounced on her toes. Satan hadn't rejected her plan.

"Convince me you'll do things differently than Alex."

"I'll open up in neighborhoods where people go to church. Most of them end up in Heaven. But I'll be looking for a neighborhood where the folks experience financial problems. Lower middle-class in other words. They'll be desperate for low interest loans. But, you have to keep Alex in Hell."

"I'll give you a year."

"That won't do any good. To put a dent in Heaven's market share, I'll need franchises everywhere and it'll take years to get them up and running. That'll take at least forty years." She started making a mental list of things to do.

"Lucy!" Vinny ran into the office. "Are you all right?"

Satan faded from human view.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I was upstairs."

Vinny looked around at the damage. "I heard about the blast at the station house and drove over to see if you were okay."

"How sweet." Lucy patted his cheek. "Listen, I'm tied up right now. How about dinner tonight? I'll need a strong shoulder to help me through this mess."

"Sure. Seven?"

Lucy nodded just as the NYFD trucks pulled up in swirl of noise and yelling.

"The bomb squad will ask a lot of questions." Vinny raised an eyebrow as if he had a few of his own.

"I'll explain tonight."

Vinny left.

"Who's that?" Satan asked.

"He doesn't know it yet, but next month he'll be my chief of security."

"Is it serious?"

"Very serious." Lucy smiled at Satan.

"That explains why you're so anxious to stay and run a business. When you get back to Hell, someone else will be my secretary."

"When I come back to Hell, maybe I'll fight to get my old job back."

"I look forward to seeing that." He patted her shoulder. "Good luck, girl." He disappeared.

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The ground rumbled under Captain Dave Stiller's feet as two M81 pocket tanks rolled by. Large red letters on the turrets spelled out B-U-D-W-E-I-S-E-R and negated the usefulness of the camouflage paint. The tanks threw up clouds of Fort Dix sand and scattered swarms of gnats.

Fueled by anxiety and disillusionment, Stiller's churning stomach growled almost as loudly as the tank engines. He hated these artificial battles. Too many innocent people died. As a West Point graduate, he followed Pentagon directives even when he disagreed with them and these battles brought in a lot of money needed to compensate for the deep budget cuts.

He glanced over at his heavy weapons platoon where a soldier dropped a round into a mortar. The tube was painted in the US Postal Service blue-and-white with the legend, "We Deliver." The mortar round exploded on the hilltop and rearranged some rubble. Piles of stone and wood were all that remained of a village. Had any of the poor bastards survived the barrage? Most of them probably had no idea why they had been moved there yesterday. The platoon lieutenant gave a hand signal to cease fire and Stiller relaxed slightly. The contract called for twenty-five rounds and all had all been fired. His troops had completed Phase One.

He activated his cell phone and heard a lilting female voice say, "My panty liner is so wonderfully soft and absorbent that I don't even --"

He held the phone away from his ear and wished the Pentagon would go back to using radios. Once the commercial finished, he called his lieutenants in charge of the rifle platoons, "Move out!" He clicked his stop watch.

The three rifle platoons stood up and moved towards the slope.

"Faster!" Stiller yelled into the phone. "Get those troops running!" Speed would help determine which unit won the grand prize and there was a lot of money at stake.

The lieutenants yelled and waved their arms; the soldiers trotted up the hill. Their bobbing heads transformed the Golden Arches decal on the back of their helmets into moving bands of color. They all wore a red-and-white bulls-eye patch below the division badge on their shoulders. The patch was the logo of the department store that was the official sponsor of his infantry unit. Stiller's wife liked the extra discount she received there on diapers for their infant daughter.

The soldiers fired from the hip -- as stipulated by the producer to increase the drama -- even though none of them could see a target. The bullets kicked up sand and rock splinters along the crest of the hill.

Recording the action, two camera crews stood on the beds of a pair of 4X4 trucks, while overhead, a helicopter circled the hill providing a different perspective. Blue and white letters identified the trucks and helicopter as part of the World-Wide Broadcasting Corporation.

"Come on." Stiller beckoned to Mathis, his company sergeant. They climbed the hill and were swallowed by an acrid cloud of cordite left behind by the rifle fire.

A hum-vee plastered with so many logos that it wouldn't be out-of-place at a NASCAR race rolled after the rifle platoons. The vehicle carried the two umpires and the referee in charge of scoring.

When the first rifleman reached the hilltop, Stiller clicked his stop watch: four minutes, thirteen-seconds. Much less than the five minutes the goddamn producer allocated to the move. He should be happy with the time and with his men firing a truckload of ammo to make his video look good.

His phone buzzed. "Sir," the first platoon lieutenant said. "I counted forty-five people alive. A fifty-five percent Kill-Ratio is an outstanding score, sir. Much better than anything I've seen from other units."

"Keep looking for more survivors." His stomach threatened outright rebellion. Out of a hundred illegal immigrants penned into the village, less than half had survived and would be allowed to stay in the country.

He and Mathis reached the village. The mortar-blasted area offered no shade from the midsummer sun. Waves of heat radiated from the sandy soil and distorted everything in view. His troops faced a long, hot afternoon. Stiller removed his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. He found a spot where he had a view of the slopes and established his command post. A quick assessment of the area told him the counterattack would come from the woods closest to the village, either the north-western or western slopes.

"I want the first platoon facing west," he told the assembled lieutenants, "the second fronting northwest and third due north. The woods on the east are too far away from the slopes, so I don't expect any trouble from that direction. Any questions?" He looked at the two men and a woman. All much younger than he. "Okay, go and set up your troops."

The referee walked over and gave him a signed form, the official tally. Fifty-two killed. Good. They found a few more survivors and he still had a great Kill-Ratio.

He and his men lunched on cold rations while a convoy of ambulances transported the survivors. After the last vehicle left the hill, the referee displayed his wristwatch to Stiller. "The counterattack can take place anytime after fifteen minutes from . . . now."

Stiller nodded his understanding. The next event was deadly and involved a mob of people desperate enough to attack professional troops.

Soon, five hundred bankrupt citizens, armed with machine pistols and high on booze and drugs would try to take the village from his company.

During the Terrorists Wars, Congress revamped the justice system and tilted it to benefit for-profit institutes. Insolvency was now a crime punishable by stiff prison sentences because individual bankruptcies lowered the profits of the lending companies. The Attorney-General then cut a deal with the entertainment industry to give the felons a chance to get out debt while reducing the number of expensive jail cells required. The Attorney-General proclaimed the arrangement a victory for the taxpayers.

"Captain?" Sergeant Mathis look worried. "I can't get air support." He waggled his cell phone over his head.

Stiller frowned.

"All I get is a loud squeal."

Stiller punched the power button on his cell phone. Nothing but noise. Not even a commercial! He leaned on a mound of rubble to keep his knees from buckling. Bile flooded the back of his mouth and left him with a horrid taste.

It had to be the producer! What was the fat fuck's name? . . . Zephyr . . . Zachery Z. Zephyr. 'Z-Cubed', as he liked to be called. The sonuvabitch wanted more bloodshed so he blocked the requests for air support. Without the cell phone, he also couldn't direct the fire of his weapons platoon at the base of the hill, and his riflemen had used most of their ammunition on the way up the hill. He looked around for the camera trucks that should be in the village with his men. Both crews were still at the bottom of the hill, drinking beers. Even worse, the hum-vee with the officials sped down the hill to join them. Stiller almost threw up his lunch.

He took a deep breath. The whole day was an outrage. First, he had to shell the illegal immigrants because it was too expensive to send them back to their native countries. Second, he had to fight off a frenzied mob of bankrupt people. Third, Zephyr put his men in extraordinary danger to punch up excitement and to increase the ratings of his reality show.

In the last year, his respect for the Pentagon had plummeted because they supported this gross and dangerous spectacle to placate the entertainment industry, amuse the public and earn money. He could take no more of this immoral charade and he resolved to resign his commission before the day ended.

If he survived.

He pulled out the canteen-shaped bottle of sports drink, took a swig, spit it out and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Boysenberry! I hate that flavor."

Mathis chuckled and offered his own canteen. "Coconut-kumquat."

"Gawd!" Stiller swallowed a mouthful. "How can the supply people accept this shit? Better round up some runners, Mathis. We'll have to do things the old-fashioned way."

While he waited for the runners, he wondered if the other officers felt like he did. Two other rifle companies had undergone similar maneuvers recently. The producer would splice together a two-hour-long special from tapes of all the battles.

Mathis returned with three privates.

"Tell the platoon lieutenants I want an ammo check," Stiller told one of them. "Fast." The runner sprinted towards the closest platoon. An idea sprang into his mind. To another runner, he said, "Go down to the tanks and tell them to get their asses up here. Go! And don't come back without them."

The ammo report was as bad as he anticipated: an average of twenty rounds for each rifle. His troops didn't have enough ammo to stop a force of five hundred maniacal attackers. Not without air or heavy weapons support.

"Fix bayonets." The lieutenants looked at him as if he was insane. The soldiers hadn't practiced bayonet fighting since boot camp. The officers gave a terse order and the blades flashed in the sunlight. Every bayonet carried the logo of a condom company on both sides of the blade. "Set all rifles on single shot," Stiller yelled. "No automatic fire."

Mathis pointed in the air. The network helicopter swooped down and hovered behind the south side of the hill. Stiller frowned. The position of the chopper made no sense. If the attack echeloned to the north face of the hill, a distinct possibility, the helicopter would be in the line of fire.

A deep growling noise interrupted his thoughts. Thank God! The two tanks, call names Bud-1 and Bud-2, bellied up the top of the slope with his runner on back of the lead tank. Stiller placed a tank on each of his flanks. With armor anchoring his lines, he felt a bit safer.

"Here they come!" a soldier shouted. A burst from an automatic weapon sent bullets whizzing over Stiller's head. The soldiers in the second platoon returned the fire.

"Hold your fire!" their lieutenant yelled. "Wait 'til they get closer. Much closer."

Stiller moved towards the point of attack and sucked in his breath. Only fifty attackers ran up the slope. Where the hell were the other four-hundred-fifty? In answer to his question, gunfire and more shouts came from his rear. Bud-2 fired its cannon and opened up with its turret machine gun.

The fifty attackers flopped to the ground and sniped at his men. Stiller cursed at them. They would pin down a portion of his soldiers; troops needed to repulse the much larger attack. Someone had given the attackers a good strategy. Z-Cubed?

Stiller ran over to Bud-2 where heavy fire from the insolvents churned up the dirt on the edge of the hill. Protected by the bulk of the tank, he saw the main strength of the debtor force charge uphill on the east flank of the hill, an area undefended except for the tank. He had been outflanked! He backed away from the tank and grabbed a runner. "Get the first platoon over here. Fast! You," he beckoned to another runner. "Get the other tank."

Now the position of the helicopter made sense. It hovered out of the line of fire of the attack and could take ground-level film of his men getting overrun.

The fire power of Bud-2 rattled the attackers and slowed them enough for the first platoon to move across the hill and drop into firing positions.

To the panting runner, Stiller said, "Round up as much ammo as you can from the other platoons."

The defaulters slogged forward, firing their automatic pistols and howling, "Debt free! For you and me!"

The crack of weapons rose to a deafening volume then subsided only to rise again.

"I'm hit!" one of his soldiers yelled. The man gripped his forearm while blood flowed through his fingers.

Bud-1 joined the defense and the two tanks ripped holes in the attackers who surged forward but in smaller numbers. Stiller heard more screams followed by cries of "Medic!"

The cannon blasts, the steady fire from both the turret machine guns and the infantry broke the attack. The survivors retreated towards the woods and prison, their chance at economic redemption ended. The bodies of those who no longer needed a jail cell littered the slope. His men had executed a large number of people who wouldn't be guilty of a crime back in his parents' time. He gawked at the red-stained grass, then forced his mind back to business.

He waved to the commander of Bud-1 who stood in the open turret. Stiller pointed to the area in front of the first group of attackers. The tank commander nodded and the tank spun around, sending a shower of sand over the nearby soldiers.

"Get me a casualty report," Stiller told a runner. He saw a number of soldiers writhing on the ground.

Stiller heard a blast from Bud-1's cannon.

"Where you goin', cowards," a soldier near that tank yelled.

"Come on back and give us a fight," a second called out.

When the runner returned, she reported, "Sir, fifteen wounded. No KIA."

Stiller tried his phone. "Now! Mortgage rates guaranteed to be lower than any other lending company--" He closed his eyes and held the phone against his shoulder until the spiel ended, then called for medical

helicopters. Two arrived within minutes, one emblazoned MERCK and the other WYETH.

Stiller heard more approaching helicopters.

A pair of them set down outside the village. One had WWBC on the side and the other COCA-COLA. To Stiller's surprise, the division commander, General Westly, jumped out of the red Coke bird followed by Colonel Maitland, his battalion commander. Both wore starched and pressed Class A uniforms in contrast to his rumpled, sweat-stained fatigues.

Z-Cubed and a few go-fers climbed out of the WWBC helicopter. Z-Cubed wore an iridescent blue-green djellaba and yellow combat boots. Six-foot tall and weighing close to two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, the man's weight was concentrated in a huge paunch that stretched the material of the gown. A rubber band held his black hair in a pony tail but his untrimmed beard flowed in all directions. When Z-Cubed moved, the sunshine changed his djellabah into shimmering patterns of light that dazzled the eye. It was like looking into a bank of strobe lights. He kicked a rock, said something to a go-fer and backhanded the man in the chest.

Stiller came to attention, saluted the officers and watched for an opportunity to resign his commission.

The officers returned his salute.

"This man," Z-Cubed wagged a fat finger in Stiller's face, "screwed up the whole production. Shoot him or hang him or whatever you do with traitors."

Stiller made a fist and shifted his weight. Before he could throw a punch, General Westly gripped Z-Cubed's elbow. "That's how our officers respond when you fuck with them." Westly's voice came out like a snarl. "You changed the script without telling him and he changed his tactics." He turned to Stiller and held out his hand. "You turned a potentially bloody defeat into a victory. Well done, Captain."

"My boss loved the new script." Z-Cubed pounded a fist into an open palm. "The public is tired of watching people get slaughtered by air strikes. Viewers want to see some deadbeats get to the top and win."

"Captain Stiller," Colonel Maitland said. "Everyone in your command can now wear a combat badge."

The Pentagon hadn't been in a battle since the Terrorist Wars ended and almost everyone with combat experience had retired. The Pentagon's press releases justified these battles as a way to fill this experience gap. Stiller knew this was the 'good' reason given out to the media while the 'real' reason was making money.

"What am I supposed to tell him?" Z-Cubed said, hands on hips. "I couldn't shoot the script because an officer can't get his men killed properly?"

Stiller cleared his throat to get the general's attention.

"You may not like it," General Westly replied, "but Captain Stiller is a hero."

"He is?" Z-Cubed gave the general a wary look.

"Sir, I want to res . . . I am?" Stiller didn't feel like a hero. He felt like someone who had been used by unscrupulous people.

"He is. You are."

Z-Cubed tapped his foot while he stared at Stiller. He made a frame out of his two thumbs and forefingers and sighted Stiller through it. "My God! The man'll photograph like a movie star. Look at that jaw line. The strong nose. The blue eyes."

Stiller's mouth dropped open.

"I can see it now, General." Z-Cubed grinned. "The show will feature this man as the heroic officer. We'll interview him before and after each film clip. He'll give us a voice-over of what's happening on those clips. Stiller'll be a national hero for his sterling defense against the low-life scum who dared to attack his unit."

Stiller gawked at Z-Cubed.

Z-Cubed stroked his beard. "Hmm . . . our unspoken sub-text will be the superb training and adaptability of American officers." Z-Cubed hugged himself. "This show will break all market share records. We can raise our advertising rates."

"I have an opening up at Division," General Westly said.

Stiller broke his opened-mouthed stare at Z-Cubed and turned to the general.

"I need someone to reorganize the training. Someone who can teach the rifle company officers to think under fire. I love the way you compensated for the lack of air strikes and mortars by using the tanks. I want you to teach these people how to think like that. By the way," Westly paused to give Stiller a smile, "the position is to be filled by a major, so I'll have to promote you."

Stiller's mind threatened to shut down from the over-load, but before it did he postponed his resignation. After all, he had a family to support. It would be selfish to resign without talking it over with his wife.

"Not a bad day, Stiller," Colonel Maitland said. "You put up a great fight, you'll be on national TV and you get a promotion."

"And you knocked off those undesirables," Z-Cubed said, "in a most bloody and colorful fashion too. It'll be a TV classic in no time. The residuals alone will be worth a mountain of cash. You win the prize, Stiller. All ten million dollars."

Stiller blinked and tried to sort things out. His wife would love it that Wal-Mart sponsored the division staff and provided more lucrative discounts than the other store. His rifle company would split up the prize money. With his portion, he'd buy shares in Pentagon Inc., the subsidiary that owned

all military advertising space and dealt with the corporations that wanted to rent some of it.

His resignation faded into oblivion. Maybe, the Pentagon knew what it was doing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Hank Quense writes humorous and satiric sci-fi and fantasy stories. He also writes and lectures about fiction writing and self-publishing. He has published 21 books and 50 short stories along with dozens of articles. He often lectures on fiction writing and publishing and has a series of guides covering the basics on each subject. He and his wife Pat usually vacation in another galaxy or parallel universe. They also time travel occasionally when Hank is searching for new story ideas.

Other books by Hank Quense

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