

# Lemmins and Bartholomew

## Stave One: Hell Hotel

### *The Vacation That Value Decided*

Poplar Joef was a child of no imagination. So she could not have been lying. And thus begins the grievous tale of Lemmins and Bartholomew.

On the planet Wifflerolky lived the molkies, a species that felt that they had no purpose other than to satiate the appetite of their predators. One of these molkies, Bartholomew Thompson, was a bus driver for a team of freelance female newscasters. The team consisted of reporter Pandora Fisk, camera operator Value Spangler, script writer Lisa Rowan, and technician Pageant Chippendale. They razzed from one city to the other, harassing mayors, civilians, and the law to the point of restraining orders and banishment until there was no place left.

"We're out of touch with our inner being," said Pandora, an advocate of New Agism. "It is indeed the true reason we are shunned from the towns."

"We're being too hard on ourselves," said Value, an advocate of flawed optimism. "We need a vacation, a weekend of relaxation and social growth."

Pandora sneered at Value. From her perspective, social interaction was the reason for the molkies' prey status. "I'm not going! They are the idiots who mingle and blab who beg to be eaten. As sure as I say, the quietest duck never got shot."

Value ignored Pandora's objection. "Then it's decided!" she argued, "We will make a reservation at a resort and give ourselves a vacation!"

"But where would we go?" said Lisa. "Every other town kicked us out, and if anybody from this town recognizes us, we probably will get banned from here too."

"Uh... well... I think I might know a place," said Bartholomew. He was a reluctant sort of person who was all too skilled at hesitating and withholding fatally essential information, a personality that was partly responsible for many of their banishments.

"Tell us, Bartholomew," said Pageant.

"Mm, well, there is this old place where nobody ever wants to visit, but I don't know why. My grandpa took me to it once, and he never left it."

"That sounds like it has a curse all over it. We'd be wise to shy from the place," said Pandora.

"Oh no, Pandora! It sounds like a place! We should go see it!" said Value. "It's decided we're going there now."

"If they'll let us," said Lisa.

### *Bartholomew Casts Eyes At Lemmins*

The waitress at the burger shop recognized them and almost called the police. Had she succeeded, all six of them might have met a better fate, albeit in jail. Unfortunately for them all, Bartholomew fell madly in love with her, and insisted on wooing her the moment he saw her. As she dialed the number, Bartholomew insisted on dialing it for her. He mistakenly assumed that she had overheard their conversation and was extending the good graces to call a place where they would be accepted into spending the night. "Oh... ah... look here, lady, you don't have to bother finding a resort for us..." he took the phone from her. She was too flabbergasted to reinforce her grip on it.

Pandora rose from her chair. "No, I am not agreeing to it," she said. "The lot of you can fall victim, but I will not have a part in it." She left and seized control of the bus, but crashed it. It should be pointed out that driving was not a common practice among the Molkies, which was partly to blame for their notorious usage as food. Pandora was not pleased with herself, but she was glad that at least she had destroyed any possibility of a vacation. But the waitress took this as an attempted excuse to stay in town. She thought, If I can drive them to wherever they want to go, then maybe they'll leave the town alone.

"I will drive you to wherever you want to go," she said.

### *Grandpa Isn't Here! Learns Bartholemew*

No map on that planet ever registered Bartholomew's mystery motel, so he had to rely on his memory as he married the actions of directing their alluring new driver to hitting on her. The union could never last. The resulting spawn was many false conclusions to their journey until Lemmins nearly ran out of gas. She plunked a tire down at a pointy old manor with a gray sky and a crabgrass lawn..

"I don't want to stop here," fretted Value. "There will be nothing but knitting old grannies. They'll bore me awfully. You'd have to jump the roof to get any excitement out of here."

"You very well should." Pandora's pointer nail seemed even sharper and blacker than usual. "The one who wanted us chasing smithering-nilly hotspots for vacations? It was you, and now look upon the dinge forthwith you hath hence-a-gain wrought."

Bart stepped out of the car. "Welp, this looks like a place, all right."

And one, added Lemmins in her mind, where you are bound to stay foralways.

Anyone wondering what the manor's inhabitants looked like only had to sample the front porch. There, an undertaker sat rocking away his troubles. He hadn't spared a glance in their direction; suppose he was a buddhist monk in early bloom? That concentration of his sure was devout, thought Pageant.

"Fancy get-up. Got any extra beds? We'd like to crash in them."

He gave her no response. Of course, she had asked prematurely. She hadn't even ascended the steps yet. She would have repeated herself once in definite earshot, but a closer look at him raised questions of a different nature, most of them being, what is wrong with this person? His hair parted in the middle, which was always fancy ironically never attractive. It gave the effect of a potrust splitting beneath a heavy, slightering blade axe. And someone this young ought not already make use of a rocker. Pageant had half a mind to take it by its handles, dump him out, and then find a more deserving old fanny to occupy it before he came to his senses and recolonized it.

"It is all very clear. Life is revealed to us in the dark at night. Light tells us all of it."

"Pandora? I think I found your husband."

Pageant didn't know if he was talking to her. He didn't make eye contact, he was staring straight ahead, yet she dare not place herself in his line of sight, lest some window to the other place reside therein..

"Come on, let's all inside," ushered Lemmins.

In Lisa's point of view, the first order of business was to pinpoint the landmaster. She hoped to guarantee some upstairs vacancies so she wouldn't get a nosebleed. They spotted the vacancies easily: They were in their fellow boarder's eyes. Spread throughout the lounge, men and women fiddled with playing cards without moving forward in any discernable game. They fondled their jewelry without bringing it to any practical adjustment. To every individual stare, there was an immovable focus, yet no object thereof.

Lisa wondered if they had wandered into the land of the blind, a tale her grandmother had often told her to scare her to sleep. It went something like this: "Those who don't close their eyes at bedtime have their eyes roll out of their heads and down to the gutter. And then they

take you to the land of the blind and leave you there." Given that she never explained who the "they" were, Lisa sort of outgrew the superstition, but she still kept a blindfold on whenever she had to work at night. She once spilled coffee into Pandora's nickel-rice salad, so she was locked into the laundry room from then on.

Look in no direction, do you? Pandora spat in no particular direction and traped to one of the card players. "Are you in a trance? This part is supposed to carry a brain inside. Is it missing?"

The woman altered the direction of her gaze, but only by a few degrees, and not towards Pandora. "We all bleed blue blood," and she whipped up a finger full of make-up. It was blue, so it was probably eye shadow.

The covenlord was altogether a trip to decipher among so many Victorian-dressed zombies. Lisa continued to wonder if they'd never seen sleep - their own, or that of their neighbors. It wasn't long before she gave up and started inspecting their sleeves and shoulders for dusts, cobwebs, and other signs of prolonged sedentaria.

Hasty footsteps and high voices from around the corner brought news of preadolescent children, and the very seeds of headaches began to sprout in more than one mind. They turned the corner, about eleven of them, and they halted when they saw the strangers. They dutifully backed away into the shadows, discouraged by such a motley sight. They probably hadn't seen un hypnotized adults in years.

"Don't hide," beckoned Value. "Come out, come out! We're deciding on spare rooms. Got any? We wouldn't want to lie atop one another; that's an easy snatch for sure, considering all the creatures who like to eat us."

The bravest one stepped forward and sized them up. "You here to bring trouble?"

"There's always trouble wherever we go, I think."

"But we don't bring it."

"We do indeed not. For you see, in this world, idiots survive. They do not read the true fact that disaster and catastrophe are the end of our sundry voyages. It is there long before our arrival, a race we yearn to lose."

"You'd be better off behind bars," burped the bibbed scamp. "No one wants to stay here. Best get out while you can."

She (if you were wondering that it was a boy, because she was not), she was the last man standing among the eleven; the rest had made good their retreat. Value pondered this. "A gaggle of scooties too shy to hang around? Will have to investigate the matter!" She picked up a skillet

to pretend it a magnifying glass. Hunching over, fist behind her back, she bounced around the corner into figure eights, might it draw out the youngster with humor.

"Hmm." Bartholomew wasn't looking for a manor chief, or open lodgings, or anything resembling scattered younglings. His hunt constituted adding up all the human antiques to see of the sum was his Fang-pa. Not only was he bad at math, but he couldn't even remember what any of his family looked like, let alone a missing ancestor.

"If he's in here, he's just not the man he used to be. Or he is, just too old for me to tell."

Somebody had discarded a laced panty on the floor. This will do for a makeshift handkerchief, reckoned Lemmins. I shall play hard-to-get, all the while being hard-to-get, while further being impossible-to-get. She then would be forever rid of clueless lovesick men and hotels.

"Yoo-hoo!"

All thoughts of Bartholomew's long-lost relatives retreated to the dungeon of his mind at the sight of Lemmins flapping meager laundry before she disappeared into the recesses of the house. Bartholomew left the den in excited pursuit. He caught a glimpse there, a peek there, never noticing the ever-narrowing corridors until his hips betrayed him and he was left to wonder how he could have been so unobservant.

Lemmins made it out through the window. She thought vile thoughts that those to whom were addressed would never hear: Now you are all stuck here, but that man is stuckest of all! And with that, she set upon a hasty pilgrimage to the getaway van. She ran and ran, and then she ran some more. With each new corner she turned, the landmarks appeared suspiciously familiar. And then the citizens also started looking familiar too as well. It was awfully strange she got to civilization first before her car, but all it took was one more turn, and through the fog smug and lumpy, she failed to accomplish her mission.

There was Value Spangler, descending the stoop still consummating her magnifying game. There Lisa Rowan, approximating a finger near this and that strangers' eyeball. There Pageant Chippendale, doing the idiotically occupied Value's job of filming the whole charade. But there, worst of all, wearing a door-frame skirt from his quasiaccomplished dislodgement, was Bartholomew Thompson, reiterating conspiratorial hogwash fed to him by the Hotelizens. Did any of these loony bin vampires even see natural light within the past ten years? Lemmins snuck over and peaked over their shoulders. Beyond she saw tense glances traded among the children. Fuming, she snatched the microphone and shoved Bartholomew out of the way to do a little reporting of her own.

"This just in. My, Lemmins Parker, car is all gone and I cannot leave this place. I wonder the reason-" and then it was the camera's turn to be snatched. "I wonder the reason it isn't here." The grown hypnomolkies hadn't responded to Lisa's frisky finger. They didn't flinch at the camera's sudden proximity either. "I wonder the reason, holy hamslop, do I wonder the reason. I wonder if someone got into my car and drove it into a bog. I wonder if it was a child." She barged the crowd's perimeter and the children turned and scattered. "I wonder if that child is running from me now." She couldn't catch so much as a glimpse. "I wonder if that child knows I'm hot on its trail. OH BOY DO I EVER WONDER."

In a minute, she gave up. She might as well go inside where she could at least snatch some vehicular apparatus of theirs to steal. A bike, a scooter, hell even a decent pair of jogging loafers.

### *Zoomba In A Room*

All that hiding from Lemmins only put them in the clutches of Value Spangler. She locked them in a room, put on a workout sweater, and led them all in Zoomba exercises. She even came up with motivational phrases like "There's a real humdinger over here" and "We're gonna shake it till the ceiling starts to rain" while an irregular beat hollered from a stereo box. The kids didn't follow her lead, though. She had to patrol-dance her way through the columns. Maybe that would stir up the shenanigans she was looking for.

You see, Pandora was too obstinate to do any reporting at the hotel that day. She was reading a magazine when she perceived a subtellegent energy nearby by. She turned to an inch-away frying pan that looked quite the threat, so she instantly turned the tables and bapped it to whatever was behind it, thus putting an end to Value's magnifying game. "Oh, it was your face behind it all along?" Pandora went back to her magazine. "Some brain damage would do her good. I hope it ensues." It was maybe why she was acting in this manner.

The attempt at crowd control didn't make the kids join in. It made them groan and then throw eggshells.

"So! You want to play rough, do you?"

No one stuck around long after that. The door was locked from the inside all along, so they escaped really easily. While Value went from room to room, uncertain as to which child she should chase first, she ran past a room where Lemmins was trying to steer a treadmill. "This horrid contraption gets you nowhere in a fimp!" She felt it deserved the ax and acted accordingly.

The whole day seemed comprised but of chaos. Some prodigal order was restored after Value tripped over Pageant's deliberately outstretched leg. "Cut the crap, Spangler. Don't you see we have work to do, eh? What's the matter?"

But Value didn't stand up. "Oh leg, leg around whom I tripped, now I must wrangle to the person attached to you. Pageant, no! We are here on vacation. What crap is there to cut? I shall vacate day up and day over. A demonstration!" She took to napping.

Pandora came sacheing along, and with one look, felt an insurmountable tower of justice descend on the guilty. "So it is that the louse suggesting these foul lodgings becomes one among their bones. Well, that is the way the cheddar rots."

"I'm not giving up that easy." Pageant stepped each Value-toe in succession. "One of these has to do the trick, just you wait."

Pandora waved away the notion. "This place is a tomb anyway. A waste; that's what the stamina you spend urging the frump to vigilance."

A double-clap heralded the entrance of Lisa. "They're about to have dinner. I'm all noseey about what these people eat. I can't help wondering whether it causes the way they act."

She said more, but Value augmented her snore volume. Her new tactic, it seemed, was to snore her way out of having to move anywhere.

### *The First Dinner*

Once all this vacation hoo-ha ended, Pageant imagined, she'd return to a world that would turn a well-worn hiney to her presence. They had to do something, so she sat in the backyard under the Pickleberry tree and pondered the great thoughts. "There's no emergency room for reputations," was the one that made the most revisits.

It was a pest, she thought, so she took a break from all that thinking and looked through the kitchen window. There, the hotel molokies set napkins and platterware in the most mechanical fashion possible. If they never leave, then how do they get new batteries? "Ah-ha!"

The idea was so exciting that she ran around the house in circles shrieking for her coworkers. Pandora took a swing at her with a lampstand, which she dodged and continued calling for an impromptu business meeting.

"There's a lack of connection in the world today," she announced once the others were all with her. "We need to broadcast to everyone just how relatable even the dingiest people can be."

"I expect you aim to place me before the camera as an example," feared Pandora. "But I will only comply if I get to push the girl with the coffee high off the roof immediately afterward, who put us all in this situation in the first place." Again, her point-nail seemed to attain advancement into a sharper and bleaker stage of life. Such was the effect when directed to Value.

"Deal," hurried Lisa, ever eager to uncover the mystery of the gothigans.

"Hey," objected Value. "I didn't agree yet, be fairer to me!"

"Agree to this," bargained Lisa. "I shall insert a trampoline improvised from Bartholomew's paunch at the last second. You won't even know the difference, or that you've been pushed."

Pandora raised an eyebrow. It certainly borrowed a lot from the satisfaction she'd get from her promised revenge. Value believed, on the other hand, that it would provide the fun the manor so heartbreakingly lacked.

"Uh, excuse me?" Stuttering Stubby took a turn to be stubborn. "I haven't eaten yet and there's not much bounce down there."

"Go along with the plan," persisted Lisa. "I can deliver Lemmins' heart of hearts to you, if only you'd be complicit."

That changed his tune in a crank. It's a good thing Lemmins was busy hucking the rocking horse into the fireplace for its locomotive uselessness. Otherwise, she might put a snag in the thread of deals. Pandora was still around, though. And if anyone could horn in on and a friendly contract, she could.

"You'd better desist in these undercover bargains, lest I inflict a sabotage upon the goals of the evening."

"That's settled, then," concluded Pageant. "Come on, everyone. Let's out there and see how much relatability we can capture."

They barged into the dining room apparently mid-prayer. The molky at the head of the table was at the line, "...and be sure to savor the flavor most sensually."

"Oh, said Lisa, "that must be the residence president."

"Quiet!" shushed Pandora, although their sudden entrance had no visible shake upon the ongoing validiction. well, we'll soon see about that.

"Hurry," said Lisa. "We need to join in. We need to show ourselves as team players," fpr what could be more relatable? She wedged a spare chair in while Pageant ushered Bartholomew into a narrow space. By the time Pageant had her own snug spot, they'd induced plenty of molkies to abandon the prayer and stare in random directions. Even still, only one of those



directions happened to be toward the table's newcomers, so was it disapproval they meant to send? Incredulity? Indignance? Curiosity, even?

"Anyone relating out there so far?" Pandora was unimpressed with the situation as it was. Value did her job for once and filmed it, but they weren't getting any answers. Pandora approached the one whose gaze was nearest into the camera. "While you are awoken from the spiritual realm, pray tell describe the deity whom you worship."

"... And confidently arrange the stars in our glorious favor..." It wasn't the one she'd just asked, but another whose eyes were still part of the prayer. His words, however, were nothing novel. They were a mere accompanied replica of the prayer already being spoken.

"Grrr," growled Pandora. "But no matter. It would seem the chief lord of this hamlet has the power to arrange the stars, and that somehow bestows magnificent fortune on those who offer it prayers. Trouble yourself to name one of these fortunes you expect?" She put the microphone to the mouth of the devout join-inner.

"And the bones left by the Swamp Eater buried, forgotten and lost." This was one of Bartholomew's open-eyed neighbors. She actually had a bowl on her head, a fork tucked behind one ear, and crayon sticking out of her nose. One of the children must have done that while she was still in a trance. She hadn't left the trance, so Pandora thought, why bother?

She also thought they were at least getting somewhere. Apparently these people prayed to "The Swamp Eater." Who knew or even really cared what else their religion mandated, one more question and then she'd get to do some violent fun destruction.

"And now for a word from the leader of the table." Pandora placed the microphone near his lips, and his voice plummeted. This wouldn't do for her, however much she hated this humbug of a story or prayer or fasting man's dinner, so she tapped his lips with the microphone. The dry mushy things continued to move, but no audible sentence came to bloom.

"Well, wasn't that relatable. I'm sure many of you have converted already. In fact, I'd like to go say a prayer of my own." She threw her hands up and left the room. While searching for dangerous weapons in the kitchen, she whispered, "Dear grand ignorancey - I don't know who you are or why they praise you, but you can go crawl back into that intergalactic foofoo shaft you belched from, Amen."

Value didn't follow after. She didn't know how many of Lisa's promises she intended to keep, so she thought tattling would be a great way to spend her last days on Earth. She started with the peepers who violated the prayer. "Mr. Abercrombie, Shink-shink and Patoola were looking while you prayed."

The head was done praying, but he hadn't introduced himself as Abercrombie, or anything else for that matter. Nobody here introduced themselves at all. He had no idea Value was addressing him or who she was tattling on, so no judgments arose from the report. Value, a girl with no patience, thought that Pandora's unauthorized departure might save her life.

"Wake up, the prayers over." Value took Lisa's silverware and stamped it on the table. "You should demote Pandora, maybe even fire her. Did you know she left the room without praying?"

"You must stop," commanded Lisa. "Pandora has finished her job for the night. Now go on the roof and let her push you off. I'll be there with Bart in seven minutes if you can do a mouse-and-mouse chase for that long."

"Forget it Lisa, the deals are all off."

Learning that not even the whole family could cooperate in the prayer told her that these weren't so relatable people after all. The closest they might come to gaining any relatability would be if rebellious children would see the thing and therefore blaspheme their dinner prayers with open eyes.

Speaking of kids, where were they?

Didn't they want dinner, or whatever this was? The elder gothigan drew a paper from the bowl and passed it to his left. They all got the sense there'd be no dinner after all. Maybe those little weasels hoarded a secret stash of animal crackers somewhere. Anywho, these big weasels proceeded plucking a paper slip and passing the bowl to the left. They weren't eating any, so they could rule out the paper slips as part of the meal.

Bart peaked under the table so he could weigh their bellies with his eyes. *Do I see that? They aren't any scrawnier than usual. There has to be food around here somewhere, it's just not on the table. I wonder if Lemmins has found it. Oh, Lemmins, Lemmins! I'd starve for a taste your love!*

But Bartholomew wouldn't be tasting anything just yet. His dead-eyed neighbor pulled out a piece of paper without even looking at it, and then it was his turn. "Who's Queso Manzo-"

Such sudden shrieks erupted from everyone at the table (excepting those with whom he'd known professionally, of course) that the letters nearly slipped from the slip. It thinned Bartholomew terribly, greatly distancing him from his qualifications as a belly-trampoline, his spine an instant traffic zone for quaking shivers.

Also altered was the hallway into a warpath as Pandora came marching down, eyes full of rage and alarm. She couldn't divide her wrath - everyone involved deserved the full amount.

And the bowl passed on, eventually into the hands of Value. She was in the mood for a kissing game during the thrill of the moment, so she pretended that that's what this was about. "Ooh, evening post-office. I get Lilac Lit-"

Again the eruption of shrieks, and this time Value joined in, much more competitive than the rest. It yanked the momentary attention of the incensed Pandora, who whirled around back into the kitchen. Whoever this was, thought Value, I'd better go and find them. What a wonderful way to spend the hour before I am pushed off the roof!

At last, all the paper was gone. A hotelizen removed the last paper, and another ordered him to read it. "Sweeney DelCapitol, you will be the one next."

"What does that mean?" complained Pageant. "I thought we were about to have din-"

Shrieking. Infernal shrieking.

"Stop that!" Value wasn't in the room when Pandora came back, so she had to punish everyone else by smacking their lips with a spoon. They all got up and scattered, but there were enough of them for Pandora to spend all her rage. With the left over bitterness, she turned on her colleagues.

"The next person to scream will garner far worse than a spoon to the lips, and that goes for the four of you. And that runaway waitress whenever I find her."

"She'd never run away!" objected Bart. All he got in return was another busted lip, but he was still hungry. "Hey, um... when do we get to... you know, eat?"

"Probably never," lamented Pageant. "This wasn't relatable at all. I feel that I should water that footage. It's all useless."

"I knew in advance it would all go to waste," sneered Pandora. "Do what you will, I am going to bed. My threat towards the screams and suchlike noises live on."

They all went to bed after that. No one cared what Value or Lemmins was doing, just so long as they did it in silence.

## **Stave Two: All of the Missing**

### *Nightly Summons*

Going to bed on an empty stomach was an uncommon occurrence for the Molkan newscrew 5. Their routine was to distribute surprise goodies they'd grabbed on their way by unguarded farms, but tonight was a different story. Bartholomew had an appetite for some

snoogy time with Lemmins. He was convinced she felt the same, it was only that her true desires were buried deep inside.

He also had a feeling it was all Value's fault, who didn't fall off the roof like she was supposed to, thereby denying him indirectly the secrets of wooing. If I were a romance guru, I wouldn't bogart them like everyone else. I'd share them on my weekly tele-show, and the world would have a lot more romance.

In a sudden jolt, he turned his head. He thought he heard a spider bark directly into his ear. With no results, he snorted his cynicism. I bet Pandora knows the language of Spiders. Next time an insect of any sort came barking into his ear, better be in English and about their predator's million-dollar military secrets. Also much quieter so he may resume his sleep. None of this barking nonsense. If I had military secrets, I wouldn't horde them like everyone else.

Wait a minute... He was up off the pillow again because he had a tasty idea. He leapt from his bed in ecstatic jubilation. I could very well be a romance guru once the idea goes public! I have to write it down... but no. The evening paper bowl had taught him a lesson: Screaming was what comes from messages on paper slips. So armpits to paper slips. Even peanutshells to paper slips. Lemmins would recite the story publicly once she came to her senses and awoke into love.

The plan was to steal into her bedroom and whisper euphoric nothings into her ear. Bartholomew thought of love poems he could recite as she slept her cares away. Once her mind was sufficiently packed with romantic implications - all of which he'd be sure to make himself the root topic - he'd return to his room and await her irrestrainable embrace.

He passed on the way a strain of detritus, and was a bit surprised to find natural foliage inside the hotel. Still, why not engorge my engagement night with a bouquet? She'll never forget, no sir! Trying to fashion the thing into a swirly cone was drivel. It had the personality of frowned spinach and dripped whatever change in shape inflicted on it. The cause was a bust.

Now, is her room behind this door, or that? He hadn't watched anyone else select a room. Surely fate would be kind and chose for him a destiny; with utmost care, he opened the door, shuffled to the bed, and leant over the person within.

"Oh do you know the muff-"

A decidedly unladylike snort interrupted his recital. As no sound that ferocious could ever come out of his betrothed, the only explanation could be that he'd entered the wrong room. Pandora's room, no less. Next time they prayed to fate, he would be the one to deny so much as a blink in her honor.

Oh well, while I am here, I may as well collect some sacred knowledge of herbal remedies. He granted his spinach-mushed hands a second look, and dug a steady finger into her nape.

Pandora's snoring ballooned before she awoke. "What, maggot?"

"Hey, uh, you know how to make a love potion?"

She didn't turn over, only doy-palmed her forehead. "why don't you go whisper subliminal messages or something? No love potion ever altered the inclinations of the heart."

Fine. Be that way. He was almost feeling too grumpy to check another room. On his way out, he gave his feet a good firm shake so as to not track out any of Pandora's stinking aura.

"Why you cowering swine!"

The outburst was followed by a slim metal rod thrown stiff into the woodwork. Pandora was now bolt upright, guacamole where her skin should be, and cucumbers for eyes. A hungry Bartholomew would have asked, "Hey, where'd you get the food?" This Bartholomew ran out screaming. Pandora, still vegetable-faced and not only that but swinging a poker, didn't notice the eyeholes in the wall they passed, much less the inquisitive eyes behind them. Bart didn't notice them either. Duh.

### *Promise Past and Curses Cast*

It was Lisa, Value, and Bartholomew in the living room the next morning. There were also some hotel zombies, but they didn't much matter. The abstract concepts present included hunger, impatience, bad attitudes, and a grudge held against lovesick Bartholomew and beauty sleep-deprived Pandora, over whose antics the sane people lost sleep. If anybody else besides the children were groggy, no one could tell. They were just as dead-eyed and intellectually aimless as usual. Bartholomew couldn't even measure his likelihood of matrimonial union with Lemmins, so he said what any self-respecting molky would say in his situation.

"It wasn't all my fault. Pandora was... I don't know, you should have seen her. What, hysterical? Yeah."

Lisa and Value didn't much care, but Pandora did. She came in and reached for a brick, and Bartholomew blamed (or even stayed in the room) no more.

"He told us about the food you were wearing," Value obviously hadn't noticed the brick. "Thanks for wasting it. Sounds like it was pretty much the only thing left we could eat."

She sure was making edible use of some pointless matter she was picking out of the rug, though.

"Cretins," snarled Pandora. "All of you. What makes you think I got any more sleep than any one of you minus the others?"

"Oh, we don't. In fact we think you're lazier than usual."

Pandora never did get to push her nemesis off the roof. That inoccurrence was never more glaring than now. It led her to an ultimatum. Perhaps she could go through with it this instance. Perhaps she could dispatch a curse. She did have some renown in the demon realm, after all.

"Which shall it be?" she queried. "Shall we up on the roof off which I shall send you," she gave a sideways glare to Lisa as she added, "as promised me last night?" Then back to Value, "or shall I bestow a curse?"

Value looked up. She didn't get what she was saying at first, but then she got. "Welp, I'm definitely not going up to the roof." She really didn't trust Bartholomew's dough. It was there, but it didn't look any more reliable than he actually was. "So let's go with the curse. Magic isn't even real, anyway."

"Oh yeah? Then what do you call this?"

I would have called what she did next aimless chanting. If you were there, you would also call it that. Lisa would have called it that if she paid attention (she didn't), and Value called it stupid aimless chanting. What was weird was when the hotelizens desisted their monotonous humdrum - the cards, the jewelry, the indoor lumberdry, and expressed some alien alertness to the noise in the room. After seeking a visual component (as they still seemed to nitwitted to correctly attribute Pandora), they employed a manual element by swinging their fingers around as they left their stations and tripped over one another. Pandora was all done, and the weird ones lay where they fell.

It was scary at first to Value. But they seemed quite dense and harmless as usual. She lowered her eyelids. "Nice prayer. Almost as good as the one last night."

Whatever it was supposed to do didn't work, on account of Pandora's curling sneer. "It was supposed to shrink that yammering hole you call a mouth, but I suppose I'll have to do that manually."

She then grabbed Value by the face and shoved her into the washing machine. Value surfaced only long enough to ask for a snorkle, but the sentence was murdered by the slamming lid as Pandora put the thing on high.

## *Matters Of Food and Starving*

"Hey watch this." Pageant came into the living room with a coffee mug. She went over to Lisa and took a swig from the emptiness inside. "Oh yeah," she snarked, "I forgot. I wonder how relatable starvation would be."

"I've been thinking," said Lisa. "That anti-dinner we ate last night ended with the name of Sweeney DelCapitol. I remember because I nicked the paper, and I have to wonder who he is."

Pandora came into the room. "That could be anyone at all. Someone at the table could possess the name, so could someone eaten long ago. Tuh, and again, tuh. Names with no one belonging to them snivel in the great world of life mysteries."

Along a line from beyond, something like a bowling bawl rumbled that-a-way.

"I'll just say this," said Pageant. "If it's someone in the house, they're probably starving right along with the rest of us. Even that hypno-pile I had to step over on my way into the room is prolly starving. If it's someone who's here but not starving, we'll just have to net him and torture for the foodstuff whereabouts."

The secret bowling noise bellowed in another direction.

"By Hockey-jocks, that it!" Lisa was so amazed by sudden freak plan that good grammar no longer came naturally. "Pop quiz: what kind of person makes a loud unstoppable noise that no one wants to hear and the answer is a children, who is also the answer to the next question about who the only kind of person to tell us anything since we got to this place."

Her plan was to administer a trip wire at the end of a corridor so that whoever was rumbling couldn't escape. She nailed hooks into doorframes and linked up camouflaged shoelaces. At last, the noise culprit made its debut, and Lisa divided the troublemaker from the skateboard by executing her trap.

## *The Vision*

With the unconscious middle-part lying face down on the porch, Bartholomew had plenty of time in orating his autobiography. It was when he got to his speed-bowling phase that he understood how he needed to adopt more religion into his life.

"Well, I've never worshipped the Swamp Eater before, but... hmm. Maybe that would show me the meaning of my time at this hotel."

Naturally all that went straight down the crapper when he saw another opportunity to try and make moo-moo with Lemmins. This time, it was because he saw her twirling along the vertical plane right out the hotel door. She was headed for some mud, so he yanked his shirt off and cast it in that direction. He didn't have super-sonic speed, though, so most of the sight (actually, all of it) registered after she was already splotched in oatmeal-soil. "I hate it here."

The skateboard followed out shortly after. All the momentum Lemmins had been building upstairs depleted, and her chance of escaping back to the city went the way of Bartholomew's conversion. The crapper, remember?

"Dibs on Sweeney's skateboard!"

*Sweeney? Sweeney DelCapitol?*

The children had all conglomerated around the door to marvel at the disaster. Once they got a look at Bartholomew's naked doughbelly, most of them would scatter. But Lisa had enough time to intervene and collect just one more piece of the puzzle.

"Sweeney, of course! That was the name that was drawn at the party."

"If that was a party, call Bartholomew 'smarty.'" Value had just crawled soaping wet from the washing machine. Pandora snapped in her direction. "Oh no," said Value, "what have you done to me? You'll get yours in time, just you wait and see!"

"Now it's even worse than before," groaned Pandora. "Oh, woe and sorrow!"

"That's not important now." Lisa knelt down. "Tell me, where is Sweeney now?"

The nearest child, a girl, shrugged. "Dunno, but that was his skateboard."

Suddenly, Lisa had a vision: She was not in a room, but in the room were a group of small children. Bartholomew was hiding something behind his back, but she could not see what it was. Bartholomew stared from face to face, and began, "Ah... uhm... children... your friend Poplar... uh... she's um... dead - er - dead... I... uh... I killed her... um... because... because she was so... frivolous... frivolous... yes she was... so I killed her... I took her to the top of a house... and... uh... I pushed, no, I... I fed her an apple core, and she choked on it... ah... yeah... um... that's how it happened, it really was."

Lisa returned, deathly white. "Sweeney..."

Most of the children were gone before she could ask anything further. She could tell the one remaining, the girl with the bib, was the bravest. She had to be the leader. Above all else, she must never disappear.

She was the bravest because she got as much an eyeful of the pasty shirtless Bartholomew, and yet she stood firm. "Ms. Scooter is our scullery maid. She'd never let in a wild savage."



Bartholomew harrumphed. "I had to do it. How else could I have saved a very eligible bachelorette?"

"Oh, but was she really worth saving?" She snickered and scurried away.

That Afternoon

One way to spend the afternoon was to lead a 4-man ransack of a three-story manor. Pageant was a part of it; she fashioned a pair of stilts so as to reach the higher floors and open their windows from the outside; a symbolic gesture, one that indicated an outsider observing unnatural but civilized environments and then gaining access through shifty means. Pandora joined to scowl at sticky-fingered runts. All Value ever did was bob along doing the frying pan routine to pretend she was a detective, and everything she said was pointless and it rhymed. Bartholomew went to the mirror to pose in front of it so he could admire his newfound shirtlessness. Whenever the children happened upon him they got scared and squealed before they scampered away. When Pandora peeked around the corner to see the commotion, she decided it was in need of everlasting censorship. Dousing the lights wouldn't cut it; it was already dark in there and all that dough still scared everyone, so she took a crumb of brick and flung it straight through the mirror. A shame I didn't strike his head, she thought.

Their day's work (those who were working) covered the kitchen, and all the drawers and mealware therein, the pantry, cupboards and dishes alike, the front porch, populated again by paraverbing funereans, the tool shed, where Lemmins could be found attempting to assemble a new getaway contraption, the ballroom, or at least the parts they could clear of cobwebs, the attic, which they could not clear of cobwebs, and the dungeon, which was almost indistinguishable from the rest of the place apart from the empty gruel bowls and iron bars. When they finished, they rendezvoused to potluck the data.

"I found these bibs," said Value. "Look closely, see that? They are apple stains. That means that food is somewhere in the house. Oooh I bet those goblins hide their own stash every day!" What she actually said was in rhyme, but don't worry, I won't torture you with it.

"I found these lunchboxes" said Pageant. "They all have names like 'Poplar Joef' and 'Titus Bakitus.' Opened, it was supposed to spill the contents, but the surprise of the contents was that there were not any. "Do you see? There is no food left. They ate it all. Why, I could just go in the backyard and crawl into a hole."

"There, you might find food about," scoffed Pandora. "Although I'd rather the rhyming girl go and not find food, only destiny and fate. As for me, what I found was terror, such that those

who look upon it stunt their growth. Look out! Where you step might be the roaming herds of pipsqueaks."

It was a surprise to all that she'd warn them, though it may be only because it wasn't Value they'd be stepping upon.

There was one more thing to discover with regards to the lunchbox and the bib. One was actually inside the other, in a compartment that Pageant had overlooked. Right away, Lisa equalled the bib to the Joef lunchbox, and she knew right away that she was the most important. The others agreed on that, but the reasons were different. Value and Pageant knew that Poplar Joef was the key to obtaining food. Lisa knew they were at the very threshold of an unfolding prophecy, and who had more crucial insight into the matter than Poplar?

Not Sweeney; he was already gone. Not Lemmins, she aimed to miss out on this golden shimmering history. Not Pandora, for her paranormal connections were oily; Not Bartholomew, for the occupants of his mind were mere questions as to how to bag Lemmins now that his face was a constellation of sharded glass. It couldn't be Pageant or Value; one longed for life's normalcy, while the other spoke unmentionable rhymes. Not any of the hotel permanents, they spoke in riddles, ones they couldn't themselves answer to.

Poplar was the only one left. She knew secrets, ones that Lisa aimed to follow. That is why she sat upon the roof and dangled the lunch box over the edge with a fishing lure. Later on in the day, Pageant came along to inspect the results. There weren't any, let alone any that led to food. Value came alone later, to say in rhyme what would otherwise only be, "the objective here is when we get to eat, right?"

"Oh, steer your minds away from food for a minute and listen. Something wild is happening here every day, and it's most likely been going on much longer than we can imagine. What is it? Is it the whole reason we, the molokies, get eaten all the time? Maybe! And if it's something that big, we'll be the first to capture it on camera, and then the consequences will be more provocative than any plate-meal or return to society."

"Woah, woah, woah-woah, woah!" said Pageant. "That's a grandiose scheme. How will the planet be able to handle it all?"

"She's right," said Value. "Something that big could never be swallowed by the public at large. I can barely swallow it, and I'm so hungry I'm eating everything in reach, even abstract ideas." That, too, actually rhymed. We all choose to forget the rhymes that Value expelled.

### *Lisa's Waiting Pays Off*

Suddenly, there wasn't just a lunchbox at the end of the pole, but some other things as well. Lisa identified each one as a yank. It giddied her stiff and tingly.

"Do you feel that?" She thrust the pole into Pageants hands. "Our reward is marching the warpath!"

"Ooh, let me have a feel," said Value, and then something that rhymed with that. "She's right, it is yanking. Look out, everyone, and get ready to eat!"

"I have it!" Lisa took it back and began to reel. "We'll have an interview. She'll tell us a lot of secrets about the place, and we will go down in history as the molokies who all found out."

As the three verbalized their fantasies about fishing reels and evening meals, Lisa began to rewind the wire. Poplar it seemed was a professed and practiced tug-warrior. The combat waged on in an epic manner, accelerated by a roar from below. The roar, however, was not the bellicose vocalizations of a bibbed youngling, but the engine of a departing motorcycle. Lemmins' latest escape tactic yanked Lisa off the roof, where she collapsed into that morning's mudpuddle and cemented the pole into the ground. Mr. Pole, hooked securely onto the rear tire, adjusted its direction to correspond with a nearby brick wall, rendering it a crumpled metal wad and its owner bowling down the street, up a half-pipe like structure, hurtling back towards the hotel, and through a perfectly good window.

"Hmm," said Pandora. "I could have sworn it was the vacation woman's voice that I heard. Well, it would seem I forced someone off the roof today, although not the one I wanted. I was levitating before all this happened, you know. I can do it when no one's watching."

### *A Dire Predicament Resolved, And Another Mystery Commences*

Lisa plucked her head from the mud to scowl up at the woman who'd never learned her own colleagues' names. "What do we have to do, show up in a tarot card?"

But it wasn't Pandora at whose lofty feet she lay. She should have known by the sneakers. It was Poplar Joef.

"What are you monkey-butts doing with my lunchbox? Dinner's already over."

"What?" Lisa's panic aided her removal from the mud. "But whose name was drawn? We couldn't afford to miss that."

Poplar shrugged. "We don't know. You think I'm going to sit through all that hoo-hah just to hear them read someone's name off a paper?" What little imagination she carries, thought Lisa, but she was still important. Value hadn't changed her mind of that, because the woman charged the girl with poetic demands for secret meal locations while the latter skipped her way back into the house, and then Bartholomew was in the way. Oh, he'd attended dinner all right. With his countenance an entire connect-the-dot puzzle made of hideous glass sprinkles, he'd feasted on a whole defeat sandwich.

"The very person we wanted to see!"

Pageant thought Lisa ought speak for herself, but the newsteam 5's script writer was too busy ushering their bus driver into a broom closet to dilly with her technician's opinions. Said opinion took on a new color when she noticed his cheeks pouched out a little further, that owing to their camera operator pointing it out like this. "Look right there, his cheeks are puffed! That must mean, inside of them, there's food and stuff." The two pursued, followed also by the reporter, who may or may not have levitated at all that day, and the privacy of the closet was obtained.

"Frisk his cheeks, Value. Those bulges promise food." The revelation broke that promise when Value issued a mighty clap, and paper wads spilt out at their feet.

"Now look what you've done! If I go down there and don't find Poplar's name, we're sunk."

Pandora snorted. "Rather a late observation, I'd say."

The closeted crowd left so little space that it was like diving into the sea, and anyway it was as hard to breathe below as it was above. There were many dead bugs on the ground, so Lisa had to navigate those as well as the shoes to reclaim the coveted name-wads, and even so, many of them were smeared by blame of Bartholomew's spittle. She stopped looking when she found "Poglar Teef." Nobody else was that important.

"Salvation!" she cried, and wriggled her way back to the surface. "Poplar will not be the one to disappear. The question is, who will be? And that is why Value's job is henceforth tracking down the real last name standing and see just how he disappears."

Value's lip made its debut.

"I'd rather figure out where the apple stains came from. That other thing is just dumb."

"Where else? Apples."

"But those only exist as permanent smears on bibs. The ones that we can still eat are the ones where I call dibs."

Pageant seethed at this vicious poetry. Someone, she thought, is developing a stingy demeanor.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Oh, you and your digestive notions. Listen to you!" She thought better of the command only too late. "But only don't. You'll get your apples soon enough, but the task at hand is to locate the last name standing, as estab..." She didn't finish her sentence because she realized another missing puzzle piece. "Just whose name was the last left in the bowl?"

"Oh, um... something like Melchizedek Lot, I think. I don't know, can I just go to sleep? All this paperwork is giving indigestion."

Pandora raised an eyebrow at this.

"Now that, I say, is a curiosity," said Pandora. "It is more like an imposter to take that action, rather than to devise ephemeral shams to ensnare reluctant women's hearts."

### *The Mystery Of The Toilet*

It is no doubt noticeable that Value's recent rhyming words do not remain a secret. This is to dispel the myth that curses are not real and Pandora cannot cast them. And that is why the only taste in their mouths, there, sitting in the rumpus room among the zombies and touching void mugs to their lips, was bitterness. Brittle, unfilling bitterness.

Pageant ventured to speak it aloud. "You know, a more companionable sorceress might chuck out all this void in my cup. Make room for nog or cider, you know."

Pandora spat in the hearth. That, too, was empty. "Need I remind you that a waitress already accompanies us? Apparently so. Because she is not me."

"We already know your witchcraft. Would it really be so hard to zap food before us? Maybe you are, it's just already inside of you where we can't reach it. You're a fiend, Pandora Fisk. You're crooked."

The less prophetic of the newsteam might have forecast a quiet evening. And if they did, well, that's why they were not so prophetic. And I'm not talking about the quarrel in the rumpus, but the surrounding clomps and rumbles Value and the gang were responsible for.

Before she could spy on anyone, she had to figure out whose name was drawn. Bartholomew already ruined the whole bowl, and by extraordinary bad luck the zombies furnaced the drawn name as a sort of ritualistic curse to make its prepubescent owner follow after.

I know! I will just have to become one of the kids, and get one to do my bids. Smuggling herself into that identity involved collecting her belongings and scattering them where they would be sure to trip people. Oh, If only I was magical, like Pandora. Then I could put a spell on them to definitely be tripped by people who then fall all over the floor. Ooh, speaking of Pandora...

She added to her mess Pandora's luggage. She had to demolish some of the walls to open some things, as they were locked. But when the deed was done, she hijacked a big-wheeler and navigated the house for a child to employ.

It wasn't long before Lemmins emerged from her hiding place. A door opened, and out poked her head and caught covetous sight of the moving vehicle. "Stop, uber me! Let me away from this fleabag!"

By now, Value was thoroughly immersed in her new role as a 10-year-old, and what better way to express these juvenile inhibitions than to disobey a desperate grownup? She doubled her speed, gravely disappointed that there weren't speed limit signs to disobey as well. Wait a minute, this was a hotel, so there were numbers on each of the door. Jackpot! I'll go faster a lot! There was no way to tell just how fast she was going anyway, and the numbers got up to 312 and higher, but all that stopped mattering when she passed a young scamp closing a bathroom door.

Motives met and mingled. The most explicit one came from the new "I'm a kid now" attitude. It led her to peak beneath the door, twirl her hair, and pretend to sip chocolate milk from a sippy cup she found lying around. I wonder if that is the kid I'm supposed to spy on, until he's all gone. Lemmins hijacked the big wheel at the same time, and the kid saw her and told her to go away.

The subtler motive came with the observation that, were this kid pottyng, he must have devoured something in recent history. The chance to eat overrode any professional briefing, and she seized the doorknob. "I know you're in there, food! And I will find you out good!" The door wouldn't give, and once again the juvenile occupant demanded her absence.

He wasn't coming out. It was better for her to find where he came from anyway. She stood to go peer pressure Pandora (Pageant would help in that matter, even if Lisa was just a ditz) into casting a time reversal spell on the lad. She was distracted from the action by wet gurgling sounds and botanical growls. There was also a sleek puddle seeping out under the door. She hoped that didn't come from the toilet.

But from ever the spill, Value leant and watched flapping tendrils wrap her target. Tentacles pattered and splished as though drumming a victory beat as the rest of it flushed itself back home, only to spill more water as it belched up its meals ossiferous remains. It must have thought better of leaving evidence like this behind, so it reclaimed them and left a vacant locked bathroom for the surface dwellers' inspection.

Value didn't spare any fret for the kid just eaten, or even for the bathroom they could never again use. She found her brand new knowledge something to lord over Pandora. She went straight to her bedroom to knock on the door. "I know something you don't know, you old big fat smelly ho."

Pandora was not the first thing to come through the door, or even the second. Gored the door a series of bullets that bounced off the wall opposite and down the hall to dismount several numbers from their doors. Then, once the door was open, the great shirtless wonder sported a brick in his face, then fell forward like a drawbridge. Then it was Pandora's turn to make an appearance. "I had to punish him, of course, for all the mashery he was involved in. Perhaps now the Burgershop girl won't be captive to his attentions."

"Well, shows how much you knows. Because guess what? I know something you do not."

From the rest of what Value said, Pandora gathered she had been digging in the poo-pot for things once alive. She got so sick of all the rhyming that she decided to replace the curse with one that made her float instead. She got jealous for some reason, but at least it was kinder on the ears. Value didn't speak in rhymes anymore.

### *Poplar Recites A History*

"You woke us all up for this?" Pageant was unhappy about the news, but that could have been because her nightwear was the most embarrassing of all. A negligee with screwdriver pointies? Aaaaah. Bartholomew shuddered on behalf of who her future husband might become, other than a goner.

"But look at the seaweed."

"Yeah I see the seaweed, and I don't care about it because I can't eat it without ending up kissing you. And I'm too mad for it."

The weed in question was no more than a cucumbered smear across Value's lips. One had to wonder how she beat the rest of them to it since she was floating all the time.

They made a clownly crew, all of them up at midnight in their spa masks, curlers, bathrobes, sleep blinds, and teddy Swiss. Unbeknownst to them all, Poplar was hiding in the shower, doing a secret contest as to who wore the doofiest get-up that night.

"And I also couldn't reach up for you, Pandora would have to cast a float spell up on me-"

"That only works once. A shame I spent it so singly, but the rhymes were wrecking my life."

"Anyway, I'm jealous that you got to eat. I hope you're grateful for it."

"Uh... didn't you find that in the bathroom?" said Bartholomew. "That... stuff on your mouth, I mean?"

"That's a wonder," said Lisa. "Usually when you're in the bathroom, food doesn't go in the body, it comes out."

"See? I told you!" Value waved her hands like she was at a party. "I knew those kids were hiding food somewhere in this house!"

"There's more to it than that," said Lisa. "This food didn't show up until the kid disappeared. You said so yourself." She looked to her surroundings. "What is going on around here?"

"So now you know."

Rather unlike Lemmins to give her position away like that, especially with Bartholomew in the room. If it was Lemmins, would have been a huge mistake, because her masher immediately closed his eyes, puckered his lips, and ran to her with arms outstretched. It's a good thing the person who stuck her leg out and tripped him was Poplar instead, all adorned in her daylight clothes.

"Rather unjust were she to come out in daywear, while the rest of us sport that meant only for the eyes of darkness." Pandora was the one with the spa mask. She had to knife holes in the center of the cucumbers to see properly, and she almost sacrificed both her eyeballs.

"You know, normal people wear pajamas and things," said Pageant.

"I wonder where the rest of the food is hiding," said Value. "I want to float over there so I can pour the truth syrup on. Pretend you're a pancake."

Lisa couldn't believe it. Just on the threshold of cosmic proportional answers, and her co-finks yakked about nightwear and things that Value thought about.

She wouldn't have the half of it. "What? What do we know?"

Poplar pointed to Value's weed-smear. "The mark of the Child-Eater." And with that, Poplar recited.



"National. Long, long time ago, so long ago, that time was nearly forgot, the molgies were the most common menu items in the great intergalactic diner. But secretly, molgies had their own menu items. Some things stayed on the menu for ages to come, some were only there a minute. But they were always plants, and once upon a menu, there was the saladus.

"The molgies craved the saladus. It's said that a molgy sporting a saladus diet under his belt gives him a more juicy quality. So you can't really blame us for its extinction. Other planets hunted them too so they could feed their molgan prisoners.

"You can't blame others either. The saladus didn't go extinct, but the molgies thought it did. To cheer themselves up when they realized the saladus wouldn't be a popular delicacy anymore, they built Marlop Manor as a testament to the molgan triumph over the saladus. It was a century ago.

"Curly Q. Marlop wasn't the one who bush-trapped the last saladus they ever got to eat. He just paid the construction worker to build this manor. The molgies back then were all cheered up at first, but there was one saladus that went underground. There maybe more, the bible of extinct doesn't say.

"This one burrowed just beneath Marlop Manor. It listened to all the jubilee at its expense. It knew that wine was a part of it, feasting and dancing. It prayed to its god, and the god imbued all the adults with numb delusion. The children kept their sapience, but everything was different from then on. A new tradition was in place. Every night, one more child would disappear from the manor, and the adults were so numb with delusion that they didn't bother to notice.

"There was one more thing... the ones most susceptible to the delusion are adults weak of mind, like those who still wear diapers or have lovesick inclinations."

Nary a half-second passed before she afterward scampered away. She eluded the hands of adults; they wanted to hold her for questioning.

"Oh this is perfect! Did you get that on film? This is just what we need to reinstate our place in society!" Pageant was excited, but Lisa wouldn't have it.

"We're just on the brink, and we're not leaving until we've uncanned some answers."

Speaking of leaving, the person trying to do that all along spilled through the roof, bringing showers of plaster with her onto the middle of the floor. It would seem Lemmins had earlier taken to tunneling her way to liberation, but the manor's winding nature mixed her up, and she started one floor too high.

She'd also become a larper. Her apron didn't match it.

"You'll not hold me captive in this flea-bag mattress joint!"

As presented by Pandora, the outline of the brick was still visible on Bartholomew's face. She had no right to help herself to any thanks, though. Bartholomew was still as blind to his advances' unwelcome as ever; for real, in fact, because he tried the close-eyes-pucker-lips-reach-arms-and-approach approach again, after assuming his prey was just playing hard-to-get.

For Lemmins, it was actually quite easy-to-get, with it being out of the room, leaving Bartholomew to run smack into the wall, before being forced to open his eyes and change direction, then close his eyes again and walk straight ahead in the blind supposition that Lemmins's lips would just materialize in front of his own.

After Bartholomew left the room, Value tried to swim after him so that she'd have complete footage of the comedy. The floatation curse excepted her from affecting the air around her in any way, though. She'd had to rely on someone else to drag her around, and now was no different. All she had left to contribute were wisdom nuggets.

"We women have to stick together. Yay for womenhood!"

That was solo merriment. Pandora was regretting that she didn't stick her leg out in front of him to give herself much needed comic relief. Pageant was still jealous over that piece of weed that Value got to eat, even more so now that she'd learned it belonged to a legendary monster. Lisa, however, was pale and another thing that goes along with pale. Silent. Romantic half-wits were the kind susceptible to the monster's manipulations. The danger she now realized was stark in plain view.

"We've been doing it all wrong," she said. "We should have been following Bartholomew."

"Hello? Wifflerolky to Lisa? That's what I was just trying to do, and would be doing if somebody hadn't bejinkled me."

Lisa turned to Pandora. "We have to follow him. He's going to lead us into trouble."

"Another late observation. However-long-we've-been-marooned-here late."

"This is our last chance to prevent a terrible catastrophe. You like prophecies? There's more to this than meets the eye. I can feel it in my bones, and other body parts. Something sinister is just around the corner. And I'm not talking about Bartholomew."

## Stave Three: An Urban Legend

### *Lemmins Disappears, Only To Re-Again*

Bartholomew crashed approximately 11 walls before he gave up and went to sleep. Lemmins, pickaxe on the ready, found him lying on the floor in the hallway. "My whole life has arrived at this moment. I must rise to my destiny and take it by the throat." She also had a hard hat, rope, lunchbox, and dead canary (or whatever the molkan equivalent was). She was bound to discover the heart of the place and leave it once and for all, and this time, she wouldn't repeat the "wrong floor" mistake.

After the newscrew had been in there, the bathroom was completely unusable. There was a crater where there used to be a toilet, and choosing that place would render her pickaxe completely unusable. She'd seen what they'd done to it. It was gray now, and it had pepper-freckles. Candy wrappers. She'd also heard all that rubbish about Value eating some dead plant phooey. Boo her, she thought. I hope you all get diarrhea.

The real heart was a different bathroom on the first floor, so she defiled that for a few yards down until she had a moment of déjà vu. This is because she accelerated more than she'd intended to and sprawled out onto the floor. "But I was on the first floor for sure! I didn't repeat last night's mistake, did I?"

She should have anchored the rope to the 'bove. She didn't in case some unauthorized figure came in and foiled her escape. Since she didn't do that, she wound up in some underground cave with no light bulbs or candles. Not even the bathroom light followed her down.

"Stay up there, will you? Well that makes you chicken. Oh, that reminds me of the one last way I may regain my bearings: Go bird!"

She emptied her lunchbox and threw the canary at the dark, where it flopped against some squelchy architecture and failed to come back to life. That only showed the place had no aura.

"Now, is the way back to town this way, or that? Oh leaving under the cloak of darkness sure accompanies a hefty cost!"

She reminded herself the important thing to remember was that she was departing. Soon, Marlop manner would be no more than a distant memory, holding within its walls the dreaded anchormolkies and their wack-a-doo shenanigans. When she got back to Hugbyville, she'd be

sure to overthrow the manager of the burger shop. Maybe snot his car for good measure, although with someone's borrowed booger, of course.

Though she couldn't see them, lently ears stuck themselves out of holes to ascertain her schemely recitations. They were attached to one who had no interest in the fugitive's metropolitan plans, more so that someone tread its turf. Meanwhile, Lemmins tried to find her way through echolocation. She yodeled wedding dirges in hopes of measuring the time it took to bounce off the wall, and that made the ears go back inside. The nose was next to come out to see if she smelt tasty. She'd obviously been in contact with a dead bird. Even though she'd left the thing behind, rot wasn't a smell that just grows legs and jogs away. The smelling thing was starting to feel disappointed, but just to make sure, it peeked out with its bloodshot glow-in-the-dark eyes.

"Oh, why did I have to choose 'Bride of the Seven Goons?' I'd know those peepers anywhere. Shoo now, you're too late for a last-ditch ogle."

She'd come too far to have Bartholomew chasing after her. She felt around on the ground for a rock to toss at it. She couldn't find anything solid, so she had to resort to dirt, and that definitely got in its eye. For a minute, she thought she'd won the battle. She didn't perceive the things that indicated tendrils were the next to come out.

### *Early Morning Fancies*

"For breakfast: dust-salted stove knob with a side of coffee-mug coasters, garnished with all the buttons I could pull off old man Abercrombie's waistcoat," actually said an impromptu menu document. It was fashioned after the great molkan menus in the days of the saladus as portrayed by Poplar the previous night, and Pageant stayed distressingly true to what she wrote there. While all that was stewing, she was hoping with all her might (and even some of Value's) that the Marlop Manor kitchenware was the best in the world so it could cook all that into an edible object. Since they didn't have salt, pepper, or any other seasonings, she sprinkled on pieces of the lawn, as well as sawdust and her own dandruff.

"What a pity that's what you'll be having to eat," scoffed Pandora. "I, on theother hand, had a most magnificent breakfast. While you were still in bed, I levitated out into town and found a viciously romantic diner, where a gnome with a swollen groin area would only feed me if I gave him all of my valuables and the deed to my family's legacy, and even after all that, I still wasn't fed until after I spent a late midnight rendezvous with him..."

But when she looked around, her story was sabotaged by an immutable lack of envy meanwhile pity. It might have been how her lack of dining and action manifested itself. Nobody knew much about Pandora's excursion into the world of men, but they had seen her eat before. This business about throwing herself at the crotch of a gnome for meals didn't happen. Neither the meal or the crotch. She was forced to switch tactics.

"That you haven't seen the sky today is the most obvious thing. You would still be looking if you had, stunned in that position by what I put there: The floating woman."

"Now that I believe," allowed Pageant. "No wonder my broth is failing. There's not enough of Value's hope to influence our luck for the better."

"Tuh, she'd be better off in outer space with all the aliens and space ships. I tried to make that happen. It would have if I could throw that far."

A disruptive bang from outside raised Pandora's hopes. Perhaps the curse had worn off, and Value had finally met her end in a fall to the ground. That was the only interruption she would have forgiven, and it wasn't that. It was actually Bartholomew puncturing a frying pan with a rusty fence pike. When he came in, a sheet of tracing paper was stuck on it as well. He ran around tossing indiscriminate chalk dust everywhere and chanting "What have I done, what have I done?"

"Ruin one of our last shots at not starving," "absolutely nothing of value since we got to this accursed mansion," and "stalk a naysaying runaway" were the three answers they came up with. Not even Lisa could concentrate on an empty stomach and all that nincompoopery going on in the background. So she got up and followed him around the manner.

"It's all over," she assured him. "She got away from this place. Your dreams had to die so that hers could come true."

Pageant called out from the kitchen. "Hey, tell him to bring some of that chalk powder in here, I'm about to deep-fry the table cloth and I need something powdery for the breading."

That wasn't happening. Bartholomew tripped over one of the zombie people lying in the middle of the floor and his chalk snowed all over the place.

The legend of the saladus had definitely cast the Marlop Manor zombies into a darker, more shadowy light. There one dusted that which needed no dusting. Just a few eyeball-steps left and there were a couple rolling vases and crocks around in the most insipid bowling tournament in the universe. And there, chilling the spine of those who encountered him, was one sitting on a coffee table, turning a book's unread pages, legs a-kicking alternately in an undeniable and sinister rhythm.

It was too deplorable to look at. She had to interfere with the one on the floor before it was too late. "I know what you're all about. You may have given up your mind to a delicious wildlife sample under our feet, but I'm staying on my position in the food chain and eating breakfast in there. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The zombie lifted his head so that his face pointed in Bartholomew's direction. "Chiggers are gay. They're gayer than you. And I gotta tell ya, that's really gay."

Five minutes later, he was sitting at the breakfast table.

Lisa couldn't find any reasons on him, even through the magnifying glass she'd stolen from Bartholomew. P&P (as she now nicked them to save energy) were stubborn. They wouldn't be curious about him or anything Poplar told them last night.

"Won't you have a look? I know there's something weird, I just can't figure out what it is."

"Put that thing away," said Pageant. "Your hunger is making you act all doofy-like."

Bartholomew not sure he wanted him at the table. For one thing, had he not proven his preferences all week long in front of everybody? For another thing, having another man at the table meant competition over the females. After all, he had suffered an irreconcilable loss lately. And should Lisa, P&P, or even Value contain an adequate semblance of what Lemmins had, he didn't want any woody-eyed haberdasher getting in the way.

The time had come to assert his masculinity.

"This suspicious dump here is ruining our beautiful friendship."

Pandora applauded herself. "The spirits favor me when they bring tidings from the future. I knew it from the start. Who are all of you again?"

"Great move," said Pageant. "When you're walled into a dead end, blame some inanimate object."

The satisfaction level of Pandora Fisk took the plunge. She needed to scoot a few living species into the blame department, and in a hurry.

"Do not let perish the memory of shes who brought us here in the first place. The floating woman, and the girl from the burger shop. Yes, dire penalties await her at the end of her journey."

Without Lemmins, Bartholomew's familiarity with the other women in his life brought him closer to the reasons he didn't pursue them with diabolical persistence. Pandora, for instance, was too musical. He needed someone whose footsteps didn't appear to follow an operatic drumbeat, and whose overall demeanor didn't threaten to break out into a ballad at

any given moment. She was also too... orange. He needed someone several steps away from orange.

As for Value, she didn't wear socks often enough. Value's feet had taken up much of his mental faculties where someone like Lemmins should have reigned. Every time he pictured a sock on one of those feet, the other would pop off. He remembered laying an eye on Lisa's high school grades, and they never spelt out anything exciting. And Pageant was way too furniture. She didn't watch enough chess championships. Lisa also wouldn't make a good astronaut. And Value's math problems involved too many even numbers...

Somewhen, during the course of all these thoughts, the table had turned into a debating platform with whether or not to remain in Marlop Manor as the topic. Pandora took a stand against voting, citing her firm belief that the mob mindset always led the way when it came to popular opinion.

"If I didn't know better," asserted Pageant, "I'd say this all was not an excuse to get out of eating this hard-worked-for meal. Guess what? I KNOW BETTER!" She turned to the zombie man staring into Pandora's bowl. "You. You like sayings, don't you? Your kind always does. I got one of my own: Starve a man long enough, and he'll drool before a toilet."

"Will he, now?" Pandora hissed for attention. "It isn't a toilet you have served us, now, is it?"

Somewhere, there is a world where a plaster piece from Pageant's bowl finds its way into Pandora's with a plop, and a stray splash droplet hits her eye, an occurrence that leads to the eventually terminated Marlop project alongside many a "promising" career (the promise being they'd get banned off the planet). There is a world where the newsteam leaves the manor and throw a break-up party complete with two broken windows and a bathroom misfire. There is a world where Pageant gets reinstated into society as an omelet eggshell sweeper, where Pandora gives New Agism to pursue a career as a ventriloquist, where Lisa takes up professional pillow fluffing, Value becomes a mudpie ingredient consultant, and even Bartholomew lands a role as a secretary for a janitorial fiction writer, who makes his 3-word debut in a pawn shop magazine article before crashing his bicycle into a bee hive.

This document does not chronicle that dimension, so the following happened instead.

### *Small Skirmish*

It is true, Pageant was ready to retaliate against the witch with the big little mouth. But then there was Lisa Rowan. Lisa, the woman staring into her bowl, as though it were alphabet

soup spelling out the answers to this mystery. Lisa, so tongue-deaf and nose-blind to the hunger all around her. Lisa, so superstitious in her night-time fables that she brought into the workplace and forced upon them all. It was into Lisa's bowl the ceiling plaster wound up, and thus ensued a food fight.

For once, everyone was thankful the place was populated by zombies. It would be hard to get away with this kind of thing in front of the woken living. Even Value tried to join in after she crawled down the side of the building. She had used her pants as a lasso to hook onto the corner of the roof, learned Pandora with dismay. So she tried to push her out the window.

"Up you go, where you will torment us no longer."

"Oh no! There looks like fun inside, and I want to get in!"

Pandora aimed to float her projectiles into the other newsies' faces. Since she hadn't perfected her telekinesis, she had to hide behind the curtains until the aforementioned encounter with Value while she practiced. Pageant took on a more stealth role, sneaking up on people so she could get a good shot at their posteriors. Bartholomew chose a strategy that could best be described as "bad," just like his stalking skills.

As for Lisa, well... she throw food indiscriminately. She had the most fun out of it, which probably would have led to the end of the great cause in and of itself. She landed plenty of hits, but none of them deliberate. When she wanted to get Value's ear, she instead hit Pandora's dress. When she was aiming for Pandora's shoe, she instead spattered Pageant's tail. And when Bartholomew's mouth was supposed to take the hit, what she bull's-eyed actually was Lemmins' forehead.

### *The Second Vision*

Lisa was agape. "Where have you been? And what is all that dirt your wearing?"

"Yeah," said Pageant. "You don't want to go back into society dressed like that do you? I thought you worked at a burger shop, and still do, that you still do."

The beam of Lemmins' gaze was nowhere near either set of eyeballs. Value was again aloft trying to lasso the window hook so she could use it to steer. Lemmins looked not at that as well.

"The apple of enlightenment has shown me the light. The apple of enlightenment has shown me the dark. The apple of enlightenment has shown me the light-dark. The apple of enlightenment has shown me the dark-light."



"For Sam's sake," resigned Pageant, invoking the name of an angel so low ranking that no one ever heard of him. "Now she's one of them. Oh well. Where'd Bartholomy go? Maybe this will cure him once and for all of his persistence."

"It already has."

In strutted Pandora, dragging a skittish, scurrying Bartholomew by the ear.

"Don't take me any closer," he pleaded, "No, let me away from that thing, it isn't Lemmins, it's anti-Lemmins!"

Like a dead body into an ironing board, Lisa stiffened rigid at the word "anti-Lemmins." The scene before her rearranged. No longer the fleabag motel full of freaks and misfits, it was now a rustic landscape. No crops in sight, barbed-wire fences had fallen into disrepair, the soil was infertile, the skies ominous. Before she could count all those skies, or even detect the cartoon black outlines where one ended and another began, a faintly familiar voice sounded in the distance.

Just like the last time this happened, Lisa was not herself on scene; more like a disembodied collection of senses with no free will. She used her imagination to turn a crank so she could zoom in. The closer she became, the clearer the word "Arnold" sired out from the object "Molkie walking backward with head down between legs."

What a big hairy deal this is! If only this were real life rather than mere dreamlucination. That way I could brag about finding a new species of insanity. What a shame I can't bring the camera into these prophetic visuals. If Pageant Chippendale wanted to leave her mark, video footage of this would be just the thing.

All goodwill disappeared after Lisa zoomed her view in enough to see that the chicken-walker was Pageant. What's more, the woman O-screamed loud enough to rumble the landscape. She was still screaming and looking through the leg lens when she ape-walked down the hill, but just beyond the horizon arose the thing responsible for the quake: A framed portrait of a wiggad Molkan man, eyes pointing down at the stage's lone actor and his mouth in the shape of an O. It was clear, he was making the sound as well.

It was unclear whether the fall to floor from Value or the welcome song sang by the newborn Bartholomew-shaped hole in the wall after Pandora lost her grip on both. But Lisa was awake again at last, silent words falling from her lips.

"The apple of enlightenment has shown me the light... the apple of enlightenment has shown me the contra-light..."

Over the course, Lemmins's look-direction locked onto Bartholomew and she started marching towards him. She didn't finish, as he smashed through the wall and was pursued. They stunned the scampering children when spotted. Nobody in the room knew them.

Some of the newsies shared a precious jolly moment over how opposite things had become. All Lisa did was belt out, "WHY isn't anyone keeping an eye on him like I told you?"

Pageant, finished with laughter, shrugged. "I thought that was Value's job."

"See?" retorted Value. "Even the missing food's making out a crisis for you."

"It is a doubtless crisis," said Pandora. "You incline towards a vicious resemblance them." Zombies, at the object of Pandora's pointing black finger, fastened their loafers with twist ties. "Them." Zombies in another area, as the finger led them, tore off cardboard and flicked it to the floor. "And maybe even them." Still other zombies clasped their buttocks in their hands and bounced where they sat. "Opposite ends indeed."

"I can tell our time here is nearing its end," said Lisa. "I want everyone in the house, including the zombies, to see what I have witnessed. A foreboding wind is stirring in my bosom, and if everybody-except-Bartholomew-now-that-I-think-about-it doesn't witness it as well... Ooh, I shudder to think."

Pandora looked down her nose. "I should think, at the prospect of human thoughts, that many share in that shudder. I'll just have to conduct a séance.

"That's great and all," snarked Pageant. "The question is, how do we get the kids to sit still long enough for the ghosts or angels or whatever to start listening?"

"Try very hard to do so."

### *Séance*

They ended up nabbing three kids by shoving a pillowcase over each head. The rest went into hiding, and midway through the opening invocation, anyone younger than grown-up all the way uttered, "this is lame," and left the room. Pandora could only shrug. Frustrated feelings were sure to repel the spirits anyway.

Everyone sat around in a circle with their legs crossed and their eyes closed. She knew she was supposed to be chanting the magic words that would show them whatever hoo-hah Lisa had been looking at, but with nobody looking in the real world, Pandora began to question her own capabilities.

Can I? Or can I not?

After all, she had put a curse on Value (even though she didn't know her name) to make her float about. Why should that person obtain the floating skills while she herself sat bound to the ground?

Enough. I will prove to them once and for all who is the true gypsy around here.

And with that, Pandora reached deep inside herself, dug around in their, and amongst all the voodoo and primitive rituals, she found something she never could have guessed, something that made her say aloud, "who cares all about whatever the vision woman saw," although everyone in the room thought it was merely part of the magic chant, so they didn't open their eyes.

But the thing that Pandora found gave her the power of levitation. So she levitated. She levitated higher, and higher, and higher, and she looked towards the heavens, even though there was a roof in the way, and she discovered secrets that nobody ever could have guessed. And still she rose. If that ceiling weren't in the way, she'd be arising today. When she bumped the obstacle, Value got curious and looked up, thereby removing Pandora's levitation power and sending her falling neck-first to the floor.

Value couldn't be altogether sorry. She clapped her hands together and said, "Welp, that's that. Did you learn anything?"

This was addressed to the general audience. The chained up blindfolded zombies weren't going to answer, nor was the equally immobilized and unvisioned Lemmins or Bartholomew, the former of whom had lots of dirt crammed in his mouth.

"I saw it, you know," said Pageant. "The saladus. Poplar was right, this will come to an unfavorable ending."

"We're coming to the end of our journey," said Lisa. "But we have to collect evidence." She looked down at her former coworker. "Well, who would dare get in front of the camera at this point? Well... the saladus is the only one we want there, everyone else's appearance would be incidental."

"Not so!" countered Value. "We need to be a part of the scene. We can't have the conspiracy ninny's theorizing that we threw in special effect."

"This is huge!" said Pageant. "We'll be welcomed back in when everyone sees the brand new mystery we've unveiled. Now, to get that camera behind the veil. Value?"

"We'll need some bait, first of all."

"Then we have no choice," said Lisa. "We will have to perform the Marlop name-drawing ritual if we want to get a chance."

## *Using A Child As Bait*

To simplify things, the three remaining newsies did the ritual without its rightful founders. They noticed that the zombies tended to slow things down when it could all be over in a jippy. They pulled out Poplar's name, and that was all there was to it.

"I'm glad all the Marlopians are chained in the room. Oh, you can hear them groaning," said Value. "I bet they're aware of our secret not-so-secret doings now."

"Let 'em," said Pageant. "Let them anything but loose. There is already someone on the loose we don't want to be. And that's the name of the kid we just drew, not to mention the kid who owns it. We don't want her loose. We want her tightly tied. I say we set a trap."

"Ooh, I second the notion!" said Value.

"We'll wait around the corner, and when she comes running about like rabid faun, one of us will stick our leg out and throw a bedsheet over her. All in favor say I."

She called for a vote because she knew she would win. Lisa stood there staring at Poplar's name on the paper the same way she'd been staring at her breakfast this morning.

"That's not alphabet soup on the paper, I can promise you that," said Pageant. "You can't eat it."

"Must we reach for renown and redemption through such unscrupulous methods?" said Lisa.

"People who fish with lunchboxes don't get to set the scruples," decreed Value.

"See? Told you all the missing food was messing with her head," philosophized Pageant.

Lisa started sweating. "You're the ones with messed with heads. Listen to you, thinking of setting traps, and all for dirty foul fame."

"Okay Misses smarty-script, tell us how you think we're ever going to show our faces in public again."

"Yes," agreed Value, "Our faces, or any other body parts. We can't do it without the girl. We all know that."

"Oh, we'll enlist the girls help all right, but we'll be doing it the ethical way. Asking her until she says yes."

Pageant rolled her eyes. "Even value wouldn't fall for something so frivolous. Would you?"

"I'd say we stick out a stilt instead. There's been enough leg-tripping around here for one weekend."

There was no time to lose. Lisa raced upstairs leaving mists of perspiration in her wake.

She didn't know how many pleas Poplar would charge for her services as bait. More likely than not, there wouldn't be many left over, so she'd better zip her lip lest any fall stray. While she panic-poked around the rooms, the usual juvenile scampering dangled leads before her, only to yank them away at the last moment. "What's the matter? Don't you want to be a part of history?" Fate had chosen Poplar. No way would any of these other rumplings step forward.

She knew danger was afoot when she found a bib on the ground. The other two had struck, she was certain of it. She issued a battle cry and punched at probably foes on her way back down the stairs. The thing that awaited her in the dining room made nothing of her visions.

A weaved blanket was suspended from the chandelier just above the table. Due to its shape, its movement, and the muffled noises inside, it had to have someone in it. Pageant and Value sat across from each other wearing chef hats and stolen bibs. From plates onto forks into their mouths went corn and raw potatoes. "One day we'll have enough for a real food fight," predicted Value, "that day just isn't his one."

"What are you doing?"

The two became aware of their coworker's presence.

"We have plan now," pitched Pageant. "We're going to keep Poplar hanging in that weave and charge her interest for her freedom."

"That's right. The longer longer we keep her in their, the bigger the prizes we can claim through our piece-of-the-pie rewards card."

"Goons," cried Lisa, "that's what you are!" She fetched a broom and mounted the table, assaulting the chandelier as Poplar cried out, "I'm under attack!"

"Stop it, I'm warning you!" Value disrupted the intervention with an impressive yank of the tablecloth, after which Pageant solidified Lisa's position on the floor with a sturdy shove of the table.

"Now you're there, and there you'll stay. I won't be gentle, no I won't."

Lisa flailed herself silly, even going so far as to shriek for the nameless zombies to rescue Poplar from the unconsensual predicament. Her voice and move-box was all out of whack after a while, and her head flopped to the left.

In that direction, there was a pile. Foodstuffs. Used, but still appetizing in the wake of the fasting they'd gotten themselves into. Chili peels, pita discs, olive pits, and pickle puddles would've been the only things the menu would have seen.

"Tempting, isn't it? It's not even the best part."

Pageant flopped Lisa's head in the other direction. That pile was made up of water pistols. Pop guns. Slingshots. Musical instruments without those trained to play them properly.

"You are not the molkies I used to know."

"Oh, you definitely used to know us," anti-reassured Value. "We're the same molkies, just a lot more evil."

"Aren't the children corrupt enough?"

"The pure of heart wouldn't have all this stashed away, would they?"

"I dare you to point out anything pure about what they've been hiding from us," said Pageant.

But Lisa wasn't pointing. She was already bankrupting her energy reserves as it was trying to hold up on the verbal battlefield.

"That's what I thought," said Pageant. "Come on, let's get some footage of this frickin thing so we can ditch this joint. You, however, can just stay there forever."

Before anything else happened, one of the delinquents rumbled by, pausing to get a good look at Lisa, jeer, and then call Poplar a sell-out. With the last few drops of life-battery before she lost consciousness, Lisa wondered how he knew it was Poplar in there. She wasn't alive long enough to say "Oh" at Poplar's rejoinder, "Look who's talking, stinky-head."

### *Unexpected Happenstance*

Pageant and Value wagoned their bait to the heart of Marlop Manor. Some stirring came from the zombie room that involved rattled chains and moaning. Value tried to think of it as Salad carols, but she couldn't help but wonder if the whole ordeal would bring Lisa and Pandora back to life, with the late New Ager's head hanging by a twig. She was so possessed that she should have been shuffling around this very moment.

"I know what you're thinking," said Pageant. "It's too late to turn back now. Just think of it as them cheering us on. Ooh, I can almost taste the climax, it is so near."

Value recorded Pageant when they got to the bathroom. She slid into her new role as replacement reporter quite handsomely. She began with a lamentation on how modern-day cameras couldn't capture tastes. She spent the next five minutes pinching the air and putting it into her mouth and sucking on it.

"Mmm. That's some palpable climax. Value, taste it too."

Value pointed her camera at herself and help herself to the climax. She had several second helping of it until Pageant commandeered the camera back onto herself.

"We can edit that later," she grumbled. "Anyway, this is something you can try yourself if you want to summon an endangered species." She took a jump-rope and tied it to the bathtub water facet. That reminded Value that they hadn't washed their hands before or after they ate. Maybe that's what they were tasting, not the climax.

"I've been thinking," she said, "If half our news team does come back to life, do you think there will be enough fame to go around?"

Pageant was impatient with the interruption. "We'll worry about that when they do come back to life."

Value's ghost-eyes sent her attention to her grammatical error.

"Oops, I meant if they do. Now unwrap Poplar. This is the most important part."

Poplar bloomed out of the weave. They didn't have any measuring tape, but the stare she was giving lengthed definitely a thousand yards, back and front.

"He won't be gentle, no he won't."

Value massaged her shoulders. "Don't worry, we're scam artists, not murderers. We'll yank you away at the last second when we get footage."

"You can do it. I believe in you."

"Aww, I believe in you too, and that's why you'll be able to do it."

But Pageant noticed the change. She had lost her strength of mind on the way over, and the saladus was trying to stay hidden.

"Dag it all, he'll never come hunting for us like that."

Poplar's stare shrunk by several hundred yards when they flickered towards Pageant. That flicker of consciousness did not go unnoticed. It contained the message, "I am totally faking the zombie business to get out of doing my duty." Pageant stood directly before the child. She intended to send the simple message, "I saw that. And I will test it right away."

She neared a suspecting finger towards the child's eye. She did well not to flinch. The resistance made up for the stiffened tensity in her neck muscles. That didn't go unnoticed either.

"I know what game you are playing," said Pageant. "And oh yeah? For us this is not a game. We are going to capture motion pictures of the creature, honey. And we just might not have the patience to yank you clean away."

She knelt to tie up the jump-rope's other end, but Value shoved her away.

"That's no way to talk to our bait, beef-brains!" She looked Poplar squarely in the eye. "I mean to say, you still are deep down, aren't you? Pretty please with sugar on top and a ripe red cherry and an olive for dessert?"

To increase her insight, she held up the magnifaking glass up to Poplar's forehead, so that she might catch a better glimpse into the young molky's inner workings. A "Pandora" was pulled; on it was brought by Pageant's hand-palm and Value's nose broke the tracing paper screen. Who is afraid of living without delusion? Value. She screamed seven stacatto screams, and then went axe-crazy.

### *The Climax They Didn't Taste*

Aside from the nonsense in the bathroom, there was a dramatic escalation in the song of the zombies. They had wiggle-wormed free from their chains, and now assumed potted plants throughout the manner to use in the day's unholy ritual. Such occurrences lay outside the newsies' periphery. Don't worry; no one was coming back to life. Whether or not the late newsies' respective sleeps are peaceful ones was a fact outside of this document's periphery.

Anyway, their feud came to a break when Bartholomew's insomniac head peered into the bathroom. Pageant was not impressed.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be chained up like the freaking criminal you are?"

What she didn't realize is that Bartholomew was chained up. She was just seeing the part of him that wasn't. That all altered when the thing his head was screwed onto, not his chained-up body still in the realm room but a pool stick, came into view. And who should be on the other end but Lemmins?

"They wedded over their common orphanhood."

Behind her, arms linked in a neighborly order, were more Marlopizens. Their words were less defined, but Pageant was sure they spelt doom in the right arrangement.

Well, doom for them, that is. Poplar slipped out butterly through their buns and thighs.

"This is getting out of control," said Pageant. "We'll just have to pick another angle. On the count of three, we rush them, got it?"

All the answer Value gave was more screams, followed by a frying pan swing. Pageant would just have to take the camera and do the whole story by herself, if she could find a way through. Beyond the grown-ups, she saw a better job of what she was trying to do. All the kids were



floating in the air like balloons, tethered to sconces, banisters, doorknobs and such with miscellaneous houseware. One's anchor was even one of the potted plants.

Enough assessment had been observed. Besides, here they came to deliver a group-hug attack.

"Snap out of it and get filming. We'd better escape this, because this scoop is even bigger than the plant thing by itself. Value? Are you listening to me?"

No, she was not. Because she was sinking head-first into the toilet with the aid of thorned vines. It was more panicky than any sentence could tell you, but the kernel of Pageant's reaction originated the sentiment, "That camera had better still work."

Whether it did or not was a matter irrelevant to what happened next. Equally thorny vines erupted from vent shafts and lashed about. Cabinets, facets, bedrooms, the fridge, and windows equally demonstrated a botanical release, accompanied by pitchers of spit-up water. It all searched for, found, and helped itself to the children. Value would not, in fact, be filming it, because there wasn't Value anymore, only shoes popping off naked foot-bones on their way down the toilet.

There was, it might be worth mentioning, one more thing, and that was the level of awareness hidden deep in the minds of the grown Marlopians. They'd been dormant, these respective awarenesses, for a while, mostly indifferent to the child sacrificing rituals, but now pretty achey with the oncoming engulfation from saladus tendrils. Pageant was no cuddle-booger either, especially feeling how easily her flesh cascaded down her bones. It was pretty incredulous they'd been doing this willingly all along. Weren't they? It was all so confusing, nobody knew anymore.

### *Written On A Forgotten Tomb*

If Poplar ever escaped, then her identity dissolved into the masses who sometimes escaped predation, but mostly did not. Marlop manor is not marked with a warning; it sits uninhabited; perhaps even the saladus grew lonely of molgies to manipulate and passed on, wondering if it would meet its family in the afterlife. If it did, we sure don't know. If, if, if. So many ifs we never see resolved, and that's the worst of tragedy's many flavors.

The last piece of history fate graces us is a brief visit their by a few vagrants. They attempted to squat in the car, then departed after television withdrawal spoiled their spirits. Someone found their boots there; other than that, human research has no reach.