

Lost City, Lost Lore
for John

Cryptids do their dirty work beneath the radar. Big foot leaves his big stinky footprints in wet cement to protest urbanization. The Loch Ness Monster pokes holes in the surf boards of people who might pollute. And the Chupacabra, a nocturnal individual quite sensitive to smell, chows down on livestock when they can't keep their flatulence under control.

But to think these vigilantes symbolize the whole of their clan would be bigotry. True, there are accounts of Jersey Devils pushing trees onto foresters. Reputational damage, however, is a crime of equal enormity. The Underground League of Yieldless Cryptids, or U.G.L.Y. Cryptids (named so for their refusal to conform to their peers' neferity), gathered to discuss a means of undoing the damage.

They held their meetings in the lost city of Atlantis, a location just obscure enough to subvert human detection but obvious enough for other cryptids to find. "Secret people find secret lairs" was the city's slogan, one that allowed access to every last remote member.

On the docket today was a submarine that had been disassembled by a gang of gremlins. Quite frankly, none of the U.G.L.Y. Cryptids were fond of submarines. Many a submarine came close to exposing them, and this latest was no exception, at least according to gremlin ringleader Greglin. Consequently, the gremlins were all stuffed into one of Big Foot Freddy's gym socks and beat with a flyswatter until they admitted it wasn't worth it. None of them were allowed at the next meeting except for Greglin.

"Let us now turn to the matter of compensation," said President Kramer Kraken. "Even though the humans slander us so, they are not without reason. Indeed, my own great-grandfather sunk more than a dozen pirate ships for looting his own private island. But the question we must ask now is, what may we offer the world of humans that they may see us in a better light?"

"How about lots of cash?" said the frogman.

His suggestion was vetoed on the grounds that, as secret monsters who made a living by marginally escaping human perception, they had little in the way of cash.

Jacob Jackalope raised his paw. "Whatever we decide on, the payment should come out of the gremlins' pockets. They're the ones who caused all of this."

Greglin scowled. Then, as if struck with a holy cattle prod, presented an idea. "Why don't we kidnap the jackalope and give him away as a present?"

"What? How is that costing you anything?"

"We'll never know what barbecued you tastes like."

"Order!" Mindy Loch Ness the third wumped her tail against the wall. "If we can't behave amongst ourselves, what example will we set for the humans?"

"Pfft, I'll say," scoffed the frogman. "Yeah. Be role models for humans."

His unhelpful remark earned him suspicious glances from the rest. He seemed to be grossly overdressed. Over his brown, scaly person, he wore a wetsuit. Even less essential were a pair of goggles and an oxygen tank. The unspoken consensus was that his dress and manner were mere distractions, so the Kraken attempted to refocus the group.

"Yes, well, I suppose you and your nephews must be the ones to at least decide on a compensatory gift."

"Hey, uh..." Greglin squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. "Sorry about that barbecue crack. Seriously, though, does it have to be a gift? That was a big ol' honkin' sub we took apart, and nothing in nature will top that."

"Well, why don't you put it back together?" said a werewolf who often lurked around the village as a realtor. "That's what I do to pig styes when I catch word of my uncles blowing them down."

The mixed shame and skepticism was not even thinly veiled. Besides, it was generally known that, while gremlins had a knack for taking things apart, putting them together was a skill even the brainiest of the cryptids hadn't learned.

"How humble are we?" crooned the frogman. "Dim upstairs, I'd say. I guess humans are the true dominant species after all. At least we're not afraid—*they're* not afraid to show themselves in broad dayyYOW!"

A good strong fanny-pinch from the Wendigo was all it took to silence him, hopefully once and for all.

"Look, let's be practical about this, okay?" said Wendy. "My guess is, those poor scooba chumps were only looking for gold dubloons or whatever. Just have Greglin and his family dump Kamyana Baba or something in their swimming pool."

"But..." Greglin's eyes darted from fellow cryptid to fellow cryptid, looking for the slightest sign of pity. "That's too heavy for us!"

"Your kin should have thought of that before they chose to tamper with the playthings of humans."

"Excuse me," said you-know-who. "Playthings?"

"It's decided." The Kraken beat his gavel upon the stone podium, cracking it and sending its antique value to zero. "Greglin and the Gremlins will carry the giant lady statue from the treasury room to the human society in the dead of night, and that will compensate them for their loss."

"No it won't!"

Froggy Wetsuit Motor-Mouth had a mathematical money argument to back this up, but he was pecked on the lips by the phoenix. "Ruddy buzzard!" He mumbled.

"President Kramer Kraken rules, that is all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find a sturdier podium."

Wendy followed him into the furniture chamber while the rest of the cryptids mingled. The frog, however, had no motive to stick around. He had an appointment with the surface. But before he left, the phoenix arrested his retreat.

"I'm no buzzard," said Phoebe, "but I think I'd enjoy watching you die. That way, I could withhold my feathers and laugh at your bloated corpse. My own hide would be better wasted on some exterminated insect up there."

"But you're supposed to be nice."

"Exactly. you forget, we are the *yieldless* cryptids. And if you think that I'll yield my individuality to the stereotype that I'm some namby pamby graveyard nurse—"

"I don't. Bye."

*

Preston Toast-Painter returned to his boss, Carla Prisock, with an audio tape of the entire meeting. She forsook her feminist leanings for a moment to kiss him for making her a part of this discovery—cryptids all spoke English? Who knew? —and then made up for it with violence. She slapped him once for each degree of idiocy he displayed during his time there.

"You defended humans. That's the perfect way to give yourself away."

"Hey, if *your* submarine just got torn up by fangorious hedgehogs, you'd—oh wait... I guess that technically *was* your submarine, wasn't it?"

Carla was about to slap his forehead again, but then halted. "Gremlins look like hedgehogs?"

"Well, some of them do. They all have claws designed to dig through metal."

"This is huge! What do the rest of them look like?"

Preston's descriptive skills were neither Darwin's nor Dickens's. He called the Kraken "a great big tangle of teeth and tentacles. That's what I wanted to be when I was a kid." Through his eyes, the Loch Ness Monster was "all neck. Seriously. You could build a freeway down that thing." And the Big Foot took just as little form to the tune of his words. "It's hair was like, Woooooah, and it's toe nails were like, duuuuuude."

Carla was about as impressed with his verbal portraiture as she'd have been had he just detailed a day at the arcade. She stood, opened a filing cabinet, and thrust a very expensive camera at his chest.

"You're going back down there. And this time, you're getting video footage."

"Wait, hey, I love exploring and all, but I'm not so sure I could find it twice, let alone get away with filming it. "

"Would you like to lose your job?"

This was not the first time Carla had made this threat, but the loss of the submarine had set the Priscock Salvaging Industry back approximately five years. Carla's board threatened to rescind her grant.

"But Carla, it's not that I don't want to do my job right, but... they said so much about trying to make humans see them in a better light that... well, if they were exposed to the world, what would happen to them?"

Carla stepped down from her authoritative stance. She laid the camera down, pulled her chair next to Preston's, then put her arm around him and nuzzled him, cheek-to-cheek.

"Think back to your childhood, when you wanted to be a Kraken when you grew up. Think back to when that was your foremost aspiration. That was stupid." She released him. "But you are kin, Preston. You are kin in spirit to the great Kramer Kraken, whom you wanted to become in adulthood, however stupid that wish may be."

Preston turned rosy and clasped his hands. "Well, I guess my girlfriend would sure be impressed. She loves sea life you know."

"No!" Carla stomped her foot to indicate that she'd conquered the final word.

"What, no, she doesn't like sea life, or no, you don't think that she does?"

"No, you can not use this assignment to impress her." Carla stomped her foot again. "You may brag to her after I show your findings to the committee and they give me a raise. This is exclusive material we're talking about, and I cannot have some flouncy mermaid spreading gossip to her friends."

She stomped her foot yet again, and Preston thought of giving it a taste of its own medicine. It wouldn't have been very effective, though. He was wearing flippers, not stiletto heels.

"This is a morose mission you're asking of me. If I do go back, I can't wear this wetsuit. They've already seen me in it, and I don't think they'll let me in again."

"Then I hope you've learned a painful lesson about opening your mouth when it should stay closed," said Carla.

Preston was a hefty Hawaiian man whose escape from the wetsuit would take the form of either peeling the frickin' thing off or sucking it all in all over his body and then slithering out. That's why he was still wearing it.

"This time, you'll go as the Grinch. My nephew prefers him over Santa Clause, and my brother in law has a loose-fitting costume."

"Huh? But the Grinch isn't a cryptid."

"Neither is 'man-in-a-wetsuit,' but no one noticed, did they?"

*

Wendy Wendigo noticed that man-in-a-wetsuit wasn't a cryptid. She tattled to the Kraken, who did little more than "promise to devote the next meeting to her concerns."

"But we shouldn't even let him back in. We might even have to relocate to The Bermuda Triangle, or Avalon, or even Bikini Bottom. I swear, he's told someone by now. Ooooh, it gives me the shivers."

Wendy repeated every implication of their uncovering to Mindy Loch Ness as the two gave one another makeovers at the Atlantis Hair Salon.

"I don't suppose that would be too bad for me," said Mindy. "My former life of crime was mostly photobombing old timey photographs anyway. What'd you used to do?"

"I used to protect the forest by forcibly recruiting boy scouts and lumberjacks." Wendy stroked Mindy's tail with a glass of scale polish. "Big mistake. Phantasmifying those guys just gave them access to new places to drink beer and make fart noises with their armpits."

"And that's why you set them free?"

"I had to. They were crowding my tree." She browsed the junk drawer for some more fashionably glittered fake claws. "It's also the reason I don't just transform Mr. I-show-up-in-a-wetsuit. Seriously. And they think *we're* the bad guys?"

Mindy rolled up her tail in a big giant curler. "I don't remember being thought of as a bad guy, and you shouldn't either. As U.G.L.Y. Cryptid members, it's our duty to help both humans and one another." She gave her manicure a rest to look up and down the Salon corridors. Suddenly flighty and high-strung, she acted as though Mister Wetsuit had come on her invitation. "That reminds me, can you keep a secret?"

"No, not really."

"Oh, I'll tell you anyway. I'm helping Greglin and his family carry the Kamyana stone widows to the surface."

If Mindy wanted this kept secret, it was solely to keep the Gremlins' feelings from hurting. Who would believe that those four inch savages could carry anything heavier than a stick of dynamite?

"Mindy, you know that, if word of this gets out, the Gremlins will just have to carry up some other artifact. *Their* reputation needs restoration, not yours."

Mindy was in the bad habit of forcing the issue by voluntarily dilating her eyes, frowning her brow, and squeezing out tears in pebble-sized doses. It did not win Wendy's affection.

"At all."

The doors flew open, and in loped Jack the Ripper. "Oy! So sorry to interrupt your gossip, ladies, but the boss called for an emergency meeting. He wants to... *dissect* the rum-pumpum of the day."

Wendy stared him in the eye. "I don't like being accused of 'girly things,'" She plucked off her eyelash extensions, remembering some advice she'd read in *Glamour Ghoul Monthly*. "But I'm glad you met us before the meeting. Get your scalpal ready. We just might have to weed out a spy."

*

Before Preston's second venture, he said goodbye to his girlfriend, divulging every aspect of U.G.L.Y. that he could remember and promising to make her the first one to see the video.

"That works out great! I have a birthday coming up, so let's shoot for watching it then. Oooh, just wait until my family sees it. It's just the thing you need to win their approval."

"Well, I can't exactly give it to you. I still have to show it to Carla. Did you say your family doesn't approve of me?"

It didn't surprise him. Preston had shared his childhood dream of becoming a Kraken when they first met. He didn't realize they were professional skeptics. Or at least the parents were. The brother was more of an amateur skeptic.

"I don't believe you... sort of," he'd charged.

Mr and Mrs. Murdock had feigned affability the rest of the evening, undermining their efforts with a sharp "So that's the type of man who bewitches our little Madison, I suppose at least one kind of bewitchcraft exists after all"-type of attitude.

Preston sighed, which was difficult under both the wetsuit and the Grinch costume. "Madison, this could actually make your parents parents lose their jobs."

"That just might be the *Umph* they need to come down off their high horse. You know, they don't approve of me, either." She rolled her eyes. "They never supported my dream of being

a dolphin rodeo rider. They wanted me to go into the seance busting business. You know, tackling the powder faced woman pretending to be the fortune teller's dead wife."

"Did they?" Preston chuckled. "That could have been an actual phantasm. Cryptids really do exist, you know."

They concluded the evening with a pillow fight. Preston couldn't bend over and duck, so Madison won. The next morning, Preston invaded Atlantis a second time. With a camera hidden in a head lamp, he walked among cryptids, who blent in a lot, but Preston, disguised as the Grinch, did not.

*

Kramer Kraken never did find a durable substitute for his broken podium. There was a mound of dirt, but his gavel didn't make the penetrative "clack, clack" sound on contact. He had to substitute that as well. He used a clown horn instead.

"Order, I say. *Honk, honk*. Don't laugh. Now. It has been brought to my notice that we might have an unexpected visitor among us. You will yourselves notice that Greglin is not here, and... nor is Mindy, oddly enough..."

Wendy drew herself up, as though a dire secret burbled within her bosom.

"But I'm sure she'll return," continued Kramer. "In the mean time, I do believe introductions are in order." Wendy, would you be so kind as to point out our wet suited guest?"

"Ooh-hoo! A guest? You imply he was invited. I'm certain if you'd ask to see his invitation, he would produce naught. Is he even here? A ghostly guest, a hoogaldy googaldy guest."

It was upon this proclamation that every head turned towards the fuzzy green pugface that practically none of them recognized.

There was one among them who did know the new arrival. The Krampus¹, cloaked in an old shawl, left his seat to look down on the Grinch.

"You really let yourself go since the last time I saw you. I recall you could fit on a snowflake once."

"Hoo hoo, that you did!" replied the Grinch. "For when last I was here, so short was I that I slipped below your vision."

The Krampus let his shawl drop, revealing a goat-like cranium, and a gargoylan countenance. His legs were goat-like as well, and he stared deep into the Grinch's headlamp. "I can't help but wonder what brings you to this unexpected height, hardly a half-foot below my own."

"Wait, no..." Wendy palmed her forehead. "That's the frogman. He's just wearing a different costume."

"Order! *Honk, honk*. Hold your impuginations, Wendy. I want to see this drama unfold."

"Who wants popcorn?" the Phoenix strutted in with an urn full of kernels. She'd forgotten her resurecting powers also worked on edible substances. Furthermore, the bigfoot ruined the batch by saying, "Wanna see a neat trick?" and attempting to scoop out a footful of kernals. Phoebe pecked him for that. He sulked. "They were ruined anyway."

And that's how the confrontation between the Grinch and the Krampus took a break.

The fact was, the year was nowhere near Christmas in any part of the world. It was much closer to April Fool's day. But the Krampus liked to make his plans in advance, and he did not look kindly on rival home invaders.

¹ For those of you who aren't in the know, the Krampus—known among his loved ones as "Rump Crumpet"—is the German antithesis of Santa Clause. While Santa supplies you with unnecessary trinkets you covet, the Krampus repays your greed by stealing your necessities. Vitamins, thermal underwear, fuseboxes, whatever you wouldn't find in a Toys-R-Us is fair game to him. He'll also nab the locks off your door and leave a post-it note that says, "Now Santa may access your home the easy way."

"Tell me, my verdant foe," he purred. "Whos' houses you plan to burgle. Is that not correct?"

"Who's... who?"

In the moment of confusion, the werewolf interjected. "Boys, boys, boys. Don't let's talk of intrusion and burglary. We strive to escape our deleterious infamy among the people, not practice it."

The Krampus huffed and puffed and socked that realting ninny all the way accross the room.

"Thus far, you have had the pleasure of stealing from your fa-hoo-doring neighbors. Dare you take on a human chimney?"

The Grinch grinned a grim and gritty grin.

"I could slide down a thousand chimneys. I could slide right back up with a full goody bag that was ere was empty."

"Very well," said the Krampus. "I challenge you to a theif-off on the morrow of April Fool's. The one to pilfer from the fewer houses will be thought of as a fool for all time."

"Oh, don't let's do that." The wolf came back for more. "Don't let's indulge in this sophomoric fantasy crime."

My, what a big mouth he had. All the better to have it clopped clear through the wall, my dear.

"Won't anybody at least try to unmask this guy?" Wendy pointed.

"I wear no mask," said the Krampus before Jack could offer up his "unmasking" knife. The Krampus obviously wasn't the one she pointed at, but he was a very pushy individual. He never tried to suppress his pushiness. "I never attempt to hide my misdeeds. I am a yieldless

cryptid. I yield not to the moral impositions of this wretched league, and neither, I suspect, does Greglin."

Kramer honked his horn again, interrupting the bombardment of protest. "Incidentally, we need to commission a probation officer to oversee the Gremlins. I myself am not certain they'll follow my orders."

"I'll do it," said Wendy. "I need something that faintly resembles a vacation from this rigamarole." She knew it was hopeless. The cryptids, barring Warren Werewolf, were all riled to see how the thief-off was going to go. Already, the mothman had erected a ticket booth. Monsters and ghosts lined up to place bets on their Krampan renegade hero, for they too longed to return to their wicked ways, yet lacked the initiative to do so.

"Order, order!" Again, Kramer honked his horn, but a bit too mightily this time. He punctured it, and the insidious honk devolved to a cautious whiz.

"I miss my gavel. But I hereby commission Wendy Wendigo to oversee the transportation of the statues. More importantly, though, I forbid any of you to place bets on those two guys' betrayal on penalty of banishment. Also, I forbid you guys stealing from houses on penalty of same. We simply can't dish out compensation for everyone. That's all."

Disappointed heads drooped over chests. The Krampus didn't falter. He cornered the Grinch, and, after everyone else left, restated his challenge. "Fool gambler or no, the thief-off will commence. Neither Santa nor you shall soil my name."

And in a whirl of wind and snowflakes, the Krampus was gone. Preston, alone in Atlantis's council room, pulled out his walkie talkie. "We'll see who soils who."

*

Madison Murdock had, against her better judgment, left her brother in charge of the walky talky she'd got for her birthday. She'd given the other one to Preston, but he was more there than here. She knew her family weren't fond of swimming, so they'd be safe and dry for electronic equipment as she climbed aboard the first dolphin that wiggled her way (which didn't take long, considering the new bikini she wore). Besides, it gave her family a chance to exercise the highest possible form of skepticism; doubting the evidence presented before their very eyes.

"This is preposterous! A little..." Matthew might have been referring to the idea that anyone, including the assembly of dolphins, could see any chemistry between his sister and her steede. He also might have been referring to his responsibility with the walky talky. At any rate, his misery was multiplied by his parents' snooty glances. "Is that the best you can do?" They seemed to be saying.

"It is highly unlikely," said Mrs. Murdock, "that a girl born of our loins would abase herself with such frivolity, don't you agree, dear?"

"Yes, darling, highly unlikely."

"Oh, screw both of you." Matthew threw a beer can at a seal who wanted to extend the romantic advances to the rest of the family. "It's all right there in front of our faces. Madison is horsing around on girly girl fish, and now they've spotted us. Are you really going to act like this is some hallucination you're having on purpose?"

In spite of their momentary astoundment, they found the words with which to answer their son.

"Do you believe," said Mr. Murdock to his wife, "that our son would choose to speak to us in so flippant a manner?"

"No dear, I do not."

"Nor do I. It must not have happened."

"I agree, it did not. But just in case," she flicked Matthew on the nose. It was the last straw. He told them they sucked, and stomped away. He thought of mooning them and yelling, "let's see you doubt this!" But the seal had come slithering back for a second helping of abuse.

"Get lost, pervert. Hello, what's this?" As he made his escape, the walky talky started beeping. Matthew was no less disgusted over his sister's career path than his parents, but he did hold at least a hint of loyalty to her happiness. He answered the signal. "Preston? Is that you? I thought you were underwater. How can you operate a walky talky?"

"I'm in Atlantis. It's dry here. Is that Matthew? Where's Madison?"

"Doing something wet. It's why she left the talking to me."

The dolphins had by now made a football game out of his sister. Like elongated quarterbacks lined up next to the homecoming queen, they would tail slap her off one back and try to submit themselves as her ride. Surely she was too smart to be enjoying it.

"Look, uh, I may need to call the life guard. Or at least the dignity guard."

"Well, whatever you do, tell Maddie to keep an eye out for the Krampus, the Lock Ness Monster, a Wendigo, and some Gremlins."

"Well, I'll try, but neither of us know what any of those things look like."

"One of them looks like me."

Matthew turned around. There was no one around to submit himself to the visual similarity of any of Preston's cryptic pals. No one, that is, except for the seal.

"Come again?"

"One of them looks like me." It was not a single voice, but a moderate crowd of voices, and it came directly from the seal. "Or, we should say, some of them look like us."

It was the first time Matthew regretted not taking his skepticism lessons seriously. Claws burst through the seal's skin, and instantly a pack of jagged-toothed porcupine creatures stood starring him in the eye. They carried weapons, little stone women who looked like his grandmother in a nun hat.

"This is impossible... I think." It was futile. His credulous side won out. "No, I lied. This is possible. This is extremely possible. I know this for a fact." He turned around. "Mom, Dad! You'd better come see this!"

On the beach a few yards away, the Murdock parents had a conversation.

"Did you hear our son cry out in pain, as though wacked in the groin with an artifact of a mythical underwater city?"

"I don't believe I did, dear."

"Well, I don't believe I did either, darling. Such a thing must not have happened."

They went back to watching their daughter's rumble.

*

Mindy Loch Ness decided it would be better for Greglin's self-esteem if he and his brood delivered the statues themselves. She tried to argue her involvement, but once he played the sworn loyalty card ("Don't you trust us, Mindy?"), she realized how suspicious she was acting, and how he must have felt like a poodle on a leash.

She wanted to celebrate her newfound trust by going to Bonnie Bunyip's, watching *Titan... Ick* and having a recreational crying session. She'd just reached the grotto when she bumped into a former boyfriend, Carlos Loch Lomond. He was not a member of the U.G.L.Y. Cryptids.

"Why, hello, Mindy," He said in the greasiest voice possible. "Played pin the fin on the leviathin lately?"

"No. Ruined any wedding photos lately?"

"Why, you say that as though it were something to be ashamed of."

"I *am* ashamed of you."

Mindy turned her back and pushed Bonnie's doorbell. Carlos didn't leave.

"Even if you save the world, the humans will never look at us with kindness and acceptance."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have a few sour onions in your garden." Mindy didn't know what onions were, but she listened nonetheless. "I don't go to those meetings for that goody-two-shoes gang of yours. I do eavesdrop on them, though. And I have to say, you should never have let the Krampus in. Some of us deserve the dreadful reputations we've accumulated."

Mindy threw her nose up in the air.

"Shows how much you know. We're not just trying to make the humans see our kinder, gentler sides. We also want to rehabilitate the cryptids who just can't seem to go straight."

Carlos snorted. "Shows how much *you* know. Some of them just don't want to go straight. Some would rather stay crooked. And our dear rotten Rump Crumpet is the crookedest crook in the crookedhood, a beautiful crook for the crooked. See for yourself."

Carlos presented her with a flyer advertising a burglary competition. It looked like the kind of poster that advertised professional wrestling, with the two opponents grinding their foreheads together and visibly screaming, although much of the rage looked photoshopped.

"Carlos, where did you get this flyer?"

"Wilma Will'o'the Wisp made it. She said she wanted to trick people into stumbling through swamp mudslides in their Sunday best again, and the theft-off might be her only chance to do it."

"How?"

"Well, some of the U.G.L.Y. club members are counting on the Grinch to fumble and steal from the poor. That way, his crime is so heinous that anything we do will be mild by comparison. We can photobomb and mislead as we please."

She had to put a stop to it. Carlos, sensing her noble intentions, had to put a stop to her. Bonnie Bunyip came to the grotto door to find nobody there, then returned to her desk to write a bill outlawing ding-dong-ditchers.

*

Wendy couldn't think of anything that would compensate the kid for his crotch-ache, so she begged his forgiveness and promised Greglin a good blast of *Fabreeze* in the face if he pulled a stunt like that again.

"You weren't ever supposed to burst through the seal skin, either. The whole point of being a cryptid—"

"Can it, will you? I just want to ditch these old stone broads and then ditch the land of the living morons."

"Fair enough." Wendy *did* find the bikini lady's attempt to body slam an animal triple her size rather moronic. The problem they faced now was finding a place to ditch the statues. They'd intended to leave them in a swimming pool with a written apology about the submarine. They should have known that swimming pools here lost their business to the beach. Now they didn't know where to put them, and a controversy broke out over their next course of action. The

impulsive younger ones wanted to pick any old museum and get back to the sea bed. "No," said Greglin. "Then we'd be accused of favoritism. This finding is big. Huge. It comes from Atlantis. And no doubt one museum will accept it while the rest will double their scorn, even if they've never heard of us."

Wendy groaned and announced, "Look, the only way to solve this is to give it to the people whose submarine you wrecked."

"Unfortunately, we don't bother to trade contact information with our victims when we commit property damage. That way, we never get caught. However, as I recall, there was one burly booger who made it out. I dunno where he went." Greglin mulled over the matter, something he rarely did. "I sure hope he didn't follow us."

"Huh?" Wendy wasn't around for the discipline of the gremlins. She didn't notice any submarine wreck survivor.

But she did notice some latex-skinned git speak out of turn at the ensuing meeting, and a lawn-skinned mineshaft worker speak non-sequitars.

"The frogman. The Grinch. He's the one who got away."

"Ah, you have a lead. Well, now we know who to give these to." He gave his own widow a pat on the cheek. While in the seal disguise, the widows made up the backbone of the animal. Throughout the swim to the surface, they complained of having no room to paddle through the fins. Wendy wasn't about to conjure up another disguise. She wasn't about to greenlight Greglin's plan, either.

"Okay, not really sure I want to trust the espionage Grinch with the delivery of a peace offering, but I do think he can lead us to the owners of that submarine."

Greglin scratched his head. "Hmm... that's the second time I've heard somebody raise trust issues over these gargirls."

"Let's just do this, Greglin. The sooner you make up for your mistake, the sooner we can—where are you going?"

For the whole colony started marching back towards the shore.

"We want to ask those dolphins if they know a Grinch or Black Lagoon Larry. You wait here with the statues."

"But there are people over there."

"They're professional skeptics. It'll be fine."

It was not, in fact, fine. True, Matthew was too busy writhing around in agony to care, but Madison had taken a break, and she was so rebellious that she believed everything she saw. She dashed towards the gremlin brood, scooped up what she could, and dropped them all onto her parents' laps.

"See?" She squealed over the panicked critters. "I told you I'm not crazy, and neither is Preston."

It was a true test of the Murdock parents' skepticism. *Were* there tiny mole men scrambling all over their laps? *Was* their daughter seeking a career taming the brains of marine mammal society? *Was* their field of study a big fat lazy wast of time? Everything they had ever doubted now stood personified in a dozen or so little creatures trying to escape their deep, capacious shin folds.

Mr. Murdock turned to his wife. "Hold fast, Lydia. This... *shared hallucination* is a formidable test of our skill and profession."

"Believe me, Marvin, I am denying it with all my womanly might."

"Oh for Pete's sake!"

Madison yanked a polaroid camera right off the neck of some bystanding tourist. "I'm snapping a photo. Later, when this is all over, we'll see how much denial you can muster."

Madison took four photos. The first would show her parents wrestling with the latest and greatest affront to their chosen profession. An observant viewer would notice an extraordinary neck in the background, atop which sat the head of a prehistoric sea monster. An analytic observer would notice a flicker of curiosity in her eye, as though itself taking notice of the scenario below. The second would show Mr. and Mrs. Murdock doubling their efforts by turning away from the gremlinian chaos. Because their eyes were closed, they would not have seen the leviathan wrestling her own photo-bombing demon. Come picture number three, and the big scaley scamp gives in, hogging the camera with a sneery horse face as she wedges her head between doubting Tommy and doubting Tina, forcing the both of them to succumb to *their* demons and believe in the existence of the things trying to escape their laps, the thing making vulgar faces at their daughter, and the thing in the fourth picture completing a dog pile and shouting, "NOOOO! You shall *not* intercept this year's annual thief-off!"

Madison would have snapped more photos, but the camera was empty. And she hissed the man away when he asked for his camera back.

"Well, this is jolly!" she said. "My parents' snoot-job is caving in, and now they have no choice but to give Preston their blessing. Where are they, anyway?"

"Don't be a bimbo." Matthew inched his way toward his sister and the forty ton pile of sea monsters. If their parents weren't lying somewhere beneath, then they must have run home really fast. Either way, there was no denying those things. "Who are you talking to?"

"Well, *you*. And why would you ever think I'm a bimbo?"

"Get real. You can't marry at seventeen." Little by little, he regained his strength. By now, he was able to stand, albeit with his legs knitted together. "You can't even propose."

"I can if Mom and Dad say so." She turned to the sea monsters. "Your timing was opportune! Could you move so I can ask my parents to let me marry?" She smirked at Matthew. "They speak English. That's a fact I bet you don't know. Who's the bimbo now?"

The larger, squarer-jawed of the sea monsters raised his head. "Silence your mouth, mortal. I must prevent my ex from intercepting the thief-off."

"No you mustn't! Gain way!"

Madison and Matthew cleared enough ground for the monster below to throw off her ex-boyfriend. A hurricane of sand blasted into the clouds while she raced towards the city. She stopped upon sight of another monster that Matthew hadn't yet noticed.

"Wait a sec," he said to Madison. "I think this is the kind of thing Preston wanted to warn you about."

"Preston called you?"

The walky talky had been smashed in the removal of the boyfriend, who lay in a forty foot deep ditch.

"Yeah, he had to warn you about some cryptids coming to the surface."

"What did he say?"

"Um, the gremlins were coming... I suppose those were the guys responsible for your broken walky talky." The Gremlins were salvaging the parts. "They did it. Anyway, then there's the Wendigo."

"That must be that creature over there." Madison pointed in the direction of a skinny grizzly bear chatting with the big blue brontoturtle.

"I hope you're pointing at the short one, because my respect for you is at stake. Anyway, one of those things is the Loch Ness monsters. There was one more thing... I can't remember its name. Campus? Corperal?"

"Well, whoever he was, he must be the guy down there."

The bed he had formed looked too much like a giant grave for Matthew's taste, especially since he'd recently lost his ability to refuse data presented to the sense. Even still, he was not satisfied.

"Hey you down there, Flipper." Even though everyone he could have legitimately called Flipper was fighting over a bikini top several yards away. "Do you have a name that sounds like Capers or Cram-daddy?"

"No." The great beast heaved itself into as much of a standing position as he could. "The one you ask of has yet to come. He shall compete in the great theif-off on the town of... why am I talking to mortals?"

"Because we'll shoot you," threatened Matthew.

"Because I'll push you in!" threatened Madison with a hardy pat on her brother's back. "These are our cryptic brethren. Be nice to them."

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm a blood relative. And if there's one thing I'm good at doubting, it's that water is thicker than blood. Hey pencil neck, get back in the water and I'll prove it."

This time, Madison did give him a shove. Or at least she thought she did, but he was no longer in front of her hand. She fell into the pit and slid down his neck, chilling him to an insufferable degree.

"Filthy mortal! Relinquish your grip upon my neck."

But Madison didn't release him. She gripped his neck with her thighs as he bucked and thrashed. "Matthew, quick! my hat!"

"I think the dolphins have it."

"Then take a snapshot!"

"I think they've got the camera, too."

"NNnnooOOO!"

Madison's disappointment was so strong that she gripped the monster's neck even harder. He slung her out and fainted.

As she slid across the beach she came across these words written in sand.

"You took my camera, bimbo. Well, now I took it back, along with those spellbinding monster pics. I'll be famous. *Plblblblblbttd*."

"He didn't even thank me," she worried. "This is bad. Very bad."

So bad, in fact, that she didn't notice the thing that pulled her to her feet. That didn't stop her from talking to it.

"I need that camera. If the footage gets out, then my boyfriend will be out of a job."

"Oh, um... what does your boyfriend do?"

"He scooba dives and takes videos of cryptids. Oop! I've said too much. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

Wendy buried her face in her hands. "I may not have to."

*

Back in the office of Carla Prisock, the rich treasure salvaging woman was again kissing and slapping Preston turn by turn for his brilliance at capturing the cryptids in their neutral state but his bumbling at drawing attention to himself, respectively.

"I love you! But you idiot, you'll make the Krampus known to all!"

"Well, April Fool's daw is tomorrow," he justified. "You still have time."

Carla was still a little frosty over Preston's impertinence as a newbie in Atlantis. Still, she did like the footage.

"It would be nice to have my grant back. There is, however, one thing to consider. I am uncertain as to the nature of this Krampus fellow's burglary. Were this video to make it to the public eye, you might get arrested for instigating a breaking and entering."

"Meh, it'll be worth it in the name of science."

"I'm glad you think so."

The latest footage, she wrapped in a rag. She made it a present and stuck on a tag. She hid it in packages, boxes, and bags.

"By the by, since when did the Grinch ever call anything 'hoogaldy googaldy?'"

"Oh, I don't know. Dr. Seuss wasn't a big part of my childhood."

"Then who was?"

"Bay watch."

"Figures. I've met your girlfriend."

Carla wondered what watching Bay Watch had to do with wanting to evolve into a mythical sea monster. Anyway, Preston was still in the Grinch suit. Carla would hate to see him mobbed by fans or detractors; It was evident from the footage that he'd become quite a celebrity down there.

"You know, you're such a good employee, and I'd hate to see you go to jail regardless of my grant return. And you seem to *love* life among the cryptids."

"Oh, I do, believe me. I wouldn't want to live down there, but still, it's nice for a visit."

"Which is why I'll have to send you down a third time." She dug around in the supply closet. "You see, I do not wish to see the Krampus sprawling down my chimney and digging through my nighties, or whatever he does."

"Whoops." Preston knew exactly what she was looking for.

"This time, you won't be needing a camera, only a fake beat box."

"Sure, but what's my mission?"

"I want you to talk the Krampus out of the thief-off. Don't worry, the Froin' Samoan suit slips off easily."

Surely Carla was aware that this was the third layer of clothing, wasn't she?

"Woah, didn't know 'fro' was a thing you could do."

"You go and fro by wearing one."

"Where did you get it?"

"I went to the committee Halloween party as you." That made sense. The Froin' Samoan was essentially Preston with a fro: a big bulky man in a floral T-shirt and cut-off slacks. "Once you find the Krampus's house, you can unzip the costume and call a truce as the Grinch. Come to think of it, you might just need a camera after all, just to set the record straight empirically."

"Hmm..." Preston considered this a moment. "Well, Madison's birthday is on April Fool's. I'd hate to miss it for that goat-horned goon."

Carla patted his shoulder. "It is for the greater good. Now, don your gay apparel and go froin'."

*

Mindy sat out the debriefing meeting. Or, I should say, *swam* out. She lurked beneath the pool of the Murdock's neighbors and blew raspberries in leg nooks of unsuspecting children.

"She's better off this way," said Wendy. "Let her in on someone's reputational jeopardy, and she'll go and try to correct it herself."

"I'm not ashamed," said Madison, who hadn't seen the need to change out of her bikini yet. "And I don't think Matthew is either."

Matthew was still relatively crippled from the crotch blow. The stone widows stood in a circle around the coffee table. He cursed them with a fiery glower, and used the same look to tell Madison to speak for herself.

"It's not a matter of shame," said Wendy. "You see, as cryptids, it's our job to keep the mystery going. We can only walk the margin of human perception. In other words, no one can know for sure whether or not we truly exist."

"Great job so far," mumbled Matthew.

"But so what?" said Madison. "What if people *do* know for sure?"

"Well, for starters, the whole phoenix family would go bald from having their feathers plucked out one by one, from mourning families who want their loved ones back. Some of us have special powers, you know. The gremlins would be hired by the military to hijack enemy planes and destroy them from inside. Mindy would be put in a zoo. I could go on down the list, but I think you get the picture."

"Cryptsploitation," whispered Matthew. "Hmph. My lack of skepticism skills makes that very easy for me to believe."

"Hey," said Madison. "That's it! Skepticism! We'll just send our parents to doubt away all the rumors and gossip."

"Rumors and gossip are not the problem," said Matthew. "You took pictures. Preston took videos. Ever read Kipling's 'Matter of Fact?' We Americans will believe anything, espe-

cially if someone posts it on facebook. Besides, our parents are lying comatose in their bed in a state of shock. No way will they go and 'doubt away' the evidence."

"Hmm... you've got a point there." She turned to Wendy. "You'd better lay low until we figure out what to do."

Wendy looked out the window. The neighborhood kids all stood around in their floaties as an adult fished around in the pool with a net. Somebody from animal control, no doubt.

"Lay low, Mindy. Lay very, very low."

Matthew picked up a widow, the one that emasculated him in his special area. "What are these nun thingies for, anyway?"

"They're a peace offering. The gremlin family was supposed to give them over as compensation for wrecking Preston's submarine." She picked up a piece of Murdock property, a framed photograph of the parents sneering at a plaster representation of the Loup Garou. "Honestly, I think he's helped himself to plenty of compensation already, risking our exposure the way he does."

"His job's at stake," defended Madison. "And so is his boss's. Well, actually, I don't like his boss. I think she's a bad influence on him. Every time he comes back from a meeting with her, he's wearing a little more clothing. I guess it's okay if she keeps her job, though."

"At the cost of our freedom and privacy?"

A tapping at the window alerted them all to Greglin and a handful of his sons.

"Oh, looks like they're all done burying Mindy's ex," said Madison.

"What are they doing out in plain sight?" cried Wendy.

"If either of you let them in," warned Matthew, "I'm squishing them all with mom's doubtathon trophy."

"Fine," grumbled Wendy. "We'll regroup in the basement."

But in crawling out the window, she saw that the pool party next door had turned their attention towards the chimney, where the animal control man lowered a fishing hook with a pair of pants on the end. Instantly, the idea that these people would wake up the next morning with all of their insulation gone came to mind. Wendy turned to Madison.

"What day is it?"

"March 31st. Hey, my actual birthday is tomorrow! Matthew, I'll still get cake, right?"

"Look, forget about your birthday for a moment. The Krampus wasn't even supposed to show up until tomorrow morning. I just don't know what the deal is."

"The deal is," said a disembodied voice flowing down from the chimney, "That I want it full known that the forthcoming theivary is no April Fool's prank. Now, which of your possessions are of the most practical value?"

He eyeballed the Kamyana widows, and his lips curled into a wicked smile.

*

Preston looked like a tic about to pop. His portrayal of the Froin' Samoan was the least convincing of all his costumes, partly because he couldn't jam to the ruckus blasting out of his boom box (how much money did Carla spend on water-proofing it?) And partly because his afro doubled as a floatation device. Preston was concerned about his appearance as an actual cryptid after an orca whapped the boom box off his shoulder. All he could rely on was the unusualness of a human who could breathe underwater, so when a school of merthugs surrounded him and asked, "What are you supposed to be?" He went,

*"It's the Froin' Samoan
 And I knows where I is goin'
 I'm gonna set up camp
 At the crib of the Kramp
 He's challengin' a theif-a-thon
 With The Mount Krumpet Green-a-thon
 So now I gotta stop
 Him at the first chimney hop."*

In mermese, that whole song translated as "a turd." Everyone in the ocean knew that all sewers led to land, so they seized him and tried to flush him up the toilet. To add an extra degree of delinquency, this was the toilet of Jack the Ripper, where all his failed "experiments" went. They were not invited. They broke down his door without permission.

When the knifey man himself came home, he found the state of his front door rather curious. "Odd," he said. "It looks like what I do to lamprey eels and white sharks, only with fewer pieces missing."

He investigated a little further to discover the ocean floor toughs trying to cram a 250 lbs man up his comode. He was a little startled that a guy of that size didn't try to fight back.

"Hold ye your seahorses, lassies. With whom you be..."

"Don't ask," snapped Thelma, the ring-leader. "He can't move, but the noise he makes sure is awful."

"We're sending him to a land where no one will believe him when he says we exist," said Peppy. "Its name is England."

"Yeah," said Heather. "We've read Kipling's 'Matter of Fact,' and we know that place is a breeding ground for skeptics."

"But a really *good* skeptic doesn't make such a big splash over there," observed Bernice. "The skeptic school is so competitive that I doubt it even exists."

"On the other hand," argued Flava, "America is so dupable that any old Jack off the streets who says, 'Well, I don't know about that,' is obviously a forum-trolling skinflint."

"And that is why we live underwater," concluded Christa. "Here, we can believe whatever we want. We can reject whatever we want, and nobody will give two barnacles about it."

...There was a 250 lbs man clogging up the toilet. The mermarauders had succeeded in squeezing his upper torso into the flush pipe. His legs dangled haplessly under a mushroomed pelvis.

"...who you be blockin' me poop pipe with?"

*"I is the Froin' Samoan
Where the frack is I goin'
It's so dark in this hood
I can't see bad or see good
I smell lotsa ex-food
so now if somehomie would
give the light of the lamp
so I's can go meet the Kramp."*

His voice was considerably muffled, but he got his message across just fine.

Jack fixed the merdelinquents with a stern look. "I can see why you thought he belonged up my komode. But ye be unedgy-cated about ye olde fabled Froin' Samoan. Gather ye round."

Unaware of what to expect, the mergals all sat around him in the living room, and he regailed them all with the legend of the Froin' Samoan.

"Know ye what lies within the belly of the Froin' Samoan? Crawdad pie, deep dished in the tartest of ramalade sauce and roofed with a sourdough crust as shimmery as the land bloke's shilling."

Somewhere in the kitchen, a timer went off.

"But it be lumpy and digested and worth a fathom less than a lick. That's what's in the belly. It's the fro ye want to... *divide*." He whipped out his knife, and a squeel erupted from the mouths of all who listened. Then, remembering their statii as gang affiliates, they were henceforth ashamed of the noise they'd just made. They rode walruses who roared from the rear, and these rear-roaring rides awoke many a stupified cryptid, whose local police, a pair of magic orcas who could summon a whalenado, were too slow to chase these terrible teen role models.

"And that's why ye should always stuff things up feet farst."

"You got me there," admitted Thelma. "So what's in the fro? Cigars? Bullets? Drugs?"

"Pearls."

But before Thelma could *pfft* and say, "sissy stuff," her five disciples deserted her, yanked the Samoan out of the pipe ("It's just about time / I got outta the grime"), shoved him back in feet first, shoved a wad of tissue paper in his mouth, and shrieked for Jack to come and dissect his fro. Unbeknownst to them, the toilet paper in his mouth was no longer necessary, as their shrieking voices hypnotized humans. It made them more open to the power of suggestion. And they suggested he buttoned it.

Jack, who had been waiting to dissect something besides a coral reef since Victorian times, gently grasped the fro. He slid his knife across it only to discover that he'd suddenly peeled off more than hair.

Old as he was, though, his memory was sharp enough to know that human brains were not fuzzy, tufted, and green.

"Yipe! What freakery be within my squat pot?"

Thelma shoved him out of the way. "Those aren't pearls, that's Christa's front yard. You all make me puke, getting all gaga over something so... whatever. Who are you anyway?"

She peeled off the rest of that layer, and saw the pugface, no less delirious than the Samoan overneath.

"Why," marveled Jack, "That'd be the Grinch! He's supposed to be rivaling with the Krampus tomorrow over who burgles the most houses."

Heather fumed. "And that's why you wanted to go and meet him? So you could botch the competition? I have all of next year's allowance riding on his performance. How dare you!" She took a leaf out of Jack's dissection kit and tried to bare the Grinch's skull. "Let's see you hamper the Krampus with a face like this!"

But underneath it all was not the muscley yuckiness that you'd normally expect. Instead she found a frog face. It confused her so much that she forgot her rage for a second.

"Um, Uncle Jack, is that what Grinch facial guts are supposed to look like?"

Jack frowned. "I ain't yar uncle, but yes. There be only one Grinch, and ye can go nay further into his face."

A collective "Eww" went around the group, so Thelma slapped them serious. "Why stop at his face? I'd like to see what's underneath all over his body now that I know there's no sissy fink jewelry down there."

She clawed away at the Hawaiian T, and then the thick green pelt under that. What she found under the frog skin was basically what she expected the Froin' Samoan to look like without any clothes, only with many more claw marks.

"I give up. That's about as far as I can go."

Her resignation brought about jubilant spirits in Jack. "Aye, lass. That may be—"

"—the last time you ever use this." And Skippy yanked away his scalpal and pulled his nose. "False advertise to us, will ya?"

Bernice and two others tackled him to the floor. "Tease us with tales of peals, *eh?*"

"That's good, that's good," Thelma began flushing, over and over. "You just keep seducing him. Buck up, Jack. Your reputation is about to be the guy with some serious digestion issues."

With so much mass creeping down the potty pipe, people were sure to get the wrong impression. The guy left a trail of bulges and bursts as he inched his way to the surface. He moved just slowly enough for passerbies to notice and make unfair assumptions about Jack's nutrition choices, although in reality, knowing whose house this was, they merely asked, "who's he dissected this time?"

*

Like a more cooperative Jonah emerging from the mouth of the whale, Preston crawled along the beach, leaving behind a heterogenous trail of green fur, latex rubber, afro curls and coral innards. All was rank and fetid. The trail drew the interest of a few circling gulls, the kind seeking subordinate welfare.

As he sought human civilization, he encountered a neck. A neck that was nearly all neck, one down which you might build a freeway, if you were so inclined.

"He prowled and scouted this way."

The voice came from above. Whatever skull it led to lay hidden among the clouds.

"He seeks to lessen his reputation."

Preston may have been delusional, but his memory was reliable. All that talk of reputational damage hadn't dribbled out his earhole. It hadn't left his conscience, either.

"His reputation..." he wheezed. "And who else's?"

"Mine, for instance."

The talking longneck had the chance to save himself some embarrassment and *not* reveal the thing that would ruin *his* reputation. After all, clouds don't tattle. But atop the neck was a head, and inside the head was silly putty. Atop the head was a pair of complicated corals. It was obviously the work of some sophomoric cryptid vandals. Human children would have used sycamore branches. Even worse was a radioactive neon globe glued between his nostrils, clearly some unfortunate remnant of nuclear warfare. Just what had been going on up here?

"Um, hey, can I ask you a question? Are you some kind of mutant apple tree?"

"Are you some kind of Klump? I am curse to sit here under an unforgiving sun, before an unforgiving crowd, explaining it all to an unforgiving *fool* while a celebrity among the cryptids undoes all the progress we've made."

Preston didn't see any crowd, unforgiving or otherwise. Even if he did, he'd suspect that they and any garbage they threw was a mirage. The sun was peculiarly unmerciful today. He'd spent too much time underwater.

"I... I am a fool..." As said before, Preston's memories hadn't ditched him. One persimmony-sour one came oozing back to remind him of his idiocy. "He undoes what he does because I challenged him."

"You? *You're* the one indirectly responsible for my jolly crimson nose?"

Back in the Atlatis council room, Preston never would have guessed that the Krampus, so deep and profound, would have bothered to maldecorate a talking neck with a shiney nose, one we'd even say that glows.

"I should have guessed. Well, I only hope that when the crowd comes upon you, they peel off that last layer of skin. I can tell you've been wearing all that rubbish behind you."

One of the gulls dining on said rubbish came along and perched on Preston's leg to get to fresher samples. "You know, this is the most depressing conversation I've ever eavesdropped on," he said. "And who cares about your reputation? It's not like you're trying to get a job from these chumps."

"Carla..." gasped Preston. "Carla would hire you."

"As what?" hissed Necky. "The titanic seahorse at the Kiddie Corale? The stake in the ground in an ogre's game of horshoe?"

"Prolly so," said the gull, "But ya know, all newcomers start at the foot of the career ladder. Sometimes even lower."

"Were only my foot free, I'd quelch you both!"

"That's great. I don't know what 'quelch' means, but... if I were you, I'd get this guy some water. I have a feeling that he's the only one around who can save your reputation."

He flew, leaving Preston at the mercy of an irritable neck. The abject scooba diver had already had his fill of water, but he was thirsty nonetheless.

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to spit in your face." The mouth on the head of the neck did just that. "Go ahead and drink it if you are so thirsty."

It was the most refreshing spit he'd ever tasted. Let's be fair, the only spit he'd sampled so far in his twenty-seven years on Earth were his own and Madison's, but neither natural beverage had revived him from an uneasy-squeezy trip through the sewer pipe.

"Yeah, right on! You'll be known as a hero for all time! Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to stop a burglary. Several feelings are at stake."

He made for the city, but immediately faced an obstacle.

During his thirst, he'd assumed that his longneck friend was hallucinating, that his fury at being stuck in the ground had caused him to see a crowd of jeering ruffians surrounding the two of them. Now he realized that he'd been wrong. The *lack* of hecklers was a mirage.

*

Preston looked at the ring of jesters, and then back at the trail of cryptic skins he once wore. Pot-bellied gulls had taken its place. They flapped away towards the waves. Preston confided his personal frustrations to his new friend. "I should have worn something with feathers. You know, like the great penguin of the North."

A can of Diet Coca-Cola landed by his feet. "What a fool!" shouted one of the crowd. "That man is talking to something that cannot answer him!"

"There is certainly a lack of wisdom over there," said his friend.

"I agree," said an eavesdropper, "We must contain the lack of wisdom to stop it from infecting the rest of Miami."

At once, everyone in the crowd linked arms and closed in. They marched. Sand grains flew up as the innermost row kicked one foot out before the other. Preston scrambled to climb up the Loss Neck monster by his spines.

"Get off me, you fool! Don't cower, they're your own people."

"I'm not trying to escape," he explained. "I just want a better view of what we're up against."

"We? I can't fight at all! I am buried in sand. And my neck is feeble from the grip of some go-go girl's giddy-up."

"Then, will you at least lower your head so I can sit on that?"

The big grumpy monster snarled. The war mongering wisemen were only a few yards away now. What would they do once they reached the center?

"All right, I'll lift you , but you'd better weigh less than you look."

Preston flexed his biceps to buy him time. It was a technique that worked hypnotically well when done in front of Madison, but these guys only paused for a moment and gagged before continuing down the warpath.

The poor creature wobbled as he lifted Preston. He had trouble keeping his balance. In fact, Preston knocked off an antler and the red nose in his struggle to stay on board.

In the distance, he saw Matthew and Madison coming his way.

The neck creature saw them too.

"Oh no, not them."

"You've met my girlfriend?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You would court such a fatal dame? Get off me at once."

And Preston fell flat on three or more marching beach goers, burying them deep. Others marched over him. He was a big guy, he could take it. The monster's neck was a different story. The people rubbed his scales in the wrong direction. They didn't really do anything else, but that was bad enough. He yowled and groaned, somewhat trying to lower his neck back into the ground.

"Could a tree crawl deep with its roots?" mused Preston. Then he realized what a fool he was acting like. "Hey, stop it! Can't you see you're making him feel bad?"

"Guess what, Island boy?" yelled a smoky vigilante. "Somebody get an axe!"

"I don't believe it."

At once, all of the commotion stopped, and Matthew Murdock had their full attention.

"At all?" asked the axe-wanter.

"At all," answered Matthew. "I don't believe in this fish with a neck like a telephone pole at all."

The disappointment was clear. Matthew Murdock's amaturity at doubting the mysteries of life was renown throughout the city. The only way he could disbelieve something were if it truly didn't exist, so the Miami beach mobsters had no choice but to agree.

"Not so fast!" said Axe-happy Arnold. "I'm not going down without a fight. What do you mean, you don't believe it?"

"I mean I deny its existance, wherever it is."

"It's right in front of me!" He gave it another rub-down. "I can't feel it if it's not there, can I?"

"Haven't you smoking pot? Well, there you have it."

"No! Uh, you're not seriously suggesting we're all having the same hallucination, are you?"

"You're all the same kind of retarded, now beat it. You ought to be in school."

"So should you."

"No, I got expelled for believing my teachers too much. They said that skepticism school was no place for a believer like me."

He'd broken their commitment to mobbing. Little by little, the crowd dwindled into nothing. "I could have sworn I ruffled his scales," they said as they meandered away.

When the last one left, the ground shook below the human folk, and from beneath emerged Mindy, Wendy, and the Gremlin brothers.

"Well, that takes care of them," said Greglin.

"Yes, but what are we going to do about the Krampus?" said Wendy.

Preston pondered this in a classic Winnie-the-Pooh meditation. "That's a good point. I don't want to be thought of as a fool for all time."

The Wendigo shook her head. "Mister, Rumpel-goat-skin Horns has the one thing that might bridge peace between the human world and the cryptids. If he does any more damage and gets away with it, we *all* will be the all-time fools."

Madison looked from Preston to the gulls. They were so bloated that they couldn't fly beyond thirty seconds without having to stop and take a breather. "Dude, what's causing that flight failure over there?"

"Oh, they ate my wetsuits and costumes. I'm sure it wasn't good for them."

"I'm sure," said Matthew. "Did you at least warn them whether or not they were gluten-free?"

"I don't know what gluten is, but most of the frog suit and Froin' Samoan were latex. There was a fair share of wool on the Grinch and Samoan's fro, too."

"Did all those belong to Carla?" said Madison. "How many costumes does that woman have? She sounds like a clothing horder."

"Say," said Mindy, "Grendel's a horder. He hordes casts, wheelchairs and bandaids, doesn't he, Carlos?"

She addressed her buried ex-boyfriend.

"Ahem... yes. He likes to keep around symbols of human suffering."

Suddenly, Madison got all jiggy. She slapped Preston's arm for attention.

"Go ask Carla!"

"Huh? Ask her what? I thought you hated my boss."

"Yes, but ask her if she has a Krampus costume!"

She turned to Wendy.

"Does Atlantis get Miami news?"

*

If you were paying little enough attention to the Krampus, he would look to you like an ordinary burglar. After all, that's how he appeared to Carla Prisock when he came down her stove pipe.

"Preston? Is that you? Have you called off the thief-off with what's his name? Kramdon?"

"Silence, waif." That answered all her questions.

"Well, whoever you are, I can't invite you to stay for dinner. My reputation at my job is at stake."

"Oh my," The Krampus set his bag gingerly on the table. "Sounds like a necessity, that reputation of yours."

"Yes, I could be demoted to picking oddly-shaped rocks out of my back yard if my reputation were slighted."

"Then tell me, dame of astral ambition, where would you expect to find these?" He reached into his bag and pulled out a gathering of stone women, each the size of a preteen without the hormonal gap-kids superhero poses.

After examining the rather ordinary things, Carla made up her mind. "I would expect to find them watching over the cryptid lands, making certain that no intrusive human eye gathered more witness than should be allowed."

She could tell from his expression that he had not expected so candid an answer. "As for the dinner non-invitation, you shall have to pardon it. I am scrimping, you see. Any salvaging grant I don't get, I shall have to pay for out of pocket."

She approached her TV. "And that means none of this." She turned it on expecting the luxury channel. She wanted to tell this goaty home invader, in the wittiest way possible, that she couldn't afford fine furniture, silverware and jewelry without her special job. She'd forgotten that she'd left the news on. Before she could change it, though, she saw someone who looked like her intruder. Only in a loose sense, though. The horns and hooves were there, but nothing else.

"Hello, my cryptid comrades. My name is 'The New and Improved Krampus,' and I'm here to change my mind about the thief-off."

"Family of yours?" said Carla.

"No. I am the only one of my kind."

"Hmm. Sounds like species preservation is of extreme importance to you."

"Shhh! I want to hear what this imposter has to say."

Carla did not approve of being shushed in her own home, and besides, they'd already missed a big chunk of it. They picked up at, "...no further plans to continue the thief-off. I know that many of you consider me to be your role model, so my nominal intention is to set a good example for all cryptids great and small."

"Lies!" cried the real Krampus. "I have every intention of continuing this thief-off! Woman, fork over your most needed possession."

"Well," Carla turned off the television. "You would have to sit through a meeting to steal it, but my most needed possession is my business acumen."

That certainly was not anything he could steal, for to steal it would have been to make it his own, and as a lone goat, he could put no business acumen to any meaningful use.

"Oh, what is this sorrow that overtakes me? I am a yieldless cryptid, I yield not to any snot-righteous law enacted by my brethren, yet yield I to the convention of a man-made legend?"

"I believe I can answer that."

Carla turned, and in walked Preston and Madison, one wearing a costume while the other wore a fro. The first thing Preston did when he saw the Kamyana nuns was to sweep them into his own bag.

"You can burn all the Atlanta footage, Carla. These nuns will get you your grant back."

The Krampus was rather stricken. "Is this to say... you are *nicking* them from me?"

"I'd go further than that. I'm *Saint* nicking them from you."

Madison intervened. "We are confiscating them. We have official documentation from Wendy, Mindy, and Greglin." She shoved said 'documentation' in the Krampus's face. "They now belong to the Prisock Salvaging Industry. And if you don't like it, go sit on a tack. I'm sure Carla has plenty of tacks lying around."

As she rambled on, Preston snuck out with the pivotal artifacts. Carla suspected that the bill of sale was no more than a fancy piece of scrap paper. Cryptids couldn't write things on paper, they were underwater. Sure enough, once Madison finished dressing down the Krampus, she dropped it on her way out the door. Nothing on it boasted any more authority than a coloring book page.

"Is this..." the Krampus was short of breath. "Is this what it's like to lose property?"

Carla could not honestly answer. She had never seen a burglar burgled before.

"You humans..." he sneered at her. "You certainly express your sense of property."

Carla edged her way to the cabinet. She wasn't sure what his impulses might lead him to do. She took out a box of cracker jacks and offered them, whether as compensation or disagreement, she wasn't sure, but his grudging loosened to mild surprise. He took the box.

"You know," he said, "my nemesis sits in the middle of your shopping centers and encourages your youth to demand unnecessary objects every winter solstice." He opened the window and stuck his foot out. "Perhaps I shall do the opposite this summer. Perhaps I will invite them to pledge these unnecessaries."

He left. Over the next few months, Carla sought him out at the mall, but all she saw were the local tourists snapping pictures at anything that moved. Madison, however, did notice a drop in the mall Santa's popularity. When she asked about the curious disinterest in toy requests, a kid said, "Meh, didn't really need anything new this year."

And as for Preston, when he looked out his window on Christmas day, he could have sworn he saw a goat-shaped constellation, surrounded by seven nuns, with each constituent star shining more brightly than any other in the rest of the sky.