

# Mickleheart and Manticore

## Stave One: The Planets

### *The Fluffy Planet*

The nicest planet was Mickleheart. It was a fluffy sort of planet, a milky white color with patches of chocolate. It was never cold there. The planet was inhabited by Leumuiers, dwarfish humanoid monkey-like animals with batlike ears and ringtails.

The Leumuiers were a friendly kind. Whoever they saw they treated like family. But at the core of the planet Mickleheart was rot. Caged in a wire-frame prison was the groomel. Due to stress, every last strand of his hair fell out and to protect his skin, he often bathed in lotions, making him slimy yet wonderfully fragrant. He was an astronomer. He had been watching the planet Manticore, and sent robotic spies and cameras there. He had been predicting war, partly prophesying it, partly advocating it, to the Leumuiers. They became so frightened of his words that they pushed him into a cage and dropped him in a well, occasionally dropping food and drink.

### *The Stinky Planet*

The worst planet was Manticore. It was a rotten sort of planet, a rancid steak color with globules of red. It was never cold there. The planet was inhabited by Gazyrolls, ogrish hog-like animals with yellow tusks and thick manes.

Manticore society was tumultuous. Whereas the Lemuiers were gentle and welcoming, the Gazyrolls were snooty and disgruntled. They only got married because their parents nagged them to do so, mostly for revenge for a lifetime of harassment.

Jagorzy'll Gobberou was a lawyer. His house was being repossessed for unpaid bills. His nagging wife and uncontrollable children slung on him buckets of blame. Buckets, I tell you! "Now listen to me, it is only by my fullest efforts that our possessions are kept!" And it was. He risked lawsuit via court appeals to salvage whatever he could from the eviction.

"But we're out of food!" said Wootainee, the wife. "I have to spend the money!"

"Don't do that, I'll go out and shoot the neighbor's pets. They're on vacation."

"Your son has already done something of the sort." Hotsotrod wanted to be a scientist, so he shot everything he could find.

"Good. Dinner's solved."

"But he's poisoned the dratted thing, I'm in no hurry to cook anything that has been poisoned."

"Fine, look here, I'll go to the mountains and shoot something while you finish packing. Then when I come back, you can cook whatever it is that I shoot, and we'll eat it."

"Now there's an idea."

It was certainly an idea, but not a good one. For one thing, *nothing* on planet Manticore was edible. If you had ever been exiled to that planet (I shouldn't think you'd go willingly), I suppose you discovered a way to live without eating. Every animal on Manticore is automatically turned toxic. They breathe the polluted air, tread the polluted ground, and frankly taste like upchuck. The Gazyrolls were used to it. Their talented digestive systems welcomed warmly otherwise vomituous meat. They did so with a smile and a secretion of juice.

This doesn't mean it was healthy. It may have partly contributed to the common Gazyroll snootiness and laziness. Gazyrolls were obese creatures. Had Manticore been any smaller, every step a Gazyroll would take would provoke an earthquake.

With a loaded gun in his hand and extra bullets in his pouch, Jagorzy waddled out the door. He waddled out the neighborhood. He waddled out the town to the outskirts and saw the Feel-Good Company's new slogan, printed on a banner tied to a miniature shuttle: "Do not allow yourself to make the Irreversible mistake," ironically making itself an irreversible mistake with a misplaced capital 'I'.

How many irreversible mistakes had Jagorzy (let alone the entire town) made that were so notorious that the feel-Good company (from which he had been recently fired) had to incorporate them into their new slogan? Working for that happy-go-lucky dangerous optimism gimmick in the first place, for one. Getting hitched to the nag queen chronic spend-thrift, giving birth to the little gremlins, quite a few irreversible mistakes. It made him angry. Not angry but mad. Not only mad, but furious. Furious and hateful. He pardoned the possible punishments for shooting down the shuttle, and came to the conclusion that if he shot the annoying space gnat and blew up the person flying it, he would probably be forced to reside at the feel-good asylum. He moved on.

Then he shot the shuttle anyway, believing that the moment of personal satisfaction would be worth the consequence. He hit the banner, much to his pride, and continued towards the mountains.

## **Stave Two: The Irreversible**

### *The Feel-Good Company Slogan*

The feel-good company banner landed on the point of a steeple. Because of the direction of the wind, the steeple tore through the words "Do not," and everyone in town saw it; "Allow yourself to make the irreversible mistake." As tragically optimistic as the feel-good company was, they had managed to cultivate a party of devoted followers. They obeyed every slogan the feel-good company conjured without hesitation or question. And they knew from whom the order "allow yourself to make the irreversible mistake" came.

"Must we adhere so readily to this new ordinate?" questioned Minister Pahapabrak. "It's meter mismatches its rhyme, having two extra syllables in the second portion."

The congregation shot up, shouting for the Associate Pastor to pin Pahapabrak's lips together. Though no pins were on the premises, Paster Gahallsgo did collect his right ear between his fingers, blessedly being the heavier of the two, and privately warned him that to question the feel-good company was to blatantly--

It was midway through this warning that Pastor Gahallsgo realized that the quick-tongued minister was doing no more than to practice the new law. He smiled and forgave his intimate brother. "After all, what transgression could be less reversible than to [question] our foundation?" He shook the minister's hand, embraced him, wished him many blessings, and kicked him out of the church for good.

Far be it from the local pastor to stand in the way of his fellow man's convictions.

"He has certainly modeled some upright behavior for us," he told the congregation.

## The Vacation

One particular lemuir father was bored of life on Mickleheart. Even lotiony environments lose their flavor after a while, and in turn, Mr. Lemuir began losing his mind. So he decided to discover a new location. He had in what he hadn't lost of his mind the opposite of Mickleheart. That way, it would offset the boredom so he could start over when he got back.

"Mrs. Lemuir," he pitched to his wife, "I'm losing my mind. Are you losing it to?"

The Mrs looked confused. "I never had your mind."

Mr gasped. "That means you lost it long ago!" Jokes like this always prologued his points. "This is more urgent than I though. We are all cooped here, cooped like a balding chicken, with an entire snowfall of feathers. It just won't do!" He got the snowfall part right, give him points on that. "There are horizons to broaden. Our horizons. Yet we huddle in the cage of our lives." He went outside and pointed at the sky. "This is a cage. Do you want to huddle in a cage, Mrs. Lemuir?"

The idea itself felt like conspiratorial blither, but Mrs did want to shed the comparison to the Groomble faster than he had shed his fur. To do this, she phoned all her friends to share in the misery, and devised a plan to alert the rest of society.

She took an elevator to the bottom of the well, and there he was, flailing and decrying the torpor of Lemuir civilization. She snapped a picture of the prophecizing goon and chronicled his madness on tape. It was now time to broadcast it all over the planet. The prospect of ever resembling him was dire enough to white out that morning's newspapers. Duplicates were made of the Poster PSA "This could be you one day" campaign, and it drove everyone to cure their predicament with a trip to some other planet.

"So glad you agree," said Mr. Lemuir. "But now, we must find the opposite of Mickleheart. I wonder what it could be. Ulfasank? Now that's a stinky if I've ever smelt one. Soilbik? What do you think, my dear?"

They couldn't decide which planet was on the opposite end of the spectrum. The only way to learn was to take a tour of the galaxy, and visit all the worst things they could.

The Lemuir kids five felt like Noah's ark, all this talk of seeking out a new world. When that comparison crept into their play, Mrs. Lemuir quickly ammended it with the reality (or rather, her version of it) that everyone would be safe and sound when they came back.

One day, a soiled old newspaper smacked the window of their saucer. Mr. Lemuir windshield wiped it off, and saw that it was a symptom of a gassy, belchous boulder. If ever there was a guaranteed antithesis of his home planet, that thing would be it. Little did he know just how right he was.

Mrs. Lemuir was tucking in the kids when he checked on her. She turned to see him enticing her with a rose. She followed him all the way out the door, and nearly fainted at the snort of Manticore's sewery toxic nature.

"Good au gratin, Mr! We can't go home and spread a stink like this!"

"But ahbababuh... spread the *stink*?" Mr. was flabbergasted. "It cannot be! As clean-hardy lemuiers, we spread cleanliness and warmth. This minor stink we go through is just the atmosphere's way to check us out."

"It's strong enough to *drive* us out."

"No, Mrs, no. Purity is stronger than filth. Remember that. It's a helpful principle that guided me 'long the way. Now come on, let's go check out the inhabitants."

Mrs gave a mournful look back at the space saucer. She longed for the gayety of a pollution-free proximity.

"Mrs, please," Mr pleaded. "Balding chickens, remember? Huddling cages."

The Mrs let out a sigh. "Well, I suppose your right, but let's wash our hands extra clean when we come back. I want to take zero chances."

"Oh, you won't regret it, I swear, my wife!"

Little did he know just how wrong he would be.

## **The Catastrophe**

In the great battle for human attention, putridity often prevails. It did so against their romantic intentions, as well as that cockamaimy philosophy Mr. Lemuir tried to push. No purity-prints marked their trek into the desert. Any sanitation they might have brought was quickly usurped by the more natural warty green grime.

All this was giving the two of them second thoughts. Even the groom couldn't poison his senses with his usual gloopy optimism. They tried to smooch once they were certainly out of the view of the saucer, but Manticore's air had so drastically altered their taste that they reflexively spat on one another, then apologetically tried to clean one another, and wound up dirtier.

"This just won't work," complained the Mrs.

"Our cleantity suffers," admitted Mr, and looked over at the horizon to see a native traveling East to West.

Now, anyone who's been paying attention to the symptoms of this planet will be cheering for the Lemuirs retreat (assuming you like them, though if you don't, you'll no doubt demand the opposite, which is what you'll soon get anyway). Cheer all you like, it won't do such good. Since Lemuirs never had firearms, they didn't recognize the shotgun as something fatal. Since they'd never met a gazyroll, they didn't know he was on the warpath for dinner. This is what they thought instead:

Say, there is a native of this land. He has many years coping with the pits and basins of this abode. We shall ask him, and he will lead us to comfier strategies. We shall survive, thank his good graces, and return home with grandiose fables.

"Hello, hello!" called out Mr. Lemuir, and Jagorzy halted and turned.

He himself didn't recognize what a Lemuir was, but he knew a romantic couple when he saw one, and far be it from him to let two love-chimps go at it while he had to watch, so he shot the Mrs.

Mr. Lemuir didn't have ages to react, but he slipped in the thought, "Maybe I should have listened back there," before he bit the dust as well.

Jagorzy didn't want to go anywhere near the things he'd just shot. They might, after all, be in some intergalactic mating position. Still, if he didn't have to go find some other rotten animal to shoot, then he could take them home, then go back to being lazy. Thankfully for him, they were just plain dead, so he dropped them in a bag and turned around.

### **Stave Three: I Told You So**

#### *Spying*

The aforementioned catastrophe was everything the Groomble had been waiting for. He'd taken a break to anoint himself with moisturizers, but when he returned to the telescope, his jaw fell. It only took two alien bullets before his fears and ambitions were realized. Take that, Mrs. PSA! It would soon be his turn to monger adequate fear. And he combed his skin in preparation.

"What did I tell you, all of you?" He bragged to no one in particular. His boast would find its way to their soft, webby ears, one day. And that would probably coincide with the next instance they shafted his cola down.. For the moment, there was no one to expose his intellectual supremacy to. In fact, there was no one around at all. They were all gone to irrelevant planets. "Drat. I forgot to spy on the other planets. Maybe there are things there that think Lemuirs taste good, too." He shivered and incidentally, lost a little oil. "I wouldn't want to meet the people who lived there. After all, they might be giants, the kind who don't brush their teeth."

The Groomble hadn't brushed his teeth in 21 years and 7 whole months. After an hour, he was wondering what gripped them for so long. For all he knew, there *were* in fact giants grabbed them and opened a jungle-themed restaurant based on their taste. He altered the telescope just a tad, but no, here came Fishsticks, on his way back to Mickleheart to feed the Groomble his Cola and leftover peanut shells. "I swear, the things they feed me will become a diet fad in the 31st century."

But that's not the point. Even the Groomble wasn't pessimistic enough to remember he wouldn't live long enough to see that part of his "intellectual supremacy" come to bear fruit.

Fishsticks dangled the tupperware over the hole.. "We're nice, remember? We don't send people to starve."

"Speaking of starving, there are some children up on Manticore. Mr. and Mrs. Lemuir's been shot! Who's going to lay out their vitamins? Who's going to read them Goldilocks and the three low-fat ice-cream scoops?"

"Keep making noise like that, and they can hear you from here." But just in time, Fishsticks remembered he was nice. "What fancies you espouse, O whimsical Groomble."

But the Groomble wasn't Whimsical. He was right.

He had to wait until Mr. Lemuir's rental ticket was two weeks overdue before the question nestled itself in the minds of *anybody* besides the village circus freak, and even then, the research endeavor amounted to a disposable afterthought, as urgently sought as something like, "I wonder if I throw this pizza at the ceiling how long it will stick before it shalooops on Uncle Rhetoric. Oh well." The Groomble even tried to climb out of the well. He thought he'd have to whisper the emergency into a stick of butter and cram it down someone's ear. All this did (his escape, that is) was force the mayor to invent the job of "quack pusher," waging ten-pence a push to shove the pessimist back where he belonged. Nobody would do it without gloves.

In any case, the indifference ended when students at the university were assigned a research topic, and they went to the magical library. There, the vast scope of knowledge was open to them, and they wrote essays on information yet unlearned. The plucky geek who turned in the pivotal essay beamed cozily as she recounted the following scene:

*Ew Gross, I Won't Eat That*

The foreign beastie meat was not a five-star delicacy. Wootainee didn't know any more about Lemuirs than her husband, but the flesh that wound up on the table was a rubbery blue-grey lump that rebelled to divide under the knife. While mother was distracted with her war, Hotsotrod, Railrod, and Rollin slipped away so as to pursue their own hobbies. They wanted no involvement with the meat, although the torture of their parents was a scene worthy of film adaptation. Railrod got out a camera and hid.

"I thought I told you to go get us dinner, not garbage," said Wootainee. "Have you gone deaf?"

Jagorzy groaned. "I suppose I would like to."

"Oh, boil your head. I shall just have to throw it in the scorching hot springs. That ought to soften it up." She stormed to the bedroom to slither into her bathingware, and stormed out the cave opening. Jagorzy slumped into the sitting room, praying for peace. Three sounds promised that he would not be granted peace: The sound of his daughter, Railrod, yammering on the phone, the sound of his son, Hotsotrod, sawing apart some dead animal, and the sound of his infant son, Rollin, screaming for sweets.

Jagorzy tore bits of the newspaper off and tried to stuff them down his ears. It helped block Rollin's screaming and Railrod's babbling. The saw's buzzing was actually somewhat relaxing. It made Jagorzy want to fall asleep in the chair. A smack in the face with a rolled - up newspaper, however, denied him sleep.

"They drained the hot springs! Why didn't you say so?" He wished he'd gone with her for a chance to push her in. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you deliberately went and found the most uncookable vermin so you could give me a hard time." Now she had the advantage of his shotgun. She didn't keep it for long, though. She hoisted the gun into his chest and knocked a whole hurricane out of him. "One way or another, Gobberou, I will be eating tonight. Are you going to aid me or shall I have to cook something you really don't want?"

He didn't want the Lemuir meat, after all. "That game still on the table?"



"Yes. So?"

He aimed the gun at her. "Get in there."

"Don't be absurd."

He blasted a hole through her bee-hive hair, and she scampered away into the kitchen. This wasn't evidence of insanity, by the way. It happened on Manticore more often than here. Jagorzy herded the rest of the house with the same show of force. When he took his own place, he threw the table upside down. "And that's that."

Although this saved the kids from losing their appetites, that mostly meant they were just hungry all over again. Wootainee, on the other hand, went snooping around her own house in whatever corner-cranny her colossal beano could stick itself.

"You lost something, ya old bag?"

It took him long enough to ask, after thirty minutes of thinking it was just a post-menopausal delirium.

"No, you have. YOUR MIND! What in Mt. Pu-pang is wrong with you?"

"Whatever compelled me to marry you, for one thing." That would be his parents. He stood up from the table. "But go ahead and worry, you big ugly gorgon. I'm going to fix that. When I come back, there's going to be an adultary wench (maybe even two! Remember counting?) around my shoulder."

"Bring back lots," hissed Wootainee. "Wench-meat would taste better than this rubbish."

She kicked away some meat out from Hotsotrod's magnifying glass. "Hey knock it off, Ma, I'm trying to figure its origins."

Nevertheless, the woman's parting demand was truly a moment of symbiosis in the relationship between Jagorzy and Wootainee Gobberou. For Wootainee, it was a successful try to force a man to provide assistance. For Jagorzy, it was nothing less than an escape from that bickering ogre who called herself his wife.

## **Stave Four: Worlds War**

### *Why You Show Me That*

And there you have it, the tale of Mrs and Mr's demise. Scallopina was so proud of it, she almost gave herself an 'A.' If you saw a picture of her, you'd know straight off the bat that this would be the kind of person to reward her own work. She definitely would have helped herself

to inordinate points had she shaken her magic eight-ball and learned that she'd merit fewer of them than she was entitled to. Frisky the Teacher beamed at the paper before him, and then saw the content that was on it.

The sorrow and woe scared him so much that he took a stamp and marked it with an 'F.' "There, that ought to make it less scary. OH NO! IT'S JUST AS FRAIDY AS IT WAS BEFORE! AAAAAH!" And so he ran from the building, pushing over trash cans, which on Mickleheart only had clean things in them. But when he got to his house, he flung books off the shelf, and built a fort to protect him from vile, cheap tales.

"Hmm," sighed the Snootent, "That letter at the top is decidedly homely. I know just what I'll do: I'll lay it in the garden in my yard. Then, I'll pretend to wake up in the morning, and greet the yellow Suntown sun with a stretch and a yawn, finding this essay and its startling truths among the flowers."

So she stuck it in a rose-bush, crawled into bed, and got up to put a sunhat and garden dress on, and went outside to see the essay was the same piece of stupid paper with an ugly old FLUNK at the top. Oh no! Mr. Burbank the gardener was about to fertilize it with a pound of manure! Phew, that was close. She rescued it just in time, even though her sunhat and dress were both goners. As the old man kneeled and kissed her feet in apology, she recited the essay aloud. Anyplace this might have been a good idea would not have scored not only a second 'F,' but one slapped on with manure.

"Oh, you're crazy, geyser." She fiddled with a little manure of her own down his trousers. "Tell you're wife your old enough for diapers again. I've got work to do."

Scallopina spent the next twenty minutes drawing tulips and earthworms around the double flunks. "Perhaps if it were space themed, yes, that might do it." It didn't, if the 'it' to be 'done' was make it look less like a failure. "To ditches with this. Somebody out there ought to see the brilliance within!"

And so she showed it to each of her neighbors, who met her with a smile, then left her with an 'F' of their own. Along with lots of strokes, seizures and heart attacks as they dashed for shelter from the terrible story. By the end of the effademic, when she stopped showing it around, she decided to blame all those 'F's for the scariness. "Why am I so brave? Oh, I just suppose I am very much so."

Everything was getting worse and worse, but from the Groombles point of view, one thing was getting better and better. With everyone good and scared, they'd be more likely to believe

him. He stopped watching the matters of Manticore, considering he couldn't do a thing about it, and started watching as some blossom-eyed girl scout was sent his-a-way.

"I hope you're humble," he smirked. "Still, I would have given you an A. You always have to go through a series of F's before you get there, just like I did."

He snapped his swimming trunks and dove into a puddle of lotion.

Scallopina harrumphed. "We're yes so different, you and I. I belong down here a lot less. What is there to eat anyway?"

"Occasionally they drop scallop shells and pickled pig's feet, maybe an olive pit if they're feeling less generous than vengeful."

"That's ridiculous. We gotta get out of here!"

The Groomble wrapped his towel up like a turban. "Not the conventional way, that's for sure. I will say, you set the stage for me here. If you cooperate, I'll give you more A's than you can spell seventeen alphabets with," whatever that meant.

So it took another two weeks for them to collect enough spoons. In addition to dropping sodas and yuck-foo down, the surface lemurs would also provide unnecessary eating utensils when they clashed with the tablecloth. So, the Groomble dug his way out while Scallopina conversed with the daily gate-keeper. She freaked out at the last minute and tried to tailgate the Groomble and the 'A's' he could reward her with. This resulted in the cave collapsing, where she was buried into a mold and, 2,110 years later, archaeologists would dig up her fossilised remains.

The Groomble made it out, though, and after plucking a public flower and mushing it into the hole he just left in memorandum, he marched straight to city hall and flicked snot at the cowering security.

### *The Antidote*

The mayor was cowering, too. He was sitting at his office desk. He'd glued erasers to his eyes, and unless the glue aged away, he'd always stay in the dark. "Oooh this keeps getting better and better," said the Groomble. Come to think of it, wasn't the mayor always in the dark?

The fact would construct the perfect sales pitch. In his spare time (which comprised the bulk of his life), the mayor liked to roll a marble from one hand to the next. "They're playmates!" He explained. All it took was for the Groomble to snatch the marble, place it on

the edge of the desk, and as the mayor stood to recover it, his vast spacious rump plummeted down towards bare floor.

"Treason!" he cried as he yanked himself off his new crater. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"It was one of your security guards, mayor," testified the Groomble. "He wouldn't have gotten away with it if you weren't so in the dark at the moment."

The mayor reached around for the source of this dubious testimony. "I just don't understand it! My staff are like nephews to me."

The Groomble stuck out his leg and tripped the mayor. "Uh oh, there goes another one." And then he took the chair he'd just lifted and smashed it through the window. "Oh no, he's getting away! Don't you want to see, so you know who to enact revenge against?"

"Indeed, I'd like some revenge." He rubbed his bruised up face. "But... I dearly fear the sight of a certain essay. Oooh, I shudder at the memory of it."

"Oh, I can fix that. I'm an exterminator for unfriendly memories." Then he leaned close, and whispered. "I can erase your memory."

The erasers popped off in surprise. "How?" Then, once the mayor's eyes adjusted to the light, "GROOMBLE?"

Even the Groomble, in all his intellect and supremacy, didn't see that coming, the falling erasers and all. You got to admire the thing's composure, though. He just shrugged and said, "Just another reason to keep your eyes peeled, mayor."

### *Mickleheart's Army*

"To the civilized Lemuirfolk of Mickleheart. Do you wish to forget what you saw in that dreadful essay today? Come to the Skinzo lab of Dr. Trey Bildero, where memories are just a fleeting thought. I, Mayor Ringtail, sanction this practice, so you know that it's one you can trust!"

Those weren't actually the Mayor's words. He was unconscious when they entered the public arena. This was because the Groomble made a bunch of phone calls to important lemurs on the planet, and created a network of summonings. He made sure to include the promise of no scary essays fluttering around, nothing that carried the stamp of an epidemic. It brought about an impressive turnout, he had to say, so he sat the mayor in a wheelchair and rolled him to the balcony so he could make this speech. When the acclaim petered out, he cried

out, "Close your eyes, it's the essay!" And threw the very same one over the crowd, where they indeed hid their eyes. Then he yanked it back with a yo-yo string.

"Very good, very good, just... keep your eyes closed, it should be gone in exactly three minutes. Just remember. Skinzo Lab. Trey Bildero. Be there, if you're not a rude slug."

And so, the Groomble retracted the mayor in the chair and went off to do who knows what with him. We haven't found his remains yet.

Before they knew it, the three minutes were up, and they peeled their eyes to behold an essay no more. "This calls for a celebration!" Said the bravest Lemuir of all. "Just be yourself! You can't go wrong." He recited those words in a sort of rhythm, shaking his end in a way to entice another to follow. "Just be yourself! You can't go wrong." This excited the rest. They formed a conga line and marched down the street, excited to go back to being their fluffy, milky, chocolatey selves, and forget the essay was ever there in the first place. They did wish, though, for the mantra to remain. Naturally, when it reached the Groomble, it assaulted his ears and made them hurl.

He'd set up beforehand a series of directional arrows to guide them down very dark tunnel. He knew if they saw him, they'd know he was up to no serious-matter-forgetting scheme (or bad, from his point of view), even if their intellect was on the pudding end of things. They didn't even see a thing when the transfobeam warped the one before in line into a hairless moisty cretin, and board the army saucer. Nope. They were all too busy with their infernal "Cha cha cha." Notice or no, they were an army of "Pessimis." And by the time the last one in line went through, not only did they remember the essay, it was just about the lone thing they ever remembered, and its significance craved in them a heavy lump of vengeance.

The groomble rubbed his hands together. "Attention, grudgeuous Pessimis-- whoops, better turn the microphone on, there. The planet Manticore is highly responsible for something that we don't like, and you sure remember what that is. Now is the time for action. Military action. I, your intellectual superior, hereby declare war on Manticore. We shall therefore get going, and lay that poolanet to dust."

The pessimis snarled in agreement, and looked out the window, excited to get violent.

## Stave Five: The Opposition

### *The Dinner Guest*

A bag of concrete mix. An heirloom shoe. A bandaid that Hotsotrod had peeled off last week. These, thought Wootainee, just might befriend their appetites a little more than that rubbish her son was now attempting to sculpt into bomb-shapes. She still planned to sling a boiling cauldron over the brains of the wench her husband brought home, but every meal needed an appetizer. The next ingredient she was about to add was her husband's power tools, when there was a knock at the door.

Wootainee didn't even get to answer it. On her way there, some Buxom floozy with a hitch in her get-along let herself in, and strolled in circles around Wootainee, looking down her nose.

"Hmm. Below average looks, way below average chef talents, I'd say." The buxom tramp farted.

"JAGORZY!" Wootaine stomped the rest of the way to the door while the tramp get-alonged down the hall to the bedrooms. Jagorzy was there all right, giving the "well how do you like that?" look.

"I hope you're having fun, because you showed up too early for me to surprise her with boiling water. But the furnace setting is all the way up. Once the water starts to bubble, you can bet--"

"Oh, stick a foot in it. You had it coming all your life. You had..." here he wobbled in a sensual trance, "... her coming."

All of the sudden, there was shouting coming from the bedrooms. That was odd, normally the dissection were the things making noise, but this time, it was quite obviously human speech. The tramp, whose name was Shooglia, hitched on out with Hotsotrod's ear pinched tight between her fingers.

"Dissect? You shall no more. Above average impressiveness, rock bottom tolerability. I know your further choices, now go dwell elsewhere." She nudged Wootainee aside with her foot and pushed past Jagorzy, then picked up their son and threw him as far as she could before shoving her cheatee inside and locking the door behind him. Hotsotrod landed OOF a few yards away, but he wasted no time in banging on the door.

"Who are you anyway!? You don't belong here."

She turned to Wootainee. "I am Shooglia, of household appraisal services. Now."

She ignored the threats from Hotsotrod, while Jagorzy smirked and tried to tell a knock-knock joke. "Shut up and open up! I'll burn the house down."

"Which one do I do? We got the matches in here, Sport. And the gasoline."

He answered his son's bangs with a slam of his own. "Ha ha ha, a chip off the old block." Never mind that he damaged the door, making it slightly easier for the unwanted runt to break in if he wanted. It's a good thing easier doesn't mean easy, though. Because Hotsotrod was still a runt. He was only slightly stronger than a wimp.

Shooglia was there on a mission, one that had little to do with compensating for Wootainee's wifely shortcomings. Her goals drove her to return to the bedrooms, and stare at Railrod for a while. The teen gossip ignored her for six minutes, then bucked her head as a way of saying "Get lost, bimbo." Observers Jagorzy and Wootainee at first hypothesized that Shooglia awaited some salary or praise for the eviction of the brother. Probably, because next stop, the receiver, where ten minutes later, she hung up and embarked on a safe adventure through drawers and cabinets.

"Notice who's doing all the talking? Your hairball. Rock bottom chance to get a word in, bedrock bottom juiciness to the gossip." At last, she found the phone bill. "This has got to go." And go it did, on the stove that is. Wootainee pranced around, trying to remember the correct procedure for dousing stove fires while Jagorzy and Shooglia sat on a couple of lawn chairs, chewing pepples and enjoying the show.

When the fire was out, another fire blazed up. This one was the temper of Wootainee Gobberou.

"And you two just sitting there like Tally-Wacker concert? I should cook the both of you! Slow, and boily, so that you feel ever second of your demise!"

Jagorzy opened his mouth to argue, and then there were high-pitched screams. These weren't coming out of him, but the infant, Rollin, who was mad that he wasn't eating dinner. So instead, Jagorzy tried to stone his wife with the pebbles. They didn't do enough damage though, and besides, Wootainee whipped out a skillet and sheltered herself from the pelts. Some of them even ricochet'd back.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, Shooglia turned around. Jagorzy took this opportunity to pilfer some of her pebbles and throw them, but they didn't move him any faster towards his goal.

It was amazing how Shooglia didn't mind right away. They could make a fortune off her if they set up a side-show circus act and cast her as the woman who could survive a blithering old

goose and a gremlin. But she didn't stay long enough for Jagorzy to pitch the idea. One more look at Wootainee, and she was off to the bathroom.

"And where do you think you're going, tramp?" demanded Wootainee.

"To critique your cosmetics," predicted Jagorzy. "Duh."

"Well, she'd better make it quick. Dinner is still overdue, and she's just about the only edible thing in here."

She still had a lot of nag she needed to set free from her heart, so she traced Shooglia's steps into the bathroom. She came out seconds later crossing her arms and grinning like smug. "Guess what, Dumpy? She's not assessing my make up."

"Well, then she's stealing it."

"Oh no, not that either."

Jagorzy leaned over for a better look. Steal and insult, those were the only two things he could think of. When she strutted out, brandishing a smoldering cue-tip, he thought he was at least partially correct, but then she said, "Beyond average sitting through the nags of your wife and screams of your child, bedrock abyss choosing to do anything about it."

His chair collapsed beneath his weight. Did she just grade *him*? Yes. Yes she did.

"There's only one way to solve your problem with noise," proclaimed Wootainee. "Remember when you said you wanted to go deaf?"

Jagorzy began backing away. "Oh, no, I'm complete in control of my faculties."

"And a lazy slouch when at the control room."

For the patriarch of the house, there was only one way out. He heaved his bucket of pebbles, then hoisted himself off the ground, lumbering around the cave as he argued his case against deafness. And Shooglia still hunted his hearing. She was a woman who wouldn't be told.

### *Childcareless*

Outside the door (which was actually more like a boulder) of the Gobberou residence, their ruckus scion son lost his voice. Any and all dreams of climbing and cutting up the Gobberou chain of command soon followed. They never found out, but Hotsotrod liked to keep his own menu of things to dissect. If things kept up at that rate, he'd have his own personal exhibit of organly exposed relatives. He'd probably keep going until he ran out of Gazyrols and other living things on Manticore to dissect, thus forcing him to turn to rocks and minerals. He'd



never launch a restaurant where everyone dissected their plates, or their fellow customers. As a result, he'd have to settle for peeing on the bimbo's car. Even if they assisted with getting him back inside, his medical tools would bend out of shape afterwards. It would all be over when they went on strike.

After giving the car a makeover, he sat down to deduce what he should do with his time. He couldn't go after other Gazyrols; they were all inside too. It was uncommon practice to answer the door in Gazyroll society. Everyone typically left their houses to club wild groceries that may or may not be edible, it was a gamble for them. The only reason to go to another house was if you failed the hunt and wanted to challenge another Gazyroll to a duel by knocking on his door, waiting to see if he was dumb enough to answer it, then clonking him on the head, and either dragging him back to your lair (if he had a family to get in the way), or roasting him over his own stove. Hotsotrod was the brains of the pack. He knew that knocking on a door was the same as asking to be a free meal.

So he didn't do anything to seduce the Gazyrolls out of their caves. He ran away from home, looking for inspiration on the outskirts of the village. He scanned the horizon for some contraption that might trap the other Gazyrols. Maybe he could find a boulder or a battering ram, then he'd be back inside in no time, digging his way through Jagorzy and his beach babe while his mom sat back and watch. She'd better be grateful for it. He'd dissect her afterwards anyway, but he'd procrastinate a few minutes if she at least cheered him on.

While looking for something dangerous, he noticed the mountains along the horizon. The last thing he'd tried to dissect was his father's yuck-meat nobody would swallow. Was that the place it came from? Just what animal had he shot up there? That had to be the ugliest thing on Manticore for it to fail so memorably. He'd never forget it as long as he lived, so he had to inspect and see what lay in the beyond.

A little ways into the mountain, there sat a big hunk of metallic something. Hotsotrod couldn't identify it as a space-craft; the concept of flight, let alone technology, was a rather cryptic indiscretion on the planet. They'd thought they'd found their scientist when he invented the hunting club, although after his first kill turned out to be a lucky strike, they got impatient and pushed him off a cliff. They didn't hand out science awards: Hotsotrod had no future. That car he peed on was basically a boulder that Shoogy-boog had to keep balanced, and the stoves were like miniature volcanoes with no free will. And that shotgun of Jagorzy's came from another planet. Some hunters landed on Manticore, but got poisoned when they

came out to look around. One went back to label the planet uninhabitable and even unvisitable (they weren't from Mickleheart), but Jagorzy still got a hold of the gun.

He wouldn't have it for that much longer, so let's get back to Hotsotrod. He wondered if the big metal thingy was where all that pew-flesh came from. There was only one way to find out.

Before he got started, a half-hour study session was in order. Out came the whole of his dissectory apparatti: a biology textbook, a scalpal, and that was pretty much it - all of that sanitation business the rest of the universe adopts was not part of Manticore medical practices. Or any practices on Manticore, of course.

Before too long, he was five sentences bored, so he closed the textbook. There wasn't any info about this organism anyway. The biological exploration of Gazyrolls usually had to do with how hard you had to club which animal they'd discovered so that it wouldn't wake up during the boil and make a break for it. They didn't hand out science awards, otherwise Hotsotrod would by then be fantasizing about what prize he was going to get.

First step, perforate the shiney metal cortex. Oddly enough, there wasn't any meat under the first layer, only buttons, screws and cables. This made him somewhat angry, as he hadn't eaten dinner. But then he remembered why he was so curious, and he wasn't angry anymore. Because this might have been that junk his mother tried to cook. Eh, he wasn't all that hungry anyway. His Dad had all the matches, so he would not be able to cook it.

After tearing out fistfuls of bolts and haywire, he wondered if he had killed it yet. Maybe it was dead before he got there, possibly still alive. As he worked, he made conversation with it. "Are you alive?" He dumped all the stuff he tore out on the ground. "What do you eat if you live? It won't be me, that's for sure!"

It was all gears and cables from thereon in. Gears upon cables, cables on gears. This thing might not ever have been alive in the first place. He slid off and ran several yards away to get a better look. The thing was big and flat and metal. He may be too nimble for it to catch him, but he'd definitely fit inside. He thought of all the damage he could do within. His mom should have swallowed a hammer so he could make demands from within the womb.

"I learned something no one else knows. I'd better scrawl it down, so they know it was me. No one else is allowed to discover it. They need to give me lots of compliments for this!" He opened the textbook and scratched in the details about it, pictorially. He went around from different angles, looking for legs, arms, horns, nose, and eyes, although there weren't many matches.

The biology textbook didn't teach a lot. All of the side effects of being smarter than everyone else started to sink in, and he slammed the textbook. "Stupid thing is useless anyway." So he threw it on the ground and kicked it against his giant new specimen. He did as much damage as he could to make up for it being so dumb.

"I'll deal with you later!" he threatened the big metal dolt, but as he reared up for another go at the textbook, his curiosity started to take over again. It looked like an eye, a big yellowy brown eye rolling around in its chamber. Maybe it was still alive after all. On top of that, maybe Dad had brought home the wrong meat. He licked his lips. Dinner would be served yet! They'd be forgiven when he came home with the delicious eyeball to eat, and then he'd dissect them when they were full. He could get to eat their portions anyway when they all opened up, so he climbed just once more and poked at the solid, crunchy thing that was probably just its glasses.

Before any started to give, the specimen started crying. These weren't like the wailing Gazyrol tears that Rollin sprung every time he wanted the food to improve, these were ghostly brown fumes. Even by Manticore standards, something weird was happening. Not even Dad smelt that bad when he came out of the shower. This was something ungodly and alive, something to drop on a battlefield when you were desperate to cheat.

"Whew-wee. I knew that dinner was bad, but this? This is like digging up a grave!"

So he continued to plunge and stab, each time freeing a little more gas, now wondering if what he was poking was even an eyeball at all. It all gave in, shards of airtight glass scattered across the floor of a newly uncovered cavity, home to a terrible, pulsing brown cloud. It was no longer tethered to the safety of the vessel, it was now in reach of the sky and the wind. The exterior dragged it out. But it didn't go willingly, it wailed and waved long, branch-like wisps, grabbing at mountains and clouds for purchase. It never stopped whistling or throbbing. All the power it had was to beg for a few more minutes on Earth, all the while rising in pitch and altitude, at last dissipating into the rest of the unhappy skyfield.

The cloud may have gone, but the inside was far from empty. Fuller still were gorged, billowing worms all lying face up from a hasty, unmoderated meal. Mold, covering the walls and floor, and a few unfortunate worms, was creeping to take its turn, inch by inch towards individual worms, eager to have a taste. Weeds were growing out of places they unwisely decided to seed; cabinet doors and airlocks choked their growth. One worm, determined to be the gluttony champion, gnawed on one that tried to struggle. But with all the stuffing came a

power. Swallowing the weed would make its power complete. It finished the job, then experienced a jailbreak of entrails.

In the midst of the tragedy, some subtle periphery creaked in its struggle to move. Behind the mold and weeds, five tiny figures tried moving their heads. They barely had the neck muscle to do so. In fact, they were nearly barren of flesh and all, although they crawled with moldy maggots. It was as if the maggots had first taken their fill, unwisely saturating themselves for the molds' appetites. They struggled still, finally locking their sunken, leaking eyes with those of Hotsotrod, grimacing just before those very eyes rolled back, showing veiny white bases.

To Hotsotrod, it looked like the worst charity case ever. After welcoming himself aboard, he figured that the place was anything but a living creature. Maybe they had some potato chips if he were lucky. He dug around the cabinets, slaughtering insects wherever they got in the way. The pitiful travel prep was just starting to get frustrating enough when he found a notebook. Even though his last experience with a book was scarring and traumatic, he thought it might at least inform him where the snacks were in the place.

Nope. The only whereabouts this thing revealed were the names of various stars, comets and nebulae. So he took it outside to dissect it. Only then did he get through to the last page, which actually told him something that might have been useful. All through out the notebook, the publisher described this star and that as "A place where no one ever slept because it was always so sunny," and "If I took a swim there, I would be refreshed enough to always feel like it's summer." It all ended with a drawing of a planet that looked good to eat.

"Oh, I'll get dinner all right. I'll get dinner, and this mysterious little thing called desert. I'll get it, and no one else will."

And so began his journey to Mickleheart, starting with a little pre-travel prep, piling up all the things that used to be alive, and either were still, they'd just make terrible company, or the things that were now dead and smelt like death took a dump in a pig sty. They made him lose his appetite. "Take that, home planet. You can have it all. I'm going to get a good meal. Don't come aft-- caw... *kack, kack, kack.*" He'd still lost his voice from all the screaming he did outside his parents' place.

## Stave Six: Armageddon

### *Target Practice*

The pessims completely forgot their former morals as lucky-go-rollabout Lemuirs. They forgot so much of it that they couldn't please themselves with sufficient violence and suffering, and they needed an orderve of the battle yet to come. So, as they sauced through the air, they aimed the space-musket for target practice. If they saw an asteroid, they shot it. A space cop was about to write them a ticket for space-littering, but they shot him too, and therefore got out of paying.

"Excellent work, my rabid psychopathmates," patronized the Groomble. "Stop shooting everything ever. That lazer doesn't have unlimited laser juice, you know."

"Don't worry, we'll shoot you too when we get back."

"You won't want to do that. I've got a big reward for you."

"Oh. Well, we can shoot that too."

There was no reward, technically. The only thing the Groomble wanted them to do when they got back was to restore them to their original milky white selves, then ignore them as mayor. Maybe grow his own gut and hiney, like the mayor, instead of eating toco crumbs all the time. He had a switch that would change them back, albeit in another room so he wouldn't bump into it by accident.

That didn't matter yet, though. He was trying to get them to save up their lazer fuel so they'd have enough to extinctify the Gazyrolls. "Just grant us one more shot."

"NO! Do you here me? You need to shoot the Gazyrolls, and the Gazyrolls only."

"It's settled then. One more shot, and we'll save the rest for Gazygut."

Maybe they'd listen if he was a little less rude. So six pessims squawked and made toot music while the pilot looked for the thing it wanted to shoot. The U.F.O didn't have feelings, like Hotsotrod thought, but if it did, it might have seen his U.F.O as an injured twin sister, and thus refused to shoot it. It didn't have feelings though. The pessims did. Most of those feelings were rage and vengeance, and they also recognized Gazyrolls when they saw them. Therefore, they shot the laser beam at the saucer they past, noticing that it was flown by a Gazyroll. They didn't manage to fry him, however. He sauced by safe and sound.

The Groomble lamented leaving them free will.

## *Landings*

By the time Hotsotrod's saucer crashed into the pivotal city on Mickleheart, he was about to run out of air. He was a dissectionist, after all, not an astronaut or a space-fish. Several buildings of unidentifiable importance were demolished, but he didn't care about that. He sucked in all the air he could find, then coughed it up because it tasted like frosting. He slowly gained twenty five pounds over the course of his visit because of the sugary atmosphere, but first, he had to find food. He didn't have to look long; the whole town seemed to be built of ginger, so he just took bites of things as he went along.

He was full enough (of himself) now to consider his landing a major conquest. "I wish I brought a flag. Then I could plant it here and dub this place 'Hotsot's paradise.' I wonder what the mortgage value is."

There didn't seem to be anybody around except for an essay with the letter 'F' all over it in various media. Ink, shaving cream, fingernail scratches, poop... it made the thing unreadable, though. Luckily, there was a map on the other side, so he followed it.

It led him to the window of some hairless lotion freak. Anywhere else might have taught him the manners not to eavesdrop. He was from you-know-where, though, so he spied.

## *Plans and Resources*

The landing in Manticore Mountain was only happy in the sense that the pessimists took a break to celebrate all the environmental hazards it started with good old happy water. Still, putting aside ideas for punishments only made way for more punitive thoughts. All that target practice had better come in handy if they didn't want their bares fried when they got back to Mickleheart. And how much ammo was left anyway?

Probably a lot less ammo than liquor, but not for long. All that booze was making them less bloodthirsty. An inclination towards domesticity was exactly what nobody wants in the army. So he brought out a mix tape labeled, "hangover noise," and while few words can match its effect on drunken ears, it was pretty much the auditory equivalent of mixing a raw egg, ketchup, root beer, iodine, toothpaste, and sailor beard shavings. They answered it with some satisfying groans of fanguish and happy-mug shattering.

"That, my precious incompetent nimrods, is the noise the Gazyrolls make." It's important to note that Hotsotrod wasn't here yet to object. "And that is what you'll hear a lot more of if

you don't sober up and shoot. Are you going to leave your ears open and vincible to a melody like that?"

The anguish-cries erupted and they scattered, taking their various places at the controls. The Groomble grinned. They were convinced.

They aimed the saucer beam and locked on to the city. They fired the weapon, and it drooled out six milliliters. For comparison, that is about enough to give a pig a sunburn.

"Well gee Commander Meathead, I just don't understand it. It worked great the last 20,031 shots we took."

The Groomble understood it. He understood it all too well.

There then followed some discussion about how to cope with it all, with frequent interjections from the Groomble about taking the Gazyrolls by stealth, barricading them in their homes and setting their homes on fire from beneath. While his strategy was heard, it was vetoed in favor of over-drinking. They reasoned that if they were just drunk enough, they could fortify themselves against the power of any old Gazyroll battle cry. So there they went, boozing it up like there was no tomorrow.

The Groomble banged his head on his desk. No woe had stung so heartily as the fact that even the products of his own brainwashing didn't share in his civic duties. But just as he was about to bang his head a fourth time, he noticed a pile on the edge of the crosshairs. He couldn't identify it, but it looked like it smelled. Before they could reach any deeper level of inebriation, he played his mix tape again, and ruined their little party.

"What do you want now, lump-brains? Can't you see we're drinking?"

"Yes I can, but I can also see something important. Take the camera and go outside. There's a pile I want a closer look at."

This time, the level of booziness worked on behalf of the Groomble. Too sobre, and the cadets would have raided the village without style. Too drunk, and he wouldn't be listening at all. Once the agent left the saucer and got used to the pukey-stank atmosphere (which real Lemuirs never would have at all), he trapsed around in a zig-zag pattern, fancying himself as a dancer for a bit. He was going to ask what the big deal was when he stepped in some crunchy mush.

"Pew. Even they wouldn't eat that toss."

"Move me in closer," said the Groomble. The first layer of it was mere wildlife; crying infant worms upset at the famine. They'd probably come expecting a smorgasbord. "Flick all of those away." The cadet did as he told, although he got a little distracted when the flinging worms

sounded a little like ricocheting bullets. Ooh, there was hope of a battle yet! But first things first, he needed to direct their motives, and he got a feeling that the very plank to do so was buried just under this pile of, once death-fungus, now bones.

"It's a skull, Turkey. Five of them. Very small."

This lit him up like a light bulb. He knew exactly what they were, and exactly how they were going to play into his plans. "Take them aboard, I'll tell you what they are."

On board, the scene was much the same as a fork getting to know an electrical socket in social form. The Groomble ordered his stooge to place the crusty pile upon the "attention table," where its stench caught the attention of the passengers, and they looked upon it with sly interest.

"Gentleheathen, or at least those of you sobre enough for language comprehension and object recognition, remark the heap upon the table in the middle. Tell me what you think it is."

"Something we get to shoot?"

Ah, Pessimis. All the savagery without the brains.

"It is the remains of your young. This is what our childhood has come to, and do you know who's responsible? I'll give you three guesses."

"Aww man, I hope it's not me. I hate responsibility, it means I have to work!"

"Shut up! I wasn't really expecting an intellegent answer from you anyway. It was the Gazyrolls, chili-breaths. And yes, they are the ones you're supposed to be shooting. and because they were not shot earlier, this is what has become of the next generation down. Now, are you going to get your heads out of your foofoo holes and correct your adiposent debtors, or are you going to put your heads back in your foofoo holes while they come and incorrect us?"

"Not if I can help it!"

"Good. That means you're true to the cause. Where'd you come from?" The one who could help it was not on screen. "Did I forget someone?"

What he saw next made him wish he did. Sauntering across the room and sticking its tongue out was the ideal sample of the reason why they needed deadly weapons around Mickleheart. They didn't have any. And so, there was the latest wrinkle in his plan. The invader crooked its arms and wrists like chicken wings the way blubber-stack kids do when forced towards physical exercise.

"Why that little..." Yet the thing wasn't little. It was taught with hardy meals, many of which had been digested in the last dozen breaths he took.

"Listen up, dungheads. The situation is more dire than we thought."



A thousand dire-units more, for the savages aboard the ship thought it called for booze and lobbing spitmorsels at the prep-speech exhibits.

"I'm going to get a weapon and unleash my wrath upon that balloon that just walked by. You had all better be not only sober but ready to rumble by the time I get finished. If you aren't, I will murder all of you."

The party and assassination mission went on while Hotsotrod wobbled around gaining weight and knocking things over. He liked doing it, but he got disappointed that there weren't any biotic factors for him to take back to the ship and dissect. He got bored and sedentary, so he found the TV and sat down to watch it for the first time.

*Look at those things. I could poison and dissect them if I could only get there. This isn't a window, though, there are no handles on it. Hmm. It looks like they are already poisoning themselves. That stuff they drink seems to be bad for them. They have bad diets. They are getting woozy, and gnash their teeth. Holy diapers if I tried to dissect them they might start a duel, and dueling sounds like exercise. Ick. I had a taste of that back there, a bite of it, a five-course-meal of it. I don't want anymore. I wish they were already dead. I miss dissecting.*

### *Bad Lifestyle Choices*

The state of intoxication the pessimists had achieved foretold an everlasting inebriation born of an everlasting whiskey flow. Five Manticore minutes later, they were raiding the cupboards for an adequate substitute. "There's got to be something somewhere! The booze muse said there'd be."

The possibility that it was just in a hidden container was tested. They drew straws and then held down the pessimist with the losing length and dumped motor oil down his mouth. He didn't get drunk, only shriveled, so out the window that was chucked. Window cleaner and degreaser affected test subjects likewise, and many sat in sullen disappointment.

"I'm getting a visual!" That meant someone learned how to look out a window. That was like the normal person inventing jetpack.

Outside the rocket they got their first look at Manticore citizenship: A washed-up lump dragging his dead luggage of a carcass in no particular direction. National debates on what to do commenced. They wanted to shoot him, but they were all out of shoot-juice (maybe baldie had something back there). It was tossed around, the idea of subjugating him to test the validity of secret alcohols, but then it would take too much media to witness the results.

Finally, they settled on taking spatulas and slapping his hairy green hide. Perhaps something useful would ooze from his skin plates, and besides they used up the bone pile Groomble's stooge had brought in.

### *The Decisive Moment*

You will recall the last time we saw Jagorzy, he was on the run from the dinner wench who'd betrayed his welcome. Few records exist that tell what occurred between now and then (and those that do, well, we can't find them), but whatever happened turned Jagorzy into the thing the pessims now wanted to beat upon.

"Old bag went all rock and roll on my eardrum," he grieved. "Which cosmic deity did I insult, and how do mend forcefields?"

It just so happened that church was letting out about this time. If he'd ever gone, might have developed some idea of which deity would sic a circus full of oily hairless cheapskates to patter rusty spatulas on his hind end.

Rotten as everything else on Manticore as this was, it did encourage him towards the drained hotsprings area. He crawled all the way into an empty one, where he buried himself in gravel. The pessims were sad to see him go, so much fun they were having. But a new opportunity was not far behind.

"I'm getting a smellual!" Even among the mighty odors fumed by Manticore, the pessims could identify the pee-stains on a boulder that was rolling their way. They then got a soundal of a woman judging, "Exemplary mischief-making, below-abysmal damage dealt." She didn't get to mush them like she probably wanted to. Her boulder rolled into an empty spring and she launched across the landscape and sit-bounced a few feet before she started deflating.

"Average acceleration," her voice plummeted in pitch, "detrimental steering." And with that, she was an insubstantial pile of skin. There was nothing to wallop there.

The pessims looked at the disappointment. Then they looked at the church-leavers.

"There's more than one and two?"

## *Tug of War*

*I'm glad she plutired out, but she couldn't be dissected like that. I wonder who the hiding guy was. He'd be good to dissect if he forgets to come out of the gravel. Hopefully he'll swallow some and forget it's there.*

These were the thoughts that Hotsotrod was thinking as he watched the scenes on TV. He thought they were neat, but he wanted to change the channel. He was about to push one of the buttons when he got a feelual on his finger, and not a friendly one. It was more sizzly and burny than he would have expected.

"Ha! Feel that? Now you're gonna be sorry!"

"Hey, you can't shoot at me!"

The next feelual went to his bottom, because the Groomble shot his chair and it cracked beneath into splinters.

"Now get out of the place, that was only the lowest setting. You'll not tamper in my dominions."

The Groomble had every intention of crisping Hotsotrod; its belly-button looked like a poked tongue by itself. Before acting on them, though, he wanted to see how the pessims were doing. He liked what he saw. They were getting into their tanks and maneuvering straight towards the city.

The Groomble bro-punched himself. "A chip off the old block. And about time, too."

But the humiliation was too much for Hotsotrod. "There's just got to be a way to show him who's boss. I'll just have to up my game." He'd already disrupted all the furniture. It was high time he went after the appliances. He found a black button and knew just what to do. "Boom."

"What happened? Did we forget the efsay? P. U, what's that smellual?"

Everything was all wrong, from the smellual to the soundual, to the tastual to the sightual. Worst of all was the feelual, particularly back in the throat where Manticore dust screwed around for a while. Lemuir turned to neighboring lemuir and said, "I've never encountered anything so awful since the efsay."

"Oh no! I've been teleported into the realm of the efsay! We got to get out of here!"

They got of their tanks and the boulder and looked around rapidly. "Oh look, back there, the ship! Let's escape from this place once and for all."

"I'm getting rid of a feelual."

The Gazyrolls saw the tanks and found them unexpected, even if the sermon that day was about kicking their enemy's muffin. What they did expect to get a nasty old feelual (from exercise) if they had to walk too far to get an sightual. Their young were screamy that day, so exercise seemed like the perfect punishment to inflict on them. They gravelled the measlier Gazyrolls (there was one with growth issues even though he was real grown-up, they gravelled him too) to take a walk and a closer look, and then come back with a report on what they saw. They'd get it in the eye if they were lying.

The shorties trudged towards the tanks, but the lookual they took in, well, startled them with unexpected answers, and their movement towards the tanks sped up.

"You're supposed to come back here and tell us what you saw! Ooh, they are going to get it," criticized several different parents and masters. "Now *I'm* going to get a nasty old feelual from having to walk so much and see just what it is they are running towards."

They were so bitter that they threw more gravel as punishment, which didn't reach so far as it should have, thus forcing them to go even further, and faster, and closer to the things that they were curious of.

And they say the turn-on, the cinnamon-chocolate-milky fur creatures abandoning the tanks, and they understood. What once was an innocent, friendly curiosity sugarblossomed into a warty P. U. puke-hued cashual when they thought of all the money they could make if they only skinned the things and marketed their pelts. "Get back here," they cried, "I want to make the profit!" And thus began the chaseual.

Needless to say what the Groomble thought back on Mickleheart. "That billowing cheater!" was what he said, for the curious. He would simply have to stand guard at the button so he couldn't press it, now that he knew it worked. Still, once pressed, his OCD drove him to make sure it worked, just in case.

"Hurry! The contents of the efsay are getting to us!"

But the same one who said that stopped caring about any essay, 'F'd" or otherwise, once she poofed into a pruney pale rat-fink and lusted after lifeforce-shed. And lo and behold, here lumbered two fat lumpy rows of sheddable life-force sacs.

The nearest gazyrolls, in the mean-time, were disappointed in the visuals they ended up getting. Since they were kids, all they wanted to do was squeeze them, inconsequent of the effect it would have on the lemairs' hygiene, health, or survival for that matter. "Ew, those things aren't squeezable now. I'm going home," and they turned around. Their profiteering seniors had caught up on the about-face, and experienced equal disappointment. "Nobody's

paying ten-grand for those *itsets*." Its, for they were so far below yucky that they didn't even deserve the dignity of a noun.

"Boom!" Tables turned, yet lessons unlearned.

### *Here Lies Lazy*

Jagorzy had waited long enough. Those who either wanted him dead or deaf weren't digging him up, and besides, he was getting hungry. He spat out the gravel and looked around. Well, the thing that was supposed to make his wife insane with envy wasn't much more, and those other things, whatever they were, were miles away, driving tanks towards his accursed home town.

It should be noted that the Gazyroll stroll matched the speed of a lumber. The Gazyroll sprint matched the speed of a lumber, with a pygmy-whisker length of difference. If his late neighbors and associates were making haste to evade the tank treads, it didn't look like it. They were shortly made into recipes for green body-part puddle, and then the puddles themselves.

The weird thing was when the tanks stopped, and the divine goons crawled out to scamper in his direction.

"Hey, I recognize those things. I shot a few earlier. I hope nobody's planning to cook them."

There were Gazyrolls that were chasing them while they were in their fluffier forms. They did revert back to the bald forms. Jagorzy didn't know if they were tastier or not. If anyone wanted to get a tasteual, he ought to warn them he already had.

He hefted his deaf-makers vehicle out of the spring and walk rolled it back to down, mushing a tank and its pilot in the process. He also mushed three children and someone's mom, but you know what they say about omelets.

"Uh, hey you?" He said to a guy in a chef's hat. "I wouldn't cook those things if I were you, or anybody else who might cook them. I had some earlier after my wife did and I swear. Lumpiest blam you'd ever wanna toss."

"How do you know your wife just can't cook? Out of my way, loser!"

He shoved Jagorzy back onto the boulder and pushed it as hard as he could. It, Jagorzy, and all the formerly living residue it theretofore collected wound up in a tarpit where it sunk, and were never heard from again. Not even archaeologists bothered.

## *A Sudden Realization*

*That's what we didn't have for dinner?* realized Hotsotrod right before he rotted away into nose gravy.

"And there you will stay. Oh, and boom," said the Groomble to the gravy. "Uck, it's all over the floor." He wasn't talking to the gravy anymore. His enemy couldn't hear him, and he had other enemies to decimate. He wanted to sit back, relax, and watch as his minions concluded the danger. That's not what they were doing when he looked at the screen. They were abandoning their tanks and exposing themselves to squeezey and flayey intentions. This was because they were lemurs again.

"This wasn't part of the plan! Well, I guess a lot of things weren't part of the plan, and they happened anyway. But I can't let history get away with this, I spent too much time in exile and lessons. I should be let out earlier."

He wasn't a time traveler. The only traveling he could do was the angrily trekked one to the room with the revert button in it, but when he got back to the control center, the odds weren't in his favor. Not a single unit had retained his pessim incarnation, to tear apart tarnation.

Another jab at the revert button elicited no results. Not the ones he was looking for anyway. Nor did the next, nor the next, nor the jackhammering he resorted to.

All that did was zap him clear across the building and set the TV on fire.

"No! My life's work! I've come too far, tell me at least they got locked into pessim mode!"

You and I can tell him no such thing as we are not there to do it.

The Maticore experience so far: An indecisive flickering between marketable fluff-things and disposable yuck-things, with a steeper inclination towards the former. There was the question as to what to do with the latter if they stayed that way. They didn't. In the end they burst into hovering spores and crept into every corner that a Gazyroll could be found. Some were out in the open, hunting lemurs. Some took to the close, hiding from pessimis, but all soon found something they never could have expected inhabiting their respiratory tract.

Wootainee was one with the greedy slug-maggots, and she was pissed at the prospect she wouldn't get to use the new things in her sewing. She would not give up so easily, and called them slippery elves. So she brushed aside a spore curtain, which revealed a whole wall of spores, and another wall behind that. The things must have gone on for acres.

"How in Hades can you hunt in a place like this?" For a joke, she mimicked a different voice and said, "This is Hades." She only did that because no one was answering her. No one was

something that *could* give an answer. They were Gazyrolls a minute ago, weren't they? Now they looked like menu items, or broken records. They looked like dead ends, they looked like car crashes... nothing that provided sensible information.

"This is all Jagorzy's fault," she assumed. Where was that oaf-goblin anyway? If he wasn't around to nag, she'd just have to blame her children. "This is all Railrod's fault," she resorted. "Or Rollin's." But they weren't around either. A lazy haircut, one of the things wandering around, was hardly something in which to invest a gratifying harassment campaign. Otherwise, she could point the finger at it, if it were only still a Gazyroll.

Maybe all this excitement had just given her fifteen fever dreams. All she needed was a 13-hour angry nap, and she'd be back to her good old cranky little self. But the buildings weren't caves anymore either, nor the caves buildings. They were numbers, or treasure maps, or tasty memories... She opened her mouth in a desperate cry for help, but her voice wasn't a voice anymore. What was it? An episode? A nest? Was it a shopping basket? Who was what, where was why, when was how...

### **A Postscript**

Not much is known about what happened to the Groomble. He expired, of course. He wasn't immortal (more like a grocery). I tell you, when Wootainee opened her mouth oh woman, did she ever open it up to let spores... take over.

It's just like my ancestor (well, our) always said... well, actually yeah no, I never met him. But he went on the run for the same reason I did - illegal experiments. I learned the lesson, though, that the Groomble never did, and I hope you'll carry it out. Don't bother trying to rescue my life's work. They can take care of themselves, they're solid.

My biggest thing for you to do, if you ever find this, is maybe get to that detective you took a fancy to, and good luck with your creature studies. I've documented all anyone needs to know about where we came from, but G. whiz do we have a long way to go.

Your Uncle,  
Trey Walker