

Chapter 3 — It Begins

Zed and Miranda stood before the small wooden doors. She'd removed the sheet once more. Miranda didn't say anything for a minute, just staring at them. Perhaps nothing at all will happen, he thought, but then decided that was unlikely. Why should he think so replaced that notion. Such things cannot be real, he answered himself. Magic is just illusion. He'd heard that somewhere before. Why is she looking so worried, he wondered? This, he had no immediate answer for — at last his mind was blank.

Both wore jeans, a tee-shirt, and sneakers, though hers were designer-made and probably costly, he judged. He'd asked her if they ought to take along some food, water, camping supplies, flashlights, and perhaps something to protect themselves, such as an axe, which could be used to chop wood for a campfire if the need arose. "Where we are going, we will not need any of that," she had replied. Again, Zed just could not imagine how this could be so. None of this made any sense at all. People only speculated and imagined the existence of alternate worlds, for alternate worlds could be the only explanation that could fit with what he'd been hearing from her. Of course, such do not exist, he finally concluded, his eyes finally focusing on Miranda as she gazed at the small doors. Nothing is going to happen at all, Zed concluded at long last and he relaxed, prepared to console her when she too agreed with that.

Breaking out of her reverie, Miranda became animated once more. Whatever spell the doors held over her seemed broken. "Okay, I'm ready to face this. Take my hand. Don't let go. I will see that we arrive okay." Zed's hand found hers and grasped it firmly. A faint smile pursed his lips, he rather liked holding her hand. Perhaps when this was over. . . he mused.

"When I open the doors, all you need to do is to look through them and lean towards the opening. Here we go," she stated, steeled in determination. With her free

hand, she opened first one and then the other. At first, Zed saw nothing at all.

Just as he was about to console her about it, he thought he saw a yellowish glow emitting from the blank wall revealed by the now opened doors. He felt a magnetic pull on his body, as if some invisible hands were reaching out to him, pulling him gently towards the opening. He felt Miranda leaning, following the pull and he followed her lead. Slowly, the yellowish glow grew stronger and brighter. As it did so, the world around him grew dimmer and dimmer, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to disappear!

Suddenly, he appeared to be in an empty void! He felt the strangest sensations. Falling! Yes, he was falling down. Images of the sperm whale that materialized above a planet and began to fall down towards its surface and certain death in the movie *Hitchhiker's Guide* came into his mind. He felt his body spinning head over heels, around and around, now yawing, now rolling, now pitching in some kind of three dimensional fall, wildly out of all control. Panic rushed over him with only Miranda's solid grasp on his hand keeping him from acting on his terror. Still his free arm flailed around in all directions in a vain, useless attempt to regain some sense of stability, some sense of orientation.

"Pretend that you are descending the basement stairs!" Miranda yelled out loudly to Zed. He saw that she was moving her legs as if she was going down a flight of stairs. Her action was beginning to stabilize her fall, but in doing so, the force nearly ripped her hand from his! Frantically, he tried to duplicate her motion, but in a three dimensional spin, how do you go down a flight of stairs? With a force of will, Zed demanded his legs cooperate, step down, step down. To his utter amazement, the action began to have an impact upon their free-fall.

After a bit of struggling, he matched her descending leg motions and finally the two stabilized. To his amazement, their wild free-fall now seemed more like an ordinary descent into some unknown basement! At last, he gathered enough courage to tilt his head downward to see where they were heading. A vast patch of green appeared to be moving rapidly towards them. A bit of will power and Zed finally became oriented. Now

they did indeed seem to be descending a set of stairs onto a vast grasslands, though it was an invisible stairs.

Bits of brown appeared and Zed finally recognized what appeared to be trees surrounding the open rolling grasslands. They were headed into a large clearing among the trees. No wait! There was something white appearing now, growing larger by the minute. Ah, a table with a white table cloth came into view. Their trajectory would land them close to the table. Satisfied that they were not about to smash into the ground becoming fresh meat, Zed began to relax slightly and wondered how many more downward steps would be needed to reach terra firma and if his knees would hold out. He felt as if he'd taken a hundred steps down, maybe more.

Wait. Figures. He saw three figures sitting around the rapidly approaching table! Strange figures! He blinked twice, heard voices, and landed on the ground. He lost his grip on Miranda and tumbled head over heels. She, however, landed on her feet.

“Ah look! Two more balloons are landing, but then I am never right,” an apathetic tortoise named Albert Rose exclaimed, his head pivoting and looking up at the two forms rapidly descending towards their table. He was sitting precariously on a rock sufficiently high so that his head could reach the straw coming out of a tea cup sitting at his place on the table. The three were taking high tea when the two balloons decided to descend upon them.

Beside him, a squirrel sat on a chair while resting his feet on the tortoise's shell, much to Albert's annoyance. “I say old man, you are right, though that cannot be, cause, as you yourself always say, ‘you are always wrong.’ Therefore, they must not be balloons. What say you, Herr Adelstein?” He fidgeted nervously on his chair, knowing that he dare not be wrong. Certainly not now, not with two balloons landing uninvitedly beside their table. Not that it would have made any difference to him had they been invited. Everyone knows that a squirrel cannot ever dare to be wrong, not ever. Certainly Sir Thomas d'Lyons knew this instinctively.

The rabbit glared at the two. “You are totally and completely wrong, wrong on

both counts, Sir Thomas! When you said that he said that you are wrong, do you mean you or he? You see, you have it all wrong yet again. You are wrong, wrong, wrong!” Herr Adelstein pounded his clenched fist on the table, nearly spilling his tea cup. Three sets of spoons bounced into the air momentarily before resting askew beside their cups.

“Besides, if Albert is always wrong, then we can conclude that indeed we are not seeing anything at all landing on the grass interrupting our tea or that they are not balloons. I suggest that we are not seeing anything at all. Let’s resume our tea. More tea, Albert?” He reached for the tea pot, completely ignoring the fact that at that very moment two balloons or whatever had just landed not four feet from himself and his two friends. Well, one landed, the other fell and executed some strange rolling motions.

“See, I told you that I am always wrong. The balloons are not in the sky any longer,” Albert muttered, agreeing with his two friends. “I would like more tea, Herr Adelstein. Yet, if I am always wrong, then perhaps I actually don’t want more tea after all. Could that possibly be?” The tortoise looked slightly perplexed, but was content to ignore the balloons which he had just seen landing nearby. “Hum, yet if I take that approach, that I would like more tea, but really meaning that I do not want more tea, and if I am always wrong, then would that not suggest that indeed I really don’t want more tea, which I said that I do want more tea.”

“Oh Albert!” Herr Adelstein exclaimed totally exasperated with his friend. “Will you please make up your mind. More tea or not? Can’t you even make one decision?”

“Herr Adelstein, please have some compassion for dear Albert. You know how difficult life is for him when he knows that he is always wrong,” Sir Thomas begged nervously. Herr Adelstein’s anger had quite flustered him and his hand shook rather violently as he held his own tea cup out, while the rabbit attempted to pour more tea into his cup. “Besides, this must be very important, Herr Adelstein. After all, two whatever have just landed beside us. We must not be wrong. All manner of ill may befall us if we do not get this right. Are they or are they not balloons? You see, the two whatever are at least as big as we are. Now if they were tiny mice, I would not be

worrying, you see.” His hand shook so badly that he had to use both hands to sit his cup back down on the table before himself. Nevertheless, a bit did spill, a dark stain crept outward from the bottom of his cup, marring the otherwise spotless tablecloth.

“Now see what you have done, Sir Thomas!” Herr Adelstein growled. “You’ve ruined our tablecloth.” This only made Sir Thomas all the more edgy. “I said nothing has landed beside us. Let us drink our tea.”

“Can you position my straw closer, please?” Albert asked humbly. His head was just an inch from being able to reach the fresh cup that the rabbit had sat before him. Begrudgingly, the rabbit complied. “So no balloons have landed. Okay. I agree. But, Herr Adelstein, you know that I am always wrong. Doesn’t that mean that two balloons have actually then landed?” the tortoise asked. The rabbit threw his hands up in utter disgust and finally turned to face the newcomers.

Miranda saw a brownish rabbit who stood at least six feet tall. He wore an immaculate, dark brown, business suit with what must have been a white, starched shirt. A black bow tie and cummerbund rounded out his apparel. His very long ears rose slightly before flopping over. As the rabbit rose from his seat, Zed finally joined Miranda, staring blinkingly at the rabbit.

Seeing Herr Adelstein rising, Sir Thomas quickly took his feet off of the back of Albert and jumped hastily to his feet, daring not to be wrong, following implicitly the rabbit’s lead. He stood just under six feet tall. He wore a black suit with a white shirt, very similar to the rabbit’s. However, his tie was a ghastly paisley, a bit too long and far too wide at its bottom. Hastily, he ran his hands over his head, smoothing his top hair.

Albert, free at last from being the squirrel’s foot stool, wiggled with some effort and at last slid off of his rock, his enormous feet finally reaching the ground. He wore a greenish tie around his neck, but no suit. His shell was azure with flakes of silver sparkling in the sunlight, although at the moment, had anyone cared to look into the sky, they would not have seen the sun itself, though the sky was perfectly clear. A bit more wiggling, and Albert was standing on his rear legs, facing the whatevers. His eyes

stared long and hard at the two.

“Excuse us, please. We didn’t intend to disrupt your tea,” Miranda politely began the conversation, acting as if it was no surprise to her to be standing beside a six foot tall rabbit, squirrel, and tortoise. Zed just gaped in complete disbelief. “My name is Miranda and this is my friend Zed.”

Herr Adelstein rose to the occasion. In a harsh tone, he replied, “Well, Albert, indeed you were quite wrong. These are most definitely not two balloons which have come down from the sky to interrupt our tea. I am quite sure that balloons have never been known to talk.”

“Gosh, Herr Adelstein,” Albert mused, “are you really certain of that detail? Perhaps they are a new type of balloon that we have not seen before. But then, you know that I am always wrong.”

Whispering to the rabbit, Sir Thomas said very nervously, “They are as b-big as us!”

Miranda picked up on his fears and hastily added, “We mean you no harm, Mr. Squirrel.”

“Sir Thomas d’Lyons,” he politely and rightly corrected her.

Herr Adelstein even more hastily interrupted him, rather testily, “He takes offense to being called a squirrel. The word has some rather unpleasant connotations, you see.” He stared at Miranda and then Zed, before adding in a growl, a big frown creased his forehead, “So are you talking balloons or are you not? You cannot dismiss the fact that you floated down from the sky like balloons!”

Zed grinned, “Sorry, sir. We are most definitely not balloons. We are humans. And I must admit that you three are the largest rabbit, squirrel, and tortoise that I have ever seen. How is it that you can talk? Such fine suits you are wearing.”

Herr Adelstein put his hands on his hips, extremely annoyed. “Of course we three can speak! You must be idiots to think otherwise! What exactly is a ‘uman anyway?”

“Of course my suit is a fine one!” Sir Thomas added. “I must look my best and

proper at all times, if I am to be right and I don't dare not be right, you see. Now Albert here, he doesn't have to worry so much, he can just retreat into his hard shell." He looked at his friend and added, "See, Albert. You were wrong again. These are not balloons, but 'umans, whatever that may be."

"We are people," Miranda attempted to explain and then gave up that line altogether. "My name is Miranda Whitney. This is Zed Osmund. We're pleased to meet you." She guessed a bit of politeness would be the best approach.

"Well, you most certainly cannot be people, because we are people and you don't look a thing like us!" Herr Adelstein stated flatly. "However, we are civilized. I am Herr Petr Adelstein. My friends, Sir Thomas d'Lyons and Albert Rose, though we may not be so pleased to meet you. That remains to be seen." The three bowed to the two.

Still, Sir Thomas was quite nervous. He kept fiddling with his tie, though he didn't even notice that he'd quite twisted it around his fingers. "Perhaps we best offer them some tea, perhaps. Don't you think that we should, Herr Adelstein? You know that we cannot afford to be wrong about it."

"I suppose that you are right, Sir Thomas. Although we have no idea what these 'umans actually are, at least we can show them that we are highly civilized and refined. Please, Miranda, Zed, have a seat and join us. We were just about to have another round of tea." He gestured to the other side of the table, intent upon putting some distance between the two 'umans and themselves.

Poof! Two chairs suddenly appeared. Zed blinked and swore they were not there a moment ago. He and Miranda headed around the table and gently felt them. Zed tested them to see if they were actually real. Poof! Two more cups, spoons, and napkins appeared beside the two, placed perfectly upon the spotless tablecloth, now stained slightly near Sir Thomas' cup. While the two sat down, the squirrel and rabbit did so quite formally, while the poor tortoise struggled to get back up on his rock once more. Once in position, the rabbit had to adjust his straw for him again. Dutifully, the rabbit poured what appeared to be strong black tea into the two cups.

“I do hope you like it black,” Sir Thomas began to fidget once more. “I’m afraid that we are out of sugar and milk at the moment.”

“Are we out or did we forget them again?” Albert asked quietly. Herr Adelstein ignored him completely, but stared at the two newcomers with a steely eye. Zed sensed that the rabbit certainly did not trust them at all.

“Ah, excellent tea,” Zed said, hoping to start the conversation fresh. “Might I ask just where we have arrived?”

“Uh, that’s rather obvious, it seems to me,” Albert answered in his slow, drawn-out manner. “You are here by our tea table. Since I am always wrong, perhaps we are not here either. If so, I wonder where we actually are?” He looked terribly puzzled, somehow his straightforward answer had led him totally astray once more. He took a sip of tea to forget about it.

“Yes, I’m thankful that we did not land on your table and spoil everything for you,” Miranda opted to be polite once more. “I believe that Zed wishes to know is what is the name of this land, this country and perhaps where it is located, that sort of thing.”

Sir Thomas fidgeted once more and whispered to Herr Adelstein, “They must be lost. Could that be it?”

The rabbit looked totally exasperated, as if this were more than he could possibly bear. He did reply though, “Malbon. This land is called Malbon, obviously.” His whiskers twisted and waggled as if he found this beyond belief. “Where do you come from that you do not even know the name of our land?” He again took a defiant attitude towards the two.

“We come from a place called Earth,” Miranda replied, trying hard not to further offend the rabbit. “Though I expect that you have never heard of our land.”

Herr Adelstein tweaked his nose, as if to say he didn’t, but Albert spoke instead. “Do all of you ‘umans float like balloons? I think that must be fun, but then, as everyone knows. I am always wrong about such things.”

“Er, I don’t know, Albert.” Zed spoke up. Somehow he felt more comfortable

talking to a tortoise than to an enormous rabbit or squirrel. “I’ve never floated like a balloon before this time — coming here, Albert. At first, it was awfully scary, you know, a horrible feeling of falling to my death and all that. Miranda got me to taking steps down, as if I were going down some stairs. After that, it got to be fun. Say, are there many of you here in Malbon? Any cities or towns? Any humans like us?” He thought this might be a key piece of information to learn quickly.

“Ants live in the cities. I am sure that you don’t want to go there!” Sir Thomas squeaked, suddenly shaking more than normal. His tea cup spilled even more. The dark stain spread noticeably now, and the rabbit glared even harder at Sir Thomas, whose hands began to shake even more so.

“Now see what you have done? All this talk about ants has totally shaken up poor Sir Thomas! We’ll have to have a clean tablecloth now!” Herr Adelstein growled and waved his right paw. Poof! The white tablecloth vanished, replaced by a new one. “See if you can keep your tea inside your cup, this time, Sir Thomas. You know that I get tired of replacing it. Next time you have to replace it.”

The squirrel looked mournfully at the ground. “Yes, Herr Adelstein. I will be more careful. You must warn them about the ants, though. Please. I am afraid that if I do, I will spill the rest of my tea.”

“Ants! Brrrrrooooooggghhh!” Herr Adelstein’s tall, furry body shook with violent passions, of which fear was primary. He shook his head from side to side, as if somehow the very idea of ants would be thrown irrevocably from his mind. “Ants, oh, terrors of terror! Let’s not talk about them, shall we? Have some more tea,” he hastily changed the topic, refilling Albert’s tea cup twice to overflowing. Zed watched as Albert’s cup managed to somehow grow taller as the brown liquid continued to rise.

“Ah, Herr Adelstein, my cup runneth over,” Albert whispered, as if the guests might not be noticing.

“Oops,” the rabbit flushed, noticing that his friend’s cup was now twice as tall as everyone else’s cups.

“Quite understandable, quite,” Sir Thomas apologized for his friend. “Here, I’ll fix it for you, Albert.” Poof. The excess tea vanished as Albert’s tea cup returned to the same size as everyone else’s cup, excepting for the straw, of course. The tortoise looked pleased and smiled to the rabbit.

Again, Zed was mystified by the growth and then shrinkage of the cup and tea. Miranda decided to try another approach. “Say, isn’t this a bit strange? I mean back home when we have a picnic we either have it in our backyard or go to a park. Is this place here a park? Are there others about enjoying this beautiful day?”

“What precisely do you mean by this beautiful day?” asked Sir Thomas, growing slightly worried again. These balloons calling themselves ‘umans, he found a bit unsettling. After all, it isn’t just anytime that you have strange, foreign bodies that speak falling from the sky interrupting your tea.

“It’s a fine day, bright, sunny, not a cloud in the sky. Perfect for a picnic, don’t you think?” she hastily explained, failing utterly to see how this could be upsetting the squirrel. Then she noticed that although the day was indeed bright, she could see no sun in the sky at all! Zed saw her looking up and followed her gaze, wondering what she was trying to see. Then, it dawned on him, no sun! What was making it seem like it was a sunny day? He caught Miranda’s barely perceptible glance and wisely said nothing about it.

Seeing Sir Thomas becoming even more agitated, Albert answered instead. “Well, it is a fine time for tea which is why we were having ours just now. Day is always present. The world is always as you see it now. How can it not be? You must come from some really weird place, but then I am always wrong on things that are important. Perhaps this is not important, in that case I might be right, but I never know, you see, since I am always wrong.”

“You mean, Albert, that it does not get dark when it is time to sleep, to go to bed and rest?” Miranda asked point blank. Even though the squirrel seemed to be still agitated for unknown reasons and the rabbit continued to stick his nose in the air as if

this was all just some insanity talk, the large tortoise seemed unmoved by it all.

“Dark? What is that?” he asked.

“You know, when the day goes away and the sky is dark. You can’t see anything then, time for sleep,” she tried to find a non-threatening way of explaining herself.

The squirrel nearly fell off of his seat! If he was shaking before, now his whole giant body seemed to convulse uncontrollably. Herr Adelstein almost dropped his tea cup and glared angrily at her. Albert seemed unplused by it all. “Oh, you must mean when the end of the world comes. It is said that when the light goes away, the world shall come to an end, but then I am not a philosopher, merely a humble tortoise. We rest in our houses when we get tired. Don’t you rest when you get tired?” he asked, becoming curious about these two. Perhaps they did not need sleep as he and his friends did.

“Oh yes, we sleep about eight hours each day, er, I mean about eight every twenty-four hours,” she replied.

Albert seemed relieved to hear this. “Ah that is good then. So do we. I just pull myself into my house here. I carry mine with me everywhere I go, much simpler this way. Now my friends here, they have to build their houses every time they get tired. Too much trouble, I say, but then they like their fancy houses. Me, I like it simple.” A quizzical look appeared on his face. “Say, might I ask, when you were up there falling down to us, you didn’t by chance see these others that you were referring to a bit ago did you? I don’t expect that you could see the ant army, though. However, if you did, please don’t mention it. Sir Thomas is quite scared of them, they are an army you know. Vicious, voracious eaters. I keep telling Sir Thomas that he ought to get a hard shell like mine. Then he would be safe from their attacks.” Poor Sir Thomas. At the mention of ants again, he fell completely out of his chair. He rose shaking so badly that the rabbit had to get out of his chair, pick up the squirrel, depositing him unceremoniously back into his chair.

“No, we saw no one around but you three. I do believe it is quite safe here,” Miranda decided to attempt to calm them down. Just what was this whole ant thing

about anyway? She was now very curious, but knew that she dare not ask more.

“Well, that is why we chose this location after all. Isn’t that right, Herr Adelstein?” the tortoise looked for confirmation, again somewhat unsure of himself.

“Yes, of course, Albert!” Herr Adelstein replied testily, having adjusted his suit coat before sitting back down. “All this talk has chilled my tea. Time for a fresh pot, don’t you think?”

“I’m rather hungry,” Sir Thomas squeaked meekly. “Perhaps we should dine now instead.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” the rabbit declared somewhat more pleasantly. “What do we feed our guests, eh Sir Thomas? I bet that you did not consider that when you made your suggestion.”

“Of course, you are right as always, Herr Adelstein. I had not thought of them. It is proper that we offer our guests something to eat, that is, if we are going to dine. It is impolite of us to eat in front of them, isn’t it? I know I dare not be wrong about that!” Sir Thomas replied, his nervousness having settled down. Perhaps it was merely that his stomach was more in control of his body than his fears.

“Hey, don’t worry about us,” Zed spoke up. “We just ate before we came. Honestly, we are not hungry. Why don’t you just go ahead and fix yourselves your meal. We are quite happy with our tea.”

Just then, the ground began shaking! “Oh no!” shrieked Sir Thomas. “The Enforcers are coming. Quick! Hide!” Poof! A large white house appeared. Made of oak clapboards and nicely stained to bring out the wood’s fine grain appeared not five feet from the squirrel. Sir Thomas dove off his chair and bolted through his front door in a flash. Poof! The house and squirrel vanished completely, then reappeared for an instant. Poof! The table, tablecloth, and tea cups vanished, leaving Zed and Miranda quite startled. Poof! The squirrel’s house vanished once more as a thundering noise could now be heard.

“Oh dear, oh dear. The Enforcers are at it again,” Herr Adelstein declared, a touch

of worry in his voice. "You will have to excuse us." Both Miranda and Zed had now arisen and poof, their chairs vanished as well, leaving no sign that a moment ago there was a picnic in progress. "Here you go, Albert," the rabbit stated dryly. Poof. A small stream appeared, along with several large rocks. The rabbit turned to the two, "Run, if you can. Fly, if you can. If not, it has been fun having you for tea. Bye."

Poof! Another large house appeared. This one was a bit rustic, something reminiscent of an old English cottage. Ivy covered its red brick walls. Brown curtains lined the edges of two front windows. The rabbit bowed to the two and ducked inside. Poof! His house also vanished.

Albert struggled to get himself down from the boulder on which his bottom had been precariously balanced. "Ah, that's better. Nice friends, don't you think? They've made me a perfect spot to hide. If I were you, I'd vanish as well. No telling what the Enforcers want. It's happened before, you know. Balloon falling from the sky. Enforcers came then too. After they were gone, we discovered that the other balloon was also gone. I suppose that the Enforcers got her too, but then perhaps not. I am never right about important things, you know."

"What? Another one of us appeared? Did she look like this?" Miranda exclaimed. Could her mother have also met these three? Why had she not asked them immediately or shown them her mother's picture.

"Better hurry up, Miranda. I can see large forms coming our way," Zed cautioned her. He didn't like the sound of their name, Enforcers. Besides, they must be incredibly powerful to make the ground shake so far in advance of their position. She showed Albert the photo of Rose.

"Yes, that would be the other balloon. I have to hide. See you when it is safe again. That is, if you are still here," Albert replied. He slid into the stream and submerged, becoming indistinguishable from the several other boulders that lined the stream.

"Wow! Mom was here," Miranda gushed. "Now we are making progress! I wonder where she went next?"

“Miranda, what are we going to do? This situation sounds dangerous.” Zed continued to look towards the oncoming riders, if riders they were. They were still a good distance away and he just could not make out who or what they were. Clearly, the three locals were terrified of these supposed Enforcers. “I wonder what they did with your mother?”

“I think that we are going to have to wait for them and ask them about mom. Perhaps we will be all right. I can’t see us as being any kind of threat here. After all, we are just looking for my mother, whom we now know was here.”

“Okay, but we’d better not tell these Enforcers about Albert there. We can say that we are following her footprints, her trail, and apparently, she ran into them around this location,” Zed suggested.

“I wonder what they enforce?” Miranda asked, but turned to face the oncoming Enforcers as well. Instinctively, her hand found his and they held to each other tightly.

“Elephants! I’ll be,” Zed exclaimed, as a half dozen, large, grey elephants came charging into view. Soon they were close enough that Zed could read the banner that was affixed to their heads, “Enforcer.” The group slowed down as they neared and most definitely took note of the two standing beside the stream and boulders, one of which was Albert, of course.

They halted before the two. The one at the head of the pack spoke, “Well, what do we have here? Outsiders again, eh? Surround them boys, we don’t want them to escape!”

“Hello, I am Miranda, and this is my friend, Zed. Why would we want to escape? Escape what? I’m sorry, we are just visiting here.” She sounded as polite as she could be, though she wanted desperately to ask about her mother.

“Outsiders!” the deep, bellowing voice replied antagonistically. “Don’t you know that practicing magic without a license is against the law here in Malbon? We are going to have to arrest you and bring you before the Court of Illegal Magic Use!”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know how to practice magic or anything else like it,” Zed protested.

Several elephants laughed, though he had no idea why. The leader replied with a biting tongue, “Yes, yes, that’s what they all say! You got here didn’t you? That’s magic, idiot. It is against the law to practice magic without a license. Arrest them.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Miranda interrupted him. Since he was dead set on arresting her anyway, she might as well ask about her mother. “Several weeks ago, did you arrest this woman somewhere around here? She is my mother and we are trying to find her. We think that she is lost or injured.” She held up the photo of Rose.

“Well, that is easy enough to discover,” he said. “Roscoe, Roscoe Small’s my name. Let’s see.” Poof. A large scroll appeared before the pachyderm’s head, floating in the air. As he looked at it, he asked, “Name of apprehendee?”

“Rose Whitney,” Miranda replied sounding a hopeful note. While the two watched, a rather lengthy list scrolled by the Enforcer. One end of the scroll continued unwinding, while the other wound up the listing, all while floating in midair. “Ah yes. Convict Rose Whitney. Convicted of practicing magic without a license twenty-one days ago. Sentenced to the Ant Farm.”

“Thank you. Can you take us to this Ant Farm? We want to find my mother, Roscoe,” Miranda asked.

All six laughed heartily, shaking the very ground beneath their feet! At last Roscoe answered her, “As soon as you are convicted, you’ll be taken there soon enough. Of course, you’ll wish that you had not been just as soon!”

“But we haven’t practiced any magic ourselves,” Zed protested.

Antagonistically, Roscoe replied, “Well, you had better be right about that! Of course, we are right, always, but if you know what’s good for you, you had better be right. That’s all I’m going to say. Now you are hereby arrested. Say, by chance have you encountered a rabbit and squirrel? They go by the names of Herr Petr Adelstein and Sir Thomas d’Lyon.”

“Er, no Enforcer Roscoe,” Miranda lied, hoping that the elephant couldn’t tell that she was. “What are they wanted for? Murder, thievery?”

“Oh far worse than that!” Roscoe exclaimed. “Practicing Magic without a License! Okay. Arrest time.” Poof! Zed found himself sitting on the back of one of the elephants. His arms were tied behind his back. A rope was fastened to each foot and encircled the belly of the pachyderm guaranteeing that he could not possibly fall off. His legs were spread wide apart, most uncomfortable. Poof. Miranda found herself similarly placed on Roscoe’s enormous back, tied up as well.

“I say, you ought to have a more comfortable box or seats on your backs,” Zed commented.

“Oh don’t be silly! You are being arrested, not dined as some dinner guest!” Roscoe taunted.

“You seem to be enjoying your job,” Zed growled, not liking the way this was unfolding.

“Of course we like our job! Ours is the most interesting job in Malbon! Stupid strangers. Okay, boys, to the Court of Illegal Magic Use! Pronto!” Roscoe barked out his bellowing orders. At once, the group began their thunderous passage over the grasslands.

The ground thundered beneath their giant feet, wind of their passage blew Miranda’s hair behind her. Zed kept bouncing on the back of his elephant. “I say, bumpy ride. Ouch. Is torture part of your arresting methods?”

“You are being arrested, not coddled. What did you expect? Using Magic without a license is a really, really bad crime here in Malbon. Didn’t you know that?” the elephant trumpeted hostilely. “Well, you darn well ought to have known that in the first place.”

“How? We are not from Malbon,” Zed protested.

“We are not the Court,” he replied testily. “That’s for them to decide. If you are not from Malbon, and any fool can see that you are not, you got here, didn’t you? That’s magic in our books. Now shut up! We are obviously right.”

More bouncing later, and Zed had had enough. “Oh this is completely

preposterous!”

Poof! Zed appeared completely free, standing on the grass. The startled elephants planted their enormous feet and skidded to a complete stop. Poof! Miranda appeared beside Zed, both rubbing their wrists. “Thanks,” she whispered.

Roscoe whirled his massive body around, clearly very angry. “I’ve a notion to squash you right now and forget this arrest! You are damn wrong to continue to add to your crimes! Well, it will do you no good. Behold, the Court of Illegal Magic Use!”

Poof! A barrister complete with white wig suddenly appeared, along with a complete English looking court. Zed blinked, the barrister was a six foot tall monkey, dressed in formal court attire! At the bench was the High Judge, also wearing a white wig, which looked utterly ridiculous, Zed thought, considering the judge was a snake.

His Honor was at least seven feet long or tall, depending on how you looked at him. He stood upright. His girth was quite large, perhaps two feet, except near his middle where a roundish ball appeared. Zed didn’t want to know what he’d had for lunch, it had to be big.

The barrister read off the charges in a loud, but bored manner. “Hear yea, hear yea. The official charges are practicing magic without a license.” Roscoe whispered something in the monkey’s overly large ears. He cleared his throat and amended the charges, placing extreme emphasis on the first word, “Repeated practicing of magic without a license, Your Honor.” The barrister straightened his robes and sat down on a chair which suddenly appeared behind him.

All eyes turned to the judge, who looked slightly annoyed, though not at the two accused. “Darn, I have indigestion once again. That darn pig anyway.” He let out a huge burp, the smell almost knocked Zed out. “Excuse me,” the huge snake said slightly apologetically. “Let’s get this over with quickly. Accused will rise and address this High Court. How do you plead?” the snake said very bored with the proceedings. He’d overseen hundreds of similar cases and was frankly tired of the whole thing.

“Not guilty,” Zed spoke for both of them.

The snake's eyebrows raised slightly. He appeared slightly annoyed with Zed. "Oh come now, the charges are quite clear. You can't possibly believe that you are not guilty," he said gruffly.

"Of course we are not guilty," Zed added. "We are not from Malbon, we've only just arrived. Neither of us know any magical spells at all. Don't we get to present evidence in our own defense?"

"Oh why bother?" the snake said irresolutely, annoyed that the proceedings had gone on this long already. He let out another belch, the darn pig was annoying him even now, although it was obviously quite dead. "Clearly, I can see that you are here. Obviously, that required magic. Any imbecile can see that! Come, I must be fair. I certainly don't want anyone accusing me of not being fair. State your names and I will consult the ledger." Poof! A giant scroll with ornate cylinders on each end appeared hovering in space before his eyes. Poof! A pair of black rimmed spectacles appeared before his eyes.

"Miranda Whitney and Zed Osmund," he replied. "We are looking for Miranda's mother, Rose Whitney." He added that last in hopes of getting a bit more information for Miranda. As they watched, the scroll began unrolling from one cylinder and rolling up on the other. Zed nearly laughed as he watched the snake's eyes moving rapidly from side to side as he read the names on the list. When the scrolling ceased, poof, it vanished as did his glasses.

"Names are not on the official registry. Guilty as charged."

Zed grinned, an idea formed in his head. "You honor, I believe that you missed them. If you will please look again at the very bottom, I'm sure that you will see our names there." Poof. He intended that they would be there, along with those of the three with whom they'd just had tea!

At first, Zed thought the snake might just explode, physically, that is. His cheeks puffed up twice their normal size, but then he knew so little about snakes. Perhaps his mouth did that anyway, after all how could he have possibly eaten that huge, well

whatever it was that formed the huge ball shape in his middle. “Preposterous! I never miss a thing,” the judge replied. He burped this time, and the poor barrister fell over backwards off his chair, having taken the blast of noxious fumes full in his face. He scrambled to his feet and tried to reposition his wig which had fallen off his head. Zed suppressed a laugh.

“Oh, just so we can get this infernally long trial over with sooner, I’ll grant your request.” The judge did as Zed asked. “What? How can this be? Why, I’ve never missed reading a name yet!”

“Perhaps it is because of your indigestion,” Zed suggested politely. The snake’s eyes bored into his, as if he were going to blast him with some kind of ray beam.

“Well, you got away with it this time. Don’t let me catch you in my court again. I won’t be so tolerant of you next time. Case dismissed.” A large gavel materialized and came pounding down on a desk that suddenly appeared. Both vanished after the gavel pounded on the desk, making a loud bang.

“But Your Honor,” the barrister protested, “their names are not on our Official Lists.”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” the judge groaned.

“Excuse me, but can you tell us what happened in the case of Rose Whitney?” Zed insisted.

“The barrister can handle that, I am going to have a wee lie down now. All this court business has tired me out something terribly. Court is adjourned.” With that, the snake vanished, leaving behind a puff of smoke.

“Oh this is wrong, this is so wrong, I just know it is very wrong. Your names are not on the Official List. Oh dear me. I shall have to investigate this further,” the monkey exclaimed, nervously.

“While you are doing that, could you please consult your records and tell us what happened to Rose Whitney?” Zed insisted, wondering if he ought to pretend to be angry with the barrister or not.

“Well, that is easily handled,” the monkey replied, donning his glasses for the first time. A green scroll appeared in his hands and the paper flew by at an alarming rate.

“How can you read so fast?” asked Zed. Perhaps the monkey was a speed reader, still, he would have to be reading at least a thousand words a second to keep up with the speeding scroll!

“Ah. Yes, here we are. Rose Whitney. Convicted of using magic without a license. Sentenced to life in the Ant Farm. There, now I will get on with my investigation. Good day. I hope to have you rearrested soon.” He glared at them and then vanished, leaving the two standing beside the elephants.

Zed turned to Roscoe. “Say, can you direct us to the Ant Farm where they took Rose Whitney, please?”

The huge pachyderm laughed so hard that the grasses shook rather violently. “Idiots. I will enjoy rounding you up a second time, when the Honorable Barrister issues the warrants. The Ant Farm is that way. Just start walking and you are sure to run into it. Of course, you will never leave there alive.” He began laughing and the other elephants joined in, as if this was the funniest thing that they had ever heard in their lives.

Miranda took Zed’s hand and led him off in the direction that Roscoe had pointed. When they were out of earshot range, she said, “Wow, you handled that well! Thanks. I would not have thought to put our names on the official list.”

“I put Albert’s and the others on there too. Don’t know if it will do them any good, however,” Zed explained, a wry smile on his face. Miranda giggled and squeezed his hand. Zed liked that more than he cared to admit just now. They continued their march across the rolling grasslands of Malbon.

“I wonder how far we have to walk?” Zed soon asked. The land all around them appeared pretty much the same. Trees were scattered here and there among the rolling hills. Tall grasses abounded. The terrain looked much the same in all directions. Worse, they had no real distant point towards which to head. “We might end up walking in

circles,” he added.

“I see what you mean. Perhaps we ought to decide that we have arrived at the Ant Farm,” Miranda suggested.

“Huh?” Zed asked confused.

She stopped and faced him, looking him squarely in his eyes. “Silly, together, we agree that we have arrived at our destination. That’s all. Come on, give it a try,” she teased him with a coy smile. He smiled back and the two stated together that they had now arrived at the Ant Farm.

“Well, I’ll be!” Zed exclaimed, followed by a shocked cry at the sight before his feet, “Oh no. Miranda!” Thousands of bleached bones and skulls lay scattered about the ground. Grasses growing up out of eye sockets gave a surreal view to the grave yard, for surely that must be what this was. Miranda let out a squeal.

In order to continue, they had to walk over the sea of bones. Crunching sounds accompanied each hesitant foot step as the two attempted to cross the wide expanse of brittle bones, which seemed to stretch out as far as they could see. Both steeled themselves and continued, neither daring to think the horrible thought that some of these could well be the bones of her mother! After what seemed an eternity, they finally reached the other side of the sea of bones and spotted the ants.

As far as Zed was concerned, these black ants looked like normal carpenter ants and more importantly, they were the right size, perhaps a half inch long. A long line of them carried bits of grasses high over their heads moving in the same direction that they were heading. One ant who was not carrying anything looked up at the two forms and shocked the two by speaking quite unexpectedly, “Hello. Please be careful of my workers here. What are you doing here? Can I help you? Have you lost your way? The elephants haven’t brought you, so you must not have been sentenced to our Ant Farm for crimes. Tom’s the name, Thomas Longleaf.”

“Hello. I am Zed Osmund and this is my friend, Miranda Whitney. Pleased to meet you. We will be careful of your workers. Say, that was an impressive pile of bones

back there. I take it that the ants devour those who get sentenced to the Ant Farm.” The bones had made an indelible impression on him. Zed was slightly nervous, though relieved to see that the ants were not giant sized as well. Had they been as large as the rabbit and squirrel, Zed would have been very nervous indeed!

Tom laughed heartily. “Ah, you saw them, well good. It took us a long time to get all of those bones carted there. My, what a project that was! Well, Zed, we had to do that. You see, not everyone is as careful as you both are being. In the past, we had so many of you giants trampling our workers. Why in just one day alone, we lost two thousand workers! We had to do something. I admit, our queen’s plan has really worked. Those bones have placed great fears in the minds of all those in Malbon. Indeed it has. Now, none dare come anywhere near our colonies. Terrific plan, don’t you think?”

“Why, I’d say positively brilliant plan. From those that we’ve met, I will back you on the results. Some are absolutely terrified of coming anywhere near here,” Zed agreed with Tom.

“Indeed, it has been most successful. We were definitely right in putting up that barrier, but then, they were right too, our workers are so very small compared to the others. We are hard to see. So in the end, we are all more or less right, you see. Still, the bones have kept us from suffering catastrophic losses of our workers.”

“So you don’t really eat the prisoners who are sent to the Ant Farm?” Miranda asked, wondering what did happen to those who were sent here. She was, of course, thinking about her mother’s sentencing to the Ant Farm. That some of those bleached bones were not her mothers was what desperately wanted to verify.

Tom laughed, “Of course not, we are vegetarians.”

“Say, how come you guys are not giant sized, like the rabbit and squirrel that we saw?” Zed asked, curious to find that the ants were not enormous. The way that Sir Thomas had been talking, Zed had imagined the ants were also monstrously large.

Again, Tom laughed, “Ah, big folks.” Poof! Tom appeared to be as tall as the two, his body was over six feet long. For a second, Zed felt a rush of anxiety, Tom looked

awfully scary this large. “Look, if I were this big, how big would the grass have to be for us to eat? Why, unless you want the grass to be seven feet tall everywhere, we ants had better stay our size.” Poof! Tom returned to his original size.

“Point well taken,” Zed agreed, relieved to see Tom reduced in size once more. “Say, we are looking for Miranda’s mother, Rose, who was sent here as a prisoner for practicing magic without a license. By any chance have you seen here?”

Tom shook his bulbous head, “No. Sorry, you are the only to giants that I’ve seen in some time. My job is to keep the workers in line and make sure they don’t get into trouble.”

“What do they do with the prisoners who are sent to the Ant Farm?” Miranda asked, still worried. She might not have been eaten, but still where was she? Imprisoned somewhere around here?

“Don’t know myself. Have to ask the queen’s guards. Follow us, we are heading there now with this load of grass for the queen’s staff. She’s the most important person in our world, you know, the queen, I mean. Don’t you have a queen in your place?” Tom asked.

“Well,” Miranda tried to reply, but then thought about how she could explain our president. “Sort of. Do you suppose that she will see us?” That seemed a more important fact to discover at the moment.

“Probably not. She is awfully busy, but her guards will see you. I’m sure that they will be helpful, if you don’t go squashing any of us before then,” Tom suggested.

They walked on in silence for a time. Zed thought that he ought to make polite conversation. After all, it wasn’t everyday that he had the opportunity to chat with an ant. However, he couldn’t figure out anything to ask. He’d never given ants much thought in his life. Now if he had been the professor at local junior college who often took summers off to go to far flung places on Earth to study ants, why he assumed that he would have zillions of questions for Tom. Ants were ants to Zed, ah well.

Suddenly, he noticed that the line of workers were now descending down a hole in

the ground. A mound of small dirt clods rose up making their hole appear to be a miniature volcano. Three mail clad ants holding long halberds suddenly appeared and then poof! The three appeared to tower over Zed and Miranda. "Halt! Who goes there?" one guard bellowed in a deep voice. "We've no notice of new prisoners."

"Hello. We are not prisoners," Zed quickly spoke for Miranda. "We have come looking for Miranda's mother, Rose, who was sent here as a prisoner for practicing magic without a license."

"Oh, well, that's better," the guard replied. Zed noticed that his uniform was red with bright yellow stripes. His chain mail rings tingled as he moved slightly, trying to keep his balance on his rear legs. The red and yellow shown through the grey rings of the mail. He looked an impressive guard, though the viciously sharp halberd kept attracting Zed's attention.

"Have you seen her? Is she being held prisoner around here somewhere? Could we possibly see her?" Miranda asked, hoping that at last they could at least see her and make sure that she was all right. She was also wondering how she might rescue her from this Ant Farm. Was she being held somewhere far underground? Perhaps in one of the many tunnels there?

"Yes. No. No," the guard replied in a machine gun fashion, mostly devoid of any recognizable emotion, which only added to her confusion and worry.

Zed was about to step in and ask "Why," when the guard finally gave a laugh. "Ho, ho. Sorry, just playing with you. Yes, yes, she was sent here. No, we don't really keep prisoners here. What could we possibly do with giants? You taste positively awful, you are an extreme danger to our colony if only because of your size. We refuse to adopt larger forms you see, not unless they enlarge all of the grasses as well and maybe the trees too. In the past, we did petition the court to do just that, but they rejected it, saying that they would then have to enlarge themselves accordingly. Guess we are both more or less right on that one. Ah well. So, no she is not here. We sent her on her way on the Malbon Express. Thus, no, you can't see her because she is not here."

“Malbon Express? What’s that?” Miranda asked, relieved that her mother was not being held prisoner here, but worried about where she might now be.

“The train. Haven’t you heard about the steam train? No matter. If you want to find this Rose person, then you need to get on the Malbon Express,” the guard offered, just a bit too willingly, Zed thought. He rather felt that the guard was trying to get rid of them quickly. Well, perhaps so, after all they were having to be very careful where they placed their feet. So many ants were about, it was hard not stepping on one.

“Thank you. Where do we find this train?” Miranda asked, resolved to follow in her mother’s footsteps.

“I will get you aboard. However, you must give me your word that you will not come back here. Too much risk of squashing our workers, you see,” the guard explained.

Both Zed and Miranda hastily agreed. Poof! They now stood on a train station platform before a long set of cars, reminiscent of the 1800's. Far up front, great clouds of black-grey smoke billowed from the antique steam engine. Curiously though, the two did not see any other passengers on the platform. “Here you go. Inside with you now,” the guard said. Poof! The two found themselves inside a car, just as the train began chug-chugging away from the platform. Neither got the chance to say thanks to the guard.