



POPPYCOCK PLACE SERIES

The happy ghetto of the really cool

## SKY SAILING HEROES



The Shops at Poppycock Place

Botzi is excited by his treasure map while Alby and Fungus watch the proceedings.

*Dedicated to Sarah, Isabel and Toby*

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A Children's Story Book

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## “SKY SAILING HEROES”

Botzi receives a treasure map from a mysterious uncle. Botzi has no money and is helped by his friends. So Noodles volunteers to take all five shopkeeper friends, Botzi, Noodles, Aurora, Banjo and Izaak up in his balloon to sail it on a trip to a South American lost city. The balloon often runs out of fuel placing our heroes in dangerous predicaments. Mexican bandits, dangerous car chases, powerful Elfin war lords, plagues of killer bees, and that’s just the easy part. The “treasure” turns out to be a dangerous instrument of power left by the pharaohs, that can enslave the world. A problem arises when Alby and Fungus, the two Bio-teks who have over-ruled their ethics modules and are growing into very selfish monsters, learn details of this expedition. ....Who will control this instrument?...Is this the makings of another world dictatorship?.....

## REVIEWS

What others are saying about “Sky Sailing Heroes”

Rating: \_\_\_ Star \* Star \* Star \* Star \* Star

World renowned novelist Charles Dickens liked the book. *“Sky Sailing Heroes is full of great expectations and widened my horizons. If only they had robots in my time -Scrooge would have made a great robot.”*

Thomas Hardy was more practical: *“A wobbly see-saw of adventure to be grasped firmly or otherwise used to chock up a rickety table. Snuggle up with this book on a cold winter night and I promise it can light your fire.”*

*“As I suspected. if you hold this book up to a mirror and read it backwards you can imagine more steamy passion in it than my novel ‘Lady Chatterbox’ -Wish I thought of this technique first to get past those pesky censors.”* D.H.Lowrence

*“How long can famous author Tobias Dingbat give away his books for free or so cheap? Please let us support him or have it on our conscience if he follows Van Gogh and cuts off an ear or two.”* The New York Times.

\* \* \* \* \*

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## **One (1)**

### **NASA's Successful Failure**

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**Poppycock** Place was just a quiet little shopping lane in a busy city. Since 1910, shopkeepers came and went, changing the business and faces of these shops every few years. In the middle of the lane stood five adjacent shops, each with two floors above, the upstairs apartments being home to all sorts of people.

But the five shops stood vacant for many years, staring gloomily at the street. Until one day something happened.....

\* \* \* \* \*

“A huge amount of money has gone into this project,” said the Deep Space Mission Director. “A new research program has been designed....it’s Plan B, if you like.”

“Well, since they can’t be astronauts, it has been decided to use their sophistication to carry out a social experiment,” explained his colleague to the other engineers in the auditorium.

\* \* \* \* \*

Last year, a secret billion dollar project undertaken by NASA was vetoed half way through completion, ending up with seven highly intelligent robots with no spaceship to fly to the stars.

The mission into deep space was highly dangerous, and NASA wanted to research the ability of sophisticated robotic life-forms that could have a chance of survival and return home, without sacrificing human beings. A whole range of scientists, engineers, medicos, psychologists, philosophers, computer programmers and many others spent a multi-billion dollar budget towards a goal which produced an amazing set of super robots. These were the new breed of Bio-Teks, with superior human characteristics combined with advanced technology.

The group consisted of four males, one female and one animal -a dog super robot. Somewhere along the design path, someone suggested a creature that would wriggle through narrow spaces and if necessary, repair faults or retrieve small objects inside the spaceship, that the larger creatures couldn’t manage, and Izaak the snake was created as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Bio-Teks were built, but the money suddenly stopped, the spaceship was scrapped, and five very expensive and intelligent near-humans plus two super animals looked around their laboratory and asked the scientists “Who are we?”, “Where are we?” And a short while later as their knowledge modules connected up with memory and energy cells, they asked

“How is it we know all this but we have no history of living?”

It took some weeks for the scientists to explain to them that their mission was cancelled and the bots were unemployed, so to speak.

The sophistication of these robots was so advanced that NASA realized it was a waste to have to put them in storage and so they were released to work and live among humans with full citizenship rights. Once a year they had to report to NASA for debriefing, to fill in reports of their experiences and have physical check-ups.

\* \* \* \* \*

Of their own decision, the seven banded together and set up businesses in a little street called Poppycock Place, occupying five adjacent shops. These shops also had two-storey dwellings built above and were rented by a variety of tenants. The tenants came from many different backgrounds, -singles, couples and families with their own personal joys and problems.

Italians, Jews, Africans, Europeans, Latin Americans were all represented, as well as trade-skills from professional to entertainers and ordinary workers. Generally the humans got on well with the Bio-Teks and accepted them into the community.

That morning, Botzi got a strange letter, a map apparently showing where a great Inca treasure was located in South America. He went around to see his friends working in the neighbouring shops next door. They gathered outside in the street discussing it. However, Alby Monk, the money lender was excluded from the gathering. He however watched with curious interest, from inside his shop window, a scowl on his face. Fungus his accomplice stood beside him, also staring at the group.

Out in the street, Noodles peered over Botzi's shoulder. "So do you think it's genuine?"

Botzi shrugged, "Dunno, the strange thing is, it's got instructions how to get to the valley where there's supposed to be a mysterious treasure and it's signed by somebody who calls himself a long lost uncle of mine, an old Uncle Reno Botzi."

"You have no uncles, you know that, Botzi!" frowned his mate Noodles.

The group of friends was now in earnest discussion. People passed them by with greetings, "G'day guys", "Hi-Five," but they only returned a brief acknowledgment.

"I know I have no uncle, Noodles, -none of us have uncles or any ancestors except the scientists who created us," mused Botzi, "but this map looks genuine to me."

"Well, are you going there to find out?"

"I'd like to but I got no money to travel such a long trip to South America."

Rory pitched in with a suggestion, "That's a shame, but you could get a loan and if you went and did find the treasure, you could easily pay it off later."

Botzi pondered, "And if I found no treasure, I'd go broke and lose my shop."

It must be said that the robots had true free will as well as computational power.

Botzi, the centre character was good hearted with a great sense of humour. It was no coincidence he was built to look a bit like a circus clown as this didn't affect his robotic abilities and his job included promoting cheerfulness on what had been expected to be a lonely space journey of a few years. Botzi was to have been the spaceship captain with Noodles acting as navigator. Noodles was strange, but still friendly looking. He was made of powerful amber-gold coloured magnetic rings that somehow hovered close to each other, but did not touch, and collectively they formed his body. But you could see straight through him, between the gaps made by the rings.

Rory, the co-pilot, was distinctly female with golden hair, rosy cheeks and a smooth chocolate brown complexion. A bright blue outfit contrasted with her shiny chrome shoes. Every effort was made to simulate the psyche of a woman including a high pitched screech that might shatter windows, both as a means of self defence and a warning siren. Later she was to find out that she had a great singing talent as well.

Banjo, the dog, could talk and think almost to the power of the others and so could Izaak, even though they had animal shapes and purpose-built animal instincts. The two soon became great friends and as they could communicate with other animals, they decided it

would be interesting to manage a pet shop. They had great fun acting as interpreters between parrots, turtles and chimpanzees.

Rory persisted, “Why don’t you ask Alby for a loan to finance your adventure trip. He’s a neighbour isn’t he? When he buys flowers from me, he always gives me a tip.”

Noodles and Botzi looked at each other. They knew Alby Monk was as hard as nails and he only put on an act with Aurora because he found her useful to have her on side, hoping to get gossip on what the others were doing. The robots initial start-up psyche was capable of further independent development, as humans are, and Aurora gravitated towards simple good-will, and trusted almost everyone at face value.

But as time went by, two of the robots, Alby and Fungus gradually drifted away from the input of ethics that NASA had taught them, among many other “super-skills”. Alby was ambitious and wanted to get rich quick. Fungus was the last to be manufactured, just as government funds were running out, and hence his intellectual circuits were not developed to the full extent of the others. Yet he was smart enough to choose what he wanted for a career and as he lacked sufficient ethical inputs, he felt comfortable in being an assistant to Alby. Fungus wanted to get rich quick too but just didn’t know how.

Alby was to be the ship’s engineer. He was designed all black so that on space walks he could absorb maximum solar energy into his batteries. This would give him longer work cycles during his outside space repair and maintenance missions. He also had to be tough, and good looks took a second place in his design. He looked tough, was tough. Some months after he left NASA, he took to wearing a tall black top hat, to look more business-like, so he thought, but instead appeared more sinister, like an undertaker.

Fungus was to be Alby’s assistant mechanic and general handyman for anything requiring attention during the space journey. Also, to simulate possible short and fat scientists in future missions, Fungus was built with these attributes to test for any drawbacks experienced by these body proportions. Not much physical disadvantage was evident in Fungus however, except that he was affected by budget cuts which came swift and caught the scientists unprepared. The computational/emotional/psychic modules used for the others were most expensive and the package for Fungus had not been started or even designed. Rather than lose the value of work already done on Fungus, the laboratory director ordered a brain package to be completed using what was left of the available components, even if some were outdated and underperformed under stress conditions. So Fungus was born, strong as a gorilla, but he could be unpredictable at times.

## Two (2)

### Poppycock Place

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**So there** they were, five new shopkeepers, together in a little shopping lane called Poppycock Place. If you stood in the street and looked from left to right there was “Banjo’s Pet Shop”, with cages of birds and puppies in the shop window. Next came Noodles “Travel Services” showing the usual holiday posters but also some curious mechanical things quietly rotating and whirring in a glass display cabinet. Noodles had a strong wish to be an inventor,

he repaired neighbours' watches for free, but secretly, in the back workshop, he was designing a machine to capture time. Noodles could turn on strong gravitational fields and he best understood the relationship between space, gravity and time.

Next shop belonged to Botzi. Botzi's big red jelly-bean body with a shiny black and red-striped pointed hat immediately radiated a figure of fun. He was very well liked, and regarded as a sort of local mayor by the people in the neighbourhood. He chose to run a "Mini-Supermarket". (He sometimes chuckled at this contradiction). He was interested not so much to make money, but to meet lots of people. Of course he was elected captain of the annual village fiesta. Folks went to him as a source of intelligent free advice on all personal and career matters.

Then came "Rory's Flower Shop". There was a genuine woman in Rory's make-up and she decided that since an engineering career was always available to her, she instead opted to surround herself with nature's beauty for now, as this aroused deep interest in her philosophical view that life creates beauty and beauty enhances life.

And last came Alby's shop. Thinking he would present his business with an image imitating some local banks, he decorated it in a Gothic look, (pointed arched windows, purple furnishings, heavy wood furniture, and gold lettering) to gain respectability. It looked odd but so was Alby. Alby wanted power, that is, to rule, to be above the rest, and one way to get there was to make money fast. He became a finance broker, share trader, money lender and even ran a pawn broker operation. He paid Fungus peanuts, but promised him a percentage of any big deals Fungus would bring to the business. Alby told him it was easy to get rich (to keep him on as a hopeful servant) and Fungus worked and dreamed of riches beyond his ability. The business was in a working-class area and was doing quite well as there were plenty of people who did not respect money and were always short. Nobody cheated Alby – one knock on their door or a stare from his big hulking frame was enough to make them repay what they owed, with interest.





Botzi and Friends survey the Treasure Map.

Three (3)

Ready to Go

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They stood on the footpath still huddled together for some time.

All three, Botzi, Noodles and Rory by now had a turn in holding the “treasure map”, as it was called, and Rory finally handed it back to Botzi. Banjo and Izaak played quietly around them, acting like a dog and a snake, as their characters were supposed to do.

A moment of thoughtful silence was broken by Pedro, who walked passed them wearing a cheeky grin. Pedro Lopez was a stage dancer who hardly ever walked when he could dance. A young Cuban, he was very popular in the neighbourhood having lived for some time with his sister, in one of the apartments.

“Yo, Jellybeans! You gettin’ ready for the Fiesta?” Pedro was chiding Botzi who incidentally, did look like a bag of red and yellow jelly beans. The village fiesta was due in six weeks.

Botzi smiled good naturedly, “You make sure I don’t dance your pants off, Pedro! I’m quick, you know.”

“But I’m better lookin’,” laughed Pedro as he disappeared, dancing down the street.

The Bio-Teks returned their attention to the map. Noodles volunteered a suggestion.

“I got an idea. There is a hot air balloon kit in the store at the back of my shop. If I can get it to work, we can all go and it won’t cost much money.”

Botzi replied, “But that would take weeks.”

“Two weeks only. Well, what else can you do if you have no money?”

Rory picked up some enthusiasm, “It’s worth a try, can we all go, Noodles?”

“I think so, it has a large passenger basket. I took it up years ago in a balloon race competition.”

Our happy crew did not notice that their excitement increased the attention of Alby Monk, still standing inside his shop. He stroked his jaw, deep in thought. Alby could be a mean, unhappy soul and often spoke in a sort of growl.

At last, Alby grunted: “Arrrrgh --I wonder what’s getting them so excited.”

Fungus offered an observation. “Something in that big envelope, maybe a letter, no doubt, is the cause.”

“No Fungus, it’s more than a letter, that’s a chart they have in Botzi’s hands. But a chart for what purpose? I smell an opportunity here. We need to know.”

“Shall I go and ask them?”

“Aaaaargh...No, stupid, I don’t want to show my interest. If that chart is leading to something that could make me rich, I want the full details. Fungus, take my long range camera up on the roof and take pictures of everything they’re looking at. Be quick and don’t let them see you.”

Fungus was quick to obey. “I’m on my way, Boss.”

Fungus did climb up to the roof, did get some clear shots of every sheet of paper Botzi was looking at, and did fall off the roof in his customary clumsy style. After some time, having

put his arm in a sling, he brought the camera over to Alby. He was embarrassed as usual when these things happened, as he thought he was a worthy and professional accomplice of the great Alby.

Fungus muttered an apology, “Er- just sprained my wrist boss, it’s nothing. -Got some good pics.”

Alby showed no sympathy. “Harrumph! Gimme the camera.”

He flicked through all the photos and took keen interest. “Have ‘em all printed, and enlarge the one about the chart. We might be going on a trip.”

Fungus smelled adventure, was this the big chance? He sprang into action, “Yes boss.”

Meanwhile, we find our friends in the little backyard behind Noodle’s shop, discussing the plans for this joint adventure. They all had a role to play. Banjo and Izaak were to be tracker and scout once they landed in South America. Noodles was the balloon owner and pilot, Botzi was the sponsor of the expedition, being the treasure map owner. He also volunteered one month’s food supply for the crew from his well stocked mini-mart. And Aurora would help in navigation and act as co-pilot to Noodles. (Actually she was also a qualified nutritionist and famous for her love of cooking.)

After an hour Noodles had his balloon unpacked. They gathered around impressed.

Noodles stated his objective. “Ok, here’s the plan. We’ll truck this lot to the local sports ground, load up with provisions and fire the burners. We start tomorrow at dawn, everybody agreed?”

A big YES! from the enthusiastic friends sealed the deal. They didn’t want to close their shops while they were away, so each one arranged for a friend or neighbour to take over for the month they expected to be overseas.

#### **Four (4)**

### **Down in Mexico**

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**The next** day, before sunrise, we find the flying quintet gathered in the balloon basket, drifting among the clouds. They were all gazing into the distance, fascinated at the colourful landscape below. Actually they had taken off not far from Manhattan and had a great view of the skyscrapers below them.

Rory commented on what they saw down in the canyons of office towers. “Look at those cars, they look like toys, especially the bright yellow taxis.”

Botzi was relaxed (a robot could be relaxed when in energy-saving mode). “It’s so peaceful up here, and no traffic jams. Look -we go from street to street across even the tallest buildings – no red traffic lights to stop us.” He gave a human-sounding chuckle. As the sun was still below the horizon, the city lights glowed bright and clear. “It looks like a giant jewel box,” mused Botzi.

Noodles studied his maps. “We have one stop in Mexico, to pick up gas for the burners, then it’s all the way to Aguas Calientes village in Peru, the start of our journey.”

Botzi enquired “Where in Mexico are we picking up supplies?”

Noodles replied “It has to be a pretty big town, but I thought why not Acapulco?”

Rory triggered her memory bank, “Oh, the beautiful beach city where Elvis jumped off a cliff in that movie ‘Fun in Acapulco’?”

Noodles smiled, “Yes, but we won’t be doing that, just spending a day to look around and relax.”

Botzi agreed, “Count me in, we’re not in a hurry. The treasure has been waiting to be discovered for a few hundred years.”

Rory asked a technical question, “How do you steer this thing, anyway?”

Noodles checked his burners as he spoke. “You don’t. You make it go up and down till you find a wind layer blowing in the direction you want to go – it’s a bit like sailing on the sea, we depend on the wind. We’re sky-sailors really -at the moment we are doing alright.”

Botzi was pleased “Well, I’m not sorry I didn’t have the money for the airfare. I wouldn’t be enjoying the scenery as much.”

There was a long period of quiet, with occasional “Ooh look at that!” and “What do you think is that?” breaking the silence. They were well over the country side, getting higher, as the day passed and the sun set in the west. Little towns started to wink their lights through the growing darkness. Up above was a beautiful canopy of stars and planets getting brighter and more numerous as darkness fell. Botzi, Banjo and Izaak went into sleep mode and Noodles and Rory took turns to watch their altitude and navigate.

Morning was also beautiful. The suns rays flowed like water drenching the highest parts of the earth first and then dribbling down into the valleys. A clear day finally arrived.

Noodles made a soft beep-like sound “Wake up boys, we’ll be landing in southern Mexico in a few hours. We’re making great progress, faster than I expected.”



The Gang enjoying their sunrise cruise over New York.  
“It looks like a giant jewel box,” mused Noodles.

The lads stirred and with some clicking and whirring, they fired up into active mode. Botzi unfolded his chart and studied it intently, with Banjo looking over his shoulder.

“You know, Noodles, my so-called Uncle talks about a treasure located on this map but in his instructions, nowhere does he say what this treasure is.”

“A treasure is a treasure. Let’s be grateful.” Noodles paused for thought. “I hope he wasn’t a nut, what a joke that would be.”

Botzi threw a pun in his reply “I don’t care how many nuts he had as long as they weren’t loose and had the bolts to hold them down.”

Noodles took the joke half-seriously, “You think he was an early development Bot? I can’t see he would be advanced enough to go exploring.” He frowned. “Let’s hope this isn’t a wild goose chase.”

Banjo offered another possibility. “Maybe he was a travelling scientist, one associated with our creation program, a ‘god-father’ to you Botzi.” They chuckled at this but did wonder at the truth of it.

Rory interrupted with an observation. “By my reckoning, our landing at Acapulco should be in three hours. Look you can see a road leading to the horizon – it must lead to somewhere.”

Noodles leaned over the side. “You’re right, our satnav co-ordinates are looking good, we are heading for the right place.”

But no sooner had Noodles pronounced the likely success of the mission when the gas burners started to sputter.

Noodles tapped his meters, hoping they would show a better fuel capacity in the gas bottles. “Oh no, we used more gas than I estimated! We’ll have to land right away.”

As the balloon slowly sank towards the earth, the wind changed direction and swung them away from where they wanted to go. Noodles, not wishing the balloon to be captured by a rogue wind, brought her down very quickly. As it happened there was a small village not far away, north of San Fernando, and they headed for it. The town appeared to be rushing up to meet them and Banjo got a little anxious that they were going to crash. But he underestimated Noodle’s skill in handling such an awkward craft. Noodles waited until he got a clear patch of flat grass right beneath them, and at about 200 metres height, he toggled the jet burners into a mighty roar spewing fire and hot air into the balloon. This made the balloon lighter in the cold morning air and braked its fast descent, so much so that the basket finally touched the ground with the gentlest of thuds. A loud cheer went up from the excited crew.

“YAY, HOORAY!” They wasted no time in jumping out and securing an anchor to the nearest small tree to stop the basket drifting along the ground.

Noodles was taking no chances with sudden gusts of wind. “OK guys, help me fold it away, for now, till we find a general store to refill our gas cylinders.”

They busied themselves with the folding and packing of the large balloon when, from a distance, two teenagers appeared to be running along the main road towards them. It wasn’t a very big town, and it had one main street, which was mainly deserted. The hot sun was slowly lifting into the sky. Noodles paused from his work and looked in the direction of the two teenagers. He could see they were a tall, lanky boy and a pretty girl with pigtails. They came to a halt next to our adventurers, their lungs gasping for breath, as if they had been running all morning.

## Five (5)

### Friends in Need

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**Both** Bots and humans looked each other up and down, wondering what the other was doing, their faces quizzical.

Noodles smiled. “What’s up hombre?”

The agitated boy cast a glance at the strange crew before him, decided they looked friendly, then stared back into the distance from whence they came.

“Please help us, we are in danger.”

Noodles was calm and confident. “What danger?”

The girl spoke. "It's a long story, but we have nowhere to hide and everybody in the village is too scared to help us."

Noodles was reassuring. "Let's sit under the shade of that tree and talk this over. You'd better start from the beginning."

They walked over to a shady tree and sat down, a bit like a group of picnickers and after looking them up and down, the boy said.

"Excuse my saying so, but are you people in costume or something? And how come I can see through the body of that Golden Man?" He was referring to Noodles who was built from a magnetic Titanium alloy and his body rings hovered just in the right place to give him his human looking shape.

The adventurers laughed.

Noodles explained. "We are bio-tek people. We have most human qualities plus extra powers. We were created to do good, but we can explain more later, as you seem to have an urgent problem?"

The girl was anxious. "It's our parents, they are in danger, father and mother are being held prisoners by Don Horrendez, the nastiest warlord in the county."

Botzi also put on an easy smile, asking, "And why is he doing that?"

The girl spoke hurriedly, knowing time was against them. "Our father was the town mayor and our family owned the biggest ranch in this county. We were living very happily, and father was well respected, until Don Horrendez came into town. After he locked up the Sheriff, he has been trying to force our father to sign the deeds to hand over our ranch to him, but our father refused Horrendez. Some time later Horrendez sent his men to take mother and father away. Father saw them coming – he opened the family safe, gave us our land titles and other papers and told us to run away. They took our parents and now Horrendez has sent his men back after us. We have been running for hours with nowhere to go and we saw you folks as our last hope."

Noodles asked, "Where are these title papers?"

The boy indicated over his shoulder "In the satchel on my back."

Rory said "Well, we landed here by accident. What is the name of this town?"

The girl was pleased that there was a female in this strange group. She gave a friendly look to Rory and answered her. "You landed in Locos Norte. It's only a small country town."

Noodles gave a sigh. "That tells me we might have problems getting gas for our burners. Where's the nearest big city?"

The boy replied. "You need to go to San Fernando, but that's about 100 kilometers away, through mountains."

Noodles looked into the distance. "And we have no car."

The boy explained the situation. "My father has a car and a van in our garage that you can borrow, but Don Horrendez's men are guarding the house."

Noodles motioned them to gather around him. “Folks, we need to have a discussion as to what we are going to do.”

They all came together and sat in a circle under the shade of the big tree. Both Noodles and Botzi agreed that something had to be done. They certainly needed transport to get fuel for the balloon and they couldn't just borrow their friends' car without helping their unfortunate parents. Don Horrendez's strange yellow castle was on the side of a rising hill, visible from the centre of town and just a few kilometres away. Don Pablo's house, however was set in the middle of a big vineyard and a few hours walk into the next valley.

It was decided that they should go to Don Pablo's ranch first and pick up Don Pablo's car and van. Next they would then drive to the castle to rescue the parents. Hoping for success, all of them would make a getaway to the nearest big city to tell their story to the authorities. Hopefully, the police or the army would come after Don Horrendez and his men and put them in jail.

Noodles concluded, “Well, first things first. We have to go to Don Pablo's house to get the cars. It's a long walk, but the town is nearly deserted, there is no other transport and we have no option but to walk there.”

Rory showed some concern. “But that's dangerous. How are you going to keep out of sight from Don Horrendez's men?”

“We'll take a chance.” Noodles turned to the teenagers. “You and your sister can stay here with Rory for protection. You can hide in that abandoned barn at the edge of the field. Botzi and I will go and get those vehicles.”

Banjo and Izaak, who were quietly listening to all this, started to show their excitement and Banjo spoke in an electronic ringing tone through his voice translator.

Banjo wagged his tail. “We want to come too, we can help!”

Botzi knew they would not take no for an answer and he thought it was no use wasting time arguing. “OK, but stay close to us.”

Noodles switched on his sensors to long distance alert. He immediately detected a moving vehicle far on the horizon. “There's a car in the distance heading our way. Quick, you people go and hide and leave this to us.” Aurora and the teenagers took off to hide in the distant barn.

After about ten minutes the car approached, driving slowly. It was a big, black limousine. Three occupants inside were carefully looking in all directions obviously looking for something or somebody. They soon spotted Noodles and Botzi and the car veered towards them, coming to a sliding halt on the dusty road. Two sinister-looking men, in black shiny suits favoured by gangsters, loped out of the opened car-doors, squinting hard under their black hats. In their arms they swung a double-barrelled shotgun, one to each man. They stopped in front of Noodles, puzzled at his appearance, and then turned to look at each other. They jabbered something in Mexican and although both Noodles and Botzi knew everything they said, because they were fitted with a language processor module, they pretended not to understand.



## Six (6)

### Bandits Dumb and Dangerous

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**The men** in black leered at the strange group as if they belonged to a circus. Finally one of the men tried some broken English.

“You speak American?”

Botzi confronted them, “Yes”

“Why you here? What is you?”

“We’re American Bio-teks on holidays.” Botzi pointed to their grounded balloon. “We have balloon trouble, no gas, no fly.”

The gangsters broke into a long discussion in Mexican and the bots listened to what they were about to do. In short, they assumed these were some kind of American robot cops who came over to spy on their criminal activities. Certainly they couldn’t go back to Don Horrendez and tell him they met some funny robots and let them go. So it was decided to take them hostage and let the Don figure out what he was going to do with them. One of the gangsters mentioned they might get a trip to the junk-yard car crusher in the next town and this set the two of them laughing.

Turning ugly and serious once more, both gangsters raised their shotgun towards the adventurers. “You come with us. –Now!” There was no mistaking the strength of the order as they pointed towards the limousine. But both Botzi and Noodles were relieved that at least they had distracted them from searching the old barn –that was good. Noodles looked at Botzi, with a faint smile.

Botzi arched his eyebrows, a sure sign of asking a question. But the bots had switched to radio transmission, a kind of telepathy, so as not to voice their intentions and be heard by the crooks. “Do you want to go first, or shall I?” was Noodles’ transmission to Botzi.

“I think I’ll have a go.” The bots were not talking about obeying the gangsters, rather they were tossing up as to who would be first to switch on their extra-human powers.

Botzi began to speak softly in highly-educated Mexican. The gangsters were taken aback, this was something unexpected. Botzi concentrated his eyes on the leader of the two and said to him, in a soft commanding voice. “Listen carefully. We are friendly, so put your guns on the ground.”

Botzi had turned on his power of hypnosis and gradually took control of the gangster’s mind. In a strange monotone voice, the leader said, “You are friends, we lay down our guns.”

The other man was startled by this and turned to his accomplice “Eh? Are you crazy?”

But before he could utter another word, Botzi was already staring at him, his eyes locked into his. “That’s a good idea, those guns are so heavy.”

With a surprised expression the Mexican muttered, “These guns are too heavy, I can’t hold it,” as he bent down to place his shot-gun on the grass.

Both guards now stood motionless staring into the distance with glazed eyes. They looked as if they were asleep standing on their feet, with their eyes open.

Botzi explained, "Noodles, the hypnosis lasts about 8 hours or until I clap my hands and unhypnotize them. We can have a problem though if the others wear very dark glasses as the driver is doing. I won't be able to penetrate their mind."

"Ok, we'll think of something -but if we are going to save time rescuing the parents, I thought we would use the limousine, - it's big enough and that driver can take us directly to the Don's place."

"What do we do with these two?"

Noodles improvised a plan. "First we need to capture and control the driver, then we'll talk to the teenagers about directions to the town jail and lock these two up. We'll use the driver to make our approach to the Don's place so as to look legitimate."

Both bots walked past the frozen gangsters towards the car but the driver, who after watching all that happened, had guessed there was something wrong and saw the two bots as a threat. He quickly wound down the car window and poked out a big revolver. Before Botzi could say "He's got a gun!", Noodles had already energised a magnetic wave at the driver and pulled the gun out of his hand. It flew into the air along the path of Noodle's force field and came to rest in Noodle's magnetic hand, which he'd morphed into the shape of a baseball glove.

What happened next was exactly as you would see in a funny movie. The driver, seeing that he was overpowered, jumped out of the car and ran towards town in a cloud of dust. Botzi, laughed and nodded to Banjo and Izaak. "Guys, you know what to do, bring him back."

Banjo needed no second request. Both he and Izaak, who had stayed quiet, watching with interest during the proceedings, went into one of their circus routines. Banjo of course was a bio-tek dog. His specialty was that he could run as fast as a racing car, and his bite was like a steel vice, impossible to loosen once he grabbed any part of you. He also had super hearing, which would come in handy later. He needed Izaak for this exercise and because Izaak couldn't run as fast, he would usually hitch a ride by wrapping himself around Banjo's body and travel with him. So, using this routine, the dynamic duo bolted down the street after the gangster driver.

Noodles and Botzi watched, as Banjo soon caught up to the driver, leapt into the air and tackled him to the ground in a swirling cloud of dust. Banjo clamped on to his leg and in a flash, Izaak acted like a strong rope and wrapped himself around the gangster, pinning his arms by his sides. Banjo, next bit off the man's shoes, chewed them to bits and spat them out as a demonstration of his biting powers. Banjo could also talk through his speech synthesizer and he told him to get up and walk back or he would chew him to bits just like what happened to his shoes. The man didn't argue, he knew he was in trouble so he walked back to the waiting group, with Banjo directly behind and Izaak coiled around the bandit, occasionally hissing into his face, just to show him who's boss.

As they approached, Botzi went across and took off the driver's dark sunglasses and smiled at him, Botzi locked into his eyes and said "You have nothing to worry about, we are friends, just visiting."

The driver acknowledged and stood still staring into space like his mates. “I have nothing to worry about, you are my friends.”

“Good. Now all of you sit down here. Just turn around and face the car.” Botzi made sure they could not see the barn. Then the bots all walked away towards the barn to discuss their plans with the others. It was decided that they would first lock the two gangsters in the local jail, which was at present deserted as the sheriff and deputy were also imprisoned in the basement of Don Horrendez’s castle. The driver, under hypnosis would continue to be their driver to the Don’s residence. But first they would go to Don Pablo’s house and take one of their family’s cars. Micalos and Josina, the teenagers, would take the van and drive to San Fernando, the nearest big city to the south-west. They would go to the city courthouse and alert the authorities to get police and army help as soon as possible.

## Seven (7)

### The Rescue Plan

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**It was** unknown how long it would take for the rescue forces to arrive from the big city, and the bots had no idea what a desperate warlord might do with his hostages in the meantime or even in the heat of the battle. Perhaps if they captured the Don, they could use him to order his men to lay down their arms and surrender. In principle this looked simple, in practice they knew the gangster boss wasn’t stupid nor would he give up easily. There was no point in going into too much detail as they did not know the plan of the castle or how many men were guarding it. All they knew was that it was a yellow-stone castle, very old and set in a large garden and surrounded by a high stone wall. On top of this wall was razor wire and electrified fencing. There were also savage dogs roaming around. Whilst the savage dogs could be managed somehow, climbing over the electrified fence pleased none of the bots as it risked shorting their sensitive electronics. Therefore a bold-faced entry through the main gate with their driver turned out to be a sensible decision, after all.

So the whole group went into action. They left the barn, Botzi approached the gangsters and ordered them to get in the car, and everybody then piled into the limousine. Using directions from the teenagers, they arrived at the county jail and two of the gangsters were marched inside. The driver was left in the limousine under hypnosis but Banjo and Izaak were watching him just in case.

Inside the jail, there were no keys to be found but the three cells were empty, all with their doors swung open.

Botzi pointed to the left cell and the two men entered. “How are we going to lock it with no keys?” he asked Noodles.

“No problem. Some strong magnetic force on the steel lock will flick it into shut position, but better than that, I’ll twist it from the inside to make it impossible to unlock, even with a key.” Botzi watched as a bolt of magnetic force actually heated the lock almost welding it into whatever Noodles had in mind.

To the men, Botzi said, “You two sit down. Relax here and be happy. You’re on holidays, Ok?”

The gangsters sat down and with an expressionless monotone voice said together “We’re on holidays. We can relax now.”

Noodles made for the door. On one wall he saw two guns and three pairs of handcuffs. He took the guns and buried them outside but kept the handcuffs to use later, if necessary. “Let’s go, we’ve got a bit of a drive to Don Pablo’s ranch.”

Botzi and Noodles decided that Banjo and Izaak should stay back and guard the balloon because if it were stolen or damaged that would destroy their treasure hunting travels and they had not enough money for return air fares anyway. Banjo was disappointed, but he agreed that the balloon had to be guarded.

Again they bundled into the limousine and Noodles stared into the driver’s eyes. “You know the way to Don Pablo’s ranch?”

“Si, Señor.”

“First take us back to the balloon then drive us to Don Pablo’s ranch, the quickest way.”

“Si Señor.”

Within five minutes they dropped off Banjo and Izaak and turned the car around. They sat in silence, all busy with their thoughts. Noodles was glad the teenagers would go to San Fernando and get help and so be out of danger’s way. If worst came to worst, all the bots were repairable, but it wasn’t so easy to repair natural born humans. Through pretty little valleys and around scenic hills the big black car wheeled its way along the narrow road until a Spanish mission style homestead, painted a rich yellow, could be seen partly hidden behind big green shady trees. It was still some distance away.

“That’s our home,” pointed out Micalos.

“Driver, hide the car inside that bushy area and stop there.” Turning to the others, “We need to check if it’s safe. Aurora, this is a job for you.” said Botzi.

Aurora knew what he meant. All the bots had wireless communication in that they could talk to each other silently and across the world if they had to, using the electronics in their head module. It was like telepathy for humans. Of course not many humans could do that at the time.

Aurora, Noodles and Botzi got out of the car and grouped together under a shady tree. The teenagers watched from the car wondering what was going on. Aurora was seen to be behaving a bit strangely, sort of doing a little wiggle dance with her feet fixed in one spot, like she was twirling a hula hoop. Micalos blinked and opened his eyes wider to see better as he thought Aurora was starting to take on a fuzzy outline. Not only that, it appeared that he was beginning to see through her.

“Josina, can you see that, or is it the shimmering hot air currents creating an optical illusion?”

His sister too, was amazed. “I see her, or I mean, I don’t see her.” Rory was now a faint outline and in a second, she was no longer there. Noodles and Botzi walked back to the car. Micalos noticed footsteps crushing the grass, making a line of repeating patterns. Something invisible was walking towards the house.

Noodles explained to the brother and sister, “Well, guys, Aurora is going to do some reconnaissance for us and check if there are any guards in the house. You stay here, while we do our plan.”

## Eight (8)

### House of Don Pablo

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**T**hey wandered down a little side lane towards the house and soon came to the entrance gate flanked by a high wall on either side. It was not locked, and Rory went ahead while the two mates stayed just outside in some bushes. Rory went around the house, looking through the window. Inside she could see one bandit sunk in a lounge chair, snoring, with an empty bottle of wine perched on the coffee table beside him. She came around the back door leading to the kitchen and it, too, was open so she tip-toed in. In the kitchen was another nasty character, also with a half empty bottle of wine, and sharpening his large hunting knife. “That’s two,” she thought. Expecting more, she looked into every room in the house but found no more bandits. Lastly, she checked the barn (only chooks scampered around) and the garage. There was a sedan, a van and an extra car probably belonging to the two bandits. Satisfied she’d found everybody, she walked back to the front gate and reported the situation.

Noodles didn’t hesitate “We’ll capture the one in the kitchen first, quietly so as not to wake the other.”

They sneaked up to the kitchen window and Botzi signalled he’d go in first and hypnotize him. Noodles nodded. But Botzi miscalculated. The kitchen bandit had decided to go outside and had put on his dark sun glasses. By the time Botzi walked around and faced him, he eyes were already shielded, deflecting Botzi’s power to hypnotise. The bandit took one look and knew Botzi meant business. In one quick motion he yelled to his accomplice and threw his knife straight at Botzi’s head. But Noodles was right behind Botzi. Noodles hummed like an electric motor and deflected the knife which dug deep into a timber post. Next, he swept his friend aside and with an even angrier hum, he pulled everything metallic off the bandit’s body. So, two guns, a belt buckle, and his jacket buttons ripped through the air into Noodles outstretched hands. Rory who had slipped past the bandit and was now behind him, picked up the heaviest fry pan from a hanging hook and wacked him on the back of the head, sending his sun glasses flying into the air. Botzi saw his chance and riveted him with his eyes.

“We are your friends, your arms are very heavy, your legs are very heavy sit down on the floor, don’t move, don’t speak.”

The bandit suddenly felt exhausted as if he was wearing clothes made of lead and he slumped into a heap on the floor just as Botzi had ordered, looking very weary. The one in the lounge was by now fully awake, but instead of bursting into the kitchen, he leapt upstairs and stood on the balcony, his guns pointing at the kitchen door. Noodles was careful but not careful enough, as he poked his head around the edge of a door a loud bang announced a flying bullet coming at him. The projectile went right through his cone-shaped hat and splintered into the wall behind him. His hat, like his body was a series of hovering rings made from a special

metallic material. These rings were kept apart from each other by a magnetic field but at the same time kept together as a whole to form his hat, body, arms and legs. Between the rings was empty space, so you could actually see through Noodles through the gaps between the rings. Each ring had electronic circuits and transmitted instructions to its surrounding rings. The bullet happened to shoot through a gap between the rings of his hat doing no damage. But Noodles was also quick on the defence. He almost glowed with power as he generated a maximum force shield around him, so strong that the rapidly firing crook was astonished to see his bullets deflected away from Noodles, into chairs, walls, and windows.

By the time Noodles had climbed the stairs towards the gangster, the bandit had run out of ammunition and was now fumbling and trying to load the next clip of bullets. Again, a magnetic pulse retrieved everything metal off him leaving him helpless. His gun, his hat with the metal star on the front and even his belt were jerked into Noodle's catching hands.

He turned to run, but his pants soon wriggled to his knees and he got no further than the outside staircase down which he fell like a rolling tumble weed. Botzi, meantime went around the back of the house and was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Here let me help you," said Botzi, "look at my eyes, you have to be more careful. You are very tired. Come with me to join your friend."

Again the man offered no resistance and followed Botzi to the kitchen.

"We'll tie them up and handcuff them, then put them to sleep for about eight hours. That should be enough time for the police to pick them up when they arrive." They found a wine cellar under the house with a steel lockable door and that's where the bandits were locked up, stretched out and snoring on the floor as if they were drunk. Noodles clanged the door shut, locked it and hid the key.

They signalled the teenagers waiting by the limousine that all was clear, and to come over. The youngsters decided to take the bandits' sedan and after packing some drinks and fruit took off to the big city to summon help.

The dynamic trio now had their work cut out for them. The hypnotised driver would drive them to a secluded spot near Don Horrendez's castle and park out of sight.

Whilst Noodles and Botzi waited outside, Rory would get out and change once again into invisible mode to get information about the place, the guards, the hostage parents, where the bandit Don was, and the layout of the rooms and report back. That was the idea.

## Nine (9)

### Horrendez Castle

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**It wasn't** long before their driver had them at the gates of the gangster's castle-mansion. He had been instructed to stop a little distance away, so Rory could get out and render herself invisible. This she did, and after some time reported back to the bots.

Rory re-materialised as she spoke. "Firstly, the parents and the sheriff are together, locked in a wine cellar in the basement of the castle, pretty much like the one we used at Don Pablo's

house. Getting them out shouldn't be too difficult. The problem is, there are four guards outside with dogs constantly monitoring each corner of the house, as well as two guards at the gate."

"What about Don Horrendez?" asked Noodles.

"The castle is only small and there are no bandits inside. There is another building behind it which is a big barn used as a garage. I looked in and saw there were no cars. It seems to me that the Don and his men have gone out on some kind of mission, and we have arrived at the best possible time to do this operation, as any other time, there might be a small army of bandits to have to fight."

"Let's get moving then," said Noodles getting back into the car. The plan was for the driver to present Noodles and Botzi as two robotic soldiers that Don Horrendez had purchased on a trial basis and Rory was to walk in again in invisible mode. Once inside the guard gate, the driver would ask the Bio-Teks to get out and demonstrate how these robots walk and talk so as to have a bit of fun. At the right moment when the guards were relaxed, Noodles would take their hardware and Botzi would put them to sleep.

The driver went through the gate and stopped in front of the gate guards. He was programmed by Botzi to say exactly what the bots wanted. Botzi and Noodles sat stiffly in the back seat staring out the windscreen just like dumb robots that have been switched off. What followed was a slapstick comedy worthy of Charlie Chaplin. It went something like this.

Driver "Hey, muchachos, look what I've got! Don Horrendez is buying some new soldiers!" As instructed, the driver ordered the robots out of the car and told them to walk around. Noodles and Botzi did so, staring straight ahead, waving their arms and goose-stepping as in a military fashion. The guards burst out laughing and made all sorts of jokes about dumb puppets. But when Botzi deliberately tripped and fell on his back waving his legs in the air as if he thought he was an upturned turtle, they were almost hysterical. Noodles, not to be outdone, deliberately walked into a nearby tree and stopped there. The gangsters could hardly catch their breath.

One gangster called out to the driver "Looks like we won't be losing our job for a while, har, har, har!"

"Don't ask for coffee, they'll burn the house down, heh, heh, heh!" rejoined the other.

"These are not soldiers, they're circus clowns, *payasos de circo!* The Don must have got them for entertainment."

The driver, again under Botzi's influence, called a halt to the shenanigans. "OK help me get them back into the car. I've got to take them into the house."

Gangster one went over to Botzi to help him up, but to his surprise, Botzi knocked off his sunglasses and smiled at him. "You are very sleepy, give me your weapons." The gangster didn't know what hit him. He did as Botzi commanded, handing over two guns and a knife, then stood up straight, looking into the distance.

Noodles, now motionless, was approached by gangster two. As soon as the gangster was near enough, a magnetic pulse stripped him of his weapons, and even some metal coins ripped through his pocket and clanged against Noodle's body. "What the hell is going on?"

exclaimed the gangster. He turned around to check what his mates were up to, and sees Botzi right behind him, again smiling. Botzi spoke softly, “You too, want to sleep. Stay still and follow me.” So now they had three gangsters under hypnosis. They marched the two guards and driver out of sight, to a nearby tree surrounded by bush. They were made to hug opposite sides of the tree and then handcuffed to each other, around the tree.

“OK,” said Noodles, “now for the four guards around the house.”

Rory had found the large kitchen in the house and went to the big freezer looking for a particular object. She found it – a large leg of ham. She put it in the large microwave, defrosted it, then shaved off bundles of ham into a bag. This done, she went out to the first guard dog and without the guard noticing (as she was still invisible), led the dog by the smell of the ham to a secluded spot away from the sight of the others. When the guard went after his dog, cursing his disobedience, he was surprised by Botzi and Noodles who soon overpowered him. They left him there, in a quiet hypnotic trance, holding on to his dog. His dog leash was clipped to his belt and the dog, with some gentle persuasion from Botzi accepted that all was well.

This operation was repeated successfully another three times and now the bots had unhindered access to the whole castle. Rory drove the limousine around the back of the garage nearby so it could not be seen from the house or the front gate, and prepared it for a quick getaway. Then she went up to the balcony of the house and set herself up to watch the road leading to the property gates for any newcomers. All seven bandits including the driver, were rounded up and escorted to the wine cellar in the basement where the hostages were kept. The guards with dogs brought their canines with them and ordered their dogs to behave, which was an order from Botzi anyway. Don Pablo, his wife, the sheriff and his deputy were astonished to see seven zombie-like guards marching towards them with four large dogs, one golden ringed robot and one shiny red robot at the rear. He couldn't speak for a moment as he tried to understand what was happening.

Noodles saw his puzzled face and after commanding the guards to stop, went to talk to Don Pablo.

“Senor Don,” he said “We are bio-teks who flew over from New York in a balloon, on our way to South America. Unfortunately we ran out of gas and landed in this little town. We weren't here long when your son and daughter ran up to us asking for help as they were being chased by some bandits. They told us what happened and we sent them to San Fernando city to get help, after capturing your family car. We have overpowered all the guards and are now here to rescue you.”

Don Pablo still speechless said softly, “Thank you. Are you sure the children are safe?”

“Yes, absolutely, they are half way to San Fernando by now. All we have to do is follow them and let the authorities come back with the army and police force. But do you know where Don Horrendez went? We have to be quick, in case he comes back soon.”

Don Pablo spoke. “There was some talk among the guards that he went to take over another ranch for his illegal activities. We don't know when he'll be back.”

Noodles looked around. “I don't see the keys anywhere, but no matter, a little magnetic manipulation on this primitive lock will soon have you free.” The lock clicked open as he finished saying this, and the hostages were let out.



Botzi directed the gang to go inside the cell. “Sit down on the floor and stay quiet boys and don’t get up till I tell you to. Tell your dogs to sit next to you.” They shuffled inside the wine cellar and Botzi closed the door.

Noodles ramped up some more magnetic power and did the same operation as before, fusing the insides of the lock so that it couldn’t be open, even with a key.

“Ok, let’s go.” Botzi led the freed people up the stairs into the kitchen and was heading for the back door, when he got a wireless message in his head from Rory.



Rory turned on her invisibility to enter the castle of Don Horrendez

**Ten (10)**

### **The Big Chase**

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“**Three** black cars are coming up the road,” warned Rory, “they don’t look friendly.”

“Head for the limousine. We’ll meet you there.” Botzi turned to the others. “Keep going, I’ve got an idea. I’ll go back and get the gang to create a diversion.” Botzi went back down to the wine cellar.

Noodles knew what Botzi was going to do and with a chuckle, he motioned to the others to follow him to the car waiting behind the garage.

Botzi skidded to a halt in front of the cellar's door. "Boys, I want you to do me a favour. Stand up straight and take a deep breath. Now, altogether, sing! 'Happy Birthday to you...Happy Birthday to Yooo..'" The gang formed a chorus. "Get the dogs to howl their best!"

"C'mon! C'mon! Old ladies can sing louder than that. RAISE YOUR VOICES !! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU....HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU...."

The gang complied, now bellowing out a big volume that blasted through two little ventilation windows high up in the cellar wall, so that the singing and howling could easily be heard around the house. Under hypnosis, they sang lustily as if their life depended on it, and with all seriousness.

"HUPPY BIRD-DAY TO YOoooo..." they sang, and the dogs picked up the lyrics, "OW-OOOOOO.."

"HUPPY BIRD-DAY TO YOoooo...", "OW-OOOOOO.." and so on. It sounded deafening.

"That's it, repeat over and over. Don't stop and keep it as loud as you can." Botzi by now was breaking into a smile as he bolted upstairs, dashed through the kitchen and headed outside for the waiting limousine.

In a short while all were in the big black limousine, except for Rory, who stood invisible at the front corner of the garage to check what will happen next. What did happen was that the lead car, also a big black limousine, screeched to a halt in front of the entrance staircase and Don Horrendez got out and looked around, followed by his men. He waited until the other cars had stopped and those occupants also walked up to him.

Don Horrendez's face contorted into a snarl. "Can you listen to that? I pay those idiots to guard the house –what happens? Nobody at the gate and they get drunk while I'm away. They'll regret this."

Bandit One (crawling to the boss): "You're right Boss, the sound is coming from the wine cellar –they're drunk alright."

Horrendez became threatening. "I'm going to whack their faces till their noses break off. I'll teach them a lesson. Half you guys follow me to the cellar, the other half get up on the roof and have a look around the property. The Don made his way to the cellar and was confronted with an amazing sight. All prisoner bandits and dogs were singing at the top of their lungs, but they were steady on their feet, they didn't sway from side to side like drunks do. He looked behind them and could see none of his hostages.

"Where's Don Pablo and the sheriff?" he roared at them. They gave no answer. In fact they didn't even acknowledge he was there –they kept on hollering and looked right through him.

His sidekick volunteered an opinion. "Something's wrong boss, they're not drunk, they're on drugs."

This infuriated Don Horrendez even more. "You have broken my number one rule –no drugs on duty! And you have lost the prisoners!! You'll pay for this trouble you caused me." He was growling in a very loud voice. "Leave them here for now, till I decide what to do with them. They're useless anyway." His anger could have been worse. It just happened that his birthday really was coming up soon –next week actually, and he thought they were practising

for that but they let things get out of hand. He turned to go back into the house and was nearly knocked over by a gangster rushing towards him.

“Something’s happened! Someone driving a limo has got away through the gate. We think it had Don Pablo and some strange men in it.”

The Don’s anger was now complete. “Aaaargh, Damn!!” He almost choked with frustration and picking up a wooden chair, he hurled it at the singers. It collided with the steel bars of the cell and smashed to pieces. The choir was unfazed, HUPPY BIRDAY to YOOOO....” and the canines “OW..OOOO!!” kept repeating over and over.

Don Horrendez heard gunshots going off outside and knew it was more trouble. He quickly staggered upstairs and ran outside, just in time to see a cloud of dust behind a car disappearing fast down the road. “Get the hell after them!” he roared.

While the Don was in the wine cellar, what happened outside was this. Rory, waited for the right moment when all guards were either inside the cellar or going up to the roof, then ran to the limousine and slammed the door, signalling Botzi to drive. They were already through the gate when the first bandits on the roof saw the car. In the time taken to realise who was inside, the car was already behind some trees and getting further away. They drew their guns and fired in the general direction, with little hope of doing any great damage, but they had to make a good show for the Don.

Don Horrendez, standing in the driveway, looked up at his outwitted clowns who stared back at him from the roof. “Get off that roof and get into the cars, you monkeys! Pancho! Zeppo! -You two stay behind and guard the place!”

With engines revving, and the Don scowling, the last of the roof-scouts finally tumbled into one of the limousines and before he could even slam the door shut, three car-sets of screeching tyres flicked pebbles, rubber smoke and dust into the air as the cars lunged down the driveway in hot pursuit.

## Eleven (11)

### Show-Down

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**Botzi** was in racing-car-driver mode. He handled the steering wheel not only by feeling the road as a normal driver would, but he was sending out radar signals to be able to see around winding bends and over the crest of hills in the road. This gave him a 5-10 km per hour advantage in speed as he only needed to brake when it was absolutely necessary. But of course, the bandits were reckless drivers and drove nearly as fast as Botzi. So the chase went on, sometimes all cars were in view on straight roads, and sometimes not, on curving sections. The odd gunshot from the gangsters assured them that this was a serious chase.

What was really scary though, was when several times Botzi had to screech down the winding sides of a mountain into a valley, and the bandit cars were visible on the road above them. The gangs wasted no time in shooting down the valley at the escaping car, but the roof was bullet proof. However, several bullets did pierce the bonnet and ricocheted around the

engine compartment. Botzi powered along, concentrating on escaping from the valley so that he could reach a straight run of highway ahead.

No sooner had he entered the highway, when he floored the pedal and roared away putting a good distance between him and the bandits' leading car. Some gangster in that car must have seen this and demanded more speed. The trouble was, the gangster car had one more bend to negotiate, and this was badly handled. The tyres screeched, the bandits cursed and the car shot over the edge like a spear, flying 30 meters into the river below.

Don Horrendez, in the second car, raged at their stupidity and bellowed to his driver "Let them swim for it, stupid asses -*asnos estúpidos!* Keep going! If we don't catch Don Pablo, I'll pull your ears off. He's going to the authorities, for sure!"

But, the incident put them further behind Botzi, and he was now just a dot on the horizon.

"I think we're going to make it," said Botzi happily, as the outskirts of the city came into view. There were people on the road now, going about their business, such that his car horn was blaring almost constantly. But it wasn't all that easy. A small hiss from under the bonnet of the car indicated something was wrong.

"Uh, oh – sounds like the radiator," said Noodles, "one of those bullets must have holed it."

"Well, we can't stop, we might get another few kilometers," replied Botzi.

But not even half a kilometre went by when, in a final angry hiss of steam, the radiator went silent. And, not long after that, the engine stopped, having overheated beyond the ability to go on. As Botzi manoeuvred the limousine to a gradual halt he looked over his shoulder and saw the gangsters approaching.

Noodles took charge. "Ok, you people get out -run and hide among those village huts! Leave this to Botzi, me and Rory." By this time, Rory was already half invisible. Don Pablo, his wife and the Sheriff ran for a hiding place.

The plan was to approach the gangsters, with Noodles acting as a deflecting magnetic shield to any bullets coming their way. Botzi walked close behind him, under his protection, waiting for a chance to lock his eyes into their eyes. Rory was to create a diversion to distract the gangsters from searching for the hostages.

Fearlessly Noodles walked towards the Don and a group of his men, now all out of their cars and menacing him with their guns.

"What iz dis?" sneered the Don at Noodles, "You Ronald McDonald gone crazy, hombre? What? -You're gonna knock us down with *hamburguesas?*"

Noodles kept his steady slow walk towards them. "Better surrender, you can't win."

This was like waving a red flag to a bull -to Don Horrendez. "Fire – mow 'em down!" A hail of bullets sped towards Noodles, but for some reason, some bullets seemed to just miss and did no damage, others stopped dead in front of him and fell down onto the road with a clatter, still smoking hot.

"Can't you fools shoot straight, *idiotas!*" barked the Don, "Here! give me that machine gun." The Don ripped the gun from the gangster's hands and sent a fusillade at Noodles' chest.

Noodles was prepared for this, having already ramped up his force-field to maximum. Again the bullets deflected to either side of him and most hit the stationary limousine behind.

“Aaaarrgh!” squealed the frustrated gangster Don.

Meanwhile, Rory had pulled an old shirt off a nearby washing line, pinning a \$50 note to the clothesline as payment, and ran to the last car. The car still had its doors ajar, the key in the ignition lock. She popped open the fuel tank flap, unscrewed the cap, soaked the shirt in fuel and threw it inside the car. Using the hot cigarette lighter, she touched it to the soaked shirt and blew strongly to initiate a flame. In a second the shirt caught fire and started to burn the seats. She whipped the key out of the lock, slammed all doors shut and locked them. Some doors had window glass not fully wound up and these gaps billowed thick white smoke

“Caramba, the car, she iz on fire!” screamed one of the gangsters.

“Go put the fire out!” yelled another, “The boot is full of big fireworks for the Don’s birthday party for next week!”

“I can’t get in –the doors are locked!!”

“Shoot the door lock, you idiot!” Six seconds of rapid gun fire punched a fist sized hole where the lock used to be and the gangster reached inside to pull the door open. The blazing heat burnt his hand and the door didn’t budge.

He recoiled with a sharp pain screaming, “It’s jammed, you try it!”

“No way, I’m outa here!”

This wasn’t said too soon as a loud bang blew the boot lid clear into the air. Then it was on. Crackers exploded, roman candles whooshed sideways, Catherine wheels hissed into the air and rolled down the highway and rockets snaked into the sky.

Don Horrendez stopped firing at Noodles and looked around in amazement. “*Santo caballos!* (Holy horses!), what’s going on?”

The fireworks had been kept as a surprise and he couldn’t understand what had happened. Most of his men were now scattering for cover and a remaining few looked at the Don for instructions. But things had changed in favour of our heroes. Firstly, Noodles forced a collection of all weapons from the standing gangsters and Botzi went around person to person, eye to eye locking them into a trance. One or two tried to swing a punch at Botzi, but he simply wacked their fist with his elbow in a super-fast action, that made them feel they had punched a brick wall. They were ordered to stand still, hands on their heads and stare at a distant tree.

## Twelve (12)

### **Handcuffs for You and You**

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**The good** news kept on coming. In the distance was heard the fluttering whump of two army helicopters, and sirens wailing of half a dozen police cars. Noodles turned to the Don “Either you hold out your hands to receive a pair of bracelets or we have ways of making you do so.”

“Grrr...rr!” scowled the Don. But he could see that resistance was useless and held his arms out to be handcuffed. “My lawyers will nail you for this, you piece of junk!”

“We’ll see,” smiled Noodles.

Within minutes, the city police chief and an army major with a full compliment of troops arrived on the scene, trucks and cars screeching to a halt in every direction, raising clouds of dust. Don Pablo, his wife and the village sheriff and deputy came out of hiding and went straight to the police-chief whom they knew. The army major joined them. After a quick explanation of who the bandits were, and how many, the army group fanned out and went searching through the whole area. The sheriff explained the whole story and what Don Hernandez was doing to their valley and its’ people.

Don Hernandez was bundled into a waiting police van, along with the hypnotized gangsters. Soon after, the teenagers arrived and went over to hug their mum and dad. The police chief, after being assured the Bio-Teks were genuine American balloonists who had run out of fuel, and how they played an important part in the rescue and even risked their lives, offered a patrol officer to drive Noodles and his gas cylinders to a fill-up garage.

The army platoon was also successful in finding and arresting the run-away gangsters and handing them over to the police. They then climbed into their truck and with the helicopters leading the way, drove to Locos Norte. They headed for the village jail and the houses of Don Pablo and Don Hernandez, to get the remainder of the gang out of the wine cellars and jail cells. Extra police cars and another custody van followed.

The teenagers took their mum home and Don Pablo offered to drive the three bots back to their balloon landing spot, after Noodles came back with the gas fuel. They had refused an invitation to stay for dinner, laughingly pointing out to the Don that bots took no ordinary meals and their efficient fuel cells lasted a month without re-fuelling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Banjo stood up as he detected a car coming in the distance. The sun was setting, but Noodles had radioed him to tell them they were not far away so Banjo would not get alarmed at the approaching car. Banjo had maintained the balloon as best as he could. Upon arrival, the bots were immediately busy, preparing for flight. They said good-bye to Don Pablo and he waited for them to leave. The roar of gas burners pierced the quiet evening sky. Luckily there was little wind and the big bag began to lift with the hot air in its belly. The cradle was upright and the bag flopped a little as it struggled to fill out, straining at the moorings.

“Ok, everybody,” said Noodles, “get in the cradle as we are about to blast off.”

They all did so and Noodles turned the burners to full-on. With an another jet-like roar of burning gas, the bag, now tight as a drum, began to lift and after one or two bumps of the cradle on the ground they were free and airborne. Noodles wasted no time in taking her up as quickly as possible, to about two thousand metres, then eased off the power to let her cruise with the breeze.

After all that excitement, the night was uneventful, the bots resting and gazing at the night sky, keeping an alert for shooting stars or bits of space junk that made the journey more interesting. Noodles kept an eye on his GPS and scanned weather forecasts on his mobile lap-top. He was now getting into his stride, sailing his balloon with expertise and great pride. He raised and lowered it, to catch the best breeze heading in the right direction, and noted with satisfaction what a good speed they were making.

\* \* \* \* \*

And the night passed, the dark inky sky shading to a lighter blue, and the stars fading into the ocean of light. Down below, deep shadows and lit-up peaks indicated they were flying over very mountainous territory. Colours of deep greens and blues signified patches of deep impenetrable jungles, pierced by rocky jagged outcrops. Noodles was a little worried that they may not find a suitable landing place. They were over Peru and it was now time to study the treasure map.

“At this speed and direction we should arrive at these map co-ordinates about mid-afternoon,” Noodles informed Botzi. “But I can’t guarantee we’ll land right on target, this mountain territory is pretty difficult. We may have to hike on foot some of the way.”

“I’m confident we’ll find it,” said Botzi optimistically, though he knew he was trying to put the best spin on it.

Rory joined him in his optimism, “I’m not fussed if we don’t find anything –we’ve already had one adventure and another coming up. What stories we have for our shop customers once we go back to New York.”

But to their dismay, mid-afternoon came and went and Noodles could not get the wind to push any harder, as it had dropped to a gentle breeze. At least their landing should be gentle, he thought. Noodles suddenly saw a clear patch. They were still some 50 kilometres from the exact landing co-ordinates, but rather than fly around all night and waste gas, he decided to land the balloon and tie her down upright using minimal gas, so as to be ready to go up again in the morning at daybreak. Hopefully they would also get a more favourable wind. The others agreed and an anxious landing was navigated through the tree-tops to the ground.

The bots were reasonably temperature insensitive as their bodies were made of a special Teflon formula, tough against heat or cold and their circuit temperature was kept constant by tiny inbuilt temperature conditioners (like air-conditioners but sealed and waterproof, venting through microscopic holes in their skin, like humans do). Noodles was different, but also fully weatherproof.

They decided to build a campfire, not for warmth, but for feeling cozy, and to ward off any large animals prowling around. Rory slept in the balloon basket and the others sat around the camp fire, switching their systems to sleep mode to conserve fuel. Conserving fuel was important to them as in the jungle, they would not have the luxury of plugging in every few nights to special power points available back home in their shops.

Botzi volunteered to keep using his full radar alert in case something approached them. Everything was still, the bots sitting like Buddhists, steady and motionless with eyes closed. Botzi meanwhile was in semi-sleep and his processors were constantly analysing the sounds of the jungle night.



The balloon sailed over some very wild and rocky places

**Thirteen (13)**

**Wonderland at Night**



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**The forest** began talking through the night, its' plants and creatures making little noises, each clear and distinct in the general stillness. Crickets dominated, with their "Chirp! Chirp!" keeping up a constant rhythm like somebody shaking a gentle beat with maracas. An odd howl or woop-woop sound, deserved more attention, but as it was far enough away, it was no cause for alarm. Occasionally, a twig snapped, but was this a falling branch? An approaching animal? Or a large frog leaping from place to place? The forest formed dark enclosing walls around them, almost impenetrable, and left only a hole in the tree-canopy above, to expose brilliant white diamond stars, so beautiful, they mesmerised the star-gazer into soft, fancy dreams.

This balance of darkness, stars, and gentle forest sounds went on for some hours. The camp fire was now down to orange embers and no flames danced past the dark wood that had turned to charcoal. The fire glow had died down to a dim haze but then again, the surrounding plants and trees looked more defined than they should be. In one particular corner of the clearing, a strange light was softly appearing as if out of nowhere and was taking the shape of a purple donut, about a meter wide and floating about a meter off the ground. And dawn was yet hours away.

Botzi's sensors picked up the variance in light and he slowly opened his eyes and watched the floating ring. He was curious and not a bit afraid and decided he would not use any extra powers in case he might destroy or frighten whatever this phenomenon was. Soon, several insect-like creatures that looked like large dragon-flies flew around and through the ring. The amazing thing was, they were taking on a bluish glow, but there was nothing around that looked like fireflies. More dragon-flies were attracted to the ring, which now lit up the forest floor.

Botzi next saw something astonishing. Six pixie-like creatures floated out from the dark into the clearing. Each of these pixies was riding on the back of creature like a sea-horse. But this was no sea and these little horses were bobbing about in the air, their riders mounted on their back. By rapidly fluttering their wings just as a humming bird keeps itself flying in one place, they nudged around into a formation.

"What next?" thought Botzi. He switched his left eye to digital camera mode and silently filmed the proceedings. He decided not to wake the others just yet as surely this would destroy the whole scene.

The pixies formed a guarding circle, hovering under the purple ring of light. A new red glow was emerging from behind the dense jungle and a small figure riding a cat-like creature moved into the circle, closely followed by four others. Botzi could make out this was some sort of leader and maybe they had gathered to do some ceremony. In fact he was looking at a rare sight. This was the King of the Forest Life-force. Everything that was good and alive was under his care.

He settled disputes and accidents and made sure that all forest plants and creatures lived happily in a wonderful harmony. Every living thing paid him respect and was happy to play its role under his guidance, and together they supported their forest homeland.

The group had a glow around them, indicating some sort of spiritual energy. They dismounted their cat-like horses and gathered around the king. They had flowing robes, like

mediaeval lords, and long flowing hair, but only their leader wore some sort of silver crown, as well as holding a glowing stick, topped by a lion's head.

Botzi detected they were beginning to talk about something. It was a weird language spoken in tiny voices. He wasted no time in analysing the meaning of the sounds and processed them into English, his preferred operating voice. Botzi listened –the king was speaking.

“The consequences of that earthquake we had last week have put the whole eco-system and our kingdom in great danger. The earthquake was small, but it cracked the entrance to the lair of Pan Everos, ‘The Destroyer.’ We suspect that he has escaped from his prison.”

There was great dismay on their faces at this catastrophic news. The king went on:

“Pan Everos is over two hundred years old and may live another two hundred but under the terms laid down by the Great Creator we are not allowed to kill him. The last time Pan Everos escaped from his permanent underworld was fifty years ago and those of you old enough can remember what happened then.”

The oldest of the King's associates spoke. “It was a terrible time, O King. The plague ruined more than half of this green paradise.”

The king continued “Yes he started the plague and controlled it, in order to starve every living creature who wouldn't submit to him as his slave. He wanted to conquer the world.”

A younger one of the four spoke bravely, “I'm ready to get my clan to fight, O king, what do we do?”

“You can't fight Pan Everos, because he's difficult to see and he doesn't fight in person. He lets his wizardry fight for him.”

“He's a wizard?” asked another, “Has he magic powers?”

“No greater than what we have,” said the king, “In that he can talk to trees and creatures and persuade them to follow him. He has shown great skills especially with insects.”

“Then united we can defeat him!” exclaimed the younger one.

“Not so easy,” replied the king, “he can hypnotize insects to do his bidding and we are defenceless in breaking their hypnosis.”

“So what's a few insects against our collective minds? We can focus on putting them to sleep and ask the insect-eaters to dispose of them.”

The king sighed, “The plague was huge, it was impossible to stop. We were doomed, except for a heavenly chance that happened just in time.”

“If it please your majesty, what was the plague and what happened?”



Botzi saw a ring of hovering blue lights as the pixies formed a circle around the red light of their king.

#### Fourteen (14)

#### Botzi offers Help

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**By now** Botzi was extremely interested. He was recording all this, but a little puzzled as to why these forest people had not yet detected his presence. Admittedly, he and the others sat motionless, without any sound and they could have been mistaken for strangely shaped rocks by anybody who had never seen a Bio-Tek. Botzi listened on, as the king told his story.

“The plague wasn’t a disease. Pan Everos hypnotized hundreds of queen fire-ants. He induced them to breed rapidly. Within weeks, they multiplied into billions, eating and killing every living thing. Anyone who didn’t pay him homage and submit to his rule was destroyed. He was power-mad, he wanted to rule the world. But Everos made one big mistake.”

“What happened?” asked Kirmon, in a hushed and worried tone.

“Everos planned to conquer the southern tribes of the giants first.”

“The human Indian tribes?”

“Yes. So he took his army of ants into the great valley of the giants through which flows the Oranji River. The humans saw the ants coming, and knew they could do nothing. As the ants marched down the sides of the valley the humans could see the green forest turn to brown as the ants ate all plant life and just left the brown soil. Every animal was running ahead of them, trying to escape. The humans left their huts, taking all they could carry and fled, climbing up over to the other side of the valley to get away. Some humans left it too late and perished under a thick blanket of ants.”

The king stopped for a moment, as if to gather strength to go on speaking about the tragedy.

“Pan stood atop the ridge of the valley behind the fighting ants, mentally directing the lead soldiers where to go and what to do. He was laughing like a demon, because he knew the humans couldn’t run forever, and it was a just a matter of time before every creature surrendered or be eaten alive. In his maniacal glee he didn’t notice grey clouds coming together, high above. The forest was used to frequent rain as this abundance of water grew luxurious plants and herbs. But this was no ordinary cloud gathering. Once in a lifetime, the forest is flooded out by heavy rains and his happened to be the time. Rains fell, so heavy, almost like a waterfall, that you couldn’t see your hand in front of you.”

Again the king paused. He thought he detected something unusual in the clearing, but hearing nothing, continued his story.

“Pan lost contact with the soldier ants. In fact he couldn’t even see them. The rain crashed even more heavily, the water rushed down the sides of the valley, ripping up naked soil and turning it into mud. The river at the bottom of the valley started to roar with flood waters. It went on for twenty hours more. Every ant, billions of them, was swept in the deluge down to the raging river which carried them all to sea. Thick mats of ants floated to the ocean but the sea broke them up and they soon drowned. Gone! -Each and every one of them.”

The king sighed with relief as if he was re-living the nightmare once again.

“What happened to Pan Everos?”

“Pan was now powerless and he knew we would go after him. He thought the best place was for him to retreat to his cave. But we suspected that too, we were waiting for him. There was a hundred of us who took him prisoner and forced him back into his under-world. Then we sealed the cave entrance once again to last a thousand years.”

“Until last week’s earthquake,” joined in one of the elders.

“That’s right,” continued the king, “we believe he got out and would seek vengeance.”

“Can’t we band together and catch him?”

“Not if he takes control of dangerous insects, by then it would be too late. We don’t know where he is and he could be hatching evil right now.”

The elfin group continued to discuss the problem, arguing the merits of many strategies to save the forest, but each had advantages and drawbacks and none was guaranteed. It was understood that to expect a coincidence of flood to save them as happened last time would be wishful thinking. Besides, Pan would be smart enough to keep his insect troops high up in the trees till the storm was over -he would not be caught again in that regard.

Botzi felt sorry for these good-minded forest guardians and he searched his in-built databank to research whether he had any information on these folks or the events they had described. He was unsuccessful as the scientists who programmed him didn't believe in fairies and thought such information was a waste of time. He had an idea though. He possessed a powerful hypnosis generator and most likely could challenge Pan Everos mind to mind, but would that be enough?

In any case, Botzi thought it was time to offer help. He was careful not to frighten them so made his presence felt in a gradual manner. Using their language, he said softly across the dark clearing.

“Good King Andorian, I have listened to your story, maybe I can help.”

The king turned around, startled, staring at the direction of the voice. His subjects did likewise.

“Is that the voice of the Earth-Mother God, your majesty?” said one with reverent awe.

The King spoke, still a little suspicious of the voice. “Who are you and where did you come from?”

It was time for Botzi to turn on the spherical light atop his cone-shaped hat. A soft pink glow revealed him sitting on the ground, with Noodles also sitting beside him, staring into the darkness, motionless. Banjo was flopped on the grass, and Izaak curled beside him.

## Fifteen (15)

### **Bio-Teks Meet the Spirits of the Forest**

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**Upon** discovering so many strange creatures grouped together, and actually larger than the giants, (as that is what they called the native tribes), the whole fairy group showed alarm and froze in their tracks. The flying horse riders lined up as a shield in front of the group as if expecting attack, to protect the king. Botzi spoke softly in a calm, friendly manner.

“We are travellers from the North. We are resting for the night and will soon be on our way again. But in the meantime, I was very concerned about this Pan Everos and your frightful dilemma. Maybe we could help.”

“How do you know our language and what species are you?” asked the king.

“We are half robots and half human. I myself have special language abilities.” The elves looked at each, puzzled, searching for answers. Obviously, Botzi thought, they have not ventured outside their forest into the scientific world of the Northern Continent. Robotic people meant nothing to them.

“How can you help us?” The king asked cautiously, wondering about the offer.

“I don't know yet,” replied Botzi, “we need to get together and discuss this in more detail.”

Botzi approached them casually keeping his face relaxed and friendly.

In order that the king and his people would not get alarmed to discover there were more of these strange creatures, Botzi introduced his other friends and mentioned something of their powers. He told them there was another robot that could make very strong push and pull effects on metal weapons, handy for disarming enemies. The other was a female type robot who was able to make herself invisible. And lastly, a dog and a snake who worked together and performed amazing tricks. The good thing about it all, was they were tougher than humans, could communicate without words, and could go for a couple of weeks without their food energy, either sunlight or electricity.

Botzi motioned to where his friends were sitting. The king could see them all except for the girl who was at rest (sleeping, in human terms) in the balloon cradle. He was expert at detecting evil auras around people who had bad intentions, and could even judge what degree of evil they were, but in the case of Botzi, he could detect nothing sinister or suspicious. Normally, the king would not have stayed around one moment longer if he detected the presence of the giants. It was safe and sensible not to let the giants know of their existence as he knew they would be hunted for curiosity and profit.

Botzi gave a gentle signal to Noodles and switched him to active mode. To make sure Noodles would not get a big surprise, he quickly gave him a briefing of all that he had seen and heard. Noodles quickly stored the facts in his memory. "Move gently Noodles, look around, you'll see me with some friends. Come over slowly, and wear a big smile."

Noodles, came to life and did as Botzi advised. He was soon close to the group and their king and they could see him clearly. "You are stranger than your friend," said the king, pointing to Noodle's body made of shiny gold rings, hovering a few centimetres apart from each other. "Er, magnetism keeps his rings together, your majesty," explained Botzi.

Noodles smiled at the whole group "Hi folks, I'm Noodles, pleased to meet you." Botzi continued the introductions. He sent a similar message to Rory and shortly they could see her approaching, also smiling.

"Hi I'm Rory," she said trying to make conversation, "we had to come down for the night due to unfavourable winds. We sail through the air in our balloon machine."

At these words, the pixies looked a long way down the clearing and saw this strange shape, very, very tall, reaching up to the sky.

"What is that," asked the king pointing to the balloon.

"It's not magic," assured Botzi. "It's just a big bag which we fill with hot air and it lifts into the air to take us on our journeys. But like a sailing ship, we depend on good winds to take us where we want to go." He waved his hand towards where Banjo and Izaak were at rest. "And our last two friends are a dog and a snake."

At the mention of the word snake, the pixies showed concern, as this was a symbol of evil to them. Botzi detected the alarm and said, "You know snakes are living creatures like the rest of us. They just want to mind their own business. Banjo and Izaak are not ordinary creatures, they are not aggressive and very intelligent. Also you can talk to them, as they too have language processors." As he was speaking he switched on both of his remaining friends and they woke up and shuffled amiably towards them, curious as to what the fuss was about.

Banjo, a big grin and tongue hanging out, disarmed their fears. Izaak took the funny road and sucking his tail, turned himself into a giant wheel and did a few spins in the air. That certainly broke the ice.

Botzi and Noodles laughed to show they were comfortable with the situation and the king bade them to sit down so they could communicate closer at their eye level.

The king spoke. "We don't have much time. When daybreak comes, Pan Everos will be building some kind of disaster system."

Botzi asked "Does he have any soldiers or servants?"

"No, he works alone, but he can command the creatures of the forest, which gives him his fighting power. Last time he wiped out the Grand Valley with an army of billions of fire ants. There was no stopping him except for the flood."

"Does he have supernatural powers?"

The King explained his powers were not unlimited but, "He can live for hundreds of years, and has a strong will to command creatures to do his bidding but is not himself a warrior. If his mind can't control you he will run and hide to catch you unawares on another day. But never underestimate him, he is very cunning."

## Sixteen (16)

### Everos Attacks

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**For about** an hour, the robots and the pixies talked at length, discussing many things, about the kingdom of the little people, their customs and their work as guardians of the forest. How Pan Everos was once one of them, a troubadour going from clan village to village singing for a living. But early in life he discovered he had a powerful ability to hypnotize and being greedy, would put people to sleep and rob them.

This criminal act was upsetting a lot of people, but their anger hit a peak when he started to kidnap children for ransom money. This was unpardonable and the village elders decreed that he be imprisoned for the rest of his life, because no one knew how much damage he could do to the whole community. They decided to ambush him and put him away but Pan Everos wasn't done yet. He collected a large swarm of mosquitoes and as the pixie soldiers went deeper into the jungle, the bites became so bad they had to retreat to fight another day.

So finally, being fully wrapped in mosquito netting and carrying heavily smoking torches, a volunteer search party finally cornered him in a clearing. Their shields were not to protect them from arrows or swords as Pan Everos was no soldier. Instead their shields were polished mirrors with which they formed a circle around the evil pixie. As the circle closed in tighter around him, he turned on his powerful hypnotic gaze but this was his undoing. Hundreds of hypnotizing eyes, his own, put him in an immovable trance. While thus frozen, four soldiers jumped out of the ring and pulled a hood over his head and tied him with ropes. He was carried to the Cave of the Underworld and released, still in a trance. Great rocks sealed up the cave except for one little hole, through which an exploding firecracker was

tossed in then the hole finally sealed. The purpose of this was to snap him out of his trance, so he could wake up and earn a living in the underworld, among all the bats, rats, snakes, lizards and other creatures of the dark. It was forbidden in the laws of the forest to destroy a helpless enemy, and therefore they had to stop him as best as they could, without killing him.

“He’s not so silly as to be trapped by mirrors again,” said the King, “we have a more difficult task this time.”

“But we have the element of surprise,” added Botzi, “He’s never seen the likes of us, and maybe we could draw his attention to attack us first. This could give us some precious time and delay him destroying the forest plus giving us a chance to ambush him.”

“Well, what do we do, now?” asked the king.

Botzi laid down a practical plan. “Your majesty, spread the word quietly amongst all your subjects to be on the lookout for anything unusual in the forest and to communicate immediately to your lieutenants who will report to you. I will give you this little device for you to use to be able to speak to me across distances. It’s called a mobile communicator. In the meantime, Noodles and I will go up in our balloon. We will tie it to a tree so it won’t drift away, and once up there we should get a good view of the area.”

Noodles was a bit concerned. He wasn’t sure how much fuel gas this might take and whether they would have enough to fly the balloon home. But he was game to have a try. Rory, Banjo and Izaak would stay on the ground to save weight and fuel, and to guard the balloon’s mooring. So they went into action, helped by the approaching light of a dawning day.

The king sent out instructions, which rapidly spread throughout the forest, to be on the lookout for what was about to happen. He bade a temporary farewell to the robots and went back to his kingdom. Botzi and Noodles wasted no time in preparing the balloon and lifting it into the air. It drifted up about 200 metres higher than the tallest tree, which happened to be nearby.

Up in the sky, swaying in the cool fresh morning air, the Bots searched intently down below and far to the horizon for clues as to where the battle would begin. Everything seemed peaceful as the golden rays of the sun sneaked through trees and ferns, reflecting flashes of light off the glistening dew.

Noodles did his best to use a minimum of gas but he had to warn Botzi, “If nothing happens by mid-day, we’ll have to put her down, or we will be in trouble, -we won’t have enough gas to search the treasure and get back home.”

Just then Botzi pointed due East, squinting into the rising sun. “See that –a strange cloud is coming off the forest tree-tops.”

“Yeah, it’s changing shape all the time, and sometimes it’s thick and sometimes you can see through it.”

“It looks like a giant swarm, Noodles.”

“It does, -but a swarm of what? And would this have something to do with the work of the evil Pan?”

By the minute the swarm was growing into the size of a small mountain, rising ever higher into the sky. The bots realised this was no ordinary swarm, and highly likely that Pan had



something to do with it. They could even hear a steady buzzing sound, gradually getting louder, indicating that it was heading their way.

A moment later, a chime on Botzi's phone indicated a call. It was the king, "Hello friends, we are in more terrible danger than before, there is no escape, as they can fly and follow you no matter where you go."

Botzi knew he was talking about the flying swarm. "What are they, and what's happening to your people?"

"They are killer bees –no-one can stand an attack of a hundred of them and there are millions. Our people have managed to hide in caves for now and are lighting smoky-fires to keep them out but it's only a matter of time."

"We can see the swarm," replied Botzi, "and they're coming our way. Don't worry -no insect can penetrate our armour-skin. We will do battle with them."

## Seventeen (17)

### Noodles Fights to the Limit

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**At this** point, Botzi and Noodles did a quick hook up to a satellite data bank and rapidly searched through information on killer bees. They listed characteristics and options for control and soon they came up with a plan. Noodles exposed the maximum amount of solar skin to the shining sun to soak up as much energy as possible for what was about to happen.

Noodles was absorbing so much energy, he actually begun to hum like a spinning top. Botzi never saw him like this before and was worrying about how this force-field that Noodles was to deploy might destroy his own sensitive electronics.

Noodles read his mind. "Don't worry, Botzi, here plug this cable into your energy socket and that will keep you neutral, that is, shielded from any magnetic power."

Botzi took the cable hooked to one of Noodle's power sockets and plugged it into one of his own. Instantly he felt relief as the magnetic pressure was already building up, but now he felt normal again.

Noodles gave him some instructions. "You take over the balloon and fly it into the middle of that swarm while I generate a network of magnetic forces."

Botzi wasted no time. He radioed Rory to loosen their anchor rope immediately, and after he checked they hadn't snagged any branches he took the balloon higher into the sky.

Botzi's job was easy as the balloon did not have to fly much of a distance –the bees had already been given a purpose – to attack the balloon, and they were approaching like a freight train –fast and furious.

The buzzing noise of millions of bees was incredible and the bots adjusted their sound inputs to filter it out so they could easily communicate.

“Here they come!” exclaimed Noodles. A moment later the cloud mountain of bees, so thick that you couldn’t see past your hand, was all around them. Botzi and Noodles were carpeted with a layer of stinging bees about 6 inches (150 mm) thick. Botzi could see they all had their stingers out, ready to hit them again and again. But interestingly, he noticed that those bees trying to fly through Noodle’s hovering rings dropped dead in a flash as they were zapped by great force.

Not only had Noodles’ humming increased to the wail of an air raid siren, he even vibrated like a tuning fork, which was exactly the effect he wanted. Botzi hoped he wouldn’t break the neutralizing cable between them as he would suffer damage for sure. Then he began to notice strange things. Firstly the whole mountain of bees had concentrated around the balloon, but as it drifted, the bees kept away from it, not wanting or being able to touch it or the bots. In a short while the balloon had a halo of clear space inside this bee mountain, and Noodles instructed Botzi to take it up 1000 metres. The bees followed as if attracted by honey. Then after a few more gestures and manoeuvres, Noodles was satisfied that he was in control.

“Take her up another 500 metres, Botzi.” This time the bees didn’t follow them but stayed at their level, high in the air. As the balloon drifted up, it slipped through the cloud of bees, and was in clear air. “Head for the coast, Botzi.”

Botzi, still wondering what Noodles was doing, found the right air-stream towards the ocean and the balloon picked up the pace in that direction. He looked back to see a giant sphere, sometimes black, sometimes shiny, hovering in the distance. This sphere contained the millions upon millions of teeming bees, pulsating as one, like a giant heart. He noticed the sphere seemed to follow them.

Noodles’ screaming hum and vibrations had now subsided, although he was strictly focussed on this wobbly cloud of bees moving slowly as if tethered by an invisible rope to the balloon.

Botzi thought this was an opportunity to ask. “Hey, Noodles, what’s happening?”

Noodles held up his hand to signify “Wait a moment.” and said nothing. For a further fifteen minutes, now having travelled seaward enough for them to see the waves breaking on the shore below, Noodles maintained his concentration without saying anything. He indicated to Botzi to fly further out to sea, for another half hour, in fact. The swarming cloud followed them, not far behind.

Botzi obeyed his instructions, until land was a faint blue ribbon on the horizon. Next Noodles hummed again but not so loudly this time. His arms stretched out towards the sphere of insects. With a final flash of light from Noodles’ transmitting hands towards the sphere, he turned to Botzi and indicated to go up higher and find a wind back to land. Botzi burned more gas and the balloon rose until they caught a fresh breeze. It was a strong wind and the balloon sailed back as if it had motors. This time, Botzi saw the sphere of bees a long way below and out to sea. It was now getting smaller as they drifted away, indicating that it was stationary a few hundred metres above the ocean.

Noodles looked at Botzi and smiled, “Now to answer your questions. What you saw was a magnetic entrapment and control of a plague of insects.”

“How did you do it?”

“First, I picked up the communication frequency of the queen bees and interfered to take command, a bit like hypnosis. All the other bees had to fly around the queens. The queens flew in a tight circle making up the centre of attraction. When they had attracted every newly hatched killer bee, then it was a matter of tidying up the messy mountain of bees into a more balanced sphere for easier towing out to sea.

“How did you get them into a sphere?”

“By sending out magnetic force-fields and wrapping them around the bees to form a giant beach ball -a bit like using masking tape, as well as tightening here and there to get a perfect shape. The bees could not fly through the fore-fields because of unpleasant shocks to their nervous systems, so they could only fly in very limited space inside the sphere.”

“Why is the sphere standing there?”

“The sphere now has an invisible hard shell of ionised air kept intact by the strong static electricity generated by the bees. We towed the sphere to sea by my magnetic pull. When we arrived far out from land, I snapped this “attraction rope” –that was the flash you saw. The sphere will now stay there, and gradually dissolve into the ocean”

“Dissolve? What do you mean?”

“Within 2-3 hours, every bee after flying for so long and colliding countless times into many other bees will be exhausted and sink to the bottom of the sphere. By the time most bees have stopped flying they will have gathered to die in a solid crush filling more than half the sphere. This will cause it to sink slowly into the ocean and any bees still active will drown.”

“Every bee? Is this ecologically a good thing to do?”

“Yes, remember this was above nature’s control, like a locust plague that eats all the food of other creatures. These plagues harm the balance of nature. Besides, the bees are not wasted, no chemical was used and the fish are going to have a party. This will benefit the fish population which is under threat.”

Noodles pointed out to sea. “Look Botzi, see how the sphere is now near the water? See all those silver flashes around it? They’re flying fish, waiting for a feed. Soon the water will de-magnetise it and it will collapse.”



The balloon sailed away from the swarm of trapped bees.

“Soon the water will de-magnetise the sphere of flying bees and it will collapse.”

### **Eighteen (18)**

#### **Everos Defeated but the Bots are Stranded**

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**Botzi** watched in fascination. First the sphere appeared to float on the water, then it began to slump at the top, losing its shape, like melting jelly. The water around it was frothing with fish, all kinds, large and small, flashing silver in the morning sun. There was lots of food and lots of fish and by the time the balloon sailed back over the shoreline towards their landing spot, the sphere was completely gone. Only some larger fish, leaping over the others could just be seen.

“Great job, well done,” said Botzi, “Now to capture Pan Everos himself.”

“Yes, that is good news,” replied Noodles, “but we created a big problem for ourselves.”

“Oh no, don’t tell me, we don’t have enough gas to get home,” groaned Botzi.

“Even worse, we probably don’t have enough gas to get to the treasure site,” replied Noodles.

“All that back and forth and up and down manoeuvring we had to do, to shake off the bees,

cost a lot of gas. We may be stuck in that forest, and have to walk out. Sadly it also means we would have to leave the balloon behind.”

“Cheer up Noodles, our pixie friends are pretty smart, they’ll help us. Let’s for now concentrate on catching the evil creature who started all this.”

They sailed in silence, a little while longer, till the clearing came in sight. As they looked down, they were astonished to see an amazing sight below. On the edges of the clearing stood thousands of pixies from King Andorian’s kingdom. They were armed with spears and bows, arrows at the ready. The King was among them, holding his horse at a standstill, in a position of attention. But the amazing part was that in the middle of the circle, stood some evil creature-like thing snarling and menacing the whole army. It was turning around slowly, doing complete circles and repeating the motion. It was soon evident why. Between it and the surrounding army was an impenetrable ring of blue fire. It appeared that the creature was controlling this ring and keeping the attackers at bay.

“Look, Noodles, there’s Rory, Banjo and Izaak standing at the back of the troops. I’ll contact Rory and find out what’s going on.”

Noodles beamed a broadcast at Rory in an encrypted code so no one could understand the message except her.

“Rory, are you alright, what’s going on?”

“Yes Botzi, we’re all OK. We heard this huge commotion coming into the clearing and saw them chasing this one pixie and surrounding him in a circle. We figured this must be Pan Everos, because we saw the king in charge of the troops. Before the soldiers could close in, he generated this huge ring of fire and no one is able to get to him at the moment. We can’t help them as we are not fireproof, and even if I were invisible that’s no protection from the fire. We decided to wait till you two came back to work out what to do.” Rory gave them a wave to signify they were safe.

The balloon was now about one hundred metres above the evil Pan. Of course he was aware of the balloon above his head and guessed rightly this would be another battle weapon against him. He hissed a loud warning at them and gesturing violently with his right arm, hurled green fireballs into the air, straight at them. Fortunately, his range was only thirty metres and they were too high to be affected.

Noodles worked out a strategy. “Look Botzi, if we descend slowly he’s going to set us on fire, before we can do anything. Also we haven’t much time as the balloon could drift away from the centre of the circle, making it really difficult to come back. Here’s what we’ll do.”

In ten seconds Noodles outlined the plan to Botzi, who nodded, “OK Lets go ! We’ll surprise him.”

And surprise him they did. A quick but measured descent to thirty metres brought them within range of his fireballs. He actually caused the wicker basket of the balloon to catch fire but before any serious damage was done, Noodles let the air out of the big bag with a swoosh, and plunged the whole contraption on Pan Everos’ head. As he lay on the ground concussed, Noodles jumped on him and had him wrapped with a thick rope. Botzi held Pan’s head in his hands and waited for Pan to wake up. Botzi was going to eyeball him and freeze him into a hypnotic trance.

Upon Pan temporarily losing consciousness, the power that sustained the fire ring faded and the king advanced his troops closer to our heroes. They stopped a short distance, ready to help but obeyed the King's signal not to interfere for the moment. Pan started to come around, feeling very restricted by the rope. He opened his eyes and stared at Botzi. Botzi knew the real battle had begun.

“You will obey my commands, close your eyes and sleep,” Botzi commanded Pan.

Pan hissed at him and cursed him in a dialect Botzi had no time to translate, but he understood they were enemies. Botzi swung his hypnotic transmitters to maximum and bored in on Pan. “You will surrender your will to mine,” commanded Botzi.

Pan wriggled and hissed louder defying Botzi, and sneering at him with scorn. Noodles watched for awhile then detected something that was causing Botzi a lot of trouble in his mental fight.

Noodles unobtrusively spoke to Botzi by radio transmission, being careful not to destroy Botzi's concentration. “He's using a magnetic shield to deflect your transmission, I'll fix that.” Noodles switched to an angry hum and within a few seconds, Pan's magnetic shield was neutralised, like a curtain drawn aside, allowing Botzi to hit him with a powerful dose of mind control.

Immediately, Pan went into a trance, staring up at the sky. After checking that their enemy was truly incapacitated, the bots turned to their friend the King and told him it was safe to lock up Pan Everos. A big cheer went up into the forest trees.

The king was most grateful, and turned to his people, “We can't thank these friends enough, this would have been another great disaster without their help.”

Immediately, the king gave orders for his men to take Pan back to his cave, but this time he ordered that the cave to be sealed with triple walls of rock. These were to be layered on the outside by a special type of tree gum that set like concrete, but still stayed flexible. In the event of another earthquake, the gum would be flexible enough to hold the rocks in place, preventing escape.

Botzi got his bio-tek friends together and related what he and Noodles had done, how the bees were captured and eventually fed to the fish, but sadly he told them they were out of gas and now marooned in the forest. Whilst they were talking, the king dismounted and walked over to them, accompanied by three couriers. One of them, a younger-looking pixie stayed close to him, talking earnestly and waving his arms as if explaining something to the king.

## **Nineteen (19)**

### **A Little Genius**

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**The king** hailed them and they respectfully turned to him to hear what he had to say.

“We are very grateful, and offer you our hospitality. If there is anything we can do to help you, let us know.” The king nodded at the young man beside him “This is my nephew, who is

a student in the Laws of Nature. He has asked if he could have a look at your flying machine as he is very interested.”

His nephew, though a little shy, was full of curiosity. -What happened to the bees? How did you do it? How does this machine fly? How do you control it? –And so on. Noodles patiently explained everything with the king and his courtiers listening with great interest.

Finally Noodles finished his lecture and stood quiet for a moment. The king looked at him, then the others, noticing some anxiety on their faces. “What is it?”

“We used up our gas reserves chasing the bees,” your majesty, “without gas to heat the air in the balloon, we are marooned here in the forest,” explained Botzi.

“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s a long journey over mountains and valleys to get to the cities of the Other Giants. We can take you there, and carry things for you.”

“It’s not just that, we don’t live in this country, we come from far away, across the sea. We have no money to be able to go back to our country.”

The king was silent for a few moments and then he offered, “We would give you riches if we had them. That is, those things the giants think are riches, gold, diamonds, -that sort of thing. None of those riches have ever been discovered in this land which is why the giants never plundered us and we were left alone to live in peace. Our riches are all things natural.”

The nephew who was deep in thought, raised his head and joined the conversation. “You say, that these bottles contained gas squeezed in by great force. You then let the gas out slowly from these taps and burnt it under the mouth of the balloon to heat the air, right?”

“Yes”, answered Noodles, amused by the nephew’s quick understanding.

“In the valley of the Moonlight, there is a gas from decomposing plant matter that sometimes catches fire and lights up dancing flames over pools of water. Would this gas be any use?”

“That’s probably methane, sometimes called swamp gas. Yes, it’s a good burning gas, but how do you get loose gas to enter into the bottles?” asked Noodles, “I don’t think you people ever saw a pump, or had use for one, or even have the electricity to run it. The gas is not much use if we can’t get it into the bottles, and it has to be under great pressure or it won’t last long.”

The nephew smiled, “Can you wait another day?”

Botzi looked at the others and grinned “I guess we could, -another day won’t make much difference seeing that it might take weeks to get back to the closest city.”

Noodles eyed the young nephew, “What have you in mind?”

The nephew explained to him respectfully, “Sir, I know what a pump is for and how it works. You are right that we have no such thing in our kingdom, but we will make one.”

Bozzi and Noodles threw glances at each other. How can this pixie make a gas pump with no manufacturing facilities whatsoever? The nephew guessed their disbelief and assured them.

“I will ask the king to send some troops to carry your empty gas bottles close to the swamp in the Moonlight valley. It’s about one hour’s walk. Meantime we will make the equipment to

serve as a pump. If you wish to rest here for a while, we will send some guides later to show you how we hope to fill your bottles.”

“Ok, we’ll wait for your escorts, when you’re ready.”

“So be it!” announced the king. He commanded a troop of soldiers to carry the bottles away and with a wave of good-bye, the group left them till their next meeting.

Rory was sceptical, “D’you think he can do it?”

“He’s got something in his mind, he seemed pretty confident. Meanwhile, it won’t hurt to repair the little bit of damage to the balloon. It’s mainly the wicker basket. Let’s hunt for some suitable branches and tie them in.”

The balloon basket had a burnt hole in one of the corners, but it was easy to fix. Within about an hour, they had gathered the right size branches which Noodles worked into the existing lattice of the basket. Banjo and Izaak were not needed to help and they spent some time practising gymnastics to co-ordinate their fighting skills if ever they were needed.

Rory sat down to watch. “You could work in a circus you two.”

Banjo said “Possibly, but we enjoy entertaining the kids living around Poppycock Place and besides, we have a pet shop to run, don’t forget.”

As promised, after some time, three escorts on miniature horses appeared almost as if out of nowhere and approached the robot group. “Master Markoni has asked us to take you to his gas pumping project.”

“OK, “agreed Botzi, “The three of us will go -Banjo and Izaak stay guard over the balloon and our equipment. You shouldn’t have any more trouble.”

“And if we did, we’re ready for it!” answered Banjo proudly sticking his chest out. Botzi turned to follow the escorts, lifting his eyebrows at his magnetic friend. Noodles understood what he was thinking. The dog-bot and snake-bot were designed to be intelligent pets, not soldiers. As it turned out, they were more intelligent and versatile than the original design, but had none of the extra powers that the human-design robots had. Still, they weren’t a push-over either. They were more than capable of fighting, as much as the strongest dog, or striking, as fast as the toughest snake.

The escorts headed towards dense jungle but it became obvious that there was a cleared pathway through which Botzi and his friends could pass without too much bother. They followed, admiring the beautiful plants, flowers and butterflies dancing around them. Up a few little hills, down a few gullies, tall trees soaring above them, the friends were soon to find themselves in a small clearing. What they saw made Noodles chuckle.

**Twenty (20)**

**It Really Worked**

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“**Well, look** at that!” As they watched, dozens of pixies all working in a co-ordinated effort, were running a very weird pumping system. It was actually a large bag in the shape of a cube, made of some sort of tough material and apparently coated with a substance to make it air-proof. The flat roof was stitched to a heavy bamboo frame as was the floor of the cube. The floor was secured to the ground by means of heavy rocks weighing down the perimeter of the bottom frame. The roof frame also had smaller rocks piled on top. This roof was attached to a rope hoisted over a pulley hung from a large tree. As the rope was being pulled up and down by dozens of volunteers, this caused a pumping action, like the bellows used by a blacksmith. As the roof lifted the bag expanded, and swamp gas was sucked in through a nozzle at the bottom of the bag. When the ropes went slack, the stones on the roof of the bag flattened it, to expel the gas under pressure through some contraption attached to the inlet of one of the gas bottles.

The young nephew, noticing the arrival of his robotic friends, walked over to volunteer more information.

“Hello friends, welcome to our little invention. It’s a bit rough but it works.”

Noodles saw ten bamboo pipes inserted into the nozzle of the bag, tightly sealed. These bamboo tubes were made up of lengths joined together and snaked into the jungle, out of sight.

The nephew explained, “Of course, we can’t stay long in the swamps of the Moonlight forest because of the gas. These bamboo pipes go all the way to the swamp and are sucking the gas. We compress it with this bag, using one-way valves and introduce it into the gas cylinders, come, I’ll show you.” He took Noodles and Botzi around the big bag to where the bottles were being filled. “See, we’re managing to force the gas into the bottles.”

“And so you are,” said Noodles astonished. “Look I can see good pressure on the register of the bottle.”

“We’ll be finished by the afternoon.” said the nephew cheerfully.

There was not much to be done. The Bots watched for some time completely impressed by the ingenuity of these little people. Finally they returned to their balloon, to find Banjo and Izaak still doing circus tricks.

“Good news Banjo, we’ll be out of here tomorrow. We are getting gas refills.”

And so in the late afternoon, a big supply party emerged from the darkening forest, carrying all 6 bottles, gassed up to their maximum. The king was there, hosting a little farewell ceremony. He presented the Bots with some beautiful crystal necklaces. They were not made of diamonds but contained the good will of the forest creatures and were very much treasured by the tribe. And then a final good-bye and the Bots were alone once again.

The night passed quietly, and at the first hint of light Noodles was up and about getting the balloon ready. Botzi switched himself on to start helping him, followed by Rory. Within half an hour, the basket was loaded with the occupants and all equipment. Noodles opened the jet on the first bottle and the flaming gas roared into the balloon sending it high in the cool morning air.

“I figure our treasure landing spot is 50 kilometres to the south-east, at this speed a little over half an hour,” announced Noodles.

The countryside was becoming more mountainous, with deeper valleys and steep rock faces. There was a sense of mystery about the whole place. Finding a safe landing spot was going to be difficult, as clear flat areas were hard to find. At the moment when Noodles calculated they were on target, the sun had risen just enough to spear the mountain ridge below them with a golden ray and edge the terrain with more detail.

“Wow, look! Looks like the ruins of an ancient city, down there.–And next to it –see? ...over there –a landing area. Hang on everybody, we’re going for it!” Noodles’ emotion generator was in full swing, and his excitement was caught by the others.

The balloon vented hot air, making it heavier so it descended at a fairly rapid rate towards a clear patch of ground.

Noodles did not want to miss this opportunity. At the last moment, he gunned the gas jet, so the cloud of hot air would act as a brake against hitting the earth too hard and the whole thing floated gently to the ground. Botzi and Banjo wasted no time leaping out, holding tethering ropes which they quickly secured to short tough trees and large rocks. Noodles carefully went through the collapse process, whilst the others picked up the limp fabric and methodically folded it.

“That’s it, packed!” declared Noodles. Botzi was already poring over his treasure map. They had come so far, and been through several adventures already –enough time had been wasted and they were eager to see what this treasure was all about.

The map was laid out on the ground, for all to see. Botzi tapped a spot on the map marked with “X”, supposedly, indicating the location of the treasure.

“As in the old pirate maps, X marks the spot, I guess,” he chuckled then a look of frustration appeared on his face. “But what are we looking for? What on earth is this treasure? Is it a chest? Is it gold bars? Diamonds, or none of these, perhaps, -What is it?”

“Time to think,” muttered Noodles, “let’s read everything on the map carefully, maybe we’ll find clues.”

They scanned the parchment from edge to edge. Botzi even turned on his vision enhancements, which gave him infra-red as well as microscopic vision abilities. This paid off, as on the bottom left-hand corner, he could just make out the words “It’s in Latin... Leo, Anguis, Testudo, Rana ”.

“Something written in Latin here,” he pointed out. He processed the words through his translator module and explained what he’d read. “Lion, snake, turtle and frog...something, something. It says ‘The lion guards his temple, the snake, turtle and frog guard the way’ ....”

“Look for a rock or something that looks like a lion’s head. We might get a line of sight in which direction it’s staring and what thing it’s staring at. How the snake, turtle and frog fit in I don’t know.”

It didn’t take long. Rory who was keen on knowing about all members of the cat family was the first to spot it. “How about this? Does this look like a lion’s head?” she said, pointing to a large rock and walking all around it.

Botzi walked up to the top of a nearby hill. “Well there’s nothing else that comes close. That lion face is looking at one of the larger ruined buildings. I expect it was some sort of temple. Let’s take a look.”



The Lost City in the Clouds. Looking for a landing area

Twenty-One (21)

**Banjo Crashes into The Underground Temple**

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**They** made their way to the broken walls, and collapsed roof of what must have been an important building. The distant view from that position was spectacular. Around them there were quite a few things to look at, piles of finely carved stones and a few sculptures of some kind of gods or rulers of that ancient kingdom. Rory sat down on one of the larger stones, probably being an altar slab. It had carvings on the sides. Banjo and Izaak probed tirelessly around every square foot of the area, as sniffing around was their specialty. Rory watched Banjo bemusedly acting just like a dog-bot that he was programmed for, his head buried in tall grass and his tail upright like an antenna. Suddenly Banjo disappeared, letting out a yelp that caught the attention of all of them. They rushed to the spot to investigate. Noodles was first, peering down what looked like a deep hole obscured by overgrown grass. He saw the first steps of a stone staircase disappearing into the darkness.

“Banjo, are you all right?” he yelled. “Banjo are you there?”

Banjo was scratched but not badly damaged. He had cart-wheeled down some fifty steps, and was a little bit shaken. “Arf! Arf! Arf!” he barked.

“He’s defaulted to pet mode, which is his emergency status.” That didn’t necessarily mean he was damaged, only in a “conserve energy” condition. Banjo could still see, hear and bark.

“We’re coming down to get you,” shouted Noodles, “stay there!”

One by one they descended down the stairs into the gloom. Both Noodles and Botzi turned on their glow lights atop their hats to illuminate the surrounds of what appeared to be a large underground temple. They found Banjo waiting for them. After a few crackles and static in his transmissions Banjo was back to normal alert mode and grinned, “Boy, that first step was sensational! I don’t recommend it to anyone!”

“Well, you seem to be alright, did you do a systems check on yourself?” asked Botzi.

“Yeah, I’ve got some scratches and a few small dents but everything’s OK.” smiled Banjo.

“Wow this place is big,” said Rory in a hushed tone. There are rooms going everywhere into the dark.”

“Too many rooms, Rory, we don’t have the time to search them all,” replied Botzi.

“Let’s examine the walls for details, these ancient tribes usually filled the walls with stories.”

“Nothing like the Egyptian wall friezes, just odd animal carvings here and there,” observed Noodles.

“All sorts of animals, lions, crocodiles, monkeys, sloths, squirrels, panthers, eagles, wolves, - what can we make of this?” Botzi was puzzled.

“You said the parchment said something about reptiles,” Rory reminded him, “What was it?”

“The snake, turtle and frog mark the way... hey, let’s find the snake, turtle and frog markings among all these.” They examined the walls, the floors, the ceilings. There was none they could find. They were in a large octagonal hall. Each of the eight sides had a high door leading into the darkness. Faintly through each door they could see it lead to yet another room with several doors.

“Looks like we have dozens of doors to explore, we could be here for weeks,” moaned Noodles.

“No we don’t have to.” said Rory excitedly, “notice the floor, all paved with stones, all tightly fitted together.”

“And so?” asked Noodles.

“Come to the centre of this main hall. I saw something, -look there it is, the centre paving stone –see, there are tiny gaps around the edges, -that’s a loose stone! Noodles, can you pull it up and see what’s under it?”

Everybody was now getting excited. Here was something that could lead to new options. Noodles went over to the stone and radiated it with a vibrating force field to loosen it up completely. Botzi flipped open a flap on his thigh to reveal a compartment. He selected a screwdriver from a well-stocked tool-box, and shoved it into the crack between the stones. He prised upwards the loose paving stone to reveal another underneath, carved on the face with an image of a snake.

“Aha!” exclaimed Rory, “See! The first clue -a snake! The snake, frog and turtle mark your way! Which door is it pointing to?”

Noodles lined up the head of the snake with the second door on their left of centre. “That door,” he pointed.

“Ok, let’s go for the next clue in that room.” Rory led the way.

The room was smaller but also octagonal, each wall-face had an opening for a doorway. Again, they had eight doors to pick from. Naturally they went to the centre of the room and looked carefully for loose pavers. None was found.

“Ok, these ones have locked into each other over time. Here goes a little vibro,” said Noodles with enthusiasm. After a few minutes, a patch of stones did become loose and Botzi pulled them up. Nothing resembling the carved picture of a creature could be found. Rory did notice there was a second paving layer under the stone floor and it was not level, but appeared to have a hump in the centre.

Suddenly she clapped her hands, “That’s it! We are looking at the back of a giant turtle. We can’t see all of it because it’s so big! Botzi, if you remove more pavers, we’ll probably uncover where the head is and where it’s pointing!”

Botzi looked at Noodles for a second opinion. It meant he’d have to excavate forty or fifty heavy pavers.

Noodles nodded in agreement with Rory. “Don’t worry, they’ll be easier to vibrate loose this time as the edges are free.” After some five minutes, the task of pulling them all up was done.

“Yay!! I was right,” said Rory ecstatically. “There’s your turtle head, and that is the door.” She now took over the pointing.

“One to go!” said Noodles, as he lead the charge into the next octagonal room, this time it had only four doors. The walls alternated between blank walls and doorway walls.

“Assuming we are looking for a frog, the last in the series, are we now going to rip up the whole floor? “

“Somehow, I don’t think, they would repeat hiding the clues in the floor. There’s something odd about these doors,” muttered Rory. “Why the blank walls? Less doors leading to less rooms would make it easier to find the treasure..... -which is not what they would want. Noodles, I have a hunch. Try sending some shock waves against the blank walls.”

Noodles was now impressed with Rory. She had been right so far but rattling the floor with vibrations was consuming a lot of energy.

“Those walls are covered with some kind of plaster,” observed Rory, “Just a gentle shake on the surface to start with, Noodles.”

Noodles picked a wall at random and waved his arms slowly over the whole surface. After a minute, cracks appeared in concentric circles and the plaster lifted and fell off. Soon a large area of wall was cleaned off to show its original stonework, tightly fitted together. Although no mortar was used, the stones were large and heavy suggesting this wall was permanent and perhaps not leading anywhere. In any case, there was no symbol to be seen, and it made sense to also check what lay under the plaster of the other walls. This Noodles duly did, cracking the plaster on the remaining three walls. They all looked alike, all stoned up and no symbols.

## **Twenty-Two (22)**

### **The Last Door**

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“**L**ooks like we’re at a dead end,” said Botzi. “Let’s have a quick look through the available four doors.” This time they could see that each door led to another dark empty room, but this was the end, there were no other doors leading off these side rooms.

“We tried the walls, we tried the floors, we looked into the rooms, what’s left? We haven’t examined the ceiling,” said Rory. They went back to the middle room and gazed at the ceiling. It was dark and dome-shaped. In the centre of the ceiling was a circular niche, about the size of a bowler hat, too dark to see inside.

“Get a light into that hole,” directed Rory, “let’s see what’s inside.”

Botzi directed a light straight into the ceiling hole and turned on telescopic mode through one of his eyes. “It’s a mini-dome,” he said “and it has what looks like a jig-saw of small coloured patches painted inside it. Lots of funny shapes, but wait, if I filter for red, green or blue patches let’s see what happens.” Botzi filtered his scanning eye for red, then blue and could make no clues. But then he tried green. “Aha! Green shapes are making up a pattern –it looks like I can see the pattern of a frog.”

“This could be it!” exclaimed Rory excitedly. “Where is the head pointing to?”

Botzi looked carefully and raised his hand to indicate one of the blank walls. “Possibly behind that wall,” he said. They all stood staring at it. How were they going to break in, assuming that there was even anything behind it?

All this time, Banjo and Izaak were serving as extra scouts, exploring each remaining room just to make sure, but mostly finding nothing except dust and stone rubble. However, Banjo had an uneasy feeling and came back to voice his concerns.

“I don’t know why, but I thought I saw something moving in the shadows, way back there, -a dark shape, just for a fleeting moment.” he said.

“We’re casting moving shadows on the walls every time we turn around,” assured Noodles, “It’s easy to imagine extra shadows.” But Banjo wasn’t convinced, he and Izaak stood staring into the shadows of the passage ways leading back to the entrance.

Noodles summoned up some more power. “I guess I’ll have to do my vibration act again, seeing we have no picks or hammers. I hope I can do this before my power pack runs down.”

“Wait a minute,” said Banjo, “we saw some old tools near the temple entrance, probably abandoned by other treasure seekers in the past. C’mon Izaak, let’s go and get them.” Within a few minutes, Banjo returned with an old pick-axe and Izaak dragged a large sledge hammer back into the room.

“What luck, they will be a big help!” said Botzi with glee. “Now, Noodles you loosen the stones, I’ll whack them hard with the hammer, and Rory, you pull the pieces out with the pick axe.”

And so it went. Rattle! Whack! Bam! Bang! The bots worked as a team and actually got into an efficient routine. A hole appeared in the first layer of wall, to reveal yet another layer. This was not surprising, and on they went with their onslaught. Soon the second wall developed a hole, but this time, a low metal door could be seen. It was embossed with a frog symbol, as if to confirm the connection with the clues of the treasure map. Botzi took the pick axe and cleaned around the sides of the door, so it would be easier to open. But the door was strong and refused to be opened. The tools they had were unsuitable to help them break through it.

“We’ve reached a dead end,” sighed Botzi, “This door is too thick, too strong.”

“We’ve still got one chance,” said Noodles, “without using too much power, I can try to magnetically manipulate the lock.”

They watched in silence as Noodles operated on the lock, sending waves to push and pull the wheels and levers inside. They could hear something was moving behind the face of the door and the excitement was building up in the whole group. Each faint click, each rusty squeak of a lever promised the more likelihood of success, and then Clack! -Did that door give a little shudder just then?

“Yahoo! –She’s open!” exclaimed Noodles. With a groaning creak, the door was opened wide, and Botzi spotlighted the interior to expose a big underground temple. One by one, they crawled in for a better view and for some time they stood staring at the big spooky chamber. Above them a high vaulted ceiling was supported by fat stone columns to each side. Two stone tabernacles, the size of tall igloos stood side by side in the centre of the floor. On the dome of the igloos stood the half statues of twin wizards, staring at them. Each igloo had an entrance opening. But the strangest of all was that inside the igloos they saw, through the entrances, a dark gloom lit up by coloured, winking lights. These lights, although shining dimly, threw enough glow to show a jade pedestal standing in the middle of each igloo.

On the flat table-top of one pedestal lay a short sceptre-looking object. It was carved in gold. The sceptre had two large crystal balls capping either end of a golden shaft, the whole thing looking a bit like a small bar-bell. At one end of the bar-bell was a brilliant blue crystal sphere almost diamond-like, cut into many scintillating facets, and the other end had a similar sphere but in brilliant pink. Inside the other igloo, on a similar pedestal, lay a gold-embossed leather pouch tied with leather straps.

Finally, Botzi offered an opinion. "I think we shouldn't touch anything until we examine what's in the pouch first."

"And what if there is a trap, when we enter inside those things?" wondered Noodles.

"Why not poke around with these old tools first?" suggested Rory.

Noodles picked up the pick-axe and swung it around gently just inside the entrances of the igloos. Nothing happened. He also took some magnetic readings and found nothing. Next he snagged the pouch with the pick-axe and dragged it to the floor, so he could reach in and grab it. This he did without any drama.

He lifted it out and untied the leather binding. Inside was a yellowed piece of paper bark with some kind of hieroglyphics inked onto its face. He gave the parchment to Botzi, who turned the message around in his hands a few times to determine a possible direction of writing. After several attempts at translating the message he finally understood it, and was staggered to learn what they were looking at.

"This is the treasure my benefactor tried to describe in the treasure map. The parchment is written in an ancient Indian language and describes that thing we are looking at. This is extraordinary!"... Botzi trailed off.

"C'mon, what is it!?" asked Rory getting frustrated.

"Well folks, the parchment says that we are looking at 'The Sceptre of Emotion'."

"The sceptre of what!? Did you say 'emotion', as in cry or laugh?"

"Yes. But it seems more sinister than that. If you hold the shaft and rub it with your thumb then you can control a person, a group or a whole country to do your bidding."

"Sounds pretty heavy, how does it work?" asked Rory.

Botzi continued, "If you point the blue crystal at any creature, people or animals or even plant-life -if you then rub the shaft, then those creatures will fear you and obey any command you give them. They go into a depression and think only you can save them so they are prepared to do anything you say."

"And the pink crystal, what does it do?" Rory was wide-eyed.

"The pink crystal is the anti-dote. Pointing this at anybody would make them happy and self-confident again. Again, they would be under your control as they would fear you sending them back into a state of unhappiness -like withdrawing a drug they depend on." Botzi re-read the parchment. "There seems to be more conditions."

Noodles showed some exasperation. "Some treasure this turned out to be. What now? Do we have to stroke it with feathers from a purple ostrich?"



“I wouldn’t joke just yet, Noodles,” said Botzi seriously. “These Indians worshipped the heavens. They know a thing or two about star signs and the influence of the stars and planets.”

“So, what are the conditions?” asked Rory building up with some impatience.

### Twenty-Three (23)

#### **Success at Last -Only to be Robbed!**

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“**F**irstly, the parchment says that the Sceptre of Emotion has great powers to destroy or to create. Therefore the omniscients of old who cast it into existence limited its power to operate for only one hour per month when the full moon is visible directly above at its azimuth. Well that’s a relief, we’d hate to make a mistake with this. Uh-Oh! Wait, there’s more!”

“Har! Har!” laughed Noodles, “This sounds like a TV commercial!”

Botzi was undaunted. “To summon the powers of the gods, you must take it to the pinnacle of the gods.....What’s that mean? There’s something here I can’t read.....Some kind of sketch – a bit like a triangle.”

“Well, we can relax, we’ll take it back home and give it to science or a museum. This is not something you can play around with, except maybe we could try it for one week of happiness and have a party or buy some lottery tickets,” smiled Botzi.

At that moment Banjo and Izaak almost went into a fit.

“STEP BACK!” roared a voice from the dark. “Don’t approach me or I will destroy you all!”

Banjo and Izaak moved backwards, closer to their friends and watched in a state of high alert as the voice emerged from the shadows. The black grim figure of a muscular man wearing a black top-hat was unmistakable. It was Alby, their horrible neighbour who owned a shop next to theirs in Poppycock Place. Alby was ambitious and he could be ruthless. Back home he bullied people to repay his loans at terribly high interest rates. He was in effect a loan shark. A shorter, squat figure standing next to him emerged as Fungus, the bot designed not unlike an American Pit Bull terrier. This cringing associate, though mentally a few cents short of a dollar, was nonetheless still capable of a savage attack if Alby so commanded.

Alby was aware that the Bots had some extra special powers. Both he and Fungus wore dark contact lenses for protection against Botzi. He was holding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, no small weapon, as it really could destroy any of them. Fungus menaced them with his steel rimmed bowler hat. (He purchased that from an odd lot of props left over from an old James Bond movie). In any case, Alby was not about to put a weapon in the hands of his clumsy assistant.

“You will all do as I say,” growled Alby. “Rory, if I see you going invisible, I’ll shoot you first. Botzi don’t try any hypnosis tricks, and Noodles, if I feel any magnetic effects, I’ll blast you with this grenade. And you animals, get behind the rest. Now everybody stand back

against those columns.” Alby was in a deadly serious mood and they did as he asked, because they were so surprised, there was no chance for them to work out a defence strategy.

Alby moved forward, picked up the sceptre from its cradle and commanded Botzi, “Hand over the parchment!” Botzi did so, saying nothing. He was careful not to upset Alby with his eyes and kept them lowered. This was not the time to try anything in such close quarters, where someone was bound to get hurt.

Alby, now loaded with what he wanted, walked slowly backwards, grunting. “See? That wasn’t so bad was it?”

Nobody said anything as they watched him and Fungus make their exit. After about a minute, Botzi and Noodles cautiously made their way out, back to the staircase leading to the grassy field above. As they raised their heads out of the hole into the sunshine, they could hear a Wop! Wop! Wop! of a helicopter’s whirring blades somewhere on a plateau below. Sure enough, a machine rose into view and with a quick turn-around headed north-east for a direction unknown, possibly towards North America.

Rory by now had joined her friends out in the fresh air and could see the worried look on their faces. “What now?” she asked.

“Well, we just helped a madman to gain possibly the most powerful small weapon on earth. Who knows what he’s going to do with it?” Botzi was feeling dejected, and fully responsible for what happened. “I wish I had never set eyes on that treasure map.”

Noodles comforted him. “Don’t blame yourself, Botzi. Firstly, we had no idea what the treasure was, and couldn’t suspect that there might be anything dangerous about it. Secondly, who would guess Alby would know where to follow us all the way here. This place is as hard to find as a pebble on the moon. You never let the treasure map out of your sight, so how did he know about all this?”

There was puzzled silence for a moment until Izaak said something that at first, didn’t appear to make sense. Izaak rarely spoke although he had speech qualities as good as Banjo. He was rather shy and preferred to listen. On this basis he learned a lot and was wiser than one would expect from a creature that looked like a snake.

Izaak disclosed some information, “While you were all reading the treasure map back home, out on the street, I saw a round hat, bobbing up and down behind the roof-top parapet wall, on the roof of Alby’s shop. I didn’t make any connection at first, so I said nothing.”

Botzi explained a theory. “You probably saw Fungus’ hat. He wears a bowler hat all the time.”

Noodles asked, “You think he was spying for Alby?”

“Quite possibly. I think he may have photographed enough of the map to get here, but not the frog and turtle clues needed to get to the treasure because the writing was very faint. That would explain why he camped nearby, waiting for us to find it, instead of stealing the treasure directly for himself and disappearing without trace. He waited for us because he didn’t know about those extra instructions, about the lion’s head and the reptile symbols. And certainly he wouldn’t be able to read the colour patches inside the little dome that pointed to the wall-safe, without the colour filters I had to use.”

They sat on the rocks, basking in the sunshine. It was good to soak their solar power cells and charge up. The mood was quiet, everyone busy with their thoughts. Finally Noodles spoke. “Ok, we have to do something, we can’t let him use this weapon, he could enslave whole countries, the world maybe.”

“We can do nothing here, Noodles, what’s the quickest way home?”

“Well let’s see...we can ride llamas, donkeys, just boots or a team of eagles! We only have the balloon.” shrugged Noodles, a little cynical.

“Of course balloon,” retorted Botzi, “I mean, how fast can we fly back if we catch the right wind patterns?”

“If we go high enough, to get the 100 mph jet stream we can do it in 3 days including a quick drop down for refuelling.”

“Let’s not waste any more time. We can discuss plans as we fly home.” said Botzi.



Alby pointed his weapon at the Bots and ordered them to hand over the treasure.

**Twenty-Four (24)**

**What a Crazy Night !**

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**They** all walked towards the balloon. To his relief, Alby did not have time to sabotage their equipment. The balloon lay limp on the ground, but Noodles had made sure it was in a carefully placed state of readiness in case they faced danger and had to make a quick exit. His advanced thinking paid off, as in a co-ordinated team effort, they had it up in the air in very quick time.

Gas roared into the big air bag once again, lifting them higher than before, so high that the view seemed endless. They required no oxygen or heating and were not fussed as the temperature around them dropped to about 5 degrees centigrade. Noodles was right, the winds at this height were fast, judging by the mountains and valleys rapidly sliding away beneath them. Of course, they felt only a gentle breeze now and that was because they moved at the same speed of the air around them.

Botzi was the first to open the discussion. “We have one thing in our favour – Alby can only use that weapon one day in the month when the moon is in the right position. The last favourable situation for that to happen was 24 days ago. It means we have some 6 days to track him down and recover the weapon, before he can use it.”

“Well he doesn’t own a helicopter as far as I know,” said Rory, “Botzi did you manage to take a photo snapshot of the escaping helicopter?”

“I did more than that, I took a high definition video with the camera in my right eye.” smiled Botzi. “It looked like a tourist hire helicopter, couldn’t get the name but got a clear shot of the registration number painted on the bottom. It flew up high enough for me to read it.”

The trip back was uneventful. Noodles did a descent near Acapulco, intending to refuel and move on. It was then that something bizarre happened. One of the NASA engineers who worked on their project was holidaying there. He spotted them and came over with a party of friends who were celebrating someone’s birthday. He begged the bots to join the party at sunset among the ruins of a nearby Inca temple, where giant statues were said to come alive and do a tribal dance.

As the bots were under some obligation to this engineer, who was one of their “godfathers” they reluctantly agreed to go to the temple for the party.

So they went. At sunset, the whole birthday gang, all quiet and hidden behind bushes among the ruins, watched a row of giant statues standing perfectly still looking into the distance.

“Not much going on here,” radioed Botzi to Noodles after watching for a while.

“Probably just rumours fuelled by a drunken imagination,” added Noodles.

More time passed. The birds twittered, the leaves rustled, it was generally quiet. The sun, a golden fireball, was slowly sinking behind the distant dark outline of the forest tree-tops.

“THUMP !”

The bots could hardly believe their sensors. One of the statues had broken rank, stepped out of the line and pounded his heavy stone foot into the earth.

“THUMP ! THUMP !” Now he was thumping both feet, one after the other into the ground. Pretty soon another stone god moved towards the first, matching the rhythm of the feet. They swayed from side to side, a bit like gorillas stomping to a jungle threat.

“THUMP ! THUMP !....THUMP ! THUMP !....THUMP ! THUMP !”

The other stone gods had not yet moved but stood watching the first pair.

The engineer turned to Botzi, “Go on, do us a favour, go out there and show these heavy turtles how to dance. We brought a Ghetto Blaster with us.”

No sooner had he said this when he turned up his music player loud and boomed out some rock. The rest of the party by now was too drunk to realise they were watching a very strange phenomenon and joined the engineer in a chanting and giggling spree.

“DANCE ! DANCE! DANCE !” they chorused to the bots.

At this commotion, the statues froze back into solid stone, fixing their glaring eyes on the intruders. There was to be no more movement from them – their sacred ritual had been violated by a party of drunks.

Botzi shrugged, graciously took Rory’s hand and escorted her out to a clearing in front of the statues. Noodles flexed his body like a slinky spring and followed them. The portable music player thudded a heavy rock beat in the twilight air. The trio of bots picked up the rhythm. Botzi spun Rory off the ground and Noodles, standing on his head, gyrated on his pointed hat with legs flailing in the air. It was a superb display rock ‘n’ roll and wrap-dancing. Great peals of laughter testified to the great fun being enjoyed by the engineer’s party, as they sat, talked and drank. The engineer was so proud of being in the team that created such complex Bio-Teks.

The stone gods glared but did not move. In the morning, they would be in their place once more and the human party would remember nothing of what happened.

The evening rolled on, and Botzi explained they had a deadline to meet and had to get going again. The party thanked them profusely and let them go. The bots wasted no time disappearing into the darkness and heading for their balloon.



It was a crazy night but the bots showed they could really dance.

Twenty-Five (25)

Where did Alby Go ?

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**The balloon** had already been refuelled and they were up in the air again sailing towards New York. Again luck was with them and they made good time, as within 24 hours they

found themselves drifting over Manhattan. Noodles pointed to Stuyvesant Field and after getting permission from the local authorities, put his craft into an open area, much to the amusement and interest of joggers and other outdoor citizens.

The balloon was quickly packed and Noodles phoned for a taxi truck to take them all home. Their friends who helped to manage their shops were very glad to see them and they spent an hour of exchanging stories between them. There was a fair amount of excitement. Noodles asked if they saw anything strange about Alby's shop and it turned out that Alby closed it soon after they had left. The shop stayed closed until two days ago when in the middle of the night they heard some noises and doors banging. Then after hearing some screeching tyres all was silent again. The shop and the money lending business had been closed down ever since. Only darkness could be seen looking through the shop window from the street.

The group of adventurers had agreed to keep secret all that had happened about the finding of the treasure in order not to attract the attention of the newspapers and cause possible panic in the community. Botzi enlisted the help of a friend in the FBI who wasted no time in checking the helicopter identification, time of arrival, who the passengers were and where they were heading. The trail led to the town of Las Montanas where the helicopter was based. From there, passengers Alby Monk and accomplice Fungus Lockjaw flew to Caracas city, in Venezuela, by light aircraft, then picked up an international jet to New York. After landing in New York, the trail ran cold.

Botzi related the details to Noodles. "In the time available, it looks like Alby and Fungus came straight back to his shop and disappeared again. We have no more clues apart from that."

"We have no choice but to do a break-in into his shop and look for leads. There's too much at stake here. By the time we get the authorities onto the case, the moon could be in a favourable window to give him power. And that's if we can get anybody to believe us, which is itself going to waste time. We have to act!" said Noodles in a determined mood.

Botzi didn't argue the obvious. After dark, they would go around the back lane and force their way into Alby's shop. They confided only in Rory as to their plan, leaving Banjo and Izaak in peace, to run their pet shop as normal and keep a watch on the other shops.

At about 10 pm Noodles, standing against the back door of Alby's shop, opened the lock and with a quick heave, they were in. It was all dark. They closed the door behind them. Botzi switched on his hat light. They decided to go upstairs and start searching Alby's office and make their way down.

The office was dark, sparsely furnished, with an antique desk and chair, wooden shelves, and a reading lamp, almost a scene out of the Charles Dickens days. Everything looked old and dusty, as befitting a stuffy old grouch like Alby, thought Botzi. But there was one thing that contrasted among all this, a computer sitting on the desk, obviously the focal point of business for Alby's Loan company.

The two friends looked at each other, and kept their conversations internally, that is they turned off their speaker modes so as not to produce sound that could be recorded in case the place was bugged.

Noodles nodded towards the computer and Botzi switched it on. The screen flickered for a while and the operating system finally presented them with the entrance screen.

“Username ? Password ?” it demanded before going any further.

“We have no time to crack this, Botzi”, said Noodles a little exasperated.

“Even if we did, I doubt that Alby would leave a trail to his whereabouts when he holds such an incredible chance to gain power and become rich. I bet he would have swapped the hard drive with a clean one, which would give us no details, including his shady loans business.”

“We can try searching this place, no one will bother us. But where to start?”

They looked around and assessed whatever clues they could find. They saw signs that someone had come in at some time and left in a hurry. A few drawers and a cupboard door were not fully closed and these areas they inspected but the result was fruitless. The waste paper basket next to the desk was emptied clean, so this may have been done as a last action on leaving the premises.

Botzi picked up the basket, stared at it and imagined Fungus doing this chore at the last minute. “Hey Noodles!” he exclaimed a little excited, “The garbage collection is not due till tomorrow. Let’s have a look at Alby’s dumpster in the laneway. If Fungus took care of this, and he’s not too bright, we may be able to find something.”

They went downstairs and exited out the back door. Alby’s dumpster was hard up against the back wall, the lid closed, and looking rather empty. On opening the lid, Botzi peered down and started to retrieve any piece of paper that might have anything readable. He was especially hopeful when he handed two tightly rolled up balls of paper to Noodles. As if by magic, Noodles vibrated each ball into a flat sheet and a quick glance told him they were in luck.

“Look at this! This is a copy of an airline itinerary, listing flight connections to Egypt!”

“Egypt?” queried Botzi.

“That’s right, and this next piece of paper is a copy of a hotel booking in Cairo. And look at the date, all done late at night only two days ago. Alby must have instructed Fungus to empty the waste paper basket into the dumpster and Fungus didn’t check what’s in it.”

## Twenty-Six (26)

### The Mystery Points to Egypt

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“**Egypt?** Why Egypt?” said Botzi, applying his best algorithmic program to his brain cells to obtain a possible solution. “Wait a minute! Remember when Alby held us up with his gun just as I was reading some obscure instructions on the parchment?”

“Yes!?” asked Noodles.

“Remember I said there was some sort of triangle amongst the word characters?”

“Go on, what are you getting at?”

“Put triangles and Egypt together – what does that point to?”



“Pyramids!?” asked Noodles.

“I bet that wasn’t just any triangle, I bet it was a symbol!”

“So you think the last part of the instructions on that parchment had something to do with pyramids?”

“Well why would Alby bother to go to Egypt? Why not wait for the full moon over New York, hide at the top of the Empire State Building, say, and conquer New York to start with?”

Noodles suggested a possibility. “Because he needed to combine the influence of a full moon with the mystical powers of a pyramid? Come to think of it, didn’t you read the parchment as saying something about the pinnacle of the Gods? That might also suggest the top of a pyramid.”

“That’s what I think, the Sceptre of Emotion needed a combination of the two to charge its power. Somehow Alby figured out the complete instructions and is carrying out a plan.”

Botzi continued, “Can you imagine how the Pharaohs were able to control thousands of slaves to do their bidding? Imagine once a month the high priest would climb to the top of the largest pyramid and use the Sceptre to radiate a feeling of helplessness and obedience to the Pharaoh.”

“If the Sceptre belonged to the Pharaohs, what was it doing locked up in the jungles of South America?”

“Who knows? Maybe the early Spanish Conquistadors brought it with them to attempt to conquer whole Indian civilisations. Or maybe, it was discovered by the Nazis during the Second World War and used secretly by Hitler. When the war ended, plenty of Nazi criminals fled to South America. One of them could have brought it over, hiding it for a future Nazi uprising but somehow failed to return to retrieve it.”

“That’s what happened to Indiana Jones in the 1940’s with his ‘Ark of the Covenant’ -what a mess that ended up!” said Noodles.

“That was Hollywood fiction Noodles, -this is for real! But we’ll find out how the Sceptre got to Peru one day -right now we have a problem. We have to stop Alby.” said Botzi grimly.

“Correct, and we’ll have to enlist some government help.”

That very night, Botzi phoned his contact in the CIA and explained the whole story. Money, visas and air tickets were ready for them by morning to pick up from a branch office in New York. By Mid-day the bots were winging their way across the Atlantic heading for Cairo the main city of Egypt.

The flight landed as scheduled and after customs clearance, the bots hailed a taxi to take them to a hotel close to the one mentioned on the discarded note-paper found in the rubbish bin. It’s worth noting that the bots had not the usual acceptance as they had in their neighbourhood back home, and quite a few people stared at our colourful friends.

They went around to the nearby hotel, to check if their “friend” had a booking, but the concierge said there was no one by the name of Alby Monk. However, a person by their description did stay one night a few days ago and had left for address unknown.

“If I were Alby, I’d probably pick the biggest pyramid around here for maximum effect. We could start with the Great Pyramid of Giza.”

“Well, we don’t need a room to sleep, as we can easily sleep outside. Let’s go find that pyramid.”

Another trip in a taxi took them to the base of Cheop’s pyramid. They paid the driver and looked out at the massive pile of giant stones. There was no sign of anyone climbing the stepped sides of this ancient monument.

“No full moon tonight, I guess Alby will stay in hiding until the right opportunity arises.”

They walked around the pyramid to familiarise themselves with the surroundings. It was assumed Alby might be armed and dangerous, and also assisted by Fungus who could be quite vicious. As Bio-teks they were forbidden to use fire-arms, and relied solely on their in-built powers and toughness. Alby and Fungus of course had somehow overruled their ethics programming.

So the plan was to throw a net over Alby and Fungus to disable them. Then a light, strong rope threaded through the net would be pulled tight and Alby rendered incapacitated. Botzi would jump on him and apply a pair of handcuffs, assisted by Noodles. This was hardly high-tech, but it might just work, if they had the element of surprise, and held them until official help arrived.

They made a circular hide-out of rocks, some distance away, to watch comings and goings around the pyramid whilst remaining unobserved. It was now a few days away from the next full moon. The bots had plenty of patience, making use of the sunny days to charge up their cells to the full to prepare for the struggle ahead.

There was one day when they decided to have a bit of fun with The Sphinx. Izaak crawled down its forehead and wriggled across its cheeks, pretending to tickle its nose. “Stop that!” laughed Botzi, “Get Down! You want to make her sneeze and blow us across the desert!?”

\* \* \* \* \*

On the day before the full moon was to appear that night, they noticed a strange, short figure dressed in Arab robes walking around the nearby sphinx. He seemed to be looking at the sandy ground, searching for something. The sun was setting and his dark silhouette against the orange glow of the horizon obviated a clear view of his features.

“You reckon that’s Fungus in disguise?” whispered Noodles.

“Maybe. If he was, what does he think he’s doing?”

The question remained unanswered. From their stone-walled hide they watched the tourist buses come and go. By now the sun had set and the flood lights had been switched on to attract the night-time visitors. Both the pyramid and the sphinx stood majestically bathed in reflected golden light against bright stars twinkling in a black sky. What a setting. No wonder the slaves and subjects of the pharaoh would have been awed by his powers, in commanding such amazing and mysterious structures to be built on such a large scale.

Botzi and Noodles were now on full alert, as the hour of power was getting closer.

The full moon was estimated to be at its peak about one hour after midnight. When midnight had passed, the tourist numbers dwindled to a small handful of young back-packers, whose wobbly walk and occasional fit of giggles suggested there may have been something more than just coke in their cokes.

With ten minutes to go, Botzi and Noodles sneaked out from their hiding place and took up positions a couple of hundred meters from the pyramid on opposite corners, so that each could watch two sides clearly.

No sooner had they taken up their positions when the whole area was plunged into darkness. The floodlights failed completely. But after some moments of visual adjustment to the low light, the grey light of a full silver moon came into its own, illuminating the scene enough to see once again the great bulk of the pyramid and its cohort, the sphinx.



Izaak got up to mischief and tickled the Sphinx's nose. "Get down!" yelled Botzi, "if she sneezes we'll be blown away across the desert!"

Twenty-Seven (27)

**Disaster Smashes the Dream**

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**Some** figures could be made out, slouching around, possibly guards or tourists. But there was one larger person at the base of the pyramid, visible from Botzi's area of watch, who seemed to have a purpose. Within a second, that person leaped onto the first tier of the pyramid stone base and headed towards the top.

Botzi radioed Noodles, "Noodles get around to the East side. I think it's him, he's going to the top."

Botzi and Noodles wasted no time. They both ran at top speed towards the base of the pyramid, keeping an eye on their quarry who was by now about a quarter of the way up. The guards were taken by surprise. Here was a race to the top by some mad tourists. They watched as the trio leaped almost like frogs, from one stone level to the next going higher and higher.

The pyramids were not designed to be climbed to the top by some future tourist and originally the sides were capped with a layer to make them smooth, and deter would-be adventurers. Even after thousands of years, the top section of the pyramid had some of this smooth capping left, making it difficult to get to the very top.

Botzi and Noodles were unsure what Alby would do to get past this smooth part, but they soon found out as he reached it. They had noticed Alby was carrying a coil of rope slung over his shoulder and some kind of back pack. For a quick moment, Alby stopped at the highest available stone ledge, pulled out a hammer and some steel pins and began to drive the pins into the soft stone, in an ever-climbing zig zag pattern. These pins formed the basis of his toe-holds to climb on, towards the top. Cleverly, as he went up, he lassoed the lowest pins with the rope and yanked them out, to deny his pursuers the same advantage and make it harder for them to follow.

Botzi and Noodles eventually reached the highest level they could manage and looked up at that dark, agile monkey getting further away.

"Blast!" exclaimed Botzi, "We've come so far and near to catching him, to be finally defeated like this."

"It's not over yet, Botzi," replied Noodles, "I can still generate a magnetic pull on the pins he's using and keep up with him."

"Well, Ok, good luck, I can't help you, because I can't get a grip. I'll go down and alert the guards to get the police."

"Leave it to me, I'll get him."

As Botzi made his way down, Noodles presented a strange sight. His body scraped flat against the pyramid face, pulled ever upwards, as if by an invisible rope, provided by a strong magnetic attraction to each new pin position. Alby could see what was happening, and as he neared the top he wasted no more time, leaving the remaining embedded pins behind. In fact, he did one mighty leap to the top point of the pinnacle and proceeded to retrieve the Sceptre from his back-pack. Noodles, now reaching these available pins, increased his climbing speed.

Alby looked at his watch. He had ten seconds to go before the Sceptre could be used. He stood upright and pointed the blue crystal end at the city of Cairo. Just before the moment

when the Mystical Powers were to be unleashed over the city of millions of unsuspecting people, Noodles yelled “No, you don’t!!”

With a desperate mighty leap from below, Noodles tackled Alby like a rugby player, knocking the Sceptre out of Alby’s hands and sending it spinning into the sky.

The whirling Sceptre arced far out away from the face of the great pyramid. A glinting spinner, it traced the pull of gravity all the way down. But the force of the duo’s collision was not enough to send it clear of the stones at the base of the pyramid. Soon as the crystals smashed into the hard material, they fragmented into tiny pieces emitting a shower of green sparks. That was the final end of that instrument, to Botzi’s great relief.

Botzi’s attention turned quickly back towards the top of the pyramid where, Noodles and Alby wrestled in a life and death struggle. This position could not be maintained forever and the inevitable overbalance by one or the other began the bone-crushing tumble and cart-wheeling down the sloping sides, neither one letting go of the other. There was nothing Botzi could do but watch and be ready to help Noodles when they finally reached the desert sand.

At about mid-way, the tumbling stopped but not the swinging punches. Whack! Bam! Grunt! Botzi was awed and hoped Noodles was alright. Alby was no chicken and lashed out with all his might. This was purely a physical fight, as unbeknown to Botzi, his friend had suffered damage to his magnetic resonator and could only fight like an old fashioned street slugger. Alby kicked Noodles off balance, but Noodles wasn’t going to be defeated and swung out to grab Alby as they both toppled downwards once again.

The pyramid guards by now had joined Botzi and waited for the two wrestlers to arrive at the lower levels. Botzi asked the guards for help, after giving them a brief explanation of what happened. Soon as the fighters came close, about three guards, Botzi and Noodles jumped on Alby and pinned him to the ground. Ropes and handcuffs soon bundled Alby into a helpless cocoon and the guards confirmed that a police van was already on its way.

“I’ll sue you for this!” snarled Alby to Botzi.

“You’ve got some cheek,” replied Botzi, “you threatened us with guns and stole my treasure. You’re going to jail.”

“Your treasure? It was my treasure – I had it in my hands and you tried to steal it from me!”

“We’ve got witnesses as to your actions,” said Noodles a bit hoarsely. His chest rings had a fair amount of scratches and dents, as well as some damage to his legs.



They saw Alby running towards the largest pyramid to climb his way to the top.

## **Twenty-Eight (28)**

### **Home to Poppycock Place**

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**Now during** all this, Fungus watched proceedings from the top of the sphinx, where Alby had instructed him to stay and keep watch. Earlier that evening, Fungus had the job of cutting the floodlight cables, which he did successfully, so Alby could do his climb to the top of the pyramid unnoticed by the guards. But, Fungus, clumsy as usual, had aroused

suspicion, when, after slicing through the main electrical cable, caused a bright flash and dropping the tools, raced away to hide. The guards were after him but he disappeared out of their sight for a while until they spied him crouching on the back of the sphinx. This was not a very intelligent guerrilla manoeuvre, as the guards quietly circled the sphinx and beckoned him to come down. They didn't like the look of him either, and doubted that Fungus, with his black bowler hat and two upright canine teeth protruding past his top lip would ever get asked to play Father Christmas in a shopping mall. Just to ensure no arguments, two guards motioned him down off the sphinx with their drawn pistols. Fungus obliged and held out his hands to receive a pair of stainless steel bracelets courtesy of the Egyptian Government.

Meanwhile, Alby was still ranting and raving. "I've got a witness too. Fungus will swear I found the treasure first and you guys mugged me, just as you did on top of the pyramid."

"What about your attempts to conquer the Egyptian people with the power of the Sceptre?"

"You must be crazy, who will believe that?"

"We have the map that leads to the treasure."

"You have a copy, you mean. And anyway, there's no proof that the Sceptre was anything but an ancient trophy. You broke it beyond repair by knocking it out of my hand."

The Bots could see the arguments would see-saw between them all night, so they changed the subject. Turning to the guards Botzi asked. "What happens now?"

"Well sir, all of you will have to report to the Cairo police station tomorrow morning and explain yourselves. Our little friend here," pointing to Fungus, "will enjoy our hospitality for at least six months in a little cell for his destruction of our floodlight system."

The guards took the personal identification of Botzi, Noodles and Alby and told them they will be expected to make a statement to the authorities. Meantime a prison van arrived and Fungus was escorted inside for a tour to the city jail.

Alby walked off into the darkness, still snarling.

Botzi turned to Noodles, "At least we destroyed a weapon that could have done great harm if it fell into the wrong hands."

"Or a lot of good, if used by kind-hearted people," added Noodles.

"As a fifty-fifty risk, I think it was better that it did not exist anymore. Alby sure proved it could easily be used by the wrong people." With that, they took a taxi to their hotel and when morning came, they made a report at the police station. Alby was nowhere to be seen. The police sergeant had bigger things on his schedule than some tourists climbing a pyramid. He gave the boys a small fine and let them go.

Back on the plane taking them home, Noodles mentioned to Botzi "The nuisance part of all this is we have to live with Alby next door, back in Poppycock Place."

"We don't have to look at him or talk to him – we'll just ignore him."

After checking out from customs, they saw Rory greeting them in a taxi. The bots piled into the vehicle and Botzi related what happened.



“We smashed the Sceptre.”

“You what? What a disaster!” exclaimed Rory

“No actually, it was a two-edged sword. It could do evil as well as good. We’re not sorry that it can’t be used by the likes of Alby and other evil people.”

“I guess that’s something to be considered,” said Rory thoughtfully, “ but cheer up, the Fiesta of San Juan will take place in Poppycock Place next week and all the tenants and shopkeepers are gearing up to make it the best ever!”

“Better polish my dancing shoes,” laughed Botzi.

## **The END**

A Children’s story by **Tobias Dingbat**

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# Poppycock Place Series The Idiota Code



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## **REVIEWS**

What others are saying about “The Idiota Code”

Rating: \_\_\_ Star \* Star \* Star \* Star \* Star

Taking a coffee break during the Battle of Britain Winsome Churchill said this about ‘The Idiota Code’ *“Never in the field of human literature was so much written for so many and read by so few.”*

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*“This book tells of a Mission Impossible that became a Mission Accomplished. Botzi and Noodles were CIA agents during the Iraqi war, working as court jesters for Saddam and distracting him into losing the war. Their work is still ‘Top Secret’ and secure from Wikileaks. After reading 2 pages all patriots should throw this book overboard from an air-craft carrier.”* George Brush

*“Famous author Tobias Dingbat was in line to win a Pulitzer Prize last night but strayed behind a queue leading to a soup kitchen. He took home 2 pullets instead.”* The New York Times.

# Benjamin Froglin



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*“A heart warming story of a courageous frog battling against the odds and bringing happiness to everyone. I will never serve frog-legs in my restaurant ever again!”* Jacques Cordon Bleu - Paris

Abraham Lincoln accepted the status quo, *“First there were the Bioteks, now we have professor frogs. Oh well, it was inevitable, as the Senate has often been populated by bullfrogs since the Boston Tea Party.”*

*“After I finished ‘The Origin of the Species’ I retired but now I have to track down Benjamin Froglin for an interview. If this frog is as smart as Tobias Dingbat says then he must be from outer space as the frogs I met could hardly read or write.”* Charles Darwin.

\* \* \* \* \*

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