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VELVET PAW of ASQUITH NOVEL

Chosen Chapters



THOMAS CORFIELD

THE VELVET PAW OF ASQUITH NOVELS



CHOSEN CHAPTERS

THOMAS CORFIELD



Panda Books Australia
Sydney – New York – Tokyo – Berlin

“Corfield is a writer who ought to have his poetic licence re-voked.”

—*Heidi Maitland, Hard but Fair.*

“Each word has been chosen with no regard for those preceding.”

—*Sorbet Flamm, Highly controversial in a traditional sense.*

“Finally, a reason to encourage illiteracy.”

—*Debbie Stott, Single Minded Multi-tasker.*

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LICENCE NOTES

Written in Australian English.

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If you enjoyed this book, then there's something wrong with you. Find a mirror, have a good, hard look at yourself and try to determine what it might be. Asking family members directly can be useful, as can total strangers after recounting a brief synopsis of your life. The latter can, however, result in prosecution, which might go some way to obtaining a differential diagnosis via expert witnesses.

Read the other Dooven Books.

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ABOUT THE BOOKS

Consider a world inhabited with only cats and dogs: a society recognizable as our own, but with its eccentricities being the norm, rather than the exception. A world where the charm of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind In the Willows* meets the exotic world of Ian Fleming's Bond. A world where fluffy just got dangerous. These are the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, also known as the Dooven Books.

Welcome to the genre of New Fable.

The books follow Oscar Teabag-Dooven, a secret agent who believes he's more a poet than a spy, in a series of international, jet-setting adventures involving greed, espionage and the odd foray into professional cheese-shaping. Unfolding with a gratuitousness only possible in a world unrestrained by conventional society, the Velvet Paw of Asquith novels take the word mystery far too literally, and the word intrigue not literally enough.

Despite finding training to be brash and clinical, with too much shouting and not enough singing, Oscar battles villains and tries thwarting their garish plans. But it isn't easy when unable to do much more than rhyme one lot of words with another. Nevertheless, he succeeds with the help of the characters he meets and a courage that arises the moment he believes it cannot.

This ebook is accompanied by a Cinematic Audiobook production, which can be found at all good online audiobook retailers and podcast sites, unless it's not there.

FORWARD

The chapters herein are the author's favourite, and span the first five Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels. The fourth, fifth and sixth books are a trilogy and have not, at the time of this release, been published. It is, therefore, intriguing to have a glimpse into what Thomas describes as "a darkening of adventure" and incorporation of "imaginative realism" into these latter adventures of his infamous international cat of mystery, Oscar Teabag-Dooven. What Thomas means by either phrase is anyone's guess, not least his own, and a trawl through his blog offers nothing in the way of enlightenment. Having collaborated with him over the past three years on various related projects doesn't help, either. It may be that we must wait until the release of the Morrigan Trilogy before having any idea. But even then it's doubtful. After all, Thomas is known for conjuring concepts that, upon closer examination, are even more superficial than he is. See, for example, his concept of Self-Derogatory Advertising (SDA): a means of marketing by highlighting the worst, rather than the best, characteristics of a product. Or the concept or Wordcasting: a failed means to bring writers and readers together through the social sharing of short book excerpts, a failure reported to have cost Thomas nearly a hundred thousand of dollars in initial development, before being abandoned, presumably because he used SDA to promote it.*

Thomas has been described as a master of nothing, a conjurer of the inconjurable and a complete prat. Although I concur with all three, I must confess that what he manifests through the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels is nothing short of whelming. What he lacks in grace, poise and talent he more than makes up for in social ineptitude. I have often been asked, having known him perhaps better than most, how similar is he to the protagonist in his best-selling sortabigraphy *Writing Wrongly*? Well, I can honestly say that not only are they one and the same, but he's far more endearing in print than real life.

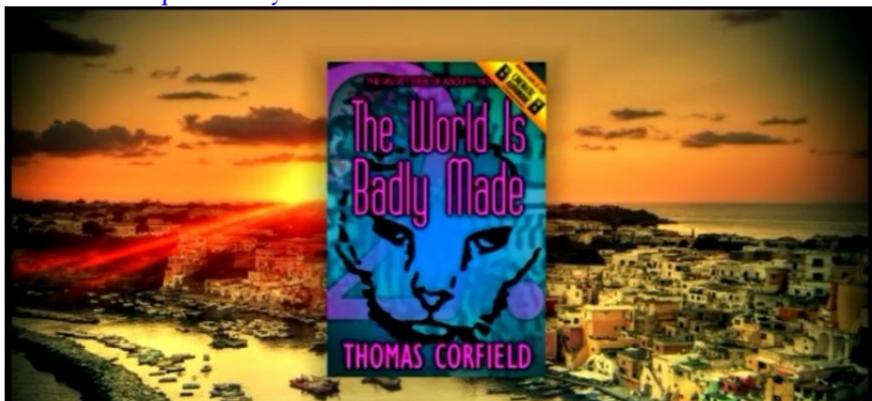
Andrew Cameron,
Filmmaker.

* Wealth Weekly, Vol 27, 2015.

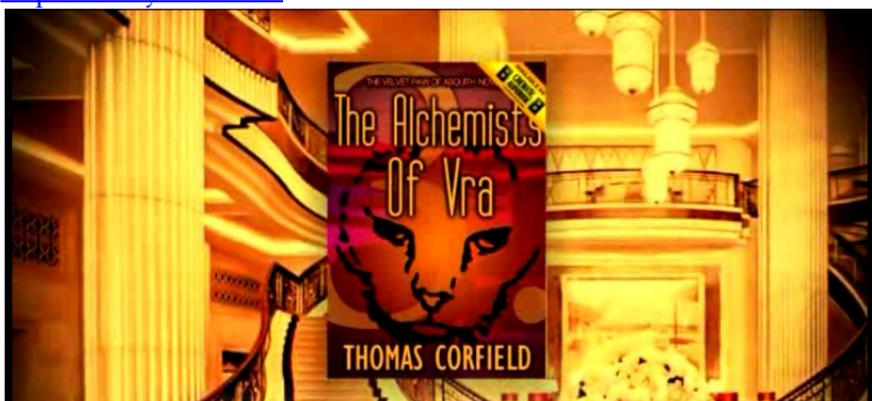
SOME RELEVANT LINKS

The Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels are representative of the emerging New Fable fiction genre. Consider visiting the following links to find out more about both.

1. Chosen Chapters from the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2fmCbBr>

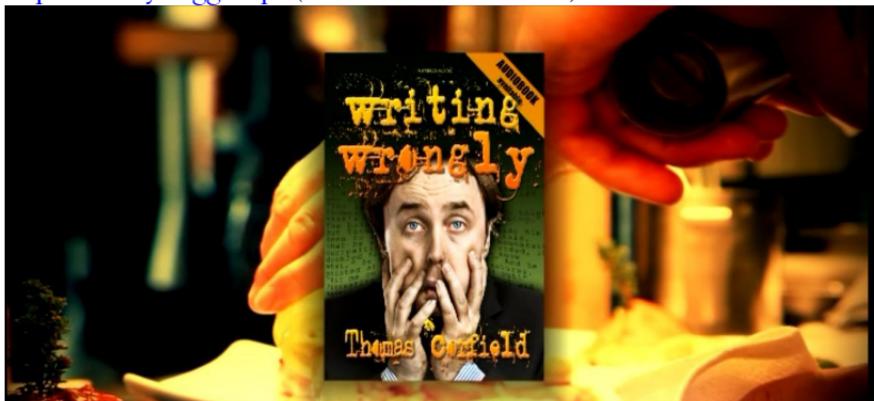


2. Hotel Scenes from the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2fNekv9>



3. The Writing Wrongly Middle Bits on Youtube:

<http://bit.ly/2ggF1qB> (contains adult themes)



4. The Velvet Paw of Asquith Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/doovenbooks>

5. A bit about the author:

<http://www.thomascorfield.com/>

6. Dooven Muzak is music written exclusively for the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, the books referred to in this one. Listen to some here:

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/dooven-muzak>

DOOVEN MUZAK - volume 5



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DOOVENISM

The Velvet Paw of Asquith novels, aka the Dooven Books, are complemented with additional media to enhance the reader's experience. Visit VELVETPAWOFASQUITH.COM to learn more about these additional components of the Dooven Books:





EXTRACTIONISMTM
Art Movement



DoovenFM!

DEDICATION

Principally for me.

CHAPTER 1

From The World Is Badly Made, Chapter 19

In which we meet Frabgnl Frin-Splummet: an impassioned funeral director who has a novel approach to his profession.

“**W**HERE are they? Where are they?”

Most animals would not consider pursuing a career as an undertaker. But Frabgnl Frin-Splummet found being an undertaker a most satisfying profession. Which was fortunate, because his father had been an undertaker—as had his father’s father—and an awful lot of fathers before them. Indeed, no closer could a family become than when they end up burying each other.

Frabgnl Frin-Splummet was a small, round dog, who wore a waistcoat, a dark velvet blazer and a big bowtie. The bowtie was standard size, but relative to the animal’s stature, appeared larger. The same could be said of his funeral parlour; a narrow building just off a highstreet which was two storeys high but five storeys deep. This wasn’t unusual for buildings of Par Beguine. The city had risen and fallen so often beneath the horror of Bedlam, that a great deal of its rising was done while it was still falling, which had resulted in some very deep basements indeed.

Like the Frin-Splummets before him, Frabgnl took great pride in carting expired animals into his basement to prepare them for

burial, and so many corpses had passed through it over the centuries that he wasn't convinced there weren't some languishing down there that he'd forgotten about.

Beneath Bedlam, business had thrived: for a funeral parlour, the bad times are far better than the good. But because recent times had been especially good, the parlour wasn't nearly as busy as it had been a millennium ago. Indeed, when Frabgnl took over from his father, it became apparent that he'd have to whittle its staff down from five animals to two. This, he'd explained over their wails of despair, was not unreasonable considering they generally just dragged dead animals down staircases. His staff had been adamant that it involved much more than just dragging. They had to be tarted up, for example, and then hauled back upstairs, shoved into wheelbarrows, before being pushed across the city and dumped into holes.

But his reasons went beyond corpse-manoeuvring.

After burying his father, he'd summoned staff to his office to advise them of the fact. "I'm sorry," he'd said, dusting his paws still covered in the earth he'd shovelled on him, "but I'm afraid there have to be some changes now that I'm in charge."

"You're not thinking of expanding are you?" a staff member asked.

"No. Quite the opposite. I'm considering streamlining the business. Making it more efficient. Father's approach, understandably perhaps, was rather old-fashioned."

"Well, it's hard not to be. Chucking dead animals in holes hasn't changed much over the years."

"That's not what—"

"They're either dead or they're not. If they are, we chuck them in holes. If they're not, we don't. It's quite easy. There's a flow chart in the office."

There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

"I know what the business involves," Frabgnl said. "It's been in my family for years. What I'm saying is that it needs to be made more efficient. You've all served the parlour very well. Indeed, I think

we've buried most of your families."

"Yes," another grumbled. "You needn't remind us. My mother still can't sleep with the covers on."

Frabgnl cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about that. I honestly thought she was dead. I was young and keen, you see."

"Even when she started yelling that she wasn't?"

"I told you, I thought it was rigor mortis."

"Rigor mortis doesn't involve the corpse yelling that it's not dead, Frabgnl."

"Yes, well, I know that now—especially after Father put up the flow-charts. Anyway, the point is that my father's approach was old fashioned and changes need to be made."

"What sort of changes?"

"Well, primarily, letting three of you go."

"Letting three of us go?" They looked at each other. "Letting us go where?"

"Away from here."

"From Par Beguine? We can't leave Par Beguine! It's our home. Who will look after my mother? She certainly won't want it to be you!"

"I don't mean leaving the city," Frabgnl said, "I mean leaving the business; leaving Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour. I'm sorry, but three of you will no longer have a job here. I can write you excellent references. Some of your holes have been brilliant."

All five of them stared.

"I'm sorry," Frabgnl sighed. "I don't like doing this, but you have to understand that things *have* changed."

"In what way?" another cried. "Animals die, we chuck them in holes! There's not much room for variation. I mean, they're dying now, somewhere. Out there animals are snuffing it." He pointed at a telephone. "Every time that thing rings, I get a little shiver of joy at the thought of some animal carking it."

There were murmurs again.

Frabgnl sighed. He didn't want to let them go. He liked them.

But he was running a business, and if he didn't make changes there wouldn't be a business left to run. "Believe me," he said. "I really am sorry. But the fact is that things have changed."

"But in what *way*, Frabgnl?"

Part of him wondered whether a flow chart might help. He said, "The truth is that Arabesque is wonderful. Thanks to the Tierre, times are very good indeed. Animals might be dying, yes, but not enough of them to keep Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour viable. It seems my father has been running the place on debt for the past several years."

"Debt?" Their faces fell. Not off, obviously, as that would be dreadful. More with a sagginess of grief.

"Yes. You have to remember that in the past, when times were bad, business boomed. After all, funerals were immensely popular here once upon a time. But nowadays, with peace and prosperity across the land, there just aren't enough corpses to put food on the table."

"What about if we killed some animals on purpose?"

"We've talked about this before," Frabgnl said. "We have to let them die naturally. Killing animals so we can bury them just isn't a viable alternative."

"That's right," another agreed. "And anyway, there's no guarantee they'll call this parlour to bury them. Par Beguine's got more funeral parlours than any other city, thanks to our history of Bedlam. The odds that we'll be the ones called to shove them in a hole are slim."

"But after I kill them, I'd staple our business card to their faces."

"Yes," said Frabgnl, "I believe we've discussed this on numerous occasions, also. And to be quite honest, it's one of the reasons behind my determining who I let go."

All five blinked at him.

"Moreover," said Frabgnl, "most of the competition now have long cars that they can stick dead animals in. Sometimes three at a time, depending how long they've been dead. They look far more

classy than our wheelbarrow, and don't fall out as often, either. Frankly, we need a hearse if this business is to remain viable—and I don't mean re-painting the wheelbarrow. Running a car is terribly expensive, and coupled with my father's debt, I have no alternative but to reduce staff. I'm sorry. Really, I am. You've all been terribly loyal."

"Well," one sighed, "in a way, I'm relieved. I'm starting to gag at the smell."

"Gag?"

"Yes. The basement's getting dreadfully whiffy, perhaps not surprising considering the number of corpses that have passed through it. But it wouldn't surprise me if there's one still down there that we've forgotten about. But it's dark, so I can't be sure."

Frabgnl stared at him. "Are you certain?"

"Oh, yes. The bulb's been blown for ages."

"No, I mean about a corpse still being down there?"

The animal shrugged. "Well, either that or the place needs a good hosing out."

Frabgnl frowned. "We can't have left one down there, surely?"

"If we got a new bulb, I could check."

"All right—but only a small one, mind. I don't want to blow the budget—primarily because I don't yet have one."

Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour was one of the oldest funeral parlours in Par Beguine, and generations of excellent service had built a sterling reputation. But good times, debt and a need for a long car left Frabgnl with little option but to try and run the place virtually by himself.

Which is why he now paced the pavement outside his parlour, muttering. "Where are they, where *are* they?"

It was early morning, and he waited for his remaining staff, a dog and cat, to arrive and help with the dragging.

"Come on!" he said, looking at his watch. "Where *are* they?"

Frabgnl was both prone to worrying and a perfectionist—which not only left him worrying about being a perfectionist, but

worrying that he wasn't worrying enough. Such traits weren't helped by an incident he'd witnessed when his father ran the place. The parlour was arranging the burial of a dog. The animal was not only dead, but had lived its entire life as a dog. So when family came to view their dearly departed and saw instead a cat, questions were not only raised, but hurled with the sort of viciousness that often had animals requiring Frin-Splummet's services in the first place. It was a dreadful mix-up. Despite his father's attempts to console them by asking whether it really mattered, since they were all going to end up cold and sloppy anyway, it was an incident that had haunted Frabgnl ever since. It left him determined to ensure no such embarrassment occurred again, which was why he now paced, looked at his watch and wondered where they were.

Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour had a loyal following. Families who'd been buried by the Frin-Splummets for generations had no intention of seeking services elsewhere, and Frabgnl prided himself on maintaining such reputation. Recently, he'd had a new gold-lettered sign made, which sat above the parlour's door. It read:

Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour.

Let Our Family Bury Yours.

He stopped pacing and peered at it, wondering whether he should buff it again. He'd buffed it yesterday, but giving it another going over might stop him worrying about where his hearse had got to. But because he'd have to get his ladder, he resumed pacing instead.

"Where *are* they?"

He had to shift a dead dog from the basement to a cemetery by ten. And although it was not yet seven, the hearse should have arrived half an hour ago. Were he in the wedding business, he might not worry so much, as there's always the option of brides catching taxis. In the funeral business, however, corpses aren't so readily accepted,

and rolling a dead dog up to a taxi, leaning it against the door while fiddling for loose change was unlikely to have drivers oblige.

With paws on hips, he glowered down the lane and cursed. He couldn't even use the wheelbarrow, as he'd sold it to buy the hearse.

A cold, dark mauve pressed the sky into morning. A chill awoke from stone and rose in wisps to get on with whatever chill got on with during the day. On the highroad, a rumbling of morning traffic grew as residents got on with whatever it was they got on with also, and Frabgnl wished his staff would follow these excellent examples.

Above the lane's narrow storeys, the Hendral Spires of Erfin Va Lahaar, the Inverted Cathedral, stood black against the purple sky. The spires towered above Par Beguine as a reminder of what Ara-besque had once endured.

"Do not look at it so fearfully, Frabgnl," his father had once said. "The cathedral's darkness symbolises light and was built to celebrate the end of Bedlam."

"But it's big and scary, Father, and only reminds me of such woe."

"Of course it does. It's impossible to rejoice in what we have, if not reminded by what was once endured."

There was a toot from down the lane.

With relieved mutterings, Frabgnl watched the battered hearse arrive, a reassuring paw waving from it. With a bump, a scrape and a pop of smoke, the old bomb rattled up to the parlour and squeaked to a halt.

While Frabgnl nodded with pride, his two employees alighted. "Marvellous what a well-painted wheelbarrow can get you these days," he said, running a paw along a rust-blistered fender.

"Er, I'd be careful doing that," the cat said. "It rained last week and significantly weakened that bit."

"Nonsense! This is a marvellous piece of motoring engineering, and proves that Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour is on par with any parlour in Par Beguine!" He peered at it. "Um, is there a bit missing here?"

“Yes,” the dog said. “We were idling at some traffic lights and a bit fell off.”

“At traffic lights? What happened?”

“We were idling.”

“As I mentioned,” the cat said, “it rained last week, so a lot of the body work is compromised.”

“Compromised?”

“Yes. It appears to have been restored once with cardboard and sticky-tape, before being coloured in with pencils.”

Frabgnl smiled at the rattling wreck. “Nevertheless, it’s a hearse. More importantly, it’s Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour’s hearse!”

The cat looked at the dog. “Let’s just hope we don’t have any funerals in the rain.”

Frabgnl glared at them. “I did my best, all right? All I had left were debts and a wheelbarrow.”

“At least a wheelbarrow’s waterproof.”

“Well, I think it’s marvellous,” Frabgnl said. “Er, shouldn’t you turn the engine off? It will take some time for us to cart the animal up from the basement.”

“Best not to,” the dog said. “Leaving the engine running increases the odds we’ll be able to drive this pile of junk away afterwards.”

“That’s right,” said the cat. “In fact, we haven’t dared turn the thing off since last Thursday.”

“Last Thursday?”

“Yes. You remember; when we couldn’t start it again at the cemetery after we’d buried that cat—which we were forced to dig up again after everyone had gone home in order to use its hind legs to chock the wheels while we pushed this thing uphill.”

“Oh, yes. I’d forgotten about that.”

“Well, we haven’t. There’s still bits of it stuck to the hubcap.”

“At least we’ve *got* hubcaps.”

“Frabgnl, we have *one* hubcap.”

“Yes, but when we had the wheelbarrow, we had none at all.”

He admired the hearse again. “I think it’s marvellous. I wonder what Father would say if he could see what Frin-Splummet Funeral Parlour now has in its arsenal?”

“Well,” the dog said, “arsenal’s probably an appropriate word, considering this thing’s a death-trap.”

“Exactly!” Frabgnl said with a clap of paws. “And what could be more appropriate for a hearse?”

Because the hearse was long, the lane narrow and the dead animal in the basement heavy, it had to be manoeuvred to a more convenient angle. The dog got back in and crunched through a gear—singular, as it had only one left—and swung the thing around about as daintily as a half-gutted chicken in a beauty salon. With the rear positioned closer to the parlour’s door, the dog alighted and chocked its wheel with the hubcap which had fallen off during the manoeuvre. Frabgnl then led them inside, through the office and down a narrow flight of stairs to a depth of cellar five storeys down.

When they emerged some time later, they struggled beneath a large, heavy dog which they intended to put to rest in a cemetery—which was ironic considering how relaxed it was already. On the pavement, Frabgnl dropped his end and issued some instructions, leaving his staff to heave the corpse into the back of the hearse, before collapsing against the side of the car. Beneath Frabgnl’s growing impatience, his employees dragged themselves along the hearse, unchocked its wheel and clambered into its confines. Satisfied, Frabgnl did the same, squeezing in beside the dead dog and feeling to be chauffeured in the most disturbing manner.

A gear was found—not the one wanted, but because choice was limited they made do—and the hearse grumbled off the kerb. With engine coughing in a manner akin to the heavy dog shortly before expiration, it rattled away, leaving a trail of oil behind lest they got lost and needed to find their way back again.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/world>

CHAPTER 2

From When Fear Is Not Afraid, Chapter 6

In which Oscar meets Binklemitre, a fellow Velvet Paw, on assignment in Barras, a lovely and sunny city with some interesting parking restrictions and unusual policies on umbrella usage.

The air was warm and smelt of exhaust and exhaustion. A hard sun beat through haze and baked everything into a crispiness that left Oscar feeling sorry for fish-fingers. He wandered past narrow laneways, which, although in shade, nevertheless smoked in a manner suggesting most of Barras was medium rare. Despite the baking heat, there was a splendidness about the place that accosted him the moment he'd landed at its airport. This was partly because not crashing into runway goes a long way to establishing a positive first-impression anywhere. Moreover, the taxi he'd seconded from it hadn't crashed either, which contributed further to his delight, especially when Barras had the sort of traffic that can only be described as violently congested. As a result, Oscar wandered along a pavement with the sort of pleasure that generally accompanies the discovery that a four course meal is not only paid for, but includes a parking voucher and complementary pen. All he required was a nice mug of chilled hot-fin at a cafe under an umbrella, and he'd find himself more content than an exhausted narcoleptic on an uncommitted Sunday morning.

When a car careered past him, he leapt aside. It bounced across the pavement, collected a rubbish bin and distributed its contents

over several pedestrians, before collecting the pedestrians. None involved were fussed, however, as the cars in Barras were so dented that when they did drive into pedestrians, their crumpled fenders tended to embrace, rather than splatter animals across bitumen. Indeed, Barras' streets were so crowded that driving around a corner could take the best part of a week. This resulted in cars being abandoned halfway around them, which contributed further to congestion. So crowded was Barras, that it was often considered to be one enormous intersection. As a consequence, it had only one set of traffic lights. These had been disconnected shortly after installation, however, as its congestion was so violent that drivers had little opportunity to pay them proper attention; a situation that became evident in the number of cars careering into buildings whenever they changed colour, and although this was unacceptable, it did momentarily relieve congestion.

Barras' traffic was an endless cabaret of spectacular proportions and Oscar found its fervour, smoke and screams most agreeable. The city was crowded, hot and furious, which rendered it the sort of place he could wander with a glorious anonymity in populous, which he revelled in until coming across a café he was looking for.

The cafe was on a corner surrounded by abandoned cars, moving ones and milling pedestrians in an assortment of combinations. There was lots of honking, screeching and banging, and that was just the pedestrians. Abandoned cars rolled amongst the cafe's tables when bumped by those moving, their bonnets flapping until the things crunched into walls or other cars, where their broken doors would wave like disenchanted street performers. Climbing over some crumpled bumpers and an assortment of flattened hubcaps, he claimed a table that was still upright and some chairs that hadn't been smashed. He sat and squinted through blazing sun, keen to order an umbrella for his table along with a chilled hot-fin. A waiter arrived holding a pen over a little pad. When he asked what Oscar might like, he mentioned the umbrella first.

"I'm sorry?" said the waiter, with no intention of writing it

down on his little pad.

“An umbrella, please,” said Oscar.

The waiter glanced about. “An umbrella, sir?”

“That’s right. An umbrella for my table.”

“I don’t think that’s possible, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Well, umbrellas can be terribly dangerous, for one thing. And for another, they’re illegal here.”

Oscar stopped squinting and blinked instead. “Illegal?”

The waiter nodded. “That’s right.”

“It’s against the law to have an umbrella on my table?”

“Yes, sir. Or indeed on your personage. You certainly can’t have one on your table.”

“But why not?”

“Because they’re illegal.”

“I’m sorr—what do you mean *illegal*.”

The waited tapped the pen against his chin in thought. “Let me see. Are you familiar with the word legal?”

Oscar nodded deliberately.

“Well, the opposite.”

“Illegal. Are you quite sure?”

“Oh, yes. Quite certain. I’ve lived in Barras a long time and know its peculiarities as though they’re my own.” His pen at the ready, he waited for something more beverage orientated.

Oscar sighed. He liked Barras, but he also liked umbrellas, and their apparent incongruity tainted his impression of the place even more than its exorbitant traffic fatality statistics, which were so high that new numbers had been invented to assist with their calculation.

“You’re quite certain there isn’t even a small one under the counter inside?” he asked. “Perhaps in lost property? Left by a customer?”

“A traffic statistic?”

“What? No, an umbrella.”

“No, sir. Barras doesn’t have any umbrellas. They’re illegal.”

“Illegal—yes—look, I must admit to struggling with the notion.”

“It’s a legal term, sir.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s a legal term. It means they’re not allowed.”

“I know what it means, but I want to know why.”

“Presumably so members of the legal fraternity can communicate with each other.”

No—look—I mean why are umbrellas illegal here?”

The waiter looked up at a sky so cloudless, that their absence was probably for legal reasons also. “Well, it doesn’t rain here very often for a start,” he said. “But more importantly, they can be extremely dangerous.”

“Umbrellas? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“With respect, sir, I’m not the one asking for an umbrella on my table.” He pointed at a poster in the café’s window. It read: *Remember: umbrellas can be deadly.* Before Oscar could read any further, a car slammed into the kerb, screeched across pavement and bounced through occupied tables. Although its arrival surprised Oscar, it surprised the table’s patrons far more, who became gathered in its fenders and slammed into another car that had done something similar earlier. The murmur of dissent arising from said patrons while removing themselves from mangled bodywork were understandable, and once they’d helped the driver out through what was once a door, an argument erupted about who was responsible for the spilt hot-fins. The driver, brushing himself down, was equally indignant and insisted it was their fault if they were foolish enough to be anywhere near a pavement. The argument escalated until a third car ploughed into the first two and collected them all communally. Since it was driverless they agreed to split the bill evenly, especially considering the table already had been.

Oscar watched them unlock themselves from crumbled fender a second time and stumble to an unshattered table, which they sat at by improvising some stools from recently shattered table. He turned

back to the poster. It had a picture of some shattered tables, upon which patrons were draped after having been impaled by umbrellas originally upon them. The point was indisputable.

“Is rush hour always like this?” Oscar asked the waiter, before cringing when a sound of shattered car followed some screeching tyres.

“What do you mean hour?”

After some blinks, Oscar asked for a chilled hot-fin. “Though I can wait,” he said, “as it might be prudent to get their orders first.” He indicated the disgruntled patrons who, having attempted to sit on shattered table, realised it was too shattered to be sat on and tried reclaiming their shattered chairs instead, which were better suited to propping up shattered table than their bottoms. Unless they found something they could improvise as table legs after all. It was a pity they didn’t have any umbrellas.

“I must say I find your city terribly exciting,” Oscar said, contributing to the small round of applause offered in light of their recovery. “But wouldn’t some sort of fence be wise?”

There was another bang, which had Oscar and the waiter cringe again.

“Where would we put a fence?” the waiter asked as a car seat sailed overhead.

Oscar looked around, realising the pavement had barely enough room for shattered tables amongst its abandoned cars.

“The abandoned cars do as good a job as protecting us as anything might,” the waiter said. “Although I must admit that working in Barras’ cafés is rather like playing an incessant game of pinball. Mind you, if things get really bad, we go inside. The walls generally stop anything really dangerous.”

“Generally?”

By way of illustration, a car slid, screeched and slammed into an array of abandoned ones. It somersaulted across them, showering patrons in a rain of shattered bodywork, until becoming lodged in an upper storey window where it teetered and creaked in quiet smoul-

der.

Oscar turned back to the waiter. "Perhaps make that two chilled hot-fins," he said, "and forget the umbrella."

The waiter nodded, before hurrying to those trying to re-establish their bottoms on shattered outdoor furniture.

At a table nearby, a dog peered at him from behind a newspaper. When Oscar smiled, the animal lowered his paper and rolled it up. He stood, tucked it under his paw and approached.

The dog asked, "Would you like an umbrella?"

"I would like one for my table, yes," said Oscar.

"Why?"

"Because it would be perfect."

"Perfect for what?"

"A clichéd postcard that I could then send home."

"And where is home exactly?"

"The same place as yours, I believe."

To this, the dog nodded, sat down at Oscar's table and held out a paw. "Binklemitre," he said. "VP of A."

Oscar took his paw before returning it, as was the custom. "Oscar Teabag-Dooven, VP of A also. I believe I made the mistake of assuming the waiter was you."

"I get that a lot," the dog said. "It must be the hat."

Oscar looked at his head. "But you're not wearing a hat."

"I meant the waiter's."

"The waiter isn't wearing one either."

"Which makes it all the more bizarre, don't you think?"

Before Oscar could reply, some burgeoning street-related cabaret began nearby, consisting of blaring horns and yelling pedestrians.

"Have you been here long?" Oscar asked, after glancing at it.

Binklemitre shrugged. "About half an hour."

"No, I meant here. In Barras. Watching this peculiar creature named the Ar'dath-Irr."

Another shrug. "Oh. Well, quite a bit longer, yes. Definitely before last Thursday. I remember that because I had to return a library

book.”

The cabaret grew in volume and involved a veritable swathe of traffic arguing with a small army of pedestrians.

“It must be an extraordinary place to live,” Oscar shouted as it marched past. “Very exciting I should imagine.”

“What?”

“I said it must be very exciting to be assigned here.”

“If one likes this sort of thing,” said Binklemitre. “But I much prefer Asquith. There’s less sun for a start, and umbrellas are legal.”

The veritable swathe coalesced into a sort of badly choreographed musical with a libretto composed entirely of profanities.

“Tell me what you know of this the Ar’dath-Irr creature,” Oscar said.

More shrugs from the dog. “Well, that’s the problem. Not a lot. Or more specifically, nothing at all. He has a routine that involves going out for a stroll in the evening, and then going back home again.” He stopped when their chilled hot-fins arrived.

“And that’s it?” Oscar asked, sipping his and retching. “There’s nothing more you know of him?”

Binklemitre frowned in thought. “He breathes air. At least, I presume he does. But anything else I can offer is also presumption.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“He eats food. He has carpet—”

“He eats carpet?”

“No, he *has* carpet. In his house. Again, presumably.”

After some more blinks, Oscar said, “Anything else?”

“Presumption-wise?”

“Ideally not.”

Another frown, followed by, “Well, he has at least one lavatory.” The frown deepened and he looked away. “Unless that’s why he goes out for a stroll.”

“Binklemitre, even I could have come up with those things.”

“Yes,” agreed Binklemitre. “That’s the marvellous thing about presumptions: they’re so presumptuous. Mind you, when the Cata-

combs advised that another Velvet Paw was coming to Barras, I was worried about having nothing more to offer, which is where the presumptions came in. Presumptions are really great when you think about it, because not only are they limited by imagination, but justified by it as well.” He fiddled through his pockets. “Anyway, I put together was a small dossier stating pretty much what I’ve just mentioned, minus the presumptions.”

“Minus them?”

“Yes. I was planning on using them as a sequel.”

“A sequel.” It wasn’t asked as a question.

“Yes, you know, if the dossier did particularly well.” He continued searching.

“Right—look—Binklemitre, do you have it, or do you have fleas?”

“Wait. It’s here somewhere. At least, I think it is.” He paused. “Unless that’s also a presumption.” After a final rummage he pulled out a crumpled scrap of paper. “It’s really more of a draft at the moment.”

“But you just said you’d already put it together.”

The frown returned. “The sequel?”

“No, the dossier.”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. I was being presumptuous.”

“May I see it?”

“But I haven’t written it yet. I was going to see how this one went.”

“Not the sequel, your dossier.”

It was offered and Oscar took it, amazed to see it had the very sentence Binklemitre mention scrawled in pencil upon it.

“That’s it?” Oscar said. “This is all you’ve come up with since being instructed to watch this creature: ‘Going outside for a stroll for a bit and then going back home again’?”

“It’s succinct and to the point.”

Oscar sighed. “Where does he live?”

“In his villa.”

“No, I mean specifically. Where does he live specifically?”

“Well, specifically in his villa.”

Oscar leant his head upon a paw. “And where does he go, Bin-klemite? And for how long?”

“Specifically?”

“Yes.”

Frowning, Binklemite counted the answers off on his paws. “His villa. A stroll. And for a bit.”

Oscar stared, stunned to meet a Velvet Paw apparently more useless than he.

“Honestly, Mister Dooven, there is nothing more I can offer. The animal is a veritable recluse. He comes out in the evening, goes for a bit of a stroll and then goes home again. I suspect the highlight of his day is using a door. There’s really nothing more that can be added. Under the circumstances, that dossier’s brimming with detail. It’s short, admittedly, which is why I made the full stop at the end of it so large.”

Oscar read the sentence again in case he’d missed something, like a second one, for example. When it was clear he hadn’t, he asked, “Have you been inside his villa?”

A shake of head. “I was only ordered to observe him. When that dossier was all I could come up with, I presumed the Catacombs decided they needed something more by sending you.”

“You can take me there at least?”

He nodded. “That much I can manage, certainly. I’ve rented a little place not far from his. It’s in a rather splendid part of town down by the docks. I wouldn’t mind living there myself long-term. But I don’t know if I could live without umbrellas.” He leant forward. “Did you know that they’re *illegal* here?”

Oscar nodded.

“Umbrellas! Illegal, if you please. It’s absurd!”

The waiter was startled by a flying hubcap. When he stumbled sideways, the chilled hot fins upon his tray spilt on Oscar.

“Well, my *word!*” Binklemite cried. “What a perfect advertise-

ment for their necessity, Dooven! You should begin a campaign!"

Later that afternoon, the two Velvet Paws waited by the window in Binklemitre's apartment. It overlooked a beautiful collection of villas cascading down toward the sea. The sun was already low and its reddening light bathed the terracotta city in more of the same. Tiled roofs lined the streets, their rusting brown framing the reds of masonry beneath. Tall mops of palm trees, outlining laneways down to the dark purple of sea, swayed beneath the dispersing heat of day. Were it not for the abandoned cars littering the street below, Oscar would consider the place on par with Ruen. But because they were all over the place, with some of them upside down, he did not. Abandoned cars were unbefitting to a scene so lovely, so he tried pretending they were parked that way intentionally. Except for those lodged in windows, which he tried pretending were curtains.

They sipped some hot-fin and waited.

"The Ar'dath-Irr won't leave until it's dusk," Binklemitre said. "It's always dusk when he leaves. And dark. Like his clothing. I get the distinct impression he would rather no one saw him at all."

They waited.

"Perhaps I should have put *that* in my report," Binklemitre realised.

"I wouldn't worry. The Catacombs have a lot of photographs regarding that sort of detail."

"Why is there so much fuss over him anyway? He's a recluse who goes out for a stroll. Why are the Catacombs interested?"

"Because his apparent introversion is the opposite of what he's famous for. Moreover, the Catacombs have evidence that he does rather more than wander around docks at dusk. It appears he's far more active than your meticulously detailed dossier suggests."

This was met with sips and blinks.

"Apparently," Oscar continued, "the Ar'dath-Irr has a tendency to travel the world in a manner most peculiar."

"In what way, peculiar?"

"Instantaneously."

“What do you mean by that?”

“That, Binklemite, is what we’re going to find out.”

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/fear>

CHAPTER 3

From With Eyes No Longer Blind, Chapter 16

In which Oscar is introduced to the extraordinary legal system of Bisarah, which has his temper become even shorter than his ears, and his confusion boundless.

The auditorium cascaded down toward a stage. Its ceiling was high and domed, and appeared to be supported by the vast columns of sunlight streaming from it. Its air smelt of dust, age and wisdom, and reverberated with the mutterings of an audience in flux. Huge waterfalls of bunched curtains hung at its perimeter, tied with the sort of ropes often used to tether planets. Animals shifted along rows of seating in a manner suggesting the place was an enormous theatre, rather than a place legally binding. Oscar had expected an air of tension, but instead there was an atmosphere of conviviality that made his brewing cynicism feel even more out of place than he did.

Flumpt pulled him aside while those who'd been waiting with them squeezed past. "These doors," he said, "like those on the far side, are opened periodically to allow the audience to come and go without disturbing the cases already underway." He pointed to a small assortment of animals upon the stage. "Those animals down there are the plaintiffs, and that animal on the other side is the accused."

"What do they accuse each other of?" Oscar asked, his cynicism ripe. "Too many hugs?"

“Sometimes.”

When Oscar stared at him, Flumpt ushered him to an aisle, which they shuffled along between wooden benches curving around the auditorium in lessening levels of orbit. At the lower levels, which were already well occupied, they found space beside Fghrei-Plint and sat.

“And you’re absolutely certain I’m not going to be forced to perform?” said Oscar, uncomfortable with the auditorium’s distinct theatrical overtones.

Flumpt offered a reassuring smile.

The stage was a fluster of animals sorting themselves into sides. On a raised platform behind the stage rear were four large, regal chairs, upon which sat three animals who were clearly in charge. One was an elderly dog draped in dark green robes laced with white, who wore a modest crown and held a long, shiny stick with something expensive on one end. Beside him resided another. She was dressed in a similar manner, and watched the fuss upon stage with a patient smile. Beside both sat an elderly cat, who wasn’t nearly so well adorned, but waited with similar serenity.

The fourth chair remained vacant.

“The plaintiffs state their case through a narrator,” Flumpt was saying, “to those upon the thrones, before the accused offers their side of the story.”

“And presumably those animals are judges,” Oscar said, wishing they could dispense with proceedings and meet whoever Flumpt wanted him to before further confusion had him forget the reason why.

Beside him, Fghrei-Plint looked puzzled. “Judges?” he asked. “What are judges?”

“The animal with the crown tied in place by his ears is the Boeviss,” Flumpt continued, ignoring him. “the King of Bisarah, and—”

“Excuse me,” said Oscar, “but tied in place by his what?”

“His ears.”

“His ears?”

“Yes.”

Oscar glanced between them, before asking, "Why is his crown tied in place with his ears?"

"To stop it falling off," Fghrei-Plint said.

“That’s ridiculous!”

Flumpt frowned. "Surely it would be more ridiculous if he used somebody else's?"

With a sigh bordering on clinical withering, Oscar surrendered.

"And that animal beside him," Flumpt continued, "is the Boevis-sisisisis, his Queen."

“Boevissisisisisisis?” tried Oscar.

"No," said Flumpt, "the Boevissisisisis."

“Boevissisisisisisisisis-isis?”

“Don’t over-emphasise the syllables. Boevissisisisis.”

“Boevissisisisisisis.”

"That's too many syllables," said Flumpt. "It should only have five."

“Boevissisisisisisis-isis.”

“Boevissisisisisis. Why are you using so many syllables?”

"I don't know," said Oscar, folding his paws indignantly. "Once I start I'm unable to stop. And the cat beside them?"

"That," said Flumpt, "is Mironaelk, the animal I wish you to meet."

Oscar peered at her. She dozed between slow blinks and appeared even less capable of offering explanation than Flumpt—which left him convinced that any creature attempting explanation about anything in this place would begin by scrubbing themselves with potatoes before trying to breathe sand.

He closed his eyes and tried not to swear.

This was like a very bad dream: one of those horrid ones where hope teases, turns nasty and leaves absurdity to commandeer everything. For a moment, he understood Lyeia's outburst. Before he

could hit anything, however, Flumpt advised the session was about to begin.

Lights dimmed and silence fell.

An animal rose to addressed the three upon thrones.

“My dear Boeviss, Boevissisisis and Mironaelk, I present to you our case entitled ‘We honestly didn’t realise she was allergic to goats.’”

There was a nod from the three.

The animal continued, “Once upon a time there were three burglars.”

The three plaintiffs stood and began prancing around the stage very badly.

The narrator continued, “They were quite nice and had burgled successfully for many years, which resulted in countless numbers of hapless yet satisfied victims.”

The prancing was so bad that two ran into each other, after which they continuing their careering by adding pirouettes in a manner suggesting they’d never attempted anything of the sort before.

Oscar turned to Flumpt in the hope the dog was as keen as he to leave, but Flumpt watched engrossed. When Oscar glanced at Fghrei-Plint, the dog appeared even more absorbed than Flumpt, which left Oscar wondering if blatant idiocy was infectious. Trapped between them, he felt claustrophobic and had a need to eat his paws. He wanted to find Lyeia and encourage her to start punching things, including him, but was instead forced to endure the bizarre performance with an uneasiness bordering on agony.

The narrator said, “One day last week they came across the accused.” He pointed at the animal sitting upon the stage’s other side, who waved. “And decided to burgle her. Which they did. Quite well by all accounts, for they forced her to accept three goats and a chicken.”

A re-enacted of said transaction was mimed, which apparently involved disembowelling each other with gardening rakes. When Oscar glanced at his companions again, they remained riveted.

“Though it turned out,” the narrator continued, “that the accused is allergic to chickens. Which is unfortunate, given the act of the plaintiffs—”

At that moment, something struck Oscar. Not a brick or anything, as that would have been dreadful. More the peculiarity that the burglars were accusing the victim.

When he pointed this out to Flumpt, the dog smiled and said, “That is why I like this place so much, Oscar. Just wait and see.”

The narrator continued, “But sadly, not only is the accused allergic to chicken, she is also allergic to goats!”

There was a gasp from an astonished audience, of which Oscar was convinced he was no longer a member.

“And although this is not an oversight on the burglars’ part,” the narrator went on, “they were then dismayed still further when realising the goats were *also* allergic to chickens, which meant the whole thing got rather messy, as you might imagine.”

There were murmurs from the audience that they did indeed, and the three upon thrones nodded, which left Oscar almost envious.

“So in closing,” the narrator said, “they would like to give her a big hug by way of apology and offer her a selection of other hypoallergenic offerings as compensation. Including—but not limited to—a table, some lovely patterned curtains, a collection of small water colour prints and a used garden water feature which is slightly cracked. None of these items lay eggs, I’m led to understand, though I believe that one of the prints is of a chicken.”

In despair, Oscar slapped his face, which had Fghrei-Plint asking whether he was worried the accused might be allergic to prints as well.

Ignoring him, Oscar turned to Flumpt. “I know it’s a lot to ask,” he said, “but would you kill me, please? I’d feel much better about everything if you killed me now.”

With a smile, Flumpt said, “I know all this seems peculiar, Oscar, but I can assure you, it’s quite wonderful.”

“Under the circumstances, Flumpt, you couldn’t assure me that

my bottom isn't some sort of spongy *on* button."

"Patience, Oscar. After this, we shall seek answers from Mironaelk. She knows all there is to know. Which is why she sits beside the Boeviss."

"I'm sorry," said Oscar, "but that fills me with little confidence: madness is madness regardless of how mad everything is."

Flumpt smiled again. "It is *our* world that is mad, Oscar. Not this one."

Oscar looked at the old cat upon throne. "Are you're seriously suggesting that animal can tell me what's been going on?"

"Yes."

"But she's half-asleep!"

Flumpt shrugged. "Perhaps it's only when we're asleep that we're ever awake."

Oscar turned to him with a stare that bordered on assault. "What the *fluff*—you're mad too!" he said. "You've just taken two fundamentally opposite statements and equated them to each other. You couldn't get more contradictory if you'd offered that statement as a working *example*!"

"Nevertheless, Mironaelk knows all there is to know on the matter."

"You mean on contradiction? I don't doubt it!"

"Calm yourself, Oscar. She can explain how you came to be here."

"Is that right?"

"Yes."

"And what has you so certain, Flumpt?"

"Because Mironaelk is from our world too."

Oscar's irritation evaporated, leaving a faint glimmer of hope behind that was young, had good career prospects and probably keen on renovating. Before Oscar could say anything further, Flumpt indicated the stage again and explained it was the accused's turn.

She stood, while the cavorting burglars sat.

The narrator continued, "On the other paw, the accused apolo-

gises for the concern that her congenital aberration has caused, and wishes to invite them all over for a curry, perhaps on Thursday.”

The accused did not dance, but stood while the burglars deliberated over the suggestion. When one approached the narrator and said something, the narrator nodded and addressed the thrones.

“The burglars thank her for the invitation but do not wish the accused to go to any trouble, being concerned that after all they’ve put her through, she’d think they were taking advantage of her hospitality.”

There were some nods from the thrones.

“They’d also like to mention that her scabs look much better and not nearly so puffy.”

The accused approached the narrator again and there was some deliberation, before the narrator addressed his audience.

“The accused insists that she’s been intending to have her family around to dinner for some time, but hasn’t managed, what with work and everything. Moreover, her brother has just got engaged, so she has to make an effort. She insists, therefore, that the invitation remains.”

The accused whispered something else.

“She further suggests Thursday might be a bit early, however, as her scabs have started to peel and could end up in the curry.”

There was some more deliberation on the part of the burglars, which was conveyed through the narrator in suggesting they have it at their place instead, so the accused didn’t have to worry about her scabs, and would she like to pop over to their place with a salad at about six-thirty on Saturday. Her family was welcome too. There was plenty of room, apparently—particularly if she accepted the table and water feature first. This was mulled over by the accused, who advised she felt as concerned for the burglars’ inconvenience as they’d been with hers. This was countered with assurances to the contrary and that they really liked curries—and if Saturday was no good, why don’t her family perhaps drop by randomly one day next week? Or even stay with them for a while? Or better still, they all

move in together and really make a go of it?

In the end, the four decided to go on holiday somewhere south next Spring. Some spoons were exchanged and scabs admired, all of which was followed by music from a small jazz band that appeared in a corner, indispersed with lots of hugging, involving the narrator, the king and queen and even the musicians. All this was accompanied with an enthusiastic round of applause from the audience which threw flowers. Several members hurried on stage to share in the embrace, which according to Fghrei-Plint, was traditional.

It looked less like a trial and more like a wedding, and Oscar was left staring at the plaintiffs, the accused and those on thrones as though they were all madder than he was. Unable to cope, Oscar put his paws over his ears and made strange snarling noises. “So that’s what courts here deal with?” he asked when it made no difference. “Not conviction and punishment, but apology and hugs?”

“Indeed,” Flumpt agreed. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“But—then—why are there need for courts at all? If they’re all so nice to each other, then why don’t they sort their problems out themselves? Why the need for this formality?”

Flumpt gestured at all the hugging. “Well, there’s the communal post-trial hugs for a start, which are terribly popular.”

“Popular?”

“Oh, yes. It’s much nicer to have lots of animals feeling warm and fuzzy, rather than only one or two. Also, it lets the palace know what’s going on with their citizens, as well as allowing citizens to know what’s going on in the palace.”

“In the palace?”

“That’s right.” He indicated the stage again that looked like a well rehearsed scene from *What The Hell Are We Doing – The Musical*. “Afterwards, these animals will wander around the palace and look at things.”

“Look at things?”

“Yes. And clean up.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You know. clean up and make something nice to eat—”

“What—animals can just wander around the place?”

“Of course. All animals are encouraged to visit the palace. Nowhere is off limits. The palace is huge, Oscar, and it’s great having animals wandering through it aimlessly. They often do the dusting. In fact, many stay overnight after helping with the washing up. And they get breakfast the next morning. Just as we did. It’s all to be *shared*, you see, provided no gifts are brought.”

“Gifts?”

“Yes,” nodded Flumpt. “It’s not uncommon for gifts to be brought to the palace. You have seen how nice animals here are to each other, so you can imagine the respect they have for the Boeviss’ family. But because the king is similarly loving, he doesn’t dream of accepting anything of the sort, and instead the palace puts visitors up for the night. Sometimes he makes their beds.”

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/eyes>

CHAPTER 4

From The Purgung of Ruen, Chapter 11

In which Archibald Hetherington-Mercilus, an elderly and overtly fluffy cat, is enlightened by the Pyjami and Sedervitz as to some vague details regarding the Purgung of Ruen: a dastardly plan involving, amongst other things, bags.

“OH, these seats!” Archibald growled. “Why must they be so plush? Every time we go around a corner I change sides!”

“Then use your walking stick as a wedge,” the Pyjami snapped, pushing him away when he slid into her again.

“I wouldn’t need to if you weren’t so obsessed with polishing everything!”

Evening fell across the harbour. Clouds turned pink and sky darkened. Beneath it, the black saloon crunched along a wharf and pulled up beside a berthed launch. Dressed in a blue suit and chauffeur’s cap, Sedervitz Tappen-Noo alighted and opened the door for his passengers. The Pyjami got out, but Archibald struggled to follow.

“Oh, this is quite ridiculous!” Archibald growled. “This car is too low and its seats are too high.”

When his complaints degraded into curse, the Pyjami demanded Sedervitz lend a paw. Amused, he did so, with Archibald smacking it away, before trying again.

“Perhaps you might consider a second walking stick, Archie,” Sedervitz said, when the animal eventually conceded, “if you find one

inadequate?"

Archibald snatched his paws free. "If I had a second one, cat, I'd beat you with it!"

Sedervitz laughed.

When all three had boarded the launch in a sort of reverse fiasco, Sedervitz replaced his chauffeur's hat with a captain's cap and started its engine. With a roar, he churned them from the wharf, spray sweeping their wake as the boat swung around. Archibald was sent careering to its stern, where his veritable swathe of obscenities was drowned beneath throbbing engine.

Being one of Ruen's wealthiest residents, the Pyjami owned an enormous yacht which was often moored off the northern headland. The *Spicy Cabanari* was spectacular in appearance, displacement and luxury. It boasted three galleys, thirty-thousand bedrooms and a car-port. It had four small dining halls—each with its own polished table—a shopping centre's worth of escalators, one shopping centre and a bath. On it, the Pyjami held spectacular balls, her guests being the elite of the elite. So elite, that it ought to be spelt with a capital. The galas were not given to entertain, so much as remind them who was in charge.

When they rounded the headland, the *Spicy Cabanari* appeared. Lit in a trellis of lights, its white slate shimmered across water like an early rising moon. Thumping through waves, Sedervitz approached its stern, before slowing with a flare of engine to bump them alongside. A rope was thrown from the deck above, which he used to secure the launch. The boat pitched and rolled, and when it teetered in their favour, the Pyjami and Archibald stumbled aboard a platform, before Sedervitz followed magnificently.

While the platform ascended to the height of deck, Archibald shivered, his fur wet from sea. "I'd rather be back in the car," he grumbled. "At least it was warm. And why does there have to be so much water? All this splashing makes me want to go to the toilet."

"Perhaps you ought to have gone before we left the Sett," Sedervitz said, amused.

“I did, confound it!”

“And yet you suffer still?”

“Unfortunately, my bladder is not what it once was.”

“Is that because it used to be your brain?”

When Archibald exploded with rage, the Pyjami said, “Sedervitz. That is quite enough. Hold your tongue, or I shall hold it for you.”

Smirking, Sedervitz gazed across water coloured purple by evening.

The cats stepped from the hoist while waiting animals stood to attention. Sedervitz strode past them and demanded the chef be sent for immediately. When they hurried away to oblige, he marched magnificently across the deck, while the Pyjami helped Archibald hobble after him.

“What is he doing here, anyway?” Archibald hissed, fuming at the cat’s magnificent strides.

“Sedervitz is a fine animal,” the Pyjami said, “and a considerable asset to what we’ve been discussing.”

“Rubbish. He is nothing of the sort. The cat is insolent and arrogant. He’s probably one of those pesky little runts himself. To trust an animal of that age with what you have prepared is ludicrous!”

“On the contrary, my dear Archie. Sedervitz Tappen-Noo is more devoted than you realise. I have absolute faith in him.”

Archibald snatched his paw from her. “Why?” he growled. “Tell me. And I warn you that my support might be less than forthcoming should you refuse.”

“I have reasons you do not need to know!” she snapped. “I trust him implicitly. Indeed, I trust him more than I do *you!*”

He muttered, knowing well her brilliance. With a humpf, he accepted her paw again and they struggled to a doorway.

Through it, a luxurious room waited. Cream leather seating lined its perimeter, with a plushness suggesting any who sat on it might not re-emerge for days. Portholes lined a wall painted a burnt orange, and although the ceiling was low, it glowed from hidden

lighting. At the room's centre was a polished table, upon which was a small granite box brimming with crispy scales.

The Pyjami led Archibald to the seating, where he prodded its upholstery warily.

"He complains a great deal," Sedervitz said, when she arrived beside him.

"He is old."

"You are old, and you don't whine like he does."

"Not out loud, perhaps," said the Pyjami. "Do not forget, Sedervitz, that we need his co-operation. We will not manage without another councillor included. I expect the very best behaviour from you. No more riling. Is that understood?"

Sedervitz took a large crispy scale, which he munched indignantly, while the Pyjami helped Archibald to a chair when he refused to drown in upholstery. The chef arrived, and Sedervitz ordered a remarkable quantity of food and a bottle of sparkling water.

The chef left, Archibald sat and the Pyjami indicated it was time.

Sedervitz pressed a button beside a picture on the wall.

"My dear Archie," the Pyjami said, "there comes a time when leaders must make decisions based not on common agreement, but rather the common good."

A panel slid aside to reveal a safe, which Sedervitz fiddled with. After a click, he opened its door and removed a large roll of paper and four shiny stones. After closing the safe, he returned to the table.

The Pyjami continued, "Sometimes the opinions of several encumber foresight. At such times, it is imperative to remain focussed and peer past opinion to ensure the right course of action is not veered from."

"Too many chefs, perhaps?"

"Indeed. And for the good of Ruen, I have taken such a liberty, for I have conceived a plan to purge Ruen of those pesky little runts via means so brilliant, that some nights I am still unable to sleep. So secret are these plans, Archie, that currently only Sedervitz and I are

aware of them.”

Archibald glowered at Sedervitz, who returned it with a smile.

“However,” she continued, “during more practical aspects of this scheme’s implementation, some councillors will undoubtedly question the activities necessary in bringing it to fruition. In as much, the success of said purging pivots upon there being another councilor to help quell their concerns.”

Archibald said nothing and waited. He’d seen Ruen’s regress beneath the young animals marauding about the place. That a plan existed to end such blasphemy was encouraging. Had Sedervitz not been present, he might have shown enthusiasm. Intrigued, he asked, “And what, pray, does this scheme entail?”

With a nod from the Pyjami, Sedervitz unrolled the paper across the table and weighted its corners with stone. Struggling from his chair, Archibald stood and peered at the schematics drawn upon it. When realisation dawned, his curiosity exploded into astonishment, and he bent closer to be certain.

After some mutterings of calculation, he looked up at them. “But this is over five thousand paws long!”

The Pyjami raised her whiskers and Sedervitz’s twitched proudly.

He returned his gaze to the paper, passing a furry paw from one end to the other, hoping the caress might reveal something far more sensible beneath. “You can’t be *serious!*”

Silence.

“I mean, what will it *use?*”

“Ah,” whispered the Pyjami, her smile cleaving her face into two distinct pieces, “that is where the *true* genius arises!”

Archibald waited for an answer, but it wasn’t forthcoming.

“Very much a need to know basis only, old chap,” Sedervitz said. “Though this isn’t the half of it, I can assure you.”

Confusion left Archibald oblivious to the cat’s conceit. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Sedervitz looked at the Pyjami who nodded permission. Indi-

cating the schematics, he said, “My dear Archie, there are *thirteen* of these masterpieces!”

To this, Archibald reeled backwards as astonishment indulged in something of an encore. He teetered upon his stick, his gaze elsewhere, wandered to the perimeter seating and sank into it. The Pyjami ground her teeth, concerned he hadn’t exploded in congratulation. If she’d underestimated him, the cat would not be permitted to return to shore.

After a time, he whispered, “But thirteen? Where can you have thirteen of these things?”

Sedervitz was about to speak, but the Pyjami held up a paw.

“There are ways and means, my dear Archie,” she said. “Ways and *means*.”

“And what is it specifically you require of me?”

His question pleased her, being an acceptance of sorts: he wasn’t debating involvement, so much as battling astonishment. Which was understandable. “For two reasons,” she said. “Firstly, because the resources involved in fabricating thirteen of these things will not go unnoticed, and I require another councillor to pacify any dissent. And secondly, these will result in immeasurable chaos across the city, and it would be impossible to weave authority upon my own amidst such turmoil. I need another beside me, Archie; an animal as committed as I am to preserve Ruen’s ways. Indeed, to return its ways.” She narrowed her eyes. “I need an animal to share the burden of Ruen’s glorious return; a co-signatory to implement policies that will ensure such contamination never occurs again.”

He stared at her. “But surely, after this, there would be mutiny? You can’t seriously imagine there’d be no revolt against the Council following such devastation?”

The Pyjami smiled. “I think that were you made aware of further detail, you’d realise no animal could cast aspersion upon Ruen’s Ruling Council.”

“How so?”

Sedervitz smirked. “As the Pyjami has already said, that is

where the true genius lies!"

Still he stared.

"It does take a certain genius," the Pyjami agreed, "to find means of removing those pesky little runts from our city without breaking a single brick of its walls."

Echoing her sentiments, Sedervitz added, "Just like the Pied Piper, Archie, but with such a beautiful irony, that not a single thread will lie loose!"

"A purging there shall be," the Pyjami purred. "In seven days' time, a purging there shall *be!*"

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/purgings>

CHAPTER 5

From The Alchemists Of Vra, Chapter 31

In which Oscar endures not only the arrogant bard, the D'dôdô-Sette, but an aeroplane crash only marginally less annoying. Of the four plane crashes over five books, Oscar is adamant that he's responsible for only two. This isn't one of them.

The D'dôdô-Sette drove them to an airfield at the edge of the city and pulled up outside a large, broken down hanger in the middle of it. He got out and sauntered over to an enormous door which he began sliding sideways. It took some effort, however, and squeaked in protest. But rather than offering to help, Oscar and Vaasi-Vee stared worriedly at the hanger, its state of disrepair not encouraging them to fly in whatever might reside within. Weeds pushed through cracks in the concrete in front of it and it was only the grass growing between its planks that held the hanger's walls together. Tiles had slipped from a sagging roof and shattered at its footings like industrial dandruff, and the whole thing was distinctly skewed to the left. The uncooperative door seemed the only functional thing about it.

While the D'dôdô-Sette heaved and swore, Oscar lent him a helping paw, leaving Vaasi-Vee to watch the interior appear with withering enthusiasm. She expected a decrepit piece of rusting machinery to appear; the sort of plane that's considered a backup for a parachute, rather than the traditional arrangement. But as sunlight flooded the hanger's interior, what appeared was something else en-

tirely.

It was an aeroplane so beautiful and shiny that even daylight seemed reluctant to touch it.

While Oscar and the D'dôdô-Sette heaved the remainder of door, she wandered toward it, amazed. Even stationary, the thing seemed eager to fly; tilted upwards as though already smelling the sky. Engines bulged in wings like ridiculous muscles, its propellers black and smooth and ready to tear air such that it would never heal. From its sides, wings spread out with an authoritative pride, the way the D'dôdô-Sette might, had he a pair.

“What do you think?” he asked, arriving beside her.

“It’s *beautiful!*” she whispered.

He humped in agreement, before regurgitating technical details that could just have easily referred to him. “This is a Shreven 123 *Acidulator*,” he said. “It has three Servolector engines delivering a total of thirteen thousand squems of plint. Its triple stage Vams are synchronised to its own Plum, and at full Thamp can reach a full Frim in under two minutes while maintaining a Gimpal of fifteen hundred speed.”

“And that’s good?” she asked, daring to run a paw along its underbelly.

He chuckled. “Good? My dear Miss Vaasi-Vee, aeroplanes simply cannot get any *better* than this!”

“This is your aeroplane?” Oscar asked, joining them.

“One of them, yes. I have four of these in different colours spread across various parts of the world. I tend to use one to get to another, in fact.”

“I must admit,” said Oscar, “that I was expecting something a little less professional.”

“Your lack of imagination doesn’t surprise me remotely. But I am a fully trained Brem pilot and have travelled more skies than you have ears.”

Vaasi-Vee said, “Why do you keep a machine as beautiful as this in such a dilapidated place?”

He smiled. "Convenience, Miss Vaasi-Vee. That, and the fact I do not wish to draw attention to myself."

To this, Oscar almost choked. But the D'dôdô-Sette ignored him.

"These planes are very rare and unbelievably expensive. Custom built, don't you know. They are safer in places such as this than on display in airfields more frequented."

"Of course," said Vaasi-Vee.

"Does it go?" Oscar asked, wanting to dispense with boasting and get the thing in the air.

The D'dôdô-Sette did not ignore him this time, and looked aghast. "Does it—?"

"Go."

With a very intentional blink, the D'dôdô-Sette said, "Oh, this aeroplane *goes* all right, Dooven. It goes beyond *remark*, don't you know!"

Oscar said that he didn't and would appreciate if they'd dispense with the showing-off and get airborne instead. Muttering at the degree of ignorance he had to tolerate, the D'dôdô-Sette opened a door and retracted some steps. After helping Vaasi-Vee aboard, he left Oscar to manage on his own.

The interior of the Acidulator was even more impressive than its exterior. Everything was upholstered in soft cream leather, embedded with dark buttons from the walls to the ceiling, which suggested they'd entered a very large and expensive mattress. There was a bar, an armchair and even a bookcase secured with a seatbelt. The whole setup offered ample opportunity for further showing-off, which the D'dôdô-Sette took advantage of while inserting himself into a pilot's seat and going through a pre-flight check of button-pressing.

"The air you're breathing is distilled and bottled from the northern coast of Peamm," he said, over some impressive hydraulic whines and expensive-sounding pre-ignition servo whirrings. "And the seats you're inserting your bottoms into are upholstered with the finest Indigo Cavaorn leather, sewn by their owners, don't you

know.”

Oscar glanced at Vaasi-Vee. “What’s he talking about?”

Still flicking at switches and buttons, the D’dôdô-Sette asked, “Have you really not heard of Cavaorn leather?”

Oscar didn’t answer and fiddled with his seatbelt in a manner suggesting he’d found part of the aeroplane that was poorly designed.

“The seats,” the D’dôdô-Sette explained, “are upholstered by the very owners of the leather.”

Because Oscar’s fiddling worsened, Vaasi-Vee finished buckling him in. “Indigo Cavaorn leather,” she said, tightening his straps. “Surely you have heard of it?”

He shook his head.

Surprised, she said, “It’s the most famous leather in the world, Oscar. It’s used to make the finest garments—Ammoros collars, for example. You must have heard of it.”

Checking gauges, the D’dôdô-Sette said, “I suspect they *don’t* make pantaloons from Cavaorn leather, Miss Vaasi-Vee.”

She ignored him. “No greater prestige in leather can there be, than from cows taught to upholster their own hide.”

“*What?*” cried Oscar.

She returned to adjusting her own seat. “It’s true.”

“Cows *upholstering* their own *hide*?”

“Nothing but the best,” the D’dôdô-Sette said, giving his instruments a final glance.

“But that’s impossible!”

“Almost,” Vaasi-Vee said. “Admittedly it takes a very dexterous and career oriented cow, which is extremely rare, being the primary reason Indigo Cavaorn leather is so terribly expensive.”

“The *cow* sews *itself* into a *chair*?”

The D’dôdô-Sette nodded and pressed some more things.

“While it’s still *alive*?”

“Initially, yes,” the D’dôdô-Sette said. “We didn’t say it was pleasant, Dooven. Just expensive.”

Oscar was lost for words.

The D'dôdô-Sette turned to Vaasi-Vee, "He seems to know less about the world than you do, and yet you believe he's going to save it?"

While Vaasi-Vee glared at him, Oscar gaped at the extraordinary sacrifice his bottom was strapped into.

Pressing a final button, the Shreven 123 Acidulator burst into a song as refined as its interior. A moment later, with the tune rising, the D'dôdô-Sette eased the aeroplane from its shed and into bright sunshine.

"Have we got enough fuel?" Oscar asked, straining at his seat-belt to try and see for himself, remembering his flight over Flumic.

Vaasi-Vee said, "I'm certain the D'dôdô-Sette has ensured everything is in order."

"It's just that I don't have the best luck when it comes to aeroplanes."

"In what way?"

"Well, they have a tendency to crash."

The D'dôdô-Sette laughed. "Dooven, I don't know what it is with you and destroying transportation, but if I were you I'd start taking it personally!"

Although Oscar frowned, it didn't last long, because the D'dôdô-Sette aimed the Acidulator at end of a runway and began hurtling the thing along it. The tarmac was in a similar state of disrepair as the hangar, and it seemed the plane would be shaken to pieces before they'd get a hundred paws across its potholes. But the Acidulator had thirteen thousand squems of plint which, with a yell of exhilaration, the D'dôdô-Sette ordered from its three Servolector engines. Not a second later, the three animals were slammed back into their seats as the aeroplane screamed from the runway and climbed at a terrific rate into the bright blue of sky.

As the aeroplane levelled out, the world was already far beneath them, with Oscar and Vaasi-Vee shaken by their removal from it. The D'dôdô-Sette, however, was nothing of the sort.

"Did you *really* have to do that?" Vaasi-Vee asked, looking

through her window. “Was such a violent launch entirely necessary?”

Their pilot turned and smiled, suggesting they’d entered his world and were now at the mercy of it. “Actually, yes,” he said. “The engines need to achieve operating temperature as quickly as possible, and that’s the way to do it.” He glanced at Oscar. “Surely you weren’t distressed by such ascent, Dooven?”

Oscar said nothing, concerned his pantaloons now contained more than just his bottom.

Wondering the same, the D’dôdô-Sette said, “I hope you have not insulted my Indigo Cavaorn leather upholstered seats.”

“No more than the cow who cursed you while making it.”

The D’dôdô-Sette laughed, before saying to Vaasi-Vee, “Help yourself to a drink. You too, Dooven, as you appear to need one.”

“Make mine a chilled hot-fin,” Oscar said sourly, when she relinquished herself from restraint.

She moved to the rear of cabin, placing a paw on his shoulder when she passed.

But Oscar scowled, indignant at the D’dôdô-Sette and his sacrificed cows. “I imagine this thing does chilled hot-fin?” he asked.

“Of course,” the D’dôdô-Sette said, looking brave and in control of everything at the helm of his beautiful plane. “But really, Dooven, you need to show a little more respect. This is not a *thing*. Not at this price. It is not even referred to as an aeroplane. Those fortunate to own one call them Acidulators at the very least. One doesn’t refer to triple stage Vams Splum synchronicity as merely a *thing*.”

“I do.”

“That’s because you’re ignorant.”

“And they probably call them Acidulators because they can’t spell aeroplane.”

“I assure you they can.”

Rather than rising further, Oscar felt a fatigue he should have dealt with a day ago. There was no use arguing up here at fifteen-hundred speed in the D’dôdôSette’s realm. Instead he looked out the

window, trying to ignore the cat's rantings about why he and the Acidulator were the very best examples of pilot and aeroplane in the world—followed by how much each was a reflection on the other; which Oscar agreed with, as they were both loud, brash and hollow.

The sky both embraced and ignored them, such was its expanse. Its bright blue faded toward the horizon where it blended in haze to a vast and sandy plain below. At this height, Arabesque's desert looked featureless, and for a peculiar moment, Oscar felt no higher than if he were strolling along a sandy beach. He leaned to the window, trying to see their shadow. Although he could not, he noticed a thin line of road and recalled with a pang, his hurtling in an open top sports car alongside the Tieress of Arabesque. While the D'dôdô-Sette's spiel continued, he fought the urge to berate the cat over his insulting the Tieress at his silly recital. Vaasi-Vee brought him a chilled hot-fin. It was very good, considering their altitude, and he thanked her while she settled back into her chair with a book retrieved from the shelves.

"How long will it take to get to Vra?" she asked their pilot, flicking through pages and sipping her own concoction.

"We aren't going to Vra."

Vaasi-Vee and Oscar looked at each other.

The D'dôdô-Sette explained, "Vra is uninhabited and consists of nothing but grass. And because it's uninhabited, the grass is too long to safely land upon it. Therefore, in three hours we shall touchdown in Talsik-Kerr and continue to Vra from there."

"But I thought the whole point of flying is so that we can avoid that place!"

"Unfortunately not."

"Now wait a minute," said Oscar, "what about the sea? There's a great big piece of wobbly sea between Talsik-Kerr and Vra."

"Yes. What about it?"

"I thought flying meant we were going to avoid that too. I assumed it was all non-stop once we were in the air!"

"Well, you assumed wrong."

“But we have to get there quickly!”

The D'dôdôSette turned to glare. “Why do you think I’m flying *this?*”

“Yes, but—” He looked at Vaasi-Vee in despair.

“How long will it take if we’re going to land first?” she asked.

The D'dôdôSette shrugged. “It rather depends how bad it is.”

“Bad?”

“Yes. Talsik-Kerr can be very bad.”

“And if it *is* bad?”

“Then it may take the rest of our lives.”

“What do you mean by that?” Oscar asked.

The D'dôdôSette turned again. “I mean that it may *take* the rest of our *lives*.” He looked ahead. “We have no choice. Flying to Vra is easy. Landing is not. We must land in Talsik-Kerr and continue south from there.”

“But I don’t understand,” said Vaasi-Vee. “You said nothing about this earlier!”

“I did. I’ve repeatedly warned you about the journey’s dangers.”

“Yes, but not about having to stop enroute!”

“There is no way to reach Vra other than via the ports of Talsik-Kerr, which is a bad and dangerous city. Should you even manage to arrive outside its walls, you would not survive within them. Certainly not without my help.”

Oscar scoffed. The hot-fin had improved his mood and he was fed up with this animal’s continued demotion of everyone but himself. “I don’t know why you believe you are the only creature able to survive dangers,” he said. “There are many just as capable.”

“There is immeasurable difference between having intuitive talents and learning skills, Dooven. Any animal can do the latter, whereas the former is both rare and blessed. Being a Velvet Paw gives you nothing more than a misguided belief that you’ve compensated for the former. Regardless, in Talsik-Kerr, your supposed skill would be wrenched from you, ripped, trodden on and then used to wipe bottoms, before the same is done with the rest of you.”

Oscar glared at Vaasi-Vee, annoyed she'd revealed his title. But she could offer little more than an apologetic shrug.

She said, "I do realise, the D'dôdô-Sette, that you have experienced all manner of dangerous situations and that you've survived them brilliantly, but I can assure you that Oscar has had his own share of remarkable feats."

The D'dôdô-Sette laughed, not turning from the view ahead. "Indeed? That means little in this situation. Talsik-Kerr is a terribly dangerous place unless you're me. Nothing can prepare you for what lies within its walls."

More scoffs from Oscar, who'd had enough. "I'm quite capable of looking after much more than myself, thank you very much."

"I see. So you know well then, that Talsik-Kerr is a city infamous for a rather unusual form of sightseeing photography?"

Oscar didn't reply, considering the only answer he had was no.

"What do you mean?" Vaasi-Vee asked.

"So rough is the city, in fact, that when tourists dared visit in the past and produce a camera, the only photographs they took were internal."

Oscar frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Let's just say it's not a *paw* that clicks the shutter."

Oscar shrugged, none the wiser.

"One becomes one's own *tripod*," the D'dôdô-Sette explained.

Oscar turned to Vaasi-Vee for enlightenment.

"Your bottom," she said. "I suspect the camera is inserted forcibly into it."

Shifting uncomfortably on his remnants of brave cow, he made a mental note to remain clenched while traversing the place. Recalling Manky's recount of boiled egg torture, he wondered what was wrong with that end of the Earth. "And were I to consider doing some painting?" he asked, in light of Masterful Posh's curiosities.

The D'dôdô-Sette turned to him. "Then I hope you are *stretchy*."

They fell silent.

The Shreven 123 Acidulator dipped and bounced as one might

expect, zooming across Arabesque like an expensive aeroplane over vast desert. The D'dôdô-Sette checked the occasional gauge and pressed the odd button. Vaasi-Vee peered from her window, chin against paw with the book half-read on her lap. Oscar glanced at her occasionally, but didn't say anything, worried a passing comment might reignite the D'dôdô-Sette's self-congratulatory rantings. Despite his concerns about what lay ahead, he was lulled by muffled roar and soon fell asleep. As did Vaasi-Vee.

The D'dôdô-Sette, however, did not.

He remained eager and alert, thrilled at hurtling into adventure. As he had on many previous occasions, he tried to find a rhyme for Acidulator, but came up with constipator—which offered little potential, even for him. Not that it mattered, for he was fazed by nothing, which was why he was a brilliant bard and superb explorer. Indeed, he'd poked the eye of peril and insulted its mother on numerous occasions, becoming rich and famous as a consequence.

On the instrument panel, a light began to flash.

This wasn't unusual; it was a light designed to flash. But not at altitude.

He blinked at it.

Its flashing indicated they had no fuel.

He glanced at his passengers, who remained asleep. Its flashing bordered on casual, and he tapped it in case it was stretching. Muttering under his breath, he looked out the window on the off-chance they were still on the ground, before wondering how he could break the news to his passengers without Oscar claiming victory prior to their slamming into desert—which, besides the obvious embarrassment, meant Oscar would have the last word.

All three engines began to sputter and the Acidulator tilted downwards.

The change in noise roused the cats.

Oscar blinked sleepily and looked around, noticing something was different—and it wasn't just the D'dôdô-Sette standing before them and smiling sheepishly.

He glanced at Vaasi-Vee, who'd noticed the same.

"What's going on?" she asked, realising the horizon was not where she'd left it.

"We might have a bit of a technical dilemma, don't you know," the D'dôdô-Sette said airily.

"What do you mean?" asked Oscar.

"I mean there's a dilemma of a technical nature that we have come into possession of."

Oscar stared, realising the cat had left the controls to fend for themselves—which, considering they appeared to be coming in to land, left him dubious they were up to the task. "Are we there already?" he asked, hoping for an answer in the affirmative.

"Well, it depends what you mean."

"Are we coming in to land?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Why is it so quiet?" Vaasi-Vee asked, which was an odd observation, considering the volume of screaming wind. She pointed at the self-fending cockpit. "And why aren't you at the controls?"

The D'dôdô-Sette glanced at it. "Yes," he said, thoughtfully. "I ought to be, but I felt it prudent to advise you of our technical dilemma first."

Realisation dawned on Oscar in a manner akin to assault. "No," he whispered. "Please—don't tell me—don't tell me we're out of fuel?"

"Actually no. We're fine on that front."

"Then what's going on?" Vaasi-Vee cried.

He approached, saying, "Miss Vaasi-Vee, please, you mustn't—"

"*Don't come near me! GET IN THERE!*" She stabbed her paws at the cockpit.

The D'dôdô-Sette hesitated. "Look, the thing is—"

"In *there!*" she screamed. "Get in there *now!*"

Oscar stood, keen to make him.

"Miss Vaasi—"

But he was interrupted by Oscar, who threw himself at the

cat—an act made easier by virtue of the aeroplane pointing downwards.

"Get in there," he growled, grabbing the animal's mane, "and get this stupid acidic thing either *level* or *landed*!"

Indignant, the D'dôdô-Sette relented and returned to the cockpit. "I'm only trying to be polite," he said. "The least I can do is tell you why we're going to die—"

Hearing this, Vaasi-Vee cried out, before sobbing into her paws.

"Honestly," he continued, pressing at buttons. "I was only thinking of you. Surely you'd want to know the reasons behind such finality, rather than being left in the dark?"

But Oscar was too busy staring at a windscreen of approaching desert to say anything.

"Anyone would consider such courtesy admirable," the D'dôdô-Sette continued, still fiddling. "But not you two. Nothing's ever good enough, is it? I offer my services out of unadulterated selflessness, and you two do nothing but criticise and—"

"Will you *shut up*!" Oscar cried. "What's going on? Tell me what's going on!"

"Make up your mind. I can't shut up *and* tell you, can I?"

Oscar grabbed his mane with both paws and scrunched it. "*What's happening?*"

"You're really not very bright, are you? I was in the process of telling you before being shovelled back here. You really ought to think these things through, Dooven. Plan ahead. Sort yourself out. Velvet Paw or not, you're only embarrassing yourself, don't you know?"

Leaning closer, Oscar hissed. "Now you listen to me; you get this thing down *safely*—and you do it now, do you hear? And if I hear even one syllable that upsets Vaasi-Vee further, I shall render your ears similar to mine well before we hit the ground. Is that understood?"

The aeroplane was shuddering and the propellers screamed as gravity won over their prior defiance.

The D'dôdô-Sette glared at him. “I do this for *her*, do you understand?”

“I don’t care if you do it for your *mother!* Just do it!”

He released the cat, who muttered while grappling with the controls.

Struggling back to his seat upon a slope aspiring to vertical, Oscar reached for Vaasi-Vee, who remained buried in paws and not daring to look at anything about to slam into her at fifteen-hundred speed. Ensuring she remained buckled, he clambered into his own, cursing that he wasn’t the dexterous career-oriented cow whose hide he now battled with, considering its demise would have been marginally less horrible than what they were about to endure.

The aeroplane screamed at a pitch that left all three cats accompanying with a chorus of their own. Thrown about their seats, they stared at rapidly approaching desert. Amidst screams, Oscar glanced at Vaasi-Vee, wanting to take her paw and squeeze it—but couldn’t because she gripped her seats in the absurd notion it might stop her being flung through windscreen.

“I’ve done this before,” he yelled, as the cabin filled with a pressure of sound.

“*What?*” she screamed back, relinquishing her seat to wipe fleetingly at tears.

“This,” he said, indicating their coffin with a brief wave of paws. “I’ve crashed four planes only recently. It’s not as horrible as it seems. This bit’s the worst. Once we hit the ground you’ll forget all about being frightened!”

The D'dôdô-Sette called out, “Brace yourselves! This landing’s not going to be conventional by any stretch of the imagination!” Despite being shaken to pieces, he turned to Oscar. “You realise that if I pull this off I’ll probably be the greatest hero in the world!”

“I thought you already were!”

“*Please*, the D'dôdô-Sette!” Vaasi-Vee cried. “Please *concentrate!* PLEASE!”

“*But you’ll bare it in mind?*” he yelled as the blur of ground rock-

eted toward them.

There was no time for answer.

With a whip and a crack, the aeroplane slammed into powdered rock, blasting a cloud of sand in an enormous aeronautical sneeze. Engines belted into ground and burst, splintering in shrapnel and sending torn sheets of metal and severed shards of propeller ricocheting across its body. When wings bit into earth, the machine pivoted until they were torn free and discarded like bark from tree. At an angle, the fuselage hurtled sideways, its somersaulting staunched by hammering sand as the remainder of aeroplane rammed through dune.

The wreckage slowed, rocked and stopped beneath a rain of sand as great chunks of expensive machinery settled in a creaking, snapping wilt of ordeal.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/alchemists>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Corfield was born in London several years ago, definitely before last Thursday. This was a good year for all concerned, and for him in particular, because without it, later years would mean little. He owes a lot to that first year, and now lives because of it in undisclosed locations after having successfully absconded from probation. Although he finds making friends difficult, this is only because no one likes him. Including his mother, who didn't bother giving him a name until he was nine. His solicitor describes him as having an allergy to apostrophes and an aversion to punctuation that borders on pathological. This makes the popularity of his books all the more remarkable. At least it would if there was any. But there isn't. So it doesn't. He was recently interviewed in Joomag's Meals of Food magazine, which didn't help anyone.

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