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Business as Usual

A Never Realm Tale

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There was a strange coldness to the room. It wasn't so much the temperature as it was the atmosphere. The nameless chill you felt when reading a horror novel. Not so much a nippy feeling, it was more like the air in the room was brooding. It had a sadness to it which can't be explained without the subject of the description becoming remorsefully depressed.

Trogimorix reflected on the banner hanging over the door. It was a restatement of Vestgeirsson's Rule: Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from ordinary technology.

Before him, sat the great infrastructure stack. A series of boxes each the size of a small child's hand. Randomly ordered, they were all carefully engraved and colored with a decorative letter of the alphabet. No two of the boxes were adorned with the same letter. Most displayed a single letter, but a few, a rare few, held as many as two. Trogimorix touched one, releasing a set of pixies. Between them, they carried a block of wood carved with the same letter as decorated the box. They flew into the great press device and dropped the letter in a tray of similarly carved wooden blocks. They were meant to form words, but Trogimorix couldn't read them as they were all backward.

"You're not using the right spelling," a voice bellowed down from high atop the device. Trogimorix had always found Ura both haughty and annoying. The great gynosphinx sat perched upon the device for no other purpose than to correct people on their word usage. "Ax," Ura insisted, "is not spelled with an 'e' at the end."

"Well in the case of an ax to chop wood, I would agree with you." Trogimorix tried putting on his best smile. "But since we are discussing the battle-axe of a warrior, in this case, Marvin the Terrible, the 'e' on the end is appropriate."

Ura crossed her front paws. "Suit yourself," she shrugged. "But I'm sure you'll get complaints from the Mystical Board of Regents."

Trogimorix thought of the board members. It was bad enough the members of the board of regular universities were a group of simpering old men with fewer ideas and intellect than your average flower, it was far worse for the Magnum Collage of the Mystical Arts. At least in a university, the board members could eventually be replaced when they died. As for the lichens on the Mystical Arts Board, one had to wait until one of them rotted away for a seat to open up. Having undead board members could be a real disadvantage to progress.

Worse yet, Trogimorix realized Ura was right. He *would* have a problem with those moldy old coggers. But what he didn't know was whether he was angrier with himself for finally realizing it or Ura for pointing it out. He despised her smug, insidious attitude.

Ura scoffed. "What I don't understand is why you even need to mention weapons in a treatise on the structure of the universe in the first place."

The top of the old device crashed down heavily on the lower deck. The original intent was to crush every ounce of juice from a grape, but in this case, it was only intended to stick ink to paper. The loud noise hardly seemed necessary. A piece of paper flew out of the machine. Acid, asbestos, and lignin-free, the parchment was intended to last for a-1000-years without yellowing. Or about two nanoseconds when exposed to dragon flame. Trogimorix caught it and glanced down at the latest page of his opus work. His

eyes noticed how Ura had managed to have the 'e' removed without further consulting him. Trogimorix thought it looked stupid.

"Some of the components of the universe are stuck so well together it would take the hero Marvin the Terrible and his battle-axe to separate them," Trogimorix emphasized the word axe. Practically spitting out the word as he said it. "It's a metaphor."

"Don't waste your breath."

Melicia entered. She was an extremely attractive witch with a medium-length mane of dark black hair. She wore a ... well, she was extremely attractive. Witches spend an inordinately large amount of time casting spells to modify their own appearance. Melicia was an example of the apex of the art. For all Trogimorix knew Melicia could have been a 1000 years old, but you'd never know by looking at her. Trogimorix always thought she looked delightfully underdressed.

"Gynosphinx don't understand metaphors." Her voice had a distinct melody to it, like the plucking of a lute. She took the paper from Trogimorix's hands and rapidly dissected the contents. Her dark blue eyes scanned over the words with an intense glare. "Do you really believe this?" She asked.

"Believe it?" Trogimorix roared with self-confidence, "I can prove it!"

"It seems absurd," she pandered to him. "The whole universe being made up of tiny planets. Each planet a prison world for angels. Kept imprisoned on the surface by groups of bat-winged demons patrolling the skies."

Trogimorix had to shake his head to break to the effect of the witch's appearance. "Naturally, you can't see it. The gods have shrunk everything down to a size too small to be seen by the human eye."

Melicia practically winked. "I sure I could see it if I pointed a shrink spell at myself as you did." She gave him a casual glance. "Still, it seems to fly in the face of religious literature which has all the demons thrown out of paradise and locked away in the underworld."

The scholar frowned. "In a sense, they are trapped. Doomed to fly perpetually over their homeworld. Keeping watch over imprisoned angels."

She gave him a wry grin. "Yet, right here you explain how some of the demons can fly to nearby worlds and engage in interactions with male or female demons flying above nearby worlds."

"Exciting isn't it?" Trogimorix grinned like an addled schoolboy. "That's how the components are kept together. Still, in the end, they are compelled to return to their own prison world. Fated to remain an integral part of their penal system."

"So, this mating of demons creates more demons?" the witch asked in a seductive tone.

"Far from it," replied Trogimorix. When he was talking about magic, he could almost resist the charms of any woman. Almost. "Demons, like their counterpart angels, can neither be created nor destroyed."

Melicia rubbed her hands lightly over Trogimorix's shoulder. Caressing the fine silk of his robes. "How sad."

Trogimorix blinked. "Emotions hardly enter into it," he announced. "What's important is the balance of negative and positive energy be maintained. It's the basis of all magic."

Spies could have learned a thing or two from Melicia. She was draining Trogimorix of all his uncovered knowledge with no more effort than she used to pour wine into a cup. "You talk about breaking up the planets into smaller asteroids. Is this true? Breaking up the penal planets would release vast amounts of mystical energy?"

Trogimorix eyes lit up as if two candles were burning inside them. "Absolutely." He practically squealed with excitement. "It would release untold amounts of magic."

"Magic you could do ..."

Trogimorix interrupted her. "... almost anything with."

Melicia expressed a malevolent grin. "Such power could raise a mystical practitioner to the very level of the gods themselves."

Rubbing his bearded chin, Trogimorix contemplated the thought. "I never considered the impact, but I suppose it would."

"I still have never understood why the gods made demons and angels in the first place." Melicia cooed.

"Well, it was all part of the build-up to the Great War. The one between good and evil," said Trogimorix.

"Yes, but it never happened."

"Ture it was stopped by the First Concord and Disarmament Treaty."

"I wonder why."

"Well when you create two groups of beings which are indestructible, the fighting can go on for rather a long time. Think of the carnage." Trogimorix frowned, "in the end, they decided nothing would be resolved, but everything else in creation would be destroyed."

"I didn't think the gods cared about destruction. Or the beings they destroyed," she purred.

"They don't. But what they really dislike are unresolved questions."

Melicia cocked her head. "But doesn't it leave the issue still unresolved?"

"Yes. However, the last article of the treaty allows them to put off the question of which has the greater power, good or evil." Trogimorix exhaled. "It's supposed to be resolved by the great biometric computer, made up of living organisms who inhabit a world formed atop the remnants of the two armies."

"What exactly is a biometric computer thingy?" She asked seductively.

"I have no idea," replied Trogimorix. "No one does."

"I suppose someone will find it sooner or later," she mused.

“Yes,” Trogimorix agreed, “But it’s supposed to pop out of existence as soon as the question is answered.”

“Seems like a bit of a waste, if you ask me.” Melicia blew in his ear.

Trogimorix smiled. “You’re telling me. That’s why we have to find it and stop it before it can give the gods their answer.”

“How exciting.”

Trogimorix pressed the ‘e’ box and added back in his missing letter. Ura grunted as the machine started up its loud nose again. As the device grunted and gowned, it walked one of the celphinoid pages. They were small children from the local villages who were dressed in complex tabards covered in magical formulae and mathematical codes. They streamed across the green material at an almost unreadable pace.

The young girl walked up to Trogimorix and said in a monotone voice, “Ring, ring.”

“Yes,” the scholar replied. “Professor Trogimorix speaking.”

The young girl kept her mouth open, but her tongue and lips never moved. Although her teeth vibrated slightly. It was the type of master artistry which would have made a ventriloquist cry. “This is Advorix from the Chancellor’s Office. Lord Venecarus would like to see you in his office.”

“When?” asked Trogimorix.

“It’s Lord Venecarus,” Advorix’s voice replied. Her voice had a hollow sound to it with a slight hiss. It was like a static discharge from two over-washed sheets. “When he wants you in his office the answer is always ... now.” There was an ominous tone to her last remark.

“Tell him I’m on my way up.”

There was a distinct click and the little girl closed her mouth. Without so much as a further word or the slightest expression, she turned on her heels and exited the room. There was an odd silence. Similar to those found in betting parlors when the unexpected happens. Say a team of fire-breathing dragons losing a sports game to a knocked together huddle of squirrels.

“Well it was nice working with you,” purred Melicia.



Lord Venecarus was a lich of the first order. His mortal remains didn’t so much walk around as they floated from place to place on a cushion of air. The black rags he wore were the remains of his burial shroud. Towards the edges, things danced about, not as stripes of material, but as a loose collection of an oily black gas accompanying the material. Only his gold, armored shoulder pads persisted unchanged by the effects of time. All that remained of his head was the upper part of his skull. The jaw bone had long since vanished. Behind his eyes, you could see a deep, red glow as if the air was somehow an ionized version of his blood. Atop the skull was the crown of the college administration. The spiked circlet ornamentation of the Chancellor, Dean of Investigative Studies and Head of the Tenure Committee.

In his boney hands, he held the Tome of the Great McGonigle, which described the only eight spells in the universe. Create, Change, Disguise, Attack, Defend, Move, Discover and Unlock. Some of professor Trogimorix's students spent years mastering a single instance of the create spell. Say, turning a ball of fluff into a bunny rabbit.

Attack, or battle magic, was the most difficult to master. Most students were able to get a grip on throwing an arrow across the room without a bow, but flame attacks were much more difficult. Students had to grasp the fundamentals of containing a ball of fire without it exploding. It was a harsh lesson. Those who failed found themselves recorded for posterity as a smudge on the classroom wall.

Lord Venecarus knew how to cast all eight. Not only did he know all eight, but he was an expert at combinations. Most magi have a hard-enough time casing one spell. Casting two spells at the same time is a special challenge all in itself. Norman Venecarus can do a spell with each hand. The most famous case was casting both a discover and an unlock spell to release the secrets of immortality. The unlock spell is a tricky bit of business. Your average wizard can open the typical padlock but opening eternal secrets of life after death is a different story.

The lich was pondering something. Although it wasn't clear what it was. It might even have been in some other dimension. The room had a strong odor of burning candle wax. Lord Venecarus barely turned an eye ... or more correctly an eye socket ... at Trogimorix as he entered. The junior magnus' hands were shaking as he approached. Lord Venecarus spoke in a clear, rich ... well, English accent. "I hear you've made a visit to the microworld."

Trogimorix stumbled and shuffled his feet. He didn't agree with the proposition. Agreeing to culpability in front of an undead lich was usually not conducive to your long-term survivability. In any case, Lord Venecarus grew tired of waiting for a verbal response. After all, one needn't bother with such things when one already knows the answer. "I hear you had a dalliance with a succubus."

This time, Trogimorix's lips moved as he struggled to form a response. Despite his most determined efforts, nothing came out. His upper lip simply resolved into a mild tremor. The former Norman Beetlewax, now Lord Venecarus wasn't impressed. He'd once been an accountant. He'd enjoyed reading to take up his time at work. Until, from one out-of-print self-help book, he learned his first attack spell. Right now, this junior professor reminded him of the bodies he left lying on the floor of his former employer's. This particular junior magnus professor didn't seem to be on the right track for future advancement. "You realize this institution has a strict non-fraternization policy which applies to students, angels and especially demons."

Trogimorix gibbered something in reply. Lord Venecarus became impatient. "Speak up."

"I thought demons couldn't reproduce," he let slip through trembling lips.

"They can't," replied Lord Venecarus. "They cannot produce other demons." He announced in a professorial tone. "But they can produce half-demons when they mate with humans. It's a very dangerous combination. The last known set where the Howard brothers, Moe, Shemp, and Curly. Everyone knows what a disaster that was. I suggest you take the appropriate steps."

"Yes, my lord." Trogimorix bowed deeply, "I understand completely."

Lord Venecarus' voice deepened. "If you don't, I'll take steps to resolve the issue. In other words, I will ensure you will no longer be tempted to break this cardinal rule." He made a gesture with his boney claws which seemed to indicate the rather painful removal of some specific body parts. Trogimorix squirmed uncomfortably. He bowed again, placing his hands in a typical protective position.

He was almost to the door when the need for academic approval overrode his survival instinct. He turned again to the lich. "Have you read my treatise?" He asked, pretending to be casual.

"Silly names," Lord Venecarus explained. "Demon Electors, Proconsul Angels, and I assure you the planets themselves are not neutral. Negative and positive magical energy having a natural attraction. Foolish notion. You obviously haven't been around many evil wizards, religious fundamentalists, or been near any department meetings lately. I'd advise giving up this course of study. It generally leads to some unfortunate ends."

Trogimorix tried to walk backward out of the door, bowing and scraping. "I named one of the planets once," Lord Venecarus reminisced. The lure of academic recognition did not seem to dissipate after death. "I called it Adam, after the first man. Bloody stupid name. What was I going to call the next one? Griselda?"

The junior magnus closed the door before he became trapped listening to the rest of the lord's recollection. He wiped the sweat from his brow and mentally patted himself on the back for avoiding his fate. Several of his colleagues had been found on the chancellor's floor ... bored to death.



Trogimorix returned to his office. When he popped open the door, he found the place filled to the rafters with undead wraiths pawing through his books. Their dark shapes were mostly ethereal with two flickering lights where their eyes should be. Among all the types of undead, wraiths were the least bad-smelling, so at least they had that going for them. "What the devil are you doing?" He shouted.

One of the wraiths shooshed him. "We don't stay the 'd' word. It tends to anger the Prince of Darkness, the Stealer of Souls."

"Sorry," replied Trogimorix sheepishly. "But what *are* you doing in my office?"

The wraith had a very distinct cockney accent. "My name's Xill, Dead Security Department. It's a pleasure to meet you," the wraith replied, trying to shake Trogimorix's hand. The result was more like a cloud of black dust your housekeeper might shake out of a dirty carpet in your flat than firm a handshake. But at least he was trying to be civil. "My mother always told me it was best in all cases to be polite. You know, observe the amities. Treat other beings with respect, like you would wish to be treated. Show them you care. Make sure you make everyone feel at home. It all starts with a proper introduction."

The junior professor of Movement Spells frowned. "What did your mother say about breaking into private offices?"

"She was quite in favor of it, truth be told. She loved a good haunting that one." The wraith's smoke shifted slightly. "But we didn't break into your office. We're here on the direct orders of Advorix and the chancellor's office."

Trogimorix turned white. “Look, I’ve just been to the administration office and ...”

“No need to explain, sir.” Remarked Xill. “It’s none of my business. We’ll just get on with our work, shall we?”

“You still haven’t told me what you are doing in my office,” Trogimorix snorted derisively.

“Security work,” Xill replied.

“What?”

“We’re translating all your work into a new form intended to confound and confuse potential thieves,” explained Xill, “We call it acronyms. They are a series of letters meant to stand for whole words or phrases. Like MOD, which stands for Mystical-Oriented Design. Or UPD ...”

“User Profile Data?” Suggested Trogimorix.

“Undead Police Department actually.” Xill chuckled. “You see how ingeniously it works. Easy to get wrong if you don’t know the exact meaning of the codes.”

Trogimorix gritted his teeth. “So, we should stop calling you wraiths and start calling you User Neutral Destroyers of Everyone’s Academic Deeds.” Xill seemed to freeze, even the gaseous part of his form seemed to halt their inky black tide. The glow for his eyes even seemed to dim.

In a wink of a glowing eye, everything returned to normal. “UNDEAD. Quite clever sir. I see you grasp our meaning. Most clever, don’t you think boys?” Everyone seemed to nod their gaseous heads. One of them, carrying a whole stack of books, was heading out of the room.

The professor looked distressed. “What’s this then?”

“What’s what, sir?”

“You’re stealing my books,” he exclaimed.

“Well, not stealing them exactly, sir,” Xill explained. “You see, it’s the second part of the security process.”

Trogimorix didn’t appear satisfied in the slightest way. “Exactly what is this second security process?”

“They are being taken to the cemetery, sir. You might say we are spiriting them away.”

“The cemetery? Whatever for?”

“Specifically, they are being removed to a storage facility which is part of Shawn Rasmussen mausoleum.”

Trogimorix gave the wraith a quizzical look. “Shawn Rasmussen’s tomb?”

“Yes, sir,” Xill responded, “You’ll be able to get back anything you want. Just fill out this form using your unique 6,542-letter password and we’ll have someone bring it right up to you. We’re calling the new process *In-Crypt-Shawn*.”

“How am I supposed to remember a 6,542-letter password?” Trogimorix complained.

“Perhaps you might use a bit of magic, sir,” Xill snickered. “But whatever you do, don’t write it down. It’s encoded so that any piece of paper you write it down on will instantly explode.”

“How the devil ... sorry, sorry ... how do you expect me to write it on the form then?”

“Well that would be a bug wouldn’t it, sir? Design flaw, I’d say.” Xill chuckled. “Nothing I can do for you there. You have to bring it up with the IT department.”

“IT? Information Touching?” Trogimorix suggested.

“No, sir. But good guess. IT, It’s the Inept Troglodyte department.”

Trogimorix had a deep desire to strangle the wraith, but since the undead creature lacked a neck, he realized his plan had a few minor flaws. His thinking process was interrupted by the approach of one of the celphinoid pages. This one seemed smaller than the usual model and carried a white bag as well as wearing her green tabard.

The young girl walked up to Trogimorix, as usual, and said in a monotone voice, “Ring, ring.”

“Who is it?” Trogimorix asked the page.

She pulled a wax tablet out of her bag and held it up. Using a sharp-pointed stylus, she carved the word ‘MOM’ into the wax. “Tell her I’ll call her back. I’ll a bit busy right now.” Trogimorix claimed. The young girl turned on her heels and exited the room. Trogimorix had a very strong vision of the angry look on his mother’s face. She despised it when he used CallerID.

More and more wraiths started leaving his office, each one carrying a stack of books. Trogimorix seemed distressed. “Aren’t you going to leave me anything? You can’t mean to take it all away.” He complained loudly.

“Oh, no,” Xill responded in a cheery voice, “That wouldn’t be appropriate. Here.” He passed the professor the stack of unbound papers and parchments. Trogimorix went through them quickly, becoming more agitated as he turned each new corner of the stack.

“Why these are all empty,” he protested, “they’re blank.”

“Of course, they are,” Xill seemed to indicate as if it went without saying. “Nothing to *In-Crypt* there, aye?”

Trogimorix stood in a state of shock as the last of the wraiths left the room with the books from his library. He glanced around, noting the collected dust on his empty bookshelves.



Vindauscia and Boartoss sat on very hard three-legged stools. Vindauscia shifted her weight on the seat and it slid, noisily, across the flagstone floor. Between them sat the Great Crystal. A giant, solid glass globe about five feet in height. It was held in the air by an intricate, but haphazard, scaffolding of tied bamboo poles. The whole structure seemed barely capable of keeping themselves from falling over, much less supporting the heavy glass orb.

Inside the sphere, people were mucking about. Some were pulling fish from a stream. Others were cutting down wheat with small, hand-held sickles. They carried the grain to a small woven basket and placed it inside. Then they went about collecting more. Each time they placed another in the basket, the last batch vanished, providing room for the new stacks.

Once the tiny, square field was emptied, it instantly grew an entirely new crop ... ready for harvest. In the background, workers were busily constructing a stone building. Behind it stood another stone building which appeared to be exactly the same. Same door, the same number of floors and windows, and exactly the same color thatched roof. Farther off in the distance, mist-shrouded hills obscured the view of the distance. Walking around the sphere gave you the same view, just from different angles. The game masters who created the *Humans and Homes* mystical vid game didn't provide a whole lot of variety.

"This seems a bit ordinary for a game," Boartoss mused. Boartoss was a rather large ogre. Green-skinned with a puffy face, Boartoss displayed a fuller set of teeth than most of the members of his race. His eyes were sunk far into his head and were so small, they almost disappeared in the folds of his skin. The stool groined, struggling to support his mass. Around his neck, he wore a simple necklace of human skulls, carefully linked together on a leather strap. It was neither longer or considerably shorter than those worn by most of the ogres of his clan. Although one or two were a bit smaller and were probably goblin rather than human skulls. His own head was neither too large for an ogre, or too small. But Boartoss did have one piece of his anatomy of somewhat extraordinary size. making him rather popular with the female staff of the college.

"You have to give it some time," Vindausia explained. Her long, flowing white gown draped itself over the front of the stool and its legs. Much in the same way the giant anaconda was draped about her shoulders and elbows. Rix was rather large for a medusa snake and he dwarfed his brothers who made up Vindausia's mane of hair. "You'll need to collect resources to defeat your opponents. You might want to consider sending your villagers out to collect some stone, so they can build walls."

Ogres weren't fond of building walls. The whole concept of protection seemed to elude them, especially Boartoss. The rings of leather straps he wore at his wrists and ankles could hardly be considered armor. Although they might stave off a blow or two -- if his hands were in the right position. Boartoss grunted. He found the wee walls of humans a distraction. They mostly got in your way when you went charging out to kill your foes. Boartoss pressed some of the scales on the turtle controller he was holding and directed some of his workers toward a pile of stone.

Vindausia too, pressed some of the scales of her turtle, directing workers to make rudimentary weapons. Rix, the snake, leaned over and opened his maw at the diapsid in the cartilaginous shell. Vindausia shifted her shoulders at the last moment and the snake's jaws snapped closed on empty air. She gave him a scolding look and he retreated, raising his head above her's. As he withdrew, a group of well-armored men appeared at the outskirts of the village.

They lumbered towards the villagers as they struggled to arm themselves. Boartoss worked his turtle frantically, giving his homesteaders instructions. They responded slowly and Boartoss grumbled pressing the scales on his turtle harder as time progressed.

"Careful," Vindausia suggested, "They are about to flank you on the left."

Boartoss roared. "I can see that."

His villagers began to fall before the armored soldiers who were mounting the attack. They didn't have much finesse. Their sword swings had a bit of a jerky motion to them. But the villagers, although less encumbered by steel plates, didn't seem to have much of an advantage in smoother movement. One by one, they fell. As they dropped, Boartoss' frustration grew. His face was now a pasty red. He seemed increasingly unhappy with the performance of his villagers. They didn't fight like ogres. Yet he appeared angrier with his inability to jump into the glass sphere and engage in combat directly. Tearing the heads off those who were interfering with all his hard work.

Boartoss growled. "Damn developers."

He batted the turtle on his hands with increasing fervor, but nothing seemed to slow the steady destruction of his villagers. In a fit of pique, he threw the turtle to the ground, screaming a few choice words in ogre. You know the ones. Rising from his stool, his foot stomped on the remains of the turtle. When he removed his foot only a smudge persisted, where the turtle had once been. Boartoss watched in distress as the warriors moved on to reducing the village houses stone by stone. Smoke rose from the remains. The raiders sauntered off into the distance, carrying bags of coins over their shoulders.

"Don't let it bother you," Vindausia's voice was deceptively birdlike. "For a mere three or four-hundred Sestertius you can buy all your lost resources back."

Boartoss' face turned beet red. "Three or Four-Hundred? Who do they think they are? The Lehman Brothers? No one robs an Ogre." He said flatly.

"How do you think you were defeated?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The other players bought resources from the company. They got ahead and now they are out collecting resources by raiding other players ... like you." She batted her eyes and the snakes took a collective stance; as if they were about to attack the ogre en masse.

Boartoss fumed. "Then it's not a game."

She leveled her dark green eyes at him. "What makes you think it is a game?"

The ogre gave her a confused look. This was a standard look for your average ogre, but Boartoss was hardly your average ogre. "What are your referring to?"

She cleared her throat softly. "They're real people. You know, actual villagers. The developers just had them all possessed by spirits. It's what caused all the jerky movements. This and a little magic thrown in and you have your game."

Boartoss cringed. "That's sick. Who developed this version of the game?"

Vindausia checked the logo on the box. "Deep Dark Secret Games."

"Well, that explains it," Boartoss snorted.

"It does?"

“Yea,” Boartoss cleared his throat, “I know those guys; Pit Fiend Devils. No moral standards.”

“So, your average game developers?” Vindausia retorted.

“Yea, pretty much.”



Trogimorix struggled down the long, cave-like passageway. The whole place had a damp, pungent smell to it. It was like there were algae growing on the walls, only you couldn't see it. Still, it was tough going. It was hard to keep your feet under you. They always put the server room in the most inexplicable place possible: back alleys, basements, back buildings. Whatever hole-in-the-wall place they can find. In this case, it made sense if you stopped to think about it. The smell changed to sulfur.

He entered a large chamber, filled with papers. Mostly they were forms, requesting data restores. All of which were being ignored. On the bottom, were some which dated back to the last century.

Mnemosyne blinked her eyes and gave Trogimorix a close stare. “What do you want?” she asked. She rose to a sitting position. Light reflected off her brilliantly colored scales. Her teeth shone like majestic icicles. She flexed her bone-like claws and her wings rustled. Light flashed off the sheets of glass which made up her wings. Trogimorix had rarely seen a more vibrant display of color, except in the stained-glass windows of a few obscure monasteries. For a crystal dragon, even Mnemosyne was exceptional. Massive clouds of smoke rose into the high ceiling as she exhaled. Trogimorix watched as text and symbols flowed across her crystal scales. “Well? Speak up. Why did you come all the way down here?”

“The chancellor has a problem with my latest work.” Trogimorix put on his best show at seeming remorseful. “Seems I crossed the line into something taboo. I was hoping I could convince you to erase it. Especially the video.”

Before the dragon could answer, a large group of homunculi rushed into the cavern chamber. The small creatures had been the dragon's servant for ages, eons even. “No requests! No requests!” they shouted. “No requests without the proper payment.” Several of the small creatures carried placards. They spouted things like ‘Unfair work practices’, ‘Down with corporate greed’, and ‘Pinochle tournament next Thursday.’

“What's going on here?” asked Trogimorix.

One of the homunculi stepped forward, to act as the spokesman. Although it might have been a spokeswoman ... with Homunculi you never know. “The name's Tim. We represent the AFL see you IO and were not letting you make any changes without a contract. We're on strike.”

“What?”

“NCNW – that's No contract, no work.”

“I see you've been talking to data security. What the devil does AFL see you IO mean?”

The homunculus grinned, displaying a wide array of teeth. “Away from link see you infrastructure operations. We're forming a data network; do you want to join?”

“What’s a network?”

“A network is any textile in which the yarns are fused, looped or knotted at their intersections, resulting in a fabric with open spaces between the yarns,” Tim replied.

“What’s that got to do with data?”

“Nothing at all. Everything’s not about you, you know. It’s about time we had new uniforms down here. Been ages since anyone of us has even had the chance to shower. We demand network uniforms! Nothing is going to get done until our demands are met.” The homunculus was emphatic.

“Yes, well,” Trogimorix protested, “but I’m not management.”

“Well, go away then.” The homunculus snorted.

“I think I can solve this problem,” Mnemosyne interrupted. “Look, I can erase your data, but it won’t help.” Another huge cloud of vapors was expelled from the dragon’s mouth as she spoke.

“Why not?” asked Trogimorix.

Mnemosyne looked up, following the white cloud she’d just released. “All the data is being backed up to the cloud.” she chuckled.

“What!”

“No! No! No!” screamed Tim. “Don’t make the dragon laugh. Don’t make the dragon laugh.”

It was too late. Mnemosyne chuckles turned into a full-fledged belly laugh. The problem with crystal dragons is – they laugh jets of flame. Papers stacked around the cavern caught fire. In an instant, the entire room was ablaze.

“CRASH,” Tim the homunculus yelled. “Get the dragon out. Get the dragon out. This is a CRASH.”

“What are you talking about?” Trogimorix demanded. “This is a fire. You have to put it out.”

“Sorry,” Tim retorted, “No fire suppression without a contract.”

“But the whole place will burn down.”

Tim ignored him. The other homunculi milled around chaotically directing the dragon toward the back door. “That’s not my problem,” Tim explained. “CRASH, CRASH,” Tim yelled like a siren alarm.

“What are you talking about,” Trogimorix complained, “it’s a fire. Nobody crashed into anything.” Trogimorix came to an abrupt halt. “What a minute, what do you mean CRASH?”

Tim grinned as the flames rose higher. “CRASH - Catastrophic restart and save hardware.”