

Otto Von Trapezoid and the Empress of Thieves

A novel

by

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Part One: Eyes Meet From Across the Room

Chapter One

“Good morning, Earth. Today... you are mine.”

Otto Von Trapezoid buttoned his labcoat and threw on his rubber gloves, but he ground his teeth at the sight of the goggles. They created an unpleasant suction against his eyes, tugged on his hair, fogged up easily, and were generally difficult to see through. Still, he thought, the simpletons would probably have no idea what he was about unless he made it glaringly obvious and played his part to the hilt.

At an underwhelming but not particularly noticeable height of 5’5”, with frazzled brown hair too short to be wild, a perpetual five o’clock shadow that would never grow into a full beard, a scowl that wasn’t quite evil so much as grumpy, and lacking any visible scars or missing limbs, he would never naturally look like a villain. He therefore had to dress like one. Otto had tried other thematically appropriate headgear, but everything had its own set of problems. The welding mask he once donned, for example, looked impressive, but his voice was muffled to the point that no one could understand his demands, and the less said about the helmet with antennae, the better. So, unfortunately, the goggles stayed.

From his eponymously-shaped orbital space station, emblazoned with a crimson trapezoid-shaped insignia overlain with a golden V, the Quadrilateral of Doom, Otto looked down on the world below. Many would have found the view humbling, beautiful, or peaceful, but all he saw was a planet full of buffoons and imbeciles, who were lucky he was deigning to become their ruler instead of atomizing them. It was time to begin. As Otto crossed the threshold from his quarters into the dark, narrow hallway, the lights above him snapped to attention and turned off as he passed. He had designed the lighting this way for several reasons. Obviously, it helped to conserve power, but the more important reason was security. The lights only activated for biological life forms, since the robots didn’t need light to see. As such, if anyone came aboard without Otto’s permission, the lights

would serve as a targeting system for the COMMODE (Cannons of Mobile Mayhem, Obliteration, Destruction, and Evisceration).

From several slots and closets along the metallic white walls, robots of every stripe emerged, rolling or floating behind, beside, and around their master. They beeped and clicked and whirred as he barked orders.

“Check the fusion reactor for leaks!” he shouted, prompting a small, wheeled robot to speed away. “We don’t need a repeat of the Kathmandu incident!”

Otto pointed to a mechanical spider that crawled along the walls. “Tell the Navi-bot to move us into position.”

Each robot obeyed its command instantly and without question, until only a small, floating sphere was left. It circled Otto, extending its thin metallic arms, shining its blue optic light in his face, whirring almost affectionately.

“And you,” Otto said, finally turning to FIX-IT (Functional Intelligence for eXamining Internal Technologies), prompting an excited stand to attention and salute. “Take your blasted pestering somewhere else!” Otto swatted FIX-IT, who flew off dejectedly. “Perhaps into the engines!”

The end of the hallway opened into Otto’s command station. It was spherical, with a large wraparound viewscreen on the ceiling. Various equations, statistics, and other important data flickered and vanished as the ship moved closer to the Earth. In the center of the room was a metallic throne on a raised platform, surrounded by a semicircular touchscreen console. The throne lowered as Otto approached.

“SCRAP, report.”

SCRAP (Self-Creating Robotic Apparatus and Protector) was Otto’s right-hand robot. As his acronym implied, SCRAP had created himself from pieces of Otto’s discarded robots and machinery, developing self-awareness (even assuming a gender identity) as he did. Tall, silver, and human-shaped, SCRAP’s chassis was a surprisingly efficient mix of mismatched parts. His eyes glowed bright red, and speakers adorned the spots where his ears should have rested. His lower half was currently in wheel mode, though it could change to legs when he needed to climb stairs or kick the occasional do-gooder out an airlock. His elbows doubled as laser cannons, and his chest sported a rather stylish flamethrower. He turned to salute with one hand, while tossing spare parts into his flaming chest cavity for sustenance with the other. “Blasters at one hundred percent, sir,” SCRAP said from his ear-speakers.

“Only one hundred? Perhaps my EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONS weren’t clear enough for you!” The pitch in Otto’s voice rose proportionally with its volume.

SCRAP rubbed his well-worn temples. “Sir, raising their power more would cut into other systems and leave us vulnerable. Also, as I’ve told you before, it’s impossible to go higher than one hundred.”

“I achieved Doctorates in Math and Physics, not to mention Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, before I was old enough to shave! I understand several forms of Non-Euclidean Geometry and Advanced Calculus better than any living human! Am I to be expected to remember...basic math? Why not ask me to analyze a poem while you’re at it?” Otto shuddered with disgust.

SCRAP ignored his master, having heard this litany of accomplishments and subsequent diatribe before. “I believe they will be sufficient for our needs, in any case.”

Otto settled into a more relaxed position on his throne as it rose to the center of the room. He couldn’t help but be amused by the quaintness of the various satellites that had popped up around Earth, like yuppies flocking to an organic food mart. Mostly they were used so the drooling masses could be entertained by the latest trained monkey to find its way onto television, but a few were designed to surveil the sky and protect against the very sort of threat Otto represented.

Though he was confident he could at least outmaneuver any weapon the world’s governments could launch into space, surprise was key to this, his magnum opus. Otto set the cannons for a wide burst, and as they charged, he decided to ignore SCRAP’s cowardly projections and turn the power output up to 180%. Dozens of satellites burst like piñatas before a morningstar, raining the shrapnel of their slipshod technology down on the unsuspecting planet below.

Otto resisted the urge to laugh maniacally, as he didn’t want to risk losing his voice at a key moment. Instead he practiced tenting his fingers and smirking. So lost was he in the moment, that he didn’t notice the ship lights turn a dim red, or the shrill throb of his alarm system sounding, or his robotic minions scattering in every direction, or SCRAP waving his arms and running around. Eventually he realized something was going on, and looked up to notice his chief minion shouting.

“...generators are down to thirty percent! At this rate, we’ll spiral into orbit and burn up like, um...” SCRAP paused for just a moment, and Otto scowled in annoyance.

“Well, like what?”

“I’m sorry sir, but I think preventing our impending destruction might be more important than concocting an apt analogy.”

Otto groaned and rose from his chair. After brushing SCRAP aside as dismissively as he could, he made for the emergency elevator to the engine room. Issuing orders to the spider-bots, SCRAP followed, making sure not to let Otto close the door on him. The scientist stood with his hands behind his back, facing forward.

“Do you care to explain to me why firing the cannons at less than double capacity is sending my magnificent citadel of destruction into flaming paroxysms before my eyes?”

“As I tried to tell you, we’re short on backup power. I routed most of it to your new project.”

“And you didn’t bother to inform me?” Otto shouted.

“I assumed you would have told me not to bore you with that sort of ‘tedious banality,’ and spent several minutes explaining how important your time was.”

Otto narrowed his eyes, but couldn’t really argue. SCRAP merely shrugged.

The engine room carried most of the machinery that served to differentiate it from run-of-the-mill space stations. Propulsion engines, a long-term life support system, and gravity generators, all of which were powered by miniature fusion reactors. The room was round and presently lit only by the emergency lights. Several repair-bots, damaged in the initial explosion, lay strewn about the floor giving off sparks. FIX-IT, however, was hard at work soldering together damaged tubes and power couplings. Upon seeing its master, it flew over to him, hovering expectantly. He walked right past, sighing disgustedly at the damaged machines on the floor.

“Worthless, all of you,” he said.

Otto tapped a console on the wall, and a complete set of tools popped out. He and SCRAP each grabbed what they needed and began the repairs. Despite their bickering, the two were quite used to working in tandem. Otto wordlessly determined the order of operations and fixed the larger problems, while SCRAP handled the lesser, but still crucial, details Otto was too impatient to fixate on.

“You know, sir, this reminds me of when we had to operate from your parents’ garage. We got our hands dirty a lot more.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing,” Otto replied, not looking up from his work. “I didn’t create those giant robotic lobsters with my own hands because it ‘built character.’” Otto spat the words, mocking the tone of a scout troop leader or mustached father. “I simply hadn’t devised an efficient means of creating minions yet.”

“It wasn’t a total loss. I don’t think the Danube will ever recover.”

“Neither will my thrice-cursed patience if you don’t cease telling me things I already know.”

After almost an hour of wrenching, tying, twisting, welding, rigging, screaming (Otto), sighing (SCRAP), replacing, reconnecting, nearly exploding, cursing (Otto), stopgapping, hammering, drilling, nearly exploding (SCRAP), overriding, and tapping, the QOD was back in working order. The lights returned from red to white and the ship resumed its standard quiet drone, which brought Otto as close as he ever was to calm.

“Well, another easily avoidable mess out of the way,” Otto snarled, “It’s time to return to the bridge. We’re almost behind schedule.”

Scheduling was a consistent problem for them. Once, during a banquet attended by many world leaders, Otto had a plan to levitate them to the station and siphon all the information from their brains. Unfortunately, he spent several hours deciding on an acronym for his levitation device (he settled on LADLE), and by the time everything was ready, he only managed to capture the overnight janitorial staff, one of whom happened to be a highly trained undercover ninja saboteur. Afterwards (and several hundred hours of repairs later), SCRAP began adding a cushion of catastrophe time into his master’s schemes.

Otto reentered the bridge, resat in his chair, and retented his fingers, though he kept a much closer watch on the viewer this time. Resmirking as best he could, he looked to his minions. “Now, where were we?”

The World’s Biggest Ball of Twine Balls was the combined dream of a retired copper salesman and a Norwegian spinsters’ book club. At some point in the mid-20th century, several individuals and communities in the United States became obsessed with creating ever-increasingly large balls of sisal twine, which grew, literally and figuratively, into objects of curiosity and, eventually, tourism. Many who visited initially did so out of a very post-modern, ironic sense of amusement, but as it often does, ironic appreciation turned to genuine affection, and the power of the twine balls grew, along with the power of their masters.

This led to the Twine Wars, perhaps the greatest shadow conflict in all of American history, in which the destruction of the planet was only very closely averted (see *Epic Battles Involving Discarded Household Objects*, chapters 9-12). Eventually, the Great Twine Accords were signed, and while the attractions remained, their time had passed. For the most part, the twine balls were now only referred to by skilled parody musicians or hack novelists going for cheap laughs.

Everything changed again when F. Roscoe “Licky” Handleman III, who’d made a modest fortune in copper wiring before leaving to pursue his dream of opening a chain of tourist traps, was tricked into purchasing the 19th largest ball of twine in Wisconsin for the sum of \$100,000 (on two accounts, he had missed a decimal place). It was far too small to impress anyone, but attempting to return it would be more embarrassment than his burgeoning chain could handle. Licky set his mind to work and eventually bought the 18th-largest ball of twine, and then the 17th as well. Putting his experience in the copper field to work, he began merging the various twine balls together, into something far greater than they could have been on their own. However, the more he put into this merger, the faster word spread, and people moved to counter his plans. Soon, no one would sell him twine of any kind. The plan might have gone belly-up then and there, if not for Anja Gunnarson and the Sisters of Norwegian Literature. Anja firmly believed twine balls had been given a bad name by the war, and, when not singing the praises of authors like Ibsen and Hamsun, she worked tirelessly to revitalize the twine industry, such as it was. When Anja heard about Licky’s plan, an alliance was forged faster than her latest reading of *Markens Grode*.

Without warning or quarter, the Sisters of Norwegian Literature undertook one of the most ferocious letter-writing campaigns in history. Their letters to Handleman’s competitors and rivals were so well-written, polite, and relentless that within eleven months, he had purchased forty-six more twine balls, and hired a crew to merge them. Another year later, and the Handleman-Gunnarson Ball, standing at one hundred meters across and weighing several hundred metric tons, was judged to be the biggest ball of twine balls ever created. With its unveiling inevitable, the Sisters drummed up interest by writing letters to everyone in the tri-state area, which were so neatly composed that the event garnered national attention and record turnout. Thousands stood around in anticipation, spending vast sums of money on twine ball merchandise and fried cotton candy. At precisely 9 am, after several minutes of hushed, reverent silence, the ball was revealed, and it was glorious. To Licky, Anja, and everyone in attendance, it resembled nothing less than a new planet created by a benevolent deity. Many shed tears of joy, while others wore novelty twine ball gloves on their hands and heads. Consequently, no one thought much of it when a bright red light from the sky enveloped the ball, assuming as they did that it was part of the show.

And so it was that the World’s Biggest Ball of Twine Balls was destroyed, the first target of Otto Von Trapezoid’s Orbital Interstellar Laser (OIL).

At 12:01 a.m. Central European Time, while hanging from a velvet rope ladder outside her luxury stealth helicopter, Esmerelda Santa Monica was watching Frederic Deschamps blink. Esmerelda's research indicated the old French security chief only took a smoke break once a night, attempting to cut down for the sake of his wife. Fortunately, she had been waiting since the moment he arrived at work. Using her monogrammed night-vision binoculars and diamond-laced stopwatch, she managed to calculate the rate and timing of his blinks, and, upon assuring the accuracy of her calculations, let go of the ladder and activated her mini-parachutes.

Landing with grace that would make an Olympic gymnast vomit with envy, Esmerelda checked her watch and ran with more elegance and speed than anyone wearing several-thousand-dollar high heels should be able to. Though the casual observer would not have seen her (as she'd have accounted for their blinking patterns), Esmerelda never committed a crime without looking exquisite. Tall and elegant, with high cheekbones and flawless caramel skin, she let her long, wavy black hair fly free tonight. This, along with her purple and black pinstriped blazer and pants, broke the first rule of being a thief: keep a low profile. The self-proclaimed Empress of Thieves sneered at any rules, let alone those followed by her common brethren. Any idiot could commit a crime in a black leotard and mask—where was the challenge in that? If Esmerelda did anything, particularly crime, she did it with style.

Many thieves before her sought to target the Louvre, and a few had succeeded here and there. Of course, even they were amateurs in Esmerelda's mind. The Santa Monica family had been in the business of crime, from petty to grand, since humans figured out they could commit it. They sold bootleg crucifixes to the Romans and burned the city when Nero didn't pay his protection money. They bought and sold kings, emperors, czars, pharaohs, and presidents at the same time they were swiping apples from vendors and change from collection plates. These days, the family's wealth and power were so vast that it was hardly necessary to do anything besides let the bribes and interest accumulate, but Esmerelda wanted to match and surpass the success of her ancestors, not to mention her sister Catalina. It was not enough to be a good criminal, or even a great one; many of those never went down in history at all. Esmerelda wanted to be the best, a legend whose name would inspire fear and reverence long after she died, which would hopefully be at an extremely old age, on a bed encrusted with jewels and artifacts, surrounded by hundreds of sycophants.

She ran from one edge of the world's greatest museum to the other, deftly sidestepping tripwires, hopping over pressure plates, and running across walls to maneuver around obstacles. At each corner, she dropped a bead from her necklace. She'd still be on camera, but she could live with

that. By the time anyone saw her, it would be too late. Using her grapple gun, Esmerelda scaled the outer wall and proceeded to traverse the inner perimeter, once again leaving behind beads. She slipped past the security cameras in time with Frederic's blinks, and approached the main door. This time of night, the entrance required a combination, retinal scan, and palm-print, all of which were easily handled with customized combo-cracking hardware, special contact lenses, and palm-replicating gloves, respectively. The red light above the door turned green and opened, allowing Esmerelda to stride in with a cocky spring in her step. This was almost too...

Just as Esmerelda caught herself thinking something very stupid, the dim museum lights turned bright red, and a sound as shrill as a banshee scratching its nails across a blackboard while abruptly stopping a record began to blare. She leapt through the door as it closed, losing one of her shoes in the process. Kicking the other off as she ran, Esmerelda wondered what had gone wrong. In addition to the full might of the building's security detail and all sorts of advanced technology, the building was only minutes away from being surrounded by a squadron of gendarmes. Abandoning subtlety, she ran from corridor to corridor, tossing beads as she went. As a several-inch thick bulletproof door closed in front of her, the master thief pulled out a small bottle of perfume from her compact and sprayed the glass. Within a few seconds, enough of the door had melted away for Esmerelda to dive through. She stopped for just a moment afterward, long enough to make sure her clothes and hair were still in place. Nevertheless, she dusted them off and kept moving.

After sliding, kicking, dodging, maneuvering, parkouring, leaping, squeezing, sabotaging, nearly exploding, dropping (beads), somersaulting, twisting, turning, backtracking (only once), adjusting (hair), wall-walking, pirouetting, lock-picking, and adjusting (outfit) her way through the colossal museum, Esmerelda finally reached the secret, center room. This was the place where the Louvre's greatest treasures were kept. The room was large and beautiful, with a high-buttressed ceiling. Every inch of the walls, the parts not adorned with one-of-a-kind paintings kept hidden from the public, was inscribed with markings so ornate, a spider on LSD would have been massively jealous, if not for all the logistical problems of that highly unlikely scenario.

Dozens of beautiful sculptures were scattered throughout the room, along with artifacts of the greatest antiquity. Esmerelda looked on in amazement, wondering what price she could fetch for even one them, and which ones she'd keep for her private collection. Twelve lifelike statues in particular interested her. Their eyes followed her, and they seemed to move in the dark. No, they were moving, and indeed, weren't statues at all. They leveled their guns, and a large, fat one in the middle smirked as he strode towards Esmerelda.

“Well, well, well,” snorted a portly, middle-aged man with a goatee. “And here I thought tracking down the Empress of Thieves would be more of a challenge. Hands where I can see them.”

“M. Deschamps,” Esmerelda said, bouncing her hair as she raised her hands. “Shall we stand around making cliché banter all night, or are you actually going to arrest me?”

“Do you hear that, boys? She wants me to arrest her!” Frederic guffawed. “Oh, I assure you; you’ll be arrested, and I shall be the one with the collar. But as I have you at my mercy, I’d like to gloat a little first!”

Deschamps and his men laughed, while Esmerelda assessed the situation. It did seem he had her. Twelve guards, all pointing guns from different angles, the security door behind her sealed, the last of her perfume acid spent, and actual police likely already outside. She’d have to watch and wait for her moment.

“So tell me, my amazing captor. How exactly did you spot me? I thought I’d accounted for everything.”

“Do you hear that, boys? She doesn’t know!” Frederic’s belly shook and tears rolled down his cheeks as his boorish laughter echoed over the sound of the alarm. “This very week, we had a new pressure plate installed at the entrance. It spotted high heels, which none of my men wear.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Esmerelda smirked. “You might look good in a pair.”

“Do you hear that, boys? She thinks I might...”

And there it was. In the moment when all of them blinked, she took the last bead from her necklace and flicked it to the center of the room.

“What was that?” Deschamps demanded, moving his gun closer to Esmerelda.

“Nothing,” she replied. “Just a little explosive set to go off in thirty seconds.”

Several guards backed away nervously, but Deschamps stood his ground. “You know what I think? I think you are bluffing, hoping for some clever distraction in which to make an escape. So I say we wait it out.”

“Your funeral,” Esmerelda said, her expression betraying nothing.

Seconds passed slowly, and the collected beads of sweat from the men in the room could have filled a small, disgusting pool. Deschamps held his gun on Esmerelda, while she simply smiled. In the end, no explosion came. With the exception of Deschamps, who merely smirked, the collective sighs could have powered a windmill.

“Well, I guess I was bluffing after all,” Esmerelda said, with no change in her expression.

“Do you hear that boys? She was bluffing after all!” Deschamps moved in to cuff her hands behind her back. “I knew you would never destroy these priceless treasures. Just one thing, though. Which one were you after?”

“Which one?” Esmerelda asked, as if the question was absurd.

“Surely you wanted something in this room.”

“Oh, you silly little man. You don’t imagine I’d go to all this trouble for any mere trinket, do you?”

The bead Esmerelda had thrown began to blink. One of the security guards moved in to examine it.

“Um, boss...”

“Not now, Henri!” Deschamps barked.

“By the way, that bead, along with the rest, is a tracking device. A target, if you will. One that needed...oh, about thirty seconds to activate.”

“A target? For what?”

Esmerelda smirked. He really was making it too easy for her. The floor and walls shook as several loud crashes reverberated throughout the room. Taking advantage of the confusion, Esmerelda head-butted Frederic and jumped away from him. While several of the guards were distracted by the reverberations, a few took potshots at her. She ducked behind a pillar until she could reach the all-purpose lock pick in her belt. This was not the first time she’d been handcuffed, and picking the lock, even at such an awkward angle, was little challenge. It did, however, give the guards time to rally and surround her. Deschamps moved in, breathing heavily and rubbing his forehead with one hand, but pointing his gun with the other.

“I don’t know what you’ve done, but there is no way you’re leaving this room.”

Esmerelda took out a tube of lipstick and twisted it. “Actually, all of you might want to leave. Right now.”

Before Frederic could turn back to ask his men if they’d heard what she said, a large metal anchor attached to a long steel cable crashed through the ceiling and buried itself in the floor. After sinking a few feet lower, it pulled up and the cable tensed. As a rope ladder unfurled next to the cable, Esmerelda threw her lipstick into the barrel of Deschamps’ gun and hopped on his head, springboarding from it to the ladder. The old security officer was too taken aback with shock to react.

“You asked what I was here for. Isn’t it obvious? I’m taking it all!”

The guards heard the pipes below them snap, pop, and burst, and felt the floor begin to rise. One of the guards opened the security door and the others ran for it. Frederic Deschamps shouted numerous French curses at them before shaking his fist at Esmerelda.

“This isn’t over, witch! I’ll find you one day, and you’ll pay for what you’ve done!”

As she rose away, her hair whipping about in the wind, Esmerelda reached into her blazer pocket and pulled out a large stack of money, which she tossed to the beleaguered security chief.

“What is this? A bribe?”

“It’s a thank you. Without your help, this would never have been so much fun, and I never would have succeeded with so much... style!” She blew the man a kiss, tossed her head back and laughed, and as she ascended toward the helicopter.

Police reports would later state thirty stealth helicopters arrived simultaneously and airlifted the entirety of the Musée de Louvre off its foundations. No one dared to shoot them down, both to avoid property damage as well as to preserve the priceless treasures inside. Once the copters were outside French airspace, radar and satellite surveillance somehow lost track of them, along with the greatest museum in the world.

Chapter Two

Yann Olinger arrived at the UN General Assembly and let out a long, low sigh. His hair was a touch greyer this morning than it had been the last time he'd checked, and the hairline had receded a bit as well. He sat down at his not-unimpressive desk, and felt his growing flab shake as he did so. Yann was only forty-three, and had never in his life felt old until recently. Years spent climbing the ladder in Liechtenstein's parliament, making friends on every side of the political aisle, and winning even the Prince's trust had earned him the job of Chief Ambassador, a position he had accepted with pride. Ah, the naiveté of youth. Now that he had served a few years, Yann saw how the world really worked. He took a swallow of scotch from the flask he kept in his desk (he'd never been much of a drinker before he took the job), and steeled himself for the morning briefing.

He waded through the sea of endless faces and bodies, people come together from all over the world, in the business of keeping human civilization and peace intact. It was an ongoing task which would probably never be complete, yet he believed in it with all his heart. No matter what everyone else did, he would keep trying, keep fighting to make the world a better place.

As he rounded the corner, the Chinese ambassador threw a pie in his face.

“Food fight!”

Yann wiped coconut custard from his eyes and ducked as his fellows began hurling their desserts at one another. In the main lobby, the ambassadors from France and Portugal were having a slip-and-slide race, while most of the South American contingent was engaged in a dance-off with the Arab League. The table tennis tournament seemed particularly active today, and the newly-installed bowling alley was drawing attention from some elder statesmen.

Yann rubbed his temples and crossed the threshold into the General Assembly Hall, where girls in short skirts offered him delicious baked goods. He waved them off and sat down in his seat, on which someone had drawn a frowny face and written “Mr. Grumpy-Pants.” Probably the ambassador from Denmark again. After several minutes, the other ambassadors filtered in, laughing and slapping each other on the back. A few paper airplanes passed overhead, when the door burst open and silenced the room. It was the American ambassador.

“You!” he shouted, as he pointed at the Iranian ambassador. The Iranian stood up, slowly and silently, and stared his American counterpart in the eye. The two men approached each other like cowboys in a Western. Everyone in the room sat on the edges of their reclining seats. After a few tense moments, the American pulled a “Kick me!” sign off his back and laughed.

“Was this you? Was it?”

The Iranian cartoonishly mugged and shrugged his shoulders. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, dude.”

“Yeah, I bet! C’mere, you!” The two mock-boxed with each other and eventually hugged before taking their seats, and not long after, the Secretary General, a distinguished fellow from Zimbabwe, approached the podium. There were a few hoots and cheers from the back.

“Yes, yes, thank you, remember to tip your waitress,” the Secretary General said, winking and giving the thumbs up to the assembly. “Now, to business. First of all, the hide-and-seek match between Italy and Belgium is still ongoing, so if anyone needs to speak with them, you’ll have to count to one hundred first.”

The crowd erupted into laughter. Yann ground his teeth. The Secretary General usually did about twenty minutes of stand-up comedy to liven the audience before they even considered doing any actual work, but before he broke out his comic props, Yann decided to raise his hand and speak.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I hate to break up the levity...”

“Nerd!” someone shouted from the back with a thick accent.

“...but there are several trade disputes which have been sitting on the shelf for months. I was hoping we could discuss a few today.”

There were several boos and hisses from the assembly, and Yann had to duck at least two spitballs, but the Secretary General raised his hands to calm the audience. “Very well. Who votes in favor of ignoring all the stuff Ambassador Grumpy-Pants just said?”

“But... that’s not even how it...” Everyone raised their hands and cheered, drowning out Yann’s protestations. He slammed his head down on his desk, where someone had at that exact moment managed to slip a whoopee cushion.

“Now, in much cooler news, I’ve decided to declare today another international holiday,” announced the Secretary General. “Today shall be henceforth known as... Super-Mega-Awesome Day!”

Another rousing cheer went up amongst the assembly, until the Chilean ambassador raised her hand. “Wait, didn’t we have a Super-Mega-Awesome Day last month?”

“No,” said the Japanese ambassador. “That was Mega-Super-Rad Day...”

And so it went. As the others debated such matters as what time the toga party would be and whether to buy new or vintage pinball machines, Yann sat silently and fantasized about his eventual destruction. The latest plan involved using a catapult to slingshot himself around the moon, back

down to Earth, and using the flame from re-entering orbit to become a meteor that would destroy this horrible place once and for all. He was so engrossed in imagining his peers burning to death that he almost missed the blinking red light coming from the massive television behind the podium. No one else was paying attention, so he tapped the button on the console. An angry, disheveled man in a labcoat and goggles shouted at someone offscreen.

“Of course it’s the right number, you mechanical pile of liquid garbage! How many UN General Assemblies can there... What are you pointing at?”

The disheveled man turned to the screen, took a sip of water before tossing the glass into the wall behind him, and laughed menacingly enough to capture the attention of the entire room.

“Hey, are you the party clown we ordered!?” asked the Secretary General, hopping up and down.

“Hardly. Who I am is Otto Von Trapezoid, future ruler of your miserable little planet.”

“Holy crap, are you an alien?” asked the Nicaraguan ambassador.

Otto stood agape at this for a moment, his eye twitching, before he continued. “As you will no doubt have seen by now, my Orbital Interstellar Laser has destroyed the World’s Biggest Ball of Twine Balls.” Otto waited for a reaction, but received only vacant stares. “Oh, very well!”

Otto pressed a button on his remote control and the screen switched to the smoldering wreckage of the tourist trap, loose twine covering the area like a spaghetti dish made for a team of gigantic professional athletes. Numerous Midwesterners cried out in anguish at the loss of their beloved ball, begging any god who would listen for a glimmer of understanding, but receiving none. Twine-looting was also widespread. Otto returned the screen to himself. “This is just the beginning. I will destroy a national monument every hour, on the hour, until my demands are met!”

“Yes, we surrender!” shouted one ambassador.

“Take all my stuff!” said another.

“Not Handkerchief World!”

Yann stood up. “Friends, we can’t give into this terrorism. Certainly not without a fight!”

Someone belted Yann in the head with a crumpled up ball of paper, and outraged cries erupted through the assembly. Eventually the Secretary General blew an air-horn to silence them.

“It’s almost nap time, so I say we meet his demands,” he said. “All right, Mr. Alien, tell us what you want.”

Von Trapezoid raised his finger and grimaced with rage, but a robot popped its head onto the screen and whispered in his ear. He calmed down considerably. “Very well, for my first—”

The screen flickered, and the mad scientist's words were lost in a haze of static. Eventually he was replaced by a tall woman with impeccable fashion sense, in a room filled with expensive pieces of art. She stood at a podium and carried a gavel, though her hair blew in what was likely an artificial breeze, and she posed for just a moment before speaking. The assembly was extremely perplexed.

"Oh, did I interrupt something?" she purred. "How sad. No doubt you all know me, by name or reputation, but for the slow, I'm Esmerelda Santa Monica, the Empress of Thieves, and I believe I have something you want."

Once again, there were blank stares from the assembly. Yann pulled out a flask from his breast pocket and chugged.

Esmerelda threw up her hands. "Seriously? I stole the Louvre! Don't you people watch the news?"

Everyone looked at the French ambassador. He blushed and slapped his own forehead. "Oh yeah. I totally spaced on that. My bad, guys."

"Your sad, sad ignorance notwithstanding," Esmerelda smirked, "I am not without a heart. I will be glad to return the museum and its treasures... for a price."

"Do you take checks?" asked the Greek ambassador.

"We're going to hold an auction, you see. I'll sell back the treasures one by one, and you'll wire money into my untraceable accounts."

The crowd cheered at the mention of an auction. Yann had seen this before. They were particularly competitive, and saw it as a game, instead of carving up the world's greatest monument to art. Something had to be done, but what?

"I'll start the first bidding at—"

As Esmerelda began to speak in her auctioneer voice, the screen once again flickered, and Von Trapezoid was once again shouting at the robot.

"... No second-rate hacking software is going to stop me! Return our signal, or... oh! Yes, well, here we are! Despite that very minor setback, I assure you my threats are deadly serious. And to prove it, I'm going to blow up—"

Esmerelda hacked the broadcast again, composed as ever. "I apologize for that unfortunate business. If you keep the overgrown Chess Club kid off my viewscreen, I'll see to it that you each receive a free margarita."

For once, Yann was actually tempted by the offer, but nonetheless, he knew the situation was a powderkeg atop a vat of nitroglycerine and smothered in gasoline. He had to stall for time, though for the moment, the problem seemed to be solving itself as Von Trapezoid and Santa Monica kept hacking each other's transmissions.

"I destroyed my university's Chess Club when they failed to make me overlord, you vile harridan! Besides, it is clearly I, the master of all science, these clods should fear, not some glorified pickpocket! Why—"

"Harridan? So you're a sexist little troll, too! Tell me, do you even know what a harridan is?"

"Um... of course I know that! I... simply see no reason to explain..." The robot whispered in Otto's ear again. "Ha, I do know! Harridan: noun. A thin, worn out horse. Yes, that is you."

"Oh, good one. Perhaps for your next jibe, you'd like to break out some old-timey one-liners!"

"You leave my book collection out of this!"

By this time, the General Assembly had stopped listening to the argument. A beach ball was being bounced around in the air, until the Georgian ambassador stole it. Yann took the opportunity to exit the assembly and dialed the emergency contact on his phone.

"Find me Jake Indestructible."

Jake Indestructible was a hard, rough, nasty man, conceived on a battlefield, born on another battlefield, and midwived on a third battlefield, forged in the heat of a thousand bloody conflicts, and covered in scars from head to toe. His massive lantern jaw was patched with more gristle than a stray dog's breakfast, and his arms were as hard as knotted tree trunks. He'd fought the Nazis, the Reds, the Kaiser, no less than ten alien species, the Twine Emperor, and if you believed him, he'd once kicked Napoleon himself in the groin. He was trained by Cherokee trackers, Shaolin monks, the last ronin samurai, a blind sniper, and bareknuckle brawlers on the mean streets of the Bronx. It was said he once held his breath for a solid month inside a tub filled with concrete while he head-butted his way out.

But today, he was getting married.

The Countess DiFrancesco, a woman of incredible wealth, taste, and beauty, had worked her way past all Jake's carefully crafted defenses after he rescued her from the archfiend Aquarius. After years of psychedelic, sexy adventures together, she'd finally convinced him to tie the knot and settle down. Perhaps it was her convincing smile, or perhaps their abiding love. Perhaps it was the gauntlet

of mega-dragons armed with railguns he faced on his last assignment. Whatever it was, Jake decided to trade the life of a spy and adventurer for idle luxury, and turned in his resignation to SPARTA, the international espionage organization he himself commanded. At her family's palatial estate, Jake stood in a tuxedo, one with no lasers at all, in the courtyard surrounded by nearly a thousand guests.

As the Countess walked down the aisle, Jake thought he had never seen her looking more beautiful. The trains of her incredibly intricate dress were so long and full that the aisle had to be widened to account for it, and her petticoats so increasingly delicate, some said they should have disintegrated on contact with air. Soon, she was standing by his side, and Jake could not have been happier, even if he were blowing up another spy. The minister began to speak.

"Friends, we are gathered here today, in the sight of God, to bring together Jacob C. Indestructible and the Countess Florentina Aurelia Valencia Lucrecia Nicoletta DiFrancesco in the bonds of matrimony. The act of marriage is a sacred trust, not to be entered lightly..."

Jake was eager to be married, but he had no patience for all this talk and claptrap. He was a man of action. Part of him even expected the wedding to be attacked by an old rival, even though he'd seen most of them atomized, fed to sharks, or trapped in parallel universes. And yet, he felt something different in the air. Was the wind picking up? As it turned out, it was. Several thousand dollars in hats and much more in hairstylist fees were swept away by the black helicopter landing on the Countess's trains. She screamed in horror and shock, while Jake, who actually did have one laser in his tux after all, pointed it at the cockpit. An unassuming middle-aged man in a suit stepped out.

"The world needs you, Mr. Indestructible," Yann Olinger said.

"Sorry, desk jockey," Jake replied. "I'm retired now."

"It's an emergency."

"It always is. But then, you'd know that, seeing it all from the sidelines. Go get your own hands dirty. Besides..." Jake yanked the Countess free from her trapped train and pulled her close. "I'm marrying this fine filly today." She swooned.

"There are currently two supervillains attempting to blackmail the UN at the same time, and if we don't stop them soon, every world monument and all the treasures in the Louvre will be lost forever."

Jake's eye twitched just a bit. "I told ya, I'm out of the game. Find someone else."

"There is no one else," Yann answered. "You're the best there ever was, and right now, you're the one we need. If forces of this magnitude manage to destabilize..."

"Yeah, I've heard it all before," Jake said. "The world can survive without me this once."

Yann shook his head, sighed, and turned to walk away. Pausing for a moment, he said, “Maybe, maybe not. But do you really want to live in a world that isn’t free?”

Jake’s eyes stayed on the helicopter. The Countess looked at him aghast. “Jake, you’re not seriously considering this?”

After a silent moment, Jake responded, “Baby, I love you.” He pulled the Countess in for a long, passionate kiss, at the end of which, she fainted. He placed her gently on the ground and looked at her wistfully before he followed Yann. “But I love freedom even more!”

The helicopter departed, with a great deal of booing and jeering in its wake. Yann mouthed an embarrassed apology to the wedding guests as they departed.

On the ride to SPARTA Headquarters, Yann explained the situation to Jake, who smoked one of his trademark cigars (they doubled as flaming darts) as he listened. SPARTA, an organization so secret its acronym could only be guessed at, was located in a dormant volcano in the heart of the Pacific Rim. The helicopter touched down on Jake’s private landing pad and activated his hidden entrance, which opened an elevator from the roof to the interior. SPARTA, despite its historical name, was quite high-tech. It harnessed the volcano heat to power its numerous supercomputers (each designed to detect a different type of global crisis) and top-of-the-line military defenses. It also served as a think tank of brilliant, promising, ethnically and culturally diverse attractive young adults, many of whom could have been on prime time television, but instead chose to serve the international community in skintight uniforms while soulful indie pop played on the speakers.

When the door to Jake’s private elevator opened, a group that was working on developing nuclear fusion—while dealing with a love triangle involving a sweet girl from the country, a rich boy with commitment issues, and a rebel who played by nobody’s rules—looked up from their research in stunned silence at their former boss.

“Ha, pay up!” the rich kid said.

The rebel took money out of his leather jacket and handed it over in the most blasé way possible. “Pfft, like I care or whatever.”

The nice country girl pouted and handed over money as well. “Aw, shucks. I thought for sure he’d be gone another month.”

“Like I said, back in two weeks with some dork in a suit!”

Another youth, a boy clearly designated as the nerd because he wore glasses and had a bad haircut, but who was still quite handsome, walked into the room and dropped his papers. “Aw, damn it! I was sure he’d have amnesia again!”

Yann looked over at Jake in confusion. Jake grunted as he changed from his tux into a combat turtleneck and camo pants in front of everyone, causing Yann to awkwardly avert his eyes “Ah, it’s just a little game the teenyboppers play. Once in a while I have to leave the job...”

“Once in a while?” a sexy blonde girl with a lot of pluck sneered. “You’ve retired like three times already.”

“And you’ve ‘died’ four or five,” added a boy Yann thought he recognized from Bollywood movies.

“What about all those times he had to go rogue...”

“All right, enough!” Jake shouted. “Listen up, eggheads, we’ve got trouble, and it ain’t the romantic variety. There’s a knucklehead with an orbital space station...” Jake noticed the rich kid counting his money, which he responded to by socking the kid in the jaw, hurtling him across the room. “Anyone else too busy to save the free world? Good. So, orbital space station, big laser. How do we stop it?”

“We could try shooting it down,” suggested the country girl.

“Nah, too risky,” Jake said, playing mumblety-peg with a knife he’d been carrying in his boot. “What else?”

“I could infect the station with a computer virus,” the nerdy kid said. “That way, the laser would malfunction.”

“You kids and your fancy Ivy League educations. The only school I went to was the school of hard knocks! Sometimes all the book-learnin’ in the world ain’t as effective as a mean right hook!”

“Let me guess: another frontal assault?” asked a jaded goth girl in the back.

“Damn straight!” Jake said. “We’re goin’ in, Brooklyn style!”

“Badass! You want us to suit up and grab some guns?” asked the rich kid, who was rubbing his face with money.

Jake spit some chewing tobacco into a nearby spittoon. “Nah. You’re all too wet behind the ears. It looks like this one... is up to me!”

“That’s all well and good,” Yann said, “but the station is in space, and as far as I know, your organization doesn’t have a rocket capable of breaking orbit.”

“Watch and learn, Frenchie.”

Yann scowled. "Liechtenstein. It's a real country, you know."

Jake Indestructible ignored him and pressed his hand against a nearby panel. A wall opened up, revealing a British gentleman of somewhat advanced age, as if to give the project some legitimacy. He tinkered away on various gadgetry while sipping Earl Grey tea, which he promptly spit out upon Indestructible's entrance.

"I say!"

"Chesterfield, fetch me my jetsuit!"

"Indubitably!"

Chesterfield produced a spacesuit with a massive jetpack attached to the back. Jake put it on over his outfit, and grabbed an arsenal's worth of weapons from the wall. He walked over to a platform beneath the exit from the volcano. Yann approached the superspy.

"Are you sure you can do this on your own? Our estimates say the station has weaponry beyond anything we do, and there's still the thief to deal with as well."

Jake put his hands on Yann's shoulders. "Let me tell ya somethin', son. When I was in The War, sometimes we had to survive with nothing but our wits and our naked bodies. If I could handle ten squads of greased-up Cossacks, I can handle this."

Yann raised his eyebrow at this, but said nothing. Jake placed a knife between his teeth and put on his helmet. He winked, then gave a signal, at which point the platform below his feet began to glow and rise at great speed. Jake activated the jetpack, and between the two, he blasted forth into the sky. Yann watched until Jake was no longer visible, and couldn't help but be a little impressed. He silently hoped for the dangerous madman's safety.

After a moment, the rebel chimed in, "So like, has anyone besides Jake ever gone on an actual mission?"

They all shook their heads.