



THE
INKWELL
CHRONICLES
Operation Bungaree

J. D. PEABODY

WORTHY
kids®

Nashville, Tennessee

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and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are
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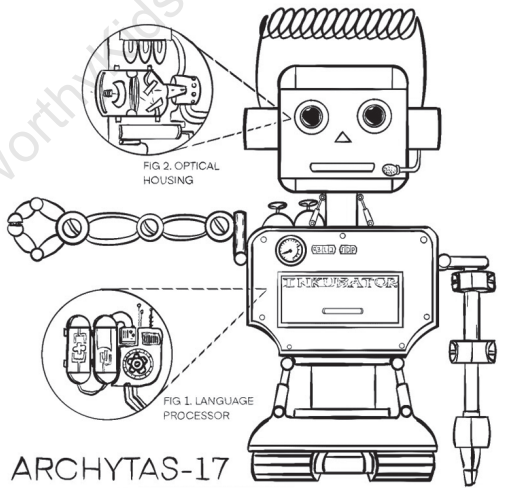
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*To Melinda—
for listening to Bea*

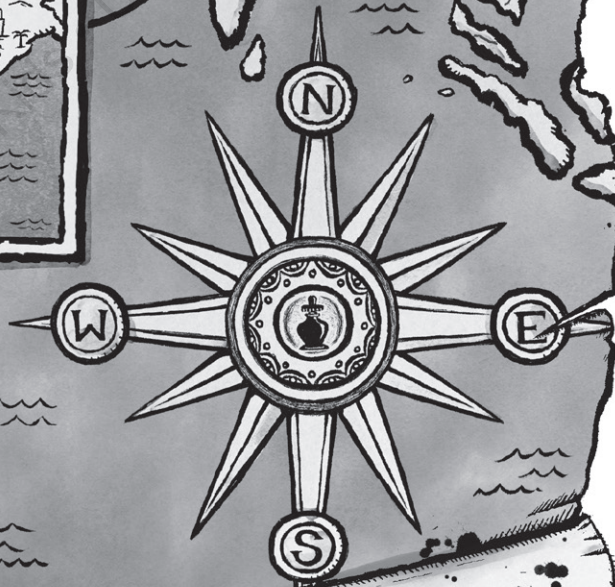




UNITED STATES

ENGLAND

PASADENA





Prologue

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Sap, Not Syrup

Take off!” Eddie Montbanks yelled to his bodyguard, Mr. Lugg, as he scrambled aboard. The airship immediately lifted away from the horror show playing out below.

Winded and angry, Eddie wiped a handkerchief across his sweaty, Ink-stained brow. He gazed down at the little cluster of people forming below. They stood forlornly near the crater he had pushed that Drake boy into moments earlier.

“Is he dead?” Mr. Lugg asked.

Eddie gave a laugh. “You ever hear of a kid surviving a fall into a volcano?”

Mr. Lugg shrugged. “I killed him, too, remember?” He looked his disheveled boss up and down. “Too bad this was all for nothing.”

“Hardly,” Eddie said. He pointed toward the jungle at the foot of the volcano. “I saw the tree where they

collected the Ink in that conductor's hat. Like they were taking syrup from a maple tree.”

“Sap,” corrected Mr. Lugg.

“Huh?”

“Syrup is a processed food,” the bodyguard explained. “Sap is what's extracted from a tree and then refined to make syrup.”

Eddie eyed him with surprise bordering on suspicion. “When did you get so smart?”

“What?” asked Mr. Lugg defensively. “That's why my mom said I couldn't have it. Too much sugar.”

Eddie waved him off. “Whatever. There's Ink in that tree, see? And as soon as those confounded Inklings leave the island, we're going to chop it down, take it back to the lab, and squeeze every last drop from its fat ugly trunk.”

Mr. Lugg considered that idea, skepticism creasing his face. “I dunno . . . I never heard of them chopping down maple trees to get sap.”

Eddie would not be deterred. “What's your deal with sap? I don't care what your mommy says; this ain't no maple tree, and we need what's in it. So we're taking it. End of discussion.”

Eddie tugged absently at the tracking bracelet the blot- ters had slapped around his wrist. It itched terribly, and several angry, red bumps were forming on the skin under- neath it.

“Get me back to base,” he said. “I gotta wash up.”



Later, Mr. Lugg made the necessary arrangements to have saws and ropes brought in to fell the majestic rainbow gum tree, which did not deserve such an ignoble end. Mercifully, after the trunk and branches had been lifted away by airship, a substantial stump remained in the ground, which eventually generated a shoot that became an even more impressive tree, brimming with an ample supply of Ink.

But that's another story.

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Back

It was not so much the thought of Everett being dashed to bits falling into the crater that worried Bea. When Fredo had retrieved the comic book page from the volcano floor and placed it in her hands, she had heard the Ink telling her clear as day that her brother had survived by Leap Reading into the story. There was no doubt in her mind that he was alive.

What *did* bother Bea was that she could not bring him back. She expected him to tumble into the normal world at any moment. But unlike in the past, no matter how many times she shook the page or shouted his name at it, nothing happened.

“I don’t understand,” she kept saying, flipping the page over and over. “It’s never taken this long.”

The grown-ups weren’t helping matters. Gilroy, Jack, and Ronald watched her efforts with pained expressions.

“I know what I heard,” Bea said, stomping away from

them. She turned to Trey, who was peering into the crater. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Her friend looked at her, still shaken. “I wish I had your confidence.”

Frustrated by all their doubts, Bea’s mood turned sour, and she decided to keep her thoughts to herself. She would prove them all wrong and find a way to bring Ev home.

Days later, the travelers found themselves back in London, crowding into the front room of the vicarage, vainly attempting to explain to Reverend Marcus Drake why his son was not with them. Bea had insisted that Aunt Dot join them. She would have wanted Trey and his parents there, too, but they were staying in Madras a few weeks longer while Trey’s uncle recovered from surgery. Osgood had also remained behind with the Thomachan family tending to Ermengarde’s wounds.

Mrs. Crimp brought in tea for everyone, but the cups remained untouched. Gilroy relayed all that had transpired since Marcus left for California, from the arrival of Gilroy’s sister, Marigold, to the flight south to Globo Gardens, and finally, to the fateful events on the island.

Gilroy held his conductor hat in his hands, his eyes red and puffy as he reached the end of his synopsis. “And so, we faced an impossible choice: Should we stay on the

island, keeping your daughter away from you even longer? Or should we head home without Everett?”

“Oh, but we didn’t leave without him!” exclaimed Bea, pointing at the page in her hand. “He’s right here, Daddy. We just have to get him out.”

An awkward silence hung in the air. The rocking chair gave a slight creak as Ronald worked it back and forth, puffing on his pipe. Jack cleared his throat.

“I daresay it’s a frightful amount to take in all at once,” Jack said softly. “The depth of the crater made a more thorough search impossible.”

“But there was no need,” said Bea, beginning to feel cross again. “Don’t you see? Everett’s not down there.”

She tried to read her father’s face as she sat on his lap. He had his arms wrapped tightly around her, and his eyes stared into some unseen place. Bea could feel his chest expand as he took several big breaths, exhaling slowly each time.

After a lengthy silence, Marcus looked around the room. “Thank you all,” he said. “It must have been extremely trying, and I want you to know that I don’t blame anyone besides Eddie Montbanks for what has happened.”

“I have some contacts in Djakarta,” Ronald said. “Local adventurers and the like. I could lead a search party of mountaineers into the volcano. If it’s a matter of funds—”

Dot raised a hand to cut him off. “I don’t think Marcus needs to make any more decisions this evening.”

“It’s all right,” said Marcus. “I expect more searching wouldn’t accomplish anything.” He looked Bea in the eyes and smoothed her hair. Then he gently took the comic book page from her hand and held it up to examine it. “We need all our best brainpower right here if we’re going to find a way to get Ev back.”

Bea gave him the most enormous squeeze and burst into tears of relief. Without a word being exchanged, everyone could see that their energies were better spent following Bea’s convictions. Even if there were only the smallest chance of Everett being inside the comic, it was worth attempting to solve the riddle of getting him home.

“All right then,” said Dot, taking charge of the situation. “I propose we adjourn to the dining room. We’re going to need pen and paper to work this problem.”



Of Falls and Walls

It was the thumbprint that stayed with Everett.

Time has a way of slowing to a stop when you're in a life-threatening situation. The brain kicks into high gear, causing specific details to burn themselves into memory with extraordinary clarity.

Standing on the lip of the volcano's crater, staring his mortal enemy in the face, Everett found the world suddenly in sharper focus, all his senses heightened and attuned to the unfolding nightmare.

"I'm sick of you ruining my life," he heard Eddie Montbanks say, flecks of spittle flying from his mouth as the man placed a foot on his chest. Everett could feel every grain of sand embedded in the heel of Eddie's shoe that pressed against his sternum and sent him hurtling into the abyss.

The pressure of the kick forced the air from his lungs. As he tipped backward through empty space, the noise of

the comic book page tearing away in his hand provided an ominous soundtrack until it ripped completely free.

And while he tumbled through the air, clutching the solitary page, all Everett could see in front of him was one giant thumbprint Eddie had left directly over a picture of MC's spaceship. Each smeary, smudgy ridge and line of it seemed to mock him. Oddly, it struck Everett as being the wrong color, since it didn't match the Ink he had thrown in Eddie's face. This thumbprint was darker and grittier, consistent with the sinister personality behind it and the Inkanto he had created.

At the last possible split-second mid-fall, Everett realized that he held the key to his survival in his own hands. He had gone Leap Reading into this very page of the comic before on multiple occasions. Could he do it under duress, when his existence depended on it? And could he do it before smashing into the fast-approaching volcanic rock below?

There was no time to wonder. He focused all his remaining attention on one panel of the comic, the page fluttering rapidly in his grip as he hurtled downward. And right before the moment of impact, precisely when the corner of the page made contact with the hardened lava below, a welcome *whooshing* noise broke the silence.

And the world went dark.

When Everett came to, he was lying face down on a smooth white surface. His head threatened to split apart

with its pounding and there was a steady hum in his ears. But he was alive! A wave of relief washed over him as he realized he had cheated death once again.

He turned to one side and opened his eyes. A solid, blank wall of dark blue rose in front of him.

Rolling over, he found himself facing another blue wall that paralleled the first. With great effort, he sat up, ignoring the protests from every joint and muscle in his body. The shift in position made him dizzy. His rib cage and neck felt like one giant bruise, telling him he had landed hard, even if it wasn't on lava rocks. When everything stopped spinning, he took in his surroundings.

Flanked by blue walls, he could see he had ended up in the middle of a long corridor no wider than one of London's alleyways. It stretched out in both directions until it reached similar corridors crossing it sideways at either end.

Rising to his feet, he walked haltingly to one end of the hallway, where he looked to his left and right. He could see more blue walls in either direction, which appeared to lead to more identical halls at either end.

One time when he was Bea's age, his father had taken him through the hedge maze at Hever Castle in Kent. Countless yew trees had been planted right next to each other to form solid walls of leaves and branches with narrow pathways in between. Each row of shrubbery looked the same, and whoever designed it incorporated

multiple dead ends and false trails to make it especially confusing.

This place reminded him of being inside that maze, except that back then his father's reassuring presence had been at his side to take him safely through.

Everett's initial relief of still being alive was slowly replaced by a sense of dread and an overwhelming flood of homesickness. He might not be lying at the bottom of a volcano, but he wasn't on the bridge of MC's spaceship from the comic, either. The tragic end he feared hadn't come true. Or had it?

Feeling weak and lightheaded, he reached out a hand toward the blue wall in front of him to steady himself. The instant he touched the surface, an electric impulse shot from his fingers to his shoulder, racing up and back down his arm. The shock of it startled and comforted him at the same time.

"These walls are Ink," he said aloud. The thought didn't really explain much, and there was no one to hear him.

But somehow, he felt less alone.



Wake-Up Call

Overthrowing an empire is not as thrilling as it might sound. Cyno discovered that fact quickly after the Scarabesse had been turned to stone. Without any hesitation, he appointed himself the new ruler of the blotter universe. No one stepped forward to oppose him at the time, with many usurpers waiting and watching to see how things played out.

The transfer of power took place immediately, and he found himself inundated with an endless list of decisions to make. There were operations to run, a headquarters to relocate, and now, thanks to Eddie Montbanks, an alliance to control. Cyno was accustomed to being the intimidating presence in the room, but in these new circumstances he felt like a bureaucrat, completely in over his dog-shaped head.

Plus, he was beginning to experience the paranoia shared by all dictators down through the ages—the fear that someone somewhere was plotting his demise the same

way he had undermined the authority of the Scarabesse. He now understood that line of Stink an enemy had once written: “Heavy is the head that wears the crown.”

Two things were clear to him. First, he needed to greatly expand his stores of this new Inkanto. Using it to wake up the swamp dragons had worked well enough for the most part. They required frequent doses to stay awake, but a few drops were enough to keep them functioning.

Un-Inkasing blotters took greater quantities of Inkanto than swamp dragons, and the effects proved to be shorter lived. The dream of amassing a horde of reanimated troops was shaping up to be a large-scale logistical hassle, involving regular Inkanto treatments, carefully administered.

At first this vexed Cyno, but then he realized it gave him even more control. He could wake a blotter army at will, then let their time expire. He could maintain discipline with threats of cutting off their Inkanto supply. He would squeeze Montbanks for as much of the stuff as could be humanly produced, then secure it all himself.

The second realization was that he needed a trustworthy leader of the blotter military legions. Blotters are notoriously backstabbing and not highly reliable for positions that would be anything but self-serving. Cyno needed someone exceptional, an ally who could squash a coup before it happened. This individual needed to be intimidating, fearsome, and uninterested in taking over.

That ruled out Spina. Although she had served admirably in multiple capacities, she was a climber with lofty ambitions and no sense of loyalty, no matter how closely the two of them had worked together in the past. That made her dangerous. Cyno could not afford to let her be the next in line for his job or she would plot to push him out of the way. No, it needed to be someone even Spina would not dare to openly oppose.

One blotter came to mind immediately: The Commander. Cyno had fought many battles at his side and had never seen anyone with a greater hatred of the enemy. He had watched as the Commander cut off his own foot to avoid being frozen in Stink, then continued fighting on one leg. He was legendary among the ranks, and the troops would follow him anywhere. What's more, he never appeared to harbor any ambitions to be anything other than a soldier. All he wanted was to avenge his foot.

If Cyno brought the Commander back from his current gargoyle state, the rank-and-file blotters would approve, the Commander would owe him his life, and Cyno would have a strong second-in-command. He was the obvious choice.

This was how Dud and Oafie found themselves on a mission that took them to the watchtower rooftop in Aberdeen, staring up at the statue of their former boss. A whole

wave of memories came flooding back, most of them unpleasant. The Commander remained exactly where Everett had Inkased him, the expression of surprised rage captured in all its frozen glory.

“I got a bad feeling about this,” whispered Oafie, shivering involuntarily.

Dud scowled at him. “And why’s that?”

“Remember your gran? The old crone weren’t too happy to have her nap interrupted. What if the boss gets all riled up?”

“Bah,” said Dud, ignoring his concern. “The Commander’s different. He’ll like being his old self. Probably give us a promotion.”

“Or turn us back into puppies,” muttered Oafie.

Dud took out a jug of Inkanto and lifted it high. “We’re the ones holding the power now.”

He poured a few drops on the top of their former leader’s head. Immediately, the Commander began to thrash back and forth as his body returned to life. He looked around wildly, expecting the battle he had been waging to still be ongoing.

“Where are you, conductor?” he bellowed. His wings stretched wide in a menacing arc as he searched in vain for any sight of his nemesis.

“The fighting is over, sir,” Dud said in an attempt at a soothing tone. “You’ve been wrapped in Stink for months now.”

The Commander's eyes narrowed with suspicion as he regarded the underlings he had transformed to dye hounds shortly before his demise. "Then how is it I'm still moving?"

Oafie stepped forward. "Dud and me, we brought you back, see?"

"You?" The Commander asked in disbelief. "You have the Witching Sticks?"

"Which sticks? Uh, no sir," said Oafie, unsure what he meant.

"We used this," Dud explained, lifting the jug.

"You exposed me to Stink?"

"Never, sir!" said Oafie. "We used the fake Stink."

The Commander snatched the Inkanto out of Dud's hands, raising it to his nose and inhaling. "On whose orders?"

"Emperor Cyno's," said Dud, kicking himself for letting go of the jug.

The Commander's face registered genuine confusion. "*Emperor Cyno?*"

"I know!" said Oafie in agreement. "We was all shocked he didn't go with King Cyno. Or His Canineship. But he chose Emperor. And I guess he can make that call when he's the top dog now, right? No pun intended."

Dud's glare made Oafie realize he should quit babbling. Then Dud proceeded to fill in the details of how the Scarabesse had been overthrown, how Inkanto had been

developed, and how Globo Gardens had been destroyed. He may have slightly embellished the role that he and Oafie had played along the way. But the Commander gleaned enough truth from the summary to grasp the new realities.

Trying out his newly restored legs, he realized with his first step that the foot he had amputated long ago remained the same—a solid stone artificial leg. He raised the jug over his foot, tipping it upside down.

Dud reached to stop him. “Sir, if I may, I wouldn’t—”

But it was too late. The Commander dumped the entire jugful of Inkanto on his Inkased boot. What he did not know was that a severed appendage stood no chance of being restored by Inkanto. In any case, no matter how much of the liquid he poured over it, the foot remained as stony and lifeless as ever.

The Commander growled in frustration and threw the empty jug off the side of the building. Dud and Oafie both winced as they heard the ceramic smash into the pavement below. Without another word, their superior officer limped his way to the edge of the building. He paused a moment, his shoulders heaving from the exertion. Then he fanned his wings wide, took to the air and flapped away.

His two subordinates stood on the roof, stunned. They had not anticipated that move.

Oafie turned and brought a fist down on top of Dud’s head. “Why’d you let him take the jug?”

Dud stomped on Oafie's foot, then stepped out of reach. "I didn't mean to, all right? He just took it."

"Did he seem off to you?" Oafie asked. "A bit barmy, flying off like that. How are we supposed to catch up to him now?"

Dud grinned impishly. "He won't get far. The stuff wears off, remember?" He walked to the edge of the roof, then dropped over the side and began climbing down the exterior of the building.

With a sigh of resignation, Oafie joined him, moving down the rough stone surface. Scaling up and down tall buildings always made him queasy, but he was not sad to be leaving Aberdeen. It was quickly joining his list of least enjoyable places to be a blotter without wings.



Humming Along

Knowing that the walls around him were made of Ink gave Everett the courage to explore a bit farther. Before heading out into the unknown, he removed one of his shoes and left it on the ground to mark the spot where he regained consciousness. With every new hallway mirroring the previous one, he didn't want to lose track of where he entered the story. From his previous Leap Reading experiences, he still considered his original landing spot to be the most likely location for leaping back out.

To help him navigate his strange new world, he reached for his dowsing sticks in his back pocket. As he did so, he realized with a start that the comic book page he had been clutching was gone. He searched wildly around him for any sign of it. "I know I had it with me," he said aloud. It was almost unbearable to think of losing the last link to anything familiar.

And then it hit him: Maybe the fact that the page was

missing meant the Leap Reading worked. He never kept a book in his hands when he was inside the story. Maybe he had landed in a part of the spaceship he didn't recognize, or he could even have missed the picture altogether and ended up in the margins. The circumstances of his leap were highly unusual and might have made for unintended consequences. But he decided to take the absence of the page as an encouraging sign.

Determined to solve the puzzle, Everett set off toward his right. The humming in his ears was still very much present, although not as loud.

When he reached the T where the two corridors met, he touched the ends of his sticks together for any indication of which way to go. They pulled Everett directly into a wall. Apparently, the fact that the walls were composed of Ink interfered with the sticks' sense of direction. He put them back in his pocket and tried to think.

If this was some unknown part of MC's ship, then his goal was to make his way to the bridge where MC sat at the controls. Everett had gotten home from that scene many times, and he felt confident he could do it again.

And if this place turned out to be something else entirely and he was nowhere near the spaceship, then he needed more of a mental map to help him understand what had happened and where he was. He had always had a good head for directions, and working with Goldie's maps had come naturally when Everett was learning to pilot

Ermengarde. Under normal circumstances, he would trace his route and make his own map on paper. But with no pen or pencil, he would have to make do by visualizing the shape of this maze in his mind.

Everett took off his other shoe to mark the turn. Then he set off to the left.

At the next junction, he used one of his socks as the indicator. He tried counting his steps between turns, but quickly found that keeping track of numbers and directions at the same time grew more and more complicated.

Each hallway he came across looked nearly identical to the last, at least at first glance. Some were wider or narrower than others. Some had doorways leading to small blank “rooms,” constructed out of the same blue walls. One corridor led to a large space with a partition in the middle that zigzagged back and forth like a folded piece of blue paper standing on edge. In front of it a circle of multiple blue tubes or bars rose into the sky, like a collection of giant pencils all perched on end. Everett walked around all sides of it but couldn’t make sense of the strange display.

As he dropped his second sock on the ground and rounded another corner, the humming grew louder, and out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement at the far end of the hallway. It was a quick flash of dark that stopped him cold. The memory of the dog-headed blotter he and Bea had encountered in Egypt and then again at Globo Gardens still haunted him, and for a moment he

panicked that the creature had somehow followed him here. But when he turned toward what he thought he saw, only an empty corridor stared back at him.

That was when he noticed that the humming in his ears had become more distinct. And it wasn't exactly a hum—it had a decidedly mechanical note to it, as if squeaky metal wheels were spinning around at a rapid pace. The volume seemed to fluctuate too.

Abandoning his previous exploration strategy, Everett decided to track down the source of the sound instead. He ran the length of the corridor toward where he had seen something, then headed in the direction it had moved.

Whatever the thing was, it traveled quickly. Everett raced down hallway after hallway, hoping he was gaining on it. The louder the sound became, the higher his spirits rose and the faster he ran.

Until the sound stopped altogether.

Everett stopped, too, catching his breath at another intersection. The complete silence unnerved him, and an alarming new reality presented itself. In his rush to locate the source of the sound, he had stopped marking his trail. He had just run blindly without thinking. And now he couldn't recall whether he had taken five rights and three lefts or the other way round.

He did an about-face and slowly began retracing his most recent steps, regretting that he hadn't been more careful. Within the span of two corridors, he was completely

disoriented. Everything looked the same, yet nothing looked familiar.

Then he heard something new. It was his stomach growling, reminding him how long it had been since he had eaten a meal or had anything to drink.

If he didn't find a way home soon, being lost would no longer be his biggest problem.

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Table Talk

The gloom among the adults at the dining room table thickened when Ronald shared the devastating news he had just heard from one of his “local adventurer” contacts in Indonesia. “It’s gone,” he said. “The rainbow gum tree is no longer on the island.”

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” asked Gilroy. The conductor had suggested a quick trip back to the tree to collect as much Ink as possible for any attempted rescue effort.

“Someone razed it to the ground,” said Ronald.

“Montbanks, no doubt,” Dot fumed. “The nerve of that man.”

Bea watched her father pace the length of the dining room, hands in a knot atop his head “This is getting us nowhere,” he said. “We’re wasting precious time. We have no Ink. With every minute that passes, I just . . . I just . . .”

His words trailed off as he struggled to maintain his composure. Jack placed a hand gently on the vicar’s back.

“I know it feels incredibly urgent. And it is. But if Bea heard correctly—”

“Which I did,” Bea blurted out.

Jack wasn’t the least offended by the interruption. “That being the case, there may be cause for great hope.”

Ronald leaned in. “Meaning what, exactly?”

Jack took a breath and continued. “Everything Everett’s been through suggests Ink itself may be caring for him in some capacity.”

“Caring for him?” repeated Dot with a note of skepticism. “Do elaborate.”

Jack picked up a pencil and began writing a list of evidence. “First, there is Everett’s surviving being thrown from the tree. All the healing that took place within his body.” He jotted *healing* on his note pad. “That appears to be all the Ink’s doing.”

“Go on,” said Marcus.

“Then there are his more recent experiences.” Jack wrote down *Leap Reading*. “Everett didn’t initiate those incidents. Some outside force must have orchestrated them, willing him into the stories.”

“Now you’re the one making a leap,” Dorothy said.

“I say,” exclaimed Ronald. “Jack might be on to something. The Ink could have deliberately led Everett to the objects he removed from stories that he needed for the journey to Krakatoa. I’m thinking of the spile and the

shoe polish.” Jack agreed and added *spile* and *shoe polish* to his growing list.

“Don’t forget the spark,” noted Bea.

“That’s right—the spark too,” said Ronald. “Those items were not anywhere in the authors’ words. Who or what placed them there?”

Jack scribbled some more on the paper in front of him. “And let’s not forget the very fact of his latest Leap inside the volcano. We’ve assumed that if Everett made it into the comic—”

“Which he did,” Bea said.

“We’ve assumed that meant he saved himself. But what if the Ink in some way cooperated of its own accord, rescuing him from his peril?”

Dot remained unconvinced. “I don’t mean to diminish hope, but aren’t you anthropomorphizing Ink a bit?”

Ronald chuckled. “A little too *deus ex machina* for you, eh, Dorothy? The Ink swooping in like an eagle out of the blue to save the day. You know, Euripides once wrote . . .”

There were just enough strange words being thrown around for Bea to lose interest. She slipped away from the table and went out the back door. Crossing the lawn, she walked behind the church to the spacious flower garden. It was a rare warm spring day, with the sparrows chirping excitedly as the bluebells danced and dipped in the light breeze.

Bea had carefully guarded Marigold's tree seedpod all the way home on the return from the island, carrying it in the small orange reticule the Fomentori had given her for safekeeping. It hadn't taken Bea long to decide where Goldie would feel most at home in her dormant state. A small empty patch on the far edge of the church garden boasted soft dirt and a good mix of sunlight and shade. The array of vibrant colors in the flowerbed next to it reminded Bea of the Mayan *huipil* Marigold had been wearing when they met.

Bea planted the seedpod as soon as they arrived home, packing the dirt gently over the top and giving it an ample drink from the watering can. Now, less than a day later, she could already see a small sprout of green poking through the dark soil.

Bea sank to her knees beside the little plant, putting her face down close to it. "Oh, Goldie," she whispered softly, her eyes brimming with tears. "I wish you were here." The tiny seedling fluttered as if in agreement.

"I know you are, but I mean as a person," Bea explained. "I'm not sure the grownups really believe me about Ev, and even if they do, nobody knows how to get him back."

She paused expectantly in case the new shoot had some sort of sign for her, some word of wisdom to guide her steps. But it just quivered silently in the April air, looking as small and fragile as she felt.

“I still talk to Ev in case he can hear me,” Bea continued. “And I’m saying my prayers every night. Mostly, anyway. I don’t understand why nothing is working.”

Bea stared at the plant a moment longer, then gave a deep sigh. “I suppose you’re right,” she said. “It’s just that waiting isn’t my favorite.”

Rising to her feet, she brushed the flecks of dirt from her knees. “Thanks for listening. I better get back inside. Someone has to keep the conversation on track.”

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Unalone

Everett never knew a button could make him want to tear his hair out.

It had been a mistake to chase that humming noise without keeping track of where he was going. Now he felt doubly lost, completely disoriented in an environment that was already strange and confusing.

Utterly alone, the gravity of his predicament crashed in on Everett and he sank to the floor. Pulling his knees up close, he buried his head in them and gave in to his emotions. Everett was not accustomed to crying, but with no worries about someone catching him at it, he let the tears flow. His shoulders shook with each sob until the wave of sadness had run its course.

Feeling spent but a little calmer, he ran his sleeve across his eyes and nose. Then he let out a big sigh. There was no use sitting and feeling sorry for himself. If he had any hope of finding his way back to where he had woken up, he

would have to keep searching. But this time he would be more cautious.

The button had been hanging loose from his shirt, and it pulled free easily. With no socks and shoes to leave behind, he needed something else to use as a makeshift marker. He left the button in the middle of the corridor and set off once more to try and regain his bearings.

After a few turns, he started feeling genuinely optimistic about his prospects. The spacing of each turn matched what little he remembered of the route he had taken. Not that he could tell one wall from the next, but he convinced himself his mind map was working. What's more, the mechanical hum returned, first faintly then louder the farther he walked.

So it was deeply disheartening to turn into a corridor and once again see the button, a small shiny dot in the middle of the floor ahead of him. He hadn't made any progress at all, but instead had simply circled back to where he started.

He felt foolish. *I'm like Winnie-the-Pooh hunting Woozles*, he thought, recalling how the bear kept chasing his own tracks around a tree, believing he was making progress.

But those thoughts vanished in the next moment for Everett, because a much larger shape than the button had just rounded the corner. And it was moving toward him.



Stumped by a Tree

Back in his laboratory again, Eddie learned that his brash decision to harvest the rainbow gum tree had cost him the prize he so coveted. As soon as he violently detached the tree from its roots, the Ink inside it calcified. By the time a section of the trunk found its way to the lab, the entire segment had turned to petrified wood. Dr. Pitz broke three drill bits attempting to bore more holes into the rock-hard substance. He sent a blunt note to his employer about how futile and misguided the effort had been.

“Pitz!” Eddie yelled when he read the note. He stormed down the hall from his office and through the swinging doors into the lab. The tree section lay in a vise on the workbench, blanched a greenish white under the fluorescent lights that flickered and hummed overhead. Mr. Lugg followed his boss through the doors, itching for the chance to do some damage to the scientist. Dr. Pitz looked up from his work and raised his goggles as Eddie tore into him.

“How dare you sit there and criticize all I’m doing to get you what you need.” Eddie pointed a thumb in Mr. Lugg’s direction. “The two of us stuck our necks on the line while you stayed here with your little test tube collection. So don’t tell me it can’t be done! I pay you to make it happen and you better do it.”

“You pay me to manufacture Inkanto,” Dr. Pitz said flatly, no longer intimidated by such threats. He straightened the lapel on his white lab coat and went on. “Supplying the ingredients is *your* job. You destroyed any value this tree had. Look.” Putting a chisel to the trunk, he pounded it with a hammer, sending sparks into the air. “Even Mr. Lug Nut here could have told you cutting it down wouldn’t work.”

Eddie’s face turned as colorful as the tree had once been. He wanted very much to fire the insubordinate subordinate standing in front of him, but Dr. Pitz was the sole keeper of the secret formula for Inkanto. The man held all the power and he knew it.

Mr. Lugg cracked his knuckles, offended over being compared to a lug nut. “You want me to break this little weasel?”

“Ha! You know what’s true about weasels?” Pitz asked with a smarmy smile. “They can destroy prey ten times their own size.”

“Enough!” shouted Eddie. “Make yourself useful, Pitz, and tell me our options.”

Mr. Lugg grunted and retreated reluctantly. Dr. Pitz repositioned his goggles over his eyes and turned back to his work. “You can ask all you want, and my answer will always be the same. BRING. ME. INK.” With each word, he hammered his chisel at the petrified wood for emphasis.

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Fine. Then I’m gonna need something from you.”

“More miracles?” asked Dr. Pitz.

“No,” Eddie said. “Electronics.”

WorthyKids • Uncorrected Proof



Mad in Madras

Ever since watching his friend get pushed into the volcano, Trey had felt sick to his stomach. He kept replaying the incident over and over, the terrified expression on Everett's face forever locked in his memory. It was impossible to forget.

When he returned to Madras, Trey kept imagining different scenarios that might have changed the outcome. If only Everett hadn't thrown Ink in Eddie's face. If only the rest of them had arrived a few seconds sooner. If only Gilroy could have used his Fomentori skills to intervene.

"Well now, that all makes sense to me," Osgood had said when Trey shared his thoughts. "You're sad about your friend, and your brain is trying hard to come up with any way to make the sadness go away."

The courier had arrived to take care of Ermengarde while the others were at Globo Gardens, and he stayed behind in Madras to tend to her when the rest of the group

made their hasty return to London. The giant pigeon sat hidden behind the old lighthouse where the Inklings had stayed. Unaccustomed to the sticky heat of Madras, she had taken shelter from the sun under the leaves of an ancient banyan tree.

Trey watched Osgood apply a special Ink-based salve to Ermengarde's wing, which had been damaged during the storm. "I'm no healer," Osgood confided in him. "But I learned a few things watching Nurse Abbie take care of you," he said, referring to Trey's recovery from the battle with the blotters at Elspet's Well.

Ermengarde cooed as Trey fed her giant seeds the courier supplied. "She's taken a liking to you, young man," Osgood said. "You've got the makings of a real pigeoneer."

"At least it's one way to be useful right now," Trey replied, the frustration showing in his voice. "I feel so out of touch with what's happening back home. I wish I had a Calamus Scroll so I could get updates more often."

"Oh! That reminds me. I meant to give you something." Osgood rummaged through his messenger bag. "Here we are." He handed Trey a small green canvas pouch with a drawstring at the top.

Trey opened it and pulled out something resembling a large cat's eye marble. The only difference was that the colored portion inside the glass was not fixed in one place. It swirled around freely, shifting hues the longer Trey held it. Not only that—Trey could feel his mood brightening

along with the changing shade of the ribbons within the marble.

“It’s an Inkourager,” explained Osgood. “Well, half of one, at any rate. It takes two to work, naturally. I gave the second one to Bea.”

“Does it send messages?” Trey asked, letting it roll around in his palm.

“Messages? Not exactly,” Osgood replied, scratching his chin. “The Ink in the marble absorbs your good wishes for someone else, along with your own state of mind. Then it relays those feelings to its matching marble for the other person to receive.”

He pointed to the vibrant hues swimming around inside the marble. “In your case, it seems as though Bea has already been making use of it.”

While he would have preferred actual news about Everett, the Inkourager did lift his spirits and make him feel more connected.

He needed something positive to keep him going, because the next morning, Osgood announced that Ermengarde had recovered enough to make the long journey home. It came as bittersweet news that the courier would be leaving. Trey and his parents stood in the sweltering heat and watched as Osgood reattached Ermen-garde’s basket.

“Tell Marcus we’ll be heading home soon,” said Mrs. Thomachan, handing Osgood a packet with two masala

dosas that Trey's aunt had made for him to eat along the way. The deliveryman had become partial to her cooking during his time in Madras and thanked Trey's mother profusely.

Trey's father shook Osgood's hand. "We will come to London before returning to Newcastle. We want to help any way we can." The courier said his goodbyes, and with that, he climbed into the basket and took to the cloudless sky, waving down from above as he went. Trey clutched his Inkourager tightly, trying not to resent being left behind. The marble felt nothing but warm in his sweaty fist.

His father placed an arm around his son's shoulder. "We'll be on our way soon as well. I promise."

Mrs. Thomachan stepped up next to her husband, her eyes full of sympathy for Trey. She hesitated a moment, then spoke in a near whisper. "Perhaps this is the time to teach him the Loud Quiet."

Mr. Thomachan raised his eyebrows and turned toward her. "The *Uratha Amaiti*? Are you certain?"

Trey tried to read his mother's expression. "What are you talking about?"

"I know it's normally played on the *nadaswaram*," she said. "But wouldn't a pen with Ink in it make it even more powerful?"

"Which might make it more dangerous," noted Mr. Thomachan.

Trey could hardly take the suspense. “Will someone tell me what’s going on, please?”

His father shared a look with his wife, who closed her eyes and nodded.

“Your mother is referring to a very specific tune.”

“One that can’t be heard,” Mrs. Thomachan added.

“I don’t understand,” Trey said, looking from one parent to the other. “A song you can’t hear?”

“People can’t,” said Mrs. Thomachan. “But blotters can.”

“When it is played correctly on an instrument of Ink,” added her husband, “which is very difficult to do.”

Trey still wasn’t following. “Why is it dangerous?”

Mr. Thomachan motioned toward the lighthouse door. “Let’s go inside.”

Trey’s mother poured them each a glass of water and they sat down around the lone wooden table in the room.

“The Loud Quiet drives blotters mad,” said his mother. “Something about the frequency of the sound waves. Most of the time it incapacitates them or makes them flee the scene. But sometimes the effect is . . . unpredictable.”

“It’s a last resort,” said Trey’s father, “and incredibly taxing on the musician playing it.”

“How would it help Everett?” Trey asked. “Blotters didn’t take him.”

“True,” his mother conceded, “But the Ink it will take to bring him back will no doubt draw them out of the woodwork.”

Trey felt as if he were seeing a new side of his parents for the very first time. “Do you really think I could learn it?”

Mr. Thomachan smiled. “The question is whether or not I can teach it. I haven’t attempted to play it since I was young.”

Mrs. Thomachan patted Trey’s arm. “He’s being too modest. Your father is one of the finest musical Inklings India has ever produced.”

Trey was eager to try anything that might benefit his friend. “When can I start?”

“A question first.” His father grew serious. “Who is Danny?”

Trey felt confused. “Danny? I don’t know a Danny.”

Mr. Thomachan looked at his wife. “Maybe he needs more time before we try this.”

“No!” Trey protested. Then suddenly it hit him. “You mean Danny from ‘O Danny Boy’?”

“See?” his mother said, elbowing Mr. Thomachan. “He’s ready.”

Trey’s shoulders slumped. “That song was written a long time ago. I have no idea who it’s about.”

“Excellent,” said his father. “Now we know where to begin.”



Archytas-17

Everett had read enough space adventures to recognize a robot when he saw one, and the thing standing next to his button in the corridor was unquestionably a robot. It had a shiny steel head that was rather squarish. Where ears would normally be, the robot wore red headphones. They were connected by a copper wire which formed a spring coil on top of its head, and it bore a striking resemblance to the hair curlers Everett had once seen Mrs. Crimp wearing.

With a creak, one of the robot's metal arms reached down to the floor, grabbed the button, and held it up. Beams of light shot out of the two black disks that served as the robot's eyes. The beams swept back and forth across the button, then up, down, and around the perimeter. It flipped the button over and repeated the process.

When the scan was complete, the lights switched off and the robot used its free arm to pull open a drawer in the center of its torso. With a clink, it dropped the button inside and closed the drawer.

It was at this point that the robot turned to regard Everett directly. As it moved in his direction, Everett couldn't help but admire the robot's feet, which were similar to treads normally seen on army tanks. The treads clanked and whirred as they rolled closer. *So that's where the sound has been coming from*, he thought.

The robot stopped about an arm's length in front of him. Everett held his breath, not moving a muscle. Suddenly, the robot emitted a loud string of staccato clicks followed by a shrill, high-pitched whistle. Everett covered his ears until it finally ended.

There was another pause. Just when Everett was considering introducing himself, the light blazed forth from the eyes again, this time scanning Everett from head to toe. He used his arm to shield his face from the intense glow as the robot assessed him from all sides. Then the eyes switched off once more.

"*Nǐ hǎo*," said the robot. The voice surprised Everett, not so much by the words it chose as by how young it sounded. He had always assumed robots were grownups and would speak in a flat monotone voice. But anyone hearing this one talk might take it for a boy the same age as Everett.

Even though Everett didn't understand the Mandarin greeting, the possibility of speaking to someone felt hopeful. "Hi. Hullo? Sorry. I don't—"

His face brightened as he recalled a Tamil greeting

Trey had taught him in Madras (which was the only greeting in another language that he knew to try). “*Vanakkam,*” he said, putting the palms of his hands together and bowing slightly.

The robot gave no sign that it understood, but a soft whirring noise came from inside it as if it were processing the information.

“You are a humanoid and your primary language is English,” the robot declared. “My inventor is from Beijing, so my original vocal programming is in Chinese. But my communications module can translate into eighty-six spoken and three ancient languages. Or if you prefer switching to the Indian Tamil dialect you spoke, simply say so.”

“English would be best,” Everett replied, then quickly added, “I come in peace.” That phrase always seemed to clear the air in science fiction stories, and he wanted to make sure he started off on the right foot with the robot. *Where am I?* He gave another bow. *If this is really dad’s comic, how did someone add in a character of their own?*

The robot’s eyes regarded him without a blink. “Please provide your name and rank.”

“My name is Everett. Ev, for short.” His stomach growled, as if to remind him to ask about food soon. “I don’t have a rank, but I’m in year six at school if that helps.”

“Everett,” the robot repeated, followed by the soft internal whir. “Everett of the memorandums?”

Everett was feeling more confused by the minute. “The memorandums?”

“Affirmative. From Space Bead Space Rake, numbers one through twenty-three. All refer to Everett the Fallen.”

“I don’t know about any memorandums,” Everett said. “Or space rakes. But I did fall.”

The robot emitted a rapid series of beeps, then said, “The probability of there being two Everetts simultaneously when there have been none in my history is close enough to zero as to be mathematically insignificant.”

“What does that mean?” Everett asked.

“It means I shall consider you Everett of the memorandums. You are now in my care,” said the robot. “But I will not store you in the Inkubator.” For the first time, Everett noticed the raised metal lettering that spelled INKUBATOR across the drawer in the robot’s torso where the button was now held.

“Is that your name?” Everett asked.

“Negative,” said the robot. “The Inkubator is where I keep things I was not programmed to handle.”

Everett fingered the threads of his shirt where the button had been. “How long do things stay in there?”

“Until an idea hatches,” the robot replied. “My internal processor continues working on it while I attend to my other tasks.”

Everett had once heard his father say something similar when he asked him where he got his ideas for MC. “Hard

to say. Our brains are marvelous things,” his father had said. “They keep mulling things over in the background. Sometimes even while we sleep.”

I could use an Inkubator right now, Everett thought. His subconscious mind didn’t seem to be generating any solutions for getting home. He hoped it was developing a plan in the background.

“What do I call you?” he asked the robot.

“I am Archytas-17. I am named after Archytas, the inventor of robotics. But you may call me Archie. That is how the captain and crew refer to me.”

Captain and crew, thought Everett. “So we *are* on a spaceship.”

“Correct,” said Archie. “We are aboard the *HSC Bungalowee*, an explorer class vessel, commanded by Maximillian Courageous.”

Everett couldn’t have been more thrilled to hear those words. “I need to speak to him right away.”