



SORCERERS
IN
SPACE

LARRY HODGES

Chapter 1

Sunday, July 13, 1969, late afternoon

“That wasn’t there before.”

Someday, I’m going to be somebody, do something. I just don’t know what. Someday...

That’s what I was thinking when Corona exploded overhead, as planned. Seconds later, the Giant Face in the Sky showed up—that was not planned. I don’t mean that metaphorically. An actual gigantic face on a gigantic head was looking down on us like we were a bunch of fish in a fishbowl.

My master and I had launched Corona just minutes before, the talisman he and I had worked on for months. Or rather, he’d worked on it. I’d spent most of my time serving him tea and handing him tools and materials coming out of a *Do not look at, smell, touch, or come anywhere near this* catalogue. Being a sorcerer’s apprentice is not all about automating brooms to carry water. It means being at the sorcerer’s beck and call twenty-four hours a day, and more when needed. I wished I were anywhere else, doing anything other than working for the meanest sorcerer in the world.

Corona exploded almost directly over my head, releasing the Corona Effect. To the untrained eye—like mine—Corona looked like your basic model rocket as it soared into the air. No one would suspect we were testing

a top-secret spy talisman that detected images and other data and translated them into text that was supposed to be beamed back to the spyer. Powered by a thaumaturgic battery, we hoped the device would turn the tide on the U.S.-Soviet Cold War this hot afternoon of 1969 at the crowded beach in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Well, my Master did. I barely knew what a Soviet was. Didn't they wear lots of red?

I was the first to see the Giant Face in the Sky, perhaps because it was looking right at me with those big, almond eyes. Soon the swimmers and sunbathers saw it, as excitement swept the beach like a tsunami.

It was the ugliest face I'd ever seen, indescribably so, except for maybe the eyes. It stared at me for a moment, blinking a couple of times, and then, its eyes began moving side to side, slowly from left to right, then fast from right to left, its lips moving slightly as it did so. The blank, stupid look on its face only made it uglier. I'd describe the face more, but, well, that wouldn't be polite. It can't help the way it looks.

"What is *that*?" I asked as I gaped.

"What's what?" Gus said. I looked over, and as usual, my Master's face and impossibly long nose was stuck in a thick book. He leaned on a long, wooden staff etched with intricate drawings of dragons and stars, and with a big, round crystal at the end that didn't do anything—but he said it looked "sorcery." He wore a huge, dark purple dress that billowed out like a parachute over his huge body. Gus claimed it was a robe and he was just big-boned, but to me it was a dress and he was just fat. It wasn't that he ate too much. He just never got any exercise, unless you counted

holding up books and notes and waving a staff about. The dress only went to his knees, exposing a pair of black Oxfords that you barely noticed because of the nerdy, knee-high red socks—*red!*—sticking out of them. He usually wore a normal sorcerer's hat, a tall, pointy purple thing with a yellow moon and star—I thought it looked like a dunce cap—but today he wore a New York Mets baseball cap. I have no idea why; the Mets finished ninth last year, though they are doing pretty good this year.

As an apprentice, I usually wore all black, but Gus rarely noticed these things, so today I wore blue jeans and my favorite orange t-shirt with a “Ping-Pong Power” slogan on the front over a picture of someone smacking in a forehand.

“Up there!” I said, pointing. The huge face stared back at me with a disapproving look, like it didn't like to be pointed at, and then went back to its peculiar side-to-side eye movement.

Gus looked up and raised his right eyebrow like he always does when he's about to say something profound. “Who the bejuzies are you?” he said, looking at me.

“Huh? I'm Neil, your apprentice!”

“Don't recall hiring any boy apprentice,” Gus said with that skeptical look I hated. “Where's that girl I hired?”

“I'm a boy!” I exclaimed. “You made me cut my hair yesterday.”

“Ah, yes, don't want long hair in the sorcerer's lab, might dab it into something and turn into a salamander. How old are you?”

“I'm thirteen.”

He shook his head. “Too old to be an apprentice, but I guess some of us are a bit slow. Now, what’s your fuss? Got something to do with meteors, does it?”

“Meteors?”

“If you’re the same apprentice I had this morning, then your horoscope today says, ‘Beware the meteor.’”

“That’s stupid.”

“You think that’s stupid? Mine says ‘Bring the red socks.’ Very peculiar. Whatever it is you’re fussing about, deal with it.” He put his nose back into his book.

“Will you just look up?” I pointed at the Face, which blinked a couple of times while looking at me, then returned to its side-to-side eye movement.

Gus stuck his nose deeper into his book. “Don’t need to look up. I already know where Corona exploded.” Without looking, he pointed off to the side of the Face, directly at the rapidly dissipating cloud of fire and smoke that had been Corona. “It’s right there. It’s unleashed the Corona Effect and should already be transmitting text, which I’ll look at later.”

Drastic times take drastic measures. I walked over to my Master, grabbed his head, and manually forced him to look up. I hoped he wouldn’t turn me into a salamander. Again.

Gus sputtered, and then went silent for a moment before quietly saying, “That wasn’t there before.”

I closed my eyes and slowly counted to five. Then I opened them and said, “Yes, there wasn’t a Giant Face in the Sky before.”

“Those eyes, that mouth, that horrible nose—it’s ugly!” Gus dropped his book, and the papers that had been stuck inside it flew about.

“Your papers!” I exclaimed.

“What?” Gus said, and then noticed the papers scattering in the breeze. He banged the base of his wooden staff against the ground—knocking off the useless crystal on top so it fell to the ground and broke into a thousand pieces, but Gus didn't notice—and the papers shot back into the book, which closed. A rock floated over and landed on it, holding it down. Gus went back to staring at the Giant Face in the Sky.

Someday, I'll be able to do that type of magic, but not for another five years, not until I'm eighteen. It was so unfair. I stared down at the stapler sticking out of my pocket. “You don't choose the wand, the wand chooses you,” Gus had told me. Sure, that's great when a big, wooden staff with cool graphics chooses you, but how about when a girl's pink stapler with baby unicorn pictures leaps off the shelf and you're stuck with it for life?

I shoved the stapler deeper into my pocket so others wouldn't see. Someday, I'm going to be somebody, do something, no matter how hard they make it for me. Except then everyone will just laugh at my pink stapler.

“*Great bejuzies!*” Gus said with a strangled cry. “Is it possible? Did I just bring that Giant Face here?” He stumbled backward, knocking the rock off his book. It opened, and the papers began scattering about again.

“How could you have done that?” I asked. The Corona project had nothing to do with creating giant heads in the sky.

“Perhaps I tell how.” The heavily-accented voice came from behind us. We spun about.

It was Chef Wang, owner of the Chef Wang Café. The man who put the “sour” in sweet and sour. He wore a white chef’s outfit, complete with a way-too-tall chef’s hat that, unlike a normal chef’s hat, ended in a crooked point. It wasn’t that Chef Wang was evil or something. It was more that he was creepy. How many Chinese men speak broken English with a heavy *Russian* accent and carry a cleaver the size of Cleveland strapped to their belts? I shuddered as if I’d been slapped with a wet Hunan fish.

“Come to my restaurant and I vill explain,” Chef Wang said. Why was he staring at me like I was an egg roll in need of egging and rolling?

“You know something about that Giant Face in the Sky?” Gus asked.

“I know vhy Giant Face in Sky,” Chef Wang said, his voice rising. He drew the cleaver and raised it over his head, still staring at me. I took a step back as Chef Wang brought the blade down, pointing it at me. “I tell you vhy.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Birds sang, crickets chirped, and somewhere nearby a toad sneezed.

“You said you were going to tell us?” Gus finally asked. “We’ll go to your fine eating establishment and talk this over.” He was fingering his wooden staff. That would have struck fear into any normal person, but the staff looked like kindling wood compared to Chef Wang’s cleaver. I’d heard rumors about it, that Chef Wang had used it to dig out the Grand Canyon, but I doubted that. I think.

Chef Wang pulled his eyes away from me and seemed to notice Gus and his staff for the first time. He smiled and returned the cleaver to his belt. “Vee go to Chef Wang Café.”

Why did that sound like a death sentence? I glanced up at the Face. It winked, and then went back to looking side to side.

Chapter 2

“You might want to put on some padding.”

It was a short walk to the Chef Wang Café. The place was still jammed from the lunch hour, though it was nearly four o’clock. Soon, Gus and I were seated at a booth while Chef Wang went to the kitchen to arrange our orders—Sweet and Sour Pork for me, Sour and Sourer Barracuda for Gus.

“Excuse me,” Gus said, “I need to use the little wizard’s room.” I was left alone at our table.

A few minutes later, a Chinese waitress came with fortune cookies. It’s sort of a law that when you eat Chinese food, you must eat a fortune cookie. The last thing Master Gus needed was more calories, so I pocketed his for myself to eat later. Then I examined mine. Weren’t fortune cookies supposed to come *after* the meal? Chinese dragons—or perhaps Russian ones—danced in my stomach as I pulled the tiny slip of paper from my fortune cookie. I read it aloud.

It said, “*A meteor will kill you in five minutes.*”

Woh. That’s heavy.

I have nothing against our mineral cousins. I’m no mineralist, but I didn’t want to be the latest victim of mineral angst. Can’t we all just get along?

“Pardon me, I couldn’t help but overhear.” A man from the next table stood by mine, staring at the ceiling. “I’m a

scientist. Did you know meteors can travel 28 miles per second? You can't outrun them. *We're doomed.*" He glanced at me. "Well, *you* are."

Another man from the table next to us also must have overheard as he leaped to his feet yelling, "Run for your lives!" He looked at me and asked, "Which way are *you* going to run?" Before I could answer, he fainted. His head made a satisfying *smack* as it hit the floor.

"The meteor will hit you about a billion times as hard," the scientist said. "You might want to put on some padding."

"Will that save me?" I asked.

"Not a chance," he said.

I decided the coward had the right idea, other than the fainting part. I ran for the front door and threw it open.

Floating in midair outside was a meteor.

It was your average potato-shaped stony meteor, grayish-brown, about my height, though far more massive. It smelled strongly of Acqua Di Gio men's cologne. The meteor floated through the door and said, "*Hi!*" There was a clattering of chairs and feet as everyone but the coward on the floor ran to safety through the kitchen door in back.

I tried to join them. The meteor followed. My heart, beating like a drum solo on a sugar high, tried to convince me to panic. I think it had the right idea. I'd need a lot of adrenalin to outrun a meteor.

"I can move 14 miles per second," it said, "so there's no point in trying to outrun me." The meteor circled me a dozen times in a blur, making a buzzing sound and hurricane winds that knocked me to the floor. It took a short detour around the restaurant, leaving debris where there

had been tables and chairs, and then came to a stop by the kitchen door, blocking my escape.

“I heard that meteors can move 28 miles per second,” I said.

The meteor seemed to droop a bit. “See how fast you are when you’re a million years old.”

I tilted my head as I studied my adversary, whose high-pitched voice seemed to come from deep inside. There was a fist-sized gap near the top of the meteor. “You have a hole in your head.”

“Well, thanks a bunch for pointing that out,” the meteor said. “I had a little scuffle on the way here, just outside Jupiter. You should see the other meteor!”

“Here,” I said, handing it my baseball cap, which said “Rock Star” on it. It was a lucky coincidence that its presumptive new owner was an actual rock, but I wore it as a fan of the Beatles, the magically-enhanced, singing insects that were such a sensation. I still dreamed of being a rock star or ping-pong champion, but those dreams had taken a bad turn after I’d been sold into slavery, I mean, became a sorcerer’s apprentice. Somehow my parents thought it was a good idea.

There was an uncomfortable silence before I realized the meteor had no arms to take the cap I was offering. I put the cap at a nice jaunty angle over the hole.

“For someone I’m about to kill,” the meteor said, “you are very kind.”

“No point in being rude in the twilight minutes of my life.” I took a step back, wondering what was taking Gus so long in the restroom. Hopefully, he could save me from this rock.

There was a yelp from the coward on the floor, whose chest I had stepped on. He sat up, saw the meteor, and yelped again. There was another blur as the meteor knocked him to the floor, where he again lay still.

“I don’t like it when people yelp at me,” the meteor said. “It makes me... apprehensive.”

“That’s understandable,” I said, feeling equally apprehensive. “So, do I just wait for you to squish me?”

“I won’t be doing that for another, um...” It trailed off.

I glanced at my watch. “Another three minutes and seven seconds.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” the meteor said. “Hey, my task would be a lot easier if I had a wristwatch. Would you sell yours? You won’t need it in a few minutes.”

“I’m not selling you my watch!” I cried. “Where would you wear it? Besides, meteors don’t carry cash.”

“True,” the meteor said. “I’ll play you rock-paper-scissors for it.”

“OK,” I said. “I’m paper. You’re rock. I win.”

“Dang,” said the meteor. “Could you let me know when it’s time to kill you?”

“Sure,” I said. “But why do you want to kill me?”

“It was in your fortune, duh!”

“Don’t you have free will?”

“Of course I have free will!” the meteor retorted. “I can choose exactly how I kill you. I could crush your skull and leak your brains all over the floor. I could squish your body and watch your insides gush out. Or perhaps I’ll smash your legs and let you die slowly as the blood pours out of your body.” It paused for a few seconds. “Which do you recommend?”

“You have a pretty specific timetable,” I said, glancing at my watch. “You have to kill me in two minutes and twenty seconds, and you can’t accurately pinpoint when I’d die from blood loss. I recommend crushing my skull or squishing my body.”

“Good point,” the meteor said. “How do you humans define death these days? Brain death or when your heart stops beating?”

“Brain death sounds good,” I said. “Though heart stopping has its advocates.” Even as I bantered with the meteor, I was thinking furiously. How was I going to get out of this?

“Really?” The meteor tilted slightly in a quizzical fashion. “I hadn’t considered the metaphysical and philosophical implications...”

He was interrupted as the coward sat up again, saw the meteor, and yelped. I kicked him in the stomach, and he lay back, groaning. Better me than the meteor.

“Thanks,” said the meteor.

“I didn’t want you to get... apprehensive,” I said.

“Think I could have his watch?” the meteor asked, floating over the coward on the floor and the Rolex on his wrist.

Before I could answer, the kitchen door opened with a slam. Against the bright lights from the kitchen, a tall figure stood silhouetted in the doorway, like an angel from heaven. Or hopefully a rockocidal geologist.

“Vhat’s going on?” asked the silhouetted figure in a Russian accent. It stepped forward, and I realized it was only Chef Wang. He glared at the meteor while holding up his cleaver. “You no follow zee fortune I wrote?”

“*You* wrote that fortune?” I exclaimed.

“Of course. You must die.” Chef Wang approached the meteor, brandishing his cleaver. “Vhy you no kill zis boy? *Kill him now!*” The meteor slunk to the floor, trembling. With a swipe of his cleaver, the chef sliced off the top of the rock star cap, leaving a four-inch hole just above the lettering. “Nice hat,” he said snarkily.

“It’s not time yet,” I said, smoldering at the demise of my favorite cap. “I’ve got another forty-two seconds.”

Chef Wang glanced at his wristwatch. “Oh, right.”

“You want to sell that watch?” the meteor asked.

“I’m not selling you my vatch!” Chef Wang cried. “You must have rocks for brains!”

“That’s not very nice,” said the meteor. To me, it asked, “Have you decided how you want to die?”

“Old age would be nice. But I’ve only got eighteen seconds.”

“Can you die of old age in eighteen seconds?”

“I’m trying really hard.”

“We don’t want to be late,” the meteor said. “Ooh, this is so exhilarating, don’t you agree! Time?”

“Ten seconds,” I said.

“Could you pay before you die?” asked Chef Wang, a grin on his face. “It’s rude to die vithout paying.”

The coward on the floor started to get up, but before he could yelp, I kicked him in the head, and he lay still again.

“He doesn’t have time to pay,” said the meteor. “You should have thought of that earlier.” It bobbed up and down in excitement. “Wow. After a million years circling Saturn, I will finally fulfill my destiny. I’m getting goose bumps!”

“It’s not your destiny,” I pointed out, “just some magic from Chef Wang.” But imminent death has a way of bringing clarity to a situation, and I had an idea.

“Kill him now!” the chef yelled at the meteor, waving his cleaver. “Vee don’t even make him pay.”

“I wouldn’t yelp at the meteor,” I said to the chef. “It makes him... apprehensive.” To the meteor, I said, “Since I haven’t paid for the food or the fortune cookie, doesn’t that mean the fortune belongs to him? Oh, and it’s time.”

“Good point,” the meteor said. It smashed into Chef Wang, crushing his chest and slamming him across the room, where he lay on his back, still. “I hate it when people yelp at me,” the meteor said.

Gus chose that moment to come out of the restroom. He looked about at the destroyed room, at Chef Wang and the coward on the floor, and the floating meteor. “Did I miss something?”

Chapter 3

“Now, you can become a functioning member of society like any other intelligent rock.”

“I’m not dead yet,” Chef Wang said. “You have failed, Buzz.” He lay on his back. Blood gushed from his chest onto the floor.

“Buzz?” I asked. “Is that the meteor’s name?”

“Yes, because of zee sound he makes ven he moves and because he has zee brains of a fly.”

“That’s not very nice,” Buzz said.

“I’m Russian assassin, what you expect?”

“Why were you trying to kill Neil?” Gus asked.

“Vhy you think?” Chef Wang said. “Oracle say he will defeat Soviet Union.”

“Does this have anything to do with the Giant Face in the Sky?” Gus asked. “And why is it that whenever someone says that, it sounds like it’s capitalized?”

“Yes!” Chef Wang exclaimed. “You see—” and then he died. Not in some dignified way, but his head fell back on the floor; he went all bug-eyed, his mouth open with his tongue sticking out the side and saliva dribbling down his chin, and then, he went rigid that way. Not the way I want to die. I was still hoping for old age.

Buzz floated by my arm and seemed to look at my wristwatch. How does he see? I didn’t see any eyes. “I was a minute late,” Buzz lamented.

Gus stared at Buzz. “Fascinating! A thaumaturgic attack meteor. Let me guess, Chef Wang planted a summons in a fortune cookie and you were caught in its spell?”

“Yep.” The meteor drooped in embarrassment.

“Excuse me, everyone,” I said. “Didn’t you hear what he said, about how I’m going to destroy Russia?”

“Not Russia,” Gus said. “The Soviet Union. Russia’s just the main part of it. Don’t you pay attention in school? Or do you just play ping-pong and listen to Beatles music?”

“It’s not ping-pong, it’s table tennis. And it’s better than practicing magic I’m not allowed to do.”

“Maybe, but according to Chef Wang, someday you’re going to have to battle the Soviets, so I suggest more studying and less ponging. Meanwhile, why don’t you pay for our meal so we can leave?”

It figures Gus would be that cheap. I glanced at the bill and dug into my pocket. All I had was a five, which just covered the bill and tip. I tossed it onto the table. It seemed silly to pay for a meal among the destruction of the café, but a bill is a bill.

“What is studying?” Buzz asked.

“It’s similar to getting smashed by a meteor, but Master Gus says it’s good for me.” Buzz tilted slightly sideways in that quizzical manner of his and floated after us as we went outside into the bright sunshine. “Why do you wear cologne?” I asked.

“I think I was made that way,” Buzz said. “Isn’t everyone?”

Throngs of people stood about staring at the Giant Face in the Sky. With all the excitement inside, I’d forgotten about it. Was it an illusion, or was it again looking directly

at me? Its mouth was slightly open, and I could just see the tip of its tongue. It went back to its side-to-side eye movement.

“Corona attracted it,” Gus said. “Look at its eyes—what do you see?”

“An ugly face with shifty eyes?” The eyes stopped moving as it glared at me. This time there was no mistaking who it glared at. Suddenly I felt very nervous—it probably wasn’t smart to anger something the size of a planet. The eyes began moving side to side again.

“*It’s reading!*” Gus exclaimed. “Look at the way the eyes go slowly from left to right as it reads a line of print, then quickly back to the left to the next line. And its lips are moving as it reads—obviously not very bright.”

Now the Face glared at Gus. Then it went back to reading.

“What does that have to do with Corona?” I asked.

“I’ve always wanted to learn to read,” Buzz said.

“Corona permeated the local atmosphere with the Corona Effect,” Gus said. “It’s sensing everything—even stuff indoors and out of sight since it’s not just a visual system—and describing it in text. Something’s wrong with the beaming signal, and so, it’s just beaming the info into Space. That’s what that thing is reading! To it, we’re like a giant book.”

“I’d really like to learn how to read,” Buzz said.

“Can I go home now?” I asked. “I want to practice my serves.” There was a school tournament coming up next week, and my reverse pendulum serve needed work. Maybe ping-pong was where I’d someday be someone, do something.

“Will you forget your ping-pong?” Gus cried. “A Russian agent just tried to kill you, you’re supposed to defeat the Soviets, there’s a Giant Face in the Sky compelling us to say its name as if capitalized, and a murderous meteor is following you around, and ping-pong’s what you’re worried about?”

“I’m not murderous!” Buzz exclaimed. “I’m a pacifist.” More quietly he added, “Except when someone makes me apprehensive.”

“How am I supposed to defeat the Soviets?” I asked. “I’m just an apprentice. Maybe I can beat them at ping-pong.”

“I was just an apprentice myself, long ago.” Gus stared up at the Face. “I know what the Soviets are going to do.” He looked down at me, his eyes bright. “We must see the President.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Buzz said.

“We’re going to see the President?” I asked. “As in John F. Kennedy?”

“That’s the one. We must warn him of the danger of the Giant Face in the Sky.”

“Wow,” I squealed, hoping it was a dignified squeal. It had been about six months since Kennedy and his armies had defeated Nixon and his warriors for the third consecutive election for president. Even I knew magic had been involved, since there was a nationwide amnesia about the Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, which prohibited anyone from being elected president more than twice. The amnesia lifted immediately after Kennedy was sworn in. Nixon took it to the Supreme Court, which unanimously ruled there was no Twenty-Second

Amendment, and upheld the election. Afterwards, the justices could be seen scratching their heads in confusion.

We went back inside and ate dinner in the empty, nearly-destroyed café. It was hard to have an appetite when the dead body of Chef Wang lay next to the unconscious body of the coward on the floor. Eventually, the coward woke up, saw the meteor, and ran out the front door, screaming his own apprehension.

Gus told me stories of his years in Kennedy's army and their battles with Nixon. For once he wasn't boring, and so I listened, captivated by the tales of sorcery and power, all of which somehow seemed to end with Gus doing something heroic but magnanimously letting someone else get the credit.

Buzz was bobbing up and down, and I realized he had been talking. "You know," he said, "when people ignore me, it makes me... apprehensive."

I was being rude to my meteor. After all, he could have killed me earlier but instead killed Chef Wang, and I didn't want him to get apprehensive.

"I'm sorry, Buzz," I said. "I'll teach you to read. How about next week?"

"Great!" Buzz bobbed up and down.

"I'm curious how you can be a pacifist when you kill people?"

"I don't want to kill anyone!" Buzz said and began to sob. If you've ever heard a meteor sob, it's a terrible thing, sort of a mix of transcontinental carpet engine and a howling monkey. "And now, I have to kill again!"

"You don't have to kill anyone," Gus said. "You only killed because Chef Wang forced you to with his fortune

cookie summons. That's over. Now you can become a functioning member of society like any other intelligent rock."

"You don't understand," Buzz said. It floated over to me. "Look in your pocket."

I checked and pulled out the fortune cookie I'd stuck in there earlier. "It's another of Chef Wang's fortune cookies."

"But he's dead!" Buzz wailed.

"So?"

"It's yours now! It was his backup fortune cookie, and since you paid for it, it's yours now, and there's no way of changing that. Read what it says." Buzz drooped down to the floor and sobbed inconsolably. "Now you won't be able to teach me to read next week!"

I pulled out the fortune. It was Sunday, July 13 at 7:00 p.m. when I read the fortune that would change my life for the next one hundred and sixty-eight hours.

It said, "*A meteor will kill you in one week.*"

Chapter 4

“Other than Gus’s death and a crying baby with lungs of epic proportions, the flight was uneventful.”

Knowing a meteor is going to kill you in one week can be frightening, but so is a Giant Face in the Sky. Outside, people stared and pointed at the Face.

The Face continued its reading, but every few lines, it stopped to look at me. I thought perhaps it was an illusion, like one of those paintings where the eyes seem to follow you wherever you go. To test my theory, I made a rather obscene gesture at it while it stared at me—and the look of surprise was the undoing of my theory.

“Are you watching me?” I screamed at the sky. The Face nodded. A few people noticed, and now, they stared and pointed at me.

“Perhaps a little discretion is advised,” Gus said. “Not that any apprentice of mine would have such common sense.”

When we got home, I doffed my other favorite baseball cap, a red one that said, “Ping-Pong Ding-Dong.” Buzz still wore the “Rock Star” cap, but the top had been cut off by Chef Wang. I offered Buzz a choice of any of the stacks of old baseball caps filling my closet, but he didn’t want to change.

“I’m a rock,” he explained.

I said hello to Laika, my pet frog, who ribbited back how much he'd missed me. I stuck him into my pocket and forgot about him.

I don't think Gus's house is normal. I mean, the guy's not just a sorcerer; he thinks he's some sort of inventor. Most people cook with fire; we use a microwave, which sends microwaves of thaumaturgic energy at food to heat it or, as usually happens, to burn it. There are brooms that walk about vacuuming and dusting the place, even if it's not needed. When Gus tried to get them to only clean when it was needed, they went outside and tried to tidy the neighbor's garden, which didn't go over well. So Gus created a special broom whose only job was to spread dirt and dust around the house for the others to clean. I thought it was a stupid way to solve the problem, but Gus was, as always, quite proud of himself. Meanwhile, I spend my days dodging the silly brooms since I have a tendency to drop things and they have a tendency to go after things that are dropped and aren't good at telling trash from homework. Unfortunately, few teachers accepted my recurring "The broom ate my homework" excuse.

I won't even talk about the shelves full of books of magic and his complete collection of *Sitting Magazine*.

I went to the mirror. Gus always said I spent much too much time in front of the mirror, but he was a fuddy-duddy who grew up in the days before mirrors had pictures, when you'd just sit around and listen to it. Buzz floated along behind me, talking merrily about reading, pacifism, and the various options for killing me in one week.

Ignoring the meteor's chatter, I faced the mirror. First, some friendly background music. "Mirror, mirror, on the

wall, play Beatles music in any of your corners at all.” In the top right corner, the four of them appeared—a praying mantis, a grasshopper, and an oversized ant, each with guitars, and a cockroach on drums—dancing about as they played their ode to exterminators, “*Let us be.*”

Now, for more serious work. Again, I came up with a quick rhyme—I was good at that. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, I want info on that big face and all.” A Microsorcery logo appeared as the sorcery for the mirror conducted its search.

A man appeared, holding up a bottle. “You too can have beautiful facial skin with the new *Face-in-All* skin moisturizer. It—”

“Stop!” I shouted, and the mirror went blank, other than the dancing insects. I’d have to try again. Someday, someone is going to invent a faster way to surf the Mirrornet. Maybe I could do that and be somebody. But for now, I was stuck. There were only so many words rhyming with wall. I’d have to do something more advanced.

I lifted the mirror off the hooks on the wall and put it on the floor. “Mirror, mirror, on the floor, I want info on the Giant Face in the Sky that I didn’t know before.”

This time, a talking head from World News appeared in the mirror, with the camera angled upward at him so we could see the Giant Face in the Sky in the background. The Face looked off to the side as the disembodied head of Walter Cronkite spoke. Cronkite had had a body until that terrible accident where he’d fallen off a thaumacopter and into the Grand Canyon. Well, most of him had. Now, he was the most famous talking head in the business.

No matter how much Cronkite spoke, it all translated to, “There’s a Giant Face in the Sky.” After listening to him say that fifteen different ways, I put the mirror back on the wall. About the only new information I’d gotten was that half the planet could see the Face, though I’d suspected that—the thing was *huge*. I decided to change channels and said, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, find a station with a ping-pong ball.”

The mirror showed me the latest lottery, with numbered ping-pong balls in a container. With gritted teeth, I tried again.

“Mirror, mirror, about to get whacked, find me some table tennis unless you want to get cracked.” The mirror found the Final of the recent Florida Table Tennis Championships while the Beatles played “*Strawberry Feasts Forever*.” I pulled up a chair to watch the final between Brian “Speed Race” Pace and “Tricky Dicky” Fleisher.

“Aren’t you packed yet?” Gus said. “Tonight, we’re going to Washington D.C. to see the President, and you’re watching ping-pong on the mirror?” He aimed his staff at the mirror, and the table tennis and Beatles action was replaced by my reflection. It’d be four more years before I’d be allowed wand magic like that, nothing beyond nursery rhymes that any five-year-old could do to control household appliances. What was the point of me having my pink stapler if I couldn’t use it? Whoever made up the rules hated me.

“You’re never going to let me do anything big, are you?” I asked.

“You want to do something big?” Gus asked. “Do the laundry.”

His earlier words registered. “*Tonight?*”

“Of course. We’re on the 10:08 carpet to Dulles Airport.”

I’d never been on anything much bigger than a carpet van, and soon, I’d be on a continental carpet! I threw a few things into a bag, and soon, we were on the way to the airport on Gus’s dusty old carpet, a ’60 Edsel Ranger convertible. Buzz followed, sometimes zipping in circles around us like an excited Labrador. With the top down, the wind blew away the July dust and heat.

Much of the trip, the Face in the Sky stared at me, occasionally stopping to read whatever lines it was seeing as its eyes went side to side, or to blink, or sometimes to glance off into the distance at whoever knows what. Mostly, it looked at me.

At one point, Gus tried to teach it Morse code, but the Face didn’t seem interested, only glancing at Gus occasionally before returning to alternately reading and staring at me. Gus shook his head in disgust.

“Stop looking at me!” I yelled. That brought a slight grin to its face. Finally I convinced Gus to put the top up on the convertible.

“Even if it can’t see you,” Gus pointed out, “it’s still seeing text from the Corona Effect telling it what you and everything down here is doing.”

I pulled my finger away from where I thought I was secretly picking my nose.

After we parked at the airport and I stood by the carpet—the Face again staring at me—Buzz floated over. “You’re fun to be with,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“It’s nine o’clock, according to the clock over there,” Buzz said. “Our flight’s at ten oh eight?” I nodded. “Course I have to kill you in one hundred and sixty-six hours. You’ll let me know when it’s time, right?”

That put a bumner on things. “Sure,” I lied, “I’m counting the seconds.”

“So am I!” Buzz exclaimed, bouncing up and down. Then, he stopped and drooped a bit. “You don’t mind, do you? I didn’t like it at first when I learned I had to kill you, but now, we know our purpose in life. Isn’t that great?”

“It’s great. I’ve always wanted to get flattened by a large heavy object.”

“Great!” Buzz zipped about the parking lot in a blur, perhaps working off some thaumaturgic energy.

We stopped at a small refreshment stand inside the airport. Gus ordered a Coke for me—made me pay for it out of my allowance—and a cherry cocktail for himself.

It took forever to get through airport security. Gus passed the time reading the latest issue of *Sitting Magazine*. “Did you know they’ve come up with thirteen new ways to sit in a chair?” he said, pointing at a chart. I looked away. He grunted and went back to reading.

Finally, we reached the front of the line.

“You can’t take that red drink past here,” the security woman said, pointing at Gus’s cherry cocktail. She wore her hair in a tight bun, with a pink pillbox hat and a huge

blue diamond the size of an apricot in front. She wore three strands of white pearls around her neck.

Gus stared at her. “Why for God’s sake not?”

“As I said, it’s red,” she said. “Someone tried to smuggle explosives onto a carpet in a red drink, so we no longer allow red drinks.”

Gus leaned forward and read her nametag. “Now, Jackie, that makes no sense at all. Someone could just as easily hide something in a drink with a different color, like a Coke.” He gestured at my drink.

“But they tried to smuggle it in a red drink, not a brown drink,” Jackie explained. “So brown drinks are not a security threat. Only red. Now if you’ll just put your drink in the available wastebasket, we can continue.”

Gus slammed his drink into the trash can. “This is why the country is falling apart!” he exclaimed. “No common sense. While you’re busy confiscating red drinks, any terrorist with a brain can simply use a Coke to smuggle explosives, and what will you do then?”

“Why, then we’d make brown drinks illegal, of course.” Jackie smiled.

Gus slammed his staff against the ground in disgust. I shrank back, wondering if he was going to turn the woman into a salamander. He has a thing for salamanders. But he was just angry.

“You’ll have to check in your staff,” Jackie said with an even brighter smile.

“Over my dead body,” Gus said. “I already gave you my drink. You’ll have my staff when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers.”

Jackie smiled even wider, her teeth flashing in the light. “You’ll have to check in your staff.”

Gus stomped his staff on the ground again, this time shooting off sparks. “Didn’t you hear what I said? Dead body? Cold, dead fingers? Now out of my way so I can board.”

This time Jackie smiled so wide her chin could have fallen off. “You’ll have to check in your staff.”

“Are you a parrot with a low IQ?” Gus exclaimed and tried pushing his way past the woman. She blocked him, and then, her blue diamond flashed. Gus fell to the ground, his head thumping against the floor.

“*What did you do to him?*” I cried. I didn’t have any weapons to fight her other than my pink stapler—and I’d get in trouble for underage magic if I used that—but I could sic Buzz on her. I doubted her energy bolt would stop a charging meteor. Except, of course, Buzz was a pacifist.

“I only knocked him out,” she said. “But now, I will kill him. You heard him—dead body, cold dead fingers?”

“You wouldn’t dare! He’s a sorcerer, first class!”

She glanced down at Gus. “Must have been a weak class.”

A group of men came through a door behind Jackie. She pointed at Gus. “Put him on ice, and check him in.” Two of the men went back through the door and returned with a black coffin. They spent a few minutes jamming Gus’s huge bulk into the coffin before they jammed the transparent top over his protruding belly. Frost instantly covered his face as his body froze.

She glanced over at me. “He’s frozen, so his heart has stopped, so he’s dead, so—”

“Ah,” Buzz exclaimed, “a fan of defining death when the heart stops beating?”

Jackie looked the meteor up and down. “I’m old fashioned that way,” she said. “But since he’s frozen, he’s brain dead, and that works for me, too. Have you read the studies on this by Kevorkian and Nietzsche?”

“I haven’t read those,” Buzz said, looking dejected. “I can’t read.”

Jackie shook her head. “Pity. But nice hat.” She looked down at Gus’s dead body. She lowered the transparent top, pried Gus’s staff from his cold, dead fingers, and handed it to one of the security men. “Check this in, would you?” She put the top back on as Gus stared out with a hideous, frozen look of disgust.

“You killed my master!” I cried. According to the rules of sorcery, that meant that someday, when I was eighteen and could use my pink stapler, I’d have to avenge him. Which, based on what I’d seen of Jackie, would probably end with her prying the pink stapler from *my* cold, dead fingers.

“Yes, I did,” she said.

I was stunned. Just like that, my Master was dead, and I was alone in the world. Except for a large, floating rock. I wasn’t even sure what I would do when I reached Washington D.C.

“The staff is checked in,” the security man said. “Do you need anything else, Mrs. Kennedy?”

My eyes shot back to Jackie. I hadn’t recognized her before, in the tight bun and pillbox hat. My eyes went wide like a sorcerer’s owl. “Mrs. President?” I stammered.

“Glad to meet you,” Jackie Kennedy said. “Now, you’ll have to check in that big rock of yours. Or would you like to join your master?” She gave another chin-dropping smile.

I hoped the cargo hold wouldn’t make Buzz apprehensive.

With Gus’s body and Buzz both checked in with luggage, I boarded the continental flying carpet alone, Persian Carpets Flight 42 to Dulles. I’ve always thought it strange that the most popular flying carpet in the country was foreign-owned, but the U.S. and Iran were friends, so there was no reason for concern.

The carpet was the size of a broomball field, a hundred yards long and fifty yards wide. The pilots sat in front with a thaumaturgic engine. I had a seat on the edge, so there was nothing between me and a ten thousand foot drop but an invisible forcefield. I was fine after using the barf bag.

Other than Gus’s death and a crying baby with lungs of epic proportions, the flight was uneventful. After a few hours, we landed in Dulles Airport, near Washington, D.C.

Gus must have made arrangements in advance, because black-clad security people met me as I got off the flight. When I asked who they were, they hushed me and marched me outside and into a government black carpet. It was covered with a black forcefield, though from inside you could see out. I watched as they loaded our luggage, Gus’s coffin, and Buzz into the cargo area in back, and then we took off.

Soon, we were over Washington, D.C. I saw the Washington Monument and the Capitol Building, and then we approached the Black House, where the president and

his family lived. It had once been white, but during the civil rights craze in the early 1960's, they'd painted it black. Not to be one-upped, Congress had placed a huge, black afro on top of the Capitol. Personally, I thought all this was stupid—it's just a color—but I guess I don't know much about politics.

We landed on the lawn next to the Black House. They let Buzz out of the cargo area, and two men picked up Gus's coffin. I grabbed our luggage, and we were led inside to a large, dim room that was sweltering hot and, like everything else, was painted black. Antique-type furniture was all over the place, and the walls were covered with historical-type paintings. On the floor was the thickest black carpet I'd ever seen.

They laid the coffin on the floor next to a huge bed with an enormous headboard. One of the men hit a switch on the coffin's side.

"We'll come get you in the morning to see the President," he said. "Don't keep him waiting."

"Let me guess," I said. "It makes him apprehensive?"

He stared at me. "No, it vexes him. You wouldn't like to see him vexed." He left, and I heard him lock the door.

I unpacked our luggage. I didn't have much, but Gus had packed two suitcases. One was the usual assortment of clothing and other odds and ends. The other was jammed with nothing but red socks.

Chapter 5

***“...great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great,
great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great,
great, great, great, great, great, great, great
grandfather!”***

Every time I think Gus is just a doddering, old man who exists solely to humiliate me, something will irritate him and he'll raise his staff and take out half a mountain. Other times, he seems like just a doddering, old man. Such as now.

It turned out his death was only temporary.

“It wasn't my fault!” he shouted from the bathroom where he was soaking in a hot tub to offset the effects of the coffin freezer. “She caught me off guard! If I face her in a fair fight, I'll turn her into a salamander!”

“That would be nice,” Buzz said.

“If I'd known Mrs. Kennedy was moonlighting at the airport, I'd have been ready.”

“I'm sure she won't tell the President,” I said, by which I meant that she would. “What's a moon, and why does it need to be lit?”

Gus responded with a long string of words that I'd never heard before but sounded strangely obscene. Buzz looked mesmerized by these strange, new words.

“Why is it so hot and dim in here?” I asked.

“Perhaps the powers-that-be should have thought of that before painting everything black,” Gus said. “A black building absorbs heat, and a black wall absorbs light.”

We finally went to bed, Gus and I on the huge bed, with Buzz floating in a corner. In the dim light, he seemed to stare at me, though he had no eyes. It was creepy. I wondered if the Giant Face in the Sky was reading about me. It would be boring reading, something like, “Neil is lying in bed. Meteor is watching him. Neil inhales as meteor continues to watch him. Neil exhales. Now, he rolls over. Meteor continues to watch. And now, Neil is taking another breath as he continues to lie in bed.” And so on.

I must have dozed off because I woke with a start at something cold touching my face. I opened my eyes and looked into the face of Abraham Lincoln. He stood next to the bed and seemed too short for Lincoln, but what did I know?

“Who are you?” Lincoln asked in a voice seemingly too high-pitched for our sixteenth president.

“I’m Neil, Mr. Lincoln.” Lincoln giggled and removed the Lincoln mask. I recognized John-John, President Kennedy’s eight-year-old son, who was wearing pajamas covered with cowboys on flying carpets.

“What’cha doing in the Lincoln Room?” he asked.

“I’m here for a top secret meeting with the President,” I said.

“Dad’ll probably make you play touch football,” came another high-pitched voice. Caroline Kennedy, the president’s eleven-year-old daughter, appeared behind John-John. She was wearing in pajamas covered with ponies. “He always makes us play football. I hate football.”

“Why were you wearing a Lincoln mask?” I asked John-John.

“It’s the Lincoln room, isn’t it?” he asked. “Besides, Willie likes it.”

“Who’s Willie?”

“Right ‘ere.” A third child appeared next to Caroline, literally—I was looking right at her when he just blinked into existence, a ghostly figure in the dim light. He wore a fancy, blue outfit that seemed a hundred years out of date, full of white lace and buttons and a huge white collar that half hid his lower face. He seemed several inches taller than Caroline, but then, I realized he was floating several inches above the ground. The figure floated toward me as I instinctively pulled the covers all the way to my chin.

“Hi,” the ghost said. “I’m Willie. I’m a hundred and eighteen years old.”

“No, you’re not,” John-John protested. “You’re only eleven, like my bratty sister.”

“If I was only ’leven, would I ’member the Civil War? Golly, I was ’leven before your great, great...”

“Shut up, Willie!” John-John cried.

“Boys,” Caroline said, shaking her head in age-old teenage disgust, two years early.

“...great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great...”

“Hold on,” I said, pushing the covers aside and sitting up in bed. “You’re Abraham Lincoln’s son?”

“...great, great, great, great grandfather!” Willie turned to me. “Yep, he’s my daddy. Would you like to meet him?”

“What’s going on?” Gus asked, also sitting up in bed and looking about. “Who are all these children?”

“What’s that?” Caroline exclaimed, noticing Buzz floating in the corner. She looked him and his torn “Rock Star” cap. “Nice hat!”

“It is a nice hat,” John-John said.

Buzz stared at the shimmering Willie and began to tremble. “Ghosts make me... apprehensive.” He pressed himself into the corner as far from Willie as possible.

“Everything makes you apprehensive,” I pointed out.

“That is a nice hat,” Willie said as he looked Buzz over.

“*I’m trying to sleep!*” Gus thundered. “*Everyone, get out!*”

John-John and Caroline scurried out of the door. Willie floated around the bed to Gus’s side.

“I’m telling daddy on you.” Then he disappeared.

Gus sank back into bed and pulled the covers up high. “All that racket probably woke him.”

Buzz floated over to my side of the bed. “I’ve never seen a ghost before.”

“You’ve only been on Earth a few hours, so there’s lots you haven’t seen,” I pointed out.

“True,” Buzz said. “Later on, I’ll have to take a tour of this planet.”

“I’ll join you,” I said.

Buzz floated close to me. “How could you? I was going to take my tour after I kill you, in one hundred and sixty-three hours.”

I slumped down into my bed. “It must be midnight.”

“Yep,” Buzz said. “I looked at your watch on the nightstand. But we’ll have a real fun time till then!”

Chapter 6

Monday, July 14, 1969

“I don’t think I could fit inside the head of a human.”

I woke up to the sound of Bo, the Black House dragon, singing the Beatles hit, *We All Live in a Yellow Tangerine*, the song that launched the magic of genetic engineering as sorcerers raced to be the first to grow an actual yellow tangerine. I listened for a while to the wonderful sounds coming through the window before yawning and getting out of bed.

Gus was standing in front of the mirror grimacing. You know someone’s an old fuddy-duddy when they use a mirror just to see their reflection. That’s so ’50s. Though I admit I sometimes glance at myself in my mirror back home, but only while surfing the mirrornet.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He looked over, the grimace now a huge smile on his face. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just getting ready to meet the President.”

“Why the big grin? It looked like you were making faces in the mirror.”

Gus sighed. “If you must know, I was practicing smiling.”

I tried not to laugh, and failed.

“Laugh all you want,” Gus said. “First impressions are everything. How’d you like to show up in front of the most

powerful man in the world and suddenly forget how to smile properly?” He grew a bit red-faced as I continued to laugh. “It happens! Just listen to your stupid laugh—shouldn’t you practice that before trying it out in front of the President?”

“I’ll try it.” I joined him at the mirror, and together, we practiced various smiles, grins, and laughs.

“Don’t forget thoughtful looks, looks of interest, and other expressions you might need,” Gus said. “You have to be prepared.”

We spent the morning practicing the various looks, mentor and student, until he pronounced my various expressions “adequate.”

Buzz floated over to the mirror. “How do you smile?”

“You just curl your lips up, like this,” Gus said, demonstrating. He looked like a jack-o’-lantern.

“He doesn’t have lips,” I pointed out. “Or eyes, nose, ears—”

“We’ll have to do something about that,” Gus interrupted. Reaching into one of his many pockets, he produced a red piece of chalk. A moment later, he’d drawn a large but rather ragged smile on Buzz.

“Shouldn’t a smile be on my front?” Buzz asked. “Why’d you draw it on my side?”

“You have a front?” I asked. “You look the same from all sides, all bumpy and cratered.”

“Of course I have a front!” Buzz exclaimed. “It’s right here... in front!”

“Well,” Gus said, “with a smile on your side, you can point that side at people when you want to smile.”

“What if I don’t want to smile?”

“Then you give them this side.” Gus drew a large, ragged frown on Buzz’s other side. “There. What do you think?”

Buzz bobbed up and down for a moment, and then turned the frowning side toward Gus.

There was a knock at the door. Without waiting for a response, a tiny, rat-faced man in a red suit entered. He wore a matching red baseball cap with the words, “Kennedy is Kool!”

“His Majesty the President awaits you,” the man said with a slight bow. He had a protruding nose with whiskers, like a rat. Under his breath he muttered, “*Who slay revealed.*”

“You don’t call the President ‘His Majesty,’” Gus said in his lecture voice. “He’s just Mr. President.”

The rat-faced man looked hurt. “You don’t think President Kennedy is majestic?”

“I didn’t say that,” Gus said. “You call a king ‘His Majesty,’ and he’s not a king.”

“You don’t need to be a king to be majestic,” the rat-faced man said, a tear rolling down his cheek. Then he muttered, “*How slay revealed.*”

“I didn’t say you had to be a king to be majestic!” Gus said, now switching to the aggravated tone I thought he reserved for me.

“But he’s not a king,” the rat-faced man said. “He’s a president.” He wiped away the tear.

“And a very majestic one!” I said, hoping to stop this from escalating and Gus getting frozen or burned, or maybe having his taxes audited.

“Listen very carefully,” Gus said. “I didn’t say President Kennedy wasn’t majestic, or that he was a king, or that you had to be a king to be majestic. These are straw man arguments that even Kennedy would laugh at. All I said was—”

“You think President Kennedy laughs at straw men?” the rat-faced man cried. “Why, I’ll have you know some of his best friends are straw men, and—”

“I didn’t say that!” Gus thundered.

The rat-faced man stared at Gus for a moment, and then shook his head. “I’m calling the IRS. I hope you’ve been paying your taxes.”

Gus opened his mouth to respond and then reconsidered. Unfortunately, he reconsidered wrongly. “You’d have the IRS check my taxes because we disagree about our president?”

Now the rat-faced man looked confused. “Who said anything about the Irate Resident Service checking your taxes? I just hope you’ve been paying your taxes since someone has to fund the IRS, and since you are obviously an irate resident, you have great need of them. Now, hurry along, we can’t keep His Majesty waiting. Or any of his straw friends.”

Buzz floated over. “Hi! What’s your name?”

The rat-faced man looked him over. “I’m Rat-Face. What do they call you? Igneous?”

“I’m Buzz.”

Rat-Face stared at Buzz for a moment. “Nice hat,” he said. He turned and went out the door. We followed. He stopped and glared back at Buzz.

“Sorry, no rocks in the Oval Office. Except in the heads of his advisors. The rest of you come with me.” Then he muttered, “*Ever ahead slowly.*”

Buzz tilted quizzically. “Are his advisors human? I don’t think I could fit inside the head of a human.”

“Buzz, you wait here for us,” I said. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Sure,” Buzz said. “Course I have to kill you in one hundred and fifty-five hours.” It must be eight o’clock Monday morning, I thought.

Rat-Face led us through a series of hallways and stairways on the way to the Oval Office, never once looking back. One moment we were in an office with dozens of people staring into desktop mirrors, then we went through a set of double doors, and suddenly, we were standing in front of a very large maple desk and President John F. Kennedy was rising to his feet.

“Your Majesty, I have brought them,” Rat-Face said. Then he muttered, “*Always loved here.*”

“C’mon, Rat-Face, you know I’ve told you not to call me that,” Kennedy said in his Boston accent. “I’m not a king. We’re all equal citizens.”

Rat-Face nodded, his whole body going up and down, and muttered, “*A shadow leveler.*”

Kennedy circled around his desk, extending his hand to Gus. His too-tight, blue robe matched the baseball cap on the head of the Massachusetts native, which said, “Red Sox Nation.” His huge sword *Chaos*, famous throughout the world, hung in a scabbard at his side.

“Ah, uh, um,” Gus said, apparently not noticing Kennedy’s outthrust hand as he gaped at the President.

“You’re Gus the Sorcerer?” Kennedy asked. “The one with information about the Giant Face in the Sky?”

“Ah, um, uh,” Gus said.

“The one with dire news on a new threat from the Soviets?”

“Uh, ah, um,” Gus said.

“There are only six combinations of ah, uh, and um,” Kennedy said. “Why don’t you get the last three out of the way so we can talk?”

“Uh, um, ah,” Gus said.

“He tells everyone you’re not majestic,” Rat-Face said. “And that you hate straw people.”

“I’ve been called a lot worse,” Kennedy said. “Besides, what’s this about straw people? There’s no such thing as straw people. Do they vote?”

“Um, ah, uh,” Gus explained.

“You’re almost there,” Kennedy said. “One more.”

“Um, uh, ah,” Gus said.

“I’m glad we got that out of the way,” Kennedy said. “Perhaps later we can talk about the straw man constituency and other weighty matters, like that problem with who’s killing the celebrities in Cleveland. You can call me John. I hear you had some problems with my wife, something about a red staff and cold dead fingers?”

“No, it was a red drink, and she caught me—”

“No matter,” Kennedy interrupted. “Let me call some others in so you can explain what’s going on.” He called out, “Hey, Robert, Lyndon, get in here!”

A side door opened, and in walked Kennedy’s brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Robert wore a blue robe matching his

brother's, with a blue baseball cap that said, "I'm with Stupid." He stood to the right of his brother's desk so the arrow under the slogan pointed at the President. Johnson wore a billowing black robe with matching baseball cap that said, "*Come to the Dark Side.*" He stood to the left of the President.

President Kennedy looked at me. "You must be Gus's apprentice, right?"

I nodded and gave him the blazing smile I'd practice that morning with Gus.

"You look like a jack-o'-lantern when you smile like that," Robert said. "You should practice in front of a mirror."

"I'm sure Gus wouldn't bring his apprentice to the Oval Office without having him practice his smile first," Johnson said. "That'd be stupid."

"I practice first thing every morning," Robert said. "Ten smiles, ten frowns, ten looks of surprise, ten superior looks, and so on."

"Now, Gus, why don't you tell us what you came to tell us?" the President asked. "Now that we got our ahs, uhs, and ums out of the way?"

His tongue no longer fettered by two-lettered exclamations, Gus explained how Corona, the top-secret spying talisman he'd been working on, had accidentally attracted the Face, which was now watching and following me around while reading text messages from the Corona Effect, and how the Soviet agent Chef Wang had showed up and tried to kill me, since he claimed I would someday defeat the Soviets.

“So you’re saying the Corona Effect describes everything in plain text and the Face is just reading the text?” the President asked.

“Must be a book lover,” Robert said.

“And this inauspicious-looking apprentice will destroy the mighty Soviet Union?” The President turned his gaze on me. “What powerful weapons would you use to do that?”

I wanted to disappear, but only ghosts can do that. “I have this.” I pulled out my pink stapler.

The two Kennedys and Johnson all leaned forward to see my wand. The most powerful men in the U.S. broke up laughing.

“That’s what you’ll use to destroy the Soviets?” Johnson chuckled.

“Perhaps he’ll staple their nuclear weapons to the missile launch floors,” Robert snickered.

“Maybe he’ll poke their eyes out with the horns of the pretty unicorns,” the President chortled.

I didn’t want to wait a hundred and fifty or so hours for Buzz to put me out of my misery. Ghost or no ghost, I tried to disappear. Gus kept his head down as he waited for the laughter to subside.

“And Chef Wang, the notorious Soviet agent,” Johnson said. “We’ve been searching for him for years! How did you find him?”

“He was running a Chinese restaurant in Cape Canaveral,” I said, glad to get off the topic of my stapler.

“How was he able to hide from us all this time?” Johnson asked. “We’ve got hundreds of agents scouring

the nation looking for him! What pseudonym was he living under?"

"He went by his regular name, Chef Wang," I said.

"That's not possible," Johnson said. "Do you have any idea how many thousands of hours and millions of dollars have been spent searching for him? What did he do, hide secretly in the basement of some Chinese restaurant?"

"It's called Chef Wang's Café," I said. "There's a big sign saying that in front. It's in the Yellow Pages. There were reviews about it in the newspapers and on the mirror shows. He was even on that celebrity chef show, under his own name."

"*That was Chef Wang?*" John exclaimed. "The guy who won first place on American Cooking Idol?"

"That was he," I said.

"Glad he's dead," Johnson said. "Now all that money we spent searching for him wasn't wasted." He surreptitiously glanced over at the President and quickly looked away when he found the President glaring at him.

"So, what is the connection between the Soviets and the Giant Face in the Sky?" Robert asked.

"Don't you see?" Gus said. "With a launching platform like that, the Soviets could send any spell at us, and we'd have no defense. We'd be helpless."

"Which means if we got there first, we could send any spell at the Soviet Union, and they'd have no defense," Johnson said, his chin in his hands as he thought deeply, a slightly evil-looking smile spreading slowly across his face.

"Wipe the slightly evil-looking smile off your face, Lyndon," the President said. "We're the good guys. Now,

why don't you two go do whatever you do with whoever you do it with and find out whatever we need to know to do whatever it is we need to do to take care of whatever this problem is." The President waved his hand at his brother and Vice President, and the two left, leaving Gus and me alone with him and Rat-Face.

"Finally got rid of them," the President said. "This looks like a serious problem, and I need some serious advice. Hey, Mr. President, you can come out now."

I always thought it awkward that former presidents were also called "Mr. President." After all, if you were in a room full of ex-presidents and called out "Mr. President," everyone in the room would look up. However, there were only two living ex-presidents now in 1969, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower. Which one was President Kennedy's secret advisor?

Out of the shadows appeared Abraham Lincoln. And he looked mad as hell.

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