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The Amphibian Brief

"Twister, sir?" asked Jordan.

Santos shook his head.

"Parcheesi?"

Santos, again, shook his head. This was getting monotonous, bordering on the pleasurable. Santos liked the monotonous. When things became shook up, it usually meant someone had died, which most people, Santos included, did not find particularly entertaining. Such is the life of a cop. Lieutenant Jordan, perhaps because of his youth or perhaps because of some deep, psychical torment, disliked monotony. Not that he was a fan of people dying, however; he was hoping to some day find a happy middle ground.

"Lying down in the road and letting trucks drive over you?"

"What?"

"Oh, sorry, I got the cards mixed up. That was some kind of fad that swept the country not too long ago, inspired by a scene in some Hollywood film. Ummm. . . ." He flipped through some cards. "Chutes and Ladders?"

"No."

"Captain, is this getting us anywhere?"

"It depends where you want to go," said Santos philosophically.

"Oh, God, you're in one of those moods again. Captain, why is it crucial that we know what game Dennis Renstor was playing when he disappeared?"

"I never said it was crucial," said Santos.

"Then why the devil have we spent the last five hours running through these index cards I made of every game I could think of, as well as some I couldn't think of?"

"Because, you can't solve a problem unless you have all the data. Even negative data can be useful, despite what the referees of academic journals may think."

"Leapfrog?" continued Jordan with a sigh.

"Hmm. Something about that rings a bell."

"Well, you've heard about the game, I'm sure. I never played it myself, and was never quite sure why it was named as such."

"Well, as I understand it—and I don't—it is so-named because the way in which the children—or adults, for that matter—leap over each other's backs is supposed to resemble the manner in which frogs leap, despite the fact that few frogs actually leap over each other's backs like that. Well, actually they kind of do, but only during mating

season, which I'm sure the inventors of this game did not have in mind."

"You never know."

"True. The age of innocence is but a myth, not to mention a pretty dull movie." He paused. "Leapfrog. I'm certain it means something, but damned if I know what. I shall have to give it no thought at all, and I'm certain it will come to me."

2.

Later that afternoon, Santos and Jordan appeared at the Lakeside Elementary School after a break-in had been reported. They were seated in the principal's office and awaited his return.

"It's been a long time since I was in a principal's office, Captain," said Jordan, eyeing the football trophies the school's team had won in the previous year's basketball championship. It wasn't a very good team. "Despite the fact that now I'm a reasonably respected member of the police department as well as a hell of a good ballroom dancer, I used to spend an awful lot of my time in the principal's office for some disciplinary infraction or other. Smoking, usually."

"Smoking? In grammar school? A bit precocious, weren't you? It wasn't because of that extra Y chromosome, was it?"

"No, I used to have a smoking habit. I picked it up from my father. He used to manufacture sausages, and he and I used to spend hours smoking them. It became a habit. On many occasions teachers caught me smoking sausages in the bathroom. It wasn't strictly illegal, mind you, but there were a number of vegetarians who went to school there and lodged a formal protest. I grew up in California, after all."

It was at that point, thankfully, that the principal entered. He was a very tall, thin man, and had a habit of wearing golf clothes during school hours. Oddly enough, every Sunday when he played golf, he wore a three-piece suit. Go figure.

"I'm Edgar Bormann, the Principal of Lakeside Elementary School. But you can call me Nigel."

"Nigel?" asked Santos.

"It's a nickname given to me by several of our English students. I'm told it's a reference to *King Lear*."

"But there's no one named Nigel in *King Lear*."

"I know. We don't have a very good English department."

"At any rate . . . Nigel . . . I'm Captain Bernard Santos and this is Lieutenant Jordan. We're from the police department, Homicide, actually."

"It does seem odd, headquarters sending two Homicide cops to investigate what can only be called the complete lack of any sort of homicide."

"Well, ours is not to reason why . . . on occasion. So, what does appear to have occurred here?"

"It's rather hard to explain, but our Biology department's frogs have disappeared."

"Actually," said Jordan, "that was pretty easy to explain."

"No," said Nigel, "it's easy to describe, but difficult to explain."

"That, Jordan," said Santos, "is a distinction that is fundamental to all police work."

"Come," said Nigel, leading them from the office, "let me show you where the frogs aren't. The Biology department is on the Eighth Floor."

"But," said Santos, "from outside it appears as if there are only two floors in this building."

"I know. We may not have a very good English department, but we've got one heck of a bunch of architecture students."

He led them up a spiral staircase, which wended its way up eight stories. They stood outside the open door of the Biology classroom, where about twenty-five fourth-grade students were listening to the teacher lecture.

"Now, molecular biologists," the teacher was lecturing, "can make primer molecules of DNA, which are about 18 bases long and will bind to a unique position in the genome. With enzymes, they can then extend a bound primer by several hundred more bases complementary to the genomic DNA. And by sequencing the elongated primer, they can then determine the genome sequence. The basic problem with this approach is that it is incredibly labor intensive. Synthesizing a new 18-base primer typically takes a day, and when you consider that three billion base pairs make up human DNA, you're talking about a good deal of work. Now, are there any questions?"

A hand shot up.

"Suzy?"

"Mr. Crick, why can't they simply use a library of hexamers, along with a protein that binds to single-strand genomic DNA. The binding protein will prevent the individual hexamers from pairing stably with the DNA, but three end-to-end hexamers will reinforce each other enough to force the protein out of the way. And since there are

only 4,096 different types of hexamers, instead of the 68 billion base-pair primers, it would seem to take far less time and stuff."

"Actually, Suzy, researchers have been using that very technique."

At that point, the end-of-class bell rang, and the students began gathering together their books.

"Now, class," said Mr. Crick above the rising din, "don't forget, I want your isolated nucleotides on my desk first thing tomorrow morning."

The students began filing out past Santos, Jordan, and Nigel.

"Ah, Nigel," said Mr. Crick, noticing the principal lurking in the doorway, "please, come in."

The three approached the teacher, who was erasing gene maps from the blackboard.

"Mr. Crick, this is Captain Santos and Lieutenant Jordan from the police department. They've come about the frogs."

"Oh, well, that's a relief. Here," he led them through a door at the back of the room, "this is where they had been kept."

He pointed to a large room filled with vegetation and other living matter, but which was curiously devoid of frogs.

"As you can see," Crick said, gesturing around the room, "we had created a habitat similar to that which the frogs—in our case, the *Gigantorana goliath* or Goliath frog of Africa—would find had they spawned in the wild. We meticulously constructed the African jungle in this room, which is remarkable in its detail, right down to the insect life."

"Ahhh!!" screamed Jordan. "Something just bit my ankle."

"Oh, it's probably nothing to worry about. What shots have you had recently?"

"Anyway, Mr. Crick," said Santos, "perhaps the frogs are simply hiding somewhere amongst all this vegetation."

"Not a chance. Do you know how large a Goliath frog can get?"

"Not particularly."

"About the size of a fox terrier. Ours were a little larger. It doesn't seem likely that they could hide easily."

"When did you last see them?" asked Santos.

"I think it's swelling rather badly," said Jordan, his voice growing weaker.

"I first noticed their absence this morning, just before my third-grade lab on artificial heart implantation using

an intraventricular cannula pump. When I returned about forty-five minutes later, the frogs were gone."

"There doesn't seem to be any sign of a struggle," said Santos.

"There appears to be some kind of fluid oozing from my leg, Captain," said Jordan.

"Actually, Lieutenant," said Santos, "the oozing of fluid means that whatever bacteria has got into the wound is being flushed out. So, consider yourself lucky. Mr. Crick, can you think of any reason why someone would want to kidnap your frogs?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Hmm. Lieutenant, dust for prints."

Jordan wiped the ooze from his swollen ankle with a handkerchief. "But Captain, I don't believe that we'll have the frogs' prints on record."

"Well, then dust for human prints. We're probably somewhat more likely to have those on file."

"I wouldn't bet on it, sir. You know how Commissioner Beale feels about fingerprints."

Nigel and Mr. Crick were looking at Santos quizzically.

Santos explained. "Unfortunately, our police commissioner is, well, a bit on the fanatically neat side. He can't stand the sight of fingerprints—on glasses, windows, doors,

or even police records. It's kind of frustrating, but we humor him. Especially since he could ruin all of our lives irreparably. Lieutenant, dust for prints anyway. I think the commissioner will be going on vacation in a week or so, and we can do our cross-checking then."

Jordan quickly took a set of a variety of prints from a number of different locations around the room, although he did have a problem dusting some of the insects, which wouldn't remain stationary long enough to pull a good impression off their chitinous shells.

"Mr. Crick," said Santos, "is there anyone else who regularly has access to this room?"

"Just Nigel, and my lab assistant. But he didn't come in today."

"Where might we be able to get in touch with him?"

"I don't know. When he leaves this building, he just tends to disappear. Of course, I've never had any need to get in touch with him when he's not here, so I suppose it could be that he's perfectly apparent to the outside world and I just have never noticed him beyond this room. Of course, I myself haven't been out of this building—or even off this floor—for several years, so what he does on his own time—or mine, for that matter—is strictly his own

business. He may even have his own business, for all I know."

"Well, the next time he turns up, please let him know we'd like to have several words with him."

They made their farewells and reassured Nigel and Mr. Crick that they would do everything in their power to return the missing frogs to their rightful home. Well, not technically their *rightful* home, but as good a home as any.

3.

"Captain, have a look at this. In the *New York Times*. "

"Oh, you've finished the crossword puzzle. And on a Friday, too. I'm very impressed, Lieutenant."

"No, Captain, it's an article from Tuesday's science section entitled 'The Continuing Mystery of the Missing Frogs.' Apparently, biologists everywhere are puzzled over the bizarre disappearance of the world's frog population."

"The whole world? Let me see that." He took the paper from Jordan. "You're right. According to this, amphibians from around the globe are disappearing in alarming numbers."

"Does anyone have any theories? You took the paper before I could get very far."

"A few, including fragile frogs' eggs being destroyed by enhanced ultraviolet radiation due to depletion of the ozone layer, pollution, et cetera. Someone mentioned suicide, but that I believe has been almost universally disregarded."

"Have they ruled out foul play?" asked Jordan.

Santos scanned the rest of the article. "There's no mention of it."

"I'm sure it's doubtful that there's some nefarious reason for the amphibians' disappearance. After all, the logistics of such a plot would be nearly impossible to work out."

"No, not impossible. Extremely improbable, but not impossible."

"But why would anyone want to bump off all the world's frogs?"

Santos pondered that question. "Ransom, perhaps. After all, many biologists say that it is the health of the amphibian population that gauges the health of an ecosystem as a whole. Without frogs, salamanders, or newts it may not be possible to determine the extent of damage done to a particular environment, which then opens doors for a variety of environmental trashing procedures."

"But certainly biologists have other means of determining how healthy an ecosystem is. Didn't you read Edward O. Wilson's *The Diversity of Life*?"

"Mm. That's a good point. Again, I shall have to give this situation no thought at all, and I'm certain that it will come to me."

"Speaking of which, have you come to any conclusions regarding Dennis Renstor?"

"No, not yet."

"You don't think that Renstor's disappearance is related to the frogs' disappearance?"

"It wouldn't surprise me, Lieutenant. If I remember his photographs correctly, he was somewhat frog-like in appearance. It would be an easy mistake to make."

Easy mistake indeed.

4.

The following day, Jordan walked into Santos's office with the mail.

"Sir, something came in the mail that you may find of interest."

Santos flipped through the pile Jordan handed him. He frowned. "But I've told Time-Life a hundred times I'm not interested in their serial killer books."

"No, not that. This." He pulled out an opened manila envelope and handed it to Santos.

"What is it?"

Jordan removed a bound sheaf of papers from the envelope and flipped through it. "It's something called 'The Amphibian Brief.' It was written by a young herpetology student at the University of Arizona. It purports to explain what happened to the world's frogs."

"What does this person claim?"

"The abstract reads as follows: 'In this paper, I will explain how one being's megalomania resulted in the abduction of the world's amphibian population, an abduction that so far has caused the disappearance of the Earth's frogs, and is likely to claim salamanders and newts within the next year.' Basically, Captain, the author asserts that the Ace Rubber Novelty Company has plans to replace all the world's real frogs with fake ones. They're going to ransom the frogs back to herpetologists and environmentalists, but the frogs that are returned will be rubber wind-ups that look and act exactly like the real things. Supposedly, the prototypes that already exist are perfect replicas. But since the company doesn't yet have the technology to allow the mock frogs to reproduce themselves, each generation of

frogs will have to be purchased anew from the company, which could be quite lucrative for them."

"Jordan, that's diabolical. They must also manufacture computer software. But what proof does this person have for this?"

"Supposedly, there was a memo sent from the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company to the Director of Marketing outlining the whole plot. This memo is not included in this brief, but is being held in a safe deposit box here in town. Included with it is a copy of a draft of a press release that was to be sent to newspapers around the world—and elsewhere—once the switch was made."

"But how can they ever expect to get away with this?"

"Well, the whole scheme is apparently premised on the fact that there really is no law on the books in any country that pertains to frogs. Amphibians, alas, have always been left out of the legislative process. They are, the author claims, the forgotten minority. And the whole thing is being done in secret so as to be able to complete the operation before any special interest groups can get legislation passed."

"Who is the president of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company?"

Jordan shrugged. "No one knows. His identity has always remained a secret. Everything that has come out of his

office has always been signed simply 'the President.' No one has ever seen him, and no name has ever appeared on any official documents."

"Jordan, I want you to do some digging. Start in my garden. There are several weeds I would like removed. Then, I want you to investigate the Ace Rubber Novelty Company. Their corporate headquarters is here in Moistville. I want you to try to find out who the president is, and perhaps where the frogs are being held. Time is of the essence, as it's likely that the live frogs are going to be killed after all the faux frogs are manufactured. Therefore, also see if you can find out when that is likely to be finished.

"Yes, sir."

"Also, fax this report to Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. I want him to try to get in touch with the author of it. He's at the University of Arizona this week, delivering a lecture entitled 'Fabrication, Falsification, and Outright Lying as a Means of Effective Forensic Analysis,' so if I know him he'll have something by the time he returns. Or, at the very least, he'll have made up something useful."

"Funny how the stuff he makes up is more useful than the stuff he finds empirically, isn't it?"

Funny indeed.

5.

But later that afternoon, Santos and Jordan found themselves back at Lakeside Elementary School. They met Nigel and Mr. Crick in the room in which the frogs were last seen.

"I'm sorry to call you up here, Captain," said Nigel, "but, well, you had asked to be informed when Crick's lab assistant turned up."

Santos stared down at the body of young man of about twenty-six. "That's him?"

"George Dunhill. He was the best lab assistant I ever had," said Mr. Crick, visibly upset. "He had such high hopes for his future. He wanted to get his Ph.D. and be a famous biologist. And even though there was no chance of that happening here—what with this being only an elementary school and all—he was completely dedicated."

"Who found the body?" asked Jordan.

"Suzy Watson. She was one of my students, quite brilliant, too. I suggested to the Nobel Committee that they consider awarding her a prize for her paper 'What I Did on My Summer Vacation.'"

Jordan bent down to examine the body. "Although I can't be certain of the cause of death, my suspicion is that it

has something to do with his body being completely stuffed with large beetles."

"Yes," said Mr. Crick, "it appears that all the beetles in this room have been gathered together and stuffed into his mouth. It's a gruesome way to die."

"Is it possible that the beetles acted alone? I mean, was he a mouth-breather and maybe dozed off or something?" Jordan asked. "Many insects do like warm, moist places."

"No, not a chance. He had a special relationship with all the insect life in this room. They all respected him. In fact, when he played in a local tennis championship, they all made it a point to go out and watch him play and cheer him on. They would never have done something like this themselves. They had to have been put up to it, probably with a good deal of money. Or dung."

"Captain," said Jordan, "none of the insects survived."

Crick sighed. "Another of life's little lessons. Never turn on your friends."

"Mr. Crick, where was Mr. Dunhill the day the frogs disappeared?" asked Santos.

"As I told you before, I'm afraid I don't know. He came into the lab very late that day, and he didn't say why. And since he's not actually paid to be here, I saw no reason to pry. But if you're thinking he had anything to do with the

frogs' disappearance, I'm afraid you're mistaken. He loved those frogs, and would never do anything to harm or inconvenience them."

"Just like the insects wouldn't have harmed Mr. Dunhill unless compelled by some third party, right?"

"But a man is not an insect, Captain," said Nigel.

"I'll grant you that," said Santos, "but something is fishy here. Come, Jordan, I need to pace a bit in the car park."

Sure enough, outside in the car park, Santos paced.

"I take it you didn't have a chance to check out the Ace Rubber Novelty Company yet."

"No, sir, I haven't. But I did find out something you may find of interest. You know the safe deposit box that the 'Amphibian Brief' said contains the incriminating memo? It was rented under the name of George Dunhill."

"That is good news. Is there a way we can get into it?"

"The only other name authorized to open the box is 'Maggie Dunhill'."

"His wife?"

"His cat."

Santos looked at Jordan. "Huh?"

"Yes, the only other 'person' authorized to open his safe deposit box is his cat."

"Well, let's pay a visit to his cat, then."

7.

George Dunhill's apartment was on the thirty-ninth floor of a large highrise in the heart of downtown Moistville. They found a spare housekey concealed inside a plastic rock placed in the corridor.

"He kind of missed the point of these things, didn't he?" said Jordan, replacing the rock on the carpet.

They unlocked the door and, upon entering, were immediately assaulted by Maggie Dunhill, who apparently hadn't been fed in a while. Jordan led the cat into the kitchen and put some food in her bowl. The cat looked at Jordan, glanced back down at the food, then back up to Jordan.

"I'm not playing 'choo-choo' with you," Jordan said to the cat.

"Lieutenant," said Santos "keep in mind we will need the cat's cooperation."

"Yes, sir," grumbled Jordan.

"Meanwhile, I'll look around for the key to that safe deposit box. And anything else I can find."

Santos wandered around the neat, one-room apartment, but couldn't find anything particularly relevant to the case at hand.

"Here comes the choo-choo," he heard Jordan saying, in a high-pitched voice. "Choo-choo!"

Santos hoped Jordan wouldn't think that he'd ever let him forget this episode. When it sounded as if Jordan was finished feeding the cat, Santos walked into the kitchen. Jordan was holding the cat, an empty spoon and can of cat food in his hand. The cat looked happy. Jordan did not.

"I've been unable to find the key to the safe deposit box—"

Santos reached over and examined the cat's collar. There was a key attached to it, behind the cat's I.D. tag.

"I think we've found the key. Let's head over to the bank now, before it closes. It's nearly four-thirty. Unless you'd like to play with the cat some more."

"No, I think we're done." The cat meowed loudly in protest. Jordan glared at her. "Oh, bite me, cat."

And she did.

A short time later, Santos, Jordan and Maggie Dunhill entered the bank. They approached the woman at the desk reserved for safe deposit box requests.

"We're here to open a safe deposit box. I'm Captain Bernard Santos with the police department, and this is Lieutenant Jordan and Maggie Dunhill. The box is in the name of George Dunhill, who has recently been murdered."

The woman, without looking up, flipped through some cards. "Ah, yes, George Dunhill. And the only other person authorized to open that box is . . . Maggie Dunhill." She looked up and saw the cat. "You're kidding. That's Maggie Dunhill?" Santos nodded. "I'll need to see some identification."

Santos removed the cat's collar and handed her Maggie's I.D. tag. She wasn't quite sure how to handle this, so she called her bank manager over and explained the situation.

"The cat believes," explained Santos, "that there is a can of tuna in that box and, not having opposable thumbs, is unable to avail herself of it without human assistance."

"Well, seeing as you are the police, I don't have a problem with it this time. But check these things more carefully in the future, Miss Jenkins."

"Yes, sir." She stood up, glowered at the cat, and led Santos, Jordan, and Maggie to the safe deposit box room.

Santos opened the box and removed its contents. There was a sheaf of paper, and a videotape, which Santos examined.

"*The Last Boy Scout?*" said Santos.

"What's that note attached to the back of it?" asked Jordan.

"It's from Dunhill. It says, 'I bought this movie, thinking it would be good, but I was wrong, and really didn't want anyone to find it in my apartment should I meet my end before taping over it. Now I figure if you've got this far, I'll have far more to be embarrassed about than a weakness for Bruce Willis.' Well, I guess that explains that."

They closed up the box and walked back through the lobby. As they walked out the front door of the bank, they heard the screeching of tires coming from around a nearby corner. Santos thought this a little odd, what with them being on the twentieth floor of an office building. At that point, a black sedan appeared from around the corner, and successfully demolished the ashtray in front of the elevator. When the cloud of white sand cleared, Santos, Jordan and Maggie Dunhill found themselves looking on in horror as the sedan came charging straight at them.

They ran back into the bank, the sedan in hot pursuit. Several bank workers and patrons screamed, more in surprise

than true terror, as the sedan plowed through rows of filing cabinets, desks, and computer terminals.

"We do *not* have a drive-thru window!" screamed the bank manager as the sedan roared past him.

Santos and Jordan, who was still clutching a somewhat bewildered Maggie Dunhill, leapt over the teller counter and watched as the sedan screeched to a halt in front of them. Santos was able to slightly discern a face inside the car. The bank security guard, an older man not quite prepared for this kind of thing, walked over to the silent car, tentatively. He drew his gun. It was at that point that the car exploded.

"Well, that was odd," said Santos.

Odd indeed.

9.

When Santos and Jordan returned to police headquarters, Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder was waiting for them.

"I got your message, Captain, and I've brought you back something from Arizona. Please meet Julia Ranida, the herpetologist we've heard so much about lately."

"My forensics examiner went to Arizona and all I got was this lousy herpetologist," said Santos shaking the hand of the quite attractive woman.

She smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Captain. Adolf speaks of you often. He also likes to dress up in your clothes in front of the bathroom mirror. *Chacun à son goût*, I guess."

"Bernard," said Schlickelmeinengrubnenbieder, "I promised her sanctuary. There are many people trying to kill her. The Ace Rubber Novelty Company has agents, assassins, and salesmen everywhere. We barely escaped Arizona with our lives."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Rather than carry our lives on the plane, we made the mistake of checking them with our baggage. Needless to say, the airline lost them. We had to send away to Hawaii for them."

"Actually, Schlickelmeinengrubnenbieder," said Santos, "we were just about to go through the material we retrieved from George Dunhill's safe deposit box."

"You've probably found *The Last Boy Scout* already then," said Julia.

"You knew George Dunhill?" asked Jordan.

"Not very well. We were married briefly several years ago. We were undergraduates together. I was studying amphibians, he was studying insects, and I guess I just caught him rather like a frog catches a fly. I guess it was

lucky that I have an extensile tongue. We married young, and it didn't work out. We kept in touch, though. It wasn't a bitter divorce. I let him have custody of all the cockroaches in the kitchen. It was the least I could do. It was through him that I found out about the Ace Rubber Novelty Company."

"How?" asked Santos.

"He had been hired by them as a consultant for their line of 'fly in the ice cube' practical jokes. They wanted to be excruciatingly accurate in their party gags. I mean, let's face it, if a guest at a party finds an ice cube with a fly embedded in it, the joke doesn't work if the fly is a species not native to wherever the party is being held. After all, there are over 100,000 species of *Diptera*, or 'true flies.' It was completely by accident that he stumbled on the memo that outlined the frog plot."

"Did he know who the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company was?" asked Jordan.

"I believe he did, but he never told me who it was. All he would say is that I had dated his brother, but that wasn't a particularly specific clue. For a brief period after our divorce, I dated hundreds of peoples' brothers."

Santos didn't want to hear any more. "Well, we had a difficult enough time getting this material from the safe deposit box, so let's at least find out what's in it."

He opened the large manila envelope and removed its contents, spreading the material out on his desk. There were a number of sheets of paper, some magazines, several sealed letter-size envelopes, and a few other random objects.

"Hmm," said Santos, riffling through everything quickly before delving headfirst into it. "Cat Fancy magazine, a letter from Ed McMahon, some slices of cheese, and—what's this?" He removed a blue, typed sheet of paper. Julia and Jordan read it over his shoulder.

"It's the memo," said Julia. "The one from the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company detailing the plan."

Santos read the memo:

To: Edgar Benjamin, Director of Marketing

From: The President

Subject: Kidnapping the Frog Population of the World

Ed:

It has recently come to my attention that many biologists the world over feel that one of the most

important members to any ecosystem is the frog. The frog's sensitivity to a variety of changes makes it an essential indicator of an ecosystem's health, which can help guide environmental policy. Similarly, we here at the Ace Rubber Novelty Company strive for technical excellence in our replicas of popular species. For example, our XJ-5000 Rubber Roach has terrified housewives for many years. We did not achieve this by skimping on detail. Along the same lines, I feel our mock frogs are the best ever produced, perhaps even superior to what nature has created. And our frogs don't fall ill at the slightest change in temperature, or burn to a crisp just because of enhanced ultraviolet radiation. Nature is not for wimps. If we were to remove all the world's frogs and replace them with our own, we could control environmental policy for years, if not weeks. If the robust health of species could be fabricated, environmentalists would have nothing to gripe about, and those of us in industry—the backbone of the modern world—would be able to whatever we wanted and not be pestered by environmental restrictions. Naturally, confidentiality must be complete for our scheme to work. Therefore, you, as head of Marketing, should regard this as business as usual, and make no effort to publicize or advertise what we are doing.

I have the greatest of faith that this effort will be the most important—if not the creepiest—industrial undertaking the world has ever known.

-The President

P.S. Bwa-ha-ha-ha.

"Well, we seem to have all the evidence we need to convict right here," said Jordan.

Santos looked pensive. "Not really. Until we catch them in the act of actually substituting those frogs, this memo could be considered by a court of law to be merely a joke or harmless prank, but only by a judge or jury that has a sense of humor, like the O.J. jury."

"So what is your plan, corporal?" asked Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"We'll have to stake out every swamp, marsh, and bog within our jurisdiction," said Santos.

"Even the statehouse?" asked Jordan.

"Well, no, I think they can handle themselves well enough. And I can't really say that it would be particularly grievous if everyone *there* were replaced by plastic replicas. . . . At any rate, Ms. Ranida, where in this county would we be likely to find the largest frog population?"

Julia thought. "Lakeside Elementary School."

Santos shook his head. "Nope, too late. It's been hit already."

"Then the only other substantial frog population would be in Hengrove Marsh, just off route 30, next door to the paper mill."

"Jordan, I want several men to go under cover and stake out that swamp."

"Um, Captain, how exactly do you go to a swamp under cover?" asked Jordan.

"That's your problem."

Problem indeed.

"Captain, I don't know how you did, but we're all eternally grateful," said Mr. Crick over the phone early the next morning.

"Well, the trick is to make sure that the oven temperature never exceeds 350 degrees. It's also important that—"

"No, no, no, I meant about the frogs."

"What frogs would these be?"

"Our frogs."

"Your frogs?"

"Yes, our frogs."

"Frogs?"

"Yes, the frogs."

"You got circles?!"

"Excuse me?"

"Mr. Crick, forgive my confusion, but I really have no idea what you're on about."

"Our frogs are back."

Santos paused. "I should have seen this coming. Mr. Crick, I'm afraid I have some bad news. They're not your frogs."

"Not our frogs? Captain, I assure you, I know my own frogs. I've spent the best years of my life with those frogs. Heck," he said, beginning to sob, "I almost married one of them."

Santos hated hysterical men, like Steven Wright. "Mr. Crick, sad as it may seem, your frogs are the result of a hideous, although admittedly loopy, plot to replace the world's frog population with rubber replicas."

"But Captain, these are identical to my frogs."

"Yes, I know, it was done by pros. Listen, you have to believe me. Dissect one, if you think I'm joking."

"No, I believe you. It could explain why Marcia was so. . . . Well, anyway. Captain, what are we to do? What's become of the real ones?"

"I don't know yet what's happened to the real frogs, but we're staking out other amphibian-based ecosystems and hopefully we'll be in luck. The culprits don't know we're on to them yet, so we may have the element of surprise."

Jordan ran into the room. "Captain! You'll never bel—"

"Jordan," Santos said, cupping his hand over the earpiece of the phone, "I'm right in the middle of a rather delicate matter."

"Could you order pepperoni?"

"Jordan!"

"But Captain, Dennis Renstor has been found."

"I'll talk to you later," he said into the phone, and hung up immediately.

Jordan continued. "He turned up at his home very early this morning. He wasn't in very good shape. He had apparently been starved for days, there was dried blood on his forehead, both his legs were broken, he was severely dehydrated, and his very expensive silk shirt had been torn. We took him to the doctor."

"And?"

"His doctor said 'Mylanta.' We're not sure what that meant, but a better doctor took care of him and he's in stable condition."

"Can he talk?"

"Oh, yes. Since a very early age."

"Good. Let's go."

Go indeed.

10.

They found Dennis Renstor resting comfortably in a custodial closet on the third floor of the hospital.

"Jordan, why is this man in a custodial closet?" asked Santos.

"He didn't read the fine print on his HMO."

"Why is there even a bed in a custodial closet?"

"Their janitor takes a lot of naps. Union rules."

"I see."

Renstor was nearly wide awake, and was playing a spirited game of Tetris on a GameBoy. And you know, he did look remarkably like a frog.

"Mr. Renstor, I am Captain Bernard Santos of the Police Department. I'd like to know exactly what happened to you."

"Well, Sergeant, I was in my backyard near Barrymore's Bog—you know, on Route 50, next door to the other paper mill—playing leapfrog, when these two men came up behind me, stuck a rag over my face, and dragged me away."

"Chloroform?"

"No, actually my nose was running. Hayfever."

"Ah."

"Anyway, I passed out shortly after that, and woke up in a big, airplane-hanger-like room, surrounded by thousands of frogs. This didn't bother me at all, loving frogs the way I do. But as the minutes stretched into hours, and the hours stretched into more hours, and the hours stretched into days, and the days into weeks, and the weeks into months, and the months into years—"

"Uh," said Jordan, "you were only there for about three weeks, you know."

"Oh. Well, it was a while anyway. And no one had fed me. The door was locked from the inside and there were no windows. So I was trapped there, hungry, thirsty, and with a big tear in my silk shirt."

"How did you ultimately manage to escape?"

"I dug a tunnel. The floor was made of wood, and it had a bad case of dry rot, and termites, and all sorts of other things wrong with it, so I was able to dig a tunnel. As it turned out, the room I was in was on the third floor of a building, so I eventually fell right on top of some guy's desk. Fortunately, it was at three in the morning, so the guy whose desk it was must have been in the bathroom or

something. His door was unlocked, so I managed to sneak out and escape."

"Where was this building?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? How did you get home?"

"I hitchhiked. Someone picked me up, and I just gave him my address.

Santos was getting annoyed. "Didn't you notice where you were going? Or where you were coming from?"

"Well, no. . . . I was busy trying to find something good on the radio. By the time I did, I was home."

At that point, the doctor entered the custodial closet. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but you'll have to leave. It's time for Mr. Renstor to be jabbed repeatedly with a variety of needles."

"Jordan," said Santos.

"Let me guess: to the car park?"

"Very much so."

Very much so indeed.

"Stop that!" Santos yelled.

11.

Once again, the car park it was.

"Let me see if I have all the facts here," said Santos, as Jordan watched him pace. "First, Dennis Renstor is kidnapped while playing leapfrog. As we know, he lives on the edge of a marsh and has an uncanny resemblance to a frog. And Jordan, the color of his silk shirt?"

"Green."

"He was wearing a green shirt when he was kidnapped, and was held in a room full of frogs. Then, a roomful of frogs at Lakeside Elementary School disappears, and a teaching assistant is killed. This aforementioned teaching assistant also has all the evidence regarding the fiendish plot on the part of the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company to replace all the world's real frogs with plastic replicas. Meanwhile, all of this is uncovered by an Arizona herpetology student who had been married to the teaching assistant who was murdered. Then, Renstor escapes and doesn't know where he was held. Am I missing anything, Jordan?"

"Well, aside from the solution, no. If only we knew where Renstor had been held."

"Didn't he say that as soon as he found something good on the radio, he arrived home?" said Jordan.

"Well, that narrows us down to about 3,000 miles."
Suddenly, Santos snapped his fingers. "Wait! What time did he arrive home?"

"About 3:05 this morning."

"Aha! And he had said that he had fallen through the floor of his prison at 3:00 am. So that means it was a five-minute drive from where he was to his home. Jordan, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I seriously doubt that, sir."

"The paper mill! I think I know the whole thing now! Round up all the suspects and meet me at the usual place in one hour."

12.

"Captain, must you hold all of your denouements here? As far as I know, I'm not even involved in this case," said Osgood Smelt, as he grudgingly watched a line of suspects stream in and occupy several tables in the House of Smelt's dining room. "Couldn't you at least have called ahead?"

"Mr. Smelt, if I knew the solution far enough in advance to make reservations, we wouldn't need the denouement."

"Ay-yi-yi."

Occupied at strategic points around the room were Julia Ranida, Jordan, Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, Nigel, Mr. Crick, Maggie Dunhill, and Dennis Renstor.

"Now," said Santos, "we're here to stop the plot against the world's frogs. An interesting piece of evidence has come up that somewhat accurately points the finger of blame. I have in my hand a small, green frog. It was captured in Barrymore's Bog, on Route 50, right next door to the paper mill. This is not a real frog; it is presumably one of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company's mock frogs. In fact, all the frogs located in Barrymore's Bog are mock frogs. Adolf?"

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder stood up. "My tests indicate that these frogs were placed there sometime very early this morning. I would say at about, oh, 5:00 am. Tests on the fly population, excrement content of the water and soil, et cetera, indicate that the bog has been without frogs for about three weeks, or precisely about as long as Dennis Renstor had been missing."

"As it turns out, that paper mill was owned by none other than George Dunhill. Upon his death, it was left to Maggie Dunhill, his cat. However, a slight problem has erupted in that the validity of the will is being contested. As it turns out, it had been made out a long

time ago, and since then it has changed ownership. Legal ownership was transferred as the result of a divorce. The rightful owner now is none other than Julia Ranida."

There was a gasp. It was Santos.

"Excuse me. I had Mexican food for lunch."

"So what does that prove?" asked Julia, overly defensively. "I leaped at the chance to own that mill. It meant that I had the right to protect Barrymore's Bog as a haven for frogs. I could work from within the system to help preserve valuable ecosystems. Plus, I had free access to all the xerox paper I could want."

"Yeah, right," said Santos. "The interesting thing is that you're not really a herpetology student, are you, Miss Ranida."

"What! Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because, dear lady," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, "the University of Arizona has no record of your enrollment. What they do have a record of is your expulsion."

"I had no idea of the power of puppetry. But it was grossly unfair to expel me for that!"

"Oh, you weren't expelled for that," continued Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. "But for the simple reason that your GPA never climbed above 0.6, and your advisers

cited gross academic incompetence as reason for your dismissal. One instructor I spoke with told me that he had brought a frog into your office, and you leapt on the desk screaming, and I quote, 'Ick! What is it? Get it out if here!'. Not the best of attitudes for a herpetology student."

"Oh, come on, that was the first week of the semester. I couldn't be expected to know *everything* right off the bat."

"You remember the memo from the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company to the Marketing Director, one Edgar Benjamin?" asked Santos rhetorically. "Well, we could find no record of an Edgar Benjamin existing outside of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company."

"So what does that mean?" asked Julia.

"Oh, it probably means we'll be here all night," groaned Smelt.

"Oh, go peddle your prawns, Smelt!" said Jordan.

"Ordinarily, it would mean, Ms. Ranida, that Mr. Benjamin was simply a workaholic. But something we uncovered changes that opinion of things. I have in my hand here a copy of your original marriage license. It lists the groom as Mr. George Dunhill and the bride as Mr. Edgar Benjamin."

"Okay, so my married name was Edgar Benjamin. So what?"

"Seeing as you were married in San Francisco, I see nothing unusual. But what I do see a problem with is that when you met Mr. Dunhill you had just failed out of junior college—where you had been a marketing major. Now, let's put two and two together, shall we? Who else would mistake Mr. Renstor for a frog but an incompetent herpetology student? And who else would circulate the 'Amphibian Brief' as a marketing plan but a failed marketing student?"

"What makes you think that the 'Amphibian Brief' was a marketing plan?" asked Julia.

"Because with the copy you sent to the New York Times you enclosed a press release on Ace Rubber Novelty Company letterhead with the line 'For more information, contact Edgar Benjamin, Director of Marketing and Publicity'."

Finally, Julia broke down. "Okay! Yes, I was Edgar Benjamin, the Marketing Director for Ace Rubber Novelty Company. And, yes, okay, I was one of the foot soldiers in the battle against the frogs. And, yes, I did own the paper mill on Route 50, where we stored some of the frogs we had taken. And, yes, I did kidnap Dennis Rentor, mistaking him for a frog. And, yes, I did marry George Dunhill, and actually it was me who really liked *The Last Boy Scout*. But

I didn't devise the frog plot, and I still don't know who the President of the company is. I can't be the bad guy! Julia Roberts will never play me in the movie!"

"No, a far more devious person is this President. And I use the term 'person' very loosely. Adolf?"

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder took out a small, covered plastic dish. Inside, was a dead beetle. "This is one of the insects that was found in George Dunhill's mouth. Macroscopic examination and other big gobs of neat stuff show that there are two small punctures on the insect's abdomen, and, in fact, on the abdomens and thoraxes of most of the insects recovered from Mr. Dunhill. It can be proven conclusively—by someone, I suppose—that the marks were made by cat claws. This is substantiated by the tiny amount of catnip we found on some of the specimens."

"And the other paper mill," said Santos, "the one on Route 30, is owned by none other than Maggie Dunhill."

Maggie meowed rather loudly.

"There is no use protesting. You first moved in with George Dunhill when he was still married to Julia. You and she acquired the Ace Rubber Novelty Company in a hostile takeover—you scratched the eyes out of the board of directors. You took over the company because at the time they made cat toys. You needed to fuel your catnip habit,

you needed more and more. Finally, more than 75 percent of the catnip purchased by the company went right into your little squeaking mouse. It was eating up company profits, you needed more and more. Finally, you and Julia hit on the frog plan. After George found out about it, you killed him. You were responsible for organizing the attack at the bank, figuring you'd be safe. You thought you were in the clear. Until—"

At that point, Maggie bolted from her chair and ran across the room toward the door. At that point, several of Santos' uniformed officers—accompanied by several police dogs—walked in and stopped her in her tracks.

"You may as well go peacefully. If you're lucky, you may be spared a trip to the vet."

The cops cuffed the cat and led her away. A second group came in, cuffed Julia, and led her out.

One by one, the other suspects began to file out, followed by Santos, Jordan, and Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Isn't anyone going to at least order something?!" shouted Smelt.

Order indeed.

14.

Back at headquarters,

"You know, Schlickelmeinengribenbieder," said Santos, "you've done it again. A little bluffing a little citing phony forensics, and you coaxed another confession. You are one of a kind."

"But Captain, none of that was made up."

"I'm sure. And crabs have fingerprints. Fool me once, my dear Adolf. . . ."

"I'm not fooling you this time, my dear Bernard. I did a hell of a lot of work on this case. I was up all night examining those insects, checking the soil and water around Barrymore's Bog, examining the frogs. This was all on the up and up. If there's one thing I learned at the symposium in Arizona, it was not to make stuff up when the truth will do just as well."

"So, what's going to happen to the frogs?" asked Jordan.

"The fake ones?" said Santos. "It's interesting about that. A new animal rights group has sprung up, dedicated to helping preserve the mock frogs. They're so lifelike, the argument goes, that they might as well be the real things. They've confiscated all the frogs created by the Ace Rubber Novelty Company and set them free in marshes around the country. In fact, they're continuing part of the frog plot started by Maggie and Julia. They won't be replacing real

frogs, but they will be upgrading the frogs at the end of a natural frog's life cycle. Believe it or not, Bill Gates is getting involved."

"If that happens," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, "the fake frogs will be the standard in a few years. Farewell, my lovelies!"

Farewell indeed.

"You're not ending it there, sir?" asked Jordan, after he had finished reading Santos' police report.

"No, but it gets weirder from here, and I am unclear as to how accurate to make this report. After the prawn business, the Commissioner now thinks there's something funny in the water supply."

"Well, he's right, you know."

"This is true. Okay, the real truth."

"The truth is really out there, Captain."

15.

The evening following what seemed to be the resolution to the case of the disappearing frogs found Santos sitting in

his living room contemplating the Miss Piggy figurine Lizzie Gould had given to him. What on Earth could it mean?

He tried putting two and two together. Miss Piggy . . . Was Moistville going to be invaded by Muppets? If the frog plot was the second plague, what did Miss Piggy have to do with it?

He snapped his fingers. "Wait," he said aloud. "Who was Miss Piggy in love with? Kermit the Frog. There's the frog connection."

He had to admit, it was an amazingly convoluted clue.

The phone rang.

"Captain, Jordan here. Sir, I think you had better get down here."

It took some time for Santos to determine exactly where "here" was, but it turned out to be the outskirts of Ellie Westerberg's Emu Farm. Santos looked down at the mangled corpse of an emu.

"Lieutenant, what could have caused this? It looks like it was mauled by a bear or a mountain lion."

"But neither of those creatures are indigenous to within fifty miles of Moistville. Maybe a particularly nasty squirrel, but a bear?"

Santos noticed something on the ground. It was a print of some kind.

"Lieutenant, what do you make of this?"

Jordan hunkered down and ran his finger along the periphery of the odd shape in the mud. "It's some kind of animal track, but nothing I've ever seen before. It's kind of a flipper surrounded by what looks like a hoof of some kind. Sir, that makes no sense."

Something quite profound occurred to Santos.

"Oh, my god. I have a feeling . . ."

"Really, sir? How unusual."

"Et tu, Lieutenant?"

"Sorry, sir."

"Look, there are more of these tracks leading down toward the paper mill. Let's go."

Santos and Jordan, under cover of night, followed the moonlit tracks down the hill. They pushed on through the underbrush until they came to a high, chainlink fence. There was a large hole—about five feet in diameter—at the bottom the of the fence. The tracks led through it.

"Do we follow?" asked Jordan.

"Of course."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Jordan followed Santos through the fence and they were immediately greeted by a loud croaking accompanied by the sound of something galloping toward them. Santos pivoted to his right.

"Holy shit . . ."

Before he or Jordan could react, the charging creature had rammed first Santos then Jordan at full speed. They both collapsed unconscious to the ground.

As the creature turned and galloped back, a p[irching whistle stoipped it in its tracks. The source of the whistle bet down and caressed Santos' cheek.

"Poor, dumb sap."

16.

When Santos came to, he was tied to a seat in the front row of a small movie theater. Directly in front of him was a stage, behind which loomed a large movie screen. Colored lights shone down on the screen from above. He tried to look behind him, bit could see only darkness as the rows of seats stretched upwards. He thioyught he saw the faint oulione of something sitting back there, he could not be sure that it was human—if it was even there at all.

Jordan, who was tied to the seat next to him, stirred and finally woke up. He briefly surveyed his stutation.

"Boy, is this a flashback. My first date with my ex-wife was remarkably similar."

"Jordan, I'm positive I don't want to know."

"Sir, why are we tied to seats in a movie theater? Oh, God! We're not going to be forced to watch Men in Black are we?"

"I hope not, Lieutenant."

"No, Captain Santos and Lieutenant Jordan," said a female voice. "We will not force you to watch Men in Black, which actually I kind of liked."

She walked out onto the stage and faced her captive audience.

"Darcy," said Santos.

"Whoa, Captain. Good for you," said Jordan.

"Shut up, Lieutenant."

She smiled wryly. "Your Captain had his chance and he blew it."

"That creature that attacked us and killed one of Ellie's emus—was that what I think it was?"

"Was it the genetically-engineered offspring of a frog and a pig? Yes, Captain Santos, it was."

"Um, may I point out, that—"

"That it is biologically impossible? No, you may not. Because you would be wrong. It is not biologically impossible for, as you have seen, it has been done."

"But how?"

"We anticipated that very question. The film you are about to see is from Ken Burns' new documentary, tentatively called *The Frog and the Pig: A Love Story*. Let's watch the film."

"Sir," said Jordan, "what is go—"

"Shhh!" said whatever it was that was sitting at the back of the theater.

The lights went out, and the screen flickered to life. Over a black screen, Civil War-era music played over the titles. The narration began.

"Hello, I'm Leonard Nimoy. For the next 36 hours, we are going to look at, in excruciating detail, one of the most exciting—if not truly disturbing—undertakings in modern genetic engineering."

"Wow," said Jordan, "they got Nimoy. I'm impressed."

"What could be more startling than the cloning of a sheep? More exhilarating than reanimating prehistoric bacteria encased within amber? Or more unlikely than reteaming the original cast of *Star Trek* for another film?"

I'm talking of course of Dux Industries' successful merging of a frog and a pig."

"That would be a 'prog,'" said Jordan.

"Or a 'fig,'" added Santos.

"President and CEO Archie Dux calls the resulting creature a 'frig,'" continued the narration.

"You know, Lieutenant, that name is going to cause a marketing nightmare," said Santos.

"It might work in Europe, though," added Jordan.

They were interrupted by a flashlight pointed in their faces.

"Would you two stop talking during the movie!" said Darcy.

"Sorry," they said in unison, and she stalked off.

"How did Dux do it?" continued the narration. "It took years of hard work and a knowledge of molecular biology second to none."

"As well as a pact with the devil and the ability to summon supernatural forces," said Jordan.

"Mm. That won't sit well with the Nobel Committee, I suspect," added Santos.

Footstyeeps stamped up the aisle, and Darc y once again shone the flashlight in their faces. "Would you two shut up! Please!" she yelled. "Just weatch the goddamn movie!"

Chastened, Santos and Jordan again focused their attention on the screen.

"But first a little background on Archie Dux's childhood," continued Leonard Nimoy. "He was born into abject poverty in North Philadelphia in 1928. His father, Edgar Dux, and his mother, Benjamin Teuthis-Dux, were social outcasts. Despite the fact that they had no money, they hoped to one day hobnob with the social set on Philadelphia's Main Line. The birth of Archie caused a scandal in polite society, as it had long been believed by the upper classes in this country that the impoverished be prohibited from reproducing. Attempts to sterilize the Duxes had alas proven fruitless."

"Actually, it ended up being fruitful," said Jordan.

"The Duxes, with young Archie in tow, fled Philadelphia, although the stock market crash of the following year suddenly had the well-to-do singing a different tune."

"It was then," said Jordan, doing a fairly good Leonard Nimoy impression, "that young Archie signed a pact with Satan, and gained the ability to transmute matter and energy at will. He then began a reign of terror that consumed the small, pleasant town of Moistville, New York."

There was a loud thrashing noise from behind them, and a strong wind blew through the theater. Several seats were torn from the floor and flew down toward the stage, some tearing through the screen. The movie stopped, but the storm raging inside the theater increased in strength. The sprinklers on the ceiling snapped on, and Santos and Jordan had no choice but to sit through the monsoon, the sprinkler-rain lashing their faces. The figure at the back of the theater—whatever it was—was gone, near as Santos could tell.

"So, m Captain," yelled Jordan over the fury of the squall, "is this why it's a not a good idea to talk during movies?" "Quite possibly."

They both struggled to untie themselves before they were blown over the railing. It was at that point that Darcy pulled herself along the rows of seats toward them.

"You fools!" she yelled. "I could have saved you! I was desperate to save you! You should have left it up to me!"

"Well, you should have been more clear on one or two points, like on how evil you actually are!" Santos yelled back.

"Like I could have! Did you know who was sitting in the back of the theater?"

"You never introduced us."

"It was Lucifer Tiddleman. If I had given even the slightest inkling that I wasn't going to kill you after showing you the movie, I would have been toast!"

She made it over to them and frantically untied them.

"Now get out of here! And get out of Moistville while you're at it! If Dux or his evil minions find you, you're dead!"

"What about you?"

"I'm already dead."

"No! Come with us. We can save you. We need your help if we're going to defeat Dux! At the very least, we need a fourth for bridge!"

"No!"

"Oh, don't be such a martyr!" yelled Santos. "Just shut up and grab my hand." She grabbed his hand and the three of them walked against the wind toward the exit at the side of the theater.

The wind became even stronger. More seats became dislodged and began to fall around the trio as they made their way slowly toward the door. Jordan tripped, and fell to the floor.

"I think I broke a heel!" he yelled above the din.

"Interesting reversal on a popular theme, Lieutenant. Now get up. It's only ten more feet."

"Yes, sir."

Jordan struggled to his feet and they made it to the door, just as all the remaining theater seats were dislodged and cascaded onto the stage.

17.

The silence of the windless night was a shock to the three of them. They crouched behind a row of bushes, twenty yards from the fence—and the hole to safety. Well, the safety bit was debatable, but would work for the time being.

"We just have to get past the frigs," said Darcy.

Jordan chuckled.

"I know," she said. "I don't like the name either. The trouble with working for a preternatural, evil entity is that it often eschews market research."

"How many of the—er—frigs are there anyway?" asked Santos.

"Three. They were prototypes."

"I'm sorry I missed the rest of the film. How were they created, anyway?"

"Truth be told, they're not real. The mock frogs that were developed by the Ace Rubber Novelty Company were merged with a popular line of mechanical wind-up pigs. When Dux Industries acquired Ace, we got all their product lines and began consolidating many of them."

"What is the point of them, if they are indeed the second plague?"

"The frigs? Oh, they're not the second plague. The original mock frogs were. When you arrested the project manager—Julia Ranida—you pretty much ended that plague. Her replacement hadn't yet been chosen, so the project lapsed. Dux figured that you were onto the plague and that it would never come to fruition. The mock frogs have been recalled and the real ones restored. My press release should be hitting the papers tomorrow: Dux Industries Saves Frogs. We blamed it all on the President of the Ace Rubber Novelty Company."

"Who is . . ."

"Captain, I think we had just better get out of here."

"Oh, right. How do you suggest we do that?"

"If one of us can create a diversion, the other two can run for the hole in the fence."

"And the person causing the distraction?"

"Well . . ."

"Captain," said Jordan, "I'll distract them. You and Darcy make a break for it."

"Lieutenant, I don't. . . ."

"Captain, I have no intention of getting mauled by one of those things again. I'll be all right. Now wait for my signal."

Jordan ran off to the right and creapt into the clearing thirty yards from the fence.

"Yoo hoo!□Frigs! Over here, you evil mutants you!" He yelled, jumping up and down. Two of the three frigs perked up and bnegan to charge toward him. He immediately bolted back toward the buiolding, the frigs in hot pursuit.

"Captain!□Now! Make a break for it!"

Santos and Darcy darted from behind the bushes and made for the hole in the fence. They quickly slid through it only to be confronted by the third frig on the other side.

"Not good," said Santos.

"Where's Lieutenant Jordan?" asked Darcy.

"I don't know. He ran back toward the paper mill."

The frig in front of them coiled and began to pounce. A gunshot from behind it stopped it in mid leap, and it crashed to the ground in a heap. Through the open wound, Santos could make out broken springs and gears.

"Lucky shot, I dare say," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, holstering his pistol.

"Adolf, thank you."

He glanced at Darcy. "And who is this, Bernard?"

"This is Darcy."

"Well, good for you, Bernard."

Santos made a Marge Simpson noise.

"Oh, and where is Lieutenant Jordan?" asked Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Right here," said Jordan who, fortuitously enough, was emerging from the hole in the fence. "Jeepers, you never said those things could hop!"

"Well, Lieutenant, they are half frog, after all."

"What happened to them?" asked Darcy.

"They hopped right into the side of the building. Artificial creatures sure are klutzy."

Klutzy indeed.