

Perihelion

Online Science Fiction Magazine



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Packrat Machine

By Karl Dandenell

THE POUNDING ON HIS CHAMBER door pulled George out of a perfectly good nap. "Master Archivist, please wake up! There is a problem in the Retrieval Hall—"

"Take five complete breaths, Hammurabi," George called out, rubbing his eyes. He found his cane, pushed himself up from his thick pallet, and opened the door. "Why are you disturbing my meditation?"

Hammurabi bowed. Without straightening, he said, "Forgive me. There was no lantern lit outside."

George glanced at the corridor and tapped his journeyman once across the shoulder with his Master's cane. "Perhaps not. Still, it is unbecoming for the Head Journeyman to run through the halls, pounding on doors like a schoolboy on holiday."

Hammurabi looked up. "Again, I apologize, Master."

"Very good," George said. "You're forgiven. Now sit down like a civilized person, and tell me your difficulty." Actually, he *had* intended to light a lantern and meditate, but obviously had been distracted by thoughts of his soft pillows. He sighed. Getting old was a pain.

Hammurabi knelt on the floor, his hands resting on his thighs. As soon as he spoke, however, his hands flew up like small birds, punctuating his sentences.

"We had a ... a failure." He briefly pinched his nostrils shut in the sacred fashion. "A null retrieval," he whispered.

A null retrieval! He quickly pinched his own nostrils shut for a moment. "If you're telling the truth—"

"I swear!"

"—then we have a serious problem," George finished. "A *very* serious problem."

Nothing like this had occurred since he wore the robes of an acolyte. A hundred years ago. "Tell me what happened."

"A distressed woman appeared before me a short time ago, Master. She requested—"

"What is her name?"

"Amaya. Is that important?"

"*Everything is important. Nothing shall be lost*" George said, quoting the first line of the Archivist Oath. Hammurabi winced in embarrassment.

"Of course. How stupid of me. In any event, a married woman named Amaya arrived at the Archives requesting a retrieval from the Packrat Machine."

"Did she call it that?"

"Yes, Master Archivist. Like most patrons, she didn't call it the Quantum Encoding and Retrieval Device, or use the official abbreviation of QERD."

That was the way of all things, thought George. No one honored tradition any more.

"Apparently her husband ..." Hammurabi paused in thought. "Donald. Donald had intentionally placed her favorite hat in the preservation bag two days ago after an argument. When she discovered it missing, she came here straightaway."



Comic Strips**Reviews****Feedback****Submissions**

George nodded. He had performed countless such rituals himself. In a culture where everything discarded was easily recreated, people indulged their desires when it came to consumer goods.

"Amaya provided me with a picture of her hat, her retrieval index, and her ration card. Everything appeared in order," Hammurabi continued, "After processing her request, I walked the thousand steps to the Re-Creation Chamber."

"Did you chant?" George asked.

"Every other staircase, Master."

"And?"

"No hat."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, Master. No feathers, nor brim, nor wire, nor snakeskin, nor lights, nor veil —"

George motioned with his cane, silencing Hammurabi. "You verified the prayer protocols, I presume. *And* performed the ritual a second time."

"Of course, Master." He looked hurt.

George felt a deep ache in his belly, and suspected his physician would soon prescribe foul-tasting medicines and a bland diet. "Where is Amaya now?"

"In one of the waiting rooms," Hammurabi said, "viewing ancient romantic films."

"A suitable distraction." Some retrievals required more time than others, and many patrons liked to wait, sampling the pleasures of the Archives while they waited.

By tradition and law, retrieved artifacts had to be taken away by the owner. This encouraged people to spend their retrieval rations more judiciously.

"Come, let us deal with this patron." George gave his bag to Hammurabi and they moved at good speed through the corridors. Normally, the Master Archivist would savor this time, for his guild enjoyed the Prince's favor, and held the privilege of retrieving certain *objets d'art* with which they adorned their offices and living quarters. George had himself recreated several Da Vinci sculptures, a Kessler knife set, two Nixon recordings, and an entire brace of arrows from the first holographic version of "Robin Hood."

As they neared the door to the Waiting Room, the Master Archivist paused and placed the ornamental helmet and face mask of his office on his head. He then tucked the ornate gloves of neoprene and otter skin into his belt and entered the room.

Amaya, a comely young woman, sat rapt before a large display, where two couples writhed in orgasmic ecstasy. Hearty music filled the air.

He clapped his hands, muting the sound. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Amaya. My worthless journeyman has not spoken the entire truth to you."

She stared at him, confused. Perfect. "I don't understand, Master Archivist. Where is my hat?" She glanced at the display with one eye, keeping the other fixed firmly on him. George pursed his lips. He always thought such body engineering indicated an excess vanity.

"Again, I apologize. Hammurabi, may I have Amaya's ration card? And the image of the hat?"

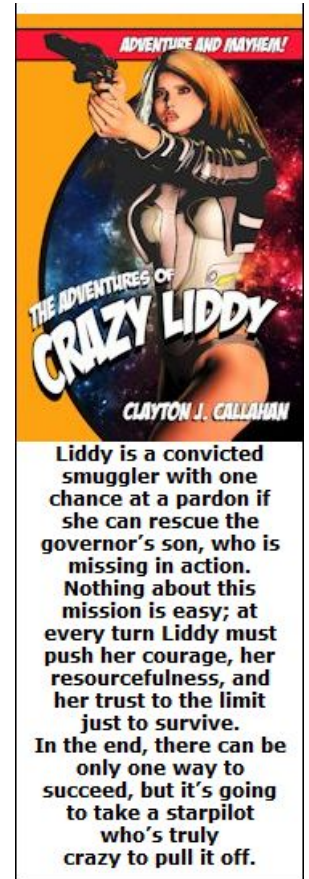
Hammurabi passed them over. George looked at the image with feigned appreciation. A truly horrible, tasteless article of clothing. Still, he had sworn an oath ... "This is such a delicate and aesthetically ... complex artifact that we will perform additional prayers and sacrifices to facilitate its return from the Fetid Regions."

"I see." She frowned. This was probably the first delayed gratification in her adult life. "How long will all that take?" she asked.

Hammurabi recognized his cue and stepped forward. "Two days."

George whacked him with the cane. "One day should suffice. We will make it a priority." He and Hammurabi bowed in formal *pranam*, folded hands at the level of their hearts. Amaya giggled and bowed in return.

"May I watch the rest of the story?"



"Of course," he said. "There is popped corn and harmful liquors in that cabinet."

They left at a dignified, serious pace befitting priests. As soon as they were out of earshot, George whacked Hammurabi again, then hit himself for good measure. "I am the seventeenth Master Archivist, and have held the office for seventy-nine years. I will *not* lose my pension over this." They continued on to the temple's living quarters. "First," he said, "find the monk who processed the collection bags for her household. Place him in the Punishment Tank for two hours. Then revive him and send him to the marketplace. Dress him in feathers, color his face. Make him appear like any other tourist."

"More punishment, Master?"

"No, no! He is to go into the marketplace, find a hat merchant and buy a suitable replacement." He handed the hat's image to Hammurabi, whose face twisted into fear. This was borderline sacrilege.

"There's some petty cash in my office," George said. "Take what you need. Meanwhile, I will commune with the QERD."

But Hammurabi stood there, fidgeting with the image in his hands. George reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "In his *Commentarii esse Desertum*, Saint Reggie wrote that it is not the original object we retrieve from the Fetid Regions, but a copy. That copy *becomes* the original when blessed with its spirit."

"And thus, that which is indistinguishable from the First shall become the First," said Hammurabi, relaxing.

"Good boy. Now run like a rabbit before the marketplace closes."

Hammurabi did so, and George turned left, moving deeper into the temple. Overhead, enormous pipes carried the raw material sludge that fed the Quantum Encoding and Retrieval Device's ravenous nanomachines.

He paused before an ornate door and lifted the lids from the ceremonial urns that flanked the entry. Crashing the lids together caused the door to slide aside.

Inside lay a simple chamber, containing only a couch with a brain interface. He removed his tokens of office and reclined on the couch. Feather-light tendrils of sensitive electronics dropped from the ceiling, touching seven sacred points around the perimeter of his shaved skull.

Maintenance records, he thought, looking down at the card in his hand. *Local retrieval index. 7869-HQA-3. A series of images traveled down his optic nerve: empty containers of soap, perfume, and body paint; worn-out shoes; plus a decent selection of aphrodisiacs.*

And there were hats. Quite a few of them. Fortunately, only one had been collected in the last month. He pointed a mental finger at it. *Query artifact. Description. The hat had a large brim, multicolor felt bands, feathers, plastic flowers, ribbons, and a neon veil. But it didn't match Amaya's image. Query. Artifact image conflict with stored record.*



Command not understood, came the computer's reply. *Please enter command again.*

"What?" he spoke aloud. *Retrieval result is null. Run diagnostic on retrieval.*

Priority?

High, George replied, and added aloud, "Now get moving."

Running diagnostic. A few seconds later, the reply flashed into his mind. Diagnostic complete. Retrieval is within parameters of stored record.

"Gobbledygook," he decided. He left the chamber and returned to his quarters, his stomach growling with indigestion.

About an hour after the evening meal, Hammurabi returned with the hapless monk, Brother Jake. The young man had been dressed in multicolor furs, necklaces of cut stones, makeup, and fuzzy boots. George felt sorry for him. The combined strain of the Punishment Tank and the marketplace had certainly taken their toll. Hammurabi looked at him with an air of expectation.

"How have you fared?" George said.

"Very well, Master Archivist," said Jake, holding up a box for his inspection.

George opened it. Inside lay a hat, a close match to the one lost by Amaya. He compared it to the image. "It will suffice," he said.

He dismissed them with a wave of his cane. After they left, he altered Amaya's image so that it matched the replacement chapeau. Then he spilled a cup of tea on the picture for good measure.

When Amaya returned the next day, Hammurabi and George presented her with her hat, sparing no formality or flourish. She looked at it strangely for a moment. George held his breath.

"Thank you," she said. She looked at the hat once more, shrugged, then placed it on her head.

They bowed. She turned to leave, but turned back after two steps. "It looks *different* somehow," she said.

George had been waiting for this. "We have reshaped the hat to your head's specifications because it had been, er, disturbed by the other items in the collection bag." Then he added, "And we will apply a credit to your ration card for the delay."

Amaya brightened at that. "Oh, it's like getting a free hat. How wonderful!" With a bow, she departed. George sighed and slumped his shoulders.

"Well," he said, removing his gloves and straightening his robes. "That takes care of that."

His evening's mediation, however, was interrupted by a nagging thought. *Should he have run a manual diagnostic on the QERD?* Like every Master Archivist, George had read those prayer books, but that was decades ago. When he had accepted his journeyman robes, he had stood in line with the other Archivists, reciting hundreds of lines of code in original assembly language. No one ever thought they would actually use that knowledge, and it was quickly forgotten.

It would be far easier to shut down and restart the QERD, but that act carried the death penalty ever since a rival Prince had bribed the fourth Master Archivist to reboot the QERD in order to bypass safety protocols and recreate forbidden military technology.

Seeing no obvious solution, George set the problem aside for the moment and returned to his duties. His sleep was troubled, though, and he left his bed before morning prayer to run retrieval tests. The first test was successful, so he invoked a Cron ritual to be sure.

Over the course of a week, he retrieved several Warhol prints, an antique shoe polisher, pitchforks, sterling silver snuff boxes, beach balls, and a couple of prize-winning romance novels.

He took one of the novels to a comfortable chair and read it thoroughly, checking for any error. The simple themes and florid prose put his mind at ease, and George decided that their difficulties were over. Everything seemed fine now.

In the late afternoon, Hammurabi opened the door and announced himself. "Master, am I disturbing you?"

"Of course you are disturbing me. Look up the definition of the verb and tell me what you find."

"Yes, Master." He looked at the book in George's hands. "Oh, is that a Susann?"

"Yes," he replied. "Apparently we suffered a rare infestation of Glitch Demons. They are rare, infernal creatures who send cosmic rays to interfere with critical circuitry, place mouse turds in the filters, and loosen screws." He indicated the pile of retrieved objects. "But as you can see, they have returned to their own cursed realms and the

QERD is operating normally again.”

Hammurabi shuffled his feet and look at them nervously. “Well ...”

“Yes?” George inquired.

Hammurabi raised his eyes. “Actually, the QERD *isn't* working, Master.”

George reached for his cane. “Eh?”

Hammurabi danced nimbly out of reach. George recalled when he could do that. “I would not bring it to your attention,” he said, “except that we have received three more requests for artifact retrieval, and all three have been ... less than perfect. What shall we do? Even now, there are patrons in the Hall of Requests. I don't know what to tell them.”

George reached deep inside and found a sigh appropriate to the occasion. “We will have to declare a religious holiday.”

“Which one?” Hammurabi stepped forward, his face eager.

“Give me a minute.” George punctuated his remark with his cane. He put on his finery and took himself and Hammurabi to the Hall of Requests. There, he addressed the monks and patrons.

“Citizens,” George said, “I regret to inform you that the temple is closing early today for the Festival of the Great Hoffa, during which no things can be found that have been lost or given away.”

One of the patrons looked up from the desk, where he'd been filling out a lengthy form. “I have never heard of this festival. Is it one of the new ones?”

“No, sir, it is quite ancient, and rarely celebrated except in certain provinces. I have decided to resurrect the tradition.”

“When will the Archives open again?” the patron asked.

“Two days hence. We shall open two hours later than usual. Please check back then.”

After the patrons departed and they sealed the doors, Hammurabi showed George the artifacts he had retrieved. The sight chilled his old bones. “The Packrat Machine has gone bonkers,” he whispered. What should have been simple retrievals—a vase, a pair of electric clippers, an oil painting of a kitten—were obviously flawed. The painting resembled a goblin taken from a children's fairy tale. The clippers contained parts of other tools: a screwdriver, a can opener, a spark plug wrench, and something that looked suspiciously like a speculum. The vase was ... inexplicable.

Hammurabi gazed at the objects. “We will lose our jobs, will we not, Master?”

“That is the least of our worries,” George said. He forced himself to breathe deeply. Perhaps he could take early retirement before the Prince learned of this. And perhaps he could flap his arms and fly to the moon.

“We have to repair the Packrat Machine,” Hammurabi said quietly.

George fiddled with his cane. “Your comprehension of the sublime has always given me happiness. This new revelation makes me drunk with joy.” Hammurabi hung his head in shame. “Now then,” George continued. “After making such a suggestion, do you have any clues how to achieve it?”

Hammurabi looked at him rather earnestly. “Can we reload the sacred operating system from backups?”

“We don't have enough capacity for a hot swap,” George said. He stroked his beard, thinking. “Much as it pains me, I will have to consult the logs.” He hobbled back to his quarters, cursing his sore knees.

For long hours, he read the system logs of previous Archivists, ranging from the meticulous Eugen, to the flamboyant Raymon, to the mysterious Antoinett who refused to retrieve any item that contained the color blue. She had been dispatched by Royal assassins early in her tenure.

Throughout the long day, he reviewed commentaries, but found nothing that would help them. The answer became painfully clear. They *must* clear the corrupted data caches with a reboot. Bearing this in mind, George took a bottle of strong wine to his pallet and drank himself to sleep.

A few short hours later Hammurabi informed him that had an important visitor.

George splashed some water on his face, then quickly dressed and went to his office, his head aching and tongue thick. His door opened and admitted a very well-dressed man with the largest ears he'd ever seen.

"Master Archivist? We are Estaban, Retainer and Chief Toady to His Royal Highness, Prince Fenton."

"Your servant, sir," George rose from his cushion and bowed slowly, mindful of his hangover.

"Our apologies for this unscheduled visit," Estaban said, his tone indicating no such sentiment. "We come on a rather urgent errand."

"The Archives are at your disposal," George said. He snapped his fingers, and Hammurabi rushed forward, bearing an extra cushion for the visitor. Estaban sat down after brushing off some imaginary dust from the cushion.

"His Highness returns from his annual visit to the provinces this week to increase taxes, and incidentally, celebrate the continued economic prosperity under His reign."

"Of course," George said, glancing at Hammurabi, who nodded vigorously. Hammurabi then added a gesture to demonstrate his opinion of Estaban.

"And in honor of the visit," Estaban continued, "We would like to present His Highness with something special." He smiled conspiratorially. "Something, shall we say, unique."

"As I said, the Archives are at your disposal." George shifted in his robes, feeling sudden perspiration under his arms. He'd completely forgotten about the Prince's visit, and it had been on the calendar for *weeks*. "We can retrieve anything that His Highness might desire."

"That's the rub," Estaban replied, and sneezed. He glanced at Hammurabi, who quickly proffered his sleeve for the Royal servant's nose. "The Prince's desires are so far beyond ordinary men that it is easy for Us to misinterpret His wishes."

"I see," George lied. "You would like to retrieve an ancient war chariot, perhaps? Or a cherished childhood toy for the Prince's scion?"

Estaban waved away these suggestions. "Too mundane. We might consider retrieving one of His honored uncles, but there is already a surfeit of idiots in court."

Several generations ago, there had arisen a fad for retrieving long-dead Royal relatives. Unfortunately, not all the memory discs were viable, and some of the retrieved aristocrats lacked their mental faculties.

"Perhaps you could tell this humble servant what *might* serve His Highness?" George asked, trying to restrain his growing temper.

"We need something *appropriate*. Simply make it tantalizing, delectable, and worthy of His Royal Personage."

"That goes without saying," George said, nearly biting his tongue in disgust of this creature. "But I feel it is my duty to point out that the QERD may require, ah, extensive maintenance soon."

"Oh?" Estaban raised his eyebrows up, and his forehead glowed a sickly green. George had heard about this particular manifestation in court. It was better than the last one, which encouraged extra limbs. "If the Packrat Machine isn't working, use an alternate mechanism." Estaban looked about the room with a calculating eye. "My, what a lovely collection of loin computers."

"I believe the proper term was *laptop*, sir," the Archivist said. "There is only one *Packrat Machine* here. The only other working QERD resides at the palace, and it is dedicated to preserving members of the Royal family."

"Are you saying, Master Archivist, that you cannot fulfill His simple request? Shall we take this to mean that you will not help in this *small* gift to His Beneficence?"

"Not at all!" cried Hammurabi. "We would give our lives for the Prince!"

"Yes, yes. *You* would, certainly." George waved Hammurabi back with his cane. "Sir, I hesitate to provide anything less than ... perfection for the Royal Son." He knew his voice was becoming whiny, and he hated himself for it.

"This is not Our concern," Estaban said. He straightened his tunic and leaned back in his chair. "It is no great secret that you are nearing the age of retirement."

George gripped his cane tight with both hands and attempted a calm smile. "I am still quite fit," he said.

"Of course, We would never imply that you are anything less than robust. But certain rumors have reached the Royal ears." Unconsciously, he scratched his own oversized lobes. "It may become necessary to install someone who understands the priorities of this office." Estaban gave a much less friendly smile this time.

"I understand you completely, sir." George rose, bowed. "We will have something appropriate for His Highness when His entourage enters the city gates."

Estaban rose and gave the most perfunctory bow that protocol allowed. As he departed, he tossed a commemorative coin at Hammurabi, who remembered not to duck.

When the door closed, Hammurabi rubbed the bruise on his cheek and asked, "Now what, Master?"

"Now? Now you prepare the QERD as best you can, while I make preparations for the Prince."

Monks cleaned every inch of pipes in the temple. They performed rituals. They traced circuits. They sacrificed bulls. They replaced filters. In the middle of the night, they even tried to load a clean set of backups from the previous century while the QERD was idle, but their test results were, if anything, worse.

"The Prince will be here tomorrow!" George yelled, pacing about the Re-Creation Chamber. "And *this* is all we have to show for it!" He kicked at the assortment of junk that littered the floor. A jack-in-the-box opened, spilling a foul-smelling doll. "A brilliant career and well-deserved pension gone the way of fossil fuels and lawyers."

"They will send us to the arena." Hammurabi looked on the verge of tears. He clutched a large pink plastic flamingo, the only successful retrieval from their last test run. "Our bodies won't even be buried in sight of the Royal castle with the other Archivists." He closed his eyes and dejectedly shook the flamingo. When he opened his eyes, George was staring at him, a sad smile on his face.

"Master, what is it?"

George perched on the edge of his desk, and leaned forward on his cane. "What is the first line of the Archivist oath, Hammurabi?"

"Everything is important. Nothing shall be lost."

"Very good. And how is this to be achieved?"

"By ensuring that every discarded object is stored by the QERD."

George nodded. "And what of people? Are they also stored?"

Hammurabi answered, "Only members of the Royal family may be encoded."

"Precisely," George said. "This has been their privilege since the Archives were established. The process is a closely held secret, especially because retrieved bodies are routinely made young and healthy as part of the ceremony. Only the Master Archivist is allowed to perform the ritual, and Royal cell culture recordings and the dedicated QERD are stored deep within the castle, guarded by fanatic warriors. No one could possibly hope to duplicate the process."

"Very true, Master!"

"There are all manner of truths, Hammurabi. Come with me." George led the way into his personal chambers, then continued on until they paused before an ordinary door, which he opened by placing his palms on either side of the handle. Behind the door sat a brain interface, a small divan, a crate of encoding discs, and a tank that bubbled with cell cultures.

"I had planned on passing this on to you when I retired," said George. "But when I saw that flamingo, I realized we had to move things along."

Hammurabi poked around under a plastic tarp. "The design is very crude."

"It's a prototype of the Royal QERD," said George. "The final version resides in the deepest part of the castle. The prototype was destroyed, and the records erased."

Hammurabi's eyes widened. "You retrieved it."

"Not me," George said. "The twelfth Master Archivist. Apparently he smuggled out

the retrieval indexes in a most intimate fashion, and assembled the components over the course of many years. He used it to re-create a crate of perfect rubies and illegal brain stimulants."

"That would explain his retirement party," Hammurabi said.

"Yes, well, government pensions only go so far." George uncovered a keyboard and typed in a password. A humming filled the room. "I've been building up a little nest egg for myself, you know," he said. "But on to more pressing matters. It's become painfully clear that we have to reboot the Quantum Encoding and Retrieval Device."

"They'll execute you for defying the Prince's edict," said Hammurabi.

"Not if I'm already dead," George said, grinning. He pointed with his cane. "In that crate are body matrix records for the Royal House. I bear a resemblance to certain members of the Royal House, wouldn't you say?"

Hammurabi squinted. "Possibly."

"Take my word. I've given this a lot of thought. When you reboot the QERD, it will be necessary to run a fairly complex retrieval to ensure everything is nominal. Why can't that test run be a new body for me? You can take a fresh personality recording and choose an appropriate body matrix from the Royal records.

"If everything works," George said, "I'll be long gone before the Royal Guard arrives to arrest me."

"If everything works," Hammurabi said.

"I don't see that I have much choice. I'm too old to become a fugitive."

Hammurabi thought a moment. "Your retrieval will be noted in the log."

"That's true. But if I give you the root password, you can edit the log as you see fit," George said. When he saw the expression on Hammurabi's face, he added, "You've been a loyal servant, Hammurabi. I'm sure you'll make a fine Master Archivist."

"Thank you, Master."

"Don't mention it. Now fetch me pen and paper. I have a suicide note to compose."

George scribbled out what he hoped was an appropriately despondent missive, sealed it with his signet ring, and left the envelope on his desk. Then he returned to the cramped room where Hammurabi waited.

"Everything appears to be working," the Head Journeyman said. "We just need a personality recording." George lay on the divan and Hammurabi settled the recording filaments onto the old man's skull, checked an errant cable, then stood back to inspect his work.

"Master?"

"Hmm, yes?"

"Have you considered the manner of your suicide?"

"Absolutely." He pulled a vial from his robes. "I retrieved this cocktail. It is used to euthanize the terminally ill."

"I hope it works."

"So do I. Now, don't forget to arrange my body in my chambers where the guards can find it without too much trouble."

"I may need a little help." Hammurabi considered his master's girth. "I'll get Brother Jake to assist me. He owes me a favor."

"Oh?" George raised his eyebrows.

Hammurabi said, "I pulled him from the punishment tank earlier than was absolutely necessary."

George eyed his apprentice sternly, then chuckled. "You always were a little kinder than necessary. Perhaps it's served you well." He swallowed the contents of the vial and closed his eyes. "Goodbye, Hammurabi."

"Farewell, Master."

Hammurabi touched a switch, and the lights dimmed.

When Prince Fenton entered the city gates, the crowds gathered to watch The Royal Son as He waved from His howdah, which was borne on the backs of those who had failed to pay His taxes. As the people pressed forward to catch the traditional thorny roses tossed from the balconies, the merchants in the marketplace hawked their hastily manufactured souvenirs. At one such stall, a tourist wearing breeches of orangutan skin shook his head at the paltry selection before him.

"Is this all you have?" He waved his hands at the display of pocket watches and books. "While I admit I am impressed by your taste in kitchen appliances and ancient computers, I am surprised that you get many customers with such an eclectic selection."

"It's a family business," replied the merchant, a young man with very wise eyes.

"And these prices!" said the tourist. "That inkpot alone represents a week's wages for me. Why should I part with my precious coin when I might make a request of the Archives for a copy?"

"Ah, that is a consideration. But why spend your precious rations? Besides, I heard a rumor there was a problem with the Packrat Machine."

The tourist turned for a moment and observed the Prince accepting the ceremonial key to the chastity belt of the city virgin. "Oh, that. I'm sure it's just a ploy to distract us from the tax increases."

The merchant spread his hands wide. "So, you see nothing that interests you?"

The tourist took one last look at a glass case. "I supposed I could purchase this antique coin for my son, though it is an obvious forgery."

"You accuse me of forgery?" said the merchant. He picked up an ornate cane and twirled it in a threatening manner.

"It's obvious to anyone with eyes. The image looks more like *you* than the Fourth Prince, you charlatan! Good day!" He turned and pushed his way into the throng.

"Good day to you, sir!" the merchant called after him. "And may I suggest you try the seller of perfumes on the next street?"

"How do you expect to earn a living with such an attitude, Master?"

George turned at the sound and smiled. "I'll manage." He padded the purse full of coins at his hip. "The robes look good on you, Hammurabi, or should I say, Master Archivist." He gave a flamboyant bow and added a wink.

"Thank you," Hammurabi said, bowing in return. "They're lighter than I expected."

"Wait until you've worn them a few years."

There was a fanfare of trumpets as Prince Fenton and His entourage left the marketplace, heading toward the palace.

George handed Hammurabi a paperback book with a lurid cover. "Here's a gift for you. The password for the Royal QERD is written in Chapter 6."

Hammurabi took the book and glanced inside. *The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy brown dog.* "Thank you, Master."

"Call me George." He began to pack away his merchandise. "Speaking of gifts, what did you retrieve for the Prince's gift?"

Hammurabi laughed. "Oh, *that*. Between restarting the QERD and disposing of your body, there wasn't time to retrieve anything new."

"I imagine Estaban was rather vexed," said George.

"On the contrary," Hammurabi said, "when he saw the flamingo in my office, he had it sent to the Prince straightaway. The Favored Son was so taken with it that He immediately ordered a thousand more for the castle."

"That will keep the Packrat Machine busy for a while," said George. "If I were you, I'd run a full set of backups as soon as you can. It's a long time until retirement." ☹

Karl Dandenell is an active member of SFWA. His work has appeared or will soon appear in "Aboriginal SF," "Buzzy Mag," and "Fiction Vortex." He is also a graduate of

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