

AN UNWELCOME QUEST



SCOTT MEYER

**AN
UNWELCOME
QUEST**

Also by Scott Meyer

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C O N T E N T S

[START READING](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

- [1.](#)
- [2.](#)
- [3.](#)
- [4.](#)
- [5.](#)
- [6.](#)
- [7.](#)
- [8.](#)
- [9.](#)
- [10.](#)
- [11.](#)
- [12.](#)
- [13.](#)
- [14.](#)
- [15.](#)
- [16.](#)
- [17.](#)
- [18.](#)
- [19.](#)
- [20.](#)
- [21.](#)
- [22.](#)
- [23.](#)
- [24.](#)
- [25.](#)
- [26.](#)
- [27.](#)
- [28.](#)
- [29.](#)
- [30.](#)
- [31.](#)
- [32.](#)
- [33.](#)

34.

35.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The following is intended to be a fun, comedic sci-fi/fantasy novel. Any similarity between the events described and how reality actually works is purely coincidental.

PROLOGUE

It was a momentous day in Camelot. Not as momentous as the day a time-traveling computer enthusiast named Phillip showed up, called himself a wizard, and demonstrated the ability to do what appeared to be genuine magic. Not as momentous as the day another wizard calling himself Merlin talked the king into changing his oldest son's name to Arthur, and the city of London's name to Camelot. Certainly not as momentous as the day construction of the monstrously huge, gold-plated castle at the heart of Camelot had been completed.

All of these things were made possible by a computer file that Phillip, Merlin (or, as he was originally known, and would be known again one day, Jimmy), and all of the other wizards had found. The file proved that reality was merely an artificial construct controlled by a computer program. Manipulating this file allowed one to manipulate reality itself, travel in time, and create things that were, in a word, magical. Things like the initiation of a new wizard, which was the particular momentous event scheduled for this day.

What nobody knew was that this would also be the day that the wizards of Camelot first found a reason to expel a wizard and exile him back to his own time. It was, as we've established, a momentous day.

Every wizard in Europe was gathered in the main ceremonial hall of the castle Camelot, eating good food that was bad for them, drinking very good drinks that were very bad for them, and generally enjoying themselves, because that was how the initiation ceremony worked. Besides, the powers they gained from their use of the computer file ensured that the food and drinks couldn't really hurt them, which made the party all the more enjoyable.

Twenty or so wizards sat around a table that would have filled any reasonably sized room, but which was almost lost in the vastness of the great hall. The hall was a cavernous expanse of polished marble and gold. The wizards all wore flowing robes and pointed hats. Most of them had staves leaning against the table or lying on the floor behind them. A few had wands. Every group has its nonconformists. All of them, regardless of their personal magical-prop preference, were just finishing their meals.

"So, Gary, how'd you enjoy having an apprentice?" Phillip asked, before taking a swig of beer from his large earthenware stein.

Gary winced, which was funny, because that was exactly how most of the people who knew Gary had reacted when they heard it was his turn to train an apprentice.

"I dunno," Gary said. "It was cool, I guess."

Gary lapsed into a silence that begged those who heard it to ask for more detail. Phillip responded with a silence that invited Gary to keep talking.

"We, uh, we didn't really hit it off," Gary continued, shaking his head. He was a tall, spindly man with limp black hair and a limp black robe. When he shook his head, the ends of his hair waved

like the tassels on the dress of a flapper dancing at a funeral.

— Tyler asked, “What do you mean? Did you fight?”

Tyler and Jeff were the other two members of the contingent from the small town of Leadchurch. Tyler was one of the few black men who had ever found the file and used it to go to Medieval England instead of, say, ancient Morocco. Jeff was a slightly built man with black hair and a brilliant mind. He had been a successful engineer before finding the file. Jeff and Tyler were good friends with Phillip, and even better friends with Gary. They usually spent a great deal of time hanging around with Gary, because he was fun, and his place was something of a party house, or in his case, a party skull-shaped cave. They had deliberately kept their distance since Gary had been assigned as a trainee.

“We didn’t fight. Nothing like that,” Gary said. He looked to the far end of the table. The trainee being initiated was sitting at the head of the table being lightly brainwashed by the chairman and the wizards, Merlin, as was also the custom. The Leadchurch wizards were sitting at the far end of the banquet table, and Phillip was taking periodic breaks from the conversation to glare at Merlin, his face a mask of loathing and scorn. Again, this was the custom.

“It’s just . . .” Gary struggled, “our senses of humor didn’t really mesh.”

Jeff said, “So he didn’t think you were funny. Big deal. Neither do I, most of the time.”

“No,” Gary said, “it’s not that he didn’t think I was funny. It’s that he thought I was funny at the wrong times. If I said or did something I thought was funny, it would just confuse him, but occasionally I’d say something serious and it would make him laugh.”

“For example?” Phillip asked.

“When I told him that we could make it so we didn’t need air or water, but we couldn’t figure out how to not feel like we need them, he thought that was the funniest thing ever. I told him it would be horrible, and he said, ‘So we don’t do it to ourselves. Just save it for someone else.’ He even wrote up a quick macro, just to prove it could be done. It makes you invisible too. He called it *ghosting*.”

“I can see how that would make you uncomfortable,” Phillip said.

Gary said, “I know, right?”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry,” Tyler said. “It wouldn’t work.”

Phillip looked to the end of the table. Jimmy (everyone called him Merlin, but to Phillip he always be Jimmy, or that jackass Jimmy, if he was feeling particularly honest) was leaning toward the trainee, smiling broadly and chuckling as he said something Phillip was certain wasn’t funny. The trainee had dark brown hair and a face that was mostly nose. He wore a brand new chocolate-brown robe. His staff, a varnished piece of wood as straight as a tent pole, topped with what appeared to be a red mushroom with white dots on the cap, leaned against the table. The trainee looked on impassive as that jackass Jimmy laughed out loud and slapped the trainee on the shoulder.

“What’s his name again?” Phillip asked.

“Todd,” Gary answered.

“Where’s he from?”

“Phoenix, Arizona. 2005.”

“Where’d he find the file?” Tyler asked.

“He never said,” Gary answered with a shrug.

“What do you mean, ‘He never said’?” Jeff asked.

“When I say ‘He never said,’ what I mean is that he, Todd, never said. I can’t break it down any farther than that.”

“Yeah,” Jeff said, rolling his eyes. “I get that, but didn’t you ask? How could you spend nearly a month training the guy and never ask?”

“I never said I didn’t ask,” Gary explained. “I didn’t say I never asked. I didn’t never ask.”

never didn't ask."

"Are you saying that you asked?" Jeff asked.

Gary said, "I asked every day. I asked where he found the file. I asked why he'd come here. I asked if he'd gotten in trouble back in his time. Hell, I asked what he did for a living. All I ever got out of him was that he was from Phoenix, from the year 2005. After that, he'd change the subject. Eventually, I figured my job was to train him, not to write his biography."

Phillip looked back to the far end of the table. Todd was giggling. Jimmy looked confused and shared a look with his assistant, Eddie, who looked uncomfortable. Jimmy glanced down to Phillip at the end of the table. Phillip quickly looked away. He didn't want Jimmy to see him looking. Phillip would be mortified if Jimmy thought that Phillip cared what Jimmy thought.

"What kind of things made him laugh?" Phillip asked.

Gary said, "Weird stuff. Things you wouldn't expect. I told him all about all the pranks you can pull on people using teleportation and conjuring spells, and he just sat there. Then I told him about the spells we aren't allowed to do, body modification, you know, the dangerous stuff. I dunno, I guess something about the way I described it just struck him funny."

Phillip looked back to the head of the table. Jimmy's assistant, Eddie, was talking. Like his boss, Eddie had adopted a fake name to live under as a wizard, but Phillip was willing to give him the pass. Eddie was the only Asian wizard in Europe, so he wore a red and gold robe and worked under the name "Wing Po, the mysterious wizard from the Orient." At this point in history, people didn't know how to react to "Eddie, the mysterious wizard from the Orient." They already had difficulty dealing with Eddie's thick New Jersey accent.

Eddie was smiling broadly, talking to Todd, the trainee, who was staring back at him with an expressionless. Jimmy was looking at Phillip's end of the table, staring at Gary as if trying to get his attention. Jimmy gave up on Gary and looked directly at Phillip. There was something in Jimmy's expression that kept Phillip from looking away.

Phillip had felt a little unsettled. Jimmy looked uncomfortable. Phillip had never seen that before, and that made him feel a whole lot unsettled.

Phillip thought for a moment, then asked Gary, "Say, what's Todd doing for his macro?"

A macro is a sort of simple program, often used by computer experts to trigger a series of commands with one keystroke. Since the wizards of Camelot's powers were derived from computer code, they used macros to create complex magical effects designed to impress other wizards and freak out the locals.

"I dunno," Gary answered. "He wouldn't tell me anything. I figured I'd let him have his surprise. He seemed excited about it. I think it might be something kinda public. He asked a lot of questions about the locals."

Phillip returned his attention to the head of the table. Todd was laughing heartily at something. Both Jimmy and Eddie were looking at Phillip. Jimmy glanced at Todd, then back to Phillip, raising his eyebrows as if to ask a question. Phillip didn't know what the question was, and certainly didn't know the answer, so he shrugged, ending the three-way nonverbal conversation that had only really communicated the fact that none of them knew what was going on.

Jimmy frowned and said something to Todd, who stopped laughing and sat up straight. Jimmy stood and cleared his throat. Slowly, all of the wizards stopped talking.

Jimmy spread his arms wide, the gold trim on his jade-green robe glowing in the candlelight. He said, "Well, friends, I hope you've all enjoyed your meal." There were nods and a murmur of assent.

Phillip said, "I enjoyed it too," intimating that he was not Jimmy's friend. It wasn't a very good heckle, not up to Phillip's usual standards. For some reason, his heart wasn't in it.

Jimmy smirked and continued, a bit more confidently than before. Phillip's hostility had put him back on familiar footing. "As you all know, we are here to celebrate the arrival of a new wizard, Todd. He has been studying with Gary, and tomorrow he faces the trials."

They all smiled at this. Everyone at the table except Todd knew that the trials were a sham, and that the real test was already under way. After living and training with a wizard for a few weeks, the initiate spent the evening making dinner conversation with Jimmy; then he would be asked to say a few words and perform an original piece of magic: his macro. Most of the wizards' powers were derived from a shell program Jimmy and Phillip had written many years ago, which made manipulating the file that controlled reality easier and safer. The trainee's macro would usually consist of several of the effects already written into the shell strung together by a simple program, and would give the other wizards an idea of what kind of magic they could expect from the new wizard in the future. After all of that, everybody would reconvene without the trainee and take a vote. It was a formality. Until this night, nobody had ever been rejected. The next morning, they'd do everything they could to make the trainee nervous, let him in on the joke, then do everything they could to make the new wizard drunk.

Jimmy continued. "As is our custom, Todd will now say a few words; then he will show us a piece of his macro."

Jimmy sat down. Todd took a deep breath, then stood and addressed the group. He was not a large man, nor was he good-looking. That said, it was difficult to take your eyes off him. Later, Phillip would decide it was his eyes. Something about his eyes drew your attention to them. It was difficult not to look at them, much like when talking to a police officer, it is difficult not to keep glancing at his gun.

"I am not a guy who makes friends easily," Todd began.

This was an excellent way to start. One didn't find oneself at this table without first stumbling across a very well hidden computer file, and that meant spending a lot of time poking around on computers. People don't often spend lots of time poking around computers at parties. Everyone listening could have said the same thing about himself. Heads silently nodded, almost involuntarily, at Todd's confession.

Todd continued. "Knowing what I know now, what we all know about how the world really works, I'm glad I didn't try."

All around the table, silently, heads stopped nodding. Several turned slightly to the side.

"Because now, I find myself here," Todd said, "with all of you. You've all been very kind, and that has made me feel so welcome."

This set the audience at ease. Phillip could feel the room relax.

Todd smiled. "I feel very much at home here, with you all. I can't imagine how terrible I would feel if you all turned on me, like all the others have." His mood seemed to darken, as did everyone else's.

"But I hope that doesn't happen," Todd said. "That would be unfortunate."

After a long silence, Jimmy stood, clapping his hands. "Right," he said, with strained good cheer. "And now, Todd, please show us your macro."

Todd instantly brightened. He left his spot at the head of the table and walked to the empty area off to the side. The half of the group sitting closest to him turned so as to easily watch the show. The hall was vast, a hundred feet tall and a hundred yards long. It was more than large enough for anything Todd may have had planned, but he stayed relatively close, only moving about twenty feet away from the table.

"I know," Todd said, "that most of you use your macro as kind of a greeting. You pull it out when you meet someone new to demonstrate your power. I hear that usually means lots of fire and

smoke and flying around.”

—A wave of good-natured laughter rippled around the table, as if the group were collectively saying “Guilty as charged.”

Todd smiled and laughed, but there was no mirth in it. It was the laugh of a man who heard your joke and thought it was funny that you were dumb enough to think he’d find it funny.

“That doesn’t really demonstrate any power, does it?” Todd asked. “No. I mean, sure, it shows that you have power, but it doesn’t show what that power is, you know? It proves nothing. It’s like a really cool explosion. Sure, the fireball and the big noise get your attention, but really, it’s the crater and the destroyed day-care center that leave an impression.”

The wizards listening knew what his words meant but didn’t know what to make of what he said.

Todd continued. “I’m doing something different. My macro doesn’t hint at my power with something big and showy. It demonstrates it clearly with something small, but unmistakable.” Todd waved his staff over the empty marble floor beside him and said, “Unray acromay.”

Pig latin, Phillip thought. *Not a promising start.*

There was an explosion that created a bright flash, a hollow sound, and a smallish mushroom cloud of dingy smoke. When the cloud dissipated, Todd was standing next to a blue plastic tarp, which was obviously draped over a large human form.

Todd giggled and rubbed his hands together. He reached down and grabbed one corner of the tarp with his free hand and held his mushroom staff aloft with the other.

Todd said, “Guys, let me show you what real power looks like.” He ripped off the tarp and threw it with a flourish. The tarp burst into flame the instant it left his hand. It distracted the wizards from Todd’s presentation more than he had expected, because he accidentally threw it directly at them and because it burned much more slowly than he had anticipated. The flaming tarpaulin fluttered to rest draped over the middle of the banquet table, several chairs, and two wizards who hadn’t been quite fast enough to get out of the way. The wizards cursed and flailed until they were out of danger, watching as the tarp burned itself out in a few seconds; then everyone was able to turn their attention back to Todd.

A large man, a full head taller than Todd and easily twice as broad through the shoulders, stood motionless next to Todd, who looked sickeningly pleased with himself. Many of the wizards immediately jumped to the conclusion that Todd had created the image of a man and had gotten many of the basic dimensions wrong. The wizards from Leadchurch knew better. Leadchurch was too small a town for someone as large as Kludge to go unnoticed.

Kludge was the second-largest, second-strongest, and second-most-violent person in Leadchurch. The fact that the largest, strongest, and most violent person in town was a woman named Gert had led Kludge to become the angriest person in town by a comfortable margin.

Gary, who had very specifically told his trainee that non-wizards were not allowed at the banquet, asked, “What’s he doing here, Todd?”

“Anything I want,” Todd nearly squealed, “and only what I want. He’s powerless to make a move until I make him move. I have complete control.”

“So, if you don’t make him move, he’ll just stand there until he dies?” Phillip asked.

“He’ll keep standing there after that. He’s held in place by invisible force bands around several parts of his body. Even if he goes totally limp, he’ll keep standing there at attention, but what fun is that?” Todd muttered something under his breath, reached into his hat, and pulled out an object Phillip had never seen. It was an oddly shaped chunk of plastic that had been dyed unconvincingly to look like metal. It had two small handles and was covered with switches, triggers, and buttons.

Jeff asked, “Is that a Nintendo Wavebird?”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “Good eye. They’ve never really made a better controller.” Todd flipped a switch and a small light glowed on the controller. He held it in both hands, his staff tucked under his arm. Todd looked at Kludge, giggled a bit, then pushed the control stick forward with his left thumb. Kludge lurched forward with his right foot, as if suddenly seized with the irresistible urge to stomp on a bug. He stood motionless for a moment; then his left foot whipped forward and stomped down with bone-jarring force. His right foot lurched forward again, followed by his left, and the cycle repeated so that he walked inexorably toward the wizards. After a few graceless steps his trajectory curved so that he walked in a circle around Todd. Each step was a powerful stomp, as if he were trying to crush the floor with his heels. From the waist up, however, Kludge remained motionless, as if his lower half were a vehicle upon which his upper body merely rode.

“I know the walk cycle needs a lot of work,” Todd said as Kludge continued to orbit him, “but you have to admit, it’s a good proof of concept. This isn’t all either. I can control his arms too.”

Todd’s right thumb pushed a second, smaller joystick to the left, and both of Kludge’s arms whipped instantly to Kludge’s left as if he were dancing the world’s most aggressive hula. Todd pushed the stick to the right, and Kludge’s arms followed suit. Todd rolled the stick around, and Kludge waved his arms over his head as he continued to stomp circles around Todd.

Todd said, “I can also make him turn his head,” and instantly, Kludge’s head wrenched to the left, then to the right, then back and forth as he continued to flail and stomp laps around his master.

“Stop him!” Phillip yelled. “Stop him right now!”

“I can do that too,” Todd said. He lifted his fingers and thumbs from the controls, and Kludge came to an immediate halt. Todd looked at the dumbstruck faces of the other wizards. He turned to Jimmy and said, “Mr. Chairman, would you like a closer look?”

Jimmy came forward, as did Phillip, even though he was not invited. As they got close to the now-stationary Kludge, they could see that while he stood unnaturally still, his eyes were alive, blinking and rolling around frantically in his head.

Jimmy turned to Todd and asked, “Is he awake?”

“Yes,” Todd answered.

Jimmy asked, “Why?”

Todd snorted. “I guess he’s not tired.”

“But I thought you said you have total control over him,” Phillip sputtered.

“I do,” Todd replied. “I have total control over his motions.”

“But not his mind,” Jimmy said.

Todd shrugged. “Okay, yeah, you got me. Yeah, I can’t control his brain, but I’m pretty sure I know what he’s thinking.”

Phillip looked up at the large man’s eyes, glaring down at him, and thought, *Yeah, I think I can do that too.*

Jimmy asked, “Can I talk to him?”

Todd said, “Knock yourself out.”

Jimmy and Phillip exchanged a look; then Phillip asked, “Will he be able to answer?”

Todd smiled. “Sure.”

Jimmy and Phillip exchanged another look; then Jimmy asked, “Will he answer with his words or yours?”

Todd said, “He can’t say anything on his own, but I can make him talk. Check this out.”

Todd pressed a button, and Kludge’s mouth stretched open to the very limits of what his jaw muscles could endure and snapped shut violently, slightly out of sync with the syllables as a recording of Todd imitating a deep, menacing voice said, “Hello, world! I am Todd’s slave! Isn’t that great?”

A wave of uncomfortable murmurs rose from the wizards. Phillip and Jimmy glanced at each other.

other, fidgeting nervously. Phillip knew what he thought of Todd's handiwork, and he knew what he hoped Jimmy thought, but with Jimmy it was always difficult to know for sure. *Maybe I should say something. Speak my mind*, Phillip thought. *It'll reassure the others who know this is unacceptable and maybe sway the few who are on the fence. I hope it's only a few of them who're on the fence anyway.*

"Todd," Phillip said, "this is awful."

Todd looked irritated and said, "Wait, wait, I know what you're thinking. Look, the lip sync is off, and the big dummy's moving kinda clumsily, but you have to admit the potential. I haven't even shown you all he can do yet. Here, one second. Look at this."

Todd pressed some combination of buttons that went by too quickly for Phillip to catch them. Kludge's arms whipped up in front of him with his palms facing forward. His mouth whipped open and the mocking recording of Todd's voice cried, "Double high five!"

Phillip and Jimmy glanced at each other again. Jimmy shrugged and started to oblige, but Todd lifted a finger and said, "One sec."

After a moment, the recording said, "Come on, bro! Don't leave me hanging!" Kludge's eyes were closed now, as if he were trying to convince himself none of this was happening, but his mouth still followed the recording like a reluctant ventriloquist's dummy.

Jimmy shook his head, then lifted his arms over his head to slap Kludge's hands. Just as his hands made contact, Kludge's right arm swung down in a blindingly fast arc and punched Jimmy in the crotch so powerfully that it lifted Jimmy off his feet.

Jimmy staggered backward, fell to the ground, and rolled onto his back, doubled over in pain. Several wizards ran to his side to offer assistance. Phillip strolled to his side to look at him. Jimmy looked up at Phillip, and the look in his eye removed any doubt Phillip had felt about Jimmy's feelings regarding Todd's macro.

Phillip looked at Kludge, standing frozen in his crotch-punching pose. His eyes were still closed. Phillip saw a single tear rolling slowly down Kludge's cheek. Phillip's eyes went down to Kludge's hand. Obviously, Todd didn't have control of the fingers, and had been unable to force Kludge to make a fist, because at least two of Kludge's fingers were badly broken.



The next morning, Phillip was back in Leadchurch, standing in a small side room in the lead-covered house of worship that gave the town its name. He was looking down at the sleeping form of Kludge who was lashed to a heavy oak table with thick leather straps. Three of the fingers of his right hand were tied to wooden sticks, and his arms and forehead were ringed with dark bruises. In a sense, Kludge had caused the bruises himself by struggling against Todd's force fields. Phillip suspected there were more, all over Kludge's body, but he wasn't going to look.

Phillip asked, "How is he?"

Bishop Galbraith, the gruff, crusty master of the lead church, said, "He's resting comfortably."

Phillip shook his head. "Those straps don't look very comfortable."

"Maybe not for him," Bishop Galbraith said, "but they make me more comfortable. If he weren't tied down, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near him when he wakes up and remembers whatever it is you all did to him."

"Of course. Please give my thanks to the sisters for tending to him. I want you to know that v

all didn't do this to him, Your Excellency. It was one wizard's work."

—The bishop held up a hand and said, "I'll trust you lot to take care of that. Don't lose too much sleep worrying about this oaf. This isn't nearly as bad as some of the things he's done to other people in his life. Some of the villagers might actually think better of wizards once word of this gets out. I just recommend you all avoid Kludge in the future. He's not apt to forgive and forget."

"Don't worry about that," Phillip said. "I can't imagine any of us would be lax enough to let him catch us off guard."

"And what about whichever of you heathens did this to him?"

"It was an apprentice."

The bishop whistled. "An apprentice did this? Who was his master? Who'd be irresponsible enough to let this happen right under his nose?"

Phillip said, "His master was the necromancer of Skull Gullet Cave."

"Ah," Galbraith said. "That makes sense. What do you intend to do to the apprentice?"

"We're going to make certain that he never hurts anybody ever again."

Bishop Galbraith said, "Aye, you hate to do it, but killing him is probably the only way."

"What? No. I'm sorry, you misunderstood. We're not going to kill him."

The bishop shook his head. "Well, I understand wanting to be merciful, but I'm pretty sure that even if you don't do the apprentice in, Kludge here will as soon as he's up and around, and he won't do as clean a job of it as you would." The bishop looked sideways at Phillip and smirked. "Or is that your plan? You get to be merciful, the apprentice gets justice, and Kludge gets his revenge. Phillip, didn't think you were that clever."

Phillip said, "That's not our plan."

"Oh," Galbraith said. "Oh well. Good to know I was right."

"About me not being clever?" Phillip asked.

"Yes, Phillip," the bishop answered, a bit more slowly than Phillip thought necessary.

"Don't worry, Your Excellency. While you and the sisters were tending to Kludge's wounds, we spent the entire night planning how to deal with the man who did this. We're going to send him to a place where he'll be safe from Kludge, and everyone will be safe from him. We've made sure that he will never be able to return."

"What are you thinking? Some sort of dungeon?"

"Worse," Phillip said. "Far worse. I give you my word, he will spend the rest of his life in a place many would consider worse than death."

1.

Seven years in Florida, Todd thought. Has it really been only seven years?

Todd, like most Americans, had a very clear picture in his head of what life in Florida was like. It was a picture created entirely by commercials for theme parks and old episodes of *Miami Vice*. Again, like most Americans, his real-world experience of Florida had been quite different. For most people, that was because they lived in the real world, in which they needed food, had to work, and didn't drive an apparently bulletproof Ferrari. For Todd, it was because he had spent his entire time in Florida sitting in a private cell in a top-secret maximum-security federal prison.

Life in an air-conditioned cinderblock cage had shaped Todd's perceptions of the whole state. If asked to describe Florida in three words, he would have said, "Gray, chilly, and dry."

For most of his time in The Facility (that was the only name his prison had ever been given), Todd had been in solitary confinement, not because he had done anything particularly bad but because none of the other prisoners had done anything bad enough to deserve being put near him. It wasn't that his company was that unpleasant. It wasn't *just* that, anyway. It was mostly because, for reasons that very few people understood, no electronic device would work anywhere near him. No television. No radio. No computers. Nothing. Being near Todd Douglas meant also having nothing to distract you from the fact that you were near Todd Douglas, and that, it was decided, was cruel and unusual punishment.

For years, Todd sat in his cage and rotted, his only entertainment coming from video games and strategy guides he got through the prison library. He loved video games. Reading about them when he couldn't play them was torture, but it was slightly less torturous than not reading about them at all. Todd had been on the verge of losing all hope when out of nowhere, a Treasury agent named Murphy turned up with a note from Merlin. He was calling himself Jimmy now, but he was still one of the bastards who had stripped Todd of his powers and exiled him here in the present for no reason.

I didn't even do anything, he often thought. I just made someone else do stuff.

With that one note, Jimmy had done Todd three big favors.

He had told Todd that he was not alone. Others had suffered the same fate he had, and at least one of those exiled like him was one of the very wizards who had exiled Todd in the first place.

He showed Todd that it was possible to escape. That one could regain one's powers. It was possible. You just needed to find someone stupid enough to help you.

Lastly, by having the letter hand-delivered by one of the Treasury agents who was working with him, Jimmy had essentially introduced Todd to someone who was, in fact, stupid enough.

It hadn't surprised Todd when the agent and his partner turned up later with Merlin (a.k.a. Jimmy). They never said as much, but their silence on the subject, their need for Todd to help the

find another iteration of the file, and their overabundance of caution where Todd was concerned sent the clear message that Jimmy had regained his powers and escaped.

Of course, in doing so, he had made it that much harder for Todd to trick them into giving him his freedom, but Todd knew that sooner or later an opportunity would present itself.

It was late. Agents Miller and Murphy had long since left for the day, back to the one-bedroom condo the Department of the Treasury had rented for them when it became clear that they were going to be in Florida indefinitely. Todd sat on his bed and reread a strategy guide for a game he had, of course, never played. The game was about a fortune hunter exploring exotic locales, seeing the world, having adventures, and making love to beautiful women. Todd closed his eyes and dreamed of a future where he could escape this prison and, if he was lucky, play that game.

Todd was so caught up in his fantasy, picturing the game console, feeling the controller in his hands, that at first he didn't hear the footsteps coming toward his cell. Usually, the way their search for the file worked was that one agent would stand near the cell and get directions from Todd while the other sat at a computer around the corner and out of range of Todd's magnetic field, following the directions and yelling back what he saw, but all of that happened during business hours. Once the agents left for the day, nobody bothered Todd except to deliver meals. Todd put his game guide down and sat up straight, wondering who his visitor would be. One of the agents? The warden, perhaps?

Todd was surprised when a guard he'd never met walked around the corner. The guard studied Todd and didn't seem impressed with what he saw. Finally, he said, "I know who you are."

"Really?" Todd asked.

"Yes," the guard replied. "You're Todd Douglas, the prisoner who's been assisting Agents Miller and Agent Murphy, and now you're going to help me."

"Really?" Todd asked.

"Yes," the guard replied, squinting at Todd in a way he probably thought looked shrewd. "I don't know what you've done, or how it helped them, but it did, and you're going to tell me all about it."

Todd stood, and stepped toward the bars of his prison cell. He leaned on the bars and said, "Really?"

"Yes," the guard said.

A long silence passed before the guard coughed, then continued. "See, when they first showed up, we all looked down at Miller and Murphy. Heck, we sorta felt sorry for them. Murphy, at least. They clearly had a crap detail, shipped out here from California, stuck talking to you all day every day. Their lives sucked." The guard saw the look on Todd's face and said, "Oh, uh, sorry. No offense intended."

"Really?" Todd asked.

The guard pressed on. "I'm just sayin', they seemed so beat down. Then, all the sudden they were on top of the world."

It was true. Using the skills that had helped Todd hack into the file to begin with, and the patterns Agents Miller and Murphy had found going over their notes from their time spent seeking out copies of the file with Jimmy, they had, just two days ago, found a fresh, undiscovered copy of the file. One that hadn't been locked down by those who were trying to keep the power of the file for themselves.

They'd spent their work time since exploring the file. Miller and Murphy seemed very excited and asked many questions, which Todd tried to answer, directing them to use his own entry as an example.

The guard said, "Some of the guys say they heard Miller and Murphy talking. They say they're setting up a new headquarters for their task force. Getting an office. Hiring up a staff. Setting up shop."

Seems they found a way to use whatever you told them to get the Treasury Department to give them some real funding.”

Todd smiled and asked, “Really?”

“Yes, really!” the guard shouted. “Really, okay?! Really!”

“Fine, okay. Sorry,” Todd said. He immediately assumed that this story was a smoke screen. The Treasury Department was, by definition, tight with money. One of the simplest applications of the file was generating unlimited amounts of cash. It was far more likely that Miller and Murphy were using this new office and staff to somehow hide and launder the money they were generating with the file. They were probably telling themselves that they’d use the money to bankroll their efforts to fight crime, but sooner or later, they’d go mad with power. Everyone who found the file did.

Everyone but me, Todd thought. They took access away from me before I ever got the chance.

“So, what’s any of this got to do with you?” Todd asked.

The guard said, “Look, the thing is, I hate this place.”

Todd said, “It’s a prison.”

“Yeah, I know, but man, you don’t understand. I really want out of here.”

“It’s a prison, and I’m a prisoner. I understand wanting out of here.”

“Not like I do,” the guard said.

“You may be right about that,” Todd said, showing more restraint than he usually had.

“Then you’ll help me?”

“Help you do what?” Todd sputtered. “Leave? I can’t leave myself! You can! Start walking down the hall. If a door is in your way, open it. Keep going until you’re outside. I don’t understand what you’re asking for here.”

“I know that you’re a prisoner and I’m a guard, but I’m just as trapped as you are.”

“No, you’re not! You go home every night!”

“Yes,” the guard said, “but every morning, I have to come back. I have to leave my home, get in my car I pay for, and burn my gas driving myself here, to this prison, every day. You inmates never stop to think about how terrible that is for us guards, do you?”

“No,” Todd said. “You’re right. We don’t.”

“So you’ll help me?”

Todd said, “I still don’t get it. You hate your job. So what? How can I help you with that? You want a reference? ‘Of all the guards who have watched me, he watched me the closest?’”

The guard smiled. “You’re on the right track, actually. Look, you’re right. I hate my job. The problem is, they aren’t going to promote me. They’ve made that clear. But I can’t get a job anywhere else because I work at a secret prison. I can’t put it on my resume, can I? If I try to fill out a job application, it’ll look like I’ve been unemployed for a decade.”

“I can see how that could be a problem,” Todd said.

“Yeah, but Miller and Murphy, they’re setting up a new office. I figure they’ll probably need some help, and they know me already, so why shouldn’t I go work for them?”

“Have you mentioned this idea to them?” Todd asked.

“Yeah.”

“And since you’re talking to me, I guess it didn’t go well.”

“They said they’d consider it.”

“Which usually means no.”

“Yeah,” the guard agreed, “but I figure if you tell me what you told them that got the Treasury Department so excited, I can use that to get a job. You know, impress them with my moxie.”

“Or blackmail them with the threat of taking it to another agency, or the press.”

The guard shrugged. “Yeah, maybe, depending on what it is and how reasonable they’re willing

to be.”

“Fair enough,” Todd said. “But why should I help you?”

The guard smiled. “Well, that’s the thing. If you don’t, that means I stay here, with you. Only like you said, you’re an inmate. I’m a guard. You can’t really do much to make my life worse. I can do lots of things to make yours worse.”

I’ve been in solitary confinement for seven years, Todd thought. What’s he gonna do to make that worse, mess with the air-conditioning?

Todd did not say this. Instead, he feigned a look of fear and said, “I see your point.” Todd knew that this was his chance. This man came here intent on pulling Todd’s strings and making Todd dance. He didn’t realize that the strings could be pulled the other direction. In many ways, the puppeteer got the short end of the stick. While the puppet does the dancing and gets the applause, the puppeteer does all of the real work.

“Okay, fine. But I can’t tell you what it is. You won’t believe it. I kinda have to show you.” Todd said, pointing. “Go see if the computer is on.”

The guard walked around the corner, out of Todd’s sight. Todd knew that at the end of a thirty-foot hallway, just inside a locked gate, there was a computer, a desk of some sort, and a chair. He listened as the guard walked to the end of the hall. After a few seconds of silence, the guard turned around and walked back. When he reached Todd’s cell, he said, “Yeah, it’s on.”

Todd expected this. Once they’d found the file, they’d all been terrified of not being able to go to it again. Murphy had documented every move they’d made so that he could repeat it without Todd’s assistance, but he also left the computer on with the file open, just in case. Of course, there was the chance that someone would find the computer and mess with the file, but the computer was located behind several locked gates, inside a top-secret maximum security prison, by itself in a hall near an inmate that the guards actively avoided, so the risk was considered pretty slight.

“Good,” Todd said. “What’s on the screen?”

The guard went back to the corner, peered down the hall, and said, “A bunch of words and numbers.”

“Yeah, Todd said, “okay, but what are they? Go look for my name. Todd Douglas. Scroll up a little if you have to, but don’t change anything.”

Miller and Murphy had been very interested in how someone’s file entry related to their physical existence, but they’d been too cowardly to look at their own entries. It was far safer to peep around in Todd’s. Now their cowardice was paying off for the last person they’d want to help, a person whose cowardice usually does.

The guard nodded and walked around the corner. Todd searched his cell as quickly as he could without making noise, looking for a specific book. It was a strategy guide for a role-playing game. He didn’t have to search long. He opened to the section of the book with the maps of the various levels and locations in the game. The maps had lots of empty space around the borders, and Todd had furiously scribbled notes there whenever Miller gave him a moment of privacy.

The guard shouted, “Found it.”

Todd leapt to the corner of his cell closest the computer. It only got him a few feet closer, but Todd was too excited for rational thought. “Okay,” He yelled, “is there a box anywhere on the screen labeled ‘search’?”

After a few agonizing seconds, the guard said, “Yeah. It’s in the upper right-hand corner. Is that right?”

“Yeah, yeah, good,” Todd said. “I want you to take the block of words and numbers that has my name in it, and I want you to select the whole thing. You’ll have to scroll through a few pages, that’s fine, but get the whole block highlighted, okay?”

The guard shouted back, "Will do."

~~Todd waited. He heard the guard curse, and his heart stopped.~~

"What?!" Todd shouted. "What happened?!"

If the guard accidentally closed the program, they probably wouldn't be able to get it back before morning. Murphy would see it and know someone had tampered with the computer. At that point, he and Miller might just decide they didn't need Todd anymore, and then Todd would be screwed.

"Oh," the guard yelled, "I didn't get the whole thing highlighted. I stopped about half a line short. Here, I'll start over."

"No!" Todd said. "Don't! That's fine! That'll do. We're good. We're good."

Once the file was found, Miller had abandoned his post at the corner of Todd's cell and stood over Murphy as they discussed their discovery. Todd had strained to hear their conversation and heard them discuss his cursed magnetic field. He gathered that it was modified in the same way that Jimmy's had been. He talked the guard through the process of finding, then modifying the magnetic field's properties.

There was the clacking of keys, then a long silence. Todd heard the guard stand up and walk back to the cell.

"Did you do it?" Todd asked, trying to hide his excitement.

The guard said, "Yeah. What did it do? What was supposed to happen?"

Todd said, "I dunno. Say, is that a digital watch?"

The guard said, "Yeah."

"What time is it?"

The guard looked at his watch and said, "Huh, that's weird."

Todd asked, "Is it broken?" and tried to hide his disappointment.

The guard said, "Yeah," and held his arm out so Todd could read the watch himself. "It's just flashing twelve."

Todd instantly shifted gears. He had been hiding disappointment, and now he was trying to hide his glee. Being near him before they'd reset his magnetic field had clearly rebooted the watch, but it was working now. The cheap digital watch's dull, gray screen uselessly flashing twelve was the most beautiful thing Todd had ever seen.

The guard obviously noticed what an important moment this was for Todd. "How long have you been in here? You've never seen a digital watch before?"

"No, I've seen plenty of digital watches," Todd said. "That's just a really nice one. It looks like it's made from really good, um, plastic."

The guard looked down at his watch with some pride. "Yeah, well, Casio knows what they're doing. Look, I did what you said, and nothing happened. Nothing I could see on the computer anyway. What was supposed to happen?"

Todd tried to think fast. "I can't say. They didn't tell me. I don't know what it's supposed to do. I just know that they wanted my help finding that file, and that they were planning to do what you just did."

The guard asked, "Why'd they need your help to find it?"

"Because I found it before."

"How'd they know that?"

"It's why I'm in prison," Todd said, thinking fast. "Look at me, do I look like a criminal to you? I found that file, and whatever it is, it was important enough for them to throw me in jail."

The guard was clearly puzzled and was trying to solve the puzzle by the time-honored method of frowning about it. Eventually he said, "Well, that's what you showed them, and it got them the

funding and their fancy new office. Maybe if I just casually mention it to them that'll be enough either impress them or spook them into giving me a job, even if I don't know what it means."—

Todd said, "Maybe. But what if it doesn't? What if you did it wrong, somehow, and they ask you what was supposed to happen and you don't know?"

"I did what you told me to. Did you tell me to do it wrong?" the guard asked.

"Well," Todd said, a little too loud, "I mean, you were working from instructions I was giving you without seeing the computer. I may have gotten some part of it wrong. That's understandable, right? And if I did, you'll look like a chump."

"Yeah," the guard agreed.

"And we don't want that," Todd said. "You'd be stuck here, and you'd make my life miserable like you said."

The guard said, "Yeah, I would."

"We can keep that from happening. Just let me go have a look at the computer."

The guard shook his head. "Oh, I don't think that's a good idea."

"But it is," Todd said. "Look, you're a trained federal prison guard, right? I'm just some guy who found the wrong file and ended up behind bars. It stands to reason that you're smarter than me, doesn't it? I mean, if you weren't, I wouldn't be your prisoner, would I? Besides, you'll be right there watching me the whole time."

One minute later, Todd was out of his cell, standing in front of a functioning computer with the file open and cued up to his entry. Todd moved Murphy's metal folding chair back away from the desk so he could stand over the keyboard. The guard stood beside him, looking quite worried, but not quite as worried enough.

Todd said, "Okay. Watch carefully. All I'm going to do is look for a specific set of numbers."

Todd selected his data chunk and searched for his current longitude and latitude while the guard looked on.

Todd's hands hovered over the keyboard for a moment while he thought. He asked the guard, "Hey, do you know what direction north is?"

The guard pointed to the left. Todd pointed to the right, the front, and behind him while mumbling "South, east, west." He reached back down to the keyboard, made a small change, and vanished instantly.

The guard squinted at the empty space where Todd had been. He was still trying to process what he had just seen when he heard a sound directly behind him. The guard turned just in time to be hit in the face with a metal folding chair.

The guard lay unconscious on the floor and didn't hear Todd say, "Look at the bright side. They'll probably fire you."

2.

Centuries earlier, in Medieval England, it was movie night for the wizards, which was just as confusing as it sounds.

The wizards were all time travelers, and for many years, they had held to an unwritten rule not to speak too much about their own times. Any two of them could be from times that were up to three decades apart. It was thought that discussion of the changes in society, social mores, and the quality of the various casts of *Saturday Night Live* would only lead to unnecessary conflict. In fact, the wizards from the mid-1990s or later refused to discuss any movies at all for fear of letting slip any details about the *Star Wars* prequels or the fourth *Indiana Jones*, a group of works that the later wizards would only refer to by the collective title *The Unpleasantness*.

Later, of course, attitudes grew more lax. Wizards from earlier times wanted to play with more advanced hardware, and wizards from later times wanted to see the looks on their faces when they did so the system slowly broke down.

Eventually, the wizards started sharing information freely, even arranging a film festival during which all three *Star Wars* prequels and the fourth *Indiana Jones* movie were all screened back to back, in the name of getting it over with.

Since then, the wizards of Leadchurch had settled into a nice routine, holding a weekly movie night, taking turns subjecting each other to a double feature of their favorite films (mostly science fiction) and their favorite food (mostly pizza).

It was Phillip's turn to host the party, and the guests were having difficulty processing his first selection. As the credits rolled, Phillip stopped his massive Betamax machine and hit rewind.

"Well, that's *Colossus: The Forbin Project*. What do you think?" he asked his friends, who were scattered comfortably around his rec room, their wizard robes unbuttoned to show the T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers they always wore underneath, except for Roy, who was of a different generation. He wore slacks, loafers, and a short-sleeved button-down shirt, but then again, he also wore a trench coat instead of a robe, and he had the only wizard hat with a fedora brim. His staff was what billiard players refer to as a "bridge."

Martin stood up from the chrome and leather couch he had been sharing with Tyler and Jeff. He stretched his back and groaned, "I dunno. It was interesting, but I want to see the sequel before I pass judgment."

Phillip smiled. "There was no sequel."

Gary, who was slowly unfolding himself after two hours of sitting cross-legged on the floor, asked, "What do you mean, no sequel? Didn't it do well enough to get a second movie made?"

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