



Tour trouble
Bing Turkby

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Tour Trouble by Bing Turkby

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Get in touch if you want to use something and we'll have a yarn.

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All of the things in this book may seem real, but apart from some of the characters' names I have made up everything. This includes character quirks, occupations, modes of transport, all sorts of stuff. So don't go thinking it's real. It's just a story. (... or so Jim K would like you to think.)

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to MacDeth, Slapskins McBOOOM,
Mardy and Jim. Thanks for the ride!

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Chapter one, two, a-one-two-three-four

Jim Keltnehausen likes to tell people that he found me abandoned in a skip bin when I was just a babe. He took me home not because he instantly loved me, he says, but because he had seen the TV shows where they create a band from “normal” people and make them famous. Jim had decided he’d start a bit earlier than that. He dressed me in rock star duds from day one. My jumpsuit was white with rhinestones gleaming, I lay abed at night with a wee microphone to suck on, and I was fed only junk food.

He found me, he shaped me, and he made me what I am today.

Actually, looking at myself in the mirror, I can almost believe it. I can’t have made such a stuff-up by myself.

My name is Bing Turkby. I stand for rowdiness, stupidity and the Turakina way.

So you think it's easy to become a rock god? Rewind your brain and try thinking that again. I had several obstacles to overcome.

My stocky frame wasn’t suited to the spandex trews, my vocal range left Gregorian Chant exponents laughing, and I couldn’t play any instruments. From the tip of my curly head to the pointy end of my winklepickers, I was the least rock-god-ish person in any room you could name.

So I had to shape up. My first project was finding an instrument that suited my rowdy tendencies. I looked high, I looked low, I looked like a berk. Nothing quite had the vibe I was after. So I made the fabulous TurkbyTone Mach 3 Customline Backless guitar. Taking a lovely old Marinucci hollowbody, (a Gibson 335 copy, I guess), I levered the top off and screwed it to a bit of wood I’d found in the shed, then screwed the neck on too. Lo and beholden unto thee, I had my own individual sound!

While arseing around with this unholy beast of an instrument, playing a bit of rock karaoke, there came an approach from a thunderous young lad with a gleam in his ear. Aye, the one known as Slapskins McBOOOM, captain of the unknowable. He desired to provide me with the power of his shamanistic drumbeats. “He always kicks a shit-hot beat,” they say truly. One noticed that his eyes were a different colour from his elbows, and many mothers were scared by his demonic glee, but they never got close enough to realise he was just a wee sweetie, really. But a wee sweetie with whiplike, pounding arms.

We then caught the eye of a purveyor of low-end doom, a bass player named MacDeth. I measured him with my gaze. “26, 14, 28,” I said to

myself. But I must have been looking at someone else. For MacDeth was a beast cut from the same cloth as me, body-shape-wise. This arresting specimen was known throughout the land for his melodic jackhammer riffs. Many gigs lay in the memory of his rockin' past, and yet he chose to join up with the Ensemble. Some called him foolhardy, but he either chose to ignore them or just couldn't hear them over the stereo. I believe that he saw the vision in my eyes, and knew that with the Ensemble, his chance for glory had arrived. His angelic harmony coupled with my lack of concern for a tune made a recipe for success. (Or lolly fudge sometimes.)

That's how Jim tells the story, but I'm sure there are other versions around. The ubiquitous Jim Keltnehausen is the manager of the Bing Turkby Ensemble, and CEO of TurkbyTone Rekkids. His regal finery shows off his bald spot well. His beer belly has taken on the shape of a serving tray so that he can rest his meals upon it while watching reruns of "The Dukes of Hazzard". Yea, multitudes have found it hilarious just to gaze upon his unappetising appearance. So why do I hang out with him? Well, he knows the bizzo, my friends. His contacts are legion amongst the rock underworld, and even among the underbelly of the underworld. His mum says he slithers to work and sheds his skin every year, but I see him as a rough diamond, the kind that makes a screechy noise as it scratches glass.

Anyway, the Ensemble put in the hard yards. We paid our dues. We even went so far as to pay our overdues at the library.

Bring on the fame and fortune.

Nother chapter

"Keltnehausen!"

My roar echoed down the corridor. A small part of it ricocheted off a light fitting and hit me in the eye.

I strode on undeterred.

I finally found my band's manager cowering in a supply cupboard off the photocopy room. We were, of course, in the highrise building that comprises the headquarters of TurkbyTone Rekkids International World-Striding Colossus Ltd. You will have seen it on the Turakina skyline as you enter the famous metropolis. I had just found out that the whole budget for the Bing Turkby Ensemble's latest tour had been spent on lunch.

"All fifty dollars?!" I screamed at the quivering mass of humanity. "Do you know what happened to the Bay City Rollers' manager?"

"He got a bit chubby didn't he? Owns a mansion somewhere?"

"OK, bad example. Suffice to say that I am displeased with proceedings thus far and would like some kind of reassurance that the tour will go ahead as planned."

"No worries, Bingo! All the moolah you make from gigs will see you well in the black. We've just got to get you to the first one. And considering that one's in Turakina, I can't see much of a problem there."

Jim's words of platitude calmed me somewhat, but my keen logical mind soon found a fault.

"We don't make money from gigs, Jimbo. Never have. It's an agreement we seem to have entered into with the god of rock'n'roll without meaning to. Something always goes wrong, and don't tell me you haven't noticed." I fingered the thick gold bracelet that so elegantly surmounted my left wrist and glanced at my diamond-encrusted Rolex. A forlorn sigh escaped my pouty lips. "I shall have to sell off some of the Turkby family jewels again, shan't I, Jim-a-ree-bob?"

And so it was that two weeks later, Slapskins, MacDeth and myself had stunned the punters at the Ben Nevis and then played music at them. Now, armed with massive egos, we planned IT! THE BIG ONE! The FIRST TRIP OUT OF TOWN!!!

Yep, we were off to Napier.

I slavishly wrote and revised set lists, striving for the perfect mix that would endear us to any crowd, even one that didn't know us and therefore didn't realise that the joke is we can't play our instruments.

Keltnenhausen assured us that the pints he bought us for tea were paid for out of his own pocket, so we were in pretty good spirits as we contemplated the conquer of the city by the sea.

First item: transport. Jim knows a guy who knows a guy with many vehicles at his disposal who hires them at reasonable rates. The only condition was that we had to deliver a parcel while we were in Napier. Apart from that, the guy didn't even want petrol money. Good sort, eh?

Item two: Soundman, roadie, and bad-joke-telling-guy. We needed one of these if we were to be taken seriously on the rock and roll road. Solution: the Reverend Mardy Pune. A whole band's worth of street cred forced into one manic bundle. Nice toolbox too.

Item three: more drinks. Done

Item four: Wake up in morning and get packed and ready for the BTE's first road trip!

The day dawned without a hint of the smog that usually mars the Turakina Industrial Park's lovely visage. At the crack of 11 o'clock (and with assurances from Jim that there are more hours in the day, but at the crappy end before lunch) we climbed out of our grubby beds and took a limo to the shower block. I always like a jacuzzi in the morning, but was told there was no time.

"We've got to be on the road by twelve, Turkby!" Jim yelled. "I have the whole thing planned down to the finest details and I'm not going to let you mess it up. Now, have you told your makeup artist, your hair guy and your tinea specialist that we don't have room for them in the van?"

"Oh Jim, go on, let them come, please! You know how I get when my hair's a mess"

My pleading was as water under Jim's stony bridge. The man was hard, but that's why I hired him I suppose.

Ah Napier, city of rock and roll! Your gleaming spires inform my dreams with a kind of scary reality than lingers upon waking. Sun, sand and sexy rockers (us, I mean) were the order of the day.

Once we were loaded in the van the trip was fairly uneventful.

"It's not like my last band," said MacDeth. "We were flown about the place in a gold-plated jet plane with drink holders on the seats and all."

"You'll like it or lump it, or both, I don't care" was Keltnehausen's urbane reply.

"Where's the controls for the stereo, I'm sick of listening to Dexy's Midnight Runners" said Slapskins.

"You think it's time for T'Pau already?" I asked. "I was saving that for later"

Oh yes, we're a riot when we're on tour. The van was stopped just out of Dannevirke because a policeman thought we looked like scarfies up to no good.

"No, no, officer. We're just good plain-living rockers off to play in another town. Would you like a Tangy Fruit?"

"Sorry lads, if you're musos there'll be no trouble. You haven't seen any businessmen or bankers smoking drugs and mooning old ladies have you?" enquired the officer.

"No, but then I was so busy watching the road and giving way to everybody that I wouldn't have noticed". Good old Jim. He's a sweet-talker and no mistake.

So we made it to Napier in jolly fine fettle and set about delivering the package.

Once we had located the street, we had no trouble finding the right house. It was burnt down.

"So what do we do with this parcel then Jimbo?" I enquired. I always turn to Jim when I am confronted with a vexatious problem. Jim raised his metaphorical sword and cleft my Gordian knot:

"We'll just put it in the back of the gleaming new Ford Transit van, which is probably the best vehicle I've ever been in by the way." (Incidentally, the BTE would be only too proud to accept a sponsorship deal from Ford, preferably including said van.)

Anyway, with that conflict resolved, we were free to pursue our inter-city stardom. Napier's navvies were bustling on the docks, bogan training supervisors were showing young fullahs how to race and leer, strip joint owners were busy clothing their girlfriends as we finally located our venue for the evening's excesses.

O'Flaherty's, land of milk and honey and Guinness! World famous for being one of the few pubs that allow you to type the letters "erty" all in a row on your computer keyboard, and for that I love it. Also for the fact that they were going to allow us to play at their punters.

The Reverend Pune quickly took charge. "Lock and load boys, let's get this show off the road." He leapt out of the van carrying two guitars, an

amplifier, five speaker bins and a Moro bar. (More sponsorship possibilities there...) Within four and a half minutes he had the PA assembled, the bass restrung and polished, the drum kit set up (while blindfold), and the kettle on.

"Is our cup of tea ready yet Pune?" we whinged. Me and Slapskins and MacDeth had been busying ourselves with getting the key to our accommodation for the evening.

"Let's go upstairs, I've brought a TV to chuck out the window," exclaimed MacDeth in a most rock and roll manner.

Jim put the kibosh on that idea. MacDeth kindly asked him to remove it.

"Get that pile of kibosh off my TV you rude manager." He wept and screamed, finally resorting to flinging himself on the four-poster bed in our penthouse suite.

Slapskins was quick to resolve the tense situation by suggesting that we just throw bits of paper out the window with the names of our least favourite TV shows written on them.

"Yeah, rock on, McBOOOM!" enthused MacDeth.

Oh yes, the Ensemble were in a dangerous mood.

Slapskins isn't allowed to use the scissors, so it took us a while to perform this documentary-worthy endeavour, but when we had finished we all agreed that we were cool and everybody else sucked.

"We win, you suck!" we chanted out the window to passers-by.

Now we turned our attention to the domicile which had been provided for us by the kind folk at O'Flaherty's. It was pretty much the kind of thing we're used to. You know, gold light switches, personal masseuse in every room, hot and cold running golden syrup, the works. I cried a bit when I found that my room was almost .00000001 centimetres smaller than MacDeth's.

"Jim," I wailed. "I will not put up with this indignity. Mr. Deth will find himself on the next boat back to Kuala Lumpur if he continues this personal vendetta against me."

For the next three hours Jim listened to my heartfelt complaints, then he finally relented and told MacDeth to give me some of the extra width from his room. Then when I went to put it in my room, I found it didn't fit! The bastard had given me more length, not width! I was on the phone to my lawyers in a flash.

Then SMASH! Down came Mardy's hand on the switchhook.

"You don't have time for this, Bingo. I've set up yer gear, now get out there and rock the shit out of it!"

Now that the gig was upon us, all personal grievances went out the window. They fluttered prettily to the ground, and were taken by pigeons to build nests.

We had our usual team huddle, where Jim K. gave us our pep-talk.

"Remember, the better you play, the more CD's we sell, and the more money I get."

MacDeth pulled out his machete.

"I mean, the more money I get to pass on to you guys!" said Jimbo.

The blade disappeared silently into MacDeth's trousers.

I made Slapskins go first down the stairs to the pub in case any crazed fans tried to get famous by licking my feet or something. I hate that! If I wanted to get rid of my toejam, I'd have a bath! Damn cheek!

I was concentrating so hard on visualising the Em7 chord that I ran straight into Mr. McBOOOM's back. I enquired as to the reason for his sudden stoppage.

"Some trouble with the Union, Slapskins?"

"N...n...n...no, it's not that this time," said the Slap-man, remembering last year when I'd had his dinner allowance removed from his contract because of an argument we'd had about paradiddles.

"I've never seen so many people at one of our gigs before!"

"Whaddya mean," I sneered. "We've cleared some pretty big rooms in our time."

I leaned forward into the tastily-decorated and reasonably-priced O'Flaherty's and my eyes rivalled saucers for sheer magnitude. Damn near popped out of my head. Lucky I was wearing my blue-blockers. The reason for my astonishment was that there were *tens* of people in the place! I could barely count 'em all, even with me shoes off. A strange feeling stole into the pit of my stomach, where I usually keep my curry. After a second, I recognised it. It was nervousness! I was darn near voiding myself! MacDeth and McBOOM are seasoned musos with many a fashionable gig under their tooled leather belts, but it suddenly struck me that I was the least experienced of the lot, and I had to lead them into battle! Sure, I've put in quite a few hours on the tennis racquet, indeed that's where I learned some of my best poses, but now was make or break time. *OK Bing*, I said to myself, *you just have to get out there and pretend you're a rock star. Get the crowd on your side and you're away.*

I managed to convince my feet that they were rocker's feet, and my legs adopted that guitar-player's swagger (*you know the one*) as I perambulated barwards.

“Evening barkeep,” I rumbled at the bemused staff member. “Would you mind if I ripped shit out of this place?”

“Why, not at all sir, in fact we have been waiting with irrepressible excitement for you to do so.” She finished pulling a pint and threw it in my face. *That’s* when I knew that O’Flaherty’s was the real rockin’ deal! This was going to be harder than I thought.

By this time the rest of the band were onstage. They rarely wait around to hear me embarrass myself any more. It’s funny the first three hundred times, I suppose.

I swaggered to the stage. Then I realised that you cannot swagger upwards. Where were the stairs? Hmm... how would a real rocker do this? I had missed seeing MacDeth and Slapskins ascend, so I had no leads there. I tried a relaxed kind of lean-then-twist arrangement. It soon turned into a slip-and-scramble affair, and I broke a tooth on my mic stand. As I lay on the stage groaning, MacDeth kindly pointed out the stairs at the side.

It was at this point that Jim started to introduce the band. He used to do a wee stand-up act to prime the punters, but the Ensemble had had his contract redrawn so that he was specifically forbidden from enraging any potentially cheerful audience. His jokes were so bad they smoked in the toilets at school. They were so bad they weren’t allowed pudding most nights. So bad in fact, that their mothers gave them grocery vouchers instead of pocket money so they could be sure they wouldn’t buy any naughty stuff from the other bad boys.

“Okay you rocking rollers!” he yelled at the bemused crowd. “Are you ready for some full-on musical good times?”

The people in the audience looked at each other warily. Obviously they’d heard this speech from many a muddled manager before.

“We’ve come all the way from sunny Turakina today,” (that got a few laughs) “to show you a good time!”

“You want the peep show next door then, mate!” shouted a witty patron. Jim’s face flushed as red as a black rose.

“No, I think you misunderstood me there friend.”

Slapskins pushed him offstage before he could do any more damage and counted us in for ‘Oil Tanker’.

And then we were off. I had managed to wipe the blood from my lips and grab my geetar in time to lay down some pop/rock riffs stolen from Roxette, and MacDeth joined in with his low-end mayhem. By the end of the first song, heads were nodding throughout the audience.

“Turn us up Pune,” I shouted. “They’re falling asleep!”

“No mate, if their eyes are still open and their heads are nodding it means they like your songs. Keep going!” The Reverend’s advice proved sound. We whacked into a few of our hits and the kind people of Napier graced us with applause, cheers, and good-natured heckling. By the end of the night, my backless guitar was steaming, MacDeth’s bass was down to one string and half a pickup, and Slapskins was playing his drums with the stumps of his arms. He’d played so hard he broke his sticks, then his hands! Pune was used to fixing him up with gaffer tape at the conclusion of any successful gig.

We retired to the lounge in our upstairs apartment, MacDeth pacing out his extra width with exultant glee, the Reverend and Mr. McBOOM debating the sample rates of 80s keyboards, and myself and Jim K. counting our hard-earned cashola.

Mardy had brought all our luggage up from the van. I was looking for my third suitcase, the one with the sleeping gear in it.

I wanted to erect my mosquito net, and wasn’t sure if I wanted to go with the maroon or the cream one this particular evening. I found the suitcase underneath the undelivered parcel, which I chucked onto the coffee table. I was starting to sort through my silk pyjamas when Jim suggested we see what was in the mysterious package.

“If we’re lucky, it could be some pavlova or something.”

That was enough to guarantee the Ensemble’s attention.

“Crack her open Jimbo” we chorused.

MacDeth was already pulling an emergency spoon out of his back pocket when we noticed the expression on our manager’s face. He had gone a lovely shade of crimson. I soon ascertained that it was because he was no longer breathing.

Mardy gave him the Heinrich manoeuvre. (He couldn’t remember the Heimlich, so he just punched Jim’s guts. Crude, I suppose, but we *are* a rock band.)

“What’s the matter Jimbag?” Slapskins’ request seemed reasonable enough.

Jim’s response was to gesticulate at the parcel that lay open in his lap. Usually when he gesticulates at his lap, I’m one of the first to run from the room, but this time, my curiosity was piqued. I risked a quick shifty in the general lap-type region.

“Heysoos Jim, it’s full of moolah!” I exclaimed in a manner redolent of Boss Hog on a winning streak. “There must be upwards of a hunnert grand in here!”

"A hunnert grand!" squeaked Mardy. "I mean, oh, a hundred thousand. What, lire?"

"Nah, good old Kiwi pingas! Jim, we'd better get this back to your man. He'll be a bit annoyed it didn't get delivered won't he?"

"He won't be mad with us, will he?" asked MacDeth. "I mean, we did *try* to deliver it. 'Snot our fault the place was AWOL."

"Hey, let's not be hasty here lads. After all, Eddie doesn't know we haven't delivered it. Maybe he meant it to be a loan to us." Jim's reasoning was dangerously sound.

"Wait a minute," said Slapskins. "The guy who gave you the package was called Eddie? He wouldn't happen to have a *nom de plume* of 'Fast' by any chance? You didn't take money and vehicles from any kind of mobster did you? You know how rough the Turakina Mafia are Jim, you should know better!"

"Actually it's 'Fats' Eddie in this case. He's the piano player from Eddie and the Doughboys. He's also their manager. Thoroughly trustworthy bloke. Well, he's paid for his crimes anyway. Well, OK, he's still got a sort of "spiritual H.P." owing on some small-scale theft and racketeering, but many consider that a trifling affair. The local business community are proud to associate with the man."

"Well, that about says it all then, eh Jim? Remember why we play rock and roll? Precisely because we're NOT members of the local business community!" I was on a roll now. "We stick it to The Man™ with the stickiest of sticks! They hope that soon my kind will drop and die, but I'm gonna wave my freak flag high!"

Before I could find a flute and do the outro from "If 6 was 9", the Keltster interrupted.

"Blah, blah, that's great you've been doing some thinking Turkbo, now can I get on with my speech please?" I nodded my assent. "Thank you. So have you thought that by just borrowing this money for a little while we can strike a blow at the top dogs? We can use this chance to subvert the unnatural order of normal business dealings! We can be a rich rock band without having to wait for decades! And once we're sufficiently famous we can pay it all back. I reckon a month should do it. I'll keep a tab of everything we spend and we'll earn back every penny through hard slog, lots of gigs, and rigging the charts."

Slapskins, MacDeth and I sat awed by our temporal and spiritual manager. His powers of reasoning were unassailable, his arguments craggy fortresses standing impenetrable by the sea. His ideals were so lofty that even Edmund Hilary hadn't seen the top of 'em.

“Sweet as then Jimbo” said MacDeth. “Let’s do it. But won’t Fats be expecting us back soon?”

“I shall have that fixed in a trice, stout master Deth.” He skipped off to the phone, which was one of those cool old ones with the round dial. It was covered with warnings from the management like *Do not put mouth-piece on lips* and *Pay at bar for calls lasting over five seconds*.

We had a wee celebratory beer while Mr. Keltnehausen did his business dealings. In a few minutes he was back.

“It’s all sussed lads” he proclaimed. “I have told Fats that we delivered the parcel as required, and that we’ve decided to continue our tour for a few weeks cos we’re doing so damn well. We’ve got till next month to spend all that dosh then earn it back, with interest.” A golden haze came over his eyes when he spoke like this. “That lot should last us longer than that anyway.”

It lasted a week. This is what we spent the first part on, in chronological order:

Another round of beers from the bar.

Another round of beers from the bar and lots of packets of chips.

Beers and cigars. (Not sure why – none of us smoke cigars...)

Beez, chups... (hic!), maw beez

Luckily at this point we fell asleep, otherwise the whole lot would’ve been gone in one night. Obviously the sensible thing to do when we woke next afternoon was to buy:

A slap-up feed at the Greasy Spoon.

And then we were on our way. After Mardy had packed all our gear into the van, and we had thanked our gracious hosts for the use of their premises for the previous evening, we drove straight off to buy:

A tour bus.

Sensing the beginning of a truly sensational spending binge, I decided to ascertain my manager’s policy on the liquid asset-to-capital ratio.

“Are you sure we need this, Jimanji?”

“Sure as shit in a shithouse! Now shut up, and no more shilly-shallying, or you’ll wake to find yourself fronting the Bjorn Turkey Eclectic on a Swedish cruise liner.”

“Yeah, what do they pay for that kind of gig?”

“OK, bad example. How bout... you’ll be reduced to tambourine duty for the next six months.”

“You can’t do that slimJim, you need me! I’m the guy with the well-defined abs who sends the girls crazy! I’m the laddish lad who cheers the blokes with the rowdy pub songs. In short, I’m the one who’ll earn this money back for you, so perhaps you should tell me why we’re buying a bus!”

Keltnenhausen could see that I was a Sophist of the highest order, and would soon have him convinced that green was red, and red was a kind of sprout, if he didn’t give in soon.

“Allrighty, my little starlet. Keep your jewellery on! Here’s the suss. We need to look professional. We need something that’ll get us noticed when we roll into town, even if it’s only Bulls. A van just won’t do that for us (although we’re still open to hearing from Ford NZ). Now picture yourself mooning passersby from the back of an official TurkbyTone tour bus! Crowds will flock, the joint will rock, and people will throw money at us to get us to play their venues!”

Jim could not have been more persuasive if he brought forth a large semiautomatic rifle and threatened us with it. To prove it, he did just that.

Slapskins and myself expressed some doubts, MacDeth and the reverend were dead against the whole idea. His point made, he stowed away the weapon, withdrew his threats, and we hopped into our very own tour bus!

I was quick to claim the sunroom on top of the vehicle. It had great views, except when we were in Feilding. It also had a double bed, a double bath, and a full-size pool table. Jim bagged the basement. Down a short flight of stairs next to the driver’s seat, this handy space had no windows or ventilation, but heaps of room for storage. Jim erected shelves “for the accounts he would be keeping of our sensible and prurient (sorry, *prudent*) use of the money we have so generously been gifted.”

The rest of the lads had a quarter-acre each to do with as they would on the first floor. Slapskins erected a hut made of MIDI controllers and linked them all up to start searching for The Lost Sample, a mythical sound sample that was said to contain all the knowledge of the universe,

encoded in 24-bit purity. MacDeth declared that he would be building a huge statue of John Paul Jones at which we could worship on Wednesdays, and Mardy hid in a corner, sharpening his jokes on a small whetstone.

As you may have surmised, this was a very large bus. Jim assured us that it was no more than we deserved. It was so big it took three drivers to drive it. It had two hundred axles, and spanned five time zones. I kid you not!

Well, you may be wondering at the price of such a vehicle, and you might be thinking that we had no money left at all! And you'd be wrong, for Mr. Keltnehausen is the best bargainer this side of the boondocks. We made an initial downpayment of three dollars fifty, with the promise of another seven hundred thousand dollars the next time there was a solar eclipse on Saturn. The bus-selling guy was unsure how he would know when that occurrence had come to pass, so we assured him we'd let him know. Huzzah! Another fine purchase by TurkbyTone Rekkids!

Chapter next

While we settled in to our new transport/accommodation, way back in timeless Turakina there was a telephone conversation taking place. It wasn't purty, as they say on *The Dukes of Hazzard*. It went a little something like this-

Angry, dangerous-sounding man: "Have you got shit for ears, shit-head? I just told you, I ain't seen the money."

Torpid, piano-playing-sounding guy: "Maybe you've got shit for eyes then! Have you *felt* the money's gentle caress? Have you hired a clairvoyant to seek the money that sits right under your stupid *nose*? It's been delivered, and that's all I need to know."

"I strongly suspect that this delivery has miscarried, my spherical friend. I am somewhat sorry to say that my goons will now pay you a visit, to pay you back for the payment which you claim was paid, but hasn't been receipted for or thereunto."

"Your threat is not only badly edited, it just isn't scary. Leave me to my cogitations. If you bother me again I'll tell your Mum." Fats hung up rather brusquely.

"Did you hear that? He called me shit-for-ears!"

Fats' right-hand man Lance the Pickaxe shook his head. "Sorry boss, I couldn't hear a thing. You didn't have it on speakerphone."

"Oh, of course, how silly of me Lance. Sorry."

"No problem Fats. By the way, would you mind calling me Pickaxe? Lance is hardly a scary enough name for a toughguy."

"Sure, sure. Sorry again, L- Pickaxe."

Lance had decided to call himself The Pickaxe because he liked mountain climbing. He had then very fortunately landed himself a job as a goon, and found that his nickname helped him progress through the ranks quite quickly, from underling, to sub-goon, ordinary goon second class, and now finally he was at the pinnacle of his profession. Head Goon. (He held a Doctorate in Goonism- with distinction- he'd passed the exam last summer.) He took his job as Fats' right-hand-man very seriously, cutting the fingernails just before they appeared unfashionably long, applying a thin coat of varnish so that Fats looked well-groomed but not girly. Pickaxe abhorred Fats' left-hand-man, who seemed to think he could get away with turning up every so often and offering to "plug" people. As a consequence, Lance longed to apply some

moisturiser to that pariah of a left hand, which stuck out in an ugly mess from Fats' left shirtsleeve, but as right-hand-man it was out of his jurisdiction.

"So, what's the story boss? I gather from your unhappy expression that the money we gave to Keltnehausen has failed to reach its intended destination."

"That would be entirely correct, Mr. P. I am sorely troubled, for even though I know that Jim is totally untrustworthy, I hadn't expected him to be stupid enough to try to steal from me. I must do two things, and I shall number them thusly, even though they have no particular order of importance.

One, I must ascertain the fate of said money.

Two, I must not let Ronnie Runco get away with calling me shit-for-ears. It rankles, and plays merry havoc with my ulcer.

Three, oh no, I've already got two. That'll have to do."

Fats levered himself up out of his chair. (He had installed a simple set of levers at every chair for just this purpose. When he visited, he took his own engineer with him.)

"Pickaxe, I shall prepare a parcel for Mr. Runco. While I do that, I wonder if you'd be so kind as to take a quick trip to that jewel of the North Island, Napier, and have a look around for me please. I assume that Jim and his Bald Turkey Experience will be in hiding at the moment, but I'm sure you can ferret them out."

"Sweet as, boss. Can I take the Impala?"

"That will be fine, but do be careful with it. It's my pride and joy, after all."

"No worries, boss!"

Chapter something

The next day, we careered down the road, throwing pamphlets out the window to advertise our upcoming gigs. The three bus drivers were still getting used to working in unison, but they did a pretty fair job. Besides, did it really matter that we'd hit a supermarket and demolished it? Surely there was insurance to cover these trivial eventualities.

Back at the start of the main road out of Napier, a lean, mean-looking man picked a tattered piece of paper out of a bush.

"The Bing Turkby Ensemble 'Stolen Property' Tour, eh?" he muttered to himself.

"See you in Hamilton, boys. You'll wish you hadn't picked a fight with The Pickaxe." And here he inserted one of the low, evil chuckles he'd been taught at the Academy.

Another chapter

On the other side of town (the down side, I suppose), a courier van pulled up outside number 6 Tittlemouse Street. The courier fullah leapt out of his vehicle, hazard lights flashing, and raced for the doorway, only to look up at the last minute and see nothing but a pile of ashes where there had once been a domicile of some sort.

“Hey, wait a minute,” he said to no-one in particular. “This isn’t number 6, it’s just that the numeral on the letterbox has fallen upside down, hanging precariously by one screw. This is number 9 Tittlemouse Street. Number 6 must be across the road there. Huh, this could really confuse someone of a lesser intellect, and no mistake.” And, being a good courier fullah, he phoned back to his control room to report the sorrowful tragedy, so that others may not be trapped by the terrible phenomenon.

Then, rushing like the blazes in his shiny short shorts, he scooted over to the real number 6 Tittlemouse Street, scarpered back across to his van, and hared off down the road just in time to miss being blown into many small pieces by the bomb which had been placed ever so lovingly in the parcel.

A small yet tasteful card fluttered to the ground bearing the inscription “To Ronnie, Happy Birthday. PS, do not call me shit-for-ears. Love, Fats Eddie Doughboy.”

When Ronnie Runco got back from the shops that afternoon to find his front door had exploded, he was mighty miffed!

He shouted murderous maledictions, mouthed madness about martyrdom, and mimed the invisible wall so convincingly that he got three dollars from passing tourists.

As a respectable baker he felt he did not deserve this kind of treatment. Of course, as a lowlife drug salesman he probably did. Interestingly, it was the combination of these two occupations that had enticed Fats Eddie to advance Ronnie such a large sum of money, because Mr. Runco was the only man who sold those delicious jam-and-cocaine filled doughnuts that Fats loved so much. As an aside, he was also the manufacturer of the famous kava kebabs that feature in the eponymous Bing Turkby song.

In a fit of rage, he threw his shopping onto the ground and rent his clothes. It was then that he noticed the card that had accompanied the parcel.

“So, Fats Eddie eh? You may have a long enough arm to reach from Turakina to here, but I have the deodorant that will nullify the odiferous

stench of your armpit. We'll soon see that he who laughs hardest oft-times gives himself a hernia."

Because you see, Ronnie Runco was on another planet really. A bad man, a crazy man, a dangerous man.

Ron went inside, passing through the portal where once had been a door. Going to his office that was part of his carshed, he whipped out the Yellow Pages and proceeded to look under H for Henchmen. Then he changed his mind, and looked under R for Ruthless Henchmen. Things were getting serious.

Chapter la-la

"Good afternoon, Damage and Father, ruthless henchmen to the Queen. How may I help you?" said the cheery voice on the other end of the line.

"Erm, sorry, did I hear that right? You don't sound very ruthless," said Ronnie.

"Oh yes sir, we're very ruthless. I'm just the receptionist obviously. James and Derek are extremely ruthless."

"James and Derek?"

"James and Derek Damage, sir. Derek being the son, James is his father."

"And the holy ghost is...?" Ronnie muttered to himself, wondering if he was dealing with the right kind of loonies.

"Their dog, sir."

"Excuse me?"

"They have a Great Dane called The Holy Ghost. I believe it's some kind of joke."

"Not a very funny one though, eh?"

"Apparently not, sir. Anyway, can I help you?"

"Well, I hope so. I need..." and he laid out what he needed. And the receptionist took it all down and promised to tell James and Derek as soon as they were back from bowls.

At the bowling green, Derek was fair kicking his father. He'd won four rounds out of five, which was a great result, considering he didn't know how to play bowls. Mind you, neither did his dad.

"That last play was ruthless, me old son," said James.

"Why thank you father," said Derek, who was halfway through getting his undergraduate degree in Ruthless. He was well aware he had a lot to live up to in his father, who had been ruthless by appointment to the Queen many moons ago.

As they left the bowling club they paid their green fees, but ruthlessly refused to subscribe for the year.

"But sir, there's a ten percent discount if you do," said the man at the gate.

They ruthlessly ignored him and strode away.

The absence of ruth had been good to James over the years. He'd gone into business by himself, and managed to support his wife and son quite nicely. The average henchman only had a career expectancy of a couple of years, but by a combination of cunning and ruthlessness James had

survived for three decades. Now he was teaching Derek the trade, and even though he was sceptical of school-taught malice, he had agreed to put the young fullah through Goon Academy. (The very same institution from which the Pickaxe had just graduated extramurally.)

James' pager went off, so they stopped at a telephone box and rang the office. The senior partner spoke on the electrical device for a few minutes, and then shared his information with his son.

Derek listened attentively and then said:

"OK pa, how do we handle this then? In the Division of Labour paper I took last year, they recommend that the younger and stronger man should tail the more dangerous targets, while the older and more experienced man could easily take care of the more trivial annoyances by himself."

"I must agree with your esteemed lecturers in this case, son of mine," said James, to the surprise of both of them. "This fat old codger sounds like he can be dealt with swiftly enough- I'll take care of him. But be careful with these other lads Dazza. Those musos sound like they must be mighty tough men to take off with that kind of moolah. And besides, there's a few of 'em. Take The Holy Ghost with you for added protection eh?"

"Yeah, I always feel a bit safer with The Holy Ghost watching over me."

Chapter toot!

I woke with a start. Well, I was hardly going to wake with a finish, was I? Fink abaht it, me old china.

Tilting my purty head with its lovely ringlets to the left, I could see from my sunroom windows out into the pleasant landscape that comprises Hamilton. I had once had the immense good fortune of taking part in an under-\$500 road trip to this metropolitan Mecca. (That's a trip where everyone has to buy a car for less than \$500 and drive around like an eejit.) So I still held fond memories of the place like glowing pixies in my well-endowed brain.

Thinking of glowing pixies reminded of the hijinks that the Reverend and Slapskins had got up to last night. Put even just one of them in a room by themselves and you've got an instant party, I reckon! The rest of us were kind of like second-row partiers, good in a team situation, often needing support to create a really rip snorting do.

I arose in a regal manner and adjusted my silk night attire, then began the 37 Yang Form of Tai Chi Chuan. The graceful movements flowed gently into each other and the time flew as I concentrated intently on all the details, meditating in motion. Before I knew it, I'd been practicing for almost five minutes!

"Phew, take a break there, Bingo," I said to myself. "There's a hard day's rock'n'rolling ahead of you yet, you young stallion."

Truly it was spoken, for tonight we would be playing at the Hillcrest, hoping to reap hatloads of Hamilton moolah and adoration as our reward. We were well aware that we needed to make some money on this tour, cos if we didn't have Fats' capital handed back to him at the end of it, he'd hand us our heads! (Of course, we would have immense difficulty in holding them because our hands would be purely going by feel. It had the potential to be a very embarrassing situation.)

I got my personal assistants to scrub me down and dress me, then headed down the spiral staircase to see how the lads were getting on.

I found MacDeth at his altar, just wrapping up a short discourse on one of Led Zeppelin's more elaborate orchestrations. There was a crowd of local people listening intently, and they applauded politely, then left, kissing MacDeth's feet as they went.

"You're getting good crowds now mate," I observed as he joined me at the door of his domicile.

"Yeah, I'm thinking of writing a book, man."

"Sorry, no room in this one. I've used it all up."

“Oh well, no worries, there’ll be another, no doubt,” he said, alluding to the fact that it’s just impossible to shut me the hell up.

MacDeth’s calmness and serenity pervaded the atmosphere as we strolled the three blocks to the breakfast table. I was all “chi’d up”, and he was in a warm fug of Kashmir.

So with cheery visage we hailed our fellow travellers.

“Didn’t think it was cold enough for hail,” said the Reverend Pune, with his trademark smirk atop his lip.

We all joined in with a chorus of “Mardy Pune, you’re a loon.”

“Time to get down to business, boys,” declared Mr. Keltnehausen of the Jim persuasion. “So far we have made exactly...” he consulted his notes, “negative ten grand.”

This was partly due to the ‘takeaway crawl’ we had instigated yesterday afternoon. Under bus rules, we had to stop whenever we saw a fast food outlet, and each member of the party had to have at least a scoop of chips. Demanding work, I agree, but we were up to it.

“That means we need to start actually making some cash soon, otherwise our expenses will soon ruin us, and here I make note of Bing’s new tiara.”

The others glared at me.

“Hey, chill it, brothers,” I pleaded. “Perhaps Slapskins might like to reconsider his purchase of gold-tipped drumsticks if we’re gonna get fernickety.”

“Fernickety isn’t a real word, you fraudulent fake,” riposted Mr. McBOOOM.

“Artistic licence, mate, read it and weep.” I produced said document and waved it at him.

“That’s how you come up with all those bullshit songs then, eh?” said Slapskins.

“Damn straight, I am authorised to use more than twenty times the daily allowance of bullshit that you guys get by on.”

“Gentlemen,” Jim broke in. “Back to the matter at hand. Make some money today or I’ll be mad. More to the point, Fats Eddie will be mad, and he knows people who can make us feel very sorry indeed.”

“Sweet as, manager of mine,” said Slapskins. “I am the merchandising king! I’ve got t-shirts, keyrings, water pistols, sex toys - the works. Give me a crowd and I’ll take their money.”

“That’s nice, drummer boy, but we’ll need more than that.” Our faces fell. Mardy picked them up and dusted them off.

“Well, I also feel I’m very close to discovering the Lost Sample now.”

"Good for you, 'Skins," said Jim in a most condescending manner. "Maybe you can sell it to Gary Numan for fifty bucks."

"It contains all the knowledge of the universe, it's got to be worth millions!"

"Knowledge in your brain isn't worth as much as gruel in your guts, as my old ma used to say. Now be quiet or I'll hammer your crash cymbal into a wok."

The band was aghast. Not about the cymbal, but about the horrific mental image of Jim K actually having a mother. It was hard to fathom. We all assumed he'd just crawled out of a swamp one day and developed the ability to breathe air.

"Fear not, lads!" trumpeted Jim, mercifully interrupting our waking nightmares with a pocket trumpet he kept handy for big announcements. "I have a few schemes of my own on the go. Now, Turkby, you'll be selling your sordid story to New Zealand Woman's Weekly. I told them you'd had an affair with a certain Prime Minister, and they've offered us five grand for the details, so use that bullshit quota my friend." I gave the 'Hausen a thumbs-up and did a quick inventory of my remaining bullshit.

Swivelling in his seat, he spied the Reverend.

"Pune, I want you to make up a time machine, then go back in time far enough to apply for the patent so we can make money from it now. Clear?"

"Clear as custard, Jim."

"Nice. Now, MacDeth, you and Slapksins will be swimsuit models for the day. I've heard they make good money for swanning around, and you two ugly ducklings will be my golden geese, goddit?"

"Yes sir!" yelled the two plucky fellows, who were confident of their abilities in this area.

"I'll be down the RSA if anyone needs me. Good luck and God bless."

And with that, our maladjusted manager moved on.

Nuvver chapter

As we ambled out of the bus and made our separate ways into town, a rather tidy '68 Chevy Impala idled at the curb a block away. Passersby could see nothing of the occupant, for the windows were heavily tinted. Had they been able to see in, they would have been disappointed, because The Pickaxe wasn't much to look at really. He'll probably be played by some ordinary-looking bloke like Lenny Di Caprio in the movie of this book. But they'll have to spend a couple of hours each morning applying makeup to him, because the Pickaxe is Polynesian. Movie magic, eh?

Lance pushed a button on the keyboard that lay in front of him. The Impala had been kitted out with a rather extensive array of devices to help the upwardly mobile goon carry out his tasks. His screen showed the movements of all three members of the Ensemble, plus roadie and manager. Situated around the computer display were all manner of electronic devices useful for surveillance, interrogation, and coffee brewing. Screwed into the sunvisor was his degree certificate, which he would show off whenever possible.

"Got the buggers," he breathed as he extricated his lock-picking apparatus. It seemed a bit too simple really. All he had to do was stroll up to the bus, gain access, locate the missing moolah and leg it out of there.

Slinking stealthily like a sneaky snake, Pickaxe made his way to the tour bus, with many a furtive glance over his shoulder. Upon reaching the door it was but the work of a few seconds to gain access. He looked at the brass plaque which hung to his left.

"TurkbyTone Travelling Towers. First floor- keyboards, whetstones and statues. Penthouse- pretentious rock star wannabe. Basement- Management office."

The bus was practically listed on the stock exchange.

The visiting Samoan sleuth took from his left inner jacket pocket a small device shaped liked a pack of Spaceman Candy Sticks. Turning the power on, he waved the instrument around in front of him. The Loot Locator's red light flashed as it was pointed towards the stairs to the basement.

"Where would we be without technology?" sniggered Lance as he approached the underworld in the manner of a Thracian poet. (Kind of.)

Finding the stolen moolah in Jim's office wasn't very tricky. In best Spenserian fashion, the mangy manager had been "sunning his gold" under a heat lamp. He thought it might cause the cash to multiply while

he was out. Pickaxe stuffed it all back into its package and exited the bus, taking care to leave a stout bag of explosives in a cupboard, with a remote control device that he could trigger from a safe distance once the BTE had boarded again. Nasty fellow eh?

Whistling a wee ditty (I think it was "Big Fish" from the album "...meets Moslem Sa"), Pickaxe strolled back to his Impala, cool as a cookie cutter in a Cuban biscuit factory. He threw open the boot of the car (it had ceased to be a trunk when the car was accepted as a New Zealand citizen), and carefully placed his precious cargo therein, laying his Loot Locator next to it.

"Shan't be needing that for the rest of the day," he observed smugly, closing the boot over it.

As he straightened from this task, he became aware of a large gun barrel pointing at his third eye.

"Howdy, city slicker," said the dungareed fellow on the other end of the weapon.

"Like your *ve*-hicle. Mind if me and my brothers take a spin?"

Lance knew that, as The Pickaxe, he should be able to kill this guy before he even knew what's up, but the fact that two other hillbillies were arrayed to either side, also with weapons, made him think again. Deciding to play along until a better opportunity presented itself, he held up his hands and lurched onto the footpath. He noticed that one of the hayseeds had scratched the beautiful candyapple paint job with the end of his blunderbuss. Bloody hillbillies! How could they desecrate such a fine machine? Eddie was going to kill him, and not in a nice way.

Lance almost leaped for the leader's throat there and then, but the ragged trio was already in the car, drooling on the plush carpet and squooshing their sweaty backs against the leather upholstery.

Putting on his best disarming smile, The Pickaxe reached slowly around to where his pistol was tucked into his waistband.

"Hold it raht thar mister," drawled Hillbilly One. "We may be inbred, but we ain't totally unversed in the ways of the wicked city."

"Yeah, keep yer hands high and yer spirits low as we drive off in your horseless carriage, or we'll take your kneecaps for ashtrays." Hillbilly Two was a powerful persuader.

So Lance could do nothing but watch as some scruffy bumpkins drove off in Fats Eddie's pride and joy, hee-hawing and yucking it up.

"Hey fellers," said the up-till-now silent Hillbilly Three, levering open the glovebox. "Looky like he left us some sustenance too!" And he

brandished the bag of Tangy Fruits that The Pickaxe had been saving as a victory treat.

Chewing and spitting, the yokels made off into the distance.

Chatty chapter

Further back along the road, in a hired Mazda 323 (so as to be inconspicuous), Derek Damage was tootling along at the legal speed limit. His father had taught him to always respect the law, and he was to keep a list of those he broke so he could replace them later.

Derek was turned out very nicely in a ten-dollar op shop suit. Flares really suited him, and the pastel blue showed off his eyes. Like The Pickaxe, he was also hot on the trail of the fabulous Bing Turkby Ensemble, for as we have seen, they stood out like a badly damaged thumb amongst a lineup of new thumbs at a plastic surgeon's office.

Rounding a bend, he saw a fairly average-looking Polynesian man stamping and cursing at the side of the road.

Being a good citizen (when he wasn't being a goon) Derek slowed the car to a halt and enquired if he could be of assistance.

"Giddy friend- oh! Hey, let's calm down eh?" he stammered as a large shiny gun was levelled at his face.

"Don't shit your pants- I want to take this car and I want it clean," demanded Pickaxe in his best demanding voice.

"Well, I suppose I can get my deposit back from the hire company, so... OK," said Derek. And then "hey, wait a minute!" as he spied Pickaxe's right pinky finger. "Is that a Goon U decoder ring?"

"No time for small talk, small fry. Get out alive or stay in dead."

"But I've got one too!" persisted Dez. "Does yours have the nightlight and compass?"

"You mean you're a goon?" Pickaxe was astounded. How could such a physically unimposing figure be a part of his burly profession?

"Yeah, we're probably classmates. I think I saw you in last year's yearbook- Lance isn't it?"

"PICKAXE!" screamed Pickaxe.

The Holy Ghost woke from his slumber in the back seat and set up a low growl.

"Bless you! Would you like a ride?" asked Derek.

Lance thought about it and realised that he needed all the help he could get. Maybe this guy had some skills he could use.

"Alright, yeah. Some miserable hoedown hayseeds just stole my car. They headed that way," he said, pointing to the town centre.

"Delighted to be of assistance," purred Derek. "I have business in town myself."

Our camera zooms out as the Mazda resumes its progress along the hallowed Hamilton highway.

Car chapter

"Sweet home Turakina, where the skies are of indeterminate hue!"

"SHUT UP, TURKBY!" yelled everyone in earshot.

The screechy racket subsided as I put down my Maton 12-string. *If only I could tune the bugger, I thought, they might appreciate my talent a bit more.*

I had spent a successful afternoon in the offices of the largest supplier of gossip and debauchery in the country. Then I left the library and went to see the staff writer from the Woman's Weekly.

We met in a snazzy hotel, because they wanted to take some grainy photos of me next to the pool out back. The photographer went and hid behind a bush up the hill behind the hotel, and then I lazed next to the pool with a student they were paying twenty bucks for the session. She was standing in for the Prime Minister.

Once the photos were taken, we retired to a bar so we could get our story straight. In the end we just found a newspaper article about Jeffrey Archer and changed the names.

With five hundred ten-dollar bills in my pocket, I left the pub light-headed and jaunty.

My walk back to the bus took me past music shops, armoured vehicle salesmen and jabbit emporiums. (Jabbits is a generic term for any food-stuff that's bad for your health, like lollies, cakes, pies, etc. The full term is crumpled jabbits.) But I ignored them all. I absolutely refused to be parted with my money, as I knew that my old pal Jim would be distressed if I did.

Pleased with my piety and dedication, I was cheerfully trudging home when I was almost flattened at a pedestrian crossing by an old Impala.

"Hey there, please try to be more considerate in your approach to driving a vehicle, hmmm?" I gave the driver a mild rebuke.

"We's sorry mister," said Hillbilly Two, poking his hayseed head out the window. "We're in a hurry-up to go and sell this here *ve*-hicle to raise money for our poor dying mother who's got no central heating in her shack."

Now, I must tell you here that I've always wanted an Impala, ever since Dad took us to town once and I sat in a beauty that used to belong to one of the Glasgows from Turakina. And the prospect of being able to help a poor Appalachian woman with three such generous-spirited sons appealed greatly to me. So it was really out of altruism that I found

myself cruising back to camp with a well-maintained V8, humming a sweet hillbilly tune. (Possibly “Big Rock Candy Mountain.”)

Chaps' chapter

Slapskins and MacDeth had done pretty well for their part. For a day's swimsuit modelling they had been paid two thousand dollars each.

"Apparently we arrived at just the right time," said MacDeth. "They wanted some 'earthy' and 'natural' beauties, and we fit the bill like a duck at a second-hand shop."

"And," said Slapskins, "we got back with all our dosh intact, unlike *some* flighty rockers..." I think he meant me.

In fact, I'm sure he meant me, because Jim took the opportunity to whack me on the head with a rolled-up newspaper.

"Well how much did *you* make today, you monkey-like manager?" I queried nastily, knowing full well he'd been at the pub all day.

"*H*actually, Master Bing, I have returned the sum of six thousand dollars from the pokie machines at the RSA."

"Oh, OK then... well done." I pouted and postured and generally sulked for a bit.

"But where's Pune?" said MacDeth. "I thought he was going to be our big hitter, he's a flamin' whiz with the electricker. A time machine should be a doddle."

"Yeah, I thought he'd be back by now," said Slapskins. "I was hoping he'd make us some toasted sandwiches. Got to watch the diet now I'm a model."

"Here I am lads," announced the Rev. "Took me longer than I thought, so I had to finish it next week and then bring it back to the present, so don't be surprised if you don't see too much of me in the next few days. Oh, mind you, I've finished it now, so I won't have to make it, will I?"

Mardy seemed well pleased. This meant that he'd made a time machine without having to actually design or build it! Clever bastard!

Unfortunately this also meant that he couldn't patent it, because he had no idea how it worked, and he couldn't prove that he'd built it. (Because he hadn't.)

"Mardy, me old china," wheedled Jim K. "Astounding though your invention is, this means that it won't actually make us any money."

"But look on the good side boss," said Pune, "I took the liberty of going into the future and setting up the gear for each gig we're going to do, and I can tell the lads which songs to leave off their setlists cos they don't go down so well."

Jim was mighty impressed.

“So, even though Bing-for-brains spent all his earnings on an old pile of junk we’ve got about ten grand all up,” summarised Mr. K neatly.

We all cheered and offered up a large “Huzzah” to the gods of rock’n’roll.

“...which would be fine and dandy except we now need to make another ninety thou, cos the rest of the cash got stolen while we were out.”

“Oh,” was the general consensus upon receiving this piece of information.

“No worries lads,” I piped up, cheerfully displaying my trump card like an old gambler who has been waiting ten years for his lucky streak to activate.

“That ‘old pile of junk’ that I purchased just happened to have ninety grand in the boot, so we’re flush!”

This piece of good news was enough to help me convince Jim to tow the Impala behind the bus for the rest of the tour, so I could use it whenever I had an afternoon off.

My maladjusted manager went out and got the bag of cash so he could stow it in one of the handy lockers in his bus-dungeon.

As the lads cheered and whistled, I caressed the little black plastic trinket I had also found in the boot of the car. I didn’t know what it did, but it was shiny, and it had a button and lights on it, so I kept it for myself. I like gadgets, and decided that this would be mine, my precious, yesss.

Chapter yet again

James Damage had decided on the direct approach to dealing with Fats Eddie. He knew that the man was old and overweight, virtually confined to a wheelchair. Just another oldtimer who owed someone money.

You'd think they'd get wiser as they get older, thought James as he knocked on the door at 29 Franklin Road, one of the swanky sections of Turakina. The street had so much swank it hurt the eyes. James gazed around at the gold-tipped fence palings and Rolls-Royce utes that were a feature of the neighbourhood as he waited to be invited in.

Soon, the door opened to reveal a pair of suspicious, shifty eyes, topped with shaggy eyebrows. These were all attached to a man who stood in the doorway. He was dressed very formally, and his poise was stiff and proper.

"Fats Eddie?" inquired James.

"No sir, he is in the drawing room," replied the man at the door. "You may enter and wait in the parlour while I inform Mr. Eddie of your arrival. Your name please?"

"James Damage, Ruthless Henchman. Here's my card." He extended his calloused hand to the tidy fellow. "You must be his butler then."

"I'm his gentleman's gentleman, sir."

"Didn't know he was that way inclined," said James with a grin.

"No, sir, I think you misunderstand..."

"Just pulling your leg, Jeeves, just pulling your leg." Mr. Damage waved him away. "Buttle on, friend, don't let me hold you up."

The gentleman's gentleman left James in the parlour and went upstairs to Fats Eddie's drawing room. Knocking twice, gently, he waited for his master's muffled "Enter", then slipped quietly into the room.

Fats Eddie sat in one of his fabulously upholstered lever-chairs, looking out at the breathtaking vista of Turakina arrayed below him. Mach Potion, his left-hand man, was standing to attention in the far corner, calculating the distance between the doorway and Eddie's left hand. He never let his guard down for a minute, that one, no matter what that ersatz "right-hand man" might think! Seeing that it was just the household servant he relaxed a bit.

"What up, Burton?" asked Fats.

"M'lord, there is a James Damage to see you downstairs. He claims to be a ruthless henchman."

"Who's he henching for?"

"I'm sorry sir, I didn't think to enquire."

"That's OK Burton, don't worry about it. Bring him up here, and round up some drinks eh?"

"Very good sir."

As Burton left the room, Fats turned to Mach and said "Be ready, boy."

Mach gave a small nod, and made sure his gun was loose in its holster.

Soon after, James Damage was shown into the room.

He held his bowler hat in his left hand as he extended his right to greet Fats Eddie. Since it was the right hand, Mach didn't get too worried.

"Fats Eddie, I presume?" said Damage.

"Correct. This is my associate Mr. Potion." Mach inclined his head slightly, keeping his eyes on James.

"Drink, Mr. ah... Damage?"

"Vodka and water, thank you." Burton elegantly prepared the drink then retired from the chamber.

"And what can I help you with?" asked Fats, using his right hand to lift a glass of rum and cocaine to his face.

"Well, I'll come straight to the point with you sir, because I sense you are a straight-talking man." Eddie smiled at this flattery.

"My employer has asked me to recover from you the sum of one hundred thousand dollars. If you have cash handy, that would be great."

Fats engaged his evil gang-boss laugh. A low murmur of chuckles built to a quick intake of breath through clenched teeth, followed by a resounding "Hah!" that was spat out with some force.

"You've been working on that I see," responded James. "I'd leave out the 'Hah' and put a sneer at the end if I was you. Save the loud exclamations for later in the conversation. Now, about this money."

Fats could see he was in the company of an old hand. He was impressed, and said so.

"You know, so often they send kids fresh out of Goon U. They don't know respect, they don't know manners. They don't know that I worked my way up from the bottom with guts and determination." Fats slammed his left fist onto his chair to underline his anger. Mach gave a yell and ran to his side.

"No, no Mach, I'm OK. Really, don't worry." Mr. Potion slowly backed into his corner again, his eagle eyes taking in the whole room.

"Mr. Damage, you can inform Mr. Runco that I know as much about the location of his money as he does. I gave it to a man to deliver it last week and it seems that he forgot to carry out his orders. I have an

operative tailing him as we speak. One of those Goon U newcomers, nevertheless he seems very eager to impress."

James snorted. "Huh, same here! My son's a recent graduate, and he's looking for Keltnerhausen as well. I assume that is the man of whom you speak?"

"Precisely." Fats nodded his assent. "So we both have our rookies out there searching for Jim and his cohorts. Suddenly I feel that perhaps they might need the presence of some more experienced hands to guide them, how bout you?"

"I was just thinking that, Mr. Eddie. In the interests of securing the missing loot and seeing all loose ends tied up tightly, could I suggest we join forces for this operation? It seems we both want the same job done."

Fats turned his gaze to the ceiling and mulled the offer over, in a large imaginary decanter.

"You know, I think I'll take you up on that, Mr. Damage. Two heads are better than one, eh? It's a pleasure to do business with someone you trust. Shake? Right hand, Mach, right hand," he said as Mach once again scurried over looking worried.

When the interview was over Fats Eddie watched James from his window as he walked to his car and drove away.

"Shall I plug him, boss?" said Mach.

Fats chewed his lip and thought about it.

"Yes, I think that would be best, Mr. Potion. We'll keep him close and wait for the right moment. Make it look like an accident."

One chapter later

Hamilton shone like a fake diamond as we prepared for the evening's gig. The Waikato river ran through town like a short-distance runner with something to prove, before stopping for a wee breather just out of town. (It's true. Go and check sometime if you don't believe me.) Students were lazing in the parks, pretending to study, with bottles of "Cola-and-nothing-else, your honour". Herds of triceratops roamed the streets, providing photo opportunities for the tourists. The sun was just about to go ni-night, exhausted after another hard day of shining on people. Thanks to Maui he now has rostered hours of work, and can't just sneak off for a kip whenever he feels like it.

Humming our happy way to Hamilton's Hillcrest, Pune spotted an old man plying an odd trade on the footpath. He was garbed in raggedy rags of the filth-encrusted variety, and his rheumy eyes gazed at something he must have seen years ago when he was a young lad and the world was new, strange, beautiful and smelled of scented toilet paper. In one hand he proffered a slightly less filthy rag, making enigmatic circular motions, like the insolent young Ralph Macchio getting his martial arts schooling. The Rev. Pune strolled up to the geezer and rubbed his balding pate, then wordlessly strolled onwards.

When no explanation seemed forthcoming, Slapskins could hold his tongue no longer. He let it go and it spake thusly: "What was that about, Pune? Did that just happen?"

"Verily it did, youngster," said the wise but not wizened one. "Don't you know it's lucky to rub the head of a walrus polisher?"

"That was a walrus polisher? I've never seen one before!"

"You didn't look closely enough, so you still haven't," was Pune's strangely mystical reply.

Bemused but not bedraggled, we approached the guardhouse at the entrance to the Hillcrest.

"Halt!" cried the guard.

"No need to cry, bud." said MacDeth. "We're just a rock'n'roll band."

"It's a literary convention, you dick," the guard riposted. "Watch it or I'll take a photo of you and stick it on the Naughty Wall. I suppose you want to load your gear in?"

"No, Mardy Pune already did that in the future earlier this morning, so we're ready to go. Time to put your welding mask on – this show's gonna be a blinder."

This is something we'd been fretting about all afternoon. If we played a blinder, would we get sued by everyone who'd been blinded? We decided it would be safest if we put a big sign up at the door and offered free sunglasses to all the punters. Thus absolved of any legal repercussions, we proceeded to stage left.

Not only had Mardy already set up my guitar and amp, he'd played the first 3 songs for me, so I went to the bar while Deth and BOOOM did their thing.

As I ordered my half-shandy-half-ginger-ale, I noticed an old man in a seat in the corner. He looked a bit like the walrus polisher we'd passed on the way there.

I approached him carefully, aware from Mardy's mysteriousness that the old fellah may possess supernatural powers.

"Um... hi there," I began, using one of my fantastic conversational opening gambits.

"Ah!" he yelled, his head swivelling wildly as he tried to ascertain my whereabouts, presumably using bat-like radar capabilities. "Who is it? Are you trying to steal my shiny robe?"

"Well, no. Your robe is... um.." I stopped myself right in the middle of an ellipsis. Who was I to crush an old man's dreams by telling him he was clad in filthy rags, when he believed himself to be in regal splendour?

"No sir, your robe is safe from my hands, I just wanted to ask if you really are a walrus polisher."

"That I am, youngling. Take a seat and I'll tell you my tale."

"Well, I have to go back onstage in 2 and a half songs, so can you just give me a verbal montage please?"

"No problem, verbal montages are my speciality," he said with a cheeky grin at the bartender. Or possibly the bus conductor two blocks away.

"Prepare yourself for one of those flashback-y kind of things you get in some books."

I settled semi-comfortably at his table, ready to leap up as soon as the band got to the end of 'Outsourced'.

The old walrus polisher's verbal montage:

- born from an egg on a mountaintop. Wait, no, that's Monkey. Start again.

- born from a mystical crystal hidden deep in a sacred cave

- time before time (well, before Mickey Mouse watches were invented anyway)

- wrathful gods
- spiteful demons
- filthy walruses
- one man, one rag, a hundred shiny walruses
- granted favour by the gods
- a mystical sw...

"Oi, Turkby, get up here and play!" came the good-natured yell from stageward.

"Just a minute!" I yelled back, turning to the old man. "A mystical sw-something? What is it?"

But the old polisher had disappeared!

Where he had sat I spied a long scabbard, sufficient to house a claymore, more or less. I could see the splendid jewel-encrusted handle, and its tang had the tang of a thousand Tangy Fruits. Drawing the sword, I marvelled at the Damascene blade. It was so sharp I almost cut my eyes just looking at it. As I held it, I could feel a magical strength come seeping through my bones. Knowledge from ages past flooded my pretty head. Things unknown by generations of men, thoughts of elves and eldritch beasts, the fall of Castle Xanthros- ah! My breath caught in my throat. Could this be..?

The fabled Sword of Xanthros!?

Many tales have I heard of this spell-soaked blade. Forged in the fires of Mount Doody, on the great plain of Maeling, it was made at the request of Vice-Count-Regent Thorval, who sought to usurp the throne of Xanthros. Charging his demon wizards to steep the sword in sundry enchantments, he aimed to call down the powers of the ancient gods and become ruler of the known universe.

Unluckily for him, one of his demon wizards held a grudge against him, pertaining to hours of work and accommodation allowances. This demon wizard snuck into the forging room one night and laid a secret, hidden spell upon the blade: It could only be wielded by one who is pure of heart, and never used for evil.

The day of the great sword unveiling arrived, and Vice-Count-Regent Thorval sat on his Regent's bench, grinning like a good 'un. He looked at all the nobles, peasants and mendicants arrayed before him and thought of the immense power he would soon possess, giving him the means to smite them all if he so desired. But, as the Sword of Xanthros was presented to him, the rebel demon wizard uttered a great cackling laugh,

spiralled up into the sky and turned into a cricket bat. He immediately fell back to the ground, because cricket bats can't fly. A young child picked him up and invented the game of cricket a few years later.

Ignoring this rather hard-to-interpret omen, the Vice-Count-Regent reached out his greedy hand for the Sword, only to be immediately immobilised, immolated and sent to the emergency ward. Alas alack his ashes were scattered to the winds on the way ward-ward (I've been waiting to use that word for a while, woohoo!) and his evil machinations were brought to an end.

The Sword of Xanthros was last seen in the hands of the Elder Wise One Balachu, who bore it away, presumably to destroy it so that no mortal may ever more be tempted to wield its over-awesoming power.

But now, swiftly returning to the present day in Hamilton, I realised that Balachu hadn't destroyed the sword at all! He must have joined the ancient order of Walrus Polishers as a cover, and then passed the sword down through their ranks, each time waiting for one who is pure of heart, who could wield it with responsibility and good judgement.

Sadly for the old walrus polisher who had just departed, he got his dates wrong, for only the previous evening a shining warrior had entered the Hillcrest, dispensing good advice, good cheer and a good few rounds before leaving to undertake a righteous quest.

That bloke could have used the Sword of Xanthros, no doubt.

Still, in the hands of Bing Turkby, great things could yet be accomplished.

Surely.

I felt a rough hand on my shoulder. "Get onstage!" roared Jim the K. "For though the band sounds better without you, people have paid to see Bing Turkby."

Somewhat stung by this over-truthful remark, I slunk to the stage, secreting the Sword of Xanthros under my splendid multi-coloured robe.

Grabbing my geetar, I performed the intro to 'Samarkand', and after that the night was just a blur of blindingly good music, sweat and stale beer.

We impressed the crowd so much that we sold 3 CDs and a Turkby-themed rubber ducky. They still tell tales of that gig around Hamilton. The night that the band brought the house down, so we had to move the stage outside, then we brought the sky down so we had to play on a floating cloud, with lightning coruscating groundwards all about us. Our amps sounded like the amps of ten men, not just three, which is pretty impressive I think. The primal thump of the drums brought forth great

mythical beasts from the ground, they writhed and moaned and dragged down the unwary to their lairs. Yea verily, we rocked.

Raptor chapter

Pickaxe called Fats Eddie the next morning. "Just checking on your right hand – you haven't let that dur-brain Mach Potion anywhere near it have you?"

"Relax, Mr. Axe," cooed Fats. "He's much more capable than you think. But no, you remember well that you had a restraining order taken out on him, so he hasn't been within 2 and half feet of my right hand. Or is it 'two and a half hands of my right foot'? No, that's for horses. Whatever. Have you got my money yet? And I'd be very pleased to hear some stories of horrible torture being performed on the perpetrators, if you'd be so kind."

"No horrible torture yet, boss, but it won't be long now."

"Well, get along with it boy. Ronnie Runco won't send me any jam-and-coke doughnuts until this mess has been sorted out, and my eyeballs are getting itchy."

"I'm onto it, Mr. Eddie."

Lance switched off his fancy encrypted cellphone and turned to Derek Damage. They'd spent the night in a two-man tent that Derek always carried with him, in case of emergencies. 'Always prepared for trouble', as the Goon U motto says.

Derek eyed the shiny cellphone enviously.

"Is that Motorvator E-3000? I thought that only sheiks and sharks could afford those."

"Welcome to the sharkpool, Dez!" said Pickaxe. "Now, I need to locate my car, and then I need to go and hurt some people who have a hunnert grand that belongs to my employer."

"Snap!" said Derek. "I'm also on the trail of one hundred thousand pingas and three or four eejits. What are the chances?"

"Extremely remote, I should think," said Lance. "Let me guess – you're tracking a so-called musical troupe that goes by the appellation The Big Turnip Enschmaltzle?"

"Bad Toenail Schemozzle, that's them! They have some purloined moolah which belongs to my employer, Ronnie Runco, the backstreet baker of illicit delights."

"Tell you what, Mr. Sammidge, how bout you help me find my car and then I'll help you find these cretins?"

"Deal!" yelped Derek excitedly. He'd been hoping to spend more time with Lance, so they could compare notes on their Goon U classes, and perhaps even set up a professional networking system so they could call

on each other's expertise in the future. He rang Ronnie Runco (reversing the charges) to update him on progress so far, then got changed out of his Noddy pyjamas and went to take The Holy Ghost for a walk, while Pickaxe fried some bacon on a portable gas cooker.

Slightly later that morning, I awoke to a fresh breeze. It had wended its way through my window and made its presence known upon my visage. Ah, Spring! I thought, (not being terribly sure I had my seasons correct. It's hard to keep track when you're on tour.) As that old loon Chaucer once said: *Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages, and palmeres for to seken straunge strondes.*

Mmmm... I wouldn't mind some 'straunge strondes' for breakfast. Then let's get this pilgrimage on the road!

After being cleansed by thirteen mermaids in my tepidarium, I attired myself in my gold lamé jumpsuit and took the elevator to the ground floor of the bus.

MacDeth was already at the breakfast table. He had swept his majestic dreads back behind his head and fashioned a small chair for pixies. There was one sitting on it now, weaving a basket out of stolen dreams.

"Good morrow, MacDeth," I correctly observed. "I trust the day finds you well?"

"Aye, passing well, Master Bing," he replied jauntily. "You missed my sermon on the time signature of 'Black Dog' this morning. I drew a crowd of two hundred. Surprised you didn't hear them all cheering."

"Well, it's at the other end of the bus, isn't it? Is there any macrobiotic mould left for me brekkie?"

The rest of the crew arrived soon after, in order of height, spaced one minute apart. We always like to make a good entrance in the BTE.

"OK team," said Jim, after he'd stuffed his big fat face full of every food source within reach. "Change of itinerary for today."

"Hold on there, K-meister," said the Reverend Pune. "I've already set up our gear for this evening. You'd better not cause a time disparity and crash the whole chronoverse."

"I'd rather eat a pickled yacht," Jim responded. "Don't take me for a fool or I'll take you for a spanking. I'm aware that we must stick to your time-machine schedule, I just meant that I have an idea for this afternoon that doesn't involve sitting around talking bullshit."

"Oh man!" I wailed. "I can't catch a break! That's what I do every afternoon. Oh no, no, you can't take that away from me." (And here I broke

into a tap routine while an orchestra suddenly and inexplicably appeared behind me.)

“The way I talk old toot, the way I sing off-key...”

Bang! A loud shot rang out like a really loud cellphone with a gun-themed ringtone.

Keltnenhausen had shot my dreams down like a buffalo hunter with no thought for future preservation of the species. Like a sugar-crazed shooter at a carnival sideshow. Like the mean old nasty man that he is.

“Shut your cake-hole or I’ll cake it with blood,” said Jim in a somewhat menacing tone. “This afternoon we are going to make a pilgrimage... ” [yippee! thought my brain] “to the ancient keepers of wisdom high on the Mountain of Mulangu. It’s on the way to the next gig in Auckland anyway, so no harm in stopping off.”

“What do we need wisdom for, Jimbalonium?” asked Slapskins, ever so politely. “We’re rock stars, it’s a bit out of character.”

“I’ve heard that if you drink of their rancid yak butter tea you gain immortality, and I thought that sounded nice. Anyone else keen?”

It took a bit of persuading for the rest of us, because of various objections.

I thought it would be no good to be immortal cos you’d have to keep buying underpants for years and years, and I hate going underpants shopping. Jim said that within a century or two he was sure there’d be a cure for underpants. So I was happy after that.

MacDeth was worried about going insane over hundreds of years because you’d fill up your brain with so many new experiences and thoughts. The Keltnenhausen said you can use a computer for remembering stuff these days, so that was cool.

McBOOOM thought his arms would get sore from playing drums for ever, but Jim K said they’d have till the end of eternity to rest up as well, so look at it that way. No worries.

The Rev. was worried about the moral implications, ie. if you experience every possibility over time, you would eventually have to become evil at some point. Jim K didn’t understand what ‘moral implications’ meant so he just told Mardy it’ll all be fine.

That settled, we rounded up all the bus drivers and gave them each a map to Mount Mulangu.

Jubbity chapter

"Hand me that bowl, Sue," said Ronnie Runco.

Sue, Ronnie's sous-chef, leaned over and proffered said item to her boss. She'd been working at Runco's Class-A Confectionery Company for three years, but was still a bit scared of Ronnie. He seemed to be perpetually on the edge of losing his temper, and given the ample supply of sharp knives, hired goons and doughnut-addicted hangers-on that populated the premises, it was a recipe for disaster really. Still, if there was one thing that Sue was confident with, it was recipes. The pay was good, and the customers were bad, so it all evened out. Another reason that Ronnie had hired her was because of her background in the SAS. She could assemble a sponge roll blindfolded in 3 seconds, as well as being able to take out an assailant using only a spatula.

Ronnie turned to glare at her. "Hurry up!" he yelled, which startled Sue so much she dropped the bowl, spilling white powder all over the kitchen floor.

"Sorry boss," she said. "I'll go get some more icing sugar."

"That wasn't icing sugar, that was five grand's worth of cocaine you've just dropped." Ronnie tsked and griped as various desperate characters leaped into the kitchen and started snorting the floor.

"I really must get my goons to clear the customers from the baking areas in future. This pharmaceutical cookery sure is a high-stress operation."

The barmy baker pulled a pistol from his checked trews and started shooting randomly in a fit of pique.

Sue the sous-chef ducked behind a bench and mentally calculated her savings, to see if she could afford to chuck this job in yet.

Eventually Ronnie calmed down, and was back to laughing and smiling, cracking bad jokes as if they were eggs and he was a baker. Which he was.

"Now, me darling," he purred, "maybe we should get some kava kebabs ready for tonight? You know how the queues stack up once the pubs have closed, so we might as well be prepared."

"Yes, Mr. Runco," said Sue sweetly.

"Please, call me Chudleigh," said Ronnie, for no apparent reason.

As Sue swung into action, Ronnie's thoughts turned to explosions, and fat piano players, and shiny stacks of money. Derek Damage was now hot on the trail of the spondulicks, but in his last report he had

mentioned teaming up with some bloke – Larry? Luanne? No, Lance, it was. Wait a minute, isn't that the name of one of Fats Eddie's handmen?

“Oh, crap in the custard, things are starting to unravel,” he whispered to himself. “If you want a job done psychotically, you just have to do it yourself, I guess.”

He called out to Sue, “Sue,” cos that's her name. “You and I need to go for a drive. There are rats in mi kitchen, as UB40 would say. And we're going to exterminate them.”

Chapter Tenzing

We arrived at Mount Mulangu at about 2PM, and the bus drivers busied themselves at the rest stop/cafe, talking about mpg, GPS, and other technicalities of the trade.

The mountain was an imposing conical structure, with a little wiggly bit coming off one side, and a not-quite-pointy top. Alright, so it wasn't very much like a cone at all. More like a huge mound of jelly left out in the sun by mistake after a birthday party for 5-year-olds had got out of hand and been cancelled due to tantrums.

"OK Kelty, where's this rancid yak butter tea?" I inquired. It was a blustery day and I was starting to get windshitty (irritated by the wind.)

Jim pointed to the top of the mountain. "Just up there, bro."

Following his finger with my eyes and triangulating the direction therefrom, I could just make out a stone building, way up in the oxygen-deprived distance.

"Oh man, I don't have my hiking winklepickers on! You could have warned me, I thought we were going to drive right to the Mulangu Monastery."

"You have to earn wisdom, or it's just knowledge," said Jim, in an uncharacteristically sagastic manner.

"Bullshit, I need a donkey," I declared, (allegedly for the first time in my life).

As I stuck my hands on my hips in frustration, I brushed against the hilt of the Sword of Xanthros, slung gracefully yet hidden thereupon. A thought struck me, then poked me in the eye. Finally I got the point. Closing my hand over the hilt, I summoned the magical power of the elder gods, and caused a shiny donkey to appear!

"Wow, that's a shiny donkey," said Slapskins.

"Don't you mean 'wow, where did that donkey come from?'" I asked, a little petulantly.

"Well, it's pretty shiny," he replied.

Great. No-one had noticed my amazing magical feat. Not only that, Jim impounded the donkey as a managerial privilege, so I didn't even get to ride it up the durn mountain.

I ground my teeth together until they produced a fine white powder, which I used to stoke the furnace of my rage.

Then I trudged after the others up the mountain path.

By this time, Derek and Pickaxe had spied the rather obvious triple-storied tour bus in the layby, with an almost-spotless Impala hooked up behind it. Lance couldn't believe his luck – he thought that the hillbillies would have melted the car down to make a plough by now.

“Well, it looks like we've both found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!” exclaimed Derek.

“Indeedy,” said Lance. “And when the leprechauns get back we'll crush their damn rainbows.”

“I'm not sure I follow you...”

“Just follow me then.”

“Well, that's where I'm having trouble.”

“Just get out of the car and keep me covered while I see if there's anyone around, eejit.”

The Holy Ghost raised his head and gave another of his Cerberus-like growls. (Although he only had one head, not three.)

Derek pulled his shiny (insert long-winded description of gun here) gun out of its holster, and kept a lookout while Lance crept over to the Impala.

After checking to see that the bus drivers were all busy in the cafe, playing dominoes and making plasticine models of their favourite coach bodies, Pickaxe swept a thermal scanning device over the bus. Derek looked on in awe – the gadgets that Lance had at his disposal!

Pickaxe ascertained that there were only thirteen mermaids, one pixie, and assorted elves aboard the bus, not the band members or entourage that he wanted to have a quiet word with. By which I mean, torture horribly then kill. (Just making sure you're paying attention.)

So he turned his attention back to the Impala.

He gave a quick series of professional-looking hand gestures to Derek, who used his Goon U decoder ring to translate them into: “stay there, keep a lookout, I'll get the car free and then we'll lay a trap for the band.” See, an education can be a useful thing.

He checked the boot first, in the futile hope that the money was still in there. But lo! It seemed that the Bong Troupy Enchilada were not quite stupid enough to leave it where hot hands could have at it. Allowing himself a brief sigh, he weighed his options on a miniature set of antique brass scales, which he kept in his pocket for this specific kind of occasion.

Chapter of the holy men

After seventeen hundred and five hours of climbing, or thereabouts, I struggled to the top of the mountain. I was tired to my bones, possibly even to my spleen. I felt as washed out as a pair of very expensive trendy jeans. Jim, Mardy, McBOOOM and MacDeth were sitting at a picnic table with some monks dressed in brown robes. The tops of their heads were shaven, as were their ears and their armpits (although I couldn't possibly know that, but an omniscient narrator told me.)

"Ah Bing, you decided to join us after all," crowed Jim K.

"Can your crows, you cankerous crony," I gasped. "Give me my tea and then roll me back down the hill."

One of the monks spoke up: "Oh, you desire to taste the tea of immortality?"

"Yes please, mister!" said Jim.

"You are most welcome to do so," said Monk 2. "But first you must learn to levitate."

"Oh," said Jim. "And how long will that take?"

"Not more than three years, but before that you must learn the language of the blades of grass," piped up the Third Monk.

"That's enough monks for now, don't you think?" whined Jim. "And we don't have time for all this. Can't we just get a takeaway carton of Rancid Yak Butter Tea for the road?"

"I'm afraid it's not possible," said the first monk, making sure he didn't add another monk to the mix and anger Jim. "These are the ways of the Acolytes of Mulangu and they must be adhered to, or the yak butter tea will have no effect. There is no exception for anyone."

"Well..." said Monk Three, "What about the Chosen One?"

"Silence! Fool! He must not be spoken of in front of non-sacerdotal ears!" exclaimed the verbose first monk.

"Chill, brother," drawled Monk Three. "These guys won't tell anyone about the Chosen One, right guys?"

"Who dat? Jimi Hendrix?" asked Slapskins.

"Oh, you have heard of Jimi Hendrix?" said Monk Two. "He was the first chosen one, but now we have room for another one since Jimi has moved to another plane of existence."

"Cool, so what if I'm the chosen one? Can I have some tea?" asked MacDeth, in a fairly confident manner.

"The chosen one will be revealed by three signs," said the Third Monk, reverting to fairy tale stereotype. "First, he shall be a master musician."

"Oooh, that's me!" said Slapskins.

"Or me, or MacDeth," I pointed out. Jim K and Mardy unsuccessfully stifled sniggers at us.

"Secondly," said the monk, "he shall have long hair."

MacDeth and I looked at each other. "Does a wig count?" I asked, hopefully.

"And third," intoned the monk, "the chosen one will carry the Sword of Xanthros!"

"Ooooh! Ooooh!" I said, and "Me! Me! I have the Sword of Xanthros! Quail! For you shall be vanquished!"

Everyone looked at me funny.

"Sorry about that last bit, I heard it somewhere a long time ago. But no, it's true, the old walrus polisher gave me the Sword of Xanthros yesterday." And I whipped it out, as they say.

The monks immediately dropped to the ground and prostrated themselves in front of me, chanting "Chosen one, chosen one" over and over.

"Hey, there's no need for that," I said, "Just call me Your Majesty."

Jim was apoplectic with rage. "How could you keep that secret from me, after all we've been through, after all the sacrifices I made for you, after all the Tangy Fruits I've supplied you with?"

"Umm... well, you are a bit of a bastard, Jim" I replied, though as nicely as I could. "I thought you'd try to steal it for yourself actually."

"And what if I did?" said Jim. "Am I not your manager? Am I not entitled to 25 percent of all your gross earnings? You could have offered me a quarter of that sword, at least!"

"Tell you what Jim, you can have the Impala. It's got to be worth quarter of a sword."

"A *magical*, mythical sword from ages past?"

"OK, you can have my gold hairbrush too."

"Deal."

Phew, now I'd made up with Jim I could get on with becoming immortal. The other guys were a bit jealous but I told them I'd always remember them fondly, so in a way they'd live forever too. Mardy punched me in the face.

The monks went into their monastery and came back with a long hollow tube that had steam coming out the top. One of them grabbed a broom handle and sloshed it around in the tube for a bit, then he poured out some heinous looking gloop into a wooden cup, and handed it to me.

"Do I have to drink this foul brew as a test before you'll give me the tea?" I asked, slightly apprehensive about downing this muck.

“No, that *is* the tea,” said Monk Three.

“It's a little stinky,” I said, trying not to give offense. It smelled like tour bus, armpits, the breath of the Balrog, and the cologne of five young men who've just turned 17.

“Well, it's called rancid yak butter tea – did that not give you a clue?”

“OK, OK, I'll drink it if I'll get my damn immortality,” I grumbled.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, vomited a little bit into a nearby bush, took another deep breath, and drank the cup dry.

Rapture chapter

A bright light enveloped my duodenum, and spread through my body. I started to float up from the ground. I could feel an intense energy charging through me. Misty shapes appeared before me – massive beings striding from the clouds. The gods of rock were coming! I could make out HotValve, glowing with the latent energy of a thousand power chords; Mayhem, who causes ordinary hardworking citizens to go crazy on a Saturday night; and CrowdSurge, who inhabits the group mind of a crowd and makes it surge like an angry ocean. One of the gods I didn't recognise came forward to speak to me. He seemed to fade in and out, as if his powers waxed and waned constantly. His lips moved in an unknown language, long lost to mortal men, but I found that I understood every word.

“Hey look guys, they've chosen another one! What's your name, mate?”

My throat was suddenly very dry. “Bing Turkby, your honour,” I managed to croak.

“OK Ben... ”

“No, it's Bing”

“*Don't interrupt me!*” he bellowed, and the belly of the heavens billowed and boiled.

I nodded, too scared to speak again.

“Right, listen,” he continued. “My name is LowBattery. Those who do not worship me suffer grave humiliation onstage. I'm supposed to give you some instructions now that you have attained geomorphic immunity, but I can't remember what they are. Just try to copy what Hendrix did, that seemed to work pretty well last time.”

I raised my hand.

“Permission to speak, Ben.”

“Well,” I said, “Jimi choked on his own vomit, can I leave that part out?”

“Yeah, if it's that important to you. Now, have you ever used a sword before?”

“No, your elevatedness”

“How bout an axe?”

“In a manner of speaking, your bigness.”

“Oh well, you should be fine then. I assume that you're a knight on some kind of quest?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, you know what you're about then. Get back to it, and best of luck. Use the Sword of Xanthros with wisdom and compassion and all will be well. Catch ya later.”

And with that he strolled back to the group in the clouds, and they all wafted gently away.

The bright light started to fade back to normal daylight.

I opened my eyes and found myself drifting back to the ground, where the BTE were having a barbecue.

“Oh hey, Bing's back,” said Slapskins. “Where'd you bugger off to?”

“Well, after I drank the magical rancid yak butter tea I was taken up into the sky to talk to the gods of rock, and granted geomorphic immunity, whatever that is.”

MacDeth gave a good-natured guffaw. “Right, you mean you passed out after drinking a shandy. We've been waiting for you to wake up so we can head back to the bus. Luckily these monks are very hospitable.”

I shook my head, then my booty. Can't keep the funk from bubblin' up, eh?

Had it really happened then? Did I just dream all of that, in a shandy-induced torpor?

Probably.

As we set off back down the mountain, Monk Two said to Monk One “Did he mention geomorphic immunity? How could he possibly know about that?”

“He must have read it in an old library book or something,” said Monk One. “That old fraud Dewey was forever hiding sacred signs and mystical portents in his Kabbalistic number system.”

“But is it true,” asked Monk Three, who hadn't had a turn for a while, “that geomorphic immunity gives you the power to shape-shift, to rearrange geological formations however you will, and never die?”

“Everybody knows those old legends about immortality and geomorphic immunity are nothing more than a conspiracy theory,” replied Monk the First in a firm and forthright voice. “Now pass me a tofu sausage.”

A short chapter

Pickaxe glanced over at Derek. Damage the Younger was scanning the horizon, using his goon training to try to detect disturbances in the landscape.

Suddenly he stiffened, and turned to signal to Lance. Using a complicated signal, known colloquially as pointing, he made Pickaxe aware that the band were making their way back to the bus.

“Right,” thought Pickaxe. “I’ll let dozy Derek help me rough up the band, then I’ll have to deal with him so I can take the moolah back to Fats Eddie for a handsome reward.”

He untied the Impala from the bus’ towbar and used his spare key to start it up and drive it over next to Derek’s Mazda.

“OK, now we find a good spot to wait and ambush those cock-strutting sons of porches.”

“You got it, Mr. Pickaxe!” enthused Derek.

Action chapter

Going down the mountain was almost as much hard work as going up it, especially since I hadn't had any vege sossies like the other guys. Jim's greasy face held a look of satiation. Mardy smiled and rubbed his full puku every time I caught his eye. He looked like the cat who'd got the cream, sold it on the feline commodities market at a profit, then bought a cream-making machine to set him up for the rest of his life.

I was trying to figure out what had happened on the mountaintop. I was pretty sure I could feel geomorphic immunity filling my soul, but it was a hard one to describe. It could just as easily have been my empty tummy grumbling.

As we approached the bus, there was a loud ricochet, followed immediately by a pain in my pins. Someone was shooting at us! Luckily the first shot had been foiled by the Sword of Xanthros, lying against my left leg.

"Duck!" I yelled.

"Save my wallet!" screamed Jim.

"Make a cake!" said Slapskins

"Where's the pinata?" asked MacDeth.

Mardy slapped us all and dragged us into the bus.

Once inside the bulletproof doors of the Turkby tour bus, we saw two men and a large dog emerge from behind an Impala that I recognised.

"Jim, they've stolen my Impala!" I moaned. "Make the nasty men give it back!"

"How bout you talk to them instead, Bingo?" he snarled. "They don't look terribly friendly right now."

I felt something rise in my gullet. It was the rancid yak butter tea – bleeeuuuuch! But at the same time I could feel a magical strength come seeping through my bones, a bit like when I had used the Sword of Xanthros earlier.

Gritting my teeth, I still managed to speak fairly clearly when I said "Don't worry Jim. I know Tai Chi."

And I stepped out of the bus.

Derek and Pickaxe stopped when they saw me emerge.

"I challenge you to a Tai Chi duel, you dastardly wrongdoers," I roared.

Pickaxe raised his gun.

Derek stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Don't worry Lance... sorry, Pickaxe. I know Tai Chi."

And he strode towards me.

Never have two men so evenly matched been arrayed against each other.

Stopping at a distance of three metres, we gave each other a small bow, then proceeded to perform warm-up exercises.

MacDeth rolled his eyes and went off to worship at the altar of Zeppelin.

McBOOOM practiced paradiddles while precariously perched in the lotus position.

Mardy went off for a kip, following the roadies' creed of "take it when you can get it."

The Keltnehausen stayed to watch cos it was in his contract.

Twenty minutes later, we nodded at each other. Let the Tai Chi combat begin.

I decided to come at him with Snake Creeps Down, but Derek realised this, and adjusted his feet in preparation to kick my advance aside. I realised that he'd realised this, so I prepared to deploy Embrace Tiger Return to Mountain. But then he realised that I'd realised that he'd realised, so we started all over again. In this way we spent 35 minutes just staring at each other.

Tumbleweeds blew past us, civilisations rose and fell, a fantasy writer completed a trilogy, while we waged a silent battle in our minds.

After another 40 minutes of extremely intense non-action, we nodded at each other, gave a small bow, and then turned away and walked back to our respective teams.

Pickaxe picked himself up from where he'd been polishing his Glokt Ultra-Fascist Brain Splatter gun/pistol thing.

"That didn't quite achieve our aims, did it Derek?"

"Not as such, but did you ever see such an epic battle? Wasn't it glorious?"

"Shut up, and wait here while I go and kill some people."

As he started towards the bus, he saw a large doughnut-shaped van arrive in the parking lot. *Crikey, there can't be many of those around, he thought. Looks like Fats Eddie has come to visit. And that's never a good sign.*

The circular van had a roll-top roof so it could be opened up for outdoor gigs and thieving jobs. Once, Fats had stolen a load of marijuana-laced jelly treats by simply driving under a plane on the runway with the van's top down, and then blowing the cargo doors off.

The Fats-mobile slowed to a halt and Mach Potion's face appeared, followed closely by the rest of his skull. Eventually his body joined in on

the act, so he stood before Lance as a complete human being, just like normal people.

"What's up, Lance?" he sneered. "Job too big for you?"

"The name's *Pickaxe*, you sewer-breath eejit!" responded Pickaxe, with a small amount of venom he'd milked from a snake earlier in the week. "And you're such a git, you should consider yourself very lucky to have a hand job with Fats Eddie. I mean, no, wait, that didn't come out right..."

"Now, Pickaxe, play nice," came the voice of Fats Eddie from within his confectionery-themed vehicle. "We just wanted to see how things were going. We've brought James Damage along to make sure things get tidied up properly."

Fats reclined on his van-mounted lever-chair. He made no move to leave the safety of the Dough-mobile, not while the Damage family were still a clear and present danger.

The senior Damage alighted from the van, and walked over to Derek and the Holy Ghost. "How's it going son?"

"Pretty good, Father! You just missed an amazing Tai Chi battle!"

James gave his son a wee smile, thinking *Oh, what has it all come to?*

Even more action chapter

Jim let me in the front door of the tour bus and then said "What the hell happened out there?"

"Well, Jim, as you could see it was quite a fight, but in the end we called it a draw. I'm knackered, can I have some Ribena please?"

Hearing conversation start up again, the rest of the BTE crew re-appeared to see what had happened.

"Yeah, that's very impressive Bing," said Mardy. "Now what are you going to do about that angry-looking man striding towards us with a large, badly-described gun?"

"Ahem," said Slapskins' throat. "Not only that, but check out who's just arrived."

Using a single Vic Firth American Classic 2B drumstick, he rhythmically pointed to the window of the ground-floor library. Light waves coming through said window struck our retinas and informed us of the arrival of a catering van with the words 'Class-A Confectionery : You'll be hooked' on the side.

Out of the vehicle climbed a woman with a semi-automatic rifle. From the opposite door leaped a manic ball of crazed energy one could only assume was the personage of Ronnie Runco, mad pharmaceutical baker and psychopathic people-killer.

"Right, I'm sick of this," I said in a stern voice. "Bing Turkyby Ensemble, it's time we took care of these annoying goons for good."

MacDeth, Slapskins and I looked at each other and nodded. "Let the power of geomorphic immunity fill your soul. Summon forth the mangonel!"

So saying, we grasped each other's hands and started a low chant.

The geomorphic immunity which had been bestowed upon me by the elder gods coursed through my renal gland, up through my squidgy bits and out through my arms, flowing into MacDeth and McBOOOM. Our chanting grew louder: "O Carcathrax! O Lorie! Summon forth the mangonel!"

As our three-part harmony reached a climax, it wove itself into a complex chord of 24-bit purity. A chord which had never before been heard by human ears.

"It's the Lost Sample!" Slapskins exulted, as arcane knowledge poured into our cranial regions.

A bolt of lightning streaked down through the solarium in my room on the top floor of the bus, raced through the atrium and then struck the

Bing Turkby Ensemble, charging us with powers beyond the ken of mortal man.

“Break!” I yelled, and the three of us ran out the door of the bus to confront our aggressors.

As we raced towards the baddies, MacDeth's dreadlocks grew magically longer and larger, eventually growing sharp snapping teeth on the end. His hirsute attack caught Mach Potion by surprise. You should have seen his face as MacDeth's dreadlocks held him thirty feet in the air, biting his tuchus!

Slapskins' whip-like drumming arms deployed their deadly cargo – he chanted a mantra over his drumsticks and they multiplied a hundred-fold, and he flung them at the goons with a rhythmic rat-at-tat-tat, like wooden machine gun bullets.

I raised the Sword of Xanthros, feeling the eldritch power deep in my thorax. The air thrummed with tension as I murmured “send me strength, send it well, summon forth the mangonel.”

CRASH! A bolt of lightning flew from the Sword of Xanthros, demolishing Derek's hired Mazda.

“Crap!” he cried. “There goes my bond!”

“Halt!” yelled Pickaxe. The bastard had somehow managed to sneak up behind me while I was summoning my magical powers. He held his gun to my head and said “Anyone moves and Ding Perky gets it.”

Everybody froze, except for Runco. “Shoot him, I don't care!” he grunted dismissively. “I just want my money.”

Pickaxe quickly removed his gun from my ear-lug region and squeezed off one shot that took Ronnie down, then trained his weapon on Sue the ex-SAS sous-chef, keeping a rather-too-snug armlock about my neck all the time. Sue slowly put her weapon on the ground.

“Noooooo!” wailed Fat's Eddie from the Dough-mobile. “You can't kill Ronnie, what about my nummy-num-nums?!”

“Put the hair away,” Lance motioned to MacDeth with his eyeballs. The dreaded dreadlocks retracted, depositing Mach Potion on the ground, where he massaged his bitten butt and glowered glaringly about.

“Lose the sticks,” said Pickaxe to McBOOOM. Slapskins shook his sleeves and three hundred sharpened drumsticks clattered to the ground.

“OK, here's what's going to happen. I want someone to bring me the bag of money that was stolen from my boss' beloved Impala. I want the

Damages to tie up these musical loons and I don't mind if you have to punch them a bit too," he tittered, evilly. (Not an easy thing to do.)

"Do as he says Jim," I croaked. "I'm too pretty to die."

"Well, I kinda like having the money... "

"Jim! Please!"

"But then again, I can earn some more if you're alive, I suppose, so... OK."

Jim K disappeared into the bowels of the bus, while James and Derek tied up Sue and the BTE crew. He-who-liked-not-to-be-called-Lance pushed me over towards the bus and told me to sit still.

Returning moments later with a black bag, Jim handed it to Pickaxe, who put it back in the boot of the Impala.

"That's one part of the job done, boss," he said.

"Don't forget the vig," grumbled Fats Eddie.

"I'll get you a pig!" yelled Slapskins.

"I have a bass rig!" added MacDeth.

"Is it some kind of garnish?" I asked.

"The interest, you baboons!" yelled Fats. "You took my money, and you owe me interest!"

"Hey, I have something that might interest you, boss," said Pickaxe, with a gleam in his eye. "It won't get you your vig, but it might make you feel better. Watch this."

And he withdrew from a secret pocket a small black remote control-looking device. Grinning manically, he pushed the button and waited for the bus to be blown into small pieces, like a semtex pinata.

But all that happened was the black box gave a wee beep. Oh, crap! He'd got the Loot Locator mixed up with the bomb detonator remote.

Sweating slightly under Fats Eddie's inquisitive gaze, he fished through his pockets looking for the correct device.

"Are you looking for this?" I asked, holding aloft the little black box which I had found earlier. "I'll push this button and see what happens, huh?"

KA-BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Fats Eddie's precious Impala disappeared in a massive explosion!

Pickaxe was thrown ten metres by the blast, but luckily for him he wasn't badly injured. Recovering his wits, he realised what had happened. Jim K had discovered the bag of explosives and swapped it with the bag of money. Being a true band manager, it was harder to get money out of him than custard from a clam.

Rage filled Lance's brain, and a strangled howl escaped his lips. (Savouring its freedom, it scarpered over the road, never to be seen or heard again. No bother - Pickaxe had several more in reserve, as well as a goodly stock of cuss words.)

"I'm bored with this, can we just plug everybody now?" asked Mach Potion.

Fats crossed his arms and pouted. "Sure, let's kill everybody and pick up the pieces afterwards. Then I need to go and find a new jam-and-co-caine baker."

Lance glanced over and even though he was half-blown up and discombobulated, he could see Mach patting Fats' hand. His *right* hand! Freeing one more strangled howl, he lurched towards Mach.

"Not the right hand, you usurper!" he screamed, and shot Mach Potion dead.

"That was my left hand, you idiot. I had my arms crossed!" Fats Eddie was not amused. Goons were expensive to replace. Now he was really mad. "I'm sick of this charade. Would you just kindly shoot everybody else please?"

The Damages, realising that they were being betrayed, untied the sous-chef and raced for cover. A shootout ensued, with nasty bullets pinging all around the place.

Since I was still not tied up, I grabbed the Sword of Xanthros, closed my eyes and held it out in front of me, trying not to cry too much. Luckily, no-one saw the Ensemble as any kind of threat, so they were focussing on out-shooting the other shooters rather than killing us.

Fats Eddie had found a gun in the glovebox and was shooting out the window of his van. He had pretty good aim, for a coked-up diabetic old loon.

Pickaxe was taking potshots from behind the wreckage of the Impala. James stepped out to get a shot at Fats but Pickaxe took him out.

"Nice shot!" yelled Fats. "Remind me to high-five you later!"

As Pickaxe grinned smarmily back at Fats, Derek popped up from behind the melted Mazda and shot the right-hand man right in the internal organs.

Fats Eddie opened his door and steadied his shooting iron against the window frame. He had Derek in his sights and was about to tidy the whole situation up. But he hadn't banked on a massive Great Dane called The Holy Ghost, who came rushing from the side, put his two massive paws on Fats' lever-chair, and sent the corpulent crook flying through the roll-top roof!

I was still cowering by the bus, my sword held out like a talisman, so I can't say I properly saw what happened next. They tell me that Fats Eddie flew beautifully, for a fat man. Sailing through the air, up to the clouds almost; then down, down, unstoppably down towards me.

Ker-splat!

Ending up impaled on the Sword of Xanthros.

Thus passed the leader of the Doughboys band, scourge of the underworld, bane of the baked goods. The baddest blow-addicted boogie-woogie piano player on the face (or the arse) of the Earth. Rather fittingly, he was done in by a Danish.

"Nooooo!" gasped Pickaxe, who was making a meal of his death scene. "You can't die, you have so much yet to do. Arson, robbery and bribery, etc. Hack, gurgle, and so on." And then he was finally still.

I untied the BTE crew, and we tried to decide how to proceed from there.

Derek was huddled over the body of his father, weeping softly like a small drinking fountain. SAS Sue went to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. But then his big dog came over and jumped on James' chest. Once, twice, then on the third bounce - Gasp! James breathed again. Turns out the bullet hadn't killed him, it had been deflected by a medal that the Queen had given him years ago (The QuARH – Queen's Award for Ruthless Henchmanship), and then he had suffered a small heart attack immediately thereafter. His faithful dog had recently been trained in CPR, and luckily he'd remembered a fair bit.

"Dad, you're alive!" exclaimed Derek. "So we've both been saved by The Holy Ghost! Hooray!"

"Hey, do you guys want a ride anywhere?" asked the Reverend. "Your car's been blown up by eldritch magical powers I'm afraid."

"Um, yeah, that would be cool. Thanks," said Derek.

"Wait up," said Sue. "You henchmen still have a job to do. I'm now in charge of the Class-A Confectionery Company and we're owed one hundred thousand dollars, which Damage and Father have been contracted to recover. I'll use the money to give the business a makeover. No more illegal ingredients. I'll make use of all my skills, and expand it into a Bakery and Self-Defence School."

"Ah," sighed Derek, turning to face us forlornly. "Well, in deference to the spectacular Tai Chi battle I had with Bing, I won't rough you up or shoot you and stuff, but it looks like I will need the money, I'm afraid."

I stepped forward and put my hand on his shoulder. I kept my voice low so that Jim wouldn't hear. "You can have the money, mate. We can always make more."

"What the hell are you talking about?" said Mardy. "We're still ten grand short, even if we give him everything we have."

"Well, we still have a gig in Auckland tonight, don't we?" I smiled.

MacDeth grunted. "Well, I'd better go tune my bass I guess. Melodic jackhammer riffs don't just make themselves, you know."

"Yep," said Slapskins. "I better go soak my arms after that magical battle so that I'm ready for rocking the shit-hot beats tonight. It's a tough life on the road, all right."

Mardy nodded at me, and we all got in the bus.

Is it the last chapter?

Later that night, at the King's Arms...

Sue the sous-chef and Derek Damage were leaning at the bar.

"You've got a good aim on you, mate," said Sue.

"You're not too bad yourself," replied Derek, with a shy smile. "Hey, do you think you might need a business partner for your school? I'm not much of a baker but I know three ways to break a man's fibula using a flash drive."

"An I.T. expert, huh? That could be handy."

Backstage, Jim K was counting the door take. "One for me, one for the band, one for me..." A merry smile briefly played across his face, but grew scared in this unknown neighbourhood, and skipped off to find another.

The Reverend Mardy Pune was taking a breather, as he'd already set up the Ensemble's gear in the future a day or two ago. He allowed himself a ten-minute break before the gig started, knowing full well that Bing would break something almost as soon as he started playing. After saying a quick prayer to Saint Ally of Audio, patron saint of professional audio gear, Pune laid his toolbox under his head and went immediately to sleep.

In the wings, MacDeth and McBOOOM were doing some vocal harmonising on the Lost Sample, spreading peace and wisdom throughout the general vicinity. In a few minutes they would take to the stage and perpetrate a sonic explosion upon the gig-going punters.

The gods of rock gathered on a ledge of cloud, looking down on the crowd that had gathered in front of the stage. LowBattery looked ready to do something, but Mayhem glared at him. "Not tonight, mate. Don't go wrecking his effect pedal batteries this time. He has shown great pluck today." (Ouch! Sorry about that one.)

Tens of people were crammed loosely into the venue, waiting to see what spectacular musical fireworks the Bing Turkby Ensemble would provide tonight.

I picked up the Backless Special and plugged it into my amp, and immediately a magical strength filled my digits.

Mayhem stepped forward from the rest of the gods, threw a salute in my direction and said softly: "Shot, bro! Let it rip!"

The End.

Stay tuned for more BTE hijinks!

Afterword

Believe it or not, this book started off many years ago as a factual, 200--word article about the Bing Turkby Ensemble's trip to Napier for a gig. I wanted to write a small piece for the local newspaper, but as I got going, I made up more and more stuff, until it became obvious that it was turning into a fantasy/comedy story.

I wrote a fairly big chunk of the book, and then left it for ages, because I realised it was actually quite hard work to be a writer, and my usual response when confronted with hard work is to ignore it.

Many years later I woke up one morning and decided it was time to finish the story off. It might not be quite as good as Grisham, but it contains all the elements that make the Bing Turkby Ensemble such a great band to be in, such as demon wizards, magical swords, and loud guitar amplifiers.

Thanks to Jasper Fforde and Robert Rankin for inspiration.

Thanks also to MacDeth, Slapskins McBOOOM, Mardy Pune and Jim Keltnehausen, for allowing me to have them appear in the book. The way they act in the story is pretty much the same as real life, so I didn't have to change much when I was writing.

If you'd like to hear some of the songs that inspired parts of this book, head to these sites:

<http://turkby.co.nz> (Official TurkbyTone Rekkids site)

<http://turkby.bandcamp.com> (downloads and more!)

<http://www.youtube.com/bingturkby>

<http://www.reverbnation.com/turkby>

And if you'd like to learn Tai Chi, find your nearest branch of Sing Ong Tai Chi at www.singongtaichi.com. It's nothing like what's in the book.

Summon forth the Mangonel!

Bing Turkby

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bing Turkby is a Knight of the Order of Xanthros, and a Walrus Polisher First Class. Master of Sleipnir the eight-legged horse, owner and inventor of the Backless Special guitar, he still finds time to write silly stories on his computer.

When he isn't performing great deeds of derring-do, he can often be found playing rather loud guitar with

The Bing Turkby Ensemble.

He lives in Papaioea (Palmerston North), New Zealand, though his ancestral seat is located in the Duchy of Turakina.



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