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Springdale

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Springdale

by Michael Somes

When Grg'uzhakzh the defiler crawled out of a hole from god-knows-where and enveloped Springdale in the shadow of his(?) grotesque majesty, town secretary Berenstein knew he needed to print out more than one attendance sheet at this week's meeting. An adjustment in the meeting agenda would also be appropriate. Generally, an agenda change required approval of two other council members, but the meeting was in fifteen minutes, and he figured funding for a commemorative plaque in the town square could wait.

The new agenda:

I. OH GOD OH GOD WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!

- A. Calm down, everyone talk in turn.
- B. Not without having a meeting about it we're not.
- C. Requisition paper bags for the community to breathe into.

II. What does this mean?

A. Divine Punishment

- 1. Course of action
 - a. assign blame
 - b. repent
- 2. Prevention of repeat occurrences
 - a. return to the old ways
 - b. think of new ways

B. Earth's revenge for mistreating the environment

- 1. Course of action
 - a. assign blame
 - b. repent
- 2. Prevention of repeat occurrences
 - a. return to the old ways
 - b. think of new ways

III. What do we do about the monster?

A. Hope it will go away following the assignment of blame and a proper repentance.

- 1. It's best to assume it won't
- 2. Allow another moment for general townsfolk panic, offer the paper bag to those who need it.

B. Then what?

Berenstein couldn't think of anything else for the outline, and he was running late, so he decided to make copies of what he had. He stumbled into the council chambers at 7:03 and looked for someone to hand the new agenda to. Nobody was there. "Now, just because an inexplicable, terrifying being crawls out of a hole and looms over the town doesn't mean we can skip meetings." He addressed this to the portraits of secretaries past on the bulletin board.

Berenstein went from house to house and gathered the townsfolk to the meeting. "I hope your decision to panic and skip the meeting covers new agenda point one." The townsfolk checked their agenda sheets and nodded.

The mayor stood up. "How do we deal with this monster?"

"That is agenda point three Mr. Mayor. First we need to discuss what does this mean, unless the agenda point is changed with the approval of a two-thirds council-" The townsfolk all talked at once, offering suggestions on killing or appeasing Grg'uzhakzh and drowning out Berenstein. The arrival of Grg'uzhakzh had collapsed everything into disorder. The monster probably wasn't even in compliance with zoning laws.

Berenstein was not an angry man. He had thrown the occasional undignified tantrum. Once, he had gotten so angry he waited a whole day before replying to an email and wrote a really terse subject line in reply so the original sender could understand the full range of his contempt for people who let their dogs off leashes in parks.

Berenstein stood up and called for quiet. Nobody heard him. He called again and again. Fifteen minutes later, and a full forty-five minutes into the meeting (which had already started late) Old-Man Hibbins walked in. The room fell silent. Berenstein (inspired by a poster in his office featuring a kitten grasping a ball of yarn and captioned "seize the moment") launched into his idea. "You see, the monster is standing on land not zoned residential..."

Hibbins shot Berenstein a glare that told him exactly how vulnerable a juvenile housecat can be. Berenstein sat down. Everyone chuckled. Berenstein's face got red. Mr. Hibbins took a breath and, in tones that made the adjective sepulchral seem like it was meant to describe a birthday party, rasped "we make an offering of virgins."

"What?" Everyone turned their heads. Oh god, Berenstein thought, I said that out loud?

"Got a better idea, secretary?" Berenstein knew contemptuous pauses, and that was the best one he'd heard in awhile.

Berenstein's mouth flapped open, and much to his horror, he said, "as a matter of fact I do. Now, as I was saying earlier the land the monster is standing on is not zoned residential, and the monster does not seem to be operating a small store or strip mall on said land. I say we summon him to the next zoning meeting to explain himself, and slap on a hefty fine, for opening up a non-approved operation of..." Berenstein looked out the window at Grg'uzhakh and did some math in his head^[1] "of considerable size."

"Did you really interrupt Hibbins to make a joke?" the mayor sighed.

Berenstein ground his teeth. "I'm serious."

Hibbins snorted, "What're you gonna do, walk over there and hand him a citation?" Again everyone laughed. Berenstein realized if he backed out now he'd look even more foolish than when he'd proposed the tax on unleashed dogs.

The townsfolk all watched from the window as Berenstein approached the monster.

The grass in the shadow of Grg'uzhakzh was already dead and even seemed to be blackening. Berenstein thought about adding that to the citation, but he figured that fell under the jurisdiction of the neighborhood homeowners association.

Berenstein presented the packet. "Mr. G. Defiler, it has come to the city council's attention that you are in violation of local zoning codes. We will require you to pay a hefty fine and attend next week's planning and zoning meeting, the information is on your paperwork." The monster did not react. He set the packet down and turned back toward the city hall when he imagined Hibbins laughing at his failure and picking out which virgins would be suitable offerings to the might of Grg'uzhakzh. "Fuck you Hibbins," he growled and stapled the citation to one of the defiler's tentacles. He left at a speed balanced between getting away as quickly as possible and still maintaining an aura of dignity.

Grg'uzhakzh must have finally noticed the citation, because there was a shriek like a swarm of flies trying to imitate an elephant. Berenstein dove for cover, expecting to turn around and see Grg'uzhakzh descending upon him. Instead Grg'uzhakzh was standing where he always did; although he was holding the tentacle with the papers stapled to it up to what Berenstein guessed was his face.

The planning and zoning meeting had the highest attendance on record. Everyone was waiting to see if the monster would show up. Hibbins and his new "army of the pure" greeted Berenstein at the door. They promised to slay the monster or give their young, virginal lives trying. "They don't have a snowball's chance in hell," Hibbins confided, "I couldn't find any volunteers for an outright offering." Berenstein made his way into the packed council chamber. He wondered how they were going to fit Grg'uzhakzh, who was twice as large as the entire town hall, into the meeting.

His musings were cut short by a cry of "honor, bravery, abstinence!" and a stampede of townsfolk pushing to see the "army of the pure" charge Grg'uzhakzh. The monster brushed them aside. There were no survivors. Berenstein mentally added funding for a memorial stone to the budget for next year. Grg'uzhakzh made his way toward the town hall. "The virgins didn't appease him! Run for it!" Hibbins pointed toward the emergency exits. The townsfolk ran, Hibbins positioned himself in the main doorway in front of the approaching abomination.

"Berenstein!" Hibbins yelled, "I never really respected you, but stapling the papers to his arm, that took balls. It's a shame you've doomed us all. Now run. I'll hold him-" Grg'uzhakzh plowed through Hibbins before Berenstein could argue they were already doomed. Now the monster stood in front of the mayor and Berenstein, somehow simultaneously larger than the town hall and fitting inside it. The monster's ability to completely disregard the laws of space explained how it was able to materialize on land zoned commercial. Grg'uzhakzh made a furious rumbling noise and held out the arm with the summons stapled to it. The mayor pointed at Berenstein. Grg'uzhakzh gave a curt nod and grabbed the mayor, plugging a tentacle into his back. The mayor's eyes rolled back and his body hung limp from the end of the tentacle, his mouth began to move. "Check, check,

one, two, three." It sounded like the mayor, but behind his normal voice there was the sound of a multitude of whispers[2]. "I suppose you are in charge here."

Berenstein watched the rest of the townsfolk heading off into the distance, surveyed the wreckage of the council chambers, and checked to see if Hibbins' flattened body was going to start moving. "Yes I am."

"Your plea for diplomacy has moved me, and I am tired from devouring a great many worlds. Although I have turned down similar offers in the past, I will gladly accept your unconditional surrender and rule over your planet as its new overlord."

The mayor managed to briefly break free of Grg'uzhakzh's control. "Don't screw this up Berenstein," he rasped, before succumbing again.

"I'm sorry Mr. Defiler, you seem to misunderstand the packet. You are in violation of local zoning codes, and are going to need to appeal for a re-zoning and pay a hefty fine."

Grg'uzhakzh shrieked, from his own body, not channeled through the mayor. The ground began to shake, the sun seemed to dim.

"You think I didn't read the chapter on the 'I am infinite, I am eternal' negotiation technique in the guide?[3]"

Grg'uzhakzh raised a tentacle "I will crush you mortal!"

"Do you know what crushes me, Mr. D? Noncompliance with zoning laws."

The tentacle descended and Berenstein was surprised to see his life actually did flash before his eyes. He sped up to his favorite part: his orientation as city secretary. He remembered being told about the mythic Form 455L affectionately known as "the labyrinth". The former secretary took him by the shoulders and said, "Do not give this form out lightly, for to give it to a person is to send them to a hell carefully devised by secretaries, clerks, and lawyers for centuries. A hell from which there is no escaping."

"Wait Grg'uzhakzh!"

Grg'uzhakzh paused. "What?"

"I've reconsidered your offer and it's a good one. We have a form you need to fill out though." Berenstein went into the safe at the base of the secretary's desk and produced the 455L.

"This will formalize our surrender so everyone knows that you are our new grotesque overlord."

Grg'uzhakzh looked over the form "What is this step 3? It says fill in answer from attached worksheet 2, but I don't see any attached worksheet."

Berenstein tried to make his smile look more like a sympathetic grimace. "No attached worksheet? I'll need you to fill out the worksheet requisition form. Can you make an appointment for next week?"

[1] Or he would've, had the sight of Grg'uzhakzh's vile frame not drowned out his thoughts with an interior scream.

[2] Like a group that is supposed to be silent, but half of them have something they need to say to their neighbor.

[3] *Albert's Exhaustive Guide to Negotiation Techniques* offers your money back if someone uses a negotiation technique not listed in the book.