



SCAVENGING IN THE THIRD DIMENSION

"This is impossible," said Durna-7, punching his reality-condenser angrily. "How does she expect us to get hold of a feline male with whiskers longer than 15 centimetres? She just does it to annoy us, I tell you!"

Xetlo+toxyl nodded glumly in agreement. Mrs 'el/Bust the teacher was really cruel when it came to handing out the assignments for the monthly scavenging exercise.

"I bet that Ippy-i^A and her team manage to get everything on the list," said Durna-7. "She always does, the little creep!"

Xetlo+toxyl nodded glumly in agreement. Ippy-i^A was the teacher's pet, and always managed to do all the sums right, get all her homework done in impeccable style, and was generally wonderful at anything. Mrs 'el/Bust thought so too. The rest of the class had its doubts.

"We never get anything on the list," said Durna-7. "Like last month - where did she expect us to find a camel with toe-nails that needed cutting? I mean, that was just too much. And by the time we had found out it was impossible, it was time to get back."

Xetlo+toxyl nodded glumly in agreement. The teams were allowed 103.66 minutes in the Third Dimension, after the end of the lunch-break, and they were expected to return with all the items on the list. Some months it wasn't too bad - like last summer, when a snowman was on the list: summer in the Fifth Dimension, as luck would have it, sometimes co-incided with mid-winter in the Third. So all the teams managed to bring back a snowman. Ippy-i^A, of course, brought back a snowman *and* a Santa Claus complete with sleigh and reindeer.

"Well, there's no time to stand around moaning," said the third member of the team, determined to be cheerful. Lootysnapsis^l studied the list carefully and then looked about at the quiet streets. All the children in the Third Dimension were probably still at school, too, so there were only one or two people pottering in their gardens, and a cat sunning itself on a wall. The cat looked suspiciously at them.

"Why don't we start with that one over there," continued Lootysnapsis^l optimistically.

"Xetlo+toxyl, you've got a tape-measure, let's see what length its whiskers are..."

It goes without saying that, like all felines of the Third Dimension, this particular cat took one look at the approaching life-forms and fled with a wail. Even Durna-7, flying like the wind, could not catch up: the cat disappeared through a cat-flap just as Durna-7 made a grab at it, and he crashed solidly into the door.

As Durna-7 was picking himself up, the door flew open and there was an angry old lady looking down at him.

"What do you think you're doing on my doorstep! Why aren't you in school?! What do you mean by frightening my poor Snowy? Just you wait till I get my hands on you, you little tyke...!" Durna-7 did not wait around. He picked himself up, whirled around on all five legs and careered back down the garden-path, green locks streaming in the wind.

Xetlo+toxyl looked at him glumly. "Didn't get it then?" she said. "We won't get any of them, I expect. Mrs 'el/Bust isn't going to be pleased. We didn't get any of them last month either. Shouldn't think we'll get the Special either."

The Special (**S U R P R I S E P R I Z E**) was something a student teacher had thought up a few months ago. Basically, you were sent out with a list of things to scavenge. There was the normal prize for any team which brought them all back. And then there was a surprise item

which no one was told about in advance: it was written on a slip of paper by the school-janitor and sealed in an envelope which was only opened when all the teams had returned. If any team had brought back that mystery item, then they got the Special (S u r p r i s e P r i z e) . This had led to some curious items being brought back: toucans, ladders with window-cleaners still attached, the last reel of a blockbuster film filched from a cinema, leaving an audience wondering how it had ended; on one occasion, in a desperate attempt to win the prize, an entire dustbin lorry. Mrs 'el/Bust had disqualified that team after the contents of the lorry were spilled on the classroom floor. To date, no one - not even Ippy-i^A, had ever won the Special.

"Oh, come on!" said Lootsnapsis^L, "Let's look for the next thing, at least. Let's see - a garden gnome with fishing rod. Well, that shouldn't be beyond us. Durna-7, you go in that direction, Xetlo+toxyl, you go up that street, I'll go up this one, and we'll meet back here in ten minutes."

Ten minutes later, the three of them were back, with no fewer than eight fishing garden-gnomes between them. The largest was the size of a well-fed panda.

Xetlo+toxyl looked at them glumly. "Got too many now, I suppose. Mrs 'el/Bust isn't going to like that one little bit."

"Oh, shut up, X." said Lootsnapsis^L. "Come on, we've at least got one of the things on the list - let's take the biggest and leave the rest -"

Just at that moment, there was a shriek from Durna-7. Two angry old ladies had crept up on them, and had grabbed him by his flowing orange beard.

"You little vandals! Come creeping into our gardens and steal our little friends, would you? Vera, go and call the police, I'll hang on to this criminal!"

Vera crept back up the road, leaning on her walking-frame, with all of the gnomes safely tucked in her string-bag.

Durna-7 struggled and kicked, and finally managed to get free. But the old lady was too fast for him and had grabbed him by the rear arm before he could escape.

"Oh no, you don't, you little menace. Stay here and we'll see what the police have to say about this. And don't you two dare move, either!" She brandished her walking-stick at Xetlo+toxyl and Lootsnapsis^L.

There was a moment's panic, until Xetlo+toxyl suddenly threw her scavenging bag right over the old lady's head and shoulders, and soon had her tied up and struggling faintly inside. Durna-7 poked the bag and called out some rude names. Xetlo+toxyl sat on top of it and looked glum. "Well, we've lost the gnomes now. And we've got no cat. What else is on the list, Looty?"

"A hamster with a slim bottom - well, there's no chance of that, from what I've seen of the hamsters in the Third Dimension. A smelly cheese - that shouldn't be too difficult. Let's find a shop."

With the fifth shop they looked into they struck lucky. It seemed to sell nothing but smelly cheese. A large red-faced man in a white coat stood behind the counter, serving a brace of old ladies. He frowned when the three friends came in, but chose to say nothing.

"Yes, it is lovely weather for the time of year, Mrs B. Now that's a tasty Cheddar I've given you there."

"And you wouldn't believe what Mrs Simpson from down the road just told me. She said there was a gang of children going round chasing the cats and stealing things from our gardens!" One of the old ladies eyed Durna-7 and gripped her umbrella tightly.

"Oh, merciful heaven, Mrs B.," said the other old lady, clutching her handbag, "You don't say!"

"Come on," said Lootsnapsis^L through her lower mouth, "Let's grab some cheese and get out

of here. Xetlo, find the smelliest."

Xetlo+toxyl glumly poked her nose at all the cheeses. They smelled of unwashed feet, cow-manure, and things too bad even to mention in this story. Dumbstruck, the shopkeeper and the two old ladies watched her.

At last, looking very mauve around the dorsal gills, Xetlo+toxyl picked up a heavy round brown cheese and pronounced it to be the smelliest in all the Dimension.

"Right," said Durna-7, "Put it in the sack and let's get going!"

At that, the spell that bound the old ladies was broken.

"Oh no, you don't, you little monkey!" shouted the larger of the two, "You stop right there and put that cheese back. You haven't even washed your hands! Hilda, grab him!"

There was a considerable struggle. In the course of it, the shopkeeper was pole-axed by a pile of Havarti cheeses, Durna-7 was blinded by a blizzard of grated Parmesan and Lootysnapsis had the breath all but squashed out of her by the weight of two old ladies. The outcome would have been bad - had it not been for some skilful manoeuvring by Xetlo+toxyl, who managed to get the cheese *and* the two old ladies into her scavenging bag and the top sealed.

"Phew!" said Durna-7, wiping the Parmesan from his seventh eye. "Well done, X., we got the cheese. Better get out of there!"

The three friends from the Fifth Dimension scuttled out of the shop and round a few corners, until they felt safe to stop, catch their breath and assess the situation.

"I can't carry this much longer," gasped Xetlo+toxyl, "I've got a stitch!" She dropped the scavenging bag, which promptly muttered and kicked.

"Right, let's see what else we've got to get..." said Lootysnapsis^l, consulting the list.

"Better hurry," warned Durna-7, "We've only got eight minutes and forty-seven seconds left."

"OK, the next thing on the list is a set of net curtains. I've seen a few of them somewhere..."

Xetlo+toxyl sighed. "So have I," she said glumly, "All the old ladies have them. Look, this house here has got some."

As they looked, the net curtains were twitched back and an old lady looked out fiercely, waving her fist and shouting something.

"Well, we've nothing to lose. Durna-7, you create a diversion and I'll try and get this set."

Durna-7 loved nothing more than to create a diversion, and soon he was running along the top of the hedge, making rude faces at the window. It was a matter of moments before the cross old lady came out, waving her stick. Quick as a flash of purple lightning, Lootysnapsis^l was in through the open door and had the curtains in her bag.

But not quick enough. The old lady's reflexes were honed to perfection when dealing with miscreant children. Lootysnapsis^l collided with the old lady as she ran back out, and the two fell on top of each other. But Xetlo+toxyl was there with her bag, and the struggle ended abruptly.

"Better jump!" shouted Durna-7 urgently, "Only fifteen seconds to go!"

The team of three clutched their scavenging bags, spun round anti-clockwise on the spot with their double-jointed thumbs interlocked and so passed back to the Fifth Dimension.

Ippy-i^A, as was to be expected, was waiting there smugly, with slim hamster eyeing up a smelly cheese, a whiskery cat perched on a pile of net curtains eyeing up the slim hamster, and a garden-gnome peacefully fishing.

"Oh, well done, Ippy-i^A, sweetheart!" enthused Mrs 'el/Bust, "You've managed to get everything!" She looked disapprovingly at the cheese collected by Lootysnapsis^l and her team.

"Not much to show for yourselves, again, Ms. Snapsis^l?"

She beamed at the rest of the class, clustered around her with an interesting collection of cats, cheeses, old tractors, red spotted toadstools. There was a chimney-sweep's brush, with chimney-sweep still attached. And a librarian with a trolley full of books. All candidates for the Special (S u r p r i s e P r i z e) .

"Well done, all of you - almost all of you. You've done a good job. As usual, the prize for getting everything goes to Ippy-i^A and her team. Now, Ippy, since you've been so good, will you open the Mystery Envelope and see what Mr VeryPale the Janitor has come up with for the Special (S u r p r i s e P r i z e) ?"

Ippy-i^A swaggered up to Mrs 'el/Bust, opened the brown envelope, took out the card and announced:

"And the Mystery Item is....three cross old ladies!"

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