

Imp Report the Third

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To the Editor:

In preparing this article for submission, Plug tells me he has run up on a hard spot. He thinks it only appropriate to inform your readership what happened to him after he last wrote, and how he comes to the beginning of this narrative. However, he is compelled to not disclose this information, and has asked that I do my best at giving an introduction for him.

Having seen the last article as it appeared in your journal, I understand that Plug was left as collateral by Kohg on her loan of Fenderhorn. Although he has not said so explicitly, I gather that on her return Kohg no longer had Fenderhorn, and that Grumpkin refused to return Plug to her at any price. Instead I gather he pawned him off on an oddities merchant, which is where I found and purchased him some weeks later.

I should note, Plug did not have a name when I met him. Corky's the one who gave him his present label, but you will see that better in the article itself.

Yours,

Samantha Smoot

Allow me to begin at the earliest point I am able, and proceed from there.

I was hanging in a little brass cage in one corner of Messrs. Poleman and Grant's Tidy Shop of Tidbits (located a block from the duck pond at Fifteenth and Elm) when a young woman in her early twenties walked into the shop. She was not the sort of woman who normally draws a lot of attention; she was short and solidly built, and though pleasing to the eye, she was not a "looker," as Mr. Poleman would have put it. Which meant he and Chuck pretty much let her poke about the shop unattended.

I, unlike them, watched her closely. Here was a woman in a thousand. Her eyes may not have been the limpid pools that Grant so loved in his ladies, but they were brim full of keen intelligence. And her antics! She went to a display of pewter statuettes, such as any young lady of indiscriminate tastes might; but instead of giving them the ordinary visual scrutiny she pulled an oblong black thing from her pocket and aimed it at each one in turn, appearing for all the world to be *listening* carefully to the

results.

"Hey," I said to her quietly, for she was quite close, "Isn't that a SIGS five-laser lazer egg?"

She turned to me in surprise. Instead of answering, she said to me "My good imp, by what are you called?"

"Nothing, anymore," I answered. "Imp for sale, I guess it is," I immediately corrected myself.

She stood for a moment looking at me. "I think I'll buy you." She smiled. "But no, it's actually a sonic hair disrupter in an old egg casing."

This sounded like a most promising sort of gal! Not only did she carry around strange devices in her pocket and point them at innocent bits of statuary, but she also decided to buy imps on a whim and called her device a sonic hair disrupter! My mind filled with all sorts of things one could do if one had a hair disrupter. . . .

As I was thinking these happy thoughts and chuckling quietly to myself, the woman had returned her attention to the statuettes. After a moment she picked up a particularly realistic rendition of a teenage girl sitting on the side of a large pig, feeding one of the piglets out of a bottle while the rest piled around the teats. It was a piece after my own heart; I had often admired it as a particularly juicy joke and thoroughly approved of her choice.

"This one," she said, turning to me again, "was made in Dolbyshire sixty years ago of a peculiar nickel-and-pewter alloy called Zealots' Tin." She paused to look at it. "A very strange subject matter to sculpt," she muttered to herself. She then popped open my cage and dropped it in to me. "Hang onto it until I'm done shopping, there's a good imp."

She potted about the shop for several more minutes, inspecting everything with a sort of misdirected intensity. The rugs she sniffed carefully the way one might a shirt in a thrift shop; the candles she rubbed between her fingers and then touched her fingers to her tongue, as if to see how they tasted. She even rapped on a crystal ball as if to sound it like a mellow for ripeness. After a fair amount of this searching about she made her selection—the statuette, five bluish marbles, a painting of a leg of mutton, and myself. She then haggled with Mr. Grant for a few minutes and ended up paying only a small sum, plus a handful of trinkets and oddities she produced from her

unusually capacious pockets.

As we left the shop, I plied her with questions.

“Master, why the marbles?”

“Dear fellow, love you though I plan to do, I cannot abide you calling me ‘Master.’ Call me Samantha if you must, Sam if you can, or even Miss Smoot if you are one of those ultra-formal imps, but by no means ‘Master.’”

“Ok. Sam, why the marbles?”

“I think they are made of leaded glass, and they seem about the right size.”

“For. . . ?”

“What?” She seemed to have let her thoughts go elsewhere. “Oh, for embedding in the pike, just behind the separator and on either side of the boulder. See, the current boulder-behind-the-separator design doesn’t make very good sense—if we make the separator large enough to give the boulder a clean shot, the envelope closes on the trunk; but if we make it smaller, turning sharply snaps the pike.”

It is a curse (or a blessing, depending on your point of view) that imps, such as myself, find even nonsense (such as the above monologue) completely unforgettable. However, I will spare you the rest of the chatter of our trip home. No sense in belaboring the point, what?

Anyway, after a period of walking and talking we arrived at a large warehouse. This we entered and found inside a huge open room with a small house inside it off to one side. The rest of the room was filled with oversized shelving and workbenches, covered with all kinds of scraps and trinkets. There were two other people in the room; a short wiry man in a worn-out tan jumpsuit and a remarkably picturesque lady in riding breeches.

“Hey, Yolk,” Sam called out as we entered, “guess what the barmies had today?”

The man looked up from his tweezers and tiny bits of metal. As he did so, Sam held up the painting. Seeing it, he let out a gasp of gratification, springing across the intervening space nimbly as an antelope.

“Wow,” he said in a hushed tone as he took the picture and stared at it in awe. “This is. . . it’s. . . AMAZING! You say ol’ bitter-boy had this for sale?”

“Naw, not him. The barmies—you know, ‘the honorable mister Poleman’ and the bod’.”

During this exchange, the lady had also left her table and walked over to join the company.

“Ugh,” she said as she saw it. “A painting of a half-finished dinner?” There was a moment’s silence while they all peered at it closely. “I guess it *is* pretty lifelike,” the lady conceded after a bit.

“You don’t sound like you approve, Corky!” exclaimed Yolk in feigned shock.

“Oh, Corky, guess what else they had!” said Sam in excitement, plucking me from her shoulder and dropping me in Corky’s hands.

“A precious pink cherub!” Corky gasped in surprise and delight.

I had never had anyone call me a cherub before, nor precious, nor pink, and I had certainly never had anyone gasp in delight at me (though there had been plenty of the other kind of gasping), so I was stunned into momentary silence. I should, of course, have bowed low and introduced myself civilly, but I was too stunned.

“What’s your name, my dear fellow?” Corky asked me.

All I managed to say was “Uh,” but fortunately Sam interceded for me. “He hasn’t got one yet.”

“Oh? Well, Corky Smoot’ll fix that in a moment. Now let me see, let me see. . . . Aha! ‘Plug,’ that’s it. Plug, my dear, you are now named Plug. Not Plug the Imp or Plug Smoot or any of that—just plain Plug.

“And now that you have a proper name,” she continued, “we can proceed with introductions. I am Guinevere Smoot, but you will call me Corky. This is my husband, Ignatius Smoot, whom you will call Yolk, and you have already met his sister, Sam, I believe?”

“Yes, madam, she was good enough to introduce herself to me on the way over,” I replied.

“‘Yes, madam’? Smoldering leatherheads, boy, what kind of talk is that? Who was your last master?”

“Messrs. Poleman and Grant, madam.”

“Call me Corky.”

“Yes, Corky.”

“Much better! Now then, I don’t mean the bod’. Who was you last proper master?”

“Well, there was Grumpkin, Bolger, and Fenderhorn. . . .”

“Grumpkin the cat?” interrupted Yolk. “I can’t imagine him hanging onto you long.”

“No. Just while master Kohg was away.”

“Master Kohg?” said Corky. “You mean Kabeous Kohg, the world-famous bounty-hunter?” I nodded. “I thought she was supposed to be devoted to her imp. Whyever did she give you up?”

“Well. . . I mean. . . well, the fact of the matter is, you may *call* me a cherub, but I am still an imp, and. . . .”

“Don’t worry, Plug,” said Sam. “I’ll tell them. Kohg wanted to chat with Maliutka Malkh about golems, and she left Plug as collateral with Grumpkin in return for having Fenderhorn help her out. I read about it in Papa’s magazine a month or two ago. Obviously, she came back without the troll and Grumpkin refused to return the imp.”

“The troll could also have come back without the witch,” suggested Yolk.

“Kabeous Kohg die when even a troll could survive? Not likely,” said Corky.

“No, I guess it is a little far fetched,” admitted Yolk. “Though what The Malady wanted with a troll in the first place is more than I can see. She’s never shown much trepidation in facing the draconian in the past.”

I hesitate to give my reactions to this little exchange. In fact, I think I won’t. Rather, I think I will skip over some details in pursuit of the big picture.

These three people were inventors, pure and simple. Whimsical in their personal tastes, but devoted to invention. When I arrived they were working on two main projects; Yolk was trying to perfect a method of extruding braided lazer, while his wife and sister worked mostly on a device they called a pipod. I suppose they were all really working on the pipod, since there is a lazer-braider in the trunk of every pipod, but that braider is somehow special, I guess, and wouldn’t work outside of a pipod. . .

But I am not writing to explain inventions. I am writing to tell about that giant guy, and so I think I will ask Sam to write up a little description of the tools and proceed with the main point of this already rambling article.

So, I spent several weeks with the Smoots, putting my “remarkably small hands,” as Sam called them, to work in helping Sam and Corky get the marbles working right and assembling tiny little actuators to attach to the lasers that Yolk was using to refine his lazer braider.

I was engaged with them in this work for quite some time, and during that time we talked a lot. It appeared that Sam had taken some considerable interest in my recent articles for this journal, and when I was working with her we would often chat about the giant. Sam, by the way, appeared to be the designer of the team. At least while I was there almost all of the bigger ideas came from Sam. Yolk built most of the delicate mechanisms and all that, and I have never seen someone like Corky for mixing and matching materials, but Sam was undeniably the lead brain behind the show.

One day, shortly after luncheon, there was a knock at the warehouse door. This was the first sign I had that anyone else even knew the place existed; we had received no deliveries of any kind, which seemed odd for such a large warehouse; nor were there any signs that the Smoots were accustomed entertaining visitors.

The sheer unexpectedness of the knock is probably why all of us gathered around the door together, rather than simply letting Yolk (whose workbench was closest to the door) answer. It proved to be well worth the gather, too, for the knocker was none other than Kabeous Kohg. She

For the Record

Pipods

Pipods (pronounced with a long ‘i’, also called “pip”s, also with a long ‘i’) are designed to be high-speed navigational devices. They resemble a squashed sphere sitting on its side with a small saddle-seat on one end and a long pointed rod on the other. Oblong hand grips coming off the neck to provide steering. See Figure 1 for a diagram of what this looks like.

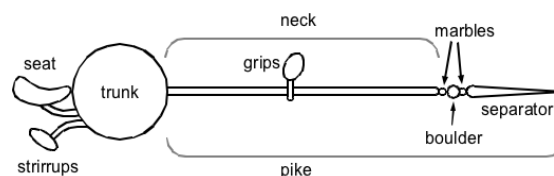


Figure 1: Pipod, side view

Pipods are ridden by laying the torso over the trunk and grabbing the grips. A braid of lazer in the neck reacts to the proximity of the nerves in the hands and signals the trunk to raise the pipod about a foot off the ground. The lazer is sufficiently sensitive to allow the pip to be directed almost effortlessly.

The pike serves another purpose beyond merely controlling the pipod. The power in the trunk is insufficient to attain anything but the lowest speeds by itself; however, the pike provides an envelope of softened air around the pipod, completely negating drag as well as removing the unpleasant rushing wind sounds that would otherwise accompany riding speeds exceeding several dozen feet per second. —S. Smoot

strode in the instant the door was opened, glanced at me sitting on Sam’s shoulder, and the turned menacingly toward Yolk.

“I have come to reclaim my imp,” she said.

“Your imp?” Yolk said mildly. “I really don’t think you want to try and make him *your* imp, Kohg.”

“What do you mean?” she snapped angrily.

“You see,” said Corky, “We rather think if he was your imp, you would have had the common decency to call him by his name.”

“His NAME? What do you mean, his name? He’s an imp! He hasn’t got a name.”

“There, master,” and by her use of Kohg’s chosen title I think Corky surprised us all, “I will have to disagree with you. Plug most certainly does have a name—‘Plug’ being that name—and having a name, cannot honestly

be said to not have a name.”

Kohg glared at Corky for a moment, muttering under her breath, then turned to Yolk again. “We are wasting time here. I will have my imp back, with your consent or without it. Which option do you choose?”

“Master K.,” said Sam, causing Kohg to wheel and face her (we were standing on the opposite side of her from Yolk and Corky), “I think you would be most unwise to do us harm. But perhaps you don’t recognize us; Samantha, Ignatius, and Guinevere Smoot?”

I confess complete ignorance as to why, at these words, Kohg stiffened like a startled deer. She looked quickly into each of the Smoots’ faces, then let her gaze run over the workbenches and trinkets littering the warehouse. Then, to my shock and amazement, she actually lowered her head deferentially to Sam.

“My apologies, ma’am,” she said. “I had no idea. One must not let the future become captive to the present.”

“Oh, no worries!” laughed Sam, “We don’t exactly go around with name-badges and a sign over the door, do we? Care to have a spot of luncheon? We still have some cold meat pie and cucumber tarts.”

“Samantha—” began Kohg.

“Just Sam,” put in Sam.

“—Sam, then—I would rather like to get my imp back,” Kohg said, rudely ignoring the invitation to lunch. “It is rather important that I have him with me.”

“Important for your quest to gather up a former medic from Gött?” asked Sam.

“Yes.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Kohg hesitated for a moment, then said “I believe I do.”

“And,” Sam continued, “you want Plug there when you meet him because you know something about imps that even Plug doesn’t know himself? No no, don’t bother answering, it’s not important.

“Tell you what,” said Sam in a way that reminded me of her recent bartering with Mr. Grant. “What if Plug and I come with you? We really can’t afford to lose him right now; we’ve almost got him trained enough to help Yolk with the lazer slug, and it would take ages to train another, especially one not already prepared by your excellent tutelage. But a week-long vacation might do us good.”

“A week-long vacation?” Kohg laughed indulgently. “There’s half a continent and an ocean to cross, plus quite a longish journey from the nearest seaport. There’s no way a human could make it in less than a month! No, I had best take the imp and go alone; it will be much faster that way.”

“Master K.,” said Sam with a look of incredulity on her face, “We may both respect one another, but you don’t seriously think I’m gullible enough to believe you would actually bring Plug back to us when you’re done? No, I must come with him if he is to go at all.”

“How do you plan to pull off the journey, then?”

“Pipod, of course.”

Yolk and Corky were somewhat surprised by this arrangement, for arrangement it proved to be. Once Kohg was introduced to the idea of pipods she offered no further argument, though it was clear she was not entirely pleased with having Sam along for the ride.

However, be that as it may, the next day we started out. Unfortunately (for it would be well worth the story) I cannot tell you much about the journey; Sam and Kohg spent most of it talking about stuff that Kohg only agreed to talk about on condition that I not write it. I can tell you, though, that we found early on the first day that at extremely high speeds the pipods could be raised arbitrarily high into the air, which allowed our journey to be more direct than we had anticipated. The lift of the trunk was only designed to repel dense matter, but apparently at high speeds there was enough air passing the trunk each second to provide the necessary repulsive mass. Anyway, we flew over the continent and the ocean and through the desert guided by Kohg, and after only a few days’ flight we came upon the giant.

It seems sort of anti-climatic to say it like that—I mean, this guy has been missing for who-knows-how-many months, has inspired at least half a dozen articles in major journals, has kept the world’s greatest bounty-hunter occupied for longer than any other single case in her history; and here we just fly in and there he is. Of course, I have left out how it was that Kohg knew where to find him; this was not an effortless find by any means. But still, it does seem a poetic injustice.

We found him alone near the mouth of a slot canyon, and the moment we landed Kohg asked him a question:

“Who’s that out in the valley?”

The giant expressed surprise we would ask him, seeing he couldn’t talk.

“You certainly seem to be able to to me,” I replied.

“What did he say, imp?” asked Kohg.

“You heard him,” I answered, “He just said he couldn’t talk.”

“I did *not* hear him,” replied Kohg, “and neither did Sam. Did he say who was out in the valley?”

The giant said it was an army out looking for him.

“For you?” I asked. “Why?”

He started to explain what he had done to deserve an army, but Sam interrupted him.

“Plug, what is he saying? Is he saying who they are?”

“Yes, he said the army was looking for him,” I said. “Why, can’t you hear him?”

“No, imp,” snapped Kohg, “we can’t.”

“Plug,” explained Sam patiently, “we can’t hear a word he says because he isn’t actually speaking. Look, until I tell you otherwise, I want you to repeat everything he says. You are to be his voice. Do you understand?”

Now that she mentioned it, I realized he wasn’t actually speaking, exactly. That is to say, not with his voice or anything. So I accepted my new assignment and began echoing his statements.

“There is an army in the valley,” I began as he picked up again, “that is searching for me—uh, I mean, for him, the giant, not me, the imp. Anyway, they are led by this topologist—well, not led really since he isn’t with them, but inspired by him anyway—who got mad at me—him (oh, bother, this is too hard. I’m just going to use the first person when translating, is that ok? Good.)

“Where was I? Oh, right. Ok, so this topologist got mad at me because I tried to destroy his special circometer because it. . . . Oh, no, they found us!”

These last words were accompanied by the giant hurling himself on top of us, pressing us to the ground as volley of javelins clattered against the rocks where we had just been standing. Something much more substantial than a javelin must have also been thrown, for in the volley a huge chunk of the canyon wall fell to the ground. Leaping to his feet again, the giant grabbed this boulder and wedged it into the mouth of the canyon.

Thus protected from further javelins for the moment, Kohg and Sam jumped onto their pipods, while I scrambled up the giant to his massive shoulder instead. Sam sped up the canyon, but almost immediately came back. “It looks like they shook loose more debris than just that boulder,” she said. “The rest of the canyon is blocked.”

“Well, I’m not going to sit here till they find us,” Kohg said. “No army has ever stopped me before!” And with that she nosed her pipod up over the boulder and into the valley, Sam following close behind her.

The giant didn’t seem to think much of this scheme; instead, he began scaling the canyon walls. Being six feet across at the shoulder, while the canyon was a bit less than that across, he rose by pressing his shoulders against opposite walls of the canyon and sort of shrugging his way up. Not a method I would have thought of myself, but one that worked surprisingly well.

As we climbed I turned my attention to the mouth of the canyon and the army below. Of Sam I saw no sign, but Kohg was weaving among the soldiers, spreading death and destruction as she went.

In the center of the army was a monstrous beetle carcass that had been hollowed out and equipped with various fighting decks and the like, and which appeared to be occupied and animated by a particularly powerful enchanter. It was this beetle-thing that seemed to give Kohg the most trouble, and against it she focused most of her attacks.

Just as we were coming to the top of the canyon I saw Kohg dive toward the beetle with ridiculous speed, leaping off her pipod just before it rammed into the head of the beetle. The pipod crumpled like paper as it collided, allowing the exposed lazer generators to flash the entire beetle. In the ensuing cloud of smoke I lost sight of Kohg, and did not see her again; before the smoke cleared the giant had gained the top of the canyon and we were off at a dead run.

“Hey, Giant! I mean, Dr. —uh, what is your name? Oh bother, you can’t make any sounds, can you? Let’s see, I’m sure I knew your name once, we talked about you a lot in Gött. . . . Ah, yes, I’ve got it now—”

“What are you getting at?” I actually said this, but he wanted to say it. Just obeying Sam’s orders to translate for him. “And why are you clinging to my shoulder? Shouldn’t you be down there with your master?”

“Yes! That’s what I was going to tell you when I momentarily forgot your name (no offense intended, I assume you; it’s just after calling you ‘the giant’ for so long. . .). Why on earth are we running away? Our place is by Sam’s side.”

“What do you mean, *our* place? If *you* want to be with your precious Sam-lady, go there yourself.”

“I can’t! She told me I was to repeat everything you say until she told me otherwise. How can I repeat what you say if I’m not here to hear it?”

“Trust me, if you aren’t here I won’t have any reason to say anything at all. Now get off my shoulder and stop your inane chatter!”

“Pardon me for changing the subject, but you seem rather out of sorts. I always got the impression from your letters and friends that you were a considerate, polite fellow, always willing to do a good deed. What’s with the gruff demeanor?”

“Do you know about that one nation?”

“(And I thought *I* was changing the subject!) Which one? Describe it to me.”

“Where everyone wears socks.”

“Don’t most people in most nations wear socks?”

“I mean out in the open. Socks and sandals instead of boots.”

“I guess not. Why, what about them?”

“That’s where this topologist is from. The sock people

pretty much worship the ground he stands on. It seems he found some slight irregularities in the shape of space, and the socks are all trying to make the irregularities bigger so that they can create more space than there is right now.”

“And that’s why you’re mean and grumpy? I’m afraid you aren’t making very much sense.”

Not another word came from the giant after I said that. He shut off to me completely. With a shrug I sat down and brought this account up to date. We’ve been running now for many hours, except when a canyon or cliff face makes us climb instead. Now that I don’t have anything else to write, I think I’ll try to get some more explanations.

“Where are we going?”

“South, I think.”

“Why south?”

“Because the socks are still chasing us from the north—if it is north.”

“How could they still be chasing us? We’ve been running without a break for hours! There’s no way they could keep up.”

“Maybe not, if they had to run the whole distance. But they remove the distance itself instead of crossing it. I told you they were all over this topologist guy.”

“Why are they chasing you at all?”

“Can’t quite figure that one out myself. They’ve been at it for months, though, ever since they found out about me through those miserable glow-fly guys. And to think I saved their lives—for this!”

There was silence again, so I wrote this down as well.

“Imp,” said the giant suddenly, “Does anyone know how to use those flying things besides the two ladies you came with?”

“Corky and Yolk do, but they’re up in their lab still.”

“Nobody else?”

“No. The test models have a whole bunch of quirks that keep them from being too easy to figure out on their own. And we haven’t started making full production models yet.”

“Good.”

Just as he said this I noticed what he must have noticed some time before, the distant glimmer of a pipod weaving through a snaky canyon towards us. The giant dropped into the canyon and stood, waiting to meet it.

Soon Sam came into view. She was bruised and bloodied, definitely a bit worse for the battle she had but recently left.

“Sam! How did you get here?” I asked.

“Sit down, let me stitch up that cut on your scalp for you,” I said for the giant.

“What? Oh, that’s you talking. Will it take long to fix?”

“Arround a half hour, I guess. It will hurt a good deal, though, without incantations.”

“No worse than getting it did, I’ll wager. Have at it.” She sat down with her back toward us and returned her attention to my original question.

“Corky made me learn an imp-finding incantation when I first bought you. Said she thought it would help if Kohg decided to steal you back.”

“Speaking of which, where is Kohg?” I asked.

“Who knows? No time to find her now. I’ve got to get back to the lab as soon as possible.”

“Back to the lab? Now?” This came as a complete surprise, but after thought it didn’t seem to bad. “Well, ok, I guess its better than being chased down by the socks all day.”

Sam tried to smile, but the pain of the giant’s work was too much for her. “Plug,” she said, “I’m leaving you here for now. I will need to be able to find this giant again soon, and since I don’t have Kohg’s gifts that means I need you to stay with him.”

“Oh, no! How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t really know. Why?”

“Well, I have this letter to send to the *Proceedings*, but it’s not ready yet. If you leave me, I may not be able to send it off until it’s out of date!”

“Well, hurry up and finish it then and I’ll post it when I get back.”

“Ok.”

“Uh, Sam?”

“Yes?”

“Could you write an introduction to it for me? I’m not allowed to write the very beginning part.”

“Sure.”

“And could you add a description of a pipod? I kind of already wrote that you would.”

“You did, did you?” She sounded as amused as a person having her head stitched up without the benefit of numbing incantations can. “Well then I guess I’ll have to, won’t I?”

“Thanks!”

And with that I sat down and scribbled out the rest of this letter. I do hope it is readable, and I hope your editorial staff proof reads it—I haven’t time. Oh, looks like the giant is just about done stitching. Better finish up!

— *Plug the imp*