

RAIN

William Hrdina

-PART I- Rocks

Look Out Below!

Twin suns pierced the horizon as Eddie crawled slowly over the large bronze rocks of the canyon. The view was majestic, blue sky streaked with long pink scratches, like the precision cutting of a surgeon into a smurf. The large peaks of the mountains rose far into the distance, the sharp early light throwing long, stark shadows. Eddie was oblivious to the scenery; his goal was more mundane, staying alive.

Eddie hung suspended like a bug, several hundred feet in the air without so much as a string holding him where he was. His eyes were fixed on the large flat rock that lay only a few feet away now, jutting out from the sheer wall he was hanging on. His breath was labored from the long and difficult climb. His fingers dug into the small indentations for purpose. Each time he let go of the wall for another handhold he went through a brief moment where he was sure he would fall, twisting and banging against the rocks until his final splat on the canyon floor.

He whimpered quietly as his large rock gun, packed snugly in its case, shifted unexpectedly, making what was already difficult veer toward impossible. He held his breath as the case slid around his body on its strap, finally swinging to a stop at his side. The case was bulky and it made scaling the canyon wall more difficult than it already was, which was pretty damn hard. There was a time Eddie looked forward to this day. But he had to admit, now that he was doing it, he wasn't enjoying the experience the way that he thought he would. Thinking the view would offer some consolation Eddie shifted his sight to the grand mountains all around him. But looking only made him feel a sickening rush of vertigo. It was very stunning vertigo visually, but nauseating nonetheless.

He made his way carefully across the last few feet of cliff, inching along with a painful, deliberate slowness. He'd come much too far to fall. Eddie planted his feet as best he could, bent his knees a little and threw himself the last little bit, landing in a heap on the large protruding rock. He hissed an enormous sigh of relief upon reaching the relative safety of his assassin's perch. He rolled onto his back, closed his eyes, and took a little time to collect himself.

The big day had finally come and Eddie was going to become an official "Adult in training." He thought of himself as an adult in training for quite some time but after today he would have the certificate to prove it. He could see it in his mind, gold calligraphy letters announcing the coming into

pre-adulthood of Eddie of the Eastside Eddies. It would have the official stamp of Vlad; their leader, and he could use it to get discounts at a number of different outlet stores.

Eddie lay on his back thinking about how great it was going to be not to be treated like a child anymore. He was a little nervous about the task that lay ahead, but he was sure that he could do what was asked of him. He would show he had the same strength as the bigger boys, the ones who seemed to enjoy tormenting those who hadn't made their first kill. Well, he thought, now he would get his kill and the torment would stop.

His breath was more regular now and he shifted onto his knees, drawing the gun case in front of him. He unzipped it revealing the rock gun. It was a X2300//5 J Pentaverat Rocket Launcher with scope. A top of the line weapon provided to Eddie by his Father, who had borrowed it from a friend who had stolen it after being dishonorably discharged from the Whozit Rock Brigades. It was essentially a fancy slingshot that fired rocks of a whole variety of shapes and sizes depending on weather condition and target type. The gun was flat black; the fact that it didn't shine at all in the light made it look even more deadly than it was. The case had a variety of differently shaped rocks; each fitted into its own nook in the thick sponge of the case. It was the sheer number of rocks that made the case, and therefore, the gun, so difficult to lug up the side of a canyon.

Eddie took the gun out of the case and lay it next to him. He decided to take a look at his targets before trying to pick out a rock. He adjusted his position, pulling his body towards the edge. The rock stuck far out, giving him a clear view of the valley far below. The act of shifting his body around caused him to accidentally bump the gun, which immediately began skittering and rolling toward the edge. Eddie felt his throat close and he let out an involuntary gasp, he thrust out his arm and grabbed the gun at the last second, barely avoiding toppling the gun case over the side as he did so. For the second time Eddie stopped to catch his breath and thank Glarf that he made the snag. A minute or two later Eddie was back at the edge of the cliff staring down at his prey.

He was amazed at how high he was. The Flallops below were very small, which was good, it made him less likely to be caught if something went wrong. He could make out their tents clearly; there were four of them, one at each of the compass points. Flallops always camped with two per tent, which made a group of eight. Plenty of targets for him to aim at, surely one would offer himself as the obvious choice.

In the middle of the tents was a fire circle. Eddie could see that there were two Flallops in the process of building a fire, the snap of their lighters drifted up to him. Reaching for the gun, he used the scope to get a better look.

He put his eye to the glass and swept the gun around, looking for something in the shape of a Flallop. Eddie always had a hard time finding

things that were artificially magnified but after a few minutes he got his bearings and located the two Flallops lighting the fire. They were ugly creatures, nine feet tall and blue with big horns that stuck out of their butts. The Flallop's horns were big but Eddie knew Whozit horns were bigger.

The Flallops were wearing overalls with buttoned straps and two front pockets. Poor backward bastards, Eddie thought. His own overalls were Velcro, and had a third, larger pocket that the inferior Flallop version lacked. Having demonstrated to himself that he had a clear enough view from where he was, Eddie moved back to the case and pondered the difficult task of choosing which rock best suited his position. His immediate inclination was for a round one, but from his angle a round rock may end up falling short of the target. He went through the case picking up one rock after another, looking for the one that would do the job in a single shot. He could, he supposed, fire a second shot before he would have to flee, but he didn't want the situation to come to that. He would only have one easy shot and he was determined to make it count. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to come out here again on another day. His mind reared at the mere thought of climbing up here again. Although he never knew it before, it was now pretty apparent to Eddie he was a trifle afraid of heights. He only wished he realized this small bit of trivia before he was too high to really do anything about it.

Whenever he started to feel tentacles of doubt enter his mind he thought of that Gold Certificate. He thought of showing it to mean old Mr. Oliver's son Wendell the next time he wanted him to do some stupid errand. Maybe he would get the chance to knock Wendell in the head with his certificate. Everyone knew that Wendell had hired someone to kill a Flallop in his name, yet he was the worst about flaunting the privileges that came with Adult-in-Training status. If Eddie earned his certificate he would be free from such disgraces, an adult in training was not a child, and in Satan's Monkey, this made all the difference.

Eddie supposed it was good that he was killing a Flallop too. They were terrible creatures, who although barely distinguishable from Whozits physically, were nevertheless the completely evil opposite of the benign to a fault Whozits. Eddie suddenly, and with great authority, decided he would use a flat rock of medium gauge thickness. He pulled two similar specimens out of the case and held them up to the suns, which by now shown as full circles a few feet over the horizon.

The flat rock fit neatly into the adjustable breach of the rock gun. He turned the device over on its side and turned a small switch to the proper position. There were different knob positions for each of the different major rock shapes, round, flat, oblong, square, and other. With the switch adjusted, the scope would automatically aim a little low since flat rocks had a tendency to drift up from the velocity of the wind. He switched a second dial that gauged thickness. The thicker the rock, the stronger the initial velocity needed to be in order to reach the target successfully. Having made his

initial adjustments Eddie lay again on his belly, his horn pointing up at the sky, his eye to the gun's scope.

The first Flallop Eddie sighted was praying. He lay strewn out on his back, arms and legs held as far out from his body as possible. His horn was planted firmly into the ground, which thrust his hips out at the sky. This prayer position was called "The Loving of Glarf" and it made Eddie's stomach turn to see it. Such a position was considered blasphemous and demonic to the Whozits, whose ideas of religion had nothing in common with the backward savage Flallops.

Seeing the Flallop praying reminded Eddie of Minitonqua, the Religious camp he was sent to as a boy. In a flash he remembered how he dreaded going, it was the first time he left his parents house for any notable length of time. Camp was considered an important part of every Whozits life and he did as he was told, spending a week total at the camp. Each day was spent primarily in a large auditorium where prominent Whozit religious leaders gave lectures. The seats were, he remembered, quite uncomfortable and he spent most of each day shifting from one cheek to the other, trying to keep his entire ass from falling asleep. He heard most of what was said however, and it became, in time, the cornerstone of his faith.

Each day had a theme of sorts; the first day was about cosmology. Eddie learned that a glorious, omniscient, and all loving being named Glarf created the world. Glarf was a very large fellow who lived before there was a universe. Nevertheless he was decidedly male, decidedly cranky, but still completely loving in every way; except the ways that he wasn't.

Legend has it one day Glarf ate a particularly spicy meal. Some Whozit Sects said it was a curry dish, others said Cantonese. The one thing that everyone agreed about, the cornerstone of their faith, was that Glarf ate a ball of spicy cheese for desert.

Glarf suffered, drank some Pepto Bismal, felt better, and then suddenly died. To which Nietzsche is rumored to have said "See, I told you he was dead." However, miraculously, four score and forty days and three nights later he came again in fulfillment of the scriptures and continued his message of Antacid salvation. He continued his message for three days before he realized there was no one to preach to.

He had yet to create anything.

Never one to be put off by details Glarf set about to alleviate this problem. He did what any rational deity would do- he created the universe. Once he started creating things he was having such a grand time of it he considered altering the basic chemistry of being so that spicy food soothed, instead of bothered, the stomach. However, the marketing people he created poo-pooed the idea, lobbying instead for what eventually became the platypus.

After a few eons of thought Glarf decided it would be a hoot to indulge himself in a Second Coming. After all, there wasn't anyone there to see his

first coming, and he so enjoyed an entrance. After a remarkably small amount of thought Glarf returned for the second first time to the world.

For his second coming Glarf chose the form of a can of primer paint which was found in an old unpainted house after a Bingo game by an old woman named Pistis Sophia. She took the can to the divinical authorities because it was glowing majestically in a way that it hadn't during her previous visits to the tool shed. Within days the authorities pronounced the spray can the second incarnation of Glarf. In a unanimous vote, the Whozit Pope, "Pope II- the Sequel" named Pistis Sophia the Wise High Saint of Returning Gods, a title that gave her a fifty- percent discount at the movies, free bus rides, and first dibs on new releases at the video store.

Eddie sat and listened to all of this with interest, it was nice to learn about the universe, even with a sleeping butt. He was pleased to find out there was an all-powerful being in his corner, it made facing the day a little easier. The lectures about the beauties of the Whozit religion took the first two days of camp and Eddie was having a pretty good time despite the abysmal seating arrangements.

Then came the third day, the "Fire and Brimstone" lecture. This was the day they learned about the terribly blasphemous beliefs of the Flallops. Beliefs so shocking some of the younger children vomited in terror.

The Flallops said the Son of Glarf came to Satan's monkey in the form of a small ball of cheese that fell from the sky. He arrived, listened to an old woman talk about her bad knees, blurry vision, and back troubles for about an hour, and was promptly eaten on a nice Ritz cracker.

Glarf returned again a couple of days later (in fulfillment of the scriptures) by exploding out of the old woman's chest a'la Alien. Astonishingly, the ball of cheese was still in pristine condition, like Kennedy's magic bullet. With a cowboy 'whoop' the cheese shot up into heaven where it remains seated at the right hand of the divine salad tong whose left hand holds an individually wrapped baggy of garlic and onion croutons.

As the priest detailed the bizarre beliefs of the Flallops, Eddie found himself wondering what the big deal was about. Then, as if to answer his question, the Priest told him what the big deal was.

"HECK!" The priest's eyes suddenly bulged out; the satin and rhinestone cocktail dress he was wearing sparkled wildly. "Anyone who believes such madness is going to spend all of eternity in Heck. Heck is a place so terrible it makes ballet lessons seem like a day at the zoo.

"Eternity," said the priest, "is the time it takes Jello to turn into a hippopotamus. It is the length of time that Rush Limbaugh will remain a big fat idiot... a very very long time indeed."

Eddie's young mind boggled at how long it would take Rush to not be a fat idiot and shivered.

"Further," the priest continued, "It's your Whozitly duty to try to save every one of the lost Flallop souls. If they won't go peaceably, we'll force

them. Either way, the glory was to Glarf, and to those who loved him in the way that they said he wanted to be loved."

Glarf himself made no comment at all. He was out having a nice espresso latte.

To believe the lies of the Flallops was to spend eternity in Heck having your intestines used as a jump rope, your eyes as ping pong balls, and your head for soccer. "You will" the priest informed them "suffer unimaginably forever, wishing the whole time to be dead, to be free of the endless torment, but the end will not come. Not ever. There will be only pain and suffering and more pain and suffering after that. And," said the Priest, "if you are not actively working to change the sick and lost minds of any Flallop that is met, then eternal damnation will meet even the believer. It is not enough to just agree with the right ideas, You have to be a booster."

At this the priest passed several wicker collection baskets. As the basket passed by Eddie he took the envelope his mother gave him and dropped it in, wondering why she didn't even hesitate to put five bucks in the envelope while refusing adamantly to cough up fifty cents for a candy bar. Eddie figured there must be a rule where the giving of money is prioritized, again probably with the threat of Heck to guarantee compliance. Eddie was a little put off by the idea that he would be punished eternally for something like that, but his fear the threat would be carried out went a long way towards his eventual acceptance of everything he was told in this regard.

Eddie shook his head, the memories clearing. It was a sin to shoot someone who was praying, even if they were praying to the wrong God, so Eddie moved the scope on, looking for a face that appeared sinister, evil, and therefore, easily shootable. He looked at the Flallops cooking, no obvious evil there. He scanned around to a Flallop reading a paperback book; his feet propped up on a rock. For a second Eddie thought he might have found his target, but then the boy shifted the book's cover and he saw it was the latest effort by his favorite writer, Bialini DeTorres, who wrote terrifically exciting stories about pitched space battles and mutant fishmongers from beyond the moon.

Again he searched around trying to find a worthy, or perhaps unworthy was a better term, target. Eddie could only spot four of the Flallops, he thought the others must still be sleeping. Eddie decided to wait to get a look at the other three, maybe one of them would stick out as the obvious choice, although thin tendrils of doubt were beginning to creep up around the edges of his resolve.

As he waited for the rest of the Flallops to emerge from their tents Eddie's mind ranged over the changes that occurred since those carefree days at camp. Besides his growing up, a process which was just as painful for him as it is for anybody, the society he lived in changed drastically as well. He watched it happen with an interested, if impotent eye, the world he knew

growing darker as he grew older, the hatred between the Flallops and the Whozits growing more in violence as he grew in height.

In the days of church camp it was very rare for the two groups to actually fight one another, although attitudes about this were changing rapidly. Eddie remembered his parents discussing whether or not violence would be necessary at the dinner table. It was discussed so casually he wasn't aware of the impact it would have. He wasn't aware his parents were jabbering away the long-standing peace of Satan's Monkey in favor of what had come, the tense anger and nastiness of war.

One night ten years earlier Eddie's Dad came home late from the corner bar, his eye swelled completely shut. He made quite a ruckus coming in and Eddie walked bleary eyed into the kitchen, his sleep interrupted and his curiosity overwhelming his desire to return to bed. He pulled up one of the kitchen chairs and watched his mother working on the eye, placing a cold piece of chicken over the nasty pink bruise. His Dad had his elbows on the table, his fingers drumming with a nervous rapidity that unsettled Eddie even more than the eye did. Normally his Dad was a calm guy, slow to anger; and he was never nervous. Eddie asked what happened.

He hadn't heard the whole story that night, but as the years went on he learned the evening's problems went much further than a nasty eye bruise. The entire fabric of their society was ripping apart and Eddie was too young to understand. His Dad was an honest guy and although he knew most of what he said would be lost on Eddie, he told him anyway because it was just the kind of guy he was.

"It's the damn Flallops Eddie, there is talk of splitting the town between us. The Flallops are going to secede from Satan's Monkey. They claim the Whozits have too much power and are actively discriminating against their kind in everything from business to sports officiating. And while for the most part they are just causing trouble, I fear that there might be just enough truth in what they are saying to cause things to get much worse indeed. I am afraid because I don't know what kind of world you are going to inherit. I am afraid because there is a great deal of uncertainty in all of our futures. I am afraid because it is very possible bar fights are only the beginning, it may get a whole lot worse before it gets any better.

And it did get worse, as Eddie knew all too well. "If it hadn't," Eddie told himself resolutely, "you can pretty well guarantee that I wouldn't be sitting up here on this rock."

As any society that invents lawyers knows, the occasional drunken fistfight can turn into a mountain of litigation with both sides yelling through split lips and busted teeth. This happened the day after his father came home with the black eye on the lawn outside of the Satan's Monkey courthouse. The yelling led to more hitting, which led to more litigation. It was a viscous circle, a tangled kite string, the NJ Freeway system, in other words, a mess. It wasn't long before the litigation turned into focus groups

which turned into lobbyists and drunken bar fight issue advocacy. Satan's Monkey was on a crash course with disaster. The lobbyists took a brief detour as parking lot attendants before veering back into the more familiar territory of political scapegoatism. This consisted of otherwise remarkable statements like "It's the Flallops fault the peaches went bad this year; it's not the forty five thousand gallons of pesticide we accidentally spilled behind the garage." That sort of thing.

Only to Eddie- a young impressionable Whozit who had yet to learn the fine art of recognizing bullshit when he heard it- the arguments seemed plausible. Of course he was only a year or so past believing in the jolly fat crucified man in the sleigh whose death everyone celebrated once a year by the hiding and giving of chocolate eggs. Eddie became a strong believer in Flallop/Whozit separation and began to pay attention when his teacher droned on about the superiority of the way Whozits brushed their teeth or did their laundry. He was pleased with what he learned, but as time passed he began to notice a trend that bothered him.

It was never enough to just say Whozits brushed their teeth better, it was always because they brushed their teeth with Gleam O Brightly. As if simply using the proper product would in itself make the Whozits superior, as if a brand name was more important than the people who made the products, as if the people weren't even involved. One day he couldn't stand it anymore and had to ask.

He raised his hand, interrupting the teacher's lesson. Mrs. Panko stopped what she was saying in mid-sentence and asked, "Yes Edward, What is it?" It was clear from her tone that what he said better be good. Mrs. Panko had a hard time getting going, and if someone threw her off her train of thought she would often have to struggle for minutes before she got it back. The kids learned to not interrupt her because when they did it immediately put her into a foul mood.

Eddie cleared his throat, feeling a great pressure on his chest; the entire class was looking at him expectantly.

"Why does it matter if we wear clothes that are made by one specific designer? Isn't the fact the clothes are made by Whozits the thing that makes them superior? If there is only one really good designer, aren't we implying it's a product that's superior, not the Whozits in general?" He was asking because he thought his teacher was making an inadvertent mistake. When she said "Poofbutt overalls were the greatest overalls that modern science produced." Eddie wanted to clarify the matter. But Mrs. Panko's response confused him even worse.

She never answered his question. Instead she simply stood there looking at him, hand on her hip. It seemed like she stood there, still as a statue, for at least an hour. It wasn't that long, but from Eddie's seat it was. He felt the silence and her gaze like a big bag of bricks settled uncomfortably on his head.

Finally she opened her mouth as if to say something. Just as suddenly she closed it again, her teeth clicking audibly together. She appeared to think for a moment and finally she started again, speaking in a whisper. Eddie leaned closer to hear, "Perhaps we need to take a look at your permanent record, it seems that you may be a troublemaker, a sympathizer perhaps?" Mrs. Panko then lifted a single eyebrow in a facial expression that expressed a definite threat. Her eyebrow was telling him he better walk very carefully now, he was on the verge of serious trouble. Eddie could feel all of the moisture in his mouth evaporate all at once.

"I'm sorry I asked an improper question Mrs. Panko, I beg your pardon and will not repeat my previous insolence." Eddie looked at her with what he hoped was an expression of great sincerity. She apparently bought it because after several minutes of trying, she did eventually get back her train of thought. However, for the next week or so, each time she mentioned a brand name she would say it directly at Eddie, stressing the word until it hissed like an angry snake.

Eddie got the message and stopped asking questions.

This didn't mean that they didn't occur to him from time to time, brief whisperings of doubt at some of his teacher's more outlandish claims. He just didn't voice them. Instead, they remained in his brain, rattling like change in a dryer.

While Eddie had reservations it seemed the rest of the world did not. Society, as a whole, moved unwaveringly forward toward war with a slow predictability that was painful to watch unfold. The political scapegoatism led to small-scale skirmishes involving moderately armed bands of nuns, used car salesmen, telemarketers, and the odd refrigerator repair artist.

Skirmishes eventually became battles. Great nasty things with rocks flying all over the place. The battles were an incredible spectacle. Too incredible perhaps. The battles eventually became televised. Thanks to a good host, (He seemed to generally care about the massive destruction of life that he commentated.) the show was a great success. It wasn't long before the war was beating out Monday Night Gladiators and winning Emmys. The latter were small rabid rabbits that came in their own cage. The Whozit leader, Vlad, a remarkably ignorant man, wanted his subjects to be as stupid as he was so he gave the award to any television show that truly *worked* to make the public more ignorant or stupid.

The success of the war of course, only insured more battles. (Not to mention product tie-ins, action figures, and even T-shirts.) Eddie received a T-shirt from his aunt the year before. He only wore it when he was doing chores in the backyard or exercising. Eddie actually liked the shirt when he first got it; his aunt always brought something when she came to visit. This wasn't as good as the time when she brought the baby grobnick, (puppy) but it was pretty good. He thought that he would wear it often.

Three days after receiving the gift however, Eddie saw something that made him relegate the shirt to chore status immediately. (Chore status was the lowest level of clothes, just one good lawn-mowing shy of being in the garbage can.) He was walking along the Flallop's perimeter fence. It was erected to separate them from both the forest and the Whozits. He had a stick in his hands and was rattling it through the links, the Chocka Chocka sound droning monotonously. As he passed around a large guard tower Eddie saw another kid, perhaps a year or two older. He was wearing a shirt almost identical to the one his aunt had given him. He stopped, taking in the details. The kid obviously thought Eddie was trying to be smart because he spit at him, the large glob of nastiness flying remarkably through the mesh of the fence untouched. Eddie had to jump out of the way to avoid getting it square on his shirt. A bit did get on his arm and he wiped it away furiously on his overalls.

On his rock Eddie waited, quietly hoping the kid that spit at him was one of the Flallops still inside a tent. He had no reason to think he was there, but it would certainly make his decision about who to shoot a hell of a lot easier.

When his mother asked him why he stopped wearing the shirt he told her it was because it was too big. This was actually true; the bottom of the shirt went almost to his knees if he didn't tuck it in. But he had lots of T-shirts that were too big; he wore them all the time. It was the T-shirt itself, the illustration that so closely resembled the illustration on the spitter's shirt. It was a still frame taken from an actual battle that had been shown on TV. It featured a Whozit guy braining a Flallop in the head with a rock. There was a terribly bright spray of purple blood. Beneath it was a caption that read, "Whozits Rule!!! Kill all the Flallops and let Glarf sort em out!!!" The explanation points were printed in the same bright purple as the blood in the picture. The boy's shirt, the one who spit on him, also featured a brain bashing- only a Whozit was on the receiving end on his version, and the caption was different too, it read, Flallops Rule!!! Kill all the Whozits and let Glarf Sort em out!!! Again the letters were written in the horrible blood purple.

The shirt raised a whole new series of questions Eddie wanted to ask, but there was no one to talk to. They stayed in his head and most of the time he forgot about them. Only now, sitting high on a rock, getting ready to kill another living being- for real, not just play acting, the questions were starting to come back. He thought of the plaque he would get if he went through with it and wondered, not for the first time, if maybe it wasn't worth it. Even if he didn't kill anybody he would automatically become an adult in training in a year and a half. He thought maybe he could wait.

In a way, Eddie thought now, what he was doing was cheating. Sure it was accepted and common now, but it was only two years earlier the rules concerning elevation to adult in training were changed. Before then everyone waited until their seventeenth birthdays. Now it was available to anyone who could kill a Flallop. At the age of sixteen Eddie's older friends began to be

asked by their teachers if they would like to be assigned to the list of kids who want early promotion to adult in training status. The words, "go murder someone" were never actually uttered in schools but everyone knew what was really being said. It was like when the swear words are cut out of movies on regular television, the actual word is bleeped out but everyone over the age of three in the room knows the lady just said "Bitch."

In the brief two years since the rule was changed the full force of peer pressure had shifted behind the idea of gaining the title early. In Satan's Monkey adults in training have a great deal more power and privilege than do children. In many ways, being an adult in training was the best time of life because a young Whozit enjoyed the freedom of adulthood and only a modicum of the responsibility. Eddie knew he was looking forward to the new privileges, so much so he squelched most of his doubts until the last minute. Most kids now became adults in training at the age of fourteen. Eddie was fifteen and a half. He had endured a year and a half of torment over his hesitancy that had hitherto been more the result of squeamishness than moral confusion. He thought about the picture on his shirt, the way the blood was spraying out in an arc. It repulsed him to think he was going to have to do that to someone himself. He put it off as long as he could.

He finally broke down and asked his Dad to get him a gun, That week, when his teacher asked him (as he did every week, like clockwork) if he wanted to be put down as a candidate for early adult in training status, he said yes. His teacher, now Mr. Przybylski, clapped him on the shoulder and told him he was glad Eddie finally came around to being a good citizen. Oddly, the strongest part of Eddie's memory of this encounter was how strong and sweet Mr. Przybylski's after shave lotion was. It seemed to surround him like some kind of eerie invisible cloud. The part where he agreed to kill a Flallop was somehow lost in the haze of his memory, lost to the smell of after-shave.

The thing that finally put him over the edge was; he now realized, stupid as hell. One of the perks of becoming an adult in training is the ability to vote in elections. Vlad was the only name on the ballot for ruler, so that part wasn't interesting. (There were very few political science majors in Satan's Monkey.) The election that got all the press, the one the public paid the most attention to, was what the official food of Satan's Monkey was going to be.

The current food was potted meat, a product that actually touted "partially defatted cooked pork fatty tissue" as one of its ingredients. It won the last election in a landslide over the incumbent Cheese Doodles on ice cream. The win was largely attributed to Potted Meats campaign slogan, "Potted meat, It's gross, but at least it's not Cheese Doodles on ice cream."

It was the straw that broke the camel's back for Eddie. He loved Cheese Doodles on ice cream; it was his favorite food. He decided to go for early status so that he could vote in the next election. He knew his was only one vote, but it would be a vote for Cheese Doodles and ice cream by Glarf,

and that was important.

Only now he wasn't so sure. He was just sitting there thinking, trying to decide what to do when he heard a rock break loose and fall very close to where he was sitting. Eddie whirled around, as fast as he could manage in his limited space, and saw his friend Nigel clinging to a rock only a few feet away.

"What are you doing here?" Eddie asked, really rather freaked out.

Nigel looked up at the sound of Eddie's voice. He immediately began to whisper urgently, "Eddie wait, stop, don't kill anyone yet! I've got to talk to you!"