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Ranklechick

AND HIS THREE-LEGGED CAT



Absurdist Baroque Punk Comic Melancholia



Rikki Simons & Tavisha

Ranklechick was a child Ghoul who lived in the depths of space.

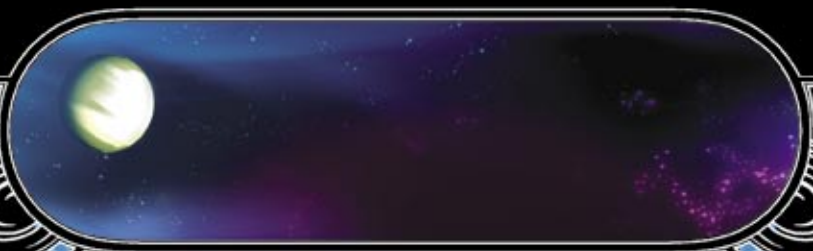
From voice actor (GIR from *Invader ZIM*) and graphic novelist (*ShutterBox* and *Super Information Hijinks: Reality Check!*) Rikki Simons and illustrator Tavisha (also *ShutterBox* and *SIH: Reality Check!*) comes a bit of absurdist baroque punk comic melancholia in the form of *Ranklechick and His Three-Legged Cat!* Oogaly-gee.

Obsessed with contacting the ghost of his brain-dead mother, Ranklechick invents an absurd collection of devices, like his Bliss Extractor, which he uses to try to get an autograph from the ghost of Charles Dickens, or his Sphere of Belligerence, a spacecraft propulsion system that literally insults physics.

Life ticks on at a lunatic pace as poor Ranklechick flees from handshaking lessons, avoids being made into candy by the evil android, Nathan Burblepinch, gets repeatedly decapitated, suffers the company of oniomaniac children, suicidal brains, ham, and a grumpy three-legged cat for a best friend ... and all the while he fights the unseen power that continues to make him believe he is becoming a comic book character

"Rikki Simons is a monstrous creature, with arms and a head, and legs as well. This book exists as proof of all these nightmarish qualities for which this horrible man is known. Having been beaten by Rikki himself into reading this, his latest masterpiece of ... something, I can honestly say that I suspect that Simons may very well also have a brain."

-Jhonen Vasquez,
creator of *Squee!*,
I Feel Sick, and
Invader ZIM



Ghoul 'ello.



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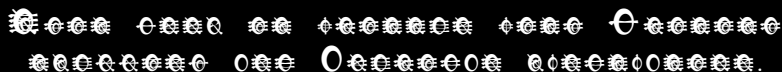
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Some Illustrations by Rikki Simons

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Studio Tavicat is a private, self-publishing studio. We are not seeking submissions.



This book is written with British spelling and American punctuation.

Completely Illustrated 2006 Internet Edition, First Four Chapters

Preview Version 1.4

Some sequential art in this colour edition was first published by Slave Labor Graphics in March and in May of 2001, in two, twenty-four page installments, under the comic book title *Ranklechick and His Three Legged Cat*.

Fonts used in this edition: Chochin, CourierNew, Fancihand, GoudyModernMT, **Marlequin**, Helvetica, Holstein, Humana Serif, Papyrus, *Rauch LET*, SpilWilk, **Techno**, Times and Times New Roman.



● Absurdist Baroque Punk Comic Melancholia ●

Written and Painted by

Rikki Simons

Illustrated by

Tavisha Wolfgarth-Simons

*This is a preview of the eBook version of
Ranklechick and His Three-Legged Cat.
Go to www.tavicat.com to see all PRINT
versions available.*

Studio  Tavicat

www.tavicat.com

“They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and have forgotten the way out again.”

Charles Dickens
A Christmas Carol

“The love of the painter standing alone and staring, staring at the great coloured surface he is making ... The window gapes as he inhales his world. His world: a rented room, and turpentine. He moves towards his half-born. He is in love.”

Mervyn Peake
Titus Groan
(The Gormenghast Novels)

For our awkward friends.





Dearest, As Yet Unrealised Future Humanity,

This edition of Ranklechick and His Three-Legged Cat is a hybrid book, a cross between a novel and a graphic novel. This “hybrid book” is designed so that when you come to the comic sections, you are meant to read them as part of the story. Please don’t skip over the word balloons like our grandmothers would and then come to us with a lecture on incompleteness. Although we like you very much for opening this volume and staying long enough to stroll a bit with our Ghouls, we cannot stress how crippled with madness we’ll become if you read only the prose sections. Likewise, if you are an avid reader of comic books, don’t just read the comic sections and skip over all the prose. That sort of behaviour is eye-rolling into the realm of lunacy and we will be extremely aggitated and even ... sullen. We may even shake your hand.

We thank you for your subtle patronage, but seriously, all we really ask of you is: if four thousand years in the future you happen to build a Bliss Extractor and use it to bring us back from the dead, please be gentle.

*Probably Sincerely,
The Zoo Keepers*

P.S.: A special instruction for those of you reading this work as an eBook: the text in the comic sections (pages 75 to 81, 125 to 135, and goodness, 191 to 213) is rather small. When reading these comic pages you are advised by the author to zoom 200%. Software is thrilling! It’s entirely true.



*So and such, my thoughts circumspect thus spent
In little less than not a leisure time
After calculated portents and signs
Know this: he shall come into existence:
A small Ghoul within the European Zoo
Where as four thousand four hundred years hence
From present-day hell's fixed and final sum
Crossed sad circumstance, still left wanting chance
I cite his charming name shall draw the lot:
Dear Das Da Ranklechick En Ranklerot.*

-Cruiksha Shaum Trafalgar







Social Interaction: *An inconvenience that is unfortunately necessary for the survival of our Ghoul race, however bothersome and painful.*

-Folksum's Guide to Practical Irritations

Chapter One: The Humdud in the Humdudgeonary

Ranklechick was a child Ghoul who lived in the depths of space. While it is true that we all live in space, from our perspective as conscious matter locked in place by centrifugal force upon a biologically active sphere, it isn't always noticeable as such. However, for Ranklechick the cosmos was present and dear to him whenever he looked up past the enormous, neon-lit ceiling of the living space station he resided within, beyond the monstrosly high transparent walls, past the station's parent satellite, Europa, past father Jupiter: and there was all the universe for him to explore. But Ranklechick was a shy Ghoul, and he would only venture out in short, brave, obsessive compulsive moments of sublime delirium — but at least he would go, even though he need not, for he was already there, and although we are all of us already there, we are not all Ghouls, and that is why Ranklechick's story is significant.

Eight years ago, in Ghoulamassive Year 4,444,



Ranklechick En Ranklerot was born. He carried the surname “En Ranklerot” because he was, by birth, an En Ranklerot Ghoul: an obsessed inventor. Where his father and mother had obtained the name “Ranklechick” he never knew, for his mother was quite literally brain-dead and his father ... well, Ranklechick would be speaking with that horrible creature momentarily.

It was now Ghoulamassive Year 4,452 and the approaching conversation with his father filled Ranklechick’s already weary heart with dread. Yes, weary, and it was so tragic to be so very tired of life when he was only eight years old ... tragic for a Ghoul, that is. If he were a Human boy it would be perfectly normal to be depressed, for depression only comes from not getting what you want. Human children, except the rare ones, desire everything because they never know what they want. (The monsters.) Ghouls, on the other hand, usually know what they want, and what they want is usually delightfully horrible and absurd — but what Ranklechick wanted, and *needed*, was to talk to the dead. Of course, this need is more absurd than usual and thus rather difficult to obtain.

The means Ranklechick employed to reach his disturbing goal usually came in the form of gadgets. For example: by his first birthday Ranklechick had already completed his first invention, a chemically imbalanced rocket ship with boosters so powerful its manic theoretical physics gained sentience and fell into depression before exploding from the strain from



learning there was no escape velocity fast enough to escape one's own desires. This first invention, this spacecraft, he had named the *Ketchi Ketchi* Mark I after a favourite poem. Ranklechick's earliest memory was that of listening to an eleven-year-old Twirlun Ai girl senselessly hum to herself. She was a nursemaid entrusted to watch him the night the Sen Spiritu Spirita Nuns came to take his lifeless mother away. "Catch me, catch me, dragon fly ... watch me wriggle through your eye"

Being so very young, he confused the line "Catch me, catch me" with "*Ketchi Ketchi*," and so the melody stuck that way in his impressionable and gigantic mind. By the next month, of course, he was no longer making such paltry syntax errors, for, being an En Ranklerot Ghoul, his technical ability to learn had doubled exponentially every two weeks, or whenever the noodles were especially good at his favourite ramen restaurant — whichever came first. After another year, he was learning pathological calculus, advanced Ghoul horror-biology, sausage preparation, the entire thousand-year history of Santa Fuego and the Bipolar Murderhammer, and already finished reading all seventeen volumes of Ultrafidian's *Starship Decorating Adventures* series.

Yes, he was very bright in technical matters, but he, being like all other Ghouls, was a mess socially. This was why all Ghoul children were forced by law to attend Social Viridity School, beginning at the age of one, until they were adults, which was sixteen years.



All, that is, except the Twirlun Ai, who began Social Viridity School at age thirteen and usually finished, dropped out, or died horribly but brilliantly by the time they were twenty-seven.

Ghouls learnt technical skills and basic reading and writing without the help of an instructor. They simply began to understand and seek out data as they grew older using the instinctual Ghoul ability known as Hyper-Precocious Correct Observation, or in the Ghoulauhn slang: Oogaly. There wasn't a Colonial Human language a Ghoul couldn't learn just by hearing it, nor was there a single trade within their various foundations that they did not comprehend by simply paying attention to the finest details, instantly knowing what kind of book to read or elder to interrogate. Yet it was ordinary social skills that stumped them most. Ask an En Ranklerot to build you a space-faring sloth or beg to hear seven volumes of law quoted from a Sen Spiritu Spiritu Nun and you'll have it done without a hint of complaint. However, be ready to have that sloth devour your family as a friendly greeting and be prepared to sign the necessary paperwork proclaiming you stupid for asking about all that law because not a single Ghoul would be able to treat you with standard common courtesy.

They were social idiots, the lot. All 1,000 Laus Muush-heds, all 55,300 Sen Spiritu Spiritu, all 64,000 En Frettin Fraught, all 46,000 En Ranklerot, all 333,333 Wot Flamin, all 4,646,000 Twirlun Ai, and



especially the one and only Zoo Keeper (he was the worst): *complete social idiots*. If they had been alive during the early twenty-first century AD, they would have been very fond of posting technical facts on Internet message boards.

By the time Ranklechick was eight years old it was Ghoulamassive Year 4452, and by then he had been in Social Viridity School for seven years ... seven long, dreadfully cordial years

There was nothing that Ranklechick hated as much as attending Social Viridity School, and there was nothing he loved more than skipping school and running away with his best friend, Pumpernick. In the top of times, they would fly away from the Zoo in whatever version of the *Ketchi Ketchi* was currently available. The trouble was, Ranklechick was stuck in school at the moment because the newest version of the *Ketchi Ketchi* (Mark IX now) was still hatching down in the dry-dock. Moreover, he hadn't seen Pumpernick for three nights (out prowling again, he assumed). There was only one thing he could do. He was going to have to call his father and beg him for an excuse to get out of school. More troublesome still was the fact that his father hated him.

Ranklechick paced back and forth before the blank humdudgeonary sitting on the public desk in his quiet Viridity dorm room. As usual, all was dim with a medley of hard and soft shadows cast about as



twinkling lights poured through filigree vines. Vines crawled up around recessed statue niches, through various living metal beams having the texture of hammered copper, and sprouted here-and-there oddly about especially where perhaps they shouldn't. The living lights flickered like candlelight in the sconces on the walls. Ranklechick fidgeted and fretted with his seventh year school uniform: the great cornflower blue ruff around his neck, his giant dark blue ribbon tied in a knot below his ruff, and his skull-shaped Reincarnica fixed square in the middle of his ribbon. He would have to dial the humdudgeonary soon if he was going to catch his father in time. He un-tucked his dark grey shirt from where it had caught in the big silver buckle on his big black belt. Bending over farther still, he quickly used the cornflower blue ruff-cuff of his sleeve to half-heartedly polish the silver boot buckles on his pointy black boots one more time. Right. Try to smooth back the wiry black hair in the mirror, perhaps? Check his catlike nose for any escaping nastiness, maybe? How about those great bags under those big oval eyes? Baggy enough? His pale blueish head was still shaped like an upside down candy corn. Oh, what was he to do? He was still a skinny little horror trapped in a big, puffy suit.

He took several deep breaths, hyperventilated, gasped and coughed, and looked about the dimly lit dorm. Ghouls only slept for four hours once every four nights. It was only the beginning of the First Night, so



no one was really tired enough to be hanging around the dorm room. He shared this room with two other En Ranklerot boys (called Punt and Floot), and one Wot Flamin (known as Egahd Marmossey). Nobody was yet sure of the Wot Flamin's gender. It was having a very rough time in school, and it was no wonder, really. Ranklechick had met its parents once and they were the worst case of social dropouts he'd ever met. The Nuns couldn't even get any information out of them about their own child. At least he didn't have to share a room with any En Frettin Fraught like last year. No one enjoyed the company of those hulking, armoured maniac "artists."

Since Ranklechick and his three roommates were so short, they had been assigned one of the low-ceilinged rooms. It was located away from the central schooling grounds and closer to the front of the Nunnery section of the vast Sen Spiritu Spirita complex. However, Ranklechick's diminutive body was only one of the reasons this dorm had been selected for him. As a kind of punishment for Ranklechick's constant escape attempts (and successes), his dorm was actually just under the grated metal floor of the Nunnery marigold gazebo. It was rather like a tomb under a bed of flowers: a very gloomy place all around. Like his father, the nuns just really hated him.

All of his dorm room companions were away at breakfast, but Ranklechick always felt horribly ill at the thought of eating after only a few hours from first



waking

He slumped into the large, padded brocade armchair in front of the humdudgeonary desk. His stomach gurgled. It hurgled. It barked. He peered down and met the eyes of his Reincarnica, Bobbi. Looking like a little fanged skull with no lower jawbone, Bobbi was worn as a sort of bolo tie around Ranklechick's great blue ribbon. Reincarnicas were little Gremgear-infused biological energy generators capable of sustaining the life of a fatally injured Ghoul for up to one Ghoul week (eight full nights). They were usually worn as jewellery and contained a limited sapience of their own but were entirely mute. The very first Reincarnica was invented by an En Ranklerot Ghoul named Chortle, one thousand years after the creation of the Zoo. Chortle was killed at age five hundred and two, however, after forgetting to wear his Reincarnica whilst attempting to eat a rather angry bowl of clam chowder.

Bobbi wasn't the only mute creature hanging around the dorm room that night. There, in a transparent sphere against the far wall quietly hummed the room's kradlewatt power plant. But we won't talk about it now. Let's just say it looked like a cross between a glowing walrus and a man-sized shrimp hovering in a huge jar. Kradlewatts were well known to sing rather like nightingales, just as Ranklechick was well known to become terrified out of his oversized mind when thinking of talking to his father. He waved at Bobbi, coughed, choked, and listened to the kradlewatt sing.



Time moved on nearer to his bedevilled hour. If he didn't get permission from his father in the next half hour, Ranklechick would have to go off to school. The students in his group were learning to shake hands tonight. He felt positively scandalised by the thought. His eyes darted from Bobbi to the kradlewatt in the corner, from the empty wrought iron bunks to the lily-striped wallpaper, and then finally back to the humdudgeonary desk. He timidly waved his hand before the blank oval screen that sat dark within the rib bone-shaped frame. He had barely pulled his hand back when the gaunt humanoid face of the Humdud appeared green and glowing on the screen. "Yes?" asked the Humdud patiently.

Ranklechick tried to straighten his posture and calm himself. He said, "Um, hello ... ah ... um ... ah" His voice was usually timid and soft, full of gulping gasps and quivering pauses — but sometimes, when he couldn't control himself, he would bellow out like a basset hound. This was one of those times.

The Humdud placidly smiled at the basset sound and the word "Zoo" lit up in English across his forehead, "Das Da Ranklechick En Ranklerot, of course. Level 800 at the Sen Spiritu Spirita Nunnery's Social Viridity School. By the sound of the tremble in your voice, I surmise that you wish to speak with your father. Wait there; I'll be your humble Humdud escort for this conversation."

The Humdud moved to one side as the screen began



to swirl. A low buzzing was heard as the connection was attempted. The line seemed to pause for as long as the dulllest of theoretical eternities, and several times, the Humdud turned to Ranklechick and gave him a reassuring smile. Almost a full minute later, the screen finally stopped buzzing and swirling as a living figure began to form within. Then, quite suddenly, Ranklechick was looking at someone who most certainly was not his father. It was a giant En Frettin Fraught, his menacing black armour swinging into view as he bent down to stare back at Ranklechick. This En Frettin Fraught was particularly mean-looking, cat ears folded back over his huge round head. Yet, his cable-thick black hair seemed something of a treasure to him. It wasn't the usual mess of web work that became of most En Frettin Fraught hair, but rather it was swept back like the quills of a porcupine. He glared at Ranklechick for what felt like a terribly long trip around an event horizon, counter spin, with no chance of stopping for lunch (the dulllest of theoretical eternities) — then finally: “What?” barked the En Frettin Fraught.

The Humdud's head floated around the edge of the screen, smiling and trying to seem the pleasant host. “Ah! You are Das Da Dai Luvmoo En Frettin Fraught! Hello! Hello! I can see by the frost in your breath that you must be down in the Sphere of Melancholy! Dreadful! Sorry to bother you, but as it were, I just so happened to be strolling along a field of bright poppies



when all of a sudden I thought, BANG! Ranklechick! My old pal Ranklechick! Why, I bet he hasn't talked with his father in ages!" The Humdud was clearly lying like a greedy carnival barker, but this was what he was supposed to do. He was breaking the ice, so to speak. "What, can you imagine the sheer look of joy on his pop's face when he sees the rosy-keen reddy rose of his favourite boy's cheek? Eh, Eh? Why I bet he'll want to talk to him right away! Have him over for some snicker doodles and coffee for a chat! What to say, friend? Can the boy have a go at his pop?"

Dai Luvmoo again just stared, completely unamused and, flicking his tongue against one of his large canine teeth rather absentmindedly, he said, "No."

"So it's 'no' then, is it?" chirped the Humdud happily.

"No."

"'No,' right?"

"Completely. No."

Ranklechick felt his heart drop as he watched the two of them go on.

Just then a voice came from off screen, far behind Dai Luvmoo. "Is it the boy?"

Dai Luvmoo yelled back over his shoulder. "Who else would it be?"

The Humdud called into the background as well. "Oh, hello Das Da Pox-Rudyard Laus Muush-hed! May your son please beg you for something?"

"Is he trying to get out of school?" came the distant



voice.

“Um!” was all Ranklechick could mutter.

Dai Luvmoo shouted quickly, “Quiet, child!”

The Humdud shook his head at Ranklechick, as if to reaffirm he had “ummed” out of turn. The floating face nodded and said, “Oh! Oh, sorry, the boy wasn’t trying be to be rude. Just got a little ahead of himself. Boys will be Ghouls when they’re boy Ghouls after all. Ah, yes. About the school. I would assume he’s feeling a bit on high nerve due to today’s coming handshaking lesson. So, yes. He would like to plead for an out.”

Dai Luvmoo’s attention ebbed from the conversation, as he began to be caught up in his memories, and said with a nostalgic sigh, “Hmmm ... I remember my first hand shaking. The fear that gripped my opponent’s heart as I began to descend upon his prone, shaking tremulant... it was ... THRILLING! I believe I actually pulled out his lungs by mistake”

Ranklechick winced. Since when did his father keep company with the likes of Dai Luvmoo? The great brooding En Frettin Fraught was very famous, as he was Seventh General of the Holmpress Brigade, the European Zoo’s first line of defence (but more often an lunatic offence). He stared at Ranklechick again, almost daring him with his gargantuan eyes to utter another “um.”

His father’s voice came again from afar. “Does the boy appear mentally damaged at the moment?”

Ranklechick knew he must have looked hideously



upset because both Dai Luvmoo and the Humdud nodded enthusiastically and said in a mishmash together, “Oh, yes! Absolutely! A terrible, terrible sight! He’ll be dead from fright by tomorrow at this rate!”

A faint chuckle and then, “GOOD!” was all his father said.

The screen went blank just as Dai Luvmoo hissed, “Pathetic little boy”

The Humdud waited a moment, as if not yet realising they had hung up on him. Then he turned back and faced Ranklechick, still smiling, “Well, that went badly. You’d best gather your things for class then, hadn’t you? Good luck!”

Ranklechick looked quite literally like he had just received a love letter from a sentient land mine. He stared down at his trembling hands.

“Oogaly-poo,” Ranklechick quietly swore.

Well said. Thus with a heart heavy with the worst kind of Oogaly, he shuffled over to the open wardrobe where he kept his courier bag full of school books and supplies. He took up the bag and gave one final look about the cramped little dorm room. He tried to smile at the kradlewatt floating in the chamber down the aisle, but the very thought of moving his lips very nearly made him mad with grief. “All these years ... father still ... oh, it wasn’t my fault!”

Slowly, he made his way over the stairs that led up to the greenhouse level.



But just then, as all seemed doomed to a day of clammy palms clasped firmly in ghastly greetings, there suddenly came a beeping from his belt! His eyes shot wide! That could mean only one thing! The communicator he'd built, the one that didn't need a Humdud to referee, was being called upon. The only person who could be hailing him was

He dropped his courier bag and rummaged through the various small egg-shaped devices fastened to the inside of his belt. One was beeping. He clicked it open and a holographic image of his favourite person in the world appeared. "Pumpernick!" he sang.

There at the end of the egg-shaped communicator hovered the face of a cat with ears so straight they made the top of his head entirely flat, so it appeared as if he had no ears at all, and that his head was nearly a perfect triangle (or rather like an upside down candy corn, like Ranklechick's). His eyes were so small and squinting that they were but mere slits, and his fur was flat and thin as well, a kind of turquoise in colour. This was Pumpernick and however very much a cat he was, Pumpernick could also talk, and although he often preferred slang, he was actually a stickler for perfect grammar and spelling, and a firm but polite unofficial guardian to Ranklechick. "You ready to leave?" he asked with little expression. His voice was always rough as gravel, a kind of tough as coffin nails masculinity that sounded very un-cat-like.

Ranklechick tried to hug the holographic cat. A hug,



of course, was something Ranklechick could never give a fellow Ghoul — and regardless, Ranklechick only hugged his cat whenever he was out of his mind with distress and unable to control himself. “Oh, I’m so very, very, very, very, very, very, very, happy to see you!” he cried.

Pumpernick’s stoic features bent up in a smile. “Yeah, I heard about the hand shaking lesson today and I kinda figured you’d be needin’ a rescue. You’re in luck too, ‘cause I’ve already had the Adjutator Drones move all yer stuff from Nth Holistic Storage.”

Ranklechick started speaking without thinking, his words rushing out like a panicked crowd spilling out of the tiny door that was his mouth, as his brain was surely a theatre on fire that was, for some reason, still selling candy and popcorn at the counter. “Oh, you won’t believe what I’ve been through! My father has started keeping company with Dai Luvmoo! From Holmpress Brigade! Oooo, he’s the worst, meanest artist yet! Always record every conversation with his kind, always, I thought.” He held up the mini recorder he had hidden in his sleeve. It played back a few of Dai Luvmoo’s snide remarks whilst Ranklechick continued to talk right over Dai Luvmoo’s recording. “Of course, I didn’t get a chance to tell him off, no. But, if I had you bet I would have said something like this, ‘My, you’re not very clever are you? Well, you’ve just insulted me for being pathetic, my most obvious and inherited weakness and I may get so confused that I sometimes



remove my own liver because I forget it doesn't belong on the outside but that doesn't mean you're better just because you're a huge, powerful, hulking man-o-war with more confidence than a super massive black hole has mass ... mass ... um ... um ... massiveness and I'm also not very good at insults ...' And did you just say you moved all my stuff?"

Ranklechick finished jabbering just as his mini recorder completed Dai Luvmoo's last line, "Pathetic little boy"

Pumpernick waited a moment, then smoothly said, "Yes, I did. I used actual words. Words that were calm. You remember 'calm?' It's an adjective and its closest synonym would be 'tranquil' while the closest synonym for the noun, 'Ranklechick' is probably just a picture of a baboon with a grenade in its mouth. Now: I said I finished moving all your stuff out of Nth Holistic Storage. Which means—"

"The new *Ketchi Ketchi*'s done!" shouted Ranklechick with glee.

Pumpernick nodded. "Hatched and cooked."

"What's cooked?" A female voice suddenly came from up the stairs. "Are you cooking something in your dorm?"

Caught! Ranklechick flinched and tried to cover the communicator, but Pumpernick's image just floated over his cupped hand.

He looked up with new trepidation, but then sighed with relief when he saw it was only Pietra, who was so



very odd in that she was a warm and friendly Twirlun Ai. Not that Twirlun Ai weren't usually friendly. Quite the contrary. They were generally very merry compared to the other Ghoulish species. However, Twirlun Ai were almost never warm. They were usually just hyper, or combustible, depending on what they were standing and waving their arms near.

Pietra flew haltingly down the stairs, using the small, black, feathery wings Ranklechick had grafted to her back. She settled with a bump and carefully brought herself to full height. All Twirlun Ai looked very Human but with a few exceptional features. They were usually very tall, two metres or more at best, but Pietra was short and stood only a little over a metre and a half. Even still, her head touched the ceiling in the low dorm room, making her tarantula-like blue-black hair bounce stiffly against the metal grating above. The twirled tips that dangled at the apex of either side of her hair curled like party favours when she tried to grab the ceiling grate for balance.

Her face alight with large eyes and tiny purple pupils, her smile beamed broadly across her completely white cheeks. Not an ounce of colour in those cheeks, not one. It was as if she were made of white plastic or a well glazed ceramic. These bizarre features aside, she appeared mostly Human ... mostly Of course, there was that strange, small, silver lion head door knocker grafted to her forehead. Every Twirlun Ai above the age of thirteen had one and Pietra was older



than thirteen by seven whole years, which meant she was a seventh-year student just like Ranklechick. The knocker sat comfortably nestled between her raven-feather bangs. Ranklechick understood that Twirlun Ai door knockers held a great significance, but he hadn't really studied up on them as much as he ought to, because, well, it was a social thing, and something so creepily personal that he'd rather stab his eyes out with his own butt than think about it. He knew a Ghoul who had done this.

Pietra beamed again. "What'cha doin'?"

Ranklechick put his finger to his lips to shush her, "Shhhh, Pietra. I'm trying to talk to Pumpernick. He's putting wonderful news in my head."

Pietra looked down at the holographic cat and said, "Riiiiight." She took the hint. "The *Ketchi*'s done, huh?"

"Yep!" Pumpernick smiled directly at Pietra and she replied with a demented tooth-filled grin. She wasn't at all startled by the idea of a talking cat. Most Ghouls didn't even care that Pumpernick lived on the Zoo because he didn't affect their lives in any direct fashion. Only Ranklechick's fellow En Ranklerot Ghouls ever gave Pumpernick any trouble. They often attempted to kidnap him for experiments. Pumpernick usually responded by jumping on their faces, clawing and biting at their eyes, and breaking their limbs with titanium pipes. He had very nimble fingers for a cat.

"So what're ya waitin' for?" Pumpernick asked.



“Let’s blow this cartoon.”

Ranklechick wasn’t really sure what the words meant, but he could guess. Pumpernick had such a strange way with language sometimes. It must have had something to do with the irregularities of his brain. Irregularities only Ranklechick knew about.

Pietra straightened her charcoal grey skirt and began looking around for something. “That’s silly,” she said, distracted. “The Nuns and Vicars are all about, getting ready for class. There’s no way you’ll be able to get past the Nunnery gate.”

“But I’ve got to!” Ranklechick cried, “I’ll just come apart if I have to shake hands. This sort of thing leads to dancing in pairs and the like! Last week was bad enough! We were learning how not to flop around on the floor in public. I was paired up with that Sen Spiritu, Pottelbomb! His horns are in their second year of growth and they won’t stop vibrating when he gets excited! He could have gouged both my eyes! He lost control whilst trying to calmly hold open an elevator door and dropped in a spasm. I could have used a good floor spasm myself but not with those head-knives of his flailing about.”

Pietra nodded sombrely. “I know. I heard Sister Toovibohnes punished him with a hug.”

Ranklechick went paler and gloomier at the memory, “At least it wasn’t a kiss on the cheek like she gave Blump. It was like watching her punch him with her lips. I barfed up my breakfast bangers right on the



spot.”

“Hey!” It was Pumpernick. They both looked down at his image. Ranklechick’s Reincarnica, Bobbi, too was glancing back and forth during the conversation.

“Are you two done yet?”

“Nope,” said Ranklechick, truthfully. “So, yeah. I almost broke out in a rash watching her perform that horrible hugging. And I know, I just know something’s going to go wrong during handshaking.”

Pietra started back towards the stairs, still distracted as she spoke. “Oh, it’s bound to. I had that lesson last month, and the En Frettin Fraught girl I was paired with got confused and tried to pull out my rib cage instead. Would have been the wrong kind of death, that. Not very glorious going out with no experiment involved.” She then whistled up the stairs, as if calling a dog. “Spaida! Will you get down here already?”

There came a rustling sound, and then something fuzzy and black came crawling down the stairs. With eight legs and two giant white eyes, it would have been somewhat of a cartoonish, football-sized spider, if it weren’t for the fact that it had two straps fastened to the top of its hairy head, making it something else entirely. Reincarnicas came in many shapes, and Pietra’s came in the form of a big hollow spider she used as a handbag. Its name was Spaida. Pietra had two Reincarnicas, in fact. The second hung about her neck like a collar, and this too was also very much a cartoon spider. Its name was Huf. Huf and Spaida:



they glanced at Ranklechick's Bobbi and each gave the other a friendly look. Of course, it was very peculiar that Pietra kept two Reincarnicas with her at all times. Most Twirlun Ai kept no Reincarnica at all. This Pietra was a most unusual Twirlun Ai, however . . .

"There! Do better to keep up with me please," she scolded Spaida, and then turned back to Ranklechick, "Now, what are we going to do to get you out of here, hmm?"

Ranklechick beamed. "You'll help me?"

"Of course!" Pietra half turned her back to him and stretched her black wings. "I need you to tighten the grafts on these grav wings you built me. They're starting to itch a bit."

"Hurrah!" cheered Pumpernick's image.

Ranklechick nodded. Her desire for repair seemed more reasonable than a selfless social calling. He relaxed again. "Oh, I can fix that for you once we get to my shop," he said. "The *Ketchi Ketchi* has a nice new shop, doesn't it, Pumpernick? Just like in my plans?"

"You bet!" said the cat.

"Oogaly-gee! But, how are you going to get me out of here?"

Pietra then grinned at him like a loon and held up her handbag, Spaida, shaking it all the while — and the handbag actually appeared worried.





Christmas: *An Olde World holiday that was designed to celebrate the birth of a man whose mother was a virgin and who himself may or may not have been his own immaterial father and was sent to Earth by his immaterial father and/or himself for the purpose of saving Humanity from himself and/or his immaterial father. Gifts were selflessly exchanged in recognition of this. This sounds far too sensible for our Ghoul tastes and was probably nowhere near as festive as our Kristmassive holiday — which celebrates the Kristmassive Project that killed the holidays of Olde World. Gifts are hoarded in recognition of this. As the song goes: “Give yourself a present to remind you you’re not dead! Wake a child to Greedgiddy with a knock upon their head! Hoot Patoop!”*

-The Hoarder’s Guide to Kristmassive Impedimenta

Chapter Two: **Christmas Ghosts for Cerebral Hauntings**

Spaida was quite expandable. Still by the time Ranklechick had finished stuffing himself into the handbag, it looked more like a backpack than a purse.

“Can we stop by the Confectionary on the way out? My appetite’s finally switched on,” Ranklechick asked from the bag. His wiry hair poked out the top and jiggled like a sea urchin in a wave pool.

Pietra peeked in at him. “No. Too risky.”

“But . . .”

“You’re only hungry because you’ve stopped