

*TEN*  
**GOOD TIMES FOR MYSTIFU**

*F*or a while the ‘good times’ promised by Snarlsgrrrrrr made it possible for the Mystifuians to conceal the truth from themselves.

After all, the drop in prices for liquor, drugs, and all heavily sugared foods was widely welcomed. Likewise, the addition of all kinds of new holidays to the calendar for the year—more spectacular parades, the thrilling oom pah pah of marching bands, the boost for business all around. Likewise, the erection of mighty statues and public structures proclaiming the glistening power and the adamantine destiny of the Ecstatic Moment, as the merger of Snarlsgrrrrrr and Mystifu was known.

But at last their plight was inescapable. Once there had been this village of such great promise, at the edge of the most majestic and beautiful of all seas, and at the foot of the most majestic and beautiful of all mountains.

Goodness knows they had considerably degraded it on their own. But this was as nothing compared to what gradually came to be under Snarlsgrrrr’s magnanimous rule. For steadily the sea filled farther and farther out from shore with the pollutants of the frenetic mining and manufacturing driven by the Snarlsgrrrrian drive for more, and more, and more wealth.

Slowly and steadily their sea became an oily, vile and evil-smelling black liquid surfaced with scum, out of which at night there crept onto the shore ever most horrifying and threatening mutant creatures.

Their mountain was similarly devastated. Up the slopes, higher and

higher, first marched Snarsgrrrrian ComConBots with axes and saws to clear cut the trees. Then they unleashed upon the mountain machines ingeniously designed to climb the rocks with suction cup feet so that every last scrap of vegetation might be plucked away to feed their lumbering, papermaking, plastics, and publishing industries. And up this slope—which was at first like the face of a child who had come down with chicken pox, and then like an old face despoiled by small pox or leprosy—there spread all the holes either dug by the mining industry in search of ever more scarce ores or drilled by the oil and gas industry in search of an ever more scarce source of fuel.

*Lacking the regulation of nature's protective green blanket upon* the mountain, as well as all that a sea turned from blue to black in color signified, soon there came whipping around the bare mountains winds of a hurricane force that regularly ravaged the village. And where once theirs had been a temperate climate with regular rainfall, now they lived amid the gyrations of climate change that impacted upon them like the regular pounding of a boxer with an unrelenting one-two punch.

First would come a period of drought so prolonged and desolating that water sold for \$50 a gallon. Then without even the warning of a single cloud suddenly the sky turned black and month after month they would be pounded by such wind-whipped heavy rains that one could only get from house to house by boat or by swimming. Then the drought would return. Then the rains would return, and so on and on.

And then, as if all this weren't bad enough, the sea began to rise as the great mass of glaciers elsewhere began to melt from the heat of the sun that beat down through the holes punched by pollution in the protective layer overhead. And as the sea rose they were forced to abandon the town lower down and try to clamber up and cling to the barren mountain side.

But worst of all, in the estimate of all who still sought comfort and some wan sense of purpose in the Code of Osanto, was the devastating human toll. For in hordes on every street corner were clustered the

homeless and the jobless displaced by the greedy drive by Snarlsgrrrr to replace expensive humans with cheap ConComBots. One could no longer go anywhere without hundreds of hollow eyes beseeching you, and hundreds of hands reaching out to you for any little bit of money, or food, or even a little evasive and, let's face it, guilty nod of some last shred of caring or commiseration.

"It's too bad," said Basil the Wondrous back home in the plush comforts of the Snarlsgrrrian Higher Ones. "We could be breeding revolution. But there's just no getting around the fact that with no costs except oil and occasional tuneups for ComConBots to do everything we need, food, clothing, housing, and all those other redline costs for humans just no longer makes any sense economically."

For a time the village museum continued to exhibit the old paintings of what the mountain, and the sea, and a happy people had once looked like. But the Mystifuians became so miserable they couldn't bear to look at them, as it only made it worse. So amid the sobbing of many children and the quiet weeping of many of their parents, the pictures of what once had existed in such glory were covered everywhere with sheets, as of a body that had died.

*It is hard to say where this might all have led had not the* mudslides begun. For with the rains had come the most incredible of mudslides, as the mountain literally began to fall apart. Down the slopes raged this great undulating brown mass that each time buried more and more of the village. And now up from the sea at night crept the Groakers.

This was the name they gave to this new kind of mutant sea creature that looked like a cross between a centipede and a scorpion. Up to 30 feet in length, their claws could slice through the door of any home that wasn't reinforced with steel and concrete. For once they had gobbled up the homeless forced to scurry out there in the open with little chance for escape, they bashed in doors, snatched up the people inside, and gobbled,

and chewed, and swallowed with many a grisly smacking of the lips, as might a squirrel nibble and savor tasty tidbits from a crushed nut

And though the legs of the Groakers were short there were so many of them they could outrun anything or anybody that dared move out at night.

It was at this juncture that fresh disaster brought salvation. For there came raging down the mountain a mud slide that buried the district in which all the power stations and television stations and publishers were located. And there came out of the sea Groakers so ferocious there was no way on earth that crews might dare to venture out to repair the power stations and everything else that had for centuries subjected the people of Mystifu to the informational overload that made it nearly impossible to think.

In the stillness one day, following word spread by a grapevine of smoke signals, there gathered in what was left of the Great Governing Chamber a large number of the remaining Mystifuians.

Each of them was bearing candles and such sandwiches as they were able to assemble so they might remain there the night, and they proceeded to explore the possibility of saving themselves.

At first the general feeling was that it was hopeless. At this juncture up stepped one among them who had learned the way of the Snarlsgrrrrrians through having been enslaved there before escaping.

"We must gather all the weapons we can find and go out into the world and seize another village not so afflicted," counseled the man known as Maxmillian the Wise, who bore the brand of Snarlsgrrrrrr on his rear end.

"Yes, yes!" the people cried and swiftly Maxmillian was elected to arrange the invasion.

But there were also present a few who had managed to find their way to Osanto over the years, as well as many more who had heard of Osanto and by candlelight had pondered its creed during the blackouts.

"Why not first try another way?" suggested one among them known as Maureen the Thoughtful.

At first only harsh laughter and catcalls greeted her, but gradually as she and others who were gathered about her spoke, the sentiment shifted. The upshot was that Maureen and a party of ten were authorized to sneak out and go over the valleys and the desert to the mountain of Osanto. Their mission was to bring back whatever they might find there that might save them.

There were those who said, "Nothing will come of it." And great was the sadness and feeling of hopelessness among many.

But there were also those who said, "Keep your spirits up. We're down so far now, there's no way left to go but up."

*And great was the hope among those who still secretly gathered during the blackouts to ponder the Code of Osanto.*