

**The Hunting of the Bubblenuff:**  
**A Fabian Vermeer Adventure**

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## Chapter 1 – A Squirrely Fellow

Fabian Vermeer worked late into the night and early into the morning, always alone. This had been his habit for as long as anyone could remember. And since no one was bothering to remember, save for Fabian, we will assume for the purposes of our tale that this is the way it had always been. He was a Fractonimbus Inquisitor of the god Solomn (“He of the Stern Cloud”), charged with identifying corruption, rooting out secrets, and expelling evil to the dark corners of the world.

More relevant to the tale at hand, Fabian was also a self-proclaimed “Cryptonaturalist”, which to his understanding of language, insofar as it went, meant that he was a seeker of creatures both mysterious and hidden. The word’s literal translation meant that he himself, the Naturalist, was the one who was hidden. If this was a definition that would be more appropriate, the irony was lost on the Fractonimbus Inquisitor.

Fabian’s present place of work was a log cabin deep in the woods of the Calanias Empire’s western frontier, far beyond the domain of the influential String Cities. The Forgotten Forest, whose old growth recesses had long since ceased to be a source of wonder. Its treasures now seemed ripe pickings to an aging nation looking for its next source of wealth and common purpose. Did the woods hold untamed dangers, or would it yield easily to a new wave of military expansion? And who would be qualified to make such a judgment?

Who indeed, thought Fabian. Who indeed?

Fabian turned the page of his journal and reviewed his sketch of the “Art-apuss”. The details had been drawn mainly from the Book of Raymoose and, more dubiously, The Fifth Book of Gascon. Detailing such unlikely creatures as the Copy Cats, the Whymera, and the Granny Wolf, Fabian had always believed Gascon V to be fabricated. First and foremost, it was a well-documented fact that Gascon was afflicted with a terrible allergic reaction to both the number five and peanuts. More importantly, it was penned during the Great Dusty Darkness of Year 362, when it is recorded that a piece of moon-cheese fell to earth and blotted out the sun. Those who endured this time allegedly turned to Very Sinful Touching under that shroud of night. Anything conceived during such a period- creative or otherwise- was suspect. Yet there was no other choice. Gascon V had possible details, and it was in details that secrets hid when they were not lingering in the dark corners of the world.

A fat raindrop landed on Fabian’s nose and he instinctively snapped the journal shut. He spotted a new leak in the ceiling, leaving him irked but not terribly surprised. The cabin had been constructed quickly and sloppily by the soldiers of nearby Fort Argus just five weeks earlier, by order of Commander Lozenge. This coming after Fabian publicly declared that he would not live with them in their den of iniquity. Fabian often suspected that the soldiers did not like him very much, and not simply because they told him so.

He rose quickly from his desk and found a spare pan to place under the leak. The room was a scene of calculated chaos, packed with pans, bowls, cups, and plates to cover

a dozen such watery fissures. Shelves were lined with empty bell jars and birdcages, as well as the skulls of extinct and possibly falsified animals. Stacks of paper piled high on the floor, towering leaves looming over obscure bestiaries and forgotten manuscripts. Everything had been annotated, copied, and recopied so many times that Fabian often had difficulty distinguishing between his own property and that which had been loaned by (or taken from) others. But it was all Fabian's at this point. Fabian's by diffusion. Fabian's by default. It was Fabian's because few really cared for Cryptonaturalism anymore (as Fabian defined it). Fabian considered himself the reigning head of an academic field that lacked a formal body.

He looked out at the aquatic bear traps scattered before him. Floor space was sparse. Any misstep could send water spilling out of its receptacle and onto the precious books. Slow movements were critical. As Fabian assessed his plight, cold rain fell on the top of his head and the back of his neck, generally acknowledged to be the worst place for cold rain to find itself on one's person. Fabian bound to his feet, still clenching the journal, and began an uncertain hopscotch to the cupboard. The wind picked up, the cabin creaked, and it took him a moment to realize that someone was knocking at the door.

He stopped midstep, balanced awkwardly on his toe and heel. He was expecting no visitors. None at all. Who would make the trip in such inhospitable conditions? The Civic Librarians would not journey this far for fine retrieval, and his taxes were in order. Or perhaps it was an agent of something far darker, something he had long suspected lurked in these woods. Something he believed was entwined with his destiny.

Fabian looked to the display stand by the door, where his full plate mail armor was assembled. Next to it was his mighty war hammer. Both bore the Stern Cloud symbol of Solomn, and both had been blessed to defend Fabian against menace. But it would take several minutes to equip them, unaided.

"Hello? Mister Fabian, I got a letter for ya." The voice was high-pitched and young. It squeaked like a baby bird captured by clumsy hands. "S'cold..." the voice said, sadly.

"Just a minute, please." Fabian yelled.

"'kay!"

Perhaps just the hammer, then. Yes, he would get the hammer and check to see who it was. If it was truly dangerous, he would close the door, lock it, and then put on the armor. But, he would try the hammer first.

There was a snuffle from outside. "I'm just gonna slip it under the door if you don't wanna come out. 'Cause it's real cold. 'kay?"

Fabian groaned. This was fruitless. "One moment!" he yelled. "I'm coming." He stepped carefully to the door, opened it slightly, and peered out.

Standing on the doorstep was the tallest girl Fabian had ever seen. She stood well over six feet, he guessed, and could be no more than sixteen or seventeen years old. Her limbs were too long for her frame, and her stooped stance suggested that she felt awkward in her own skin. She wore a black poncho over an ill-fitting enlisted soldier's uniform for the Imperial Army. A massive claymore sword was strapped to her back. Fabian met her gaze with equal parts curiosity and suspicion. She had large, honest blue eyes and a broad flat nose that was red from the sniffles. The wet poncho could barely contain the bushy brown hair underneath it. Conscious of her youth, she was trying to

conduct herself in a forthright and professional manner. But she was far too tall for Fabian's comfort.

The girl reached into her coat and produced a scroll. "Commander wanted me to give this to you, sir."

Fabian looked at the scroll, then at the shivering girl, "Eh... Won't you come in?" Then quickly added, "Just for a moment."

She nodded and came inside. Fabian closed the door behind her. She stood awkwardly in wait. Her size and lack of coordination made her unable to follow in Fabian's careful footsteps.

Fabian observed this. "Ah, let me... clear some space." He stepped lightly over the papers and cleared a small spot for her in the far corner of the room. "There you go". The girl walked clumsily to the corner and stood there, dripping rainwater. She cast furtive glances about at the cabin's curiosities. As Fabian was unaccustomed to visitors, and she was unaccustomed to Fabian, an awkward silence descended.

Fabian wondered what was supposed to happen next. "If I had a free chair..." he began, but didn't know where he was going with this. Nearly every fiber of his body wanted her gone, to return to his work in silence. And yet a small part of him, his sense of professionalism perhaps, was not entirely opposed to company. Weren't Inquisitors supposed to know how to penetrate the secrets of the soul? Could this be a chance to practice his craft?

Fabian straightened his shoulders and turned to regard her, a new strength in his eyes. Her eyes widened and she straightened up, sensing a change in the mood.

"And what was your name?"

"Private Wilhelmina Turkle, sir."

"A Private, you say? In the Calanias Exploratory Army? And since when did they start allowing girls?"

Wilhelmina shrugged.

"You are a girl, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

Fabian looked her up and down. "And your age. Why, I would guess that in Imperial reckoning you are no more than... 17?"

Wilhelmina nodded.

Fabian folded his hands behind his back and began to pace. "And in what year... oh, Gods!" Fabian glanced over to his desk and saw that a large pool of water had collected on its surface, soaking several papers. He never had quite gotten around to finding that bucket.

"Quick!" he cried, gesturing to Wilhelmina. "The helmet! The helmet!"

Surprised by his sudden urgency, she spotted the suit of armor standing next to her and snatched the helmet off the top. She tossed it towards Fabian's outstretched arms and watched as he used it to catch the rainwater. Fabian then frantically scooped papers off the desk and wiped its surface with a towel.

"Are you okay," asked Wilhelmina.

Fabian mumbled something as he shook the items dry. He fastened the wet papers to a clothesline running across the room. Wilhelmina stood in wait, expecting the interrogation to continue. It did not, as Fabian was anxiously assessing the water damage. An awkward silence fell over the room.

“Um...” asked Wilhelmina with uncertainty, “how old are you, sir?”

“Mm?” Fabian wiped up the desk with a dish towel. “Old enough.”

“You don’t seem so old,” replied Wilhelmina.

It was true. For all of his pomposity, Fabian was actually quite a young man. Slim of body and fair of face, he looked even more youthful than his years. It was a failing he had always struggled against. Fabian’s head perked up from the desk and his eyes fell on Wilhelmina once more. Was this a challenge?

“I am a full score,” said Fabian, bringing his authority to bear.

“How old’s that?”

“Twenty.”

“Oh.”

“But I am well ahead of my physical years in terms of intelligence.”

“kay.”

“Even the Stratus Redeemer of my Church said so. Do you think they make every common boy an Inquisitor of Solomn?”

“No... I was just askin’. Cause people at the fort sometimes talk about Fabian Vermeer being a hermit, so I thought you were older. You know, like an old hermit... Or somethin’...”

“You would be well-advised, child, to not listen to people all the time. All true wisdom lies in scripture. And in books.”

“What about books written by people?”

“The people who say nasty things about me don’t write books.” Fabian crossed to the stove. “Would you like some tea?”

Still shivering, she nodded.

A teapot was still simmering over coals he had set earlier. “Please,” he said as he retrieved a spare cup, “You may call me Fabian. Or Inquisitor if you must.”

“Ok... Fabian.”

“Actually, Inquisitor is better.”

“Inquisitor... Fabian.”

As he poured the tea, a small flying squirrel leaped from the rafters and sailed onto Fabian’s back. Wilhelmina jumped to her feet, fumbling for the sword on her back. “Look out!” she screamed.

The little squirrel curled around Fabian’s neck like a scarf, then closed its eyes.

“Mmm? Oh no, don’t worry.”

“Sorry, sir. I thought it was gonna getcha.”

“This is Dashiell. The flying squirrel is my spirit animal, you know. Where ever I go, they seek me out. Dashiell did so shortly after I arrived in these woods.”

“What’s a spirit animal?”

“An animal of the natural world that embodies one’s essence. Take the flying squirrel, for example. Do you know why I identify with this creature so strongly?”

“Cause you’re squirrely?”

Fabian sighed. “No. Because the flying squirrel is a noble creature, an equal to the Carpenter Ant or the Sugar Moose.”

“Sugar Moose?” asked Wilhelmina.

Fabian sighed again, deeper and more dramatically this time. “So much to learn. The flying squirrel is the defender of the forest. In olden times, the prophet

Barlowethayne raised a Grand Army of the Forest, and joined the squirrels with the Judgment Badgers and Pom-cupines to banish evil to the dark corners of the world. This was before the Badger Schism, of course. Though small and overlooked, the squirrels provided much-needed air support for the onslaught. The flying squirrels retain their dignity and honor regardless of circumstance.”

“So, it’s ‘cause you’re short?”

Fabian’s lip twitched and his tea cup rattled in his hand. “I am of normal height!” A beat passed. He composed him and handed her the cup. “Please. Enjoy your tea.”

“Thank you, sir. Can I sit down, if that’s ok?”

Fabian nodded and she sat down and leaned against the wall of the cabin, her knees drawn to her chest as she blew on the tea. Fabian observed that her movements, likely due to age, were not unlike like the proverbial Puppy of St. Atticus, with feet too large for its body. That particular puppy had drowned.

“How is the tea, child?”

“S’good. Thanks.”

Fabian opened the scroll and read it over. He scowled. Commander Lozengé was demanding that he return to the Outpost immediately. He didn’t need three guesses to learn him what this was about. He had been here a month and still hadn’t ventured into the woods to begin his field research. They never understood that these things take time...

“Inquisitor Fabian?”

“Mm?”

“Do I have a spirit animal?”

Fabian looked up, “Why, of course you do! It would take some time to determine what it is...” He shook the scroll in his hand, “The letter says I’m to come back with you, ah, ‘immediately’. Was the Commander more specific than that? Immediately, as in ‘now’? Or, perhaps tomorrow?”

Wilhelmina shrugged. “Whatever the note says.”

The anxiousness had begun to build in his chest. For Fabian Vermeer was indeed a squirrely fellow and was most suspicious of change.

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*The Art-apuss! Deep dark squid of the way-down, neverbelow. Neverbelow, where the Book of Raymoose states that even mighty Solomn, God of Justice and the Clouds, did once receive Swimmer’s Ear. It is here, in this terrible place that these tormented, solitary lurkers dwell, forever hunting cryptic crafts and dubious dreams.*

*Sir Legos of Blockley boasted at the Feast of Innumerable Hams, “The great tentacled beast seized me in its great beastly tentacles. My boat was shaken, and my model boat within was broken. It pulled me into the dark below! It provided an breathing tube and wetsuit, as well as a gift card voucher and taffy as payment. And then it pulled me into the neverbelow!”*

*Like so many other victims of this audacious Octopoda, Sir Legos was taken to the creature’s studio in the belly of a sunken galleon. There he was made to bear witness to the Art-apuss’ creative works. And what works they were! Ink-stained canvases of uncertain shapes. So-called “Found Art” constructs of discarded bottles*

*and street signs. A garden of multi-colored seaweed and goldfish, coral and starfish.*

*Such sin! Such decadence! What of the lost art of portraiture?*

*Discontented with its efforts, the Art-apuss demanded that Sir Legos critique his work. But what could be said? Who among us could speak the truth of our hearts when confronted with that fearful seaweed beret, wicked inky moustache, and terrible paint-blackened tentacles? Each appendage more brush-bearing than the last!*

*A pat answer, a shallow compliment, and the deep-sea dabbler was contented. Sir Legos was released and the Art-puss presented his work to the strange and awful coffee houses you have read about, where the Lampreys read their derivative poetry and the Angler Fish sing their amateur songs. And yet even they look down upon the Art-apuss.*

*And what reward for Sir Legos of Blockley?*

*The taffy was saltwater! Basest of taffies!*

*Amen,*

*~ Fabian Vermeer, Fractonimbus Inquisitor of Solomn ~*