

Hell-come Home

(An Excerpt from “A Memoir Of Totally True Things That Happened For Real You Guys”
[AMOTTTTHFRYG])

“The end game is so close that I can taste it. Soon everything will be different.”

“And in light of our unexpected difficulties, I propose our first target will be the floating monstrosity that is Hover-Jersey. The ascension of that... engineering abomination... set us back so many months of calculation! They laugh at us from atop their-”

“Settle down, soldier. We are all aware of New Jersey’s impediment to our cause. And I agree with your proposal that it be the first location to experience the sheer power of the Monocle. What better place to be incinerated by the concentrated force of our glorious sun than those traitorous, devil-worshipping secessionists?”

“So how long until we can initiate the strike?”

“Well, we have to wait for the satellite to get into place. And of course we need the official go-ahead from His Optimization, the Robo-Pope. Hail President Robo-Pope!”

“Hail President Robo-Pope.”

“I [whirr] will make my judgement regarding Hover-Jersey after the [click] ceremonial coconut cream pie has been consumed. [whirr] We must adhere to tradition, [click] especially in these dark times. Bring it to me!”

“Waiter, get over here! What’s the matter with you?”

“This pie? Right here?” I asked, stepping out of the shadows with the steaming lump of dough and custard in my hand.

“Yes!” the Robo-Pope demanded. “Let me have it!”

I hurled the pie over the table. The assembly of military personnel watched in horror as it majestically soared across the room and collided with the chrome mug of the Robo-Pope. His hat fell off and cream got all over his presidential pin. He fell backwards in his chair.

“Heresy!”

“Kill that guy!”

I pulled off my robe disguise and my sword unfolded in my hand. The nearest guards came at me with their batons. I threw my robe at them, and as they fumbled around blindly, I was able to quickly stab them both. My blade, in Assert mode, glided through their flesh without leaving a cut, but they felt the pain as if the cut was real. It was enough to render them incapacitated.

The priest summoned a baton of light from his fingertips and lunged at me. The weapon sparked as I knocked it aside with my blade. I flicked my sword into Hurt mode and lopped his arm off.

Two more guards came at me from both sides. I deflected the strikes of one with my buckler while parrying the other one's baton with my sword. They grew frustrated, and both prepared to rush me. I jumped back and they ran into each other, their hard plastic armor smacking together to make a series of clicking sounds. I grabbed them each by the back of the neck and clunked their heads together, hard. They collapsed into crumpled heaps.

The general pulled an assault rifle from under the table and opened fire. I ducked down and held up my shield arm, and my buckler expanded into a full tower shield in time to deflect the onslaught of bullets. Rather than move around and try to shoot me from another angle, he simply stood there and emptied his entire clip. From behind cover, I drew my revolver loaded a

nonlethal rubber round into it. The general stopped to reload. I lowered my shield and shot him in the face.

I picked up the briefcase of secret plans off the table. I looked back at the men who were writhing around in pain, feeling kind of bad for the guy whose arm I cut off but knowing the finest medical care Vatican-America had to offer would treat him afterwards. I turned towards the window.

The Robo-Pope wiped the custard off his face and glared at me with his ultraviolet eye. “Wait!” I glanced back at him. He put his hat back on and studied me. “You are an immensely [click] capable agent, your [whirr] talent is wasted in allegiance with whoever sent you. [beep] Join me, and be a part of something that [whirr] matters! We’re the deliverance that the world needs!”

I put my gun away. “That’s kind of a hefty decision. So I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll let your gods decide.” I reached into the satchel on my belt and pulled out an eight-sided die.

“You carry polyhedral dice around with you?”

I ignored his comment. “Call evens or odds. If you win, then I’ll defect. If I win, I get the heck out of here and take these secret plans with me.”

“Hmmm.” I heard processors inside the man’s metal head consider my proposal. “The [click] Holy Binary will determine your fate. In the name of the Zero and the One, cast your die. [amen.exe has stopped working]”

I threw the die. The Robo-Pope watched it tumble across the table, a thin beam of light emitting from his eye and scanning it as it flew. He declared “Even!” The die clattered to a halt, and he leaned forward to inspect the number. “I-” he began. He wasn’t able to finish, as the die exploded in an electromagnetic pulse. Arcs of electricity shot through the Robo-Pope’s body,

frying his circuitry. He shuddered and twitched and slumped down in his chair. With his last bit of energy, he managed to ask, "Who- who are you?"

I ignited my jetpack and kicked the window open. I turned to him and tipped my hat. "The name's Felix. And don't let me ever catch any of you guys in Jersey."

I let up on my jetpack's ignition as I approached the docking pod of Hover-Jersey. The rusty metallic doors slid open and I set down onto the bright yellow landing pad. The Magi-Cops immediately swarmed around me and began analyzing me with their chunks of Scan Quartz. While I admired their stylish haz-mat robes, I found them profoundly annoying. Always in your face, looking for signs of supernatural toxins, and the crystals tended to make whatever they scanned tremendously nauseous.

One of them put his crystal away, and the others followed suit. "You're clean," he said. "Show me your papers."

"Ugh," I caught myself sighing. I took off my top hat and reached into its four dimensional innards. Digging around the extradimensional space, I felt my fingers brush against the familiar plastic of my identification badge. I pulled it out and held it up to the Magi-Cop's face.

He stared for a moment, and then, "Do you have any aliases by which-"

Having heard this a thousand times, I recited what he wanted to hear. "StacheHeart, a bearer of the Stached Lotus; Mikey "Crime-Committer" Formaggio, an alias I assumed to go undercover and infiltrate the Multiethnic Mafia; F'unck Almighty, last of the F'unck people and granted the title of Almighty by default; The Jaywalker, he who has transcended the designated crosswalks of space and time; The Wanderin' Czar, the czar who wanders."

“Thank you. Welcome back to Hover-Jersey, sir.”

The other door opened and I stepped through. I stuffed my ID back into my hat and set my hat back onto my head. The cool breeze of Hover-Jersey’s artificial climate wafted my tailcoat as I emerged from the docking station. I was home.

I decided to walk. My jetpack was low on fuel and I had just returned from a four hour flight from the mysterious pyramid that appeared in upstate New York, so feeling solid ground beneath my feet again was nice. The sun was setting and the suburbs were winding down. My eyeglasses HUD informed me that it was going to rain tomorrow.

I walked up the stairs to my treehouse and was greeted by my beloved bulldog. “Loaf! What’s shakin’?”

“Woof!” he replied. “Bark!”

I knelt down and Loaf waddled over. His cybernetic eye focused directly on the center of my face, while his organic eye wandered towards the squirrel visible just outside the door. He licked my face with his sloppy bulldog tongue and made excited snorting sounds.

Loaf rolled over as I rubbed his belly. I stood up, leaving him writhing around like a doofus, and headed to the kitchen. A mail cube was waiting for me.

“Good boy, you got the mail.”

“Bark.” Loaf trotted after me.

I took off my hat and pulled out the spoils of my trip. Several briefcases of sensitive information,
a crystal emanating a mysterious hum, a key that didn’t quite exist in Euclidean space, and some legendary and/or haunted swords.

“Woof!”

“I’ll sort them later. They’re probably fine on the table for now.” I picked up the cube. It was from the governor. I sighed and pressed in the cube’s side with my thumb, and the top of it slid open. The holographic image of the governor began to form. The blob of blurry light consolidated into the familiar figure.

“Felix. If you return by the time of the Ascension Festival, I wish to enlist your help for the ceremony. See me at once.”

The Ascension Festival was in two hours. I didn’t really feel like doing anything that night, as cool as I thought the governor was. I was exhausted.

“For your efforts, I will pay you 200 gold diabloons and buy you some funnel cake at the festival.”

I was overcome with an invigorating second wind. After a hastily-assembled mango smoothie, I refueled my jetpack and set out for the governor’s mansion.

“Identify yourself or we will open fire.”

“Shut up, it’s Felix.” I landed in front of the governor’s mansion and the Magi-Cops put away their gun-wands.

“You haven’t been here in a while. Running low on money for fake videogame hats?”

I ignored his sass. “How’s the governor?”

“On edge about the anniversary. He figured you weren’t going to make it.” The Magi-Cop put his hand against the runestone scanner device, and the doors of the opulent mansion flipped open. No matter how often I’d been here, I always found myself startled at how dark it was inside. It was like wading through tar. A few beacons of orange candlelight poked through in

a few spots. My eyeglasses automatically adjusted to the grainy green of night-vision, which did nothing to the heavy darkness clogging the manor's foyer. I manually switched it off.

A hefty lump of shadow fell from the ceiling and unfolded into the shape of the governor of Hover-Jersey. Two hooved feet clattered against the marble floor as he stood up. He reached out his clawed hand and pulled a chain, turning on a small desk lamp that chased some of the darkness away. The sudden light illuminated the governor's wings, and I could see the veins running through the flaps of skin hanging from his arms. He craned his antlered head towards me and his dead white eyes peered beyond my glasses, beyond my eyes, and into my brain.

"Please, sit," he said in a deep, mildly raspy voice.

I shrugged and sat down on the nearest sofa. The governor stood over me, his hefty, forked tail slowly wagging back and forth. "Was your escapade fruitful?"

I helped myself to the after-dinner mints in a nearby bowl. "The pyramid just had a couple of cursed swords in it. Oh, and I found secret plans by the Vatican-American Conglomerate to nuke Hover-Jersey or something. I took the intelligence briefcase and pied the Robo-Pope in the face."

"I feared tensions between Hover-Jersey and the VAC would only grow as the anniversary of our launch approached. That is why I called for your assistance. The VAC will make an attempt on my life during the Ascension Festival." The governor began pacing back and forth.

"Probably," I replied. I stuck my finger in my mouth and dug out the bit of mint that had lodged themselves between my teeth.

"No, definitely. My seers have peeled back the shrinkwrap that constrains reality and grasped at what strands of the future that they could. A specialized assassin known as Agent 404

has accepted a contract to do whatever it takes to kill me before midnight tonight. We believe it will be during my appearance at tonight's ceremony."

"Can you even kill the Jersey Devil?" I asked. I had always figured he was immortal or something.

"Many have tried," he replied, a glint appearing in his eye as he said so. "And failed. But this man was hired by the wealthiest country-corporation the world has ever known. He won't be some random cryptozoologist or plucky young protagonist looking to make a name for himself. Agent 404's history is murky and incomprehensible, but from what we gathered, he... or possibly 'it'... is efficient, resourceful, and ruthless. I don't want to take the chance."

Governor Jersey Devil the First walked over to the window and watched the last bit of the sun sink into the horizon. He went on. "I have a sizeable number of Magi-Cops assigned to the Festival, and in addition, have hired a force of gruff mercenaries who deep down have hearts of gold and truly care about one another. But I would feel safer if you lent me your blade."

"You betcha," I said.

The Ascension Festival could be smelled from miles away. I think it broke the world record for the largest amount of zeppole produced in one night. People had traveled from all over the nation-state for the festival, the first of its kind. The glow of the Gravity-Spite jets created a torrent of colors along the horizon, even at night.

I landed on the edge of the festival grounds and walked through the wooden gate mostly out of nostalgia. I could have probably landed right in the middle of it without a problem but there's something about going through the cramped front gates and having your hand stamped.

After morbidly failing a balloon-popping game, I went backstage of the big ceremonial area in the center of the carnival grounds. The governor was doing that thing where his eyes were closed and runic symbols of energy floated around his face as he chanted in an ancient, lost language.

“Uh. What’s shakin’, Devil?” I knocked on the wooden support beam holding up the stage.

He continued whispering for a few more moments. The symbols faded, and he opened one eye to look at me. “The Um-field is turbulent. That does not bode well. But we must press on. The mercenaries are patrolling the perimeter, and I will have Magi-Cops on stage with me. I need you to mill about the audience, ready to go wherever this 404 may appear.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

“Prepare yourself, and head out into the crowd. I will be making my way to the stage now.” The Jersey Devil extended his arms and flapped his wings, a foul stink wafting through the room as he did so. His body was dragged upwards with each flap, and I guess you could call it flying, but it had none of the grace displayed by other things that could fly.

I adjusted my hat and coat, made sure my sword (Rad-Blade), shield (Cool-Shield), revolver (the Shenani-Gun), and satchel of dice (Satchel O’ Dice) were securely fastened. I probably mentioned them by name before at some point in this memoir but I just like saying their names. I pushed my glasses up my nose, and twirled the edges of my mustache a bit.

“Showtime.”

“Citizens of New Jersey. Occupants of the majestic Hover-Jersey.”

I wormed into the crowd as the governor began his speech.

“One year ago today, we took our stand against the techno-theocracy that our former home had become. We seceded, politically and physically, from a nation whose rule we deemed unjust. Countless hours of toil resulted in the construction of the Gravity-Spite devices that allowed us to tear ourselves free of the earth, and free of the chains of the President Robo-Pope.”

The people hung onto his words, possibly because when he spoke it felt more like he implanted the memory of what he just said into your mind rather than going through the eardrum process. I casually looked around the crowd with my hands in my pockets. Despite my jetpack and weapons hanging off my person, everyone’s attention was occupied by the Jersey Devil giving his political speech.

“They said we would not survive. That we could not be a sovereign state. Or that the logistics of making an entire state take off and float could not possibly be feasible. But we are still here today, a year later, celebrating our independence. We are a beacon in the sky to neighboring states, showing them that they do not have to put up with the Robo-Pope’s madness, either. We are a symbol of freedom and the power of technology. We are-”

A crack rung out as a gunshot struck the Jersey Devil in the chest. He craned his neck down and examined the bullet that had been crushed against his scales of hardened fur. As he plucked it out of his body with his claws, the nearby Magi-Cops pointed in the direction from which the shot came: the ferris wheel.

The crowd erupted into panic. I ignited my jetpack and hurtled upwards. Having suddenly become a bright, obvious target for whoever the sniper was, I held out my buckler in front of me to deflect any shots he might have attempted. Magi-Cops converged on the ferris wheel from the ground. I headed for the topmost carriage.

It was empty. I moved on to the next one, going clockwise, and found it empty as well. The third one was decidedly occupied. However, instead of some super assassin, it was a cheap rifle rigged to a bizarre mechanism (labelled "Aim Bot") by way of copious amounts of duct tape. Before I could examine the machine further, a big display of numbers counting down caught my attention.

"Crap."

The ferris wheel carriage exploded. My shield absorbed enough of the force so that I wasn't rendered a thick pudding of human remains, but it still knocked me into a disorienting tailspin. My surroundings were a blur of color, dominated by the orange of the ensuing fire. My jetpack stabilized after a few moments. I just hovered there for a bit so my senses could stabilize as well.

I looked down at the stage. The Jersey Devil watched the ferris wheel burn. A couple of Magi-Cops had stayed behind with him while the others investigated. A distortion in the air caught my attention. Right behind the governor, a humanoid figure slowly materialized. It was hard to look directly at him; the radiation emanating from his body forced my focus away from him. He was carrying a yellow longsword, dripping with some kind of gold liquid.

I turned in midair and hurtled towards the stage. The guy raised the sword, and the seemingly oblivious governor whacked him aside with his hefty tail. The Jersey Devil and the Magi-Cops faced the crumpled heap, who quickly got to his feet. Then, he disappeared, quickly blinking out of existence.

I descended onto the stage. "The ferris wheel was a distraction."

"I know. 404 is here." The Jersey Devil scanned the stage, clenching his claws and snarling a bit.

“I can’t find him, sir!” a Magi-Cop shouted. A moment later, a huge gash appeared in his torso. The other Magi-Cop fired his gun-wand and the ensuing orange flare detonated upon contact with his wounded comrade. The flickering human shape of 404 stumbled over and then went invisible once more.

“He had some gaudy sword,” I told the governor.

“No doubt some enchanted blade he believes capable of taking my life.”

The fallen Magi-Cop’s wound began spewing a bright yellow sludge. The substance wrapped around the man’s writhing body and totally encased it. The other Magi-Cop knelt down beside him and tried to wipe the goo away. The goo seemed to go away by its own volition, and the man beneath had been converted into a petrified statue.

“That’s Cyber-Vatican technology,” the Jersey Devil said. “And-”

404 popped back into my peripheral vision. The Jersey Devil knocked me aside in time to prevent my imminent decapitation. I adjusted my hat and then drew my blade. I twirled it around in my hand as the metal snapped into place, taking the shape of a longsword. I clenched my left fist and the buckler expanded into a modest shield.

“Alright, chump, shall we-”

404 was not in the mood for my inane banter. He vanished.

“Oh, come on!” I clicked my glasses and the thermal vision booted up. 404’s magic blade had been spewing heat everywhere. It was a mess of indistinguishable red and orange. So much for that. Upon deactivating the thermal function, I was met with the sight of 404 swinging his sword at me. I brought my blade up to deflect it. Contact with his weapon sent a deep, nauseating heat through my body that made me shudder. I successfully parried his attack but was unable to follow up, instead stumbling back with the sudden dizziness. He lunged at me and I held up my

sword in time to nudge his stab a millimeter away from my head. I could feel the heat of it on my cheek.

The Jersey Devil leapt forward. 404 disappeared, but a moment later, the Jersey Devil held up his open hand. He squeezed, and red streams of blood appeared from thin air. 404 flickered back into visibility and slashed the governor across the face. The Jersey Devil lost his grip, but spewed a bright green cloud of acid from his mouth that made 404's colorful, chainmail-like armor sizzle and smoke.

The flesh around the wound on the governor's face began to harden and crack. His head twitched, and he stepped back a few times. Meanwhile, 404 was patting out the fire that had begun on his chest. He noticed me watching him, and cloaked. Figuring he would go for the governor, I made my way to the disoriented Jersey Devil and waited. The smoke and sparks had faded, and 404 was once again completely invisible.

404 uncloaked... near the spot in which I was standing before coming to guard the governor. He looked around for a few moments before noticing I had relocated. He disappeared again.

I glanced at the Jersey Devil. He had seen it too.

"He thought I was still there," I said.

"Because he cannot see while he's cloaked," the governor replied.

Of course. Light passing through him meant his eyes weren't able to pick any of it up. He was completely blind while invisible.

The Jersey Devil flapped his wings, and made an arc across the stage. I followed with my jetpack. As we landed, 404 reappeared where we had been. Despite the weird armor covering his face, I could sense an expression of frustration. He vanished.

The Jersey Devil flew up and into the rafters of the stage. I took a few steps forward and stuck my foot out onto the line that I predicted would be 404's path. Sure enough, I felt a sudden jerk as this jerk tripped over my foot. The planks of the stage rattled where he collapsed. I jetpacked up a few feet, and then brought my elbow down onto where I was really, really hoping 404 would be. Fortunately for my elbow's structural integrity, I smashed into 404's semi-hard spinal column instead of the stage's really hard floor. 404's cloaking device fizzled and I stood up to the sight of a man in great pain trying to get to his feet.

Magi-Cops stormed the stage and put up a cube of energy around 404. When he noticed this, he must have decided that getting up wasn't worth the pain and effort. He slumped back down into a heap.

I took my glasses off and wiped the lenses with my jacket. They weren't dirty or smudged, I just did it when I was anxious and not sure what else to do. The Jersey Devil landed beside me.

"Place him under arrest," he ordered. The Magi-Cops converged, and their barrier shrunk around its victim, until it was a human-shaped coating of energy. They lifted 404 up with quivering beams from the ends of their gun-wands, and carried him off stage.

The Jersey Devil turned to me. "Fine work, Felix. You have great potential. I hope life in Hover-Jersey helps you realize the torrent of power hidden behind your shell of flesh, because the nexus of diverging timelines may rest on your shoulders, and great catastrophe--"

"Can you buy me funnel cake now?"

The Jersey Devil sighed, a hint of green acidic mist seeping from his nostrils. "Fine."