

The Turnip Keepers
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Chapter 2

The first rays of the dawn filtered through the small cell's barred window, waking Karri from her fitful sleep she'd had on the second night of her imprisonment. She'd suffered from strange dreams all night. Several times the dreams had jerked her out of her sleep, heart racing and face dripping sweat in spite of the chill of the night. However, the details of these dreams eluded her, cover by a dismal fog her memory could not penetrate.

Karri yawned and got up off the cold dirt floor, her dirty auburn hair falling around her face. She ran her hand through her hair and yanked out a clump of dirt, a process that brought tears to her eyes. Sighing, she craned her head upward and looked out the window. There was nothing to see but the sky; the cell was underground and the window embedded in its roof.

Karri stretched her muscles and then began pacing back and forth along the length of the cell. She turned around frequently, as the cell was only eight feet long and five feet wide. A bucket of water sat in one corner, and a chamber pot in the other.

Tomorrow was the day of the Hamster Apocalypse. It was also the day Karri intended to put her escape plan into motion. Not that it was much of a plan, as it relied entirely on factors Karri had little to no control over: the Turnip Keepers failing to produce a Hamster Apocalypse, the peasants revolting as they realized that they'd been lied to and their turnips stolen, then storming the fortress and freeing all the prisoners in the dungeon.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew Karri's attention. Two Turnip Keepers walked towards her cell, dragging an unconscious man behind them. One of them unlocked the padlock on Karri's cell and slid the door open. Karri dashed out the opening and squeezed between the two men.

"Hey! You were supposed to stay in there!" exclaimed one of the Turnip Keepers. He dropped the prisoner and dashed after Karri.

Karri raced down the hallway. She dashed around a corner and ran past several cells, most of them empty, before her progress was abruptly halted as she smacked into a muscular man wearing a business suit and a pink tie. Karri stumbled backward, her eyes suddenly widening in fear. The man with the pink tie was a dreadful legend among those who lived under the rule of the Turnip Keepers. No sighting of him had ever been confirmed, but he was said to be the unseen force behind the Turnip Keepers' rise to power, an extremely skilled assassin who had killed the land's previous rulers. The rumors said that he answered to only one person, his master, the supreme ruler of the Turnip Keepers.

Karri still couldn't remember the supreme ruler's name, although she thought it was from some sort of children's television show. Weird. But that wasn't what she needed to focus on right now. The man with the pink tie was after her, and she needed to escape. She turned to dash down the hallway in the opposite direction.

Too late. The man with the pink tie grabbed her shoulder in a powerful grip and spun her around.

“She escaped from the cell when we tried to put that new prisoner in, sir!” said the Turnip Keeper who had been pursuing Karri. He wrung his hands nervously.

The man with the pink tie pinned Karri against the wall. He turned his head towards the Turnip Keeper. “Cell Number 4, correct?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Hmmm.” The man with the pink tie looked at Karri and leaned in closely. He murmured in a low voice, saying “Have you been having any...*strange* experiences lately? Visions, you might say, of events that could happen in the future?”

“Um,” said Karri. The question was totally unexpected. Her dreams the last two nights had definitely been peculiar, but she couldn’t even remember details and was certain that they hadn’t been visions of the future. The man with the pink tie had been in them, though; that detail had leapt to the front of her mind when she saw him.

“Think carefully about your answer,” said the man, his dark eyes boring into Karri. “It may affect the fate of the world in ways you could never fathom.”

Ok. This was getting really weird and creepy. Karri snorted and pushed against the man. “The strangest thing that’s happened to me lately has been getting my turnips stolen to prepare for an apocalypse that’s never going to occur.”

The man chuckled. “You still think that the Hamster Apocalypse is complete fiction? Seriously, Karri, I expected better from a woman of your intelligence. Oh well, some more time locked up in that cell should enable you to think clearly.”

The man shoved Karri towards the Turnip Keeper, who grabbed her arms and marched her back towards the cell.

“Make sure she has plenty of water,” the man with the pink tie said. “Actually, wait, I’ll just do it myself.”

He walked into the cell and tipped over the water bucket, causing the water soaked into the dirt floor. The man picked up the bucket and walked away with it, whistling a cheery tune in seeming defiance of his dreadful reputation.

The two Turnip Keepers collectively breathed a sigh of relief as the assassin departed, then shoved Karri into the cell. Karri stumbled over the unconscious body and fell against the hard stone wall. The guards double-checked the padlock securing the cell before walking away.

Karri dusted herself off and got off the unconscious man. At least that was an exciting way to start off what would certainly be a dull day in the dungeon. Plus, when that new prisoner woke up, she’d have someone to talk to. She looked down at her companion’s face. He was a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, with curly brown hair and a bruised face. Evidently, like Karri, he had fought against the Turnip Keepers when they captured him. Even with the disfiguring bruises, his face looked strangely familiar. Karri furrowed her brow, trying to recall where she’d seen him before. He wasn’t one of the nearby turnip farmers or villagers.

A chill crept into Karri’s heart, and she gasped. She remembered where she’d seen this person before. He’d been a prominent figure in her dreams last night — Karri remembered that he had fought the man with the pink tie. She’d dreamed of this man the past two nights.

Before she even knew he existed.

“Ughhh,” said Ted, forcing his eyelids open. His head pounded and he couldn’t focus. He was laying on stone floor in a dungeon cell. A woman with dark red hair cascading around her face looked down at him.

“You’re awake,” said the woman. She reached down and pulled Ted unsteadily to his feet. “Welcome to the Dungeon of the Turnip Keepers.”

“Oh,” replied Ted. His whole body ached from the beating he had received while fighting the man with the pink tie. At least now he knew that the Turnip Keepers were responsible for his kidnapping. His throat was parched. “I need some water.”

“There’s a bucket in the corner.” The woman indicating a wooden pail. Ted walked over to it and took a long drink. He thought the water tasted funny, but maybe that was just because he hadn’t drunk since being kidnapped.

“Where’s Fred and Ned?” asked Ted, looking in vain for his boss and partner, who were nowhere to be seen in the small cell.

“Who?” asked the woman.

“Two people I was working with. They were kidnapped with me.”

The woman shrugged. “They might be in another cell. I’m Karri, by the way.”

Ted gave his name and held out his hand. Karri shook it.

“So, do you have a plan to escape this place?” Ted asked.

“I’m hoping there will be a massive rebellion tomorrow,” answered Karri. “Peasants will storm this castle, overthrow the Turnip Keepers, and set free all the prisoners.”

“Ah, I see,” said Ted. “Do you have a plan for making sure this rebellion actually happens?”

“No,” sighed Karri. She slumped against a wall. “I’m hoping it will happen on its own after everyone realizes they’ve been lied to about the hamster apocalypse.”

“A *what* apocalypse?”

“Hamster. You haven’t heard of it?”

“No. I’m a foreigner, you see.”

“I should have guessed - your accent, you see. Anyway, the Hamster Apocalypse is the latest bit of propaganda the Turnip Keepers are using to steal turnips. They say that hamsters will come from the sky and eat all the turnips, and the only safe turnips will be the ones locked in the Grand Treasury.”

“Hamsters? From the *sky*? Sounds like a meteorological phenomenon. Ned would be- where is Ned, anyway?”

“It’s nonsense,” humphed Karri. “And I’ve never heard of Ned.”

“What about Fred? Wally? Director Obed? Any of the other FBI agents?”

“You’re with the FBI? What are you doing over here? I thought they only handled crime in their own country.”

“Well, Director Obed is also the director of the CIA, so the two organizations have kind of gotten mashed together over the past few years. Besides, I’m not supposed to be over here. I was kidnapped from my native country.”

Karri cocked her head. “Kidnapped? By the Turnip Keepers? How strange. I thought they wanted to avoid offending other countries, since they’re too worked up about this jiggernozj of an apocalypse to risk starting a war.”

“Well, the project I was working on with my team was *strictly* confidential, so I can’t tell you *why* they kidnapped me.” Truth be told, Ted wasn’t sure himself. The Turnip Keepers, as their name implied, collected turnips, and would obviously consider the Eternal Turnip a valuable prize. But why would the man with the pink tie drug him, then carry him all the way across the ocean to the Land of the Turnip Keepers? As the combat specialist, Ted was the least valuable member of the team of Turnip Specialists. Half the jargon Ned and Fred batted back and forth when they analyzed the turnip’s properties completely flew over his head. He was just there to protect them in case things got dangerous - which, he remembered, he had failed to do. All his Epic Warrior training had been useful precisely zero times. Which brought his mind back to the question of why he hadn’t simply been killed, seeing as there was hardly anything he could offer the Turnip Keepers.

Ted dusted off his wrinkled clothing and inspected his surrounding. If he wasn’t valuable to his captors, they might simply decide to execute him at any moment. The imperative to escape weighed heavily on his mind. He focused on the cell’s lock and tried to calculate how long before he had enough fingernail clippings to build a tool that could pick it, but his vision swam with concentration and his head pounded. Whatever he’d been drugged with must not have worn off yet.

“So, what is it like, living in a highly developed country with a stable, democratic government?” asked Karri.

“Well, there were riots,” said Ted, trying to recall the news he had read. “In Super Hero City a few nights ago. So not always stable.”

“I wish we could have a riot here,” said Karri.

Of course. Oppressive government. Ted winced inwardly at his insensitive comment. *Fool! That’s like complaining about your love life to a eunuch!* He tried to think of what he should say to Karri, but drew a blank. Situations such as this one were exceedingly unfamiliar to him.

“Oh,” he said finally, to his dissatisfaction. “So, what is it like, living in an impoverished country with a despotic, tyrannical government?”

“Well, it’s not as bad as here as in some other places,” said Karri. Her gaze drifted to the barred window. “Nobody has starved - yet. But with all these turnip taxes... Even so, I can’t say it’s a bad life - if you have a family that loves you and you love back. But sometimes, all your family members die, or leave, or betray you to your worst enemies, and then... um...”

“Is that why you’re in the dungeon now?” asked Ted.

A moment’s silence. Then, “That’s an awfully personal question to ask of someone you just met, Ted.”

“Oh, er, ok,” said Ted. “I won’t ask you any more questions, then, if that’s what you prefer.” With that they retired to separate corners of the cell. Ted drank some more water, trying to banish his headache, but to no avail. A fog crept over his mind. The effects of whatever drug he’d been given seemed to be worsening.

Karri’s hair was unkempt but beautiful. Ted found himself watching it flutter up and down as she slowly nodded her head, looking out the window in private meditation. He could do lots of things with hair, he remembered. Maybe even pick locks quicker than with fingernail clippings. Despite his mental exertions to the contrary, he couldn’t remember how, exactly. That part of his brain seemed absent at the moment. He

wondered how best to cut off a portion of Karri's hair, then decided not to ask. His blundering interrogations of his cellmate had been offensive enough already.

Ted felt strangely tired, and for some reason the face of his childhood nemesis kept floating across his mind. He shouldn't be this tired, he reasoned. It was daylight outside, so he must have slept at least an entire night. What was in that drug the man with the pink tie gave him? There was a hole in the dungeon's wall.

Oh, thought Ted. *We could have just escaped through that this whole time.* And with that thought he walked through the hole and into timeless expanse beyond.

Karri jerked her head away from the window to focus on the crashing sound from behind her. The noise turned out to be Ted, who had fallen to the floor unconscious after utterly failing to walk through the solid stone wall.

She pondered the strangeness of the doomed endeavor for a moment. Perhaps he was hallucinating. Karri reached down and felt his forehead. No sign of a fever. Even if the Turnip Keepers cared enough about this prisoner to keep him well, she wouldn't be able to convince them that he needed a doctor. Maybe he was going insane. After all, she'd heard that certain people took to confinement badly.

A chill of fear ran through her at the idea of being locked in a cell with someone descending into madness, but she shook it off. She'd been thinking about her childhood a moment ago, of the simple pleasures that delighted her so easily: her mother's turnip stew, catching wild hamsters with Leniad and Brogard - that was before he had turned to the dark side, of course - and listening to her father tell her stories he had heard from his father, stories of a time long past, when turnips were famed as a delicacy the world over, and even the humblest turnip farmer could make a fortune. Alas, those joyous days of love and peace were gone, devoured by the unstoppable march of time. Times had changed indeed. Her father had his wish; turnips were popular again, although not in the way he hoped. He was dead now, his hair greyed and his back bent under the strain of producing enough enough turnips to satisfy both the demands of the Turnip Keepers and his own family. Her mother, likewise dead; Leniad, gone to who-knows-where; and Brogard? The less said about him, the better.

"Um, Karri?"

Speak of the devil, thought Karri, for before her eyes came the traitor himself, creeping down the hall like the backstabbing rat he was. She watched him but made no reply.

"I just wanted to tell you not to drink the water," Brogard said, scratching the back of his neck nervously. He was alone, away from the negative influence of his Turnip Keeper companions for a moment. That was something. "I saw the man with the pink tie but some greenish powder into it and thought he might be trying to poison you. That man creeps me out. I don't know why the ELMO lets him stay around."

"Alright, let me get this straight," said Karri, trying not to let too much sarcasm taint her tone. "I can't drink the water because it's poisoned. But water is necessary for the proper functioning of every major bodily system, correct? I believe you learned that in biology."

“Yes, you’re right, I’ll-”

“And so if I don’t drink the water, I die. But if I do drink the water, I die anyway. Why not just execute me and get it over with?”

“What I was going to say is, I’ll get you some fresh water that’s safe to drink,” said Brogard. He looked Karri in the eye. “I don’t want you to die.”

Karri nodded, a sliver of affection for her brother creeping back into her heart. Maybe she shouldn’t be so rude to him.

Brogard took the keys from his belt. “You’ll have to promise not to escape when I open the door.”

Karri consented to this, reciting a pact she and her brothers had contrived during their childhood. Brogard unlocked the door and slid it wide open. Karri punched him the face, then slammed her palm over his mouth before he could cry out.

“Sorry, Brogard,” she whispered. “But we’re not children anymore.” She slammed her brother’s helmet down onto his skull, and he went limp.

Over a hundred years ago, Philemon McDonter was tinkering in his garage when he stumbled upon the secret of combining the functions of a grocery store scanner and a taser into one compact device. The invention secured his legacy, but his true gift lay in his extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, which he used to form a multibillion-dollar business. As a result, he not only became one of the wealthiest men in the world, but also drove shoplifting nearly to extinction.

How such an auspicious and industrious member of society produced as renegade an offspring as Michael McDonter was one of the greatest mysteries of the preceding century. The young McDonter took his share of his father’s inheritance and squandered it on an eccentric globe-spanning quest to find the lost Champion’s Breakfast. After decades of searching for the mythical items, he returned home in defeat and at last conceded that the objects of his endeavor had never existed in the first place.

At least, that was the official story. Arthur stepped out of Eisenhower’s helicopter and surveyed the mass of living, breathing evidence to the contrary, all summoned to McDonter Manor to plan a response to the new threat posed to the fruits¹ of Michael’s lifelong labor.

There was his cousin Philip, unimpressive in his daytime guise as a garbage man, but not as the vigilante hero who single-handedly stopped the riots and caused Super Hero City, for the first time in decades, to live up to its name. He held the Pancake of Power tightly, as if worried that someone might snatch it from his grasp. Across the lawn stood Rewant, a kleptomaniac with a rather fluid moral code. His skillful use of the Potato of Invisibility made him an infamous burglar from whom no ancient artifact or renowned document was safe. Komri always insisted that he return his acquisitions, and he complied. Usually. Arthur suspected that the framed Declaration of Independence he kept in his house was the original.

¹ In multiple cases, the fruits were literal.

Eisenhower shouted a greeting to his brother Truman, who during his stint in the military had used his breakfast item to free a village from terrorists and save countless lives. Then there was Great-Aunt Muriel, who had temporarily given up her inheritance for safekeeping, but that didn't matter. She hadn't needed it to become a world-renowned actress, novelist and president of three charities.

And in the midst of all these stood Arthur, a middle-aged bachelor lawyer whose greatest achievement consisted of getting a conviction for a geneticist accused of illegally cloning himself. And that hadn't even been him, really. The evidence gathered by the undercover FBI operation had been so overwhelming even a blind jury would've made the same decision.

Arthur wandered aimlessly through the crowd without speaking, dreading the inevitable question: *So, Arthur, have you done anything with that bacon lately?*

Have you used your gift to avert a catastrophe and save innocent lives?

Has your foresight granted you insight into the resolution to our current predicament?

Have you figured out who's attacking us and why?

Have you done anything worthy of that great and noble name which you so proudly bear? Anything? No? Just filed paperwork? Oh well, don't give up Arthur, your still have the rest of your life.

"Hello, Arthur, how are you today?"

For some reason Grandpa Komri's boisterous voice always made Arthur want to scream. Perhaps because it reminded him of Eisenhower's, whom he'd had enough of today already. He made a mental note to start saving for his own helicopter, one that would never smell like oatmeal.

Arthur's monosyllabic response to Komri's inquiry did little to express his true feelings. Komri was undeterred, however.

"I'm glad you're here, boy. The meeting should start in half an hour. I believe everyone's here but for Phelmatar. Have you seen your parents? I wanted to ask them if they planned to enter the International Husband-and-Wife Team Swordfighting Contest again this year."

Arthur shook his head. "I rode with Eisenhower, but I think I saw their car driving towards the North entrance."

Komri left, pausing to shake the hand of another distant relative who hadn't been to the manor in years. Arthur slunk away and wandered into the kitchens. There was one good thing about McDonter family reunions: the food was both abundant and appetizing. This was due to the deft hand of Aunt Manira, Guardian of the Sacred Pastry, who led an elite team of McDonter chefs in preparing exquisite dining for the whole family.

Arthur perused a selection of snacks until a bell rang from the manor's highest steeple, indicating the advent of the meeting. His head down, he meandered over the the great hall. Chairs were arranged in circular rows surrounding a podium with a microphone. Arthur sat in the back row, then scooted his chair out of the circle for good measure.

"My dear relatives and fellow bearers of the Breakfast!" Komri said. "We are gathered here today in order to discuss a threat to our way of life, and indeed, to the

Champion's Breakfast, the protection of which our late progenitor laid upon us as a solemn charge. My niece, Muriel, will come explain to us the situation."

Muriel ascended to the stage and spoke into the microphone, her voice clear as ever despite her seventy-odd years of age. "A few weeks ago my husband Phelmatar and I began receiving mysterious communications demanding that we leave the Eternal Turnip in a specified place, with dire insinuations of some form of punishment should we not. We discussed the matter with Komri and agreed that we should temporarily move the turnip here for safekeeping. However, our good friend in the FBI, Wally, said that move would be expected by anyone with knowledge of our family's secret duty. He suggested we give it to him instead, and we complied. The turnip was hidden in an underground lab, and we stopped worrying about while we tried to find who was behind the threats.

But recently we received dire news from Wally. Somehow, the location of the secret lab was discovered, and broken into. The Eternal Turnip is gone, along with three FBI agents under Wally's command. Security cameras have captured footage of the perpetrator. Phelmatar has been trying to attain it, but without much success so far."

"Why not? Who's keeping the security footage from us?" asked one of Arthur's cousins after Muriel fell silent.

"Wally is hesitant — from what he's told me I know that he's reluctant to officially admit that the break-in occurred, seeing as the Eternal Turnip was never officially at the secret base in the first place. Phelmatar's filling out paperwork requesting the release of the security footage, but in-between bureaucrats and figuring out ways to never mention the true nature of the item he was keeping in the lab, it's a long process."

"How could you give part of the Champion's Breakfast to an FBI agent, anyway?" yelled Rewant. "They can't be trusted!"

"Says a criminal," snorted another McDonter. "You just don't want the FBI involved for fear that they'll finally catch up to the mastermind behind the Air Force One heist."

"That was beautiful," said Rewant with a wistful sigh. "I stole the Air Force One *while the president of the United States was flying in it* and he didn't even notice until two days later²! I am a genius."

"You nearly caused a war! Thousands could've died!"

"Oh yeah, and how many actually died? That's right, *none*, because I knew exactly what I was doing. I'll have you know I actually saved lives during that encounter—"

"Oh shut up. One day your stunts are going to get us all killed!"

"Silence!" Komri bellowed, sprinting up to the podium. "That is *not* the matter we are here to discuss. Muriel, do you have any leads on who is behind this plot?"

"None, although I wonder... why would anyone go after the Eternal Turnip? It's the least powerful of the Champion's Breakfast."

Eisenhower raised a hand. "Could it be the Turnip Keepers? For years they've been trying to collect as many turnips as possible. The Eternal Turnip would be the ultimate capstone to their collection."

² It wouldn't be anything to boast about if it was obvious how he had accomplished it

Komri nodded. “That’s definitely possible, although I wouldn’t jump to conclusions too soon. It’s possible that someone thought Muriel would be easy to intimidate because she’s so old.”

“Hey! I’m forty years younger than you are, old man³!”

“And of course,” continued Komri. “The Eternal Turnip may not have been the only target of this plot. Eisenhower has some relevant information to share with us.”

Eisenhower rose to his feet. “Just a few days ago, three men came into my bakery just as I was about to close for the day. They carried retractable melee weapons hidden in briefcases, and after I refused their demand to hand over the Oatmeal Sword, they drew their weapons and attacked me. I used oatmeal to fight back and easily disarmed them. I turned them over to the police and said in the official report I fought them off using a normal sword.

That same day, I heard from my brother that the Bacon-”

Oh, come on, not now, in front of everyone? thought Arthur. He silently made gestures intending to hush his brother.

“Oh, I see Arthur would like to recount the incident himself. Alright, Arthur, come up here. Don’t be shy.”

Arthur worked his way up to the podium. “One day I came home from work. The Bacon of Revelation wasn’t where it normally was. I couldn’t find it anywhere. Eisenhower thinks it was stolen. The End.”

An arduous alarm arose among Arthur’s assembled audience. Cries of dismay, anger, and confusion rippled throughout the crowd.

“*Lost the Bacon? How could you?*”

“It’s a conspiracy! The government is out to get us!”

“Calm down everyone, the solution to all this is really very simple-”

“How did anyone find out where two items of the Champion’s Breakfast were being kept?”

“It’s the government! They have drones, eyes everywhere!”

“All we have to do is find the Bacon and the Turnip, and *steal them back.*”

“Great idea, Rewant, it’s easy to steal something when you don’t even know where it is.”

“You think I knew where the *Mona Lisa* was when-“

“I knew this wouldn’t turn out well the moment I heard the words ‘FBI agent!’” Muriel’s iPhone rang. She answered it.

“You’re all being ridiculous,” murmured Arthur to himself. “I’m going home. You can all sort this mess out yourselves.”

Before he could leave, Komri issued another call for silence. “Phelmatar Whitestone is on the phone right now, and he just obtained the security footage of the break-in.”

“Finally!” Rewant said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. “We can see this mysterious enemy.”

“Hey, Arthur, did you have a recording of your home when the theft occurred?”

³ Whether or not the McDonters’ continuing vitality even in their elder years was a direct result of holding the Champion’s Breakfast is a matter of some contention. Insufficient data exists to verify a correlation between holding an item of the Champion’s Breakfast and increased lifespan.

Actually, Arthur did. A prosecuting lawyer could pick up all sorts of enemies just for doing his job, and it never hurt to be careful. He'd installed the cameras long ago and never had reason to use them, so reviewing the footage had completely slipped his mind.

"Quiet, please, everyone," said Komri. "A momentous occurrence is about to take place. Phelmatar just emailed Muriel the recording of what happened in the secret lab when the Eternal Turnip was stolen. She's going to play it on the big screen in just a moment. Someone turn off the lights, we might as well go for a dramatic effect here."

The lights dimmed. Muriel attached her iPhone to a projector and cast the image against the blank screen on the far end of the room. She pressed play.

A man in a business suit entered what looked like an empty pizza parlor through a back door, a metal pole in one hand. He looked straight at the camera and began to speak.

"If you're watching this, McDonters, you probably know that I have your precious Eternal Turnip. The leader of my organization has commanded me to give you this message. We are watching you. We know of the Breakfast you think yourselves worthy of bearing, and we will destroy you. The Hamsters of Doom are coming. You cannot stop this, and the Breakfast must be returned to its rightful owner. Surrender the Champion's Breakfast to us, and you will live. Fail to do this, and you will be destroyed. Adieu."

The man extended his metal pole, which Arthur now recognized a spear, and flipped a switch on the side. An electric buzz sounded, and blue light flickered about the spear's tip. The man reached for a seemingly normal board in the floor and pulled on it, revealing a trapdoor. He descended beneath the floor and the trapdoor sounded a death knell as it closed behind him, leaving the camera surveying an empty restaurant.