

...continued from page 33

steel, it could easily have held centuries of dates and probably weighed in at around five and a half pounds. Remembering with glee everything he had learned from tormenting Mr. Koan, his school's librarian, with the tools of the library trade, Dagon scooped up the stamp, and taking hold of the moveable bands of type for month, day, and year, randomly wheeled and spun the due date to April 12, 1900. Then he put it right back in the exact right spot at the exact same angle and waited, whistling nonchalantly.

Finally, a librarian past the best before date of crusty old librarians stepped out of the STAFF ONLY room and over to Patron Loans, bearing an inkpad the size of a TV dinner and in a matching brass. He wore a grey cardigan over a simple red tie.

"This one's so crusty he's growing barnacles," Dagon thought.

The librarian took the book from Dagon's hand and blew the dust off its cover, causing Dagon to sneeze. "A Firsthand and True Account of the Discovery of the Mysterious Mechanism at Antikythera, Including an Inventory of Other Artifacts Retrieved from the Wreck of a Roman Vessel, by Dimitrios Kondos, Captain of the Symi." The librarian looked up. "A stimulating selection, sir. May I inquire as to how it came to your attention?"

Dagon showed him the old index card he'd found in a book about Charles Babbage. "I'm not much of a reader, but I have to do a project for school on examples of the earliest analog computers ever made."

The librarian nodded. "Well, this will be an exciting place to start, though you may find it's a bit short on the specifics of the mechanism's inner workings."

"I can always Google that."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know—I can always check it out on the web."

"Ah." He turned the book on its face and stamped the return date onto the date due card.

Dagon's finely honed ability to distract, based on years of practice at diverting his teachers' attention from his incomplete assignments (a symptom of his constantly dividing and multiplying attention), was working like a charm.

The librarian had half-closed the book when his eyes narrowed in on something. He opened the back cover again, squinting at the due date he'd just stamped.

Dagon smirked, anticipating the trembling lips, the quaking hands that always preceded Mr. Koan's eruptions.

This librarian merely raised his left eyebrow. "I see that you're hoping for an extended loan. I'll have to consult with my colleague, the Antiquarian."

"But sir—the time!"

"I'll be back in a jiffy. At his advanced age, he's a little hard of hearing, so I'll have to get him in person."

Again, Dagon checked the time on the cell he wasn't supposed to have. His mother was due back in five minutes. Had the librarian left the book at the desk, he'd have picked it up and made a run for the book elevator.

Cardigan returned with his Anti-Aquarian colleague, who looked as long in the tooth as his title implied. He had long grey hair and a beard to match, both sagging to his knees, where one was indistinguishable from the other, and a grayish toga that fell the rest of the way down to his leather sandaled feet. "This one's so crusty even his barnacles are growing barnacles," Dagon mused.

The two librarians whispered back and forth—Cardigan cupping both hands to the Antiquarian's better ear. Finally, through milky eyes, the Antiquarian looked directly at Dagon and nodded his consent.

Cardigan approached the desk. "Sorry for the delay. Ordinarily, with a new patron, we don't consent to extended loans. But under the circumstances, we have decided to grant your request."

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, Dagon took the book from Cardigan and turned back for the book elevator.

"Excuse me, sir, but the exit's over here."

Dagon stopped. "But I came up over there."

"Of course. That's the entrance. You cannot go back that way when checking out a book."

Dagon turned around.

"Through the gate over here," said Cardigan, smiling.

There, to the right of the Patron Loans Desk, was an old turnstile. Its oak body and brass spokes seemed to be burnished with age and polished from decades of use. Yet, as he stepped through it, Dagon couldn't help noticing the counter on its top: 0001.

He hurried beyond the turnstile down a short corridor towards a stairwell marked with a fire exit sign. Halfway to the stairs, his eyesight became blurry around the edges, and he