

“F---,” Mirabelle said, dropping the lever for the fourth time.

“What she said,” Tarnby agreed.

“Once more,” said Professor Volpe.

“F--- it, and you, and it,” said Mirabelle, sitting down. “I’ve had it.”

The oxen moaned plaintively. They were tired of bawling, and had settled down, with ox-like composure, to pretending to chew their cud while they waited to be unmired. Being mired wasn’t all bad, they decided. It was a bit like getting a rest break. And the clay under the salt crust turned out to be pleasantly cool and damp, at least by comparison to the blazing, shimmering world above. If only there were anything left in their stomachs to properly call a cud, life would be bliss.

“F--- it for me too,” Tarnby said, giving up and wiping his slime and grit covered hands on his apron. “That wheel isn’t going anywhere this time.”

“You said that last time,” Lillebo reminded him.

The professor gritted his teeth, and tried not to point out the obvious, which was that if they didn’t get the wagon unstuck, they’d all ‘had it,’ and this time, for good. He didn’t intend to give up that easily, but he couldn’t lift the wheel himself, and an argument wasn’t going to help them at this point. Think, professor, he thought to himself. There has to be another way.

“Rest a bit. I’ll think of something. We’ll have at it again in a bit.”

Tarnby spat a mouthful of black, grit-filled sputum into the salt. It was unreasonable, unfair. Sure and everything was bone dry as it could be-- this place sucked the moisture right out of his body-- and even right where the edge of the salt plain met the mirror sheen of the salt sea, there was no water that was any use to anyone. Yet, for all that, it was wet enough to make mud. Thick mud. And deep. There was no justice in the world.

And little mercy, Professor Volpe thought to himself, looking out across the vast, flat, salt-covered plain. Not a living thing grew anywhere. Without the cart and the oxen, his companions would soon lie flat on the salt, drying, and shriveling to bleached, alkali-crust mummies. There would be no scavengers to strip the flesh from their bones, unless they did each other the favor in their last moments of delirium. Their corpses would last forever, a monument to his hubris in bringing the group out here. Think, professor, think. Lever, fulcrum. Check. Pulley? Unlikely, with what they had to work with.

Beyond the plain were mountains, and it was said there was a wadi beyond them, but too far to reach. Back the way they had come, then? Could it be done on foot? The flesh of the oxen might sustain them that far . . . but it meant abandoning his quest. He unrolled his map again, trying to find the spot. A place where the elevation was lowest, dipping to a central well . . . a place where water once ran fresh, where roses once grew beside a farmhouse. But where in all this wasteland would it have been?

He stared out across the mirror of the salt lake. They had been skirting the lake for some time--but every time they approached it, the wagon broke through the crust, and stuck. Through the glaring heat shimmer he could see the far mountains mirrored in the shining lake, the image broken by occasional clouds that were only in the mirror and not in the sky. Floating rafts of alkali foam. There was no way of knowing how deep the-- “water” for want of a better term-- went. Feet? Fathoms? He was reluctant to test the matter.

Still, logic demanded that water tends to pool in low areas. For all he knew, the well might be *beneath* the lake--but what sense would that make? And how would ever find it?

A splash, and path of small rings appeared across the lake, shattering the mirror. Lillebo said, “I’ll bet I can hit it from here.”

“Can not,” said Tarnby.

“Can, too,” she insisted, “See?”

Tarnby and Lillebo stood by the edge of the lake, skipping stones across it.

“Hit what?” said Mirabelle.

“The box.”

“What box?”

“That one, way out there.”

“How did a box get way out there? Who’s crazy enough to come here? Besides us?”

Tarnby wondered.

“Maybe the salt went out that far once. Maybe their cart got stuck there and they ditched some goods to lighten the load,” Mirabelle shrugged.

“Wonder if it had anything worthwhile in it,” Tarnby speculated.

“One way to find out,” Lillabo laughed. “Race ya!”

The professor was about to shout a warning, but Lillabo was already sprinting. The thought of wading into those terrible waters held Tarnby back a moment, and then, the thought of losing Lillabo to them, or perhaps it was merely the thought of losing the race to Lillabo, dragged him from his paralysis. He ran after her.

He was surprised--and relieved-- to find that the water did not suddenly drop off and leave him swimming in neck deep muck. Mucky the ground was, but the layer of salt water upon it was mere inches deep. And somewhat cooling despite the oil and grit. Lillabo’s laughter was, as always, contagious. It *did* feel good to run, after days of slogging and hauling and frustration. Truancy itself was a bit of a lift. If only there were a cool flagon waiting for him after the race, he would not mind chasing an oil-slicked Lillabo anywhere, no matter how dirty she got. If death were indeed waiting for them by that ill-fated ox cart, then it could damn well cool its heels and wait there until Tarnby caught Lillabo one last time.

He caught her mere yards shy of the box, and grappled her about the waist. She kicked and writhed appealingly, but did not quite pull free. He held her there, tormenting her with the closeness of her goal, but not letting her quite reach it, because it pleased him to do so, and because it pleased her to let him get away with it.

The box sat in the salt lake, surrounded and encrusted by salt foam crystals.(1) It was not much of a box, he thought, and it was disappointingly empty. Well, empty except for being full of more salt, which he noted, was not a staple in short supply in these parts.

Which gave the professor time to reach them, and to stare open-mouthed with wonder at the box. “You’ve found it, my girl!” he cried, reaching down to scuff her curly head. “You are my treasure as always.”

Lillabo beamed.

“It’s a box,” said Tarnby, disgruntled. “An empty box.” Just when he was thinking of Lillabo as a woman, and near enough had her thinking that way herself, the old fool had always to go and make her feel like a child again. There was no justice in the universe.

“Is it?” said the professor. He approached the box carefully, brushing the foam from its lips, and reaching in to scoop out handfuls of oily, crystalline sludge. “Mirabelle!” he called--his voice carried well in that empty place, “Bring me my pack! Bring all of them--you, you two,” he called distractedly, as if he could not quite remember their names, “Go help her--we’ll need the tools--there’s precipitate here--we’ll need something to chip it out of the way.” It’s got to be wide enough for us to descend, he thought, it just has to be. After we’ve come all this way. “Use the wagon cover to shade the oxen,” he called back as an afterthought, “But leave them where they lie--unbuckle them--they’ll be alright in their wallow--give them water if we have any. And then get back here, fast as you can.”

Intrigued, the team set to their tasks, and in a little while found that the box was indeed a lot deeper than it had seemed. Deeper even than shallow lake, or the salt crust below. “It’s the top of the chimney,” Professor Volpe explained at last. “Lady Bank’s manor--it had great tall chimneys.”

Lillabo looked perplexed, not understanding how the top of a chimney came to be rising out of the ground.

“How did you know this was the chimney?” Mirabelle asked.

The Professor grinned. "Look at the salt here--it's full of twigs."

"So?" said Lillabo, really at a loss by this point.

"We've not seen a twig for miles. Nothing grows here anymore. But the legends say the famous rose grew over the house--engulfed it--buried even the highest of the chimneys," he explained. "These twigs were here when the salt came--before the salt. They are ancient, but nothing can rot here, because of the salt. It preserves things--see?"

"Like, um, salt pork?" asked Lillabo.

"Exactly, m'girl. Just so." He chortled, pleased.

"So." Tarnby echoed the professor's last word, but did not go on. He kicked at the side of the box, chimney. Whatever. A chunk of alkaline foam crunched under his callused foot.

"So?" Lillabo asked.

"So, next--I'm just guessing this--next thing, you're going to be wanting some clever small person to try to squeeze down that pipe and see what's down there, aren't you?"

"Just so, lad. Thank you for volunteering. Dangerous mission this."

Tarnby gritted his teeth. He didn't expect the Professor to send the girls. But it irked him to be taken for granted. "Fine," he said crossly.

"I'll go!" Lillabo offered. "Let me go first."

"Yes, yes," Mirabelle said drily. "Let her go first."

Tarnby and the Professor exchanged a look. On this they were agreed. Both knew better than to bother arguing with Lillabo. By the time they got out the word "No," she'd be down the chute into some strange dark place, poking at things. Tarnby got to work.

It was a narrow squeeze--a long, slippery, squeeze into such a darkness as had not seen day for decades of decades.

Lillabo pouted, but her petulance was quickly overwhelmed by her curiosity. "What's down there?" she called.

Descending, Tarnby came to a place at last where the tight fitting walls opened wide, gradually at first, and then suddenly. He fell the last few feet, spluttering dust into an empty hearth.

"Are you all right?" came an echoing call from the world above.

"Yeah, I guess," he replied, feeling in his pockets for his tinder and wicks.

Investigation revealed little enough of interest in the kitchen. Apart from being unimaginably old, it looked like a typical abandoned manor kitchen. It had been a large, nice one once upon a time, probably at one time filled with the terrible magics of the ancients. But now, all was rust and decay. They had seen plenty of similar sites.

The others soon descended, leaving a rope to aid their return. Even the tall professor managed to worm his way down the narrow transit. Tall he was, but wiry, and the journey had left little width to any of them.

It was cool in the kitchen, and all were tired. They scavenged what antiquities seemed worthy and small enough to remove through the chimney, but there seemed nowhere else to go. The little group had trusted the professor to guide them this far, but they were not prepared for the disappointment of reaching their destination.

"Maybe this isn't the right place," Mirabelle offered, uncertain as to whether that would be a relief or another disappointment. She yawned. "But I tell you what: I'm still beat, and it's cool down here. Let's give it a rest before we climb back up there and go looking for something else. Whose turn is it to cook, and what've we got left to eat?"

The group agreed with the concept of lingering in the cool, and set about preparations. But even after what passed for their meal Professor Volpe paced the small room anxiously, looking for a clue--any excuse to stay here and not travel further. He was sure this was the place. He began to recite to himself the passages he recalled from the ancient texts, trying to remember anything that would help.

"What *are* you mumbling about?" Mirabelle asked at last.

He began again, but louder, and his fine voice filled the small room clearly, in the cadences of one whose voice has filled halls, but with the control of one who knows his acoustics and does not overfill a smaller space. “Long ago--longer even than that--before all these other things began--*before* the Oligarchs built their tombs in the desert, Lady Banks traveled to a lonesome place, and there abode in the place of endless sun. None now recall why she left her father’s lands, but it is remembered that, one day, in a surge of homesickness for the misty isle of her birth, she sent her men across the seas to retrieve a single slim shoot of a certain delicate and pale rose which grew in her father’s garden. And the legend recalls further that they returned with said burden, alive as requested, enshrined in a small ceramic pot.”

“What’s an Oligarch?” Lillabo whispered to Tarnby.

“Ancient man, I think,” he replied “Shh.”

“She planted the rose beside her dwelling,” the professor continued, “between her kitchen and the deep, deep well which provided water for all her retinue.

“And a strange thing occurred.

“The rose itself had not been a native of the misty isle. It had been transplanted once before, long ago, from another place. A warm place. A sunny place.

“Long years had passed since the caravans and ships had swept to the East and returned with their exotic spices and specimens. And in the misty isle, the treasured rose of the East had grown demure and wan, pining for its lost shining lands in a garden so unlike the gardens of its birth.

“But beside the Lady’s well in the land of the sun, it warmed, and remembered. Its roots reached long in search of water. Its canes sprouted shoots to embrace the sun-drenched skies. It bloomed profusions of blooms, overgrew the garden, and engulfed the house.

“And thereafter the place was known as the Well of Roses.”

Lillabo picked at a piece of mud caked in her toe hair. “Uh-huh.”

Mirabelle looked unimpressed. “And *that’s* what we came all this way to find?”

“Yes,” the Professor said.

Lillabo finished her pedicure, yawned and stretched out, using her pack for a pillow.

Tarnby was already snoring, but he rolled over to drape an arm over Lillabo, in hopes that he could leech a little warmth from her. Even asleep, he knew where to find butter for his bread.

“I’ll grant you that water is a pretty good treasure out *here*,” said Mirabelle, “*if* there was anyone around to sell it to. But, as I recall, we had a lot of water at home.”

Her glare was challenging, calculating, and possibly murderous. If she had known the word “mutiny,” it would have crossed her mind.

“Lady Tomlin met the elves at the Well of Roses.”

“Uh huh.”

“And although Dr. Thomas met them elsewhere, when he returned to us, it was at the Well of Roses. Nearly seven centuries after he left, I believe it is said. A century is one hundred years?” he added, hoping the explanation would be unnecessary.

Mirabelle nodded.

“And it is said that the last of the elven ships left from the harbor at the Well of Roses.”

“Well they won’t have gone far in *that* sea,” Mirabelle opined sleepily. “Unless their ships had a pretty shallow draft.”

“It was different then. This was all before the efreeti and the fall of men. This house was above ground then. There probably was no salt sea in those days,” the professor replied, but Mirabelle had rolled over with the others, and she pulled her blanket over her ears.

Professor Volpe sat and smoked his pipe until long after the shaft of chimney light turned pink, and then blue and faded altogether from sight.

“So we’re looking for an elven harbor?” Tarnby said in the morning, when he was more interested in hearing about where they were going next.

“Yes.”

“And you think it’s here.”

“Yes.”

“And you think there’s something worth finding in that harbor, if it’s here, even though the elves probably took everything they cared about with them when they went?”

“Yes.”

“Are we gonna find the spot where the ancients stoned Dr. Thomas?” Mirabelle asked, and her voice had a hint of irony and steel in it that the professor did not quite like.

“I don’t think so,” he replied evenly.

“Why did they stone him?” Lillabo asked, completely oblivious to the current of tension between the two.

“Because he told them the truth,” the Professor replied.

“Sometimes the truth is hard to hear,” Mirabelle said.

They stared at each other a long moment. It was anyone’s guess as to who would blink first.

“There’s a difference between ‘true’ and ‘certain,’ said the Professor at last. “Let’s make certain of what is here, or isn’t, and then we’ll know a little more than we do now. Which is what this little adventure is all about, as you recall. ‘Treasure in plenty there may be, but knowledge is the treasure most precious to me.’”

There was universal rolling of the eyes at this.

But they got to work searching the farmhouse again. Better rested, they soon found a door they had previously mistaken for a pantry. Through it was a perfectly ordinary well-house stair, with a rusted yoke and a desiccated pair of wooden buckets still hanging on hooks on the wall, and a few antique jars of pickles keeping cool.

No one was foolhardy enough to open the pickles.

They descended the narrow stair, and came through an arch into a space so unimaginably vast there was no seeing the other side of it from the light of the professor’s little candle. And there were echoes, echoes of their own movements and voices, but more, echoes of other things in motion, regular, quiet sounds, like water lapping at the edge of a great stone pool. Like dripping. And the smell! The smell was unmistakably the long imagined, longed for, dreamed of scent of fresh water.

“The well!” the professor cried. “As it was said in the days of the ancients--a spring underground in the desert--in the desert that *was* before the desert of salt.” He held up his small candle, which flickered in a small breeze that came from the cavern. “And a cistern large enough to water a city? I hadn’t expected that,” he admitted. “A *subterranean* harbor, perhaps?”

“It exists, old man,” said Mirabelle. “I didn’t credit it, but there you are.”

Tarnby reached for Lillabo, but she was already gone. “Race ya!” echoed from her as she sped toward the enticing, promised pool.

“Lilli! Wait!” Tarnby called, desperate that she would find herself suddenly sped past the brink of a precipice, or plunging into . . . he could not imagine what she might plunge into besides a pool of deep, cold water. And how bad could that be? There was nothing more he wanted to do himself. A chance to rinse the grit from his body was a chance mostly worth taking, he reckoned. He chased after her into the dark cavern.

He was brought up short by a sickening thud, which he later understood to be the sound of his face colliding with a 50-foot pillar of rock. He reeled backward, only barely holding onto his footing, and stood there, too stunned to assess how badly this was going to hurt, admiring the sparkly little lights in front of his eyes.

The professor called from the entry, “Lillabo? Tarnby? Are you all right? Where are you? Can you see anything of this place?” He peered into the cavern, but the dim light of his candle only served to dazzle his eyes, and could not penetrate the depths of the room.

“The silly child is playing games with us,” opined Mirabelle.

“I *must* have light,” the professor said in an agonized voice. “Forgive me?”

“Forgive what?” said Mirabelle.

“We must have light. I *must* see,” he handed her his candle. And the professor reached into his waistcoat pocket, and drew forth some small things. He began a process of mumbling over them.

He flared into light.

Mirabelle shrieked, and made the sign of the kettle, backing away from him in disgust. “You’ve been meddling with more than the ancient history texts!” she accused. “You swore--you promised--you said you weren’t dabbling in the mysteries of the ancients.”

“Mirabelle,” he said, but he was peering away through the cavern, trying not so much to see Lillabo or Tarnby as he was trying to fathom the carvings on the pillar before him, “I swear I never have and never will dabble in the ancient magics that brought the world of men to its destruction. But *this*, this is just light. It has nothing to do with . . .” There was a splash, as Lillabo found her water at last.

“Lilli?” Tarnby lifted his bleeding nose from his hands and called again, and now Professor Volpe could see his silhouette in the distance, way across the cavern standing before another enormous pillar.

Which was odd, because the small light the professor had made could not possibly have traveled that far--nor should it have silhouetted him. It was as if the light came from *beyond* Tarnby--as if the sun were slowly rising in the pool--the golden sun arising from the depths--with a glow that illuminated the whole of the great hall--no--gilded it-- the columns were glittering in that dim golden light, reflecting from every surface, light pooling as if it were water itself. (2)

Mirabelle’s face was purple with fury. “*Now* look what you’ve done,” she hissed, and then her face grew pale with fear.

“Miri, this isn’t me,” the professor turned toward her to explain, but he soon realized that her wild, white, staring eyes were not fixed on him, but beyond him--toward the pool.

Volpe turned--he knew better than to turn--but how could he not? He heard her behind him stumbling away into what few shadows remained, seeking darkness like a blanket to hold over her head to shield herself from nightmare.

He watched, stupefied, as light, streams of bright light, poured forth from the pool, creeping through the columns, penetrating through all the vast shadowed spaces of the hall like golden syrup, blinding as sunlight.

He felt fear leave him suddenly, as swiftly as candle snuffed. One moment, he was contemplating terror as he had never known it, and the next, there was a clear, soundless calm, and comfort--such warmth as if he were an infant held in his mother’s arms.

A head rose from the pool, on a long snakelike neck. A huge head, covered in scales, with a neck longer than any neck has ever been. A glowing and golden neck three times the height of houses, thick as tree trunks. And perched upon its nose, the limp form of Lillabo.

Volpe and Tarnby stood fixed in their places, unable to move.

The great beast leaned forward, struggled awkwardly a bit for its footing and balance on the slippery rocks, and then pulled forth from the water a vast wing to balance itself. It leaned forward, resting its head with its precious burden upon a convenient rock shelf, and said in a voice too terrible to be casual, yet too kind to be terrible, “*Does this belong to you?*”

“Lillibo,” Tarnby whispered, waking slowly. “Yes. Mine. Give!”

The great eye cocked a great ridge above it where an eyebrow would have been, had it been the sort of creature with eyebrows instead of scales.

“Please?” Tarnby added, for the look was so very like his mother’s own disapproving eye, there was no mistaking its meaning.

“Very well,” the creature replied, setting Lillabo’s body down gently upon the stones. “But I advise you to get her warm with some swiftness. She appears to be,” the creature paused and cast about for a proper word, “. . . limp.” She continued, “And rather colder than I recall your kind being when they are quite well.”

It did not take long for Tarnby and the Professor to bring Lillabo round, and after boiling a bit of tea with the clear lake water, they were soon all feeling a lot merrier, and less thirsty, than they had been for many days. The creature watched the doings with some apparent amusement.

When Lillabo first opened her eyes, her mouth did not straggle far behind. "Oooh" she whispered. "What'd I find?"

"It's ok, Lil--he--it--saved you. You were a right idiot to go jumping in like that."

"But why is it glowing?" she asked, oblivious as usual to scolding. "Sure and it looks like a giant frog that's swallowed too many fireflies."

"Fireflies'd be green, Lil." Tarnby said, stubbornly. "What's golden and glows?"

"Hot roasted walnuts? Two canaries perched on an oil lamp?" she replied, giggling, and no longer bothering to whisper. "Applesauce Flambé! Ask me another one. I'm good at this game."

"Dragons," a parched voice creaked.

They turned to look at Mirabelle as she crept slowly towards their campfire. "So good of you all to come rushing to save *me*," she murmured. "Pour me a cuppa, you bastards."

"We all figured you're a big girl," said Tarnby. "You can handle anything, right?"

The professor handed her a mug, and noticed her hands were still trembling. He was too polite to mention it, though. One moment of pity for Mirabelle when she was down on her pride, and he'd regret it for the rest of the trip. He had enough on his plate already. If she wasn't going to give him slack about dabbling in small magics, she wasn't going to think much of teatime with Mr. Dragon. Dragons were more ancient than the ancients, he knew. Dragons were practically elven in their lifespans. But that discussion was for later. For the moment, Mirabelle was more or less behaving herself, and it seemed best to move along.

"So, um," Mirabelle said, turning to face the dragon and trying to sound like she had it together as usual. "Come here often?"

"I live here," the dragon replied.

"Always?" asked the professor, forgetting in his eagerness that there were proper protocols for introducing oneself to dragons. Courtesy was never his strong point when on the hunt, and now it seemed as if the trail he had feared was cold might still be able to grant him what he wanted to know.

"A long while. I am no immortal," said the dragon modestly.

"Since before the salt?" asked Lillabo.

"Yes."

"I am an historian," the professor said, finding his professional courtesy at last "Professor Volpe, they call me. I have traveled from far lands to find pieces of the past, so that I can help others understand the ways of the shattered world. Can you tell us about the time of the salt, when the world of men fell?"

"I can, but it is a sad tale," said the dragon. "And where to begin? All stories truly begin well before their proper beginnings."

"The leaving of the elves?" the professor asked hopefully.

"Ah. Then." The dragon thought a moment, remembering, and seeking a proper cadence for the telling of the tale. At last, it began.

"It was a sad time after the elves left us. I thought myself inconsolable and spent the age sulking in my second best hoard. But I was young then, as I shall not be again, and did not realize that one cannot sulk forever.

"Which is not to say that I did not try.

"That hoard lacked the view of the endless sea that pained me so, but was not lacking splendors of its own. Since I could not bear the smell of mithril or the sound of the sea, I consoled myself with the untarnishable treasures wrought by the dwarves. But that, too, is now long gone.

“The age of men was not for our kind, and so I curled up in mountains of pure unwrought ore and slept, seeking splendors in dreams of departed ages. The mountains, I thought, aged eternally, in spans beyond the ken of men.

“And yet not even the mountains escaped the attentions of men, and as they fell, I woke within them. It was as well. Ore is not the same as treasure. After such an age, I knew hunger as I had not known it before. The starving hatchling eats what is put before him.

“Amazed I was to discover what the works of men had wrought. What cities they had spread like a fungus, like corals, like tangled and rotting vegetable roots creeping across the world. Their lights and their noises! Unceasing pulsing coils of light as they wound their way, day and night, across the world, scurrying like inflamed anthills.

“And, oh, the follies I found they had bargained with the efreeti.

“The efreeti, who like the lost elven lords, live forever and fade not. Foolish, foolish men.

“Bottles, they called them, believing they were traps. And all their glittering cities were brought to light by such ingenious inventions. Hah. Nothing more than space for an immortal to rest, to wait, to watch a fermentation brew and bubble. To recline by a roasting fire, slowly preparing the feast.

“Do you recall that men measured their time by the seasons in those days, when we had such things? The men made “calendars” for watching to progression of their own successions, their own rates of decay--do you still use such tools? Let us use them for a moment so you may see the fullness of their folly, as they might have seen it with their own eyes, had they the wit to comprehend such things. A man lives perhaps 400 of their seasons, or a hundred circles of the sun, as they said. An iron bottle--if well tended--might last perhaps ten times that long--give or take an irrelevance.

“And an efreet lives forever.

“You might as well bottle one in a lit beeswax taper.

“There is no bottle made of any thing that outlasts the malice of an efreet.

“And their feasting was terrible when the bottles failed.

“It does not bear thinking of, only that although the world has not been truly bright since the elves departed across the endlessness in their silvered ships, it has been much, much darker since the wedding feast of the efreeti flamed across it in fury.”

The dragon lowered its head and sipped a little water from the pool.

“Forgive my soliloquizing. I have been alone this little while. I have not told a tale in quite some time.”

“But . . . did you see the elves?” Professor Volpe asked

“Indeed. It has been a long while since any have seen elves. I did not think any save myself remembered them anymore.”

“You’re mostly right about that,” the professor admitted. “I’ve looked everywhere for records of them, and there is too little to find. Can you tell me about them? Is there anything left of them here at Rose Well that you can show me?”

“Rose Well?” the dragon said curiously. It pondered a moment. “Ah. You are much mistaken. The “Rose Well” you seek is not *this* Well of Roses. A simple linguistic confusion, I see. The Rose Well you seek is many, many leagues from here. But it is as well you came to this place instead. There is nothing left to see there.”

The professor sat with his mug frozen below his chin, unable to accept the words the dragon was saying. He could not bear to turn to see the look on Mirabelle’s face, but he knew what he would find there. A faint glimmer of opportunity at last lit the terrible darkness of his shameful ignorance, and he stammered, “You have been to the harbor there?”

“Indeed. I have seen the ships of silver both arrive and depart.”

“Then answer me this riddle: how can there be a harbor in the middle of desert, where there is no sea? It makes no sense. It has to be here--this is the only place. It was in a desert, and it had a rose well, and here--this cavern--the water flows to somewhere, does it not? There’s a current in it. A subterranean harbor. It makes sense.”

“Do you doubt me?” said the dragon, and its voice was full of both wonder and warning. “The harbor of the elves needed no water.”

The professor was subdued, suspicious and perplexed.

After a bit, Lillabo said, “Well that’s a pickle. I give up. What’d they do, sail their boats across the sky?”

“Yes.”

The professor looked up as the pieces fell in to place. “Flying ships,” he whispered. “Yes, the ancients wrote of such things. I have seen pictures. But I never thought on it. The idea was absurd--the ancients wrote such a lot of nonsense, I was sure they were fable. Myth.”

“Perhaps they were. Who is to say such things are not also sometimes true?” the dragon replied, a touch smugly, resting its head upon a coil of tail. “But there is nothing left at Rose Well. The Oligarchs took whatever the elves left and buried it in their holy temple some leagues distant.”

The professor looked up. “And where is the buried temple of the Oligarchs?” he asked hopefully.

“Fused beneath the Sea of White Glass,” the dragon replied. “The efreeti were very thorough in the settling of that account.”

Professor Volpe hung his head, yanking at his hair in despair and frustration. The dragon noted that his ears were somewhat longer and more pointed than those of his halfling companions. They were, as his family name implied, foxlike. He was, she considered, only slightly taller than the average halfling, but there *was* something odd about his build.

“You are one of Lady Tomlin’s descendants, are you not?” she asked at last.

He looked up. “You have heard of her?”

“Indeed. She traveled on the last elven ship. I heard of her return.”

“Why? Why did she return?”

“Because the elves had some sympathy for men, I know not why. They sent Thomas to warn men of the folly of meddling with the efreeti. But none there were who could bear to hear his truths, meant to turn men’s minds from folly to sanity, for the sanity of immortals was more than mortals could bear in the brief blossoming and fading of their minds spans.”

“What?” said Tarnby.

“He was wacky,” Lillabo translated freely.

“And so men heeded him not, and were destroyed,” the dragon continued. “And therefore the elves sent one last gift to us.”

“Lady Tomlin.”

“Yes. After the efreeti finished their affairs with the world of men, they grew bored and moved elsewhere. And so the elves returned the last human female in their keeping to what was left of her world.”

“And their gift to her? Was that meant to be a blessing or a curse?”

“Who can say? They did not explain their purposes to me.”

The professor jerked his head away with his teeth clenched, restraining himself from uttering the ungracious word. Grateful he was, but also further frustrated.

Mirabelle filled in the squelched thought on his behalf. “Isn’t that just peachy.” She poured herself a last cup of tea, deliberately draining the pot. “It’s been lovely, but I think it’s about time for us to go now.”

“If it makes a difference to your errand, I *am* glad that you have come,” the dragon offered. “I have not had guests these several years. And I have need of occasional visitors.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in knowing that there’s a large pair of mired oxen upstairs, basically unarmed?” Tarnby offered, trying to sound casual as he estimated the length of time it would take him to sprint to the wellhouse stairs, whether a dragon would be able to fit through them, and whether it was worth trying to stall the inevitable hostilities long enough to gather up the tea supplies and a skin or two of water. Slow roasted is as good as flash fried, he reasoned.

“Excuse me?”

“Oxen, two big ones. Not fatty, but definitely good cuts of muscle on ‘em,” Tarnby offered.

The dragon considered. “That would be lovely. Thank you.” She paused a moment, musing, and then turned her long snakelike neck, and brought her head forward until she was nearly nose to nose with Tarnby, who really had not imagined how large her teeth were until that moment. “You were not concerned that I was thinking of consuming guests, were you?”

“No sir,” Tarnby stammered.

“Ma’am,” the dragon corrected him.

“Ma’am, sir. I mean Ma’am. Yes, Ma’am. No, that is. Hadn’t crossed my mind, that is. Ma’am.”

“Hmm,” said the dragon. “Of course not. That would have been offensive. But what I meant to say, before I was interrupted, was that there is something I’d like you to see.”

“What’s that?”

“Some thing few mortals have ever been offered by a dragon, and none that now live.” She lowered her voice to a breathy whisper. “My hoard.”

“Hoard?” said Mirabelle. “As in ‘treasure’?”

“Yes,” said the dragon. “Follow me. I will show you the West Wing.”

“Which wing is its west one?”

“Shushup and just follow, Lilli. And don’t ask so many questions, alright?”

The dragon’s hoard was beyond reckoning in size, and, they soon found, very nearly incomprehensible, despite a disconcerting quality of orderliness. There were rooms and rooms of things, not piled in heaps as one might have expected, but laid out in curious arrangements. The dragon plainly liked rather a lot of empty space around each of her treasures, or clusters of disparate objects on various themes. One room was all full of things that were blue, including twelve panels of differently hued and saturated glass. Another full of things that were more or less round, such as a ball of bricks with a door and cupola, a giant cement donut, and a series of hoops strung on wires across the ceiling.

The group followed the dragon in hushed but bewildered silence.

Every so often there would be some recognizable thing, such as a chair, or something that might have been usable as a chair, had it not been made of some inhospitable thing such as rusted razorwire.

There were a great number of things that appeared to have been made entirely of rust, or mildew, or, perhaps, many of the objects simply hadn’t withstood the passage of time. There were many things that were nothing more than mouldering heaps of rotting textiles and rust, and no one dared ask whether that was their intended form. Tarnby and Lillabo got distracted for a while speculating about a large lumpy bronze that might once have looked like two people kissing, but was now so covered in verdigris that they couldn’t quite figure why two lovers who had a bucket of Green Slime dumped over their heads hadn’t thrashed around screaming for a bit before getting stuck that way forever.

“What about this one?” Tarnby said, peering up at a sculpture of a man wearing a top hat and playing a violin. The man and the hat were all in white. The violin, purple. (3)

Lillabo peered up with him, standing up on her tiptoes to see. “What is it?”

“Tedious example of Humorous Realism,” the dragon replied.

“What’s that?” asked Lillabo, cocking her head sidewise and considering the object from another angle.

“A type of art.”

“Art?” asked the professor. “This is art?” He had heard of such things.

“That is a matter of opinion,” the dragon replied.

“So, uh, how far does it shoot?” Tarnby asked with a speculative look.

“Excuse me?”

“And how does he know what he’s firing at if he’s not looking towards it?” Mirabelle added. “Is it accurate? How much damage can the art do--could it kill something with one shot, or would you have to use it multiple times?”

“That would depend on the quality of the art, I suppose,” the dragon answered. “Most things do.”

“Do what?”

“Depend on the quality of the art. Most things that are important to *me*, that is.”

“Why?”

The dragon sighed and shook its head. “How much hoard should a bored lord hoard . . .” it murmured as it slid away out of the cavern.

“And why is it purple?” Lillabo called after it, undaunted by the apparent end of the conversation. She buoyantly traipsed off after her new friend. “And why is he wearing a pot on his head?”

“How about this one?” the dragon asked, refusing to discuss the sculpture further. She indicated a very large flat object, roughly rectangular, that was pinned against a wall.

Tarnby considered. “I could do that, but my Gaffer would tan my backside for kicking over the whitewash on one of Gran’s bedsheets like that. What got smeared on it after the whitewash? Lamp black and treacle? When he was through tanning me, she’d skin me and use me for a saddle.”

“I remember hearing about this sort of thing,” the professor said, full of wonder. “There was a name for this school of painting, a philosophy, but I can’t recall what it was. It meant something like ‘hurl it at the wall and see what sticks.’”

“It was an expression of action and joy,” offered the dragon.

“Reminds me of the kitchen when my niece was first learning to eat with a spoon,” said Lillabo. “That was action and joy all right. We laughed until our sides ached.”

The dragon smiled, faintly.

“And what do *you* think of my hoard?” the dragon said to Mirabelle at last, who had trailed along silently and not spoken one word the entire time.

“It’s not what I would have expected,” she replied. The professor shot her a warning look, which she ignored. “Stories I heard, dragons were supposed to sleep on golden heaps of treasure. You’ve got heaps of stuff all right, but heaps of what, I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Indeed. Even dragons can’t spend all day lolling in bed,” the dragon replied. “These things, they are perhaps not as lasting as gold, but I find them more interesting. For one as enlightened as myself, mere ore does not suffice. To be truly counted as treasure, material must be wrought in some way--managed by a master craftsman, or at least a competent coinsmith. And I grew weary of the mathematics of counting coinage long ago. I find that I am weary of it still. You will not find any of that sort of thing here, little fur feet. Nor much else that might fit in a small pocket or bag, I might add.” The dragon yawned, and excused herself. “Feel free to roam about,” she said. “I find myself unexpectedly tired after so long a conversation. As I said, I am out of practice at these things. I think I shall have a bit of a lie down in the front all where we met.”

In the archway, she turned to consider them with a level gaze. “I trust your courtesy and your judgment,” she said. “I believe we understand each other, hrrmm?”

The caverns were laid out in an orderly fashion, and it was not long before the group felt comfortable finding their way from one place to another. They split into two groups after a while, because Mirabelle couldn’t stand much more of the unending patter of Tarnby and Lillabo, and the professor didn’t think it sensible to leave Mirabelle wandering about alone.

The professor and Mirabelle came at last to a small side cavern. Small by comparison to the other halls, that is. Compared to them, it was a broom closet. In its own right, they could easily have fit the town hall of their village entirely inside it, including the steeple. By the entrance arch, as there were for most rooms, there was a small plaque engraved in several languages with the name of the grouping. Most times, the professor found himself none the wiser

for having parsed a line or two of such scripts, but this one intrigued him. “Mass Assembled Clockwork Contrivances,” he read. They shrugged, and entered.

The hall was smooth floored, and full of enormous shapes lying in orderly rows.

“What in the name of furry little footprints is that?” Mirabelle said, gazing at a twisted heap of metal tubes and wheels. “That’s not another art, is it?”

“No,” said the professor, musing. “It has a sort of a saddle, see? And these would have been saddle bags, I think.”

“If it was meant to look like a horse, the smith forgot to stick a head on it,” Mirabelle stated. They stared at it a while.

“I don’t think it was meant to look like a horse,” the professor decided at last. “More like a centaur. Man above, wheels below.”

“A *live* man?” said Mirabelle, the image becoming clear in her mind.

“I think so.”

They walked on through the still darkness by flickering candle light. Mirabelle looked around. The large sarcophagus shaped objects each had small wheels, she now saw, although incomprehensibly too small to reach the floor. Piles of black chunks like charcoal were heaped around each of wheels. “These were wagons, once, weren’t they?” she said.

“Possibly,” the professor replied cautiously.

“And they didn’t need horses to pull them, did they?” she asked. “No hitches in front,” she observed.

There was a look in her eyes the professor didn’t quite like.

She walked around the enormous cavern again, trailing her fingers along the shapes, brushing inches of thick dust from features she wanted to examine.

At last she came to the end of the hall. She stood staring at the very last row of objects beside the very brink of the channel in which the wide underground river flowed through the cavern.

Then she walked briskly along the aisle, scanning each of the shapes with an appraising eye. She halted at the one in the very center of the display. Her breath made a low whistling sound as she inhaled, gazing upon it.

She stood as transfixed as Volpe had been when the dragon had first raised her head from the cavern waters.

At last she stepped forward and ran her hands over the smooth sides of the thing before her. It was not metal, or glass, or wood. Some faintly pliable thing, smooth as ivory, and beneath the dust, red as desire. It was sleek as a seed. It had no wheels, no wings. It needed no explanation.

“This one,” she said hoarsely.

“Mirabelle,” said the professor, “This isn’t a trip to the market square.”

“I’m not buying anything,” she said. “We’re just not leaving here without this.” She turned to face him with a challenging eye.

He knew she spoke the truth. Without the oxen, there was no other way home. Wherever the river went, it was the only path forward to anywhere.

“Miri,” he said, fearing to speak it, “This thing? It was powered by the ancient magics. The kind that destroyed the world. It’s not just a simple matter of light.”

“That much was obvious,” she said. “Horses without heads and carts without oxen, they don’t just move themselves.” A grip and a hoist, and she pulled herself nimbly up over the side. “These boats move without sails or oars, right? And if I’m any judge, this one moves like greased ballista bolts.”

“I swore you a true oath--I’ve never dabbled in these sorts of magics.”

“You’re released from any promises you made to me, old man,” Mirabelle said, kicking down the remains of an old canvas cover and various mooring ropes. “Get the other two busy, and then come back and give me a hand with this thing.”

It took a moment or two to find Lillibo and Tarnby debating the merits of an incomprehensible striped thing that Tarnby liked and Lilli hated, but less than a sentence and a wiggle of cant to give them their assignments.

The professor returned to find Mirabelle flipping through an old toolbox and set of scroll cases. “Here,” she said, tossing him the scrolls. “This looks like your problem.” She hopped down over the side to investigate the mechanisms on the ramp and winches.

The language of the manuals was as archaic as anything he had ever seen, and, he suspected, not strictly grammatical in the usual sense. But it *was* copiously illustrated. He wasn’t sure he could fix anything if the magics were not all still in working order, but invoking them if they *were* still working, well, that was pretty straightforward. And, as Mirabelle had guessed, according to the illustrations, the boat *would* move like a greased ballista bolt. Or something faster than that, if he could think of anything faster than that. He fervently hoped a dragon with a stomach full of oxen was not faster than that.

Tarnby and Lillabo came in awkwardly carrying a thing on spindly legs. It looked like the kind of tripod used to hang a kettle over a fire, only, it was made of wood instead of iron, and instead of having a hook for hanging a pot, it had a shelf. On the shelf was something like a window. In the window, there was—well—that was an interesting question. “I’m sorry to bother you,” Lillabo said, “But we have a question about this one.”

“Yes?” said the dragon, raising her head slightly. Her shoulders seemed to tense slightly, reminding Lillabo of a cat uncertain of whether or not a mouse was in a hole.

“What is it?” Tarnby asked, as they set it down.

The dragon relaxed, slightly. “You tell me,” she replied.

Lillabo backed up a bit and cocked her head to the side. “If you squint a bit, it looks kind of like flowers,” she said after a while. “I’m not sure what kind. Blue, right?” She leaned forward and sniffed it. “But, pee-yuw,” she said. “Smells like old eggs. I like Tandle’s better.”

“Tandle makes better flowers?” the dragon said. Its ears pricked forward.

“Tandle’s the gardener. I don’t think he makes ‘em, he just water’s em and they kind of make themselves,” she explained.

“Ah,” the dragon said with disappointment. “I had rather hoped you knew someone with the skill to craft such things—not real flowers, but images of flowers, or shapes, perhaps.”

“Oh, those. Tarnby can do that,” Lillabo said. “See? He carved my bowl all around the edge. He put flowers *and* hearts on it for me last Lambing Day.” She dug around in her pack for a moment and then held up her wooden bowl and pointed to the carvings. “His flowers look like flowers, see? *Those* are tulips, and *those* are daisies. These ones, these are the hearts. I don’t know why we carve them that way—they don’t look anything like real hearts, with all tubes and juice and stuff—but it’s how you’re supposed to draw hearts anyway, so he did.”

The dragon reached forward its massive head and sniffed at the bowl. The carver’s enthusiasm for the project was apparent at least. “Decorative craft,” she announced at last, with some regret.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Tarnby said, instantly sensing there was something not quite complimentary about the Dragon’s tone.

“It’s not a matter of wrong,” said the Dragon. “Just monetary value.”

The halflings looked at the dragon with a confused expression that was becoming familiar.

“Look,” said the Dragon, “The bowl is very pretty, but how much gold would you trade for it?”

“I don’t have any gold,” said Lillabo.

“Yes, but you have a bowl. How many gold pieces would somebody have to give you for you to give them the bowl?”

“I can’t drink soup out of a gold piece,” Lillabo declared. “And Tarnby made this for me. It’s not for sale.”

“Yeah,” said Tarnby, getting the general jist, “but you’d have traded the bowl and the spoon I made you to go with it for something to drink out of ‘em when we were back on the salt flats, wouldn’t ya?”

“Well, yeah. Then. But there’s plenty of water here. Now if you had some stew to sell, I’d consider it . . . but then, if you gave me the stew, and I gave you the bowl and spoon, we’d neither of us get much dinner, would we?” Lillabo replied. She looked back at the dragon, “Begging your pardon, I’m afraid I still don’t get any of this.”

“Once upon a time,” the dragon began, “the painting upon that easel alone would have been worth enough for my purposes. But I was foolish then, and lingered when I should have struck. And now, as you say, it is a canvas that smells of old eggs, decorated with unrecognizable flowers. The world is much diminished.” She laid her long neck across the floor of the cavern, sinking her head slowly to the bare stone floor. She sighed.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Lillabo said. “Was I mean? Did you paint it? Did I hurt your feelings? It is kind of pretty, even if it’s not like real flowers”

“No,” the Dragon laughed bitterly. “It is not my work, only my hoard. Men and Dwarves and Elves make art . . . made art,” she corrected herself. “A dragon’s only art is collecting.”

“Is that better or worse than ‘decorative craft?’” Tarnby wondered, still somewhat offended.

“Depends on what kind of soup you have in mind for supper,” she replied.

And then, to forestall the inevitable questions, she began again. “My people, certain of my people, when we attain a certain age and level of understanding, we are able to transcend our mortal bodies—to rise above all attachments to things earthly—to ascend to a higher level of understanding. But, in order to do so, we must consume a hoard of sufficient value—to incorporate all that is worthy in it into ourselves—and to rise above the attachment to such things as external objects.”

“Is that fun?” Lillabo asked skeptically.

“I don’t know. I have never achieved it. But I have earnestly desired it, these many centuries.” She raised her head, only to stare down at her reflection in the still waters of the pool. “When my hoard was worthy, it was too precious to me, and I could not bring myself to consume it. And since the fall of men, I have never been entirely certain that its value is intrinsic—that it is sufficiently worthy without them to esteem it.”

She turned to face them, and it seemed that the sadness in her eyes was as deep and ancient as the pool itself. “It would be a great wrong to destroy so much of the little remnant of men—so few of their works remain—and to destroy them without achieving my goal would leave me bereft of hoard and the possibility of ascension. For who should make me a new one?”

“My Gran has a saying about that sort of thing,” Tarnby offered. “‘If you eat that whole cake, young feller, there isn’t going to be any more cake.’”

The dragon cocked its head, considering. “Just so. Your Gran has hit the crux of the matter, I believe. The elves have left us, men have destroyed themselves, and no one has seen a dwarf for an hundred thousand years. The world is left to halflings who carve pretty bowls, which are as valuable as the soup they put in them.”

“Would my bowl really help?” Lillabo offered. “I’d miss it, but Tarnby could make me another one—couldn’t you?” she turned to him for confirmation.

“I don’t think that’s the point, dear,” said the Professor, who had entered quietly.

“You keep it, child,” the dragon replied gently. “To you it is beyond price, and to me . . . I’m afraid it is not quite as valuable as I would need it to be. Though precious, to be sure.”

“And speaking of soup,” Mirabelle interjected, stomping in to the room, “I’m famished. When do we eat?”

“Now’s good by me,” said Lillabo.

“I’m up for it,” Tarnby agreed immediately. “Mind if we cook something in your front room there?” he asked. “Back where we had tea?”

“Not a bit,” said the dragon. “I have had a thought or two concerning some oxen myself.”

“Nothing beats a nice chunk of slow roast salt-crust ox,” Mirabelle opined.

“Indeed. Make yourselves comfortable,” the dragon replied. “I believe I can find the larder myself, if you’ll excuse me.”

“How is she gonna get up there?” Lillabo wondered aloud. “She’s not going through that chimney.”

“Magic,” the voice of the dragon replied from the next room. And then, as far as they could tell, she truly was gone.

They waited a few heartbeats.

Tarnby whistled a few bars of an old drinking tune and picked his nose.

Mirabelle cleaned her fingernails with her pocketknife.

Lillabo looked around the room for something to ask questions about, but found that she had already exhausted most of the possibilities. “What gift did the elves give Lady Tomlin?” she asked at last.

Tarnby stopped whistling, and Mirabelle looked up from her study.

The professor remained staring into the dark pool, and did not turn to face them. “An unceasing impregnation,” he replied at last.

“What?”

“She gave birth continuously for the remainder of her days. One child after another without pause between her pregnancies.”

“Oh. My sister does *that*,” said Lillabo dismissively.

“I’ll grant you the courtesy of assuming your sister bears her husband’s children. Lady Tomlin’s children all bore the long ears and slanted eyes of the elves, and there lived no man in all the world to touch her.”

“And you’re one of her grandchildren,” Mirabelle said.

“Many generations removed, but yes.”

“Which is why you want to go to the Sea of White Glass and have a poke around to see what’s left.” Tarnby added.

“Yes.”

The professor fell silent, and the hall grew quiet but for the lapping of water as they thought about that.

“Suits me.”

“Why not?”

“Ok then,” said Mirabelle. “Let’s do it.”

The cavern seemed strangely quiet after the halflings left. Peaceful, but empty in a way it had not felt empty for centuries.

The dragon coiled herself about her treasures—and stared at them with dissatisfaction.

Blurry, she thought, smells of old eggs. I could do that. One more jejune comment from the perky little blonde and she surely would have permitted herself an accidental squashing tail sweep, though it cost her her immortal soul. She’d have been terribly apologetic about it, to be sure. She wondered whether the little group would have missed the darling child very much. She recalled the profusion of affection expressed in the carved bowl and resigned herself to admitting that they might have.

They had not understood. All these things, once so precious, not only to men, but to her. Her things. Her treasures. She had been quite the connoisseur. And patron. It had been a good age—full of drama and innovation—fads even. But always something with a surprise—a thought that kept the endless roll of ages from monotony, from staleness. Men had been fixated with novelty, but for all their shortsightedness, novelty had been something a thousand year old

dragon had been delighted to discover. How long can one wallow in the golden torcs of prehistory? She had contemplated the eternal shininess of the dwarven hoard until it dulled her mind with its repetition and unchanging prettiness. To ascend, one needed a transcendent mind. Not to remain fixed, but to grow in wisdom, experience, understanding. She had bartered the lot of the dwarven hoard to support her artisans and salons, to found the great art schools, to grow her hoard in a dozen repositories around the world.

Good riddance to amateur art critics, she thought. At least they had not valued anything enough to attempt to steal anything other than the boat. And they *had* attempted to pay for the theft, after a fashion. Lillabo had left her the carved bowl, plainly misunderstanding her use of the word “precious.”

I will follow them down the river in a while, she thought. Too soon after eating, and I shall have cramps. She belched. Tomorrow. I’m sure I can’t be bothered with it today.

Out of habit, she cancelled the light spell and lay in the dark a while, staring at what remained in the black and white view of her darkvision. Light, she had found, faded the colors of most paintings. They lasted longer in the dark. And she had grown accustomed to viewing them this way. Color--color was all about color, but black and white was about everything else. The light had been necessary for the halflings to confirm her fears about the state of her hoard, but it was unneeded now.

As, apparently, was the rest of her “collection,” she brooded. The only thing of value they thought worthy of stealing was something they found useful. Useful! Useful was several ranks lower than “decorative” or “representational.” Nothing useful was *ever* transcendent.

“I’m sorry, was I cruel? Did you paint that?” she mimicked. She dug her talons in the clay at the edge of the pool until deep water ran in the furrows. “I *should* have squashed her.” She lifted her claw full of clay and squeezed it until the clay ran through her talons in great globs. She imagined the sensation of it when she caught up with them tomorrow. “There’s your ‘hurl it at the wall and see what sticks!’” she thundered, hurling the blob into Hall A. “I *will* consume it--I will consume every last rotting shred of it and be free of it. I hate you!” she cried at West Wing. “You are not a hoard. You are *nothing!*” She crouched, inhaled and then charged, roaring “Better, I will incinerate it! There will be nothing left of men--it will all be as the efreeti intended!” She inhaled again, feeling her rage truly stoking within her this time, as it had not done in decades.

She exhaled. Great goutts of flames billowed from her jaws.

Hall A was utterly consumed.

When the flames exhausted their fuel, little was left of the little there had been.

Sick with morbid curiosity, she returned to the site to observe the thoroughness of her pique.

Among the ashes, a great twisted lump of glowing ceramic lay pierced through what had been her favorite stained glass window. The holocaust had fused the glass to the clay.

“Well there’s an adolescent expression of angst,” she opined reflexively. “Raw, emotional and honest perhaps, but crude in execution to say the least.”

“Although . . .,” she considered. “Notwithstanding the immaturity of the piece,” she lay down in front of it to contemplate it further, “I think I rather like it.”

She lay down in the smoking ashes of Hall A to watch as the incandescent object cooled.

“Crude, yes, but full of integrity and passion.”

The colors changed as the object cooled, and the room faded from color as the light source failed. “Did you paint that?” she found herself wondering. “Indeed, I did.” she thought. “I, Noachsvornvoren, did that.” It looked good in black and white, too.

She stared at it a while, well pleased, and not nearly as sorry for the loss of the window as she thought she might have been.

“Ten great schools and twelve great museums I, Noachsvernvorel, built, and thought they were my art. Dragons do not make art. They hoard it. But I, Noachsvernvorel, *I* am transcendent. I am an artist myself. Me. I have made art with my own claws and breath.”

She looked down at her talons. But these, she thought, these will not do. Anything else done in that mode would be derivative. Clumsy, really, she thought, gazing upon her first beloved work. Amateurish. It cannot be refined with claws.

But I can do better.

I will need . . . the fingers of Lady Banks, she thought. It had been so long since she had assumed that form, and wandered the world in search of her pets and her investments.

She remembered the shape. She had had long, fine fingers in those days, an aristocrat’s hands. It was no trouble to recall the shape--it was as yesterday.

She looked down at them again. Yes, she thought, these would do.

They are perhaps not yet the hands of a sculptor or potter. But I have plenty of time to learn.

She looked back up at her Composition No. 1. With that as a beginning, from here I can only improve.

She cracked her clean new fingers experimentally, testing the length and strength and dexterity of them. (4)

Yes.

I will have plenty of time to learn.

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footnote 1: box

footnote 2: cavern

footnote 3: busker

footnote 4: hands