

The End of the World

Even Mirabelle's swearing would have been better than the silence that settled over the little group.

They had hardly paused at the wreckage of the boat when they had regained the river. Mirabelle had scavenged a few quick things while she waited for the others to catch up. And then they had run as fast and as far as their starved, exhausted and battered bodies would carry them.

Beside the river there had been a narrow walkway, carved into the lip of the tunnel. Running along it, the professor noticed that the walls of the tunnel were smooth in this place. Too smooth and even. They could not have been carved by the flow of the water. It was as if they were running a race inside the largest pickle crock in the world.

And then they had come to the wreckage at the end of the tunnel, rather sooner than they would have expected. The river threw itself with wild abandon over a heap of crumbling rubble and twisted metal. The sunlight beyond was dazzling after so long underground, and rainbows broke through the shattered spray of the river as it twisted, broke, and plummeted into the deep gorge below.

Lillabo had looked down at the 500 foot drop. "Good thing we weren't racing along in that boat," she had said.

And then the awful silence had settled its teeth into them.

If they hadn't wrecked the swift boat, they wouldn't have been captured by illithids, and Lillabo wouldn't have had to poison Tarnby to give the rest of them a chance to escape. They wouldn't have had to leave his tortured corpse there behind. But they all would have died together scant minutes later, in one clean, quick, sudden inevitability.

Each of them felt selfish and ashamed for having thought it.

The halflings stood at the lip of the walkway, staring out over the panorama below. Beyond the rocks and river far beneath their feet, the other side of the gorge was a much lower hill, and they could clearly see over it to the low plain on the far side of it. A sizable town could be seen on that side of the hill, its farmlands stretching nearly to the dunes that lay as a barrier between them and a vast, shimmering expanse of silvered blue.

A last few islands poked their heads out of the water, before the ocean yawned and stretched itself to the horizon.

“We have come to the utmost west,” Professor Volpe said at last, staring out over the sea. “It is the end of the world.”

They were glad of the ropes in Mirabelle’s pack, and of a faint path that seemed to carve its way down the wall of the canyon. Not so much stairs as a series of footholds, it was clear that other travelers had passed this way before, although perhaps not for some long while. It was a long scramble downward that managed to cover each of them in both mud and dust before they reached the valley floor.

The wind was brisk but the sun was warm. They didn’t fancy trying to make a good first impression in town covered in filth, so Mirabelle and Lillabo went to rinse off in the pool at the base of the waterfall. The professor wandered downstream a bit, and tried to avert his eyes discretely while they cleaned up, but the very act of doing it reminded him that Tarnby would have peeked. He’d have given Tarnby the disapproving eyebrow, and Tarnby would have twinkled a grin back at him and started whistling, innocently looking up at the sky. And the professor would have scowled outside, and smiled inside, his mind full of imagining what Tarnby had seen, without having actually committed any offense against his friends.

It ached to think he would not scold Tarnby for peeking again.

“Hola!” a voice called “El ningún bañarse en el resorte sagrado, por favor. Se prohíbe! Ni hao? Namaste? Hallo?”

The professor spotted a halfling lad waving and calling. The boy had dark brown skin and a shaggy mop of fair hair. “Hello?” Volpe called back.

The lad smiled. “Geen het zwemmen. Het baden is verboden!” He gestured towards the girls, regretfully.

The professor thought about that one for a bit. For moment, he thought he caught a glimpse of that same sort of twinkle he’d been reminiscing about, as if the boy had watched their long slow climb down the slope, and actually waited until the girls were mostly undressed before coming to warn them not to go in the pool. The boy, he noted, had almond shaped eyes. “Girls!” the professor called. “I think he wants you to get away

from the water. Something about prohibited or forbidden, but I'm not getting the rest of it."

The girls grabbed their things and strolled over. "Seems like every place we go, we get into trouble," Mirabelle mumbled.

"Seems like it's been taking us less and less time to do it, too," Lillabo added. "I think we've broken some sort of record this time--we haven't even gotten *into* the town yet."

"It's a gift," the professor replied. "Let's try to be restrained in our use of it this time around. Seems like there is only one town left before us. After this, there's no place left for us to go but back the way we came."

The girls nodded grimly. Back the way they came was too terrible a thought, so forward on best behavior was an option they were going to have to settle for.

"Can you take us to town?" the professor asked the boy, gesturing in the direction of the village.

The boy nodded. "Si. Da. Ok." He gestured for them to follow. "Er zijn baden in het dorp. Ik zal u tonen."

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The boy brought them to a beautiful wood framed building with walls that seemed to be made mostly of paper. Golden carp swam lazily under the porch of the house, which was perched over a pond. Cautiously, the little group walked up the stairs. Inside a dark haired halfling woman wearing a black cotton robe welcomed them, bowing courteously. She fussed over them, speaking just enough Common for them to be able to explain that they were travelers, and that they were tired and hungry and needed a bath. She led them into a exquisitely tiled room with a large pool of steaming water. She indicated the small sponges and basins for cleaning themselves before bathing in the sparkling clear water. She brought them tea, and porridge, and freshly folded towels.

The woman looked askance at their heap of their filthy and tattered belongings, and then turned to them to pantomime the motions of doing laundry and mending. They all agreed that *that* was a fine idea. She gathered up their things by wrapping a sheet

around them, so as to avoid actually touching them, and took them away. A few moments later she returned with some plain black cotton robes like her own, presumably for them to use in the meanwhile. She laid them in a neat pile beside the folded towels.

The girls stripped, scrubbed, and splashed in happily.

The professor averted his eyes, and tried not to let the empty space in the pool remind him of Tarnby.

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After their baths, they managed to offer the dark haired woman enough money to elicit a smile and a courteous bow. They were feeling sufficiently grateful that Mirabelle and Lillabo managed to keep a straight face while following the professor's lead and bowing back to the woman as she had bowed to them. Bowing didn't feel quite so silly wearing robes like hers. They hoped the borrowed clothes would help them to fit in. They hoped they had understood correctly that their own clothes would be ready in the morning.

The trip to the bathhouse nearly emptied their treasury, but they all agreed that it had been well worth the expense. They smiled as they wandered towards the main part of town, hoping they would be able to find some way to earn a place to sleep for the night.

They wandered through the market. It seemed odd after so many weeks in the wilderness to be surrounded by the bustle of a village again. Mirabelle shadowed the professor's footsteps, feeling anxious about being surrounded by so many curious eyes. The market was an enormous one, full of every thing imaginable: vegetables, belts, breads, bolts of fabric, balls of yarn, broken farm implements, tradesmen repairing broken implements, puppies, sheep, joints of meat, shellfish, crayfish, dried fish, smoked fish, seaweed, sealskins and otter pelts. Long strings of dried peppers, ropes of garlic, bags of meal. Pottery bowls and mugs and casseroles. Tiny teapots with matching cups. Strange cylindrical pastries etched with patterns of beautiful flowers. Colorful paper effigies of farm animals hung down from the rafters of one stand, while a long string of dark brown ducks hung from another, their beaks gaping open.

Six halflings wearing striped woolen capes and large hats were playing music on pipes and tall drums in an open square where many families were picnicking. Many of the families were using sticks to eat long strands of something white soaked in bowls of broth. It made Lillabo shudder to see them dangling the strands like tentacles from their mouths before they slurped them in with obvious enjoyment. She looked away, somewhere else, anywhere else.

A family of craftspeople sat making dolls--the father casting porcelain faces and settling them gently into a bin, the mother painstakingly tufting hair, a grandmother delicately painting lips and eyebrows, and six small children carefully knitting bodies and clothes.

The professor kept a calm but firm hand on Lillabo's shoulder as they walked through the market. He read the look in her eyes when she saw the bin full of doll heads, moments before the thought actually traveled from her impulsive fingertips to her brain. "The *last* village," he reminded her. "The *very* last village. And you are too old for dolls, young lady."

Lillabo pouted and stuffed her hands deep in her sleeves, since the borrowed robes had no pockets. It wasn't fair. Here they were surrounded by everything anybody could possibly want, and they had nothing in their inventory but for her itchy fingers. If Tarnby were here, they'd have found a corner and a couple of rocks, or even old fruits that someone had thrown away. Borrowed a few doll heads, perhaps. And he'd have juggled and sung one of his funny songs, and they'd have had lunch money in a few minutes. But there was no Tarnby. There was no Tarnby. She tried not to think about it, or the smell of spiced fish stew that drifted over the crowd.

A bewildering patter of voices were in the air and it was impossible to make any sense of the language. Sometimes the professor thought he caught a cognate, and sometimes he reckoned that he could find no order to the language because it wasn't only one language. There were as many types of clothing. It was hard to get a sense of what his group ought to be wearing to blend in properly, but no one seemed to remark their loaned robes, so they seemed sufficient. The merchants all seemed accustomed to haggling in multiple modes and sign language, and perfectly comfortable with strangers who did not know their way around.

They came to a row of large stone balls in the center of an open plaza near the picnicking families and musicians. Lillabo sat down on one. Her feet hurt, along with the rest of her, and she was tired. She listened to the music of the men in the striped capes. Volpe and Mirabelle stood near her.

“You know what I’ve noticed?” Mirabelle said.

“What?” asked the professor.

“Ears. I’m noticing a lot of funny ears around here.”

“Mmm,” agreed the professor. He had noticed that, too. About one out of every thirty halflings they passed bore the distinctive signs of Lady Tomlin’s children.

An old woman sat in the center of the plaza, with a crowd of festively dressed young lasses helping her. She held a long wooden paddle with holes carved in it along the edges, and another hole carved in its center. The girls were helping her to tie long skeins of colored wool to the holes. Each skein was a different color, and the balls of yarn made an approximate rainbow. A group of young lads were busily erecting a tall pole in the center of the square, painted with similar colors. They occasionally paused in their hoisting to take turns beating each other with sticks and bells.

“A maypole?” Mirabelle wondered, mentally putting the two objects together. “It can’t be Mayday already?” She shook her head, confused. Sure and the weather felt like May, but . . . but it had been September when they had begun the trek towards the Sea of Salt and though they had traveled many days, perhaps even weeks, surely it had not been months? Not six months?

“No,” said the professor, also trying to calculate how long they had been on the road, and unable to come up with an answer that made sense. “It can’t be May. I saw the starhunter high in the sky the night before we went underground--he’s usually on the horizon by late April, and by May he should be gone altogether. We can’t have traveled the underground river more than a week or so.

“But wouldn’t that mean that it’s near solstice?” Lillabo asked. “Which is ridiculous, because it *feels* like May here.”

“I don’t know,” the professor replied. “We’ll have to find someone who speaks our language and ask. Maybe we lost track of more time than we thought when we were . . .” and then he could not finish the thought aloud. He did not need to. They knew what

he meant. Not one of them wanted to recall their time in the illithid slave pits, or what had happened there.

The old woman clapped her hands, and the village girls all stood up, shaking out their pretty striped skirts and petticoats. The spar for the top of the Maypole was now finished, and ready for some enterprising young lady to clamber to the top of the pole and install. This much was obvious, even though Professor Volpe could not make out a word of their dialect: the pole had deliberately been erected before the top spar was complete, and the obliging young men had cheerfully greased the pole to enhance the experience. They were now standing around leering. The girls were now all giggling and gossiping and pushing each other to try first. The old woman held up a flowered wreath to crown the champion who should manage the feat, and called an exhortation and a challenge to the girls. The girls held back, with a great pantomime of shyness.

By this time, a substantial crowd had gathered to watch.

The professor glanced sideways. Mirabelle was, of course, looking disdainful of the whole celebration. But Lillabo, he had expected her to be interested in the obvious challenge. Greased or not, that pole was well within the range of her abilities. And the Queen of the May was bound to get fed something and have some prize beyond the floral crown and bragging rights. Instead Lillabo sat on her round rock and stared dully across the plaza.

The old woman laughed, and pulled a pair of knitting needles from her sewing kit. She grabbed her long gray streaked hair, gave it a twist and stuck both needles through it, securing a bun. Then she rolled up her sleeves, and approached the pole with great deliberation, flexing her arms and licking her lips thoughtfully. The village girls squealed. The old woman stood before the pole, rubbing her hands together and making kissy-kissy faces at the appalled youths. They catcalled and pleaded with her not to attempt the climb. The girls giggled uncontrollably. The old woman pulled a crochet hook from her pocket and made suggestive gestures at the boys, who cringed, and resorted to bribing her with various things. She grabbed one of them by the hair and planted a mock smooch upon his lips with such force that he fell over backward. One of the girls came running over to see if he was ok, and a general chant and much clapping asserted that she had just volunteered herself for the trial. The old woman laughed and

slapped the girl on her ample rump. Then she pulled the needles from her hair, tossed them and the crochet hook onto the spar and its skeins, offering the lot of them to the elected girl. (1) She retired to her bench, chuckling, brushing out her skirts, and fishing out her pipe and leaf for a well earned smoke.

The girls got to work helping their friend begin the ascent.

“You may think her a ludicrous sight today,” a quiet voice said behind them, “but you should have seen her in her day. *She* was a Solstice Queen to remember.”

Professor Volpe startled. He had not heard anyone approach. Mirabelle whirled, crouching defensively. Lillabo sat quietly on her rock, staring at the cavorting young lads and lasses without as much as a blink.

“Hello,” the tall man said. “I am Miguel.”

Professor Volpe tried not to stare. The man was taller than any halfling has ever been. A giant, with broad hands, fair hair and dark brown skin. And pointed ears, longer than Volpe’s own. His mouth worked with silent surprise. One of Lady Tomlin’s own children? It had to be. Also, very likely, the father of the boy who had met them at the pool. The resemblance was remarkable.

“Welcome to the village of Berryessa,” Miguel continued smoothly. “You’ve only just made it in time for la Celebración del Solsticio. I’m sorry I didn’t have more time to help you get settled in before things got started. It is a great business, preparing the fiesta.”

“Solstico,” Volpe said. “So it *is* solstice?”

“Yes,” replied Miguel, sounding mildly amused.

“The whole point of maypoles is that they’re for *May*,” Mirabelle insisted.

“The point of ‘maypoles,’ as you call them, is to invoke the Ladies’ blessings of fertility upon the community,” Miguel said. “Our agricultural cycle begins here, with the winter rains, so we celebrate here. By May, it’s a bit late for that sort of thing and we’re busy with first harvest.”

Lillabo replied automatically, “It’s not raining.”

Miguel laughed. He had a big, charming laugh. “Indeed not, senorita. But it is the season for rain, and we will likely have some this evening. You will need a place to stay

by then. I offer you my hospitality. And you and your lovely wife as well,” he said to Volpe.

“She’s not my wife,” Volpe replied at the exact same moment that Mirabelle blurted out “He’s not my husband.”

“Ah, indeed. My mistake. I am so very sorry. You are unmarried?” he asked Mirabelle.

“Yep.”

“Then, if your ears are round as well, you are welcome to participate in the festivities, if you wish,” Miguel said, indicating the throng cheering beside the pole, “and your friend too, if she is also a senorita? It would be an honor to welcome either of you as my queen for the evening.”

Mirabelle’s eyes narrowed. “Lillabo’s sitting this one out ‘cause she just poisoned the man who had first claim on her maidenhood, and she’s not in a particularly festive mood.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Miguel replied softly. “And you?”

Mirabelle lifted her pudgy hands and made a rude gesture to the half-elf. “I’m no maiden,” she spat, “And I’m not interested in bedding you.”

Miguel stepped forward. With curious look on his face, and a slow, deliberate motion he gently caught her upraised right arm, wrapping his fingertips around her wrist.

Mirabelle swore and reached with her other hand to wrench his grip free, but he slipped his right hand into her left sleeve and placed his thumb on her left wrist.

And then, as pressed his fingertips across the nerves of both her wrists, she felt her arms become rigid with paralysis. He shifted his grip slightly, and she watched with growing frustration and rage as those of her fingers which had been clenched uncurled themselves(2).

He stared implacably down into her furious eyes. “There is no need for hostility,” he said quietly. “I am quite capable of understanding the phrase ‘no thank you.’”

Mirabelle stared at their locked hands trying to fight down a sense of panic. Her fingers were passing from tingly to numb, and this man-elf was touching her. She wanted

to get away. She *needed* to get away. She did the only thing she could think of and jerked her knee upward, hard and fast.

She was never quite certain how she had passed from that moment into the next one, in which she found herself face down on the paving stones with her arms pinned behind her back. She had a vague memory that there had been a point when she had decided that she would like to keep her elbows intact, and that everything else had seemed to flow naturally from that point. On the whole, she had found the impact with the pavement to be remarkably gentle, as if he had somehow contrived both to knock her off balance and support her weight as she fell.

“Let’s try this again,” he said leaning over her. “You will be polite, and I will not hurt you, or require any thing of you that you do not wish to give. This is a festival of joy, and will remain one. No fee will be required for my hospitality other than your common courtesy.”

“I am not a f---ing courteous person,” Mirabelle replied.

Miguel sighed. “That is your choice.”

“Please,” said Professor Volpe on her behalf, “These last few days, they’ve been difficult for all of us.”

And then to her he leaned down and said, “Please Mirabelle, the last village. This is the last place, and we need to stay here at least few days before we can think about where we might go next. Miguel has offered us help, and we need it. Can you try to be polite to him, just this once? I swear I will not let anyone harm you, but you must stop looking for trouble.”

“Get. Him. Off. Of. Me.”

“Please?” Volpe added.

“Please,” she added through gritted teeth.

Miguel released her. “I apologize for any misunderstanding,” he said affably.

Volpe scratched his head. Mirabelle insults and then attacks the town elder, and he apologizes to her. They might be able to make a go of this place after all. If the girls could just manage to keep themselves out of trouble. Just this once. Reflexively, he turned to stare at the round rock where Lillabo had been sitting, half expecting her to

have disappeared the moment he had turned his back on her. But no, there she sat, still, her head drooping and nodding with exhaustion.

“Us too,” Volpe replied to Miguel. “Is there somewhere Lillabo could rest for a bit? We’re all perhaps a bit too worn out for the festival just now.”

“Of course,” Miguel replied, first noticing Lillabo’s drowsiness. “Where are my manners? It is no trouble at all.” He knelt before Lillabo, so that his face was level with hers. “Can you walk, child?” he asked gently. Receiving no reply, he turned to Mirabelle for permission, “If I may?” And then he scooped Lillabo up against his shoulder and carried her as a father carries an exhausted infant. “Follow me.” She seemed so tiny and limp against his broad shoulder. Miguel led them from the market.

* * * * *

And Lillabo dreamed.

She dreamed about the bin of doll heads in the market.

A heaped wagon full of empty, staring eyes, all around her.

She was in the middle of them.

She was one of them.

A disembodied head, without arms to reach or fingers to touch.

Where was her body?

They were all talking.

All the heads were talking.

Talking about sunlight.

Talking about an aching emptiness.

Talking about hunger.

She was, too.(3)

Lillabo woke, shaking and terrified, in a strange dim room. For a moment, she lay wondering where she was in that familiar way that travelers often do, knowing the answer would come to her in a few minutes. But the longer she lay, the less familiar

anything looked. Cracks of golden sunlight seeped in around the edges of the shutters that blocked the window. She opened the shutters and peered out at the setting sun, just ducking below a blanket-like layer of low clouds rolling in from the sea. Nothing on the street below looked familiar either. She turned and padded toward the door of the room very softly, listening carefully to hear what noises came from beyond the room.

She was relieved to recognize the professor's drawl quietly conversing with someone--someone male. An unfamiliar deep voice, with a strange accent. The stranger was telling the professor a tale of an immense city, full of ancient magics--a city which was perhaps the very source of ancient magics--which had sprawled to cover and consume the world, and how the efreeti had broken the edge of the world to sink the hearts of men into the sea. Apparently the work of the efreeti was not yet complete, and the valley had troubles with occasional cracking and splitting still. "El Valle del Placer del Corazón derrite sin fin en el mar," he said, quoting some verse. "The Valley of Heart's Delight crumbles endlessly into the sea," he translated. "But very slowly," he added. "So we do not worry about it over much."

Mirabelle's voice cut in occasionally, too, and she seemed very subdued and relaxed. Drunk? No, Mirabelle never got drunk. But there was certainly an ever so slightly tipsy edge to her voice when she spoke.

The professor asked a question that Lillabo couldn't quite make out, and she heard the stranger laugh and reply clearly, "The Maypole is not wrapped all in one color, is it? The beauty of the thing is the weaving of each hue, each strand retaining its unique shade and shimmer. We speak many languages here because we come from many places. I have gathered the settlements from all along the coast and brought them here to this good place. There is plenty of fish, and game, and the farms are as fertile as one could desire. We have fresh water in plenty year round from the ancient aqueduct. It is a good place."

"The aqueduct? Is that the river we followed?" she heard the professor ask.

"Yes, yes. The ancients drowned a high valley and build a long pipe to bring the water here. The original terminus now lies broken beneath the sea, but we are well content with our waterfall. Year round it flows, when all our other streams have dried with the summer heat."

She heard him place a small object, perhaps a cup, on a wooden table. “Now if you will excuse me, the sun is setting, and I have a festival to attend. You’re sure you will not join us? We will have plenty of time for the telling of stories and recounting of histories tomorrow.”

Lillabo waited until she heard him leave, and then stepped out into the room. Mirabelle and Volpe were sitting on brightly colored cushions sharing a bottle of wine. Several bottles, from the looks of things, although Lillabo suspected the professor had been nursing the same small cup for some time while Mirabelle sampled various things.

“Ah, you’re awake,” Volpe said, standing up, a bit unsteadily. “Did you sleep well?”

Lillabo shook her head, remembering the awful dream. “I don’t feel rested at all.”

He looked a bit disappointed. “Would you like to go to the festival?”

“No thanks, I don’t think I’m up to it.” She sniffed the air. “What *are* you drinking Mirabelle?”

Mirabelle looked around at the various ceramic jugs, carafes and bottles. “This one,” she said after a bit, picking up a tall earthenware jug. “Cactus juice, from what Miguel said. Prof’s having the rice water.”

“Wine,” he corrected her.

Mirabelle rolled her eyes, unimpressed. She cast an appraising eye at Lillabo, and then looked around for something in a green glass bottle. “This is probably your deal. Tastes like pink grape juice, from what I can tell. Too sweet for me, but Miguel liked it.”

Lillabo accepted the bottle and sank into a cushion. There was food, too. Fresh vegetables and pickled ones, flat breads and beans. There was even some leftover chicken and onions. Everything tasted heavily of garlic, except the wine. The sounds of music and celebration drifted through the open window on the fine night air. To Lillabo’s mind, it was every bit as good as being at the festival, less the crowds and the bustle.

They chatted for a while, and then were startled by sudden immense noises from outside. Rushing to the window, they were awed to see bright colored lights flashing and falling in the sky. “It is the fireworks Miguel mentioned,” Volpe said, his eyes wide with wonder, “Like the one he showed us, only many more, and much larger.” They watched for what seemed like a very long time, alternately wincing from the noises and gasping at

the spectacle of lights. Eventually it ended, and everyone staggered off to bed. Lillabo hoped she had drunk enough of the pink wine to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She had no such luck.

Lillabo dreamed of whiteness.

She dreamed of fog creeping across the sky at sunset --no--steam covering the windows of the bathhouse--no-- she dreamed of coils of white tendrils branching and spreading like ferns, like frost on a windowpane. Like frost that covers a windowpane slowly until the sun is blotted out. Only without the windowpane--as if there were nothing between her and the sun, except for her tendrils of frost reaching out across the sky to embrace, to suffocate, to smother the hated thing.

She dreamt of herself reaching with impossible hunger to swallow the sun in a lattice of frost cold roots, to suck its warmth from the sky until there would be no light, no warmth anywhere and all would be cold, cold and dark as Tarnby's rose.

(4)

She woke, crying. It was dark, and her head hurt terribly.

Mirabelle and the professor came, and somebody held her for a bit. She could not make any sense of anything they said, but she was glad they were there. After a while, sleep claimed her again, like a dark undertow pulling her down.

The professor sat, brushing the sticky strands of Lillabo's hair from her forehead. He was glad she was asleep again, snoring peacefully, but he worried. She had been tossing and mumbling all night, and even awake and crying she hardly seemed to know who they were. It was so unlike her.

Mirabelle sat beside him a while, watching too. After a bit, she laid her head on his shoulder.

The professor became nearly paralyzed with awkward fear at that moment. Surreptitiously, he glanced sideways to make sure it really was Mirabelle. Mirabelle never touched anybody if she didn't have to.

She caught him looking at her, and she smiled. That also was creepy. Only the wry twist at the corner of her mouth was familiar, and he held on to that for dear sanity. She is playing me for something, he thought. Ok. What?

He turned to ask her what was on her mind, and caught her lips full on his own. It would have been a good kiss, her fingers curling through his hair and pulling him in close, had it not been so very . . . very . . . abnormal. He pulled away, his pulse racing. "One of us," he stammered quietly, "is probably under the influence of something. I, for one, am inclined to think I am hallucinating."

She sat back, letting him go. His shock seemed to amuse her. "I never get drunk," she reminded him, and indeed, she did sound dead sober.

"Then why?"

"Because I like you," she said. "Because you're kind. And because I think the entire village is out there lying in each other's arms tonight, and I am tired of being alone."

"That's not a good enough reason," he said, backing up.

"It isn't?"

"Mirabelle, I . . . can't. Your family betrayed you, and you came to me and I've done everything I can to help you . . . but this, this is not right."

She looked disappointed, and a bit hurt.

"I couldn't bear the thought of you hating me afterwards," he added, hoping it would soften the refusal. "I promised you no one would hurt you, and that includes me."

"I'm not asking you to hurt me," she replied. "Maybe later, if we feel like it," she added wryly. "But just now, I'm tired of being your broken little girl. I *was* a scared young thing when you met me, but I've grown up a lot since then. I'm ok now. Really. I am."

He shook his head, gathered up his blankets and walked out to the room where they had had supper.

"How old do I have to be to not be your surrogate daughter any more?" she asked following him.

"Good night, Mirabelle," he replied, laying his blankets on the floor by the table. He lay down, thinking about all the young halflings he had seen grow from children to

women to old grandmothers. He could not explain to her that he would see her as withered as the woman who threatened to climb the maypole this afternoon, and still think of her as a child. Lady Tomlin's gift. Lady Tomlin's curse. He thought about Miguel's endless succession of May Queens, and the village full of his descendants. He wondered how Miguel managed it. He imagined the kick Tarnby would have given him for being an idiot. He pulled his blankets over himself, rolled over and closed his eyes.

Alone, Mirabelle sat cursing the darkness, quietly.

Lillabo moaned in her sleep, and started shuddering again.

Lillabo dreamed.

She dreamed she was naked, and tied to the maypole.

No, she dreamed she was the maypole, and the villagers were dancing around her,

binding her to it with their colored strands, weaving in and out in their many colored dance.

And she looked at them and realized that each strand was like the long white skeins she had seen families eating with sticks in the marketplace. And she was terribly hungry. She had but to bend her mouth to them, and she began to suck.

Rather than reeling the villagers in like so many small fish, she felt herself extend out to them through those long colored lines. White lattices of lace spun down each strand like spiderwebs, like spreading frost. The color drained from each line as she sucked, and the colors flowed in to her like sweet juices.

At her feet, the villagers lay drained of colors, covered in white lace. They crumbled and sank like heaps of damp ashes.

"I need you, too," she heard her voice say, but it was Tarnby's voice, and he meant her, Lillabo. "Come back. You left me here. I need you. Come back."

She woke beside a snoring Mirabelle. Late morning light rimmed the shutters of the window.

She began packing her bags.

Quietly, ever so quietly, Lillabo opened the door, and went out.

* * * * *

When Mirabelle and the professor awoke at last, Lillabo had long been gone.

Mirabelle and Volpe searched the whole house, noting only that her pack had left with her, and that Miguel had not returned home in the night. Miguel was probably asleep in the arms of his queen, but where was Lillabo? With a sick feeling in his stomach, Volpe had a terrible intuition. He raced outside and turned to face the cliff wall that reared up over the valley in the distance. There, on the steep path he could see a small pale figure ascending, slowly. Mirabelle saw the ashen look on his face and turned to look. "Where does she think she's going?" she cried.

"We must catch her--run! Begin the climb. I will leave a note for Miguel so he will know where we have gone and then catch up as fast as I can. But stop her! Do not go any further than the ford without me if you cannot catch her. Run!"

"Oh, I'll catch her all right," said Mirabelle, and off she flew.

* * * * *

The climb up the treacherous slope was almost as bad as the descent had been, and worse for being rushed. The tunnel was as they remembered it, but it seemed more ominous now to be going willfully into that darkness instead of fleeing from it.

Mirabelle made her way cautiously down the tunnel, her heart pounding from the exertion of the climb and her fear. When she reached the wreckage of their enchanted boat at the ford, there was no sign of Lillabo. Impatient and angry, she turned to wait for Volpe. It seemed like ages before the professor reached her, and he was flushed and breathing hard when he arrived. He gestured for her to wait one minute further while he caught his breath enough to speak. Then, without explanation, he pulled her close and

whispered a chant, an ancient invocation to the Ladies for their protection from all things corrupt and foul. Twice he recited the chant in a whisper that could barely be heard above the rushing river. Mirabelle hoped the Ladies had fine sharp ears to hear such a thing. At the conclusion of the first recitation, he kissed Mirabelle upon the forehead. At the second, he bowed himself low to the river and placed his fingertips upon his own brow. He stood silently for a moment, and then exhaled deeply and straightened himself. "Ok," he said. "Let's go."

The path to the illithid settlement was not hard to follow. Many feet had trod it. One recent set of small bare footprints marked the damp earth.

The silence of the cavern was ominous. Yesterday, the noises of the thralls and the masters had been terrifying. Today, water dripped in the darkness, and that was all. Somehow, it was worse. Patches of glow moss still illuminated the way.

"Are they all gone, do you think?" Mirabelle whispered. Volpe shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

The footprints led them past the now empty thrall pit, and through the tangle of silent tunnels that had been the settlement. Bits of wreckage and scattered weapons here and there indicated that the thralls had indeed fought terribly for their freedom, or at least for the sake of fighting. But there was no sign of the thralls themselves, nor of the illithids either. Nor of Lillabo.

"You would think there would be bodies," Mirabelle added. "Parts of bodies, at the very least."

The professor nodded, and they came to a familiar doorway. The entrance to the place where Tarnby had died. The arena.

They entered.

A massive dark heap lay in the center of the arena, covered in a lattice of faintly coruscating white frost. Lillabo stood before it. She seemed lost in thought. "Tarnby?" she called to it at last. "Are you in there?"

The thing shuddered, and a wave of pain and hatred and longing blasted out from it, ringing inside the heads of the three halflings. Volpe felt that but for the beneficence of the Ladies, he would have fallen to the ground with the agony of it.

I am. The creature's voice rang inside their heads. *And what am I? I am as you made me.*

It felt as the voices of the illithids had felt, only vaster, as if it were the sound of many voices speaking simultaneously the very same thought.

"I did *not*," Lillabo said, hastily retreating to the wall. A trail of white lace filled and followed her footsteps across the floor, a streaking line as if of frost crystals blooming, clusters of small white blossoms forming slowly in her wake. She jumped up on top of the stocks to avoid letting them touch her.

You did, It replied. *You did this to me.*

"What did I do?" wailed Lillabo, as the white lace slowly frothed up the wooden stock toward her.

You fed us. Me.

"I was trying to help! The little mushroom told me it would be a good idea. I thought it would help you, Tarnby. I am so sorry."

I am . . . grateful, said the voice. *You gave all of us to me, that we might now be as I am.*

"You're *not* Tarnby, are you?" she cried.

I have consumed him, and he is of me now. As I have consumed all. Join us, and you will see. I have missed you, Lillabo.

"Professor!" she wailed, catching sight of them at last as she glanced wildly around the room. "Help me!"

But it was Mirabelle who threw her the rope and pointed to the first gallery. Lillabo needed but a moment to uncoil the rope and hurl the weighted end around a high pillar and the gallery railing. With a skill born of long practice she swung and shimmied high up beyond the thing's grasp, over the railing, and into the gallery.

The stocks, now covered with white lattice, shivered and collapsed into a heap of damp ashes. A rich wet smell of rot filled the room.

The professor and Mirabelle backed hastily out of the room, wondering how to find their way through the tunnels to the gallery where Lillabo was. There had to be stairs--illithids, so far as they knew--could not simply walk through walls. It took them a

moment, but the way was clear, and they were soon running in to the upper gallery. Where, it turned out, Lillabo was no longer.

They gazed in sick horror out over the pit of the arena floor, where Lillabo hung, suspended in the air over the creature. Shadowy heads shaped themselves and melted back into the mound, as if the creature could not decide which mouth to consume her with, or sustain any one maw long enough to engulf her. There were so many mouths, so many heads in the thing, so many tentacles of frost and lace eagerly reaching into the air. Lillabo's body was jerked this way and that, as if pulled in multiple directions by unseen hands, but always lower and lower towards the creature. Waves of desperate pain roiled out of the creature as it struggled with itself over her. Her piercing cries of terror rang the cavern walls.

It hates itself, a voice murmured in the professor's mind. A familiar voice, with a trace of a mountain drawl. *I cannot juggle myself much longer.*

"Tarnby?" Volpe called. "Tarnby is that you--are you in there."

Yes. And, uh, more exactly, no. The fungus ate us, but it doesn't know how to combine us. And the illithids hate each other. Each wants to be the only mind. Whenever one surfaces, the others try to destroy it. They're gonna destroy me when they are through bickering over her. But just now, I'm the least of their problems."

"What can we do?"

Sing for her. She must come to me now. I'm so sorry. They used my own longing to lure her here, and worse, through her, they have seen the whole town. They want all of it. We must destroy us, or all will die. I will show Lillabo what to do. But you must sing. I can't reach her in her fear.

Volpe was not a man who sang often. His heart never seemed light enough for such matters. Tarnby had been a whistler, but Volpe had always been a speaker of words and a teller of tales. He racked his brain for any song that he thought might help Lillabo now. It seemed a foolish time for singing, and his mind was suddenly empty of songs. But it was one of his gifts, as Tarnby well knew, to sing courage into his friends when he chose.

If only he could think of a song.

The only thing that came to mind at last was the Ballad of Lady Tomlin, who had left her people to follow the elves, and returned to a world destroyed beyond all hope of recovery. It seemed a nonsensical thing to choose, but he knew all the words by heart, and the tune was simple. He sang of her curiosity in undertaking the challenge of the elves, of her grief at the loss of all her kin, and her courage in returning to the world that had been the world of men and was no longer. He sang of her faith in a world remade.

Strength and courage flowed from Volpe to Lillabo, and she stopped her thrashing and wailing. She shivered still, turning to him with desperate, pleading eyes. And then she seemed to be listening, not only to his song, but also to some inner voice. And she grew calm, with a sudden impulsive resolve Volpe had seen in her eyes many times before. She winked once to Mirabelle and then twisted herself in the air, reaching down a hand. A filmy tendril of lace reached up to grasp her, and in a matter of instants covered her arm, her shoulders, her back and head, and then she was pulled suddenly down into the heap and disappeared.

Sing! Tarnby's voice cried once, and then no more.

And Volpe sang, his bass voice booming across the cavern. He sang of lady Tomlin's gift, and he sang of her curse. Her endless travail to bring a race of half-elven half-men into the world to replace some of what had been lost. He sang courage. He sang hope. He sang awfully for a bard, but he sang without stopping, and that was what mattered most of all.

He sang until he was nearly overwhelmed by the thrashing strikes of mental energy as the hideous fungus mind tried to tear itself asunder. Whatever Tarnby and Lillabo had devised was plainly working. So long as he sang them courage, he thought, perhaps the other minds could not quite destroy and subsume them. So long as any minds held themselves apart, the creature could not tolerate itself. And two rogue minds playing touch and go--two skilled hiders and tricksters, long practiced in the art of distraction and confidence gaming--they would be tricky to catch as waterbugs on a still pond.

But his own thoughts, perhaps, gave their game away. He found himself hoisted in to the air, dangling as Lillabo had done. They would silence him and the game would be over. The Ladies' blessings must have kept them from being able to invade his mind

and silence him as the illithid had done in the thrall pits, but they could still batter him about with their strange forces.

Or simply engulf him. The creature's hunger and rage was such that it had no sense to stop absorbing creatures it could not assimilate. He braced himself for the inevitable, his mind focused on finding some way to join Tarnby and Lillabo's game. If he could not save himself and his friends today, surely he must do what he could to save Berryessa--perhaps find a way to send a warning to Miguel.

A white tendril of mycelia wrapped itself around his ankle. It did not so much pull him downward, as creep up over him, with a numbing sensation, as if his leg were dissolving and there were no nerves to carry the sensation of pain to his brain.

The next sensation was far more painful, as he felt himself abruptly yanked sideways and upward with a blow that knocked the wind from him and silenced his song at last. The swinging feeling was followed by a falling sensation and a terrible dizzying hardness as he hit the arena floor, and the familiar sound of someone swearing some truly awful curses. And then there was another ache wrapped around his leg, strangling it. And then a sudden dull pain, as awful as anything he had ever imagined, and a terrible cracking sound. And then darkness in his mind beyond the lightlessness of the cavern.

Mirabelle hoisted the dwarven axe and struck his leg again and again. It was a messy job, but it had to be done. The white frost was still crawling and devouring his limb. At last she severed the leg altogether, and used the flat of the axe to hit the diseased member, still pulsing and spewing blood, across the arena floor into the fungus mind, which was now truly smoking and sparking in its rage.

"Don't you f---ing die on me, you old bastard," she hissed, trying messily to tie off Volpe's stump. "Tarnby mooned around after Lillabo for three years, without speaking his mind, and where are they now? Over there in that insane puffball. You may not live forever, Volpe, but you're damn well not dying before I get to tell you that I love you, you condescending old fart. You're just not, ok? You hear me? Wake up. Wake up. We're getting the f--- out of here. Now."

She hoisted Volpe up over her shoulder and began to drag him toward the door. He was terribly heavy, and mostly unconscious. She wondered if they would make it as far as the door, much less the river. She did not have a plan for what they would do after

the river. The slope had been hard enough able-bodied, and her rope was still tied to the pillar where she had anchored it when she swung down to knock Volpe's body from the beast.

The fungus thrashed in its indigestion. For the moment, Lillabo and Tarnby were still doing a bang up job of whatever it was they were doing. Tendrils of white reached for her, but too slowly, and never for long enough to complete the reach before collapsing and shriveling. She did not look back to watch new tendrils forming, growing, reaching and dying. But she knew they were there.

She staggered and hauled Volpe halfway down the hallway, using her litany of known profanity as a mantra to keep her aching body moving.

"Would you like a hand with that?" a voice offered from the darkness. Miguel. He stepped forward, his broad arms reaching out to catch her and Volpe. She bit back the urge to say something sarcastic. This man has come to help us, she thought. And we really need the help. She settled for nodding her head and shifting Volpe's bulk to his open arms. Miguel lifted Volpe as if he weighed no more than Lillabo.

"Hola!" he called softly back down the corridor. "Amigos, podríamos utilizar una cierta ayuda aquí." He turned back to her "Where is your friend? Did you find her, and your other friend?"

Mirabelle shook her head, too overwhelmed to explain. "There's a big, uh," she sifted through various nouns and adjectives trying to find one that wouldn't offend Miguel, "abomination back in that cavern that wants to eat your entire town. Lillabo and Tarnby have it distracted for the moment, but I think their play is just about over." She brightened considerably and actually managed to bat her eyes as she added brightly, "Would you mind terribly just popping in there and finishing it off before it starts regenerating or something awful like that? Don't let it touch you. Set it on fire or collapse the cavern on it, or something like that if you can. Mind the getting picked up and hurled through the air by invisible forces thing--it almost always lands badly."

Miguel nodded seriously. "Let's get him somewhere safe for the moment, and then my friends and I will go." He carried Volpe back as far as the river, and set him on the dry walkway. He beckoned to one of his friends. "This man needs healing," he said.

“Then come join us, quick as you can. We may need healing ourselves soon enough.”

The man agreed.

“You wait here,” he said to Mirabelle. “We will go see to it.”

Mirabelle nodded and waved her and in the general direction of the corridor. “Be my guest.”

Miguel’s troop of soldiers followed him back toward the arena. A more hung-over looking bunch of heroes she had never imagined coming to her rescue. She regretted spoiling their morning after. Hers, too. She noted that some of them were still carrying souvenirs of the night before, although why they had carried the long tubes of fireworks all the way up that treacherous slope, she could not imagine.

She wondered how many of them would return to their festival brides.

* * * * *

The next morning dawned soaking wet with the sacred gift of winter rain. Sheets of water poured out of the sky, blessing everything in sight.

Mirabelle was glad to be indoors, relatively unblessed.

Volpe was still looking pale, shattered with grief for his companions and numb with denial about the loss of his leg. He was still somewhat hard of hearing from the explosions that had rung the cavern the day before. From what Mirabelle described, Volpe was just as glad he had been unconscious for the experience.

Miguel brought him yellow porridge, and sat with him while as he ate.

They spoke little, as listening seemed too much effort, and the things they thought were too hard to say. Miguel had lost friends in the battle, too. Though he took some comfort in having saved Berryessa, it did not seem enough. Such bargains never were easy ones.

The next day was little better.

It took some time before Volpe was ready to try to hobble about the village on his crutch. Mirabelle insisted that the healing man had done all there was to do, and that it was high time Volpe got himself out of bed.

Miguel accompanied him on his first walk across the market square. “You see?” he said. “You *can* do it, just as Mirabelle here says. You are no longer a prisoner of my bedroom.”

The professor nodded, though his arms were sore. The crutch would take some getting used to.

“Which brings us to the question of where you will go,” Miguel continued. “You are, of course, welcome to stay in Berryessa if you wish, but I am thinking we should look into finding you a place of your own.”

Volpe shook his head. “We have business in the Sea of White Glass.”

Mirabelle looked up with some surprise. “We do?”

“Yes,” answered the professor. “At least, I do.”

“There’s a difference between getting up off your . . .” she corrected herself and substituted a less offensive word than the one she had had in mind, “*bottom*, and climbing cliffs and crossing deserts.”

“You do not have to come,” Volpe replied, and was sorry the moment he had said it. The trip without Mirabelle was unthinkable.

Mirabelle read the conflict in his face and rolled her eyes. “As if,” she said.

“Why, my friend?” Miguel asked. “Why must you go to that terrible, empty place? It is like a page unwritten. There is nothing there. Nothing.”

“I can’t explain it,” Volpe replied. “All my life I have wondered about the elves. Who they were, and why they went away. Why they sent Lady Tomlin back. Why their gift of long life is in me. What am I meant to do with it?” he paused, lost in the same musings that had driven him so many years. “Do you know these things, Miguel?”

“They were trying to help?” Miguel replied. “I do not think the elves themselves could answer your questions, could you find a way to reach them. They are not elvish questions.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Miguel gestured across the square at the row of stone balls. “Sit here, on this bench, and look at those a while. Tell me what you see,” he said. (5)

The professor sat and considered them. They were easier to see now that the square was not full of festival. Each was perfectly round, and they were perfectly spaced

apart from each other. There was something about them that reminded him of the dragon's hoard.

"Are they art?" he asked at last. "Or a model of something--the celestial spheres? A solar calendar? A memorial? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"And you?" Miguel asked, turning to Mirabelle. "What do you see?"

"A row of stone balls. We sat on them at the festival."

Miguel nodded, and turned back to Volpe. "You see, my friend, *that* is a halfling answer. The part of you that gives you so much trouble, that looks at things and tries so desperately to find patterns and meaning in them, that asks 'why?' and 'what's it all for?' and 'how will it all end?' *that* is your human part. You are as human as anything currently alive. You are as likely to find answers for your questions within you as anywhere else."

"And my elven part--what does that see?"

"Enough time to stand here a while and look at things until the human part of you understands what to do with them."

"Unless you get run over by a cart," Mirabelle added philosophically.

"How do you manage it?" Volpe asked Miguel. "How do you manage to stand here and watch this village grow into a city, and see your children age and die, and know that the land is endlessly crumbling in to the sea? To know that eventually all of Berryessa will be beneath the waves, and that you will still be here to see it fall? How do you live with that?"

"Think of it this way, my friend. Children do not build sandcastles because they expect them to last, or, indeed, because they have any purpose whatsoever. They build them for the joy of building them, knowing full well that the waves will come," Miguel said. "It is still a very pleasant way to spend a sunny afternoon."

Volpe nodded. He could imagine worse places to spend his afternoons than basking in the mild, warm January sun.

"That castle's ok," Mirabelle said, pointing to an old house that stood empty a little way off the square. She had noticed it earlier in the week as she had been wandering about enjoying a break in the rains. "It's gotten a head start on the crumbling into oblivion thing, but nothing we couldn't change its mind about for a while."

Volpe nodded. He could see her point.

“Marvelous, my friends. That house has needed someone a long while. We’ll see to it. And I will have my own bed back at last, too!”

“Yes,” said Mirabelle. “It’s definitely time we did something about a bed.”

Volpe smiled, thinking of the tune Tarnby would have whistled at that, and the smirk that would have flashed through Lillabo’s innocent wide eyes.

“Ok, then,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

(1) yarn

(2) grip

(3) smilingfaces

(4) ode to the sun

(5) veryround