

The Rose

There was no doubt that the word that left Mirabelle's lips when they hit the ford was a mightily discouraging one.

The drover Silvado stood ankle-deep in the river, surrounded by his herd. He looked up into the glare of the oncoming lights in a paralysis of confusion. If there was a word in his language for what Mirabelle had said, surely, it would have crossed his mind.

Briefly.

The screeching of the boat as its bottom hit the gravel bottom of the shallow ford filled the cavern.

Silvado's screech was much briefer, though no less head ringing, in its own way.

Mirabelle leaned on the tiller as hard as she could, but the river was too shallow, and the rudder snapped.

The boat went over Silvado like a flat iron over a wet handkerchief.

The boat skipped across the gravel, hit the far wall, and exploded.

Two hundred head of soggy thralls spooked and scattered in all directions.

The other herders swore, too.

The halflings lay like a heap of wet laundry in the wreckage of the boat.

The drovers got to work regrouping the thralls. Flicks of their long tentacle extensions whipped the reluctant ones around. Long yodels of psychic imperative reached away down the riverbed where some had run too far to be whipped. It took some time for the illithids to sort the thralls by their brands back into their marching order, but the herders worked with a certain grim pride in their prowess, in this challenge to their mastery. It asserted the rightness of their world to see the orderly lines re-form.

It took but a moment's thought to gather the halflings in with the rest of herd, and then they resumed marching toward New Colony.

The herders were joyful with anticipation of the reception they would get when they arrived, with dinner in tow: four fine wild-caught minds. A delicacy New Colony had not had. After countless meals of the same over-conditioned thrall brains, the promise of something different was tantalizing.

The thrallherds bickered occasionally about whether to eat them right there, and who should eat which. But wisdom prevailed, and it was decided that the only fair thing to do was haul them back to town and let the Nourishers sample all four of them on everyone's behalf. It was not far. Once past the ford, it was but a bit of a scramble up-cavern, and there, just above the flood level, were the humble beginnings of New Colony.

Life was rough on the frontier. New Colony needed a morale boost, something to send home to the Elder Brain about. A grand taste-linked performance eating competition was just the thing to really show the boss that New Colony was really making its way in the world.

And the winner of the competition, they decided, would become the new culinary Master. No more days of slogging through the tunnels, stalactites dripping down the back of one's neck. The Master Culinaire, the trainer of Nourishers, would live well in the comforts of town: devising pleasures for the colony, tending the larder, giving performances. It would be a good life.

For the Master Culinaire, that is. Not for the thralls.

The thralls were herded into the storage pit, and the herders went to report.

The pit was a foul place. Foul with unwashed bodies, foul with offal, foul with effluvia. The herd milled mindlessly about, or lay listlessly in the dim twilight. The walls were lined with crumbling and faintly luminescent moss.

Temporarily released from mental domination, and ignored by the rest of the herd, the halflings huddled together in the pit. After a bit, Tarnby and Lillabo examined the walls, but they were not only too smooth to climb, but also covered in the oily and crumbling glowmoss that made climbing futile. The professor stared up at the lip of the pit, trying to determine whether there were guards, and if so, what kind, and what they were doing.

Mirabelle swore. A lot.

Lunch was served. The thralls came alive, surging forward to tear what little there was with their fingers and teeth. Hungry as the halflings were, they could neither bear the thought of fighting through that throng for scraps, nor could they stomach the sight of the food offered. Before it was torn to pieces by the hungry thralls, it had recognizably had

finger and elbows, legs and toes, and a familiar looking brand upon its shoulder. The head only had been a misshapen blob, unrecognizable but for the long, thick beard.

Lillabo buried her face in the professor's shirt to avert her eyes from the sight of the thralls devouring one of their own.

The professor patted her hair absently, staring off with a far away look. There was something he was trying to remember--something he had once seen. It was not until the thralls lost interest in squabbling over the skeletal remains of their lunch that the itchy spot in his mind finally released the information about the familiar thing. It was a bit of pelvic bone that caught his eye and finally provided the key. Once, long ago, in his investigation of Enwy Tor, he had come across a temple of memory. And inside it there had been skeletons--many skeletons-- that some vanished humans had assembled with wires and displayed as grim decorations. Skeletons of all the races--human, halfling, elf . . . and there had been another. Shorter than humans, taller than halflings, and bigger boned than either. "Dwarves", he recalled at last. The runes upon the altar had called them dwarves, an extinct species, not seen for a hundred thousand years.

And yet here were a couple hundred of them milling about. He could imagine their skeletons and skulls beneath their shambling frames. Disgusting, stupid things. No wonder they had all but died out.

Still, it was worth recalling: the skeleton he had seen mounted had been that of a great chieftain, buried in a mound with vast golden treasures. The humans had looted the tomb to decorate their temple. Once, these creatures had been great artisans. And warriors.

It was hard to credit it.

Mirabelle got up to pace, looking for a place to pee. One spot seemed as awful as another. The thralls paid no more mind to such matters than they did to personal hygiene, or privacy, or diet. She could not imagine how anyone could live in such conditions for very long, except that perhaps being beyond caring made it less awful somehow.

Her patrol of the pit at last led her to a place where a small seep of water created a stagnant pool. This was where the thralls drank. She watched them lick the moisture from

the walls as it dripped into the pit. Even the thralls seemed to know better than to drink from the fetid puddle they stood in.

She wondered how long it would be before she would give in to her thirst, and whether that would be before or after she caved in to her hunger. At the moment, starving to death was looking pretty good. She strolled back to report her find to the group.

“A spring?” the professor said hopefully.

“It does not so much ‘spring’ as ‘dribble,’” she replied.

“Well, let’s go see it,” said the professor. “It’s something to look at in any case.”

The group returned to the spring, but it was pretty much as Mirabelle had described, and none of them drew much hope from it. Except Lillabo, who ever had a knack for spotting a pretty thing. “Look!” she said. “What’s that?”

They turned to look at a small outcrop beside the puddle. A wrinkled fungus clung to the rock. In one place, the folds and ruffles of it curved into a familiar shape. “That one looks just like a rose,” said Lilabo cheerfully.

Mirabelle shuddered, and turned away.

The professor pulled Lillabo away quickly. “You don’t know what it is,” he said. “Best not get too close.”

She smiled and reached into her pocket for her gloves. “You think I don’t know my mushrooms?” she asked as she pulled them on. And with that, she reached forward and gripped the small rose with one hand, giving it a twist. With the other she stripped the glove from her hand until it was inside out, wrapped around the rose. “Ta-da!” She held up the little white bag with its soggy dark lump inside.

“Lillabo. Put that down. Fungus can be dangerous”

She shook her head. “I like it. It may be the last flower I ever pick.”

“Oh, let her have it,” sighed Tarnby. “How much worse can things get?”

Mirabelle kicked him in the shins for that one. “Don’t you ever,” she hissed, “*ever* say that particular phrase again.”

Tarnby hopped on one leg, smiling. It was almost freakishly normal. The professor lecturing on the hazards of mycology. Lilabo ignoring everybody’s instructions, Mirabelle breaking kneecaps.

And then the Nourisher came.

The Nourisher fancied himself a true gourmet and a showman. He wore a typical wide brimmed leather hat to keep the stalactites from dripping down his neck, and a long leather jacket, fancy with the brands of the thralls it was crafted from. He wore fine lace flounces of infant-skin at his cuffs. He carried his cephalometer on a long chain on his hip, and kept a set of ivory handled striators in a bandolier across his chest.

His voice rasped inside their skulls. "Yes, my thralls, we are going to feast upon your excellent brains tonight. You are honored to be such delicacies! Wild caught minds--so fresh and full of tantalizing novelties. This shall be my greatest performance. The launching of my magnificent career. A symphony of delight I will play with these most excellent ingredients. I shall draw out every nuance, every flavor. My audience shall be astounded by my prowess."

The Nourisher could be said to be a long-winded bastard, that is, if his speech required any wind, or his progenitors had ever engaged in an act of copulation.

"My opponents," he continued, "they do not know how to research these things ahead of time. I alone was taught by the great Sil'Moran. I know. One does not simply butcher a fine, delicate and luscious brain. One savors. One extracts the most exquisite portions in just the right order, avoiding triteness, eschewing cliché.

"And to do that, one examines each possibility in such precision that there will be no surprises, no embarrassments, no sour notes before the audience. Sessadril will not win this competition. *I* shall show them how it is done properly. Allsido, Kkadret--they will not win this title from me. I, Syyeala, I shall be the new Master Culinaire."

He paused, lost in a vision of his own terrible glory.

And then he continued. "Enough of your fear. It is pungent, but a skilled eater, such as myself, cannot afford to lose the subtler fragrances. My fans expect greatness of me. Your fear is something any one of them might extract themselves. They rely upon *me* to show them all the richness beyond mere anxiety. Submission and misery, these we have in abundance already. Show me something else, something . . . fresh.

"Open to me, little minds. Before the dining, one must appreciate the quality of the ingredients."

"You," he said, gesturing randomly at Mirabelle. "Open."

“Now.”

Predawn was moist and chill. Mirabelle knew where she was. Hiding in the steep, wild mountains of her childhood.

Not here, she thought. Not here. Not here, again.

But you are *always* here? Syyalea’s voice rang in her mind. Strange creatures-- such an abundance of embedded experience. And this experience--it causes such lovely adrenaline flows.

No, thought Mirabelle.

Yes, said Syyalea. Oh yes. Show me.

The three lawmen crept through the mountain, looking. They had found the still. Soon they would find her. The still must be burning already. When she tended it, there was no smoke. Fine wisps of gray at worst, she reckoned. Black smoke boiling over the ridge was a sure sign that things had gone bad. (1)

Her pa had always said they’d find it by the smoke. “A gel that brews, why she’s a wife proper, but a girl that ‘stills, why she’s another case altogether, ain’t she?” Pa had said. “You watch that smoke, gel. They will.”

And now, there was smoke in plenty. Too much smoke.

She lay in the shadows, and hoped the dawn would not come too soon. Somewhere, nearby, a blackbird sang in the holler. Stupid bird, sleep. It can’t be dawn.

She curled tighter in her ball of shadow.

“Now, it’d be a right pity if they was to find you hiding here, wouldn’t it gel?” said a soft male voice behind her, a familiar drawl tinged with the smell of pipeweed.

And moonshine.

And desire.

“She’s all poison in there, right?” Tarnby blurted out. “Take it from me--I’m just telling you this ‘cause you seem like a fellow who takes his work seriously. Twenty minutes after you ingest what she’s got in that head of hers, bang! Indigestion.”

Syyeala looked up from his work, cephalometer and striator in hand. Tarnby’s interruption was annoying--just when things were getting interesting--but he was intrigued by the creature’s audacity. The fear waves were still in him, but he had pooled them somewhere below his conscious mind. His frontal lobes were pulsing, not with the effort of controlling his fear, but with some other thing--calculation? speech? spatial relation? It was worth investigating. And such pleasantly ambiguous emotions--Tarnby did not like Mirabelle, and yet he felt protective of her?

“Very well,” Syyeala replied, with a trace of humor in his rasp. “Let us pass along then.” He was gratified to see the spike in Tarnby’s catacholamines as he reached for the other female thrall.

“And Lillabo’s a tentacle-ache, and that’s for sure,” Tarnby said.

“Excuse me?” Syyeala turned to look.

“No nutritional value in that head--full of nothing but fluff,” Tarnby offered. “Too sweet by half. No nuance. No real flavor.”

Syyeala looked through the transparent layers of Tarnby’s thoughts. “And you love her. You would offer yourself in her place. But there is no bargain. You will all be consumed this evening at the competition.”

He returned to contemplating Lillabo’s skull.

Tarnby opened his mouth to reply, but Syyeala had had enough.

“You. Shut,” said Syyeala.

And Tarnby’s mouth closed.

When the wagon rolled into town, Lillabo remembered, there had been garlands of autumn flowers in the trees, and kettles full of sweet rolls all along the paths. Lillabo could sense the excitement in the air. A wedding! Lillabo loved weddings. There was always plenty of food, and everyone looked so lovely, decked out in their best bonnets and bangles. She peered eagerly between the

wheels of the wagon. A wedding! Work for minstrels and tumblers and dancers and storytellers. And work for her, too, perhaps.

Look! There was the Great Gate--two magnificent elms trees, side by side, their golden canopies just touching their leaf tips, like lovers brushing their noses together. Such a romantic spot for the ceremony. She hoped the professor would stop the cart nearby, where there would be a good view of the bride and the groom. She imagined the glowing faces of the newlyweds just turning to face each other in the glow of the afternoon light, a first, long awaited embrace sealing their bliss.

But the Professor clicked his tongue to the ponies and the cart went on up the hill. "Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow's the day, Tarnby, or I'm no judge. There just setting up now. It's too late in the day for this burg--they always marry at noon here, so there's plenty of time for carousing the night before, a good lie-in in the morning, and plenty of time to feast all afternoon after the ceremony. We'll pick a spot up by the tavern and have plenty of business tonight."

And plenty of business in the morning, too, what with all the headaches that were bound to come with a wedding, Lillabo figured.

And they did have fine business that night. The villagers were in a healthy mood to hear the professor's spiel on his Invigorating Elixir, and there were plenty of young folks feeling in just the right mood for sampling something invigorating, or buying their pal a special present to help him along in his forthcoming duties.

The carousing went on late into the night, and Lillabo and Tarnby made a pretty good penny as well, Tarnby with his juggling and tumbling, and Lillabo gaily plying her own skills among the merry throng.

She loved the temple of Cyrrollalee best of all. Such beautiful decorations--so lovingly crafted. The townspeople were very skilled.

And it was late by the time things died down, and the professor began re=packing the cart. Experience had shown that it was best not to linger too long in one place. Fish and houseguests got their three days, but Professor Volpe's wagon often found itself on a tighter schedule, he was never quite sure why. His

cures and elixirs did what he claimed they would. But he had learned not to overstay his welcome. A quick busk and a shill in the morning, and then on the road again as soon as the wedding was well under way. Everyone would be too distracted to see them off.

They were about bedded in for the evening when there came a timid knock at the wagon door. The professor groaned, stood up, and answered the door. Lillabo heard the floorboards creak as he crossed the small room.

A pale young woman stood there in the lamplight. Lillabo recognized her anklets. She had admired them earlier in the day.

It was the bride, Mirabelle.

"May I speak with you privately?" she asked.

"Of course my dear," he replied.

Tarnby sighed, took up his pipe and stepped outside. Lillabo watched his feet come down the stairs and stroll off towards the picketed ponies. She lay very quietly, and listened.

"I need a cure, Professor Volpe," Mirabelle said.

"A cure?" he replied.

"I do not want this child," she said simply.

"No," said the Professor, "I cannot do this thing."

"Give me a cure," said the bride, "Or I will fix things another way and go to hell for it sooner rather than later."

"Why, child? It is no great shame--or at least no unusual one-- to be with child before the wedding night. Disregard what the old biddies say--no harm will come of it, and in a few month's time, no one will much regard an eight month's infant. You would much regret losing your husband's firstborn"

"But I do not want him either," Mirabele spat, and there was such a depth of agony and frustration in her voice as Lillabo had never heard before.

"Ah." said the professor. He fell silent, thinking a while. And then after a bit, he added, "Did you when . . .um."

"No."

"And did he?"

"He was drunk, and he told me that if I hollered he'd turn me over to the Councilors . . ." she bit her lip and would not finish her sentence.

"Ah. I see. He had you in rather a compromising position, before he got you into a compromising position."

"Yes."

"And now he means to make an honest woman of you whether you would or no?"

"My parents, they found out, and they insisted. They won't listen to reason," she said furiously. "They won't listen to anything about Uncle Vaarn at all." And then she broke, and collapsed into tears.

The professor handed her his handkerchief and patted her shoulder a while. Then he leaned out the window and called softly, "Tarnby? Get the ponies hitched up. This visit is going to be shorter than I thought."

Tarnby groaned and got to work.

Syyeala turned away from Lillabo, considering. He repositioned the cephalometer and began to stroke his tentacles across Mirabelle's rigid and staring face again. There was something he did not understand here. These creatures were odd, with their heads full of an absurdly long now. Their ability to linger in events not currently occurring was perplexing to say the least. But their biology! It made delightful surges of hormones, but in such odd, unpredictable ways. Thralls--proper tame thralls--bred as they were instructed. But these creatures were incomprehensible in the emotions they attached to such matters. Delicious, he was sure they would be, but how to guarantee a performance when the ingredients were so chaotic, so tangled?

Tarnby watched as Syyeala worked. He saw again the Nourisher's attention again focus upon Mirabelle. She shifted slightly--from her stiff, near catatonic paralysis, he thought he saw her slump into something more like a faint. Her jaw went slack. Such a little thing, but it wrenched him to see all the defiance leave her--as if even the terrible hiding place in her mind where she had gone to ground was no barrier, no protection.

The bird sang in the holler.

*Please don't let it be dawn.
The smoke wreathed across the mountain side.
She was burning still.
She was on fire like the dawn.
The breath in her
was not her breath.
The fire in her
was not her fire.
In her belly
he was inside her,
she did not want him there.*

*He left part of himself behind,
and it grew, grew in layers,
a growing thing,
consuming her.
Her breath was its breath.
Its breath stealing hers.
Her food, its food.
Such hunger.
It fed on her day and night, growing, growing in layers,
singing an endless song of demands.
Breaths leaving her body that were not hers.*

*She wanted it out.
To be hollow again if she could not be whole.*

*The rose.
She consumed the rose,
and it consumed her,
washed her body in fire.*

*The little bird inside her sang
for a dawn it would never see--
a spirit trailing out
that might have lived in her.
She was smoke writhing across the sky,
a shrieking whistle in the dawn.*

*The medicine was bitter.
The bitterness was fire.
The bird writhed in the smoke
in the holler;
in the hollow place inside her,
there was fire.
Blinding fire, like the sunrise.
The bride writhed;
The bird sang:*

please don't let it be dawn.

The bird sang smoke.(2)

For a while it was quiet.

Syyeala paused after Mirabelle and left to attend to some matters of his own.

Tarnby hoped she had given him a pain.

Lillabo seemed not the least put off by her experience. "And do you remember," she was saying, "that time when you first found me hiding under the wagon? *That's* what he wanted to know about. He made me tell him the whole story. Well, almost. He got distracted before we got to the good bit, where Tarnby found my hammock. I was going to tell him about that, but we never got to that part of the tale."

The professor groaned with the memory. There he was, engaged in the most illicit and illegal of medicine, when Tarnby had come in dragging the stowaway. Mirabelle's fever had not yet broken, and he did not know whether or not he had killed her as well as the child. They were making a good pace over the pass, hoping to be clear of the river before the townsfolk noticed the absence of their bride in the morning. Accusations of kidnapping and murder hung in his mind like weights, and he was not certain they were unjustified.

He had been rehearsing his address to the lynch mob for hours.

And then Tarnby had gotten behind the wagon to help push it up over a particularly steep spot, and noticed the little hammock strung like a spider's nest under the cart.

They'd have dumped Lillabo right there on the mountainside, but Volpe had been terrified of leaving evidence on the trail. The more so when investigation of the hammock revealed that Lillabo had swiped both the figurine of Yondalla and the figurine of Arvoreen the Defender from the town's shrine. Among other pretty souvenirs of their travels of the past four months. Her hammock contained a virtual travelogue of "what I did on my summer vacation."

The statues were so very pretty, she had said. She hadn't really thought about how anyone would feel about missing them. The elms, she said, were her favorites, but they were too big to fit in her pocket. The figurines, she said, were a bit like them, if you placed them nose to nose so that they almost looked as if they were kissing.(3) She had so wanted a souvenir of the pretty elms.

The professor had not wanted to add another murder to his list of evil deeds for the day, and so they had made a bargain: Lillabo could accompany them to the next town, if she promised to sneak the figurines back into a temple there.

But news sometimes travels faster than a pony cart, and by the time they arrived in the next town, a posse was already scouring the woods for the outlaw doctor and his accomplices. They had beaten a hasty retreat over the western ridge as fast as they could climb it.

That had been three years ago.

The group waited anxiously a while, but Syyeala did not return. At last, another illithid came to the edge of the pit. “The event begins,” its thought scraped through their skulls. “You will come.” And, much to their surprise, they were lifted out of the pit by an invisible force, as firm in its grip as if the creature had gripped them by the collars with its own hands.

The halflings were led to what passed for an amphitheater. Two burly and well-armed thralls led each of them into the wide pit, but the presence of the guards was largely ceremonial. Not one of the Halflings could have placed a footstep other than as directed by that dominating voice.

The arena was bare but for the stocks, the gutter, and the glowmoss covered floor. The stands rose above the pit in darkness. The halflings could hear the rustling of many bodies, though they could not see them.

It was obvious that once they were placed in the stocks, escape would be impossible. Tarnby considered the nearly headless cadaver he had seen pitched into the pit.

Things did not look good.

The master of ceremonies waved his arms in a grand flourish. A fine bit of theater in that showman. It reminded Tarnby of the professor standing on his stump before his wagon, calling the crowds in. The rules of the competition were announced.

Lots were cast. The first contestant stepped forward dressed in formal robes and a fez. Tarnby could not tell for certain, but he thought it might be Syyeala after all.

It considered the four ingredients, and then gestured.

Tarnby.

Tarnby found himself stepping forward. A bucket and razor were before him, and he knelt, feeling like a marionette. He watched as his hands slowly lifted the long straight blade, and he wished he had the will to turn the blade to his own throat, but the voice of Syyalea rasped in his skull, and even the wish left him.

Carefully, he scraped the hair from his head. He stepped forward to the stocks, but Syyalea held up a claw, and he paused just before it.

“Observe” Syyalea called to the gathered throng. “A creature of deep passions, rare emotional control, and swift neural reflexes!” And Syyalea tossed three objects – three long sharp objects attached to long leather cables—towards Tarnby.

Tarnby’s reflex was automatic. It did not matter what the objects were—they were bladed, and they were approaching him. He dodged, and tumbled. He plucked two of them from the air as they fell. He caught the ropey part of the third with his toe where it had fallen. A quick flip of his ankle and all three strange objects were aloft in a classic cascade pattern. They were oddly shaped, but well weighted. A surge of hope filled him—was the creature such a fool as to arm him? Were they going to give him a fighting chance? He did not mind the thought of dying so much, if he could die in combat. He calculated the heft of the strange things—wide leather straps with weighted blades at the ends. Entangle at one end, stab with the other.

Syyalea stepped forward, arms folded within his robes, a picture of poise and concentration.

Tarnby struck, hurling two of the blades where he judged they would do the most good, and sweeping at Syyalea’s feet with the ropey part of the third.

They were perfect throws, as they needed to be.

Except that the blades twisted as they flew, in a spiral Tarnby had not given them, reversing themselves as if of their own volition.

Tarnby’s confusion drained from surprise to horror as the ropey parts attached themselves to Syyalea’s tentacles, and reached for him.

Syyalea’s thrusts brought all three of the business ends of the tentacle extensions through Tarnby’s nose, ear and eye at the very moment that hope died within him. He felt himself embraced in Syyalea’s arms in a suffocating hug.

And there was worse to come.

“Do you know what I taste?” whispered Syyalea. “What we all taste, through me, tasting you? I will show you.”

And then, by some awful sorcery Tarnby could not comprehend, he was seeing himself through Syyalea’s mind. A palette of serotonin and neurotransmitters, tissue and protein and fluid. A host of illithid were in Syyalea’s mind, all observing the process, all

savouring his destruction, critiquing his performance. Or was it Syylea they were judging?

Syylea's arms released him, so that he slumped into the open stock. Syylea slammed the top bar of the stock over his head with a resounding thud and stepped back to survey his work with satisfaction, his quivering tentacle extensions still embedded in Tarnby's skull.

He gestured to the other halflings. "It is not forbidden for you to say farewell," he offered. "Approach!"

Tarnby wished he could lift his head to look at them, but he knew he was seeing them as they approached through Syylea's eyes. Fear, anxiety, horror and, yes, disgust, radiated from them as they approached. He was flooded with shame. He could tell his friends were uncertain about whether they wanted to approach at all. Except for Lillabo. There was something about her, some quivering, kind, horrible intent. Anticipation. Pity.

The tentacles yanked his face up to meet hers. He saw her dimly through his one remaining eye. She knelt before him. "Tarnby?" she said, as if talking to a very small child.

He managed a tiny nod, to let her know there was still something of him in this puppet body. Perhaps it was a nod, perhaps it had only been a blink. It was so hard to tell. He felt emotion well up within him and he could not tell what emotion it was for the overriding eagerness of all the observers in his mind sampling it and disputing its qualities.

"I brought you something," she whispered, and as one the entire room inclined their curiosity towards her. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small white bag. Her glove. She pulled it right side out, and the rose fungus lay there, black against the white cotton. (4) "The last flower I will ever pick," she whispered. She leaned forward, as if to kiss him. Her face was so close to him, she almost brushed Syylea's tentacles, still embedded in his eye and nose. The glow of the moss lit her beautiful face, and it reminded Tarnby of something . . . something he had once seen. Two trees brushing leaf tips, a pair of statuettes, face to face. She was so close, he almost could have kissed her, could he have but reached for her. He was rooted as a tree, frozen as a statue. "Eat," she whispered, lifting the rose to his lips.

Tarnby recoiled in disgust at the thought of eating the unknown fungus. And then he felt shame and confusion again, a grim black humor filled him, and he felt Syyallea cherish it. Imagine being fastidious about your last meal. Imagine rejecting a last farewell gift from a girl you loved that you had never told of your affection. Imagine the stupidity of never telling the girl you loved that she was all your desire, and then trying to speak it with your nose stuffed full of snake.

The illithid throng chuckled with his grim realizations, and they ordered him, *obey*.

Obey.

Thrall you are, and thrall you shall die and you will obey every order given, no matter how repugnant.

Obey.

And Syyallea opened Tarnby's mouth, for he could not quite remember how to do the task himself.

Lillabo placed the rose inside it.

With puppetlike motion, like a ventriloquist's doll, he chewed. The rose was too big a mouthful, and he gagged, but still chewed, because they insisted, and they savored his sensations as his food-starved body leaped to devour the morsel, echoing their own fierce hungers. His mouth opened and closed, saliva and crumbs falling from each slack moment. And as he swallowed, she stared at him with her kind, sad eyes. Her eyes like blue ice on frost covered morning, like fierce stars blazing in the twilight of dawn.

And then she melted, and the snakes arose, and the world became lavender screams of iridescent pain, shattering in rainbow shards. The rose was alive. Alive within him--a creature of spores, reaching its mycelia through his synapses. It gripped his nervous system with thorns of ice. The sun screamed through his mind as it dawned--all the white hot blinding brightness of it, redoubled in its glare through the agony of a score of illithid minds that had never seen such a light, minds that could not bear the thought of sunrise.

The professor felt the terrible grip of the mind controllers rip free from his skull. All around the arena, the illithids were reeling and thrashing, caught in awful feedback they could not escape as the fungus grew with terrible speed, feasting on the unusual

abundance of mental energies. A moment, a moment might be all he had. They would kill Tarnby, and it would end. Tarnby was half dead already.

“Arise thralls! Arise, you dwarves!” he called, his voice clogged in his throat with tears he had been unable to weep. “You,” he cried shoving one of the bald guards, “Now, *now* is your moment. Arise now, or remain thralls another hundred thousand years!!” The guard stumbled forward, confused by the unfamiliar freedom from mental domination. No dwarf had thought an independent thought since the subjugation of the race millennia ago. But orders, order were familiar, even if they came from a small shouting master. “Attack! Hit them! Attack!”

It was unthinkable to refuse an order. It was unthinkable to attack a master. A conundrum best solved by not thinking at all. The dwarf went berserk, assaulting everything in sight, master and thrall. The other thralls responded in kind to the threat. They had working mindlessly for so long, now was not the time for thinking. A vast sprawling brawl ensued, crashing from one end of the hall to another.

The professor judged it a good moment to leave.

Mirabelle concurred.

Lillabo turned to look as a raging dwarf slashed a huge double bladed axe through the tentacles piercing Tarnby’s head and down into what was left of Tarnby’s skull. A tangle of tentacle extensions collapsed over his corpse. (5)

She did not linger to see how long it would take the illithids to recover from the effects of the fungus. Mirabelle had writhed for three days, her body on fire with fever that seemed determined to take her along with the unwanted child. But the fungus had been in her body, and had needed time to encapsulate, spore and purge itself. Without Tarnby to hold the reservoir of poison, she guessed the illithids would free themselves from the effects of it in moments.

It had taken some time for the thrall herds to gather the stampede at the ford. This time, the thralls were more than merely scattered, they were enraged. It might buy them a bit longer.

She ran.

(1) low cloud (2) bird breath (3) faces (4) rose (5) sheds