

Who's 4 a Treasure

Knohear

Knohear is a planet in a solar system in a galaxy that thinks a good time is having a few friends over for a game of forfeit coinage. It is a place where the laws of physics applied, but were rejected and told to go get a job elsewhere, there was no place for its new fangled ideas. Each action having an equal, but opposite reaction, actually that one seems to work out all right, but the others are rejected. The body remaining in motion junk, everybody knows that a body stops for no apparent reason and goes and buys a pint. Well I suppose that is an outside force. Okay, so there is a little physics, but no one really pays it too much attention. What I'm trying to get at is that Knohear is a place where anything can happen, invariably does, and then demands its t-shirt, a round of drinks and someone to cuddle, preferably that good looking girl in the corner, no not that one, the one in the cheerleader outfit with the pompoms. You get the picture, and if you don't, read on, I promise you will.

Introduction

Two thousand years ago the civil war of Barock was entering its final battle. The men loyal to King Regal were finally gaining the upper hand. Prince Poorson, the rebel leader, sat in his field tent reading the daily scout reports. It was obvious from the reports that he would meet the king's men in battle on the plains of Wickness. He would have the geographical advantage, but King Regal would have almost three times his numbers. In six weeks it would all be over one-way or another. Prince Poorson was going to lose! He had one last roll of the dice. In the corner of his tent sat a cast iron chest. Inside was his people's only salvation and greatest treasure.

He called his second in command into the tent and gave him instructions. Lord Da'Loose bowed his head to his commander and promised he would not let him down. He loaded the chest onto a wagon and left for the fabled city of Heldslong. It was said that the black smiths of Heldslong made the finest weapons in all the land. It was the start of the rainy season, but Lord Da'Loose kept up a good pace of two DW's (days walk) per day through mud, rain and landslides. Fighting off bandits and thieves, he kept the pace all the

way to the Eagle Mountains. (Now called the Horn Mountains as the last eagle was shot and eaten over five hundred years ago). His last stop before scaling the heights was Hardpassvil Inn in the village of Hardpassvil; well technically the Inn was Hardpassvil.

“Sometime when you roll the dice it comes up snake eyes.” This was Prince Poorson’s last thought before the executioner chopped his head off. (Excerpt for: ‘The true facts of the myths and legends of Prince Poorson the trusting.’ Pick up a copy today, not only is it a good read, but can help cure any gullibility.)

For two hundred years treasure hunters searched the mountain pass for the great Poorson treasure, but everyone knew that Da’Loose had taken it and probably bought his own small kingdom way out east. To this day the word Daloose still means spending someone else’s money. (You may notice a discrepancy between the last official search and today, some sixteen hundred years. They are important. It means that the idea of looking for the Poorson treasure can be lost in the mists of time and pass into the realms of myths and legends. Which really helps out my story.)

In truth this is not really the story of a treasure hunt, although there is one on these pages. Nor is it the tale of four incompetent friends blundering from one misadventure into another hopeless situation; although you may be forgiven for thinking so. Oh no, this is a tale about luck.

The men with long grey beards (Sometimes called Wizards, sometimes Professors, but mostly called Old farts.) working in dusty old basements (Sometimes called libraries, but mostly called dusty old basements.) working on old manuscripts and scrolls (Sometimes called, well only called old manuscripts and scrolls) have come to the conclusion that there are three types of luck. Good, Bad and Blind. They decided that ‘bad luck’ could be broken into ‘No luck’, ‘Worse luck’, ‘I told him not to mix his drinks luck’ and finally ‘Who would believe that that whole army would just disappeared when that thing fell out of the sky luck’. That last one becomes important later. More types of Bad luck have been discovered, but while out celebrating the discovery, most discoverers fall victim to ‘I told him not to mix his drinks luck’. So before he has a chance to write it down, have it

notarised and let it stand up to a panel of his peers, the discoverer normally runs into one of the following, in no particular order: (Most statements collected posthumously and notarised by Mrs. Maude's Palm, Tarot and Tea readings incorporating Sun, Moon and Stars Séances including Bill's notarising and past life civil attorney at law. As they have paid for this product placement there will be more on them later.)

"I was just following/running away for the big pink gargoyle when a carriage came out of nowhere."

"Always say sorry and buy a fresh round when you spill One Eye McCready's or Giant Bob's beer. 'Out of my way peasant' is not acceptable as an apology."

"How was I suppose to know that you had to pay all loses at McCready's casino."

"I can't believe I couldn't swim across the Valmic River"

"King Clement does not take kindly to being mooned."

"Sometimes when you imagine a horde of barbarians baying for your blood, they are real."

The list goes on, but as I have limited parchment I will stop there.

Good luck is the rare stuff of dreams that only happens to other people. Sometimes it is called urban legend. "My friend's cousin's boyfriend's sister's neighbour's uncle won money at McCready's casino and lived to spend it." Or "King Clement only had the mooning old fart flog to death." I know it sounds ridiculous, but as they say fact is stranger than myth and legend. Which brings me to the final point: Blind luck.

There has been a lot of talk about this luck, maybe too much talk. Most people agree that it doesn't exist, but I hope to prove them wrong with this Honest to Gods true tale. (If you don't believe me check the genuine Bill's notarising and past life civil attorney at law stamp on the front cover.) Oh, before I start I will explain what blind luck is. Just before you die, Death rings up the God, devil or time-share where you will spend eternity, to confirm a delivery date. The deity checks their 'Don't let them in' list and if you are on it you receive a little bit of blind luck. I.e. The guy about to stab, rob and rape you, not in any particular order, suddenly remembers that he left the stove on and rushes home to turn it off before his wife finds out and gives him an ear full. Death then receives a bank transfer; a

silver-plated tea set and a note saying no thank you, but that nice looking man that just ran home would look perfect in my new atrium. To sum up blind luck, it is when an omnipotent being takes a thorough disliking to you and prevents you from dieing. This can be a double-edged sword, as they say some things are worse then death. I.e. One eye McCready deciding your left testicle would match quite nicely with your right in his Balls of the World collection.

Let the tale begin.

Chapter 1

Clemville

Siege

Her father was the greatest pickpocket ever caught, and some say her mother was the greatest pickpocket ever, but she was never caught. (I would never say anything so slanderous; I really believe she is a nice housewife who constantly received gifts of jewellery and purses of gold from admiring admirers.) After her father caught a terminal case of executioners flu and her mother took over the precedence of the quick fingers guild Samantha Ingrid Elizabeth Gail Elkton, (Siege for short, don't ever call her Sam or she will explain exactly where her names comes from, which is one of those fates worse then death that I explained about earlier.) was on her own. Even though she was young this didn't pose any problems. Hundreds of generations of quick finger guild inbreeding had produced an almost magical being in Siege. Without her knowledge, people around her would lose things that would mysteriously turn up in her pockets. If by some chance the person in question suddenly noticed the fifteen silver guineas were missing, she would be the last person questioned. (Sorry that was a bit of a lie. She would never be questioned. It reminds me of the case of Giant Bob's gold half piece. Bob was in the process of paying his tab at the Swill and Donkey. He had just handed the coin to Guiness when it disappeared. Even though they searched us all thoroughly, and I mean rubber glove thorough, they never even looked at her. Not ten minutes later she bought us all a round, from Guiness, in front of Bob, using the gold half piece and they never even batted an eyelid.)

These days she is a little more cautious of who she walks too close to. I believe she has turned out quiet beautiful, you know long flowing red hair, stunning body, a smile that would melt a glacier etc. etc. However I find it very difficult to remember what she looks like when I'm not in her presence. Even when I am in her presence I find it hard to look directly at her. I know it sounds strange but it's like looking at someone through the bottom of your fifth tankard of ale. Truth is it doesn't matter whether or not I can see her to tell you her part in the story.

It began like all good stories, with the weather! It was what us Clemville locals like to call a perfect day. The wind was gently blowing, (I think you call it a force two gale, but if you can stand upright we call it a gentle breeze), the clouds were kindly spitting a light drizzle and the sun had just set below the smog inversion layer. Siege held her long black coat closed around her as she scurried down the street. (Like everything the rain and wind tended to ignore her. Still she acted like everyone around, just in case someone saw her, which, as I mentioned earlier, was highly unlikely.) She was on an urgent mission. Clemville's Goth Clock had just rung five times and Lord Fanger's Bathhouse closed at six. For someone that dirt had trouble seeing, let alone attaching itself to, she spent a lot of time washing. She was the only person, outside of the nobility that had her own indoor shower. But if she didn't go to Lord Fanger's at least once a day, she didn't feel clean.

She entered the bathhouse and paid the attendant. When she left her house she didn't have a cent on her, but by the time she had walk the nearly deserted streets she had enough money to spend a year in the baths. Everyone in the bathhouse ignored her, including the attendants, so it was lucky that she had somehow picked up a towel, bar of soap, shampoo, conditioner and a bottle of Channel No.7 the perfume for the discerning lady about town. (I still don't believe that the water of the Valmic River, even if channel seven is nearly impossible to get to, should be rubbed, dabbed or otherwise brought with in ten feet of a human body. I suppose that the stagnant water smell is all the rage up on Bullion Hill, where you can't smell the real thing. Besides Siege thought it made her smell classy.)

The sun had set by the time she left. As it was a Friday night a lot of college students were hitting the streets for a wild night on the town. She took great care to avoid the poor revellers. (Everyone knows that students that can afford a decent night on the town tend to head uphill where they are less likely to be robbed, stabbed, raped, or beaten to a pulp or any combination of the above. The advantage of down town is that it's cheap and they are not likely to check a paying customers ID.) She had to duck down quite a few dark alleys, but she made it home without her pockets jangling too much. She sat down and started to eat the packed supper she found in one of her pockets. (If

you don't already hate her, here is one more reason: She can eat anything she likes without putting on weight. Like everything else fat has trouble finding her.) After finishing her dinner she started her nightly ritual of going through her pockets. (All the money she finds gets donated to the Sisters of Questionable Virtue, unless she has to pay rent or buy a new dress or buy something that doesn't fit in a pocket. Basically the Sisters get very little in the way of donations from Siege, but it's alright as they have their own lucrative business, in which men get to question their virtue.) On the night this adventure starts, she found a leather bound scroll. As it was in a language she couldn't read, she knew she would have to go down to the Swill and Donkey and get her good friend Tricks to translate it for her.

Tricks

Hottest woman in the kingdom! If you are into well-built warrior, break your legs off at the knee if you look at them too closely, women. Don't mistake her nickname for the services the very friendly woman of questionable virtue at the Swill and Donkey perform. (Shamus the Idiot's story should help you remember not to try. Someone, it might have been me; it was one of those nights that no matter how much alcohol you consume you never forget, mentioned to Shamus that that tall, curvaceous woman dressed in tight leather standing in the corner's name was Tricks. Before anyone could pull him back the drooling idiot was standing next to her whispering in her ear. Six months later they were still cleaning bits of Shamus off the wall.) Oh no, she is called Tricks because of what she can do with weaponry. I was there the night that the Royal guard came to fetch her for King Clement's bed. She held all twenty of them off with nothing more than a pair of nail clippers and an emery board. The next day King Clement made a hastily planed tour of the Great Plains with two hundred of his best guards, after Tricks mentioned to the fleeing survivors of the manicure massacre that she might just visit King Clement's bed one night, but she would bring a sword. Nobody is quiet sure were she comes from. Some say that she is the daughter of an Amazon princess, others that she was secretly bred in the dungeons as an assassin or was conjured up by a wizard as his warrior love slave. (Nobody says the last very loud.) Where

she comes from is left to speculation, as no one has had the courage to ask her.

When Siege entered the Swill and Donkey, Tricks was in her usual Friday night mood, happily tipsy. (Never let it be said that she ever got drunk or had a hangover. By that I mean if you value your life, never let it be said.) She spent most of her Friday and Saturday nights scaring the students into buying her drinks. The other four nights a week she spends scaring us regular folk into buying her drinks. Sunday she reserved for religious purposes. I.e. scaring priests into buying her drinks. Siege walked up to her and, because it was Siege, spent a good ten minutes trying to get Tricks's attention.

"Hey, Siegey baby, didn't see you there." Tricks said when Siege finally got her attention.

"Can I buy you a drink or a young lad or something?"

"Uh, um, perhaps a drink, one with an umbrella." she replied.

Of the three choices Tricks had given her the drink sounded safest, even though she had enough drinks in her pockets to start a small pub; it was a busy night. (Tricks could well have supplied a lad, shouting something like 'Oy, you, no not you, your good looking friend, yes you, come here and service my friend.' And no one could refuse, at least not twice. The 'something' could have been anything. Once, the 'something' turned into a hubcap from King Clement's carriage. Boy did we laugh that time, all two weeks in the dungeon. It's enough to say that when Tricks offers you 'something', always take the drink or prepare for a little pain.)

"Guiness, can I have a drink for Siege, make it one with an umbrella. That guy over there with the pink shirt is paying." she shouted above the noise of the crowd.

When she shouted the bar tended to go completely silent, so everyone got to hear the crack about Greg the gay. (Greg the gay was not actually gay. He just wore very nice clothes, was always clean and lived with his mother. However, he never wore pink.)

"Coming right up, Tricks. Good to know Siege is here, if I see her I'll say hello, just give me a minute to put the silverware in the vault. It won't do any good, but one must try."

Siege turned bright red, (She was a bit embarrassed about her skill.) but no one saw.

"So what brings you out on a Friday night?" Tricks asked in a nudge, nudge, wink, wink sort of way. "I thought you stayed home on the busy nights, too much stuff to carry. Which reminds me, just check my wallet and see if I remembered my riding licence." (King Clement came up with a great idea to make money, the riding license. You had to go down to the DHA, Department of Horse Affairs, and show an examiner that you could in fact ride a horse. For this they charged a small fee, it was not however how they made the money. If you were caught riding a horse without a riding licence they confiscated the horse. It worked well for about a month, but now everyone has a riding licence. As King Clement claimed he was instituting the policy to keep the streets of Clemville safe, he couldn't rescind the law even though it was now costing him money. For a week he tried instituting a law about drunk riding, but after stopping the rebellion he said that it was just a joke.) Siege checked her pockets and found Tricks's wallet. She gave it back, but Tricks said "Keep it; it will just end up back in your pocket anyway. I'll get it back before we leave. So tell me, what's up?"

"I found this scroll; I was hoping you could translate it. It looks very old."

Tricks managed quite easily to get an empty table. She spread the map out and looked at it.

"Not in any language I know, but it sure does look intriguing. Look here, that bit almost looks like the Horn Mountains. Tell you what, it's Friday night, so Brain should be home, let's go ask him."

At this point Siege's drink arrived.

"Sorry Ms Siege, are you here?" Gunes asked.

Siege said she was right in front of him.

"Of course you are, anyway here's your drink. I couldn't get the handle of the umbrella into the tankard, so I had to use a parasol. Only thing is Parasols cost three times what umbrellas do and Greg the gay is asking if, as and when you finish your drink, he could take the parasol home for his mother?"

The Brain

Brian O'Shaunase was born to a dyslexic father. When his father got to the births registry office the celebrations had been in full swing for

five hours, compounded by his dyslexia he got the 'i' and 'a' switched. While everyone in his household called him Brian, at school they all thought it was hilarious and called him Brain. As time passed, some even started calling him The Brain. (Quite often, positive reinforcement has a profound effect on the young, for example; calling someone the brain his whole life could make him into an intellectual. This however was not the case with Brain O'Shaunase, although he thought it was.) Being of the opinion that he was super smart when in fact he was just average gave him the die hard opinion that he could do anything, if it went wrong he could always blame the incompetence of others. So he went to magic school, which he breezed through. (The wizards teaching him were so scared he would blow up the university or the world that they sent him through as fast as they could. They concentrated his studies on the fundamentals of magic, things like: Curing with herbs 101, small puffs of smoke 207, small puffs of coloured smoke 302, Chemicals for the seriously stupid 1820 and the old favourite, woodwork that looks like magic and metalwork that looks like magic. He really excelled in the last two, so much so that when he left he thought that that was what magic was all about.)

It wasn't long before he became the guy you went to see if you wanted something made that was a little unusual. It was not always as the client expected. Thinking that he was smarter than anyone else, he had a tendency to overdo his inventions, for example: Lord Hadalot was trying to save money, so he went to the Brain to make his carriage move without the expense of keeping up the horses. The Brain came up with a brilliant idea that involved cogs, wheels, pulleys, cables and a water wheel. He showed the plans to Lord Hadalot, who thought it was wonderful and had him make a working example. Lord Hadalot used it for about a week, but quickly found out that the upkeep of five extra slaves to keep the machine running was more expensive than the upkeep of the horses. (The 'Incredible horseless slave carriage machine' is now in the Clemsonian museum in the section titled 'the display of things that the inventor should have known better', which is almost entirely dedicated to the inventions of The Brain. It's that huge monstrosity next to the arrowless bow. More on the bow later. Okay, enough with this 'The Brain' stuff. We'll just refer to him as Brain, his ego is big enough.)

It was Friday night and Brain was sipping on his cider. (His preferred drink was beer, but he wanted a clear head while working on his experiments, he didn't know that cider had alcohol in it.) While looking for a part for his new machine, he had stumbled upon his old course notes 'small puffs of smoke 207' and found a hand written note on the side of one of the pages. He remembered over hearing one of the wizards talking to someone about not letting them add crushed charcoal to the experiment, as it was too dangerous. At the time he had been too busy trying to chat up one of the girls from his class and he didn't hear which one it was.

It was a slow night, most people spend their weekends drinking and not looking for odd inventions, so he thought he would run through a few experiments, adding a bit of crushed charcoal to each. The wind was finding its way into the room, through the half closed window, making it a little chilly. (The window was being held half open by his next entry into the Clemsonian, 'the incredible automatic window "half" closing machine'. He still had some bugs to work out; the little ladybirds he was using as a power source were not strong enough to close the window fully.) He would throw his experiments in the fire, as they had charcoal in them, when he finished seeing if the charcoal had any effect. He took a sip of cider, added an ingredient and shook it up, all the while mumbling about the inefficiency of desk top sorcery, and surely he could make a machine that could do it all for you. He had gotten down to the last few and was starting to lose interest in the whole thing. He took a hand full of salt peter added it to the sulphur, added some crushed charcoal, had a sip of cider, when there was a knock on the door. He turned and shouted that they should come in, as the door was unlocked. The wind took this opportunity to blow the book a few pages ahead. (The wind has always had a great sense of humour.) The next instruction was: place ingredients in a sealed container. He had just finished putting them in an iron pot and really screwing the lid on tight, when the door came crashing down. Turns out he locked the door after his distraught house keeper had run out screaming that she was going to call the police if he ever made her drink one of his energy drinks again. Obviously the drink was a complete success, as he had never seen his chubby (big boned) house keeper move so fast. A small thing like a locked door wasn't going to keep Tricks out. As Brain had said it was open, she made sure he wasn't a liar, by totally destroying it.

"Ah. Tricks, so good of you to drop by. Can I offer you an energy drink?" Brain said, completely oblivious to the door lying in splinters all over the floor.

"You know what Brain, I think I'll pass, but do keep one cold for me."

Like the door, he completely missed the sarcasm and proceeded to put one of his vile concoctions in the cooler. (Another of his great inventions. It might have actually been one of his few resounding successes if he had put a handle on the inside of his experimental walk in version, thus avoiding the rather unpleasant 'Iceman' incident.)

"Looking for a new sword sharpener or something?"

"Something." she replied without batting an eye. The groan was almost audible on the Great Plains.

"I have this scroll."

"Oh, hi Siege. Didn't see you come in, can I offer you an energy drink? I have a fresh one in the cooler."

"No thanks." she replied. "I already tried one. Like I was saying, I have this scroll, Tricks thought you might be able to translate it."

"Sure. Hand it over and I will stick it in the machine."

Tricks didn't think this was a good idea, so she wrote a quick note in Tra'ker and told him to try that out first. Brain feed it into the machine and out came a blank note and a pile of shredded paper.

"See, a perfect translation."

"But nothing is written on it. Look what it did to the original." Tricks said, running the shredded paper through her fingers.

"Well, um. Well you see it's a sort of physic machine. It more gets a feeling for the person who wrote the note. Apparently you have nothing going on in your head." (Whoops!!) The machine chattered again. "Hold on, put that sword away you might hurt someone. Let's see what this thing says. 'I will chop you in half.' Hum, an interesting thing to translate, I wonder where it got it from. Anyhow, pass me the scroll and I will..." The machine whorled again and out popped a really big 'NO'. "Piece of junk." Brain said and kicked the machine, which promptly collapsed in to a pile of wooden cogs and bits of scroll all containing the words 'Please don't kick me.'

"Tell you what, as my machine seems to have fallen apart, why don't I take you to a guy I know. He's really into scrolls and things. Maybe

he can help you, but we will have to stop at the Swill and Donkey and pick up some pies." They left the apartment, with the door still lying on the floor. On the way out Brain remembered his last experiment, and rather than leaving the metal jar filled with Salt peter, sulphur and charcoal, lying around as a tripping hazard, he chucked it in the fire.

Mister Opie jnr.

Scroll worm extraordinaire. This is how Mister Opie would like to have grown up: Raised by dragons, in the heart of the Horn mountain. The slayer of demons. The rescuer of maidens and the hero of the people. This is how it really was: Raised by Alexandra and Mister Opie snr. Reader of way to many scrolls. Can't talk to women. Oh and so pale he is almost see through.

He grew up in the middle class suburb of Okoff. His parents insisted that he take over the family bakery, so they sent him to business school. It didn't work out quite as they expected. While looking for a scroll on how to make money from twenty loaves a day, he came across 'The Adventure of Rodney the Demon Slayer'; from that day on he was hooked on reading. His brother Mister Opie jnr.ner became a successful baker and Mister Opie jnr. became an impoverished librarian. Who needs money when you've got thousands of scrolls at your disposal? Well, Mister Opie for one. A diet of rat and old scroll soup can leave a guy a bit odd. So he subcontracted out his vast knowledge of all things fantastical to anyone who would feed him a decent meal. That was how Brain had gotten to meet him. Brain, never one to do any sort of research, had been in the sub basement of the Grand Library, munching on a pie and looking to see if there was any patent on 'The incredible horseless saddle machine' when a strange pale creature had come out of a huge pile of scrolls and taken his pie. They had spent the rest of the day discussing how they could help each other. Mister Opie would check for patent and Brain would supply the food.

As it was late on Friday night and Opie was reading 'How to tame a Dragon' by Two fingers Die Mil. He had read it hundreds of times before and just like 'Armchair Sorcery' and 'Battle axes for beginners', he had as yet to put any of them to practise. He had read

so many magic books they had created a powerful 'reality field' around him. (The 'reality field' is one of those Holy Grail type things. Wizards are undecided if it exists or if it is just a figment of some gods imagination. It does not allow magic to pass through it, so it would be really handy if someone cast a spell on you; on the other hand, swords and arrows have no trouble getting through. Bulldock The Lesser once managed to create a small field around himself, but as his spells couldn't pass through from his side, his opponent, Giant Bob, just hit him on the head and took the money back to one eye McCready's casino.) Anyway what this meant was that he, Opie, could find all those magic scrolls that had cloaking spells on them. In fact there was a whole section of what looked like empty shelves dedicated to them. The cloaking spells from the scrolls had leached into the wood and the shelves had disappeared. Opie being the only one that could find them, now ate very well. As the library was closed for the weekend, Opie had two days of rat and scroll soup to look forward to. He was just getting to the part were Die Mil was explaining how to remove the over eager dragon from you hand without loosing too many fingers, when the front door turned into a pile of splinters.

The whole quest for a translator had started to wear a bit thin for Tricks. When she got bored she had a tendency to amuse herself by breaking things.

"I think he would have let us in if we had knocked."

"Shut up Brain, if I want to break a door, that's my right as a free citizen. Just like it's my right to break you in half if you annoy me to much, Compende."

"It's not you right to break me in half."

"Starting to annoy me, Brain."

"Hi Brain, Is that steak and kidney I smell?" Opie asked sniffing the air, while almost drooling.

"Brain, can I have a private word with you?" almost dragging him away. "Who is that gorgeous lady with you?" he asked in a whisper.

"You mean Tricks, I would hardly consider Miss Warrior a lady and in fact, lady would be the last thing I'd call her."

"No, no, not Tricks. The red head."

"Red head?"

"Yeah, the one that keeps putting stuff in her pockets."

"Red head, pockets? Um, oh yes you mean Siege. Hey Siege Opie

can see you, come over here and meet him."

"Shuss man, you know I'm no good at this stuff. Oh no she is coming over." Siege came over and stood in front of the two men. Opie blushed and tried not to look at her. Brain sort of wondered off. As both Siege and Opie were hopeless at wooing the opposite sex, they just stood there blushing. It took Tricks hacking at a book shelf to pull them out of their romantic blushing exchange.

"Excuse me, I should probably see what all the fuss is about."

You have never seen a librarian move so fast. (I may have given you the impression that Opie was a librarian, that is not so. He was in fact the third assistant to the lower librarian. i.e. the real bottom of all things librarian. So on a Friday night while all the other librarians were out celebrating a new acquisition, cataloguing system or generally not being at the library, Opie was left in charge.) Tricks had just finished testing the sharpness of her blade on a pile of scrolls when Brain and Opie joined her.

"Brain, why are you here?"

"I was busy adding a little charcoal to some stuff when..."

He was interrupted by a rather loud bang.

"Sounds like the methane factory is going to be hiring again. Anyway Tricks here sort of came over for some of my new energy..."

"Shut it Brain. Can you translate this scroll, um, what the hell is your name?"

"Opie. Let me see it. Ah yes, I saw something about this."

He took the scroll and wondered off into the darkened recess of the library basement. Tricks and Brain followed closely on his heels, Siege behind them, giggling from time to time.

"I could probably make a decent lighting system for this place." Brain said, looking around for possible places to put his patented 'Hardly ever explodes methane gas lights' (He probably should have added 'but when it does it will take half a block with it'. Methane was only used to keep the really big swamp monsters from invading Clemville. Whenever one of the creatures would venture beyond the great barrier, [a small wooden fence] the Clemville Anti-Swamp Monster Brigade would light the moat of methane. Sometimes the monster leaves, [most swamp monster don't want to go to Clemville, they think it is beneath them, the methane is more of welcome to Clemville that most of them refuse] but mostly the CASMoB get very singed.)

"So Tricks, wanna find a corner and make out? Ouch, that hurt."

"It will be more painful if you don't shut up."

"Gees, there is just no...Ouch ok, I'll stop, see lips are...ouch"

Before too much damage could be done to Brain, Opie returned looking all excited, clutching a handful of scrolls.

"Hi Siege." followed by giggles.

"Hi Opie." followed by giggles, then complete silence.

The silence lingered heavily in the air. Then it left to read a scroll.

"Well, what did you find?" Tricks asked, finally letting go of Brains collar and strolling purposefully towards Opie.

"What? Oh, yes." he said, dragging his eyes off Siege. "It seems that this is Gelmont the Lost's original scroll to the treasure of Da'Loose."

"Don't look at me like that, you aren't going to spend my money."

"No, no that's not what I meant. Lord Da'Loose was a real guy. It's just that people thought he stole the money and that's where the story comes from. Anyway, this guy Gelmont the Lost went searching for the treasure. He figured that Da'Loose got lost in the Horn Mountains, you know they use to be called the Eagle Mountains?"

"Why the Eagle Mountains, I went camping there with my dad and we didn't see nothing but vultures, boy did they taste foul or what. Did I ever tell you about..."

"Shut up!" Opie, Tricks and Siege said in unison. "Please Opie continue."

"Thanks, as I was saying, you see this mark at the bottom here. That means it was checked out of this library."

He opened up one of the scrolls he had just retrieved and showed them the same mark. "See, it was checked out a little under sixteen hundred years ago. You see that annotating in the left column. No, I think that is a coffee stain. I mean the one that looks like an x, as in marks the spot. It was taken out of the treasure map section."

"I didn't know you had a treasure map section. Anything interesting in it?" Brain asked rubbing his hands and thinking about an incredible automatic treasure-digging machine. (The idea of treasure slowly faded and the idea of a backhoe started to take its place. Luckily for the Ditch Diggers Guild [they always gave thanks to Lady Luck even though they had a really bad life, they could have been part of CASMoB] Opie answered Brain's question before the idea could take root and start blooming.)

"No one would return the scrolls, so it now contains the scrolls about what happened to people who didn't return their library scrolls. Real horror section."

"I swear Brain, you say one more word and you will be walking home on the stumps your legs used to be on."

To emphasize her point she tapped his legs with the flat of her sword.

"So we have a treasure map. What does it say?"

"I don't know. It is written in code. Only Belmont will know."

"Fat lot of use you are, he died over sixteen hundred years ago. Come on Siege, let's go get a drink."

"Wait. I know someone who could translate it, but it will cost."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Maude's Palm, Tarot and Tea readings incorporating Sun, Moon and Stars Séances including Bill's notarising and past life civil attorney at law."

"That will cost. Fancy a quick stroll through Bullion Heights, Siege?"

Mrs. Maude's Palm, Tarot and Tea readings incorporating Sun, Moon and Stars Séances including Bill's notarizing and past life civil attorney at law

A fine place. Ever wanted to know your future? Perhaps ask granddad where he hid the family gold? Even get your own back on your ungrateful decedents after you're dead, by getting a full notarised change of will. Some may think they are a little pricey, but think of the benefits. Imagine your wife's surprise when you kill her new lover even before she has had a chance to meet him. Or finding all that gold that was left under the floorboards by dear old granddad. Or even suing the guy you beat to death for breaking your best club. (This is a paid for product placement; actual readings, Séances and court cases may differ from advertised. I.e. granddad squandered the family fortune at McCready's Casino and House of Interesting Repute. Feel free to visit Bill and sue the philanderer.)

Friday night after payday at Mrs. Maude's was a sight to behold. The queue was halfway around the block, and it was in a tough neighbourhood. Quite often you got to jump the line, simply because you were mugged and murdered before you got to the door. Luckily our intrepid travellers had a go-to-the-front-of-the-queue pass, Tricks. She had never stood in a queue before and she wouldn't start tonight. A couple of "What the... oh hi Tricks, sorry didn't see you coming through." and they were at the reception desk. Lovely Matilda looked up from her ghostly writing pad.

"Tricks, Brain, Mister Opie and Siege to see Sarah, sorry I mean Lady Laseer. Please go on through, she is expecting you."

The four walked through the door and entered the world of the Séances.

It was quiet a mess of ghostly figures. Half the newly dead were coming back to tell their dearly leftbehinds that they had left the keys under the mat or that water-skiing behind a swamp monster should be left to the professionals. Lady Laseer hadn't yet made her entrance, so the dead were getting a bit out of control. The constant begging for messages to be carried to their loved ones was really starting to get on Tricks's nerves. (It is said that once you are dead you can no longer feel pain from the living. While this is mostly true, it is not always the case. Case in point: Tricks's skill with a sword actually transcends the life/death barrier. Another case in point: Simon the foolish had just ask Siege, why they didn't call her Sam. It turns out that it not only is a fate worse than death, it is also a fate worse than being dead.) Tricks was about to swing her sword when Lady Laseer walked in.

"Hi Tricks, please don't kill my dead, they are my living."

"Hi Sarah, long time no see."

They hugged each other. The other three living people in the room almost died of shock. Unfortunately Brain recovered first.

"You two know each other? When did this happen?"

"We grew up together." Lady Laseer replied.

"Tricks grew up?"

After that Brain was silent the rest of the Séance. He always found it difficult to speak with a blood nose.

"So shall we get on with the Séance?" Sarah said after they had wiped up the blood.

The spirits saw what Tricks had done to one of her friends and decided that next door at Max's Mix State of Consciousness would be a better place to hang out.

"Maude says you guys want to contact Gelmont the Lost."

When she got an agreement from the four of them she started to clear the candles off the table.

"Don't we need those?" Opie asked.

"Candles, hell no. That is for the tourists. They interfere with the

signal, sort of makes it hard to hear the dead buggers, all fuzz and stuff. As I understand it you want a clear channel to the wonderer."

"Should I dim the lights, it doesn't feel right with all this brightness in here."

Opie just wasn't into bright things. Spending most of his life wondering around the catacombs of the library had not prepared him for the five hundred watt candles they favoured at Mrs. Maude's.

"If it would make you feel better, go ahead. I just thought you might like to get a bit of a tan going."

Opie rushed around blowing out candles and soon they were ready to try calling the spirits. The old scroll was spread across the table and Laseer was starting her low hum. (Calling spirits is a true art. Billions of people have died over the millennia and finding one in particular can be a real mission, especially when he has been dead for thousands of years. When you first die you either take an old wagon to your final destination i.e. Hell, heaven, the beach or some sort of prearranged religious hideout. Or you hang around moaning with the other dead people about how great it was when you were still flesh. Things like 'boy did I ever enjoy that last pie' or 'remember sex, I really should have been a member of the screaming orgasm cult.' Slowly the bitching and moaning gets too much and you start a tour of the various places eternity has to offer. Eventually you find a nice place to settle down and start going to bed earlier and earlier, until one day you just don't bother to get out of bed. Then suddenly, while you half asleep having that really great dream about that sexy Tiffany Johnson, someone grabs you by the shoulder and rips you into a darkened room with five people sitting around a table. Yeah you would be pissed.)

"What the hell do you want?" the really dark spirit said hovering above the table. (The darker they are the angrier they are, and this one was nearly corporeal.)

"Are you Gelmont the Lost?" a sweet voice asked.

"No I bloody ain't!"

"Sorry, wrong number."

Before he could get another word and/or deed in he found they had hung up. He sat fuming in his bed. Then decided that it was his loud 'party animal' neighbour they were looking for, so he went next door to give the bastard a piece of his mind, only he was out.

"H e y, h o w y o u g u y s d o i n g." Gelmont the lost said, almost

invisible above the table.

"Are you Gelmont the Lost?" a sweet voice asked.

"Yeah, That would be me." he continued in his slow drawn out slur. "I was just finishing off this like really big bong and I like heard you guys calling. So I hopped on over, man, the after life is like so wicked man."

He almost disappeared. It was lucky that he was still filled with smoke, or they wouldn't have seen him at all.

"Gelmont, can you translate this scroll?"

"N o s w e a t."

Before their eyes the scroll changed from being a scroll into a map. It clearly showed that it was just the rambling of some old guy that had never found anything in his life.

"Well, so much for finding Da'Loose's treasure." Tricks said, starting to get up to make her way back to the Swill and Donkey.

"Hey are you guys looking for the Da' Loose treasure. Bummer man I think I'm loosing my high. Sweet man, I think I left the original map in Nad. Yeah, it had like all these really cool directions and things, but you know how anal these mapmakers can be. So I sort of copied the important stuff, you know, where to get the best weed and who has the best ale, that sort of thing. No jokes that was a wicked trip man. Sorry I can't hang and chat, got a heinous party to go to at Mrs. Johnson's. Chow." And then he was gone.

"Well, that was certainly interesting." Tricks said, "Anyone feel like an adventure?"

They all went to the Swill and Donkey to discuss their strategy.

The Swill and Donkey

Dark, secluded and altogether seedy looking. The type of place that you go into and kind of wish you had rather spent the evening in the torture chamber. Frequented by Pirates, ruffians, vagabonds, lowlifes, the occasional student, Greg the gay and other riff-raff. Tricks loved the place. She spent every...sorry been through all that. Anyway, one more point, the bed in the back room was in fact Tricks's. That's right she lived in the pub, in fact she was the owner. Never let it be said that she got drinks on the house though. (She always got someone to pay for them. While owning a Pub may seem

like a great idea, it can get rather boring.)

A quick recap courtesy of Brain. His nose had finally stopped bleeding and as usual he was feeling a little talkative.

"So there I was minding my own business when who should come crashing through my door. That's right, Tricks herself, demanding one of my new energy drinks. So I tell her, not on your life, you will have to.." (So much for the recap). It was at about this point that the drunken old miner wondered off and the other three returned.

"How's your nose?" Tricks asked, sitting down and offering Brain a large raw steak.

"Don't eat it. Put it on your nose, it will help with the swelling."

Brain thought it would help more if it was in his stomach, but didn't say a word. It had gotten quite late and only the hardened drinkers were left, those and the ones that had tried Guinness's secret won't-be-able-to-walk-for-three-days brew. The four sat in silence for a while sipping at their ales, quietly pondering their choices.

"Well I'm off home, see you guys around."

Ten minutes later Brain was back.

"Someone nicked my house, there is just a bloody great crater where it used to be."

The others chuckled and bought him a fresh round.

"So when do we leave for Nad? Anyone have any idea of which part of town it's in."

Opie cleared his throat.

"Well actually, um, it's across the sea of a thousand widows. I have been trying to get there for years. It has one of the greatest libraries of all time. Past, present and future scrolls, all waiting for me to come and read them. Every time I make the arrangements, war breaks out on The Kingdoms of Lob and Cray. So I'm still in, even if there isn't a treasure, seeing the books will make it all worthwhile."

"I found the scroll, and I would really like the opportunity to get out of the crowded city. Feel what it is like to have empty pockets for a while, so I'm in." Siege said, looking mostly at Opie and blushing.

"There had better be a treasure, I need to rebuild my house and catch up on a few experiments, so I'm in. Tricks?" Brain asked.

"Sure why not? I could do with another quest." Raising her voice she shouted. "Guinness bring us some more beer, for tomorrow we are off

a'questing."

A loud cheer resounded around the pub; everyone would be richer with Tricks out a'questing.

Chapter 2

Kingdom of Cray

"I will not have that jumped up, no good, lying bastard saying those things."

"Yes sire, but he is your brother."

"I don't care."

The King of Cray was fuming. It was too much. The treaty they had reached last year had finally broken down. It could mean only one thing: War. (It is a well know fact that Crustation Island is the butt of all jokes. By some weird twist of fate, the gods in all their wisdom and the love of a good joke had divided the island in half. On one half they put the spawning grounds for Crayfish and on the other the spawning ground for Lobster. They were both very wealthy Kingdoms, as everyone likes the very pricey delicacies, but which is better?)

"We had an agreement." the King of Cray continued.

They would divide up the mainland and only promote their products in the designated areas. They had divided before the great gold strike in Mineston. Now with the flush miners they were selling thousands of Crayfish in that town. King Lob had decided that he wanted a piece of this lucrative deal and had started shipping lobsters inland. Word had reached King Cray and he wasn't happy. Never one to stick to an agreement himself, he still felt that it was wrong when other people broke his agreements.

"If he's not careful, we will end up with a worthless product. Can you imagine people haggling over the price of a beautiful crayfish, in the streets, like they were common fish? It makes me sick to the stomach. Quick James call my Master at Arms, I must prepare." There was only one thing the people of Cray enjoyed more then a well-cooked Crayfish smothered in garlic butter, and that was war. The same could be said for the people of Lob. In fact if there wasn't a war at least once a year the men folk had a tendency to wonder off and join the foreign legion. So to war they went.

Kingdom of Nad

Population: Two. The King (really a woman, but she thought it was a bit unfair that men got the really cool titles and she was left with the girly sounding queen. Also, the first ruler of Nad had decreed that only kings shall rule the kingdom.) and her faithful scroll keeper Paulo the reasonably good-looking, if you are into that whole Latin lover kind of thing.

"Oh, Paulo!"

"Si, my King!"

He might not have been any good at keeping the scrolls, in fact he was downright hopeless, but he made up for it in other areas and the scrolls pretty much looked after themselves. The kingdom of Nad was chosen thousands of years ago to be the archive of important writings. It is no more than a rock jutting out of the sea, with one redeeming feature. It is filled with caves, all interlocking and only one entrance. So the scroll keepers of old built a really impressive library above the opening. (It is well known that librarians love to read fantasy, and as they had way too much cash on their hands, thanks to the sale of the notorious librarian written book 'Alchemy: true stories', they built what can only be described as a fairy tale castle, only much, much bigger. The scrolls started flooding in. As the island of Nad had no real entertainment i.e. women and the pub were left on the mainland, they proclaimed one of their members king and appointed him an assistant. Whoever the king was, the appointed assistant was always of the opposite sex. This insured the survival of the royal lineage and the keeping of the scrolls.)

"That was fantastic, Paulo."

"Si. My King." Paulo didn't speak much.

"Let's lock up, throw up the spells and take a long holiday."

Yeah you guessed it: "Si. my King."

The City Without a Name.

(That's right, if you look at a map it will clearly show a city, but it doesn't have a name. So most people refer to it as The City Without a Name. It has been called worse, but for some reason known only to a few select gods it always reverts to The City Without a Name. The designer of it took a look at the Swill and Donkey and said 'Gee, I really like that, but could we make it seedier and more depraved.

How about chucking in a few rougher ruffians, and don't worry about good looking woman, we will be happy with the bottom of the barrel.' Well if they didn't, how else did it end up just like that?)

The worst of the worst was Captain Vernon The Vindictive. Pirate extraordinaire, vagabond to be sure and all round murdering scum. That was when he was in a good mood. Which he wasn't, ever. To add to his woes he had accidentally driven his ship into the harbour wall and it would take all week to fix. Normally he would have nicked another ship and returned in a week saying something like 'Sorry I got it confused with my ship, tell you what, you don't complain and I won't kill you.' Most people didn't complain. However, there was a shortage of ships in the harbour. The ones that were left had guards, and I don't mean wishy washy regular guards, I mean tough and mean guards, like the kind you would find in The City Without a Name. So he stayed home, well he stayed in the Black Flag pub, and drank away his sorrows getting more and more angry.

The Great Desert

Antagon and Marshmid were at war again; only Marshmid didn't know it yet. The great general Killem had decided to attack Marshmid by surprise. Instead of taking all his men by ship, he had created a clever rouse. He marched his men into the Great Desert and was going to attack through the swamp. Having spent all his money hiring every available ship to lay siege to the City, he didn't have enough money to buy a decent map. So he was thoroughly lost. The men who were sent into the swamp to get water invariably didn't return. Luckily a swamp monster was quite nice over a roasting fire. General Killem was quite happy to keep looking for the way to Marshmid, and a few dead soldiers was the chance you took when planning a brilliant strategy. (How Killem remained in charge of the Antagon army after the 'long way round the mainland' fiasco is a bit of a mystery. Oh yes he was the Kings favourite cousin.)

Deep in outer space.

Bored of his existence as an asteroid, the big rock known to his friends as Humphrey and by the astronomers on Knohear as P-1743 slowly came closer to the planet. Peering down he slipped and started

a deadly spiral that could only end in one thing, a fireball. He really should have paid more attention in Gravity class, instead of trying to chat up Mary.

Clemville

"My head hurts." Brain said, stumbling out of the back room and into Saturday morning at the Swill and Donkey.

It was hard to tell that it was Saturday morning as the Swill and Donkey pretty much looked like that twenty-four seven.

"Have you got something for my head, Guinness."

That was another feature of the Pub, Guinness. (As a youth he had decided he wanted to live in a bar. When he asked a wizard to make it possible for him to "Live the rest of my life awake in a bar" the wizard, William the Witty, had granted him the wish. Now he couldn't leave, and never slept.)

"Best thing in the world for a hang over is another ale."

Brain ran back to the room, hand over his mouth. (He had meant a greasy breakfast, nothing related to alcohol.) He didn't emerge for another ten minutes. Sitting happily in a corner with Opie and Siege, Tricks was sipping on her remedy for a night of non-stop drinking, tea. Opie had been spared the indignity of a hangover; simply by passing out after his second drink, he wasn't one to hold his liquor. Like everything else, alcohol had trouble-finding Siege. (Between her mouth and her blood steam the alcohol would simply wonder off and attach itself to someone else. It was quiet a novel experience sitting next to her while she was drinking, especially if you weren't.)

"Should we wait for Brain, or do we start making plans?" Tricks asked.

She had finished her tea, which meant it was now safe to talk to her. She could be a real bear until she had finished her tea.

"It might help if we made the plans and then told him they were set in stone, you know how he can get if you allow him a chance to argue." Siege said, summing up what the other two had been thinking.

"Good. First order of business is to get the map. Let's hire a boat and sail to Nad." Tricks said and was starting to stand up to announce to the people in the pub that they were going to lend her a boat, but was cut short by Opie.

"At the library we keep all the boat hiring records, and according to the records all the ships have been hired out. We would be lucky if we got a row boat."

His voice sort of petered out under Tricks's glare.

"Oh good. Anything else you want to add?"

Opie understood sarcasm, but decided to continue anyway.

"Well since you asked, we can't sail to Nad, the tides of Crustation Island mean we have to stop there and cross the island first, and then catch the ferry across."

Tricks replied, "What nonsense. That is just a fairy tale they tell to small children to stop them from running away from home." (What? She does sometimes talk a lot of old rubbish, but for some reason no one ever argues with her.) Brain returned in time to hear this remark

"What? Gods you sometimes talk a lot of old rubbish." (Seems Brain doesn't know that.), Brain said holding his head. He was trying to keep the pink elephants that were happily dancing around him from disturbing the other patrons. "Everyone knows that Nad is not a real place, it's more a state of mind." We will skip the next two-hours, it is enough to say that Brain will make a full recovery and that Tricks's hand is still fine.

We next find the adventurers strolling the street of Clemville, making their way to the Clemville docks.

"Do those two always go on like that?" the shy Opie finally plucked up the courage to ask a question directly at Siege, rather than mumbling and hoping that the words would magically arrive at her ears.

"Ever since I've known them! I think its sexual tension."

She giggled and then blushed and then tried to hide her face in her hands and then gave up and changed the subject.

"Can you really see me?"

"Off course, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Then he did the giggle, blushing and hands thing. They were silent for a few more blocks.

"What's it like..." they both said in unison, and then both, what will now be known as GBH, giggle blush hide.

"You go first." Siege said, after they had walked another silent block.

"What do you suppose those two are talking about?" Tricks asked.

"Probably about how hard you hit me in the eye."

"Stop being such a big baby, I hardly touched you, and you were being very rude."

"Ha! You're one to talk. I think it is much ruder to hit people in public, then voicing ones opinion."

"When you have something sensible to say I might listen to your opinion, but until then or hell freezes over I will help keep you on the straight and narrow."

"What crap are you trying to justify your use of violence with now? Like I always say; when the lower life forms can't argue their way out of a problem, they turn to violence."

"Oh now you are really going to get it."

"I'm so scared." Brain said running as fast as he could.

Luckily for him Tricks was laughing so hard she had trouble running.

"See what I mean?" Siege said as Brain came flying past, closely followed by a chuckling Tricks.

"Like I was saying, it can be hard always being the last person anyone ever talks to. Sometimes even Tricks doesn't notice me for a good ten minutes and she's my best friend."

"That truly is sad. I think you are one of the most noticeable people I have ever seen." GBH.

"Thanks, so what is it like working in the library."

"You know I really like reading, so that part is great, it's all the rest that can get you down. I don't get out much, so I would have to say that Brain is my best friend. The others at the library don't really like working there; they were sort of thrust into it because of their families. They always make fun of me because I chose to work there rather than become a baker. They give me all the horrible jobs, like cleaning out the basement, but what they don't know is that it is my favourite job. All the old manuscripts, and it keeps me away from them."

"Well I think you do a very important job. How would people find out stuff if there wasn't a library?" GBH

"Come on you two love birds, we haven't got all day." GBH

Clemville Dock

They had finally arrived at the dock and Brain was still alive. The Clemville Dock is not a place for regular people. It is situated at the furthest extent of Clemville on the Valmic river delta. Of the

twenty-seven reported channels (More have been discovered, but posthumous reports don't count.) it is on Channel No. 1, which is also the widest. It was more of a river port than a dock, although the traditional name remained. Hundreds of small jetties lined the bank, most of them empty. Across the channel you could just make out the CASMoB filling their trench with the huge vats of methane. (As methane was quite hard to work with it was suggested that they use highly distilled alcohol to burn in the trench. They tried it for a day, but it turns out that members of CASMoB and swamp monsters alike get wasted on near pure alcohol. So after they had cleared out the really drunk swamp monsters [they had decided to go to a football match and their team lost, so you can imagine the damage] they decided that methane, while not quite as much fun, would be better than a swamp monster pub.) Slightly further up river was the Junk Town. It was entirely made up of old boats that were no longer fit to float. As there was a nice big sand bank, they had parked the boats on it and now people who were not fit to float, but liked the fresh stench of the sea, lived on them. As long as you didn't go down below it was quite nice. Closer to the sea was where the Clemville fishing fleet moored. They were out, some of them trying to catch some fish, but most of them having joined up with General Killlem's surprise attack. The houses (I use the word very loosely) that lined the 'wharf' were made up mostly of two types; fish markets and shipping transport. The repair yard was part of Junk Town. That way if any boat was unfit for active duty, they could always leave it where it was and someone could move in. The Clemville navy was parked one hundred yards inland, so nobody could steal their ship. Did I forget the stench? Kind of hard to forget.

"What the hell is that smell?" Brain said after taking a nice deep breath of what he thought would be fresh sea air. "How can people live here?"

"Quit whining Brain, it's just rotten fish and raw sewerage." Tricks said.

She knew what to expect, she had been there before. The other three were gasping for breath and trying to block their noses.

"I've never seen it so deserted, let's go and find Anchors Away and get us a boat."

"Any chance of a ship?" Brain asked, remembering the last time he went on a boat.

Anchors Away was the kind of place that made the Swill and Donkey look really posh. Even Tricks who had been in it before felt like washing, so you can imagine how Siege felt. The gloom that hung around the place had been building itself up for years. (It had grown so big over time that it was now swallowing cats and small dogs. It still hadn't reach gloom sentience yet like its big brother in the cave of eternal suffering which could swallow small children and dwarfs, but it was trying really hard.) The Barkeep, if you can call an ex-pirate skeleton a barkeep, hadn't been alive for about ten years. The owner, having already experienced paying wages, had decided that it would be more fitting for his little dive to have some character, rather than good service. Now you had to really shout (for obvious reasons the skeleton was hard of hearing) to get any service.

"Four ales and a ship." Tricks said at the top of her voice, which was really loud, so loud in fact that the skeleton almost moved.

Brain dashed outside, decided that outside looked cleaner and it was probably better if he threw up inside, so he found a corner.

"Better make that three ales and a glass of water." (The water in the place had long since fermented into a really strong drink, so sweet old Mrs Nick brought four ales. Mrs. Nick is a bit of an enigma. Four foot two and the sweetest looking old women you would ever care to meet. Normally, in this part of the world or any part of the world, she would have been taken advantage of, but she was married to Mr. Nick. Yes, that's right Old Nick himself, how they got together is another story.)

"Hello, dears. I heard you asking for a ship." the sweet old woman said. "I'm terribly sorry, but they are all off on some silly errand or other at the moment. Tell you what, I know this really nice fellow Mr. Titler, one of my husbands poker buddies, he's just down the street, I know he hasn't sailed yet. Between you and me I don't think he's likely to sail, too much elbow lifting if you know what I mean." She winked suggestively. "Perhaps if you asked him really nicely he will take you where you want to go. You just tell him that Mrs. Nick sent you." Before anyone could get a word in, she continued. "You're looking a little under the weather there Mr. O'Shaunase. Tell you what; I got this nice little remedy in the back. I always give it to Mr. Nick after one of his poker nights. He always says if he wasn't the devil it would kill him, (she has no clue that he really is the devil) he can be so funny at times." She chuckled and started to head towards the back.

"Quick Siege, put some coins on the table and let's get out of here before she comes back and forces us to try her vile concoction." Tricks said making a hasty move towards the door. "From what I've heard even the Gods won't go near the stuff, they all say it is the only fit punishment for the rebellious one."

Having narrowly escaped the concoction of doom, the four intrepid quest-a-nears headed down the dock towards Tittler's Shipping and Pirate Emporium. When they got there Jack Tittler was sitting on a rocking chair on the front porch of his store/house/should-have-been-demolished establishment. Tricks made the introduction and said that Mrs. Nick had sent them.

"Crazy old bat." he muttered. "So what can I do you fine folks for?"

"We need a ship to take us to Nad."

Tricks had appointed herself spokesman for the little band, Brain was quiet happy with that idea for the time being. The ale he had just quaffed was mixing rather nicely with the alcohol already in his blood stream, add to it the alcohol that Siege had just consumed, he had a bit of a tendency to wonder off. Opie was having a hard time keeping him in one place, and frequently had to pull him off the edge of the dock, Brain trying to convince Opie that he could swim across.

"No can do, love. The blinking constabulary 'ave impounded me ship, 'aven't they. There I was minding me own business, when one of them silly blinking CASMoB boats filled with methane sails right in me path. Well I can tell you I gave them what for. Sent them all to Davey Jones, didn't I. Well the copper says I 'ave't pay for the methane, till I does they's keepin' me ship. Tells you what, you get me ship back and I'll takes you as far as old Crusty, won't I."

"Okay, we get your ship back and you will take us to Crustation Island?" Tricks said not quite sure if the old sea dog was going to take them or not.

"Swot I said, in'it."

"Right, where have they got your ship?"

"Down the ways a little, can't miss it, it's the beauty with the green flag. You see old 'ofty 'e'll sort you out. I'll be up the road 'aven' a quick pint. You got any loose change I coulds borrow. Ta very much. Sees you in a bit."

Then he was gone. Tricks stood for a while watching him go.

"Anyone actually want to go looking for Ofty or what ever his name is or should we try something else."

"I bet I could swim across the Valmic and nick, he he, one of the CASMoB boats."

"Not now Brain. Control your friend Opie, he's an idiot."

"I relent, repeat, re-something that Bicks, Fricks, ah, spoilsport." Brain sat down, realized that a donkey had recently walked past, stood back up and suggested that they all take a quick bath and meet back at the Swill and Donkey. The others thought it was a great idea, slowly edging away from Brain.

The Swill and Donkey

"I'm starting to wonder if this whole going on a quest thing is all it's cracked up to be?" Brain said.

He had finally recovered from his hangover and was now sipping on some tea, much to the amusement of the other patrons.

"It's turning into a classic. I have read enough scrolls in my time to recognise the beginnings of an epic adventure. First the heroes are blocked at every turn, they have no choice but to fall back on their wits." Opie would have said more, but Tricks interrupted him.

"Like Opie was saying, we fall back on my wits. I think we should steal the navy's ship and head out. It's not like they are going to follow us, they only have one ship."

"It's a hundred yards inland."

"Ah, you finally here Siege." Siege was the first to arrive, but only Opie noticed her. "When has a little thing like one hundred yards of land ever stopped us?"

"Right." Brain said rather enthusiastically. "I could build some sort of ship moving thing. Like a giant wagon, well maybe two wagons on each side, with a big wooden thing down the middle that would lift the ship and carry it to water."

"Or we could blackmail a wizard to move it for us. I know just the guy, a real pervert." Tricks continued. While Tricks and Brain argued over which idea had more validity, Opie and Siege entered their own private little world.

"Is questing really like what you said earlier?" Siege asked, by now you should know that GBH is implied each time they talk to each other.

"Sometimes it is really magical. The hero is always on the side of right, no matter what hardships he has to face, and he always gets the girl in the end."

"That sounds really great." She edged a little closer to the tall librarian. "Tell me more about the heroes."

"Well for one thing they don't argue quite as much as Brain and Tricks."

They both laughed.

"Which one of those two do you think will be the hero?" she asked, after a moment's pause, while Opie tried to put his arm around her.

"Gods help us if either of them try to be the hero." Opie replied as Siege snuggled into his shoulder.

"Oy you two, no time for hanky panky. Brain and I have come up with a cunning plan." Tricks's words were like a magic separator. Opie got one more dig in.

"See what I mean? At least they're making it interesting." GBH.

"Okay, listen up. Siege, your job is to distract the guards, so dress sexy. Opie, you have to get us some intel, just sneak into the office and find out how they plan to launch the ship in the event of an emergency. Brain and I are going to make said emergency. Before you ask what emergency, it is better that you don't know. It is enough to say that I will be visiting a high official. Yes what is it Opie?"

"Don't you think it would be better if Siege sneaks in and I create the diversion?"

"Don't be stupid, you will never look like a pretty woman. Hmm..."

Cocking her head to one side, Tricks contemplated the possibility.

"No offence, but desperate sailors wouldn't pick you up."

"But, I mean..."

"No buts get on with it." With that they were into the night.

Siege and Opie

They were walking slowly in the direction of the navy's HQ. It was a Saturday night, so they had to keep stopping to empty out Sieges pockets. Only the lights from the windows of houses lit the road they were walking on, it was quiet dark. Even though Siege had no fear that anyone would attack her she still allowed Opie to put a protective arm around her.

"Is Tricks always like that?" he asked, after he had Siege firmly in hand.

Opie really did have trouble talking to woman; except when he was drunk, they were his cousin or apparently Siege. All the years he had spent trying to avoid the opposite sex for fear that he might turn into

a giant blithering idiot had suddenly evaporated when he was with Siege.

"Pretty much. I know she can seem all boisterous and hard arsed, but underneath she is really a ... well she boisterous and hard arsed underneath, but a great person to have on your side when the chips are down."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, well I know you feel a little embarrassed about your gift, but maybe we can use it to our advantage. I'll pretend to get a light from one of the guards, and you sneak in. I feel sure that if you just walk around the office the plans will mysteriously end up in one of your pockets."

"I'll give it a try, but I never know what is going to land up in my pockets. More importantly, when we see Tricks again, no matter what, we must pretend that we did it her way."

"Fine, but we will know which one is really taking the risk."

They were almost there. They could see the bright blue flag that designated the navy HQ. It was well lit and the building stood out like a sore thumb. Someone had decided that if they were going to have a dry land navy they might as well have a very impressive building. To say it looked like a ship would be a vast injustice to ships everywhere, it looked like a ship an architect would design. All flowing lines with way too many headpieces. The headpieces were all naked women. Siege blushed. Opie tried desperately not to look at them, but they had used the Miss Clemville finalists as models, so he was in a losing battle between hormones and embarrassment. The two disengaged and Siege fell into the shadows. Opie strolled purposefully towards the guards, well as purposefully as he could, his nerves were kicking in. He had read a lot of stories about dungeons and torture chambers, so every gory detail was running through this head. He was about to ask for a light when he remembered that he didn't have a cigarette. He was trapped. The guards had spotted him and were moving into a position to intercept him. He started to think hard. Siege was relying on him to distract them for a few seconds.

Tricks and Brain

"I still think we should go with the wagons and long stick thingy."

"Listen Brain I will only say this once more, but if you mention

wagons and long stick thingies again I am going to brain you, no pun intended."

"So what makes you think your plan will work?"

"Because it is brilliant."

Brain wasn't sure about the whole brilliance of the idea. As far as he was concerned the only way to do things was with magic. His kind of magic, or rather clever devices that looked like they were magical.

"Run it by me again, I think while you were explaining it I was drinking tea and probably lapsed into a coma."

It wasn't the tea; it was the water in the tea. Tricks drank her tea made from water that came, by the barrel, from the Horn Mountain Spring. Brain had tea made from water that was best used for flushing the toilet; actually using it to flush the toilet would probably be a bad idea.

"It's brilliant in its simplicity. First we break into the palace, then I visit King Clement and tell him the only place he would be safe was out at sea. He will organise for the navy ship to be launched and with the plans for the launch in our hands we will know when to steal it. Brilliant and simple."

"Simple minded if you ask me."

"What was that? You are going to have to speak up if you want to tell me something. I can't stand mumblers."

"Nothing, lets get on with it."

They walked a little way in silence. It was amazing how many people could recognise Tricks and Brain from a great distance. The fear that Tricks would want something from them or that Brain would try one of his patented ideas on them gave them very good eyesight. The two of them walked on in nearly deserted streets. Only the odd tourist was about, and being quiet late on a Saturday night most of them had already been mugged and were safely in their high security hotel rooms. They arrived at the palace. It was brilliantly lit; the King was having a party. Actually the King had a party almost every night. It was another of his moneymaking schemes. He would invite the richest people in the kingdom and some of the noblest looking people from the Quick finger guild, all profits to be split eighty forty (That might not quite add up to a hundred percent, but the explanation is quite simple. Quick finger guild accounting). It worked very well. But it presented a problem for our questers. How to get in without raising to much fuss. Tricks was all for the direct approach. Beat up

the guards and just walk in. Luckily two nobles, a man and a woman, rode past as she was explaining to Brain how she was going to beat the hell out of two hundred well trained guards.

"I think a better idea has just presented itself." he said, watching the young nobles.

He pointed to them. She looked and said "So?"

"We knock them out and steal their clothes and invitations and then waltz right in."

"Suppose it could work, but I still think my way would work better for the over all plan."

They accosted the young couple and stole their clothes and invitations. They tied them to the horses and then for good measure took their licences away. Slapping the horses so they would either run home or into the arms of the law, Tricks and Brain made their way to the party, now wearing what was considered fashion in Clemville.

"You know with a little string and some glue you could turn that dress into a decent kite."

"I don't care how clever you think this plan is, if this skirt blows up one more time I swear I will call this whole little quest off."

"Don't stress it Tricks, you have sexy legs."

Luckily his pants didn't hinder his running like the skirt was doing to Tricks. They arrived at the gate guards. They presented their passes and the guard took one look at the names on the invitations and said "Hi Tricks, Brain, lose your invitations?"

Siege and Opie

Wide-eyed and terrified Opie walked towards trouble. Not going to give up an inch and allow Siege to get caught. His mind still blank on what he should do. Then the perfect opportunity presented itself. Someone had left a bottle in the gutter and as Opie stepped across the pavement, planting his size fifteens on the bottle, he did a complete summersault and landed on his face. It was such a classic move the guards burst out laughing. Using his acrobatic skills Opie had distracted the guards, Siege was in the clear. Truth be told, she had already entered the warehouse. Opie sat up; guards now surrounded him.

"Anyone got a smoke for me?" Opie asked dusting himself off.

After his performance all the guards offered him one. Only problem, they didn't have any.

"Damn it, where's my smokes. Did anyone see if Siege walked past?" one asked.

Opie froze.

"Right, like we're going to see that." another replied, with a chuckle.

Opie relaxed.

"I think I walked past her earlier." Opie said. "Or I wouldn't ask you fine fellows for one."

"Yeah, sweet kid. I think. Can't say as I remember what she looks like, nice kid though. Once I lost my riding licence, and she brought it back, not like some people in the quick fingers guild. They would have sold it as soon as look at it."

"I don't suppose any of you know where I can buy some cigarettes at this time of night." Opie asked, trying to distract them some more.

"Just round the corner, but it won't do you any good. Check, you'll find you don't have any money either."

"Of course." Opie said, plan foiled.

He had hoped that he could offer to buy them a drink, but if he produced cash they would know he had been lying about walking past Siege. Then one of them spoke and Opie's blood ran cold.

"Tell you what, you seem like an honest fellow. Why don't we pop inside and ask the station commander to lend you a few coins, he should still be in his office."

Opie stammered, regained the use of his voice and said, "Only if it's no trouble." He thought and thought, but no cunning plan came to mind. He would have to enter the station and hope that Siege wasn't already caught.

Tricks and Brain

The guard was an old friend. They didn't get paid enough to drink in the part of town that they worked in. Instead they spent most of their free time in the Swill and Donkey. Derek Frazier was a part time regular at the Swill and Donkey, so Tricks and Brain didn't recognise him, but as they were full time regulars he recognised them.

"So," he said looking at the invitations again. "I will let you pass on one condition."

The two stood with baited breath. They needn't have worried.

"Please tell Guinness that I'm a decent guy and could I please get

service slightly higher on the ranking board?" (Ah the infamous 'Ranking Board'. Quite simple really. The more you tip the higher you go on the board. The higher you are on the board the quicker you are served. You can also climb the board by doing great deeds or incredibly stupid / funny things or you can know someone. Lord Earlington managed to get to the top of the board by trying to buy the pub. This qualified him for both the biggest tip in the history of the Swill and Donkey and doing an incredibly stupid and funny thing.)

"I will speak to him, see what we can do."

"Thanks, Tricks, well have a good night. Please don't disrupt the party too much." They said they would be a quiet as church mice. (The big vicious type that always threatens the landowner.)

They walked into the palace ballroom. They were announced, rather sceptically, by the maitre dom, and then ushered inside. They were too late to be introduced personally to his Royal Highness King Clement and entourage, but they were in time to see the spectacular view. The ballroom was the largest domed structure in the land. It had been built fifty years ago when one of the nobles had lost a bet. (I believe it was over who could drink the most mead in one sitting, without toilet breaks or standing to stretch your legs. Rumour has it that it took three days and forty gallons of mead.) Giant pillars that looked remarkable like mead barrels stacked on top of each other supported the dome. They were made of the finest marble, mined at great expense, from the Horn Mountains. If you looked closely you could see the gold veins in them. The floor was made of wood, the likes of which hasn't been around for the last fifty years. That's right, the wood was the famous singing forest of Everlon. (Legend has it that the famous talking forest of Everlon would sing to weary travellers as they passed through. Some said it was the most beautiful music ever sung. No matter how tired you were you would suddenly find a new spring in your step or a skip in your heart. That was until it was cut down to make the floor for the ballroom. I heard they started with tone-deaf lumberjacks, and then started using musical lumberjacks, because the music increased production. I don't believe that though, as there are no musical lumberjacks.) The beautiful ballroom was nothing in comparison to the buffet tables that were set up. The most exotic foods in the entire world were sitting on the table. Things you had only ever heard about in legends. Like the Serpent sea eel, the most wondrous fish type thing in all the land. For King Clement's table the eel was not enough, ho no, he had Serpent

sea eel brains, served in five oyster sauce. (The eels were very small and stupid, so you can imagine just how small their brains were.) There were other wondrous things, like dragon teeth soup and yeti milk cheese, and of course the Kings favourite, unicorn on an open spit. However, our brave adventurers had no time to admire the delectable and exotic food, they were on a mission.

They started to make their way toward a large group of people. The king was bound to be in the middle of it all, telling bad jokes and boasting about his prowess. They were so intent on the king they didn't see the Kings own royal guards making their way towards them. These men were well trained and had strict orders to throw Tricks in the dungeon. Unfortunately for Tricks and Brain the captain of the guard was a very smart man. He knew he would never be able to take Tricks easily, so he had come up with a plan. He walked right past Tricks as if she wasn't there, and then spun on his heels and grabbed Brain from behind. He put the blade of his sword to his throat and said.

"If you don't come quietly I will be forced to kill your friend."

Tricks looked at the captain with a fierce fire burning in her eyes. Captain Jack Turner knew that if he ever met Tricks outside the royal grounds he was a dead man. Even so he stood his ground, though he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Come on Tricks, this is not a hard decision. A night in the dungeon or a dead friend."

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking." Tricks said finally gaining control of her emotions. "Sorry Brain I can't see any way out, other than surrendering to these cowards. Do your worst you bunch of lily livered whossey boys."

Siege and Opie

Opie walked into the station. There was no sign of commotion. Still he held his breath. He looked around; there was no evidence that they had found Siege yet. He knew that he would be the only one that could see her, but try as he might he could not see her anywhere. He had no choice, he had to follow the guards into the station commanders office. He walked in and almost had a heart attack. Standing in plain view, and rifling through the file in the filing cabinet was Siege. As they walked in she turned and looked at them,

then shrugged her shoulders and carried on going through the files. Opie was at a complete loss for words. No one seemed able to see her. He managed to get his mouth closed and pay just enough attention to the station commander to hear him say that he didn't have much money, but he could offer Opie a cigarette. Confused and dazed Opie said thanks. The station Commander felt in his pockets, but couldn't find his cigarettes. As calm as can be Siege felt through her pockets and found some cigarettes and placed them on the desk. The Commander saw them and gave one to Opie, who without thinking popped it in his mouth and accepted the offered match. Ten seconds of Opie coughing his lungs out sort of aroused the guard's suspicions. When Siege started to pat him on his back, they finally saw her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the commander asked. "Quick grab her while you still can." he shouted.

Opie tried bravely to help her, but to no avail. They were both caught. All Opie had succeeded in doing was getting them both caught.

"A pair of thieves, lets see if we can find a nice spot in King C's dungeon for these two. Take them away, wait a second. Go through Siege's clothes first. See if there is anything interesting in them?"

The guard and the Station commander had a really good night after that, what with all the great food and a couple of sisters of questionable virtue.

Siege, Tricks, Opie and Brain spent the night in the dungeon, along with half the population of Clemville. It was a Saturday night after all.

King Clement's Dungeon

I have spent a little time as King Clement's guest, so I know about his dungeon. It has many layers. The top level is for riff raff, which is where I spent my time. Not an altogether bad place. Three squares a day, running water, nice stone slab for a bed and pillow, covered in previously mentioned running water, loads of cockroaches and rats. Them being the three square meals I mentioned, if you count the tasty fungus on the walls. All in all I have spent time in worse. The only problem with that level is that if a torturer wants to see if one of his new methods works, he is liable to drag someone out and test it

on them. It is just a big open dormitory, sort of like a processing area. You hang around until about lunchtime, and then they open the doors for about ten minutes and all those that want to are free to leave. This first level is kept for drunks and nuisances.

Level two is more like a traditional dungeon. Long dark corridor, small cells, the foul smell of decay and of course the screams of the unfortunate in the torture chamber at the end of the passage. I never spent much time there, but from what I saw it was really bad. This is where they keep thieves and other unserious crime type people. I believe there are ten levels, each one getting exponentially worse.

Somehow our four intrepid adventurers managed to get locked in the same cell on level two. It was just the five of them, the fifth being Short John Lead, well-known pirate school drop out. He was well-known because he was the first pirate wannabe to ever drop out of pirate school. The whole chopping people up and stealing their boats was too much for him. So he did what all dropouts do, he became a consultant. He could weigh up the risks of any planned jobs, as well as doing the finest cost to profit analogies around.

Our adventure could have ended right here, with our heroes locked up in prison for the next two months. Luckily they had Siege with them, but we will get to that a little later. I told you that this was a tale about luck, but I haven't as yet gotten to what was lucky about it, well here goes. They were lucky that they were caught and chucked in a cell with Short John Lead. He knew where every available ship in the whole world was. There are other instances of luck, but I think you can find them for yourself. The best pieces of luck are still to come.

The four friends sat in the gloomy cell. They had hoped that they would have been put in level one, but the head jailer had taken one look at them and instantly put them on level two. He had been present at the great jail break, when Tricks had lead an army of drunks and nuisances makers out of the front gate twelve hours early. He didn't want a repeat of the same performance. So they sat in the gloom.

"What you folks in for?" Short John Lead asked, finally sitting up off the stone floor. He was a 'hard drunk', which basically meant he

would cause too many problems to be allowed into the general population of level one.

"The usual." Brain replied, pointing at Tricks.

"Tricks up to her usual tricks then." The old pirate laughed heartily until he started coughing. Tricks was fuming, the indignity of being taken to the dungeon completely sober. She barely raised an eyebrow at the pirates joke.

"Let's just say that I'm glad I'm not the captain of the guard. When Tricks gets out he's going to be in a deep pile of it and it's gonna be mostly his own body parts." Brain said. "So, Opie how did you 'whined' up in here?" not too sure where his pun was going. Opie explained how they had gotten caught, but left out the bit about how they had swapped roles in the caper.

"Oh, well. It was bound to happen. We should have used the wagon and long stick thingy that I was thinking of."

"Enough Brain." Tricks said coming out of her gloom finally. "We are here without a ship. Our prospects of escape are very low. So I don't want any lip from you."

"I know were you can get a ship, but as for the getting out part..." Short John Lead said his words petering out into another coughing fit.

"I think I have a way out." Siege said rifling through her pocket. "I seem to have picked up some keys along the way."

"That's great, Siege. So tell us John, where can we find this ship?" Brain asked.

"You get me out and I'll tell you."

"Siege, get to work. Let's get out of here." Tricks said, "We have a quest to finish."

Getting out was easy after they had established they had the keys. The only problem they encountered was the gateposts. Sending Siege ahead easily solved this; she would walk past the guards and then whistle. The guards would turn to see what the noise was and then the other three would pounce on them. Truth is Tricks did most of the pouncing, Brain and Opie were quite capable of their fair share of pouncing, but they left it mostly up to Tricks, as she needed to vent a little steam. The others decided it would be prudent to let her vent her frustration on the guards rather than take it out on them later. In no time at all they were standing on the street.

"We got you out, so where can we find a ship?" Tricks asked Short

John Lead.

“In four days one of the best ships will be ready to sail. Only problem is it belongs to Vernon The Vindictive. The work crew said it would only be ready in a week, so he will be drinking until then. I know for a fact that it will be ready sooner, so if you play your cards right you should be able to ‘borrow’ it while he’s drunk. Second problem is that it’s in the Town with No Name. The third problem is if he catches you it will be a fate worse then death.” He started an evil chuckle, that turned into an evil cough, and then deteriorated into a plain coughing fit. When he finally regained control of his voice he said: “Well good luck, if you want to make it in time you will have to leave now, it’s about four days ride from here.”

(I bring this chapter to a close with a bit of information. Distance in Knothear is measured in DW, DR, DS and DF or Days Walk, Days Ride, Days Sailing and Days Flight respectively. This is a rough guide to distance. One DW can be anything from five miles to forty kilometres, depending on who tells you. I.e. an old man says that the castle is 10DW’s he means it will take him ten days to walk there. However a young fit man will say the same distance is 3DW’s and a well know bragger will say the castle is only 1.3DW’s away. So if you start adding up distances and for some reason it turns out that it took someone four days at full gallop on a horse to go the grand distance of two and a half miles remember that distance in Knothear is subjective. I.e. the horse was lame and the rider was actually carrying it the distance. Plus it helps me avoid all those nasty adding up things.)

Chapter 3

Kingdom of Lob

Private Nat Grey sat on the wall. His heart was pounding and his hands were shaking. It was his honour to volunteer and be chosen out of all the men on the front line to run to the distant chalk line and moon the soldiers of Cray. 'Some honour' he was thinking, remembering what his father had told him five years ago. It was clear in his mind as he jumped down onto the wet soil: "Never volunteer for the mooning." He had said as he sat down on the cushion with a hole in it. "Those lads from Cray are crack shots with the bow. I should know." he said, rubbing the spot on his butt where the arrow had been removed. Well Nat had not volunteered in the sense that he had stood up and said 'Gee, could I run to the front and moon those sharp shooting lads of Cray.' Ho no he had volunteered in the sense that his sergeant had walked up to him and said 'Private Grey you just volunteered to demoralize the enemy.' (The wars between the Kingdoms of Lob and Cray were very civilized affairs. The armies gather up behind the 'Kingdom walls', long stretches of stonewalls that run from coast to coast. These walls were separated by No mans land, quite often called Fools land. Down the centre runs a chalk line that is the true divide of the two kingdoms. After a few days of 'demoralizing' each other they all jump the wall and charge. When I say all, I mean all the privates; generals and other officers sit on the wall and scream orders. As no one cares who wins, it's more about braining your opponents; the war is over at sunset of that day, followed by rude letters about how inferior the other side was.)

Nat strolled slowly towards the chalk line; he could see his opposite number walking towards him. They met in the middle, they would both be safe until they crossed the line and dropped their pants.

"Hi," his opposite number said, "names Sam."

"Nat, you volunteer?"

"Yeah, my serge said I did, so I must have."

"Same here, well I suppose we should get on with it."

They simultaneously stepped across the line and started mooning their respective enemies. A loud cheer rang out from both encampments and then the sizzle of incoming arrows could be heard. Nat felt a sharp pain in his left butt cheek, and knew he was hit. He

stood up and started to walk back towards his own encampment. He heard Sam say that it stung like blue blazes. Nat couldn't agree more as he limped on. His fellow warriors all cheered him, as he got closer. He would spend the rest of the war in the infirmary with all the other volunteers.

Kingdom of Nad

King Isabelle the 5th stood with her bags all packed and ready to go. She had been waiting for Paulo for over an hour. He might have been extraordinary in the bed room, but he was a real woman when it came to packing. The VIP dragon limo had been waiting for quite some time, and dragon limos weren't cheap. She had decided that they were going to stay at the 'Great Desert spa and Gangster Hide Out'. The perfect place to get away from all the damp and cold that she was presently waiting in. As she was a King, even though she only lorded over one man and a pile of books, she got special treatment. One such treat was the use of a Dragon Limo. As dragons are notoriously hard to train (See: How to tame a Dragon by Two fingers Di Mil.) very few were in service. This ones driver was starting to get agitated.

"Listen, your majesty, we must get going. I still have to pick up Sal Ca'pin and if Khali (Kh'alukin'pol'te is the dragons real name, but you try pronouncing it.) here doesn't get his supper on time I'm liable for the damage when he eats someone's village."

"Just a sec." she replied sweetly and then commandeered her Kingly voice and shouted, "Paulo if you are not out here in ten seconds we are leaving without you."

Five seconds later Paulo came running through the castle gates.

"Finally ready?" she asked in what could only be interpreted as fierce and sarcastic.

"Si, my King." said the wordsmith.

"Well step back and let me lock up."

She closed the front door and then bolted the huge lock. Using all ten keys she locked the minor locks and then stood back and opened a small black book and started reading from it. (She was reading a spell that had been invented millennia ago to protect the great library. It was so complex it would take an infinite amount of wizards working an infinite number of years to crack it. Or the words on a little piece of paper that was at that very moment fluttering under the door.)

When she was finished a shimmer of air covered the whole castle, making it look all blurry.

"Get on the dragon, our holiday of hot sun and fine food awaits."

"Si, my King."

The City Without a Name

(I know that I have called it all sorts of things from 'The city without a name', 'The town of no name', 'The village unnamed' etc. I do not do this on purpose; it is merely the gods screwing with my parchment. Like all good jokes of the gods they are really hammering this one home.)

Dougy Losnal hammered in another nail, then stood and stretched his back. He looked at his throbbing thumb again and sighed. He had been working non-stop all week and now he had to work the weekend. He liked to spend his Sundays quietly drinking until his wife looked appealing and then doing his husbandly duty, followed by drinking himself into a coma. Like all the people hammering away that Sunday morning he knew they were fixing a pirate ship. The consequences of not finishing this job on time could be very severe.

"How many days we got?" he asked his foreman.

"Till next weekend. The boss has got the owner down the pub, trying to keep him drunk."

"Some people get the best job. I recon we should be finished by Thursday at the latest."

"Shush, Dougy, don't let anyone hear you. If something goes wrong we will never be finished by then. Better if the Pirate thinks we are going to take all week rather than being late."

"Suppose so." Dougy shook his head and picked up another nail, held it against the wooden board and gave his thumb another good whack. The foreman chuckled and said that Dougy was the worst carpenter he had even seen. Dougy just swore.

Marshmid

Captain Shamus Gumboot looked out at all the ships blockading his harbour. It had been a long time since he had seen so many ships, if ever. They blanketed the sea as far as he could see. If nothing else it

was a grand sight. Technically it was a blockage, but ships kept coming in to get fresh water and supplies. Business in Marshmid was booming. As the city was completely surrounded by a marsh it was a well-known fact that if the city was to survive they had to trade with the outside world. (The well-known fact had forgotten that the marsh supplied everything a city needed, from fruit and vegetables to swamp monster meat and water. The water was a bit strange tasting, but completely drinkable.)

"We really must thank Killem for this windfall. Any idea when he will attack?" The Captain asked.

"No idea, sir." the young corporal replied, "He is lost somewhere in the great desert. The scouts say it could be any time between now and eternity."

They both laughed.

"Even so, we should probably call in the army, prepare them for a swamp attack. I assume he is planning to come across the swamp?"

"That's what our spies say." the younger man replied.

"On second thought, I think leave all the men gathering supplies for the ships. The swamp will slow that idiot down enough that we will have ample warning. Look here comes our next customer. Tell the merchants to hike the prices by ten percent, you know something like war tax."

"Yes sir." The young man scurried away.

"I just love war, so profitable." the Captain said to himself, paging through another set of financial statements. "Maybe now I can get a bookkeeper."

The road out of Clemville

Our four intrepid travellers had finally left Clemville. It was mid-day Sunday when they rode out the front gates. What with Siegfried having a bath and Opie collecting some important documents and maps it had taken the whole morning to get their stuff together. Tricks had organised the horses and Brain had... (Come to think of it what the hell had Brain been doing all morning? Perhaps we will find out later in the tale. What ever it was I'm sure it will be below Brain's expectations, but really comical for the rest of us) a big sack, that he wouldn't let anybody look into. He kept saying it was a surprise. I almost missed the part about the gate. The main gate of Clemville is a sight to behold. A behemoth of a gate, it puts all other gates to

shame. (Excluding the fabled gates of 'Wizards World' or the ten gates to Utopia, but they are the greatest gates that anyone living has ever seen.) It takes ten thousand slaves and oxen to move them. Yes they move, on great big wheels. Ah the gates of Clemville, marvel of modern technology. The original gates are near the heart of Clemville; they are now a pile of rubble. As the city grew the kings would expand the city limits, each time building new gates. Then one day King Clement the fourteenth decided that the city would keep growing and if he had to build a new gate each time it would become far to expensive, so he turned to the city engineers, who in turn turned to Anthony O'Shaunase [That's right one of Brain's ancestors] and the rest as they say are expanding city limits gates. What about the city wall, you might ask? Who needs a city wall when you have the worlds most impressive gates.

"Wow, those are the most impressive gates I have ever seen." Siege said turning in her saddle to stare back at the marvel.

"Not too bad, you know one of my ancestors built them." Brain replied, desperately trying to stay in his saddle. "Of course he didn't have access to my superb intellect and great mental..." the others were saved from Brain's boorish boasting by him falling out of his saddle again. After he got back on the horse he had completely forgotten all about gates and ancestors. Instead he muttered about ineffectual transport and how he could have found a quicker and easier way to get them to the Metropolis with No name. The others merely laughed at his discomfort.

They move on in silence for a short distance on the main road out of town. They came to a T junction, and some wise-ass had removed the signs and replaced them with signs reading 'left' and 'right', only they were swapped around. Brain has never be good at telling left from right, so he naturally assumed that he should follow the sign marked right. So of course Opie had a map open and pointed out that Brain was going the wrong way. Brain has never been wrong, that he knows of, so he argued. They needed to be across the Valmic River by dark, so Siege suggested that while Brain was arguing with Opie, she gets off her horse and swap the signs around. Tricks suggested that she would drag him in the right direction if he didn't follow. In the end it was settled by Brain himself.

"Okay, we shall see." he said. "Once we have gone down the road for four or five days and no city appears, I will expect some apologies."

"Fine Brain," Tricks said turning her horse and heading down the road. "As long as you go this way."

He followed for the next few hours lost in his own world. (Just so you know they are now going in the right direction, and Brain completely forgot about the incident.)

They arrived at the bridge over the Valmic River. It was already starting to get dark and some swamp monsters were gathering below, ready to pounce on unsuspecting travellers. The bridge, as they like to call it, is more of a jetty on either side, with a hand pull raft in the middle. As it was dusk the 'Valmic Mercs', (The Valmic Mercs were a group of men that waited on the bridge. As it was quite a busy bridge, traffic had to keep flowing. But there was the ever present danger of being eaten by a swamp monster, so the Valmic Mercs would offer their services as protection across the river. Fighting off monster as you crossed.) were starting to gather. Our four enterprising adventurers did not need any help as they had Tricks.

"Three tickets for the ferry." Tricks asked.

"Will that be with or without protection." the young, bored looking woman in the booth asked, without looking up from her 'Country Life Celebes' scroll.

"Without." She sounded a bit put out; maybe her reputation didn't get out this far. The young girl, who we could now see in the waning light, and let me say she wasn't much to write home about, took out three tickets and handed them out the window, glancing up as she did. Boy did she blush.

"Oh my Gods it's you. It's really you. Oh my Gods. I can't believe the famous Tricks is at my window. Oh my Gods. Can I get an autograph? Oh my gods. I was just reading about you in CLC. They said you were put in the dungeon. Oh my gods." on and on. (You may have noticed that the girl knew that Tricks had been in the dungeon. She had read it in CLC, which comes out on a Thursday, so they couldn't possibly know that she was put in the dungeon. Well CLC employed many great wizards, they could afford to with their circulation, and these wizards would magically update any important or breaking news onto the scroll during the week. For subscribers only. They had originally used seers to just plain predict the future, but after a few unfortunate incidents of slander [when you know your future you can change it] they opted for the update method.)

Tricks was in a much better mood after that. On the raft she really let

those swamp monsters have it. It got so bad that Brain and Opie had to try calm her down. Her number one fan watched her the whole way and cheered every time she smited one of the beasts. A short distance from the river was the 'Top of the Delta' inn. They decided to spend the night there.

To say that the Top of the Delta inn was a fine establishment would have been a mite slanderous, mites being its most populous residents. The building style was all the rage when it was constructed, heroin chic. (Heroin chic was all the rage for about two months, three centuries ago. All the really chic people would take heroin and then design things. 99.9% of the things would fall down, but the designers were too high to notice or care. After a while everyone decided that a pile of rubble as a house was not such a hot idea, so they started the next great movement, build to last, the solid years. The inn is a bit of an enigma, in fact it is the only piece of architecture that survived the period, but it doesn't look like it should have.)

"Holy hell, will you look at that?" Brain shouted.

"Shuss, don't speak too loud or it might fall down." Opie said.

The four of them gingerly walked over and gently knocked on the front door. An elderly man with an unlazy eye opened it. (You know how a lazy eye takes its time to catch up to the other eye; an unlazy eye does the exact opposite. It sort of races around trying to guess where the good eye is going to look.)

"Good evening," he said, looking them all up and down, while appearing to look into space. "What can I do for you?"

"What's it like having an eye like..."

"Please excuse Brain he doesn't get out much. Could we have two rooms for the night?" Opie said.

"Please come in, would you like some supper?"

The unlazy eye winked at Brain and then tried to turn around in the man's head, the head turned, closely followed by the man's body. They stepped into the inn and walked as quietly as they could to the front desk. Then they almost hit the ground when the man shouted. "Three suppers and make it snappy."

After they had recovered from the shock, Opie piped up that it would be four suppers. "Expecting someone, because I can assure you that each meal is more than enough for one person."

"No, sir I didn't mean to disrespect your fine establishment, it just

that there are four of us. May I introduce Siege? She takes some effort to see."

"Samantha Elkton, as I live and breath. I remember the day your mother and father honeymooned here." His good eye glazed over, the unlazy one darted around, not knowing what to do with itself. "Cleaned me out they did, every last penny and all my silverware."

Opie, Siege and Brain prepared to run, Tricks slowly started to reach for her sword. "A fine night." he continued. "The next day I got a cheque in the mail, covered all my costs and a little extra besides. That was how I was able to refurnish the place." Brain had a quick look around and saw that the place looked like it had been refurnished over twenty years ago. While Siege caught up with the proprietor, the other three had a look around.

It had a distinct feminine touch to it. What with all the flowers and pink wallpaper. There were some paintings on the wall, which was almost unheard of in these seedy dives, but the choice of picture was a tad bazaar. They were mostly pictures of young men in various stages of undress; mostly holding bunches of flowers and seductively staring down on everyone. There was a faint hint of perfume in the air, not the subtle fragrance used in larny places, but more the cling-to-the-back-of-the-throat, over-powering, rose-choke smell. They found themselves in the dining room, and they could have been forgiven for thinking that they were at a high fluting street cafe in the heart of Bullion Heights. Delicate wood chairs and small round tables dotted the place. On each table sat a white tablecloth, so white it hurt the eyes, a vase of flowers and highly polished silverware. Brain looked back into the entrance hall, it was still a quaint mess, looked back at the dining room and shook his head to try clear it. The other two merely stared. They were startled by a voice, it said "That..." and then the proprietor was on the floor with a sword to his throat.

"You must be the infamous Tricks? Sorry to startle you, but what I was going to say is that is my wife's work. The rest of the inn, excluding the kitchen, is my domain."

Brain wondered briefly about the half naked men in the painting, but became completely distracted by the Smart waiter. (A dumb waiter is like a little lift that carries food from one floor to another. A smart waiter is a device that carries food from the kitchen to the table. More about that later.) Needless to say he had to go and inspect it. While he was on his way over, the door to the kitchen sprang open

and a woman appeared. Some may say she was plump, or big boned, chubby, or some other endearing word to describe her. The only word I can think of was tannie. (Tannie is a word you use to show respect to an older woman, but I always pictured a Tannie as a just past middle aged Afrikaans woman with an apron and a bowl of vetkoek.)

"Hello." she said, all smiles and happiness. "I have prepared you all a feast. Please sit down, the best table is the one in the corner by the window."

They all took her advice, all except Brain. He seemed fascinated by the smart waiter. As he should, he invented it. Although he called it 'The incredible food to the table moving machine.' His one never worked all that well. By the time the food made it to the table it was normally cold. After studying the tracks for a few minutes he went over to the table and joined the others.

"Prepare for a long wait and cold food." he whispered to the others. No sooner had he said it then the little train filled with food came tootling down the track and stopped at their table. Brain jumped up and said:

"This is an outrage! How did you get it to go so fast?"

"What was that dear?" the tannie said.

"Your The incredible food to the table moving machine." he replied looking almost down cast.

"Oh, that was easy. We simply replaced the rats with a dog, more strength don't you know and we couldn't have rats in the kitchen." she said it so sweetly that Brain almost felt better, "But we call it a smart waiter."

There was just no cheering up Brain after that. The chicken pie was superb, as was the chocolate mousse. They all retired upstairs after supper. The landlord brought them some ales and said that if they wanted more they should ring the bell. After they had looked around for the bell, desperately trying to follow the overactive eye, he told them it was the string by the door. They decided to sit in the girls' room and drink and talk.

"Not bad for a first day." Tricks said, she had unsheathed her sword and was sharpening it on her portable wet stone.

"I don't know." Brain sighed.

"Oh cheer up, Brain. Just because someone fixed one of you great ideas doesn't mean you have to sulk. Remember it is the idea that

counts."

"I suppose, but it still hurts."

"When we get back you can try putting a dog in the train." Siege said.

"Thanks, I'll think about it." He then took a large swig of ale and let his mind work on the problem. He was starting to think about greyhounds and high speed trains when Tricks broke into his thoughts.

"So what is everyone going to do with their share of the treasure?"

Siege was the first to reply. "I'm going to buy a house in the country, faraway from anyone. What about you Opie?"

"I was thinking of opening a mobile library and book swap wagon train, but maybe a nice country library would be a good idea." He looked into Siege's eyes and blushed, so did she.

"Oh give me a break." Tricks said. "I'm not sharing a room with Brain."

Opie and Siege would have glowed in the dark they went so red.

"It could be fun. A little long journey stress relief." Brain said, a big toothy grin on his face.

"Don't go down that road Brain. Besides you snore."

"How do you know he snores?" Siege asked hiding her giggle behind her hand. It was Tricks and Brains turn to blush.

"Well, ah, you know, I was young. Quit that giggling. It's very unlady like. So Brain what you going to do with your share?" Tricks floundered, then tried to change the subject. Opie would have none of that.

"Do tell, were you two an item once."

"None of you damn business! Brain, you were saying." Brain had difficulty answering over the gales of laughter emanating from the other two. Finally the other two were quiet.

"First I'm going to buy a new house." Brain was finally able to say.

"Something really spectacular. Sort of a house cross workshop type thing. Then I'm going to buy everything you need to run a successful workshop. After that maybe half a dozen Sisters of questionable virtue, ouch. That was my shore soldier Tricks. So what you going to do with you share?" He looked at Tricks, still rubbing his shoulder.

"Haven't given it much thought really. I'm more in it for the adventure. I could redecorate the Swill, but that would probably turn away some of the regulars. Maybe open up a weapons school or something equally violent. Or I could shake up with some Lads of

Unscrupulous Vigour until the... Ouch. Brain you are not supposed to hit a woman."

"See what I mean about the sexual tension." Siege said quietly to Opie.

They chattered away the rest of the evening, not really discussing much. At about mid-night they made their way to their individual bedrooms. The only thing of note was that Opie leaned in to kiss Siege, but was interrupted at the last second by Brain walking out of the bathroom. They blushed a bit, but Brain didn't seem to notice.

The next morning they were back on the road. They had consumed far too much breakfast and were taking it slowly. Not much happened along the way until the afternoon. Tricks was the first to hear it. (I might have forgotten to mention that Tricks has incredible hearing and an unbelievable sense of smell, but bats see better than her. No she doesn't wear glasses, she uses the old fashioned, tried and tested method; she squints a lot.)

"Sounds like a troop of horses coming up from behind." she said turning in her saddle and squinting down the road. Brain suggested that she was hearing things, but took a look anyway. (Brain had excellent vision, but too many explosions had left him partially deaf. Before you ask, the other two were mostly average in the senses department, apart from Opie's ability to read in near darkness. When I say that I don't mean he can see in the dark I mean he is only able to read in it. It is more of a six-sense kind of thing. He has read so many books, that the words sort of jump into his head.)

"Surprise, surprise, you're right. I can see a small cloud of dust. I would guess thirty to forty horses. Boy are they moving. We had better pull off the road for a bit, let them pass. Perhaps a break for lunch?"

The others agreed, even though they were still quite full from breakfast. They pulled over to the side and started to enjoy the packed lunch from The Top of the Delta. It was a feast to rival the huge breakfast. Seven cheeses, four types of bread, biscuits and cold meats, not to mention the wine selection. They proceeded to stuff themselves. While the forty horsemen moved in on their position, unbeknownst to the travellers, a band of highway men were waiting in the bushes at their very position, they were merely waiting for

their leader to finish off in the bushes and then they would make their move. Not even Tricks heard the curses of who had forgotten the toilet paper or the louder curse of who had left out a bunch stinging nettles. Needless to say our four-intrepid travellers were in for a big surprise. They were finishing of their lunch when the horsemen arrived. The horsemen quickly took up position around them and the leader rode forward.

Tricks was on her feet, sword in hand. Brain stood next to her, his left hand on her shoulder and in his right he held a short stabbing spear. Opie and Siege hung back, lying in a ditch, crossbows trained on the leader, and a couple of javelins at the ready.

"Can we help you gentlemen?" Brain asked, knowing that if he gave Tricks a chance to talk she would scream bloody murder and charge.

"You most certainly may." the leader said, it was quiet obvious that he was well educated, and by the way he sat in the saddle it was apparent that he had had some military training.

"Why not ask your men to move back and we can discuss this over some bread and wine." Brain continued.

"I do not think so, sir. If you do as we ask there should be no problems."

"You are going to have a bloody problem with me in a second!" Tricks said moving towards the man, Brain powerless to hold her back. Instantly three men moved in to protect the leader. Brain was able to hold her back before she attacked the leader.

"Very well, sir." The sir came out of Brains mouth as more of an insult then a show of respect. "What do you ask?"

"We heard a rumour that you have a map to the Da'Loose's treasure. Hand it over and you can leave."

"You will have to tear it from my cold dead fingers." Tricks said rather dramatically.

"So be it. ATTACK!!!" (Sorry to interrupted at this critical moment, but there are some important things I have to add here. Remember I mentioned that this was a tale about blind luck; well here is a small piece of that stuff. Just off to the side of where the battle is about to take place, stood a solitary figure. He was dressed up in black, looked really thin and held a scythe. That's right it was Grimy himself, prepared to take the fallen to their final resting places. At present he was making a call to the various places the people believed they would end up. All but four had confirmed. The non-confirmers went

something like this. 'We would love to have her over, but we just invested in some new solid gold tableware and we would hate to have to replace it so soon.' 'Any chance of a rain check. I just know he's going to want me to try his energy drinks.' 'Boy is she going to be pissed if she looses, she might even take it out on me. See if you can't delay it a bit.' 'I kind of like the guy, I would really like to see him get to Nad. If he's reading all those scrolls, it means he's not reading my income tax returns or private diary.' Grimy sighed. He waited for his banker to confirm that the deposits had been made before he acted.) The men were poised and ready to attack. (But we must travel back a few seconds so you can get the full story) The leader of the highwaymen returned, he was scratching his butt and mumbling things about nettles and incompetent assistants. He turned to his number two and asked if anything was happening.

"Well, Capitan. It seems that we are not the only people out for a little gold." He pointed at the newly arrived horsemen.

"Bloody hell, they will not be getting my prize. These travellers must be loaded to have so much attention. Prepare the men to attack." His number two looked at him with a bit of concern. (As right he should. What the Capitan should have said was: 'Gee, what a pity. We really could have used some money about now. Oh well, you win some, you lose some. Lets get out of here.' Grimy was preparing some blind luck.) Orders were orders and when Capitan said jump you said into which bed.

Tricks took out the two men on the left of the Leader of the horsemen, while Brain took out the one on the right. The leader managed to avoid Siege's bolt by falling off his horse. Opie hit one of the men in the eye with his bolt and was instantly sick to his stomach. (He has a thing about eyes.) Siege threw a javelin, but completely missed. She spent the rest of the battle rubbing Opie's back, telling him it would be all right. Opie spent the rest of the battle getting rid of his last few meals. Tricks and Brain fought gallantly, but it was a losing battle. The riders were professional soldiers and they had speed and height to their advantage. When Brain was stabbed in the shoulder it took all of Tricks's skill to protect him from a fatal blow. Just as all was lost the Highwaymen arrived. The horsemen's attention diverted, Tricks was able to carry Brain back to the ditch.

"Come on you two, let's see if we can sneak away during the

confusion."

They grabbed what they could and moved off. Brain had gone into shock, so Tricks had to carry him over her shoulder. Opie was still a little pale, but he could walk. They moved on down the road, sticking to the cover provided for highwaymen and vagabonds (I mean the bushes on the side of the road.)

They passed an old man wearing a black cowl, he chuckled as they went by and said, "Thanks, maybe I will see you later." Then he walked up the road towards the battle. The demoralised and injured travellers found their horses a short time after that, courtesy of Grimy. Tricks tied Brain to his saddle and they galloped off. Tricks knew there would be survivors from one side or the other. The secret was now out. How anyone found out about their quest she didn't know, but they knew and that meant they would be hounded where ever they went. What she didn't know was that both the Captain and the leader of the horsemen had survived and they both had access to more men. She put it out of her mind; she was really concerned for Brain. He had lost a lot of blood and was looking paler than Opie, if that was possible. They needed to find a doctor and fast.

(It's pretty clear that Brain will survive this brush with death. I mean Grimy was paid and he hasn't lost a client yet. Grimy was a thorough man and after receiving payment he had flitted into the Town with No Name two days earlier and arranged for a doctor to come riding out. Something about a great job opportunity in the country. They met him half an hour after the battle. Even though he was in a hurry, the whole hippo oath thing made him tend to Brain's injuries.)

"Lucky you were coming this way." Tricks said as the doctor worked on Brain's shoulder.

"I'd say. A few more hours and your friend would have been dead." the young doctor said. "Please call me doc. So where you folks headed?" Tricks fought down the rising panic. He was only asking out of courtesy, not a hidden agenda to steal their map. (They didn't have a map. They were on their way to The Kingdom of Nad to get it. Thought I would remind you, in case you had forgotten.) She replied:

"The city without a name."

"I wouldn't bother if I were you. I just finished my internship there."

No place for a lady or the injured. Although it is lucky (Have you noticed how many times luck has come into this bit, keep reading.) I was interned there. I've seen these wounds five or six times a day for the last two years. Like I said the village with no name is no place to go. I'm really glad that I found out about this job opportunity in the country. I could have been stuck in that hellhole for the rest of my life. That's all I can do for him. Let him rest and in a few days he will be fine. Well I must be off, that job won't wait forever."

"Siege give the man some money. I'm sure you have quite a lot after that scuffle." Siege dug through her pockets, discarding small knives and various trinkets. She came out with quite a few gold coins. Doc was only slightly surprised when a new woman suddenly appeared before him, but was even more surprised when his hand filled with gold.

"That is far too much, please I couldn't accept so much."

"You saved our friend, if we had more it would be yours." Tricks said, using her hand to close his fingers over the money.

"Maybe my luck is changing." he said, "Well I will wish you all good luck. If you go to the metropolis without a name you will probably need it."

With that he was on his horse and off down the road. Opie opened his eyes to the sound of the horse galloping away.

"Is the doctor leaving?" he asked. "Did he leave something for my stomach?"

"Stop being such a baby, you only shot one guy in the eye." Tricks said.

Opie groaned and held onto his stomach.

"Leave him alone, Tricks. He's been through a horrible ordeal. He's just sensitive about eyes. As he should, how can you read without eyes?"

There was silence for a long time, only broken by Brains moaning. He finally woke up and they were able to move on. He sat in front of Tricks on her horse, so she could hold him up. They were still two days hard riding to get to the City with no name. They stopped at a military guard post and spent the night there. The next morning Brain was able to ride on his own. (Wait a second; I forgot to mention the Military guard post. It will become important, but much later.)

The military guard posts, according to tourist books, are set up to help protect the road from thieves and other miscreants. Their real

purpose is to make money from travellers. They charge an exorbitant rate to stay in their three star barracks, because it is the safest place to stay along the road. The food is all right, but with a thousand percent mark up, you would be forgiven for wanting something more palatable than army rations. The whole dawn bugle thing can be a bit annoying, but luckily you can pay to have it turned off. Not to mention the hundred and one other ways they find to part you from your money. They really do protect the road; I mean how can they fleece you of your cash when some highwayman already has.

Their horses were lead away for some five star grooming, according to the soldier that took them. (One of the hundred and one ways I mentioned.) Brain went straight to bed, with lots of chicken broth, chicken broth is not quite the right word, more like chicken flavoured water. While he slept, the other three had a look around. The whole military thing was very overpowering. Weapons and medals dotted the place, not to mention five centuries of armour and paintings of great generals and famous battle scenes. After the day they had had it was too much, so they found the mess hall and ordered some food. They were quietly eating, contemplating the day's events and what the future would hold when the Post Commander walked up to their table.

"You civs having a good time." he said in a parade ground voice that suggested that if they weren't they might find themselves in the stockade.

"Yes fine, just great. Fantastic." and other things that made the place sound better than it really was.

"Good, let me know if anything is wrong." he continued, in a voice that suggested if you came to him with a complaint he was liable to stuff his desk down your throat.

"Lights out in twenty minutes, enjoy the rest of your stay."

Then he was gone, to put the fear of military discipline into someone else. They finished their supper and headed to the barracks. Ooo, I nearly missed the important bit. When the commander walked up to their table he was wearing a gold medallion around his neck. A souvenir of his time in the Great Desert. Okay back to the next day.

The road to the City Without a Name

Brain was much better, back to his usual obnoxious self, only worse, because he had, as he put it, 'taken one for the team.' They could see gathering storms; one behind and one in front. They were huge storm fronts, the kind that even gods fear and they were slowly moving towards our favourite questers. They were riding in bright sunlight, but the storms were an ominous sign of the trouble ahead and the problems coming up fast behind. What had started as a fun adventure was slowly turning in to a mission with the possibility that one or all of them could die. Okay, enough morbid imagery.

"You know, I don't think one of you has thanked me yet. There I was putting my life on the line, taking one for the team and not one of you had the decency to say, gee thanks Brain you really saved our bacon."

The others mumbled something that could have vaguely been construed to be a thank you.

"And another thing, I checked through my sack and found a few things missing. Any idea what happened to my secret stash of energy drinks?"

The others roared with laughter. (That was another way the military gatepost made money, a few items would go missing from any unattended bags. In this case, a six pack of Brain's energy drink. At the exact moment they were talking about it, six privates were lining up in front of sick bay complaining of stomach ache and diarrhoea.)

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing Brain, it's just good to know that things have a way of working out in the end." (Tricks is into that whole karma thing.)

Brain was slightly confused by this answer, but he would never admit to it. Instead he shrugged his shoulders, winced at the stabbing pain and then mumbled something like good, glad that's sorted.

They shot the breeze for a little while, using Brains arrowless bow. (Said there would be more on the bow, well here it is. It looked more like a crossbow, but had a tube where the arrow normally sat. Attached to the bowstring was an arrow, without a point. When you pulled back on the bow the arrow would line up with the base of the tube, you would then fill the tube with stones or anything else handy that would fit in the tube and then release the bow string and the headless arrow would fire the stones and things at the target. Due to patent protection I can't go into more detail. All I will say is that while the stones are not deadly, they really, really hurt, as Opie is

about to find out.) He had found the bows in his bag and was testing them. He had brought four along, so they all had a chance to try them.

"Not bad hey Brain." Opie said. "These could be really great for riot control. Hey watch were you point that thing. Ouch. Now you gonna get it."

Of course Opie missed Brain, but hit his horse instead. The horse bolted and it took the others over an hour to catch up to him. At which point they collided with the storm. It was a biggy. It only got worse when its brother joined up. The four of them found an abandoned house to hole up in while the storm passed. While the storm passed, so did a group of highwaymen. It was lucky that the storm started when it did or the band of cutthroats would have caught them. (I'm not sure how long Grimy's protection lasts, but it can't be forever.) The storm was over almost as fast as it had begun. Siege was the only one of them that had remained untouched by the rain. Opie was in total awe of this ability.

"It was amazing. " he said once they were out of the very leaky house. "It was like you were shimmering, almost too fast for the eye to see."

"What was that? Can you see something shimmering? Wow this shoulder hurts, would you mind helping Tricks with the horse? I'll keep Siege company. Thanks Opie, watch out for the tree stump, oops, too late. So Siege, how you doing."

"Don't start Brain, I know your reputation too well."

"Me, a reputation. I can't believe that." Brain said acting all hurt.

"Why don't you hit on Tricks, you're just wasting your time here." Brain feigned as if he was hurt and then a wicked thought hit him.

"I could never hit on her, because she would hit on me."

Siege didn't think it was quite as funny as Brain was making out. Every time he came up for air he would say 'Hit on me' and then collapse into gales of laughter again. Siege left him and joined the others.

"What's got Brain going now?" Tricks asked.

"He thinks he's a regular stand up comic." Siege said sourly.

"Well he certainly looks better, maybe I will go shimmy him along. Hold the horses, Opie will be back in a sec." Tricks walked off to help Brain along; no sooner had she left than Opie appeared.

"Brain can really be a pain some times." he said.

"Tell me about it." she replied.

They stared into each other's eyes for a few seconds, and then Opie took her free hand. He moved a little closer, but didn't feel he could move in for a kiss. Not with Tricks shouting at Brain and Brain whimpering about his shoulder. Instead he said:

"When we finally get a chance to be alone, may I kiss you?"

They both blushed.

"I think I would like that, yes. Yes you may."

He squeezed her hand and then the other two arrived. They saddled up and continued.

The rest of the journey to the city without a name was fraught with clear sky and happy travellers, the happiest travellers were the ones leaving The town with no name. They always said the same thing; don't go there, mostly with haunted looks in their eyes. The only real thing of note was that Opie got sunburnt; he was now a deep red in colour, making it hard to tell when he was blushing. They rounded a hill and there sat the city without a name in all its squalor. They all cheered, it might have been a bit premature. Waiting in the city was an army of cutthroats, baying for their blood. Add to that a large group of evil horsemen hot on their heels. Maybe it sounded like a cheer of relief, but it could as well have been their death cries.

Chapter 4

The Kingdom of Cray

Things were hotting up on Crustation. It was turning into one of those battles that your granddad would talk about. Something like, 'in my day we had real battles, not like those pussy footed arguments you young folk seem to enjoy. I remember when...' At about that point his incontinence would flare up or someone would stuff a sweet bun in his mouth. So we're not one hundred percent sure what the old battles were really like, the official documentation for the battles is always a bit vague, things like 'Bloody great battle', 'Fantastic fight', 'We really showed them, man was that ever fun' etc. Anyway this was turning into one of those. They were still a week away from jumping the walls, but the kings had arrived to partake in the festivities.

War was big business on Crustation. The towns-folk had arrived in their droves bringing food and drink enough for an army. With the towns-folk came all the trades. Bakers, carpenters, fortunetellers, smiths of all kinds, circus folk, wizards and a host of other services too numerous to mention. The carpenters were busy vying for position on the battlefield. They had to get close to the action or no one would buy their seats, but too close and they could loose paying customers and their reputations, at least until the next battle. The circuses were setting up a little way from the actual battleground. There were many types, some with clowns and trapeze artist, others with animals and some even recreated battles of past eras, but with humorous under tones. The smell of cooking food hung heavy in the air. The laughter of children could be heard across the battlefield. The kids started early. They used wooden homemade weapons or, if their folks were rich enough, exact replicas of past 'great weapons' and attacked each other across the white line, keeping up the islands warring traditions. Medics were on permanent stand by.

The King was greeted with his normal fanfare. Well the normal fanfare he received during a war, which was loud cheering and happy ovations, not like the stuff he got during normal times, the shouts, curses and rotten fruit. This was a time of war and the people really appreciated it. He walked up to the podium and stood facing his

people. The noise from the children's mock battle, the saws of the carpenters, the laughter from the tents and the voices of ten thousand people became silent. The king cleared his throat.

"Too long have we suffered the indignity of the lobster eaters believing their half rate product is better than our beautiful Crayfish."

He pointed out to the field.

"Even now I can smell their foul crustaceans."

He spat on the floor for emphasis.

"I have written the most scathing letter ever written, to those filthy lobster eaters. You can get a copy from the scribes if you want to read how scathing it was."

A pale book-wormy guy stood up and pointed out the directions of the various scribe booths, he sat down again and rubbed his hands in glee. After all, he had worked hard to win this lucrative contract, and now it was about to pay off.

"I have just received a response to that letter and let me tell you it was pathetic compared to mine."

The scribes were busy rewriting it to sound pathetic.

"That too can be bought from the scribes. "

The man jumped up and pointed again.

"Next Friday we will destroy them."

There was a gasp from the crowd, nearly a week of partying and money making, it truly was going to be one of the all time great battles. The king stepped off his podium and the crowd went mad, cheering and clapping like he was a superstar. The cheers from the kingdom of Lob could not be heard over Cray's cheering, but they were equally loud.

In a retrograde orbit around Knothear

Humphrey was very unhappy. He had called all his friends, but they had merely laughed at him. He was starting to get desperate. He had spoken to planets before, but it had always ended in disaster. The planets mostly treated him like a child, mocking him and generally being unfriendly, but none of them had ever eaten him before. On a technical level he knew that planets quite often ate his kind, that was how they grew, but he never thought it would happen to him. He squinted down at the looming planet below. He knew he should have changed the prescription on his glasses millennia ago, but he thought he would have time. Now he was drifting in and he couldn't see who

it was. It took a while, but he managed to make out some features. It was Knothear. He had learnt about her at school, as far as he could remember she had little pink things running around on her, but he couldn't remember why that was important, the important thing was that she was friendly. He put in a call.

"Good day, and welcome to Knothear's computer operated answering service. This is a recording. All conversations will be recorded to help us bring you a better service. Please press 1 if you are a god wishing to create a new animal. Please press 2 if you are a god waiting for planning permission to build a new volcano. Please press 3 if you are a god looking to dry up a lake. Please press 4 if you...Please press 473 if you require bigger gold deposits. Please press 474 if you require smaller gold deposits. Please press 475 if you...Please press 7392 if you want to frighten small children. Please press 7393 if you want to hide under a bed. Please press 7394 if you...Please press 83726534892 if you are an asteroid about to collide with the surface. "

Finally, he started to punch in the number, but it was quiet big and he had forgotten what it was by the time he got to the seventh digit. So he scratched around for a piece of paper and pen and started listening to the messages again. He finally got through.

"So you are about to crash into me?" a sweet feminine voice asked.

"Um, well, yes. Yes, is that Knothear?" he asked.

"Why yes dear, and what is your name?"

"Humphrey." He remembered his manners. "Humphrey ma'am."

"Okay Humphrey, what can I do for you?"

"Well ma'am, I seem to be falling into you and I would really appreciate it if..."

"Sorry dear, that's the other line. You hang in there for a century of two and I'll be right back." And then she was gone.

'Century or two indeed,' he thought 'I'll be lucky if I have a few weeks'

The Great Desert

General Killem was happily sitting in his tent. The hot sun was beating down, but it wasn't affecting him. He had an 'incredible cooling the air box and combination ice making machine'. So while he sat in the lap of luxury, his men scurried around in the baking sun trying to catch lizards and other interesting meals. One guy even

managed to catch a whole banquet, but his friends thought that eating sand was not such a hot idea and maybe he should sit in the shade for a while.

The great (only in his and the king's eyes) general had a sip of ice-cold water and looked around at his men. He smiled, it was good to put your men at ease. (If you called standing at parade ground attention, in the hot sun while a maniac smiled at you while sipping cold spring water, when the last thing you drank was five days ago and it was your own urine, at ease, then Killem was really putting these people at ease.)

"I think that we should break camp tonight and head towards the swamp."

They had been wondering around the desert for so long that they almost cheered at this remark. Swamp monsters, leeches and the oppressive humidity would be a welcome change. Only the fact that they were facing General Killem prevented them from cheering.

"If we travel at night, it will be easier on the men."

A very un-Killem remark. The last thing on his mind was normally his men. They were starting to worry about his sanity, but that had never really been a concern, he was a nut plain and simple.

"Yes we will head east, this new compass thingy will show us the way."

Yup he had lost it. They would be heading parallel to the swamp, possibly moving further away from it. One of the men had obviously been in the sun too long.

He cleared his throat and said, "Sir, that is moving away from the swamp."

Killem chucked his ice cold water in the man's face, and shouted for the torturers. During the last painful days of his life the man still thought it was worth it. The ice water thing, not the torture thing.

That Nameless Town

They rode into town on a high, which disappeared as quickly as a Sister of Questionable Virtue when she finds out your money is finished. The first thing that attacked them was a mangy rabid dog, closely followed by its mangy rabid owner, and then its mangy rabid fleas. The dog and owner were easily disposed of, the fleas hung

around for the rest of their stay. That was the high point of their visit. To say that it went down hill from then would be an understatement, more like down mountain or off cliff, something more dramatic. They say the sun never sets in the town with no name, it sort of falls out of the sky, if you see it at all. The smog and pollution in the air leaves the place very grey. The only time it is reasonably clean is when a hurricane is blowing in off the sea. When our four intrepid travelers arrived, the storm had passed and the pollution hadn't quite taken hold yet. (It was working itself into a frenzy, preparing to blitz the town the next day.) The travelers decided to find somewhere to stay. The pleasant afternoon suddenly turned into night and all the creatures that inhabited that realm instantly appeared. Tricks used all her skill and soon they were at the front door of the Oak Barricade Inn.

A huge wooded door greeted them, they were a little startled by it, but then a flap opened and was filled with a huge head that demanded to know their business. They asked for room and board and showed some money. The head said that they were welcome to come in. The flap closed and the door opened. Behind it stood a stool and a really short man with a giant head. They stared for a few seconds, and the man shrugged and said:

"You should see my twin brother, he got my body."

No sooner said and his brother arrived. Almost eight feet tall, but with a tiny little head.

"No, you got my head."

The acoustics were a little weird, such a deep booming voice from such a tiny mouth. The two started to argue, so Tricks butted in.

"Very interesting, but do you have room for us?"

"We always have room for paying customers." the short one said.

"You won't find a safer place in all of...in this town." He walked them into the main entrance. The giant took the horses; he carried them one by one up the stairs and up to the second floor stables.

The entrance hall was designed exactly as you would expect, if you thought about it for a while. (Don't worry, I will describe it. Feel free to make notes, or tick off the items you got right, I will leave little brackets with points so you can mark as you go. Add up your score at the end and see what kind of reader you are.)

Dark wood reception desk (1) in two levels, one side five feet high, the other two feet high (3). Gold plated name wedges (1) one saying 'reception' the other saying 'See reception' (3). A brass bell (1) with a small badly written note saying 'Ring the bell and we will grind your bones to make our bread (5). Wall paper (1) with a paisley pattern (4), really big at the bottom, really small at the top (8). Two wooden chairs (1) one large, one little (1). A Bacarra rug (1) made during the heroine chic period (10) in bright pink (5). Dead body in the corner (5), In the shape of a loaf of bread (10). (So how did you do. Here is the scoring: 0 - Brain dead. Put this parchment down and go get a new brain. 1-9 -unconscious, try waking up, stories are best told to people that don't snore quite so loud. 11-20 -Barely awake, all the clues are there, but I suggest that you go back to the beginning and try reading with a little more thought. 21-30 - awake but not paying too much attention to detail, I suggest you knuckle down and start reading like you mean it. 31-40 - A pass, nice work, it wouldn't hurt to pay a little more attention to detail; you might miss a vital clue. 41-50 - Very good, was it the bread shaped body that got you, never mind, you are a first rate reader, the kind of person I want, really sucking the marrow out of the story. 51-60 - Bloody liar.)

The short man walked behind the desk and filled in the registration form in triplicate, handed them a copy and then carefully deposited their money in a safe. He walked them through to the dinning room and suggested the nice fresh bread and soup. The travelers said the soup would be fine, but he could hold the bread.

They ate in silence. When they were finished the giant joined them.

"So where you going?" the big guy asked.

"Perhaps you can help?" Opie asked. "We are looking for a ship. We want to go to The Kingdom of Nad."

"Most ships have sailed." the smaller man said. (I really should give these guys names. How about Sam and Greg, Sam the small and Greg the giant. Sam's right, but pronounce Greg Jeg. Much better.) "I saw one being repaired, but it belongs to the notorious pirate, Slappy the slayer or something."

"Vernon The Vindictive." Greg said. (Remember pronounced Jeg, actually this is getting really weird, let's call him Jeg.)

"He makes sails from the people he skins." Jeg (Ah much better.) continued.

"That is truly gross." Siege piped up. "I don't think I want to sail with someone like that."

"We are not going to sail with him." Tricks said rather forcefully.

"We are going to st..." She shut up. (She was going to say 'steal' for those of you that scored below 30. Luckily for her, Sam and Jeg scored in the 10 region.)

"What was that?" Brain asked. (Although he thought he scored in the neighborhood of 76, I'm guessing he scored about 2.)

"Nothing Brain. Let's get to bed we have a long day tomorrow."

"I'm not really tied." Opie said. "I think I will sit by the fire for a while."

"Me neither." Siege said stifling a yawn. "Maybe I'll sit up as well."

"Suit yourselves, but I'm knackered." Brain said catching Siege's yawn.

Brain and Tricks went to bed, separately, even though he tried one on, Tricks merely showed him her sword and suggested if he slipped into her bed he might find it sleeping next to her. They had a nice quiet night. Near the fire things were a little different. Opie and Siege sat together in front of the fire. They sat in silence, watching the fire flicker and crackle. Opie finally picked up the courage to kiss her, but as he turned towards her he saw that she was fast asleep. He sighed and joined her. The next morning they were both very stiff, on top of that Brain and Tricks teased them mercilessly.

After breakfast they paid for another night and walked around the town. They were tired of always waiting while Brain climbed back on his horse, and it would be harder for him to fall off his own two legs, although he did manage it a few times. If only he would look down when he walked, he would probably have seen that open manhole. Which, surprisingly, turned into a bit of good luck, which we will get to later. Tricks was quite happy to leave him down in the sewer, but Opie and Siege insisted that they get him out. Two hours and a piece of rope later they were back at the Inn having a quick bath and then were finally back on the road. They made their way to the harbor, and as promised it was deserted. All but the one lone ship, moored at a dock. It had been repaired a few days earlier. The workmen were admiring their handy work and the foreman was starting to make his way to where his boss and the pirate Vernon The Vindictive were drinking. Tricks stopped him in the street.

"Beautiful looking boat." she said.

"Not too bad if you like the whole pirate thing." he replied.

A little more idle chatter and the man said he had to go and see the owner to tell him his ship was ready.

"Mind if we tag along?" she asked. "We could do with a stiff drink."

"Some armed guards might be nice." he said looking Tricks up and down. "Maybe I will be able to hold onto my money then."

Opie and Brain giggled, then laughed, then held their sides. They stopped when Siege hit them on the back of their heads. They both apologized and had to run after Tricks. (We now run into a little piece of bad luck.) Vernon The Vindictive was nowhere to be found, which meant that he couldn't pay for his repair work. Which meant that 'Lushish Linda', Vernon's ship, now had armed guards around it, and they would stay until the work had been paid for. 'Binghams repairim while you drinkim' had lost enough money when the owner merely stole back his ship without paying, that they were not going to allow it to happen again.

The four decided that they would stop off in a pub and have a few pints, and discuss their strategy. They found what they assumed was an okay pub. It was the best they had walk past so far, besides their feet were getting sore. The patrons lying outside hardly moved as our band of heroes walked all over them. They found a decent enough spot. After turfing out the present occupants, completely disinfecting the benches and table with stuff they had found in Sieges pockets, (turns out that there are a lot of people walking around 'The place that looks like a city but could be mistaken for a sewer pit with no name' with disinfectant and paper towels.) they sat down and ordered some strong ales. They sat in gloom for a few minutes, each wondering about their own problems.

"It's just a minor set back." Siege said after they had wallowed in their misery for two ales each. "I was never really happy with the whole sailing with pirates thing anyway."

"We weren't going to sail with the pirates; we were going to steal their ship." Tricks said taking a swig of her third ale.

"I think I like that idea even less." Siege said, "Do you know what would happen if we got caught, not to mention that none of us can sail a boat."

"No prob there." Brain said starting his fourth, and completely forgetting that he was the closest to Siege. "I mean how hard can it

be? It has a steering wheel and no bloody horses. Yep, that's the way it should be, now if only I could perfect the whole incredible horseless carriage thing, then I wouldn't have to worry about getting seasick."

"You get seasick?" Opie and Siege asked simultaneously, apparently Tricks already knew.

"Hey, don't be like that, it's not a fault, more a challenge. I studied it and it turns out the more brilliant you are the more likely it is for you to get seasick. It has to do with brain capacity and salt air, like when you put copper into..."

"Thanks Brain, but how does this help us get to Nad?" Tricks's statement brought them back into the doldrums, even a few more ales couldn't pull them out.

The only one sober when it happened was Siege, Tricks might claim that she was sober, but I repeat my first statement, the only one sober when it happened was Siege.

The army of cutthroats appeared out of nowhere. Sacks at the ready they had bundled up our heroes and dragged them off to a secret lair before anyone knew what had happened. Buckets of cold water and the cursing of forty really bad men had them awake in no time. Tricks was the first awake. She shook her head to clear it and then decided that it would probably be a good idea if she didn't do that again. She could feel a lump starting to form on the back of her head and the world was a little blurry. She could make out some figures arguing in front of her, but couldn't tell who they were. Her hands were tied behind her back, and she was sitting on a chair. She tried to stand, but discovered that she was in fact tied to the chair, which was bolted to the floor. Add to this the fact that she had started to itch, you can guess how pissed off she was. The next to wake was Brain.

After shaking his head and wincing he said: "What a great party. I can't remember a thing, in fact I can't even move. What happened after that little pub? Is Siege around, I seem to be blind, I'm sure she'll remember."

He would have said more, but the world was slowly materializing around him. All he managed was an 'Oh'. Siege and Opie woke up a few minutes later. After a few more minutes the arguing stopped and a man walked up to Brain.

"Are you in charge?" Halitosis breath asked.

"Unofficially, we haven't really voted on it or anything. Maybe if you

untied our hands we could have a vote or Ouch. That really hurt. Listen if you keep hitting me I might just...ouch. That really is...ouch. Do you...ouch."

Brain really wasn't taking the hint. He would probably have gone on all day if Tricks hadn't spoken up.

"Leave him alone. I'm in charge and you would do well to watch who you hit."

"You are in no position to make demands." the man said. "I'm Hector Vedor. You are my captors."

Opie giggled, the others didn't catch Hector's faux par. "You think this is a big joke." he said to Opie.

Opie tried to hide his huge grin.

"Well you will be laughing out of the last side of your end..."

Opie couldn't hold it in any longer and burst out laughing. Brain took this moment to say something really stupid.

"When I get my share of the treasure I'm going to hire King Clements torture chamber just for you guys."

"What treasure Brain?" Tricks quickly said, hoping that Brain would come back with some smart reply like 'The treasure I will get for selling some great invention' or other. Instead he replied:

"You know the one from that old thief guy."

It was too late the Cutthroat ex-highway man pounced.

"Now we know for sure there is a treasure. Give us the map and we will let you go." Hector said, all smiles.

Opie took this opportunity to share some information. "Actually there is no map."

"Liar!" Hector screamed into his face. (It is a little known fact that all highway men have extreme halitosis. Hector was no exception. In fact his was so bad it made Opie turn away and gag.)

"Ha," Hector continued, "look at his face, you can see that he is lying."

He went on butchering classic sayings. (How he came up with 'Liar, liar, bonfire on fire' is beyond me, and a 'gathering liar rolls no stones' is beyond even the great thinkers,[or as we like to call them Old men on the tops of mountains that are so hard to get to, that you needn't even bother making the trip, because by the time you get there you would have probably forgotten what you wanted to ask them in the first place and then you have to come all the way down again and only when you get to the bottom would you remember, unless you were researching a story and you wrote every thing down

and asked a young fit man to run up the mountain for you, but they still can't answer your question so you tear at your hair and curse the two gold crowns that you wasted on the fit young man, knowing that the money could have been better spent on a fit young woman or Sister of Questionable Virtue] of our time.)

At this point it might be a good idea if I squash a few implied implications. If you had been paying attention to the last paragraph you would have guessed that Siege was tied up with the others, however if you had been paying attention to story as a whole you would have realized that very few people can see Siege, let alone catch her. Well it is time to clear a little misconception up. When one of Hector's men hit Tricks on the back of the head, it was a glancing blow, the club flew out of his hand and hit Siege on the forehead, knocking her out and sending her spewing to the floor. She then woke at the same time as Opie, as I told you earlier, but she was still on the pub floor. So while Opie was getting beaten up, while laughing his head off, Siege was trying to find where her friends were. So we come to another point of blind luck. Hector is really losing it, map or no map he is about to kill Opie, when that doesn't help him get the map he will kill Tricks and of course Brain has no clue on what is going on at all, which will leave Siege by herself in a strange city, with a band of evil horsemen just arriving in the city. It looked like my story was about to end. It was at this desperate hour that one person no one ever sees bumped into another person no one sees.

"Excuse me, ma'am." he said politely, tipping his cowl at her, quite confident that she wouldn't see or hear him.

"No problem." she replied, feeling very heavy on her left side.

Reaching into her pocket she pulled out a large, leather bound book. It had the days date on it and 'COLLECTIONS' written in bold black letters. It automatically opened onto the page marked next ten collections and there at the top of the page it said two names that made her blood run cold. 'Mister Opie Jnr.' and 'Brain O'Shaunase', there was a third name between those two, but I would probably die if I ever repeated it, needless to say Siege didn't recognize it, but felt sure it was Tricks.

"I'll be taking that back now, miss." the cowed man said, his boney fingers starting to protrude from his sleeve.

Siege had no time to think about consequences, she handed the book

over. (There has been a lot of speculating about this next bit, some believe it would have been impossible, others that she would have been easily caught, and still others, wanting to know exactly how it was accomplished so they could do the same. This is what I know.) She passed the book almost into his hands, at the last second she sneezed and dropped the book, mumbling an apology she bent over and started to retrieve the book from the ground with her right hand, at the same time she was putting a piece of paper in her pocket with her left hand. The book got back to its rightful owner, with a bit of a mud stain and missing a page. As the cowled man walked away, Siege could swear that she heard him chuckle, and then he was gone. She carefully took the page out of her pocket and read it. Next to the three names was an address. All she had to do was find the place and rescue her friends.

Changing fate always needs some help. It is not a simple matter. At the moment Siege was stealing the page, Hector was moving his knife to cut Opie's throat. The fates were at a party when they got the call that something had gone wrong and could they please clean up the mess. After some foul language they came up with a simple solution, but because they were slightly wasted it wasn't the most perfect plan they could have come up with, but it worked well for our heroes. One minute Hector Vedor was about to cut Opie's throat, and the next minute he was standing in the desert in the middle of General Killlem's army. There were a few seconds of confusion and the cutthroats were running out of the building screaming. This made it easier for Siege to find the place and free her friends. On the walk back to the inn she tried to tell them about how she had stolen the page from Death himself, but only Opie paid any attention. Brain was too caught up in his own thoughts about making an automatic rope untier and Tricks was thinking about what she was going to do to the cutthroats if she found any. They were each so caught up in their own thoughts that they didn't notice that they had strayed into the really bad part of town and a bunch of evil horsemen were coming down on them. However they hit a spot of the good stuff, luck that is.

They passed a pub and saw someone they recognized. Short John Lead. So they went and said hello, but he just looked at them as if he had never seen them before. Which he hadn't, because it wasn't Short John Lead. It was in fact his identical bother (notice I left out

the word twin) Medium Paul Tin. (Guess the name of the third triplet... That's right, Large Greg Copper.) It took the four treasure hunters quite some time to figure this out. (By now you should have realized that they don't meet one of the Metal Brothers for nothing. This was no exception.)

Even though they knew that Medium Paul Tin was not Short John Lead they couldn't leave, as they had ordered drinks and as yet hadn't paid for them, and establishments such as this looked down on that. So while they waited for the ales and something with an umbrella, they made small talk with the old haggard man, who's table they were using.

"So, heard from your brother recently?" Opie tried, the gloomy silence starting to encroach on their party.

"Ay," the man replied, "Twas not short of fort-ay yer begon."

"Oh." someone replied, they allowed the silence another opportunity to grab a foot hold. Then the drinks arrived.

"Sorry," the sexy young waitress said, (when I say sexy and young I mean she could still have children and you didn't feel too sick to the stomach when you looked at her.) "They couldn't find an umbrella, so they put a sail in it."

Siege said that was fine and then didn't touch the drink, but Medium Paul Tin thought it was the best drink he had had all week, I think that is maybe, what the hell he said, "Aye, Arg, Ah" between sips.

Tricks tried next.

"Any chance you know how we can get a ship?"

"Nye," he replied, "Me's a wirl'd class drinker, I is."

"Oh."

"That be ta fella ya'll looks fir." He pointed to a man lying on the floor. "He'll sto yer cross ta deep. There tis none by his self Vernon The Vindictive, pirate en no good scerge."

Tricks walked over to the man lying in a disgusting pool of something and kicked him. He didn't move, so she kicked him harder, same result. She walked back to the others and sat down.

"He will probably be out till tomorrow." she said. "Which means we will have to steal his ship tonight."

The sun took this opportunity to disappear. It hadn't been gone for more then two minutes when a minor hurricane arrived. After causing some minor wind damage it settled down into a happy pattern of simple bucketing down. The four would-be boat thieves

made their unhappy way out into the downpour. The one good thing about the downpour was that it kept the riff-raff at home. It didn't take them long to get to the Oak Barricade Inn. (The fates might have been completely drunk when they changed Hector into a desert soldier, but they were completely sober when they pulled this next stunt.) The evil horsemen were staying at Oak Barricade Inn. So you can imagine the surprise that sprung up when our heroes walked into the dining room. (The surprise was so great that people 10DW's away stood with their mouths open and stared.) Time seemed to stand still, the only sound was the ticking of the clock, so obviously time wasn't standing at all, more like it was sitting down with it's legs up sucking on a pipe and reading a good book. Someone cleared their throat, then coughed and finally said

"Can we be getting you some supper then?" It was Sam the small. Jeg the giant walked into the middle of the room, with a really big ax and just stood there. As calm as anything Brain put his hand on Tricks's shoulder and gently steered her towards a table, the other two followed, they sat down and had a leisurely supper. The horsemen finally left and went back to their rooms.

"That was a bit tense." Opie said when they were finally alone.

"If we let people like that bully us around we wont get anywhere on this quest." Tricks said. "Why don't we pop upstairs and bump them off in their sleep."

"I'm not sure I could do that." Siege said.

"Yeah, I don't think they will be sleeping much tonight." Opie continued. "Probably waiting for us. What's wrong Brain? You seem very quiet."

"I was just thinking. Where do sewer drains go?" Brain replied. "If they are any thing like Clemville's they would empty into the harbor."

"Good thinking Brain." Tricks said. "We could kill them and dump them in the sewer you found this morning."

"Not exactly what I was thinking. I would hate to take on twenty well trained men, especially with small headed guy around."

"Perish the thought." Opie said. "I'm sure that guy could take even Tricks."

"He's all muscle and fighting is about skill." Tricks replied pulling out a short sword from somewhere and deftly chopping the top inch off a candle. To reinforce her demonstration of skill she flicked the

chopped off bit into the air and cut it in half again. Still lit the candle landed where it had started. Siege and Opie clapped. Brain said:

“What I was trying to say was that we could go down into the sewer and make our way to the harbor and steal the ship. No one will see us coming.”

“In the sewer. Are you nuts? I would rather take on the army of guards protecting it then walk through that filth.” Tricks said. “Do you know how bad you smelt when we got you out of there? Let me tell you it wasn’t pretty. You expect Siege to walk through that? The rest of us could take it, but she would need forty million baths.”

“You trying to say that you would go through if I could make a plan for Siege?” Brain asked.

“Sure.” Tricks said not seeing the trap, but thinking there was no way Siege would ever walk through raw sewage.

“That’s great. So Siege walks out in plain sight, as no one will see her anyway and...That wasn’t very lady-like Tricks.” She had just used some language that would make a sailor blush. “Like I was saying, Siege distracts the guards and we hop on board. Next thing you know we’re sailing the high seas.”

“That’s all good and well, but do any of you know how to sail?” Opie asked.

“Oh please,” Brain said after everyone had shaken their heads. “How hard can it be? Pirates do it and they aren’t exactly known for their brain power. I recon I could sail it with both hands tied behind my back.” (Very prophetic words.)

After a few more minutes of arguing they decided they would give Brain’s idea a go. It had nothing to do with the sounds of sword sharpening coming from above. They quietly packed up their stuff and headed for the door. One peak out of it confirmed their fears that the horsemen were going to attack at any moment. They were standing on either side of the door three deep, each with swords in their hands and blood in their eyes. Siege slipped back in and relayed this information.

“Only one thing for it.” Tricks said drawing her sword. “We will have to fight our way out. Me first.” Opie grabbed her arm.

“Maybe we could try the window?” he said, pointing at the two large windows that you could easily ride a horse through. Tricks just grunted and headed towards it. The second Brain started to open the window there was a loud knock on the door. They turned as one,

weapons ready. (This happens all across the universe. The second you decide to leave a hotel without paying, the manager suddenly appears. Some say it is just coincidence, others that they have secret cameras, but most believe that managers have a magic sixth sense called 'bailing sight'.)

"I've just brought you some fresh towels." Sam the small shouted through the door. Tricks wasn't ready to believe that.

"It's a trick." she whispered. "He's in on it. Let's open the door and teach him a lesson."

"Don't be silly, he might have Jeg with him."

"So?" Tricks said, not quite as confidently as she would have liked.

"I have an idea." Siege said. She raised her voice. "We are just popping out for some fresh air, not to worry I have left some money on the bed, and can you look after our horses?" The others stared at her. Not because of what she said, that made complete sense, but because she had raised her voice. None of them had ever heard Siege speak so loudly. Into the stunned silence that followed, Sam said that he hoped they had enjoyed their stay and would come again, and could they please leave a few extra coins for horse feed. Siege felt through her pockets and added the rest of the money she found to the pile.

"Thanks again for staying at Oak Barricade Inn." Sam said counting the clicks of the money as it hit the bed. (Another ability of hotel managers.)

With the bill settled, the four slipped out the window and into the night. From an upstairs window the leader of the horsemen watched them go and chuckled to himself.

Siege had no problems getting to the dock. She sat and waited for the others, sipping on a hot chocolate she had found.

The other three entered the sewage system of the dirtiest, most disgusting, vile city that ever graced civilization. For all that, it wasn't as bad as they expected. For one, most people used the street for their sewage disposal, and for another the constant rain found its way into it, rain loves cold damp areas, and the sewer was that. The three climbed down into the darkness, climbed back out and went looking for a lantern. Lantern procured they tried again. The sewer system of the City without a name is quite a place, but first you have to disregard the fact that five percent of the city use it for its intended

purpose and secondly that you have to wade ankle deep in it, not to mention the fact that some times you are going to end up having to swim, with the rats and other interesting things science hasn't named yet. That aside it is quiet beautiful, for a sewer. It was constructed before the gods decided that the town without a name would be a great place to pull a few pranks. The beautiful stone work was visible in a few places, but the rest of the walls were like huge canvases, beautiful murals were painted on them. Paintings of mythical battles and beautiful women, Dragons and heroes and all the strange and wonderful creatures of Knothear. The heroes stood in awe for a few minutes staring at the wonder of the place. Then the smell caught up to them and they continued their journey.

"I really have to come back and study this place." Opie said as they marched on. "I can't believe that such a magnificent place has not been catalogued."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Tricks said shining the light on a group of skeletons lying in the water, clipboards still clutched in their boney fingers. "Let's move on before we catch the same fate."

"Looks like something ate them." Brain said. "You can see teeth marks on the bones."

"Probably rats." Tricks replied, wading ahead and discovering the first pothole. After Tricks had finished cursing Brain for his stupid idea in a language neither of them understood, but got the meaning quiet clearly, they continued. Only this time the two men took point.

"Must be bloody big rats to leave those teeth marks." Brain whispered to Opie, forgetting about Tricks's incredible hearing. "Man sized would be my guess." Very quietly Tricks swapped the lantern to her left hand and drew her short sword. Opie's response to the statement was to start telling stories he had read about cannibals. They all swore that their goose bumps were from the cold. They found the main sewer canal soon after that. It was ten times more impressive then the tributary they had been walking in, but more importantly it had sidewalks on either side with the sewage running down the middle. As they had each taken a turn at falling into potholes they were completely soaked. The dry land was such a welcome surprise that they let out a 'whoop' of delight. They were slightly taken back when it was returned, Opie started to explain echoes when a voice said:

"Welcome to hell." In front and behind them shadows materialized into men, which turned into evil horsemen. "About that treasure

map.” their leader said cleaning his nails on his sword.

Unaware of what was going on underground, Siege started to munch a sandwich.

(I thought I would take this opportunity to explain the sewer system, it will make the next paragraph seem more plausible. [As if we need a little plausibility in this story.] It was built centuries ago by an eccentric king, his name was stolen by the mist of time. He had bet his kingdom with his neighbor that he could build the greatest city ever. Just after the completion of the sewer system war had broken out and work was abandoned for a few years. When the workmen returned they found the sewer teeming with the dregs of society. They were cleaning them out when one of the men was bitten and got rabies. Ever conscious of his men’s well-being, the king abandoned the city and took over his neighbor’s kingdom by force. He then sealed the town off and proclaimed it unsafe for human habitation, but you know what people are like, they see an un-crossable line and have to go investigate. So it grew into the cesspool it is today. However the dregs that lived in the sewer bred and their descendants still live there.)

The leader of the evil horsemen took one step forward when a horde of pale human like creatures pounced on them to shouts of 'meat meat meat'. The evil horsemen had found an easier way into the tunnels, so had not stepped into any potholes, they hadn't even gotten wet. So while the horsemen were dragged away to grace someone’s dinner table or dry eating area, our heroes were left untouched. (When you live in a sewer, anything that doesn't smell like raw sewage has to taste good.) Thirty seconds later the three were all alone.

"That was interesting." Brain said.

"Quite." Opie said

"Shall we go." Tricks said.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, apart from Opie stepping on a loose brick and falling into the canal, the eventful bit was that as he fell he used Brain to steady himself, who in turn used Tricks and all three of them got re-soaked. After that they didn't stand too close to each other. They finally found the dock and as luck is still the point

of this story, the exit was right next to the ship they were going to steal.

As discussed earlier, Opie whistled to let Siege know they were in position and she could start creating a diversion. Opie whistled the mating call of the green toed wobbler with some rather unexpected results. (The green toed wobbler is well known for its beauty in both song and plumage in Clemville, but in The Village of nameless 'ville it is well known for its good eating.) The next thing they knew sailors, workmen and other interesting people were pitching up asking if they had seen a large red and yellow bird. They pointed further down the dock. With all the people out on the hunt, it was no longer necessary to create a diversion. In no time at all, the dockyard was completely abandoned. Tricks hit Brain across the back of his head.

"What was that for?" He asked rubbing the back of his head.

"For making me walk through raw sewage, when what we needed was a bird call." So they climbed aboard and cast off. The current and retreating tide pulling them out to sea.

I finish off this chapter on a high note. Our heroes are sailing off into the sun rise, the evil horsemen and cutthroat highwaymen are taken care of and a treasure is just around the corner. What more can we ask for? Perhaps the ability to sail. That aside, our questers are not out of the woods, maybe I should say waters, yet. They still have to get the map and cross Crustation where a war is brewing. Not to mention the fact that they have to find Crustation. Like everything in this story they are going to need a lot of luck, and some of that is going to have to be blind.

Chapter 5

The Kingdom of Lob

The sun rose above the hill and sprinkled its rays down through the sleeping tents. The big board ticked over: 5 days till the battle started. Only the sounds of a great party the night before could be heard. Moans, snoring and people being sick. The party had been rough, more injuries had been sustained during it than were expected for the coming war, as was always the case. Captain Felder was walking around looking for members of his crack infiltration squad. Every time he found one he would kick them and tell them to make their way to the wall. They weren't part of the party plans, they were supposed to stay out of it and sneak across the battle field to spy on the enemy, while they were hungover. Like most pre-war parties, this one had a mind of its own. Everyone was hungover, except Captain Felder. He got into a fist fight early in the evening and had been out cold the whole night. When he awoke he decided he would be the first Captain in Lobs history to actually perform an infiltration.

When he arrived at the wall he found seven of his twenty man squad. Hand on his hip he shook his head, the ache on his jaw spurring him to greater things.

"I guess you seven will have to do, ATTENTION." One man fell over, the rest seemed to balance okay on their feet without the wall's support. "Today we do a great thing for the people of Lob. Our King has entrusted us..." His carefully prepared speech was interrupted by the sounds of vomiting. Undaunted he continued "...to spy on the...Oh to hell with that let's get over the wall and sneak into Cray. Try not get caught." So over the wall they went. It took them most of the day to sneak into the enemy camp. They had to stop every few steps to have a quick lie down. When they finally arrived at their destination the next party was in full swing. So they joined in. When the war finally started they found themselves fighting for the wrong side, but war was war and they had a jolly good time anyway.

The Hardpassvil Inn

"Finally we are home. It might have taken two thousand years, but the Smiths have the inn back." Derek Smith said to his wife. Two thousand years ago his family had lost the inn to the bank, as no one

had ever shown any interest in buying the desolate place it had stood in mothballs all that time. So from generation to generation the story had been told that one day a member of the family had to buy the inn back. Each year the family would slowly pay a small sum of money to the bank. Derek was the last surviving member of the clan and he had just paid the final payment which gave him the deeds back from the bank. He now stood in front of the run down hovel that was the Hardpassvil Inn. He hugged his wife for the twenty fourth time that day.

"Da ya th'nk weza a go ta de plaze?" she asked looking at the Inn that had stood up to two thousand years of blizzards, rain, hail, birds and the occasional sand storm.

"Not to worry in a few months she will be like new." he replied and tried to open the front door. After a few minutes of huffing and puffing they used the back door. It didn't take them long to get into the swing of the moment and soon they were whistling while they cleaned. It was exactly as his great (I'm not sure just how many greats should be in here, but take it from me there are a whole bunch, almost a hundred I would guess.) grandfather had left it. Reception book on the desk, wrapped in oil skins, as his great x 97 grandfather had said, 'Always look after you customers, and keep a good record of them.' Behind the desk in the room pigeon holes was one letter, still waiting to be delivered to the man who was staying in room 21a. The kitchen was filled with rats, but as Mrs. Smith made a mean rat pie so that was more of a blessing then a nasty shock.

That night they sat in front of a cozy fire eating rat pie and drinking two thousand year old port. Getting the Inn into a state ready for customers would only take two weeks instead of the months they originally thought. "I'll clean out the rooms tomorrow." Derek said. "Quite a bat haven, so we should make some money from the fertilizer people." His wife nodded. She felt sure that she had married the right man, even though his constant talk about getting the Inn back had seemed a bit annoying in the beginning, in the long run she had caught the bug as well, like all the Mrs. Smiths before her.

"Goo' T'inkin Dear, I a do ta Kitchen on ta moro. En try me bat pie recepy." Content in their new lives they watched the fire crack for a few minutes then christened the Inn.

The Great Desert

Hector Vedor looked at the spear pointed at his head for the tenth time and came to the same conclusion. 'Life was not crossbow darts.' One minute he was about to get his hands on a treasure, the next he was standing in the middle of a desert surrounded by sun burnt soldiers. It hadn't taken them long to tie him up and march him over to General Killem's tent. As there were quiet a few people waiting to see the General they had to take a number. They finally got in to see the man.

"Good a deserter." the general said jumping to the wrong conclusion, as usual. "Lets string him up and set an example."

"Well sir, general, sir, sir." One of the braver guards said "Sir, he kind of just appeared out of thin air, sir, general, sir."

"What?" The guards had had enough, so they dropped their spears and ran like hell and tried to blend in with the sand. Killem hardly noticed. Hector would have run with them, but he was chained up and only managed to fall on his face.

"Quick, bring this man into my private sanctum; he could be a message from the gods." Very few people know about Killem's fascination with the occult. As a boy he had a vision of ruling Marshmid, but only if he took it over unconventionally. Hence his weird fetish for attacking in a bizarre fashion. "This could be an answer to my question." he continued. "We must cut him open and read his intestines." Hector didn't think that was such a great idea, he had a feeling that exposing your intestines was probably a: painful, b: gross and c: deadly. So using his deepest voice he said:

"The Gods are unhappy, George." He had overheard the guards calling the general 'Georgey porgy pudding and nuts', so had wrongly assumed that George was the generals name.

"Who?" The general asked. Feeling his life flash before him Hector tried again.

"Georgey porgy pudding and nuts, which is how your men refer to you."

"You mean you're not here about my new carriages?" Hector thought about that for a few seconds and decided, what the hell, the guy's nuts and went with the flow, after all having your intestines read wasn't as bad a trying to follow what this General nutter was saying.

"I come about ill discipline, carriages and my other thing. Your gods have sent me to error the correction of your ways." For all his smart cunning plans, and this piece of inspiration is one of the best, Hector was not a very intelligent man. He had managed to get the general to

do almost anything he wanted, (My favorite was having the general dance around like a headless chicken) but all he could think about was how to get the treasure map and exacting his revenge on the three adventurers who had played such an unfair trick on him. He had managed to get all the minor things settled, the men were having a great time flogging each other when ever the General stuck his head out. They had decided on the cerise pink rather than the salmon for the carriage. Marshmid would only fall on a full moon during the day, not for another two months and now it was time for Hector to play his final hand.

"The most important thing that the gods have sent me here for is to retrieve a very valuable map from three very evil people. If you get the map and the people suffer and die in agony, you will be greatly rewarded. The reward would be the heart of your desire." General Killeem was almost foaming at the mouth thinking what his heart of desire could be.

"Tell the gods I will do it. How do I find them?"

"I will make you the way, but first I need some more ice water, and put in some whiskey and hold the water."

"Would you like a breath mint with that?"

Somewhere on the sea

"I think it's that way."

"You think. What the hell happened to 'I could drive this thing blind folded' Brain. I swear you mess up one more time and I'll keel hall you." Tricks was not happy. They had all spent the first day being sea sick and with no-one manning the rudder they had drifted out beyond the sight of land. Lushish Linda was a fine pirate ship, dirty, smelly and almost impossible to control. She had three masts and genuine canvas square sails, the rigging normally required forty men who knew their way around a boat and could lift twice their body weight. A couple of landlovers were no match for her and she knew it. The sea was as flat as Queen Gertrude's chest (You could have a great game of billiards on her chest, if you didn't mind walking around with no head. She'd be game, but King Herald would probably take offence) and still the ship rocked and rolled like it was a force ten hurricane.

Brain turned the wheel, which was large and heavy, to port, (Or to his left and in the completely opposite direction to any ports

anywhere.) They were happily steering out into the great unknown ocean. It would have been worse if they had managed to get up a sail, but their first attempt was about a mile behind them, slowly sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Siege and Opie were below deck cataloguing the contents of the hold. It was nicely stocked with good pirate food, so they were looking for something to eat.

"I'm not sure what this stuff is," Siege said opening a wooden crate, "but we could eat the mushrooms growing on it."

"Sounds good, now all we need is something to go with it. Maybe a chicken pie." They both chuckled and carried on looking. They worked in silence for a few more minutes, until the shouting on deck became unbearable.

"Maybe we should go find out what the noise is all about?" Siege agreed and they made their way onto the deck.

The first thing they saw was Tricks shouting at the main mast, which seemed to be shouting back at her, in Brains voice. They quickly ran over to see what all the swearing was about. Tricks had tied Brain to the mast and he didn't seem too happy about it.

"Is there a problem Tricks?" Opie asked as diplomatically as he could. For an answer Tricks pointed at the wheel, or where the wheel normally was.

"This idiot," she said pointing at Brain, "thought he could improve on the design."

"I would have if you hadn't interfered." Brain shouted.

"Oh, that's rich, we could have crashed."

"We're in the middle of the ocean. All I was doing was making it easier to turn."

"All you were doing was bugging it up."

"You're a fine one to talk."

"Me! You're the one who..."

"Me! It was..."

It deteriorated very quickly into the swear fest it had been earlier. Opie had to shout to make them hear him.

"So," He said when he finally got their attention. "why don't we just put the wheel back on?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Brains pointing at Tricks, not an easy feat when you hands are tied behind your back and you are lashed to a mast, but Opie understood who he meant.

"Tricks?"

"It was an accident, and as much his fault as mine."

"Me? ME? Ha"

"Well if you hadn't been pulling so hard..."

Opie had a sick feeling in his stomach. He knew where this was going.

"You threw the wheel overboard, didn't you?"

Their sheepish looks were all the answer he needed. He shook his head in disgust, he might have even 'tut tutted'. Opie was not known for speaking out or taking charge of a situation, but the situation called for a cool head, and his was the only one available.

"Tricks untie Brain. Brain get below deck and start making a new wheel, I saw some wood down there, Siege show him where it is. While they're doing that, you and I are going to try put up some sails. After all it could be worse." And then it was. They had been so busy arguing, no one had seen the ship pulling up along side. The first they knew about it was when an arrow slammed into the mast, closely followed by a catapult ball taking out the forward mast. All thought of steering left their minds as they made a mad dash for their own catapult. Tricks was instantly back in charge.

"Brain, Opie load her up, Siege pull the trigger when I give the word and I'll do the aiming." And so began the shortest battle in pirate history.

"We can't find any stone balls." Brain shouted as another ball went whizzing over the ship.

"Find anything heavy to throw at them." Tricks replied still lining up her shot. Opie said he thought he had seen some stuff down below that could work. They raced down and found some heavy barrels, filled with liquid. It was the only thing they could find that might work. They laboriously rolled it onto deck.

"That might work, what's in it?" Tricks asked as they placed the barrel on to the catapult.

"It says water." Opie replied, but they were on a pirate ship. "There are about ten more. Come on Brain lets get some more."

They ran back and rolled another barrel onto the deck. The first thing they noticed was the lack of noise. Then they saw the girls dancing around. Then they noticed the lack of an enemy ship. Opie cleared his throat.

"Um, what happened?" he asked, the other two stopped dancing enough to explain the story, then they all started dancing. It went something like this.

Tricks lined up a shot on their main mast, taking careful aim she told Siege to fire. The barrel soared up into the air and smashed against

the mast, inflicting absolutely no damage what so ever. The water from the barrel flowed over the ship, only it wasn't water, it was hundred proof rum. The second it touched an open flame the ship caught fire, as it was a pirate ship, filled with ah, 'water' it quickly sunk.

When they finished the little dance of joy they cracked open the barrel and sampled the contents.

The next morning life wasn't quite so rosy. Rum, maybe I should just call it raw alcohol, shouldn't be drunk on an empty stomach. Mushrooms aren't classed as food in my book, especially when they're magic. Suffice is to say they had a rough morning; the only good news was that the ship was starting to take a liking to its new crew. At about lunch time a crate fell over that was filled with pickled things. They ate well, and if they smelt a bit vinegary afterward, no one complained. That afternoon they each continued on the tasks Opie had given them the day before. Brain and Siege were to make a new wheel, while Tricks and Opie tried to set some new sails.

"A standard wheel, Brain." Opie said on his way to collect some canvas. "I don't want to see any improvements. Siege keep an eye on him."

Using a piece of coal and drawing on the side of the ship, Brain drew a perfectly normal wheel.

"Okay Siege, that's the plan, so let's find some wood." So they did. The normality of the wheel was eating away at Brain, and he just couldn't live with himself if he didn't add a few great ideas.

"You know Siege, I don't think we have the skill or tools to make an exact replica of a wheel, so we will have to change the design, just a little."

"I don't think Tricks and Opie will like that." She replied a bit skeptically.

"Don't get me wrong, I really want this to work, I just don't think we can do it perfectly. If we just make the wheel square, we could make it a lot quicker." Siege didn't think it was such a good idea, but Brain managed to convince her that it was best for the over all operation. From there it deteriorated into another of Brains great invention. Though he called it a wheel, what he really wanted to call it was 'The Incredible self steering and easy turning ship driving device', but he kept that to himself, at least until the others told him what a great

invention it was. (The really strange thing is, that it actually worked, well the self-steering bit. Although the wheel, 'square', turned on its mounting, it had no link to the rudder, so the ship basically self steered in which ever way it though it should be going.) After setting it in place Brain started work on a thing that required canvas and long beams, he hadn't figured out what it would be yet, but he was sure it would turn into something fantastic.

Opie and Tricks were having a hard time getting the sail up. They heaved and hoed, tied knots and untied knots and pulled and pushed and swore and cursed. Their basic problem was man power, they only had the equivalent of three and a half people, Tricks being equivalent to three and Opie making up the other half. If you know anything about stolen pirate ships (other then the fact that you are in for a really painful time if they ever catch you) you will know that it requires a shanghaied group of about twenty men to raise the sails. (If you didn't know that, take my word for it, I read Short John Lead's book on efficient pirating {I'm happy to report that the nightmares are finally subsiding}). Finally with Siege and Brains help they managed to get the sail half way up. They took a moment out to watch a sunset and then all went to sleep. Nothing happened until just after midnight. (For those of you looking for adventure and dastardly deed feel free to skip the next paragraph, it's a soppy romantic bit that contains blushing, stuttering and giggling. That's right it's the blossoming romance between Opie and Siege.)

Opie awoke with a start, it felt like something with many small legs had walked over his forehead. Up to that point the cockroaches had restricted themselves to only eating his jacket. He jumped up and shook. Hundreds of the brown little bugger fell of and went looking for the idiot that had disturbed their meal. (The face walking cockroach, not Opie.) Opie thought he would take a walk to try get over the shivers. When he got on deck he saw he wasn't alone. At the bow of the ship Siege stood looking into the water.

"You look ..." Opie had to rush over and help her back on board.

She had been so surprised; she had slipped overboard, only just managing to grab on at the last second. Not many people are able to sneak up on Siege, especially in the middle of the night miles from anywhere.

"Thanks." she said once she was safely back on board. "I'm not used

to being surprised."

"Sorry, I should have thought." Opie blushed. "I was going to say you look beautiful in the moon light." Siege giggled.

"I think that's the first time a compliment has nearly killed." She blushed, Opie giggle. (She's wrong of course, for example King Clement once complimented a young lady rather luridly and when she slapped him playfully he fell over the battlement and landed in the moot, where he proceeded to drown. Luckily a guard was passing and suggested that he stand up, the moot only being three feet deep. Then there was the case of Hannibal the humorless... Lets keep that for another time and get back to the romantic bit.)

"It's on nights like this that I sometimes wish I didn't spend all my time underground reading scrolls." Opie said looking out across the moonlight sea. He turned and looked into Siege's eyes, they both blushed, but didn't break eye contact. They stepped closer together, it was the perfect moment for a kiss. In fact it was such a perfect moment anything could have happened. (Knowing this story so far, you are probably expecting something really bazaar. Sea monsters, the unexpected arrive of Tricks or a myriad of other unlikely things. What actually happened is strange beyond belief. {I myself didn't believe it, so I rechecked my sources, but I can assure you it's true.}) They kissed. One of those long time pining kisses. Earth moving, firework kisses. The best five seconds of their lives. On parting they both sighed and then gave it another go, this one lasted longer. After some more kissing they sat down and Opie showed her some of his favorite constellations.

"It's a little tricky finding them without the line joining them up." he said battling to point out Seth the Slippery Sea Serpent. He was more use to seeing the book versions, which had the pictures already drawn in.

"I'm just happy to be with you." Siege said, snuggling more into his shoulder. And that's how Brain found them in the morning.

"Wake up sleepy head." Brain said gently kicking Opie in the kidneys. "I see someone's been getting some."

"Piss off Brain, and nobodies been getting anything." Opie replied starting to rise. (Okay hold onto your hats this is the bazaar bit. {if you skipped the romantic bit I mentioned that something bazaar would happen or did happen or something...just go read the paragraph you lazy git.}) "How about minding your own business."

he continued untangling himself from Siege. “And leave Siege and me alone.”

“What?” Brain replied

“Huh?” Opie cunningly countered.

“Pardon?” Brain retorted.

“I said ‘Leave Siege and me alone’”

“Why?”

“Because it none of your business.”

“What?”

“You know?” Opie was starting to feel a little exacerbated, people weren’t suppose to be so bugging after you told them to mind their own business. “Siege and me.”

“What about Siege and you?” Brain asked, confusion playing drums across his face.

“You know?”

“Um, not really.”

“There’s just no talking to you, Brain.” With that Opie stormed off. Brain muttered something about people shouldn’t drink pirate water so early in the morning and walked off to play with his ‘wheel’. (You might be a bit confused by the previous conversation, well those of you that scored below 40 on the paying attention to detail score sheet. After a night of kissing and cuddling, it seems that Opie’s ‘reality field’ had included Siege, while they lay arm in arm. So when Brain came out he saw the two of them together, but when Opie stood up she sort of disappeared as only she can. Hence the confusion. {Makes you wonder what would happen if they did get it on, well it makes me wonder, perhaps we will find out before this tale ends}) Tricks knew nothing about this when she arrived on deck, so was quite surprised when Opie barged past her.

“I beg you pardon.” she said sarcastically.

“Leave me alone.” he replied and disappeared into the hold. Tricks wondered what was eating him for about a second, and then noticed that Brain was at the helm.

“Oh no you don’t.” she said and started making her way towards Brain. “What do you think you are doing?” she asked him.

“Just steering, you know checking out how great the new wheel is.”

“Don’t you mean Square!” she chuckled. Brain rolled his eyes.

“Some people have no clue, talking of no clue. Have you seen Opie this morning?” Brain asked, spinning the wheel with one finger, hoping that Tricks would notice, but she told him about her weird

encounter with Opie instead.

“Yeah. I had the same thing this morning.”

“Why don’t you two leave him alone.” And Siege stormed off.

“I swear Brain those two have gone completely nuts.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, I think I have the hang of all this sailing stuff.” When Tricks finished laughing, she asked him if he could explain just how he had come to that conclusion. The more he tried to explain the harder she laughed, until he to stormed off. She mentioned something about the stability of her friends and had a go at the wheel. She was happily surprised by how easy it was to steer.

“Good job Brain.” she said very, very quietly. It wasn’t until lunchtime that everyone had returned to their normal selves. Their lunch consisted of pickled fish and blue cheese. The cheese might have been a jug of milk that had been left out for many years.

“Brain, Tricks. Siege and I have been talking, and, well, we have decided that we should tell you that we are, um, have decided that, um we are going to, that is to say, are...”

“Spit it out Opie. We haven’t got all day.” Tricks said

“Well technically we have, got all day that is.”

“Don’t be a smart ass Brain.”

“Well you started it with you incorrect information.”

“It’s a saying.”

“Please I’m trying to tell you the Siege and I are a couple.” Opie said and then blushed, so did Siege, but the other two didn’t notice.

“Let him take his time.” Brain said. “For all we know it might... What did you say?” He asked turning back towards Opie.

“I said we’re a couple.”

“A couple of what?”

“Just a couple, you know dating. Something you and Brain should do.”

It was Tricks and Brains turn to blush. The ship took this opportunity to crash into something. They all lurched. Tricks and Brain onto their backs and Opie and Siege face first into the pickled fish and cheese. There was a moments silence and then someone said something that would have made a pirate blush. Another moment of silence and the four of them rushed onto the deck.

“I told you someone should stand guard.” Tricks said. “But no, you know best.”

“No point beating a dead horse.” Opie said.

“I take offence to being called a dead horse. Besides I could see nothing for miles.” Brain said. “So obviously we hit something invisible, and it wouldn’t have mattered if we had...Good God will you look at that. Do you think it’s friendly?”

“With those teeth? I don’t think so.” Tricks replied, whipping out her sword. The others whipped out nothing, they had left their weapons below.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions.” Siege said taking a step forward.

“Were should we jump?” asked Brain. This was followed by a deep rumble of laughter.

“I LIKE THAT LITTLE FELLOW.” a booming deep voice said.

“YOU WOULD.” replied another booming voice from the front of the ship. “AFTER ALL HE’S NOT STUCK IN YOUR BACK.” the voice from the front continued.

“HOLD ON A SEC WHILE I PULL HIM OUT.” Voice number one said and then proceeded to remove the ship, ever so gently from voice number two. “THERE YOU ARE, AND HARDLY A SCRATCH. HOW DO YOU DO LITTLE ONE?” he said to the ship. “I’M MANEY AND THE GUY YOU CRASHED INTO IS HEWY.”

“Hi.” shouted Brain. “I’m Brain, this is Opie and Tricks, and the one you can’t see is Siege.”

“OH.” Maney said. “AND YOU ALL LIVE IN THAT ONE BODY.”

“Well, in a way, sort of. I’m going to go with a yes, at the moment. What do you eat, if you don’t mind me asking?” Brain asked.

“Quiet Brain,” Siege said softly. “We don’t want to upset them.”

“ANYTHING REALLY.” Maney answered “I’M PARTIAL TO ALGAE, AND HEWY LIKES KELP, BUT WE’LL PRETTY MUCH EAT ANY TYPE OF SEAWEED.” The four humans almost cheered. “AND OF COURSE THE OCCASIONAL SHIP, WHEN WE CAN FIND THEM.”

“YEAH, I LIKE TO SUCK OUT THE SQUISHY BITS IN THE MIDDLE.” Hewy said licking his lips in remembrance of bygone feasts.

“LUCKY ENOUGH FOR YOU.” Maney said. “YOU ALWAYS FIND THEM FIRST. IF ONLY WE COULD REMEMBER WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE. DON’T SUPPOSE YOU KNOW WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE DO YOU?” The NO was audible in the Horn Mountains. “DIDN’T THINK SO. SO WHAT KIND OF SEA

MONSTER ARE YOU?”

“Linitis old Heratas.” Opie shouted, happy that his vast knowledge of all things monster like was finally going to pay off.

“A LINA-WHATS-IT?”

“Sorry that was our Latin name, we are more commonly known as Blue Bellied Grumblers.”

“LATIN NAME, ISN’T THAT THE THING THE SQUISHY THINGS CALL STUFF, SO THEY CAN LAUGH AT YOU.” Hewy had a closer look at the ship in Maneys hand. “YOU KNOW WHAT MANEY. I THINK THAT THERE IN YOUR HAND COULD BE A SHIP.”

“I DON’T THINK SO HEWY. IT TALKS. SHIPS ONLY SCREAM.”

“YOU COULD BE RIGHT, MAYBE WE SHOULD EAT IT ANYWAY, JUST TO BE SURE.” (Sorry to interrupted at such a critical moment, but it would hardly be a good tale if you didn’t know the facts. Rumor: People can live inside sea monsters stomachs quiet happily for years, if he doesn’t chew. Fact: 1; Sea monsters stomachs are filled with flesh eating acid, not pleasant. 2; Sea monsters always chew their food very well, if it’s not seaweed, they like things that don’t taste green. Rumor: Sea monsters are cunning and vicious. Fact: Sea monsters stupid and laid back. Rumor: A sea monster will eat anything. Fact: A sea monster will eat anything that fits in its mouth. There are many more facts about sea monster, but those are the ones pertinent to this story.) Tricks had had enough. She strode purposeful towards the monsters waving her swords. Opie looked crest fall, because his plan to fake being a sea monster hadn’t worked. Brain was rapped up in his own thoughts; it had to do with sea monster transport networks. The only one left with a plan that might succeed was Siege. She cleared her throat and said:

“Excuse me Maney.” The ship continued its short journey towards Maneys mouth. So she shouted. “Maney do you know what a cannibal is.” The ship stopped and a puzzled expression flitted over the monsters huge, terrifying face.

“NO, BUT IT DOESN’T SOUND VERY NICE.”

“I’VE HEARD OF THAT.” Hewy said. “I GOT HIT BY ONE OF THOSE LAST YEAR, WHEN WE ATE THAT NICE LITTLE HARBOUR. BOY DID IT EVER STING.”

“No,” Siege shouted, “I think that was a cannon ball.”

“OH, THEN WHAT’S A CAN...A CAN-O...WHAT YOU SAID?”

“A cannibal. Let me explain it this way, would you eat your friend Maney?”

“DON’T KNOW.” Hewy replied, “I’VE NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT IT.” Not the answer Siege was looking for. So she tried another track.

“Maney, would you eat Hewy?” Maney shook his head.

“MAYBE, IF HE TASTED GOOD.” (Head movement responses are one of those things that don’t always translate correctly for species to species. For example a goblin shaking his head will mean no, while a dragon’s nod will mean he wants to jump your bones.) Siege put her hands over her face and quietly screamed. Her cunning plan to fool the monsters into not eating the ship because it would be cannibalistic was going nowhere. Opie saw what was happening and knew just how to fix the situation.

“You two are a lot bigger then our little ssh...um, us.” he said, the cunning plan taking root. “And you probably taste a lot better.” The two monsters looked at each other, the dawning of an idea that had never occurred to each other suddenly blossoming in their minds. (New fact: A sea monster will eat anything that fits in its mouth or it can bite off his best friend.) Maney carefully put the boat down and took a bite out of Hewy. Hewy took a bite out of Maney. They floated in the water chewing, it tasted very good.

“THAT WAS PRETTY GOOD.” Maney said, “YOU SHOULD TRY IT.” So Hewy did, and took a huge bite out of himself. (New fact: Sea monsters have a high pain threshold and are remarkably stupid.)

“YOU KNOW MANEY.” Hewy said as they swam off. “WE ARE GOING TO EAT VERY WELL FROM NOW ON.”

“THAT’S A FACT HEWY.” he replied, taking a small bite of his friend’s ear. It was a bit chewy, so he spat it out and took a bite out of his own rump. (Fact: Sea monsters are now on the endangered species list.)

“That was kind of unexpected.” Brain said. The others nodded in agreement. (Human head movement responses are the same as goblins.) Opie and Siege took this opportunity to hug and kiss each other. Tricks and Brain gasped.

“Did you see that?” Brain said completely blown away.

“Yes.” Tricks replied, “She just popped out of nowhere when he kissed her.”

“This could be important.” Brain continued.

“You’re damn right.” Tricks said, drawing her sword again. “I’m going to kill your little friend. Opie! What the hell are you doing to my sister?”

“Siege is your sister?”

“Not sister; sister, metaphorically, like the sisters of questionable virtue sister.”

“You’re a sister of questionable virtue?” Brain said, a smile spreading across his face, he knew what she meant, but couldn’t help himself.

“No you moron I said ‘like’, like a sister.”

“Oh,” Brain said desperately trying not to laugh out loud. “You just sleep with people for money, but aren’t a sister.”

When they finally got Brain back on board he was still laughing, and Tricks had forgotten all about Opie and Siege. Tricks spent the rest of the afternoon kicking things and mumbling dark and dastardly things she was going to do to Brain. Opie and Siege sat at the back of the boat and fished for supper. (Supper was pickled sausage and what can only be described as penicillin.) Brain decided to continue his work on ‘the amazing thing that is made from thin poles and cotton canvas’. He tried various things, but couldn’t quite work out where it was leading him. He had the feeling that it was going to revolutionize the world, but he just didn’t know how. Then he remembered a drawing he had seen. Dragon’s wings. Using the tools he could find, he got to work. Brain being Brain knew that dragon wings were not perfect, so he redesigned them. What he ended up with is best described as ‘not dragon’s wings’. When he hauled it on deck and told the others of his great invention they all chuckled at him, until he showed them how it worked, then they really laughed. In a huff Brain went back below deck to make some energy drinks, his great invention sleeping with the fishes and occasional sea monster. (I’m not sure that pickled fish, rotten milk, pirate water and other unrecognizable ingredients could make an energy drink, but it would probably taste just the same as all the others he had concocted over the years.)

The next day absolutely nothing happened, except that Siege was a lot more visible, as was Opie’s grin.

At about two o’clock the next morning Brain went outside to take

over the watch from Tricks, but couldn't find her. Half asleep he thought nothing of it. It wasn't until breakfast that he started to worry. They searched the ship, but the only sign of her was her sword, left lying on the deck. They called and called, but nothing came of it.

"She must have fallen over board." Opie said to the distraught Brain.

"Or maybe the sea monster came back. I think we are going to have to face facts, Brain, I think she could be dead."

"Take that back. No one could kill Tricks. No way. Not Tricks. She's probably hiding, having a good laugh." Brain stood and threw his mug at the wall. "You think that's funny." he shouted. He sat back down and banged his forehead on the table. "She would have laughed at that." he said, "'How's throwing you mug going to help, Brain' she would have said. 'Temper, temper, Brain' and I had just made a new batch of energy drinks."

"Maybe that's why she vanished." Siege whispered to Opie. Neither of them laughed. They all knew that without Tricks the adventure was over. They were going to hang around on the ship until they hit land, and then make their way home. The worst hit was Brain, he became very morbid. He would stand on deck and look out at the horizon. Siege and Opie worried about him.

"I hope he isn't thinking of jumping overboard." Siege said that night, while she and Opie sat below deck.

"I don't think so. I tried to talk to him, but he just said he wanted to be alone."

"Do you know if he and Tricks had a thing?" she blushed.

"I can't be sure, but I think there could have been something in the past."

"They do make a perfect, if a bit bazaar, couple." Siege said.

"Yeah, they do act a bit like school children." They both chuckled for the first time that day. "You've known her for the longest, has she ever mentioned anything?"

"No." Siege replied. "Until we started this adventure, I didn't even know that she knew Brain. Sure I would see him at the Swill a lot, but always talking to someone about some great idea of his." They were silent for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts.

"I sure wish I could hear the two of them argue again."

"Where the hell have you been?" Brain shouted.

"Don't shout at me, Brain." Tricks shouted back. Opie and Siege ran

on deck and pretty much rehashed what Brain had asked.

“Let’s get below deck and crack open some pirate water. Boy do I have a story for you.”

So they followed Tricks below and poured out some rum, very watered down and Tricks told her story. (I will tell it in her words, as I can’t find any corroborating witnesses.)

“I was standing on deck, looking out for sea monsters and invisible islands when out of no where...What happened to your mug Brain? You didn’t..? Never mind. Like I was saying there I was with these to huge men, only they were standing on what looked like fish tales. No Opie, mermaids are women, I think I can tell the difference. Oh, mermen then. So these mermen are standing there on their tails mumbling something about how their boss Neptis wants to...Who’s telling this story Opie me or you? Okay so their boss Neptune, I’m sure they said Neptis, wanted to see me. I didn’t think that was such a great idea so I grabbed my sword and prepared to fight. Just wait Brain. I thought of calling for help, but there were only two of them, I didn’t see the other two behind me with the net. Bloody mermen can move quietly on those tail leg things. Maybe we should suggest it to the infiltration guild when we get back. Or maybe your mom, Siege I’m sure they could...Good idea, you write that down Opie. Where was I? Oh yes. The bugger threw the net over me from behind, I mean really, what kind of a fair fight is that. Ha-ha Brain. So I was about to call you guys when one of them stuck a cod in my mouth, I can still taste it. Not pleasant let me tell you. They bundled me up and the next thing I know I’m going over board, right into the water, or should I say right under the water. That was rhetorical Opie. Here’s the weird bit. It’s like I can breathe water, only I’m breathing air. Don’t ask, I don’t know how to explain it. Can I have a refill please, all this talking is making me thirsty. Thanks Siege. Which reminds me, you and I still have to have that talk.”

“So we get to the bottom of the ocean and you will never guess what’s there. No body likes a smarty pants Opie. Right so there’s this huge castle and lots more merthings. I’m just taking in the sights when up swims this merman, twice the size of the ones I came with. They all bow to him and then swim off. He pulled the cod out my mouth and unravelled the net, as soon as I was free I punched him in the eye. Have you ever tried to punch someone underwater? Not

easy. Although he did have a bit of a shiner when I left. Anyway, he called his friends and they dragged me into the castle. It's at about this point that I think I'm dreaming. No Brain I didn't try pinching myself. Up ahead is the door to the castle, one of those big wooden ones, with the iron bar wrapped around it, don't ask how it doesn't rust. Anyway I quickly forgot about rust when they opened the door. The castle was filled with air, it was like a, a, well it was like nothing I had ever seen before. The bully merguys chucked me into the castle and said something like if I tried to leave the castle I would drown. Don't be so facetious Brain. Okay, you know me, I tried to leave, only I couldn't breathe the water anymore. “

“There I am deep under water standing in a courtyard with flowers and trees and the smells of baking bread. Well obviously someone was going to pay. I mean the nerve of some people. Drag you off a perfectly good ship into what can only be described as a castle at the bottom of the sea. Poseidon who? I thought you said his name was Neptune? Oh he's got two names. Sometimes I worry about you Opie. Well I didn't meet either of them. I met someone else. This guy walks into the courtyard, just a regular guy with feet and everything. Let me tell you he took my breath away, one hunk of a gorgeous man. He was only wearing shorts and I can tell you that he must do a lot of working out. Wow. I'm getting a little parched, could you get me another drink please Brain. Thanks. He asked me to join him for lunch. At that moment a whole bunch of mermen pitched with a table full of the most glorious food you have ever seen. So I postponed killing him until after I had eaten. You know, get the lay of the land and such, besides I was starting to get a little sick of pickled stuff. During lunch he rambled on about how great he was and all his accomplishments. I told him it was pretty cool that he could find strawberries this time of year. He said he had a source, so I punched him and asked why the hell he had brought me to his hellhole. So he told me and it took four of his guards to pull me off him. He did a lot of apologizing and sent me back to the ship. The end.”

The others sat in stunned silence for a few seconds and then all asked the same question at once, but each in a different way.

“It's kind of embarrassing.” Tricks replied, “Well, maybe I can tell you if you promise not to laugh.” they all dutifully promised.

“Okay, here goes. It seems that he is the perfect male on the planet, and I am obviously the perfect female. You promised Brain. Better.

So he thought that if he made the perfect place for me then maybe we could start producing the perfect children. I mean it Brain, one laugh and you will get to meet him.” Brain couldn’t contain it any more. He jumped up and gave Tricks a big hug.

“Good to have you back Tricks.” he said.

“Something in your eye Brain?” she asked.

“Yeah.” he replied. “Pickle juice.”

“So you’re telling us that this was just some guys way of trying to pick you up?” Opie asked after they had had a chance to settle down. “You didn’t get to meet Neptune? Can you pass me some more of that lovely bread, please?”

“Yes, no and here.” Tricks replied. “I suppose we should be glad I’m so perfect, I mean look at this great feast and he’s having us towed to Crustation Island.”

“Yeah, lucky.” Brain mumbled.

“Oh cheer up Brain. According to Neptis we were way off course. If he hadn’t come along we could well have ended up in the pirate fleet off Marshmid. As it is, it’s going to take all night and tomorrow to get us back on course.”

The next evening they found themselves at a deserted harbor. No ships and no people.

“I think your boy friend has brought us to the wrong place.” Brain said.

“No, look at the sign, I can read it from here, so you must be able to.”

“Okay so it’s the right place.”

The sign said ‘Welcome to the free port of all Crustation Island.’

“So where are all the people.”

“Maybe that will explain it.” Opie said pointing to a hand written sign. Brain had to strain his eyes, but he could just read it.

“It says ‘Gone warring back in five to ten days’”

“Good then we are just in time.” Tricks said playing with her sword.

“In time for what?” Siege asked

“Going to war of course.” The others looked at Tricks and shook their heads.

Chapter 6

Marshmid

“What do you mean they have just wondered off?” Captain Gumboot asked into the stunned silence.

“Well sir,” the young scout said. “I was standing at the edge of the swamp, watching the army, as was my duty and they just sort of started heading deeper into the desert. Sort of in the direction of Barock, sir.”

The nervous young scout stood in the middle of the parliament building of Marshmid. He was down on one knee, his cap in his hand. He kept looking back at his mud covered wellies, as if they could run in and save him. The wellies just looked back at him as if to say, ‘not a chance mate, you wouldn’t catch me in there.’ (FYI: In Marshmid those rubber boots you wear to walk through mud and swamps are called wellies so as not to accidentally cause confusion. I.e. “This gumboot’s full of shit.” And having the ruler of the town standing behind you asking just exactly what you thought he was full of.)

“The sun must have fried his brain.” Gumboot said to the parliamentarians. “Let’s see if we can’t get someone into Killem’s inner circle and find out what his new strategy is.”

“Well sir.” Sergeant Dylan Mole, head of infiltration, said, “We did manage to capture, well capture is too strong of a word, I think the correct term would be promised him a glass of water and a place out of the sun, one of Killem’s chief of staff yesterday. We thought that the man was delirious, so we put him in a cold dungeon, he seemed happy enough, but with this new information he might make sense.”

“Get him in here. Thank you scout. You can get back to your post.”

The scout almost tripped himself up as he made a break for the exit, bowing the whole way out. The others sat around discussing the events while the prisoner/defector was brought up.

When he was finally hauled in, he was a complete mess. He was badly sun burnt and was clutching a glass, when one of the guards tried to take the glass he got bitten.

“Let him keep it, guard.” Captain Gumboot said. “So Mister...what is your name?” The man snapped to attention and saluted, dropping

his glass in the process.

An hour later they had a new glass in his hands and had finally stopped him crying. Not wanting a repeat of the previous out burst Gumboot continued more tactfully.

“What can you tell us about General Killem’s plans, Sir.”

“This god appeared and told the general that we had to go to Barock and wait for these three people and then kill’em.” The man giggled at his pun. Gumboot ordered the man away.

“I see what you mean Dylan, obviously spent too much time in the sun, but what ever the reason Killem’s on the way to Barock. Maybe we should send some men after him, just to make sure this isn’t some new elaborate plan.”

Barock Crater Lake

“Pa it looks like an army is invading.”

“A what?”

“An army pa, and they look thirsty.”

The father and son sat on their little rowing boat in the middle of Crater Lake. They had been fishing since dawn, and they had almost filled the boat.

“They look hungry as well.” the father said. “We best be getting back to the house and have your ma lock up your sisters, on second thought we best be locking you up as well.”

They rowed back to the little house by the edge of the lake as fast as they could.

The army had just hit the water and showed no sign of stopping, when they arrived.

“Fishin’ will be poor tomorrow.” the father mumbled as he herded his children into the under ground cellar that they had build for this exact purpose. (Barock had seen it’s fair, some would say unfair, share of invading armies. It seemed that Barock was the center of the invading armies universe. So much so, that the locals had turned the place into a bit of a war town. It didn’t have a standing army of its own, ho no, it had something much more diabolical, huge pots and vast stills. It worked very simply, the army would invade, the locals would sell them food and booze. If they didn’t have the money to pay, they were more then welcome to pay with weapons, which in turn the locals would sell to the next army that could afford it. A very

prosperous town indeed.)

“The kids are safe pa. If you could check on the still, I’ll take the fish up to the town and let everyone know we being invaded.”

“Thank you ma.” (Yes, they really do call each other Ma and Pa.)

After a few hours of wallowing in the water Killem’s army marched into the town. They were greeted by the mayor, the local high school marching band, the smells of fresh braked bread, fish and chicken soup, the sounds of beer casts being tapped and of course the two hundred sisters of questionable virtue that called Barock home. Killem’s army were so well fleeced that first night, they had to spend the remainder of their stay in Barock camping by the Lake, only the lucky or skilled card players able to sneak back into town.

The Hardpassvil Inn

“Ta place is more en less gettin’ ship shape, dear.” Mrs Smith said to her husband. “I twos t’inkin’ wes best ba getting’ ta town en buy more linen.”

“Good thinking, sweetie.” he replied. “Take the money from the fertilizer sale and see what you can do. I’ll just finish off upstairs. Be careful mind you, the road to Barock is a bit sticky this time of year.”

“Will do, see ya in a co’ple da.”

After seeing his wife off Derek Smith went upstairs to finish off the last few rooms. Whistling to himself as he cleaned the room, he found a wooden box under what was once a bed. Being such a fastidious inn keeper, he did what his ancestors would have and put the box in the lost and found. He had a light lunch of rabbit pie, not his wife’s best, but as they had eaten all the bats and rats, he knew all he could look forward to were the almost inedible rabbit, chicken and venison pies his wife would try to make. He went out to the back shed and had a good look around, but there was no sign that rats had started moving back.

“Oh well back to work I suppose.” he said, very deflated.

He was just finishing off room 21a, when he found a key. The tag had rotted off years ago, so he thought that it must have been from the last guest. He went down stairs and checked in the Reception book. He wrote out a tag, tied it to the key and put it with the

envelope for room 21a. (What did he write on the tag you may ask? Lord Da'Loose of course.)

Free Port of all Crustation Island

“I can't believe there's no one here.”

“Stop saying that Brain, I for one find it refreshing that nothing and no one is trying to kill or eat us.” Opie said.

“What do you suppose this warring is all about?” Tricks asked. She hadn't sheathed her sword since they had arrived.

“Probably some kind of Festival. Like King Clement day.” Siege said walking down the middle of the street.

“Hey, look at that.” Brain shouted excitedly. “It's a box full of money. Look, there's another one. Looks like there's one at each shop.”

“I've heard of those.” Opie said. “There're called honesty boxes. You take what you want from the shop and then put the money in the box.”

“Wow, some people are really stupid.” Brain said walking closer to one of the boxes. “Haven't they ever heard of the thieves' guild?”

“Move the coin and look at the bottom of the box.” Opie told Brain. Who complied.

“There's some sort of symbol at the bottom.”

“It's called the honesty mark. If you steal from the box it means, if you are caught, you will be executed.” Opie said taking a look at the mark, while Siege moved farther away.

“But there's no one here.”

“What did I say earlier about you saying that?”

“Okay, I'll stop saying it. Who would see us if we, or someone with a natural tendency to steal, decided to help ourselves?”

“No idea.” Opie replied, “But they probably left someone to watch, it's just not worth the risk. Look out Siege.” he suddenly shouted as Siege backed into a table containing an honesty box.

He ran over to her, but stepped back in complete surprise. “That's strange.”

“What?” asked Siege turning and looking in the box. “The money's still there. Do you think I'm losing my power because of all the...you know?” Opie blushed.

“I don't think so. You are still putting fruit and stuff in your pockets,

you're just not taking money from the honesty boxes."

"Maybe it's like some sort of Siege protection spell." Brain said.

"Stop bugging around." Tricks said from farther up the street. "I think I can hear some people. Sounds like they are having a great party up ahead."

"I can't hear anything." Brain said walking closer to her.

"Can't say I'm all that surprised, Brain, as you're as deaf as a post." (Odd saying that. Posts hear very well, it's just that they don't have much to say, so people assume they must be deaf.)

"I can hear just fine, thank you very much."

"Whatever. I hear feasting and drinking. You can pussy foot around here all you want, I'm going to join in the festivities."

"You two go ahead," Opie said. "I want to try a few experiments with Siege and these honesty boxes. We'll catch up in a mo."

"Experiments in kissing and cuddling is more like it." Brain said once they were out of earshot.

"Thanks for that image, Brain" Tricks said sarcastically. "All I can picture is Opie groping fresh air."

"It's not like that." Brain replied. "It's like he has a magic that makes her visible when they kiss. I saw it when you fell overboard."

"I didn't fall overboard, I was abducted. Besides, I don't think I want his magic rubbing up against me."

"Yeah, me neither." Brain replied.

"Oh, I didn't know you were into guys." Tricks said, chuckling.

"I meant Siege, not my type."

"So what is your type?" she asked as casually as she could.

"Not really sure." he replied, "Never really thought about it. Too busy making great inventions."

"That's rich." she said and picked up the pace. "Sometime I wonder if you aren't gay."

"Hey, just what the hell do you mean?"

"Nothing, lets go find this party." Brain stood in stunned silence, then ran and caught up with Tricks. Neither of them felt much like talking.

Crustation is divided down the middle, with the Kingdom of Lob on the West and the Kingdom of Cray on the east. The only place the two merge is at the free port of all Crustation Island. The Walls start a short distance outside the city limits. Depending on which way you want to go, you take the east or west path. There are no signposts.

Brain and Tricks were so intent on not talking to each other that they took different paths. Opie and Siege got to the fork in the road and decided to split up; not knowing which way the other two had gone. They decided to meet back at the fork at sunset. Fate, or maybe I should say beer, conspired against them and prevented them from keeping their meeting.

Opie and Brain

Brain arrived at the perfect time to join in the festivities. The party was in full swing. He marched himself into the first beer tent, got a couple of jugs of beer and sat down. Opie found him ten minutes later on his second jug.

“Have a beer, pal.” he said passing the third jug to Opie.

“No time, where is Tricks?”

“Who the hell cares!”

“I do. We must find her and meet Siege at the fork in the road before sunset.”

“I’m not going.” Brain slurred.

“Why not?”

“She hates me.”

“Who?”

“You know?”

“Actually, I don’t”

“Drink your beer or I shan’t talk to you.” Opie sighed and took a sip. He knew it wouldn’t be easy getting Brain to go with him. He thought about all the ways he could convince his friend to follow. The thinking was thirsty work, and the next thing he knew he and Brain were standing on a table singing ‘Lob the great’ with two hundred other patrons.

Tricks and Siege

Siege had a very similar experience with Tricks, only she didn’t get drunk or sing ‘Cray the great.’ When she finally managed to get Tricks to sit down it was well past sunset. She did manage to find out that Brain had gone in Opie’s direction, so she was hoping that he would bring him to where she and Tricks were when he didn’t find her waiting at the fork in the road. She made sure she and Tricks were waiting in a visible position in the tent.

“Tell me what’s wrong?” Siege asked the now morbid Tricks.
“Hey Siege.” Tricks giggled “What you doing here?”
“Trying to rescue you.”
“I’ll do the rescuing...whoops.” Tricks said trying to pull out her sword, only to watch it go clattering to the ground. “I think I’m drunk.” she whispered very loudly and then giggled conspiratorially.
“Have some more beer.” She hiccupped.
“I don’t think that would be good for you.”
“I shinish. I shnizzest. I sh...shn. I demand you drink.”
“Okay, but then you have to tell me what happened between you and Brain.”
“That’s all water under the bridge.” Then she got morbid again and stared into her beer. Nothing Siege could do would cheer her up. Until a captain in the Cray army came around and signed them up for active duty. In no time Tricks was dancing on the tables again.

Opie and Brain

“I don’t think this is such a good idea Brain.” Opie said through the fog that was now his brain.
“Sure it is, nothing like a bit of exercise to cure a hangover.”
Opie shrugged his shoulders and signed his name. It was too much effort to try arguing with Brain once he had made up his mind to do something stupid. They spent the rest of the night drinking and talking about really profound things, which only really drunk people find profound. The next morning they woke up to the sounds of trumpets. They were lying just outside the tent they had spent most of the previous night in.

“What the hell is that racket?” Brain asked, trying to cover his ears with his hands, which was made very tricky by the beer jug he still held.
“Did you leave a wake up call, ‘cause if you did I swear I will kill you.”
“What you say? I can’t hear too well with all these trumpets and I think I have a beer mug stuck to my hand.”
At this point a man in uniform with the letters MP written on an armband walked up to them and checked the back of their hand.
“ATTENTION.” he shouted, and then held his head and continued in a much more civilized volume. “Up you get lads, the battle will begin

shortly. Let me just say it was very brave of you to sign up for the first wave of the attack.”

“The whoza what’sit?” Brain tried to ask. Opie hit Brain on the back of the head.

“You see what happens when you sign things.”

“What?” Brain rubbed the back of his head. The MP laughed, and then thought better of it, he too had been up all night singing ‘Lob the great’.

“No time for second thoughts.” the MP said. “The battle will start soon, so you had better go find you regiment. It should be near the wall.” With that said he went to find the next group of lads that had decided to sleep in.

“Oh, gods Brain, what have you gotten us into? Siege is going to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about her.” Brain said. “I think that guy said we were in the first wave of the attack, we probably won’t live till lunch.”

“Nice way to cheer a guy up. I swear Brain if we get out of this alive I’m going to kill you.”

“No time for that, we have to think of a way out of this.”

“How about we make a run for it.”

“Don’t be stupid, Opie. I’m in no shape to run.”

“Good point. Maybe we could pretend to be sick.”

“Doesn’t look like that will work.” Brain replied pointing at the now visible army. Brain and Opie looked positively well compared to some of the men trying to stand at attention.

“We going to die, aren’t we?”

“Yip.”

Tricks and Siege

Tricks wasn’t in much better shape. She was suffering from what she called flu, as she never got a hangover, so the only explanation was the one she was using. She stood in her position with the other first wavers, while Siege ran back and forth to the coffee tent. They had both signed up for the first wave, but Siege wasn’t required to participate, for obvious reasons. There was a lot of coffee drinking going on in the ranks of the first wavers. It seemed that everyone had caught Tricks’s flu.

“As much as I’m looking forward to this war,” one of the soldiers

next to Tricks said. "I just wish it could start later or maybe tomorrow."

"I know what you mean." someone else said. "I really don't picture myself charging into battle right now."

"Think we could ask the sarg to get a postponement."

"Has anyone seen the sarg this morning?"

"Yeah, I saw him in one of the red tents, poor bugger was at it all night, I'll be surprised if he can walk any time this week." That got a lot of laughter. (In case you don't know: Licensed sisters of questionable virtue use red tents to advertise their presence when away from their homes. At their homes they use red silk draped over their door.)

"Very funny Jenkins." a large burly man said. "Get back in formation. For your information, it's them that won't be walking."

He continued walking, but there was a lot of hidden pain in every step. He got to the front of the troops and with great difficulty and lots of help, managed to stand on the wooden stool.

"Good warday morning, troops. For those that don't know me." he said looking at Tricks, "I'm Sergeant Loude. I will be the one giving you instructions. If you do what I say, you should all come back alive, however if you mess up or don't follow my instructions..."

"What's this instruction stuff, Sarg?" Jenkins shouted from the ranks.

"They're like orders, only some lily liver idiot back at HQ thinks 'instructions' is more motivational sounding then orders. If you ask me, using words like instructions and acceptable casualties is what's making this army into the ham fisted pussy footed lame assed no good hoity toity fanning around load of old cods whollop that..." Tricks didn't hear the rest, one of the men whispered into her ear.

"This is why we signed up with the firsties." he said in a very low whisper. "Old sarg always gives this sort of grand style performance before a war."

"Okay." she replied, "but what exactly is he saying?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but he's about to blow, if my..." Sarg blowing cut him off.

"WHAT THE HELL..." he shouted.

He held his head and said a little softer. "What the hell are you doing talking while I'm handing out orders, I mean instructions. You two front and center." Tricks and the whisperer made their way forward.

"Well Private Soat, I see you have a problem with me talking again,

and who is your little girlfriend.”

“I’m nobodies girlfriend Sarg.” Tricks said. “I’m Tricks form Clemville.”

A hush descended on the soldiers.

“The Tricks?” Jenkins asked.

“I don’t know about around here,” she said. “but where I come from I’m The Tricks.”

“Greatest sword in all the land?” Sarg asked.

“Yes that would be me.”

“Then we are truly honored to have you here at our fine warday.”

Sarge said. “Private Soat, go inform the King of our great fortune.

While we wait for a response, let’s see if we can’t get Tricks to give us a few lessons.”

She was happy to oblige, until the Kings guards invited her to join him at his private box. Siege invited herself, and they had the best view of the battle, only they weren’t able to participate, which suited Siege just fine thank you very much, but Tricks was a little disappointed. The great food and wine more then made up for it though.

Opie and Brain

Opie and Brain sat out nothing. They couldn't come up with an excuse in time, and had to endure the entire battle from start to finish. They also got a speech from their sarg, but it was more about duty and honour. Half the men, including Brain, fell asleep and had to be roused when it was time to go over the wall. The sight that greeted them was more spectacular than they could have imagined. All across no mans land were banners and grand stands. People were cheering and shouting and selling things. Everyone on their side of the center line wore blue, on the other side everyone was in green. (In the first few battles everyone had worn the colour of their favorite cooked crustacean. Which made the battle extremely difficult, it turned into a free for all and no winner could be declared. As a result, the Kings had decided from then on the people would wear the colour of the water their favourite crustacean was found in. This stopped the free for all, but still no winner could be declared and so began the legend of the letter writing.)

"Gather in the tent." their sarg said.

While they were all moving into the tent Opie whispered to Brain.

"Our only hope of survival is to stick together. You fight off anyone who gets too close, and I'll take out the rest with my crossbow."

"Sounds good, only thing is, they seem to be confiscating all weapons." Opie looked into the tent and sure enough a group of men were taking away the weapons of the men in the line in front of them.

"I don't like this." Brain said as Opie turned back to the colour he had been before the adventure had started, pale, very, very pale.

"Okay, this is for you new people." the sarg said. "We can't afford to lose too many men, what with harvest time coming up, so we have changed the rules of our war a bit from what you are used to. Firstly you will use our weapons, they are these wooden sticks covered in sponge, let me tell you they hurt, but are unlikely to kill. Secondly there are drums dotted around the battlefield filled with red paint, you dip your sword in the red paint and whack someone, preferably from the opposing team. If you are whacked, a ref, dressed in yellow will either declare you dead or fit to continue. Thirdly have fun, it is warday after all." Opie and Brain stood in stunned silence.

"You mean we aren't going to die?" Opie asked no one in particular.

"That's the spirit." someone replied. "The longer you last the more likely you can win a seat at the King's banquet."

They got their blue tunics and marched out onto the field, dipping their swords in a drum of red paint as they went. They were finally lined up on the field facing the feared enemy. Someone yelled charge so they did.

Tricks and Siege

“Look Tricks.” Siege said. “That’s Opie and Brain standing in front of the blue team.” They were both sitting in the green section. Someone had been thoughtful enough to supply them with green pullovers.

“Looks like they have already seen some action.” Tricks replied, not really able to distinguish, who was who from this distance, but she could clearly see the red liquid dripping off their swords.

“Oh no.” she said as the two formations charged. “They’re all going to die.”

“That’s what happens if you choose the wrong team.” the king said.

Siege was silent. She watched in horror as the men stumbled and weaved their way closer together.

“I’m sure they will be fine.” Tricks said as the two groups clashed. “I trained Brain after all.”

The first clash was a bit of an anti-climax. Swords swung and missed, or didn’t swing at all, the walking pace of the clashing men hardly counted as a charge. Eventually it was a nice mix of men, where if you swung your sword you were bound to hit someone.

“Looks like Opie and Brain are in the middle.” Siege said.

“They are?” Tricks replied squinting, “Hard to tell.”

“Oh no.” Siege said sinking into her chair, that some fat guy kept trying to take, then having to mumble an apology. “Opie’s been hit. He’s bleeding badly. I’ve never seen so much blood.” the king chuckled.

“Watch this.” he said. A man in a yellow coat ran up to Opie, looked him over and then pulled out a blue card. He held the card high into the air. The cheer from the blue benches was only just louder than the boo’s from the green benches. The ref put the blue card away took out a yellow one and tied Opie’s arm to his side.

“Damn.” the King said. “That was a mortal blow if ever I saw one.”

He stood up and called over one of the young girls standing in front of his box. “Get the cheer leading squad in gear, we need more

noise.”

“Yes, sir.” she replied. “Come on girls we have work to do. “ She shouted. “I want this crowd whipped into a frenzy.” And they ran off waving their pom-poms.

“Uh. What just happened?” Tricks asked.

“We lost the killer blow.” the King replied.

“Huh?” Tricks and Siege ask simultaneously.

“You’re new here, so let me explain.” he said as a green card was raised. “Damn looks like we going to lose one. Anyway, when we first started fighting against each other it was a very bloody affair. The problem was that we lost too many men and harvesting of our lifeblood, the beautiful crayfish, dropped dangerously low. My ancestors tried to ban the fighting, but after the first few coup attempts we had to bring back the wars. This was the only way we could think of to do it. It looks good, and very few people get killed.”

“What exactly is going on?” a very puzzled Tricks asked.

Her eye sight was not the best, but what she could see was lots of blood and men lying on the floor writhing in agony.

“I’ll explain the rules, maybe that will help. Damn another red card. More noise girl.” he continued after sitting down. “We have wooden swords covered in sponge. The participants dip the swords in red paint and then try to whack an opponent with it. The guys in yellow are the refs. If they hold up a red card it means you are dead and must fall to the ground and take no more part in the battle. However if he holds up a green card it means the injury is severe, but if we cheer loud enough he could get a reprieve and merely loses a limb. If he holds up a blue then we must boo.”

“That sounds like fun. Can I have a go?”

“I insist.” the king replied. “I was merely saving you from the first wave. Letting your hangover subside a...”

“I don’t get hung over.” she replied sharply.

“Of course not.” the king replied very diplomatically. “Feel free to join in.”

“Well maybe a bit more breakfast before I go.”

“Of course.”

Opie and Brain

It was getting into late afternoon. Opie and Brain had paused for

lunch and an afternoon nap. They had spent the morning having a fantastic time. Opie still had his arm tied up, the surgeon said it wouldn't be able to be repaired before the end of the battle, but he was able to walk on both legs again. Brain still had the patch over his eye, but he could use his right hand again.

"Aren't you glad I signed us up?" Brain asked Opie for the seventh time that day.

"Yes Brain." he replied again. "I must admit it is great fun, if only all wars were like this. I think I would become a professional soldier."

"Yeah, me to. You know, you surprised me out there today. I didn't think you were such a good fighter."

"Thanks Brain." Opie replied. "You're no slouch either."

"Thanks. Come on finish your beer. I want to be part of the final charge."

"Yeah let's go finish off the greens." and then he burst into song.

"Oh lob the great, lob on my plate. Kill all the crays and never be late."

The other recovering soldiers joined him and prepared for the final conflict.

The final clash turned into the greatest battle of all time. The sun was just hitting the horizon and people were lighting the torches. It looked for the first time that there might be a conclusion to the war. Three figures stood in the gloom, two in blue and one in green. The foes stood panting, facing each other.

"Brain, Opie, it's good to see you guys again." Tricks said. "Pity I'm going to have to kill you."

"Nice try Tricks." Brain replied. "Opie you take the left, I'll take the right. If we co-ordinate we should be able to take her."

"Not likely guys." she said following Brains movements, just as he had hoped. He made a halfhearted lunge, which she blocked easily.

"You're going to have to do better than that if you want to get me."

"Something you don't know yet Tricks." Brain said continuing to move around her.

"What's that?"

"Opie wouldn't be here if he wasn't very good with a sword."

The ploy worked, Tricks swung around in Opie's direction. Brain lunged with the killer blow. (I might have mentioned that Tricks was the greatest fighter in the land, but it goes further than that. She is without doubt the greatest fighter of all time. So there has been a bit

of speculation about what happened next. This is as good as I can get it.) Tricks used some sort of backhand, over the shoulder blocking technique, which defies logic and the laws of physics, stopping Brain's killer blow. She quickly and as casually as you like chopped Opie's head off and then split him in half. She waited for the red card with her back to Brain, when she got it, she turned to Brain and said: "Next idea Brain." He just stood there looking at his pal lying on the floor writhing in agony.

"No more tricks Tricks. Did you have to split him down the middle from the balls up?"

"I'm okay." Opie squeaked.

"Don't worry pal I'll get her back for you." he said circling around Tricks. She just laughed and stood her ground. Then something odd occurred to Brain.

"How come you don't have any red paint on you Tricks?" (She didn't even have paint speckles on her.)

"I'm that good Brain."

"Oh cobbles!" (He probably said something much worse, but cobbles pretty much covers it.)

The sun slipped below the horizon as Brain made his lunge. Tricks was about to move out of the way, when the trumpets bleared. Everyone in the grand stands stood up and cheered. Before the two combatants could do any damage to each other, (What I really mean is before Tricks could paint Brain red.) a ref jumped between them and declared the war over and a draw. Then the crowds arrived. Tricks and Brain were hoisted onto shoulders and carried off to their respective teams. Siege helped Opie limp off the battlefield.

"If she's prevented you from having children I'll kill you. What were you thinking, going into battle like that, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

"You want to have children with me?"

"Well you know, someday." They both blushed, and then Siege became a lot more visible.

It came as no surprise that Tricks and Brain were treated very well at their respective parties. I think Brain was treated a little bit better, in the beginning, than Tricks was. He did stand up to Tricks in one on one combat and survived. The fact that she didn't get a chance to hurt him didn't seem to faze the revelers in Lob. Let's catch up with him first. Before we do that lets find out where Opie and Siege are. Looks

like a barn, with hay, oh dear, lets move along swiftly to Brain this is PG rated after all.

Brain

“...In conclusion.” A loud roar came from the crowd as King Lob said these words. He had been going on a bit, he had spent the first half hour praising his generals, the next half hour praising himself, and now only was he moving onto Brain.

“It with great pleasure that I give you the man of the hour. Not much is known of this great man from across the sea, not much until today that is.”

He paused for a sip of wine. He knew he had the people on the edge of their seats. He had paid a lot for the information he now had in his possession. Four scribes and a librarian were not happy to part with the information they were going to sell during the banquet. The king was rich, and he had made a deal to punt their new book during his speech, ‘Our hero: Brain O’Shaunase story.’

He put his glass down and continued. “We all know that he is a great fighter. He stood and stared into the jaws of defeat.”

He was having trouble reading the pages in front of him, so he had to keep lifting his glasses to his eyes.

“We all know Tricks from the pages of Country Life Celebs. We have followed her adventures in this most informed scroll. (He was probably getting a bit of a kick back from CFC.) From what I’ve read few survived an encounter with that master of the sword. That was until today. This great day.” He waited for the clapping to stop before continuing. “Brain O’Shaunase is not like other men. Oh no. He has invented great time saving devices. I hear that the King of Clemville has dedicated a whole wing of his castle to this great man. But you can read more about that in a new book by Scrolls McNally, on sale here tonight. I have come to praise this great man tonight for what he did for our pride. In my letter to Cray tomorrow I will state that we in fact won.”

He waited for the cheering and cries of a rematch to subside.

“Before the end of the days fight we had two men left on the field, while they only had one. Ladies and gentlemen with out further ado, I give you the great, the intelligent, the good looking and all-round great guy,” He didn’t bother reading the last bit with his glasses, the

moment was too dramatic. “Do try his energy drinks (I think that read ‘Don’t try his energy drinks.) Mr. Brain O’Shaunase.”

The crowd went wild. Brain appeared shaking hands and kissing girls. He stood on the table grinning like a sailor in a convent. He stood there while the cries of we love you slowly turned into the chant of ‘Speech, speech, speech.’ (I have never quiet understood that. You have just had an hour of boring speeches, so you ask for some more? Or worse yet, you take this guy who has been fighting for you all day, with no break to write a speech and demand he talk to you. Maybe it’s just me, but I think that’s unfair, especially when he’s a birthday boy, who just wants to sit in the Swill and Donkey and get blind drunk, I hope you’re reading this Doug and Sean and all my other friends at the Swill.) He held up his hand and waited for the crowd to grow quiet.

“Thank you,” Brain said. “I could hardly top the speech by your king, so I will only say one thing.”

The crowd cheered, some of them shouting that he should be the new king. When they fell silent again he started singing ‘Lob the great.’ Everyone stood and sang. (Brain may not have a way with words, in fact he invariably says the wrong thing at the wrong time, but this night he could do no wrong, that was until the incident with the...lets leave that till after his triumphant feast.)

He sat on the kings right and ate two whole lobsters smothered in garlic butter, it was very messy, so we will go see how Tricks was making out on the other side of the kingdom. Before we do though, we will quickly stop by a certain barn, no they’re still in it, but now I can hear moaning, so swiftly moving on.

Tricks

Her reception was even more tempestuous than Brains. Everyone knew who she was and of her reputation. The cheering and speeches were all behind them, she now sat next to the king, eating her crayfish.

“Tricks if you could have just brained Brain before the sunset we could have finally won, I mean really won, no doubt about it.” King Cray said.

“Sorry,” Tricks replied. “If you had told me the rules a little more thoroughly I would have.” She licked her fingers and took a sip of the best selling beer in the kingdom of Cray, “Tricks’s pride.”

“I didn’t think it would get so close, we normally have two or three hundred men still on the field when the sun does down. But you really decimated the opposition.”

Tricks smiled, she didn’t want to say that she had decimated quite a few friendlies as well. Or what Sergeant Loude would call ‘Friendly fire’, but would want to say ‘bloody idiot that’s your own team’.

“I tried my best.” she said instead. “That was great fun, how often do you do it?”

“Not as often as the people like.” he replied. “The problem is my brother and I really get along.”

“What’s your brother got to do with it?” she asked.

“I keep forgetting that you’re new here. My brother King Lob.”

“I’m a little confused. Maybe it’s this great beer, but how does it work that you and your brother are able to rule two separate kingdoms. Surely your children will inherit your throne and his, his. If that makes any sense?”

“Yes and no. It’s a bit confusing to an outsider, but we both have the same wife.”

“I’m sure that must cause a few problems.” she said trying to picture this poor women having to put up with not one, but two egotistical kings.

“Not really.” he said straight-faced. “We both only get to sleep with her once, and then a wizard takes care of the rest.”

“Oh.” Tricks said sceptically, she knew just how the wizard was going to take care of the rest.

“He’s a eunuch.” the king said quickly, hearing the scepticism in Tricks voice. “I don’t know how it works, but she always produces identical twins with a birth mark on their stomachs.”

He raised his shirt and showed Tricks his birthmark; it was a perfect little Crayfish.

“Wow, that’s some neat trick.”

“Yeah, and it works out great, after we have done our duty to the wife we are free to fool around with who ever we like.”

“Don’t even think about it.” she said, picking up on his vibe.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” he replied very quickly, he might be a King, but if King Clement was scared of her then he was doubly so.

“What I was going to ask was if you could come back, next time we have a war, we could really use your help again.”

“I would love to. Send word to the Swill and Donkey in Clemville and I’ll be here as fast as I can.”

“Thank you, oh will you excuse me, it looks like my servant is calling me. Always some problem or other after a war. Yes James.”

James came scurrying to his side.

“Sorry to interrupt you my liege.” he said very formally, “But we just received word that no ships are available to transport the stock to the mainland.”

“What? How long will the ice last?”

“A few days at most.”

“This is serious, go see if my brother is having the same problem. I would hate to have to share transport with him.”

“Yes my lord.”

With that the small man scampered away.

“Sorry Tricks, it seems there is a shortage of ships. Indecently, how did you get here?”

“Oh um.” she said profoundly. “We borrowed a pirate ship.”

“I don’t suppose we could borrow it for a few days?”

“Yes of course, but we’re going to Nad, if you could help us get there?”

She let the question hang in the air

“No problem.” he promptly replied, kind of wishing that he hadn’t.

The crossing to Nad was almost impossible without a dragon.

Brain

(No we are not going any where near that damn barn) Brain had just lent the ship to King Lob. It could have been the shortest peace in Crustation’s history, but commerce comes first. The statistician that calculates these things determined that it is only possible to have a war every six months to a year. Any shorter and you run the risk of losing production, any longer and you will have a revolt on your hands. He first decided that you could have a war every weekend, if you didn’t have such a big party, but nobody went for that. Then he tried setting it up every nine months, but it turned out the women were too busy having babies to turn up and cheer there men on. So the statistician tore up his scrolls and moved to a nice little house by the sea in the City With No Name.

“Tell me Brain,” King Lob asked. “What are you going to do in Nad?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.” Brain said very truthfully.

He was trying very hard to remember what he was doing at this banquet. It didn't look like the Swill and Donkey, and everyone seemed to like him. They kept putting drinks in his hand and toasting his health. Then there were all the pretty girls that kept kissing him. He first thought that it must be a dream, but when he pinched himself it hurt, that was not conclusive, because he had tried it when he was asleep and it had hurt then too, or maybe he had just dreamt it or maybe he was a little butterfly flying around the flowers and he had had a dream that he was a man who pinched himself. It was all very confusing so he decided to go with the whole butterfly thing. But it hurt worse then pinching every time he flew off the table. So he decided to pretend to be a man, and hid his wings, which was hard as people stood all around him.

“Are you alright Brain?” someone said to the little butterfly, who was scared that if it talked then everyone would know it was a butterfly and they would feed it to the chameleon that sat next to him with it's big crown and hungry eyes. So he just nodded.

“Maybe you should eat something.” the chameleon said.

He thought that it was a bit strange that the chameleon was being nice, but he licked the honey anyway, then he realized that the chameleon was just fattening him up. So he ran out side. At these banquets the guest of honour is not allowed to escape. A couple of guards dragged him in and fed him hot coffee, until he stopped complaining that they were breaking his wings.

“Probably the combination of a days combat, too much alcohol and not enough food.” the guard said depositing Brain back on his chair.

He turned to the other guard and said in a very quiet whisper. “He's right the king does look a bit like a chameleon.”

They both chuckled as they walked away.

“Sorry about that your Highne...your majest...your Kingnessly guy.” Brain said, trying to get the words to fit.

“Please Brain call me by my first name.”

“Thanks, um...what is your name?”

“King.”

“Really?”

“Yes, my full name is King Lob Crustation the forty third.”

“You're kidding.”

“No.”

”Okay, King. What I was trying to say was...No I've forgotten,

sorry...oh yes. Probably something I ate on the ship.”

Then he got excited.

“I know what will sort me out. I made some energy drinks on the ship, they should be in my bag.”

Then his excitement dried up.

“I put it down last night in the beer tent. It’s probably long gone by now.”

“Well if you left it there it’s probably in the lost and found.”

“You mean someone wouldn’t nick it.”

“Nick who?”

“You know, steal it.”

“Not on this island.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll send someone to find it for you.”

It didn’t take long. Before Brain could eat another lobster, his bag was in front of him. He opened it up and took out the two jars that contained his precious energy drinks. He popped the cork and was about to take a sip...

“Mind if I try a little?” the King asked, so Brain handed him the jar and opened the other one.

“Mind if I try some?” a man to his right asked, and so began the great poisoning of Lob. (I don’t know why, but when you taste something really vile you have to share it with all you friends. Maybe it’s so you can talk about the experience afterwards. Who knows?)

Somehow Brain managed not to have a single sip, like always. (I actually don’t think Brain has ever tried his energy drinks.) He also managed to time the vomit reaction to hold off till everyone in the hall had taken a sip. Luckily he managed to find asylum in the kingdom of Cray, which almost started another war. (I don’t know why people let Brain go anywhere, oh yes, to get him out of their place.)

The Barn

It has to be done. (This is a bit of a delicate moment, so please try to be quiet.) We have to go a back in time little for this, because at the moment they are both asleep, and Opie snores.

“Let’s just try and get some sleep.” Siege said, “I’m sure it happens all the time, especially if you get hit there.”

“I swear it’s never happened before.” Opie replied.

“You mean there was a before?” Siege asked in a huff.

“No. I mean, you know, when...” Big blush. “When I’m alone in the library looking at pictures and stuff.”

“What?”

“You know.”

“No idea.” Siege said, meaning it.

“You know, when I...” Deep breath. “When I play with...oh god, I can’t explain it.”

“You mean masturbate?” she asked with a straight face.

Her mother had told her all about masturbation and how natural and fun it could be. Opie on the other hand (No pun intended.) had read too many old books that talked about going blind, growing hair in weird places and other such things.

“Yes.” he managed to force out.

“Oh, that’s okay then.” she said, “As long as there weren’t any other girls.”

“No. I promise, I’ve lived too long in the library to even meet other girls, let alone you know.”

“Let’s try getting some sleep, who knows what Tricks and Brain have in store for tomorrow.” (We know, the crossing to Nad. What about the moaning you might ask? Well that was just before this scene started and it involved Siege trying what her mother said was natural and fun on Opie. He was moaning in pain.)

Chapter 7

Barock

“It looks like their money is starting to dry up.” Lord Moe Denero, one of the village elders of Barock, said. “It’s great that we are making so much from the sisters and the taverns, but we need to start selling more food and they just don’t have the money left for it. “

“It’s always like this.” Sister Betty, the Sisters of Questionable virtue’s representative on the council, said. “First the booze then the girls and then more booze, it take a few days for them to realize just how hungry they are.”

“Yes we all know that, Sister.” Jake Cookslot, head of food supply said. “It’s just that these guys have no money left. I don’t think it’s right to always ask the food department to take weapons.”

“The city always buys the weapons from you.” Denero said.

“I know.” replied Cookslot. “It’s just that our profit margin is so low, not much more then a thousand percent, that carting the weapons from some of the out lying areas eats up what profit we do make. I mean it’s not like the sisters and things, they come to you, but we have to ride out to the camp.”

“I see. “ Denero said, pulling on his goatee. “Is there any way you could help out Sister? Something like service and coin for weapons?”

“I don’t see any problems with that.” she answered. “If you could get word out to the soldiers, they should bring the weapons to us, but why don’t you just buy the weapons directly from the men?”

“Didn’t I explain this last year? Of course that was your predecessor.” Denero said. “It’s simply a matter of not showing that the city is arming. If word spread that we were taking on arms, one of our more violent neighbours might think we are preparing for war.”

“Okay, we’ll do the service and coin thing, maybe the taverns could also do beer and coin?”

“I’m willing,” Smiley Sot, head of breweries, said. “but don’t we already have a full arsenal?”

“Yes.” Denero replied. “The good news is that I have just received word that Knocksвил is arming again. I think they are probably going to try take on Heldslong, again.”

They all chuckled.

“I’ll send word that we have what they want. On a different note, I bumped into Mrs. Smith this morning. Apparently she and her

husband have opened up the Hardpassvil Inn. I must say I have been missing her rat pie.” Everyone’s eyes glazed over with happy memories. “She said that they will be serving Sunday lunch pie, but you must bring your own rats. She also suggests that her Bat pie might be even nicer, but again bring your own bats. On that note let’s close the meeting with the vote. All those in favour of implementing the discussed issues say ‘yes’. Carried unanimously. Let’s get on with it.”

The new plan of service/beer and coin was a roaring success. Quiet soon the once well armed army of General Killem was reduced to a group of men camping around a lake. Killem hardly noticed he was too busy planning his dream castle overlooking all of Marshland. The Gods had promised him that they would create a mountain right in the middle of the land, from where he could see it all. The only thing he would have to do is kill three adventures heading for the Horn Mountain. With his army at his back, that would be no problem.

Somewhere in the Horn mountains

Large Greg Copper sat in his cave recounting his fingers. He had been doing it for the past week, but couldn’t come to the right answers.

“Let’s try it again.” he said to his best friend, Rock (Which surprisingly was an actual rock but it only spoke to Greg, one of the metal bothers. He hadn’t followed in his oldest brother’s footsteps and become a pirate school drop out, nor did he drink. He found the natural high of being completely insane was enough of a rush for him.)

“One, two, three...eight, nine, ten. Right so I have ten.”

“Good,” Rock said, “Now count your right hand, good, write down five in the sand. Okay. Remember we had ten earlier, so count backwards from ten on you left hand. Good, now write down six next to the five and add them. Take your time, we have all year.”

“Eleven.” Greg said after a few minutes.

“See,” Rock said, “I told you that you’re deformed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Normal people only have ten fingers and you have eleven.”

“How do you know normal people only have ten fingers?”

“I met one once, he stayed right here in this cave.” Rock replied with his impassive face showing none of the laughter that was boiling up

inside of him. He had been playing this trick on Large Greg Copper for the last week, but still wasn't tired of it yet.

"How do you know he wasn't deformed or a figment of your imagination, like the loonies?"

This was something new, normally they broke down into 'is', 'isn't' at this point.

"'cos." Rock replied stalling for time.

"'cos why?"

"Just 'cos."

The conversation finally broke down into more familiar territory of 'cos', 'cosn't'. (Don't ask, he's nuts remember. You might be thinking that Rock is just a figment of Greg's imagination, the only problem with that is that Rock is smarter than Greg.)

"You know Rock," Greg said after he woke up, "there are a lot more bats and rats in the cave than usual."

"I noticed, I think it's because people have moved into the inn at the bottom of the pass." Rock replied, straight-faced.

"Oh, wait a second. How do you know people have moved into the inn?"

"I can smell the cooking."

"Oh, wait a second. How can you smell?"

"I just can."

"Can't"

"Can." You get the picture. Greg and Rock spend their days arguing.

"Looks like snow." Greg said after he woke up. (Greg spends a lot of time cat napping, by that I don't mean he steals cats, although he also does that sometimes.)

"No it doesn't." I'll spare you the does, doesn't thing.

It did snow. Not the happy snow of the lowland, no pretty snow flakes that gently settle to the ground. This was the Horn Mountains after all. A cloud of snow gets very heavy, so heavy it can't, can, can't (leave me alone damn it.) go party with its friends, so it just lets it go all at once. I mean there is hardly anyone to catch the snowflakes on their tongue, so what's the point of making it pretty. Greg ran out and tried to catch a few, but after he dug himself out of the ten feet of instant snow his heart wasn't (was) in it. He sat around the imaginary fire with Rock and sang unprintable songs instead.

In serious retrograde orbit around Knothear

“Hey Humphrey, is that you pal?” someone shouted from deep in space.

“Yes.” he replied, “Who is that? I can’t see all that well, forgot to get a new prescription for my glasses.”

“It’s me Rodney,” Rodney said, “We had Grav 101 together.”

“Rodney, thank the gods. I’ve been trying to contact someone.”

“Well here I am. Listen, let’s catch up at Mary’s party, I have some shopping to do and you know how I hate to be late. You know you should check your orbit there pal, I know you’re into older women, but Knothear will eat you alive.”

Then Rodney was gone.

“Like I don’t already know that.” Humphrey mumbled. “Bastard, I always knew he had a thing for Mary. All that bad advice he gave me in school, I’ll show him.” But it was no good; he wouldn’t be showing anyone anything, unless you count the somehow important pink things, and all he would be showing them was a great big fireball. He sulked for a little while, but that didn’t help either. Then his luck changed, or so he thought.

“Evening Mr. P-1743.” a deep booming voice said. Humphrey swung himself around and saw his old school headmaster.

“Boy, am I glad to see you Headmaster.” Humphrey said with, what we will call, a tear in his, what we will call, eyes.

“Yes, I’m sure you are, you still owe me an essay on the laws of planetary attraction.”

“Yes sir, I’ll write it for you as soon as I get out of this predicament.”

“Very well, I’ll expect it on my desk by the end of the millennium.”

“Thank you, sir.” Humphrey replied grinning with joy, thinking that he was saved. “Sir, if I may ask, what are you doing here?”

“I came to visit an old friend. Knothear’s third moon. I was inviting him to a party at Miss P-1758’s place.”

“You mean you’re going to Mary’s party as well.”

“Seems all the asteroids and lesser moons are going.”

“Wow, sounds like a great party.”

“I’m sure it will be. Well best be off, don’t forget about that essay. Dying in a fiery ball of vaporized gas is no excuse.”

“Uh. What do you mean?”

“I knew you weren’t the brightest in the class, but surely you’re not

that dumb?” the headmaster asked.

“Yes I am, please you have got to help me.”

“Okay.” the headmaster said. “Aim for water, that’s the blue stuff.”

Nad Strait

The most feared stretch of water in the world which anyone civilized was likely to cross, excluding the Great Rapids of Crosston or the Water of Eternal Night or the Scary Ocean of...Let me start again. Nad Strait looked really scary. The waves were heaving, there were dark clouds hanging over it spewing lightning from every orifice and large shapes swam just under the surface, looking menacing and hungry.

“Well good luck, and thanks for the ship.” King Cray said. The four soon to be drowned travellers were too busy staring at the turmoil that was the Strait to notice the king’s hasty retreat.

“I’ve seen worse.”

“Where, Brain?”

The silence (when I say silence I mean that nobody spoke, not that the thunder and strange mating calls of large dark shapes also ceased to make a deafening racket.) continued.

“We have a boat.” Brain tried again, pointing at the reed boat that would probably sink in a dry riverbed.

“Looks like the adventure is over.” Opie said. “Come on Siege let’s get back to Clemville and get married.”

“Over my dead body.” Tricks said before Siege could say something gushy like ‘yes’”.

“If you go in that boat it will probably happen sooner then you think.” Opie replied. Brain thought that was very funny. Tricks told him to stop laughing, without using her voice.

“Opie I have one word for you.” Brain said rubbing the back of his head. “Thebiggestlibraryintheworld.”

“That’s six words Brain.” Tricks said.

“Not the way I say it.” replied Brain.

“Opie are you alright?” Siege asked the vacant eyed Opie.

“Huh, what, sorry,” Opie said coming back to the world of the conscious. “I was just thinking, we can get married any time, but Thebiggestlibraryintheworld is a once in a life time chance we can’t miss.”

“And I’m not?” Siege said and stormed off in a huff.

“Nice move numb nuts.” (Funny on many levels, nice one Brain)
“Don’t make me pull a Tricks on you Brain.” (Ooh, good comeback.)
Opie started heading after Siege. “I’ll meet you at the Dragon and Waffle. Wait for us there; I don’t know how long it will take me to apologize to Siege.” (Dragon and Waffle is a pub near the Nad Strait.)

“’Spose a few beers couldn’t hurt.”

“It’s seven in the morning Brain.”

“Your point?”

“Fair enough, it must be after twelve somewhere in the world.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Sometimes you make me want to scream.”

“People always say that.” Brain said as straight faced as Rock. “I can’t for the life of me figure out why.”

Tricks tried screaming, but when her very good impression of the Giant Five Teeth Mauler mating call was answered they decided it would be best to try a few beers, whatever the hour.

“I’m sorry, Siege.” Opie said again. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that we have such a great opportunity here, that we shouldn’t waste it.”

“Did you really mean what you said about getting married?” Siege asked, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“You bet I did.” Opie replied raising himself to his full height, and then he slouched again. “Only problem is a librarian doesn’t make much money. I couldn’t offer you much in the way of a big wedding or any of the finer things in life.”

“That’s alright; I always seem to have enough money.” she replied.

“I was thinking about that.” Opie said looking a little sheepish. “You know how the others can see you like I can after we kiss?”

“Yes?”

“I think I have some sort of magic shield around me, and when I get intimate with someone it kind of rubs off.”

“Go on.”

“Well what if we get really intimate and it’s permanent?”

“I didn’t think about that, but maybe I could become a waitress at The Swill and Donkey, I’m sure Tricks won’t mind.”

“Tricks might not mind, but I do. Those people are pigs.”

“You’re so sweet when you’re jealous.” Siege said and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him.

“All I’m saying is, I don’t want a precious flower like you working in a place like that, especially when everyone can see how beautiful you are.”

“Ah, you’re so sweet. I love you.” she said looking longingly into his eyes.

“I love you too.” he replied. “I really do.” He jumped on a large boulder and shouted, “I love Siege.” He hopped back down, almost twisting his ankle, “Wow, that feels great. I love you Siege.” Then they did some serious kissing, so serious in fact that Siege could be seen from space by a half blind asteroid, but she wasn’t blue so he didn’t pay much attention.

“That settles it.” she said when they finally came up for air. “We are going to have to continue on this treasure hunt. We are going to have the best wedding Clemville has ever seen.”

“I can’t wait. Let’s go tell the others.”

“Not just yet.” she said. “About last night.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that also, maybe we should wait until we can find a more romantic setting, you know candles and flowers, maybe a bed.”

“I was thinking a little more practically.” Siege said. “This setting is romantic enough for me, but we might need my skills on this quest.”

“Good thinking.” Opie replied. “It’s not fair, though, that we should suffer just because we might need your skills.”

“True, but we can still kiss and cuddle.”

“I don’t suppose you know what blue balls are?”

“Like when Tricks hit you there.”

“Similar, but I get them when I’m around you.”

“Sorry, is there anything I can do to help?”

“Actually there might be.”

He showed her, and it did help, let’s just say natural and fun.

“What took you so long?” Even this snide innuendo from Brain didn’t wipe the grin off Opie’s face.

“Just talking about the wedding we’re going to have.” Siege said sitting down with Opie, they were still holding hands, so she was clearly present.

“So the adventure is over.” Tricks said dejectedly. “Well I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you.” they both replied, Opie continued. “We have decided that we need the treasure to have the best wedding of all time.”

“Now that’s a reason to drink.” Brain said. “Let me buy you around, Siege can I borrow some money?”

They spent the rest of the morning drinking to each other’s health. Then some lunatic, you know the kind, they have a board with ‘the end is neigh or bob or something, came running in saying the world was going to end, of course no-one believed him, until he dragged someone out and showed them, and what do you know, he almost had a point. The four adventures went to see for themselves.

“I was watching the sky.” the not so lunatic said. “Waiting for it to fall and kill us all, when I saw it happen. First the one moon got smaller and smaller until it vanished and then the big one did the same.”

“So?” someone said, it could have been Brain, but he’s not admitting it.

“What do you mean so? It’s a sign that the world is going to end.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is.” (Oh god, they really did that didn’t they. Sorry.) Anyway, while the argument ensued outside our four heroes went back to their drinks. Opie looked very worried.

“What’s up, Opie?”

“I’ve read about this sort of thing. You see, the moons are responsible for all the tidal forces on Knothear. If they just disappear we could well see the end of the world.”

“What rubbish, surely the moons wonder off from time to time, how else would they get to a good party?” Brain said.

“Don’t be so stupid Brain, Moons don’t party.” (Brain’s getting the last laugh, only he will never know.)

“They seem fun to me.” he mumbled.

“Like I was saying.” Opie continued. “The moons basically use this magic force called gravity to keep tides and things working, without them it could mean giant tidal waves or hurricanes, the likes of which have never been seen.”

“I’m not so sure of your theory, Opie.” Brain said.

“It’s not my theory Brain, it’s a fact, and I read it in the natural forces section of the Library.”

“Then how do you explain that?” Brain was pointing out the door at the clearly visible Strait.

“Um...um...wow.” was Opie’s explanation. (This is mine. The moons moved off at the exact declination to pull the cloud off the sea

and made the sea as flat as something really, really flat that I can't think of right now.)

"Everyone to the boat, here's our chance." Tricks shouted.

They got in the boat and started paddling. Then someone remembered something.

"What about the dark shapes under the water?" Siege asked.

"I don't see anything now, maybe we just imagined them?" Brain replied, but picked up his paddling speed.

"I don't see anything." Tricks said from the front of the boat.

"Let's count ourselves lucky, but not take any chances. I vote for high speed rowing." Opie said.

"I second that." Brain said and they all picked up the pace. They landed safely on Nad two hours later. (So what did happen to the creatures in the strait? Simple: They were vain and without their cloud cover they didn't want any one to see just how ugly they were.)

Kingdom of Nad

"Where to now?" Brain asked looking out at the great expanse of nothing but bare rock.

"Let's walk inland," Tricks said. "We don't have much time to waste, who knows how long the moons are going to be out partying." Opie gave her a quizzical look. Tricks just shrugged as if to say, 'if you can't beat him join him.' Opie rolled his eye as if to say, 'but you can beat him.'

"Yeah let's just get the map and get out of here."

"Hey wait a second." Opie said in a high, very unmanly voice. "I've waited my whole life to get to this place and you guys just want to leave."

"Sorry Opie we don't have time to argue, why don't you guard the boat and the rest of us will find the library thing." Tricks said it in her best 'I must be obeyed' voice. Opie did what he was told, but only after kissing Siege off. Half an hour later he caught up with them.

"It's weird, but the clouds and heavy seas have come back." he said after catching his breath. The others, (By that I mean Brain and Tricks) didn't believe him, so they had to go back, and sure enough, he was telling the truth.

"Now what?" Tricks said.

"Guess we wait till the next moon party." Brain said, Tricks didn't

join him, instead swatted him quite hard on the back of the head.

“This is serious you oaf.”

“Don’t sweat it, Tricks.” he replied, pretending the clup had not hurt.

“I’ll invent something to get us off this island.” When the others finished laughing Brain was half a mile away. He was the first to see the castle. He just stood in awe of the fairytale come to life in front of him. The others joined him; the silence was finally broken by Siege.

“I bet they have some great baths in there.”

“Yeah,” replied Brain, “and great ingredients for energy drinks.”

“Brain you start on the energy drinks again and I’ll...I’ll do something really nasty to you.” Tricks said. “Exactly what happened in Lob anyway.”

“None of your beeswax.”

They walked on each in their own silent world. Opie was thinking of all the books he could read, Siege was thinking of the long hot baths, Brain was thinking of all the great inventions he could make and Tricks was thinking about all the points an ambush could be set up, and a little about the cool weapons a place like this could have. They arrived at the door. It was huge and very imposing.

“Let’s go knock.” They walked forward, but only Opie made it to the door.

“What’s up guys?” he asked the three people sitting in the dirt behind him.

“Nothing.” replied Tricks, “Just the little thing of an invisible barrier around the door.”

“Then how come...” Opie started, but then nodded. “I really do have an anti magic field around me. Not to worry I’ll knock.”

So he did, but after banging for two hours and still no answer he decided that there was no one home.

“Looks like no-one’s home.” he said.

“You think? How we supposed to get in now?” Brain asked, a touch sarcastically.

“I have an Idea.”

He walked out of the magic shield area, kissed Siege and walked back through the barrier, holding her hand. She was able to pass through, until Opie let go of her hand and then she went flying back to a rather nasty fall.

“At least we know one thing, it’s a solid field and my magic rubs off with a kiss.”

“Isn’t that two things?”

“Shut up Brain. Give me your sword Tricks, I’ll cut down the door and see if I can find an off switch.” He hacked and hacked. “It’s no use.” he said sweating profusely, “we’ll never get in.”

“Why not let Tricks have a go?” Brain said.

“Because of the field.” Tricks and Opie replied as one.

“He has a point.” Siege said.

“You see.” Brain said, “Ah, what exactly is my point?”

“Opie could take Tricks in with him.” she replied.

“Yeah, but that would mean...” It was too much, Brain burst out laughing. Then had to go take a leak, for fear of wetting his pants.

“I’m not making out with him.” Tricks said.

“Shut up Tricks, we need to get into the castle and you are the only one skilled enough to do it.” Siege said defiantly, “Just pucker up and do it. Opie you better hate every second of it.”

“Yes my love.”

It took two tries, but eventually they were standing at the door. Tricks was about to swing her sword, when she saw a piece of paper on the floor. She bent down to pick it up, letting go of Opie’s hand in the process. Fortunately for her she landed on something soft, unfortunately for Brain it was him.

“Bring that piece of paper Opie.” she said getting off Brain, who seemed to be enjoying himself a little too much. “Maybe it’s important.”

He brought it out and handed it to Tricks.

“Can’t read it, can you Brain?” he looked at it.

“Yeah, it’s an open sesame spell. You have to be at the door when you read it. Very high end coding.” He actually whistled. “Who ever wrote this knew what they were doing. Very person specific. If we didn’t have you Opie there is no way we would be getting in. Just stand at the door and read the lines.”

“Problem, Brain.” Opie said looking at the note. “I don’t read gobbledy gook.”

“Then you are just going to have to take Tricks back in.”

“Can’t help you there Brain.” she replied.

“Siege?” She just shook her head.

“Pucker up Brain, I find it works best if you slip him some tongue.” Tricks held her straight face for almost two seconds before she cracked. The tears were streaming down her face, so she didn’t see

the actual kiss, but she did see Opie and Brain walking hand in hand to the door.

“This stays on the island.” Brain said, Opie agreed. (You’re reading it, so it obviously didn’t)

They all walked into the most beautiful entrance hall ever made, so grand that it put King Clement’s ballroom to shame. In fact it was so grand I don’t know how to describe it. One thing I can tell you is that it was well sign posted. The four signs that they were interested in were: Bathroom, for Siege. Library, for Opie. Armoury, for Tricks. Potions, for Brain. They moved off in their respective directions. Tricks was going to say that Opie should find the map first, but she saw a rare two-handed sword, so didn’t.

Siege

It put Lord Fanger’s bathhouse to shame. For one thing, it was twice the size of his, for another the mosaic tiles actually made pictures, as opposed to the shambles his blind mother had made on his floor. There were eight arches, each with a number above the door. She stripped down and started at number one. The first was cool, but not cold. When she submerged herself, the water started to bubble, and jets of water started spraying her body. She moved onto the second, which was hotter, with bubbles and soap. It progressed like this all the way through. Of note, was the fifth bath, where the statues came to life and helped scrub her back and the final sauna, where a large statue gave her the best massage anyone who has never been into that room has ever had. When she emerged, a robe and select fruits were waiting. She ate some fruit and did it all again. It was the first time in her life she really felt clean, the bad news is that from then on it was all down hill in the clean department for her.

Brain

I might have mentioned that Brain went to wizard school, what I didn’t mention was that the school he went to was the best in all the land, for example the potion library at his school had ninety percent of all known ingredients. The potion library he walked into on Nad had two hundred and sixty one percent of known ingredients and a really awesome workbench and best of all an assistant that didn’t

talk. Not like at school where the assistant, mostly a wizard, would constantly complain that adding this or leaving out that would be trouble. Oh no not in this lab. In this lab the assistant would happily allow Brain to mix anything he wanted. He was like a kid in a candy store, where the shopkeeper kept stuffing your mouth with sweets. (This is a point where a little blind luck came into play. Brain did some pretty hard-core experiments, but he didn't destroy the universe, so blind luck must have been involved. There was also a bit of good luck, but we will talk more about that later.) After fooling around with things that went bang, he got down to the important business of making energy drinks. The assistant was well trained, so Brain ate lab sarmies, you know the type; dry bread with what could be called cheese and ham. I don't know why people working in labs like them, but they always seem to have them. That aside Brain had a wonderful time making energy drinks and trying to re-grow his eyebrows. The assistant didn't talk, but it did shake its head a lot, every time Brain made him try a new formula of energy drink.

Tricks

Tricks walked into heaven; well what she would consider heaven. I think at this point I should tell you a little more about the library. Originally it was used to house only scrolls, but each King had his own passion, so they would add things during their rule. For example King Isabelle the 2nd loved baths almost as much as a Siege, hence the wonderful time Siege was now having. King Lovewar was into weapons, hence the Armoury. There are too many collections to mention, from stamps to bottle tops, potions to names on rice grains. The current ruler Isabelle the 5th is into beds, (Her faithful scroll keeper is Paulo after all.) so she has one of the best examples of beds in the kingdom, and it's still growing, in fact she will be back shortly with a new one. (Whoops, did I inadvertently create a tension point?) Back to Tricks and heaven. King Lovewar had very similar tastes to Tricks when it came to weapons; unlike Tricks he merely admired them. Tricks on the other hand had to swing and play and stab and thrust and all those other things only weapons experts can do, then she found the dummy. It was a statue very similar to Siege's washers and Brains assistant, only it knew how to fight. It started with the number one on its chest, but quickly moved through the numbers each time Tricks defeated it. She tried different weapons; each time it

reset. She had a few problems with the forties, only because she was trying some weapons she didn't know. (They weren't weapons at all; they were some sex toys Paulo had left lying around.) It wasn't until the late nineties that Tricks even broke a sweat. After she defeated number one hundred the dummy walked back to its alcove, with a decided limp, and Tricks couldn't coax it out again. If it wasn't an inanimate object I would swear it was crying. Tricks spent the rest of her time sharpening her own weapons.

Opie

As the Library is the heart of the island, it is by far the most impressive of all the collections. It is housed in the caves that riddle the island. Each cave is so huge you can barely see the end of it, and there are thousands of caves. My advise to anyone going there is to know what you want, or you will end up like Opie. He ran from one batch of scrolls to another, never quite reading one, merely looking at the title and drooling, but that's a little in the future. He opened the door and walked down the stairs. He was not impressed. In front of him was a statue with one shelf of scrolls. He walked up to the desk and the statue came to life. Unlike the statues the others encountered, this one spoke.

"Good day, sir." it said, in that tone all librarians have, you know that one you get when you come back with a book, two and a half minutes over due. "Is there anything I can help sir with?"

"Um, yes actually, do you have a catalogue or some sort of filing system?" he asked.

"No to both questions sir." it replied. Opie said something like damn "If sir would like something specific," it continued, "perhaps I could get it for him."

"Well I suppose it can't hurt to ask." he said in a way that showed he didn't think it would help at all. "I'm looking for a map."

"A map of the library or did sir have a particular map in mind?"

"A particular map, but a map of the library would be a good start." he said getting more excited.

"Sorry sir, but there is no map of the library." it replied.

"Then why did you ask me if I wanted that map?"

"Sorry sir." it replied. "Please rephrase your question, I am unable to answer. Perhaps I can get you a scroll on golem etiquette."

"Golem etiquette?"

“Golems are inanimate object brought to life sir, I am such an object.” it replied.

“Okay, let’s try again.” he said, wishing he had a book on golem etiquette. “I’m looking for a map. I think it is called the Da’Loose treasure map. I think it was taken out by Gelmont the Lost.”

“Yes sir, that will take a few minutes to find, please feel free to browse, but if you break it, you replace it. If sir does not wish to browse, coffee and biscuits are...”

“I’ll browse.” Opie said. This is the looking at the title and drooling bit. He finally got thirsty and hungry, so he went to find the coffee and biscuits. A scroll was lying on the desk when he arrived.

“Is this the map I asked for?” he asked.

“Yes sir” it replied.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Sorry sir.” it replied. “Please rephrase you question, I am unable to answer. Perhaps I can get you a scroll on golem etiquette.”

“Never mind.” he said, “Coffee and biscuits this way.” He pointed to the coffee and biscuits sitting on a table in an adjacent room.

“Yes sir.” it replied, “I have just been informed that supper is now ready in the banquet hall.”

“Thanks.” he said taking the map, he had forgotten that he had missed lunch, and the rumble in his stomach suggested that he didn’t miss supper.

“If I could just stamp sirs library card, he may take the scroll for a fortnight.”

“Um, I don’t have a library card?”

“Then sir will not be able to take the scroll with him.” it replied impassively, Opie looked around for the exit, but the door out of the library closed.

“Oh, perhaps I could copy it?”

“We do have a copy service sir, if sir would like to take a copy with him, we could arrange for one to be made.”

“Yes please.” he said, wishing he had the book on golem etiquette.

“And a copy of golem etiquette. How long will it take to get the copies?”

“They will be brought up to the banquet hall in a few minutes.” it replied, the doors opening again.

“I can come back?” Opie asked, the hope seeping through his voice.

“Yes sir.”

“How do I get a library card?”

“We don’t have library cards.” it replied.

“Okay, then don’t forget the scroll on golem etiquette.”

“Of course not sir.”

They all arrived at the banquet hall at the same time, then Tricks, followed by Brain and Opie left. Siege made them go bath. They came back smelling of roses and old spice respectively. The banquet hall lived up to its name. It was a hall, with a huge banquet. They piled up their plates and sat down on one corner of the huge table.

“I found the map.” Opie said between mouthfuls of food. “I’m getting it copied.”

“Good.” Tricks said, using her incredibly sharp sword to cut up a watermelon. “What does it say?”

“I don’t know yet.” he said rather sheepishly. “I kind of got caught up in the library. I’m thinking of going back tonight. Perhaps you and Brain can translate it while I show Siege around the library.”

“Would sir like the map translated?”

“Oh, I didn’t see you there.” Opie said to the library golem.

“Everybody this is the library golem. Yes please, and maybe two copies. “

“Yes sir,” it replied. “Of what sir.”

“The Da’Loose treasure map.” he said with hardly batting an eyelid, “I’ll take the scroll on golem etiquette now. Thank you.”

He opened the scroll and read it, then read it again, then sighed, then read it for everyone.

“It says:” he read aloud. “There is no etiquette when dealing with golem, just be patient and repeat your question in different ways until you get the desired response. Good luck.”

“My golem never spoke.” Brain said. “He wouldn’t even try my energy drinks.”

“You better not be making energy drinks again.” Tricks said with fire in her eyes.

“No, it was the golem.” he quickly replied.

“Good, let’s keep it that way. As Opie is taking Siege to the library, and I don’t want any hanky panky, you and I should get a feel for the lay of the land.” Tricks said. “We should find a good place to stand guard, and some decent bedrooms. I don’t want any surprises.” Then she almost jumped out of her skin.

“Perhaps we can stand guard.” said the fifty golems that seemed to appear out of thin air, each with the number one hundred on their

chests.

“Good, yes, very good.” she said, putting her sword away.

“I could do with a cognac and a cigar.” Brain said hoping that his reading of the situation was right, which of course it was. A waiter golem walked into the room with a tray with a bottle of cognac and a box of assorted cigars. Tricks and Siege got a Kahlua Dom’ Pedro each and Opie tried the Irish coffee.

“This is the most fantastic place in the world.” Siege said. “I think we should forget about treasure hunting and just live here.”

“Talking of being stranded,” Tricks said practically. “How are we going to get out of here?”

“Let’s not worry about that now.” Opie replied, “We should just forget about it for tonight and have a good time.”

“I’m with Opie.” Brain said. “I wonder if they have karaoke here?”

“Yes sir.” the golem butler said. “Through those doors.”

A band of musician golems were waiting for them when they arrived in the music hall. A large golem, the first they saw with more than two hands, was holding a scroll at each corner, his fifth hand pointing to the words. Brain actually jumped with joy. It was a much better setup than Tricks supplied at the Swill on Thursday nights. The biggest plus was the audience. Rather the lack of an audience; nobody to jeer or throw things. Which is why Siege and Opie sloped off during Brains enthusiastic rendition of twinkle, twinkle little star. Tricks checked the five-armed golem for a number, but couldn’t find one. (This might sound weird, but Tricks has the sweetest singing voice you can imagine.) Brain butchered all his favourite songs and Tricks sang beautifully and the golems came to life. (The audience was starting to fill with golems, who clapped politely for Brain, but were really coming to listen to Tricks.) Opie and Siege explored Thebiggestlibraryintheworld.

Opie and Siege

“This is huge.” Siege said in awe.

“This is only one cave.” Opie replied. “I haven’t been far, but I’ve seen about ten caves so far, and they are all filled with scrolls.”

“Have you read any interesting stories yet?” she asked. Opie blushed a little

“Not yet.” he said and smiled. “I was so excited that I, well, just

looked at a few titles.”

“Any recommendations?” she asked, noticing a book called ‘The Perfect Wedding’.

“So many.” he replied, blushing. “Have you ever read the Karma Sutra?”

“No.” she replied. “Is it any good?”

He cleared his throat and said she should look into it, and maybe he could lend her his well read copy when they got back to Clemville. Opie explained that if there was anything specific that she wanted to look at, she should ask the library golem. She said she would, but for now she was happy looking around the library with her fiancé. She liked the way that sounded, so she said it again.

“I’m so happy,” Opie said after the fourth time she said fiancé. “but I still have to buy you a ring.”

“This one you gave me this morning is just fine.” she said, looking at the wire ring Brain had helped Opie bend.

“No, you must have a nice big diamond.”

“Well, maybe after we find the treasure you can buy me one.”

“Better yet, there might be one in the treasure, wouldn’t that be great.” he said. Siegfried said it would be. They kissed, and Opie told all the scrolls how happy he was. The library golem appeared and told him “Sssh.” They whispered from then on. Opie wanted to see the dragon section, so while he was knee deep in scrolls on dragon husbandry, Siegfried asked the library golem for a copy of the Karma Sutra. She did a lot of blushing.

Tricks and Brain

Most of the golems moved off to do whatever golems did with their spare time, probably plotting to take over the world, or more likely to become statues in alcoves somewhere.

“That was fun, thanks Brain.”

“No, thank you. I didn’t know you could sing? How come you never sing at the Swill? You would attract a lot more customers.” Tricks laughed.

“I think the Swill and Donkey is full enough.” she replied.

“True, but you could make some serious money with your voice.”

They were still sitting in the music hall, the band still played, but the music was more end of a good evening kind of music. They were sipping on some beer. Brain had tried to get some really rare

Knockvil ale, but they were out of stock. So they had settled for an old favourite Swill poison. Tricks wondered how they got beer from her bar, but no amount of wondering got her an answer.

“If your swear never to tell, I’ll let you in on a secret.” she said.

“I swear.”

“I have some serious money.”

“What!” Brain said in real shock, this was coming from someone who never paid for drinks and sent Siege into Bullion Heights when they wanted a good night out. “You mean you’re rich?”

“I wouldn’t put it like that.” she replied.

“Remember when I was in the dungeon and you said you didn’t have money for bail? I rotted in that place for a week. Now you’re saying that you’re rich.” He stood up and fumed, very ineffectually.

“No Brain.” Tricks said pulling him back to his chair. “Hear me out and then you can make your judgment.”

“Okay, but it better be good.”

“What I said was that I have some serious money, but only if I want it.”

“Don’t you want it?”

“Don’t interrupt. Very few people know, but my parents are very rich, and when I say very rich, I mean buy a kingdom rich. I’m not going to tell you our family name, but believe me when I say rich.” She had a sip of her beer, but continued when the tension was too much for Brain and he begged her to go on.

“My grandfather left half the fortune to my parents and the other half to me, his only grandchild. The money is waiting for me to take it.”

“Great, where is it waiting and how do we get it?” He stood as if to charge off and open a safe.

“Sit down.” she said, smiling to herself. “The money is sitting in the family vault. I saw it when I was a little girl, it’s more money than I have ever seen in my life, as for getting it, that’s another story.”

“That’s fine, I’m ready for another story.”

“Okay, but you’re not allowed to tell.”

“I swore an oath, and my word is my bond.” he said, placing his hand over his heart.

“You also swore to pay your bar tab.”

“That’s different, now that I know you could be rolling it I don’t feel so bad about not paying.”

“You never felt bad.” she said with a giggle. The drinks of the world were starting to go to her head; she was worried that she was giving

away too much of herself, but the drinks kept fuzzing up her brain. She looked at Brain, and he was starting to look good.

“Pull yourself out of it girl.” she said.

“What?” Brain asked.

“Nothing, I was just about to tell you how to get to my money.”

“Oh, goodie.”

“The vault has a magic lock that will only open if me, my husband and my child stand at the door and demand to have it open.”

“Oh, that sucks.” Brain said knowing there was more to the story than his brain was letting him know. Tricks sat smiling at him, waiting for the bombshell to land. Brains face changed, it was starting to hit home. Tricks laughed.

“You’re married?” Short pause, while the next bombshell hit. “And you have a kid?”

“No.” she replied.

“Then how do you get...oh? I see.”

“Yeah, before I can get the money I have to get married and have a kid. You were right the first time, it sucks.”

“So, why haven’t you done it already?”

“Truth is I don’t want to.”

“But all that money.” Brain stood up excitedly, a new plan had suddenly come to mind. “Next priest we meet, you and I’ll get married, and then we can start working on a kid.” The look on her face told him not to go in that direction. “Or we could adopt or borrow.”

“No it has to be ‘from my loins’. Beside, if I wanted to do it, I would do by now.”

“That’s true.” Brain said, and they both laughed.

“Please Brain, don’t tell anyone.” she wasn’t smiling anymore. “I shouldn’t have told you, but you know, if anyone finds out about this, well let’s just say people will start hitting on me for the wrong reason. Okay.”

“Yeah sure Tricks. I promise. As long as you don’t mind me hitting on you for the right reasons.”

“Sure,” she replied, “As long as you don’t mind me hitting on you, with a club.” They both broke up laughing. The golem butler brought them some coffee.

Siege and Opie

She put the book down on the desk.

“Could I have a copy of that sent to my room?” Siege asked the golem librarian.

“Yes ma’am. Which room is yours?”

“Oh. I don’t know?” The librarian suggested that she could send it to the main foyer, Siege said that would be fine, and then suggested that it could be wrapped in a brown bag. The librarian looked at the book and suggested she put a different cover, and maybe a spell that only she could open, Siege thought that that would be a good idea, and could the cover be something to do with weddings, the librarian said that would be fine. (Siege was very embarrassed when Brain handed her the book later. The new cover read ‘How to please your husband on your wedding night.’) With the details of the great book cover exchange behind her and a very embarrassing moment ahead of her, Siege went into the library to find Opie. (The librarian had thought that a map of the library was such a good idea, that she had made one. Only problem was that it weighed in at seven and three quarter tons. She had discussed this with one of the older books, and it suggested that she make a magic scroll with only the important information on it. So she did, only she was a golem {You might have noticed that it has become she. The reason for this is that the best librarians are women. [Remember this when buying this book for your branch] So while she is not anatomically correct, she is going to be a she.} and she got it wrong. {More about the wrongness later, but not in this story.} It was with this one and only scroll that Siege went to find Opie.)

She held the scroll in front of her, as she had been told, and said “Point to Opie.” The arrow on the scroll turned and pointed to the next cave. She followed the arrow, and was soon standing in front of a pile of giggling scrolls.

“Opie.” she called, shaking the magic directional scroll.

“Yes my love.” the scrolls answered.

“Oh you’re in there. I thought my map was broken.”

“What was that?”

“Never mind.” she said putting the scroll in her pocket. “What you doing?”

“I’m reading a book by Two fingers Die Mil, only back then he was know as Die Mil the insane dragon trainer. Man I can’t wait until we can get a dragon of our own.”

“Aren’t they very expensive?” she asked, thinking that at the rate

they were spending the treasure, there wouldn't be much left.
"No, not at all." he replied, coming out of the pile of scrolls. "It says here that the eggs are everywhere, if you know how to look."
"What about feeding him?"
"It says," he said pointing to a page "that they pretty much pay for themselves once you've trained them."
"Good, as long as it doesn't cost too much, then we can get one."
"What time is it?" he asked. "We should start heading back, get some sleep. I wonder if Brain or Tricks have found a way out of here, not that I want to leave."
"Me neither. Let's go have a bath and find somewhere to sleep."

They walked into the main lounge, Tricks and Brain were asleep on the couch, arm in arm. The golem butler had pulled a blanket over them.

"Let's leave them, they look so peaceful." Siege said as they walked through.

"Do you know any more about their past?" Opie asked.

"No, it felt like Tricks wanted to talk about it before the battle, but she didn't."

"I got the same feeling from Brain, why can't they be smart, like us and just talk about it." Siege agreed. They took their bath and found a bedroom with twin beds. Opie said he didn't trust himself to sleep in the same bed as Siege. They fell asleep like they had had a long day, which they had. They were all fast asleep when the dragon and its cargo of three people and a bed landed outside the castle, I mean Library.

Chapter 8

Farian

“Hey your gracious majesty.” the man in the red, green, yellow and black hat said. “I know it’s like puttin’ salt on da sticky bun mon, but there like be some ship and dey, you know, want some supplies.”

“Best be coolin down mon.” the king replied, he too had a red, green, yellow and black hat. “Just be givin’ them some stuff, it’s da way of da people, mon.”

“Sorry to be da wet leaf in da pipe, your gracious majesty, but we be down to our last t’ousand tons, mon.” The King took a pull on his pipe, and then another pull, still not breathing out he took another pull. A sure sign he was worried. He signalled with his hand and a group of young girls (Mostly debutants from Clemville’s more affluent suburbs on their gap year or trying to find themselves.) came running, well wondering, over. They helped the king to his feet and started carrying him to the door.

“No sweat it, mon.” the king said on his way out. “I’ll be bustin’ out da ‘mergency supply. You see if you can be gettin da farmer to bring in da crop.”

“Dat why you being da king, peace mon.”

“Peace.” The king made his wobbly way down to the psychedelic dock. (I’m not sure why stoned people think their stoned friends can help them walk better, maybe it’s the whole if everyone falls, no one can laugh thing.) They made it to the dock with only three spills and seven stops to top up on ‘oxygen’. The armada of ships that had been blockading Marshmid had gotten word that General Killem had moved off and with no more need for their services, they had moved off. As most of them needed to re-supply before sailing off to their ports of call, and didn’t want to pay the high prices Marshmid was now demanding, they were stopping at nearby harbours. The smart captains were sailing straight through to The Nameless Metropolis, even if it did mean sacrificing a few men to the age old practice of eating the weak or fat or both. It was better then stopping off at Farian, where a ships captain could look forward to desertion, dereliction of duty, mutiny and infuriating harbour officials.

“Hey, mon.” the king said to a group of very angry rookie captains getting ready to lynch the harbourmaster. “What seem ta be da trouble.”

All the captains tried to talk at once.

“Chill out mon. You wit da wild hair. Speak ta da king.”

It was lucky that he pointed, as most pirate captains have wild hair.

“We be looken fir supplies, arg.” the one with the wildest hair said.

“No sweat mon.” the king replied. “I just be sendin’ da fella ta get ya wantin’s for ya.”

“We be much obliged your grace.” the man said and then threw in an arg, just to make sure everyone was clear that he was a pirate, even though this was his first gig as captain.

“Why don’t you be joinin’ me and da lovelies at da palace?”

The captains all agreed, remember they were very inexperienced at their jobs.

By early evening the cutthroat, bad assed pirates were very chilled, the ships crews had all made their way into town and were enjoying Farian’s biggest business, second only to the cold pizza shops, which also made a killing that night, money wise that is. Any time someone thought about asking for supplies, a hubbly was shoved in their mouth. In the end it probably would have been cheaper to buy their supplies, non-weed related, in Marshmid.

The Great Desert spa and Gangster Hide Out

“That’s the last of the kings and queens.” Monsieur DeBackrub said to his staff. “We only have this morning to get ready for the six families to arrive. I know Sal Ca’pin is already in residence, and those of you that have already had the pleasure of dealing with him will know what I mean when I say gangsters can be very demanding.” Almost everyone in the crowd nodded their heads. Most people thought the egotistical megalomaniac kings and stuck up demanding queens would be the worst at a spa, or any outing for that matter, but at least they let you know, all be it in derogatory terms, when you were displeasing them. With gangsters, they mumble something, while stroking their chin, and the next thing you know you’re either learning to breath under water or neck deep in the desert.

“Monsieur.” One of the chambermaids asked. (Monsieur DeBackrub liked people to believe he was more larny then his slums of Mineston upbringing would suggest.)

“Oui.” he replied straight faced, remembering his accent.

“Will we be required to, um, service them, like the kings.”

“Yes Margo, are you on the list to become a sister?” he replied, completely losing the accent.

“No sir. Sorry. No monsieur, I’m on my gap year, monsieur, I just couldn’t get into Farian.”

“Very well, I will move you onto kitchen duty. Are there any others that should not be servicing the customers?” Only two hands were raised. “Okay, I will move you two to kitchen duty a’so.”

“Sorry monsieur, but we are on kitchen duty, could we become chambermaids?”

“Oui. Okay everyone let us get to work.”

Everyone made their way to their posts. Monsieur DeBackrub hated the annual families get together, he always ended up losing staff, don’t get him wrong, the money was great, but he hated retraining staff.

He walked along the corridor to the four men in black suits with dark glasses, standing in front of a door.

“Bonsuier gentlemen, could I ‘ave a word with Monsieur Ca’pin.”

“He is expecting you.” One of the men replied, opening the door for him. Monsieur DeBackrub started to sweat. He walked through the door, only to be confronted by another four men, they searched him and let him pass into the hot tub room. Sal Ca’pin was lounging in the bath with two ‘friends’ he had brought with him.

“It is good that you have decided to grace my presence.” Sal said

“Oui, your command is my pleasure.”

“Yes, yes. Sit. I need to ask you a favor; in return I will do you a service for you. Capish.”

“Capish, I mean oiu.” Monsieur DeBackrub replied, the heat from the room making him sweat even more.

“I have a close personal friend coming.” Sal said. “Bobby No Face. He is one ugly son of a whore. I want you to find someone to look after him.”

“Oiu monsieur.” Monsieur DeBackrub replied.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love him like a brother, but he is repulsive. You must find a really sick woman, who is into that sort of thing, you know keep him away from the meeting. Good, now the service I offer you. I’m going to take care of your mother-in-law. I know she owns this establishment, so it will be yours if you do me this favor. Am I making myself clear.”

“Oiu, very clear mister Ca’pin, sir. Thank you.”

“Good, now get out of here.” Monsieur DeBackrub left, and the grin couldn’t be wiped from his face, even when one of the stoves exploded, taking half the kitchen staff with it.

Somewhere in the Horn mountains

“What’s eating you Rock?” large Greg Copper asked, “Have the termites come back again?”

“No, I just don’t feel well.” Rock replied and moaned. “I think it’s my stomach.”

“Sorry Rock. Hey wait a minute, you don’t have a stomach.”

“You know what I mean, it hurts where my stomach would be if I had one. Maybe it’s something I ate.”

“Sorry Rock. Hey wait a minute, you don’t eat.”

“Yes I do.”

“No you don’t”

“Do.”

“Don’t.” (Oh gods these two again. I’m going to leave out the whole arguing and sleeping thing, feel free to assume that it’s there.)

“How come every time I want to go deeper into the cave you always get sick?” Greg asked.

“It’s just coincidence.” Rock replied.

“You know what I think?” Greg said walking around Rock, he didn’t do much walking, he found it painful when he suddenly had a catnap more then a meter off the ground. “I think you’re scared that I might get hurt, and you don’t want to lose your only friend.”

“You’re not my only friend.” Rock replied in a huff, “I have plenty of friends.”

“Fine then I’m going into the cave.” Rock thought about it and decided that it would be best if he lied a little.

“You’re right, I don’t want to see you get hurt.” Once again he had managed to prevent someone from going into the cave. Rock’s sworn duty was to protect the deep cave. He hadn’t had to fight so hard since Gelmont the Lost had last stayed in the cave. He knew that one day someone would come with the password and Rock would finally be free to erode in peace.

Kingdom of Nad

“Take the bed to the back entrance, some golems will help you off load. Paulo help him, I’m going to find our house sitters.”

“Si my King.” She waited for him to leave before muttering how annoying those three words were becoming. She had tried every language she could find, and while he seemed to understand, he always used the same response. At first she had worried that the other Kings at the spa were going to take advantage of his limited response, until she remembered that most other kings were men, then she really worried. She ended up spending all her time in their bedroom. She smiled at the fond memory. Now she had to evict some squatters. She called in her golem army and marched into the castle.

“Did you sleep well?” Tricks asked, yawning and stretching.

“Like a rock.” Brain replied, knowing nothing about some rocks that had to stay up all night worrying that someone would enter their cave. “Did we..?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I wasn’t that drunk.”

“I was, you sure you didn’t take advantage of me?” He had to run. The shoe would have hit him squarely on the back of the head if he hadn’t run into the golem army.

“Hey what’s up statue guys?” Brain asked standing back up.

“Grab him.” Isabelle shouted, pointing at Brain. “And the other one.” She pointed at Tricks. “Wait,” she shouted. “Let them go.”

“Hi Bell.” Tricks said, “So this is where you got to.”

“Tricks, what the hell are you doing in my Kingdom?”

“I’ll explain later. Let me first introduce Brain, Brain this is Bell.”

They shook hands, Brain did the whole kiss the hand thing and King Isabelle did the whole fan her face with her hand thing.

“Is this Brain?” She asked.

“None other, unfortunately.” Tricks replied.

“None other what?” Brain asked looking at Tricks puzzled.

“None of your business is what.” Tricks snapped. “Go organize some breakfast.” She waited until he left before speaking again. “Don’t mention, you know what? We don’t want to give him a bigger head than he already has.” Bell (I’m going to call King Isabelle the 5th Bell from now on as Tricks does) smiled.

“Same old Tricks.” They hugged. “I stopped at school a few months back, Tricks O’Shaunase is still carved on your desk.”

“Don’t ever say that out loud again.” she said, but smiled anyway.

“Say what?” They both turned.

“This is the rest of my party. Opie and Siege, Siege you’re looking positively visible this morning.” Siege blushed, Opie saw her discomfort and let go her hand.

“Nice to meet you Opie.” Bell said, “Shall we go see what’s for breakfast. I must go pay the Dragon rider, but I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Wait a second, that could be our way off this island, how long can you keep the dragon here?” Tricks asked.

“I’ll find out?” Bell replied.

“Can I come with you?” Opie asked a goofy look coming over his face.

“Of course, follow me.” Opie followed like a puppy going to supptime, if he had a tail it would have broken many expensive vases.

“I can keep him here till lunch time.” she said sitting down at the breakfast table. “This is the man in my life, Paulo.” Paulo bowed deeply and then shook everyone’s hand, it went like this.

“Si my King. Si my King. Glad to make your acquaintance. Si my King.”

“What did you say, Paulo?” Bell said jumping up from her chair.

“Si my King?” He replied.

“No, when you shook Opie’s hand.”

“Si my King.”

“I think it’s me. Maybe Paulo has a weak spell cast on him and touching me cancels it out?” Opie said. “Come here Paulo try shaking my hand again.” They shook hands again.

“I think he could be onto something.” Paulo said, closely followed by Si my King when they let go hands.

“If you don’t mind helping out, could I borrow you a little later? I have a few questions to ask Paulo.”

“Any time.”

“Thanks. Now Tricks, lets take a walk, we have some catching up to do. The rest of you can enjoy the pleasures of the castle.” They walked out. Paulo grabbed Opie’s arm.

“Would you mind holding my hand?” Paulo said when he had a firm grip on Opie. “But there are some books I want to get out of the library and I can’t find them. I need the Librarians help, but she’s all, ‘I’m not your king.’”

“Love to help out. What do you do here, apart from being Bell’s

man?"

"Scroll keeper, don't ask." Then they were gone.

"All alone again." Brain said.

"I'm still here." Siege said.

"Oh, you want to go see a dragon?"

"Not really."

"Me neither. Perhaps a game of chess?"

"No, I cheat."

"Sorry. I think I'll go make some energy...go see the potion library."

"Have fun, I'm off for a bath." They left. The golems came in and tidied up, muttering about ungrateful people and about how if only they could think, they would rule the world.

Tricks and Bell

"So you finally hooked up with 'Mister Gorgeous'." Bell said.

"No, not now." Tricks replied. "I did, but that was long ago. Now we're just friends." Bell smiled, that all knowing smile that every girl knows how to do when they are about to say something really profound that everyone knows deep down to be true.

"But you want more than friendship."

"Let's not talk about that. How have you been?"

"Not so fast, what happened?" Bell said stopping and looking at Tricks. They were standing on the edge of the island; the castle was behind them, a cold breeze coming of the ocean. "I still remember bunking out of boarding school so that you could catch a glimpse of the long haired wizard."

"You know, we had a thing, but he was so wrapped up in himself and his stupid inventions, and then my family got into a war and I had to leave. When I came back it was just different. You know?"

"Yeah, but there is nothing stopping you now." Bell said as they reached the cliff.

"I'll see. Maybe after this quest."

"Tell me about this quest of yours. What are you looking for?"

"Promise you won't laugh. We are looking for Da'Loose's treasure." Bell laughed, even though she promised that she wouldn't.

"You don't need the money, so why are you risking your life?"

"I had nothing better to do, besides someone has to look after the others."

"You mean you have to look after Brain." Tricks was silent for a

long time.

“Yes, but I promised myself that no one would ever have that sort of power over me.” she said. “Enough about me, where on earth did you find Paulo? Didn’t you and what’s his name, Lord Hadalot, have a thing?” Bell laughed.

“You remember. That was just fun, the guy was too cheap. You know I didn’t know my parents, well it turns out that I was of royal decent. Can you believe it; Marge Snobbins would have been green with envy. Remember her and all her friends all trying to be all larny and things with their gold leaf invitations. What posers. There we were, you the richest woman in the land and me an actual king. What did they call themselves?”

“The Get a Royal Gang.”

“Oh yes,” They laughed. “I wonder what happened to them?”

“Marge married a fish monger. Well he owns a chain of fish and chips shops. Tons of money, but no lineage. I mugged her last year, just for old times sake, stole her deed to a baronship, I’ve got it in my pub, The Swill and Donkey. You should come and visit.”

“Don’t tell me you bought that old place?”

“You don’t buy the Swill, it adopts you.”

“True, how many times were we thrown out of there by Gunes?”

“I might own the place, but he still turfs me out if I get too rowdy.” Tricks said wondering how the place was coping without her.

“Do you ever see Sarah?”

“You’re not going to believe this, she has become Lady Laseer at Mrs. Maude’s.”

“Old sceptical Sarah? Well stranger things have happened. I suppose you heard about Mary?”

“No, what?”

“She lost her legs in a cart accident, poor thing. She married a farmer, just like she always said she would. I don’t know the whole story, but she’s now in a wheel chair, causing all kinds of hell with the poor labourers.”

“The four of us should get together. Let’s met at the Swill in say four weeks, that should give me enough time to finish off this adventure.”

“It’s a date, you get Sarah, and I’ll fly in Mary. Let’s get back inside, it’s freezing.”

Opie and Paulo

“Oh my, Paulo. I didn’t know such books existed?” Opie said, bright red in the face, holding firmly onto Paulo’s hand. He kept letting go of Paulo after each book the man asked for. “I’ll take a copy.” He would say each time he regained his wits. They had been standing in front of the golem Librarian ordering books for quiet some time. At first Opie wasn’t happy holding Paulo’s hand, but he had completely forgotten about it when Paulo started ordering books. Opie’s idea of a racy book was the Karma Sutra, when he suggested it to Paulo, Paulo had shrugged and said that he was no longer a beginner. It went down hill from then on. It was about to get worse.

“Paulo, Opie, could you quickly come to my room.” the messenger golem said in a perfect imitation of Bells voice.

“Si my King.” Paulo replied to the golem. Opie checked that their hands were still connected. Paulo shrugged and said, “Old habits die hard.”

“Sorry sir.” the librarian golem said, “But that book is out of stock, could I order you one from the main land.”

“That’s a good idea,” Paulo said. “You should order any other books that are out of stock. What do you think my new friend the great librarian from Clemville, thinks about us being out of books. Sorry Opie my friend, but good help is hard to find.”

“How many books are out of stock?” Opie asked.

“Seven million four hundred and twenty seven thousand, six hundred and one.” She replied.

“That’s a lot of books Paulo.”

“It is, I feel so ashamed. How can I run this library with such incompetence? Quick, quick go get the books.”

”Uh, that’s not what I meant.” Opie said.

“No time my lovely King is waiting.”

“King?” Opie said looking at their hands again.

“Yes the lovely King Isabelle the 5th. I love how her name sounds on my tongue.” They made their way to her room, and Opie got really embarrassed.

“I would like to try a few things my king.” Paulo said opening a book. Two hours later Opie descended the stairs, glowing bright red.

“Having a hard time?” Tricks asked, looking up from the newly translated map.

“You have no idea.”

Everyone but Brain sat around the dinning room table. Brain had promised he would join them later, as he put it, he was onto something, and he wanted to finish before they left.

“What’s your boy up to?” Bell asked Tricks.

“I don’t know, probably making energy drinks.”

“Really, do you think he could make me some?”

“Don’t go there. I think he took down the whole Kingdom of Lob with them.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

“Pity, I could use some, I can’t go as long as I used to, three four sessions a day and I’m stuffed.”

“I pity you.” Tricks said sarcastically, not that Bell got her sarcasm.

“Yeah. So about this map?”

“Like I was saying, your majesty.” Natha, the dragon rider said.

“Please call me Bell.”

“Yes your majesty, I can’t take them further then Marshmid. I have to pick up a few dignitaries there, and there won’t be any space on Khali. (short for Kh'alukin'pol'te, the dragon.) If we had left this morning it would have been fine, only now I will have to rush.”

“Okay, get your dragon ready, we will be out in a few minutes.”

Tricks said. Natha left to prepare. Tricks leaned over the map.

“Looks like we will have to go through the swamp, because I’m not taking any more bloody boats.”

“I’m with Tricks.” Siege said, she was quite visible as Opie was still holding her hand.

“Okay.” said Opie who had fond memories of the ship. “We get to Farian and then what? How do we find this Warm water place?”

“I think I just came from there.” Bell said. “It now The Great Desert Spa. If you’re looking for, what does it say?”

“Open the direction with the medallion of war and it will show you the hiding place.” Opie read off the map.

“Right.” continued Bell. “So you get to the warm place, ask for directions from the war medallion and then what?”

“You’re not really helping Bell.” Tricks said.

“I’ve never been good with maps.” she replied. “I know you are going to have to head inland from Farian. There is a huge highway from there that goes all the way over the mountains. If you follow it to Barock you could probably find a guide or something from there to The Great Desert spa. Only I don’t know of any road into the

desert.”

“We’ll worry about that when we get there. Good of you to join us Brain. What have you been up to?” Tricks asked.

“You know, just fooling around.” They left it at that. The Dragon brayed, so it was time to go. Everyone hugged and kissed goodbye. Bell pulled Brain aside.

“You look after my friend.” she said. “Tricks is not as tough as she thinks.”

“I will.” he replied. “With my life.”

“Good, now hand me one of those energy drinks you have in your bag so she doesn’t think we’re talking about her.”

“You like my energy drinks?”

“No you idiot, it’s a rouse.”

The dragon flight was everything Opie hoped it would be. He got off knowing that he would one day own one. Siege got off knowing that she would never get anywhere near, let alone fly, on one again. Brain was to busy smiling, not too sure what a rouse was, but was happy that someone had finally demanded one of his energy drinks. Tricks spent the flight reminiscing about her old school days.

Marshmid

Arriving on a dragon has its advantages. Most people think you must be awfully important if you rate a dragon. With most of the cabinet away signing another peace treaty with General Killlem, the usual parliament groupies latched onto our four intrepid wonderers. At first it was quite heart warming having a group of young men and women following you around, but it got stale very quickly.

“Can’t you do something about this mob, Brain? Give them one of your energy drinks or something.” Tricks said as she almost tripped over one that had gotten too close. It was a small group that had started, but as is quite often the case with crowds, it had attracted more people to it. There were people in the crowd who had no idea why they were there, if asked, they would have probably answered that it seemed like a good idea at the time.

“I’ll try, but you know crowds, it’s like they have a mind of their own. Listen up, good people of Marshmid.” Brain shouted. “We are looking for a guide to take us to Farian.” The crowd remained. “Through the swamp.” One guy remained. “Sorry mate are you deaf

or something?”

“I’m Alwa Lost. I’ll guide you through the swamp.” the guy said.

“But I’ll be needing thirty pieces of gold.”

“Ten.” Tricks replied. The others were going to explain to Tricks that they had no money, but she shushed them.

“Twenty.” he countered.

“Nine.” she replied and waited for it to sink in.

“What?” He asked, “You aren’t supposed to go backwards.”

“Eight.” she offered.

“Okay I’ll do it for ten.”

“Seven.” she said straight-faced.

“Done.” he replied. “Up front.”

“Three when we start tomorrow morning.” she said. “And the other three when we are safely in Farian.”

“Deal, I’ll meet you at... hey wait a second. Damn you’re one tough negotiator.” The applause from some of the nearby shops suggested they agreed. “Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow, meet me at the Roses and Kitten, it’s the pub that smells like a litter tray and is filled with thorny knives.” After he had left Brain turned to Tricks.

“How are we going to get six pieces of gold?” he asked in a loud whisper.

“Easy.” she replied. “Siege let go Opie’s hand and take a stroll in that direction.”

The next morning they paid over the three pieces of gold and started off into the swamp.

Alwa stood in front of them; they were at the entrance to the swamp.

“Good morning folks.” he said, he had studied his speech the night before, it had been quite some time since he had last given it.

“My name is Alwa Lost.” he paused, some people found that funny, but he didn’t know why. “We are about to embark on a journey into the swamp. The swamp is not a place for sightseeing, in fact the less sights you see the better you will be able to sleep.”

He started to laugh at his joke, then remembered some of the sights he had seen, and stopped. “Okay, I was part of the great survey, which mapped the swamp back about thirty years ago.”

He waited for the applause that normally came at this point.

“Just bloody get on with it.” Tricks said.

“Alright, no need to be rude.”

“You’ll see the rude part of my sword where the sun don’t shine in a

minute.” (I’m not sure that actually makes sense.)

“I’m not sure. “ Alwa said. “Exactly what you mean?”

“Do you want me to demonstrate?”

“No thanks. Where was I? Okay, then I became a scout. This means only the gods know the swamp better than me.” (The gods took one look at the swamp and wanted no part of it.) “So step where I step and do what I do, okay?” He got the mandatory nods and stepped off into the swamp.

“Well that was a complete waste of three gold pieces.” Brain said as Alwa disappeared in what looked like quicksand.

“I’m not so sure.” replied Tricks. “Bloody little shyster, when I catch him I’m going to split him in half and make him lead us if it kills us.”

“Technically Tricks you can’t...”

“Not now Brain.” And she stepped into the quicksand. The other three stood in shock.

“Do you think we should follow her?” Siege asked.

“Maybe she thinks she can still breathe water.” Brain suggested.

“Not funny Brain.” Opie said. “She must have had a reason.”

“Yeah, she’s Tricks.” Brain said. “Completely nuts.”

“Maybe, but at least I have a clue.” Tricks said. “Oldest trick in the book. Get your money up front and then pretend to disappear.” She threw the soaking wet guide on the floor in front of them. He did not look like he was surviving his old trick very well.

“Sorry folks.” he sputtered, “I was going to come back, I just thought it would be funny.”

“And your two friends I had to deal with?”

“They must have been muggers, you saw them taking money from me.”

“Pay off more like.” Tricks said. “One thing to remember from now on. My name is Tricks, I’m The Tricks from Clemville.” Alwa Lost suddenly changed his attitude. He grovelled in front of Tricks pleading for his life.

“If you get us to Farian safely I will spare you.” she said. “If you do it in record time I’ll even give you the other three coins.” he said he would.

“Tricks if you ever...” Brain started to say.

“Stow it Brain, I’ve had just about as much crap as I can take from you.”

“But...” he tried again.

“Enough, I’m sick of your whining.”

“I don’t wh...”

“One more word and I’ll, I’ll do something nasty.” Brain turned and stood as far from her as he could, and still be part of the group, he muttered something about how she had already done something nasty.

“Good.” Tricks said. “Let’s go. I’m sick of standing here.” She took a deep breath, turned from the others for a second and said in what she hoped was a steady voice. “Let’s go.”

The Swamp

Unlike most other swamps, this swamp was specifically designed to scare the hell out of anyone. For example other swamps have quicksand that will pleasantly drown you, if you happen to step into it. That was just too tame for this swamp, this swamp had to have the best of everything, so its quicksand actively goes out to find you, and when it catches you it slowly eats you from the feet up. The brown stuff called mud in other swamps merely dirties your shoes; the brown stuff called hells spawn in this swamp eats its way through your shoes. In other swamps you can drink the water, it might be pungent and make you violently sick, but at least it doesn’t try to strangle you on the way down. Other swamps have sweet animals like crocodiles and snakes, this swamp ate them, all that is left are things that are best describe by your dreams after eating bad sea food. “What is that?” Brain asked as he watched a tree eat something that could be described as a pool of quicksand.

“Please sir,” their now humble guide said. “Do not look at the natives while they eat, it’s rude and they love the taste of rude things.”

“Then Tricks should be the first to go.” he said quietly to himself, in his head, in a dark corner, where he could hardly hear it. For all his trying to escape earlier Alwa was a very good guide. What he had said earlier was true; he had helped the great survey. An event that had seen hundreds of men die agonizing deaths.

“We must move faster then I would like.” he said after studying the sun. “We don’t have much time to get to a safe place for the night.”

“You mean we have to sleep here over night?” Opie asked.

“Yes, as evening breaks tomorrow night we will be in Farian.”

“Is their anywhere safe in the swamp?” Siege asked.

“Yes.” replied the guard. “At the halfway point. It is the most dangerous part of the swamp. So dangerous that everything there is

afraid to come out at night, we should be perfectly safe, as long as no one snores.”

“Maybe we should walk faster.” Siege said looking at Opie.

“Maybe we should run.” Brain said looking at Tricks.

“Stop being so neurotic.” Tricks said, I’m sure there is nothing to worry about.” (The gods were not so sure, they had quite a few guests in their homes that thought the same way. They were going to have to do something; they looked into their piggy banks and called an old friend. That’s right, it’s time for some more blind luck. It went something like this: “Hi mister death guy, anything you can do about them?” “Well they’re not actually in any danger at the moment.” “But they’re in the swamp.” “So.” “That’s certain death.” “No, I am.” “Are you saying they’re not going to die?” “No.” “Huh.” “They could die, only I don’t know yet.” “Could you find out?” “Yes, but only when they’re dead, they have Tricks with them after all.” “Don’t remind me, I get her.” “{The sound Death makes when he’s not reminding someone.}” “Oh, let’s be safe and save them anyway.” “Okay, but not my department.” “Who then?” “Try Alfred Eberstein.” “Who’s that?” “Some guy that talks about relativity.” “What have relatives got to do with our situation?” “Your situation.” “Right, so what do I do?” “Look I’m a busy guy.” “I’ll make it worth your while.” “Okay, make the transfer and I’ll pull some strings.” “Done.” When he said strings, he meant quantum strings.)

“That’s odd?” Alwa said looking at the swamp.

“What?” asked Tricks making it very clear with that one word, that if the answer wasn’t very good, people were going to get very sore.

“I don’t know, it’s funny.” he said, and then one look at Tricks reminded him just what part of the food chain he could soon be part of. He hurried on. “I know this swamp like the bottom of my beer mug, and I know we should have two days of travel to go, but it looks like we are about to enter Farian.”

Farian

They were just in time for lunch. Tricks had no option but to pay Alwa. The puzzled man took his three gold pieces, sat in a pub and then caught a lift back to Marshmid with some very stoned pirates that thought it would be funny to take the long way round, for all we know they are still sailing.

“Let’s go find a quite place to check the map and get a bite to eat.”

Tricks said. "Oh stop sulking Brain, it's very off putting."

"What you going to do if I don't, chop my head off?"

"Suit yourself. I'm going into that pub, having a few beers, some food and seeing where we have to go next." She strode off purposefully. The others looked at the name of the pub and laughed.

"Well at least something cheered you up, Brain." Opie said.

"Yeah, why does she always have to be such a hard ass?" he asked.

"Just be like a duck." Siege said.

"What you mean, quack?"

"No, let the water run right off your back." Looking at his puzzled expression, Siege quickly continued. "Don't let any thing she says effect you."

"I think I prefer the quacking."

"If you quack at her she will hurt you." Opie said. "Enough chit chat lets go into Tricks's Arms." They all laughed at the pub's name again. It was gloomy in The Tricks's Arms pub; the smell of gunga was strong in the air, but other then that it could well have been The Swill and Donkey. It seemed as if everyone was happy and chatting, that included Tricks.

"I wonder who that hunk is that Tricks is talking to?" Siege asked.

"You think he's a hunk?" Opie asked, looking like a puppy that had just been scolded.

"You're my hunk, I just meant hunky to other people."

"I don't think I like this." Brain said. "Go get Tricks, we'll find another pub."

"Remember, Brain be a duck."

"Okay, being a duck, being a duck." He tried some quacking, just to get into character, but too many people were looking at him so he stopped.

"Who's your new friend?" Siege asked as they reached Tricks.

"He's not a new friend." Tricks replied, Brain was starting not to like it even more, and the images of roast duck kept popping into his head. "This is Brett Itbig, we go way back. He owns the place, so I thought we would spend the night, you know give us a chance to rest." The image of a burned duck falling out of the sky whipped through Brains mind.

"There's still plenty of day light, maybe we should push on?" Brain tried.

"No, I want to stay here tonight, with Brett." Tricks said and looked at Brain, so he knew in no uncertain terms exactly what she meant.

“Do what you want.” Brain replied. “I’m leaving.” And with that he stormed out.

“Go with him Opie.” Siege said, “Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Are you coming?” Opie asked looking at the good-looking Mr. Itbig.

“No, this is something only guys can fix.” Siege replied. Opie looked at Tricks, who nodded.

“Okay, see you later. I’ll bring him back here, when I can.” He had to run to catch up.

Opie and Brain

“What happened in there?” Opie asked when he caught up with Brain.

“That bitch is too much.” he replied and then said some really unprintable things about Tricks, her heritage and her future.

“Remember the duck.” Opie tried, thinking that Siege’s duck story was sweet and fitting.

“The duck got stuck by lightning and sank.” They both laughed.

“Screw it, let’s go get drunk.”

“Back at the...”

“Hell no, I’m not staying in town. Let’s steal a wagon and head inland. That looks good.” Brain said pointing to a chariot parked in front of the Da Palace.

“I don’t know.” Opie said, suddenly feeling a chill run through him.

“Maybe we should find a place in town.”

“Never! Come on live a little.” Opie mumbled something about how he thought he was living, and that stealing a tricked out chariot looked more like dying. It was too late, Brain was already undoing the lock with his patented incredible lock undoing thingy. When that didn’t work he hit the lock with a rock. That worked just fine, and then he found the key behind the sun visor.

“Will you look at this thing, it has everything.” Brain said very excited. “Lanterns, double brakes, power reins, cup holders, leather stools, even an odometer and the best of all, a built in fridge filled with beer.”

“Hey mon, what you do wid da kings wheels mon.” One of the force of guards coming towards them said.

“We’re just borrowing it.” Brain shouted. “We’ll bring it back

tomorrow.”

“Datta be fine.” the guard replied. “We lock you up den.” The guards moved off.

“See; no problem.” Brain said whipping the horses into motion.

“Wow, it even has an automatic whip.” Opie just shook his head.

“They said I should go with you, but I don’t think they had this in mind.”

“Speak up Opie, I can’t hear you over the shocks of the electric eel windows.”

“I was just saying we should find the pub quickly.” he shouted, then said a little softer. “I really need a drink.”

Desert Inn Swamp

The road followed the swamp inland. On one side of the road were creatures of your darkest imagination, on the other side were creatures that looked tasty, you know cows and sheep and things. For some unknown reason (When I say unknown I mean unknown to gods and creatures) the one side never invades the other. Then all of a sudden there is a desert, filled with nothing, yet on the other side of the road is plush farmland. It is at the point where desert, swamp and farmland meet that a pub sits. A pub called Desert Inn Swamp; originally it was called Desert Swamp Inn Farmland, but you couldn’t acronym it into a word that would bring you more business. In Farian the word dis had a meaning. For example: “Hey mon, let’s be going ta dis pub.” Of course he meant the pub he could see, but quite often his ‘mon’ would take him quite literally and go to DIS pub. Hence the name change. Opie and Brain arrived at dis pub.

They parked the chariot in the parking lot and walked in. It was a nice family place, if your family liked to get drunk, stoned and then eat cold pizza. The building was three sided, but only had a veranda on two sides.

“I wonder why they didn’t put a veranda on the last side?” Brain wondered out loud.

“We find,” a man said. “That looking at the swamp tends to scare customers away, especially after a ten bong special.”

“We walked through it.” said Brain, suddenly remembering he was still wearing his swamp clothes. “It’s not that bad.”

“In that case sir, the first bong is on the house. I’m Jack Pyram, the owner of the DIS pub. If you need anything, just shout.”

“TWO JUGS OF BEERS.” Brain said taking the man literally. “And bring Opie what he wants.”

“Very good sir.” Jack replied. “I’ll bring them with your bong.”

“Wait a second, how come you don’t have a funny accent?” Brain asked, Opie had decided he wanted no part of this conversation, and went to find a table, and maybe a washroom.

“‘Cause ya no be wearin’ da colours mon.” He pointed at the four coloured flag with the big green leaf in the middle. Brain was getting bored of the conversation, even though he wanted to know what ‘da colours’ were. He went to find Opie instead. It wasn’t long until they were eating cold pizza and finding out that tables were very funny things, in fact every thing seemed to be funny. It was getting into evening and the night time crowd was starting to arrive, a lot of people wearing ‘da colours’ looking for their friends, who were probably sitting in a pub in Farian waiting for them. Opie and Brain found a pool table. Not one of those that you would find King Clement and his pals playing on, ho no, flat slate was too expensive for a small pub to buy, this was adventure pool. Uneven surface, nine balls, two holes and many obstacles, including discarded beer mugs. The rules were simple: sink the most balls in your hole using the white ball. Opie was a much better player then Brain, for some obscure reason. Brain had been playing since he could see over the table; Opie on the other hand had never seen the game before in his life. A couple a pool sharks came and tried to hustle them, but it took so long to play the first game, that the hustlers left half way through.

“What’s going on between you and Tricks?” Opie finally managed to ask, but Brain still didn’t want to talk about it. They ordered some tequila shots and talked about past conquest.

“I once had a girlfriend before Siege.” Opie said.

“Oh I thought you were a virgin.”

“I am.”

“Still.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. What about this previous girlfriend?”

“Well, it was while I was still at school.” Opie said putting down his fifth tequila shot of twelve. “It’s the reason I can’t pick up girls.” He went silent.

“What happened?” Brain asked, when it became clear that Opie wasn’t going to continue.

“You know, she dumped me for another guy.”

“So, that’s happened to me plenty of times?” Brain replied, thinking of all the girls that had dumped him over the years, he was starting to feel a little depressed, so he drank some more tequila. “Why didn’t you try other girls?”

“She told everyone that I was small, but she didn’t even get to see it.”

“Sorry man, you should have tried another school.”

“Great now you tell me.” Opie said pretending that he hadn’t thought of that. “It was at the same time I discovered books, beside I had just started dating Mrs. Palmer.”

“Mrs. Palmer?” Brain asked genuinely puzzled.

“My right hand.”

“Oh. OH. Okay, So what about you and Siegfried, any action?”

“No, we have decided to wait until after we have the treasure.”

“Why?”

“Well we discussed it, and you know the whole magic thing around me, well we were scared that if we did it, she would lose her magic power. And I think we are going to still need her.”

“Good thinking, but I would probably still nail her, you know, take my chances.”

“We need the treasure to start our lives.”

“All I’m saying is if she’s will...No actually your idea is best, I need that treasure as well. Come on I’ll race you to the end of the tequila platter.” Opie finished his, but Brain was struggling with the last few. He might have talked a good game, but he couldn’t drink to save (maybe that should be shorten) his life. He talked Opie into helping him out. After the last one Opie put his head under the table and threw up, Brain didn’t throw up that night, which is why Opie was in serious trouble the next day.

“Let’s go dance.” Brain said, he always found it helped to go dancing when he had had too much to drink.

“There is a no dancing policy in this pub.” Opie said pointing out a sign he had seen earlier.

“That sucks.” Brain replied. “Let’s go find a place in town.” Opie said that would be a great idea. It wasn’t too late, so Siegfried wouldn’t be worried yet.

“I’ll drive.” Opie said. He was starting to sober up, so he could tell that Brain was in no condition to be driving. They walked outside and got into the chariot, they hadn’t gone very far when Brain made him pull over.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” he said. “Drive a little way down the road and I’ll catch up.” Opie wasn’t completely sober yet, so he drove quiet a long way, thinking it would be funny. Brain still couldn’t throw up, so he walked to Opie.

“How far did I walk?” Brain asked when he caught up.

“I don’t know.” replied Opie.

“Go back and measure it, I’ll keep walking.” Opie dutifully drove back and measured the distance. When he returned, Brain was nowhere in sight. He drove further along, but couldn’t find him. He turned around and headed back. Turned out Brain was taking a leak.

“How far?” Asked Brain.

“I don’t know, when I couldn’t find you I had to double back.” Opie wasn’t sober enough to lie.

“Go back and measure.”

“Just get in the chariot Brain.”

“Not until you measure.” said Brain walking off. As Opie was pointing in the right direction he went back and measured.

“5800 WT’s (Wheel Turns, while I don’t have exact figures, I would guess 1 WT is about one and a half steps, my steps that is. I measured it on King Clement’s carriage. I asked for an interview for this Tale, and he must have thought that I asked him to tie me up and drag me around all day.)” Opie replied, reading the odometer. “Now can you get in the chariot?”

“I can do six.” replied Brain, “Go another two hundred.”

“Okay, but you better get in.” Brain promised he would. After walking the two hundred he dutifully got in, but they had gone less than a thousand when Brain wanted out again. He walked another three thousand WTS, Opie dutifully recording each step of the way, while swearing.

“How many is that?” asked Brain.

“It makes nine Brain. Very impressive, can we go now? It’s getting late.”

“One more, I can make ten thousand.” (Why don’t they have a measure for a thousand? Something like TWT.)

“Brain if you don’t…” But Brain was gone.

The sun was starting to put in an appearance when Opie tied the unlucky thirteen thousand WT walker to the chariot.

“Do you know how much trouble I’m going to be in when we get back?” He said to Brain, not worrying too much why there was bondage equipment under the seat.

“One more, please Opie.” Brain pleaded.

“No we are going to town if it kills you.” Which is why when they got back to Da Palace the guards had just come on duty.

“Welcome ta da dungeon.” the guard said throwing the two of them into it. It was already filled with pirates that had thought it would be a good idea to sit in a warehouse of stash and light it all at once. They were just coming down and were not very happy about it.

Siege had stayed up all night worrying, but on a positive note, Tricks had a wonderful night.

Farian

Tricks and Siege spent the morning looking for Opie and Brain, well Siege did most of the looking. Tricks helped for a little while, but snuck back to the Tricks’s Arms to ‘study the map’ some more. Siege finally found out that the boys were in the dungeon, it wasn’t hard to arrange bail, as most of the guards had taken a smoke break and couldn’t remember why they were locked up. She gave the guards enough money so they could have cold pizza all day long, and the boys were out. They met Tricks at her namesake pub.

“We should get to Barock and see if there are any camel trains to the spa.” Tricks said, she was being a little more friendly to Brain, but he still wasn’t talking to her. The others were quite happy with this arrangement. They all decided that going to Barock and then to the spa would be the best arrangement. They packed up their stuff and caught the daily bus.

Chapter 9

In even more serious retrograde orbit around Knothear

Humphrey was starting to feel dizzy. He was closer to the ground, so he was spinning around the planet even faster. Looking out for the blue stuff wasn't helping either. He was warming up, and was starting to think that his headmaster hadn't been joking about the whole ball of vaporized gas thing.

"It just can't be true." he said for ten millionth time. But it was. He was starting to wonder just how he was going to hit the blue stuff if he was going this fast. He had never gone to any lectures on using the atmosphere of a planet to slow down or bounce back into space. (If it had been called Fun with planets, instead of Atmospheric challenges 101, he might have gone.) All that was left to him was to make his last few hours as comfortable as he could, only he couldn't think of any way to get comfortable. He was just resigning himself to a fiery death when Knothear called.

"Hello dear." she said. "Listen sweetie, could you do me a huge favour."

"Yes ma'am." he replied, thanking his lucky stars (Being great uncle Hubert and auntie Peg.) he thought he was saved. "Anything you want."

"Thanks dear." she replied. "I've be asked by an old friend, Mr. Death, if I could clean up a little problem for him, would you mind crashing into a specific point for me, I'll send up some winds to help you out."

"Yes ma'am." he said a little dejectedly. "Is there any blue near it?" He asked

"Yes, I believe there is some, well thanks for your help, and have a nice day." Then she hung up. He had hardly had time to get depressed again, when he started getting buffeted by the winds. He tried to convince them that they should blow him back into space, but winds are very one track minded and completely ignored him.

The Great Desert spa and Gangster Hide Out

“Walk with me.” Sal Ca’pin said. “Out into the desert.” Normally this was Sal’s way of saying you are about to die, well he probably wouldn’t have said it quite like that more likely he would have said ‘Go with my boys for a walk in the desert.’ Well actually as he was the boss of bosses in Clemville it is more likely he would have said ‘Go with my boys to get a new pair of concrete shoes.’ Actually he never really said stuff like that, what he would have said, and you would have been nowhere near, would have been ‘Take care of him.’ I think you get the idea, but that’s not the point the point is that Bobby No Face wasn’t worried.

“Yes Capo.” he replied, the brown sack over were his face should have been was starting to chaff. He was hopping that a nice walk in the desert would give him the opportunity to take it off. When he tried, Sal insisted that it was for his own safety that he leave it on.

“As my second cousin on your uncle’s side it is my duty to see that you are happy.” Sal said, when they were out of earshot of the spa.

“Yes Capo, I really enjoy my work.”

“Yes, but don’t you want more.”

“No Capo, making informants ill is a very fulfilling job.” No Face said.

“Fair enough, I won’t ask again, but if there is ever anything you need all you have to do is ask?”

“Well Capo, there is one thing.”

“Name it and it’s yours.”

“It’s my woman Capo, it’s just that, well, I would like to try a live one.” Sal felt a little sick at this confession, but he had heard worse, probably done worse.

“Not to worry, it is all taken care of.”

“Thank you Capo.” he replied, a big smile on his face, if he had one.

“What’s that?” He pointed out into the desert.

“Looks like a box.” Sal replied. They started walking in its direction.

“This whole desert has been a battlefield at one time or another.” Sal continued. “This is were most of the families made their money, extortion and rackets are peanuts compared to the money you make from a good war.” They stopped at the box and No Face picked it up.

“I wonder what it was, looks like it has a puzzle set into it. Can I keep it Capo? I love puzzles.”

“Knock yourself out.” Sal rolled his eyes at the heavens and helped

No Face up. “It was an expression not an order.” People always took Capo Sal Ca’pin literally. It was less painful that way.
“Let’s get back, see if your woman has arrived.”

Barock

“I think the army is completely fleeced.” Lord Moe Denero said looking up from the pages in front of him. “It says here that most of them are down to their underwear.”

“Maybe they have more money coming?” Jake Cookslot said hopefully.

“This is Killem’s army.” Lord Moe Denero answered. “I know he gets a very strict budget from his cousin.”

“True, but why have they stayed?” Sister Betty asked. “Normally by this point the army has left, I mean they have no weapons or armour and if the sistervine is right no one to fight.”

“What do you mean?”

“According to my sources,” Sister Betty answered. “they have signed an agreement with Marshmid not to attack.”

“Maybe they will get a tribute?” Cookslot said even more hopefully

“From Marshmid.” Denero laughed. “More like Killem would have to pay. Enough about that. Sister if you could send some sisters into the camp with some beers and find out what is going on, we’ll pay the expenses from the information account. Right, new business. I know the sisters have black balled Bobby No Face, but I have just received word that Monsieur DeBackrub is looking for a girl to service Mr. No Face. He is willing to pay a fortune.”

“Sorry Moe, if I send one of the girls I will be black balled myself.”

“Can’t we make some sort of arrangement, we are talking some very good money.”

“Absolutely not.” She quickly replied, shaking her head. “The man is a monster, not only is he vile to look at, but his tendencies lean towards the dead.”

“Oh dear.” exclaimed Denero. “We can’t have that. I’ll just refuse, if you could write a letter explaining it, maybe we could still save Monsieur DeBackrub’s business.”

“I would be happy to.” Sister Betty said. “The spa has always been a good training ground for our girls.”

“Good. He’s also asked for some more kitchen staff, seems they had an accident with one of their stoves. Jake?”

“Well we are a bit understaffed ourselves, but I could probably rustle up a few people.”

“Thanks, wait a second.” Denero said. “It says here that it’s a mob week. I think it’s only fair you let your people know.”

“I will do, but we probably won’t get any volunteers.”

“Looks like we will be letting DeBackrub down again.”

“Maybe we will get lucky and some people looking for work will arrive on the bus.” Sister Betty said.

“That brings us to the last point in the meeting. The bus service to and from Farian will be stopping the other side of Killem’s army. I tried to convince them that its safe, but they don’t want to risk it. I know we all have shipments coming in so I think it would be best if we pool our resources to bring the goods the rest of the way. All agreed. Good. Meeting adjourned.”

Barock Crater Lake

“What do you mean the bus stops here, I can’t even see a town from here.” Tricks said getting very much into the bus drivers face, “Do you know who I am?” She continued. She was starting to get into her fame. Everyone in Clemville knew who she was, but it wasn’t until this adventure started that she realized just how famous she was in the rest of the land, but they only seemed to know her when she told them her name.

“Sorry madam,” the driver replied. “You could be the great Tricks herself, and I wouldn’t be allowed to take you any farther.”

“I am Tricks.”

“Really, could I get your autograph? For my kid brother, he’s a big fan.”

“Alright, come on gang we have to walk the rest of the way.” They got out and started to walk towards the town.

“I wouldn’t go that way if I was you.” shouted the bus driver.

“There’s an army camped there.” The road wary travellers ignored him and carried on walking.

“What was that?” Brain asked after they had been walking for a few minutes.

“What?” Opie replied.

“I swear I saw two men running away.”

“So?”

“They were in their underwear.”

“Still stoned from last night?” Tricks asked.

“No.” Brain replied. “Maybe, but I swear I saw them.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Opie said. “We have the great Tricks with us.” They walked on in silence unaware that ahead of them an army was preparing to carry out the work of the Gods, or so the army thought.

“What do you mean we have no weapons?” Killem raged at his second in command. “I have one chance to be favoured by the gods and you let the men become weapon-less. What do you mean we have no armour?” Killem looked out of his tent at his once proud army. There were no tents, no fires, no weapons and no clothes, unless you counted underwear. Hector Vedor decided he had better step in before Killem ruined his plan. He had just been informed that the people he was looking for were on their way.

“General.” Hector said. “It is a test. Your men must collect rocks and stone the travellers to death.”

“I knew that.” Killem said. “But do we collect rocks or stone?”

“Rocks.” Hector said, “We’ll rock them to death.”

“Quick get the men to collect rocks. We must make these people suffer.”

“Yes general.” Hector said walking outside, there were a few towns’ people around, but he didn’t want any witnesses. “The more they suffer the greater will be your reward. Also you should get rid of the towns’ people, the gods don’t want a scene.” Damn he thought as Killem ran off, should have said his men should get rid of the towns folk. It was very tiring always thinking with such a literal man around, one little thing said wrong and who knows what could happen. At least the army was collecting stones.

“The general said that we should prepare to take them just below the ridge.” Hector told the second in command. Hector was not used to army strategy, anyone who would have said that attacking from that position was the strategy of an ambush highwayman, oh yes that’s what Hector Vedor was.

“Ouch, why did you do that?”

“What? Ouch, cut that out.”

“It’s not me, someone is throwing pebbles at us.”

“Don’t panic guys, but look at this.” Siege said. “Sneak, I don’t what them to see you.” Siege was a little ahead of the other three; she

hadn't been hit by any soldiers finding their range with some pebbles. The other three had stopped to argue over who was hurting whom. They peered over the ridge and then sat back against some rocks.

"They look like they mean business." Brain said. "I wonder were the other army is?"

"No they don't." Tricks said. "They have no clothes and no weapons."

"They have a lot of stones." Opie added. "Maybe it's like Crustation, but instead of paint they throw stones in their underwear."

"You could be right." replied Tricks. "But what ever it is they're not after us. Let's go." They all stood up so the army could see that they were fully clothed, Brain might have waved, but whatever he did, they were sitting back against the rocks before the first few stones arrived.

"Maybe they are after us?" Tricks said. "Whatever, I think we can take them."

"Now who's stupid?" Brain said looking Tricks in the eye and hardly blinking a lot.

"Come out and take your punishment like a mouse. It's time to separate the cheese from the stone." Hector shouted.

"I recognize that voice, but I just can't place it." Opie said.

"Maybe if you could smell it." Tricks said.

"Oh yes Victor Hugo." Opie replied.

"Who?" Asked Brain.

"The guy who caught us in that pirate place." Brain still looked confused.

"You are sitting cats." Hector shouted, the men around him giving him a little room, his breath had gotten worse.

"Did he say cats?" Opie asked.

"No rats." Brain replied.

"Do rats sit?" Opie wondered, but Tricks told him to be quiet before Brain could answer, something to do with bats.

"He meant duck." Tricks said, not knowing about the earlier conversation between the other three.

"You mean sitting or quaking?" Brain asked

"Yes Brain." She replied. "We're quaking ducks." Brain looked confused for a few seconds and decided he would try something else.

"Why is he after us?"

"Don't you remember? He was after our treasure map." Opie replied.

“Oh yes, but how does he know we have one now? One of you must be working for him.” Brain thought that was very clever, Tricks told him to shut up until he had something useful to add. Surprisingly he did. Hector took this opportunity to say something equally profound and just as wrong.

“It is no use beating two birds near a bush with many stones.”

“So what do we do?” Opie said.

“We could run away.” Siege tried.

“No, if they have set such a good ambush, they probably have men waiting for us elsewhere.” Tricks said. “Looks like we will have to fight. Opie you and Brain take the left, Siege and I will take the right.”

“No Tricks Brain was right. There must be a better way.” Opie said.

“I borrowed a book from the library in Nad that could help.” Brain said.

“I don’t think I like this.” Tricks replied.

“You are more than welcome to try fighting them.” Brain said. “But as a trained wizard, I could cast a spell that would make them disappear.”

“Yip, I’m defiantly not liking this.” Tricks said. “Besides, since when have you strayed from things that look like magic?”

“I do okay.” Replied Brain. He opened his bag and looked under the few energy drinks he had with him. He pulled out the scroll and started reading from the pages.

“What does that spell do Brain?” Opie asked.

“I don’t know.” Brain replied. “It’s in a funny language, so it must be good.” The others looked at him in horror for two seconds; they only looked away when a huge bang was heard from the other side of the ridge. Siege, being the least visible, was the first to see Humphries’ final resting place.

“Looks like you did it, Brain.” Siege said. “There is no one left.” The others stood up and surveyed the scene. Tricks took the scroll from Brain and put it in her pack.

“No use letting you try that again. Not that I believe this was anything other than blind luck, we don’t want to take chances.”

“You’re welcome guys.” Brain said, not getting the adoration he felt he deserved.

“Come on, daylight’s fading, we should get into town.” They past one lone man on their way into town. He was sitting on a rock crying about lost empires, and wondering what he had done to the gods. When they asked if they could help him, he replied that his cousin

was probably going to be cross, but that he would send a dragon to collect him any way.

“Well it was nice meeting you Mr. Killem.” Siege said as they left.

“General.” was his only reply.

Barock

The town centre was abuzz with news of the disaster that had befallen the army. Mostly it was things like, ‘They were just taking up space.’ ‘We had fleeced them dry anyway.’ and ‘You can finally let out our daughters and son, Ma.’ The town of Barock was returning to its peacetime pace. Some shops were closing, there were more pretty girls walking the streets, but most people were looking forward to a nice holiday aboard.

“Let’s find somewhere to stay.” Tricks said. “Then we can see about getting to this Desert spa.”

“Good idea.” said Brain. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“You didn’t get any sleep.” replied Opie. “We were fighting off horny pirates in the dungeon.” Opie took a little time out to clup Brain again. Brain was starting to get used to it.

“Sorry.” he replied.

“Stop bickering you two.” Tricks said as they passed another closed Inn. “I swear there are no places open. At this rate we might as well start walking to the desert inn, if we can find it.”

“I couldn’t help over hearing.” A man with a goatee said. “Are you looking for work at the spa?” Opie caught on the quickest.

“Yes, but we can’t get there. We were going to try hiring some camels and things tomorrow. But nothing is open for us to sleep in tonight.”

“Don’t worry about that.” he replied. “I’m Moe Denero, please call me Moe. I sort of run this little town. You can stay at my place tonight and then as luck would have it, I’m sending some people to the spa tomorrow, and you can join them.” He looked Tricks up and down and smiled. Luckily for him, Tricks wasn’t paying him any attention. She was too busy watching a wagonload of swords going by on its way to Knocksvil.

“This is my humble abode.” Moe said pointing to a house that was built by a man who supplied wine, woman and food to armies. That’s right, it was very garish and pink, with way too many gargoyles, but

it was big. "Please come inside." he continued. "I know I have the key here somewhere. Just a second. Damn." Opie put his hand in Siege's pocket, something no other living soul could do and pulled out the key. Siege blushed. Opie pretended to find the key on the floor and handed it to Moe. "I normally have it on this...damn, now I've lost the gold chain it's normally on." Siege started to dig in her pockets, but Opie shook his head. "Oh well, these things happen, let's get in side and see what chef is making for supper." If you liked the outside, you will love the inside. There are few words that describe it, and here they are: gothic brookie lace. It was one of those styles that was as successful in the interior design industry as heroine chic was in the building industry.

"Please make yourselves at home; the bedrooms are all on the second and third floor."

"Do you live alone in this mansion?" Brain asked, thinking that there probably wasn't another soul in the universe that would share this house with him.

"Yes." he replied, just as Sister Betty walked into the entrance hall.

"This is my, um, fellow council member. Sister Betty."

"Nice to meet you." They all shook hands.

"Are you a nun?" Brain asked the elderly yet strikingly beautiful woman.

"Good heavens no." She laughed. "My virtue may no longer be a question, but I'm still a sister. I run the sisters in this region."

"Cool." Said Brain. "Are you staying for supper?"

"If Moe invites me, I might stay all night." she replied.

"Well yes. Um." Moe squirmed. "We do have your figure, I mean, some figures to go over. Could you stay?"

"I would love to, thank you. I just have to pop out and close up the rectory." she said heading for the door. "Chef let me in, I was dropping off some receipts."

"Thanks son." Moe said to Brain. "I've be trying to get up the nerve to ask her out for years. But she's so intimidating."

"I know what you mean." Brain said watching Tricks walk up the stairs.

They were all in Tricks's room for an impromptu meeting.

"Good thinking on the work thing Opie." Tricks said. "I think from now on we mustn't tell anyone about the treasure. Agreed?" Everyone agreed. "Good. I had a chance to study the map earlier, and

I think we are looking for a box that has an exact location for the hiding place. The only problem is...let me show you.” She opened the map and put it on the bed.

“That must be where we find the direction.” Opie said pointing at the map. “Oh I see.”

“See what?” asked Brain.

“It looks like there are three pieces to this puzzle.” Opie replied reading on. “First the box, but that needs a special medallion to open it, the box will have the direction. Second is another box that’s lost. No idea what that does. Third, it says: ‘The word is pass, but you will stay till you’re 21 hey.’ Maybe if we find the box it will explain more.”

“I don’t know, but we can finish this after supper, that’s the dinner bell.” Brain said. They started to leave, just as they exiting the room Tricks stopped them.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“I swear I heard someone running from this floor.”

“It was just the supper bell, maybe it was Moe, and he’s hungry.” Brain said.

“Perhaps you’re right.” She replied, but he was wrong. They made their way to the dining room. The stood at the door and looked.

“Sit, sit.” Moe said. “Sorry about the leftovers, but we were catering to an army that upped and disappeared, so everyone is having to make do with leftovers.”

“Wow what a fantastic feast.” said Brain, sitting down near his new friend. He wanted to talk to him about a few ideas he had about how to run a more efficient town through the use of some incredible machines. Siege and Opie sat together and disgustingly fed each other. So Tricks joined Sister Betty

“I was warned you were coming, Tricks.” Sister Betty said.

“How? Oh of course the sistervine. Is there anyway you could find out how the Swill is doing? I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone, but if you could let the word filter down, I would be very gratefully.”

“No need.” She replied. “Guess sent word that business is booming. I think he wants you to take more vacations.”

“He would, when I’m not there he gets to keep the tips.”

“From what I’ve heard.” Betty continued. “The customers get to spend their money on themselves.”

“Yeah, all the more reason for me to get back.” They both laughed.

“...it should have gold leaf interior, with matching horsemen in dark blue. Is Brain going to be the best man, cause if he is...” (Boring wedding talk).

“I was thinking about this weapon transport thing, Moe.” Brain said so excited he wasn’t eating. “What about an amazing moving ribbon thing. Even better an incredible industrial version of the from the kitchen to the table without having a person do it machine.”

“Sounds interesting Brain.” Moe said politely. “But we don’t know where the army is going to camp.”

“That’s easy, you just set out designated areas, and then you put the incredible thing moving something machine thingy there.”

“You’re a genius Brain. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Cause I’m the genius.”

“Yes, yes.” Moe replied absentmindedly. He wasn’t thinking of Brains inventions, but the designated areas. With that they could build officers messes and staff housing, maybe even put in some restaurants. The ideas were flooding into his mind.

“So you’re going to hire me to make it for you?” Brain asked, catching Moe in the middle of a thought.

“Yes.”

“Good, when can I start?”

“What, oh dear.” Moe suddenly realized what he had done, but he wasn’t the head of the town council for nothing. “I would like you to start tomorrow, but we want it done properly. I mean there are zoning issues and stamps and all sorts of things. Including getting you an unlimited budget.” Sly old politician had Brain with the budget. “Tell you what, it shouldn’t take too long, but you go to the spa and say in two, three years max I’ll send for you.”

“Can’t wait.” Brain said, not really listening. He took a bite of turkey, and then went to find a pen and paper, he had plans to draw, not that he would have followed the plans, even if he did get the job.

That night they sat in Tricks room, with their eavesdropper at the door, not that they knew about the eavesdropper, because if they had, they probably wouldn’t have talked about the map and treasure. More likely Tricks would have done to him for real what she did to Opie for play-play in Crustation.

“What did he say about the camels?” Tricks asked Brain again. “And

if you mention that he thought you were a genius again you will be swinging from the window ledge by the very short rope you keep between your legs.”

“No need to be rude Tricks.” Brain said unflustered. “It’s a well know fact that genius are well en...”

“Put him down Tricks.” Opie had to yell. Tricks complied, but muttered something about threats being useless, unless you backed them up. “The camels Brain.”

“Okay, he said that they would be in the town square tomorrow.” Brain said. “They are sending some people and supplies out to the spa. He warned me that there are going to be some as he put it bent noses, whatever that means?”

“It means that the mob will be there.” Tricks replied looking thoughtful.

“What sort of mob?” Brain asked looking at his sketch, and not really paying attention.

“Mobster, like Sal Ca’pin and his buddies.” Tricks replied.

“Didn’t they try to extort you once.” Siege asked, remembering the scene. As far as she knew a mobster hadn’t set foot in the Swill since. Truth is they hadn’t been in the area since. These days the shops in the area paid their ‘protection money’ directly to the Swill by way of Guinness, Tricks had no idea.

“Yeah, if there are a lot of them it could be a problem.” Tricks replied. “I want to keep a low profile, in and out.”

“Your idea of a low profile is killing all the witnesses.” Brain replied, started to chuckle at his joke, then thought better of it, it was too close to the truth. None of them even vaguely thought that they wouldn’t find the box.

“Don’t become a witness Brain.” Tricks thought that was very funny.

“Cheer up, by this time tomorrow we will be rolling in treasure.”

“There is the matter of the other two clues.” Opie piped up.

“Two words, Opie. Red mackerel.”

“I think you meant herring.”

“What have herrings got to do with treasure? Wake up Opie.” Opie decided that arguing over semantics now would be a waste of time, especially with this lot.

“So we catch the camel train tomorrow.” Opie said faking a yawn.

“Good, I think I’ll be off to bed. See you in the morning.” They all went to their respective bedrooms, Opie by way of Sieges.

Brain sat in his room with the incredible ribbon of moving stuff

design sitting in front of him. A design that would have won him the coveted Clemville design award, but he wasn't even looking at it. He was thinking about Tricks. He knew he had messed up some how, but he couldn't figure out how. He had to make it up to her. Then it struck him. Tricks loved weapons. He turned the page on his ribbon machine and started drawing. He even whistled tunelessly.

Chef sat in the kitchen. Nine town bouncers sat with him. (Town bouncers are picked from the toughest of the tough. They have to be able to hold back an army from storming the town and taking what they want for free. One look at them is enough to stop most armies from invading. They mostly spend their time chucking out drunken soldiers, ten at a time, from the various taverns.)

“So we are clear?” Chef asked. “You follow them until they find the treasure, and only then do you take them out.” The others agreed. Chef should have said that there was a riddle to the map, because these goons were not that bright, and they thought that they knew best. Chef went to bed, leaving the nine men alone.

“He doesn't know what he's talking about.” One of the no neck wonders said. “People always fight harder when they have something to protect.”

“Yeah,” replied what could be considered the first ones twin. “We should take them before they get the treasure, then follow the map ourselves.”

“That's a much better plan.” the near triplet said. “Do any of you recognize the girl?”

“No, but she does look familiar.” the quad replied.

“Who cares, we're going to be rich.” said the, I don't know what the word for a fifth identical sibling is, but whatever it is that's who this guy is.

The Great Desert

I don't know how many of you have ever been on a camel? They are not called the ships of the desert for nothing. (It has nothing to do with semen.) They rock like a ship in a storm, a really nasty storm that has it in for you. (Like a really vindictive storm and he just found out you slept with his wife.) Brain had trouble staying on a horse, so you can imagine how much fun he was having with the camels. They hadn't gone very far before Brain claimed that he was quite happy to walk the rest of the way. Luckily the leader of the expedition came

up with a plan. Brain was a little put out that someone else came up with a brilliant idea, but he was too sore to complain, besides he had a weapon to think about. So while the others rocked from side to side, Brain was pulled behind the camel on sledge. It was very comfortable, but the others thought they would give it a miss, as I said, it was behind the camel.

“I don’t think I trust those men.” Tricks said pulling her camel up close to Opie and Siege. Opie and Siege were riding together. Opie wasn’t holding Siege’s hand when the head count was made.

“Yeah, I over heard that the expedition leader wasn’t happy that they were coming.” Opie replied. “Apparently they are bouncers from Barock.”

“Next water stop I want Siege to get close to them, maybe find out what they’re up to.” Tricks said looking at Opie. “So no more fooling around.” They agreed, and Tricks moved off to tell Brain the situation. She chose the wrong moment to join him.

“I told you we’d need your expertise.” Opie said. “Not that anyone but me would appreciate it.”

“As long as you do, that’s enough for me,” She replied, and they had to fight the urge to cuddle.

“Maybe you should join Tricks on her camel.” Opie said after a brief silence.

“From the sound of her language I don’t think I want to.” Siege replied, they both turned and chuckled. “At least they have something in common.”

“Yeah.” Opie laughed. “Sorry about the other night. I really tried, but Brain just wouldn’t get into the chariot.”

“No, I’m sorry that I was so cross with you.” They had to fight the urge again. “Maybe I should ride with Tricks. At this rate I’ll be visible for months.” Luckily it wasn’t far to the first oasis. (When I say lucky I mean someone, and you all know who, was playing with string again.)

“That was quicker then I expected.” said the expedition leader, scratching his head. “Half an hour everyone, we normally eat lunch here, but as we’re making such good time we should be quick.” Everyone had to water his or her camels first. The expedition leader (Now know as Red, because he spent so much time in the sun) had to help Brain, his camel thought it would be fun to see if he could drown his freeloader. (We’ll deal with Siege’s infiltration first, even though it happened after the Tricks and Brain incident, which we’ll

come back to.)

Siege

“Be careful my love.” Opie said as Siege made her way towards where the bouncers sat drinking wine. “Just scream if you get into trouble.”

“I will my love.” She sneaked as quietly as she could, even though it was unlikely anyone would notice her. She sat a short distance from the men. (Now called one, two, three, etc.) Back before she started being visible she would have sat right in the middle of the group, as it was, she was still able to get the wine off the group, which caused a minor disagreement so we won’t be bothering to use the number six from now on.

“Are we all clear on the plan?” said number one.

“What?” Asked number four just back from digging a hole under a very happy palm tree.

“The plan.”

“Oh good.” said number four (The number will now be assumed.)

“So we have a plan.”

“Yes, will someone explain it to him please.” said one. (By one I don’t mean some arb one of the group, maybe I should have given them names, oh well, too late now.)

“The basic plan is to kill them and take the map.” said two. (Much better, it’s the whole one thing that’s confusing. New plan six is okay and one in now fertilizer.)

“Good plan.” said four, “But which of us will get to do the killing.”

“I thought we could draw straws.” said three.

“Where the ones who draw the best pictures gets to do the killing, what was that giggle?” Siege had to hold her hand over her mouth.

“Maybe it’s the ghost of one.” Seven said.

“Jaun who?” It was too much for Siege, she ran into the desert and let rip. Opie who had been watching joined her, and between gales of laughter got the just of the story. After Siege had calmed down enough she made her way back to the men.

“So that’s settled.” said nine. “Two, three and four will kill the map holders and the rest of us will kill the rest of the camel train.”

“When are we going to do the killing?” asked six.

“Good point.” replied nine. “Any ideas eight?”

“It should be out in the desert, somewhere where it will look like an

accident.” replied eight.

“I think I know the perfect place.” replied six. “Ambush valley.”

“Good, then that’s settled. Where exactly is ambush valley?”

“It’s hard to miss; it’s the only valley we go through in this sea of sand. Is still a few hours away.” answered six. “Just in case you miss the signs I’ll signal with a trumpet.”

“Sounds good, um, where did you get a trumpet from?” Two asked.

“You said I should pack my instruments of destruction, and I couldn’t think of any thing worse then a trumpet.”

“What?”

“I read somewhere that they can bring down the walls of great cities.”

“Only if you march around them.”

“Maybe I could march around the camel train.”

“I think that would give the plan away. Save the trumpet for signalling, and use your sword for fighting.”

“I didn’t bring a sword.” This resulted in another happy palm tree. (I can safely say six won’t be resurrected again.)

“Can one of you play the trumpet?” Nine asked.

“One’s dead, but I can play.” replied two. Siege made her escape and told the others about the number gang’s plans.

“What’s up with you two?” she asked Tricks and Brain, but neither of them answered.

Tricks and Brain

We go back a little in time for this bit. It does contain full frontal nudity, so if you are under sixteen please read this bit with your eyes closed.

Tricks was not happy with Brain’s camel. She reeked, and if someone hadn’t played with the strings of time, she would have done the numbers gang’s job for them in regards to Brain, who thought the situation was too funny for words.

“I swear Brain if you don’t shut up, I’ll turn you into vulture food.”

But of course he couldn’t. Tricks had almost decided to carry out her threat when the oasis appeared. “You’re one lucky man.” she said and went to find a secluded place to clean up. As the camel had messed on her clothes as well, she walked into the water fully clothed. After spending a few minutes wallowing in the cool water she decided she should undress and have a proper bath. Brain had the

same idea, but being a guy he was a lot quicker in his washing. He put his wet clothes on a bush to dry and started heading back to camp, only halfway there did he realize that he was butt naked. He turned around, but picked the wrong pool. At this point Tricks was emerging and neither of them saw the other until they were a few feet apart.

“Turn around Brain.” she said when she saw him. She was standing in ankle deep water at the time.

“I can’t.” Brain replied looking directly at her. “I think I’m paralyzed.”

“Then close your eyes.” Tricks made no effort to cover herself, and was starting to enjoy the scene.

“They don’t seem to work.” Brain replied, they were clearly working as they made their way down her belly.

“At least something seems to be working.” Tricks said with a chuckle, looking at his groin. “Water a bit cold.”

“You really know how to deflate a man.” he replied turning to go find his clothes.

“I’m sorry Brain, were you inflated?”

“At least I’m not fat.” he shouted back. He didn’t mean it, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“It’s called muscle.” She shouted, but like most woman she thought she carried a little extra baggage. She looked down at her near perfect body. “Bastard.” was all she said.

Okay, you can open your eyes now.

The Great Desert

The unease that Tricks and Brain felt towards each other evaporated with the news that they were going to be attacked. They knew they were out manned, even with Tricks on their side it would be a harsh battle.

“If only three of them are going to attack us we should be fine.” Tricks said. “You and Opie take one and I’ll take the other two.” she said to Brain. “Hell Siege could even crossbow one of them.”

“That’s not the problem.” Brain said, Siege and Opie let the two of them talk, as neither of them had much experience in this sort of thing. “I’m worried about the other four. They’ll cut this train to pieces. The rest of the group are cooks and sisters, for the gods sakes.”

“We could use them as a distraction,” Tricks replied, only concerned with her little group’s survival. “Once we’ve dispatched our attackers, the other four will be so busy killing the other people we can easily get them.”

“It won’t work. We need the people, at least Red to get to the spa.”

“You’re right.” Tricks replied. “They will probably take him out first, he looks like the only one that will put up a fight.”

“If we could protect Red the plan might work.” Brain said. “How many men do you think will go after him?”

“If the rest of their plan is one each, we can assume it will be one guy.” Tricks answered.

“Yeah, so we put Siege on his camel...off the sledge.” All three jumped off the sledge. “Close! I’m starting to know when he’s about to let one rip.” They climbed back on the sledge. They had decided that all four of them should be together, so they had harnessed up the other two camels. “Like I was saying. We put Siege with a crossbow on Red’s camel, they won’t see her and that will protect him at least. Do you really think you can take two of them?” Brain asked Tricks.

“No problem, but it will take some time.” She answered. “But we will probably lose the rest of the people.”

“No.” said Siege. “We must save them all.”

“Sorry Siege.” Tricks said. “I don’t think that’s possible with these odds.”

“Then change the odds.”

“Not a bad idea.” Tricks said suddenly getting excited. “If I kill off the ones that are going to attack the rest of the people, we won’t have to worry about them.”

“It will never work.” Brain said. “They might be stupid, but they seem well organized. If we kill one of them they will just start the attack earlier.”

“He’s right Siege, we can’t save them.”

“Then you’re going to have to find away.”

“There’s no way.” Tricks said getting cross. “Just stick to our plan and we’ll be fine.”

“If you don’t find a way to at least try and save everyone,” Siege said, being the most forceful she had ever been. “I won’t protect Red and you can all wonder the desert till you die.” she said hoping they wouldn’t call her bluff.

“If you feel that strongly.” Tricks replied. “We better come up with a new idea.”

“Okay.” said Brain. “Let’s forget about the plan for now. How much time do we have?”

“The man said a few hours.”

“Good. What weapons do we have?” Brain asked, he decided to only mention the weapons he had that would actually kill someone. “I’ve got my long sword, short sword and knife. Tricks?”

“My two handed sword, a long sword, two throwing knives and a stiletto.”

“Crossbow, scimitar and knife.” Opie said.

“Crossbow, knife and a stiletto.” The others looked at Siege when she said stiletto, she just shrugged her shoulders. “A girl has to protect herself.”

“Two crossbows.” Brain said thoughtfully. “How many bolts?”

“It takes too long to reload.” Tricks replied. “They’ll go for anyone with a crossbow first.”

“True.” replied Brain. “I wonder what Red’s packing?”

“I checked him out earlier.” Tricks said. “He only has a long bow and a knife. He said that the biggest problem in the desert were scavengers, and you could see them coming for miles.”

“In this sort of fight a long bow would be useless, unless we can buy him some time.” Brain said. “What we need to do is get them all to attack us. Siege and Red could pick off three or four from a distance, and the rest we could clean up. If only we could get them to only attack us.”

“I think I can help you there.” Opie finally said.

“How?” The others asked.

“Tell me Brain?” Opie asked. “How many people would you send to fight Tricks?”

“Of course.” Tricks and Brain said together. Brain continued “If they know who you are, they would send everyone, if they attack at all. Nice one Opie.”

“Thanks, but we will have to let them know, without them suspecting we know their plan. Then we will have to find out if they have changed their plan. Did I say that right?”

“We got the just of it. Siege are you ready for some more spying?”

“Show me the way, and thanks, I didn’t mean to be mean earlier, but I couldn’t let those people die.” They put the gang into action. Tricks, Opie and Siege rode up to the number gang and while Opie was introducing his best friend Tricks of Clemville to the gang, Siege slipped onto one of the camels. Tricks and Opie returned to Brain.

They were ready to attack if Opie spotted Siege give the signal that she was in trouble. Shortly she slipped off the camel and joined them. “They have fallen for it.” she said when she was back on the sledge. “They thought that they recognized you Tricks, but they weren’t sure. Six of them will attack you, but one of them is still going for Red.”

“Opie you go with Siege,” Tricks said. “Make her visible and explain the situation. When the man attacks you, shoot him from a distance, that should also draw another man away from our attack. Only shoot the second man when he gets very close. Take my short sword, in case any of the others see you shooting. Reload and take out as may as you can, with Reds help on the long bow. After the initial charge we will try and lead them away from the others. Ready, let’s do this. Remember a battle plan doesn’t survive contact with the enemy, so keep it fluid.” After the other two had gone Tricks turned to Brain. “You’re going to have to ride the camel. I have a bad feeling about Red, I think he’s going to panic.”

“No way Tricks.” he said. “I’ll fall off and you and Opie will be alone.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Do you think you could take one of them from the ground?”

“If I take his camel out.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t say that, bad Karma.” Tricks said.

“I don’t believe in Karma.” Brain replied. “Not when it comes to saving my friends.”

“Okay, take my double handed sword and give me your long sword. Try taking out two camels; hopefully I’ll be able to dispatch my two guys before you need help. The only problem is Opie. I don’t think he can stand up to a full charge with one of those guys.”

“I was thinking, we could give him one of the poles from my sledge. He could use it as a lance.”

“Brilliant. Now all we have to do is get it on his camel without them seeing.” Opie returned. “Everything going alright?”

“Fine, but I’m a bit worried about Red, he looked panicked.” Opie said. “Siege is in place and ready to go.”

“Opie have you ever used a lance?”

“No.”

“Want to learn?” They explained the principle to him. Then told him the best way to practice was in the heat of battle. He didn’t look convinced.

They noticed the valley and prepared the ambush. The number gang waited until everyone was in the valley and as the trumpet sounded, charged. As a lot of things were happening at once, I'll break it down into segments.

One man, I think he was Five, charged at Red and Siege. He was surprised to find an arrow in his chest. The man next to him, Three, thought that Red had somehow fired the arrow and went charging after him. Siege was waiting for the man to get close, but Red made a break for it.

The other five men charged at Tricks, she and Opie charged back. The front two men suddenly found themselves sprawling to the floor. When it became clear that the attack was about to commence. Brain had moved closer to the group. He had used the animal skins from his sledge as camouflage. They ran at him at full gallop, but didn't see him. Eight was knocked unconscious by the fall, but Nine jumped up and was ready to face Brain. Not used to the two handed sword, Brain was in a little trouble. He swung the heavy weapon at his opponent, holding him at bay, but he knew he wouldn't be able to hold him off for long.

Opie charged straight at his mark, Two. At the last second he revealed that he had a lance. It was too late for Two to turn. He rode right into the sharp point of Opie's make shift lance. The lance shattered on contact. Opie drew his sword and headed after Siege and the run away Red.

Tricks sliced the first of her targets, Seven, in half and ducked under the blow from Four. She had to wheel her camel, no easy feat, but Four had had enough. He could see all his fallen comrades, and wanted no part of it. He raced off into the desert. Tricks was about to give chase, but Brain called her. She made short work of Nine, and Brain plunged his sword into a newly revived Eight.

Red stopped his camel and turned to face the charging Three. He started to draw his bow, knowing that he didn't stand a chance of firing it, when Siege pulled the trigger on her crossbow.

"I forgot about you." he said to Siege as they made their way back. "I was trying to get a bit of distance between him and me so I could shoot."

"Forget it." Siege said. "Everyone does." They left the bodies to the scavengers and continued on their way.

"What about the one that got away?" Tricks asked Red when they

stopped for lunch.

“I wouldn’t worry about him.” Red said. “If the desert doesn’t get him, I’ll make sure everyone in Barock knows what type of man he is, they’ll hang him for sure, if he’s stupid enough to go back.”

“Once again, I’m really sorry about the two camels.”

“Like I said before, better them than this whole train.”

They continued on to the spa, not knowing that there was a worse battle coming, and it wasn’t against easy to dispatch bouncers. They were heading straight into a fight with the mob, all six families.

Chapter 10

Hardpassvil Inn

“Looks like a heavy snow.” Derek Smith said to his wife.

“Ay.” replied Mrs. Smith. “Ya best be put’in out da sign.”

“Pity.” he replied. “I was hoping for some customers before the winter set in.”

“It’s nay all bad news.” she said. “We kan still be storing da rats in da barn.”

“With eight feet of snow we could freeze an elephant.”

“Ay. Well nay time fir dilly dallying.”

“Right, I’ll get the sign up, you see to supper.” They each left on their respective tasks. Mrs. Smith walked to the barn. Half of it was now filled with snow. She dug into it and pulled out a few frozen rats and a couple of bats. She thought about putting the rats back, but on second thought decided to try rat and bat pie. When the people of Barock had heard that she was back in town they had sent out everyone on a collection, luckily there had been a piper in town. Before you can sing ‘ring a ring a rosey’ she had her wagon full and had to borrow a trailer.

Derek took the sign from his office. It said that the pass was closed and that anyone who decided to take it would have to settle their debts in full, make out a will and should probably have their head examined. He walked out into the snow and found the hole in the ground. It was on a small out crop of rock that the snow never seemed to cover. His ancestors had drilled a hole so that the sign would fit perfectly. He put the sign in and surveyed the area. It was not a pretty sight. He walked back to the inn, the smells of pie leading the way. He knew the smells of his wife’s cooking, but this was something new. He licked his lips in anticipation, then wished he hadn’t as they froze together. It took him a few minutes to unfreeze them in front of the fire.

They ate the pie, Derek said it was her best yet, in front of the fire and then did what they planed to do for the rest of the winter. Mrs. Smith might be a well known cook, but she was even better at other things, some say she could have been trained by Sister Betty herself.

Somewhere in the Horn mountains

Large Greg Copper woke up and looked around.

“Any more snow and we’ll be covered for the winter.” he told his friend.

“Then you better get out and find some food.” replied Rock.

“Why out? I was hoping to live off the rats and bats in the cave.”

“Then you would have to go deeper into the cave, and it’s very unstable.” Rock replied, shaking the interior of the cave, just enough so that a few stones fell, but not enough to cave in the roof. “See.” continued Rock. “What do you think would happen to you if you went in there?”

“I guess I would find food?”

“No you moron, you would be crushed by falling rocks.”

“But you haven’t crushed me yet.” Greg replied, starting to look confused.

“That’s because I’m your friend.” Rock said, inspiration suddenly hitting. “I overheard the other rocks talking, and they said that they were just waiting for a chance to get you.”

“Really, maybe if I talk to them they would become my friends and then I wouldn’t have to eat grass all winter.”

“Cave rocks hate everything.” Rock replied, not seeing how to talk Greg into another argument.

“You like me, and you’re a cave rock.”

“Outer cave rock.” replied Rock, pretending to be hurt.

“Sorry, but you all look the same to me.”

“Don’t”, “Do”, “Don’t”. Sometime later they got back to the subject of food and the deeper cave. Then Greg found a new friend, Gravel. Gravel was stupid and thought that everything Greg said was profound. Surprisingly enough Rock felt hurt.

Somewhere in Clemville

Hi. I hope you have enjoyed this story so far. I can’t give you too many details, but I thought if you got this far, you probably wouldn’t mind meeting the author. First off, I can’t tell you my real name, or any of my aliases. I owe a little money to One eye McCready, and as you probably know that’s not a very bright idea. Someone told me I could make some money transcribing manuscripts, but I ended up at The Swell and Donkey and had a few beers instead. That was when I

first heard this story. Thinking it was a bit fanciful I did some research. You know the kind you do over a few beers with people that heard from a friend of a friend. Turned out that the facts checked out perfectly.

My best piece of luck came when the Clemville mob picked me up. Turns out that getting drunk and breaking into Sal Ca'pin's house is not the brightest of plans. Urinating on his favourite chair, while he was still in it, may have alerted him to my presence. Luckily I had my wits about me, nothing like having ten burly men grab you and dip you in a vat of concrete to sober you up. I mentioned that I was writing this tale, and Sal himself pulled me out of the concrete. He sat me down on a stool, and told me his side of The Great Spa and Gangster Hide out story. I promised him I would tell it in his words, so he let me go, from the third story window of his house. Which brings me to my point. In the next bit there will be a title called 'In Sal Ca'pin's own words' please ignore my screams of pain, his associates thought it would help my memory if they punched, kicked and did other unspeakable things to me.

Remember I mentioned I wasn't that bright. My theory is if I can hide from McCready for this long, how hard is it going to be to hide from the mob. You'll understand in the next chapter. So if anything goes wrong, put some flowers in the Valmic and wish me a happy afterlife. (I just joined the cult of the screaming orgasm so it should be a blast.) Remember I brought you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the third or fourth hand truth as notarized by Bill.

The Great Spa and Gangster Hide Out

“Sorry folks.” Red said. “this is as far as I go. This is your last chance to back out of any agreements you made to work here.” One girl decided that going home to the family farm and becoming a milkmaid wasn't such a bad proposition after all. (On a side note, she didn't become a milkmaid, she became Mrs. Red instead. Well they say the best way to a woman's heart is to lead her safely through the desert. Actually they say something else, but until you take your woman to the desert you have no right to argue.) The remaining people walked up to the large wooden door.

Seen from a distance the Spa looks like a desert fort. It is completely ringed by a wooden fence. (Where the original builders got the wood

is one of those mysteries the have academics getting large grants.) It's huge. Inside are fifty huts, or bungalows, as Monsieur DeBackrub keeps insisting. The reason the Spa is situated where it is, is no mystery. It enjoys year round sun. It's slightly below sea level so you don't get sun burnt, but can get a nice tan. It has four natural springs, hot, cold, perfect and mineral. And it is situated in no mans land, so it doesn't pay taxes.

Monsieur DeBackrub had everyone lined up in front of him. He looked everyone over, and made a fatal mistake. (Our four heroes had changed their names. As it would get confusing to say for example: ' "Get scrubbing John." he said to Brain.' We will just use their names and pretend that no one knows them, especially Tricks. Well the only reason they did it was to protect Tricks's identity, but Brain felt left out, you can make up the rest for your self, the point is they have different names, but we're using their real names.)

"You two are on scrubbing duty." he said when he got to Brain and Opie. He had assigned tasks to the people that had brought letters of recommendation. As our four adventures had 'lost' their letters he was giving them the horrible jobs. Siege was taking a look around, for obvious reasons. "I have a special task for you, Tricks (remember, he wouldn't have called her Tricks, he would have said something else. I'm saying Tricks so as not to confuse you.). If you could come with me, we will fix you up." Remember she has just been through a bloody battle and spent a day in the desert. Monsieur DeBackrub didn't want to take any chances so he took her to 'Rich Bitch Grooming' centre, or 'Queens Parlour' as it says above the door and told the women inside to 'doll her up'. It took some time. Our little group had decided to keep a low profile, but some of the things they wanted to do to Tricks in the parlour were not going down well with our warrior woman. Having worked on the meanest of the mean, these parlour women knew their stuff, but I can safely say that Tricks is still talked about in salon circles.

"Please Dear, if you don't stop wriggling we can't pluck your eye brows." Tricks replied with something that suggested that they would be plucking Old Nicks eyebrows before they got near her with the tweezers. Let's just say they did their usual good job and move on.

"Hey Opie." Brain said scrubbing away at one of the floors. "When you woke up this morning did you think you would be scrubbing floors today?"

“You sound way too cheerful Brain.” Opie replied. “I rode a camel all day through the desert, I had to battle against a bunch of blood thirsty thieves and now I have to scrub hundreds of floors before supper. You were with me every step of the way, how do you remain so cheerful.”

“Normally I wouldn’t, but look over there.” He pointed with his scrubbing brush.

“Is that Tricks?” Opie asked in disbelief.

“None other. If it wasn’t for the sword on her back I wouldn’t have recognized her. Well the sword and the scowl.”

“Boy does she clean up good.” Opie said, going back to scrubbing.

“You better not let her see you checking her out.”

“This is an opportunity not to be missed.” Brain said standing up and stretching his back.

“No wonder she hits you all the time.” Opie said, joining his friend. They walked in Tricks’s direction.

“Evening madam.” Brain said politely to Tricks. “Can we help you with your bag?”

“One more word Brain and I swear they will be printing you name on granite.”

“Ah give us a kiss their sister.” Opie tried to pull Tricks off Brain, but he didn’t have the strength. (I’m not sure if Brain got lucky or unlucky at this point.) Two Mobster goons came around the corner and pulled Brain away from Tricks. Jumping to the wrong conclusion they proceeded to beat the hell out of Brain. Even though Brain end up lying in a pool of his own blood, he still said it was worth it when Opie took him to the infirmary. Tricks told the men she was supposed to meet a Mr. Bobby. The two goons sniggered to each other and then showed her the way, one of them rubbing his head, hoping it would leave a scar.

Opie met up with Siege on his way back to work. He related the details of Brain and Tricks’s meeting and then got back to scrubbing floors.

“He’s so stupid,” she said. “Now you have to do all the floors by yourself.” At this point she didn’t offer to help, she continued not to offer all through the conversation.

“It’s not so bad.” he said not even thinking about asking for her help.

“It was very funny, and when he called her a sister, I swear I almost peed my pants.”

“Well it was stupid of him.”

"I guess," he replied. "Any luck finding the box?"

"I've found plenty of boxes, but none that a medallion would open. I just wish the map was more specific."

"I hate to say it, but the map is very old, it might be too late. For all we know someone could have already found it." Opie was getting into the scrubbing. He still found a novelty in bazaar activities. He had seen one of the women staying at the spa knitting, and he thought he would like to give it a go.

"Don't say it." Siege said. "I know we will find it, even if it takes for ever. I want a perfect wedding."

"Then I guess eloping is out of the question?" Opie joked.

"Only as a last resort. Well, keep scrubbing, I'm off to check the rest of the Spa. Maybe I'll get lucky." A few minutes after Siege left, Brain arrived, his head in bandages and his left arm in a sling. He was still chuckling, but softer, the loud stuff hurt too much.

"Hey Opie," he said carefully getting down on his hand and knees.

"Backrub said I was still fit for scrubbing duty, would you mind breaking my other arm, or should I go insult Tricks some more."

"Brain, sometimes you go too far. One day she is going to kill you."

"I can't wait, I hope it's in the throws of... Yes sir, sorry sir. I'll get right back to it sir. That guy can be a real toss." Brain waited for Monsieur DeBackrub to leave before he added that last bit. "Remind me why we have to pretend to be working here?"

"We need the box, and if more people find out about you know what, we will have another fight on our hands."

"I'm not sure which is worse, scrubbing floors or fighting wars."

"I kind of like it." Opie replied. Brain just looked at him in disbelief.

Tricks walk with the two men. They were heading for the far part of the Spa called 'The Compound.' The original designer had thought, correctly, that the mobsters that were coming to hide out would feel more at home in this section. Unlike the rest of the Spa, this portion opened out into the desert, it also had dark alleys and carriage boots. No expense was spared to make organized crime feel at home. From time to time one of the employees would fire arrows into a window, at no extra cost to the guests, merely a deposit for the arrows and a bit of insurance for the employee, in case someone got out of hand.

"So you're off to see Bobby No Face." one of the goons asked.

"Yes," replied Tricks. "Why is he called that?"

"I think it was his father's name."

“Yeah.” replied the other. “Bobby the Ripper.”

“No, I mean No Face.” Tricks tried again.

“Well his father was the Ripper. So he wanted to name his son after him. First he tried Bobby the Obnoxious then Bobby Talks Back Too Much. Then one day his father got the hell in, I mean he was the Ripper after all, and we’ve been calling him No Face since.”

“So it’s a family thing.”

“Don’t speak about the family. There’s feds everywhere.”

“What?” Tricks asked genuinely puzzled.

“Right.” Tricks gave up trying to follow. She was hoping that none of the goons in the area were the ones that came to her pub. She needn’t have worried, as all of them had retired with a decent disability package. After the silence dragged on a little, one of the men, the one without the scar asked Tricks how much she charged for a quickie. He started his own scar collection that day. They dropped her off at the Capos villa and went to compare their freshly acquired scars-to-be.

In Sal Ca’pin’s own words

“I (Ouch) knew (Ouch) there (Ouch) was (Ouch) something (Hot damn that hurts) up (Ouch) the (I think you get the picture) minute she walked in. She was a good-looking dame, but nobody sends someone like her to the likes of No Face. So I asked her what she wanted. She says that she was a special, but only for No Face. (Think I lost consciousness at this point, but no one told Sal) So I’ve got her sword finally. She stared at me with those green eyes, I’m the Capo, the boss of bosses and I’m thinking I want out of the room. Are you getting this? Good. I can tell you that I was scared, wait, make him forget that bit. (It was light when I woke up, but apparently Sal had kept talking.) So I was standing in the room, and there was blood everywhere. We didn’t even find all the pieces. She knew her stuff all right. If she hadn’t just killed No Face I would have brought her into the family. Needless to say we can’t have that sort of thing going on. I ordered her killed and that stuck up prig DeBackrub as well, what the hell kind of a name is that anyway? Actually better not have me saying I ordered anyone killed, drop him on his head a few times. (I’m not sure after that, it was dark, but it might have been that my eyes had swollen closed.) So when I knew she and her two partners were dead we all went out for some steak. You got that. Good. I think

you can take a moral away with you. Don't mess with the mob. Capesh? Okay boys throw him out.

The Real Story

“Here toots, have a brandy.” Sal said when Tricks walked in. She still had her sword on her back, only one person had tried to take it away, and he was in no position to mention the fact that he had failed, not unless you give Lady Laseer a call. Sal hadn't seen a weapon in years, so he just thought that it was some sort of sex toy. Tricks took a sip and asked if she could have a Beer rather. He organized one and asked her to sit. Tricks still had no idea what was going on. She sat and waited to be filled in. (Not that kind of filled in you pervert.) Instead of telling her anything Sal just looked her over and whistled. Tricks would have jumped up and chopped his head off if the ten goons hadn't come into the room at that moment. One of them whispered in Sal's ear.

“I have just been informed” Sal said after the man had repeated his whispering. (If it wasn't for his goons, I'd tell you that Sal was a deaf old balding pansy.) “that you are carrying a weapon. Is this true?” Sal looked her over, but couldn't seem to decide if his men meant a deadly weapon or that her body was a weapon. He figured that if he were any older he would probably have died of a heart attack just from looking at her.

“What of it?” Tricks replied, making it clear that any objections would be met with a substantial force. Not knowing who she was one of the goons reached out to point at her sword.

“If this goes so do I.” Tricks said after they had carried the crying goon away. Sal not wanting to ruin No Face's night told the goons that she could keep her weapon. (I knew he was lying about that. There are very few people that can take Tricks's sword from her, actually no one can take Tricks's sword away.) Sal was starting to worry that maybe Monsieur DeBackrub had sent the wrong person.

“How long have you been in the game?” Sal asked, naturally meaning the Sisterhood.

“Since I was fifteen.” Tricks replied, naturally meaning the warrior hood.

“Then I guess you've seen some pretty disgusting stuff in your time?”

“You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've seen.” Tricks said “I

sometimes wonder if some of the things I've seen were ever men." she continued remembering one particular battle.

"Then I guess you are the right person." Sal said, he almost smiled, but everyone knows that Sal only smiles when large sums of cash are placed in his hands. "If you could do me a favour, please call him Bobby?"

"Aren't I supposed to ask for the favour?" Tricks had heard a couple of mob stories.

"If you call him Bobby and one day you need a favour, it will be granted."

"Thanks, shouldn't I get going."

"No, no, there is still plenty of time. Have another beer." Sal knew that she talked a good game, but he didn't want to take any chances. She would be less likely to scream if she was a bit tipsy. Five beers later she probably wouldn't have screamed if the ground opened up and the dead attacked. (Actually she probably wouldn't have screamed at that stone cold sober. Maybe I should have used if all weapons were banned, she might scream at that, but more likely she would have chopped it in half.) One of the goons led her to No Face's room.

Tricks is not as stupid as I seem to be making her out to be. She had a clear idea of what was going on. Her plan was not to break cover unless she really had to or they found the box. She had decided that she would get the guy blind drunk and then knock him unconscious. When he woke up she would then pretend that he had had a really good time. The only problem with her cunning plan was that Bobby No Face didn't drink. The goon knocked on No Face's door and told him his present from the Capo had arrived. No Face opened the door, the sack still on his face and let Tricks in. The goon walked away hoping No Face would leave something for the rest of them, until he met up with his two friends, new scar one and two.

"Wow Sal really knows how to pick them." Bobby said, looking Tricks over. Tricks was too busy looking for the bar to notice.

"Where's the beer?" she asked after a quick look around revealed nothing.

"I don't drink." he replied. "I could order you something." Tricks was about to say no when she saw the box.

"What is that?" She pointed at the box.

"Just a box I found in the desert, I was about to open it when I heard you were coming."

“Can I see it?” she asked, hoping she didn’t sound too eager.

“Knock yourself out. I’ll get you some beers.” Bobby stuck his head out the room, and saw that nobody was around. He knew that screaming wouldn’t bring anyone running, he had paid to see that that wouldn’t happen. With the coast clear he could put his plan into action. I will tell you his original plan, because he didn’t get to do it. He was going to take off his sack, scare her enough so that she would be weak. He would then rape her while stabbing her and then climax with her death. He got to the sack taking off.

“I get it.” Tricks said looking at him squarely where his face should be. “Your father ripped your face off.”

“Yes.” Replied Bobby thrown of a bit by the fact that she wasn’t screaming. “Doesn’t this make you feel weak?” he asked pointing to his face

“Not really.” replied Tricks having seen far worse things. “I’m more into rugged good-looks, and possibly someone with a face.”

“It doesn’t matter.” he finally said, a little disappointed that she hadn’t screamed, but he still had time, and a sharp knife. “I’ll make you scream yet.” He dove at her, but at the last second realized that he had made a mistake. Tricks went on instinct. Bobby No Face finally got his scream, but unfortunately it was him. She chopped him at the knees, groin, elbows and head, and then before he fell apart she chopped him down the middle. Ten sections fell to the ground. Tricks wiped her sword on the bed, picked up the box and calmly walked out the room. She passed one of the goons on the way.

“Hey aren’t you supposed to be with No Face?” He asked.

“No.” she replied. “I wouldn’t let him play his little game and he went all to pieces.”

“No, no, the boss wanted you to stay the whole night.”

“Go tell your boss I’m no longer a sister, from now on I’m Tricks of Clemville, Capesh?” The guard stared at her while the words sunk in. He turned and ran, he had a bad feeling that she meant the going to pieces literally. She found her friends, told them that the charade was over because she had the box. They decided to have a beer to celebrate. Because she had already had five she forgot to mention that she had just killed Sal Ca’pin’s close personal friend.

“Here Brain, see if you can read the inscription on the box.” Tricks said handing the box over. They were sitting in the spa’s recreation area. They had just been served by one of the girls from the camel train. She winked to let them know that their secret was still safe with

her. Tricks explained that they were no longer in disguise.

“Ah, like that’s so fantastic.” she said. “I’ve been like dying to tell everyone that I was like saved by the great Tricks, it’s like so awesome. PS all the drinks I bring you are like totally free.” Tricks thanked her and she shuffled off giggling.

“Anything Brain?”

“No.” he said turning the box around. “It’s not magic. Looks like plain old ancient to me, Opie?” He handed the box on. Opie looked at it and smiled.

“It says if you try to force the lock all the contents will be destroyed.”

“I guess we’ll have to try find a lock smith.” Tricks said a little disappointed.

“I doubt that will help.” replied Opie. “Unless you place the medallion in this marked area there is very little chance of saving the contents.” At that moment Monsieur DeBackrub made an appearance.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he said. “This is for guests only, get out.”

“Shut up you big phoney.” Tricks shouted right back. “We’re paying customers now.”

“Where is your money then?” he asked. He was about to ring the bell when the contents of Sieges pockets mysteriously appeared on the table. “Oh, welcome to The Great Spa, I hope you enjoy your stay.” He took a leather bag from the counter and emptied the contents into his hands. It was filled with gold pieces. Siege had recently walked through the very affluent town of Barock. He walked off very happy.

“Will you look at that.” Opie said as Siege started to put the things back in her pockets.

“What?” The others asked. Opie pointed.

“Siege has had the medallion all along.” Opie said picking up the medallion from the counter. “I remember seeing her take it from the barracks commander, but I completely forgot.”

“When was that?” asked Brain.

“You were injured at the time.” Opie told him how they came by the medallion, and then he tried it in the box. “It fits, now all I have to do is turn it in the right sequence and it should open.” He reread the instructions and turned the medallion. The lid popped open. They all looked inside, and it was empty.

“Great, now what?” Brain asked downing his beer and ordering another round.

“I don’t understand.” Opie said searching the empty box again. “The map said that the box would give us directions.”

“Maybe it’s another riddle.” Siege said hopefully. “Like the box has nothing in it so do nothing?” she tried. Tricks and Brain tried to look at her, so Opie gave her a kiss and held her hand.

“I could do that.” Brain replied. Trying to finish his beer so he could order another one. He was still having trouble with the bandages, but as they weren’t impeding his drinking ability he was ignoring them. “A few days to heal, and then what. Do you think the box will suddenly get a direction?”

“Who knows?” replied Tricks. “Stranger things have happened.” The others agreed with that. Opie had the feeling he was missing something, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Monsieur DeBackrub returned with the keys to their new suite.

On the other side of the Spa things were looking grim. Sal had his hands around a goon’s neck.

“How can you let Tricks walk right into my home?” He asked as the man passed out, or chose not to answer. Sal tried to throw him against the wall, but he was a feeble old man and only managed to drop him. Seeing what their boss had intended, two goons picked him up and tossed him against the wall. “Go and see if Bobby is alright. Who knows what she’s capable of?” He found out very quickly. He followed his now very hyped up men to the carnage that was Bobby No Face’s room. Sal picked up the piece of arm that still held the knife.

“At least he died fighting. Put him in his sack and bring him to my room, and be quick about it.” Sal walked off. The goons ever faithful to their boss’s requests, and always taking him literally had to chop up the body some more, but it still wouldn’t fit in his sack. So they buried the extra bits in the back garden. (Maybe Sal was right when he said they didn’t find all the bits.) Sal placed the sack on the table.

“Such a small man in the end.” he said. “Is he all here?”

“No Capo.” One of the men replied.

“We can’t even find all of you my dear friend.” Sal closed his eyes and said an oath. He opened his eyes and looked at all his men. “She must die, her and anyone with her. Capesh?” They all vowed that she wouldn’t live to see the sun set. “Good, go break out the bag pipe cases.” (Crossbows don’t fit in violin cases.) They first sent out scouts to find Tricks. They found her at the moment Opie let go of

Siege's hand. When they reported back they said she was with two accomplices at the bar, drinking lots of beer.

"Good." Sal said rubbing his hands together. "Let's wait until they leave. Kill the other two, but Tricks is mine." The goons looked at him with a new respect, but they were really worried that the old man was starting to lose it.

"I don't get it." Opie said on his fifth beer, up to that point he had been holding Siege's hand, and she had been matching them drink for drink. As she had never gotten drunk before she was completely plastered. She tried letting go of Opie's hand, hoping that the alcohol would wonder off like it always did, but it had gotten itself so entrenched in her blood stream, it decided to hang around and see what would happen. It didn't have long to wait. Siege leaned closer to Opie.

"I can't feel my teeth." she said touching them with her fingers. "Are they still there?" Opie assured her that they were. She giggled and then threw up in his lap. Seconds later she was asleep on his shoulder.

"Brain could you carry Siege to her room, I've got to go clean up." Brain looked at the situation and laughed.

"No problem." he replied. "Tricks look after my beer, I'll be back."

"Don't be stupid Brain." she replied. "Finish your beer. Opie go get cleaned up and then we should all hit the sack, tomorrow we've got an empty box to solve." They did as they were told.

Sal positioned his men for the ambush. It would work perfectly. Sal had his crossbow trained on the door, but if he missed the twenty other men would guarantee that Tricks would not walk away. The other twenty men were ready for her accomplices, ten each with loaded crossbows. They sat and waited, and waited. "I'd be surprised if they can walk." Sal said to his second in command. "How long have they been sitting in there?"

"Many hours, but the more they drink the easier it will be to take them down." he replied. Sal nodded. A little later he fell asleep, accidentally letting his crossbow go off. It shot one of his own men in the leg. The man didn't even cry out. He limped off to see a doctor. The rest of them waited on. When Sal woke with the sun on his back all his men were still awake and watching the door.

"Are they still drinking?" He asked. No one answered. "Are you sure

they will come out the servants exit?" It seems Sal had wasted his night. As paying guests our four heroes had gone out the front way.

They had gone as far as the hot spring. Brain couldn't carry Siege any more. Opie gave it a try, but after he tripped, they decided to take a break. Brain stripped down to his underwear and jumped in. He then remembered that his bandages were still on. So he took those off. Then he remembered that his arm was in a sling. He looked at it, but couldn't find the sling, so he tried the other arm. It wasn't there either. Then he started to wonder how he had carried Siege so far. He was just staring to think when some thing caught his eye. A slide. He forgot all about the other problems and took a slide; it was fun so he kept doing it.

Opie sat on a bench with Siege's head on his lap. She would wake up every now and again to throw up on Opie. Her stomach was always full. Tricks watched Brain slide for a while and then thought it would be fun to spin in circles and sing show tunes. Brain saw her and decided that spinning was not a good idea if you're drunk, besides it was making him dizzy.

"No spinning Tricks." Brain said in the sternest voice he could muster in his drunkenness.

"What you going to do about it?" Tricks replied playfully.

"I'll come down there and paddle your backside."

"Ooo, I can't wait." she replied, spinning again. Brain decided that he would have to show her he meant business. He got quiet close, but Tricks shrieked like a little girl and ran away, spinning whenever she was far enough away from Brain. At this point a guy from the other party at the perfect spring joined them.

"Hey guys." he said. "You got any extra stuff?"

"Huh." Brain replied profoundly. He had been about to catch Tricks.

"You know some weed, or what ever you're taking." Brain actually giggled. They told him they had nothing, but he left like he didn't believe them. Tricks went and looked after Siege so Opie could wash off. He joined Brain at the slide. Tricks thought it would be funny to hide from the guys, so they would panic when they got back, then she could jump out and surprise them. As she wasn't all there, she chose a well lit corner and the guys saw her almost immediately, but she still insisted that she gave them a fright.

They got back to their four-room suite and found the complementary

bottle of vodka. They decided that a quick game of forfeit coinage would be fun. A simple game, if you miss the glass you drink, if you get it in the glass you nominate someone to do a forfeit. (They were very drunk, so I'm not sure how much of the rest of this is true.)

"Bulls eye." Brain said, he had already had many misses. "I nominate Tricks to give us a pole dance." She had already made him do it, to hilarious consequences. "Use that wall as your pole." Tricks jumped up and gave a performance that kept both the guys sitting cross-legged for quite some time. At some point Siege made the boys show their naked butts to the world, a chambermaid happened to be passing at the time, but she was more impressed then offended (they claimed).

"I've got a good one." Tricks said smiling through the haze of alcohol. "Opie do a pole dance against Brain."

"Hey that's not fair." Brain replied indignantly. "You're only allowed to nominate one person."

"Tell you what Brain, if you can get the coin in the glass." Tricks replied with a big grin on her face. "Then I will do a pole dance against you." Brains hand was shaking so much that the coin went in the complete opposite direction. The girls roared with laughter as the boys put on their show. The boys spent the rest of the night trying to win so they could get the girls to put on a show. Brain managed to win a Tricks pole dance, where he was the pole, but it wasn't until the last shot of vodka that they managed to get the girls to pole dace against each other. It was only slightly marred but Opie holding Sieges hand so Brain could get a good look. I'm not sure how long the two guys had to stay seated after that. They decided to all go to bed, until Siege found a bottle of champagne. Things really got rakish after that.

The next morning Tricks was the first to wake up. The first thing she noticed was that she was completely naked. The second was the completely naked Brain next to her. She quickly gathered up her clothes and went to her own room. She couldn't remember what had happened. Truth is that none of them remembered what happened after they had gotten halfway through the first bottle of champagne, let alone where the other two bottles had come from. She checked on Siege and Opie, they were in the same bed, but fully clothed. Tricks left them to sleep and went out. She had a quick swim and then did some of her neglected sword workouts. She didn't notice the goon

watching her. He got paler and paler as he watched some of her moves.

Siege woke up and punched Opie. This woke Opie up.

“Why you do that?” He asked.

“You had an affair.”

“No I didn’t.” replied Opie, pretty sure he hadn’t touched Tricks all night.

“In my dream.” Siege replied.

“Oh.” Opie replied and laughed. That might have been a mistake.

“So you admit it?”

“It was in your dream.” Opie replied, logic firmly on his side.

“But you had the affair.” she said telling logic to go take a flying leap.

“Was she worth it?” Opie asked trying to make light of the situation.

“You tell me.” she replied and stormed off. Opie sat staring at the slammed door.

“What have I done?” he asked it, but it just hung there not saying a word. (But you could tell it was laughing on the inside. Never trust doors I always say.)

Siege spent the rest of the morning soaking away her troubles in the mineral spring.

Opie woke up Brain and together they went to find some breakfast. Opie told him about Sieges dream.

“That’s a real toughie.” Brain said between mouthfuls of fried egg, bacon and greasy mushroom. As he always says a good greasy breakfast is better than any hangover cure, until he could perfect one. (He once tried to liquidize the breakfast and drink it, but after being violently ill he didn’t try that again.) “In her mind you have cheated on her, but you didn’t, did you? Last night is a little foggy.”

“No I didn’t.” Opie replied. “How can you blame a guy for what does on in your head?”

“She’s not a guy.” Brain replied. “They don’t think like us. I’m not sure that they do think. I mean we had fun last night, but this morning when we walked past Tricks she was all dagger eyes.”

“I noticed, do you think Siege told her about her dream.”

“I think it was me who was in trouble.” Brain replied stuffing some more bacon in his mouth. “Wawatis.” he said and then chewed and swallowed. “What do you think we should do?” he finally said.

“I really don’t know, maybe chocolates and flowers.”

“Are you nuts, then she’ll really think you’re having an affair.” Brain replied mopping up the last of the grease with his bread. “Tell you what, cut your losses. The best way to get over a girl is to find another one. What about those two?”

“I’m not interested. I think I’ll go find Siege and try apologizing.” Brain made a whip sound. Opie looked at him and said “At least my being whipped is figurative.” Brain watched him go and decided to introduce himself to one or, after what he saw last night, both the young woman.

“Any chance of picking you up?” he asked when he got to the table. The one girl said they were taken, but the other one smiled at him. “I’m Brain.”

“Hi Brain I’m Carol.” The other girl rolled her eyes and left, muttering something about a girl’s only weekend.

“Well Carol.” Brain said sitting down. “I was just telling my friend how perfectly dressed you are. I hope you don’t mind me joining you, but I just had to see you up close. Let me just say that I would have walked the Great desert for such a sight. You are even more pretty up close, may I?” He reached over and touched her hand. He sighed. “Even lovelier to touch.” Carol blushed. (He might be a complete toss the rest of the time, but you have to give him one thing, he can pick up girls. I think you know where this is going. A few more smooth lines and back to her place for a quick drink and well you can guess the rest.) Tricks watched him walk passed hand in hand with the young girl. She was doing a complicated manoeuvre with her sword when it ‘slipped’ and pegged into the ground between Brain’s legs.

“A little more grip, Tricks old girl.” he said throwing it back. He probably shouldn’t have said her name. His little underage girl ran over to Tricks and asked her to sign her copy of Country Life Celebs. Then Carol ran off to find her friend, in no time Tricks was surrounded by the Mineston Girls Choir. Brain resigned himself to spending the day in the cold spring.

The goon got back and told Sal what he had seen. He recounted it with awe. Sal was not a complete idiot. He knew that there would be very little chance of taking on Tricks where she had the advantage. He would have to wait until they were in the desert. Then he could shoot them from a distance.

“We should follow them when they leave. I have to stay and have a

meeting with the other families, but the rest of you are going to ride out into the desert. I don't care how long it takes but I want them dead. In the mean time keep a watch on them." They swore a blood oath on it.

Tricks finally remembered that she had killed the mobster. As she didn't want to talk to Brain she told Opie and Siege. Opie visibly paled.

"You killed a mob boss." he said horrified. He to had read books on the subject.

"He wasn't a boss. I don't think." She replied, thinking that she probably shouldn't have told anyone.

"What ever." Opie said. "You killed a mobster. Don't they start wars over thing like that?"

"Only if you're a rival family."

"Well at least we can feel safe then." Opie said sarcastically.

"Whatever possessed you to do that?"

"He had the box and he charged at me with a knife." Tricks replied, hoping that Opie would run out of things to say.

"We could tell them it was self defence." He thought about it for a little while. "No that won't work, they will probably kill us anyway."

"Quiet Opie." Siege said. "Tricks, why are you still alive, surely they should have killed you already?"

"I don't know." Tricks replied. "I would have thought that last night would have been the perfect opportunity. Maybe they haven't found the body."

"Then we better start packing and get out of here." Opie said, then Siege shushed him again.

"Tricks do you think they know who you are?"

"Yes, I bragged."

"Typical." Opie added, then wished he hadn't as both girls looked at him.

"Opie go find your friend." Siege said. "Tell him the situation and have him meet us in the room." Opie left, but he wasn't happy about it. He kept looking over his shoulder.

"Let's assume they haven't found the body, could you pretend it wasn't you?" Siege asked.

"I have a better idea." Tricks said suddenly smiling. "Sal Ca'pin promised me a favour. I complied with his portion, so he owes me one."

“What do you mean?”

Tricks explained, and then explained what she was going to do. By the end of the explanation they were both laughing. Tricks went off to carry out the plan and Siege went to inform the guys.

Siege told them the score, they weren't that impressed with the idea, but they said they would wait and see. While they were waiting Opie picked up the box again.

“Still nothing.” he said after looking inside again. “I don't think anything will appear if it hasn't by now.”

“Yeah.” replied Brain. “We must be missing something.” They looked it over, but nothing sprang to mind. “Doesn't it say anything more on the label?”

“No, just the instructions.”

“Maybe there is something else on the map.” Siege said, but the two guys shook their head. She opened it up anyway. Opie walked closer and looked, but he couldn't find anything.

“Maybe when we found the box the original map changed, you know magic like.” Opie said, remembering that the map they had was a copy.

“You could be right.” Brain supplied. “But if we have to find our way back to Nad you can count me out.”

“I don't believe that.” Siege said. “We have all the clues, now we just have to decipher them.”

“Sorry Siege, but I think this adventure is over, even if the mob doesn't get us.” He put the box down and asked the others if they wanted to go get some lunch and a beer.

“Look at that.” Brain said getting excited. “The sun is reflecting off the medallion.” Opie looked and sure enough a small gold spot was on the map.

“If we place it right, then it should point the way.” He sounded even more excited.

“Doesn't the sun move?” Siege asked. The both looked at her.

“She's right.” replied Opie. “We don't know what time of day, let alone the time of the year it should be in position.”

“Lets find where it fits, we can worry about the sun later.” They searched the map. Opie spotted the square first, only because he lifted the map to the light.

“Put it on and see what happens.” They did. The gold dot was pointing at Hardpassvil.

“Now if only we could figure out the time, and which way the map should be we should be back on track.” Brain said. He pulled the map, he meant to pull it closer so he could fold it away, but instead he stopped.

“That’s strange.” He showed Opie.

“May gods.” Opie said not believing his eyes. “Do you know what kind of skill that takes?”

“What?” Siege asked. Opie showed her. “So?” she wondered.

“It doesn’t matter where the sun is.” he said moving the map. “The point is always on Hardpassvil.” Siege watched as they turned the map completely around, but the point didn’t move. “It must be the design of the medallion. Now all we have to do is hope Tricks is successful.”

Tricks marched right passed the goons and opened Sal’s door. Sal was in conference with the heads of the other families. It was going to work out better then she hoped. She could now shame him into granting her favour in front of the other families.

“Hi Sal, remember me?” She asked all smiles.

“Yes, you killed a close personal friend of mine.” he replied. Oh well Tricks thought, they do know.

“Okay, then I have come to ask for my favour.”

“What favour, you murdering whore?” Tricks just smiled at him.

“Are you denying me the favour you promised me in front of all these people?”

“I owe you nothing.” He spat on the floor in front of her.

“I assume that you think he is a man of his word.” she said to the other men around the table. “Think again. He promised me one favour if I called Bobby No Face, Bobby.”

“Is this true?” One of the other men asked.

“Yes.” Sal said remembering.

“Then honour your agreement, or there can never be peace between us.”

“But she killed him.” Sal replied.

“Tell me young lady?” The man asked. “What happened?”

“I walked into his room, he attacked me with a knife so I killed him.” Tricks said calmly.

“You didn’t call him No Face.”

“Not once.” she replied starting to enjoy Sal’s discomfort.

“Okay.” Sal said. “What is your favour?”

“You let me and my friends go.” she replied.

“I can’t.” replied Sal.

“Why not?” The man asked.

“I swore a blood oath to kill her.” Sal said showing the cut on his left hand.

“Yes.” the man said. “You must ask for another favour, perhaps a quick death.”

“No, give us a weeks head start before you come after us.” Tricks said thinking quickly. She had hoped that the plan would work, but it was falling apart.

“You have one day.” Sal said. “At dawn tomorrow I send my men after you, no negotiation.”

“Fair enough.” Tricks said and smiled. “But I promise you on my word as Tricks of Clemville.” There was a loud intake of breath from around the table. “That after I have killed all your men I will come back and cut your balls off.” She turned and left. She heard one of the men telling Sal he was a fool and wanted no part of his deals. Tricks laughed as she left, but wasn’t sure if she would be able to carry out her threat. There were so many goons around, and Sal would probably send every man he had just to make sure she never came back.

Chapter 11

The Great Spa and Gangster Hide Out

Sal stormed out of the meeting. He was furious.

“How dare those ingrates ban me from the council of families.”

“They are afraid Capo.” Nino his second in command said. “They don’t have the balls to stand up to Tricks like you do.” Sal winced at the expression. He was starting to think he might have made a mistake.

“No.” he said aloud. “I’m Sal Ca’pin and no one gets one over on me.” Then he wished he could bring No Face back to life so he could kill him with his bare hands. “Burn No Face’s body and flush the ashes.”

“Yes sir.” Nino said finally having a task.

“Then personally go kill the owner of this dump.” Monsieur DeBackrub had made a fatal mistake in choosing Tricks to send to No Face. Luckily for him it was fatal for his mother-in-law, she was still the owner, and Nino always followed orders to the letter. Nino ran off so Sal called over one of the goons.

“What’s your name son?” He asked putting his arm around the lad.

“Nino sir.” Frank replied.

“Very convenient.” Sal replied. The goons had been told by Nino, the real one, that if Sal asked their name they must reply that it was Nino, as Sal quiet often forgot things and they didn’t want to embarrass him. “Nino I want you to get all the men together and I mean all of them. They must meet me in the piazza (Another feature to make the mobsters feel at home.) half an hour from now.” The lad ran off, spreading the word. Sal found himself another Nino, this one to wash his back. The cold sweat he was having since Tricks’s threat, was not mixing well with his general sweat. It was like they were having a turf war on his back.

He called his men to order, well he whispered in Nino’s ear and Nino called the men to order.

“At first light tomorrow we are going after Bobby No Face’s murderer. She is the one and only Tricks, but don’t be afraid.” He wished he hadn’t said her name. Even though they all knew they would be hunting her, the men looked very afraid when he said her name. “We will never get close enough to her for her to use her

weapons. Each of you has been issued with a crossbow and many bolts, use them wisely.” He paused so the men could check their crossbows. “Good. There are over a hundred of you so I think it is safe to say I will have her head stuffed and mounted on my wall by sunset tomorrow.” The crowd looked at him, so he added the piece de résistance. “Ten thousand gold coins to the one who brings me her head.” It was enough money to buy half a kingdom, yet the cheer from the crowd was very lack lustre. Sal shrugged his shoulders. “If you don’t come back with her head I will find you and spend a long painful time killing you. Capesh? Now go to bed and get some sleep.” The men wondered off. Sal turned to Nino. “Good luck tomorrow Nino. When you’ve finished, come back to Clemville, I’ll be sleeping there tonight.” The sounds of a dragon were just audible in the distance.

The road between Barock and Hardpassvil

“You idiot.” Chef said. “Why didn’t you do as we planned?”

“We thought...” Four (The only escapee from the numbers gang massacre) tried, but Chef cut him off.

“There’s your problem, none of you were capable of thinking.” Chef rubbed his head. “I’m sick of working for someone else, that was my big break and you screwed it up.” Four wasn’t happy with the way Chef was treating him. He had spent the last two days lost in the desert, no water and no food. His camel had died and he had to walk the whole of the third day. He stumbled into town and, although they were looking for him, he was in such a state that no one recognized him. He went straight to Chef who sent him to a hiding place up the road.

“You didn’t get the map and you left witnesses.” Chef continued. “They’ll string you up and me if they catch us together. I think it’s best if you lay low. Here take this money and go stay at the Hardpassvil inn. At least you can still be useful.”

“How?” the big man asked.

“Steal Mrs. Smith’s famous rat pie recipe. This should be enough money to keep you there all winter.” Chef looked around again, but no one was around. “Just make yourself scarce on Sundays.”

“Yes Chef.” Four walked off. Chef hoped that the bumbling oaf would be able to get the recipe, and then he could open his own restaurant in some big city like Clemville. He walked home to

prepare evening meal with visions of serving kings and queens.

Somewhere in the Horn mountains

Rock studied his sleeping friend. He so badly wanted to tell him the truth, but a promise is a promise and only the person with the password would get past him. He had stood guard at the cave entrance for thousands of years and no one had come to claim what he guarded. He looked out at the blizzard and knew that no one would come this year.

He spotted a rat and shook himself. A rock dislodged from the cave roof and landed on the rat.

“Wake up.” he shouted at Greg. “Dinners ready.” Greg ate the rat and went back into hibernation. Rock hated winter, not that he felt the cold, it was the loneliness that always got to him. Nobody dared cross the pass in winter and Large Greg Copper spent all his time sleeping. Rock loved the spring. That was when the loonies came out. They would come into the cave and talk to Greg. Greg would tell them wise things. Off course the people thought it was quite natural for a ‘Wise man’ to talk to a rock. Some of them even pretended to hear the wise answers Greg would get from the rock, but none of them could really hear him. You had to truly be mad to hear Rock, and most of the loonies were just people looking for love, only they didn’t know it.

“We help a lot of people don’t we Greg.” Rock said, Greg answered with his usual snore. Rock smiled and waited patiently for the next rat to appear.

The Great Desert

“What do you mean we’re lost?” Tricks said. “You have the map, what more do you want?”

“It doesn’t help.” Brain said, starting to get annoyed. They had been walking all night, the sun had risen a few hours earlier and the landscape around them didn’t match what the map said it should. They had decided to use the time they had been granted by Sal Ca’pin to go as far as they could. When Tricks told them of the ‘favour’ she had gotten out of him, the others weren’t happy, but as Siege explained, it was better than nothing. They knew that Sal would have men watching which direction they had gone in, so they

had pretended to head for Clemville, in almost the exact opposite direction. The idea was that they would walk under cover of darkness in that direction for half the night, turn ninety degrees at midnight and then at daybreak start heading in the right direction. They had carried out the plan, only to find themselves at an oasis that wasn't marked on the map. Well it might have been, but according to Brain it wasn't. Of the five oasis marked on the map they had seen two, and the other three were very close to the Great Plains.

"Let me have a look." Opie said, taking the map from Brain. He looked at it, turned it around, looked at where the sun was and folded up the map.

"He's right." Opie said. "We're lost."

"I suppose we should spend the rest of the day at this oasis, wait for the sun to go down." Tricks said dumping her bags on the ground.

"I'm off for a swim."

"What about the mob?" Opie asked.

"Well if we can't find where we are, how are they?" Brain replied following Tricks's lead.

"True." They spent the rest of the morning wallowing in the shallow water. They had enough supplies for a couple of days, so they ate well. They decided to have an afternoon snooze in the shade of the trees, taking turns standing on guard. At nightfall they refilled their water bottles and headed out, in what they hoped was the right direction. The sand slowly gave way to a rockier desert, with a few plants. The plants became more frequent, which they took as a sign they were heading in the right direction. The only problem was that they were hard to see at night and full of thorns.

"Stop wriggling." Tricks said to Brain. "If you move too much I might end up cutting you and not the plant."

"Be careful, these bloody things hurt." Brain responded, trying in vain to pull himself out. Luckily the moons had returned and Tricks was able to see what she was doing. As Brain was nearly completely night blind this was his third trip into a thorn bush.

"Don't take anything from this," Tricks said, "but hold my hand and I'll lead you."

"Thanks Tricks." Brain said, pulling out a few thorns that had broken off in his leg. It was starting to itch, but every time he scratched it hurt. He was not a happy trekker.

The sun rose over the scrubland. As far as they could see it was the

same. Rocks, sands, thorn bushes and sheep. Sheep?

“What the hell are sheep doing here?” Brain wondered aloud, hoping the others could also see them. “Or are those things just white bushes?”

“No.” replied Tricks. “They look like genuine sheep to me.”

“I wonder what they’re doing out here?” Opie said, he was about to wonder what they eat, when one took a bite out of a thorn bush.

“You would think they would get tangled up in those things.” Brain said, knowing full well how tangled up in a thorn bush a person could get, without a woolly jacket.

“Who cares?” Tricks said, “looks like mutton for breakfast. Pass me a crossbow.” Tricks went off to stalk one of the fluffy white things. It seemed that the sheep had never been hunted, and virtually came to her. This should have been a clue as to what was about to follow, but as our four clueless adventures didn’t have a clue they had roast mutton for breakfast, well brunch. It was quiet late when they had a decent fire going.

“Nothing like fresh mutton to warm the heart.” Brain said. The others looked at him wondering what he meant. They were sitting in the middle of a baking hot scrubland with no shade and he thought it was the fresh mutton warming him.

“I wonder what happened to the mob?” Siege asked.

“Probably half way to Clemville by now.” Tricks replied. She didn’t know they had hired a tracker, and were hot on their tail.

“You’re probably right.” Opie said. “But we can’t stay here long.” He was starting to feel the heat. “Let’s go find some shade.” The others looked around, but no one saw anything resembling shade. They saw something else.

“It’s the mob.” Brain shouted. “Run for your lives.”

“It’s not the mob.” Tricks said, slowly drawing out her sword. “It’s just some funny little brown people with sticks.”

“I have a bad feeling we just ate their sheep.” Opie said.

“Yeah.” replied Brain. “It’s not sitting well in my stomach either.”

“Well we can’t sit around all day playing with the natives.” Tricks said and started to walk forward. The natives clustered around her and made threatening motions with the sharpened sticks. One of them poked her, when she took another step, so she punched him on the nose. “Out of my way.” she said showing her fists. “Do you know who I am?” They seemed to part, but were shaking their heads, and trying to hold the others back.

“I’m with her.” Brain said pointing at Tricks. He turned to Opie. “Do you think we’ve stumbled into the Great Desert mental asylum?”

“No, I think they’re just pissed because we ate their sheep.”

“Is that all, Siege give them some money.” She tried, but they just shook their heads. They pointed their sticks at Tricks and then tried to block the others.

“Stop encouraging them.” Tricks said from up front. “Just push the sticks out of...” She didn’t finish her sentence. In front of her was the biggest snake she had ever seen. Its back was camouflaged to the colour of the land, but it was rearing up so they could see its under belly. It was a dark purple, the colour shifted in the light. Tricks stood rooted to the spot. The snake’s long fangs were dripping a green liquid that she could only assume was poison. Its head was big enough to swallow Tricks whole. The natives behind her instantly threw their sticks to the ground, got on their hands and knees and bowed to the creature. Tricks didn’t see this, her eyes were locked with the creature.

“Be careful.” Brain whispered unnecessarily. “They only see movement.” he made up. “Try backing away slowly.”

“Which is it Brain?” Tricks asked. “They see movement or should I back away.” Apparently she should have tried the backing away. The snake took this opportunity to strike. The snake was like lightning, but a month and a half too slow for Tricks. He crashed face first into the sand and broke one of his fangs. While he was still down Tricks kicked him very hard in the head. He stopped wriggling.

“Quick Tricks.” Brain said, not rushing forward. “Chop its head off.”

“Why?” Tricks asked, looking at the unconscious beast.

“Because it’s going to wake up and eat us.” he tried again.

“No it won’t.” she said. “Not now that it knows who it’s dealing with. Besides, it would be bad karma.”

“You and your karma.” Brain said shaking his head, but still making no move towards the snake. The snake started to revive. Opie, Siege and Brain took a step back, tripping over the natives that had prostrated themselves in front of the snake.

“Listen very carefully.” she said standing in front of the snake again.

“If you try to attack me again I’m going to kick you hard.”

“Sorry.” the Snake said. “I thought you were the virgin sacrifice.”

“Tricks’s a virgin?” Brain thought that was very funny, until the snake looked at him. The snake looked back at Tricks.

“Not the Tricks?” the snake asked.

“One and the same.” she replied. “So what are you doing out in the desert eating virgins?”

“I don’t actually eat them.” he answered. “I just pop them in my mouth and take them back to my cave.”

“Oh.” Tricks said.

“Yeah, they cook and clean for me.” He pulled himself up. “Excuse me, where are my manners. I’m Stuart.”

“Hi, Stuart. That’s Brain, Siege and Opie.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” he said bowing his head. “Do you want to get out of the hot ssun?”

“Thanks, what about the natives?”

“They’re my worshippers; they will probably go back to building shrines to me after we leave.”

“Okay.”

“Please hop on my back, it is quite some distance.” They did as Stuart suggested, and in no time they were speeding along with the wind in their hair.

“Nice place.” Tricks said looking around. “I love the waterfall.”

“Built it myself.” Stuart replied. “Sorry but we only have mutton on the menu.”

They arrived at his cave in a few minutes, but it would have taken them a few hours to walk. The place was an underground cave. It had a huge pool of water in the middle, with many caves leading off it. There were plenty of natives running around, carrying things or sweeping.

“I do sso like a clean house.” he said.

“Do these people live here forever?” Siege asked.

“Oh heavens no.” Stuart replied. “Most of them stay for a year or two and then head home. I gather that it is a privilege to be selected to work here.”

“So you don’t understand their language?”

“Not as well as I should, tell you what, go get cleaned up and I’ll tell you all about it at lunch, well a late lunch anyway. It will probably make cook furious that I didn’t mention I would bring guests.” The four adventures found an empty cave.

“This is all a little weird.” Brain said. “You don’t suppose we’re hallucinating it all from being in the desert too long.” Tricks pinched him. “What was that for?” He asked rubbing this arm.

“So you can see you’re not hallucinating.” she replied

“Pinching is dreaming, or is it falling on your face, never mind.” He walked off to explore. He liked the waterfall, so he wanted to get a closer look at how it worked.

“I think we just got very lucky.” Tricks said to the remaining party. “If we could convince Stuart to take us to Hardpassvil, we should get there in no time.”

“Yeah.” replied Opie. “I’m still worried though. Can we really trust him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Forget I said anything, I’m just tired. Maybe I’ll get some sleep before lunch.”

“Okay, but I’m off to explore.” Tricks left.

“What do you think Siege?” he asked after Tricks was out of ear shot.

“I feel it as well, it’s like there’s something wrong. Have you ever heard of a talking snake?”

“You mean other then the sea monsters.”

“Oh yes, I forgot about them.”

“I think he’s probably a god that did something wrong and has to pay penance by being a snake.” Opie said. “Let’s not worry too much about it. I really am tied.” They cuddled up and went to sleep.

“What’s that Brain?” Tricks said coming round the corner. Brain looked at her very guiltily while try to hide the thing behind his back. “Nothing.” he replied as innocently as he could. She strode over to him and pulled it out of his hand.

“Just what were you going to do with this spanner?” she asked shaking it in his face.

“I saw that he was using a water wheel to move the water from a larger waterfall deeper in the cave to make this one work.” he said, trying to get the spanner back from Tricks’s fast moving hands. “I thought I would improve it, you know, my way of saying thanks.”

“Do you want to go out into the desert again? ‘Cause if you fiddle with this stuff that is exactly where you’ll end up.”

“No, I’ll make it better.”

“How many things have you ‘improved’ since we started this trip?” she asked slapping him on the back of the hand. “Let the spanner go.”

“I fixed plenty of things.”

“Yeah.” she replied. “Plenty of things that don’t work right any

more.” She turned him around and marched him back to the main cave.

“Go into that cave, get some sleep and don’t come out until lunch.” Tricks said. She sat with him until he fell asleep, then she joined him, but not before tying a rope to their legs. She needn’t have bothered. They all slept till supertime.

“You were all sleeping so soundly that I thought I would leave you.” Stuart said when the four of them were sitting around the table. “I hope you like mutton, please dig in.” There was a whole spit roasted sheep in front of Stuart, which he swallowed whole, the other people at the table merely cut pieces of their roast, and wondered if it would be polite not to finish a whole sheep each.

“Much better.” Stuart said licking his lips. “Please feel free to ask all the questions you like.”

“Are you a god?” Opie blurted out.

“Good heavens no.” Stuart replied. “I’m just a really big snake.”

“But you can talk.”

“Don’t all snakes talk?” he asked, a puzzled look coming over his scaly face.

“No...” Opie started. “Truth is I don’t know? I never really stopped to talk to one.”

“There you go then.” Stuart said. “Maybe all snakes do talk, not that I’ve met any others, I came from an egg you know. I was in my room one morning, it wasn’t really my room, but I didn’t know that at the time, and I started feeling a little claustrophobic, so I broke out. That was when I discovered the world. I was lying at the foot of the Horn Mountains and there in front of me was a book called an encyclopaedia. It was full of information. I figured someone must have left it for me, so I read it. Did you know the Horn Mountains used to be called the Eagle Mountains? Strange hey, I sometime go and look at them, but I never see any eagles.”

“What’s up with the worship thing?”

“That’s quite a funny story.” he said and chuckled. The chuckle sent a cool shiver down everyone’s back, not a sound you want to hear in a dark alley. “Mostly I looked up things in the encyclopaedia that I wanted to know, but I thought I should probably read everything. I was reading about missionaries and I thought that would be fun. I didn’t have a bible, that’s a book with special stories, but I did have the encyclopaedia, and that had some nice stuff in it. I was small at

the time, so I tried to convert the rats to the word, but they always ran away when I got close. Like it said in the book, being a missionary is not easy work. That was when I got tired of eating bugs. I felt bad about eating my faithful flock, even though they ran away from me so I ate them, and tried to convert the sheep. They were much more willing to hear the great word, even though they didn't say much. Then one fateful day I ate one of them. By this time I was bored of being a missionary. It was the day after I ate my first sheep that a whole group of Notmads came..."

"Sorry to interrupt." Brain said, "but what are Notmads?"

"Those are the people."

"Don't you mean Nomads?"

"No, the book said that Nomads move around, and they didn't."

"Okay, please continue."

"Thanks. Anyway the Notmads started poking me with their sticks, so I swallowed one and ran away. I didn't eat her; I just spat her out when I got back to my cave. She bowed to me and started cleaning up all the mess. Now they keep supplying me with people, they seem to think that I won't eat all their sheep if they do. I spy on them, I have very good camouflage, and they seem to think I'm a god and they have to send me people and build alters to me." he chuckled again. "All that time I was trying to minister to the animals, and I should have been doing it to the Notmads. Funny how life works out."

"Yes." said Tricks. "I don't want to overstay our welcome, but is there any chance you can take us to Hardpassvil?"

"If you show me where it is." he replied. "I would be more than happy."

"Thanks, I just wish I knew where we were?" Tricks said.

"That's easy, according to the encyclopaedia we are in the crown of the Horn Mountains." Stuart replied.

"Then it should be towards the setting sun." Opie said.

"Listen Stuart." Tricks said. "I don't want to be rude, but most people aren't like the Notmads. They would probably kill you if they got the chance."

"Yes I know." Stuart replied. "When you were sleeping I went out to get some more sheep and a whole bunch of men started shooting arrows at me." There was silence.

"The mob." Siege said first.

"How did they find us?" Brain asked.

“Probably a tracker, what does it matter, they are probably right on our tail.” Tricks said standing up.

“It will take them a day and a night to get here.” Stuart said.

“Yeah, the longer they spend in the desert the easier it will be to take them on.” Tricks said sitting back down. “If only they didn’t have sheep to eat.”

“I could call the sheep in for Sunday mass.” Stuart offered.

“Your sheep go to mass?” Brain asked.

“Yes.” replied Stuart straight faced. “They are the only ones I converted. The Notmads think I’m their god. So they make up their own rituals.”

“Okay.” Tricks said standing up again. “Call in the sheep and we’ll get ready to take on the mob. I don’t suppose you counted how many there were?”

“About a hundred.” Stuart replied.

“Well at least they will be tired and hungry when then get here.” Stuart left to call in the sheep. The others found a room to talk in.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to get Stuart to take us now?” Opie asked.

“Yes.” replied Tricks. “But we will never have a better chance of throwing those guys off our trail.”

“There are a hundred of them.” Brain piped up.

“So, we have the element of surprise, and they will be exhausted, plus we have a big snake on our side.” Tricks took another sip of water. “I think we should stop them here and then not worry about them ever again, you know what they’re like, they’ll keep coming until we’re all dead.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Brain said. “But we should come up with a good plan of attack.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, you know that water wheel?” She told them her plan. They all went off to do their respective tasks.

At day break the next morning they were ready. They stood on the slight rise above the cave. They could see the silhouettes of the men on the horizon.

“Won’t be long now.” Tricks said. “I hope this thing works Brain.”

“I tested it this morning, Stuart helped, but he said I could keep all the royalties.” Brain replied looking at the giant water wheel.

“Good. Siege how many rocks did you and the Notmads collect?”

“I didn’t count, but probably a thousand.”

“That should be enough. Opie were you able to find the ingredients I asked for?”

“Not as much as I had hoped, but it should be enough.”

“Fine. Let’s go start dipping the wool I sheared and get ready.” They walked down into the cave; the Notmads were already dipping the wool in the black oil and lamp wax mix.

“Stuart took me into Easypassvil, but I didn’t want him to get too close.” Opie said. “That’s why I only brought this much.” he said pointing at the four drums. “It took me half the night to carry it as it was.” He stretched out his back. “I could only find about a hundred sacks though.”

“It should be enough, we are reusing them.” Tricks said looking very impressed with what her troops had accomplished. “Those guys won’t know what hit them. Brain come with me, I want a few range finders before they can see us. Opie, Siege keep supervising.” They walked outside and almost stepped onto the nearly invisible Stuart.

“Sorry Stuart, didn’t see you there.” Tricks said.

“I was just practicing for my duty.” he replied.

“Good, but don’t go all heroic on us. Just keep them in range, and yourself out of harms way.”

“Yes sir.” he said and saluted with his tongue. Tricks returned the salute and Stuart disappeared into the gathering light. Tricks and Brain walked up to the water wheel or as Brain secretly called it the incredible automatic stone and burning wool throwing machine. They had a few test shots and they were right on target.

Brain had spent most of the night firstly getting the water wheel into position, and then bolting on lengths of wood with hooks on the end. It was connected to the giant water wheel underground, by a disengageable gear. It was basically an automatic trebuchet.

“Nice work Brain.” Tricks said after they had tried it out. Brain didn’t stop smiling the rest of the day, he even kept it while he was being treated for burns, but I think Stuart’s secret stash of homebrew helped more with that.

“Pull the cover over and let’s get ready to meet our guests.”

The mobsters started to get into position. They looked tired. It was nearly midday when they walked into the small clearing. They couldn’t believe their luck. Sitting in the middle of the clearing were ten troughs of water. If they had stopped to think about it, they would have thought it was for the sheep, as Tricks intended, but all they

could think about was filling their bellies. Most of them had drunk some before they noticed the water was filled with salt.

“It’s a trap.” the real Nino said as the first ball of burning wool hit the ground. The oil and wax splattered and started burning them. Another quickly followed it. The black smoke made it hard to see, but Nino managed to rally his non-burning troops and charged the hill. Brain quickly changed to rocks; with their shorter range they crushed bones and started the retreat. A few men got off crossbow shots, but none of them even came close to the wall our heroes were hiding behind. A few men tried to run away, but Stuart would rear up every time they tried to leave the designated area.

After about ten minutes of bombardment, Tricks called a cease-fire. She drew her sword and hopped over the wall. Surprisingly very few people were dead. Lots of burns and breaks, but not a lot of deaths. She found Nino and dragged him away.

“Okay put this lot out, and lock them up in the cave.” she shouted. The Notmads brought buckets of water and doused those that were still burning. They then, with the help of Opie and Siege, herded the men into the specially made cave, the one with the wooden bar. Brain had some trouble disengaging the gear, and this is when he got burnt. Tricks dunked Nino’s head in a bucket of water and then threw him on the ground.

“Hello again.” Tricks said putting the tip of her sword at his groin. “Fancy meeting you again.” Nino looked up at her and thought he was dead, he had never seen such fire in anyone’s eyes before, and he had looked into some pretty fiery eyes in his time.

“I was under orders.” he tried. “A blood oath.”

“Well I guess we are going to have our own blood oath.” Tricks said still smiling.

“Wait, we could have our own blood oath.” Nino tried desperately. He was starting to really hate Sal Ca’pin, probably sitting in his mansion in Clemville, drinking fine wine, eating good food and having sisters over. “Could I have some water please?” He asked so politely that Tricks gave him some.

“Tell me about the blood oath?” Tricks asked as Nino drunk his full.

“Nowadays the blood oath is a task you accept until its completion or your death.”

“That doesn’t bode well for you, does it?” No-one was supposed to interfere with Tricks, she had made it quite clear, but a young Notmad girl brought her a plate of snacks anyway. “Do you have any

honour?” Tricks asked. “And if not, do you believe I can cut you in half before you can move a muscle.” he nodded.

“You have my word, I will not try to escape. If that is not enough then I do know you are Tricks of Clemville.” Tricks took her foot off his chest and allowed him to sit up.

“Eat something, and then explain why I’m not going to kill you?” He ate, rather quickly.

“Will my men be fed?” Tricks assured him they would. “Thank you. I’m more of a traditional man, and I think the blood oath is the honour of a man. When you go into this sacred pact you do so to honour someone. In my case it was Sal Ca’pin, but when I found out he would be flying back to Clemville, I lost all respect for him.”

“What does that mean?” Tricks asked, hoping she would like his answer.

“To me, he broke the blood oath he also took. Therefore I feel nothing towards him.”

“Good, that means I won’t have to kill you.” Tricks smiled and Nino was glad that he wasn’t in her bad books anymore. “Let’s go into the cave, we can negotiate better out of the sun.”

“Negotiate?” Tricks just smiled and kept walking.

The first thing she heard when she walked into the cave was Brain screaming.

“What the hell..?” she said and ran off in the direction of the screaming. Nino stood around looking lost, until a large snake appeared and told him to come through to the dinning room. Nino was a little worried that he was about to be eaten, but after what he had just experienced, he was starting to lose all faith in being surprised.

“What happened Brain?” Tricks said coming round the corner. Brain looked at her, his hand was wrapped in a bandage and he was smiling. “What’s going on?” She asked in that very polite voice that made it crystal clear that if the explanation wasn’t damn good, heads were going to roll.

“I just swallowed too much of Stuarts homebrew.” he replied. Seeing the look on her face, he thought he should explain a little more. “For numisakal porpoises.” She started to walk towards him, but he passed out before she got within striking distance.

“Can’t leave them alone for a second.” she said, going back to the dining room. When she arrived in the dinning room, she walked up to

Opie and hit him on the back of the head.

“That’s for your lame headed friend.” She sat down, waiting for Opie to make a big deal out of it.

“I’ll pass it on.” he said with a smile. “What are we going to do with the mobsters? I don’t feel right killing them off.”

“We could convince them to join the church of Stuart.” Nino walked in at that moment. He had been in the kitchen organizing some food for his men.

“What’s the church of Stuart?” he asked. Opie jumped to his feet.

“He’s alright Opie. The big snake fancies himself as a bit of a preacher. We were thinking that we could convert your men and they could spend the rest of their lives here praying to Stuart.”

“I guess it would be hard to escape from here.” Nino said. “But I have a better idea.” he told them. Opie was the first to object.

“It’s too risky. You’re putting your life in the hands of someone sworn to kill us.”

“He has a point Nino. How do we guarantee you won’t double cross us?”

“I give you my word of honour, I know you probably don’t trust it, but you could always have the big snake hang around.”

“We would have to blind fold you so that you wouldn’t know where he was.” Tricks said.

“That would be fine, but let me tell you the real reason I want to do this.” They told him to continue. “Sal was my mentor; I really looked up to him. Then he ran away from a fight that by all rights we should have won. Sure it was up against the great Tricks, but we had you out numbered and out gunned. He was scared of the threat you made.”

“Ah, what threat was that?” Opie asked.

“I didn’t want to mention it, but I promised Sal I would come back and take his balls.” Tricks shrugged her shoulders, Opie just stared at her.

“No wonder he sent so many men.” Opie said after a respectful silence.

“I thought it would scare him off at the time.” Tricks said, shrugging again. “Anyway are we going to try Nino’s plan or should I go kill everyone now.” She stood up and drew her sword, making sure everyone knew she meant it.

“We’ll go along with his plan, but what about Brain?” Siege asked.

“From the look of it he’s already doing his bit.” Tricks replied.

Nino moved as quietly as he could. He had a sword in his hand, and he was grinning. The blood on the blade was running down to his hand, making it sticky. He found the locked cave where his men were. They almost screamed when they saw him, but he held his finger to his lips. He didn't know where Stuart was, but he didn't want to take any chances. He expertly cut away the rope holding the bars in place.

"Prepare to move on my command," he whispered.

"What about Tricks and the others?" One of the men asked.

"Forget about them, I played them like a violin. They didn't even see me coming." He smiled the conspiratorial smile. "No time to explain; let's get out before the snake comes back." They followed him out. One of the men gasped as they walked passed the hacked up bodies of Tricks and Opie.

"Nice work, Nino." One of the men said. Brain took this moment to moan. "I think that ones still alive, do you want us to finish him off?"

"No time, but what I did to him, let's just say there is no cure." They all chuckled. In no time they were running through the desert.

"Hey, Nino you need Tricks's head to get the ten large."

"What do you think is in this sack?" He replied. They had to stop so he could show them her head, but it was so bloody they thought it would be a better idea if they waited till he had a chance to clean it up.

"That went well." Tricks said getting up.

"I thought we were done for when Brain stirred." Opie replied.

"I think that probably helped sell the show. He really did sound like he was in pain." Siege said. "I hope this red stuff washes off."

"One thing Tricks." Opie started. "What happens with your head? I mean when they get back they are going to know it's not you."

"Two days in the desert and it will be reeking." Tricks smiled at the thought. "They will have to leave it, and if they don't, which I personally hope, it will be so rotten they won't be able to tell it wasn't me."

"Okay, one more thing. What happens when we get back to Clemville and Sal sees we are still alive?"

"Stop worrying over every little detail." Opie thought it was quiet important, but didn't say anything. The important thing was that they were alive and one step closer to the treasure.

"I think we should stay here for a couple of days." Tricks said

unusually compassionately. "Give Brain a chance to heal." Stuart took this moment to come sliding in. He was in such a hurry that he slipped and knocked Opie over.

"Sorry." he said. "Did it work, did we fool them?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes, didn't you see?" Tricks asked.

"No, sorry, I fell asleep." he replied, looking as sheepish as a snake could.

"Fat lot of help you would have been. All hail the great Stuart." Tricks said sarcastically, then continued without batting an eyelid.

"Can we stay a couple of days?" He replied that he would love to have some genuine talking company. They saw to Brain and then cleaned up.

It was a well-rested and clean group of people that sat down to breakfast the next day.

"I think we should tell him." Opie said, continuing the discussion he had started with Tricks earlier. Tricks thought about it for a few minutes and then looked at Stuart.

"Have you ever heard of Da'Loose, Stuart?" she asked.

"Wow." he replied. "I haven't heard that name since I was a few feet long."

"Just how old are you?" Opie asked.

"I have no idea." Stuart replied. "I didn't know you aged until a few hundred years ago, so I didn't bother to count before that. By the way you are all invited to my birthday party. I'm so excited I can hardly wait."

"Thanks." Siege said. "What date is it?"

"I don't understand?" Stuart asked looking perplexed.

"You have a birthday on a certain day of the year."

"Oh, that would probably make more sense, but I like my way better. I have a year long party, once every hundred years."

"Let me guess?" Tricks said. "Next year is your birthday year."

"Oh heavens no." he replied. "If that was the case I would be out of my mind preparing. No I'm having it in twenty three years."

"Okay, well that certainly gives us time to pick up a gift, let me check my diary and I'll get back to you?" Tricks said.

"Oh I do hope you can come." Stuart said. "Why do you have to pick up a gift?"

"It's what you're supposed to do." Siege added, starting to wonder

just how he had read the encyclopaedia. “You give gifts to the party boy, or snake in your case.”

“There you go again.” Stuart said. “You guys really know how to pull my tail. At your birthday you give the gift. You guys really crack me up.” Have you ever heard a huge snake laugh? Very, very scary.

“Sorry to change the subject.” Opie said trying to get the hell laugh out of his head. “You were saying something about Da’Loose?”

“He was one of the guys.” Stuart said. “Quite important as I recall. They marched past when I still lived at the base of the mountain. I was preaching to the rats at the time, I think it was about the time I gave up bugs. Anyway this army, and when I say army, I mean a group of men with pitchforks and sharpened sticks, camped right near my tunnel. I spent some time in their camp; quite a few heathen rats were following them. Try as I might I couldn’t convert them. I had to pin them down with my teeth, but they mostly ended up committing suicide rather than being converted.”

“Do you know you’re a poisonous snake?” Opie asked.

“I am?”

“Yes, as far as I can tell you are one of the most deadly, a King Cobra.”

“Wow.” Stuart said almost beaming. “Here I am thinking I’m a common house snake and all the time I’ve been royalty. That probably explains some of the unexpected deaths.” he continued more soberly.

“Sorry to interrupt your ‘guess the snake’ game.” Tricks said not sounding sorry at all. “Do you think you could continue with the story?”

“Yes of course.” Stuart ruffled his scales and continued. “According to the encyclopaedia it was what is called a rebellion. They were being lead by some guy call Poorson. From what I over heard, he was a poor farmer that was sick of some king. They camped for a few days, then moved on taking the heathen rats with them.”

“Is that all?” Tricks asked a little disappointed.

“No. They left a real mess; it took me almost two weeks to clean up. Whenever I asked the converted rats to help, they always claimed they had bad backs. I’m sorry to leave during this fascinating discussion, but I called the sheep in for mass, and if I don’t give it to them they get all skittish, well more skittish then usual.” He left the three of them alone.

“Have either of you checked on Brain?” Tricks asked, she was

thinking about something Stuart had said, but wasn't ready to bring it up yet.

"I checked on him before I came here." Siege said. "He has some remarkable healing properties. I think the homebrew is affecting him worse than the actual burn."

"I was thinking about it." Opie said. "Snakes aren't affected by their own poison, but it does make them high. I think Stuart adds a little poison to his brew. I think it is also helping Brain heal quickly, although he has healed very fast in the past. My guess is that it's his body's natural defence to his chosen career."

"He does spend a lot of time blowing himself up." Tricks replied with a smile, she quickly lost it and said more seriously. "Stuart said that Poorson was a poor farmer, that doesn't bode well for the size of the treasure."

"Yeah." replied Opie. "I was thinking about that, but I think he probably collected a lot of money from the people who joined up with him."

"As far as I've heard, they were also poor, that's why they started the rebellion." Tricks said.

"Yes, but they could have had some rich backers." Stuart came slithering in.

"I just remembered something about Poorson." he said excitedly.

"That was a quick mass." Tricks said, wishing some of the mass she had to go to at school were that quick.

"Oh, I'm not finished, the sheep have bowed their heads in prayer, they will stay like that for a week unless I say amen." Stuart replied. Then he started to slink away.

"You remembered something?" Opie prompted.

"Oh yes." Stuart continued getting excited. "I was in his tent, Poorson's I mean, and I heard him say he had something that would guarantee their victory, but I didn't hear what. At the time he pointed at a cast iron chest." Stuart started to leave, the older sheep might stay forever with their heads bowed, but the lamb choir could get into some real mischief if he wasn't around.

"I was starting to worry there for a minute." Opie said. "Now we have confirmation of the treasure."

"Yes." Tricks said. "Confirmation that it did exist once, but still no proof that Da'Loose didn't steal it.

"I still think with everything we have heard and seen so far that the treasure does exist and next clue is at Hardpassvil. I'm off to see how

Brain is doing.” Opie left.

“We can only hope it exists.” Siege said, but with Opie gone, Tricks was ignoring her, so she went for another luxurious bath in the sun-heated pool. The Notmad virgins made excellent back scrubbers, and seemed happy to be cleaning a person and not something scaly.

“How you doing Brain?” Opie asked when he walked into what was now the hospital room.

“Hey Opie.” Brain replied looking better. “Don’t drink the local stuff, it’s poison.”

“Truer then you know.” Opie replied, happy that his friend wasn’t dead. “I stopped off at mass, don’t ask, it’s a long story. Anyway Stuart said the homebrew was water and the green stuff, as he put it, from his fangs. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“What do you mean?” Brain asked looking very serious.

“He’s a poisonous snake, from what I know his poison should have killed you.”

“That can’t be right.” Brain replied. “My arm was hurting this morning so I drank some more, great pain killer, but I feel fine.”

“I think you have become immune to his poison.”

“You mean I could take part in the Great Parade as a snake charmer?” Brain joked.

“I don’t think you could charm anything. Maybe if you had Stuart, but his bite would probably kill you before the poison had time to work.” They both had a good chuckle. “We’ve found out some more information about the treasure.” Opie told him about Stuart’s encounter with the Poorson army, and about the discussion they had afterwards.

“I’m with you on that one.” Brain said. “If he went to the trouble to locking it in a cast iron box it must be valuable.”

“That was my thought, anyway get well soon, we can’t leave until you’re fighting fit.” Brain promised he would be up and around before nightfall, if the home brew lasted that long. Opie got Stuart to make some more. Brain spent the day designing the perfect weapon for Tricks, or better yet, what he considered the perfect weapon for Tricks. The uneasiness Opie and Siege had felt when they first arrived in the cave evaporated the next morning when they left. Stuart dropped them at the snow line as close to Hardpassvil as he dared go.

“I hate that white stuff.” he said giving the snow the evil eye. “It

makes me all lethargic and sleepy.” Opie explained to him that he was cold blooded, Stuart took offence, but Siege saved the friendship by saying that he had a warm heart. They reassured him once again that his tooth would re grow. They promised to write, not that they had anywhere to post the letters to. Stuart said he would get a Notmad to open a post box at Easypassvil, now that he knew a world existed outside his own he would start training the Notmads. (That’s a story for another time.) They all hugged him and he was off. It was with high spirits that they walked through the snow, not knowing that the hardest part of the journey was still to come.

Chapter 12

Hiding out in Clemville

The tale is almost told, I'm sad to say. Our heroes are on the last, and most challenging chapter of their adventure. I hope you have enjoyed our time together, I know I have, but every story has an end. While I have many tales to tell this one is over, or will be as soon as I get to the end. Why do I always have to do this? Butting my head in where it doesn't belong. There you are patiently reading my story, waiting (I hope) in eager anticipation for me to start the next thrilling and scary chapter, and all I can do is rattle on about how unhappy I am that the story is coming to an end. Oh gods, I'm doing it again. I really should have my head examined. That reminds me of the time I had to go visit Doc Headpull, it's quite fun the way...lets save that from another time. I am proud to present to you the final chapter, not counting the end bit; I think they call it the epilogue. You know the bit where you visit with the surviving hero some time after the event. (Did I just give something away, I hope not.) You know the post adventure interview and painting op. There I go again rattling away. Well without further ado or fan fair here it is. In fact as I took so long getting back to this chapter, the last, I'll skip the whole walking through the snow bit and put them just outside Hardpassvil, I won't even mention the Yeti. What was that? You want to hear about the Yeti. But I was trying to...never mind. I'll tell you about the Yeti, but it's not part of the story. The next chapter starts at Hardpassvil.

The Yeti is a big white gorilla looking thing. Our heroes met him about half way between the snow line and the village of Hardpassvil, when I say village I mean the place that has the Hardpassvil Inn, and nothing else that even vaguely looks like a village, but as the Inn has a pub in it, it is classed as a village in my book.

"Hello." said the Yeti.

"Hello." replied the four travellers.

"Have you seen Blinky my pet rabbit?" the Yeti asked.

"No." they replied.

"Okay, if you see him, let him know I'm looking for him." And he moved on calling for Blinky and the top of his voice.

Happy now, can we get to the next chapter or do you want me to tell you about Blinky and the Yeti. You do? Well I'm not going to, that's

another story. Okay all that junk I spouted earlier, go back and read the first two sentences and we'll begin.

Hardpassvil

"All I'm saying is that it's not right." Brain said continuing their discussion as they walked towards the Inn.

"I'm telling you Brain it's the right colour." Tricks replied in exasperation. Opie and Siege were wisely not saying anything.

"I've seen it falling in Clemville, in fact I made a study on it, and it was never once this colour."

"I swear Brain; you can be real stupid sometimes."

"I take offence." he replied. "Snow is either brown or yellow. Mostly brown when it falls, but growing yellower the longer it stays on the ground." Tricks shook her head. They were at the door to the Inn. She was hoping he wouldn't bring up the subject again. She knocked and Derek Smith promptly answered it.

"Morning folks." he said cheerfully. "What can I do for you this fine day?" Tricks looked around at the dark clouds, the ground covered in snow and felt the icy wind blowing on their backs. She didn't say anything, she didn't want to start Brain off with his whole theory on it not being possible for white snow to come from black clouds.

"Four rooms. Please." Tricks said. "And maybe a nice place by the fire."

"Certainly." Derek replied. "If you could just sign in the book, I'll go stoke up the living room fire. Could I offer you some of Mrs. Smith's pie? Lunch is still a ways off." Tricks replied that that would be lovely. (She didn't actually say lovely, she said it would be nice, but I thought she said it as if she meant to say lovely, but would never use that word.)

"Look at that." Brain said after Derek had left. "The guy who stayed here before Johnson was called Da'Loose. What a weird coincidence."

"I don't think it is a coincidence." Tricks replied. "Look at the date."

"But that's over two thousand years ago." Brain said. Then he clicked. "Oh, I remember, the legend is about that old."

"Let me see." said Opie pushing past Brain. "He stayed in room 21a. I think one of us should stay there. Did you hear that?"

"Probably a bird landing on the roof." Tricks, oh one of great hearing, said.

“Huh? No I mean when I said 21 hey.” The others looked at him blankly. “The clue! The word is pass, but you will stay till you’re 21 hey.” he quoted from memory.

“You memorized that?” Brain asked, as if it was a complete waste of brain space.

“Shut up Brain, I think Opie is onto something.” Tricks said, but didn’t get a chance to say anything more. Derek returned.

“The fire is ready and Mrs. Smith is heating the pie.” He had learnt from past experience that you don’t mention what type of pie it was.

“Thank you.” Opie said. “Would it be possible for me to stay in room 21? I’m a little superstitious...” He let the sentence hang.

“We only have 21a, would that be all right?” Derek said looking in his room registry. He knew that only one person was staying in the inn, and he was in room 3, but as he had been told since he was old enough to read, ‘always check the registry, ten seconds now can save a lot of embarrassment and maybe a customer.’

“Yes, that would be perfect.” Opie replied.

“I’ll put the rest of your party in adjoining rooms if that suits you.” he added a sir in there somewhere. “If you would like to make your way to the lounge, I’ll send your luggage to your rooms.” He couldn’t see any luggage, but it was always polite to refer to dirty old sacks as luggage. They thanked him and went through to the lounge. They sat around the fire, warming their toes and raving about the pie.

“I hope the treasure is in the cellar here.” Brain said when he was sure they were alone. He couldn’t see Four with his ear to the closed door. He had seen them come in, and knew an opportunity when he saw one. “I don’t think I could go very far in this weather.”

“I wonder if there is a winter clothes store in the area?” Opie said moving closer to the fire. “These extremes in weather can’t be good for you.” They sat in silence for a few minutes then before anyone could say any more, Mrs. Smith returned with a tray. On the tray were four glasses with an amber liquid in them.

“I ‘ave brought you a drop ‘o the good stuff.” she said. “Get this in ya belly and ya be glowing like a witchin”” They thanked her and each took a large mouthful, and nearly choked.

“Whiskey.” Opie said through his burning throat.

“Smooth.” Tricks said gruffly.

“Not bad.” Siege tried.

“Could use a drop of Stuart’s homebrew.” Brain said taking another sip.

“Ya will no be blending me finest with that Steward filth.” Mrs. Smith said.

“Sorry ma’am.” Brain said suddenly recognizing her accent. “I meant no disrespect, it’s just that our heathen pallets are not up to such fine whiskey.” Brain was very proud of his recovery. Mrs. Smith huffed, but brought them a second round. They all felt warmer. Derek returned and told them their rooms were ready.

“I have lit a fire in each, but please feel free to use the lounge as long as you like. Unfortunately all the outdoor activities are cancelled due to weather.” He pulled a flyer from his pocket and read. “We are pleased to announce the reopening of the Hardpassvil Inn. Oh, you already know that.” He cleared his throat and scanned down the page. “Ah, here we are. Indoor activities include adventure billiards, crossbow darts, cards, fire warming and whiskey tasting. Please ask management, that’s me, for any equipment you require. Hope to see you...that’s it really.” he finished, putting the flyer in his pocket.

“I haven’t played crossbow darts since we left the Swill.” Brain said.

“Up for a game Opie?”

“Nah.” Opie replied. “I think I’ll try the fire warming.”

“I’ll play you.” Tricks said.

“Siege?” he tried. She shook her head. “Okay Tricks, but we’re not playing for money again, and you use your left hand and stand twice the distance, blind folded.” He still lost, badly. (Crossbow darts is one of my favourite games, but as it is only found in a few places, I should probably explain it to you. You shoot three miniature arrows into a board using a miniature one-handed crossbow. The board has numbered wedges around it. The goal is to either get the highest score after a predetermined number of shots or to count to twenty, one number at a time.) They had a go at the Whiskey tasting, but Brain lost at that as well. They had more pie for lunch, and then retired to their rooms.

“Let me see.” Opie said trying to get a look at the map. “I don’t think so Brain. I think that we have to come here for another clue.”

“But if you really focus it looks like it’s right on top of the dot.” Brain tried again. He was trying to prove that the dot showed that the treasure would be found in the attic of the building they were staying in.

“No, I think it’s to do with this room, the clue mentioned this room, and something about a pass.”

“Could have been he didn’t finish the word. He meant to say passage to the attic.” Brain tried again.

“Forget the attic, Tricks hit him if he says attic one more time.” Opie said starting to get cross.

“I was thinking the same thing. Come on Brain make my day.” Brain sat scowling on the bed and watched the others.

“What about this lost box?” Opie said, looking at the second clue. “I wonder how we’re going to find that?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Siege said.

“I’m actually starting to worry that this whole thing is a hoax.” Opie said un-expectantly.

“What do you mean?” Tricks asked.

“Well.” he started, cleared his throat and shook his head. “I’ve been thinking about it. Let’s look at the facts. Da’Loose took the treasure and disappeared. Either he spent it or he was robbed and murdered. I can’t think of another explanation for why we haven’t heard of him since. Then all of a sudden we had a map, with clues, a box, a medallion and all the things we don’t know we need yet. So if one of the two fates I mentioned is right, how did they come into being?” The others stared at him for a few seconds and then swore.

“He right, we’re being conned.” Tricks was the first to speak, but the others shared her sentiment. “I’ll kill the bastard if I find him.”

“Um.” Brain said. “Where does the map lead if not to the treasure?”

“My guess is it goes round and round in circles.” Opie said. “We’ll find this lost box and it will have another map with more clues and so on and so on.”

“So you mean we won’t find the treasure?”

“No, I think we’ve be conned.”

“I need a drink.” Brain said feeling weak. “We risked our lives for nothing, just someone’s cruel idea of a joke.”

“The only thing I can think about is getting smashed.” Tricks said.

“Let’s get drunk tonight, and we can start heading for home tomorrow.” They all agreed.

The End

Just kidding! There was a knock on the door before they could reach

it. It was a very dejected Opie who opened the door.
“Sorry to bother you.” Derek said. “but there’s a letter for you.”
“For me?” Opie asked, wondering who could have guessed he was staying here.
“Yes, and it’s marked urgent.” Opie didn’t know what to say. He tried ‘thank you’ and that seemed to work out all right.
“I bet it’s from the hoaxster.” Brain said. “Writing to congratulate us on foiling his plan.” The others just looked at him. “What? It could be.”
Opie looked at the letter.
“It says 21a on the envelope.” He carefully opened it. He sat down very heavily on the bed. “My gods, it’s from Da’Loose.”
“Da’Loose was having us on?” Brain wondered out loud.
“No.” Opie said scanning the page. “Let me read it to you.

Dear Fredrick

I’m sorry I failed you. By the time you read this letter I will have died of the killer flu. Rest assured the treasure is safe; I have hidden it very well. Please do not blame the men with me; it was my own stupidity that has led to this catastrophe. I was trying to save time by travelling over the Hard Pass. We were hit by a blizzard and had to hide out in a cave. By the end of the storm we were completely snowed in. Though the men tried to dig us out, it was hopeless. We were only able to escape during the thaw, but too few of us. I have sent you the map, the clues will lead you to this letter and the key. There is one other thing, I can’t explain it, some sort of dark magic, you will understand when you claim the treasure. You will need the password; it is in the box I have left under my bed. It should remain safe as the Inn is being foreclosed.

Gods speed. Long live King Poorson.

Your faithful servant

Gilbert Da’Loose

He didn’t run off.” Opie ended. “Poorson was probably dead by then, but Da’Loose died still thinking they could win.”
“Is this part of the con?” Brain asked.
“No.” Opie replied. “This is an explanation I didn’t think of. The treasure is real. We finally have proof.”

“Great, but can we still go and get some beer.”

“Yes, but first we must find the key and the password box.” Opie replied. “I wonder what he meant by the dark magic?” No one answered; they were on their hands and knees looking for the box and key.

“Nothing.” said Tricks standing up.

“I’ve got it.” Opie said heading for the door. “Maybe the Inn has a lost and found.” They all ran down stairs. Derek opened up and the first item they found was a box, the next was a mould-covered sandwich and it went down hill from there. One thing they didn’t find was a key.

“You don’t have a key do you?” Opie asked.

“What kind of key?” Derek asked. Opie was at a loss for words, he didn’t want to give the game away.

“You know?” Brain said. “The one Da’Loose left.” The others stared at him in horror. They were more shocked when Derek gave it to him.

“This calls for a celebration.” Tricks said after hiding their newly acquired items in their room.

They woke up the next morning not feeling quite so happy. How Brain got the dart in his rump is still open to debate. After a leisurely Breakfast they went up stairs and opened the box. The password was missing. They could clearly see where it had been, but someone must have taken it from the box. They all thought of Derek first, but the man was so honest it made them feel sick just thinking about it.

“What about Johnson?” Brain asked.

“Who?” Tricks and Opie asked simultaneously.

“The other guy staying here. I saw his name in that registry thing.”

“That was from years ago.” Tricks answered first.

“No, he checked in a few days ago.” The others thought about it for a little while and then went to check the book. Sure enough Brain was right, and he didn’t let them forget it. They found Derek and asked him where Mr. Johnston was.

“The fool has paid in full for the whole winter and this morning he decides to go up the Pass.” They ran up stairs.

“He’s got the password and he’s probably heard every word we’ve said.” Tricks said as they sorted out the meagre clothes they had.

“I was hoping we still had time to plan.” Opie said, looking at the clothes he had hoped to replace.

“I guess we are going to have to go after him like this then.” Brain said feeling cold already.

“No.” said Siege. “Give me a sword Tricks, I’ll get the password back. You worry about finding some clothes.”

“Sorry to tell you this, my love.” Opie said. “But your clothes aren’t any better than ours.”

“I could walk up that pass naked and not feel a thing. Stop arguing and give me a sword.” The others looked at her with a new respect. She walked off into the snow, only Opie watched her go. The other two were trying to convince the Smiths to give them some warm clothes.

“You will have to go to town.” Derek said. “What we have is the bare necessities.” Nothing they could say would change their minds. They told Opie the bad news.

“Then we will just have to go to town.” he replied. In the end they decided that only Tricks should go, as she was the fastest. She got to Barock and back in record time. (I have no collaborating evidence, but I think someone was playing with string again.)

Siege

The going was tougher than she had expected when she volunteered. No snow had fallen since Four Johnston left, so at least she had an easy track to follow. She was worried about what would happen when she caught up with him. She was in no doubt that she would be able to move faster through the snow than him, but she didn’t know what kind of a head start he had. All she had to do was get close enough to him to steal the password, but she didn’t want to tell the others her fear. If the dark magic was two thousand years old, would it still be working. If it wasn’t, he would still be able to get through. Siege wasn’t sure she would be able to stop him, well she knew she would be able to stop him. She could just walk up to him and stab him, but she wasn’t sure she could do that.

She had to climb the second rise on her hands and knees. When she got to the top she saw the man. He must have heard something, because he turned around. Siege recognized him instantly. He kept walking. It didn’t take long for Siege to catch up to him. She walked in his footsteps, sword in hand. He kept turning as if he was expecting some one. He also talked to himself.

“I should have killed them.” he muttered each time he turned. It

made Siege's decision easier. She was about to plunge the sword into his heart when she thought of something. None of them knew where the cave was, but this man was walking with a purpose. She couldn't kill him until he showed her where the cave was. She followed him. The weak sun was setting when he stopped and started digging. Before she lost her nerve, she plunged the sword into his heart. He died instantly, without a word. Siege left the sword sticking out of him and ran back to the Inn, the tears rolling down her face and freezing in the snow. She had never killed a defenceless man before, up close and personal. It was late when she ran into Opie's arms.

"Well at least we can now take our time. Good thinking Siege." Tricks said after hearing the story. Siege had told it to Opie, but she had cried so much he told the others, sparing her the pain of reliving it.

"No." Siege said. "We have to leave first thing in the morning. I saw a storm brewing, and if his body gets covered we'll never find the cave."

"Okay." Tricks said. "What's the password?" Siege smiled.

"Stand aside, King Poorson the Great wishes to enter." she said.

"He might be the butt of all money jokes, but I think Da'Loose had a great sense of humour." Brain said.

"Irony." Opie corrected.

"Iron what?"

"Forget it. Go get some sleep."

"Don't boss me around, who do you think's in charge of this expedition?"

"Tricks."

"Okay, good night then." Brain locked himself in his room and continued working on his weapon for Tricks. (This is where things get a little strange.) Tricks couldn't sleep; she went down to the pub to try find some warm milk or hot whiskey. Mr. and Mrs. Smith were sitting behind the bar talking, the strange thing was Brain. He was sitting in the corner nursing a beer. Tricks walked over to the bar.

"Evening." she said. "How long has he been here?" She pointed at Brain.

"About five beers." Derek replied. "Make that six." He had just seen Brain raise his hand.

"I'll take it to him, can you pour me one as well." She took the beers and sat down next to Brain.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him.

“Nothing.” he said. “I was just working on something, but I was having trouble staying awake, so I drank one of my energy drinks.”

“You did what?”

“They’re not as bad as everyone makes out.” he replied. “Only thing is I’m wide awake and well, feel like drinking beer.”

“Nothing wrong with that, but you shouldn’t drink alone.”

“I know, but I had such a strong urge.”

“Well I’m here now, so tell me what you’re working on?”

“It was supposed to be a surprise.” he said suddenly looking bashful.

“A present for you.”

“For me?” He showed her the drawing. “It’s just a sword.” she said, looking at the drawing.

“Yeah, but when you push this lever it, well turn the page.” She did.

“Wow, would it work?”

“Yeah, but I know what you think. If I make it, it will be a flop.”

“So don’t make it. Get a metal smith to do it.”

“Yeah well, happy birthday for tomorrow.”

“Thanks Brain, but if you tell the others...” She paused. “Well please don’t tell the others.”

“Your secret is safe with me, so how old are you?” He laughed.

“Younger then you.”

It wasn’t long after that when Tricks started to feel sleepy. Brain stayed up most of the night, but finally fell asleep close to dawn, only to he woken up again.

It was still dark when they set off. Siege had no problem once Opie let go her hand. The other three were struggling. Siege hoped that she could remember where Four had been digging. The storm had come early. A fresh layer of snow had been deposited. With the four travellers on the pass the clouds were making an effort. Snowflakes gently floated down, no one tried to catch them on their tongues. All the travellers were Clemites, they knew that snow was poisonous. After an hour of trying, the clouds gave up and dumped their full load.

“Where did that come from?” Opie asked, waist deep in snow.

“I told you it wasn’t snow.” Brain said, wading out.

“It’s too cold for you to start.” Tricks said. “If I hit you, you’re going to shatter into a million pieces.” Brain kept very quiet. He still remembered playing with liquid nitrogen, and he felt that cold. They

trampled on. At some point Opie mentioned that they should have gotten snow shoes, but stopped when Tricks glared at him. They were nearing where Siege thought the cave was. The sun was directly overhead, but wasn't acting like it.

"What's that?" Brain asked pointing up the steep side of the mountain.

"Looks like a cloud that's lost its footing." Tricks replied.

"I don't think so." replied Opie staring. "Looks more like an avalanche to me."

"Oh." said Brain profoundly. "What does it do, apart from slipping down mountains?"

"I don't know, but we'll probably find out in a few minutes." Tricks said. "Let's keep walking, we haven't got all day." They kept walking.

"Hey it's grown." Brain said.

"Just ignore it." Tricks said, she wanted to get out of the cold, and stopping every ten seconds to get an update on the 'avalanche' wasn't going to make that happen. A few seconds later she got a lot colder.

The avalanche raced over them, hardly stopping to say hello. Our four adventures were convinced to join him in his mad dash to the Hardpassvil Inn. He was getting close when someone must have called time. He put the breaks on and sat in a huddle, looking like a new mountain. Siege walked right out, but the other three were trapped. Opie had the spade tied to his back, but he was so pinned in, he couldn't move, as were the other two. Siege had no choice but to head back to the Inn and find help.

"I warned you." was Derek's first response. "Come on let's get some shovels from the barn. I should tell you that the survival rate from an avalanche is also zero." Siege said that she didn't have time for pessimistic points of view. She didn't believe in the half full or empty glass concept, she like to think the glass was full, no halves about it. Derek looked at her blankly, but got the shovels anyway.

It took them all day, but at sunset the three blue people were sitting in front of a roaring fire drinking hot whiskey in coffee, something Mrs. Smith was trying. Brain wondered if she could put some cream on top, but they didn't have any.

"You are all very lucky." Derek said. "Now perhaps you will believe me when I say the pass is no place to be this time of year." They all nodded, but said they were going out again tomorrow. He washed his

hands of them, or said he would, but didn't.

Round two started after a hearty breakfast. (When I say hearty I don't mean good for the heart, I mean quite the opposite.) This time they found the cave without any problems. The avalanche had opened up the top of the cave, so they were able to crawl in. They then decided to leave, as it was the wrong cave.

"Hey what you doing in my cave?" the previously sleeping man said.

"Sorry, wrong cave." Tricks replied.

"Oh, okay, do you have anything to eat that isn't raw rat?"

"Don't I know you? Opie said looking closer. The man looked into Opie's eyes, turned his head and spoke to the cave.

"Have we seen him before?" he asked, then turned to Opie. "No." he replied.

"Okay." Opie said slowly. "Well you look familiar."

"I should I'm Large Greg Copper, everyone knows me."

"You're another twin?" Tricks asked.

"No, there are three of us, that makes us. What does that make us?" he asked the cave. "Thanks, that makes us a threesome."

"Triplets." Opie corrected.

"Are you calling Rock a liar?"

"What have rocks got to do with it?" Opie replied puzzled.

"Peasants." Greg said. "You should respect your elders. Should." Little pause. "Should." Little pause. The next thing they knew Greg fell face first onto the ground and started snoring.

"That was a little weird?" Brain said unnecessarily.

"Should we help him?" Siege asked.

"Probably, we owe that much to his bother." Tricks said. "Brain start a fire, Opie organize some of our supplies, I think the poor guy looks a little undernourished." In no time, well a little time as the wood was quite wet, they had a fire going. Greg woke up and the smile on his face suggested it had been a while since he had sat around a fire eating warm, well, cooked food.

"So you have come to hear my wisdom." Greg said finishing off his piece of rat pie.

"Not really." Tricks said. "We were looking for another cave."

"Did you hear that Rock? They're looking for another cave." Brain did the circle around the side of the head thing. "I know, but, well you know, I was just making a point. Was. Was. Was." The snoring started again.

“I think he’s lived alone too long.” Opie said. “I had it once; the books started talking to me.” Tricks and Brain looked at him, you know the look, the one you give people when you would prefer they kept certain information to themselves.

“Alrighty then.” Brain said. “We should probably be making tracks.”

“How do we know this isn’t the right cave?” Siege asked.

“Do you see a cast iron chest?” Brain said a little caustically.

“What?” Greg said jumping to his feet. “What do you mean? But they have real food. No I’m not going to kill them.”

“I think you should get ready, it looks like he’s lost it.” Brain whispered to Tricks.

“Please don’t collapse the cave.” Greg said. “How do I know what the password is? Oh them.” Greg turned to them, three swords and a crossbow were levelled at him, he completely ignored the weapons.

“Rock wants to know what the password is.” he said.

“The dark magic.” Opie said. “This is the right cave. Tell me Mr. Ah metal guy, is there a cast iron chest farther in the cave?”

“Greg, call me Greg the wise man who sits in the mountain and has all the answers to all the question and never tires of his relentless search for perfection.”

“Okay, all that stuff you said. Is there a chest deep in the cave?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about all that stuff you just said about knowing everything?”

“What stuff?”

Opie screamed, a few stone fell from the roof and hit him on the head. “Rock says give him the password, leave or die.”

“Just give him the password.” Brain said putting his sword away.

“Stand aside, King Poorson the Great wishes to enter.” Opie said, trying to sound regal.

“Is that right?” Greg asked Rock.

“I don’t know.” Rock said.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Opie said. “Did the rest of you just hear the rock talk?”

“Yes.” they replied.

“Oh good, at least I’m not going nuts. Okay Rock what do you mean you don’t know?”

“I can’t remember.” Rock replied. “It’s been so long.”

“Take my word for it, it is right.”

“How can I?”

“Because I have it written down on a piece of paper.” Opie felt a

little stupid showing the paper to a rock, but did anyway.
“How do I know you didn’t write that yourself?”
“I didn’t, we found it in a box from Da’Loose.”
“Okay.” said Rock. “Send Da’Loose.”
“He died, years ago. He sent us in his place.”
“Then I can’t help you.”
“Screw it.” Tricks said. “Let’s just go in.” The roof caved in over the passage. “Or we could try negotiating.”
“Please let us in.” Opie said, and stroked the roof. Rock didn’t reply.
“It’s magic Opie, hold the rock and Tricks and I will go get the chest.” Brain said heading for the tunnel.
“Don’t let go.” Tricks said following him. Opie had to stand holding Rock for almost an hour while Tricks and Brain dragged the chest out. They thought it would be prudent to take it out of the cave before Opie released the rock. Greg sat quietly trying to talk to his old friend. He was asleep when they dragged the chest out.
“Finally. Open it up Opie.” Tricks said a little out of breath. Opie wanted to make a little speech, but the others made him use the key. He turned the key and the chest unlocked like it was just used yesterday. Brain was the first to swear, but the others followed him very quickly.
“We’re too late.” Brain said after getting it out of his system.
“Someone has beaten us to it.” They all looked into the empty chest, well not completely empty.
“Looks like they left us a note.” Opie said reaching in. “Looks like quite a substantial one.” It was wrapped in oiled leather. “Let’s get back to the Inn, we can read it there.” The others agreed. They made their way back. It was a very depressed group of people that sat down at the Hardpassvil inn pub. Their beers sat untouched in front of them as Opie started to open the document.
“Maybe it’s another map.” he said without conviction. The others didn’t respond. He spread the document out in front of them. Brain was the first to recognize it.
“It’s a design for a hand held crossbow.” he said, his interest suddenly peaked.
“Look it’s dated and Poorson signed the design.” Opie said.
“Why are you two so excited?” Tricks asked.
“Because...” they both began. “You tell her Opie.”
“Thanks.” Opie smiled. “It’s the treasure.”
“What?”

“Let me explain. The crossbow wasn’t invented until about six hundred years ago. If Poorson had been able to get this into production he would have won the war. You see the crossbow can be used by farmers, if each of them had been equipped with this they would have been unstoppable.”

“So you’re saying there’s no gold.”

“Looks that way, but what we have here might be better.”

“How so?” Tricks asked wondering what would be better than gold.

“To a weapons collector or a library this is an almost priceless object.” He carefully started to fold it up.

“You mean we found treasure after all.”

“Yes.”

Epilogue

Knothear

Well the story is told. They have the treasure, but there are a few loose ends I would like to clear up.

Large Greg Copper and Rock are still arguing. Rock is still guarding the cave and Greg is still giving out useless advice. They are still debating whether there are other people in the world or if it's all just a figment of their imagination.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith are finally having a quiet winter in front of the fire, except for Sundays when they entertain half of Barock.

Humphrey has settled down with his older woman, Barbara Rock. (Yeah you guesst it the girl Barock is named after.) There is talk of wedding bells.

The wars in Crustation are as popular as ever, but the talk of the greatest war of all has simmered down a bit. The statue erected to Brain looks more like King Lob.

King Isabelle is looking forward to her first child; Paulo is in a flat panic trying to get the golems to build a nursery. He is using hand gestures, so you can imagine just how bad it is going.

As for our four heroes, well see for yourself.

The Swill and Donkey

“Welcome home.” Tricks said, letting go of the potential troublemaker. She put the empty energy drink on the bar. “How was the honeymoon?” Opie and Siege both blushed.

“It was good.” Opie managed.

“So are we going to be seeing more of you Siege, or what?”

“A little, but it's safe to say that my skills are still intact.” She only lost her power for, how do I put this delicately, however long the session is. That's how long she is visible. So on a good day ten fifteen minutes, but mostly three or four.

“How was the reunion?” Opie asked Tricks.

“Same old same old. We have only just finished cleaning the place up. Congratulations on your promotion, Opie.”

“Thanks, but it’s to you and Brain that the credit should go. How can I ever thank you enough for donating the manuscript to the library. It was great, Clammy himself congratulated me. Assistant head librarian actually gives me a little power, I’m thinking of contacting Bell, starting a scroll exchange.”

“She was asking after you at the reunion.” Tricks replied. “Paulo is going out of his mind with the baby coming.” They all laughed thinking of Paulo running around trying to get things done with just three words.

“Where is Brain?” Siege asked.

“He’ll be over in a few minutes, who would have believed he would have made a useful energy drink?” They all laughed. “It might not give you any energy, but it sure as hell makes you drink beer. He can’t make enough to supply the demand from pubs.” She pointed to the nearly empty shelf behind the bar.

“Is that Brain’s famous sword?” Opie asked pointing to the three bladed sword hanging above the energy drinks.

“Yeah.” Tricks replied. “The bloody idiot decided to make it himself, so the first time I used it, it nearly took off my fingers. Don’t tell him, but I got Blacky Smith to make me a real one based on his design.” She pulled the sword from her back and demonstrated. The others were rather impressed. “Not everyone’s thing, but it works okay for me. I tried to sell the design to King Clement for Brain, but he had heard about how it had nearly chopped off my fingers, so he wasn’t interested.”

At that moment a man in a rumpled suit, carrying flowers and a box of chocolates walked in.

“Is that who I think it is?” Siege asked.

“Yes.” replied Tricks. “Brain says that he’s courting me. He’s trying really hard, last night he took me to Greenshort’s, you know the fancy place on Bullion Heights? Really expensive, but the food was in such small portions, I had to eat when I got home. He said I could pick the place tonight so I’ve chosen room service at Interland Ratz, you know, throw him a bone, or give him one.” she said with a wink.

The end.

