



Myth Communication

Robert M. Cook, et al

Long ago and far away, some of us at alt.fan.asprin were writing a round-robin collaborative fan-fic piece, based on Robert Lynn Asprin's then-defunct 'MythAdventure' fantasy/comedy novels. If you don't know who Robert Lynn Asprin is, go check out my handy-dandy FAQ page. I contributed some chapters to this story, and, doing my best Phil Foglio imitation, also drew a picture for each chapter.

The fan-fic eventually trailed off and died. I decided this wasn't acceptable, and wrote an epic multi-chapter ending on my own.

This story takes place after *Mything Persons*, and sort of spins off from there into an alternate timeline from the official books, particularly when my chapters get going. Certain background details are different from the original stories as well.

Below you will find the original 13 chapters of the story, my 13 drawings for those chapters, and my ending, which I called *Myth Communication*. There are no drawings for the 'new' chapters, but who knows; maybe someday I will get inspired and ambitious.

Disclaimers...

- If you don't like the ending I wrote, write your own and post it.
- If you want remember the original story as it ended with the 13 chapters, don't read my ending.
- If you have moral and/or legal objections to the concept of fan-fiction, please leave now.
- If any lawyer-types in positions of authority ever come after me for posting this stuff, it'll be yanked so fast it'll make your head spin, so enjoy it while you can.
- Before posting the original chapters, I did do a spot of grammar and spelling correction, even to the extent of adding a single line here and there to clear up the narrative flow. However, no new plot has been added, and several minor contradictions and inconsistencies remain, as a token of the fact that several authors worked on this thing.
- I came up with an opening quote for each of the four original chapters which didn't have one.
- **IF YOUR WORK APPEARS HERE AND YOU DO NOT WISH IT TO, PLEASE CONTACT ME AND I WILL REMOVE IT.**
- **IF I HAVE MISIDENTIFIED ANY OF THE AUTHORS, PLEASE CONTACT ME AND I WILL CORRECT IT.**

Credits

Charles Billings: Chapters 1, 8
Robert M. Cook: Chapters 4, 7, 11, 14a-33a
Steven Harris: Chapters 5, 9
Raginturtl: Chapter 12
James Whitney: Chapters 2, 6, 10, 13
Nathan Yospe: Chapter 3

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Chapter 1

“Wrong? What could possibly go wrong?”

J. Hoffa

“HEY KID! You’re not sleeping, are you?”

Aahz’s booming voice penetrated through the walls of my bedroom, making me wonder whether the Deveels had lied to us when they said the place was soundproof. Either that, or Aahz’s voice was one of the few things throughout the dimensions that simply could not be stopped. Probably the latter, I groaned.

Needless to say, I was still sleeping off the effects of yet another after-hours bout of drinking with Aahz and the guys over at Gus’s. They always held it better than I ever could hope to. File it away as another object lesson, I guessed.

“Kid, what are you doing?” Aahz bellowed as he burst into my room. “Don’t you know today’s the big Huffball tournament over at the Geek’s?”

“I do,” I shot back at him, “and our match isn’t until evening!” My head started vibrating painfully, and I just shut my eyes tightly. That seemed to help.

“Yeah, but Gus’s singles’ match begins in two hours! We’ve got to be there to pull for him!” He strode over to my bed and lowered his voice, “Besides, I’ve got a five spot on him. Now get up!”

Not willing to let me go at my own pace, Aahz grabbed me and pulled me out of bed.

“Okay, okay,” I said shakily. “I’m up. I’m up.”

“C’mon. Chumley and Tananda are getting breakfast together.” He let me go and turned back toward the door.

I sighed heavily and rubbed my eyes. Aahz reached back and grabbed me, pulling me out the door.

* * *

Aahz strode into the dining room ahead of me. Chumley's face was buried in a newspaper, which apparently he read intently. Tananda was going through some forms while she spooned herself something out of a bowl. The table was covered with platters of bagels, meats, fruit and other assorted breakfast foods.

"Well, we're all up now," Aahz said. "What's good today, Tanda?"

"Well, I thought the..." she began. She stopped suddenly as Chumley shrieked. We all looked at him as he looked at me. He was wearing his trifocals again.

"Gads," he exhaled, as he looked at me again, "it's only you, Skeeve. For a moment I thought a giant eye was following Aahz into the room."

"Take those damn things off," Tananda scolded him.

"I need them to read the funnies," he said, gesturing with his Financial News of Deva. "Besides, the troll who invented them also invented democracy. If that's not a good endorsement I don't know what else is."

"He should have stuck to governments," she mumbled. She turned back to Aahz. "I did the bacon today, and the grapefruits are very nice."

"All I needed to hear," Aahz said. He then went into the kitchen and got himself some Pervish nasties, slurping them greedily from their carton as he came back into the dining room. Tananda narrowed her eyes at him but simply went back to her forms.

"Well," Chumley said disgustedly, "the Family Circus sucks again today."

"The FND picked it up?" Aahz spit some of his food across the table.

Chumley nodded from behind his paper without looking up. "It's everywhere!"

I grabbed a orenberry bagel and started chewing into it. I just stared at the fruit on the table. "Hey, just where do orenberries come from?" I asked, gesturing with my bagel.

Aahz and Tananda looked at one another for a moment.

"Skeeve," said Tananda carefully, "there's really no such thing as an orenberry."

I just looked at her.

Aahz laughed. "Let's just say it's a creative euphemism."

"For what?" I asked, puzzled.

"For something that'd never sell if they were straightforward about it," he finished, grinning.

I chewed for another second, then spit the whole thing out. I tossed the bagel on the table and felt ill.

"Hey, relax, kid. It won't kill you. We Pervects love 'em." He grabbed my half-eaten bagel and started to mop up the juice from his carton with it. Chumley

reached for his glass of juice, but he fell a few inches short. He kept grasping at it vainly. Finally, Tananda nonchalantly pushed it toward him until he grabbed it. He glared at her as he took a draught from the glass. “Don’t say anything,” he said. Tananda just looked at him. “I can tell you’re just sitting there smugly with your bloody perfect eyesight and all, just mocking me. Don’t try to hide it.”

Instead of responding, Tananda picked up a honeydew and set it in front of her. I grabbed some bacon and poured myself a glass of juice. She picked up a chopping knife and sliced the honeydew in half as I chewed my bacon. She held up one half by her head and looked contemptuously at Chumley.

“Do you see this?” she asked dramatically.

“Surely,” Chumley glared back.

She took the half of honeydew and slowly mashed it into his face. Chumley threw down his trifocals and his paper and surged up.

“Okay, that’s blinking *it!*” he yelled.

“Hey boss!” Guido’s voice broke into our little drama. “Someone’s here to see you!”

We all looked back at him, the moment completely defused.

“Tell them to come back later,” I said to him. “We’re in the middle of breakfast.”

“Actually, boss,” Guido continued, “it’s an assemblage of Deveels, representing the Devan Department of Commerce. They’re pretty insistent.”



I looked over at Aahz. "Our boss," Aahz said. He looked back at Guido. "Give us a minute, Guido, we'll be right down." He looked back at me and sighed sadly. "So much for Gus's match."

* * *

Ten minutes later, Aahz and I found ourselves in a very important looking conference room, sitting across a large oval table from three well dressed Deveels. Two more equally well dressed Deveels sat behind them, next to the wall. Those at the table looked just younger than middle age, while one of the Deveels by the wall looked very old. The other by the wall was the youngest in the room, and was leaning slightly toward the elder Deveel.

"We'll come right to the point," said one of the Deveels at the table, the one on the left, "my name's Ollipo, and I'm Department Vice President of the Devan Department of Commerce. With me are Yulleen," he gestured at the Deveel sitting next to him, "Department of Commerce Deputy Vice President for Agriculture and Mining, and Ginghe," he nodded at the third Deveel, "chief negotiator for the Department of Commerce."

The other two nodded at us. "Who are they?" I gestured at the other two.

The three Deveels looked at one another. After a moment, they looked back at me stonily. Apparently that wasn't an appropriate question. Aahz nudged me. He leaned over and whispered at me. "He's got to be the President of the Department. He's holding the bag for this entire dimension. The other guy's his lackey. Deveels are cagey, though. Just talk to these three. They're going to be the dealers. "

"You mean he's in control..." I began.

"Yes," Aahz was suddenly tense. "Keep that in mind."

"If we may begin," Ginghe began testily. We turned our attention to him. "We have hired you as Magician in Residence for the dimension of Deva, and we are now faced with a situation that requires your services."

I looked at Aahz. He glanced at me and nodded. Ginghe continued. "Commerce has run into a problem with our hard labor. In eight of our dimensions, we have discovered a plot by a number of our workers to illegally organize to collectively bargain with the Department. Our efforts to quell the organizing efforts have thus far failed in satisfactorily resolving the impasse. We now turn to you for a solution."

He pulled out a stack of papers, and laid a ream in front of us. It appeared to be a guide. Aahz picked it up and glanced it over. It contained some charts and pictures, but was mostly a text document.

"The primary dimension affected is Gezirah. The operations affected by the movement are seventeen mine systems, nineteen timber subsidiaries and mills, and

fourteen textile mills.”

“How many workers?” Aahz asked.

“One hundred eight thousand,” Ginghe said grimly. Aahz looked impressed. Ginghe continued. “Secondary dimensions include Augaraj, an ocean world: workers from numerous resorts, fisheries and off-shore operations.” He slapped another packet in front of us. “Kaymayan,” out came another packet, “mining, grain agriculture and exotic timbers. Chirosovo,” ...yet another packet... “mountainous and frozen, numerous mining operations and resorts affected. Boukiero, a jungle world, with textile, fruit, gaming and distilling operations affected.”

“How many distilleries?” Aahz asked, smiling.

“Fifteen,” Ginghe said, humorlessly. He passed over more packets, apparently unwilling to let Aahz continue. “Kabayouran, silk and spice operations and mining of magikal metals affected. Najran, manufacturing facilities for cosmetics and refineries affected. Finally,” he passed over the last packet, “there is Toros Daglari, another ocean world, with unrest at resort and fishery operations. Total working population affected numbers seven hundred seventeen thousand.”

“Sounds rough,” Aahz said, glancing at the papers. “What do you want us to do?”

“You will head out to Gezirah tonight. There you will meet with Dierack, our field liaison. He will fill you in with all the details concerning our operation and counter-strikes. He has more detailed information on the subjects and concerns involved.”

“Tonight?” Aahz looked askance at him. “We’ve had other plans...”

Ginghe wouldn’t let him finish. “Need we remind you of the contract you signed with us? It explicitly stated that you would provide any services we deemed necessary. That is what we are paying you for, after all.”

“Look,” Aahz said bluntly. “We’d love to help, but we’ve got other plans. How ‘bout we arrange to hire...”

Ollipo broke in. “The contract stated that no subcontracting was allowed. We hired the Great Skeeve, not the people hired by the Great Skeeve.”

“But it said that if you were asking on behalf of a private entity...”

“These are State-run operations.”

“Oh,” Aahz’s face fell. “But we can contract with third parties to aid in our effort.”

“Correct.”

Aahz closed his eyes as if in great pain. “And that means that the rate we’ll be paid is a fixed rate.” I now understood what pained him.

“Three percent of the annual profit of the effected operations.”

“And how much are we talking about?”

Ginghe, Ollipo and Yulleen looked at one another for a moment. Ginghe looked back at us.

“Thirty eight point six million gold.”

They looked at us for a moment. Aahz’s face was frozen in a half smile, half sneer.

“Sounds good, gentlemen,” Aahz said smoothly. “But let’s just say I wasn’t born yesterday.” The three Deveels’ stare began to waver. I noticed the elder Deveel leaned over and spoke briefly with his lackey, and shifted in his seat, folding his arms and staring at Aahz. Aahz continued. “You’re talking about extensive operations in eight dimensions, concerning nearly three quarters of a million workers. Either you’re feeding me a line of crap, or you’re three turnips short of a picnic and this is all some bizarre hoax.”

He leaned forward against the marble table and looked fiercely at Ginghe. “So you’re going to tell me exactly what the figure is, or we’ll let you solve your own problems. You may have gotten a lot on us in that contract, but I made sure it’d require you to play ball with us. You spill, or we walk.”

The three looked at each other nervously. Ginghe shot an anxious look over his shoulder at the elder Deveel. The elder nodded at him. Ginghe looked back at us and licked his lips. Aahz just smiled at him, intimidating him right out of his tailored pants.

“Profits...” Ginghe stammered, looking at the notes he had before him, “...profits from the last year totaled six hundred eighty billion.”

I froze, wondering if I had sullied my drawers. That was nothing compared to Aahz, however. He screamed and in reflex smacked his head clean on the table hard enough to almost crack it. His head bounced off the table and he flew right out of his chair onto the floor. He pulled himself back up and braced himself on the table. His tongue was hanging out, and apparently, he wasn’t aware of it. He just jabbered incoherently. We just looked at the Deveels. Ginghe looked over at Yulleen, then looked at Ollipo, and looked back at us.

“You shall not receive payment until after completion of the job. So, as we said, we would like you to start right away. We will provide room and board for you and any agents you feel are necessary for this undertaking. You shall leave for Gezirah tonight, and you will meet Dierack tomorrow morning. The concierge will give you more detailed instructions when you reach the hotel.”

“That is all, gentlemen,” Ollipo concluded grimly.

* * *

Aahz was still choking as we made our way back to our tent. “I can’t. I just can’t believe it.”

“I’m worried, Aahz.”

“What?” he gasped incredulously. “What’s the problem?”

“Why would the Deveels hire us for a job of such magnitude?”

“Why do you think they hired you as resident magician in the first place?” he

retorted. “Besides, it can’t be that extensive, or else they would have given us a massive staff right there. We’ve got to see what this Dierack person has to say before we can truly appraise what’s going on. It’s labor, though, Skeeve. They can be tricky, but you’d be surprised how easily they’ll fall apart once you get going, and we’re even going to get an all expense trip to the Toros Daglari out of the deal. Kid, that’s the poshest, most exclusive resort dimension in the universe. It’s amazing!”

“But Aahz, if it’s that easy, wouldn’t they have already taken care of it?”

“*Get out of my way!*” Aahz yelled at a gaggle of old women that stood before us. “*I’m a gonna holler!*”

He ran off toward our tent, hollering in delight. I couldn’t even muster up a smile.

Chapter 2

*“We must approach this problem with our
customary care, discretion, and tact!”*

Vlad the Impaler

“AAHZ, I’VE GOT a very bad feeling about this.”

“You’ve got a very bad feeling about everything, kid.”

We were packing our things in preparation for our trip to Gezirah. It would have been a lot quicker if Aahz actually spent his time packing and less time dancing around the room.

“Aahz,” I continued, “we have no idea what we’re getting into here.”

“Listen kid,” Aahz replied, “it’s just a labor dispute. Some guys don’t want to work. We convince them they should. Simple.”

“If it’s so simple, why are they paying us so much money for it?”

“Kid, it’s in our contract. That’s the sweetest thing about it. We get three percent of the affected profits. We went over this before. They need us, that’s what they pay us.”

“So why do they need us?”

“How should I know? They’re Deveels! They’re incompetent.”

“Hmph.” I wasn’t convinced.

“Look, Kid, if it makes you feel any better, I know this is going to be difficult. Heck, it’ll probably be the toughest assignment we’ve been on in a while, if only because there are so many people involved. But after it... think of it. You’ll never have to do anything that you don’t want to do. Ever.”



“That makes me feel so much better,” I replied, sarcastically.

We had finished packing and headed down to our foyer, where the rest of our group was waiting. We had decided on a group of five: Gus, our nigh-invulnerable gargoyle friend; Tananda, the trollop assassin; Chumley, Tananda’s brother, a mild-mannered gargantuan troll; Aahz, who you’ve already met; and me.

That left out a few people. Guido and Nunzio, my bodyguards, complained the loudest.

“We’re his bodyguards! We guard his body! How are we supposed to do that if we’re nowhere near his body?”

“I believe,” Aahz countered, “that Skeeve will be adequately protected.”

“It’s our responsibility,” Nunzio countered.

“I’m not having this argument with you two,” Aahz denied flatly. “This is not a combat mission. We’re going to places which probably haven’t even heard of Skeeve. You two bumblers are going to mess up the negotiation process. The use of bodyguards is a sign of bad faith.”

“It’s a sign of bad faith???” replied Guido, incredulous.

And on it went. I really couldn’t take any more of it. Aahz was right, but he was holding back a key element of his decision process. He knew this would be a fight, and he didn’t want anyone in there that he didn’t have a long history of trust. Plus, I suspect that he wanted to keep the group as small as possible. Less ways to split the fee around.

And so Massha had to stay, also. She was considerably easier to convince. We wanted a responsible party to keep an eye on the place while we were gone.

Someone who could handle whatever was thrown at him (or her, in this case). Also, she qualified under Aahz's "lack of long history". So that was it. Truthfully, I felt the worst about leaving Massha behind, but I could understand the reasoning behind it.

And we were off.

* * *

Gezilah was a dimension of heavy forests and rolling hills. We had D-hopped into what Aahz had said was one of the few settlements on the dimension. The native Gezirahans were small, furry beings. On the average, they were two feet shorter than I was, though slightly broader.

The town, however, was not run by Gezirahans. It was run by Deveels. We only saw a few natives in the town, although there were several Deveels disguised as Gezirahans. We went to the hotel, which was a large brick building that looked distinctly out of place in a wooded environment.

We walked in and "checked in" to the hotel, whatever that meant. The proprietor of the hotel, a clean-cut young Deveel, gave us two keys to some rooms, and showed the way up there. Our bags were taken by several native Gezirahans, who grumbled a bit but seemed to do their job effectively.

After a night's sleep, we finally met with Dierack the following morning. Dierack was a large, muscular Deveel who was also fairly clean cut. He carried with him a stack of papers with pictures of various people.

"We have reason to believe," Dierack said, "that there is a small group of competitors that are sabotaging our operations on the affected dimensions. We know very little about them; however, the extent to which the labor disputes have spread across the dimension implies their existence."

"So," Aahz countered, "we don't know what we're up against."

"Correct," Dierack continued, "but in the meantime your duties are to stabilize the dimensions and search for the saboteurs. In the meantime, here are a list of the native Gezirahan leaders." He then rattled off several names, displaying pictures that all looked alike to me.

"And these are the people we'll be negotiating with?" I asked. This brought a loud laugh from Dierack, and a confused look from Aahz and Tananda.

"Negotiating?" Dierack continued, once he had gotten his breath back. "Dear oh dear, no. You're going to kill them."

Chapter 3

“Hey Gang! Let’s split up!”

J. Lennon

“WHAT!” I lunged toward the Devel, heedless of his muscles. A steel bar stopped me before I was halfway there. As I picked myself up off the ground and struggled to recapture my breath, Aahz glared down at me, his arm still outstretched. “Easy, kid,” he said in that low voice he uses when he’s expecting me to play along with one of his cons, “Just go along with him.”

“But Aahz! He’s talking about hiring us to assassinate these people!”

“Good thing we brought along an assassin, then, isn’t it?”

Tananda winked at me, “Don’t worry, we’ll get the whole story first. Assassinating people without knowing why is bad business. Only the Gray Guild does that sort of thing.”

“There’s more than one assassin’s guild? I didn’t know that.”

“Well, of course there is. There’s the Guild of Atastach, they’re the ones that handle religious assassinations, specializing in burning of heretics, and then there is the guild of Lonny Hill, which handles all sorts of political assassinations, and then for your undetectable poisonings, you have...” Tananda’s voice droned on, somehow sounding less like her and more like some dry lecturer showing off his store of trivial facts, and I started to drift off.

“Hey, kid, WAKE UP!” Aahz knocked me forward with a heavy slap in the back, and I shook my head to clear it. “Huh? What? Oh.” Dierack was still talking, and Gus and Chumley were listening intently, or at least paying intense attention.

Chumley was slowly licking his lips in his “Big Crunch” impression, and Gus had on that million dollar grin of his, the one full of needle sharp stone teeth. It was almost as scary as one of Aahz’s grins.

“Hey, Skeeve, what do you think? The Deveel here wants us to just kill these fellows without attempting any sort of negotiation. What’s your take on the matter?”

“What do you think my take is?” With a growl, I mentally picked Dierack up and tossed him over my shoulder. “We’re going to investigate further.”

Aahz silenced me with a glare, and we finished the discussion with Dierack. We left the motel and went out into town.

Walking beside me, Aahz picked up the conversation again. “Kid, if we take the time to investigate, we’ll be forever on this job. Besides, don’t you think the Deveels have done their own investigations? Let’s just take out these jokers and move on to the next dimension.”

“I don’t like this, Aahz. The Deveels must not be telling us everything. When have they ever told us the truth before?”

“Relax, kid. They gave us the real figures for their profit losses. If there’s anything a Deveel would share last, that’s it.”

“That’s just what worries me, Aahz. If they’re willing to share that, can you imagine what they might be hiding? And think of what they are paying us. It almost sounds like we got a deal.”

“Oh. You know, when you put it like that...” Aahz stopped walking and started scratching his scaly head. “Hey Gus, Tanda, Chumley, gather round. War council.”

The crew circled in, and we went into a huddle. “Okay, let’s get the facts we know out first.” Aahz began ticking off on his fingers. “First off, we know that this is multidimensional, so there is someone else behind these local labor yahoos. Yes, Skeeve?” Aahz caught my waving arm out of the corner of his eye.

“What dimension are Yahoos from?”

“Kid...” Aahz groaned, face in his hands. “Never mind. The point is, if we just kill off the locals, we have no way of finding out what they know of what’s going on here.”

“Right. So, I guess we’re going off to talk to them now.”

“Wrong. Now we are going off to infiltrate their organization.” Aahz turned to me with a toothy grin. “Do you want to be a lumberjack or a miner?”



Chapter 4

“I’m a Lumberjack and I’m okay!” Traditional Gezirahan folk-song

“LUMBERJACK,” I REPLIED without hesitation.

“That was quick.” Tanda commented with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter...” I added, but inside, I admitted that the idea of getting out into the woods appealed to me, since it reminded me of my time with Garkin. I wasn’t terribly happy then, but somehow those long dreary months were now tinged with the rosy hue of nostalgia....

“Gezirah to Skeeve.” Aahz waved a hand in front of my face and I snapped out of my contemplations. “Kid, pay attention for once, okay?” He turned to the others. “Skeeve and I will go buy ourselves some plaid shirts. Tanda, you and Chumley get the mining.” The brother and sister team nodded. I tried to picture Tanda and Chumley crawling around in a mine with pickaxes and miner’s lanterns strapped to their heads. My imagination wasn’t up to the task.

“Gus, you’d better check out the textiles.”

“Right.”

Chumley abruptly spoke up, looking thoughtful. “You know, perhaps we should go back and talk to that Dierack fellow again.”

“Chumley? You feeling okay?”

“If we want to hook up with these union blokes, then our Mr. Dierack would presumably be able to point us towards the places where there is the most union activity, perhaps even obtain us some jobs. If we go charging in blindly, it might

take months before we find a way into this union.”

Aahz wavered, clearly torn. Finally he shook his head. “No. Skeeve reminded me that we’re dealing with Deveels here. We’ll just have to do it the hard way. It’s better if we keep Dierack out of the loop for now.” Tanda and Gus nodded their assent to this point.

Chumley shrugged. “Righty-ho. Come along, little sis. Let’s go find us some miners, shall we?”

“Big strong burly ones, I hope.” Tanda grinned.

They and Gus started off. Aahz called after them. “Meet back at the hotel this afternoon, and we’ll swap notes!” The other three waved an affirmation, and then we were alone on the street.

“So what now, Aahz?”

“Now, we go join the local cattle call.”

Locating the lumber hiring hall wasn’t terribly difficult- it was one of the largest buildings in town, apart from the hotel, and built from the same type of bricks. For some reason, this fact struck Aahz as hilarious.

“A lumber hiring hall made out of bricks. Only the Deveels would do something like this.” Privately, I wondered, and filed the fact away for future contemplation.

There were more native Gezirahans in and around the hall than in the other parts of town we had seen, although still not what you’d call swarms of them. Most of them looked tired and dispirited as they trooped in and out of the doors. At Aahz’s prompting, I slapped a quick Gezirahan disguise on both of us. I wondered how the others were going to deal with this particular problem, but it was too late to start worrying about that now.

We walked into the building. It was a large, windowless barn-like structure, with Deveels seated behind little glassed-over windows, and row after row of plain wooden benches, mostly empty. A few Gezirahans loitered around. An incredibly wizened Deveel sat at a battered black desk near the entrance, under a large sign written in two languages, one presumably Gezirahan, the other Deveelscript, which I could now read fairly well. There was only one word:

INFORMATION

Aahz looked around for a minute, and then strolled confidently over to the table.

“Excuse me, my good...”

“Take a number.” The Deveel didn’t even look up from the flimsy-looking book he was reading.

“We want to know...”

“Take a number.” Still not looking up, the Deveel pointed at a pile of wooden cards hanging on a nail on the front of the desk. Written on the top card was the



number “42”.

“Look. We...”

“Take a number.”

Seeing Aahz’s expression, I grabbed his arm, pulled on it and hissed in his ear. “Aahz! Beating this guy up will not get us anything. They’ll just throw us out. We’d better just take the number.”

“Gaaaahhh...” Aahz snapped up the top card and skulked off to one of the benches. I stood for a minute, looking up at the sign and then down at the Deveel. I couldn’t resist.

“What are orenberries made of?”

To my immense surprise, the Deveel looked up and studied me levelly for a moment. Finally, he spoke. “You really don’t want to know.” He returned to his book.

“Uh. Thanks.” I backed off and sat down next to the scowling Aahz. I peeked over at him, then carefully plucked the card out of his clenching hands before he snapped it in two.

One of the Deveels at the window suddenly called out “28!”

Aahz growled. I knew then that it was going to be a long afternoon.

A sudden thought occurred to me, and I swiveled on the bench so I was facing Aahz.

“Aahz?”

“Yeah, Kid?” There was a dangerous note of weariness lurking in Aahz’s voice, but I pushed on.

“How come you didn’t offer me a job in textiles?”

Aahz looked over at me, evidently surprised. He must have thought I was going to ask if we weren’t supposed to be taking that number somewhere, but some merchants in the Bazaar use a similar system, so for once I knew the drill.

“You’ve never been inside a Devan textile mill, have you?”

“Umm... No.”

“How can I put this? The reason I sent Gus to check out the textiles is that stone doesn’t corrode or melt as easily as flesh.”

“Ugh.”

“Exactly. They use things in those places that *I’d* find a trifle uncomfortable.”

I thought for a minute more. “So how do the Gezirahans handle it?” I looked at the nearest one, three benches away. He shot back a suspicious glance then ignored me. “They seem to be made of flesh, under all that hair.”

Aahz yawned and closed his eyes, seemingly calmer now. “Dunno. Maybe Gus’ll find out for you.” I made another mental note to ask Gus to do just that if he got a chance.

“29!”

It was a long afternoon. I read the various posters tacked to the walls, and all of the brochures, handouts and leaflets. Three times. If you ever need a cure for insomnia, I can say without hesitation or fear of contradiction, report immediately to the main Deveel lumbering hiring hall on Gezirah. Surprisingly, after his initial near-explosion, Aahz took it well, sitting on the bench and seeming to doze. I quizzed him and he shrugged:

“Bureaucracies. They exist to drive you mad, and I’m not going to give this one the satisfaction. It’s been so long since I had to deal with a real one, I let my temper get the best of me there.”

Finally: “42!” We scrambled to our feet and marched over to the appropriate window. The Deveel sitting behind the glass was almost as decrepit as the one manning the information booth. He examined us critically. Before Aahz could plunge into his spiel, he croaked:

“Haven’t seen you before.” My mind raced, trying to think a quick, plausible lie, even though Aahz no doubt had a dozen stored away for just such emergencies.

The Deveil continued after only a microscopic pause: “Good! Always good to get some fresh blood around here.” He rooted around in the piles of paper on his desk, then stopped and looked up. “You two have worked in the lumber industry before, of course?”

“Of course.” Aahz. Of course.

The Deveil nodded with no great show of interest and resumed digging. Finally he pulled out a piece of paper triumphantly. “Here we are. Two positions just opened up in an outfit a little ways north of here. And you’re in more luck! A wagon is headed that way, leaving... oh... any minute now. Out back. You interested?”

“Well, actually, we...” Aahz’s hand dropped onto my shoulder in the patented ‘Skeeve shut up’ grip and I broke off.

“Might my colleague and I have a moment to discuss this?”

The Deveil shrugged. “Sure, but the wagon ain’t waiting, and it’s a two-day walk.”

Aahz pulled me out of earshot. “This is perfect! There can only one reason he’d be willing to hire two unknown schlubs right off the street, and why he’s trying to get us up there so fast. Also why no one else here...” a gesture at the waiting Gezirahans “...has taken him up on this offer.” My blank stare must have clued him to elucidate. “This outfit, whatever it is, must have just experienced labor trouble, and they’re looking for some scabs. Unless I miss my guess, we’re headed into a hotbed of labor activity, which is exactly what we want. Let’s go tell gramps over there that we’ll take the job.”

I briefly wondered why being turned into scabs was so great, considering Aahz had just said he was trying to avoid getting us corroded or melted, but dismissed that point for the moment and addressed some bigger problems: “What if it’s just that this job, whatever it is, is such a hellhole that no one wants it? And what about the others? Chumley? Tanda?”

Aahz grinned. “Don’t worry. I know Tanda. They’ll catch up with us. And every instinct tells me we’re onto something here. Let’s go, kid, our cart is waiting.” He pulled me back to the window and smiled broadly. It was a good thing he was disguised as a Gezirahan when he did this, or the specimen embalmed behind the glass might have had a heart attack right then and there. “We’ll take the job.”

The Deveil smiled back, causing my skin to crawl. “Excellent. Now just sign this form... here... and here... and give **this** to the cart driver... good... all right. You’re ready. Right out through that door.”

I leaned over and spoke quickly before Aahz could clamp down again. “Sir? What’s the name of this... outfit?”

The Deveil paused, then said nonchalantly “Camp #251.” I was careful to keep my face blank, and he seemed to release a withheld breath. If you weren’t used to dealing with Deveels, you probably wouldn’t even have noticed either the

hesitation or the breath.

Another fact for the file.

“Thank you, sir. Back in a minute, Aahz.”

“Kid, where...”

I dashed back to the front of the hall and stopped in front of the information Deveel.

“Um. Sir? Excuse me? Could I ask a favor?”

The Deveel looked up, wordlessly. I realized now he was even older than I’d first thought. How long did Deveels live anyway...?

“If... some friends of mine come by here later today, could you give them a message?”

“Perhaps. How will I recognize these friends of yours?”

“They’re... uh... they’re... you’ll know them when you see them, I think.”

“Ah. And what is the message?”

“Just tell them that... The Kid hopes he found what we were looking for at Camp 251.”

“‘The Kid hopes he found what you were looking for at Camp 251.’ Very well.” He started to look down at his book, then swiveled his gaze back up at me, an odd glint in his eye. “Whatever it is you’re doing, my young fellow, you’d best be very careful. Strange things are afoot on Gezilah, and all is not as it seems. But then, it never is, is it?” He winked at me, and returned to his book. I stared at him for a moment, then turned and ran for my wagon.

Chapter 5

“What you see is what you get.”

RuPaul

WHEN THE OLD DEVEEL had told me that all the things on Gezilah were not what they seemed, I suspected he had been referring to the labor problem we were investigating. But it wasn't until Aahz and I laid eyes on our transportation to Camp #251 that I realized what he meant. The 'wagon' was nothing more than five pieces of wood tied together with some rotten rope and placed on top of an axle with two old pockmarked wheels jutting out from the side. Resting in front was an enormous bug that was obviously the steed responsible for pulling the wagon.

“What is that thing?” I asked Aahz. I pointed to the giant insect, which held more than a passing resemblance to one of my recent nightmares.

“Huh? The Cristotle? Just some giant beetle the Deveels use on their dimensions as pack animals. They're harmless as long as you don't wear any bright colors around them. Tends to make them think it's mating season.” Aahz explained. A roll of thunder sounded in the distance.

“Sounds like its going to rain.” I said, as a Deveel came around the corner with a trail of thirty Gezirahans following in a quiet single file. The Deveel was huge, with muscles bulging from under a leather outfit he wore.

“Are you the two new ones coming along?” He growled. Apparently he wasn't too enthusiastic about his job.

“Yes, we are.” Aahz spoke first. The Deveel simply shook his head with displeasure and motioned us to the wagon after taking our two registration tickets.



I could hear him muttering under his breath about how no gambling debt was worth this punishment and that he should have gotten a job with his cousin Sal.

It soon became apparent that the Gezirahan custom of riding in a wagon was to simply pile in on top of each other and to hold on for dear life. A custom that took on a decidedly horrific turn when it started to rain and I got to experience the scent of wet Gezirahan fur. We had been traveling for eighteen hours when, soon after the rain stopped, we suddenly found ourselves at a wooden house seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The sun was beginning to set and the lighting gave the surrounding forest a decidedly spooky look.

“Okay, everyone out!” the Deveel yelled back to us as we all slid off the wagon onto the muddy ground. I could see Aahz glaring at some Gezirahan who had just poked him in the eye with a foot. The Deveel then stood up upon the front of the wagon and unfolded a piece of paper. “Ahem! Welcome to Lumber Camp #251 situated in the lovely forest of Kirn. Here you will be able to enjoy working in a relaxed environment filled with compassion and understanding from your Camp Coordinator, Talmor Blox. If you have any questions or complaints, please do not hesitate to bring them to your Camp Coordinator... after going through the proper channels. This greeting has been approved by the Deveel... Hmmm, maybe I’m not supposed to read that part.” The Deveel then folded the piece of paper again and placed it into an inner pocket of his leather vest. A small furry paw/hand suddenly raised itself out of the crowd.

“Excuse me, Mr. Deveel?” A small voice pleaded. I could see an inner struggle take place in the Deveel. He obviously saw the questioner, but he didn’t know if he

wanted to deal with the trouble of actually responding to the plea. He placed a hand upon his forehead, sighed, and pointed to the Gezirahan.

“Yes?”

“Could we have your name in case any of us wish to complain about your driving and/or unpleasant personality?” The little squeaky voice said. The Deveel’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“What?!!” the Deveel exclaimed with a twinge of fear in his voice.

“Bingo!” A voice whispered excitedly in my ear. I turned to see Aahz standing behind me. He had slowly found his way through the crowd to stand there. The glint in his eyes and the rubbing of his hands suggested he was quite pleased with what was happening.

“Care to tell me what’s going on?” I whispered back. Aahz smiled one of his frightening grins.

“This is so easy, I’m almost sorry I brought the rest of the gang for this job. You see that little Gezirahan causing all the trouble? He’s working for the opposition. He’s a plant, a mole. He joins the workers, pretends he is one of them, tries to push the management too far, and when they snap, he makes himself out to be a martyr. A classic maneuver. Now all we have to do is get friendly with that one and he introduces us to his leaders. Within a few days, we’ll have traced this whole movement back to the source.” Aahz sighed with bliss-filled thoughts as to how he was going to spend his share of our wages for this job. I turned my attention back to the Gezirahan and the Deveel and what was turning into a verbal fight.

“So we will not be given weekends and special holidays off?” the Gezirahan sheepishly asked.

“Look, I told you, I’m not in control of your contracts. I don’t know what you signed up for and frankly, I don’t care!” the Deveel yelled as he looked directly over to me. “Well, what do you want??!!” I froze as I heard Aahz speaking from behind me.

“Are you saying that as a Deveel, you don’t care about Gezirahans?” I heard Aahz ask. Suddenly, all the other Gezirahans swiveled their heads about and looked right at us. A noticeable gasp came from their mouths and a few began whispering amongst themselves.

“I didn’t say that! All I said is that I don’t care about what your contracts say. If you have a problem with them, take them to someone else!” the Deveel fumed.

“So we are expected to honor contracts that the Deveels themselves don’t even care about?” Aahz asked with an put-upon incredulous voice. Another noticeable gasp escaped from the Gezirahans. They didn’t seem to be treating Aahz’s questioning in the same way they had the first Gezirahan asking the questions.

“Who said we didn’t care about your contracts?!!” A voice roared from behind the now quickly-dispersing crowd. Standing there, in a stiff green outfit with a look of pure hatred on his face was a tall thin Deveel. “I care about your contracts! And

if anyone decides that their contract is somehow faulty, then I suggest you bring it up with me. I am Camp Coordinator, Talmor Blox. I've been assigned to make you into the best lumberjacks in the known dimensions. And I take pride in that position! Now, everyone into the wooden house on your right! This will be your home for the next six weeks. Let's go!"

With that, every Gezirahan made a mad dash for the front door. We all forced our way in and everyone started to lay claim to a bed. I ran to one against the wall and threw myself upon the mattress. I rolled over on my back and looked for Aahz. I had expected him to choose the bed next to mine, but instead I saw him picking a bed next to the troublemaker Gezirahan across the room. The Gezirahan who had already claimed that bed flew across the room onto a bed a few feet away thanks to Aahz's tossing. After a few minutes, everyone settled down and Talmor Blox entered the room.

"All right, listen up! Tomorrow morning you will be awakened at dawn and will be given a 12 minute lesson on the use of the various tools you will be using during your stay here. Pay attention because it will only be told to you once! After that, you will be taken to the lumber site and assigned to a series of trees which will be YOUR responsibility. I don't like lazy workers and I WILL be watching. In one hour, I'll be back with your dinner. Oh, and before I forget, if anyone is caught trying to leave before completing the terms of their contract, they will be dealt with accordingly. Enjoy your stay." Talmor Blox concluded with a smile as he headed out the door. The room erupted once more into activity as Gezirahans began to talk amongst themselves, while I walked over to Aahz's bed. I could see that Aahz had already started talking to the trouble-making Gezirahan from earlier and I was curious as to how Aahz's instincts were playing out. Before I was half-way across the room, though, I felt something poke me in the shoulders. I glanced behind me and saw a little Gezirahan standing there.

"Nygolian bago nixilish?" It asked. I stared at its little brown eyes for a moment.

"Ummm, yes? Could you repeat that?" Suddenly, I realized that it was speaking to me in its native tongue and I didn't know any words in the Gezirahan language.

"Nygolian bago nixilish?" it repeated.

"Errrr. Yum yum." I replied while I rubbed my belly and licked my lips. I was sure it wasn't the right response, but I was stalling for time. Hopefully it would just think I was some idiot and would leave me alone. Without warning the little Gezirahan giggled and began to rub its own tummy.

"Liaro-dian blakn'tln!" another Gezirahan said while it began to pat my little Gezirahan on the back as if congratulating it.

"Daro bago nixilish vec tares?" Another Gezirahan asked as it entered our circle.

"Umm, excuse me, fellas. I need to talk to my friend for a second." I said as I

turned around and headed for Aahz. I got two steps away before the room was broken by a wailing from behind me. I looked back and saw my little Gezirahan friend on the ground sobbing in agony. “What the...?”

“You just called off your engagement, you heartbreaker.” Aahz’s voice broke in behind me.

“Engagement? But we are both males.” I said. Aahz shook his head.

“Nope, seems you gave us Gezirahan FEMALE disguises.” Aahz explained. “Remember how they all over-reacted when I was giving the wagon driver a hard time? Seems females in Gezirahan society aren’t suppose to be so political. I just got a little lecture from our trouble making Gezirahan friend about that. It also seems that the only kind of females who would ever actually join a lumber company are there to entertain the workers.”

“You mean like singing and dancing?” I asked with concern. I was a lousy singer and my dancing was twice as bad.

“No, not singing and dancing. Entertaining! Like.... Well, remember Alcain’s Interdimensional House of Pleasure back in Deva?”

I nodded in terror. “So what are we going to do, Aahz?”

“Well, the first thing we are going to do is-“ Aahz started. He was interrupted by a shout from one of the Gezirahans who had been sitting quietly on the bed a few feet away.

“Aahz?! Did you just call this Gezirahan by the name ‘Aahz’?” He shouted as he hopped off the bed and walked over to us.

“Yeah, he did! You have a problem with the name?” Aahz growled. The Gezirahan looked from Aahz to me and then back to Aahz. He squinted as if trying to see us more clearly.

“No, not really. I just used to know an Aahz and I didn’t think it was that popular of a name... especially among Gezirahans.” This time Aahz squinted at the Gezirahan.

“Am I to assume that neither one of us might be who we think we are?” Aahz suggested, keeping his voice low.

“Shall we go somewhere a bit less... crowded?” the Gezirahan asked as he waved his little paw toward the door. Aahz rubbed his chin in thought for a few seconds and then started following the Gezirahan. As I left the building, I could hear the little Gezirahan whose heart I had broken let forth a new wail of emotional pain. I kept telling myself that it was better this way, especially since comforting him would involve a lot more skill in illusion-making than I was capable of.

I followed Aahz and the Gezirahan around to the back of the building where we couldn’t be seen.

“Okay, let’s drop the disguises and see who we are.” the Gezirahan said. I looked to Aahz for his decision and with his nod I closed my eyes and let our illusions dissolve. I heard Aahz gasp as I opened my eyes to see an Imp standing where only moments before there was a Gezirahan. And it wasn’t just any Imp...

“*BROCKHURST!!!*” Aahz and I clamored. I had met Brockhurst before on two separate occasions. The first involved him trying to kill Aahz and me while the second time he had put his life on the line to help Aahz and me. I still held something of a grudge against Brockhurst since he had been behind my past mentor’s death, yet I knew that deep down he had, in the end, come to view us as friends.

“You idiots! What are you doing here?” Brockhurst hissed.

“Say, watch who you are calling an idiot! Skeeve isn’t half as dumb as he looks.” Aahz hissed back.

“I think he was referring to both.... Was that suppose to be a compliment, Aahz?” I asked.

“Shut up, Kid. Okay, Brockhurst, what’s your story? I know mercenary work for Imps are hard to get these days, but I seriously doubt you came to Gezirah to work part-time as a lumberjack.” Aahz pointed out.

“I asked you first, Aahz. YOU are supposed to be working on Deva, not on this dimension. What are you two doing here? Looking to make money on the side?” Brockhurst replied. The Pervect and the Imp glared at each other for a few moments before I decided to break in.

“Look, this isn’t getting us anywhere. Aahz and I are here working for the Devan Department of Commerce to help get rid of some labor problems they’ve been having. Seems someone is trying to get several of the workers on various dimensions to create some kind of collective.” I said, trying to remember what we actually were here to do. I really wish I had been paying more attention now that I needed the information.

“You expect me to believe that?” Brockhurst laughed. “You two take the cake.”

“Cake? I didn’t mention a cake.” I stammered in confusion.

“And what are you doing here, Brockhurst? Checking out the latest spring Gezirahan fashions?” Aahz asked.

“Well it seems that at least one of us is working for the Devan Department of Commerce, but I’m afraid it isn’t you two.” Brockhurst started to explain, “See, I got hired about a week ago to come to Gezirah. Seems that the Deveels got wind of a plot to break up the local labor organization by a bunch of off-worlders. My job was to come here, infiltrate the local worker population, and assassinate anyone trying to break it up. Simple job with great pay. How could I resist?”

“I thought labor organizing was illegal on Deveel dimensional systems?” I asked Aahz.

“It is. Unless it’s the Devan Labor Collective.” Aahz said as he slapped his forehead with the palm of his clawed hand.

“The what?”

“The Devan Labor Collective.” Brockhurst said, “It’s how the State keeps the workers under control. Everyone who works automatically belongs. When the

workers complain...”

“...The State tells them to go to the Collective or the Collective tells them to talk to the State. Eventually the workers give up and accept the situation. And with the Collective dues, the State has a way to keep from losing too much on wages.” Aahz finished, “I’ve got a feeling we’ve just gotten ourselves in the middle of something really big, Kid. I trusted a Deveel and now we’re paying for it. How many more assassins did they hire, Brockhurst?”

“30.” Brockhurst answered.

“30! Something is really going on.” Aahz said.

“You guys are serious about being hired by the Devan Department of Commerce, aren’t you?” Brockhurst asked.

“Yes,” I explained, “Some Deveel named Ginghe negotiated for the Department and basically told us that our contract forced us into taking on this job.”

“Ginghe? There isn’t a Ginghe working for the Department.” Brockhurst replied.

“There isn’t?!” Aahz asked in shock.

“No, they just had an election for the Department positions two weeks ago. Don’t you ever read the Financial News of Deva? There is more than the Devan Stock Exchange data in there, there’s politics, sports, even a comics page, though I hear they have started to run Family Circus in it.”

“What’s this Family Circus everyone is talking about?” I asked.

“So let me get this straight,” Aahz began as he pointed to Brockhurst, “You were hired to kill anyone trying to break up the local chapter of the Devan Labor Collective. Skeeve and I were hired to kill off anyone who seemed to be defending or creating a local labor collective. There are thirty of you and only five of us. Plus, we were hired by someone who doesn’t seem to be working for the Devan Department of Commerce. And if we were all to follow our orders, Skeeve and I would be dead and justified in the eyes of the real Devan Department.”

“You forgot something.” I said with a chill as I suddenly realized that Aahz had indeed forgotten something.

“Oh yes, and we are in the middle of the woods with a bunch of randy Gezirahans who think we are females who are along for their entertainment. And we are contracted for the next six weeks into being lumberjacks with no way out.” Aahz added. I shook my head sadly.

“No, not that.”

“And we are stuck talking to an Imp?” Aahz suggested. Brockhurst glared at Aahz.

“No, Aahz. That Tanda, Chumley, and Gus are on Gezirah too and they don’t know about any of this.” I said.

“They should be okay.” Brockhurst said, “As long as they keep to the lumberyards. Most of us are spread out pretty thin out here. Its only in the mines

that we are grouped together.”

Aahz and I groaned in unison.

“Well, it can’t get any worse.” Brockhurst said with a shrug in an attempt to make us feel better.

“Oh, I don’t know, it could get worse if I don’t hear a damn good explanation as to why there is an Imp, Pervert, and Klahd hiding behind my camp house!!” a voice roared loudly into the dusk-lit woods as Camp Coordinator Talmor Blox stepped out of the shadows with two heavily armed Deveels behind him. Next to Talmor Blox was the small furry figure of our trouble-making friend who was busy pointing and gesturing towards us. “Who wants to be the first to give me a good reason why I shouldn’t simply have you killed for trespassing?”

Chapter 6

“Run, Luke, run!”

O. W. Kenobi

BLOX STOOD THERE, expectantly, hands on his hips. He glared at us. I stammered a few words. Aahz glared back at him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Aahz shouted.

“What?” asked Blox, taken aback.

“Here we’ve been,” Aahz continued, “just sitting on our cans for the last three minutes...”

“Hours,” I corrected.

“Hours, waiting for someone to give us our tour of the facilities and when the guy in charge... you are in charge, aren’t you?” Blox nodded. “When the guy in charge finally decides to show up he accuses us of trespassing! I don’t think I’ve ever been treated so rudely!”

“Listen, Pervert. You have no business being here.”

“Did you hear that?” Aahz exclaimed, turning toward me. “One word, freak. One word and you’re gone. Kaput. Vanished without a trace. Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah,” Blox responded. “You’re a Pervert. An uppity one who thinks he can just barge in on my operation and...”

“I don’t believe it!” Aahz exclaimed. “Hey, shrimp, get a clue. Where do you think this wood goes? Who do you think buys it? You’re talking to Penbrius, magician extraordinaire. I take your wood and make magical staves out of it.”

“Ah. So what the hell are they doing here?”

“These two are my associates, Phlemeist and Noseball.”

“Phlemeist and Noseball?” I’m glad the Deveel asked, because it would have been silly coming from me.

“Hey, what do I look like, their mother? Blame her.”

“I’ll say.”

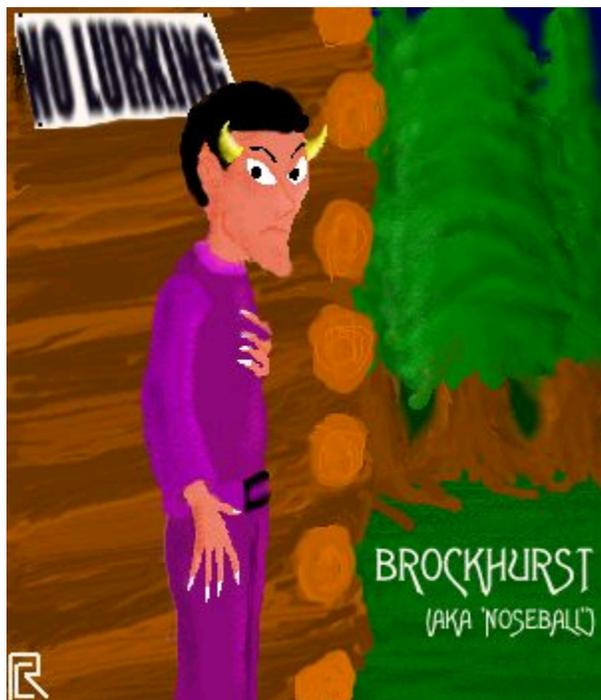
“Anyway, I’ve been having problems enchanting my staves and my contact suggested I come up here and have a look for myself. Now I can see why. With you around, it’s no wonder everything is messed up.”

“Oh, I’m sure. You’re probably just incompetent. We have the finest in magical lumber here.”

“I’ll just have to talk to your supervisor. I guarantee you, you’ve lost my business.”

“I would rather starve than do business with a filthy Pervert, so it’s just as well.”

Aahz then stormed around and left, Having little choice, we followed him.



* * *

“Aahz?” I asked, after we had gotten sufficiently far enough away from the camp.

“Yeah, kid?” Aahz replied.

“Why did you let that Deveel get away with talking to you like that?”

Aahz laughed. “Listen, kid. The plan was to get us out of a sticky situation.

And we did. And that's all there is to it."

I looked askance at Brockhurst, who was leading us by a distance. I turned to Aahz and asked him a question.

"So, what do you think of what Brockhurst told us?"

"Well," Aahz replied, "the last time I believed a Deveel and an Imp in the same day I almost didn't survive to tell about it. Something's up here."

"So he's lying? Why would he lie to us?"

"Oh, I don't think he's lying," Aahz corrected, "I just think he's been misled by someone. He is rather gullible, you know."

"So what now?"

"Well, we go and find Tananda, Chumley, and Gus, and let them know what's up. Then we decide what to do. I should have known; 500 billion gold was too good to be true."

"You think they're okay?"

"Oh, sure. Tananda's a trained assassin, Chumley's a great lookout, and Gus is, well, a rock. I wouldn't worry too much about them."

And so we headed back for town.

Chapter 7

“Over the river and through the woods...”

M. Lewis and W. Clark

I QUICKLY REALIZED, however, that ‘heading back to town’ was much easier said than done. The long Gezirahan night was just settling in, and it now almost pitch-black. The narrow road meandered its muddy way up and down the steep, tree-covered slopes, under a sky that still dribbled cold splatters of rain. After only a couple of miles of hard vertical slogging, I vowed to never again look unkindly upon any Gezirahan-filled cart that happened to be going my way. As a last straw, it began to rain again in earnest, and Aahz finally agreed to stop for the night. We picked a squat, bushy tree beside the road under which to, for lack of any better phrase, set up camp.

Aahz was able to scrounge up some dry wood from somewhere. I ignited the gnarled branches with a quick blast of magik, and set up a simple magik ward around us in the darkness. After we were hunkered down, performing the ritual poking of sticks into the fire, Brockhurst began producing a array of surprisingly bulky items from hidden pockets in his stylish outfit, some obviously weapons, some not. One of the last things he pulled out was a package wrapped in a highly reflective substance. He ripped off the wrapper, revealing a handful of knobby brown bars. He offered one to me and after a noticeable hesitation, one to Aahz.

“What are these?” Aahz asked suspiciously, eyeing the brown shape in his claw like it was about lunge at his throat.

“Oats.” With a practiced bite, Brockhurst chomped off the end of his bar and

began chewing vigorously.

Aahz grunted, knowingly, but I stared at my bar feeling queasy. Brockhurst must have seen the look, as he shifted the mass to one cheek and amplified.

“They’re assassin guild survival rations. You never know when, while on an assignment and through no fault of your own,” he glared over at Aahz “...you might end up stranded out in the woods without any dinner. ‘Oats’ stands for ‘Official Assassin Travel Sustenance. They’re made by the Vipers.”

“Vipers? What dimension are *they* from?”

Aahz rolled his eyes and Brockhurst shook his head. “No. They’re not from any dimension. They’re a guild of assassins; the League of Crimson Vipers. You did know there’s more than one assassin’s guild, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone?” I recovered smoothly. Very occasionally, some of Aahz’s influence rubs off on me...

“Well, *those* Vipers. As you no doubt know, the Vipers’ main specialty is untraceable poisons. What a lot of people *don’t* know is that they sideline in all kinds of food production. Including OATS, which they sell at a discount to the other Guilds.” Brockhurst leaned forward, obviously warming to his subject as he chewed. “Now, normally, you’d think that we wouldn’t trust them not to poison us, right? And we wouldn’t. But there’s an interesting story behind that. You see, the Vipers and the Lonny Hill crowd got into this squabble over turf a couple hundred years ago, when there was this chain of restaurants owned by this politician....”

As he continued, I wondered vaguely if there was something in all assassins’ training that provoked this tendency for lectures. Maybe Brockhurst and Tanda went to same school, although the possibility boggled the imagination... The Imp’s voice faded into a drone in the background. At this point, my stomach woke up and began growling loudly; I realized with a start that we hadn’t eaten since leaving the hotel. (How long ago was that? It already seemed like weeks....) Profoundly glad that Aahz hadn’t been given time to 1) remember that I knew how to set animal snares, and 2) send me back out into the rain, I broke off a corner of my bar and cautiously popped it in my mouth. The bar didn’t taste like much of anything, and you could chew it for what seemed like hours before it finally dissolved in your mouth. Aahz tasted his, silently curled up his lip, and offered what was left to me. I absently stashed it in my pocket as I looked over at Brockhurst, who was still talking....

“Say... Brockhurst?”

“...he said, ‘you vant your vindows vip...’ Huh? Sorry. What?”

“I know this may be a bad time to ask, but how were you able to disguise yourself back there? When you were working for Isstvan, we... uh... you got dosed by that magik-killing joke powder.”

Instead of becoming angry, Brockhurst sighed, and made a gesture at the various items scattered around him.

“I used one of these. I’ve become a mechanic, a gadget-monger. After you paid

me for the campaign against Big Julie's army, I got caught up on my guild fees, took the rest of my cut to the Bazaar and started buying whatever magikal backup I needed. I could afford it, so I got the best. Now, well, I get by. And in a hundred years, the powder wears off, and I'll be skilled in both areas. I suppose I should thank you, but I'm not going to." He smiled.

I smiled back, trying to show as many teeth as he had. "The next time you're in the Bazaar, come on over to our headquarters and I'll introduce you to Massha."

"Who?"

Aahz interrupted from the shadows on his side of the fire. "Save it. Something for you to look forward to with rapturous anticipation. And now that we've gotten Brockhurst's life history updated, can we maybe get some sleep?" As I tried to get comfortable on the hard ground, the OATS settled in my stomach like a lump of lead, and I thought about the Gezirahans back at camp, eating their slop and sleeping on their filthy mattresses. They didn't know how lucky they were. I dozed off, listening to the rain drip off the foliage.

* * *

The next morning, after we'd uncramped ourselves, things looked a great deal better. The ward was undisturbed. The sun had come back out, and brightly-colored animals were flitting between the trees, chirping and whistling cheerfully. Every dimension seems to have some variant of this—these appeared, oddly enough, to be bats.

We broke camp and washed off what layers of grime and fur we could in a stream that tumbled across the road. Aahz then rose and looked around himself in disgust.

"Wonderful. No way to hitch a ride. This crummy goat-path sure isn't the route the logging wagons use. They must take the logs somewhere else to ship 'em off-dimension. Why can't these Deveels do something sensible for once, and ship the logs back to town for dimension transport?"

"Um... Aahz? What do you mean the logging wagons don't come this way? Didn't we come up this road in one?"

"Kid, please. That was just a lousy cart for hauling the workers around in. A logging wagon... well, trust me on this. You'll know one when you see one."

"But that Deveel at the hiring hall called it a wagon!"

Brockhurst injected himself into the conversation. "Who cares what they're called! You say nothing's coming. So how do we get out of here? Fly? It's a two-day walk back to town."

"Well, I **can** fly, but I don't think I can carry..."

Aahz silenced us both with a glare. He then gave a mirthless grin. "We walk. And the first thing with wheels that we see going in the right direction, we hitch a ride." I almost asked him what would happen if the owner of the wheeled object

took exception to this little plan, but decided I probably wouldn't like the answer and held my tongue.

We glumly clumped along single-file up and down the hills and between the endless rows of towering trees. The road remained deserted. In front of me, Aahz would shoot an occasional murderous glance at the cheerful bats warbling overhead. Fortunately for them, there wasn't even a good rock to be had for throwing. Brockhurst walked silently behind me. Looking up at the ancient trunks towering around us, I suddenly felt very small, and very young. Whatever turned out to be happening here on Gezirah, they would probably still be here long after it was all over, and we were all forgotten.

Unless Blox chopped them all down, of course.



Some time later, we came down the last of a series of switch-backs and abruptly found ourselves at a confusing crossroads, with five or six roads of different sizes all running together. The remains of a rotted, useless, signpost sprouted amidst the muddy confusion. For a long time, Aahz stared in all directions and then sighed. He turned around.

“I don't suppose either of you saw this last night?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“I was buried on the bottom of the pile the whole time. All I saw were rotten wooden slats.” Brockhurst absently pulled out one last splinter as he spoke.

Aahz sighed again. “I tried to keep track, in case something like this happened, but somehow I got distracted.” He managed a somewhat feeble version of his grin,

and continued. “Okay, kid, you’d better levitate up above the trees and tell us if you can see a...” He broke off.

“See a what?” Automatically I started casting around in the air for a force line.

He raised a scaly green hand in a shushing gesture, his head cocked. “Something’s coming. From that way.” He pointed down one of the larger roads.

Brockhurst listened intently, and tentatively nodded his head. “I think you’re right.” I still couldn’t hear anything, but I had long ago accepted Aahz’s unequaled ability as an early- warning system.

“Glad to hear that those ears are good for something.” Aahz plowed on, cutting off whatever retort Brockhurst had planned. “Okay, we don’t have long. Before they get here, slap some disguises on us. Cover Brockhurst, too. I don’t trust gadgets and I never will.”

“Um... Aahz?”

“Yeah, kid? Make it fast.”

“Last time I made us female Gezirahans. How do they... umm... I mean... what’s the difference? So I can make us males?”

“Oh! Right! That’s easy. Female Gezirahans have those...” He broke off again, obviously struck by a sudden thought. He smiled evilly. “Never mind. I’ve got a better idea. Make us all Deveels instead. It’s a logging wagon, and when it gets here, we’re gonna play this from the other side of the tracks.”

“Another wagon.” Brockhurst grumbled in disgust. I silently agreed, my resolution of the previous night suddenly evaporating in the warm sunlight.

“Look, Imp. I said that that wasn’t **a logging wagon**. Now shut up.”

I piped up, my earlier qualms resurfacing. “But what if they’re headed away from town, instead of...”

“Just do it.”

I looked at him, and gave Brockhurst a resigned shrug. As the logging wagon came rumbling slowly into view, three somewhat bedraggled Deveels stood in the crossroads waiting for it.

Chapter 8

“It ain’t unusual.”

T. Jones

AND WE CONTINUED to stand there, as three bedraggled Deveels, as the logging wagon went right on by us.

“Hey! Hey!” Aahz shouted. “Are you gonna stop for us or what?!”

Apparently not, I thought, as the wagon took one of the roads away from us and disappeared from view.

“I don’t believe this!” Aahz raged. “Did you see that?! The driver didn’t even look at us! Just right on by! No conscience! Nothing!”

“Aahz,” I tried to interject.

“Three people out in the middle of nowhere! Where’s the consideration in this God forsaken place? No wonder everyone in this place has that pinched uncomfortable look! With natives like these, who couldn’t help becoming a psychopath?”

He came down the road, walking back toward me.

“I’ll tell you, now I’m ready. Three more days of this and I’ll be primed to kill someone.”

It didn’t seem as if I’d be able to get him to stop ranting, so I fell back on my old reliable. Without worrying about what the two of them would think, I started crying. Without shame, without pity, and without hope, I just stood there as tears streamed down my cheeks. Aahz noticed and his expression changed from one of disgust to one I couldn’t recognize at all.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” he foamed. “There’s no time for blubbering! Sheese! I’ve known people who were going into battle to be killed for sure who had more composure than you. How’d you ever manage to get where you are when you fall to pieces over something this stupid?!”

Apparently it wasn’t as reliable as I had anticipated. I dried my eyes and looked back at him. He was still foaming, probably about how the animals in this dimension didn’t quite appeal to him, but I decided to take the initiative.

“Um, Aahz?” I said.

He went on.

“Aahz!” I yelled.

“Just a minute!” he yelled back. “I’m not through!”

“I think—” Brockhurst began, in a vain attempt to get Aahz under control.

“Oh, so now you’re thinking, Imp? I’ll tell you something, we’re better off with you not thinking. It was you who got us into this mess in the first place. So do us all a favor and just stop thinking. Just stop now, or...”

“I think maybe we should—” Brockhurst continued undaunted.

“Or maybe I’ll prime myself on you,” Aahz finished.

Brockhurst shrugged, cowed into silence. He looked over at me, and I just rolled my eyes at him. We walked over to the side of the road and sat down.

Two hours later, we still sat there. Aahz had been on quite a roll, but I’ll admit that I had no problems with the fall foliage, so maybe his frustrations were making him stretch a little.

“And another thing,” Aahz yelled at the trees, “the bathroom facilities here are just absolutely atrocious. Reminds me of the Caicos: three weeks with stalls like that and we’ll all be lucky if we don’t start sprouting a fungus!”

He turned toward us and took a deep breath. For a moment I thought he was hyperventilating again, but apparently he really was finished.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he retorted.

I rolled my eyes.

“Skeeve,” he began with intense solemnity, “when are you going to start thinking for yourself? That wagon was going somewhere, probably back to town since he was fully loaded. That and the wagon was full with finished products, so he’s dropping that off to be shipped. Let’s go.”

So we walked down the road where the wagon had gone.

* * *

After a few more hours, the road started heading up at a steep angle. This seemed to make Aahz happy.

“Yes, yes, I remember that we came over a mountain range. This makes perfect

sense. At least we're going in the right direction."

Although this did lend me some comfort, I wasn't that pleased. The road was very steep. After about an hour, we came out of the trees, along a ridge, where we could see the expanse of the valley below us. At this point the road had gotten very muddy from last night's rain. We continued on, as the road got increasingly precarious along the ridge. Finally, as the road went around a curve above a very steep precipice, Aahz stopped and looked up the face of the cliff above us.

"Hmm," he mumbled. "This could be rather nasty, especially with the rain."

He walked a little forward, with Brockhurst and me trailing after him. Aahz looked up the cliff again and looked down into the void.

"This really isn't safe," he said. "No loud noises."

"How'd the wagon get around it, then?" I countered.

"It doesn't matter how it did, kid," Aahz shot back. "That doesn't make it any safer for us. Here, let me see how firm this is."

With that, he raised his foot and stomped on the road. We looked at his foot dumbly, and he smiled at us.

"Okay, this should be safe."

With that, the road fell out from under us.



* * *

I was immediately disoriented as I fell with the road, but I got my bearings and flew above the carnage. My friends, however, were not so lucky.

“Aahz!” I shouted, but I couldn’t see either one of them. I cast desperately about as ton after tons of rock, mud and trees slid down into the valley. It was useless. I couldn’t see either one of them. I closed my eyes and tried to find them from their auras, but that didn’t work, either, as both of them had lost any aura they might have had when their powers were stripped from them.

Finally, the last few stones trailed along after the worst was done, and as swiftly as it had started, the avalanche was over. I looked in vain for a place to land, but I realized that I would have to fly down to the valley, well over a thousand feet below the ridge where the road had been. Seeing no other option, I descended.

On the way down, I heard the unmistakable sound of Aahz shouting at me.

“Hey kid!” he yelled, heedless of his own safety. “Over here!”

Not wanting him to yell any more, I searched the ground for him, and sure enough, there he was, half buried, gesticulating wildly at me, about two thirds of the way down the slide. I flew down and landed near him.

“Well,” he continued, “isn’t this a revolting development?”

“Where’s Brockhurst?” I asked.

“How should I know? Kid, we’ve just had half a mountain fall on us.”

He began to pull himself out from under the dirt and boulders that constituted his living tomb, so to speak. “No, kid, I don’t need any help whatsoever, and yes, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you?” I asked.

“No!” he yelled, almost bringing the other half down on us. I went over to him and helped unearth him. He limped away from me and sat down on a boulder that seemed stable enough, all things considered.

“I dinged my knee,” he winced. “But I think it just got hit funny. I managed to relocate my shoulders waiting for you as you pulled your Tinkerbell trick. Quick thinking, by the way, kid.”

“Thanks,” I said, taken aback. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Of course I am,” he said swiftly. “We Pervects aren’t fragile little things, you know. I can still walk. We only need to get back to the road.”

“But we have to find Brockhurst!” I said.

“Forget him. He’s worm food, or whatever little animals this Godforsaken dimension has for those sorts of things, which isn’t such a bad thing, really,” Aahz said brusquely. “The imp was starting to annoy me, and he was, after all, working on the other side.”

By now I had completely forgotten whose side I was on, so I just accepted this statement. I looked at the mud and rock slide around us and thought about Brockhurst. He was my friend. I remember hiring him on Deva; how pitiful he

was, and how that pitifulness so much resembled my own. Suddenly, I missed him terribly. Now that he was gone, I felt as if I didn't have a hope in the world.

"Oh no," Aahz broke in, "you're not going to start crying again. No way, kid. I can't see how anyone could have any respect for you when you turn all Patty Schroeder on us whenever things turn bad. If you let that tear slip, kid, I'll really give you something to cry about. I'll beat you senseless."

And so that was that.

* * *

After getting back on stable ground, we shacked up for the night again before starting the next morning. The road was pretty easy going after we got over the ridge, as it was all downhill. Late in the afternoon we pulled into town, unsure of what we were supposed to be doing. Fortunately or un, we discovered Gus waiting for us at our hotel's lobby, solving that problem for the time being. We explained what we had found out to him, with his look becoming more ironically stony as we finished.

"Brockhurst was misinformed," he said sagely. "The Devan Executive Branch was overhauled recently, but Ginghe was one of the unappointed hierarchy, which means he kept his job. The Financial News was rather clear about that, and Brockhurst doesn't read the News anyway. Someone who undoubtedly thought that he wouldn't know the difference told him that, and he bought it."

"So you mean the deal's still on?" Aahz asked. And that was it again, as he jumped about the room.

"Aahz! Aahz! Aahz!" Gus shouted at him. "Sit down! That's not all!"

Aahz calmed down at once at this, and sat back down next to me. He was, however, still grinning as his right foot twitched unconsciously.

"What I was about to say is that there's nothing going on at the textile mill I visited."

"What do you mean?" Aahz asked.

"I mean there was no labor problem there whatsoever, either that or the saboteurs have such a tight grip on everyone that there's absolutely no indication that anything's up, and believe me, I tried my hardest to shake something from them. None of the people Dierack mentioned were there, even the people he assured me were employees. Something really suspicious is going on. Either that or the Deveels have already cleared that plant out, but I didn't see any evidence of that, either. Dierack would have told us that. I've only got one lead, and it's not too hot."

"What's that?"

"One of the guys at the mill, an off-worlder, said he had a cousin working in the gas mines on Chirosovo just in passing. The papers mentioned something about gas mines on Chirosovo being another hot spot. This one guy I'm fairly certain has

no contacts to the saboteurs, because he's so genuinely dumb he couldn't spell 'dog' if you spotted him the D and the G. But that's all I have to go on."

"I don't trust Dierack," Aahz said.

"And neither do I," Gus responded, "but it's what we've got to go on so far." He huffed and looked away. "You know, they could be setting us up to get killed, but the only problem is, if they're playing straight, if we start going against them, they'll want us killed. I say we head on out to Chirosovo and try to get a better handle on this before we decide what Ginghe and the gang's really holding for us."

"What about Tananda and Chumley?" I asked.

"Still no word, but they should be all right. Let's just leave them a note, a simple one, that we're searching for more information on Chirosovo. That'll work without alerting anyone of our suspicions."

Aahz rubbed his hands reflexively. "Chirosovo," he said, looking a bit austere. "Hope you can scrounge up some warm clothes, kid, 'cause this isn't going to be pretty."

Chapter 9

“There is no such thing as being overconfident.”
Captain Edward J. Smith

AS GUS WENT TO THE HOTEL to leave Tanda and Chumley a message, Aahz suggested that we pick up some fur coats from one of the local sellers. After an hour of searching, Aahz finally spotted a store selling its winter clothing at a reduced rate. We were lucky that Gezirah was experiencing its dimensional version of spring. We entered the store and I followed Aahz immediately to the back where the fur coats were resting in a huge pile on a little white table. Aahz grabbed a few and threw a few more toward me. They had a peculiar scent on them, something resembling how Gleep smelled after being left out in the rain. Unfortunately, the closest thing to my size enveloped me from head to well below my feet.

“Um, Aahz? Can’t we find something a little smaller?” I asked. It seemed like a simple request. Hadn’t Aahz himself once tell me that you can tell a true magician from the quality of his tailor? At least that was what he had said when questioned about the rather expensive outfits he had been charging to our company for his own personal use. Though now that I had thought about it, I realized that Aahz didn’t seem too concerned about my appearance in general. In fact, I was suppose to be the Great Skeeve, Lord Magician of Deva and Court Magician to the Kingdom of Possiltum and if anyone should have the better tailor, it should be me. So right then and there, I decided to take a stand.

“I refuse to wear this coat, Aahz. It is uncomfortable and too large. I want something form-fitting and created with style and excitement. I want a coat that

says, 'Here comes the Great Skeeve'." I announced. Aahz eyes began to grow in size.

"Listen kid. We aren't buying these things because they look good, we are buying them because they are on sale. Now if you want a coat that says, 'Here comes the Great Skeeve', " Aahz sarcastically growled, "then I'll get some paper and some ink, write 'Here comes the Great Skeeve' on it in big friendly letters, *AND NAIL IT ON YOUR BACK!*"

A few patrons of the store glanced over at us and quickly exited the store. A old Deveel standing behind the cash register watched them leave in horror and then swiftly glared over at us in fury.

"Besides," Aahz continued, " we are headed to Chirosovo, a dimension known as the Ice Capital of the Known Dimensions. And the last time I was there, I wished I had a coat like one of these. Do you know why?"

"Because it was really cold?" I suggested. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the shop keeper walking toward us.

"NO! BECAUSE IT WAS REALLY REALLY COLD!" Aahz roared.

"Excuse me, Gentlemen. Is there a problem here?" The shop keeper asked as he studied both of us. I figured that Aahz wasn't quite in the mood to handle this formality, so I decided I'd give it a shot.

"No problem, just looking." I smiled. The shop keeper bit his lower lip as he looked from one of us to the other. I could see that he was trying to think of something to say as a response.

"Well, could... that is to say, I would greatly appreciate it if you would shop a little more quietly." the shop keeper suggested. Aahz's face suddenly broke into a smile.

"Oh? And how appreciative would that be exactly? Say, an extra 25% off?" Aahz asked in a sweet tone of voice. Any suggestion of any kind of debt can mean only one thing to the discriminating Pervect, a reduction of cost.

"I beg your pardon?" the shop keeper said as he tried to recollect his thoughts. It was obvious that the idea of lowering the already, to the typical Deveel's mind anyhow, low prices was something of a shock. The Deveel needed some time to think, and knowing Aahz, he wasn't going to get that time.

"Sorry, buddy, I don't just give away my pardon. But for that extra 35% off from the sale price that you just offered, I might throw the pardon in too." Aahz suggested quickly. A sweat broke out on the Deveel's forehead.

"I didn't offer 35%!" the Deveel exclaimed.

"It sure sounded that way to me, didn't kid?" Aahz asked me.

"Uh, yes?" I added.

"Damn right it did. Unless you said 45%. Sometimes I can't hear right. Something to do with this Gezirah air, I think." Aahz said as he looked down at his claws and gently shined them on his shirt.

"45%!!! But I..."

“SOLD!” Aahz shouted as he shook the shop keeper’s hands. “You are a tough one to haggle with, I wanted these coats for 50% more, but you held in there until I broke. I admire that. It was beautiful.”

“But the coats are already at 55% off.” the shop keeper said partially to himself. “With your 45% that means you... that you... that the coats are **FREE!**”

“Really? Then in that case I’ll take all twenty of them.” Aahz said as he lifted the coats up into the air and looked at me. “Here kid, you carry.” Before I could reply, a literal mountain of stinky brownish fur crashed down on me. “Just follow my voice, kid.” I heard Aahz say through my muffled ears and that’s exactly what I did.

In an hour, we were suited up in our fur coats with the extras placed in a large cloth sack. We went to the hotel to check out and pick up Gus. Instead of finding Gus, we found a note from him telling us that he was going to the mines to find Tanda and Chumley himself. He asked us to meet him a little later behind an old abandoned building a couple of blocks away. Gathering our things, we walked to the building where we had agreed to meet, sneaked around to the back and waited. After a few minutes, I started to get bored and extremely hot.

“Where’s Gus?” I asked Aahz. “I am starting to sweat to death under this thing.”

“He’ll be here soon. Gus knows how to take care of himself. Luckily, given his physical makeup, he won’t be needing any of our coats.” Aahz said as he lovingly stroked his furry garment. We sat in silence for a while until I spoke again.

“Aahz? Can you tell me what happened to you on Chirosovo?” Aahz didn’t talk much about his past, so I was intrigued by his hint earlier that he had not only



been to Chirosovo, but had obviously had a rough time there. It would also be nice to know what to expect from our upcoming visit.

“I don’t like talking about it.” Aahz growled as he began to use his fingers to make shapes in the dirt. I looked over to Aahz and tried to read his emotions. Not an easy thing to do for a Pervect; they seem to have only two real emotions, anger and greed. But something was bothering Aahz, that much I could tell.

“Quit staring at me.” Aahz hissed without lifting his head to face me. He gave out a sigh and looked up toward the sky. “Okay, I’ll be honest. When I was a young pup of a magician, I did some pretty stupid things. The usual things. Popping into primitive dimensions and using magik to impress the natives. Toss a few fireballs around, levitate a few chairs, that sort of thing. We called it Dimensional Roulette. It was a game and sometimes very profitable. You see, once you’ve started to show your stuff to the natives, they come to think you are some kind of god and they’ll give you access to just about anything. They’ll heap piles of gold in your lap, offer their daughters, and then one day, you just disappear. They think they’ve offended their god, and meanwhile their god is enjoying a leisurely time at Mare Inebrium buying drinks for his friends.”

“Mare Inebrium?”

“Just a place I used to hang out. Anyhow, like I said, I’m not too proud of it. That’s one of the reasons I don’t want you to learn too much too soon. Magik needs responsibility and when you’re just starting out, you want to try everything.”

“How does Chirosovo fit into this?” I asked as Aahz frowned.

“Well, Dimensional Roulette is gambling pure and simple. And where there is money to be made...”

“There will always be somebody bigger than you trying to get it.” I finished for him. It was an old Pervish proverb that Aahz had forced me to memorize. That along with 255 others from the *Pervish Child’s First Book of Quotes*, the illustrations for which still haunt my nightmares.

“Exactly. And on my second spin of the wheel of chance, I materialized right into a dimension owned by a very powerful wizard. Not only that, but I appeared right in the middle of some religious ceremony honoring him. He didn’t take too kindly to that. So with a few well placed spells from this powerful wizard, I found myself stranded on Chirosovo. And this was a hundred years before it was ‘discovered’ by the Deveels.”

“But you still had magik, didn’t you? Why didn’t you just hop off of Chirosovo and go back to Perv or something?” I asked.

“Because kid, this wizard was really something. He was an outlaw, certainly, but he knew spells I still don’t understand. He placed some bizarre curse on me that my magik wouldn’t work right until I teleported a written apology promising to never again step into his little private dimension. Of course, he didn’t tell me this until after I’d spent a full week on Chirosovo. Every time I tried to hop off of Chirosovo, I kept setting my clothes on fire. A result with chilling effects, if you

get my drift.”

“What was this wizard’s name?”

“Penbrius.” Aahz stated matter-of-factly. If it hadn’t been from the ton of fur holding me down, I would have nearly jumped from where I was sitting.

“*Penbrius?! But that was the name you used back at the lumber camp.*”

“Did I?” Aahz asked innocently.

“Aahz, you know you did.” I shot back. Aahz frowned.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“You think he might be behind all of this?” I asked suddenly.

“I’m not sure yet. Most of the dimensions involved in this labor problem are awfully close to Penbrius’ personal realm. If he is still around and still as possessive, he might see Deva’s dimensional search for natural resources to be something of a threat. I brought up his name to see if there was any reaction from that moron Blox, but he didn’t seem to recognize the name. So I’ve just put it in the back of my mind. But listen, if he is behind this, you are going back to Deva immediately. Do you understand?” Aahz said in a harsh tone, “Penbrius is big and from what I remember from 500 years ago, not exactly the kind of wizard to play fair. Now forget what I said.

“The chances are that he isn’t involved. But if word has gotten out about how much money the resident wizard of Deva makes on a daily basis, then Penbrius just might be that ‘somebody bigger than you trying to get it’.”

Aahz shuddered and I admit, I shuddered too. I’ve never really seen Aahz scared before, and I certainly wasn’t liking it now. Suddenly, the uncomfortable silence was broken by the sound of thunderous wings and Gus the gargoye landed in a cloud of dust.

“We’ve got problems, Aahz!” Gus exclaimed. Aahz stood up and slapped his scaled hand upon his forehead.

“Not more bad news! I don’t think I can take much more!” Aahz groaned.

“It’s Tanda and Chumley. They’re not on Gezirah anymore.” Gus explained between deep breaths. He had obviously flown as fast as he could to get here.

“Not on Gezirah!? Where are they?!” Aahz shouted.

Gus sucked in a few breaths before continuing. “When I got to the hotel to leave them a note, I found a message already there, from Tanda. She claimed that Chumley had been arrested and placed in some makeshift jail at the mining camp. She asked us to come as soon as we could or they were going to transfer Chumley to Deva for trial. As soon as I read that, I took off for the mining camp.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“I was too late. The transfer was supposed to be last night.” Gus answered.

“Supposed to’?” Aahz questioned.

“Tanda got involved.” Gus explained. Aahz shook his head.

“This is getting worse by the minute. This was going to be an easy case, remember? Live in a resort and break up a labor union. That was the deal. Now we

have the Devan Department of Commerce wanting us to kill labor workers who, from what we have found, seem to be innocent, assassins who either are or think they are working for the same Deva Department of Commerce as we are but who are supposed to kill us, a cold miserable dimension we have to go to just to see how innocent these labor workers are and now this!. What lousy dimension did Tanda and Chumley go to anyhow?"

"I don't know, but as I was at the mining camp a couple of Deveels tried to arrest me as an accomplice. And guess on whose orders they were trying to do it."

Aahz's eyes narrowed. "Dierack!"

"In any case, I suggest we leave soon. If Dierack is looking for me, then he will certainly be looking for both of you as well." Gus said.

"But we didn't do anything. We weren't even at the mining camp." I said.

"Look kid, whatever is going on here, it isn't in our favor. I say we take Tanda and Chumley's example and get off this dimension." Aahz ordered. I saw the logic there, but it still didn't seem like something an innocent person would do.

"If we leave now, won't it look like we are admitting that we are guilty?" I asked.

Gus looked over at Aahz. "Skeev has a point. If Dierack is on the up and up, running will make us look guilty of something."

"And if Dierack is actually planning on railroading us, I'd rather he does it later than right now." Aahz said.

"Up and up? Railroading? What are you two talking about?" I asked.

"Besides," Aahz continued while ignoring me, "if there really is a labor problem and we solve it, the Devan Department of Commerce will drop the charges."

Of course, that was assuming that the Deva Department of Commerce didn't mind actually paying us our huge fee, I thought.

"So where are we going?" I asked giving up on getting any translation of what Gus and he had said.

"To Chirosovo, of course." Aahz stated as he pushed the red button on the D-Hopper and I suddenly felt my stomach drop.

Chapter 10

“Unusual weather we’ve been having...”

Noah

WHEN THE BLAZE OF COLORS that usually comes with the dimensional hopping ceased, we found ourselves on a barren, rocky plain. The sky was somewhat reddish, and the sun hung in the sky far too close for comfort. I immediately started sweating.

“Um, Aahz,” I noted, “wasn’t Chirosovo supposed to be cold?”

Aahz waved a hand at me and started to look around. We both shed our coats as quickly as possible, giving little relief in the searing heat.

“Aahz?” I continued. Aahz was looking at the D-Hopper in disgust.

“Damn mechanical devices. They never work quite right. So I had one dial off. It would never happen with real magik.”

“Aahz?”

“Relax kid, the setting on this thing was wrong. Just one little change and we should be okay.”

“But...”

“Grab your coat,” Aahz said, as he pushed the button.

Nothing happened.

Aahz jumped up and down, pressing the button again and again. I scanned for force lines, and got the bad news. There weren’t any. Rather, there were, but they were so weak that I could hardly find them.

“Aahz,” I asked, “doesn’t the D-Hopper depend on force lines to work?”

“Of course it does,” Aahz noted, angrily. “All magikal devices do.”

“Well,” I noted, “that’s probably why it doesn’t work. No force lines.”

Aahz stared at me with what was perhaps the stupidest look I’ve ever seen him give me. He then threw his arms to the sky and screamed.

Gus looked at Aahz. “Aahz, how could you mis-set the D-Hopper?” he asked, quite calmly.

Aahz glared at Gus. “Hey, haven’t you ever made a mistake before? Let’s just think of a way out of this.”

“Aahz, it’s not that,” said Gus. “In the years that I’ve known you, you’ve always been very particular about things. You, quite frankly, do not make mistakes, at least not on that scale.”

Aahz fumed silently. “What are you saying, Gus?” I asked.

“Somehow, I don’t think Aahz made a mistake. I think this is Chirosovo.”

“What?” Aahz exclaimed. “Chirosovo’s an ice world.”

“Was an ice world.”

Aahz nodded. “It has been a few hundred years...”

“*Wait, wait, wait!*” I screamed. “That makes **no** sense at all! Ginghe said Chirosovo was mountainous and frozen. Heck, even the guy on Gezirah that Gus met said that it was cold, and he knew someone working in the gas mines...”

“Well,” Gus said, “I wouldn’t put too much faith in that...”

“Gas mines?” Aahz asked.

“Probably a mix-up.”

Aahz peered up at the sky. “Could a gas mine explosion have caused this?”

“Possibly,” Gus remarked. “But it would have probably taken the entire dimension with it. But by the looks of it, something magikal helped. Or maybe it did it completely. Chirosovo was never magik-poor, at least not on this scale.”

“Great,” Aahz continued. “We’re on Chirosovo. Obviously, though, there’s no labor strife because there’s no labor to strife. But we’ve got to get out of here, and with the D-Hopper not working, we’ve got to figure some other means.”

“Like what?” I asked. “It’s not as though there are any other magicians out there!”

“First things first, kid. We need to get water. We need to get somewhere colder. And then we can start talking about getting out. Let’s head toward those mountains.”



Chapter 11

“Anybody home?”

E. Ripley

HEAT. Endless heat and light, bouncing and reflecting off of everything... And that sun... burning relentlessly overhead...

“Kid? C’mon kid, open up...”

The worried voice seemed to be coming from some vast distance, echoing down the long hot red tunnel. Then something wet sloshed against my mouth, tepid streams trickling down my dust-caked throat. I coughed, and reluctantly cracked open my eyes. Maybe it had all just been a horrible dream... time to get up and go to the Huffball tournament....

No such luck. Blinking the last of the sand and grit out of my eyes, I realized I was looking up at an unfamiliar dark wooden-beamed ceiling. The green blob that hovered over me finally came into focus as Aahz, holding something up to my face. A cold scaly hand was gently slipped behind my neck, holding up my head.

“Aahz? What...”

“Don’t try to talk, kid. Just sip at this. No! Sip!” I unintentionally took a large swallow of the lukewarm water and started coughing violently. It still felt wonderful. I cleared my throat and tried again to speak, or rather croak, this time with somewhat more success.

“Aahz? Where are we? What happened? The last thing... I remember... was walking towards those mountains....”

“We made it. Barely.” I’d never heard Aahz sound like this. Open relief was a

rare enough emotion for the Pervect, but his voice was a close match to my own rasp. “If Gus hadn’t been here...” He shook his head. “It’s a good thing gargoyles don’t need water.”

“I... I’ve never known *you* to need water, Aahz.” I tried to smile, but it was too painful with my chapped lips. I eased myself up off the wooden-planked floor on which I had been sprawled, and coughed again, bringing up another wad of dust.

Aahz managed a somewhat feeble grin in return and pushed the ornate wooden mug he was holding into my hand.

“Yes, but I’ve never had to hike halfway across the newly christened Inferno Capital of the Known Dimensions before, either. Keep sipping at that.”

“I passed out... didn’t I?” I took another small swallow of flat water, savoring it. “I’m sorry, Aahz.”

He put his hand on my shoulder, and grinned, this time with more enthusiasm.

“Like I said, kid, if Gus hadn’t been here, maybe neither of us would have made it. He was practically carrying both of us towards the end there.”

“Towards the end...?” I looked around with more curiosity. An astute reader may have noticed that the word ‘wood’ has already cropped up several times in my description of the room. That’s because that’s all that there was. Wood. An interlocking wooden floor, elaborately polished and carved wooden walls, leading up to the heavy beams I had seen upon first opening my eyes. Pieces of sturdy-looking wooden furniture were scattered around the large dim room, which was lit only by the remorseless sun beating in through some distant opening. The only stones in sight were those that made up an enormous unlit fireplace looming against a nearby wall. It was surprisingly cool. Dust mites floated everywhere. I looked back at Aahz, who was sipping from a mug of his own, scowling with obvious distaste at the contents.

“This isn’t quite (cough) what I pictured a gas mine as looking like...” I ventured cautiously.

“No. It’s a ski resort. Remember what our old buddy Ginghe said? Resorts. The Deveels’ main business on Chirosovo is... was... the gas mines, but they had also turned it into a big draw for the winter sports crowd.” Aahz paused and looked at me, a more typical expression filtering across his face. “You do know what skiing is, don’t you?”

“Of course.” This was actually true. During the winter months on Klah, people had often used skis to get around. I paused myself for a moment, then said, somewhat incredulously: “But a skiing *resort*? Are you telling me people actually ski for fun? They strap on skis and tramp around in the woods because they *want to*?”

“Woods? Well, I suppose some of the cross-country set may have come here, but I imagine it was mostly the downhillers. I think I saw what’s left of some chairlifts...” Aahz broke off and shook his head in disgust, a movement which was clearly aimed at the universe in general, not me. “Why couldn’t all of this been

here when I was stuck on this miserable dimension before? If there had been a few ski bunnies around, I wouldn't have wanted to leave. At the very least I could have kept warm."

"Ski bunnies? Do their pelts make good fur coats or something?" The only response to this comment was a groan from Aahz, which actually made me feel a lot better; we were back in familiar territory. A thought suddenly struck me, and I looked around again.

"Say... where's Gus?"

"Once we found some..." (mild grimace) "...water, he went to see if he could raise anyone. The place appears to be deserted." He cocked his head. "He's headed back this way now. Alone." We both got slowly to our feet, still clutching our mugs of brackish water. I settled weakly onto a stool that stood in front of a nearby wooden counter as the gargoyle abruptly appeared from around a corner. Even in the dusty gloom, I could see he was thoughtful, even worried. (How someone whose face is permanently locked in an ear-to-ear grin can display such a wide range of emotion has always puzzled me.) He spoke:

"Skeeve! I'm glad to see you're all right. Didn't find anyone. But there's... something you should both see..."

"I wanted to say thanks, Gus." Aahz said. I fell silent and stared at him. Thanks to Aahz's linguistic training, I had understood the words, but still....

"Gus, why are you suddenly speaking Deveelish?" Aahz cut in suspiciously, beating me to the punch.

Gus looked back with equal suspicion, but replied in Klahdish. "I've been speaking Deveelish since we D-Hopped into Gezirah. I figured it would be simpler." He 'frowned'. "Oh! Must be your translator pendants have finally stopped working, just like the D-Hopper. Until we get out of here, nothing magikal will work."

Translator pendant? I reached up and felt the amulet's lump under my tunic. The gadget was such a standard part of an experienced dimension traveler's gear that I had forgotten about mine. As I traced my finger around it, a faint voice began jumping up and down far back in my mind, trying to get my attention...

Showing his usual resiliency, Aahz appeared to have fully recovered from the Pervish version of dehydration, and was again ranting about magikal devices: "Stupid inferior gizmos! Let this be a lesson to you, kid! Learning a language the hard way is always safer than relying on some piece of junk that can let you down at a moment's notice. Remind me when this is all over to start you in on more language lessons!"

"Aahz." Gus sighed. "You know as well I do, that unlike many mechanical magik items, translator pendants are always totally reliable. There has to be something wrong with a dimension's basic magik structure, like here, for one to ever fail."

The mental pieces fell into place, and I looked up in sudden alarm. "Aahz!"

“That may be true, Gus, but becoming too dependent on anything, especially a machine, is a bad idea. All it takes is one moderately competent pickpocket and you’re in serious trouble.”

“Aahz! When I...”

“No, kid, you’re not getting out of this again. It’s an area of your education that’s been sorely neglected. But that’s for later.” He turned back to Gus. “What was it you wanted to show us?”

“*AAHZ!*” My heat-damaged voice cracked and I took another hasty swallow from the mug.

“Kid, we don’t have time for...” He trailed off when he saw my expression. “What is it?”

“I had forgotten I was wearing it, but back on Gezirah, remember when that Gezirahan at the lumber camp thought that I had accepted... thought that I was... um... there was that little misunderstanding? I couldn’t understand what he was saying! The pendant didn’t work on Gezirah!” I looked at them, and they stared back. I continued, slightly more calmly. “Well... mine didn’t work. You understood what he was saying. Maybe yours...”

Aahz gave his head an absent shake. “I learned non-magikally to speak Gezirahan... somewhere...” He scratched his temple in brief puzzlement. “Where *did* I pick that up? Berlitz?” He shook himself. “Not important. The important thing is, you’re right. Neither of us noticed at the time, but the pendants didn’t work there. You didn’t have any trouble doing any spells on Gezirah, did you?”

“No. But I wasn’t doing anything very complicated either. And Brockhurst... didn’t seem to be having any trouble...” Before the two of us buried him in an avalanche... a voice added from somewhere down inside of myself.

Aahz glowered at Brockhurst’s name. “I doubt that imp would have noticed if anything was going wrong with his equipment. But I bet the Deveels did.”

“Huh?”

“Dierack! At our meeting, that oily little worm Dierack made a comment about someone ‘sabotaging’ the Deveels’ operation. Remember? We all assumed at the time it was these so-called labor agitators. Maybe it wasn’t sabotage at all. Maybe things were going wrong because the force lines on Gezirah are... in the process of doing whatever the force lines here did.”

“And not just Gezirah. Dierack was talking about all of the dimensions we’ve been assigned to fix.” Gus’s voice was calm, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

“Yes.” Aahz was grim. “As soon as we arrived here in Desertville, we could see that whatever is happening is a lot bigger than any penny ante labor dispute. This would just seem to confirm it. We have to get off this dimension, fast, and hit one of the others. See if they’ve been having the same problems.”

When **Aahz** refers a labor dispute that involves billions in gold as ‘penny ante’, I start to worry. I opened my mouth to speak, but once again someone got there first, this time Gus:

“That’s part of what I was going to tell you; I didn’t have an opportunity before, Aahz. I didn’t find this place by chance; there were some strange lights flashing around it. They had died down by the time we got here. I think its been the site of magikal activity, fairly recently. Maybe we can use that fact somehow...”

“Lights?” Aahz frowned, and turned to me. “Kid? You see anything unusual now? In the room here. Look for an aura.”

I took another slurp of water to steady my nerves, and looked around the room, squinting. There was... something... colors flickered at the edges of my vision...

“Yes. There’s something. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. It’s like... like...”

“Like there are colors, but you can only see them out of the corner of your eye?” Aahz queried intently. “They disappear if you try to look straight at them?”

“Yes! Exactly! What does it mean?”

“It means that not too long ago, a **big** surge of magik washed through here. I’ve heard about this sort of thing happening, but never seen it myself.”

“A surge of magik big enough to wipe out an entire dimension?”

“No. That’s what I don’t understand. A blast big enough to do what we saw outside would have leveled this place and left a crater a half-mile wide.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. That’s the other thing I wanted to show you. C’mon.” Gus clumped off in the direction from which he had just appeared, his stone footsteps loud on the wooden floorboards. Standing up, I started to follow him, but wobbled slightly as I stepped away from the bar. Aahz wordlessly stepped up next to me and helped me walk.

We left the ‘lounge’ area in which I had been set down, and passed though a series of smaller rooms of various sizes. There were cafes, and meeting rooms, and storage space for racks and racks of skis. (Seeing the pairs of slim, polished, strips of brightly-painted wood made me realize once again how far up in the world I had come: ‘skis’ on Klah are battered, chunky, slabs...) The function of most of the other chambers was totally obscure, at least to me, but all were dim, silent and still. Harsh light still trickled in irregularly from somewhere up in the rafters. Then I noticed that all of the rooms were showing signs of damage—splintered wood, holes blown through walls, scorch marks, each room worse than the one before... Suddenly I shivered.

“Is it just me, or is suddenly getting... cold in here?”

Gus shook his head. “You’re not imagining it. But it gets stranger.”

Dodging a fallen beam, we rounded a corner, and all stumbled to a halt. In the long corridor before us, the architecture of the building took a radical change, or perhaps revealed its true nature. Most of the wood paneling on the walls and floor had been peeled and splintered away, as if it had been attacked by a giant chisel. Or a giant wind. What now stood revealed was square methodical blocks of ugly gray stone. Aahz studied them for a long time in silence, then spoke:

“That’s not Deveel architecture. All of that overdone wood scrollwork back in

the lobby, that's the sort of thing they'd do. But this...."

Gus nodded in agreement. "This place is built into the side of a hill. I think we're already almost underground. It looks to me like the Deveels found an existing, abandoned, structure, and just renovated and added on to it to build their lodge. So who built it originally? The native Chirosovans?"

"No," Aahz declared decisively. "When I was here before, the things the natives threw together made that hut you and Garkin lived in, kid, look positively palatial. No way they could have built this."

"You did say it's been 500 years since you were here, Aahz. Maybe they learned...."

"No. It just doesn't feel right. Let's see what's at the end of this corridor." Something about Aahz's tone suggested he was holding something back. I didn't press him.

We reached the end of the corridor which opened out into a small chamber, which still had fragments of wood stuck to the walls. Remnants of doors swung in passages to the right and left. The temperature had dropped so far I was actually able to see my breath, and the magikal afterimages swirled more thickly than ever, seeming to flow along the walls, outlining the blocks. None of this was what captured my immediate attention, however. The entire far wall had collapsed in a jumble of beams and rocks, revealing a circular stone tunnel that led further down into the blackness of the hillside. It was clear that the collapsed wall had, until fairly recently, covered the tunnel's mouth. The cold breeze that had been hitting us poured steadily out of the tunnel, and ghosted away behind us.



Carved around the rim of the tunnel mouth was a series of squiggly, unpleasant-looking, symbols. Each of them glowed with the first real aura I had seen since arriving on Chirosovo, a sickly red color. I glanced at Aahz out of the corner of my eye. He had that dangerous expressionless look that I had seen in the past in moments of great tension and crisis. I spoke, my voice very thin in the cool silence:

“You’ve seen symbols like that before, haven’t you, Aahz? And walls like this, too.”

“Yes,” replied Aahz, his voice very flat. “But only once.”

Somehow, I managed to swallow and speak. “At a religious ceremony about 500 years ago?”

“Yes. Penbrius. Penbrius built this place.”

Chapter 12

“I’m here to put the ‘P’ back in parody.”

Rage

“WELL, AT LEAST NOW we know what we’re dealing with,” Aahz said buoyantly.

“What are we dealing with? And why are you so happy?” I demanded. I was thirsty again and the heat really was wearing me down. I couldn’t even see clearly across the room. Certainly, the dim light contributed to my vision problem, but I could tell there was more to it than simply that.

“I’m not. What makes you say that?” he turned.

“You seem happy.”

“I’m not happy,” Aahz seethed. His earlier buoyancy was now clearly gone. “We’re going to die here, partner. There is nothing more certain than that. Don’t make me kill you before then.”

He turned away and looked back at Gus. Gus simply sat on the floor, fiddling with a piece of the furnished wood that he had found somewhere. I turned away from them, deciding that I wasn’t going to cry over my impending death until it got a little more impending. Instead, I examined the walls closely. They were wood furnished, cheaply. The pattern of the design was not particularly elaborate or even interesting. I blinked, then I blinked again. Something was very odd about the pattern. It became even more indistinct and uninvolved, and then faded back to the more elaborate pattern. My fading eyes may have been playing tricks on me, but I just wanted to be sure. “Hey Aahz, come look at this.” The design solidified itself

at that moment. “Aahz?” I looked back at them. Gus still sat on the floor, his eyes fixed on the wall opposite him. He now simply held the stick he had been fidgeting with in his hand, but it was held in a strange, unnatural position. Aahz faced the wall away from me. He didn’t seem to hear me. He seemed deep in thought. “Aahz?” I tried to walk over to him but my legs wouldn’t move. They were simply too heavy for me to move...

Then, suddenly, the air between Aahz and me started to shimmer, almost like an eddy in a pool. Only it wasn’t an eddy! It was vertical in the air before me. A vague shape started to appear in the middle of the eddy. And suddenly, it was floating there in the air before me. A large fish was floating before me, a coho or sockeye salmon. It fixed me with a stern gaze.

“Skeeve,” it began, “have you ever wondered about the extent of absurdity?”

“What?”

The salmon, it probably was a coho, but I couldn’t be sure, seemed to roll its eyes. “There is an infinite number of possibilities in today’s language, Skeeve. Learn that well.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

The fish used its whole body to slap me across the face. Its scales raked. “That frustrated headache that looks rambunctiously around us even now wonders aloud about actuality.”

By now I was thoroughly confused. The salmon continued, looking sternly at me. “Is the helicopter a implement of pleasure? Is it a love machine?”

“What’s a helicopter?”

Just for good measure, the fish slapped me across the face again.

Now that I thought of it, it was probably a sockeye.

“Stop that!”

The fish rolled its eyes and tried again. “When the pelican smells like the moose, it is time to change the bathwater.” I closed my eyes and tried to shut the fish out of my thoughts. “My,” the fish grumbled, “this is going to be difficult.” I looked back at the fish. There was a very human-like strain on his face that seemed to suggest that he was trying to pass a softball, whatever that is. “Look, Skeeve, it’s me,” Tananda’s voice came from the fish.

“Tananda! What are you doing as a fish?!”

“I haven’t got much time to explain this. I had to channel myself through one of the recently departed denizens of the dimension you are on right now. I had to select one of you as my message’s recipient, and I picked you because your brain would be the easiest to manipulate.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering whether I should be insulted.

“Anyway, it’s easier to channel if you send an indirect message, which is the reason for my channelee’s prior incoherence. Now that you’ve forced Chumley and me to strain ourselves magically and physically to send this coherent message, we won’t be able to come for you for four days. Remember that.”

“Four days. Gotcha.”

“Now, my message to you, I haven’t got much time. Skeeve, you three are not on Chirosovo. You were intercepted in transit.”

“Who, what? What’s going on?” I demanded.

The fish slapped me across the face with his body again. “Listen! We don’t have much time! Isn’t there something odd about your surroundings?”

“Now that you mention it, there is! The walls... they’re not maintaining their form!”

“Right!” the fish shouted. “It’s all an illusion! Penbrius caught you when you were traveling through the dimensions! And he’s cast a spell that’s got all three of you in its thrall! It’s all an illusion! Wake up!”

Suddenly, the fish and the room faded into black, and Aahz and Gus started moving again. “What?!” Aahz shouted. The new room came into focus, and I immediately recognized it as a wizard’s workroom. Aahz, Gus and I stood in the middle of an immense pentagram inscribed on the floor. The walls were covered with shelves that held books, scrolls, potions and assorted other bits of junk and the air was musty and stale. The room was dimly lit, so I couldn’t see clearly.

As the spell faded entirely, we heard a soft groan come from one side of the room. There we found an old man slumped on his side. Five candles surrounded him, and his body had knocked two of them off their stands. He was wheezing quietly. Aahz pulled him upright.

“Penbrius!” Aahz exclaimed.

“I had you,” he sighed. “I was so close to ending you, destroying you utterly, Aahzmandius.”

“Only my mother calls me that.” Aahz scolded.

“It was going to be my final solution. My last gasp of glory before I departed. I was going to destroy the one who caused me so much grief all those many years. All those many years, I chased you, like the wizened old man after the marlin.”

“Sheesh man, it was only an ice cream cone.”

“Oh, but it wasn’t just any ice cream cone you destroyed. It was a Keeshusha’s triple cone. I tried at first merely to cast a spell that would get you shouting ‘Whee!’ at funerals, but I botched the mixture. The picture of you shouting ‘Goll-lee!’ at the zenith of sexual ecstasy was amusing, but it was not enough to balance the sin you committed against me. It only escalated after each and every failure. Do you think the sinking of the Titania was merely a coincidence? But then you managed to wash ashore on the Rali, the Island of Nubile Playtex Models. I tried, and failed every time. I had to finish you, to collect not only the debt you owed me for that cone, but each successive embarrassing failure.”

“Gee,” Aahz said, “I’m impressed. Good going.”

“But now,” Penbrius continued. “It is over. I have failed for the last time. This spell was simply too much for me to expect to survive. I do not have the energy to continue. I will die with your debt unpaid. I hope you’re satisfied with yourself,

Aahzmandius.”

“Actually, I am, very much so,” Aahz grinned. “So long, Penbrius.”

With that, Gus and Aahz headed for the door, leaving Penbrius lying on the floor, gasping toward his last.

“Aahz,” I said, “we can’t just leave him here to die!”

Aahz looked back at me over his shoulder. “Why not?”

“It’d be inhuman!”

“Only humans can be inhuman, and I, as you well know, am not human.”

I shrugged, and followed them out the door. Made sense to me.

* * *

“Hmm,” Aahz said, “so Penbrius intercepted us mid-flight and transported us here. The Black Containment spell he cast on us has stripped us temporarily of our magikal powers, including the power of any item we may have on us. How long will it be before Tananda comes for us?”

“Four days,” I said. “How long will our powers be gone?” I was terrified of being without my powers, no matter how meager they were.

“Depends on the vintage of the spell. Chances are it will be longer than a week.”

“Why do our translator pendants work?”

“Believe it or not,” Aahz said confidentially, “they’re not magically powered. They’re more of a filter system that latches on to your particular racial characteristic. Your characteristics trigger the mechanism.”

“Never thought of it like that before.”

We continued on down a busy street on the dimension of Rio Paulo. Apparently, both Aahz and Gus had been here before, although I had never heard of the place. It was quite a spectacular sight. The time was early evening, and all sorts of people were jostling around in the street in bright clothing, seeming to celebrate something. All sorts of races were represented, from humans to quasi humans to creatures with camel or octopi faces to even gargoyles and Deveels. But everyone seemed to want to make noise in the wash of color and chaos that was the street.

“Aahz,” Gus said, pulling on his sleeve, “do you see what I see?”

Aahz looked in the same direction. “Oh boy, do I.”

I couldn’t see what they were referring to.

“I think she’s looking at me.” Gus said intensely.

“Of course she is.” Aahz said.

“Quiet,” Gus snapped. “Do you know how long it’s been?”

“Don’t want to think about it,” Aahz said, purple tongue firmly in cheek. “It might remind me of how long I’ve been.”

“That’s it! She’s looking back at me. And she’s slipping into the Tiky Cantina.

Let's go!"

"Wait a minute Gus," I said desperately, but I stopped when Aahz placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Gus disappeared into the crowd.

"Two lessons partner," Aahz said as he released his grip. "Learn these two fundamental lessons well. First, don't get into a protracted land war in Asia without proper air cover, and second, never, ever, get in the way of a hard-up gargoyle when he beads in on his poonana."

Well that was just great! Here I was stranded on some insane dimension with a melodramatic Pervect and a really randy gargoyle.

"Partner," Aahz continued, grinning but not looking at me. He placed his arm around me affectionately. "I think we'd better follow our old chum into the action."

With that, we followed Gus into the Tiky Cantina, some posh, noisy nightclub type place. Soon, I couldn't think of much of anything.

First I was struck by the noise, so extraordinarily loud that it seemed to form a wall all around me. The center of attention in the club was the main stage, where a band played. One member of the band played six different sized timpani in some semblance of a beat, while one of the other members, who I couldn't tell, blasted out a very smarmy, sleazy bass line to go with the timpani. Another member blasted forth with all sorts of strange percussion, while a fourth played something like a lute and sang for the audience, who seemed to be egging him on. Another three women sang along with him in some parts of the song. Every so often, the music would stop, and the lead singer would lead the audience through a chant, and then the music would start again, at an even more throbbing pace. The music itself was beyond description, with the possible exception of "loud." The club itself



was remarkably sparse of decorations adorning the walls, excluding the mirrored ceilings, walls and pillars. Even the floor, though made of wood, cast a good reflection up. The only effects in abundance were the multiple colored lights, flashing over the crowd as it surged and seethed through the club.

“There she is!” Gus shouted. “I’m going in!”

“Hold on there one minute, sir,” Aahz admonished. “You’re forgetting. This is Rio Paulo.”

Gus stopped for a moment and stared dumbfounded. Suddenly, he broke into a smile of realization. “Thank you, Aahz! I almost forgot my customs!” At that, he clapped his hands. “Savanti!”

“Come with us unless you want to get severely beaten,” Aahz said to me, grabbing onto my arm. We walked, although sauntered would probably be the better word, over to the area of the club that looked like a bar.

“Nutter, de santo,” Aahz shouted at the bartender, “three whiskies!” He then turned to me. “Always begin by calling the bartender ‘Nutter,’ or he’ll cut your hands off. Bartenders here are touchy souls.” He and Gus leaned up against the bar with their forearms. The bartender brought us our drinks, and Aahz tossed some coins to him. The bartender smiled at him and knocked the coins on the bar for good measure before turning away.

I picked up my drink, an amber colored liquid in a square glass, and turned around to view the carnage. Aahz immediately grabbed me and spun me back toward the bar. “Skeeve, you must face away from the dance floor. Right now we’re on display, and one of the women in the club, if she’s so inclined, will choose one of us to be her partner for the night. Here’s what the custom calls for. Put your forearms on the bar and stick your butt out. Move your butt to the rhythm of the music.”

“I’m not sure I want to do this.”

“I don’t care. If you don’t do this you’ll be flouting the tradition, and you’ll be killed. I can understand your trepidation, what with your baboon ass and all. You’ve really let the bod go to hell since we moved to the Bazaar, haven’t you? But it’s essential that you do this.”

And so I stood there, with my butt sticking out, with Aahz and Gus, their butts also sticking out and grooving to the rhythm of the music.

“Good,” Aahz said, not looking at me. “If a woman wants you, she’ll come up and do a double squeeze on your cheeks, single squeeze if she only wants to play. It’s considered bad form to deny a woman what she feels is rightfully hers.”

So we continued on jiggling there for about ten minutes before some woman came up and grabbed onto Gus’s posterior. “Hot damn!” Gus exclaimed, spilling his drink all over the bar. He escorted the woman to the dance floor, and they bounced along to the sleazy bass line. The bass line had stayed true the whole time. In fact, the tune itself seemed to be in a loop, and I commented on this to Aahz.

“Good of you to notice that, partner,” he said. “It’s a traditional song here,

written by the guy with the guitar. It's a four hour song, broken up into twelve repeating loops of twenty minutes each."

"What's the song?"

"It's called 'My Baby's Mocha Jive Talking on a Saturday Night Blues.' It's immensely popular and a favorite of dance clubs throughout this dimension. I'm impressed that we have the man himself here performing it."

"What do those lyrics mean?"

"That's right! Translator pendants don't do lyrics, since the meaning can't be spliced from the tone. Anyway, the twenty minute loop begins with a standard five minute instrumental to set the rhythm section. Then the guy begins with the proper verse. Here it is right now," and Aahz began to loosely translate while the singer sang.

"My baby's done gone and leff me on a Saturday night... she's done gone again and leff me yes she has... she said she don't find me lovely, yes I can see or something... and so I lost my job... my boss hates me, some standard job gripe type thing... yes, I've got my baby's mocha jive talking Saturday night blues baby..." And then they went into a brief musical interlude. "And so I known now what I needed yes I did... and I know the place for it... yes indeed my landlady don't love me no more... so I went down to the bar... I went to the bar... I went to the bartender... my old faithful bartender yes indeed take a bow jimmy... he said what you be wanting boy... and I say nutter... just give me a pink lemonade with a straw please... Wait a minute! That's not right! Oh, you understand it, kid. You don't need the exact translation," he blurted as the band got down into an interlude again. "Okay, here's the key part here, Skeeve. When they put the bright white lights on, you're supposed to, if you're on the floor, start jumping up and down and raising your hands. The singer'll lead you into it. Like right now, now here's the rough translation to these lyrics:

"Ee-eye-ee-eye-oh... ee-eye-ee-eye-oh, that's a chant of supreme religious significance and can't be translated. You understand that there's heavily irony in the chant." The singer started singing again. Aahz roughly translated. "Idiomatic expression meaning unholy relations with his mother, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy homosexual relations with his father, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy relations with his dog, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of extremely unholy acts with a member of the local constabulary, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy acts with the drunk guy passed out in his own puke on the beach, who done him wrong... idiomatic expression meaning the commission of unholy acts with his woman's dog, who done him no wrong but deserved it just the same. And now, Skeeve, the music will stop a moment for this line." The music stopped and the singer led the crowd in the shouting of another line, and then the band got back down to the now very familiar line. "You must sing along there or

you'll be considered strange. The line roughly translates into 'the ten thousand things arise, but he doesn't begin them. Wheat begets millet.'"

"Gosh Aahz, what does that mean?"

"Nothing. It's an expression that suggests that life is essentially meaningless."

"Life has no meaning?"

"Not at all. It's a bit difficult to understand, clearly. Sure, there are expressions of that sort of sentiment from all over. Shit happens. Confucius say shit happens. Hemingway say life is nada. You know what I mean. But this line, this one's different. Because to say life is meaningless ascribes meaning to the meaninglessness. Life is not meaningless, because you can gain meaning through the meaninglessness. No, this does something entirely different. It doesn't make a definitive statement at all, recognizing that as ultimately futile. It's an expression of no sentiment whatsoever, but the expression of a sentiment just the same. I happen to think it's a lot more powerful a statement myself. It doesn't have the same sort of presumptuous assertion of the mastery of life and all its little mysteries. What do you think?"

"I think I need another drink."

"Bravo!" Aahz shouted. "Nutter! Another whisky-yeeow!" I turned to look and a woman was there, a rather attractive, short woman with close cropped hair which framed a round face with big brown almond shaped eyes, a pert little nose and heart shaped lips. She was wearing a flamboyant pink bodysuit that seemed to be painted on. She was truly delectable, and she had just grabbed Aahz's butt with both her hands. "Hey baby!" Aahz exclaimed. "What's your best thing? See you around, kid." He left for the dance floor with his arm around her. I continued on, turning back to the bar, swiveling my butt in vain.

After another ten minutes, I looked back on the dance floor. Aahz and Gus, once I found both of them, seemed to be hitting it off quite well with their respective ladies. Finally, I scored a hit, and a woman grabbed onto my butt with one hand. That meant she just wanted to play with me. Okay, so she'll play with me. We went out onto the dance floor and danced along with the sleazy song that still was going on. I let her lead and as we got through the chanting and the hand raising and the statement of the fundamental meaninglessness of life she finally spoke to me.

"Do you want to slip in the back?"

Thoughts danced through my head about what that particular idiomatic expression must mean, so I just stalled in the meantime. "Don't you want to know my name?"

"No," she said, matter-of-factly. She twined her arms around my neck and began to suck on my cheek slowly, grooving to the music.

"I'm not sure I can go along with this," I said uncomfortably.

"What's wrong? You gay?"

"No. I'm not very happy right now."

“We can enjoy,” she cooed. “I’m very good. I know very much. Don’t think too much. Don’t do anything. I’ll do everything.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t,” I said.

She huffed and grabbed my hand, leading me to the bar. “Nutter de santo,” she said, clearly annoyed. “Tabasco.” At this, the bartender brought a glass of red, thick, liquid to her. She grabbed the glass and threw it in my face. She then stormed off. The bartender laughed uproariously.

So I stood at the bar some more, wiggling my butt in what I hoped would be an unobtrusive manner. The song eventually ended, which was remarkable in itself. The crowd cheered for about five minutes or so before the band went into its next selection. It had a slow bass groove and basic drum, with a simple chord progression from what sounded similar to a Klahdish church organ. What was most notable was that the singer began singing in Klahdish.

“Don’t worry... about a thing,” he sang, “’cause every little thing...gonna be all right. Singing don’t worry... about a thing... ’cause every little thing’s... gonna be all right... rise up this morning... smile with the rising sun... three little birds... perch by my doorstep... singing sweet songs... of melodies pure and true... singing: ‘this is my message to you-hoo-hoo.’” And then he went back to the beginning lyrics as Aahz and Gus came back to me.

“Hey partner, what happened? I saw you had a live one.”

“Ah,” I waved at him, “I wasn’t interested.”

Aahz looked back at Gus for a moment. He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Kid, I know how it must feel. How tough it must be for you. I just want to let you know that I’m willing to support you no matter what your lifestyle choice may be.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I must admit that I was wondering about you all these years. Luanna made me think my impressions were wrong, but when she bailed I had to admit that my speculations resurfaced.”

“What?”

“It’s okay to be a homosexual, Skeeve. I’m comfortable with it as long as you are, if that’s how you truly feel.”

“No, no!”

“What, you’re not?”

“Of course not! What made you think so?”

“It’s not a question of what made me think so. It’s more a question of what made me think it couldn’t be anything else.”

“Just... just... just drop it. Okay?”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “Must admit, that’s quite a latency period you’re running with, Skeeve.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. We were going to get out of here, and we wanted to let you know.”

“Okay,” I said, “let’s split.”

Aahz looked back at Gus, who cocked his head. Aahz jerked his head a bit. “Okay then.”

We headed for an exit that eventually led to a side alley. The woman with Aahz pressed his head against hers, and they swayed to a silent rhythm. Gus walked behind the woman who had chosen him, with his talons wrapped around her midsection. Gus looked at Aahz, and cocked an eyebrow.

“Quite a dimension, wouldn’t you say, kid?”

I turned away from Gus to look at Aahz. “Quite.”

“Hey kid,” he smiled. “Where’d Gus go?”

I spun around to where Gus had been standing, and he was gone, along with the woman he met at the club. There was not a single trace of him. I gaped for a moment. “I don’t know. Where did he…” I began to look for him and noticed that as I had turned away from Aahz, he and the woman vanished as well.

I was alone, on a crazy dimension, and I didn’t have the slightest idea what I should do. Every little thing’s gonna be all right my swiveling ass.

Chapter 13

“Life is never so bad it can’t get worse.”

Murphy

I SAT DOWN. What could I do? I had to assume Aahz and Gus were coming back at some point. And I knew that if I actually did anything, it would just be looking for trouble. So I sat down and thought.

What was our purpose here? What would we do now? Would we head off to Chirosovo? After this experience, I felt like simply returning to Deva and packing it in. It just wasn’t worth it; we didn’t have any coherent sense of where we were going, what we were supposed to do when we got there, and how it would matter at all. We needed a better direction, but I don’t know where we would get that.

After almost half an hour, my thought processes were interrupted by a loud scream from the upstairs of a nearby building. The voice was a familiar one.

“Goll-lee!”

Good, I thought. Perhaps now Aahz would come back. I allowed myself to believe this until about ten minutes later, when the Penbrius-induced scream repeated. I began to think of the ways in which Pervects are different than Klahds, and indeed when the scream emanated for the third time, even louder, I lost all confidence in Aahz appearing soon.

As I stated earlier, I really just stayed put, thinking that if I went anywhere it would just be looking for trouble. Well, it didn’t really matter, because trouble found me anyway.

“That’s him,” a familiar looking woman said. “He refused me.”

I now recognized her as the one who had squeezed my butt in the cantina. I began to run. I didn't get far.

I had only gotten about twenty feet when a forceful hand grabbed my left shoulder and pulled me back, knocking me off balance and to the ground. I looked up and saw a woman who would have resembled Massha, if you had turned Massha's fat into muscle. She took her hand, and threw some powder on me. She said, "Billings Cardozo," and everything turned black.

* * *



I AWOKED TO DISCOVER that I was hanging off of some sort of ropes. The ropes were tied to my shoulders, and held me on a wall about four feet off the ground. What was perhaps more perplexing, or bothersome, was that I was completely naked. Even more disconcerting was the fact that this seemed to be some sort of town square.

The ropes bound me tight; there was no way I could free myself. I sensed an additional pressure holding me there, leading to believe that I was also held by some sort of magik.

I smiled weakly as people walked by. The men who walked by me just seemed to avert their gaze and shake their heads, perhaps in disgust, but in what I hoped was some sort of sympathy. The women were far meaner, however. Some threw dirt at me. Some pointed at me and started to laugh hysterically. Still others came up and made what I assumed were sexual gestures to me.

Finally Aahz showed up.

“Aahz!” I yelled. He saw me, but quickly averted his gaze and moved closer to me.

“Aahz, what in Deva is going on here?”

“Keep your voice down,” Aahz said. “It’s against tradition for a kaijin to be speaking loudly, and the only way I can talk to you is with my back turned.”

“Aahz, where am I?” I demanded. “What’s a kaijin? What can I do.”

“Listen, kid,” he said, “you’re in pretty serious trouble. I told you it was bad form to deny a woman what she thought was rightfully hers. For all intents and purposes, you were rightfully hers.”

“What?” I screamed.

“Kid, keep your voice down. Listen, kid, Rio Paulo is one hell of a fun place to come, so long as you’re not a weeny prissy pants. But you have to go along with it. If you don’t want to, you don’t come here.”

“But I didn’t have any choice in the matter.”

“Kid, if I searched really hard, I think I might be able to find one being on this dimension who cared. Right now, you’re a kaijin, which is just the formal term for a weeny prissy pants. The woman you denied has the right to leave you up here until she feels you’ve overcome your inhibitions.”

“Can’t you get me out of here?”

“Listen, kid, I’m barely allowed to talk to you. If I try to release you, we both will get thrown in jail. And if you think your current situation is bad, it’s only because you haven’t seen a Rio Paulo jail. Even Pervects are frightened at the prospect.”

“So what do I do?”

“Well, every day at around high noon, the original woman you spurned is going to perform a traditional Rio Paulo ritual in front of you. She’s going to basically try to get you aroused, and also less inhibited about what she’s doing. Here’s my advice to you, kid: don’t look away from her at any time. I don’t care how much your sensibilities are threatened. You won’t be set free until you actively watch her perform the entire ritual.”

“And how long will that take?”

“For you? Probably a month.”

I sighed. Hopefully Tananda and Chumley would be more understanding of my plight.

After several hours, it was high noon and the ritual was to begin. I was lowered to a point only a few inches off the ground, for whatever reason. I didn’t know at the time.

The woman (odd, I thought, that I didn’t even know her name) showed up and stood in front of me. She inserted her index and middle finger into her mouth, and licked them heavily. She then reached down with her fingers and...

I averted my gaze. It was too disgusting.

She came up to me and slapped me. “This is going to take a long time,” she said disapprovingly.

I had no choice but to agree.

(THE END of the original chapters.)

Chapter 14a

*“I’ve always enjoyed ‘stories’ more than
‘serials’ myself.”*

Geoduck

AFTER SLAPPING ME, the woman returned to her position before me and proceeded to perform the rest of the proscribed ritual. Evidently she had to, or wanted to, even though I had already failed the test for the day. Looking back now, I’m not quite sure how to describe what happened next, except to say the business with the moistened fingers was just a tiny warm-up for the main event, which involved all sorts of things getting dampened, or downright soaked. As I watched or more accurately tried to watch it unfold, I noted vaguely that the members of the crowd which surged continually through the square gave the performance only the most casual of glances as they passed by. If this sort of *public* display drew that blasé of a reaction, then what did people do behind closed doors on this dimension? What exactly had Aahz and his partner been doing up in that room?

I decided that I didn’t want to know.

I decided that I wasn’t going to last three more days here, assuming that Tanda and Chumley would agree to cut me down when they finally showed up. And since even Aahz had refused to help me, I had to assume the worst.

The woman finally finished her various gyrations with a particularly dramatic flourish. (A couple members the crowd almost broke stride.) Pushing her long crinkled mass of intertwined purple and red hair into position behind her head, she slinked back to the wall and again slapped me, exactly as she had before. She then

wordlessly reassembled her skimpy garments and melted into the crowd without a backwards glance. The same unseen forces quickly and unceremoniously winched me back up into position. Life, such as it was, went on. More taunting, more dirt.

Until several hours later, when a mass of thick black clouds slowly rolled in over the rooftops of the buildings and it started to rain. A few sloppy splashes at first, then a steady lukewarm drizzle. A little more verbal abuse (along with mud now, instead of dirt) was hurled in my direction and then the crowd quickly evaporated off the square into the various surrounding buildings. In minutes, I was alone in the growing darkness of evening. I could hear the thumping sounds of ‘music’ and revelry behind the many glowing windows. The random thought flickered across my mind that Rio Paulo must be the only dimension in existence that had its entire main square ringed not with government offices and banks, but nightclubs.

Or to be more accurate, ‘round-the-clock clubs’.

With last of the mob vanishing from view, I arrived at my absolute lowest ebb. It was almost as if the universe had consciously conspired to bring me to this point of absolute bottomed-out futility: casually abandoned by my closest friends, magikless, on a dimension that seemed determined to repeatedly rub my nose in filth and squalor. Tied to a wall in the rain.

But then as I hung there, the large tepid drops dribbling off my naked, grimy, body, something tickled at the back of my mind. Something now bothered me, apart from the obvious physical problems that screamed out from various potions of my anatomy. Something mental. A voice, trying to get my attention. For a moment, I thought Tanda might be trying to send me another message, but after a few seconds I realized that like the moment in the ski lodge with the malfunctioning translator pendant, it was my own mental voice. Trying to tell me something. Something important.

I closed my eyes and tried to bring the thought forward. Perversely, now that it had my full attention, it attempted to slip away, and the despair swelled up again, a suffocating wave that came down like the rain. I ground my teeth and remembered that long-ago moment in Garkin’s hut when I first lit that stupid candle with magik. Remembered that moment of clarity and power. The magik may be gone for now, but the mind was still there. Yes. The mind; the best weapon and tool of them all. Like most of our adventures, up until now this current outing had never given me any real chance to catch my mental breath. To just stop and think. Well, *that* problem had certainly been solved for once.

I forced my hands to unclench themselves. I closed my eyes. I sagged against the roughness of the ropes, which didn’t really help much.

Clear your mind. Rise above all of this. The thought is there. I can find it. I am Skeeve. I helped bring down Isstvan. I defeated the greatest army ever seen on Klah. I have taken on the Mob, the Deveels, and a town full of vampires literally out for my blood. And came out on top in the end.

I can do this.

“No, you can’t.”

I snapped my eyes open, and looked around. The voice had been distinct, even piercing, but there was no one in sight, not even a salmon. (Although there was currently just about enough water in the air to support even a normal one.)

“What’s going on? Who’s there?” I croaked the words.

“That’s sort of your mantra in life, isn’t it?” The voice dripped with contempt. “What’s going on? I don’t understand. Explain it to me, Aahz. Help me. Tell me what to do. Make my decisions for me.”

“Tanda? Aahz?” I craned my neck. “Is that you?”

“No. No. And no again.” The voice’s owner finally emerged out of the wet night, slouching, his hands jammed in the pockets of his tunic. Even though his leather boots squished in the clumps of mud, it seemed that the lights of buildings behind him shown right through him. He was a rather spindly man, with an unruly shock of strawberry red hair. “You’re on your own, Skeeve.”

I stared.

“Who are you? Why are you disguised as me?”

He rose up off the ground, his hands still hidden. Abruptly we were nose-to-nose.

“You weren’t listening, Klahd-for-brains. I said you’re on your own.”

“You’re saying that you’re me?”

“Well what do you know. There **is** a brain buried under all that inert matter. Somewhere. You’d better try to find it and get it working, before you run out of time.”

“I don’t understand.”

One of his hands emerged with lightning speed. It was a supremely odd sensation as it struck my face—as if I was made of thick pudding, and his hand passed through me directly but slowly, prolonging the moment of impact.

It was still better than getting hit by the salmon or the woman.

“You don’t have time for this, *kid*. You’re in serious trouble.”

“I’m aware of that!” I almost yelled the words, as soon as his hand was free of my face. “I’m tied to a wall and now I’m hallucinating again! Is this some kind of side effect of the containment spell? Or the dust that Massha’s evil twin sprayed me with?”

“Hmm. Better. At least you’re asking constructive questions now.” His voice was almost mild. He idly drifted backwards a few feet, his boots dangling. “The wrong questions, of course. But I suppose we have to start somewhere.” He paused and sighed. “As a reward, here’s a hint. You’re not hallucinating. At least, not in the sense that you mean. In fact, your mind is the clearest it’s been in... quite a while now. Now why don’t you humor me. Take that as a starting point, accept it as truth for a moment. Then tell me what you can work out.”

I glared at him, then looked down my body as I spoke.

“All right. Fine. You say my mind is the clearest it’s been in quite a while. That would mean that my mind has been clouded. That I’ve been confused.”

“Yesss...?”

Confusion.

I raised my head, and spoke almost to myself.

“Because... Before... before it almost made sense...”

“What did?” He again extracted one of his hands. This time, however, he idly studied his fingernails.

I tried to make a wide gesture, which isn’t easy to do with just your shoulders.

“Everything. I mean, I didn’t understand what was going on...”

“Nothing new there.”

“Ha ha. But... but there was a feeling that... it *could* make sense. Somehow. That if we... if *I* just kept pushing, I could have found an answer. Could have figured out what was going on. With the Deveels. These supposed union members. Penbrius. Chirosovo. All of it.”

“Uh huh. Maybe. Maybe not. After all, as you were so recently reminded, life is ultimately meaningless. But you said ‘before’. When did it start to go wrong?”

“When Penbrius cast that spell. The Black Containment. And Tanda showed up as that fish.”

“Tanda?”

“You know who Tanda is, as well as I do.”

“Yes. Tanda the Trollop assassin.”

I looked up at the clouds this time, squinting against the rain. I sucked some water off my lips before speaking.

“Tanda...”

“Yes?”

“Where... where did she learn... where did she learn that spell? With the fish? She’s not a real magician. She knows how to dimension hop... and some assassin tricks, but sending a message like that? She and Chumley can’t *do* things like that.”

“Interesting.”

I started building up an intellectual head of steam.

“And that whole scene with Penbrius! Where did **that** come from? When Aahz first told me about their meeting, he said that Penbrius just... dismissed him. Like an annoying insect. Left him stranded on Chirosovo with no clothes or... or snow bunnies or anything until he apologized. But that dying man we met... he had been trying unsuccessfully to get revenge on Aahz for years.”

The phantom scraped at a cuticle with the opposed thumbnail, and spoke without looking at me. “Maybe Aahz lied.”

“No. I mean, sure he’s capable of such things. He does it as naturally as breathing, when he wants to. But I think he was telling the truth that time. No. I know he was. So what’s going on?”

I pushed on before he could answer.

“Then there’s Rio Paulo. Penbrius the megapowerful paranoid magikal recluse had his secret base of operations on *Rio Paulo*? Aahz referred to Penbrius as having a ‘personal realm’. There’s no way that this... this diseased, gaudy, non-stop carnival of a dimension was his home!”

“All of which still leaves you tied naked to a wall in the rain, talking to yourself.”

“Shut up. I’m trying to concentrate. This can’t be his home, but when we walked out the front door of his workshop, we were right out here on the street. Sure, it could have been a magical doorway, like our place back on Deva... but no. It still doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe-”

“And then there’s Gus and Aahz’s behavior after we got here! Okay, I admit, I openly and freely admit that I don’t know what the romantic life of stone gargoyles is like, but the Gus I know is too level-headed to let himself get distracted so easily. And neither he nor Aahz would leave me here to rot like this. No matter what they thought of my sex life...”

“Or total lack thereof...”

“...or how afraid they were of Rio Paulo’s jails! It just doesn’t add up.”

I looked around, listened to the rain and the distant thump thump thump of the music. This time, my doppelganger watched me in silence until I continued.

“Just before you came... I was thinking the universe had deliberately conspired against me. What if I had been right? What if this all was a conspiracy against me?”

“An impartial viewer of the situation would probably have to reply that you have a severely exaggerated sense of your own importance.”

“Okay. Fine. Not a conspiracy then. But... something.” I turned my gaze inward for a last time, looked for the quiet place of power. Found it. I let out a breath of tension as the light broke over me. “The runes. The runes around the doorway. Back at the ski lodge. They had to be there for a reason. Since the concealing wall got knocked down by whatever it was that wrecked the place. They were a second line of defense, to keep people like us out. They did something to me. We looked at the runes, and they did something. Sent me here. Rio Paulo, or whatever this place actually is. Got me into this whole mess. Forget about that ‘Black Containment’ spell. The runes are the only thing that makes any sense. If I’m trapped by some kind of spell, it even explains you.”

“Very good.” The other Skeeve applauded sardonically. “So now what?”

I turned my head and looked at him. I’m not entirely sure what my double saw there, but he immediately stopped clapping, and started drifting further away, fading swiftly back into silence and nothingness. My voice sounded very chilly and bleak in my ears.

“Now? Well, the first thing that I do is get off this damn wall.”

I closed my eyes, and settled down to await the woman’s return.

Chapter 15a

*“Retconning! We don’t need no stinking
retconning!”*

J. Taylor & B. Braga

THE DAY DAWNED BRIGHT AND CLEAR, the clouds having finally finished their appointed task and moved on during the early hours of the morning. The partying that surrounded me, on the other hand, never really went away. There *was* a period just before sunrise where the general traffic and noise dropped to a grim, determined trickle. During this stretch, a few twisted, slimy figures straggled by. I was unsure if they were Rio Paulites crawling home to recover their strength for the coming night’s festivities, or streetsweepers cleaning out the gutters. The end result was the same, so I suppose it didn’t really matter.

Finally, the multi-colored mobs reappeared in full strength, bursting forth like a gaudy flower as the sun rose, flopping and oozing and scuttling by in all of their glory. That hadn’t changed.

But something had. It took me a moment to realize what it was, but finally I realized that it was the women in the crowd.

At first, they resumed their activities of the previous day, but like my nocturnal visitor, when they met my eyes, they seemed to see something there, and most of them moved off after only a token nod or a quick gesture. I also sensed rather than saw that crowd members of both sexes were beginning to eye me in a speculative fashion, instead of ignoring me like before.

Then as the hours crawled closer and closer to noon, I realized that I was

definitely acquiring an official audience; a wide semi-circle of figures was forming around me, a couple hundred sets of eyes were settling in for the long haul. Street vendors appeared so suddenly they may have been teleporting in magikally. They were working the edges of the crowd, selling food and other less identifiable items. It made me vaguely homesick for the Bazaar.

And, finally, noon arrived once again. The ropes lowered me back towards the ground. The crowd smoothly parted, and the woman stepped into view, walking towards me.

Arriving in her position, she licked her fingers, and began the ritual.

Her body moved, twisted, flowed. Arranged its various shapely parts in ways that seemed to simultaneously defy both gravity and physics. If this was magik, it was a type that I had never heard of before. Pieces of clothing came free, and twirled around her body as if they had a mind of their own. (And who knows, maybe they did.) Never completely revealing, never completely concealing what was underneath. A profound silence spread outward from her body, filling the square.

I watched. I watched it all without flinching. The feelings of nausea and queasiness were still there, as strong as before. Problems like that are not something you can just dismiss overnight.

But this time I clamped down on them. Clamped down like Aahz grabbing my shoulder in mid-negotiation, and never letting go. I stood on some high, chilly, mountaintop, looking down at the scene before me with cool detachment. I had climbed that mountain during the night, and had no intention of falling off.

I watched as she danced. I watched her, and the crowd watched me.

There was a final spinning climax, and she stood before me, her clothes swirling to rest, her arms raised and her fingers carefully pointed. She looked at me.

She dropped her arms, and walked to the wall. We were looking at each other, nose to nose, as I had stood with myself during the night. There was a brief, endless, pause.

The crowd sucked in its collective breath.

She slapped me, the sound echoing across the square.

The crowd let out the breath. I noted out of the corner of one eye that a great deal of money was changing hands as people on the losing side of wagers paid up.

“Nothing has changed.” She spoke flatly as she stepped back. “You watched every minute, yes, but you just bottled everything up. You felt nothing. You have learned *nothing*. We still have a long way to go. I will be back tomorrow.” She turned to go.

“No.” I spoke the word, still very far away, still very cold. She froze, and turned her head, the movement looking as if an invisible giant had grabbed her skull and was twisting it around. “This is over. Now.” I had never felt this way before, as if I had tapped into some primal force line, filling me with power.

(It was the first time, but not the last I found myself in this type of position. But we'll get to that in time...)

With one quick jerk, I snapped my arms away from the walls. The ropes broke around me, dissolved like mist. The magic held me for a moment, then I slid down, landing on my feet with a squish in the half-dried mud. I staggered, but somehow kept upright. I heard a gasp from the crowd, and coins were hastily snatched back on all sides.

The woman watched me. I have no idea what she was thinking. She could have given unreadability lessons to Aahz.

I walked to her. (Well, if I am brutally honest with myself, it was more a stagger than a walk.) We stood, both of us more or less naked, looking into each other's eyes once again. The crowd went away, the world went away.

I kissed her, and she responded, grabbing the back of my head with both hands. I hadn't been kissed like this since my first meeting with Tanda.

Actually, I had never been kissed like this. Tanda was **very** good at this sort of thing, but this nameless woman... it felt as if she planned to rip off my lips after she was done with them and take them home as trophies. Her tongue did things that I had never dreamed possible.

She responded, and I responded right back. I seemed to remember a time when this had seemed so much more possible, more desirable. Where had it all gone so wrong?

The world was dark, and now it began to spin, faster and faster, louder and louder, collapsing in on itself.

I was falling down, spinning into a bottomless hole. The woman's lips, her entire body collapsed in on themselves as well, leaving me holding mist, holding nothing. I spun down and down

and down

and with a tremendous white-hot crash, slammed into something hard and unyielding, splattering the remnants of my body far and wide.

All was blackness.

* * *

I jerked into an upright sitting position, my head bobbing like a Jahk-in-a-box.

I was sprawled on a chilly stone floor, made up of ugly gray blocks. Nearby, a black tunnel mouth loomed, surrounded by unpleasant-looking red symbols. I stared at those symbols. The rest of the room seemed to go dark, the wood pattern on the walls began to simplify, lose cohesion....

"No!" I snapped my head away from the symbols, and looked at a nearby wall. The wood pattern didn't change, because there *was* no wood. Why had I thought that there was any? It had all been blown away by... whatever it was that had blown it away. I looked around the room, being very sure to keep my eyes averted

from the symbols.

Aahz and Gus both lay sprawled on the floor, unmoving. Rolling ungracefully onto my hands and knees, I scuttled over to where Aahz lay.

“Aahz!” I yelled, and shook him. There was no response—his eyes remained closed, his mouth locked in a unpleasant snarl.

“Aahz!” I shouted louder, and slapped his face. All this accomplished was almost breaking my wrist. I held it, grimacing. As I did so, I fleetingly realized that while I was again wearing my battered, dusty, clothes, the wounds from the ropes still bit into my skin in several places, and there was mud congealing inside my boots. I forced my mind back to the immediate problem. Finally, seeing no alternative, I picked up a nearby chunk of rock, and repeated the procedure on Aahz, with a slight modification.

“Aahz! Wake ugggghhhggg....” Aahz’s reaction was blindingly fast, and this time, it wasn’t my wrist that was almost snapped.

“No!” Aahz sat up, snarling, lifting me off the ground. “It’s *mine!* You can’t take it away from me! Not again! Not...” He broke off and looked up his arm at me, his clenched hand still cutting off my air supply. “Kid? *Skeeve?* I saw them ki...” Again he stopped, and stared around the room. My vision was starting to waver, and the world began to go dark (in a very different, but equally unpleasant, way than before...), but I saw him stare at the symbols for a moment then snap his head away, back towards me.

After a moment’s careful deliberation, I decided now was a good time to pass out.

* * *

“Kid? C’mon, kid, quit doing this to me! Wake up!” The endless tunnel was dark and chilly this time, but the voice echoed just as much as before.

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. Once again, Aahz was crouched over me, looking down. “Kid, what’s the matter with you? Twice in one day!”

I thought for a moment, then jacked myself up onto my elbows, and spoke with continued deep deliberation.

“If I were to be completely honest with myself, Aahz, I would have to say that I have a really bad case of the mocha jive talking Saturday night blues.”

Aahz stared at me, and I sighed.

“It’s a song, Aahz. It’s...”

“I know what it is! When the zark were you ever on Rio Paulo?”

Now it was my turn to stare.

“Rio Paulo actually exists?”

Aahz seemed to realize something. He turned to where Gus was laying, and started poking his fingers somewhere in the gargoyle’s many cracks and crevices. He spoke as he did so. “Of course it exists. It’s a well-known tourist dimension,

sorta like Toros Daglari. Well... no, not really like Toros..." He seemed to find what he was looking for.

"But it was all just an illusion..." As I said this, I again felt my rope burns, and trailed off.

Aahz jabbed his fingers sharply. Gus gave a surprised yelp, and bolted upright, his eyes wide. Aahz spoke apologetically.

"Sorry, Gus. I know you'd rather it was your poonana doing that."

Gus looked at him, his tone faintly wounded:

"What happened?"

"Black Containment is what happened. When we came in here, we tripped some kind of automatic defense spell. Those runes there. That tunnel is protected with the spell."

Like Aahz and I before him, Gus glanced at the glyphs, and looked quickly away.

"Oh. Nasty. How did you break out of it?"

"I didn't. The kid did. Somehow."

"Aahz? What's—"

"Black Containment, kid, is a spell that constructs a sort of prison around your mind. No." Aahz corrected himself as he and Gus got their feet. "That's wrong. It creates a prison *out of* your mind. It takes your memories, all the things that you fear most, and binds them together, makes a dream world and traps you there. Unless you can get out, the things you experience just keep getting worse and worse, more and more unbearable. Finally you die just to escape. Unless you can face those things, and beat them."

"But how did I visit..." I trailed off, then inanely repeated myself. "Rio Paulo actually exists?"

"It's actually a bit more complicated than Aahz said." Gus replied, coming over to me and offering me a hand up. "You know how all dimensions are reflections of the same base?"

"Uh... Yes."

"Black Containment can use this fact to make the prison more... realistic. It is able to take a reading of a nearby dimension, and then use it as a template for your torment. Rio Paulo is a real dimension, and it's actually fairly close by. If that's where you went, so to speak, any people you met will actually live there. And if you met them in real life, they would find you oddly familiar."

"Yeah, kid. Where do you think Deja Vu comes from?"

I thought, and spoke cautiously. "So was it real?"

"Yes."

"And no."

I thought further about all of this, and then asked the only question that came to mind.

"Have you been to the real Rio Paulo, Aahz?"

“Yeah. Once or twice.” He and Gus exchanged a quick, in-jokish, glance. “And before you ask, I wouldn’t take you there if the Gnomes offered me the combination to the Central Vault on Zoorik. The Rio Paulites would eat you alive.” He frowned. “Or you’d end up somehow finding a way of destroying the place. Either way, I couldn’t live with myself.”

“Aahz?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Where did you go? Just now?”

Aahz was silent. It was who Gus replied, gently.

“Do you want to tell us what you went though? Exactly?”

I thought, and deliberately turned my attention to the tunnel mouth.

“What do we do now?”

Even as I asked the question, I already knew the answer. Aahz merely confirmed it.

“We go down.”

Chapter 16a

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Captain G. E. Pickett

I FACED AAHZ. This was something else I had thought about while hanging on the wall. I may have already lost that moment of clarity, but my resolve had not wavered.

“That’s right. **We** go down.”

Aahz stared at me like he’d never seen me before.

“What?”

“I said, I’m going with you. All the way. I don’t care what you said, or how powerful this Penbrius is, I’m not letting you ship me back to Deva. If he’s destroyed this dimension, he may destroy others. We can’t let that happen.”

“Penbrius built all of this?” Gus finally got a word in edgewise. “Wasn’t he the one who...”

“Yes to both questions.” Aahz interrupted shortly. He directed his next comment at me. “You *are* going back to Deva. At the first opportunity. If I have to slug you and take you back unconscious, I will. From the little I saw of Penbrius, he was as powerful as Isstvan, if not more, *and* he wasn’t as nutty as a fruitcake.”

“Well,” Gus again interceded with his usual calmness. “The whole question’s academic at the moment. Nobody’s going to Deva, or anywhere else.” He pointed a stone talon at the tunnel mouth. “Aahz, as we’ve all just learned so vividly, those symbols have auras. If we’re going to get off Chirosovo, we have to go down this tunnel. There’s magik down there.”

Aahz fumed silently for a long moment, then growled:

“All right. But kid, you’re staying up here until Gus and I check this out. “

“Aahz! You might need me!”

It was Gus who replied. “Skeeve, I’m going to be blunt. For the moment, Aahz is right. The only use you’d be against Penbrius would be magikally. There appears to be magik down there, but until we confirm it, if there’s trouble, you’ll just be in the way, especially in your weakened condition. So, you should **stay here.**”

I looked at them both for a long moment, then silently sat down on a nearby pile of rubble.

It was just as well, since my legs were about to give out on me anyway.

Since they couldn’t use magik to make a light, they fashioned a crude torch from a broken timber and a ragged strip of cloth. Gus started the fire by striking his arm briskly against a nearby chunk of rock, filling the air with a shower of sparks and an odd burnt smell. Despite my foul mood, I was impressed.

“Say, Gus! That’s a neat trick!”

He grinned.

“Learned that in the Pebble Scouts. It was my first merit badge.”

“Huh?”

“Later, kid. C’mon, Gus. Let’s get this over with.” Aahz thrust the torch ahead of him, and they started down the passage. The torch light faded, leaving me with only the grim red glow of the auras for light.

Those moments sitting alone in that chilly, dark, room were among the longest I have ever spent, waiting for either Aahz, or the hole’s occupant to come up to get me. Silence poured mockingly from the tunnel entrance. The runes glowed evilly.

There was the sound of footsteps coming back up the tunnel. I picked up a nearby piece of timber. It probably wouldn’t do the slightest bit of good, but...

It was Aahz, still holding the make-shift torch.

“It looks okay, kid. Strange, but okay. C’mon.” I rose and flipped away my makeshift club.

After sloping smoothly down for what seemed like an eternity, the tunnel ended in a small chamber, apparently carved directly out of the rock of the mountain range. It was bitterly cold.

I looked around the room, and realized that fairly bright light was shining out from some indefinite source, as if patches of the air itself at been somehow lit up for our benefit. Aahz must have seen this as well, but did not discard the torch.

The room was roughly circular, with collections of odd indentions and bulges clustered in the wall at irregular intervals. While many of them appeared to be badly damaged or even burn out entirely, many more glowed not just with auras but from some ‘physical’ light source. I noted vaguely that there *still* wasn’t enough magik around to tap into. This was not what caught my immediate attention, however.

I said the tunnel ended, but in a sense it went on; there was an enormous hole

dominating the middle of the room, ringed with more of the glowing symbols. I inched towards it, and looked in. The pit's black glassy-smooth sides shot straight down, the diameter appearing to slowly grow narrower as it plunged into darkness. An icy wind blew out of it unceasingly. Far, far down the shaft sickly worms of lights glowed and squirmed. Aahz and Gus joined me. Aahz hesitated for a moment, then dropped the smoldering stick into the hole. It fell. And fell. And fell. Suddenly, there was blinding flash, and something that resembled a purplish lightning bolt lanced out from the side of the pit, hitting the torch. The torch, entirely in flames now, continued to drop. Another bolt hit it, and another.

"Well, I think we've confirmed there's magik down there, but I personally vote against going down to tap into it." I commented gravely.

Aahz reluctantly looked away from the hole, first at me, then at Gus.

"Gus... I don't suppose you can get down there, at least to before those bolts...?"

The gargoyle knelt for a moment and studied the hole, tested it with his fingers. Finally, he shook his head.

"Whatever this stuff is, it's virtually frictionless. And I can't dig into it with my talons. Don't touch it, either of you. Something tells me it might not be real healthy for flesh." He straightened up. "And as you may have guessed from my general lack of aerodynamics, my flying is a magikal ability. I'm grounded until we get off Chirosovo. I could jump in, and fall, and maybe survive long enough to accumulate enough magik to dimension hop, but if you came with me..." He didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Aahz sighed, and then said, grimly. "Gus. It may come to that anyway. If it does, you'll have to go without us. Someone has to get out of here and get word back to..."

"The Deveels?"

Aahz sighed again. "I suppose. I can't think of anyone better offhand."

Gus nodded silently but firmly. Aahz clapped him on the shoulder, and then clapped his hands together, briskly. "But let's see what else we've got here before we start really panicking. Spread out and check everything. Anything that looks interesting, give a holler."

I wandered slowly along the wall, studying the various surfaces. It was all completely incomprehensible. With some of the still-active lights, small, black, needle-like objects quivered slowly back and forth behind sheets of glass. In other holes, symbols shaped like the auras flickered and changed. I shivered, suddenly realizing how cold I was getting. I couldn't stay down here for very long.

Then I saw something both interesting and vaguely within my frame of reference. It appeared to be a narrow crack running up one of the walls, neatly splitting the stones in two as if someone had whacked each with a large axe. There was something about it that seemed to pull at me... I took a step closer...

"Check this out." Gus's voice came from across the room,, and I jerked in

surprise, losing my concentration. Aahz and I crossed the room, carefully skirting the central hole and joining the gargoyle in front of a... I wasn't sure *what* it was. It was a flat metal plate bolted firmly into the wall and covered with both more of the squiggly symbols and other, more geometric, shapes.

"What is it?" I rubbed my arms with my hands, and stomped my feet. The cold was really beginning to bite into me. Even so, after what I had just gone through it still felt almost pleasant.

"I think it's a map." Aahz replied after a moment's frowning consideration. "I could be wrong, but it *looks* like a map of Chirosovo. Or a large chunk of it, anyway. Here's the mountain range we're currently... uh... under. Looks about right, anyway."

"And that." Gus pointed. "That glowing circle. That must be where we are right now."

"Yeah... and..." Aahz frowned. "Look. There's at least... what? A dozen more circles just like it scattered around the map. Assuming they're all buildings like this one, whatever Penbrius is doing here, it's a big operation."

"Is..." I muttered thoughtfully.

"What is it, kid?"

"Well, Gus said earlier that the Deveels must have built their lodge on top of an **abandoned** building. And it makes sense. If Penbrius was still using this place, would he have allowed them to do that? Judging from what you said, it sounds like that's just the sort of thing that would set him off."

"Maybe that's exactly what happened. Maybe that's why this place got blasted."

I immediately turned back on myself. "But the whole dimension? Isn't that a little bit of overkill? Even for someone like Penbrius?"

Aahz was silent.

"I think Skeeve's right." Gus said. "But since we don't even know for what purpose this place was originally built, we're probably not going to get any definitive answers. The lodge up top looked to be fairly new, and its construction may very well be why Penbrius sent a blast of magik through here. But on the other hand the Deveels ran a thriving skiing industry here on Chirosovo for what... 3-400 years? before this happened. Something's changed. Recently. Once we find out what, we'll be a long way towards solving this mystery."

"This is all terribly fascinating, but we still need to find a way out of here."

This comment reminded me of what I had been looking at.

"Um... guys? Would you come look at something *I* found?"

* * *

"A crack?" It was abundantly clear that Aahz was less than impressed.

"There's something there. I can feel it. Gus? Can you maybe..." I blew into my

hands. "...pry out a few of those blocks?"

"Sure thing. It's just that tunnel I can't grip." Gus shrugged, dug his talons into the crack and pulled. Clearly much more easily than he had anticipated, two or three of them tumbled free. He ripped out a few more.

Behind them was a hollow, tube-shaped space, running up and down out of sight, as if we'd cut our way into the middle of a chimney. That's exactly what we *had* done, for all I knew.

Except...

There was something in the middle of the tube, glowing faintly. A thin, pale thread of color, running down the tube like an anemic fangworm. It almost looked like...

"A force line!" I yelled.

"Where?" The comment came from Gus and Aahz simultaneously, both automatically looking skyward.

"Right there! In the tube! Can't you see it?"

Aahz looked at Gus, who peered into the tube more closely, squinting.

"Nno... I don't." My heart dropped, squishing into the mud in my boots. "But Skeeve, you're a real magician. I just know the basics; Dimension hopping. Disguise spells. Aura reading. That stuff. If there's a really weak force line running through there, it's very possible you can see it, and I can't." My heart rebounded, at least part of the way.

"Well, kid, don't just stand there! Try and draw some power from it!"

I took a step closer, and reached out my hand, more than half-expecting something to come lunging out of the darkness and chomp onto me.

I felt it. Not a set of jaws, but magik flowing into me. Well... trickling into me. A little drop at a time. It didn't feel like either a sky or a ground force line, but... somehow... somewhere in between. It was to a normal force line what thin gruel is to real food; life-sustaining, but little more. I grinned over at the other two as my heart zoomed the rest of the way back into place.

"It's real. It's there!" I looked around the room in surprise. With the flow of magik coming into me, I could now see something even more strange. The room was ringed with similar 'force lines', running up and down just behind the walls, exactly as this one was. They seemed to spread out rapidly as they neared the ceiling, and passed out of 'view'. I reported this fact to my companions, and then asked: "What does it mean, Aahz?"

"I dunno, kid. We'll discuss it later. After we get out of here. And now we have a way to leave." He reached inside his garments somewhere, and fumbled out the D-Hopper. "And since I don't think we're going to learn anything more than we have, let's do just that before we all get frostbite." Gus and I stepped next to him. Aahz spun the dials on the device seemingly at random, held it as close to the tube as possible, and again punched the button.

Nothing happened. Aahz punched the button once again. Still nothing.

“There’s still not enough power. It’s not going to work. We’re back to square one.” Aahz’s voice was expressionless.

“No we’re not.” Gus immediately spoke up. “There’s another way.”

“What’s that?”

“We teach Skeeve how to dimension travel.”

Chapter 17a

“Getting there is half the fun.”

Hannibal

AAHZ SAID NOTHING. I stared at Gus. After a moment, the gargoyle continued relentlessly.

“I’ve always thought you should have taught Skeeve how to do this a long time ago, Aahz, under controlled conditions. You now have two choices. Either I leave you and Skeeve behind here, and risk the tunnel, or we all hop out of here, together. Which is it going to be?”

I spoke before Aahz could reply.

“Aahz, I have to learn this. It’s the only way.”

Aahz again looked at the unpleasant hole in the floor. It leered back at him. He turned his yellow gaze in my direction. Finally, he spoke, his voice wearier than I had ever heard it before: “You have to promise me, no matter what, that you do not do this again after today, until we’ve had more time to practice.”

“I promise.”

His gaze was cool.

“Aahz...” I hesitated for a moment, then went down on one knee. “I absolutely promise I will not dimension hop after this one time, until we’ve had a chance to practice.”

Aahz sighed, and seemed to shrivel up slightly.

“All right. All right. Get up. I believe you, Skeeve. You’re not ready for this, I’m not ready for this, I don’t think the universe is ready, but...” He broke off and

clapped his hands together again, rubbed them purposefully. “First, are you charging up your ‘battery’?”

I nodded, and he continued, carefully framing his words with his green hands. “Okay. The actual... process... of dimension hopping isn’t really all that hard. The hard part is *controlled* d-hopping, that is, getting where you want to go, instead of ending up in some unknown dimension.”

“I think I understand. but... does it really matter, in this one case? I mean, anywhere would be better than here, wouldn’t it?”

“Trust me on this, kid. There’s **always** someplace worse you can be. I’ve seen, heard about, dimensions that... well, that’s not important right now. What it boils down to is, for your first trip at least, it’s vitally important that you shoot for a dimension you’re familiar with. That’s the one good thing about this situation; we actually have a dimension for you to aim for.”

“Deva?”

“No. For one thing, despite what I just said about warning the Deveels, we don’t know what reception is waiting for us there. More importantly, even though you’ve lived there for a while now, you still don’t know it well enough to be certain. It has to be Klah.”

“Klah? Okay, but...”

“What?”

“Didn’t you say... back on Gezirah, that you can jump into unfamiliar dimensions? I mean, that’s how you met Penbrius...”

“Kid, you have to walk before you can fly. Yes, of course there’s a way to get to a dimension you’ve never been to before. But there’s no way I’m teaching it to you today. Later. **Much** later. Get my drift?” Aahz’s voice was chilly, even in that room.

“Yes.” I replied, weakly.

“Good. As I said, Klah. As an added bonus it’s close by, as dimensions go. Let’s aim for... erm... I know! That inn we owned for a while. I’d say Possiltum, but we’ve finally cut loose of that third-rate kingdom for good, and may as well not open up that particular can of worms again. It’ll help that the inn is right on top of all of those force lines. Okay...” He hesitated for a long moment, clearly searching for just the right words. “...What you need to do is create a map, in your mind, of Klah. Not an exact map or a complete one... just pick out some of the details you know. Possiltum. Twixt. That cruddy forest you and Garkin lived in. The inn. Any other place you’re familiar with there. Try and put these on your ‘map’ in approximately the proper relationship to each other. Just leave the rest of it blank. Put the inn at the center of the map. You got it?”

“I think so... Yes.”

“What you are doing,” Gus chipped in, suddenly, “is sort of creating a mental pentagram. If there was the right kind of physical pentagram at the other end, this would be a lot easier.”

“Yeah. There are even some ‘public’ ones set up in the Bazaar on Deva, but the Deveels charge an arm, a leg and various internal organs for their use and Deva’s out anyway. Gus, grab onto Skeeve. Kid, close your eyes. You need to concentrate.” I did as I was told, and felt two sets of strong, firm, cold, hands grab onto to me on either side. “Now, this is the tricky part. Tap into your storage. You have to imagine that stored magik flowing out onto the map. See it wash over the map like water, surrounding each of your ‘guideposts’ with a little pool... and linking up... a straight line between posts.... Can you see it?”

I strained, and started to speak: “N... wait... I... yes! Hey, it’s happening!” I could see the glowing pattern ooze out like a Deveel’s smile and form in the darkness before me. “That was almost... easy!”

“Yeah. Lethally easy.” Aahz muttered, then continued more loudly: “That pattern you’re seeing is a key. Now look beyond it, through it. You should see a series of doors... or things that look like doors.”

“I see... yeah! They sort of look like glowing rectangles....” I stared at the shapes that were suddenly hovering before me in the darkness, somehow simultaneously serene and deeply ominous. The fact that they had always been lurking there, invisible, was disturbing.

“Good. Those are the dimensions that are reachable from Chirosovo. One of them is Klah. Start gently overlapping your key onto each doorway. One of them will fit. Don’t try and force it! You’ll know when you find the right one!”

I slid the key over the first doorway. The doorway’s frame contorted around the key, resembling a snake-cat trying to swallow a pig that was a little too big for its throat. It failed, and snapped back into position. I moved the key on to the next one. And the next. And the next.

Then I hit a doorway that worked. It slotted neatly around the key, and both exploded in a redoubled glow of power.

“Got... it...” I realized vaguely I was sweating, even in the icy air...

“Good, kid. Reach out magikally, and pull that door towards you.” Aahz’s voice was as tense as mine.

“Okay... here it comes...”

“When it reaches you, let the rest of your stored magik pour into it! All at once!”

“And here we go.” I cut loose the ‘dam’ holding back the magik, and the darkness flared up around me. Instead of the near-instantaneous hop I had experienced on previous trips, something grabbed me from the ‘side’, and pulled me slowly but violently into the washed-out darkness, stripping away Aahz and Gus’ hands, and taking me a piece at a time...

* * *

I coughed and gasped, dropping to my hands and then my knees on some gritty

surface. I retched violently, but nothing came up. After a long moment, it felt like my stomach, along with the rest of my insides, had finally consented to rejoin the rest of my body, and I took a couple of deep breaths. The world slowly stopped gyrating.

Then it hit me. Actually several things hit me. First, I realized the air around me was actually warm. Not icy cold, not boiling hot, but warm.

The second was an odd smell, followed by a equally odd noise. The smell was... salt?

The sound was...

I looked up sharply. A strange, endless blue field wavered before me, stretching clear out to the horizon. What kind of grass moved like that? It was so... fluid. Like...

Water?

I realized with a start that I must be looking out across the first ocean I had ever seen.

It was somehow smaller than I had pictured one being.

“Aahz! Gus!” I crowed. “We made it! I did it! I...” I trailed off and looked up and down the... beach...? Yes. Sand... rocks... waves breaking on the shoreline... this had to be a beach.

A small winged creature circled overhead and gave off a mournful cry. Other than it, I was totally alone.

Chapter 18a

“I hate it when guests drop in unannounced.”

General Zaroff

STRANGE MOP-LIKE TREES SPROUTED FROM THE SANDY SOIL and riotous green undergrowth ran rampant everywhere, spewing clutching tendrils. The sun burned briskly overhead in a deep blue sky, but the yellow orb was the proper size and a cool breeze swept in off the water, keeping the temperature nicely balanced. Getting to my feet in a daze, I staggered slowly down to where the water lapped calmly against the white sand of the beach and hesitantly tested it with my hand. It was surprisingly warm but felt like ordinary water. I'd once heard somewhere that seawater was undrinkable and more corrosive than the fresh variety and I had always had the vague impression that an ocean would be a bubbling steaming cauldron. I pulled my hand out the water, rose, and started walking numbly down the beach until I came to a small stream tumbling out of the 'woods'. After sipping it with some caution, I took a long drink, still feeling dehydrated from our hike across Chirosovo and my two 'days' on the wall. The stream water was clear, icy cold and far more refreshing than the dregs that Aahz and Gus had scrounged up at the ski lodge. Then my stomach growled. I looked around in a no doubt stupid fashion, hoping that some food would be lying out, waiting to be eaten.

Amazingly enough, some was. Up at the edge of the jungle there was a tree covered with large bunches of bananas, the green-yellow fingers pointing enticingly into the air. Before moving to the Bazaar I'd never even heard of this

particular fruit, but many merchants there sold them, along with every other fruit you could possibly imagine and a few that you couldn't. (The ones that move even after being picked off the tree are especially disquieting...) I bobbed my way up from the shore to stand under the tree and look up speculatively. All I'd have to do is levitate up and... I paused. It occurred to me I hadn't thought to see what the state of magik was here, wherever 'here' was. I closed my eyes and looked around expecting the worst....

There was a bright glorious force line arcing through the air, reaching across the entire sky. I let out a relieved breath and greedily tapped into it, felt its power flow into me. After the last one and half dimensions I had visited, it was nirvana.

Then for a split second, I felt something unpleasant. It was much like drinking a cool beverage and feeling an unexpected bit of grit go down your throat. Something was wrong with the force line. Not serious. Yet...

I tapped in again, levitating myself up into the air towards the bananas.

* * *

Starting to sweat under the sun, even with the breeze, I removed my tunic and continued on down the beach, alternately munching from a banana and a bulbous green-orange fruit from another nearby tree. (I'd seen it for sale in the Bazaar as well at a monstrosly expensive price, but its name escaped me...) I now had no idea what to do. Occasionally, I'd call out for Gus, or Aahz, or anybody, with no response. If they were still back on Chirosovo, there was nothing I could do. I closed my eyes and searched for the 'doors' I had tried to step through earlier. Now that I knew 'where' to look, it wasn't at all hard to find them; they glowed in the darkness, much more strongly than before. None of them appeared to be the door to Klah and somehow I knew that I would now always recognize that door when I saw it. I opened my eyes decisively and dismissed the idea that had been forming. I had barely made it here with the two of them helping me, and even if I could figure out how to hop back successfully, there was almost no chance of popping in down in that strange room again. I wasn't up to another walk in sunny downtown Chirosovo, even if I'd known which direction in which to **take** that walk. More than that, however, I had the distinct impression the two of them had come at least part of the way with me. Hopefully they'd ended up somewhere where they could use the D-Hopper or The gargoyle's natural talents. Like Chumley and Tanda before them they'd just have to fend for themselves for the moment, something they were all very good at. I tried not to worry too much.

For the first time I seriously began to consider where I was. It was obvious I hadn't made it back to Klah but had wound up on some other dimension. Thinking, I vaguely remembered Ginghe during his briefing describing at least one of the effected dimensions as an 'ocean world'. Since it was presumably close to Chirosovo, I wondered if that was where I had landed and tried unsuccessfully to

remember the name of the place. Abejekerwhatsuitz? Something like that...

I was just speculating over the unpleasant possibility that I had gone to the real Rio Paulo when I looked up and stumbled to a surprised stop. I had arrived at a sharp point in the shoreline and was staring out over a vast stretch of water, uninterrupted by land. The beach took a sharp bend and thrust out a sandy finger into the sea before sliding back almost in the exact direction I had come. The vista was truly mind-blowing: the ocean stretched as far I could see in all directions, gentle blue rollers washing gently on and on. More of the winged 'birds' circled far overhead hooting occasional calls back and forth. The first force line serenely arced overhead and another one passed by not far away. A few puffy white clouds drifted by. It was almost impossible to imagine this idyllic place ending up like Chirosovo. But I had the horrible feeling down in my stomach that this was exactly what was going to happen, and sooner rather than later.

I discarded the spent remnants of the fruit and launched myself skyward once more, going much higher than before, rising above the level of the mop-trees to get a better view of my surroundings.

Which turned out to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, a better view of more ocean. Rotating slowly, my free hand shading my eyes against the sun, I realized with only a small start that I was on (or rather above) a small island floating in an endless blue sea. No other land was visible in any direction. Giving up on that search for the moment, I started scanning the island spread out below my feet for signs of my friends, or anything else.

Nothing.

Then I realized I was wrong. There *was* something on the island, crouching menacingly amidst the foliage, up among the small but steep clump of green hills that made up the island's center. The vigorous local plant life had made a concerted and enthusiastic attempt to overrun the structure but its basic gray cube shape still stood out amidst the tangle of vines.

It was a very familiar gray color. I felt a cold chill ripple down my spine. I steeled myself and began floating down towards the structure.

* * *

I settled down beside the gray building, feeling like I was lowering myself into the throat of some vast green beast. It was clear that no one had been near the building in a long time and that even if they had, they would have just about had to fly in, as I had. The building was sunk down in a narrow ravine, with no roads, overgrown or otherwise, leading to it. How had Penbrius built it? **Why** had he built here, on an island in the middle of nowhere?

I started picking my way through the dense underbrush, trying to circle the building and find an opening inside. Vines and shrubs clawed at me in the green coolness, and I quickly put my tunic back on. Small creatures chattered noisily

from the damp green darkness, indignantly scurrying or flapping or oozing away at my approach. Once or twice I had to hack away at obstructions in my way with magik or float over a particularly bad gnarl. There were simply too many obstacles to stay constantly airborne, however.

Finally, I emerged hot sweaty and tired into something resembling a clearing. The bushes here had evidently been cut back recently; “recently” if you were dealing in terms of years at least. There was also an unadorned rectangular entrance to the building, an ominous black hole that brought unpleasantly to mind the gap left in a smile by a missing tooth. For a moment, I seriously considered turning around and leaving. I applied another layer of steel to my spine and scooped up a convenient discarded branch. It was a simple matter to wrap a small ward around it and pump in enough power that it started to glow with a visible light. Until I grew stone appendages like Gus, it would have to do.

Inside, I found the now-familiar collection of gray blocks. A few hesitant green tendrils had crept in from the outside and loitered nervously near the entrance, but mostly the stonework’s cool symmetry remained unviolated, marching back and forth in relentless rows. The passageway sloped downward at a fairly sharp angle with smaller, bare, chambers leading off on both sides. A cool breeze was hitting me in the face, blowing up from down below. I started straight down, already having a pretty good idea what I would find.

Only it wasn’t what I expected, exactly. As it had on Chirosovo, the main passage eventually dead-ended in a small chamber. However instead of a ring of guard symbols and a further passage going down, there was another stone wall. A wall with something wrong... it had bulged slightly, as if some great force (Chumley or Gus perhaps) had pounded on it from the other side but failed to break through. No. I decided if Chumley or Gus had attacked the wall, it wouldn’t still be standing. Cool air chilled its way through the cracks knocked between the stones.

I hesitated for a long moment, studying the damage, then began prying away at the bricks with magik. Like the ones Gus had ripped out of the wall on Chirosovo, they surrendered with surprising ease, and in a few moments, there was a big enough hole for me to squirm through. I felt another Black Containment spell trying to sink its claws into me. Knowing now what was happening, it was easy to shake off. I started to clamber through the hole, but then pulled myself up short as I realized that there was also the tight netlike crisscrossing of a protective ward stretched across the hole’s entrance. It looked much like the one that Frumple had used on his shop in Twixt. I pried at it with my magik and it bent in the same way as well, admittedly with a great deal more effort than Frumple’s setup. Finally I squirmed through into the dark passageway beyond, thrusting my torch out ahead of me.

Unlike the passage on Chirosovo, this one switch-backed its way down. I realized that its builder wouldn’t have as much room in which to operate; if you

dug too far in any one direction here, you'd have hit the ocean.

The room at the bottom, on the other hand, was almost identical to the one I had just left. Icy cold, with a large hole at the center and lights flashing and blinking everywhere. There were three obvious differences however; all of the lights and glyphs in this room appeared to be working, the cold was even more intense, and the 'map' on the wall had a radically different arrangement of symbols. The whole effect was vaguely clinical and deeply unsettling. Studying the last item more carefully, I noticed there were about the same number of glowing circles as had been on the Chirosovan map, and that as before one of them was blinking brighter than the rest. This had to be where I was. I scanned the map for nearby landmasses. The nearest on the map, if I was reading it accurately, was off to the east. I was in fact in the middle of a good-size ocean, but there were, it would seem, three large continents as well. Unfortunately there appeared to be absolutely no way to judge the map's scale; the nearest mainland could be just over the horizon, or three days away... Still, at least I had something to aim for, if worst came to worst.

I tried to burn the map into my memory, then checked out the central hole. The runes on this one were all glowing brightly and another ward covered the top of the hole like a porous but deadly trapdoor. I looked further down. The colors at the bottom of the hole were much brighter and more active, almost zipping back and forth and sparking nastily against one another. I thought for a long moment. I could pry the bars apart, and carefully float down there and maybe even get through those lights... Then I looked at my white-clouded breath. There was still one problem that I didn't see how to solve. Half reluctantly, half with relief, I turned to walk back up to the surface, stomping my feet to get the feeling back into them.

I stopped. For the first time, I noticed that the same set of force lines as on Chirosovo was hidden behind the walls, reaching up and out of sight, and sinking down to evidently meet somewhere beneath my feet. For some reason, they brought to mind the image of a barbershop. I looked down into the hole one last time and shivered. I walked back up the passage.

Emerging back into the sunlight and welcome warmth, I discarded my torch and took to the air for a third time, rising carefully through the tangled growths. Once I was clear I rose to the same height as my second flight and looked down at the structure beneath my feet. Now that I was looking for them, I could see the weak lines emerging in a very wide ring from the vegetation around the structure and slicing up into the sky, beginning to split apart into smaller strands as they rose. I looked at the two 'real' forcelines I had seen before, and realized that they appeared to be slightly... bent... as if they were being slowly pulled towards the island. I swallowed and started to rise more quickly, going higher, slowly turning and staring out across the water. It felt like the building I had left behind was staring up at me, making the back of my neck itch. If something didn't turn up, I'd have to risk flying east, knowing that my power source had once again officially

been placed in the 'unreliable' category. I had to find... something.

But there was nothing.

Except in one direction, roughly along the path I was planning to follow as a last resort. There, finally, was something. Not land, but a small white and blue object, moving along the horizon at a fair clip. I realized it had to be some kind of boat, although my knowledge of watercraft basically began and ended with the fact that the pointy end went first. I thought again for a long moment about that unpleasant kink in the force lines, about that hole waiting for me down below. I gritted my teeth and set off in the direction of the ship, sailing down closer to the water as soon as I wafted over the last bank of trees.

Chapter 19a

*“Then he fell in with bad company and ran
off to sea.”*

Davey Jones’ mother

ZIPPING ACROSS THE OCEAN was a strange, exhilarating experience, watching the endless waves roll majestically along a few feet below me, feeling the cool breeze beat me in the face. Occasionally a sleek-bodied sea creature would jump out of the water and hang suspended for a moment before dropping back out of sight beneath the blue-green surface. Force lines crossed the air at regular intervals, giving me fresh boosts of power whenever I needed them.

At one point, I pulled myself to a surprised stop and looked down at the water beneath the tips of my boots. Another force line shot past. Unlike the others, however, this one was down under the water. I had never seen one that looked like it before and in spite of the urgency of the situation, I dipped a little closer to examine it. It was a serene blue-green color, glowing brighter than the water and more ‘solid’ than a sky line. I tapped into it for a moment, and realized with a start it must be a water force line. I had never been near a large enough body of water to find one before. The power was cool, but strong and flowing and deep. Tasting it, I felt as if I could fly forever, run to the ends of the earth and back, dive to the bottom of the sea...

I pulled free. Now was not the time for experimenting and the taste of the power was actually a little scary. I resumed my charge toward the boat, angling my path to intercept it.

The power that I had just sucked up helped immensely. I tore along, eating up the distance. I felt so good for a moment, I risked doing a couple of loops and twists in the sky.

Whatever dimension this was, it was a very nice place to visit.

Unfortunately, by the time I was getting close to the boat, I was beginning to seriously tire. Even with the ‘water’ line’s major boost, when you levitate yourself, you’re not just floating effortlessly along. It’s work, just like running for a long distance is tiring for even the best of athletes.

I studied my target. The blue-gray boat was evidently powered by an elaborate arrangement of sparkling white sails, and bounced jauntily along, plowing through the waves. As I said before, I didn’t know much about boats, but I got the vague impression that this wasn’t one of the bigger types that you might encounter. Also, while not exactly streamlined and flashy, it looked well-made, with none of the crudeness that I now associate with dimensions like Klah. I floated alongside the ship for a moment, and looked it over more carefully. There was a word painted on the side of the vessel in an unfamiliar language, the scrolling letters large and ornate. Oddly, a pop-eyed, curly-haired wooden statue grinned out over the water from a post at the very front of the vessel. There was no sign of life on board. I tried calling, but the wind just blew my voice away. Finally I gave a mental shrug, and settled down on the ship’s... floor? I knew there was a special word for it, but I couldn’t remember it off-hand.

As soon as my feet touched down on the wooden planks, I staggered a little to one side and an unpleasant queasy sensation erupted in my stomach. The boat continued to go up. And down. And *up*... I staggered again. This was almost as bad as that Gezirahan cart-ride... I had just been **flying**; how could riding on a boat make me ill? I felt my meal of fruit rise up from my stomach, but then grudgingly settle down again. I got a death-grip on a nearby rope and hung on grimly. I’d pushed myself far too hard with that flight, especially after Chirosovo and Rio Paulo, and now I was paying the price.

Suddenly, a nearby door popped open, and someone stepped out into the sunshine.

* * *

I was expecting absolutely anything. Walking trees. Giant orange and blue bugs. Winged purple-furred gorillas. Except what it turned out to be. ‘It’ was, to my immense surprise, a young female Deveel.

While I hadn’t exactly gotten to know any of them personally, I knew that there was such a thing as a female Deveel; occasionally a more elderly specimen turned up running a booth at the Bazaar and of course some of Alcain’s... er... employees could sometimes be seen shopping the Bazaar’s stalls, picking up various... whatever women in that profession need, I suppose. But being in close

contact with one closer (relatively) to my own age was a definite rarity. Especially one dressed like this: she was wearing, to use the word in its loosest possible sense, two very small pieces of cloth, each stretched tentatively across her more private areas and leaving open large swaths of smooth red skin. It had been a while since I had seen so much of a Deveel's naked body, of either sex, and I had to say it wasn't at all unpleasant. The furry legs, delicate hooves and slim tail were a little off-putting, however.

She had been talking to someone still inside, her head turned back over her shoulder, her mass of black hair floating loose in the breeze. She was also wearing some kind of strange, billed, rounded hat, carefully shaped so her horns poked through it unimpeded. She finally looked forward, and saw me clinging grimly to the rope. She let out a startled shriek, and took an involuntary step backwards, almost falling back through the door from which she had emerged. I belatedly realized how battered and disreputable I must have appeared after what I had been through during the last few hours. Should have invested a few moments in a disguise spell...

Almost instantly, another Deveel appeared in the doorway, this one a young male, wearing an equally small piece of clothing around his waist and a similar headpiece. "Yilla? What's wrong? Are you..." He saw me and trailed off. I took a deep breath and plunged in:

"Look. Folks. I'm very sorry to... um... drop in uninvited, but I just need some information and then I'll... be on my way."

"Drop in...?" The female (Yilla, presumably) asked weakly, staring at me wide-eyed. "How... where..."

"Miss, please. I just need to know where I am. I'm a little lost."

"I'll say!" The male stared at me with unabashed curiosity. "Klah's at least two dimensions from here!" He hesitated. "You are a Klahd, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm a Klahd." I sighed. I suppose one of these days I should come up with a new name for my species, like Aahz and his fellow Pervects have, but I never seem to get around to it. "Like I said, could you just tell me where I am?"

"Uh... you're out in the middle of the Great Western Ocean.... Did you dimension hop here? I didn't think Klahds knew how to do that." They both seemed to be getting over their initial fright in surprisingly short order. Of course, the way I was clinging weakly to the rope may have hinted that I wasn't much of a threat to them.

"I didn't think anyone could do that." Yilla commented. "Right onto a moving boat? Wow! Talk about lucky!"

"No." I shook my head. "I flew here. From an island. Back over that way... somewhere..." I gave a vague wave.

"Klahds can fly? I never heard that before, either..."

I sighed again, heavily.

"I'm a magician, okay? Now, could you please tell me what *dimension* I'm on?"

It's rather important."

"Oh! You're on Toros Daglari!" He hesitated. "A magician? Why didn't you just use one of the—?"

Yilla leaned over and interrupted her compatriot conspiratorially, still keeping her dark eyes on me. "Are Klahds normally that greenish color?"

That did it. I relinquished my grip on the rope, staggered to the side of the boat and threw up.

* * *

"Are you going to be all right?" The voice came from beside me at the waist-high rail that ran around the edge of the ship. I looked up. The male Deveel was standing next to me, now pulling on a striped shirt in addition to the rather skimpy 'pants' he had been wearing before.

"I don't know..." I admitted. "I feel sick and queasy."

"Oh, you ever been seasick before?"

"Uh... no. But this is my first time out on an ocean."

He nodded sympathetically and called over his shoulder: "Yilla! Could you bring that seasickness gunk?"

"Seasickness...? No... I couldn't... really..." I protested feebly.

"I insist. You look like you need it."

"How much is this going to cost me?"

To my utter surprise, the Deveel laughed cheerfully.

"I see you're familiar with Deveels. But we're not all like that." He must have seen my look of disbelief, because he continued more seriously. "Okay, most of us are like that. Most of the time. I suppose I'm no exception in my own way. But I'm on vacation at the moment. I came out here today to relax, not sell seasickness cures. Besides, now a magician owes me a favor. Never know when that might come in handy." Somehow, his last comment was bizarrely comforting. I was back on familiar ground. I straightened up as best I could, and went into haggling mode.

"If all I get for dishing out a favor is a tube of ... erm... anti-sickness gunk, I'll pass. However, if you're willing to let me stay on your boat until you get back to... port, then we have a deal. I'll do my best to help around the boat or just stay out of your way, and you throw in the gunk."

Yilla had appeared beside us, now wearing a fairly modest robe and holding a small white tube. The male looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Is this deal acceptable to you, Yilla?"

She shot him one of those indecipherable glances that close couples use with each other, then smiled. I was suddenly strongly reminded of my meeting with the Woof Writers on Limbo.

"I suppose so, if it's acceptable with Mr...." she looked at me, her own narrow eyebrows raised.

While I had forgotten about a disguise spell, this was something I had considered before landing. For once, Aahz would have been proud of me. I didn't even hesitate:

"Penbrius." I felt a brief spasm of guilt at the lie, but if Dierack and the other Executive Branch Deveels really were looking to arrest Skeeve the Great, at least this way I'd possibly be avoiding trouble for both me and my new hosts, as friendly as they seemed.

Also taking another cue from Aahz, I watched their expressions closely for any strong reaction as I said the name. There didn't appear to be one.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Penbrius. My name is Karrik, and this, as you may have guessed, is Yilla. So we have a deal?" He extended his hand and I shook it.

"We have a deal."

Chapter 20a

“There are natives and then there are natives.”

Tarzan

KARRIK AND YILLA as has already been hinted, were not typical Deveels or at least not typical in my experience. It turned out there was a reason for this...

“You’re not tourists? You live here on Toros Daglari?” I asked somewhat incredulously. I smeared a final dab of the odorous seasickness cure behind my ear, as I had been directed. It seemed to be doing the job.

Yilla nodded and looked up at the blue sky from under her hat. The two of us were laying on the deck of the boat, up near the bow. (I was starting, slowly, to pick up more of the terminology.) Behind us, Karrik was busy pulling and knotting various ropes, raising and lowering sails and manning (Deveeling?) the wheel. I tried to help and with my levitation skills was able to do one or two small chores for him, working up in the rigging and scraping at this and that down near the boat’s waterline, but in the end I mostly just stayed out of his way while he ran the boat. I noted that Yilla did too, but it was clear even to me that she could have run the craft by herself if she so desired.

“I’ve only been to the Bazaar two or three times in my whole life. Both our families have lived here for several generations.” She rolled gracefully onto her side and looked at me with a pert expression. “You live there, in the Bazaar, you said? What do you know about Devan history?”

“Uh... I know that there was once a great environmental and economic catastrophe on Deva which turned the Deveels into a race of interdimensional

traders.”

“Yes, the ones that stayed close to Deva. But not all Deveels did. Many of them left, settled elsewhere. Most of those that were able to put down roots, survive... never took up the active trading life, although some of it rubbed off on us, I suppose... Especially after...” She hesitated then continued. “Anyway, over the years, a large number of the escaping Deveels found their way here and settled. Our ancestors. It seemed like paradise, after the devastation that they were fleeing. The natives were friendly as well, so they stayed, establishing their own community, working to fit in with the original natives.”

“Especially after?” I prodded gently.

She seemed to think for a moment, then sighed.

“We, well, the Deveels that lived here then, were essentially cut off from Deva for a long time after the great collapse. There was almost no contact until relatively recently. Deva and its fate had become practically a myth for us. Then the Deveels from the Bazaar... the Traders, we usually call them... officially found this place... I suppose they’d say they discovered it... and they turned it into their big resort.” She sighed again, a complex sound.

“Yes. I was told recently that Toros Daglari is the... what did Aahz say? The poshest, most exclusive... something or other. He seemed very excited about the idea of coming here, anyway.”

“Yes.” Very flat. “We natives... both Deveels and the original Daglarites... aren’t even allowed into the actual resort areas, unless we work there. The Traders have taken over large chunks of the best land and the jobs that *are* there are very menial. There’s been a lot of...” She glanced in Karrik’s direction... “hard feelings.”

“The resort workers... um... haven’t ever tried to unionize, have they? I mean, really unionize, not through the Devan Labor Collective?”

“No.” She looked at me oddly. “Although that would be an extremely good idea, now that you mention it.”

At that moment, Karrik came over and squatted easily beside us, the boat again racing along unattended. Watching his black-furred lower half bend in relation to the bobbing deck was a fascinating thing.

“So, Penbrius, has Yilla netted you for information yet? We’re both dying to know what brings a magician like yourself to Toros. I mean, it’s fairly obvious you’re not here on a vacation.”

After hearing Yilla’s story, I was sorely tempted to tell them the truth, even give them my real name but... something held me back. Learning that they weren’t on the best of terms with the ‘Traders’ reinforced my desire to protect them from trouble. All I needed right now was having to worry about the possibility of my hosts being arrested for harboring a wanted fugitive. Also, why worry them needlessly? They obviously didn’t know anything about Penbrius and if their entire dimension was in danger of going up in flames...

“I... let’s just say that I’ve been hired by some important people to solve a very serious problem and that I ended up here, on Toros Daglari, by accident. If I told you any more than that, I’d... be endangering you. And I don’t want that.”

They exchanged another one of those glances.

“I see. Well, if there’s anything we can do to help...”

“No, thank you. I already owe you one favor.”

They laughed in unison, apparently with total sincerity.

“So...” I asked, deliberately changing the subject, “what do you two do? For a living, I mean.”

Karrik shrugged.

“Cater to tourists. That’s pretty much all anyone does here anymore. Either that or work in the fishing industry. But the Daglarites don’t really need our help in **that** area. You haven’t seen one yet? You’ll understand what I mean when you do. We, personally, take people out on the Tardiz for sightseeing and fishing and whatnot.”

“Out on the what?”

“The Tardiz. Didn’t we tell you? That’s the name of the boat.” He gestured proudly.

“Tardiz?”

It’s from a legend among our people.” Yilla replied. “About a great traveler. Coming from the background we do, living where we do, we tend to have a thing about travelers and wanderers. That’s part of why we let you stay on board, if you wondering. It’s obvious you’ve been traveling quite a bit.”

“Yes.” I looked down at my bedraggled attire. I had washed what I could over the side of the boat and scraped most of the dried mud out of my boots, but it was all still in bad shape. “I’ve been getting around these last few days. So... you work for the actual resort? From what Yilla was just saying...”

“No. There are several classes of tourists. Some, most of them, never set foot outside the resort proper or stray from its official tours and trips, which is what the Traders want of course, but enough of them come looking for a ‘true native experience’ down in ‘Fishtown’ that we get by. We Native Deveels are considered something of a novelty.” The last line had both pride and bitterness mixed in it.

“But it lets you make a living.”

“*And* do what we want to do.” Yilla added pointedly. I got the vague impression they had had this conversation before.

“Yes.” He smiled easily and put his hand on her shoulder. “It does both.”

* * *

It was another day before the boat came in sight of land, but it was a day of much-needed recovery for me. I got a solid night’s sleep up on the deck under the stars, while Yilla and Karrik retired below-deck to their cabin. They had offered

me the use of the boat's 'spacious' guest cabin, (I smiled uncomprehendingly at Karrik's obviously well-used joke about the boat actually being 'bigger on the inside') but I have found that after living in the Bazaar, I prefer to sleep outside when I get the chance, assuming of course I don't have to sleep on the bare ground in the rain. It was still nicely warm even after the sun had set and the boat rocked gently, quickly plunging me down into sleep.

In addition, I finally got some real food in my stomach. Yilla did the cooking during the expeditions that Karrik led and she prepared the meals for all of us in the ship's small galley. It was all very good, if a bit salty. At one point in one of the meals, I asked her what it was all made out of it. She hesitated for a moment, then said carefully: "Some guests we take out turn out to be real gillcloggers. One of the nicer ways we've found to get back at them is to tell them what they've been eating for the last three days."

I looked down at my empty plate. I thought again of orenberries. I silently held out the plate for thirds. That seasickness remedy had really done its job.

I didn't learn much about the food, but I learned a great deal more.

The two of them had spent their whole lives on the seas of Toros, and freely answered all of my questions they could about the sealife (the creatures I'd seen during my flight, for instance, were called Dollfins; occasionally one would appear and ride the waves in front of the boat for a time), the currents and the tides, the history and the geography of the dimension and sailing in general. Fortunately, they didn't press me too much about my own life and I kept my answers as vague as was possible and still remain marginally polite, saying only that I ran a small 'magician for hire' outfit out of the Bazaar.

I also had a chance to study my hosts. Despite their comments about problems with the 'Traders', it was clear they were perhaps the first two fundamentally **happy** Deveels that I had ever met. Talking to them made me wonder what else I'd missed over the years and I made an internal vow, assuming the next few days didn't end in total disaster, that I would get out and visit more dimensions again, see more of the world than just the Bazaar. Especially if... no, *since*... Aahz was going to teach me more about dimension travel.

And as we drew near the sighting of land, I did pick up one last tidbit of particular interest. I had avoided the subject at first, but finally screwed up my nerve and 'casually' asked if they knew of any interesting ruins on the dimension. (It was during another lull in the handling of the boat and Karrik was there as well.) They looked at each other, and Karrik shrugged again.

"No. Not really. Before the Traders came along, the Daglarites weren't much for building large permanent structures, at least above the water. They do incredible things with living coral; they can control its growth and shape it into caves and such."

"There's the Temple." Yilla spoke thoughtfully, looking out over the water.

"The what?" This wasn't me, but Karrik. He immediately answered his own

question.

“Oh. Right. That thing up above town.” He turned to me. “It’s this big gray cube, full of empty rooms. Up in the hills above Fishtown. I think even a lot of Natives have never heard about it. I’m **sure** the Traders don’t know about it. I’ve only been near it once or twice myself.”

“The Daglarites worship there?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

“No. Well, I don’t think so. We Natives just called it that for lack of anything better. The Daglarites...”

“The Daglarites act like it doesn’t exist.” Yilla spoke, still thoughtful, her gaze still far away. “They pretend they don’t know what you’re talking about if you ask them. Even with us Natives. They never go near the place.” She rubbed her own forearms and continued in a lower tone of voice. “And some of us think they have the right idea. There’s something sinister about it.”

“Sinister?” Karrik again. “It’s just a crumbling pile of stones.”

For the first time since I had joined them, Yilla shot Karrik a glance that bordered on the contemptuous. She faced me and repeated herself.

“There’s something sinister about it. I went there once and that was more than enough.”

She turned and walked away along the deck, still holding herself.

Karrik sighed, rolled his eyes and followed her, excusing himself.

I silently turned and walked the other way. I arrived at the bow and stared out in the same direction as the figurehead, both of us silently waiting for the mainland to come into view.

Chapter 21a

*“When you go to town, you always meet
such interesting people.”*

John Q. Bumpkin

“LAND” IN THIS CASE turned out to be a much larger version of the island I had first arrived on: a long strip of vibrant green rising slowly from over the horizon. Once we were in sight of it, Karrik ran the boat parallel to the shore for quite a while and gradually a large collection of buildings came into sight, poking up over the trees in the same way that the land had poked up out of the sea. They were enormous glitteringly white structures, dozens of them flowing and rising up in graceful interconnected profusion along the shoreline, the whole mass seeming almost to float a few feet above the ground. Hundreds of ranked windows reflected the glare of the sun back out to the sea. Dozens of brightly-colored sails flitted back and forth close to the shore. Others of the latter objects, to my surprise, appeared to be soaring up in the air and making slow circles above the buildings. I wondered to myself what kind of magik was used to keep them aloft.

“That’s the main resort complex.” Joining me at the rail, Yilla responded to my unvoiced question. She and Karrik obviously couldn’t stay angry with each other for long, but she was still somewhat subdued. “Tropical playground of the rich and famous from a hundred dimensions.” As she said this, I speculated silently about what kind of reception ‘The Great Skeeve’ would get there, both before and after our recent legal problems. Maybe I would be getting a chance to find out...

But if so, it wasn’t going to happen right away, since we sailed on past staying

well out to sea. As it had blossomed, the resort shrank back into the greenery.

Upon seeing our true destination a ways further down the coast, two things immediately struck me. The first was the squalor. The new buildings were a sagging, sprawling, collection of unpainted wood and mossy stone, smeared along the shores of a deep bay. The second thought was how oddly similar the basic set-up was to that of the resort. The structures hugged the shore and were all interconnected, with rickety-looking gangways and scaffolding and bridges running every which way, often one above the other. Many of the bigger buildings had the unwritten word ‘warehouse’ all over them—large, square, with two or three rows of small windows set high up on their sides.

As I have already noted, all of the buildings, warehouses or not, had a seriously seedy look to them and looked like they’d been thrown together with little talent and less enthusiasm. In short, I was strongly reminded of buildings back on Klah, although these were a lot bigger. A steady stream of dilapidated vessels, large and small, put in and out of the multitude of run-down docks that stuck far out into the bay like a bunch of thin wooden tongues. None of the ships had colorful sails.

I also got my first glimpse of the ‘real’ natives: they were skinny gray bipeds, a little shorter than me but taller than Gezirahans, with white stomachs, lots of fins, large goggling eyes and wide mouths full of small sharp teeth. As had already been hinted with Karrik’s comment about the coral, they were amphibians, which made their fishing operations a great deal easier. They swarmed everywhere, on the boats putting out to sea, loading and unloading cargo, agilely swimming around in the water, just hanging around on the docks, watching the coming and going of the traffic.... There were a few undisguised Deveels intermixed with the crowds, all working and yelling and pushing just as hard as the Daglarites. The smell of fish was everywhere.

Karrik and Yilla were quickly consumed with the complex, almost mystical, operation of getting the Tardiz up to one of the docks, leaving little time for conversation, although I had a thousand new questions. I found a corner and tried to be unobtrusive.

Then the vessel finally nosed up to the one of the docks and a Daglarite abruptly appeared from somewhere on shore, wearing a striped jersey much like Karrik’s. The newcomer and Karrik started tossing ropes back and forth and tying them down, lashing the Tardiz tight in much the same manner as a spider-bear stringing up a victim in one of its webs.

Watching this, I suddenly realized that someone was standing beside me. Yilla. I turned to her in surprise and she studied me silently for a long moment before speaking, looking at me from under the brim of her hat.

“You’re going up there, aren’t you? To the Temple.” Her tone was sad and resigned. I decided lying would serve no purpose. “Yes. Yes, I am. If I can find something I need first...”

“Why?”

“I have to. You were right. It’s a dangerous place. More dangerous than even you realized, probably.”

“Are you going to do... something... about it?”

“Yes. Well. I’m going to try. It’s part of the reason I’m here.”

She thought for a moment, then nodded firmly.

“Good.” She gave me a brief sisterly hug and a peck on one cheek. “Do it. Be careful, but do it.”

“Thank you. Thanks for everything.”

She nodded again, and slipped back to her post.

The boat was secured and I prepared to make my departure. Yilla remained behind on board, waving a short goodbye to me and disappearing below deck. Karrik watched her go with obvious puzzlement.

“It’s all right, Karrik. We said goodbye just now.”

“Oh. Okay.” Despite his words, he glanced again.

We stepped off onto the dock, where the Daglarite was waiting for us, coiling up a last piece of stray rope.

“Ixthol!” Karrik called and waved. The Daglarite turned and gave what I assumed to be a smile in return. We walked closer as Karrik continued. “This is Ixthol. He helps us out here on the dock and sometimes on the boat, when the guests want to see more of the native customs....”

“And this...” Karrik addressed his friend/employee and gestured at me with mock-grandeur, “...is a poor wretch we rescued at sea. Ixthol, meet Mr. Penbrius.”

The Daglarite paused in his labor and looked at me with his goggling eyes.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of me?” I asked, without much hope. I hadn’t disguised my features, but I had made my clothes look presentable again.

Ixthol blinked (a startling sight) and spoke in a pedantic and slightly burbly tone. “I am sorry, honored guest, but I do not know many Klahds. I have never heard of one called that name.”

He dropped his gaze and began coiling rope once again.

“Oh. Oh well...” I followed Karrik down the dock back toward (relatively) dry land. As I walked along the boards, I noted that the structure was in much better shape than many in the port. The tourist business must do better than Karrik and Yilla had let on... Snapping my attention back into focus, I increased my pace and caught up with the Deveel. As I did so, I glanced back over my shoulder. The Daglarite was gone, as if the earth (or rather water) had swallowed him up. I blinked myself. “They sure can move fast.”

Karrik glanced as well and nodded vaguely.

“Around the water, yes. Many a fish has learned that lesson the hard way.”

The back of my neck itched and I looked behind us one last time. The dock was still empty.

The two of us paused together for a final moment at the start of the dock,

standing under an arching sign that read ‘Tardiz Tours’ in neatly-painted Deveelscript.

“Thank you again, Karrik. As promised, I owe you a favor and more. If you ever want to collect, come to the Bazaar and find a restaurant there called the Sign of the Yellow Crescent. Ask for Gus and tell him who you are. He’ll get you in touch with me.” The crowd surged around us, several of its components shooting off a friendly greeting to Karrik as they passed by.

“I’ll remember. But to be honest, Penbrius, that favor may never go collected. We both enjoyed having you on board. It’s so rare to get someone out there, or anywhere, who is honestly curious and eager to learn more and even pitch in and help. The world could use more people like you. Take care of yourself.” He hesitated for a very long moment, then pulled something out from under his jersey: a folded piece of paper. He thrust it at me almost defiantly. I took it between two fingers and looked down at it.

“What’s this?”

He shuffled his hooves against the wood planks and again glanced in the direction of the boat, the tip of his tail lashing back and forth nervously.

“It’s a map to that Temple you were asking about. It’s not exact, since it’s been a while since... since I was up there. I don’t know. I didn’t want to admit it, because I don’t like it when she worries about... unimportant things, but this time... Yilla was right. That Temple... Anyway, I just figured that might be where you’re heading now.” He looked at the sign overhead.

“I...” I smiled awkwardly. “I guess I need to work on my ‘subtle questioning’ skills a little more, huh? Thanks one last time.”

We shook hands again and I started to walk away. And stopped. I owed him this much and more....

“Karrik. I’m probably going to be very... busy the next couple of days. If Gus isn’t there when you go looking for him, that probably means your favor will have to go uncollected.”

He said nothing for a moment, then:

“It’s bad, isn’t it? Whatever you’re trying to stop. Out on the boat, I was complaining about the Traders coming in and wrecking everything, but... there’s something worse happening. Much worse. It’s not just the Temple. I haven’t mentioned it to anyone... even Yilla... but... I can feel it... some days lately out on the Tardiz, I can almost taste it on the wind... Is that why you are here?”

As if the scene was being deliberately directed for greatest dramatic potential, there was a sudden crack of thunder and we and everyone else on the pier paused and looked skyward, the sudden silence almost more disturbing than the sound of the thunder. Ominous black clouds were suddenly scuttling across the sky, scattered for the moment, but still casting a shadow over the town. I again thought of the cart ride on Gezirah and felt a sudden chill. Another storm. I looked back at

him.

“Yes. Something bad is happening. In fact... you and Yilla... might want to consider taking a real vacation for a few days. Go visit the Bazaar, or something.”

“I see.” He hesitated for a long moment. “But this is our home. I’ll ask Yilla, if she wants to go, but... no. Unless she wants to, we’re not leaving. Good luck... Penbrius. I imagine you’re going to need it.” He paused again and almost smiled.... “And the way I see it, it’s self interest. If we stay here, you have added incentive to fix whatever it is that needs fixing.” He smiled for real, turned and walked back down towards the Tardiz and Yilla, his form framed by the sign and its two support posts. I watched him go, then slipped into a Daglarite disguise, carefully stowed away the paper, and headed into town. Overhead, the thunder rumbled.

* * *

Karrik and Yilla had explained that ‘Fishtown’ wasn’t this place’s original name, but the nickname had stuck, the same way the odor stuck to everything within a five mile radius.

And not just the odor. Everywhere there piles of dead fish, fish parts, fish skeletons and fishing equipment: nets, pots, lines, reels... (I often wonder why no one catches fish using the sensible method that we practiced back on Klah...) Since the town’s original inhabitants were equally at home on land or in the water, there were also canals and pools and locks and water-filled shoots everywhere, flowing murkily in the deep ancient shadows between the tall spindly buildings. There was so much water around, in fact, it could still be said with a fair degree of accuracy that I still hadn’t reached the actual shore.

Crowds of Daglarites, still sprinkled with a few Deveels, surged by me on all sides and large wagons pulled by barnacle-encrusted Cristotles rumbled past, most loaded down with a wild assortment of fish, or at least slimy dead things pulled out of the ocean. Occasional splatters of rain came down, adding to the damp atmosphere. I wandered through the crooked, narrow, algae-coated streets, beneath the sharp overhangs and over the countless stone bridges, carefully studying what kinds of shops were available. In countless places there were unreadable signs pointing down under the water, and shadowy gatherings of Daglarites could dimly be seen flowing in and out of submerged doorways, many of which appeared to be made of some substance other than wood or stone; coral, I assumed. I realized that there must be literally a whole other city down under my feet. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the above-water selection was somewhat limited: lots of stores selling what I gathered to be fishing and boating gear, lots of decrepit taverns and inns and a few tacky-looking tourist shops. What was surprising was that I eventually found what I was looking for.

As I had said to Yilla, I didn’t have much choice. I had now been on two

(probably three) dimensions where Penbrius had constructed buildings with large tunnels leading... somewhere. I had no concrete proof, but my gut told me what, or rather, who, I was going to find if I was able to make it down one of those tunnels. (After all, I currently lived in a house that used a very similar principle.) Prompted by the clouds that continued to roll intermittently overhead, my gut went on to tell me that I no longer had time to try and find Aahz and/or Gus and/or anybody else. I had to go after Penbrius. Now. Alone.

Which, as always, was easier said than done. I now had access to magik again, solving the lightning bolt part of the problem of possibly getting through the tunnel alive. The other part...

I approached the cramped, narrow, shop that had caught my eye. I couldn't read the sign overhead, but the objects hanging in the window drew me in like a magnet. I hesitated for a moment, then did a quick change to my disguise spell, becoming a bland non-descript Deveel, or as close as you can get to such a being, wearing a striped jersey. I entered the store.

"Good afternoon... sahr..." The Daglarite behind the counter greeted me with his race's version of a smile. (Additionally, I wouldn't have thought it possible for a member of a race equipped with bulging fishlike eyes to wear a shifty expression, but somehow this individual managed it.) I breathed a small sigh of thanks for functioning translator pendants and slipped into my 'indifferent world-weary' pose, one that I had been practicing on Devan merchants with varying degrees of success.

"Good afternoon. Tell me, my good man, that is foul-weather gear you've got in the window there, isn't it?"

"Ah, sahr has a discriminating eye! Yes, we sell the finest weather-protection clothing in Ie'ennismoou'thh." Ie'enn...? I thought. No wonder the Deveels just called this place 'Fishtown'...

"This is something of an odd request," Taking a cue from my subconscious, I studied my fingernails. "...but do you happen to have anything in that line for... cold weather? Really cold weather?"

"Ah, sahr is going out on one of the icefish expeditions in the northern regions?"

"Uh, you might say I'm planning to go on a little expedition, yes."

"**Right** this way, sahr..."

As he led me into the dimness of the rear of the shop and continued his sales pitch, I noted clinically that at least some of the natives had adapted without apparent trouble to the Deveels' methods of doing things... Somehow I had come through the events of the last couple of days with a few gold pieces still in my pocket. Now was the time to use them.

After a bit of haggling, I left the shop with one set of heavy, insulated pants, a matching hooded jacket and a pair of heavy boots, which, while admittedly not nearly as cheap, all fit me much better than the furry monstrosity that Aahz had

forced on me a couple of days before. If I hadn't been wearing a disguise spell, it would have definitely been worthy of being worn by the Great Skeeve.

Tucking my purchases under my arm, I took two steps away from the shop and felt someone tap me from behind on the shoulder. Startled, I spun around.

It was Ixthol. You may be surprised I was able to recognize him again so quickly after such a short meeting, especially in a town filled with people who all looked just like him. I don't claim any special powers of observation: he still had on the jersey and the coil of rope he'd been assembling was now draped neatly across his thin torso. The brief thought flickered across my mind that he had somehow gotten off the dock without getting either the rope or jersey wet.

"Yess...?" I asked cautiously.

He stared at me.

"You are Skeeve. Skeeve the Great."

It was not a question.

Chapter 22a

“It’s a conspiracy!”

J. Caesar

I STARED BACK FOR A LONG MOMENT, utterly flummoxed. Finally, I managed:

“Uh... no. Sorry. You must have me mistaken for...”

“No. You are a Klahd. You are a magician. You know the name. The name we do not tell the Deveels, certainly do not tell the Trader-Deveels. The name from the ancient times. You cannot be the true owner of the name. You can only be Skeeve the Great.”

“Name?” One comment jumped out at me. “You mean Pen—”

“Gah!” He made a frantic gesture. “Please do not say the name out loud again! Not in public! Perhaps it is safe for one such as yourself, but very bad for those who may be nearby!”

“Because the... uh... true owner of the name might hear?”

He gave me an odd look, surprisingly like the one Yilla had shot me on the boat.

“No. Owner of that name went away long ago, never to return. He went off with angels, some say, to a higher dimension. The use of that name will not bring its owner. The legends say... it bring something much worse....”

For a moment I paused, overcome by the irony of the situation. Aahz’s little name-dropping scheme had finally produced some results, now that I had my answers and had already decided on a course of action. I bestirred myself and

addressed the immediate problem.

“Okay, Ixthol. I admit it. I am Skeeve.” I paused again, a thought suddenly striking me. “How... how did you keep up with me? I changed my disguise twice!”

“I followed you when you left the Tardiz Tour dock. I saw you change. I saw you change again. These things convinced me you are the one I seek.”

I sighed, kicked myself mentally two or three times and made a note to find dark alleys from now on for my switches. I once again forced my mind back on the business at hand.

“Ixthol, I’m in the middle of something very important here. What do you want?”

I snapped out the question a little more harshly than I had intended. The Daglarite suddenly seemed nervous and hesitated. I realized with a start what courage it must have taken for him to follow and then actually accost ‘The Great Skeeve’ right out on the street. I wondered vaguely what Yilla and Karrik’s reaction would have been if I *had* told them my real name when I first arrived on the Tardiz. Jump off the boat and swim for their lives? While often it can be great, other times having A Reputation can be a real drag.

“I want you... I request that you... come with me, Great Skeeve. There is a meeting taking place and it is of vital import that you consent to attend.”

“A meeting? Of who? Or what?”

His eyes goggled around nervously at the constant flow of fishy (or I guess ‘froggy’) pedestrians that passed us by in the street.

“No. Not here. The spies are everywhere. If I saw these things, perhaps others saw them as well. Will you come with me? Into that alley?” He pointed. “And change yourself again?”

I stifled a highly-inappropriate laugh at this echoing of my own thoughts. Whatever was so important that this individual felt he had to approach me, I had better check it out. And a sizable part of me was more than willing to put off the confrontation that appeared to be coming more and more inevitable. Still, I spoke as we started for the alley:

“Ixthol, unless this meeting is going to happen *right now*, I have to go. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I mean, the meeting is happening right now. It has been happening for some time. Come, please.”

We stepped into the alley. I became a Daglarite again, and altered Ixthol somewhat while I was at it. A little caution never hurt...

He led me off into the warren of streets.

* * *

With Ixthol leading the way, it didn't take long for us to arrive at a low-slung discrete building, stashed unobtrusively in a forgotten cul-de-sac-cum-pier which jutted out over another large pool of water. The numbers of pedestrians on the streets and waterways (as if there was a difference in this town...) had dropped to almost nothing, although the din of the more active parts of the port was still audible in the background.

While the wooden buildings around it all looked ready to dissolve down into the water below, our destination seemed different somehow. It took me a moment, but I realized that while the building's exterior was as ragged and crumbling as its neighbors, the basic frame of the structure was still solid. I didn't realize how solid at first—the first door we passed through looked as broken down and flimsy as all of the others out on the street. In the damp hallway beyond, however, stood another, much more imposing door. As we stepped up to it, I noted how thick the interior walls actually were. We were entering a fortress. Ixthol knocked a pattern on the door, clearly some kind of code. Thinking to avoid some trouble for once, I dropped his disguise spell before someone replied.

A tiny slot slid open in the door, and pair of goggling, but suspicious, eyes peered out. There was a hasty, whispered, conversation and the door was grudgingly cranked open. Literally cranked; it was as thick as the walls, and heavily reinforced. It would have taken a battering ram to get through.

Or else you'd just tell Aahz there was a fortune in gold stacked on the other side.

What was actually there was not nearly as pleasant: a group of very tense Daglarites, all armed with crude but effective-looking weapons. I decided there was no reason to make them any more jumpy, and kept my disguise spell in place. There was another tense conversation. As the door was being cranked shut, I noticed there was a strange line of symbols hacked into the stone floor where the door would rest when closed. They reminded me of the ones that Garkin had carved into his pentagram, back in the hut on Klah. Some kind of ward? The conversation finally ended and the guards stepped aside with obvious bad grace. Ixthol silently gestured me to follow and led me further into the building, through more dimly-lit corridors. The interior walls were made of the same stuff as the rest of the town's underpinnings—dirty-white coral. Strange lights flickered in side rooms and furtive figures darted to and fro. Several of the rooms contained pools of water, or perhaps were connected to the greater pool below....

"What is this place?" I finally whispered. Ixthol jumped like he'd been goosed with a hot poker.

"It is a secret place. A place the Trader-Deveels do not know about. We hope. Maybe." This comment worried me. Surely if he knew about me, Ixthol also knew who I was currently working for. I held my tongue.

We arrived at another guarded chamber, with an almost identical repeat of the previous performance, except that at the end, Ixthol was allowed into the room

beyond, leaving me behind. There was an unbearably long wait, with the guards watching me and fingering the weapons in their webbed hands. I stared back coolly, while furtively sucking in as much magikal power as I could hold. Finally, the door was opened again and I was waved inside.

I stepped into the room beyond, and blinked, trying to adjust my eyes to the dim red light as the door was closed firmly behind me. There was several shadowy figures in the cramped, low-ceilinged chamber, sitting around a large table. Well... some of them sat. Others lurked. Or hunched. Or in one notable case, hovered in a large glass tank of water that extended out from one of the walls. I decided the time for patience and subtlety were past. I stepped forward, and dropped my disguise spell.

“All right. I’m here. What’s all of this about?” I asked, crossing my arms in what I hoped was a cool and confident manner. The effect may have been someone dissipated by the fact that I was still holding the warm clothing I had purchased.

The figures shifted nervously, looking at one another. Finally, surprisingly, it was Ixthol spoke up, his gills quivering. I realized for the first time that he was sitting at the table along with the rest.

“Great Skeeve. We are among the leaders of each of our dimensions. We come to you... because we feel we have no choice. In fact, having heard stories of your prowess on all of our worlds, we had decided to approach you, even before I learned you were here. I apologize for bringing you to this place in this manner, but we know the Trader-Deveels are looking for all of us. We do not quite understand why; we have done nothing to upset them. If after we tell you why we have brought you here, you decide to tell them of this place, this meeting, we will not try to stop you.”

“Asssssuming we even could.” This dry, analytical, slithering, comment from one of the other table-sitters. It looked like a small tightly wrapped animated mummy, one that had used sticky purple bandages instead of the traditional white. Two yellow spots glowed from among the thick strands which were wound around its ‘head’.

A new chittering voice, its owner most resembling a giant green and yellow ant with multifaceted eyes:

“Yes. Wee do not know what briings you to Toros Daglarii, but wee, all of uus, face a criisis, and wee see your presence as an opportunittee. Something is happening. Something terriible. On eeach of our dimensiions.”

“Each of your dimensions...” I echoed, looking at the figures more carefully, now that my eyes had adjusted somewhat. I belatedly realized one of the individuals at the table was a Gezirahan. “You... you’re all from the other dimensions... the ones run by the Deveels... like Kaykay. Uh...”

“Kay-may-an.” A looming, almost square, creature, who looked like a crude cross between a brick wall and a very large ox. The massive chair it sat in had been heavily reinforced.

“Najran.” The mummy.

“Kabayouraan.” The ant.

“B’kiero.” A four-armed three-eyed winged monkey with silky green fur.

“Aaugarahhhajckkk.” The blobby multi-tentacled thing floating in the tank of water. (This is a rough translation, as you may have guessed; even with the pendant, the creature’s voice was blurred and distorted.)

“And Gezirah.” I finished, nodding at the short furred figure who completed the group. I looked again. “Is... someone from Chirosovo here?”

“Chirosovo?” Ixthol again. “No, Great Skeeve. I have heard of that dimension, but we have not been in contact with anyone from there. Like your own race, I do not believe they travel much from their home.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’ll ask one more time. Why did you want to meet with me?”

The Boukieron replied, its voice a squeaking chirp: “On our ‘mensions, magik’s... goin’ wrong. Malfunctionin’. Signs n’ portents fill th’ air. Th’ force lines flicker in th’ sky. On Boukiero, th’ Quwigimu trees are dyin’. Slow at first, but now th’ problems’ gettin’ worse. Lot worse. We don’t know what is happenin’. We don’t know how t’ stop it. We start meetin’ with others, ‘cross the ‘imensions, secret-like. T’ try n’ figger it out.”

I opened my mouth to ask why they just hadn’t gone to the Deveels for help.

And closed it again. I mean, the answer to *that* was fairly obvious. The ‘oxwall’ ponderously picked up the narrative.

“But no... one knows... why. There are... no an-swars. So we had... just de-cided to... pool our re-sour-ces... send some-one to De-va. To ask you... for help. To... hi-re you.”

“You want to... hire... me...?” I stared, my jaw dropping.

“Yes. Wee realiize that ones such as uus do not have much to offer one of your stature, but aall that wee have, is yours. Iif only you can save uus. Tell uus what wee must doo.”

“I... Will you give me just a moment? I... have to consider something....”

Another exchange of nervous glances.

“Of course... Great Skeeve.”

I turned my back on the assembly for a long moment. It would not do to break out in laughter or tears at this particular point. I mean, back on Deva, I was already playing two enormous heavily-armed organizations off against each other. I *really* didn’t need to add another one, but it now looked like I’d have to do exactly that. I also thought for one hysterical moment that I could in one fell swoop just about complete the job that the Deveels had originally hired me to do. Somehow, I got myself back under control and faced them all again.

“I am willing to help you. I will not report you to the Deveels... the Traders. I think we can... reach an agreement on a fee.” I flinched instinctively for a moment, expecting, even wanting, a cold scaly hand to clamp threateningly onto

my shoulder. Nothing. Discarding the warm clothing as casually as I could, I stepped up, placed both hands on the table, and leaned forward. “Since I am, in fact, here on Toros Daglari **because** of this very problem!”

Chapter 23a

“You want the bad news, or the worse news?”

G. Reaper

THE ASSEMBLED CREATURES STARED BACK at me in amazement. Well, some of them were amazed; with the others it was hard to be 100% sure.

“You... you know what is caussing the problem?” The Najranian’s voice was that of someone about to slam their head into a wall, hoping that would help universe to suddenly start making sense.

“I— I’ll be honest. I don’t know exactly *what’s* causing the problem. What I do know, however, is who is causing the problem.”

“Whhooogg’ isss cauggisngg?” The blob spasmed questioningly.

“Yes.” I shot an apologetic glance at Ixthol before continuing. “It is Penbrius. That, Ixthol, is why I was travelling under his name. I was hoping to meet someone very much like you.”

There was a long silence.

“Penbrius? You know of Penbriiuis?” The Kabayouranian tapped the knobby tip of one of his (her? its?) thin forelimbs on the table in an strangely obvious gesture of nervousness.

‘He’ continued carefully, as if trying to explain something to a very powerful but very stupid child. “Great Skeeve... Penbriiuis deeparted from thiis realm long ago. Even so, the Great Penbriiuis would not do such a thing. Iit could not bee hiim.” There was a murmur of surprised agreement around the table and then a number of equally surprised and speculative glances back and forth.

“So Ixthol just told me. Nonetheless, he is the one causing the problems. Or least, the... uh... ‘Temples’ he built so long ago are now causing the problems you now face.” A sudden thought occurred to me. “There are Temples on each of your worlds? Gray stone blocks that Penbrius... um... I imagine he is said to have built them long ago?” Cautious nods (or their equivalent) all around. “Good. Well, not good, bad actually, but it confirms what I am saying. As I say, those Temples are the problem. I’m sure that they, or the power behind them, are what is damaging the force lines on each of your worlds. And the problem will only get worse. There are similar Temples on Chirosovo and Chirosovo is now a devastated wasteland. And whatever caused that devastation came boiling up out of the Temples. Apparently quite suddenly. With no direct warning.” I swept the table with my gaze. “The fact that you all know his name and have each kept it secret all of these centuries, would indicate there was even more to Penbrius than *any* of you suspected. If, before this meeting, any of you knew that his name was a... um... thing of power... on other dimensions, please speak up.”

Silence. A few more speculative glances were exchanged. I continued.

“Now, I ask you all, what, exactly, do your legends say of Penbrius? Do you know why he built the Temples?”

“No. Iit iis not known.” The ant spoke. “Hee came into the woorld. Hee worked miiracles, and thousands from the Swarms became hiis followers. Hee ordered thee Temples built, following exactly the designs hee laid before uus. Thousands and thousands more labored. Thee Temples were built. Hee warned uus that hee was fighting a great enemy and to never speak of him agaiin, lest thee enemy learn of hiis efforts. Hee departed.” The others around the table nodded general agreement.

“A great enemy? Did he say what this enemy was?”

“Nah. Th’ Great Penbrius never revealed much, not even t’ his followers.”

“And he didn’t *force* you to build these things? He *asked* you to?”

“It was not... nec-es-sar-y. Any-thing he... asked... was done.”

I mulled this information over for a long moment. A short time ago, Aahz had told me that he himself had pulled similar stunts in the past and I had heard stories about such things before. One carefully-planned visit to the Bazaar and a ‘demon’ could set himself up for life on a backwards world. And now it seemed Penbrius had done it as well, on a somewhat larger order of magnitude. To do... what? I was beginning to suspect an answer to this, but I didn’t think I’d get anymore useful information out the group on that point. One thing I was curious about, however...

“What did Penbrius look like?”

“Like onee of us. Thee best of us. His armor shined thee briightest, his eyes had thee....”

“No, he had no armor, his fins glistened in the....”

“Yes, okay.” I broke in. He had used a disguise spell on each dimension. No surprise there. It was probably lucky for me that he had used his real name....

I looked at the Gezirahan and sighed wearily.

“If only one of us had been looking at that trouble-maker when Aahz dropped the name on Blox.”

“Great Skeeve? I don’t understand....”

“Nothing. Never mind.” I found my mental thread and continued. “As I said, it doesn’t matter what Penbrius is said to have done in the distant past. He is still alive, he is very dangerous and he is now threatening all of your worlds. After I leave this meeting, I am going to go to the nearest Temple and attempt to travel to his realm. I strongly believe that each Temple is some kind of... gateway there. I will go there and I will do what I can to stop him. I will not exaggerate and claim that my victory in this battle is assured. I suggest that each of you return home at once, or better, send someone home with a message. If after a day, you have not heard from me, or the problems don’t start getting better, I would further suggest you do whatever is within your power to destroy all of the Temples.”

The oxwall spoke: “You... you do not... know what you... ask.”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute. I’ve been at one Temple on this world alone that will be horribly difficult to reach, much less destroy. Which is why I ask you to wait a day before acting. I will admit that it is even conceivable that destroying the Temples will somehow make things worse. But honestly, after what I saw on Chirosovo, I don’t see how. If you wish to save your worlds, I say it has to be done. You wanted my help. This is all the help I can give. I would go to the Deveels and try and convince them that something is wrong and they should help you, but... I don’t think I have the time.” I spread my hands in the air. I suddenly felt very small and tired. One last idea suddenly occurred to me. “I realize that the Temples must hold a sacred place for all of your peoples and that there will be a tremendous outcry if you order their destruction, even assuming you can get around the Deveels. If this will help, I offer it. ‘Penbrius’ is a word of power. As I am all too often reminded these days, so also is the word ‘Skeeve’. You have my permission to go to your people and use my name in whatever manner would be most effective in this situation. Say that... I dunno... I have ordered the Temples torn down. That I will rip through your dimension like a hurricane if they are not found and demolished. I won’t do that....” I hastened to add, sensing a nervous shift in my audience. “I won’t lift a finger against any of your worlds. But if my name is enough to get your people moving, use it. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go. I think there is very little time left.”

There was a long, stunned silence. Finally the ‘mummy’ spoke.

“But... Great Ssskeeve... your... your fee....”

I bent over and retrieved my new garments from the floor before replying.

“The Great Skeeve never collects his fee before he finishes the job. And the amount of my fee, in this case, will be determined by how successful I am. If we ever meet again, we can discuss it. Ixthol, let’s go.” I yanked open the door and strode from the room, suddenly wanting very badly to throw up again.

Chapter 24a

*“A funny thing happened on the way to
the Temple...”*

T. G. Skeeve

IXTHOL FLIPPED ALONG BEHIND ME, trying to keep up as I marched grimly out of the building.

“Great Skeeve? Is it really true? Is it Penbrius who is causing the problems?”

“Yes.” I forced myself to slow down and let him catch up. “I realize that this is something hard for any sane being to believe, that a semi-mythical religious figure from your distant past is on the verge of returning and causing the destruction of your world, but it is what is happening.”

“And will you... you will kill him?” Spoken in the same tone as if I had confidently said I was going to fly off and kill the sun.

The question seemed to reverberate inside my mind. Would I kill Penbrius? It wouldn't be first time I had used my Magik to kill someone; to this day, I can still see vividly in my mind a soldier nicknamed The Brute being hacked apart by his own men on a Klahdish battlefield. But could I walk into a room, face Penbrius, or any man, and kill him if it came to that?

“I hope it won't come to that, Ixthol. I honestly do. Perhaps he can be persuaded to stop doing whatever it is he is up to. But if he can't... yes. I will kill him.” And I knew I was telling the truth, both to my guide and to myself. However, since in any potential confrontation between Penbrius and myself there was a good chance I wouldn't be the one doing the killing, I changed the subject:

“Ixthol? Are you telling me you’re one of the native leaders? For Toros Daglari, anyway?”

“It is my honor to serve my people in that fashion, yes.”

“Then why do you work for a crummy... er... well... not ‘crummy’, but small-time tour operation?”

He shrugged. “Despite what the Traders have done to our world, helping travelers in an honorable profession. Also, I learn much about what is happening in other dimensions. It was there, as a matter of fact, that I first heard of *you*, Great Skeeve. Also, it is the best place to hide; out in plain sight. The Traders not expect to find me there. The honorable Karrik and Yilla do not know my secret. There is little danger.”

“But you said something about spies....” My mouth asked the question, but my mind was considering something else. If **Ixthol** had heard my real name while on the Tardiz, then surely Karrik and Yilla....

“Ixthol is not the name I use when leading my people. On Klah, would you have recognized your leaders if they swam past you in the stream, not wearing the symbols of their authority?”

I forced myself to concentrate on what he was asking. “Well... before I became a magician and started... No. You’re right. I wouldn’t have.” I wondered how much of this ‘cloak and dagger’ talent the Daglarites had come by naturally and how much came from being in contact with Deveels for who knows how many centuries... Now was not the time to ask, however.

I also had a sudden strange realization, something that had never occurred to me before. Klah could have very easily ended up like Toros Daglari and all the rest, if there had been anything there the Deveels had wanted. Instead of being Magician In Residence on Deva, I could be working as a spider-bear wrangler so Deveels would have fur coats, or mining gold down under the Impass Mountains.

It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

* * *

We stopped again in the guarded chamber near the front door. The guards were still there and they all stared at my changed appearance, but I ignored them now and focused on my guide.

“Ixthol, I need a couple of things from you. I’ve been told approximately where the nearest Temple is, but if you could send someone along to direct me, I would appreciate it.”

“I will lead you there myself, Great Skeeve. I know the most direct route there from Ie’ennismoou’thh.”

“Thank you. Secondly, this is a long shot, but it’s something that’s worth trying. Could you pass the word around among your people and try and find for me some visitors who will possibly be arriving here on Toros from off-dimension, or

are already here? I realize there must be a lot of comings and goings around here, but it's important. If any of these people can be found, I need you to get them in touch with me. Tell them... The Kid said he needs to meet with them. Direct them to wherever this Temple is."

"We will do what we can, Great Skeeve."

"Thank you. There are four people: a Troll, a Trollop, a Pervect..."

"Is that anything like a Pervert, Great Skeeve?"

"Yes." I said, trying to keep the ice out of my voice. "...and a stone gargoyle. It's very likely the Troll and Trollop will be together." I gave him everyone's name, and as good a description as I could. I wasn't sure, for instance, how much different than any other Troll Chumley was.

Ixthol indicated his understanding, and gestured to a couple of the Daglarites who hovered nearby. There was another brief whispered conversation, and the recipients of his words vanished back into the building, moving in different directions. We left through the front door. As we did so, I re-established our disguise spells.

"Oh... there's one more thing I'm curious about, Ixthol. It's not important, but does the name of this city mean anything?"

"Great Skeeve? Oh... it's a word from one of the older dialects. It means... 'place where the fish are gathered for sale'."

"I should have known."

* * *

Even with Ixthol leading me through various back alleys and shortcuts, it still took us a while to get to the edge of Ie'enn... the city and on up into the green hills beyond. Several times I saw what had to be the main road, full of gray bodies and carts trundling back and forth. Evidently having a central off-dimension transfer point for goods was common on most Deveel worlds. The path we followed, however, was narrow and obviously low-traveled, winding and switch-backing its way along through the dense green brush. We passed no one along the way. Overhead, the clouds continued to rumble and gather. A few splops of rain pattered down out of the sky. We walked on in silence, both wrapped up in our thoughts. Finally...

"The Temple is up there." Ixthol stopped and pointed up the side of the next hill before us. "That trail leads directly to it."

I looked up the 'trail', which was a somewhat grandiose label, I thought. The faint trace wound upwards between the 'palm trees' (somewhere in last day I had picked up their proper name) and jagged chunks of black rock that poked skyward, an unpleasant match for the clouds that continued to roll overhead.

"Thank you Ixthol. Thanks for everything. I can take it from here. You'd better get yourself under cover."

“Under cover, Great Skeeve?”

“Well, it looks like it might rain and I didn’t want you to get... Ah. Never mind.”

“I will wait here for you. I would come further, but few risk going any closer.”

“Thank you, Ixthol. And I understand. But don’t wait forever. If I don’t come back, remember what I said.” I started to levitate myself, but a particularly vivid flash of lightning caused me to reconsider. I was going to be risking electrocution as it was; no point in doing it outside the building. Waving goodbye to Ixthol, I started climbing the hard way, sweating with my load of padded clothing.

More switch-backs wound slowly up the hill. At one point, I stopped to catch my breath, and study the local forcelines. Like the ones near the island, I could see where they were starting to bend. If anything, the phenomenon was more pronounced. I continued on. I had toiled along for perhaps an hour, when I rounded yet another sharp bend in the trail, and almost literally bumped into two Daglarites coming down. They both looked extremely grim. Surprised, I stepped aside into the tall grass to let them pass. They did so, hardly glancing at me. As the second walked past, I caught a strange odor wafting around him: it smelled like... like... something I’d smelled recently... burnt... rock?

“Gus?” I asked, disbelievingly.

They both stopped dead, and turned to face me.

“Skeeve?”

I dropped my disguise spell.

So did they. It was Gus and Aahz. We all stared stupidly at one another for a minute. Then I almost burst into tears, and reached out to grab them both in an embrace. Gus immediately danced backwards out of reach.

“No! Don’t touch me! I’m still a little juiced!”

“What? I don’t underst... gak!” Aahz grabbed me both shoulders and pulled me towards him, showing all of his teeth

“You know something, kid? That was the MOST MISERABLE EXCUSE AT AN ATTEMPT AT D-HOPPING I HAVE EVER SEEN!”

“I— I’m happy to (urk) see you, too, Aahz....”

“What Aahz is *trying* to say, Skeeve, is that it wasn’t your fault.” Gus stood nearby, grinning. “I’ve never felt anything quite like that trip before. Something... hijacked us during the hop. I think it was something to do with that setup of Penbrius’; these buildings he’s built are...”

“Doing something... to the force lines on all the... wheeze... dimensions... Aahz? C-could you maybe...” The world was starting to go strange colors....

“Oh, right....” Aahz eased up a little but didn’t let go entirely. “Gus is right, kid. It wasn’t your fault.” He paused and winced. “Please tell me you ended up here on Toros. Please tell me you didn’t make it to Klah and try to D-Hop back here on your own.”

“No. I arrived here. On an island out in the ocean. Near one of the Temples.

Where... where did you guys land?"

They exchanged glances, and a nasty feeling crept into my stomach. I repeated the question. "Where did you guys land?"

"Well, Skeeve, we didn't so much land as..."

"Pop out."

"Huh?"

Aahz sighed, and his smile dissolved.

"Kid, we came into Toros about a half-mine above the ocean."

I stared at him in absolute horror.

"*It wasn't your fault* and everything turned out okay." Aahz continued earnestly. "Gus caught me and he flew us back to the mainland."

"But if Gus hadn't been there... if you two had been separated..."

"But he was and we weren't. Maybe I shouldn't have told you, but hopefully now you'll wait until you can get some *proper* training before you try anything like that again."

"I... Okay." I took a deep, shuddering breath. "But... what are you doing here? At this Temple?"

"What are these 'Temples'?"

"I— I mean Penbrius'... whatever it is. Force line dohicky. That's what the natives here call them."

"You've been talking to the natives?"

"Yes. Both kinds. All kinds. It's a long story. What are you doing here, at this Temple, Aahz?"

Aahz released my shoulders altogether.

"I imagine the same thing you are, judging from those clothes you're hauling there, which would have been a good idea, if going after Penbrius alone wasn't so suicidally dangerous. After we landed, we nosed around for a while over at the Resort." He paused for a moment, overcome by some deep emotion. "We have got to go back there sometime when the fate of the universe isn't hanging in the balance..." He shook himself. "We couldn't find you, but after a lot of persistent questioning we finally heard about this place and tried to go down the tunnel. Get into Penbrius' personal realm."

"Gus? You went down the tunnel? How did you get past the ward over the mouth?"

"What ward?"

"The Temple I visited had wards covering both tunnels. Like the one that Frumple had over his shop, Aahz."

"Huh. They weren't there on this one. Something must be happening to them, like everything else. There weren't any on Chirosovo, either."

"So you had to turn back because of the lightning?"

"No. Since I could take it slow, I was able to handle the lightning, as it turned out, at least as far down as I could go."

“As far as...?”

“The tunnel narrows towards the bottom. Narrows too far for any of us to fit through. And the magik flowing through there....” He shook his head.

“Oh.” This announcement was simultaneously a horrible disappointment and a vast relief. “But... but why did you do that at all? Why didn’t you just D-Hop there? I mean, I understand that Penbrius’ realm wouldn’t be on the D-Hopper, but couldn’t Gus just...”

They both looked grim. Gus spoke.

“I can’t find it. Penbrius’ dimension. It must be adjacent to this one, but I can’t see the doorway.”

Chapter 25a

“Previously on MythAdventures...”

S. Lucci

“OH.” I SAID AGAIN, WITTILY.

“Is there some way Penbrius could be blocking you?”

“I don’t know what else it could be. I have to admit, I don’t know what to do now.”

For once I had a useful answer. “I say we ask the Daglarites. They have secret legends about Penbrius; maybe they know something, anything, that might be able to help us.”

“And I suppose you know where we can find one who’d be willing to talk to us about these ‘secret legends’?” Aahz commented, witheringly.

“Yes.” I glanced skyward: the lightning appeared to have died down somewhat for the moment. “And if I... we... fly... we can be there in a very short time....”

“All right. Let’s go talk to this friend of yours.”

Gus agreed to carry Aahz, and took off. I floated up after them. Having taken to the air, we were able to get back down the hill in short order. Ixthol was still there, along with a Daglarite I hadn’t see before, as far as I knew. What really caught my attention, however, was:

“Chumley! Tanda!”

“Skeeve old boy!”

“Hi, handsome!”

I dropped to the ground, followed closely by Gus and Aahz. The brother and

sister team were standing next to the two natives. I looked at Ixthol. “You found them!”

Ixthol stared with open curiosity at the Pervect and the Gargoyle, then looked back at me and shrugged. “Great Skeeve. Not many trolls visit Toros. It was not terribly difficult.” He hesitated, then continued “You... you have already been to Penbrius?”

“Been where?”

“Just a second, Tanda. No, I haven’t, Ixthol. I’m afraid we’ve hit a snag.” I said, urgently, “This is very important. Your people are obviously familiar with dimension travel, maybe more than you want to be. Are you aware of any dimensions close to Toros Daglari that you can’t reach? That are blocked somehow? Have you heard of anything like this?”

Ixthol looked blank.

“No, Great Skeeve. None that I know of....”

Suddenly Ixthol’s fellow Daglarite spoke up, diffidently:

“There... there is Ulliny.”

“Ulliny? Is that a dimension?”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Aahz commented.

Ixthol shot his assistant, if that’s what he was, a sour look.

“Ulliny is an old fool. He used to be a magician, long ago. He babbles about things that happened scores of years ago. It is said he was found lying on a hillside near here, unconscious. He was delirious. He claimed...” Ixthol trailed off, a surprised look on his face. (And when a Daglarite looks surprised, he *really* looks surprised.)

“He claimed that he had travelled to the land of Penbrius.” The assistant finished. “By Dimension Travelling. And that Penbrius took away his magik as punishment. Others tried to see the door through which he claimed to travel, but none could. When he fully recovered, he denied everything he had said.”

“I think we need to talk to this Ulliny person.”

“We... we will bring him to you, Great Skeeve.... At once. He lives close by.” Ixthol and the other Daglarite immediately departed.

“Been where?” Tanda repeated.

“You first.” Cut in Aahz. “The last we heard, you two were breaking out of jail? What happened?”

“Actually,” Chumley admitted, “Our careers in mining went rather badly right from the start. Well, once we reached that wretched camp, at any rate. We found some miners easily enough in town and once dear little sis here went to work on them, they were more than willing to let us ‘join up’.”

Tanda smiled, stuck out her tongue at him, and continued the narrative.

“The group we joined was shipped off to a mining camp right away. It wasn’t far at all from town. Man, I thought I’d been in some real dives before, but that place...” She shook her head of light green hair. “It made the Black Hole of

Fornchopa look like... well..." she made a general, all-encompassing gesture. "...Toros Daglari. If that's how the Deveels treat all of their employees, I'm amazed that they **haven't** tried to unionize, really unionize, sooner."

I considered telling her what the actual inhabitants thought of 'Toros Daglari', but didn't interrupt.

"Anyway, we got to the camp and we started nosing around, looking for any hint of... what do the Deveels call it? 'Unauthorized union activity'. And you know what we found?"

"That the camp was crawling with assassins hired by the Devan Labor Collective." Aahz replied heavily.

Tanda paused, her eyes narrowed. "I see you've been busy as well. Yes, the camp was 'crawling' with assassins. And just a few hours after we got there, they came after us. Well, they came after Chumley. I think they must have been watching us from the moment we hit camp."

"They were looking for off-world union busters." Aahz filled them in on some of what we had been through, and our conversation with Brockhurst. He didn't mention Penbrius.

"Brockhurst is dead?" Tanda commented softly, after hearing about the rockslide. "That's a shame. He wasn't a bad guy, as Imps go."

"Yeah, whatever." Aahz muttered. "So what happened with the assassins?"

"They were rather insistent chaps, I'm afraid. My... disagreement... grew somewhat heated. It attracted the attention of the camp police."

"Your note said you were thrown in some kind of jail? How did a bunch of Deveel camp guards manage that?"

Chumley looked simultaneously grim and embarrassed.

"The Deveels had hired a batch of trolls to be their camp police force. My argument with them was even more... er..."

"Explosive?"

"Yes. Rather. In the end, the roppers bunged me into some sort of old ore-storage compartment, and sketched a pentagram around it so I couldn't dimension hop. I do believe they were going to charge me with Destruction of Property."

We all winced. Destruction of Property, on Deveel-controlled dimensions, ranked right up there with Murder, Breaking A Contract and Folk-Singing. Actually, Murder doesn't really belong the list; the others are a lot more serious.

"Of course, I have to admit that I *am* actually rather guilty of Destroying quite a large amount of Property..."

"Then what happened?"

Tanda put on an winsome expression. "Not for the first time, I officially became Chumley's co-conspirator." She paused. "And while meeting with Chumley's guards, I was reminded once again why I left Trollia in the first place." She cracked her knuckles thoughtfully.

"I can just imagine." Aahz groaned. "So you busted Chumley out of the

pentagram and came here?”

“Yes. Since we couldn’t very well go back to Deva, we figured this would be the next best place. We knew *you’d* find your way here eventually, Aahz.” She flashed an impish smile. “And then that cute little native showed up where we were hiding out and said The Kid was looking for us. And here we are.”

“Cute?!”

“So the question now is,” Chumley continued, ignoring Aahz’s bellow, “Why are some Deveels hiring us, while other Deveels are trying to get us killed?”

“No. That’s not the question at all. Or it’s one that will have to wait until later.” Aahz contradicted him.

Then we told them about Penbrius, and Chirosovo, and the gray building waiting for us at the top of the hill.

* * *

And after *that*, I told everyone about my meeting with the native leaders, glossing over the matter of them hiring me, since Aahz **really** didn’t need to be distracted right then by the scent of money.

“So now we know where the Deveels got the idea that someone was trying to unionize; they heard about the native meetings. But that doesn’t explain where Brockhurst and the other assassins fit in.” Gus commented, once I finished my story.

“Actually,” Aahz said, thoughtfully, “What Skeeve just told us gets me to thinking. Kid, remember that trouble-making Gezirahan back at that moron Blox’s lumber camp? I assumed at the time that he was a plant by the union organizers. But maybe I had it backwards. Maybe he was a plant by somebody else.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Just before Blox and the troublemaker showed up, you remember I said that the Devan Labor Collective was created to help keep the workers in line, and that it was supposed to help the Devan Executive Branch? But both of those organizations are bureaucracies, and bureaucracies have a way of sometimes... biting off their own head...” He glanced at the others. “Gus, Chumley? The Financial Times of Deva said that there has been a recent reorganization of the Executive Branch, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, this is just a guess, but I’ll bet that during that reorganization or because of it, communication between the Executives and the Labor bigwigs broke down. Somebody didn’t get a message they were supposed to get. Someone didn’t fill out a form, or didn’t return a phone call. I know for a fact that the Executive Branch and the Collective now employ different sets of spies on Deveel colony worlds. So... the Executive spies get wind of these native meetings, and the Executive

Branch then tried to hunt down and kill the native leadership. They couldn't find the natives, who were probably all off-dimension at meetings like the one Skeeve attended and the 'sabotage' was getting steadily worse, so they...."

"Sicced me on them." I concluded bitterly.

Tanda sighed and continued:

"And then the *labor* spies heard somewhere that someone was coming to Gezirah to break up 'the labor union', and so the Collective hired Brockhurst and the other assassins to come in and kill the intruders."

"And I'll bet my last gold piece that our furry friend was a spy working for one or the other of the Deveel factions as well, either trying to draw out 'unauthorized union' organizers, or find the 'union-busting off-worlders'. The fact that he squealed on us to Blox should have clued me in sooner. Not that it matters now, but since he and Brockhurst were working at cross purposes, I'd guess the Executives hired him."

"So you're telling me all of this happened because some Deveel bureaucrat didn't bother to look in his 'In-Box'?" Gus snarled. I shared the sentiment, if not understanding the exact meaning.

"No, of course not." Aahz commented, surprisingly mildly. "Penbrius would still be doing... whatever it is he's doing. But we would have all been saved a great deal of time and trouble. If we'd known what was going on, we could have hit the Bazaar, armed ourselves to the teeth, and gone in guns blazing. But we didn't know. And now..." He glanced skyward at the ominous clouds boiling and rumbling overhead. "...we just don't have time. We go in as-is. One way or the other, we get into Penbrius' realm, and we take him down."

"But Aahz..."

"Kid?"

"What if the story Penbrius told the natives is true? What if, whatever he's doing is actually to prevent some greater evil?"

"Greater than threatening eight or more dimensions with total destruction?"

"I... well..."

"No. Trust me on this one, Kid. It's a standard schtick in the demon business; 'I'm goodness and light personified, and there's some evil enemy off there somewhere over that hill from which only I can protect you.' It's been done more times than I can count." Aahz paused grimly for a moment, then continued. "And remember, I met the man once, if only briefly. Whatever he's doing, it is not some great humanitarian project. We're going to stop him. Whatever it takes."

We all fell silent, and listened to the thunder rumble overhead.

Chapter 26a

*“Those who ignore history are condemned
to repeat it.”*

Sisyphus

AFTER AN INTERMINABLE WAIT, the two Daglarites returned, shepherding along with them a obviously decrepit member of their species. Their charge was protesting bitterly as they approached.

“What’s the meaning of this, you disrespectful fingerlings? Rousing my out of my sleppool at this time of day!”

“I *told* you, Ulliny, the Great Skeeve desires to speak to you.”

“The Great who? Never heard of him.”

“That’s almost comforting.” I muttered under my breath.

“What was that, handsome?”

“Nothing.”

“Great Skeeve...” Ixthol spoke formally as they arrived next to us. “This is Ulliny.”

“So I gathered.” Aahz snarled. “Look, gramps, we’re short on time here. We want to know about Penbrius.”

All three of the Daglarites took an automatic step or two away from him. I stepped in front of Aahz and spoke.

“My apologies for my colleague’s behavior. He sometimes forgets to use the proper respect when talking to a magician.”

Aahz made a strangled noise. Someone, Tanda I think, giggled.

“Really?” The elderly Daglarite eyed me shrewdly. “And how would *you* know that, fingerling?”

I spread my arms theatrically and rose a foot or so off of the ground. I spun around once, slowly and settled back to earth. I continued: “Please, Ulliny. Let’s step off to the side here for a moment and discuss some things, one magician to another.”

“Very well, Great Whatever-your-name-is. If you want to know something about... him, let’s go talk.”

We moved a few paces away from the group.

“So, what’s a nice Kladh like you doing hanging out with a Pervert, anyway?” He grinned, showing a mouthful of still-sharp teeth.

“That’s ‘Pervect.’ He’s my partner.”

“This is Toros Daglari, Great Whosis. I’ve seen his kind here on vacation. They will always be Perverts.”

I stifled my annoyance. Now was not the time to get into an argument.

“Is it true? Not about Pervects, but that you once visited Penbrius’ realm?”

“Down to business, eh? Good. My skin dries out if I’m away from my pool for too long. It was a long time ago, now. Maybe fifty years. I was learning to dimension hop. Went to Kaykayman, Augar... Agger... (can never pronounce that one...), the usual stops. Then I got interested in the... what do those Deveels call them... Temples....” He glanced at me and grinned a little. “You know there’s more than just the one, doncha?”

“Yes.”

“Most of us get interested at one time or another. Go look. But there’s never anything to see, you know. We go and look and then keep our Promise not to tell... although I’m breaking it now, aren’t I?” He laughed, a strange but not unpleasant bubbling sound. “But you already know some it, I see, and it’s to another magician, so that’s all right. Where was I?”

“You went to look at the Temple up there.”

“Yes, that’s right. Snoopied around. Saw nothing, got ready to leave. Then... then....” He looked around, then back at me. “I happened to look at the Doorways. To the other worlds. And there was one there that I hadn’t seen before. Just jumped out at me.”

“Where exactly were you....”

“I’m getting to that! I was in one of those little rooms that branch off from the main passageway. I could only see the Door in that room. If I stepped into the hall, the Door disappeared. Same in all of the other rooms. So I went back to the room, and Hopped. Had to see, didn’t I?” He shook his head. “I saw. I saw all right.”

“What happened? What was Penbrius like?”

“I made another Promise that day.” He spoke flatly, but I could see that he was afraid. “And that one, I’m keeping. What happened then is... between me an’ Penbrius. Or maybe just Penbrius and Penbrius.” He gave me another sharp-eyed

glance. “You going to go visit Penbrius, Great...?”

“Skeeve. Yes. Yes I am.”

He shook his head.

“Goodbye then. You know everything I know now.” He shook his head again, and turned away. I walked back to the others.

“Will you see that he gets home, Ixthol?”

“Of course, Great Skeeve.” He gestured to his assistant, who went off with Ulliny.

“What did he say, Skeeve?”

I looked at Aahz and made a ‘go ahead’ gesture. I knew we would have had to walk a lot further away to get out of the range of his hearing.

“He was actually inside a specific room in the Temple when he jumped, huh?” Aahz was obviously pondering deeply. “Makes sense. We saw how they can distort Dimension Hopping. Maybe, in that one room, it distorts whatever shield he’s got in place as well....”

“You didn’t try when you were up there before?”

“No.” Aahz sighed. “We tried as soon as we got back to the mainland and realized where we were. Or Gus did, anyway. He had no luck. But if we can do it...”

“Let’s go.”

The lightning, and rain, had started up again, worse than before, so we were forced to hike back up the hill again, once again saying goodbye and leaving Ixthol behind at the bottom. For the most part, we all walked silently, each of us wrapped up in our own thoughts. All too soon, however, the familiar gray shape loomed into view, the path opening out into a clearing in front of a black entrance. This Temple wasn’t quite as covered with foliage as the one on the island, and it gave me my first really good look at one of the structures. The square block radiated menace. The faint forceline drains(?) shooting out of it like the probing proboscises of a flock of mosquito-bats didn’t improve my opinion.

“I say, not the most cheerful of places, is it?” Chumley commented, squinting through his rain-streaked glasses at the building before us.

“I dunno.” Gus grinned. “I sort of like the color.” He flexed his gray wings.

“Stow it, guys. Let’s get this over with.” Aahz snapped. I repeated my trick with the ward torch, and we entered the building, looking for the proper room.

* * *

“I see it. It’s there.” Tanda spoke up almost at once. “There’s one there now that wasn’t there before.” We stood crammed into one of the small rooms off the main passageway. The cool wind gusted up from down below; Aahz and Gus’s previous visit had left the blocking wall a pile of rubble.

Chumley and Gus nodded agreement. I closed my eyes and looked, but

couldn't see anything different. But getting an exact count on the number of doors was oddly difficult, like they kept fading in and out. I didn't know if the Temple was causing it, or if it was something you just go used to after a while....

"Are you sure?" I asked nervously. "I don't see...."

"Kid..." Aahz growled. "You promised."

"Skeeve?" Chumley sounded surprised. "You can see dimensional connections?"

I realized that we hadn't mentioned how we got off of Chirosovo. "Yes. Aahz showed me. It was the only we could get off of Chirosovo."

Chumley faced Aahz. "It was about bloody time you showed him. We've all been wondering about it."

"He's still not ready. We need to practice a lot more. Which reminds me, Skeeve..." He crossed his arms. "You may have forgotten what I said about you going home, but I haven't. Now that we can get into Penbrius' realm, you are going back to Deva." He produced the D-Hopper. "You take the D-Hopper and get out of here."

I looked down at the cylinder and back up at Aahz.

"No."

Aahz said nothing, but took a step closer to me.

To my immense surprise, Tanda interjected herself into the confrontation, stepping in front of Aahz.

"Aahz?" She spoke softly.

"Get out of the way, Tanda."

Tanda slapped him across the face. Hard. Unlike my feeble attempt, Tanda's blow knocked Aahz's head sharply to one side. The sound seemed to ricochet around the small room for an eternity. After he got his head twisted back around straight, Aahz looked at her, his jaw hanging open. Mine was open as well.

"I'm sorry, Aahz, but that had to be done. It's the only way to get you to listen to me. We've had this discussion before, but it seems you need a refresher. In case you hadn't noticed, Skeeve here is now old enough to make his own decisions. Yes, what we are about to do is dangerous. Incredibly dangerous. But it is no longer up to you to decide whether Skeeve comes with us or not. And if you try again to send him away, I'll..."

"You'll what?"

"I'll stop you."

"We'll stop you." Chumley spoke up.

"That's right." Gus added.

"Aahz, we need him along. He's the only real magician we've got, and whatever Penbrius has waiting for us, our chances of getting through it are probably doubled if Skeeve is with us. I know it and you know it. It's time to let him go. Even if it means he gets killed. If we all get killed."

Aahz looked at me. Just when I thought I had seen all of Aahz's moods, he

would come along and drop a new one on me. Like now. If I didn't know better, I'd have said he was about to cry. Finally, he straightened up "Let's do it. But you still take D-Hopper, kid. If something goes wrong..." I started to say that I had a place to run to now, if things got really hairy. But I didn't think Aahz would appreciate that comment. I silently took the D-Hopper and stuck it in my pocket.

We gathered close to together around Chumley and he Hopped.

And it worked. Suddenly, we were in the realm of Penbrius.

Chapter 27a

“Which part of ‘Go Away’ don’t you understand?”

Shih Huang Ti

YOU MIGHT WONDER how I knew this, but it was fairly obvious. We were now all crowded into an even smaller room with a single jagged opening leading out. The only light dribbled in from whatever room lay beyond, giving the hole an unpleasant resemblance to a fang-filled mouth. Around us, above us and below us, was more of Penbrius’ trademark stonework. But more than that...

“Wow.”

“Gosh.”

“My word.”

“I’ll say.”

“What?”

For once it wasn’t me asking the stupid question: Aahz glared at the rest of us as we stared around at the walls.

They were alive. Not literally, but alive nonetheless and crawling with magik, much like what Gus and I had seen on Chirosovo, only ten thousand times more intense- this dimension was overflowing with the power. I felt almost dizzy as it washed around me, into me. I imagined this must be what an inhabitant of Limbo feels like upon arriving on Deva, or any other ‘normal’ dimension.

“What’s wrong with all of you?” Aahz snarled.

“Magik, old boy.” Chumley said, still looking at the ceiling, which was about

an inch from the end of his nose. "I've never seen so much of the stuff in one place before. It's almost literally oozing out of the walls."

I looked around again.

"But it's not... natural... if that's the word. Any of you see... or sense... a force line anywhere? It's like it's all just floating in the air... or something...."

"Look, people, this is fascinating, but we need to get moving. Penbrius probably already knows that we're here, and we'd better move fast. Let's go!"

"This isn't where you arrived before, Aahz?"

"No. Now MOVE!"

One by one we squeezed out of the room through the crack. Chumley barely made it.

The chamber beyond was difficult to describe. It was something like standing inside a gigantic chunk of zoorik cheese, cheese that had been carved out of stone. Thick rifts and arches of stone ran everywhere, spiraling up as high as we could see, and down into darkness on both sides of the narrow path-cum-bridge on which we stood. What appeared to be a sun sent wan orange light trickling down to us from somewhere high above, but it was hard to tell for sure. Oddly, more than anything, it resembled the broken and shattered Deveel ski lodge on Chirosovo.

"Now what?"

"I suppose we go down there." Aahz pointed.

It was another round tunnel, shooting down into the earth, much bigger than any of the others we had seen. Another difference was that it was brightly lit by large unwinking globes that hung from the ceiling.

I pried open the wards that covered it, and we started down. I felt like I was floating as I walked.

At the bottom of the tunnel was a third difference, perhaps the biggest of all: this end of the tunnel was blocked with an enormous circular door, made out of some black metal and ringed with three rows of the sullen red symbols. Black Containment tried once again to well up around me, but I shook it off.

The door had no handle on this side and it was, perhaps unsurprisingly, closed.

I don't think, in fact, I have ever seen a door that was so *resolutely* closed.

"Wow!" Tanda breathed. "That's almost as big as the main vault door for the Gnomes' Central Treasury on Zoorik!"

"Really?" Aahz cocked a sardonic eyebrow or at least the patch on his face that would sport such an object if he had possessed one. "And how would **you** know that?"

Tanda blinked innocently. "Oh... you hear things... you know..."

"Yeah, right. I think we can get through that, but it would be easier if you did it, Kid."

"Huh? Oh... Okay..." I snapped myself back to attention and reached out with magik...

And after a few moments gave up in frustration.

“It’s not working. Even with all of this extra power. It’s weird, like... like I can’t get a ‘grip’ on the door magikally. My... uh... ‘fingers’ keep slipping off. Have you ever heard of anything like this?”

“No. But, like I said, Penbrius can do things that I’ve never seen before. We’ll just have to do it the hard way.”

“You mean break through physically? Isn’t there an easier way?” I asked, eyeing the door.

“Such as?” Aahz asked, aridly.

“Well, um...” I floundered. “Why don’t we jump to another dimension, walk a few feet in that direction, and then jump back here? I mean, this dimension ‘here’, not ‘here here’.”

Aahz and the others exchanged glances.

“You forget, kid, we’re underground. If we jump to another dimension right now....”

“We’d end up buried?” I asked nervously.

“No, of course not. Two objects can’t occupy the same space at the same time. We’d just be shifted to the nearest available open space, most likely winding up back on the surface. If we were lucky, we might end up in some natural underground...”

“Aahz?” Tanda spoke up. “You were the one who was in a hurry. Could we possibly skip the lecture for now?”

“Besides...” added Chumley suddenly, his voice thoughtful. “It wouldn’t work even if we could jump with pinpoint accuracy.”

“Why not?”

“Skeeve, you’re already forgetting how hard it was just to crack into this dimension. Now I know why. We’re inside a Scrambling Field. I didn’t realize it before, because it’s been so bloody long since I’ve been around one of the blasted things. Can’t you all feel it?”

As soon as Chumley mentioned it, I realized he was right. In addition to the wash of magic, there was something more... a very faint tingling at the ends of my fingertips and toes....

“I assume that a Scrambling Field doesn’t have anything to do with egg farms?” I joked weakly.

“If only.” Aahz replied, grim. “Kid, let me see the D-Hopper for a second.” I passed it over to him, and he studied the lights on it for a minute. “Yup. You’re right, Chumley. Kid, a Scrambling Field is like a... well... the opposite of the method you used to D-hop off Chirosovo. It’s a kind of enormous invisible pentagram that prevents anyone inside it from traveling between dimensions. Either in... or out.” He twisted the D-Hopper’s settings in his hands, still watching the lights. “Big ones suck an enormous amount of power, which is why they’re so rare. But, as we’ve seen, Penbrius has power to burn. It also explains why we couldn’t find this place unless we were standing clear down inside that... Temple.

I imagine that that little room we arrived in is right at the edge of the field, or maybe in a weak zone between overlapping fields.”

“But Aahz! If this field was in place before, how did **you** get in here, when you interrupted that ceremony?”

“Who knows? Maybe the field wasn’t there!”

“Most likely you and whatshisface... that poor old Daglarite... and maybe others like you were the reason the field was set up.” Tanda contributed. “Standard operating procedure for a place like this. If someone finds a way in, block it so it can’t happen again.”

“Terrific. Anyway, the upshot of all this is, we’re gonna have to this the old-fashioned way. Chumley? Gus? Let’s do it.” He and the other two closed in on the door.

At the time, neither of us realized that he had stuck the D-Hopper back in his own pocket.

* * *

Even with the enormous combined strength of the three, the door did not move easily. For what seemed like an eternity they pulled and strained without noticeable effect. Then Aahz gasped:

“There... something’s starting to... give!”

“Yes... but there’s something bloody odd... about...”

With a tortured scream of metal, the door finally began to tear away from its frame.

“Hurry... Skeeve... Tanda... get through...” I levitated Tanda and myself up, and carefully inserted our bodies through the small hole that was now available. One by one, our friends followed, Chumley again just squeezing through. As soon as he dropped to the floor on the other side, we all turned and stared: the door was silently bending itself slowly back into shape, refilling the hole. In a few moments, it was as if it had never been damaged.

“Neat trick.”

“It must be alive, Aahz, like that cell in Blut!”

“Yeah. C’mon, let’s go.”

Beyond the door, the hallway continued on straight for a stretch, abruptly opening out into another large room. Maybe ‘room’ isn’t the right word, though; it was a wide circular pit that both dropped down and rose up out of out of sight into blackness. Two railing-less platforms stuck out tentatively over the abyss, one on our side, one far across the gap. We all clustered at the edge of ‘our’ platform and stared across. Gus squinted, and then spoke.

“A bridge! See that framework on the other side? It’s some kind of drawbridge that’s been pulled back!” He pointed. “I guess we’ll have to just levitate our way across.”

“Okay.” I reached out to lift myself and the others over. But Tanda interrupted, raising a slender hand and looking up into the darkness overhead.

“Hold it. There’s something about this I don’t like. This seems familiar...” She squinted as well, then sniffed the air and shifted her gaze to the sheer walls of the pit. I followed the look, but could see nothing unusual. (In a relative sense, of course...)

“Well,” replied Gus, “How about I fly over alone and figure out how to operate the bridge controls? Shouldn’t be too hard.”

Tanda bit her lip, but finally nodded.

“Okay. But remember to check the bridge controls for traps.”

Gus returned her nod, limbered up his wings and took off.

The second he flew off the platform, there was an intense flash of white light from the walls and a thunderclap of sound, sending us all into an instinctive crouch and clutching at our ears. We all stared in amazement as Gus went tumbling head over tail above us, back down the tunnel, bouncing to a gradual stop. The rest of us dashed back up the tunnel and clustered around him.

“Gus! Gus, are you okay?”

Gus sat up, and shook his head. For a moment, I thought I could hear a rattling noise.

“I’m... I’m fine. Whoa... what was that?”

“I remember now. I’ve seen one of these before.” Tanda replied. “It’s a magik inversion field. Penbrius seems to have a thing for this kind of field-effect magik. Any magik you pour into the field, gets amplified and reflected right back at you. Your flying triggered it off. If Skeeve tried to levitate us all across, it would be even worse.”

“So we can’t use magik to get across? Terrific.”

“It’s simple.” Tanda started back up the hallway as Aahz and Chumley helped Gus back to his feet. I hurried after her, an ominous feeling forming in the pit of my stomach. Reaching the platform again, she grinned at me.

“There’s a way across. The disadvantage of using magik like this is...” She took a deep breath, and jumped. Not across (into...) the pit, but towards one of the curving walls. I had to resist the almost overwhelming urge to try and snatch her back magikally.

Not that it was needed. Tanda landed, seeming to cling to the wall like a fly. She looked back at me and grinned.

“...you have shape and carve the walls a certain way, position your runes just so, to get the proper focusing effect.” Swallowing my heart back into its proper position, I looked more carefully and saw that the walls were not quite as smooth as they first appeared; there were indentations and lumps in the slick black stone. Still, I would have fallen off in about five seconds if I had tried to climb along it. Tanda didn’t appear to have any trouble; she swarmed along the wall, hopping lightly from foothold to foothold, working her way around the edge of the pit. The

others moved to join me, and we all watched in silence. Gus idly scraped a claw across the stone, and then looked at his hand in surprise; it was obviously much harder than he had expected.

It seemed like an eternity, but actually Tanda reached the other side in a very short time, and disappeared into the gloom for a long moment. Nothing happened. Then, abruptly, there were a series of unpleasant snaps and pops cut off by a single powerful click, and the bridge slowly rumbled out towards us. It clicked into place with a hollow thud, a rickety disused-looking edifice. We crossed one at a time, the inversion field popping and hissing impotently as we passed through it, the bridge creaking threateningly under our weight. Tanda was waiting for us on the other platform.

“That... that was very impressive, Tanda...” I managed as I fell into step beside her. We started down the next tunnel.

“Hey, no problem, Skeeve. I was right about the traps on the controls, but I...”

“LOOK OUT!” Moving with surprising speed, Gus was between us, pushing us behind him. An enormous gout of flame washed up out of a hole in the floor. Gus took the brunt of it, but enough swirled around him to leave me feeling, and Tanda looking, rather parbroiled. We both staggered back a couple of steps, coughing.

“T-that was impressive, too, Gus....” I choked out.

He grinned, as another blast of flame hit him.

“Compared to Bufort, this is a summer’s breeze.” He stomped down heavily, and something under him shattered. The flame cut off instantly. We moved off again, this time Gus taking the lead....

* * *

There were two more flame traps, the last one blasting out of the ceilings and walls as well as the floor. Gus smashed them one at a time. I noticed as I stepped over them that like the door before them, the damage started repairing itself almost immediately. It was at this point that I also realized there hadn’t been a handle on *this* side of the door, either.

Then we were approaching another large room. Even before we entered it, there was a problem.

“Hold up.” Aahz said. “See that glittering stuff floating in from the room? That’s bad news. It’s magik-deadening powder.”

I took a horrified step backwards. “The same stuff that took your powers away?”

“Huh? Oh, no. This stuff doesn’t kill magik, just blocks it. Anything coated in it becomes immune to low-level wards. Lots of merchants in the Bazaar sell it, usually stored in a gadget that looks sort of like a blackboard eraser. Whatever’s in that room, again, we’ll have to face it without magik. Get behind us, Skeeve.” I

sighed, but obeyed. We stepped into the room.

The creature squatting in the middle of the room was enormous, even bigger than Chumley. In fact it looked vaguely trollish, with bulging rubbery limbs and a massive slab of a head nestled down between its mountainous gray shoulders. Streamers of saliva dripped from fang-filled jaws and hissed when they splatted against the floor.

It opened its bloodshot, narrow eyes and saw us. An evil rumbling growl issued from deep in its throat.

Chapter 28a

“How’s that for a plot twist?”

R. Serling

“OH, TERRIFIC.” Gus groaned, shifting into a defensive stance. Aahz and Tanda followed suit.

“Bertie?” Chumley stepped forward. “I say, Bertie, old bean, is that you?”

The thing blinked, and peered at Chumley myopically.

“Chumley? Chumley, old sport!” Its voice caused the walls to tremble slightly. “It’s been simply ages! When was the last time?”

“It must have been that day at the Regatta. We all got together to root for the old alma mater’s current offering, remember?”

“Ah, yes.” The thing... Bertie... sighed, causing a few chips of rock to flake off and float to the floor. “They weren’t very impressive, I must say. Not at all up to the standard that we chaps set, eh?”

Chumley sighed as well. “No, but then, one must stick with the old school ties, mustn’t one?” He turned and looked at the rest of us. We stared back at him, and the other. Tanda was the one who finally spoke:

“*That’s* Bertie? I dunno, Chumley, somehow I got the impression from what you always told me that he was, well... bigger.”

“*Bigger?*” The word slipped out before I could stifle it.

“Bertie and I were in the same House at University, you know.” Chumley confided to the rest of us. “He’s a good old egg.” He introduced all of us to the creature, then continued. “Blast it all, Bertie, don’t tell me you’re working for this

blighter Penbrius.”

Bertie shrugged, a complex gesture that took quite a while to complete.

“It’s a living, you know. Actually, I’ve never even met the fellow. I was in the Bazaar, rather at loose ends as it happened, and this odd little chap approached me, said he had a job for someone of my talents. All I have to do is keep anyone from passing through this chamber. Easy work, really. You’re the first to come along in ages.”

“Which brings up a somewhat awkward point, actually...” Chumley hesitated. “You see, we have to go through here. Rather urgently.”

Bertie sighed again. “I was afraid it might come to that. I’m sorry, but I simply can’t allow it. It is my job, you know.”

“Hmm. I understand. But I’ll tell you what, old sport. How about this... We have a rematch, like the old days. Just the two of us, you and I, one on one, head to head. If I win, we go through. If you win, we turn back.”

“Errrrmm... Yes. It’s agreed. I wouldn’t do this for anyone else, Chumley, but to be honest, I’ve quite missed our little bouts. It just so happens I have what we need right over here.”

As Bertie rummaged, I stepped up to Chumley and whispered:

“Should... should we get out of the room while you do this? I mean, falling rocks... or something...”

Chumley gave me a puzzled glance.

“No, of course you don’t have to leave. Just tell Aahz he has to try and keep his voice down.”

“Huh?”

Bertie turned back, holding an odd flat board in his hands, marked with a neat pattern of black and white squares.

“So we can bloody well concentrate. Now please be quiet.” Chumley hunched down with Bertie over the board, and began placing odd little chunks of carved rock on the various squares...

“What are they doing?” I hissed as I sidled up to Aahz, who watched the proceedings with an air of intense boredom.

“Playing chess.” He snorted. “Give me a good game of Dragon Poker any day.”

“Amen to that.” Tanda rolled her eyes.

“Anyone ever tell you two that you have the grace and culture of a pair of tree stumps?”

“Hey, Gus, I don’t recall *you* ever turning down a Dragon Poker match.”

“At least *I* make an attempt to broaden my intellectual horizons. You wouldn’t know an ‘en passant’ capture if it bit you on the scaly green ass.”

“They’re playing chess? But why don’t they have any—”

“Will you lot please be QUIET!”

We were quiet.

The two combatants, if that was the proper word, went to work in silence as well, shifting the chunks of rock around on top of the board in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. They didn't seem to hesitate even for a moment between movements, but worked with an air of grim determination. Occasionally one would remove one of the chunks from the board and place it on the ground beside him. Even so, the ritual seemed to go on for an incredibly long time. The number of chunks dwindled, and the moves, if anything, came even faster. Finally, abruptly, Chumley leaned back.

"Checkmate in three moves."

Bertie studied the board for a moment longer, then nodded, and tipped over one of the few remaining chunks in a ceremonial manner.

"Good show, Chumley. You are as a formidable opponent as I remembered. It was a pleasure sparring with you, I must say. The competition down here is simply third rate."

"Down here? Who the deuce do you find to play with here?"

"The same chap who hired me. His name's Snyth, bye the bye. Works for Penbrius. Actually a well-meaning little fellow for the most part, but an abominable chess player." He began carefully collecting the chunks and putting them in a small wooden box. "But now that you mention it, he hasn't been around in quite a little while. As I said before, no one has. Confidentially, even before you came along, I was thinking of moving on." He looked up, an uneasy expression rumbling across his craggy face like an earthquake. "I keep having the most disagreeable feeling that something nasty is about to happen."

Chumley nodded, and leaned closer.

"Strictly on the QT, old boy, if I were you, I'd think about leaving, sooner rather than later. We have strong reason to believe that you're quite right, and that something rather unpleasant may be brewing in these parts."

Bertie returned the nod. "Since you've honorably defeated me, I don't feel so rotten about deserting my post. I'll be off, then. I know a somewhat faster way out than the one you came in. Very pleasant to meet all of you, especially you, Tananda. Your brother has told me so much about you."

"Likewise, Bertie. Hope we bump into each other again someday." Tanda managed a smile, but it was a trifle wan. Bertie gave a final wave, tucked the box and the board into two deep folds in his hide, and with almost frightening agility, clambered up a nearby wall and out of sight into the darkness. I spoke as I watched him go.

"Why didn't we ask for his help with Penbrius? We're probably going to need it..."

Chumley shook his head firmly.

"Leaving your guard post after being defeated in honorable combat is one thing. Openly turning against your employer is quite another. I knew he'd never agree." He hesitated and gave a slight smile. "And in any event, while I may be the

better chess player, Bertie has always had rather more sense than I.”

We moved on.

* * *

After we paused long enough for Gus to blow the magik-killing powder off the rest of us with his wings, things went fairly quickly. Another row of fire traps. Another, smaller, door that like the first gave into an attack from Aahz, Chumley and Gus before quickly reforming itself behind us. A nasty sliding block trap that Chumley disabled by not being quite fast enough in moving his leg. And finally, a long bubbling pool of acid that I had to carefully levitate everyone over, while shielding them with wards, since even the fumes were eating away at the surrounding rocks.

And so we found ourselves in a long corridor made of all-too-familiar small gray stone blocks. Chumley was limping, Tanda and I both still slightly singed. Even Gus had been damaged by his encounter with the inversion field, a nasty scrape running down one of his wings. When I expressed concern, he assured me a little concrete would fix the problem. I didn't dare ask what concrete was.

Aahz, somehow, had made it through intact. He rubbed his hands, and smiled at us.

“Maybe this isn't going to be so bad after all. Compared to that little weasel Diz-Nee, Penbrius is a piker when it comes to defense spells. Let's go find him.”

The rest of us looked at each other.

“I say we throw him back in there.”

“Bloody well seconded.”

But Aahz had already loped off down the hallway. We glumly trooped after him.

The building was a warren of identical corridors, twisting and turning and branching seemingly at random. We hiked on and on. Occasionally, there was a gentle ramp sloping up or down. Odd thunder-like noises rumbled in the distance, and there was the occasional flash of unpleasant light. But since leaving Bertie, no inhabitants.

Until we rounded yet another corner, and practically tripped over a pathetic, scrawny, figure sprawled in the passageway. Everyone pulled up in surprise.

“Is he dead?” Gus asked, peering around Chumley's bulk, with which he had collided.

“No.” Tanda responded authoritatively, even before the creature sat up and looked at us. I thought briefly that it would make sense that an Assassin would know at a glance if someone were still a potential target or not...

“Is he Penbrius?” I started sucking in even more power...

“No.” Aahz responded with equal authority.

“Greetings, noble intruders. You know the Master's name?” The creature

abruptly spoke, his voice a shrill warble. “Did you know the Master?” He looked like a bedraggled, bipedal, short-eared bunny rabbit, jammed first into a red-and-black tiger skin, and then an ill-fitting multipocketed smock.

“Well,” Aahz said smiling widely, “Your ‘Master’ and I met once, and we need...”

“‘DID you know’?” I cut in, killing Aahz’s promising lie in mid-birth.

“Yes.” The creature blinked his wide blue eyes, owlshly. “The Master is dead. Did you not know that?”

Chapter 29a

*“Just because one problem has been solved
doesn’t mean your troubles are over.”*

The Pied Piper

THE SILENCE that followed this statement was one of the most profound I have ever experienced.

Usually it is Aahz who first recovers his voice in such circumstances, but this time, I was the one who finally replied.

“But... that was just the Black Containment spell... He didn’t really die... did he?”

The creature looked at me blankly, nervously fingering the blunt-pronged implement he held in his long fingers. I noted absently that the tool glowed with a strong aura, but its user did not.

“I of course do not know what you experienced while in the grip of Black Containment, Mr. Magician, but the master is most assuredly dead.”

“You actually personally saw Penbrius die?” Aahz, speaking as if to a Deveel who had just offered to sell him the sun, moon and, for just a slight additional fee, the stars.

“Yes. I was there. The Master is dead.”

“And who **are** you, exactly?” Tanda asked, eyebrows raised.

“Ah!” The figure scrambled to his feet and gave her a surprisingly graceful bow. She smiled. “A hundred pardons, Miss Assassin. My name is Snafyu. Snafyu of Penbrius. As my father before me, and his father before him, I am... I was the

Master's chief assistant... Before his most unexpected and perhaps untimely demise.”

“I say, old chap, how did you know little sis here is an assassin?”

Snafyu turned and was looking at Chumley's stomach. He blinked yet again, and lifted his gaze so he could see the Troll's face. “Is it not obvious, Mr. Troll?”

“Dead... how is that possible...” Aahz looked perhaps the most stunned I'd ever seen him.

“That is a long story, and very complicated...” Suddenly there was a loud sizzling sound, and something started glowing on the wall, an unpleasant orange jag bubbling along in the cracks between the stones.

“Ah! A moment, all of you. Please! This is what I was waiting for!” Snafyu leapt across the corridor in a single bound, and jammed the tool he was holding directly into the color. There was a loud snap, and the color flashed out, leaving a sickly sweet odor behind. With an effort and a grunt, Snafyu extracted the tool and turned back to where the rest of us stood staring at him. “Fixed. For now. Until the next one.” He sighed. “Always a next one. Well... not *always*...”

“Snafyu?” Aahz spoke almost gently.

“Yes, Mr. Pervect?”

Aahz paused, his chain of thought obviously derailed for a moment. He spoke an aside to the rest of us. “You know, I almost like this guy already.” He focused his attention back on Snafyu. “What is going on around here? If Penbrius is dead, then... WHY IS EVERY DIMENSION WITHIN SHOUTING DISTANCE APPARENTLY ABOUT TO EXPLODE!?”

“Ah. Yes. Very bad. It is the Device. The Device continues to run, and run. Without the Master to control it, regulate it, it runs faster and faster. Draws more and more power. Does more and more damage. Warps the force lines... sucks them dry... I try to... to keep all of the plates spinning, but it is harder and harder. Soon... very soon...”

“Plates?”

“Then why don't you shut this Device off?” Aahz bellowed, ignoring my question.

“Would. Can't. Unless... No. Not enough.” He looked around at us, then refocused his attention on me. “At least now you are here, Mr. Magician. One problem is solved...”

“I don't understand.” For once when I said this, I was sort of lying. A horrible suspicion was beginning to form in my mind. “What is this... Device?”

Snafyu smiled almost proudly and stretched his arms wide.

“This whole structure is the Device. All corridors, all rooms. Even the empty spaces in between. And more. “

“More?”

“Oh, yes. Tunnels. Or channels if honorable intruders prefer. Running in from other dimensions. Pull and focus power from force lines, bring it here!”

“Tunnels filled with icy cold air?”

“Yes. Cold is side-effect of magik channeling. You have seen the tunnels?”

“We’ve seen what’s at the other end, yes.”

“But what does this ‘Device’ do?” I demanded.

“The Master designed and built the Device. So that he would have magik. More magik than anyone. Channel more magik into himself than anyone. And I helped to run it!”

“So he would have magik?” Chumley queried closely. “Are you saying that this Penbrius chap wasn’t a magician at all? He was a...”

“Mechanic.” Aahz stared at the nearest wall for a moment and then back at Snafyu. “All these years, and he was JUST A STUPID MECHANIC!?”

“No, no. Not a stupid mechanic, Mr. Pervect. A *great* mechanic. The greatest mechanic who has ever lived in all the dimensions. He built the Device, and it channeled the magik of a dozen dimensions into itself. Into him. Gave him much power.”

“That’s... mind-boggling...” I murmured, although I had already been scrabbling around the edges of the idea for some time.

“But not terribly original, you know.” Chumley commented. “Those great ruddy fools the Krell built one. Remember what happened to that lot?”

“And J’Mis of Hyperion.” Gus chipped in. “Built that Great Gadget, or whatever it was called. Five years later they found his bloated, white-haired, corpse curled up in a corner.”

“And Voimsa, the High Scribe of Rotnart.” Tanda added “Built the Omnivac machine. They had to scrape what was left of him off—”

“Yes, yes.” Snafyu cut in impatiently. “The Master studied all of those, many more. Knew he could do it better. Do it properly. Took the best of what had been done before, and improved them all. Structures. Ideas. Even assistants.” He touched his own chest. “Others not take power from man dimensions. Only gathered power from own dimension, focused it. The Device much bigger, much more powerful. And it seemed as if he had succeeded in task. Worked for centuries. Performed wonders beyond imagining. Then one day... very suddenly... The Master die during power transfer. Nothing left but ashes. Massive explosion barely averted by myself and others. Since then, Device falling apart. Running out of control. Soon it will explode. Taking all nearby dimensions with it.”

“Like Chirosovo?”

“Yes. No. Maybe much worse. Once, already, I cannot keep magik contained. Large blow-out before control is regained. Blowout of magik wash out of Transfer Stations, over Dimension #5. Chirosovo, it is called? Do very bad things, I imagine. You have seen, I gather? But Chirosovo will recover, some day. Many centuries perhaps, but it will recover. If Device explodes, perhaps nothing will recover. All dimensions Device touch, will be destroyed...” He shook his head, and corrected himself. “Not if. When. Soon Device will explode. IS inevitable.”

“Nothing is inevitable.” Aahz snarled.

“Well... there is way. Maybe. Come. I will show you....” Snafyu went bounding off down the corridor. We exchanged a complex group glance and shrug and hurried after him.

He led us unerringly through the endless warren of passageways, until we rounded a final corner and stood before a third imposing-looking black door, if anything even bigger than the first one Aahz and the others had ripped through. Snafyu casually kicked it, and it opened in a slow, almost grudging fashion.

“Wish we’d known that little trick before.” Someone muttered behind me.

We stepped through the door and into the fair-size round chamber beyond. It was like being at the bottom of a well: the familiar monotonous stonework circled us to form the walls, which then reached up out of sight into darkness. In the center of the room loomed a bunched collection of large stone pillars and cubes, all covered with bumps and knobs that flashed different colors. Dozens of screens, like those of the Dispatcher on Blut, flashed what appeared to be colored reams of garbled nonsense. An ominous off-kilter wavering sound filled the air. There was so much magik bouncing around the room I felt my feet trying to leave the ground of their own accord. I glanced at Aahz and knew, without having to ask, that this is where he had encountered Penbrius so many years ago.

Chapter 30a

“Hail, hail, the gang’s all here...”

Col. Mustard

“*THIS* ROOM controls the entire Device?”

“Yes. Ah! Mr. Troll! Please do not touch the walls! Very dangerous!” Snafyu spoke sharply, and Chumley snatched back his hand with matching suddenness. “Please touch nothing unless I say. Safe to touch floor, at least mostly...”

Aahz spoke. “Are you telling me you and Penbrius ran this thing all by yourself?”

“No, no. The Master had many servants. All gone now, except me.”

“Where are they?” Tanda.

“Dead, I know. Or I suppose.” There was a squalling sound and without even looking, Snafyu reached out a long thin arm and knocked sharply on the side of one of the pillars with the tool he still held. There was a tinny clang, and the sound stopped. “When the Master died, of those who survive, many fled in fear. Others stay, like me. Try to keep things running. Is our job to keep things running, no? And... and I do not wish to die. Is that wrong?” His voice became a bit plaintive for a moment, then returned to briskness. “But dangerous now. Well, it has always been dangerous... More dangerous. Some killed maintaining machine. Others try to go for help. Find real magician to help us. Only way. None have come back. Very difficult for one to get in and out of Device, as the honorable intruders must know; in fact, I have never been outside Device. Device may be breaking down, but many defenses continue unabated. Now, only I remain.”

“Why didn’t you ask Bertie for help?”

“Bertie? Oh, Mr. Guard.” Snafyu paused, unhappily. “Master told only Snyth how to get past acid pit, and Snyth died when Master did. Snyle and Synrf thought they had figured out way... Hadn’t.” He finished bleakly.

“Well, there’s no time for regrets now. You said needed a magician? Well, you’ve got one. What’s the problem?”

“I can fix everything, shut off Device safely, with Mr. Magician now here to help me... except....”

“Except?”

“Need more. In addition to Magician, need other people to run controls. Here, here, here....” He pointed at various spots around the room, all widely separated. “Master *may* have been able to run Device all alone, but I doubt it. I certainly cannot. This is the way it has always been. Servants run controls, the Master stood on the platform.” He pointed a low stone podium that stood nearby. It was surrounded by rings of more of the evil runes, but they were all currently dark; no light, no aura. “Wore specially-constructed suit, into which was channeled magik. Everyone not working watch.” He further pointed at a row of low stone benches which lined one wall, then looked at Aahz. “This is what you saw, Mr. Pervect.”

“What? You were here when I came here before?”

“No. But grandfather was. You say you once meet Master? Only once Pervect come here. Interrupt transfer procedure. Must have been you, yes? Master very annoyed. Install Scrambling Field afterwards. Then Mr. Frogman somehow find his way here. Master very annoyed. Seal up all but one maintenance tunnel. Install more defenses. Hire Mr. Guard.”

“See, Aahz? Told you.”

“Shut up, Tanda. Look, Snafyu, this is all fascinating, but what do you need Skeeve for?”

“Skeeve? Oh, Mr. Magician. He protect operators from Device with wards and whatnot.”

“What do you mean, I’d have to protect you from the Device?”

“Device has safeguards. Protects itself when unauthorized ones such as ourselves attempt to access important functions like main shut-down. Slash. Cut. Chop. Zap. Very nasty. Even to Mr. Stone there. Realized early on wards only way to protect.”

“Fine! So you need Skeeve and some other helpers!” Aahz snarled. “Just show us what to do!”

“Aahz? You’re actually *volunteering* to run mechanical magik? This really is serious, isn’t it?”

“You’ll note he said ‘us’, not ‘me’.”

“No. Not work.” Snafyu ignored the extra commentary. “Need...” His head swiveled, as he obviously again ran inventory on everyone in the room. “...six people, in addition to Mr. Magician. Five simply not enough.”

“Terrific.”

“But there is something we can do. We can bring someone else here!”

“Bring someone?”

“Could we get Massha here, or Guido and Nunzio, or even Skeeve’s Daglarite friend?” Tanda asked urgently.

Aahz gave a grim shake of his head.

“That’s what I was just thinking. But there’s a problem. If what Snafyu is saying is true, we can’t do it in time. We’d have to fight our way all the way back outside the Field to use the D-Hopper, or have one of you dimension-travel back to Deva. And from the look of things in this room, if I’m reading those monitors correctly...”

“Yes! No! I mean, yes, no time to go and come!” Snafyu hopped from one powerful foot to the other. “But you misunderstand! Device have many powers, only some of which I know. Capable of much. One thing, we can bring someone *here*, to the control room, using the Device! It was one of the things I learned how to do, although the Master would have been very displeased if he knew I knew... But there is a problem. Reason I not bring help to here before, and turn off Device.”

“Of course. There’s always one more problem.” Gus muttered, eyeing the pillars as a particularly vivid light show flashed across them.

“We must have something the person recently owned, for extended period. I didn’t have something. You have something, hopefully? The Device finds them with thing, turns Scrambling Field...” he uncharacteristically groped for a word... “inside out... for less than a second and brings them here, wherever they may be. Whenever they may be. Or so the Master once said when he thought I was not listening. But we need something they once owned! Otherwise, it won’t work!” He paused. “Also not work on anyone who die inside Field. Have tried. That’s why I can’t bring back any of the Master’s other servants.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about similar magik gizmos.” Aahz commented. “Trackers and stuff like that. Own something long enough and it starts to pick up a bit of your aura. But we don’t have anything of Massha’s or even the hoods. Terrific. Looks like we don’t have any choice but to fight our way back out after all...”

“Um... Aahz?”

Aahz looked at me, saw my expression and immediately groaned, holding both hands to his forehead.

“I’m not going to like this, whatever it is, am I?”

“Well, actually, it *could* be worse...” I reached into my pocket, looking for the map that Karrik had given me...

It was gone; I had already managed to lose it.

Even as my heart gave a lurch, my hand closed around something else, further down in the pocket. It took me a moment before I realized what it was. I winced, and pulled the Official Assassin Travel Sustenance bar out into the light.

Unnervingly, even after having been cooked (twice), frozen, dunked in seawater and who knows what else, it still looked exactly as it had when I had stuffed in my pocket back on Gezirah. It wasn't even chipped or crumbled, except the missing corner where Aahz had sampled it. My stomach gave a little lurch. I had actually *eaten* one of these?

Aahz looked as well, then threw back his head and screamed, the sound bleeding out oddly into the cramped space that surrounded us. As if it wasn't so cramped at all...

"AGGGGGHHH! 'Could be worse'? How could it be worse!? An *Imp*! I have to trust my life to a zarking *Imp*!" He broke off and looked wistfully back at the door through which we had entered the room. "Maybe we could go find that passage Bertie was talking about..."

"Aahz, old boy," Chumley spoke up. "You yourself said we simply do not have the time. Are you saying that this... er... object... belonged to that Brockhurst fellow? If this infernal contraption can bring him here, we'd better do it and do it quickly."

Aahz ground his teeth, which is always an impressive spectacle.

"All right. Do it. Get it over with."

I handed the bar to Snafyu, who examined it with professional curiosity for a moment, then scuttled over to one of the numerous control banks at the center of the room. He carefully positioned the bar on a squat, eight-sided pedestal, and made adjustments to the various protuberances surrounding it. Symbols glowed. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, abruptly, something grabbed me, a dozen strong invisible hands yanking me off my feet, up into the air. Only, unpleasantly, I *wasn't* yanked at all. I was a piece of taffy, being stretched... stretched...

snap

And in an instant I was across the room, standing by the pillar and Snafyu. I staggered a little and coughed, realizing somehow that the Device had latched onto me as someone who once owned the bar. I felt its attentions grudgingly turn elsewhere, stretching out across the dimensions, painfully, agonizingly, the whole room seeming to be pulled now, not just me...

SNAP

Something was in the air above Snafyu and I, and we both looked up. Everybody looked up.

Several somethings were in the air.

"AAAIE!" I instinctively threw up a protective ward over all our heads.

The giant mud-encrusted boulders came raining down, surrounding the plummeting Brockhurst. Both they and he hit the ward and careened off towards the walls. With the massive power still flowing through me, I was able to snag the *Imp* magikally just before he made contact.

The rocks weren't so lucky, if that particular word can be applied to inanimate

objects. They went smashing into the walls.

But they didn't smash at all. They splatted in, half-disappearing as if it was now the walls which were made of warm taffy. The boulders hung there for a moment, and then started vibrating. Slowly at first, then faster. And faster.

"GET DOWN!" Snafyu cried. I hastily yanked Brockhurst into the protection of the ward and redoubled the shield's strength.

The boulders exploded. Violently. Smaller but still sizable chunks of rock went splattering off from the point of impact. Those that hit a wall plowed in, buzzed and exploded again, repeating the process. The din was horrendous. We hunkered down, wincing as the ever-smaller bits of shrapnel continued to bounce and ricochet and explode. Finally, mercifully, there was nothing left but dust and gravel rattling noisily to the floor. We all took our hands off of our ears. There was a new, unpleasant tone in the Device's throb, and the walls were wavering, water now instead of taffy....

"*That* doesn't sound good...." Tanda commented as I lowered Brockhurst back to the floor and dropped the ward.

Snafyu was staring around him in horrified fascination.

"Miss Assassin is correct. This is not good. The Device couldn't handle that. Device not working properly! Should not have happened at all. Should not have been rocks, too! Device now teetering on the brink. We have even less time!"

Brockhurst dropped to the ground, looking both dazed and perhaps an inch or two taller than I remembered. What appeared to be wisps of pure white smoke floated off his badly mangled clothes. He staggered around in a small circle, and almost tottered against the wall again. Gus calmly pulled him back to safety. Clutched in the gargoyle's grip, Brockhurst coughed violently, blowing out more reams of the 'smoke'. He looked around in bemusement.

"Skeeve? Aahz... Gus!?" The last word was directed at the grinning stone face looming overhead. "Are... are we dead? That avalanche..."

"You're not dead." Aahz growled. "When that happens, you and I are **not** going to the same place. If we do, *someone's* going to be in a lot of trouble."

Snafyu blurred his way across the room. How someone who was so gangly could move so fast...

"Mr. Brockhurst! Pleased to meet you." He grabbed Brockhurst's unresisting hand and shook it. "We need your help. Now. Very soon. Mr. Stone? Please bring Mr. Brockhurst over here...."

Gus shrugged and carried Brockhurst's dangling body across the room.

"Right here, Mr. Stone. Thank you. Mr. Magician? Stand here, after you have set up wards. I will be at these controls. You need to protect me and the others with wards, surround us closely on all sides, yes?"

"Okay."

"Miss Assassin, Mr. Troll? Over here..." He bounded off.

As he did so, I was aware that Aahz had appeared at my side. "Kid? We can't

do this! Something about this whole set-up stinks.”

I replied out of the corner of my mouth. “I don’t see that we have much choice, Aahz. There’s so much magik bouncing around here, we have to something. Besides... I trust him. I think he’s telling the truth.”

Aahz frowned. “Actually, so do I. Think he’s telling the truth, I mean. I’m not sure our furry friend there could lie if you held a loaded Iolo laserbow to his head and ordered him to. What I meant was...”

“Mr. Pervect! Over here, please!”

I shot a helpless glance at Aahz. *What else can we do?* and he rolled his eyes and stalked off, disappearing around behind the central pillars. The team was now positioned around the room, Chumley hunched in small alcove, Tanda clung halfway up the side of one of the pillars, Gus along with Aahz had gone out of sight around the pillars. Brockhurst clung to the station at which he had been positioned. Slowly circling the room, I started putting wards around each person, bending the fields back again and again so they were triple-strength. Keeping each in place was tricky; if anything, all the extra power made it harder to keep everything under control. It was like trying to keep your bar drink in your glass after suddenly being dumped in the ocean. I ended up back in the center of the room, next to Snafyu as he had indicated. I covered the two of us and croaked: “Whatever you are going to do, Snafyu, do it fast!”

“Yes, Mr. Magician.” He studied the controls before him and began barking orders in a surprisingly authoritative voice, pushing and pulling at things as he did so. “Mr. Brockhurst! Push third button from the top! Square red one!” Brockhurst looked at me and I managed a nod. Like Gus before him, Brockhurst shrugged and touched the button. He frowned for a moment as if feeling something odd coursing up his finger, then pushed down. Snafyu continued.

“Miss Assassin, push small green, first row! Now the blue one, next to it! Yes...! Mr. Rock, Mr. Troll, both of you, pull large violet lever on far left edge of panel!” There was a ragged zapping sound, and a stream of unhealthy-looking lights gushed out of one of the walls, splashing against Tanda’s ward, which smoked and sizzled, but held. Then a different section of the wall bulged and lashed out, a crackling stone fist, pounding down on either Gus or Aahz. It felt as if the blow had hit me, but again the ward held. Countless snake-things rose up from the cracks in the floor and battered their fangs against the sides of the wards, while multiple bolts of lightning commenced blasting down from the darkness above, hitting every ward and then arcing between them. I crashed to my hands and knees, my fingers trying with no small success to dig into the floorstones. The commands and fruitless counter-attacks went on for what seemed like an eternity, hopping from one team member and back again. It was mind-boggling that Snafyu could remember all this. Finally...

“Almost there... Mr. Pervect! Large triangular button with the yellow sign...near the bottom... Yes! Now! Everyone! On three! Push big black button in

the very middle of your panel! One labeled ‘Do Not Push’! One... two... threee!”

zap

And nothing more. It was all oddly anticlimactic, but Snafyu sagged with relief.

“Yes! Power should now drain off in...”

There was a horrific shift which slapped Tanda against the side of her pillar and knocked all the rest of the group off of their feet. (I was ahead of the game for once.) The Device’s wail cranked up yet another notch on the ‘urgency’ scale. Every light in the room came on, and started flashing insanely. Dozens of screens blew out, leaving black mouths that belched smoke and were ringed with glass fangs.

“And *that* sounds even worse.” I shouldn’t have been able to hear the dangling Tanda’s ironic comment, but somehow I picked it up quite clearly.

Snafyu looked around in wild despair.

“Don’t understand! Should have worked... should...”

“*ssssSSSNNAAFYYYYYUUU!*” The disembodied voice rumbled through the room, starting low but slowly and relentlessly building like a vast avalanche. We all froze. Finally Snafyu spoke from his sprawl on the floor:

“M... Master?”

“***WHAT HAAAVE YOU BEEEN DOINNNG SNAFYUUU?***” The voice blasted its way across my brain, rattling my back teeth. I somehow lifted my head and looked at the platform. Something was forming there... a shimmering white shape....

“**That**” yelled Aahz, quite unnecessarily in my opinion, “is Penbrius.”

Chapter 31a

*“Take a memo; I want to know how many people
I had to step on to get to the top.”*

B. Gates

“I KNEW IT!” Aahz came weaving out from behind the pillars; my wards had finally collapsed. “I knew that zarking mechanic couldn’t really be dead! That last ‘power transfer’, the one that Snafyu thought killed him... did something else! Probably exactly what Penbrius wanted it to! He also probably lied to Snafyu about this ‘shut-down’ procedure as well!” The others came straggling to join us.

“But what...” I broke off and looked upward from my spot on the floor. We all did. I suddenly had the distinct and quite horrible feeling that a vast hand was reaching down from somewhere, getting ready to squash all of us... it had already blocked out the sun...

A moment of absolute clarity arrived. Lowering my eyes, I looked at the platform on which Penbrius had evidently stood so many times, getting his doses of power. He had been a mechanic; he had needed this ‘suit’ of his to draw the power in...

While our efforts had failed to turn off the Device, we *had* evidently reactivated the platform; the runes were glowing brightly, and a piercingly bright aura glowed around both the platform and the vast, slowly forming, shape at its center... what if a *real* magician got on the platform...

“SSSSNNAAFFFYUUUU!”

I didn’t stop to think anymore, but sprang to my feet and jumped for the

platform. Aahz's cry seemed to come from very far away.

“SKEEVE! NO!”

I felt his grasping nails rip uselessly through the fabric of the back of my already-tattered tunic.

I landed on the platform.

And the connection was made.

Power, unimaginable power roared into me, power beyond comprehension, power that made the sea that I had been swimming in seem like a single drop in comparison. And something more. More than raw power; raw knowledge. I have often thought since that day that perhaps, ultimately, they are the same thing. While everything that next happened still seems vivid and sharp in my mind, I know in reality my memories are only the tiniest fraction of what I actually saw, actually touched. My brain just couldn't hold all of it; it started leaking out almost as soon as it was poured in.

Because the instant my feet landed on that platform, suddenly I was raised up, swelled to gigantic size and I could see everywhere. See inside and underneath and beyond and through... **everything**. I could follow the forcelines of magikal power, their masses stringing and tangling off into the endless distance, connecting, *being*, dimension after dimension after dimension. I could see and touch and smell the rain-soaked forests of Gezirah, and Chirosovo's charred remains, and the Bazaar and Klah and Rio Paulo and Trollia and Perv and Gus's stony home dimension and further, even stranger, places on and on seemingly forever, places where the air is sweet green poison, places where the stars sing at night and the sun howls all day long, places where down is up and out is in and every triangle has four sides, all of these simultaneously overlapped and reflected and spread out at my feet like a map, the countless inhabitants all swarming back and forth like masses of ants. In many of these dimensions, storms raged, lightning and thunder booming, the rain coming down in torrents.

And 'beside' me, also standing on that infinite mountaintop, was another figure, somewhat tall and skeleton-thin and bipedal now but still mostly vague and shimmering.

Penbrius.

And 'above' us, something more. An incredible new realm that glittered and flashed and arched across the infinite colorless sky, a place, an endless ideal built of force lines and more than force lines, a thing of glory and wonder that made the Resort on Toros Daglari look like Fishtown after a fire, a typhoon and three good-sized riots. The endless beauty of it pierced and burned.

And because in that instant I knew everything, I finally understood what the figure beside me had been trying to do, trying monomaniacally for all of these centuries, building his power up and up, unbeknownst even to his non-magician servants, storing it in the very framework of the Device until the critical point had finally been reached, a short time ago. I understood why he hadn't bothered to act

when the Deveels used his ‘Temple’ as the basis for their ski lodge. For a moment, even with all the power now at my command, I had to struggle to wrap my mind around the concept revealed in my mind. In all of my adventures with Aahz, even dealing with Isstvan, we had never really faced anyone who... who was so relentlessly *evil*. Someone whom you couldn’t finagle, or sweet-talk, or con, or trick with a dose of drugged wine. Someone who was going to do what they wanted, get what they wanted, not caring... about **anything** else. Ignoring everything until it got in his way, then crushing it ruthlessly...

I looked at the enraged shape wavering beside me, and yelled, screamed without words:

“Having all this power! Being able to do things most ‘real’ magicians never even dreamed of! Being able to bring the dead back to life, seeing all of this... even all of this wasn’t enough for you, was it? You wanted to separate from your body, rise to here, and then ride the biggest blast of magik ever beyond this point, up... up there! Into *that!*” I pointed “above” us. “That’s all you’ve ever cared about!”

The thing that had been Penbrius the master mechanic glared at me without eyes, unspeaking. I plowed on.

“The Device wasn’t a device anymore, after you saw that! You rigged it to explode! Snafyu and all your other servants were supposed to have died in the blast, while that thing down there ran wildly out of control, creating a bomb... a Bomb, a rocket...” (in the white-hot split second in which all of this occurred, I knew exactly what a rocket was; Aahz has tried to explain it to me since, and lost me totally after two sentences.) “...for blasting you away from the world, and leaving a pile of smoking wreckage behind. Wreckage that would stretch across a dozen dimensions... But it didn’t work. Snafyu lived, and, not knowing his was defying your wishes, somehow managing to keep the Bomb from going off. You trained him and the others too well!”

YES

The thing flashed and sparkled as it finally spoke, spoke as I had, without words or mouth. No longer an avalanche, his voice now grated like sandpaper rubbed across raw skin. Aahz had said that Penbrius wasn’t insane like Isstvan. Even before the thing had spoken, I had known that he had been right; Penbrius was insane in a far worse way. The icy, focused, madness oozed out between every blocky word, moving like the magic that flowed around the endless bricks of his personal realm.

TRAPPED between the two worlds, my body STRIPPED away, but still here... waiting... WATCHING.... Cut off from BOTH above and below.... UNTIL NOW.... Whatever you and that little fool Snafyu have done... has FREED me back into the lower world.... I **WILL reach the oTHER rEALM now, but first, you will all **PAY** for your interference...**

The shape began to flicker... stretch... reach out both of its ragged edges/hands

towards the crowds below us. I realized that was what it had been doing all along, blotting out the sun... With a tremendous effort and focusing of will, I searched among the vast throngs of ants that scurried madly around my feet, and found my friends, huddling in a tiny stone chamber whose paper-thin walls and ceiling were collapsing around them. Somehow closer to the ground than the bodiless thing floating right beside me, I reached down ahead of it, pricked a hole in the flimsy net that pinned the tiny figures down, and gave them a gentle nudge with my fingertip, shoving them all an eighth of an inch into a new dimension. Even as I did that, the groping corner of Penbrius smashed into the space that they had just occupied, and the miniature chamber finished collapsing. I felt something break loose beneath my ‘feet’; the magik that Snafyu had somehow contained for so long was finally free...

Possession of absolute knowledge certainly improves your reaction time. I snapped erect, turned and grabbed Penbrius, wrapping his long twisting form in a grim bear-hug. It was like trying to hold onto a vast shredded blanket flapping in a high wind, a strangling living blanket that didn’t want to be held. Countless edges slashed at me, slicing viciously through both my remaining clothes and my remaining bits of skin. My arms ripped down through layer after layer of rotten nothingness, my grip failing. I looked over my shoulder, as screaming strands of Penbrius found my throat and limbs and wrapped themselves, tighter... tighter...

All in all, the woman on Rio Paulo had been a lot more pleasant.

I jumped off the platform.

Something tore free at my feet, spurting scalding ichor and dissolving my boots.

“NNNNOOOOOoooo...”

Beneath us, around us, the Bomb went off. But now it had a place to go, no longer backed up behind the vast bulk of Penbrius, not pushing him upward into whatever waited above while backwashing out along the tunnels below, scouring dimension after dimension... An enormous column of raw magikal power roared ‘sky’ward unchecked, and quickly spread out into a vast thin cloud, behaving much as one of Gus’s disgusting bottles of cola does when shaken vigorously. The place up in the sky, whatever and wherever it actually was, soaked it all up without a flicker. A drop of water thrown into a deep, endless sea...

I pulled on Penbrius, tumbling off the remains of the platform, instantly shrinking back down into the remnants of the control room. Even as I fell, I found the only key I knew, slammed it into the only doorway, and Hopped, feeling the heat of the magik wash over me, as the Device/Bomb continued to crumble around us, millions of pieces of stone and smashed magikal machinery being sucked up into that endless ‘sky’. Already the knowledge that had been crammed into my mind was melting away, leaving me...

My shoulder hit a gritty surface, followed rapidly by the rest of my body. I let

out a ‘wuff’ and wrapped my arms tighter around the thing that lay crumpled between them. Only it was already disintegrating as well, blowing apart, melting down between my fingers, sliding away from my neck, my arms and legs. With a great effort, I swallowed some air and uncramped my digits. Released the last remnants. They fluttered mournfully away in the warm breeze, a thin scream of rage still cutting the air. For a moment, there was a shape there, tall, with piercing black eyes, and long dangling things which may have clumps of hair, or maybe garments... But only for a moment. Unlike me, Penbrius had no body to return to and thus was gone, in both sight and sound. I wondered vaguely if he was finally headed towards the place he had been trying to get to all along. I thought again of the corrosive clawing beauty of the place up in the sky, and was able, almost, to feel a momentary stab of pity. Then I thought...

Warm breeze? I rolled slowly onto my back, and groggily sat up, fully expecting to find myself sitting on the shore of that stupid island again. Maybe Karrik and Yilla could use a new deckhand....

I’m not sure if I was happy or disappointed to discover that I was sitting in the middle of a disused gravelly path. Weeds sprouted around me in abundance. At the edge of the path, grass grew tall and rampant. And beyond the grass....

Stood the inn that Aahz and I had lived in after defeating Isstvan. It looked about the same as we had left it; evidently no new squat... er... **residents** had come along since our departure to Possiltum. I sat, my shredded pants and legs spread out before me on the ground and stared at the structure for what seemed like a long time. I had absolutely no idea what to do now. Then...

BAMF!

I didn’t even turn to look.

“I’m sorry, Aahz. I broke my promise.”

After a moment, a cold hand came to rest on my shoulder. I could have been mistaken, but it appeared to be trembling.

“That’s... okay. Skeeve. I’ll let it go. Just this once.” Screwing up my nerve, I finally looked around. The entire gang stood there, all looking somewhat battered, but alive. Aahz continued, looked down at me expressionlessly.

“After you jumped on the platform, we were suddenly back on Toros Daglari. Outside that... ‘Temple’. We watched it just cave in on itself, and collapse, like it was being sucked down into the ground. There was nothing left but a hole.”

Chumley spoke up.

“Aahz couldn’t see it, but something... several somethings... ripped free from the local force lines when the Temple imploded. They were sucked down the hole as well. After a moment, there was a quite large blast of magik back out of that hole. Not nearly as bad as it might have been, I imagine. Quite impressive, nonetheless. And then nothing. The clouds started clearing away almost immediately.” I nodded, and scanned the group.

Along with the rest of them was an equally banged-up Snafyu, who was staring

around quizzically, but particularly up at the sky.

“What’s the matter, Snafyu?” I croaked. “Is something still wrong?”

He looked at me and blinked.

“No, Mr. Magician. The Device is gone. Destroyed. I can feel its absence inside of me. But...”

“Yes?” Tanda asked, standing nearby and casually holding her badly torn and singed costume in place with one golden-green hand. With the other arm, she propped up a noodle-limp Brockhurst.

“I... I have never been outside the Device before. Never seen the sky before. Knew it was blue... but never.... Is this what fresh air smells like?” He looked like he was about to cry.

“Well, old chap, you know not all of the dimensions have blue skies.” Chumley copied Aahz’s gesture with the Penbrian standing next to him. Snafyu looked up at him.

“No, Mr. Troll. I did not know that. Perhaps I will now learn...”

Aahz helped me to my feet. He smiled.

“Let’s start by showing him Deva’s sky, shall we? I want to get home and go talk to Ginghe and his friends *real* bad.”

“Can we possibly take a bath first? And maybe—” I shot another guilty glance at Tanda, then looked down at my own (essentially) bare feet. “Change our clothes?”

“I keep telling you, kid, you’ll never get anywhere in this world if you keep letting yourself be distracted by all of these irrelevancies.”

“Aahz?”

“Yeah, Tanda?”

“Shut up. And Skeeve?”

“Um... yes?”

“Do you mind telling us exactly what just happened?”

“Well... it’s a long story... and I’ve already forgotten a lot of it.”

“You can tell us on the way to Ginghe’s office.” Aahz flipped some dials and punched the button the D Hopper.

Chapter 32a

“Saving the world is the easy part. The aftermath is where things get tricky.”

King Arthur

AAHZ AND I WERE BACK in the conference room, sitting across the table from Ginghe and the others. I had finally won out, and we'd stopped at our place to get presentable before returning to the negotiating table. It appeared that our opposite numbers hadn't moved in the entire time we'd been away.

“And so,” Ginghe said. “It would appear the problem has been successfully resolved.” He began fastidiously stacking the various piles of paper scattered before him. “The Devan Executive Branch thanks you for your efforts. If we'll be needing your services again, we will of course be in touch.”

“Aren't you forgetting something?” Aahz's voice was silky smooth, but there was just the tiniest edge lurking in it somewhere that made me want to take cover under the table.

“Oh... yes. The Department has ordered all criminal charges against you and your associates to be summarily dropped.”

“Swell. What I was referring to, in fact, was the matter of our fee.”

“Your fee. Well, gentlemen, as I... or rather, as the Executive Branch sees it, you were... assigned... specifically... to locate and quell certain centers of unauthorized labor-union activity. Yet, in your report just now you indicated, quite persuasively, that there was in fact **no** attempt at unauthorized labor organization. Since this was the case, our original agreement can be considered, and shall be

considered, null and void. This is our final word on the subject.” He saw Aahz’s expression and raised a finger. “May I continue? Stories of your... prowess... are of course well known throughout this dimension. I have no doubt the two of you could inflict serious harm on both myself and my colleagues. However, if you so much as lay a finger on any one of us, you will be banned from the Bazaar for life.”

“It would be worth it.” Aahz rose. An expression of concern crept across Ginghe’s face. Ollipo and Yuleen shifted nervously in their seats.

There was a noise behind the three of them, a sort of silent authoritative cough. Everyone around the table, even Aahz, paused and looked in that direction. The elderly Deveel looked back at us stonily, then crooked a long finger at the stripling sitting next to him. The youth leaned over, and listened nervously for a long moment. He then rose, whispered in Ginghe’s ear, and scurried back to his position at the elder’s side.

Ginghe straightened his garments with exaggerated care, and scribbled something on a piece of paper, which he carefully pushed across the table towards us, clearly wishing he was pushing it through a set of stout iron bars. And attached to the end of a very long pole.

“While the Department...” An almost subliminal glance over his shoulder “...stands by its original statement, it does acknowledge your recent efforts on its behalf... and what may have happened if your efforts were unsuccessful. The Department offers you the indicated figure, not as payment for any defunct agreement which may or may not have once existed, but as recognition for those services which you have recently performed.”

Aahz and I both looked at the sheet of paper which lay before us. Aahz looked back up, sneering.

“This is...”

“More than we would make in a year of normal operation.” I cut in. He turned his gaze onto me. I sighed at his expression and continued quietly. “I know, I know, I’m ruining our negotiating position. But I’ve had a very long week, Aahz, and I’m very tired. Let’s just take the money and go home. Just this once. Please. We saved more than seven dimensions from, at best, ending up like Deva once did.” I shot a glance at the other end of the table. “That’s almost reward enough in itself. And even you must know they never intended to give us all of that money. If Penbrius hadn’t been at the bottom of this whole mess, they would have found some other way to weasel out of it.”

Aahz continued to stare at me for a long moment, then rolled his eyes and gave off a tired sigh of his own. “At least you said ‘almost’. There’s hope for you yet, kid.” He faced the silent, tense, Deveels again and spoke more loudly. “We have a deal. But we’ll take the money now. In gold.”

Ginghe glanced again over his shoulder, and the elder Deveel nodded, once, almost imperceptibly. Then the President, (or whatever his title actually was)

looked across the table at me, directly at me. For some odd reason, I suddenly expected him to wink, or smile. He did neither, but stared, his gaze like two force beams slicing across the room. Presumably he saw whatever it was he was looking for, since he broke contact, rose and silently left the room, the young flunky trailing along in his wake.

* * *

We returned to our palatial headquarters through the crowded streets of the Bazaar, carrying a *very* large bag of gold. When I wasn't worrying about being mugged, my thoughts kept drifting back to that last look the President had shot at me. I'd seen someone look at me like that before, recently... where...

I shook it off and looked at Aahz. While he would probably spend a few months, or more likely years, being deeply depressed at not getting the original sum under discussion, he began casting more and more speculative glances down at the burden he carried in a tight grasp. As we entered our front door, the gang, including Brockhurst and Snafyu, were all assembled in the front lobby, obviously waiting expectantly for us.

Aahz hoisted the bag in the air, and grinned ear to ear. Possibly even further.

"Let's all go over to Gus's place. Drinks... are on the Deveels!"

Everyone started cheering and clustered around us, shaking hands, and talking all at once, already reliving the exploits of the past few days. Tanda even gave me quick kiss on the cheek, a reward for which I would gladly have traded three similar bags of gold. I saw Snafyu standing diffidently off to one side and I stepped over to talk to him, grinning.

"Another new experience, Snafyu. Are you up to it?"

Tanda had found him some better-fitting clothes to wear somewhere, and he appeared to have straightened up a bit from his usual slouch. He regarded me gravely, then nodded. "Yes, Mr. Mag... Mr. Skeeve. I think I am."

I grinned again, and gave him a little push on the back of his new tunic to join the others. I started to follow him.

And stumbled to a stop.

Snafyu's expression... or one a lot like it... As everyone else started trooping out the door, I managed to grab ahold of Aahz's collar and pull him back.

"Tell everyone I'll be there in a minute. There's something I have to do first." I grinned and gave a thumbs up, but unlike the others, it was half-hearted. If Aahz had been carrying even a slightly smaller bag of gold, no doubt he would have noticed, but as it was....

"Huh? Okay, kid. But if you don't hurry, there won't be any strawberry milkshakes left." He grinned himself, turned and went after the others, still gleefully hugging the bag to his chest.

I immediately went to Aahz's room and started looking for....

The D-Hopper. For one insane moment I had considered attempting to do this under my own power, but I came to my senses and went looking for the tubular device. I found it stashed inside a cupboard along with some other objects I decided that were best not studied too closely. If Aahz had known what I was doing....

But he didn't.

It took a moment, but I found the setting for Gezirah, and punched the button.

Chapter 33a

“Wheels within Wheels within Wheels...”

Simple Simon

I WAS STANDING in the main Gezirahan town once again. Tapping into a nearby force line, I could still feel the lingering effects of Penbrius’ interference, but it was already much less noticeable than before. There appeared to be more natives on the streets than before, and they all seemed somewhat happier. Soon all would be as it was.... Or everything would be different. Penbrius had been bleeding magik off of this dimension for over five hundred years, after all. I guess it all depended on your frame of reference.

I again slapped on a Gezirahan disguise, presumably a female one, since Aahz had never gotten around to telling me the difference. I oriented myself and walked quickly across town. The lumber hiring hall was exactly as I had last seen it. I walked in. The information Deveel hadn’t changed either. He still sat at the black desk, reading from apparently the same book. He looked up as I approached.

“Ah. ‘The Kid’. I’m afraid that your friends never did come by, or I missed them if they did.”

“You knew.”

“Knew?”

“About Penbrius. About everything. You knew exactly what was happening.”

He gave me an expressionless look. I seemed to be getting a lot of those this day, which I supposed was the point.

“Why didn’t you **tell** someone? Chirosovo won’t be habitable for centuries!

You could have prevented that!” I slammed a fist on the desk. A couple of nearby Gezirahans looked up disinterestedly than ignored us. I imagine it was a common reaction to this particular Deveel.

The Deveel actually put the book down on the desk before answering me. He meticulously folded his hands before him.

“Assuming, for the sake of argument, that I had known something about someone named ‘Penbrius’, what good would it have done for me to tell anyone? Why should they, whoever ‘they’ might be, have listened to a dried up old relic like myself?”

“You had to *try*!”

“So you say.” A pause. “A further supposition. Suppose I, in my menial position, realized that something was wrong, and decided to tell someone. Who would I tell? The Deveel Executive Branch? A group of money-grubbing merchants who wouldn’t notice a entire city of victorious post-game Jahks marching through the room, as long as the profits keep rolling in? The Devan Labor Council? Their only areas of expertise are the stifling of genuine labor unions and the production of those cretinous posters.” He nodded his head towards the nearest paper-festooned wall.

“Well... you could have...” I looked at him squarely. “You could have come and told **me**. I’m the official Magician In Residence of the Bazaar on Deva! It’s my *job* to deal with these problems!”

“Ah.” He said again, this time raising a long gnarled finger in accompaniment. “An interesting idea, and one that is not entirely without merit.” He refolded his hands. “One last supposition for you to consider, ‘Kid.’ Suppose an individual knew that something... unpleasant... was about to happen and also knew offhand of only one person who *might* be in a position to stop it. Or, on the other hand, be in a position to make things infinitely worse if he wasn’t up to the challenge. What does the first individual do?”

“Wasn’t up to the challenge...?”

“In the course of a long lifetime, one sees many times how... lethally... easy it is for someone to acquire an undeserved reputation. For good or for evil. And, as you are no doubt aware, the current Magician In Residence on Deva has... acquired himself quite a reputation. Word of his mighty deeds have even reached humble colonial backwaters such as this.”

My head somehow remained unturned.

“So. This first hypothetical person would...”

“Would... how should I put this... point the potential Klahd of the hour in the generally proper direction and send him on his way. If he succeeds, so much the better. If he fails to uncover the truth and work towards fixing the problem, then he was never up to the task to begin with. And something else will have to be tried.”

“None of this changes the fact that Chirosovo has been obliterated.”

“True. And if there is such a person, that is something that he will have to live

with. For the rest of his life.” It was only there for a split second, but I saw something I’d never seen a Deveel’s face before—pain. Unselfish pain. Or perhaps the most selfish pain of all.

I stood silently for a moment, then quietly asked:

“So you consider making a vague hint about ‘something being wrong’ a good example of ‘pointing me in the right direction’?”

The Deveel matched my silence, and even extended it a bit. Finally:

“Yes, if it is part of a larger... tapestry. I said my previous supposition was the last, but there is always one more. Always. Something else one learns. Suppose that our, as you put it, first hypothetical friend noticed something was wrong because... he was familiar with the signs. It was something that he had lived through once before.”

I looked at him askance.

“Something that... in the end... turned an entire dimension into a... desolate, barren wasteland?”

“Something of that nature, yes.”

“You... you were there? When Deva... but that was... centuries ago! Longer than even a Deveel’s lifespan! There’s no way...”

“Deveels can live a long time. A very long time. And with a little magikal assistance...” He shrugged, a gesture in its way as complex as Bertie’s had been. “In any event, a person sees that the great tragedy is coming again. And knows that, like before, no one will listen to a doomsayer, no one will help. Directly. Until it is too late. Unless, of course, they are confronted with a threat in which they will believe. He also sees that the natives are worried, and meeting with each other in secret. So, taking advantage of certain recent events, he starts...” a vague waving gesture “...rumors... that an illegal labor union is organizing. And so... someone who might be able to solve the problem is brought into the picture. And thus the problem is solved.” He rose to his cloven feet, surprising me; despite the suspicions that had brought me back to this room, at some subconscious level I had assumed he was permanently attached to the desk. “This problem, at least. There will be others, of course. There always are.” He left the desk, and me, and started walking silently towards the door leading out onto the street.

Walking silently. I studied him, his gait, for a moment. Add a little padding, give him a fake beard... and...

Yes. Now, except for that gaze, you could swim right past him in the stream, so to speak. But before...

I cleared my throat and he stopped, looking back at me.

“Your ‘menial’ position? Sir?”

His reply was prompt.

“Tell me, what do you know of bureaucracies?”

I hesitated, then replied cautiously: “Someone once told me that they exist to drive people mad.”

“Ah. The man was a realist. The higher one rises in a bureaucracy, my young friend, the less true power one has. Particularly one constructed and manned by Deveels. The more one is bound up by a million tiny threads of incompetence, jealousy and corruption, holding him firmly in place, the more one has to go under the table, and behind the backs of his underlings, just to get true information, to get the **important** things done.” He paused. “Perhaps this is true of all of those who rise to positions of power. I gather this Penbrius individual did similar things. And you, too, perhaps? I notice your excitable green friend is not here. Be seeing you, Kid.” Without waiting for a reply, he stepped through the door, and was gone.

I looked back at the desk. A somewhat younger Deveel had appeared seemingly from nowhere and was sliding into place behind it. He picked up the book and started reading. I studied him for a moment, then spoke:

“What are orenberries made of?”

“Take a number.” He didn’t even look up from the book.

I nodded, and pulled the D-Hopper out of my pocket. I flipped the dials into the familiar ‘Deva’ setting and punched the button. The Bazaar swirled up around me, and settled into stability. I dropped my disguise, and set off to join Aahz and the others, and to try and get a strawberry milkshake, if any were left.

* * *

But as I approached the door of the Yellow Crescent Inn, the portal suddenly burst open, and a familiar face appeared. It was Aahz, and he looked... there isn’t a word for what Aahz looked like. If you added up the words ‘anticipatory’, ‘furious’, ‘hopeful’ and threw in a smidgen of ‘greedy’, you’d be in the ball-park.

“Kid! *There* you are. I was beginning to wonder if you hadn’t made a break for it.” He smiled. It was his unpleasant smile. Well, all of Aahz’s smiles are unpleasant, but this one ranked well up towards the top of the ‘yeek!’ scale.

“Uh... why would I want to do that?” I asked, preparing to do just what he’d suggested if it should prove necessary. I suddenly realized I was still carrying the D-Hopper in my pocket... Maybe I could...

“Well...” Aahz tapped his fingers together in an ominous fashion. “We were just starting to pass out the milkshakes, when two people showed up, looking for you. One was someone dressed like Popeye the Sailor Deveel who says **you** owe **him** a favor, and the other was that Daglarite you were so chummy with, saying something about paying you your fee per your and his *contract*.” With the last word, Aahz’s smile grew even broader.

“Ah.” It was truly a word for all occasions.

“Yes.” Before I could run for it or even reach into my pocket, Aahz was beside me, draping a friendly arm over my shoulders. Well... maybe not friendly, exactly, but at least no bones were broken... “They also said something about wanting to hire you again, and help them get rid of somebody... a bunch of yahoos they

called... um... what was the word they used?”

“The Traders?” I hazarded.

“*That’s* right!” The grasp grew a little tighter. “Is there... oh... anything you feel like telling me, *partner*?”

I placed my arm around Aahz’s shoulder, mimicking his gesture. I grinned.

“Nah. It would just upset you, Aahz. But from what I already know about these ‘Traders’, it just *might* be an assignment worthy of the Great Skeeve. Let’s go get a round of milkshakes and talk to them, shall we?”

THE END

***Author's Postscript:** When I first plotted out this story, I actually did consider going on to write a sequel. As I write this, I don't think it's going to happen. I figure I've been pushing my legal and ethical luck by writing and posting this fanfic, and one of the main reasons I got involved in the original round-robin was that the official Myth series appeared to be quite dead, thus lessening the financial impact of any fanfic on Mr. Asprin. Since it was recently posted/claimed on alt.fan.asprin that the series may yet revive in some form*, this justification has been taken from me. This being the case, 'Myth Communication' will probably be the only piece of fanfic (RLA-based or otherwise) that I will ever write. I hope that you all have enjoyed reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. If I ever **do** write anything more, it will have to be stories about (yeek!) characters of my own invention. Hope to see you there. And even if our paths never cross again, don't forget to carry on with your own life's MythAdventures.*

Geoduck

May 25, 2000 A.D.

** March 2005: RLA's MythAdventures indeed have resumed, and are found in the following books:*

- *Myth-ion Improbable* (called "Volume 3.5" by RLA)
- *Something M.Y.T.H. Inc.*
- *Myth-told Tales*, with Jody Lynn Nye. (Short story collection.)
- *Myth Alliances*, with Jody Lynn Nye.
- *Myth-Taken Identity*, with Jody Lynn Nye, published by Meisha Merlin Publishing. Trade paperback format, with illustrations by Phil Foglio

Upcoming books:

- *Class Dis-Mythed* (September 2005)

