

Bumberboom

by Avram Davidson

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Along the narrow road, marked a few times with cairns of whitewashed stones, a young man came by with a careful look and a deliberate gait and a something in his budget which went drip-a-drip red. The land showed gardens and fenced fields and flowering fruit trees. The bleating of sheep sounded faintly. The young man's somewhat large mouth became somewhat smaller as he reflected how well such a land might yield... and as he wondered who might hold the yield of it.

Around the road's bend he came upon a small house of wood with an old man peering from the door with weepy eyes that gave a sudden start on seeing who it was whose feet-sounds on the road had brought him from his fusty bed. And his scrunnel legs shook.

"Fortune for you, senior," the young man said, showing his empty palms. "I do but seek a chance and place to build a fire to broil the pair of leverets which fortune has sent my way for breakfast."

The old man shook his head and stubble beard. "Leverets, my young, should not be seared on a naked fire. Leverets should be stewed gently in a proper pot with carrots, onions, and a leek and a leaf of laurel, to say the least."

With a sigh and a smile and a shrug, the young man said, "You speak as much to the wit as would my own father, who (I will conceal nothing) is High Man to the Hereditor of Land Qanaras, a land not totally without Fortune's favor, though not the puissant realm it was before the Great Gene Shift. Woe!-- and my own name, it is Mallian, son Hazelip."

The old man nodded and bobbed his throat. "This place, to which I make you free, though poor in all but such mere things as pot and fire and garden herbs-- this place, I say, is mine. Ronan, it is called, and I am by salutary custom called only 'Ronan's.' To be sure, I have another name, but in view of my age and ill health you will excuse my not pronouncing it, lest some ill-disposed person overhear and use the knowledge to work a malevolence upon me... Yonder is the well at which you may fill the pot. So. So. And who can be ignorant-- ahem-hum-hem-- of the past and present fame of Land Qanaras, that diligent and canny country in which doubtless flourishes a mastery of medicine of geography, medicine of art and craft, and medicine of magic as well as other forms of healing; who? Enough, enough. Water, my young. The leverets are already dead and need not be drowned."

The stew of young hares was sweet and savory, and Ronan's put his crusts to soak in the juice, remarking that they would do him well for his noonmeal. "Ah ahah!" he said, with a pleasurable eructation. "How much better are hares in the pot with carrots than in the garden with them! And what brings you here, my young," he sought for a fragment of flesh caught by a rotting tush, "to the small enclave which is this Section, not properly termable a Land, and under the beneficent protection of Themselves, the Kings of the Dwerfs; what? eh? um ahum..." He rolled his rufous and watery eyes swiftly to his guest, then ostentatiously away.

Mallian gave a start, and his hand twitched towards his sling and pouch, none of which totally escaped rheumy old Ronan's, for all his silly miming. "I should have known!" Mallian growled, bringing his thick brown brows together in a scowl. "Those cairns of whited stones... It is a Bandy sign, isn't it?"

Now how the old senior rolled his watery eyes up and down and shook his head! "We make no use of that pejorative expression, my young! *We* do not call Them 'Bandies,' *No!* We call Them, the Kings of

the Dwerfs, so." He winked, pouching up one cheek, squeezing out a tear. "And we are grateful for Their benevolences, yes we are." He drew down the corners of his cavernous and hound-lip mouth in a mocking expression. "Let the Dwerfs humorously call us 'Stickpins'! But-- 'Bandy'? Hem! Hem! No sir, that word is not to be used." And he rambled on and on about the Dwerfymen and his loyalty, meanwhile drawing his face into all sorts of mimes and mows which mocked of his words, when there came in from the distance a confused noise, at which he fell silent and harkened, his mouth drooping open and nasty.

It was not until they were outside in the clear day that they could hear the noise resolve into a shouting or a howling and a continuous rumbling and rattling. Old Ronan's began to shake and mumble, keeping very close to his visitor, as though having observed again that this one had large hands and shoulders and was young and seemingly strong. "Fortune forbend that there should be foreign troops in the Section," he quavered. "An outrage not to be born, do I not pay my tax and levy, for all that I'm a Stickpin? Go up a bit, my young, on that hill where I point, and see what is the cause and source of all this unseemly riot-- not exposing yourself unduly, but taking pains to spy out everything."

So up Mallian went, spiraling along the hill through the fragrant acacias and the stinking reptilian sumacs, and so to the top, where, through the coppice peering, he could see all these good fenced flat lands and the deep wide grasslands.

But more immediately below and along the road he saw a most unprecedented sight, stood open-mouthed and tugged the coarse bottoms of his bifurcated beard, grunting in astonishment. He turned and, through cupped hands, called once, "*Come up-- !*" and turned again to watch further, paying no wit to the querulous pipings and pantings of the ancient.

Up from around the concealing curve of another hill and along what Mallian conceived must be the famed Broad Road which led to and through the whole length of the Erst Marshes came a procession in some ways reminiscent of pilgrim throngs or decimated tribes fleeing famine or pestilence or plunder-- men and women and children clad in rags when clad at all, some few afoot, some fewer riding, but most of them attached in one way or other to the thing ridden: a thing, immense, of great length, tubular, rather like the most gigantic blow-gun the most inflamed imagination might conceive of, trundling and rumbling along on enormous and metal-shod wheels, the spokes and rims as thick as a man-- some of them in harness to which they bent so low that they were horizontal, squatting as though for greater traction-- some bowing as though at huge oars, pushing against beams thrust through the spokes-- some straining their arms against the rims of the wheels or against the body or butt of the monstrous engine-- others pushing with their backs--

This tremendous contrivance rocked and rumbled and shook and rolled on, and all the while its attendance roared and shouted and howled, and the wind shifted and flung the stink of them into Mallian's face. "In Fortune's name, what is it?" he demanded of old Ronan's, extending an arm to pull him up. The senior looked and shrieked and moaned and pressed his cheeks with his palms.

"*What is it?*" cried Mallian, shaking him.

Ronan's threw out his arms. "Juggernaut!" he screamed. "Juggernaut! Bumberboom!"

All that frightened old Ronan's had to do-- indeed, was able to do-- was skitter back to his little house and release the pigeon whose arrival in the proper belled cage of its home dove-cote would not only inform the local confederate Dwerf King that something was wrong in his realm but would inform him a fairly close approximation of *where*. Yet the old man refused utterly to perform this small task by himself, would not unhand Mallian at all, and pulled along with him until they were back at the senior's place and the bird released.

"Remain, remain with me, my young," he pleaded, loose tears coursing down his twitching face. "At least until the Sectional Constabulary shall have arrived and set things aright."

But the last thing which Mallian wanted was an interview with a Bandy border-guardsmen. He arose and shook his head.

"Stay, stay, do. I have smoked pullets and both black beer and white, strained comb-honey, dried fruits," he began to enumerate the attraction of abiding, but was interrupted in a way he had not fancied to be.

A smile full of teeth parted Mallian's light brown beard. "Good, good. Not bad for one of your priorly

announced poverty; well may one envy the rich of this Section. Now-- as a reward for my accompanying you back here, to say nothing of the work of topping that mountainous hill to obtain intelligence for you-- let you replenish, and quickly! my budget here with as many such smokelings as will fit. Then you may fill the chinks and interstices with the aforesaid dried fruits. No, no, another word not. I am too modest to appreciate the compliments you would pay me by a continued solicitation of my presence. One jug of black beer I may be persuaded to take; the honey I must forego until another occasion. So.

"Fortune favor you, senior Ronan's. One further deed we may do each other. You will not need to inform your Dwerfymen of my presence or passage; I, in turn, will not need to inform them-- unless I am stopped by them, of course-- hem!-- of your treasonous grimaces and repetitions of the fell name of *Bandy*. Sun shine upon you, and forfend the shadow of the Juggernaut Bumberboom!"

Thus, laughing loudly, he left the ancient as he had first found him, weeping and alarmed, and went on his way. Indeed, he had fully retraced his way to the top of the hill before he realized that he had not asked *the* question. He scowled and fingered his long moustaches, deliberating a return, but finally decided against it. "Such an old queery man would know no medicine of any worth," he assured himself. "Let alone wit of this most vital matter. But I will keep in mind his words about the vaporous device which pumps and drains the Erst Marshes, for-- if, indeed, it is not a mere vapor of the senior himself (and how he cozened me out of half a hare; shame!)-- for such medicine may well imply the presence of more. Hem, hem, we will see."

The road was riddled and griddled with great ruts from the gigantic gunwheels. Amidst clots of filth lay a man who had unjudiciously interposed his neck between wheel and road, and a child who mewed and yipped at Mallian but made no attempt to walk. Man and child, quick and dead, looked as like as the spit of their mouths-- blond hair so pale as to be almost as white as that of the People of the Moon-- equally pale, but pale, pale blue of small, small eyes-- a sort of squinting, blankness of expression-- and slack, silly mouths. Idiot father and idiot son, was Mallian's impression. And he wondered how they had come to be with the gun crew. And he went on.

Warm was the day and the beer soon went down swift. Mallian was about to hoist the jug for the last time when he heard a too-well-remembered thudding on the road and looked, quickly, from one to another side for cover. But the land was flat for many arms' lengths on either side of the road. "Curse!" he muttered and reached with a sigh for sling and stones, when he bethought that he might hide-- did he trot fast-- behind a certain maple tree.

Mallian trotted, saw the ditch behind the tree, tumbled into it cod over cop, and had just time to right himself and peer out as the *thudthud-thudthud* of hooves came by, and he saw the mounts.

There were two of them, fat and hairy barrel-bodied Bandy ponies-- a description which would as well have fit the two squat Dwerfymen riders whose short legs fit the curves of their mounts' sides as though steamed and bent thereto. Large heads, broad backs, beards which would reach to their protruding navels if not whipped away by wind, faces neither grim nor alarmed but intent and determined, the Bandies came at the gallop. The scabbards of their slashers were on their backs, within quick reach of their hands. They looked to neither side nor did they speak; in a moment more they were gone.

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But the crossroads, when he came to them, swarmed with people. "They have taken everything, everything eatable in my house!" a woman wailed, gesturing to the empty shelves revealed by the open doors.

But another cried, "*Take>*?" I did not wait for them to *take*-- I *gave* them all there was to eat in mine!"

"Wisely done, wisely done!" a man agreed, wiping from his red face a sweat which came from agitation rather than heat. "Food can always be purchased, food is even now growing and grazing-- food, in short, can be replaced. But how can one replace that destroyed by the destruction sure to be caused if the Crew of Bumberboom were to fire even one shot from their enormous cannon? Surely it would shatter bodies and houses alike!"

And a fourth person, by his look and manner probably someone of some stature in the community, said in a sober tone of voice as he patted the middle front of his well-filled tunic, "All this is very true, but since the community and property of the Section as a whole is threatened, it is not a problem to be entirely dealt with by individuals. Fortunately, as we have seen, our protectors have been alerted. Two of their constables have already passed by and, by now, are doubtless making arrangements with the cannon's Crew. It is equally fortunate," he pointed out, looking around and gathering in the approval of the crowd, "that the demands of the Crew of Bumberboom are so modest... that it is only food they seek and not women or power or dominion. Eh ahem? For who could resist in the face of that tremendous and destructive engine!"

Someone else muttered that it might be better for the Crew if their needs were not limited to food alone but included water, soap, and a change of clothing. There were scattered laughs at this. The magnate, however, pursed his lips and drew his face into lines of disapproval. "That is as it may be," he said, severely. "The educated person knows that customs differ among different people, and it is not for us to risk offending the Crew of Bumberboom by making gauche comments on such matters. For my part, so long as they withdraw satisfied from the Section, I care not if they ever or never bathe again, eh ahem?"

Clearly he spoke for the majority and the majority slowly began to disperse to go about their other business, confident that the Dwerf agents would deal with the matter which had so excited and upset them. Mallian approached the magnate and saluted him, the latter returning the gesture with an air of mildly surprised condescension. "Whence and whither, strange my young?" he enquired. "And for why?"

Mal sighed. "Ah, senior, your question not only sums up the matter, it places a finger upon the sore center of it. The whence is easily answered: Land Qanaras, a Land afflicted and perplexed. As to whither, I do not yet know, and can say only that I am wandering in search of a medicine which will supply an answer. Which last, I perceive you have already realized, comprises the why. But before I speak of that I would enquire of you concerning a current matter. Sympathize with my ignorance and inform me as to what is Bumberboom, or Juggernaut, as I have heard it also denominated, and who its Crew may be."

The magnate's face had shown a conflict between flattery at Mal's compliments and unease at the prospect of being involved in his problems. But the gathering round of a few gaping loungers eager for free diversion decided his mind. "Important matters," he said, importantly, holding up his chin so that his jowls withdrew, "are not to be discussed where every lack-work may gawp and crane at an inoffensive visitor. Come along with me, my young, and I will not scruple to take time away from my many important affairs and inform you."

And, as they walked slowly through the crossroads hamlet, he related to him that Bumberboom was an engine or contrivance of both great size and potency, founded upon the principles of a medicine known only to its Crew. It had the capacity of casting great shots over great distances accompanied (so it was said) by hideous and deadly fires and deadly and hideous noises. Whence it had been derived, when and by whom made, only the Crew itself could say, and they-- perhaps naturally enough-- would not. "Suffice it that they have the secret of this medicine and that they use it to go whither they will, depending for sustenance upon the inevitable desire of those among whom they wander that they immediately wander elsewhere without giving an exhibition of their powers, which would prove painful in the extreme. Thus, my young, is your question answered.

"As for your problems, hem hem, I greatly regret that my civic and commercial duties do not permit me to indulge in hearing them. I must content myself reluctantly with saying that no Land under the beneficent protection of the Kings of the Dwerfs can be either afflicted or perplexed, and on this note I, alas, must take my leave. Fortune favor you!"

He waddled off briskly towards a showy dwelling-place from which came kitchen smells indicative that at least one household had left the supply of food to the Crew of Bumberboom for the governing powers to deal with.

"Sun shine upon you," Mal said, somewhat glumly, for he had learned very little from the man which he had not already been able to deduce by himself. But as he reflected on the possible uses of Bumberboom

it occurred to him that therein it was conceivable lay an answer to his quest and question, though not in any way which he had previously considered.

The hamlet fell away behind him, and as he continued along the famed Broad Road he saw upon its dusty surface the hoofprints of the Dwerfish ponies, and the grooves made by the great wheels of Bumberboom. Slowly he began to smile, and then he quickened his steps and strode briskly along.

The situation at the border was perhaps brittle rather than tense; so occupied with their affairs were those gathered there that they did not observe Mallian approaching. He heard a hoarse babble of voices from farther away and saw the huge muzzle of Bumberboom lifted up from behind a rise of ground. The whitewashed stone cairns marking the dominion of the Dwerfs stood on each side of the road, and beyond them on each side of the road was another symbol consisting of two long wooden beams painted red. Their ends were planted in the ground and they inclined towards each other until for a short space they crisscrossed. The sight of the two Dwerfs brought him to pause a moment and to consider concealment... but they were on foot, and their mounts were tethered off at a distance, and moreover their territory clearly came to an end here, although he was not familiar with what new territory might be symbolized by the red beams.

Neither had he before ever seen men like those who stood conversing with the Bandyes. They wore not the breeches, shirt and tunic so common elsewhere, but closefitting upper garments extending as a sort of hood or cap closely over the scalp and to which a sort of curious simulated ears were attached. And tights of cloth they wore about their loins. These garments had not the rough look of wool nor (it suddenly seemed) the dull look of linen, but they had a mightily attractive smoothness and sheen and glow, and they rippled when even a muscle was moved.

"Oh, we are so infinitely obliged to the Kings of the Dwerfs," one was saying, in a tone which seemed to indicate very little sense of true obligation. Rays of sunlight slanted through the bowering branches of the trees and picked out the emblematics embroidered upon the red tunics of the Dwerfymen. "We are so obliged to them-- through their constables of course--" he bowed and put more expression into the salute than was in his face, "for having sent us this number of greatly desirable guests. And such guests as they are, too!"

And a second said, with a dull and lowering look, "Our appreciation will be conveyed from our masters to yours, very shortly, have no fears."

One of the Dwerfs said with a shrug, "They would away, as we have told you, and who can hold what will away? Furthermore, who can argue with Bumberboom?"

The other Dwerf, hearing or perhaps subtly feeling the approach of some one behind, glanced back and saw Mal coming. He took his comrade's arm and turned him around. "Hold, Raflin. Do you remember that report?"

Raflin puckered his caterpillar brows and nodded. "I do. And I do believe, Gorlin, that this is one with whom we would speak. Halt, fellow, in the names of the Kings!"

But Mal, skipping nimbly, said, "It is a false report, to begin with, and a case of erroneous identification to continue with. Furthermore, the names of your Kings are as nothing to me for I was never their subject, and lastly--"

"Hold! Hold!"

"-- lastly," Mal said, lining up beside the stranger-men, "I am not at the present moment any longer in your Section or your Land at all, and accordingly I defy you, Bandy rogues that you are!" And he spraddled his legs in contempt at them.

The Dwerfs grunted their rage and simultaneously began to reach for their slashers and to move forward upon their crook legs, but the guards from the other side of the border took several paces toward them and regarded them with extreme disfavor. They stopped.

"So be it, then," said Raflin, after a moment. "We will not invoke the doctrine of close pursuit. But be assured, Stickpin," he flung the term at unflinching Mallian, "and be assured, you other Stickpins, that we will complain upon you for harboring a malignant, an enemy, a ruffian, fugitive, and recusant, a rapiner and an otherwise offender against our Kings, their Crowns and Staves; and we will demand and, I do not doubt, will obtain his return."

Mallian bracked his tongue and again spraddled his legs.

Said one of the other guards, "Demand, then. It may be you will secure his return-- and with him, too, the return of Bumberboom and all its Crew."

The Dwerfs made no reply to this but turned and proceeded to their ponies. One of them, however, whirled around and flung out his hand and forefinger at Mal. "As for you, fellow!" he declared roundly, "Were you at all instructed in any wise of medicine of history, you would understand-- you would know-- that the bodily form of the Dwerfs is the original bodily form of all mankind. We have only pity for you who descended out of those misshapen sufferers from the Great Gene Shift." He swung himself about once more and neither of them spoke again. The two stout ponies went trot-a-trot down the road, dust motes rising to dance in the sunbeams.

Mallian turned his head to see the stranger-men regarding him without expression. He thrust his hand into his bosom and withdrew the letter of statements in its pouch. He handed it out... to the air, as it were, for none reached to take it. After a moment and in some perplexity he asked, "Does none desire to examine the well-phrased let-pass with which my natal territory-- or, to be more precise, its governance-- has supplied me?"

With slight yawn one of them said, and he shook his head, "None of whom I know... Such ceremonies are reserved for those arrived on official purposes, and not for mere proletaries or profugitives."

Stung by such belittling indifference, Mallian exclaimed to the effect that he was indeed on just such purposes arrived. The strangers smiled at him a trifle scornfully. "These pretensions are at the moment and under the circumstances amusing," they said, "but they will not do, barbado; a-no-no, they will not do at all. Those arrived on official purposes unto this Land of Elver State, of which we of the corps of guards are both the internal and the external defense, arrive with proper pomp. They, for one thing, are dressed in garments of serrycloth, as indeed are we, ahem hum. For another, they ride upon smooth-haired horses adorned with many trappings of broideries and burnishments, and so do all their party-- which, by definition, is numerous. And for another and the last, though this by no means the least, they come provided with a multitude of rich donatives of which distribution is made to the members of the corps of guards."

Mallian cast down his eyes and gnawed upon his lips. "Nonetheless," he declared, "I have been issued with this letter of statements directing all to let me pass, and the fact of your having made no gesture to prevent my passage at all would not altogether seem to justify my failing to present it. And inasmuch as you desire not to trouble to read it, it would be a pretty courtesy on my part to read it to you. I have oftentimes been commended for my reading voice, and I doubt not but that you gallants of Elver Guards will desire to do the same, and furthermore, the problem set down herein, which is the high purpose of my journeyings, may so move you as to search among your minds to see if peradventure you know of a medicine which may shed both light and hope thereon."

And he read them the let-pass, or letter of statements, as he had done to the pseudomorphs, and to the People of the Moon.

"Ah, well," said one with a snuffle of his nose, "Interesting and absorbing as the beardy one's problem is, and while I doubt not that the medicines of our Masters contains an answer to it-- it is no more than the speck of a fly compared to the problem lying over the rise there. Anent which, let us move and consider, for an action of some sort will assuredly be required of our hands."

They proceeded upward and then paused, considering, Mal with them. There had evidently been a house of some sort there below, but it had been unstrategically situated in terms of the attempts of the Crew of Bumberboom to pass with their weapon along the road above it. It had gone off the road, and the marks of its going were eaten into the berm, and before it had either been brought to rest or come to rest of its own accord, it had thoroughly crushed the house-- the fragments of which were being now unskillfully transformed into cook-fires. The harnesses hung empty, the guideropes lay ignored upon the ground. The Crew was both at rest and at meat. And, it became at once apparent, at other occupations as well.

"Scandalous!" exclaimed Mallian. "Shocking!"

One of the Elver Guards shrugged. "As well be scandalized or shocked at cats and dogs," he said.

Mal protested. "But dogs and cats are not human-- "

The upper lip of the Elver Guard went up further. "Are *those*?" he demanded.

Not overmuch regarding this remark, Mal allowed his mind to run still more over a notion which, in seedling form, had occurred to him before. Cautiously, tentatively, he began to broach the matter. "I have been in some measure too overwhelmed by your kindness in offering me refuge," he explained, "from those hangmen Dwerfs to express my gratification fully. But-- "

"No need, no need," the Elver murmured, scratching his armhole-- then, as though only then becoming aware of what he was doing, he stepped back from the berm with a curse and a scowl. "A tetany upon those wittol swine! They must have fleas as large as mice-- if indeed no worse. I am for going away and constructing a steam-lodge and boiling self and habit."

"Do, Naccanath," murmured another Elver. "And when asked how you proceeded to rid the State of this lumbering menace, be prepared to answer, 'I bathed me.' But for praise or commendation, do not be prepared."

The guard Naccanath hesitated, muttered, scratched.

Mallian moved his mouth against the sudden fretful silence. "But now that I am able to take two consecutive breaths free from fear of Bandyemen pursuit and am made aware not only of my safety and refuge but of the wisdom of those whose-- "

A fight broke out among the Crew below, but was soon settled.

An Elver said, in a faintly dissatisfied tone, "Ah... he did but club him. I had thought he might well eat him; it would surprise me not a wit."

And another said, a peevish note in his voice, bruising a blossom under his nose to counteract the noisome taint now rising from below, "Why need they eat each other when all the world rushes to supply them with far less gamy food? In fact," his face became a sight brighter, "may this not be a possible solution?-- videlicet, simply to supply them with a steady ration of victual, thus depriving them of incentive to leave their present location. Denizened right here, they remain under supervision and do no further damage and post no further threat."

Musing a moment, the others then shook their heads. Another said, "They would breed, Durraneth, at a rate which would soon enough make their maintenance a cost not to be considered. Further, experience has shown that nomads do not easily take to denization."

They sighed and sucked their lips and their unhappy breaths caused their smooth garments to ripple and shimmer in a marvelous manner, for which Mallian, nevertheless, had but small eyes.

"-- whose tolerance has undoubtedly saved my life," he continued resolutely-- and a shade more loudly. The Elver Guards now turned to consider him and his words. "What is the point of your narration, profugitive?" demanded the one called Durraneth, in his voice a coolness only to be expected in one whose own proposal had just now been considered and dismissed. Barely had he finished asking his question when a head appeared above the berm, its countenance vacant and filthy, and looked at them openmouthed as they stepped backwards with fastidious precaution. "Cappin?" it enquired. "Cappin Mog?" A bellow from below diverted it so that it turned, released its hold, slid down and away and did not return.

"The point of my narration, gallant guards Elver, is just this: that I would ask of you a consideration for which I offer to perform a service, thus and thus, inform me kindly where I may inquire of your Masters a medicine to solve the problems of my own Land Qanaras, and in return I will rid you and all the Land of Elver State forever of Bumberboom and its Crew."

The green shade flashed blue as a jay noisily chased another through the trees. Narrowly the guards regarded him. Then Naccanath said, "Seemingly such an agreement would be of benefit to all and of detriment to none. Still, I am moved to inquire-- not from suspicion, fie upon such a thought, hem hem, but out of mere curiosity and interest-- how do you propose to do this?"

Mallian's fingers stroked the left and then the right tip of his short beard, through which a slight smile peeped deprecatingly. "To reveal this before an agreement has been reached would perhaps be out of keeping with the traditions of negotiating. I point this out, not from suspicion, fie upon the thought, hem hem, but simply because I have been very traditionally reared and do not desire to cast reflection upon

my upbringing by departing therefrom even in trifles."

After another silence, Durraneeth said, with something like a frown, "Would it be untraditional for you to indicate by which route you intend for yourself and them to depart, and your destination as well?"

Mallian said it would not. Logic, he pointed out, would indicate a departure by the shortest route (other than the one back into the near-lying Section of the Dwarf Kings' dominions) out of Elver State, and to show his perfect good will and trusts in the matter he would entreat the advice of the company as to a good route to achieve this purpose-- accompanied, perhaps, by a map-- and, as for his destination, well:

"I am a hill man by origin, and lonely therefore. Nevertheless there is nought of the hermit in my background or makeup; I admire also the proximity of fair lowlands and goodly towns to which one may conveniently descend to purchase merchandise with the modest yield of the hills. And therefore-- "

Durraneeth cleared his throat and cast a slant glance at his fellows. "And therefore-- inform me if I understand you arightly, Mallian son Hazelip-- and therefore you desire information about a place lying outside of Elver State and situated upon a hill overlooking fair lowlands and goodly towns, or perhaps at least one goodly town. Is it so?"

Mal frankly admitted that the conjecture was correct. "At least one goodly town," he murmured, "although two or even three would be better."

The guard-lodge had a stark neatness about it which Mallian, familiar with the companionable disorder of Qanaras and the opulent show of the Dwerfs, found a bit chilling. There were, to be sure, many contrivances visible which seemed both curious and interesting, as well as an entire shelf bearing nought but books, which much impressed him. "Where are much books is much medicine," he quoted, reverently.

The Elver Guards gave but a nod or two at this and began to spread a table with maps and to converse in low tones among themselves, paying to Mal's thoughtfully-pointed-out observation that it was now high noon and mealtime, inattention to which the very best of wills could only call coarse. He therefore did not feel a compunction at devoting himself forthwith to the smoked pullets and dried fruits with which his budget had thoughtfully been filled by old Ronan's. And when the guard Naccanath said, over his shoulder, "Attend hither, profugitive," he replied that he in no wise feared that Elver folk would work him a malignancy via use and medicine of his own and proper name, and therefore he would cheerfully respond to it, which was Mallian, son Hazelip High Man to the Hereditor of Land Qanaras. "But at the moment I eat," he pointed out. He raised his brows and bit and chewed.

The Crewmen's supply had all been eaten to a faretheewell, and they sat or lay about snoring or scratching or simply staring about them as Mal approached. He had come quite near before it occurred to them to stare at him. He was already among them before any of them had made up their minds that he perhaps ought not to be. But it was not until he had begun to make a circuit of the ponderous engine that anything like concern began really to make itself evident. The sight of Bumberboom at close up proved interesting enough even to banish the train of thought caused by the sight of the Crew close up. The same near-idiot face repeated over and over again in varying stages of grime, the same snaggle and snarl of pale hair and small, vacant, pale blue eyes-- what did it mean?

It scarcely could mean that the same moron Crew which was now attached to Bumberboom had created it in the first place. They could never have fashioned those immense and massy wheels of stout wood reinforced with iron and rimmed with broad iron ties. Never could they have founded that gigantic tube whereon, in the casting, figures of beasts and monsters had been fixed, never have devised that ornate breech in the shape of a bearded face with lips puckered as though whistling, nor the even more ornate and in fact rather frightening face which terminated the great tube's other end, mouth distended into an enormous shout-- mouth silent now, but threatening of anything but silence...

Anything but silence now among the Crew, whose disturbance bore more resemblance to a poultry-yard than an anthill, running and squawking-- thrice in succession people fell full-tilt against Mallian, but it was certain from their great alarm that it had not been their aim to do so.

And as they trotted about they set up a cry and howl which presently resolved itself in Mallian's ears into the same words, meaningless as yet, which he had heard before from one of them... now, however,

not as a question, but as an appeal for aid. "Cappin Mog! Cappin Mog! *Cappin Mog!*"

And Mal meanwhile continued his perambulation and examination. The carriage was fitted with large boxes, but these were locked. He was about to make a closer inspection when someone bellowed close by, and at the same moment, something struck him between the shoulder blades. He took a quick step sideways before spinning around, and the sight of his face acted as instant deterrent to the one who had evidently flung the clod and was now doing a sort of angry dance with another clod in his hand. His arms were inordinately long and thickly thewed; chest and trunk were barrel-thick; neck there was none visible, and the broadnosed face was alive with fury.

"Gid 'way!" it shouted, though perhaps with a shade more caution than in its previous bellow. "Gid 'way! Gid oud! Don' touch-a! Killya! Cutcha-troat!"

And the others of the Crew, male and female, taking courage from this couthless champion, began to draw in behind him, shaking their fists.

"Cutcha-troat, tellya! Gid oud! Don't touch-a! Bumberboom! Bumberboom!"

The rabble highly approving these sentiments, at once began to shout the word most familiar to them: "Bumberboom! Bumberboom! *Bumberboom! Bumberboom!*"

Mallian stood where he was and let them howl, and by and by they began to tire of it. He had by now become a familiar object to them and, as he neither moved nor spoke nor did anything of further interest, they grew bored with him, and-- one by one-- he could see some emotion too faint to be wonder, perplexity of a low order, perhaps, begin to overtake them. They did not really know any more why they were there or why they were so loudly engaged. And so, first one by one, and then, as regarded those who were left, all of a sudden, they ceased their commotion and wandered off.

Not so the one who had thrown both turf and threats at Mal. Highly intelligent he was not, but neither was he an utter idiot. He knew that Mal had no business near the great weapon, and he was determined to get him away from it. Regardless of the defection of his Crew he now came a step nearer, hitched up his dissolving breeches, and menaced with his hands.

"Toll ya, gid oud!" he bellowed. "Trow ya down and kill-ya, ya don' gid oud!"

Mal asked, "Who are you?"

A look of astonishment came upon the man's face. He had evidently never been asked the question before, and it was not any doubt as to his identity but a shock that his identity was not universally known which made him go slack.

After a moment he said, "Who my? My Cappin Mog! Is who." And for emphasis shouted, "Mog! Mog! Cappin Mog! Cappin of Bumberboom and alla Crew! Is who-- "

Mallian allowed his own face to register an extreme mixture of enlightenment, astonishment, impressment, and self-deprecation. "Oh, *you* are Captain Mog!"

The captain gave an emphatic nod and grunt, patted his stomach, clearly quite pleased with the effect. "My Cappin Mog," he affirmed. "Is who."

"Pardon, senior... pardon, Captain..." He bowed and showed his palms. "I did not know, you see..." The man nodded and came close to smirking and in fact emitted a pleased sound which came close enough to being a giggle to be identified as such, grotesque as the sound seemed coming from him. He gazed from side to side and wiped his loose mouth with the back of his bristly paw. And at that, Mallian gave a bound and a jump and sailed forward and upward and kicked him in the side of the head and felled him like a tree.

* * *

Some of the Crew observed what happened and their hoots of astonishment brought others back from casual wandering about the vicinity. They formed a rough circle about the two, though it was without either intention of doing so or awareness of the utility thereof. Several of them growled and even shouted at Mallian and bared their dirty teeth and spat. One or two even went so far as to look about for a weapon-- but what immediately came to view was an overlooked loaf of bread, and in a moment they were too concerned with an idiot quarrel about it to pursue the audacious gesture.

Mog lay a while on his side, his eyes opened, he frowned, he rolled over on his elbows and gazed at Mallian and at the Crewmen. He smacked his lips tentatively. "Cutcha-troat," he said, but without real passion. Then he raised his rump and so in stages got to his feet. "Gid oud," he repeated. "Killya..." He looked around for some means of accomplishing this, saw nothing save his slackmouthed followers and the great gun. Toward this he flung up his arms. "*Bumberboom!*" he cried, warningly. "*Bumberboom!* Goddam sunamabitchen big noise! *Drop-down-dead!*"

His small pale eyes observed approvingly that Mal, apparently convinced by this fearsome threat, had begun to walk away, and he drew back a trifle to let him pass. Whereat Mal repeated his spring and his sally and knocked him down again. This time he remained down a much longer time, and when he next arose, it was not to address himself to Mal at all. He put his hands at his hips and threw back his head and shouted. The words meant nothing of themselves to Mal, but the effect was immediate. The Crewmen left their places in the circle and bent to their positions in the harness and elsewhere. Mog took a deep breath. He cried, "Forehead... *harsh!*" They bent, dug in their feet, groaned.

"*Bumberboom!*" they cried.

"*Bumberboom!*" The limber lifted.

"*Bumberboom!*" The trail lifted.

"*Bum... ber... boom!*" The ponderous equipage trembled, shifted. The great wheels shivered, dropped dirt and turf. Turned. Turned slowly. But turned.

Bumberboom began to move forward.

"You may stop her here, Captain Mog," Mal said presently. The man looked at him. "Stop? *Here?*" Mog's face moved, uncertainly. Mal gestured, pointed. Then he gave a slight teeter or two, as though readying himself to jump. Mog crouched, cried out, covered his head with his arms. He shouted, walking backwards. And the cannon's wheels ceased to turn and the crew promptly slipped its harness and lay down in the road like dogs.

Elver Guard Naccanath asked, coming forward with his compeers, "You do not propose to leave them there, I trust?"

"Not for any longer than is required for us to settle our indentures. You have an information to give me-- or, rather, two; likewise, a map."

Naccanath's thin lips parted in his thin, smooth-shaven face. He unrolled something in his hands. "Attend, then pro-- hem-- Mallian son Hazelip High Man to the Hereditor of Land Qanaras. Here is a carto or map which is limned upon strong linen, and we have marked with red a few several places which bear upon this present business. Thus: this border station. This road. Follow my finger, now... This road forks *here* and *here* and *here*. The right of this last one leads to our capital community, wherein our Masters of a surety can medicate your question-- but thither you go not now, for instead you are to follow via the left fork of this first furcation, and this leads, as is clearly delineated, to the Great Rift and all the Land Nor.

"And concerning this same, observe how we have reddled for you a choice of hills, few of which overlook less than a league of fine fat flatland nor fewer than two prosperous trading towns."

Mallian's pursed lips thrust out in concentration between his beard and his moustachioes, he nodded, traced the lines with his brown and furry fingers, so different from the thin pale digit of his present informer, who, asked what sundry of produce and people Land Nor afforded, replied that it was a good yielder of hogs and hides and horses, as well as grain and small timber, but that its people were of a sullen and willful disposition. "Though I do not doubt," he concluded, "that they will be willing enough to trade with you."

"Nor do I," Mallian said, well enough pleased. He reached his hand for the map, but it was not forthcoming. "Come, come, Elver senior," he said, reproachfully; "surely you do not think that even my own keen mind can have committed the carto to memory? Why, unless you relinquish it, neither I nor my newly-gained companions can be sure of finding our way out of Elver State as expeditiously as all of us might wish."

Naccanath rolled the map up and thrust it into a tube of worked leather. "You may be well sure of it," he said, "for guard Durraneeth and I will accompany you as far as the Rift. We would think it but ill

hospitality," he said, "to do other."

Mallian cleared his throat and avoided eyes. "I am like to be overwhelmed by such high courtesy. But so be it... Captain Mog! *On!*"

He took his seat, with some sullenness, upon the cases fixed by the gun-carriage, and, the procession underway, diverted himself by picking the locks. He found in one nothing but some handful of a mouldy-powdery substance, and in the other nothing but an ill-made book. With a shrug of his shoulders, he began to turn the dusty pages and to read. Presently he cast a glance, swiftly and suspiciously, at the Elver pair. But they, absorbed in moody thought, spared him no look but rode silently along on their lean horses. He grunted and turned a leaf.

* * *

The pothecary in the first town wherein they paused threw up his hands as Mallian entered. "I have no victualty at all to supply you with," he cried, in a trembling and petulant voice. "By reason of lacking either a wife or servant-woman, I eat in the cookshops. Moreover, such treacles and comfits as my shelves afford are of a highly bitter and aperient sort, though a measured quantity may never harm you if you are of a costive disposition.... But what can these terms mean to him," he added, in a lower tone, as though to himself; "is it not known to me, if to none other, that all these cannoneers are as dull of wits as dogs, by virtue of having neither bred nor gendered outside their number for generations? Still, they have the medicine of the deadly noise, and it behooves me to speak dulcetly," he sighed. "What would you, senior?"

"Sixteen and one-half measures of crushed charcoal," said Mallian, "to begin with... large measures, the largest you have."

The pothecary's lower lip drooped. "Hem, hem, this would suffice to rid of wind the stomachs of a small army, though to be sure it is a small army which..." The apple of his throat bobbed in sudden perceptive terror. "Pay no heed to my previous comments, Master!" he pleaded. "I perceive with utter conviction the falsity of my conjectures. Charcoal-- sixteen and one-half measures. Immediately, Master! Immediately!"

He scurried about from keg to ladle to scales, darting looks of bewilderment at Mallian. Presently he inquired, "And what next is your design, lordling? You say fourteen and a half large measures of sulphur? It will be my delight-- nonetheless, may I not point out that sulphur is not in current favor for fumations? Asafeodita is much preferred nowadays as an ingredient to banish the daemons and miasmas, as well-- hem! Observe how I fawn contritely for having made the suggestion! Sulphur it shall be..."

The third substance caused him no little concern; he nibbled his mouth and frowned and snuvvled. "Snowy nitrum, Master? Forgive both the poverty of my mind and shop alike, but-- Hold! I adjure but myself, Master-Lord! Is not 'snowy nitrum' another name for what is also termed the saline stone, or saltpeter? In one moment I shall have looked into my lexicon. Thus, thus. And my conjecture was correct! Sixty-nine large measures of saltpeter, more correctly denominated 'snowy nitrum'... it may well exhaust my supply, but of that, nothing. The drysalters must wait their pickled meats upon a fresh supply, whenever.

"I know not the use nor preparation of this triune of charcoal, sulphur, and saltpeter. Shall I triturate it for you with a mortar and pestle?"

"By no means," Mallian said, hastily. "That is... hem. Reflection seems demanded here." He pulled a bit on his beard and peeped from under his lashes at the pothecary, a small and bony-browed man of no particular age. There were things which this one was accustomed to doing which Mallian had never done himself; furthermore, he had said a thing which Mallian wished to hear be said again and at more length. The more he considered the more he favored the notion. At last cleared his throat and spoke.

"Senior pothecary, is yours a trade which might be swiftly sold for a profit?"

The drugsman looked out the open door in a quick and fearful look. He put his dry lips up to Mallian's sun-browned ear. "There is no business to be sold for a profit in Elver State," he hissed. "The taxers lurk like beasts of prey... Why do you ask? There is no business even to be *held* for a profit. Why, lordling

mine, do you ask? What is stational commerce to you? You pass through, Master, with your giant thundermaker and you are supplied and you pass on and you pass on. Neither profits nor taxes nor stocks nor sales are matters you need review... *Why do you ask?*"

Indeed, the shop did have a decidedly well-taxed look to it and its meager shelves. Mal was fortunate in having obtained the things he wanted. "The Free Company of Cannoneers--" he caught the open mouth, blank look-- "Bumberboom, that is--" "Oh, aye, Master, Bumberboom." "-- The Free Company of Cannoneers is in need of the services of a responsible and learned man, versed in such medicines as history and, for another example, pothecation. And it thus befalls me to wonder--"

The pothecary genuflected and kissed Mallian's hands and knees. He locked his shop and deposited the keys with the local chirurgeon. And that night whilst the Crew lay deep in snoring and the Elver Guards camped disdainfully apart with heads upon saddles, he and the pothecary spoke long and low together beside a guttering fire, and the coldly indifferent stars pulsed overhead.

"No," said the chemist, whose name was Zembac Pix. "No, Master-Lord, I have made no especial study of the matter. All of my life, Bumberboom-- or, as some call it, Juggernaut-- has been a byword. Bad mothers frighten bad children with it. One comes across references to it in chronicles. Whence it first came, neither do I nor anyone else know. Nor who first devised it. I was a younger man when first I saw it; most fled in terror or hastened to bring out food, but I tarried as near as I dared. So it was, or so it seemed, that none but I noticed that these fearsome fellows were little better, if better at all, than idiots. This one Mog was not then their captain. I know not what he was named, 'twas long ago and my mind has been crammed overfull ever since of drug receipts and tax-demands. Well, hem a hum. But he was not quite an idiot; indeed, I think he was a wit wittier than this one. Let us say a moron, then. And off they trundled, I wondering as they went. Twice more before today have I seen them. And heard of them more than twice. It has been counted a cause for thanks that, unlike other wandering armsmen, they never ravished nor rapted away any women. They took no recruits, either.

"The reason for this gensual clannishness, I cannot say. But its results are plain: No fresh genes have come their way since, aye, hem, who knows when? And whatsoever flaws they had amongst them to start with, such have been multiplied and squared and cubed, to use the tongue of the medicine called mathematic. And thus only idiot habit keeps them going and coming and passing to and fro. And only equally idiot habit keeps the rest of the world afearing them and yielding to them. I cannot say how old this olden book you've found may be-- a century at least, I venture. It is not by the gun alone, then, nor by medicine alone, then, that the great noise and destruction comes... No... But by these three substances, mixed and moistened and dried and cracked and sieved. By my cod and cullions, this is no small thing you have discovered!"

Mallian spat into the fire. Then he reached out in the dimness and gently took Zembac Pix, the pothecary, by the throat. "You must remember that pronoun," he said softly. He felt the apple of the throat bob up and down. "*I*. Not you. *I*. Not we. *I*... Fortunately Mallian son Hazelip is of a trusting nature." He released his grasp.

"*Fortunately...*" said Pix, in a tremulous whisper.

"I have great plans. Great needs. I can offer great rewards. You, potionman, may become the councillor of the councillors of kings. Therefore be exceedingly virtuous. And exceedingly cautious."

He gazed into the other's eyes, glinted by a single dull-red spot of fire-glow in each. And watched them move as the other nodded.

* * *

They stood upon the lip of the cliff. There down beyond lay the Rift, wide and uneven and hummocked here and there; and beyond on the other side of the ruins huddled haggardly. Mallian spat stoutly. "It will be no easy crossing," he observed. "Still, I perceive there is a road of sorts, and cross we must. Nevertheless..."

He paused so long that Durraneth and Naccanath stirred somewhat restlessly, and the unease communicated itself to the other Elvers who had ridden out from their near-adjacent city to witness both

arrival and departure.

"What mean you by *nevertheless*?" Naccanath asked-- perhaps still recollecting this flea-bite, he reined his horse up a way apart from Bumberboom and its Crew. The way hither had followed no rigid schedule. The Crew waked to the day when it felt the day full upon it, was by no means immediately prepared for toil, and made up for its swiftness at eating by its almost pythonic requirements for post-digestive rests. Naccanath had urgently hinted for more speed; Mal had-- rather less urgently-- passed it on to Captain Mog, and Captain Mog had cursed and kicked and cudged... and gotten a short burst of increased pace... for a moment or so. At intervals.

"By *nevertheless*," Mallian said, rather slowly, "I mean that there is something which we must do before we begin to cross." He issued a loud order to Mog, who issued a louder one. Mog knew nothing of Mallian's quest, nothing of the problem behind Mallian's question. All he knew to the point was that if Mal asked him to do something and he did not do it, he would be kicked in the head. He had tried a number of ways to avoid this, but the only one which ever worked was to obey orders. Quickly.

Slowly, therefore, erratically, Bumberboom began to move around until its great muzzle was pointing toward the Rift. Another order, and the massive gun was unlimbered. Its trail now rested on the ground. Naccanath cleared his throat, looked at Durraneeth. Durraneeth returned the look.

"What-- and I point out the extreme civility with which the question is asked-- what is it your intention to have done now, son Hazelip?"

Mal stroked the points of his beard. "It is my intention to fire the gun," he said.

The horsemen backed up a pace or two or three as though they had practiced the movement. "Fire-- fire *Bumberboom*?"

"So some call it. Others, I understand, prefer the name of Juggernaut."

One of the Elvers said, "I have not heard that this has been done at all of late." He cleared his throat twice.

"So much the better for doing it now. The crew wants practice, and no one can object to whatever damage may be done the Rift."

Naccanath said, rather sharply, "The Rift! It is not the Rift which concerns us-- we are still on Elver soil, and I consider the possible great damage which may be done thereto... including, and this is no small consideration, to *us*-- It would be much better for you to wait until you are already in the Rift."

"No it would not. I desire to calculate a matter called range... a matter of arcane medicine which it will henceforth be important for me to know... and in particular the trajectory as calculated from an eminence of land, as it might be a cliff or hill."

The Elvers consulted hurriedly together and then requested that Mallian might delay his calculations until they were able to get well away from the site. He frowned, gave a short and slightly impatient nod, and they were off even faster than the two Dwerfyemen had gone, the time Mallian had hidden in the ditch.

"They fear the fatal noise," he said to Zembac Pix, with a twisted grin. "It is as well. The less they see, the better so. Well. Down goes the large-grained powder as the book directs. Hold firm the ladle, Zembac Pix. So. So. Smoothly. So." Mallian took the ram and tried to follow the directions so that the powder was securely back where it should be but not so firmly packed that it would not properly ignite. Then, satisfied, he ordered the shot brought forward. Mog and his mates came up with the great round stone, hoisted it... dropped it. The man responsible howled for his toes and then howled for his ribs as Mog beat upon them. But it was done at last.

Next the fine powder was laid in a train along the groove to the touch-hole. "What next?" asked Mallian. Pix looked into the book. "Next is fire," he said. "Captain Mog! A brand of fire!"

The Crewmen seemed unsure of how they should seem. What memories they might hold of actual gunfire must be at many removes and quite dim, muted not by time alone but by the thick membranes of their sluggish minds. They had been bred to the gun, lived by and for the gun, had nought but the great gun at all. Yet they had never fired it, had forgotten how to make its fuel, forgotten perhaps all save some dim glints of recollections of old mumblings and mutterings which served them for history. They were excited. They were uneasy. Something new had come into their brute lives. One of them, who had

watched the loading, perhaps spoke for all. "Bumberboom... Bumberboom *eat*," he said.

Zembac Pix received the burning stick and said, before handling it to Mal, "Stand carefully as the handbook directs, lest the cannon crush you by its--" But Mallian, impatient, seized the fire and thrust it at the train of powder. It hissed, vanished. Then, with a roar like thunder waging war on thunder, the hideous muzzle-mouth spewed flame and smoke. The gun leaped as though wounded, fell back, subsided. Darkness, thick darkness, evil stench surrounded them. Gradually, it cleared away. They looked at each other. "...recoil," Zembac Pix finished his sentence.

The Crew rose slowly from the ground, idiot faces round with awe and terror and joy. The occasion required words. They found them-- or, at least, it. "Bumberboom! *Bumberboom! Bumberboom! Bumberboom!*" They leaped and lurched and shouted and roared.

"*Bumberboom!*

"*Bumberboom!*

"*Bumberboom!*"

Zembac Pix pointed far out into the Rift. "The shot seems to have scored a trench along that hillock. Ha! Ahem hum-hum!"

"So I see... yes. Suppose that were a row of houses. Ha! Ha-ha!"

"Elver houses!"

"Bandy houses!"

"Ha *ha!*"

Something caught their eye. Something gleamed there in the trench now as clouds drifted away and the sun came through-- a something which seemed to have slightly deflected the path of the stone shot. They discussed what it might be, agreed that whatever it might be could well go on waiting. "Captain Mog! On!"

"Forehead... *harsh!*"

It was a while later that they saw the Elvers descending by another road which allowed them to steer far clear of the great gun and its Crew-- a line of Elver horsemen and behind each guard and riding on the crupper, a man with a spade. "Curious," said Mal. "Very curious, Master-Lord," agreed Zembac Pix. But by the time they themselves had gotten close enough to leave the toiling, chanting Crew and go and see, the sight was more than merely curious.

"Observe, Mallian son Hazelip," said Naccanath, in an odd tone and a gesture. "See what sight the monstrous voice of Bumberboom has uncovered."

It was a sight indeed. The hillock had been shoveled and the ground excavated a good way beneath the surface of the general ground-level. There lay revealed the immense figure of an image with upraised arm and with a crown or coronet upon its head from which radiated a series of great spikes at least twice the length of a man. As far as they could see, it was clad in a flowing garment of some strange sort. It was an unfamiliar shade of blue-green which was almost black.

"What is it?" asked Mallian, voice low with awe.

The Elvers shrugged. "Who can say... it seems to be hollow." Thus Naccanath. Durraneeth had something else to say.

"Do you recall, Prince of Qanaras," he began-- Mallian noted his own promotion in rank but showed nothing on his face-- "Do you recall what said the Dwerfy constable?... as say they all, of course... that before the Great Gene Shift all men were of their dwerfish size?"

Mallian said, "I do recall. What of it?"

Slowly Durraneeth said, "This great image is hollow. There are passages within. But the spaces seem exceedingly small. Do you suppose--"

"Do I suppose that this evidences a possible truth to the absurd Bandy boast? Never! As well declare that the gigantic statue demonstrates that the original form of mankind was that of the race of the giants!"

Durraneeth nodded slowly. Then his eyes moved from gigantic statue to gigantic gun and back once more. "I wish..." he began. "I wish I knew what it had held in its hand..." he said. "Oh, I do not know, of course, that it had held anything in its hand. It has an arm, it must have had a hand.... No consequence; it

was a mere sudden fancy, of no rational importance."

But Mallian had now a question of his own. He pointed down into the pit, past a fallen tree, to where four Elvers stood regarding the newly-found wonder and a fifth stood upon its face. On the brim stood a box of strange sort, from which wires led down to the body of the statue. "What is that?" he asked.

Durraneeth shrugged. "An engine... a toy, really. It simulates a magnetical current. Really, it tells us nothing-- save only that the entire figure seems to be made of metal. All of it! Incredible. No, I suppose you are correct. About the original stature of man. The matter, I must suppose, remains as before..." For yet another moment he stood there, musing. Then he said, "When you are ready, Prince, to pose your question, we will be ready to serve you in seeking its answer. Do not tarry too long among the morose and barbarous folk of Nor. Fare you well, Fare you well."

* * *

The morose and barbarous folk of Nor had for the most part, forewarned by the echoing roar of Bumberboom's sole shot and, further, by the sight of it being toiled across the Trans-Rift Road, fled into the raddled ruins where it was hardly practicable to follow them. They had taken much of their substance with them, but the Crew were experienced foragers; noses keen as dogs', they soon sniffed out food and even sooner devoured it.

Mallian had no desire to go groping about in the ruins after anyone. He consulted the map-- Naccanath still held the leathern tube, but Mal held the map, whether Naccanath knew it or not-- and consulted Zembac Pix as well. "I would that I had reflected to demand, hem a hum, to request horses of the Elvers. Doubtless they could be trained to pull the gun."

The pothecary's eyes narrowed beneath their bony brows, and he smiled a knowing smile. "Horses will come later," he said. "Horses... and many other things..."

Getting Bumberboom up a hill had to come first. After that would come supplies-- not hastily proffered or hastily seized to be hastily gobbled, but efficiently levied, to be efficiently distributed. And efficiently consumed? Not all of them. The key word was *surplus*. Surplus of commodity meant trade, which meant wealth and power. One area of farms, and towns to start with. Power firmly established there meant a fulcrum firmly established there. And with a fulcrum once established, what might not leverage do?

But haste was not to be indulged in. Leaving Zembac Pix in charge of gun and crew, Mal set off to scout out the land, with a particular emphasis on hills. The first one he came to overlooked, to be sure, fine fat fields and no less than four towns, all of them prosperous, but the roads leading up the hill were too narrow by far to admit of Bumberboom's huge carriage being taken up. Widening would be a matter of months. Not to be thought of. The second hill was easy of access but looked down on one small town only, and that none too favorsome in its appearance. He sighed, pressed on. A third hill was well-located but culminated in a peak of rocky scarps such as could afford abiding-place only to birds. A fourth... A fifth...

Perhaps it was the seventh hill which seemed so ideal in every way but one. There was a slope of mountable angle, the top was both flat and wide, with enough trees to provide shade when desired and yet without interfering with the maneuverability of the great gun. From the summit Mal could see widespread and fruitful fields, and the rooftops of several towns. He had passed by two of them and observed with approbation the signs of good care and productivity, and a third appeared to be large enough to justify an assumption of the same. It was as tempting, as inviting from above as it had seemed from below; therefore, he had surmounted it despite a difficulty exemplified in the mud even now drying on his feet and shanks. There was definitely a current; one could not exactly say that a swamp lay at the foot of the hill athwart the only possible approach, but there was no gravel-bottomed shallow ford, though carefully he looked for one. Mud, sticky, catchy mud-- and Bumberboom mired securely was as good as no Bumberboom at all. Mallian sighed and retraced his steps.

There was a man in the water when he came through it again, breeches slung around his shoulder and shirt tucked up shamelessly around his ribs, and he was spearing small fish with a trident. "Fortune favor

you," said Mal.

The man said, "Mm."

"Fortune favor you," repeated Mal, a trifle louder, a trifle annoyed.

"We don't say, 'Fortune favor you' in these parts."

"Oh? What do you say, then?"

"We say, 'Mm.'"

"Oh. Well, then-- Mm."

"Mm." And the man speared another small fish, and another, gutted them and strung them. He had set up a small makeshift smokehouse ashore, and now proceeded to deposit his catch therein before returning to securing more.

"You prefer smoked fish to fresh fish?"

"No, I don't," the man said decidedly. "But they keep and fresh ones don't. Be you purblind? Look-see that dried mud yonder side. And nigh side. I catch fish while there be water. Soon there'll be none till the rains."

Mallian wondered that he had not observed this before. "Senior, I think you," he said sincerely. "Now indulgently inform me what you say in these parts for farewell."

The man peered into the water. "We say, 'Mm,'" he answered.

Mal sighed. "Mm."

"Mm," said the fisherman. He scratched his navel and speared another fish.

"What governance have you in these parts," he enquired of a man leading a pack-horse as he passed through the next town.

"None," said the man. "And wants none. The Land Nor is non-governanced, by definition."

"I see. I thank you. Mm," said Mal.

"Mm," said the packman.

He accompanied the great gun all the way, but sent Zembac Pix ahead and aside to spread the word that other lands and their rulers-- as it might be the Kings of the Dwerfs or the Masters of Elver State-- envying the ungovernanced condition of Land Nor, had determined to send armies, troops, spies, and other means of assault thereto, with the intention of establishing a governance over it and over its people. But that the Free Company of Cannoneers, hearing of the daemonical plan, had come unsolicited to the defense of Land Nor with a weapon more utile than a thousand swords, videlicet, the great cannon BUMBERBOOM. Zembac Pix went forth and fro and by and by caught up with Mal and Mog and Crew where they were encamped on a threshing-floor.

"Spread you the word?"

"Most diligently, Master-Lord."

"And with what countenance and comments did they receive it?"

The pothecary seemed to hesitate. "For the most part," he said, "without change of countenance and with no other comment than the labial consonant, Mm."

Mal pondered. Then he raised his eyes. "You say, 'For the most part'-- "

"A true relation of my statement, Master-Lord. There was an exception, a tiresome and philosophizing man who keeps an hostelry for the distribution of liquor of malt"-- here Zembac Pix wet his lips very slightly and made a small smile-- "and his comment was to the effect that Land Nor is non-governanced by definition and it thus follows that Land Nor cannot be governanced inasmuch as according to the laws of logic, a thing is not what it is not but is what it is, and to speak of the governancing of Land Nor is to speak of the moving of the immovable which is to speak nonsense. And much other words he spoke, but only to recapitulate what he had already spoken."

Mal said nothing, but after a moment he shook his head. Then he rose from the threshing-floor.

"Captain Mog! *On!*"

Captain Mog rose from the threshing-floor. "Forehead-- *harsh!*"

The crew rose from the threshing-floor and fell to in its sundry posts and places. "Bumberboom! *Bum* bumberboom! *Bumberboom!*"

"*Bumberboom!*"

The great wheels trembled.

"*Bumberboom!*"

The great wheels moved.

"*Bumberboom!*"

The great wheels turned.

Along the dusty roads it trundled and rumbled. Not in one day did it reach the base of the hill, nor in two, nor three. But by the time it reached it, most of the marshy stream had vanished away, leaving a foundation of good hard, sun-baked mud. Fallen trees were selected and trimmed to act as brakes and props. And when the now-dwindled stream had dwindled to a mere trickle, they began the ascent. They shouted, they chanted, they grunted rhythmically, they howled. They pushed, they pulled, they levered. Now and then they turned a rope around a stout tree; now and then they rested the gun upon the logs and panted and drew breath, then fell to once again. "*Bumberboom! Bumberboom! Bumberboom!*"

And at last they dragged it up upon the very crown and summit of the hill, wheeled it into the best place of vantage, and unlimbered it. "Now," said Mal, "to compose and distribute a proclamation." Zembac Pix assisted him in the wording of it, which was to the effect that the Free Company of Cannoneers had now commenced the arduous duty of defending Land Nor against alien and hostile forces intent upon establishing a governance over the Land aforesaid. And that in order to compensate the previously denominated Free Company and in order to sustain it subsequently and to guarantee its defensive postures, voluntary contributions according to the schedule subappended would be received. Each town was held responsible for collecting the donatives of its citizens and should any town fail to collect and transport the voluntaries assessed it, this would reveal that it was secretly supporting the tyrannical alien pro-governance plan. Whereat, it would be necessary for the Free Company to bombard the town aforesaid. And herein fail not.

"How shall we sign it?" asked Mal, mightily pleased by the several crisp turns of phrase.

"Might I suggest, Master-lord, a succinct: *Mallian, General-Commandating?*"

"Hem a hum... Very good. But... do you not recollect how the Elver Guard referred to me as 'Prince'? I do not wish to appear high-flown or much-given to elaborate titles. What think you, then, of a simple, *Mallian, Prince; what?*"

Zembac Pix nibbled the end of his quill. "Beautifully suggested, Lordling. Subsequently. When they are ready. One must not seem over-humble to commence with."

A breeze wafted up from the terrain below and it conveyed in it a hint of hogs, hides, horses, and others of the rich usufructs of the land. A faint smile played upon Mallian's features. "I allow myself to be persuaded," he said. "So be it. Go now, have copies made, post them in the public places and proclaim it at the cross-roads. You may accompany the first train of tribute, a hum hum, of donative... if you wish."

Zembac Pix declared it would be his pleasure. He descended. He ascended. Time had elapsed. "Canting and poxy pothecary!" Mal cried, raging. "Where have you been? And why so long? Where are the voluntaries of food and drink and staples, of steeds and of trade-goods and manufactured artclery? From what knacker's yard did you steal that wretched beast which mocks the name of horse? Answer! Reply! And give good account, else I will spread you to the off-wheel of Juggernaut and flog you with the traces!"

Zembac Pix descended delicately from the scrap of rug bound with a rope cinch which served him for a saddle, and was momentarily seized with a spasmodic contraction of the glottis which impeded his speech and may possibly have been responsible as well for the slight instability of his gait. And in his arms he tenderly cuddled a firkin containing some sort of liqueous matter.

"Master-Lord," he began, "with the utmost diligence have I carried out every word of your instructions, whether plainly expressed or merely implied. I purchased writing materials, I made clear copies in the most exquisite calligraphy, and I long retained in my possession a specimen the mere sight of which would instantly persuade you; alas, that on returning hither I was with infinite reluctance constrained to employ it for a usage too gross to be named between us-- hem hem-- though even kings must live by nature.

"Furthermore I posted them in the public places and I proclaimed their message at the cross-roads.

Moreover I entered into all places of resort and refreshment in order the more thoroughly to disseminate the matter. Conceive, then, with what incredulous and tearful regret I must report that, far from hastening to contribute to the meritorious support of the Free Company, they merely hastened to confect pellets of wool and wax to stuff into their ears 'to save them,' as they said, 'from the horrid noise and torturous sound' of Bumberboom... The steed and this firkin of liquor of malt do not represent, Lordling, even one single poor contributor but only my success in a game of skill at which I was constrained to participate, they threatening me with many mischiefs and malignancies should I refuse."

There was a long, long silence. Then Zembac Pix, sighing deeply, drew from the firkin of liquor a quantity in a leather cup and offered it to Mallian. And in truth it did not smell ill. The breeze played upon the hill; the crewmen dozed or picked for lice; the sun was warm. "To think of such ingratitude," Mal said, after a while. Zembac Pix wept afresh to think of it. They were mildly surprised to find themselves holding to the wheels of the cannon and gazing down upon the reprobate lands below.

"I owe it to my father not to disgrace his name and station by a breach of my word, would you not agree?"

"Utterly, Master-Lord."

"I said that contumacy would merit bombardment." He belched slightly upon the vowels of the last word. "And so it must be."

In this they were in perfect accord, but a slight difference of opinion now arose as to whether the town nearest below lay at a distance of two hundred lengths or at one nearer to three hundred lengths-- and also whether the demonstrated distance of Bumberboom's range was as much as three hundred lengths or as little as two hundred lengths. They concluded that it was better to use more force than necessary rather than less than necessary, and they accordingly loaded a charge a third heavier than that used before. Furthermore, on the same principle, they rammed a double shot down the barrel.

"And now for to prime her," said Zembac Pix, giggling slightly.

"Hold," said Mal. "last time we were too close to witness the moment of ejection. I would witness this act and not have my vision clouded with smoke."

The apothecary nodded and chuckled. "Perfectly do I understand and take your meaning. I shall lay a long powder-trail... let me use this length of wood as a gently inclined plane. Excellent, excellent; the powder stays in place and does not slide off! ...and thus and thus and thus... Ahem hem, I seem to have used up the last of the powder."

His face was so woebegone that Mallian was constrained to laugh. "No matter. No matter. We will make more. Is not the recipe contained in the formulary book? Where is the fire-stick? Here. Ha! Hear it sizzle! So-- 'morose and barbarous' you have been termed, folk of Nor, and now here is your requition for-- "

All the thunders of the sky and the lightnings thereof burst upon them in rolling slashes of fire and smoke. The earth shook like a dying man, and they were instantly thrown upon the quaking ground. Things flew screaming over their heads. They lay deafened and stunned for long moments.

Mallian, presently seeing Zembac Pix's mouth moving, said, with a groan, "I cannot hear. I cannot hear."

"I had not spoken. Woe! Mercy! Malignant fates! Where is the Bumberboom?"

And the Crew, now picking themselves up from the dirt, with shrieks and wails, began the same question. "Bumberboom? Bumberboom? Bumberboom?" But a few fragments of twisted metal and a shattered wheel were all that remained of that great cannon and weapon more utile than a thousand swords...

Mallian felt a sob shake his throat. All his plans, all his efforts, wasted and shattered in a single moment! He fought for and found control. "Age and disuse," he said, "must have corroded the barrel. Never mind. We will somehow contrive to cast another."

Zembac Pix agreed, and said through his tears, "And to prepare more powder. Four and one-half measures of sulphur to thirty-one and a third of-- "

"You err. It was of a certainty twenty-five and a fifth of sulphur to six and one eighth of snowy... Or was it eleven and one tenth of... We must consult the formulary." But of that sole book wherein alone the

arcane and secret art of the gunnery was delineated, only one scorched bit of page remained, and on it was inscribed the single word *overload*. There was another silence, the longest yet, disturbed only by the idiotic and inconsolable ululations of the Crew.

In a different voice Mallian said, "It is just as well. Clearly the engine represented a mere theorizing, and, as we have plainly seen, is of no practical value whatsoever. What is perhaps more to the point, I observe that the horse is uninjured, and I propose we mount him immediately and proceed by way of the woods to the northern and nearest border of this land of morose and barbarous folk, for I trust not their humors at all."

"Oh, agreed! Agreed, Master-Lord!" declared Zembac Pix, scrambling up behind him. "Only one question more: What of the erstwhile Crew? Should we try to persuade them to follow?"

Mal wheeled the horse around. "I think not," he said. "Soon enough their bellies will bring them down to where the pantries and the bake-ovens of the Nor-folk are. But we will not tarry to witness this droll confrontation. We will, however, think about it. I am of the firm opinion that they deserve one another."

He kicked his heels into the horse's sides and Zembac Pix smote it on the rump. They rode down the hill.

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