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The horde had enjoyed an unusually good day. As was his custom, Death Bird had deployed his men in two columns. When they converged at sunset, they entrapped a large band of refugees. Camp was pitched earlier than usual to enjoy the spoils: women for rape, horses for food, men for sport—everything a goblin's heart could desire.

For Kadie it had been an exceedingly bad day. The weather was unbearably hot now, bringing dust and insects, but in the last few weeks she had learned to endure those. Her cramps and nausea did not come from weather alone. Even goblins came down with fever, and why should she expect to be tougher than them? Trouble was, sickness was weakness in this army. The ones who couldn't keep up were killed by their friends. Sympathy was about as common hereabouts as killer whales. By afternoon, she was barely managing to stay on Allena's back. Running alongside as always, Blood Beak naturally noticed her distress, but he jeered much less than she expected. Indeed, he seemed almost concerned.

The goblin army camped by totems. The prince himself was a Raven, but his bodyguards came from a wide variety of tribes. The little band would attach itself to a different group each night. Blood Beak was gaining authority. The men had begun to regard him more as their leader than their ward, and would generally do what he said, as long as he did not try to overrule their standing orders. This night he insisted on joining the Beavers, who were setting up alongside an unburned barn. He got his way, probably because it was a good campsite, near a well.

With the magnanimous air of an imperor bestowing a dukedom, he told Kadie she could have the barn. Shelter and privacy were rare treats, and she was grateful. Then he ordered one of the guards to unsaddle the mare for her, and again was obeyed, although not very willingly. Blood Beak could be quite pleasant at times, for a goblin.

Ignoring her own light-headedness and aches, Kadie first established Allena in a corner by the door with hay and water, and only then made a nook for herself at the far end, behind some bales of straw. She had no desire to eat, but she felt even more sticky and filthy than usual. She must wash before sleeping, she decided.

That was when she discovered what the trouble was. Her mother had warned her, of course, that such things would happen. Most of her friends had started long ago, and back in Krasnegar she had been quite worried that she was taking so long. Lately she hadn't thought about it. Well, now it had started. It should be an exciting milestone in her life, the start of womanhood. Thousands of leagues from home in the middle of a barbarian host, it was a very unwelcome development indeed. Fortunately she had some spare garments to use as rags—there was no shortage of such plunder and it wasn't really stealing because anything she did not rescue would just be burned by the goblins.

As the sky grew dark, she settled down to try to sleep, sore and unhappy. She laid her magic rapier within reach as she always did and pulled a tattered old cloak over herself for warmth. More than anything, she thought she would like a hot brick wrapped in a blanket, just to cuddle. She had barely closed her eyes before a nerve-curdling shriek rang out close by. It was followed at once by another, even louder. The goblins had begun the evening's entertainment, and the Beavers' fire was right outside her barn. She was used to it by now, of course. Even Allena hardly flicked her ears any more at the sounds or smells of torture, but it was rarely so close. There was rarely so much of it.

Every time Kadie began to settle, another scream would jar her awake. The night outside was bright with moonlight and campfires, and loud with torment, far and near-agony and raucous merriment in Evil-spawned choruses.

Tonight of all nights she needed to sleep. She needed her mother, whom she had not seen in over two months. In fact, she had not spoken with any woman in that time. She spoke to hardly anyone except Blood Beak.

Blood Beak, her future husband, the goblin prince. By his standards, she supposed, she would now class as nubile. The wedding could come any time now. She wished she had a breviary, to know the right prayers to say and the right Gods to invoke. But she would not be able to read it in the dark, and probably there was no proper prayer for this situation. Mom had told her that exact words didn't really matter. She hoped they didn't, because she'd done a lot of very unorthodox praying lately. She'd even prayed to the God of Rescues, and she wasn't at all sure that there was a God of Rescues. Perhaps she had prayed wrongly—to the God of Battles to send the legions and kill all the goblins, for example. The God of Battles had not heeded her appeal. And the God of Rescues, if there was one, was not rescuing those poor men and women outside. At least nothing that bad had happened to her, at least not yet.

If only they would be quiet outside there and let her sleep! There were so many victims tonight that the torments might go on till dawn.

“Kadie?”

Perhaps she had floated off into a half sleep. It was not a scream that wakened her, it was a whisper. She sat up with a stifled cry that was half a groan. Her hand fumbled for her sword. “Who's there?”

“It's me.”

“Go away!” And yet she was relieved that it was Blood Beak. She could see him now. The barn was not completely dark.

“I need to talk with you.”

“We talked all day. You can talk all tomorrow. Go away. I'm sleeping.”

“You were weeping. I heard you.” He came closer. “Why were you weeping?” He spoke impish very well now, when no one else was listening.

“I wasn't. Why shouldn't I weep? What does it matter to you? Go away!”

She had her sword ready, although her palm was so slippery wet and shaking that she doubted she could use it. Her heart was pounding madly. She had driven Quiet Stalker to his death and she would kill Blood Beak if he tried to touch her. Yes, she would! He did not come close enough. He knelt down by her wall of straw, just out of reach.

“Don't want you to weep.”

She couldn't think of an answer. The more she thought about it, the more that remark seemed totally wrong. “Kadie, I'm worried.”

And that one, too. “What's the matter?” She saw a gleam of firelight on his face and chest, and dark stains. “You're hurt!”

“No.”

“That's blood!”

“Yes. I cut an artery by mistake.”

Her insides lurched. She never let him talk about what he did in the evenings. She tried to pretend to herself that he didn't join in, but she knew he did.

"You killed him?"

He made a noise that sounded perilously like a sniff. "I made a fool of myself, Kadie! They give me first scream, and I was so excited my hand slipped . . ." He banged his fist on the ground. "What an idiot trick! He was the best we had, too! Would have lasted for . . . you really want to hear?"

"No." She could sense his hurt and pain, though. The other goblins would have jeered at him. He must feel like a failure, like Brak must have felt at losing a fight to skinny Gath, or an imp getting cheated. Probably the guards would be a lot less inclined to do what he said now.

"I'm glad the man died easily," she said. "I'm sorry you're upset. Now please go away."

He didn't answer, just wiped moodily at the drying blood that had sprayed all over him.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Father's gone mad." He spoke so softly she barely heard.

Death Bird had always been mad, but she mustn't say that. "Why? What's he doing?"

"Nothing. That's the trouble. It's not just me! Other men are saying it, too. He won't turn back. We keep going south. You know those mountains we saw?"

"They were clouds."

"The sort of clouds you get above mountains. They're the mountains on the other side of the Empire! The Mosweeps, they're called. He's brought us all the way across the Empire!"

"I know. You knew. We talked about it."

"But . . . But the legions are behind us! We should be going back, and he won't."

"He'll have to when he gets to the sea." She wished she'd paid more attention to geography lessons.

"I suppose. Then we'll have legions on one side and the sea on the other."

She had never heard a hint of this from Blood Beak before.

"You think I can change his mind?" she said disbelievingly.

"You? Gods, no! I think he's forgotten all about you. He hardly even sends for me anymore." Blood Beak's voice trailed off uncertainly.

A sudden powerful shriek outside told her that the goblins had started on a fresh victim. She ignored it, waiting. "Kadie . . . No one's come to rescue you yet."

"They will!" She wished she still believed that.

"Kadie . . . If I could help you escape . . . Would you like that, Kadie?"

She began to shake all over. "How?"

"I don't know!" he said miserably. "I don't think I can. But I would if I could! If I see a chance . . ."

She couldn't think of any way he could help her escape, either, but her heart seemed to explode with excitement. She thought of herself marching up to one of those great houses she had seen, a mansion like Kinvale, except it wouldn't be burning and there would still be people living in it, rich people, imps. They would be clean and well dressed. *I am so sorry to drop in unexpectedly like this, but I am Princess Kadolan of Krasnegar, and I have just escaped from the goblins . . .*

"But why?"

He was quiet so long that she thought he was not going to answer at all. Then he said, "Because we're all going to die!"

"You've beaten the legions before."

"Only two at a time." His voice went shrill. "They must be after us by now! We've outrun them, that's all. But when we turn back, we'll bang into dozens of legions. Hundreds of legions!"

It must be true, of course. And not a goblin would be allowed to escape. Not one would straggle back to Pondague across the whole width of the Empire. Especially not the king's son.

"I expect your father's thought of this, you know. He must have some sort of plan that he hasn't told anyone."

"I hope so! That's what everyone's hoping."

"But—if I could escape, yes, I'd like that very much, Blood Beak. I'd be very grateful. I'd tell everyone how you helped me, and ask for you to be pardoned."

"I don't want that!" he said angrily. "You think I'm a coward?" His voice rose in outrage. "You *think* I'm trying to save myself!"

"No, of course not! I know you're brave. I think it's wonderful and romantic that you're offering to help me." But she had upset him, had said the wrong thing.

"Just like one of your stories!" His voice wavered. "Trying to make me into an impish prince, aren't you? Well, I'm not an impish prince. Maybe I'm clumsy with a knife, but I'm going off to the women now, and I take a lot of satisfying! No one laughs at me there! So just don't you forget who I am!" He jumped up.

"Blood Beak!"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you. You had bad luck tonight, but I'm sure you can make up for it with the women. I'll let you tell me all about it tomorrow if you want. And I would be very, very grateful if you could help me escape."

He grunted. "If you see a way, then let me know and I'll think about it."

He stalked out.

Kadie lay down again and stared wide-eyed at the dark. Did he mean it? Could he help her? Now she had a whole new terror to deal with. Despair was much easier to bear than hope.

Rain was falling in the Mosweeps, of course, but it was a warm, soothing rain, and the night was pleasant in spite of it. Rap sat by himself on a rock at the front door of Shaggi's castle, alongside the waterfall. He was brooding about his family and worrying about the future. His grand design was starting to fall apart already.

Today had been a holiday. For the first time in half a year, he had sat around and relaxed and not gone anywhere. One of the youthful trolls had been sent off downstream to fetch Tik Tok's anthropophagous band; two more troll sorcerers had wandered in and been released from their servitude. A wild party had hatched and was rapidly growing to a full-fledged riot. The noise inside the castle was incredible.

Nevertheless, there was a war on, and riotous parties were vulnerable to surprise attacks. Rap himself had insisted on posting guards, taking one of the first watches himself. All he need do was keep a vigilant eye on the ambience, and it was remaining silent. Growling and crunching noises in some bushes at the far side of the pool told him where the two mundanes, Urg and Shaggi, were consoling each other in traditional fashion. Thrugg would not mind, so Rap should not; although he was reminded that he had enjoyed no time alone with Inos since the great storm washed out the causeway.

He recalled himself to duty, taking a glance at the ambience. He detected nothing within a hundred leagues. He went back to meditating on what happened next.

Obviously there was little point now in visiting the Nogid Archipelago, for Zinixo and Tik Tok between them had emptied the closet. The Covin was thought to have captured forty or so recruits, which meant that the bad guys' power was still growing faster than the good guys'.

So what next? Rap had gone fishing for an ally and landed an army, and he had no idea what to do with it. Probably nothing. Zinixo had nurtured his Covin in secret until he was ready to strike, and Rap had told Shandie that they would do much the same. No rendezvous, he had said, no preordained day of uprising. To set a time or place would be to invite discovery. Sneak attacks might betray the entire movement. Bizarre as it seemed in mundane terms, that strategy had been accepted by both imperor and warlock.

The troll sorcerers would fit in well with it. They would very happily vanish off back to their castles and wait until trumpets of the Last Battle rang in the ambience. Whether they would then respond, of course, was a problem for the future.

But the anthropophagi must find some safer refuge. They were already homeless refugees and would enjoy life in the Mosweeps no more than a faun did. Inevitably they would start preying on the imps, if not for meat then just for sport. As soon as their presence became known the army would start hunting them, and the Covin would come to assist.

Had any would-be leader ever commanded a force so grotesque: trolls and anthropophagi? Rap was yoking the ox with the tiger. His own occult powers were trivial, good for little more than fairground juggling, and yet as the only outsider in the group he must somehow keep the peace between the two sides. It would be a marriage of fire and water, but if he let his army sit still and do nothing, it would rot. So follow me! Where to?

Faerie? Dragon Reach?

Always he came back to that nagging feeling that he had forgotten something.

Then he had company . . .

A slender woman stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the light of the bonfires within. She stepped

closer with a familiar jingling sound, and he found himself looking at a skirt of white bones, human ribs. He stood up quickly.

She was young. Mostly she wore tattoos of red and blue, but take those away and she would be very pretty. She had flowers tucked in her hair, and bones through her nose and earlobes, but take those away . . .

She was very close. "I am Sin Sin," she said huskily. Rap gulped, sweating in the damp night. *Inos, come here, I need you!* "I'm, er, I'm Rap."

"I know," she breathed.

Her bra seemed to be fashioned out of two juvenile skulls, one slightly larger than the other. He realized that he had been staring at it rather too long.

"Isn't that very uncomfortable?" he asked. "Yes. Do please take it off."

"Er, no. I'd rather not."

"As you wish." She sighed and tried to embrace him. He backed away, almost falling into the pool below. "Sin Sin, I'm on guard." A long time since Inos . . . too long with only trolls . . .

"I came to relieve you. But you needn't go."

"I wouldn't want to distract you while you keep watch."

"You won't."

"Yes, I will. I mean, I might."

"Fauns are so-o-o handsome!"

"No, they're not. Please, Sin Sin!"

"Yes, yes!"

"I'm married."

"So? You still look good enough to eat." She smiled seductively, but the effect was spoiled by her sharpened teeth. Rap's self-control came back with a rush.

"That's what I'm afraid of!" he said firmly, and slipped by her. He splashed through the stream into the castle. The largest bonfire was the size of a small cottage, and its glare blinded him. The noise of drums and singing was mind-crippling, and the tumult in the ambience even worse. Forty or so sorcerers and mages were making merry, and that must be a rare event in the history of the world. Until now, power had always brought danger, and the sorcerous had been reclusive people. This infant brotherhood he had created was changing the rules already.

He must not claim all the credit—Thrugg had not enslaved him, despite his greater power, and Tik Tok's band had kept their individual freedom—but it was Rap's vision of a society of free sorcerers that had inspired this party.

What a party! Had Pandemia ever seen its like? Incandescent dragons circled near the roof. Naked troll maidens were dancing erotically—and it took him a moment to realize that they were illusory, as was the band of anthropophagous muscle men parodying them on the other side. A fountain of wine was

spouting into the stream. The air was filled with smoke and colored balls and half a dozen albatrosses and giant bats, apparently playing some sort of team game. A bewildered camel brayed in terror on a high ledge. The great chamber was a madhouse of mirth and foolery.

Trolls and anthropophagi? Probably there had never been such a meeting before. Were they mundanes, half the gathering would be cooking the other half, but these were sorcerers, united in a common cause. So far. They were all drunk on magic. Was he just being a nervous maiden aunt, or could he already detect dangerous undertones in the horseplay? If it went too far, there were no limits on what might happen. And even if it didn't, there would be the emotional hangover when it ended and reality returned. Poor old worrywart Aunt Rap!

He checked the upstream rooms and discovered several strange orgies in progress, some of the participants real and some occult. In an obscure chamber he located the people he wanted. Of course there was no such thing as privacy around sorcerers, but the little room was secluded—off the main stream, watered only by seepage. He transported himself there, into calm and sanity. Or maybe not.

Grunth was reclining in an elaborate chair large enough to be called a throne, decked out like an impress in jewels and scarlet satin. Her tiara flashed with a fortune in rubies and sapphires; her great clawed feet were encased in golden sandals. She beamed a toothy baboon snarl at him and he saw that she was drunk.

Tik Tok sprawled in a wicker chair, wearing a blissful idiot look of extreme intoxication. He had rearranged his tattoos in yellow and magenta, and festooned his hair with pink rosebuds. He was gnawing on a juicy bone that Rap carefully did not inspect carefully.

Thrugg had chosen to squat on the floor as usual, nude as usual, munching noisily on nuts and roots. He looked up with a sour glance that was very unusual—for him—and must mean trouble.

The fourth member of the party was Doctor Sagorn. Darad had needed little persuading to make him depart from such alarming company, and he had summoned the old jotunn in his place. The scholar sat erect on a highbacked chair. He wore a thin gown of pale-blue cotton. It was sweat-stained and rumpled, but his customary arrogant disdain for once seemed to be hiding an agreeable mood. His pale-blue eyes gleamed when he saw Rap, and the withered lips trembled on the verge of a smile.

The stuffed penguin in the doorway defied explanation.

Rap materialized a seat for himself and a mug of Krasnegarian beer. He sat back and, after a moment's reflection, added a local cool breeze. The mundane environment was satisfactory, then. The ambience continued to rock, flash, riot, boom, stink, and swim as the party continued, downstream in the sprawling castle. He tried to ignore it. When nobody said anything, he began with Thrugg. "What's wrong?"

The troll's mouth was too full for speech. "*Wurnk and Vog.*"

Sagorn spasmed with surprise, so he must have been included in the sending.

"The old fellows?" Rap asked.

"*Yes. They don't like crowds. Wanna go.*"

"Not surprising! I expect the rest will follow them in a day or two."

Abandoning words, Thrugg flashed an excruciating image of a slave being beaten by a gang of imps. Everyone winced, and yelped. The implication was one of strong disapproval, which seemed out of

character for the unwarlike troll. Why should he want to keep the army together?

“Isn’t that the plan?” Sagorn muttered. “To hide out individually until battle is joined?”

Again Thrugg replied without words, and this time the image was a relative measure of the strength of forty sorcerers and a couple of dozen lesser magic-users. Not only was a larger group inherently more powerful, it was also much less detectable. Sagorn’s mouth fell open.

“Good point,” Rap admitted. “If we must have an army, then the larger the better.” Sorcery would become possible again, if it was used with caution.

Thrugg nodded more cheerfully, pulping timber in his monstrous jaws.

Rap readjusted his thinking yet again. “So we keep the trolls enlisted. We need to hunt down the rest of the fifty you mentioned, though. That means organizing messengers. It means setting up a central headquarters. Two might be better. Would Vog and Wurnk do that much?”

Thrugg shrugged, but even before the gesture was complete, he had located the two old trolls, explained, persuaded, and won agreement. It was all over in a blink, and he nodded.

Grunth belched and said, “They’d better!” in an ominous voice. The witch had not yet adjusted to the idea of voluntary servitude.

“And what do the rest of us do?” Rap asked. “If we stay here, we’ll achieve nothing. Where do we go, and how?” He thought of the vast expanse of rain forest surrounding him and mentally shuddered.

Tik Tok paused in his gnawing. “Downstream. Watercourses felicitate travel in jungles.”

“Good point. But that takes us to the coast, and there will be imps at the coast.”

“Mm!” The anthropophagus nodded and licked his lips.

Then he flashed pictures of forty or so sorcerers standing on the shore, calling in a ship, compelling the crew to row to shore in their longboat, marooning the sailors, and rowing back out in their boat. The imagery was not as vivid as Thrugg’s, and rather spoiled by an alcoholic unsteadiness, but it obviously represented a feasible plan when there was so much power available. The final scene showed the ship sailing away with its rigging full of sorcerers, all lustily singing sea chanteys. A large, unidentified carcass was being roasted over an improbable bonfire on the deck.

“I fail to see how carnal self-indulgence will promote the cause,” Sagorn remarked dryly.

Tik Tok turned to stare at him thoughtfully. “Where I come from, jotnar are regarded as speciously tasty mortals.”

“I am sure my old meat would be unpleasantly stringy.” The haggard old face had turned a little paler, though. Rap repressed a grin. It took a lot to discomfit the sage.

“We steal a ship of course,” Grunth said sleepily. “Easy.”

“And go where?” That was the ultimate question. After a moment’s silence, Tik Tok said, “Did you and your fellow composers not set up a revenue?”

“No,” Rap said. “It seemed too dangerous.”

“Not much help!” Sagorn snapped, resuming his disdainful pout. “With so much power available, why

not just go on the attack? If you can create a diversion, the Covin will send a party of sorcerers to investigate. You overpower them, break their loyalty spells, and win them to your cause; then skedaddle and pull the same trick somewhere else.”

Groaning like a constipated bull, Grunth subsided into the depths of her throne and closed her eyes. Sagorn’s pale cheeks flushed pink.

“It won’t work, Doctor,” Rap said gently. “Sorcerous armies move instantaneously. You can’t run away from them. Remember the trouble Raspnex went to when he rescued us in Hub? It was a miracle, what he achieved that night. It had taken weeks to prepare, probably, and it cost him half a dozen votaries. Guerilla warfare won’t work in the ambience. As soon as we show our hand, Zinixo will cut it off.”

The old man scowled. He was out of his depth with sorcery, and that discovery would be unwelcome. Downstream, the party was waxing even wilder. Half the dancers were airborne, and so were some of the lovers. The games were developing into occult tests of strength. A bear was wrestling a giant squid near a tug of war between a team of trolls and six white stallions—

“Go and drop in on Lith’rian,” Grunth muttered without opening her eyes.

“I am inclined to agree with that, I think.” Rap sighed and quaffed some beer; the flavor made him homesick. If there was organized resistance anywhere, it would be among the elves, in Ilrane. He realized he was hungry, and began to contemplate the prospects of a plate of chicken dumplings.

“Sysanasso?” Tik Tok mumbled, his mouth full of meat.

“Another good idea. There’s a nasty rumor about fauns being stubborn, though. I don’t know where to start there, or how we can persuade them even to spread the news.”

Rap knew who was the logical agent to assign to Sysanasso, and he didn’t want the job. He had never thought of himself as indispensable before, but he suspected he was the only glue that might hold this improbable legion together.

He heard a strange noise he could not recall ever hearing before. Doctor Sagorn was laughing.

“Doctor?”

“I was just imagining the elvish customs officials at Vislawn or Mistrin when you dock and they meet your crew.”

“I am not familial with elves,” Tik Tok remarked. “Singers, not fighters?”

“Elves are people of exquisite taste!” Sagorn said primly.

Rap expected Tik Tok to say he was ogrely looking forward to meating them, but he didn’t. Perhaps mere puns were beneath his dignity. He just licked his lips again.

“Zark has sorcerers,” Grunth said, and yawned like a hungry crocodile.

“I’m sure it does,” Rap agreed. “It also has a central authority, the caliph. We wrote to him and hopefully he will spread the word. Dragon Reach might make a very good refuge, if we take no metal and use no sorcery. Or the Keriths—sorcerers should be able to resist the merfolk, shouldn’t they?”

Thrugg leered. “Resist the men.”

Sagorn snorted. “Your Majesty, I am inclined to think you initiated this counter-revolution without

adequate preparation.”

“I’m certain of it. We had very little choice at the time.”

Silence fell in the rocky chamber, broken only by the quiet trickling of water down one slimy green wall. The ambience, on the other hand, was approaching the boil. A couple of the older anthropophagi were trying to calm things down, with little success. Perhaps the shielding would fail, and the whole castle just explode.

Rap clawed his hair, making a mental note to shorten it in the morning. “Listen, Doctor. Maybe you can help me. Ever since we began this adventure, I’ve had a nagging hunch that I’ve forgotten something, that I’m overlooking something.”

“I understood that sorcerers had perfect memories.”

“I’m not much of a sorcerer. But that’s a good point. If I have forgotten something, maybe I’ve been made to forget it!” He glanced around and saw that the others were listening. He hoped he was not about to make too much of a fool of himself. “You’re not a sorcerer. Can you think of anything we saw, or anything that came up in conversation . . . any plan we discussed and then set aside, perhaps?”

“A forgetfulness spell specifically directed at the sorcerous?” the old man muttered. “Is that possible?”

“Probably. Almost anything is possible if there is enough power available. Could Zinixo have blanked my mind?” He felt he was really conjuring bubbles now, but having gone so far he might as well wade in until he sank.

“If he had managed that much,” Thrugg growled, “then he would have been able to call you to him.”

“I suppose so.”

“What sort of something?” Sagorn said thoughtfully.

“What would be useful? A strategy? A place of refuge? A weapon? A possible ally?” His eyes glinted coldly, like sunlight on a northern sea. “What about that prelecting pool the emperor saw? Nobody ever quite explained that episode!”

“A *pixie!*” Rap yelled. “That’s it! You’ve got it! Shandie met a pixie near Hub!”

Grunth yawned again. “If you’re starting in on bedtime stories, then I think I’ll organize a bale of hay and catch up on my beauty sleep.”

“Unfortunately pixies are instinct,” Tik Tok said sadly, and yawned, also. “Would have been nice to invite someone diffident for dinner.”

“Pixies still exist,” Rap said firmly. “My wife met some, many years ago. *The emperor met a pixie!*”

Three sorcerers stared at him as if he had taken leave of his senses.

He was so excited now he could hardly sit still. “Don’t you see? The War of the Five Warlocks? What happened at the end of it? Who won? Grunth?”

“Don’t recall,” she said uneasily.

“No one does!” Sagorn was beaming.

“It was the second millennium!” Rap shouted. “There was more sorcery around then than there ever has been since—until now, the third millennium. Anything would have been possible with that kind of power loose! Now do you understand? There is an aversion spell on Thume! An inattention spell, and it’s directed more at sorcerers than at mundanes, although it obviously affects them, too. Shielding blunts it, because the last time I thought of this I was in a shielded house, like this one. When I went outside I forgot again.”

“You were otherwise engaged,” Sagorn murmured, but he was obviously relishing the mad suggestion and the audience’s reluctance to accept it.

“I want you to stay close to me in future,” Rap said, “and whisper ‘Thume’ in my ear every half hour.”

All three sorcerers were cold sober now.

“That kind of spell wouldn’t last that long,” Thugg protested, glaring at Rap like a hungry grizzly taking aim.

“No, it wouldn’t. Of course it wouldn’t! So who is maintaining it?”

No one answered. What sort of power could maintain a spell over an entire country, let alone establish it there in the first place?

“Whole armies can vanish in Thume,” Sagorn said gleefully. “Or not, as the case may be. Travelers disappear or return with tales of an empty, deserted land, yet not even the Impire has been able to commandeer that emptiness! *And no one wonders why?* Ma’am, gentlemen . . . This does not make sense! Why has it never worried you before?”

Rap glanced around the group and saw the dawning of belief, the dawning of excitement, even. Could the War of the Five Warlocks have left some secret behind in Thume, a secret still active after a thousand years?

“I wonder if we could even approach it?” He looked down at his bare arm and wrote *Thume* on it. No, that would not be enough. “Thugg, you’re strongest, I think. Fix this tattoo for me so I can’t wipe it off in a fit of absentmindedness. Give it all you’ve got.”

The result was an explosion in the ambience that almost stunned him. It rocked the castle. The wild melee downstream came to an instant halt, shocked into sobriety. All Rap actually felt, though, was a momentary tingling.

“Thank you!” he said weakly, still dazed.

“Couldn’t do it harder or the shielding would have burst,” Thugg explained apologetically.

All the other sorcerers and mages in the castle were staring at their leaders in consternation, wondering what had provoked that immense outburst of power. For some reason most seemed to have picked out Rap as the culprit. They should be informed of the new theory, but whom would they believe? Well, there was one person there who would never refuse an audience.

“Tik Tok, why don’t you explain?”

Tik Tok beamed his dagger teeth and sprang to his feet in a shower of rosebuds. “*Fiends and alloys!*” he proclaimed. “*I am pleased to denounce that we have made a significant breakdown in understudying!*” He paused and glanced at Rap. “Good start?”

“An incredible performance,” Rap said dryly. “Carry on.”

Westward look:

*And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.*

— Clough, *Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth*