

Prisoners of Perfection

Epic Fail: Book Two

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Chapter One

It was a rat that led the way, the first one ever seen in the forest prison world. It was Soma who saw it first. From high above the forest floor, perched on the top of a blue eucalyptus, she heard an unfamiliar scrabbling sound, and peered down between the leaves to see a creature sneaking its way among the duff. She assumed it was a squirrel, of course, since squirrels were familiar and fairly numerous, but this one was missing all the fur off its tail, and it was squeaking. Soma swung down from branch to branch and in moments had snatched it up by that very same tail, but quickly dropped it as it lifted and squirmed to bite her hand. The rat hit the ground running but Soma pounced again, and this time grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, so it couldn't reach her with its teeth. The rat struggled and kicked, but Soma held on tight, and carried it back to Bombarda's hut by the lake. He'd know what it was, she thought. Bombarda knew everything.

He was sitting by the fire in the middle of his house, warming his hands and watching the smoke curl up through the hole in the roof. It was not cold outside, but Bombarda was always cold inside. He felt the chill in his bones, his eternally sixty-four year old bones. Of all the luck, he was one of those cursed to stop aging when he was already old, not like Soma, or her near constant companion, Squee, who were both eight, and had been eight for so long now that no one could say how many years it had been. No one even tried to guess anymore. Since the day when The Hidden One had died, the inmates of the forest prison had hoped against hope that there might be a true cure for their immortality. All of them had been locked away, cast aside by a mortal civilization that could no longer tolerate their presence.

In the beginning, when the first of their lot had randomly turned up, not aging past some binary birthday, be it eight or sixteen or thirty two or sixty four, or even one hundred and twenty eight in the extremely rare case of The Hidden One, way back then the first reaction of the normal humans had been jealousy accompanied by fear, then anger and rage. The immortals were seized and eagerly experimented upon, even tortured and dismembered in a mad race to discover their secret, a secret that was never detected. It had to be something in the genes, but if it was, it was locked away in all the infinite so-called junk DNA that littered their bodies like everyone else's. Scientists failed, and doctors failed, and politicians failed, and the mob ruled in the end. They were tossed into this mutated forest prison, a jail whose infinity matched their own interminance. The forest had no boundaries, or none that anyone could determine. Anyone who came close to an edge, or thought they did, found themselves somehow transported, instantly and seamlessly, to another part of the woods entirely.

Bombarda, the old pulp fiction writer publicly known as Gowdy, had spent years, decades, maybe even centuries, seeking a way out. He had made many attempts. He had tried to burn down the forest, but the curious trees were resistant to flame. He had tried hacking away at them with sharpened stone axes, but the crazy trees grew back just as fast as he could cut them down. Just as the immortals could not become ill or seriously injured, neither did the trees ever seem to suffer any great or permanent

damage, no matter what anyone tried to do to them. Bombarda tried digging a tunnel. He set his Watchers about it, his gang of perpetual children who did whatever he ordered them to, who obeyed him because it suited their fancy, they enjoyed it, and anyway they were infinitely bored besides. The tunnel led them nowhere, only around in circles though they dug it as straight as could be. This prison was impossible, from its vegetation to its population, not a bit of it could be explained except by accidents of scientific research. The forest had once been a university arboretum, but it had expanded and changed and taken on a life of its own, eventually expelling its original inhabitants, who fled for fear of becoming forever lost in its tangles. That is when the government took it over and found it to be the perfect solution to its problem of the immortals, and what to do about them.

Anyone who did not age like a regular person, anyone who exhibited the symptoms, was rounded up and summarily tossed into the forest world. There were some cases of false diagnosis. These individuals lived and then died. The rest merely lived. The forest provided plenty in the way of fruits and berries and tubers. Hunger was not a problem, and neither was shelter or weather. The world had its own particular climate, not too hot, not too cold, and almost maddeningly unvarying. It rained a bit every day, and a bit every night. Clouds came and clouds went. The sun came up, the sun went down. The moon, however, never rose, though there were stars. No one ever understood about the moon. The lakes did have tides, but no one knew how. The moon must be there, they decided, but hiding. Without the moon and its phases, time was bereft of its markers. The stars always seemed to be in the very same places. The sun never altered its angle. It was almost as if, no, exactly as if, it was not the actual sun, and they were not the actual stars. It must be a fake. It was all a big fake.

Bombarda had once kept a marking of time, tallies scratched into rocks, but there weren't enough rocks in the forest to note all the days that went by. It had to be many thousands, he thought, hundreds of years if not more. There was never any word from outside. Already it had been a very long time since anyone new had arrived. The last of the prisoners were all veterans by now. The tribes, for the people naturally organized themselves, like among like, were all set and stable, and any old conflicts had long since resolved themselves in futility. There was no point in not getting along, in not letting each other alone. The cave dwellers stayed near their caves. The river folk camped on their banks. The tree people lived in the canopy and all the various groups kept out of the way of each other. Even the loners remained all alone. Altogether Bombarda figured they numbered a couple of thousand, no more. Most of them lived in the moment, hopeless and bereft of even a mere curiosity. Gone were the days of want and desire. Gone were the dreams of rescue or even escape. Nobody thought about that anymore, except for Bombarda, who still thought of little else.

His was a thirst for revenge. He had cultivated this lust for a very long time, and was not going to give it up easily. Even after all of his attempts had led to nothing but failure he still dreamed every night of discovering a way out, a way back into the civilized world, where he would find the people who'd done this to him, and he would show them no mercy at all. He had once been a quite famous author, who wrote bloodthirsty books of horror and carnage, bestsellers all, and had been living a life of luxury and adulation when somebody noticed there was something unusual about him. For at least twenty years he had stayed exactly the same. Not even a hair on his head was different after all of that time. His editor, his agent, his publicist, his fans, all of them had gotten much older, but not Gowdy, no, he didn't change. There were whispers of magic and witchcraft, of bargains made with the devil, just as in one of his books, but soon enough the agency put it together, and determined him to be an immortal. One night, while he was sleeping and dreaming of white puffy clouds, they knocked down his door, they seized him and dragged him away. Before he was even awake, or so it seemed to him later, he had found himself alone and abandoned in this cursed forest prison.

The first person he'd met was The Hidden One. She and her grand-daughter, Ember, a wise and precocious child, acted like gatekeepers back in those days, welcoming in all the new prisoners, and

showing them how to get along and get by. He'd never forgiven them for that cruel hospitality. Instead of helping him stay, they should have been helping him leave. He knew it wasn't their fault, and that his judgment was completely unjust, but that's how he felt, and he honored his feelings by staying loyal to them, regardless of situations or facts. He plotted and schemed, but it did him no good. He couldn't even enjoy the unquestionable beauty of his immediate surroundings, his self-built cottage on the banks of a lake, with the mountains in the distance, and the sparkling rivers that flowed in and flowed out. He sat by his fire and kept his inner fire burning.

He kept birds in cages. He had trained some of them to leave and return, and had set his Watchers to follow, hoping they would lead the way out, but the birds never did. They just flew around and came home. Now he hated them too, but he couldn't get rid of them. Even when he destroyed all the cages, the birds still came home, and nested on the roof or inside along the walls. He tried to ignore their singing and chirping. Let the children enjoy them, he thought, while I remain bitter and cold. The children did love all the birds, gave them names and chased them around. They had begged Bombarda to make them new cages, which he eventually reluctantly did. He would have reason to be glad he had done so.

Soma came bursting into the hut with her new prize possession, the curious rat. The rat sensed the presence of birds and perked up in her grasp, sniffing and twitching and hoping to get its claws into some of their bellies. The birds, for their part, those that could, flew right up and out through the hole in the roof with the smoke. Bombarda turned to look at the girl.

"What have you got for me now?" he asked. Soma was always bringing him something, if only a leaf, for him to identify and teach her about. She knew as much about the things in this world as he did, only her memory was not quite developed, and she had trouble holding on to her knowledge, or at least she pretended. The truth was she enjoyed making her mentor feel needed and important.

"I don't know," she said, and this was also the truth. "I thought it was a squirrel, but look at its tail."

"It's a rat," Bombarda said with a sneer. "Just a common, filthy rat."

"Can we keep it?" she asked. "We could put it in a cage."

"If you like," he shrugged as if the whole matter was of no interest to him, but he watched closely as she put it inside of an empty one.

"Where did you find it?" he said.

"Out there," she gestured. It didn't really matter to her where she'd found it. One place was the same as another in the forest.

"It must have come from somewhere," Bombarda murmured, suddenly intrigued. New things never happened anymore. New creatures never entered their world, and nothing ever left unless it was eaten. He stood up, creakily, and walked slowly towards the rat. He peered closely into the cage, and the rat peered just as closely at him.

"Will you show me the way?" he asked it, and the rat twitched its whiskers as if it answered, maybe. Maybe I will if you let me out of here, but then again, maybe I won't.

"This could be the very thing we've been waiting for all along," Bombarda said to Soma, who smiled, pleased to have possibly pleased him.

"But how," he turned back to the rat, "how can we make it show us the way, and how can we even keep up with him."

"That's easy," Soma said. "We tie him, right? Get a long vine and we tie him. Then we hold on to one end and see where he goes."

"You're the smart one," Bombarda said with as close to a smile as he could. "You always were the

smart one," he added, and gave her a small pat on her nearly bald little head. Soma grinned and said, "What do we name him?"

Chapter Two

A vote was held later that day, when a sufficient number of Watchers had gathered and submitted enough nominations to make it interesting. Bombarda's own suggestion was 'Retribution', but none of the children selected that one. A couple of popular choices were 'Squeak' and 'Smelly', but 'Squeak' was too close to 'Squee', who objected on the grounds that he didn't think he'd like people confusing him with a rat. He was all for 'Smelly', or 'Stinky', but in the end it was Soma's own name that carried the day, and the rat was from then on known as 'Scratch'. The rat itself seemed to approve of the name, because he swiped out with his claws whenever anyone got close enough and repeated his new name, drawing a little blood in one instance.

Although no one really bothered to have possessions in the forest, for there were few to be had and no sense in withholding anything from others, everyone in the group referred to Scratch as Soma's. She was the one who brought it seeds and grain, and who took it for walks after securing it with a leash of vine. She let it go this way and that, keeping a loose enough hold on it that the rat could feel he was free though knowing full well that he wasn't. He wasn't terribly useful at first, foraging only for food or for nesting materials for which he had no actual use, seeing as he still slept in the cage every night. Bombarda accompanied the two with sharp anticipation, but after several useless excursions he decided to remain at home, with Soma promising not to escape without him, should she ever be so fortunate.

Soma was certain that Scratch would show them the way, and she often talked to the rat about just that, encouraging him to lead her back to where he'd come into their world. She and Squee took him to all the old places they knew, the ones that they felt were right on the edge. Squee knew all of the tricks and the traps. He could place his whole arm just so, leaning off of a branch, that the arm disappeared and a friend he had placed several miles away later reported that he saw it dangling down from another distant tree. Much of the forest was illusion, especially, they believed, around its periphery. Soma and Squee had it all mapped out in their minds, a jagged polygon of corners and bends where the laws of motion stopped making sense and instead of going forward you twisted and turned and teleported halfway across instead. It was an invisible transportation device, a kind of transparent aerial subway whose carriages operated at warp speed. They took Scratch on tours of all of these sites, but Scratch merely sniffed his way around as if he might have been anywhere.

But Soma and Squee would never give up. Squee was always a rascal, climbing and leaping and jumping about. He'd pick the rat up and toss it into the air while Soma protested and reached out to catch the poor thing as it fell. The rat came to trust her, expecting her always to be there, and soon even seemed to enjoy Squee's outlandish surprises. The rat would clamber up and rest on Soma's shoulder, or even on top of her head, claws withdrawn, nose nuzzling into her neck. Soma felt that one day she'd take it off of its leash and the rat would stay with her and not run away. She was right. When that day came she tried it, just for a minute, she said to herself, and then just for a while. After that Scratch spent every night with her, up in the trees where she slept in a hollowed out bit of a trunk.

Scratch spoke to her then in a dream. He asked her if she wanted to see the big world, the bigger one outside of that place. Oh, did she ever, she told him. He promised to take her. Where is it, she asked. Over by the log bridge where the oak tree has fallen, he whispered. Soma knew just where that was. The next morning she went to Bombarda, with Scratch on her back peering out from her ear, and told him it was time to get going.

"Bring all your stuff," she sang out with a laugh.

"What stuff?" he replied, "I don't want anything we've got here."

"I'm bringing my magical pine cone," Squee shouted down from a tree as he swung out to join them.

"I'm bringing Scratch," Soma said. "But really he's bringing me, and you too."

"What about the guys?" Squee asked, meaning the other Watchers in their little tribe, but he already knew what their answer would be. It was the three of them only who were going to go. The others didn't even want to. Squee wasn't sure he wanted to, either. He liked it in there, in the trees, where he was the master of all things he required. Every twig, every stone was his friend and he felt he belonged. Each morning he woke up fresh and brand new, ready for the same old adventures he'd had many thousands of times, yet each day was just as exciting to him. Squee had the great gift of folly. Soma was fond of adventure as well, but she yearned for a new one, a limitless one, and imagined that the "big world" out there had no end, no beginning, and would never run out or repeat.

Armed with nothing, therefore, except a rat and a magical pine cone, the old man and his two child companions made their way to the log bridge where the oak tree had fallen over the river. The banks of the river were high at that point, six foot cliffs along either side, and the river was half of that depth but quite sleepy and slow. Soma put Scratch down on the log and he quickly scampered out to the middle, about ten feet from shore. He turned back and squeaked for Soma to follow but not on the log, but below, in the water. She jumped in and started wading across, the river coming up to her neck. Squee hopped in behind her, and then Bombarda descended carefully as well. Scratch was waiting for them on the log. When all three arrived, they felt a bit foolish, standing out there partly submerged in the chilly wide stream. Scratch began squeaking again, and edged his way over to Soma who held out her hand, but he didn't jump on it, but dug into the log with his claws and went upside down under beneath it. Soma didn't have to duck her head to follow, and neither did Squee, but Bombarda had to sink down even further into the water to pursue them under the log. When his head and his body were fully below, he noticed that they were all gone.

Then he was gone too. They were no longer in the forest, after all of those years, after all of that yearning and seeking they were finally out. Bombarda burst into tears. Soma and Squee grabbed hold of each other's hands and started dancing and twirling around and around on the beach, on the warm sunny beach where they were, next to a huge and magnificent ocean. Even Scratch seemed delighted as he scampered this way and that, thrilled to be home once again.

Chapter Three

Of all the eight year old immortals, none embraced his age more enthusiastically than Squee. He possessed an unlimited energy and a sense of sheer enjoyment to go along with it. All day long he was accustomed to flying through the trees, loudly emitting the grunts and groans and squeals that had led to his name. Able to scale a two hundred foot sequoia as fast as a raven could ascend the same distance, he had no match by branch or by air among his people. The Squee of the forest was barely glimpsed by ground-dwellers most of the time except for an occasional flash of his shoulder-length platinum blond hair or a patch of his well-bronzed skin, an elbow or a heel occasionally visible for a fraction of a second as high above he flung himself without fear or hesitation from one tree to the next in pursuit of absolutely nothing but thrills.

Now that he found himself suddenly thrust into an entirely strange new world, he was momentarily paralyzed like a puppy overwhelmed by a galaxy of unfamiliar smells. The hot shifting sand beneath his toes felt like nothing he had ever experienced, and the vast blue ocean stretching out before him was something unimaginable. Of course he'd been told stories about such things, but those were fairy tales as far as he knew, mere legends left over from the fragmentary and suspect memories of his fellow eternal inmates. In the very midst of it now he couldn't decide what to do first. Soma also seemed under the same spell while Gowdy was already kicking at the crumbly stuff and trying to figure out which

direction was which. He'd covered his eyes with his hand while ascertaining the sun's present location and studying its movement.

Squee fell to his knees and began furiously digging into the sand until he'd quickly formed a deep enough pit to leap into and begin to bury his body from the sides, shouting indefinite syllables until accidentally swallowing a bit of sand. Spitting it out he began to scream, bringing Soma rushing over to the side of the hole, where she stared down at him and, shaking her head, exclaimed,

"Squee! No! You can't eat it!"

"Know it," he yelled up at her. "Colder down here," he added, digging into the damp sand at the bottom of the hole.

"It's from the ocean," Soma told him, but Squee wasn't listening. Instead he was digging deeper and deeper, and finding the sand increasingly wetter, he just kept blinking and wondering and not comprehending the mystery. He had never been the smartest kid, and all the untold years had not added an iota to his mental capacity.

"Come on," Soma gestured for him to follow her. "Let's check out the water."

"Water!" Squee cried, and he leaped out of the hole, landing on his feet at the first try out of the six foot hole.

The two children raced each other across the beach towards the ocean, where Soma went first, being faster by land, and dashed into the water. At the first touch of it Squee generated yet another of his customized and meaningless grunts, and ran back onto the dry sand.

"COLD!" he yelled after Soma, but the girl was already into the water well over her head and swimming in ever-larger circles, each time back facing the beach encouraging Squee to come back in. After a few turns she gave up and headed out to where the waves were breaking. They had often swum at the lake by Gowdy's cabin, but it was a warm water there, and calm, nearly tideless. But Soma took to the waves as if she'd been riding them her entire life. She seemed to know instinctively how to catch one and let it take her outstretched body bumping and bouncing all the way back to the beach, where she jumped up and shook herself and again invited Squee in to join her. By that time, he had already dipped his toes in a few more times, and had decided that cold was nothing but a new thing to face head on and conquer. He ran into the ocean beside her and moments later was body-surfing like a champion.

Gowdy stood on the sand and watched the pair of youngsters playing in the surf. He felt no desire tugging at him to enter the sea, and the hot sun beating down on him was already making him sweat and feel anxious. He needed water, and scanned the area around for river inlets further down the coast. There was nothing and no one in sight, no sign of human habitation anywhere. He felt the forest behind him and wanted to get as far away from it as possible, but could not make out where it ended in either direction along the waterfront. He would have to make a decision which way to go, but based on no good information. He knew by now that the ocean was to the west, that the sun would set behind it, so that north was to the right, and south to the left. He had no reason to favor either one, but eventually decided to go right. After all, it was people of the north who'd been his enemies. It was there he would seek his revenge.

Chapter Four

Not only thirst, but hunger as well drove them on, so it was without resistance that Gowdy was able to gather the children in from the waves and follow along. It was already early afternoon and though the only shade was by the edge of the forest, none of them were eager to go near that borderline again, in case it somehow magically dragged them back inside. Gowdy was realizing, before it even occurred to Soma, let alone Squee, that many things were going to be different from now on, including the

acquisition of food. Eating was strictly required for the immortals. Many had tried to do without it in the early days, first as a form of hunger strike, in case anyone was watching from the outside, and later as a method of attempted suicide, but not eating simply left their bodies weak and their minds tired, much like a regular person might feel after running a marathon. They could not end their lives that way, only make themselves miserable. In the forest there was always plenty of readily available food but looking around Gowdy saw nothing that would serve the purpose.

He presumed there were fish in the sea, if eventually it came to that, but between the ocean and the forest there was only the wide strip of warm yellow sand. Soma and Squee went racing on ahead, running as fast as they could along the water until they were nearly out of sight. Then they would stop and splash in the waves until the old man caught up with them again. Gowdy was used to the noisy pleasures of the youth and didn't begrudge them their fun. For their part, it never occurred to them to try and cheer him up or get him to join in their games. They operated perfectly congruently in their separate ways.

Soma was the first to notice a sign of human habitation. Then again, she was typically the first in everything. Sharp-eyed, sharp-eared, always thinking, always curious, nothing escaped her attention for long, and though it was only a wisp of smoke at the edge of the horizon, practically indistinguishable from a patch of cloud, she hastened over to Gowdy's side to point it out to him. He had been walking slowly but steadily along but now he picked up his pace and marched directly towards the site. There would be fire, and maybe there would be people. Gowdy managed to keep his mind busy with worries and concerns no matter what the situation. He'd been doing that for so long it would have been impossible for him to stop for a moment, even to admire the scenery. What if it were merely a wildfire, and not people? But then, what if there were people, and the people were hostile? What if they were armed, and attacked? He could only hope! He was himself ready for conflict. Somebody had to pay, and with any luck it would be a lot of somebodies.

As they drew closer, they could see the smoke was indeed coming from a sort of structure. It looked like a narrow vertical box, like an old windowless phone booth made of thin boards tied together with vines, walled on three sides and open to the sea on the fourth. The smoke was streaming through a square hole in the thatched roof, and the fire itself was a small dwindling bundle of sticks on the middle of the floor, and was rapidly nearing its conclusion. Squee and Soma cautiously circled the small building several times as if expecting something or someone to pop out of it at any moment, while Gowdy scanned the area around it, which was the same strip of sand, no different than where they had come from except, and this exception made Gowdy's heart leap for an instant, the forest behind it was gone.

They must have passed its border some time before, because now they couldn't see it at all. The landscape behind the beach was utterly changed. Dunes swelled up behind the fire hut, dotted with clumps of thick grasses. Gowdy scrambled up the hillocks with the children rushing past him to reach the top first, and once above they saw a mostly flat land filled with low brush, bushes and shrubs and an occasional clump of short stubby trees, most of which surrounded small ponds. They could make out a few thin paths cutting through the marshland here and there, also leading to and between the tiny lakes, and Soma quickly ascertained that those paths were actually creeks and rivulets. She and Squee were already splashing their way through them, stopping once or twice to scoop up water in their hands and suck it down. Gowdy followed a short way and also drank, but stopped before getting too far away from the fire. He planned to keep watch over that place until someone arrived. He was sure they would. He signaled his intention to Soma with a gesture she immediately understood and let him know they'd be returning shortly.

Gowdy walked back up the other side of the dune and found a place in a thicket of grass where he could watch the smoking structure and keep himself hidden from ocean view. He settled in and began

what turned out to be a longer wait than he guessed. The fire went out completely within an hour or so, and by that time the children had returned with another surprise, a wild rabbit Squee had captured and was holding on under its forelegs while it kicked and struggled with its powerful back legs attempting to escape.

"Can we keep it?" the boy wanted to know, and Gowdy shrugged.

"Keep it where?" he asked. "Keep it how?"

"Maybe we should eat it," Squee said with a serious look on his face. They had all been vegetarians for so long it was a novel concept, and he didn't really mean any harm to the creature. Somehow he had the idea that they could keep it as a pet and eat it too.

"Ew," Soma made a face. "I think we should let her go."

"How do you know it's a she?" Squee demanded. Soma was always so sure of herself, and Squee never so, that he was always wanting her to prove what she claimed. Even though she always did, he was never satisfied to take her word for anything.

"It's got no, you know," she said, pointing at the rear of the creature's belly. Disgusted, or at least feigning disgust, Squee set the rabbit on the ground and let it go. It quickly scampered back down the dune and into the brush.

"We will have to eat something," Gowdy said, watching the creature flee. "Did you find any berries or fruits back there?"

"We found these," Soma produced a handful of small, shiny and squishy red balls.

"We tried one," she added. "They taste terrible, like yellow dirt."

"Probably poisonous," Gowdy remarked, taking one and studying it closely.

"Not for humans," he said, and popped it into his mouth. He rolled the thing around on his tongue before biting down on it, and making a disapproving face.

"Quite right," he said. "Juicy but bitter. Some nutritional value. They'll do fine."

Soma divided up the rest and handed them out and the three munched quietly while the afternoon continued to proceed towards dusk and still nobody arrived to check on the fire in the booth-like place. Squee settled down for a nap while Soma and Gowdy talked quietly about the possibility of heading toward what looked like mountains far off in the distance behind the wetlands. A strip of clouds had gathered there low along the horizon, which is what gave Gowdy the idea, although the mountains, if there were any, could not themselves be seen. Gowdy wanted to stay along the coast, thinking there was a better chance of finding people. Soma was not interested in finding people. She wanted to explore, and anything new and different was always good, in her mind. She wouldn't dream of heading off on her own, though. She was, like all of her kind, essentially a pack animal.

The sun was going down behind the water, glowing huge and red beneath the pinkening sky, when they heard the sounds of voices coming closer. The watchers scrambled to their knees and poked their heads out through the grass to see who was approaching.

Chapter Five

It seemed they came out of nowhere. One minute there was no one and the next there they were, two young people, a boy and a girl, or a man and a woman. Gowdy could not be sure of their ages. They looked very similar, extremely thin, nearly skeletal, with long straight blond hair and naked, dripping yellowish skin. They must have just come out of the water, he thought, but couldn't recall hearing any splashing. They walked side by side, straight up to the fire hut, speaking to each other in a familiar-

sounding language. As they came closer, he could make out some of the words and realized they were not only in English, but American English. Gowdy almost smiled. He was sure he was on the right track after all. He'd been worried they'd find themselves on the other side of the planet, far from the homeland of his enemies. He would have journeyed as far as he had to, but he'd rather not have to.

They watched as the two young people walked behind the hut, knelt down, and began to clear away an area of sand with their hands. They uncovered some sort of enclosure hidden below the beach, a box or a chest. They opened its lid and removed a neatly tied bundle of sticks which they set aside, then closed to top again, and covered it over with sand again. They stood and the male untied the bundle and carried the wood back around to the front of the hut while the female followed. Now they were hidden from view, Gowdy decided it was time to come out. He emerged from the grass and walked down from the dune with Soma and Squee right behind him. When they got to the fire hut, they saw the people again kneeling and both involved in arranging the sticks in a pile on the floor. They did not notice the strangers but silently went about their business.

Once all the sticks had been placed in the pyramid-like heap, they stood up and took two paces back from the entrance. The female bowed slightly and slowly raised her left hand, palm up, until it was level with her chin. At that moment, the sticks burst into flame, seemingly by themselves. The couple turned to each other and leaned their faces together to touch noses.

"How'd they do that?" Squee burst out, startling the couple. The man let out a shout, something like "ha!" as he turned and curled his fingers towards his palms in a gesture none of the immortals understood. Getting a good look at them for the first time, Gowdy noticed they had several folds of skin along the lines of their ribs, neat rows of flab that contrasted sharply with their otherwise bony bodies. Their fingers were much longer than a normal person, and their ears seem to be pinned back and welded to the skull rather than protruding.

"Hello," Soma said with a smile, stepping forward, holding her hands out in a friendly way. The couple both took a step back toward the fire and the man thrust his chin forward and made another grunting sound, this time like "er!". If he thought he was frightening the strangers, he was quite mistaken.

"Don't be afraid," Soma said. "We can be nice." She looked back at Gowdy and gestured for him to make a nicer face. She knew he could do it if he tried, and he did make an attempt, if not much of one. Squee imitated the man's recent grunting noise, which only had the effect of making the couple's eyes widen even more.

"What are you doing?" Soma asked, determined to get the conversation going. This time the female spoke up.

"Keeping the fire," she said.

"Why?" Soma asked, but there was no response.

"Do you live around here?" Soma asked. The woman shook her head.

"Where are your people?" Gowdy interrupted, prompting the man to answer this time, but not in words. He raised his hand and pointed out towards the ocean. Gowdy turned to look in that direction, then turned back.

"There's an island out there?"

The man shrugged, and looked at his companion. She seemed anxious and shook her head wildly. The man shifted his glance from Squee to Soma and finally to Gowdy.

"We have to do it now. Go away."

"Do what?" Gowdy asked as the woman grabbed the man's hand and started pulling him closer to her.

"Now," the man repeated. "Go away."

"I think we'd better back off," Soma suggested, and Gowdy reluctantly agreed. The couple's agitation was growing by the second. They were beginning to shake and quiver so violently it seemed they might burst. Soma led Gowdy and Squee back to the dunes behind the hut and, looking back, saw the couple fall on each other and begin to writhe on the sand and coil about each other like struggling serpents. It took her some moments to realize what was going on.

"Oh," she sighed as they reached their grass hiding place.

"Yes, that," Gowdy agreed. "Must be some sort of ritual."

"Did you see their bodies?" Soma asked.

"Very strange," Gowdy nodded.

"I think they're nice," Squee put in but the others ignored him.

The couple squirmed about on the beach for a few minutes, making a variety of noises that ranged from cooing to whistling while the immortals spied on them from their hidden spot. Then the two leaped up and ran plunging into the surf. Gowdy and the children came back down to the fire hut, hoping to catch the two in a better frame of body and mind after their horizontal dance, but the scrawny couple did not re-emerge from the ocean. Not once did they even come up to breathe, but were gone, submerged and lost from view for good.

Chapter Six

"Do you think they drowned?" Squee asked.

"Drowned," Gowdy corrected for what might have been the millionth time. Squee was not interested in retention.

"I don't think so," Soma said, picking up Scratch and giving him a good scratching behind the ears. The rat had stayed with them the entire time, straying for a time into the marshland but reappearing shortly after the new fire had been lit, and the smoke reached his nose.

"I think they live in the water," she added.

"But what are they?" Squee wanted to know.

"Must be mutants," Gowdy concluded.

"Like us?" Soma asked.

"Maybe, but different," he told her. "I wouldn't put anything past those humans. God only knows the mischief they've been up to since they locked us away. It's a wonder the planet's even still here! Last thing I remember they were cooking it up, burning everything in sight just to keep all their little motors running. Couldn't get along without burning."

"Maybe that's still true," Soma said, stepping closer to the fire inside the hut. "Did you see how it just turned itself on?"

"I'm wondering why they're hiding those bundles under the beach."

"Think we should take some with us?"

"Nah. I'd leave it. But we can camp out here for the night, I think."

The children needed no more encouraging, but plopped themselves right down on the sand near the warmth and promptly dozed off. Gowdy remained awake for a time, gazing out over the ocean and wondering. The strange mer-people had frightened him nearly as much as he had frightened them, he thought. What if it was all gone, everything he'd ever known? What if nothing was the same?

"At least they spoke English," he comforted himself, as if that one link would suffice to justify the

retribution he had in mind, and anyone who spoke it was eligible to take responsibility for everything they had suffered.

In the morning, they gathered some more of the red berries, and pulled out some satisfactory tubers from beneath the streams as well. The day had dawned warm already, especially by the fire which was amazingly long-lasting, the smallish sticks hardly burnt through at all, and since they had nothing in which to carry water, they drank to fill their bellies, and then proceeded north along the coastline. Gowdy had anticipated more little structures like the fire hut, but they did not encounter any, and the long day turned into a colder night, and then another's day march after that. On the evening of that second day, they finally came across something more promising.

From the distance it seemed like it must be a mirage, a gigantic pink castle floating above the waves around a gentle bend of the beach. Soma and Squee made a bet with each other that the building wasn't really there, and true to form raced off in pursuit, leaving Gowdy and the rat behind. They didn't stop a hundred yards ahead, as the old man expected, but kept going, until they reached it. Then they rushed back to inform Gowdy of their discovery. Soma was more out of breath so it was Squee who reported.

"It's a Grand Resort," he said, "Soma says so. There was a sign and she read it."

"Grand Hyatt Nomador," Soma wheezed, catching her breath.

"Grand Hyatt?" Gowdy could not believe it. "What about the people? Tell me about the people."

The kids glanced at each other and frowned in disappointment.

"We didn't see anybody," Squee admitted

"Of course we didn't look much," Soma brightened. "Come on and see," and she tugged at Gowdy's arm but he didn't need the encouragement. His old legs youthened enough to pick up the pace, and soon they were all together at the entrance of the great hotel.

The lobby was deserted, and completely quiet except for the occasional screeching of a bright red parrot who sat on a perch by a small marble pond. The stone floors were refreshing cool on their feet, and the luxurious surroundings made them all feel a bit strange. To one side, a long wooden desk shone with polish, while throughout the floor huge pillars held up a ceiling more than a hundred feet high, carved with images of angels and gods and exotic creatures. The walls were black-streaked marble and comfortable white lounge chairs were strategically arranged to afford the best views out the back of the room out onto the ocean. Everything was immaculately clean. Gowdy felt rooted to the floor at the entrance trying to take it all in. He had been in such a hotel, once upon a time. It must have been, he couldn't have calculated, possibly hundreds of years before, or maybe it was only decades. There was no way to know. He knew the year of his imprisonment, but not the year it was now. It occurred to him to hunt for clues, paper or computer, but he saw nothing like that. The desks were clear as were all the little tables arranged near the seats.

Eventually, the three began to move around, inspecting the place more closely. Squee naturally was interested most in the parrot, whom he tried to talk to but who did not correspond except with a squawks. Soma ran to every corner and peered down carpeted hallways, but didn't want to leave the general area by herself. Gowdy looked into the offices in search of any kind of text but found, again, not a trace of information. He rejoined the children by the parrot and was about to announce the next phase of the plan he had in mind, when he became aware of a whirring noise above him, and looked up to see a sort of disc hovering in the air a few feet above them. It was gray and metallic looking with a bubble in the middle and what appeared to be grooves like little windows all along the edges. Startled, Gowdy realized the thing looked exactly like old images of a flying saucer, only it was no more than a foot in diameter and a few inches in height.

The saucer shifted laterally and moved quite rapidly, zooming above each of their heads in succession

and making a short, subtle clicking noise each time, and then it was gone, as quickly as it had appeared. None of them could see which direction it went.

"Poof!" Squee exclaimed.

"What do you think?" Soma asked in a concerned tone.

"Spies," Gowdy pronounced with confidence. "Surveillance. Enemies." He seemed almost cheered by the notion.

"Now they know we're here," he continued, "it'll be their move. But we can act in the meantime. I suggest we stick together, though."

"Me, too," Soma nodded.

"Sure," Squee pitched in agreeably.

"Then lead on," Gowdy instructed Soma, who turned and led them down what she felt was the most promising hallway, one that wrapped around the perimeter of the building to the right of where they were, carpeted but under an arcade, exposed to the sea on the outside. They passed a series of metal doors on their right, which Gowdy informed them were called 'elevators' and were something they should look into later. Then they passed a large dining area fronted by a palm-laden stream which ran clear and swiftly beside white table-clothed tables with unlit candles upon them. After that the hallway turned to the left, and the doors they went by had numbers beside them, and smooth metal handles.

"These are the guest rooms," Gowdy told them. "Inside we'll find comfortable beds and other nice things," but Squee, tugging at the handles, complained they could never get in.

"We'll find a way," Gowdy said. "The thing to look for is people. Once we find them, well, then we will."

And yet there was no one. They climbed up stairs and walked down more halls, exploring not only the main building but the smaller ones off to the side. Out in the back there were pools and waterfalls and slides, all very well kept, all looking fresh and inviting, but no one was in them, not in the hot tubs, not in the ocean, not in the restaurants, not in the shops which they saw full of clothing and gadgets and items for every occasion. The hotel was a ghost town. All they did see were more of the small flying saucers, darting in and out of view every so often, and keeping well out of reach above their heads.

Chapter Seven

They scouted around the outer perimeter of the ground floor of main building once more, but from the outside all the shades were drawn and the patio doors closed and locked. There was no way into any of the rooms, and no way even to see inside them. Gowdy was thinking about finding a rock and hurling it through the glass but was all of a sudden knocked off his feet and bumped his head against the window instead.

"Woah," Squee was shrieking, "did you see that?"

"I don't know," Soma chattered, "I don't know what I saw. Something flying all right, went right passed us. Wait, there they are," and she pointed up to the top of the building. Gowdy, rubbing his head, looked up and caught a glimpse of what had to be people, but couldn't be. They reminded him of the mer-people in their skinny blondness but the extra folds of skin they had appeared to be on their arms and shoulders, not on their chests. Six, no seven of them, but as he finished counting they all together leaped off the roof and cycling in the air, turned about and disappeared over the building.

"I want to go up there," Squee declared, heading for the stairwell. Soma followed before Gowdy could get a word in. He was too tired, and only wanted to get into one of those suites and lie down on what he knew had to be the most comfortable bed he would have slept on in ages. Sighing, he returned to the

lobby and down the first hall they'd taken, planning on trying all the doors again, and maybe smashing one of the handles if he could. He'd barely reached the first room when a loud clicking noise reverberated all up and down the hall, and every single door swung open at the same instant. From each door, a single person emerged. There were both men and women, and like the creatures from the sea, they were all golden-skinned, blond and slender. They were all nude except for colorful boxer-type shorts, and proceeded to glide past him without a word as he stood back to let them pass.

He could distinguish the genders from the slight variations in shape, the females' hips and small breasts, the males' narrow waists and greater height. The men were all between six foot and six two or three. Gowdy was himself a bit over six feet but weighed at least fifty pounds more than these skeletal figures. They did sport different hair styles, practically their only distinguishing characteristic among them, for they all had the same shade of sky blue eyes, and appeared to be at least siblings, if not in fact actual clones of one another. None seemed to notice his existence, and after the last one - there had been at least twenty - had gone by him, he followed to see where they would go. He was not surprised when he saw them enter the patio dining area and seat themselves, four to a table, and sit quietly, glancing occasionally at one another, but not speaking until everyone had settled down.

That was when another figure entered the room from the opposite direction. This young man had curly and short auburn hair, his skin was more orange and his eyes somewhat brownish-green. He was wearing a light white suit and open-toed brown sandals. He stood in the center of the dining area and seemed to be counting the guests with his eyes. He was about to speak, but then he noticed Gowdy, standing at the edge of the patio, and raised his hand, motioning for Gowdy to enter and pointed at an empty table. Gowdy approached it, and at a further gesture, sat himself down. The man, who could either be host or servant, seemed satisfied and removed a small golden bell from his pants pocket. He gave it a little shake, at which a single pure high tone sounded, like a tuning fork. At that signal, the guests brought their right hands up and, using the middle finger, each tapped three times in rapid succession upon the table in front of them. Instantly, plates appeared, full of food, and utensils, napkins and liquid-filled glasses also popped out of nowhere, and everyone began to eat.

Gowdy's place alone remained foodless. The host - or servant - noticed this, and walked briskly over to him.

"You are not hungry, sir?" He asked politely.

"Oh, I'm hungry," Gowdy replied.

"Then tap," the man said. Gowdy hesitated and the man repeated his command.

"Tap," he encouraged. As Gowdy still did not move, the man leaned over and tapped on Gowdy's table for him. As with the others, food appeared.

"I did not know what you desired," the man apologized, "so I only ordered what I myself might like at this time." Gowdy blinked and stared at the meal, which consisted of grilled prawns and green beans, an avocado salad, fresh bread, and sparkling lemonade.

"It looks, it looks great," he sputtered, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Please, enjoy," said the man, who turned and walked away, leaving the room towards what Gowdy presumed must be the kitchen. Everyone else was eating, each with a different customized meal it seemed, and he was truly hungry, so he began to eat. The food was astonishingly delicious. It made him forget all about Squee and Soma and everything he'd been intending to do. He felt strangely light-headed as well, almost giddy. He ate slowly, determined to finish off every last crumb, and didn't notice how the others were rushing through their dinner, and had all departed soundlessly. When he finally did look up from his plate, he saw that all the tables were cleared and once again spotless and neat. Gowdy stood up, but almost immediately toppled to the floor as if his feet refused to hold him up. He tried to get up, but found he lacked the strength, and only managed to crawl a few feet before giving up and

lying down on the stone floor, exhausted. He lay there for some time, panting and feeling feverish. He imagined he had fallen asleep and was dreaming that someone was shaking him, and it took him a few minutes to realize that someone really was.

It was one of the blond men, a youth with impossibly tangled curls and very large teeth, or so it seemed to Gowdy. The teeth made quite an impression on him.

"Yo, dude," the man was saying, "you all right, man? You don't look so hot right now."

"What?" Gowdy was certain he was either dreaming or hallucinating. The kid spoke just like one of Gowdy's sons had so very long ago.

"Must have been the lemonade," the guy was saying, "Hector likes that stuff but no one else can really handle it. He sure did you one. Yeah, he sure did."

"Lemonade?" Gowdy murmured, while the man bent down and pulled Gowdy up to a sitting position, before sitting down beside him.

"You're like new here, right?" he said, "I can always tell when there's a new guy. Not like there ever is a new guy, but if there ever was, I'd be pretty sure that I could tell. For one thing, you're like really old. Or maybe it's just the lemonade gave you all those gray hairs? Could be, man, I wouldn't put it past it. That stuff's like literally retarded."

"No," Gowdy nearly growled, coming slowly back to his senses. "It wasn't the lemonade. Yes, I am, like you say, really old. And I do mean really, really old."

"I believe you, man," the young man laughed, "like, wow, like, I don't know. Like, woah." And he sat back, at a complete loss of words.

"Where are we?" Gowdy asked.

"Nomador," the young man replied at once, with a tone of surprise that anyone would even ask such a question.

"What country?" Gowdy asked, and before the man could answer, he added, "also what year is it?"

"Country? Year?" The young man shrugged as if those terms were utterly foreign to him.

"What's your name, then?" Gowdy asked, determined to learn at least something.

"Oh, you can call me Kai," the man said. "Everybody calls me Kai."

"All right," Gowdy said, and struggled to his feet. He stood a bit wobbly, but stood nevertheless. Kai also got up and held out his hand in an offer to help steady the old man, but Gowdy waved him off.

"What can you tell me about this place?" Gowdy asked. "We've come a long way and we don't know where we are."

Kai looked around to see if anyone else was there.

"We?" he asked.

"My friends," Gowdy said, "they went upstairs. To see about those, the flying people."

"Flying people?" Kai seemed confused.

"Yes," Gowdy said, "we saw, or we thought we saw, some people up there, it looked like they were flying."

"On the roof?" Kai said. "How can you fly on a roof? You'd have to fly in the, oh," he interrupted himself, "you mean the flock."

"The flock?"

"Yeah, yeah, the flock. Sometimes they perch up there on the ledge for a minute. But they don't fly o

the roof, man, they fly in the air."

"Right," Gowdy shook his head. "What else do they do?"

"The flock? They don't 'do' anything. They just flock around." Kai giggled at his joke and Gowdy waited patiently.

"What else can you tell me?"

"I don't know," said Kai. "Where did you come from? You said you came a long way. Where from?"

"We came up the beach," he started to explain, but Kai interrupted and said,\

"Well, duh. You couldn't have come from anywhere else."

"What about inland?" Gowdy asked.

"What's that?"

"Behind the beach, towards the mountains."

"Mountains?"

"Yes, look, I'll show you," Gowdy said, and started walking away, intending to show Kai the view from in front of the lobby. He'd only gone a few steps when he turned back and to his utter surprise, saw that Kai was gone, without a trace. Gowdy could not be sure if he'd simply imagined the entire episode and was still standing there, puzzled, when Soma appeared by his side and said,

"We found a way into a room, but Squee won't go in. He wants to sleep on the roof. Says he's happier up and out in the open."

"I'm sure he is," Gowdy nodded, as he followed Soma towards the stairs.

Chapter Eight

Gowdy felt as if he were still inside of a dream. Soma had led him to the room, a suite on the top floor of the hotel with two bedrooms, each with a plush king size bed, two bathrooms, a full kitchen and living room with leather seats and couches facing a glass wall overlooking the beach and the ocean below. He could see some figures splashing in the waves and assumed they were the same creatures he'd seen in the dining room earlier. Soma was peppering him with questions about the various articles she was pulling out of drawers and cabinets, objects he had only vague memories of, such as wine bottle openers, ice makers, potato mashers, crock pots, tumblers and toasters, but as he described their names and functions to her his own voice sounded to him like it was coming from deep below the surface of the sea. His head was spinning and he nearly lost his balance a couple of times. Soma could tell that something was wrong, so she led him into one of the bedrooms and had him lie down. She threw a blanket over him and sat down on a chair beside the bed. She spoke to him quietly.

"Bombarda?"

He didn't answer right away. His eyes were open and staring up at the ceiling. His face was very red and damp.

"Bombarda? What's wrong?" the girl asked. He turned towards her and muttered something. She had to make him repeat himself a few times before she understood he was saying that he'd eaten their food, and drank their beverage. He mentioned the names Hector and Kai and tried to tell her what he'd seen or imagined he'd seen but she couldn't follow any of it.

"I must be sick," he said, and realized it must have been decades or even centuries since he'd even known anyone to be ill. His kind could never have that experience, and yet, here he was, and he was having it. What could it mean?

"What is sick?" Soma wanted to know, but he couldn't explain it to her. He couldn't speak any more, but fell fast asleep. She stayed and watched him for a little while, trying to think of what she could possibly do to help him feel better, and realized she had not a single idea. Certainly it would do no good to ask Squee, but that idea sparked another one in her mind, the idea of getting some help from someone. She decided that Gowdy wouldn't be any worse off without her sitting there doing nothing, so she got up and went back downstairs, hoping to find someone to talk to.

The halls were deserted, as was the lobby and the dining room and the kitchen. She was just about to head out towards the beach when the bathers came striding in, single file just as they'd done earlier, alternating male, female, male, female, and all without making a sound. They were all completely dry and clean, and showed no signs of having been either in the water or on the beach, but she was certain she had seen them in the waves only minutes before from the windows upstairs. They moved past her without taking notice of her presence, and she determined to follow them, just as Gowdy had done before, only she was not content to hang back and just wait and watch. She picked one female and caught up with her, walked along next to her, struggling to keep up with the other's longer legs, and when they came to the door of her room, it opened by itself, and Soma slid right in along with the female.

Soma stood just inside the door and watched as the woman walked into the bathroom, closed the door, and emerged a minute or so later. The room was smaller than the suite upstairs, but was every bit as luxurious, from the leather seating to the polished wooden desk and table, the bedroom off to the side where she could see a neatly made bed with several fluffy pillows and a clean white comforter on top. The shades were drawn on the windows but still the room was full of light. When the woman reappeared, it seemed she still had not sensed Soma's presence.

"Hello?" Soma said, walking up to her. The woman did not hear and continued to walk on toward the bedroom. Soma went in right behind her and then briefly tugged on the woman's elbow. The female turned, blinked once or twice, did not look down, then turned back again and was about to climb into bed when Soma grabbed her arm again and this time did not let go.

"Hey," Soma said, louder. "Can you hear me? Can you see me? I'm right here."

After a few perplexing moments, while the woman looked to her right, then to her left, but still not down at her arm to see what was holding it, Soma jumped up and down a few times and managed to place herself momentarily in the woman's field of vision. The woman finally noticed her and wrinkled her nose in a sort of snarl.

"What is this?" she said out loud.

"I'm a person," Soma said. "What are you?"

The woman did not register the words. She repeated her earlier question and Soma saw that she was not talking to her, but was gazing at a spot high up on the opposite wall. Soma followed the woman's sight line and saw a small oval protrusion near the ceiling. It looked like a goose egg half stuck into the wall, mostly gray with some black spots. Soma looked back at the woman, who said, for the third time,

"What is this?"

"It is a little girl," came a gentle, man's voice from the lump in the wall. "No worries," it added.

The woman nodded, and with her hand carefully touched Soma's, and removed it from her arm. Then she proceeded to get into the bed and under the covers, where she instantly fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

While Soma searched throughout the hotel for Hector or Kai or anyone walking around at all, Squee

was up on the roof attempting to play with the flock. He'd found them all gathered on the edge, hopping about on their toes and flapping their arms wildly while shrieking odd noises as loud as they could. It seemed they were all trying to startle one another off of the building, and every now and then they succeeded, and one would slip or at least seem to slip and fall off the side, only to raise themselves up once again with rapid flutterings and kicks. Squee counted more than seven of them. There were not many more, but he tended to lose count after seven. At close range he noticed they were not so much like the sea people as he'd originally suspected. Yes, they had extra folds of skin, but these were loose and flappy, not bound to the bodies like the mer-people's were. Also, they weren't nearly as tall, ranging from only slightly taller than himself to maybe another six inches higher. They looked very young, too. He would have guessed they were more like the sixteen year olds of the forest than grown-ups. Most were boys. Only two appeared to be females, but he wasn't quite sure, since they all looked very similar and were crowded together in a bunch.

Every time he approached, and he tried to be as quiet and sneaky as possible, they took notice and blasted off altogether, flying to the opposite side of the building, where they landed in a heap and regrouped, much like pigeons or gulls. Their voices were not only loud but annoying as well, even to Squee, who could grunt and squeal with great volume but whose tone was not nearly as grating. They reminded him of amplified squirrels, but although he could pretty much understand everything a squirrel could say, the words of the flock were nonsense to him, and he realized it might take a long time to learn their peculiar language. There was something tremendously attractive about them, and Squee eventually settled into a corner and watched as the night began to fall and the flock went about their rituals and routines. Then, just as the sun was about to disappear for the day, they took off and flew away. Squee leaped up and ran to the edge to see if he could follow their track, but they soon vanished inland into the night.

After that, Squee couldn't rest. He paced up and down, back and forth, growing more restless by the minute. His thoughts began to get jumbled up, not at all like his usual mental wanderings. He wondered what happened to Soma and started to feel angry with her for not being with him. It occurred to him for the very first time that he had no idea whatsoever what he was even doing out there in that place, out of his old forest home and onto this strange and baffling shore, where the people didn't make any sense, and he was suddenly determined to go anywhere else but remain where he was. He rushed down the stairs and back to the room that Soma had found, where the door was still propped open, but inside now there was Gowdy, groaning and asleep on the bed.

Squee looked around and, seeing the sink, went over and turned it on to splash water all over his face. That didn't help. He was still as agitated as before, and didn't know what he would do if Soma didn't turn up. He might just go running off all by himself. Fortunately, she did come back to the room only minutes after Squee, having found nothing and no one after that one silly creature. Squee shouted to see her and jumped up and down before dashing over and grabbing her by the waist and squeezing her tightly. Soma had to wrest herself free and push him away, all the time trying to get him to hush.

"Ssh," she whispered, "look. Bombarda got sick. He ate some of their food. I think it was bad."

"Why'd he do that?" Squee said, and snorted his disapproval.

"I don't know," Soma told him, taking his arm and leading him away from the bedroom.

"I don't like it here," Squee told her, and she nodded.

"Me either," she said.

"I think we should go somewhere else."

"Me too," she agreed, "but I don't know what to do about him."

"We could leave him," Squee said and Soma looked shocked.

"Leave Bombarda? We can't do that!"

"Why not? He can take care of himself."

"Squee! I can't believe you're saying that. We always stick together."

"Sure, you and me," he said, and his voice was growing louder by the second. "But not him. He's not like us."

"No," Soma said, "We're not leaving without him."

Squee sighed. He could never argue with Soma. She was the boss, but for the first time he could ever remember he wasn't liking it, not one bit. He wanted to go after the flock. He was afraid they were getting farther away all the time, and for some reason which he couldn't have explained, he was having a hard time breathing when he thought he might never see them again.

"There were saucers up there on the roof," he found himself saying, although it wasn't true. "And they were flashing these blue lights all over, right on me. They followed wherever I went. I was scared."

Soma nodded, and bit her lower lip to show her concern. She was always protective of him, and he knew that. If he could convince her that he was in danger, yes, that was the way he could get her to go.

"I want to check on Bombarda," she said, and left Squee to go back to the bedroom, where she sat down beside the old man and looked at him closely. To her surprise, she saw he looked very much younger. His tangled gray hair was turning quite blond, and the old familiar wrinkles on his forehead were gone, replaced by an unfamiliar smoothness. She put a hand on his cheek and felt that the fever was gone. He looked peaceful, relaxed, was breathing very calmly. She took hold of a shoulder and pushed it a little. Gowdy growled quietly, and slowly opened his eyes.

"Soma?" he said. "It's still night?"

"It's still night," she replied. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I think so," he said, surprising even himself. He took a deep breath and began to get up. Yes, he felt pretty good. He sat up on the side of the bed and nearly smiled. He quickly remembered himself and turned that thing back upside down how it belonged.

"Why are we awake?" he wanted to know.

"We think we should go," she answered, and pointed at Squee who'd come up to the edge of the door and was fidgeting, shifting from one foot to the next as if he were dancing.

"Go now?" Gowdy shook his head. "Any reason why now?"

"Squee's being pestered by saucers," Soma said.

"I had a bad feeling about those," Gowdy murmured. "All right, then. I can't say I'm sorry to go."

He was up and into the hall in a bound, with Soma and Squee rushing to catch him. Gowdy realized his body was lighter, and that he had a great deal more energy than he was used to. He practically raced to the stairway and down it, and even felt like laughing. It was all he could do to hold on to his old personality, the mean, the scowling, embittered Bombarda. This new one felt like an acrobat!

They dashed out of the lobby and found themselves back on the still warm sand, and only then did they stop all at once and look at each other. Soma was the first to wonder out loud where they thought they should go. Squee was the first one to answer. He pointed to a narrow dirt trail, leading into the wetlands, on toward the mountains. This was the direction he'd seen the flock go. This was where he was determined to follow. The other two, though mildly surprised at Squee's new found leadership, had no better idea, so they willingly went along behind him.

Chapter Ten

It was a long day's walk through the flat, open wetlands, with the distant mountains only gradually drawing nearer. It was especially trying for Soma, for two reasons. For one, Squee was continually running ahead, sometimes even out of sight for long stretches, and when they did finally catch up to him, he'd be sitting on a creek bank, dangling his feet in the shallow waters, scowling and fretting, restless and moody in a way Soma had never known him to be in all those years together. Then, no sooner had they met him, he'd leap up again and dash off, ever onwards as if aiming his whole body at some invisible target far away. Gowdy presented an equal but nearly opposite problem. Ever since they'd left the hotel, while his body was growing clearly more youthful by the hour, his pace was slowing even more than when he was physically more aged, and he seemed increasingly preoccupied, not with the same weighty thoughts, but with others she could not discern, and he was unable, or at least unwilling, to discuss.

Time and again Soma tried to start up a conversation, remarking on the oddness of all the people and places they'd seen since emerging from the forest, but Gowdy would only nod and murmur something unintelligible. To Soma it was all a big puzzle, and her two longtime companions were now becoming additional pieces. She was not certain they had truly escaped from the prison at all. Maybe, she thought, they'd only stumbled upon a different corner of it, and the creatures in here were somehow like themselves, though perhaps in a completely different way. While she and her friends were what they called "binary-stuck immortals", these other beings seemed estranged from the human race in other particulars. Perhaps this wing of the prison had been added later, after their own confinement, since surely they'd never heard of anyone like these. And the place was not the country or world they'd been torn from. True, many many years had passed, and perhaps they were only on the outskirts, or on some island. It was hard to know. They needed more facts. They needed to arrive at some place where someone could give them answers.

That day did not bring them anywhere and eventually they settled down, well after dark when even Squee would not go on, and camped for the night. They slept soundly, undisturbed by any sounds, not even noticing the absence of insects or birds or fish or animal life of any kind. The marsh was an ecosystem consisting solely of plant-life, and even then sparsely, perhaps a hundred species of plants and grasses and flowers altogether. The next day dawned with no sign of any more life, but Squee seemed to know where he wanted to go. Perhaps he was only guessing, but he struck out as soon as he woke, with only Soma catching a glimpse of him running off. She roused Gowdy and they silently set off after him. The mountains were closer now, much more so than they'd seemed at twilight the previous evening. Soma even suspected that they had somehow been transported while they slept, as if the whole plain were riding on a buried conveyor belt. She even stopped once to see if they would continue moving, but since they didn't, she wrote it off as one more jagged, irregular piece of nonsense that was beyond fitting together. Maybe it doesn't need to, she thought. Maybe we just go on, and let the mysteries slip by like leaves on a gently flowing stream.

Gowdy was not paying attention, at least not to his immediate surroundings, but every now and then he'd turn his head and look back at where they'd been. Soma had to stop, and take him by the arm to get him going forward again. When she asked him what he was thinking, he merely shook his head and said nothing. She was beginning to grow annoyed with this new and strange Bombarda, and was missing the old curmudgeon. She tried to rally him with talk of vengeance.

"Any day now," she said, 'we're going to find the bastards who locked us away, oh yes. And when we do. Ha! There will be hell to pay. Am I right?"

"What's that?" Gowdy mildly replied. His own words so often repeated, now flung back at him by his protege, seemed to make no impression.

"Revenge!" she reminded him. "Remember the plan?"

"Oh right," he nodded, unconvincingly. "The plan. Vengeance. Yes. They'll be sorry."

Soma sighed in disgust. Her Bombarda was no longer the grizzly old coot she'd grown so fond of. His steel gray hair was now entirely blond and curly where once it hung straight. His body was lighter than ever, as skinny as a child, but toned and even tanned, as if he'd been out sunbathing for years instead of lurking in a cool dark hut in the woods. Even his teeth seemed whiter, and his eyes more blue. If only he weren't so slow, she muttered, wondering where Scratch had run off to, wondering if maybe this time they'd lose Squee for good as well.

They didn't. He came running back through the narrow path, shouting over and over about finding something. A house. And when he arrived all out of breath it took several starts to get the whole story out, about how he'd found an old abandoned house not far ahead, all broken down and rotting, surrounded by a broken metal fence, and inside there were chairs and pictures and stuff, and it looked like there used to be a barn next to the house, only now it was just a pile of boards and random slabs of cement. By the time they got there, Squee had finally tired of repeating the same report over and over again, and the other two could see that everything was just as he'd said. He had failed to mention a few details, such as the fact that the second and third stories had no floors remaining intact, so you could only gaze up at what was left of their rooms from the bottom. The house was large and still more or less in one piece from the outside. It had been neglected for long enough that all the paint was completely gone and there was no way to know what colors it had ever been. The old fence mostly served now as railings for ivy and weeds, and all of the doors and windows of the building were gone.

Soma and Squee investigated every corner of the ground floor while Gowdy stood around and didn't do much. He'd found himself drawn to an old and battered wooden trunk that occupied one corner. He studied it for some time, ignoring the squeals and shouts of the children as they loudly announced each and every discovery, from rusty old cast iron pots in the kitchen to a buried hatchet found beside the ruins of a staircase. Eventually, Gowdy knelt down and lifted the trunk's lid. If he was surprised by what he found inside, he did not reveal it. He remained on his knees leaning over the contents, occasionally reaching in with a hand before withdrawing it without touching anything. It was Soma who said out loud what Gowdy was seeing.

"Books!" she shouted, and as Squee came running over she grabbed one and lifted it high over her head.

"A lot of books!" she yelled, and now Squee was jumping at them and pulling them out one by one and stacking them onto the floor. They were all kinds of books, from hard-cover picture books to drugstore paperbacks, some illustrated children's books, several thin novels with barely enough pages to allow for a title on the spine, more robust bestsellers and even a few spiral bound cookbooks.

"Careful with those!" Gowdy instructed, and the children slowed down their pillage just enough to make it look like they were being obedient. They had none of them seen a book since their imprisonment, however long ago that had been. Soma could read, a little. Gowdy would sometimes scratch out sentences in the mud by the lake and give the children lessons, but in her excitement at seeing all these books the words all looked like gibberish to her. She tried to make herself calm down enough to spell out the titles one word at a time, but was finding it more and more difficult to breathe. The dust in the house and the dust from the books gave her such a bad coughing spell she had to go outside and rest for a bit. Squee finished unloading the trunk and then spent a little time rearranging the piles, but soon got bored with that and went outside to join her. Only Gowdy remained in the house, studying the spines and the covers. He made only the slightest sound, barely a whisper, when he read the titles of three of his own once popular books, and his full name from that former life, R. A. Gowdy.

Chapter Eleven

"Well, well! What have we here?" A deep voice boomed right above Soma's head so loudly she thought at first it was an earthquake. Whipping around, she saw, instead of boulders flying and mountains tumbling, an enormous man, at least six foot five, at least three hundred pounds, towering over her and Squee and peering down at them with tiny eyes concealed within a mass of shaggy hair. His beard seemed as long as the children were tall, and he was wearing old denim overalls over a red plaid shirt, and work boots as big as the rocks Soma had expected to come falling on her head.

"Ruffians!" the man exclaimed. "Vagabonds! Layabouts! Why are you sneaking around my house!"

"Your house?" Soma piped up, emphasizing the second word. "It's a wreck, more like it. How can somebody live here and claim it? I'd be embarrassed myself!"

"Yeah, it's a mess!" Squee chimed in. "And dirty, really dirty."

"My home nevertheless," the giant scolded them, "and I don't recall inviting any pipsqueak scalawags to rummage through my belongings. Where'd you get that?"

He grabbed the book Soma had been holding and tore it from her hands. After inspecting it for any apparent new damage, he brought it down and that's when Soma and Squee first noticed the cart. It was a rickety thing on ancient wheels, about waist high to the man, made of slats of pallet crate wood, with drawers barely attached here and there to its sides. The man pulled open one of these and stuffed the book in with the few others already inside it, then he slammed it shut before Soma could get a better look at them.

"That's private," he declared, "not for prying eyes, especially not some young ones."

"Why? What's so special about that old book?" Soma asked.

"Why, that's an original R.A. Gowdy," the man said, seemingly astonished at her ignorance. "Aye, and there's another," he nearly shouted, as the real Gowdy appeared in the doorway. The giant stepped over to him and snatched away the book he was holding as well.

"Two Gowdy's, he said. What do you know about that? You all must be collectors. Sent by the service, were you? Well, you won't get them. Nobody gets their mitts on my masters." He huffed back to his cart and shoved the other book into the same side drawer.

"What do you know about Gowdy?" he asked, staring down at Soma, who shrugged.

"Nothing," she replied.

"They say he never died," the man winked at her. "What do you think about that?"

"Some people can't!" Squee shouted, before Soma could get her hand onto his mouth to shut him up.

"But everybody dies," she quickly added,

"Do they now?" the man rubbed his beard and surveyed his visitors, the two children standing beneath him, and the oddly quiet man still standing in the doorway.

"I suppose it's how you define the word 'death'," he said. "There are those who are born to die, but then there are others," and at this he glanced at Gowdy again, "those who are made, and you cannot call their ends a death, now can you? It's more of a cessation I should say, a shutting down, a turning off. Them that aren't quite living if you know what I'm talking about."

"No," Soma declared. "I don't."

"But that's all for dinner table conversation," he said, suddenly smiling and rubbing his hands together.

"I suppose you must be rather hungry, all out here in the middle of nothing at all for some reason."

"No thank you," she said, still keeping her hand near Squee's face. Squee had gotten the message,

though, and wasn't planning on speaking again anytime soon. "We're not hungry."

"Not hungry? Well, that's saying something. Indeed," and again he glanced over at Gowdy and said, "some of you might have eaten the wrong thing, and that fairly recently, I'd guess."

"What do you know about it?" Soma asked. "What's happening to him, and how can we fix it, and what were those creatures back there, and where are we anyway, and who are you? My name is Soma and this is my friend Squee, and Bombarda there is our leader."

The giant laughed and said,

"You're a little girl with a lot of questions now, aren't you?" He studied her face for a few moments.

"As for me," he said, "call me Red Cliff. As to where you are, well, let me first ask you this. Where do you want to be?"

Soma sighed and looked over at Bombarda, but he gave no indication that he was even following the conversation. His blank expression gave her the impression that he was actually fast asleep on his feet.

"We want to be where the people are," she said, "the real people, I mean."

"Yes," Red Cliff nodded, "the real people. I know what you mean. Sometimes we long for the good old days, don't we, when it was possible to know, for sure. When the only genetically modified organisms were the ones you ate, not the ones you were. Back before the people were bred, like sheepdogs. Like sheep, more like it. Happily grazing all day long! Oh, you can find a real person now and then, but people? A whole bunch of them at once? That will be hard to do, young lady. Doesn't matter where you go."

"But where are we?" Soma repeated.

"And when?" Squee blurted out. He couldn't help himself. It was something Bombarda had drilled into him, the wanting to know about the when.

"Been away?" The big man queried.

"Just wandering a bit," Soma said, "We kind of lost track."

Again she glanced at Bombarda, but he was still of absolutely no use. They'd finally encountered someone who could help him with his scheme, she thought, and now he was - what was he?

"What did they do to him?" she asked, pointing at Bombarda. "He ate some of their food back at the beach."

"And drank something too, I'd wager," Red Cliff said. Soma nodded.

"Orange juice?" he asked, then shook his head. "No, if it were orange juice, he'd have more facial hair. Soda pop? But then he'd have more energy. If I had to guess, I'd say it was probably lemonade. The hair, you know, and the lethargy."

"He had a fever," she said, "and he's lost a lot of weight."

"More than that," Red Cliff told her. "Chances are he's lost his mind as well. His old mind, that is. The one with the usual thoughts and memories. He'll have a new one now, but it will come pre-configured, initialized, if you will, stocked with selected thoughts and memories. Good ones, for the most part. Happy ones."

"How do we get him back?" Soma asked, alarmed. Red Cliff shook his head.

"Never heard of it," he said. "I'm not saying it's impossible, mind you, just that it's never been done."

Soma suddenly burst into tears. She'd suspected as much, but now that Red Cliff had confirmed her worst fears, she was overwhelmed by the realization that Bombarda truly was no more, and that everything he was, everything he had ever been was lost forever.

"But if you want to find people," Red Cliff hurriedly went on, disturbed by her outburst and wanting only to get rid of these unwelcome guests, "here, take this," and he opened another drawer, and pulling out a rolled up sheet of paper handed it to Soma. She unfurled it and saw at once it was a sort of map, crudely drawn, but there on the bottom, that had to be the ocean, and the hotel was marked with a large red 'X'. Above it were grasses and above them were squiggles and curves that were meant to be the mountains right in front of them now. Off to the left there was a long stretch of grasses ending at the ocean once again. To the right, still on this side of the mountains, there were smaller hills indicated, and tree-like shapes, and what looked like a collection of houses, squares and rectangles clustered together. She put her finger on that area and looked up at Red Cliff.

"Yes," he told her, "that is Greenland. You'll find people there. Many people. Maybe not the ones you're looking for, but at least there's some. Even real ones, yes. Maybe you'll find who you're looking for."

Maybe, Soma said to herself, but how will I know?

Chapter Twelve

Squee needed no prodding. The thrill of discovery of the old house had worn off the moment Red Cliff had surprised them, and he was more than ready to continue his pursuit of the flock. Soma had some more questions for their ungracious host, but realized he had deliberately not answered most of the ones she'd already asked, so she grabbed Bombarda and led him away from there. They walked well into the night, Soma clutching her old mentor in one hand and the rolled up map in the other. She determined that if the map was proportionally correct, they should reach the village by morning, but her plan to keep the march going without sleep was met with utter resistance from her two companions. Squee had zoomed off ahead at the start, but by dusk they caught up with him waiting by the side of the path, which was now much more clearly a path and intermittently marked with faded wooden signs with arrows pointing towards Greenland in one direction, and Nomador in the other. When they met Squee, he and Bombarda both threw themselves on the ground at once and fell asleep immediately.

Soma remained awake for some time, scrutinizing the stars up above, studying them closely to make sure they moved. She had come to trust nothing at all, not in the world, and not outside of it either. She still thought they may perhaps be trapped beneath a dome, a massive one of illusion and deceit, scrolling through fictitious stars to keep the inhabitants below convinced they were the real ones twinkling and sparkling. She tried to focus on the map but in the dim crescent moonlight was unable to make it out clearly. From her memory she could only guess at the gaps, the large section off to the east that was completely unmarked. Did the rest of the world begin there, or were they on an island? Were they even on the planet Earth? She had no way of knowing, and eventually wore herself out with wondering, and joined her friends in dreamless slumber.

When she woke up in the morning, Squee was already gone, and Gowdy still sleeping. She roused him and silently led him on toward the village. He was fully rejuvenated by then, and looked to be no more than twenty five years old. His blond curls stretched below his shoulders, and his ribs stuck through an emaciated but tanned and toned carcass. His eyes were sky blue now, and his pink lips betrayed a shy and sheepish smile as if he were thinking of pleasant but private notions. He did not speak, not even in reply to her most trivial statements. Soma could not remember ever feeling so alone in her life. They walked on steadily for a few hours more in solitude. Meanwhile the path widened into a road, and the wetlands gave way to grassy hills, where now and then they saw small groups of sheep and goats grazing. Then ahead they began to see people, walking before them, also heading towards the town. Soma was content to follow and not stir up conversation, barely nodding and murmuring greetings at those they passed, who responded in like fashion.

They were all of the same general format as had befallen Gowdy, young-looking, tanned and blond,

vacant and vaguely smiling. They walked in couples or foursomes, never alone, and never in odd numbers, she noticed. They were always paired by gender as well, and as naked as the people from the sea. The day was warm, but not hot, just as it had been since they emerged from the forest, with little variety in the temperature, even at night. Soma began to sort through her recollections, compiling a record of everything she'd seen and experienced. The fact that it had not rained. The fact that the moon did rise at a different time and place each night. The fact that the stars moved. The fact that the people all seemed to be variations on a theme, even the sea people and the flock, except for the anomaly of Red Cliff and the two reported by Gowdy before his lapse into otherness.

They were joined by more and more people as the morning turned toward noon, and soon they found themselves in a crowd of maybe forty or fifty. Some they passed, while others passed them by, and the road led straight into a cluster of identical wooden buildings on either side of the road. These structures were uniformly two stories tall, connected together, side by side, and stretched along wooden plank walkways under plywood arcades for about a quarter of a mile. Each individual unit was distinguishable from its neighbors only by an alternating paint scheme of pale greenish-yellow, and pale yellowish-green. Each one featured a door set between two windows on the ground floor, and two large picture windows facing the street up above, with the arcade serving as a sort of fence-less and border-less common deck for that story. Soma could see no one inside any of the buildings. She counted thirty two of them on either side of the street.

None of the buildings seemed to house a business of any kind, nor were there any people visible within them. None of the people they walked with came out of or went into any of these units, but all came from the same direction as they, though from where they'd emerged she had no idea. She saw no houses, or tents, or cabins or anything at all along the side of the road as they'd walked. The people had seemed to pop out of nowhere, suddenly appearing as if they'd been there the whole time only she just hadn't noticed them. They continued to follow the group past what seemed to be the end of the town. There another street crossed the main one, and on the other side of that road there was a long wall, about five feet tall, stretching as far as Soma could see to the left and right. The wall seemed to be covered with uniform, multicolored tiles.

The crowd seemed to have multiplied. Now there were dozens of people, most heading determinedly towards the left but some drifting in the other direction, closer to the wall, gazing at the pictures upon it. Soma noticed that these people were all carrying piles of small pink rectangles in their hands. She came to a stop in the middle of the street, and pulled Gowdy to a halt as well. They found themselves surrounded as more and more people flowed around them, filling up the street. Soma felt lost beneath so many creatures so much taller than she, and looked around for a way out, but saw she'd have to go against the grain to get free. She started pushing her way to the side of the street, thinking she'd take cover on the boardwalk in front of the buildings back there, but progress was slow, especially with Bombarda now resisting and trying to pull her towards the wall. She cried out in frustration, and then a space suddenly cleared out before her, and a stranger stood before her, another blond youth who grinned as he greeted her, displaying unusually large teeth, and said,

"Right this way, little lady! Right this way!"

Chapter Thirteen

He spread his arms out wide and the crowd parted around him as Soma, pulling Bombarda, followed him to the side of the road. Hopping up onto the boardwalk, he turned and shouted, as if to the whole world.

"A-lo-ha!!" and began to laugh loudly. Soma peered up at him and thought all she could see was mouth and tangled hair.

"I see you've got the big guy with you," he winked at her. "Might as well let him go, you know. Seeing as he's already gone, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean," Soma snapped, clutching Gowdy even more tightly.

"You do know who he is, I suppose," the young man said.

"I don't know who YOU are," Soma replied, which set off another of his laughing fits.

"Oh, you can call me Kai," he said, finally. "That's what HE called me."

Soma gasped and took a step back.

"You're the one he told me about! From the hotel! What did you do to him?" and she raised her fist as if to strike, at which Kai snickered and pretended to cower, holding his hands up over his face.

"Oh no," he cried, "the little girl's gonna hit me. Oh heavens! Oh my!"

"Stop that right now," Soma scolded, "and tell me what you know. What did you do to Bombarda?"

"Bombarda?" Kai stopped joking and looked at her, confused. He seemed genuinely bewildered for a few moments, but then he shrugged and said,

"A name's a name. So you call him Bombarda. Here we know him as the one and only R.A. Gowdy."

"Who's R.A. Gowdy?" Soma asked. It was her turn to be confused. She looked back and forth between Kai and the man she'd always known as Bombarda.

"Yes, R.A. Gowdy," Kai continued, "in the living flesh, if not entirely his own. Presumed dead, of course, who wouldn't be, after more than two hundred years? And if not dead, then missing. Oh yes, there were those who knew he couldn't actually be dead, not dead in the way we knew it back then."

"There's only one way to be dead," Soma muttered, but Kai, placing his hand on her shoulder, disagreed.

"There's plenty of ways," he said.

"Who is R.A. Gowdy?" Soma repeated, "and how come you people never answer a question?"

"Because we don't have to," Kai retorted. "We can do what we want now, can't we? If we don't want to answer, we don't. Just because someone asks you a question, you're not obliged to respond. Someone even talks to you. Who says you have to talk back? Do what you want. That's the way."

"Who is R.A. Gowdy?" Soma said again, this time slowly, emphasizing every syllable.

"Only the greatest writer of pulp trash of his era," Kai sniffed. "Practically the only writer of fiction that anyone still gives a damn about. We like him, you see. We like him a lot. Hector didn't know who it was. He only thought: Stranger, Danger. The way we've been taught."

"Then you didn't mean to do this to him?"

"Oh no, not at all. Too late now, of course. It's a pity/"

"There must be a way!" Soma declared. "You did this to him. You can undo it too."

"Not me," Kai put up his hands again. "I didn't do anything, believe me. It was Hector."

"Then where do I find this Hector?" she said.

"Nobody finds Hector," Kai shrugged. "Hector finds you."

They were quiet for a few minutes after that. Soma was studying her friend, Bombarda, trying to associate the new name and story with everything she'd ever known about him. That he'd been a writer was no surprise. She remembered seeing those books at Red Cliff's house, and now wished she'd taken at least one with her. She told herself to go back if she could. In the meantime, no matter what this Kai person said, she was going to discover a way to restore her Bombarda, or whatever his name really

was. When she looked back up, Kai was gone. Standing there, right where he'd been, now stood Squee.

Chapter Fourteen

"You can get stuff," Squee said as Soma blinked in surprise.

"Right over there," he pointed towards the wall. "You can get like all kinds of stuff."

"What stuff?" Soma shook her head.

"Pretty much anything, it looks like," he told her. "Come on and I'll show you."

Squee started to step off the boardwalk, back into the still bustling throng, but Soma held back, reluctant. There were now more people returning the way they had come than entering, and those who were leaving were all carrying items, some in what looked like bags, some in what looked like boxes, everyone proceeding quite orderly and still none of them saying a word.

"Come on!" Squee was beckoning her from the street. "It's totally safe. No one's going to hurt you or even get in your way. They're like, I don't know, it's like their tame animals, not really human."

Soma, with Bombarda - now Gowdy - in tow, stepped off the curb and onto the street, following Squee.

"Where did you get to?" she yelled after him as he dashed down the street to the left, but he didn't hear, or at least didn't answer.

"You, too," Soma mumbled. She caught up with him finally way down the road, where the wall actually came to an end. There, beyond it, lay several huge mounds of sawdust and dried grasses and leaves, surrounding the road, which simply ended right there. All around the mounds there were people bending over and picking up whatever they could grab by the handful. Then they would carry it over to the side of the road where, she now saw, a large gray rectangular shape loomed, more than seven feet high and four feet wide. The shape was solid except for a square hole directly in the middle, about a foot on each side, and a narrow slot just below it which opened up onto a sort of short shelf. Squee led Soma and Gowdy closer to the machine, where they watched as people lined up, and one by one each person dumped the stuff they were holding in their hands into the square hole and waited for a few moments. Then several of the small pink rectangles appeared sliding out of the slot. The person gathered these, and started walking back towards the wall. Each person followed the exact same routine. They put in a handful of something - sawdust or leaves or dirt, she couldn't really tell - and received some pink rectangle things from the machine.

"What is it?" she wondered aloud, and Squee filled her in.

"You feed the beast," he pointed at the machine, "and it gives you back bubblegum. Then you take your bubblegum over to the wishing wall. Then you put the gum into one of the holes beneath the picture of the thing you want, and then you just get the thing! Just like that! You just get it like it popped right out of the air!"

"That's ridiculous," Soma said, shaking her head. "Nothing pops right out of the air."

"Wanna bet?" he laughed.

"What kind of stuff?" she asked again, not really expecting an answer, but this time she got one.

"I'll show you," he said, "it's all pictures. The whole wall's full of pictures. Most of it's food. Like every kind of food you could ever even imagine, but there's other stuff too, like things I never heard of, mostly. It's really weird. But come on, let's get some bubblegum first."

He raced over to one of the mounds and grabbed a handful of leaves. Soma followed and did as he did, and they waited patiently in line, although surprisingly it didn't take long. Somehow the math didn't work, and even though there were maybe fifty people ahead of them, and each one took a minute to get

their stuff processed, it only seemed a few seconds had passed before there they were, standing in front of what Squee'd called "the beast" and trading in their vegetation for some sticks of slimy but solid pink gooey stuff.

"Now for the good part," Squee yipped, and dashed to the wall, Soma and Gowdy again straggling, unable to keep up with the lad.

"You see?" he shouted, "it's all kinds of food over here."

As they got closer, Soma began to make out the images displayed on small squares covering the wall. She saw pictures of breakfasts, of bacon and eggs, pancakes and waffles, toast and all kinds of fruits. Then there were lunches and dinners, from burgers and fries to sweet and sour pork, onion soup, steak and roast chicken and dishes from all around the world, most of which she couldn't even recognize. There were snacks and desserts, cookies and cheeses, and beverages of every variety. The food part of the wall seemed to go on and on, and most of the people were choosing from those, sticking their "bubblegum" into the slots beneath the tile pictures and just like Squee had described, the dishes materialized as if out of thin air, packaged in the carry-out cartons she'd seen them departing with earlier.

Soma's gum was in the hand that held onto the map. In the other she still kept tight hold of Gowdy, who all this time was letting himself be dragged around like a dog on a leash. He didn't seem to be noticing anything around him. Squee was rushing back and forth and up and down, and kept calling out to Soma to join him and see what he'd seen. She did her best to keep up as he pointed out things you could get, all sorts of odd ends, like umbrellas and bicycle tires and shoes and hats and golf balls and goldfish, washing machines and beach front property, human babies and porcelain coffee cups. Soma was completely mystified. She scanned and scrutinized the wall ever more closely, wondering what she could possibly see next. There were some images of people, several young women in underwear, but also old men playing chess, and grandmothers with knitting needles and kindly old eyes.

Then she saw train engines, and horse drawn carriages and airplanes and cars. She saw pistols and swords, blue whales and tall redwood trees. She saw stacks of firewood, plumbing fixtures, sweatshirts, milk cartons, bar stools, toucans, sunglasses, skin cream, skeleton keys, copper bottomed pots, balls of string, a box of raisins, headphones, and then, at the very bottom right corner, practically on the ground, the last tile on the whole of the wall, there was nothing. An empty white square.

"What is it?" she asked out loud.

"Whatever you want." came a voice from behind her. She looked up, startled, but not shocked to see the gleaming white teeth and happy face of the mischievous Kai.

"Anything?" Squee asked.

"Anything you can imagine," Kai said.

"I want to be with the flock!" Squee blurted out, and stuck his pink rectangles into the slot just below the white square. In a flash, he was changed. By the time he stood back up, he'd already sprouted two wings on his back, and extra folds of flesh were beginning to form on his arms. He stared at them, and then at Soma, and with a shriek of joy he said,

"I love you!" and then he was gone, lifted up in the air, flying off to the north. Soma gazed after him, her feelings all jumbled with excitement and sorrow.

"Anything you can imagine," Kai was saying, now more quietly, "but only until the sun goes down."

Chapter Fifteen

"Yes," Kai continued, "It's a limited time offer and, or so I'm told, and only available once per

customer. Use your wish wisely, little girl." He bowed deeply and turned away but turned back when Soma shouted "Wait!".

"Yes? Is there anything else I can help you with?" he asked.

"You haven't actually helped me with anything," Soma said. "But you're not like all the others around here. For one thing, you talk. What are you?"

"Ah," he smiled his big smile, "that's for me to know, and you to find out." He grinned his toothy grin, winked his customary wink and just like that, he vanished, right in front of her eyes.

"How did you do that?" Soma yelled, "And why don't you ever answer any of my questions?"

For a moment she was sure she could hear his laughter somewhere on the wind.

She turned and regarded the blank expression on Gowdy's face once again, uncertain of what she should do. The instant Squee had changed and flown away she'd had the idea of wishing Bombarda back just as he'd been before, but if it would only last until sunset, then should she? And if it were to be her only chance to wish for "anything at all", should she use it on that? Already the afternoon was growing late. How could she know what was the right thing to do? And what else would she wish for, anyway? She didn't know. She was only a child. No matter how many years she had lived, her mind remained that of an eight year old girl. Her only thought now was that Bombarda would know. He always did before. He was her teacher, her guardian, her leader, her friend. It seemed impossible, looking now at the bland youth before her, that this could even be the same person. Suddenly she had no doubts and, putting her bubblegum into the slot, watched as the young man whose hand she was holding reverted in a flash to the old man she'd known so well.

Gowdy winced as he felt his bones become brittle and his body grew frail and he stooped, unable to support the years of his frame on his legs, nearly falling. Soma threw her arms around his waist, sobbing with relief and concern, and at least helped to steady him. The old man reached out and put his hands on her shoulders, and gently pushed her away.

"Ah, Soma," he said, "It's you. I was dreaming."

"I know," she cried, "They changed you. It was Hector when he gave you the lemonade."

"It's all better," he smiled.

"What is? What's better?" Soma let go and took a step back. He looked the old Bombarda, but his quiet, soft voice didn't sound quite like him. Was he really restored, or was this just another of Kai's tricks?

"I was happy," Gowdy said with a fond, wistful smile.

"What about your plan?" Soma said, "what about our revenge? We came out of that forest for a reason. We were going to find the people who did that to us and get vengeance. Somehow. It's what you always said. It's what you wanted."

"You remember what George Herbert said? Living well is the best revenge."

"Who the hell is George Herbert?"

"He was a poet, a long time ago," Gowdy told her.

"Kai told me you were a writer too, also a long time ago," Soma said, "he said your name was Gowdy."

"What's a name?" Gowdy shrugged, "who needs it? Names are just for struggle and distinction. When you become as one, let it go."

"One what?" Soma found herself growing annoyed.

"I have to go back," Gowdy told her.

"To Nomador," Soma finished for him. "Don't worry. The effect wears off at sunset."

"Ah, that's good," he sighed. "You'd like it there. I have a nice room, remember? That's why the door was open. It was for me."

"I didn't like it there before," she corrected him. "And I won't like it there ever. It's not for me."

"What is for you then?" he asked.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "You obviously are perfectly happy to be a blithering idiot basking in the sun for the rest of eternity, or however long you get. And Squee only wants to go flying around with a different bunch of creepy mutants. I just have this map."

She unrolled it and held it up to show Gowdy, who glanced at it for a moment, uninterested, then looked away.

"Kai was right when he said there were many ways to die," she said. Gowdy didn't seem to hear. His eyes were fixed on the road that led to Nomador.

"Go then," Soma said. "It's almost sundown anyway."

Gowdy nodded and without another word he left her standing in the now deserted street. Soma didn't even wonder where everyone else had got to, or how the day had grown so short, or how the tiles on the wall were all turning now to a uniform gray, the pictures fading out, all but the one white square which seemed to be pulsing and glowing, luminescent in the twilight. She knew she had used up her one and only anything wish, and she didn't care. Behind her, the row of buildings on the road to Nomador grew dark as night time came on. Before her lay the road to the uncharted region on the map. Soma went that way, and she knew that the next time she saw Squee, she would tell him to forget about wishing, and just order the lemonade. She smiled to herself in the dark as she walked, and with her tongue discovered that two of her baby teeth were wiggling. They would come falling out soon, and big teeth would take their place. Really big teeth.

THE END

EPIC FAIL

Book Two

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