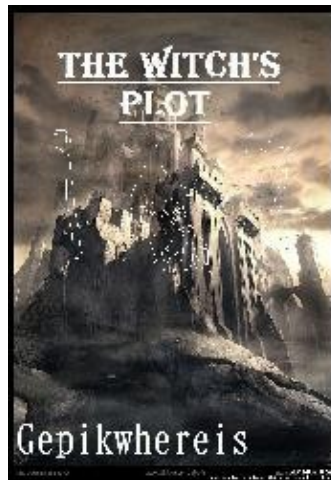


The Witch's Plot

By : **Gepikwhereis**

The northern part of the island kingdom of Belaria comprises the Tropagian forest. The darkest realm; and a Belarian's easy nightmare. Besides thriving with unfathomable and ever bloodthirsty creatures, it also is the stronghold of witch, Mai Canniola, the vilest witch ever. And when she throws her intricate plot upon Charles, a young boy of 15 residing in the Belarian village of Tempster with his aunt and cousin, will he be able to wriggle himself free from her treacherous web? And will the only good folks dwelling in Tropagia, the Macacawks and the Potion Makers, help him? Or will they instead turn against him and make it all worser? It is not going to be long before Charles quiet life is totally disrupted and upturned...



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Chapter 1: Prologue

The Witch's Plot

by

Gepikwhereis

Prologue

Albert had found the dead cockroach stuck between some big rocks on the river bank. The most peculiar insect he had ever seen, it was also probably the largest one that existed. More than half a metre in breadth only, its length was almost two metres.

A new species of course, what should he name it...?

He wondered vaguely for some time. What could be an appropriate name for the giant cockroach? ...

'Ah, Bennetrium!' he decided finally,, after his surname "Bennet". 'Yes. that would be nice', he thought, somehow feeling good about it,'...Bennetrium... the largest cockroach ever!'

Coming to Tropagia hadn't been all a waste, after all, he had discovered innumerable numbers of new plant and animal species, more than half of which he had named after His Majesty, a quantity after himself, many after family members, and a good deal still after his more efficient of men. Moreover, he considered his greatest achievement of all as succeeding to pierce the countless superstitions people held concerning Tropagia, and the talks of such and such outwardly "supernatural" beings lurking in the forest.

Yes, there were beings in the Tropagian forest, not though of the nonsensical kind people nightmared, but rather exotic, much as the cockroach that lay in front of him.

However, Albert's success did have a downside as well -- The expedition would not be able to reach the sea on the northern shore of Belaria, as the plans were, also an estimate of the area over which Tropagia was spread could not be taken. This was because Albert had simply collected too many specimens of the flora and fauna already to keep on continuing, and thus in two days' time they were scheduled to begin their return journey to the capital.

Still as far as his calculations went, the expedition party had penetrated around 63-68 kilometres into Tropagia, not considering the various loops the river Gordan had taken, which they had been utilising both as a water source and as a guide into the forest since the start.

'Sire, Sire!' said a rather frantic Ashgad, one of Albert's men, as he rushed into the tent, 'I-I think you should come see this Sire!'

'Ashgad-?' Albert was greatly surprised, when Ashgad caught him by the arm and pulled him out of the tent, outside.

'You have to see this, Sire!'

Ashgad pointed at the opposite bank on the other side of the river. Looking at the place, the ground might have verily disappeared from beneath Albert's feet.

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'The Gods protect us', he muttered barely audible.

There were about a dozen of them, Men half, Bugs half. It was a paralysing sight. Men till their waists, they were bugs from below having six hairy stick like legs. They were looking at the expedition party, observant, just as the men were looking at them, fear stricken. One thing was set clear... The Devil's children did dwell Tropagia.

Albert shook his head in disbelief, appalled at the scene before him. He had been wrong in his perception of Tropagia. The superstitions of the people had been but true.

'The men are ready Sire', said Ashgad, 'Should we open fire?' And so were they. All of Albert's men had armed themselves with rifles, muskets and pistols. But Albert declined.

'No, it's too risky; we'd be foolish to fire without knowing what strengths they posses'.

'But what should we do, then-?'

Bam!!!

Someone suddenly fired, fear overtaken. The bullet hit the thick armour of one of the mutants and bounced off harmlessly. It was enough to unleash the mutants into action. And with a thundering roar they charged, the shallow river in between little of an obstacle for them.

Before he knew it, Albert was running way from the river bank towards the lush density of plants as everybody else was, fiercely yelling a single word - 'Flee!'

Even as they fled, some of Albert's men fired aimless shots at the mutants. This, however, was no hindrance, and by the time a handful of seconds had passed, the mutants reached this side of the river.

Albert ran madly, uncaring of the direction as long it took him away from the half men half bugs, amidst the thickness of vegetation around him. He could hear pained screams of his men from behind- the mutants had got them. Poor fellows, he thought, but what could he do besides try and somehow save his own soul? So Albert kept running.

After sometime of adrenaline filled run, Albert slowed down his pace and looked behind- Only plants. He ran some more, 'The farther the better.'

Albert finally came to a stop and crouched behind a tree, gasping for breath, heart drumming and body hot. After inhaling furiously for a couple of minutes, his body began to cool down and his breathe returned.

Albert considered his surroundings more sensibly. Where was he?

He had definitely come a long way away from the river bank, for the cries and howls of his men and the mutants had faded into an undisturbed quiet.

Now trees, bushes and other plants surrounded him on all sides, as though encaging him. He felt claustrophobic, despite all his love for nature.

More moments throbbed by, and slowly fear returned to Albert as stark realisation overtook him. He could not get to the river, his only chance of any survival at all.

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He might have escaped the demons, temporarily most perhaps, but now, Albert Bennet was lost in the Tropagian forest.

Chapter 2: The Stocker

Chapter one

The Stocker

Nearly thirty years later, in the south Belarian village of Tempstow, two young boys were busy at a game of Trimpato.

The elder of the two, Charles was a skinny teenager of 15, with a triangular face, elongated nose, brownish hair and eyes. An odd thing in his features was his right ear, which was slightly larger than his left.

His cousin, Thomas was three years younger to him and had a flat face and broad lips that were presently even broader due to his broad grin. He had succeeded in trapping Charles's shepherd by crating an irregular circle of sheep. There was no way out for Charles now.

'Urgh!' Charles groaned. He took his shepherd in hand and knocked off Thomas' sheep with it.

'Hey!' Thomas said, 'you can't do that!-Still, I win! LOSER, WOESER! Ha, ha!'

'Nah,' said Charles playfully, sweeping away all the pieces from the Trimpato board with a swift motion of his hand, 'You don't have any proof of that, do you?'

'I won! I won!' Thomas hooted, ignoring Charles, 'I won, I-'

MEOW!

Thomas, baffled, narrowed his eyes.

'A cat?' He jumped off the bed and looked under it, where the 'MEOW!' had come from. 'It's there!'

Charles got to the floor and getting on his knees saw it too. It was a large purple cat, dead mouse in mouth.

Thomas picked his boot from nearby.

'Here you go!' He threw it at the cat. It made a dash and nearly dodged it, but for its tail where the boot hit violently and the cat meowed in anguish.

It madly sprinted out of Thomas' room. Soon they heard a great clash of utensils falling onto the floor in the kitchen.

Rushing there Charles and Thomas were aghast seeing the vast numbers of utensils scattered on the floor and, at least, half a dozen clay plates and cups had been reduced to tiny fragments.

The purple cat was nowhere to be seen.

Charles and Thomas, extensively cursing the cat, spent almost half an hour tidying up the mess. It was to their great relief when they finally ended with it; but before they could decide whether to have another game at Trimpato, Aunt Isabella, who had been off to the market, showed up at the door.

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Aunt Isabella was the younger sister of Charles' father and also Thomas' mother. Charles owed a lot to her and knew he could never repay her fully in life. Aunt Isabella had been the one who had adopted him, had consoled him as his very mother would have, at his father's death in a dreadful car accident, when his other relatives hadn't cared to give him much of a thought.

'Well boys', said Aunt Isabella, she appeared distinctively tired for some reasons; 'I want you to do something right away'.

'What?' Thomas asked sheepishly, frowning.

'To go to Mr. Dolby Doof's house and -'

'Mr. Dolby Doff!' exclaimed Thomas, flabbergasted, 'That mind numbing owner of the "Recipe Book Library"?'

Aunt lent him a severe look.

'Exactly, him,' She said. She turned her eyes to Charles, her expressions becoming kinder.

'And you need to ask him a book, any book actually, which tells how to prepare Goigpaise-'

'Goigpaise?' Thomas burst, even Charles was taken; Aunt Isabella wanted to prepare Goigpaise? There wasn't even any occasion.

'Are some guests coming, Aunt?' Charles asked.

'Yes, guests are coming tomorrow... Special guests,' she added, more reminiscently.

As the two cousins trotted up the dusty tattered road of Tempstow villa, Charles could very well understand the irritated temper boiling about Thomas.

'I tell you,' he said, to himself and not really to Charles, 'we're gonna be stuck in Doof's for hours... Man, he'll suck the soul's outta us with his talks!'

Thomas wasn't lying; Mr Dolby Doof was the most boring person living. He had a whole house stuffed with books, books, books and books - all recipe books that too, no sign of literature or fiction or poetry. Mr Doof lent his books for free to anyone who wanted to try out a new dish that, he considered, was his way of social contribution.

And with him giving lectures on almost every book he owned, Charles' earlier visits, along with Thomas, had been deathly dull, and he remembered being thankful they hadn't fallen unconscious out of excessive boredom.

Reaching the Recipe Book House, they knocked and were welcomed in by the wide smiling Mr Doof.

'Um, Mr Doof,' said Charles, wanting to be direct to the point, 'um, do you have any book on how to prepare Goigpaise?'

The big bellied Mr Doof frowned at the word then smiled at his own forgetfulness.

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'Ah, Goigpaise, how can I even forget that dish!' he lent them an approving look, 'It's one of the finest delicacies! ... Well, do take a seat, while I go bring just the book for you.'

They sat themselves on the chairs and Mr Doof, humming an awkward tune, walked to the next room. Thomas looked at Charles uneasily.

'The moment the book's in our hands,' he said in a hushed voice, 'we're gonna make a run from here.'

Charles nodded, acknowledging. Make a run, he thought, he was sceptic it was even possible.

Mr Doof returned in a short while, clutching a fat little book called '**Goigpaise? Here it is!**' and featuring a tiny man on the cover swimming merrily in a bowl of Goigpaise.

'As I said, just the book for you; it tells everything about Goigpaise, How to prepare it, the history, additional information, etc, etc... Here,' He made a bow and handed Charles the book.

'By the way, how many times have you tasted Goigpaise before?'

'Just a couple of times,' Charles replied.

'And you?' Mr Doof was evidently in no intention of sparing Thomas, who flinched awkwardly, as though accused of a crime he hadn't committed.

Then, not very confidently, he answered in a small voice,

'Yes... a few times.'

'What sort of visions did you see?'

'Er, I- I don't remember...' Thomas said quietly, turning a shade of pink. Mr Doof, however, seemed like he hadn't heard a funnier job.

'What?!' he laughed hilariously, 'No one ever forgets any Goigpaise vision!'

Thomas might have as well received a slap.

'No- No, really I cannot remember them properly,' he poorly tried to explain, it couldn't have been clearer though that whether he remembered any Goigpaise or not, he simply wished to keep conversation the shortest possible with Mr Doof.

'Okay, then,' said Mr Doof, 'If you don't want to share your joyful experiences with a *poor old man* like me, then so be it,' he stretched his lips into a weak smile and Charles could almost sense Thomas all wanted was to disappear. Honestly, Charles did not think Mr Doof was any *poor old man* he claimed to be. He did have a few streaks of grey hair here and there amongst his balding circle of jet black, but with a face that yet had to shed the youthful glow; he couldn't have been anymore than 47-49 years of age.

Charles decided to speak up, before Thomas had to suffer more of his interrogations.

'Um, Mr Doof... Well then, I think we should leave now.' Charles and Thomas got up to go; suddenly, began rapping hard at the door.

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'Master I am home!' A voice yelled from outside, strangely artificial sounding.

Thomas opted to open the door.

'No! Don't open!' yelled a frantic Mr Doof, 'No!' Too late, not understanding, Thomas opened the door already.

Charles gaped in raw bewilderment as he saw the man at the threshold - Standing with the identical bulging stomach and funny rounded face was the exact replica of Mr Dolby Doof!

'But- But!' Thomas stuttered, '*Two* Dolby Doofs!'

Charles looked questioningly at Mr Doof.

'Who is he?'

Mr Doof went and roughly pulled his look-alike inside, who apparently didn't mind.

'He is, err, my- my... twin brother. He... lives in Lofusgrad,' he explained to the boys rather desperately, 'he look like me a lot... doesn't he?'

Charles tentatively eyed Thomas, who shrugged giving him a tragic I-think-we-should-make-a-run look.

'Well,' said Charles, heeding Thomas, 'so long then, Mr Doof, we've got work at home... I think we should be on our way.'

Then uncaring to any response from Mr Doof, the boys hurried out of the house.

'That geek has a twin brother?' said Thomas once they were in the road, 'And he's come to live here?'

'Maybe, though I never heard that before,' said Charles. He felt vaguely suspicious of the matter, not recalling any incident when Mr Doof had mentioned his twin before - something he shouldn't have failed at, not with his big-mouthed nature; and especially his desperate reaction when his twin showed up, it was strangely like he was covering p something, not to mention his weird twin calling him '*Master*'.

Thomas abruptly stopped in his tracks and caught Charles' arm.

'What?' Charles asked. Thomas' face had become ghastly white like parchment.

'There, the hat is a pointed one,' he said pointing down the road. Charles felt cramps in his stomach.

A person in a great moustache, reaching down to his waist in tendrils and wearing brown rags altogether with a high pointed hat, was coming towards them, staggering unsteadily - a future stocker!

'What are we gonna do now?' Thomas panicked.

'Dunno,' said Charles, 'Best thing would be to ignore him totally.'

'We cannot *ignore* him,' said Thomas, 'Stocker's smell *too* bad! I don't wanna go near him.'

'We'd have to, he is coming our way.'

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'Let's take the other road,' suggested Thomas.

'The other road, we'd take an hour to reach home?! Come on Thomas, don't be a git!'

Charles nudged at Thomas arm. Thomas looked at him with grave eyes.

'Alright,' he said, stubbornly.

As they approached the future Stocker, bad smell wafted to them from him, intense smell, like that of animal dropping except a great many times stronger, making them cover their noses.

The Stocker in his coarse broken voice, was singing himself a song (one that would definitely win any Ugly Melody contest in the winter celebrations) when suddenly he stopped.

'Charles', he said. Wait *Charles*? No, not possible, Charles thought, the Future Stocker certainly hadn't spoken his name! His heart sank horribly.

'Quick,' he whispered to Thomas, and as they hastened, the voice came again.

'*Charles...*' A chilling sensation crept down Charles' spine, clouds blocking the one last tiny ray of hope he had. It wasn't considered good when a Future Stocker knew your name. Charles gulped bile.

The Stocker scrambled and the next moment he found himself separated from Thomas, the Stocker's dirty brow eyes drilling at his own, his bony but immensely powerful hands holding Charles tight by the collar.

He almost couldn't breathe, the Stocker stank so horrid. Nausea overwhelming, Charles fought to get loose from the Stocker.

'Let go! Let go!' he yelled, as the Stocker grabbed his arms, restraining them from movement. Thee Stocker, though fragile appearing, was extremely strong.

Charles tried to kick him away, but it was to no use, his drastic attempts a mere itch to the Stocker, who kept whispering '*Charles! Charles!*' In an eerie tone, like he would forget the name if he didn't.

'Let him go you --!' Thomas violently banged himself against the Stocker: A mistake.

The Stocker glared at him, threateningly. Grasping Thomas' clothes with one hand, controlling Charles with the other, he hurled him away.

Thomas landed roughly on the ground, though fortunately escaping injuries.

Rolling his eyes at Charles, the Stocker once again repeated, '*Charles...*' Then most unexpectedly, he released Charles and burst into a bout of hysterical sobbing. Charles seized his chance to scam away, as the man sunk into a ball and began wailing pathetically.

Aunt was more than astonished, when after reaching home, they told her about her misadventure: She was aghast.

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Charles had never seen her get so much worried, except a couple of times when Thomas had got in a fight with a bully and another when had had broken his leg, in the two years he had been with her.

'... but they dint have any right to go about frightening people like that! Even the king had forbidden them from going near normal people!'

'It's alright, Aunt,' said Charles, wishing they hadn't opened their mouths about the Stocker in the first place, 'He didn't really harm us, anyway.'

'No Charles,' said Aunt, her thin face a red chilli, 'you don't know these Future Stockers... they are a curse.'

'A curse?' asked Charles.

'Yes...when I was young,' she continued, a vein beating at her temple, her eyes teary and red, 'your grandfather, h- he met one - the next day, he was m- murdered!'

'What?' Charles had never known this before.

'Yes, t- that was w- what happened,' Aunt was actually weeping now, 'T- These St- Stockers are to b- blame for everything b- bad.'

Out of the moment, Aunt stood up, and wiping her tears, made out of the room.

Thomas stared at Charles, big eyed.

'Are you gonna die tomorrow?'

The rest of the day was the Charles and Thomas took baths (they had acquired a nasty rotten stench after coming in contact with the Stocker). Aunt Isabella was quiet most of the time, taking only to call for meals and her eyes always were bloodshot. Thomas wasn't very talkative either, proffering instead to be lonesome. Charles suspected he was probably wondering if he, Charles, was really to die tomorrow - something he himself hoped against and choose not to bother too much about.

Chapter 3: What Happened to Murphy

Chapter 2

What Happened to Murphy

That night a man staggered in one of the roads of Tempstow village. He was weak, terribly weak; but not hopeless whatsoever.

Armando's stomach had been cut and he was sure the thigh bone of his right leg had snapped; but he kept going, inching on as a snail. His mauled body was ablaze with a fire of pain, but he was not prepared to give into it, not just yet: at least not before he reached the Descendant.

Suddenly Armando thought he had heard a voice. He stopped and looked around, the night was dark and the crescent moon that floated amongst the clouds did little to pierce it. No, there couldn't have been anyone, not in the dead of the night; it had most probably been only his imagination. Armando trudged on; he knew the little energy left in him was rapidly draining, he smiled at the thought, although his blood smeared lips pained: his life would no doubt end in the next couple of hours. All these years he had been striving to attain immortality, the only reason why he had abandoned Lysando, his blood- brother, why he had taken to serve her...

Peculiarly enough, death seemed a funny business now. And anyhow, it didn't matter much to him; all he wanted was a small amount of time in which to deliver the warning.

Armando's heart started beating a slight bit faster, he could sense the Descendant was no more than around half- a- kilometre away. Then his heart feel and his smile left his face, as his agonised stomach made him feel nauseated. This was going to be a long half- a- kilometre. Spitting out a bloody bog of phlegm, and forcing his bruised up reluctant legs to move on, that had themselves come to a halt, Armando ruefully imagined what it would have been if he still had his tattoos on his body; he could have easily gotten himself to the Descendant in no time at all, but tattoo- less, he considered it a sheer miracle in itself that he had managed to slip from the Fortian's clutches with only a handful of wounds, even though fatal as they were.

'Armando,' a female voice whispered, that made his already shivering body to have a rocking shudder.

He recognised more too well whom the voice belonged to; he shook his head, his mind was playing tricks on him. No wonder he was hallucinating, simply too much had happened to him that day. She couldn't possibly know where he was even besides her infinite powers... Still as a precaution he quickened his pace, although that worsened his suffering.

'You think you can succeed?'

Armando gasped, fear enveloping him. No. His mind was definitely illumining him. He warily looked around again; no one. Muttering a quick prayer to himself, he continued on the Descendants trail.

A few minutes passed, the stars blinking down at the unmistakable substitute for a ghost, struggling his way in the Tempstow road, urging himself to carry on.

'You can't let go,' Armando kept telling himself repeatedly, 'You are going to make it... You will have to make it.' Though a part of him and a rather large one at that never gave up the idea he might collapse on the road any moment now.

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His fears merged into the real the next minute. He couldn't fathom where it came from, but most suddenly, he felt a sharp unendurable pain on his back accompanied by a loud cracking noise. That triggered his already bleeding stomach to rocket sky high, off balancing him, his thigh only adding to it. Armando trampled face first to the ground and moaned like he had never before, wriggling over and over as a worm, the dust sticking to his face and wounds.

'So, what do you say now?' said the female voice, he was now sure was no figment of his imagination.

'Go away, you filth!' Armando groaned.

'Go away?' said the female voice, 'You want me to go away? And *filth* you call me?' She paused for a second, and then continued slyly, 'So sad!' she said aloud, 'I only came to sing you a lullaby before you sleep! Um... anyway, ahem," she let out an artificial cough, 'listen...'

She broke into a melodious song. Ah, melody it was! But only as melodious as poison could be; the tongue she sang was one that Armando had heard for years, but couldn't understand a tad bit. Still, the song caused Armando more and worse pain than his body or soul had ever been exposed to in life...

Long before the female voice stopped, life had already abandoned Armando's limp body.

Charles awoke early the next day to the freshness of the morning and cheerful chirpings of birds outside the window. For some time, he remained in a dreamy state, staring, unfocussed, at the ceiling, enjoying the moment.

Then he started, jerking to a sitting position, all that had incident yesterday fleeting to his mind's eye ... Aunt, Mr Doof's twin, the Stocker.

An icy cold overcame his body. His one thought: Was he going to...

Die?

He had always somehow believed he would easily accept death when it came to him; but now, with a supposed *death day* - today, already fixed, he felt spooked out of the matter.

Were he given the chance to choose his manner, he would have opted for an unexpected sudden death, totally out of the blue.

Something purple flickered in the corner of his eye. Charles turned his head: It was the rampage cat of yesterday, sitting over some of his school books on the table. Charles blinked. The cat wasn't there! It was like it had vanished into air. Had he been imagining? He wondered, but not a moment ago he had been sure the cat was there. So, where had it gone?

Either ways this was quite a sign - maybe he was to die today after all.

Charles swallowed. He had to stop thinking about this.

Breakfast was a grim affair that morning - not the usual cheer of yesterday. There was scarcely any sound; the only available were of spoons and dishes being moved, and of chewing.

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The singularly awkward silence was greatly stressing for Charles, who was at discomfort's peak.

'Um, Aunt,' he began; Aunt Isabella looked up at him vacantly. Charles lingered for a while, scanning his memory for a topic, before he finally (and luckily) found a good one.

'Er, yesterday, you said guests were to come; who?'

'Oh that?' said Aunt, sipping her tea, 'Yes, my friend and her son.'

'Your friend?' Charles asked.

'Yes, her name is Celine. I met her yesterday in the market place by coincidence and invited her here.'

'You mean Murphy's mum?' said Thomas, he appeared eager Aunt was at last speaking normally.

'Yes, exactly,' replied Aunt Isabella.

'So when are they coming, mum?'

'Today, 'Celine said around noon.'

Noon soon arrived and with it the guests as well. Around a quarter past twelve, a horse drawn open cab came rattling along and stopped at their gate.

Excepting the cabmen, there were a lady and her son in it. Celine was a tall gaunt woman of sharp features, the boy, Murphy, though, was short and obese, preferably of Thomas' age.

Everyone had gone out to receive them, and Aunt Isabella, especially, was delighted.

'Celine!' She called out, in a very girlish sort of voice, as Celine and Murphy got down from the cab.

'Isabella!' Celine said and they hugged.

'I'm so glad you came!' said Aunt.

'Hey lady,' the short old cabman said, 'I need ta get back to town and fast. Will ye pay me already?'

'All right,' said Celine, her tone suddenly rigid, businesslike, 'What is the fare?'

'Only 50 Eacks ma'am.'

'50 Eacks!' Celine exclaimed, 'The other cabman took only 35 when I last came here! Here have 40 instead; I'm being kind to you.'

The cabman scowled, but accepted the 40 Eacks without a word.

After the man and his cab had gone, Aunt said,

'Celine, you are still the same, aren't you? I can never get this people take 45, and you did with 40!'

'No,' said Celine, 'you just need to be confident, that's all.'

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'Well, let's go in now, I've got loads to talk with you; Charles, do help with Celine's luggage.'

'So sweet of you, my dear,' Celine said as Charles picked up her suitcases. Then they all went inside.

After lunch, Aunt Isabella and Celine got to cook Goigpaise - *the dream dish*. Actually, they were to serve it at night only, but since Goigpaise needed a lot of time and tedious procedure to be prepared, they were required to start early.

The boys spent their time playing Trimpato. Thomas was jealous of Murphy, for as it was discovered, he was an extremely good Trimpato player. What more, even when Charles and Thomas teamed and played against him, he won.

However, Murphy had a weak point of being rather goofy. Half the time you would be thinking he didn't know how to speak Belarian properly. And Thomas put his goofiness to big use, playing hopeless pranks on him; although Murphy barely was annoyed by them: Thomas' pranks, simple as they were to Charles, were seemingly beyond Murphy's understanding range. He would simply look at Thomas blankly, most of the time and say a confused, 'What?'

Around 8, dinner time, Aunt Isabella and Celine proudly announced the completion of the special dish on the menu-Goigpaise.

Everyone was thrilled; Thomas composed a nursery rhyme on Goigpaise, drumming with spoons on the dining table, Charles occasionally adding a line or two to the rhyme, as they waited the *dream dish* to be served.

And when they finally had their Goigpaise full bowls in front of them, Celine raised her arm and said,

'On the count of three: 1-2-3! To Goigpaise!'

'To Goigpaise!' They cheered after her. The next moment saw everyone spooning Goigpaise into their mouths.

Charles leaned back on his chair and closed his eyes, letting grasp him all over. He saw great things, marvellous ones, and of indescribable beauty, far surpassing any earthly splendour. Who knew, he might have been with the gods themselves!

Charles never knew how long he remained in that blissful state until it withdrew him. He then simply took another spoon of Goigpaise and the marvels returned in seconds. And each time it was over, a spoon was everything needed to revive it. Thus, the glory and splendour on and on, never ending, forever...

That night, Charles went to bed thinking only of Goigpaise. Oh, that lovely dish, that made one tour the Heavens! Neither Stocker nor Death held importance or any of his concerns. Those were trial stuff.

Goigpaise was life, he cared solely for it.

'Thomas! You know you shouldn't have done that!' Said Celine, she had the look of someone utterly shocked.

'But-But I didn't do anything!' Thomas said in response, 'It was the cat's fault!'

'MUMMY!' Murphy wailed, wiping the dung in his face and making it messier.

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After breakfast, Charles had had barely gone to his room, with the thought of doing a bit of leisure reading, when he had suddenly heard Murphy's tremendously loud cries and rushed to see what had happened to him-Greenish brown dung over the entire of his face and big tears constantly streaming down from his eyes; Celine, Thomas and Aunt Isabella standing horrified by him.

'Celine,' said Aunt, 'do take him to the bathroom and clean up him first. Definitely, no one would like to be so.'

Murphy's snobs rose louder.

'Shut up!' Celine yelled at him, irritated, 'You aren't going to die!'

Once they returned from the bathroom, Murphy clean now, but still having a screwed face, Celine and Aunt Isabella together inquired of Thomas about the matter.

'It was all him,' Murphy complained quickly before Thomas.

'No, no,' Thomas hastened to assure, 'It wasn't me, Murphy. You should have seen the cat, it was the culprit!'

'Explain what you are speaking, Thomas,' Aunt said, sternly.

'It was the cat mum, I saw it; it had a dung ball with itself and threw it at Murphy!'

'What?' Celine said, surprised. Aunt Isabella though inclined her head like Thomas was merely telling her about munching crackers.

'A *cat with a dung ball* you say?'

'Yeah mum,' said Thomas, 'it threw thee dung ball and it hit Murphy!'

'So how come Murphy did not see *the dung ball the cat threw* coming?' Though unsure whether Thomas had any idea of it, Charles sensed high temper swelling inside Aunt, which could explode any given moment.

'It was strange mum-the dung ball. It- it kind of took a curve in air and hit Murphy on his face rather than the back!'

'Oh *really*?' said Aunt. In an instant, almost as if by magic, something long appeared in Aunt's hand and in the upcoming seconds Thomas had been caned black and blue at least 7-8 times and it would have continued, had not for Celine, who despite being momentarily bewildered, regained herself and said,

'Stop it, Isabella! He's just a boy!'

'Just a boy,' said Aunt, 'but look how he dares tell such an exaggerated lie!'

'I WASNT LYING,' Thomas shouted in full force, and weeping, ran out of the house.

It was a good two long hours, before Thomas returned home and sneaked into Charles' room.

'Murphy's in my room,' he said glumly and sat on the chair beside the door.

'What really happened to Murphy?' Charles asked after letting some silent minutes pass.

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'Whatever I told mum,' Thomas replied.

'A cat actually threw a dung ball at him?'

'Yes, it was the same cat that destroyed the plates in the kitchen that day.'

A picture of the purple tom cat flashed in Charles' mind, he had seen, or thought seeing, the other morning. This was getting more than a coincidence, added by that there were few pet cats in the neighbourhood, and Charles did not think he knew anybody with a purple cat.

'But how can a cat actually do something like that?' said Charles.

Thomas shrugged.

'I don't know, but it's the strangest cat I've seen.'

Charles nodded; though hard to believe, he knew Thomas wasn't telling his imaginations: he never lied after receiving a good beating. Of course, chances were still there, but would Thomas...? Somehow, deep down in, Charles felt not.

Both Murphy and Thomas followed a no-speaking rule towards each other; and the next day, when the guests packed up and were ready to leave for town, on the account that Celine could not afford being away from business too long, the two boys had to be persuaded by their mothers to shake hands and exchange 'byes', which, there is little need to say, they did flatly.

Thomas took on a gayer shade after his rival's departure, and Charles was very much happy for him; he had started growing tired of Thomas' lonesome and quiet behaviour of late.

At night, during dinner time, Charles, strangely for himself, refused to have the meal. He oddly wasn't simply feeling like eating anything.

'But why?' Aunt Isabella asked, 'Why don't you want to eat? Are you not feeling well?'

'No, Aunt,' Charles said meekly, 'it's nothing-just don't want to eat.'

'Aren't you hungry?'

'No, it's-it's okay.'

Charles went to his room and lay on the bed. His skin prickled with cold despite being the middle of summer. He touched his forehead with the back of his hand, it was fiery hot. Maybe, I'm going to have fever, he thought. He opened his trunk and took out a blanket from there. He hadn't fallen ill once till yet while with Aunt Isabella, and dreaded falling either. He did not want to trouble her unnecessarily when she had already helped him so much.

Charles ears twined when he suddenly heard someone rapping on the main door.

'Mrs Isabella? Mrs Isabella Sadinton?' said the thick sturdy voice of a man, 'Could you open the door please?'

The dining room was located towards the back of the house and it wasn't probable for either Aunt or Thomas to hear the man. Charles' room was closer to the main door, so he removed the blanket from over him, and

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went for it, the man continuing to shout.

Charles unbolted and opened the door. A uniformed soldier stood, holding a club in one hand and a paper in another. Beside him were about six other soldiers, lower ranked as their differently fashioned uniform said.

'Yes?' Charles wasn't able to say beyond the word, the higher ranked soldier had him rendered unconscious with a single blow of his club on the head.

Chapter 4: In Nascat

In Nascat

When Charles next was conscious of the world around him, he was no longer in their house at Tempstow; the corner he was lying belonged to a small damp and enclosed room that had just a single window, with bars, and a tiny door, firmly closed.

Sitting on the floor by him were Aunt Isabella, who was massaging his head, and Thomas, who curiously gazed, with a nasty sort of curiosity, at a bone-sack of a man, shackled, on the other corner. Both Aunt and Thomas were thin faced and crack-lipped, and appeared to be in despair.

'Aunt,' Charles said weakly. She turned her eyes at his face.

'Charles,' she smiled, 'you are awake.'

Charles tried and sat upright. I was difficult, his head hurt so badly.

'Where are we?' he said, 'Those... Those soldiers...'

'We are in Nascat,' said Aunt, 'They brought us here,' she grimaced, 'Countrymen; they call themselves-and beat others for fun.'

'In Nascat?' said Charles, the blaze in his head, it took time for him to properly take in the words, 'You mean... You mean the prison of Nascat?'

Aunt nodded.

'But why? Why did they bring us here?'

'They won't say,' said Thomas aloud, turning away from the old man and at him, 'They have kept us here one whole day and still won't explain why they brought us here at the first place!'

'But surely,' said Charles, 'there must be a reason.'

'It's all because of the Stocker you two met,' said Aunt, sounding mysterious, 'Stocker *are* evil omens.'

'Whatever,' said Thomas, irritably, 'I just want to get out of this awful place.' Scratching his head, he took back to gazing at the man, who apparently was sleeping, breathing slow and deep.

'Mum,' said Thomas, 'that man's been sleeping since yesterday itself.'

'So,' said Aunt, 'what's the problem with you? We don't want him awake; he's a convict and we don't know for what crime he's here.'

'We are here for no crime,' said Thomas, 'And besides, are they going to give us any food or water? I'm heck hungry and thirsty.'

By what it looked like, they probably weren't. Hours upon gloomy hours of starving hunger and thirst, they were totally made devoid of any energy and had little of it to even converse. Charles would pass into sleep

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many a times, but sleep with an empty stomach was more disturbing than refreshing, and the ache in his head never sought to cease.

Once, out of pure excessive frustration, Thomas got up and banged furiously at the door of the cell several times, and then fell in a swoon by it when no response came from anyone outside. Fanning, using their hands, it took a long time for Aunt and Charles to get him conscious again.

Food came only at night, as they could see through the small window. A panel at the bottom of the door opened and some loaves of bread along with water was passed in.

The bread was stale and the water tasted of mud. But so hungry they were, they swallowed it all down the throat. They had no option.

Ponder how much he did; Charles failed to see the point behind them being made prisoners. They were clean of wrong doings, paid the taxes regularly, and were what one called good citizens. What more, the soldiers themselves were guilty of taking them from home by force and not making known the charges against them. Charles prayed things to solve soon and hoped they could get out of the pit they had fallen into.

The old thin man, their sleeping cell mate never woke up. His sleep was to last forever. It was Thomas who saw him first and pointed out to Aunt and Charles, who realised that the man had ceased breathing.

What followed was an endless session of banging at the door. Fortunately, it didn't go futile as someone finally got annoyed by the noise, and opening the panel warned them to stop or he would have them beaten up.

'But it's not that,' said Aunt, her whole form shivering in anxiety, 'a man has died here!'

'What rubbish!' said the man in the other side, 'You're lying, aren't you?'

'No, really,' said Charles, 'there's a dead man here!'

'Alright,' said the man, 'I'm opening the door, but try to be smart and you won't see the next hour.'

The man then was heard calling for others, after which there was a sound of a key being inserted into a lock, and then, with a creak, the door swung open.

'There, there!' said Charles, pointing at the corpse of the old man, as three jailors poured in. They took him out in a matter of minutes and locked the door behind them.

'It's horrible!' said Aunt, clutching her head, 'It's simply horrible! When are we going to get out of here?!'

'I was telling you from the beginning,' said a shaken Thomas, 'but you won't listen-you never listen.'

The death of the convict spilled terror into their hearts. What if they were never released and had to suffer a fate similar to the man? As the days passed in the prison, days of unbearable hunger with nights of only little relief compared to the former, their fear and dread heightened. The jailor, who supplied them with food every night, rarely talked to them and his mouth opened solely to scold. Getting any information out of him regarding why they were imprisoned and when they were to be set free, if it was to happen, was impossible.

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Then, one night, something occurred that was to install itself in Charles' mind for permanent.

It was stormy outside, thunder clapping to stun the ears every now and then. They had only just had their meek prison food, and were preparing to sleep. Sleeping on the floor was a task in itself, no trace of comfort in sight, and they knew when they woke up they would be hardly capable of moving their stiff muscles. Everyone was half their initial size now, and Charles, skinny from before, was a skeleton and worse. The effect of prison life was clearly evident on their bodies.

Suddenly, there was a great 'BOOM', like a cannon shell being fired, not outside though, it had nothing to do with the thunder, but inside their cell, forcing them to cover their ears, the noise a torture.

'What the heck was that?' said Thomas after it passed, awed. It was dark and only an outline of him could be seen.

'It originated inside for sure,' said Charles, getting to his feet, alert.

'What caused it?' said Aunt Isabella.

'Dunno,' said Charles, 'there is nothing really that could have.'

'Maybe,' said Thomas, 'some kind of heavy load fell over the room; what dye say?'

Charles declined.

'No, it originated within itself, I'm sure.'

Again there was a 'BOOM', that was swiftly followed by yet another, causing the cell to jitter by the sheer intensity of sound.

'What's happening?!' said Aunt, terrified.

'Something's definitely going on!' said Charles.

A white light flashed in mid-air, just below the ceiling, and formed into a ball that hovered, illuminating the cell bright.

In his utter shock, Charles could not dare himself to move. The event occurring before them was one he hadn't imagined in his craziest of dreams. Perhaps this was the first time mortal eyes were witnessing something of the kind as magical.

'Fear not,' a voice said, and it belonged neither to Charles, Thomas or Aunt, 'I mean no harm to you, but rather the reverse. I am the spirit of Williams Garvinson and seek but help from you.'

'A spirit?' said Thomas, the appal in his tone glassy clear, 'You mean you're a ghost?'

'Alas, yes' in a sense I am. I am the man who was in this cell and died.'

'You're the ghost of the old convict?' Charles asked. He had always refused to believe in ghosts, spirits and supernatural beings. But this one... He was guaranteed nobody was tricking them by creating effects with sound and light-there was nothing to gain from that.

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'Yes,' the voice answered grimly, 'however, I was innocent of the crime they accused me with, and that too of the worst crime there could be: of murdering my dearest of friends, the renowned scientist, Albert Bennet!'

'What!' Aunt Isabella burst out, 'you're the same Garvinson who killed my father?'

'Are you his daughter in real?' the spirit asked, acquiring an extremely surprised note.

'Why, of course!' Aunt said, agitated, the earlier fear getting wiped, 'And these are his grandchildren! You are a murderer, Garvinson, you always will be; and I'm not afraid of you even if you are a ghost, the Gods shall protect us against you.'

A few moments passed in cavernous silence. For Charles, the entire thing was like getting hit by a club a second time. All he had known about the circumstances surrounding his grandfather's death was that a certain Garvinson had attacked him with a dagger and killed him. And this was the very Garvinson? His grandfather's killer?

'No,' said the spirit in remorse, 'I didn't do anything to him... It was all false, I never murdered Albert... I was framed.'

'Framed, eh?' Aunt was in a fury, 'You were caught red handed, and the dagger was in your hand.'

'NOOO!!!' the spirit bellowed. The ball dissolved into liquid light that swirled and took the appearance of the convict, who had died.

Aunt gasped but maintained her bold.

'Go away,' she said, 'go away in the name of the almighty gods!'

'I didn't,' said the convict, 'kill Albert. Please believe me, I am innocent, he was my friend!'

'Don't lie,' Aunt snarled.

'I am not. I still remember that terrible day; Albert came to my place, looking all white and shuddering, and spilled information about the staff and the axe, and after that let out a painful cry-and died. I was terrified and did not know what to do. I discovered the knife plunged into his back that I had not seen earlier because of his shawl. At the precise moment I was taking out the dagger from his body, people burst into my house and saw me holding it, they had heard Albert's cry. I tried to explain to them, but everyone was adamant.'

'You're making stuff,' said Aunt, 'my father never had any friend by your name-only his murderer.'

Garvinson eyed Aunt Isabella sorrowfully.

'It is alright if you do not believe me,' he said, 'I understand, and no soul believes me anyhow, but as for going away from here and leaving you, that I cannot do-alone. You will have to help me because I am obliged to this cell, as long as the promise I made to Albert is not fulfilled.'

'You're making stuff,' Aunt said again.

'Please trust me,' said Garvinson, 'If you help me, I would be able to help you too. I can help you get out from here.'

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'Can you really help us escape this horrid prison?' Thomas asked.

'Yes, but not until you render me the favour of completing my unfulfilled promise to Albert-It is what binds me to this place.'

Charles looked at Aunt Isabella; she did not seem acceptant of the deal.

'No,' she said, 'we aren't criminals like you, we needn't escape from here. They'll release us themselves soon.'

Garvinson shook his head of white light.

'They would not because they do not. Once you are in Nascat, you either escape or are here for life. They just want to keep as many people as possible to show they are doing their duties well. And if you run away, they would not bother to search for you; they will merely pick up someone else.'

Aunt Isabella flinched; this was making an effect on her. Charles himself felt queasy of the idea to spend his life span locked in a prison cell.

'But definitely,' said Aunt, 'they won't do something like that.'

'They have done so to hundreds of people,' said Garvinson, 'It is least likely they will spare you; trust me I can be of help. Alive, I was not able to flee myself, but as a spirit, I can help you to be free.'

Aunt glanced at Charles and Thomas thoughtfully. Maybe it was their dry faces that compelled her, but her anger disappeared from her expressions and she said,

'What will we have to do?'

'You will have to go to the Tropagian forest.'

'What!?' She was stupefied, as were the boys, 'To the Tropagian forest?'

'Yes' said Garvinson, 'It is where the staff and the axe are.'

'The staff and the axe?'

'The staff Navarion and the axe Acario. Albert had instructed me to destroy Navarion by cutting it into two using Acario.'

'Why'd my father assign you to carry out such a task?'

'Because he had me in his confidence,' said Garvinson, 'He had come to know of the two artefacts during the Tropagian expedition. Navarion is an evil staff that if falls into wrong hands, has the capacity to make everyone slaves of its wielder, and hence needs to be destroyed, the axe Acario being the sole object that could do so.'

'But that's impossible,' said Aunt Isabella, 'A woman and two boys, you can't simply expect us to go to a place like Tropagia! That vile forest took the lives of all, excepting my father's, during the expedition.'

'And they all died to save him-So that he could destroy the staff Navarion, but he died without succeeding, handing me the task, which I failed at as well.'

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Aunt eyed the convict suspiciously.

'The men died in an accident while crossing the river. My father had got to the other bank first of all, that's why he survived.'

'No,' said the convict, 'what you have been hearing is untrue. Albert told me he hid the real facts as he did not want people to grow more afraid of the Tropagian forest. His party had encountered demons in it and in the ensuing battle his men gave up their lives to save him.'

'My father and his men came across actual demons!?'

'Yes; but demons and the dark creatures are beings of the night, they are not around during daytime. So, if you go to Tropagia and are able to get to the axe hill before nightfall, you should be secure from harm, as by Albert's words, the hill is magical and bad forces cannot wander near to it.'

'So, the forest is free from dangers during the day?' Aunt asked, 'And we'll be safe if we can get to the hill?'

'Yes,' said Garvinson, 'Albert said so, although I do not know how he came to know it all.'

Aunt nodded, her eyes sat at the floor. From what Charles could see, she was thinking hard.'

'Still,' she said after a minute, 'we can't go to Tropagia as long as we are locked up here,' she frowned doubtfully, 'which brings me to thinking, how will you help us when we can't help you in the first place?'

'No,' said Garvinson, dismissing her puzzlement, 'after death I have acquired magical powers and though I cannot myself, I can teleport you to the Tropagian forest, as close to the axe hill as my abilities allow me.'

'Hmmm...!' Aunt mused.

'But what will we do once we get to the hill?' Charles asked.

'You will have to climb to its top. There you will find a cave, in it the axe Acario resides, which you should retrieve. Then, after spending the night there, you will have to journey to the temple of Breene on the banks of the river Brank and within sight able distance from the hill, towards the north. The staff Navarion is located inside the temple and you must use the axe to cut it into two, so that its dark powers are diminished.'

Aunt looked at Charles.

'Do you think you should agree?'

Charles brainstormed for some seconds.

'Maybe we can give it a try,' he said, 'and he says they won't search us if we escape from here-And hey,' Charles turned to Garvinson, 'What after we destroy the staff?'

'Worry not,' he replied, 'once the staff is destroyed, my obligations to Albert will be over and I shall become a free spirit. I would be able to go to the forest myself and take you from there and transport you to your home.'

'And what if you don't,' Aunt said testily, slight scepticism in her voice.

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'I promise I will,' said Garvinson, 'and you can trust in that, for unless a spirit has fulfilled all his promises, he is not permitted to pass to the other world.'

The night went quick in nervous anticipation of the morning. Curious and excited, they didn't sleep, besides, sleeping would only give them the cramps. Charles wasn't fully sure about Garvinson, and he had chosen to accept his offer just because it didn't have any downside to it, which meant, even if Garvinson was lying, they had nothing to lose; Nascat was frustrating enough that a week more of staying there would rob him of his sanity.

With the breaking of first rays of day, Garvinson, who had turned himself invisible the previous night, reappeared and told them to assemble in a line holding hands.

'So,' he said, 'of your food, Tropagia would provide it in abundance, quantities of fruits and berries. You should keep a lookout for darker coloured fruits, as they may well be poisonous, other colours you can go for. I am transporting you the closest possible to xe hill.'

The three of them exchanged looks and nodded, grasping each others' hands even more tightly.'

'Let's hope for the best,' said Aunt.

'Right,' agreed Charles.

'This is gonna be adventurous,' said Thomas, glowing for the first time in what Charles thought ages.

Garvinson lifted his arms and, making complicated gestures with them, began to mutter strange words, riddling incantations their mortal ears could not make any sense of.

Smoke gushed from his hands, dense, but breathable, smoke which surrounded them until it was the only thing in their visions.

When the smoke cleared they were no longer in their cell at Nascat. No walls held them captive any longer. The wide blue sky was over their heads and everywhere was trees. Freedom was theirs.

They were in the Tropagian forest.

Chapter 5: Henry

Chapter 4

HENRY

'So?' said Thomas, surveying the spot with his eyes, 'This is the bloody forest, eh?'

A stream flowed nearby, a small one, its breadth only a few metres. The rustling water appeared clean; thirsty, Charles scooped and cupped a couple of handfuls into his mouth. It certainly tasted better than the water they provided at Nascat.

'It ought to be,' he said, 'but where is the hill?' The trees weren't that tall, but they were so thick in numbers everywhere, they did not permit a good view of any direction.

'I can climb a tree and see,' Thomas offered.

'Yes, do it,' said Aunt, 'we need to get to the hill as fast as we can.'

Thomas was an expert in climbing trees, way agile than Charles. He quickly got on top of one, while Charles and Aunt waited below, watching.

'I see it,' he said, flinging his arm forward, 'and good news! We'll have that stream with us; it flows straight to the hill and then curves.'

After Thomas carefully descended down, Aunt said,

'Come on, now.' And they began their journey.

The Dwarf Dwarf castle was dark as always, not that light was scant, only its inhabitants hated the name of it and, anyhow, they did not require it at all. What more, its mistress, Mai Canniola-three witches who had found residence in one single body-had made sure her castle was wholly light-proof by using her strongest of light repelling spells, and also strictly disapproved of her dear Assurs going out of the castle during day.

Today, she was seated on her majestic Throne, as always, and at her easiest, scratching her misty yellow teeth with her misty deformed nails. In front of her was a golden stool on which a purple cat sat, licking his paws to clean.

'Is she replaced?' Mai Canniola asked the purple one, who purred.

'Yes, and quit successfully indeed.'

'So, we don't need her any longer, do we? The Assurs can have a feast.' The Assurs cheered, howling happily in appreciation. A smile crept onto Canniola's lips; the Assurs, half men half bugs, and her ever-loyal slaves, she liked them rewarded once in a while or two, and seeing the savagery of their merry making.

'No,' said the purple one, taut, quietening the Assurs all at once, 'We don't know what use we may need her for and when. Mariola will do her job well, there is no doubt to that, but it cannot be said at what turn we shall

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happen to require the real one. At best, we keep her in a place which is not in a stone's throw, so that we are not tempted to kill her.'

'Gullop?' said Mai Canniola, her smile gone, knowing that the purple one's *we* solely meant she and her Assurs, 'the barren rock of an island; what do you say?'

'Yes, that can suffice,' he said and blew his nose, '...well, it's time I get involved as well.'

Canniola nodded, thoughtfully.

'So long, then,' said the purple one and with a flick, the stool was empty.'

'You'll have to do with the usual game,' Canniola told the Assurs, '... Or hey! Lexon and his men, they are useless now, hunt for them at night!' The Assurs, whose faces had fallen, were revived and delighted. Mai Canniola divided herself into three, and started chatting with her 'selves'.

As Charles, Thomas and Aunt Isabella irksomely waddled through the forest, splashing stream water that flowed beneath their feet, they soon found how bizarre Tropagia was. From three inches big army ants, their lines they were careful not to disturb, to mobile plants, the flowers of which kept snapping at flies, the environment felt exceptionally alien to them.

They avoided consuming the strange looking unfamiliar fruits showing up every few metres. They had seen none of the like back at home, and although Garvinson's spirit had told them about the edibility of the lighter coloured ones, they feared at selecting the wrong fruit by mistake.

But, ultimately, by noon, hunger and tire had the better of them. Walking for so long, their legs had grown sore and leady. Two kilometres of forest still lay between them and the hill, however, wearied, they were forced to give into some rest; they plucked three of the apple shaped grey fruits, and, prior to eating, hoped these were not going to be their last fruits.

'It's not that bad,' said Thomas, as he munched at his fruit.

Charles took a bite of his own.

'It tastes both like an apple and a guava at the same time, doesn't it?'

'Hmmm,' said Thomas, finishing and throwing away the leftover, 'I think I'll get another one.'

He rose and plucked another one of the grey fruits from the lower branches of the tree.

Aunt Isabella exhaled slowly.

'I pray we can get to the hill within a couple of hours. I wonder if I'll manage it though, walking is such a task!'

Thomas chewed on,

'And that Garvinson said he'd get us as close to the axe hill as possible!'

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'He must have tried his best,' said Aunt, when abruptly, she turned vigilant, '-hey, do you hear that?'

'What?' Charles and Thomas asked.

'Someone's crying, can't you hear that?'

They strained their ears. Charles heard a faint continuous weeping noise. Amongst the many sounds that the forest was ever making, it was difficult, but it existed none the less.

'Yes,' said Charles, 'Someone's crying!'

'We are not alone here for sure,' said Aunt, 'I say we get moving; I feel crept!'

'Shouldn't we investigate a bit?' said Thomas.

'Investigate?' said Aunt, 'Are you mad?'

'He said we won't find demons when it's still day? What if there is a person there who needs help?'

'People don't come to Tropagia for leisure,' mocked Aunt Isabella.

'A tad of looking around won't harm, will it?' Thomas pressed on.

'It won't actually,' said Charles, more to Aunt than to Thomas. He wanted to find out who was crying. He had a feeling somebody was really in need of help.

'Okay,' said Aunt, finally persuaded, 'let's see, but this can get wrong.'

Listening hard, they moved into the woods, though careful not to venture too far from the stream, peering through the trees, in search for the weeping fellow.

Not long before, they found him: a young boy, younger than Thomas by a slight, slumped at the foot of a tree, his clothes torn and nasty gashes spread over his body.

'Whoa!' said Thomas, 'Who're you?'

The boy wheezed as he saw them-he had been gazing down and hadn't realised their arrival up till now. His eyes bulged, and terror paralysed him. He was able to mutter only two shivering words.

'Please...don't...'

'Hey, hey,' said Charles, striding over, 'relax, relax. What happened to you? Why are you here?'

A cute little striped blue kitten appeared from a bush and crept onto the boy's lap, who remained stiff and fearful.

Charles crouched next to him.

'Are you alright, boy?'

'Please...don't...' he muttered again.

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'He seems to have suffered a lot,' Aunt said, she and Thomas walking over as well.

'How did he get to this heck jungle?' said Thomas.

A sob burst from the boy.

'You...you are going to harm me...aren't you?'

'No,' said Charles kindly, 'nobody's going to harm you, you're totally safe, cheer up.'

'He...he brought me here and left me to die...the r-rascal.'

'Who?' Charles asked.

'M-My uncle...he brought me here...he wants all our property.'

'Your uncle?' Thomas said, big eyed.

'Yes,' the boy replied, sniffing and trying to control his tears, but failing, 'he killed my parents...and didn't even spare my older brother...he made it look like I killed them and the stupid village elders took his word, without thinking I could never do such a thing...because everyone feared him.'

'That's evil,' said Aunt, astonishment glued to her face at the uncle's act, 'what kind of an uncle does something like that!'

'He is my father's step-brother...he always hated our family with all despise...he killed everyone!' The boy broke into loud wails.

'Man!' said Charles. He felt pity towards the poor soul.

'Hey,' he placed a consoling hand on his shoulder, 'calm down.'

An angry wave rippled Aunt's features,

'His uncle is a brute; he can't do this to such a little boy!'

The cat purred quietly, evidently the boy's pet, who, even as he sobbed away, kept caressing it tenderly. The boy was a decent one, if not for his placid condition of present. Despite marks of recent ill-treatment, his face still told of a cared-for life prior to that.

'How far is your village from here?' Charles said to him.

'I don't know,' he replied, taking sharp breathes, 'they blindfolded me...but, it took about a week.'

Charles was quizzical,

'Took a week?' he said, 'I mean, this forest is so dangerous, you didn't have any trouble from the wild animals and demons?'

'No...my uncle was the only demon for me.'

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'Hmmm,' said Charles, 'anyway, your village sure isn't near.'

It took a while for the boy to quieten down. His tears weren't point blank; the cause was too strong; anyone was meant to dissolve under the situation he was in.

'What do we do with him?' Charles asked of Aunt Isabella, 'It would be inhuman to leave him alone and go.'

Aunt did not appear to think there was any validity in the question,

'Why, of course,' she said, 'we have to take him along, what else?'

Charles nodded, approving very much. The boy's tears had ceased by now, he was staring melancholy at his cat.

'Charles asked him his name.

'Henry,' he replied, his eyes moving up to Charles.

'Will you come with us?'

'Yes,' said Henry, 'I will...I have nowhere to go.'

'Alright then,' said Charles, to everyone this time, 'let's get back on track, we need to get to the hill before night.'

They returned to the stream and after feeding Henry few of the apple-shaped grey fruits, so that to replenish his energy, continued on the trek.

They had advanced only a short distance, when suddenly Thomas said of spotting something, plausibly an animal, moving amidst the bushes and shrubs.

'It can be anything,' said Charles, alarm in each word, 'come fast! Garvinson only said demons won't be around during daytime, he didn't tell anything about wild animals.'

Barely had he spoken, a great beast jumped in front of them from the woods. The most fearsome of beasts this was, gigantic in size and odd could be one of the scant words for its description. Its head resembles a wolf's alright, just way bigger, but it had a hump on its back like an ox's, and three clawed scaled feet as the ones birds had, oversized birds that is to say.

All of them made an instinctive dash in the opposite direction, instantly, terrorised to their cores.

'Run, run, run!' Charles shouted, racing faster than ever.

'Look!' Aunt Isabella shrieked. With a bound, the fiend had taken to the air and rapidly crossed them overhead. Without a second's ado, it was before them.

'AARRHG!' They nearly crashed against the animal from the inertia of their run.

The hulking one roared, a roar so loud and shaking, they almost seemed to be off-thrown their feet.

The Witch's Plot

They rushed, but at the very moment, there was a series of 'pops', like bubbles bursting, and there, through sheer magic, appeared by the beast a man of the most peculiarity, wearing a strange green gown, face tattoo-adorned, and leisurely keeping his arm on the beast's hump.

'Stop, everybody, stop. Please do,' he said in a fairly dramatic tone, his voice sounding both like an old man's and a young boy's at the same time.

'Who are you?' Charles asked, sarcastic, halting, and raising his hands to signal the others as well. This man apparently knew magic and had something to do with the wolf-headed animal: Otherwise, it would be feasting on him as of now.

'Everybody 'round here calls me Lysando, 'cause ye know what? I am Lysando!' He smiled wide and hilarious, his lips stretching the breadth of his face.

Charles narrowed his eyes at the wolf-animal.

'And that beast?'

'Oh', said Lysando, patting the beast ever so akin to an old pal, 'He's the king of my Bherias and my best friend; name's Gyepik.'

Charles wondered of the word 'friend' was applicable in this case,

'It nearly ate us,' Thomas gritted his teeth angrily.

'Nay,' said Lysando, gay, 'he was simply playin', that's all.'

'Playing?' said Aunt Isabella, breathing heavily, raising a brow.

'Yeah, 'course; I understand ye people got a little bit frightened, but the thing is-what are ye doin' in my area? Will ye explain please?'

'Your area?' Charles asked.

'Yeah, 'course,' said Lysando. 'It's my area, definitely not yours, I assume?-or hey,' he acquired a warning note, 'are ye Canniola's Assurs disguised as ordinary folks? In that case, I won't step from assaultin' ye-though I'm sceptic an Assurs tongue can ever form a word, and besides they rarely are seen at this time of the day-which 'course lends me in a dilemma as of your identity, since ye speak so well.'

'Hey, listen,' said Charles, not understanding a word Lysando was blabbing. 'We don't know what you're speaking, okay? So-'

'So what?' said Lysando, 'Tell me your identity first.'

'You've got nothing to do with that,' said Aunt, cross.

Lysando shook a finger delicately,

'I've got everythin' to do with that. May I remind ye, this is *my* area.'

'Shut it up,' said Aunt, 'first you let this frightening animal loose on us and-'

The Witch's Plot

'He was playin' I have told ye. Why did ye enter my area in the first place?'

'Alright,' Aunt Isabella clasped her hands together at Lysando, fed up. 'Please excuse us; we are leaving *your* area. Come on, let's get away from here, he irritates me.'

As they were to go, Lysando announced,

'Wait and tell me who ye people are, or else, I'll actually let Gyepik on ye.'

'Urgh!' Aunt Isabella said in exasperation.

Charles turned decisively at Lysando.

'See,' he told him, 'we were just passing this place when we heard this boy here crying,' he gestured towards Henry,' and stopped to have a look. We decided to take him with us, and were continuing on our way, when that monster of yours jumped in front of us and attacked us. And then, you appeared-so, that's it, there's nothing else to tell.'

Lysando inflated his mouth with air, and thought for a moment.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Charles Bennet.' He lent Lysando an Is-this-over-man? look.

'Charles Bennet,' Lysando echoed, genuinely reminiscent for some reasons,'...That recalls some old times to me.'

'Can we go now?' said Thomas, folding his arms.

'Wait,' said Lysando, talking to Charles,'...Bennet...Um, do ye know of Albert Bennet, er, the scientist?'

A strange itch came underneath Charles skin. What was Lysando getting to? He wondered. It was beyond doubt he was referring to his grandfather.

'The one who led an expedition to this forest?'

'Exactly,' said Lysando, an eager expression dressing his tattooed face.

Charles glanced at the others; Aunt and Thomas were gaping; Henry, however, was confused. A prickling cluster of seconds elapsed before he slowly spoke,

'He was my Grandfather.'

Lysando's jaw dropped, and his eyes came to the verge of popping out.

'Don't ye move,' he said in a swift breath, and became one with the air in a 'pop'.

The wolf-animal remained though, staring at them, eyes fixed and unblinking.

'Why do all these magic people know grandpa? Thomas wondered out loud.

The Witch's Plot

'That Thomas,' said Aunt, 'only you grandfather himself would know...Anyhow, let's not stay here, that monster is gazing too hungrily at us, and we need to get to the hill, remember?'

'Let's move,' said Charles. 'We don't want to provoke it, do we?'

With extreme slowness they began to move backwards, one step at a time. But the wolf-animal was not to be deceived easily; before long, it became aware of the plan they were up to.

It snarled at them, and coming over, took to circling around them, ready to pounce the moment that pleased it.

All afraid, they considered it wiser to stay still, until the tattooed man returned.

And it took him a long time, made so, undisputedly, by the beast's ever rigid glare on them, even if it were not more than a trifle of minutes in reality.

And Lysando did not reappear alone. He brought some dozen men with himself, whose height did not surpass half of a normal human's. Height wasn't, however, their only peculiarity; the bunch of them had a tail each, giving them an appearance of humanised monkeys.

'Which of them is he?' one of the short men said, who carried a sword (length of a regular knife) in a sheath, clearly meaning Charles' group by 'them'.

Lysando pointed at Charles.

'Him.'

'And who are the others?'

'Who are they?' Lysando asked Charles, hurriedly, indicating Thomas, Aunt and Henry.

'They are my Aunt, cousin and the boy we found,' Charles replied.

The short man stepped forward. It did not require anybody to tell of his possible leadership over the other short people, who thought it just right for him to be in command.

'You,' he addressed Charles, an air of curious disbelief hanging about his persona, 'you are Albert Bennett's grandson?'

The matter was getting a tad thick, Charles thought, the strangest of strangers questioning them as regard their identity. But they were greatly outnumbered, and then, there was the wolf-animal too. For a brief second he ventured if he should lie of not bearing any relation with Grandfather and then the thing ended with. But that was not possible now, not after he had already told to Lysando; still, he could give it a try...

'No,' he said, making himself sound as confident as possible, 'I'm not.'

'What!' Lysando was shocked, 'But ye told me-'

'I lied to you,' Charles cut across him, 'we-we just wanted you to let us go.'

'Then why didn't ye simply state ye got nothin' to do with Albert?'

The Witch's Plot

'Because...' Charles began cheekily, felling utterly helpless of what made-up reply he should give, when, fortunately, Aunt Isabella came to the rescue.

'...You were making us feel crazed out!' Said Aunt, tone very convincing, apparently understanding Charles' intention, 'We already said we were simple people, but you wouldn't believe us!'

'Simple people don't come to Tropagia,' said the short man, eyes gleaming suspicion.

'Yeah, Tonkeytus,' said Lysando, 'and the boy's surname's Bennet!'

'Bennet, eh?' said Tonkeytus. He lent Charles an extremely penetrating look. 'Let them go, you're just being a nuisance to them, Lysando...'

'Wh-what?!' Lysando seemed as if the latter had slapped him, 'Let 'em go? Why in the world's sake?'

'You and your Bheria monsters,' Tonkeytus snapped, 'you are always problematic to everyone.'

'B-but!'

'Oh, Lysando, don't be childish!'

Evidently this poked Lysando's ego, for, in a fury, he said,

'Who cares!' and magically vanished before the next second dawned, together with his wolf-animal'

'Pardon us please,' Tonkeytus said to Charles' group, and he and his men too disappeared in the blink of an eyelid.

Aunt Isabella heaved sigh of relief.

'At last!'

Chapter 6: House of the Macacawks

Chapter 5

House of the Macacawks

'Man, this map's tricky,' said Betro, one of Lexon Gambwell's four men, staring aghast at the map he held, which had been directing them to go south until a minute previously, and had suddenly changed for south-west instead.

'Gambwell, this is all shit!'

'Give it to me, dumb head,' said Lexon and snatched the map from Betro. He looked at it, it was no longer asking them to travel south-west, but east. 'Holy!' Lexon gasped the next moment, as all the contents disappeared altogether, leaving the map a total blank.

Furious, he tore it into half a dozen pieces and threw aside.

'Hey,' said Gensk, another of his men. 'Why did you do that for?'

'It's useless, she scammed me!' Lexon looked away.'

'She?' said Betro, confused. 'A woman? Whom are you talking about? -Hey, hey, you know, then, who kept the gold below the tree?'

'Shut up,' Lexon snapped. 'And get the chest open, will you? I want to see the gold.'

Betro grimaced, but dragged the chest to their midst. Producing a key, he unsuccessfully tried at the lock a couple of times. In the third attempt, it finally gave way. Lexon's heart beat quadrupled, fear stirring in his pit. He shouldn't have accepted the witch's deal at all, the map was already nuts; just as a dog's tail never straightened, and sly never disembodied a witch, whatever you say. Still, all the hard work with Henry and his family, he didn't want seeing it get wasted.

For some time, Betro struggled with the chest, which was too tightly shut and refused to open up. Not long before, though, he was able to get it open. And open it did, to reveal the glittering wealth and to etch relief onto Lexon's features.

It is rather remarkable to note how quickly expressions change. Indeed, a few things have the capability to be faster, it must be said. And specially, when immense relief switches places with tragic grief... well, expressions tend to forgo their quality of speed... just as was the case with Lexon and his men. Even as the quantity of gold became ash, Lexon, and for "*long*" while, remained gazing at it, his face bearing relief still, though in a very slow rate, it was changing.

Lexon fell onto his knees.

'Mai canniola,' he muttered. '...You cheated me.'

Stark horror was the only expression he now had.

The Witch's Plot

Charles nearly walked into Tonkeytus, the leader of the tribe of the short men, when he suddenly appeared right in front of him.

'You?' he exclaimed. Behind, Henry's pet cat made a fearful sound. Less than a quarter of an hour had passed since they left the spot where they had been interrogated by Lysando, the wizard, and here was Tonkeytus once more, who had, so sincerely, asked them apology for the trouble from Lysando.

Aunt Isabella, at annoyance's peak, furrowed angrily. The fact that Tonkeytus knew magic did not much bother her.

'You are here again?'

Tonkeytus ignored her but insisted on Charles.

'You were lying then, weren't you?' He asked him in curious words. Caught off guard completely, Charles spluttered an awkward 'How d'you know?' betraying all the efforts he had made at concealment earlier at once.

'It's child's play for me to differentiate between a truth and a lie.' Although a small form, he cast quite a towering aura about himself.

Charles attempted at regaining himself, wishing he hadn't been stupid.

'But why do you care who we are?'

'I don't care who you are, only your relation with Albert Bennet. You, boy, resemble him a lot, particularly your ears-which I doubt at being a mere coincidence.'

Charles knew his grandfather had an ear bigger than the other, just as himself. His father had told him of that who, too, had the same case with his ears. It was a generic physical feature, he had said, that passed from father to son. Charles always betted, no matter how many greats you put before, his entire line of grandfathers had had the same kind of ears.

Charles decided to answer in an obvious manner.

'Alright, I'm Albert Bennet's grandson; so, what do you gain from it? And what would you lose if I'm not?'

'It's nothing about gaining or losing,' Tonkeytus replied, eyes reflecting his inner determination. Somewhere, Charles felt, Tonkeytus was steadily getting onto a definite goal. 'Are you sure you are Albert's grandson?'

Strangely, Charles found himself keeping quiet. He just kept looking at Tonkeytus, his gaze wavering from time to time. It was probably best, considering that he could not sum up any way of dealing with the proximity question. Whether to decline or subject, he was incapable to decide. Either for good or for worse, it wasn't known, Thomas picked up the talk, so that Tonkeytus was made to turn at him instead.

'Yes,' Thomas blared. 'Albert Bennet was our grandpa, so you don't fry our heads anymore.'

'You are not lying, are you?'

Thomas grunted itch.

The Witch's Plot

'All the time you are asking us to tell the truth, and when we do so, you call it a lie?'

Tonkeytus, whom Thomas surpassed by a foot, eyed him, but not with contempt. It was a wholly different kind of expression his face hosted. Somewhat of disbelief, yet not without a tinge of belief as well. Charles saw a very confused mind indeed, behind Tonkeytus' face. Although, he never was sure what played in it. Here was someone determined, but divided between himself as regard his decisions. Then Tonkeytus became completely vacant.

'Alright,' he said, nodding to them, though speaking more to himself. He produced a small black glass bottle from a pocket in his trousers.

'What's that' Charles said, his ears hot for some causes.

'Nothing...' Tonkeytus murmured slowly, uncapping the bottle, unleashing an immensely sweet aroma in the process.

'Hey, hey-DON'T!' An alarmed Aunt Isabella deliberately tried to reach for the bottle in Tonkeytus' hand-she never got it. She crashed onto the ground, and before he realised it, Charles had fallen too. Strong dizziness was over him in wee seconds. Then all he knew about was slipping into the arms of a deep warm sleep...

It had been a long time since the Assurs and the Dwarfy Dwarf had seen Canniola get into such a rage as this. And they feared it most because she simultaneously kept unleashing her fury upon them, randomly shooting curses at anyone whenever an occasional sound or two was heard.

However, in reality, Mai Canniola's external madness only reflected a portion of the internal tantrum that was swelling inside of her. She was doing her best to control herself; murdering her own followers, she was but merely causing harm to herself, and she knew that more too well than not.

But what had happened was in no way something that could be flung aside without worry. The Macacawks had got them, and neither the purple one or Miranda, or herself, had been able to stop it, solely because of the risk of getting revealed. She wanted to, using all her might, direct her powers to solve the problem, but a failed attempt would leave none but the last option: Force that would lead not only to the disclosure of the entire plot to the Descendant, but also to the Potion Makers and Macacawks and whom not.

Caniola trusted the Purple one and Miranda with everything for devising a way out; the former specially, he had been the greatest help ever bestowed on her. However, the main trouble was time; it was the last month of the 3000th year, and if they could not shake off the Macacawks well before the days ran out, then she would be doomed to be monitored by Navarion for all eternity...

Her jaw muscle twitched as she heard her head Dwarfy Dwarf, who stood beside her throne, gulp audibly. He flinched, apparently shocked at his own unconscious doing, then remained still for good.

Mai Canniola clenched her fists into balls, fighting to be in her cool. No, he is too important... I mustn't... I cannot...

The next minute saw the head Dwarfy Dwarf lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood after the witch had throttled him to limpness and then literally shredded out his guts with her misty two inch long nails.

The Witch's Plot

'NOOO!!!' Canniola shrieked, reverberating everywhere, shaking every single being in the castle. 'NO! DO SOMETHING, ARAKOSH! DO SOMETHING!'

'Ummm,' Charles moaned as he opened his eyes, feeling a soft bed underneath him. When the blur finally gave way, he saw a ceiling overhead, white washed, decorated with a large painting of a plant sapling. There was a very strong scent of soil about the room that though wasn't really any bad smell, Charles found itchy.

He thought of rubbing away the remaining sleep, but strangely, he never actually did so. He thought again the same thing, and once more, his hands his hands did not move up to his eyes, remaining as they were. Charles frowned, wondering. Before soon, the frown faded and his brows climbed high in his forehead and his eyes widened his mouth opening. He realised, he was unable of moving his arms, how hard he tried. In fact, he could not move any part of his body at all, his head being the one exception. His torso, his legs, arms, hands and fingers; they were totally not responding to his mind's will. Of course, that they were there, he was able to feel their presence, it was not like they had gone devoid of feeling absolutely. But his connection with them did not extend any further. From his shoulders onward to the tips of his feet, he could not move a single muscle.

As Charles fretted over his body, no idea at how it had come to such a state, just then, the door of half-of-usual-size of the room was pushed open, and in came a beaming Tonkeytus, a food trolley in front of him.

'Awake, aren't you?' he said. Charles had a violent urge to smack his brains out, and he didn't think he would have resisted to play it out in actuality if not for his presently corpse like body.

'You!' he snarled. 'What have you done to me? And where are the others?'

'Oh,' said Tonkeytus, still smiling. 'Don't worry it's nothing. Your body will be alright in a couple of hours; it's so at the time being because you smelled the Paralyin gas. Your friends are in a different room and unconscious. I just wanted to show you to somebody.'

'Shut up!' Charles hissed, 'You kidnapped us, you bastard!'

'Well,' he said, taking it without offence. 'I am not one, and this is no kidnapping; you'll be freed once you talk with Grandcawk.'

'I'm talking with no one! Just release us!'

'Can't actually, not before the effects of the Paralyin gas wears off you. And, anyway, you'll be only glad I brought you here-at least if you truly are Albert Bennet's grandson.'

'I am, so what; let my body get okay and then see what I do to you!'

Tonkeytus mused loudly, then bringing the trolley beside Charles, said,

'Cool down, boy, cool down; you don't look the killer kind anyway. And I repeat, you'll be only glad I brought you here once you meet Grandcawk. Um, here is some bread, butter and tea, your upper body will be quite functional by half-an-hour, and you can have this then.'

The Witch's Plot

It was at that moment that something struck Charles: Tonkeytus, standing next to the bed, might have as well been taller than himself.

Though hatred was boiling hot inside Charles, he could not help but become puzzled at it. Tonkeytus, hadn't he been shorter than half a normal man the last time he had seen him?

'Um,' said Tonkeytus. 'I've got some work, so... well, I'll come after sometime.'

Making to the door, he was about to open it, when Charles, in between noisy breathes, said,

'You got big. How?'

Much to his surprise, Tonkeytus chuckled.

'It's strange, isn't it, how one's perspective may lend him such a reversed outlook on the reality? ... Wait sometime more, there is more to it.'

He left the room, and Charles sank deeper into his pool of confuse. "Reversal of the reality"? What on earth did he mean by it? And what was more there more to it? ...

Nothing could have been more disheartening to Charles than lying on that soft bed, fully conscious of mind, but exercising a dead man's capability for movement.

Aunt, Thomas, Henry... were they safe? He did not know if he should trust Tonkeytus. His character was too doubtful for it; he appeared all friendly and had a kind old face, but Charles could not understand why he had first helped them in getting away from Lysando, and then rounded upon them to maliciously make them unconscious and brought them to this place consent less.

What Charles was sure about was that everything happening had a strong connection with his grandfather. From Garvinson's spirit to his present situation, all had his grandfather at the base.

I was almost unnatural that such odious people knew him. Of course, he had been a naturalist and, although infamous for the failed Tropagian mission, was quite a known name in Belaria. But ghosts and tailed humans, who dwelt in Tropagia, knowing him... that, allowed Charles a very twisty sensation in his guts that he had never experienced before.

Charles was a damnable sure even his father hadn't had any knowledge regarding Grandfather's veiled relations with the mysteries of Tropagia, and didn't think it was all pious on the latter's part in keeping mum towards his family, if not others.

Charles really missed his father, especially now that the world seemed to be converging into bleak weirdness, the series of unimagined, out-of-place, charging at them like mad bulls. Maybe, somehow, these things wouldn't have happened had he been there. Charles heaved a sigh.

The plight of a drunken cabman cost a lot... The cab had run over his father, killing him on the spot.

The realisation of controlled movement of the upper body came after what qualified for an aeon. His legs had still to revive, but just the fact he could move his arms about infused great spirit in him. And yes-

It was time he did something.

The Witch's Plot

Charles rolled himself to the side of his bed; then, using his arms for safety, dropped to the floor, managing to hurt his hips nonetheless. It was at that moment Charles caught a glimpse of something dangling to his lower back, kind of a rope.

There was an abrupt pause in his breathing, as a second glance told him more than he would have preferred digesting. It wasn't a rope; it shared the light brown colour of his skin, or extended from his own body. Charles' heart skipped a breathe; he did not want to hear this.

It was a tail. His "own" tail.

His hand quivering, he touched and held it. He could feel it. Although, like his legs, it didn't respond to his will, it was possible for him to sense his being. It was a part of him just as the rest of his body was.

And all this time he never realised its existence, until now? How?! Charles felt stupid, and then thought it was not his fault after all. He had never had a tail, and wasn't accustomed to bearing one. It was obvious he had mistaken it with his legs and backside. Question was,

How did he happen to have a tail?

'Surely Tonkeytus,' he answered himself. 'He did this, no doubt.' While he could not speculate a reason why, he was definite Tonkeytus, who knew magic, had used his vile powers to give him a tail. And was this what he had meant by his words?

Charles contorted his face and gritted his jaw muscle. As long as a child, he remembered, he "had" wanted a tail and had fantasized possessing one. But he wasn't a child anymore, he didn't fancy one nor did it please him very much for others to play out all sorts of weird transformations to his body.

He jerked his head when he heard the muffled noise of gunshots being fired in a continuous row, that took not less than half-a-minute to cease, then, immediately following, was the raising of an enthusiastic song, sung in unison by what had to be a whole crowd of people:

'Grandcawk, Grandcawk,

You're good and great;

Never have we met someone,

More clean of soul and straight!

You sled the terror,

Balloor.

All our maladies and heartaches,

You've always been there to cure.

Today, you've reached your 200th year,

And, praise you, we've no sorrows to bear.

The Witch's Plot

A happy, happy birthday to you Grandcawk!

Even we nutty people, your blessings turned brainy,

Have washed and cleaned our stinky socks!

Without you, we are nothing, we pride no existence;

You're to us all, the smoothest, the wisest,

And the strongest fence.'

The song came to its magnificent ending in high tones, after which there was much cheering and merry shouts for some time. They gradually quietened in a few minutes, and silence took over.

Thoughwhelmed by the sudden intensity of the song, there was only one question Charles found himself asking-*People?* What kind of place was it outside of the room?

He hadn't been all sure where Tonkeytus had brought them, and this had merely increased his curiosity. Of course, Tonkeytus did not live alone, he had his men and Lysando, together with the wolf-monster, that Charles needn't be told of; but the song had had female voices too, and also, possibly, voices that ought to have belonged to children.

Mustering great effort, Charles dragged himself to the door. It was closed from outside and firmly shut. Charles rapped hard at it no fewer than two dozen times, yelling forcefully Tonkeytus' name. Everything was in vain; that somebody was nearby outside, was an 'anti-possibility.'

His arms and throat thoroughly exhausted, Charles gave up his pointless efforts and retreated to hoping. There was nothing to do, and his limp legs added a good amount to that. If Aunt, Thomas and Henry did not turn up alright, Charles swore, he'd smother Tonkeytus if he could-*Thing* was, he couldn't, not now in his present condition anyway.

Charles began waiting. It was a wait for the effects of the Paralyin or something, to wear off his legs; however, before the wait ripened, he heard the clatter of approaching footsteps.

Charles fisted his mad out at the door.

'GET ME OUT OF HERE! GET ME OUT OF HERE!'

A woman called out in a rushed tone.

'Charles, it's okay, it's me, your Aunt; I've come to you.' It was indeed Aunt Isabella. Charles mentally scolded himself for not recognising the voice.

'Get the door open fast, I want to see him,' she told someone, and an 'Of course' of readily agreement issued, that Charles believed to be Tonkeytus.

A click of unbolting, and the door opened to reveal the two of them. Lines of worry were cleaved onto Aunt's face, who respired fast and tense, her arms thrown wide as if searching; Tonkeytus, initially about to gesture at the bed, then opting for the floor once seeing Charles.

The Witch's Plot

They were of the same height. Aunt Isabella had a tail.

'Aunt!' said Charles astonished eyes prowling at her tail and interrogating of her unnatural short stature.

'It's him,' said Aunt, flushing red, chinning at Tonkeytus. 'He did it to all of us,' she added, and it was explained to Charles why Tonkeytus had looked taller earlier, as of now-he himself had shrunk in height.

'It's nothing to worry about. Your bodies will become as before once you go out of the house.' Tonkeytus sounded obvious.

Charles stared him dead at the eye.

'Why did you bring us here for, and what's this place exactly?'

Tonkeytus opened his mouth, but it was Aunt Isabella who answered, her tone pressed.

'He wants us to meet someone called Grandcawk, head of their tribe or something. He says this is their 'house', and we are a great depth below ground.'

Charles exhaled sulkily, casting a pair of stern eyes at Tonkeytus.

'You ridiculed that other man, Lysando, for thinking us to have relation with Albert Bennet, why did you change your mind then, eh, and brought us here without consent?'

'I know,' said Tonkeytus slowly, I brought you here against your will, and I'm sorry for that. But we have something of your grandfather's that we want to return. And, as I told you then, you look like a miniature of your grandfather; you reminded me strongly of him. I planned of bringing you here the very moment my sight fell on you. But I could not do so in front of Lysando and the Macacawks, and hence had to fend him off and catch up with you later.'

'But why?' Charles asked. 'They are your men after all.'

Tonkeytus furrowed quizzically, as if Charles question was pretty much dumb.

'You sure know very little about your own grandfather boy,' he turned his head sideways. 'And you, lady, you must be knowing something about Albert's life, right? He was your father!'

Aunt Isabella, not catching, had eyes dull as a vacant room. Tonkeytus strained the edge of his upper lip disbelievingly, then, after apparently checking the annals of his memory, finally was able to wear an expression of understanding on his face.

'So,' he said, to himself rather than Aunt or Charles. 'Good old Albert kept his promise, after all. He didn't tell anybody, even his own family about us-and still they call his "*Traitor*"!'

His mouth formed a self explanatory "O" and he nodded briskly to himself.

'What are you talking about?' said Charles, observing Tonkeytus.

Tonkeytus, suddenly reminiscent, snapped out and said,

The Witch's Plot

'...No, no; it's not your fault you don't know anything about your grandfather's life. We made him vow not to tell anyone about ourselves, Tropagia dwellers... Well um, you see, Albert was a great man, and was a great friend of both the Macacawks and the Potion Makers...well, that was until he was framed.'

'Framed?' said Aunt, an awkward iciness in her word.

'um, yes,' said Tonkeytus, 'Albert was framed of murdering the then king of the Potion Makers, Brucus the first, and...'Tonkeytus clicked his tongue in hesitation, 'And declared a traitor.'

Charles took a breath and raised a brow. At that bubble of a moment, he firmly told himself: Either Tonkeytus was a crazy old brat, who wasn't quite in his mind right now (while Charles had long given up Tonkeytus was anything of a determined person, he was slowly beginning to doubt Tonkeytus' mentality), or thirty years ago, someone bearing a wicked mind had falsely claimed his grandfather's identity to be his own, and fooled Tonkeytus and his people.

Utterly sarcastic as Charles was, he took it best to let Tonkeytus continue his gibberish.

'...And that's why son, I transformed your bodies into Macacawk-like with doses of a special potion. Otherwise if someone comes to know who you are, the Potion Makers would be communicated and reported, and they won't spare any mercy on you to avenge their old king.'

'Alright,' said Charles flatly, nodding approve. His anger for Tonkeytus was slowly vanishing for not-so-mysterious reasons, only to be replaced by a sort of frustrated exasperation.

'...I want to see the boys.'

"But they are unconscious,' said Tonkeytus, slightly turned down at the uninterested response. 'They can't come back.'

Charles steadily got up to his feet. It had abruptly come to him that he could control his legs again, when he had unknowingly moved his toes.

'Charles!' said Aunt happily.

'I can go to them, anyway.'

Outside the room, Tonkeytus led Aunt and Charles through a number of passages and corridors that winded often. At first he was slow at walking, but quickly enough, he was able to walk properly. One thing that settled in Charles' mind was that the place was very large; what intrigued him however was the absence of a single soul to be seen. So, the question was where were the ones who had sung sometime ago?

'I heard a crowd of people singing together about half-an-hour ago,' said Charles. 'Then why is this place all so empty?'

'You heard Grandcawk's birthday song, then, didn't you boy?' said Tonkeytus.

'Grandcawk's birthday song?'

'Yes, it's his birthday today. He's 200 years old now. Everyone is in the hall room and feasting, that's why nobody's around these parts of the house.' Aunt shrugged when Charles exchanged giddy looks with her.

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'I wanted to join the feast too,' continued Tonkeytus, wistful. 'But your Aunt fully revived very fast, and when I went to check, she created a tantrum to see how you were.'

'Why did you keep me separate from the others in the first place?' said Charles.

'There simply weren't enough beds, and I didn't have the keys to the nearby rooms,' Tonkeytus replied airily. 'And besides, I thought it more secure to keep you in a more desolate of sectors of the House.'

When they reached the room in which Thomas and Henry were, they found that they had become conscious, though, below their necks, their bodies remained out of function. Henry's cat was perched near his legs, eyes large and twinkling and ears raised. Both the boys' confusion fixed beings were largely relived upon seeing Charles and Aunt; but within seconds worry and shock overcame their faces as they realised the transformations Charles and Aunt Isabella had undergone through, added by that Tonkeytus was with them.

I took a long tedious while to explain them the things that they barely could make any head or tail out of. They were unable to fathom why although they could still feel their bodies, they couldn't move them; and when told that they too had tails, pale seized their skins.

'It differs according to the age,' was the reply Tonkeytus gave when Charles questioned him of why the boys were taking so long to recover from the Paralyin Gas's effects. 'They'll be as good as ever in an hour, it's nothing to bother about.'

When Thomas and Henry recovered till their waists, Tonkeytus brought them some food that Charles ate this time along with the others. They were suspicious that Tonkeytus might try and drug them as second time, but noon and the wild fruits may as well as have been an age go, and the only option was to subject to hunger.

Once they finished, Tonkeytus took away the plates, and returning, informed that the grand feast was over, and Grandcawk had retired to his chamber, the other people also had begun returning to their own respective rooms. 'Let the boys get well with their legs, and after sometime, I'll take you to Grandcawk, the head of us, Macacawks. And you will be ever grateful I brought you here, doesn't matter even if I played crook.'

'When will you let us go back to the forest?' Aunt asked, decisively, a tad of urgency in her voice.

'Tomorrow morning-because it's night, and I trust you know the forest is a thousand times more dangerous at night than during day,' he added when Aunt glinted fiery eyes. 'And it is certainly not desired that Albert's descendants should die due to our fault. It's strange, actually, why you came to Tropagia initially, though I won't trouble you asking whatever trouble that was for.'

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Chapter 7

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Chapter 8

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