

HAROLD KING



KAYAM THE MISTAKE

Kayam the Mistake

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Chapter 1: Becoming a Wizard

Badjagarata, the great wizard, felt he had finally achieved his goal after many years of intensive work. He had found a solution to the problem of how an ordinary person could be turned into a wizard. He hadn't succeeded entirely as he was yet to achieve this with adults.

"The way things stand currently," he explained to his favorite acolyte, Chinkramasila the wizardess, "is that a wizard's abilities essentially reside in the brain. Those who are not born with an adequate brain structure cannot become wizards, at least for the moment. The thought process of adults and even newborns is too ossified for this. Although in the case of the brain the term 'ossified' isn't really appropriate..."

"I think I know what you mean, Prof," said Chinkramasila. In their community, that is, at the School of Wizardry, everybody called Badjagarata "Prof". This title was not primarily the abbreviation of "Professor", but rather the nickname for "Professional". He was the director of this school, and was obviously far better and more powerful in the scope of Magic than anybody else.

"Great. Conversely, we *can* influence the fetal brain to evolve in the right direction. Of course only if it hasn't yet developed too far. According to my calculations, the small interval when the fetus is between one hundred and twenty days and one hundred and twenty-seven is the most suitable time period. This interval is narrow, but fortunately with the help of a crystal ball we can determine whether any woman is pregnant, as well as what stage of development the fetus is at. And if the fetus is found to be suitable then we should be able to achieve the creation of an excellent wizard after birth. At least he will have all the innate abilities that are required, because a wizard must naturally learn a great deal too. Every craft needs to be learned, even wizardry, in fact this one more so..."

"Then if I'm not mistaken Prof, soon you'll be carrying out an experiment."

"Yes, Chinkramasila. But first I must search for a suitable individual—a mother whose fetus is sufficiently developed yet also immature... and of course this child has to be born into such circumstances where he can receive some education in his first years of life. Fetch me the crystal ball!"

Badjagarata did not generally like crystal balls, nor magic wands, in fact he was not keen on objects at all. He specifically loathed having to rely on the help of "dead matter", instead preferring to carry out the necessary magic simply by using his willpower. He exerted himself a great deal, struggled and even suffered during these strenuous exercises. He had certainly achieved some great successes, but could not rely entirely on willpower magic, at least for the time being.

Now Badjagarata looked into the orb, holding it before him using both his index fingers. He stated the search criteria: "Woman. Pregnant. Free human. Married. Husband can read and write." After thinking for a moment he then added, "Lives in Atlantua," in order to make it easier to monitor the outcome of the experiment, since this is where he himself lived. The age of the fetus was specified before he ordered the search to begin.

The crystal ball flashed, displaying the following message inside:

"The number of women within these parameters is 171."

"Narrow search!" ordered Badjagarata. "Expecting her first child."

"98 people," came the immediate response.

Badjazarata paused again in thought. He did not want to decide randomly. Finally he said, "The family does not have a slave." He believed it would not be good for the prospective wizard to grow up in circumstances that were too comfortable because he would become accustomed to service and slavery. Naturally there were no slaves in the community of wizards led by Badjazarata.

"77 people," informed the sphere.

"The man or woman is a distinguished scientist," he suggested hopefully.

"0 people." This was not working very well.

"Back," ordered Badjazarata.

The previous result was announced: **"77 people."**

"The mother can read," he said cautiously.

"2 people."

"The mother can also write."

"1 person."

"Picture!" commanded Badjazarata. The elegant face of a young woman appeared in the crystal ball, and Badjazarata was immediately informed of the woman's "parameters".

"Name: Zielmona. Husband: Durman, clerk in the city of Sizon. Woman's age: 19 years. Husband's age: 25 years. Gender of fetus: male."

"Oh dear, my ball is malfunctioning again!" frowned Badjazarata.

"What's the problem, Prof?" Chinkramasila asked.

"It is still writing the husband's name directly after the name of the woman, but I thought I had managed to fix this error. It should have first given the data about the woman and only then the husband's name and data, but instead it changes haphazardly between the two of them. Look... the age of the woman is written after the name of the husband!"

"It doesn't matter, the main thing is that you found an appropriate subject for the experiment, Prof," said Chinkramasila, trying to ease his agitation.

"Yes, but this imperfection annoys me! As soon as I'm done with this experiment I will review the ball's magic equations, because order is the life and soul of everything. But now let's carry out the experiment," and he smiled at Chinkramasila before getting on with the job. "You see Chinkramasila, it feels great to be a wizard! It's so good to know that something lasting can be born from the work of our hands, and this time it will be born literally. To be able to explore the world's secrets, and at the same time generate happiness in others... I'm sure this woman Zielmona will be delighted to see her child as being different to the others, a very special child who stands out among his companions, because every mother wants to be proud of her child. The father too, of course. What a great feeling it is to be able to do something good for this woman!"

"Then why don't you do this for all the world's fetuses whose age meets the criteria?"

"Well, although I am sure of the result, we really should proceed methodically. After all, magic is part of the sciences. So before we move on to mass production we must run a series of properly controlled experiments. This is just the first one. We have to wait for the result and try not to act in haste. What is forty or fifty years for us who are immortal while this child grows up and becomes a wizard?" Then Badjazarata raised his right hand as the golden ball of energy began to flicker in his palm. He focused his concentration and pointed his left hand at the floating image of the woman, directing his attention to her abdomen, and said, "May you become a wizard!"

The ball of energy disappeared from his palm with a faint pop, and Badjazarata leaned forward in exhaustion with his head in his hands. "Become a very great wizard," he whispered.

"Is something wrong, Prof?" asked Chinkramasila, leaning towards him.

"No, no, nothing... It's just that this magic was rather taxing. I really gave it everything I could, and the boy will have great abilities. I directed all I could from his brain structure into the magic. Ultimately it will be the contrast between him and the other people that determines the success of the experiment. That certainly was quite tiring though, even for me. But really, there's no problem, I just need a little sleep. I am no longer required for the experiment at this stage, since I don't expect anything unusual to happen with the child for at least four or five years."

Chapter 2: Kayam's Childhood

Badjaharata was right in the sense that for a good while nothing particularly interesting happened to the newborn child, unless we consider it strange to have been named ten days after his birth. The reason for this was that due to the medical conditions and lifestyle at that time, infant mortality was quite high, therefore they were not concerned with naming the infant right away. They didn't see the point if there was a good chance he might die within a few days, in fact this was quite a common occurrence. Until the baby remained alive for ten days it was not considered a real person. It was perfectly acceptable for the head of the household to kill the unwanted child in this time if he so desired, and even the mother if she was single or a prostitute. The child became a human on the tenth day, and it was then he received a name.

Zielmona's son was given the name Kayam. His father Durman decided on this name. Allegedly there had once lived a very famous clerk who had earned the title 'mathematician' from the king for discovering the logarithm table, and he was called Kayam. Durman decided he would like his son to become a clerk as well, to follow in his footsteps and of course masterfully develop in the field of science, so he named him after that old mathematician.

He immediately wanted to teach his son all the various sciences, but for the time being there were serious obstacles. Since for somebody to learn mathematics they needed to be able to read and write. In order to read he first must know how to speak, and it appeared that Kayam showed little willingness to learn this vast science of speaking aloud. It was not as if Kayam was a quiet child. Quite the opposite in fact. When he was born he screamed like there were seven demons roaring from his throat simultaneously. It was a miracle he didn't get hoarse. He strained himself so much that his cheeks became flaming red. The midwife had never come across such a loud, wailing infant before, and she stated this on more than one occasion. Kayam kicked so violently during his baths that the midwife actually dropped him once. Fortunately he had only fallen into the water and not hit the tub itself. And he had not drowned as they had pulled him out quickly.

Even later on it was not characteristic of him to behave calmly. At least until he had learned to walk. If he was awake he was either being nursed or howling, so his mother never got a minute's rest from him. Kayam simply required Zielmona's complete attention at every moment. The only time he calmed down was when she rocked him. Even when he fell asleep he would wake up again within a short time, unless someone was beside him rocking the cradle. When the rocking ceased Kayam would awaken within minutes and begin to wail so that everybody was startled out of their sleep. Poor Zielmona was constantly suffering from lack of sleep because of her cursed child.

The situation improved slightly when he could crawl around on all fours. It was then that he began his great voyages of exploration, and as a result pulled all the tablecloths off the tables whether they had something on them or not. Tablecloths and curtains became his obsession, and he loved to tear at them and pull them down. He treated the cat like a furry rug, and when it first snuggled up to him purring he tried to tear out its whiskers and yank out its fur. The cat scratched him as it tried to escape, which of course made Kayam scream, and it avoided him like the plague from then on. Kayam had also climbed into the fireplace because he was so fond of the beautiful red embers, which of course resulted in a nasty burn to his hand. He liked cheese so much that he once reached into a mouse trap and it snapped down on his finger so hard that his fingernail turned black. Naturally these events triggered more screaming.

His parents soon discovered that Kayam could not be left alone for even a minute, because this child of theirs attracted trouble like a magnet to an iron. Since Durman was out working during the day, the care of Kayam was left to Zielmona. But alongside the sea of housework it was impossible to keep an eye on the child at all times.

Once Kayam knocked over the cauldron of boiling water. He was lucky to have not scalded himself but the dog, who was warming up beside the fire. Another time when Zielmona was feeding the pigs, she came running into the house in terror after seeing black smoke billowing out of the window. It turned out that Kayam had been playing with fire again. He was tearing out the pages from his father's costly science books and tossing them into the fireplace. In fact some of them he would just ignite, and giggling happily run around the room with the burning paper in his hand until it burned down to his fingertips. Then he would throw it away, letting it fall on the couch or the floor, before lighting up another one. In the end the house did not burn down, but it came very close and the damage was considerable. They could not even scold him for this because he didn't understand what was said to him. Kayam did not learn to speak until he was over three years old. It was no wonder his parents were worried.

Eventually Durman had to accompany the city's judge to the capital as a clerk, and he took his wife along to assist him with the great amount of work that had to be done. This meant some extra money. During this time Zielmona's mother, who was now Kayam's grandmother, came over to look after the boy. His parents had barely gone when Kayam began to shout, "Where are Mommy and Daddy? Where are they?!"

A month later when his parents had returned from their trip, he shouted himself hoarse and could speak perfectly. Of course they asked him why he had not spoken until now.

"I wasn't sure if I would speak correctly, so before I began this important experiment I wanted to continue studying this strange activity," he replied. This was rather odd speech to be coming from a child of less than four years. As if that wasn't bizarre enough, Kayam went on. "I wasn't even sure whether my environment deserved to be engaged in a conversation with me, the Great Kayam. Since it's obvious that no one around here is as perfect as me!"

His parents were not able to contain their astonishment. In any case they were relieved to hear their only child finally speak—he was not stupid after all. Perhaps a little strange, but it seemed he was incredibly smart, which neither his mother or father minded at all.

Kayam learned to read and write rather quickly, and by the age of five he had even mastered a relatively high level of mathematics. But it was not quite certain that he wasn't stupid. The word 'stupid' was not really appropriate in his case, but he didn't seem entirely normal. For after Kayam began speaking he developed a lot of strange habits. For example, not only was he not afraid of the dark like other children, he was especially fond of it. He sought it out. He had various hiding places and his favorite pastime was spending hours alone in complete darkness. His hideouts included

places like the corners of the attic, the inside of the closet, which had a special latch installed by his father so he could hide in there without anyone being able to open it from the outside. Kayam had thrown a tantrum until his father gave in.

Once Zielmona noticed that the pigs were playing with her most treasured dresses in the dirty pen. It appeared that Kayam had taken them out of the big suitcase because he had wanted to hide in it, and by removing them he could turn them into a comfortable bed for the pigs. His mother spanked him good and proper and forbade him to climb in there. From then on his new hiding place was under the bed. He hid there so often that his clothes were constantly covered in dirt and dust.

"Why do you climb into dark places all on your own?" asked his mother.

"So I can think more clearly without being disturbed," came the response.

Kayam stubbornly persisted with this habit until he grew so big he no longer fit into these tiny spaces. But even then he required absolute silence and darkness where he was sleeping.

"I suppose it's better that he's not afraid of the dark than for him to be a cowardly rabbit," sighed Zielmona. "I'm sure it's because of that blasted fireball. It must have frightened baby Kayam when he was a fetus." Zielmona remembered it well, that when she was around four months pregnant a fireball had sprung out of nowhere and burst right in front of her belly. The intense light had even blinded her for a moment. This fireball was of course the magic of Badjagarata, turning Kayam into a wizard, although Zielmona didn't know that.

But the point is that Kayam enjoyed solitude far more than other people. He did not even like playing with other children and thought they were stupid fools. Needless to say they did not like him either. This did have some basis. If someone had said that Kayam was a "strange child", well, they would not be lying.

One day Kayam was standing hesitantly before the door leading to the hallway. The door was closed and he wanted to go out. It was not locked, for at that time doors with locks were very rare in Atlantua. But the door handle was closed, and Kayam had not yet encountered such a problem before. This door was generally left open in the Durman house. He stood there in front of it and stamped his foot in frustration. "They've locked it! They've closed it! Yes, there's no doubt that is what they've done. To me... me, Kayam! It's an atrocity, abominable! It's not right... such things should be forbidden! Let me just talk to them and sort out this obvious error. How could they do this to me?! Don't they know who I am?! Hmm... clearly not! It didn't even occur to them... They can't see out of their own eyes! Yes, it was a mistake to talk to them... a serious mistake! It should not have happened. Who do they think they are?! And now they've locked me in here. All right, perhaps not intentionally, but still. How can they disregard me?! But they have, there is no question about it. I'm sure I am locked in because I see a closed door. This is a door that divides the apartment's air space into two halves. And it is closed! I'm standing on one side because I cannot be in two places at the same time. Therefore I conclude that if I want to get to the other side I have to overcome this obstacle limiting my movement. I must do this because I could be waiting in vain for these negligent parents of mine!"

"Now," said Kayam raising his index finger importantly, "as far as I can recall, the door can basically be in two main states—closed like this, and open like it normally is. In order to achieve my goal I have to find a way to obtain the open state rather than the closed one. This can be accomplished using that object called a 'handle'. I have often seen my parents push it down and then pull the door towards them, after which it opens. Very good, so now I must also do this! That's it, I've found the solution—I always knew I was a genius!"

Kayam reached up to the very high door handle, pulled it downwards and towards himself. The door opened, but only a few centimeters before bumping into his toes. Little Kayam stared at the

door dumbfounded. "Yes, yes, of course, I should have thought about that—it's obvious! After all I am standing on the same side that the door opens towards. Two bodies cannot be in the same place simultaneously—this is a fundamental truth. If I am here, and this is indeed the case, then the door cannot move into this spot. Yet it is undeniable that I must be here in order to open the door, however I am here reluctantly since I only wish to open the door so that I can get to the other side. Hmm... Oh dear, I'm in a bit of a pickle! What do I do now? Oh, how did my parents do this?! Hmm... I can't remember. Yet somehow they managed to solve it. But even they couldn't have been in the same place the door is. Damn it, why can't I remember?!"

Little Kayam just stood there for a long time, rubbing his chin. Finally his eyes lit up. "Of course! Anybody can be in the same place as another object, but *not at the same time!* While I am pulling the door this way I have to step back as well. Then a small space is always being freed that can be occupied by the door continuously as it moves towards me. Yes, that's it, of course! Brilliant... I am so smart, undeniably a genius, to solve such a huge problem so successfully! Let's perform this experiment in practice too..." Kayam opened the door instantly and stepped out into the hallway.¹

For a long time his parents were not able to decide whether Kayam was a genius or an idiot. On one occasion he was sitting on the potty in the hallway when he saw the cat come in and start digging into its food as usual. Kayam watched him for a while, then said, "What a good appetite this cat has. When he grows up he'll turn into a big dog!"

As Durman and Zielmona began to laugh, Kayam got very offended and began sulking. He kept insisting that he was right, since you'd have to be blind to not see that a cat is small and a dog is big, and everybody knew that those who ate grew. Therefore it was logical to conclude that if the cat ate well he would grow into a dog. Eventually his father sat him on his lap and one by one introduced him to the various animals. Then Kayam understood, and said, "Well, I knew I wasn't the stupid one! Why didn't you tell me earlier that not every furry and four-legged creature was called a cat or a dog? Now I understand. An animal is anything that moves about, and they consist of cats, dogs, geese and many other kinds too. But what I said in there was correct as far as I could tell. My conclusion was logical, based on the information available to me!"

The truth is that Badjaharata's prediction did not come to pass. Durman and Zielmona were not at all pleased about having a special child. Sometimes they admired Kayam for his intelligence, but most of the time they were shocked and horrified by his speech and behavior. His attitude towards the world was extremely strange. He considered himself the absolute center of the universe, and the rest of the world to be basically extraneous and insignificant, whose only use was as material to be processed by his mind. At the same time Kayam's conceitedness very quickly turned in the opposite direction, at least in terms of practical matters. And since life mostly consists of an infinite series of practical things, Kayam became a lethargic and melancholic child in his first years.

The profound decline of his self-confidence was in fact generated by his own parents. One day they scolded him because he had used his father's ink to color the feathers of the geese and ducks, and ink was not exactly cheap at that time. In addition he had destroyed the goose's feathers, which were no longer a nice white and had clumped together in places. Kayam vainly protested that it was a scientific experiment, and he basically just wanted to know if the animals would recognize each other if they were a different color, but he was thoroughly spanked for it.

¹ Author's comment—I just want to tell you, Dear Reader, that this is one of the "adventures" from my own childhood. It also happened to me, and I remember opening a door for the first time and the thoughts that were running through my head... Yes, Kayam is modeled on me, without that much exaggeration...

His next experiment was to try to figure out why it was much more difficult to break an egg by pressing on its tip than to do this perpendicularly along its longitudinal axis. He sat there brooding for hours in front of the eggs, resting his chin in his palm and humming and hawing without saying a word, as he played around with breaking the eggs in different ways from time to time. When his mother noticed how many eggs her mischievous little boy had wasted, she granted him a reward for this experiment—a slap.

But Kayam did not give up. He grabbed hold of the cat, who was already very wary of him, and carried him up to the roof, tying a rope around its middle. He had heard that cats always fell on their feet and wanted to try this, so he carried out a series of experiments to test this hypothesis. How many times would the cat fall on its feet and how many times would it not? He began to throw the unfortunate cat from the roof, and after it hit the ground he would haul it back up to the roof with the rope. It was repeated again and again. Initially the cat landed on its feet, but not all the time. Sometimes it became entangled in the rope so that it could not turn as it wanted to when it fell. After a while its legs got sore and it became dizzy. By the time his parents realized what Kayam was doing the cat had suffered such serious injuries that they had to nurse it for weeks. But it remained crippled for the rest of its life. Kayam was spanked again. "They refuse to let me experiment! Feeble-minded, ignorant hicks... they are enemies of progress! How am I supposed to advance science?" seethed Kayam, rubbing his aching buttocks.

There was an incident where he was not beaten but laughed at instead, however this was worse than a beating for the vain Kayam. What happened was that Kayam wanted to capture some sparrows so he could try to figure out how these tiny animals could fly. Although he was much bigger and stronger than them he could not fly, no matter how much he flapped his hands. He ran after the sparrows in order to catch them, of course without any success. When his mother saw this she smiled and said to Kayam, "My dear boy, you'll never be able to get them that way. Don't you know that you can only catch sparrows if you sprinkle salt on their tails?"

Well, Kayam needed to hear no more. His face brightened immediately, but he was cautious as he knew his parents were stingy misers, who were not prepared to sacrifice anything in the name of science. So he did not act at once, but waited for the right moment when nobody was in the kitchen and stole all the salt. Then he began an even greater pursuit after the sparrows, attempting to get at least close enough to sprinkle the salt on their tails. But he could not seem to manage this as the sparrows were clever, beginning to recognize that this two-legged creature was constantly running after them, being more bothersome than a dog, so they gradually flew further and further away in their wariness. Kayam was not willing to give up yet though, and now he grabbed the salt in handfuls, throwing it at the birds in the hope that some of it would fall on their tails. Even though he could have sworn he hit some of the sparrows several times, they did not show any sign of slowing down and continued flying away without being captured.

After a while his father lay his hand on Kayam's shoulder, but he started to shout that it wasn't fair because his mother had told him he was supposed to do this with sparrows. This was a statement his father believed could not have been invented, so he asked his wife about it. When his mother discovered what had happened she was not even angry about the salt, but laughed so hard she was in tears. It was only later that she could stammer out that of course she didn't mean it literally. She just wanted to tell him that he would never be able to catch the sparrows with his bare hands, because even if he were to get within arm's reach of them so he could sprinkle salt on their tails, the sparrows were not going to wait around. And if he was able to get that close he wouldn't need salt because he could just catch them with his hands!

On hearing this his father began to laugh, and called Kayam a silly goose because he took everything literally without considering the underlying meaning of the words. Kayam became rather angry and hysterical he was so annoyed. He yelled at the top of his lungs that his parents should not laugh at him because he didn't deserve it. Why was it so impossible to think that salt might have the effect of paralyzing sparrows or at least slowing them down?! Or perhaps they liked the taste of it, and when smelling its odor they might want to lick it from their tails, being lost in their enjoyment while he could sneak in and catch them! So in many ways it could be conceivable that salt sprinkling was good advice. He shouted that he did not deserve to be laughed at just because he trusted his parents. Kayam began to insult them, calling them lying pigs, and only stopped when they threatened him with a spanking. But even then he looked at them with hostility, especially his mother because she was the one that had lied to him. His mother was astonished because she never imagined such a quarrel would result from those few innocent, playful words. Kayam really did take everything too seriously!²

After this new failure Kayam spent even more time in his dark room. No matter how much encouragement his parents or others gave him or how many requests they made, he just said, "That won't work for me!" He even said this when he really did think it might be possible to succeed. He did not want another spanking.

At around this time Durman decided to teach his son to read and write, as well as a small amount of mathematics. And Kayam did turn out to be successful in this, in fact he excelled at an extraordinary speed. Within two months he had completely mastered reading and writing, although it was futile for him to write quickly as his letters came out incredibly sloppy and ugly. When he became really absorbed in writing the words were so illegible that his notes were unreadable by anyone other than himself. He could always figure out what was hiding behind the deformed, cramped handwriting, however he would sometimes frown in confusion at some of the letters.

During those two months he also learnt elementary mathematics, and had practically grasped everything his father currently knew about the subject. Little more was expected of clerks, except of course that their handwriting should be beautiful, which could not be said about Kayam. He did not have the patience to fiddle about with drawing letters. But Durman assumed that after a little practice his letters would become more beautiful and over time he could become a clerk too...

Kayam did not say that he wasn't going to be a clerk, he had no idea what he wanted to be when he grew up, but he had an opinion about writing. He was lazy. He discovered that the most frequently occurring consonant in the language seemed to be "t", so he decided he would now mark it with just a vertical line in order to speed up his writing. The most frequently occurring vowel was "e", so he marked this with a horizontal stroke. The second most common vowel was "a", and that received a small semi-circle. The second most common consonant was "l", and he marked it with a small oblique line. In this way Kayam dealt with most of the letters of the alphabet, sparing no effort in counting how many times each letter appeared within a long piece of text. This was actually the first time in his life that he had worked on something really seriously. He discovered that the decreasing frequency of consonants was given the following order: t, l, n, s, m, k, j, v, z, p... So the more frequent a letter was, the simpler its sign.

Two months later, after becoming acquainted with the science of writing, he even had his own form of writing, which could be called a kind of primitive shorthand. Kayam taught himself to master it and found he could write a whole lot faster this way. Naturally nobody else could read it.

² Author's comment—If the reader finds this scenario too unlikely, then I must call their attention to the fact that this actually happened to me word for word, except that the salt sprinkling advice was not given to me by my mother but my grandmother.

For a while. Because later on his father turned to Kayam's invention with a measure of interest and constructed a table of the signs. He pondered over it for a long time and finally learned it, but also included abbreviations of whole words. Common words such as 'I', 'you', 'that', 'this', 'and', 'or', 'to', 'because' and other words that were frequently used in a clerk's job. For example 'king', 'emperor', 'noble' and common prepositions like 'from', 'to', 'in', 'at', etc. He learnt these because it was quite common that as a clerk he would be dictated to by some distinguished commissioner, and he wanted to be able to transcribe the text as fast as possible. It did not matter how carelessly the words were written down at the time, because after the commissioner had gone he would rewrite the text in beautiful handwriting.

Often the dictators became impatient when the clerk could not write fast enough. Kayam's method was a brilliant solution to this problem. He still couldn't write as fast as some of them dictated, but it was much faster than before, and this significantly improved his reputation. From here on Durman was called upon even more often to take dictation, because those who dictated to him appreciated how quickly he completed his work. It increased their income, enabling them to live more luxurious lifestyles. Kayam received praise for this too, and Durman envisaged his boy becoming something more than just a clerk.

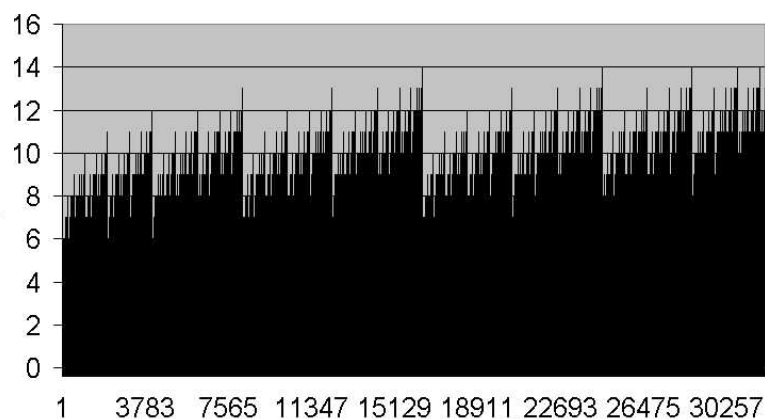
He decided he had enough money to enroll Kayam into a more prestigious school. In those days there wasn't really a great selection of prestigious schools. There were not even many ordinary schools. In the whole city of Sizon there existed only one of those schools, and most of the students came to study there from far away cities, of course only if they or their parents could afford the expensive tuition fees. Kayam was rather fortunate to have been born in this city as it meant he did not have to live on the school grounds, which would make his studies so expensive that Durman might not have been able to afford it. This way Kayam could walk to school in the morning and amble home in the evening.

Durman enrolled his boy in the school under the assumption that they would soon discover how much cleverer he was than the other students, and in turn Kayam's aversion to the world would disappear. But it quickly became apparent that this hope was in vain, in fact Kayam's pessimistic worldview manifested even stronger. It was not the study materials that were the problem, at least not those that posed the most difficulties for others. For instance he did extremely well in mathematics. So well that he had soon left his classmates far behind. Most of them had difficulty dividing or multiplying decimal fractions, and even ordinary fractions terrified them, particularly if they were compound fractions. But Kayam happily became independent from the flow of the class and focused his attention on something else that was of greater interest to him. When the teacher called on him he usually just stammered indiscriminately as he didn't have a faintest idea where they were in the lesson. However as soon as he realized what the problem was he solved it within seconds, explaining on numerous occasions that it was a waste of time to solve such boring problems. Once his instructor lost his patience and asked him, "What would you consider to be an interesting problem then?!"

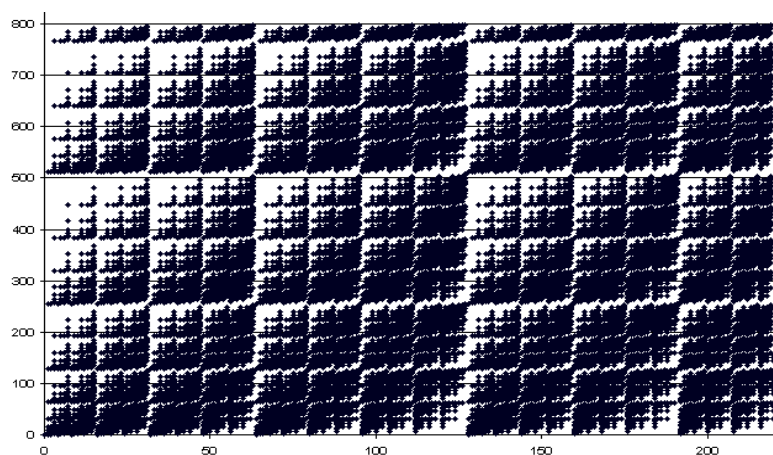
"What I'm working on now, for example," answered Kayam with pride. "Although it isn't really a problem but an invention. A discovery. These numbers we are working with are very boring. Why are there exactly ten of them? Is it just because our ancestors had ten fingers? Because if people had only eight fingers then they would have invented only eight numbers. I have proved that just two numbers are enough—the zero and the one. But there could even be more than ten numbers if we wanted," and with that he walked up to the board and actually proved what he had said, which completely stunned the instructor because what Kayam had explained was correct. He had basically invented the binary, tertiary, quadrille and any other numeral system. This was only at the age of

six, which suggested he was undoubtedly a genius. But even so, this was not the only significant achievement of his childhood.

It soon became apparent that he had quite a passion for mathematics. He had a strong affinity with dissecting questions that had no usefulness at all. While the others struggled with such mundane issues as the repayment amount five years into a loan given the base and interest, if the money was given with compound interest Kayam began an astonishing task. He wrote out the first couple of thousand numbers in the binary system just so he could count the immense number of one and zero series, and how many ones were in the exposition of the binary number system. Then he plotted this in a coordinate system as a column diagram, getting something like a fractal image:



But unfortunately nobody knew what fractals were at that time, not even Kayam. It had not been given a name yet. Both his teacher and his father already considered the binary number system useless nonsense let alone taking it any further, but Kayam carried on anyway, counting the number of ones in this ridiculously altered number form. He even prepared a coordinate system and marked the points on the grid where the number of the X and Y coordinates had the same number of ones in the exposition of the binary number system. For example the form of the number seven in binary format was '111'. The form of the number thirteen was '1101'. Both these numbers included the same amount of ones in binary format, so the (7,13) and (13,7) coordinates of the coordinate-system were marked. He ended up with the following image:



It looked like some kind of embossed cloth covered in shadow. Without any modesty whatsoever he called it "Kayam-cloth". Kayam pondered for hours over this image, seeing that certain small sections faithfully followed the forms of the bigger parts, that the same pattern was repeated in the var-

ious sizes, and he felt that he had discovered one of nature's unknown organizational systems. It impressed upon him the notion that numbers were rather complicated things. He even communicated this opinion of his to his classmates, who mocked him and told him he was stupid because numbers themselves were very simple; it was only the mathematical operation that was difficult. Therefore according to them, Kayam was an idiot.

Even though Kayam could be stupid regarding other things, when it came to numbers he was not. In fact he was more skilled with numbers than anybody else.

When it came to light that he was studying the regularity of the above figure in order to find the organizing principle, they told him sarcastically that he was trying to find a needle in a haystack, and that is impossible. To this Kayam replied without hesitation:

"But it's very easy to find a needle in a haystack!"

"How?" asked his own math teacher.

"It really is rather simple. All you have to do is ignite the haystack, then drag a magnet over the ashes and it will attract the needle!"

Everyone was amazed by this response.

Even so, Kayam's teacher told him that it was unnecessary to put time and effort into entirely speculative subjects that don't even exist. Kayam did not doubt however that his fractals did have a real existence, as definitive and objective as that of the Majestic Emperor. In fact he had said that the proof of the existence of fractals was one of his main achievements, whereas the existence of the Majestic Emperor—although it was very probable—had not been rigorously proven yet!

It soon emerged that nobody at school liked Kayam. His fate was even more difficult as he was the smallest of his class, in fact of the whole school. His peers mocked him, calling him pumpkin seed, fucker, little runt, worm, fledgling and many other things. Then when they found out how much of a better student he was than everyone else, especially in the most difficult subject, math, they took revenge on him and beat him up. Of course they could not prevent Kayam from developing his knowledge of mathematics, in fact quite the opposite occurred: he took every opportunity to flaunt his skills in this area.

His teachers did not like him either—not even his math teacher. Kayam thought about things quite differently than what was expected of him.

For example when they studied geometry... And this was a very important subject, as clerks needed to be able to measure the different land areas, estates and building sites. Geometry was needed for big constructions, planning buildings and even for astronomical observations. Kayam did not care about these exercises in the slightest.

He firmly stated his opinion, that according to him geometry is useless. It was created from things like lines, planes, and other ideal shapes such as the cube, cone, pyramid and sphere. These could easily be defined by equations, or equation systems if it takes on a suitably chosen coordinate system. After that the geometric proofs could be reduced to mathematical theorems, which with the usual coordinate geometry or algebraic methods would enable them to be proved or disproved.

"In any case," explained Kayam, "geometric definitions are not certain. They are not quite accurate and there is too much subjectivity in them. For example, why does the point only have a location but not a size? That does not tell us what the point actually is, right? And what about the straight line having only length but no thickness? That does not say anything at all about what a straight line is! With this I can draw the perimeter of a circle, and that could be a straight line because I can say it has only length, but not thickness. Doesn't this sound rather stupid?! Tell me, can it be labeled as an 'accurate definition' when the result is such a stupendous imbecility?!"

One day he stated that he could create a broken line from sections that fit into a finite, unit-sized section, amongst its two endpoints, and that the line never intersected itself even though the length of this line was infinite. The teacher said that he was completely out of his mind as it was impossible anything infinite could fit into a finite area, especially if it did not intersect itself. Kayam shouted louder and louder at the teacher to allow him to prove his point. Finally the teacher let him have his way, but said that if it did not work he was going to spank him. Kayam confidently waved his hand in the air and went to the board:

"Let's take a section unit, and mark the first and second thirds of it. Therefore we divide it into three parts. Now we raise an equilateral triangle to the middle third. Each side will be a third of the original section. We then rub out the base of the triangle, and as a result get a hat-like figure. This broken line has four sections. Now we repeat the above procedure for each of the section parts.

At this point we have a rather complicated figure, which has a lot of peaks but never intersects itself. This figure is made up of sixteen break lines, or sections. Obviously it is much longer than the original section. Now the above procedure is repeated for these small sections, and so on and so on until infinity.

It is obvious that repeating the process an infinite amount of times will make the line of infinite length, but it will not go through the two end points of the original section, and it will not run out of the plane anywhere since it will not be higher than one third or than the height of the first equilateral triangle. I think if we continue the scribbling long enough, we will get a drawing that looks like a beautiful snowflake!"³

Then Kayam went on to state that such a procedure could be done on a two-dimensional surface as well, piercing a square in different places. In fact he could take away spaces from a cube that remained in its restricted space area, and while the resulting surface would be infinitely large its volume would become zero. The teacher did not allow him to prove this. He sat him down and said that he had a perverted way of thinking, and that it was the job of clerks and scientists to study things in the real world, not fantasies of this nature.

Kayam sulked and it was his opinion that he indeed saw the reality of the world correctly, because snowflakes *were* constructed in that way, and nature proved these organizational principles of there always being something large within something small. These followed the same principles, in fact it was not just large things found within small things but also infinitely large things.

This principle lead him to address infinities. Soon he began telling his classmates that no matter how short a straight line was it contained the same amount of points as an infinite line.

Of course they told him he was stupid after this. Even the teacher had said so. But one day Kayam got his revenge.

On this occasion he went to his teacher with a surprisingly innocent face, and said that he had become stuck with a problem that seemed to be simple, although no matter how hard he tried he could not solve it. He asked the teacher if he would solve it for him.

The teacher became smug and was pleased that Kayam was not acting like he knew everything for once, so he walked into the trap and asked what the problem was?

Kayam replied:

"I have become aware that the concept of the 'straight line' is a surprisingly complicated thing. Let us suppose that a , b , c and d are four points on a straight line. We will also assume that point b

³ We now know this shape as the Koch-curve because Hegel van Koch the Swedish mathematician first described it in 1904.

is found between a and c , and that c is between points b and d . Prove that the b point is located between the a and d points."

"Don't be silly—I just draw the line and place the points and it can be seen!" replied the teacher.

"Yes of course, that I can see very well, but I want it to be proved!"

"Then prove it yourself and stop bothering me with such crummy examples!"

"But this small crummy example trips me up sir. I was hoping that you, being a teacher, would be able to prove it for me. After all, you are so much smarter than I am."

The teacher wanted to reply almost violently, but this was not advisable as this was happening before the entire class. So in order to maintain his authority he agreed to prove the example, since it did seem to be a rather simple one. He also wanted to teach Kayam a lesson.

But despite struggling late into the night, he could not prove it. He decided he would solve it tomorrow.

He did not manage to solve it the next day either, nor the next, in fact it never got solved, even though Kayam politely inquired about its progress every day. Naturally he asked in front of the other children. Finally the teacher said it was ready, but because Kayam was naughty he would not tell him the answer.

None of the children believed him and the teacher knew this. Not even Kayam. More precisely, Kayam did not just *believe* this, he *knew* his teacher had not solved the problem, since Kayam had only half told the truth when he said he could not solve it. He was in fact not able to solve it, but he could prove that this problem could not be proved with the usual axioms of geometry.⁴ However he did not inform the teacher of this.

Anyhow, after that the teacher was wary of asking Kayam what he was doing during class in case he threw another tricky problem at him, which would seem very innocent yet he would not be able to solve it.

Kayam wandered deeper and deeper into the wonderful landscape of mathematics where infinites were the masters. Certain special numbers impressed him quite a lot. For example the 1.61803398874989484820458683436564... infinite decimal fraction, which is the result of the operation $(1/2)*(1+\sqrt{5})$, but the result would be the same for $2*\cos(\pi/5)$. He called this amazing number "phi". Why was it so amazing? Because it appeared in numerous different places in mathematics.

Consider two completely different random numbers—1 and 4 for example, and perform the following procedure:

$1 + 4 = 5$	$5 / 4 = 1.25$
$4 + 5 = 9$	$9 / 5 = 1.800$
$5 + 9 = 14$	$14 / 9 = 1.555$
$9 + 14 = 23$	$23 / 14 = 1.643$
$14 + 23 = 37$	$37 / 23 = 1.608$
$23 + 37 = 60$	$60 / 37 = 1.622$
$37 + 60 = 97$	$97 / 60 = 1.617$
$60 + 97 = 157$	$157 / 97 = 1.618$

In other words if you continue this series to the infinite, the quotient of the neighboring numbers gets close to the threshold limit value of "phi".

⁴ This problem, or rather 'axiom', is known today as the Pasch-axiom, discovered by M. Pasch in 1882.

He showed this to his classmates in vain. They just waved it off and told him that it was enough for them to deal with the math they did in class. For them there was no beauty in it. On several occasions they beat him up. The teacher had said that mathematics is interesting as long as it is useful. When he started mentioning things like his discovery of unknown numbers that are greater than 0 but smaller than any $1/n$ shaped fraction (where n can be any arbitrary positive whole number) he was again called stupid.⁵

However although Kayam was so brilliant at mathematics, he did fall short in other areas. The school's slogan was "A sound soul in a sound body". Kayam did not really believe in the soul, but he could not withdraw himself from the mandatory gym classes. Due to being the smallest and woefully clumsy, he just stumbled about among the others who were happy to shove him and trip him if they could, mocking him at every opportunity. Kayam felt incredibly miserable when he was panting like a workhorse; he sweated from every pore, became covered in blue spots and was overcome with exhaustion. He absolutely hated these classes.

Even in the gym classes where they just played he could not enjoy himself, unlike most children. They could hardly wait for the teacher to tell them they were going to play some kind of ball game. Kayam did not like this either as he was required to move with this activity too. In addition he found it pointless for two dozen children to be running mindlessly around after a ball. He even told them in the first class that if they wanted to play with a ball, why didn't they give everybody their own ball and then they would not have to fight over a single ball, struggling to retrieve it from the others. Of course they told him he was stupid. But Kayam did not give up; he loudly insisted that it made no sense for somebody who has the ball to be chased by the others in order to snatch it from him.

"This is exactly the same way a chicken behaves," he said, "when it is chasing another one who has found a worm. The worm is hanging out of its beak and the miserable chicken can't swallow it because if it stops the others will take it away from her. Yes, you are all like hens! It doesn't even make sense to play with a ball. I don't see any purpose in kicking a ball just so that it can be mine again after a significant amount of running. But if I feel like doing it in some kind of insane mood, I should at least not be hindered by others. Why not give everybody a special ball?"

"You are the insane one!" said the other kids, and when the teacher was not looking they kicked him in the buttocks, despite the protests of poor Kayam that he was not the ball and should not be kicked...

But there were more children for the ball game than needed, and Kayam was not called into the team very often. Along with a few of the other ungifted he remained a viewer, or the teacher ordered them to run around the track while the others played.

But it did not please Kayam to just be a viewer either. He stared at the others in boredom, and it was obvious he wanted to be somewhere else. Some of the children who were watching the match with him asked, "

"Why don't you cheer?"

"Cheer? What for? I have no reason to be happy."

"You fool, it means to urge the team on!"

But Kayam still did not understand. It took a long time to explain to him the meaning of this behavior. Then he thought about it and finally said that to him it did not make any difference which team won in such a useless activity.

⁵ Such numbers do indeed exist, and we call them 'infinitesimals'.

"It wouldn't even make sense if they agreed right at the beginning how many points each team had. The only tangible result is that all the kicking ends up destroying the ball, although I don't really see this as a bad thing. The ball shouldn't have even have been made. I'm not interested in this!"

"That doesn't matter, you just decide which team you prefer or just pick one, and then encourage them. Don't just sit there with such a sour face!"

Kayam thought it over again, but he found this suggestion to be dangerous too because what if the team he was not encouraging beat him up? Finally he came up with a solution and began shouting:

"Speed up one of you, don't let the other team win!"

"What are you shouting now, you brainless maggot?!" yelled the teacher.

"But this way each group will try to do better and the game will be more exciting!" replied Kayam, demonstrating that he was not mindless. This way they could not find fault with him, but the others were not impressed. That was not a problem as Kayam did not like them either.

If he had the choice he would not have bothered with these classes, because even if he did not have to sweat he felt it was a waste of time. Unfortunately even his father shared the school's view. Durman was a handsome man with a proportional body, his face was attractive, and although he was not quite Hercules was said to be relatively muscular. Durman was afraid that if his son became a clerk, stooping over his paperwork, this would make his back even more stooped. He clearly found it useful for Kayam to be engaged in sport, but even if he didn't, he would not want to hear that he was cutting gym classes.

However Kayam would much rather spend this time working on his favorite subjects—infinitesimals, various other infinite things and the many mathematical concepts he had discovered. He got to the point where he was no longer willing to learn most of the exercises in his gym class.

"I won't be able to do it," he said, and he refused to try climbing up the rope for example, even when the gym teacher kicked him in the buttocks, to the delight of the others.

Besides he was right. He was not able to pull himself up to the top of the rope. His father was not happy that Kayam didn't deal with anything related to the real world and that he only cared about the most abstract branches of mathematics.

"This is not the right way to do things, son," he explained to him. "A person can achieve whatever he wants, of course if he puts in the time to practice it!"

"That's not true. I am an unfortunate creature. I don't have a sense for anything, even mathematics."

"Don't talk this way, you are specifically talented in that area! But you could have talent in other areas too, you just need to believe in yourself. Listen to me—I want you to say to yourself things like, 'I am talented', 'I will succeed in everything', and if you make yourself believe this then you will see that you will indeed succeed!"

Kayam thought about it for a bit and began at least attempting the advice of his father. Although because he wanted a fast result he was not satisfied with the short sentences his father had suggested, so he set about solving this problem with real Kayam thoroughness. First of all he compiled a long list of different inspiring sentences. The list looked like this:

The 23 Commandments of Self-Confidence

1. I possess the abilities of a genius.
2. I have outstanding abilities that I do not yet recognize, but will in due course.

3. In many areas I am simply Top-notch.
4. With each passing day, in all respects I am becoming better, wiser, more of a genius, more beautiful, healthier and more worthy of being loved.
5. Even in the areas where I have already reached perfection, I am still developing day by day, and therefore creating new things that do not yet exist in the world.
6. The external signs of my genius are clearly visible and obvious to everyone.
7. Many people value me for my outstanding abilities.
8. Those who do not love me and even mock me do this because my excellence generates an inferiority complex in them, causing them to take narrow-minded revenge.
9. I am not conceited because I have something to be proud of.
10. The pathetic combative arrows of the lowly, petty, envious gray masses cannot reach my great majestic throne.
11. I have so far carried out many great deeds and I will continue to do so.
12. So many wonderful things are still waiting for me in life.
13. There is a wonderful career ahead of me and I am at the beginning of that path.
14. The world would be poorer and less colorful without me in it.
15. I do not regret deciding to be born at this time and place.
16. I am the Great Benefactor and my mere presence brings light into the boring lives of my fellow men.
17. Even those who do not love me will benefit from me, because with my insight and talent I make them realize that it is their responsibility to develop.
18. I am grateful to those who treat me badly, because if they were not there I would have nobody to measure my goodness, my lovability and other values against.
19. If I did not exist I would have to be discovered.
20. People are often bad, but that is not a problem because if everybody was good the world would be boring. However not all people are bad: me for instance.
21. Sooner or later everyone must realize that they should become more like me.
22. It is very likely that the world was created to bring me about and serve as a framework for me.
23. If people are the Crown of Creation then I am the diamond on top of the crown!⁶

It was not so difficult for him to devise such things as he was inherently vain, or arrogant if you like. He experienced failure only in practical things and his gym classes, and it only made him temporarily sad that they did not value his mathematical genius. This list was comprised of words in which he always felt were his innermost substance. Afterwards he repeated the list three times a day, in the morning, at noon and at night, as well as other times when he was feeling depressed. Soon he knew it by heart. For him it was like regular daily prayer was to others.

It generated results. But not the kind of results that would enable him to do well in his exercises, as to do that would require him to practice and he was physically too lazy. But he did not care that the others mocked him for this, because despite his lack in this area he still believed he was a GENIUS.

⁶ All this does not mean that Kayam believes the world was created by some god. It is just his way of expressing himself picturesquely, since it describes how much he believes he is superior to others. In reality Kayam could be called more of a materialist.

He took his magnificent nature so seriously that on one occasion as he was on his way to school, he accosted one of the children, asking him whether he could see his greatness just by looking at his face.

"What?!" The amazed child just stared at him.

"I mean, you must be able to see what a genius I am! Isn't it obvious from afar that I am the Great Kayam, the most magnificent creature in the world?"

"What?!"

Kayam still did not give up. He had gotten used to the fact that the perception of most people was woefully slow.

"It is impossible for you to not see what a wonderful person I am! So you can't notice that nobody could even come close to me in any important field? I am so smart that everybody should be grateful just because I was born!"

It should be obvious to anyone without dishwater in his head! I asked you if you can really see this about me? And I only asked because..."

"Are you an imbecile, Kayam?" asked the child, looking at Kayam with an odd expression.

The rest of the sentence lost on Kayam. He just stared in astonishment at his classmate and moved on. As Kayam walked away his mind was churning.

"Amazing! Simply amazing! This cannot be true! I wouldn't even believe it if somebody told me this! I am telling the kid how smart I am and he asks me whether I'm an imbecile! He wasn't even aware of what I was telling him. I am surrounded by stupid people, there is no doubt about it, they are idiots! Every living being in the world except me is just a hopeless idiot, that's for sure!"

I was explaining to him for ages how smart I am, and suddenly it turns out that he doesn't understand anything, not even my words because he asked whether I was stupid! How could I possibly be stupid when I'm a genius? Those who are smart are not stupid—this is a fundamental mathematical theorem, a postulate, a self-evident truth that requires no explanation! But he is so stupid that it makes no difference telling him that I'm smart, he still finds it possible that I might be stupid! What a stupid person! How astonishing... this guy is hopeless! That's right, hopeless! Each one of my classmates is hopeless! The teachers as well, all of them! I'm the only normal one! They can't even grasp that someone who is smart cannot be stupid! It's not even worth talking to them if they're that stupid! That's right, they are the stupid ones, not me! What I'm saying doesn't even register in their minds! Hah, they're completely hopeless, without a doubt!"

From then on "hopeless" became his favorite word.

Chapter 3: The Rebellious Elf

Tila was lounging around in her favorite place—the very top of the Big Mountain. There were no trees growing in the immediate vicinity of the highest peak within at least a ten-meter diameter circle, and from those trees leaning on the slope, none stretched so high that its crown hid the view of the landscape from anyone who happened to be standing or lying there. Tila was glad of this. She loved coming up here to contemplate. Everything was so beautiful. She had come here regularly during the one thousand five hundred years of her childhood, where she could survey the entire expanse of Elfland.

Directly below her on the hillside she could see the bell peaches growing. This name does not indicate a real peach, as there existed quite a range of these fruits—some like peaches, others similar to apricots, as well as many other kinds. They were called 'bell' peaches because their seeds were transparent, glass-like, appearing as a cluster of gems, and if they clinked together they tinkled with a unique sound. The path leading to the mountain top, or paths—as there was not only one, curved intricately back and forth throughout the peach garden. Not that they were prevented from going directly up it, for the mountain was not steep, but just because it was so pleasant to wander about among the bell peaches. It was no coincidence that in spite of its magnitude the Big Mountain was not steep. Why would it be, when along with other parts of Elfland it was artificially designed?

Slightly below lay the golden apple trees. They produced extremely delicious juicy apples, and their color was the purest gold, in fact this was enhanced further due to the symbiotic bacteria living beneath the skin, which radiated light, sometimes weakly and at other times strongly. The stronger the light, the further it radiated, and this made the apples feel better and healthier. Some of the golden apples were able to shine up to three meters away, enabling one to even read by its illumination. The result was a blinding light that beamed from the base of the Big Mountain. After the apples were picked they glowed for weeks, albeit with decreasing intensity. For this reason the inhabitants of Elfland did not use artificial light sources. They always took one or two apples with them to use for lighting when necessary. But it was rare that they required them. The elves had sharp eyes with which, even in near darkness, enabled them to see quite a distance, and besides, there was always light where it was needed in Elfland.

Farther away on the plain grew scattered groups of small trees; ordinary apples, pears and plums, as well as spineless acacia and other varieties. All of them were evergreens. There was no winter in Elfland, nor summer, because then it was too hot. Climbing through these trees grew the speaking grape. They really did "speak" when somebody or something flicked or moved them, causing them to tinkle with a thousand voices. The grapes were not soft, in fact they had a very strong skin covering them that snapped easily between the teeth of the elves. Then luscious, honeyed nectar would spill out onto their tongues, however if it hit another grape lightly it would tinkle. Almost every grape produced a different sound to the others, as the sound depended on its size and age. The larger ones jingled louder than the smaller ones, and the younger ones produced a higher sound than the older ones. In addition, the grapes also radiated light like the golden apples, but while the apples glowed with a golden light the grapes gave off light of a different color. There were as many different colors as there were bunches of grapes, although every grape within a bunch lit up the same way. But even in a single grape vine the color of the grape clusters varied. The intensity of light, however, was less than that of the golden apples.

Many other fruits grew on the plain too, such as coconuts, dates, figs, pineapples, kiwi fruit, raspberries, currants, strawberries, bananas, oranges, lemons and even a number of others that no human had ever seen before. Some of them existed in varieties that tinkled or emanated light, although not all plants had these qualities. At the same time there were no plants in Elfland of which some part could not be eaten by the elf inhabitants. Even the grass was able to be heartily consumed. This was not a coincidence but the inevitable result of the lives of the elves. They had to eat something and they did not eat meat. Because of this they needed to choose from a variety of plants and fruits in order to have a balanced diet.

Behind the plain followed some steep hills and beyond that was yet another plain. Charming little ponds lay among the hills, and around the distant plain spread a rather large lake. The entire region of the Big Mountain was like an island surrounded by sea, even if this water was only called a sea to the inhabitants of Elfland, as it would not have been more than two kilometers wide. On the

other side of the water the plains continued. The elves had no other name for this body of water. It was salty, unlike the water of the ponds among the hills or the water of the creeks. There were of course several streams that transported water to the sea, and sooner or later all the water flowed into it. And not just the water from ordinary creeks, there were also geyser streams, which carried hot water, naturally of a temperature one could bathe in. There were even various thermal springs and some with cold water.

In some of the lakes grew giant water lilies together with many other flowers. The leaves of the roses were so enormous that an elf could fit on one comfortably, and if sitting down could even sail in it. They could also walk over to the other side of the lake by stepping on the leaves if they wished. But otherwise the elves were excellent swimmers, for instance an elf was able to easily swim across the entire two kilometers of sea if they so desired. And they did not have to fear being attacked by a shark. In the region of Elfland animals that were dangerous to elves did not exist, nor even animals that hunted each other, so there were no predators, parasites or even pathogenic micro-organisms. Of course it was not absolutely necessary to swim across the sea, as many bridges ran over it.

However on the other side of the plain, in the outer zone of Elfland, grew the most important plants—the crystal trees! The trees of the crystal forest looked like gnarled, slightly dwarfed apple trees, but on these trees grew bunches of grape-like fruits instead of apples. These bunches were very tiny, almost the size of a bunch of currants, and along with the whole crystal tree were sometimes milky white and sometimes translucent or transparent, as if they were made of diamond or glass. These tiny diamond currants also lit up, and in the whole of Elfland they were the only ones that emanated a pure white light. Although they did not tinkle. And they were very hard, in fact harder than diamond. If diamond existed in Elfland (which it did not) it could have been polished with these crystals. For this reason, if they knocked together they also clinked. But it was only a sort of muffled clunk as when wooden balls hit each other, not a tinkling sound.

The elves did not keep the crystal trees due to their sound; they had a far more important role. The radiation of white light was a beneficial attribute. Golden apples radiated a stronger light, but it was not white light. However these little crystal clusters illuminated further than the golden apples. Tila could not verify this yet, but according to the older elves, after harvesting their light only faded after ten thousand years. There was something still more important than the illumination though—despite how hard this crop was, and even though a tooth would break before it cracked through the shell, saliva would melt it in the mouth within seconds, seeds and all, and every particle would turn into pure energy within the elves. In fact it would give them real magical power!

Everybody was capable of magic in Elfland. A greater impossibility could not be imagined than an elf who could not do magic; after all, this is what made them elves. But not all magic occurred easily, and for the more difficult magic it was beneficial if the elf took one or more crystals. Sometimes they just ate the crystals for no particular reason. Not that it would have been sufficient to satiate them, as it did not make up for common food in the long run. However consuming the crystals filled them with such an undeniably glorious feeling after a few moments, which lasted several hours, that even the most ardent worldly drug user would never have experienced such a thing. Moreover it did not have any adverse effects.

If the elves traveled somewhere outside of Elfland it was useful to take a few kilos of these crystals with them, since doing magic was more difficult away from their home. It was supposedly so easy in Elfland because of the magic scent of the crystal trees surrounding everything, which was so delicate that even the sensitive noses of the elves failed to pick it up. But these trees grew exclusively in Elfland, and it was said that the Ancients created them more than a hundred thousand

billion years ago. This was a fair amount of time, during which whole universes could be born and then perish. However it was irrelevant to a species that was capable of relocating from one universe to another.

Consequently, the crystal tree enjoyed a great respect in Elfland. Not only its crop, but every little part of it was able to give magical power. The broken branches could even be sucked on. They were made from tough material, yet it wasn't difficult to break them. Of course none of the elves would have committed such an extravagance as breaking a branch off a crystal tree. The crystal tree was a sensitive plant, and if it became severely damaged it was ruined. It was true that a new one would grow in its place, but the crystal trees were a kind of symbol of Elfland and thus revered.

As Tila continued to gaze over the glowing crystal tree forest, she could not see anything beyond it except the cold darkness of Space. Only the Cosmos followed. This was not surprising to her, as like everybody else she knew that Elfland was floating in interstellar space. Not just floating, but orbiting. She looked up into the sky. Above her she could clearly see the entire massive plate of the Galaxy with its nucleus and spiral arms. That was why she liked the mountain top. The merging brightness of all the illuminated plants only faintly reached this place, and nothing could suppress the light of the distant stars. The disk of Elfland, which was barely three meters thick yet had a radius of thirty kilometers, was protected by a magic dome and orbited the nucleus of the Galaxy as though it were a tiny planet.

Tila was glad to be born at a time when her homeland's location enabled her to see the whole galaxy as it revolved, because Elfland did not orbit in the plane of the other stars but at a right angle to them. She could simply not get enough of the beautiful scenery that the galaxy presented, and especially liked its grim core. The place where the gigantic black hole snuffed nebulae into itself, and even whole stars that got too close due to the perturbation disturbance of their movement. The nebulae and distant dust clouds sparkled beautifully from the shimmering ionized energy. They glittered in different colors, and now and then their calmness was disturbed by wild spurts. The whole thing looked as if long fire snakes were cuddling.

In addition, Tila could see all this in much greater detail than an ordinary human. Her eyes were significantly sharper and more sensitive. She could see the crystal trees at the periphery of Elfland quite well from a good thirty kilometers away. Part of the reason for this was that her face was very unlike that of a human. Her eyes were large and were positioned at a forty-five degree angle, not horizontally as with most humans. They narrowed towards her ears, and actually looked quite a lot like an elongated drop of water with the "tail" slightly curled up. All elves had such eyes. But apart from this they still looked rather graceful, in fact, beautiful. There was not a single elf to be found who was not beautiful. Nevertheless, it was a different kind of beauty that humans had to accustom to. For instance, Tila's face had a number of unusual features—an upturned nose; thick, sensuous lips; a pronounced lower lip as if she had black ancestors, however her skin was not dark at all. Her face was not round but somewhat bony. Basically, anybody looking at her would have been able to tell at a glance that this being was a member of some special group of unknown people. If one examined her for a little while, they would immediately ascertain that Tila was human-like, but definitely not a human. Something else.

Tila wasn't concerned about this. Besides, she had never seen a human being before. She knew that there were countless human-inhabited planets in the Galaxy, but even her eyes were not good enough to see millions of light-years into the distance, where humans experienced joy or suffering on the surfaces of these planets. She simply flew up the mountain to look at the stars, star clusters and nebulae. Yes, she flew. If the elves sucked on a crystal they were able to fly without wings. One crystal was enough for about an hour's flight, but they were allowed to take several more crystals

with them so they could eat them during the flight. They did not fall, even if they forgot to replenish themselves, but would instead slowly descend to the ground. Controlling their movement was no issue as they flew wherever they wished to go, their thoughts guiding the direction of flight.

So Tila had flown up here. The intense brightness of Elfland was below the dark Cosmos, and above it were the stars of the Galaxy. Further along were other tiny galaxies, and a few stray lonely stars shed their light here and there. Tila was not dizzy at all and felt perfectly safe. The protective dome thoroughly defended Elfland.

Almost six hundred years ago Elfland had become entangled with an intergalactic meteor cluster. Tila had come up here then too. She saw all the cosmic debris approaching, some so fast it was there in a flash, hitting the force-field and crashing like a bullet into a metal wall, then immediately bouncing off and flying in another direction. This bombardment did not harm Elfland, and down on the plain it couldn't even be noticed. At most, if the meteor hit the dome almost vertically and was fairly large, then it would explode, scattering millions of tiny blazing sparks. In this situation they may have been able to reach the soil of Elfland, as light could penetrate the force-field. But only to a certain extent. It filtered the offensive harsh light so that it would not hurt the eyes of the inhabitants.

Tila had admired the meteor shower for days. She found it the most beautiful experience of her life, and was enthralled by this rampage of ancient, wild, unbridled energy in her immediate vicinity. Some meteors were like asteroids and bigger than the whole of Elfland, but Elfland was never hurt by any of these forceful collisions.

For Tila the meteor shower was a symbol of Chaos. She loved Chaos, since she knew that it was none other than the primordial creative force. Chaos wasn't all disorder, as many believed; it had a complex internal structure, and hidden within were small islands of Order as well. Naturally Chaos destroys, and it destroys Order, but only because it wants to create new forms of Order for a short time, until they are ripe enough for destruction. Therefore Chaos was nothing more than a creative youth, a Renewal. It was a Rebirth. So that life could be created from death, just as the old mystical thinkers depicted it—a rose emerging from a skull.

If there were other elves watching the meteor shower she would have quickly become bored and stopped. However during the two years that it lasted, Tila spent as much time as she could up here in order to miss as little as possible. The other elves were not interested. Perhaps they were alarmed by the wild rampage of unrestrained forces, but Tila had known for a long time that she was different to the other elves. She liked the raw, wild power. The Chaos. Of course only when she was safe. But she knew that here under the magic dome she had nothing to fear. This had been created by their ancestors, the Great Elders, who had flown here from the Ancient Universe, and if anything else was required to ensure their undisturbed peace their wise queen Luchilla had strengthened it with further magic. Even though it had not been attempted, supposedly Elfland could have flown into the middle of any giant star at a temperature of millions of degrees and remained there for a thousand years, and it still would have been fine. Only the large black holes posed some danger to it, but these were more just a passing inconvenience. Elfland would have balanced the gravitational anomalies, but when they reached singularity it could not prevent itself from passing through into an unknown universe. Then the Wise ones would have to search for a method to find their way back to this universe. That could take them centuries. Even so, it still wouldn't be a catastrophe for those who live forever. That is, as long as no accident occurred... An accident, within the territory of Elfland—this would be one of the greatest absurdities! Outside, however, lurked many more horrors...

There was no meteor shower now, but Tila still observed the Galaxy. "It's interesting," she thought, "that those who live in the galaxy only see the dizzy swirl of stars, without any order. The Chaos. We need to be far away from this city of stars in order to see the internal structure within the Chaos—its spiral organization." She had been gazing at the stars for some time when she felt herself becoming dizzy for a moment. At the same time she heard a strange bell tinkling, not with her ears but inside her head. This meant that she had been called for a Convention. Not just her, but all the elves in Elfland. It was the primary responsibility of the elves to get to the Convention as fast as they could. Tila did not hesitate. She placed a crystal into her mouth, and by the time it had melted under her tongue she was already in the air, racing a meter over the treetops with breakneck speed toward the Big Oak.

It was an unusual and unworthy property for an elf to love speed and a certain degree of danger. Tila was not permitted to fly so close to the treetops at even a tenth of this speed, let alone the speed she flew with. If she lost control even a little, she would find herself entangled in the branches, and then the more skilled elves who were well-versed in magic would have to heal her. Not to mention how painful this would be! Besides, one should not race about so fast at such high altitudes, yet Tila was flying at a speed of a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour. She was speeding through the air as it buzzed around her. Racing that fast could easily result in bumping into another flying elf.

The crystals did not make it possible for someone to fly in such a ridiculous fashion. The highest possible speed that could be reached with the assistance of crystals was about forty kilometers per hour, and the elves didn't even use this speed. But Tila, among others, loved the mountain top, because as she was flying down she could almost completely disable the power of the crystal after she had risen up high; she only used it to move forward. So she relied on gravity as she hurtled down, not vertically but obliquely, her own body weight increasing her acceleration until she was short of breath from the wind blowing towards her. However this didn't bother her because an elf did not suffocate easily. Tila could manage to be without air for five or six minutes, and she thoroughly enjoyed racing through the blurred masses of trees beneath her with the air whizzing past her ears.

The other elves, especially Tila's instructors, found these aerial stunts reckless bravado. They considered it dangerous, as Tila was not only risking her own well-being but was a danger to other elves. Tila knew this was true, but she simply could not give up the thrill of speed. Oh, the feeling of action... of something exciting happening to her! Yet in Elfland everybody was deeply convinced that action, or *activity*, as they called it, was not necessarily a bad thing but was suspicious and should be treated with the utmost caution.

As Tila approached the Great Oak she carefully slowed down to not just forty but twenty kilometers per hour, but by the time she reached the other elves she could not avoid being caught out. "You were racing again. I saw you," said her instructor, Cinda.

Tila blushed. "I didn't want to be late!"

"Why are you saying something that isn't true?" asked Cinda. In elf language this meant that according to Cinda, Tila was lying. They did not have a special word for lying.

"But it *is* true—I didn't want to be late!"

"Perhaps. But I know that wasn't the main reason you were racing."

"I enjoy it, Cinda... I can't help it!"

"One day you will lose control," said Cinda sadly. "You know that if you are dead for more than an hour nobody can resurrect you!"

"I'll be careful, Cinda!"

"You, never." The old elf shook her head dolefully. Cinda was truly old, for she was one of the Great Ancients who had built Elfland billions of years ago, and this meant she was at least a few thousand million years old herself. Tila had never asked her precisely how old she was, and perhaps she didn't even know. In any case, there couldn't be more than ten thousand elves living in Elfland, but this was fairly large number considering there were barely seventy among them who were Great Elders like Cinda.

Gradually all the elves gathered around the Great Oak. When everyone was present, Varuma said, "Create the Circle! We must open the Gate and search for the queen!"

"Again?" asked Tila, but she received no answer. They merely glared at her reproachfully for interrupting. After all, she was just a child. But she should have been able to control herself at least that much... The Gate Opening was not a trivial matter, and it wasn't appropriate to disturb the concentration of others.

Of course, Tila was whining precisely because she knew the Gate Opening was not trivial. It was the only activity in the lives of the elves that was life-threatening. Literally life threatening. All it took was for one's attention to wander for a moment, to lose concentration, and it could lead to the death of several elves. And yet it was essential. They had to go after their kidnapped queen. They could not let her down! But Tila simply hated the Gate Openings. Even if everything went fine—and until now nothing had gone wrong—it still caused significant pain and suffering to the elves who were weaker than their peers. Those who had little talent for magic, or were simply too young...

Not that Tila was particularly old herself, being only one thousand five hundred years of age. Although she was not considered a child, the elves looked upon her as a barely developed teenager, as a human would consider a girl under the age of fifteen. She was still young enough that no male elf had yet asked her to make love to him. Tila was not exceptionally beautiful by elf standards, but she could be regarded as at least average in appearance. And although it was uncommon for human males to make love to young girls, among the elves any boy was permitted to do this with any elf girl, there was no jealousy, however Tila had never been asked to do so.

Therefore Tila was young, and at times some of the Gate Openings caused her considerable pain too. However now she was dumbfounded as she heard Varuma say, "We must travel far away. Step into the Circle, even those who, who... Everyone must step into the circle who has passed the age of twenty!"

Tila was not the only one shocked by these words. This was akin to humans calling on a group of four year-old infants to take part in a particularly dangerous and painful task. Varuma, who now substituted as queen in Elfland, knew herself what an astounding thing she had requested, so she immediately raised her arm and said, "We need all our strength! The marid who has kidnapped our queen seems to be tired of our harassment of following him, and wants to shake us off. He has traveled very far, and isn't even in this galaxy anymore. So we must now open the Gate into an entirely different galaxy, not just the neighboring one. This will be the biggest jump we have done since we emigrated to this Universe. The queen is so far away from us now that we Elders can barely track down her whereabouts. So we need all of our strength... and even that will only just be enough!"

Of course Tila couldn't just leave things at that. She was the eternal rebel. "But this could kill the younger ones!"

"I don't think so. It will hurt them, but..."

"They could still die from the intense pain!"

"I know that it's a big risk," Varuma looked at her coldly. "But surely you're not saying we should abandon our Queen?!"

"Of course not. Don't accuse me of something like that, Varuma, even if you are the most respected Elder! Even if I'm just a little runt compared to you, but I know that our main principle is solidarity. I want to suggest something different. Let's open the Big Oak!" She pointed at the enormous tree behind Varuma. Everyone stared at Tila in silence. The hair of some of the elves glowed faintly green from the tense concentration.

"You don't mean to say that..." started Varuma.

"Yes, yes, yes, exactly that! I don't see why we should risk our lives and the lives of our loved ones, and why we have to endure such incredible pain over and over, instead of..."

"Because we are elves. Destructive magic is not worthy of us!"

"Well, I don't think it's worthy of us to let the queen be held captive of that nasty marid for thousands of years, instead of opening the Oak and learning at least some of the magic stored within it, and then simply destroying the marid! That's what we should be doing! I don't mind if we close the Oak back up afterwards and forget all about the devastating magic!"

"A marid is a living being. It is forbidden to kill a living being!"

"Well, a non-living being can't be killed—it can only be done to living ones," scoffed Tila.

"Tila, that's an awful thing to say—your thinking makes me shudder!" Varuma recoiled.

"But why do we respect the lives of sprites when they don't respect ours?!" Tila shouted.

"Perhaps the sprites are not our ancient enemies?! Maybe they weren't the ones who destroyed our Homeland, our Parent Universe... How many trillions of elves were eaten by these cursed monsters, Varuma?! Come on, answer me! You're one of the Great Elders—you must know these things better than me. Because according to what I've learned, only those elves who gave up their elfness escaped the Great Devastation and fled to this universe. Only us real elves remained here in Elfland, and it wasn't even us but barely seventy of our ancestors, and then at the last minute you Elders figured out a method of defense. This is what became of our great principles, that from the billions of elves that existed, only seventy remained!"

"Tila, we do not step onto the road of destruction because it is this road that we have denied. If we do, the first step is like falling into an abyss—we begin to fall deeper and deeper, and then there is no turning back. I am not going to argue with you now. This is what we decided and that's all there is to it. Step into the circle or remain out of it, but we will not open the Oak!"

"Don't insult me, of course I'll step into the circle..." Tila bowed her head and took her place.

The elves did not stand in a single circle but in twenty-four concentric circles, and in each ring they laid their hands on the shoulders of those standing beside them. In the middle of the circles stood the Big Oak, and Varuma was flying above its crown. Every elf now sucked on five crystals at once. This was already dangerous in itself. One crystal gave an elf a wonderful feeling of being filled with energy. Even two crystals was not dangerous. If the elf felt that the energy of the previous crystal was diminishing, they could consume another one with no problems, or even two, and then after that as many as they wished, as long as they were eaten one after the other. They could eat them for millions of years like this and it would not harm them. However if an elf were to eat many crystals at one time, the energy released would by necessity find its way out, either by breaking out like a devastating flood and causing destruction, or else destroying the elf. Or both scenarios could happen, which was most likely. It was like medication for humans—even the best medication could be a deadly poison in excessive amounts.

Tila ate her own crystals too, but her defiant opposition continued growing inside of her. Grim and even murderous thoughts ran through her head. She was positioned between two Great Elders;

one stood directly beside her on the left, and on her right stood a young girl called Iki, who was not even thirty years old. By elf standards she had only just grown out of infancy, as elf bodies grew much slower than those of humans. Iki looked just like an eight year-old human girl, apart from the shape of her face of course. Tila could not bare to think about what Iki was going to suffer, when the magic that followed was going to be painful and strenuous even for *her*.

Another Great Elder stood to the right of Iki, who was none other than Cinda herself. This placement was not a coincidence. If possible, each point of the circle had to be equally strong in order to avoid interruption in the chain when the energy flowing through it became stronger. Of course it was not possible to create equal strength in all places, but if the tougher and weaker elves were evenly positioned, then to a certain point the stronger and more experienced ones equalized the weakness of the others close to them. Tila was in the outermost circle, as that was where all the youngest elves were. This was the least dangerous and stressful place, since the energy flowed from the outside toward the center. The worst place was the center, where Varuma stood, but Tila wasn't worried about her. Although she looked like a beautiful young woman, like every other elf (except of course the boys, who were rather handsome young men), since their bodies did not age once they had reached adult size, Varuma was the oldest of the group of Great Elders. She had a wealth of experience in Gate Openings, was tougher than the Big Oak itself, and the only one older than her was the captive Elf Queen herself, Luchilla.

"Undress!" ordered Varuma.

This order must be explained. The inhabitants of Elfland did not wear clothing as humans did. It made no sense, because as far as the weather was concerned it was always a comfortable temperature. There were no spiky plants, they didn't do any strenuous or dangerous work, and it even rained if they wanted it to, although at those times they generally didn't stand out in it unless they deliberately wanted to get wet. Sometimes it could be great fun. But they could just as well conjure up a tiny protective area around themselves and the rain would trickle down from it as if they were under a glass dome. Why would you need clothes in such a place?! As far as sex was concerned, it was just like a kiss to a human man or woman. Anybody could do it to anyone and there was no shame. Therefore clothes were unnecessary. They did wear some kind of clothing, but it was not made from fabric or any kind of precious metal. Not even from silk. When they were ten years old the rather small elves had learned to do an easy kind of magic, which could be called "clothing magic", although it did not mean that they conjured clothing onto themselves. Not real clothing, anyhow. With some slight concentration they could conjure up a glittering, translucent shell of light around their bodies; it could be loose or tight, calm or turbulent, red or green or golden in color, in fact any color they wanted, even multicolored with a certain color on the bottom and another color on the top, or striped or polka dotted if they so desired. If the elf did not want their body to be seen, it could be made to be as opaque as a metal plate. So the elves were not exactly shy, but even if they were, this garment would have satisfied their sense of decency. This light shell was such that if the elves did not prevent it, the light would reflect the elf's mood in a rather complex pattern. This was akin to mind reading, and the slightly older elves could easily guess the elf's emotions based on their light shell. Unless the elf intentionally formed it into something indecipherable. And similar to the way a human's facial expression can always be read, the elves had their clothing patterns. Even while they were sleeping or under water. The only time their clothing was not visible was if they deliberately focused and sort of "turned off" this part of themselves. Therefore this is how they undressed. This undressing cost them a little energy, but it was advantageous in giving them more strength for other magic until they "dressed" again, and was generally only done in a major emergency.

The glint of the elves' clothing slowly died out one by one. Tila also obeyed. Now Varuma began the Gate Opening, or more precisely, obtaining the required energy concentration. She hovered over the Oak Tree with her legs hanging beneath her, closed her eyes, and in the next moment every light in the region of Elfland went out. The light of the crystal trees ceased and the golden apples no longer shone... The great mass of the Galaxy was visible above their heads, just as Tila had seen it from the mountain top. Now it could be seen by everyone, this galaxy they were about to leave.

Suddenly a tiny ball of light appeared above Varuma's head. It began to spin and then flattened, narrowing to a disc, and then narrowing even further until it was finally just a very thin membrane, but large enough to reach over the heads of the concentrating elves in the innermost circle. They shuddered violently with their eyes wide open, and the glow suddenly jumped from one elf to her neighbor as their own light intensified, then jumped further to the third elf and then the fourth... And so it moved around the circle until finally all that remained was a bright ring of light. When it returned to the first elf it had collected a subsequent dose of energy and lit up again, the energy wave carrying away this new burst of energy as it passed through the circle the second time. In this way it sort of "skimmed" the succeeding energy packages from everyone. The radiance above the elves' heads reached the second circle and the energy wave began its circuit there. This continued on with the remaining circles...

By the time Tila's outermost twenty-fourth circle had joined the energy chain, the energy of the center circle was raging in the form of blinding explosions. To the right of Tila and Iki, Cinda was beginning the cycle again, and when the energy wave reached Tila to extract her dose, a complete round of energy poured onto Tila for a moment until it passed across her. Even though those in the outer circle were required to store the energy for the shortest time, this is where the majority of the elves were. Between the energy packages the break was longer than in the inner circles and the whole thing did not last very long, however the individual packages were larger and more painful. Tila almost trembled in shock and was relieved when she could pass it over. But the elf to the right of her was Iki. The little girl's knees buckled when the enormous mass of energy sped over her head. As far as the slightly dazed Tila could determine, Cinda strove to spare Iki by stretching out her palm over the small elf girl's head, and in this way somewhat drawing the energy from her onto herself from the very first moment. But this was not enough. The second and third rounds came upon them, because so much energy was required for the Gate Opening that it was impossible to feed it all into the magic field at the same time, plus the energy could not be held in one place as they were raising it. They had to feed their power into the energy wave from the outside for at least ten rounds, again and again. The proceeding cascades of energy became even more intense. As the fifth wave of energy passed through the circle, Tila felt she was barely alive. Beside her Iki moaned when it was not her turn to endure the energy package. Then came the sixth and the seventh round...

"Prepare!" shouted Varuma.

Everybody held out their left leg. In the eighth round the energy began leaking into the center of the circle. Sparks crackled from the soil toward the light circle looming above, and an opalescent complex fractal image appeared in the air.

"Concentrate!" ordered Varuma.

"I can't take it!" Iki shouted, with tears in her eyes. Tila could well imagine what the little girl must be feeling. Moaning could be heard from here and there, but this was the first time in her life Tila had experienced an elf crying. She herself could feel all her nerves shaking and was almost writhing in anguish... But how must Iki be feeling?!

"Step out!" she said to her immediately.

"You can't do that!" interjected Cinda. "If she breaks the circle now, the energy will not be able to travel around it, and all of us will..." She could not finish her sentence. The ninth energy wave was approaching, and it sped over them. Iki screamed and her body slumped. Cinda grabbed the girl's arm. "Hold it!" she shouted at Tila.

"She's going to die—she won't be able to take the tenth!" protested Tila, and she watched in horror as the energy monster that was swelling into a tremendous fireball began hurtling in their direction.

"There is no way back now!" Cinda shouted.

But Tila thought otherwise. "I will take her place!" she stated, and held her hand imperiously behind her back as a bunch of crystals flew into her hand. She had no idea how many there were, but stuffed them all into her mouth...

"Have you lost your mind?!" Cinda screamed.

However now Tila was overflowing with energy, and besides, once she was intent on something nothing could defeat her stubbornness. Little Iki did not notice a thing with her head hanging in front of her, but Tila grabbed her arm, and with one harsh tug she tore her out of the circle, moving her away. Then Tila herself stood widespread, stretching her arms on either side of her in order to touch both the Elders, and in this way filling two places in the circle. She awaited the energy shower. In addition to the many crystals everyone else had eaten, a huge energy bubble began to swell above Tila's head. Cinda could not do anything. The energy wave was already there and was pouring down onto Tila...

"Now!" shouted Varuma, because she knew the elves could no longer control the tremendous energy volume. They were not almighty. Everyone held out their hands toward the center of the circle. The energy flow from the outside circle to the one inside it, and from there to the next and so on. Finally all of it was showered onto Varuma, who raised both arms above her head, and through this the mass of energy was conducted. It then escaped from Elfland, covering the glow of the Galaxy. A pitch-black disc appeared with pink shreds of energy flashing at its edges. This was basically a miniature Black Hole, only its singularity was directed and led exactly where they wanted to go. Everyone could feel Elfland drifting toward the Hole. Soon it would suck them in. After this happened the Hole would cease to exist. Small Black Holes burst fairly quickly—they self-destruct.

But there was a small problem. The Hole, the Gate, did come into existence, although when everybody was supposed to reach out with both hands toward the center of the Circle, Tila did not only fail to raise both, but even a single hand. She knew that was what she should have done and had every intention to, but she simply could not take it. As she occupied two places in the circle, her own place and that of Iki, which certainly was a very heroic thing to do and she had probably saved Iki's life, but this way she had to endure twice as much suffering from the energy shower. It was loaded with the energy from her consumption of all the crystals she had fed into the Circle. But she only did this because she was trying to prevent any problems caused by tearing Iki out of the Circle. She had thought that this way she could make up for the missing energy amount, and had indeed achieved this. But the energy mass had hit her so forcefully and for so long that she couldn't even move from the anguish; every nerve in her body was in agony. She stood there motionless and dazed when all the other elves had long since raised their hands, and the energy poured towards the center of the circle.

Because she had not extended her arms, the energy could not be conducted from her to the rest of the circle, and at the same time almost all the energy from the outermost circle was upon her. The

remaining accumulated energy was attracted to the center, and because of this it began to be drawn inwards along with Tila. When the entire storm of energy burst into the "sky", creating the Gate, Tila was swept out there with it. She had no time or energy to shout. There was simply a flash, after which she disappeared into the Gate, long before Elfland could fall into singularity.

There were not many who saw Tila's accident, but those that did were rather shocked. And for a while even Varuma had no idea what to do.

Chapter 4: The Birth of Clerk "Getsnappy"

It was not only his gym classes that made Kayam feel bad at school. The other boys were constantly mocking him and finding fault, and most of the time he was just referred to as "stupid". Kayam simply did not understand how they could be so stupid to regard *him* as stupid, because even these dumb students had to admit and actually be aware that he was quite knowledgeable in mathematics. Nevertheless he was still labeled stupid. To Kayam this was inconceivable... incomprehensible.

Much of what at that time was just considered student fun was utterly incomprehensible to him. For example, on one occasion when he was called on by the teacher, he was shocked to find that he could not stand up. It turned out that they had smeared glue onto his chair, and by the time he needed to respond his pants were glued fast to the chair. Thanks to his exhaustive efforts he finally managed to stand up, at the cost of tearing the seat off his trousers, as it refused to separate from the chair. The culprit's identity was never revealed, and instead everyone just laughed at him. Kayam was furious and shook his fist at them angrily, calling his classmates hopeless idiots. He decided that if they could call him stupid, then why couldn't he call them idiots? The teacher scolded him and forbade him to say such things. After all, only one or two students at most could have been guilty of this prank, the others were not, and Kayam had no right to blame the innocent. Even those who were guilty should not be addressed with such an ugly word! Kayam felt they were being unfair to him. And to make matters worse, the whole class accompanied him on his way home while wearing his torn pants.

He took revenge however, and the next day placed tacks on each of their chairs. Unfortunately very few of them sat down, as most of them noticed the tacks beforehand. Afterwards they went after him, suspecting that he was probably responsible. They beat him up thoroughly and even pricked him with his own tacks.

Kayam was angry at the whole world. He absolutely hated school; not for the reason the other students hated it—the schoolwork—but because of his classmates. He so often imagined himself as being a true colossus; a giant, muscular, invincible hero, and oh how he wished he could smash their faces, break their limbs and tear them apart into tiny shreds! After all, they deserved it. They were nasty, bad, evil people, since anyone who failed to recognize his genius couldn't possibly be a good person! In Kayam's defense, it must be said that his vengeful thoughts never lasted long. He was not really the sort to hold grudges. In fact he wouldn't have even bothered with the others if they had not provoked and bullied him. But they had.

It often happened, for example, that during an exam one of his peers wanted to cheat and would ask Kayam for help. If he did not help he was beaten up during the break. If he whispered the

answer then further answers were requested. In the end Kayam could hardly concentrate on his own exam. It was fortunate that he had a sharp, quick mind and was done much faster than the others. But sometimes he still lagged behind. He hated having to constantly watch the teacher instead of concentrating on his exam, so that he wouldn't notice the cheating going on. If he refused to whisper any more answers he was beaten up as well, regardless of the fact that he had helped them a lot previously. Sometimes giving the answer wasn't even enough, since the kid who had asked for it was so stupid that Kayam's help was of no use to him, because he wasn't able to use it in the example.

Once one of his classmates asked him the following: "Hey Kayam, what am I supposed to do with five?" meaning problem number five, of course.

"Formula solver..." mumbled Kayam as he kept an eye on the teacher.

"What?"

"Use the formula for quadratic equations!"

"The what?"

"Hopeless..." Kayam gestured in disappointment. He presumed another beating would come from this.

"What thing do you mean?"

" $x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$," hissed Kayam, giving the correct formula to the boy.

The boy remembered something about this from his studies, wrote down the formula and applied it, but he ended up getting the wrong answer and so later beat Kayam up. It turned out Kayam had whispered the formula correctly, however the kid had misunderstood—he had not divided the whole formula by $2a$ but only the bit under the square root, and that was why his answer was wrong.

Another time, with a trigonometry problem, one of them asked how the third side of a triangle could be calculated. "Cosine theorem!" hissed Kayam.

"What?"

"Leave me alone if you're that stupid to not even know this!" muttered Kayam, recalling the previous failure.

"Just tell me, otherwise I'll be seeing you during the break!"

" $c^2 = a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cos \gamma$," hissed Kayam.

"What? What the hell's ' γ '?"

Kayam motioned with his hand despairingly as he repeated the formula, and began to explain that γ was the angle opposite the c side. But now the teacher noticed him and picked up his exam, saying that he deserved a bad grade because he was cheating. Kayam protested in vain that it wasn't true, he hadn't cheated—the others had asked him for the answer, but he was told that it didn't matter. Kayam insisted that it did indeed matter, because if he was the one telling *them* the answer, that meant *he* knew the answer. However the teacher replied that he was the only one he saw talking, not the others, so he shouldn't argue. Kayam received a bad grade, and the kid he had helped beat him up in the break because Kayam had almost given him away.

Kayam felt hatred toward the whole world again. He told his father he had learned enough in school and that he would be better off discontinuing; that he actually knew more about mathematics than his own teacher. His father pondered the question and tested his son himself, discovering that as far as mathematics was concerned, Kayam's knowledge was indeed far superior to his own. His performance differed in other academic subjects however. If he failed his religion class it was of no concern, but he hadn't done well in history either. Kayam had no interest in the subject. He

performed well below average in all the humanity classes too. It was true that he could write quickly, yet although he was already fourteen years old, his handwriting was still unacceptably terrible. For this reason, and because his father believed his slightly daft son would benefit from engaging in some social interaction, he ultimately decided he would pay the tuition and that his son would continue attending school.

At around that time Kayam developed an attraction to physics and chemistry. To experiments. Since the poultry plague had been destroying animals in the area and the Durman's hens had all died, Kayam simply moved out into the chicken house and converted it into a laboratory for himself. All day long he mixed together various secret swills for his own amusement, and one day he committed a real scandal in the village. The housewife next door was a really good friend of Kayam's mother, but from the very start she couldn't stand Kayam, calling him an idiot, completely insane, and saying that nothing would become of him. In addition this woman regularly prayed to various gods and was fervently religious. On this particular occasion she gave Kayam a good clip around the ear, all because he had used her angora cat for one of his experiments. Not the actual cat—just his fur. He wanted to determine which one was tougher, human hair or cat hair, and which had a greater tensile strength. Obtaining the cat fur was essential to do this. He had no need for human hair, so had just shaved the cat bare, not the woman. Human hair he could find closer to home, as by that time Kayam had a little sister, Blumbi. She was a pretty, six year-old girl with long hair. And since Kayam already knew how ungrateful people were and that they had no sense for serious scientific matters, he did not ask Blumbi to give him her hair. Instead he sneaked up to her bed at night and cut off her ponytail, so as not to wake her up. Then he locked himself into the chicken hutch laboratory and started an exciting experiment...

These things had consequences of course. Everybody knew that Kayam was the culprit, and they found the ponytail and pile of cat fur among his belongings. His mother slapped him terribly and his father gave him a good beating. The neighbor woman also beat him, shouting that he should go to hell and rot in his grave forever.

Kayam's soul craved revenge. It wasn't possible to take revenge on his father and mother—it would have made no sense since he relied on them for his daily meals, however the woman next door was a different story entirely! By then he had successfully managed to extract phosphorous from human urine, and from this he produced a nice ointment. One night he smeared himself with it from head to toe, including his hair. Around midnight he sauntered over to his neighbor's place, crouched below the window stark naked and began howling bitterly like a cat. The woman opened the window in an attempt to chase the cat away. Suddenly Kayam arose from his squatting position, his whole body glowing from the ointment. He stretched out his arm toward the neighbor and said, "Your wish has been fulfilled! I have died, but my soul has come to get you! Come with me!"

The woman snatched at her heart and then collapsed. Kayam feared his revenge had gone a little too well and ran away. It turned out she had actually had a heart attack, although she didn't die. It took a few weeks of convalescing and she eventually recovered. But even after that she could not run or do any heavy work, as she tired easily. Kayam's parents naturally gave him another hammering, and because of these sorts of shenanigans Durman thought it would be better if his son spent part of the day in school rather than being a troublemaker at home. However Kayam did not remain at school for long.

What happened was that two boys had begun fighting in the break. They were not even fighting with Kayam, but Kayam was present and heard every word being said. One boy had done a particularly foul-smelling fart, and the other was having a go at him. Words were exchanged, and

finally the other boy said to the one who had farted, "Listen, if that's the way you want to be, next time I'll hold a candle up to your ass, and if you fart the gas will ignite!"

Those who heard the debate were in fits of laughter. However the comment gave Kayam an idea, after all, he was experimenting with chemistry right now. Could it be possible that the gas from the anus was combustible?! He was so overwhelmed by the thirst for knowledge that he could hardly wait to get home. But there were candles at school too—they were used for various experiments. Kayam even knew where they were. Besides, he was on watch-keeping duty today and did not have to go out during the break. So he made the most of the opportunity, particularly as he could feel all the beans he had gobbled up for dinner and breakfast gathering valuable material for the experiment within him. When the class ended and he was the only remaining student in the room, he lit the candle and placed it on the floor. But there were too many shadows there, and he was concerned he wouldn't be able to clearly see the result of the experiment. So he moved the candle onto the teacher's table instead. He lowered his trousers and positioned his legs carefully so that the candle would be between them—close to his buttocks, but enough space to avoid being burned by the flame. Then he twisted his head back so he could see whether the ejected gas would ignite or cause a fireball like the one fire-eaters produced. He stood like this, waiting for his swirling bowel to give the signal to begin the experiment.

And it did—a true gunshot! But it was too strong, and blew the candle out. Kayam was not disheartened. He lit it again and repositioned himself, even though his kneecaps were sore from all the kneeling, but if he had his mind set on something he would not give up easily. Science always came first! So Kayam lay there with his chest and head over the table beside the door. He couldn't actually see the door because he was looking towards the window, watching the candle between his legs while his buttocks protruded up in the air like a snow-white mountain as he awaited the new dose for his experiment. He didn't even notice the door opening and the other children coming into the room. Kayam was oblivious to everything else, his head was so full of the tremendous discovery he was about to make.

"I will be the Great Benefactor of mankind," he thought, looking at the candle. "If it burns and does so with a decent flame, I'm going to manufacture little balloons that everyone can carry with them. If one feels the need to break wind, they merely pull down their trousers, press the opening of the balloon to their buttocks and then tie it off so that the expensive gas doesn't escape. Yes, this will have the added benefit of the air not being smelly afterwards! Then they will take these balloons home and attach them to the Kayam machine, which will suck the gas out of them and store it in a large tank, and if they want to light it all they have to do is open a little tap and ignite the expelled gas, instantly flooding the room with light... yes, free light... no need for expensive candles! Everybody will be able produce their own lighting at night!"

Kayam's lighting device would be in everybody's home; it would replace lamps and candles everywhere. In fact, these kinds of balloons could also be attached to the buttocks of cows, as surely their farts were flammable too. That would be even better—a cow released a lot more gas than a human, and all that was currently wasted. But the invention could be developed further. It would not be necessary for people to carry the balloons in their pockets to collect the fart, because what if they didn't have time to undress when the need arose, and it would be awkward in the cold winter. It would be much simpler if everyone had pants with a section made of rubber at the back, naturally closed off with a valve, and then the gas could be released into the pants as it usually is. However the bubble would gradually become bigger behind every person from the series of farts, which was useful because the person could just look back and see how much of the luminous gas had accumulated. Then they could just go home, attach the trousers to the Kayam machine and drain it...

This was the point Kayam had reached in his thinking, and he was utterly astonished by his own genius. He was vowing earth-shattering plans about the wonderful possibilities of free light, when suddenly a terrible blow hit him on the backside. Above him stood the teacher, who had just struck his bare ass with a paddle. The blow was so forceful that Kayam no longer had his buttocks in the air but collapsed onto the table, landing directly on the candle, which went out and burnt his thigh. And now, perhaps due to the blow, another portion of gas broke out of him, but too late because the candle was no longer burning and he wasn't able to discover whether or not it was a combustible gas...

Despite explaining that it was a scientific experiment, people were not very sympathetic. They did not appreciate his genius, and even decided that because he was perpetually disrupting the discipline in school he was to be expelled. Kayam didn't really mind this, although he did care that his parents had not rewarded his discovery. His father just beat him, and so Kayam ultimately disparaged the idea of buttock-lighting, and even though he would have been free to carry out these experiments in the hen house, he decided to give up on the idea. "If people don't want free light then they can shove it! I can't force something good on them," he said sullenly.

* * *

Badjajarata, the great wizard, was naturally informed about Kayam's life from time to time via his crystal ball. His face became ever gloomier due to the things he had seen. All day long he had been walking back and forth with his head hanging down, when finally he said to his pupil, Chinkramasila, "I have to admit that as far as Kayam's concerned, I have failed!"

"How so, Prof? All our research shows that this Kayam has quite an exceptional talent for magic!"

"That's true. The magic did succeed in that respect. It has now been proven that a wizard can be produced this way from an unborn child. But you've seen how this kind of wizard turns out. This Kayam... he truly is stupid! His parents and classmates are right about that. He's not stupid regarding mathematics, nor magic, although fortunately he hasn't learned any of that yet. But as far as his behavior goes, his overconfident attitude and disregard for others... This Kayam is ready to wade through everything and everyone without hesitation, just to satisfy his every little whim..."

"But he's not evil."

"That's true... he's certainly not evil. But he doesn't have the discipline, the sense of responsibility that someone who possesses magical power should have! Not that he doesn't have a high sense of responsibility, he just doesn't have as much as would reasonably be expected from an ordinary person. Kayam isn't able to control his desires, his sudden explosions of passion..."

"But Prof, you said that the essence of magic is to know our true desires!"

"Certainly. But what if one's true desires are the kind that belong to insane individuals like Kayam? Don't you agree that this could be huge threat to the entire world?! Kayam is simply not wizard material. If he discovers how much magic power he has, well, we should prepare for the worst! First he would kill his classmates, then his neighbor—whom he almost killed already... then his parents, and who knows who else... Yes, I see now that it was a grave mistake to create Kayam. This is entirely my fault!" and Badjajarata began again to glumly pace the room of the wizard school.

"It's like when a surgery is successful but the patient dies... I focused all Kayam's existing brain structure on magic and mathematics, and there are almost no brain resources left for other tasks befitting his environment, such as relating to people. He's unable to integrate into a community. I

really ought to kill him to prevent further danger, but how would that look when I created him? He's as much my child as he is Durman's and Zielmona's. It's all my fault! I'm not going to create anymore wizards because one Kayam is enough, in fact, even that's too many! This was a defective experiment, I can see that now. I didn't want Kayam to be this way, but I was in error. Oh dear, how sad... how embarrassing! This Kayam was a mistake, in fact Mistake with a capital M, because it was such a big mistake! Yet I must do something about him. Nobody should be allowed to live in the world with such great power and so little sense of responsibility!"

"Can't his magic talent be taken away from him?" asked Chinkramasila tentatively.

"No, unfortunately that isn't possible... at least for now... but perhaps there is something I can do!" A smile came upon Badjharata's face. "Yes, I can do this and I will do it... I'll curse him!"

"In what way?"

"The curse will basically be a condition. I am going to tie the unraveling of magic skills to a condition. The first manifestation of it. Unfortunately I can't do it with the rest, but with the first one, yes. I'm going to set a condition that he will never be able to meet, primarily because he has no idea that he possesses magic talent and that it's subject to a condition, nor what that condition is!"

"And what will the condition be, Prof?"

"To carry out a large, and in addition, completely selfless good deed. Not just any kind, but an act where he saves the life of at least a hundred and forty-four innocent people at one time. It's easy to see that Kayam would not be able to do this in his lifetime, even if he lives a thousand years. I've noticed that Kayam abhors any physical ordeal, in fact he's a cowardly rabbit, but he must perform this good deed entirely without magical abilities, since at the time of the deed he will not yet have these powers. He's weak and doesn't have the slightest intention of using violence against anybody, although it's generally necessary to use force for these kinds of heroic acts. You only have to look at any heroic story. Kayam doesn't have a clue about the fundamentals of sword play, his muscles are weak, he can't even climb up the rope in gym class! But most importantly, caring about people doesn't even enter his mind, so saving lives won't either. As vain as he is, he'll only be occupied with himself. It wouldn't occur to him to offer his help, even if someone was trying to impale an innocent baby at the dinner table! And especially such a large number of people... Even if by some incredible coincidence he could save one or two, he wouldn't be able to do it with a hundred and forty-four!"

"Strange coincidences often happen, Prof. Make it a bigger number," Chinkramasila said thoughtfully.

"I can't! One hundred and forty-four is a magic number because it's the square of twelve, and the twelve is positioned between two twin primes—between eleven and thirteen—and at the same time its square, one hundred and forty-four, is at the same distance between two prime numbers—it is equally separated from 139 and 149 by five. It's true for all magic numbers that they are the same distance from the two closest prime numbers, and this is true for its square as well. Therefore the first magic number is nine, its prime neighbor being seven and eleven... Nine squared is 81, and its prime neighbors are 79 and 83, so the second magic number is twelve. The third one is fifteen, the fourth is eighteen and the fifth is twenty-one... In any case, I have to use the smallest of the magic numbers, one which is not only a magic number but is directly between two twin primes. This is the twelve... and the square of it is 144!"

"But Prof, after a blockage like this, doesn't it usually occur that the disabled ability emerges in a particularly spectacular and powerful manner?"

"Yes, after a long repression it does usually surface in a spectacular way. But don't worry, Chinkramasila. How could Kayam save a hundred and forty-four people at once if he doesn't have it

in him to be a big hero? The most he could hope for is to become a clerk somewhere, if they allow him to, and if he doesn't make his master so angry he wants to hang him! And I should add that even if he does perform his good deed, he must do it without glorifying himself, therefore not carrying it out with the intention of being a celebrated hero, but merely in order to do good. In fact, if a single thought crosses his mind that the people he saved will be grateful to him, the whole thing will be invalid, unless it's offset by Kayam knowing that as a result of this heroic act he may be punished by others, even beaten up. Ah, Kayam would never be capable of such a thing!"

"I trust you, Prof, but don't forget that one fool makes a hundred!"

"Perhaps. But if Kayam somehow fools that many people, it won't lead to the saving of lives. Anyway, as far as Kayam's regard for people goes, he would sooner kill a hundred and forty-four than save the same amount of people!" the great wizard stated, closing the discussion.

Chinkramasila did not say a word because she admired her teacher greatly, however she agreed wholeheartedly with Badjazarata that Kayam was a monstrous fool. Yet folk wisdom did say that fortune favors the fool...

* * *

For the time being however, Kayam didn't seem to be having much luck. His parents were grumpy because he had been expelled, but now that Kayam no longer had to study and he was old enough, they decided it would be proper for him to contribute to the family income. For a while his father tried getting him to tutor school children who weren't good at math. But Kayam's classmates had no desire to go to him, and neither did anyone from the school who knew of him, so Kayam just taught those who were unfamiliar with his reputation, that is, the youngest kids. It quickly became apparent however that he did not have the patience for the younger ones. If a six year-old could not read very well after the first hour, or didn't know numbers well enough that Kayam could explain complex equation systems to them, he immediately determined that the poor child was completely untalented, in fact an imbecile, and that it wasn't worth the effort.

Therefore this endeavor failed. Kayam became a useless freeloader, and remained at home unemployed for a long period of time. The only benefit they gained from him was that he chopped their winter firewood, but even this was short-lived, because on one occasion he struck his leg with the ax instead of the wood. Fortunately it wasn't with the sharp edge, but he could hardly move for weeks. His mother, Zielmona, said, "I'd rather cut up the wood myself—there would be fewer problems to deal with. Now I have to bring him breakfast, lunch and dinner in bed!"

There was one time, however, when his experimental inclinations did benefit them. They had a distant relative living in a faraway city. A certain man named Jikach. He was also a clerk. One day his wife Zantanila came to Zielmona crying, complaining that her husband had been suspected of embezzlement by his master. Jikach had allegedly stolen a lot of money. He was even arrested. She was afraid they would do a house search and take everything away as compensation. She brought some of her gold jewelry along and wanted Zielmona to keep it for her until the case was cleared up, because she was sure her husband was innocent. But even if it all worked out, they would never get back the jewelry that was confiscated, as this was not the custom of aristocrats. It was common for them to just take it away and fail to return it. Zielmona was worried they might discover that the woman had come to them, and then they would search *their* home for the jewelry.

"It has to be hidden!" responded Zantanila.

"But how? They could find it anywhere!"

"What if you bury it?"

"Then I might not be able to find it again. Or what if they dig up the garden? Because these things do occur to them!"

"I can hide the jewelry someplace they'll never find!" Kayam blurted out unasked.

"Oh shut up, don't be ridiculous...!"

"No really, I do know a way of hiding it!"

"How?" asked his father.

"I'm not going to tell you because then you'll know, and you'll divulge it to someone!"

"Just stop it! Now..." Durman raised his palm to spank him, but Zantanila stood between them.

"Don't hit him! He's right—it *is* better if he's the only one who knows the secret. I trust him."

"Don't give your jewelry to him! I'm warning you in advance, Zantanila, because it's sad that I have to say this about my own son, but he's a fool and completely unreliable with anything other than mathematics. In fact I don't doubt that he would be able to hide it so that nobody could find it, nobody in the world, but unfortunately I think it's likely he won't be able to find it later either!"

"Try to understand that I'm afraid of keeping the jewelry at home, because they could take it away at any time!" She stopped in front of Kayam and handed him a small bundle.

"Here it is. I trust you completely."

Kayam did not even thank her for trusting him. He just took the bundle and went out to the chicken hutch. And behold, Zantanila was right! The next day ten troopers came to the house saying that they had heard that the wife of the embezzler, clerk Jikach, had been here and that Jikach's house had been searched in vain, for they had found nothing there. The missing money must be here. They searched the whole house, but of course they didn't find anything. Then they went out to the farm buildings, to the pig and chicken hutches.

"It's unnecessary to go in there, honorable soldiers, since it's only my fool of a son that lives there..." Durman was wringing his hands nervously. Oh, how much trouble Zantanila had got them into! Stupid Kayam had probably forgotten to hide the gold, and if they found it then the whole family would be finished.

Of course all this concern made the soldiers' leader suspicious. He kicked the door in and dragged Kayam out, turning everything upside down and throwing it out into the garden. But all he found were some books, and various suspicious-looking powders and liquids. Nothing resembling gold or silver. He even scratched the large metal objects, to see whether they were made of gold but had been painted over to mislead the searchers. All in vain. They had to leave without completing their task, despite being extremely thorough. They had not dug up the garden, but had thoroughly inspected it for any fresh traces of digging, and even rummaged about in the bottom of the outdoor toilet with a large branch and pitchfork.

Kayam's respect grew considerably after the soldiers had left. In fact they all demanded right away that he tell them where he had hidden the gold. Surely he could disclose it now that the soldiers were not coming back. Kayam innocently told them that he wouldn't be able to return it just yet, as he would need at least a week to retrieve it—since the soldiers had not found any pure gold because he didn't possess any. "Here is your jewelry and all your gold coins!" He pointed to a big glass balloon in the corner of the hen house that had been lodged in the ground. When he removed the lid, a caustic smell was released and a dark slop could be seen.

"I'm sorry?!" Zantanila stood there amazed.

"I dissolved all your jewelry and gold coins in acid!"

"But... but it was such beautiful jewelry, they were masterpieces, all of them..." Zantanila stammered.

"Even still, the acid has dissolved them."

"But I know for a fact that gold is the king of metals because no acid can dissolve it!" protested Durman.

"Well, I was able to prepare a mixture that could actually dissolve it!" said Kayam defiantly.

"But what will become of my jewelry now?!"

"I will extract the gold from it," Kayam shrugged. "They won't be individual pieces of jewelry, unless you have them reconstructed, but you can receive the pure gold back."

Zantanila accepted that it was better to get the jewelry's gold back than for it to be taken by the soldiers. She was polite enough to thank Kayam for this, although she was rather wary until Kayam transformed her gold from that suspicious slop into a glittering nugget...

This was the only beneficial action Kayam performed for a long time. However later on he was again of great use to them; not to his close family unfortunately, but again to Zantanila. It began just like the previous time—Zantanila appeared at their house, crying that her family was in great trouble again. She told them that her dapper lad of a son was interested in girls. He wanted to get married, but it was not just anybody he desired—it was the daughter of the nearby city's judge.

"This isn't a tragedy," laughed Durman, "because if he succeeds in marrying the girl then that's great, and if not then surely he'll survive the blow to his ego!"

"Oh, but it *is* a tragedy! My son won't survive it, because the judge is a terribly clever man, it's intimidating how intelligent he is, and he's decided to give his daughter to the smartest man he can find. He has announced that he'll accept any man as a possible suitor, but he must prove his cleverness. This will be done by the judge locking his daughter into one of two rooms adjacent to each other. One room will have a gold door handle and the other a silver one. The suitor will have to choose which room he enters. If he goes into the room in which the girl is waiting, then he can prepare for the wedding. But god help him if he enters the other one, because there will be hangman waiting next to a scaffold!"

"Well that sounds rather cruel!" Durman wrinkled his forehead.

"It certainly is! The judge is doing this so that men won't just arbitrarily go asking for the hand of his daughter. If they chose a door at random they'd have a fifty percent chance of entering the room with the girl, but this way they really have to think about their choice."

"But how could it be anything other than a guess?!"

"I don't know. Although the judge did say that before choosing, the suitor is allowed to pose him a question, but only one. And he can only ask a question to which the answer is a simple 'yes' or 'no'. He will answer the question but he may lie. Every morning he'll decide whether or not he'll lie to the suitors. But he won't tell anybody if he's lying or not. And he'll only take in one suitor per day."

"What if the suitor asks whether he's lying that day...?" Zielmona began to speculate.

"That's not an option, because he won't discover anything by doing that. If the judge tells him that he's lying that day, then, since the suitor can only ask one question he won't have any left to inquire about what's hidden in each room!"

"In any case," blurted Kayam unsolicited, "the question in this form is meaningless because the suitor would always receive the answer that the judge is not lying. Since if it's a truth-telling day he'll get this answer, and if it's a lying day then he'll get the exact same answer because he's lying!"

"That's right!" nodded Durman. "But what are you hoping for? Why have you come to us?" he asked Zantanila.

"Well, I actually came because your son so cleverly hid the gold last time. He's such a smart boy, and I'd like to ask you to allow him to come with me. Maybe he can talk my son out of his stupid desire to marry the daughter of this reprehensible judge!"

"Why didn't you bring your son with you?"

"I wanted to, but he wouldn't come."

"Aren't you afraid that while you're here he'll go to the judge to ask for the hand of his daughter?"

"No, because it takes me at most two weeks to travel there and back, but the judge is so rich and this girl so beautiful that appointments have been made with suitors every day for a whole month in advance. So far they've all been hung without exception... Please let Kayam come with me, to see if he can talk..."

"I have no intention of talking your son out of this! If he's smart enough then let him marry the girl!" said Kayam. "This problem has a solution, and I know what it is!"

"Tell me! Tell me, please!" The desperate mother grabbed Kayam's arms.

"I will not tell you. It would be dishonest."

"How so?"

"The judge is doing this to ensure that his future son-in-law is the smartest man. But if I tell you the answer and you tell your son, your son won't win the hand of the girl by his own merits and therefore I will be deceiving the judge! This is unfair, and further complications could arise later on as well."

"What kind of complications?"

"How should I know? Not that I care."

"Oh Kayam, I trust you implicitly... please tell me the answer!"

"Not a chance," said Kayam.

"You know what, I don't even believe you know the answer! You're just messing around!"

"Me?!" growled Kayam.

"Yes, you! You're just playing at being the great scientist, and you have no idea what the solution is!"

"Yes I do!" retorted Kayam, getting riled up.

"I don't believe you. You don't even have the slightest idea of how to solve this, and no matter what you say I won't believe it unless you can prove it!"

"Well all right then, listen to me very carefully so I don't have to say it twice! Your son should ask the judge the following: 'Your Honor, if I asked you whether your daughter is in the room with the gold handle, would you answer the same thing as if I asked you whether you are having a truth-telling day?' "

Even Kayam's own father gaped at him for a few moments before bursting out, "This is ridiculous! It makes no sense at all!"

"Should I explain it then?" asked Kayam confidently.

"Please do!" Zantanila leaned toward him expectantly.

"Let's say the girl really is in the room with the gold door handle, and the judge is having a truth-telling day. Then he would answer 'yes' to the question of whether she is in that room. He would also say 'yes' to the question of whether he is having a truth-telling day. Therefore he would answer the same for the both questions and would say 'yes' to the boy's question. Is this clear so far?" He looked around sternly.

"Yes," stammered Zantanila cautiously.

"If the girl is in the room with the gold door handle but the judge is having a lying day, then he will answer 'no' to the question of whether the girl is in the gold-handled room. But for the question of whether he is having a truth-telling day he would say 'yes', since he is lying. The two answers will therefore be different and he would answer 'no' to your son's question. Because he is lying that

day, he is also lying about that and saying yes. So if the girl is in the gold-handled room then the answer must be 'yes'. Now, suppose that the girl is in the room with the silver handle... In this case, if the judge is having a truth-telling day he would say 'no' to the question of whether she is in the gold-handled room. But to the question of whether he is having a truth-telling day he would say 'yes'. Therefore the two answers are not the same and he will answer 'no' to your son's question. If the girl is in the room with the silver door handle and the judge is lying, then to the first question of whether she is in the gold-handled room he would say 'yes', since he is lying. He would say 'yes' when asked if he is having a truth-telling day since he is lying about that too. The two answers are the same and he would answer 'yes' to your son's question, but because he is lying he will say 'no' instead! So, if the girl is in the room with the silver handle the answer must be 'no'. In other words, even if the judge is having a lying day he will answer the suitor with a 'yes' if the girl is in the room in question, in this case the gold-handled one as the question was posed that way, and will say 'no' to the question if the girl is in the other room. So if your son asks the exact question I told you and the judge's answer is 'yes', then he should open the gold-handled room. Otherwise he should open the silver-handled one!"

"Oh, what a great mind you have! How absolutely clever of you!" Zantanila marveled.

"That's an understatement—I'm not smart, I'm a *genius*!" said Kayam, puffing himself up.

Zantanila thanked him some more before quickly hurrying back to her son. Later they learned that the son had successfully won the girl's hand, by means of an invitation to the wedding. But Zantanila specified that Kayam was not permitted to come, only his parents, as she was afraid that he might blurt out that the idea had come from him.

"Well, there you go—this is what I get for being good to somebody! Somebody else is marrying the beautiful rich girl, whom I actually deserve, and they won't even invite me to the wedding! Not only do they not invite me, but they straight-out ban me from participating!" Kayam grumbled. But he did not grumble for long, because his parents returned from the wedding bringing with them three wagons full of delicacies. Kayam really loved his belly, and for the next few weeks he had no reason to complain when it came to eating.

The trouble occurred six months later. Zantanila was looking for them again. She was not crying this time, but her face still showed anxiety. As she was a docile woman, she did not confront his parents first but immediately sought out Kayam. "Listen Kayam, you're so clever... I mean, not just clever but a *genius*... Please, I really need your help!"

"Sure, so you can leave me out of another wedding?!"

"But I did send you all those things last time!"

"I didn't even get to eat a good majority of it—my parents and sister did. However the little sensitive brat always cries whenever she sees me and runs away. It's not like I want to skin her—I was only asking for her pony-tail. I want to see if human hair works better for bowstrings than twisted animal gut..."

"Listen, if you help me Kayam, I'll give you *my* hair! See how much longer it is than your sister's... I don't even mind if you shave my head bald!"

"You won't need to be bald, the pony-tail is enough," said Kayam generously.

"Even better. So can I tell you?"

"Okay, see what a decent man I am..." said Kayam modestly.

"Well the problem is this—My son's father in-law has to rule in a very special case, and although he's a very smart man, this time even *he* doesn't know the answer! He called upon my son to advise him, because he had found the answer so quickly to the marriage proposal..."

"And of course your son doesn't know what to advise. Well, I knew there would be some problems... I warned you in advance that it wouldn't end well if your son wore borrowed plumes, or rather, borrowed genius!" fussed Kayam.

"Yes, I know, but I don't regret that it happened this way because my son has a great life with his wife. But now listen to me! This is the story... The judge has a friend who's not only a clerk but a lawyer as well. This man agreed to teach the profession without charge to a poor but otherwise very talented boy. They made an agreement, a written statement that although he would study free of charge, after he had mastered the profession and when he won his first trial, he would be required to pay him some money. Not just a small amount, but one hundred gold coins in full. The boy passed all the necessary exams with excellent results and he began working as a clerk. He earns a good wage, but hasn't undertaken advocacy in lawsuits because he doesn't want to pay his former master that much money. He says that he's not obliged to since he hasn't won a lawsuit yet. The former teacher has tried to sue him, and the judge in charge of the case is my son's father-in-law. The boy had just shrugged his shoulders and told the judge that it was completely useless to sue him because he was in no way obliged to pay. If he wins the lawsuit he naturally won't have to pay, because the judge will rule that he isn't required to pay. However if he loses, he still hasn't won a single lawsuit, so according to the formal written agreement he's still not obliged to pay. The thing is, the teacher, who is the judge's friend, says that if the boy loses the lawsuit then he must pay, because losing the lawsuit means that the judge rules that the defendant is required to pay. On the contrary, if the boy wins he is also obliged to pay because he would have just won a lawsuit, and after the first winning trial he must pay one hundred gold coins. Now the judge is scratching his chin and doesn't know what to do. He wants to judge in favor of his friend, but he's afraid to. He doesn't want it to look like he's biased, and besides, from each of their points of view both of them are right!"

Kayam just shrugged. "It really isn't very difficult to help you with this. The case is rather simple... I see that not only should *I* have married the judge's daughter, but also that I should be the judge instead of that pumpkin head! The situation is as clear as day. The boy hasn't actually won any lawsuits yet. In the contract there is nothing stating that he is required to undertake lawsuits. This can be condemned morally but not legally. He didn't win any lawsuits therefore he is not required to pay. The judge must proclaim this. And so the boy will win the lawsuit. Immediately afterwards the former teacher should sue him again on the grounds that he has now won a lawsuit, and because this is indeed true, now the judge can benefit his friend quite lawfully in this second trial and the boy will be obliged to pay the tuition fee!"

Zantanila could not thank him enough, and she traveled back so quickly that she forgot to cut off her pony-tail. Though a week later she remembered her debts and sent the pony-tail along with one her acquaintances, who happened to be passing by Kayam's house at that time. But Kayam no longer cared about it by then, because his interest was tied down to something else—he had discovered non-euklidian geometries, however he wasn't able to delve into this topic for very long. The reason being that Durman felt it was time to find his son a real job.

It was around this time that the Emperor ordered a census to be carried out of the entire territory of his realm. The emperor of Atlantua was then named Zor. He had only recently become an emperor, and was previously simply known as a king. During the past fifteen years serving as king he had conquered three countries, and although they retained a certain degree of autonomy he had attached them to his kingdom. There were a few other countries that he had not managed to conquer, however they were still obliged to pay taxes. He felt that he ought to have some title that expressed not just the fact that he was a king, but the king of kings, hence taking the title 'Emperor'.

Zor was undoubtedly a great king. A gifted emperor. Many centuries later he was recognized by historians as essentially being the one who made Atlantua great. That's why it was rather strange that in the congruent opinion of subsequent historians, Zor had an exceptionally unimaginative mind. They stated that it wasn't his genius that made him a king or an emperor, but his unscrupulous violence, coupled with his affection for bureaucracy.

If we try to understand Emperor Zor without bias, then we cannot accept the claim that he was unimaginative. Particularly in his early reign when he fought many battles, and these were against some major superior forces. For instance the one that occurred shortly before Kayam's birth, which he fought against his half-brother near the town of Sizon. He even won these battles. This would not have been possible without a high degree of military tactic savvy, and for that a little imagination was needed. He simply didn't like it if governing was based on a series of sudden inspirations. He preferred to use scientific methods in legislation and in administration too, therefore he actually invented bureaucracy. Wherever he could, he carefully restricted the rights of nobility. He made sport of the fact that he could be considered unimaginative, and that all his laws were kept to the letter.

As for his maliciousness and violence, that was of course true. He could not even be an emperor if that wasn't his nature. He had murdered his brother, and when he was suspected and his father called him accountable, he killed his own father. His mother fled with his sister to marry another country's king so that her son-in-law could be the king of Atlantua, as opposed to her husband's murderer, his son. In response to this Zor attacked the said country with seventy thousand soldiers, from which only ten thousand remained alive, but he won and afterwards had the king, his sister and mother executed. Sometime after the battle of Sizon, his half-brother was also executed. And Zor's laws were not known for being gentle towards transgressors and the guilty. There was barely a single punishment in his law book not involving some form of death. Even so, around the time Kayam had been expelled from school, this ruthless go-getter had already marched into people's ordinary lives as an unquestioningly good and gracious emperor.

A trait of this emperor existed, which although recorded by historians was not common knowledge, and many of his dispositions can only be understood in this light. Zor was a miser to the most absurd degree. Not only in terms of his own clothing or food, but also with regard to the entire kingdom. If fate had not determined that he be an emperor, he would probably have made an excellent treasurer. He ate the same things as the common soldiers, slept the same way, and after they had crowned him he melted down all the palace's precious metal ornaments. In fact he had a falling out with the priests because he repeated this with the sculptures of God too. He himself never sacrificed to gods. In his noble simplicity he stated that he did not waste anything. The sculptures were unnecessary because *he* was the supreme god. However he required only one sacrifice—that they adhere to his laws!

He pathologically abhorred waste. He was constantly thinking about how he could save money here and there. Of course he always tried to increase his revenue, but that wasn't his main priority. It was more profitable to manage the use of existing revenues, namely by not releasing them. The direct consequence of this was that he did not really raise taxes, at least not the taxes of the treasury. But if he realized that someone was using the tax entitled to him for something he considered useless, he immediately took measures so that the tax would stream directly to him.

When he had taken over the throne, the treasury almost echoed from the emptiness. Much later, after his death, one could barely enter the treasury it was crammed so full with gold, silver, and precious stones. He did all this while fighting many successful wars, as well as significantly upgrading the road network of Atlantua, and building numerous public buildings, storage places and

hospitals. He founded academies, he launched the first major technical revolution, and even abolished slavery in Atlantua. Naturally this wasn't down to any great benevolence on his part, but as a result of his stinginess. He recognized that slave labor was simply not effective. Besides, slaves only produced for their masters; they did not pay taxes to the king. If he released them then he could require them to pay taxes.

He brought in laws in favor of women too. Not that he thought women were worth as much as men—there was no question about that—but for example, he decreed that if a man killed his wife or beat her so badly she became crippled, then the man's assets would be confiscated and credited to the treasury, and he himself would be sentenced to twenty years of hard labor. The convicts did not usually survive it. This deterred men from significant deflection, and it was in the interest of the Emperor because with his clerk-mind he concluded that he would gain more revenue if he had more subjects, so he had no interest in men killing their wives or crippling them. He also ordered that in the case of the husband's death, the eldest son would only inherit the fortune if he had already reached adulthood. If he was a minor the wealth went to his wife, and women naturally approved of this. The Emperor liked the idea that the legacy was not just uselessly sitting there, performing no function until the child had grown up, but now the wife would be turning the money around by buying and selling, and for the Emperor that meant new taxes coming in.

It was typical of him to punish deliberate murder with decapitation. Tax evasion seemed a more serious transgression in his eyes, and its punishment was for the offender to be gradually cooked in hot oil for an entire day. But in general his main concern was that every contract needed to be in writing, witnessed by his officials, and had to be complied with. Naturally a certain fee was to be paid after each contract.

At the time Kayam was expelled from school, Emperor Zor had not yet liberated the slaves and the great clerk system had not been fully established. But the Emperor had obviously been thinking about future plans because he had ordered the census. He specifically wanted to know how many people lived in the country—how many men and how many women, how old they were and the nature of their professions. He was particularly interested in how many were working for the state. Although back then they were not called "state employees" but "servants of the empire". All this information helped the Emperor to impose the taxes that had to be paid by everyone.

Atlantua was a huge empire, and the census gave the clerks an enormous amount of work. They weren't required to conduct it of course; this was done by the judges in the free towns and by various noble lords in other places. But the clerks had to scribble down all the names. In addition, some professions needed to be compiled separately, for example blacksmiths, since in the case of a war it was good to know how many blacksmiths were in the country, how many slaves there were, the number of clerks, doctors and so on. Zor was a thorough man. As soon as he acquired the empire he wanted to know exactly what he was earning and how much he already had. Each clerk knew that the census would go on for months, but they didn't mind. They knew it would bring them a substantial income.

These weeks had indeed become the dawn of sure signs of financial prosperity in Durman's life. He had so many things to transcribe that he could earn as much as he wanted. In theory he could have earned even more, but unfortunately for him the day only contained twenty-four hours. Now he was very pleased about his son's invention, the shorthand. From early morning until late at night he used this shorthand writing at the count's premises, and at night he transcribed his scribblings into a nice, readable version. He only regretted that he had so little time to sleep. His son could not help him with this because his writing was so atrocious. It was then that the Great Idea popped into

his head. Kayam was not able to write beautifully, but his proficiency in shorthand exceeded his own. After all, he had invented it!

One day he ordered Kayam, who was now fifteen years old, tall and yet quite thin for an adolescent, "Today you're coming with me! I have to go to Pakunda to help the city council with the census. I think if there are two of me I'll be able to do twice as much work, and in turn *earn* twice as much! You will be the other me. Try to behave as if you not only have a brain but have some sense in it too. I know that this isn't the case, but please try to act as if it were! Even though it'll be difficult, try to make a man of yourself. All you have to do is write down what's dictated to you in a big list using shorthand, and then later back at home I'll rewrite it properly."

The city of Pakunda was much larger than Sizon. The city council didn't really care if Durman did the work or his son. They were actually glad that there were two of them, as this way they could finish earlier. In order not to disturb each other they put them in two separate rooms. A member of the council accompanied each of them inside, their job being to dictate the necessary information, partly from their head and partly from various sketchy notes. Kayam's dictator was a council member called Kessel. Kayam settled comfortably in a cushioned seat and placed the writing board on his knees, onto which he spread the first sheet of paper. Beside him was a bottle of ink and several quills. He waited for the dictator to start speaking.

"Where should we begin..." Kessel grumbled. "The main report is ready, but the Emperor is also demanding that the people must be itemized by occupation. So, who do we start with...? There are many slaves... I think we'll start with the clerks, as we'll have that done in no time. Yes, the clerks will be a good starting point, and then we'll continue with the chefs... Okay, let's begin! Clerk, get snappy!" he encouraged Kayam before proceeding to dictate the names. "Clerk Nilju, Clerk Malmachi..."

Kayam diligently wrote down everything Kessel dictated, however the beginning of Kayam's list looked like this: 'Clerk Getsnappy, Clerk Nilju, Clerk Malmachi...' Because Kayam had misunderstood the councilor's encouragement, assuming that "get snappy" referred to a name. In any case, after they had finished with the clerks they began on the chefs, then the blacksmiths, followed by the endless series of slaves...

It didn't even occur to anyone to verify Kayam's notes. They wouldn't have been able to read them anyway, and not because they were "ornamented" with numerous inkblots, but because he had taken it down in shorthand. Only Kayam and Durman knew how to read it, and sometimes even Durman had difficulty. Nevertheless, nothing really happened on that day. Everyone had been satisfied with how fast Kayam took notes. They brought the papers home, and within a few days his father had rewritten it all neatly and accurately, starting the whole thing of course with Clerk Getsnappy. He then took the papers to the honorable city council of Pakunda, where nobody reviewed them again. Besides, they had been urged on by the deadline and so had instantly forwarded them to the majestic Emperor Chancellery.

It seemed that everything was in order; the census had ended and everyone was in calmer spirits. Nobody would have guessed that Kayam's minor mishearing would unleash serious complications, and affect not only his own family but the whole of Pakunda and even Atlantua. However for now the trouble lay sleeping. For the time being...

Chapter 5: Falling Sky Spark

Djuli was already an adolescent girl when Kayam was born. And when Kayam "gave birth" to Clerk Getsnappy, Djuli could no longer be considered a young girl, however she wasn't old either, for on that exact day she had turned thirty-three. Naturally she had no idea who Getsnappy was, who although didn't exist was already well on his way to causing all sorts of complications in Atlantua and even beyond; misery, suffering and poverty for some, joy and wealth for others. Djuli had not even heard of Kayam yet her fate was to be inexorably entangled with his, at least for a good while, even though he was young enough to be her son. It was no mystery that she didn't know of him, since Djuli wasn't actually from Atlantua. She lived in a neighboring country called Torgo, in a frontier town not far from Sizon, the city where Kayam lived, but back then it was part of another country.

At that time Atlantua was an immense empire, however Torgo was also a relatively large country. In addition, Torgo and Atlantua traded with each other via its long border, with Torgo possessing almost the entire coastline south of Atlantua. This coastal strip was not particularly wide, no more than perhaps fifty kilometers at any given point and generally spanning only ten, however it was almost five hundred kilometers in length. It stretched out from Torgo like a kind of tail on the map, and separated Atlantua from the sea. Understandably, all the kings of Atlantua had been complaining about this for generations. The cities on the coast were rich, and King Zor wanted their taxes too—all the revenue from the maritime trade tax to enrich his treasury. But the appropriation of these cities was not easy, because Torgo was a strong country and the coastal cities were particularly well fortified from the direction of the mainland. The maritime trade was so important. A massive amount of goods were brought to the rich southern cities, all by ship, because only a voyage could take them to the countries where the Sun was eternally Lord of the sky, where the Ice Queen forever withheld her icy breath.

Djuli happened to live in one of the villages that was close to Sizon as well as the seashore, but at the same time was a citizen of different country to Kayam. Although it would be a gross exaggeration to say she was a "citizen" of this city, for at least two reasons. Firstly, Djuli was a slave. And it was only free people who were considered citizens, not just in Torgo but in Atlantua and every other known country. Djuli wasn't even born in Torgo, nor in Atlantua, but in what was generally known as an uncivilized area. She first saw the light of day in a very remote mountain village, as a member of the Zunzan tribe. Her native tongue was Zunzan. Unfortunately for Djuli it was very close to the border of Torgo and some Torg slave hunters had broken into the village, massacring the Zunzan people because their hunters fiercely resisted. They were unable to capture many of the men, and only slightly more of the women, but many children were taken as prisoners and Djuli was among them.

When they had captured her she was almost a grown woman—fifteen years old. It occasionally happened in her tribe that a girl was married at fourteen, but it was more common at the age of sixteen. At the time of the attack she was being courted, for a few weeks already, by two different men. One of them was a nice young man and the other a middle-aged hunter, who already had a wife. Djuli did not know which one to choose. The young man's youth was alluring and moreover he was very handsome. On the other hand, the fact that the married hunter wanted a second wife proved he was a rather distinguished man, since he was capable of supporting two wives. It didn't bother Djuli that she would be, so to speak, the "second wife", as bickering and jealousy was not a

habit of wives in her tribe. In fact it was rare for a man to have two wives, because they didn't generally live very well. But her suitor was known as an excellent hunter indeed.

Was. Because the attackers killed him, as well as the young man, and Djuli was enslaved. Here she lacked the freedom she had in the tribe of being able to choose her future husband, in fact she was not permitted to have a husband at all. She drifted from one end of the country to the other at the whim of her various owners. Initially she was disposed of by many of them since she didn't know the Torg language, nor much about their lifestyle, and had little use—except of course for bed-related activities, which they often used her for. But over time she learned the language and the customs, thus becoming "civilized", as the Torg people would say. This was of course coupled with much anguish and suffering. She was beaten regularly. Once when she had tried to escape, they whipped her so badly that for weeks she had to remain—not in a bed, as she wasn't lucky enough to be given one, but on a pile of straw in the stable, which she was forced to lie on. She gave birth twice, naturally unaware of who the father was, but it didn't matter because by the time they had reached four years of age they were sold off somewhere far away. These children were boys and they were both castrated to maintain their high voices, enabling them to be singers in some church choir, since women were not permitted in churches.

By the time Djuli was thirty-three years old she inexorably hated the world. Everywhere she looked she seemed to experience senseless, gratuitous cruelty and wild barbarian violence. She could see that anyone in the world was capable of inflicting immense suffering on others, if it meant making their own lives a little better. There didn't even have to be a good reason for it; one might simply gain pleasure from having the power to cause others suffering. Djuli considered it cruel the way they treated animals. All the senseless hunting, and the brutality of the great lords with their slaves... But even things like branding the hide of oxen and horses with hot iron stamps in order for the owner to recognize them. Surely the animals found this unpleasant...

The concept of money was not familiar to Djuli for a long time. Even later she was no friend of this acquisition of civilization, and regarded it as suspicious, loathsome and insidious. She hated it from the moment she learned she had been sold for three gold coins. She had seen her purchase being made; saw the gold coins being exchanged between masters, but at the time she had no idea what it meant. Of course later when she knew the Torg language, some of the more experienced slaves explained it to her, and although Djuli had become accustomed to all sorts of horrendous behaviors she had been dumbfounded. How could it be that the residents of Torgo valued her as little as being equivalent to those three glittering pebbles?! They were just immobile pieces of metal. They couldn't work, they weren't as beautiful as her; and she knew how to weave, spin and fish, was rather good at archery, sang with a pleasant voice and understood a great deal more... Did they not value all these aspects of her?!

"I could accept it if my price was at least that of a nice horse, but those three yellow pebbles..." She shook her head in bewilderment as she thought about money. In her eyes this was the most wicked evil in existence, and she suspected that the minds of the people of Torgo—and obviously others too—had become impaired and their sense of beauty corrupted, causing them to see gold as being more beautiful than anything else. This then led to all the evils they committed.

Djuli's grumbling about her being worth more than three yellow metal pebbles contained much truth, as in her tribe she wasn't just anybody, she was an 'uvi'. This is what shaman candidates were called. Her mother was a real shaman, and Djuli had procrastinated between the two suitors, as she wasn't even sure she wanted to get married just yet. Shamans were not forbidden to marry, but the students of shamanism were during their six to eight years of study, so that they could devote all their attention to acquiring this noble science. Her mother encouraged Djuli to follow in her

footsteps and become a shaman too, but Djuli was still hesitant. She had mastered a great majority of the healing skills and knew more about it than anyone else in the tribe, apart from her mother. It was only a small portion of her mother's knowledge.

Of course nothing became of it all, neither the shamanism nor the marriage, because the slave hunters came. And they had found Djuli the uvi, who was one of the most beautiful girls in the tribe, to be worth merely three gold pebbles!

Motionless, cold objects were unable to speak, nor did they have a soul according to the beliefs of the Zunzan people. Her mother had told Djuli that all plants and animals had souls, but not objects. However as Djuli thought about money she was inclined to believe that any great shaman woman, even her mother, was wrong as far as gold was concerned. Perhaps objects in general didn't have souls, but money—particularly gold—did indeed have one. A filthy, evil soul that was also dangerous, because it could emigrate into anyone who wasn't cautious enough with it. Those who were not sufficiently vigilant and distrustful were corrupted to the core by this soul as it crept over them and forced them to commit all kinds of despicable obscenities. This is how the soul of gold or any other form of money could act, for although it was immobile it could do all the evil deeds it wished through the people it had corrupted! Djuli hated money more than the whip, however they never slogged her back with money. Even so, she knew with every strike that the whip itself was soulless dead matter, yet the strikes were actually administered by the gold. It was not the person whipping her but the soul of the gold that had been transferred to its owners.

Djuli belonged to one of the rare slaves that had learned the language of the given country perfectly in vain, and it didn't matter that they were slaves for a longer time than they had spent previously as a free person, they were not reconciled to their circumstances. But all this didn't mean she would try to live according to the old customs of her tribe. Not only because it was largely impossible, but because she did not believe many of the things she had previously believed in as a free woman. So even if she clung to her past, in her thoughts and beliefs she had broken with it. Not all at once; it had been a long and painful process. But little by little she had realized that the world was equipped in a very different way than she had first thought, than what her mother had told her.

Her mother's name was Muchi. This was not actually her real name, but she had never used her real name after becoming a shaman. She received a name from her initiator that suited her vision. After consuming the sacred drink that took her soul to a faraway place, Djuli's mother dreamed that she was in the sky, and among the many stars there was a peculiar one that did not emit light and therefore couldn't even be seen. It was just a big hole in the sky, and if one looked at it they would not see mere darkness but it would appear as if they had been blinded for a while. The previous shaman had then named the woman Muchi, which in the Zunzan language meant "hole in the sky". From then on Djuli's mother was not known by any other name. Her old name became taboo.

Later her mother often dreamed about the Hole in the Sky, as well as other things. Often visions would come to her, and they were more or less about the same thing. About a being that she gave various names to: "The Good Evil", "The Redeemer Satan" (she had heard the name "Satan" from a Torg missionary who had visited), "The Fallen Light", "The Dark Soul", and countless similar names. In spite of her being a shaman she could not decide which name was appropriate.

After her first vision she was not able to speak for six months. The other members of the tribe informed Djuli of this, as she was not yet alive at the time these visions began. Later on of course her mother started talking again. Then when Djuli was born and had grown up, her mother often spoke about what she had seen after these soul trips.

"My beloved child," Muchi had said to her. "We humans have not always been humans. Long ago we lived in a magnificent world. Everything was full of light and wonder, nobody had to work,

trees brought forth crops by themselves, and the crops were made of Solid Light! There our ancestors also possessed miraculous powers. They were real wizards and their every wish was fulfilled. This shining country was surrounded by endless darkness, but nobody cared about that because darkness is Nothing, and light is Something, and Nothing can never hurt Something! But it happened that from this Nothing countless Children of Dark Light broke out, which began the process of destroying our ancestors—the Children of Light. In the beginning they had no idea what destruction was at all, what killing was—the concept was unknown to them. For a long time they couldn't even defend themselves. While the Children of Dark Light were killing their fellow beings, the survivors kept searching for a way to defeat them. Then the Children of Light who were cowards left the others in the lurch, and leaped fearfully into the Darkness to escape the beings of Dark Light. They fled into the Darkness for a long time until finally they arrived at a different world, this world that we live in. Here not everything was total darkness, yet it wasn't all light like where they'd come from. This, Djuli, was the Twilight World! The escapees didn't find beautiful trees and there wasn't Edible Light. They had left that behind due to their cowardice and terror in their Light Home. They had to eat whatever they found here, and although there was food to eat, it all had to be produced through hard work. This grueling work caused their souls to become heavy and their senses dull; fatigue tormented them and their light-being darkened due to the unsuitable nourishment, their glow gradually fading. It was they who became the ancestors of humans, Djuli! Now the Sky Spark is barely visible in the souls of people living in the Twilight World. And it turned out that even cowardice and the surrender of their celestial beings didn't offer them a perfect escape. Because sure enough the Children of Dark Light followed them into this world, as they greedily craved real light. They came over here destroying and eating people, even if not as eagerly as before, since only a small amount of real Light is hidden within humans and so we weren't really such great prey for them. We could only be safe from them if we completely abandoned our divinity, our light-being, and became animals. But it wasn't really worth escaping at such a price!"

"What was the solution then?" asked Djuli, who at that time believed everything her mother told her.

"It was what the Brave Children of Light attempted—to preserve their original essence while finding a method of defense."

"And did they end up succeeding?"

"I'm sure they must have, because I don't believe Darkness can ever triumph over Light. But how... that I don't know. Our cowardly ancestors escaped before any victory occurred. If you ever experience evil and suffering in the world, my dear daughter, just see this as us getting our deserved punishment. Because these kinds of things have only come upon us since our ancient ancestors committed the Ancient Sin—the origin of all sins, the filthiest, most abominable of sins... they abandoned their fellows! They were cowards, great cowards! Surely there must have been a terrible danger, but it shouldn't have been allowed to occur under any circumstances. All our misery is the direct consequence of this action. Cowardice and betrayal always incurs punishment, because that's the way the world works, Djuli!"

"So if I get pricked by a thorn, this is a punishment for my ancestors being cowards thousands of years ago?"

"Yes."

"But that's unfair! *I* didn't do anything wrong!"

"Of course not, but it's not the kind of punishment you're thinking about. 'Punishment' isn't even a good word for it. It's something that arises from the core of the world."

"Then the world is unfair!"

"No. Listen, my girl... If there was tribe living somewhere, in a valley they couldn't leave, and one of the generations killed all the goats because they were so tasty, then they would live well on the delicious goat meat. However this would carry its penalty—the next generation would no longer have any goats ever again, even if they themselves hadn't committed any sin. To kill all the goats would be a very foolish act, and the World would avenge it. The greater the foolishness, the greater the punishment. You're right that this punishment doesn't necessarily strike the real culprits with all its force, so you could call it unfair. If you insist that a punishment is only a punishment if it's fair, then so be it, but then don't call it a punishment—just accept that it's the Law of the World."

"Okay, then the Law of the World is unfair!" shouted Djuli, ever protesting.

"Not entirely. Because the punishment always falls onto the guilty, their offspring or people in their immediate environment who are somehow connected to the guilty ones. Those who perhaps had a chance to stop the foolishness. If a nation commits such follies regularly, that nation will die out over time, since the world doesn't need foolish nations who destroy its beauty! In its own way, at least in the long run, the World is very much a just place. It really *is* fair overall. Its duty isn't to take care of justice in the short-term. During this time it's the responsibility of the world's inhabitants to be fair to each other. After all, the world can't take care of every little thing! Unfortunately our ancestors committed a great sin, and it's punishment has been weighing upon us ever since. They thought they were very clever, because seeing how eagerly the Children of Dark Light threw themselves at the true Light, they assumed they wouldn't follow them into the Darkness. So that's where they fled. Of course in reality they weren't really that clever..."

"I'd love to live where our Ancestors lived! Surely by now those who remained there have won," stated Djuli confidently.

"Oh yes, my child, I would also love to live there. But this isn't possible for a while. Not for us. We aren't worthy of it," sighed Muchi. "However from what I saw in my visions, I believe the moment of salvation is near!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The Children of Dark Light are still alive, and they are very strong. But ultimately the greatest power is always self-destructive. It constantly wants to take action. And since every action carries the risk of making a mistake, that is, doing something one shouldn't do, if somebody lives and acts for long enough they will inevitably make mistakes over time. Even mistakes that are fatal to themselves, as in the infinity of time all actions must occur. I have seen that even in your lifetime, my child, the time will come when one of the Children of Darkness will commit that fatal mistake, which will eventually lead to their destruction. Because sometimes even a small event is enough to cause major consequences. Think about how one rolling pebble can cause a huge avalanche!"

"And what will this event be?"

"I saw the Earth arriving at the center of the World on its celestial journey. One of the Children of Dark Light came here at the same time. They should not have done this."

"Why not?"

"Because as they were coming here the Sky Hole was opened, enabling them to drag one of the Survivors with them. One of the Victors who hadn't jumped into the Darkness. And she won't be like the others. She won't be unequivocally Good, she'll be the Avenger! Her soul will be infected with all the Evil the Children of Dark Light have committed against their nation!"

"And what will she do?" asked little Djuli curiously.

"Well, I'm not quite sure," said her mother, a little embarrassed. "When I had the vision I could only find out as much as she told me..."

"She spoke to you?"

"She certainly did. And she said, 'Help me shaman, I have to find the Fool!'"

"I don't understand!" said Djuli wide-eyed.

"Nor do I. I don't know who the Fool is, although I think that since our ancestors believed they were very clever when they threw themselves into the Darkness, whatever was ruined by the Clever ones can only be restored by a Fool. But it's not important for me to know this."

"How come?"

"My dear girl, I feel that I won't live long enough to see the arrival of the Daughter of Light. It will be your responsibility to identify her and help her. I understood enough to know that she needs help."

"But I don't even know what she wants to do!"

"*You* don't have to know that, only her."

"But she'll be a great wizard, won't she?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then what could I possibly help her with?!"

"I don't know that either. But later your questions will be answered..."

"By who?"

"The Gaffer of Time. Because in time everything will be revealed. Until then your only job is to live a decent life, since you have to be worthy of her. That's why it would be good if you finally decided to become a shaman..."

These are the sorts of things Muchi told Djuli, and for a while Djuli believed her, but then she became a slave for a few years and her faith slowly dwindled away. Even if this mysterious person did arrive, this "Holy Satan" (another name her mother had used), how could she help her as a slave?! Anyway, having experienced so much horror in the world, she became increasingly less convinced of the premise that humans possessed even a tiny amount of Celestial Light. She was more inclined to believe that humans themselves were those Children of Dark Light. But the thought occasionally crossed her mind that it wouldn't be such a bad thing if all humans were devoured by these Dark Light beings.

Her mother had often reassured her not to be afraid, because even if she died her soul would be with Djuli until the end and she would help her in any way she could. Djuli didn't believe this either. She had never felt that she would get any kind of otherworldly assistance. Her mother's soul had not prevented her from being whipped. She tended to think that anything to do with otherworldliness—ghosts, gods, souls—anything mystical, was merely jumbled fiction, except for the fact that money really did have a soul... a filthy and hideous soul!

She may not have received help from her mother's soul, however the odd interesting event occurred that gave her an opportunity to take thorough revenge on her masters. She did it in such a way that nobody could hold her accountable and thus avoid the threat of punishment. There were two such cases in particular that were memorable to her. Both occurred when she was well acquainted with the Torgo language and living in the little coastal village of Odun. Which was strange, as Djuli's life here was basically not that bad compared to what it had been elsewhere. One could even say that after she had become a slave here, things were relatively good for her. Neither her owner, Mr. Numo, nor his wife, Varbilma, were so rich that they could afford unjust cruelty to their slaves; after all, if a slave died it was a great loss. Djuli wasn't even whipped in this place.

She did have to work hard here, but this didn't really bother her. In her former tribe a significant amount of work was incumbent upon the women. They had worked in the fields, gathered edible acorns in the forest, cooked meals, woven baskets, prepared the skins of animals that the hunters brought back, taken care of the children and many other such tasks. So the heavy workload was

unpleasant, but at least it was familiar. In addition, Numo and Varbilma trusted their slaves to a certain degree. There were still slave supervisors, but the slaves were allowed to go off unattended to more remote parts of the estate.

When Djuli had first come here, the old slaves told her that this was a good place; that she shouldn't try to escape because there was nowhere to go, and if she did the owner would sell her and she'd only end up in a worse place. Djuli did not run away, although she still rebelled mentally. Her past few escape attempts had all ended with a harsh beating. Being thirty years old (as many years had passed by the time she came to Odun) she was despairing enough not to repeat that kind of thing, at least not unless she had a particularly advantageous opportunity before her. This did not however present itself.

She soon learned what was expected of her. The work was relatively easy, her tasks mostly consisting of roaming the seashore at low tide and collecting the edible, less foul-smelling fish that were washed up on the bank, as well as the edible shells, because the master liked seafood. If there were enough the slaves also got some, as this considerably reduced the cost of their food supply. Sometimes she had to do washing and stoke the fire, when they cooked as well as in the winter so they wouldn't freeze. She also picked fruit, tidied and cleaned the house, so she was basically a domestic slave. Only on very rare occasions was she required to do farm work, if for some reason they needed an extra burst of manpower, but this only occurred at harvest time.

To be honest, Djuli's life was so good that many of the slaves who worked in the fields all day long were especially envious of her. She should have been happy enough, but she simply hated her masters. She was not the least bit grateful for her fate, that her work was relatively easy compared to how difficult it could have been. Barely a year had passed in Odun before she dared to confront her mistress, Varbilma, about wanting to be moved out among the rural slaves, and have a woman from that group take her place as a house slave.

"Why?" Varbilma raised her eyebrows in surprise.

Djuli would have preferred not to tell her the reason, but since she could not think of a lie that would help her she told the truth. "Because of the young gentleman who is often a guest here, my lady, and whenever he's here he always climbs onto me!"

"So what?!" Varbilma was still confused. The "young gentleman" was none other than Varbilma's brother, who did not live in Odun— although he had a house there too—but visited them quite often.

"My lady, I don't like this, and I know that nobody generally cares what a slave does or doesn't like, but my happiness would depend on so little! Any of the rural slave girls would be more than happy to take my place, and I could still be useful to you there!"

"But then you'd have to learn how to do farm work..."

"The majority of it I know already, and the rest I can learn quickly!"

"Don't interrupt! The girl who replaced you would then also have to learn the tasks here in the house. Besides, I don't have any objection if my brother wants to enjoy you. I know that he often seeks your company, and for that reason you should stay in the house. How would it look if I valued the wishes of a slave more than the well-being of my own brother?!"

"But last time he didn't just come alone. Three others were with him and they did all kinds of disgusting things to me!"

"Who cares?!"

"But they forced me to do things I dare not even speak about..."

"Don't tell me—I'm not interested! Naturally the job of a slave is to do *everything* the owner demands of them. Slaves were specifically created by the world to work for those who aren't slaves,

because they're not suitable for anything else and don't even have a fully-fledged soul like free people. A slave is an inferior being!"

"Would you say that if you were a slave yourself?!" asked Djuli, her eyes flashing with such hatred that Varbilma was startled and took a step back.

"This is unheard of! Such rebelliousness! How dare you!" she shouted, and called the slave supervisor to request ten blows to Djuli's buttocks.

Two weeks later Varbilma's brother arrived with a dozen of his buddies. They were carousing until dawn, at which time they decided they needed a woman. Varbilma ordered Djuli to go to them, all on her own, as the other women were either too far away or weren't as pretty as Djuli, so the lads would have no interest in them.

Varbilma wasn't the only one who failed to understand Djuli, most of the slaves didn't either. When they learned that Djuli wanted to work in the fields, not a single slave girl regretted her not succeeding, but only so that they themselves could go and become a domestic slave. They didn't even care if they were occasionally required to please Varbilma's brother and friends, or even master Numo. "Your problem, Djuli," said one of the slave women, "is that you still consider yourself a free woman, even though of course you're not. Come to terms with your fate!"

"The only thing I'll ever come to terms with is death!" replied Djuli. "I'm going to pay them back anyway—I'll kill Varbilma, her brother, both of them if possible, but for now I'm just waiting for a good opportunity..."

"You're out of your mind!" said the slave woman leaving. She didn't really take her seriously enough to bother informing Varbilma of her threatening words. Which was quite fortunate for Djuli. She could have been killed as a result, or at the very least gotten a hearty whipping.

Fairly soon after Djuli was sent to Varbilma's brother, Madun, and his friends, Varbilma herself went on a journey to a city that happened to be Sizon. This was a city of Atlantua, but at that time there was peace between Atlantua and Torgo. Several of the slaves went with her and Djuli was among them. Varbilma wanted to buy some sheep. They already had many sheep, seventy altogether, but she had decided to buy some more, because she had heard that somebody from afar had brought a special type of sheep to Sizon that possessed particularly delicate strands of wool. She thought it would be good business to breed them. She took the male slaves along to shepherd the sheep home, and Djuli to serve her during the trip.

They arrived in Sizon, and although the sheep were expensive, she managed to buy some. Not many—just five of the newly-bred animals. Nobody except the sharp-eyed Djuli noticed how carefully one of the animals was lifting its leg. In an unguarded moment she even managed to examine it, and could see that the problem was definitely not coming from the barb in his leg. She smiled contentedly, but did not say anything. Not a word, however she knew that great peril was in store for Varbilma. This sheep was sick. Djuli knew of this disease, even if she could not cure it, because she had seen it sometimes attack wild animals, making them easy prey for hunters and other predators. In these cases the hunters just killed the animals. They did not eat them, to avoid the possibility of catching the disease. Although quite rare, it did occasionally spread to humans. Touching the animal wasn't that dangerous, but eating it was not advisable. In Djuli's tribe the hunters usually just shot down these animals with arrows, and left them lying there so that the disease wouldn't infect other wild animals. According to Djuli's knowledge only hyenas, the scavengers, were truly immune to this disease.

And so Djuli said nothing. She remained silent because she wasn't sure they would believe her, but mostly because she dearly hoped she was right and that it would cause enormous trouble for Varbilma. On her way home, whenever she thought about the kind of humiliation she had to endure

from Varbilma's brother and how heartlessly Varbilma had rejected her request, it was enough to just look at the sadly limping sheep at the back to feel she had already received some recompense. See, her masters were wrong to value her at three gold pebbles! She was worth more, in fact a lot more! For she knew things her masters did not. She could have saved them a significant amount, and she would have if Varbilma had at least sent her out to work in the fields. But she had not. Fine, but now she would take her revenge. Oh, how easy this was going to be! She only had to keep her mouth shut.

And that she did. The sick sheep arrived home, and before long they were all dying in big piles on Numo and Varbilma's estate. Soon there wasn't a single sheep left alive. In fact the epidemic attacked the neighboring estate's herd too, and the owner requested compensation, which he never got, however he remained an enemy forever. Nobody dared to eat the meat of these sheep, and they were afraid to give it to the slaves as well in case they happened to die. They didn't even dare to use their wool, so the whole herd went to waste and were all burned. Varbilma was beaten by her husband, as he was furious with her for being so stupid as to buy a sick animal. As if this wasn't enough the master bought twenty new sheep the following year, but it was in vain as they also caught the disease. Djuli just grinned to herself. She knew that in such a case healthy ungulates should not be allowed in an area where sick ones have been grazing, and also that they should not be kept in a pen where any sick animals have lived previously. It was not recommended to do so for a period of twenty years. She could have told her masters this, and would have if they had treated her nicely. Why couldn't they? They wouldn't even have to let her free. Her tribe no longer existed, and she had to live somewhere. All they had to do was be nice to her so that she could consider the estate to be a little like her own. They could at least have done so much as to allow her to do the heavier work, particularly when anybody, truly anybody would have been happy to take her place in the house. But Varbilma had not allowed it. Alright, if she was going to treat her like three stupid pebbles, then Djuli would behave as though she knew as much as the pebbles! She would not tell them that she knew the attributes of this disease.

It was obvious that Djuli's "silent revenge" was thoroughly shaking Varbilma and Numo's financial position. They even had to sell some slaves, although Djuli was not among them. All the domestic slaves had been sold except for her. To assist with the smooth running of the house Varbilma bought an eight year-old girl named Tin, since a child was cheaper. She entrusted her into Djuli's care in order to teach her the easier household chores. Djuli strove to fulfill her task, which was not that difficult as Tin had been a slave from birth. She had not known any other life so she did not rebel, and moreover she was an obedient and hard-working girl. Even cheerful. Djuli quite liked her, as much as if she were her own daughter.

Not even half a year had passed when Varbilma's brother came to them again, and this time he not only had a taste for Djuli but for Tin as well. Varbilma brought Djuli the news. She walked into the chamber where both Djuli and Tin resided and ordered them to go to Madun, because the young man wanted to see them. Djuli knew of course that this wasn't just about 'seeing' them. She was already somewhat resigned to her fate, particularly when she thought about the situation with the sheep, and she hoped she would have similar opportunities for revenge. So she caressed Tin's head, telling her to stay there and that she would be back in the morning. However Varbilma stepped forward, saying, "No, Tin is not staying! Didn't you hear that my brother wants to see her too?!"

"She's still a child!" protested Djuli, her face pale.

"But just a slave. And Madun wants her precisely because she's a child. He made a bet with his buddies, and they don't believe he can push it into an eight year-old, so now he wants to prove it!"

Djuli just looked into Varbilma's face for a moment and said, "How would you feel if they wanted to push it into your own daughter?" Because Varbilma and Numo had a six year-old girl themselves. Their only child, and although they had wanted more children, "it didn't work out", as it's usually said. But they loved her more than anything.

Varbilma's face went pale. "You impudent, arrogant slave!" she shouted. Then she shouted again—not at Djuli but the slave supervisor. He caught Djuli and gave her a thorough beating, while Madun and his buddies came to take Tin...

This time Djuli dodged being raped, as she was beaten up instead. Tin was not so lucky. The whole drunken gang dealt with her until morning. But now the crime carried its own punishment, and not just in one form. Tin was still young at the time, a virgin too, and wasn't accustomed to this kind of boorishness, so she had managed to escape all sorts of terrible things thus far. In the morning it turned out that she had only initially protested with the men, of course to no avail, but after the first few men she was no longer even crying and just obediently let them to do whatever they wanted with her. She didn't say a word and was not responsive to anything.

Afterwards she refused to speak. They could not get her to work, and she only ate if they spoon-fed her. She had become insane. This caused yet another problem for Varbilma, since an insane slave was not useful for anything. She had to buy another slave to replace her. At first she planned to kill Tin, but then decided otherwise, believing that her mind would probably go back to normal eventually. She let her squat in Djuli's room, allowing Djuli to feed her.

The flame of revenge burned even brighter in Djuli. She really loved Tin. It occurred to her what a pity it was that the sheep troubles had not occurred recently. If only she could smuggle some morsels of sick sheep meat into Varbilma's food... But that was long ago, and it had all been burned since then. She didn't have such luck now.

Yet she was fortunate in another way. It so happened that one day Numo and Varbilma's daughter was playing in front of the manor house, and Djuli could see from the window that a fox was ambling about there in broad daylight. Djuli quickly ran inside. She had just been dusting. If she did not shout at the fox, the fox might bite the master's daughter to death. She kept an eye on it and was soon convinced that it was unlikely the fox would bite the little girl, as it was so tame. But this made Djuli suspicious. Foxes usually avoided the company of people. She knew this well, being the daughter of hunting folk. The fox had come here in broad daylight and was playing with the child. Although the corner of its mouth seemed a little saggy...

Djuli knew right away that this was a rabid fox. Rabies was a frightening disease and could also attack humans. Not just if the rabid animal bit the human either; animal saliva could also spread the disease, and stroking it could be dangerous too. It was better not to pet animals who were suspiciously tame... Djuli almost rushed over to drag the little girl away from the fox, but then she thought about Tin squatting there in her chamber, who had become that way because of Varbilma, and instead she did not do anything, just hastily ran into one of the back rooms to continue the dusting.

Two months later Numo and Varbilma's only child died of rabies. Their sorrow was unspeakable. Especially that of Varbilma, because as if the loss wasn't enough Numo began to yell at his wife, his voice getting louder and louder. He blamed her for having given birth to only one child during all this time, and how much less they would be suffering if there were still one or two siblings alive. Surely that was Varbilma's fault...

Djuli marched off to her chamber and caressed Tin's head, smiling contentedly in the dark. Perhaps this revenge was unjust because Varbilma's daughter had nothing to do with any of it. But as her shaman mother had explained to her—this was simply the Law of the World. Those who do

wrong will have the consequences of their actions come back to them, and if not to them then to their close friends or relatives. According to higher principles this was right and just, and as a result bad people would leave fewer offspring than good people, creating over a long period of time a reduction in the number of bad people living in the world. Because the offspring of bad people are more than likely to be worse than the offspring of good people. See, the Law of the World really *was* just; perhaps not in each individual case, but on a mass scale. Varbilma ruined Tin, and now she didn't have a successor. This was a just punishment, although not because she ruined a child and therefore had to pay for it with her own daughter—it wasn't that simple. But the idea that she committed a great evil act, and in doing so transgressed the moral Law of the World, causing her number of offspring to be less than it otherwise would have been. In fact presently it seemed the number of Varbilma's offspring was zero!

It was true that this vengeance afflicted Mr. Numo too, but Numo, being Varbilma's husband, really was someone close to her. If someone assumed to be "close" to another person, then it meant sharing their fate. And they would obviously think alike. Yes, it was just that he bear the punishment too, or at least part of it. Nevertheless, Djuli did feel a little remorse, yet she was striving to overcome it. Would it have been better if Varbilma's daughter had grown up to be another Varbilma? Surely that's what would have happened, as her mother would have raised her to become like her!

Now that Djuli was thinking in line with the principles she had learned from her shaman mother, it certainly didn't mean that she believed anything else Muchi had told her. As far as she was concerned her shaman mother was an ignorant and helpless dreamer. All the narcotic concoctions had disturbed her mind and she was seeing things that did not exist. The world was simply a place of atrocities and cruelty, nothing else. Djuli thought the smartest thing to do was to try to escape from that cruelty and fight back whenever she could.

This was Djuli's state of mind when early one morning, shortly after her thirty-third birthday, they chased her out to look for fish, mussels and some salt on the seashore. Djuli obediently swung her knapsack over her shoulder and headed down the kilometer-long road leading to the shore. Meanwhile she hummed a little song her mother had made up. Djuli had already forgotten most of the verses by now, but she remembered the first one and the melody. It went like this:

I am tramping about the wild twilight countryside alone
No one to show me the way, through the great darkness I am blown
Falling Sky Spark, be my guest and my Guiding Star above
Without a doubt my life is yours, forever, you are my Love!

She was not bothered in the slightest that it wasn't actually twilight, but a bright cloudless morning. Of course her mother meant the 'twilight countryside' in a figurative sense—she believed humans lived in the Twilight World.

Djuli was in a relatively good mood. She was especially pleased that she had managed to avenge Tin's fate, however her joy was far from cloudless. To be honest, she would have preferred it if Tin was healed. In fact, if she had never gone crazy to begin with. At the same time, although she realized that from the greater perspective of the entire World Varbilma's punishment of losing her daughter was just, she was tormented by uncomfortable feelings when she thought about her own role. Somehow she felt she had crossed a line that she should not have crossed. After all, her mother had said that these long-term punishments, the mass-scale jurisdiction, was the task of the World itself, and the task of people was to pay attention to the small-scale justice. It was undeniable that in examining the events on a small scale, what happened was unjust, since Varbilma's daughter wasn't

the cause of Djuli's misery, and neither that of Tin. Now Djuli was afraid that she had intervened in something she should not have. After all, who was she to dare act in place of the World?! If the World had wanted the girl to die of rabies it could have arranged that itself, and Djuli would not have seen anything. Of course she had nothing to lose. She was a slave, and couldn't fall any deeper than that. She could die, but that wouldn't really be such a bad thing. Yet she was still tormented by the thought of not helping the girl and not dragging her away from the fox. Alongside these bad feelings, however, was a great sense of gloating when she thought about Varbilma's sorrow. She could not decide which feeling was stronger in her, and wondered how she would react if Varbilma had a new child and *she* started playing with a rabid animal. Well, she was still unsure whether she would drag the child away or leave it to its doom.

Djuli was whistling and humming, trying to surrender herself to the unclouded feeling of joy, when finally she reached the seashore. Directly in front of her, where the trail appeared from the cover of trees on the waterfront, she discovered a motionless human body. It was probably some unfortunate sailor who had drowned, being washed up on the shore by the high tide, and when the water receded the body had sunk into the sand. They were likely to be in poor condition, if alive at all, because there was no trail showing that they had at least tried to crawl up onto the bank. If the body remained here and the high tide returned, it might carry it back out to the ocean.

Djuli's first instinctive reaction was to run to the corpse, and if it turned out that there was still some sign of life, she could help them. Then she stopped. Was it the right thing to help them? There were two possibilities—they were either a slave or they weren't. If they were, it probably wasn't a good idea to bring them to their senses, since why would a slave want to live? Their life was full of suffering. But if this wasn't a slave then it must be a slave owner, in which case they should definitely not be allowed to live! She was again racked by contradictory feelings. Finally she decided that she would at least go and take a look out of curiosity. It was highly likely that they were dead already, and if so then all her problems were solved at once because she wouldn't have to decide whether or not to help her, and the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty would end.

The unknown person lay on her stomach, but based on her physique Djuli was certain she was a woman. This increased her sympathy and willingness to help, because although Varbilma, who had wronged her and Tin was a woman, during Djuli's life as a slave it was generally the men she hated more than the women. Most of the people who had done bad things to her were men. In fact Varbilma probably wouldn't have wronged her, nor Tin, if she had not had a brother, Madun! However she still couldn't decide whether or not to help this unknown woman, that is if she was still alive. But she did want to know either way, and was curious about what kind of person she might be. She squatted down and rolled the woman over onto her back, then cried out in shock. She had never seen such a peculiar type of person before, and was fascinated by her great big, odd-looking slanted eyes. For the one laying there was none other than Tila.

It took a few seconds to recover from her surprise. Then she leaned down towards Tila, and pressed her ear to her chest to listen for a heartbeat. It was beating. She could definitely hear strong beats. So the woman was alive! Djuli sighed and turned the woman over again, pulling her into a kneeling position in order to remove the water by squeezing her chest. She was not entirely sure it was worth doing good for this person, who was likely to be shipwrecked, but she knew that if she didn't she would be tormented by insecurity as she had been with Varbilma's daughter, and what she didn't want were those bad feelings. It was entirely possible that with time this woman would recover by herself anyway. So it was best to help her and she would probably be grateful. The woman could not give her anything now, since she didn't even have any clothing. But the ship she came on may not have been destroyed. Perhaps a big wave had knocked her off the deck and her

companions were out looking for her. And if they found her then it was not inconceivable that the woman's gratitude might extend to taking Djuli with her. If she was rich enough she could even buy her. Or help her to escape. Although when Djuli thought about these things she grimaced bitterly. This was all just childish daydreaming. The world didn't work that way. The world wasn't good, in fact barely a trace of gratitude existed in it. Anyway, why would this woman be rich when she had been washed up stark naked on the shore?! In principle of course it wasn't impossible that after getting into the water she had rid herself of her clothes in order to swim more easily, but somehow Djuli thought it was more likely she had been naked upon entering the sea, and if she was then she could not be rich, in fact she was probably a slave herself too!

As she was squeezing Tila's chest, she occasionally had to take a break because it was a tiring task, even if she was much stronger than Tila. After all, slave work had put some muscle on her. During these breaks she put Tila down for while on the sand so she wouldn't have to hold her, Tila's hands and legs splaying awkwardly like the limbs of a puppet. Finally after the umpteenth push Tila began coughing and her limbs started to writhe. Her palm opened, scattering some glittering crystals into the sand, before falling back into unconsciousness. Djuli stared at the crystals as if she had received an electric shock. Although she had never seen gems before, she knew very well what they were, as the slaves talked a lot about how good it would be to be rich so they could buy their freedom, and then *they* could be masters too... and the simplest way to achieve that was to find some valuable, precious gems. There was little chance of that happening, but at the same time it was possible for a slave, because Luck, the faithful servant of the Goddess of Fortune, was an authority who did not notice whether her favored was a king or a slave!

Djuli's hand hesitantly reached out sideways toward a big, fist-sized stone. If she hit this woman on the head, if she killed her, then all the diamonds could be hers! Because if these pebbles were not the wondrous and valuable colorless diamonds, then she didn't know what else they could possibly be. One of these diamonds could buy not just her freedom but the whole of master Numo and Varbilma's estate. Perhaps even several entire villages!

She almost picked up the stone when she looked at the woman. Her eyes were still closed. Presumably she hadn't noticed that the pebbles had fallen out of her hand, and if she came to, she would think that she had thrown her treasures into the sea. It was unnecessary to kill her. So Djuli quickly gathered the diamonds and sunk them into the deepest pocket of her clothing, meanwhile intently watching the woman's face. She was determined that if the woman opened her eyes and saw her picking up the diamonds she would beat her to death. But Tila had not opened her eyes. Djuli thoroughly scoured the area to see if there were any more diamonds around, but she didn't find any. She returned to the shipwrecked woman and continued reviving her.

After a while Tila actually did open her eyes. Opening one's eyes could be seen as a fairly trivial act that wouldn't mystify anyone. Yet when Tila did this, Djuli was utterly astonished. Tila was lying in such a way that the yellow disk of the Sun hung directly opposite her above the horizon, and being summer it truly radiated with cruel force. She had opened her eyes and looked straight into the Sun! The normal human reaction was to close our eyes immediately and even turn our heads away. But Tila didn't have the slightest intention of doing that. Her pupils narrowed but she continued studying it, looking with great curiosity into the Sun's disc. Djuli looked at her with the same curiosity. What kind of creature could this be, who was able to look into the blazing summer sun without blinking?!

"What's your name?" she asked hopefully, in case she might know the Torg language. This was not an implausible assumption, since she *was* sailing toward this place.

The girl looked at her and spoke some strange incomprehensible words that Djuli could not understand, but then she found most voices strange. She could see that her shipwrecked woman did not know the language of Torgo. Therefore she had to ask her things in a simpler way. Perhaps it would be best if she told the woman her own name first. It didn't get any simpler than that! She pointed to herself and said, "Djuli". After that she pointed to Tila with a questioning expression...

Now, it was clear to Tila from the first moment that Djuli was not an elf, to put it mildly. This could easily be deduced from her eyes and different facial features. She thought this girl might be one of the degenerated elves; that she herself could see Tila was not one of her own, and now she was wondering where she was from and what race she belonged to. She assumed that Djuli was telling her the name of her own race, indicating she was a member of the 'Djuli' people, and now she wanted to know the name of Tila's race. Tila pointed at herself and said, "Ilv". She said this word very strangely, the 'i' sound being deeper than Djuli was used to, and the 'v' sound somewhere between an 'f' and a 'v'.

"Elf!" repeated Djuli as best she could, due to the different sounds. Tila recognized the word and nodded happily that yes, she was from the elf race. She did not know that Djuli thought her actual name was Elf. Djuli didn't find this name unusual. Elves had not appeared in the mythology of her former tribe, nor in Torgo or Atlantua, so the word meant nothing to her.

However now she had to decide what to do. Should she leave the unknown woman alone, or take her with her to her masters? The phrase "take her with her" being just a figurative expression of course. She would never be able to lift the woman onto her shoulders, not to mention carry her a distance of a good kilometer! Although she suspected this to be unnecessary because the woman was capable of walking, or at least she would be after a little rest. But what should she do? As far as she could see she didn't have much choice. As she was, naked and without food and weapons, Elf would soon perish. She hadn't saved her just so that she could die in a different way. No matter what happened to her at Numo's, she must take her there! She stood up and waved at her. But Elf did not move, and instead pointed at the Sun. Djuli didn't understand, though Tila was trying to indicate that she wanted to be left there a little longer because the Sun was making her feel magnificent.

Elfland rarely ventured inside galaxies, where the stars were close by, because sprites tended to wander about in those areas. So it orbited around the galaxies from a distance, where individual stars looked like tiny sparks. This was not a problem as the crystal trees were able to collect the diluted energy streams flowing from the sparks, and they were stored in the crystals. But Tila had never seen a star this close up before, as she was seeing the Sun now.

When she had fallen through the Gate and emerged into normal space near Earth, the coldness of the universe had not harmed her. Generally speaking, an elf couldn't be killed by heat or cold. They could actually bathe in the lava lake of a volcano, and the only reason they didn't do this was because if they sank they would suffocate. The glowing rock could also damage the soles of their feet. And since the surface of the Sun was only about six thousand degrees, they could feasibly play about there. However they didn't do this, and not because of the temperature but due to the lack of air, which they of course needed. All these outstanding abilities were thanks to the fact that even when they turned off their clothing, their bodies were protected by a covering—a microscopic force-field that had a thickness of around 1/1000 millimeter. This protected them from hypothermia as well as extreme heat. But not from physical damage. So an elf could be killed with a knife or an arrow, however not usually by heat, at least in Earth's conditions. It took a few million degrees to destroy their force field and then the elf would be roasted. In the case of a weaker elf, or if the elf was a child, then half a million degrees was enough for this to occur. Anything less could do little to harm them.

So Tila had emerged from the Gate close to Earth, in fact almost into the atmosphere, and was immediately seized by Mother Earth's invisible hand, gravity, and began hurtling downwards. This did not harm her either, although at first it was terribly cold—less than minus two hundred degrees. Then as she continued descending like a meteor, the ionized gas atoms began to glow around her and the temperature rose to more than a thousand degrees. However that hadn't hurt her either. The bigger problem was the air that she had to inhale. When she flew out of Elfland she was accompanied by a roughly egg-shaped volume of air that surrounded her. All this was falling with her, and at a speed of more than two thousand kilometers per hour, gradually increasing as she fell... She had enough air to last five minutes. She was well aware that she was plummeting, but was so dazed by the previous events that she hardly cared. Finally the realization infiltrated her mind that this would not end well, because even though the cold and heat couldn't hurt her, and the air might last until she reached this seemingly habitable planet, the fall would definitely kill her. Even if she fell into water, it would flatten her like a pancake! She tried to think of something, and finally gathered her strength in an attempt to fly the way she did in Elfland. This was somewhat successful, but she was falling with such terrible speed; Mother Earth was drawing her down with such brutal force, from such a great height, that she did not completely achieve her goal and crashed down into the sea. Although not at a speed of two thousand kilometers, but closer to sixty, because she had managed to significantly decrease her speed by this time. But it still stunned her, and together with being dazed from the events of the Gate Opening and the exertion of flying... she fainted. This could happen, even to an elf!

So Tila had fainted and must have almost drowned while unconscious. Now she was here on the shore and had regained consciousness, where Djuli was bending over her. She had opened her eyes just a few minutes ago and felt fully recovered, knowing that it was thanks to the Sun. This star hung above her head and churned the energy so violently that she was almost saturated with it. She was back to normal. Her head no longer hurt, she wasn't dazed and she felt wonderful, even better than she had ever felt in Elfland, without the help of crystals. Because if she ate a crystal in Elfland she felt even better than she did now, until its effect wore off. With her elf eyes she could see the Sun's energy rising up and spilling over onto the landscape around her. Everything sparkled and the whole region was green. She became part of the endless stream of energy, all her cells greedily sucking up the Sun's power. At that moment Tila, who was honest, could not deny that she was delighted to have fallen into this wonderful place. Now she was quite glad the accident had happened to her. Well, good deeds were eventually rewarded... She had saved Iki's life, and as a reward ended up here. It had all worked out rather well!

She would have liked to enjoy the Sun's rays some more, and did not want to go into the woods where Djuli was inviting her. But no matter what she said to Djuli, she didn't understand any of it. On the contrary, Djuli wanted to go back to her masters, so she leaned down toward Tila and took her hand, attempting to pull her from the ground. She did not succeed. Tila didn't want to get up, and had instead decided to learn Djuli's language. She recalled from her studies that the language of the degenerated elves—the humans—was also degenerated in many ways. But she knew that it could be figured out. It was true that she had never learned how to do this, nor had she practiced it, but she hoped that now thanks to the abundant energy along with a little skill, she would be able to achieve it. She grabbed Djuli's hand, pulled her down to the ground beside her and then raised her two palms, placing them over Djuli's right and left temples. After this she closed her eyes...

The next thing Djuli remembered was waking up a little woozy, and was astonished to realize she had awoken in her small bedroom with one of the older slaves called Trikma sitting beside her.

"What... what happened?" asked Djuli and tried to sit up, touching her head. As she turned she saw the strange rescued woman lying next to her, no longer naked but wearing some of Djuli's old clothes—some trousers and a long, sleeveless shirt. The weather was warm for the moment so that was sufficient.

"I must tell you what happened!" said Trikma. "It was almost evening and you still hadn't come back. The mistress thought that you'd run away and she sent some male slaves and the slave supervisor after you. They found you with this woman on the shore!" she exclaimed, pointing at Tila. "It seems that you may have sunstroke, but nobody knows who *that* is! She's a very strange woman, perhaps not even human... *I* certainly don't think she's human anyway, probably an evil demon or something, and I'm not keen on being here with her but the mistress ordered me to!"

"I have no idea who this is, Trikma! I think she was shipwrecked. I tried to revive her and I succeeded. She said her name was Elf, and after... after that I think I fainted. And... and I've had some very strange dreams! I saw some kind of crystal city in the sky... everything was full of light... and I was flying too..."

"You have such beautiful dreams, I envy you," sighed Trikma. "I wish I had such nice dreams, especially after sunstroke. But all my dreams are about terrifying things!"

Tila began to move, then opened her huge eyes and sat up. Trikma cautiously drew back. Tila smiled and introduced herself. "My name is Tila."

"I thought your name was Elf!" said Djuli surprised.

"No, of course not! I am an Elf, that's true, but the word *elf*—that's... that's my tribe, the name of my people. Isn't that what you call it?"

"What?"

"My people. I may not say everything correctly straight away. I apologize in advance if I am mistaken about something. I thought I could learn your language quickly since it is a degenerate language and had to be simpler than ours, which is whole and complex, but I found just the opposite to be true. When I began downloading the information I encountered a bewildering plethora of codes!"

"What do you mean by 'information', and what's a 'code'?"

"I'm sorry. If I can't find the right word for something in your language I involuntarily use the elf equivalent. This could be the problem. To be fair, I barely know any magic, I am still very young—basically a child—and the central nervous system is not child's play! The download took a long time, didn't it?"

"Download? Does that mean that I fainted because of what you did?"

"Please don't be angry with me! I didn't mean for that to happen. But I was suddenly flooded with such a large mass of information that I could not control the peripheral systems, and I'm glad I was able to direct the life support systems of our bodies. I was forced to temporarily turn off consciousness, at least in your case."

"I don't understand what you're talking about!"

"Oh, it's so difficult to explain in such degenerate language... but basically what I'm saying is that I expected just one language, however it turned out that you had two languages in your mind!"

"You learned the Torg language in a single day?!" Djuli was amazed.

"Not only that, but also the language you call 'Zunzan'. Both of them. That was the problem, that two languages came upon me at once. It was like having to concentrate on two things at the same time, and barely being able to separate them from each other. And they are both very difficult languages in their own right—complicated, full of exceptions, illogical... There are no such things in the language of Elfland!"

"Was this... some kind of magic?" asked Djuli anxiously.

"Of course," smiled Tila.

"Are you a wizard?" asked Trikma cautiously.

"No, I am an elf!"

"What's an elf?"

"An elf is simply an elf! Someone like me!"

"That doesn't explain anything!"

"I know, but I can only say that we live up there among the stars, in a city called Elfland. Everything there is beautiful and perfect. There are speaking grapes and bell peaches and golden apples and many other beautiful things, which I presume you don't have here. But due to an unfortunate accident I fell out of that city and dropped down here near you," explained Tila, trying to confine herself to the most important elements, as she suspected they would not understand the details if she began talking to these primitives about sprites and Gate Openings.

"I... I think I've seen this magic city in my dreams!" said Djuli excitedly.

"It's possible, because when we download a language, it can happen that some fragments of information seep through to the opposite side, and to you that could seem like a dream!"

"You've fallen down from the sky?! From among the stars?!" marveled Trikma, gaping at her.

"Exactly!" nodded Tila.

"I have to go and tell my masters this right now!" Trikma sprung up and rushed away.

She had barely stepped out of the room when Djuli cautiously reached into her pocket to see if the diamonds had been taken from her while she was unconscious. But that had not happened. All of them were still there. As she pondered whether to believe what Tila had said and what to ask of her, Varbilma and Numo came in.

"I heard that an angel has allegedly fallen down to us!" said Varbilma sarcastically upon entering. Then she immediately snapped at Djuli. "Stand up when I'm talking to you! You can't be so ill that you're unable to bow!"

Djuli obeyed immediately. She had only forgotten to do that because she was watching Tila.

"Stand up and let me look at you!" said Varbilma to Tila. Tila stood up.

"Are you really an angel?" asked Numo.

"What is an 'angel'?" asked Tila.

"Well... it's a thing... a celestial being that flies about here and there..."

"I am not an angel but an elf. And I really have come from above!"

"From the sky?"

"You could say that. There is a city called Elfland—from there."

"So from the sky. And you consider yourself an angel. But you don't even have wings! You can't fly!"

"Not now, but when I lived in Elfland I could. And I am not an angel, I'm an elf."

"Don't argue, anyone who comes from the sky is an angel! That is, if you really do come from there. But I don't believe that!" Varbilma poked her index finger at Tila's chest.

"Why not?"

"Because angels don't faint! You just looked like somebody who had almost drowned!"

"Yes, that did almost happen to me because when I fell, I fell into the ocean."

"You see!"

"See what?"

"That you're not an angel. They don't have accidents! They'd do some kind of magic to keep them from drowning. You were unconscious for an entire day!"

"No, I was not unconscious, I was studying the Torg language!"

"Ah, you compulsive liar! I'll tell you what I think happened... You were traveling on a ship from some barbarian country where you were a slave, and that's why you were naked. Some kind of storm sank the ship or a large whale and you washed up on the shore. Now you think I'm such a fool as to believe you're an angel... Huh, I don't believe it for a second! You can't fool me just because you have such strange eyes. And I'm not falling on my face, when you speak our language so well for a barbarian!"

"Sorry, why should you fall on your face?" asked Tila puzzled.

"Don't be cheeky!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know what it means to be 'cheeky'... How could I possibly not have cheeks?!"

"Hey, are you an idiot?!" Varbilma said in astonishment.

"No, I'm an elf!" answered Tila willingly.

"How come you don't know what it means to 'cheeky' then?"

"Because although I downloaded both languages from Djuli in their entirety, there are many words to which I can't associate any specific objective meaning or personal emotional experience. Please explain to me what 'cheeky' means, and why you have threatened to fall on your face because I speak your language well. I don't want you to fall on your face, so I'll speak another language instead then, okay?!"

"What arrogance!" Varbilma was appalled.

"Sorry, but what is 'arrogance'?"

"Being cheeky!" snapped Varbilma. "Oh it doesn't matter! I hope you know that if you were a slave in your barbarian country..."

"I'm sorry, but what is 'barbarian'?"

"It's what *you* are!"

"So, an elf?"

"You're out of your mind!"

Now Tila looked at her in utter confusion. "I'm sorry, but how can I be outside of my mind? My mind is who I am!"

"Silence! As a slave you are only allowed to speak if I say so!"

"I'm sorry, does this mean that from now on my name will be 'Slave' instead of 'Tila' during my stay here? Or does 'slave' mean 'elf' in the Torg language?"

"Neither! Slave means slave and that's it! You must do what I or my husband command, because if you don't you'll get what's coming to you! I will not tolerate lying, is that clear?!"

"Of course, we elves do not lie!"

"You're not an elf, you're a slave!"

"I still don't know what a slave is, but even if I am a slave, I'm also an elf!"

"Now listen to me... I'm running out of patience! First of all, as a slave you can't speak to me like that!"

"If you wish I could use the Zunzan language instead. Or do you perhaps understand the language of elves?"

"Enough of this impertinence! You are to call me 'my lady'!"

"I don't understand! Am I to take that to mean that you're mine?"

"What are you talking about, you idiot?!"

"I'm sorry, what's an idiot?"

"It's what *you* are!"

"I am an elf."

"Enough of this! It's not me who is yours but you who are mine, because you're a slave!"

"So I am your lady?"

"For God's sake! I'm going to have you whipped if you continue to play stupid! Understand that you cannot talk to me in such a direct tone. When you speak you must say 'my lady' or 'madam'!"

"I'm sorry, but what is 'madam' and what is this 'whipping' you talk about?"

Varbilma took a deep breath, her face becoming so red that they feared she may have a stroke.

"Listen to me Djuli! I don't want to beat her to death, but if she continues like this I swear I will! I'd prefer not to kill her because I really need slaves. I'll leave her to you, and you can teach her what it means to be a slave. And try to persuade her not to play the fool, because if she does, in the morning I'll strip the skin off her back! It won't be good for you either if she remains this way, because this thing, this 'elf' or whatever you call her, is *your* responsibility. Do you understand?!"

"Yes, madam!" Djuli bowed.

"Good!" Varbilma turned around angrily and went out. Mr. Numo followed her. Djuli heard the master saying to his wife, "My dear, is it possible that she isn't being cheeky, but is simply stupid?"

"It doesn't matter either way, she'll make a good slave. Then she can at least be useful!" Numo uttered something in reply, which couldn't be heard by Djuli.

Chapter 6: Getsnappy Awakens

Councilor Kessel, member of the dignified Council of Pakunda, did not know why the judge was convening the council at such an unusual time. It was customary for the council to meet once a week on Tuesdays. This was a wise habit, as it meant they could discuss the cases of the previous week calmly and soberly, with a clear head. Over the weekend everybody could think about their own concerns, and they had a chance to calm their emotions if they had heard any outrageous news. The remaining clouds of intoxication from their weekend celebrations were clearing, and by the end of Monday they were sober again.

Now, however, the council had scheduled an emergency meeting on Thursday. Ever since Kessel had been a councilor, a good ten years, nothing like this had ever happened. There had been instances where nobody was allowed to leave the town hall, as when they had to work on the census. This had occurred relatively recently, but it was work as opposed to a meeting. Kessel, who preferred the events of his life to move with clockwork precision, was not happy at all. There was a slim chance that this complication would be the harbinger of a pleasant event, however it was more likely to be a serious inconvenience. So as soon as Kessel received the news he rushed to the town hall with an expression of great concern on his face.

The town hall was a great big building, in fact a palace. Around fifty years earlier it had been owned by the lord who had also owned Pakunda and the surrounding land. But then various chaotic events had occurred that none of the current councilors remembered, only knowing about them from hearsay and chronicles, and at the end of the turbulent era the lord died and Pakunda received a broad right municipality. To use the expression of Atlantua at the time, it became a "free city". In fact, not just a free city—all the surrounding villages belonged to its provisional jurisdiction too. This suited the city rather well, and they did not cry about the old days. Since then Pakunda only

owed obedience to the Emperor, more specifically to the officials appointed by the Emperor. At present the person who dealt with the affairs of the free cities was called the Chancellor of the Free Cities. But Pakunda was not terribly interested in him as he was practically nonexistent to them. They had never even seen him, living so far away in the capital. Pakunda was basically not required to do anything except pay taxes to the Emperor—a not small yet manageable amount—and sometimes fulfill the odd imperial whim, as they had done recently for example with the census. Therefore the leaders and citizens of Pakunda had been in good spirits and the former lord's palace was made into a town hall. Why not? It was a beautiful majestic building, large enough and comfortable too. Why have the citizens make another one? Surely they wouldn't appreciate the cost or work involved!

Kessel was the last among those to arrive, the eleventh. They found it important for the city council to always have an odd number of members, because if possible they needed to have majority votes to decide on the disputed issues. So there were ten council members as well as the judge himself, who was called Moko. But Moko generally controlled proper conduct of the meetings, and he only voted if the voting was a tie, therefore 5-5, or other variants like 2-2-2-2, 4-4-2, or 3-3-3-1. On these occasions he voted, according to the law, on whichever of the proposals had the highest proportion of votes. All of this was of course just a nice theory. In practice there were often small quarrels and fierce debates before a decision was made, although they tried to prevent these from getting out to the public, as they were not intended for the ears of the general populace.

Because they had ordered an emergency meeting, Kessel guessed that it would not be a smooth, friendly little chat, and he was prepared for the worst, including some vulgar fights.

"You're finally here!" greeted Judge Moko. "Sit down and I shall present to you the... the problem..." That was in itself unusual. The judge, as chairman of the council, did not usually report "problems" but points of agenda. However Kessel, being a wise man, did not say anything. Why increase the tension without purpose and reason? But he was curious and so sat down at his usual place, opposite the judge at the head of the table. Judge Moko always sat at the head of the table, and at the foot sat the second most respected council member, who had a good chance of being a judge himself at the judge selection, or if a change occurred due to demission or death. There was no rule that he would necessarily become the new judge, but it rarely happened otherwise.

On one side of the long table sat five council members, and facing them on the other side were four. According to the custom the four were called the "fewer" and the five were called the "greater". The "fewer" were the oldest council members, and they sat there because it provided them with more space, and theoretically it was more comfortable. Voting was not done anonymously in the council, and these "fewer" members were always the first to vote. Conversely, when the judge asked for a formal opinion from the councilors, those from the majority side—the younger council members—were required to state their opinion first. This benefited the "fewer" members as they had more time to think, and because they were aware of the others' opinions in advance it enabled them to criticize those speaking before them. Kessel, as the occupant of the foot of the table, belonged of course theoretically to the "fewer" group, yet had an even more respected position.

Everybody was generally required to stand when they spoke, except for the judge. The judge did not stand now either, but reached out toward the heavy bundle of paper that lay in front of him, and said, "A law package has come from the Majestic Emperor. I'm not going to read it all, just quickly inform you of the gist. Of course every one of you will soon receive a copy, as our Majestic Emperor has wisely sent two copies and I've already given one of them to the clerks to transcribe."

"But," he continued, taking a deep breath, "time is pressing as there are a great many strange provisions in these laws and we must discuss all of them, chiefly because many of them won't please the citizens of our city. Although there are some that will likely be welcomed... Now there's no need to vote on anything, at least I'm fairly sure of that. The current session is purely a sort of exploratory meeting, however once we're done with these we also have to find some solutions to a few minor problems..." said the judge, starting to fiddle nervously with the corners of the pages. The judge's nervousness did not escape Kessel's attention.

"Our Majestic Emperor," continued the judge, "first specifies a maximum number of council members that are permitted in the various free cities. Many cities are going to have to part with some of their councilors." The council members were taken aback, and stared at the judge in horror. None of them wished to part from their position.

"Fortunately this does not apply to us," said the judge quickly. "The Emperor has found that considering the size of Pakunda and the surrounding towns, the eleven of us are not intolerably many considering the amount of work." Everybody took a deep breath. "On the contrary," the judge continued "this provision means that although the Majestic Emperor does not want to intervene in the future with how the free cities elect their Council, from now on the Emperor will require a little more tax than previously—a five percent increase." Well, that was still manageable.

"But the citizens won't even feel it, because from now on they no longer have to pay our salary. Our Emperor will instead pay us from this five percent extra tax. So the citizens will still be electing us, although our wages will come from a different source."

"But that means we'll essentially become not the city's officials but the Emperor's!" exclaimed Kessel in astonishment.

"Yes, yes, exactly!" nodded the judge. "But what else can we do? We must do as the Emperor wishes. Emperor Zor is not some kind of weak emperor whom we could oppose. Think about it—he even had his mother executed! We couldn't even do anything against a weak emperor. We're not a bunch of tyrannical, wealthy lords with a great army! And the Emperor didn't mention anything about cutting our pay. You could just say that what we now call a salary will be called a tax that instantly returns to our pockets!"

"It's not just a difference in how we label it, though!" Councilor Grenaxyon protested. "Because it's all well and good now while we don't have any disadvantages, but if we accept this then we are approving that sometime later, at the Emperor's whim, he may reduce our salary or curtail it at his own discretion!"

"Perhaps you have an idea of how we could confront the Emperor about that? Would you dare to deny his command?" asked the judge.

"Well I didn't say that..." Grenaxyon quickly backed down.

"Perhaps we could express our respectful disagreement to the Emperor," suggested Councilor Etingengey.

"Brilliant! A wise opinion, and I trust that you will personally take this disapproval to the Emperor!" said the judge at once.

"No, no, that's not an option—my wife is sick and I can't leave Pakunda just now..."

"Then enough of this! We mustn't argue with Zor, that would be a total catastrophe, and not just for ourselves but for the city as well! Don't you remember what he did to his own family?! When some brave men told him that he couldn't have his sister executed because according to ancient law it was forbidden to execute a virgin, he then ordered the executioner to dishonor his sister in public beforehand, and after that behead her! Then the Emperor couldn't be accused of violating the ancient traditions, since he had not beheaded a virgin woman. This kind of emperor should not be

disputed! Anyway, it's unnecessary. The majority of the nation will approve of many of his provisions. I don't mind if anybody wants to express his disagreement to me, but only if they are brave enough to personally take the letter of complaint to the Emperor. If they aren't willing to do that, then stop keeping us from taking action with such preposterous rowdiness!"

"But how can we talk about action if we're not doing anything at all?" Councilor Notlob objected.

"It's our job to do the best we can in the interests of the city, of course taking into consideration any contingencies and our own limitations. It is not our responsibility to drive the city's chariot into the abyss just because we wish to go that way, even if we see no road leading there! If further roads open up to us we must naturally choose the best one. But let's face it, we don't have enough strength to build our own path through a jungle that has been grown by forces more powerful than ourselves!"

This was a very beautiful speech. So much so that for a few moments everyone was silent. Then Kessel asked, "What are our specific tasks?"

"First of all," said the judge, "you need to know that what I said before, about us receiving our salary from the Emperor from now on, well, this also applies to a number of other people. The Emperor has called these people 'Servants of the Empire', or in simple terms, 'public officials'. They include not just us councilors, but others such as all the clerks who until now have been serving the town hall, our carriage drivers, bailiffs, executioners and their assistants, guards, the city's soldiers and officers, and many others. You'll receive the complete list soon. He hasn't docked the salaries of these people, although we must discard some of the soldiers, because he has fixed the number of officials depending on the number of people in each city. We have not exceeded the limit in other occupations, but apparently we have too many soldiers and His Majesty will not allow this. He knows exactly how many we have, since we wrote it all down for him during the census."

"I knew this census wasn't an ordinary thing and that it wouldn't end well!" sighed Notlob.

"It doesn't matter, this is the situation right now and we must deal with it!" the judge admonished him, and then went on to say, "I may have already mentioned that he has passed some new laws. It's for this very reason that I have called you here, honorable gentlemen. All we have to do is take note of the past laws, and I don't think those would be of great interest to our citizens. On the other hand, some of the new legislation... Just remember our Emperor's recent law about underage children not inheriting anything in the case of the father's death, but the wife instead. You know what an uproar that was!"

"The women liked it, they had no complaints..." remarked Kessel.

"Of course they didn't, but they're just women..." muttered Councilor Gandavi.

"Most of the laws are again related to women," said the judge. "Our Emperor has decreed that anyone selling her charm on the street, who is therefore a whore, must be executed. But not by stoning, as the ancient tradition requires, in fact the Emperor explicitly forbade this, saying that it is unnecessary to spread such ludicrous brutality. Instead the woman shall be beheaded without mercy, as forceful action has to be taken!"

"Finally the Emperor is doing something virtuous," sighed Grenaxyon contentedly.

"Just wait till I've finished," said the judge ominously. "Because this law, you see, only applies to street whores. The Emperor has ordained that anybody can freely establish a brothel, where the woman herself or those she takes on can sell their charms. There is just one condition, and that is before the very first day of operation she is to notify us, the Council, and we must issue a certificate declaring that the house is a legal brothel. In addition, we must issue her and every woman working there, who has the duty of satisfying the guest's desires, another certificate called a 'docket', which

proves that she is a registered 'pleasure girl'. Such women are no longer allowed to be called whores or any other contemptuous word, only 'pleasure girls', because according to him a whore is someone who does something like this at a street corner or in other dirty places. The term 'pleasure girl' was created by the Emperor himself for the express purpose of eliminating public disdain against these girls. He sees them as being ordinary, honorable workers. The pleasure girls must hand over their dockets to us so that we can keep their records up to date and collect taxes from them, which will be given to the Treasury every month. This tax, determined by the Emperor, is no small amount! Naturally we have been given the right to collect taxes from the pleasure girls and the brothels."

"Well, then the Emperor will be the world's biggest pimp!" remarked Kessel insightfully. This witty remark did not bring forth laughter however, as they were all listening in horror. The judge pretended he had not heard anything.

"Furthermore," he continued, "the Emperor has ordered that only free women are to work in the houses, not slaves. Any free woman, even if she's a wife, can work as a pleasure girl, but slave women cannot. Because she might kill the guest in some melancholic mood, and such an event would ruin the brothel's reputation, encouraging many men to find satisfaction from the street whores!"

"Ah, and they don't pay taxes, which would reduce the Emperor's income!" said Grenaxyon.

"Of course, I'm sure the Emperor's concerned about that," nodded the judge. "That's why he's ordered for such women to always carry their dockets with them and produce it upon request. Those who cannot comply must be executed at once for the crime of tax evasion. A madam will pay this price too if they employ a woman without a docket, or a woman who is a slave!"

"The level of immorality in the city will be monstrous! If any woman can freely become a whore if she wishes..." moaned Councilor Outintey.

"Not a whore, a pleasure girl!" corrected the judge quickly. "I think it would be highly advisable for us to become acquainted with this new word..." he sighed. "The Emperor has justified this by saying that there will actually be less immorality due to the cessation of scandalous street whoredom! He has written that men desire pleasure, and as long as there is a demand there are always going to be some who want to satisfy this demand, therefore there will be a supply as well. So it cannot be eliminated entirely, only squeezed into a verifiable framework. You know, he may be right about that, but there are many citizens who aren't going to like it!"

"Oh, I'm not so sure," wondered Kessel aloud. "Whores will be pleased, even if they now have to pay taxes, and those who regularly visit them will approve too. Others may be glad that these kinds of women will no longer be seen on the streets!"

"Furthermore," continued the judge, "I shall emphasize that the Emperor commands that the pleasure girls should not be punished with contempt. He says they are the same decent working people as blacksmiths, dyers, clerks or anyone else! The child of a pleasure girl is to be seen the same way as a legitimate child, like anybody else's child. If the pleasure girl has a husband then he is to be regarded as the father of the child. If not, then the child will be the same as any other fatherless or orphaned child. They are to be considered as if for example, their father had just died young in a war."

"I can see," said Notlob thoughtfully, "that the Emperor has decreed all these benefits for the so-called 'pleasure girls' so that there will be more of them, and this way he can increase his tax revenue!"

"I did not hear this!" said the judge severely. "We could be in deep trouble if the Emperor hears this kind of talk!"

"Well so far it's not too bad," surmised Etingengey. "Whores already existed before, and they will continue to exist, except now they'll just be called something different and locked away in a house... at least while they're 'working'. There are brothels in other cities, so this isn't anything new! Is there anything else?"

"Yes," said the judge. "Namely that the Emperor has brought a unified provision for the entire empire regarding adultery."

"And what is that?" asked Etingengey.

"From now on it is forbidden to stone an adulterous woman. Furthermore, it is forbidden to ban her from wearing jewelry and fur, in fact no punishment should be imposed on her at all. Her husband is not even permitted to beat her. However her crime won't go entirely unpunished... she must pay the appropriate financial penalty to the Emperor's treasury."

"And how much is this?" asked Kessel quickly, while the other councilors sat there in stunned silence.

"A fairly insignificant amount—just one silver coin."

"Compared to an adulterous woman being stoned to death, that really is nothing," nodded Kessel, "but for some poor peasant this amount is still enough to make them think about what they've done. Especially because peasant women have very little money of their own."

"Well of course," nodded the judge. "but according to the Emperor's law it should not be investigated whether or not the guilty woman pays this fine! The law that has been labeled 'moral purity' states that the husband and wife were married in order to bear the hardship of life together, therefore their sins as well, so if the woman slips up, the penalty must be paid out of the family wealth, regardless of how much belongs to either the wife or husband!"

A huge uproar arose among the council members. Everyone was shouting simultaneously that this was unheard of, since almost everywhere the case was that all money and property belonged to the husband. Did that mean if the man was cheated on by his obscene immoral wife, instead of getting revenge he would have to pay the penalty?! The judge nodded that yes, that was exactly what it meant, and went on to say, "Enough, enough, be quiet, because that's nothing!"

"How is that nothing, since I can't imagine a greater injustice!" many shouted again.

"Shall I tell you the rest, or should I adjourn the meeting?!"

"Just tell us the rest, sir!" Kessel gesticulated.

"If a man cheats on his wife then the penalty is exactly the same, including the amount of money!"

"What?!" The councilors' eyes bulged.

"Yes indeed, and I can guess why. Let's say that a married man is sleeping with a married woman, naturally not his own wife. This way both of them must pay—the man *and* the woman!"

"But, but..." marveled the council members.

Then Notlob suddenly asked, "How is it to be proven that the infidelity occurred? Do they have to be seen doing it?"

"According to the Majestic Emperor the evidence is quite simple. It is enough for the cheated spouse to file a written complaint. Of course this requires a small fee, but that will be deducted from their combined wealth. The Emperor generally considers all wealth to be combined in a marriage, do you understand?"

"But then a woman can accuse her husband out of revenge, without reason!"

"Yes, but the husband can also do that to his wife," said Kessel.

"But it doesn't matter who accuses who, because the result is the same—the family still has to pay the Emperor!" said the judge, waving his arms in despair.

"I believe that all this," said Kessel, "will cause adultery lawsuits to cease altogether, because it simply won't make any sense to accuse one another if the result is the same whether I cheat on my wife or my wife cheats on me!"

"This is exactly its purpose! Soon breaking up a marriage will be a private affair for everyone."

"But on this basis, will divorce no longer be permitted?" asked Etingengey.

"No, but don't worry about divorce as it has also become incredibly simple. Our Majestic Emperor has decreed that from now on anybody can get a divorce. Men or women. No reason is required and there is no need for the spouse's agreement. Nothing else, other than having to pay a certain fee—of course out of their combined wealth. To make sure anybody can get a divorce, the divorce fee is not a fixed amount. A clerk will go out to the family to estimate their assets, and ten percent of that sum will be the fee. The competent government treasury, therefore us, will receive one twentieth of it. The rest will go to the treasury of the Emperor. Our Emperor calls this law the 'marriage safeguard' because such a high fee will ensure that couples think carefully about whether to get a divorce or not. And since from here on anybody can get a divorce, even a woman by merely declaring her intent, as well as the fact that the total wealth after the fee deduction is to be halved between the former husband and wife, well, I think this will have quite the opposite effect and increase the divorce rate significantly!"

"Again the Emperor isn't thinking about anything other than pocketing as much money as possible!" said Kessel.

"It's sure to be a disaster for those whose wives are angry with them," mused Gandavi. "Since these women won't care about a tenth of the amount being lost if they still receive half of the rest. They'll get forty five percent of the original wealth!"

"Indeed they will," nodded the judge.

"But since when are women entitled to as much as men?!" seethed Outintey.

"The Emperor has written that it is not in his interest for the couple to stay together if there is no peace between them, because then the productive work that they carry out together will suffer. But wait, because I haven't told you everything yet!"

"What could there possibly still be to come?!" said the councilors in astonishment.

"Well, prepare for the worst!" After this "reassurance" he continued, "If someone gets married they are also required to pay a certain fee, of course just a small amount. However the marriage solely depends on the boy and girl announcing their intention of marriage to a council member or an official appointed by them, and that they are at least fourteen years old. Do you understand?! This is all that's required to be married! It's not even necessary for the girl's parents to agree to it! Oh yes, I forgot to mention that neither of them can already be married. But otherwise anybody can marry anybody. It doesn't matter if they have a child, if they are divorced, if she's a hooker... or more precisely a 'pleasure girl', if she has a bad reputation, if she's a teenage mother, if she's a child of a delinquent—none of this matters!"

"Well this tops everything!" uttered Notlob, astonished.

"Then listen further, because I have some good news too! The Emperor has abolished the former custom that if a boy sleeps with a girl and they stay together for a year afterwards then they are considered husband and wife. From now on it no longer exists."

"Of course, because they're not paying the fee," Kessel muttered.

"Certainly! From now on the only marriages that are valid are those that are concluded in this way."

"Finally some good news, because immorality will be reduced," sighed councilor Libon.

"Why do I get the feeling that something bad is coming?" asked Kessel sarcastically.

"Your thinking is correct!" the judge nodded towards him. "Don't you understand?!" he looked around at the other councilors. "From this it follows that these are the only kinds of marriages that are valid, making all previous marriages invalid! Unless of course they are confirmed before us in the town hall in writing, and they have paid the fee. I admit that the fee isn't great, but there are a lot of couples and this will considerably swell the Emperor's treasury! But even more depressing is that many of them won't be willing to confirm their marriage. At the Emperor's behest everybody who wants to confirm their marriage, that is both men and women, must have explained to them that this is not an obligation. However if they don't do this, they will no longer be married and therefore their wealth is to be divided in half, with ten percent of the total to be paid as a fee, so they are to behave just as if they were getting a divorce!"

"Great!" cried Libon. "If they don't confirm their marriage then they must be married because the Emperor is divorcing them, but if they do confirm it then they were not married because if they were they would not have to get married again! Therefore if they are married then they are unmarried, and if they are unmarried then they are married! I just love the Emperor's logic!"

"Do you wish to tell him this directly?" asked the judge.

"No, not really..."

"Well, that's how it is then! Besides, I'm not terribly interested in the couples who do confirm their marriages... but have you any idea what most women will do if they learn that with the Emperor's sanction they have the opportunity to divorce their husbands with impunity, enabling them to receive half of their total wealth?! Chaos would break out within days throughout the whole empire!"

"It will certainly give women cause to revere the Emperor," speculated Kessel.

"It will cost the Emperor his throne!" predicted Notlob.

"I don't believe so—the Emperor's army is full of unmarried men," said the judge. "And they'll just be happy that because women can dare to live a more profligate lifestyle, it will be easier to fool about with them, and if they desire to marry someday they'll have a better chance of finding a rich woman. Do not fear for the Emperor—if Zor's throne is ever shaken, it isn't going to be in present times! How could it be when he only acquired his power a few years ago, and ever since then all his enemies are pushing up daisies?!"

"Okay, fine... Well then, now that we've heard all the most important laws..."

"Just hang on a little longer, Libon!" admonished Judge Moko.

"There's still more to go?!"

"Yes, there is. Our Emperor has foreseen that due to this new legislation many men won't want to get married. That's why he has imposed high taxes on bachelors. Every male between the ages of thirty and fifty who doesn't have a wife must pay an annual fee."

"Surely we can't tolerate this one!" Notlob piped up.

"Okay, well I'm glad you have the courage to take this to Emperor Zor..."

"No, no, I wasn't thinking of doing that!" stuttered Notlob as the judge's words cut into him, and proceeded to sit down. "But isn't the Emperor going to impose taxes on maids and spinsters?"

"No. Besides, under these laws any woman would be a fool to remain unmarried! At most the very ugly women will remain without a husband, but not of their own accord!"

"We're lucky the Emperor hasn't put power into the hands of women!" muttered Grenaxyon.

"What makes you think he won't do that?" asked the judge.

"Surely not!" The councilor paled ominously.

"Oh yes!" nodded the judge. "Of course, don't imagine it's anything as terrible as for instance that council members can only be women. The Emperor isn't stupid! But... he has written that he

suspects there will be many people in the empire who won't approve of his wise provisions. Consider that these are beneficial for men too, not just women, however if we look at them with the superficial glance of a fool it may seem like they are overly in favor of women. For this reason he orders that every place there is a city Council, for every ten men a new councilor needs to be appointed who must compulsorily be a woman over the age of twenty, and her form of address is to be 'arbitress'. The arbitress must be unmarried or divorced as long as she bears this office. It is the Emperor's command that the arbitress be totally independent of the men. And as far as the councilors are concerned, every ten members will be counted as a whole and any extra will begin a new group. So for example in the case of a council having twelve men, it must expand with two arbitresses. Fortunately we are precisely ten in number. I am the eleventh, however I am the judge and not an ordinary councilor, so it means that in our case just one arbitress is necessary... And the duty of this arbitress will be to supervise the observation of each of the Emperor's laws that refer to women. More precisely, the implementation of these laws is our duty, but this *female* will have rights to their supervision and monitoring. She is permitted to inform the authorities about everything related to women, in fact it is precisely this informing that is her duty. And if there is anything she doesn't like and we are not willing to change it, then she may complain to the Emperor himself!"

"But how can women become councilors when they can't even read?!" Outintey wondered.

"The Emperor has written that the arbitress must naturally be a woman who has reading and writing skills, and that if we can't find one then we're not to worry. We just have to write to him and he'll send us an appropriate arbitress."

"We'll require nothing of the sort!" snapped Kessel. "I have no desire for the Emperor to send us a snoop! She should at least have been born in our own city!"

"I agree," the judge nodded quickly.

"There must be some woman in the city who is literate!"

"Of course, I'm sure there must be..." said the judge, "but that doesn't help us a great deal because we can't sabotage the Emperor's regulations. He has informed us that he will be sending inspection commissioners every year throughout the whole empire, to whom citizens may lodge complaints, and if he finds that the council members are not doing their jobs properly, then he'll have them skinned alive! The same applies to the arbitress. So she won't risk not doing everything as the Emperor has ordered, because she'll literally want to save her own skin!"

"Yes, but we'll still get along better with a woman who was born in our own city..." muttered Etingengey. "Anyway, I imagine the arbitress will be paid by the city, so I don't want some stranger getting our money!"

"Naturally the arbitress will be paid by the Emperor!" said the judge.

"Of course, with the money from our own pockets!"

"So, is that everything now?" asked Grenaxyon. "I certainly hope so!"

"I believe it is... although there is a tiny problem that has come up."

"And what would that be?"

"Based on our previous year's taxes, the Emperor has sent us our full salary for the year in advance. And not only *our* salary but also that of the clerks and everybody else."

"This isn't a problem, it's good news! Finally something good!" Etingengey rejoiced. "Because it's always a good thing for us to receive money. So far the Emperor has just taken it away, not given us any of it!"

"This is a sign that the Emperor is taking his laws very seriously..." Kessel furrowed his eyebrows, somewhat concerned.

"Of course," said the judge, "but right now that's not the issue. It's the fact that he's also sent the clerks' salaries. Each clerk has received his salary in an envelope, addressed to his own name by the Emperor's chancellery. And there is one item among these addressed to a certain clerk 'Getsnappy'."

"So what?" asked Etingengey.

"Well, as soon as I saw the envelope I began to suspect that something was wrong with it, because the truth is that there aren't that many literate people around here. If you remember, we even had to call in supplementary clerks from the neighboring city of Sizon when we carried out the census. What I'm saying is that I may not know every literate person, but I do know the clerks almost personally, and I could bet that I know them by name, but as far as I know there is no Getsnappy on our register! Even so, I carefully inquired here and there and even asked the clerks themselves whether they know a colleague called Getsnappy, and it turned out that they didn't know anything about him! Some of them were rather surprised and asked me where I had gotten this strange name from. Others mentioned that he might be a slave clerk of barbarian origin. As far as I know, the Emperor has sent money to someone who doesn't exist in our circles. But frankly I'd appreciate it if any of you councilor gentlemen were to accuse me of being ignorant, to let me know if you believe I'm mistaken and you do in fact know somebody called Getsnappy. I don't even mind if he isn't a clerk!"

The councilors stared helplessly at each other, but didn't say a word. After a while when they finally spoke, it was to say that they knew of nobody called Getsnappy. "Surely some incorrect data must have been entered into the census report," said Notlob at last. "I assume the clerk mistakenly put down the name of somebody else."

"No," the judge shook his head, "because I checked everybody. Not just the clerks but everyone else who is entitled to a salary according to the Emperor's law, and everybody has received his compensation in full. It's only yours, gentlemen, that I have yet to allocate, but here it is to the last copper. Therefore I can safely say that this sum of money," and he pulled out an envelope, placing it on the table with a purposeful motion, "is for someone who doesn't even exist! The name Getsnappy was not a typo. He did not get on the list in place of somebody else—he is an additional individual above the headcount! Moreover, as far as I can tell he not only fails to exist now, but has never existed, not even at the time of the census—certainly not in our area of administration. He was never employed by us, and definitely not as a clerk! Not as an Atlantuan *or* barbarian clerk. We don't even employ barbarian clerks!"

"I do. I have a barbarian slave called Muchi, and she has not only learned to speak our language but can also read and write it rather well!" blurted out Etingengey.

"Here at the town hall we do not employ barbarians!" stated the judge confidently. "This Getsnappy is not listed as a slave anyway!"

"So what is it that actually needs to be done now?" asked Outintey, puzzled.

"We need to decide what to do with this money!" answered the judge.

"Let's just be honest," suggested Kessel. "We'll send it back to the Emperor with a letter informing him that an unfortunate error has occurred, and that he has sent the money to someone who doesn't exist. I don't think he would be angry about that, since as far as I can judge the Majestic Miser would be only too happy to receive money!"

"Don't speak of him like that, Kessel!" said the judge quickly. "And especially you, because you have no reason for it. First of all, even if the Emperor does get the money, he still won't like it if you rub it in that a mistake has been made—nobody likes this. And secondly, I can confirm that the Emperor hasn't made any mistake, since I looked over the copies of the census reports and could see that when we itemized the names of the employees, Getsnappy *was* listed among the clerks, and at

the very top as if he was the chief clerk. As far as I'm aware, you yourself put together the list of clerks. Therefore you can't state that the Emperor was mistaken when it was you who was mistaken! Or if you didn't make a mistake, would you be so kind as to tell us who this Getsnappy clerk is?! Where is he right now? What was his job and how did he come to be employed by our dignified council? How long has he worked here and what does this whole thing mean?!"

Kessel began to feel rather uncomfortable hearing these words. In reality he could not deny that he had set up the list of clerks himself. But there was nothing else he could say but the truth, and it was this: "To the best of my knowledge I never dictated a clerk called Getsnappy to the clerk who wrote this list down. Why would I have done this? I know that at that time it wasn't our previous clerk serving me but a clerk who had come from the city of Sizon, in fact not even the clerk but his son, whose name was Kayak or something like that. Ah, I remember now, it wasn't 'Kayak' but 'Kayam'. It even occurred to me then what a foolish name he had. I wanted to joke about it, but finally decided not to, thinking that it wasn't worthy of me. I'm only telling you all this so you can understand why I remember him. He wrote the list, and I have no idea why he deceived us and wrote down this Getsnappy, but it is certain that I didn't dictate anything of the sort! He probably wanted to introduce one of his friends into public service deceitfully! I suggest we send soldiers for him, catch him and interrogate him!"

"Naturally this is what should be done," nodded the judge, "but we must find a solution for this money!" he shouted, smacking down on the envelope.

"I can only repeat what I've said... Let's send it back to the Emperor, confessing that we have made a mistake! Perhaps we should send it along with this Kayak or Kayam, for then if the Emperor becomes angry he won't pour out his anger onto us!"

"Aren't you afraid, Kessel, that it will be precisely you the Emperor will be angry at?" asked Judge Moko.

"I don't think so. After all, it wasn't me who wrote the list but that Kayam or whoever!"

"Indeed, but when this completed list arrived it was you who signed it, therefore taking responsibility without checking it!"

"Yes, well naturally I'm not happy about the incident at all, but as far as I can judge the Emperor, even though he's quite an oppressive and violent man, it's undeniable that his objectives are not evil! His rulings are certainly strange, but each law is aimed at a specific goal, and that is to enrich his treasury. If we send the money back then we will be proving our honesty. I don't believe this would make him angry, and he must see that with a task as great as writing down the names of every person in the entire empire, a few errors are inevitably going to occur! This sort of thing simply can't be helped, because we are talking about millions of people, and in addition many of them are drifting about from place to place. There may be some who have registered more than once and others not at all, so I don't believe that this Getsnappy could be the only mistake in the census! The point is that we have recognized the error in time. Anyhow, it's me who is in the greatest danger here, but I'm not too worried about it. I will probably receive a scolding from the Emperor, and he may not even waste time with that—he'll simply delete Getsnappy from the list and be done with it! I'm really not anticipating more than a reprimand. I suggest we send him a letter of explanation, together with that clerk guy called Kayam."

"Would you take it there personally, as the one who failed to check the list?!" asked the judge.

Kessel went a little pale, then said, "Well, not gladly, but I believe I am obliged to do so. It is my duty. I'll go if necessary, but only together with that Kayak fellow. And on no account should I bother the Emperor with such a trifle before we've sent him a letter, because he's unlikely to even wish for my attendance!"

"Does anybody have a different opinion?" asked the judge.

"Yes!" Libon stood up. "I find Councilor Kessel's suggestion irrational, unnecessary, and a completely irresponsible, unreasonable risk! So far Emperor Zor has never behaved in such a way that Mr. Kessel should count on lenience being one of his traits! The swift removal of his head is more likely! I wouldn't object to the councilor undertaking this, due to it being his own fault, although unfortunately I have serious concerns that the Emperor's anger won't stop merely at scolding Councilor Kessel, but will reverberate further like a stone cast into a lake that generates progressively more waves, and it may eventually catch up with *us*—the innocent ones! Let's not forget that the Emperor may believe it was the duty of all of us to check the list!"

"You don't have the right to criticize my suggestion unless you have a better idea!" said Kessel.

"But I do indeed have something better! Simply put Getsnappy's salary into the city's treasury and be done with it! The Emperor will never look for Getsnappy and the other clerks can handle the workload without him. Naturally we should keep this to ourselves, it mustn't be revealed, but I think we have enough sense not to mention it to unauthorized people!"

"This is very dangerous—if it's exposed the Emperor could hold us accountable for embezzlement!" protested Kessel.

"It's the wisest decision we can make, because we won't be needlessly compounding the problem! The smartest thing to do is not draw the Emperor's attention to our city, because that will only create trouble!" Libon sat down.

"On the other hand," said Grenaxyon, "we can't put the money into the city treasury because it has to be documented. Money that doesn't have its source of origin listed is not permitted to be in there, and we can't lie that the money originated from somewhere else because then we'd only be adding to the chaos! I suggest that we simply distribute the money among ourselves, because we're the only ones that know about this and we're not planning on telling anyone else. Let's just divide it equally into eleven parts and leave it at that!"

"I object!" said Kessel immediately.

"Why?" asked the judge.

"Don't misunderstand me, it's not that I'm protecting the Emperor's property, but I'm genuinely afraid of what will happen if comes to light! I understand that you are also afraid of this mistake of the non-existent Getsnappy provoking the Emperor's anger, but his anger will be a hundred times greater if it's revealed that we're engaged in embezzlement!"

"The situation is that the Majestic Emperor has authenticated the document with his own signature, which proves that a clerk called Getsnappy exists here in Pakunda. If it is disclosed that the Emperor has signed something that's nonsense, he'll be so angry that he couldn't possibly be any angrier!" said Outintey.

"That's ridiculous—an Emperor's anger naturally has degrees!" Kessel shook his head. "I am of the opinion that we should not risk the greater wrath to avoid the smaller one. This is just like if I were to accidentally break a neighbor's vase as a guest in their house. My response wouldn't be to beat the neighbor to death just to avoid my breakage being detected! In other words, okay, we made a mistake, and I admit that I could be considered the guiltiest one, but don't cover up this small mistake with a much larger one! It's even possible the Emperor will appreciate our honesty!"

As Kessel looked around at the other councilors, he saw no signs of accordance on their faces. Although he was being threatened with the greatest danger, they were far more afraid of the Emperor than of Kessel.

The judge asked if there were any suggestions other than the two previous proposals. But there were none. He then put the question to vote without giving his own opinion. It was not compulsory

as he only had to vote in the event of a tie, however this was presently not the case. Kessel naturally voted for his own proposal, while everybody else voted that it was unnecessary to inform the Emperor. So the issue was decided.

"Now we must divide the money into eleven equal parts..." began the judge, but Kessel cut in.

"Excuse me sir, but it's easier to divide the money into ten parts. I'm not claiming a penny of this!"

"Why not?"

"I'm telling you honestly that I'm afraid of this possibly being discovered! After all, I don't believe the name Getsnappy is listed in the consolidated report, and if he only appears in the list of clerks and then the Emperor compares it with the consolidated list, it may occur to him that something isn't right!"

"But that would be an enormous amount of work, the Emperor would never do it!"

"He may or may not. Emperor Zor is capable of anything! In any case, if the embezzlement comes out, I don't want my name to be among those who had a fair share in this!"

"You're shamelessly not going to join us in taking a share?!" said Gandavi.

"I am not! At least not in *this*!"

The judge did not want to aggravate the quarrel. "Everyone has a right to refuse a gift of money!" he said. "Then we will divide this into ten parts... and we'll do the same with any further salary that is addressed to the name Getsnappy!" And so he divided up the money.

However their duties for the day had not yet ended, for now the judge asked, "Does anybody have any ideas about how we ought to communicate the Emperor's new laws to the citizens? And most importantly, how can we achieve their execution and implementation in a way that will prevent the citizens from feeling any antipathy towards us? Because this is clearly in the best interests of us all!"

The councilors nodded. Finally Grenaxyon said, "As to how we should communicate them, well, I have no idea. I say we simply publish them. After all, it wasn't us who created these laws! But regarding the more important element, their implementation, I have a very simple yet remarkably useful idea... We shouldn't announce publicly that we are looking for a literate arbitress. Instead we search for a literate slave and entrust the work to her..."

"Hang on a minute!" the judge cut in. "Naturally the arbitress can only be a free person!"

"That's not a problem, we will liberate the woman!" said Grenaxyon excitedly. "She is sure to be pleased about gaining her freedom, on top of holding a rather respectable position! And because she was a slave she would be accustomed to obedience. In addition, she will know a little about writing but nothing about politics, so she will obey us in all matters! Of course we must uphold the Emperor's commands, but this way she won't 'blab' about everything. Excuse this crass word, but let's face it—this is basically what we all fear! So we could aim to obey the Emperor's laws and orders, but only as much as is absolutely necessary. There will plenty of room for individual judgment, and we will combine the rigor of the law with leniency in the case of those who deserve it, perhaps some mitigation with the somewhat stranger provisions, and traditions will also be taken into account... As Pakunda is a fair distance from the capital it is unlikely that the Emperor will pay us a visit, and as far as the visit of the inspection officer is concerned, if nobody complains there won't be any problems at all. If the Emperor were to get angry with the arbitress, well, no harm done, she was just a former slave! In regards to the enforcement of the laws, this is the main task we are entrusting her with. She must ensure these are all carried out correctly, and I would say that the simplest and most effective means of accomplishing this is for her to do it herself. If the citizens

become angry it will be directed at her. So this way we can't be blamed with insults, vitriol or slander, neither from the Emperor above nor from the citizens below!"

Grenaxyon's idea was received with unanimous approval. Only Kessel asked, "What assurance do we have that the former slave woman won't abuse her status, perhaps not immediately but in time when she realizes her privileged position?"

This question was answered by Councilor Etingengey. "I can guarantee it! There is a slave woman called Muchi who lives in my house. She comes from some far-off barbarian tribe, beyond Torgo. Despite this she has learned our language exceedingly well—she can speak it, knows how to read and write, and basically has the skills of a clerk. I don't know where she learned it, probably from one of her former masters. She is quite old, for I happen to know that she's fifty-eight, and for the five years she's been with me she has been obedient and I've had no problems with her whatsoever. Anyhow, this Muchi has two children who are twins, a boy and a girl, and both are fifteen years old. I believe Muchi would be a very suitable choice for us since she's a barbarian born slave, has no interest in the politics of Atlantua, nor does she understand it. Even though barbarians are generally stupid, the older ones are obedient. But most importantly, if she doesn't do as we wish her children will suffer! I must say that although her children are obviously from her former master—this is evident by Muchi being blond and the children brown-haired—this slave woman loves them very much, so she won't risk me selling them or treating them badly just because she won't dance to our tune. This would not be in her interests either, since she doesn't owe anything to the Emperor. Why would she be loyal to Emperor Zor when he isn't her ruler? She wasn't even born in Atlantua!"

The proposal was received with eruptive enthusiasm. The judge gave a special thanks to Etingengey for being so selfless as to give up his slave for the community of councilors, since it was a loss for him to liberate the slave.

"Come now, it isn't that great a loss! She's quite old, although I can't deny that she still looks reasonably good for her age..." said Etingengey. "I didn't actually buy her because I needed her, I just really fancied her daughter. She wasn't even ten years old at that time, but I could see that she would become an attractive woman. So I thought, seeing as she's so pretty it might be worth raising her and then later on I could sell her for a good price, especially if she remains a virgin, for as you know, many people seek this pleasure. I threaten her on a regular basis so that she doesn't carry on with other men, and every month I check to make sure she's still innocent... But the girl could not be sold without her mother. Therefore I bought both of them, but I don't really mind whether or not I keep the mother. I will liberate her for a good cause. I strive to make things better for our city, and avoid such careless mistakes as those of Councilor Kessel!"

Kessel looked at Etingengey scowling, but he maintained eye contact. It occurred to Kessel that he was probably being accused because in the case of the judge resigning or dying he wanted to take his place! This was of course true, but Etingengey was currently in a winning position because everyone praised him and voted for his proposal. Even Kessel succumbed, because he couldn't think of anything better for the moment. So they all dispersed in reassurance.

* * *

Mother Muchi, the former shamaness, listened to the words of Etingengey in amazement. "Is this some kind of joke, sir?" she asked afterwards.

"No, this is no joke. You too will be a councilor yourself! And of course you'll be liberated, because the Emperor ordered that... Oh why am I talking so much? I've told you all this already—

there's no need to repeat myself. You're able to read. Tomorrow morning we will walk down to the town hall, and there you will receive your letter of liberation along with a copy of all the Emperor's laws that have been issued thus far. You will only require a small portion of these, since you'll only be dealing with the laws affecting women. You must sort through these yourself so you have your own collection, because nobody is going to do it for you. Then if you don't believe me, you can read your job description within these documents. So essentially you'll be dealing with the remarriages and that sort of thing... Do you understand now?"

"Yes sir, I understand and I'm very pleased, but I just don't understand—why me exactly?"

"Because you know how to read. And write. And writing skills are especially important, because sometimes you'll be required to write to the Emperor that everything is going well here, that we are observing his laws and so on. It's true that it won't be the Emperor himself reading them, but someone from the chancellery, I believe... However I must inform you that it is specifically you we have chosen because you have two beloved children, Yana and Simor, do you not? Of course, I hope you have already guessed that I'm not planning to liberate *them*. There is no imperial order requiring that! As long as you behave appropriately, I shall behave appropriately with them!"

"I don't understand sir... Would you be so kind as to explain how I should behave in order for you to consider my behavior appropriate?"

Etingengey smiled in satisfaction. He suspected mother Muchi would be the right woman for them. See how politely she was inquiring, how accommodating she was! "Well, the Emperor has brought in some new regulations about the divorce of women and some new rules about marriage..." and Etingengey told her all about these new laws. Then he continued, "It will be your job for example to renew the marriages in writing and collect the fees, which naturally you can't pocket, but that goes without saying. Not that you will need to, because you'll receive a decent salary and will be paid what the Emperor specifies to the last penny. It's up to you to arrange accommodation for yourself, but initially you may stay in one of the chambers of the town hall until you find a suitable lease. However the main point is that it's not crucial to observe every little detail of the laws so strictly. It isn't necessary for instance to formally announce this divorce law to women, nor to men for that matter. Those who want a divorce will come to you, and you are to divorce them with no questions asked, and collect the fee. But it is not our goal to spread immorality around the city and its surrounds! So if a couple comes to you and announces that they want to renew their marriage, don't try to explain to them that this is possible but not obligatory, because they could also get a divorce. Just think of your children! You don't want me to have Simor castrated or sell Yana to some far-off place, do you?! Wouldn't it be much better if I found a master for her who desires a virgin and treats her well?!"

"Of course, sir, of course!" nodded mother Muchi quickly.

"Well, that's it then! Tomorrow we will arrange everything and within a few days you will receive the detailed regulations, as well as a list of which of the Emperor's rules we could ease somewhat of their unusual and unprecedented rigor. I rather hope that you plan to be faithful to us, the ones who allow you to put bread on the table, as opposed to an unknown emperor!"

"Of course, sir!" nodded mother Muchi, still hardly able to believe the whole thing.

"Now you had better start cleaning and beautifying yourself, so you can look your best when you come to the town hall tomorrow!" and with this Etingengey left her.

Whether mother Muchi believed it or not, it all came to pass. The following day her master, Etingengey, accompanied her to the town hall, and there a clerk called Malmachi wrote out two copies of the liberation letter. She received one and the other was left as a record in the town hall. Afterwards he immediately wrote her nomination as arbitress, referring to such and such a number

of the Emperor's law according to which she could become an arbitress, who was required in all of the free cities. This time he wrote not two but many copies, and each of these was signed by Judge Moko as well as all ten councilors. One of the copies was handed to her.

Then the judge said, "This isn't actually a true appointment yet. Naturally there are formalities for these kinds of things. It's just a sort of 'temporary' appointment. We have to send three copies of this written nomination to the Majestic Emperor's chancellery, as that is what he has ordered. He will sign them, one copy will remain with him, and he'll send two of them back by courier. One will be yours Muchi, and the other will be placed here in the town hall."

"Will this be the final one?"

"Yes. From that time onward you will legally and definitively be considered an arbitress. It has to be done this way because His Majesty needs to approve these sorts of things."

"What do I do in the meantime?"

"You can clean the room you are living in, and after that you'll have plenty of learning to do because you'll receive the books containing the laws—the city laws as well the Emperor's regulations, and these are not minor things to study! Ultimately you need to know the laws that we don't necessarily want to enforce with fire and iron in all aspects, since an inspection officer could come at any time... You don't have to worry about the proclamation of the laws, leave that to us and we will announce those we deem to be important. Besides, these can wait until your final emperor-approved appointment arrives. And this will certainly come, but it's also a good opportunity to postpone the inevitable."

All this transpired as planned, and the judge did not dare refuse to give Muchi her salary that was sent by the Emperor, which was a truly substantial sum, especially for a former penniless slave! Right away he ordered her to purchase the appropriate attire for her position, the furnishings for her room and even the writing supplies she would need. At the same time he immediately withdrew part of the money on the grounds that it was to cover the cost of the copies of laws Muchi had received. Muchi did not say a word, even though it was a hefty sum, however she still had plenty of money leftover. She wasn't destitute, wasn't threatened by the scourge of starvation, in fact she could afford fairly decent meals on a regular basis.

It was a long journey for the courier to get to the capital, and the return trip was equally long. Even with a change over of horses the whole journey took two weeks there and back, but it seemed everything had been sorted out as soon as possible. The Emperor did not keep mother Muchi waiting; he may have even signed the appointment on the very day it arrived in Valle. Valle was the name of Atlantua's capital.

During these two weeks mother Muchi read the laws diligently, especially the non-local laws ordained by the Emperor, and among those the ones specifically about women. It must be said that these certainly gained her approval! She soon discovered that the Emperor was not a friend of women but of his treasury, but that didn't bother mother Muchi. Why should it not also benefit the Emperor as well as the women? Muchi studiously copied a collection for herself of all the Emperor's laws relating to women, or those she thought she should know about, that might not specifically affect women but could be interesting in special cases... She was very cautious about interfering in the affairs of the city council, and was always humble and emphatically polite with the councilors, even with the clerks. Everybody was pleased by this.

Then one beautiful day mother Muchi's appointment arrived by courier. It was one of the two copies sent, and on it sprawled the holy handwritten signature of the Majestic Emperor along with a red wax seal hanging from a golden thread. And if that wasn't enough, the Emperor had also sent

her a gift—a gold-tipped, bronze quill pen that had the name of the Emperor artificially engraved on one side of it, and on the other—albeit in much smaller letters—the name of Muchi. It came with a letter, and although it seemed likely that the Emperor had not written it, he had signed it. The letter stated that the Emperor hoped Muchi would serve him and the Empire with this gift pen, and that these kind of pens were only granted to those who he had personally appointed as officials. They were created by clever craftsmen in the basement of the palace, and the Emperor forbade anybody else to use them. As well as this, Muchi, being the Emperor's personally appointed official, would from now on have the noble rank of baroness. She was to be addressed as 'Honorable Lady' or 'Honorable Madam', depending on which one she found more suitable, but in any case she now had the title 'Honorable'.

A 'baron' was the lowest noble rank in Atlantua. This was followed by 'count' and then 'prince'. Of course there were also female equivalents of these—baroness, countess and princess. Addressing the various ranks was a rather complicated system. The lowest form of address was 'Sir' and 'Lady'. In practice every free man or woman was to be called that by the lowest ranks, for example the servant called his master 'Sir', as well as the kitchen boy the chef, and the servant the house owner. Slaves and beggars called everybody 'Sir'. The next rank up was 'Honorable Sir/Lady', which was what Muchi had now received. After that came 'Mighty', followed by 'Respectable', and then 'His Excellency'. This was not tied closely to whether someone was a baron or a prince, although princes were generally called 'His Excellency'. There were many other ranks too, as at that time a confusing rank and solicitation jungle prevailed in Atlantua. The other ranks depended on a wide range of social functions and were not necessarily ordered above or below each other. But these listed ranks and forms of address were. For instance every councilor of Pakunda was entitled to the solicitation 'Honorable' from non-members, even though they were not barons. Conversely, mother Muchi was a baroness, so theoretically she had a higher rank than Moko, the judge of Pakunda. At the same time every council of the free cities was unified, therefore all council members as a body could claim the solicitation 'Respectable'. For example if a letter was written to them it would be addressed 'Respectable Council of Pakunda...' But perhaps that is enough to illustrate that it was not easy to avoid offending somebody with an incorrectly rattled solicitation. It was no coincidence that this was a special science, in fact almost an art—a kind of etiquette craft.

In the package Muchi had received... sorry, the *Honorable Baroness Muchi*, came the certificate proving her baroness nobility, as well as a separate special seal with her name, rank and title on it, and a confirmation that she was a servant of the Empire. There was a special provision indicating the specific rights and responsibilities she had as the local Officer of Women's Affairs. Mother Muchi was more or less clear about her responsibilities—she was to check whether all the Emperor's laws were being observed. However she was more interested in her own rights. She had never even dreamed of having rights! They were right here.

It turned out, first of all, that from now on it was forbidden for the city council to punish her in any situation, to chastise her, condemn her, bring her to court, arrest her, for her to be threatened by anybody from the city or anywhere else. If anything like this came to the Emperor's attention he would have the ears and nose of the guilty one cut off, and they would be sentenced to twenty years hard labor in the salt mines. Of course the council did not always have to agree with Muchi, but if they did not agree they couldn't do anything against her except file a complaint to the Chancellor of the Free Cities, who had the rank of prince and was therefore addressed as 'Your Excellency'. This prince was also Muchi's immediate superior, and the 'Honorable Baroness Muchi' could turn to him confidently in any situation. And if not directly to him then to his appointed chancellors. It was their duty to read all of her letters along with those from the other Officers of Women's Affairs, and to

reply to them all as soon as possible. In the case of Baroness Muchi not receiving a reply to her letter within a month she was to send another letter, to be tied with a green ribbon indicating that 'His Excellency' would read it personally, and if the omission came to light then the offender would be torn into four pieces with a horse! If she deemed it appropriate she could also send a letter to the Imperial Chancellery. This was a completely separate entity, independent of the Chancellery of the Free Cities. This letter should be sent in the same manner as the previous ones, but must be tied with an orange ribbon. She should receive a reply within two months, but was to take care, for if she wrote foolish things that her superior could have arranged himself they may impose a fine on her. If Baroness Muchi did not receive a reply within two months, then she could write to the Head of Imperial Chancellors. The letter addressed to him must be tied with a blue ribbon. He would act immediately and the defaulters would be torn into four pieces with a horse.

In an extreme case, where Baroness Muchi considered nobody to have acted properly or if she wanted to communicate information about something extraordinary, for example she learned of an assassination attempt against the Emperor, then she could write to the almighty Majestic Emperor himself. The letters to the Majestic Emperor must be tied with a purple ribbon. Baroness Muchi could rest assured, as everybody in the courier service knew what the purple ribbon meant, and they would rush at full speed to His Majesty. But the sender should beware of such a consignment, because if the Majestic Emperor decides that she is wasting the courier's energy and the Emperor's time, then anything could happen. At the very least she would be stripped of her titles and relieved of her employment, but her head could just as easily fall into the dust! However the opportunity was there, confirmed by the fact that an entire roll of ribbon in each color was included in the package. Each ribbon in turn was embossed with the Emperor's crest animal—the ant. Everyone had laughed when, after taking the throne, he had ordered for his crest animal to be the diligent ant, for he was going to work with the diligence of an ant to ensure that the Empire would flourish. By this time nobody was laughing.

Mother Muchi looked at the ribbons thoughtfully. She definitely felt that she had power in her hands. Without a moment's hesitation she began to write a rather long letter...

At that time in Atlantua the courier service traveled regularly between certain cities. Anybody who wasn't a slave was free to send letters wherever they wanted, if they paid the not insignificant fee. In principle a slave could also correspond, but this was really just theoretical since slaves generally didn't know how to read, let alone write. Why would they when this was a science even few people possessed among the free, and besides, how would they pay the courier fee? However it was different for the servants of the Empire. For the Emperor's officials the shipments were delivered free of charge. It was enough for mother Muchi to show the imperial seal and the courier bowed before her and took the letter right away. After that came the patient waiting. Mother Muchi remained humble and calm, doing whatever the councilors told her to do, and refraining from doing anything she was not told to do. She waited for the response to her letter.

Not even a month had passed by and the reply came. Not directly to her but to Judge Moko. Initially the upstanding councilors didn't even know this was a reply to mother Muchi's letter. How could they have known when they had no idea she had even sent one?! Thus a brief letter arrived with the post. It was addressed to the judge and went as follows:

"I, the Most Excellent Chancellor of the Free Cities, hereby order that the Honorable Councilor Etingengey depart to Valle within two days of receiving this letter so that he can meet with me personally."

The chancellor did not write anything else, he was not threatening punishment, but that would have been unnecessary. Nobody would dare stay home or delay in the event of such a letter. None of the council members could understand. They would have even been surprised if the chancellor had invited Judge Moko in for a personal chat, but Etingengey?! In any case, the summoned councilor quickly prepared for his journey and headed off; not casually after two days, but the very next day, lest he accidentally anger the chancellor by his delay.

Everybody knew that the journey to Valle took at least two weeks. So they were very surprised when on the sixth day after the previous letter a new letter came. It read:

"I, the Most Excellent Chancellor of the Free Cities, hereby declare on behalf of our Majestic and glorious Emperor that we have found Councilor Etingengey guilty of activities against the Empire, such as sabotaging the Majestic Emperor's orders, extortion, and efforts to diminish the income of the Imperial Treasury. For this reason I command that all movable and immovable assets belonging to Councilor Etingengey be confiscated. From among these assets, the land, house and estate is to be given to Baroness Muchi, the Local Officer of Women's Affairs in Pakunda.

All Etingengey's slaves are to be liberated, and I am ordering the judge of Pakunda to verify whether this liberation has indeed occurred with regard to Yana and Simor, the two children of the Honorable Baroness Muchi. In the event that these two children have come into the possession of somebody else, they are still to be liberated wherever they may be. I personally hold the judge of Pakunda responsible for their successful liberation, as well as the success of their quest, if necessary. Etingengey's savings and any precious metals or gems he may have are to be sent to the Imperial Treasury at once. It is the official responsibility of Baroness Muchi to be present during the valuation of his possessions and to verify the work of the auditors. Furthermore I order that a new councilor be appointed in place of Councilor Etingengey, effective immediately. Given that Pakunda is one of the free cities, I do not wish to assert who that new person should be, but I expect him to be a trustworthy and loyal subject of the Emperor, that he will not abuse his position, nor sabotage the Emperor's laws. Discussing the case with His Majesty himself, I came to the conclusion that it would be preferable for the son of the Honorable Baroness Muchi, Simor, to be the new councilor. Therefore in the name of our Majestic Emperor I recommend Simor for this post. I suggest that the Respectable Council of Pakunda consider the many benefits of this proposal, and although you are not obliged to accept it, please reflect on how discourteous its rejection would be and how sad it would make His Majesty.

I demand a detailed response regarding the measures taken within eight days. I have sent a copy of this letter to Baroness Muchi, therefore it is unnecessary to inform her about it, however I would appreciate you informing her about all further steps taken."

This was the letter, with the signature and seal underneath. Needless to say, the judge ordered another emergency meeting. All the councilors gathered and the judge read out the Emperor's letter without prior explanation. It was true that this hadn't been written by the Emperor but by the chancellor, however that did not mean anything. It was almost as if the Emperor had written it himself, since the chancellor referred to the Emperor in the letter, saying he had spoken to him about the case of nominating Muchi's son. Judge Moko believed the chancellor would not put something like that in writing if he had not in fact spoken to the Emperor about it. That is, it may not have been "100 percent" an imperial letter, but it was at least ninety percent so. Everyone listened wanly as it was being read.

"How did the Emperor even know that Muchi has any children?!" asked Gandavi in astonishment.

"Well, he may have looked it up in the list of slaves that we sent him during the census," suggested Kessel.

"Or Muchi may have written him a letter..." speculated Libon.

"Muchi? Not a chance! That modest little woman?!" Even Moko the judge was dumbfounded.

"It's possible—a sly cat can jump high!" said Kessel.

"But that's not the decision we have to make now though, is it?" Libon began. "It's the one about... what was his name... Simor? About him! Because I think the chancellor's request is outrageous, since the reason we are free cities is precisely so that we can choose our own leadership!"

"He's not demanding this," said the judge, shaking his head. "We can't find fault in it because he has emphasized that it's not obligatory!"

"But even the fact that it's recommended! He has made an implicit threat... in fact, it wasn't even that implicit! We can't leave this be! Besides, Etingengey only departed a few days ago—he hasn't even arrived there yet! How can they have declared him guilty already?! It's as though the chancellery had decided in advance that he was guilty, even at the time he was summoned! They couldn't make this decision based on the reports of the census, as there is nothing in there to implicate him! This was nothing more than a nefarious ruse to quickly remove him from our midst so that he wouldn't become suspicious and escape, and to enable the chancellor to transfer part of his assets into Muchi's hands with the treasury pocketing the rest! This has surely only happened because Muchi wrote to them complaining about her former master's threat against her children, and they've accepted her complaint without even hearing Etingengey's side. This is tyranny, an atrocity! I'd be surprised if Etingengey ever returns, however we certainly don't need that Simor in the council! We'd never be able to speak freely, and he would always be spying on us and reporting everything to the chancellor and the Emperor. This is going to impede our fundamental freedom! Now do you all want to be terrified of that old slave woman, to fear that crone, just because she might write a letter to Valle?!"

"Are you certain that all this has happened because she complained?" asked Outintey.

"Yes!" shouted Libon with deep conviction.

"And he's right!" came a voice from the doorway. All ten of them turned around to look. Mother Muchi was standing at the door with her son Simor. "Excuse me, gentlemen," said the woman, "but you were so absorbed in the debate that you didn't notice me come in!"

"But how did you get in, when the soldiers..." stammered the judge.

"Oh, they know the imperial seal—all I had to do was show it to them!" Mother Muchi walked over to table on the side of the "fewer" members, and in the middle of them all raised her right leg to place her foot on the table, her elbows resting on her knee.

"So," she said, and turned her head to look at them all. "It would be good, gentlemen, if we could clarify something. First of all, it was actually me who wrote the letter that caused the death of my former master with the unpronounceable name! Because he may still be alive right at this moment, but I'm sure it won't be for long. So there's no need to debate this issue since I am confessing that I'm responsible for his fate. And don't bother, oh-so wise men, trying to figure out why I did this. I'll tell you! It's because you made a terrible, abhorrent mistake. I had no objection to you liberating me and making me an arbitress, and I make every effort to please you when I carry out the Emperor's orders, but it's the fact that you blackmailed me! It wouldn't have been a big deal

if you had blackmailed me with my own life, but the life of my children! Oh, you fools! You haven't the faintest idea what it means to a woman of my kind to be blackmailed with her own children!"

"Why, what does it mean?" asked the judge, still shocked. He had no idea what to do.

"You should know that my former master has told me why you all thought I was suitable for this post! Among other things, because I'm a barbarian woman in your eyes, and so I am not bound to the Emperor by any loyalty or emotion. Well, it's true. That's why I would have been a really good obedient lamb for you. But that stupid Etingengey didn't think about the fact that since I'm a barbarian woman I love my children very much! Not like you stupid brutes, who are known to even sell your own blood into slavery! If Etingengey had only spoken to me nicely, just reminding me to be grateful for my freedom and power, then everything would have been all right. But to blackmail me with the lives of Yana and Simor... oh, that was a fatal mistake! As you can see, I broke his neck. And it wasn't even difficult. You may not believe it, but it's better if you do, that I have the right to even write to the Emperor himself! I can complain precisely to Him if I wish, but I didn't even have to do that. Nor did I even write to the chancellor, only to his officials. Therefore I wrote an entirely ordinary letter. What would have happened if I had tied it with a purple ribbon?! As I gather from the reply, it got into the hands of the chancellor. And how quickly he took action! It couldn't be any different, if you think about it. It's in the Emperor's primary interest that everything in the realm of the Empire should go exactly as he ordered. Under no circumstances can he afford for corrupt or otherwise biased people to be his officials! All I had to do was honestly write down that my former master, where my two children still work as slaves, is blackmailing me and that's how he intends to keep me in check. And neither the Emperor's authority nor the enforcement of his laws can allow this to happen. So I wrote down everything in regards to why I was nominated and how they wanted to blackmail me. I was gracious only in one thing—to the rest of you miserable wretches! In that I only mentioned the name of my former master, and nobody else. But don't rejoice just yet!"

She paused for a moment to look at their faces, then continued: "You should all know that in my former barbarian country I was a shamaness, and not just any kind. I suppose you know what this means, but for those of you who don't, I'll briefly inform you. A shamaness is a sort of priestess, and as such she serves the higher authorities. Although I haven't done it for some time, I believe I could still send my soul out among the stars even now. But I'm not going to do that, as I can see that I have enough work to do here on Earth. However I do enjoy serving higher authorities if they are working towards a rightful purpose that I happen to approve of, and based on his legislation I consider the Emperor to be such an authority. I very much approve of most of his laws. Even though I've done nothing for him, His Majesty has already done a great deal for me, and I can truly say that I consider him a gracious god. He has given me authority, freedom, put power into my hands, given me a majestic insignia, my former master's beautiful house and possessions, a rank, title, and most of all the freedom of my children. I would be the most stupid creature in the world, the most ungrateful wench, if I didn't do everything in my power to serve Him! There's no doubt that he did this so that I would serve him faithfully, but that doesn't bother me. He has achieved his goal, therefore take note, gentlemen, that I am the Emperor's, and if I see that you are not going out of your way to serve him I'll immediately arrange for you to follow your colleague to Valle, and what happens to you there, well, you can guess!"

Now mother Muchi took her foot down and walked over to Kessel at the end of the table, saying, "Out of the way! You can sit in Etingengey's place, as from now on this is my seat if I decide to honor you with my presence!"

Kessel's face clouded over, but he did not resist. Mother Muchi sat in the comfortable chair and said, "You're all in my hands, pals, don't you forget it! I have the list you stupidly wrote down,

which states the imperial laws you don't want carried out. It's true that you haven't signed it, but I don't think the Emperor will require proof. Although he could obtain it if necessary. If he analyzes your handwriting and compares it with the list, it will be immediately revealed that it was written by Mr. Judge here!" She laughed openly at Moko, who became as pale as a ghost.

"Ah, I see the judge realizes what I'm talking about! So I'm thinking, why should I break your neck when I can use you? If you blackmail me, why shouldn't I blackmail you? Now you will dance to my tune! I don't mind if you all remain councilors, but it's imperative that all the Emperor's laws be kept. Not just the ones relating to women, but all the others as well. Even beyond this, you shall do everything I ask of you. And don't think you can easily get rid of me! I wrote in my letter that I'm afraid I'll be the victim of poisoning or assassination. I am pleased to inform your *honorable persons*," said mother Muchi, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "that my beloved chancellor has written back saying that he cannot prevent such things, but in the case of something happening to me the whole City Council will be sentenced to the confiscation of their wealth, and they'll be sold as slaves!"

She took another break, and this time not sarcasm but true bitterness dripped from her voice as she began to speak again. "Whether you like it or not, from now on I will be ruling over you! Don't be under the illusion that I, a former slave woman who is barbarian by birth, am not capable of ruling over you or anybody else! I have told you already, but I'll repeat it—I was a shamaness, and I still consider myself one, even now. The thing you have to know about shamans is that in my tribe, the Zunzans, everybody obeyed them, even the chief. The shamaness didn't deal with the small, everyday matters—that was the job of the chief—but regarding the more serious issues they asked the shaman's opinion, and whatever she said went, there was no debate about it! So your jobs will remain as they have been, but if I tell you to do something, know that I am the shaman and not just with issues relating to women. Until I say otherwise you are merely to follow the Emperor's laws to the letter, because if I realize that you're not, then woe to you! As for the issues concerning women, I won't be implementing those but my daughter Yana. So right this minute you shall appoint her as my assistant! Regarding her salary, it's enough for her to receive the same amount as me. And in order not to bother the Emperor with the registration of another person, you will throw together her salary from your own salaries. Furthermore, I expect you to nominate my son Simor as a councilor, as His Excellency the chancellor desires. But don't worry—this worthy young man," she said, pointing at her son who was standing there silently, "doesn't want to constantly sit in your circles and argue about ridiculous things. Although as a councilor, I expect him to be given chief authority over the city's entire armed forces, and thus designated captain of all soldiers!"

"But he's only fifteen years old!" the judge finally broke out.

"All the better. This is the finest age for a man as he's very docile. One more word of objection and I will halve your salary! If there are any further words of objection I will write to the Emperor and enclose your list of laws not to be observed. Oh yes, but don't think you'll be able to find that list—not on me, in my chambers or anywhere else! I've hidden it well. And anyhow, he would believe me even without that. Now go and arrange everything as I've specified—I want to see the nominations!" Mother Muchi waved her hand in dismissal.

"We will take action right away, my lady!" uttered the judge, standing humbly and rather quickly. After all, he had the most to fear!

"Not lady, but *honorable lady*!" corrected mother Muchi immediately.

"Honorable Lady!" repeated the judge. And only when he was far enough away from the boardroom for mother Muchi not to hear him, he muttered, "A greater problem could not have befallen us!" However the subsequent events shortly afterwards proved how sadly mistaken he was.

The judge was instantly uneasy about the diminishment of the council's authority, for the people were not filled with undivided enthusiasm for the Emperor's laws. Although it was true that women were pleased by them for the most part... In any case, as soon as Zor's regulations were announced, a great number of women visited Yana, saying that they most certainly wanted a divorce. Poor Yana did nothing else day and night but write out divorce papers. And of course go out to houses with the clerks and auditors to collect the ten percent fee. At the same time, in some parts of the city men were in great conflict with women; because they could tolerate women divorcing them, and even the ten percent fee, but they did not like the fact that these women were entitled to almost half their wealth. The city's military had to bring them into order, but it was also lowering the popularity of the council. Particularly in the eyes of men, as the women wanting a divorce were benefiting significantly. And if all this wasn't enough, mother Muchi began strictly collecting the bachelor tax. Moreover, she interpreted the Emperor's law to mean that this tax was not only to be paid by those who have never had a wife, but everyone in the prescribed age range of thirty to fifty who for some reason did not have a wife. So according to her they were all bachelors, even if they were widowed or divorced.

Mother Muchi did all this out of gratitude to the Emperor for all the good things he had done for her thus far. It was essentially trust in advance, and the Emperor expected her to serve him this way so she could obtain for him a large sum of money. Mother Muchi was determined not only to earn this trust but to deserve further trust. She neatly arranged all the money into categories, packed it into boxes according to the various denominations, and summoned Judge Moko, saying, "Here is all the money the Emperor is entitled to. I want you now to write a receipt for it, along with several copies, which is then to be signed by you and every other councilor. And make sure it's sent to the Imperial Treasury—that is, the money not the receipt!"

"Why do *I* have to send it?!" protested the judge.

"Because I don't have the appropriate armed forces to protect it from robbers on the long road, and besides, I don't want to be held responsible!" she blurted, jabbing her index finger into Judge Moko's stomach, not painfully but just to stress the point. "And you can't deny that I have given you the money, because I will send a copy of the receipt to the Emperor so that His Majesty will know how much money he can expect to receive from you."

And this is precisely what happened. She sent a copy of the receipt directly to the Emperor, keeping another for herself, and attached a letter full of gratitude in which she thanked the Emperor for his anticipatory confidence and the many good things he had done for her. She particularly emphasized how much she approved of all His Majesty's regulations, especially the laws regarding women, and also promised that she would soon be sending more money. She was not afraid to send it directly to the Emperor, after all she knew that everyone liked to be praised. It was more than likely the Emperor did too, but if he considered it a useless flattery there would be no problem because the receipt was there proving that Muchi had done her work well. She had acquired a lot of money for the treasury, and there is no man in the world who would not be happy about such news. She was certain that Emperor Zor could not imagine any greater news than this!

But mother Muchi was not ungrateful to the chancellor either. She also wrote him a letter of thanks, and even mentioned in her letter to the Emperor that she was very satisfied with the way the chancellor had taken action about her complaint regarding the councilor of Pakunda. She informed the chancellor of this in her letter, thinking this would bode well for him, as what kind of gentleman wouldn't appreciate being praised before the lord of life and death, the Emperor?!

Having thus secured her position, she began to the fullest extent possible seeing to the affairs she believed were important. And the most effective way of doing this, she felt, was to write a letter that was even longer than the previous one... Naturally this went to the Emperor too.

However before the long and soon to be significant letter, a scandal erupted that had little to do with Muchi's endeavor. But it certainly affected the Emperor. Poor Judge Moko had believed they were over the worst of it, as the people were slowly getting used to the new orders. Well, the people living in the city of Pakunda were slowly adjusting to the Emperor's laws, of course the women faster than the men... But not those living outside of Pakunda, for instance that damn Getsnappy!

It happened on the very day mother Muchi wrote the fateful letter. On that day at around noon the next courier from the capital arrived in Pakunda. He handed over the consignment to the council's assistant clerk, and after completing his task he left. For him the matter was settled, however for the judge it was not. As he opened the letter and read it his face became a ghostly white, his legs beginning to tremble like a dewy spider web in a violent gust of wind, and he didn't sit but rather fell into the wicker chair so that it creaked in protest under the judge's substantial weight. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, which he struggled to wipe off. "Oh, good god... good god!" he sighed for a while, and reread the letter to see whether he had misunderstood something the first time, but it still contained the same thing it had previously:

"As His Majesty's Royal Chancellery was verifying the statements of the Chancellery of the Free Cities, an omission was encountered in Pakunda's records. The first item on the list of clerks is a clerk named Getsnappy, but to the best of our knowledge there is no one with such a name in Atlantua, nor anything remotely similar. Point 133 of the Instructions released by His Majesty for the most recent census states that if the clerk is of barbarian origin, then the following additional information must be included in the list—his ethnicity, language skills, age, Atlantuan moniker (if he has one) and how long he has worked in the service of the Empire. Furthermore, the council is obliged to take responsibility for the barbarian clerk's allegiance to our Empire through the signatures of two witnesses. The Council of Pakunda has failed to carry out any of this.

It is conceivable however that this gross negligence, which would entail the penalty noted in point seventeen of the third item of the Census Instructions, did not happen and we could instead assume that this individual named Getsnappy in fact originated from Atlantua in a village called Snapp. Although even if this were the case, the honorable Council of Pakunda has still failed because as stated in the first paragraph of section 2C in the Census Instructions, it is forbidden to identify a person solely on the basis of their place of origin to avoid the likelihood of confusion. However given that no further individuals named Getsnappy appear in the lists submitted by Pakunda, we consider it an unintentional mistake that did not cause any damage, therefore we are sentencing the council members to a penalty of fifty gold coins, payable immediately to the Imperial Treasury from this year's salary. At the same time I am ordering that this error be corrected at once, thus you are to inform our chancellery and the Chancellery of the Free Cities of the real name of this person originating from Snapp village."

It was clear that Judge Moko had to order another emergency meeting, of course without inviting mother Muchi and her son Simor. There was no need for them to be present; they would no doubt notify the chancellor straight away and probably even the Emperor. This should remain a matter for the original "true" councilors, since it was their shared secret.

He presented the chancellery's letter to the councilors and awaited their suggestions. But none came forth for a considerable time; everyone just sat there blinking in horror, their faces paling.

"What kind of penalty is mentioned in point seventeen of item three?" asked Libon finally, but it was more of a whimper than a question.

"Fifty lashes and the confiscation of wealth, naturally along with being removed from our office!" replied the judge.

"Then I'd rather pay the fifty gold!" said Libon quickly. And when the others thought about the feeling of a whip striking their bare backs they nodded in agreement.

"You see, I told you right at the beginning that honesty was the best course of action!" said Kessel. "I hope you appreciate that I didn't take part in the embezzlement, and so it's fair that my fifty gold be put together by the rest of you honorable men!"

"I don't think so! After all, the whole thing was your fault!" snapped Outintey. "If you hadn't been so stupid as to include that non-existent Getsnappy on the list, all this wouldn't be happening!"

"That's right! You should be paying *our* penalty too!" Notlob immediately joined Outintey.

"It wasn't me who wrote it in but that clerk called Kayam, who is currently sitting locked up in our prison!"

"What did he have to say? Why did he write it in?"

"He just said that he only wrote down what I'd dictated to him. Therefore he's lying! I thoroughly beat him with a stick, but he just screamed and clung to his lie. I didn't want to torture him further, because if the whole thing is revealed I can take him to the Emperor as the main culprit, and then hopefully the ruler will be more lenient with us!"

"It's still your fault for not checking the list!" accused Libon.

"Stop arguing, gentleman, because even if you're right one hundred times over, this isn't the time for such behavior! The problem is shared between us, and we have to get out of it together!" said the judge. "Solving this problem will not be simple because I have no idea what to do, and if we come up with an idea we must execute it in a way that this damn Muchi vixen won't notice!"

The councilors nodded invigoratingly to these words. Then Grenaxyon remarked, "In any case, we need to arrange something that will avoid confiscation and flogging, so I don't think we have a choice in the matter! In light of this, it cannot be disputed that this Getsnappy originated from the village of Snapp. Therefore he is a citizen of Atlantua, from Snapp village, and we must find a name for him!"

"Let it be Kayam!" said Notlob.

"Why that exactly?" asked the judge.

"Because it's a rare name. In addition, I am quite suspicious regarding the Emperor, and if there is a continuation of this case, for example if His Majesty for some reason wishes to see this Getsnappy..."

"Why would he wish to see him?" asked Grenaxyon.

"How should I know?! But it's better to be prepared for any eventuality. Therefore ideally we need to send him a real, living Getsnappy, who is actually called Getsnappy. However since we cannot procure somebody with this name, he should at least be someone with Getsnappy's other name. I think you realize, gentlemen, that this Kayam should not be pitied, since he was the one who unleashed all this peril onto us! Plus he is genuinely a clerk, therefore he cannot deny that he's clerk Getsnappy!"

"And what if he says that he isn't from that Snapp village, but from... er... Sizon?" asked Councilor Istroch.

"Then he's lying!" declared Judge Moko firmly. "We maintain that he is lying! Or if he isn't, he was lying when he attested to being a Snapp resident before us earlier!"

The councilors all agreed on this. They soon wrote to the appropriate places to inform them that this Getsnappy was in fact called 'Kayam'. Along with the letter they sent their penalties of fifty gold, which deflated their assets considerably, especially those who had not been in office very long and thus had little savings.

Meanwhile mother Muchi had diligently written her extremely long letter to the Emperor himself. It went as follows:

Proposal: *Increasing the revenue of the Imperial Treasury and general improvement of the Empire.*

I, Muchi, a servant of the Empire who is the Officer of Women's Affairs in Pakunda and a baroness by the Majestic Emperor's grace, dare to submit the following proposals to Your Majesty through this letter.

1. It would be proper if Your Majesty passed a law that throughout the Empire the old unjust regulation of women not being able to hold certain occupations be abolished. All the more so because it is applicable to almost all occupations at this time. Currently women cannot engage in any profession other than being a pleasure girl or barmaid. This is unjust and a huge loss to your treasury in revenue. Given the fact that many women would like to work diligently in some kind of profession and are instead forced to beg or commit criminal offenses to keep themselves alive and receive an income, they are not paying taxes. But if you think about it, Majestic Emperor, half your subjects are women. The moment you order that women can work in any field, your revenue will be doubled within a few years. Furthermore, as women begin to work they will compete with men in the same professions and therefore be forced to work more and more efficiently, increasing your tax revenue and making your Empire flourish. If women work they will become rich, and in the case of a rich woman getting a divorce she will have to pay you a higher divorce fee.

2. The slave system does not work effectively. Slaves cannot get married, nor get a divorce. This is all a loss for the treasury. It would be right to eliminate slavery throughout the whole Empire. And if you do not wish to do that, it would at least be fair to order strict measures that it be prohibited for owners to kill their slaves, because even though the slave is 'his' in a sense, the slave is also yours as he is living in your Empire. All this mindless waste is reducing the holding of Atlantua. I know of a case where a dying man ordered the death of all his slaves and for them to be buried in the same grave. It would be good to put an end to these sorts of things.

3. I dare to remind you, my ruler, that in the otherwise extremely judicious divorce law, you did not mention which parent is to have the children in the case of a divorce. I would like to call to your kind attention that many women in my district are not getting a divorce purely because they are afraid, and rightly so, that the men will demand custody of their children. And the women, being weaker as well as the fact that the authorities of Pakunda favor men, will not be able to prevent this from happening. This will cause a huge loss of fees for your treasury, in my estimation at least as much as I have already sent you. My suggestion is for you to order that if the child is able to speak, ask them where they want to stay and let the child remain with that parent. If they cannot speak then let them simply live with their mother, since mothers know how to better take care of such a small child. These kinds of provisions would give women the courage to get rid of their unwanted husbands, and in addition they would praise your name.

4. I have noticed that a number of your laws favoring women considerably reduce the willingness of men to marry. Therefore it would be a good idea to allow the perpetrators of some crimes to be exempt from punishment, if a woman chooses the criminal as their husband and he is willing to marry her. In this case they must naturally pay the marriage fee. If they get a divorce later on it will be additional revenue for the treasury. If they remain together then this is also beneficial, as the man has probably improved himself. And we can only be happy about an improved criminal, because if he is not living in crime then he is doing some kind of useful work that is enriching the Empire. This law should also be extended to a man who marries a criminal woman, in which case the woman is exempt from punishment. I don't think there will be many cases like this, but it would be a shame to give up this small profit.

5. On several occasions I have come across women wanting to get a divorce, complaining that their husbands were beating them. This should be forbidden because it reduces a woman's work capacity, which is not in the interest of the Empire. It is even a loss if the woman, in spite of being beaten, does not want to get a divorce. I propose, kind Emperor, that you order for every woman to file a complaint with me if she is beaten, and in this case for the man to pay an appropriate fine to your treasury. This would significantly reduce the beating of women, since a man who is rather "heavy-handed" will soon become impoverished. A man who is not satisfied with his woman should simply get a divorce.

6. I know of a case where a man would happily marry a slave woman, but the woman is somebody else's slave and the man can't afford to purchase her. I ask you, my divine Emperor, to please order that if a man wants to marry another man's slave, then the slave owner be obliged to liberate her so that nothing can obstruct the marriage. This would increase your popularity, Majestic Emperor, as the true protector of love, and would naturally benefit the treasury due to the increase in marriages. Of course this is only necessary if you decide not to abolish slavery all together.

7. At present a father is permitted to kill his daughter with impunity if she loses her virginity before marriage. A husband may also do this if his wife is not innocent on their wedding night. I would like to protest, my Emperor, even against the fact that she is labeled "innocent", because this reflects that a non-virgin woman is "guilty". At the same time, please see what a pointless waste it is to kill a woman for such a trifle, and what a great loss that is to your treasury. Since if a woman is killed for any reason by either her father or her husband, she will not get married and therefore no taxes will be paid to you. Later on she cannot get a divorce, which is again a loss in fees. She will then not have any children, so you cannot count on any revenue from them either. Finally, she will never work in her life, since she is no longer alive, therefore she will not be paying you any yearly tax.

8. I am aware of a case where, after the laws were published, a man who was afraid his wife would divorce him tried to prevent this from happening by quickly selling his wife into slavery. I ask your permission to have this deceitful man executed for the crime of tax evasion and efforts to diminish the income of the treasury. In order to prevent further situations of this kind, please decree that it be prohibited for the head of the household to sell any of his family members into slavery. All these sorts of things only decrease your revenue.

9. It often occurs that a man drives off his sick slave because he does not want to make sacrifices to treat his illness. If after some time he recovers, then he demands him to return as a slave. This should be forbidden and I hope you see it the same way.

Mother Muchi used these exact words when writing down the nine points to the Emperor, and it can be seen from her letter that while trying to be polite, she had no experience in corresponding with aristocratic circles. She wrote the letter in a friendly manner, as if the Emperor was a kind acquaintance of hers. However she was oblivious of this, and tied the letter with a purple ribbon, entrusting it to the courier.

Before long the response arrived. A rather extraordinary response. Since when the courier came a few days later, he handed over the reply to mother Muchi with an expression of deep reverence. The reply was also tied with a purple ribbon, and that could only mean one thing—that the Emperor himself had written to mother Muchi! Naturally the Council of Pakunda learned of this, as it was difficult to conceal if somebody received a letter with a purple ribbon. Even though he was a blood-thirsty tyrant, the Emperor's lines conveyed that he found mother Muchi's letter amusing, as far as her style was concerned—the jovial and friendly tone. He was not offended by it, and had inquired of his officials about who this Muchi was, learning that she used to be a slave and had also come from a barbarian tribe. For this reason he realized he could not demand from her the highfalutin solemnity he expected from his other subjects. This is what he wrote to her:

My beloved subject Muchi,

I received your letter and was delighted to see that you are guarding my treasury with such careful concern. I was a little surprised that there were several instances where you had written such things as "would you be so kind to order..." as if I, the Emperor, were not even your friend but your servant! However somewhat later my divine person realized that You, my most honored subject, most likely believed I really was a servant—The First Servant of the Empire. Because I did not think you would presume I was your servant! So when my initial anger had settled I was rather astounded by your wisdom.

I have seriously studied your proposals. The idea of liberating all slaves is not timely just now. I would not be too hasty about such far-reaching steps, as that sort of thing requires serious preliminary preparations. Do not bore me, my subject, in the future with proposals of that nature. Even mentioning this was unnecessary because my divine person has ample intelligence to realize long ago how uneconomical slave labor is.

As far as your other proposals are concerned, a large proportion of them were granted. I order that women may now carry out every type of work in the territory of the Empire that men of the same age are doing. With one exception, and that is pregnant women, whom I forbid to undertake work requiring any lifting above ten kilograms, as that would endanger the health of the fetus. Regarding the placement of children in the case of divorce, I allow that if the child can speak they may stay wherever they desire. But in the case of smaller children, I disagree with you. I order that in these cases the children become the property of the state, and the parent to receive the child will be the one who is willing to pay the most to the treasury after the divorce from the remaining wealth. I find the assumption justified that whichever parent loves their child best should be willing to make the greatest sacrifice for them, and it makes sense to have the child stay with the parent who loves them most.

Your proposals on the marriage of criminals as well as the beating of women are fully accepted. It should also be permitted, according to what you have written, for someone to marry a slave. With regards to the beating of women, I order that a woman can complain once per day, and despite how hard the beating was the penalty will be five percent of their wealth, which is to be transferred to the treasury. As you asked, I forbid anybody to kill a woman purely on the basis of not being a virgin. And what is more, because I appreciate your diligence and for your sake alone, I forbid

anybody to call virgins "innocent" throughout the whole Empire. From now on a virgin should simply be called a virgin. Consider this an imperial benevolence especially for you.

Furthermore, I forbid anybody to kill their slaves. I will not forbid a man to drive off his sick slave, because it is better if there are no sick among the healthy to infect them, but I do order that the slave who is driven off be considered a free person and therefore after their fortuitous recovery they are not obliged to return to their former master. A man who has sold his wife because she wants to get a divorce is to be skinned alive. At the same time, I command that the wife be tracked down and given forty five percent of the combined assets, with the rest of the wealth (the ten percent fee and the portion the husband would have been entitled to) being payed to the treasury. Moreover I forbid anybody to sell any of his family members as slaves.

As far as you are concerned, my subject, being so rich in ideas, as an expression of my appreciation for your efforts I allow you to keep one percent of the total sum to be payed to the treasury, but I require that you regularly inform the Chancellery of this amount. Furthermore, I hereby appoint you 'Countess'. Your salutation from now on is 'Mighty'. Along with my letter I am sending a full robe attire, in the hope that it is becoming to you. There is also a new seal engraved with your rank, adding that you are a "Beloved of the Emperor". The old seal should be sent back immediately in order to avoid misuse.

On another note, I am informing you that I have learned of a village in your region called Snapp. My officials consider it strange that although you have detailed how much revenue you sent and from which villages, Snapp does not appear in your list at all. Why isn't any revenue coming in from there? I do not doubt your honesty, so don't worry, this is no complaint against you, but I would like you to explain this strange occurrence, or if you have neglected the village until now then you are to go there immediately.

This was the letter. There was no farewell text at the bottom, just the usual, huge, sprawling signature of the Emperor. But mother Muchi was very happy. She did not overestimate the Emperor's goodwill, for she knew that in certain cases Emperor Zor would cut her throat without hesitation, but that only made these words more significant.

She immediately tried on the robe. It would look better on a younger woman, she thought, but it looked good on her too. Without hesitation and still wearing the robe, she searched for Judge Moko to inquire about how she could get to this Snapp village as soon as possible. Poor Judge Moko was not feeling too well that day. When the courier had brought the Emperor's letter to mother Muchi, the judge had also received a letter, in which the Emperor informed the city of Pakunda of his new laws that were inspired by mother Muchi. However this one was not written in the form of a friendly chat; he simply stated the new laws and that was it. The judge knew that this would further increase dissatisfaction in his city, as well as the surrounding villages... The last thing he needed now was this damn Getsnappy coming and annoying him again, or rather Getsnappy's birthplace!

As soon as mother Muchi asked the way to Snapp, the judge paled and had an irresistible urge to lean against the wall of the corridor. "Er... the thing is... where is it that you wanted to go, Honorable Madam?" he asked, trying to gain some time.

Miraculously he was given more time than he had hoped, because mother Muchi smiled and said, "My salutation is no longer 'Honorable' but *Mighty*, as the Majestic Emperor ordained that from now on I am not a Baroness but a Countess! In case you doubt my words, I can present you with my appointment document at home. Otherwise, you can see for yourself what I have here!" and she thrust the seal under the judge's nose. "You see, it is written here that I am a Beloved of the Emperor! And incidentally, this robe I'm wearing was also sent by him."

"Oh, congratulations Mighty Madam!" nodded the judge, and tried to force a smile onto his face, all the while thinking about the fact that his own salutation was still 'Honorable'. "May I ask, how is it that you know about the existence of Snapp village?"

"You may not ask. I wish to go there and that's all you need to know! Interestingly I haven't heard of it until now, even though it must be under Pakunda's administration. Tell me, where is it?"

The judge took a deep breath and replied, "It's in the past."

"What do you mean 'in the past'?!"

"It has been buried by History, the sediments of Time! It happened that many years ago during a war, the troops of Torgo completely destroyed the village of Snapp. I have to note that it wasn't a great loss to the Empire because this Snapp was essentially little more than a small farm, with less than fifty people living in it. However the Torgo troops burned it to the ground, killing most of the inhabitants by sword and hauling the rest away into slavery. I only know of one survivor—a swaddled baby boy, who somehow wasn't found by the enemy men, but nobody else escaped. And because this Snapp village was spread across the area we now call Cursed Valley, which as its name suggests is quite unfavorable for agriculture, nobody has moved there since, and today not even traces of the burnt wood and clay houses remain. Nobody lives in Snapp now because it doesn't exist anymore. Therefore you can't go there, Mighty Madam!"

"That's a shame," sighed mother Muchi, but accepted the judge's response. She wrote to her superiors that Snapp no longer existed because the Torgs had destroyed it.

The same thing was written by the judge, and it was signed by him along with everybody else in the council apart from Simor, Muchi's son, as a shared responsibility for this being the situation with Snapp village. They wrote this to avoid any further letters from the chancellery in the following weeks, threatening them with a penalty for apparently not having carried out the census in the village of Snapp.

A few weeks later the response arrived from the chancellery, merely saying that the Office had taken note of the report about the fate of Snapp and its nonexistence. The judge took a deep breath, patting himself on the back for how quickly he had come up with an answer to Muchi's question, and that with this cunning answer he had settled the Getsnappy case for good. He felt that everything was going to be fine now that the Getsnappy issue had been cleared up. Getsnappy's village did not exist, it was gone, and hopefully along with that demon, that perpetual troublemaker Getsnappy!

For a while it seemed that Getsnappy would not stir up anymore trouble. But not because the judge had killed him with this idea. How could he have done that when Getsnappy had never lived? Those who are not living are dead, and dead people cannot be killed. Every educated mind knows that death is eternal...

Chapter 7: The Wild World

After being left on their own, Djuli looked at Tila with interest and wondered what to say to her. Or rather what she should ask her. But the initiation of conversation solved itself, since there was a

bowl of apples in the room. Tila must have been hungry because she took one of them and bit into it, immediately grimacing. "Oooh, this is sour!"

"That?!" Djuli exclaimed in surprise. "Give it here!" She bit into it and found that although she had tasted sweeter apples, there was nothing wrong with this one. "Are apples sweeter than this where you're from?" she asked.

"They certainly are! Everything is naturally perfect in Elfland!"

"Tila... you said that you are an elf."

"Yes."

"But you do know that we're not elves?"

"Of course, you're humans."

Djuli took a deep breath. It would soon be settled if she was the one her mother had spoken so much about. "Do you know where humans come from?"

"Yes I do—you're degenerated elves."

"Because our ancestors fled like cowards..." whispered Djuli, and stared intently into Tila's face.

"Yes," Tila nodded. "But how did you know? As far as we elves knew, humans had long forgotten this."

"They cowardly escaped when all those Children of Dark Light attacked us..." whispered Djuli, bowing her head.

"I don't know what Dark Light is, let alone what its children are," answered Tila. "I simply learned that the name of the Attackers were 'Sprites'. And it wasn't just any type of sprite that came to destroy our Homeland, but the most dangerous and nasty ones, the 'marids'!" Then she looked at Djuli in astonishment. "You're crying. What happened?"

Tears really were streaming down Djuli's face, for she had seen that her mother was completely right. It didn't matter that Tila called the Children of Dark Light 'sprites'. Her mother was not able to ascertain every tiny detail from her visions. She spoke in symbols, in pictures, as was customary with shamans. Now Djuli staggered over to the canvas bag stuffed with straw that she used as a bed, and buried her head in her hands, her tears flowing, and muttered, "It was true... it was all true! We are the descendants of cowardly worms! Yes, we betrayed the others and committed the Ancient Sin, the Sin of all Sins! Our suffering here is warranted because in the long run the World is just. We can never ever be elves! I can never live in that crystal city I saw in my dream. All because of the cowardice of my ancestors. Because if all that hadn't happened I could have been an elf, and would not be barely earning a living as a miserable slave! But the Original Sin has made me eternally unworthy of happiness, it has contaminated me... I am a human, forever a human, and I can never be an elf!"

Tila bent down and caressed Djuli's hair. "I still don't know what a slave is, but please don't be sad! I don't despise you, and I don't think that you're bad. I'm not even sure you would have fled. Of course your ancestors did indeed flee, but don't despise them too much. Don't judge them, because the danger was immense, much greater than you can imagine. And those they fled from are still alive and in this world! You don't know how you would have behaved in that situation, and it may not have been the way they did. I like you Djuli. I don't consider you Bad just because your ancestors were cowards. I don't believe you should be burdened with the sin of your ancestors."

"It doesn't matter, because what my mother taught me is true. I see now that the World *is* just in the long run, and I am the bastard of a mongrel generation. I no longer have the Sky Spark in me..."

"No, that's not true!" Tila protested with surprising vehemence and vigor. "It's not true at all! It does exist in you, it exists in every human. Every human is an elf, they just don't know it because they've forgotten their true being!"

"They disowned it when their ancestors ran away!"

"No Djuli, no! They would have liked to remain elves, but it wasn't possible."

"Why not?"

"Because they were ashamed of what they had done. They were afraid to look into each other's eyes. They avoided each other's company because the presence of others reminded them of those whom they abandoned out of danger. They became lonely, and the lonelier they got, the more they only thought about themselves, and slowly their habit of caring and helping others ceased. And so they became more and more selfish due to the Ancient Shame. You see, Djuli, it isn't necessarily good to be ashamed of our sin. But humans are all still elves, they have just forgotten this. A human starts becoming an elf when they begin helping others. And the more they do it, the more of an elf they become!"

"Then Varbilma was right—you truly are an angel! Angels are really no different to elves, they just have another name."

"I don't know Djuli, it's possible. But tell me, how do you know about these things? About the Great Escape and the rest? It is rumored in Elfland that humans had completely forgotten their origins."

"My mother spoke to me about this when the truth declared itself to her in a vision. She was a shaman woman, you know. But Tila, I would so much like to be an elf! Tell me that everything isn't now ruined forever, because I don't want to be a slave for the rest of my life!"

"Try to understand that I don't actually know what it means to be a slave. However as far as humanity is concerned, I don't believe that it is the end of everything forever. There is no fundamental and unbridgeable gap between elves and humans. We elves used to live in a different universe, which was destroyed by the sprites. They gobbled up the crystal trees, the elves and everything, as the sprites came from a universe where there was hardly any matter—all of it was destroyed over time by proton decay... but I suppose this is beyond your understanding... So anyway, we lived there and your ancestors fled here. There were probably just as many true elves remaining in Elfland as are residing there now. But we no longer have to be afraid of the sprites because we managed to develop a very effective protective magic against them. Unfortunately our queen was kidnapped by a marid... but that's another issue altogether. The point is that there weren't always elves in our universe. Eons ago we elves were like you humans. Little by little we climbed up from the Ancient Darkness toward the Light. It took an incredibly long time for our minds to be receptive to the knowledge that the most important thing in the universe was helping each other, solidarity, and we were finally able to leave evil and wickedness behind. Our evolution did not progress in a continuous straight line, we often took many steps backwards. So you humans are not fundamentally different to us elves, you are merely ancient elves, yes... that's what we could call you. Ultimately what happened was simply the arrival of sprites setting back our progress for many eras. But progress cannot be stopped, and at some point in the future everybody will inevitably become elves again."

"But that doesn't help me," sighed Djuli. "I haven't become an elf!"

"It seems unlikely," nodded Tila seriously. "Actually you could become one if you completely changed your way of thinking, but this is a very difficult thing to do, and in that case you really wouldn't be yourself because the essence of an intelligent being is her thoughts. But don't be under the illusion that it's easy being an elf! Even I don't always succeed in being worthy of my elf-being. Strictly speaking, Djuli, I'm a *bad* elf!"

Tila's claim of being a bad elf eerily matched the vision of Djuli's mother, and all the names she attributed to the prospective visitor—the "Good Evil", the "Redeemer Satan", the "Dark Soul" and all the others. "What makes you bad?"

"Because I want to take action!" said Tila, raising her head defiantly.

"Is that a sin?"

"Activity is always dangerous. But I think those nasty sprites hurt us so much that we shouldn't respect their right to live! We have plenty of power now to finish them off. When they attacked us we had no idea how to defend ourselves, but since then many billions of years have passed and our sages have figured out their methods to a significant degree. However among these methods only the passive ones are used. They don't want to kill, even if it's a sprite they would be killing. The rest of the knowledge is locked in the Big Tree. I must say they didn't get too far with this, for long ago the sprites rewarded their tolerance by having one of the nasty marids kidnap our Queen as she was flying among the stars."

"Oh, the poor queen! What happened to her? Did the sprite eat her?!"

"No, he just held her captive. He has kept Luchilla prisoner for many thousands of years. You know Djuli, the sprite wants the queen to tell him how to neutralize Elfland's magic protective field!"

"Aren't you afraid that the queen will tire of being in captivity and tell him?"

Tila was amazed, in fact she looked at Djuli resentfully. "Why would the Queen do such a thing?! She's an elf! It's out of the question!"

"The ancestors of humans were elves too, yet they still let the others down!"

"That's true, but this is Luchilla, the queen of the elves! Even though the ancestors of humans fled, they didn't become traitors and form alliances with our enemies! There's a huge difference!"

"Why aren't you rescuing her?"

"I would like to and so would the others, but they said we must not use violence. They said that the sprites are strong, but strong power—if active—inevitably destroys itself over time because it will make a big mistake..."

"Yes, that's it! My mother told me about this!" shouted Djuli. "In fact the sprite has already made that mistake! My mother told me that the sprite would come here to Earth and that he shouldn't have come here because... because now the Earth is the center of the Universe... but I don't really understand this... and yes, you have to find the Fool!"

"I don't understand!" Tila shook her head.

"You don't know who this Fool is?" Djuli asked.

"A fool is someone who isn't clever, right?"

"Yes. But you're supposed to know who that person is!"

"I don't, but why am I supposed to know this?"

"I believe it's because the sprite brought your queen here and it's your responsibility to free her."

"My responsibility?!" Tila started becoming very nervous. "Listen to me Djuli, I'd be happy to free her, but I don't have the slightest idea how to. Even one of our Great Elders wouldn't be strong enough to fight against a marid, and I'm just a little girl, barely fifteen hundred years old!"

"This is considered *childhood* where you're from?!"

"Of course, because if nothing intervenes we can live forever."

"Good for you!" sighed Djuli enviously.

"Whether it's good or not, I'm not able to tackle a marid! I didn't come here to fight him—it was only an accident that I fell here! From the phrases I downloaded from you, I think it's appropriate to say that it 'frightens the hell out of me' to think of a marid lurking about! If the marid discovers that

I'm here, an elf, he'll immediately come for me and devour me! I wish nothing less than to meet a marid! Of course the situation would be different if they had allowed me to open the Big Oak and learn at least some of the magic in there, but they didn't."

"I believe my mother knew this, but she saw it as a shaman, and that if you meet the Fool, whoever he is, then the two of you will be able defeat the marid!"

"But I don't know who this Fool is! You know what, take me to your mother. Perhaps talking to her will help me figure it out."

"Unfortunately I can't do that. My mother is dead."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What happened to her?"

"She was killed."

"Was it by a marid or some other sprite?"

"By humans. Slave hunters."

"I don't understand. Can you please finally tell me what a slave is?!"

Djuli sighed heavily and made an attempt. After all, it was unavoidable as Varbilma had commanded that she do this. She began to speak, telling Tila that humans basically fell into two groups—the rich and the poor. Aside from the insignificant minority who were somewhere between these groups. The rich could enjoy all of life's pleasures and they did not work. The poor however did all the work for them, and not only did they receive no reward for this but they were oppressed and humiliated by the rich.

"But then it's a good thing to be poor!" said Tila.

"Why is that?!" Djuli asked in astonishment.

"Well, you said that the poor are permitted to work, but the miserable rich are deprived of the pleasures of work."

Upon hearing this, Djuli almost asked her what Varbilma had asked previously—whether Tila was an idiot, but she changed her mind at the last minute and instead asked, "What is work like where you come from?"

"Ah, where I'm from work is a privilege. It's a great honor if we allow somebody to work."

"How come?"

"But Djuli, how could it be otherwise?! Those who work always have the potential to make mistakes. Activity is always dangerous, and unnecessary too. Elfland is full of beautiful things to look at, because this isn't dangerous. We can play music, which isn't dangerous either, as well as bathe, play with various animals and with each other, we can make love..."

"Anybody with anybody?" asked Djuli amazed.

"Of course! Although I still don't know what that's like, because they don't do it with the younger ones. It would be boring and tiring anyway, since I'm still naive in this area. I don't yet know the methods of how to give pleasure to a partner... On top of all this there are many more forms of harmless entertainment that the wise ones have identified as possessing very little activity. But work, well that's completely different! Work basically differs from entertainment in the sense that entertainment is done because one feels like doing it, not because it's necessary. And work is something that is necessary, whether or not one feels like working. It's essential. Where I'm from there isn't much work, that is—essential activity, but if there is any then it's almost impossible to find an elf who would not gladly offer to do it. And then what usually happens is that the Great Elders debate for long periods about who among Elfland's younger generation is the most skilled to carry out the work."

"So the Elders are kept out of it then," said Djuli sarcastically. "It seems this Elfland is not so perfect after all!"

"But Djuli, please understand that it cannot be otherwise, because there is very little work to be done—it's the only thing Elfland has a shortage of. It's not possible for the Great Elders to do the work, because they would immediately be blamed for being selfish and wanting all the pleasure for themselves!"

"What pleasure?! I was talking about work!"

"So was I! The pleasure of successfully completed work. I have already told you that work is something necessary, that which has to be done under any circumstances. And if it is necessary, then if the worker makes a mistake they could endanger somebody with it, either themselves or the community. Usually both, because they are part of the community. Therefore work should not be entrusted to inexperienced individuals. At the same time, nobody is born with experience of course, so in every elf's life there is a time when they have to do a particular type of work for the first time. They're not required to, but nobody wants to be left out—everybody wants to exercise their fundamental right to be able to work for the community! That's why there is much debate over who should have the privilege of working on the various tasks of the community. I could even say that we barely argue about anything other than who should do what little work we have!"

"Is it really such a great pleasure to work?!"

"Of course! Even though I am still very young, I have had the privilege of working for the community on two occasions already. Twice Djuli! Just imagine, I'm barely fifteen hundred years old and I've already worked twice!" Tila proudly puffed out her chest and strutted several times around the small room. "That's right. Look at me, having been able to work twice! One time I had to demonstrate tremendous courage because I was required to travel into space, outside of Elfland, and redirect one of the asteroids, even though a sprite could have caught me at any time!"

"There are that many sprites wandering about there?"

"No, of course not. There generally aren't any sprites there. It would have to be a terrible stroke of bad luck to have even one wandering about, as slim as the chance of being struck by lightning in broad daylight, but if one *would* have turned up there I'd be finished, because he'd eat me up! But the point is that *I* was entrusted with the work, even though there were other elves wanting to do this for the community. It was a very important job!"

"Why's that?"

"Because if any matter touches the periphery of Elfland, the Great Elders, using some simple magic, can transform it to become part of Elfland. Elfland is circular in shape and its radius can expand. This was important because we had reproduced, a new elf was born, and so Elfland needed to be enlarged. To do this we need matter. It isn't important what kind of matter, as long as it's matter. Oh, I felt so wonderful being able to do something for the community! Although it wasn't easy to concentrate for that long and maintain the magic field, and it was risky too because if I had been careless it could have smashed into Elfland..."

"And then many elves would have died?"

"Oh, no, nobody at all! Elfland protects itself. But we would have needed to find a new asteroid, and that would have taken a lot of time!"

"And your other job?"

"For a while I had to be connected to the chain of Observers. These are elves who are constantly listening tensely—in their minds of course—and observing where the marid is taking the queen. I'm sorry, but I can't explain it any better than that. So I have worked twice and I am very proud of it. Oh how great it is to work, to do something useful! I feel so sorry for the rich among you, who can't experience the joy of working! This really can't be very good for them. Those dreadful poor people should be forced to allow the rich ones to work a little too. I know this kind of

thinking is unworthy of an elf, but even so, it's what I believe. After all, it isn't right to deprive someone of the greatest joy in life—to work. It's outrageous, an intolerable injustice!"

Djuli gaped at her for a moment and then broke out in uncontrollable laughter. Tila did not understand what was so funny. "What are you laughing about?" she asked.

"Would you like to work, Tila?"

"Oh yes, so very much!"

"Not for Elfland, but..."

"I don't mind, I just want to do something useful! It makes no difference whether I work for Elfland or for you humans, since you're basically elves too. Is there perhaps something I can do for you?"

"Well, if you have such an eagerness to work, then I can promise you that soon you'll have an abundance of work to do. For a 'slave', in a sense, is none other than a person who does nothing but work from morning till night! I think in just a few days you'll be able to work as much, or even more than all the elves of Elfland put together have worked in a million years!"

"How marvelous!" Tila began to clap. "Oh, I'll enjoy it so much! The others will be astonished when they come for me!"

"Will they come for you?!" asked Djuli with feverish excitement.

"Of course, I'm absolutely certain! They already pretty much know which way I fell, so after examining a few hundred planets they're sure to find me. In the worst case it may take them a hundred or two hundred years, after I've had my fun, to grab me by the scruff of the neck—that's the correct expression in this language, right?—and take me back to Elfland. How wonderful it is to be among you! But Djuli, is it really true that it's possible to do lots of work here?!"

"You bet, you can start right away if you like! Over there is a knife and some apples—you can cut them up and core them, because soon it will be dark and I have to bring Tin inside. She's a little girl, and the only thing I can feed her is cored apples."

"Cut up the apples? Is that allowed?!" asked Tila with eager eyes.

"Of course!"

"All of them?"

"Yes. The knife is over there..."

"Why would I need a knife for this?" wondered Tila, staring at the apples. Suddenly her hair expanded like a mane framing her face, as if her head was the body of a hedgehog and her hair its spikes, which were glowing green. A barely audible, dull roar hummed around Tila. Then the apples jumped up in the air as if thrown by a juggler, the topmost one cracking, its core falling out and flying to a corner of the table in even groups of five. The remaining part of the apples fell back into the same plate they had leapt out of before. The whole thing was done in ten seconds, and now Tila's hair hung tidily back in place.

"Wow!" Djuli marveled. "That was... incredible! How did you do that?!"

"With magic," Tila shrugged. "At least I believe that's what you would call it."

"You didn't even need a knife!"

"No. In fact, what do you use that strange piece of metal for?"

"Well... for this," said Djuli, and took hold of the knife, cutting one of the apple quarters into pieces and then placing one in her mouth to eat.

"Oh, where I'm from it's a lot easier to do it this way!" Tila took a section of apple, placed it directly in her palm while staring at it intently, and in the next moment it fell apart into roughly twenty tiny pieces. She put one into her mouth. "Isn't this much simpler? Why don't you do it this way?"

"We humans can't do magic," Djuli said, shaking her head sadly.

"None at all?"

"No. Well... sometimes you hear rumors of humans who know magic, but these people are very rare, perhaps only one in a hundred thousand at most, and because of their specialty we call them 'wizards'. But even these rumors are very unreliable, and the whole thing could easily be cheating and lying and in reality they can't do magic at all, it's just what's said about them."

"Are these wizards allowed to work?"

"They may be allowed to, but they usually don't."

"How is that possible?! Or... I understand now! They are like our Great Elders in that they're so compassionate they abandon this joy for the sake of the others!"

"Oh Tila, please leave it be—that's not how it is! Here it's the slaves who work the most..."

"I want to be a slave!" said Tila firmly.

"You poor thing, you have no idea what you're talking about," said Djuli looking at Tila sadly.
"You really don't know what you're talking about!"

"But I *do*! I want to do lots of work!"

"That's not the only thing slavery means. Tell me, do you like being beaten?"

"What's that?" asked Tila.

"What do you mean 'what's that'? Beating?"

"Yes, what is 'beating'?"

"Hitting."

"Why should I be hit? Hitting... I don't even know what kinds of things are generally hit... objects perhaps... although where I'm from this doesn't happen very often either..."

"Of course, of course, because where you're from the elves solve everything with magic!"

"I don't understand—you hit each other because you can't do magic? And the person who is hit is able to do magic afterwards, at least a little?"

"No. Some people are hit purely to be hurt."

"But why would the one hitting wish to be hurt?"

"Oh, please don't be so daft! It's the one who's hit who is hurt!"

"And they like this?" asked Tila suspiciously.

"Of course they don't like it!"

"Then why are they being hit?"

"Because they want them to feel pain."

Tila again looked at Djuli suspiciously. "Please don't be angry with me for saying this, but I think that you're seriously ill."

"Me?!" asked Djuli fearfully. "Why would I be ill?!"

"Because you say things that don't exist. Isn't this what you call lying?"

"Yes, but I'm not lying!"

"Of course, of course, I understand, but those who lie always profess not to be lying. It's a serious illness for someone to have this tendency, and unfortunately it's very difficult to cure. I'm not capable of doing it myself, but in Elfland the Great Elders have dealt quite well with such neurotics. If Elfland descends here to Earth when they come to get me, I will speak on your behalf so that you can be cured as well!"

"Stop interrogating me, I'm not lying!"

"Okay, okay, of course not, it's just..."

"Don't try to calm me—tell me why you think I'm lying!"

"Because what you said doesn't exist!"

"What doesn't exist?"

"People beating each other! This is the highest level of madness from which there is no possible benefit. It can only result in damage!"

"But things really are this way, and you shouldn't be surprised since you've just explained to me that our ancestors were estranged from each other, and that they no longer help one another..."

"Of course, that's true, but I'm telling you honestly Djuli that when I learned about it in Elfland I couldn't really believe it, because I thought that with their betrayal and cowardice they made matters worse by not helping each other either. But even so, not helping another person is quite a different thing to causing him harm intentionally! After all, if an elf doesn't help another they are partially a fool because they are renouncing the joy of helping, which is a great loss. On the other hand, if not helping will cause harm to the other elf, then the one failing to assist is simply a vile, despicable person! However this is quite different to intentional wrong doing. Anyone who does such a thing resembles not an elf but a marid!"

"Okay. I'll prove to you that I'm telling the truth, Tila!" said Djuli.

"I don't want you to hit me!" Tila held up her hands in alarm.

"It didn't even occur to me to hit you. I like you, and I wouldn't dare anyway. But look at this," she said, and slipped out of her flimsy little dress so that her upper body was completely naked.

"You're pretty dirty... is that what you wanted to show me?" asked Tila.

"Look at my back!" said Djuli, ignoring the critique regarding her cleanliness. She turned. Her back was full whip marks. They were all healed, but were clearly visible—long, slightly curved stripes that were raised on the skin of her back like miniature mountain ranges.

"Oh, you poor thing! Did you have some kind of terrible accident?" shouted Tila paling, and touched the scars. "What happened to you?!"

"I was whipped."

"What's that?"

"A whip is a thick piece of wood that has long strips of leather or some other material attached to one of its ends. The whipping itself is when somebody grabs the stick and whisks it in such a way that the tied-on straps snap against the person's body. Usually on their back, but not always."

"But that would be terribly painful! Why would they do this?!"

"To cause pain."

"That's impossible!"

"But you can see for yourself that it *is* possible! The marks are here on my back. And they did that to me more than once!"

"And why didn't they heal your wounds?"

"Heal them?! The last thing I need is some dirty doctor touching me! Besides, my masters refused to spend any money on medical treatment, but that was fortunate because from what I've seen of the way local doctors operate, it's filled me with great suspicion. Charlatans, ignorant fools, every one of them! But I used to be an 'uvi', a shaman student, and I did what I could for myself. As you can see, it healed quite nicely."

"This? But your back is covered in scars!"

"You can't expect much else after a beating like that!"

"I don't understand you, Djuli. How can you say that it's healed when I can see that it isn't?"

"Now I don't understand you. After all, my skin is intact and it isn't bleeding anymore!"

"How can your skin be intact if even you yourself admit that it's covered in scars?!"

"Tila, I don't think we're talking about the same thing. You elves only call the skin healed when it doesn't have visible scars?"

"Of course, that's obvious!"

"So you're saying that elves never have accidents that leave scars such as this?"

"Even small accidents don't occur where I'm from, but if they did we would not allow our backs to remain like that!"

"What would you do then?"

"We would heal it."

"With magic?"

"Of course. It's not that hard, in fact it's one of the simplest forms of magic. It's more difficult with internal organs, and the most difficult of all is the brain—only the Great Elders know how to do that. I could take care of this in no time, even me, a child! Will you allow me to, Djuli? I would really love to do some work!"

"You don't mean to say that you could make the whip marks disappear from my back?!"

"From anywhere else too, if you have some more."

"And... and will it hurt?"

"Of course not, how could you think that?! We elves don't like it if something hurts us. Lay down here on your stomach, I'll be done with you in seconds!"

Djuli didn't know whether or not to believe her, but after the demonstration of magically coring the apples she did not dare believe it to be impossible. She lay face-down on the mattress. Tila bent over her and bowed her head. She did not even touch Djuli with her hands, but stroked her back with her long flowing hair. For a few moments Djuli felt an intense itch, which subsided to a mild tingling sensation, as if somebody was pleasantly tickling her back... and then nothing.

Just as she was about to ask what was happening and whether she was done, Tila said, "Your back is now healthy, just as it should be."

Of course Djuli could not see her own back, but she reached behind as far as possible in an attempt to touch the places where the scars had been. She could not feel anything at all that resembled them. "Incredible! Could you heal my thighs and buttocks as well?"

"Of course, but you must undress."

Djuli did so, and Tila healed her thighs too. Djuli could verify this by looking at the inside of her thigh, which was now completely smooth. "Gosh, you really are a great wizard! Thank you!"

"Oh, it's nothing—I believe you saved my life when you saved me from drowning, which is a far greater deed than this. And I'm even more grateful to you because you've given me the pleasure of finally being able to work again!"

"Can you heal anything?"

"Not anything, I'm not one of the Great Elders. Even they aren't capable of everything. I must confess to you that I've never done anything like this in my life, in fact I was quite nervous. I think back at home I would have only managed it if I'd eaten a crystal, but here I trusted that I could do it without one because I'm so close to the Sun, and everything is buzzing from its energy... But tell me what happened to your back!"

"I was whipped."

"So the person holding the whip didn't notice that you were under him?"

"Try to understand that he was hitting me for the express purpose of causing me pain! Listen Tila, soon you will learn how things function around here. In this place work is not a pleasure. It is very difficult to produce food, and most people will gladly have others work for them. But it would be foolish for anyone to also do the work of others when it's difficult enough to do their own work! This is how the strong threaten those who are weaker, because if they don't work for them they'll cause them unpleasantness, for instance by beating them or even killing them. If the weaker ones

are women and the stronger ones men, they can threaten them with rape. This means sticking their male member into the woman when she doesn't want it. I'm only telling you this because I assume these kinds of things don't happen where you're from... But here it occurs rather frequently, and it's happened to me several times. Even if they kill somebody, they try to make them suffer as long as possible, torturing them with the most terrible agonies imaginable!"

Djuli explained in detail what impalement was, the breaking wheel, flaying, being burnt alive, whipped to death, drawn and quartered... She told her that a person's death sentence wasn't always this ghastly; some were given an easier death, such as being hanged or beheaded. "You can see, Tila, how terrible this place is when these are the merciful judgments!" said Djuli.

Tila could hardly believe all this. She kept interrupting with phrases such as, "I don't believe it!", "There is no such thing, it doesn't exist!"

Describing the executions was extremely difficult, as the simplest concepts had to be explained at length. For example when Djuli told her that the priest was present at ceremonial executions, Tila assumed he was something like a doctor. She had no idea what a priest was, nor a god, religion, or church. She assumed that the viewers of the execution were watching the event to develop their anatomical knowledge, because they were interested in the internal organization of the human body. It didn't enter Tila's mind that they could enjoy such spectacles. Nor did she understand why they failed to obstruct the executioner from his murderous act. Were they afraid of him? Surely not, since there were many more of them!

Djuli began to explain that those who did not want to work usually joined together with a mutual power and forced others to work for them. These vile freeloaders formed intricately structured groups, and among them were people called soldiers, who were very strong and had good weapons... Again Tila cut in, as she didn't know what a weapon was. Djuli told her that it was a killing device, and it included the sword, bow, arrow, mace, battle ax, spear, sling, dagger, and that there were many more; she had just listed the most common ones. She went on to say that there were a great many soldiers, and that the poor wouldn't dare rebel because they were afraid they would be killed.

Tila listened to it all like some absurd horror story. "This is not real, it doesn't exist!" she exclaimed, shaking her head. "Humans are unable to do such things, since they are basically elves!"

But Djuli insisted that it was indeed true. Then she alluded that everything wasn't as simple as she had made it out to be thus far, because there were many levels of how much one had to work or how much one received from others. On top was the king, who did not have to do anything at all, however he could take what he liked from anybody. The slaves were at the bottom, who did most of the work and could not take anything from anybody, while their masters took everything from them. She said that many people did not consider slaves to be human beings; they called them "speaking tools", and generally treated them like inanimate objects. "I was sold for three pieces of gold," said Djuli sadly.

But Tila didn't understand this either, as she hadn't the faintest idea what money was. She found it no easier to understand than Djuli had in the beginning. At first she thought money was some kind of valuable item like the crystals in Elfland, but there wasn't enough of it being produced here, and that was why there were constant quarrels between humans about who should get it and how much. She could have understood this. But when she shared her opinion with Djuli she responded by shaking her head violently, saying that no, money was just round or rectangular pieces of metal made of bronze or brass, and the most valuable among them were made of silver or gold. They weren't good for anything at all, apart from being admired for their nice yellow color. And the ones that were not made from gold weren't even good for that.

"Then why do people need it?" inquired Tila.

"Because there's such little gold available."

"And what of it?"

"There isn't much of it, so everyone wants to have it for themselves!"

"I don't understand..." Tila shook her head. "That can't be right, Djuli, I'm sure you must have observed something incorrectly."

Djuli insisted in vain that it was true, and she only knew this because she had been sold for three gold pebbles.

"But what does it mean that you were 'sold'?"

"It means that from now on I can't do whatever I want, but instead have to do what my masters tell me to do. My owners, do you understand? I have had various other owners before, but currently they are Mr. Numo and Lady Varbilma, whom you met a while ago."

"Are you sick?"

"Why would I be sick?"

"Well, you said that you can't do what you want. Someone who is sick, for instance a paralytic, can't do what they want, because they aren't able to walk no matter how much they desire to. Tell me, Djuli, what you would like to do and why you can't do it, and I will try to heal you. It's more than likely to succeed. You do seem healthy just looking at you, but you must know what your problem is..."

"No, no, no!" cried Djuli, almost tearing out her hair in frustration from how little the elf understood about human society. "It's not being able to go where I want to go, for instance back to my tribe, my people..."

"But both of your legs are healthy!"

"Yes, but if I leave, Varbilma would say that I've escaped and she'd call the slave supervisor, and then his men would capture me and bring me back and I'd be whipped again!"

"Why?"

"Because I escaped."

"I don't understand!"

"They don't want me to leave here because then I couldn't work for them, and Varbilma's brother wouldn't be able to fuck me if I wasn't here!"

"Fuck you?"

"Rape me! You know, I've already spoken to you about this."

"Then why can't he rape other women instead? They might not even mind!"

"Oh you dear thing, it's not that simple, because if a woman doesn't mind then it's no longer rape!"

"I don't understand."

"I can see that!"

"Why doesn't this Varbilma want to work?"

"She doesn't like to dig dirt."

"Dig?"

"Oh, it's how we describe the difficult work that needs to be done with the soil!"

"But why does it need to be dug? The ground isn't for digging but for walking on!"

"It's the only way we can produce food."

"But the food isn't in the ground, it's produced by the trees and bushes!"

"Of course, part of it, but not every kind is, and what they produce isn't enough."

"That's totally unbelievable—so much energy is floating around the landscape here that everything is buzzing with life!"

"Of course it's true that there are many living things around here, probably more than there should be, and that's why living beings eat each other and try to protect themselves from being eaten. I guess you don't have anything like that where you're from!"

"Like what?"

"Well, one animal eating another, for example."

"What are you talking about? Of course not! That's complete nonsense. The job of living creatures is to help each other!"

"Here there are even animals who eat humans!"

"Are they sprites?"

"I'm telling you, they're not sprites but animals!"

"That's not possible. I don't believe it! Any animal that isn't a nasty sprite would not eat another animal, let alone a human!"

Djuli's face brightened. "Well okay then, you eternal disbeliever... I'm going to prove to you that there is indeed such a thing!"

"Completely impossible. It doesn't exist!"

"I'll prove it."

"An impossible mission."

"Don't argue, just stay still!"

"What should I do?"

"Nothing, don't move!"

Tila obeyed, and Djuli's hand sprang open. A moment later there was a large fly squirming in her grasp, which had been daring enough to land on Tila's hair. Djuli hated flies because her mother had taught her that flies spread disease, so she had become a skillful fly catcher. Now she was carefully trapping the fly between her palm and the fingers of her other hand. It floundered between her fingers, unable to escape due to Djuli's grip on its wings. "I caught him, do you see?"

"Let him go!"

"Why?"

"It's clear that he's not happy. He would like to leave!"

"I have no intention of letting him go, but I'll show you something right now. Come with me!"

"Where?"

"Here, next to the door," and with that Djuli walked over and pointed to a spot in the corner above them. "Do you see that there?"

"How odd... what is that?"

"A spider web. The eight-legged creature in there is a spider. I imagine that if you don't have animals that eat each other, then you probably don't have spiders in Elfland, right?"

"No, we don't have such cute little animals there. It's too bad!"

"I think spiders are cute animals too, but I'm sure you won't like them."

"Why not? I already like them!"

"Well, we'll see if you feel the same way in about ten minutes. Did you know that flies, even the one I've caught here, can make humans sick? And because I don't like being sick, I don't kill the spiders here in my room, who..."

"But Djuli, how could you possibly kill such a charming little animal?!"

"Lots of people do! But not me, because I consider spiders to be my allies in my struggle against flies. For spiders eat flies!"

"Flies? These kinds of flies?"

"Yes, like the one here in my hand."

"You can't be serious! Surely this is just a prank!"

"Is it? Then pay close attention," said Djuli, throwing the fly into the spider web. The spider did not hesitate, and was so quick that even Tila's sharp elf eyes could barely follow the events. It immediately attacked the fly and within seconds the spider had wrapped up the insect and inserted its chelicerae...

Because of her sharp eyes, Tila could see everything in more detail than Djuli could. She watched in horror at what was happening in the web. "This... this... but... oh... it's eating it..."

"The spider has bitten into the fly with its chelicerae and injected its digestive juices. That's what I learned from my mother, and when it dissolves the fly's internal organs then it sucks back this nutritious pulp!"

"Save it, Djuli!"

"The fly?"

"Yes! I'm sure you know how!"

"I have no desire to save it, because I like spiders better than flies. I even feed them on a regular basis, and besides, the spider has a right to live too! If I take the fly from him then the spider would starve and die! Tell me Tila, why should the fly live and not the spider?"

"Let the spider eat other things, like fruit!"

"Oh you silly thing, it doesn't work like that! A spider can't eat anything other than small animals, it's entire body was created that way. And it would be useless for me to save the fly now, because the spider has already bitten it and it would die anyway, even if I did take it out of the web. But that would be pointless because then the spider couldn't eat it either!"

Tila looked at the miniature tragedy in the web for a long few minutes, then turned away. Her face was pale, and Djuli could see that the elf was about to faint or become nauseous. "I can't look at it any longer! This is terrible!" Tila whimpered.

"Do you believe what I told you now?!"

"I don't know... I do believe that living organisms eat each other here, yes..."

"Oh, but that was only a silly bug! You should see what a cat does to a mouse, or watch a pig get slaughtered! I wonder what you'd say about that!"

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"It's probably for the best. You poor thing, you really picked a bad place to fall into! So now do you believe what I've been telling you, about the way people treat each other here?"

"I don't know... but if *this* is true..." Tila blinked towards the web.

"Don't move!" shouted Djuli, her palm suddenly slapping Tila's hand.

"Ouch, that hurt! You don't want to eat me, do you?! Why are you hurting me?!" shouted Tila.

"Because of this!" Djuli indicated the squashed mosquito on the back of Tila's hand.

"But... but this was alive... *and you killed it!*" Tila snapped angrily, pointing at her with trembling fingers.

"Yes, and you should be glad that I did!"

"What?! I'm not glad at all! Why would I be happy when I've just witnessed a murder...?!"

"Hey, calm down—you don't understand... I killed it so it isn't able to suck your blood!"

"What?!"

"This was a mosquito. Mosquitoes feed themselves by flying onto other animals, inserting their long suckers into their skin and sucking blood from them. In fact I don't think I swatted him in

time," said Djuli, watching Tila with a sardonic smile as her fingers pressed into the location of the dead mosquito. A pretty little bump had already started to develop.

"Does it itch, or hurt?" she asked the elf.

"It does!" Tila nodded.

"A mosquito bite always itches like that. You can see that it has stabbed you. Now tell me, do you still feel sorry for it?"

"I don't know what to think..." Tila shook her head and the ends of her hair flashed. A moment later the place where the bite was had healed. But it was only the little hole, the scar, that had healed, because interestingly it still itched and Tila scratched it with a grimace on her face. "I don't like this planet as much as I did in the beginning," she said to Djuli.

Suddenly Djuli jumped up. "Oh, it must be dark already! I must go out and get Tin right away!"

"Who's that?"

"A little girl, an insane little girl. I'm taking care of her. But I completely forgot about her, probably because of you being such a novelty... I have to go look for her!" She opened the door and stepped out. It wasn't yet dark outside, just twilight. "Tin! Tin!" shouted Djuli.

Soon she found the girl. She didn't have to look far, as she was sitting in the same place they had put her when they had tried to make space in the room for Djuli and Tila, who were both unconscious at the time. "Oh my little one, I had almost forgotten about you!" said Djuli, and hugged her before taking her into the room and setting her down on the mattress. Taking a piece of apple, she began to feed her.

"Is her hand sick?" asked Tila.

"Why would it be sick?"

"Because she isn't eating."

"No, but not because of her hands. Her mind is sick. She's insane."

"What's that?"

"She went insane when some rotten men raped her!"

"How can a man be rotten?" wondered Tila.

"It's just a figure of speech. I meant scoundrels—those who do nasty, despicable things to the innocent! There were many of them who raped Tin, and since then the little girl has not spoken. She doesn't do anything except sit, and only eats if I put food into her mouth. Even this way she eats very little. Just look at her, she's almost skin and bones!"

"She really doesn't seem very healthy."

"Could you heal her?"

"Well, I don't know... I think there is something wrong with her brain, but perhaps I've already told you that dealing with the central nervous system is not an easy task... it's not child's play... that's how you say it, right? And I am very much still a child among the elves..."

"Please try! I love her very much!" Djuli begged her. "Just think that now you'll be able to work, and this will be real work because you can achieve something of great benefit!"

"That is undeniably true, and I would very much like to, but it's a great responsibility. Too great. It seems like a difficult case, one that would require some of the Great Elders. If I mess it up she could even die!"

"It doesn't matter, because this isn't much of a life for her anyway, and I don't even know how long Varbilma will keep her. She may even decide to kill her at some point..."

"Varbilma? Is she the woman who was here before?"

"Yes, that one!"

"Would she kill Tin?"

"Yes!"

"But why? Surely she doesn't want to eat her like a spider eats a fly?!"

"Oh, of course not! She would kill her because she's no longer of any benefit to her, and wouldn't want her to waste food unnecessarily!"

"But she's not wasting it—she doesn't scatter it around, she only eats what you put into her mouth!"

"Even that amount is a waste to her!"

"I don't believe it, it can't be possible! A human eats so little, especially such a small girl. And besides, food is meant to be eaten!"

"Please don't argue, just heal her!"

Tila sighed deeply. "Well, I can at least examine her. Lay her down here."

Djuli laid Tin on her back. Tila bent over her and placed a palm on top of her forehead, closing her eyes. She stayed motionless for a very long time. Meanwhile little Tin also closed her eyes and remained still, although after a while she began to smile as if having a pleasant dream.

Djuli was becoming impatient and thought about waking Tila up, who had probably gone to sleep, when Tila "awoke" by herself. "It's not working," she said to Djuli's questioning eyes. "I can't do it this way."

"Which way? What is actually wrong with her?"

"This is quite a strange case Djuli, and I'm sure this sort of thing has never occurred in Elfland. I would never have even known what this was if you hadn't spoken about all the bad things that happen here in your world, but now I think I do know. When all those nasty things happened to Tin, she simply decided that she didn't want to live in this kind of world, and that's all there is to it. Of course this wasn't a conscious decision on her part, it was more like an instinct. But the truth is, I think Tin is more 'elf-like' than an average human. After all, it's logical that occasionally humans will be born into your world whose thinking is closer to that of the ancient elves. And I think these people are more prone to this kind of madness, especially if they've experienced nasty things."

"Ah, yes, we would call them 'sensitive souls'," said Djuli, now understanding.

"Certainly. But you should know, Djuli, that I'm not at all sure this is true, it's just my opinion. You have to understand that I am considered a child among the adult elves, just like Tin is among humans."

"Alright, fine, but why should Tin go crazy because of that?"

"She isn't crazy, she has just locked herself in. She isn't willing to be aware of the world because she thinks it's bad. After all, I can understand her position. If it's an everyday occurrence for living creatures to eat one another, then this must really be a horrible place, perfectly suited to sprites! At least you humans don't eat each other!"

"Well, I haven't come across anything like that here, but there are supposedly people in far-off places called cannibals, and they tend to eat those who don't belong to their tribe..."

"That's abhorrent! I can't believe that either!"

"I know, I know, you don't believe most of what I'm saying! I can't prove it because I haven't seen it with my own eyes, but I certainly believe it. However I still don't fully understand Tin's condition..."

"I don't know what else to say about it. She is rejecting this world, but since she's not an elf she can't step out of it, so in her mind she has closed her eyes and ears, all her senses, and is afraid to open them because she feels that she would only experience nasty things. Which is actually quite likely. I could sense that inside she is constantly terrified, and that she doesn't dare reawaken into the world."

"Then what can be done? Can I persuade her to stop this?"

"No, Djuli. If I at least had a crystal, then maybe, but even then there would only be a slim chance of it succeeding. In fact, I'm not even sure the success would be a true success..."

"You're being vague. Just tell me what sort of crystals you're talking about!"

Tila began to speak about the crystal trees of Elfland and what kind of effects its crystals have.

"Wow, that's really interesting! So if I had such a crystal and I ate it, does that mean I could fly in the air for a while?!"

"Well, not exactly. You may have originated from elves, but you aren't elves anymore. It's a very remote kinship, especially since I think you have moved much further away from the ancestors than the Great Elders realize. If you do such things as eat each other, then you must have very little elfness within you. Of course, even if you do have some, it's not hopeless because it will accumulate over an immeasurable period of time and you will become fully fledged elves again, but right now you are not. A crystal affects somebody more if they have a greater elf-like essence, or 'soul' as you may call it. However I believe your understanding of the 'soul' is something that lives on after death, which is not correct. Let's just say that the more benevolent a person is the more it will affect them. But if things go on here as you told me, with people hurting each other just for fun without any benefit, then I suspect the only explanation is that you have degenerated over time. Your elfness couldn't possibly have degenerated this much on its own... somewhere in the depths of Time you must have committed some atrocity that caused you to hybridize with a nasty sprite, and your offspring have inherited its cruelty. Of course this is just guesswork, and the Great Elders would perhaps laugh at my theory. But in any case, you certainly wouldn't be able to fly from eating a crystal!"

"Then what kind of benefit could I get from it?"

"I don't know for sure, but I imagine something like if you were sick it would heal you, you would probably feel great afterwards, and it's likely that you wouldn't age for a long time. You might even gain a few decades from such a crystal. But it's useless talking about it because there are no crystals here—we can only obtain them from Elfland."

On hearing this Djuli reached into her pocket and brought out the crystals she had stolen. "Here you are," she said, placing them in Tila's hand.

"Oh my goodness!" said Tila in amazement.

"I found them beside you on the seashore. I thought they were diamonds."

"What are diamonds?"

"They're... it doesn't matter, it's not important! Let's just say they're the most valuable form of money. Here Tila, use these to help Tin!"

Tila looked at the five crystals that had been placed into her palm. "There's something I should tell you, Djuli."

"What?"

"I can't by any means 'change her back' to the way she was. She has become like this due to her bad memories, however I'm not able to do anything as drastic as erase her memories. According to the laws of Elfland that would be one of the greatest sins, because an elf is none other than his or her memories! I'm sure this is also true of humans. All I can do is try to counteract the effects of all the terrible memories by giving Tin additional beautiful memories. But I am not a human, I don't have any memories of this world, only of Elfland. So in this case she will have a lot of my own memories, and will become a little like me."

"Like an elf?"

"I don't know, Djuli. I've never done anything like this before, and I don't think the Great Elders

have ever experimented with something of this nature either. We don't interfere in the lives of humans. I believe that if I do this and they learn about it, they will give me quite a scolding because this isn't just an activity but an irresponsible experiment, and I can't be at all certain of the outcome. It's possible that Tin won't have any idea who she is in the end, and she'll go so crazy that even the Great Elders won't be able to heal her. The confusion in her mind could be great enough to kill her! Do you still want to go ahead with the experiment, Djuli?"

"Yes, Tila. Do it! I wouldn't expect one of the Great Elders, a more experienced healer than you, to come here just for Tin's sake. And I don't think it matters whether Tin is this crazy or a little more. Please begin!"

"Djuli, I'll begin if you say so, because you know your world and to some extent I'm willing to consider you my teacher, but please think about your answer one more time. Are you sure that it will be a good thing for Tin, even if the healing is successful? Won't they hurt her after she's healed?"

"They might. But I'm not afraid of that at all, because I know that you, Tila, will protect her. And me too..."

"You don't know what you're saying! I can't do anything that will harm others, and besides, I don't even know what to do if I was willing to do it! I've never learned the kind of magic that would be appropriate for this, and there is very little active magic that I know anyway!"

"Please don't argue, just trust me! The problem is, Tila, that you're too much of an elf. Much more elf-like than you're supposed to be if you want to stay alive in this world! But I will attempt to corrupt you somewhat."

"But I don't want to be corrupted," said Tila stiffly.

"You may not right now, but I think you'll have an entirely different opinion by this time tomorrow. And it doesn't matter for the moment, just heal Tin if you can! If it reassures you, I'll take full responsibility for the consequences."

"You're being confusing again, since it's the one who does something who has the responsibility. But okay, I'll see what I can do," and with that she placed the crystals on the corner of the table, with the exception of one that she held in her hand. With her left hand she lowered Tin's chin, placed the crystal into her mouth and closed it again. Then she sat down beside her, placed her palm on the girl's forehead and closed her eyes.

She remained in this position for almost for an hour. There had been no change, at least not by all outward appearances, unless one counted Tila's increasing frown and the gradual brightening of Tin's little face, which had begun to take on a joyful smile.

Finally Tila opened her eyes. "I'm done," she said.

"But Tin isn't awake yet!"

"She won't be for a while. She'll probably sleep until morning. I wouldn't advise waking her up, it's better if she rests. Don't be fooled by the fact that Tin is smiling, Djuli—this was tiring for her as well as me. I've told you already that the central nervous system isn't child's play, which is ridiculous since I, someone who is definitely considered a child among the elves, am playing with it! I am honestly afraid to awaken Tin, because I have no idea what the result of what I did is going to be!"

"Why, what did you do?"

"What I told you earlier—I gave her some nice memories. Things I remembered from when I was living in Elfland. Like when I was flying above the bell peach trees, or looking at the Galaxy from the mountain top, and when there was a meteor shower..."

"Your words make no sense to me, Tila!"

"Well, basically all my beautiful memories. I tried to pass on the feeling of how wonderful it is for everybody to love each other. But I am afraid, Djuli, because the consequences of this might be that she will believe she has actually lived in Elfland. Or she may understand that I have just shown her these beautiful images, but will then be miserable for life because she'll crave after Elfland and want to live there, and that's impossible! Oh dear, I wish I hadn't listened to you! Especially because while I was doing this, some of Tin's own memories filtered into my mind—horrible memories, and I can't even believe life is like this here! In such a world it can only cause great sorrow for the girl to know even a little about life in Elfland, since her life here is totally different!"

"Please don't regret it, Tila!" Djuli grabbed Tila's shoulder and looked deep into her eyes. "Don't regret it. I can see that you really are a child, despite your fifteen hundred years. A naive innocent child, who knows nothing about life, and I believe your revered Great Elders are childish in the same way. The effect will be the exact opposite of what you're anticipating, because this world is even more horrible than you think. It's so awful that it can barely be tolerated! We can only endure it if we have hope that it will be better someday, even if it's not in our lifetime. You said it right the first time—Tin denied herself this world because she didn't know any better, because she didn't have hope for a better, more beautiful world... that's why she went insane! But if she knows that there is a better world out there, then she can cope with the one she's living in now. After all, this is the basis of every religion—they maintain hope in people by referring to heaven and the afterlife, a better and more beautiful world in which their souls will travel to after their death. They believe their soul is eternal, and if people didn't believe this they would immediately commit suicide to escape all the atrocities of slavery. No matter what the outcome, believe me Tila, you've done a good thing for the girl! In fact I'd like to ask you if you could do the same thing for me too. The few images I've already seen are making me long for more of these beautiful memories!"

"No, Djuli. I still don't know what this religion thing is you're talking about, but I feel that it would be a poison to you if I interfered with the operation of your central nervous system, and it would only fill you with eager insatiable desires, which would not be good for you. Don't even ask me for such a thing, and you don't need it anyway!" In order to avoid further conversation, Tila took a slice of apple and stuffed it into her mouth, grimacing from its sourness. She anxiously watched the sleeping Tin.

"Oh Tila, don't be afraid, there won't be anything wrong with her," Djuli reassured her. "When you look at me with such worry, your eyes look even more slanted than usual. I fear this will cause you a lot of problems."

"What, my eyes?"

"Yes. Some people will find you ugly, and others may try to rape you, because men sometimes have a taste for the extraordinary..."

"They can't rape me."

"Why's that?"

"It's impossible. My vaginal muscles are so strong that I don't believe anybody could push anything into me if I didn't allow it!"

"Can you contract it that tightly?"

"Of course. We elves have conscious control over every one of our muscles if we wish. I assume you don't."

"Well, not really. But if you don't allow it they'll beat you!"

"Because of my eyes?"

"Partly. Extraordinary women always attract men. It would be a good idea for you to think about what to do if Varbilma's brother comes and wants to sleep with you."

"Would it be better this way?" asked Tila, and suddenly her face transformed before Djuli's admiring gaze. Her eyes no longer stretched upwards toward her ears at a forty-five degree angle, but stood almost horizontally on her face. Even though they were large, they were much less seductive and bold. Instead her face displayed big, innocent round eyes, almost like those of an inquisitive sheep.

"How did you do that?!" marveled Djuli. "With magic?!"

"I didn't need any magic for this. We simply have control over all our muscles. Our faces are more agile than yours, and probably possess more muscles. And our eye balls are larger as well, it's just that a significant portion is covered by various membranes and folds of skin. In their natural state they slant downwards leaving a narrow opening, and that allows our eyes to move in this direction. But with just a little concentration, the skin folds and eye ball can be placed in a different position," and with that Tila altered the shape of her eyes a few times in front of Djuli. "So, is this better?" she asked.

"Amazing! I envy you! And yes, I think that'll be better. You are still quite extraordinary this way, but perhaps not so conspicuous. Isn't it uncomfortable though, to hold your eyes in that position?"

"Well, it's probably the equivalent of constantly bending one of your fingers. It's not a big deal."

Djuli blinked enviously at Tila. "I would so much like to be an elf!"

"But all humans are elves."

"Allegedly. However I don't even think you believe this, Tila."

"Yes I do! It is my firm belief that the Great Elders are telling the truth, and that the ancestors of humans were indeed elves!"

"Maybe our ancestors, but not us. I've heard something about the ancestors of dogs being wolves. But dogs aren't the same as wolves!"

"I don't know what wolves are, but in a sense you are still elves."

"And perhaps sprites too. You did say that at some point in ancient times the sprites mixed with our ancestors..."

"It's possible, but this is just the irresponsible chatter of a young elf. Don't worry about it, Djuli! Even if this is the case, you have more elf in you than sprite."

"I'm not at all sure about that!" Djuli objected. "Since in my experience a true elf like you finds it inconceivable that we deliberately cause harm to each other or to any kind of living being. Here it's an everyday occurrence!"

"Djuli, you may be right about all this, but the solution isn't to become sad over it. It's more important to begin doing something to change the conditions among humans. Futile sorrow does nothing to improve the fate of the world..."

"You're right!" responded Djuli, starting to tug at Tila's sleeves. "You're right—let's change it! You and I... both of us... we could do great things! For instance..."

"Djuli, sorry for interrupting, but please don't tug at my dress! It rubs on my skin."

"Rubs?"

"Yes. We're not used to such rough materials. But you probably don't have clothes like ours."

"Why, what kind of clothes do you have?"

"Shall I show you?"

"But you can't—you were naked when I found you!"

"I can still show you," and with that Tila wriggled out of Djuli's borrowed dress. Djuli could only see her naked for a few moments, as she immediately "got changed" into her usual light dress.

"Oh! Oh, wow..." stammered Djuli.

"This is what we wear in Elfland," said Tila.

"But... this is beautiful... but... it's not warm enough, and it doesn't protect you against thorns..."

"It doesn't need to be warm. Where I'm from it never gets cold, but even if it did, an elf can't freeze or burn. Perhaps if we were inside the Sun... yes, we'd probably burn there, but certainly not in a place that was colder than that. And of course we don't have any thorns."

"But here we have lots of them! So it would be a good idea to become acquainted with our clothes."

"Well yes, I suppose if you have lots of things like mosquitoes..." muttered Tila.

"Listen Tila, I wanted to say something before. Why shouldn't we start taking action so that things will get better around here?"

"You're right, let's start now!"

"Great, I knew that you'd understand! Please kill Varbilma and Numo!"

"What?!" Tila sprang up so quickly and frantically that she bumped the table, knocking over the plate of apple segments. However they did not fall to the ground, nor did they get dirty, because when Tila noticed what had happened she glanced sideways, her hair lit up momentarily, and the fruit flew back onto the plate, which then descended to the center of the table. Meanwhile the crystals had also fallen off the table, but now they flew into Tila's hand.

She did all this casually as she spoke to Djuli. "I beg you, please don't ask anything like this of me! How could I kill a person—two people?! I couldn't even kill an animal let alone a human! Are you telling me that this is how we're going to make the world a better place?! I'm amazed at your thinking, Djuli! How can you say that when it would only increase the amount of Evil in the world?!"

"Not at all! Tila, listen to me carefully. Suppose a man were to come in now, let's say Mr. Numo or Varbilma's brother, Madun, and wanted to rape Tin. Or me. Or you. Or suppose they wanted to kill us! What would you do?"

"But why would they commit such an atrocity?"

"That doesn't matter for now. Let's just imagine that they wanted to do it, and..."

"But why should we imagine a situation that's completely impossible?!"

"Dear Tila, how can you state so emphatically that it's impossible?"

"How could it be possible? Even if I believe that you humans find it acceptable under some circumstances to kill each other, there has to be a reason someone would be determined to do such a thing. So I will try to behave in a way that doesn't provide a reason for either Madun, Varbilma or anyone else. Besides, they clearly haven't killed you!"

"Well, no, but I've been whipped! That's not pleasant either! And you're right that there always has to be some reason to kill somebody, that's true. But it's usually a reason you couldn't avoid with even your best intentions. For example it could be that they don't want to feed you anymore. Even you elves need to eat sometimes, I'd imagine! Or they might realize you're an elf and want to kill you because they're afraid of elves. They may want to rape you and you don't allow it by tightly squeezing your muscles, and then the man will get mad and might kill you. Or they'll kill somebody because they want to kidnap one of their family members. Or because someone is too old and has no further benefit. Or because they've taken everyone from a village and they have no use for the small babies, so they kill them. Or they may kill anyone anywhere just because they belong to another country. They may even kill you just for fun, because of the exciting spectacle of someone squirming on the end of a stick! Don't think I'm exaggerating, Tila, I was just selecting some of the most common reasons. I could list many more, all things that we can't do anything about! It's true that sometimes they kill a person who is actually guilty, but this isn't always the case. I dare say that

the victims in most murders are innocent. You simply fell into a world where this is how things are, so let me ask you—is it that you only can't be burned? Would you die if your head was hit with a sword or an ax?"

"Yes, that could kill me, but..."

"There is no 'but'!" Tell me, would you like to live until your country you call Elfland comes for you?"

"Yes, of course I would!"

"Then let me ask you a question—who do you think are the most valuable, elves or sprites? If you had to choose, who should live longer, an elf or a sprite? Which one would you vote for to live?"

"What kind of questions are these, Djuli?! Of course elves should live, in fact I've even said in Elfland that I would be happiest if all sprites dropped dead as soon as possible. They should be exterminated from the world!"

"Great! And who do you perceive as more valuable in regards to sprites and humans?"

"I think my answer to that is quite obvious too—humans of course! After all, humans are elves to some extent at least, and sprites are not. But if what you say is true..."

"Stop right there, I can already guess what you're going to say—we've degenerated to such a degree that we're not much different to sprites! But we are slightly better, right?"

"Of course, Djuli, you are definitely better than them!"

"Then let me ask you—if you saw a sprite about to attack an elf and you could save the elf's life by killing the sprite, would you do it?"

"Of course, with pleasure! But I don't know how to kill a sprite!"

"Yes, but if you figured out how to do it, then you'd do it, right?"

"You bet I would!"

"Without hesitation, right?"

"Yes, but I have to tell you that the Great Elders..."

"I think they would do it as well!" stated Djuli confidently, however she was not at all sure that what she was saying was true. "After all," she continued, "it's not a question of whether the Great Elders would kill all sprites indiscriminately, since then they'd be killing innocent sprites too, if there is such a thing as an innocent sprite... They would only have to decide who is to die, a sprite or an elf. If they don't help then the elf dies, and if they do help they kill the sprite, and the sprite dies. Either way they cause someone's death, and I can't imagine that you elves, who supposedly love each other so much, would decide that the sprite should live and not the elf!"

"Of course, Djuli, I'm certain of that too! *I* would definitely go to help the elf without hesitation!"

"And would you do the same if the sprite wanted to kill not an elf, but a human?"

"Well... well yes, I believe I would, at least if I was certain I could kill the sprite..."

"Yes, that's exactly the scenario I'm suggesting!"

"And of course the human would have to be a person who was worthy of this activity, that is, someone better than the sprite. If I saw that he was the kind of human who had formerly killed somebody, then I'm not at all sure that I'd try to protect him, because he wouldn't be much better than a sprite. And if that human had killed an elf, then I certainly wouldn't try to protect him!"

"Oh Tila, you have no idea how happy you've made me! I wanted to demonstrate to you that there's a great difference between humans as far as their values are concerned, but I think you've come to this conclusion on your own. My next question is almost unnecessary, but I'll ask you

anyway—if you see a human wanting to kill an elf, whom would you help, the elf or the human? Would you kill the human in order to save the elf?"

Tila's face became serious. "Yes, I would kill him, although I'm sure that the Great Elders would object to such a thing. Because we have to set an example for humans and for each other by our behavior. We are permitted to defend ourselves, but only with passive tools, meaning those that don't cause death, or even injury and suffering to those we consider our enemies."

"That's a suicidal philosophy!"

"Possibly. But I don't think I'm a very good elf. Even my teachers, the Great Elders, have told me this on more than one occasion..."

"Tila, stop mentioning the Great Elders all the time, I'm specifically talking about you! You Tila, and no one else! Would *you* in such circumstances kill a human in order to save an elf?"

"I believe I would do it," said Tila going pale. Then she continued, "Djuli, I beg you to please end this conversation! I simply feel unwell thinking about killing. My stomach is upset, you can see that my light dress has become gray, and I even have a headache. Please let's not talk about killing, this is horrible!"

"But I still have one final question to ask you. Are you an elf?"

"What a question, since you know that I am! I've already told you several times!"

"So you're an elf, and you've admitted that in order to protect another elf you would be willing to kill, even if reluctantly. Then why aren't you able to do this for your own protection? See how illogical this standpoint is! Of course I realize that you would use what you call 'passive methods' to the utmost extent, but if you can't see any other solution, why do you assume that you're worth less than other elves for whom you would commit the last resort act of killing? In fact, why do you assume that you're worth less than your attacker?! Regardless of whether your attacker is a human or a sprite! Surely you're more valuable than your attacker, even if it's purely because he is the attacker and wants to kill for no good reason, making him as nasty as a sprite. And you're not seeking to take anyone's life, you only want them to let you live as you let others live! It's a proven fact that if someone is attacked, they have the right to defend themselves. And if there is no other solution they have the right to assure their own life by killing the other if need be, because they are worth more than the attacker—they're the one being attacked, not doing the attacking!"

"I am not feeling well Djuli, leave me alone!"

"Tila, I've told you everything. Now all I can say is that you have to make a decision. I won't try to persuade you any longer. If you decide that I'm wrong then you'll die very soon, and you'll probably suffer a great deal beforehand too. But then you'd deserve it!"

"I'm really not feeling well, Djuli. Please don't bully me!"

"Eat some apple and think about what I've said!" She passed Tila the plate of apples and made her lie down, caressing her face as if she was her own daughter. She looked a great deal older than Tila, even though Tila was fifteen hundred years old and Djuli only thirty-three.

A little while later she spoke. "Tila, my dear naive, childish little Tila... I'm only telling you this for your own benefit, so you can see that it's not important whether somebody is a sprite, a human or an elf."

"And why's that?"

"It only matters whether they are good or bad. These are the only two groups that exist. Those who let the others live are good, and those who do not are bad."

"That's not true! You like spiders for example, even though they're bad because they eat flies!"

"That's not what I mean. The spider *has* to eat the fly! But I doubt that sprites have to eat elves. If a human doesn't have anything to eat and he eats another human, that's a sad necessity, but

perhaps it's okay. He isn't necessarily evil. But if he kills me or you, or anyone else for no reason, then he's bad, evil! Do you understand now, Tila? And I can't see why such a person should deserve more consideration than an elf-eating sprite! Would it make any difference to you if it was a sprite eating you or a human? All of them deserve to die!"

"Well, it's possible..."

"Tila, you said that some of Tin's memories filtered into you. Which memories?"

"The ones in which they raped her..."

"And was it pleasant? That was just a memory—imagine if you had to live through it yourself! Tell me, don't you feel you would have gladly avoided this situation, even if it meant having to kill some of them?!"

"Yes, yes, Djuli, I do feel this way, but it isn't right. It's a bad feeling. It's inappropriate, a sin, and I feel that it's not only those men who did this to Tin that are evil, they have also made *me* evil for feeling this way, and I don't want to feel this!"

"Oh, you poor thing! I understand what you're saying, but there's nothing to be done, it's just the way the world is—it's either you or them! And if this is the way it is, then why sacrifice yourself over them?! At least if I had to choose, I'd rather let myself live, and... *and I'm not willing to feel bad about that!*" stated Djuli, emphasizing her last words. "Anyway, I don't really doubt that you would decide to protect yourself in such a case. I'm more concerned about what you can do in order to protect yourself, because you told me you hadn't learned this kind of magic."

"Oh, well I'm not too bothered as far as humans are concerned. If I decide that I'm willing to harm them, then that wouldn't be too difficult..."

"Why, what would you do?" asked Djuli curiously.

"Actually, I wouldn't even have to kill them," said Tila cheerfully. "I could employ a much gentler means. For example I could make anyone who touches me fall into a deep sleep, and only wake up days later. Even the Great Elders wouldn't disapprove of this! I could even put somebody into a deep sleep from a distance. Then if I had to hurt somebody, although I'd rather avoid this if possible, I could do negative healing. However this isn't really worthy of an elf..."

"What's negative healing?"

"Tampering with someone's body. For instance I could stop a person's heart, or raise their blood pressure, or do the opposite and lower it so that they'll faint... or I could cause intolerable itching, which isn't particularly difficult, and at least it's not as awful as stopping their heart... or even better, I could order their bowels to evacuate its contents..."

"Haha, that's great!" laughed Djuli. "The person wants to hurt you, and then he shits his pants!"

Tila smiled. Only weakly, but it was still a smile. "Yes Djuli, after all, it's much less evil than stopping someone's heart..."

"Can you make him wet himself?"

"Of course, Djuli, almost anything's possible! I could give him a stomach ache, or make him blind or deaf for a short while, or obstruct his speech... yes, all this is possible. Or, although I would be reluctant to do this, I could mess around with his brain, but that..."

"I know, I know... that isn't child's play!"

"Exactly. I could even make them see some frightening monster in my place, perhaps a sprite, and then they would run away and lose their mind, I suppose... Yes, now that I think about it, it's not even necessary for me to kill if I want to protect myself, so you're wrong about that, Djuli!"

"Unless of course they decide to shoot at you from a distance!"

"But my dear Djuli, I can't just kill everybody who comes near me!"

"Only those with bad intentions!"

"If I'm aware that someone is approaching with bad intentions I can take care of them in a gentle manner, but if I don't find out in time that they want to cause harm, I still couldn't kill them. No, no, Djuli, no matter what you say, I don't feel that a human would harm me, not even an animal. I'm more afraid of sprites, particularly because I know for certain that one of them is not too far away. The one who is keeping our queen captive, and he's wandering about somewhere close by. Marids can usually sense if an elf is near them, and I have no idea how to fight him or protect myself from him. For now I just hope that Elfland finds me before the sprite does!"

Djuli thought about this. The truth was, she was just as worried about Tila's life as Tila was herself. She felt that her primary goal right now was to keep Tila alive, because this was a unique and amazing opportunity for her, to have a true elf by her side who could help change her fate for the better. She believed that if she remained by Tila for long enough she would succeed in "corrupting" her to the extent that the elf would help free her from slavery, become a great Lady and perhaps even more... She could help those she loved and those slaves who were unjustly languishing in oppression, as well as destroy those she considered to be evil, cruel oppressors. But if some nasty sprite ate Tila, nothing would come out of this. No matter how much power an elf had, they could only do things if they were alive, not dead! This was why she was inquiring about the abilities of sprites and elves, and if Tila knew how a sprite could be defeated. She desperately felt that she was questioning Tila in vain, because she rigidly insisted that she hadn't the slightest idea of what she could do, not only in the case of a marid but even against a sprite with much less power.

"So are there other kinds of sprites?" asked Djuli.

"Of course, we know that there are four main groups—ghules, djinns, ifrits and marids. We don't actually have any problems with the ghules, as none of them would eat an elf, nor a human I would think. However such sprites do exist in the other three groups, especially among the marids. To the best of my knowledge there has never been an elf who has killed even a single sprite!"

"But wait a minute Tila, that's impossible! You just told me about some Big Oak in which devastating magic is locked. How do you elves know that this magic is suitable against sprites if no one has ever tried it?!"

"I don't believe the Great Elders have actually tried it, they just assume that it would be capable of conquering sprites."

"But how do you defend yourselves against the harassment of sprites in Elfland?"

"Well, quite simply we don't. I mean, there is no way to do this. We simply don't leave Elfland."

"But how is Elfland protecting itself then?"

"In a passive way."

"But what is this passive way?"

"It's like a kind of magic field surrounding it that even the strongest sprites can't break through, not even if they joined forces. Besides, sprites are very solitary beings and it is not typical of them to unite or join together for a common purpose."

"So if an elf is alone somewhere, any sprite can do whatever he wants with them?!"

"Yes Djuli, this is true!" nodded Tila.

"I don't believe it! That can't be right!"

"Hey Djuli, you don't have to learn this from me!"

"What?"

"That you don't believe it! I usually say that, remember?"

"Tila, I'm not in a joking mood. This is dead serious, since at any moment the marid could appear, and I would not like it if he ate my friend! Tell me, would it help if you ate some crystals?"

"In what way?"

"How should I know, you're the elf! It's unbelievable that I, a human who has no understanding of magic, has to give advice to an elf in the field of magic! If a sprite came, why couldn't you for instance burn him with lightning?"

"Ah, this is partly superfluous and partly impossible."

"Explain what you mean by that..."

"I once asked my teacher in Elfland the same thing, and she told me that the sprites cannot be defeated with lightning, because in order to do that we would need such a huge bolt of lightning that even the focused power of all the elves in Elfland would not be enough. And hitting a sprite with lots of small lightning bolts would only cause him pain, not kill him. The most that could be achieved is for him to be in enough pain that he runs away. But before that happened he probably would have already killed the elf who was hurting him. That's why it's superfluous, and it's impossible because I have no idea how to conjure up lightning! I haven't learned anything like this because it's active magic, and a particularly destructive sort at that!"

"Listen, Tila. You have to admit that I'm much weaker than a big, strong man, right?"

"Yes, and what of it?"

"Well, if a big, strong man were to come and wanted to kill me, then I would naturally try to defend myself. I would have little chance against him, but I think it's probable that even if he won, I'd still be able to cause him some minor injuries before my death. And it wouldn't be entirely impossible for me to win instead of him, of course with a lot of luck and exerting all my strength. It's also conceivable, even if unlikely, that I would have a knife on me and manage to stab him through the heart before he stabbed me. And I would have an even greater chance of winning if I anticipated the attack and prepared for it in advance, imagining the attack in my mind and thinking about what I would do if he behaved in various ways. I'm telling you all this, Tila, because I simply refuse to believe that you, a very powerful elf, can't do anything to protect yourself against a sprite! This can't be true! You may be much weaker than a sprite, I can believe that. You may have less experience in the field of magic, and even know a lot less magic than they do. Perhaps you against a sprite would be the equivalent of me against a group of five men who wanted to join forces in order to kill me. All this is possible. Maybe you do have an infinitesimal woefully small chance against the sprite, but there's no way your chances are simply nothing... zero! There is just no way! You have to grab hold of that small chance! You have to prepare for the sprite's attack! Plus I'm absolutely certain that if we do everything we can, then it will succeed and we'll win!"

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Because I may have told you already that my mother, who was a shaman woman, predicted that you would come, and that afterwards we would find the Fool, whoever that is, and this would be the beginning of redemption and the end of the interference of sprites in the world. My mother was an excellent shaman, and initially I didn't believe her, but she was right because you came. You're exactly like the one she described in her visions, and if she was right about that then she's probably right about the other things as well. Of course we'll have to do it ourselves!"

"But please understand Djuli that I..."

"Be quiet, I'm the boss! I'm not going to listen to you, Tila, because nothing comes out of you but acquiescence to whatever you consider inevitable and unalterable! Let's instead hear what kind of magic you *did* learn in Elfland. Because I'm sure you must have learned something there during your fifteen hundred years!"

"Of course I did... primarily the art of healing, then the formation of my light dress, how to fly after I eat a crystal..."

"Good, good... and what else?"

"Please understand that I learned nothing that would be useful against the sprites!"

"Tila, leave it to me to decide what might be useful against them. Don't forget that I think very differently to you elves! All you have to be concerned about right now is specifying what you have learned. For example, can't you use negative healing against the sprites?"

"Of course not! The body of a sprite is quite different to that of a human, in fact according to our knowledge they don't even technically have a body!"

"But surely some other part of them can be tampered with!"

"I'm sure it can, but I haven't learned what that is. We don't know the bodies of sprites very well."

"Okay, well now I want to hear about what other kinds of magic you've dealt with apart from those you've mentioned."

"But Djuli, you're inquiring about destructive magic, however you must understand that apart from the magic I've told you about, I've dealt exclusively with magic that is not destructive but creative."

"Creation? That could be interesting! You mean the kind where for example you gesture with your hand and a beautiful flower appears?"

"Well, not exactly. It's not quite that simple. We elves don't deal with the creation of something that already exists, since why would you want to create such a thing from nothing when it's easier to propagate it from one that pre-exists?"

"I don't understand."

"We attempt to create something that is not only nonexistent, but has never existed before. You know, this is how we beautify Elfland. We believe that our country is more beautiful if it's more varied. But we must be careful to only create things that can integrate into the society of plants and animals that already exist there, so that nothing gets hurt, and this is an incredibly big responsibility because imagine if we accidentally messed something up! For instance if we created a plant that poisoned the golden apple trees with its scent! The responsibility is huge and it's not unusual that I haven't created anything yet, only practiced. Creating is only permissible for those who, if not Great Elders, are at least a billion years old!"

"What's a billion?"

"You don't know, Djuli? A billion is a thousand million."

"Oh, good god! I don't even know what a million is! I only know that it's a very large amount."

"A million is a thousand times a thousand. I hope you know what a thousand is!"

"Yes, of course I do! That's unbelievable! You really live that long?!"

"We do indeed, and even longer if a nasty sprite doesn't come and eat us—then we live forever! Some of the Great Elders lived a hundred thousand billion years ago!"

"I can't even imagine that!"

"Never mind Djuli, me neither."

"Okay, then let's leave this for now. Instead tell me how you managed to practice if you haven't created anything?"

"Well I have actually created of course, but since this is an activity and the risk is high, I didn't create in real space but on an astral level, in other words, in virtual space."

"I suppose you can guess that I barely understand any of this... Now were you actually creating, or not? Or were you saying that you only create in your imagination? Are you just imagining, because I can do that too, but it's not magic!"

"No, no, Djuli, this truly is magic, and the most difficult type I know! Everything occurs just as in real creation, but we don't carry out the last phase. Or rather, at the last minute we carry out another procedure that basically destroys the result of our previous work."

"I still don't understand, Tila!"

"What I'm saying is that this real world is full of materials that are cumbersome, sluggish and a pain to work with, whether we want to change them with our muscles or the power of magic. But when we plan a new creature, it's rarely perfect in the beginning. We always have to change things here and there. If we do this on real material then we become extremely tired. In addition, if we actually created even an imperfect creature, it's morally problematic for us to destroy it afterwards, since it was alive and couldn't do anything about the fact that it was imperfect. Because *we* created it that way, and so it isn't their fault. For this reason we elves act differently if we want to create something, and we do this in a way where we don't create in real space but in a virtual space, which is also known as an astral plane. Here things like creation, termination and transformation are much easier, and then when we are satisfied with the result, only then do we bring the creatures into the real world, or you could say we 'materialize' them. And that's very easy, because all we have to do is not destroy them before we return from the astral plane to our own world, since these creatures are essentially part of ourselves, our power and energy, so if we return to the real world then they automatically return with us and therefore become materialized. The most difficult part of the whole thing is reaching a high enough level of awareness to be able to get to the astral plane. From that point on everything runs smoothly. Of course as long as we have sufficient energy to create, because every living creature we create depletes our strength. But this isn't too harmful, at least not in Elfland, because when we return to the real world we just eat one or two crystals and regain our energy."

"Okay, fine, I'm sure it's just as you say, but what the hell is an 'astral plane'?!"

"I can't explain that to you in a single word, but perhaps it would be best to use a metaphor. We elves believe that matter is none other than solidified thought."

"What?!"

"We believe that basically everything you see in the world is merely a guise. In reality it doesn't even exist. Not the table, nor the knife, nor the ground upon which you stand, and not even you and I. At least not in the way you think. But all this together, the entire vast universe, in fact even the many other universes—it's all just a giant thought sentence, and so individual pieces of matter like you and me, or a tree or piece of fruit, are the words and letters of that thought sentence!"

"But who thought out this sentence?" asked Djuli attentively in amazement.

"We don't know. We call it the 'Primary Existence'."

"Tila, isn't this the same thing we call 'God'? Because we also believe that an absolute, powerful being created the world. Well, first the smaller gods and then they created the rest..."

"There may be a similarity between the two concepts," said Tila shrugging, "but they aren't the same. If you understand creation as some being with great power creating the world from nothing, then we certainly *aren't* talking about the same thing! We elves believe that the Primary Existence didn't bring anything at all into being. He still exists alone, and is probably unable to create anything, although of course I can't be sure of this. However the whole world, together with all its particles, is none other than his thoughts!"

"But I have my own will..."

"That's because he thought of you as having your own will. But this isn't quite true because he didn't deliberately think of you and me, only of the basic building blocks of the World and the laws

that drive them. Your body also consists of such tiny particles, Djuli, and the Primary Existence is monitoring what comes into being from these imaginary particles."

"But I can imagine things too, although if I imagine a pretty girl, she won't have her own will!"

"Not always, Djuli. But I'm quite certain that you've succeeded in coming up with a thought that had its own volition. In fact probably quite frequently, almost every night! Haven't you ever had a dream, in which you met somebody whose actions suggested that they were independent of you, and you couldn't influence them? You made these up and gave them their own will, even if you did it unconsciously. You unintentionally gave them a will and took it all back when you woke up, integrating them into the Oneness of your being. And if *you're* capable of doing this, why wouldn't the Primary Existence be able to?"

"So, what, we're his dream images?"

"Kind of. We may not have proof of this, but us elves believe that He deliberately created us. I don't mean us personally, but the world that He specifically created, in which the elves came into being and perhaps other creatures too. Maybe even the sprites. We believe this because the World, at least its basic synthesis, is much more logical than what generally occurs in a dream."

"Wow... this is a pretty awesome teaching... that I myself am a Creator, even if only in my dreams, and even if I can't influence the outcome of the creation..." Djuli almost felt faint from excitement.

"And with a little practice you can achieve the skill of dreaming about something you've decided on while you're awake!"

"But Tila, sometimes it happens to me that when I've woken up, I remember so much about the characters in my dream that it seems as if I *was* all of them! So in my dreams I alternate between various people... do you understand?"

"Of course, and that's exactly the point—just as you bestow your attention on some of your dream images so that you temporarily identify with them, it's the same with the Primary Existence. This is how He identifies with us, although it's quite possible that all of us are being monitored at once."

"Tila, whatever you say, what you've described is none other than a new religion—the religion of elves! And you've convinced me to live in this way!"

"It's more of a philosophy, Djuli. Now that I'm becoming accustomed to the language I downloaded from you, many of the concepts that I previously didn't understand have begun to sink in, like figuring out what you mean by 'prayer'. But you ought to know that we believe the Primary Existence should in no way be harassed with prayers! This is just as absurd as if one of your dream images called upon you in a dream and said, 'Dear Djuli, please think me to be stronger or richer, because I'm not happy the way I am!'. The Primary Existence doesn't interfere in the course of things, he merely observes it, and he doesn't need to intervene because we are all part of him. However he is more than the sum of his parts, and not because the whole is able to do more than the individual parts, but because he obviously doesn't only consist of thoughts. Besides, he is sure to have thoughts that are not part of the World Conglomerate he invented!"

"Even so, it's still a religion!"

"Fine, call it that if you want! I don't mind, I won't object. But concerning the astral plane..."

"Yes, yes, tell me!"

"Imagine, Djuli, that there is a great big ball of ice, and on its surface live tiny little ice men. Let's say that these ice men wanted to carve something out of the pieces of ice. They could do this, but they might find it easier if they melted the ice pieces in question and altered the liquid water into the form they wanted, letting it cool again afterwards. In simple cases this certainly wouldn't be

advisable, because it would be difficult to melt ice in a world where water only exists in this form due to the extreme cold. But if they wanted to create a more complicated structure they *would* do this, as water takes on forms more easily in liquid than in ice. Of course they'd have to allow for all the tiny details, and the method could be difficult. Now I've given you this analogy, Djuli, even though it's rather imperfect, so that you would understand what I mean when I say that matter is solidified thought. Of course just figuratively. It is the thoughts of the Primary Existence, but in a solidified and stable form, because he has chosen to allow only those thoughts that conform to certain rules, and we call these rules the 'Laws of Nature'. The thoughts are 'solid' because they are embedded in the law structure that was created, just as water molecules in the form of ice are constrained in an ice crystal structure... although perhaps you don't understand this. It is certain, however, that the water molecules in a block of ice can only move a very small amount, as they have a specific location assigned to them by the laws of nature relating to ice. This is the same with every piece of matter. If I wanted to change a rock into a person I'd have to be incredibly cunning, because I'd have to devise a series of changes that are permitted by the laws of nature, and even if it was possible it would be incredibly complicated, since a stone is something very different from a human! In such a case it would be simpler if I 'dissolved the laws' in the part of the world where the rock exists and took away its essence, then raised the rock to the astral plane where the thoughts of the Primary Existence are 'liquid', so to speak. Then I'd make the necessary changes and place it back into the real world, allowing the laws to refreeze and crystallize it. Perhaps I'm still not being very clear?" asked Tila, anxiously peering at Djuli's face.

"Okay, I understand from this that a rock can't be changed into a person, except when it can! But you were talking about creating from nothing!"

"Well, not entirely. What we create in the astral plane is not made from nothing, but from our energy."

"But then a rock isn't necessary!"

"Of course not. With enough consciousness we can manage to awaken from the Eternal Dream that we are in, and this awakening means that even if just to a small extent, we are getting closer to the Primary Existence himself. This might be something like when you're asleep and dreaming, you imagine that you're a queen for example. But then this queen starts to wake up. However you don't wake up completely, since if you did you would know that you are not a queen but Djuli. Therefore you are just slightly awake, in a state where you still believe you're a queen and are not conscious of your real surroundings, and you are able to turn onto your other side—not like Djuli would, but like a queen. So the queen created by your dream was most definitely alive for a few moments, since she turned in the real world! Tremendous power and concentration is needed to achieve this, Djuli, but it is possible. We can step into the astral plane and even carry things up there—various objects or other elves. No elf is able to go up there by themselves initially, so the child elves are taken up by a teacher the first few times. But when we are up there creation is very easy. It's only a matter of imagining something, and right at that moment whatever it is will appear. In fact if you were up there in the astral plane, I'm entirely certain that you could do it too, or any other human, since as you said before—you are also capable of imagining! What you don't know is how to get up to the astral plane. You may envisage this plane as being a place of freedom, a world of disembodied thoughts, where anything is possible... Although of course not everything is possible, because we aren't equal to the whole Primary Existence. We can create anything in the astral plane that is not contradictory to the fundamental laws of the World, because the materialization of our thoughts is not constrained by matter. So our thoughts do not solidify, they don't get immersed in matter, but due to this nothing can come into being that isn't also possible in the real world. So we can create

anything that has a theoretical possibility in matter. Imagine this as the material world being a sentence, and when you go up to the astral plane the sentence falls apart into letters. And although you can assemble any kind of word from the letters, even words that have never existed before in text, you can't make up new letters!"

"I don't understand this metaphor because I don't know how to read," sighed Djuli.

"Then I'll teach you! The point is that we can't change the laws of nature there either. Perhaps there is a plane above the astral plane, a level of consciousness where we could change these laws, but none of the elves have ever been able to rise that high," said Tila, contemplating.

"And how does creation come about from this in reality?"

"It's really quite simple... all it requires is that when we return from the astral plane, we choose not to destroy our creations. When we are back here again they'll exist beside us. But I've never been allowed to do that. It's a great responsibility, Djuli! You know, when we go up there, all our thoughts are fulfilled—every single one of them without exception, do you understand? Even those we don't want fulfilled! If I think of a tree for instance, it appears. And the more detailed I think of it, the more I focus on it, the more real it will be. If it occurs to me for it to have horrible big thorns, the thorns will immediately appear on it. If I decide that I don't need the tree, then it disappears. But these are only thought experiments. In reality they aren't alive, even if I think of an intelligent being. They will have their own volition and I can talk to them, but they are only as alive as one of your dream images, therefore it isn't a sin for me to decide that they should no longer exist. According to our moral principles, someone begins living when they are brought down from the astral plane to be here among us. So that's why us elves practice the creation there, and only materialize what the Great Elders deem to be perfect."

"Wow, I'd really love to try that myself!" exclaimed Djuli. "Tell me Tila, would you be able to send *me* up to the astral plane?"

"I think so, but don't be angry with me, because I won't do it!"

"Why?"

"Because you couldn't come back."

"You aren't able to bring me back?"

"Of course I'm able to, but I can't trust you!"

"Why not?!" said Djuli, taking offense.

"Because if the Great Elders have not allowed *me* to create because they're afraid I'd mess something up, how much greater would the risk be in your case, Djuli?! Besides, it would cause you harm."

"Why?"

"Because as I said before, what we create requires energy. All our thoughts take up energy and diminish our strength, and the astral plane is a world of embodied thoughts! How much strength do you think you have, Djuli, being not a real elf but just a human?! You wouldn't even notice it there, but after two or three attempts you'd be so exhausted that when you returned you would die within moments!"

"But if I wasn't satisfied with some of the creatures and decided that they shouldn't exist, wouldn't the energy I invested flow back into me?"

"Certainly not! You either see the creature in front of you as dead, or you may decide for it to be destroyed without a trace, but you will not regain the energy that you sacrificed for it. It's like if you were to give birth to a child, and perhaps if you were as evil as a sprite you could kill that child, even burn it so that no trace would remain, but the flesh of the newborn would not return to your body!"

"Oh, I would love so much to play the role of the Creator God!" sighed Djuli.

Tila did not respond, and instead began stuffing all the apple pieces into her mouth. It seemed she had gotten used to these not being as tasty as the apples of Elfland. She chewed with such a grim and resolute expression on her face that it looked as though she was determined to continue eating until she had "destroyed" them all.

But she could not eat all of it undisturbed, because Djuli began speaking again. "Tila, are sprites able to go up to the astral plane?"

"I don't know. They might be able to, although I've never met any of them there."

"And what determines whether you can take somebody or something up there?"

"It depends on weight. It's like a smaller piece of ice being able to melt more easily than a bigger one."

"I see, and what does a sprite weigh?"

"Not much, because they barely contain any matter. But Djuli, I'm asking you in the name of the Primary Existence—why would I take a sprite into virtual space?!"

"So you can fight him there!" shouted Djuli, poking her index finger at Tila's chest.

"What?!"

"You heard me! Now don't come back at me saying that you don't know how to do this. It may be that no elf has ever tried such a thing, but all the better, because it means that the sprites have never fought elves under such circumstances either! And it's possible that you may not know how to harm them in the astral plane, but that isn't a counterargument because you don't even know how to harm them here in Reality! At least this option gives you the definite advantage of shocking the sprite. All the great military leaders strove to utilize the benefit of surprise!"

"But Djuli, do you think I could tamper with the sprite there?"

"You might be able to."

"Surely not! I would only succeed if he allowed me to, since he also has a will, and..."

"That's good! If you can't alter him, then surely he can't alter you either because you have a will too. So right away you're protected from him!"

"As long as I'm in the astral plane! In fact not even then, because if the sprite isn't able to kill me directly, he could do so indirectly by thinking up some creatures who could indeed hurt me!"

"Ah, we finally got there! I knew that if we worked together we would come up with a solution!" said Djuli clapping.

"What are you so happy about?!"

"Don't you understand? You could create some creatures who could kill the sprite!"

"Come on, at best there would be a great battle between the sprite's creatures and mine!"

"Possibly, but what's to say yours won't win and destroy the sprite?!"

"Just that a marid is sure to be inconceivably stronger than me, so when both our combatants are dropping dead, the loss won't be significant for him. However I will tire quickly, and be finished off in the same way as if I hadn't attempted this complicated means of escape!"

"You shouldn't be attempting escape but victory!" uttered Djuli, shaking Tila by the shoulders without regard. "Listen to me, little elf... I've lived here in this cruel world since birth, and I know that on several occasions clever warlords have reaped victory over enormous superiority! You just have to design your army skillfully and lead them into battle, that's all!"

"Oh, I don't understand these sorts of things, and I don't have any experience in destruction!"

"Alright, then I will fight the marid instead of you!" Djuli stood up boldly, placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest before Tila.

"You?!" said Tila in astonishment.

"Yes, me! Believe me, I have a lot more experience in the field of killing and war than you do. Firstly because I've killed several times, secondly because I've often seen others being killed, and thirdly because I've heard so much about these sorts of things!"

"But you don't even know how to go up to the..."

"You will send me there!" Djuli cut in.

"But you don't have enough strength to..."

"Then you'll give me that strength!" interrupted Djuli again.

"But..."

"Or is that something that can't be solved?"

"It can be solved, but then I'll be giving so much of myself to you, and you're not even an elf..."

"Tila, the only time I would want you to do this is if the marid shows up! Then it won't matter to you anyway, and I might be able to help. All you have to do is throw the marid and I over into that wonderland you call the astral plane!"

Tila was silent for a while, then said, "Okay. We'll try it. You're right, if a marid comes then nothing really matters to me anymore. And really, why not entrust the battle to warriors?"

"You'll see, it will work. My mother told me so!" said Djuli, hugging her.

However Tila could not enjoy Djuli's affection for long, for she soon became tired. "Djuli, I really must sleep! We elves don't generally sleep in Elfland, but all these new experiences have exhausted me. I could just eat a crystal and that would fix me, but it seems like an unnecessary waste. I might need it for something else."

"You're right, just go to sleep," Djuli smiled. And in that moment Tila's head fell onto the mattress. Djuli looked at her lovingly and carefully covered her with a blanket.

Chapter 8: The Little Elf

It must have been a rather intense experience for Tila to fall down to Earth and observe the kind of barbarian world she had found herself in, because she did not awaken for quite some time. It was not only her that remained sleeping but Djuli too. In fact the first one to open her eyes the next morning was little Tin, who for a long time just lay there leisurely doing nothing but stare up at the ceiling. After awhile she sighed, got up, and wolfed down the two segments of apple she found on the plate that had not been eaten by Tila the previous night. As she ate she watched Tila with a slight smile on her face, and finally tiptoed carefully to the door and stepped out.

Outside the bright disc of the Sun was just emerging from the horizon. Everybody was starting to wake up. Tin looked around somewhat hesitantly for a place to sit where the Sun's rays, which were now becoming warmer, would not be prevented from freely reaching her. She found such a place not far from her room. Tin sat down, pulled her legs up beneath her and propped her back against the wall. She sat there motionless, closing her eyes and blissfully smiling.

Perhaps ten minutes had passed when an older slave woman, Trikma, came by. She had been around when Tila first came to. However this time she had not come by because of Tila, but simply to fetch water from the nearby well for use in the kitchen.

"Good morning, aunt Trikma!" greeted Tin, without even opening her eyes.

Trikma was so frightened by the sudden outburst that the water pitcher fell from her hand, which fortunately didn't break as it was made of metal. "You... you... but you're..."

"I'm not crazy anymore. Tila healed me," responded Tin, her eyes still shut.

"How did you know it was me passing by? What happened to your eyes? Why aren't you opening them?!"

"There's nothing wrong with my eyes, it's just so nice to bask in the sun! The Sun gives me strength," replied Tin, her eyes now open. However she was looking at Trikma so oddly that it made the slave's flesh crawl, perhaps not from fear but she couldn't figure out why else.

"What's wrong, dear Tin?" she asked.

"There's nothing wrong, aunt Trikma. I feel wonderful!" and Tin continued to smile. But her eyes still looked strange, and the whole smile seemed somehow unnatural to Trikma. No human smiled like that.

"Oh Tin... I'm so happy that you've come back to us... but... but please tell me what's wrong!"

"I'm telling you, there's nothing wrong with me! Don't worry, aunt Trikma, I'm perfectly well, in fact I've never felt better in my life! Aunt Tila healed me, and now I'm even healthier than I was before!"

"Tila can heal... the er..."

"Insane. Yes. Or anyone else. Because she's an elf!"

"I don't know what an 'elf' is. Lady Varbilma said Tila was a slave!"

"Varbilma is stupid and evil. Tila is an elf, and an elf just means someone like Tila, or me."

"What are you talking about?! Tin, my dear, I may not know what an elf is, but I'm certain that you're a human!"

"I was. But I've decided that I don't want to be a human anymore. From now on I am an elf, and I will live as an elf lives! It's not impossible, because while I was sleeping Tila told me that humans actually are elves, they've just degenerated. But Tila has healed me, and from now on everything depends on my goodwill. I may not be a highly skilled elf, but I don't care if I'm the most inexperienced among them. I see myself as an elf and I can't think any differently, because humans are bad and evil and they hurt each other! I saw Elfland through Tila's eyes, and if the elves come to get Tila then I'm going with them! I want to live there in the crystal city!"

"In which city?!"

"In Elfland! Where the speaking grapes and golden apples and bell peaches grow!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"You probably don't understand, aunt Trikma, because Tila hasn't shown you any images of it. But Elfland is a wonderful place and I've seen it! I've seen it because Tila showed it to me. She accidentally fell down here, and I even know that it happened because she wanted to help an elf my own age. Her name was Iki. Oh, Elfland is such a magnificent place! Just imagine, aunt Trikma, that you're floating above the crystal trees and everything is full of light... Everything smells wonderful, there are no wild animals, no poisonous plants, the fruits give off light and everyone loves each other..."

Tin spoke to Trikma about Elfland for a long time. The slave woman listened in amazement, completely forgetting about the water. Finally the cook stepped out of the house and snapped at her. "Hey Trikma, what's happening with that water?!"

Trikma winced as if she had awoken from a dream. Tin had described the place so beautifully that it made her feel cozy and relaxed. "I'll bring it right away!"

"Why haven't you done it yet? Have you been lazing about?!"

"No, it's just that a miracle has happened! Tin has been healed!"

"What?! Are you sure?"

"Well... it does at least appear to be so..." Trikma decided not to mention the strange things Tin had spoken about. If the little girl was telling the truth then she was no longer insane, but even if she was still insane, she was already on the path of improvement because she was previously unable to move nor utter a single word.

The news astounded the cook. "I must report this to the master immediately!" she said, and went off to do so.

Trikma left Tin where she was, quickly running to fetch the water so she could be back here by the time Mr. Numo arrived. She was curious about what he would say to the fact that Tin no longer considered herself a human but some kind of elf. Although she had to hurry, she managed to get back in time to see Mr. Numo ambling out of the house. But he wasn't alone—Varbilma accompanied him. It seemed the lady was also curious.

"Good morning, uncle Numo! And you, aunt Varbilma!" greeted Tin as they approached her.

"How dare you speak to us in such a manner! And stand up immediately!" snapped Varbilma.

"I don't feel like standing up. And could you please stand somewhere where you're not blocking the Sun from me! After all, the Sun isn't your property."

"What?! This is unheard of! This..."

"My dear, leave her alone! She's probably not completely well yet," said Numo, trying to calm her.

"But this is rebellion! This little slave waster..."

"I am not a slave, I'm an elf!" said Tin, and with that she stood up, but only because Varbilma was still obscuring the Sun. She now moved sideways a few steps and was standing in the sunshine again.

"What are you, my dear?!" came the sound of Djuli's voice suddenly, who had meanwhile woken up.

"An elf, like Tila. Of course not as smart, and not as educated. But still an elf. And it's a well-known fact that an elf cannot be a slave."

"I'll show you that you're a slave, you little bastard! If you don't listen and you're cheeky, I can tread on you like a worm!" Varbilma's voice was trembling with indignation.

"You could do that," nodded Tin, "and you could of course beat me and even kill me. But I still won't be a slave. I shall remain an elf in every possible circumstance, in the worst case a dead elf! I am no longer a slave. I can't be, because a slave is ordered to do things that an elf isn't allowed to do!"

"Now listen, I'm not going to hear any more rebellious talk from you! If you're healed I'm glad, but then make yourself useful if you know what's good for you! Go over to the henhouse and cut the head off one of the chooks. Then defeather and gut it, because I want roast chicken for lunch! And I don't want to hear any objections, otherwise there'll be hell to pay!"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, aunt Varbilma! I don't want to offend you in any way, which is why I'm calling you 'aunt', and Numo 'uncle', even though you don't deserve it because you're as evil as a sprite! I'm trying to be polite, but this doesn't mean I'm going to obey you. And now you want me to commit murder! How could I, an elf, do such a horrible thing?!"

"Who in God's name is asking you to commit murder?!"

"You just told me to cut a chicken's head off! And of course I can never kill a single living creature again!"

"You stupid thing, you fool... If you don't kill, you can no longer eat meat!"

"That's right, so from now on I won't eat meat!"

"Fine, that's your business. But *I* however *do* want to eat meat, so..."

"No, no, please don't go on!" said Tin, shaking her head. "I can't take part in a crime such as this! Even if you beat me up or have me raped by your brother! Not even if you kill me! If I did anything like that I wouldn't be an elf, and I'd rather be dead than not be able to leave with the elves when they come to get Tila. I won't take that risk, it's out of the question!"

"I don't need my brother here to teach you a lesson," said Varbilma, stepping forward. But Numo caught his wife's arm.

"What are you talking about, Tin?" asked Numo, squinting suspiciously.

"Please understand, uncle Numo, that I cannot commit murder! It's..."

"We'll talk later about how you feel regarding murder and slavery, but what is it you were saying about Madun? Did he rape you?!"

"It was hardly rape, since a slave can't be raped. They're required to be obedient to their masters!" said Varbilma quickly.

"Aha, so Madun did rape her!" retorted Mr. Numo.

"Not just him... there were others too, a good dozen of them!" said Tin. "And it really wasn't very nice of them because it hurt me very much, and I told them that I didn't want to, but it was no use screaming because they just did it anyway. I'd still be insane if Tila hadn't healed me!"

"I suspected something like this had happened to her," Numo frowned. "I could sense it, and was almost certain. It did occur to me that she'd gone insane just after your brother had visited!" He looked at Varbilma angrily. "I'll have you know that I never liked Madun, and from now on he is banned from entering my house!"

"You can't do that, he's my brother! And besides, he didn't rape anybody because Tin is a slave, and these sorts of things belong to the work of a slave. Madun is no worse than the others, and you're no better than him either! You also enjoy the slave women, even though you're married and have a wife, me, and Madun is still a bachelor! You can't possibly reproach anything like this, and let me tell you another thing—I know that you've slept with Djuli on more than one occasion!"

"But at least Djuli's a grown woman, not a little girl!" shouted Numo. "I'm not going to take responsibility for this. Besides, if I sleep with a slave woman, I don't allow other men to take part at the same time! If I had known this I'd never have let him into my estate! Dozens of them, and such a young girl! This would have even been an excessive punishment! It's outrageous! After all, I've always been satisfied with Tin. Listen to me, Varbilma. I understand that you're defending your brother, but this really is too much. I would have actually preferred it if you'd told me immediately after he'd done this to Tin. Even if we disregard the moral side, it can't be denied that this event was what caused her insanity and in turn harmed us!"

Djuli began to feel a dark plume writhing in her soul, like some thick evil snake, and said, "But Mr. Numo, Varbilma could not have only known about it afterwards, because she was already aware of what Madun wanted to do with Tin beforehand. She herself brought Tin to her brother and his buddies, even though I tried to stop her with all my strength, but she had me beaten up! It was futile protesting, as she'd done it because Madun had made a bet with his buddies that he could push his dick into such a small girl. This was planned in advance, and Varbilma knew all about it!"

"What?!" roared Numo. "Is this true?!"

"Yes, aunt Varbilma really did drag me to Madun," said Tin.

"How could you do something like this?!" Numo stared at his wife, angry as a bull.

"Why are you getting so riled up? How was I to know that she'd go insane over such a trifle, and..."

"You wouldn't see it as a trifle if a dozen men were to rape *you*, even as an adult!" said Djuli unsolicited.

"You shouldn't have said anything, you dirty little telltale! Don't worry, you'll get what's coming to you!" and Varbilma stepped towards Djuli with her hand raised.

But at that moment she began to shriek because Numo was grabbing the back of her hair and pulled it so hard that she fell back, landing painfully on her buttocks. "You despicable woman! You'll get what's coming to you right now!" shouted Mr. Numo, giving her several decent kicks.

Varbilma attempted to drag herself away, still screeching. Numo had stopped kicking her, but now bent down in order to hit her instead. "I'll have you know that I'm not going to be a henpecked husband that tolerates your brother ruling over my estate! What are you thinking, shoving little girls in front of his dick, hey?! How can your brother presume that if I don't rape children then he can?! Here, in my own house! You piece of trash! You are useless at bearing children for me—a single girl was all you could manage, and now I discover that you destroyed Tin with the help of your brother, when I always liked that child! What were you thinking, you bitch, dragging Tin over with your own hands to satisfy the dirty desires of that pub-crawling drunken gang?! What are you, a wife or a pimp?! I'm fed up with your good-for-nothing brother's sex antics, who is slowly draining me of my wealth! And if that's not enough for him, now he's destroying my slaves! I forbid him once and for all from coming here... he's banned forever!" He had continued beating Varbilma during his speech, and now her nose was bleeding.

Meanwhile Djuli watched her mistress with a sardonic smile on her face, and she not only failed to run and help her, but didn't even say a word. Little Tin however was continually screaming, "Enough, enough!" She finally ran over and positioned herself in front of Varbilma's face, saying to Numo, "Don't beat her anymore, it's not what I want!"

"Get out the way! Don't be a fool, she deserves it! I'm hitting her because of what she did to you!"

"The reason I won't allow it isn't because I'm a fool, but because I'm an elf! Please stop, uncle Numo—I don't want you to hurt her!"

"You can't tell me what to do with my wife!"

"Tin, get away from there! You told me yourself that Varbilma is evil!" said Djuli.

"She *is* evil, but I'm not defending her because she's good, it's because *I'm* good! I'm an elf, and an elf doesn't tolerate somebody getting hurt, especially if they themselves are the cause!"

"Don't interfere with the affairs of the masters!" said Djuli, and stepped over to grab Tin's arm and drag her away. Tin fiercely resisted, but Djuli was much stronger.

"Leave me alone, Djuli! You shouldn't be bad either. Varbilma should not be hurt. Nobody should ever be hurt!"

"Oh, my silly little child, don't be an even bigger fool than Tila, since you've been living in this world your whole life!"

"I may have lived here, but I'm not willing to conform to the laws I believe are bad!"

The argument between Djuli and Tin was unnecessary however, because Tin had achieved her goal. She had held Numo up for so long that his initial anger toward Varbilma had passed. He had stopped beating her, and now pulled her up off the ground, flung her toward the house and gave her a parting kick on the backside, shouting, "Clear off, you family disgrace, and pay good attention to what I said—I don't want to see Madun here again, because if I catch him I'll tie you both together and throw you into the river! Do you understand?!"

"I... I..." Varbilma stammered. No intelligible sound came out of her mouth. Her tears were flowing, her snot mixing with the blood from her nose, and whining noises erupted from her throat.

This was the second time in her life she had been beaten (the first was also by Numo, after the death of the sheep), however this time it was much more severe.

"Stop whining like a dog!" snapped Numo, and picked up the water pitcher Trikma had brought, pouring ice cold water onto Varbilma. "Well, have you come to your senses?! Get out of here and pull yourself together! Take what I said very seriously, and keep in mind—I don't want to hear that you've beaten Djuli or Tin! Djuli did the right thing in telling me what I ought to know about, and Tin doesn't deserve a beating—I've always been very satisfied with her, and she's suffered quite enough already! Perhaps you haven't noticed, you stupid goose, that I love Tin as if she were my own daughter! Or don't you care? Well, get out of my sight!" With that he stroked Tin's head, then went off somewhere to calm down. He usually went fishing at times like this, so Djuli assumed that was where he was going now. As he was leaving he could be heard grumbling, "The hell with it, I have a right to be the master of my own house!"

"What's happened here? What's all this shouting about?" asked Tila. They hadn't even noticed she was standing in the doorway. It seemed that she had also awoken, and Djuli explained to her what had happened.

"Ah, so Numo did something bad to the woman who you say is his wife?"

"Yes, he beat his wife."

"Well, I still don't quite understand what a 'wife' is, the concept remains a bit vague to me, but at least I know that this Numo is a bad person!"

"No, no, on the contrary!" shouted Djuli, her eyes almost shining with excitement. "You see Tila, you must listen to me, because you know so little about the conditions here that you think the opposite of what you should about people. I'm just starting to like Mr. Numo now, because he beat Varbilma. He did it to prevent her from beating Tin, and so that the terrible things Varbilma's brother and his companions did to Tin wouldn't happen anymore. He actually defended Tin, just as if you were protecting her from a sprite!"

"But it was still a nasty thing for uncle Numo to do! It would have been enough to just scold her and tell her that he won't allow these sorts of things to happen to me anymore," said Tin.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't die and that you're healed," smiled Tila. "And you were able to stand between Numo and Varbilma...?"

"Of course, so he wouldn't beat her anymore! Surely you would have done the same thing!"

"Well, I'm not so sure about that..." said Tila musingly. "I would have felt a strong urge to do so initially, but perhaps after I'd given it some thought... well, I guess it's not entirely impossible that I wouldn't have done it."

"But Tila, you're an elf!"

"Of course I am, however I'm not living in Elfland but here on Earth! For the time being at least."

"An elf remains an elf wherever they are!"

"Certainly, but they don't behave the same way everywhere."

"Yes they do!"

"No, they don't. After all Tin, don't forget that an elf is an elf only as long as they are alive. If they are dead they are no longer an elf, just a dead body. So an elf has to behave in a way that ensures they can stay alive."

"That's not true! Tila, I'm disappointed in you. I can see that you're a bad elf!"

"Interesting... I was told that a lot in Elfland too. They're probably right, but I can't wriggle out of my skin!"

"Tila, how is it possible that I'm a better elf than you, when you gave me a bunch of your own memories?! Have you forgotten that an elf is only an elf if they think in an elf-like way?!"

"I like being an elf, Tin, but I like living even more! I don't like killing, but I can see that your thinking has changed in many ways while you were sleeping, and it seems that mine has too. I decided that if at all possible I will serve the Good. But I consider myself part of the Good, therefore it's Good if I stay alive! Since I can only serve the Good if I'm alive, then the most important Good is to keep myself alive. So first and foremost I want to be alive, and only after that an elf. Why shouldn't I decide this? Here on Earth I even have to wear a dress made of cloth, because the light dress isn't enough to protect me from thorns. I've had somewhat similar thoughts in Elfland too. Here on Earth it's necessary to live differently than in Elfland, simply because the Earth is not Elfland. I will do whatever it takes to stay alive—Djuli was right about that yesterday. I have to do this. Of course I'll try to remain worthy of the elves, but only as long as it isn't going to result in my death!"

"Well I believe the opposite. The most important thing to me is being an elf, and I only want to be alive if I can do so as an elf!" said Tin firmly, and looked at Tila in a way that no one would have expected from an eight year-old girl.

"I'm sorry, my little one, but you're a human and you can't be an elf!" Tila caressed her head.

"But why not?"

"Do you think the elves would accept you?"

"Yes. If I'm good enough they would. And you can vouch for my behavior being sufficiently elf-like. I don't want you to lie, just tell the truth, and I'll show you that I'm good enough!"

"But even if you did, it still wouldn't be possible because Elfland might take two hundred years to find me, which isn't a long time for me, but for you it is. By then you will have become old and died, and you'll no longer be here..."

"You may be right. But even so, I don't mind that much because I have a purpose now, and if I have a purpose in my life then it's worth living! The path leading up to this goal will be fulfilling in itself!"

"You can't do magic either..."

"Perhaps not the kind of magic an ordinary elf can do. Although I think..." and with these words Tin suddenly threw off all her clothes.

"What are you doing?!" Djuli exclaimed. "Get dressed immediately, it's cold this morning!"

"Right away, mother Djuli!" said Tin, and in the next moment a light dress was glowing around her. It was similar to Tila's light clothing, although far from as perfect. The stripes were uneven and a black band appeared here and there, which from Tila's experience meant she still had anger and hatred in her, even if only a little. But it was not easy to become an elf instantly.

It looked as if the light dress was torn in certain places, and Tin's body could be seen through the gaps. The torn areas were not in fixed locations, but as though being driven by interference, they drifted around Tin, trembling, wavering, some bigger than others. In any case, it was still amazing. Djuli had certainly not imagined that Tin would "get dressed" in this manner, but even Tila assumed the little girl wasn't capable of such a thing. It seemed that the healing had been successful beyond her expectations.

Trikma, who presumed that after Varbilma's beating the woman had more pressing concerns than eating chicken, decided that she had a bit of time to spare before bringing more water, therefore was standing a little farther away and curiously eavesdropping. After seeing Tin's feat she cried out, not knowing whether it was from amazement or fear, and ran off.

"Well, it's not that impossible to believe I'm becoming a real elf, is it?!" Tin exclaimed proudly.

"But... but you're obviously a human, not an elf!" marveled Djuli, her jaw literally dropping.

"I was what I was, but I've now decided that I'm an elf, and it seems that it's affected not only my morals but a lot of other things as well," the little girl explained in a surprisingly grown-up way.

"She's right about that, we can't deny it," nodded Tila.

"Tila, please explain this to me!" Djuli demanded.

"There's nothing to explain. It's just as Tin has said, there's no more I can say. The best I can do is tell you that this is an eloquent testimony that you humans are essentially elves. You all have the potential hidden within you to be elves, and sometimes it can be embodied and released if certain circumstances help it along. Tin was assisted by the crystal, among other things."

"So when a person here becomes a wizard, they are born with these abilities, and it's actually a throwback from our elf ancestors?"

"Yes, I think this is a manifestation of some of the elves' abilities."

"So Tin doesn't possess all the abilities of an elf then?"

"Probably not, since if every ability was apparent she'd simply be an elf and that's that."

"Elves must inevitably be much more powerful wizards than even the greatest human wizards..."

"I believe this is generally the case. But don't forget what I've already warned you about—it's only *me* that thinks this. It's just the chatter of an elf child, Djuli!"

"Even still, you understand these things better than me, and I believe you. So is Tin a real elf now?"

"I didn't believe it was possible either, but I can't close my eyes to the facts. I think the girl is right, and she really has actually become an elf. Although I'd prefer to say that she's been healed, since I believe that under normal conditions, humans are not humans but elves. And of course, as I can see on her light dress, she's a very naive and uneducated elf. But with diligent practice she can still improve her abilities significantly. I don't think she could probably ever reach my level, which is at least average in Elfland, but in a few centuries..."

"She won't live that long!" shouted Djuli.

"I think she may now be immortal, or her life has at least been prolonged a great deal, and I don't doubt that if Elfland finds her the Great Elders will accept her and make her immortal."

"Tila, please give me a crystal and let me eat it!"

Tila shook her head. "No, Djuli. I'm certain that you wouldn't become an elf from doing that."

"That's not true! Tin became an elf! And don't forget that if I hadn't let you know about the crystals I could have kept them all!"

"Djuli, the reason I'm not giving you a crystal is not because I hold a grudge. Please listen and try to understand—Tin has been changed not solely because of the crystals. This was a conscious decision on her part, and she hasn't spoken about anything else since she's been able to talk, so we can believe her."

"Alright, then I'm also going to decide consciously that from today onward I will be an elf!"

"Why?"

"Because it'd be great to be an elf! I want to live forever, and I want to understand magic..."

"Why do you want to understand it?"

"Why... why?! So they stop treating me so badly, so I can protect myself, and so I can kill those who wrong me and avenge my grievances!"

"You see Djuli, this is precisely the reason it wouldn't work for you. Tin doesn't want to be an elf in order to live forever. That didn't even occur to her. On the contrary, she would rather die than live a life in which she can't be an elf. So eternal life is definitely not her motive. And then you want

to use magic to harm others, which is the exact opposite of how elves think! Tin even protected Varbilma's face so that Numo couldn't beat the woman. You were here, you saw it! Tin did this, even though Varbilma had done something very bad to her. Look at Tin's light dress and how little dark color it contains. She barely has any hatred in herself, and there's no doubt that when she overcomes this her magic abilities will improve, because the bad thoughts that are using up much of her strength will then be released. I would be more than happy to give you a crystal if it would turn you into an elf, but it makes no sense to waste it right now. First you must change yourself—your internal thoughts, your attitude to life—and if this happens then yes, I will give you a crystal. But not yet. Because if I give you one now, there may not be any left for a time when it could actually be useful to you. And you wouldn't want that either!"

"But I don't understand this Tila, because you also said that you're now willing to do wrong to others in order to stay alive, yet I don't think that will prevent you from being able to do magic!"

"Of course it won't. But I've always been an elf. An elf can do such things and still remain an elf. But this is different—it's different when somebody who isn't an elf wants to become one. Besides, I'm sure that if I began thinking evil thoughts, my power would gradually diminish and soon I wouldn't be able to do magic anymore. I only said that I would defend myself, and perhaps others who are worthy of it, but not with anger or emotions, not in a manner that would cause more discomfort to someone than necessary. You're talking about revenge, which doesn't solve anything. However defense and vengeance are two very different things!"

"Would you like to take revenge on the sprites?"

"Yes, but according to the Great Elders this feeling is not appropriate. In any case, I'm not as highly skilled in magic as the Great Elders, and it's probably because I think this way!"

"I can't help it... I hate the men who killed my mother, my people, who sold me into slavery and beat me, who... Oh, I hate nearly everybody! I hate the world, but you can't be surprised about that Tila, since the world ruined me!"

"Djuli, these feelings are rather incomprehensible to me, and also illogical. Since I'm also part of the world, and I'm sure I belong to the better part of the world for you because I healed your back!"

"If you don't want to be a slave, Djuli, don't fill your head with thoughts of revenge but with how you can cease being a slave," advised Tin.

"Oh my darling girl, it's not that simple!"

"But it's very simple! Just declare that you're not a slave and that's it! You were here, you heard how I did it!" replied the little girl. "If someone is willing to die for their freedom or convictions, then nobody can rule over them!"

"But I don't want to die!"

"Then you don't hate the world as much as you said. Now you must decide—what do you value more? Life, and I mean any kind of life, or freedom? Because listen, neither Varbilma nor Numo considers me a slave anymore, and all I had to do was open my mouth!"

"Yeah sure, Varbilma almost beat you to death, and she would actually beat me to death if I did the same, because Mr. Numo wouldn't protect me! And more to the point, he wouldn't have even protected *you* if his daughter had still been alive, because then *she* would be the one he loved. If I hadn't have..." She suddenly broke off mid-sentence.

The long silence made Tin suspicious and she asked, "What did you do and when, Djuli?"

"Ah, nothing, it doesn't matter..."

"It does! You're being very suspicious, Djuli. Tell me!"

"Ultimately I don't have any responsibility to you, and I'm not obliged to tell you everything I do!"

"Yes you are. To me you are, in any case," asserted Tila.

"And why is that, Tila?"

"Because I need to know everything about this world, and because I'm supposedly your friend!"

"This is not the kind of thing that..."

"Djuli, two types of deeds exist in the world. Good deeds and those to be ashamed of. It's easy to talk about good deeds, but if you don't tell me then I have to believe you did something shameful, and I might assume that it's more severe than it actually is."

"Well, okay..." sighed Djuli, and told her about how she had failed to save Mr. Numo's daughter, even though she could have. She emphasized that she had decided this because of Varbilma allowing Tin to be raped, and also mentioned that it had to do with the long-term justice of the world that her mother had spoken to her about.

Tila listened to the story in horror. Tin felt likewise. Finally Tila just said, "Djuli, I believe that you also feel that what you did wasn't right."

"But I'm not even sure I could have saved her! By the time I'd noticed she had probably already petted the fox and caught rabies!"

"That's possible of course, but keep in mind that this isn't primarily about the little girl."

"Then what's it about?"

"Yourself. Because you can't know whether or not you could have saved her, even if you had tried, and since then it's been constantly on your mind. The question is whether this action did any good, and of course the answer is no. You weren't able to help Tin by doing this."

"But I got revenge!"

"And this is a good thing?"

"Yes, because Numo and Varbilma were miserable!"

"I don't think it's such a good thing if someone is sad."

"It was good for me!"

"Really? Are you sure that seeing their grief caused you more joy than remorse for this deed? And it's not only what you've been feeling until now, because it will accompany you for the rest of your life!"

Djuli did not reply.

"You see, revenge doesn't solve anything!" said Tin, hugging her.

Djuli was silent, and when she began speaking it was about something else entirely. "It would be better for you to dress in normal clothing, my darling. This light clothing doesn't protect you from the cold!"

"Believe me, I don't feel cold at all!"

"But it's chilly at dawn."

"I know, but it must be because of my elfness!"

"Even so, you should still get dressed. Let's not make a fuss. Besides, there are thorns and mosquitoes too..."

Tin obeyed.

Meanwhile Tila was getting restless. "I really don't want to cause any inconvenience, but I am rather hungry."

"Actually, we usually have breakfast in an hour, but I don't think it matters in the present circumstances, since everybody is dealing with the row between the master and the mistress. So let's just go to the kitchen and we can ask the cook for something for you too," said Djuli.

So that's what they did, and Tin went along with them. She was also hungry, which was not surprising because she really was skinny, having eaten hardly anything during her period of insanity. Djuli's attempts to feed her mouthfuls had been in vain. Her slender body gave the impression that she was barely six years old, as opposed to eight, and her height was lower than average for this age too.

Stepping into the kitchen they saw that several of the slaves were already there, eating at a wooden table. It had obviously occurred to others as well that keeping the regular breakfast time wasn't so important right now. They were all talking loudly, but as soon as the three entered all eyes were focused on them and everyone went silent. Suddenly one of the men nudged Trikma.

"See, you fool, I knew that you were imagining things! It isn't true at all that Tin is wearing a light dress!"

That was all they needed, as now everybody began talking at the same time. Most of them were asking Djuli how it had happened, the master beating up Varbilma. Was it true that he did it because of Tin? Was it true that Tin was healed? And was it really Tila who had healed her? Because they had heard that Tila was an elf. But what did 'elf' mean? Did it mean that she was a doctor from a faraway country? Or that the name of her people was 'Elf', like the name of Djuli's people was 'Zunzan'? Was it true that Tin had stated that she no longer considered herself a slave? Because if she had then she was still crazy, just not as much as before. What would she do if Mr. Numo didn't give her back her freedom?

The only thing they did not ask was whether Numo had beaten up Varbilma. That was obviously true, as several of them had seen her crying and dragging herself to her room with a blood nose. She had even summoned Trokinga to take care of her wounds, who was a slave herself but also in a way her confidante. Trokinga was still with Varbilma, but when she ran out to get some hot water she mentioned that Varbilma had been beaten up very badly and was still furious at Numo, Djuli and Tin. Varbilma had said that she did not understand how Numo could love Tin, if he did in fact love her and wasn't just saying it, since Tin was not only a slave but wasn't even an especially pretty slave girl. There were far prettier slave children on their estate. It was incomprehensible to her what he liked about Tin when she was as thin as a rail, had a bony body devoid of softness, there were giant bags under her eyes and her hair was constantly tangled. Varbilma was simply bewildered that she was beaten up because of this child. The reason she had sent Tin to her brother that time was precisely because Tin was in this state, and such a child should not be pitied.

So the slaves gossiped loudly, and of course all of them were curious about the responses of those concerned. All Tila had to say was that she had indeed healed Tin. She had nothing further to add because she didn't know the situation and conduct here, and besides, the food on offer interested her more. There was some kind of strange-colored porridge, a watery soup, a few vegetables, and apples—which they had plenty of right now, but it was all completely foreign to Tila. She was smelling the soup with particular suspicion.

Djuli on the other hand had more than enough to feed their curiosity. She told them that elves lived up in the sky, in a wonderful crystal city where golden apples grew on the trees. There were speaking grapes, bell peaches and many other kinds of unimaginable beauties. They could even fly if they wished. They loved each other very much, and were unable to cause others harm because elves were such good beings. She mentioned that Tila had had an accident and fallen down here, but because she had such great power she survived this great fall into the sea. And it was clear that Tila really was goodhearted because she healed Tin, which was not surprising since she was an elf, and elves could do magic because they were all wizards with exceptional abilities. Tila was eager to be

of benefit to humans, but was only willing to do the sort of magic that would not hurt others—she refused to do anything else. For this reason nobody should think that Tila was going to be a slave here, because she would naturally only do what she believed was appropriate. And they shouldn't dare to treat her badly, as making an elf angry was not wise and would have consequences. After all, Tila's goodness did not mean that she wouldn't protect herself!

Djuli did not talk to the others about the sprites. She didn't think they would understand and besides, it was none of their business.

"Okay, well I'm not sure whether I believe all this," said Evla, the hefty old cook, "but it seems that Tin also considers herself to be an elf."

"Yes, because Tila could only heal her by changing her into an elf. But to do this it was also required that Tin be so good that she wasn't capable of feeling hatred. Those who don't think in this gentle manner can't be elves. That's why I can't be an elf, because I'm obviously capable of feeling hatred—I could happily kill Varbilma at anytime!"

"Not Mr. Numo?" asked Evla curiously.

"Until now I would have gladly killed him, but not anymore. Now I almost admire him since he punched Varbilma in the face. But one thing is certain, I don't like him so much that I want to be his bed-warmer! I will never sleep with him again, no matter what he says. From now on it's not only Tin that refuses to be a slave, I won't be one either!" and she looked around proudly at their astonished faces. She decided she would accept the little girl's advice, and hoped that if it got her into trouble, Tila would protect her. Anyway, this was her only chance to become free, as long as Tila didn't wander off somewhere away from the estate for good, or a marid didn't eat her up. In the worst case they weren't likely to kill her, as things were going badly enough for the Numo household right now for them to kill a healthy slave. At most they would beat her up, but she was used to that as it had occurred so frequently since being a slave.

"Be careful Djuli, slave rebellion is severely punished!" Trikma warned her.

Djuli just shrugged in response.

"So now you're not even going to work?" inquired Trikma further.

"I will, because I can see that I wouldn't get anything to eat otherwise! I just won't tolerate Varbilma slapping me for no good reason, and if her brother comes with his friends I'm not going to be their whore, and I won't submit to them..."

"Not even to Mr. Numo?"

"Of course not! I'm just as worthy a human as him!"

"This will not end well, Djuli. I could be rubbing ointment on your whipped back for weeks..."

"My back? Just take a look, Tila healed it!" and with that Djuli, ignoring decency, threw off her upper garment and displayed her back to the women, and even the men. Then she got dressed again.

"That's great, but if Tila only knows how to heal..." Evla began.

"That's not all she knows. She will definitely protect me and stay close to my side, won't you Tila?" Djuli asked the elf.

"I'll protect you, Djuli," promised Tila, "and of course I'll be with you because I want to get to know your world. But I'll only protect you if you don't do nasty things to others!"

"I won't do any such thing!"

Tila muttered something incomprehensible, but it seemed to Djuli that the elf wasn't quite sure she was telling the truth and didn't entirely trust her.

"Would you dare to hit back if Varbilma hits you?" one of the men asked Djuli.

"You bet I would! If she hits me I'll slap her face so hard her teeth will fall out! I'm stronger than her anyway, since all she does all day is fuss about while I work like a draught animal!"

"I'm telling you, Djuli, it won't end well," said mother Evla, the cook. "I'm not going to listen to any more of this rebellious talk! Your mind has been infected since this Miracle Doctor came here. I suggest you wash your face in cold water or ask Tila to bring your sanity back. In any case, I'm taking the chicken to Varbilma!"

She walked over to the spit, which was being turned above the fire by a slave child. The chicken was roasting there. "Take it off the spit, my child!" she waved to the boy. The boy obeyed, and Evla grabbed a big wooden fork to push the chicken onto a tray. But it did not want to come off. It seemed to have roasted itself onto the spit, or who knows what the problem might have been, but it did not want to budge.

"Oh, damn it! If I force it any harder I'll ruin its shape, and Varbilma likes it whole!" grumbled the cook. But she didn't dare touch it with her hand because the chicken was still so hot the fat was sizzling. She was about to grab it using a cloth, when Tila stood up.

"Leave it, I'll do it," she said, and walked over to the spit. With her left hand she grabbed hold of the hot metal right up close to the chicken, taking it from the child, then with her other hand grasped the chicken and calmly pulled it off. "Where should I put this dead bird?" she asked, still holding the skewer as well as the chicken. She had no intention of letting go of either of them, even though this kind of stunt would have burned blisters on anybody else's hands.

Everyone just gasped.

"Don't your hands hurt? Aren't they burning?" asked Trikma shocked.

"Of course not. I don't think anything on Earth is capable of burning me."

"Nothing at all? What if you fell into a volcanic crater, right into the red-hot lava?" asked Djuli.

"Well, if the lava was liquid enough I might drown. Or I could suffocate from the smoke, or get stuck under a pile of rocks. But I certainly wouldn't burn. How could I, when the lava might be only a few thousand degrees? I can't really be hurt unless the temperature is higher than a million and a half degrees. Even the Sun's surface is only six thousand degrees, I can tell by its color!"

Of course the slaves didn't know what a million was, so Tila explained that it was a thousand times a thousand. But for some of the slaves even a thousand was too big a number. In the end Tila shrugged. "Okay, if you don't understand then you don't understand. The main thing is that fire can't hurt me," and she proceeded to fiddle with the skewer. "Well, where should I put it?"

"Right here!" Evla pointed at the table. "Put the chicken here on the tray!"

Tila did as she was told.

"Although Varbilma doesn't really deserve such a delicious meal..." Djuli grumbled.

"As far as I'm concerned, anybody can eat this dead bird if they want," said Tila. "Tin for instance... she's so tiny that she could do with some extra nourishment. But that's your business. You don't have to worry about me, we elves don't eat meat. Although I must admit that it doesn't smell bad at all!"

"I don't need any, because I really do see myself as a real elf," said Tin. "But Tila, if you don't eat meat, then how come you ate that meat broth so heartily just before?"

"What... what do you mean? This is made of *meat*!?" Tila pointed at the golden brown soup, paling.

"Of course!"

"But I didn't see any meat in it!"

"You're right, us slaves very rarely get meat. But the chicken was cooked in this before it went on the spit. You know, it's good to cook chicken before roasting it—it makes the meat softer and more tender. You really did seem to be enjoying that soup, you even licked your lips afterwards, even though the soup was full of chicken fat!"

"Yes, it did taste good, I can't deny that. I almost feel as though I've eaten a crystal..."

Tila looked hesitantly at the chicken and then the soup, conflicting feelings churning within her. She didn't know if she was going to be sick or... She finally decided on the alternative.

"After all, it wasn't me who killed the poor thing..." she murmured. "I think I deserve it more than Varbilma does." Then she raised her arms and the slaves saw a miracle. The ends of Tila's hair lit up for a fraction of a second, and the chicken on the tray fell into pieces. The wings and thighs separated so perfectly that it looked as if it had not been cut with a knife but a razor. One thigh flew into Tila's hand, the other moved through the air and stopped directly in front of Djuli's face.

"I'll taste it!" stated Tila firmly. "Ultimately it wasn't me who killed it, and it's fitting that the one who does the killing shouldn't reap any benefits from it. But I want you to taste it too, Djuli, so you can tell me if it tastes like it usually does so that I'm not misled."

"Sure, I'd be very happy to taste it! I haven't eaten a chicken thigh for at least a decade now, and it's the most delicious part of the chicken!" grinned Djuli. She reached out in the air, grabbed the now cooling thigh and began to eat it, chomping down on it ravenously. And with a full mouth she beamed at Tila, who had suddenly become hesitant. "You can eat it with confidence, it's downright excellent!"

The slaves could only watch in astonishment and alarm.

"But this is Varbilma's chicken! You're not only tearing it apart, but you're eating the thighs! She'll be extremely angry!" yammered Evla. But nobody paid any attention to the cook, and of course she was afraid to do anything to oppose Tila. Whether or not she was an elf, it was certain that this Tila was a great wizard, and it would be better not to defy her. Nor Djuli for that matter, because it was quite obvious that Djuli was in Tila's good graces, and who would be a crazy enough slave to want to find fault with a wizard's protege?!

Finally Tila took a deep breath and bit into the chicken thigh. At that moment a smile broke out on her face. "I feel sorry for the poor thing, but its meat is so tasty!" she said with her mouth full.

Tin just looked at her, shaking her head. "You're a bad elf, Tila—this will only lead to trouble!"

"You can be sure of that! If Varbilma learns about this... or even Mr. Numo... he'll be angry too! A roast chicken is not intended for filling the bellies of slaves!" said Trikma.

"Numo can do me a favor for once," announced Djuli with her terse opinion. "Because I am no longer a slave, and Tila is even less of a slave than me!"

"I wasn't talking about them," said Tin, "but about Tila. Her strength will probably decrease because she's polluting herself with meat!"

"Oh, on the contrary!" and suddenly a dazzling light garment lit up around Tila. She hadn't even undressed, her human clothing completely covered by light stripes. Above her head glowed a halo, around which numerous glittering sparks were racing along with small balls of energy. It was like a miniature equivalent of the energy circle used at the Gate Opening. Such a wonderful crown had surely never been possessed by anyone before. Tila could see for herself what she looked like, as there was a tub of water in the kitchen that acted as a mirror. An extremely satisfied smile came over her face. "I've done it! At home I could never manage to store energy reserves above my head—only the Great Elders can do this! I am truly grateful to this dead bird. It may be disgusting to eat a carcass, but it sure is tasty and extremely beneficial!"

"It's an obscenity!" responded Tin.

"I know, there's no doubt about that," nodded Tila, "but I feel that in this wild world I need extra strength, even just so I can protect you in certain situations. You should eat some too—you must have liked it when you were human!"

"I did, but that was then, not now. Now I'm a real elf!"

"That's your business, my little one. But I think I'll eat some more of it!" She looked at the remainder of the chicken. "However I don't think I can eat the whole thing. Would you like some more?" she asked Djuli.

"Yes, I'd love some more if you're offering!"

Tila gestured in the direction of the chicken, and although her hair didn't light up this time, the chicken fell neatly into two pieces along the line of the breast bone. One piece flew to Tila, the other to Djuli, and they set about eating it.

"And what about Varbilma's breakfast?" asked the cook.

"I'm happy to bring her the bones..." and Djuli started laughing so hard that a piece of meat got stuck in her throat. She began to cough, and probably would have choked if Tin had not hit her on the back in time.

Finally the cook sent one of the children out to behead another chicken, even though she only had permission for one, and it would take a long time to cook. But it would be preferable to take it to Varbilma later than never. Who knew if Tila would protect her as well?

The slaves did not say anything. They could see that this was something they had better not get involved with. After all, if they took part with Tila and Djuli and later the elf flew away somewhere, it would turn out bad for them because Varbilma and Numo would take revenge. However if they took Varbilma and Numo's side—which they had no desire to do—then it could end with Tila gesturing at them like she had done with the chicken earlier, and they did not feel the need to be torn apart into two pieces as if a large sword had divided them lengthwise!

A few slaves, however, plucked up the courage to ask Tila if she would be so kind as to heal their various injuries. Some of them had whipping scars on their backs like Djuli, although in defense of the Numo household it must be said that on this estate it was not common for slaves to be violently flogged. Of course beatings did occur on occasion, but they were far less severe than what they would have been subjected to at other places. The reason for this was not that Numo and Varbilma were gentle in nature, but that neither the master nor mistress liked "extraordinary events" such as slaves rioting or escaping. So they usually bought slaves who were not "fresh meat", that is, those who had become slaves only recently after being free. Instead they preferred the relatively older ones, who were already accustomed to slavery and resigned to it, or those who were young like Tin and had been born as slaves. Such slaves, even if more expensive, were worth it because there was less trouble with them. And they weren't always more expensive, especially if they were less attractive women, because slave owners tended to favor the beautiful young ones and it was these that came at a high price. However Mr. Numo bought slaves for doing work; it didn't matter to him if they were pretty or ugly. It's true that he had slept with most of the slave women, but this was not his main consideration. He was simply not rich enough to pay for a large number of beautiful women. In fact Djuli was the most beautiful woman on the estate, but as we know she was thirty-three years old, and although she had never been an ugly girl and was still rather attractive even now, nobody would look upon her as a young, stunning beauty. And if one sometimes caught her downcast gaze, it made their blood run cold. Some of the slaves now recalled this gaze of hers, and they could bet that Varbilma wouldn't stay alive for long, now that Djuli was being protected by a wizard.

Therefore the wounds and scars caused by Varbilma or Numo were very few in number. Even Varbilma did not often have them flogged, although her hands were quick to hit. She was a strict woman and punished regularly, but she preferred to slap or kick the slaves she believed were guilty. Naturally they were afraid to hit back, even if they were stronger than her. The slapping and kicking hurt, but what was that compared to whipping!

Tila showed a willingness to treat them, in fact she began healing with great fervor. She was finally able to work, and do sensible work that didn't hurt anybody. She told them to clean up the kitchen table, which became an improvised "operating table". Those who needed healing were required to lay down on there. Tila caressed them all with her bright strands of hair, and the ugly scars on their thighs and backs disappeared at once. She treated the smaller wounds in an even simpler way, for instance if someone had a bruise on their finger it was enough for Tila to just hold it in her palm for a few moments. A nasty thorn had wedged itself under the fingernail of a teenage slave girl, and Tila just held the injured finger between two of her own fingers, causing the thorn to instantly fly out from under the fingernail, like a small sprite being kicked from behind. And it wasn't only minor injuries that Tila could heal, but even some internal organ problems. For example the cook had long been suffering from urinary difficulties, and that was now gone too.

After these miracles nobody had any doubts at all about Tila's power. The slaves swore that they had never felt better. And Tila was very happy. For the moment she didn't mind that she had fallen onto this terrible, barbarian planet. It had its advantages—she could do a lot of good here! They were all praising her when Mr. Numo stepped into the kitchen. Fortunately nobody was undergoing treatment at that time, and Tila had already turned her light dress off. The smiles froze on the slaves' faces and they pulled their heads into their shoulders. Everybody recognized that much time had passed, the morning was long gone and they should be somewhere else doing productive work. But it was such an extraordinary event to meet a wizard, and this had made them forget about everything.

Mr. Numo however did not even notice the number of idlers. He was so disgruntled that it was clear to Djuli the master's anger was far from being assuaged. He had not come back because he had calmed down and was bored of fishing, but... because he was hungry.

"Give me something to eat at once!" he ordered the cook.

Evla was in despair, as she had not prepared anything for the master. She heard that Mr. Numo had gone fishing, and because this was his favorite pastime and he didn't usually return for hours, she thought she had plenty of time to prepare his meal. But she did not have to explain, because Numo's eyes were glued to the roast chicken turning on the spit, which by now was quite crispy.

"That will do nicely. Give it to me!" he demanded, pointing at it.

This was of course the second chicken the cook had put on the spit, as the first one had been eaten by Djuli and Tila. Naturally the cook had not prepared it for Numo but for Varbilma. However she was afraid to say anything and immediately took it off the spit, even though it seemed a little raw inside, and gave it to Numo. She motioned with her eyes for the kitchen boy to go, and the child knew his duty. He ran straight out to behead another chicken. Well, this was definitely not a lucky day for the chickens!

Mr. Numo started pecking at his food in silence. The slaves had a sudden urge to be somewhere else, so they quickly left the kitchen. Nobody remained except the cook and the little kitchen boy, as it was their place of work. They were authorized to stay there. Unlike Tila, Djuli and Tin. They really had no reason to be here. At least Djuli didn't. Since Tin had been healed she had not been given any jobs to do, and nor had Tila. On the other hand, Djuli knew exactly what she was supposed to be doing. First of all, cleaning the house—sweeping, shaking the rugs out, dusting, airing the rooms, tending to the caged pet birds, polishing Mr. Numo's footwear, fluffing up the pillows and plenty of other such things. Each task on its own was not particularly strenuous, but there were so many of them that it took up Djuli's entire day, with minimal breaks, and if she had any spare time she had to go to the sea shore for fish... Yes, this was her job, not sitting comfortably in the warm kitchen! She was not authorized to be here at all. In fact this was true for Tin as well,

since she had been ordered to remain by Djuli's side, and it was logical that now she was healthy again she should be busy helping Djuli.

But Numo didn't seem to care. He just sat there with a grim look on his face, eating the chicken. Then he suddenly gestured at Tin. "Come here!"

Tin went over to him obediently.

Mr. Numo sat her beside him and caressed the little girl's hair. "Hey kid, don't be angry with me. I didn't know about the whole thing—I really didn't want it to happen. If my wife ever wants to hurt you, just tell me and I'll knock out all of her teeth! I'll protect you. It's an atrocity to do something like this to a child! And in my own house!"

"Although I have heard from your own mouth that a slave should allegedly do whatever they are ordered to!" said Djuli a little resentfully. She was not in the least moved by her master's clumsy attempt to please Tin.

"Yes, I will admit to that," said Mr. Numo firmly, "however Tin is not primarily a slave, but a child! That's the main reason all this happened to her! So we must set a boundary for the behaviors that are acceptable and those which aren't. And besides, even if Tin is a slave she is *my* slave, and I am proud of the fact that I treat my slaves well!"

Djuli had nothing to say to that. Her idea of treating slaves well was quite different than Numo's, but she couldn't deny that many slaves lived in far worse circumstances. She knew this because she had worked for several slave owners before. It was possible that a better master than Numo existed, but unfortunately she had not yet met any.

"Here you go kiddo, eat this! I'm sure you've never eaten such a delicious thigh in your life!" Numo handed Tin one of the chicken thighs.

"Thank you, but I don't want it. I can't eat meat," said Tin, staving it off.

"What do you mean you can't eat it?! I'm in charge here and I allow you to. You need it badly—you're practically skin and bones, and besides, you deserve it!"

"Thanks again, but I'm an elf now, and elves don't eat meat."

"I have no idea what an elf is, but you have to eat something! And the thigh of the chicken is very tasty!"

It was true that chicken thighs were indeed tasty, but it has to be said that Mr. Numo was not quite that generous, because for some strange reason he preferred chicken breast to thighs. He had eaten all the breast by then, so he did not really give Tin the parts he felt were most delicious. However it was still a nice gesture.

"Thank you, but I'm only allowed to eat fruits, vegetables, bread and honey. Certainly not meat and eggs!"

"And you can have milk too," blurted out Tila.

"Of course, milk too, as for that no animal has to be killed. And everything that is made from milk."

"I don't know what this foolishness is, but I'm not going to argue because I'll get all riled up again!" responded Numo, although he didn't seem particularly calm even now. "Evla, I order that from now on you must bring Tin whatever she wants to eat. Anything, in any quantity, at any time, because I'm ashamed that such a thing has happened in my house to such a little girl. As far as I'm concerned she can eat honey by the kilogram—I'm not so poor that this would ruin me. Feed her as though she were my daughter!"

"With pleasure, sir!" smiled the cook, and she turned around to place a big jar of aromatic honey on the table before Tin. The little girl happily began spooning the honey into her mouth, and seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly.

"Why don't you free her if you *supposedly* love her so much?!" asked Djuli sarcastically.

"Well, because... because... that's none of your business!" Numo uttered.

But Djuli was not frightened of him. "It *is* my business, because I love her like a daughter! Even more than you, because if I was her master I would free her straightaway!"

"It doesn't matter whether or not she's free if I love her and protect her!"

"On the contrary! It matters a great deal, because if she had been a free girl Varbilma wouldn't have done this to her!"

"She wouldn't dare do this anymore—I taught her a thorough lesson!"

"I think it's simply that you're afraid of your wife. You're nothing but a worthless bastard, a true henpecked husband, because it makes you shudder to think about how Varbilma would react if she found out that you had freed this little girl. She would accuse you of being wasteful, and when you think about this it scares the shit out of you!" stated Djuli, placing her left hand on her hip and poking her right index finger at Numo's chest.

"What?!" roared Mr. Numo.

"I'm right, or else you don't really love Tin that much! But that would be terrible because then you'd just be playing with her, pretending to love her when you really just want to take her to bed!"

"Okay you little... this is more than enough, Djuli... for god's sake, what do you think you're doing?! Do you want to end up like Varbilma?!"

"Ha! It's easy to threaten, isn't it? But it'll be futile beating me, even if you have me executed... For you'll still be afraid of Varbilma! You can't win this argument by killing me, because I won't believe that you love Tin unless you free her!"

"You fool, how could I be afraid of Varbilma when I just knocked her flat earlier?!"

"I told you already—it's easy to beat someone. But you can't beat her forever, and Varbilma will always be haranguing you about being wasteful by freeing Tin, and you don't like hearing this—you're afraid of it!"

"I am certainly not afraid of her! I'm a real man, and my wife doesn't order me around!"

"I don't believe it! Even if you beat me to death I won't believe it!"

"Okay, I'll prove it! Damn your mother! I'll prove it, but this will have consequences Djuli, because I won't tolerate such talk!"

"I knew it! Thank you, sir. Thank you so much for having me beaten after Tin is released! I just ask that you not only have me beaten but thoroughly whipped as well!"

Mr. Numo's anger had all but vanished in his great astonishment. "Heh?! What the..?!"

"Are you not feeling well, sir?" inquired Djuli with a lovely smile.

"Why would I be feeling unwell?!"

"Because you keep stammering as though you can't get your words out!"

"Djuli, I think that of the two of us, *you're* the one who isn't feeling well, not me!"

"Why's that?"

"How could you not be out of your mind, not be unwell, when you're happy for me to beat you and even beg to be whipped?!"

"Should I tell you the reason?"

"Please do," asked Numo politely. After all, it was not advisable to upset the insane.

"Because if I am harmed by you in any way after Tin's liberation, then it's undeniable that you only freed her because I fought it out with you, therefore Tin won't be free because you love her but because I was so brave and payed for it with a great beating. That is, the more severely I am beaten, the more it will prove how much *I* love Tin, and not *you*! So I ask you to please beat me awfully well after you free Tin!"

"Up yours!" Numo shouted, and snarled at the kitchen boy, "Get out of here, and call all the slaves to the courtyard right now, so I can announce Tin's freedom!"

The kitchen boy ran off and Djuli looked into Numo's face, grinning. But she could not do it for long, because although Numo didn't beat her, he stood up and rushed out of the kitchen, practically bursting with rage. He muttered something incomprehensible under his non-existent mustache, of which only one sentence could be understood: "Damn woman, how she can twist words!"

Soon all the slaves had gathered together. There were roughly a hundred of them, which wasn't really a large number, as plenty of other estates had far more workers than this. Everybody was there, even the slave supervisor. They were not surprised, because the child had spread the news to everybody that they were to assemble in front of the mansion for Tin's liberation. This was unprecedented news, since some of the slaves didn't even know that Tin had recovered or that Numo had beaten up Varbilma. In fact the child had also told them that the woman found yesterday was some kind of wizard, which certainly seemed unbelievable.

But the miracle did indeed happen—Mr. Numo stood before them and declared to everyone that Tin was a free woman, even if she was still a child, that nobody should dare to hurt or scold her, and the next time he was in town he would have her liberation letter written. However this was of little significance, as naturally a child like her could not wander about in the wild world, especially not as an orphan, because even with a liberation letter she would be caught and sold as a slave again. And if not, she would starve to death. Tin was going to be living here on the estate, and she would help in whatever way she could, but as a free woman. In fact, she was to be regarded as Numo's adopted daughter.

After this the slaves had to get back to their work. Numo turned to Djuli. "You see, I *was* capable of doing it, you cheeky insolent wench! And I'll have you know that I'm not going to beat you. No, I'm not stupid enough to give you such pleasure! Get on with your work instead! But alone... because *you*," he turned to Tin, "are coming with me. We will walk and talk for a bit. I need to clear my head. I have no desire to stay here at home with women like Varbilma and Djuli!"

"I like Djuli!" said Tin.

"Of course, of course you do, but right now I don't like her at all!" and with that he took Tin's hand and wandered over to the seashore with her.

Djuli wasn't bothered in the slightest that Mr. Numo had spoken to her in that way. She grinned even more boldly because she could see that Numo obviously had great remorse, and was trying to lessen it with his honorable attention to Tin. This may be somewhat similar, thought Djuli, to what she felt when she had not saved Numo's daughter from rabies.

Mr. Numo and Tin walked out to where they could hear the roar of the sea, and Numo said to the little girl, "Hey kid, you don't believe that I freed you just because of Djuli, do you?" he began. "Because you know, that isn't the reason. I would have done it anyway, just a little later when I could have a regular liberation letter written for you. I really do love you!"

"You don't need to explain yourself, uncle Numo, it's not important."

"How is it not important? And besides, I'm not explaining myself!"

"It's not the explanation that isn't important, although that's not either, but the liberation letter. And my freedom."

"Please don't go crazy again... of course your freedom has significance!"

"But since this morning I have no longer been a slave. In my soul I was already free, if you understand Mr. Numo, and that's what's important. Because I'm an elf, and an elf can only do what is appropriate for an elf!"

"Listen Tin, I still don't understand what this elf business is about—I'm guessing it's some sort of aftereffect from your madness. But you'd better get it out of your head, because I'd like you to be completely healthy!"

"An elf is somebody who... actually, it's probably better if I don't explain it because you wouldn't believe it. I'll show you instead."

"What?"

"This!" and Tin proceeded to throw off her dress.

"What are you doing?!" shouted Numo, who on one hand was concerned that she would catch a cold, and on the other thought that the girl was undressing because she assumed he wanted to do the same thing to her as Varbilma's brother had. But in the next moment she was dressed again. This time in her light dress.

"Heh?! What the...?!" Mr. Numo gasped, just as he had when Djuli had asked for the beating.

"Now are you beginning to understand what an elf is?" Tin asked him.

"No!" answered Mr. Numo honestly, shaking his head. But even this single word had been a delayed response.

Tin began to speak about everything she had experienced with regards to being an elf, and it took a very long time...

It was late evening by the time they got back from the seashore. Nobody had missed Numo and Tin; not even the dog went looking for them. The others had been absorbed in totally different matters.

The whole thing had begun quite harmlessly. After Djuli's altercation with Numo, the master had left the kitchen in such a hurried rage to free Tin that he had forgotten to eat the chicken thigh he had vainly offered the girl. The uneaten thigh remained on the table until the liberation ceremony, a more surprising than solemn event, had taken place. Varbilma was the only person not present, but she may not have known what was going on out there.

Later, when the slaves had left and Mr. Numo had gone off with Tin, Tila suddenly said, "I've never eaten honey before, but I find the smell appealing so I think I'd like to try some," and she went back to the kitchen. Wherever Tila went Djuli followed, because she felt secure in Tila's presence, and was also curious about what she thought of the honey.

Inside the kitchen Tila grabbed the jar of honey, and although Tin had heartily consumed the extraordinary delicacy earlier, it was still over half full. Now Tila took a wooden spoon and stuffed herself with the sweet pulp. "Wow, Djuli, this is even better than the chicken! This makes me... I can't even describe how this makes me feel... All my cells are fizzing and I'm bursting with power! And it's such a great feeling to not be eating the flesh of some living being!"

"Then go ahead and eat it, Tila, but I have to say that even though I like honey, I value a roast far more. Especially chicken, and especially the thigh! But I'm glad you mentioned that, because you've given me an idea. I'm not going to let the flies eat this thigh! If Numo left it here then I'll eat it, while you feast on the honey!" Djuli grabbed the thigh and bit into it.

At that moment the entrance of the kitchen darkened, and Varbilma stepped through.

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After Varbilma was beaten by her husband, she underwent quite a variety of mental states. At first she wasn't able to think of anything else, and just whined in fear. Then she felt sorry for herself and was able to nurse her wounds—if not her wounded soul, at least her wounded body, with Trokinga's help. Meanwhile she berated Numo relentlessly, as well as Djuli and even Tin, regardless of the fact

that Tin had protected her. This only enhanced Varbilma's anger towards her, as she hated the feeling that she ought to be grateful. She hated the whole world, especially those filthy slaves, who rebelled and snitched instead of doing work and honest service, although it was for this purpose they were created. But even that wasn't enough for some of them, such as Tin being so despicable that she was capable of going insane just to annoy her. And to top it all off she didn't stay insane forever but was healed by some vicious evil, specifically timed to cause the greatest possible inconvenience to Varbilma. What depraved people lived in the world! The only thing that slightly attenuated her immense hatred was imagining the sort of tortures she would use to kill Tin, Djuli and that sneering, lying new slave woman, Tila. In fact, now even her dear husband, Numo, was added to the list of those she wanted to torture to death!

Varbilma's heart craved revenge. However she knew that even in her current troubled state of mind she could only torture her husband to death in her imagination. Because first of all Numo was much stronger than her, and although it was not characteristic of him to be a great hero and he was no weapon expert, he did understand fighting and combat far better than her. And then there was the slave supervisor and his men, who were sure to be capable of protecting Numo. If she knocked her husband out unexpectedly it would have dire consequences, because around here the punishment for a husband-murderer was for an executioner to humiliate the woman by publicly raping her, and then shoving a glowing hot iron rod into her to burn her insides, and this would be a very unpleasant way to die!

So she could not take revenge on Numo. Nor Tin. At least for the time being, because Varbilma was hoping that this sudden love Numo had for the child would soon subside. Then in a week, a month, or perhaps a year... even then it would be satisfying. Allegedly revenge is a dish best served cold, as the saying goes. But for now she had to neglect Tin. Although there were still two individuals left she could unleash her anger upon—Djuli and Tila! And in their case she did not have to find an excuse. After all, Numo would understand that this Tila had to be made to do some useful work, as they could not feed her for free. Based on what she had heard from her yesterday, this Tila was deliberately looking for trouble. She was disobedient. She rebelled. Now she would pay her a visit, and not alone but with the slave supervisor and his men. There had to be a few slaves with them too, as witnesses, so they could see that Varbilma was not acting cruelly, but that Tila had provoked the punishment. And if she disciplined Tila then Djuli's turn would come, since she had expressly ordered Djuli yesterday evening to teach Tila, and Numo had heard this.

She almost began to dress the naked body of her thought into the fancy clothing of the act, when it occurred to her that it would be better to do this when Numo was not around. She turned to Trokinga and inquired about her husband's whereabouts. The woman went out and came back with the news that he was gathering all the slaves in the courtyard, for he was freeing Tin.

Varbilma felt that Tin had only been healed to drive her insane instead. "That damn fool Numo! He's lost his mind!" she shouted, and in her anger began tearing the bed sheets.

"My lady, please calm down!" pleaded Trokinga startled.

"What?! How dare you speak to me! Who do you think you are?! Take that! And that!" shouted Varbilma, giving her two sharp slaps on the face. She wanted to continue slapping, but Trokinga decided she'd had enough, and accepting the accusation of disobedience she left, running.

Varbilma did not go after her. Instead she peeked out the window to see that the slaves really had assembled in the courtyard, and her husband really was announcing that he was giving Tin her freedom back. It reassured Varbilma a little that the letter of liberation had not yet been prepared. It was likely that later on the whole thing could be reversed. Still, it was unheard of! For what reason

did this scrawny, emaciated little frog deserve freedom?! She hadn't even worked off what she had cost them!

After the ceremony she saw Numo depart, holding Tin's hand. Varbilma decided then that she really had to let off some steam. The best part of it was that she realized she had good reason to be angry, because it was almost noon and she had not received her lunch, nor her breakfast! Yet she had made it clear yesterday evening that she wanted roast chicken for both breakfast and lunch. Instead she had not only failed to get this for breakfast, but had not received anything. They had completely forgotten about her! What was this?! Who did they think they were?! Just because her husband beat her, it didn't mean she had to starve to death!

She stepped out of her room and called for the slave supervisor and his men, as well as six slaves she saw working here and there. These were required as witnesses, but of course she didn't tell them that—it was none of their business!

It was at this time that Varbilma walked into the kitchen. She was not planning to scold Djuli and Tila just yet but the cook woman, about why she had still not brought her any food, and specifically not what she had asked for. But as though some heavenly power had heard her prayer, in the kitchen she found the idler Djuli, wandering about without working, in fact Tila was there too! And that wasn't all... Varbilma was prepared for a lot of things, but not for what she now saw. This could not be true! Tila, the new slave woman, was gobbling down a huge jar of honey. Not eating, but gobbling—stuffing it inside herself, her hands, face, mouth and nose all sticky. And she wasn't just taking small mouthfuls, but was ladling the stuff with a huge wooden spoon, lauding how good it tasted. Of course it was good food—too good to belong in the belly of slaves! And if that were not enough, Djuli was sitting opposite Tila crossing her stretched out legs. At least she didn't have them up on the table, but this was unbelievable—she was eating a chicken thigh! They had not brought Varbilma anything to eat, absolutely nothing, and this dirty pig Djuli was gobbling up the chicken that was intended for her!

Varbilma strode into the kitchen followed by the supervisor, his men and the "invited" slaves. "So *that's* why I haven't gotten anything to eat yet! Because of you!" She pointed at Djuli, her fingers trembling from indignation, as in Djuli's hands the half-eaten chicken thigh could be seen.

All the slaves expected this to be a scandal, and could see that it was already in full swing. Nobody doubted that Djuli would not survive this without severe punishment, nor the new woman, Tila. At least not these particular six slaves, as they had not been present during the miracles Tila had performed. Only the little kitchen boy had witnessed this, who guessed that Tila was at least unlikely to be punished. Wizards were generally not known for being easily disciplined...

Djuli, however, did not seem frightened at all. Interestingly, although Tila seemed to be the guiltiest of the two as she was gobbling up the expensive honey, it was Djuli who the enraged Varbilma stood before. The two women did not even appear worried, let alone scared. Out of the entire kitchen mob, Evla the cook seemed the most frightened. First she huddled behind a large cauldron, but then realizing this was completely unsuitable for hiding her bulky body, began to explain in a whimpering, pleading voice, "My lady, I'm just in the process of preparing your chicken now..."

"And may I please know why Djuli is stuffing herself before me? How can it be that an unwashed, stinking slave is eating a chicken thigh?!"

Tila responded first. "I agree that Djuli was not particularly clean yesterday evening, at least compared to our usual elf standards, but Djuli is not an elf. On the other hand, I can attest that she does not stink in the slightest!"

"If you don't like me being dirty, then give me less work so I have time to bathe, and don't be so stingy about the fuel, so I can wash in warm water!" said Djuli, and continued to eat the chicken thigh, gnawing off the rest of the meat calmly and pointing the bone toward Varbilma to reinforce her previous comment.

Djuli was now being downright nasty and insolent. She believed she had gotten to know Tila quite well, and the elf had not the faintest idea about human relations, especially not what was considered polite behavior. After all, she had told Varbilma yesterday that she didn't know what it meant to be "cheeky". And she had promised to protect her. That's right, so now Djuli would arrange an opportunity for her to do that. She would provoke Varbilma's viciousness, which, considering her previous harsh words and the woman's angry expression, would not be difficult. Djuli only had to be careful that she did not hit first, or if possible, at all. One or two slaps from Varbilma wouldn't matter, as she was used to these sorts of things. But what would happen afterwards?! She didn't know, but she trusted Tila. It would be ideal if Tila just waved her hand in the air and Varbilma fell apart like the chicken! But whatever happened, Djuli thought it likely that things were going to turn out badly for Varbilma, far worse than getting a few slaps. So now she tried to behave naughtily on purpose, because she knew that only Varbilma and the slaves would notice her naughtiness. The poor inexperienced Tila would not.

Varbilma could indeed sense Djuli's intolerable impudence, and the only thing she didn't know was who to deal with first. Should she reprimand Tila, who had interrupted the conversation unasked and was possibly to be held accountable, or should she scold and kick the cook for only just preparing the chicken now, or should she deal with Djuli? Finally she decided on the latter, because Djuli was closer and naughtier.

"You're not even going to stop eating the chicken?! And what's this about, not standing up when I come in?!" she yelled.

"Why should I stand up? There are plenty of chairs here if you want to sit down too," said Djuli, pointing with the chicken bone toward a vacant chair and carefully omitting the solicitation "lady". She knew that Tila would not consider this impolite, and probably didn't even understand the concept of impoliteness, however this factual remark would greatly enrage Varbilma. And that it did.

"Can you see how insolent she is?!" Varbilma exclaimed to the slave supervisor, pointing at Djuli. Because although she was very angry, she wanted to keep herself in check. Not that she was afraid of Djuli, but her husband Numo might later decide to protect a slave again.

Without waiting for the supervisor's response, she took a step toward Djuli, violently knocked the chicken bone out of her hand, and then slapped her on the cheek. At least that was her intention. Because Djuli had decided to take the slap if absolutely necessary, but why should she if she didn't have to? It was not hard to determine what Varbilma's next action would be, so she had prepared for it. As soon as the woman began raising her palm she lifted her own arm in order to block the slap, causing Varbilma to hit her forearm instead of her face.

"She's resisting! She hit me!" shouted Varbilma, even though Djuli had not struck her but the other way round. She would not be frightened of Djuli, and grabbed hold of the clothes on her body, picked her up and threw her toward Tila. This knocked Tila off the chair, and the jar fell out of her hand. But Tila was becoming even more fond of honey than a bear, and she was careful not to waste the delicacy. Otherwise it would have been difficult to explain how the honey jar, which had flown at least two meters in the air, ended up on the floor unbroken and landing perfectly on its bottom.

Djuli tried to get up quickly, but Varbilma was standing beside her and kicked her. However she still managed to get up afterwards, and when Varbilma's leg swung out to kick her again, she

jumped away just in time for the leg to ram directly into Tila's stomach. The elf girl became a little pale. Her magic force field did not protect her against kicking. It probably could have been designed to be impenetrable to material objects, but then an elf wouldn't even be capable of being caressed!

At the moment, however, Varbilma didn't want to kick Tila, so she went after Djuli. In any case, she was reassured that the girl was fleeing from her. The miserable wretch did not know that Djuli would have gladly hit back, and that she had only not done it because she didn't want to appear bad in front of Tila. She was waiting for Tila's intervention. If Tila would only protect her from the slave supervisor and his men, Djuli could take care of Varbilma herself. She may end up with some scratches, but that was nothing. She would gladly endure that for the pleasure of slapping her palm against Varbilma's face. Oh my, that would be a real treat!

But she didn't dare. The most important thing was for Tila to be on her side, and Tila had strange ideas about truth and the applicability of violence. So Djuli ran away, and sought refuge behind the cook's broad back. Mother Evla stood in front of her, and in front of the cook was the cooking pot. In front of that was the kitchen boy, so there were several obstacles in a row, and when Varbilma reached her she just ran to the other end of the row.

"Catch her!" Varbilma gestured to the slave supervisor, since she had gotten tired of chasing. "Catch her so I can teach her some decency!"

"You mean by kicking me?" asked Djuli, but in the next moment some men caught her from both sides.

"You'll soon find out what I mean, you insolent, vile, telltale, rebellious slave, who has dared to gobble up my chicken!"

"Isn't chicken intended for eating?" asked... not Djuli, but Tila.

"You can just shut your trap, and when I'm finished with Djuli I'll deal with you, honeyface!"

"I won't let you kill Djuli!" stated Tila, and stepped closer, her left hand clutching her still painful stomach.

"Who said anything about killing her, you idiot?!" said Varbilma in astonishment.

"You just said that you wanted to finish with her!"

"Yes, finish—not kill! I'm not going to argue with you. Come on, catch her too!" shouted Varbilma to two of the other supervisors, and they caught Tila's arms as they had done earlier with Djuli. "Now you'll get what you deserve!" said Varbilma, her arm poised to hit...

But the hit was not yet carried out because Tila began speaking again, not in the least disturbed by the fact that at present, by all human calculations she was in a rather bad situation because she was considered a prisoner. "I'm warning you, Varbilma, Djuli doesn't like it when she's beaten!"

"So what?!" Varbilma looked at her in amazement. This Tila was most certainly an imbecile, talking about such strange things!

"Believe me, she really doesn't like being hit—she told me yesterday, I heard it with my own ears! And I don't like being kicked either. Nobody has done this to me until now, although I imagined it would be quite unpleasant, and when you kicked me just before I did indeed find it very unpleasant. So please don't do this again. If we've done something wrong, then come and sit down so we can discuss it rationally, as would be expected of elves and I'm assuming humans too!" and because the henchmen were holding her arms, she nodded toward the overturned chair.

Varbilma gaped at her for a moment, then despite her anger burst out laughing. "You idiot, I know that nobody likes being beaten—that's precisely why I hit Djuli, because I know she doesn't like it! I want her to not at all like what she gets from me!" She immediately struck Djuli, the slap leaving a mark from Varbilma's five fingers on her face.

"See, you fool?! Now she'll only get further punishment, and then it'll be your turn!" said Varbilma, raising her hand once more...

Tila spoke again, but this time asking Djuli something. Varbilma paused, curious about what sort of fantastical nonsense Tila would come up with. It was not unpleasant to discipline the slaves while being entertained in the meantime.

"Djuli, I'm not sure whether I understand the meaning of one of your words," said Tila. "You say 'command' if you are insisting that under any circumstances somebody is to do something or not do something, right?"

"Yes, you've described it well, Tila—that's exactly what this word means!"

"Good." Now Tila looked at Varbilma. "Varbilma, I, Tila, command you to stop hurting Djuli at once! And you who are holding Djuli's arms," she said, gesturing with her eyes to the slave supervisors, "Release her immediately! And me too!" She wriggled in the grip of the men's hands.

Of course they didn't let her go, but instead, after gaping for a moment, broke into laughter.

"Why, what will happen if we don't let you go?" asked one of the men.

"And what will happen if I beat Djuli, hey?!" asked Varbilma, and this time slapped Djuli on the other cheek for a change. Although it was a big slap, Djuli took it smilingly because she felt that the situation was getting inflamed and that Tila would soon act. She had been waiting for this moment, but not because she wanted to escape Varbilma and her punishment; she just wanted Varbilma to finally get her own well-deserved punishment.

"My lady, please let me explain what happened with the chicken..." said the cook rushing over, but it was to her own peril because Varbilma jabbed her chest so hard that she fell onto her backside.

"Shut up, who asked you?! It'll be your turn last!"

"But my lady, you should know that Tila is a great wizard!"

"Wasn't Tin enough—have you gone crazy too?! I've had enough of this, you can't deceive me with your lies! She's just a fool, not a wizard!" she shouted, pointing at Tila.

"I'm not actually a wizard—I'm an elf," responded Tila. "Please, Varbilma, I really don't want to cause you any discomfort, because I'll feel bad about it. That's why I command you again to behave in a manner worthy of a human! I don't know why it's a problem that Djuli ate the dead bird... I can assure you that she enjoyed it very much and that she didn't waste anything, and..."

"Good heavens, I don't doubt that she enjoyed it! That was my roast! Right, just for that I'm going to..."

"Varbilma, I command you for the third time..."

"I am not Varbilma to you! You must call me 'lady', and here you do not command *me*, I command *you*! And not only that—soon you'll get a beating too!"

"Varbilma, I insist that you don't fight, otherwise I'll be forced to cause you serious discomfort, in spite of my better convictions!"

"Fool, I'm the one who's going to cause you discomfort! You can't do it to me!"

"I certainly can, and I can choose whatever means I like! I'm warning you again, that if you..."

"Bugger your warning!" and now Varbilma gave Djuli a good kick in the leg.

"Varbilma, one more kick and I'll make you soil your pants! You, and those who are refusing to let Djuli go!"

"What?! Me?! This is ridiculous! You'll be the one soiling yourself from fear! I think I'll deal with you first!" Varbilma left Djuli and walked up to Tila, raising her hand yet again.

However at that moment the almost dead silence was broken by a sound resembling a machine gun, although at that time they didn't even know what a simple front-loading pistol was. A loud

gurgle could be heard from under Varbilma's skirt and in the pants of the men holding Tila. It seemed that Tila had extended the blessed activity to the ones who held her captive too, because they contributed to the stink concert in their own way. They instantly took their paws off Tila and grabbed their buttocks fearfully. Varbilma likewise moved her palm away from Tila's face. It occurred to her at the last minute that she could not reach under her skirt in front of everybody. She just stood there paling, along with the four men, and not knowing what to do. Suddenly a dark stain began to spread between the legs of the men's trousers, rapidly making its way down the legs towards the cuffs. At the same time a thick, yellowish mass began oozing down Varbilma's bare leg under her skirt...

"Hahaha! Varbilma has soiled herself! It serves her right! Pooh, what a stinky animal you are, Varbilma!" laughed Djuli, and made a show of covering her nose. She began speaking in an obtuse tone. "How many times have you told me that I'm a stinking slave?! Well I want you to know that I'm not a slave anymore, and that *you're* the stinky one, not me!"

Varbilma didn't say a single thing in response, just stood there in horror like a statue. Then she suddenly spun around and ran out of the kitchen, yellow drops falling from her legs and dirtying the kitchen floor. The slave supervisors followed their mistress, as well as those Tila didn't have to discipline. For the time being they believed Tila was a wizardess, and did not want to make her angry. They had to believe it, since she had told them ahead of time that Varbilma would soil herself, and moments later this actually happened, just as Varbilma wanted to hit Tila. Even if this was a coincidence, the fact that the four other men had also lost control of their bowels at exactly the same time could not be. Such a degree of coincidence was simply impossible.

After this, every movement and sentence of Tila was closely followed, which was easy to do because not much movement occurred. Tila did not leave the kitchen, where with an almost stubborn determination was about to devour the rest of the honey. However the chatter increased, as little by little all the slaves that had not yet seen Tila put aside their work and were hovering about, just to look at the beautiful wizardess. Even if she called herself an elf...

They asked Tila about various things, and if her mouth was not filled with honey Tila answered them patiently, gently smiling. The news had spread about what a friendly wizardess Tila was, and the previously timid slaves now came to see what was going on. Eventually even those who had run away due to urgent business joined them, of course only returning after they had sorted themselves out, and settled down to watch Tila from a distance. But Tila didn't care about them. They were enjoying the risk they had taken by coming here, driven by the curiosity of hearing that Tila could instantly heal all sorts of diseases. At that time it was rare for a person to not have some kind of disease, either minor or major, because their general state of health was so poor. They hoped that if this Tila really was as kindhearted as was rumored, she might be willing to cure them too.

And Tila did indeed diligently heal everybody, while repeatedly mentioning how much she preferred this to negative healing. How reluctant she was to do it, but could not allow anyone to hurt her or somebody who was innocent. She even healed one of the men who had soiled himself and had a painful canine tooth. Unfortunately Tila could not heal the tooth, but she held it between two fingers and the tooth painlessly fell out. Tila reassured him that in a few days a new healthy tooth would grow in its place. As she worked she willingly spoke to everyone about who the elves were and what it was like in Elfland.

So that day all work on the estate ceased, as everyone was engrossed with Tila, who even showed them her light dress. In the meantime she tried to talk them into behaving nicely and not hurting each other, encouraging them to try to live like an elf. After all, it was possible to live a good life without brutality, because this planet Earth was fundamentally a wonderful place with lots

of great things in it, for instance honey... and with these words Tila began to crave some again, but it seemed the honey had run out. Everybody found it incredible that so much honey could disappear into an elf, as she had eaten almost an entire jar of it on her own. It was unbelievable! Even if she could fit that much in, how could she not get sick of it?! But Tila had not lost her craving yet. The cook immediately brought her another jar of honey, because she felt it was better to be friends with Tila than with her masters. Varbilma did not show up to reproach her for her preposterous squandering, and by evening Tila had gobbled up half of it.

Everybody on the estate was having a great time. Not just her but the slaves as well, because the slave supervisors were not only afraid to punish them, but even to question them about why they were not working.

Chapter 9: Getsnappy, Father of the Orks

When the soldiers came to get Kayam on account of the creation of Getsnappy, his parents were naturally quite alarmed, particularly because the soldiers didn't know why the boy had to be taken in. The councilors had not told them as a precaution. Of course Kayam himself was even more frightened than his parents, even though the soldiers didn't beat him. They would have if he had resisted, but Kayam was weak and knew that resistance would be futile. So on the surface he appeared to be a calm prisoner, however this only meant he wasn't trying to escape or fight the soldiers. In reality he was consumed by sheer terror.

The soldiers took him to Pakunda where they escorted him to the town hall prison, directly to the torture chamber, and tied him on the rack. A councilor now entered, whom Kayam did not recognize, however he claimed to be the one who had dictated the data to him during the census. He asked Kayam why he had written a non-existent clerk called Getsnappy into the list. With the utmost sincerity, Kayam denied doing anything of the sort. The councilor beat him with a stick, but although Kayam screamed until he was quite hoarse, he insisted he had only written down the individuals that were dictated to him. The poor thing really couldn't recall misunderstanding anything, for if he knew it was a misunderstanding he would not have written it into the list in the first place! So the councilor left, angry that Kayam was such a stubborn liar, who could not even be swayed by punishment. As Kayam's tears fell, he felt hatred toward the whole world, believing a profound injustice was happening to him. At that moment he would have gladly blown up not only the Earth, but the entire Universe if he had the means, even if he knew he would die along with it.

In any case, Kayam was not released but locked into a prison cell, which was not dark and windowless as would be expected in a prison. In fact it had quite a large window, barred of course, and Kayam was the only person in it. He had received a private cell. Councilor Kessel, who had interrogated Kayam, had not done this as an honor but deliberately, so that he would not have any companionship. As they approached the cell, Kessel turned to the prison guard, saying, "Make sure this rotten worm, this vile contemptible clerk 'Getsnappy' is left entirely alone in the prison—he's to have no companions! Hopefully solitary confinement will soften him up. I don't want to give him the pleasure of talking to other prisoners all day long and having fun! Even the toughest criminals, the greatest villains and most impertinent evildoers are not able to take solitude for long. Within a

week or two they break and confess everything. I want him to tell us what his aim was by falsifying the census list. He's going to remain alone until he has a good think about it and makes a contrite confession!"

"It's possible, honorable sir, that he'll go crazy before that happens!"

"That is indeed a strong possibility, as is often the case with solitary confinement, but I don't care whether he confesses or goes crazy! Just think about it, 'Clerk Getsnappy!'" he said to Kayam sardonically in farewell. Then Kessel left, and Kayam was locked behind bars in the prison cell.

Kayam most definitely did feel bad in there, however the reason was by no means loneliness but the beatings to his buttocks. That was his biggest problem, not a lack of companionship. In fact for the moment he hated all human beings so much that he could not imagine a greater gift than being alone. Kessel would never have guessed that putting Kayam in solitary confinement would give him such joy. He would certainly have lost his mind much sooner in a prison cell together with many others. Kayam could not imagine what Councilor Kessel and the prison guard were talking about. Why on earth would he go crazy?! What was so terrible about being alone that would drive one crazy? He had rather gotten used to solitude, since at home when he was little he often climbed into all sorts of narrow dark places for the sole purpose of being alone. Poor Kessel didn't know this, and had thus chosen the most inappropriate method for breaking Kayam.

It cannot be denied that although Kayam was not afraid of solitude, he did feel quite uncomfortable in the cell. His bed consisted of a handful of moldy straw on the floor, and as far as the toilet was concerned, it was no more than a pit dug into the ground beside one of the cell walls. It was at least one man deep, with two wide boards on either side that he had to place his feet onto, or squat over if he wished to do his business in the pit. The prisoner had to deal with its permanent stench, the flies buzzing above it and worms crawling about inside. Nobody cared. If someone slipped and fell into it, well that was their problem!

The greater problem, however, was that Kayam could not carry out his favorite experiments here. And although he enjoyed being alone, he undeniably became bored after a while. But this took much longer than it did for others. Initially while his buttocks were healing he was not bored at all, as he was busy tending his wounds. He had a lot of trouble with this due to the copious flies coming from the toilet pit, and he did not want these disgusting insects climbing onto his wounds, so he had to keep his trousers pulled up. But when he did this the fabric perpetually stuck to the wounds, causing Kayam significant anguish. So there was plenty to deal with, since he could not even sit down, only stand, walk or lay there. Even walking was painful. Every time he felt the slightest pain he was reminded of how much he hated the whole world.

Kayam had been thoroughly beaten on the rack, and his lower body did not heal for a good two months. Only then did he get a little bored. But he amused himself by imagining how he could torture Kessel and the other councilors of Pakunda, should the occasion arise. As well as the soldiers who had brought him here. And the prison guard who stole the meat from his food, which was always smelly anyway... He had many other thoughts too that wouldn't be called friendly.

In fact he had barely begun to feel bored when he discovered a plausible solution to his boredom. Several actually, but the most effective one originated from his outrage toward the world. He decided that as soon as he got out of here he would make a weapon that could protect him against anybody. It would be huge and powerful, worthy of Kayam's name. Since he was the greatest human in the entire World, it was fitting that he give irrefutable evidence of his greatness to the insignificant remnants of humanity, to the envious, pathetic gray mass of nobodies. Yes, to the masses! He would not let them trample on his greatness. He must not be discouraged—he would eventually be released because it was impossible for life not to be favorable to him, the Genius, and

when the time came he would make sure that he could never be humiliated in the same way again. This was his duty to the World, because his greatness could not allow pettiness and injustice to crush his light into dust. And because the stupid mob only respected the word 'power', he would have to obtain power! Not physical power, of course. An intellectual man like Kayam had to use his mind. It would be best if he tried to invent this great miracle weapon here in the prison, where he had plenty of spare time. So until he was freed he would begin his preparations without a moment's delay.

As this occurred to him he calmed down, in fact it put him in quite a good mood to think about how his enemies would react, what kind of expression they would have when the Great Kayam marched among them with his wonder weapon. Nobody would dare to disagree with him! They would bow before him, fear his power and his name, and obey him in the blink of an eye!

As soon as this decision was made he felt that he had already achieved the most difficult task. He now had a goal, knew what he needed to do, and after this remained only the easiest parts of the job, the trivial chores, since all he had to do now was figure out what this wonder weapon would be. Kayam saw the invention of this idea as a kind of job, and approached it with scientific rigor.

"Let's see," he said aloud, talking to himself. "What kind of weapon do I need? Probably one that I can fight with without having to be near the enemy. Because these kinds of things are awkward, I might get wounded... and that would be very unpleasant. Not to mention what a great misfortune it would be for the world if I died. My security is therefore paramount. Hence I don't need a weapon like a sword, a dagger or a knife, but rather one resembling a bow. In fact the ideal weapon would kill from a distance. We can define this as a kind of axiom. Yes, let's call this an axiom, as it's best to work with mathematical precision. In addition, I'm not particularly strong, because while others were developing their muscles I developed my brain. Therefore I need a weapon that can be handled with minimal strength, so that with little power investment it can cause great destruction. Axiom two—the ideal weapon should not depend on the handler's muscular strength. Thirdly, I'm not particularly skilled. Therefore I need a weapon that destroys the enemy in a large space all at once, where the resulting hit does not depend on my aiming ability, as is the case with a bow and arrow. Thus the third axiom is—the ideal weapon should have a wide range of destruction." Kayam scratched his head, mulling it all over.

"Is there anything else? No, I don't think so. If I figure this out I'll be satisfied with myself. A weapon that kills from a distance, is easy to handle and has a wide range of destruction. Yes, that's what I need! Now let's see what it could be... In all mathematical problems it's possible to deduce the answer from the data, and the question generally shows the path to the solution. What follows from a weapon needing to be effective from a distance? That's obvious! The weapon must be similar to the bow and arrow in that it consists of two parts—one remains with the user, the bow, and the other destroys the enemy, the arrow. It's clear that this is required in the case of my weapon. Yes, but if I wanted to kill a lot of people at the same time, the object being ejected from the weapon cannot be as large as an arrow because then I'd have to carry too much around with me, and I might as well fight the masses comfortably! Therefore this object must be very tiny. But I have even further knowledge... Ejection requires a lot of force, especially if I don't just want to shoot out one thing at a time. It would never have enough power for that, and the second axiom states that shooting should require a small amount force. Oops! I just concluded that the shooting would require great force. That's a contradiction!" He slapped his forehead in frustration.

"But no, it's not! While the projectile machine is under tension it needs great power, but after that a small hand movement should be enough to eject the object. So the driving force of the projectile should not be muscle but something else. But what? Hmm... perhaps something like bent

wood, although I can forget that right away because it requires great strength. It would be better to use something that gives its strength freely. What gives strength freely? Water... but I'd need a lot of it... Wind... but it's not always blowing... Sun... there is very little of it... Fire... but it's not always burning... Hang on a minute! Fire is basically chemical energy. Yes, that's it! After all, if there is only a small amount of power but I focus it in a small space, it could cause great destruction! If I hit somebody in the mouth with my palm, at best his gums may bleed, but if I punch him using the same strength with my fist then I'd probably break a few of his teeth. An arrow is also more effective when it's sharp. Yes, that's it! Fire produces gasses and smoke, and if I direct these into a narrow pipe then it will force out whatever is inside. Of course the fumes would be needed quickly and a lot of it at once. I have to find a material that burns very fast and meanwhile produces a lot of fumes."

Now Kayam sat down on the ground and began to think it through further. During his previous chemical experiments he had become familiar with many substances, and regarding scientific things he was anything but forgetful. In his mind he lined up the known substances that would be most suitable for him. He found that saltpeter was very appropriate because it burned quickly. But unfortunately it did not produce enough gas. Well that didn't matter, he would mix it with something else containing a high amount of gaseous combustion materials. The answer offered itself—sulfur! That was specifically a material that produced a great amount of gas. Of course it was rather expensive, and even worse, it had a tendency to agglomerate. Even saltpeter was inclined to agglomerate. However the whole mixture had to be burned at once if possible. Again it was obvious what he had to do—one third of the mixture had to be some other substance, probably a powder that was easily combustible and at the same time had difficulty agglomerating, and it should be as cheap as possible. Kayam had to think for merely a moment before he figured it out—coal powder! That burnt really well, even if not as well as sulfur or saltpeter, but it was cheap and did not tend to agglomerate... Yes, this was a good mixture: the saltpeter would burn quickly, generating a lot of heat, which would in turn quickly burn the sulfur powder and hopefully the coal powder, which would prevent any agglomeration...

And so Kayam, alone in a prison cell without any possibility of conducting experiments, invented gunpowder after just ten minutes dedication to intensive brainstorming. After this it only took another five minutes to figure out not only the first primitive cannon, but also the flintlock pistol. Yet even that was not enough for him, because soon he realized that this kind of cannon would be very heavy and impossible to drag along with him. Although this was only a minor problem, as he could mount it on wheels and put a horse in front of it. The real problem was that it would be very slow to reload. Even portioning the gun powder into small bags would not help, because after every shot the inside of the cannon would have to be cleaned thoroughly so that no glowing residue remained. And the tube would need to cool down. During that time anyone could come up to Kayam and pierce his precious skin!

It was the same situation with the pistol, being light but difficult to reload. Now he had to think about it seriously, but Kayam's imagination was far above average. His brain was like this because Badjharata had done everything possible to make it so. Imagination was very important when doing magic. This imagination was logical, and did not flutter about right and left but followed the trail like a loyal dog, working toward a single goal.

First Kayam figured out that the filling would be faster if the gunpowder and projectile were not separately inserted into the cannon or pistol, but if the two were built into one. After this he realized it would be easier to clean the tube if it was not just open at one but both ends. Therefore the cannon could be opened at the back, and then the gunpowder filled from behind, which was better because

as this was taking place one could hide from the enemy behind it and not have to go out in front of the cannon... In fact, if the gunpowder was integrated with the projectile it could be wrapped into a nice little package, allowing only a tiny hole for the fire to reach it, and this way it did not matter whether there was any glowing residue in the cannon tube... It was even possible to produce gunpowder that had an explosive charge at the front. The ejection charge could be connected to a slowly burning rope at the front, of course "slow" meaning only a second or two, and then it would explode above the target, scattering its remnants over the enemies... But what about the pistol? It would be difficult to have the back of the pistol open at all times.

Kayam racked his brain, and barely five minutes later he had invented the revolving pistol. This had the benefit of not needing to be frequently reloaded, and it was possible to load a lot at once. It would not matter if one compartment of the rotation clip warmed up from the shot, because the next time he would not be shooting from the same one, and by the time it had to be reloaded it would have cooled down...

Shortly after inventing this, his brilliant idea was obscured by an even greater one—away with the rotating clip! The pistol needed to be grasped and this could not be avoided. But why should the handle be solid? Great use could be made of this space. It couldn't be that hard to put a spring at the bottom that continually pushed the bullets upwards, and when one flew out the next one would slide right into its place in the tube. If he made a revolver he could store a maximum of six or eight bullets at one time, otherwise the periphery of the rotation clip would be too large and that would make it difficult to carry, as well as the bullets being able to easily drop out of the rotary clip. But he could fit at least thirty bullets into the handle, since he would make them very tiny. They were not likely to fall out of there. Kayam was sure he could concoct some sort of substance to fill the bullet head with that would ignite very quickly, even in the air. Because while the bullet was cutting through the air it would warm up from the friction and heat of the launch. Then the burning hot bullet would hit something and blow up, burning everything in its vicinity.

However as soon as the igniting bullet occurred to him, he quickly had another idea—he would put a large tank on his back that was half-filled with brandy. Above the brandy would be air that he had compressed with a pump. A flexible tube would extend from the tank to his right hand, which could be opened with a valve, and in front of it there would be some hot iron. When he opened the valve the alcohol would spray out and the hot iron would ignite it, causing fire to leap out onto whoever he wanted. Of course keeping the iron glowing hot would be a little tricky... but this could be avoided by striking a spark on some kind of tinder box when opening the valve... the details could be altered, but with a little experimentation he would have a magnificent flame thrower too...

"Yes! I will be a powerful, great man, and soon everybody will see who this Wonderful Kayam is! You goddamned dirty trash, I will incinerate everything with my flamethrower! You did the wrong thing making me angry! I only needed to rack my brain a little, and soon I'll be destroying all of yours, because I'm going to create such weapons as you have never seen before!" he shouted into the prison cell, so loudly that his voice echoed between the empty walls. "Nobody will be safe around me unless they're hiding behind a thick bailey!"

As soon as he said this he thought, "Why should they be safe behind a bailey?!" And immediately he found the answer to this problem—he had to create a bullet that was much larger than the previous ones, where the propellant inside did not burn all at once, but continuously while the fumes were streaming out. He had to create wings on both sides to keep it heading straight, and the bullet—which Kayam called a "rocket" to differentiate it from a regular bullet—would carry a lot more propellant and therefore be able to fly a greater distance. Further as well as higher, and it would carry explosive material that would explode upon reaching its target, destroying everything

in sight. A castle wall would not be protected against this because the rocket would either destroy it or fly over it.

Kayam was so intrigued by his great ideas that he began to pace the cell up and down impatiently, almost walking into the cesspool. He would have liked to start the practical implementation straight away, but he ran into some objective difficulties—namely that he was locked in! There were some minor details that he really needed to try out in practice, as the whole series of ideas were only worth something if he could actually pull it off.

Then a killer doubt occurred to Kayam. It was great that he had it all figured out, but would he be able to create it? Because he had no doubt that every one of his ideas was achievable, it was only a matter of diligence, money and skills. He did not lack diligence if he was interested in something, and not much money was required for the first front-loading single-shot pistol. After that his father would give him as much as he needed, because he would see that it was worth it... but what about the manual dexterity? After all, until now he had been dealing with chemistry, but as far as the assembly was concerned, his abilities could be said to be average at best, to put it mildly. To put it very mildly indeed! Nothing was less characteristic of Kayam than being skilled in dexterity and handiness. In chemistry that wasn't important, as he mostly just stirred powders and liquids. Even with this he encountered temporary problems here and there, like the time he built a primitive distillation apparatus, though somehow he had managed to succeed. In any case, he much preferred mathematics. Little dexterity was required for that. But due to his excellent imagination, he knew well that all these improved weapon ideas were most likely to be suitable for killing himself, if the assembly, turning, grinding, and rasping were not extremely precise. Of course the design as well, but that didn't worry him as he did not fear calculations. However if he thought about the automatic refill forcing a poorly-turned bullet into the gun barrel, which may only be half a millimeter larger than it should be, and then it firing and getting stuck in the narrow end of the barrel that had also been poorly turned, and the bullet exploding within the barrel itself—well, even Kayam's back began to sweat as he imagined the consequences. He would be quite happy to kill everyone else right now, but not himself. There were a few moments when he had wanted to die, yet now was not one of them. Not when he could feel how close he was to success.

It was as clear as a simple mathematical theorem, for instance the solving of a quadratic equation, that there were only two ways to create the weapons—either Kayam made them himself or he had them made by somebody else. But the latter was no good because he would be at the mercy of the weapon maker, who could steal his weapons when he had finished making them. And Kayam had no intention of making others powerful and invincible. So whether he liked it or not, he was the one who would have to make them. This meant he had to develop his dexterity, at least to an adequate degree to be able build a suitable production line, so that he could make a large quantity of identical pistol bullets. Because Kayam had decided that for now the pistol was enough. Cannons and rockets were too big and would be heavy to carry. But a pistol that contained bullets in its handle would be quite useful. They would no longer be able to catch him and put him in jail. Well, good. At the very least, this had the advantage of making use of his time in prison. He could acquire dexterity even here—it wasn't exactly rocket science! Ultimately the people most skilled in dexterity were painters, sculptors and other artistic types. He had to start practicing something of this nature, and hopefully by the time he somehow got out of here he would have no problem with things like rasping and turning a bullet or barrel precisely.

Now that he had decided this, he also had to make a decision about what to do—should he paint or sculpt? This was a simple choice, as Kayam could see that in his current circumstances it was unlikely for him to find any material for sculpting, so that left drawing and painting. Even this

would be difficult, because he had to find a solution for what to draw on and what to draw with. He decided he would begin with the ground and the stone wall of the prison cell. He could scratch many different things with the end of his spoon for instance. However he did not know what he would use to color these drawings.

This kind of prison art had already been attempted by other prisoners before him, as could be seen by the many scratches on the wall. Kayam could make out the following phrases:

"I hate the powerful!"

"Go to hell, Pakunda!"

"I will love you until I die, my darling!"

Naturally most of the graffiti was unreadable text and various drawings, as most prisoners were not able to write. There were gallows, skull and crossbones, and an arrow piercing a thorn-crowned heart...

Kayam hated these drawers. He hated them because they had contaminated the majority of the wall surface he wanted to use. Some of the graffiti was engraved so deeply that there was no way of scraping it off. He himself was cautious, and scratched faintly so that later on he could get rid of his unsuccessful creations. First of all he scraped off most of his predecessors' work on the wall opposite the window. He chose this place because the sun shone its light there for a significant part of the day. From this point of view the location of Kayam's prison cell was quite advantageous.

He would not draw on the wall to begin with, but try out his skills on the packed earth. Now all he had to figure out was the subject of his first artwork. It soon became clear what that should be—a portrait of the prison guard. He saw him often and in addition hated him, therefore he deserved to be drawn a few times and made fun of, since his first drawings were sure to be extremely distorted.

So he began, and with a Kayam thoroughness drew obsessively for weeks. Finally after two months of diligent practice he believed he had sufficient dexterity to repeat the same thing in life-size on the cleaned prison wall. And that's what he did. It turned out to be quite a masterpiece, a truly great picture! The prison guard, who was called Tepito, noticed it when inspecting the cell one time and liked it. It was flattering to his vanity that he had inspired Kayam to make such a creation. After this Kayam dared to ask him if he could have some paper and some kind of writing tool—a pen and ink, or at least a piece of coal. But instead of help, Tepito just grumbled at him, saying, "No more!" and gave him a kick. It wasn't hard, but Kayam still found it humiliating.

He got revenge though. After the prison guard left, Kayam bent down by the toilet pit, picked out a few chunks of excrement and smeared it over the portrait of Tepito. He would have preferred to throw it at the real Tepito, but he didn't dare because he still remembered how much it had hurt to have his buttocks thrashed. Nevertheless, as he was looking at the carefully drawn wall art, it occurred to him that the brown feces really wasn't such a bad color. And it suited Tepito too. He was such an ugly, evil monster that it was appropriate for his skin to not be white; not even grayish like the material of the prison wall, but brown like the fur of a beast. Hmm... Tepito really should be like this in reality! In fact... and Kayam became inspired again. He decided he would draw the prison guard as he should be, and draw him a body that suited his temperament.

Beside the previous picture he began sketching another one—a giant two-meter tall human form with a huge cone-shaped head and a monstrous jaw. Two terrifying canines grew upwards out of the lower jaw, situated between two similar ones growing down from the upper jaw. This was not quite terrifying enough to Kayam, so he drew an additional two canines at the very edge of the lower jaw. They were a lot bigger than the previous ones and resembled the tusks of a wild boar, turning slightly out toward the ears. This monster face had huge eyes that looked like those of a cat and were positioned vertically. It had an upturned nose, similar to that of a pig with large nostrils.

Kayam made the ears very small as he didn't care about them. On the other hand he took great care with the body, especially the limbs, supplying his creation with knotted, almost gnarled muscles. This figure was the most exquisite embodiment of raw, fierce power. Kayam also drew large, hook-like claws on the hands and feet, however later this wasn't good enough for him so he erased the claws. It was not the claws he was dissatisfied with but the fingers they were attached to. He formed these so that the end joints bent upward, making them a bit like "retractable" claws. If he wanted to use his claws he would stretch out his fingers and scratch with them at will. Otherwise they would get caught in whatever he grabbed hold of.

Considering his extremely limited set of tools, this picture turned out even better than the last one. Of course it came at a price, as Kayam worked on it for a full week, but it was still ready much quicker than the previous picture because his experience of such work had grown significantly.

After this he made a third picture. The figure was the same as the other one, only somewhat smaller, and it was squatting and eating the raw intestines of a disemboweled human corpse.

"Necrophagous...yes, that's very fitting for that ugly beast!" thought Kayam, feeling that he had taken noble revenge upon Tepito. Of course he knew that it would be better if he could take true revenge instead of just a symbolic one. And soon fate provided him with that unexpected opportunity.

It so happened that when Kayam had been imprisoned for a good six months, various reshufflings were taking place in some of the buildings and organizations under control of the city hall, in order to save a little money. Kayam did not know the details of course, and he would not have been interested anyway. The bottom line was that Tepito himself wanted to profit from this reshuffling, and had arranged that from now on his wife, Firmoca, would bring in the meager, single daily meal to the prisoners. With this he might be able to save the salary of a chief servant, or at least part of it, and his family might receive extra money too. The only people who knew about this were Firmoca and himself.

In any case, the woman performed her work silently. She was quite a stout woman, but had a kind face, and would generally be referred to as "chubby". In their first encounter she was not in a very cheerful mood. Although her face was beautiful, her features seemed sad. She sighed heavily and placed the food on the ground through the bars, then turned and went on with her business. This was how things went from day to day. Kayam did not speak to her, nor ask her to bring him writing tools, because he did not want the woman to kick him too. What good could he expect from the wife of a prison guard? In fact, not just an ordinary prison guard but a prison *commander*, as Tepito had proudly declared on several occasions. He did indeed have a few soldiers under his command—three in total.

But Kayam was mistaken. It did matter whether it was the prison guard or his wife. One day after Firmoca handed him his food through the grille, she did not leave right away but stood there in front of the bars. She hesitantly regarded the now rather unkempt, dirty Kayam, then looked to the right and left to see whether anybody was coming, and finally said, "Hey, you!"

"My name is Kayam!" he grunted confidently.

"Aren't you the clerk called Getsnappy?" asked the woman.

"They call me Getsnappy, but I don't know why. My name is Kayam!"

"It must be because you're from the town of Snapp."

"I was born in Sizon."

"Then you probably moved to Snapp after your birth."

"I don't even know where Snapp is. I've always lived in Sizon."

"Then you were born in Snapp, that's why you're Getsnappy, and after your birth you moved to Sizon. Don't argue!"

Kayam did not argue, fearing the woman would kick him. Instead he just shrugged and remained silent.

"Hey you!" the woman repeated.

"My name is Kayam. I can be Getsnappy if you want, which is better than calling me your slave, but I prefer Kayam. You know, I'm the great Kayam, who..."

"Hey, listen to me!" the woman cut in. She looked around again, but nobody came. "If you're Getsnappy, then you're a clerk and you can read!"

"We can argue about whether or not I'm Getsnappy, but I am certainly a clerk!"

"Now I don't understand... can you read or not?!" asked the woman, whom the gods had not blessed with a great intellect.

"Yes, I can read," answered Kayam.

"Good!" The woman pulled out a letter from her pocket. "Then read this to me!"

"I have no intention of reading it," responded Kayam immediately.

"Why not?!"

"Because it won't get me out of this place. Have it read by one of the city hall clerks—that's their job! I am a prisoner, and the job of a prisoner is not to read but to escape!"

"Don't be a fool, Getsnappy—you can't escape from here!"

"As long as I'm a prisoner I will not read. It is not in my interest to do so, for as soon as I've read it there will be trouble and they'll beat me. Not a chance! If you don't want to pay a clerk, have it read by your husband—by that wild beast, if he can read at all, which I honestly doubt!"

"He can't read actually, but that's pure luck because... Oh Getsnappy, stop being so stubborn—I must know what's in the letter!"

"Then let me out, and if you release me I'll read it straight away!"

"I can't do that... my husband would beat me to death, because you're right—he really is a wild beast! I'd have divorced him long ago, as it's now possible with the Emperor's new legislation, but I'm afraid to do it because then he'd beat me to death, and it would make no difference whether they punished him afterwards... I couldn't be resurrected!"

Kayam listened. If the woman considered her husband to be a wild beast, then perhaps not everything was lost. "If you won't let me out then take your letter away, for I have nothing to gain," he shrugged.

"But please understand, if I take it there..."

"They won't ask a lot for a simple reading," Kayam reassured her.

"Of course, I know that, but the clerk will start gossiping about the kind of letter I've received!"

"Why, what kind of letter is this?"

"Don't be irritating—how should I know if you don't read it to me?!"

The woman must have sensed some movement at the end of the corridor, because she hid the letter into her skirt and departed.

But not for long. In the evening she returned with a large bundle containing all sorts of special goodies, including a bottle of wine, half a roast chicken, a large plate of bacon, a loaf of rye bread, some apples and even half a kilo of cottage cheese. "I brought this for you. You'll get it if you read me the letter!" She showed Kayam her gifts through the bars and handed him an apple as an appetizer.

Kayam salivated, as he longed for the delicacies he had not tasted and seen for a very long time. "Give it to me!" he said immediately.

"First the letter!" and Firmoca handed the letter over.

Kayam did not object. He took it from her and unfolded it, starting to grimace. "Goodness, this person writes terribly!" as though he could have written it much more beautifully himself.

"Read to me what he has written!" Firmoca urged him.

"Well, it's not much."

"Okay, but what does this 'not much' say?"

Kayam read out the following:

"My dear little piglet,

Do not think your tomcat has forgotten you. I could not be there at the agreed time because the situation is getting serious between Atlantua and Torgo, and the Emperor has prohibited vacations. I am still sitting here in the garrison and am waiting for the joyous moment when I can again sink into the pillows of your lovely, living body. Do you remember how we squeezed each other all night the last time? I have been dreaming about it ever since. If you know of a trustworthy clerk you can send me a letter, however I cannot tell you ahead of time when we can meet again in person. Be careful not to let your husband know, as I fear for you. As for the other thing, my father has still not relented, but something will happen. It is possible that war will break out and then if I succeed in gaining glory it won't be important. Your tomcat kisses your rose petals...

This was the letter, and there was no signature.

"Give it back to me!" said the woman, reaching for it.

"First the bundle!" Kayam ordered suspiciously.

Firmoca passed it to him, after which she received the letter. She held it close to her heart. "Oh, my hero!" she sighed, looking dreamily into the distance. "My dear tomcat!"

Kayam was curious. "How can you squeeze all night? And what are these rose petals of yours that he's kissing? Or perhaps they're something you're wearing?"

"That's none of your business!" The woman's face turned purple. "There are your goodies... stuff yourself! Those should be your concern, not me!" With that she turned around, but after a few steps changed her mind and came back.

"Hey you!"

"Hey?!" responded Kayam curtly, partly because he had already learned this word from the woman, and partly because he was wolfing down the food and had a full mouth.

"Can you write too, Getsnappy?"

"Aha," nodded Kayam.

"And can you keep a secret?"

"Aha." Kayam nodded again vigorously, as he was hoping for further treats.

"Then from now on I want you to write out my letters to him."

"Okay," said Kayam. "But then I'm entitled to make a request, right?"

"You can't possibly complain now!" The woman pointed at the remnants of the food.

"Not now, but I don't want to have to do it later either. And for writing a letter I need paper, a pen and ink, and some kind of hard board to place the paper on..."

"You'll get all that."

"And what if your husband notices?"

"I'll get you some fresh straw for your bed and you can hide it under there!"

"But I'd like to have more paper than is necessary just for the letter, because I want to draw to prevent me from getting bored."

"Drawing?! A prisoner! I don't believe it!"

"If there is no drawing there is no letter writing!" Kayam concluded. "I don't believe it can matter to you how many sheets of paper you bring!"

"Do you have any idea how much paper and ink cost?!"

"Let see... after all I am a clerk. It really doesn't cost that much."

"But my husband notices every penny, if it's missing!"

"Then sell some hens or eggs, and buy the necessary items from that money," Kayam shrugged heartlessly. "If you're brave enough to cheat on your husband, then you should be brave enough to do this."

"Oh, it's not about that, you don't understand any of this..." stammered the woman, wringing her hands outside the cell bars. "I don't just simply... well... you have to realize that I don't just want to sleep with my hero, I want him to marry me!"

"Great, and what is the obstacle to that, if a divorce is now easy to obtain?"

"Like I said before, it's that my husband would kill me! I can only announce this to him if my hero is already in the city, and right by my side, because then he'll protect me. But until my tomcat arrives I can't do that!"

"Okay, but he won't arrive any later if you bring me some paper!"

"But my husband..."

"Very touching, but I don't care. Don't exchange letters with your tomcat then. Surely you can squeeze somebody else!"

"Oh no, that's not an option! I have to hold onto the soul of my hero, because if he doesn't receive a letter he'll think I've forgotten about him and his love will subside, and then... then..."

"Then he'll squeeze somebody else and kiss somebody else's petals," Kayam finished the sentence.

"Well, yes, yes... and especially because his parents don't want to allow..."

"Allow what?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter! Alright you dirty blackmailer, you'll get everything you ask for, but you're to keep your mouth shut! Don't say a word about this, otherwise I'll mix poison into your next meal!"

"Who could I possibly tell when I'm alone?!" Kayam gestured around him. "And anyway, that's not all, because when winter comes I'm also going to need adequate fuel for a fire, otherwise I'll freeze to death and there will be nobody to write to your tomcat!"

"Ah, by that time he'll have come anyway!" hoped the woman.

Kayam was hoping that the tomcat wouldn't come, and he was fortunate that this turned out to be the case. So Firmoca did require his services, having him sometimes write several letters per week. She could do that because one of her good friends worked for the courier service, who delivered her letters for free among the other official posts.

Of course when winter came all the other inmates were freezing cold, but in Kayam's cell a blazing bonfire was radiating heat, the smoke pouring out of the window opening. This surely would have been seen by Tepito, but he did not say anything. Since in the meantime significant events had occurred in Kayam's life that led the prison commander to overlook certain things.

It all started because of his drawings. After he had obtained paper he no longer had to scratch on the walls, since drawing on paper was much more convenient, plus it allowed him to create far more accurately and beautifully. He began by drawing the terrible wild man, who was modeled on Tepito, although naturally a much smaller version. It was immediately apparent that drawing was not such a simple thing—it was much easier to model in a larger size. Kayam used up a lot of paper for his useless experiments, all the more because at that time there were no erasers. Instead they

carefully scraped the surface layer of the paper where the error was made with a sharp blade. For this reason it was fortunate that primitive paper had the less-appealing feature of being quite thick, and could be scraped more roughly than the nicer modern, thinner papers. Kayam botched many of his drawings, however he was not bothered by this. He covered his straw bed with the ruined paper, and this way it prickled his skin less in the evening.

Finally he succeeded. He was so pleased with the result that he took a piece of straw from his bed, attached it to the top of the sheet of paper and fixed it onto the wall where the sun shone the most, inserting the straw into a slot between two stones. He set about developing his dexterity further, as he would have to model very small objects. He had to be able to draw beautifully in miniature. So he began drawing the same figure consuming the viscera of a human corpse.

Just then Firmoca reappeared. She had brought the latest letter for him to read, but she noticed the sheets of paper lying all over the place, and was horrified by the terrible waste. "What's this?!" she shouted, pressing her hand to her heart.

"Sorry, every beginning is difficult," shrugged Kayam.

"But..."

"It's getting easier. Now I don't think I'll have any problems with the main figure... I'm more concerned about being able to draw the corpse authentically, especially the viscera. Unfortunately I've only seen animal carcasses until now, not human ones, so I have to rely on my memories of a pig being slaughtered when drawing human intestines."

"What are you talking about?!" asked Firmoca puzzled.

"About *this*!" and Kayam took down his best picture from the wall, proudly showing his creation to the anticipated appreciative reception of the woman. Kayam always liked to boast.

"May the souls of my mother and father help me, who is that terrible monster?!"

"Well, this is none other than... eh... hmm..." Kayam suddenly started coughing, because it occurred to him that it would probably be unwise to call the figure "Tepito". Firmoca might mention it or talk out loud in her dreams, and then Tepito would skin his back. And since Kayam had already discovered she did not have a sharp mind—to put it mildly, she may think Kayam was stupid as this figure did not particularly resemble her husband. She would not understand that Kayam had not drawn the reality but just a symbolic representation of him.

But the woman did not leave it at that. "Who is this? Or *what* is this?" she asked again.

"Well, uh..." and Kayam's mind raced to come up with an answer. He had to tell her something for he did not want the woman to be angry. It was true that he was quite certain of his indispensability, but still, it was better to be careful. So far this arrangement suited him because she made his prison life much more comfortable. "Well... I just drew it..."

"What do you mean you just drew it?! Have you seen something like this somewhere? How could you possibly survive around such a creature?! I would certainly be horrified if I encountered somebody like this!"

Kayam almost confessed that he had just invented the whole thing, but he had an irresistible desire to boast so that the woman would think he was brave. Therefore he said the following: "Oh, this is nothing! Where I used to live there existed many of these creatures, not just one. They're called, uh..." and Kayam cleared his throat in order to gain time until he found a fitting name for the creature. During this action it occurred to him that if they could talk at all they would probably produce some deep, guttural grunt that would suit such terrible throat. And so he continued, "They are known as Horks. And I'm not afraid of them at all, not in the least! In fact, if I may say so, I'm the only one who doesn't fear them. Everybody else does, but not me—they're my friends! Every hork is a friend of mine. If they knew I was a prisoner here I wouldn't remain here long, because

they'd come to rescue me. They are very fond of me, and respect me. They know that I'm the great Kayam!"

"What are these... what did you call them? Horks? Can they speak?"

"Of course they can! But they speak their own Hork language because they're intelligent beings. They call it horking, which in their language means speaking Hork. I have learned this language myself. It sounds like the grunting of wild animals."

"Are there many of these living around Snapp village?" Firmoca asked anxiously.

"Oh yes, there are masses of them around there!" said Kayam, his hands gesturing wildly in the air.

"Well then, I won't be going near there anytime soon! Where is this Snapp village?"

"Well... it's very far from here," said Kayam reassuringly. "A long way away, truly, so the Horks won't come here!" he continued, almost bursting from laughter. He was certain that a woman as stupid as her would never realize how much he had duped her.

Now Firmoca looked at the picture much more calmly. She definitely felt more comfortable knowing that they did not live here. "I'm keeping this picture!" she declared suddenly. "I like it, and my nephew will like it too! He likes drawing and sculpture. He's preparing to be a painter. So... Horks! What strange creatures there are living in the world that I haven't even heard of! Amazing! What a brave man you are, Getsnappy, daring to live among them! Aren't you afraid that they'll eat you?!"

Kayam shrugged with a facade of modesty. "Well, not really. You know, they mostly eat carcasses. But it's true that their teeth are very strong and they can tear off the arm of a man with one bite! They're even able to crunch the thick bones of a buffalo! But as you can see, I am not a carcass, and anything that isn't a carcass they don't like so much. They prefer it if the carcass is stinky and full of worms, saying that those ones have a truly appealing aroma and are more appetizing!"

"Ugh!" Firmoca became pale and almost began to retch.

"This is how they are—believe me, I know! I'm just drawing a picture now in which one of these creatures is eating the intestines of a human."

"Oh, don't tell me such things, it's making me sick! Why don't you read me this letter instead, because my tomcat has written again!"

Kayam read it out to the woman, but tomcat's letter saddened Firmoca this time, even though it should have made her happy. For it turned out that this tomcat was a soldier, a really strapping young man, and he was brave too. A marauding group of Torgs had broken into the country near the border where tomcat was stationed, but they had chased them off, killed many of them and taken some as prisoners. However during the battle tomcat's captain was killed and tomcat was going to replace him, as he had killed four men and captured another. This rank of captain was not particularly high, but now he was no longer an ordinary soldier. And he was now far less hopeful that he could come to get Firmoca, because as he wrote, the "situation is becoming more complicated". He did not want to risk making his superiors angry, as in Emperor Zor's reign this was not the secret to longevity. Besides, his parents had not given their consent to the marriage. So he had to stand on his own two feet so he could ensure a livelihood for himself and his little "piglet", meaning Firmoca.

Kayam was quite pleased about this, in fact he could not have received better news. He wished that tomcat would stay far away as long as he was in jail. But Firmoca was blubbering, wiping her tears and sighing loudly. "He doesn't truly love me anymore! I don't feel that he loves me!"

"What makes you think he doesn't love you?" Kayam protested.

"He hasn't even written that he kisses my rose petals!"

Kayam felt sorry for the woman. He pretended to look at the letter again and shouted, "Oh, but he did write it! Somehow it escaped my attention. Here it is at the bottom... 'I kiss your rose petals many times and I dream about them at night!'"

"Ah..." smiled the woman with relief, then angrily took the letter from Kayam's hands and snapped at him, "You don't even deserve these treats! You're not really a clerk! Why aren't you reading everything in the letter?!"

"Well there you go, that's what I get for being kindhearted! Why do I bother feeling sorry for such scummy folk?!" thought Kayam sadly. To divert her attention from this embarrassing subject, he said, "Could I at least know what those petals are?"

"You'll find out when you grow up, but not from me!" replied the woman.

Naturally Firmoca did not dare stop bringing Kayam his treats. She wasn't actually that angry with him, just worried, because she was making him write far more letters than she had received from her "tomcat". This filled her with uneasiness. Even if she was stupid, she had enough sense to know that she was stupid, and that there were a great many women who were even prettier than her. And besides, men were so inconsistent, so flighty! But Kayam could not help with this. She thought about getting Kayam to write some love poems, but she gave up on the thought. It was not appropriate for a woman to court a man.

So she left feeling anxious, and as a means of distraction took Kayam's drawing to her nephew. The little boy, who was around ten years old, found the Hork portrait so appealing that he hung it up and began drawing the creature both from the front, and as he imagined it to be from the side. He tried to find out everything he could about this strange human species from Firmoca, but she could not tell him much, since she only knew from Kayam that they lived somewhere close to Snapp village and ate carcasses.

In any case, the young boy called Alez drew a lot better than Kayam, and within two days he had prepared several Hork drawings, sending them to Kayam through Firmoca so that clerk Getsnappy, the Hork expert, could use his "expertise" to determine whether they were true to life. Upon receiving them, Kayam was tortured by contradictory feelings. On the one hand he was consumed with envy, because he could clearly see that this little boy Alez had far more talent in drawing than he had, even though he was barely ten years old. On the other hand he liked the vanity of being considered an expert and being asked to critique the work. Otherwise he was impressed by the drawings. But he could not just admit it that easily, because then where would his expert authority be?! Firmoca had told him that her little nephew was burning from Hork fever and would like to know more about these strange creatures. Kayam informed her that right now he could only say that the pictures were beautiful, but far from good because the Horks were not hairy. On the contrary, they wore clothing since they were intelligent beings. They were just like humans, although he believed that Horks and humans were not able to beget offspring together. It may be possible, although it was unlikely anyone had tried it. Since a human man was much too weak to rape a Hork woman. The Horks would not do it with a human woman because they consider humans disgusting, as do humans them. They regard humans as some kind of degenerate species, like tiny white worms, or vermin, and if a man thinks a woman is disgusting he will not copulate with her. He only told her this much, but if Firmoca was coming back tomorrow he would write down a bunch of things about the Horks.

And so he did. He thoroughly enjoyed letting his imagination run free, as well the opportunity of being an expert, of flaunting his knowledge. Oh these foolish human creatures, how easy it was

to deceive them! They believed everything of him. He had described it well—humans were just tiny little, white worms. And malicious! Horks were indeed a superior creature.

He had learned that Firmoca's nephew was suffering from a slight speech disorder, and always pronounced the word "Hork" as "Ork". But this did not bother Kayam, for he knew perfectly well that the correct word was Hork.

By the next morning he had scribbled down the following on a piece of paper:

What is a Hork?

An intelligent being. An anthropoid. They have their own language, and if one is speaking Hork they call it "horking".

1. Their speech comes from deep in the throat and most of their words are based on the XOX formula, where X can be any consonant group and O is a vowel. There are very few words that are not built upon this formula. In the Hork language the only vowels are A, O, U and the 'E' sound, which is a combination of the sounds 'ey' and 'ee', but is rarely used. Regarding the consonants, the 'R' sound plays quite a large role. They can only pronounce the 'Y' sound as 'ry', and the 'L' sound is very infrequently used.

2. Adult Horks are approximately two meters tall. Instead of fingernails they possess great big claws. They are extremely strong. Their heads are particularly large, resembling an egg. Their skull consists of a broad, vaulted cranium. On its surface is a solid bony ridge, where the muscle mass of the large, lower jaw attaches. A Hork can easily bite off a grown man's arm, or even crunch the tubular bones of a large buffalo. Their teeth are commensurable from this. Every Hork has four canine teeth that protrude out from the lips. Upwards from the lower jaw are the two inner canines, and downwards from the upper jaw are the outer canines. Furthermore, in the case of males, apart from the four canines there exists another huge canine that grows upwards from the lower jaw on each side. These are much bigger than all the other canines and bend slightly outwards toward the ears. Often they decorate these by gilding various patterns on them, considering them a symbol of manhood, but they have no real function. Regarding their teeth—the tendency to decay is not typical in Horks and they do not deteriorate even if not cleaned, therefore brushing their teeth only has a deodorizing function.

They are scavengers. They also eat fresh meat, but favor a carcass that has been stinking for several days, because of its apparent "aroma" and "bouquet". It is preferable if there are many maggots crawling about inside. The decomposing internal organs are even tastier than the meat. They eat the intestines, including their contents. In their opinion this is filled with beneficial nutrients that cause their skin to shine and improves the health of their head fur. A Hork's body is extremely resistant to disease. It is impossible for a Hork to catch any disease from a dead animal, for example rabies, and in their circles intestinal worms are unheard of; neither is liver rot or any other disease caused by parasites. Horks generally die slowly of old age, barring an accident or war.

A Hork has no facial hair, and instead of ordinary head hair they have short, bristly fur growing on top of their heads. This can be a wide variety of colors, ranging from reddish to the more common brown. Their body is completely hairless everywhere else, even around the genitals, therefore they don't tend to get lice or fleas either.

Despite their disgusting eating habits they are a very clean species. They can endure the cold weather like the hardest of humans, and the heat even more so. Interestingly enough, their most cold-tolerant body part is the soles of their feet, which have thick, coarse skin and substantial fat

cushioning to protect them against the cold. A Hork can walk for hours on ice with bare feet if their other body parts are warmly dressed. It is for this reason that they don't often wear shoes.

The skin of Horks can range from white through to dark brown, but the white-skinned ones can tolerate the sun just as well as those with dark skin. The claws on their hands and feet are able to be retracted. Due to this their fingers are twice as thick as human fingers (extra space is needed in the last joint of the finger for their crescent shaped claws), therefore their fingers appear distorted. They are however quite mobile.

They have an upturned nose that is rather small, resembling that of a pig, although their nostrils are wide. Their eyes are like those of a cat, slotted vertically, and they can see just as well as lynxes in the dark. However their sense of smell is even better than their vision—they can smell almost anything from an incredible distance, especially carcasses. A Hork's hearing is no better than that of humans, perhaps even a little duller. Their ears are small and roundish. This may be the reason they are not particularly attracted to music. Their music culture is confined to a primitive thumping rhythm, and they like percussion and pipes, especially panpipes and bagpipes. They have many kinds of drums, but they have a preference for gongs. They also make tiny bells on which melodies can be played, and they call this a "gam lan". Humans know these as "gamelans", which in the Hork language means "percussion". Like beavers, they are able to close off their ears from offending noise or when they are immersed in water.

The reproductive cycle of the Horks is periodic, somewhat similar to that of deer. Throughout the year there is only one month in which they are interested in reproduction—for males and females alike this month is June. In June the entire Hork society almost comes to a halt, and nobody pays attention to anything else, except perhaps rescuing those involved in accidents. They accumulate enough food for this time. There are almost as many males as females and usually everybody has a partner, but there is always a big fight over the more desirable females. However in the end the female is the one who gets to choose, and it is inevitably the winner she chooses. The battle between the Hork males usually consists of snarling, staring at each other with a threatening expression, chest-banging and similar poses, and they show off their strength by lifting heavy weights and making terrifying threats, but it is very rare that it ends up in a bloody fight. This is mainly because it is not in the interest of any Hork male to have an actual fight. They are so strong and well-equipped with "bodily weapons", with strong teeth and claws, that even a very powerful male could be severely crippled if he fought with a smaller male; he may even bite him to death. If a Hork uses anything other than his bodily strength to defeat his opponent, for example a sword, a knife or a rock, the other Horks will execute him. Therefore this does not usually happen.

It is rare for a Hork to have more than one female in the mating season. Outside of the mating season they simply don't mate and have no interest in the activity. The couples do not remain together during this time and the male gives no assistance at all in raising the children. There is no guarantee that he will mate with her again next year. The female will give birth to the little Hork the following March, and after that she will breastfeed for at least three years. During these years she will not mate with anybody, nor feel any desire to. They do not esteem virginity and the females do not have hymens. Given that it is apparent from the above that they do not know the concept of family in human terms, the woman is not subject to the man, except of course during mating season, but she does not have to work and will not mate with anybody other than the strongest male at that time. Outside of the estrus period the Hork woman is equal to the Hork man in all respects. Generally Hork women are only slightly weaker than the men, and sometimes even stronger than a weak man.

Horks usually give birth to a single child—twins are very rare. Although the males do not help the females individually, as a collective society they all provide assistance to the mothers with children because there is great solidarity among them. There are no other Hork tribes, just the one. Outside of the mating season all the Horks are mostly good friends with one another. They are even hospitable to Horks that are unknown to them, as well as those who in the mating competition a week earlier had snarled the most terrible threats to their face. They do not take it seriously as they know it only applied to the time of estrus. The rivalry during the mating season is basically just flaunting their strength, and is more or less a national sporting event where the prize is the female. And just like a human athlete can be friends with his conquered rival, such is it with Horks. The females are wonderful mothers and love their children very much. Orphans without a mother do not exist because they are always accepted by some other mother with a child, in fact they even compete for them.

This was Kayam's description, and he felt that he had fabricated the Hork beings with a true scientific thoroughness. Everything was logical, and after this nobody would doubt his Hork expertise. Who could possibly know the Horks in such detail unless they had lived among them?! How brave he was! What wonderful beings he had invented! They were ugly, but that was their only problem. Otherwise the Hork society was much more loving than that of the humans. All humans were evil, cruel, unjust, dirty... the most disgusting of animals! It could not be disputed that all this was true of mankind, since they even kept such a magnificent being as him, Kayam, in prison instead of lauding him and giving him supreme command!

When he thought about this he did not mind that the world wasn't such a pleasant place for humans. The world was full of terrible imperfections, but the filthy trash of humanity did not deserve a better world! As this occurred to Kayam, he immediately grabbed his pen and wrote:

According to Hork mythology, the world we both currently live in is not the only existing world. Long ago all intelligent beings lived in a completely different world that contained no matter, as far as our usual interpretation of it goes. In this world, every desire a person conceived was fulfilled as soon as they had thought of it. Unfortunately there were beings who conceived the sorts of things that were not pleasant for the other beings. These thoughts caused them a lot of sadness. And because nobody in that world liked to be sad either, over time the great majority of good beings decided that these evil beings, who could not fit into the community of True Beings, should be excluded from them until they had learned how to be Good. Therefore they cast them out of their world to a level below, to the harsher, material world that we know. It was a far more unpleasant, rougher and grimmer world here, and not all of their wishes were fulfilled, in fact they had to work hard for everything. So this is the world of retribution where our remote ancestors were banished, and the True Beings, who remained in the more pleasant world of Desire, will not invite those living in this world (the Horks and other intelligent beings) to live among themselves until they have improved and become worthy of them. Sometimes, however, they send beings to us who undertake birth into this harsh, material world, who undergo astonishing suffering in order to proclaim the truth and open the eyes, ears and souls of the beings here, so that they can see the path of refinement. If anyone thinks the world we live in is unjust because it causes much suffering, know that the world actually is just, because this is a world of retribution and suffering is necessary to arouse desires for a better and more beautiful world that we must progress towards!

After Kayam had finished this he was flooded with even more satisfaction. Now he had really put humanity in its place! All humans deserved to be punished because they had mistreated him, ignored him and put him in prison. And they had received their punishment too, purely by the fact of being born. Being born *here*, into the world of retribution! Haha! He had described it to them rather well!

The next day Firmoca came for the written Hork description, and Kayam read it out to her. She listened in astonishment. Finally she said that she was not going to take it with her because she could obviously not read it, nor could she read it to Alez. But she did tell him what she remembered of it, and the following day Alez begged to go to the prison so that Kayam could read the whole thing to him. Of course Alez memorized almost all of it in the first reading. Children seem to easily remember anything that interests them! Neither Firmoca nor Alez doubted that every word was true, because Kayam had figured everything out so convincingly and logically. Firmoca believed it so strongly that after Alez left she quickly made Kayam write a letter to her tomcat, in which she inquired full of concern about whether there were Horks in the area where her tomcat was stationed, because she was worried about him. Kayam had to stifle a laugh, but he wrote the letter.

Tomcat's reply arrived with the courier, and all he wrote about the Horks was that he did not know who they were and had never heard of these creatures in his life. In the next letter Firmoca attached the "article" Kayam had written, in which all the relevant information about the Horks was summarized. In addition she sent a few drawings that were made not by Kayam, but Alez. Kayam had just evaluated them, graciously approving that yes, the Horks looked exactly like this. Some of the Horks in these pictures were wearing armor and swinging horrific swords with their clawed hands.

By the time tomcat's reply arrived the Hork legend had spread like an endemic all over Pakunda and the surrounding towns. Although almost everybody just called them Orks instead of Horks. Since after the expert Kayam had approved the pictures, little Alez boasted to his friends and showed them his work, but he had pronounced them in his own way as 'Orks', therefore his friends learned to call them that. Anybody who had some talent in drawing or sculpting began modeling Horks, that's how much they liked these terrifying, strong, disgusting, yet relatively tame monsters. Because this was the kind of thing that attracted children—things that were huge, strong and terrifying, but in reality they know they aren't dangerous because they aren't alive or not threatening to them for some other reason. For example because they are scavengers, like the Orks.⁷

And of course all of them wanted to talk to clerk Getsnappy so they could find out more and more details about an Ork's appearance or their habits, or even just to see the hero Getsnappy, who was a friend of the Horks. However this was difficult, because Getsnappy was not allowed to receive visitors whenever he liked. Prisoners did not have this luxury. But since his first Hork fan was a relative of Firmoca, Tepito, the prison guard, eventually let those who were curious come into the courtyard of the city hall and sit in front of the cell's barred window. They could talk to "Getsnappy" provided they pay a small fee—not to Getsnappy, but to Tepito! This was the reason he became much more lenient towards Kayam, and did not even oppose Kayam building a fire in his cell when the cold weather set in.

Only Alez managed to get inside the prison cell to see Kayam, who afterwards boasted loudly to everyone that his friend was the great clerk Getsnappy himself, none other than the friend of the Orks. This gave the slight impression that he was also a friend of the Orks. Kayam explained in vain that they were Horks, not Orks. Occasionally Alez would say the word correctly, but mostly he

⁷ Like dinosaurs are these days.

mispronounced it, causing some of the curious people who had come to Kayam's cell to call them 'Horks', and others 'Orks'. It aggravated Kayam a little, since he had named his beings himself, and they still got it wrong. However it felt really good that Alez had referred to him as the "great Getsnappy". It was true that his name wasn't really Getsnappy, but that didn't matter. The point was that behind this name it was him that people imagined.

It must be mentioned, however, that the majority of Kayam's visitors were not children, but women. Due to Kayam's deep hatred for humans he often told his visitors not only of the appearance of the Horks, but also their philosophy about why the world was so bad. Finally this reached the ears of adults, because Firmoca told her female friends and this philosophy, or mythology if you like, was well received by many of them. At last there was a logical explanation for why the world was the way it was. Many came so that they could hear it with their own ears from Getsnappy, and he told them. After a while they began thinking—although Kayam had not said this about himself—that Getsnappy was none other than one of the True Beings, who had voluntarily suffered being born into this material world in order to teach the fools what was Good, Beautiful and True.

Meanwhile the children, in following the Hork trend, began grunting from their throats to each other, and those who spoke like this said they were horking. Before long every little grunt was known as horking. Much later "horking" came to mean a sudden, angry grunt, and was incorporated into the Atlantuan language.

Of course this whole "orking" thing, which could rightly be called a fashion trend, was not able to remain hidden from the leaders of Pakunda. The councilors did not wish to put an end to it however, in fact they were quite happy about the whole thing. Now Kayam himself was even confessing that he was Getsnappy! Any potential problems that occurred regarding clerk Getsnappy or the non-existent Snapp village would have to be born by Kayam, since after so much evidence he could not deny that he was in fact this clerk. Councilor Kessel had remarked as much. "This Getsnappy truly is a fool! And hey, one fool makes a hundred!"

All of the councilors already referred to Kayam as Getsnappy, and some of them didn't even remember the name 'Kayam'. Those who were "orking" in the city knew Kayam as Getsnappy, even Firmoca, and those who were not "orking" didn't know of him at all.

But Kayam had not only created the Ork trend. He had founded the basis of several religions, all of which sprang from his Hork philosophy. And this was not purely to do with "Getsnappy", but also "piglet" and "tomcat". Because tomcat's next letter to his piglet arrived, and in it he wrote that fortunately there were no Horks in his area, which he was very glad about as they had enough problems with the Torgs. But there couldn't be that many problems with the Torgs, as the gallant soldier had not even mentioned Torgo and the battles apart from this single line in the letter. He was moaning more about his parents' lack of understanding of his love for her! This letter finally helped Kayam understand what the problem was with tomcat's parents, and he finally learned tomcat's real name—it was Harri.

As Kayam knew very well, Atlantua was a true empire. An empire largely differs from a simple country in that there are many nations within it, therefore it is not a nation state but a state of several nations. In Atlantua many nations have lived peacefully side by side since ancient times, and they all spoke the same language, Atlantuan, the difference only being a matter of regional dialect. Atlantua could confidently be regarded as one big tribal alliance. Of course it was not always a single empire containing many nations, and every nations' characteristics did not permanently disappear. A number of smaller nations and tribes dissolved into bigger ones, but at least in Kayam's time the larger tribes took their traditions seriously, which manifested itself in different clothing

customs, special celebrations and art forms, and of course their belief systems. These major tribes that did not merge were proud of their differences from the others. There were seven of them, namely as follows: Kelt, Ind, Manychyar, Shum, Shem, Nipon and Skald. Some of these were already associated with several smaller tribes, for example the Skalds. The largest tribe of Skalds was called 'Euskald', the "eu" word meaning "happy". Therefore Euskald = Happy Skald.

Although everybody considered themselves Atlantuan, they strongly identified with the specific tribe they were from. This custom persisted for many centuries after Kayam's era, until the destruction of Atlantua, when the remnants of some of the tribes spread out across the world to seek a new homeland. The descendants of nearly all these tribes have survived to this day. The Celts originated from the Kelt tribe (who of course later merged with various other European groups); the ancestors of the Indo-Europeans originated from the Inds. Only the Euskalds remained from the Skalds and became the Basques. They did name the whole of Europe however, as the word "rope" in their language meant "peninsula". They were very happy to have found this new home, so they named it "Happy Peninsula", thus Europe.

From the Manychyars came the Hungarians (the name Manychyar has changed over time, from Manydjyar, Manydyar to Madyar, which means "Hungarian" in the Hungarian language, although they spell it "magyar"). The Shum people became the Sumerians, and the Shem tribe split into several nations—the ancestors of the Jews, Arabs, Phoenicians and Egyptians. The Nipon people became the Japanese, who were most similar to the Manychyars in their behavior and appearance (at least at that time). In addition, their tribe's territory was right beside that of the Manychyar's, so they were practically relatives. The Kelts, by the way, did not originally call themselves 'Kelts' but 'Selts'. Their territory lay east of the Manychyar's, therefore the Hungarians just called them the 'eastern ones', which in Hungarian is "keletiek". And because the word was somewhat similar to 'selt' and because the Manychyar nation was much bigger than the 'Selts', over time their name changed from 'Selt' to 'Kelt', even among themselves.

Kayam, like Firmoca, originated from the Nipon tribe, although he did not attribute any significance to this. He was a true cosmopolitan in spirit, however this word and concept was not known at that time. Harri, Firmoca's tomcat, was Manychyar, but that would not have been a problem because it didn't particularly interest him. Inter-tribal marriage was common, and the offspring were considered part of the tribe the father belonged to. The trouble began when foolish-minded elderly people wanted to "restore" the "purity" of their tribes and therefore prevent mixed marriages. Among them was Harri's father, and even his mother, who herself was a pure-blooded Manychyar. For the past three generations there wasn't a single person among their ancestors who was not Manychyar. One might call this a nationalist mindset, and it was very rare in Atlantua back then, but nevertheless not unprecedented. It was usually those who were not in favor of the idea of an empire that thought this way, who claimed that a unified empire would kill the diversity of nations. They did not like Emperor Zor, nor any other emperor, and the emperors did not like them either.

It may perhaps now be possible to understand why Harri's father did not want his son to marry his little piglet. Not because she was already married, not because she was only average-looking, and not because she wasn't rich. These reasons would have made sense, but his father did not care about these things at all. Firmoca was not Manychyar, and it was intolerable that Harri break the noble tradition of the family and marry into another tribe!

According to the Emperor's laws, marriage did not require the parents' consent. At the same time however the parents could disinherit the child for any reason, and even without reason, making subsistence difficult for the youngster. That was why Harri wanted to make something of himself in

the army at all costs. His father, Mr. Huba, had repeatedly warned him that he could marry any girl who was Manychar, and although he would not say anything about it, if he married someone who was not Manychar in origin then there was a way up as well as down—he would be disinherited!

Mr. Huba's thinking might be more understandable if we knew that he was not just a gentleman, but also a shaman. The Manychys preserved their shamanic traditions even with their city-dwelling, settled lifestyle (and retained it later too, in fact it flourished even after the dissolution of Atlantua). There were many similarities between the shamanism of the Manychys and the shaman tradition mother Muchi pursued. Among the tribes of Atlantua, only the Manychys believed in this. Those who were not Manychar gave no consideration to the words of the shamans. They did not request any fortune telling, did not pay them, yet the shamans still tried to support manychysm.

It seemed however that Harri had serious feelings for Firmoca. His letter to her was very long, and in it he expressed his disappointment with the whole Manychysm thing, as well as the shamanism of his father, which had become an obstacle to enabling their two loving hearts to beat as one. As far as he was concerned, he certainly found Firmoca's view of the Horks she had conveyed in her letter more believable, because they may be ugly and disgusting and probably threatening too, but he deeply felt it to be true that this was a world of punishment. If what the Hork nation professed was true, then it didn't matter who was Manychar and who was Nipon, Skald or any other tribe, as long as they were a good person and loved each other. He wanted to put it in writing in this letter to Firmoca that he denied the Manychar belief, and regarding his religion, from now on he considered himself an honorary Hork. Because he was not willing to believe in anything that separated him from Firmoca!

"Oh, my hero!" Firmoca stammered, clutching the letter to herself and shedding tears of joy. She became so emotional that she could no longer stand, and slammed down beside the wall onto her rather shapely and large rear, making a noise like a wet dishcloth dropping onto the floor, and continued sighing. "Oh, my hero tomcat!"

After this Firmoca also claimed to be an honorary Hork, at least as far as her religion was concerned. Because naturally neither of them assumed that from now on they would start eating carcasses... Firmoca took it so seriously that she told several of her friends that she believed the Horks were right concerning the things of the world. And all her friends told their own friends, who told their friends, and they all thought about this and began sharing Firmoca's view. Some of them even converted their husbands to this new religion. This wasn't a problem, nor was it prohibited, because in Atlantua there was so much religious freedom that nobody even needed to state the fact. It never occurred to anyone that religion should be anything other than a private affair. Even those among the Manychar shamans, who thought like Mr. Huba, never said that other religions should be prohibited or that anybody should be forced into a particular faith. They believed that enforcement would only cause them to at best reach a pretense of faith, which would not mean anything. Their only wish was that their offspring follow the faith that was true to them, because they were born into it. Religious intolerance was still hiding in the distant future.

Therefore the problem was not that people had converted to the Ork (or Hork) "religion", but that this religion, if it could be called a religion, did not have holy scriptures or detailed beliefs passed on through oral traditions. Some even began explaining what Kayam had said according to their own liking. Due to this a very different set of belief systems emerged in a short period of time that had begun with Kayam's original intellectual grounds. One group, for example, retained from Kayam's original teaching that this world was a punishment world, although they called it the "Valley of Tears", or the "Well of Suffering". And they combined this with the widespread view in

Atlantua that people have souls. Kayam had not said a word about people having souls as he didn't believe in this, but they figured that if this was a world of punishment then it could not be so easy to escape from it just by dying, and that being the end of it all. Not a chance! After death the soul would naturally re-emerge into this wretched punishment world, and would have to wander about here over the course of millions of lives, until it became noble enough to return to the original, wonderful world of desire from where it was once chased out of. This later became the basis of the Brahmanist philosophy and religion, and even later Buddhism. Of course during later centuries it underwent a number of changes and refinements and expanded extensively, but its basis came from what Kayam had created.

Others were so drawn in by the Desire world Kayam had spoken about, where every thought and wish was immediately fulfilled, that they wanted to get there as soon as possible. They were appalled by the teaching of the previous group that they had to be reborn over and over, and believed that this world did indeed constitute punishment, since it was obviously quite a miserable place. But they also believed that the True Beings judged each person's soul after their death, and only tested them once in this terrible world. If they felt the person had passed the test then they let them live among themselves again, however if they found them to be utterly hopeless they were banished to an even worse world than this one, forcing them to live there forever and ever. They called this place Hell. From this beginning evolved the first variant of Judaism over many centuries, and later after many modifications came Islam, Christianity, and basically most religions that do not believe in the concept of rebirth.

These were the two main evolutionary trends of Kayam's original Hork religion, but of course from the outset they were many sub-variants of each, almost as many as the number of Getsnappy's followers, and they disputed for days, weeks and months over whose imagination was closer to reality. Initially each of them ran to Getsnappy with their own version so that he could tell them who was seeing the truth more accurately, but although Kayam liked to play the judge he was reluctant to commit himself to any one trend because he knew the others would be angry at him, and he was now a cautious man. All he could say was that he wasn't able to form any opinion on these matters as he only knew what the Horks professed, which was what he had already spoken about. So the question remained unresolved, leaving everybody to believe whatever they wanted. However the result was that each of the newly formed religious groups, while preaching contradictory teachings, still regarded Getsnappy as their prophet.

The new religions spread at a dizzying pace. Kayam had not yet been in prison two years when not only the inhabitants of Pakunda confessed to be followers of his religion, but also a considerable proportion of young people who could reach Pakunda within a week's journey. Even older people became followers, although they were a much smaller portion. As matters stood, the development of these religions had already reached a level where further development was inhibited by a regrettable circumstance—the founder, prophet Getsnappy, was still alive. Because it is easy to see how much it would increase the appeal of a religion if, for example, one could say heart-stirring prayers in which one could beg the prophet to do miracles, or if the prophet's life could be colored with all sorts of fictional but instructive legends. But this could not be done if the prophet was still alive. It would be strange to pray to a living individual, who moreover was so obviously unable to perform miracles that he was stuck in jail and could not even free himself! Living people are full of all kinds of fallibilities that make them woefully unsuitable for being a subject of prayer and supplication.

It seemed that Getsnappy had done his duty and could go. It was time for Getsnappy, who had never lived, to fall back into nonexistence and die, leaving his followers in this punishment world on their own. Of course Kayam hadn't the slightest intention of dying. But Getsnappy saw clearly

that his responsibility was now to pass away. He had to die if he wanted to live on in the faith of the people, and because Kayam insisted on living with such inexplicable stubbornness, Getsnappy decided to make himself independent of Kayam. Why not, as he was never Kayam in the first place! He was the creation of Kayam, but not Kayam himself. He couldn't be the same as Kayam because there was a tiny difference between them—Kayam existed but Getsnappy did not! That is, he could die without Kayam, as to Kayam it made no difference whether Getsnappy lived or died. And whatever Getsnappy decided he would follow through with. The time was very near for Getsnappy to have a tragic end. Of course only to be resurrected in the near future, obviously at the most inopportune moment.

Kayam was peacefully sitting in his prison cell, and had no idea that his intellectual creation was deeply contemplating his death. He didn't even suspect anything when that fateful letter arrived. It was another of tomcat's letters, and he had written that favorable events had happened to him. It all started when war broke out between Atlantua and Torgo, and because of this they fortified the garrison where Harri served. Among the recruits was a young man, whose name nobody knew. He was only known as Mamasboy, spoken as a single word. He was a tall lad, but thin as a shoelace with not an ounce of muscle on him, as though he were just a skeleton. Not useful for much either, and in addition he did not like to bathe. Generally speaking soldiers aren't the cleanest of folks, but Mamasboy had been told by his mother that there were leeches in water, and ever since then he had been so afraid of leeches that he avoided bathing water, even water from the basin. The silly thing thought that a leech would crawl into his anus and bite it. It was impossible to get this nonsense out of his head. One time when he was particularly stinky, Harri said to him, "Hey, you'd better wash your dick, otherwise it'll rot!"

"My what?" he asked.

"Your dick!"

"What's that?"

Harri almost punched him because he thought he was being sarcastic, but as he looked into his face he saw that he was seriously inquiring about the meaning of the word. Then he pointed between the guy's legs, saying, "It's what's hanging down there! That's your dick—didn't you even know that?!"

At this the lad's face lit up and the light of reason came upon him as he exclaimed, "Oh that! You mean my willy!"

Everybody who heard this broke out in a roar of laughter. After some interrogation it turned out that his father had died when he was a baby, leaving his mother to raise him alone. She was extremely protective of him, even protecting him from the wind, and had never taught him a single dirty word. She did not allow him to make friends and was the one who taught him the word 'willy'. The guy didn't even know how a child was born—he thought that girls got pregnant from kissing. That's when he was given the name Mamasboy.

This unfortunate fellow was assigned to Harri's sector. Once when Harri was talking to his soldiers about the Orks and showing them the picture, Mamasboy asserted that not long ago he had seen something like this in the woods nearby. Of course nobody believed him, but Mamasboy insisted so strongly that the group got up and went over to this nearby place where according to him the Ork had been seen. And there the boy showed them a cave where the Ork supposedly was. Because he felt so bad about being mocked by the soldiers he did not even wait for the others, but rushed inside so that he could catch the Ork and prove his courage.

Soon a huge growl came out of the cave, which could easily have been perceived as the "horking" of Hork speech, however the wailing of Mamasboy could not. No one dared go in there

apart from Harri. Although in the letter he had confessed to his piglet that he was very much afraid, he was secretly hoping to catch the Hork and be awarded. Inside he had found Mamasboy, who had been knocked down. There were no Horks, but instead a rather large bear. Fortunately the bear had no interest in him as he was about to bite into the boy's head, and so with a clever move he was able to pierce the bear's heart, which the foolish Mamasboy thought was a Hork!

Mamasboy did not end up dying, but the bear had hit him on the head so hard that he became even dumber than he was before. Even though they told him that it was a bear, not a Hork, and showed him the skinned bear fur, it was in vain because he just kept repeating that he didn't understand why they were suddenly calling the Hork a bear when everybody knew it was a Hork! It couldn't have been anything other than human since he had seen it walking on two legs. Everybody knew that only humans walked on two legs, not animals, and in a sense Horks were humans too. Besides, he had not even heard of an animal called a bear. His mom had showed him all the animals that existed—pigeons, chicks, roosters, doggies, pussycats, mice, and he also knew about lammies, cows and bleaters (the fool meant goats), so he knew all the existing animals and therefore this couldn't be anything other than a Hork. He quarreled with them and scolded them for eating human flesh when they were eating the bear's meat. Of course Mamasboy didn't eat a single bite of the meat, declaring that he was not a cannibal!

He had taken it so much to heart that he reported them for man-eating, so Harri was to appear in front of his superiors and give an account of the accusations. He went to his superiors and explained the whole thing, and they dropped the charges, sending Mamasboy home to his mother. But the case continued in a way that he was appointed Captain due to his bravery, and he received a cash reward—not a lot, but it was something. He requested a few days vacation so he could get married. After all, with a captain's salary they could make a living. Not a great one, but better than what his little piglet now received from her prison guard. He was granted the vacation, although not straight away. It would be a month later but was also a month in duration, therefore he would be arriving at that time, and piglet should wait for him.

"Oh, my hero!" Firmoca held the letter to her heart as she had done many other times, her flesh almost quivering from happiness.

Kayam was far from happy, as he did not yet know that the time of his freedom was near. But it must be said that Firmoca was quite fair, giving Kayam a tremendous amount of treats on this occasion. She even promised that if he was not executed she would support Getsnappy by her new husband's side too, who would surely not prohibit this since without Getsnappy they could not have exchanged so many letters.

But the trouble didn't come from Firmoca, but somewhere else—her husband Tepito! Firmoca's fear of her husband did not lack serious grounds. Tepito wasn't exactly a model of gentleness, after all, this was not generally an admirable trait in a prison guard. In addition he was terribly jealous. At first he was even suspicious of Kayam, because why was his wife going to see Getsnappy so often? Why was she providing him with so many delicacies? But finally he accepted that she was just crazy about this new religion Getsnappy had invented. Women were so stupid! It was better if he let Firmoca pamper Getsnappy, as it would not be good if Kayam were to be destroyed by the bleakness of prison life. Then his income would cease. And besides, Kayam was not only a prisoner but was so dirty from not having bathed for two years that he stank from miles away, and it would be impossible that Firmoca would want to cheat on him with the stinky Getsnappy!

Yet he was still suspicious. He could feel that his wife did not love him. She could not have loved him, since Firmoca's parents had forced her to marry him, before the Emperor had banned this custom. However he did not realize who he should rightly be suspicious of. He was wasting his

suspicion on someone who was perfectly innocent. After he had convinced himself that Kayam could not endanger his masculine rights, the subject of his suspicion was none other than Mamasboy—that wretched, helpless, half-witted imbecile boy, who was still troubled and whom Harri the tomcat had chased home from the army!

Harri had reported to Firmoca about Mamasboy in detail in his letter, but he forgot to write that Mamasboy was from the very same city where Kayam was born—Sizon! However he was probably unaware of that. Mamasboy was naturally unhappy in the army, and although he was twenty-five years old, he was glad they had chased him home so he could be back under his mother's skirt. And there he told everybody about the things that had happened to him. Of course in his story the tales were quite different. Not that he lied, as he was probably too stupid to come up with a lie. He simply said that he had lived through the events. For example, he told them he had found his place in the army, and in fact he was the bravest of them all because he went hunting for Orks! Everybody had been trembling in fear and nobody else dared go into the Ork's cave except for him. But he went in there and attacked the Ork. He could not deny that he hadn't defeated the Ork and that the Ork had knocked him down, however this was not unexpected as he was a lot bigger than him. He had done the best he could on his own. It would have been enough if somebody else had been there with him, then the two of them could have easily conquered it. Finally that person did arrive—the second bravest man in the sector, the captain himself! It was Harri who stabbed the Ork with a spear, and he only succeeded because in the meantime the Ork had become weaker due to a loss of blood and was slow, since before he was knocked down he had managed to stab the Ork with his knife. If he had not been so brave, Harri would have been eaten by the Ork for sure! But people were so unfair, and Harri denied his merits, as he wanted all the glory for himself. In fact he was an even greater villain because after this they ate the Ork! They became cannibals! That's right, not just Harri but all the soldiers in his troop. It was only him that refused to eat a human, and that was why they chased him away from there, because he was much braver than them and they were envious of him.

Of course Mamasboy's mother believed his every word, or at least pretended to believe the tales of her young son. But others did not, because they knew Mamasboy. That is to say, they did not believe that Mamasboy really attacked the Ork. And it was a true injustice because he *did* attack it—perhaps not an Ork, but a bear, and it required a lot of courage or madness. They did believe however that Mamasboy's captain hunted the Hork and knocked it down. But as far as eating it went, that they could not believe.

The city of Sizon was not far from Pakunda. The news had also reached there and this was further evidence of Getsnappy's claim of the existence of Horks. There was no problem with this; it was more what Mamasboy had let out about how he knew about the Horks. He had said that he was made aware of them through a letter that was written from Pakunda, by a woman who used to work in the prison. He did not mention that the letter was written to him; it was just assumed by everyone that he was the one who had received the letter because he did not say otherwise. Firmoca was the only woman who worked in the prison, and as soon as this reached Tepito's ears he became extremely jealous. He watched every move of Firmoca even more carefully—where she went, how much time she spent there, how nicely she smiled at others... He even approved of the time she spent with Kayam in prison because he considered Kayam harmless.

He discovered nothing remarkable, as far as her actions were concerned. But one time he had the desire to make love, not at night in bed but during the daytime at the foot of the haystack, even though this was not a habit of his in general. It so happened that the half-opposing but at the same

time resigned Firmoca pulled down her skirt with a grimace on her face, and a letter fell out of it. What other letter could this be but the latest letter from tomcat!

"Give that back!" yelled the startled Firmoca, snatching for it, but Tepito was faster and lifted it into the air. Then he slapped his wife so hard that she almost lost one of her teeth.

"Aha! Now I've caught you, you floozy, you whore! Now I'll finally know who you're cheating on me with!" and he raised the letter triumphantly in display. He was no longer interested in making love. He rushed off immediately, and it was only on the street that it occurred to him how stupid he was. He didn't have to look for a clerk at the city hall to read him the letter—the prison here was much closer, where Getsnappy resided. He could be reached sooner and would not even ask him for money.

Tepito ran over to Kayam with lightening speed. "This, this..." he stammered, handing the letter through the bars with his trembling fingers. "I want you to read this to me!"

"What for?" asked Kayam, blinking in astonishment. It was enough just to glance at the handwriting for him to recognize that this was something tomcat had written. And if he exposed the love affair of piglet and tomcat then his good life was over. He would rarely even get stinky meat, let alone delicacies.

"What for? What for? How can you possibly ask why, you fool?! Because I want to know who's banging my wife, that whore! Read it or I'll skin your back!"

Kayam took the letter, albeit not with great enthusiasm, and his mind churned over what he should do. Finally he decided that in the end it made no difference for him. He was not risking much if he lied. If he did not read the letter Tepito really would skin his back, but if he did read it Firmoca would be exposed and it would come to light that he regularly read her the letters from tomcat, and also that he wrote Firmoca's letters for her, since she couldn't write. And this would more than likely result in him losing the skin off his back as well. It would cause no greater problem if he just made up a lie. Either his lie would be discovered or not. He would let whatever happened happen.

So with the letter in his hands he said, "Okay, I'll read it. Although it is a very long letter, and for all that work I really deserve some reward, don't you think? I was thinking perhaps for example..."

"Think for example that if you don't start right away I'll punch you in the stomach!" screamed the jealous beast through the bars. Tepito's face was red from anger, snarling as best he could with his fingernails bent like claws. Now he really did resemble a Hork! A very angry Hork!

Kayam sighed again as his thoughts raced around his head. He "read" the following:

"Dear Honorable Madam Firmoca..."

Well, at least this didn't start out like a love letter. Kayam continued, "We, as dejected parents, are turning to your noble person so that in as far as you are able you could try to reason with your powerful husband Tepito, that his gloomy heart may soften towards our unfortunate child, Kayam, who is imprisoned over there, to improve the circumstances in which he is forced to live. I, an unhappy mother, am imploring your noble heart! It would be a great relief for Kayam if he could drink fresh milk once a week, and also bathe every week, the latter not even costing your honorable person anything. He has always enjoyed this since childhood, naturally in warm water! In the hope that you have heard my request and that my obtrusiveness did not bother you too much, I remain with great respect your humble admirer—Mrs. Zielmona."

Tepito listened to this "reading" with his mouth wide open, in fact with open ears too, but to be honest he felt relieved. His worst fears had not come to pass... his wife was not cheating on him!

And how wonderful it was that she was begging him, Tepito, because he was such a great man, a true prison master! That really boosted his ego.

Now Kayam, reinforcing what he had read, said, "How kind my mother is! I had no idea she had written to you. Is it then possible that I could bathe once a week?"

"What?! Don't be as stupid as your mother! A jail isn't a place where one should feel good! What a crazy fool this Getsnappy is! Goodness me! My wife has more sense, not telling me about this stupid letter!"

"I'm not surprised," mumbled Kayam. But Tepito heard it.

"Don't talk back, I'm not interested in your opinion! I only deserve praise, since I'm too good to you as it is!" With that he turned and left. He didn't even take the letter with him and Kayam tore it into pieces and dropped it into the toilet pit, even covering it with some dirt.

Tepito did not fulfill Kayam's requests, but not purely out of viciousness. First of all, milk was expensive. And Firmoca brought Getsnappy enough goodies. As far as bathing was concerned, there was no way that was going to happen. Kayam should remain as dirty as possible, then he won't have to be jealous of him!

Back at home he gave Firmoca a hug, but instead of loving words he whispered nasty things to her—that she was a stupid creature, an animal, for why didn't she tell him that it wasn't a love letter, just a message written by Getsnappy's mother?!

"But... from where did you..." stammered Firmoca, who was waiting to be beaten to death.

"I just had Getsnappy read me the letter!"

Firmoca began to comprehend what was going on and replied, "I wanted to tell you, but you immediately slapped me and ran away!"

"Okay, I was mistaken. These things happen," mumbled Tepito ashamed, and to forget about his disgrace he hurried to the pub to get something to drink.

Firmoca also hurried away, but not to the pub; to Kayam, with a huge package of mouth-watering delicacies. She felt she owed her life exclusively to Getsnappy's composure.

Kayam treated her only slightly more kindly than Tepito. "You're dumber than a worm! What the hell were you thinking keeping those letters from your randy cat on you?!"

"It's not true—I always burn them, always, it was only the latest one that I had with me!"

"Well, you don't have it anymore because I tore it to pieces! And this is how it shall be from now on!"

"Oh it will be, it will be!" nodded the woman readily. She was actually terribly frightened.

But she had no opportunity to make any more mistakes, because not even two days had passed and her tomcat arrived! Firmoca had only expected him the following afternoon, but he was in such a hurry that he had gained an entire day. It did not occur to either of them to notify Kayam, and Harri didn't know him anyway. Firmoca had only just seen Harri from the window, and already she was rushing towards him at breakneck speed, her arms clinging around his neck and almost suffocating the rather strong man with her embrace. They did not even waste time reveling in their joy. Tepito was in the pub again and they used this time to go to mother Muchi, where first Firmoca announced that she was divorcing Tepito, and second that she wanted to marry Harri right away. There was no obstacle to this because Harri had brought along the marriage fee.

By the time mother Muchi had marched out to Tepito's house to estimate his wealth, part of which belonged to the Emperor and the rest divided in two between Tepito and Firmoca, Firmoca was legally the wife of her tomcat. Tepito of course didn't know anything about this. He arrived back to discover Firmoca and Harri standing peacefully arm in arm, and even the blind could see that they were in love. Tepito's jealousy set in immediately.

"Hey!" he shouted in exasperation, "Leave my wife alone, damn you!"

"What do you mean *your* wife?! She's *my* wife now!"

"Since when?!"

"For at least the past ten minutes. She divorced you not long ago and married me!"

"I'd like to see proof of that!"

"You can see it right now. And if you doubt my word just enter your house, as the wealth inspection is now in process!"

"What?! What inspection?!"

"The only one it can be! Don't act as if you don't know what the law states! In a divorce, half of the wealth..."

"Aaaah!" Tepito yelled and rushed into the house. Inside he found mother Muchi with a few soldiers, who were diligently noting what everything was worth. Tepito was afraid to do anything because the soldiers outnumbered him, and besides, it was not good life insurance to kill or beat a woman such as mother Muchi, whom the Emperor had personally written a letter to! Instead he rushed back outside and pulled out his sword...

He had barely reached stabbing range when Harri knocked the weapon from his hand and pointed the sword at his chest. "Calm down! I am far more proficient in fencing than you are. I learned this science on the battlefield, not just from watching soldiers in combat at a distance like you! Firmoca is mine, you can go after other women! Now get out of here! If you pull a weapon on me once more or hurt my wife with even a single word I will kill you. I'll stab this iron sword into your throat! I'm serious!"

"Screw you!" shrieked Tepito, and ran off without even retrieving his sword from the ground. But he did not go after other women. He went somewhere else entirely. To the prison. To Kayam. He may not have been as smart as Kayam, but he was not stupid either. By now he had realized that Kayam had deceived him with that letter. And now he would get what was coming to him. On his way to the cell he unhooked a heavy whip from the wall, but he decided this was not enough, so he also took along a stick. With these in his hands he clomped into Kayam's cell.

"We need to have a little chat with each other!" he shouted at Kayam with bloodshot eyes.

Kayam ran into the farthest corner of the cell. This conversation was not promising to be a good one. Compared to how angry he was, Tepito behaved rather cautiously and with foresight. As soon as he had opened the barred door he entered the cell, and instead of bouncing on Kayam immediately he calmly closed the door behind him and pocketed the key.

"Well! You're not going to escape now, buddy!" he grinned at Kayam, but his grin was anything but kind.

"What's the matter?! What happened?" asked Kayam, feigning ignorance as he stared in terror at the whip Tepito was brandishing in his palm.

"You're asking what happened?! You're really asking that?! You still think I'm stupid?! You're going to pretend you don't know?! Because it's not me who's stupid, not me!" He stepped closer, and although Kayam thought he was at a safe distance, the whip had already hit his shoulder painfully. It had a long strap. "I'm not stupid! At least certainly not as stupid as you think I am! I hate it when people incorrectly assume that I'm stupid! But don't worry, you'll pay for it!" and he struck him again with the whip.

"No, no, you're not stupid at all sir, really, you're not! I didn't ask this because I thought you were stupid, I'm the stupid one!" Kayam began howling in desperation.

"Oh, you're stupid alright! But the reason you're stupid is because you think *I'm* stupid!" and with that Tepito struck him forcefully another two times with the whip. He was a fairly strong man, much stronger than Kayam in any case.

And Kayam did not like to be beaten. He jumped and ran to the far end of the cell. At the same time he believed it was wisest to insist he didn't know about anything, although he guessed that it was something to do with the letter. So as his tears flowed from the pain of the whip and he prodded his wounded shoulder, he asked, "What has happened, my lord? Please tell me, as I'm sure it's some kind of misunderstanding that I can explain!"

"Well of course, Getsnappy, I'm sure you could explain anything. You do have a way with words, but the time of fancy words is over! My eyes have been opened, oh yes!" and he was again beside Kayam. For a change he used the stick in his left hand, and struck at Kayam's shin so hard that it almost broke. Kayam could not jump away and just fell to the ground, screaming in agony. Tepito stopped above him and began whipping his back. "Take that! And that! I've had enough of your words, of your lies! You're not even human but some kind of evil spirit! You're none other than the Father of Lies! But now you'll get what you deserve because I'll tear you apart. I'll chop you up into tiny pieces and even gobble you up! You're just a worthless, bloody little mouse compared to me! And now I'm the lion! In fact an enormous elephant, and I tread on such small animals, such tiny worms as you!" Tepito was silent for a moment, but only to transfer the whip into his left hand. He threw the stick to the ground as he no longer needed it.

"Yes, yes, my lord, everything you say is true! I admit it, I am very small compared to you. You truly are a gargantuan animal, there's no doubt about it, you're the biggest animal in the world! I've always had a deep conviction that you were a mighty animal, just please don't hurt me!" Kayam shouted, but of course this just made Tepito even more furious because he thought Kayam was mocking him. His anger was so great that he couldn't even speak. He found flogging too mild a punishment and so he started kicking Kayam.

Although he was not the model of bravery it was necessary to defend himself, so finally Kayam pushed Tepito, and using the momentary pause in his beating he jumped up and tried to escape as far as possible, in the opposite direction of Tepito. The only problem was that the prison cell was not large enough to run very far in it, and in addition Kayam was standing between Tepito and the toilet pit. Because he was afraid to go toward Tepito, he had no other choice than to run across the three-step long wooden footbridge to the other side of the pit.

The toilet pit was so large because this way it did not have to be cleaned very often. However it was not this large originally. Its sides were made of earth, and because of its frequent use it became sodden and had gradually eroded. From time to time longer and longer planks were required to bridge the distance over the top of the pit, but this was more convenient for the various people guarding the prison than digging a new pit and cobbling the sides.

So Kayam ran to the other side because he considered the pit his protective shield. Of course it was a rather thin protective shield. Tepito could have walked around the pit in moments without any problem. It would barely have taken him five steps. However anger was clouding his mind so much that this did not even occur to him, and instead he headed toward the thin wooden footbridge in order to cross over it. But Tepito never even managed to step onto the footbridge. The fact that the ground was so crumbly near the toilet pit saved Kayam's life. It was muddy because the air in the prison was quite humid, and it had also absorbed a lot of water and other materials from inside the pit. Kayam had never yet had an accident himself, because if somebody was carrying out his business in such an unstable location on these slimy, slippery planks, he had to move about very carefully. However at this moment being careful was the last thing that could be said about Tepito!

He leapt with great force, his legs landing directly beside the pit on the ground, or rather the mud. He did not have time for another move because his feet slipped right over the edge. Tepito landed on his ass on the side of the pit where his feet were previously, but his buttocks did not stay there for long because the momentum carried him further on the slippery mud. He slipped so quickly that he almost flew over to the other side.

Almost, but not quite. Both his legs reached the other side but not his bottom, and Tepito dropped into the toilet pit on his back, into the lovely fermenting excrement. And because the pit was so deep and the substance in it so thin, his back was soon submerged along with his stomach and head. He began to jerk violently in an attempt to get out of there. He reached out both arms to find some kind of handrail, and with one hand knocked down one of the planks from its place, but his left hand grabbed onto the other plank. Kayam was back to his senses now, and as he bent over he forcefully smashed Tepito's fingers with his fist, causing the prison guard to let go of the plank before realizing that it wasn't the best idea to let go of the lifesaving handrail over such a trifle. But it was too late, and Kayam quickly dragged away both planks. Then he lifted both Tepito's legs, which were half protruding from the pit, and tried to push the prison guard's head down into the pool of diluted feces. Of course Tepito was kicking wildly, and he managed to hit Kayam on the chin once, but this did not really achieve anything other than making things worse for himself, as his head just buried deeper into the pit.

Kayam however did not like being kicked. He released Tepito's legs, and since now only the top of his buttocks could be seen, he took the stick and struck huge blows on Tepito's exposed legs and even between his legs, hoping that he could reach his manhood. He must have succeeded a couple of times as it was impossible that from so many hits a few of them didn't reach their target, and the pain certainly urged Tepito to cry out, but the consequences were clearly that his lungs and mouth filled with liquid. Kayam tried to push the prison guard deeper with the stick. His efforts were successful because the movement of the legs slowed, indicating that Tepito was drowning. Finally everything went quiet. Tepito was no longer jerking and all that could be seen in the pit were two feet stretched out above the surface.

Kayam panted contentedly. The confrontation had greatly increased his confidence, for he had defeated a very strong and much hated enemy. Although luck had played a big part in it, he had noticed the opportunity offered to him and pounced on it. On both the opportunity and on Tepito! Of course what had taken place did leave traces of evidence. For instance on Kayam's body. Tepito had been fiercely fighting for his life, meanwhile splashing about all the not entirely clean water, to put it mildly. Kayam got plenty of it on himself, but it didn't matter that much to him since he had not bathed in two years.

First of all he pondered over what he should do. In order to escape he would need the key. But Tepito had put it in his pocket. He could not haul out the prison guard's heavy body. While he was doing that anybody could come in and notice, and that would look pretty bad for him. Since Tepito was face down in the toilet pit, the key might have fallen out of his pocket and be lying at the bottom, and he would never find it there! Even if he managed to obtain the key, it was more than likely that there were other prison guards outside. Or if not, he could now see that it would be immediately obvious to anyone that he was escaping from prison. It was better to stay calm. So instead he tried to remove all traces of his crime. He pushed Tepito's body further down with the stick, especially his legs, until finally he succeeded in forcing them to remain under the actual shit level. Because what was there could not be called a water level!

He threw the whip into the pit and pushed it down quite deep. He hid the long stick too, but did not throw it into the pit, just stuck it into the soft ground beside it so that it didn't look like it might

be good for something else, and this way he'd also know where to find it. After that he replaced the planks over the pit, stamped on the soil around it to tidy it up, and using his drinking water cleaned himself as best he could, especially his hands and face. He couldn't do much about his clothing. Later it occurred to him that he could have sacrificed some of his straw bed, and cleaned the worst of the mess on his clothes up with a bundle of straw. He would have had plenty of time to do this because nobody bothered him in his prison solitude for quite a long time.

It only occurred to Firmoca in the evening that her ex-husband may have attempted to get revenge. It was then she came to her senses from Harri's loving gaze and told him to hurry over to the prison, because the clerk was there who had written her letters, and Tepito might want to do something bad to him. At first Harri just shrugged with indifference. But Firmoca quickly told him that clerk Getsnappy had been very good to her when Tepito had found his last letter, so she owed her life to the man. This changed Harri's view of the matter and they rushed to the prison.

Firmoca was of course allowed in by the soldier on guard, and because Harri was with her he let him in too. Firmoca asked him whether Tepito was around. The soldier answered that he had not seen him. He was not lying. Tepito had arrived at the prison shortly after Firmoca and Harri had gotten married, and at that time there was a different guard standing there. Since then there had been a shift changeover. The previous guard did not care what his superior was doing in there and this present guard did not know that Tepito should have been in there. But Firmoca was not reassured. It occurred to her that Tepito could have gone over there hours ago, so she stepped into the building to see if Kayam was still alive.

He was alive. Alive and trying to pretend that nothing special had happened.

"Was my husband here? Oh, what am I talking about... Tepito!" asked Firmoca.

"Well, it's about time you decided to check up on him!" thought Kayam angrily, and he would have gladly told her his opinion. But he didn't, because he was not sure what piglet would say to the fact that he had killed her husband. It was true that she wanted to divorce Tepito, but even so, she may not have been happy to learn that Kayam had drowned her husband in feces.

"No, I haven't seen him all day," said Kayam in such a neutral voice that he could have won first place in the world championship of lying.

Firmoca was very glad to hear this, and introduced Harri to Kayam. She said that this was her tomcat, whom Kayam knew from all the letters.

"Ah, so you're the 'hork-killer' hero!" said Kayam, not without sarcasm. "And when will you be marrying your piglet?"

"Well, you don't have much decency, my friend, talking like that!" replied Harri immediately.

"But that's what you call her!"

"I'm allowed to because I love her!"

"I also love her in my own way," Kayam shrugged. "Especially when she brings me a delicious roast!"

"That's not the same!"

"To me it is," Kayam shrugged again, scratching his long, sparse, yet unspeakably filthy beard.

"Stop arguing!" Firmoca demanded. "Anyway, you might as well know that I'm already his wife!"

"Really?"

"Yes, really!"

"Hm..." Kayam muttered rather gloomily. It wasn't possible not to notice his bad mood.

"You're not even going to congratulate us? You don't wish us happiness?!" asked Firmoca.

"Oh yes, of course I do!"

"And you're not forcing yourself to say this?"

"Take it as though I'd been wishing you the best for a full half hour!"

"What's the matter, Getsnappy?"

"Oh nothing, I was just thinking that after this you'll no longer need my services and I'll have to go back to eating meat with worms."

"That won't be the case at all! I know what gratitude is, and besides, Harri will only be staying for a month and I'm not sure for how long, but after that he'll be gone again and we'll only be able to exchange letters. He definitely can't come home as long as the Emperor is at war with Torgo!"

"Oh, well that's more like it!" Kayam calmed down.

"But will Tepito allow you to come to Getsnappy if you're now my wife?!" Harri asked concerned. And his concern was completely sincere. After all, it would be ideal if in exchange for merely a few treats his wife could permanently have a clerk at her disposal.

The thought certainly frightened Firmoca, and she began to worry. But Kayam reassured her, "I don't think we're going to have any serious problems with Tepito. I believe that from now on he'll behave more calmly."

"And why do you think that?" asked Firmoca cautiously. As far as she knew, her husband was not known for his calmness!

"Well, last time he was here he said something about envying Harri's glory, and that he might go off to hunt for the Horks himself!" replied Kayam quickly. "He said that he wanted to bring you a Hork trophy so you might respect him more."

"What?!" Firmoca was astonished.

"Yes, my thoughts exactly! Perhaps he's already out looking for Horks somewhere. Or if not, he'll soon be going on such a journey. He seemed very determined. So as far as he's concerned I'm not terribly worried. And because the Horks are so strong, I doubt that he'd even return home from such a trip, unless he takes some companions along with him. Because if he goes alone I would bet on the Hork's victory, and then Tepito would have no trophies to bring home. His head would be a trophy of theirs instead and later on a delicious treat! Of course only after the flies have gotten to it and the maggots have crawled into his eye sockets, because that's how the Hork's prefer it!"

Firmoca and Harri looked at each other in amazement, then said goodbye to Kayam. As soon as they reached the front of the prison, Harri said, "That Getsnappy is a complete fool!"

It seemed however that Kayam was right, because Tepito did not show up from then on. In the city, news had spread around that regardless of how Tepito had treated his wife, he loved her so much that in his grief of losing Firmoca through divorce he went away to kill some Horks to prove his worth.

Since there was no information about what should happen with the part of the wealth that Tepito was entitled to after the divorce, and the wealth could not be unclaimed, Judge Moko ordered for it to be temporarily given to Tepito's brother, whose name happened to be the same as Firmoca's former husband—Tepito! Judge Moko said that if Tepito did not arrive home within a year, then he would be declared missing and Tepito's wealth would permanently remain with his brother, Tepito.

Of course nobody was particularly interested in this, not even the judge, but they did care that serious disturbances had arisen with the prison management since Tepito had left. They had to appoint a new prison commander. There were certainly many candidates for this post, as any of the soldiers would have been glad to take the position of prison commander. But Harri was still in the city at that time, for he was yet to return from his vacation, and he was worried what would happen to his young wife if he was forced to return to his troop. How would she survive? What would happen to her if he stayed on the battlefield? Because it was entirely possible that he could be killed

—he didn't have to go into a Hork cave or even a bear cave, it would only take someone secretly shooting an arrow at him!

And since he had found the honorable Madam Muchi to be rather friendly to Firmoca during the wealth estimation, he sought her out to ask if she could possibly support his little piglet with her authority in being appointed prison commander. After all, according to the laws of Emperor Zor women could now fill any kind of position or office, and who could be more suitable for this than Firmoca, who by her former husband had gained plenty of experience in the management of this prestigious institution. And at the same time Muchi and Judge Moko could prove how well they were following and implementing the new laws of the Emperor.

Mother Muchi's ears were open to the suggestion. She was very pleased that she could help Firmoca get this position, believing that Firmoca would be really grateful, and it could only benefit Muchi if there was somebody at the head of the prison who felt indebted to her. How great it would be if perhaps someone was sent to prison whom she wanted to see dead! After all, unexpected death could occur in prison too. And it was not unimaginable either that she might want to have somebody secretly escape from prison... For the time being that would be unlikely, as she had enough power to not have to do it in secret, but who knew what the future would bring...

She went to the judge and told him that the majestic Emperor would surely be delighted if Pakunda were to be a leader in the implementation of his new laws. And so Muchi had her own candidate for the post of prison commander, and that was Firmoca.

"But we can't do that—it's a very masculine position!" protested the judge in astonishment.

"That's precisely the reason! Now there's an opportunity for women to show that they're not beneath men!"

"What if one of the prisoners is insolent or wants to escape?"

"I didn't say that Firmoca herself would do the flogging or executing, that's what the executioner is for! She won't even be the guard, as we have soldiers for that. But the commander, that's something she could be!"

The judge thought it over and decided that he did not want to fight over this with Muchi. He would rather she didn't send another purple-ribbon letter, for then the Emperor would call Moko himself in for a little chat! Anyway, it was pure luck that mother Muchi did not wish to have her daughter Yana appointed as prison commander. At least he knew Firmoca, and if he wanted something Firmoca would do it without a word. As for Yana, he couldn't be so sure. So he pronounced Firmoca's appointment.

Firmoca and Harri were both very pleased with this. And because Firmoca was basically a grateful young woman and since everything depended on her from now on, she set about making Kayam's life better right away. She could not release him because that depended on the judge, but she did give him a comfortable bed with a soft mattress and he could bathe once a week in warm water. She got him some clean clothes as well. It must be said that he was in great need of bathing! And of course he was fed abundantly—not always roast chicken, but nothing worse than the average person back then.

Harri soon departed, and Firmoca carried out her duties alone in the office even better than Tepito had, probably because she did not spend most of her day in the pub! In Pakunda's prison there were not many prisoners, so there wasn't that much to do. She had plenty of time to continue getting Kayam to write long letters to Harri. Slowly, however, it seemed that this idyll was coming to an end. Why? Well, not because of Harri, nor Firmoca, and not even mother Muchi, the Emperor or Judge Moko. Who else could be responsible but Kayam!

Those who had become adherents to Getsnappy's created religion naturally asked their prophet why he was in prison. Kayam replied that he really didn't know. As far as he could tell the charge against him was that he had written something down incorrectly in one of the lists at the time of the census, but he had not done anything of the sort, it was not in his interest. He swore that he only wrote down what a councilor named Kessel had dictated to him, but it seemed that up there in the city hall somebody wanted to make him the scapegoat for a mistake they had made!

Nobody would have cared if it was an ordinary prisoner telling them such things, since prisoners often proclaimed their innocence and accused everyone but themselves. But this was a different case; here it was the great, or at least soon to be great, Getsnappy who was being accused! And because people knew that those in power liked to shift the blame of their mistakes onto others of a lower rank, it became more and more frequent to hear griping around the place that the city councilors ought to let Getsnappy go, because it was impossible that such a pure soul—who although a little strange was an honest character—would have committed any crime. Getsnappy was innocent, a martyr if you like, and they should free him! Or if the councilors did not want to do that, they should hold a regular court hearing for him in front of the general public.

When Judge Moko heard these claims he was rather frightened. He summoned all the councilors who knew of the Getsnappy affair, therefore everybody except Muchi's son, Simor, and described the problem to them, or as he usually said, "explained the matter". He immediately stated his own opinion that he did not feel it was wise keeping Getsnappy in prison, as the citizens of Pakunda would be angry with him and next time they wouldn't vote for him because of this stupid guy. It was better to let Kayam go.

"I object!" said Kessel at once. "I most definitely object! And it's not because I want to get petty revenge by keeping him in prison, it's that if he's in prison he'll always be available in case we need him, for instance to take him to the Emperor. But if on the contrary we let him go, he'll immediately run off somewhere and might even make accusations!"

"He's already making accusations!" retorted Councilor Istroch. "He can't possibly stir up more trouble than he's doing now while he's in prison! I think it would be particularly beneficial for us if he wasn't making accusations in the very center of the city. I suggest we release him, or have him secretly killed in the prison if we want revenge, or for some other reason."

"I object again!" said Kessel. "It would be an even bigger mistake to have him killed than to let him go!"

"I agree," said the judge. "We can't have him killed, and even if some kind of accident happened to him or if he died from a disease in prison, everyone would still whisper that we've done away with him. Unfortunately many people like him, for instance all the children in Pakunda, but not only them... most of the women too, because almost every woman believes in some new religion; even my wife has sadly been flirting with this idea lately! There are now men who are professing the Hork faith too, but luckily they are not in the majority. It would be the greatest carelessness to have Getsnappy killed now. This wouldn't just be a crime, but much worse—a fatal mistake!"

"But we can't allow him to make further accusations in jail!" said Grenaxyon.

"I specifically ordered this meeting so that you could give me your suggestions!" The judge smiled at the councilors and sat down contentedly. He had cleverly hidden that he had no good ideas himself.

"I don't think we should release him," said Notlob, "because if we let him go, who knows what he'll do! By now he's become some kind of celebrity. Even the Emperor has probably heard about this so-called prophet and might inquire about who Getsnappy is—is he a clerk in our circles or a prophet from somewhere else?!"

"What if we delete him from the list of clerks?" asked Outintey.

"We would need a good reason for that!" said Kessel.

"Is it not a good enough reason that he's in prison?"

"Not anymore. We should have done so earlier. But we honorable gentlemen did not do that at the time, and since then we have been pocketing Getsnappy's salary. Therefore we can't say that Getsnappy is unworthy of being a clerk because he's in prison, for I'd bet that within days we'd be harassed with uncomfortable questions, like how could Getsnappy be collecting the Emperor's salary if he's been in prison for a good two years?! But we can't act as if he was only imprisoned recently, because it would easily come to light that he's been sitting there for quite some time, and we'd also have to explain the charges laid against him. We can't say that it's because he wrote clerk Getsnappy onto the list when clerk Getsnappy doesn't even exist, since everybody thinks he really *is* clerk Getsnappy—that's what we've told everyone! And of course it's impossible that Getsnappy, who does exist because he's imprisoned, has written himself as the nonexistent person on the list! It would be very strange if Getsnappy only existed because he, the nonexistent person, successfully created himself. How can we say his crime is that he wrote in this nonexistent Getsnappy, when for everybody else Getsnappy obviously truly exists? It can't be a crime to exist!"

"Hmm..." nodded the judge, cracking his fingers. "This is a difficult situation..."

"We really can't hold a trial for Getsnappy, because then everything would be revealed!" sighed Notlob.

"The best thing would be if he died, but in a way that we couldn't be held accountable, so neither by killing him nor by abetting," mused the judge aloud.

"Why didn't the Torgs kill this Getsnappy along with the other villagers a long time ago?!" Councilor Libon sighed sarcastically, thinking about what Judge Moko had falsely told mother Muchi regarding the fate of the village Getsnappy had only just managed to escape from.

To this Councilor Outintey shouted, "That's it! I've found the solution, and I'm not exaggerating—it's an especially brilliant solution! You all know there was a recent command issued by the majestic Emperor that our city is to send fifteen people to the army to fight against Torgo, of course fully equipped with weapons and food for three months, which would all be at our expense..."

"We know, we know... if you're a genius, we're not stupid either! Now get to the point!" urged Kessel.

"But that *is* the point! Our city's worthy citizens don't have any desire to be soldiers, and their wages would be a great expense. Why couldn't we kill two birds with one stone—finally solve the Getsnappy issue and be spared the soldiers' wages?! Let's announce at the prison that if there are any prisoners who are willing to serve as soldiers for the city for free for a specified period of time, they will be released from the remainder of their sentence. Of course this would still cost us money for their food, not to mention weapons, but it's still cheaper than..."

"Okay, okay, we get it—you don't need to go into all the details!" Kessel stopped him. "But have you thought about the fact that there might be not enough prisoners in the prison for what is required?"

"How can there not be fifteen people there?! Come on, there are thirty men among them! And about half a dozen women, whom as far as I'm concerned can go too. It may seem odd for a woman to go to war, but the Emperor did say that women were allowed to fill any position. He didn't preclude that of a mercenary soldier! But I think there will be enough men."

"And what if this strange Getsnappy doesn't want to go into military service?"

"Oh come on, of course he'll want to! I'd go if I was in his place. But if he doesn't want to, then we'll just tell him that he's going and that's it, otherwise we'll kill him. I'm sure he'll gladly go then!"

I hope something happens to him in the army. If he's as much of a nitwit as is rumored, there's no doubt he'll bite the dust in the first battle. And if he doesn't get killed by the Torgs, then he'll probably contract some kind of disease and die from that. Epidemics aren't uncommon in warfare. So the wishes of his followers in Pakunda will be fulfilled, because he'll get out of prison and will have the chance to perform some kind of heroic act. But it'll be good for us too because he won't be here on our home turf, and won't return either as he'll soon be deceased. Since he's a clerk he won't have any experience in swordsmanship, and he was weak enough when he arrived at the prison, so by now he'll have become even weaker. His demise will occur regardless, either by an enemy or disease..."

"Ah, but the fool has luck..." murmured Kessel thoughtfully.

"Can you think of anything better?!" asked Outintey aggressively.

"No, not better... but even in prison there are plagues, and Getsnappy has remained as fit as a fiddle!"

"He couldn't survive being lanced with a spear! If you don't have any better ideas then you don't have the right to undermine my proposal!"

"But what happens if Getsnappy gets out of prison, and then the citizens see him and protest his going to war?" asked the judge.

"Oh, that's not such a big deal," Outintey shrugged. "The whole thing must naturally be done in secret. We'll have to prepare everything ahead of time—the weapons, the food, and every prisoner who is going to war will have to be told, except for Getsnappy. We only tell him the night before his departure that he can come with them or stay, and if he wants to come then he has to leave right away. The next day we'll announce how cleverly we've solved the problem and how much money we've saved the city, because we sent criminals into the army and this way the honest men of Pakunda will not be killed. And as an aside we'll mention that we have assured this opportunity for clerk Getsnappy as well, at his own request, to atone for his sins and so that he can return home having earned glory."

"But what guarantee do we have that the prisoners won't escape on their way to the army base?" worried Kessel.

"Well most of them have families and relatives here. Surely they will hope for them to survive the war, even come back with some spoils and return as honest people. Perhaps even as rich people! Of course we'll also tell them that any fugitives will be hanged upon capture. And after Getsnappy goes off to the army he must immediately be erased from the list of clerks, and the appropriate place must be notified that Getsnappy is serving as a soldier to protect the Empire."

They debated for a while, after which everybody voted in favor of this proposal. Outintey was very proud that he had solved the Getsnappy problem so ingeniously.

Everything happened just as the wise councilors had planned. One stormy night some unknown men came to Kayam, and they told him that he had ten seconds to decide what he wanted—they would either beat him to death on the spot, or he could escape. In the latter case he would get some clean clothes and the mandatory weapons for a standard foot soldier, as well as a large backpack filled with non-perishable food, consisting mostly of dried bacon and rock-hard biscuits. After that he would go off to the army with a few of his prison mates.

"But I have no idea about war! I've no experience with fighting!" said Kayam, taken aback.

"Oh, so you're choosing to be beaten to death! That's fine with us," said the man questioning Kayam, and he stepped closer.

"No, no, on the contrary—I'm happy to be a soldier!" Kayam answered hastily.

"Good then! Get going!" the man gestured towards him.

So at dawn the next day Kayam did not find himself in prison but on a dusty road, carrying a heavy bundle that dug deeply into the skin of his shoulders. As he was adjusting its straps he wandered on to some unknown destination while the stronger and more experienced soldiers mocked him for his weakness, his underweight toothpick legs, and all the other things he couldn't do anything about. For this reason it didn't even occur to him to be grateful to those who had finally released him from prison, but instead he muttered the most terrible curses between his teeth. He yearned for the cozy walls of the prison cell, where Firmoca fed him fresh bread and where he didn't have to carry anything. Where he could sit comfortably all day long, and even have the pleasure of putting Tepito's body to shame by defecating on top of his head, even if he couldn't see the man because he was well covered—not by a tomb but something else entirely! Here however he had to pant, sweat, exert himself... there were all sorts of problems to deal with, even worse than in his gym class at school. Plus he had to fear getting close to all the angry Torgs, whose only desire was to punch holes in his vulnerable, precious skin that deserved a better fate. Kayam truly wished the worst for the councilors of Pakunda, who had released him from prison. How despicable they were! They could go to hell!

They didn't in fact go to hell, however there was soon plenty of trouble for sending Getsnappy to the battlefield. Initially it seemed that everything was going well. There was some slight moaning about Getsnappy going off to be a soldier, as the prophet's followers did not believe this to be the end of his prison sentence. But their tempers cooled quickly, since they realized it was rather different than being in prison. And perhaps the prophet Getsnappy really would be victorious. The councilors had untruthfully emphasized that Getsnappy himself had requested to be a soldier, and they did not have the heart to reject such a patriotic request.

It was actually Firmoca who was the most dissatisfied because she no longer had a free clerk at her disposal in the person of Kayam, whom she could also trust. Firmoca believed every word of the councilors as she was not even there when the soldiers took the prisoners (which ended up being all the men). The prison guards had let the gentlemen of the council in without Firmoca's permission. How could they not have when these men were essentially Firmoca's superiors?!

It seemed that everything was turning out for the best. Now the only thing left to satisfy the councilors was for Getsnappy to die, and then they would be rid of him for good. And as we know, Getsnappy himself had already long decided that now was the time he must die urgently. Therefore unanimity prevailed between the councilors and Getsnappy. What could be more wonderful than this unity of interests! How could there be any obstacle to everyone's happiness if they all wanted the same thing? The problem lay not in the goal but in the journey toward the goal, for Getsnappy wanted to die in quite a different manner to what the councilors had planned for him. He had not singled out the Torgs as his killer but mother Muchi. Of course she wouldn't be held accountable for his death... in fact nobody would ever know that Getsnappy's death had originated from her. Even mother Muchi herself would never find out.

Like all great things it started out quite innocently—mother Muchi and Firmoca became friends. Firmoca was much dumber than Muchi, but she would admit that willingly anytime. And she was very grateful because she knew that without Muchi she could never have become a prison commander. Their friendship enabled them to talk often, and once mother Muchi said something about how unhealthy dirt was. Firmoca pondered over this, and because she thought she would be a more respectable prison commander the more prisoners she had, it would not be in her interest for the prisoners to die. The smartest thing to do would be to make the prison as clean as possible. So she decided to have it cleaned up.

Naturally her deployed soldiers didn't have the stomach for work which was not only difficult but also disgusting. However Firmoca found a solution—they did not need to do the work, just act as supervisors and slave drivers. There were still enough prisoners left, so *they* would do the work! All the soldiers had to do was monitor the process. This was quite different and the soldiers loved it, having a good laugh at the prisoners. They had great fun, especially when giving an order to clean the toilet pits! And interestingly, even the prisoners enjoyed it because at least it gave them some variety in their boring prison life. To add to their amusement, occasionally the soldiers pushed a prisoner into the toilet pit—not head-first of course. And the prisoners didn't even mind that much, as Firmoca had announced beforehand that when they had finished working they could wash themselves thoroughly in the prison courtyard. It may not have been in hot water, but fortunately the calendar indicated it was mid-summer.

They had barely begun the work when of course they came upon Tepito's body in Kayam's cell. But nobody could tell that it was the corpse of Tepito. It had been rotting there for more than three months, and not only had the bacteria done its decomposing work on him, but the body was crawling with maggots & worms, his flesh hanging off in shreds. Naturally it wasn't possible to identify who this was, nor could the gender even be determined. But it was so utterly foul-smelling that when they pulled it out, in pieces because it did not come out as a whole, even the prisoners who were accustomed to the stench were retching as the odor reached their nostrils. Because the smell of the feces was rather different to a rotting corpse! It had not stunk until now because the thick excrement had managed to block the putrefying smell, but now that they had disturbed it...

The point is that news had spread all around that they had found an unidentifiable corpse in Getsnappy's cell! It couldn't even be identified from the clothes. Most people did not remember what kind of clothes Getsnappy had worn. They hadn't even seen him, only heard his voice through the bars. Even Alez, the little boy who sometimes went to see him in his cell, could only say that his clothes were dirty. And the remnants of Tepito's clothes were certainly dirty... The whip didn't turn up, its leather strap had rotten and sunk to the bottom, and since the prisoners were not stupid enough to do unnecessary work, they did not dig out the last few shovelfuls.

So everybody believed that Getsnappy had died and they had found his corpse. Who else could it possibly be in Getsnappy's cell?! No other prisoners had been put in this cell since Getsnappy had allegedly left to become a soldier. Because the question occurred to everyone that if Getsnappy had died, then why did the councilors lie that Getsnappy had gone off to the army? The rotting corpse was too fresh to have been there for decades.

Soon a crowd of at least two hundred people were bustling in the streets, yelling that the councilors had nastily murdered the worthy Getsnappy and then lied that he had gone off to become a soldier. They had devised this whole soldier thing to get rid of Getsnappy and cover up the traces of his murder. It was clear that Getsnappy was a true martyr, as he had said long before that the councilors of Pakunda wanted to accuse him of some mistake of theirs. What kind of mistake they did not know, but they didn't care either. This was about something else entirely—life and death! But because some explanation was necessary for why Getsnappy was such a burden to the councilors of Pakunda, somebody quickly came up with one. It was because the councilors did not like the ultimate truth Getsnappy had preached. The councilors did not profess his faith!

Which particular faith of Getsnappy's was not mentioned. For the time being there was a complete unity of views between the various religious groups, although a religious war almost broke out. This was however not between the advocates of the various beliefs of Getsnappy, but between the new beliefs generally and the old ones of the councilors. Even so, they had never thought about protecting their old beliefs before.

Now it turned out to not be such a great idea, secretly sending Getsnappy off to be a soldier. When the scandal had broken out, the councilors happened to all be at the town hall except for Outintey, who was diligently trying to get there. But he never arrived, as the enraged crowd of Getsnappy believers caught him on the street and proclaimed him guilty without a trial, beating him to death. It was particularly the female adherents of Getsnappy's religion who participated in this. And by pure chance they were right about Outintey being the one who had devised the plan for Getsnappy to be sent off to the army.

After this the crowd marched to the town hall, but it was guarded by soldiers. Even though there were Getsnappy believers among them, for the time being they did not switch over to the side of the demonstrators, and because of this the majority of unarmed protesters were afraid to attack the town hall. Inside all the councilors were pale, sweating in fear that they should have done better.

"I fear that next time they won't vote for us as the leaders of Pakunda!" Libon shuddered.

"In fact we're unlikely to even complete this cycle!" added Grenaxyon.

"Gentlemen, we're not talking about our office here but our lives!" the judge warned them, as if they didn't know. Even though they were aware of this fact, they didn't dare even admit it to themselves, so they would not seem like cowards. However the judge believed it was better to face the dangers openly, otherwise they may make a fatal mistake. And he did not like the idea of that, especially concerning himself!

"Let's tell them that Getsnappy really did go off to be a soldier!" said Gandavi desperately.

"They wouldn't believe us," Judge Moko shook his head.

"We could show them the papers about the fifteen soldiers..."

"They wouldn't believe that either. They'd immediately say we forged them. Besides, do you really believe many of them out there can read?!"

"But that corpse is certainly not Getsnappy's! Unfortunately!"

"Actually, it is fortunate. Can you imagine what would have happened if he had died in reality?!"

"Much the same thing! And if they kill us, at least he would have been dead too!"

"It doesn't matter—let's save our own skin now, councilors, and not worry about Getsnappy!"

"But we do have to worry about him because that corpse is not Getsnappy's! Let's tell them this!"

"Do you think they'd believe it?! Getsnappy disappeared, nobody has seen him, and it's only us saying that he went off to be a soldier. Sometime later a dead body appears in his cell. Of course that's going to be suspicious to anybody! I would be suspicious too if I was in their place! Mainly because Getsnappy spoke so much about us being angry with him and that he was innocent, and he accused us of a whole bunch of things. Of course it's suspicious! That stupid Outintey spoiled everything by suggesting we take him away in secret!"

"But that corpse was not Getsnappy!" said Istroch tearfully. "I can even guess who it probably was! May I be the first to be killed if it isn't the corpse of Tepito, the prison commander! He didn't go off to hunt for the Horks, Getsnappy killed him and hid him in the toilet pit! Let me be the first to be killed if..."

"If I may say so, you should not only be the first but also the last to be killed, because I'm not willing to follow you!" said Gandavi quickly, who was a little superstitious. "Apart from that I agree with you. But nobody would believe this."

"If Getsnappy could kill that strong Tepito," said Kessel, "then he's not that helpless, and there's a chance he'll come home from the war and everyone will see that he's alive! He can't be that stupid either, as not only did he kill Tepito but also cleverly hid him!"

"He was probably just randomly lucky," stated Notlob.

"But I said it before that the fool has luck!"

"We don't have time to wait for Getsnappy to return!" said the judge with concern, as he listened to the commotion outside.

How little time they had became clear moments later when one of the guards came to them, reporting that someone from the crowd surrounding the town hall had just thrown Councilor Outintey's head at them. "And they were shouting," said the officer, "for us to take his head to the other councilors as a gift, so that you can all see what your fate will be! Because you won't stay safe behind these walls for long, since they've sent messengers to Sizon as well as other cities and villages, so that all the Getsnappy believers will come to Pakunda right away and unite together to take revenge on the prophet's murderers! I didn't bring the head in because it's not a pretty sight, but if any of you want to see it, it's outside. I'm warning you though, it really is quite gruesome, because they didn't just cut the head off the body, they pierced both his eyes too!"

The councilors did not feel any desire to look at the disembodied head of their former companion.

"Well there you go! That's what he gets for giving that kind of advice, and boasting about how brilliant he is!" said Kessel.

And with these words the idea was born in the judge's mind that would save them. "That's it! Does everyone else agree that he was the one at fault, the reason for all this?!"

"Getsnappy? Well of course!" nodded Libon.

"Not Getsnappy, you dimwit!" shouted the judge, for he felt their time was scarce due to the crowd outside becoming increasingly louder. And despite this, the uncomprehending fool was not grasping anything of his words!

"I will not put up with this kind of talk—I am not a dimwit, nor am I to blame!"

"You may not be to blame, but you are certainly a dimwit!" retorted Kessel, who had grasped the judge's idea before he'd even been told. "Everything should be blamed on Outintey, as it makes no difference to him anymore! And in a sense this is legitimate because he caused the trouble, even if he didn't kill Getsnappy!"

"Yes, that's right!" nodded the judge. "And we have to act fast, because, because... well, you can hear why!" He jerked his head toward the window. "And not a word about the corpse not being Getsnappy! Then they'll become angry instead of believing us, because they'll think we're just explaining ourselves! We have to feign the utmost regret for poor Getsnappy's fate! I will personally declare that I believe in that hodgepodge Hork belief, for then I'll be more sympathetic in their eyes. After all, my wife has been trying to persuade me for ages, so there will finally be peace in the family! I could do with such peace there outside as well! I suggest you all do the same, even if you don't believe it, just say that you do!"

"There's still no guarantee of success," worried Grenaxyon.

"Of course not, but it's the only thing we can do! I'll talk to them—that seems most appropriate since I'm the judge."

"But what if Getsnappy comes home, and then..." began Istroch.

"How do I know?! I don't have time to deal with this sort of thing, I have to protect our lives! I'd certainly be happier if I knew for sure that a few months from now I'd have to worry about Getsnappy returning, since only a living person can worry! Otherwise, it's possible that nothing interesting will happen at all—his followers will be happy, and after all their rejoicing they'll be too busy apologizing to us for their absurd accusations. But we really can't discuss this any further

because they'll break down the door soon, and that would be too bad because then nobody would listen to us—they'd be beating us to death!"

The judge stood up and went out to the balcony of the town hall to give a speech to the enraged crowd. It was not by chance that he began his explanation from there—this way many people could see him at once, and he was up high, so nobody could push, hit or stab him. It was true however that as soon as he came into sight, a few stones and bits of trash flew in his direction, but he quickly raised his hand. "Listen! Listen to me! I know who is guilty!"

If he had said that it was not Getsnappy who had died in prison, the crowd's anger would have immediately intensified because they would think he was a liar and probably come at the armed soldiers. But this way everybody fell silent for a moment. The judge eloquently explained that the councilors were shocked to hear what had happened; that Getsnappy did not go off to become a soldier, as Outintey had told them, but was murdered! They had no idea how this outrageous event had occurred and they really had sent fifteen soldiers to the army. They could not have done otherwise as the majestic Emperor had ordered this, and who would dare to disobey the Emperor's commands or ignore them?! The order could be interpreted in different ways, and they had chosen the solution that was more favorable to the city, easing the burden by sending prisoners, because this way they didn't have to pay them wages. But there was no way they would totally ignore an imperial command, because nobody wanted to end up in the imperial jail! Emperor Zor's executioners were notorious for torture!

The protesters thought about this for a while. They did not believe that the judge nor the other councilors would dare contend with the Emperor. The Emperor's request to send soldiers was not at all unusual or unprecedented. And the judge had also carried out the Emperor's strange laws, such as those regarding women, precisely and accurately. Of course he had sent the soldiers!

"But Getsnappy was not among those soldiers!" cried a tearful woman and spat at the judge, but she was too far away and missed.

"I don't know why the hell they're so fond of that fool!" puzzled the judge, however he did not say it aloud. Instead he said, "It seems that Getsnappy wasn't actually among the soldiers, but we cannot do anything about this, as we councilors truly believed he was! Councilor Outintey arranged the recruitment of the soldiers, and he's the one who could tell you about what happened and how. I'm terribly sorry for what happened, believe me! I'm more sorry than you can imagine, because this morning I had a vision, and from it I understood that the valiant Getsnappy is indeed a real prophet and that he's right! Everything he said is true, therefore I myself am now a believer of the Hork or Ork faith! We could have told you this earlier, but we didn't want to come before you with such incomplete news, loyal citizens of Pakunda. We were waiting for Outintey to give us an explanation for what had happened in the prison between him and Getsnappy, but as I just heard, you hot-blooded, thoughtless youths killed him, the only man who could tell us the truth! You should not have done this, since self-righteousness is severely punishable by law!" He paused for a moment, giving his audience time to take this in.

"But I realize that you were caught up in an otherwise understandable and justified anger, since a serious and outrageous crime has occurred—a murder! I understand how difficult it is to act sensibly at these times. So I have decided in complete agreement with the other councilors that I will not be initiating an investigation over the death of Outintey. Besides, it would be difficult to determine who specifically caused the death of the guilty councilor. Because we have no doubt that he was guilty! Unfortunately we will now never know what happened. It may even be that Getsnappy was not killed out of some secret, incomprehensible rage, but that he suffered a fatal accident, or perhaps had some kind of disease and Outintey just found him there dead. Then he

became afraid that they would accuse him of murder and hid the corpse. It's possible! Or maybe he really did kill him. Anyway, we'll never know the truth, and this isn't our fault but the fault of those who killed the councilor—the only credible witness to the events, the eyewitness who knew the truth! However there's no doubt that Outintey in a sense rightly suffered death, because whatever happened there in Getsnappy's cell, Outintey lied to me, the judge, to the other councilors, and also to you upstanding citizens of Pakunda! Now I can only tell you to calmly return to your homes, think over the events that have happened, draw your own conclusions and don't lose your tempers so recklessly next time! Because you should not have killed Outintey but tied him up and brought him to me! I will now retire and seek out my wife, and together we will say a warm-hearted prayer to Getsnappy. Because my sin is great—I see now that the prophet Getsnappy's prison sentence was wrong, and it only occurred because of some vile intrigue of Outintey. I suggest that you also pray to him."

The judge concluded with a merciful wave of the hand, and turned to leave the balcony, but was unable to. For as though he were a king or leader, the crowd suddenly knelt down in unison and a loud roar flew up toward the sky from all over as they prayed to the soul of Getsnappy. Initially it was just a chaotic jumble of sound, as everybody was saying something different, but the judge was afraid to go. He didn't want to disturb the festive moment, for if he could not curb their pious zeal, it would be better for him to head the movement. If he did not do that, this new belief and its followers might trample on him. In any case, it was preferable for the people's grief to turn to prayer rather than fighting!

But because he saw that he had to create order, as there was no established prayer for Getsnappy, he took the leadership into his own hands, or rather his mouth, and said, "Be quiet! Don't all talk at the same time, because it's no different to the bleating of morons, and it's not worthy to the memory of our great teacher, Getsnappy! I will pray first, and you will all repeat nicely after me!"

And because the judge was not a judge by chance and had a natural authority, everyone became silent and he began: "Getsnappy, our lord in heaven..."

"Getsnappy, our lord in heaven..." the crowd repeated.

"...Please look down upon us unworthy people, and help us in the war we are fighting with Torgo... Multiply our cattle and other possessions... Protect us from all danger... Send your frightening Ork army, whose horrific sight will make heavy the heart and arms of the enemy... Open our eyes to the Ultimate Truth, which is now veiled from our longing gaze by the thick fabric of lies... Thank you for being with us in our final hour, when our body cools and the warmth of the soul leaves us... Thank you for your willingness to be born into this world of punishment... and for taking on the many human trials of suffering... purely to lead us to the Path of Truth and serve our spiritual advancement... We ask that you do not remain long in your heavenly home, because we will be waiting for you, our noble teacher... Come back to us and spread the seeds of your knowledge! I promise to be your faithful follower until death, and keep your teachings as precious diamonds in my heart!"

That was the hastily contrived yet very successful prayer of Judge Moko. The crowd repeated it piously after him, and the judge was no longer afraid that he would be beaten to death. Ultimately a prayer leader was a sort of ruler, a boss, and generally devotees did not attack such people. His prayer touched the crowd so much that most of the women were sobbing. Moko did not know this, but there was a clerk in the crowd who had noted the entire prayer and transcribed it as best he could so that everybody could learn it, and this became the fundamental prayer of the religion. Its appeal was most likely attributed to the inclusion of the request that Getsnappy send his fearsome

Ork army. Many people liked this because it was so wonderful to imagine what it would be like to have a few hundred Orks appear to fight on their side.

Since the judge had used the more pronounceable and widespread version 'Ork' from the two denominations in his prayer, this was the name that was written into the official prayer. And with this it was decided that the name of the creatures were not Horks, as Getsnappy had named them, but Orks. But it made no difference as Getsnappy didn't even exist in reality, nor did the Horks, and because of this they began their own independent existence and development in people's minds. By including the name 'Ork' in the prayer, this word almost became sacred and was canonized.

Centuries and even millennia later when people had forgotten about the name Getsnappy, the legend of the Orks still held its own, even after the destruction of Atlantua, although of course it had undergone many changes. So much so that besides them being disgusting, they were also thought to be evil. After all, why shouldn't that which is disgusting be evil too! At least the people remembered them, unlike Getsnappy, since how much more vivid a fantasy was an Ork than a formless clerk Getsnappy with only a name! The name 'Ork' was preserved wherever people remembered these creatures. The descendants of the Manychyars—the Hungarians—did forget about the Orks, but they kept the word "horking", which the other nations had forgotten, and to this day it remains in the Hungarian language as "horkant"—meaning "to snort". They even made up a new word derived from "horking", which was "horkol"—meaning "to snore", but that had nothing to do with the Orks...

All this, however, was still hidden in the very distant future. When the prayer had come to an end, the crowd sadly but calmly disbanded. Judge Moko was relieved to return, first to the rooms of the town hall, and later home to his house, where his wife noted with great satisfaction his conversion to the Hork faith.

Chapter 10: The Birth of the Orks

Numo returned to the manor house together with Tin, late in the evening. He was convinced that Tin, the little elf, had shown him things that could never have occurred in this little village of Odun, let alone anywhere else in the world's existence. Then when he finally arrived back, he became less certain. Perhaps Tin really was an elf now, since she even had a light dress, but just some sort of "infant" elf. Tila, on the other hand, was much older and more experienced than her, and was born an elf. Her experience had been proven to Numo's workers and slaves while he had been peacefully walking.

They were now waiting for him. As soon as they noticed his approach, many of them ran toward him and without being asked told him the news of what had happened with his wife and some of the slave supervisors, and that Tila had healed everybody. Of course they also told him that virtually all work on the estate had ceased that day, and it wasn't until evening that somebody noticed that the pigs needed to be fed. The cows were only milked because Tila had decided she wanted some milk to drink.

Numo no longer doubted that Tila was a wizard. If Tin was suddenly able to do these things, why wouldn't Tila be able to do even greater magic when she had basically turned Tin into a wizard through healing her? So now that he believed this, he was incredibly amazed that his estate had at once become the home of two wizards! Even the arrival of one wizard could not be called an ordinary event, but two... and in addition one of them was Tin, a little girl, in fact a crazy little girl! Who would have believed it?!

Nobody could blame him for immediately asking Tila, in the most polite manner possible, if she would be so kind as to turn Numo into a wizard too. After all, who wouldn't want to be a wizard if that possibility was open to them?! But Tila told Numo what she had told Djuli—that unfortunately she was not able to do this. "Believe me," she said to him, "I'd happily do it if I could! Since if I was able to turn you into a wizard, that would mean I could also turn you into an elf. But unfortunately that isn't the way it works. To do this it would be necessary for your attitude toward the world to change completely, and I don't believe you're capable of that. Or do you think you could behave as gently and benevolently, even towards your enemies, as Tin?"

Numo realized that he was not able to do this. Of course it had to be explained to him at length, until he finally understood that wizardry—or at least the elf form that Tila knew—was not just about somebody waving their hand and causing a great miracle to occur, but meant a whole different lifestyle and way of thinking. He sighed sadly, because he really wanted to be a wizard. But Tila said that if she could do that she would have first made Djuli into a wizard, and Djuli was clearly not yet a wizard, which was firm evidence that she wasn't lying and couldn't just turn anyone into a wizard.

After Numo had grasped that he would probably be forced to remain human until his death, he began to worry. Because it was wonderful to have a wizard here at his estate: she would come in very handy, even if she wasn't a slave, and he was determined not to make her angry but become her friend. However it was by no means good if the arrival of a wizard disrupted the usual daily work routine, and in doing so prevented the necessary work being carried out!

As soon as he brought this up, Djuli, who was naturally there as she never left Tila's side, immediately interrupted him: "I hope you don't assume, Numo, that from now on everything will be the same as it was before!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Numo cautiously, seeing such a determined glint in Djuli's eyes that for some reason it made him feel uneasy. He did not like being looked at in that way, especially when it came from a slave.

"I mean, for instance, that I'm no longer going to be a slave," said Djuli, which was what Numo was most afraid of.

And Numo didn't dare protest. Because it would not be pleasant if Tila made him soil his pants, although he was sure that Tila could do other things too, even kill if she was angry enough! Being so gentle and kindhearted, she might feel remorse after killing her enemy and cry for days, but that would be no help to the person who was torn to pieces with a mere hand gesture!

"Sure, well of course... I was just thinking along these lines myself. That goes without saying! I heard from Tin that you saved Tila's life on the seashore, where she fell from the sky. Tila must be truly grateful for that, because I'm sure even a wizard would be hurt badly if they fell from the sky! After all, the sky is very high! It occurred to me that since you did such a good thing for her, you should actually belong to her. So I'll no longer regard you as my slave, but instead hand you over to Tila as a gift. From now on you'll be her slave, and she can do..."

"I'm not going to be Tila's slave either!" interrupted Djuli, her eyes glinting even more resolutely. "An elf has no need of slaves, and Tila doesn't keep any! I am Tila's friend, her

companion if you like, her mentor, because she is not yet familiar with our world. We could say I'm her confidant, her guide, her lady-in-waiting, or whatever you want to call it! In fact, in a sense I'm her teacher. Tila is so gentle that she might even starve to death, just to avoid having to hurt somebody. So she needs a strong character beside her, and I've decided that this will be me—if she's okay with that. Therefore Tila will do what I say—not because I'm her mistress, but just somebody who possesses a lot of knowledge that she doesn't. She realizes this too and we've discussed it. Naturally she'll only be obedient to a certain extent, of that I'm certain, but rest assured Numo that this extent runs quite far! And I won't conceal that from you. You should know that while you were away I thoroughly taught Tila about slavery, as last night your wife Varbilma ordered me to explain the basics of it to her. You were present, so you would have heard this too. And Tila really doesn't like the way slaves are treated here! That's to say..."

"But I treat them very well!" defended Numo quite honestly.

"Oh yeah, so that's why what happened to Tin occurred then?!"

"No, no, of course not, but I really didn't know anything about that!" and with these words Numo caressed Tin's little head. "Besides, Varbilma has already been punished for it!"

"Varbilma would have been punished if she'd been screwed in the same way by a dozen or so men, like her brother did to Tin! Although she might even enjoy that since she's older, but I'm sure if two hundred of them climbed onto her she'd be unlikely to find that enjoyable! Or perhaps a great big stud... But that's not what this is about, because even if such inappropriate foul play did not happen, the life of a slave is still not pleasant! And above all, I think it's extremely unjust for someone to perform a lifetime of hard work, just so that somebody else can enjoy its results! So Tila and I have decided that as long as she is in this world, which could even be a few hundred years, she won't allow these despicable things to happen anywhere near her. And since she's now here on your estate, Numo, that means slavery will be abolished on your estate. Nobody will be a slave anymore! I'll tell you right now that this not only implies that Tin and I are no longer slaves, not to mention Tila, who with her divine power has liberated every slave on the estate, it most definitely means that you can't buy any more slaves to work for you! So you can immediately release your slave supervisors back into the world because they'll no longer be needed, since there is no need for slave supervisors when there are no slaves! By the way, I've taken the liberty of telling them this, and some of them have already left, perhaps because they're afraid of Tila. But those who are still here are just waiting for your consent and for you to pay them their remaining wages. They're not that upset by it because Tila healed all their various health problems, even though I don't believe they deserved it. But Tila is so kindhearted. I think it would be very easy to explain what an elf is to those who have never met one—a very powerful and extremely kindhearted wizard!"

Numo sighed deeply. "Djuli, I was anticipating something like this. Seriously, I was. Although I did think it would be Tila who came up with such an improbable wish, not you, but that doesn't matter, I still expected it."

"Great, I'm glad it didn't catch you by surprise!"

"No, it wasn't surprising at all. But listen..."

"Stop! Not another word, Numo! I warned you ahead of time that my wish was irrevocable, and you should actually be glad I'm not denying that the estate is still yours! But if you oppose me further then it can come to that too, because I hate slavery and slave-owners, and I don't particularly like you either! I somewhat respect you for being outraged by what your wife inflicted on Tin, and albeit with my powerful persuasion you finally freed the little girl, that's indeed respectable. But don't try to abuse my faint kindness because it will end badly!"

"Djuli, I'm not opposing you because it would be futile—I don't have enough power to defy the will of a wizard!"

"It's *my* will!"

"Come on Djuli, this has nothing to do with you and you know it! Tila's what's important here! Let me ask Tila herself what she's capable of doing. Can you conjure up food, for example?"

"No, I can't," said Tila honestly.

"Aha, then what are you going to eat?"

"What do you mean? Whatever I've been eating until now! For instance I really like honey..." began Tila, however this time Numo dared to interrupt her words.

"But that has to be produced! I don't know how it works with you elves, but in our country we have to extort everything from nature with heavy labor! That's why I need slaves. And because a slave has to eat too, they not only have to produce food for my wife and I, but also for themselves! As soon as the slaves stop working, they starve to death!"

"Is this true?" asked Tila.

"Of course it's true!" said Djuli. "But I don't want them to stop working completely from now on. They still have to work, but for themselves rather than for others. My heart won't break if hereafter Numo has to dig the soil too!"

"Right, so I suppose from now on it won't be me and Varbilma keeping slaves, but you and Tila! That you'll now be the slave-owners, right?!" asked Numo sarcastically.

"Not at all! I've been working since I've been here!" Djuli raised her head haughtily, "And Tila will be working too. It's not that we aren't grateful to her, since without her the slaves couldn't have won their freedom. But Tila herself declared that she wants to work, because in Elfland—where she used to live—it was considered a great honor to be allowed to work. She could heal everybody here for one, but there are also plenty of other ways she could make herself useful. For instance she's quite good at controlling the weather—there will always be enough rain or sunshine if needed, and she can ensure that nasty things like hail stay far away from us. She told me she won't be dealing with the cultivation of the land, because she has seen the way plowing is carried out here and her conscience couldn't bear for a plow to accidentally bisect an earthworm. But if a tree needed to be cut up for firewood, she could chop it up into small pieces in moments, even into kindling, and this is quite a task because tree-cutting is ridiculously labor intensive! However for her it will just be fun. If we want to build something, for example a new house or a crop storage shed, she can easily form the cut trees into beams—beautiful rectangular ones or rounded beams if we prefer, and she can lift them into the air on her own to exactly the right place, so construction will be very simple. If we make bricks she will fly them over to the correct spot. I've shown her how we do weaving here, and she said it was a tricky thing, but after some experimentation the weaving machine was working by itself and the spindle was spinning faster than I've ever seen it spin before! Tila just sat there and watched it. My friend is certainly a powerful wizard!" exclaimed Djuli, and she hugged Tila. "But when she did have to spin, she managed to do it so fast that her hands seemed invisible! I couldn't believe it! And she said that was nothing—if we put five spinning wheels in the room she could spin all five of them at once! And if she practices a little she could manage ten of them. There are probably many other areas we could make use of her too. She said she'd be happy to help with anything, as long as she doesn't have to hurt others. So don't think that Tila is lazy, Numo—she'll actually be the most useful member of our community!"

"What kind of community?"

"Any former slave who wants to leave here can go, since they are no longer slaves. But whoever wants to can stay, and then we'll all work together and mutually enjoy the benefits."

Everything will be so much better than it was—for starters, you won't have to pay the wages of the slave supervisors!"

"That sounds good," said Tin. But Numo was less enthusiastic about the idea.

"If there's no supervisor standing behind someone, they'll get lazy and not do any work!"

"That's not true! The peasants work very hard, and nobody's behind them with a whip!"

"Of course, because they're afraid their master will beat them if they don't have enough produce at harvest time!"

"It doesn't matter what you do or don't believe, Numo, because I, Djuli the Uvi, believe that it's far more stimulating to work for yourself. It was the same with us in the Zunzan tribe, until you rotten Torgs destroyed my village!"

"What is an 'uvi'?" inquired Numo. "Was that some kind of noble rank where you lived?"

"No, it meant that I was a shaman student. My mother was the shaman of the village. An excellent shaman, and she prophesied Tila's arrival years beforehand!"

"Is that so?"

"Indeed! And it isn't true that nobody is willing to work without threat. Take you, for instance... who threatens you?!"

"Me?! Why would I be threatened?! I don't even work!"

"Well, not much, that's true, but you still do some! For instance you keep track of how much produce you have, you inquire about prices at fairs, you sell what is in excess, buy what we don't produce ourselves or produce only little of... All that's work! I admit that it's very comfortable work compared to what the slaves do, but in the end it's still work! And nobody forced you to do it!"

"But I am forced to! By hunger! Because if I don't do it there'll be nothing to eat, and I don't want to die of starvation!"

"There you go! All this is true for the people working here too, even if they aren't slaves!"

"But it's still more effective if somebody isn't only afraid of future hunger, but..."

"Also the whip? Is that what you were going to say?! I'll prove to you right away that this isn't the case!"

"Djuli, I can see that I'm in your power, but don't tell me you're going to prove it to me! This can't be proven!"

"But it already has been! It's enough for you to believe that at this moment I'm not afraid of you and therefore I'm not lying to you. Since you wouldn't hurt me—Tila wouldn't let that happen—and a person who has nothing to fear has no interest in lying either!"

"I am willing to admit that you're not lying. But what is it that you're not lying about?"

"Do you remember when your stupid wife Varbilma bought those sick sheep?"

"Oh god, yes!"

"That caused you a lot of harm then, didn't it?"

"It certainly did! We still haven't returned to the wealth we had at that time. And if I'm going to be losing slaves now..."

"Then you'll become rich again! But that's not what I want to talk about right now. Listen, I want you to know that that loss could have been avoided."

"Of course. But the woman didn't know that..."

"But *I* knew!" Djuli was so excited that she jumped up and began pacing back and forth, then pointed her index finger at Numo's chest and repeated, "I knew! I knew everything ahead of time! I knew this would happen before Varbilma had even bought the sheep! I don't know if you remember, but I was one of the slaves that accompanied Varbilma. Yes, I was there too, and I saw one of the sheep limping. I knew what this meant, and that it wasn't just because something had pierced its

hoof. I knew exactly what it was, because I'd examined it and could see that it was a disease. I also found several other symptoms of the disease, as those of us from the Zunzan tribe know about this sickness. Not just the shamans—although it's their responsibility to heal—it's common knowledge. And I was there... not just anybody but Djuli, the Uvi! I also understand healing, though of course not nearly as well as Tila. I'm just an uvi, not an actual elf! Anyway, I knew the sheep was sick and that it shouldn't be bought, in fact none of that flock should have been bought! All I had to do was tell her this and then the problem wouldn't have occurred, that is of course if Varbilma had the sense to accept my advice! But if she had any sense at all she would have seen that the animal was limping, and that would have made her think twice. She could have bought sheep from somebody else. Everything depended on whether or not I spoke up. But I didn't!"

"Why not?!" asked Numo in astonishment.

"Why, Why?! You sure ask good questions! Because I'm a slave of course! Or I was. And slaves utterly hate their masters, who only beat and exploit them! A slave won't be better off if their master's life goes well, since they'll still be a slave! Why should a slave risk telling Varbilma, and instead of being thanked she'll be scolded?! I didn't get any poorer when your sheep breeding went into decline! In fact I was happy to get revenge, because I had my own reasons for hating Varbilma. I assumed that if I didn't tell her you'd be angry at Varbilma and probably beat her, and this is exactly what happened. I'm glad I didn't say anything!"

"Why did you hate Varbilma so much? Since at that time Tin was still..."

"This has nothing to do with Tin. It's that I didn't like her brother and his friends constantly mounting me when they were staying here. One day I asked your wife to relocate me to be among the field workers, who although work harder than I do in the house, are far away from Varbilma's brother. I told her that any field slave would gladly trade places with me, the girls too, and they wouldn't mind being the kitten of Madun and his friends. I know this with absolute certainty, because I've spoken to them. But instead of fulfilling my tiny request Varbilma scolded me, saying that Madun likes me because I'm the prettiest and that I was to stay in the house! Well after this, why would I have been so kind as to tell you about the sick sheep, huh?! But all that's nothing, because I knew in advance how this sort of disease would destroy you, and that you wouldn't be able to keep sheep in that area for years. Yes, I knew this but said nothing. I let you buy new sheep and they all died too! All this could have been avoided if you had just let me do the work I wanted to do. My request would have been very easy to fulfill, it was totally insignificant. It wouldn't have cost you anything and would have pleased two of your slaves at once—me and the girl who would have taken my place. It wasn't a matter of me not wanting to work, not at all! I would have been happy just not having to suffer the humiliation of being Madun's whore! But you..."

"That bloody woman!" shouted Numo, his face filling with anger. He stood up and headed for the door, but Tin also sprung up and dove before him.

"I won't let you beat up Varbilma!"

"But this Madun has taken an enormous amount of money from my pocket!"

"That's true, but now I'm telling you to sit back down again because this really doesn't have any significance anymore!" said Djuli. "However I am glad that you believe me. Because this is the proof! Proof that it's much better to not have slaves working for you. If you would have hired free people to work for you, then it would have taken at least ten years of wages to make up for the amount this plague cost you, and it's something I could have prevented with a single sentence. And in the meantime you could have saved the salary of the slave supervisors too!"

"But how could I have known that such treasure was hiding among my slaves?!"

"Have you ever asked me whether or not I understand something?! No, you haven't! Because you don't even consider slaves to be human beings! But this doesn't matter anyway. If a slave doesn't understand anything he'll be sure to lounge about whenever he can, because the only thing he'll benefit from is rest. So slaves aren't necessary. If you want to keep slaves then there's nothing stopping you from doing so. I'm not going to forbid you, but it won't be here on this estate! You can go off to a remote part of the world and do whatever you want there. There will be no more slaves here!"

"Okay, then what's going to happen to me? Are you going to chase me away like the slave supervisors?"

"I didn't chase them away, and nobody has hurt them. Plenty of people would like to, but Tila won't allow bloodshed. We aren't going to force you or Varbilma to leave either. I don't think you're such a bad person that I can't at least give you a try. But as for Varbilma, well, I'd very much like to kill her, but as I said before—Tila won't allow me to!"

"I don't want you to either!" said Tin quickly.

"Of course, of course you don't!" Djuli smiled at her. "My plan is that Varbilma will help Evla in the kitchen, because cooking is what she knows best, and you'll do whatever you were already doing. I hate that obscene thing you call 'money', so somebody else should deal with it. I can acknowledge that money is a necessary evil, but I insist that it be shared. You can't hoard it all yourself, however I have no objection to you living well on it along with everybody else on the estate. Regarding your authority, naturally you can't order anybody around, but we'll maintain the impression to the outside world that everything is yours. It's unnecessary to explain anything as they wouldn't understand. Of course, we won't conceal that you no longer have slaves, but I don't want to humiliate you so you can say that you've liberated them. If you or Varbilma aren't happy with this arrangement however, feel free to leave, nobody will grieve for you!"

"I hope you don't leave, because it would make me sad," stated Tin.

Mr. Numo thought about it for a while, and then said, "I suppose it'll be possible to leave later on if I decide to, so I'll stay for the time being because there doesn't seem to be any better option. Then I'll just see how things go..."

Djuli had little doubt that Mr. Numo would stay in the beginning. After all, he didn't have much to lose if he stayed, but he would lose everything if he left. And since he would not have to do any heavy work, his job would basically be the same as it had always been. To the outside world he would remain an estate owner, and at best everybody would admire him for his generosity for liberating his slaves. Some may think he was stupid for doing this, but that only meant they would no longer be his friend from now on. And if everything went well he might even increase his income, since he may not have slaves, but he would have a real wizard! Even if he could not order her around, she could still help him and the small community in many ways voluntarily. If the wizard decided to leave and the method without slavery didn't work out, it could return to the previous management system. Those who were liberated were unlikely to be forced back into slavery, but at least nobody would doubt that the estate was still his. If on the contrary Mr. Numo left now, it was certain that the estate would never be his, and if things went well here he wouldn't benefit from the profits!

So Mr. Numo did the only logical thing to do and nodded at Djuli's proposal, willingly or unwillingly. She suggested he would become a kind of administrator, chiefly a financial administrator. But Djuli was not sure what Varbilma's decision would be. And suddenly she didn't even know what she herself would prefer—for Varbilma to be packed off the estate and step out of her life forever, or for her to be some sort of servant in the communal kitchen... Because it was not

a given that if Numo stayed Varbilma would also stay. The village of Odun was not in Atlantua, and the divorce laws were not as favorable to women here as opposed to across the border, but here the women were free to just leave their husbands. Of course in this case the husband was not obliged to give the woman anything, as long as he didn't send her off naked. He was required to allow the woman to take her best outfit, as much food as she could carry, and if the husband had two horses then the woman could take one of them. This wasn't really very much, but if it was so terrible to stay with her husband, for example if she was being beaten regularly, then at least she had a way to divorce him of her own volition.

Lately it seemed that Varbilma had hit a bad patch. There wasn't much peace between her and Numo. She had firstly received a good scolding because of the sheep, which had happened a long time ago, but now it was referred to again. Numo had beaten her very badly because of Tin, then she was shamed publicly because of Tila... and now she was basically losing the estate because Numo would no longer be in charge, but instead Tila, or Djuli in the name of Tila. But as if this wasn't enough, they expected Varbilma to work?! It was unbelievable! That from now on she would be subordinate to her cook, Evla, who until now had been her slave?! How could she acquiesce to this?!

She really didn't want to resign herself to these circumstances. In fact she was so adamant that when Numo finally left Djuli and sought her out, in order to tell her what kind of alterations were going to occur at the estate, Varbilma immediately said, "It wasn't very nice of you to beat me because of a smelly slave, but if you're going to let the slaves take away your estate, then I don't mind telling you—even if you beat me for it—that you're not only rude and brutal, but more insane than Tin!"

"Woman, I am not brutal, so I suggest you think about what you're saying! I will not tolerate you insulting me! Lie down and go to sleep instead!"

Varbilma did so because she did not want to be beaten again, but by the next morning her opinion remained unchanged. "You can't allow us to lose everything because of Djuli—an entire life's work!" she pleaded to Numo with clasped hands.

"Hey, this isn't about Djuli but Tila!"

"Kill her then!"

"What?! Me?! Kill her?! A wizard?! Tell me, do you really believe I could kill a wizard? Me, Numo?! I've barely even wielded a sword in my hand, but at least I understand that. Magic is totally foreign to me! You think I would dare attack a wizard, who didn't even need to touch you and those other men, yet made you all shit your pants?! Don't irritate me woman, because I may do something I regret! The estate might be worth a lot, but my life is worth more!"

"If you had a little courage you could shoot an arrow at her when she was unguarded, or stab her with a sword. Given how unsuspecting she is and how little she knows about our world, she wouldn't suspect it until the last moment!"

"Well that's great! Why don't *you* do it?!"

"You're the man!"

"Yes, I am a man. But not a wizard!" and Numo, who had been standing by the open window during the morning's conversation, now pointed outside. "Look at that!"

Varbilma looked out. About a hundred meters from them in the direction he was pointing, Tila was standing before a big pile, the height of a man. This pile consisted of logs, many meters in length and the thickness of a man's body. The slaves had cut these down last year so that when they dried out they could cut them up into smaller pieces for winter firewood. Because it was easier to cut dry wood than wood that was raw and wet.

"If my guess is correct, Tila is about to make herself useful!" said Mr. Numo.

"But she's not doing anything!"

"Not yet. Not *yet*! But what do you expect, she only just got there! I've been watching her movements from here, and it soon became clear she was heading toward the woodpile. Apparently she loves working. See, didn't I tell you? Just watch!"

Tila had stopped about five meters from the wood pile. Her light dress began to glow, covering the linen clothing she was wearing, and suddenly every hair on her head stood up in the air, sparks leaping from their ends. Then the strands of hair reached out toward the woodpile as if they were snakes. Tila's hands did not move, she was clasping them behind her. However the woodpile did! One by one, as though a giant juggler was moving the logs, they all rose into the air and flew a couple of meters away before dropping to the ground, but instead of logs they had been chopped into small pieces. The whole thing lasted no more than ten or twenty seconds, and Tila split the last branch into even smaller pieces that could function as kindling. Numo had no doubt that if Tila wanted to, with this power she could turn the whole lot into sawdust!

"Did you see that, woman?! Now do you think I'm crazy?! For trusting Tila? It was her that healed Tin, and I clearly haven't lost my mind! This is the sort of wizard who could read my mind! It's possible that a sword wouldn't even harm her. In the kitchen she casually grabbed hold of the burning hot spit! Even if I could kill her, the second I stab the sword into her she'd just wave her hand and turn me into sawdust! I can't even guarantee my victory if I behead her with a single blow—you saw how she cut the wood without even moving a finger! What if I cut her head off and Tila dies, but just before I do so her hair moves and that's the end of me?! Answer me this! Or should I ask, 'Dear Tila, please let me shave you bald so that I don't have to be afraid of beheading you!' Is this what you want?!"

"What about in her sleep..."

"No, don't even think such a thing! No matter how deep she's sleeping, she's sure to wake up from being stabbed! And if she has even a single second before her death, she could take me with her to her grave! Thanks, but that's not something I wish upon myself! Even if she doesn't do anything like that, everybody would suspect that it was me, and the slaves would kill me to get revenge! Besides, it's not impossible that this whole thing will greatly benefit me..."

"How?! You've lost everything!"

"Nonsense! I didn't lose anything! It would have taken at least a week for five or six of the strongest male slaves, if they were diligent, to carry out this work. And that's being conservative! It's more likely it would take them three or even four weeks! And in the meantime a slave supervisor would have to watch them constantly. But now they're doing something else instead!"

"*If* they're doing anything!"

"They are. Didn't you hear them marching out to the field singing? They're as happy as Larry! I really don't have to pay a single supervisor!"

"But they're not working for *you*!"

"No, they aren't. From now on I'll just be dealing with the financial matters."

"Ha! Djuli will always be reminding us of that! She's as vile as a viper!"

"Only because you made her vile. I heard what happened with her. You didn't let her out in the field just so that Madun could have a pretty woman to screw! It's not that I mind, but he could at least buy one for himself, not lay my Djuli on her back! Don't get so upset— if you'd only understand that Djuli wouldn't be any trouble if you just expected work from her, and didn't completely humiliate her and insult her dignity! In fact, considering what you did to her she treats me rather kindly!"

"She certainly doesn't with me!"

"You deserve it!"

"Since when does a slave have any self-respect?!"

"It was never the case that slave's don't have any self-respect. All of them do, they just keep it to themselves! Anyway, there's nothing to argue about because this is how it is and you'll just have to like it! Djuli isn't going to say anything about how I spend the money, because on the one hand she doesn't understand it, in fact she hates money, and on the other hand I'm not going to waste it on foolish things! For instance I've always longed to have a swimming pool here in the courtyard, paved and with a fountain like those of kings! I know it would cost a fortune and at the moment I have no hope of building it, but be assured that if I do get the money I will indeed have it built. Even though it's a luxury, Djuli won't object because I'm sure she'd love to splash about in a marble pool! The same goes for everything—I don't care if Djuli says that the estate isn't mine, although yesterday she was clear that she wouldn't say this. But *if* she said it was hers, I wouldn't care as long as I got to live well, in fact even better than before. I strongly believe that with this wizard Tila, my business is going to fare much better than it did previously. Very few people have a servant who's a wizard!"

"She'll be Djuli's servant!"

"That's what Djuli says. But she's going to help me with her magic. And just imagine, if this pool became a reality..."

"Why? So that Djuli could wash her dirty slave body in it?! And all the others?!"

"I do admit that it would be more indulgent if I could bathe in it alone, but it's still better than nobody being able to bathe in it because the marble pool doesn't exist! And I'd rather them be included than for me to go without!"

"But..."

"Stop being obstructive, woman! If you don't understand this, you're dumber than I thought! Just listen to me, you mentally-retarded creature... the point is that it makes no difference to me whether they bow before me or live better! All that matters is obtaining a lot of money. Now, money has two main uses—eating well and living in a nice place. If there is enough money for us to have royal feasts, and I strongly believe that with Tila's help there will be, then I shall gorge myself! I don't care if the others are stuffing their stomachs with the same thing as me! What does it matter, if it isn't being taken from my own mouth?! I don't know about you, but I don't need others to go hungry in order to feel satisfied! As far as living in a nice place goes, you couldn't find a better locality than this, and Tila will take care of the weather so it'll be even more beautiful. And if the former slaves decide to build some pretty cottages for themselves, what do I care?! But mine will not be uglier. It will certainly not be uglier! We might even have enough money for a palace, and then we'll have enough space for everybody. Even kings don't live alone in their palace—it is filled with servants, and it would be like me being a king myself and having servants living by my side!"

"But you're not a king! Nobody obeys your commands!"

"Rubbish! When it comes down to it, money is what's important, and anything I say in relation to that is bound to be obeyed. It is my area of expertise, after all!"

But Varbilma just shook her head, saying that she couldn't see things turning out well this way because there would be no authority.

"To hell with your authority, if you know what's good for you, you imbecile!" Numo pushed her angrily. "Go to the kitchen—I don't even want to see you! I'm sick of dealing with this level of incomprehension! You don't have to shoot me down right at the beginning, when you can't possibly

know whether things will go well or not! We have enough time to worry about that later, because for the moment there's nothing we can do. Now get out of my sight!"

"But you must understand that if you don't own the estate, then your children can't inherit it either!"

"What children?! You're not even capable of giving me a boy! What do I care about inheritance?! All you could manage was giving birth to a single girl! Don't make a fool of yourself—get out of here! Get on with your job, because Djuli said that if you don't work hard in the kitchen then Evla won't be satisfied with you and you won't get any lunch! I'm going off to do my own job too. I have to talk to Djuli and Tila about what we need to plant this year in larger quantities. Could you please move out of the way so I don't knock you over! I'm just taking in how I sent away all the supervisors and appointed Djuli in their place, who is able to do their job alone, in fact she makes the slaves work even harder than before. This woman is a real treasure, at least it appears that way for the moment. I'm sure that over time her manners will improve somewhat, but it's understandable that she's a bit intoxicated by her sudden freedom. I'd probably behave the same if I had a friend who was a wizard. Now please, let me get out!"

Varbilma obediently stepped aside and wondered whether she should go to the kitchen or make an escape. Numo did indeed go looking for Djuli. He found her, with Tila of course. And because Tila was there he took the liberty of making a request. Varbilma's words had made him think. Not about the inheritance, as that was far off in the future, but the fact that a successor would be necessary. In other words, a child. So he said, "I know that you don't like Varbilma, I can understand that. However this isn't so much about her but about me. I would very much like to have a child, more than one if possible. I don't even mind if they're all girls. Tila, I'd really like you to examine my wife, find out what the problem with her is and heal her if you can, because we've been together for many years and she's only been able to give birth to one girl. Although even she died fairly recently."

"I really don't like this idea—Varbilma is not worthy of reproducing!" said Djuli censoriously.

"It would be best if you didn't give us your opinion on this matter!" Tila looked at her coldly, implying that Djuli could have perhaps saved the little girl. But she did not betray Djuli, and instead said, "I am willing to heal Varbilma if she is sick, but during my short stay here and what I've heard from people, I'm not sure she would accept my healing!"

"That's not a problem. I'll just order her to!" said Numo, calming down. But his calm was short-lived.

"I'm not willing to participate in any kind of crime that forces somebody to do something against their will!" and Tila looked at Numo with such icy coldness that he literally shivered. Tila went on. "If I did this I would be utterly unworthy of the name 'elf'! It already raises serious questions in elf morality about whether I have the right to cause discomfort to others in order to protect myself. I agreed to this, but not without wrestling with it in my mind, and I know that in Elfland many would have concerns about my decision, in fact I'm not going to embellish it—practically everybody would! But I went even further—I took upon myself the terrible burden of daring to decide, where appropriate, who is right if two people are in a quarrel. At least I did so to the extent that I wouldn't allow a person to cause another bodily injury. This is also a concern because I could easily be mistaken and might cause more trouble for one person than he would cause to the other. Still, I'm even willing to do that in specific circumstances. But I cannot interfere with certain things, like letting myself get involved if the person in question isn't causing anyone any harm. So if Varbilma refuses to be examined, then I won't force her to and I won't tolerate you forcing her to either!"

"Well okay, but I hope that I can talk some sense into her. One thing is certain though—if she refuses to be healed, particularly if this is a painless process, then I'll divorce her because I want children!"

"I don't precisely know what this divorce thing is, but if it's not going to hurt Varbilma then you can do it. But what makes you so sure that Varbilma has a problem in her body?"

"Well, what else could it be?!" wondered Numo, his jaw dropping.

"A problem in *your* body, for instance! It's been known to happen that a man isn't a real man because he can't get his dick to stand up!" mocked Djuli.

"Ah, that's impossible!" sighed Numo with relief. "Since you know from experience, Djuli, that this is not something I have a problem with!"

"Not being able to harden is not the only possible problem," said Tila. "Where I'm from in Elfland there can sometimes be a small problem with the reproductive system, and this can occur with women, but it's more often the case with men. Of course it isn't very common with our race, but it's certainly possible that the problem is in you. I can't be sure, but it might be. It would be better if I started the examination with you, if you agree to it, and then I can examine Varbilma later in the event she agrees. It's entirely possible that she doesn't even have a problem, and then we'll save ourselves a lot of quarreling!"

Numo agreed to the examination, but not without blushing. "Should I undress?" he asked.

"It would be pretty difficult otherwise!" Djuli mocked him again. "And I don't know why you're embarrassed in front of Tila—she is after all a pretty girl!"

"This is not a serious examination, you don't have to undress. It's enough for you to just lay down comfortably on the floor," said Tila, pointing at the smooth ground.

Numo obeyed.

"Now I will examine your thermal image," said Tila, and began looking Numo over from head to toe. "If I want to I'm able to see the body temperature of humans or elves. Sick body parts have quite a different temperature than healthy ones."

She listened for a while and then said, "You have a tiny gallstone. Your stomach is not totally healthy either. And one of the veins in your right leg is a little too thick. Does it not hurt when you stand a lot?"

"Yes, it does! You're absolutely right! What a great doctor you are!"

"Don't worry, all this has now been healed. As for the child... well, that isn't going to happen the way things are at the moment! I was right, it is actually you that has the problem. It is also possible that Varbilma isn't completely healthy, but since she has already given birth, she is probably not as sick as you are. As things stand, Numo, you will never be able to produce a child!"

"What... I'm sorry?! Why not?! What's the problem?!"

"In your childhood, some kind of inflammation or infection damaged the tube that... that... ah, I can't explain it this way... but basically only urine can come out of you, because the other tube to the urethra that transfers the material from which the child is produced is blocked!"

"I don't understand, what kind of material are you talking about?!"

"Tila's right! I also noticed that whenever you raped me nothing ever spurted out of your dick!" said Djuli freely.

"That wasn't rape!"

"It certainly was, since I didn't want it!"

"You didn't protest!"

"That's because I was afraid to!"

"That's a shame, because if you had have protested I wouldn't have done it!"

"Yeah, in hindsight you can say anything you want!"

"But I'm telling the truth!"

"Stop it!" said Tila irritably. "This bickering is disgusting! Forget about the past, be good friends, and start life afresh!"

"That's fine with me!" Mr. Numo retorted.

"I'll see how he behaves. First the guy has to prove himself, prove that it's not only children he can behave decently with!"

"Of course it's not only with them that I can! But anyway, what were you saying about the stuff that's supposed to squirt out?! Sorry for being blunt, but I have to say this—when I fuck a woman I don't piss in her because I'm not a disgusting pig! Or is this necessary to produce a child?! Because I've never heard of it!"

At this Djuli began to laugh, rolling on the ground with such great joy she was almost bursting from it. Finally after a good fifteen minutes, when she had calmed down a little, she explained to Numo with great difficulty what he needed to know about this issue, but even during her explanation she could barely contain her laughter.

Numo listened to her, gaping in amazement. "Right... so if that white goo doesn't come out and enter the woman, then there can't be a child!"

"Exactly! But you don't have to worry about this anymore because I've restored everything!" Tila assured him. "Now go to Varbilma, and you can immediately start cooperating with regards to this child you want!"

"I understand. Thank you! But tell me, elf girl, the way I was before... did that make it absolutely inconceivable for me to produce a child?"

"Absolutely inconceivable!" nodded Tila.

"Please, this is very important to me! Would you dare to state with the utmost certainty that it was in no way possible to have a child by me as I was?!"

"Numo, at the age of fifteen hundred years I am only considered a child elf, therefore there are many diseases that I am not able to heal. However these are mainly problems relating to the central nervous system, that is, diseases of the brain and spinal cord. And I can even treat a significant portion of those too. But even if I can't cure something, I am able to diagnose it with great confidence, which means that I will still know what the problem is. Your problem was not with the brain or a disease of the spinal cord, in fact not even with some complex internal organ..."

"Like his heart," interrupted Djuli.

"Oh no, the heart is a very simple organ, nothing more than a pump! I was thinking of something like the liver or pancreas... But Numo's problem didn't involve anything like that—it was simply a tiny little tube inside him that had become blocked. As if a small vein had closed up. Seriously, it was less trouble than him cutting his finger and me needing to heal that. But although this problem was small, it was essential to his normal functioning, because if I didn't heal him he would never be able to have children! It was thoroughly blocked, Numo, akin to covering someone's nose and mouth so they can't breathe, and without air they will die. What I am telling you is that now that I've healed you, it is definitely possible for you to have children, but previously you could not. Even though I am still a child by elf standards, you can trust that I'm not mistaken about this, because a problem of this sort is no more difficult for us than a human child picking a flower from a field, however I consider that to be wrong because the flower dries out and dies without bearing any fruit!"

Djuli didn't say a word, just sat behind Tila lowering her head, and with a terrific effort stifled her laughter again. She had guessed why Numo was asking this, and just like the case with the

sheep, also remained silent now. She wasn't beating Varbilma. She wasn't hurting the woman. Nobody had ordered her to be Varbilma's unsolicited defender, so why should she speak now?! Even if Tila had asked why Numo was so interested in this... but she didn't. Numo thanked Tila for the healing and left with a strange expression on his face.

They didn't see him for a good while after that. Precisely until lunchtime in fact, where it turned out that Varbilma did not have to make the decision of whether to stay or go.

Those who worked in the outer parts of the estate customarily took their lunch with them, and those who worked in the house or close by came home for lunch. Because the weather was nice, Evla the cook and the kitchen boy set the table outside, where there were some nice wooden tables. Numo was there having lunch with them, and Tila and Djuli were also present. Only Varbilma was absent.

"Where's Varbilma? Isn't she hungry?" asked Djuli. "Oh yes, and how did she work? Were you satisfied with her, Evla? Because if not it would be better if she didn't join us, since those who don't work shouldn't be allowed to eat!" stated Djuli in a decidedly commanding manner, as though she were a queen or had worked that much herself. However she had not done anything all morning, other than accompany Tila, show her various things, teach her about human customs and draw Tila's attention to the kinds of work she could do. This had really been quite an easy task. But nobody said anything, certainly not the former slaves, since it was already a huge step that the slave supervisors were no longer at their backs. And they knew that this was at least partially thanks to Djuli.

"I haven't seen Varbilma all day!" Evla replied to her.

"Aha! Then she'd better not come here to eat! In fact she shouldn't come home either, because we can't have an idler sleeping under our roof!"

"Don't worry Djuli, you'll never see Varbilma again!" Mr. Numo reassured her.

"How come?"

"She's not here at the table because she's not on the estate. She may not even still be alive."

"Why's that?!" asked Djuli, shocked.

"When I learned that I could never have children, I suddenly understood that the little girl Varbilma had given birth to was not conceived from me. I'm not so stupid for that not to occur to me! And since I know how much Tila dislikes violence, I didn't want to offend her with such a scene, so I politely asked my wife to go for a little walk into the forest, and questioned her."

"And?" asked Djuli curiously, rubbing her hands together contentedly under the wooden table top. This was turning out to be more intriguing than she had hoped!

"So I asked her why she had cheated on me, and with whom. Why I deserved this, and how many times she had done it. Then I told her I was going to divorce her. To that she said that she had just wanted to make me happy because I'd wanted a child so much. That she didn't mind if I divorced her since she didn't want to stay anyway. She would rather go and live with her brother, and would only take her dowry with her. I told her that she wouldn't get a penny, only what the law prescribes—one outfit, a horse and some food. After all, she did deceive me and nastily lie to me! She began to argue and I got angry."

"And?! What happened next?!" asked Djuli excitedly.

"Well, I became very angry!" said Numo, and bowed his head, staring very closely at his plate.

"How angry?" asked Tin ominously.

"Well, er... quite a lot. We could say that she deserved it, even just for what she did to you, or allowed to happen to you... but I wouldn't worry if I were you. I don't think she would dare come back here, however she can still get to Madun's place because I only broke her hands—both her legs are still intact. In full awareness of my responsibility I can state that even if she had fainted, she was

still breathing when I left her. So I believe she's still alive, that is if a bear or wolf doesn't come by and devour her!"

"Uncle Numo, that was a very awful thing that you did!" Tin looked at him reproachfully.

"I know. But she deserved it!" countered the man.

"Djuli, this was also a very awful thing for you to do!" Tila gave her a similarly reproving look.

"What have I got to do with all this?!" said Djuli in astonishment.

"Djuli, you're not stupid, but don't think that I am either! You have a lot to do with this, and you know very well what I'm talking about. At least Numo has acknowledged his own responsibility, why don't you do the same?"

"But I really didn't do anything!"

"That's precisely it! You didn't do anything to prevent this, although all you had to do was tell me. I'm pretty sure you knew in advance what the consequences would be, that... oh, I don't need to explain! You knew everything ahead of time because you know how humans think. You knew what Numo would do!"

"Of course I knew, but nobody ever asked me what I thought Numo would do! Why are you scolding me Tila, when I didn't do anything wrong? Why not Numo, who beat Varbilma?!"

"Be glad that I'm scolding you, Djuli! Why should I scold Numo? I don't expect anything extraordinary from him, he's like every other average man! I simply forbid him to beat anybody again. To my greatest regret, if he repeats something like this I'll have to chase him away from the estate, and if he doesn't leave when asked politely I'll be forced to bring pruritus upon him. Every inch of his body will be terribly itchy if he comes within a day's journey from the estate. But you, Djuli! I really expected more kindness from you, more dignity! I considered you my true friend! Tell me, does a friend behave like this?! Because I think that if a true friend knows something that the other doesn't, then she'll tell her! Voluntarily! Even if she isn't asked! Where I'm from every elf behaves in this way, and it's sad that you humans don't do the same. I thought that at least friends would treat each other in such a manner. I'm very disappointed in you Djuli!"

"Tila, I didn't mean to hurt you. If it would have caused you any harm, then..."

"It did harm me! I feel very uncomfortable that something bad happened to a human being nearby!"

"But it's just Varbilma, and I didn't tell you because... because..."

"Because you knew something bad would happen to her! It was more important to you that Varbilma feel terrible than maintaining our friendship!"

"But why should our friendship break up because of this?!" said Djuli in alarm.

"It won't break up. It will still remain, for the time being, but it has become weaker. The more you behave like this—in a manner unworthy of an elf—the further it will weaken. Djuli, I don't know whether you understand why you can't be an elf. An elf doesn't behave in this way!"

"I didn't hurt Varbilma!"

"But you did. You hurt her with your silence. And you hurt me too, because now I feel uncomfortable. Because I'm an elf! I may be a bad elf, as Tin and even my masters have told me, but I'm definitely much better than a human!"

"What must a true elf be like if you, a bad elf, are so good?!" Trokinga said almost reverently.

"Do you want to know?"

"Of course!"

"Then take a look at Tin," advised Tila.

And as if in response to these words, Tin immediately said, "Tila, are we going to look for Varbilma, and will you heal her?"

Djuli interrupted before she could answer. "Tila, I know I'm going to risk you getting angry with me again, but I will speak my mind because I'm honest. I object to you helping. Varbilma really did cheat on Numo, and this has nothing to do with us. Besides, she's often hurt me and Tin too, as well as others, and it's futile to heal her Tila, because it would be as if I healed her, since I was the one who found you on the seashore! Varbilma has not deserved this, even if Tin has forgiven her. Anyway, I doubt that her forgiveness could really be that honest and selfless. Naturally Tin wants to leave our world with the elves if Elfland comes to get you, and she's bound to be busy trying to prove that she's worthy of your fellow elves taking her with them. This is the only thing that matters to her, and everything else seems trivial!"

"Djuli, what you're saying is partly true," responded Tin, looking at her without a hint of anger. "Of course I'm trying to consciously prove that I'm a good elf. Of course I'm trying to be an even better elf than Tila. It can't be otherwise, as Tila was born an elf and I wasn't. If I'm not definitely seen as suitable for Elfland, if Tila has any doubt about my worthiness, she won't suggest that they take me away with them. And my fate isn't even certain if she does suggest this, because it'll surely depend on the Great Elders. But you're still mistaken, because I genuinely have forgiven Varbilma. And you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because what you said was true, Djuli—Elfland is the only important thing in my life. And from this it follows that I'm not interested in anything else, not least Varbilma! I feel that I am far superior to her now, because I'm an elf, or at least an elf candidate. That's why I don't care about the petty mischief Varbilma or other people get up to. I don't even care about my own human life, if it means giving up the elfness in me! For me the past simply doesn't exist. And Djuli, I feel sorry for you having such a great psychological burden, to be overwhelmed by so many awful thoughts. I have been reborn, and I've never been happier!"

"This has nothing to do with Varbilma not deserving help!" said Djuli. "Perhaps if she had asked for help, but she hasn't!"

"She can't ask us, that's why we have to go to her! And Djuli, be aware that I'm not talking about Varbilma but about us—you and me!"

"I can't be responsible for all the world's problems, nor for Varbilma's! I don't agree with Tila that I'm the cause of Varbilma's problems. Perhaps there's a slight chance that I should have told Tila what I knew—given our friendship—but just because I didn't, that doesn't mean I caused Varbilma's troubles!"

"Djuli, forget about Varbilma for a moment! You're right that you are not responsible for all the world's problems, however you *are* responsible for yourself! You can't change the world, that's true, but you can change yourself. Listen, I'm just a child, both as an elf and a human, and I may not be able to explain everything to you very clearly, but I want you to at least believe that I'm far beyond the petty arguments of humans. I have an entirely different outlook, and there is no deception in me. I really am trying to prove that I'm worthy of Elfland, but not in the sneaky way you've assumed. It may be that the ancient human elf-abilities are going to unfold in me, but of course it will be a slow process. First of all my mind will develop, my way of thinking—you may have noticed that I speak more seriously than an ordinary child of my age. The past for me is like a bad dream, and people don't generally seek revenge for their dreams! For me the only reality is Elfland, and this world here is just a dream. The people in it are just dream characters, who I find more convenient to like than hate!"

"The one problem I have with all this is that I'm still living in reality, not in a dream-world!"

"Djuli, don't you see that you're elevating yourself to a higher dignity when you declare that you're no longer human but an elf, a Superior Being who is above humans?! Try to love people, since it's so easy to do!"

"Some of them may be easy to love, a negligible amount..."

"Everyone! Just make a start, even if it's difficult in the beginning. It will get easier in time."

"Not for me it won't," Djuli shook her head sadly, and her mind ran through all the suffering she had had to endure so far, and those who had caused it—the many humans. She recalled seeing the inhabitants of her village screaming, and many being murdered by the Torg slave hunters. Even after that people were being whipped to death, killed if they weren't able to march... She was also whipped and still remembered the feeling of it, even if the scars on her back had disappeared thanks to Tila... Many of her friends who were captured along with her and had survived were sold, their children too... Such trivialities as being raped didn't even count in comparison, and after all this she was supposed to wish good for those who had done this to her?!

"No, it won't work," she said, not stubbornly but sadly. "In order to do this I would actually need to be an elf. For me, my darling, this is unfortunately not just difficult—it's simply impossible! Perhaps if Tila poked around in my brain too, like she did with you... maybe then I could manage it, but the way I am it's not going to happen. And if she did do this, I wouldn't be the same person I am now. I don't think you're the same Tin I knew before either. That little girl died forever when she went crazy, and when Tila touched your brain she created another Tin, who looks just like the old one and has similar memories. I even love this new Tin very much, but it's not the same little girl. So this can't work for me, Tin, and you can either accept me as being bad or not, but I can't help you with that." Djuli paused in thought for a moment, then continued.

"I feel that you, me and Tila are linked somehow in a sequence of goodness that binds us to the world. All of us are good, but in differing measures. At the bottom are the common people, then comes me, then Tila, and finally you, my treasure, as the Crown of Goodness along with all the other elves. I might be better than most humans, at least that's what I'd like to believe, but Tila is better than me, and you're even better than Tila. That being said, nobody who behaves the way other humans do should be allowed to live! The only way people in this real world should live is the way I live my life. The way Tila lives now, or at least wants to, is incredibly difficult and is only achievable by an elf with magic abilities. The way *you* want to live, Tin—even an elf can't live that way because they'd be killed in no time! To live that way here is *absolutely impossible*! I live as well as a human being can, and if even you don't love me for this, I can't be any different!"

"Oh mother Djuli, you're not that bad, and of course I love you the way you are! I'm just sorry that we can't be together in Elfland!"

"Well, my dear child, then you have to choose between Elfland and me!"

"I can't give up on Elfland!" said Tin a little sadly.

"Then don't. I think it would be good for you to go with them, of course if they're willing to take you. You'll make a very good elf. Don't give it up on my account! You know, my darling, it's simply that I live in the *real* world. I'm too grown up to believe in a dream world and escape there, but you're still just a child, so you might be able to."

"Elves are not children!"

"They are. I believe they're no more than very good wizard children. Even their Great Elders."

"The world would be a much better place if everybody was this kind of child!"

"It certainly would be, and I strongly believe this too. But as long as there is even a single adult like Varbilma living in the world, as much as we would like it, not everybody can be an elf child!"

We still need the sort of bad adults like me, who aren't as bad as Varbilma, but still bad enough to not be afraid of harming those evil people if they want to hurt you elves!"

"That's not true, Djuli! Varbilma can't hurt me!" Tila said.

"But she could hurt those who would like to be elves, for example Tin, if we allow it!"

"Let's not argue, Tila, please go and heal Varbilma!" appealed Tin.

Djuli shook her head and said nothing. Tila spoke. "I will go. But first I want to finish eating. Because I may be an elf, but I'm a really bad elf, and Varbilma doesn't deserve to be more important than my satiety!"

"Yes, you really are a bad elf, Tila!" Tin looked at her reproachfully.

"I know, sweetheart. The Great Elders have already told me this in Elfland, on more than one occasion," acknowledged Tila, bowing her head in shame. But she finished her meal first anyway...

There was no slave on the estate who wished Varbilma well. None of them wanted Tila to heal their former mistress, but of course there wasn't a slave who would dare say this. Djuli was the only one brave enough. In any case, Tila did not go alone to search for Varbilma—Djuli and Tin went with her. Although Djuli didn't go for Varbilma's sake, she just didn't want to leave Tila's side. Mr. Numo went along too. He didn't want to go, but Tila had ordered him to come and show her where he had left his wife so that they could find her easily. Mr. Numo agreed that he would show her the spot, but that Tila should not refer to her as his wife because he no longer considered her as such. And because Tila didn't quite understand all this 'wife' business and the principles of human family relationships, she just shrugged indifferently. As long as she got to Varbilma.

They arrived there after a fifteen minute walk, since Numo had not led his wife any further. He had been too angry, and only wanted them to be out of earshot. By the time they got there Varbilma had regained consciousness, and was not precisely in the same spot but a little further away. She had wanted to get away from the estate. Of course she had not gotten very far, since if someone has both her arms broken then every bump caused by walking is a terrible torture.

"Stop, you wretched woman, let me help you!" shouted Tila.

Varbilma stopped, although hesitantly. It was likely her pride and desire to be healed were wrestling within her. But she stopped, knowing that she could not escape from Tila anyway.

It didn't take Tila long to heal her. This time she did not carry out the extensive examinations as when she had healed the slaves on the kitchen table. She solely concentrated on Varbilma's superficial injuries. Tila placed her palm on Varbilma's forehead and her hair began to glow. Varbilma's pain was gone in an instant, and not only were her hands healed but the scratches on her face had disappeared too.

The woman stood there vacillating. She knew she ought to thank Tila for the healing, but her feelings of humiliation held her back. However she did not have to say anything, as Numo spoke instead. "You were healed because this little girl wanted it so much!" He pointed at Tin. "But I'd like you to know that *I* didn't want Tila to come out here and heal you. And besides, I no longer consider you my wife, so get out of here and don't come back to the estate!"

"Enough of this! It's not up to you!" said Tila grimly. "Anybody can live near me, as you say 'on the estate', who behaves decently and therefore does not hurt others. Because I may be able to accept that you need to inflict death on other beings in order to live, but I can't believe it's necessary to kill each other, or harm another human! If Varbilma wants to she can come back and live among us, as long as she behaves accordingly."

"That is of course if she works!" blurted Djuli viciously, glaring at Varbilma. "And it would be appropriate to say thank you to Tin, as she was the one pleading Tila to do this!"

"I didn't ask for your kindness!" cried Varbilma haughtily, staring at Tin with such disdain that even Djuli was alarmed, and she jumped between Tin and Varbilma defensively. But Varbilma did not attack, just continued speaking. "It was futile for Tin to encourage you, Tila! I know that I should be grateful, but this doesn't make me like Tin any more, in fact I hate her even more violently than ever! I hate her because only a truly good person would do such a thing. I detest her, since now I have to consider myself worse than her, worse than anybody on Earth! I hope that I never see you all again!"

"But aunt Varbilma, it's so easy to be good!" and with that Tin ran out from behind Djuli and walked over to Varbilma, but Varbilma recoiled.

"Don't touch me, you little witch! I *am* good! Very good! But there are things I consider more important than goodness! And that's money, wealth, power, fulfilling my desire to become a real Lady, being able to buy all the jewelry I want, and eating lavish gourmet food until I burst! Yes, that's been my dream since childhood, and I can only succeed in reaching my goal if I don't have to live on my work alone but have the work of others to help me. This can only be achieved if I have an army of slaves at my disposal. I'm not going to give up my desires for some vague notion of goodness! Goodness is a weak, gutless force, which although always reaches its goal, is nothing more than POWER! Wild, merciless power! I'm sure that Tila is a wizard in vain, because at some point she'll be defeated by a greater power that doesn't suffer from such suicidal delusions as she does, that people must always be good to everyone! Anyhow, it's easy for her to talk such nonsense, after all, she's a wizard and I'm not! The only thing that's happened is that now it's not me who's the lady of the estate but Tila! Okay, I accept that she's stronger and that I have no choice but to leave the estate. I'd rather leave than be a slave in a place where I used to be a mistress! But if she's going to kick me out of my position, she shouldn't flaunt the noble idea of altruism, because it's simply disgusting! It's a good thing I don't need your charity because I have a place to go—I'm going to my brother, Madun!" She turned around and left.

Tila, Djuli, Numo and Tin just watched her until she disappeared in the bend of the forest path, and then Numo said, "So she's not going to beg from us, but her brother. Okay, if that's what she prefers..."

Tila simply shrugged and said, "Let's go home—I'm going to chop up some wood before it gets dark. I really enjoy this kind of work!"

* * *

The former estate of Mr. Numo and Varbilma was a good hour away from the village of Odun, which it technically belonged to, and Varbilma got to the village before dark. She soon found Madun's house. It was quite a large house, and this was necessary for many reasons. One was that although Madun was an unmarried bachelor, there were always a number of his cheerful pals living with him, who would not only spend the night there but sometimes a few days, in fact they often stayed for a whole week. The other reason was that Madun lived on slave trade, and a place was needed for the slaves who had recently been bought or sold. And those who supervised them... but these were mostly his pals. Sometimes the house almost pealed from the emptiness, and a couple of men would guard Madun's property when he was away on business trips. When he returned from such a trip, especially if it was successful and he had quickly disposed of his merchandise, he would sometimes party for weeks. He loved this lifestyle, which he could live more cheaply than others since he was never short of women—he had the slave girls there!

Of course he was frequently a guest elsewhere, for instance at Varbilma's, because one of the roads he often drove his slaves down passed by her place. The main reason he did this was to sell them. He would head over there with the slaves, and come back without them but with a bag stuffed full of money. These were the times he visited Numo and Varbilma.

Varbilma was fortunate enough to find Madun at home. He was planning to leave the next day, so Varbilma had arrived in time. She immediately started complaining about what had happened. Madun listened to the whole story in disbelief. "A wizard called Elf took over your estate?!" he asked incredulously.

"No, no! Elf, if I understood correctly, is actually the name of her tribe. The wizard's name is Tila, and it seems that there are different types of wizards. She happens to belong to the tribe of wizards called 'elves'. But what difference does it make to me whether she's an elf or not, if she can do magic and kick me out of the estate?! Just imagine, she declared that all the slaves were granted freedom! And now they're actually cultivating the estate together, *my* estate, and they all want to reap the benefits! Isn't that outrageous?!"

"It certainly is outrageous, but the estate is ultimately Numo's, not yours! What happened to your husband? Why isn't he here, or did the wizard perhaps kill him?"

"No, no, not at all! But he did divorce me!"

"What?!"

"Yes, well actually, the main reason he divorced me is because of you!"

"Because of *me*?! Surely not! That's impossible!"

"But it's true!" and with that Varbilma reported everything to Madun. She did not even leave out the shame of Tila making her soil her pants. She told Madun this so that her brother could see that she had essentially suffered because of him. He had wanted Tin at that time, and that was why they were angry with her. She also told him what had happened in the forest between her and Numo.

"Aha, well that explains it!" shouted Madun. "So you, my sister, brought shame on our family by cheating on your husband! Yes, it's becoming clear now—of course he divorced you! But not because of me, as you wanted it to appear, but because of *your* mistake! Since *you* cheated on Numo, not me! Don't try to blame your mistake on me, when it was you who was immoral!"

"Madun, it's true that I cheated on my husband, but you can't say it was immoral!"

"How else would you define it?!"

"I don't know, but it wasn't my blood that drove me into the arms of another man—I just wanted to please Numo with a child!"

"Rubbish, anyone could say that!"

"It hurts that you don't believe me!"

"I'm entitled to my opinion, regardless of how it affects you! Even if what you said is true, it's still immoral that you've been with somebody other than your wedded husband!"

"Okay, let's say that I *am* immoral, but you can't lay that on me, Madun, when you were the one who wanted a prepubescent girl, which is why you got Tin!"

"Who was a slave, so I was free to do so! But you're only allowed to be with your husband! Anyway, I'm not particularly interested in the matter. After all, it's your pussy that you gave to somebody else, and now you've lost your husband as a result. It's all your own business. So what do you want from me now?!"

"You need to ask?! You can't figure it out?! For you to help me, of course!"

"Me, help you?! And what did you have in mind? Surely you don't expect me to attack the estate and kill the revolted slaves, along with the wizard?! Because I'll tell you right now that there's no way that's happening! You have too many slaves, but that's the least of the my concerns. If even

Numo is afraid of the wizard, I'll admit that I'm also afraid of her. Besides, on what grounds should I fight for this if your husband is on the wizard's side?!"

"He's not necessarily on her side, he's just waiting to see whether it'll work out better for him or worse!"

"That doesn't make any difference. Even if the attack was successful, the situation is that Numo, who has never bothered me before, would incriminate me to the judge for attacking the estate, and I don't fancy being rewarded for killing an evil wizard by going to prison!"

"Okay, I can understand that, but that's not what I'm asking! I'd simply like to be able to live here with you, and for you to assure me financial security until I find a suitable husband. I don't think that's implausible, although I confess that I'm not a young girl anymore. But if you support me with some kind of financial arrangement then it really won't be impossible, because I'm still a decent-looking woman for my age!"

"What?! I don't believe this! Do you think that I'm going to reward you when you've brought shame on our family with your behavior?! I should be punishing you instead!"

"You want to punish me?!"

"Well I am the oldest male family member, and it's my responsibility to watch over the family's morality!"

"This is ridiculous, Madun! Have you forgotten how much I always supported you against Numo?! Think about it—if they wouldn't have been so angry about Tin, which was your doing, then Numo would have forgiven me for cheating on him once, because he would easily believe that I wanted to please him with the child. Even the elf said that *he* had the problem, that it was *his* fault we couldn't have a child! If he wouldn't have been angry because of what you did to Tin, who he for some reason seems to like, then he wouldn't have chased me away! Or he would have at least given me back my dowry. It's your duty to help me!"

"It's only *you* that has a duty here, you guilty woman, because you've sinned greatly against women's morality and propriety! But it's okay. You can't say I don't have any brotherly love, because I'm willing to help you."

"Oh, you frightened me, Madun!"

"I didn't mean to scare you—I really will help you. Of course I expect that if I offer you a helping hand, then I should profit from this a little too. I will state in advance that there is not going to be any financial gift, as I don't want to waste my money on you. But neither do I want to throw you out on the street, so you can stay at my house. I'm away fairly often anyway, and somebody has to take care of the place. You won't necessarily have to contaminate your hands with dirty work, there are enough slaves around here for that. You can just manage them. However when my friends are here as guests, I expect you to serve them with whatever they want. You are to ensure they have a good time."

"Why, can't the slaves do this?"

"You fool! They will be doing this, but you must also play a part. I'm not talking about putting food in front of them, but using your feminine charms! Don't worry, I'm not incestuous, I have no desire to enjoy you myself! But you're right, you certainly are pretty, even now, and I don't see why such a value should be wasted. My friends love beautiful women. You must satisfy them free of charge, as they are my friends! You don't have to sleep with them for money, but for others you will. I've been thinking about this for weeks now, that I should open a brothel. They make fairly good money these days, plus they gather all the pretty girls! Slave girls of course, but it doesn't particularly bother me if some of them aren't slaves. My house is big enough, and it could be arranged in the east wing. So when my friends aren't here, you'll go over there and sell your charms,

working for the food you get and the roof above your head. It's better than begging on the street. I think you should be very grateful to me for assuring you this, particularly after you practically bragged about cheating on your husband!"

"You stinking pig, I don't believe this! You don't even have a spark of gratitude in you, you just want to exploit me! Me, your own sister!"

"What does it matter now? It can't be that unpleasant for you, you might even enjoy it, since it's nothing new for you to surrender to the hug of a stranger!"

"You dirty pig!" shouted Varbilma, and wanted to slap her brother. But Madun caught her hand at the last minute, twisted it and held it down. Varbilma cried out and was forced to turn around.

But Madun showed no anger on his face, in fact he was smiling. "Look how aggressive you've become!" he said, patting Varbilma on the buttocks in a friendly manner before giving her a kick. She almost fell on her face. "Off you go to the east wing, where I'll show you your room!"

"Never!" shouted the woman, and ran toward the exit.

Madun did not run after her. "Think about it!" he shouted.

"Up yours!" came the answer through the door.

"You'll soon come back!" laughed Madun.

"Only to kill you!" And on that note Varbilma left her "loving" brother's home.

* * *

After that nobody saw Varbilma for a long time. But no one missed her either, not Madun nor Djuli and the others. Djuli most certainly didn't miss her! Everyone was occupied with their newly obtained freedom. Initially there were a few hiccups of course. For example, some of the slaves were unable to come to terms with Numo not being chased away from the estate along with Varbilma. Grumblings could be heard that Numo ought to be killed, because with Tila being so gentle *she* would not punish the culprits! Yet nothing became of the matter, since it somehow reached Tila's ears, who summoned everyone and announced that anybody who did such a thing would be kicked off the estate. Then they would be unable to share in the prosperity that would soon be here.

An elf was capable of many things, but she wasn't able to speed up the passing of seasons. They would have to wait until at least the first harvest before any real prosperity would arrive. But still, the signs that major changes were about to take place here had already been manifesting for some time. In the beginning this had nothing to do with Tila. It was simply because people felt secure beside Tila, as they trusted that nobody would send them back into slavery. So they dared to believe that they were working for themselves now, and they began working with such zeal that Numo just watched them in amazement. Over the course of a single week they had plowed as much soil as they would previously have done in at least three weeks. They even managed to harrow it. The rate of work was higher because their fear had gone, and in addition there were more hands available because the work that usually required most of the men was now done by Tila, for example the woodcutting. But not only that—they no longer had to carry water. On one occasion it was said that Tila looked at the hill behind the house for so long that she bored a hole into it, and from the hill sprang fresh, clean water. All they had to do was manufacture a few meters of pipes so the water could be directed into the house, or rather onto the house and through the kitchen. Tila said that this was hard work, even for her, but it was worth it. Her exhaustion didn't last long; after eating half a kilogram of honey she was back to her old self again.

Then Tila told them to show her the seeds before planting them. They brought her the seeds, after which Tila created a small wind, and from the many kilograms of wheat seeds a portion flew away. Only those remained that were healthy and intact because the diseased seeds that would not have sprouted, along with the weeds mixed in, were blown away. Now they would just be planting quality seed in the field. She also "stimulated" them a little, which she called "waking them up", so they would germinate earlier. The people explained it in a simpler way however, saying that Tila the elf had "blessed" the seeds. Whether it was a blessing or a stimulation, it had the following result—the planted seeds germinated within moments, and their roots took hold in half as much time as usual. But Tila was not satisfied with this, and told them it was just her first halfhearted attempt and it would work better and faster next time. That it made no difference being an elf, as she still had to practice these things until she got it right. She had not done this before, so she preferred to start small in case she ruined something...

The weather was excellent, thanks to Tila of course, always being whatever the crop required. Pests did not spoil them too much either, because it was enough to bring Tila one specimen of each pest, be it a mouse, locust or anything else, and none of them headed in their direction but completely avoided their estate. Tila said she had performed a kind of magic that made these creatures feel an irresistible desire to go somewhere else. That this was not so much for the sake of the humans but for the pests, because if they came here people would kill them, so she basically just told the pests that coming this way would be life threatening. Djuli and the others did not mind what reason she had relieved them of pests, they were just glad it was being done.

They would soon also have an abundance of perhaps the most important thing in human society, money. One of the slaves asked Tila whether she could conjure up gold for them. Tila replied that of course it was possible for her to conjure up anything they wanted, be it gold, copper, iron or diamonds, since all of that was just matter, and energy could be transformed into matter. The only problem was that an enormous amount of energy was required to create even a tiny morsel of matter. "The amount of energy needed to turn a salt crystal into gold, or create anything from so-called 'nothing', would be enough to boil the water of a huge lake! If I wanted to conjure up as much gold as the size of a human head, with that energy I could evaporate an entire inland sea! And the thing is, I'm not willing to do that!"

"But there won't be any catastrophe if you make gold, because you're transforming this thing called 'energy' into gold, not boiling a sea!" objected the questioner, who turned out to be Evla, the cook.

"Of course! But we elves consider the most active types of magic to be those that destroy some existing thing, therefore transforming it back into energy. Then come those that change some existing thing into something else, and the third active category is creation magic. These are the three categories that are specifically forbidden for an elf who is not authorized. And I'm not an authorized elf, but merely a child! Don't be fooled by my adult body, Evla, as our body size isn't the least bit dependent on age. What is my age of one thousand five hundred years compared to the Great Elders, who are billions of years old?! I am willing to carry out destructive magic, which is in the first category, but only in the most terrible life-threatening situations. But don't be angry with me, because I don't see why I should violate the laws of Elfland just so that people can have more of this rather useless metal!"

"I understand all this, but why would it be such a terrible crime to create a little gold when you're not harming anybody by doing it?"

"I don't think it would be a crime. Even according to the Great Elders this is quite a harmless activity, if somebody performs the appropriate magic well. It isn't the activity of creation itself that

is dangerous, but the fact that a tremendous amount of energy needs to be controlled. If I could be completely certain that my magic would work out exactly as I planned it, then I'd gladly do it without remorse. The problem is what might happen if I do something wrong! Because then the situation may 'get out of hand', I believe you Torgs would say. Imagine what it would be like to lose control of the amount of energy required to evaporate an inland sea! Nobody in this entire region would survive, that's for sure! Everything within a distance of a several day journey would become a lake of liquid lava! And swimming on the top of the lava would be only one being, and that is me. But only until I sink to the bottom and suffocate because I still need air, even if the heat may not hurt me. Although I'm not even sure of that, as I can only tolerate a temperature of one and a half million degrees, and if I make even a small error in the magic the burst of energy could raise the heat even higher, and then that would be the end of me! It would be better not to risk something like this!"⁸

"It's a shame you aren't able to carry out this magic!"

"That's not the case at all! I am quite capable of doing it. I don't know any first category magic, I know a little of the second category, but this is third category magic, which I know very well. I am 99.99 percent certain that no problem would occur if I made a mountain of gold! I have enough energy and knowledge to do this. But if I did something wrong then the consequences would be terrible, and I'm not willing to even take that small risk. We practice these kinds of things under the supervision of one of the Great Elders, and only after millions of years a very experienced disciple alone is allowed to perform them. I don't see, Evla, why I should now have to break the well-established elf traditions in such a risky manner!"

Djuli and the others did manage to obtain some gold, although not a mountain of it. But at least they had money, and it was plenty for their requirements. This was also thanks to Tila, even if she hadn't created it with magic. But not just her, Mr. Numo as well, which was perfectly logical since he understood money like an ancient agricultural entrepreneur!

One day when he was walking in town, he met up with an old friend, who complained that he had lost hearing in his left ear. His head was still sore on that side, and as the days passed it was becoming even more painful. He had gone to a medicine woman, who had asked for a lot of money in exchange for wafting incense plants over him, shouting incomprehensible words for a length of time, then spitting into his ear and blowing into it through a pierced wooden spoon. She had said that the pain would go away by the following day if he believed strongly enough. But the pain did not disappear, it got stronger. When Numo learned how much money the medicine woman had asked for, he was quite horrified. For that money he could have bought a child slave, even if she wasn't particularly beautiful. At the time Tin had cost him less.

"Hey, my friend, I can see your problem is rather serious, because it's one thing for your pain to not go away, but the fact that it's now worse is a sign that your disease is spreading! It might even be fatal!"

"I'm worried too, but what can I do?!"

"Come over to my place! Whether you believe it or not, a great wizard lives on my estate. She'll cure you instantly!"

"That's what the medicine woman told me too, but I don't trust such things anymore. If I die I die, but I'm not going to allow my money to go to these charlatans, these scammers, who live on the gullibility of others!"

⁸ **Author's note:** By my calculations, if we consider the speed of light to be 300,000 km/sec, the energy of one kilogram of matter is able to heat 216,000 cubic kilometers of water from 0 to 100 degrees.

"Listen, I'm not asking for more than the medicine woman, in fact I'd even be satisfied with half of it! Plus, you only have to pay afterwards if the pain has gone. I trust you, if you acknowledge here and now that payment is a point of honor to you. I repeat, you only need to pay if the pain has actually disappeared."

"Sure, then you'll say that I didn't believe in the wizard enough and that's why the healing didn't work, so it's all my fault!"

"On the contrary! She's a real wizard, and won't only heal you if you believe in her, in fact it would make no difference if you thought she was a crook and didn't believe in her at all! I just hope you'll notice that the pain has gone and that you won't deny it!"

"Okay, I'll do it. But I really am only going to pay if I feel that the pain is no longer there!"

"If the pain goes away, then you won't feel anything!" laughed Numo. "Come on!"

"Oh, I don't have any money on me now!"

"That's not a problem, just come, Tila will heal you and after that you'll have time to run home for the money. Come on, this woman's a real miracle! She's not even human, but a real elf!"

"What's that?"

"Ah, you'll find out!"

So Mr. Numo dragged his friend over to Tila and Tila examined him. She immediately told him that one of the man's molars was inflamed so badly that he couldn't even feel the pain in his tooth anymore, and that the inflammation had spread to his ear, which was why he couldn't hear. So Tila took hold of the bad tooth with two fingers and pulled it out. Pus flowed out of the hole where the tooth had been, and Numo's friend sat there spitting it out for quite some time. Naturally there was only pus and no blood at all, as Tila had taken care of the bleeding during the tooth extraction. Once the wound was cleared of pus, his splitting headache completely disappeared. But Tila was not satisfied with this, and her hair glowed for awhile, after which she stated that the patient could now hear on that side. And he could indeed hear, which wasn't difficult for him to notice. Tila reassured him that within a few days a new tooth would grow in its place.

The man could not stop marveling and paid the price Numo had set without dispute. After that he found the medicine woman and beat her until she gave back the money she had previously squeezed out of him. When he had received the money he beat her some more, until she promised she would gather her belongings and leave the village of Odun. The woman did this the following day.

Numo took his recent earnings and went to the market, to the place where slaves were sold. He sought out the most miserable-looking six or seven year-old girl, bought her and took her to Djuli.

"Here you go, Djuli, I've brought you this little girl!"

"For me?! Numo, don't you understand that we don't keep slaves?!"

"That's precisely why I bought her! So that she won't have to be a slave anymore! I thought you'd be happy to have her, as Tin looked much like this when we gave her to you to help."

"You're being very suspicious, Numo. What are you trying to prove by this—how good you are?!"

"I'm no better than I was before. I would like to prove something to you, but it's not my goodness!"

"Then what is it?"

"That money, which you hate so much, can also do a lot of good! I can foresee Tila being able to do a tremendous amount of work, so much that she'll barely have time to sleep! She'd probably enjoy it too, and it would also be good for us. I'm talking about her healing skills. Tila really *can* heal, unlike the many others who just lie about their abilities! The people who come to her really

would find a cure, which is great for them, great for Tila since she finds it enjoyable, and great for us because we would ask for money in exchange for the healing. And part of the money we get—as we don't need all of it—could be used to do good, for example buying slaves and freeing them. I'm saying this so you won't object, because I'm afraid that otherwise you won't approve of the ethics of asking for money to be healed. But look at this little girl... I bought her with the money I received from the deaf man that Tila healed this morning. Isn't it better this way, asking for money for the healing so that I could buy the child, rather than leaving the money with him? The girl will be happy here, and otherwise she would have suffered. She'd probably have ended up like Tin, but even if they didn't rape her at such a young age, as soon as she got older, then... I won't go on—you're an intelligent woman, Djuli, you understand the situation."

Djuli nodded and caressed the little girl's head. "I'll talk to Tila about this," she said and left.

Tila did not refuse the proposition, in fact she was ecstatic when she learned that lots of people would soon be visiting her for healing. She was truly filled with enthusiasm. The fever of work, the flush of activity! As far as money was concerned, she just said, "I still do not quite understand what this money business is, but that's why I have no dealings with it, because I prefer to avoid discussing things I don't understand very well. Do as you wish, I just want you to make sure that everybody has access to me, no matter how much money they have!"

And that's how it was. Numo very wisely did not work with fixed prices but instead adjusted the healing fee to each person's circumstances. He asked much more from the rich than the poor. But it was definitely worth it for them, because soon the news about the miracle doctor spread for miles. All the more so because the knowledge she had was extraordinary. There was virtually no disease she couldn't help with, except for certain mental illnesses. She was reluctant to touch the brain. Sometimes, very rarely she did risk something of this nature, when she was quite sure of its success and the problem wasn't severe by elf standards. But if someone was paralyzed for example, she could always get their body back to normal. The saddest cases were when they brought people to her with lost limbs. Although she was able to grow a new tooth, arms and legs were beyond her, as well as a tongue, if someone had it torn out. She told them that the Great Elders were able to heal those things, but she couldn't. After all, she was just a child elf! But if somebody lost their outer ear then she could grow it back, because that wasn't such a complicated organ, no more than a piece of skin. However aside from these problems, she was practically able to heal anything. Warts disappeared at her touch. Intestinal worms immediately dropped out of patients without her even having to lay a finger on them. There wasn't a single person who later complained that their symptoms had returned after they had gone, and in many cases they felt even better a few days afterwards than they had felt directly after Tila's treatment.

Tila spoke a lot about not actually being a wizard but an elf, and what an elf was. Tin also talked to the visitors about the elves, and as a result the Torg mythology was expanded with the concept of elves. According to this an elf was some kind of beautiful girl, who was infinitely kind, understood healing, and could fly if she wanted to (the latter being possible only in Elfland, although nobody took note of this), she lived up in the sky somewhere with other elves and they had a queen. An elf could perform magic too, and was very fond of honey. Due to Tila's love of honey and an elf's ability to fly, centuries later the image of elves changed to them having wings and using these to hover over flowers and suck nectar from them, and that was what they lived on. In fact for some nectar was too harsh a substance, so they spread the rumor that elves lived on the scent of flowers.

Otherwise, it wasn't Tila's healings that surprised people so much but her frank confession that by elf standards she was just a child elf, and a very naughty, mischievous child elf at that. She was

just a bad child! Because if bad elf children were like that, then what would a true, infinitely kind, good elf be like?!

Not long afterwards, perhaps a few months later, people were even coming from Atlantua to be healed by Tila, therefore the news of the elves had reached there too. First of all the two nearest Atlantuan cities, Sizon and Pakunda. These were the cities where the greatest numbers of Manychyars lived. Therefore the legend of the elves had made its way into this tribe's legend world. But what was more important from the world's perspective was that when a good year had passed after Tila's arrival, not only did they have plenty of money, but more and more people came to see Tila from Atlantua who were followers of the recently-born Getsnappy religion, or some trend of the Ork belief. Of course they were not just satisfied with Tila healing them; they also tried to explain their new "salvation doctrine" in detail to the residents of the estate, specifically questioning Tila about what her opinion of their belief was. Some initially considered Tila to be one of the True Beings, like Getsnappy, who were born into this world specifically for the sake of humans. But only at first, because Tila had firmly opposed this idea. She told them that although she was capable of many miracles, she was from a very material-based world and that she had no memory whatsoever of being somewhere else before her birth, in fact she had never been anywhere else before. She said that although she was able to ascend to the astral plane for a short period of time, which could be considered a non-material world, it was not the place she lived and she could not survive there for long. And even when she did go there, she had never met any beings who lived there permanently, who regarded it as their real world, their home. This could have discouraged the Getsnappy believers but it didn't, because Tila carefully added that what she had said should not be considered a refutation of the new faith. It could not be ruled out that there was an even higher level of reality above the astral plane, which was not the same however as the enlightened self-awareness of the Primary Existence, in which everything that exists is ultimately a universal oneness. Why shouldn't there exist such beings on that plane that are just the dream thoughts of the Primary Existence, but have a greater degree of awareness than even humans and elves, and have never left that plane?! The people listening to Tila were very happy to hear this, because it meant they believed in something that even an elf could not refute. Since an elf, a wizard, understood these things far better than them! And so that they could have a name for what they were talking about, they called this hypothetical existence plane a "mental plane".

The biggest role in shaping the fate of the world was not played by the elaborate emergence of the Getsnappy religion, but by the relatively insignificant side issues—the fact that Getsnappy had said that this religion, or rather philosophy, was originally the ingenuity of the Horks. It was they who had discovered it. It should be said that all the inhabitants of the elf estate, including those who had come here to be healed, were fairly quickly converted to the Getsnappy religion, since it seemed logical. According to Tila it didn't conflict with the views of the elves, and taking on this belief showed that they were different than other humans. The main reasons they converted was because it did not require any financial sacrifice, and they were interested in who this prophet was and what he was teaching. And what more natural way to acquire knowledge of the Horks! Some of them were even able to show various drawings of what these Horks or Orks looked like. In fact a true Ork expert arrived there in the person of Alez. This was the little boy who was first infected with the Hork frenzy, which had emanated from Kayam's prison like some mental illness-inducing vapor. He was able to draw well, and had now made several Ork pictures for Djuli and the others out of gratitude.

What had happened was that after Kayam had been sent off to be a soldier, Alez was bathing in a lake and something had pricked the sole of his foot. They never discovered what, but the wound

had become infected and the doctors wanted to amputate his leg. It occurred to somebody that a miracle doctor was living nearby in Torgo. They brought the little boy there and Tila successfully healed Alez's leg, quickly and spectacularly. When by chance somebody uttered the word "Hork" in front of him, Alez didn't need any more and immediately engaged in lively conversation with the person. Later he spoke with others too, telling them he knew exactly what an Ork looked like because the great Getsnappy himself had judged his portraits as excellent! By the end of the day he had made a good dozen Hork drawings for them. Djuli and the others were amazed when they saw the beautiful pictures and listened to the detailed accounts of the Ork customs. This pleased Alez so much that he wanted to stay with them on the estate, but his parents promptly took him home.

Even if Alez could not move there for the time being, others certainly did. Because in spite of Numo loudly voicing that he had freed the slaves voluntarily and out of benevolence, to protect his prestige, the truth eventually came to light. Since even Numo could not deny that a wizard girl was living on the estate, and how interesting that Numo had suddenly developed this strange generosity just as she arrived! At the same time it was undeniable that Numo was well-off. He dressed in finer clothing, and there were more beautiful horses pulling not his cart, but his carriage. He now had a pool too, even if it wasn't particularly large or made of marble, but at least it was a stone pool, which did not even have to be maintained. Because Tila just had to look at the ground until a hole appeared, and it was not fresh spring water bubbling from the hole but almost scorching thermal water, which fed into the pool constantly and spilled out the other side. But this did not go to waste, because when it cooled down to a lukewarm temperature they used it for irrigation, and since it was not cold but lukewarm it was very good for the harvest. Every former slave had their own little house built as well, and of course there were no supervisors...

People could see that they lived very well on Numo's estate, and there were some who were so envious that they wanted to share in this good life. One night a number of them broke in and tried to drive off their horses. A great fight erupted between the thieves and the residents of the estate. In the end the residents won, killing five of the thieves and capturing six of them. Nobody from the estate died, although three of them were seriously injured and would surely have died if Tila had not gotten there in time. (She did not usually sleep except in extraordinary circumstances, but was not in the area the attack took place.) First she healed the dying with great success, and after that helped the other wounded men. Then her "subjects" waited for her to bring judgment on the thieves. However they didn't have much doubt that she would release them. The thieves had only dared to break in because they assumed that even if it turned out badly they would not be hurt. One of the horse thieves even said impertinently, "What's all the fuss about?! Just let us go and be done with it! After all, that's what will end up happening anyway!"

Tila just stood opposite the thieves and looked at their insolent, grinning faces, so certain they would not be harmed, and said, "You're right, I will do as you ask—I will let you go. You are free to go wherever you like!"

When they had been set at ease, she said, "But not now—in the morning."

"Why in the morning?!" asked one of them.

"Because tonight you shall be punished! I will allow the residents of the estate to do whatever they wish with you until the sun rises. My only stipulation is that you should not be killed or crippled, so that means they aren't to cut off any body parts or pluck out your eyes... But I won't go into the details, they know what kind of problems I'm not able to heal. I forbid them to do any of those things. But they can do anything else to you for the entire night. I will come back again in the morning and heal you, and then you may go wherever you like. This will be a just punishment since you wanted to cause discomfort to many of us, so now you'll get the same in return. You won't die

and you won't be crippled because I'll heal you, but this night will forever be memorable to you and will make you think twice about whether to come here again and re-experience something like this!"

The former slaves all cheered, and Tila had barely turned away when they began their attack, tormenting the thieves with great zeal until morning so that they almost died of pain, and by the end they couldn't even manage to scream. Not one of them didn't have their skin torn to shreds when Tila finally arrived to heal them. Even after the healing they were white with fear, trembling, and they humbly stammered their thanks before running away as fast as they could. None of them came back to rob them again, although they weren't really punished because they were still alive and not crippled either, as Tila had even healed the injuries they had gotten elsewhere. So they left healthier than when they had arrived! But it was certain that the all-night torture session became an experience they would never forget in their lives.

There were other kinds of visitors that came to them too—those inquiring about whether they could settle down at the estate, and Tila told them they were free to do so. Many poor people moved there, but there were also some who honestly confessed to being slaves that had escaped. However Numo had suspicions that those who considered themselves beggars or destitute were actually runaway slaves, at least a good portion of them.

The frequency of slaves escaping to Tila reached such a level that nobody dared keep slaves in the village of Odun, which was the one closest to the estate, unless they constantly kept massive clamps on their legs. But doing this significantly inhibited the slaves from meeting their previous productivity levels, and for this as well as financial reasons it was not worth keeping slaves in this area. So barely a single slave remained in Odun. Slaves could only be found here for a short period of time, carefully locked up, for example at Madun's house, where they were not kept for himself but to be sold off.

Of course many people didn't like the fact that slaves were taking refuge at Numo's. There were some who complained about it to the village judge, but he just shrugged and said that he didn't have the armed forces to go up against a wizard. If a few brave men wanted to get together and go to Numo in order to defeat the wizard and take the slaves back, he was fine with that, and he acknowledged in advance that they would be acting lawfully and would not be punished by him. But they should not encourage him to do such a thing, because there was little point in the great world for him to pick a fight with a wizard!

So things remained the way they were, and Djuli and the others happily lived their lives—until one day something happened that Tila had very much been afraid of from the first moment she arrived on Earth...

The sun was shining beautifully around noon, when they were preparing for lunch in the courtyard again. Tila and Djuli were already sitting at the dining table when they felt a cool gust of wind sweep over the landscape. Although there wasn't a single cloud floating in the sky, the sun seemed to be fading. In the next moment they saw a formless dark cloud appear between the table and the house.

"Oh my goodness—the marid!" shouted Tila, suddenly sinking into the chair behind her, deathly pale. "The marid!" she repeated, but this time in a whisper. "He's come to eat me up!"

Djuli was by Tila's side as usual, almost clinging to her like a tick. Now as she looked at her friend she understood that Tila was indeed a child, perhaps not only by elf standards. The Great Tila, Liberator of Slaves, was now behaving like a frightened little girl who had spotted a snarling dog! Djuli had also seen the black cloud, but she was not frightened of it. Of course this must be a marid if Tila said so, because she would know, and he was sure to be a dangerous opponent—

obviously a lethal enemy. Djuli also knew she did not stand much of a chance against him. But anybody, be it elf or human, could only die once. She couldn't see why she ought to fear him more than a well-armed slave hunter who wanted to capture or kill her. She wouldn't have much of a chance against him either! Death was still death, whether caused by a marid or the sword of a soldier. And if the marid ate her? Well, it didn't make any difference if the marid ate her or if a soldier stabbed her in the heart and she was eaten afterwards by worms! She may even suffer less from a marid than if she was stabbed in the stomach with a sword, in which case she would suffer for hours!

Not many shared Djuli's opinion; everybody screamed and fled. Well, Tin didn't, in fact she had wanted to run to Tila. But Numo caught the little girl by the arms, lifted her like a rag doll and ran into the house. He had no idea what a marid was, but this thing had appeared unexpectedly and therefore could be some kind of magical entity. He could also see that Tila was really frightened, so this could not be a friendly cloud, and Numo's chances against it would not be any better than Tila's.

Djuli however remained in her place. How Tila had scolded her for not telling her in advance that Numo would beat Varbilma! Now she would show her that she was a true friend! It might even result in her death, but that didn't matter terribly much. She really didn't want to continue living if she no longer had her elf friend. It would only mean again living her days in constant fear. She grabbed whatever objects were at hand— a pan, a plate, a knife, and threw them at the marid. The objects disappeared into the dark matter and it didn't look like they had harmed him.

Tila was still sitting there in shock. The cloud began to move, although not very fast, and proceeded to roll towards them. In response Djuli stopped her ineffectual throwing, turned around and gave Tila a huge slap, which she instantly regretted because Tila's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Pull yourself together, you stupid child!" Djuli screeched. "There's nothing I can do to this thing, but you have the power! You have the strength! I'm sure you can do something!"

"It's hopeless Djuli, I'm not able to do anything..."

"Don't give up on yourself, you idiot! Don't be as dumb as the Great Elders in Elfland! Pull yourself together! Do that astral thing you told me about on the first day! Send me there and give me strength! Then I, the bad Djuli, will obliterate that nasty thing!"

"I'm afraid that it won't work..." mumbled Tila, and just stared trembling at the approaching dark matter behind Djuli. "Escape Djuli, because I'm done for anyway!" she screamed. The fear had brought on an attack of hysteria.

Djuli lifted Tila with both hands, who was not much shorter than her, then shook her and placed her back down on the ground. With her left hand holding her tightly and her right hand grabbing hold of her jaw, she looked squarely into the elf's eyes. "Pull yourself together! Be an adult! I'm going to hold you until this thing eats you up along with me! Or until you do as I say! Now I'm your Great Elder, and I order you to do what we spoke about!"

Suddenly Djuli saw a flash of light and was forced to close her eyes... When she opened them again she realized she was no longer in front of the manor house, but somewhere else entirely. It could well be the astral plane, or "imaginary world", "virtual space", "quasi-reality", because Tila had called it many different things, but Djuli was sure of it right away. What exactly was this place though? She seemed to be floating, perhaps in the air, although she couldn't be certain as she was surprised to notice that she wasn't even breathing—she had no need for air! Glowing clouds in various shades of violet swirled around her, but wherever she looked, for as far as she could see, there was nothing but clouds and certainly no ground beneath her feet. However that wasn't an issue because she wasn't falling. Suddenly she heard a voice in her head, Tila's voice.

"Djuli, I've sent you up with the marid, be careful! He can't hurt you directly but his creations can. I concede all my power to you, but it only seems a lot by human standards. I can't help you anymore and I can no longer send messages, because doing so on the astral plane is very exhausting!" and with that Tila's voice disappeared from Djuli's head.

She now noticed a white glow appear in the middle of her chest. Not around her heart, but at the place where Tila had once mentioned there was a bundle of nerves called the solar plexus. Djuli felt great, powerful and omnipotent. She needed this feeling too, because in the next moment a dark mass appeared—the marid! An immense fog enveloped her and she became frightened. But then she realized that nothing horrible had happened to her.

"I'd better get out of here!" she thought. And behold, a great miracle occurred... as soon as she thought about getting out, she immediately emerged from the marid and was able to see him from the outside.

"Aha, you can't actually hurt me!" she thought. Yet her fear returned as the marid suddenly shot a huge bolt of lightening at her. But Djuli was not destroyed—the lightning simply bounced off her and went somewhere else.

"All right then, I want lightning too!" cried Djuli. It was incredible. As if she were a god, in her clenched fist she held a rod of lightning that twirled back and forth like a light whip. She did not hesitate, and swung the lightning directly toward the marid as though it were a spear. It did not leap out onto the marid, but instead flew over him completely harmlessly.

"Damn it, why doesn't this thing have a body?! Then I could at least wound him!" shouted Djuli. "This isn't a fair fight! I want to feel the ground under my feet and I want this monster to have a body that I can wound! If it's true that the astral plane is a world of unsolidified, unfrozen thoughts, I wish for it to be so cold that the marid's thoughts freeze into a body. Turn him into a human body!"

All of a sudden she was not floating but standing somewhere in the middle of an endless plain, and perhaps a few hundred meters away stood a giant black man, a good five meters tall with a crown of flames on his head. He also held a sword of flames in his hand, but with the blade pointing upwards as if it were a strange royal scepter or magic wand. Djuli knew that this could be none other than the marid.

The marid finally spoke. "It will cost you dearly, weak human, for forcing me into a human body, even if it's just temporarily! Because this way your body is also vulnerable to human weapons, even though you are on the astral plane. Your attempt is ridiculous! The astral plane is only a world of desires and imaginations, that is why we sprites don't go there, because we prefer reality. But if that is what you want, so be it!" In the next moment a valiant, armored knight appeared in front of the marid, who menacingly pointed his spear at Djuli, threatening her with it.

Djuli knew that she would not be able to defeat the knight. But not to worry, she could create a knight as well! And she imagined an even bigger knight, who was not riding a horse but a lion. He attacked the marid's knight, piercing right through it with his spear. The knight with the lion rode on to attack the black knight, the marid, but then more knights appeared in front of the marid—ten of them, who were equal in size to him. Djuli thought up even more knights, and sent them to reinforce the first one. A great battle broke out. Whenever somebody died, their corpse remained on the battlefield, but that did not diminish the intensity of the battle because Djuli's knights defeated those of the marid in vain. The marid just created new ones, and Djuli did the same. Each time she created another knight she felt as if part of her was breaking down. She also noticed that the fiery white glow in the middle of her chest was becoming a little paler, and understood that this was

probably because she was consuming the energy she had received from Tila, which was none other than Tila's life force.

She tried to end the fight quickly and thought up a strange bird, in fact six of them, whom she sent out against the knights. These birds were able to shoot arrows at the enemy from their feathers. In moments they had shot down the marid's knights. But the marid was on guard and thought up an armored scaly dragon, which the birds shot at in vain, and soon the dragon had finished off the birds, flying among them and smiting them with its tail. He was coming up against Djuli, but then Djuli imagined a small fly-like insect, which climbed into the dragon's nostril and got into his lungs. It began biting with its stinger, and the dragon flew about madly in great pain until finally it slammed into the ground and lay there motionless. Now Djuli quickly thought up more of these fly-like insects to kill the marid's new knights, but when the insects flew towards them the marid conjured up a whirlwind and that propelled the small flies far away. The marid then created some big gorillas and they started coming towards Djuli. Also some more knights, and this enormous strength seemed to overpower Djuli's army.

Djuli then created a twenty meter-tall giant. It began to move, and all the hostile knights were crushed beneath its huge feet as he stepped on them. The only problem was that a being of this size was made up of a significant amount of matter, and the energy reserves indicated on Djuli's chest had almost completely burnt out. But the giant had done a good job of defeating almost everybody. When he got to the marid, the dragon was suddenly recreated and Djuli's giant and the dragon intertwined in a deadly embrace. The giant squeezed the dragon's neck tightly until he suffocated, but meanwhile the dragon had clawed the giant's stomach so that his internal organs spilled out, and this had killed the giant too. Straight away the marid created a bunch of lions, tigers and gorillas in place of the knights, and set them on Djuli.

Djuli wanted to quickly create some archers, but she noticed in terror that she wasn't able to. Her light circle was barely flickering. After all, Tila's energy reserves were not infinite. She really couldn't say that Tila had little strength. As she looked over the battlefield she saw it was covered with corpses, and there were many among them that she had created with Tila's power. If the matter of a single human head stored enough energy to evaporate an inland sea, then she could not imagine how much of Tila's energy and power she had wasted in just one hour! There wasn't even enough left to create a single archer.

Suddenly the light circle began to vibrate and its radiation intensified. Like a dying sigh, Tila's thought message came to her: "I swallowed a crystal, Djuli, but I don't have many crystals so you'd better come up with something quickly, because whatever you have done so far has not been a good plan of attack!"

Djuli knew this too. And so she decided not to create her archer. She boldly faced the approaching herd of wild animals, and thought that no matter what she created it would be overpowered by the marid's own creations. So ultimately the one who dies will be the one who has the least energy reserves. And that would definitely be her, as Tila had previously told her. She had said that with a good battle plan the power between the forces could be equalized. But now she didn't believe this. Here there was no way to encircle the enemy, because at any time the marid could create a bunch of creatures and place them wherever he wanted to fight the invading army, and they couldn't even be taken by surprise. There could be no night attacks, and all sorts of magical beings could assail the army... since this really was just an imaginary world, and here it was only energy reserves that counted. The beings created by her and the marid were only symbolic forms of their different power allotments. Power was the only thing that mattered!

She looked across the battlefield again. An awful amount of energy was laying there conquered, wasted. But wait a minute! Tila had said that this was first category magic, the destructive type where matter was destroyed... and this was the most dangerous! That probably meant, as Tila had said, that matter was changed back into energy. How good would it be if the defeated corpses of the beings could be transformed back into energy that she could freely use! But unfortunately this was not possible. The idea had come to her when she had first talked about it with Tila, however Tila told her it wasn't an option. But would it be possible to create live beings from all those dead ones?! She attempted this, to no avail. It was futile, as here on the astral plane she could only create matter from energy, not from other things. Matter couldn't be transformed, at least not by her. Then she laughed. Transforming matter into a different type of matter could not only be done through magic. There was an infinitely simple, well-known, everyday method that humans have used since ancient times, even the most common people. There was only one major problem with it—it took time!

The marid's lions were getting closer, but instead of a new creation, Djuli tried to reach Tila in her thoughts. "Tila, Tila! Can I influence the passage of time?!"

"Yes, you only need to want it. But be careful—if you interfere with the passage of time then you won't have a say in the outcome of the battle, you can only watch it play out, since it will be in a different time zone than yours until you get back to the normal timeline!"

Djuli didn't even thank Tila for her answer, but acted quickly. She created again, using nearly all the additional strength she had received from Tila. But this time it wasn't just anything. Not archers or lancers, nor armored knights. Armor weighed a ton and consisted of a lot of matter, and she didn't have the energy for that. She needed creatures who were equipped from birth with effective body armor—teeth and claws! They had to be like that so that the body armor could be reborn with each generation; things like swords and armor could not. What Djuli had in mind was the conversion of matter into a different kind of matter through the method of reproduction. In addition, Djuli wanted intelligent beings. Even the knights created by the marid were not intelligent beings; just some kind of puppets that he could move about at will. But in order for something or someone to reproduce, it was helpful to have a mind. Especially if they had to engage in a war. But the main reason Djuli needed intelligent beings was that it took time to reproduce. Djuli did not have years or centuries to wait; she had to speed up the passage of time, and during this her beings would be left to their own devices. They needed a mind so they could decide what to do with themselves. Fortunately Djuli didn't have much difficulty with the invention of these beings, in fact she did not have to come up with any of it herself, as someone else had already invented them long ago—clerk Getsnappy, the prophet of the new religion!

"I want them to be exactly how Alez described the Horks!" she thought. Then Djuli stretched out her arms on either side of her and said, "Let it be!", meanwhile trying to visualize the Horks she had seen in the pictures as vividly as possible. Almost all her energy went into this creation.

After she was done she looked around. There were at least two hundred Horks busying themselves around her on the plain—naked, because Djuli had not wanted to waste energy creating clothes for them. But they were as lifelike as the images she had imagined could be. They knew what their job was—to protect Djuli, their queen, creator and ancient mother. And they knew this because Djuli had planted that specific idea in their minds.

Now she gave them an order. "Reproduce and multiply!" The women were to stay behind and start mating with whichever male they liked. The rest of the males were to chase away the lions and other monsters, and if they succeeded in this they should not try to fight, just defend themselves whenever they were attacked. Their only real job was to reproduce. Fortunately they did not have to

work since they were scavengers. They were to collect the corpses of the humans and monsters on the plain and feast on them.

"Gobble and multiply!" ordered Djuli lastly, and then thought very hard about wanting to speed up the passage of time. "Let one day of theirs be a single second for me!" she decided. And she quickly calculated that according to this, one full year of the battle between the Horks and the marid would take place in six of her minutes. One hundred years would go by in ten hours. And Djuli began to count. If the Horks started reproducing at the age of twenty, and every female Hork gave birth to a child every three or four years, then how many of them would there be in a hundred years? She could not work it out. For that she would need to know how often the population doubled. Of course she was not interested in this but in the number of adult, combat-ready inhabitants. If necessary the child Orks could fight, and in order to reproduce they would not necessarily need to be fully-grown adults. A twenty year-old could be considered an adult. So every twenty years the population growth would double, and in one hundred years this would multiply by five, therefore there would be a thirty-two fold increase in numbers... There would likely be even more, since the Hork mother was not going to wait until her child was twenty before giving birth to other children... However this magnificent multiplication rate would be ruined by those who fall in battle and can no longer reproduce! But the fighting would mostly be carried out by men, and the women will be left behind to give birth, so there would only be a small number of males for all those females...

"What am I talking about?!" thought Djuli. "A few men are enough for a large number of women! Since they're not animals but intelligent beings, and besides, they are my creations so they're not just males and females but men and women!"

The most brilliant part of the idea was not that Djuli had created Horks because they were strong, since it would have been easy to invent stronger beings, but because they were scavengers! Since if any of them died, their matter would be used over time to create a new Hork. The energy invested in them would not go to waste! In fact even the corpses of the beings generated by the marid would be gobbled up, and that energy would support Djuli in the bodies of the Hork children and later Hork adults. That was perhaps the greatest part of all! And it was even a good thing that although the Horks were strong, their height of two meters was not much taller than that of a human. They were not as big as giants, therefore they would soon reach adult size and could multiply quickly. And just as many geese can overpower a pig, so would many Horks overpower a dragon! In addition, because they were intelligent beings they would probably use the weapons from their defeated enemies, if the marid decided to create armed enemies for them... But they could also create their own weapons, for instance from the bones of the dragons or other enemies...

Djuli was now quite certain that she would win, as long as the marid did not trample on her Orks in a huge charge. But she trusted that the marid would not dare put everything he had into one attack. After all, his power was not infinite either. And because Djuli had now created such a large number of Horks, she assumed that the marid, who was not likely to suspect what she was planning, would first try smaller attacks and thus create an advantage for Djuli because it would take time. If time was passing the Horks would be multiplying, ensuring she would not run out of energy and increasing the number of beings who could help her in the battle.

Djuli sped up time with the equation of one second = one day, and it was so fast that she was unable to properly follow the progress of the battle. She saw the creatures as little dots zigzagging back and forth, and often not even that if a crowd did not stay in one place for long. In the beginning it seemed to her as if the Horks had diminished, and this was logical because at first many of them were probably killed. However slowly they began to multiply, because more and

more of them were swarming on her field. This must have happened when the first generation grew up. By this time the huge corpse of the dragon had disappeared from the battlefield, and even the giant's corpse. The battle swirled back and forth, and sometimes the Hork numbers went down significantly, probably when the marid had figured out some cunning strategy to achieve a temporary success. But Djuli's Horks continued to proliferate, on average becoming greater in number and occupying more and more space. Not even ten hours had passed by, which meant a lapse of a hundred years, yet Djuli was beginning to have the uncertain feeling that there were too few corpses on the battlefield. This would definitely curb the propagation of the Hork nation. And when Djuli reached the ninth hour in her own time, she saw that the Horks were starting to tire of these lean times. By then the field was almost blacked out by them and they began going up against the Black King, the marid. Not with bad intentions, they simply wanted to eat him.

Djuli was certain that the marid was terrified. Even based on a modest estimate, there were a minimum of three to four thousand Horks serving her by now, and the majority of them did not originate from the energy of Djuli and Tila but from that of the monster corpses the marid had created—from recycled bodies. The marid had not encountered such a tactic before. Now the marid gave it everything he had. For a moment a large humanoid shape flashed before Djuli's eyes that was even bigger than her former giant, at least five times the size. And as if lightning had traversed across the battlefield, which of course was only seen this fast by Djuli, the giant was suddenly down. Djuli looked around and found that the number of her loyal Horks were suspiciously low. There were barely more than she had originally created. The field was black with Hork bodies, and Djuli could see this well because with the immobility of death they had shown up in her slowed time. This was a huge catastrophe for the Hork nation, but even so, the Horks were still alive and the giant was dead. The giant was a huge mass and was sure to thoroughly diminish the marid's strength reserves. The hardworking little Horks immediately began climbing the enormous tower of meat and proceeded to gobble up the carcasses. Naturally those of their own comrades too. Their task was greatly facilitated by the fact that the astral plane did not allow the meat to deteriorate over time, because there were no putrefactive bacteria here. Djuli knew about bacteria, as Tila could see them if she wanted to and had told her about them. Of course Djuli wasn't thinking about this now.

However the marid had thought a great deal about how these accursed creatures created by Djuli were not all being destroyed, in fact they were multiplying faster and faster over time. Djuli suddenly noticed that the marid was no longer there; he had simply disappeared. And she abruptly heard Tila's thoughts in her mind: "He's disappeared! He's gone away! He's fled, I can feel it! Yes Djuli, you've won! I can't believe it, you've saved my life!"

Djuli quickly switched back into normal time. Some of the Ork children were standing beside her and they began to shout excitedly, "The sacred statue moved! The statue moved! Mommy, the statue is alive!"

Immediately a huge Ork woman walked up to Djuli and humbly bowed down before her, while she grunted at the children, "Be quiet, you naughty fools! How many times have I told you that she's not a statue but our creator, the goddess Djuli!"

Djuli did not have time to deal with the Hork woman, as Tila was speaking in her head again: "Djuli, you must come down from the astral plane, because keeping you there is depleting my energy! However if I bring you down myself and you do not come of your own will, then you will die! Please come down now, because I am happy that you won, but I am so weak I can barely move!"

"How do I do that?" asked Djuli.

"You just have to think very strongly about wanting to return to Reality. But before you do this, please imagine that the beings you have created are no longer alive! That is, if you have any living beings left."

"Why must I imagine that?"

"So they will not be brought into Reality! We cannot litter the world with all sorts of things! That would be a terrible risk!"

"Okay," thought Djuli to Tila, although she was not at all certain whether she was actually okay with this. She looked over at the Horks. They had dwindled, that's for sure, and there were not nearly as many as she had first created. The last giant of the marid's creation had drastically reduced their numbers. But even now there were still almost a hundred of them. And they were all looking at her. What was this Hork woman beside her saying? That she was their goddess? Of course she was, she created them! She may not have invented the Hork nation, that was the work of the mysterious Getsnappy, and they were not created from her energy but Tila's, but it was her that wanted them to be created. It was possible that the existence of Horks was not just a legend and that they really did exist somewhere around the village of Snapp. But *these* Horks were actually created by *her*, they were her own creatures and owed their existence to her. Even if they were ugly, they loved her! And besides, she was already finding them less ugly..."

Just at that moment a little hork girl came running up to her. "Aunty, why are you so ugly?"

"Oh, my child, how can you say such a thing?!" Her mother dragged her away and said to Djuli, "Please do not be angry with her, goddess, she doesn't know what she is talking about! She is practically still an infant and her mind has not yet developed!"

"It's okay," smiled Djuli, and stepped over to the little girl, stroking her head. "It's no problem at all. I'm not ugly, just different than all of you, but there's nothing wrong with that."

"But you are ugly! Don't worry though, that's why I love you. You're so unbelievably ugly that it's almost beautiful! Anyone who is so incredibly ugly has to be loved!"

Hearing this brought tears to Djuli's eyes, and she bent down and hugged the child, saying, "I love you very much too! I will take you all to a wonderful world, where you don't have to fight as much as you do here. I won't kill you, I give you my word!" and Djuli realized that what she was about to do could mean the end of her friendship with Tila. Perhaps Tila would accuse her of only bringing the Horks into Reality so that she could be a queen, so that she could parade about anywhere accompanied by the Horks and everybody would fear her. Djuli did not deny that this was an appealing thought. Maybe she would do it for this reason, but right now she was not. Tila herself said that elves did not create in Reality because it was not only difficult, but also a moral concern to destroy a creature. Tila could say anything she wanted, but these creatures seemed real to her, as real as if they already existed in reality. They were intelligent beings, not just creatures! They had saved her life, and Tila's too, even if they didn't know anything about the latter. Tila must understand this. She could not murder them! Djuli was responsible for them.

She stood up, and with her left hand reached for the flickering glow above her chest, as she was about to perform more magic. She shouted, "I want to understand and speak the Hork language!"

Down in Reality, Tila immediately sensed her energy decreasing again. "Djuli, what magic are you doing now?!" she asked right away.

But Djuli did not answer, and instead gave the Horks an order: "Gather around me!"

When they were all standing beside her, she said, "I want to return to Reality, but together with my upstanding Hork nation!"

And that was exactly what happened.

Chapter 11: The Birth of Snapp Village

When Tila had hurled Djuli and the marid with tremendous exertion up to the astral plane, it was as if they had disappeared because they had temporarily left Reality. Tila, however, remained. It was not surprising that everybody, from Mr. Numo to the small kitchen boy, believed the two of them had disappeared because the marid had taken Djuli. On the other hand, they were glad that at least Tila was still alive, because they could not deny that she was considered a much more valuable member of the community than Djuli. Some of them went over to Tila in order to console her and of course ask her what this terrible thing was. But it was to no avail, as she just gestured vigorously at them, saying, "Go, get out of here! Don't disturb me! It's not over yet—Djuli is fighting the marid and I need to help her and give her strength, do you hear, don't disturb me!"

She just sat there without wasting any energy on healing herself, although Djuli had truly put her in her place by trying to slap some courage into her. After all, Djuli was not some pampered noblewoman but had been a slave almost her entire adult life, and sometimes did very heavy work, not to mention formerly being a hunter's daughter, so she could hit quite hard!

The inhabitants of the estate did not really understand what Tila was talking about. What did she mean that Djuli was fighting the marid?! Why wasn't Tila the elf doing this? And how could Djuli be fighting when she was nowhere to be seen?! Neither was the marid, although they could only rejoice over that. But they did not intervene in any way, just left Tila to sit where she was in her rather miserable, exhausted state. After all, this did sound suspiciously "wizard-like", so they had better not meddle with it. The only thing to do was wait for the marid to return. They did not know what he was capable of doing and what he wanted here, but he looked unspeakably nasty, evil and intimidating at first glance. It was possible that Djuli really was fighting with the marid, but they certainly couldn't see any of it. And if Tila was helping Djuli, she sure did it in a strange way because she was just sitting there.

After a while many of them just shrugged and slipped away to go about their business. Others watched Tila from afar, but as the hours passed many of them moved on. Tin was the only one bothered by the whole thing, because thanks to the memories she had received from Tila she had some idea about what a marid actually was. She knew that it was some ancient evil creature, because the ugly marid species had killed an incredible amount of elves and she was very worried about Tila. She desperately wanted to rush over to help her with her limited abilities, although she could not say how. But Mr. Numo was on his guard, holding her tightly by the arms, and when Tin started becoming hysterical he dragged her into the house and used a rather ruthless method to discipline her—he handcuffed her! It was not that long since slavery had existed here, so there were still a few of these sorts of disciplinary tools about the place. In the meantime he tried to convince Tin to leave Tila alone, because she understood these things better. That no matter what she said about being a child, compared to Tin she was a grown-up and on top of that was born an elf. But Tin just kept shouting that her place was beside Tila.

"Okay, if you want to disturb her, if you want to focus on yourself rather than what she's doing, whatever that may be, then by all means go to her! Then you can boast about having killed your best friend!"

"I only want to help her!"

"Djuli is the one helping her. I don't know how, but it must be the case if Tila herself said so. You can't do anything for her. If a newborn sparrow can't even fly, it should not try to fight an eagle!"

"Yes, that's just it! Tila is like an adult sparrow compared to the marid, and she stands no chance, so she needs all the help she can get!"

"But not yours! This is not a subject of debate. Besides, what could you possibly do?! Would you kill the marid if you were able to? Since it is an intelligent being, and according to the elves murder is a great sin, isn't it?!" asked Numo mockingly, who was ideologically much closer to Djuli than Tin.

Tin paused, then hesitantly said, "I know they would never accept me into Elfland if I did anything like that... but... but yes, I think I would kill the marid... because if one of them has to die, I'd rather it be him instead of Tila..."

There was nothing more Numo could do after that, and he not only cuffed Tin's hands and legs but tied her up so tightly it was almost cruel. He couldn't think of any other option, not wanting the girl to try some elf trick in an act of desperate ingenuity to escape, and disrupt Tila's concentration. He could not risk leaving her untied and just watching her, because his attention only had to wander for a moment and she'd be gone. Now that he was sure she wasn't going anywhere, he went and sat out on the porch, from where he could keep an eye on both girls—the tied-up Tin and Tila sitting by the ruins of the dining table, who since the disappearance of Djuli and the marid had likely not even opened her eyes.

Finally when it was late at night, a sudden blinding flash dazzled Mr. Numo, and he noticed that Djuli had arrived back, although he could not imagine where she had come from. She arrived quite devoid of dignity, suddenly appearing in the air a good two meters from the ground, or rather the table, and fell directly onto it. She was cursing because she had hit her knee.

"Oh you poor thing, I'll heal you right away!" said Tila, although she had not even healed herself yet.

But the next moment such intentions left her mind, for another flash tore apart the dark veil of night, and a Hork appeared in the courtyard three feet away from them. Then another and another... some landing on the dining table, some on the ground, and one falling on top of a chair, which broke under its weight... Mr. Numo began counting them involuntarily, reaching a total of ninety-eight. He had included child Horks in this number, except for the baby Horks who could not walk yet and were held by their mothers, or those that could walk but were still small enough to be carried. If he counted these as well, he figured there must be about a hundred and twenty of them.

The male Horks could easily be distinguished from the females because they had two giant fangs. It was also clear who their leader was, the Hork king, so to speak—an old male, who was more than the standard two meters in height by about twenty centimeters, a real giant. He had fangs that reached his ears, even a little beyond, and his hair was a silvery color. He held a massive shield in his left hand, and a sword in his right that was so big Numo was certain he himself would have difficulty lifting it with both hands. The Hork chief had obtained these from one of the marid's great knights he had defeated, but of course Numo had no knowledge of this. He belonged to a group of Horks who wore clothing that was not made from plant material, as this did not grow in the astral

plane, but from thin plates of bone that were tied together with ropes they had constructed using the enemy's hair, to form a kind of armor that covered their bodies. It really was a ghastly sight.

Some of the estate inhabitants were attracted by the flashes of light, suspecting they were falling stars. Others thought the marid had come back and fled. Some were peeking through the windows of their houses and slightly open doors. They were rather surprised when they noticed that it wasn't stars but Horks that were falling. What a miracle this was—Horks falling from the sky!

Incidentally, it was not only them who were surprised, but the Horks too. The world of the astral plane was quite bleak, and they had gotten used to a life consisting of killing enemies and eating them. For instance they had never seen plants before. Now that they had arrived in Reality they wandered about in awe, sniffing all the new scents here, and the Horks had a legendary sense of smell—every educated person knew this since Getsnappy. The nostrils of some of the Hork children widened when they smelled the lunch remnants, and went about eating them. Others blinked in amazement at the starry sky, and most of them began to examine the grass and bushes in wonder...

Suddenly the Hork leader shouted, "Shtryargh bramh!"

At this everybody gathered around him. Now pointing at Djuli, the leader horked, "Dramh ryang brung rur Djuli uh vumh!"

All the Horks humbly bowed before the goddess Djuli.

Even Tila herself was astonished by the present situation, although at least she knew how this may have happened. "Djuli, didn't I tell you that..."

"Tila, shut up! Don't argue, this was my decision and I take responsibility for it! These are my creations, and they've helped me, not to mention you. You ought to keep this fact in mind, after all, if they hadn't existed the marid would have eaten you up!"

"Djuli, didn't I tell you that it's strictly prohibited for an elf to create intelligent beings on the astral plane?!"

"Pretend that you hadn't told me! But don't feel an ounce of remorse for your forgetfulness, because it would have made no difference if you had said it. I was in a situation where it was precisely them who I needed to create! I'm not stupid, I believe that this is generally a good law, but this was not a 'general' situation—it was explicitly life-threatening! And if my precious life is in danger, then I can honestly say that I don't give two hoots about all the great laws. The lawmakers can make an exception this once! I love them," she said, pointing at the Horks, "and I brought them here to Reality, where I believe they will be happy!" With that she stepped up to one of the Hork women and hugged her. The woman began to purr from the great honor, although until now it was not even known that Horks could purr.

"Look how cute they are!" exclaimed Djuli as she stroked the Hork woman's head reassuringly, even though she was bigger than her. "And there won't be any trouble with them, Tila. They'll behave very well and won't hurt anybody, unless of course someone wants to hurt them, because they won't tolerate that and nor would I want them to. They are not elves but Horks! They damn well know how to protect themselves too. I can say this because they're accustomed to killing terrible monsters, so some taunting, human nutcase isn't going to hurt them very much! I can state with assurance that these Horks are the masters of survival, however at the same time they are gentle, because I created them as we know them from the stories people have told. They are not predators but scavengers, so nobody has to be afraid of them!"

"I believe all this, Djuli. The only trouble is that in order to eat a carcass they have to make carcasses, and that can only be done by killing living beings! And to be honest, I don't really like the fact that a species has appeared in the world that can only live if another living being is destroyed!"

"Well I can't do anything about that, so you had better just get used to the idea that they exist and that's that! I hope you don't wish to destroy them, because then you'll have to kill me too!" and Djuli stood in front of the Hork woman, shielding her with her body.

"What do you take me for, Djuli?! I could possibly bring myself to kill a sprite at most, which unfortunately was exactly the thing I was unable to do!"

"Well good, that's reassured me somewhat. Now you have to decide whether you'll accept me back as your friend after this..."

Tila sighed deeply. "I will forgive you, Djuli, since there is not much else I can do."

"No, Tila, we can't be friends if it's going to be like that! I don't accept your forgiveness, as you don't have the right to forgive someone who hasn't committed a crime! I insist you acknowledge that I didn't do anything wrong, in fact it's praise I deserve rather than criticism! This is what I require of you, in fact I demand it! I shall consider you a pig if you don't at least accept that you are not to pass judgment on this issue, since you yourself said that you're just a child. But I'd prefer it if you admitted that what I did was a good thing!"

"You undoubtedly did good by chasing off the marid, I can readily acknowledge that, and I would be busy thanking you if you had not have disturbed me by bringing the Horks into Reality! But the fact is you did bring them here. You should not have materialized them, and please remember that I specifically warned you about this!"

"But why is it such a huge problem that we have Horks here, when they are supposedly already living somewhere else near Snapp village?!"

"Well yes, supposedly. However I'm not at all certain about that."

"But many people have said so!"

"For instance, nobody has told us where exactly this Snapp village is located. This is already suspicious, because I'm beginning to recognize the astonishing tendency of humans to lie. I have seen pictures that portray such creatures, which obviously cannot exist, but people have sworn under oath that they do indeed exist. From the very first moment I guessed that the Horks were just another human legend without any factual basis, even if they are more credible than the mermaid, for example. And now you have created them!"

"Yes, and I'm glad I did!" shouted Djuli defiantly.

"Make this the payment for saving your life!" shouted Mr. Numo to Tila from the door.

"No!" cried Djuli. "I helped Tila because she's my friend! It's simply that the Horks are like my children—I'm the Mother of the Horks and a mother can't leave her children, and especially not allow them to be destroyed! I have the right to let them live, not because they're a 'payment' but because every mother has the right to see her children alive. Why can nobody here accept this?!"

"I can accept it," said Mr. Numo.

Now shouting could be heard from the house. Tin was crying out for Numo to let her go, because as far as she could judge the danger had passed, and she wanted to see the Horks too. So Numo released her.

Tila just sighed again. "It is pointless arguing because we cannot change what has happened. But if you demand my understanding, then I can demand something from you in exchange. Something you have already mentioned once, but I would like you to call together everybody on the estate and announce it again in front of them—that the birth of the Horks is solely your responsibility, and thus all crimes, disturbances and liability arising from this is your burden! And it is your duty to supervise them so they don't cause any trouble!"

"Gladly! Of course I'm willing to do that, after all, I am their Creator Mother!"

She did not summon everybody herself but asked Numo to do this, and Numo, as though he were queen Djuli's footman, raced off to obey the command.

Meanwhile Tila scoffed down another crystal (she only had two left) to revive herself a little. Some of her strength was regained, but not all of it. She had wasted so much energy that it could not be recovered by the consumption of a single crystal, however she wanted to save the rest for emergency situations. So in addition she asked Evla to bring her a stupendous quantity of honey, which she did, because by that time it was well known that Tila loved honey more than any bear, and so they had thoroughly stocked their reserves of this delicacy. While everybody was gathering together, Tila ate two kilograms of honey in a single sitting. Then she gestured with her hands, and conjured up so much light that for a good two hundred meter radius around her the darkness almost became daylight. And before the crowd Djuli told them that during the battle with the sprite, Tila had given her the necessary power to defeat the marid, but this power had been controlled by her. She was the commander, using it to create a Hork army, and the survivors of this army could be seen here. She, Djuli, was their queen, in fact their goddess! Nobody had to be afraid of them however, as long as they did not taunt them. But just to be sure, she also warned the Horks that those they saw here were their friends, and were not to be eaten.

Needless to say, nobody slept that night. That is... only a single soul slept, who usually did not waste her time sleeping—Tila! She soon "turned off" the light and fell sleep, not even interested in the details of the battle because she was too exhausted. It had almost been futile for her to eat a crystal. And that is how it was for a good two weeks. She slept ten hours per day and during the day only sunbathed, because she said it gave her energy and made her feel normal again. But she was not yet back to her old self, she had just begun to feel that way.

Nobody minded that Tila was asleep on this evening, as nobody was particularly interested in her now. Everyone was busy dealing with the Horks, of course only when the Horks allowed it. Due to their sharp, wide eyes they were not bothered by darkness and roamed the area. Soon a shrill squeal could be heard from the poultry yard. It turned out that one of the Hork children had caught a goose, and by the time they got there he had half eaten it. One of the Hork males knocked out a bull with a single blow. It was rather difficult to explain to them that they did not necessarily have to kill everything that wasn't human. The explanation was a thankless task, which was of course left to Djuli, and for this reason she could not sleep.

Mr. Numo was perhaps the wisest among them, even wiser than Djuli to a certain extent, because he quelled the Hork's hunting desire and curiosity by bringing all sorts of delicacies up from the basement and letting them eat those instead of murdering the domestic animals. And this is what happened, the Horks happily foraging among the various types of foods. But it soon became apparent that certain foods were more appealing to them than others. They sniffed at the honey with distrust, and did not like its sweet taste. Although they did eat some of the plants, they considered them more of a seasoning. They liked salt, sausage and brawn, as well as pork rind, but it was not their preferred choice. In the end it seemed they favored raw meat, specifically the parts that humans threw away—the intestines and internal organs. They could have easily figured this out, since they already knew what Horks liked from the legends. Humans knew this better than the Horks themselves!

It was the little kitchen boy who remembered this, and realized what he had to do. A few days ago a cow had been slaughtered that was not milking well (of course at a time when Tila was not nearby), and since there was no need for the intestines and stomach they had buried it some distance away so it would not smell. Now the boy disappeared for while, taking a shovel with him, and not long afterwards he returned, proudly pushing a barrow containing a stinking pile that was teeming

with worms. Everybody fled in horror as they inhaled the terrible stench. The kitchen boy was also overcome with nausea, but still loudly shouted, "Hey Horks, come over here! I've brought you some delicious treats!"

They did not have to be shouted at, because the kitchen boy and the treats hadn't even arrived when the Horks' nostrils began to twitch, and they looked around suspiciously, heading in the direction of the odor. They almost seized on the contents of the wheelbarrow as an irresistible desire enveloped them to stuff themselves with this food that had such a mouth-watering scent. The Hork leader, whose name was Dredd, could barely bring about order among them so that they could all have a share. Of course he also gobbled up plenty of it himself, and became as ecstatic from the carcass meat as Tila had been when she first tasted honey. Afterwards Dredd rubbed his belly, still chewing and dwelling on the pleasant memory, then went over to Djuli to ask if they could obtain more of this sort of food. She asked the others whether there were more carcasses, but they were not aware of any. Djuli informed him that unfortunately that was all they had at present.

"Okay, well where we can hunt for such tasty animals then?" inquired Dredd.

"This isn't something that can be hunted for—it's not alive, it's a carcass!"

"So a carcass is something that has died."

"Exactly."

"But carcasses have never tasted this good!" said the leader, thinking about the experiences on the astral plane.

"Not where you were before, but here in my world, the one I've brought you into, every single carcass is this tasty. But not right away—it takes a few days."

"All of them?! Really?!"

"Yes. Of course initially it only tastes a little like this, but it gets better once it matures. I mean, the longer you leave the carcass alone."

"I don't understand. What has to be done with it for it to become so tasty?"

"Nothing, you just have to not eat it right away. It will get tasty on its own over time."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Dredd, and again bowed before Djuli's feet, kissing them. "Great Goddess, thank you so much for bringing me here to this wonderful world! One cannot imagine a better place than where the meat gets tasty on its own, and we don't even have to do anything to it!"

He horked to everybody around him, and in his deep guttural voice he told them the unbelievable but wonderful news of what he had just learned from Djuli. Then he promptly asked her where they could hunt, so that they could begin aging the meat as soon as possible. Djuli pointed at the forest behind the estate, saying that they were free to hunt there but were to return by morning.

The Horks left, and only a few women with children stayed on the estate to care for the little ones. Djuli showed them the houses and told them that in the morning they would have to build something similar, because this world did not only consist of good things. Here there was a winter, which meant that the weather became very cold and they would require houses and clothing...

In the meantime the Hork children were wandering about all over the place, but Djuli did not fear for them. There were no dangerous animals here, and even if a Hork child were to meet a fox, if the child was at least five years old it was more likely that the fox would be afraid of the child than the other way round. The Hork children were curious too. It must be said that the reason they wandered about was because there wasn't anything else for them to do; for instance they were not able to talk to the people on the estate. Djuli had created the first Horks with a knowledge of the Torgo language, and the adults of later generations also learned this language that was considered sacred, but as the generations passed the number of them became fewer. Now the younger children

only spoke the Hork language, so they could not talk to the humans. But they excitedly sniffed every little nook and cranny, turning over stones inquisitively. Soon they found lots of worms, slugs, beetles and other bugs, which were all incredibly tasty. The Hork children took some of these to their mothers, and in no time everyone who wasn't listening to Djuli's explanations rushed away to hunt for worms. Finally Djuli realized that even with her goddess authority, they would still need to at least learn a little about this new world. So she distributed all the spades they had, and showed them an area that needed to be dug up for cultivation. She showed them how to use the spades and moments later every Hork woman and child was working the land with a feverish zeal, cultivating it just so they could extract the worms, beetles, larvae, crickets and other bugs. Their vision was so sharp even in the dark, and their sense of smell too, that not a single bug could escape unnoticed. Mice and gophers were dug out too, and one of them even found a rat's nest. They really enjoyed being able to hunt now, without having to fight dangerous enemies. And everything was filled with intoxicating smells. Oh, what a wonderful place their goddess had brought them to!

They worked industriously and by morning half the land was dug up, as if thousands of moles had been busy there. The Horks were snoring with full stomachs on top of the mounds, and only the return of the Hork males woke them up in the bright daylight. They had brought many spoils back with them, even things that humans would not hunt for. For example foxes, whose meat generally wasn't eaten by humans due to its stench. Wolves too, as well as many of the dogs from Odun village, who had strayed to hunt, but to their peril had become prey themselves. Their kill also included an assortment of sparrows and other small birds they had come across, a bear, four boars and a bunch of snakes they had picked up somewhere from under the rocks. They had even caught some ferrets, not bothered at all by their stench.

Everybody ate until they were gorged, and at Djuli's suggestion put the rest out in the sun to rot. This meant all the flesh of the animals, as it was mostly just the internal organs they ate. When Numo noticed this, he asked whether they liked the furry hides. They told him they would eat it if there was nothing else, but it wasn't their favorite part. So Numo requested the valuable furs, saying that skinned corpses would spoil quicker and therefore be tastier. He gave the hides to those who knew how to work them so he could sell them at a good price. The Horks did not mind this, because in exchange for the furs Numo gave them a variety of linen clothing and some tools. They were happy with the trade and snoozed for a few hours. The most challenging thing for Numo was trying to get back at least some of the spades because the Horks found them very appealing, especially the children, who would dig in the dirt from morning till night for the tasty grubs. They tirelessly dug deeply everywhere. The adults set out building houses in the late afternoon, on Djuli's advice. Tila assisted them with this, meanwhile listening to Djuli convey the details of the battle.

* * *

Considering how bad the reputation of the Horks became for centuries and even millennia later (at which time they were widely known as Orks), it was rather odd that their first meeting with humans was actually quite friendly. Of course this may have just been because people trusted Djuli, who was Tila's friend, and she had told them that the Horks were not malicious. They really weren't, and although people considered them terribly ugly beings, they gladly helped out with any heavy work. They were willing to give the fur from the animals they hunted to the inhabitants working on the estate, and in return received many small items that would have been difficult for them to make themselves. For example some of the Hork women had learned how to weave, but it was certainly more difficult for them with their big claws than for the human women. It was far more convenient

to do exchanges with humans for things that required such fine motor skills, and there were plenty of other things they gladly exchanged too. However they were very eager to dig, harrow and plow, as during this process they found worms which they could eat. Sometimes they ate a little of the buffalo dung, finding it to be a good spice, although they were happy to clean the stables anyway because the manure in there was filled with tasty worms.

In addition they loved to fish, and could manage to stay underwater for a long time. There was no debating over how to distribute the fish between the Horks and humans, since the Horks considered the head of the fish to be the best part, whereas humans generally avoided eating this part because they found it smelly. Horks liked the innards of the fish, and they crunched on the scales for fun, just as children do nowadays with candy. They ate the spine of the fish too, and it never occurred that a fishbone got stuck in their throat, not even to a Hork child, they chewed them so well. They loved eviscerating and skinning animals, but found cats and dogs bothersome. Dogs ate the things they liked to eat, and they didn't like cats because they ate all the mice. Mice were so small that they swallowed them whole, having a preference for newborn mice and rats, which they dipped in butter before swallowing them. They soon discovered that they could breed mice and rats, so that these morsels would be in constant supply. The leader Dredd instructed them to start breeding two different types of rats—a delicious tasting rat with a lot of meat on it, and a fat rat that was very fatty and aromatic. In this case, "aroma" meant the awful odor that the humans usually called mouse smell. They certainly didn't want to eat this Hork delicacy! Soon they discovered the tasty flesh of leeches and began breeding them too.

If a bull had to be lead somewhere it was the best to call the Horks, because they did not fear such large animals. They were much stronger than humans and bulls were afraid of them, sensing that they were not as weak a nation as humans.

It is safe to say that there was no conflict of interest between the humans and Horks, but that instead they beneficially complemented each other. It seemed that nothing could stand in the way of the eternal, unbreakable friendship developing between the Horks and humans. The fact that this did not happen was not the fault of the Horks, as they truly had good intentions. It was the humans who were guilty. Naturally not those who lived with the Horks, who soon realized that these beings preferred exactly the types of work they hated most, the sort involving heavy work or that they found disgusting. How much easier it was to weave than to clean the stables, not to mention digging in the garden! And how good it was to have someone to help them out by pulling up the heavy net while fishing; a Hork man, who although ugly was very strong. There was no disagreement about how they shared their combined prey—he would get the internal organs, head and bones, which he liked best, and the humans got the other delicious parts. How easy it was to cultivate a friendship between Horks and humans when it was enough to just take the Hork friend the intestines of a chicken when it was slaughtered as a small gift, and the Hork would receive it with great joy!

Djuli and Tila's human protégés were most definitely satisfied with the Horks. They didn't even mind that they fumbled at first when learning new tasks, for example when trying to build their houses, which essentially ended up being built by the humans. But it wasn't terribly difficult, as they didn't all need separate houses, not even separate rooms. It was sufficient to house several of them together in a large room, and they were all happy with that. Their ugliness did not matter either, in fact it was an advantage. Nobody dared to attack them now that the Horks were here, and the humans did not need to be jealous of their Hork friends because they knew that their wives would not cheat on them with a Hork. Neither her nor the Hork would desire this! The Horks certainly looked very formidable, and that was what basically led to the deterioration of the relationship between Horks and humans. Unfortunately this began shortly after they had arrived in this Reality.

What happened was that the Horks did not want to return the spades, as they liked them very much. Finally after a great deal of pleading Mr. Numo managed to recover just three of these useful tools. So he let it go, and when morning arrived he got into the wagon and drove into the village because he needed more spades. There were also not enough for every Hork to have one, and the children were always fighting over who could use it to dig up the soil. Since they didn't deal with ironwork on the estate, he had to go to the blacksmith in the village to buy the spades. And that cost money of course, but he decided that they had plenty right now and besides, the financial sacrifice was worth it for the peace. So he drove to the blacksmith in the village and told him that he needed spades, and did he have any?

"Yes, of course I have," said the blacksmith. "How many do you need, sir? Three, four, six?"

"Let's make it a hundred of them. I hope you'll give me a discount if I place a bulk order!"

"Sorry?! How many was it that you needed, sir?!"

"A hundred, but I could even do with a hundred and fifty. Let's not waste time because I want to get home soon so I don't miss out on any exciting events. Tell me, how many spades do you have?"

It turned out that the blacksmith did not have a hundred and fifty spades. Not even fifty, just forty-eight. Mr. Numo bought them all, bargaining for a good while, and finally they agreed on a price that in Numo's opinion was not too bad—eighty copper coins. This was not even the value of one silver coin, because at that time a silver coin was worth two hundred copper coins. The only problem was that Numo had headed out for the spades in a rush, and had not taken any change with him. He had just put a single gold coin in his pocket, which was worth much more than a silver one, in fact it was worth two hundred silver coins, or two hundred and fifteen, depending on whether it was a silver coin from Torgo or Atlantua. The money system was so complicated at that time, and it really had to be understood. But whatever the case was, a gold coin was certainly worth much more than a silver coin, and considerably more than a copper one, and now Numo gave the gold coin to the blacksmith. "I hope you have enough change to give back to me?!"

"Of course, of course!" he grinned happily, and quickly disappeared into another room that adjoined the workshop while his strong, muscular assistants continued working.

He soon returned. "Here you go," he said, and counted one hundred and twenty copper coins into Numo's palm. "I hope I'll be fortunate enough to have you visit me again, my good sir!" and bowed before Numo.

"What's this?" asked Numo paling.

"What do you mean?"

"You only gave me back a hundred and twenty copper coins, that is, you paid me the change of one silver, but I gave you a gold coin!"

"No you didn't, it was a silver coin!"

"I'm telling you, it was gold! I even asked if you were able to give me change!"

"Of course, from a silver! Because you paid with a silver coin!"

"That's not true! Are you intending to steal from me?! You dirty thief!" shouted Numo.

"What?! You're calling me a thief in my own house?! How dare you! Hey lads, take this ranting donkey and throw him out!"

The three muscular blacksmith lads were there right away. They grabbed Numo's arms from both sides, slapped him hard and threw him out on the street. The blacksmith even tilted his hips and shouted, "Don't you call me a thief, because even if you did pay with gold, I'd be entitled to it! I know that two of my slaves fled to your place and are now living there with you, and that has done me great harm! You're the thief, not me, a dirty slave thief!"

"You are indeed a thief!"

"Prove it if you can! And if you don't shut up, my lads will continue what they started!"

Numo got to his feet and felt terribly ashamed, because many people had seen him being thrown out. Without a word he climbed into his carriage, not even bothering to collect the requested spades, but he didn't dare ask for them. He drove back so fast that he almost turned off the road at a bend.

"Did you bring the spades?" asked Djuli as soon as he arrived.

"No I didn't, because... because... oh, it's a long story! Call the chief!"

"What chief?"

"His name is Dredd, if I remember correctly."

"Why do you need him?" asked Djuli suspiciously.

Numo could see that an explanation was unavoidable, and he quickly told her what it was about.

"Aha, so the blacksmith wants to take revenge because two of his slaves are here! Okay, I'm coming too!" said Djuli.

She called Dredd and told him that she required his assistance. Since the Horks didn't know what money was, she didn't go into that. She would not have liked her beloved nation to be infected with the ugly spirit of money that she detested so much, so she just told Dredd that not all humans were good and friends of theirs—here on the estate, yes, but not in other places. And now they were to go to a human who had behaved badly toward their friend Numo. This guy also had a lot of spades they could bring back with them.

"That's great, the children love spades!" Dredd grinned. He shouted something, causing four Hork men to come running towards him. Each held a weapon as well as a shield, which they had obtained from the astral plane. They politely introduced themselves to Numo—they were called Brudj, Shrum, Mryarkh and Krarm. Poor Numo was unable to remember these names, and in the next moment had already forgotten them. He also observed that it was not a coincidence Dredd was the leader, since so far he had the most normal name of the lot!

The Horks got into the carriage, along with Djuli. Numo was already inside, and he turned around and drove back to the village at breakneck speed. The Horks enjoyed the ride tremendously, because it was the first time they had ever seen a carriage and they really liked the wheels. How great it was to just sit and scratch themselves! They did not get tired, even though they were moving. This really was a world of miracles! These poor, weak little white worms, the humans, were able to invent such clever wonders!

They had not even reached the village, and Numo was already feeling that he had authority. As they moved along they passed a group of peasants who were heading out to the fields, and they immediately cast away their hoes and scythes and ran back and forth screaming, not caring if they ran into a thorny bush, as long as they could escape these terrible monsters.

Finally they made it to the village. In order to get to the blacksmith's house they had to almost drive down the entire street. When they had arrived it was still bright outside with life bustling about, but by the time they passed within fifty feet of the village's outskirts everything had died down. Not only had people run back to their houses as fast as the wind and closed all the doors and shutters, trembling in fear inside, but even the stray dogs were frightened and ran off because they had never experienced a Hork smell before.

The blacksmith was not aware of the sort of delegation that was turning up at his place. He was inside, and his assistants too—working. Numo was not devoid of humor. When he realized that the blacksmith had not noticed he was at his gate again, he stopped his carriage and told Dredd to

remain outside. He was only to come in if he whistled. Numo got out himself and entered the building with Djuli. "Hey!" he shouted.

"Now what, wasn't that enough?! What do you want?!" snapped the blacksmith, and grabbed hold of a large hammer in his left hand, while wiping his right hand on his leather apron. He then transferred the hammer into his right hand and stepped closer menacingly.

"We really need to talk about this matter," said Mr. Numo.

"That's one option..." answered the blacksmith, brandishing the hammer as an indication of how he imagined the conversation would turn out.

Numo pretended not to notice. "Do you feel justified in keeping the gold?" he asked him.

"Yes, I do!" the blacksmith grinned.

"Well I feel differently. I've brought a friend of mine for this conversation, who understands the law better than I do. If the outcome results in you being right, then I'm fine with it. I suggest you discuss it with my friend instead of me."

"Gladly!" and the blacksmith turned to Djuli. "Let the lady fire away!"

"Oh, but you're mistaken! It's not Djuli I was talking about, but rather another friend. I want you to persuade him!" With that he whistled, and the workshop doorway darkened as Dredd entered. He came quickly because he was eager for all the children to have spades. The Horks were generally very fond of children, as Getsnappy had already mentioned.

"Now, where are those spades?!" he asked, and came closer. "And where is the bad man whose throat I need to bite?"

"Do you think you'll be able to persuade him that you're right?!" asked Djuli, and grinned as the blacksmith had earlier, but even more widely. However the blacksmith was not grinning at all, but turning pale in terror.

His fear intensified as Brudj, Shrum, Mryarkh and Krarm entered the workshop. The blacksmith's assistants began to howl terribly, and they dropped everything and ran out through the back door. The blacksmith just stood there frightened, then suddenly collapsed without a sound. Djuli bent down to examine him. After a few moments she stood up and gave him a kick.

"Cowardly worm! First he soils himself from fear, then his heart stops from being so scared!"

"Ah, so that means we can take him home and allow his meat to putrefy?!" asked Dredd happily.

"Yes, of course!"

"And where is the bad man I was supposed to bite?"

"It should have been him, but now it's unnecessary because he's already dead."

"And what about the spades?"

"I think they'll be out the back somewhere. But since it turned out this way, let's not be fussy and just put everything in the cart. This rotter doesn't have a wife or child, so why shouldn't it be us who inherits his belongings?!" said Mr. Numo, and Djuli nodded vigorously at these words.

Of course they could not fit everything from the workshop into one cart. They returned twelve times before everything had been emptied. Mr. Numo found his money too. Nobody intercepted the delivery and nothing was lost, because at least two Horks remained in the workshop while the cart was on its way, and nobody dared to go in there. A number of people ventured out but from a very great distance, and they stared at these unknown, novel creatures. Some of them recognized them as the Horks from Getsnappy's religion, but they did not dare approach them.

The children on the estate were delighted about the spades, and soon the Horks became acquainted with the blacksmith craft, making abundant quantities of not just spades but other tools too, for themselves and their human friends. They also forged weapons, and they were very good

weapons indeed. Blacksmith work suited them because they didn't have to use too many fine hand movements, although it should be said that some of the Horks competed with the humans in this field. They had an artistic sense too, decorating their helmets with the horns and tusks of the animals they hunted, and they looked much more fearsome this way, even if it made the helmets less reliable.

In the village of Odun the blacksmith's assistants spread the news everywhere that the Horks had killed their master and robbed the workshop. The Horks did not care what was being said about them, they didn't even really know, but in their opinion it did not matter if the people were just talking, as long as they didn't attack them. And the humans didn't dare do that. So the Horks spent their time hunting, forging and rotting their meat in the sun to make it tastier. However they did this far away from the courtyard, as even their best friend and goddess Djuli, turned her nose up at the smell of the carcasses and asked them if they could spare their human friends from this odor. The Horks were surprised, but obeyed. Nevertheless, by this time they had learned that humans ate certain aged cheeses containing mold, and said that although they occasionally drank milk and didn't have a particular objection to cheese, some of the molds were very stinky. They considered moldy cheese to be a disgusting eating habit of humans. Not to mention the horrid smell of wine or beer—the only thing more terrible was the smell of brandy! There wasn't a single Hork who did not try to avoid the wine cellar due to the smell emanating from it. Of course the humans didn't mind this, as it meant they did not have to protect their drinks from them. Nor the gingerbread and other sweets, because even the child Horks didn't like sweet things. They ate honey purely as medicine, grimacingly, but they did not need it very often because they didn't tend to get sick. Their body was practically made of iron, which was fortunate because Tila had said she didn't have any knowledge about Hork body systems, so she would only take on the healing of Horks in life-threatening situations, when she didn't have much to lose in the case she did more harm than good.

The Horks created their own musical instruments too, and although Getsnappy had said they were not a musical nation, it turned out that they frequently played music with their bells, whistles and various percussion instruments. It was only the music of humans they didn't find appealing. They did learn a few human songs though, and even rearranged them for their own instruments. And there was some Hork music that humans enjoyed. Mainly Djuli, who was by far the most biased towards the Horks, and she gradually began spending more time with them than with Tila. But Tila no longer needed her that much, as she was already fairly well acquainted with the world of humans.

In any case, there was no major overlap between the music culture of the Horks and humans. It worked out well that the Hork houses were built a five minute walk away from the courtyard, because this way the constant Hork music didn't disturb the humans. And it was loud, reminiscent of the various marches humans knew. Getsnappy was probably right about the Horks not really being a musical nation. The contradiction was only illusory, and it partly came from the fact that the Horks didn't have that much else to do with their spare time, and partly because they were still living in the daze of this new world, where they found everything beautiful and were very happy. After the constant fighting in the astral plane they had arrived in a country of peace. What a wonder world this was—wherever they went they knew that the ground beneath their feet was full of tasty snacks! Hork children could rarely be seen without a short-handled spade on them. If they wanted a treat to eat, they just dug in the ground around them.

This good world ended with the coming of winter. As the snow fell it began to get cold. The Horks were so hardy that even now they rarely wore shoes, a characteristic Getsnappy was well aware of. But they did have to wear clothing on their upper bodies, even though they were not a shy

nation. The world had now become so nasty that the meat was aging much slower, and when the frost came it failed to age at all, which meant they had to wait months for the appetizing greenish brown tint to appear on top. The Horks expressed their discontent to Djuli, insisting that the goddess do something about it. But Djuli replied that she had little power to change the passing of seasons, and that they should find consolation in the fact that it was not going to last forever, only three or four months at most. Now they discovered how wise Djuli was to make them build houses. And to begin animal husbandry. Yet they still had few animals and little food, so they needed to hunt. Djuli instilled in the Horks that they were not to go to the village of Odun or the surrounding villages to kill the peasants' animals, because it would not end well. She did not want any confrontation, and besides, there were about fifty adult Horks, which may have been a lot of strength on its own, but there were even more peasants and if they became very exasperated hundreds of them could get together and kill the Horks. And even if the Horks won they would suffer a great loss, which was not worth the few scraps of food.

Hunting in the winter was very difficult, even for the Horks. They were glad when it became even colder and some of the birds froze and fell from the trees; this made them easy to collect. But it was not enough, even with the addition of the innards from a pig slaughter from their human friends. They had to hunt. Dredd vowed that the following summer he would create a huge stock of bred animals. However in the meantime they would not starve. The Horks were like humans in that they also preferred to do things the easy way. They did not go to the village for the peasant's animals because they respected Djuli's wishes, but traveled further away to obtain prey. It was during these wanderings that they happened to discover the cemetery. Naturally they could not do anything with the corpses that had been there for years and had crumbled, but those that were a week or two old could be utilized. In fact, during the winter when the temperatures were below freezing point, even the corpses that were a good two months old could be consumed.

One day the villagers awoke to find that the cemetery had been ravaged. It had been looted, although there were some graves they had not touched—the old graves. The Horks knew which "eternal" resting places hid usable corpses as they could smell them out. During a single night they took everything that was of value to them, dishonoring at least fifty graves, which the villagers considered sacrilege. The Horks did not deny that they were the culprits, nor could they have, as their wide footprints resembling those of a bear were clearly visible everywhere. Their feet could tolerate the cold, and they were not wearing shoes on that night either. The residents of Odun village were outraged. This was more than they could tolerate. The blacksmith may well have offended Numo and given the Horks good reason to kill him, but what had *they* done to deserve this?! The Horks had desecrated the corpses of their loved ones. They had no respect for the dead! A complaint was immediately made to Tila regarding the matter. But it turned out that Tila did not quite understand humans yet, and as if she were a Hork herself she could not comprehend what was so terrible about the Horks eating the corpses.

"Would it have been better if they had eaten living people?" she asked in total incomprehension.

"But they were *our* corpses!" complained the judge, whom the villagers had sent for this thankless task, although he was very afraid that he may not return since the Horks were there.

"What do you mean they were *yours*? You wanted to eat them?" inquired Tila.

"What do you take us for?!" recoiled the judge in horror.

"I was not inferring anything, I am just interested. Did you want to eat them? Because then I can acknowledge that it was unfair to take the corpses from you. They can be excused for assuming that humans do not eat their own corpses, and I thought this was the case too!"

"Of course we don't eat them!"

"Do you know some kind of magic I'm unaware of that can resurrect them?"

"No, of course not!"

"Did you want to use them for something else then?"

"No, of course we don't use them for anything! What do you elves do with your dead?!"

"With us death is very rare, but if it does occur we bury them under a crystal tree so that it can absorb the material of our sibling, and later when we eat the crystals from the tree then their death serves to nurture our strength. The trees under which we bury the elves bear crystals abundantly for thousands of years."

"See, you bury your dead too!"

"Ah, now I understand! So you must eat the plants that grow on the grave—the grass and so forth..."

"No, no, no! We just go out to the cemetery garden and respect our dead!"

"How?"

"We just sit there, take care of the grave and remember our deceased loved one!"

"But you can still do the same thing now. And I'm sure that any of the Horks would be willing to help you take care of the graves—they love digging the soil!"

"But it's not the same because the corpses aren't in the graves!"

"Well the body is not going to remain down there for long anyway. Do you think that if the worms eat the corpse and its matter is transferred into the bodies of the worms, then the worms are going to stay in one place, deep in the grave?! They are sure to crawl away somewhere! All that will remain are the bones. In any case, I find your customs strange. Because it is perfectly fine to remember your dead, but the grave, body and bones are absolutely unnecessary for you to do this. And I doubt that you can see the dead person through the ground. Or if you are able to do this, please teach me how, because even as an elf I am incapable of such a marvel!"

"Of course we can't see the dead person down there!"

"Then what does it matter if they are there or not?"

"Of course it matters!"

"That is illogical."

"You insensitive stump!" shouted the judge, and ran off. It was in vain that Tila shouted after him, trying to explain that she was not a stump. That a stump was just made of wood, which was obviously insensitive as it couldn't feel anything, in fact it would be strange if a stump was a sensitive object!

It was interesting that while the judge had been so unsuccessful with the gentle Tila, he found more understanding with the much tougher Djuli, who listened to him in astonishment.

"Believe me, until now I wasn't even aware that the Horks were eating the dead!"

"I believe you, but please do something about it!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do!" said Djuli, shaking her head. "Once they've eaten them, then they've eaten them. I can't retrieve them from their stomachs! Incidentally, I have to say that I don't find what they've done to be such a terrible thing. What does it matter to you whether the worms eat them or..."

"Oh, don't start behaving like Tila!"

"Did Tila say the same thing? How clever of her!"

"But Djuli, you're not some celestial being, an elf or whatever Tila is, but a human being! You must understand how outrageous this is!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Where I'm from in the Zunzan tribe, the custom was to place the dead high up in the trees for the birds to consume, and the remains that the birds couldn't eat—

the bones—were collected by the shaman. She made whistles from the shin bones, and used these for ceremonies, so shin bones were called 'whistle bones' in our native language. The rest of the bones were burned and the ashes scattered. You can believe me, I know this custom very well because the shaman was my mother! This is a good custom because we humans kill and eat a lot of birds in our lives, so it's fitting that after our death we feed the birds with our own dead bodies. It's a kind of reciprocation for the food they gave us. I would very much like it if after my death the birds were to eat me, but even more if my beloved Horks ate me!"

"You're horrible, Djuli, you make me shudder!"

"Stop with this indignation, after all, it isn't you who has been eaten, not even one of your relatives! Tell me, what do you expect me to do? Because even if I wanted to I couldn't give you back your dead!"

"But you could at least return the bones!"

"I don't think much will be left of those either, because the Horks' teeth are so strong that they're capable of chewing even buffalo bones, let alone human bones! Even a Hork woman could tear your arm off in a single bite, sir. But okay, I'll ask them and see what I can do."

The judge did not follow Djuli, who went to the houses of the Horks. She spoke with them, saying that the villagers were very angry about the corpses. The Horks were rather surprised by this.

"We didn't kill any humans, nor did we take their animals!" said Dredd.

"They're still angry, because the dead people were theirs."

"Didn't they take them to the cemetery because they didn't need them? You humans told me yourself that you find the appetizing smell of rotten flesh stinky. We assumed they took them out there so they would not have to tolerate the stench around them. And we figured that if they don't need them, we can make use of them!"

"They do in fact take them there for that reason, but afterwards they like to occasionally visit the site to remember their dead."

"Why can't they remember them at home? That would be much more convenient!"

"It's just the way they're used to doing it."

"I don't understand! First they take the dead out there so they're not bothered by the smell, and then they go back so they can smell the stench again?!"

"No, because if they bury it deeply enough, the stench can't be smelled from the surface."

"We could smell it quite strongly—that's how we knew where to dig!"

"Humans don't actually have much of a sense of smell—they can't smell it the way you do."

"But if we take the dead away, then they won't smell it at all!"

"Don't argue about this, Dredd. Humans cling to their dead and they don't want you eating them."

"But then it will uselessly rot down there! Is that what they want?!"

"Yes, precisely that!"

"What outrageous selfishness! If they ate them I could understand, but this..."

"I don't think they do it out of selfishness, but foolishness! If it makes you feel any better, Dredd, I understand your perspective and I don't blame you. I think you're right, but it's pointless fighting with them about it. Now they're just asking for you to at least give the bones back to them."

Dredd shook his head and led Djuli to the corpses, which were lying there in the snow, and she could see that they had not eaten all of them; there were at least twenty that had not even been touched yet. She looked around, but there was no sign of the judge. He was afraid to come here. Djuli said to Dredd, "Listen, I'll advocate for you. Quickly remove all the meat and return the bones

to the cemetery. And don't tell any human that there was meat on them!" After this Djuli left hastily, for the putrid air near the rotting corpses was revolting.

The Horks did as Djuli said, but the humans were still mad at them because of course the bones were all mixed up, and they didn't know which bones belonged to which corpse. The bones had to be reburied too, which was difficult in the winter, but the Horks didn't help them because they were angry at the humans on account of their selfishness, and nobody had invited them to help anyway. Djuli promised the judge that nothing like this would happen again, but only if the judge also promised that from now on they would pay taxes to the Horks, entitling them to all the intestines, stomachs and other parts of the slaughtered animals that were unsuitable for human consumption. They should understand that winter time was very difficult for the Horks; they did not have enough time to prepare for the winter and they needed something to eat. The people ought to be glad that the Horks were content with this and did not ask for wheat and gold like the landlord. So the judge promised to do this for the peace of the cemetery, and was very pleased that he had managed to achieve this much. Not only had they refrained from killing him, but he could now obtain the bones back and there would be no more cemetery theft. The villagers would be satisfied with him—he was an excellent judge!

Things were working out well, but the villagers didn't like the Horks very much and became quite distrustful of them. However the Horks' faith in goddess Djuli continued to grow, especially since she had arranged for them to receive delicious treats from the humans on a regular basis. Almost every day a wagon arrived loaded with all kinds of goodies that people didn't need—chicken and cow intestines, dead dogs and cats, rats that had been beaten to death, skinned fox corpses and other such things. Djuli hoped that nothing would happen to further undermine the relationship of the villagers and the Horks. But it did, and it was Djuli who was culpable. It even happened twice.

The whole thing began quite innocently, without Djuli yet playing a role. What happened was that one day the accumulated pile of firewood for the winter had toppled onto one of the Hork women. Unfortunately she was not simply crippled, but had broken her limbs as well as her ribs. Tila could not help her, as by the time she arrived the woman was dead. This caused Tila great sadness. She felt sincere remorse for not having already cut up the big pile of logs a long time ago, since then such a disaster would not have happened. But even though she liked working she did not always have time for it. There were so many people coming for healing that all her time was occupied by this activity. When she had rushed to the site upon news of the disaster, the little office in the courtyard she used was full. In the summertime she worked out in the yard, but in winter she had to move inside the house so that the patients would not get cold. At that moment more than ten people were waiting for her. The news of the Horks' presence had reduced the desire of patients to come, but those who had serious problems risked the trip. And since fewer people were coming from nearby, it was balanced out by the fact that the news of Tila's activities was spreading further away, and an army of sick people began arriving from new districts.

Before leaving the site, Tila quickly cut up the wood so that it wouldn't cause any more trouble. But this event had left her feeling distressed, in fact she was more upset than the Horks were, who on the astral plane had become accustomed to one of their kind dying every now and then, and sometimes many at once. As was their custom, they undressed the corpse and pulled her out to the yard that was dedicated for this purpose, to begin putrefying the meat. Tila went back to healing, although she was heavily burdened by her conscience. She could not be everywhere at the same time! All the wood in the vicinity of the mansion needed to be cut up. She also had to think about regulating the weather so that they wouldn't have snow storms in the winter, and so the snow

wouldn't fall too heavily, as it was uncomfortable to shovel. And as far as possible she had to regulate the temperature, because nobody likes a minus twenty degree frost, not to mention the even colder temperatures. That of course meant work for her every day, for if she did not control the weather it would get out of hand and become inconsistent, as it usually was. And then there were all the patients... Of course these were just excuses. Cutting up wood didn't take her that long. She remembered that she was asked to do this at one point, and had said that she would, but she forgot all about it. She very rarely went to the Horks because they didn't need to be healed, and Djuli was the one who dealt with them anyway. This was her mistake, no matter how she looked at it. Oh, how sad this whole thing was!

She began to recover, wiping the tears from her eyes. Some of her patients asked her what had happened. "A friend of mine died," she told them. "A Hork friend."

A few gave their condolences, but most did not say anything at all. These were not people who lived on the estate, and they did not know the Horks. All they knew from seeing them was that they were ugly, and they were inclined to immediately think that everything ugly was evil. Of course they didn't dare say this because Tila loved these monsters, and she might refuse to heal them! So it was not only the Horks but also Tila who they didn't know.

Tila attended to the patients in turn. Finally in the late afternoon she was almost finished. The last patient was a little fourteen year-old girl. Although the term "little" should be used with caution here. At that time fourteen year-olds were not considered little, and some of them even had a child, or two in rare situations. This one did not yet have any. Otherwise she was quite a pretty girl, however she was blind—in both eyes! She could not have come here alone, so her mother had brought her. Tila learned that she was not born blind, but had become this way three years ago when their landlord had had a quarrel with the lord of the neighboring estate. He attacked the village and burnt down many of the houses, including theirs. The girl could not escape the burning house because a soldier had knocked her down and the burning roof had collapsed on her and burnt both her eyes. Her father could not help her because he had also been struck down, and her mother was being raped by several soldiers... Such cases were not at all rare at that time. The girl was rather fortunate that they had managed to pull her out from under the burning beam at all. Even still, her face was seriously burnt.

Tila looked at her sadly, and as her hair began to light up, she said, "I can take care of your face, but I am unable to do anything about your eyes, my little one. I cannot even grow back limbs that have been cut off, and the eye is a very complicated organ!"

The girl was bitterly disappointed. "What can I do with a beautiful face if I'll never see?!"

"I can't perform a miracle, and believe me, I'm very sorry about this!"

"But who else can perform miracles if not a wizard?!" cried the girl.

"I am not a wizard but an elf, as I have already mentioned. I am an elf, but that is not my name, as many believe. I am not a wizard called Elf, but an elf whose name is Tila. I am not omnipotent, my dear... What is your name?"

"I am Veeya, your Grace," said the girl, with a great effort to appropriately address this elf-wizard. She gave her this title because the only thing greater was "Highness". Those who were not the king's direct blood relatives could not receive a higher title than "Grace". Except perhaps "Majesty", but that did not always mean a higher rank than "Grace", at least not in Torgo or Atlantua. Of course Tila didn't have the faintest idea what it meant. She assumed it was related to being "gracious".

"I don't understand how I could be gracious to you. Believe me, I would gladly heal you if I could! But unfortunately I do not possess enough knowledge, and so I was only able to heal your face. It is as beautiful as it was before, without any trace of burns!"

But the girl began to cry. "What can I do with my beauty?! I'd rather stay ugly and be able to see! I wouldn't even mind if I was as ugly as an Ork. I've heard how ugly they are and that they eat carcasses, but I would take all that upon myself if I could only see again! This way I don't get any benefit from your healing, elf Tila. Please change me back to being ugly, because if I'm still blind I'll be vulnerable to everybody, and if my face is beautiful then I'm bound to be raped eventually! Do you hear me? Change me back to being ugly, for if you don't give me back my sight, nobody will want to marry me as a blind woman! I only need beauty if I can see as well!"

Tila did not say a word, just stared into the distance for a long time, and the girl's mother was afraid her daughter had offended the wizardess. "Please don't be angry with her. The pain is making her talk nonsense, the silly child..." she pleaded.

But Tila waved her hand about impatiently. "Quiet! I have to think!"

After a short while, she spoke again. "Perhaps there is something I could do. I am not at all certain it would be successful, but I don't think it would hurt her in any way. It just might not work."

"Will I see again?!" shouted Veeya excitedly.

"If my plan succeeds, then yes. Only..."

"Only what?"

"Only there is something you may not be happy about."

"What's that?"

"You will lose your beauty."

"I can accept that."

"Wait, you don't know what I'm talking about yet! I am truly unable to conjure up an eye. I cannot heal a blind eye, at least not in your case. If it was only covered by a cataract that would be different, I've healed lots of those... But in your case the only thing that would work would be for you to receive new eyes. This is not impossible, but because I can't create new eyes for you, they would have to be taken from a corpse and put into your head in place of the ones you have now. It will not hurt, you don't have to worry about that, and you will be able to see with them. They will feel just like your old eyes. However in order to do this we need a corpse."

Her mother was startled for a moment, but Veeya immediately said, "I'm fine with that!"

"Hang on, you realize that to do this we need a fresh corpse, and there aren't any around right now. Plus it is rather dubious to wait around for somebody to die just for your sake. Even if they did, we cannot be sure the dead person's relatives would approve of me removing their eyes. I have just recently experienced that humans are illogical in this area, and they begrudge others of their dead. But one of my Hork friends has just died. Perhaps you have heard about it, as there are many people I have told. If you agree, I can place both her eyes into your head. You should be able to see with them because I can graft the eyes onto your optic nerves. Your sight will be even better than before, as a Hork's vision is comparable to that of an eagle. But unfortunately I must inform you that their heads are considerably larger than those of humans, which means their eyes are bigger too. You will look strange, and there will not be many who find you beautiful."

"She'll look like you!" exclaimed Veeya's mother, pointing at Tila.

"That's right, although you don't even know what my eyes really look like. This is their true form!" and Tila allowed her eyes to take on their original shape.

"Wow!" said the mother in astonishment, and because Tila could see that she was a little horrified, she quickly changed them back to the form people were accustomed to.

"Veeya's eyes would look like the ones you saw on me just now. In fact, even more strange because the eyes of Horks are not really like human eyes. They resemble human eyes when they contract from bright light, but otherwise they are more like cat eyes, which is why they can see so brilliantly in the dark. So Veeya will look rather strange, and in no way beautiful. Her sight will be exceptional, but her beauty..."

"I am totally fine with it. I want to see! My eyesight is worth more to me than anything in the world!"

"Good, I find it logical that you can accept this compromise, and I would do the same if I were in your position. I was only telling you because I know that you humans don't always follow the rules of logic when you make decisions. And of course I do not have the right to try and change your mind if you don't agree."

"I certainly do agree! Please do what you've suggested!"

"Have you really thought it through, my girl?" asked the mother. "They'll consider you a monster with these eyes!"

"Yes, I have!"

"But this way there'll be no chance of anybody wanting to marry you..."

"I don't care! As a blind woman I have little chance of getting married anyway, so it makes no difference!"

"But it does! We could find you a blind man, and there are plenty of those..."

"I was talking about a *good* marriage! Two blind people supporting each other isn't such a great prospect. The blind leading the sightless?!"

"It has its own beauty, loving each other, and that way you can have a child too..."

"Who I could never see. No! I've decided, mother, and you don't have a right to decide for me. After all, I'm the blind one, not you, in fact you've never even been blind!"

"Okay, I'll go and get the eyes!" said Tila.

Dredd was quite surprised to see Tila because he knew that she was usually doing healings at this time. When he asked her about this, she replied, "It is because of a healing that I have come now. I require the eyes of this Hork woman." She told him that a girl was in need of them, so that she could see again.

"Go ahead and take them!" waved Dredd generously. "And tell the humans that we are better than them, because we do not begrudge them our dead and their body parts!"

But Tila could hardly tell anyone this, because only the girl and her mother were there, who did not come from the village of Odun and were therefore not affected by the theft of the corpses.

The eyes really were considerably larger than those of Veeya. But by this time Tila had greatly developed her skills in plastic surgery, and she altered the cranial bones around the eye sockets a little so that the eyes would have enough space, in a way that made them sit slightly out to the sides. Then she cleaned the eye sockets, removing any remains of the old eyes, and put the new ones in place. This went relatively smoothly, but now came the difficult part—fitting the new eyeballs with the old nerves and movement muscles. Tila made many attempts, and this single healing took her until morning, so it was fortunate she didn't have to sleep. Veeya was not sleepy because Tila kept her engaged by frequently asking her to open her eyes and tell her what she could see, if she could see at all, or asking her to move her eyes to the right or left. So Veeya was not bored, in fact on several occasions the courtyard flashed before her or sometimes Tila, so she was already beginning to see. Oh, how wonderful this was! She was certain now that she would at least be able to see to some degree, even if it wasn't going to be a complete success, and that was fantastic!

Tila solved the eye movement problem relatively quickly, but it didn't function for Veeya until morning as she wasn't accustomed to these large eyeballs. She only knew how to move her own small eyeballs. Tila could not help her with this, and told her that it would just require practice. Seeing would likely be tiring for her eyes and she needed to rest them frequently, but in time she would get used to it as her muscles became stronger. There were two facts that caused the most problems—one was that a Hork's eyes really were like those of cats, meaning that they could be opened in two planes, horizontally and vertically. This enabled them to more accurately control the amount of light entering the eyes, which happened automatically of course. This was not functioning for Veeya because she didn't have a nerve attached to these additional muscles. Tila eventually solved this problem by redirecting some of the nerves that move the eyebrows, and this way Veeya could move that muscle with conscious effort. She told her to practice using it, and in time it would become automatic, just like being able to breathe voluntarily but also reflexively, without having to think about it.

"Oh, of course I'll practice plenty, and I'll work very hard. I'll do anything if it helps me see again!" said the girl.

The other problem derived from the fact that Hork eyes were so perfect. The structure of the human eye is designed in such a way that it is only able to see one single point with perfect clarity. But as one goes further away in any direction from this point in their field of vision, it becomes more blurry to them. So if a human wants to clearly see a horizontal line such as the horizon, they cannot do anything other than begin looking at it from the left and keep their gaze moving from left to right across the horizon. Or right to left if they wish, or even back and forth. But they must move their eyes or their head, as they cannot see the entire horizontal band at the same time.

In contrast, the structure of a Hork's eye is like that of a lion. Their sharp vision is not confined to a single point, but in the case of a horizontal line the middle of the eye will give a continuous clear picture. This of course is a great thing for lions, and generally for all predators living in the savannas in open, grassy deserts. They can then notice their prey as soon as it appears in their field of vision. Of course it is equally beneficial for prey animals if they can quickly and accurately detect predators approaching, and don't have to waste time moving their eyes. It is basically a good thing for scavengers too, to be able to detect the movement of predators in order to avoid becoming prey and to know where to follow them to obtain food for themselves.

The problem was not that this was a bad asset for a human to possess. But the human brain's image processing system was simply not prepared for them to see a clear picture of more than one point at a time. So when Tila could state with confidence that she was done and that the operation had been successful, Veeya could still not see perfectly. She could see, but it was as if she was seeing many pictures overlapping each other. She could simultaneously see the left and right corner of the yard, as well as its center, and the muddled images caused Veeya to sway back and forth, groping about as if she was still blind.

Naturally her mother was concerned. "Oh, it wasn't worth you becoming disfigured! Let's ask Tila to change the whole thing back to the way it was!"

"No!" cried the girl. "This is still better than not being able to see anything!"

"Wait, let me explain what is happening," Tila cut in, and began to describe the difference between the eyes of Horks and humans. "The eyes will function perfectly now. Veeya's brain just has to adapt to these new eyes. I cannot help her with that, I'm afraid, but they will come good in time. Veeya just has one task—to practice using them a lot, which simply means to see as much as she can."

"There's nothing else I'd rather be doing!" sighed the girl.

"Believe me, it will get increasingly better because the brain is a very docile contraption. It is really nothing more than a learning machine—it is learning something every moment. Unfortunately it does not always learn what we want it to learn, but one day you will wake up to find that you can simply see again, in fact your vision will be even sharper than it was before. I suggest you stay here as our guest until then."

The girl and her mother accepted the invitation, and it turned out that Tila really was telling the truth, because by the morning of the eighth day Veeya could see everything perfectly. She could not be grateful enough to Tila, and thoroughly enjoyed seeing everything with far better visual acuity than she had in the past. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she could acknowledge that she really did look a little strange, but was happy to pay that price for her vision. She thanked Tila for so long that the elf got tired of it, telling Veeya that she was grateful for the opportunity to skillfully carry out this novel kind of work and that she was truly proud of it, but she didn't want to be held up any longer as she had lots of work to do. So Veeya and her mother headed home.

On their way home Veeya got many stares. A man who had a traveling circus even offered to take her with him for good money, and he would display her as some kind of monster, but Veeya refused. Of course when people asked her why her eyes were like that, she could not tell them anything but the truth, and this had consequences. A few days later a man visited Tila, saying that as she could see, he only had one arm and would like it if Tila could replace his missing right arm with that of the Hork corpse.

"Then you'll really look like a monster!" Djuli told him. "They'll be even more terrified of you than a Hork, because a Hork is a Hork, a harmonious whole in itself, but you'll be half Hork and half human!"

"It won't be half—most of my body will remain human! And I'd like this in any case, because it's very inconvenient living with only one arm!"

Tila shrugged and said that she would be willing to do it, and in the end Djuli didn't object either. Why should she? If she thought about it she would have undertaken this addition herself if necessary. But nothing came of this, because in the meantime the weather had temporarily warmed to somewhere above freezing point, and the Hork woman's corpse had not deteriorated so much that the Horks wanted to consume it, but was spoiled enough that Tila had to inform the man that she was not able to successfully use the limb. He was very disappointed and went away, but came back two days later, bringing with him a fresh headless corpse. He said this would be even better because the replacement arm would be from a human.

"Where did you get this from?" asked Djuli in amazement.

"It's the body of a man who raped a woman. Her relatives caught him and killed him, and when I learned of this I ask them to sell me the corpse. I didn't even have to pay much for it. Can I have his arm? I'll leave the rest of the body here for the Horks to enjoy, I only need the arm!" he urged Djuli with a shy smile.

Tila carried out the transplant and the arm worked perfectly. This was a much simpler operation than the case with Veeya's eyes, because she was attaching a human body part to a human, not dealing with xenotransplantation between different species. However the skin color was not the same, and the man's left arm was a centimeter shorter, but he was fine with that as he could now use his right arm perfectly. There was no prosthesis that could rival it!

The man had barely left Odun village to boast to everyone about having a new hand, when another man arrived shortly afterwards, pulling a ten year-old child on a sled in order for Tila to heal him. When the child was six years old, a horse had kicked his leg causing an open fracture. This had become infected and his leg had to be cut off at the knee. Now his left leg was all that

remained; the right one was missing. The parents asked for the leg of the corpse that Tila had "operated" on to be put on the boy so that he could walk again, since it didn't matter to the corpse whether he was missing just an arm or a leg too!

Tila shook her head. "This isn't going to work. If I take an adult leg and put it on a ten year-old boy, there will be such a great difference between the two legs that he will be incredibly distorted and barely be able to limp!"

"It's still better than not walking at all, or having to use a crutch!" said the boy's mother firmly.

"What if you changed both my legs?" asked the boy.

"You'll still be distorted, because you'll have two huge adult legs on a child's body!"

"His body will later grow into them!" said the father.

Tila thought it over, and then decided to go ahead with the major operation. The boy had at once grown several centimeters taller. It looked rather strange indeed for a ten year-old child to be walking on adult legs, and his manner of walking was rather uncertain for a while, as though he were walking on sticks. Years later his body grew in size, but this did not help much as his growth hormones reached his new legs too, and as his body grew so did his legs, although not to the same extent. So he was left odd-looking until his death, but at least he could walk.

The next day a mother brought in her young daughter who happened to have a missing left leg. She had heard that the previous day a boy had been here whose good left leg was replaced, and this would be perfect for her daughter! Djuli ran to the Horks, and fortunately they had not yet eaten the leg, so it was given to the little girl. This leg was almost a good fit for her, just a handwidth longer than it should have been, although Tila could help this somewhat with magic. The girl limped a little, but it wasn't too bad and could only be noticed if someone was watching her very carefully.

"We should probably store the unused body parts in the house, and only take them to the Horks if they begin to stink," said Tila. "That way they won't eat anything that somebody might need."

This was what they did from then on, and many corpses were brought to them that had been used for organ donations. They threw the body parts that weren't required into a pit, and called this the "organ warehouse".

The corpse trade was definitely booming in the area. There were two reasons for this—one being that there was a great demand for transplantable body parts, and the other that few of these existed. Interestingly, both these facts were triggered by the same thing—the frequent wars. In times of war the number of cripples was understandably increased. In addition poverty was growing, which meant a rise in criminal activities, particularly theft, and at that time the punishment for theft was usually mutilation. Accidents often occurred too because there was no trade union, nor work cover. There were also many diseases, sepsis in particular, which in the present time of primitive medicine—that basically resembled quackery—could only be solved by amputation. Sepsis was common and occurred frequently, because hygiene was at such a low level that it was almost nonexistent, and there were no vaccinations either. Thus the number of cripples was much higher than in a civilized society, and would have been even greater if it had not been the case that cripples lived purely on begging and died very quickly.

So there was a desperate need for organs, but the supply was much lower than the demand. It was true that many people died in battle who would have made excellent donors for transplantation, but unfortunately the battles did not happen to take place near the area Tila lived. And although it was winter, the transportation was so slow that the body had usually deteriorated to a useless condition by the time it reached Tila. The Horks were the only ones happy about that. Therefore the only corpses available were those that had died in the village of Odun or the surrounding areas, perhaps no more than a day's walk away, or a maximum of three or four days journey if there was a

constant severe frost. Corpses that were any older, even if they were seemingly well preserved, were too deteriorated for Tila to benefit from them.

Other types of corpses were out of the question too. The ones belonging to the elderly were not sellable, since what could a young child of ten do with an arm from a seventy-year old?! Of course it was better than nothing, but there was a good chance that ten years later it would become so frail and diseased that it would have to be cut off! And most deaths did occur among the elderly, for obvious reasons. Anyone suffering from an accident usually required the body parts that were specifically injured, and it often occurred that by the time news of a suitable corpse had reached the person and the corpse had been brought to Tila, too much time had elapsed. The medieval communication at that time was everything but perfect and fast.

On top of this, many families were not willing to help the sufferers by handing over their dead, insisting on a burial. Many corpses did not even turn up, for example those who had died from an accident in the forest, or had become the prey of predators or drowned at sea. The latter was common among fishermen in stormy weather. And finally there were certain diseases that Tila could not assist with, and the body parts of these people could not be transplanted to anyone because it would have infected the healthy person's entire body. Therefore the demand for organs was huge compared to the supply. And it is a well known fact that in every case where demand exceeds supply, two things occur—a higher price develops and at the same time a "black market", that is, an illegal source of supply.

This is what happened now too. It may seem abhorrent, but the most common method of procuring organs was that when it was learned that a death had occurred somewhere, everybody who had a missing body part—or their relative or trustee—rushed over to the bereaved family and without any piety asked to "examine the dead body" to see whether it was suitable for their purposes, after which a genuine auction began for the corpse. Naturally only if the family did not oppose to it. Most of the time they initially protested indignantly, because how could they sell their loved one's corpse?! But increasingly larger sums of money were offered for it until finally they could not resist the temptation. The nation was so poor at that time that they needed every penny they could get. And because most of the buyers were not rich either, they quickly realized that it would be expedient for them to co-operate—if one required a left leg and the other the right one, then they both purchased the same corpse, and this way it cost them only half as much. Or they might find somebody who needed one or both arms, or the tongue. There was even a man who wanted the male organ because it had been cut off him when he was a child...

One of Tila's female guests wanted to have both her breasts replaced and brought in a corpse who had much larger and more beautiful breasts. However Tila refused to do it, saying that every operation of this kind was ultimately risky, and that she did not see why she should carry out a risky surgery when the women's breasts had nothing wrong with them. She was not going to break the elf laws just because of ridiculous human vanity! The woman left angrily and tried to spread negative rumors about Tila wherever she could.

One day a strange merchant arrived in the village. He set up a tent on the market square, and put a big table in front of it. On this he placed the naked corpse of a beautiful young woman, who had died from a stab through her heart. He began offering his wares to those who were interested.

"I have here a gorgeous young woman! There is absolutely nothing wrong with her! I found her body this morning on the side of the road as I was coming here, and it was still quite fresh as it hadn't cooled down yet. She must have been the victim of a robbery murder. You can clearly see that she's entirely healthy, young and beautiful! Anybody could make use of her legs, arms, tongue, or perhaps her nose or lips...."

"There's no need for lips, Tila can regrow those!" somebody shouted.

"Okay, well her limbs! But also her breasts, if some of you dear ladies are missing one or both of them. They could be yours! Who will make an offer?"

The body had to be bought in one piece. Tila often told them not to bring in individual limbs, because people would cut them off in a way that prevented her from being able to attach them properly. They were to entrust her with the dismembering; she wanted whole corpses.

Soon there was a great commotion at the trader's table. The trader praised the unparalleled assets and value of the corpse, and people stood around it as if he were selling some kind of fabric. They inspected it, even touching it to confirm that yes, it was now cold but still quite fresh, the flesh was springy... it really was excellent merchandise!

There truly was a huge demand. It was not only the inhabitants of Odun village that were in need, but crowds came from afar because they had heard they might be able to get new limbs here. They had to stay overnight in order to get to Tila in time if they had found a suitable body part. Suitable being the key word. Not many of them were willing to become disfigured by having an ill-fitting limb attached to themselves. Although Tila's transplants had begun relatively recently, people were becoming picky—they did not only want to get rid of their lameness, but wanted to look beautiful too. Naturally this increased the prices.

The woman was soon sold. She was bought in her entirety by a single man called Vupoler. Nobody knew why he needed the body because Vupoler was completely healthy, albeit extremely ugly. But the trader didn't care; the only thing that mattered was selling his merchandise. As it turned out, he did not just have that one corpse. Soon another one came out from the depths of his tent, this time a male corpse—a big, strong young man. He told them that this was likely to be the woman's husband, because he had found him in the same place. It was sold within moments for a very large sum, by a combined group of six men—one was missing both legs, one the left hand, another the right, one was missing his tongue, and the fifth and the sixth needed the eyes. But it was not over yet, because now the trader brought out the corpses of three children, saying that these were certain to be the children of the man and woman. They were sold too, at a slightly lower price.

Those who had bought the corpses rushed over to Tila right away, and she carried out the operations, starting with the group of six men, which they were very pleased about. This was followed by those of the children, while Vupoler remained last with the corpse of the beautiful woman. Tila did not know why he had come here if he was not crippled, but she didn't have time to deal with this question because she had so much to do. Although she now had a fair amount of practice in doing the transplants, they still weren't as routine for her as doing a tooth extraction.

Finally it was Vupoler's turn. "I would like to make a very special request, elf Tila," said the ugly man. "I'd like you to do a complete body swap on me."

"I'm not quite sure I understand what you mean by this," asked Tila suspiciously.

"I think you understand very well, you just find it hard to believe! But I can be more specific if you wish."

"Please do!" Djuli gestured in a queenly manner, who was standing beside Tila. "Although I think I can guess what you mean. You want Tila to transplant your head on this woman's neck!"

"Oh no, I wouldn't achieve much by doing that!" replied the man. "That's almost what I want, but a more perfect form of it. However I would first like to ask you, Tila, whether what I heard is true—that the essence of a person is their brain, the center of emotions and thoughts, and not the heart?!"

"Yes, that is absolutely true," nodded Tila. "And since I can surmise that you want a brain transplant, my answer is no! Most definitely not! All transplants are risky, which is why I denied

replacing a woman's two healthy breasts with a pair that were more beautiful. But the danger is even greater if I poke around with the central nervous system. I'm simply not willing to do that, especially in your case, with you essentially being completely healthy!"

"But I don't want you to tamper with my brain, it's fine as it is! Simply take it out and put it into that woman's body. Of course you'll need to resurrect the body, but I'm sure that won't be an issue for you, since if you can resurrect individual parts you should be able to do it with the whole body as well. She still has internal organs, but I have great faith in your knowledge and if it's not possible to make these function then you can use my own as a replacement."

"That won't be necessary, I'm perfectly able to resurrect them. The reason I am not able to resurrect a dead person is not because of their body but the death of their brain."

"Great, then what's the obstacle?"

"I've already told you, this is a task involving great risk, because it is not only the brain that needs to be transplanted. A person's brain does not exist in isolation, it is part of the central nervous system, which includes the spinal cord with all its blood vessels and connecting nerves, and how would I extract them from the vertebrae?! Even I am unable to do that. I would have to replace the entire spinal column, or cut it here," she said, pointing to the back of Vupoler's head, "which would not be a significant problem in itself, because things like consciousness and memories live inside the skull portion of the brain. It would be enough to transplant that section, but then I would have to align it with the woman's spinal cord, and do you know what that means?!"

"No, and I don't care either! This is important to me!"

"It is not important because it's not justified!"

"According to you. But I see it quite differently, honorable wizard. I have serious reasons for doing this, several in fact!"

"I don't even want to hear them, because none of them can be serious enough to risk your life for! Since if I do anything wrong you will die or become paralyzed, do you understand?!"

"I have great trust in you, and..."

"No!"

"But if you don't do it, then I'll die anyway!"

"Why is that?!"

"Please listen to me very carefully," said Vupoler. "First of all, since childhood I've felt that something went wrong when I was born, because I'm actually a woman, in soul anyway! A woman whose soul was locked into a man's body by an evil spirit. It's not as though I'm unable to react accordingly when I'm approached by a female, but that doesn't change my feeling that I'm actually a woman. Living the life of a man is torture for me! And now I finally have a chance to become one! Besides, look how ugly I am—my nose is large and crooked, my eyes are watery, my skin is wrinkled and blotchy... I don't even have the masculine benefit of women finding me attractive! And they are accurate in their judgment—I wouldn't be attracted to myself either if I was a woman. I don't even like myself the way I am! But I also have a third reason. I am one of the children of an estate owner, the eldest. Recently my father died, and my mother had already passed away even earlier. According to the law I should have inherited the family wealth after my father's death, but my brother cut me out of the inheritance. My younger brother. He could do this because the inhabitants of the castle never respected me, since I never took part in war-like masculine activities, such as fencing, horseback riding and fighting... You should understand this, elf, because I've heard that you don't like bloodshed either! So anyway, my brother was more respected than I was. He recently made an attack on my life, and I only just managed to run away. I was lucky that I could at least take some cash with me, and I almost spent all of it buying this woman's beautiful body. I'd

really like it if you could place me into her. If my brother finds me as I am, he'll recognize me and kill me in order to prevent me jeopardizing his dominion over the estate! However this way he'll never recognize me, and I could be a woman, a beautiful one at that... so everybody wins! Even my brother, because the estate will remain his!"

Tila was silent for a while, then said, "No, I can't do it! The risk is so enormous that..."

"Tila, if you don't help me now it means that not only can I not be a woman, but that I've squandered my money unnecessarily for the corpse!"

"That doesn't matter, I'm sure you can quickly resell it," Djuli reassured him.

"No, I want to be a woman, because I know that's what I really am! If you're going to be so stubborn, Tila, then I'll walk up to the closest cliff right now and jump off it! And I hope that my body is broken so badly that it will be easier to put me into the body of this woman than to put the old one back together. Of course it is possible that my brain will splatter on the rocks, but I'm willing to take that risk, because it'll still be better for me than living the way I am now!"

"Have you thought about what it means to live as a woman?" asked Djuli.

"Of course, and that's exactly what I want!"

"As a woman you have to give birth, and that's not pleasant!"

"I don't necessarily *have* to, but if I do ever give birth, I'm sure I'll manage it somehow!"

"And every month..."

"I know, I know!" the man cut in, gesturing wildly. "Although on the other hand, I wouldn't have to shave my beard!"

"Women are often beaten and raped..."

"Well I don't believe that will happen to me, because during my time as a man I've learned how to use weapons, so I'll definitely have more expertise in this area compared to most women!"

"Compared to women, yes! But women are generally raped by men, not other women, at least in my experience and observations!" said Djuli with great ridicule, who was to her greatest regret an expert in such cases of violence.

"The unexpectedness of it will assist me greatly," said the man confidently. "Besides, as a woman I might feel like learning how to defend myself, because one of my life's greatest wishes will have been fulfilled—I'll have become a woman! I'll be happy, which will make everything much easier!"

"You are completely crazy!" stated Djuli firmly, with deep conviction.

"Well of course I am, but you can't heal me any other way, so why shouldn't I become a woman?!"

"You'll regret it later."

"I already regret being a man *now*!"

"No!" said Tila

"Then I'll go. Just know that you've sent somebody to their death!" responded the man, and turned away.

"Wait, Tila!" Djuli said, and the man stopped. "What he's saying is true! This man really is crazy, and if that's the case then he really is capable of killing himself! And when you hear about his fate you'll feel terrible!"

"If I do something wrong then he'll die as well!"

"That's true, but at least he has a chance of surviving! Tell me, doesn't the opportunity to do such exciting work appeal to you?"

"Sure, because I love working, but the risk is too great!" said the elf reluctantly. "I'm not even sure he really would kill himself. Nobody would do such a thing!"

"Oh, come on! As a human I can tell you that suicide isn't particularly uncommon in this world! Anyway, there's a pretty easy way of finding out if this Vupoler is determined enough."

"How?"

"Like this!" Djuli pulled out a knife and placed it into the man's hand. "Here you go! Take this knife and pull down your trousers. If you really don't want to be a man, then cut off that which makes you one!"

"Then Tila will do what I'm asking?"

Tila nodded hesitantly. "Yes... yes, I suppose so. Then I will be able to see that you're hopelessly insane and that there's no other solution to your problem."

"All right, I'll cut it off, but I'd like to ask you to make it a little easier for me. Don't give me a knife, but an ax!"

"Why?"

"That way it'll be over in a second!"

So Djuli brought him an ax. The man knelt down in front of a stump, laid it on top and struck it with the ax... Within seconds he had fainted from the agony.

His awakening was much more pleasant however, as he came to in the woman's body. And although Tila was very concerned about the operation, it succeeded admirably. Joining the brain and the spinal cord required very precise work and it took a long time, but in the end the whole thing was much easier than Veeya's eye surgery.

"Wonderful!" cheered the... man... or woman? Who knew what this person was now?! "I have decided that from now on my name will be Aleeta. I came up with this name a long time ago, as I always fantasized that if I had been born a woman, this would be my name. I want to leave right away and experience what it's like to be a woman. Even the pleasures of making love!"

"Well, you should prepare for the fact that it may not necessarily be that pleasurable for you, since it usually hurts the first time. We elves have long been debating whether or not to eliminate the hymen," said Tila.

"Am I a virgin?!" marveled... Aleeta.

"Yes, and I know that because naturally I examined the entire body thoroughly so I could heal whatever was wrong with it, and this was unavoidable anyway as I had to revive every portion of the body from frostbite."

However the man was thrilled by this news rather than being bothered by it, since he was going to live the full life of a woman, and could even experience the wedding night! But he was surprised. "Then this woman could not have been the wife of that man, nor the mother of those children!" he wondered aloud.

"What are you talking about?" asked Djuli.

Aleeta told them that when he, as Vupoler, had bought the corpse from the trader, he had said that the family was probably the victim of a robbery. But according to this they were not a family at all, at most distant relatives! Djuli frowned because she suspected something was going on that she didn't like, but she wasn't sure what it was. In any case, Aleeta left and Vupoler's corpse did not go to waste – his arms, legs and other usable parts went to various cripples.

In the following days Tila's transplant work increased considerably, although nobody came with such a strange request as Vupoler. The reason for this increase was because the merchant, from whom Vupoler had bought the body, had not left the marketplace but continued to bring out new fresh corpses to sell every day. He said he had good connections and an extensive network of agents who sought them out, and that was why he was able to obtain them, however they were not to ask any further questions as the rest was a business secret.

The whole thing became increasingly suspicious to Djuli. "I simply don't understand where he's getting so many corpses from!" she said, expressing her doubts to Dredd on one occasion. "These are very high quality corpses, and some of them have only cooled down for two or three hours before being taken to the market to sell. He's been selling them there for a good two weeks now, and he sells at least ten per day! I'm suspicious of him doing something he shouldn't be. Besides, almost all of them are young or no older than middle age, and every single one of them has undergone a violent death—a stab through the heart, being hit over the head or strangulation! I wouldn't be surprised if there was some skirmish going on nearby, but the war is far away!"

"I don't mind if he brings a lot of corpses because then we get the intestines and internal organs, and those are delicious," said Dredd, rubbing his stomach. "But I'm also fine with us doing a bit of sniffing out, to see where he goes and when. Then we'll find out where all these corpses are coming from. We may even find a pile of them, which us Horks would certainly be thrilled about! The corpses can be kept with us too, it's as good as anywhere else, in fact they'll probably be safest if they're with us!"

"In any case, we'll do whatever you tell us to do, Djuli, since you're the goddess!" said another Hork called Brudj.

Djuli smiled at the thought that she had gone from being a slave woman to being a goddess. If anyone could do this it would be her. "And how do you plan to do this 'sniffing out', Dredd?" she asked.

"By literally sniffing him out! Some of us will surround the village from a distance, but close enough so that we can detect when he leaves, and then we'll follow him. Of course we first have to get near him at the marketplace in order to pick up his scent, but after that we'll be able to smell him coming from five hundred meters away, since we have brilliant noses—unlike you humans! We don't even have to see him to track him down. Just lead us to the marketplace and point him out, and we'll take care of the rest!"

And that's exactly what happened. Djuli went down to the marketplace along with two dozen Horks, eight of which weren't even adults but largish children, who found the whole thing to be an exciting game. Naturally these were "children" only by Hork standards—they weighed a minimum of forty to fifty kilos! An average adult male Hork rarely weighed less than a hundred and fifty kilos, and it wasn't uncommon for them to weigh two hundred. The weight of an adult female Hork tended to be around a hundred kilos, but there were some who reached a hundred and fifty. And if a forty to fifty kilo Hork child with his big teeth and huge claws got into a fight with a hundred kilo, well-built adult human, there is no doubt that the Hork child would have no trouble apart from a few bruises at most, however the human man would first die and then end up as a delicacy on the Horks' table! Because the Hork child only had to put the man's hands into his mouth once, and he would no longer have anything to punch with.

So the Horks went off to the market with Djuli. They looked at the corpse to feign interest, but in reality they were sniffing out the trader, who was beginning to worry about what they wanted. Did they want to eat his corpse?!

"You see, humans really are selfish! It's clear that they don't begrudge the dead from each other, only from us Horks!" Dredd murmured in his deep bass voice as he eyed the corpse.

Then the Horks left, but lurked near every village exit, waiting to see if the trader would come that way so they could follow him. A little Hork girl called Hratch was the lucky one to sniff out the trader's dark tracks. She ran over to Djuli excitedly. "This merchant has some great big tents in the mountains, a good two-hours walk from the village—over there, in a valley!" and she pointed to a

spot in the distance. "There were at least ten humans hanging about outside, but I could smell the odor of around a hundred and fifty people, who must be in the tent. They have a very bad odor!"

"What do you mean *a bad odor*?"

"I could sense the smell of fear, sadness and despair. The people in the tents are very afraid!"

On hearing this, Djuli's face clouded over. "I don't even have to go there, I already know what's going on! It doesn't take great wisdom, nor the shamanic abilities inherited from my mother to figure out where these high quality corpses have come from. This dirty villain bought himself some slaves and brought them here. He then kills them in turn and sells them, because he gets far more for corpses than for slaves! He may have been the first to discover this, but I'm sure that others will soon realize it too. Some may have even done so already, secretly slaughtering the slaves and making Tila transplant some of their organs into them. This is pure evil, much worse than cannibalism! We can't reward murder! We should never have started this whole thing!"

Then she made a decision. "We're going to put an end to this! My little Hratch, please run and call back all our Hork brothers, and tell them that I'll need them early tomorrow morning before dawn!"

Djuli accompanied them on this rescue mission of course. She wore a shiny chain shirt, a light-weight saber and a gleaming steel helmet, which the Horks had forged for her. Tila was not informed about any of it. It's not that she didn't believe she could persuade Tila of the necessity of this action, but she felt Tila's conscience would be calmer if she was confronted with a prearranged circumstance. Plus she assumed that if it was left to Tila, she would handle the situation with some of her gentle magic, like bringing the great itch upon the trader and his assistants. However Djuli firmly believed they did not deserve to continue living. As a former slave herself, she could easily sympathize with the other slaves. She already considered it a great atrocity to take advantage of another man's labor force and keep them in slavery, but how much more squalid it was for him to not just keep them as laborers but kill them!

Djuli got up well before dawn, told the Horks that it was time and they came. They expected it would be entertaining, and had an extra incentive because Djuli had told them beforehand that it was an opportunity to easily obtain some fresh meat.

"That's great, although you know it's not fresh meat we like best..." laughed Dredd.

"Don't worry about that. These are such rotten bastards that their flesh will deteriorate very quickly, the way you like it, since people who are this rotten have practically already reached the highest degree of deterioration!" laughed Djuli in response, but somewhat bitterly. She did not like the fact that such a degree of vileness occurred in the human world.

They arrived at the merchant's tents. Hratch was leading them. "There they are!" the little girl pointed ahead in the dark. Djuli was blind as a bat, but the Horks could see a fair bit better, as well as being able to use their noses.

"Yes, I can sense their smell too!" nodded Brudj. "Hratch is right, there are at least a hundred and fifty of them! Can we begin our attack on them, Djuli?"

"Yes, but be careful! Make sure you only kill those who are armed. The others are not to be hurt. I want the prisoners alive, because we came to rescue them, not kill them!"

"I know that Djuli, I'm not stupid!" said Dredd, and he horked a command that caused the Horks to move forward. They were not terribly cautious as they knew that they were much stronger, and had it been summertime they could have crept up to the guards and finished them off without a sound, but now the frozen snow crackled under their wide feet. The guards heard it of course.

"Stop, who are you?!" asked the first watchman they reached, although he found it hard to believe it was a human approaching. His fear began to heighten however, because a good two dozen Horks were coming towards him. He couldn't see them, but they were making so much noise that he was expecting a wild boar or a bear, and those were dangerous animals! Of course if it was a man, he could be dangerous too...

The creature approaching was definitely not human, he got that right, however it wasn't a wild animal either. Well, it may not have been an animal, but it was certainly wild! Brudj was the closest to the guard, and in response to the question immediately grunted in his deep guttural voice, "Your death!" causing the man to jump.

The guard already had an arrow placed on his bow and he shot it in the direction of the voice, but Brudj stopped it with the edge of his shield. Even without the shield, it would have whizzed right over his shoulder. The guard was basically ornamental out here, as he could see nothing in the darkness. For now even the stars did not illuminate their surroundings, the snow clouds extinguishing the lights in the sky.

Brudj was now standing beside the guard, projecting the large claw of his index finger—which until now had been retracted, and with a single horizontal motion cut the guard's throat. He not only cut through the main blood vessels but also his trachea and esophagus, completely severing his head. And he didn't stop there either, but went on to further mutilate the body.

They soon reached the tents and commenced their task there. Dredd sent two Horks out to search for and kill the other two men guarding the camp. The reason he knew that there were precisely two guards alive not far from them was because he could sense their smell. This also informed him of which direction they should head in. The Horks, Shrum and Krarm, made a start right away. The rest of them headed toward the tents to look around. Here their brilliant olfactory abilities did not help, since there were people in every tent. They needed to know which ones were armed and which were not. Finally when they were about to enter the tents, Dredd, the leader, suggested a different solution. "Stop!" he horked. "We can't see anything inside there. Cut the ropes of the tents and pull them off! Anyone who gets up and runs is not going to be a prisoner, because it's impossible that the prisoners wouldn't be tied up or handcuffed. And besides, we'll be able to see who has weapons. Kill those ones, but not the others!"

This is exactly what happened. They didn't even need knives to hack the ropes, the Horks' claws were sharp enough for this purpose. The tents fell onto the heads of those inside, causing them to swear loudly, although before long they realized it was a good thing since somebody was likely to come and pull it off them. When the men inside reached for their weapons and ran out from under the tents to see what had happened, they ran right into their assailants. Big, strong bear-like paws caught hold of them and giant teeth dug into their throats, or their heads were simply smashed in by enormous fists, and that was the end of them! The whole thing was over very quickly, and there wasn't even much screaming. The prisoners were surprisingly calm, because they knew that it couldn't get any worse for them if the enemy won. Even if they remained slaves, which was more than likely, they would still be alive and not killed off one by one like before.

After the Horks killed the armed men, they weren't too concerned about the handcuffed prisoners. They didn't even go near them, which was just as well, because if they had seen the Horks in the dark they would probably have died of a heart attack. They just lifted a few corpses onto their shoulders, stumbled home with them and then came back for another round. Being as strong they were, it was no more trouble carrying the bodies than it would be for an adult man to carry a decent-sized goose. Some stayed of course, not to guard the prisoners but to protect them.

More men might turn up, or there may still be some armed men among the prisoners. Besides, Djuli the goddess was still here, and she needed a bodyguard!

By the time the Horks returned from their second round it was beginning to get lighter. Now the prisoners could see them too, and screams broke out from among the group. So Djuli stepped in, telling them that they need not be afraid because all these creatures were her good friends; they were Horks. However all of them happened to come from faraway places that had not yet heard news of such a nation. Djuli thoroughly explained that the Horks only ate those that Djuli allowed them to, and she had forbidden them to eat anybody but the guards. After that she freed them, telling them to stand in rows of four and begin walking forwards. They obeyed her, trembling. Even though they no longer wore ropes or handcuffs, they were afraid to attempt an escape because there were Horks surrounding them from all sides, and any disobedience might result in having their throats bitten!

Djuli did not want to keep them as slaves, but she didn't yet tell them they were free, as she knew that the moment she did they would scatter to the four winds. First she wanted to show them to Tila, so that she could see that what she had done wasn't just senseless bloodshed but rather a very useful thing, because all these people would have died if she had not intervened. They were the living proof of her justified action.

On their way home she asked them who they were, and it turned out that not all of them were slaves, in fact most of them weren't. The merchant was not wealthy enough to buy lots of young slaves, although he only got good money for the corpses of healthy, young and beautiful people. That is why he or his men preferred to entice poor and usually single individuals that nobody would search for. He did the same with the beggars if they didn't seem very crippled, and it was even easier with them as it was enough to just offer them some alms. The child corpses were nearly all "manufactured" from beggar children. Beautiful women were the simplest to acquire, as he simply called on some of the prostitutes, who then never showed up again... Djuli could not figure out how the virgin girl Vupoler had bought was mixed into them; she must have been a unique circumstance. When Djuli thought about how pleased Aleeta was to receive the body of a beautiful virgin, she could only mutter, "Fortune favors the fool!"

Tila was rather astonished when she saw the hundred and fifty frightened faces. Djuli told her candidly what she had done and how she had done it. Afterwards she informed the rescued prisoners that they were of course now free, even those who had previously been slaves, because she, Djuli, was giving back their freedom. Those who felt they had nowhere to go were permitted to live with them, but in that case they would have to work.

Roughly thirty of them decided to go home or somewhere else, and all the rest stayed. It was Mr. Numo who was happiest about this, because although nearly half of those who stayed were children and the rest mostly men, there were still about thirty women among them and they were real beauties. Mr. Numo hoped that at least some of them would not reject his approaches. It must be mentioned that since the former slave women had been freed by Tila and Djuli, none of them wanted to sleep with him, least of all Djuli. It wasn't that they were old-fashioned, in fact some of them particularly liked this kind of fun, but they didn't indulge in it with Numo because their defiance gave them a sense of self-worth. It proved that they really were free, not slaves, and that they had a right to refuse to sleep with Numo if they didn't want to. And since they had not had such a right until now, they enjoyed enforcing it at every opportunity.

The newcomers were not burdened by memories of the past, so Numo was now able to accommodate not one but three gorgeous women in his house, whose "professions" used to be a vague transition between thief, prostitute and beggar. They were delighted to now be living on such

a beautiful estate, where even the work was easy, as Numo had told them that the heavy work was done by the elf and the Horks. Numo thanked Djuli for bringing the prisoners here and by doing so solving his long-standing problem of the woman deficit!

"I didn't do it for your sake!" responded Djuli.

"I know, I know, but thanks anyway..."

So this is what happened, and Tila was deeply saddened to learn that many people had been murdered purely because she had wanted to help the crippled. She could not deny that if she had not started the transplant healings then the trader would not have collected innocent people who were completely healthy, and then killed them and sold their corpses. It's true that many people would have remained crippled, but they wouldn't have died, and which of these was the least serious problem—being crippled or dying?! Especially considering humans themselves intentionally made some people crippled, either during war or as punishment with the help of an executioner.

"How true it is what the Great Elders say, that all activity is dangerous! Even the seemingly innocent act of healing!" said Tila, bursting into tears.

"Don't cry!" Djuli hugged her. "It wasn't your fault..."

"But it *was* my fault!"

"Come on, humans are the ones to blame for this!"

"No, the blame is mine, and the Great Elders will say so too!"

"This really isn't your fault. In fact I feel like I'm largely to blame because I'm your advisor and I know how humans behave, after all, I am one myself. I should have considered at the very beginning that something like this could easily happen! If you're guilty, then what does that make me?! You're not guilty at all, Tila, you only wanted to do good. I don't even hold myself responsible, although I am of course annoyed that I didn't have sufficient foresight. But this whole thing has to end as soon as possible!"

"You're right, Djuli. What should we do?"

"We will take the advice of the Great Elders and no longer do anything of this nature. So from now on there will be no more transplants, because you can't verify whether the corpse they bring in has suffered an accident or was the victim of deliberate murder!"

"All right, Djuli. I can see that there is no other solution," sighed Tila.

Djuli called some of the Horks and went down to the village marketplace, where she announced to everyone that they were not to bring corpses to Tila anymore, and she described what had happened. On account of this Tila had decided, on Djuli's advice, that she was finished with the organ and limb transplants. There would be no more.

"What?! But my son still hasn't got a leg!" shouted a lavishly dressed man in exasperation, and shoved ahead so menacingly that Brudj immediately stepped in front of Djuli and grunted at the man with his gaping mouth. He stopped at once, and even took a step back.

"There will be no more transplants because the elf has lost her confidence in you!" said Djuli. "Tila is still willing to heal after this, but only as she did before, without the use of corpses. She has no desire to be an accomplice in murdering innocent people!"

"But Djuli," objected another man, "you said that these people the trader murdered were all either slaves or some other kind of trash, like prostitutes, beggars and vagrants... and they're not much of a loss!"

"I beg your pardon—I am not trash!" shouted a woman in response, who probably was a prostitute, given her attire.

"Well I believe it *is* a loss," said Djuli. "And you shouldn't say such things, because I was also once a slave and I won't tolerate you talking about slaves in this manner! You should honor your

slaves, since they bring in profit for their owners! I feel it would have been a great loss if they had killed me when I was a slave!"

"Hardly! It would have been better for everyone if you had died, because you're the one who persuaded the elf not to heal us!"

"I've had enough of this guy!" said Djuli. "Brudj, Dredd, please punish him, but in such a way that he remains alive. Beat him, break both his arms and even cut off his dick if you like, because a man who doesn't value the lives of others should not reproduce!"

At that moment the Horks leapt forward, doing everything Djuli commanded of them. The man's male member was instantly devoured by Dredd, causing the man to scream out in agony.

"And don't you dare go to see Tila at the estate to have your arms healed, because if I catch you there I'll have you killed by my Horks!" Djuli shouted. Then she turned to the others, who had watched the scene in horror. "You must all be aware that I simply won't tolerate you ignoring the interests of the weak and defenseless so much that you even contest their right to live! Trust is a great asset, and that is what you've lost. The small boat of trust has sailed away forever! The elf no longer trusts humans, and nor do I. So this is how it's going to be, whether you like it or not! You should be glad that Tila is willing to do any kind of healing at all now. She's very sad that you hurt her, and was even in tears, because you abused her trust! Shame on you, you evil rat nation!"

"But it's not our fault—the trader did all this, not us!" a woman shouted.

"That's true, but the trader is also a human. And even if he died and Tila continued doing the transplants, with time somebody else would come along and do the same thing. Any one of you could follow in his footsteps! So you just have to accept it, since you can't force her to do something she doesn't want to. I'm going to leave now, because humans disgust me! Tila and the Horks are much more pleasant company than you are!"

"But you're also a human, so if we're a 'rat nation' this includes you as well!" somebody shouted at her.

"No, I disown my human self. I no longer consider myself human!"

"Then what are you?!"

"An ugly Hork or a bad elf, whatever you wish to call me! You may regard me as anything but a human from now on! Now I really must go, because it stinks so much here that my nose can't take it anymore!" said Djuli, and she did indeed head home. The Horks were surprised by this comment because the village did not seem that stinky even to them, let alone to Djuli's dull nose, but she explained that she had meant it in a moral sense.

In any case, Djuli had certainly infuriated the villagers, and those from other areas too. Even some of the lords, since several of them suffered from various forms of disability and they had planned to have themselves operated on. But now Djuli had arranged things so that there would no longer be the opportunity to do that. Everybody was angry with Djuli, not Tila, because she was the one who had discovered the trader was doing business with corpses, and she was the one who had the trader killed by the Horks. Djuli was the one scolding the villagers, and she had confessed to advising Tila not to do any more transplants. Djuli went everywhere with the Horks, and even stated that she didn't consider herself a human. Djuli was the source of everything bad and unpleasant, and it would be best if a brave man went and killed her!

Such a thing never occurred of course, partly because it was rare that Djuli went anywhere without the company of the Horks and did not often leave the estate, but mainly because everybody knew that the Horks considered Djuli a goddess for some incomprehensible reason, and so if someone were to kill her they should be prepared for the Horks to kill them, and be left to rot in disgrace before being eaten!

There was a gentleman who had two of his fingers missing, and he went to Tila, interrogating her about how she could possibly avoid doing something that was in their best interest. After all, most humans were completely innocent, so Tila was punishing the innocent too!

Djuli was right beside her, and said, "That's true. But first of all, the weight of the sin is so heavy that we must avoid the opportunity to repeat it at all costs! On the other hand, of course not everybody is capable of killing a person—most of them would shudder at the thought of committing murder. But it only takes one evil person who is willing to kill the innocent, and from then on everybody else would think that they might as well buy the corpses, since it's no longer a sin. They didn't kill them and they're dead anyway, and if they don't buy it somebody else will. Why should others get healed and not them?!"

"Well, they'd be right!" shouted the gentleman.

"No, they wouldn't be right. As the evil person would be killing the innocent *precisely* because there are people who are willing to buy the fruit of his evil-doing, so they then become complicit in the murders the moment they buy the product of this sin, the corpses!"

"I don't care, I just want to be healthy! I demand to be healed!"

"You can't demand anything here!"

"What do you mean I can't?! Do you think we'll tolerate all these rotten slaves finding shelter here to live a comfortable life if we can't even hope to be healed anymore?! You will get something in return for this! I order you to heal me, elf, and if you don't do it you can prepare for the worst!" and he poked Tila indignantly in the chest, his fingers shaking with agitation. Tila turned and left without a word, but behind her back a huge gurgling sound could be heard, and the protesting nobleman grabbed hold of his underpants in horror...

As the days went by the scandal grew, and in this it was Madun who was the guilty one. Although he was not the least bit crippled, the presence of Tila had been disrupting his business for a long time. Since all the runaway slaves had found refuge at Numo's estate, everybody in the village had gradually stopped wanting to keep slaves, and the number of slaves in the distant neighborhood had also sharply declined. The willingness of slaves to escape had increased dramatically, and the vast majority of the escapes were successful, that is the slaves managed to reach Numo's estate. There were supposedly more than five hundred there, excluding the Horks. Therefore Madun had to take his slaves further away in order to sell them. This was inconvenient, cumbersome, increased the mortality rate of the slaves as well as the cost, since the slaves had to be fed, and understandably he did not like this. Something had to be done about it!

So far he had not dared take any action, but now he felt the time had come. Of course he was not stupid, and he didn't believe that he or anybody else could overcome the wizardess, who even had the Horks' support. However he did strongly believe that if the people got together in sufficient numbers then they could defeat the Horks, if Tila the wizardess was not supporting them. It must therefore be ensured that Tila leave the area, and then everything would slowly pick up again. He anticipated that Tila's expulsion could be carried out fairly easily. The wizardess was kindhearted, and if she saw how much people hated her she would pick up her belongings and go somewhere where she would receive more love.

So he began a large-scale campaign. He and his men told everybody that the way things were going now was not good, and they were much worse off than when Tila had not been living in the area. "Just think about it," he explained in the bars at night. "We may now be able to be cured from some diseases, but a person is rarely afflicted with a disease! And there are still doctors and mediwitches, and they usually heal those who turn to them. Okay, I know that they ask for a lot of money, and Tila's healings are cheaper—for the poor at least and some even for free—but on the

other hand it's not really free because she draws a lot of money from our pockets in other ways. She's causing us a lot of harm! How? You don't know? I'll tell you! One example is that now we have to pay taxes to the evil Horks, as if the monsters were our landlords, who in addition desecrate our dead! Okay, sure, we only have to give them all sorts of disgusting offal, but who knows how long that will last because their appetite might alter to wanting more delicious morsels, and what will we do if they start demanding our geese or ducks, or ham?! Or if they develop a taste for our women and want to screw them, or even eat them?! Or do one before the other! Even if things do stay this way, it takes time for someone to carry them all that stinking offal! During that time they're unable to do their work or entertain themselves. These are all losses for us! But the most significant loss is that we can't keep slaves, since nobody dares to buy any! Why would they when they'll only try to escape?! This inhibits the progress of work, which is an unbelievably big loss! We are toiling here in Odun, and have to cultivate everything with our hands, while the inhabitants of other villages—who were more fortunate because an elf didn't move to their area—can keep slaves even now, and they're happily getting rich and laughing at our fate. This isn't good, we must do something about it! And as soon as possible before the Horks eat our children!"

This is how Madun spoke, and many listened to his voice. One day a good two hundred humans got together (it was surely by coincidence that Madun was not among them, as he had some urgent business...), and they went to Tila. Not for healing but to shout at her, albeit from a fair distance, that she should get out of here and go somewhere else, to leave them alone because things were much better before she moved here. Now they couldn't even keep slaves. She should piss off along with her Horks, and she might as well hang herself on a tree!

Djuli was not with Tila this time, and a cry could be heard from the crowd: "Let's beat her, she won't hit back anyway!"

This did not happen, but some of them began throwing stones at Tila. None of them had hit her yet, but the crowd was getting closer and closer. Tila just watched them sadly, then wept in silence. Seeing this, the emboldened crowd came even closer... Tila turned and started running towards the mansion. The people were now also running to get closer to her and perhaps even kill or beat her, but suddenly they all began scratching themselves fiercely, almost screaming in anguish, the itch was so severe. And it became even stronger the closer they got to Tila. When they realized this they all urgently tried to get as far away from her as possible, although their departure was not particularly fast, as they had to keep scratching themselves everywhere—on top of their heads, under their arms, between their legs, on their backs and stomachs... Even on their legs, causing them to occasionally bend forward while they ran so they could not see where they were going. This often caused them to fall of course, but getting back up was not as important to them as scratching.

Tila searched for Djuli and told her what had happened.

"I think that from now on the Horks should patrol the border of the estate so these kinds of things don't happen," said Djuli.

"No, no, that is not a good idea! I don't think they will come back, and besides, the Horks would kill them. I have managed to thwart their attack peacefully without any bloodshed!"

"But Tila, they don't deserve consideration! You heal them and then they want to beat you for it! You've probably even saved some of their lives!"

"I'm sure I have. I even recognized some of them..." cried Tila.

"You see, this a degree of ingratitude I don't even have words for! Anyone who could do something like that is such a disgusting worm that even the Horks would likely spit out their flesh! They don't deserve consideration!"

"They are just ignorant," said Tila, bowing her head as if she was talking to the ground. "Anyhow, I think they are right. Everything probably was better here before I came and interfered. I shall leave."

"No!" said Djuli in alarm, gripping Tila's shoulder so tightly that it hurt. "Don't leave! Look around you—the whole estate is beautiful now, and all these people are happy here because of you! You can't abandon us!"

"But there are a greater number of villagers, and they have said that things are worse for them and that I should leave."

"What is it that they don't like?"

"That I'm interfering in their lives. They said a lot of other things too, but that pretty much sums it up. And according to elf morality, it really isn't appropriate to interfere with the lives of those who do not ask for it."

"Okay. I have an idea, Tila. How about you only interfere with the lives of those who ask you to!" Djuli looked at her hopefully.

"What do you mean?"

"It's very simple. You are part of this estate. In a sense what Varbilma wanted has actually happened—you practically became a slave of the estate because you live here and work for us. Let it stay this way. Stay here, heal us, and work for us in whatever capacity you're able to. You don't have to bother with the village! The money we get from the healings is not that important, since we're wealthy enough and have plenty to eat, as we produce it ourselves. The villagers are ungrateful and don't deserve to be healed! If they don't want you to be here, that's fine, behave towards them as if you weren't here. You won't exist to them. If they don't want good things, then fine, you won't heal them! From now on you'll only heal those who move to our estate!"

"I cannot tell them this."

"That's okay, then I'll tell them!"

And that's what Djuli did. She went back to the village with the Horks. There she summoned everybody to the marketplace again, and announced that in view of the previous day's attack—which was the utmost evidence of ingratitude—she has advised Tila to no longer heal anybody from the village, nor anyone else who doesn't live on the estate. "This doesn't mean Tila will leave us. She will live at the same place, and nobody can say anything about that because the estate is not yours, you mob of rats!"

The villagers listened to all this, more disgruntled than ever. They did not want to harm Tila so that she couldn't heal them, they just wanted her away from the village. It was true that this meant she wouldn't be able to, but that didn't matter if she went away. If she wasn't going however, then they expected her to at least still heal them. This was the worst possible scenario. And it was Djuli who had advised the elf to do this. Oh, if only Djuli were dead!

But they did not dare attack her, since even now at least a dozen Horks were with her. So all they had left was their verbal objections, and they suspected this would not have much effect. Ultimately the strong are lord over the weak, and the word of the lord is always fulfilled. Djuli was now strong because the Horks obeyed her, and it definitely looked like this former slave was slowly becoming landlord of the village!

Nevertheless, the shouting began. "Since the arrival of Tila everything has gone wrong! We can't even keep slaves anymore!"

"My heart breaks for you!" thought Djuli on hearing this.

"And we don't want to live under the rule of the Horks!"

"We can't allow the Horks to oppress us!"

"Are you crazy, you brute?! Who the hell is oppressing you?!" shouted not Djuli, but Dredd at the speaker.

"I know that you rob babies at night and eat them! Everybody knows that!"

"You can't know such a thing because it's not true! If you don't believe me, come over to where we live and take a look at the area we age our meat. You won't find a single baby there!"

"Well, that's because you gobble them up fresh!"

"You fool, you don't even know what you're talking about, since it's common knowledge that we like aged meat! We'd be stupid to eat fresh meat when we can have something tastier, and we don't even have to work for it, just leave the meat to rest for a while!"

"You do eat babies! My neighbor's baby disappeared a few days ago, and I'm certain that you creatures ate it, even Madun said so! We will not stand for this! We demand that you give us back our freedom! We want to keep slaves again, but we can't do that if Tila stays here and everybody keeps escaping to your place!"

"Aha, so that's who's behind it all!" nodded Djuli. "I suspected as much. So it's Madun who is providing this great wisdom?! Hmm, that makes sense. He is a slave trader, right... at least he used to be..."

Then she suddenly turned towards Dredd. "Listen to me, my friends! They can't hate you any more than they already do. Come and grab your weapons, and we'll go visit my dear friend Madun!" She suddenly turned to the accusing man. "Because your neighbor's baby was taken by a wolf or some other animal, or the woman killed it herself or somebody kidnapped it, but it was not a Hork! If a Hork had this opportunity he would have kidnapped you or your neighbor, as there'd be more meat on you than on a baby! But Madun is going to get it now, because he's clearly telling lies! And anyhow, I've disliked him for a long time!" Djuli clenched her mouth firmly in satisfaction. She was happy that she could finally reprimand Varbilma's brother. How he had humiliated her! And what he had done to Tin!

The Horks immediately grabbed their shields with their left hand. Those who were not wearing helmets now put one on, and they held a huge straight sword in their right hand. The sword tips reached out beside their shields and they were instantly standing in a battle formation, their goddess disappearing between them. Since Djuli was much shorter than them, she could not even be seen among the Hork phalanx. She didn't even know where they were going, but she didn't need to as the Horks were leading her. She only had to tell them that Madun's house was next to that of the boot maker, and the Horks knew where this was. It could not be missed because a large boot was hanging above the door.

They were now moving forward, the first row placing their shields in front of them and the side rows to the left and right accordingly, protecting them from all sides and making the whole phalanx look like a large tortoise. If the enemy began throwing something at them, those in the middle of the group would raise their shields above their heads. Nobody dared to attack the Horks of course, although it was not unfeasible for them to be defeated if attacked by two or three hundred humans. But the Horks were massive and looked like dangerous predators, and the humans' fear was intensified by a superstitious dread.

"I beg you, gracious princess Djuli," said the judge in despair. "Please don't start a battle in the very center of the village!" He could not see her, but was shouting to the girl as he ran beside the Horks.

Djuli was ignoring the judge so completely that she didn't even answer him. Dredd told her that he could see some humans running away and they were certain to inform Madun, so it would be a

good idea to hurry. Djuli nodded and the Horks took on a faster pace, almost forcing her to run in order to keep up with them, but she managed to keep pace.

It was not far to Madun's house, although it was not so much a house but a small palace. Unfortunately the door in front of them was locked, however this did not concern Djuli. She didn't even bother telling the Horks what to do, as she felt that they understood battle better than her. Her only order was, "Kill everybody except the slaves! And I wouldn't mind it if you gave Madun a slow painful death!"

Locked doors were not a great obstacle for the Horks. Some, with Dredd and Brudj at the forefront, began belting it forcefully using their swords, while others stood on each other's shoulders to reach the windows. This succeeded, and the first of them were just climbing into the house through the windows as Dredd and the others broke the door down. The rest of the Horks ensured that any men defending the house who had peeked out the windows immediately received an arrow or knife in his chest or forehead.

Djuli did not enter the house for the duration of the battle, just waited outside for the result. Of course the Horks didn't leave her alone out there; two of them stayed with her, and considering that the bystanders showed little willingness to attack the Horks—given the large number of them—this seemed sufficient protection.

"This will have consequences, Djuli!" foretold the judge grimly.

"Should I take that as a threat?!" the girl asked in a sharp voice.

"Oh, no! It's just that... how can I put this... the landlord cannot allow somebody to carry out a private war on his estate!"

"I don't care about the landlord! I won't hurt him as long as he doesn't hurt me. But if he attacks me, things will turn bad! I was a slave once, but not anymore, and I have no intention of reverting back to one!"

The fight did not last long. Barely a quarter of an hour had passed before the Horks reappeared. "There were no losses on our side, Djuli, only one wounded—Brudj's arm was cut pretty badly by a sword," reported Dredd.

"That kind of thing isn't serious, Tila will heal it," said Djuli. "Did you find any slaves?"

"Yes, in fact we managed to capture Madun alive for you! Tell us, what kind of painful death did you have in mind for him?"

"Oh! Dredd, seriously, if you were a human I would fall in love with you!" Djuli hugged the Hork leader, and gazed into his boar-fanged face with a look of genuine love. "You could not have brought me better news!"

And Dredd, although he was an old Hork and this did not happen often, now began to purr in contentment from the great honor. The world's greatest being had hugged him, Djuli the Goddess, their Creator! And what a nice thing she had said to him!

"Oh, well actually it wasn't me that caught him but Brudj, and that's the reason he was injured. Because he could have easily killed him, but to capture someone alive is much more difficult, since Madun was not aiming to spare our lives..."

Just then Brudj came through the door, a makeshift bloody bandage paraded on his right arm. Djuli ran up to him and kissed him hard on the lips. "Oh Brudj, you were so fantastic! Dredd just told me that it was you who captured Madun! I love you so much! The only reason I'm not offering myself to you is because I know you consider me ugly. But I really do love you—you're a wonderful man! You've even uncovered my most secret thoughts!" and she kissed Brudj again. The Hork melted at receiving this honor and leaned against the wall, blinking in amazement, his face blushing like a young virgin.

Upon seeing this, many of the villagers began to vomit. "Eeww... kissing a Hork! She's kissing his mouth, which isn't just incredibly ugly, but has been used to gobble up smelly carcasses!"

Djuli just ignored them and entered the palatial building, into the large bathroom where she found Madun tied up. He was not completely intact—one of his arms was laying at a suspiciously odd angle, but he was still conscious. "Right, so this is where you are. Now you'll get what you deserve! You've humiliated me on many occasions, you raped Tin with your buddies, even though she's just a little girl, and on top of that you spread bad rumors about my upstanding Hork nation! But now you're finished!"

"I beg you Djuli, have mercy on me! I didn't do anything wrong, I just..." But Djuli did not hear him out.

"Bring me a long pole, sharpen it and impale him with it in the courtyard!" she ordered the Horks.

And this is what happened. It should be noted, however, that impaling was not an easy death, and not just for the convicted (for them it was not *difficult* but *painful*), but for the executioner as well. The pole had to be inserted between the convict's buttocks so deeply that when it was erected they would not slip off to the side, and would squirm about in vain as the pole slid deeper and deeper into them. But the pole had to be thick enough not to break, and a pole of this size doesn't slide very easily into the anus. This was usually solved by stretching the convict's legs apart, and tying their feet to the two ends of a board so that they would remain in this position. The board was tied to a horse and the blunt end of the pole was supported by something. Then they slowly started the horse moving, and the convict was dragged by the board. As this was happening, several people held onto the pole so that its tip was positioned correctly. As soon as the pole reached the required depth they stopped the horse, removed the board and stood the pole upright.

This is how it was usually done. But now it wasn't the weak humans but the strong Horks who were impaling Madun, so the whole thing was much easier. A couple of Horks held onto Madun's shoulders, one prized open his legs, and with a single push Dredd shoved the pole into its required place. After this they only had to support the pole and watch that he continued to slowly slip down it. But in order for him to suffer even more, they set a crossbeam at a certain height so that Madun could rely on his feet to prevent him from slipping further. They didn't want his death to be too easy for him.

By the time Madun had reached the cross beam his stomach had been pierced by the pole, and his howls were earsplitting when he regained consciousness, as he had fainted on several occasions. Djuli on the other hand just sat and watched. She did not feel sorry for him at all, because Tin had howled when Madun and his buddies were raping her, and he hadn't cared about Tin's howling then.

"Bring everything inside the house to the estate!" Djuli ordered her Horks. "And release Madun's slaves and send them here to me!"

Soon all the slaves were standing in front of Djuli and watching their former master Madun jerking on the pole. They had not anticipated this! There were at least fifty slaves in total, and Djuli addressed them: "I believe you've already met the Horks, since they sent you to me. I want you to know that I am Djuli, mistress of the Horks, their queen if you like, but most of all their goddess. And I don't just mean this figuratively, because even if humans don't consider me a goddess, the Horks quite rightly do, for it was I who created them! How this is possible is a long story, so I won't go into that, but it doesn't concern you anyway. I don't think you would understand. The point is that we live on an estate nearby, and it is not only Horks that live there but an even greater number of humans. I am now giving you back your freedom. You can go wherever you like, and those who

have nowhere to go will be accepted by us. They may accompany us to the estate and of course live as free men and women. You might as well know that I was also a slave a few years ago."

Now a woman's voice sounded from the back row, which happened to be in the Zunzan language. "Djuli, are you by any chance the daughter of a shaman woman called Muchi, and an uvi?"

Djuli was shaking as if somebody had poured a bucket of cold water on her. "Who are you?" she shouted in that direction.

The woman rushed to the front. She didn't even have to tell her her name, Djuli recognized her immediately. It was her childhood friend, Pilshi. They embraced each other, crying.

"How wonderful that we've found each other!" exclaimed Djuli. But it turned out that this was not their only joy, because two other women and a man from among the slaves were also from Djuli's village.

There were ten or so slaves who decided to go off somewhere else, and the rest followed Djuli back to the estate, Numo's estate. Although it seemed that this was progressively becoming not so much Numo's estate but Djuli's. All the slaves who wanted to stay came in handy, helping to ransack Madun's house and carry away his belongings.

Numo and Tila were dumbfounded at the great migration of people, but Djuli explained the situation. Numo nodded, seeming to be in favor of all Djuli's actions, however Tila scolded her. "You should not have killed Madun! And especially not in such a painful way!"

"I most certainly did have to kill him! He spread lies about you and the Horks, and who knows what he's said about those who live here! And what about how he treated Tin in such a filthy manner, not to mention my own insignificant person?!"

"Madun really did deserve what he got," said Numo.

"But surely not a painful death!"

"Tila, please don't interfere with this as well! It's something that's better off entrusting to humans, or more specifically, me. It will only create problems if you interfere, because you could easily take the side of the guilty party!"

"I believe you, Djuli, but unfortunately it was my own power that created the Horks, and I'm afraid that I've put such power into your hands, that... you basically don't have the moral sense to use properly!"

"What?! That I don't?! For goodness sake, would it have been better if this power had gotten into the hands of Madun, who rapes children?! Tila, another word of this kind and I'm going to be seriously angry!"

Now Numo turned to Tila. "Tila, I value you greatly," he said, "but this time Djuli really is right. This Djuli is a real treasure, a diamond, and not a rough one but a brilliantly shining diamond among women, and I'm blushing because I hadn't noticed until now that there was such a diamond on my estate! Djuli lived here in my house for years as a slave, and me being so blind and foolish, I didn't realize that I possessed such a treasure. But since Djuli has now essentially been running the estate, everybody is happier and richer, and even I feel better! I can clearly see that it wasn't Varbilma I should have married. But better late than never—perhaps it isn't too late..." And in front of everybody Mr. Numo bent down on one knee before Djuli and said, "With a pure heart, I sincerely ask you, dear Djuli, to be my wife!"

Djuli looked at Numo in astonishment and then laughed. "Well, this is an interesting experience—my previous slave owner wants to marry me! Hey Numo, didn't you just come to terms with me being a free woman? And now you want to force me into captivity in a different way?! Just get up!"

Numo got to his feet a little embarrassed. Djuli gave him a hug. "I hereby forgive you, Numo, for everything that you've done to me in the past. But I will not become your wife! I want to be free, free forever, and a wife is a prisoner of her husband, even if she is technically a free woman. And besides, I have declared before the villagers that I no longer consider myself a human. I am starting to see that in a certain sense Tin is right. Humans are too awful for me to state that I belong to them. I'm a lot worse than Tin, but in my own way I consider myself an elf or a Hork. I feel that I'm somewhere between these two beings. I will not belong to anybody other than myself, the elves or the worthy Hork nation!"

Numo sighed deeply. "I was afraid that this would be your answer," but then the man looked at Tila and said, "Djuli has rejected me. So you can trust that I'm not saying this out of self-interest but because I honestly believe it—that what Djuli did today doesn't deserve scolding but rather praise!"

Now it was Tila who sighed. "The villagers will not say that Madun received a just punishment but that Djuli is exercising the rights of a landlord over the village, because she has arbitrarily punished the worthy Madun, and simply had him executed because he dared tell the truth about the Horks. And incidentally, she also robbed his house. That's what they will say! I don't doubt that Djuli wanted to do good, but that doesn't help the situation!"

And the villagers did in fact say this. It was not just the people of Odun village either. The news spread far and wide that Horks were living here, and that everybody was afraid of them because they were wild, cruel and hunted children, and they had better beware of them. And since Getsnappy had said that the Horks lived around Snapp village, rumors spread for at least a good week's walking distance from Odun village that Snapp village was nearby. Some already began to refer to Odun as Snapp, instead of its original name.

This is what happened in Pakunda too, as they received news of everything there. And one day mother Muchi asked Judge Moko, "Didn't you tell me last time that this Snapp village was in Curse Valley?"

The judge retorted ominously, "Is there a problem with that village?"

"Well, I just heard that it's actually in Torgo, on the seashore!"

"Well I heard from my predecessor that this village was in Curse Valley," said the judge quickly. "And Curse Valley does extend in the direction of Torgo. My predecessor may have been incorrect. There may have been a small village there that the Torgs destroyed, but perhaps it wasn't Snapp. It's possible that Snapp village really is the seashore village you heard about, great arbitress!"

"But that means Snapp village was not destroyed!"

"It may have once been destroyed by the Torgs, and then rebuilt. Only the Torgs can know that."

It was ultimately this version that spread among the people, that Snapp village was situated in Odun's current location. It was said that it had always been an ancient settlement of Atlantua, until the Torgs maliciously destroyed it and killed everyone. Clerk Getsnappy was the only survivor because celestial powers had saved the baby by sending a Hork there, who had taken the child with him. The Horks raised Getsnappy, and when he grew up he began spreading the word of the True Faith. Meanwhile the Torgs built their own village, Odun, on the site of the destroyed village of Snapp. So now Torgo owned a region of Atlantua. And according to this, the real name of Odun village was none other than Snapp!

Therefore after the birth of clerk Getsnappy, Snapp village was also born—Getsnappy's birthplace! It became a real, existing village with existing residents. And existing Horks...

Chapter 12: The Miracles of Getsnappy

Kayam was a confirmed civilian. A born civilian. He had absolutely no sense of military discipline or respect for rank, nor formalities and courtesy in general. This was perhaps not surprising since Badjaharata, the great wizard, had programmed all the brain structures of Kayam's embryo for sensitivity to magic and mathematics, therefore he had few "resources" left for other things.

This was not yet apparent as he marched along with his released prison inmates to their prospective station, to a place where many other similar groups were gathering into a large army corps. So far Kayam simply hated the army because of all the walking he had to do, the heavy weapons and food packages they forced him to carry, and the rough manner in which the soldiers spoke. But as soon as they reached the border of the city of Munu, where they had to report for briefing as soldiers sent by Pakunda, it all came to light.

It turned out that they were required to first participate in some kind of training. Since Emperor Zor had introduced bureaucracy into the army and would not tolerate the soldiers attacking the enemy in an undisciplined rabble, he developed a realistic scenario of warfare. This was partially the reason he conquered his outnumbered rivals, and ultimately what enabled him to assume his imperial throne. Now he sent some of his well-trying instructors to each of the military groups, to make real soldiers of the crowd. Of course he was not expecting to achieve anything miraculous, and there was not much time for training, but they attempted it for one month.

Their main trainer was called Krift, whose rank was lieutenant. It was he who started the whole thing the day after Kayam's arrival, shouting, "Line up, you filthy scum!"

The soldiers lined up slowly, meanwhile jostling and chattering. Even Kayam complied, yawning loudly because he was sleepy. He knew what lining up meant—it was something similar to what he had once done in school.

"If I shout 'line up', then everybody is to get their asses over here quick smart! Anyone failing to do so will be whipped!" bellowed Krift. "Do you understand?!"

"Yes!" nodded the men, including Kayam. He did not like being whipped.

Krift bellowed again, "Attention!"

Everybody pulled themselves upright. Everyone except Kayam. He was looking around in terror, assuming there was some kind of danger, and asked, "To what?"

"Heh?!" The burly, strong lieutenant glared at him, not counting on such outrageous insolence. Occasionally a soldier had difficulty understanding something, but talking back...!

"Could you please tell me what I need to pay attention to," inquired Kayam politely. "Because I don't see any danger, and I don't want to have an accident! I appreciate very much that you're warning me of the danger, but I really don't know what to watch out for, and I must honestly admit that this truly has me worried!"

Everybody around him broke out in laughter, although Kayam had said this seriously. He really had no idea what the meaning of "attention" was in the army, and had even tried to be polite. Nevertheless, it was decided right then that Kayam was the fool of the century. Although they didn't even know his name yet.

"Hey, are you crazy or something?!" Krift stared at him, red from fury.

"No, in fact I'm actually quite smart. I discovered fractals, which is a kind of mathematical construction that..."

"Ah, so you really are crazy!" repeated Krift, interrupting.

Kayam just stared at him silently and thought: "This guy is just like the stupid child I explained my genius to, who then assumed *I* was stupid! Hopeless!"

This last word he stated out loud, gesturing toward Krift.

"Yes, you are hopelessly stupid, my young lad! What's your name, soldier?" he asked with suspicious gentleness.

"I am clerk Getsnappy," replied Kayam, because he had learned that this was what everybody regarded him as, and he did not want to have another hopeless argument, not to mention a beating!

"What?! How could you be Getsnappy?! My goodness, this guy really is a fool, or else a perverse liar!" shouted Krift. "Him, Getsnappy! He's insulting the great prophet, of whom I happen to be a loyal follower! You little pipsqueak clown, don't you dare say that again or else I'll skin the flesh off your back! What's your name, huh?!" he asked, and stepped up to Kayam, slapping him hard on the face.

"Kayam, my name is Kayam! I am Kayam, sir! Kayam, Kayam!" he shrieked frantically.

"Ah, so you do have your own name! Don't take the name of the prophet in vain again, or else you'll lose your pecker!"

The few men who were sent here with him from Pakunda were in no hurry to help Kayam either, as since they had also been locked up had never seen Kayam before, and therefore didn't know he actually was the "true" Getsnappy. This was how clerk Getsnappy became independent of Kayam. He had died in prison, and it was Kayam who joined the army. So he was written onto the list of soldiers as Kayam, not Getsnappy.

"Tie up this waster naked in the sun, to teach him some decent manners!" yelled Krift.

So Kayam hung there all day with his wrists tied by ropes, while the others trained far away. Nobody was concerned about him, even though he had fainted several times.

In the evening they untied him and he was permitted to sleep. But early the next day Krift again yelled at them to line up, followed by a call to attention. This time Kayam did not ask anything but tried to imitate the others as well as he could, pulling himself upright. So far things were going smoothly, but now Krift shouted, "At ease!"

"Finally!" slipped out of Kayam's mouth, who was very sleepy and tired, since he had not done well with his poor fitness after what he had endured yesterday. He immediately attempted to obey the "at ease" command by dropping to the ground. This of course could have no other consequence than Krift slapping him on the face and tying him up again.

Kayam had never in his life spent an entire day from morning till evening in the scorching summer sun, let alone bare chested. So the main result of being tied up the first day was that he got terribly burnt, and was suffering from mild sunstroke. When he had to line up the next day, every step was painful due to the clothing rubbing on his burnt skin. He had not even recovered before they tied him up again. It was quite obvious that he would not come away from this without serious consequences.

They brought Kayam down in the early afternoon, because the field physician reported to Krift that the foolish boy was barely breathing and unconscious. That he may not even survive in his current condition, but would certainly not last out there until evening. So they untied him and took him to the hospital tent, put a cool compress on his head and rubbed his burnt back with some very foul-smelling cream. That is all they could do for him. It was now left to Mother Nature whether he survived or not. They put some morsels of food and some water to drink beside him so that if he

regained consciousness he could eat. After that they left him alone, and for the moment he was the only occupant of the hospital tent.

Kayam tossed about unconsciously for days, occasionally blurting out phrases during his nightmares. He mentioned Getsnappy, the Horks, various mathematical concepts, and even the word "hopeless" repeatedly in his delirium. He finally came to for a short while, but although he had lost a considerable amount of weight he was not hungry, only thirsty. He drank a little and then fainted again.

It went on like this for a good two weeks, but toward the end he began to occasionally nibble on his food. He got better and better, but the thought was ingrained in his mind that humanity in general was totally and irrevocably hopeless. He was also determined to escape at the first opportunity, for he could not remain among such hopeless fools! They may kill him as a result, but it couldn't be worse than the kinds of torture he had already endured here. He needed to urgently get home so he could prepare his wonder weapons he had invented in prison, and then he would not get mixed up in these sorts of situations anymore. Escape was risky however.

His current situation in the hospital tent was not that bad; he did not have to do anything, just lay quietly while the others were sweating on the training field. There was only one problem—he could not go outside to do his business, because he suspected that as soon as they found out he could stand on his feet they would find an unpleasant task for him. So Kayam always feigned deep unconsciousness when the doctor or somebody else came in, and as far as his needs were concerned, always scraped it under the mat in the tent like a dog. The ground was hard, so he just spread a thin layer of sand over it and the whole thing was taken care of. It was covered by the carpet after all.

He had managed to stretch out this situation until the fourth week after his arrival at the camp. By then however the weather had cooled down, and he was forced to drape himself with the mat that covered his mess. The piles of manure had not yet emerged because of the thin layer of dust covering them. Around morning Krift and the doctor came to see him. Kayam could hear Krift's voice in the tent as he lay there feigning sleep. "We're leaving tomorrow. You say that he's already eating so he needs to leave too, whether he's recovered or not!"

Then a few kicks rammed into his side. "Hey you!" Krift said to him. "Get up, or I'll poke my sword up your backside!"

Kayam obeyed.

"Aha! I knew that you were well enough! You see, I'm a better doctor than you are!" Krift grinned at the doctor. "Now get out of here, you dirty fraud! You may have gotten away with avoiding the training, but you're only worse off now because you'll be unprepared for battle! Get your stuff together as your platoon leaves tomorrow!"

He attempted to kick Kayam again, but Kayam was on guard and stepped back. However Krift was not the sort of man who abandoned his decisions. He took another step towards Kayam, but this time his foot landed on some manure that was barely covered by dust. He slipped and fell, hurting his head badly, in spite of the fact that his face fell on something soft—another pile of manure! Kayam was beaten again after he had cleaned himself up, but it was done carefully to ensure he could still go to war the next day.

Kayam was fortunate that Krift was not his captain in the war—he only trained them. They got another man for a commander, whose name was Girlimpay. But he was not much better than Krift, despite the fact that he called himself a loyal follower of the prophet Getsnappy. Kayam slowly began to hate his own creation, Getsnappy. "This Getsnappy must be a terrible guy if every jerk happily becomes one of his followers!" he thought.

The first day's march already completely destroyed him. He panted, stumbled and had all kinds of problems. He was sweating like an overworked runt and drinking water in vain, as he could not drink enough to quench his thirst. This was astonishing to experience, because even half-dead he could not stop thinking that the more he drank, the thirstier he became. He wasn't thirsty at the time he was drinking of course, but a few minutes later he seemed to be even thirstier than before.

He began mulling over this conundrum, and since he had something to think about he quite tolerably lasted until evening, by which time he believed he had come up with a solution. "The problem could be," he thought, "that perspiration is not ordinary water, but contains salt. This must be the case, since it tastes salty on my tongue. So if I'm sweating, my body doesn't just lose water but also salt. And obviously other substances as well. Therefore water is not suitable for quenching thirst. I must experiment with a better alternative! Of course this drink must consist mainly of water, as a large part of perspiration is water, but it has to contain other substances too..."

So Kayam set about this task, and by the end of the evening had already prepared his own "physiological saline solution". This is what he called the liquid. First of all he roamed the neighborhood, looking for all sorts of herbs and berries he knew to be harmless if cooked, and preferably tasty too. He collected a decent handful of each of these in his helmet. There was nettle, elderflowers, chamomile and dandelions, which he tossed into water and boiled, then extracted the cooked plants and discarded them. He continued boiling the liquid, adding some chunks of bacon. Much of the fat was cooked out of them and it covered the top of the concoction. The bacon was also removed, which of course he did not discard but ate. However it was not done yet, as the thick, dark, greasy liquid had to be thoroughly salted...

"What's this going to be?" inquired his commander, Girlimpay.

"Physiological saline solution," replied Kayam.

"What the hell's that?"

"It replaces the substances escaping my body during perspiration, and will therefore better quench my thirst!"

"You really are completely nuts!" said Girlimpay, sniffing the air suspiciously. "You're really going to drink this horrible stuff?!"

"Well, yes!"

"I don't believe it! It even smells awful. Who would be crazy enough to drink that?!"

"I'm going to drink it, although I'm not crazy!"

"But it can't be any good!"

"It's true that it's not very tasty. It would be perfect if I could put some honey into it!"

"What?! But I saw you just put salt into it before!"

"That's precisely why I need it! If I add some honey to it then I could salt it even more, so that the sweet and salty taste would be proportionate. However unfortunately I don't have any honey."

"Well listen, you fool, I have some honey and I'll give it to you. But if you mix it in and don't drink it then I swear I'll trample on your dick! I won't tolerate waste!"

"I will drink it, I will! But not today—tomorrow, during the marching. I've made it for that specific purpose!"

"I'll be very curious to see that!" said Girlimpay, and did in fact give him the honey. He then checked to see if Kayam was filling the flask with the liquid, and took it from him, saying he didn't want Kayam cheating and pouring it out.

The next morning he handed it back to Kayam, who was so distrustful of people that he had to verify that it really was his mixture in the flask. It was indeed. Girlimpay had not poured it out or replaced it with something else. Everybody watched Kayam with keen interest and barely contained

laughter, to see how he would endure the march. Today Girlimpay wanted them to march a considerably long distance, until it got dark. They were all certain that Kayam would not be able to manage the trek, that he would collapse and that would be the end of him. Especially when he first became extremely thirsty, since he did not have any drinkable water. All he had was that terrible slop in place of water in his flask, and they may not be able to find drinkable water on the journey. Everyone was determined not to give Kayam any water. Let the fool suffer so they could laugh at him!

After the first hour Kayam was already reaching for his flask, but he did not drink much, little more than a sip. The others looked at him grinning, as most of them were trained strong men and had not drank anything yet, intent on saving their water. However later on they were guzzling it down. Toward noon many of the soldiers' bottles were empty. Kayam had only consumed his second or third sip, and was looking remarkably more cheerful than on the previous day. In addition, his bottle was almost still completely full. At around three in the afternoon, as if a thousand devils had gotten into him, he showed no sign of collapsing. He was even sweating less than yesterday. There were soldiers who were already staggering with fatigue, yet Kayam was in such a good mood he started whistling. His flask was only half empty, and he was sure that its contents would easily last until late evening.⁹

"If you don't shut your whistling mouth I'm going to make a thrush out of you, because I'll slap you so hard that you'll fly up to the trees among the birds!" said an old soldier ambling beside him, who was drenched in sweat and wheezing loudly.

So Kayam stopped whistling, but he did not understand. Yesterday the problem was that he was tottering, in a bad mood and could not handle the marching, and today it was that he was fresh, in a good mood and could manage the marching quite well. How on earth could he please the others?! "Hopeless!" he uttered, waving his hand resignedly.

In the evening Commander Girlimpay tasted Kayam's magic drink, but the first sip barely reached his mouth before he spat it out. "Eew, this is poison!" he frowned at Kayam. "You're not even human if you can swallow this, it's horrible! I'm not drinking anything of the sort, I'd rather sweat!"

"Because *you* are the stupid one, not *me*!" thought Kayam, but he did not speak his mind. Instead he immediately started preparing another dose of the "wonder drink".

Nobody followed suit. Not even Commander Girlimpay. He did not give Kayam any more honey either, saying he did not want him wasting it on stupid things. But Kayam went around the commander, and the next day as they were marching through a village he made a trade for about two kilos of honey with one of the peasants, and since he did not have any money he gave up his scabbard in exchange. When the others asked where he would keep his sword, Kayam replied that he would just tie it to his side, as this way he would not have to drag it out if the enemy attacked him unexpectedly. And since he was so suspicious of his beloved fellow humans, he mixed the honey he had received with lots of salt, right there before them. This way it was completely useless

⁹ Author's comment—It cannot be said that such a mixture would be particularly tasty, but not as foul as many would think. I can assure you that this is true, because to my greatest regret I myself was forced to be a soldier for one and a half years. And during the marching training sessions I drank such a concoction, which I prepared myself, although instead of fat I used butter and added a tea bag to it. Unfortunately I did not have honey, so I sweetened it with sugar. So feel free to try it if necessary, dear Reader, because its effect was exactly as I wrote down in the case of Kayam—I could happily do the fifteen kilometer training session, and still had some of the drink left over in the evening (the military flask was only half a liter). I was not thirsty, although many of my new fellow recruits, who looked a lot stronger than me, were collected from the side of the road by ambulance.

to anybody else, as it would be unpalatable. It was now only good for Kayam's terrible tea, assuring he would be able to cope with the marching for a long while.

Nevertheless, the marching was not Kayam's main problem. From the very first day of his war retreat he thought hard about how he could save his skin when it came to an actual battle. Because he had no illusions about what would happen to him in a battle if the situation turned serious. He had always pulled the short straw at school when it came to fighting! From the first moment he was very worried that they would expect some dramatic ancient savagery of him, to have to defeat some great overpowering enemy, although to be honest he was also reluctant to attack someone much weaker than him. Because he may be able to easily defeat a weaker person, but there was still a chance he might suffer injuries, since his opponent would be defending himself. And Kayam did not believe killing someone would bring him joy if he was given a deep cut to his arm beforehand. It would not be another's death that would make him happiest, but if he were to remain free of trouble. Even if he managed to defeat the enemy in a way that prevented himself getting injured, he would probably still sweat a lot during the fight, and that would be rather unpleasant! He had unfortunately sweated plenty already...

It turned out, however, that although Kayam could say a lot of bad things about Commander Girlimpay, the one thing they had in common was their world view—Girlimpay also wanted to stay alive! And since their unit was given the task of breaking through the group of Torgs who had blocked the road to a small Torg city called Nokoli, and then conquering Nokoli, one evening Girlimpay suggested the following: "Boys, it's a fool who risks his life when he can be successful in other ways! We are not interested in killing the Torgs, while they want to kill us. We just want all the loot! Or is there anyone stupid enough here who thinks otherwise?!" and Girlimpay stared suspiciously at Kayam. But Kayam did not want to protest at all. He wasn't even interested in the loot so much, he just wanted to get home as fast as possible so he could prepare his wonder weapons. But it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to obtain a whole bunch of loot, provided they didn't want to send him to the underworld for it. One thing was certain—obtaining loot was far better than fighting! So he did not say anything. The others nodded vigorously and agreed.

"Then I say," continued Girlimpay, "that we leave the Torgs here in the cove. Let them patrol the area. It's not them who are important to us but the city of Nokoli. Let's just go around them!"

"But sir, it's not possible to go around them—the place is surrounded by mountains, it's totally impassable!" objected one of the lads.

"That's just it! They'll believe this too! But I think it's a smaller risk to fight the impassable wilderness than to fight these men. At least the wilderness won't shoot arrows at us! Besides, I don't think this wilderness is particularly impassable. Sure it's all steep cliffs in this part, but a good half day's walk from here I saw a footpath on top of the cliff, at roughly the height of four men. I suggest we go back there and climb up somehow. The footpath is bound to lead somewhere, whether a man or animal has created it. This way we'll circumvent the enemy, and we can hit on the unsuspecting city and conquer it with minimal combat!"

The proposal was well received. They walked back to the aforementioned spot, cut down a few trees, and constructed ladders in order to climb up the cliff. It turned out that there really was some kind of track made by hoofed animals, and they followed it in single file. Although they were at times required to pass a huge abyss only a step away, they still considered it more pleasant than battle.

Three days later they reached the outskirts of the city of Nokoli, which was rather small in size and more like a large village than a real city. It wasn't even protected by a wall.

"Now I hope you know what your job is, moron!" the commander inquired of Kayam.

"Why, what is it?!" asked Kayam, frightened.

"It's to run into the city and kill anyone you see on the street and in the houses, and then collect all their valuables!"

"Right!" replied Kayam. "Of course, it's quite clear—I'm to kill everyone who wants to hurt me!"

"That is not what I said, you fool, you brainless animal! You also have to kill those who don't want to kill you!"

"Them too? But why?"

"Because as soon as you turn your back to them, they might stab you with a knife!"

"Oh, well yes, I didn't think of that. So all the men have to be killed... Right, I get it, I'm not stupid! Of course, it's as clear as day, indisputable—every man I see..."

"And the women!"

"I'm sorry?"

"They could also stab you. So it's better if you get in first!"

"Okay, sure, so we only leave the children alone..."

"No, you kill them too."

"Even the babies?!"

"That's what's generally done."

"But that doesn't make sense, a baby can't do any harm, and..."

"Just shut up and do what I said! We can't take any prisoners now because we have to keep moving on. Besides, the enemy is behind us and we couldn't retreat with prisoners, so everybody must be killed. Well, come on, weapons in hands boys and let's move ahead!" Commander Girlimpay ordered. The lads broke out into a loud "hurrah" and began running toward the unsuspecting city, first throwing down their rucksacks under the trees.

Kayam also began running, however took his rucksack with him. He had no intention of throwing it down, not a chance, since it contained the life elixir, the salted honey! Without that he could not prepare a drink that would make the grueling march bearable. He was not about to leave that unattended so some nasty thief could steal it! After all, it wasn't only fellow soldiers that might come here. It wouldn't be much help to him if the thief noticed much later that the honey was not suitable for him to eat because it was salty. Conceivably even one of his fellow soldiers could sneak back here and pour the honey out, just to annoy him. People could be so evil!

"You dimwit, get rid of your backpack so that..." began Commander Girlimpay, but Kayam interrupted.

"I have no intention of taking it off, since it's protecting my back!" He did not tell them that it was just that he didn't trust his dear fellow soldiers.

He would have preferred not to take part in the whole expedition, to instead sit under a tree and wait until the whole thing was over, even if it meant giving up the potential loot. But he knew that he couldn't do this, because then the others would beat him up and perhaps even kill him. So he figured that he would run with the others; not in the first few rows but somewhere in the middle, or even further behind. Although at the same time he did not want to be at the very back, so he watched the others vigilantly and always made sure that there were three or four of them running behind him. If he behaved this way nobody could tell that he was a coward, since he was not the last. Why wasn't he the first? Well, he never said that he could run the fastest!

By the time Kayam reached the little city, the battle was already in full swing. And because Kayam did not feel the need for somebody to shoot him down with an arrow, he ran into one of the first houses that seemed quiet because its residents had either been killed or had escaped. Their

being killed was more likely, as the room Kayam entered was the kitchen, and in there lay the corpse of a beautiful woman who had been slayed with a sword. From one of the rooms inside he could hear the clamor of a search, but when he looked very carefully he saw the back of a fellow soldier and calmed down. It was not the enemy. If he was here then Kayam was allowed to be here too, because this was a battle, and he was not hiding at all now but fighting with great zeal—he was helping his fellow companion occupy this house! He was doing a great and noble job in the interest of his homeland, Atlantua!

Meanwhile, as he was looking around it occurred to him that a picture on the wall was lopsided. It bothered his aesthetic sense, so he adjusted it—and lo and behold, he noticed a small cavity behind the picture, which happened to contain a pair of gold earrings. They were sure to belong to the woman who was stabbed. Kayam took them out and looked at them with pleasure. Well, this expedition had turned out to not be so bad after all—he already had some loot! Not that this was particularly important to him, but it was still a bonus. As far as he was concerned, he didn't quite understand why people were so obsessed with gold. He knew it was very valuable, but this was not a satisfying explanation for the covetousness mankind had for it. Since it was only worth so much because people valued it. But why was it valued?! What was its use? It was beautiful in its own way because it glittered, but many other things glittered too. At the same time gold was heavy, and it was a soft metal so you could not make sharp tools from it. It seemed Kayam's opinion of gold was very close to Djuli's view, in fact perhaps even identical.

Kayam was ruminating over this as he looked at the earrings, when the soldier suddenly appeared from the other room. "Hey hey, that's mine, my friend!" he said, snatching the earrings out of Kayam's hand.

"What do you mean? I found it!" Kayam protested, but the soldier shoved him so hard that he fell onto his back.

"Shut up, you fool! How could it be yours when I was the one who occupied this house?! Get out of here and find yourself another house, and don't be so impertinent as to put your boorish face on something I've acquired! If I see you here once more I'll pin you down with the tip of my sword!" he threatened Kayam, and swung his leg out to kick him. But Kayam made off on all fours, then jumped up and ran away. His entire being was in ebullition against the whole stinking, unjust world. The earrings should indeed have been his claim, because that stupid soldier would never have found them otherwise! It would not have occurred to him to adjust the picture.

He stepped out onto the street and continued on. Far away in the distance the noise of battle could still be heard, but around it everything was surprisingly quiet. There were dead bodies laying about in several places, and Kayam discovered one of his fellow soldiers among the dead, but the majority were Torg civilians. Kayam was not heartbroken by the death of the soldier, nor for the people of Torgo. He was a rather insensitive stump, and despite the many dead bodies surrounding him, the only thing on his mind was that it was almost noon and it was time to eat lunch. This great warfare was no more than a fuss about nothing, and manslaughter was simply unworthy to Man's common sense because it wasted the value of other men. Their death was meaningless, it had no benefit. It would be more logical if the prisoner was sold as a slave. But even that was pointless in its own way, because the other person isn't going to want to be sold so he'll defend himself and a fight will break out, and then one of the two will likely die. Therefore the risk of losing a human life was high either way, and in that case it would be better to leave the whole thing alone and let everyone live in peace. But hey, people were not logical. They were all hopeless, every one of them!

As he looked around he saw that Nokoli was actually built at the foot of a steep mountain. He walked with great caution, toward where the almost vertical wall of the mountain rose. He

suspected that nobody would have escaped that way because there was no road there, and if there was no road known to the residents of Nokoli, then he would be very unlikely to run into an enemy. But on his way there he deliberately poked his sword into a corpse in order to make the tip bloody. Then they wouldn't be able to say that he didn't fight!

As soon as he reached the cul-de-sac he noticed a large house at the end. It was built from beautiful white stone, and in a slum such as Nokoli it seemed like a palace! Kayam picked up his pace to reach it. He was halfway down the street when several soldiers came out of the house, and laughed at him. "There's no point going in there, you idiot, we've already taken everything!"

"That's alright, I'll just take a look around. I might still find something. Anyhow, I have some important business to take care of—I'm searching for butter to put into my drink!" responded Kayam, without changing direction.

"Let him go—he can trawl through the empty houses and gobble up the food. Then we'll have more treasure for ourselves!" the others laughed.

So Kayam entered the beautiful, large house and was completely alone. That is, if you didn't count the corpses. He went into the dining room and saw that the family had just been preparing to eat when they were attacked. The head of the family, a large bearded man, was laying there dead, along with his wife, two sons and daughter. Even a baby lay among the dead bodies. Somebody had taken the baby by his legs and smashed his head against the wall. But the table was filled with all sorts of goodies! There was a roast, fresh rye bread and other delicacies too. The roast was not completely untouched, for the soldiers had taken a few bites, but as far as Kayam could judge they mostly consumed the wine, which he didn't much care for. In any case, there was plenty of food for Kayam, and he did not hesitate as it was a long time since he had eaten such delicious food. He filled his belly amidst all the dead bodies, which did not spoil his appetite in the least. When he had finished the feast, he did not stand up but sat there rubbing his stomach in contentment, as this was the first time it had swelled so much since his departure. He scornfully thought about all his stupid, hopeless fellow soldiers, who had left behind all these earthly goods in order to run after the inedible gold trinkets. He didn't find it urgent to search this house. Gold was not that important, and besides, whatever was here was surely already taken by the soldiers. The hopeless idiots!

He was sitting peacefully when he heard some movement in one of the distant rooms. He was attentive to the noise, and even a little scared. What if the enemy was hiding there?! No matter how worried he was, he believed it was better to be certain than uncertain, so he took his sword into his hand and sneaked carefully toward the room to take a look inside. Because it may just be a small dog or cat, which would be no cause for concern, but if he saw some strong man then he would cut and run!

It was not a dog or a cat, nor even a man. A pretty young girl, perhaps twelve or fourteen years old, had been hiding under the bed in terror and was now climbing out. She must have thought the enemy had gone because Kayam was sitting so quietly, filled with the pleasure of digesting the banquet. When the girl noticed Kayam she screamed so loud that he was almost deafened. Then she knelt down in front of him. "I beg you, please have mercy on me! Don't hurt me!" She clasped her hands together as tears fell in streams down her face.

On seeing this, Kayam first felt great relief that he had not found some dangerous enemy. Then his soul was filled with triumph. Well, now he was the Great, the Strong, the Powerful one! Now they were begging him! Now this girl was in his power and he could do whatever he wanted with her!

However the intoxication of his triumph only lasted a few seconds, as a moment later he felt ashamed. How was this a triumph?! This?! Come on! What a disgrace! Had the rough, brutish

soldiers depraved him this much?! How could he not see that this was just a terrified little girl?! To boast about a pathetic youngster like this would be appropriate for some mentally retarded numskull like his fellow soldiers, but not him! After all, he was not just anybody—he wasn't an Insignificant Nobody, he was Kayam the Genius, the Glamour of the World, the Wonderful, the Untouchable, the Great, the Diamond atop the Crown of the World! He was obviously mistaken in his thoughts earlier. There wasn't anything great about this girl begging him now. Even though he was not particularly strong, compared to her he was. He could strangle her with his bare hands, and he even had a weapon, whereas the girl was unarmed. Of course she was begging him! There was nothing extraordinary about this. It wasn't a triumph. Such a victory was simply unworthy of him. He was destined for much greater things! What *would* be a worthy triumph for him? Kayam pondered over this.

As he stood there above the girl, his silence filled her with absolute terror, although he had long forgotten about the girl as he gazed into the distance. The girl could have left, even taken his sword and stabbed him, and Kayam would probably not have noticed. But the girl naturally thought she had encountered a normal, "regular" soldier, so she didn't do anything of the sort, just continued heartrendingly begging for her life. Kayam didn't even hear her words. He was thinking about the fact that the others most likely relished these moments, for women and children to beg before them or even strong men, so they could prove themselves to be stronger. But he, Kayam the Wise, had just realized that this kind of triumph was not worth anything, less than dogshit, because he was called to do far greater things. But what exactly?!

"I should be defeating some horrible, frightening monster!" he thought. "Like in fairy tales where the hero slays the dragon! Naturally not with my bare hands, or a sword, or with any other weapon... but with my mind! With my knowledge! With my inner being! And I don't even necessarily have to kill him. Because if I kill him then it's done, finished, and I can't show it to anybody! But if I could lead him on a chain... Although that's no good either, for what's it to me if I capture a single monster?! I am Kayam! I have to force myself to defeat ten... no, a hundred... what do I mean a hundred—a thousand, even a million terrifying, horrible powerful monsters, because that alone is worthy of me! Not such worthless degenerates as humans! After all, what is any man compared to me?! It is simply not worthy of me to rule over them!"

Kayam chewed this over with perfect abstract form, worthy of a true mathematician and irrespective of the given objective reality, which was unfortunately that he was currently being forced into a war by precisely these unworthy people, despite the fact that Kayam didn't like or want this war! And this didn't involve Kayam ruling over people at all, except for perhaps this little girl! He was just saying that ruling over people was unworthy of him, although he had not yet even acquired this dominance.

"Slavery is the real triumph," Kayam thought, "but not slavery over people. For how much better is it for a master to rule over someone, and instead of killing them insist that they serve him! Since then he can enjoy his splendor and dominion, not just for a moment during the act of killing, but whenever his ruled subject serves him. In fact, even when they are not serving him, for if I am the master then I can use their service anytime I want. I should be doing the sort of thing as when a victorious conqueror leads the nation in chains! But this is no good either, because humans are too unsuitable to be subjects of domination. I can just imagine capturing a bunch of people and then them constantly making a racket with their chains, not allowing me to sleep, and messing up the yard around them... Well thank you very much, but I've had enough of inhaling their stench in prison! And if I removed their chains they would immediately escape! Plus I'd have to feed them! What I really need is some horrible monster, in fact several, whom I don't have to feed or at least

not very often, and who don't bellow into my ears when I want to rest. They would fulfill my desires, everybody would fear them, and they wouldn't require a lot of space so I could collect a whole lot of them. Yes, that's the sort of thing I need! But what could it be, since a monster is only terrifying because it's big, and if it's big it takes up a lot of space! Heck, I can't believe it—I'm caught up on some minor detail when world domination is almost within my reach! Although unless I decide which enemy I should mobilize my genius abilities to defeat, I can't deal with the relatively insignificant problem of how to defeat this enemy that is terrifying to everybody else! I'm the only one who knows what is worthy for me to fight, so the conquest won't be that problematical because with my mind it's impossible not to find a solution!"

Kayam had no doubts at all that he could defeat a monster that was unconquerable by others. This was as fundamental and evident a fact as a mathematical axiom. How could he not defeat it, since he was none other than Kayam the Genius!

Kayam was so immersed in thoughts about his life's purpose that he had been standing there for a good ten minutes already and had not said anything. The poor girl had almost died from fear. Finally, not knowing what else to do, she slid down to Kayam's feet, embracing and kissing them as a sign of honor. This distracted Kayam from his pensive mood. He looked at the girl as if he was seeing her for the first time in his life. "Hey, who the hell are you?!" he asked in astonishment. He had completely forgotten how he had come to be in the room, and wondered where this little girl had come from.

"My name is Ivy, my great lord! You're not going to hurt me, are you?! I'm begging to your generosity and good heart!"

"Hurt you?! Why the blazes should I hurt you?!" Kayam was bewildered, and then suddenly had an uncomfortable thought—the girl was right. He was here for the express purpose of hurting her! Along with everybody else, since Girlimpay had commanded that every person was to be killed. Everybody—which meant this little girl as well! However there was a definite resistance in his soul to do this. That is if he had anything like a soul at all. If he did, it must be a very resilient one, since he had been heartily consuming food among the corpses of her slaughtered family! Yet somehow this soul had now become activated. A defiant antipathy was awakening in him. He was not going to be ordered around by a bastard like Girlimpay! What right did he have to determine who Kayam the Wonderful should or shouldn't kill?! He would decide for himself! It was simply not worthy of him to kill this girl. Perhaps if it were a giant, horrible creature... but no, not even that! He would have to capture it so that he could show it to everybody, and then they could admire Kayam's greatness...

He almost fell back into daydreaming again, but the girl was pleading so loudly and so heartrendingly that it was exasperating. "Alright, alright, just keep quiet! Hey, do you hear me, I told you to shut it! I won't hurt you if can be smart!"

This only made Ivy howl even more. She just kept shouting at Kayam not to rape her, that she would show him the place where the family treasures were kept, if only he had mercy on her and didn't steal her virginity, because then nobody would marry her! She was so frightened that her words could barely be understood, although the Torg language was quite similar to some of the dialects of Atlantuan—most of it sounding like a mixture of Manychyar and Nipon—which was why Kayam had understood Ivy so far. But the girl's weeping had now become so frantic that it was getting increasingly difficult for Kayam to understand.

He finally managed to comprehend it. "Hey, stop irritating me, you moron! Nobody's trying to rape you! I'll have you know that if I sleep with somebody, it wouldn't be rape but a great honor for the other person!" He announced this with such great pride, as if he had already been with a woman.

Although he was still a virgin, like Ivy. "So," he continued, "what I meant by being 'smart' was that if somebody comes you have to hide yourself well, because not everybody is like me and many of the others would do nasty things to you! This is how you have to be smart. Is that clear?"

"Yes, yes, I am very grateful to you, respectable, honorable..."

"Quiet! Not so loud, somebody will hear! Now go and show me where that jewelry is!" Kayam commanded, because he was undeniably curious.

Ivy got up trembling, and led Kayam into a large room that resembled a bathroom. It was built of stone, and completely empty apart from an enormous bathtub. Above it a pipe projected from the wall, along with two large handles, one painted pink and the other blue. Intermittent drops of water trickled into the empty bath. The girl climbed into the tub, reached to the bottom and raised an otherwise undetectable trapdoor, which hid a cavity the size of a man's head. Weeping, she pulled out a pile of necklaces, earrings, brooches and other jewelry. "These are all the valuable possessions we have," she said to Kayam.

"Ah, yes, very beautiful," said Kayam absentmindedly. "Don't they get wet down there?"

"It doesn't matter—water can't harm gold."

"Right, they're very nice," Kayam muttered. But he was no longer interested in the gold, and instead his attention was drawn to the two handles on the wall. "What are those?"

"There's a hot spring in the mountain beside our house, and if I turn the pink handle it diverts hot water from there into the pipe. If I turn the blue handle then cold water comes out from the nearby stream. This way you can adjust how warm you want the bathwater to be."

"Amazing!" said Kayam. "I have to try this!" With that he grabbed the jewelry from Ivy's hand and returned it to the cavity, slamming the trapdoor back over it. Then he turned on the taps, first one then the other, and as soon as he felt that the resulting water was lukewarm he threw off his clothes without any shame. He stood under the water, which slowly began to fill the bath, since the drain hole was plugged. Ivy turned away in embarrassment.

"Hey, don't stare at me, but I want you to listen," Kayam growled. "This house of yours is quite big. Do you have any wine?"

"Yes, of course. Shall I bring you some?"

"Ugh, I don't drink that terrible stuff! But if you have wine, then you must also spray the barrels with sulfur, right?"

"Of course," replied Ivy with a fairly uncomprehending look on her face.

"And you generally preserve meat with nitrates?"

"Yes, we do."

"Great! I presume you have coal too, so you don't freeze in the winter. Then let's make a deal! I'll leave you this gold trash," he said, pointing to the bottom of the bath, "but you have to bring me a bunch of nitrate, sulfur and coal—everything that you have. Deposit it in the adjoining room, and make sure nobody sees you. Now run along!" he waved in dismissal.

Ivy ran off and fearfully obeyed. Kayam began soaking his haggard body parts, enjoying himself immensely. He soaked for a good hour, and after that Ivy told him that everything he had asked for had been brought into one of the rooms. "But I didn't put it in the next room because my brother's dead body is there..." and Ivy started to cry.

"Don't cry over him—if he's dead then he can't feel any pain!" Kayam "consoled" Ivy, with as much empathy as a tree stump.

In any case, when he had finished bathing he went out to the room containing his required materials. It didn't even occur to him to take the jewelry from the hiding place at the bottom of the bath, although Ivy strongly suspected that this soldier would not keep his promise. That wasn't her

main concern though, as long as he didn't rape or kill her! However Kayam did not touch the treasure, just instructed Ivy to bring him flour, salt and sand. After that he closed the door and told her that if she valued her life then she would not peek, and not come in until he said so.

He began mixing together the materials for the wonder weapon. The flour, salt and sand was solely a ruse, so that Ivy would not know what it was made from. He did not even use these ingredients, and climbed out the window to hide them in a large pile of weeds. Then he combined the coal, sulfur and nitrate powders, making sure they were as fine as possible, but this wasn't an issue as Ivy had brought him a fine grind of everything. It was apparent that the coal powder had even been sifted. She feared Kayam so much that she didn't dare bring him anything other than powder, when that was what he had asked for. She knew that she had to attend to this strange soldier fully, because it was clear what would happen to her if she did not obey—it was evident in the bodies of her family members!

Therefore Kayam did not have to bother too much with grinding, although that was what he was most concerned about. Before he mixed the appropriate ingredients together he had to think about what the mixing ratio should be. It was even a struggle for him. Finally he speculated the following: "Nitrate is needed to make it burn fast. The sulfur is necessary for the preparation of the gas, and coal powder is only needed to prevent coagulation. This then is the order of priority. If there is no nitrate to speed up the burning, the sulfur will not burn, or it will burn slowly and the whole thing won't be effective. If there is no coal powder the mixture will still work, but probably just coagulate quickly. So the most important ingredient is the nitrate. Let's say about seventy percent. There must be more of this than sulfur to thoroughly circulate the nitrate particles around the sulfur particles. This is the only way it will burn quickly. After this comes the sulfur, let's say twenty percent... that should be enough, because sulfur can produce quite high levels of gas... and the remaining ten percent will be coal powder. Yes, this should work well!"¹⁰

As soon as he was done preparing the mixture he went out to look for a torch. It was not difficult to find one as at that time in the evenings they exclusively used candles, lampions and torches for lighting, so they had them in every house. He lit it, took it inside, and with a handful of straw created a bonfire in the middle of the room. Then he bundled half a handful of powder into a bag and threw it into the bonfire from a good distance. A tremendous explosion could be heard, partially deafening Kayam, and the bonfire flew in million directions. In its place he could see a fist-sized hole in the stone floor of the room. He was thrilled, he had done it! He knew that he could do it!

There was enough gunpowder to fill three decent-size jugs, and he covered one of them with a thick cloth, tied it and stowed it in his rucksack. From another jug he took out roughly one and half kilos, bundled it in some fabric and then left the room in search for Ivy. He did not have to look far because upon hearing the explosion, the girl had begun to worry about what had happened to the kind soldier. But she only dared go up to the door and no further.

Now Kayam stepped out and grabbed her hand. "Come on!" He pulled her after him.

"Where are we going?!" the girl asked, frightened.

"I saw a big pile of wood in your yard!" and he pulled the girl after him excitedly.

This reassured Ivy somewhat. He hadn't said 'haystack', and a wood pile was not generally the sort of thing people made love on...

¹⁰ More than 687 liters of gas is generated from one kilogram of sulfur during burning!

Kayam stuffed the gunpowder deep inside the wood pile, and then thought about how he could safely ignite the material. It soon came to him. He sprinkled a thin strip of powder a fair distance away, and then using the flame from the torch he had brought with him, set fire to the strip...

The flame ran along it, and once it had reached its destination an even bigger explosion could be heard. The elegantly stacked blocks of wood were flying everywhere, and one hit Kayam on the shoulder. He hissed loudly and tears ran from his eyes. But his self-pity soon ended when Ivy asked with trembling lips, "What was that?!"

"That was a material I invented. I, Kayam, oh yes, Kayam the Wonderful, the Unsurpassable, the World's Smartest Human, the Topmost Genius of Geniuses!"

"You... you invented this?!" Ivy marveled, and there was such admiration reflected in her eyes that it gave Kayam's ego quite a boost. He had never received such recognition from another person before.

"That's right, I myself and no other!"

"Oh, well you must really be a clever man then! A remarkably clever man!"

"Oh yes, but this shouldn't be surprising, since I told you that I am Kayam! Even if some people do call me by the stupid name of Getsnappy!"

"*You're* the great Getsnappy?!" This amazed Ivy even more.

"Not really... how can I explain it... In a certain sense I am, although I'm pretty sure Getsnappy doesn't even exist. Some idiot invented him and there are many people who wanted to blame me for inventing this chap, I have no idea why, and I dare say I have nothing to do with the whole thing! I still don't understand why they happened to decide *I* was Getsnappy! Let's not even talk about this—the point is that I invented this material, and you can see how wonderful it is!"

"Yes, I certainly can! It truly is a wonderful discovery... Imagine how much easier this would make mining!"

"And not only that..." Kayam murmured, the image of all his planned weapons flashing before him. He knew that gunpowder wasn't enough on its own; he also needed the metal parts from which he would assemble the weapons. But he could not make them here in the army.

"You must really be a genius, there's no doubt about it!" said Ivy.

"That's right, it's obvious after this!" nodded Kayam in satisfaction. He decided that the name of this material would be "gunpowder", given that it was going to be used for his future miraculous guns.

Suddenly he was overcome by an irresistible desire to use the merciful benefits of the bath again, as his shoulder hurt where the flying branch had struck him. Without hesitation he left the dumbfounded Ivy there and headed for the bath. He stood under the faucet, first running lukewarm water over himself before slowly making it warmer and warmer, enjoying being able to control the water temperature by rotating the handle. Finally after about a quarter of an hour the bathroom was filled with steam, as the water Kayam was bathing in was so warm his skin was turning red. But this did not bother him, because he had heated the water gradually and in the meantime gotten used to the heat.

As he soaked himself his mind was filled solely with his greatness. See, now it was not just him saying he was brilliant—others were acknowledging it too! This Ivy as well! Now there was no doubt, he had irrefutable evidence, recognition that had come from an independent place. Yes, the time had finally come when others could clearly see his countless abilities and his brilliance! This time could have come earlier, but it seemed that it was like a man's body size or the development of body hair—it was necessary to reach a certain age before the change became apparent.

He sunk deeper and deeper into the pleasant warm water and the even more pleasant self-praise and complacency, when the door abruptly opened and a soldier entered. It was the same soldier who had previously taken the pair of earrings from him. He must have heard the splash of water, and he approached with his sword stretched out before him because he could not see anything due to the steam. His eyes had not adjusted to it like Kayam's had. Kayam did not want to get stabbed, so he shouted at him, "Hey, don't go poking that iron into me! I'm Kayam!"

The soldier recognized the voice. He paused, blinked and finally managed to make out Kayam standing on the other side of the steam-curtain, knee high in water, whose back was being pounded by the water gushing from the pipe. "Aha, so this is where you are! I thought you were among the dead, but no such luck!"

"That doesn't sound like a friendly welcome!"

"Well it damn well isn't! The entire group is searching for you because you weren't among the survivors, nor among the dead! Then somebody said that they'd seen you around here and I had to chase after you, although I could think of better things to do for fun! I should have known that being as stupid as you are, you'd be engaging in some ridiculous atrocity! What are you doing, you fool?!"

Kayam didn't think he was the fool but the soldier, if he couldn't see that he was bathing, but he replied, "I think it's quite obvious what I'm doing—enjoying the comfort of warm water!" and since he was very happy to explain, he immediately told the soldier how the cold and warm water worked, even though he didn't like the guy. Talking, on the other hand, was something he liked very much!

The soldier was rather amazed. "Well then, I'll have to try this too!" he said, and threw off his clothes before ordering Kayam to get out of there so he could now bathe.

"Well there you go, that's what I get for doing someone a good turn!" Kayam murmured, but he didn't dare resist and got out from under the shower. He didn't even bother to shut it off, and with a single leap the soldier jumped into his place... only to jump back out screaming.

"Damn you, you deliberately made it hot!" and he began thrashing Kayam. It was fortunate that he was naked, because if he had had a weapon on him he would have stabbed Kayam.

"But I didn't do any such thiiiiiiing..." Kayam shrieked.

"Yes you did! The water's as hot as a fire!"

"You're just not used to it yet..." grumbled poor Kayam.

"Right, we'll soon see if you're lying, buddy! Go and stand under the hot water yourself, and if you don't do it I'll castrate you!"

Kayam jumped up promptly, and very calmly stood under the stream of hot water. He had no problem with it, since he had been soaking for half an hour and become accustomed to it, unlike the soldier, and Kayam's body had not yet cooled down during the short struggle.

"You really are crazy!" exclaimed the soldier upon seeing this. Then he ordered Kayam out of there and stood back in himself, but first adjusting the water to a more tolerable temperature.

The soldier had been showering for about five minutes while Kayam waited for his turn again, when suddenly the door opened and Ivy stepped in. "I can't pull my father out into the yard. You're such a nice, respectable and worthy man, Kayam, will you help me bury him?" Then she caught sight of the foreign soldier and squealed, attempting to escape. She mustn't have seen the soldier's arrival, otherwise she would not have come in.

The soldier jumped out of the water and caught hold of her, giving her two good slaps. Ivy was lucky that the soldier had just been showering, because if he was clothed he would have had his weapons on him and definitely killed the girl. But now he just knocked her to the ground, sat on her stomach, and said to Kayam with a large grin, "Aha, so you're in cahoots with the enemy! Didn't the

commander tell you to kill everybody?! You're not going to get away with this, buddy! I'll report the whole thing to him! But first I'll show you what should be done with these types—first I'll slip my dick into her, and after that my sword!" and with that he began tearing off Ivy's clothing against the girl's resistance. But it was futile, as the soldier was obviously much stronger. Not just stronger than her, but also Kayam.

Kayam did not like what the soldier had said, not one bit. He had no doubt about what to expect from Commander Girlimpay, however being reported wasn't the only thing he disliked. It was not as if he wasn't afraid of Girlimpay—Kayam feared even weaker men—but the truth was that something else bothered him much more. Not just bothered, it outraged him! What was this soldier thinking, wanting to rape Ivy?! In fact, not only rape her but kill her, since if he stabs her with a sword she would die! Of course Kayam figured that loads of women had probably been raped and killed in the village today. But that didn't matter, as none of them were Ivy. Namely, Ivy was a very special person—the first person to respect him! She had called him a genius and admired him! He could not let such a nasty thing happen to her! If the soldier were to just rape her, he could tolerate that. Ideally he'd like to prevent this too, but it wasn't that big a deal. However it was absolutely essential to prevent him from killing her! It was out of the question that Ivy should die, because then the number of admirers of the Great Kayam in the world would diminish, and this should be avoided at all costs!

First of all he had to distract the soldier's attention from the girl. Kayam saw only one way of doing this. There was only one thing that interested these barbaric soldiers more than screwing. As soon as he had figured out his tactic, he returned from his field of thoughts to the much grayer, dirtier ground of Reality. Ivy's screams again reached his ears. The soldier had completely torn off her dress and was now preparing to take her for himself.

"All right, my friend, just do it," said Kayam in an indifferent voice. "In the meantime I'll go and take the treasure. I really hope that Commander Girlimpay will favor me if I bring him a pile of gold!"

"What kind of treasure?!" All movement of the soldier stopped, apart from his head, which now turned towards Kayam.

"You rotten bastard, you told me you would leave them for me! You promised not to steal it!" Ivy screamed, and that was enough to fully persuade the soldier that Kayam was telling the truth and that there was indeed treasure here.

"It makes no difference to you now, because my friend is going to first stick his dick into you and then his sword!" shrugged Kayam, and made his way to the door with great haste.

The soldier could see that he had no time to rape Ivy, so he left the girl and leapt beside Kayam, grabbing his arm. "What kind of treasure are you talking about?!"

"Take it easy, it's not that much, little more than would fit into a small knapsack, so you might as well deal with..."

"You idiot, do you have any idea how valuable a knapsack full of jewelry is?!"

"No. I've never had the slightest interest in jewelry."

"Ah, well I have, because I'm not a fool!"

"Just leave me alone and let me go! Go back to the girl. I have to take the treasure to Girlimpay so he can forgive my delay!"

"Hey dummy, it isn't necessary for Girlimpay to get the jewelry! Let's agree that if you hand it over to me, I won't say anything to the commander. In fact, I'll even say that there were some enemies here and you defended yourself heroically, and when I finally arrived we defeated them! This would be the best way to avoid punishment. Why would you want to give that treasure to

Girlimpay when I know that you don't even like the commander?! Why not give them to your friend, to *me*!?" and he smiled ingratiatingly with a look of feverish greed, but kept one eye on the girl to make sure she didn't escape. However she did not run away because she had nowhere to go. She attempted to put her torn clothing back on as well as she could, although for the time being this didn't bother the soldier.

"My friend indeed! When you're about to murder my great admirer?! The crabs munching on your dick are more of a friend to me than you are!" fumed Kayam, but only to himself. Out loud he said, "Do you swear that you won't tell the commander anything if you get the treasure?!"

"Of course, I swear to God!" the soldier was quick to reassure him. "Do we have to go far?!"

"No, why?"

"Because I should probably kill the girl first. You know, so she won't escape!"

"How can you screw her if you kill her?! There's no rush... tie her up instead! Anyway, we don't have to go very far."

"What a clever idea—you're not that stupid after all!" said the soldier with dubious praise. He rushed over to Ivy, tore off her dress again, and tied her arms and legs firmly with the torn rags. Then he leapt over to Kayam. "Lead the way, my friend!"

They really didn't have to go far, as Kayam led him to the room where he had placed the jug of gunpowder. "It's there in the jug!" he said. He held a burning torch in his hand, which was not entirely superfluous, for the sun was now shining on the other side of the house and not much light reached this room.

The soldier went over to the jug and looked into it. "You lied!" he shouted. "All that's in here is some black powder!"

"Yeah, that's because I poured it over the jewelry so nobody would notice it!"

The soldier needed no more—he turned the jug upside down and tipped out the powder at his feet. Naturally there wasn't a single piece of jewelry in the jug, but he did not have time to protest as Kayam cleverly flung the burning torch at the pile, meanwhile dashing behind the protection of the doorway.

He peeped out a few seconds later, when the roar of the explosion had dissipated, if not the smoke. The soldier was no longer in the place he had been, in fact there wasn't really a "soldier" at all, just pieces of one.

"Well, that's done!" said Kayam, rubbing his palms together in satisfaction. Then he took a knife and went to release Ivy. "You idiot, I told you to be smart! You were far too careless!" he said to the girl, enjoying very much the fact that at long last he could tell somebody they were an idiot.

The girl did not even protest. "Did you... kill him?!" she asked, her mouth trembling from the noise of the explosion.

"Of course, just look at his remains!"

Ivy quickly put on another dress and ran out to take a look. "Thank you so much for saving me, and please forgive me for doubting you! You truly are a nice guy. I don't even know how you got mixed up with these pigs!"

"Believe me, I didn't want to be! I plan to escape as soon as possible!" and Kayam headed for the bathroom with a sudden idea. He fumbled among the soldier's belongings until he found the earrings he had stolen, and brought them out to Ivy. "Here you go," he said, handing them over. "Not only will I not take anything from you, I'll give this to you as well! Please accept it. If the others find it they'll take it from me anyway. But now I really must go!"

Ivy hugged Kayam and kissed him warmly on the lips. "Go! And if you're ever in the area I'd be more than happy to accept you as a guest, my hero, Kayam! Or Getsnappy... whoever you are!"

"Ah, but I might die tomorrow..."

"You?! Come on, that will never happen! You have so much more to do with your life!"

Then Kayam left, very much enjoying the praise. The earrings weren't such a great price to pay for this...

"Where have we been then?! Did we cowardly escape from the battlefield?!" asked Commander Girlimpay as soon as he saw Kayam. As he spoke he was pounding his right fist into his left palm, which Kayam found decidedly worrying. And since he didn't want to be beaten, he realized that he had to think of something urgently. However Kayam's brain could function very fast when he wanted it to.

"No, not at all sir," he replied. "On the contrary—I fought heroically, as evidenced by all the injuries you can observe!" He pointed to his battered face, even though these injuries were caused by his fellow blown-up soldier who had clobbered him for the hot bath.

"Sure you fought, in that house we'd already thoroughly searched?! Who were you fighting with?!" laughed one of the soldiers.

"You don't even look like a man who was wounded in battle, but one who was beaten up!" said Girlimpay, joining in the laughter.

"Of course, I won't deny that I was beaten up, but only because there were so many of them! What happened was that I was looking around the house, and suddenly five Torg residents showed up. I started fighting them and managed to withstand their assault for a long time, but they fenced me in and knocked the sword out of my hand. Naturally they wanted to kill me, but they first beat me up as a form of torture. I can assure you that I would not be alive if a fellow soldier had not come after me and attacked them unexpectedly so that I could pick up my sword, and then the two of us chased them off. But my companion was overwhelmed with pride, and shouted after them, 'Don't ever bring your dirty faces around here again! You can mess with Getsnappy, not us heroic soldiers!' And behold, that's when the miracle happened!"

"What kind of miracle?"

"The miracle was, Commander, that clerk Getsnappy appeared!" replied Kayam. By that time everybody knew that Getsnappy had allegedly died in the prison of Pakunda, since the rumor had spread like a whirlwind.

"What are you talking about?!"

"That's what happened—I'll die on the spot if it wasn't so!" shouted Kayam confidently, who was not in the least bit superstitious. "He appeared, and said that he would not tolerate his name being spoken in vain, for he who spoke his holy name as a slanderous rebuke would be punished! Either by being instantly destroyed, or suffering an accident, for instance slipping in battle and being killed by the enemy, or contracting some kind of hideous disease! And to prove his words the Great Getsnappy immediately employed his punishment, striking my dear savior with lightning and tearing him to pieces on the spot! If anybody doesn't believe me they are welcome to go there and see the remains of my companion, because he really was torn to pieces, giving no thought to the consequences of his swearing! He had just undressed to take a bath, and it was then that the great Getsnappy appeared, so his corpse is naked. Come and take a look!"

Almost all the soldiers went to inspect the "lightning-struck" body of their comrade. Kayam really hoped that Ivy would now have enough sense to monitor the area and hide if they came. This seemed likely, as she could not be found. They all stared in horror at the roasted corpse that had been torn apart. It really did look like someone who had been struck by lightning, which Kayam found gratifying. After this they entirely forgot about his delay, and even believed that he actually

had fought bravely with some of the enemies. After all, the torn apart body of his comrade served as proof of his words! They did not even speak of Kayam anymore, only of the fact that clerk Getsnappy could visit from the afterlife whenever he wanted, and that he could do miracles and punish the guilty! And at that time almost everybody was strongly superstitious.

Kayam was extremely pleased with himself that he had managed to blame everything on Getsnappy. And because he suspected that similar miracles would need to happen in the future, from hereon he always carried a large bundle of gunpowder with him. He soon realized that it had to be thoroughly protected from moisture, as his powder contained coal dust, and any moisture would destroy the powdery consistency and greatly impair its efficiency.

This was put to the test while they were staying in the occupied village for a few days, during which time it rained, on Kayam's gunpowder too. Fortunately he had half a jug left at Ivy's house. Kayam went over to get it, and seeing as he was there he took another bath. He went there regularly to bathe if the other soldiers could not see where he was going, and every time he came out of the warm water mysterious hands had prepared a delicious meal for him on the kitchen table. This was sure to be the work of Ivy. But he never saw the girl again. She did not dare show herself as she was watching to see if anybody else was coming. She had learned her lesson. This did not bother Kayam, as he cared more about the tasty morsels than the girl. And the warm bath. He was very sad when they had to leave.

All the more so because he learned that there was no refuge anymore—they were going to join a larger group, and not just a group but the troops. They were going into real battle where they would have to attack the enemy! He was very much afraid of battle. Afraid that he would not be able to use the gunpowder there. If he had the necessary weapons for the gunpowder then yes, but not without them. It made no sense to take it with him during the attack. He would have a hard time running if he had to escape. And if he had it with him and somebody approached him, there was a chance he might blow up one of the enemies, but also a risk of him being blown up himself!

In the absence of a better option, on the crucial day of the battle he used his old proven tactic of running at the back, but without being the very last. However he knew that even so, he would still expose himself to the mockery of others if there was not at least one person who could attest to his courage. In any case, it would be futile to run at the back. This would not solve anything, as the enemy was made up of many people, so by the time he got there he would have to fight with somebody. These were not peaceful villagers who were trying to escape—they wanted to kill too!

Eventually Kayam came up with a brilliant idea. As he slowly got closer to the fighters, he looked around cautiously to see if he noticed any familiar faces in the crowd. Finally he recognized Commander Girlimpay. He was fighting an enormous Torg warrior, who was armored from head to toe. It was more of a chain-shirt than true armor, but Girlimpay only had leather armor on. Now Kayam began implementing his well thought-out plan. He swung his light-weight saber like a windmill on his right, and started roaring at the top of his voice so that it could be heard even over the noise of the battle, "I will save you, captain! I will save you Girlimpay! I will save you! I'm on my way, I'm coming, hold on!"

Girlimpay heard Kayam and turned his head to look at him for a brief moment. The Torg warrior noticed this, took in Kayam's position and prepared to defend himself from two directions at the same time. But as soon as Kayam noticed that he had noticed, he immediately reduced his speed and failed to get there in time to engage in the fight. However because Girlimpay was such a good fighter, he managed to wound the Torg warrior's face, who now had less attention to spare on Girlimpay from having to keep an eye on Kayam too. Then the wounded soldier, blinded by his own blood, was easily stabbed by Girlimpay.

Kayam arrived just at that moment. "Boy am I glad! I was so worried about you, my beloved commander!" he said, congratulating Girlimpay.

"Hmm..." murmured Girlimpay uncertainly. He did not want to commit to being grateful, but for the time being he couldn't find any excuses. A fact was a fact, and it seemed that even if Kayam had not saved his life, at least he had wanted to and gave him a little help.

He was just wondering what to say when Kayam shouted out in an agonized voice, "I'll save you too! I'm on my way, I'll be right there! I'm coming as fast as I can! I'll kill your enemy, I'll tear out his bowels, I'll stab him with my sword, I'll drink his blood and stomp on his dick! I'll save you, my friend!" and was already rushing to the aid of another fellow comrade. Of course this individual was not fighting in the center of the battle among the great whirl of people but on the edge, and so Kayam wasn't running to help the man closest to him but towards a warrior at least a hundred meters away. He didn't even get there in time. The one whom he "wanted to help" won the fight without him. However this did not discourage Kayam; he just ran another hundred meters toward another warrior, who in addition had his back turned to him. But that worked out well for Kayam because his opponent noticed him, and when Kayam went around his "friend" he turned his head to look at Kayam, enabling the Atlantuan soldier to easily finish him off. Therefore Kayam could again boast that he had saved a warrior's life. Soon he was shouting again, and it went on like this during the entire battle. Kayam just continued yelling and running, not killing anybody, although using forethought he smeared his sword with the blood of a corpse.

His plan was successful. After the battle was finally won, the soldiers looked at him in a much friendlier manner. Although Girlimpay explained to him thoroughly that he didn't have to fight in such an inefficient way; the closest enemy should always be attacked first, as then more of them could be killed and time wasn't wasted on needless running around. But Kayam, who didn't regret wasting his time in the least, just cockily shrugged his shoulders, saying that he didn't care since he wasn't given this much military pay to let his beloved friends down! And if he sees a friend in trouble somewhere, then the battle itself takes second priority—he must immediately rush to his friend's aid. He feels an irresistible inner urge to do so, apart from it clearly being his loyal duty!

"But you have friends beside you too!" said Girlimpay.

"Of course, but they may not be my true friends. There's a big difference between friends and true friends! And besides, they might not be in as much trouble!" Kayam replied haughtily.

Nobody could say anything to that. The best they could do was ask Kayam how many enemies he had killed, to which he boastfully lied eight. Since at these times every soldier exaggerated the truth, the soldiers listening to Kayam wisely halved that in their minds so that it came to be four, and it became the opinion that even if Kayam was a great liar he could at least finish off one or two enemies. This was not an excellent result, but they could not expect more from the skimpy Kayam.

Kayam was very satisfied with himself at how adeptly he had survived the battle. The only thing he didn't like was that he was so hoarse he could barely whisper, on top of being as tired as a work horse, because even though the other soldiers may have fought more than him, Kayam had certainly been running around more than anybody else. But that was far better than getting injured or crippled, the fate of several of his fellow soldiers. Not to mention those who had died!

"I'm not a coward, no, not at all," he explained to himself. "It's just that if I tackle danger I want to do it for my own sake, my own glory, not for the sake of stupid kings who can't settle things peacefully with each other! I'm not going to have myself stabbed because of them! Or if they can't agree peacefully, then Emperor Zor and the Torg king should duel and leave me out of the whole thing! I have nothing to do with such mindless stupidities as battles, war, homeland, national pride or any other kind of senseless perverted malarkey!"

So the battle had been won, and it really was a big battle, lasting nearly the entire day. By the time it was clear they had won and had captured many of the Torg survivors (there were not many left) it was almost evening. There was little time left for the victorious Atlantians to do any looting. In those days the fallen soldiers could not expect to be honored in their deaths, and it was common for them to be robbed. This was justified by the price of armor, swords and other weapons being quite high. And most of the soldiers had money on them too, because nobody dared leave their property in the camp, even during an attack. It may not have been much, but many a little makes a mickle, and in a big battle there were numerous fallen men! Even if somebody was only injured, but in a way that prevented them from crawling off the battlefield, it was still likely that they would be killed and robbed, rather than sold as a slave. After all, if they were able to walk they would have escaped, and if they hadn't done this, then their inability to walk made them unsuitable as a slave. It was possible that they might recover with time, but who would bother struggling with an enemy's recovery? Who would feed them until then?!

All this was considered completely natural at that time, to both the Torgs and the Atlantians, and when the traversing of the battlefield began along with the slaughter of the wounded, nobody begged for mercy but rather to be executed painlessly and therefore quickly. This request was generally fulfilled without any need for supplication, although it was not expressly down to the enemy's benevolence but because it was in the fundamental interests of the raiders. Since the less time they spent on an individual soldier, the more time they had for looting before their pals beat them to it.

Yes, the great pillaging of the dead had now begun, but it would soon be evening. The size of the battlefield was enormous, because this had practically been the decisive battle between Atlantia and Torgo in this expedition. There were certain to be at least ten thousand dead, and so until dark they could only traverse a fraction of the area in which to seize their valuables. Even taking into consideration that there were quite a large number of treasure hunters hungry for loot, because although the Atlantians had won this victory, it had cost them dearly—only two thirds of the Atlantian army remained.

In any case, by the time evening arrived everybody had trailed off from the battlefield and retreated to their tents. Although the men were quite cruel, wild and ruthless—perhaps even braver than in the later, more civilized generations—they were very afraid to stumble among dead corpses at night. Rather like a person nowadays being afraid of the cemetery, only much more intense, and it was universal among people. This was certain to be because so much superstition polluted their minds. A great many horror stories were spread about the dead rising from the grave, vengeful ghosts and the like. Nobody wanted a dead arm to reach out and grab their ankle while they were plundering the corpses. How could a living person protect themselves against a dead one, since it was impossible to kill somebody who was already dead!

Kayam naturally went out for a little asset acquisition precisely at that time. The guards were rather surprised when they saw him heading out to the battlefield with a bundle of rags in his hand, serving as a swag.

"What are you planning on doing?!" they asked him. "You can't go out there now, it's dark!"

"Who forbade it?"

"Nobody, but just think about all those dead bodies lying there!"

"That just works in my favor—they won't be able to retaliate!"

"But sometimes they do!"

"Surely less often than if they were alive," Kayam shrugged, who did not believe in these sorts of things at all. He only feared living men, not the dead.

It made sense of course for Kayam to go hunting treasure in the dark. He may not have been able to see as well as he could during the day, but apart from this one negative he saw only advantages in night looting. For starters it gave him a chance to rest somewhat from all the running around, which was no insignificant aspect. Kayam believed that comfort should be his first consideration, as there was no treasure worth dying from exhaustion for. Resting came first and then treasure hunting, if he decided afterwards that it was worth getting up at all! Plus he knew how much the others were afraid of the dark. If he wandered about after valuables in the daylight, many thousands of soldiers would be doing the same thing out there on the battlefield, and if he found something valuable they might take it from him. He had experienced this already and was not keen to repeat it. In the dark he had the whole terrain to himself all night, and he found this far more convenient. It was also an advantage that approximately two hours had passed since the last act of combat. If a Torg soldier had only been injured and could not crawl away from the battlefield, by this time he would presumably have shuffled off this mortal coil, therefore would not stab a sword into Kayam as he bent over him. Kayam always regarded his safety to be of paramount importance. He actually preferred darkness over light, as it meant there were fewer stupid people around him, and had liked hiding in dark places ever since he was a child. Finally, he knew that they would consider him very brave, and this boosted his ego.

What a great many advantages! And the only payment required for all this was to open his eyes a little wider, relying on the light of the moon instead of the sun. Kayam was ready to make this small sacrifice for the benefits it gave. So Kayam wandered about on the battlefield, and it did not bother him if he stepped into a pool of blood or on someone's entrails, unless it made him slip and fall. He was completely insensitive to death; it did not make him shudder. Whenever he noticed it he just shook his head in dismay. These people were killed without purpose, without meaning! They could have been sold as slaves, or at least been made to do some useful work. The country would be far better off that way. Oh, how much valuable labor was being wasted!

"Or," he mused, "if they've already killed them, their corpses should at least be collected and processed into some kind of useful material! It would still be a big loss, but less so, since then all that material isn't going to waste! Their flesh could be eagerly consumed by pigs or other animals, their fat too, or soap could even be made from it. Their intestines would make excellent twine or bow strings, their bowel contents would make good manure, and their bones could be turned into magnificent glue... but this way they were just rotting away uselessly! If we're going to allow the bodies to decompose, we should at least not let all of them decay in the field at once, but distribute them individually to the peasants—everyone getting one or two corpses as a gift, to dig under their favorite tree as manure. I'm sure they'd be thrilled by the idea, and probably even form queues! Who knows, they might even pay for them! Hmm, corpse manure... that's not such a bad idea... I must be an absolute genius to have come up with this! But being left here in one mass as they are now could pose a serious epidemic threat, and think of how stinky they'll be in a few days!"

Kayam was not wandering through the nearest section of the battlefield but towards the furthest end, because he suspected his fellow soldiers would not have yet searched the corpses there during the last two hours of daylight. He was right, and his swag was filling nicely, although he didn't bother taking things such as helmets, swords or armor because he found them heavy. The "treasury" weapons that were allocated to him for the expedition were already enough of a burden. Naturally he collected all the money first, as every soldier had a few pennies on them and all that slowly added up. He also found some small gold and silver objects that had probably been stolen by these soldiers from somewhere, perhaps some Atlantuan settlement.

The swag was at least half-full, and since Kayam hated lugging things around he decided to go back, although he searched the corpses along the way. Besides, it was long past midnight and he wanted to get some sleep too. It was then that he happened upon a sort of leather wallet on one of the corpses. Although wallets were not yet invented at that time (even paper money was unheard of), it looked quite similar to a modern wallet. Kayam had never seen anything like it. He examined it curiously and opened it. In one of the compartments there were several letters, and in the other compartment just one, with completely different writing than the others. Kayam looked at the letters enviously. Even by the dim light of the moon he could easily ascertain that all the letters were written with real pearl handwriting. Both writers of these letters had a far more beautiful style than he did. He took out the solitary letter and began to read it. It read as follows:

To my dear wife, my gorgeous little swan,

I don't know whether I can send you this letter before the final battle. The courier might not be going in that direction, and in this case I will send it after the battle, if I am still alive. I hope I will be, because your love protects me from all harm. But if I am able to send the letter before the battle and I do not return, know that I will die with your name on my lips and be faithful to you until death, my beloved, and that I was only commanded to bring glory to you and my country, Torgo. I will die with a sword in my hand, without retreating a single step, so as not to bring shame on you with my cowardice, and doing my patriotic duty in not allowing the enemy to occupy the ancient land of Torgo, which is the right of our children! I know that we have argued about this on numerous occasions and that you did not want me to go to war. You asked me why I am reaching to the sword when I am a clerk, and that I should be making a living with ink, not with blood. I hope that I do not bore you in writing this, but when I think about the fact that not even two months have passed since going to war, and that you may be carrying my child beneath your heart, if I do not return I want my son to know my character from this letter and know that I was a true hero.

Please understand my reasoning. When the Homeland is in imminent danger, nobody would avoid taking immediate action to drive out the enemy. This is our motherland, the place we call home, and if necessary we have to be willing to die for it! Anyone who thinks otherwise is simply unwelcome and unworthy of enjoying the prosperity that the reign of our great king provides for them. The Torg nation's existence is at stake, which must be at the heart of every true Torg. And this means that the Torg blood, our flag, royal family, our faith and honor, the land on which we live that has been consecrated by the decaying corpses of our ancestors—all must be protected with our lives, even if we perish as a result! Because the idea that we were fighting for will live on forever! You cry in vain, for I had to leave you to enter the ranks of heroes, who leave their loving wives far behind to do their duty in protecting their women from the enemy. I know that now the burden of housework lies entirely on your weak shoulders, but take comfort in the fact that I am suffering as much as you are. However I must tell you that I have only started to feel like a Man since I came to war, and I believe that one is not truly a man if he doesn't serve his country with weapons in his hands for at least a few years, when the country is being attacked or needs to attack another country to protect its honor, or when the King believes an attack would be in our country's interests, signaling another important step in the rise of our nation.

My love for you is very strong, but my love for my Homeland is stronger. Please do not be insulted, but it cannot be otherwise because this Homeland gave me You, my love! I send you millions of kisses, my beetle-eyed pigeon... Your Gavadj

"Well, this Gavadj is a complete idiot, that's for sure, but he got what he deserved—those who are stupid ought to die!" Kayam muttered, throwing the letter onto the body. He removed the woman's letters from the wallet, without bothering to read them, and threw them onto the corpse too. The wallet he did hold onto however. It was nice leather work, and he thought that it would be a good place to keep his notes in. At least he wouldn't have to fear it being stolen, as thieves only sought out money and precious metals.

However the guy still made him fume. "Going to war when he's a clerk! It actually puts me to shame too in a certain sense, since I'm also a clerk. But I'm only here because I was forced to participate in the war. Nobody forced this dumb cretin—he volunteered!" Kayam shook his head again as he looked at the young boy's corpse. It appeared that a wounded horse had fallen directly onto Gavadj's legs and broken them, but even if they weren't broken, he could not have climbed out from under it, and in the meantime somebody was bound to have stabbed him. He may have even died from hitting his head. Kayam could not quite determine the true cause of his death, as for that he would need to examine the body thoroughly, but he was not particularly interested in the matter. He had already seen plenty of deaths. He shook his head for the third time, thinking that the "beetle-eyed pigeon" had not chosen a very suitable husband for herself, and was about to leave... when the "corpse" started to groan and squirm.

Any other Atlantuan who could bring himself to pilfer corpses at night would have shouted out in terror and fled, losing his mind due to a belief that the dead corpse had risen and would take revenge and kill him. Kayam on the other hand, although surprised, immediately assumed that the guy was not actually dead. And if that was the case, then it was his business! Kayam just shrugged and went on his way. It did not even occur to him that it would be a mercy to give him the coup de grâce, let alone help him. He had no pity for him. If he felt sorry for anybody it was the "beetle-eyed pigeon", who according to Kayam had considerably more sense than her husband, since she did not want Gavadj to go to war. Somebody would presumably find the guy tomorrow and kill him, and with time the pigeon would be consoled and marry someone else, and then that man would embrace her and enjoy her beetle-eyed charm instead of Gavadj. Because Gavadj, the hero, had died protecting the Homeland! And the Homeland would be grateful to him, because nobody would ever know his name and Gavadj would not gain any benefit from this at all. Nor would the "pigeon", because even if she remarried, she would still have to go through a grieving process. The whole thing would at most benefit the second husband she accepts!

Kayam went on searching for treasure for awhile, and returned to the camp well before dawn. It turned out that they were waiting for him. Commander Girlimpay himself was standing in front of the tent, despite the late hour of night, and he was quite agitated. Kayam had barely arrived back when Girlimpay caught his "savior" by the ears and said, "Damn it, you idiot, I forbid you to wander off anywhere at night! Although it doesn't matter now, because after this I won't have any more problems with you. Come with me immediately, because the captain will tear my dick off if I don't take you to him at once! For goodness sake, I was just coming to get you and they tell me you're off treasure hunting! I was worried sick about whether the dead would allow you to come back to the camp, but as I can see you're all right. It seems the celestial beings protect fools!" As he spoke he dragged the rather frightened Kayam toward the captain's tent. Right now Kayam was more worried about the captain than the dead!

"What does the captain want?!" he asked Girlimpay, paling.

"I think he needs a clerk, because the old one died."

This set Kayam's mind at ease, in fact he even began to feel enthused by the idea. Being a clerk was a good thing, a very good thing! Then he would not have to go into battle running and shouting,

which was rather dangerous as the enemy didn't know that he had no intention of using his sword, and he could be shot with an arrow!

The captain said to him, "Can you ride a horse?"

"No!" retorted Kayam.

"Great! But just to be sure, I forbid you to get on a horse! My old clerk was exceptionally good," explained the captain as he paced around the large tent. "Then he got on a horse, and fell off and broke his neck! I understand that he did it because the enemy was near and he wanted to escape, but he should have stayed put. We would have eventually driven away the Torg assailants. He left me here without a clerk, the bugger, where there's a heap of things needing to be written out! Prisoners have to be counted, those who have fallen in battle, and the loot too... The entire outcome of the battle must be recorded—what happened, how it happened, why it happened—because Emperor Zor demands a detailed report of everything, even the expeditions, and it must include a list of the revenue and expenditure and so on, and he needs it all urgently! And now that moron goes breaking his neck in the middle of the heaviest workload we've had so far! It's almost as if he did it just to annoy me! So..." He turned toward Kayam. "They have told me that you're able to write somewhat, but now I want to test you, and if it turns out that you're suitable then you can be my clerk, effective immediately! The ink and everything else you need is over there," he said, pointing to the corner. "Now take a seat, and write down what I dictate to you!"

Kayam obeyed immediately, even though he was sleepy. The captain dictated a very important letter to him—it was for the Royal Chancellery. Kayam wrote down everything, surprising the captain by how fast he could write. But when he looked at the result he frowned. "Hey, I'm not very good with letters—I mean, I can't write—but I've seen enough of them to judge that these are incredibly sloppy!"

"But at least I wrote it quickly! Very quickly! In fact, I can write even faster!" Kayam blurted out, thinking of his shorthand, because he did not want to lose this seemingly comfortable job.

"Sure it might be faster, but probably even messier! Listen, it wouldn't matter to me, however you cannot be a clerk with writing like that, even though I have a great need for one. I'm not the one who's going to be reading what you write down—I just don't want any trouble from sending such abominable glop to high places!"

"I can actually write very beautifully, sir, but what I usually do is first write down what you dictate in a messy but very fast manner, and after that when I'm alone in my tent I would rewrite it slowly and neatly."

"What?! You write it twice when you could write it once?!"

"This would be of great benefit to you, sir, because I'm saving you time!"

"Well, all right. Listen, you have until noon to rewrite this letter beautifully, but if you have lied I will have you beaten!" warned the captain.

Kayam promptly skedaddled. He went into his tent, threw the treasure bag into the corner and headed out to the battlefield again, knowing that he did not have much time because dawn was approaching and the other treasure hunters would soon be heading there too. However this time he was not seeking treasure. He was looking for Gavadj. Hopefully that stupid clerk was still alive, as he was certainly able to write beautifully. And Kayam could make great use of that now.

By the time he got there it was already dawn. Gavadj was laying on the ground motionless, both his legs under the dead horse strangely distorted. Kayam gave him a small kick where he suspected the fracture was, and the boy came to with a loud howl, indicating he was still alive.

"Please kill me quickly and don't torture me!" he pleaded.

"I don't think so!" protested Kayam. "I still need you, my pal Gavadj! I'm not as foolish as you. I am Kayam, not an idiot! It isn't too late to kill you, but right now I need you alive and not dead. You're as stupid as a donkey, coming to battle when you're a clerk!"

"How did you know that?!"

"I read your letter, what you wrote to your beetle-eyes!"

"You had no right to do that!"

"And you had no right to leave the woman on her own!"

"I am protecting my country, which you, the villainous enemy wants to occupy!"

"Hold on, just leave me out of this! I am a clerk like you, but I *had* to come, whereas you weren't forced by anybody, so our situations are completely different! And look at where this great bravado has got you! You're lying here with broken legs because you can't pull them out from under the horse..."

"I would be able to if they weren't broken!"

"But they *are* broken! I could kill you whenever I wanted, and if *I* don't do it, the others will be here soon and they will! But you had to protect the honor of your homeland while at home others may be taking the honor of your wife whom you left alone, because there is nobody to protect her! Wow, what a crazy lunatic you are! So answer me now—do you want to live?"

"Well..."

"Oh, so you don't. Then I'll leave you here!"

"Hey, hey, I didn't say that I don't want to! But what price do I have to pay for it?!"

"For the duration of the war you will be my prisoner. You will do as I say, which will mostly be sitting in my tent and copying out my quickly yet sloppily written notes into neat handwriting. Because you are able to write beautifully, as I have seen."

"And after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"After the war!"

"You will go back to your beetle-eyes. I'm not going to feed you!"

Gavadj listened to this with great relief. He was afraid that he would be a slave for the rest of his life. "Wonderful! Thank you!"

Kayam began pulling the dead horse off Gavadj, which took quite an effort, although Gavadj suffered the most due to the pain in his legs. By the time Kayam was done he was sweating, but Gavadj had fainted several times. It turned out that his right leg was broken and the left one had just gotten bruised, albeit very badly. Even so, he was forced to haltingly make his way to the Atlantuan military camp, meanwhile leaning on Kayam's shoulder. Needless to say, every hop hurt like hell.

"So, isn't war wonderful?!" Kayam asked sarcastically.

"Well, now I'll be a hero!" the boy heaved and hissed.

"Ah, so now hero is a synonym for 'moron', is it?!" Kayam grimaced, even more derisively than before.

"Who are you to talk to me like this?!"

The little devil in Kayam laughed and said, "Kayam is not my only name. I also go by the name of clerk Getsnappy!"

"I don't believe you!"

"That's your problem, my *hero*!"

"I am indeed a hero!"

"Then what was the benefit of your heroism? Perhaps you saved your homeland?"

"No..."

"How many enemies did you kill?"

"That's none of your business!"

"So none at all then! I guessed as much."

"Wouldn't you do anything for your homeland?!" asked Gavadj.

"Anything?! You're asking *me* this?! I wouldn't even move my little finger if I didn't feel like it, if the action didn't benefit me in any way, if I wasn't harmed by failing to act and nobody was forcing me to do it!"

"What an aberrant character you have!"

"Hardly! I simply find this notion of 'homeland' a whole lot of bull, which the world should have disregarded a long time ago! You know why?"

"Yes, I do! Because you, Kayam—if I remember your name correctly—are a *coward*! A sneaky, unpersonable, spineless, vile..."

Kayam callously jumped away from Gavadj, who fell, wailing from the pain of his broken leg. Kayam just stood above him. "You have no right to speak of me this way, because even if it wasn't selflessly, I just saved your life! I can tolerate you saying a few bad words about me, but not if you're going to pile them on so I can't get a word in edgewise! Now grab a hold of me again and let's go on. And listen, I am most definitely not a coward! Have you noticed why people kill each other in war?! It's for their homelands! Not for their *homes*, but their *homelands*! Does that make any sense at all?! I think you'll find that it doesn't, because people have two main needs—to eat and have a roof over their heads. But having a greater number of homelands doesn't increase the amount of food or houses! Homelands, that is countries and empires, aren't real existing things like bread or houses that are sensible, but some meaningless human creation—no more than lines on a map! Country borders don't follow the laws of nature, they're invented by humans, so people should eliminate them! In addition, we don't gain bread and houses during a war but lose them, because they are destroyed! Therefore war is bad for people. Wars break out precisely because of countries, which you call 'homelands', and if we accept the premise that all evil gives rise to evil, then it follows that the concept of homeland is also evil, purposeless and harmful, and thus not something we should protect by sacrificing our blood! On the contrary, it is something we must strive to eliminate—not by destroying everything within the country of course, but by eliminating the very concept of 'country'! Namely, it would be better to have as few homelands as possible, preferably none. I would be happy if Atlantua conquers Torgo if it means fewer countries existing in the world, but I don't want to participate in the conquest process!"

"You wouldn't talk like this if Torgo conquered Atlantua!"

"I would indeed! It makes no difference to me whether the area I live in is called Atlantua or Torgo! Or what the king's name is! None of this matters, since if I'm not enjoying my life there I'll just move somewhere else! My homeland is wherever I can live well. And the fewer countries there are, the less chance there is of war, so the ideal would be to have no countries at all! This is a simple basic truth, like a mathematical axiom. All the nations of the Earth should have united into one country a long time ago!"

"Then the country itself would be eliminated!"

"Yes, and how good would that be!"

Gavadj did not respond to this, he just hopped beside Kayam on one leg, hissing and thinking it over. He did not like the philosophy of Kayam-Getsnappy very much, but it was undeniable that this worldview was not lacking in logic.

Finally he said, "If there was only one country, then there would only be a single nation left in the world, because the rest would be obliterated by that one powerful nation!"

"They could settle it peacefully, if they had enough sense."

"It wouldn't matter, because over time they would get so mixed up that they'd become one nation anyway!"

"I don't see a problem with that," said Kayam.

"But then the variegation of nations would be lost, the cultural diversity!"

"I don't believe it would cause a great deal of harm, since diversity doesn't give us any benefits now, it only causes damage—hatred of each other and wars! Even if there was some benefit to diversity, I would readily sacrifice it for the sake of eternal peace. In other words, patriotism is not just worthless in my eyes but idiotic nonsense, hogwash, and should be urgently consigned to oblivion, as it only generates blood, violence, war, poverty and endless suffering, which makes patriotism the obstacle to eternal peace!"

"I'm starting to believe that you really are Getsnappy! His teachings are always about peace. But you're wrong, because nations have a right to autonomy..."

"That's just garbage that kings persuade people of! Anyway, it's never the nations that possess it, only the lords. They tell people these things in order to rule over them, and all the fools believe it! In my opinion, the unsightly concept of 'nation' is nonexistent malarkey, just like 'homeland' and 'country'. It signifies something that doesn't exist, because there is no such thing in nature as a 'nation', only human beings. People exist, but nations don't! So a person can have a right to autonomy, but not a nation. It's interesting to note that lords never mention the people's right to autonomy, obviously because they would instantly have to eliminate slavery! However they do mention a nation's right to autonomy, because that helps them stay in power. The autonomy of people, on the other hand, would obstruct their ability to rule. That's why they don't mention it! And if a nation is nonexistent, how can it have autonomy?!"

"But what about group interest, group law...?"

"Any group's boundary can only be drawn artificially, so the only group of people that can concretely exist are human beings in their totality and therefore the world's entire population!"

"But nations do indeed exist, there are many signs indicative of a unit—a common language, shared clothing styles, skin color, physique, customs, religion... and the more similar these things are among humans the more they belong to a particular nation!"

"Bullshit! That doesn't indicate anything! Atlantua professes to be a nation, even though its inhabitants speak multiple languages, their clothing is different, not to mention their religions! And it's clear that you can understand me quite well, however you still grimly stress that your homeland is different than mine! But suppose things really are as you say. Do you know what the response of the wise Kayam, your savior, is to that?!"

"What?"

"Well, my little brother," said Kayam to the boy, who was in fact no younger than him. "What you call a nation is not a nation *because* of these differences, since the causal relationship is reversed! It's like this—people, mainly rulers, invented the concept of 'nation' in order to have something to rule over, and then they invented these symbols for themselves... the clothing, flags, coat of arms, religion, maybe even the language! These are not really causes but *effects*, a consequence deriving from the nation concept itself! It's only you imbeciles that believe these things have to be fought for, even though it was invented so that fools like you would end up fighting. Actually, not even for that reason, just for the king and his own interests. You're like monkeys at a circus—you jump around after all this meaningless tripe while others, the rulers, laugh at you! You are fighting for words, mere words that lack any substance, and they've always been meaningless!"

"You can't expect all people to behave the same way!"

"Well, that's undoubtedly true, but it's beside the point! Because the core of my message is that it's time human beings learned how to behave properly, without killing each other! Unfortunately this is impossible as long as those ludicrous concepts of Empire, State, Homeland—and whatever other brainwashing garbage is currently swirling around your head—exist at all!"

Kayam spoke no more, and Gavadj continued hopping in contemplation. He was outraged by Kayam's view, but he had no retort and was horrified by the possibility that Kayam might be right. That would be terrible! Maybe his wife was justified in not wanting him to go to war! He had spent so much money on weapons alone, which were now of course left behind on the battlefield. This was partly because a prisoner was not allowed to possess weapons, and partly because Kayam refused to carry them. Gavadj could hardly carry them in his wounded state; he was lucky to be able to drag himself into captivity.

They finally reached the first soldiers going out to search the dead, who were very surprised that Kayam had captured a prisoner of war. "What do you need him for?" they asked Kayam.

"That's my business, but I heard that there won't be any great battles for a good while, so he can convalesce with me. A prisoner always comes in handy!" he replied proudly.

The soldiers did not tease him, since they had heard Kayam was no longer a soldier but the captain's clerk. They certainly had no use for a crippled slave, but that was Kayam's business.

Kayam led Gavadj into his tent, who begged him for some water. Kayam gave him a whole jug, after which he handed him the captain's letter, telling him to speedily copy it using his wonderful handwriting. Gavadj completed it quickly and beautifully, and Kayam took it to the captain. He did not even bother tying Gavadj up since he was exhausted, and besides, where could he escape with a broken leg?!

The captain was satisfied with the result, even complimenting Kayam on his fine work, who did not consider it necessary to enlighten his commander that he himself had not copied the letter. And although Kayam was sleepy, the captain dictated many more letters and statements to him. He noted them all down, then went back to his tent, shook Gavadj awake, and thrust the papers before him so he could copy them neatly. During this time it was his turn to sleep. And so it went on for many days, in fact weeks.

They did occasionally change campsites in the meantime, but this wasn't much of a problem because Gavadj could fit into the back of one of the captain's chariots. The captain was a decent man, and did not doubt that Kayam had the right to capture a slave. Kayam's workload was heavy, however this didn't particularly bother him. He was glad that he didn't have to go into battle, even though there were no great battles going on anymore, only small local resistance hotspots that were soon broken up by the Atlantuan troops.

It was already late autumn when Emperor Zor's letter arrived, stating that he had made peace with the king of Torgo. For the time being at least he would not be doing any more conquering, since the king of Torgo had acknowledged that Zor now had ownership of all the regions he had seized thus far, even a substantial portion of the seashore. This was good for the emperor, but many of the officers were dissatisfied because they believed the emperor could easily have made further conquests, as he was in a favorable position and had the strength to do so.

Kayam did not care about politics; he was just happy that the war would soon be over. But it was not over yet. First the area had to be occupied, the taxes had to be arranged, the army's food supply collected for the winter, and permanent garrisons established. Of course Kayam didn't have to take care of all this himself, but it did mean a lot of clerical work, which he had a fair share of. For instance, for a good while his job was to travel back and forth to various food collecting

locations in the occupied regions, and note how much of a particular food was taken and from where. He was very afraid of being raided by the conquered population, and although nothing ever happened they were still rather intimidating. For this reason Kayam always brought the jug containing gunpowder along with him. He had developed it even further, by mixing several handfuls of tiny pebbles into the finely ground powder so that they were distributed evenly throughout the entire volume of the jug. The pebbles, though tiny, were just big enough that if they plowed into someone's body it would cause lethal damage. Kayam believed this would greatly enhance the effectiveness of the weapon.

The residents did not attack, however something else entirely happened. They were traversing a little further out, into a tiny village that bore the rather strange name 'Glahtj'. And it was interesting because by this time he knew from Gavadj, who had become a relatively tolerant friend, that his young wife lived here—the "beetle-eyes", whose real name was Zaty. Incidentally, with Kayam's lack of interest in people he would never have normally remembered this if Gavadj hadn't spoken so much about it. He was constantly jabbering whenever he didn't have anything to copy, and it was always about his wife, whom he missed so much. But his leg had not yet recovered, and Kayam still needed him. Whether or not Kayam wanted it, due to the repetition he had noted the two names—*Glahtj*, where *Zaty* lived. On this occasion he was required to travel there with six soldiers, naturally not as the commander but contributing as a clerk.

The village was not particularly large, even by the standards of that time. It contained no more than thirty cottages. Nevertheless, if the villagers were to team up, there would have been enough of them to wipe out Kayam and his squad. But this did not happen. At that time people on earth were quite fearful, and generally didn't own weapons. Furthermore, what happened was not out of the ordinary for them. Kayam and his companions came to them under the guise of tax collectors, appropriating some of the crops and cattle. No violence occurred. It was not as if there were no beautiful women here or that the soldiers didn't feel any desire, but there was a strict command from Emperor Zor that measures should be taken to avoid any rebellion that would unnecessarily incite the wrath of people in the occupied territories. He specifically emphasized that the rape of women was strictly forbidden by army officers, even threatening those guilty with execution, as these activities would be likely to cause hostility toward the Atlantians, and the Emperor's aim was to have them accept his ruling as soon as possible. The commanders passed this message on to the soldiers, who were of course rather displeased.

Now Kayam and the soldiers went through the houses one by one, gathering all sorts of things to put into the cart. Following their orders they did not touch the women, which the villagers probably wouldn't have tolerated anyway. But the gathering of food was not very difficult. The villagers were reassured that they had only come with a single cart, so they were unlikely to take everything. They didn't want everything. Their order was to search for foods that were considered delicacies, meaning ham, honey, cheese and the like. One cart was really enough for this, because in such a small village they wouldn't have more than a cartload of these.

The houses were relatively far apart, the whole village reminiscent of a scattered group of farmsteads. Whenever they arrived at a house, they ordered the resident to come out and state his name, and Kayam wrote it down. He didn't even know why, but that was his duty. Then he had to write down what they took. They arrived at the eighth house, when a young woman came out, announcing that her name was Zaty. Kayam picked up on it. He had wondered who the great Beloved of his clerk was, and decided that this Gavadj must be insane, because the woman did not evoke the image of a beautiful swan in Kayam's mind at all, not to mention anything else. To be fair, she wasn't exactly ugly. She was young, and her eyes were black, so the name "beetle-eyes"

suited her in that respect. But she was a rather pale, thin woman, and even in this small village of Glahtj he could point out at least three other women who were much prettier than her. Nevertheless, Gavadj had spoken of Zatyí so often to Kayam, who was basically his enemy, that there was no doubt he was seriously in love with her. He was repeatedly mentioning how much he looked forward to the end of the war, so he could go back to his wife.

The head of the food collection squad told Zatyí what they needed. The woman said that she didn't have anything of that kind.

"You can't possibly not have any!" responded the soldier firmly, jutting his stubbly chin forward in emphasis. "We must take something from every house, it's only fair! And somebody from the village told us that you guys were some kind of clerks, so you must be rich!"

"We've never been rich, sir, however it is true that my husband was a clerk. But he may not even be alive anymore, because he went to war and hasn't returned!"

"Aha, so he was fighting against us!"

"Sure, even though I didn't want him to... The poor have never benefited from wars! Then the tax collectors came..."

"You're lying! *We're* the tax collectors, and we haven't come this way until now!"

"It was the Torg tax collectors who came, and they took nearly everything! All they left was a cow and two bags of millet, which I really need, otherwise I'll starve to death!"

"You want to eat the cow?!" laughed the soldier.

"My little boy needs the milk!"

"We heroes need it too! Boys, tie the cow behind the cart! It'll slowly trail along behind us, and if there's nothing else then the two bags of millet will be fine."

"But we'll starve to death, both me and the child! He's only young, not even six months old, and he needs milk! If you take the cow I can't buy another one. I no longer have a husband to help me—he hasn't come home and must have fallen in battle! Please don't take the cow! Don't be so cruel!" begged the woman.

"If you don't have a husband then work yourself! You could earn a living from your body," suggested one of the soldiers.

The previous soldier and leader of the group, looked as if he had suddenly remembered something and winked at the lads, saying, "Hey boys, we're not such bad people!"

"Not at all!" responded another immediately, not yet knowing what their leader was planning to say, although the wink made it sound like more was coming.

"We don't rape women. But we need something in return. We won't take the cow if you behave sensibly, alright?!" and he looked at the woman.

"But... but..."

"No buts! You know what I'm talking about! It makes no difference to you anyway, because your husband has probably long been rotting on the battlefield, and you need the cow! We need it too, but we need other things as well. You can choose what you want to give—yourself or the cow!"

And because he could see the woman was hesitating with tears running down her face, he grabbed her hand and dragged her into the house. The woman obeyed, stumbling reluctantly. The other soldiers followed the commander with a loud cheer.

Kayam did not go along with them; he stayed in the cart on his own. The truth was that he would have very much liked to finally be with a woman, but not in this way. For one thing, being as garrulous as he was, he was afraid he would accidentally blab to Gavadj that they were at his wife's place, and how could he tell him that he had slept with the woman?! Gavadj was sure to be deeply offended, and might even kill him during the night... or he would deliberately write something

incorrectly and they would blame it on him, and he had no desire to sit in prison again for years because of that damned Getsnappy whom he supposedly wrote onto the census list... And besides, the woman was crying. Who the hell wants to have intercourse with a sobbing woman?! The soldiers seemed to be in the mood for it. But not Kayam. This just showed that he was not a soldier—he was much better than that! A far greater, more brilliant, adept and noble man!

After about ten minutes their leader came out. He seemed satisfied. "It's just as well you stayed out here, because somebody had to watch the cart," he said to Kayam. "Come on, let's get that cow tied behind it!"

Kayam was rather surprised by this. "But sir, you slept with the woman, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course!"

"And the others are now doing the same inside, right?"

"You bet, humping to their hearts content... and what of it?"

"But you promised her that if she let this happen we would not take the cow!"

"You ass, don't be such a fool! She's just a whore of the enemy and her husband fought against us anyway. He even died in battle! How can such a promise be binding?! In fact it wasn't even a promise, just a ploy to deceive the enemy. Listen, if you're a dumbshit and don't want to screw her, then that's your business, but don't go taking the moral high ground, alright?!"

"But why do we need a cow? Who's going to look after it at the war camp?!"

"Nobody, we'll slaughter it and eat it! Come on, go and tie up the cow!"

"I refuse to, I'm a clerk! If you tie up the cow then I'll write down that we're also taking a cow—that's my job, so it's fine—but I'm not tying up a cow!"

"Just do it, otherwise it won't only be your pockmarks deforming your face!"

"But sir, I can't—I'm afraid of cows!"

"And not of me?"

"Not as much as I am of cows—they can kick much harder! After all, it is a far bigger animal than you are..."

"How dare you! I'm not an animal, I resent the implication!"

"Well you see, if you're not an animal then naturally the cow is a bigger animal, isn't it? So just calm down, because if you hit me I'll tell the captain!"

"Up yours!" shouted the soldier, then spat at Kayam. "Cowardly worm!" But there was nothing he could do, so he went into the stable to chase the cow out himself.

Kayam was incensed. It was true that he had not slept with the woman himself, but he also felt bound by the promise of the soldiers. He couldn't possibly allow anybody to accuse the Great Kayam of being a liar, of being dishonest and just like these damn soldiers, who weren't even capable of writing down their own names! Besides, he was very satisfied with Gavadj's work. If they took the cow the woman might die, and if Zatyí died, the stupid Gavadj might kill himself or become melancholic and not be able to work as well... and that would only cause Kayam trouble. Gavadj had learned to read his shorthand notes quite well by this stage, even though Kayam himself could acknowledge that his handwriting resembled cat scrawls. Therefore he had to save the cow!

He made a hasty decision, and by the time the soldier had disappeared behind the house on his way to the stable, Kayam's plan was fully formed. He pulled out his jug and placed it under the wagon's seat, inverting it so that a little gunpowder spilled out, before covering it all with some empty bags. Then he took a piece of string and wet it, coated it in gunpowder, and lay it in the crack between two of the wagon's boards, so that one end led into the jug and the other ended on the ground. From here he sprinkled a strip of the gunpowder that led a good four or five meters toward the house. He would have liked to spread it further but he was afraid to take any more from the jug,

fearing that its impact would not be great enough. When he was done he began piling up the food supplies, mainly the sacks, at the back of the cart. His muscles could certainly feel the strain, being unaccustomed to heavy work.

The soldier arrived back with the cow. "What the hell are you doing?!" he growled.

Kayam did not want the cow, who would be behind them, to be hurt by the explosion. But instead he said, "I don't want the cow to be able to see me when I'm sitting in the cart, in case it butts me!"

"You idiot, only bulls do that!"

"A cow is a bull too, only a female bull! I'm afraid of cows!"

"You really are a fool!"

"Why does it matter where the sacks are put anyway? This way there's more space for the other things!"

The soldier just shrugged and tied the cow to the cart. Meanwhile two more soldiers came out of the woman's house, leaving three of them still inside. Kayam was nervous that they would notice the black strip of gunpowder, but nobody seemed to care about it. The commander was keen to get going, but of course he had already enjoyed Zaty's charms! "Where are these motherfuckers?! Come on!"

"Just get into the wagon, I'll tell them!" said Kayam casually, and entered the house. "Hey, the commander wants to leave, get cracking!"

Two of them were already leaving, and the third one got off the woman angrily. "He could have waited, I haven't even tried her ass yet..." he muttered, but made his way outside too. "You should also get cracking then, we're not waiting for *you*!" he added, giving Kayam a poke.

"There's no need to wait for me, I'm keeping my promise. I'm not going to touch her, as then we couldn't take the cow..." said Kayam in an innocent sanctimonious voice, however he knew very well that he was exposing his companions in front of the woman. Zaty's shame would have stopped her from leaving the house until they were far away, but Kayam wanted her to come out so she could see what he was about to do.

He had achieved his goal. Zaty became hysterical, screaming in a delirious voice that this wasn't the deal—they couldn't take the cow, they'd promised, and she scolded them for being thieves and swindlers. This caused the soldiers to quickly flee the house, a little ashamed of themselves. Zaty even followed them into the yard, and she would have run over to the cow, but one of the soldiers gave her a slap and kicked her to the ground, where she lay wailing.

"Come on!" said the commander, and everyone jumped onto the wagon. At the end of the strip of gunpowder Kayam pretended he had fallen. He dithered about, moaning that he had hurt himself. In the meantime he turned his back to the soldiers and extracted two pieces of flint from his pocket. Now that everybody was on the wagon, he struck a spark...

Without delay he hunched over and put his hands over his ears, well-aware that his "magic powder" was quite loud. The five men in the wagon just watched, wondering what the foolish Kayam was doing now, and stared uncomprehendingly at the tiny strip of fire approaching them. But before they could even ask anything, it reached the wagon and ran underneath it... then BOOM!

Now a cow is a rather calm animal, but if it is tied to a cart that's exploding it will become quite "agitated". The cow began to moo in horror, frantically throwing itself about in an attempt to tear the rope. Finally it succeeded and ran off, passing within an inch of Kayam's nose, who was lying on the ground. And although Kayam was just pretending to be afraid of cows earlier, after this experience he decided that he was in fact afraid of wild cows at least. But now he picked himself up and began leaping about in a frenzy, cheering, "I did it, I did it, yes, it worked, it succeeded! How

wonderful to be able to finish off six of the damn bastards at once!" He jumped over to Zaty, lifted her off the ground, hugged her and even kissed her, but then quickly let her go, as he did not want the woman to think badly of him too. However the woman did not even protest, just stared blankly at the soldiers' body parts that were scattered everywhere.

Finally he heard moaning coming from the back section of the wagon that had remained intact. Kayam carefully reached for his sword and went over to investigate. It was not as if he wasn't afraid of any possible survivors taking revenge, but he was determined that he would now fight with anyone if necessary, because he'd be in much more trouble if they grassed on him back at the camp. But he could see that he wouldn't have to do anything of the sort. The leader of the squad had actually survived the explosion by some sort of miracle, however both his legs were missing as well as his right hand and wrist. Kayam felt great satisfaction as he stood above him. "Haha! You thought you could threaten me, you dirty pig! Me, the great Getsnappy?! Well you can see that *I* did this, it was *me* who caused your death! And you are going to die because I refuse to bandage you up! You might still remain alive for a while, but you'll eventually bleed to death. I, clerk Getsnappy, will not tolerate anyone treating the weak and defenseless so despicably! I wouldn't be saying this if you had gained some advantage from it... but no, it was merely lust! And what's more, you even wanted to involve me! Me, the Wonderful, the Great One?! Well, that's not going to happen, my friend!" And although it was not worthy of his greatness Kayam kicked the crippled, human wreck that was writhing on the ground. A few moments later he really did pass out from the loss of blood, and there was no doubt he would soon be gone.

"You're the great Getsnappy?!" shouted Zaty behind Kayam in true religious ecstasy, and she had no reason to doubt his words for he had just performed a great miracle before her very eyes. He had destroyed the enemy and even saved her cow! It did not matter that the cow had run away. He could search for it, but it would probably come back soon on its own.

"Well yes, you could say that I am, in a certain sense..." said Kayam vaguely, somewhat "obscuring" the facts from the woman.

"But sir, rumor has it that you've died! Or isn't this true?!"

Kayam couldn't stop himself from responding. "I was resurrected! I decided to be resurrected! But I'm warning you, good woman, that I come and go among people in secret and I forbid you to reveal my identity to anyone!"

The woman fell before him on her knees. "I beg you to perform a miracle, since you have authority and you know about the afterlife! Please resurrect my poor husband!"

"You're talking about Gavadj, right?" asked Kayam.

"You really do know everything, sir!"

"You can rest assured, I've already saved him. He's working with me. He was only wounded—one of his legs was broken, but his condition is improving. And he deserved to have his leg broken because he was stupid enough to volunteer to go to war as a clerk, leaving his beetle-eyes here, exposed to the arbitrariness of tax collectors!"

"You really do know everything, sir, even that the Torg tax collectors raped me..." cried the woman. Kayam did not know this, nor was it what he was talking about, but he wisely remained silent. Then the silence bored him and he said, "Well, I'll saunter off back to the camp now, and you'd better hide with your cow for awhile, because there are sure to be many soldiers coming to pry soon!" So Kayam leisurely made his way back, bringing a jug of honey along with him so that he would have something to snack on during the trip. It was a miracle the jug of honey had survived the explosion, but Kayam thought it was only natural. He deserved a bit of luck, in fact that was the least he deserved!

It was a huge surprise to the army when they learned of the miracle Getsnappy had performed. Girlimpay and his team had previously told them about Getsnappy's first miracle, however nobody believed them. But now that this had happened, it was conceivable that the earlier miracle really had occurred. Curiously Kayam was the only one present on both occasions, and the only one who remained alive. When he was questioned about this, he just smiled mysteriously and said that it was because he was such an infinitely good person. He always tried to avoid harming anybody, he kept the Emperor's commands, and there wouldn't have been any problem at all if the others had not wanted to rape Zaty. Because if they offered something in exchange for sleeping with her and did not keep their promise, that constitutes rape! At least according to Getsnappy...

Kayam faithfully described everything to those at the camp, down to the last detail—what had happened, why it had happened and how, only keeping quiet about his own role. He blamed everything on Getsnappy this time too, claiming that clerk Getsnappy had appeared out of the blue and struck every guilty man with lightning.

"But he didn't consider you guilty at all?!"

"No," shrugged Kayam. "In fact he even complimented me on what a decent person I am!"

"Astonishing! That's incredibly strange!"

"Not really, it's quite understandable actually. After all, I am a clerk like Getsnappy, and a clerk is not going to peck out the eyes of another clerk like a raven, nor eat them as they commonly say..."

"It's dog eat dog! That's what they say!"

"So what? Dogs don't actually eat each other, and you think ravens do?"

"No, but that's the phrase! It's dogs, not ravens!"

"Okay, but you agree with my statement that ravens don't eat each other's eyes, and neither do dogs?"

"What are you getting at?!"

"That it doesn't matter, they're basically the same!"

"Dogs and ravens?!"

"Ravens and clerks! In the sense that a raven has feathers and so does a clerk, because he writes with one! Now leave me in peace, because if you don't hurry the evening will descend and you won't be able to see the wagon that has been struck by lightning!"

Many had already rushed over to see the remnants. Kayam did not go with them; he didn't need to as they managed to find it without him. Besides, he was needed "back home" because Gavadj was overwhelmed with grief when he learned what had happened to his wife. Kayam was trying to console him, of course in his own way... "You silly bugger, I told you that you should have stayed at home to protect the woman, not the 'homeland'!"

"But why did she agree to sleep with them?! She cheated on me!"

"You thoroughly deserved it, the fool that you are! You had it coming! She didn't even know whether you were alive, and she didn't want to starve to death! She may even have feared that if she didn't agree, they would do it without her consent, by force, and then take the cow too!"

"But you *did* intend to take it!"

"Hey, leave me out of this! I didn't screw your woman, in fact I didn't even want the cow!"

"But they still intended to take it!"

"She couldn't have known that at the time! Listen, my brother, I think the woman acted as wisely as she could. You can't reproach her for anything, only yourself. If I hear that you've hurt her, I swear I'll call Getsnappy to shove a lightning bolt up your ass, so bear that in mind! Believe me, if I pray to him he is sure to do great miracles, because I'm on very good terms with him—one might

even say we have an intimate, warm friendship. Whether you believe it or not, he has left me alive twice now, which is concrete evidence that what I'm saying is true!"

"You're a damned liar, you just said earlier that *you're* Getsnappy!"

"Well in a certain sense I am, really."

"Now are you him, or aren't you?!"

"It's so difficult to understand the intricate relationship between Getsnappy and I that I don't even want to attempt explaining it, because you wouldn't be able to grasp it. Those on your intellectual level, who fall for such vacuous and cheesy phrases like 'patriotism', are utterly hopeless, each and every one of you without exception!"

"You're a rotten filthy animal, not Getsnappy, and you belong to the enemy!"

"Okay, then I'll tell you something. It wasn't only the Atlantians who enjoyed the charms of Zaty!"

"What?!"

"Even earlier on, when you had just left to fight for your 'homeland', the Torg tax collectors came and also had their way with her. Zaty told me. This is how much the homeland honors its heroes—while they're shedding their blood for it, *it* is sending out its tax collectors to screw their women!"

And so once Kayam had done a good job of "comforting" the heroic Gavadj, whom he no longer cared about, he sacrificed some of his treasures to buy a bunch of ingredients in order to make another portion of his gunpowder. He did not want to be left without any material in case Getsnappy wanted to perform another miracle. Although he was careful to ensure Gavadj never saw him mixing the materials together.

* * *

Now that Kayam had been conspicuously honored by clerk Getsnappy on multiple occasions with signs of his appreciation, the soldiers began respecting Kayam somewhat more. Not a great deal, but a little. In any case, they had no doubt that Kayam was an accomplished clerk, as well as an honest guy. He must be competent, otherwise the captain would have kicked him out long ago. And if he wasn't honest, then clerk Getsnappy would not consider him worthy of his afterlife friendship. Consequently, on one occasion when Kayam had very little money, he managed to triple his remaining funds thanks to his newfound regard. Here is the story...

Kayam was scribbling down some statements for the captain, meanwhile wondering what he should do. He barely had any money left, only a single gold coin. Gold was worth a lot, and because Kayam did not stoop down to such vulgar entertainment as tossing dice and drinking, he believed it would last a long time. One gold coin was worth twelve silver coins, and even a silver coin could last up to a week if it was only spent on food. But Kayam was now feeling skeptical about the future. What if his money ran out? How would he buy his salted honey, for example? How could he live without that?! Oh, the horror!

At that moment three soldiers walked up to him. "Hey Kayam, do you have any change? Could you exchange some gold coins for us?" one of them asked.

"Gold? Me? How many?" asked Kayam curiously.

"Eleven gold coins. To silver," answered the soldier.

"Oh come on boys, I only have one gold coin, and that's not even in silver," said Kayam, not afraid to tell them how little money he had. If they believed he was poor, then they wouldn't want to steal from him.

"Bloody hell, if you can't exchange our money anyway, not even a single gold coin, then why do you care how many coins we want exchanged?!" the soldier swore.

"There's no need to get stroppy with me—I've done nothing wrong to deserve that! What do you need the change for anyway? Gambling perhaps? Because you can do that with gold too. In fact, if the stakes are higher then the game is more exciting, isn't it?"

"That's not the point!" said another soldier. "Just listen, Kayam... You're supposedly smart, at least you should be because you're a clerk. Perhaps you could help us fairly divide the eleven gold coins that we've found. We've asked everybody in vain, nobody has any change, they all just keep large values of gold from the loot on them, and now we don't know what to do!"

"Ah, so you've found eleven gold coins... Geez, why can't I be that lucky?!" Kayam grumbled. "But I see what you mean, it is actually impossible to divide eleven gold coins between three people fairly."

"Oh, it doesn't have to be divided into equal parts! You should know that I believe it was the gods themselves who sent us this money, or maybe even clerk Getsnappy!"

"And why do you think that?"

"Well this is what happened. The three of us were on patrol, and we were talking along the way so it wouldn't be so boring. The conversation turned to how great it would be to find a bunch of money. Then I said that if only I could find a bag full of it, I wouldn't even be so greedy as to keep it all for myself—a third would be enough for me, because I would fairly divide the money between the three of us. In response, my companion here," he pointed at the stocky soldier beside him, "said that it was very nice of me, but he was a little more modest and a quarter of the money would be enough for him. Then my third companion said that if they really did find some money, he'd be happy with even a sixth of it. He just wanted to finally find something, because he didn't even have enough to buy a drink and his throat was completely parched. Well, barely had he spoken these words when after a few steps we really did find a purse right in the middle of the road! It's obvious that some higher power heard our complaints and placed the purse in our path! Before we opened it we agreed that no matter how much money was in the purse, we would divide it in the proportions we had spoken about previously. This way the gods or clerk Getsnappy wouldn't be angry with us for behaving differently to what we had vowed a few minutes earlier, since then they might take back the money and punish us! So I would get a third of the total, and my other fellows a quarter and a sixth. After that we opened the purse—this one here..." The soldier pointed to a beautifully embroidered velvet purse. "And there were a total of eleven gold pieces inside. Well, we had no idea how to divide this in the way it should be. It proved to be a very difficult task, and eventually we thought of exchanging them for silver coins to make it easier, because that way we'd have a larger amount of coins to divide. Then we could divide it into three piles—I would get one of them to make up my one third, and my fellows would somehow share the rest. But you don't have enough change!" He looked at Kayam regretfully.

"Well no, I don't have any change at all! However I may be able to help you," grinned Kayam.

"You can? How?"

"This should convince you of how much I love you guys! See and admire my unprecedented generosity—I will add my one gold coin to your eleven coins, and then I'll divide that among you in the exact proportions you agreed upon. But if I'm acting in such an altruistic manner, I ought to receive some kind of symbolic token in return—so I get the pouch. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course, that's a great solution!"

"It sure is!"

"Thank you very much!" said the soldiers, smiling happily. But regardless of what they were saying, Kayam could tell from their expressions that they considered him a complete fool for giving them his own money. Since the purse, although beautiful, was not even worth a single silver coin, let alone a gold one (the value of twelve silver coins), yet he had added a whole gold coin to the soldier's money!

"So," Kayam continued, and made a show of slipping his one gold coin into the pouch. "Here we have not eleven but twelve gold coins. One third goes to you, right?" he turned to the first soldier.

"Yes!"

"One third of twelve is four. Here you go, here are your four gold coins!" Kayam took four coins from the purse and handed them to the soldier. Then he turned to the second soldier.

"According to your vow, you get a quarter of the money, right?"

"That's right!"

"A quarter of twelve is three, so here are your three coins," said Kayam. "And for you..." he turned to the third, "You get a sixth of the money. One sixth of the twelve gold coins is two, so here are your two gold coins!" He handed him the money, then closed the purse and put it into his pocket. "And the pouch is mine, that's what we agreed!"

The soldiers thanked him and left. A little later however, one of them said, "Hey boys, there's something I don't like about this!"

"What?" asked the fellow.

"How many gold coins did we find?"

"Eleven," stated his friend.

"Well if I received four, you three, and you two, that's only nine gold coins all together! Kayam was left with his gold coin and two of our eleven!"

"Hey!" snapped the two others. "The dirty little crook! Let's go back and beat it out of him!"

They immediately rushed back to Kayam, but the captain was there with him.

"What's the rush, boys?!" he asked them sternly, as the three soldiers practically fell into the tent in a fluster. They began telling the captain the story, interrupting each other and pointing at Kayam with accusatory gestures.

"Ah, interesting! These boys are accusing you of swindling their money! What do you say to that, Kayam—do you deny the charges?" asked the captain.

"Of course I deny the charges!"

"So the incident did not happen as they told it?"

"Oh yes. But I didn't cheat them, I gave them a gift! You can count it yourself, my dear captain, and you too, boys!" he said to the soldiers. "You found eleven gold coins, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"From the eleven gold coins you had to receive one third of it, which works out to be three and two thirds of a gold coin, or eight silver coins. Instead of this you received four whole gold coins, right?"

"That's true..." said the soldier with a look of amazement.

"So, you did very well out of it then, didn't you?!" inquired Kayam harshly, glaring at him.

"Well, er... if I think about it that way, then actually..."

"So yes! You got more than you should have, four silvers more, which is equal to one third of a gold coin! Four silvers more than your fair portion. And you accuse *me* of stealing, you bastard!"

Kayam turned to the second soldier. "And you too—how ungrateful you are as well! From the eleven gold coins you should have been entitled to two and three quarters of a gold coin, because

that's one quarter of eleven! Instead you received three whole gold coins from me, which means that you too received more than your fair share of a quarter of the gold coins, three silvers more! Since when am I a thief?! Is a thief someone who gives more to somebody than he deserves? It's a ridiculous absurdity, isn't it?"

"And you," he turned to the third soldier, "you did well out of it too, because from the eleven gold coins you should have received one and five sixths of a gold coin, that is, one gold coin and ten silvers. Instead you got two whole gold coins from me, so you came out of it with an extra two silvers than you were rightfully entitled to! Isn't that so?!"

"Well yeah, but you were still left with two gold coins!"

"What does this have to do with *my* money? Doesn't it matter that you came out of this better, that you received more than your share?!"

"But I don't understand," said the first soldier, desperation showing on his face. "How is it possible that we received more than our share, but at the same time you have more money left than you started with?! Are you a wizard or something?"

"I am a genius."

"That's not an answer!"

"Since when do I owe you an answer?! Do you think it's my duty to teach you all? How much will you pay me to become your teacher?"

"Come on now, enough debating!" The captain stood up. "Do you acknowledge that you received more than your share?" he said, turning to the soldiers.

"Yes, but..."

"There is no 'but' here! If you received more then Kayam did not steal from you, because if he had then you would have received less, not more! So get out of here and stop jabbering, because you know what the punishment is for making false accusations! You may go! And I suggest you do it very quickly, because I've got things to do and I don't have time for your silly games!"

He turned to Kayam. "Now let's deal with what I came here for—I shall dictate a report that I urgently need you to write for the Emperor..."

Kayam wrote the report, meanwhile grinning. He knew that he was right and that he was a genius. But even if he wasn't, it could at least be said that he understood mathematics, unlike the soldiers. The secret of it all was that the soldiers did not understand how fractions worked. One third, one quarter and one sixth added up to three quarters of the total. So according to their agreement, the soldiers had only claimed three quarters of the money! Kayam recognized this quickly. Three quarters of twelve gold coins is nine, and he had distributed this among the soldiers so that they got somewhat more than they would have been entitled to otherwise, and the rest of the money was left for Kayam. Plus of course the purse. Previously he had only one gold coin, but now he had three—his genius had tripled his money! It was certainly worthwhile learning mathematics in those days!

Chapter 13: The Emperor Chooses a Wife

The reason the Emperor terminated the war fairly quickly was that he had an urgent private endeavor. It was something that, while private, was still befitting for the Emperor to carry out

publicly, preferably when the country was at peace. This endeavor was marriage. The Emperor getting married! This was momentous, sensational news!

Originally Emperor Zor had not thought about marriage at all. He had many lovers and some children here and there, although they were considered illegitimate. In fact, on the particular day that gave the decisive turn to this remarkable event, the idea of a legitimate covenant had not occurred to the Emperor even as a remote possibility. He was simply visiting the city of Sizon, which was relatively close to the war's main area of operations, and thought it worthwhile to temporarily set up his headquarters there. Besides, he had never seen this area of his country before.

He arrived unexpectedly, as was his usual custom. The illustrious leaders of Sizon could not bow enough before him, with big smiles on their faces and wild despair in their hearts, because although they did not expect to benefit much from the imperial visit, there would be trouble if the majestic Emperor was not satisfied with something. For the time being however, no particular complications arose from the Emperor's arrival. Zor merely stated that they were to organize suitable accommodation for him, and while this was being arranged he would go hunting.

The morality or immorality of hunting need not be judged by the standards of a later age. At that time wild animals were in greater abundance than they are today, and hunting was a significant source of obtaining meat. The view that the catastrophic decline in wildlife was caused by widespread excessive hunting is incorrect. It certainly contributed to it, but only marginally. The main cause was urbanization and overpopulation of humans, which involved the requisition of green spaces to construct a growing number of buildings. Great tracts of wilderness underwent cultivation too, and in order to have arable land they had to clear the forests, which meant the destruction of wildlife habitat...

There is another thing that should not be withheld. Ancient and medieval hunters still hunted with bows and arrows, and in many cases even with spears, swords and knives. These weapons could be seen as balancing the power difference between humans and predators. They were the claws, fangs and teeth of the "human animal". The bow's string essentially replaced a man's muscles, enabling him to "run" as fast, or "jump" as far as, say, a tiger. Therefore the wild animal did have a chance against man, which was proven by the frequent death of hunters. Even if we consider that most of the time they were not hunting for dangerous animals like wild boars or bears, but deer or stags. For these creatures, a lone human hunter still posed a great danger, but no more than that of a wolf or any other wild animal for which it was already prey. In fact human hunters posed less of a threat, because they hunted less frequently than wolves and did not have such sensitive noses. It is true that they borrowed the noses of dogs to supplement their sense of smell, but even bloodhounds are not able to smell half as well as an average wolf.

So at that time hunting was not frowned upon, even by the standards of the modern era. Unlike the hunters of later times, when the meat of the killed animal was not even used because they only wanted trophies such as the antlers; when they could bump off animals from several kilometers away with scoped rifles, from the complete security of high stands. The animals didn't stand a chance against humans under such conditions, and we can freely condemn these hunters. But not the hunters of the Middle Ages, even if they did admit that it was entertaining. This may well have been the case, but it was life-threatening entertainment, since the life of a man in the Middle Ages involved a far closer proximity to death on a daily basis than people who lived centuries later. People in those days found nothing objectionable about hunting. They looked forward to a big hunt, because back then they didn't have such entertainment as television or cup matches.

It was not irresponsible for the Emperor to go hunting near the city of Sizon. Although Sizon was near Torgo, it was still part of Atlantua, and was not so close that they would have to encounter

the enemy. In addition, the areas on the other side of the border were under strong occupation by Atlantua's army. And naturally Zor did not go hunting alone. Most certainly not, since the number of people accompanying him to Sizon was approximately four thousand! Only three hundred of these were servants and officials. The rest were largely made up of members of the imperial guard, because even if Zor was stingy he did not spare money when it came to securing his life. He knew that there were many out there who were thirsty for his blood, for he had plenty of enemies. The members of the imperial guard were paid generously and escorted their lord everywhere. Even on hunting trips. There were also a few lords participating in the hunt, including the judge of Sizon, who would gladly have renounced this honor, but could not do so because the Emperor had ordered him to point out the areas that were richest in prey. Nevertheless, most of the "hunters" were bodyguards. Their job of course, was not to keep an eye on the prey but on potential assassins. Which meant that these people had to hunt together with the Emperor. It was quite unlikely that an assassin would be hiding in the bushes awaiting the Emperor. Nobody could have known that the Emperor would be hunting today, and specifically in this area. It was far more plausible for one of the Emperor's officials or chiefs to have longstanding murderous thoughts in their minds!

Emperor Zor enjoyed hunting—not in its harshest and most dangerous forms, for instance he never hunted bears. He liked deer hunting. Not for cowardly reasons, but because he loved to eat venison, and his stinginess inspired him to hunt for animals whose parts were all edible and were easy to kill due to their abundance. Regardless of this, there was a case where he had faced a bear and even killed it. But he preferred deer. And behold, as he now emerged onto a clearing he noticed a beautiful elk! He had already raised his bow to shoot when the deer lifted his head, glanced at Zor, then took a big leap and disappeared. Zor became annoyed. He was not accustomed to failing when he had decided to do something. He spurred his steed and chased after the noble prey.

The deer was cautious. It wasn't running very fast, but turning onto various hidden tracks here and there, and occasionally Zor almost lost its trail. In the zeal of the hunt he did not even notice that almost three hours had passed since he had begun following the prey that kept emerging and then disappearing. Finally to his great annoyance it turned out that he had totally lost track of the animal. He realized later that he had not only lost sight of the deer but also his own companions, and didn't have the faintest idea where he was. It was understandable that on a hunt he could stray from his entourage, since his horse was one of the best and it was difficult to follow a hunting emperor. It may have been understandable, but it was dreadfully inconvenient. A solitary emperor was truly desirable prey to anyone who was angry with him. Of course, only if they recognized him. But even that wouldn't be a great tragedy, as Emperor Zor knew he was well-versed in various weapon handling practices. He was not a coward and didn't frighten easily... it was just that he had no idea which direction to head in to get back to Sizon. Sure, he would eventually find his way back, but evening was approaching, and despite his bravery and miserliness he still liked to be comfortable to the extent of sleeping with a shelter over his head. Plus he had no tools with him to light a fire, so that he could at least protect himself from the mosquitoes that had started gathering.

Suddenly the horse snapped his head up and began kicking with his right foreleg. This was a sign that he could sense a human. Zor knew this because he knew his animal. He tossed the bridle onto the horse's back, indicating permission to go off towards the humans he had sniffed out. Zor thought it unlikely that he would be recognized in this area, given that he had never been here before, but even if he was, it didn't necessarily mean they would want to kill him. He didn't look like an emperor; he was in a hunting suit. It was not solely due to his miserliness that he did not adorn himself with ornaments, but for practical purposes. Naturally this was a fine, expensive hunting outfit, and it showed that he was not impoverished, but in no way did it scream that he was

ruler of the Empire! Only very primitive, uneducated people would believe that a king went horseback riding in the forest with a crown on his head, since the first twig he encountered would brush the metal hat right off. Zor didn't even like having the crown on his head for official ceremonies. He found it uncomfortable and heavy, not to mention that if he wore it a lot it would wear out quicker!

His horse soon arrived at a clearing, where nine people were warming themselves by two fires and roasting meat over the flames. The group consisted of eight men and one woman, and were none other than the honorable council of Pakunda, including Judge Moko and councilors Kessel, Notlob, Grenaxyon, Gandavi, Libon and Istroch. Councilor Simor was here too, as well as his sister, Yana—mother Muchi's children. Muchi herself, however, was not present. They were also out here hunting, which wasn't really that strange of a coincidence. It was the start of autumn, the most favorable time for this activity, and who else would go hunting if not the most prominent people of the city—the councilors and children of the arbitress?! Mother Muchi was the child of a hunting nation and had passed on much knowledge to her children. However the hunt was not her idea, and not even that of Yana or Simor. It sprang from Judge Moko's mind as a means of ingratiating himself and the other councilors with Simor and Yana, and through them seek an ally with mother Muchi, who seemed to get along very well with the Emperor. To do this it was necessary to organize appropriate group activities, and being hunting "season", a shared hunt seemed the obvious choice. He believed that if they hunted down some good prey, then the joy it brought might establish a basis for later influencing Yana and Simor's "Emperor-phile" views to converge somewhat closer to Moko's own viewpoint. They had no trouble finding prey, and had caught several roebucks and some deer. Simor, being a brave man, had stabbed an old boar bearing big fangs with his spear, which wasn't exactly a harmless venture! Yana was not that heroic and preferred to shoot down birds, finding their meat tastier, but this required a much greater degree of skillfulness and she was able to adeptly hit even distant pigeons in flight with her arrow.

"Good evening to you all, and bon appetit!" Emperor Zor greeted them politely as he emerged onto the clearing. "Would you allow me, gentlemen—and you, my lady—to settle down by your fire?"

Everyone took a good look at him. They did not jump up in alarm because Zor was alone, and although he looked rather strong, there were eight men among them and even Yana could be an unpleasant enemy with her archery skills. At the same time, it would have been impolite not to invite in the lonely wanderer.

"Come on, take a seat down here next to us!" Simor gestured to him, meanwhile looking enviously at Zor's horse. His own horse was a very fine animal too, but not this fine. For although Zor was extremely stingy, he took great care in choosing his horse, as in a certain situation his life may depend on what kind of horse he had.

"Could you tell us your name?" queried Judge Moko.

"My name is Lasyodyark," Emperor Zor replied. He felt that being incognito was highly advisable. As long as he was alone, it was better not to brag about being the Emperor. Moreover, he figured this name was difficult to remember, and so anyone who heard it would quickly forget it and wrap its bearer in the fog of insignificance. For if we do not remember somebody's name we do not remember the person themselves, and we do not want to kill someone we don't remember! Emperor Zor had not forgotten that his own father too was a victim of violent death—he was slain by Zor himself, but how many previous emperors had had their lives ended in a similar manner, by knife, dagger or poison?!

"I moved to Sizon fairly recently," he said, explaining his presence and obscurity with the utmost brevity.

Then he sat down by the fire. Moko's company introduced themselves, of course using their real names. When it was Yana and Simor's turn, Zor observed them with interest. Yana said that she and her brother were the children of the honorable Countess Muchi, who was the Local Officer of Women's Affairs here in Pakunda. Yana proudly added that even she herself performed some of the practical tasks, for example dealing with the editing of divorce documents.

Zor picked up on the name Muchi. It must be said that Emperor Zor's almost obsessive affinity for bureaucracy was not a coincidence. He was able to do it because he had an exceptional memory. He could recall important conversations or letters he had only read once almost verbatim, even years later. Woe to the person who for instance moved one of his sculptures without permission, because the Emperor knew the precise location of every little object in the huge palace. He knew the names of the judges in every city of his great empire, and even the names of most of the councilors, not to mention the names and ranks of the more important officers and noblemen, including the generals. No matter how complicated the operational plan being discussed, it did not have to be drawn out, as he knew the marching route, the time, the size of the group, as well as all the variations and sub-variations with all their various details. He knew how much tax should be collected annually for each city, and even knew about some of the villages, if not all of them.

Now he remembered that this Muchi was a liberated barbarian slave, who had some issues with them wanting to blackmail her with her two children, but the chancellor took action and the matter was resolved. Muchi had written him a letter of gratitude and sent him some money, even though it should not have been sent directly to him. The poor thing thought she would dazzle him with the amount she had sent, although compared to the imperial wealth and needs of the empire it was a pitifully small amount. But at least it showed that Muchi was trying. She had also sent him a slew of suggestions to increase his wealth, which did actually contain numerous good elements, and for the most part he accepted these suggestions. So, these were her children! It was a pity that Muchi was not here, as he would have liked to meet her.

It seemed that they were in the middle of a big debate, in which they wanted to involve him. Because the obligatory politeness of introductions was barely over when Yana asked him, "So where did you come from?"

"What do you mean, where?"

"Well, from which village or city did you move to Sizon?"

"Oh, ahh... from Valle!" stated Emperor Zor, naming the capital. He at least knew this city and wouldn't get into trouble if they asked him something about it. He had to be careful not to contradict himself.

"That's a shame." Yana lowered her head.

"Why?" asked Zor curiously.

"Because I was hoping that you came from an area that the Emperor had recently occupied. But oh well..."

"Why would that be so important?" Zor inquired further.

"It's just that news has spread around here lately that there are Horks living in an outlying village called Snapp. Or Orks, because they also go by that name. Some people swear that they have been there, and they were healed by a wizardess called Tila, or Elf—perhaps both. They usually call her Elf Tila, although some say Elf Ila, and I've even heard her called Elf Ilona too. So it has caused a fair bit of commotion in this area... And those who were there with this healer woman, claim to

have seen Orks with their own eyes, and not just once. But Judge Moko doesn't believe it. Although at the same time he states that he's a believer of the Getsnappy religion!"

"Not only do *I* not believe it, but neither do my councilors, and as for me being a believer of Getsnappy, since we are essentially among ourselves, I can honestly tell you that this isn't true! I only said it so that the enraged crowd wouldn't tear me apart because of the death of that damn Getsnappy! I know for certain that he didn't die—he couldn't have because he was sent to battle. He must have gone, because his name was entered into the register, which I forwarded to the appropriate official place. But it was in vain, because the crowd was out of control. And I am positive it was the body of the prison guard who previously went missing that they found in the pit, however it would be futile to explain this to anyone. Even if I were a believer of Getsnappy, I don't see why it would follow that I also believe in the existence of carcass-eating Orks! One doesn't necessarily imply the other!"

"Many say that they've seen them, and these are people known to be trustworthy!"

"Well I'll believe it if I see them," shrugged Judge Moko skeptically.

"What actually are these Orks?" inquired Emperor Zor. He hadn't heard anything about them until now.

So Yana and Simor began telling him the great tale, and by the end Zor knew everything about Getsnappy's creatures. But when they asked him whether he believed in their existence, he just said, "No. However if I were the Emperor, I would definitely consider it worthwhile sending out some reliable people to Snapp village to look into the truth of the matter! Naturally with a mandate to bring a live Hork back with them. A Hork squadron would be of great assistance in a war—they would terrify the enemy!"

"Do you think the Emperor would do this if he heard the news?" asked Simor.

"Absolutely!" Zor nodded. "I lived in Valle, and as a man from the capital I can say that Zor is the sort of man that would do it. He's always interested in fresh news. Why wouldn't he? If you think about it, it's nothing for him to simply write a letter to somebody here in the district, for instance the Women's Affairs officer," he nodded toward Yana, "and she would arrange it right away! You told me this Snapp village is apparently not too far from here—it must be the case if people are going there to get healed... And there are sure to be women there as well, therefore it would fit into the scope of activities of the arbitress, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it would. And what's your opinion of the Emperor, uh..." asked Yana, fumbling.

"Lasyodyark," Zor nodded towards her, gratifyingly acknowledging that they had forgotten his name already.

"Yes, right, so what do you think of him?"

"Well, let's see..." pondered the Emperor. "Emperor Zor is... well, he's... actually..."

"Just blurt it out—nobody will bite your nose off if you don't like him!" Judge Moko chided.

"Well, I didn't say that I don't like him... After all, Zor is undoubtedly a talented ruler..." said Zor, thinking that if he said this then it wouldn't matter whether they liked him or not. If they did like him, that would be the reason why, and if they hated him, the recognition of the enemy's dominant virtue would not make him utterly despicable in their eyes.

"You see, it's not just my brother and I that believe Emperor Zor is an excellent ruler!" said Yana brusquely to the judge.

"Of course he's talented—I have no doubt that he has great talent, especially in stuffing his pockets at our expense!" responded Councilor Libon. "So, is our dear guest married?"

"No, I'm still single," answered Zor calmly.

"Ah, great! Then soon you'll be paying the bachelor's tax too, and I'd be curious to know whether you'll still consider our emperor quite so talented!"

"Well he has to support his army by some means," said Zor.

"There you go, finally an intelligent person who can admit to fundamental truths!" said Yana, gazing at Zor contentedly.

"He only needs such a big army so he can tyrannize at his leisure!" said the judge. "Anyway, you should be able to see, Yana, that the Emperor is a tyrant! And a bloodthirsty tyrant at that!"

"I can acknowledge that," smiled Yana with the meekness of a daffodil.

"Well then?!" said the judge.

"What do you mean 'well then'?"

"Well then why are you defending him so intently?!"

"Me?!"

"Yes you! You and Simor, and your mother too!"

"Oh, but you're deeply mistaken! I have no intention of defending him, nor does my mother! We're too inconsequential to defend the Emperor, in fact I think my mother would be the first to readily admit that Emperor Zor is a bloodthirsty, cruel, ruthless dictator and a true tyrant! He even surpasses your average tyrant with his selfishness and desire for power... Look at how many people he's had killed, and there's sure to be more! The majority of these were innocent too, and those who weren't may not have even deserved the death sentence, so we certainly don't wish to defend the Emperor!"

"But that's what you're doing!"

"Not at all! We're not defending the Emperor, only his laws!"

"That's not true! By doing this you are serving the Emperor!"

"We may indeed be serving him by doing this, but we're not defending him and there's a huge difference between the two!"

"But why would you faithfully serve such a vile, bloodthirsty high-flier?! He even had his own relatives killed!"

"Great, then he did the right thing!"

"How can a beautiful young woman like you say such a terrible thing?!"

"I may be beautiful, but I still have common sense! If he had not had his relatives killed he would not have become an emperor!"

"But one horror can't be made right by another!"

"I see only one horror, not two. Or do you consider Zor being an emperor a terrible thing too, judge?"

"You bet I do! How could a bloodthirsty tyrant becoming a ruler be a good thing?! That's why it's obvious that his laws aren't worthy of defense!"

"Well I see the situation quite differently," protested Yana. "Emperor Zor may be a tyrant, but this fact has nothing to do with another fact—the kind of laws he makes. It doesn't necessarily mean his laws are bad! You know sir, manure stinks, but even on top of a pile of manure can sprout a beautiful fragrant rose. However my analogy is still further appropriate, because in order for the rose to be beautiful and fragrant it was essential for the stinking manure pile to be there, since it nourished the rose! So we can see with my mother that if Zor were not such a cruel tyrant, nobody would obey him. They wouldn't be afraid of him and he couldn't have introduced all those excellent laws, which my mother and I gladly welcome. But it's not just us—many others approve too, and especially women!"

Zor listened to the debate with great interest, and felt no need to comment. He found it extremely gripping, and especially liked the fact that the beautiful Yana was defending his tyranny. He had never encountered such a thing before. Of course there were countless people who called him a great king, he never had a shortage of flatterers, but now Yana could not possibly know that he was the Emperor. Nobody here by the fire could know that. Yana was defending him sincerely, and in such an interesting way! Because there were sure to be others apart from Yana who also sincerely admired his leadership. He had heard that there were plenty who considered him a good emperor, although they ignored the obvious fact that he was a tyrant. This was common even among his bodyguards, officials and lovers... Yet Zor himself knew that he must be the most tyrannical of tyrants! It simply could not be any different, because if he was not like this they would have cut his throat long ago. But Yana was different. Yana acknowledged that he was a tyrant, and not only did she not mind, she even understood his need to be this way!

Yana had to continue defending Zor, for now Judge Moko said, "I admit that the laws of Emperor Zor may contain some good elements. But he is still worthy of our contempt, and it would have been better if he had not come into power, because such great sacrifices were made in order to do this, as well as to keep him in power, that it was not worth the potential benefits of his laws! Moreover, not all of his laws reveal great wisdom, other than being suitable for filling his treasury of course, from which us ordinary people can't see much benefit!"

"I think the Emperor's wrongdoings are amply compensated by the goodness of his laws, because it would not have occurred to anybody else to enforce a law benefiting women, at least not as many as Zor implemented. And that's not even mentioning the slaves... But I will talk about them because my mother used to be a slave, and so did I, and you are well aware, councilors, that anyone who helps the situation of slaves can never be a bad person in my eyes! Without the Emperor I'd still be a slave today! You should know that the Emperor plans to liberate all slaves in due course. My mother suggested this in her letter, and when the Emperor himself wrote a reply to her, he didn't say that it wasn't possible but that it would require careful preparation and that he had already been thinking along these lines. He may be a tyrant, but Zor is a very smart man and will put this into effect as soon as he creates the favorable conditions. I could further illustrate my viewpoint to you, gentlemen, with the following metaphor: Even if a god has to clean a cesspool, he must anticipate and accept the sad fact that his hands are going to get dirty. This is unfortunately unavoidable."

"I don't believe that," said Councilor Grenaxyon. "He wouldn't be crazy enough to do such a thing!"

"I certainly would be!" thought Zor. "I have every intention of doing this, and it's going to make me truly rich because at least two thirds of the population are slaves, and once they are freed they'll have to pay me taxes!"

"If he does do that," said Istroch, "then riots will break out across the country!"

"Of course they will!" nodded Yana. "That's why Zor has to be such a great tyrant and hold so much authority that nobody can even pee without his permission. Otherwise the rebellion could overthrow him! But that won't happen. The Emperor is clever, and has probably ensured there are no slave-owners among his bodyguards, nor anyone in the palace with a single slave. This way he won't be harmed by the slave liberation and they won't become his assassins!"

"Gosh, I hadn't considered that," thought Emperor Zor, "but as soon as I leave here I'll immediately make the necessary arrangements. This clever girl has given me a brilliant idea!"

"It would be simple to achieve," continued Yana. "All he has to do is prepare a list of the people close to him who have slaves, and note how many they have. After all, he does know all this already. Then using various excuses he can remove them from the palace, without even needing to

tell them the truth about why he's doing it. Or he could arrange an alleged conspiracy in which he found them guilty, and have their heads. It can't be that difficult to fabricate evidence against them. One way might be to promise some of the thieves that he won't have their hands cut off if they testify against this and that, even against the lords. Publicly of course... And he really won't have the thieves' hands cut off, however a few days later all the witnesses will be killed on some dark street corner. The Emperor would never be suspected because these witnesses were certain to have been killed by the relatives of the accused! Then these relatives could also be charged, perhaps not by penalty of death but with asset confiscation, which would enrich the treasury and make it more difficult to plot against the Emperor or pay for his assassination. The whole thing really is quite straightforward..." she said, looking dreamily into the distance.

"Wow, what a clever woman!" thought the Emperor.

"You would be a worthy wife for that tyrant—your thinking is as unjust and bloody as his!" growled Councilor Gandavi.

"It may be bloody, but it's not unjust!" said Yana. "It's all about there being smaller and greater truths. Those who have been executed by the Emperor in such a case are of course compromised by their small truth, since they didn't really plot against the Emperor. But the interest of the empire is a higher truth than theirs, and it's in the interest of the empire for there to be no slaves, regardless of the cost! I consider this to be a far more important truth."

"Of course, because you used to be a slave yourself!"

"That may well be the reason, but if you had been a slave, you would probably feel the same! And as far as me being the Emperor's wife... come on!" laughed Yana.

"But you'd make a good wife for him!" teased Grenaxyon. "Your mother could write him a letter, saying that she has a highly suitable daughter on offer!"

"What, me?! Don't be ridiculous! The Emperor wouldn't reply to the letter anyway, and his silence would be completely understandable. He has no need for me—I'm sure there are plenty of women who flatter him! Although I would certainly make a good wife. Still, I wouldn't marry him even if I could, because he wouldn't be a suitable husband for *me*, so there's no point even talking about this!"

"Why wouldn't the Emperor be a suitable husband for you, my lady?!" asked Emperor Zor in astonishment.

"Because he's a tyrant!"

"But you've just been asserting the whole time that this isn't a problem!"

"Of course it's not a problem, in fact it's very useful, but only regarding the empire! I accept the Emperor as the tyrant he is, and I'm even happy about it because it's what an empire needs. Well naturally not just any kind of tyrant but a clever tyrant, and Zor is definitely clever. It is my firm belief that nothing can be more beneficial to an empire, not even a stream of gold, than an enlightened, clever, progressive and greatly despotic ruler! Because being a tyrant means that he can implement his will. However when it comes to family life, the situation is rather different. As Zor's spouse, I wouldn't even be allowed to use the potty until I had prepared a potty schedule a week in advance, in triplicate, and had it approved by him! I can just imagine, I'd be allowed to sit on the potty on Mondays from eight ten to eight twenty-five, and in the afternoon from three till three twenty, and the same would apply to Tuesday. And if I exceeded the time by two minutes I'd have to go and perform hard labor, but on Wednesdays..."

She wasn't able to finish as they all erupted into laughter. The judge laughed the loudest, from relief. He was beginning to fear that Yana would lodge a complaint to her mother, and then mother

Muchi would write to the Emperor about him being opposed to many of His Majesty's laws. But if her daughter saw the situation this way...

"And why would I want to be Zor's wife when he's so stingy?!" continued Yana. "You do know this, don't you?!"

"Oh yes! That's precisely why his laws can be interpreted somewhat loosely!" the judge hurried to answer. "We don't ask for much. It's just that you and your mother carry the interpretation of his laws to the extreme, like with the bachelor tax. Since when are the divorced and widowed bachelors?! The Emperor has never specified this anywhere!"

"I like Emperor Zor," said Yana, gazing into the distance. "I think my mother does too. We like making him a lot of money. Zor is a great miser, but let him enjoy all the money. Besides, he doesn't spend it on silly things like many other kings, who have twenty or thirty crowns made for them and travel on gold chariots, and all sorts of other rubbish, for instance gold horseshoe nails... I'm sure he's managing the money for the country's benefit. So yes, we do love the Emperor, and wherever possible we try to be his loyal stewards."

"Aha, there it is again—you love him! You really are meant for each other!" grunted Grenaxyon.

"No, no," laughed Yana. "Zor's miserliness may be beneficial for a country, but not at all for a wife! With him I imagine I'd be walking around in a sackcloth dress like some hermit... no thanks! I heard that he eats the same thing as his soldiers, which on one hand is rather commendable and can only be approved of, because that way his soldiers are more inclined to respect him and be more motivated to fight for him. But Zor would surely require me to eat a similar diet, and I have no wish to do that! It's not that I'm some sort of priggish crybaby... I can't possibly be, because I wasn't brought up as a lady but as a slave. However that's just it—I'm no longer a slave! Thanks to Zor I'm free, and even possess the rank of countess. I've become accustomed to eating fine food. I'm not demanding to have lark's tongue or peacock roast every day, I'm still fairly moderate even now, but I do desire to eat better meals than those of rough soldiers, and on a regular basis! But with Zor?!"

Another roar of laughter. Zor lowered his head to hide his blushing. Fortunately nobody noticed, or if they did, they explained it to themselves as him trying to cover up his smile.

"This reminds me of a joke," said Judge Moko emboldened. "Listen to this! Once Emperor Zor had diarrhea early in the morning. He did what he had to do, but a few hours later it struck him again. He sat on the potty and asked the servant for some toilet paper to wipe his bottom with. The servant gave it to him, but when the Emperor held the paper in his hand he called for the executioner and had the servant put to death. You know why?"

"Why?" asked Simor.

"Because the servant gave him fresh paper to wipe his ass with, although the Emperor hated waste, and Zor thought that the other side of that morning's toilet paper was still usable!"

Everybody was rolling on the ground in hysterics.

"Do you know what Emperor Zor does if he's cold?" asked Councilor Libon.

"What?" asked the judge.

"He goes closer to the fireplace, of course. But what does he do if he gets even colder?"

"What?"

"He moves closer. But what does he do if he's so cold that he's almost freezing?"

"He moves even closer?" suggests Yana.

"No. Then he orders them to light the fireplace!"

More fits of laughter broke out.

Judge Moko began telling another joke. "The Emperor and a senator are talking to each other confidentially. The senator says to the Emperor, 'I never had sex with my wife before our marriage. What about you, Emperor?' 'Ah...' pondered the Emperor, 'I'm sorry, but I don't remember all the insignificant details of my life... Help me out please, what is the name of your wife?' "

This time it took quite a while for the laughter to die down.

Finally Grenaxyon spoke up with a joke of his own. "I heard that the Emperor only accepts foreign diplomats at night, and in complete darkness. Do you know why?"

"...???"

"Because then he can sit on the throne naked, and this way his crown, clothing and even his underwear won't wear out!"

Everyone found this hilarious, even Yana and Emperor Zor. He wasn't offended in the slightest. If they had told the truth about how he saved money then he may have been offended, but these were such absurdities that he knew nobody would ever believe them. In fact he suspected these stories would instead pave the way for a fondness towards him, despite his tyranny.

"I heard," said Yana, "that Emperor Zor cut his cat's tail off, so that when they let the animal out in the winter it would get through the door quicker and less warmth would escape!"

Emperor Zor was afraid they would ask him for a joke, for he didn't know any, but nobody did. They had all caught a joke-telling fever, and weren't really listening. Everybody wanted to tell their own joke, and only listened to the jokes of others so that the others would listen to theirs. But Zor on the other hand was quite different; he proved to be a grateful audience and enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Now Judge Moko had another turn. "It happened one time that the Emperor saw his young boy sitting on a beautiful new horse. He asked him where he got it from. 'Well, the story is,' the boy told him, 'that I went out to the surrounding forest this morning on foot for a bit of a walk. I sat under a big tree and began thinking about how I could make things in the Empire better. Then suddenly a pretty young girl arrived at the clearing with this horse. She took off all her clothes and said—You can have anything you want!' 'My word, I'm impressed, son—what a perfect choice!' praised Zor. 'Her clothes probably wouldn't have fit you anyway!' "

There were hoots of laughter again.

"The Emperor went hunting once and somehow lost his entourage," said Councilor Libon. "He strayed far away, and as he was walking along a mountain ridge he could see in the valley below some two hundred Torg soldiers attempting to destroy a small village. 'Good grief!' said the Emperor. 'Something has to be done to help my good people of Atlantua!' He thinks and thinks, and then comes up with a solution. It was winter time and there were some big rocks lying nearby. He tries lifting one, but with no success as it's frozen to the ground. He takes out his knife and using this digs into the frozen earth. Finally the rock begins to move. The Emperor starts rolling it down the hillside, and as the rock rolls snow adheres to its surface, creating a giant avalanche that showers down and buries the enemy soldiers. So now he climbs down the mountain to the village, and the villagers are very grateful to the royal Emperor, telling him what a hero he is. But suddenly they are horrified to see that he's crying. They ask him what's wrong, to which the Emperor pulls out his knife and shows them, sobbing, 'Don't you see?! My heroic act means nothing because my precious, magnificent knife has been destroyed—the frozen earth has blunted its edge!' "

Everybody was in stitches, gripping onto their bellies.

Now Kessel spoke. "I heard that the Emperor got rid of his advisors and bought some monkeys instead. You know why?"

"...???"

"Because monkeys don't ask for a salary, but they can chatter and scratch their stomachs just as well as the advisors!"

"Ah yes, and I heard that he got rid of his court ladies and bought parrots instead!" said Notlob. The reason for this did not have to be explained to anyone as it was quite obvious.

Emperor Zor was amazed at how many jokes were told about him, and he had never heard of any of them! He decided he would have his secret service minister executed. How was it possible that he had not been informed about them?!

"I even heard," said Kessel, "that a landlord died once who was extremely cruel, and shortly afterwards one of his peasants died too. Well, lo and behold, the peasant discovers that the punishment in the afterlife is that everybody must stand in a sea of blood to the depth he deserves. They lead the peasant onto the shore of the blood sea to the place he will have to stand. He notices that there are some standing knee-high in blood, and others who are up to their waist. Suddenly he sees his own recently-deceased landlord. He was a notoriously cruel man, yet the waves of the blood sea were barely splashing his feet! This really surprised the peasant. 'How is it possible that you're only standing in blood that barely covers your feet, when others are up to their waists?!' he asked the landlord. To this he replied, 'Sssh! Please don't tell anyone, but I'm standing on Emperor Zor's head!' "

Zor laughed the loudest at this. It was an impossible situation—they were making jokes about what happened to him after his death, while he was still alive!

This reminded Councilor Istroch of a joke. "Emperor Zor has three lovers. One prefers a milk bath, another a rose oil bath, and the third a hot bath. But what kind of bath does the Emperor like best?"

"Perhaps a cold one?" asked Simor.

"Not at all. A blood bath!"

Another burst of laughter.

"Do you know why the Emperor didn't allow money to be made with his picture on it?" asked Gandavi.

"Why was that?" asked Zor himself.

"Because this would involve hammering, and he doesn't like to be beaten but caressed!"

The next joke came from Judge Moko. "Once the Emperor visited a city where they were about to hang a villain. The convict seized the opportunity and begged the Emperor, saying, 'Please have mercy on my pitiful life, royal Emperor! I'm just a petty criminal, and it's unnecessary for the rope to be wasted on me!' To this the Emperor exclaimed, 'That's just it! What a sensible man... he's right! From now on you shall be the judge here, my boy, because you have a sense of how to economize. The judge shall be beheaded instead of you! Why would you hang people when it wears out the rope, since you could just remove their head!' "

After this Istroch spoke. "I heard that the Emperor recently made the following imperial proclamation: 'It has come to the attention of our majestic person that some of you dare to call us miserly! I, the majestic and divine Emperor firmly protest against the absurd slander that I am so stingy that I fill my teeth with copper! This slander is not only vile but a sheer impossibility! Why would I do this, when the copper would deteriorate and lose its value?!' "

The most uproarious laughter broke out.

Judge Moko had another turn. "Emperor Zor has triplets born. He asks for the royal painter, and says to him, 'I want you to paint one of my children for me.' 'Just one?' asks the painter in astonishment. 'Of course just one of them, you dimwit, since the other two look exactly the same!' "

Now Councilor Libon told a joke. "There was a noble holy shaman who spent his whole life praying, and when he was not doing this he was preaching to people about living a decent life. He suddenly took it into his head that he would kill the oppressive Emperor. And he succeeded too, stabbing the Emperor with a sword, after which he was swiftly killed himself by Zor's bodyguard. So the souls of the Emperor and the holy man arrive in heaven at the same time. At the entrance stands Clerk Getsnappy, and he says, 'Emperor Zor, come on into Heaven! You, shaman, must stay out!' 'What?! That bloodthirsty murderer is allowed to go in, and I, the good holy man, must stay out?!' asked the shaman outraged. 'I will explain it to you, my child.' said Getsnappy, looking down at him benevolently. 'The thing is, whenever you preached to people everyone stood there yawning. But when Emperor Zor appeared someplace with his army, everybody prayed diligently!' "

Emperor Zor was laughing hardest of all at this. Although they were doing it mockingly, even the creators of the jokes acknowledged that his activities were useful!

"People were bored with the endless wars," began Simor, "and they persuaded Emperor Zor and the king of Torgo to fight a duel, agreeing that whichever one killed the other, he would have both countries. They decided on archery. Emperor Zor shot his arrow first, and it bounced off the king's shield and broke in two. The Torg king took a shot, and his arrow flew past the Emperor's ear. Zor then took another shot and hit the Torg king right in the eye, killing him instantly. So Emperor Zor got Torgo, and his people were very happy. However the Emperor was annoyed, and grumbled, 'It's just my luck—now I've wasted a good arrow!' "

Simor continued with a second joke. "The Emperor does actually have some favorable attributes. For instance he's not selfish at all... Yes, there are many people who would beg to differ, but I have irrefutable evidence to back this up. By a lucky coincidence of circumstances, Emperor Zor encountered a very beautiful young noblewoman, who was completely alone. Zor welcomed the opportunity, and said to her, 'Madam, would you please be my lover?' 'Sorry, but I'm afraid that's impossible, Majestic Emperor, as I already have a husband!' To which Zor replied, 'Well, what of him?! You needn't worry, my dear, I'm not jealous in the slightest!' "

Guffaws erupted among the group.

"Emperor Zor," Judge Moko told them, "married the Torg king's ugly daughter in order to get Torgo as a dowry. The wedding took place, and barely had the wedding night begun when the Emperor entered the bedroom and saw one of his generals embracing his new wife. The general saw that he had been exposed and went pale, his knees starting to tremble in fear, however the Emperor just raised his eyebrows and said in astonishment, 'Good lord, I don't believe it! This is my duty to the Empire—but why would *you* do it?!' "

"They also say," said Grenaxyon, "that a famous sculptor wanted to model the Emperor's figure onto a hillside. The Emperor liked this idea, but he wanted to first see it in miniature. So the sculptor made it for him. He depicted the Emperor as a formidable warrior, standing over the corpse of his defeated enemy in a triumphant pose, with a helmet on his head, a shield in his left hand and a sword dripping with blood in his right. The Emperor looked at the statue for a while and then pointed at the sword. 'I don't know this tool. What is it?' 'It's a sword, my majestic lord!' replied the sculptor. 'I won't be needing that. I'm happy with the sculpture, but I would like to make a few minor alterations. There should not be a helmet on my head, but rather a pencil wedged behind my ear. The sword dripping blood should be changed to a quill-pen dripping ink in my right hand, and instead of a shield in my left hand I want a book. Before my feet I would like a census list in place of the corpse. And my facial expression should not be so much grim as pensive. But in all other respects the statue's design is very fitting!' "

Zor laughed again. He regarded the characterization as very appropriate and flattering to him. He even liked the fact that he had made major changes to all the important parts of the original design, and then claimed that these were minor alterations. Haha, this really was typical of him! They were very perceptive!

"When the Emperor was a young child," said Libon, "he was told how a baby was conceived. Emperor Zor said that all that panting must be rather tiring. So they explained to him that it may well be tiring but was also very enjoyable, and they immediately led him to a slave girl to experience the pleasures of lovemaking. Zor did what he had to do, and afterwards agreed that it really was very enjoyable. But then he thought about it and asked, 'Does everybody make babies with a woman this way? Every man?' 'Yes, majestic Zor!' replied his secretary. 'The peasants too?' 'Yes, my lord!' 'Hmm.. And how much tax are they paying for this pleasure?' "

Everybody was rolling about in laughter.

"Everyone knows that the Emperor lives on soldier rations," said Kessel, starting a new joke. "But few know that the Emperor has a man who was given the title 'Imperial Sloth'. His job is to be the world's laziest person. He lives very well, stuffing himself daily with the finest delicacies. Of course with this lifestyle it's no wonder he's obese. He moves very little, and as a result is frequently visited by fleas. It so happened that one of the fleas lost his friend, and it was only weeks later that he turned up. Meanwhile the lazy parasitic flea had become rather plump, but the flea who had just returned looked quite skinny. 'What happened to you?!' asked the fat flea in amazement. 'Oh, don't even ask, I feel like I'm on my deathbed!' complained the thin flea. 'The wife said I was fat, and she didn't want me sucking the greasy blood of that lazy bastard. So on a regular basis she chases me over to the Emperor to feed, because she wants me to lose weight...' "

Emperor Zor was still in hysterics. These jokes were ridiculous, but very good! Of course he never kept an "Imperial Sloth". He wouldn't spend money on a thing like that!

Now Yana told a joke. "I'll tell you all why Emperor Zor didn't melt his crown. The reason is because he realized that without the crown nobody was able to recognize him as the Emperor. Anyway, this is what happened... One time Emperor Zor had a sudden urge to go and be among the ordinary people, so he could see with his own eyes how they lived. He disguised himself as a poor beggar, and wandered far away from the capital on foot. When night fell he came upon a similar poor beggar, sitting at the edge of a ditch. He was in the middle of eating something. 'Hey there buddy, can I sit here?' Zor asked him. 'Of course, mate!' 'Thanks. But I have to admit, I'm very hungry. Any chance you could give me something?' 'Sure, take this, it's half my loaf of bread.' 'I don't suppose you have anything to drink too?' 'Well, not a lot, but there is a flask of wine. I'll let you drink half of it.' 'Oh, thanks very much, you're a good man!' 'Yes, yes, I am...' and the vagabond brought out a short pipe. 'What are you doing?' the Emperor asked, as he had never seen such a thing before. 'This is opium—extremely potent stuff... It makes you feel amazing! Do you want to try it?' 'Well, why not?!' and Zor took a deep puff. Then he said, 'I'm convinced that you truly are a good, unselfish man. So I will now reveal to you my true identity—I am Emperor Zor!' The vagabond broke into a broad grin, and replied, 'Is that so? You see, I told you before buddy that this is very strong stuff!' He pointed to the pipe. 'Just wait a bit longer, and soon you'll even feel like you're Clerk Getsnappy himself!' "

They all found this one hilarious.

Then Yana told a second joke. "Everybody knows that Emperor Zor considers himself the greatest of gods. Consequently, he has very little willingness to pray to other gods. This was characteristic of him even in his childhood. It happened once that little Zor was having lunch together with his parents. His parents began saying grace as usual, but they saw that little Zor wasn't

joining in and had instead started eating already. 'What are you doing, child? Why aren't you saying grace?!' his mother asked him. 'Because it's no longer necessary. I've taken a far more efficient and useful action this morning.' 'Have you perhaps said your prayer in advance in the early hours of the morning?' 'Oh no, not at all! But I did inform the cook politely yet with the greatest assurance, that if the food he gives me is not tasty enough, then crows will hollow out his eyes and vultures will feast on his bowels!' "

The laughter was now tempestuous.

"Emperor Zor," said Judge Moko again, as it seemed he knew the most jokes about the Emperor, "once walked into the throne room with a very grim face. His secretary asked what was wrong. The Emperor replied, 'My dear secretary, I'm in deep shit!' 'Why's that?!' said the secretary in astonishment, as he had never heard the Emperor speak in such a vulgar manner before. 'Well it's just that Torgo is strong now, and I don't know whether or not they're going to attack. I really need a few more years to develop my army. So there are two possibilities,' the Emperor began to explain, raising his fingers. 'Torgo either attacks or doesn't. If they don't attack, then that's good for me. If they do, there are two further possibilities—I either win or I don't. If I win, then that's good for me. If I lose, there are two possible scenarios—either Torgo will occupy the entire country or it won't. If they don't occupy the whole country, then that's good for me because I can remain king in the rest of the country. If they do, then there are two possible options—I can either escape or I can't. If I can escape, then that's good for me. If I can't, two possibilities arise—either the king will kill me or he won't. If he doesn't kill me, then that's good for me. If he does, then there are also two possibilities—he either arranges a fancy funeral for me or just throws my corpse away to rot. Now, if I'm buried, then that's good for me. If he just throws my body away, there are two possibilities—either the animals devour me, or I rot and the plants absorb me. If the animals devour me, then that's good for me because it is worthy of me. If the plants absorb me, there are two possibilities—I'll either become a flower or a tree. If I become a flower, then that's good for me because that is also worthy of an emperor. But if I become a tree, there are again two possibilities—either people will process me or they won't. If they don't process me, that's good for me. If they do, there are two more possibilities—I'll either become a plank or paper. If I become a plank, that's good for me. But if I become paper, then two further possibilities arise—I either become paper used for writing or paper for wiping the posterior. If I become writing paper, that's good for me. But if I become the other sort then there are still two possibilities—I either get used by a woman or a man. If it's a woman, that's good for me because there would be two possible scenarios—I'll either be used at the front or at the back. If I am used at the front, that's good for me because I've always loved those ornate charms of women in my life. But if I get used at the back there is only one possible outcome, the same one as being used by a man—I'll be in just as shitty a situation as I am now!' "

Emperor Zor had a good laugh about this too. He found the joke very insightful because it was typical of him to always consider every possibility.

"I even heard," said Kessel, "that once the king of Torgo visited Emperor Zor, and they were having a pleasant, friendly conversation. During this the king mentioned he had left the palace the day before. 'And you've arrived here already?' Emperor Zor marveled. 'Well yes, I have very fine horses, although I wasn't actually planning to rush over quite so quickly. My foolish driver drove so fast he almost killed me! I'm going to sack him today!' 'Oh, don't take it to heart, give him another chance...' advised Emperor Zor graciously."

Now Judge Moko opened his mouth again. "The wife of the Torg king meets Emperor Zor's wife, the Empress, and they start chatting. Mostly about men, of course. 'Oh, I don't have a bad word to say about my husband', the Torg king's wife tells her. 'He never requires a thing, or asks

anything of me...' 'Ah, I relate to that,' nodded the Empress. 'It's the same with us—Zor never asks anything of me either, he usually just orders me about...' "

Everybody was rolling around in fits of laughter again, despite the fact that Zor didn't yet have a wife.

Judge Moko went on to tell another joke. "The teacher of the clerk school asked the children to narrate a cautionary tale, one by one. The first child said, 'Yesterday I whispered answers to my friend next to me in history class, and in exchange he whispered answers to me in math class today.' 'That is impermissible, nor does it include a moral lesson!' the teacher responded. 'Oh but it does—that it's possible to count on a true friend, even with cheating!' The second child told the following story: 'There was a grasshopper who played the violin all summer, sang, enjoyed life and did no work. Meanwhile an ant toiled diligently every single day from dawn until late evening, collecting food. Winter had now begun, and one extraordinarily cold night both of them froze.' 'And what is the moral lesson of this?' the teacher asked. 'It's that the present moment is all that's important, and it must be enjoyed. There's no point worrying about the future, because in the end you'll croak anyway!' Now Emperor Zor's eldest son began to speak, the young prince. 'This happened before I was born. Once a terrible epidemic occurred in the Empire, and killed more than half its citizens. The Emperor—my father—was deeply saddened, even though he survived the epidemic. But almost everybody else in the capital city had died, as well as those in his palace. Finally the Emperor decided a new census must be made, in order to ascertain how many had survived in the Empire and who they were. But the neighboring empire, Torgo, attacked our country because they thought we were now weak. So Zor had barely received the first documents about the new census when the enemy broke into his residence. They found the Emperor sitting in the garden by a big fountain, deep in thought about the best thing to do for the sake of the Empire. The Emperor was alone at that moment, but he managed to kill the first thirty Torg warriors with his bow. After this his ammunition ran out. Then he struck the next ten enemies dead with a statue that was standing by the fountain. The statue broke. Next he killed the following fifteen attackers with his knife, but eventually his knife broke as well. Then an enormous warrior came up against him, a true giant. He was much stronger than the Emperor, but my father bit into his throat. Fortunately there was only one enemy surviving by this time, who was very frightened by the Emperor, and he pleaded for mercy. Although now Emperor Zor noticed in great horror that during the fight his beloved lists—the documents about the census—had been ruined. This enraged him terribly and urged him to kill this last enemy by strangling him.' The teacher listened to this horror story, feeling giddy. 'But what is the moral lesson of this terrible story?' he asked at the end. 'Well, it's that you shouldn't disturb the benevolent Emperor when he's thinking about the general economic estate of his beloved Empire!' "

Now Notlob told a joke. "Emperor Zor has many wives and lovers, therefore he had numerous children, roughly thirty of them. But unfortunately they were all born female... The Emperor worried about how to find good husbands for all these daughters, or any kind of husband at all. Once when he was sitting among his daughters, the eldest of them asked, 'Papa, why is my name Plashy Spring?' 'Well, because your mother got pregnant with you by the side of a beautiful plashy spring,' the Emperor replied. 'And why is my name Stormy Twirl?' the second girl asked him. 'Because on that precious night when you were... anyway, on that important night, the weather was so incredibly stormy it almost blew away the entire palace!' Now the youngest girl began to cry. The Emperor caressed her head. 'Hey, don't cry... I still love you too, baby, my youngest daughter Late Sorrow!' "

The joke the Emperor loved best, however, was told by Yana. "I came up with this story myself, so everyone listen... The Emperor had three advisors, but since he was so stingy he thought a single advisor would do, and two of them could be sacked. Naturally he wanted to keep the smartest one, so in order to find this out he posed a question to the advisors, planning to decide afterwards which of them responded the most wisely. He placed a large glass on the table and filled it with wine, but only halfway. Then he asked the three advisors, 'Answer me this... according to you, is this glass now half-full or half-empty?' The first advisor answered that the cup was half-full. The second that it was half-empty. The third said, 'Both viewpoints are correct. The cup can be either half-empty or half-full, depending on whether we are being pessimistic or optimistic.' To this the Emperor replied, 'Idiots! Get out of here, all three of you! I don't want to see any of you, since I'm much wiser than all of you put together! How is it possible that none of you have the sense of thrift to realize the obvious—that the glass is simply twice as large as it should be for the given quantity of wine!' "

Everybody laughed, except the Emperor. He just looked at Yana. "My goodness," he thought, "she's not just pretty but incredibly smart too! And how true it is in such a case, that the vessel is unnecessarily oversized!"

But there was still more, as Yana continued speaking. "I'd like to tell you all another joke that I came up with... Emperor Zor is without a doubt the most honest ruler in existence, because he never lies to his people. He will always speak the truth. There is no need for him to lie, as he always finds the most appropriate words to communicate even the most awkward situations in a competent manner. For example, once he challenged the Torg king to a running match. Unfortunately however, our Emperor hadn't even managed to get to the halfway point by the time the Torg king reached the finish line... The next day Zor's bellmen, following his orders, apprised the people of the events that had taken place. 'In the Great Imperial Running Match, our majestic Emperor successfully acquired the glorious second place—meanwhile the Torg king brought shame upon himself, falling back to second last!'"

More laughter broke out, and Zor thought, "The girl is right again—what a brilliant mind! In the given situation, that's precisely how the event should be expressed! What talent she has with propaganda!"

And so the joke-telling went on long after midnight, because there were slathers of jokes about Emperor Zor. The Emperor felt great. He may have been a tyrant, but he did have a sense of humor. He did not see this as a curtailment of his imperial authority, but as proof that he was indeed a great ruler, if he could occupy the imaginations of people this much. They only went to sleep when nobody could keep their eyes open any longer and the fire began to smolder. Even as they were nodding off, a giggle or two could still be heard.

The next morning Zor confessed to them that he was lost, and asked for the way to Sizon. He was shown the right direction, after which the Emperor said farewell and rode off on his horse. They did not see him for an entire day.

* * *

"The Emperor! The Emperor! The Emperor has come, and he's standing here by the gate!" blurted one of the servants, rushing over to Judge Moko in a desperate hurry on the second day after the hunt.

The judge could hardly believe it. Until now he had assumed the Emperor was miles away from Pakunda. Even the news that the Emperor was staying in Sizon had not reached him. But it was

true, and he quickly slipped into his fanciest clothing and ran out of the city hall. By that time the Emperor was no longer in front of Pakunda's gates but had entered the main square. It was there that Judge Moko caught sight of the him. It was impossible not to notice that Zor was the Emperor, because this time he arrived in full imperial splendor, with a crown on his head and a royal purple robe covering his body. The only thing missing was the scepter in his left hand, but that was because he was holding onto the reins of his horse, for naturally he had not come on foot. Even his sword scabbard was lavishly gilded. Zor did not care for such meaningless vanities, but the gold scabbard escaped the fate of the other jewelry—being smelted. It was not that he didn't want to desecrate the beautiful scabbard in this way, but his councilors persuaded him that it could always be smelted at a later date; that this scabbard had adorned the waist of the Atlantuan kings for centuries, and there was tradition to think about. Zor finally caved in, and although he usually carried a different sword, he did gird himself with it on ceremonial occasions.

So it could clearly be seen that Zor was the Emperor, but also of course the meek, quiet hunter whom the judge had met in the woods! All the jewelry and even the crown could not make him unrecognizable. As soon as the judge recognized the Emperor, he instantly paled, his knees shaking so hard that even the Emperor could hear them knocking together. The Emperor waved him over, and he had no choice but to stumble towards him. Now the Emperor leaned down to him from the horse's back and said, "I am in deep shit, Judge, because I need to get to a woman! To a particular woman, but I don't know where she lives. That is, as far as you're concerned you have two options. You can either show me Yana's house, or not. If you do show it to me, then that's good for you. But if you don't, there is only one possibility—you will be in just as much shit as the paper you wipe your ass with!"

"I... I'll show you where she lives, Majestic Emperor..."

"Great! Hey bodyguards, could one of you give your horse to the judge? I don't want to have to wait for him to walk there!"

Soon they were standing in front of mother Muchi's beautiful big house. "Here... she lives here..." Judge Moko pointed at the house with trembling fingers.

"Good. I now have an important task for you to do, Judge," denoted Emperor Zor.

"What is it, Majestic Emperor?" asked the judge, a little hopeful. After all, whatever this important task was, hopefully it meant he would stay alive, because he could only do something if he was living! Although he hardly dared to believe and hope for this, after the jokes he had told about the Emperor, heard by his own ears...! How he had called him a bloodthirsty tyrant!

"I want you to summon all the councilors, and compile a book containing all the jokes that exist about me. Include everything that you told me at the hunt, even the ones Yana and Simor told, as well as anything else that comes to mind. And you really don't have much time. You must get a move on, because I want at least a hundred copies by the time of my wedding with Yana! I noticed that she likes these jokes, so it will be my wedding present to her. I'm warning you in advance, so don't say I didn't tell you—I want beautiful books, and they must be thick, substantial, with a bevy of jokes! If they aren't ready by then, I swear you will find out precisely what a bloodthirsty tyrant I am! At the very least, all the councilors of Pakunda can say goodbye to their heads, except for Simor of course, Yana's brother! If you're surprised by the fact that I'm not banning the jokes but having them assembled into a book, I will explain. Conquests and empire building aren't going to last forever. Whatever I conquer will be enjoyed by my son and perhaps my grandchildren. Maybe even a few generations beyond that. But the time will definitely come when an untalented king takes the throne in Atlantua, who will disorganize everything I've created and let it go to waste, or some genius conqueror will take the throne in one of the neighboring countries and whittle away

this one. In a few hundred years only historians will remember the Emperor. Perhaps his name will live on in the odd legend. But if some short insightful jokes spread around the empire, then it's likely that far into the future people will remember that there once lived an emperor called Zor! So you and your councilors should get a move on, because you mustn't forget—it's in my interests to keep you alive, as long as you are serving me faithfully! I don't wish for you to like me. As far as I'm concerned you can even say nasty things about me. You are free to do anything except fail to obey my commands!" With that Emperor Zor jumped off his horse and walked up to the entrance of the house that resembled a small palace.

Naturally there was a servant guarding the place, since not just anybody was allowed to enter the house of the arbitress! He could see the big crowd on the street, which partly consisted of the Emperor and his entourage, and partly of people who had rushed onto the street to stare at the Emperor. However he did not believe the Emperor would visit *them*. Okay, he was stopping in front of their house, but that didn't mean anything. Neither did he know whether it was in fact the Emperor who had arrived. It was clear that the man sitting on the horse was an incredibly distinguished individual, and that there was something resembling a crown on his head, but surely this couldn't be the Emperor himself...!

Now Zor stepped right in front of him and asked, "Hey you! Does countess Muchi live in this house?"

"Yes, she does live here, honorable sir!" stammered the servant, who felt very uncomfortable since he was only certain that a rather eminent person was calling on him, however he did not yet know his rank. How should he address him?! He figured 'honorable sir' would be his safest bet. He also bowed deeply before him. This was sure to be good enough.

But it was not good enough. Because now the visitor said, "It shows that this Muchi is a very kindhearted woman if she would employ such a mentally retarded man! Since when am I an 'honorable sir', you idiot?! Don't you see the crown on my head?! I will admit that I hate it, and I'm only wearing it now so that it is written all over me that I'm the Emperor, although it turns out it's of no use at all! So I suggest you get going while I'm still in a good mood, and report to your mistress that Emperor Zor is down here waiting for her, politely begging for her favor to deign to meet with me, as I have come to propose to her daughter!"

The servant dashed away and did not appear again, trying to stay out of the Emperor's sight. Wow, he had really missed the mark! The crown on the Emperor's head had made him suspicious, but he did not dare believe that he was the Emperor himself...!

In any case, he must have made the arrival of the Emperor known, because moments later mother Muchi appeared and began to bow humbly before the Emperor from a great distance. She asked him not to wait in the lobby, for it was more comfortable inside the house. Meanwhile she kept repeating what an honor it was.

"Of course, I'm well aware of that!" nodded the Emperor.

"I truly didn't expect, majestic Emperor, that my simple little letter would gain your approval so much that it would drive you to visit me!" continued mother Muchi. "And this proposal! I can barely believe it!"

"Of course, of course... but where is your daughter?"

Mother Muchi ran up the stairs to Yana's room at breakneck speed. "Come quickly, my girl, come quickly! For the Emperor is waiting for you down in the lobby and wants to ask for your hand in marriage!"

"What?!" exclaimed Yana, searching for signs of insanity on her mother's face.

"Did you hear me? Come down right now, as the Emperor can't be kept waiting!"

"Of course not... And why the Emperor exactly—why not some god?!"

"He is almost a god compared to us! Come on, don't be so reluctant!"

"This is some kind of bad joke, right? What did I do to deserve it?!"

"Move, you silly goose, or I'll tear your hair out!"

Yana just shrugged, believing none of it, but she went anyway. She had it in her head that this whole thing was a big tease, and they had dressed somebody in fancy clothing, who wanted to trick her by saying he was the Emperor. However she figured she might as well go along with it, and when she reached the bend in the staircase she could see that somebody really was waiting there, wearing such fine garments that they could not have been put on somebody just to deceive her. And the crown on his head, which did not appear to be made of copper, really did shine like gold and was covered in diamonds. On the street behind the Emperor she could see all his attendants—so many dapper gallants...

Then as she came closer she recognized the Emperor's face. It was the man with the unpronounceable name, who had sat among them at the hunt and spent the night with them in the woods! She stopped on the fourth step, put her hands on her waist and shouted at Zor, "A proposal, well of course! As if I'd believe that! You might as well just admit that this is some vile mockery to make my disappointment even greater when you lead me to the scaffold!"

"Why on earth would I want to kill you?!" exclaimed Zor.

"Because I was laughing at the jokes about you!"

"I laughed at them too. You can't think I'm so foolish as to have myself executed, and if not myself, then why you?"

"But I even told my own jokes!"

"Yes, and I liked them! Especially the one you created about the half-empty glass. You are very clever, and worthy of me! Of course if I think about it, you might deserve revenge. So you are right. And what better revenge than a lifetime's imprisonment, where my two arms hold you more securely captive than the bars of a cell!"

The Emperor stepped forward and ceremonially bent down on one knee before Yana. He reached out his hand and said, "I'm not one for giving flashy speeches, so I'm going to simply ask you—will you be my wife?"

"I've only just become a free woman, and you want me to lose my freedom again?! Because I know for certain that the divorce laws wouldn't apply to me. If I wasn't happy with something, I wouldn't be able to divorce you and get half the empire as my share of the family wealth!"

"There's no need to be so sharp-tongued! You might be my prisoner in a certain sense, but to everyone else you will be their Lady! I promise that you won't have to eat soldiers food, you can use the potty whenever you wish, and basically do whatever you want, within reasonable limits. By this I mean not scattering money irresponsibly like my mother did at that time—I remember it well. But I have no fear of that in your case, Yana, because during the time I spent with you on the hunt I have come to know you as a smart and sensible woman. In fact I am deeply convinced that you would be a great companion in my reign, because you would provide me with much brilliant advice. Apart from that I only ask that you be a faithful wife to me, but I don't think this will be an issue as it would take a very stupid woman to risk the rank of Empress by having secret adventures! I'm not a jealous monster. And the councilor was right who said that we were meant for each other!"

"Come now, my daughter, don't be a fool! What are you waiting for—for the gods to bless you?! You can't wait for a better suitor than the Emperor himself!" shouted mother Muchi, seeing Yana's hesitation.

"Well, if he solemnly promises in front of you that he won't force me into a hermit lifestyle..." said Yana, thoroughly enjoying that the Emperor was still kneeling before her. But of course she did not dare drag this out any longer, so without waiting for his promise she slowly placed her hand into Emperor Zor's palm.

Then Emperor Zor asked for mother Muchi's blessing over the marriage, although only out of courtesy, as he didn't believe in the effectiveness of any blessing or curse. And mother Muchi replied, "Of course you have my blessing, my sweet son, but now that I'll shortly become your mother-in-law, I hope I have the authority to command that you tell me how you both came to know each other! I know that I'll have no say in the ruling of the Empire as a result of this marriage, but I do have a right to know this, because I'm bursting from curiosity!"

Mother Muchi's wish was fulfilled, and they proceeded to tell her how they had made each other's acquaintance.

* * *

So this was how the Emperor chose a wife for himself. Naturally both mother Muchi and Yana were immediately appointed princesses. Mother Muchi's address was no longer "honorable" but "majestic", and Yana's title was even more beautiful—she was henceforth to be referred to as "Majestic Empress". Simor was no longer a councilor of Pakunda for he was now a prince, and also bore the title "majestic". Emperor Zor placed him alongside one of his most experienced military leaders to learn the military profession, and when he had learned this well he would become a military leader himself. Of course, this was only after the wedding took place. The date was set for a month later, and in order to prevent anything obstructing the great celebration, Emperor Zor quickly made peace with Torgo.

Chapter 14: Getsnappy the Traitor

As a result of the current suspension of war between Atlantua and Torgo, it was necessary to transform the conquering army into an occupying force, and significant reorganization took place in the military. For example Kayam's commander, the captain, was declared leader of an occupied Torg city by his superiors, and he no longer had a need for Kayam there. Kayam remained a clerk, but was stationed at a smaller garrison, where his commander was none other than his previous commander, Girlimpay, who had been promoted in rank. Now Girlimpay had become a captain.

He could not dispense with Kayam's clerical services because he didn't know how to write. But he did not value Kayam much. His character was such that he only respected strength, and Kayam certainly didn't have much of that! At least Kayam did not have to fear such atrocities as being beaten or having to go into battle. In fact he was also given a separate room to live in, since Girlimpay's garrison had an entire fortress, albeit a small one. Kayam received a small ground floor room, which even had an entrance hall. This hall made a suitable place for Gavadj to inhabit, whose leg had recovered enough that he could move around on it carefully. He was responsible for cleaning the two rooms, as well as doing the copying and everything else required of a loyal

servant. Gavadj yearned for his wife at home, but it was out of the question because Kayam needed him. And he did not dare to escape. Otherwise he was thoroughly cured of his patriotism. It wasn't so much that the Atlantuan soldiers had essentially raped his wife, as this was almost to be expected since they were the enemy. But the fact that some Torg tax collectors had done this too beforehand! Why should he shed his blood for such a homeland?! He began to form a growing respect for Kayam. This Kayam was a strange guy, that's for sure, but he did have a great mind and was full of wisdom!

Gavadj may have respected Kayam, but certainly not Girlimpay, who often referred to him as "you idiot", or "you fool". Kayam found this increasingly intolerable, and longed to be in a place where he could prepare his gunpowder weapons. He couldn't do it here in the fortress. For one, he was afraid that others would steal his idea and that his secret would be revealed. Secondly, there were no appropriate tools here, and thirdly, he did not have the time to do it because there was so much writing to be done. This consumed all his waking hours, even if Gavadj did do all the neat copying instead of him.

Of course there was plenty of writing to do. There were twenty villages belonging to the fortress where Kayam lived, and even a small city. Naturally Emperor Zor had ordered that they do a census on the occupied areas so that he was aware of precisely what he had occupied. He wanted to know how many men were still operational, because the threat of rebellion depended on this, and Emperor Zor was determined not to station any more soldiers here than was absolutely necessary, since it cost money. He wanted to know how many literate people there were, because it was important to know the number of intelligent good people in the area, and also how much livestock the residents had—that is, how wealthy they were. So it was not only the people that had to be counted, but the animals too... Oh, Kayam was up to his ears in work!

In addition, winter was just setting in and a rebellion had already broken out in the province. Of course it was quashed, but after this they made sure they traveled everywhere with armed forces, which slowed the work down.

For a while nothing went wrong. However as the end of December approached and the bitter frost was numbing people's hands and feet, it turned out that one of Girlimpay's three-man patrol units had not returned to the fortress by evening. Girlimpay fretted and fumed. He was not just angry but frightened too, fearing this was the forerunner of some new uprising. So he sent out a strong team on the path the three patrol men had taken, yet there was no trace of their comrades.

"The hell with it!" raged Girlimpay. "These damned Torgs can't mess with us like that! We have to set an example! I order that a team of one hundred men visit every village and collect ten people from each. Announce that if the soldiers are not back within ten days, or if they're dead and their murderers aren't revealed, then the hostages will be painfully executed! Be sure to gather predominantly women, boys, who we'll play about with during the ten days, and this will motivate these stinking rebels to speed up their search for the murderers!"

Girlimpay's lads were happy to carry out the order, and by evening had brought in two hundred and ten women and young girls to the fortress. This was almost as many as the total headcount of the garrison. Disregarding Kayam and Gavadj, there were two hundred and twenty soldiers "keeping the peace" under the command of Girlimpay, plus another thirty servants.

"Have you announced my order?" asked Girlimpay sternly.

"Of course!" nodded the soldiers.

"And our comrades have not turned up?"

"No, sir!"

"They haven't surrendered the murderers?"

"No!"

"Was there any resistance?"

"Of course sir! Some of the men refused to allow us to take their wives and daughters, and we had to beat them, but there was no other trouble."

"Good! Then have some fun with them, and when you get bored put them all in prison. After ten days we'll begin the executions. Let's say five or ten per day, I'll decide how many later. We can't allow them to consider us weak!"

"Captain Girlimpay, sir..." began Kayam.

"What do you want?!" Girlimpay frowned at him coldly.

"Emperor Zor ordered that the rape of women is forbidden, as it tends to incite rebellion in the population!"

"Don't be ridiculous, they'd rebel anyway! The only thing they respect is power!"

"Yes, yes, but..."

"What is it?!"

"These are women, so surely they're innocent."

"Nonsense, they're guilty too because they're the wives of the criminals!"

"But what if the people had nothing to do with it and the soldiers were just attacked by a band of thieves, who don't care whether they're from Atlantua or Torgo because they're only interested in robbing?"

"Don't be such a fool, thieves don't attack soldiers, they attack traders!"

"It could still have been thieves, because if there are many of them they'll attack anybody. But even if we assume that they're not thieves, then what I'm saying is that..."

"I don't care what you're saying!"

"But how can the villagers know who is guilty?!"

"They'll know because the guilty one is bound to hear what's going on, as he obviously lives in one of the villages!"

"Perhaps, but he'd be a fool to come out and give himself up!"

"Then the women will be executed! Now shut your bloody mouth, you idiot, because I've had enough of your whining! I truly can't believe you're defending the enemy!"

"They're not enemies, because it can't have been women who robbed our soldiers!"

"You're still defending the enemy if you defend their relatives!"

"I'm just defending common sense and logic, and I admit..."

"That you're a traitor!"

"I am certainly not a traitor, but this will result in a huge uprising, and I only wanted to warn you about it, commander! It will cause a rebellion, and the rebels will be right!"

"A rebel can never be right! Get the hell out of here, you intellectual cripple, and don't bother me with your stupidity! Distribute the women and let the fun begin! Oh, but not yet... First everyone must be listed, so that word doesn't accidentally reach the public. We need to know who the hostages are, so they don't harangue us about somebody going missing whom we didn't even bring here. Naturally everything must be done in an orderly fashion, because if the Emperor learns about it he may require a full report from us. So a moment's patience boys—first the clerk will write down everybody's name and the village she came from. Those who have been written up can be taken right away, but don't fight over them, because if you do I'll smash your face in! You can begin the register now, Kayam. Concern yourself with that and not politics—that's my business, and besides, to them you're a complete nutcase anyway. Now get going!"

Kayam shamefully stumbled off in search of the ink bottle, quill pen and a few sheets of paper, and went over to the line of frightened women, asking for their names and which village they were from. Anger began to boil inside him. He really detested this job. Some of the women were so terrified they could barely whimper their name, and others had to have it beaten out of them. It wasn't Kayam who did the beating, however he felt as though it was, since they were beaten in order for him to write down their names. And although Kayam didn't care about people much, he did not want to be involved in this—precisely because he didn't want to care about people. Not even these women! Nor did he like the fact that what was happening now would likely bring about discord between his garrison and both the residents of the area as well as the Emperor. As far as Kayam could judge the Emperor's intentions based on his legislation, Zor would have wished to govern this province with entirely different methods than Girlimpay had now decided on. Kayam didn't even like being attacked from one direction, let alone having to fear being attacked from several directions at once! And besides, what right did they have to force him, the Great Kayam, to do something he didn't want to do?!

Nevertheless, right now he felt it was advisable to note down the women's names, because if he didn't, it would probably not end well. The women were crying, even sobbing, since they knew that they were sure to be raped after this, and there was a good chance that it would go on for days and then they would be killed. This was an accurate assumption, for as soon as Kayam had written down the name of a woman she was caught by a soldier, often several, and there were heated debates about who would get the woman or have her first. The only thing that prevented great bloodshed in these disputes was the presence of Girlimpay.

When Kayam had jotted down the names of about half the women, he reached a young girl. She was a very odd-looking child, and not even beautiful according to Kayam. Her eye sockets were curiously bulging out to the sides, as if her eyeballs were pushing against them, which were incredibly large. And despite the dim light conditions of the twilight hours they were slit vertically, for there was still enough light for her large eyes to see well without her pupils being completely dilated. This made her appearance somewhat cat-like.

"And what's your name?" asked Kayam in amazement.

"My name is Veeya," answered the girl, not trembling any less than her female companions.

"Why are your eyes like that?" asked Girlimpay, who was ambling past Kayam in front of the women, also astonished by her strange eyes.

"Elf Tila put the eyes of a dead Ork in me," replied the girl obediently.

"My goodness, you're ugly!" grimaced Girlimpay, and spat on the ground. "A real monster! Why the hell did you bring this ugly creature here, boys? Couldn't you find a better ass than this?! I not only have no desire to screw her, but none to kill her either! It makes me want to puke!"

"Don't be angry, boss, but you told us to bring in ten women from every village, and we couldn't bring anyone else from that dump she lives in because hardly anybody lives there! Apart from her there was only an eighty-year old hag, and she's better than that, isn't she?!" apologized one of the lads.

"Not that much better! Don't you find her ugly?"

"She might make a good hostage," said another lad shrugging.

"Perhaps. Does anyone want her?"

"If there's nothing better, she'll do," said the fellow from before. "Although there are far more attractive chicks here than her, that's for sure! This one for instance..." He pointed at a pretty blond girl.

"All right, well listen... This Kayam is bound to be a virgin, since being as stupid as he is, there's no woman who'd have allowed him to screw her! Our crazy clerk can have that ugly thing. After all, we don't want to give him one of the better women!" snickered Girlimpay.

"Yeah, that's right! This is what he deserves!" could be heard from all around. Kayam turned beet red from anger, as he hated being mocked. But he didn't dare say a word, and after recording all the names of the women he returned to his little room with Veeya obediently following him. Not that she wasn't afraid of Kayam, but the others scared her more. At least what she had experienced of them out in the courtyard did not fill her with confidence.

Kayam had barely stepped into the room when Gavadj suddenly grabbed his hand. "Kayam, Kayam! Tell me... was Zatyι among them?!"

"No." Kayam shook his head.

"Are you sure?!"

"I would have noticed," reassured Kayam. Then he started pacing up and down the small room. "Astonishing... astonishing!" he muttered as he walked. Then suddenly he roared at them. "Sit down, dammit, you're making it difficult for me to walk around!"

They obeyed him immediately. Gavadj because he was basically Kayam's slave, and Veeya because she had no idea what to expect from Kayam and did not want to irritate him. Veeya and Gavadj settled down on the bed, however Veeya tried to sit as far away from Gavadj as possible. Kayam could walk around comfortably now.

"Baffling! It's simply baffling! This Girlimpay is completely hopeless!" murmured Kayam. "The soldiers too! They're all hopeless, every single one of them, without exception! And stupid too—there's no doubt about that! I am surrounded by idiotic fools! They're so stupid that they don't recognize the genius in me... They don't even have the slightest idea who I am!"

"But I know who you are!" said Gavadj bravely. "You said earlier on that Getsnappy would intervene if you wanted him to, in fact you even insinuated that you are the great Getsnappy! Then please intervene so that Getsnappy can save those women outside! Or save them yourself! It's enough of a shame that Getsnappy is allowing them to get raped, but he could at least prevent these innocent women from being killed!"

"Heh?! What are you talking about?!" said Kayam uncomprehendingly. "I thought you were over serving your so-called 'homeland'?"

"This has nothing to do with the homeland! It's about them wanting to kill innocent people!"

"That's right, now you're talking sense!" said Kayam. "We're all innocent here! And that includes me, because you see, I haven't done anything wrong either! They deeply humiliated me with their mocking, and by pushing an ugly girl onto me, this... what's your name again?" he asked.

"I am Veeya, sir!" replied the girl quickly, not minding at all that Kayam considered her ugly. This was definitely an advantage now, as it meant Kayam would not rape her.

"What was it you said about the reason your eyes are like that?"

"Because elf Tila replaced my real eyes, which were blinded during an accident, with Hork eyes!"

"You're stupid too—you can't even speak properly! An eye can't be blinded, only a person, if for example their eyes are plucked out! But an eye has no eyes to pluck out!" remarked Kayam pedantically. "And besides, it's not possible for this to be the cause of your strange eyes because Horks don't exist!"

"But they do! I've seen several of them with my own eyes!"

"Anyone who says this is lying."

"Why would I lie?!"

"I don't know, but I'm aware that there's a Hork legend spreading, and I know very well that it's a mere legend because I invented the Horks myself! Yes, myself, none other than I, Kayam the Great, the Glorious, the Genius, because my imagination is so extraordinary that I am capable of inventing such a credible nation as the Horks! Nothing proves my supreme talent better than the fact that I made the Horks so believable that it caused everybody to believe in their existence! However it's not surprising, as ever since I was born I've felt that I had particularly unique abilities!"

He paced about for awhile, entirely immersed in his own greatness, and then stopped in front of Veeya. "So tell me, why are your eyes really like that? This time I want to hear the truth!"

"But that is the truth! The Horks live in the village that is these days known as Snapp, although it used to be called Odun. It's a settlement not far from here on the coast, and a wizardess called Tila lives there, who says that she's originally from a tribe of wizards called 'Elf', which is interesting because until now I didn't know there were different tribes of wizards... But that's where the Horks live! And this Tila has healed loads of people..."

Veeya spoke to Kayam about this for a long time in an attempt to prove the truth of her story, since she did not want Kayam to believe she was a liar. If Kayam thought she was lying to him he might take offense, and perhaps even hurt or kill her. Or toss her out to the other soldiers, who would be rough with her and probably torture her for the sheer fun of it!

Kayam listened to Veeya in amazement. "Horks exist in reality?! Amazing! Incredible!" he marveled. "Since I know that I myself invented them! I designed their appearance and lifestyle with scientific thoroughness... I can't be that lucky to pinpoint by mere coincidence the characteristics of an already existing nation! Besides, this isn't even feasible because if Horks had already existed for a long time, then everybody would have known about them long ago, being that close to Sizon and Pakunda! And I would have heard of them when I was a child, even if only in fairytales or horror stories... Hey Veeya, how long have the Horks been there?"

"I couldn't tell you exactly, but I heard that it wasn't that long, maybe a few years. Or even less... a year, or half a year... They certainly haven't always been there!"

"Aha! Yes, yes, then that probably means only since I invented them in prison! That must be the case..." And once again Kayam paced about as he spoke to himself, gesticulating wildly. "Yes! Yes! This is clear proof that the whole world was created to serve me! It could be that if I invent something that is believable enough, and have sufficient determination, then at that moment it becomes realized somewhere. Yes! The World is adapting itself to my thoughts! That's fantastic! Hold on, World, now I know how to rule you... haha! I do indeed, since as soon as I invented the Horks they materialized straight away! Instantaneously, immediately, that very moment! Now I know who I am!"

Veeya did not say anything, although she determined that Commander Girlimpay and the soldiers out there were basically right—this Kayam was a complete nutter! But if he was crazy, then maybe he would help her. Maybe. Who knows? It was worth a try.

Meanwhile Kayam continued speaking. "Tremble, World! Tremble, because I've discovered your greatest secret, and now I, the Terrible Kayam, am coming! All I have to do is mobilize my wonderful imagination and it will come to be... but *what* will come to be? Hmm, I have to mull this over for a bit... What do I actually want to achieve?"

"Help!" said Veeya.

"What?! Heh?! What the...?!" asked Kayam, staring uncomprehendingly at the girl who had disrupted his thoughts.

"I said 'help'," repeated Veeya. "You just said that you ruled the whole world, didn't you? And so I'm asking for your help!"

"With what?"

"You need to ask?! Really?! You've seen what they wanted to do to me!"

"Oh yes, well of course. Hmm, indeed... I see, yes, I see... that's absolutely true... Something should be done, there's no doubt about it! Hmm... a solution must be found, after all, it's beyond doubt one of the undeniable Truths that seeing the ugliness of Reality, coming face to face with the raw and brutal ruthlessness of Existence..."

"Couldn't you just help me escape, for example?!" Veeya asked, a little impatiently.

"Escape! That's it! Yes, this really is a brilliant idea that is worthy of me! Of course! I must escape! Yes! I, the Ruler of the World, am ill-suited to this dirty, depraved army! I have to get out of here! It's unlikely that anybody would go looking for me, as they'll just believe I haven't returned because some enemy has captured me, like those three soldiers that created all that mess... yes, yes! Let's see... escape... hmm... Well, that isn't really too difficult, certainly not worth wasting words over... It's more important that I am not found, that they don't come after me, and even more important that nobody subsequently realizes that I'm a fugitive, because then they would disturb my solitude while I'm constructing my weapons... hmm! The hell with it! I'm sure to be missed on some of their lists. Damn! The best thing would be if everybody in the garrison apart from me died during an enemy raid. Yes... so I have to invent some horrible terrifying enemy that will attack Girlimpay and the others... I'm hardly going to be shedding any tears because they're pushing up the daisies! Although I have no objection to them simply biting the dust! But that could be difficult at this time of winter, when everything is heavily covered in snow! Hahaha!"

Now Kayam paused for a moment, and utilizing this silence, Gavadj asked, "And what about me, honorable Kayam?"

"You?! What do I care what happens to you?!"

"I'm afraid that you'll tell Getsnappy to send some frightening otherworldly army here, but I don't want to die yet!"

"You're not going to frigging die—you'll go back home to your beetle-eyes, because I don't need you anymore! Of course you will. It's certainly not necessary for everybody to die, because then I would also be included! No, no, not at all... Naturally it's only those swine soldiers that need to die, who behave as though they don't know who I am! It's possible of course that they don't actually know, but that's no excuse, it just makes it an even greater sin! Anyone who is that stupid ought to die! And the women will escape, of course you too, Veeya. Hmm... I assume they'll be happy about that, in fact they may not even run off right away and start glorifying me! Although it might be better to avoid this, because it could reach the ears of others who are blessed with less intelligence, and they might disapprove of what I've done. Then they'd become a nuisance and obstruct the realization of my great plans, especially those concerning the miraculous weapons! Hmm... they may even see me as a traitor! But that's not an issue—if one has goals one must make sacrifices, don't you agree?" He looked across at Veeya and Gavadj.

"Oh, definitely!" nodded his 'slave'.

"I'm glad that we see the situation alike," said Kayam. "I have great goals, which I now see must include saving the women. After all, it is not permissible for them to believe that I'm among the unjust ones, which is likely, given that I've just written down their names. And if sacrifices are required to achieve these goals, then so be it! I'm not afraid of making sacrifices, that's not my style. I will even sacrifice all my fellow soldiers if necessary, and I can now see that it will be. I'll make whatever sacrifice is necessary for my goals, without hesitation!"

He sat down and buried his chin into his hands. "So now I just have to fabricate some horrible, terrifying creature that will attack the garrison... yes... what should it be, what should it be...?"

"Perhaps it would be better to focus on how we could get out unnoticed," suggested Gavadj.

"Don't worry, that really won't be a problem."

"How could it not be when the gate is locked and guarded?!"

"That part of things concerns me the least. We'll get out, you'll see! But first..."

"With all due respect, I doubt your assertion. It's impossible to get us out of here unnoticed! You yourself can't even manage it, let alone the three of us!"

"Well I didn't say unnoticed, but we *will* get out!"

"Then they'll capture us."

"It won't occur to anybody to chase us. Really, it won't be a problem, I assure you. But now I have to come up with something thoroughly believable, some horrible, terrifying..."

"I think I can help," said Veeya, who naturally didn't believe that if Kayam invented something it would immediately appear. However she did wish for Kayam to deal with their escape as soon as possible.

"How can you help?" asked Kayam.

"You don't have to invent anything new—the Horks are horrible and terrifying enough! Snapp village isn't too far away from here, it really isn't! If someone's determined enough they can get there in a good two-day's walk. If you can get me out of here, I'll take it upon myself to go there and tell Djuli. From what I know of her, she's the kind of woman who won't tolerate anyone hurting women!"

"She must be a lovely little Hork woman!"

"No, Djuli isn't a Hork, she's human, but the Horks respect her like their goddess—they even literally consider her this! I'll tell her what's going on here, and I believe she'll lead the Horks here to save the others. All you have to do is get me out of the fortress, and I'll take care of the rest!"

"No, I'll go with you to the Horks. After all, they are my creations and I want to see them in real life!"

"If you like. So, how do we get out of this hostile place?"

"With the help of my wonder powder!" Kayam rubbed his palms together contentedly, then knelt down, and from under his bed pulled out several jugs filled with gunpowder. A piece of greasy paper covered each one to protect it from moisture, leaving only a small hole in the center through which the wick protruded. He had prepared six of these jugs over the past few weeks, as in recent years he had become overly mistrustful of the world and other people, so as far as possible he wanted to hedge himself against any unpleasant surprises.

"These will certainly help us," he added. "We'll just go over to the gate and calmly walk out."

"But the gate's closed!" protested Veeya.

"Of course. It's closed right now, but soon these jugs will be kind enough to open it for us!" and Kayam patted one of them lovingly. Just on its side, and carefully so as not to cause any damage.

Now Veeya was utterly convinced that she had been given to a crazy soldier. A very crazy soldier! Kayam seriously believed that if they bombarded the gate with those seemingly fragile jugs then it would break not the jugs, but the gate?!

"I really don't want to start an argument..." she began, but Kayam interrupted derisively.

"Somehow I have the feeling you're going to do that anyway!"

"Well yeah, because I don't want to die in an escape attempt that's obviously hopeless! Perhaps instead you could get us a rope from somewhere and we could slide down at a deserted spot of the wall..."

Kayam thought about how successful he had been in gym class at school and his back shuddered. "No, no, don't even say such a thing! That's a totally absurd idea, guaranteed to be

impracticable! They thoroughly guard every single point of the fortress wall—I would know, believe me! No, there can be no question of anything like that! Furthermore, even if some of the sections are unguarded, a patrol would quickly arrive and discover the rope as we're climbing down it. And if they don't notice us because we've already climbed down, they'll still see the rope and then the pursuers will come after us! Besides, I have no idea where to get a sufficiently long rope from, in fact I don't even know how long the rope should be, or how I would carry it to the lowering point unnoticed. I don't know if the rope would be strong enough to carry our weight, and on top of all this the descent would be slow. So the whole plan is full of pitfalls, which are all exceedingly ludicrous risks, and anyone in their right mind would simply not take on such a thing!" Kayam was trembling in sincere horror, although it was exclusively because he hated the idea of climbing the rope. In reality they didn't guard the wall that closely and he may even be able to obtain some rope, or if not, he could tear up some bags and tie the pieces together.

"It still seems like a better idea than ramming the gate with jugs!" objected Gavadj.

"Shut your mouths and do as I command, otherwise I won't bother protecting you!" Kayam snapped in anger. "Take two jugs each right now, and then follow me. These are wonder jugs, and I should inform you that clerk Getsnappy gave them to me as a gift. You'll soon see what they're capable of! They are able to perform miracles, tremendous miracles, sensational miracles—and they literally do create a sensation, because the noise they make can be heard for miles! You just have to remember that they cannot be exposed to fire or water. So don't start throwing them—I'll use them myself as necessary. Your job is only to carry them for me, and when I ask for one you must quickly hand it to me. Oh yes, and please take note that when I say 'On the ground!', you must immediately lie down, of course being careful not to break the jugs, because if you're not careful then the miracle powder escaping the jug will destroy you as well!"

Veeya blinked incredulously at the seemingly ordinary jugs, which were rather ugly too, because Kayam had bought the cheapest jugs possible to turn into improvised hand grenades, or bombs if you like. However she dared not say anything. Gavadj, on the other hand, did not know whether to believe Kayam or not. After all, Getsnappy had allegedly appeared before the man once, and even if he did not save his wife Zaty, at least he punished the rapists. And Kayam had repeatedly boasted to him about his secret relationship with Getsnappy.

Finally he shrugged and took two of the jugs. Whatever will be will be! He had truly had enough of captivity and was fed up with it. But Kayam was his master, so officially he was Kayam's slave and consequently had to do what Kayam commanded of him. He didn't know anything, so if Kayam told him to carry these jugs somewhere, he would carry them. Veeya's thoughts were much the same. As long as nobody wanted to kill or rape her, there was no great trouble. She also took two of the jugs and headed after Kayam.

It was not very late when they arrived out in the yard, but it was almost pitch-dark, since it was winter and that meant it got dark early. The weather was bad too. It was already windy and cold when Kayam was here in the yard earlier writing down the women's names, but it seemed to have deteriorated further. A bitter cold wind was blowing and the thin crescent of the moon above only emerged for occasional moments, but merely to illuminate the edge of a storm cloud. The frozen snow crunched beneath their feet. Nobody could be seen in the yard, neither soldiers nor women. The "fun" was sure to be in progress, but it was obvious that the women had been dragged inside somewhere from the open. No matter how wildly someone desired a woman, he had to have enough sense to rape somebody in the pleasant warmth, rather than freeze his naked buttocks to the bone in the icy wind!

Kayam was cold too. "It's just my luck to have to save women at a time when the weather's so horrible!" he muttered, and deeply regretted not being able to put his hands into his pockets. But there was no question of doing that, because he was holding a jug under both armpits, as well as a burning torch in his right hand. He wasn't sure what he was most afraid of—that the gunpowder would ignite from a spark leaping into one of his jugs, or that the wind would blow out the flame of the torch, which was already almost smoldering.

Gavadj was baffled. "Are we going to escape with a torch?!"

Kayam couldn't bring himself not to joke about this. "It's dark outside and I like to see where I'm going!"

"Right, so much for an unnoticeable escape!" grumbled Gavadj.

Kayam didn't respond, just hemmed something contentedly and all-knowingly, however he did not part with his torch. They stomped through the snow until they reached the fortress gate. Of course there was nobody in front of it, as the guards were not stupid enough to expose themselves to the onslaught of the wind at such a time. But when they saw Kayam coming their way, a sentinel stepped out of the guardhouse with great annoyance, not at all impressed with having to leave the nice warmth of his snug.

He recognized Kayam. "What the hell are you doing here?!" he shouted at him.

Kayam did not even acknowledge him with a reply. "On the ground!" hissed Kayam at Veeya and Gavadj, and when they just stared at him dumbly, apparently having little desire to slump into the cold snow, he kicked Gavadj's bottom with all his might. "Lie down, you fool, or do you want to die?!" he shouted.

Finally Gavadj laid down and Veeya did the same. Kayam calmly placed the jugs on the ground and ignited one of the fuses with the flame of his torch. He quickly thrust the torch into a snow dune as he would still be needing it, and threw the jug at the guard a good thirty feet away. As soon as he had thrown it he hit the ground himself with uncanny promptness and haste, even plastering his palms over his ears.

The explosion came without delay. When Kayam looked up the guard was nowhere to be seen, and half the guardhouse was missing. Loud wails informed him that there were guards inside and that at least some of them were still alive, albeit injured. But Kayam didn't care about that. He now grabbed the other jug and threw it at the gate. The gate was thick and strong, and although one explosion had made a hole in it, Kayam could see that it wasn't large enough for them to climb through, so he threw a second jug in that direction. Now the hole was just large enough to squeeze through.

Kayam stayed until last, not due to misconstrued heroism, but because he knew he would be able to hold up any potential attackers with his wonder weapon. And indeed, the huge racket caused by the three explosions drove many people out of the buildings of the fortress courtyard, some half or completely naked, assuming there was a lightning strike or an earthquake. Ten or so men emerged almost simultaneously from the door of the tower, and in order to deter them from pursuing him further he threw a jug right in the middle of the group as they got closer. None of them were left standing. Kayam hoped that Girlimpay was among them, but he could not determine this in the dark.

In any case, he decided that the right thing to do now was to get away from the fortress quickly, although he found it hard to believe he'd been recognized. Anyone who had gotten close enough to recognize him had simply not survived the encounter! He climbed through the gap in the gate, taking the two remaining jugs of gunpowder with him, then moseyed down the hill on which the fortress stood after Veeya and Gavadj. He hoped the pursuit was now over, and since the torch

would not continue to burn throughout the long journey—preventing him from using his remaining weapons—he dug the "miracle jugs" deep into the side of a large snow dune, extinguished the torch and threw it away.

"Well, how did I do?! Exceptionally well, right?! I was brilliant, wasn't I?! See, I told you that getting out wouldn't be a problem because you could trust me!" he boasted in front of his friends at the narrow forest belt surrounding the fortress. And they were so dumbfounded that they literally couldn't utter a single word.

"I don't even know what to say!" and Veeya just gaped at him like a washed-up fish. "How did you do that?!"

"It's a secret! Classified information!" said Kayam mysteriously. "But I will tell you this... the things I desire really do occur and come into existence!"

"I suspect the same thing happened with those soldiers whom Getsnappy allegedly hit with lightning!" said Gavadj, looking at Kayam suspiciously.

"You can ask your wife about that—she'll tell you all the interesting details because she saw the whole affair!" smiled Kayam, feeling intoxicated.

"Oh yes, of course... my wife! Then you don't need me anymore, do you?! I can go home, right?!" asked Gavadj hopefully. But he knew that if Kayam told him to stay he would obey without a word. He would not dare argue with the miracle worker, who he now firmly believed was none other than Getsnappy himself... he had to be!

But Kayam did not tell him to stay. "Of course, you're free to go!" he replied. "You can leave right away. And we'd better get going too, because I want to reach the Horks as soon as possible! You can lead me there," he told Veeya. He no longer cared about Gavadj, who hung about for a while before saying goodbye and wandering off in the darkness. Kayam followed Veeya's footsteps, swearing bitterly over his misfortune—that even when successful, even when trying to free a bunch of women, he had to carry it out in the harshest conditions, in winter when it was cold and dark, and to top it off the wind was constantly blowing snow into his face!

But he continued on regardless. He had a goal, and even if he collapsed he would carry it through, come hell or high water! Yes! Because he was none other than Kayam! And neither the darkness nor the weather would command him, for if he decided to do something he would accomplish it, at any cost! Now he would call in the Horks to save the women, yes, and he would destroy all the brutish soldiers who were constantly mocking him! Even if some of them escaped, they would still be greatly annoyed because they wouldn't be able to kill the women, nor rape them. Yes, that's what would happen! He would soon return with the Horks, and then they'd get a huge surprise! Haha! That's how it will be, because he, the Great Kayam, wishes it to be so!

There was no thought in Kayam's mind that the Horks would not obey him. How could they not do what he commanded of them, since he was their father—he had invented them! Full of determination, he lowered his head like a bull ready to butt, and stomping through the snow grimly he trudged forward in the dark of the night like a giant earthworm traveling on its underground route. And although the journey was strenuous in the cold and sometimes knee-high snow, somehow Kayam felt no fatigue at all.

* * *

It was in these moments that somewhere far away from Kayam, Badjharata the great wizard noticed his favorite crystal ball hover before him and start beeping in a shrill tone. The poor ball

could not tell him what the trouble was or what it wanted. It wasn't that clever. Badjazarata had simply instructed it a long time ago to notify him of certain events, and the ball had done so.

He looked into the ball, and did not like what he saw. He didn't like it at all! His expression became so grim that his pupil, Chinkramasila, leaned in closer with concern and asked, "Is there something wrong, Prof?"

"There most definitely is—a complete tragedy has occurred! This Kayam... oh, why did I have to release him into the world?! It was the greatest mistake of my life! His magical powers are awakening! Believe it or not, he is preparing to save a group of women, and not just one hundred and forty-four, but over two hundred! In fact he hasn't merely decided to do it, it's already well underway! Some idiotic person did the unimaginable—he allowed this fool into the army, and now Kayam has escaped and wants to bring help in order to free the prisoners!"

"Ah, well it might not be that dangerous, since it won't be *him* saving the people."

"Oh, but it will be! Since if he didn't break free or lead the rescue team there, then the people wouldn't be able to escape! This will unfortunately break my curse just as validly as if he were slaughtering the jailers with his own hands!" and he explained the situation to Chinkramasila. The Horks weren't mentioned, but only because he didn't know about them. The ball had not told him anything about what kind of help Kayam planned to bring the women; it only said that Kayam was going for help.

"So," Badjazarata continued, "as far as Kayam is concerned, he's already saved one person—that young man called Gavadj, whom he allowed to return to his wife. According to the ball he also saved a girl called Ivy earlier on, and because that involved saving a life it shook the authority of my curse over him. It didn't break it of course, since one girl is not equal to a hundred and forty-four, and Kayam needs to save at least a hundred and forty-four simultaneously, but it did weaken the curse a little. However the fact that he has already saved this Gavadj makes it much more dangerous, because Gavadj is included in the one hundred and forty-four, since he was saved as a result of the same act... that is, if Kayam's plan is successful and he saves all the others. Well, I don't even know what to say—I was so certain that Kayam wouldn't be capable of such altruism! He's too selfish!"

"But really, Prof—what are Kayam's motives? Might he not just be saving the women for his own vanity?" asked Chinkramasila hopefully.

"Unfortunately not. Of course that does play a role in his motives, but it's offset by the fact that he's well aware that many will consider him a traitor if they find out what he did. Yet as self-righteous as the guy is, he doesn't care at all... to put it bluntly—he doesn't give a flying shit about that sort of thing! If he gets something into his head, he will carry it through!"

"And revenge is another motive, because he hates his fellow soldiers. However he will still be absolved of my curse even if he saves people out of vengeance, because the key thing here is the saving of lives! And since he has already saved a girl, and therefore one of the hundred and forty-four, the curse field is now rapidly collapsing. Its energy level is already weakening. The more likely Kayam is to successfully carry out his plan, the weaker it becomes. It's pure luck that he also has selfish motives, but otherwise I fear that given his extraordinary magic talent, he may even be able to do small-scale magic already! You might say it could "overflow" from the "curse's cup", even before any saving actually occurs. Chinkramasila, I have created a magical human monster, and now I don't know what to do with it! I have no control over him! Oh dear, as long as he doesn't save even a single person completely selflessly without thinking about himself in the meantime, because then it'll be over... my curse will break like an eggshell, and I have no idea what this crazy person will use his talent for, which rivals mine!"

"Perhaps you could prevent him from reaching his goal of bringing help," suggested Chinkramasila.

"How?"

"This Kayam, he's very fond of comfort, right? Well you could make his journey difficult. Of course, not in a way that would make him suspect somebody's intentionally causing him trouble! I don't imagine it would be that hard for you, Prof, to worsen the weather a little where he is now. The weather is bad enough there at the moment—all you'd have to do is mess with it a bit so it becomes even harsher, and then he might give up on the whole thing! I know this seems like a rather desperate attempt..."

"We'll try it anyway," sighed Badjharata. He held his hand above the ball and a milky fog began to swirl within it. Badjharata uttered, "Let there be a snow storm, and bone-chilling cold!"

* * *

Up until midnight Kayam and Veeya traveled with relative ease, because even if it was windy, it was no colder than perhaps minus five degrees Celsius. That was nothing compared to the howling hurricane-like gale that hit them head on shortly afterwards. As if that wasn't enough, the temperature dropped as steeply as if it had fallen down from a mountaintop into the abyss! The thermometer was not yet invented, but if they had have had one, it would have registered the temperature as being around minus forty-five degrees! Badjharata did not mess about. He truly did everything in his power to ruin Kayam's determination to walk any further.

However Kayam had an entirely different opinion on this. He swore and huffed like an angry cat when the wind threw snow into his face, his hands were frozen blue, and his body was tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees so that he could manage to move ahead in the upwind. He was furious with the whole world. Yet he continued on, raising his leg and forcing it forward, one step at a time, again and again... His feet were so frozen he couldn't even feel them anymore; it was as though there were stone pillars hanging beneath his knees. But he did not give up, because he had a goal. He, the Great Kayam, had decided to save the women, so they would be saved come rain or shine! There was no way he would fail in something he was determined to do! Nobody could obstruct him from achieving his goals! Well, they could certainly try... but they wouldn't be able to for long! Because he now realized how the world worked. And he would soon have his wonder weapons too. A small breeze, even if it was cold, could do very little to hold him back. He, Kayam! The Genius, the Miracle Worker! There was no way!

"You're small fry, you Blizzard, you Cold, you Wind! You Snow!" Kayam spat angrily yet resolutely into the air. The wind immediately threw his saliva back in his face, and in the next moment it froze into a film of ice. Kayam didn't even notice. His frozen fingers prevented him from being able to grab hold of anything, but he didn't care. He just continued forward.

"Kayam..." he heard the weak voice behind him, bringing him to his senses for a moment. He had been enjoying reflecting on how great a man he was.

"Heh?! What do you want?!" he asked, turning around. It was only now that he noticed he had been walking at the front for a long time, plowing through the snow, even though Veeya was supposed to be leading the way.

The girl ambled behind him, frozen blue-green, but by this time she had fallen to her knees. "It's crazy to go on in weather like this! Let's dig ourselves into a snow dune—at least the wind won't reach us there! That's what hunters usually do in the winter when they're caught in a gale, and if the wind calms down later, perhaps in the morning, then we'll continue the journey!"

"No!" stomped Kayam angrily. He yelled to make himself heard over the wind. "We must go on, because we can't know when they're planning to kill the first girls!"

"But I can't possibly take another step!"

"You have to continue on, because I don't know the way!"

"But I can't, I'm completely exhausted!"

"Alright, then lie down and I'll tie a rope under your arms and pull you!"

"Are you crazy?! I'll freeze in an instant!"

"Then come on and get moving! We have to save the women! This is *me* telling you this, me, you understand? Me, Kayam, and I will not tolerate anybody obstructing my plans, whether it be a cold wind or some stupid shrew!"

"But please understand that if we don't find a place that's protected from the wind, I'm going to freeze to death within moments!"

"Oh, so that's all the problem is?! That one tiny thing?! Why don't you speak sensibly, you silly goose?!" Kayam's face brightened up. "It's not a question of us stopping then, but of me helping you become less cold!" and with that he took off his coat and tossed it over to Veeya. "Put it on!"

"You're crazy, you'll freeze!!!"

Kayam was incensed. "Ah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?! But you're not going to get away with it that easily! You can suck it! Me, freeze?! Not a chance! As if! Ha! Of course you want me to freeze, because then you could leisurely dig yourself into your favorite snow dune, you lazy pig! Sheer laziness! But you just watch—I will by no means freeze, and you shall come with me and show me the way!"

"You misunderstand, I didn't mean that at all, I just..."

"Put on that damned coat at once!" Kayam screamed hoarsely at Veeya, his eyes flashing with rage. Veeya was so frightened she didn't dare object. She pulled the coat on top of her own coat. Needless to say she began feeling a little better after this, although it did make her look bloated, like a fat teddy bear. Kayam just stood there in front of her in the minus forty-five degree icy cold wind, with nothing else on from the waist up except a thin shirt. Yet he didn't seem at all concerned about the cold.

"Be aware," explained Kayam, raising his finger at Veeya, "that if I tell you to do something then *that* is what you shall do, because I am Kayam, Kayam and no other, therefore I know what's best! So let's go now, and I don't want to hear you stopping anywhere, because my rotten fellow soldiers are raping your fellow women, and I don't want them enjoying themselves for long!"

"Okay, okay, I'm doing it! But don't get me wrong—I want to save them too! And thanks for the coat, I think it has saved my life... but what I don't understand is—how come you're not cold?!"

"Whether or not I'm cold is not your concern, because you're too insignificant to conceive of my incredible and infinite greatness! And it's unnecessary to marvel over it, as it's only natural that I wouldn't let you freeze, because if I did allow it then I wouldn't know the way ahead and therefore not be able to save the others. The last thing I need is for you to die! Do you really think I would tolerate you just dying comfortably, negligently, abandoning me and depriving me of my well-deserved, glorious rescues?! What an absurd delusion! Don't even dream about it! The only thing that will happen now is exclusively what I wish to happen! And if I don't want something to happen, then it won't... and I don't want you to die, it's forbidden! You understand?! Is that clear?! Engrave it in your mind that you cannot die, because I, Kayam, have forbidden you to! And I don't recommend that you deceive me by surreptitiously dying, because then I'll be furious with you! Don't provoke my anger with anything of the sort, because I swear that you won't survive it! You're better off not getting to know my bad side, is that clear?!"

The reply he was waiting for did not come. He turned around and shouted at the girl, but her lips were barely moving. Kayam put his ear in front of Veeya's lips and heard a faint whisper, from which he could only guess meant that her nose and lips were frozen and she could not speak. Without a word Kayam wriggled out of his shirt and tied it around Veeya's face, so that only her two eyes were visible above the improvised face mask.

"There you go, if you breathe through this you'll soon feel warmer!" he told her. Then he started ahead, now with a completely naked torso. The wind seemed to cause him no harm at all, and Veeya just watched him in astonishment.

Kayam muttered as he walked along. "Freezing her nose and mouth indeed... what a crummy trick! She wants to die on me again?! I don't think so! She just made this up because she's too lazy to put in the effort, and doesn't want to come along! Freezing... when it's not even really that cold! Yes, that is interesting... The wind appears to be blowing harder, but compared to the beginning of the journey it's not actually that cold. In fact I wouldn't even consider it cool, more lukewarm. Haha! I knew the world would obey my will! Perhaps not instantly, there may be some delay, but over time it will become everything I want it to be! See, even the weather has become less harsh! It will gradually get warmer. If it goes on like this, soon the snow will even melt!"

And Kayam was saying this when Badjagarata had done his best to sabotage the weather, and the temperature had already fallen below minus fifty degrees. Kayam continued his journey with a naked torso, and he was right about the snow melting... a snowflake barely touched him before it instantly melted. Small streams of slush began to flow down Kayam's shoulders.

* * *

"It's all been in vain, it's over!" sighed Badjagarata despairingly. "Kayam's magic channels have opened. This cold gale interference was not wise advice—instead of obstructing him it's helped him further, as far as his magic is concerned. Because instead of discouraging him from continuing the journey, it almost caused the death of his female travel companion, which induced Kayam to give her his own clothing and in turn save the woman again, this time from freezing to death. And on this occasion it was completely selfless! He is able to do magic now, and my curse will only be sufficient to block the more difficult magic, but if he succeeds in saving the other women then even this restriction will be removed!"

"So what happens now?" asked Chinkramasila at a loss.

"I don't know! All we can do is watch what Kayam plans to do with his power. Perhaps he won't realize the applications for his newfound abilities, and he'll die without training himself to be a great wizard. After all, we won't accept him among us, and even a great wizard would have difficulty learning the secrets of magic without an instructor... Kayam doesn't currently have one, and I hardly think one is suddenly going to emerge out of the blue!"

"I hope you're right this time, Prof," sighed Chinkramasila. But she had a feeling that things wouldn't turn out as Badjagarata believed they would. For although he was a great wizard, in fact the greatest wizard in existence, this fool Kayam seemed to have been brought into the world just so that he could confute the prophecies of the great Master Badjagarata. So far Kayam had consistently performed feats that even Badjagarata was unable to predict... And all because Kayam really was a genius in his own way. Or a fool, and a fool has fortune. Although there was no reason why he couldn't be both a fool and a genius!

Even if she did not mention it to Badjagarata, Chinkramasila became increasingly confident that some great teacher would indeed come to Kayam and teach him the finesse of magic. She did not

know where this individual would come from, but she was certain that Kayam would have a tutor. It had to be so, because although Chinkramasila was not yet as great a wizard as her instructor, Badjagarata, her female intuition told her that Kayam's birth could not be accidental. There were great powers at work here, which were far greater than that of a wizard, and they were pulling the strings of the great Badjagarata like a puppet. Badjagarata only believed that he had created Kayam. Even if he had, he was certainly obeying another's will. Yes, she was sure that Kayam would find a great teacher, simply because he was both too smart and too stupid for his existence to be a mere coincidence. Kayam's existence must have a purpose!

What this purpose was could not be seen by Kayam, nor by Badjagarata or Chinkramasila. But it may have already been decided before Kayam's birth...

* * *

"You're not human!" blurted Veeya in a surprisingly clear voice behind the makeshift shirt-veil. This really had warmed the air she breathed in, and it had done her good.

"Of course not, I'm Kayam—I'm much more than an ordinary human!" replied Kayam, not paying much attention. For now something else was occupying his thoughts. They were standing on the banks of a wide yet swift-flowing stream, which they had to cross. The stream was flowing fast enough not to freeze even in this temperature, at least not in the middle.

"We have to find a boat or a bridge... that is, if you can't fly as well!" said Veeya.

"No way! That would take ages, and I'm not even sure we'd manage to find anything. We're going through it and that's that!" snapped Kayam.

"Don't be crazy! I won't do it—we'll drown, and if not, then the cold, icy water will..."

"Quiet! Stop whining in my ear, you stupid chook! I've had enough of your perpetual niggling! I don't care whether you want to come or not. If you don't, then I'll just have to carry you!"

Kayam lifted Veeya up, and although he had previously considered himself a weak lad, now he was lifting her so easily that this girl wrapped in fur coats felt like a feather. Veeya could not even protest that he put her down because Kayam had already stepped into the river, and she was hardly going to insist that he drop her right in the middle of the icy torrent.

"See, this is working... all we need is a bit of goodwill!" muttered Kayam. "Even the weather is assisting me—dawn is already approaching and now I can see where I'm going!" And although he didn't care about it, Veeya noticed small clouds of steam rising up from the icy water wherever Kayam stepped. It was impossible for her not to believe that this guy, Kayam, was none other than a great wizard! Or perhaps he really was clerk Getsnappy returning from the afterlife... Or he could even be both!

Kayam made it to the other side. Any other human would have frozen to death walking into the icy river, but not Kayam! It's true that upon coming out of the water his trousers were frozen solid and disintegrated, but Kayam wasn't concerned about that. He marched chirpily in the remains of his underwear, which were essentially shorts.

"You're a wizard!" Veeya said to him.

"What?! Me, a wizard?!" responded Kayam in bewilderment.

"How could you possibly not know this?! Think about it... how else you could you have survived this intense cold?! There's snow all around and you're strolling about practically naked!"

"Hmm... that is rather interesting," said Kayam thoughtfully. "I suppose in a certain sense it might not be normal for me to feel this pleasant in the winter time. Hmm... I never used to like winter because it was so cold. Interesting... I actually feel strangely warm. How peculiar! It's

absolutely remarkable, there's no doubt about that! Interesting... Could I really be a wizard?! Well, well! Somehow that possibility never occurred to me! This is definitely worth looking into, although it's completely logical. Of course, I've always felt like a special person... in fact, not even human... that I'm different from the others... Yes, of course! Who else could be a wizard but me?! This explains everything! It sheds a whole new light on the matter! Oh yes, things are now starting to fall into place. It even makes sense that my special abilities didn't appear right after I was born... I first had to live the life of an ordinary person for years and experience their unbelievable selfishness, their abominable ways, their pettiness, their nastiness and infinite foolishness... Yes, all this was necessary for me to realize that my path is vastly different to theirs, and that I'm entirely different to others! I am more than them, and not just because I'm a wizard. If I wasn't a wizard, I'd still be different to them. Nobler, better, destined for greater things! Human values don't apply to me, I need to be judged by different standards... Yes, I'm not actually a human at all, but something else! I've always felt this! So, I'm a wizard, huh?! How very fitting!"

* * *

Djuli and the others were rather taken aback when Kayam and Veeya finally reached them. The poor girl could barely stagger from fatigue, as it had been a day and a half since their departure, and during this time they had continued on without rest. They had padded through snow-covered roads and even trackless areas, since there were no roads leading here directly. Yet Kayam had not stopped for a moment, just continued on like he was demon-possessed.

It wasn't seeing Veeya that surprised them, however, but the fact that Kayam was ambling in front of Veeya "dressed" in only threadbare underpants. By this time the harsh weather had subsided somewhat (since Badjaharata could see it was no use making them struggle), although it was still a good minus ten degrees. It seemed that Kayam couldn't care less about this.

"Make way, make way for me! Kayam the great wizard has arrived!" he shouted to them from afar when he learned from Veeya that they had reached their destination. He could soon see this with his own eyes, because Tila and Djuli stepped out of the house, along with the Hork leader, Dredd. Although Kayam did not know any of them, it was immediately obvious to him that Dredd was a real Hork!

Shortly afterwards another Hork joined him—Brudj. "Wow, this guy can tolerate the cold even better than us Horks!" said Brudj, looked approvingly at Kayam's bare body.

"What happened?! What's all this about?!" Tila asked Veeya, whom she was already acquainted with and now recognized from her eyes.

"I'll tell you, but first let's go someplace a little warmer," said Veeya. So they all entered the house, and Veeya immediately settled down in front of the stove. Kayam did the same. He may have been able to tolerate the cold, but the warmth now felt good to him. Veeya told Tila all the necessary details, and amazingly Kayam didn't say a word. It was not that he didn't want to boast, but he began yawning, overcome by insurmountable fatigue, and eventually fell asleep in his chair.

Tila and Djuli listened to Veeya's story in astonishment. They were not shocked by the fact that some women, even two hundred of them, were raped and that soldiers wanted to execute them. At that time this was quite common, as life was nothing but an endless series of cruelty. By this time even Tila had become accustomed to such news, hearing about it so often. However Veeya was telling them about the incredible things Kayam had done.

"Are you saying that his name's Kayam and he's a wizard?" Tila asked, pointing at the sleeping man.

"Yes, exactly! He proved it when he destroyed the gate with his magic powder!"

"Hang on a minute—that doesn't necessarily make him a wizard!" said Tila. "I can easily see how he could manage that without any kind of magic, simply by using some mixture of cleverly selected materials! Nevertheless, I do believe you, because anyone other than my kind could not have survived this journey naked unless they were a wizard."

"He's not just a wizard, but a fool too," continued Veeya, although perhaps it was inappropriate to say such a thing about her savior.

"A *fool*?! What do you mean by that?!" Djuli pounced on the word with special emphasis.

"Well, in the way he talks and behaves... for example... the guy can't even hold a conversation, he just gives these big arrogant speeches," and with that Veeya began describing Kayam's character to them. She didn't know why Djuli was listening to these words with an increasingly gratified smile on her face. Finally Veeya said, "But let's not talk about this Kayam anymore. Tell me instead that you'll help the others! You won't allow them to be executed, right?!"

Tila and Djuli looked at each other, then Tila shook her head, "I'm staying out of this."

"Well I'm not!" asserted Djuli. "This Kayam may be a fool on the surface, but I don't think he actually is. He's right—the Horks would scare the hell out of that Captain Girlimpay!"

"That wasn't Kayam's idea, it was mine!" said Veeya jealously.

"It doesn't matter. I'll fulfill your wish, Veeya, and save them. But do you think you can get back there? Are you able to lead me to the fortress? Because I don't know where it is, and you look very tired!"

"Yeah, I'm exhausted! But what else can I do?"

"I'll tell you," said Mr. Numo. "You can stay here and lie down, rest! I know which fortress you're talking about, I've been there before. I can lead Djuli and the Horks there!"

When dawn awoke Kayam the next morning, Djuli and Mr. Numo were no longer there, and most of the Horks had gone off to save the women. Tila, Tin and Veeya, however, remained in the house. Tila herself had been waiting in tremendous excitement for Kayam to "regain possession of his cognitive abilities", as she pedantically referred to it, or to put it simply—awaken.

Before Djuli had rushed off to save the women, she reminded Tila that her shaman mother Muchi had told her she must find the Fool, because for some reason he was necessary to conquer the Children of Darkness. And if the Children of Darkness were the elves' enemies, then it followed that they were sprites, so it seemed that the Fool's purpose was something like preventing the sprites from continuing to bother the elves. Therefore it would be wise for Tila to observe Kayam closely, because if Veeya's words were true—that Kayam behaved like a fool—then it was possible he wasn't just an ordinary fool but the exact Fool the elves had a great need for, even if those in Elfland didn't know about it yet!

Tila could see that there was only a very slim chance Kayam could be of any help to her with the sprites, but she did not want to miss that chance. So when Kayam began to awaken she sat close to him, looking at the young man with a curious smile on her face. He was rather shabby, as Kayam hardly gave the impression of an attractive gentleman after his journey through the snow storm. Even so, Tila's doubts did not stem from Kayam's appearance. She knew very well that appearances weren't important. But what could a human do against the sprites, when even the elves were powerless against them?! Okay, according to Veeya Kayam was a wizard—but even if he was, he would only be a novice wizard, and Tila rather doubted that a human wizard could be anywhere near as talented as an elf. After all, humans were just deteriorated elves, so even if this magic ability awakened in some of them as part of their elf inheritance, it would be a deteriorated magic ability.

How could he possibly know more than an elf?! Well, whatever would be would be, for she had nothing to lose, and there would no harm in talking to Kayam, to "test" him.

As Kayam regained consciousness, his big yawn made his jaw crack. He rubbed his eyes, stretched and said, "What the hell, I fell asleep! Oh well, let's get going... tell me where the Horks are so we can go and save the women!" He looked impatiently at Veeya, Tin and Tila. Mainly at Tila, since she was the one most likely to know where the Horks were. Kayam stood up and headed for the door. When he got there, he looked back at them. "What's the matter? Are you planning to lead me to the Horks, or what?!" That was Kayam's 'Good morning'.

"The Horks have already begun the rescue mission under the leadership of Djuli and Chief Dredd," replied Tila.

"What?! They've gone?! And they left me here?! Me, Kayam, the great wizard?!" railed Kayam. He was fired up within moments.

"But you were sleeping. How could we wake you up? That wouldn't be an appropriate thing to do to a guest!"

"If you had said you didn't dare wake me because you were afraid of my terrifying magic powers..." muttered Kayam. "But even then! You still could have waited until I was awake!"

"What, so the women would have to wait longer for their rescue?!" asked Veeya sharply.

"Well yes, I suppose that's reasonable..." muttered Kayam in response. Then suddenly he said, "I'll go after them! I want to see how the Horks fight. And I might be able to help them!"

Tila did not even try talking him out of it. "All right, go, but I don't think you'll be able to catch up with them."

"You may be right... then I shall have to hurry. You could give me a horse!"

"Or perhaps some clothing, since you're practically naked!"

"That doesn't matter. I can handle the cold, as you may well have noticed! After all, I am a wizard!" Kayam stated proudly, then opened the door and stepped out into the open air.

But he recoiled immediately. It was daylight outside, fairly late in the morning, and not particularly windy either. The temperature was barely below freezing, so the weather was ostensibly more pleasant than when Kayam had arrived. However he shuddered and jumped back into the warm room, slamming the door behind him. "Huh! I don't understand! It's terribly cold out there! This is atrocious! What happened to the world while I was asleep?! What kind of catastrophe cooled the air down to such a dreadful degree?!"

Tila smiled. "No catastrophe has occurred, in fact it's significantly warmer than when you arrived. And I'm clearly not lying, because you can see that the wind has died down now."

"But this is impossible—I'm a wizard and I can tolerate the cold!"

"You may well be a wizard, but even so, you're still just a novice! I think what has happened is that the heredity of your human elf component has awakened to a small extent, enabling you to perform some minor miracles. But in order for this ability to awaken in you, a strong emotional upheaval was necessary, and your extraordinary abilities only lasted as long as the emotional state of mind. You can still rightfully consider yourself a wizard, because most people who aren't wizards are not able to perform miracles, even in a heightened emotional state. However you are not in this state of mind right now, so it's futile waiting until you can withstand the frost!"

"This is ridiculous, a wizard can always do magic! A person is either a wizard or they aren't—there's no intermediate state!"

"Sure, a trained and educated wizard can naturally perform miracles at any time, but still only those he has studied thoroughly. If I interpreted Veeya's story correctly, you didn't even know that you were a wizard until yesterday or the evening before, so you really are a complete novice! What

more do you want, Kayam?! Just be glad you didn't freeze to death in the blizzard—this is an exceptional accomplishment from a beginner! After all, you humans don't have an elf shield to protect you from the extreme cold or heat. I'm also quite sure that it wasn't enough just to get you into a heightened state of arousal, because this great miracle of you enduring such extreme cold without clothing for such a long period of time, was only possible if you manifested genuine elf abilities. And they never function so well unless you reach a heightened emotional state for noble, selfless reasons. It's futile being angry now, you'll just freeze if you go outside in the cold. You have to want the miracle for selfless reasons, and only then will it occur. At least, this is the case with elf magic, because there are certainly other possible kinds of magic, many kinds. But as far as elf abilities are concerned, they cannot be mobilized for selfish purposes!"¹¹

"What are you rattling on at me for about elves, you stupid wench, when I don't even know who or what they are?! How can you have the nerve to educate me about what magic is and isn't, when you aren't even as much of a wizard as I am?!" bragged Kayam smugly before Tila.

"How can you be so certain that I'm not a wizard?"

"In my experience, wizards do not look the way you do!"

"And how many wizards have you seen before?"

"Well not that many, in fact not even one, but I know they don't look like you!"

"Right, so I suppose they look like you then, naked from the waist up and wearing torn rags in place of underwear?"

"Wizards aren't usually women!"

"That's a bold and risky assertion! There's no basis to what you're saying, they're not facts, it's just foolish male pride speaking, you arrogant monkey! Why don't you go over to the fireplace and warm yourself up, then you might come to your senses!" scolded Tila.

"How can you talk to me like that, to a wizard?! Burn yourself for all I care! Get out of my sight, and don't stand here jabbering at me, you stupid hen!" Kayam hurled back at her. "A wizard could indeed look like me, but as far as you're concerned..."

However he could not finish, because Tila butted in. "So you don't think I'm very 'wizard-like', heh? Would it be better if I did this?" Suddenly her light dress was glowing around her, and she stopped adjusting her eyes to their usual human form, allowing Kayam to see their natural large and slanting shape. But even this was not enough for her, for she then proceeded to throw off her human clothing so that only her light dress covered her, and climbed into the fireplace, settling down onto the glowing embers. "There you go, I have done as you asked, great wizard!" she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Are you coming to join me? You know what, if you're brave enough to come here I'll let you have your way with me. Let this carpet of embers be our wedding bed! This is a worthy place for the union of two wizards, isn't it? Well, are you coming, great wizard?! I am yearning with desire..."

Kayam just gawped at her like a stranded fish. His pride was literally in ruins.

"So, which of us is the greater wizard now then?" asked Tila, still in the heat of the fireplace.

Kayam did not say a word in response, just turned abruptly, opened the door and ran out into the cold as he was—almost naked—stubbornly storming off into the blind world.

¹¹ It was just as Tila said. Many thousands of years later Kayam got into a lot of trouble; not on Earth but on another planet called "Tlaxan". He was wandering about a very cold highland, the Grim Mountains, and was in great need of magic to create some warmth for himself so that he wouldn't freeze, but he did not succeed. This story, however, is described in a novel titled, "Kayam and the Lord of Monsters".

"I'm going to die... yes, that's right, perish... I don't want to live like this anymore! I want to die! What's the point in going on?! I mean, come on! I was trying to save the women, and all I get is ridicule and scorn! Nobody ever appreciates me, even as a wizard I'm a nobody..."

He muttered on and on like this and finally reached a large woodpile, crouching down behind it and waiting to freeze. He was determined not to go back to the house, even if it meant freezing to death. And if it had been up to him, he really would have frozen. But it wasn't, because Tila was Tila and therefore an elf. Kayam had barely been squatting there for five minutes, already half frozen, when he heard footsteps. Tila was standing in front of him, still wearing her light dress. She gestured with her hand, causing the snow a good distance around Kayam to melt, and a warm wind began to blow. This breathed some life back into Kayam, but his only response was, "Get out of here, leave me alone! I don't even want to see you... leave me to die!"

"Okay, I'll leave. I will leave if that's what you really want, because I'm starting to learn that humans cannot be helped against their will. All I ask is that you don't make this decision based on a sudden burst of anger, but that you give it serious consideration... Do you really want to die, or is it something else entirely that you would like?"

"What else could I want?! I'm just a worthless nobody, a pathetic figure who can't succeed in anything and..."

"And who is also a wizard. Tell me, Kayam, do you know how to read?"

"Of course! After all, I am a clerk by profession!"

"But surely it was difficult for you at first. Did you want to die then, when it was difficult to spell out your first word? Did you want to die just because your father or teacher or somebody else could read better than you back then?!"

"No, but you've humiliated me!"

"Surely I'm not the first one to humiliate you in your life! Besides, I wasn't humiliating you just now—you humiliated yourself by trying to humiliate me, and that didn't work out very well for you, as I believe you humans say. You underestimated me, merely because I'm a woman! And in response I have proven that..."

"That I'm a worthless, untrained little nobody!"

"No, I've proven only that I'm more skilled than you in the field of magic. But I want you to remember something forever, Kayam—that just because I'm somebody, it doesn't mean you're a lesser person. Don't look for your value in others!"

"What value? I thought I was a real wizard, a great wizard..."

"You *are* a wizard!"

"But not a great one! Not a powerful one!"

"You still have the potential to be that."

"Eh, even *you've* defeated me..."

"Defeated you?! How could I have defeated you when there was not even a contest? Please don't talk nonsense!" admonished Tila. "Tell me, Kayam, did you go to school?"

"Yes, of course... what's that got to do with anything?"

"Well, when did your teacher ever defeat you?"

"My teacher? I never had to compete with my teacher!"

"Well I want you to know that *I* am your teacher. Your instructor, if you like. Listen Kayam, I heard from somebody that you are a fool. But I don't believe that you really are a fool. Perhaps a little conceited and arrogant, but I would prefer to say that you are too ambitious and prone to strong emotions. And you are not cautious enough either—you keep hitting your head against a wall and finding fault in those you know nothing about, like me for example! You would be wise to think

before you speak, and show some respect for others. This advice could help you avoid many unnecessary problems in life. But even so, you are still a very kind and decent guy, you just need to be educated a little and learn how to become a real wizard. Or is that not what you want?"

"Eh, there's no point to the whole thing if there are wizards out there who are greater than me, and there's definitely already one—the one teaching me!"

"That's not true!"

"How is it not true?!"

"I'll tell you... Wizards are all humans, right? Humans who can do magic. Or don't you see it that way, Kayam?"

"Yes I do—so what?"

"Well it's just that I've already told you that I'm not a human but an elf. An elf girl. Therefore I'm not a wizard, I'm an elf! An elf can do magic of course, but that doesn't make them a wizard. They are something else entirely! I must tell you as well that an elf is much more adept at magic than a human, because a human is just a deteriorated elf. So if I teach you, you could be a rather brilliant wizard, even the most brilliant wizard among humans! Of course you'll probably never reach my level of perfection, but you could at least be the best among your own kind. However in order to do this you would need to reconcile with me and accept me as your instructor. I know this will be terribly difficult for you, because I get the feeling you would struggle to accede to someone above you, but everything comes with a price!"

"Wow... is that really possible?! You could teach me to be as great a wizard as you?!"

"Well, not as good as me... that would be impossible."

"You're not just saying that because you want to hide some secret knowledge you have, are you?"

"Of course not. Oh, I should have guessed! You think that you're better than me and that I just have to tell you everything you need to know and how it's done, and then one day you'll surpass me, your instructor!" laughed Tila. "Oh Kayam, you really are the image of egotism! You won't manage to do that, but I don't mind if you want to dream about it. At least then you'll try harder!"

"I'm sure that I will manage it, although I have no doubt that it will require an exorbitant effort. But that's okay. I'm positive that what I say will come to pass, as the world adapts itself to my wishes!"

"The entire world?! Don't you feel that's a little extreme?!" said Tila, again with a touch of sarcasm. Such arrogance was truly unprecedented!

"Not at all—I even have proof that this is happening!"

"And what's that?!"

"Well, the fact that I devised the Horks, and shortly afterwards they appeared in the world!" Kayam began explaining to Tila how he had invented the Horks in the solitude of prison. Tila found this credible, since the Hork legend had to have originated somewhere, otherwise it would not have gotten to Djuli.

When Kayam finished his story, Tila said, "I'm going to have to disappoint you, Kayam. The world did not create the Horks because of you, in fact it wasn't even the world that created them, it was Djuli!" Now Tila began recounting her lengthy tale, although not in full detail. She told him about being forced to contend with a sprite, and that Djuli had ended up taking him on instead of her. About Djuli using the Hork legend in the fight, and her becoming so fond of these creatures that she had brought them down into reality from the imaginary world.

Kayam didn't quite understand such an explanation of course, certainly not its particulars, but he grasped the basics and shouted, "That's not a counterargument, Tila! On the contrary—I couldn't

possibly have received better evidence that I am right and that the world really is adapting to my strong desires!"

"Why would this be evidence of that?"

"Because I wasn't telling you how the Horks came about, just that they appeared not long after I invented them, and if I had not invented them then they wouldn't have appeared! Naturally the world is free to choose how it adapts to my desires, how it does what I expect from it. This time it achieved this by using Djuli as a tool. If I hadn't have invented the Horks, Djuli would never have heard about them and couldn't use them in combat, and if she had won using a different method, the Horks would never have come into existence! I was necessary for the Horks to be born! Me, me Kayam, that's right... the Horks exist because I invented them and the world obeyed me! I am great and powerful, the center of the World... yes, that's clearly what happened... I knew in advance that I'd be right! Djuli was just a tool for the world, a tool, merely a means to satisfy my desires! I'm the real creator!"

"You know what, I'm not going to argue with you. But answer me—do you want me to teach you? Do you want to become a real wizard, to stand out among humans and be above the greatest lords?"

"Yes, yes of course, I would like that very much! Although, I would even ask... how do I say this...?"

"What's the problem?"

"Well, how can I put this... Don't misunderstand me—I'm sure it'd be great to be a wizard, but to be frank, I find humans so loathsome and narrow-minded... and recently I came to the conclusion that humans would be atrocious subjects to rule over. I think I'd feel much better if it wasn't humans under my dominion but elves. That would be far more worthy of me! Although perhaps not elves either... I don't really understand who you elves are, but outwardly you look too human-like, and I don't really trust anything that has a human form. But I still want to learn magic of course, you can start teaching me right now... I just wanted to say that I don't care much for humans. Hopefully magic will help me find my true purpose and give me a reason to live. Because I must find a purpose for my life, I can see that now! I do want to see myself as great and terribly powerful—you're right about that, if this is what you mean by 'egotism' and being 'highly ambitious'! Although I can only achieve this if I don't have to rule over such vile mongrels as humans! You yourself even called them deteriorated, and I don't know why you said that but I think you're right, because I feel the same about them. What I need is something big, powerful, terrifying... if I could rule over something like that... yes... yes, *then* I would feel that I've finally achieved my purpose!"

Kayam gazed into the distance as he spoke, then with squinting eyes he rubbed his chin, took in Tila's tall form from bottom to top, and asked her in a distinctly cunning voice, "Say, Elf... could you tell me more about that sprite or whatever you called it, who you were admittedly *not* able to defeat?"

Tila raised her eyebrows at Kayam, and thought, "My goodness! Is it possible that Djuli was right, or rather her mother, who predicted that a guy as foolish as this would defeat the sprite... in fact, all sprites?! He doesn't even have any training yet and he already wants to take on one of the most powerful—a marid!"

And since there had been several signs that Djuli's shaman mother may have been right about her prediction, Tila decided she was not going to make this an issue of pride. She would admit that the elves really were helpless against the sprites, and refrain from talking Kayam out of his bottomless vanity. It would only further encourage him to want to fight the sprites, like wind to a

sailboat. In fact, Tila would do her best to make Kayam pursue the sprites in true hunting dog fashion. Let them have a frightening enemy for once – it was about time they had some misfortune!

"Come on, let's go inside, and then I'll tell you all sorts of interesting things!" she said to Kayam. He got up and followed Tila.

By the time they got there it appeared that Tin had found some clothing from Mr. Numo's wardrobe that would fit Kayam. However he was reluctant to put them on, demanding that Tila tell him everything she knew about the sprites. So she began describing them, but also told him a great deal about the elves—how they had fled to this world from one that was overrun by sprites, and that it was from these elves that humans ultimately evolved...¹²

Naturally Kayam could not help interrupting. "That cannot be true!"

"And why not?" asked Tila in amazement.

"Because then every human has the potential to be a wizard!"

"That's not how it works. During the deterioration process a species loses many of its features, and the ability to do magic can be one of these."

"Well I have my own theory about this that I developed a long time ago, the moment I first saw a monkey in a circus. It's that humans and monkeys evolved from a common ancestor, so the ancestors of humans must be sought after in the animal kingdom, not among the elves!"

"You are right in the sense that in our prehistoric world, an incredibly long time ago, the elves did evolve from the animal kingdom, and precisely from the sort of ape-like beings you mentioned. But as far as humans are concerned, their ancestors are us elves! On the other hand, I can imagine that we elves may even be the ancestors of the monkeys you were talking about—they just degenerated even further than humans. I don't see why that couldn't be possible..."

Kayam thought this over, then said, "I still find my own theory more realistic. Because it's not just humans who lack magic skills—monkeys do as well, in fact even more so! And if you elves are so incredibly gentle, or stupid, that you won't even protect yourselves, then it's inconceivable that you could become such a contemptible species as humans due to deterioration or any other reason! For they are so despicable, cruel, selfish and stupid that they're completely hopeless! I am well aware of this, especially since being in the army. Their favorite pastime is killing each other without any purpose, but you're even reluctant to kill when it comes to self-defense! There couldn't possibly be more of a contrast! And then you want to tell me that there's some relation between elves and humans?! No way! Despite all my respect for you, I have to state that this is utter hogwash!"

"I love it when you express yourself in such an elegant and sympathetic manner!" said Veeya sarcastically. But unfortunately Kayam was not paying any attention to her.

Kayam had declared this so confidently that even Tila became uncertain. After some consideration she finally said, "I have no doubts about the ancestors of humans being the elves, because the Great Elders say so and they are sure to know!"¹³ But I had already been formulating such suspicions in my mind before, precisely for the reasons you mentioned. It occurred to me that perhaps sometime long ago these elf fugitives copulated with sprites, who were no doubt vile and cruel, and perhaps humans originated from this horrible union!"

¹² The story of how the elves evolved is described in detail in the short novel titled 'Breeding Humans'.

¹³ Regarding the origin of humans, strange as it may seem, Tila and Kayam were both right! Humans did indeed originate from elves, but also from the animal kingdom. They are clearly not just degenerated elves, as the elves' ancestors crossbred with an indigenous species (so they really did interbreed—Tila was right about that, but it wasn't with the sprites), and from this hybridization were born the ancestors of humans. Naturally the species that the elves crossbred with evolved from the animal kingdom, just like the elves did, and the name of this species even appears in human fables - 'mannikins'. However the Reader can find out more about this in the book titled 'Y'. Yes, the title consists of a single letter Y. The reason for this can be discovered by reading the novel!

"I'm still not convinced... I'm sure I know better. My logic is never wrong and therefore humans originated from the animal kingdom!" said Kayam.

"Let's not argue about this, because fortunately it has no bearing on your future curriculum!" stated Tila in true teacher fashion.

"Okay, fine, of course, you're right... I'm sorry, I don't really care about humans or even elves, since it's not them I want to rule over but sprites!" replied Kayam.

"*Rule* over them?! Not kill them?!" Tila said in astonishment.

"Of course I want to rule over them! Unless I've misunderstood, you need a great hero who will straighten that ghastly nation out, and I am willing to do that, but I'm not going to work purely to please you—I need to also benefit from my efforts! I would be a fool to kill the sprites! The sprites must truly be frightening creatures if even you elves are terrified of them, so if you fear them then humans will too, and that's exactly what I need! To rule over such a terrifying horrible creature, and not just one... But if I kill them, what kind of dominion is that?! If a slave-owner kills his slaves he is no longer a slave-owner because he has nobody to work for him! And I am no fool but Kayam! I will capture them and force my will on them, I will be their king! Of course I'll forbid them to eat elves, they will have to make do with humans. And I won't even allow them to eat humans whenever they wish, only as a reward. And not necessarily anyone either... only those who treat me badly and are disrespectful can be gobbled up. Yes, this will work out rather nicely, Tila, and don't try to talk me out of it—I don't want to kill the sprites but be their prison guard!"

Tila was taken aback by this. She already considered it extremely dangerous for someone to attempt to kill a sprite, but to *capture* them?! What if the sprite escaped?! As far as the elves were concerned, it didn't really matter. If the sprites became prisoners, that would suit them too. Then they couldn't run amok. They deserved it, anyway. She knew that right now she wasn't thinking in a very elf-like manner, but she quite liked the idea that the sprites would not be finished off quickly but would suffer for millions of years under Kayam's imprisonment. A sprite was keeping their queen captive, so it was only fair that they should also get a taste of imprisonment—see how they liked it!

"If you're capable of doing that, Kayam, I'd be thrilled!" she responded.

"And that would mean I'm a greater wizard than you, Tila, because you're not able to defeat the sprites, but I am!" said Kayam.

"Yes, if this turns out to be the case, then I will admit it," smiled Tila, "but don't lose sight of the fact that you're not able to do this *yet*, so you have a lot to learn!"

"Well, let's begin right away!" Kayam straightened himself up.

"Hang on! You have to remember that I don't actually know any effective method of defeating the sprites, because if I did, then all the other elves would know it too and we would have defeated them a long time ago!"

"That's not an issue—I'll figure these methods out myself at the appropriate time. I was thinking more about what I would call 'mastering the basics' of magic!"

"You're right, we really should start your education with that. And we can begin now, but I would first like to warn you that even though I am over fifteen hundred years old, I am still considered a child among the elves. Not even a particularly old child. I'm not telling you this to play myself down, in fact I'm far more of an adult than you are with your meager twenty years of life experience! I'm just saying it so you will understand that I am not able to teach you everything that the elves know, because I don't know all of it. I am not trained in the most effective and dangerous magic, and I'm sure there must be a lot that I'm not even aware of. In addition to this I've never

trained anybody in magic before, nor in anything else, so you're going to need a lot of patience, as all I can do is show you what I know, not teach it."

"Sure, of course, but let's get on with it! You haven't said anything useful yet! I will be patient, sure, but just tell me the basics of how to do magic, damn it! How long do I have to keep waiting?!"

Tila sighed deeply. This sounded like anything but proof of Kayam's patience, however she began anyway. "There may be other ways to do magic, but this is the only method I know. On the one hand there is mind magic, and essentially every elf has this ability. The essence of mind magic is that we strongly imagine something and it appears or happens, but it works better if the person is more elf-like. This is what helped you endure the frost when you came here. Then there is the so-called ritual magic, which has several sub-categories, for example making talismans and the like. In our experience it works particularly well for those with a sense for mind magic, but it can also sometimes work for those who aren't so good at it. Because not everything has to be imagined at precisely the same moment—the magic can be planned well in advance, typically using mathematics..."

"Oooh... yes, that's very good news! This magic thing is going to work really well for me then, because I'm brilliant in mathematics—I've even made my own discoveries in this science!" Kayam rhapsodized.

"Really?! Well, that certainly is good news!" said Tila, becoming increasingly convinced that this Kayam was "her man". She immediately decided she was not going to talk any further to Kayam about mind magic. Why awaken the elf heritage in him when it was unlikely to be better than that of a true-born elf? Defeating the sprites was going to require new methods. They would need a totally different approach, so Kayam had to be directed and encouraged towards ritual magic, which wouldn't be too difficult if he was so enthusiastic about mathematics.

"All right, then I'll begin explaining this to you right away if you like!" she told him.

"Of course! Go on then, let's hear it!" urged Kayam.

"In order to do ritual magic you need various tools, for example talismans, a magic wand, maybe even a crystal ball. Spells are considered tools too, and are regarded similarly to devices such as magic rings or other talismans—they are merely phonic tools, whereas a magic seal is a visual tool. This is proven by the fact that magic spells can be designed like any other kind of talisman. Of course, designing these is not a simple process."

"Okay, so how should they be designed?"

"Wait a moment, first you have to understand why these tools are even necessary for ritual magic... Basically, magic is a single indivisible whole and there is no difference between ritual and mind magic at its deepest core. It's just that various types of magic can vary in their level of difficulty, just like one mathematical problem being easier or more difficult than another. So it may occur that a wizard wants to do some magic that he is not able to do with mind magic. Why wouldn't he be able to do it? Well, it could be for a variety of reasons, but generally it's because he is not capable of the degree of concentration required for the magic in that moment. Despite the fact that the magic may not be extremely difficult, it still might not work for him if he can't focus well enough. This is when ritual magic can help him, which is essentially breaking down a very complex mathematical problem into parts and solving these small sections individually. Then all the partial results are added together to arrive at the end result. We also call this method 'modular magic design', although there is a bit more to it than that. Surely you are familiar with solving difficult mathematical problems this way, Kayam...?"

"Yes, of course I am! Come on, tell me more!"

"Well, a more serious type of magic may consist of many partial results, and to combine them in order to arrive at the final result can be cumbersome. That's why there is what we call 'contact magic', which helps us by sort of arranging the partial magic results in their correct place by themselves. I know this sounds a little vague. The point, however, is that the basis of magic is always to imagine the world in our minds, or rather a detail of it that we want a change to occur in, and to imagine the result of the magic as well as the path leading up to it. This is mind magic. Let's use a specific example so it's easier to understand... Suppose you have a big log and you want to chop it up into kindling. There are plenty of ways to solve this, but there are always two constant points—the log and the kindling. You have to imagine these two endpoints along with the entire transformation procedure. The log rising into the air, a flame shooting out from you like lightening, it chopping up the log into pieces and the pieces falling down... Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course! I'll try it out right now, and chop up this table into pieces..." said Kayam.

"No, don't—you won't succeed! How could you possibly manage this when you can't even imagine a log?!"

"I can do that already!"

"That's not true. You have no idea what a log really looks like! It's not only the exterior that matters. In mind magic you have to imagine it in minute detail—the color, contours, scent, texture, weight... and all this at the same time. But it is terribly difficult for someone who hasn't practiced! A log is a part of a tree, which was once a living thing, and it has a very complex construction. Beginners must start with things that have a simpler construction, for example a metal object, let's say a ring... However fortunately ritual magic can help here. It is easier, although it does require careful preparation. Let's stick with the log example... I'm pretty sure, Kayam, that you are not able to imagine a log as perfectly as you should, but if you don't believe me you are free to try it. I want you to now think in the manner required for ritual magic. Imagination is still necessary for this, just slightly less than with mind magic. Fortunately we have magic tools to help us here, spells in particular. Our tongues are always readily available, so we can easily carry magic spells anywhere."

"Okay, so which spell can I use to help me break apart wood?"

"Listen Kayam, you don't even know what the magic spell is for yet! You can say whatever spell you like and the wood will stay intact, if you don't know *why* you're saying it. Since no magic spell of a few syllables is going to break apart wood for you. It is only your own magic power that can break it. That's why it is futile for a person to learn even the best magic spell if they do not have any magic talent... it will achieve nothing! A spell is just a kind of psychic crutch. It is only necessary to help you automatically and effortlessly imagine certain things required for magic. They are not much use for anything else, but are great for this! Talisman objects can also have such an effect, although they are able to do even more, but I won't go into that now because I don't want to confuse you by bombarding you with everything at once, so let's just stick with magic spells since they are the most useful. You need to know, Kayam, that magic spells are in a certain sense customizable as they are intended for individualized use, and basically anything that helps you with your imagination can be one, so you can design your own magic spells. There are some rules of course. After all, you are a human, and humans are the same in many respects.

"Spells are made up of sounds, and all sounds have a kind of individuality that evoke certain emotions in us, images if you like. So a spell should consist of sounds that help you recall the image of the desired object or process. For example, when we think of the 'o' sound, we think of something round... and you will notice that even the shape of the letter is a circle! For the 'i' sound we are thinking of something small and thin—you can see this letter in words such as 'thin' or 'little'. The 'u' sound evokes depth or distance... think about the word 'upward'. With the 'l' sound we think of

something smooth and flat, as is found in the word 'flat' itself, or 'sleek'. The 'r' sound brings to mind something with a rough surface, seen in the first letter of the words 'rough' and 'raspy'. And so it goes on, every sound possessing some kind of emotional charge...

"As you may well be aware, most languages even take this into consideration to some degree. But not enough, so ordinary words are not magic spells. In any case, it is not a coincidence that if you are learning a foreign language, you tend to most easily remember those words where the meaning is relatively close to the mood of the sound image. So according to this, it is obvious that a well-constructed magic spell is one in which the sounds of the word indicate as many features of the object as possible. Of course the sequence of the sounds is also important—for instance it is not the same whether you say 'lor' or 'rol'. Both words mean something round because they contain the 'o' sound. But the 'l' sound means flat or smooth, whereas the 'r' means rough. Obviously in the case of the 'lor' spell, the 'r' has been put in to indicate that the 'l' sound here does not mean smooth, but flat. Therefore the meaning of 'lor' is flat, round and rough. However the spell 'rol' is quite different. The 'r' sound is at the front, so it is definitely rough. It is also round. Now comes the 'l' sound, which is not here to offset the rough meaning of 'r', because this is the only meaning it can have, but means that it is flat. Seemingly we have the same thing—but that is not the case. It is not the same if something is flat, round and rough, or rough, round and flat. Because the order of priority is different. Something that is flat, round and rough could be for example the stump of a tree that has been cut down with a saw; and something rough, round and flat could be a circular area on the seashore that is full of rocks jabbing into our feet, and you may want to use magic to move them away from there. In addition, the letter at the front is not always the most important. Most magic spells are very long because there are many features identifying an object, not to mention the process. And since a person remembers the beginning and end of words more easily, the longer the word is the more characteristic letters there are at the beginning or end. The majority of spells will of course consist of more than one word, and this complicates the situation further.

"A magic spell can in principal be anything if it has the right effect on you. Having said that, you naturally have an easier job if you create an especially good spell, or have learned it for the object. You are free to consider really good spells as the 'real name' of the object or event, as if it were the word of an ancient language and the original name of the object. It is expedient for this hypothetical language to be given a name, and we elves have called it the 'archeol' language."

"Yes, alright, so how does the tree actually get chopped up?!" asked Kayam in a fever of impatience.

"Theoretically what happens is that you pronounce the magic spell, that is, the sequence of sounds that evoke in you the image of the log with sufficient accuracy. You don't have to say the spell out loud, it is enough just to think it. After this you say or think the spell for the splitting, then the spell for the split logs along with the image of the place where the logs have to be placed, then the spell for it falling and the whole thing is done! But unfortunately it is not that simple. What does it mean to think of the spell for the log? Well first you need to know what the spell is, which as I said before must be very precise. Imagining a log with sufficient accuracy means imagining it in such detail that the desired magic occurs on a structural level. So if you want to just move the log from here to there or there to here, then there is no need for a precise magic spell. Because the movement would take place in space, a so-called macroscopic process, so no change is occurring inside the log. Here it is sufficient for the spell to evoke the external image of the log. However if you want to chop them up then the logs undergo major changes, certain crystal structure changes where cells and fibers are broken apart, therefore you need a spell that helps you precisely imagine the log in this way. Let's say you want to ignite that log... then you'll need an even more precise

spell, since the structure of the log is totally altered during combustion. Smoke and ash are rather different in structure than the original log, so you need to be able to imagine the log up to the detail of the most basic chemical components...

"And if you want to make it disappear, then that is even more difficult! To do this you have to imagine the details of the subatomic components, and after that the 'Non-existence', which is extremely difficult! On top of that there are several types of Non-existence! Of course this not a subject for novice wizards, so let's leave that for the time being... You may not even know what an atom is, but I'll explain that later... So even the first process of imagining the log isn't easy. First of all you have to determine what you want to accomplish with the log, how detailed the required magic spell has to be, and then apply the same thing to every spell you need. You must learn these separately and practice them so that you can really get an adequate image of the thing, and only after that can you attempt the magic."

"Right, so if I want to perform some magic with this table..." began Kayam, pointing at the large, heavy oak table in front of him.

"Yes, then you need a magic spell. But I do not recommend trying this, because a table is an intricate geometric body that in addition is made of wood, and I have already told you that wood is a complex organic compound, since it was once alive! To begin with you need something much simpler, let's say..."

But Tila was unable to finish her speech because Kayam got up, reached both hands out towards the table in a theatrical motion, and uttered with noble simplicity the following horrendous and lurid spell—the longest and most complex of all spells... "Huh!"

And in response to this concise magic spell—which must have condensed all the necessary information relating to a table—the table, weighing at least fifty kilograms, jerked as if somebody had kicked it from below, and suddenly flew up into the air like it had been shot from a cannon. Naturally it could not fly very far, as the ceiling broke its soar and shattered it into thousands of pieces, wounding everyone in the room. Kayam was hurt the worst, since the largest piece of the table had hit him on the head, causing his scalp to bleed. A large bump soon formed, and remained there until Tila quickly healed it. Tila also tended to the injuries of Veeya and Tin, as well as her own. Kayam was astoundingly unperturbed by it all. His injury did not give rise to swearing, but rather a grin so wide it was virtually ear to ear. Meanwhile Veeya and Tin were groaning in pain, wailing, "Oh, it hurts!"

After she had recovered somewhat, Veeya said, "Wow! That was a hot situation! I have to admit that I was so scared I almost shit my pants!"

"How did you *do* that?!" asked Tila in amazement.

"Well, I just said the appropriate magic spell!"

"To yourself?"

"No, out loud. You must have heard it too!"

"All I heard was something like 'huh'."

"Then you heard it correctly, because that was the spell, precisely that—'huh'!"

"That's not possible! There are no short spells like that, since what could merely consist of a single syllable?!"

"A great many things. The sound 'h' I believe means height, and you said the 'u' means depth, so height is a negative depth. And I wanted the table to fly upwards!"

"But where is the actual table in your 'magic spell'?"

"Nowhere. It wasn't necessary, because I didn't primarily imagine the flight of the table. Not directly. I imagined what you would all say after I flew it up there. You told me, Tila, that I must

first attempt small things, that this was too difficult for me and I wouldn't succeed. Me, the Great Kayam! I think not! Anything smaller isn't even worthy of me! Do you expect me to clown about with rings like some sort of showman?! I just imagined that the table was flying upwards, and how amazed you all were by it, expressing your shock and astonishment by saying things like, 'Wow!' I was able to imagine that very well. And so I said 'huh', which perfectly evoked in me the image of the flying table, and as you can see, it worked! Everything was in it—the table, the flying, the shattering.. the amazement... And it was a perfectly valid spell, because you told me that magic spells could be personalized!"

Tila was forced to admit that Kayam was right this time, since the magic had worked, and Veeya really had said 'Wow!' afterwards.

"I have to say that you perform magic in a very peculiar way!"

"I'm sure I do, but that can only be a good thing because *your* methods were unsuccessful against the marid!" stated Kayam confidently. "I have to become the great hero you turn to when confronted with the menacing sprites, you gentle, helpless elves!"

"Of course, of course... it's just, how do I put this... Deviating to such an extent from the usual methods... well, it's very risky!"

"Indisputably," nodded Kayam. "But all I can say to you is this—it is something that must be undertaken for the sake of new experiences and discoveries, in fact even to preserve our individuality! And this is very important to me, I am worthy of no less... I can summarize all this briefly yet very aptly: 'If you walk behind the herd, you will only get shitty grass, and only very little of it!' "

* * *

Mr. Numo did in fact know the way to the fortress, and the Hork army reached it without any problems. However although there was no trouble, there were some disputes right at the beginning of the journey. For as soon as the Horks learned that they had to trek such a long distance, they insisted that Djuli could not walk that far. It was fine for the Horks to go there and fight a little if Goddess Djuli found it appropriate for some reason, but they could not allow their goddess to endure such fatigue. So Djuli should either stay at home—as she didn't want to fight anyway—or if she insisted on going with them, they would quickly put together some sort of rickshaw and carry her.

Djuli wanted to come along, but would not hear of any rickshaw, refusing to have them carry her. Eventually the issue was resolved—Djuli was given a horse, and she went on her way in the saddle. She was wrapped up thoroughly in lots of furs, her eyes barely visible. The Horks themselves preferred to walk, largely due to them not having enough horses, but also because not all their horses were willing to tolerate Hork riders on their backs. In addition, few of the Horks had learned to ride a horse; they favored the infantry style of fighting, as it meant they could also use their legs as a weapon. They had created a kind of shoe for themselves that they could kick off their feet in a single easy motion, and then use their formidable foot claws to attack. If their opponent was not wearing chain armor he was sure to be totally eviscerated with a single kick. However this tactic would be fairly difficult while sitting on a horse.

So the Horks went on foot, and only Djuli and Mr. Numo were on horses, as well as the leader Dredd and Brudj. The latter two Horks were not doing this for reasons of dignity, but because they considered it necessary to have a couple of horses to help them quickly scout around the fortress. After all, it was better to be safe than sorry, and they did not want to run into a trap.

Nevertheless, the Horks moved surprisingly quickly, and were extremely persistent. They could not be any other way, as this was how Kayam created them, as did Djuli on the astral plane. If a Hork decided he was going to walk, then he would walk. It is true that over a short distance a horse was certainly faster than a Hork, but over a long distance a horse would be sure to collapse from exhaustion sooner than an adult Hork!

So they walked non-stop all day and night, and reached the base of the fortress at dawn the next day. Their pace was only a little slower than a trotting horse, that is, as fast as a horse could trot through snow that was knee-high in places. The horses of Djuli, Dredd and Brudj seemed quite exhausted, however the Horks merely wiped their sweaty foreheads, had a bit of a stretch and stated that they were ready for the siege, since there was no point waiting.

"Aren't you tired?" Djuli asked.

"Yes, we are, but that's why we want to rest as soon as possible. We just think it would be more comfortable to do this inside the fortress!" Krarm replied.

As for the riders' reconnaissance around the premises, they decided not to bother. The fortress stood on almost flat terrain, and although it was surrounded by forest for some distance, the Horks were fortunate that the wind was blowing frontwise. So all they had to do was go over to the other side of the fort, turn their backs so they were looking out toward the forest, and then open their wide nostrils to inhale the fresh dawn air. Within moments they ascertained that they could not sense any kind of human odor coming from out there at all. And if they said this, it was surely so. Brudj told Djuli that this olfactory detection of theirs was very effective; that there were no humans in the immediate vicinity, and that a maximum of four or five could possibly be loitering within a distance of ten to fifteen kilometers, since if there were more of them the Horks would have picked up their scent.

This meant that their only enemies were those in the fortress. As for what was to happen to them, Djuli gave the following order, "Kill every man in the building, but make sure you don't harm any women!"

"As you wish, Djuli!" nodded Dredd at the "goddess's" request.

Although it could be said that they arrived at the fortress at dawn, it was more of a promise of dawn, barely first light. When the Horks began their attack, it was still dark enough for a human not to be able to see more than ten meters ahead.

"Take good care of yourselves!" said Djuli, and hugged Dredd, Brudj and some of the other Hork companions she was especially fond of, even kissing them. "Take really good care of yourselves, as it would cause me great grief if you were to come to any harm! Don't forget that I was only able to create you with Tila's help, but I'm utterly incapable of resurrecting you!"

"There won't be any trouble... these aren't the sort of monsters we had to deal with in the other world—it'll be an easy victory!" said Brudj, flexing his muscles.

"It's not the swords I'm afraid of, but you being shot with arrows..."

"We do have chain armor on. Besides, humans can't see very well at this time of day, so let's not waste time saying goodbye because light would favor the enemy! Let's attack now!" said Dredd, and began his orders. "Come on chums, kick off your shoes and we'll head for the gate! Once we've broken that, we won't have to make any more ruckus when we're inside!"

All fifty Horks took off their shoes, and it now transpired how useful it was for them to have such tough, fat-cushioned soles that could withstand the frost and snow for hours. They hastily ran to the gate, where a pleasant surprise awaited them—it turned out that the fortress inhabitants had not properly filled the gap that had been blown up by Kayam two days earlier, and had only nailed a

couple of thin boards inside the hole. The gap was just large enough for a Hork to be able to squeeze through.

With the Horks' strength there was no difficulty breaking the boards in a matter of moments, and by the time a few guards had rushed over to the commotion, three Horks were already inside, Brudj being among them. And now it became clear what it meant to be a Hork. The average height of a human at that time ranged between 160 and 170 centimeters, and the guards were suddenly looking at a two meter-tall monster rising above them, whose arms were almost thicker than their thighs, wielding a horrendous broadsword...

When a Hork used his sword, he was able to split a person in two at the waist with a single blow. However this was not always necessary. It was enough for Brudj or Dredd to swing their fists, and if they struck somebody on the head even their helmet could not protect them from their brain squirting out of their eyes and ears. Or they just dragged their claws down a guard's face and in one motion dislocate his jaw, but all it took was a guard's face to be skinned for him to lose his courage... Despite this, Brudj still almost came off badly—one of the soldiers wanted to stab him with a sword from behind, but Dredd noticed his intentions and like a predator he jumped over, opened his mouth and clamped down on the arm close to the shoulder, biting it off entirely by the time he had landed.

The courtyard was filled with a great cacophony of roaring and screaming, the screams emanating from the fortress inhabitants and the roaring from the throats of the Horks. This hurricane of sound naturally caused those still asleep to jump out of their beds and rush to the courtyard, some even half naked and merely brandishing a sword. They were anticipating an enemy attack and acted accordingly, however they did not expect enemies such as these!

All the Horks were inside the fortress by this time, and on Dredd's orders they began occupying the higher points of the building, as those were the most dangerous places from where they could be shot with arrows. So far there had been no deaths on their part, although a few stray arrows had raced by them. The humans could not see very well in the foggy, damp, darkness of morning, however they still succeeded in wounding one of the Horks, piercing his arm with an arrow. It merely caused a little pain, but not enough to make him retreat from the battle. Instead he kicked a door in and went inside to search for enemies.

It didn't take long for the men to decide they did not want to fight with such creatures as the Horks. All their effort went into getting out of the fortress, and in the end about thirty of them managed to escape, simply because there were not enough Horks to prevent it. By the time it occurred to the Horks to guard the gate, it was too late and many of the men had already gotten out. There were some who jumped straight off the fortress wall in a panic, often breaking their necks, but others survived by falling onto a large snow dune, climbing out and fleeing.

"Hey, don't let them get away!" cried Djuli, who was watching from a safe distance, awaiting the outcome of the battle. A "safe distance" in this case meant being far enough away to not be shot by an arrow.

This was said to the four Horks who remained by her side as bodyguards. In response they just shrugged, picked their noses and told her that unfortunately there was no question of them complying with their goddess's order, since then they would have to leave her here alone and they were not going to risk Djuli's life! Djuli was annoyed, but she could see that this was actually nothing more than a sign of the Horks' love for her.

The battle barely lasted two hours. In fact, by the time it was fully daylight they were done with everything, apart from some fugitives fleeing to the woods on the snowy plains. Leader Dredd immediately set out to catch them up and slay them, assisted by Mr. Numo, who rode behind on

horseback and used his bow. He was now caught in the fever of warfare and believed there was no great threat of danger. It felt amazing to fight with the Horks, and even though they were ugly, they were also strong and brave. He was so glad to be on their side and not their enemy's! On top of this, he wanted to gain Djuli's recognition. By this time he had learned that the Horks were created when Djuli had fought with the marid, and he was filled with awe by her courage. He greatly respected the girl for that.

Nearly all of the fugitives were caught and killed, mostly by the Horks, although Mr. Numo managed to finish off three of them with an arrow. However five of the soldiers escaped—those who had reached the woods and hidden. Even the Horks could not find them, as the wind had changed direction and they could no longer pick up their odor. Djuli had also commanded them not to pursue the men, because in the dense forest they might assassinate one of the Horks. She greatly feared for her beloved Hork friends, and the last thing she wanted was for one of them to be killed. She was grateful that there had only been one injury and that death had not yet befallen any of them. It was not worth the risk now that they were at the end, since the whole point of them coming was to rescue the women.

And so out of at least two hundred soldiers, these five survived and spread the news everywhere that Getsnappy had returned from the afterlife and set his Horks friends on them. They said that they had even seen Getsnappy, as he was riding a horse in front of the Horks, shooting at them with arrows. The fugitives had therefore clearly mistaken Mr. Numo for clerk Getsnappy. And they exaggerated the number of Horks too, speaking not of fifty but five hundred. They must have been the most cowardly soldiers, for they had fled the furthest and in order to do that they would have been the first to flee. But nobody doubted their word, as it was undeniable that the fortress had been destroyed and the garrison slaughtered. This was confirmed not only by the fugitives themselves, but by the abandoned fortress and the local women who had been rescued.

As soon as all the enemy soldiers had been eliminated, Djuli went through every room and prison cell, and released all the women. They were extremely grateful, although terribly frightened by the visage of the Horks, some almost wishing to have their prison guards back instead. And so despite their gratitude they did not waste much time thanking them, for as soon as they realized they were free they quickly rushed home to their loved ones as fast as they could. They had trembled in horror as they watched the Horks quite leisurely begin to gorge themselves on the corpses, starting of course with the intestines, brain and organs. Initially the women were not at all certain whether they had really been rescued or whether they were facing an even more horrible captivity, which is why they fled from Djuli and the others, fearing they might change their minds and that the horrible monsters might eat them.

So now Djuli and the Horks remained alone in the fortress. After a thorough inspection of the place, Djuli said they deserved a rest. They dragged in the dead bodies of the fugitives they had captured, and meanwhile Djuli and Numo heartily feasted on the delicacies they had found inside the fortress. Djuli decided they would leave the day after tomorrow.

And that is what they did. Using some horses and oxen they had found on the fortress grounds, they attached each one to the front of a cart and filled it with various things they might find useful back at home. This included weapons, tools, an abundance of food, seeds, corn, soldier corpses as food for the Horks, all the money they could find, and many other things. Djuli considered these their rightful spoils of war.

Just as they were leaving, a delegation from a few of the nearby villages arrived. There were four judges among them and some others who were considered prestigious at the time, even a Torg soldier. He mentioned that he was one of the Torg king's commanders, only he had been wounded in

the last lost battle and the villagers had been secretly caring for him. They all solemnly thanked Djuli for saving their women with her Horks, and in doing so supporting the Torgs in the war against Atlantua. They then proposed that all their combat-capable lads join Djuli and the Horks, and in return be given the weapons they had looted from the fortress.

Djuli just looked at them for a moment in amazement, and then asked, "When did I say I was supporting anyone, whether it be Torg or Altantuan?!"

"Well... I mean..." the delegates began stammering.

"I'll have you know that the only side I'm on is my own! However if I *were* on anyone's side in the war it would be Atlantua's, because I despise the Torgs! And I'll tell you why... because the Torg slave hunters ravaged my village! They eradicated my people—the Zunzan tribe—or very nearly, because I don't believe many would have survived the events that took place at the time. I can still see the flames over my village in my dreams sometimes. Many of my good friends were killed or abducted, and I was also kidnapped and turned into a slave. I was raped countless times, and when I gave birth to children they were torn from me and sold. I don't even know where they are now or what has happened to them! So I ask you please in your infinite kindness to tell me why the hell I should have any regard for your nation! Because I, a dim-witted slave, can't possibly imagine what there is to love about your people, or why I should advocate for you against Atlantua or any other country! So for your information, I would much rather support Atlantua than you—purely because Atlantua is your enemy! The only reason I don't support Atlantua either is because I have enough sense to know that if the Zunzan tribe had happened to border Atlantua, then the Atlantians would have done the same, since they are no better than you lot! Don't be fooled by the fact that I just killed Atlantians—it only appeared that way on the surface. It wasn't Atlantians I killed but vile, disgusting human rats, who were abusive to women! All I did was help free some women, and I don't give a shit if the prison guards were Atlantians or Torgs! I would just as willingly have rescued Atlantian women from the captivity of Torg soldiers, if that were the case! I don't belong to the Torg nation, who exterminated my foregone tribe, nor to the Atlantians... I've found myself a new nation—the Horks! I have such regard for them that I can in all honesty say I would sooner sleep with all the Horks you see here at once than with a Torg, even the most handsome of them! Now get the hell out of here because I want to leave, and if I still see you here in ten minutes time, I'll prove to you exactly how much I'm NOT on the side of the Torgs!"

"What, you're still here?!" horked Dredd.

"Mmm... I can smell tasty human flesh!" Brudj growled, and snapped his teeth at the Torg commander.

No more was needed, and the delegates scooted off back home.

Chapter 15: Kayam, Lord of the Sprites

It was typical of Kayam to not think of returning home, even for a short visit, to reassure his mother and father that he was no longer in prison, nor in the army. It simply did not occur to him. He merely strove with every fiber of his being to become an excellent wizard, and now it was apparent

that Badjharata really knew his stuff when he put all of Kayam's talents into the service of magic. For magic seemed to flow easily for Kayam; it was amazing how he picked up everything Tila explained to him almost effortlessly. He often had great innovative ideas too; one might even say he was a genius in the field of magic. Tila herself had to admit this, which bolstered his ego no end.

Kayam was daydreaming on one occasion about how great it would be to finally get hold of the very first sprite of his life. Tila told him he should be focusing instead on how he would protect himself against the sprites, because the sad truth was that for the time being Kayam was defenseless if a sprite wanted to burn him to ashes with a lightning bolt. Elves were protected from this, but not him.

"Of course I'll be protected! If I see a sprite coming, I can instantly protect myself from those sorts of things!" replied Kayam with great confidence.

"And how will you do that?"

"I always carry this on me," he said, pointing to a small stick, "as well as this!" He now showed her a piece of chalk.

"And you plan to ward off the lightning strike with these?!" doubted Tila.

"I not only *plan* to, I *will* ward it off!"

"How?"

"Like this!" Kayam bent down and quickly drew a circle-like figure around him, making a groove in the dust with the stick.

"Kayam, don't be ridiculous! Do you really think that this is going to protect you from a sprite?!"

"Well, from the lightening anyway!"

"Don't joke with me!"

"Try it then, Tila—shoot a lightning bolt at me!"

"I'm unable to do that. I haven't learned destructive magic."

"What about generating some sort of fire—a jet of flame that you would cut up logs with?"

"I don't need a jet of flame to do that... but you're right, I am of course able to produce a small fire," and with that a meter-long column of flame appeared in Tila's hand, which with a simple gesture became horizontal. It wasn't exactly a lightning bolt, but a jet of flame nevertheless.

"Now I'm going to fry your bottom, so you will learn..." began Tila, but her words faltered. The flame leapt in all directions, as if Kayam was surrounded by an invisible wall that ran precisely along the groove he had made with his stick.

Tila just gawped. "How did you do that?!"

"I simply decided that this was an impenetrable wall, and only things I allow can pass through. I imagined what would happen to your jet of flame if it touched the wall, and lo and behold—that's exactly what transpired!"

"I see, but sprites can do magic too. What if I am a sprite, and I imagine that the jet of flame *does* pass through it?!" Tila's eyes slanted back toward her ears, becoming more elf-like, for she was now concentrating with all her might. The flame began to penetrate the circle toward Kayam...

Then suddenly as if something had pushed it aside, Kayam's invisible wall was restored. It could be seen on Kayam's face that he was also deeply concentrating.

This rather surprised Tila, and she attempted to muster up more power. The jet of flame slammed against the "wall", then gradually began to inch closer toward Kayam's body like a sharp needle. Kayam drew another inner circle on the ground around himself, and when the flame broke through for moments he was protected by this inner circle. But it still wasn't enough. Now Kayam threw the stick, which like a boomerang flew in a semi-circle and returned to him, meanwhile

drawing a furrow on the ground and in this way enclosing Tila. Kayam swiftly stepped out of his own circle, and was now standing outside the whole thing. Tila was left inside the magic circle—not one she had created but Kayam! She noticed in amazement and horror that her flame could not get through the invisible wall, and that it was getting warmer and warmer in the little circle. This didn't harm her of course, but the air was quickly running out. She tried to step out of it, but to her surprise found she was incapable of crossing the line, as if she were colliding with a solid metal wall!

She focused intently, however Kayam was doing the same, and the invisible wall alternated between softening and hardening... Finally it faded away, as Kayam bent down and erased the line. Tila could now step out.

"I don't want to hurt you!" asserted Kayam proudly.

"I'm not entirely sure you could have hurt me. I was far from the limits of my capabilities!" replied Tila.

"So was I! I still had some tricks up my sleeve. Because I'll have you know that yesterday evening I had a sudden inspiration. It was then that I came up with the magic circle, which I call a 'clausura'. That's why I need the stick. But if, for example, I'm standing on a stone floor when the sprite appears and I'm not able to furrow into the ground, I can draw it with a piece of chalk instead. In any case, I think it's a very primitive method to deploy our own magic power for this sort of combat!"

"How else could it be used?!"

"No commander fights in battle himself, it's his soldiers who do that. My magic power is only necessary to lead other forces into battle against the sprites. To direct!"

"Direct what?!"

"That, for instance!" Kayam pointed at the sun. "In my humble opinion, it is unlikely that many sprites have as much power as that raging in an entire star..."

"You're out of your mind! If you mess about with the Sun and you do something wrong, you'll be instantly destroyed!"

"Absolutely. But if I don't do anything wrong... then it would make even the strongest sprite tremble! You told me yourself, Tila, that even *you* would burn inside the Sun because its temperature is over fifteen million degrees!"

"Well, I'm not sure what its exact temperature is, but it could easily be even hotter than that!"

"It doesn't matter—a whole star is a frightening amount of power! And it *is* possible to direct a large force with a small one. A horse is stronger than a man, and yet he can manage to direct it with a small amount of strength, no more than is necessary to move the reins!"

Tila pondered over this. "You might be right about that... but I'll freely admit to you that I wouldn't ever dare mess about with an entire star!"

"Well of course, and I don't blame you! But herein lies the difference between us—I'm not just anybody, not a common elf, but the Great Kayam himself!"

Naturally Kayam was not able to do all this right after having flown the table into the air. He had been diligently learning from Tila for weeks beforehand, and when she was not teaching him he was practicing all sorts of things, even those he felt were deeply unworthy of him—like moving small objects back and forth. He soon realized that concentrating intensely or imagining something was not primarily going to be an issue for him in doing magic, for he was able to instantly imagine the most amazing things, quite realistically and with great acuity. Since he did have a good imagination. But that was just it—his imagination was far too good! So much so that when he imagined something, another image immediately intruded, and then a third... He had to learn how to control his imagination so he could concentrate on the same thing for a long period of time.

However this took an extraordinary effort from Kayam. It was pretty much the only thing about magic that he found difficult; so difficult that he almost sweated blood in training for it. Moving small objects around turned out to be a great tool for this. Kayam just lay down somewhere with a ball, tossed it into the air, and focused on making it hover there or spin round. If it fell down, he knew that his mind had strayed. Later he did the same thing with two balls, then three or even more. These were harmless exercises, but suitable for mastering the discipline of his imagination. Little by little Kayam acquired the technique of how to split his consciousness, partially concentrating on what he wanted to achieve—for example moving the balls—and allowing the rest of his mind to think about something else...

But this was really a fair way ahead. By the time he had discovered the 'clausura' the winter was already over, in fact it was then that Emperor Zor had "discovered" them. As we know, the Emperor had heard about the Horks earlier from Yana, but after learning that these strange creatures had seized one of his castles he paid them great attention. First of all he wanted to determine whether the Horks existed at all. A great many people claimed that they did exist, but the Emperor did not want to rely on dubious rumors. So he decided to send an imperial commissioner to investigate the matter; a person whose word could be trusted categorically, who had no interest in cheating him, who was intelligent enough not to be deceived by some dressed-up, masked man disguised as a monster, and in addition had an interest in the Hork matter. Naturally there could be nobody more suitable for this than Mother Muchi!

Emperor Zor gladly entrusted her with this task, as he had an excellent relationship with his mother-in-law. She eagerly prepared for the journey, which she carried out with the utmost respect as a royal mother-in-law and princess, bringing along a huge entourage of two hundred members, Mother Muchi being the arbiter of each one's life and death. She was dedicated to getting to the bottom of this Hork affair, and would not return home until she had irrefutable evidence that the whole thing was a groundless legend or until she had spoken with a Hork personally. Or an Ork, as for the time being it was still uncertain what their true name actually was.

It was obvious that she should first travel to the village whose name was just as uncertain as that of the Horks, being referred to as either Odun or Snapp. When she got there, otherwise without any trouble or danger, she realized it was not going to be that difficult to find the Horks at all. The first passerby of whom she inquired told her that the Horks did indeed live here, not far from the village in an estate owned by a man called Numo, and that he had seen the Horks with his own eyes—in the village as well as at the estate, where he had gone once to be cured of tapeworms by a wizard called Tila. Although she had not done it gladly, because she was so kindhearted that she felt remorse at causing the death of such lovely innocent creatures as worms. But she did it anyway, and completely free of charge. It was a pity she didn't heal nowadays, not even for money!

Mother Muchi cut off the guy's chatter because she was not interested in wizards just now, let alone tapeworms... Instead she told the man to lead them to the Horks' estate, which he did.

It was early spring, and at this time many people were busy out in the field doing necessary work. Mother Muchi had barely stepped out of her carriage when she saw several Horks, who were working peacefully among the humans. They did not seem at all bloodthirsty, and for the most part were just digging or plowing the soil, at times bending down to pick something up and stuff it into their mouths. She could not see what they were eating from such a distance, but from what she had heard about the Horks' tastes, she suspected they were worms or bugs.

Of course the residents of the estate noticed they had a visitor, one who appeared to be rather high-ranking. Two of them immediately hurried over to her. One was a man, whom Mother Muchi correctly assumed was the owner of the estate called Numo. The other was a woman, who looked to

be roughly in her thirties. She seemed remarkably familiar to Muchi, but she couldn't say why. However now the woman stopped in her tracks a few feet away from her, staring hesitantly for a few moments. Then her eyes widened and her face filled with bewilderment, as she cried out, "Mother!" She rushed over and hugged the rather surprised Muchi. And this is how Djuli and Mother Muchi found each other.

It was no wonder Djuli recognized Muchi as her mother earlier than her mother did her, as when they were separated Djuli was only ten years old and had changed a fair bit during this time. She had grown into an adult woman and endured many hardships. Mother Muchi on the other hand was already an adult at that time, and since then had at most developed a few wrinkles and become richer, but she had not changed as much as Djuli.

Naturally after this there was no doubt about her being a very welcome guest at the "Hork estate", and they had much to tell each other. They shared everything that had happened to them over the years. Djuli even introduced her mother to Pilsu, the Zunzan girl and her childhood friend, whom she had rescued from slavery with the help of the Horks. Mother Muchi remembered Pilsu.

It must be said that although they listened to each other's stories in amazement, Mother Muchi wasn't half as surprised by the Horks, Tila or anything that had happened to Djuli as much as Djuli was that Yana, her still unknown half-sister, had become the Emperor's wife, making Mother Muchi his mother-in-law. Yet the appearance of an elf was a far more astounding event than somebody becoming the Emperor's wife. For while it was rare for a woman to become an empress, ultimately emperors did sometimes get married, but how often did an elf appear?!

Then again, Mother Muchi was in a certain sense still a shaman woman, and so listening to Djuli she only nodded contentedly. "Well well... I predicted this, my girl, that the Fallen Light would come to us! I also predicted that the Fool would emerge and put an end to the turbulence of the Children of Darkness. Though I didn't know that the girl was called Tila and that she belonged to some kind of elf tribe, nor that the Children of Darkness were called Sprites, but everything else I predicted magnificently... And this Kayam you were telling me about is well on the way to becoming the fearsome enemy of the sprites!"

"It's Tila who's said this, not me—I can't judge Kayam's progress..."

"Well yes, but I'm sure Tila knows all about it. I would like to speak with her!"

And so she did. She was very interested in what Elfland was like, and Tila readily reported everything. These stories were also heard by Djuli and Tin, and Djuli was overcome by an intense yearning to see Elfland and all the wonders it contained. She was now beginning to understand Tin, who was willing to give up everything that was human just to become an elf.

Her desire to see Elfland was so powerful that when Mother Muchi mentioned that she should visit the Emperor in the hope that Zor might make her a princess too and bestow great wealth upon her, Djuli just laughed bitterly. "Me, go to Emperor Zor?! What on earth for?! The Emperor means nothing to me, and nor does Atlantua! Please understand, mother, that I am only living here to be near Tila, because I hope that in my lifetime the moment will come when the elves find her, and Tila said that then Elfland will descend here to Earth so that she may return to her own people! And then I... I..." Djuli could not finish her sentence, for she was choked up with tears. Tila immediately gave her a hug and tried to comfort her.

"Do you believe the elves would take you with them?" asked Mother Muchi in amazement.

"No, I have no hope of that. But maybe... if I ask them very nicely... and I hope Tila will say a few words on my behalf... then they might allow me to walk through Elfland before they fly away, so I can see everything there with my own eyes! I wouldn't even mind if I were to die afterwards, as I'll be enriched by an experience that no other human has ever been given. I have no intention of

going to the Emperor, mother, even if I could be some kind of great Lady! I'm not willing to travel far from Tila, in case I miss the moment when Elfland arrives! But I'll tell you another thing... when the elves have left, I still won't go to the Emperor to become a princess or whatever else. Even then I would prefer to live with the Horks, because they respect me..."

"You would be respected by humans too, as a princess!"

"Perhaps. But the Horks *love* me as well!"

"My daughter, you are obviously not a Hork but a human!"

"Yes, but I'm not proud of that at all, and besides, I'm an extremely frustrated and bitter human. I absolutely detest the human race! This is how it is and you can't change it, mother, no matter what you say!"

"Perhaps Tila could cure you of this bitterness."

Djuli shook her head. "Tila isn't capable of that. Even if she was, she's told me countless times that emotions are located in the brain, which she sometimes calls the "central nervous system", and that she's not willing to mess about with that because it's very complex and there's a high probability she could make things worse. It's even forbidden for an elf to do this. Anyhow, I feel that I could cure myself, if what I'm feeling is a disease at all... A few hundred years among the elves should be enough... but when am I going to live a few hundred years?!" she laughed bitterly. "And when would they accept *me* among them?! They might accept Tin because she's already an elf... but not me. So there's no point even talking about it—I belong with the Horks and that's that! Even if they do eat stinky things, they're an honest nation, not malicious hypocrites like humans... They're a bit like us Zunzans were... I feel good around them."

Mother Muchi could not say anything to that.

Somewhat later she said to Djuli, "It is my duty to impart to you the Emperor's message. He has entrusted me with the task that if I find real Horks, I must try to persuade them to be allies against Torgo. I'm telling you this, my daughter, because I can see that you're the chief leader of the Horks."

"I think you already know what my answer is going to be, mother."

"I have an idea, but could you elaborate?"

"Sure. I have no desire to bring my Horks into the petty, meaningless warfare of humans! So they can be destroyed for the sake of human greed?! I don't think so!"

"Generally I would agree with you, my girl, but I must say that Emperor Zor is not like the rumors many people have spread about him. He has legislated many great and wise laws that have eased the fate of slaves as well as women. I'm sure you've heard about these, some of which originated from me, but the Emperor decided to introduce them as he deemed them proper. Plus he has informed me himself, therefore I have it from a reliable source, that he plans to liberate all slaves. Every single one of them! So slavery will be entirely abolished in his empire. But he's only willing to do this if he can occupy Torgo, since Torgo could be dangerous—being a powerful nation—and if he announces the slave liberation law there will be riots in the country. He isn't afraid of this, as he's already made preparations for subduing it. But if Torgo, detecting the advantageous situation, attacks him at the precise time the riots are storming our Empire, then the external attack combined with the internal uprising could easily terminate his imperial lordship. So Torgo must be seized first, and only then can the slaves be liberated."

"My answer is still no, mother. I don't have that many Horks, and they wouldn't be a great force for the Emperor anyway—I can't risk them!"

"I think a Hork is worth at least ten strong soldiers in battle. Plus they have the added benefit of their appearance causing tremendous superstitious terror in their enemies, and as a result could

make an army a hundred times larger retreat! So what I'm saying is that a hundred Horks could force an army of ten thousand men to flee!"

"I think you're greatly exaggerating, although there is certainly some truth to your words. But I still wouldn't risk their lives! The Emperor should solve his conquest issues himself!"

Mother Muchi sighed heavily and took note of her daughters response, which she then sent to the Emperor. She deeply regretted that she could not send a more favorable message, as she was sincerely trying to support Emperor Zor's plans—that's why she got along so well with her son-in-law. She firmly believed that although Emperor Zor's soul was defiled by many dark sins, there was a need for such an emperor in the world, since this sinful man was fighting for honorable and progressive goals, even if it was for selfish reasons. Zor was like a rag—the longer he lived and therefore the more he was used, the dirtier and filthier he became, but the greater the area of the world he would clean!

Muchi strongly believed that for progress to occur we sometimes had to commit great sins. She believed in this so much that she was willing to risk a row with her new-found daughter by speaking directly to leader Dredd about this matter, but it was futile, as Dredd showed no desire to support the Emperor. He told her he only recognized one lord in Heaven or on Earth, and it wasn't even a lord but a lady—not Zor but Djuli! If Djuli were to command or even just ask, he would cut his own throat without hesitation, but if she told him not to then he wouldn't. The Horks would immediately go into battle at Djuli's request, whether it be beside Zor or against him, but if she did not require it of them they would rather stay at home scratching their bellies and sunbathing. All the more so if she insisted they were not to fight!

No matter how persuasively Mother Muchi argued the merits of abolishing slavery, Dredd just grinned and said that it meant nothing to him at all, because he knew enough to see that Horks could never be slaves, and he didn't care about anyone else. Finally he warned Mother Muchi to pass on the message to the Emperor that he should think better of reacting in anger and sending out an army against them, since they were incredible fighters. They had not learned the craft of killing on some scrawny humans but on the horrible monsters the Marid had created on the astral plane, and there was no such thing as a Hork surrendering—they would fight till the death! That's what they were accustomed to doing, so it's possible that even the entire Imperial Army might not be able to defeat them. However if they did, they would suffer such terrible destruction that there would be no hope of the Emperor conquering Torgo, in fact it was more than likely Torgo would conquer Atlantua!

Looking at the Horks, Mother Muchi believed this. They certainly did not appear weak or cowardly!

Things would have remained the same if a chance event had not occurred that fundamentally changed the fate of the world. Such coincidences do happen on occasion. Although let's not exaggerate—it may not have changed the fate of the entire world, but certainly that of the Earth...

It really was a matter of pure coincidence that this conversation between Dredd and Mother Muchi took place just as Kayam was lying down somewhere nearby. He was amusing himself by trying to float six balls above his head, in such a way that they orbited round and round like miniature planets, and not all in the same direction either. Therefore Kayam had heard every word.

When Mother Muchi gave up trying to persuade Dredd and was about to leave, Kayam jumped up and rushed over to her. He asked her how trustworthy the Emperor was, how reliable his assertion that he would eliminate slavery after defeating Torgo. Mother Muchi assured Kayam that it was the Emperor's strong intention, and that he could be absolutely certain of this because the Emperor was incredibly stingy, and anyone could easily see that slavery was not very efficient. Of

course the Emperor would abolish slavery—not because he was a good man but because it was in his basic financial interest!

"Well, it's good to hear that there's finally a clever guy on the throne, which I've been perceiving for some time!" cheered Kayam. "I would be happy if a man like Zor could bring some logic into people's lives, and it really has to start with abolishing slavery!"

"But before he does that he has to create safe conditions, by conquering Torgo," said Mother Muchi, and then asked, "Perhaps you want to help the Emperor with your magic powers?"

"Oh no, I probably wouldn't be enough on my own, at least not until I've learned more, and besides—my work doesn't involve ruling over humans but over sprites! On the other hand, I could design weapons for the Emperor that don't require magic, but would still provide great superiority over any of his enemies!"

"What kind of weapons are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm only willing to divulge this to the Emperor. So the Emperor is to come here, and then I'll show him what it is!"

"You think the Emperor's going to come here? Why don't you go to him?"

"Me?! Me, Kayam, the Great Wizard?! What are you thinking—what's an ordinary emperor compared to me?! He can come here himself if he wants to claim the small droplets of my genius, and I suggest that he is immeasurably polite to me, otherwise I'll immediately perform some terrible magic on him!"

"But what assurance do I have that you really can create a weapon that doesn't require magic? Because I have no doubt that you can do magic, even Tila admitted that, however you weren't talking about magical weapons but weapons without magic!"

"The assurance is Veeya. Ask her!" spat Kayam angrily, and went away.

Mother Muchi did ask Veeya, the girl with Hork eyes, as she had ended up staying with them on the estate. Veeya told Mother Muchi how Kayam had blown up the fortress gate, as well as the soldiers. Mother Muchi thought this over, and finally decided to not only tell the Emperor the bad news—that the Horks were not willing to fight for him—but also try to persuade His Imperial Majesty to come down to where Kayam and the Horks lived, and that he should be very courteous to Kayam because it seemed this crazy genius had indeed invented some weapons that Zor could benefit from.

The Emperor agreed to come, and spoke to Kayam with great respect, which boosted Kayam's ego beyond measure. Kayam prepared some gunpowder for him, demonstrated how it worked and made him privy to the recipe. The Emperor had already decided it had been very worthwhile visiting Kayam, but this was almost nothing, because now Kayam made some drawings for him, showing how he envisioned the effective use of gunpowder, including the cannons he had devised, the rockets, rifles, pistols and even machine guns...

The Emperor listened intently to Kayam, and when he left took the weapon blueprints with him. He suspected the weapons were going to be worth much more than the help of the Horks would have been. Kayam was not afraid to hand over this knowledge to the Emperor, as he already considered himself a great enough wizard to not need to fear some captain like Girlimpay or any other human. He believed he could easily defend himself against humans with the help of magic... in fact even sprites. And his knowledge was developing day by day. Only recently he had come to realize that his wizard abilities were significantly enhanced if he did not utter the magic spells on their own, but with the help of hand gestures. This gunpowder, the rockets and so forth, were just childish toys in his eyes, not really worth more than a few days gratification from the Emperor's amazement.

Of course he had made the Emperor swear that if he conquered Torgo with the help of his discovery, then he would immediately put an end to slavery. He threatened Zor horribly with what he, the Great Kayam, would do to him if the Emperor broke his promise. But the Emperor had no qualms about making this pledge, as he had every intention of liberating the slaves. After all, it would increase the revenue of his treasury! He only informed Kayam that conquering Torgo would take a few years, because all those weapons Kayam had drawn for him had to first be made. Then the Emperor left, and in the days that followed Kayam diligently continued with his practice...

The Emperor soon made arrangements for the production of gunpowder, the first rudimentary cannons and missiles, and later also the manufacture of machine guns, as he had truly efficient organizational skills. He even managed to keep the composition of gunpowder secret throughout his long life. And once he had conquered Torgo he did indeed abolish slavery, keeping his promise to Kayam, even though Kayam had long since forgotten about it and had no intention of checking up on the Emperor. Nevertheless, although the composition of gunpowder remained secret for a long time, its effect did not, since many people had seen and also experienced what this gunpowder could do during the numerous wars. Among them were Zatyí and Gavadj, as well as the five soldiers who had fled the fortress the Horks had seized. It occurred to them that it could be the same material that clerk Getsnappy had blown up the wagon with, and that which had blown open a gap in the fortress gate. This rumor spread everywhere, and since the Emperor did not reveal to anyone the secret of where he had obtained the gunpowder and weapons, it was said that clerk Getsnappy had discovered gunpowder and made it available for the benefit of mankind. Although the term "benefit" was not considered appropriate to some, who believed clerk Getsnappy had brought fatal danger upon the world...

The dubiously beneficial gift of gunpowder wasn't the only thing that Kayam donated to his "beloved" fellow humans; he did something else as well. Just as he had given the gunpowder to the Emperor inspired purely by good intentions—to put an end to slavery—this other gift was also basically born of goodwill, even though it did much more harm than good in the long run.

It all started when Kayam discovered something very interesting. Namely, that certain constellations, stars and even planets could give him the power to execute various types of magic. It is true that the Sun was an obvious source of power, but deep down Kayam was a cautious guy, even if he didn't show it, and he recalled Tila's warning that if he did something wrong involving the Sun then his life could be put into jeopardy. Although the distant stars gave less power, the fact that they were far away meant there was virtually no risk associated with them. At worst they would explode in a boom, and then what? Who would care?!

Kayam realized that if he supplemented his magic circle with various symbols of stars, constellations or planets, then their energy would flow into the circle, which would greatly increase its effectiveness. This was again something that was not used by elves. They had no knowledge of it, simply because Elfland was constantly moving about here and there in the universe, always near different stars, so there was no time or reason to experience the effects of any of them. But Kayam assumed he would live the majority of his life on Earth, so this was very useful knowledge for him. At least for the time being, as it turned out that he was mistaken on this point. He was subsequently transferred to another planet named Tlaxan, however this didn't happen until centuries later.

Shortly after this discovery another epiphany came to him—that it mattered what kind of star symbols he drew into the circle, and even where they were drawn. It was not a good idea to completely fill the circle with these symbols, since every star and planet had a different vibrational frequency. More precisely, they transmitted differing vibrational energy into space, and these varied wavelengths could help by increasing each other's effects, but could also extinguish or at least

weaken each other. Kayam began putting together a big chart of the effect each one had—which one's were "friends" and therefore strengthened each other, and which were "enemies" and weakened the other constellations. He gave the neutrals a zero value, and the others a respective negative or positive value. Initially Kayam drew either many positive or negative symbols in the circle, in order to enhance its effect.

Barely a week had passed however, before he rushed over to Tila enthusiastically. "I've figured it out! I've figured it out!" he cheered.

"What?" asked Tila.

"This!" He pointed at a drawing on a piece of paper. "I have called it a 'talisman accumulator'! Remember you once spoke to me about a force called electricity, which is similar to water in that it flows in the direction where there is more of it rather than where there is less, resulting in negatives and positives... Well, I've done the same thing with talismans!"

"I don't quite understand you."

"My whole problem so far has been that some symbols were blocking out the effect of others, so I was unable to apply them all at once. But now I've solved it!"

"I'm curious to know what your solution is..."

"Look! I draw three circles. The one in the middle is my clausura, which I stand in. In one of the outside circles I draw symbols that strengthen each other. In the other outside circle I draw symbols that although strengthen each other, also weaken the effect of the symbols drawn in the first outside circle. So the negative labeled symbols are put in one circle, and the positive in the other. With a line I connect both circles to the central circle I am in. The power starts to flow into the two outside circles and from these to each other, so that the positive and negative equalize. But they can only do this through my clausura—all the energy will flow through it and I'll be standing in the middle of a raging sea of energy, using all that power to do whatever I like with! And even if I don't use it, it will be flowing around me and protecting me from everything!"

Kayam was so excited about his discovery that he even showed it to Djuli and Veeya, although he knew that these two women did not understand magic at all. Djuli was not very interested in the whole thing, and basically nor was Veeya, but nevertheless she thoughtfully examined the sketch and said, "I've seen some drawings like this somewhere!"

"Where?!" said Kayam, almost offended.

"Not far from us on the beach there's an old ruined church, and it's on one of the walls. Of course I may be mistaken, I don't understand magic, but when I think back I do recall the drawings being similar. I was there when..."

She was not able to finish speaking because Kayam wasn't interested in when Veeya was there, but how he could get there. Veeya explained this to him, and he immediately rushed off in deep despair. He couldn't bare to think that somebody may have already discovered his brilliant idea!

Following the girl's directions, he had found the church easily. However it had been quite journey to get there. Mr. Numo had seen Kayam almost running from the estate, and this had roused his interest. "Where are you going, Kayam?" he asked, stopping him.

"Veeya says there's some old church here in the neighborhood, and I have to go there!"

"What do you mean, 'have to'?" asked Mr. Numo frowning.

"Well, I have to look at its ornamentation, because someone may have stolen my idea!"

Mr. Numo did not ask what the idea was, and for the moment it didn't occur to him how strange Kayam's statement was. The church was obviously built decades before Kayam was born, in fact probably even before the time of his father and mother. How could the builders have stolen the idea

of the yet unborn Kayam?! But Mr. Numo did not start explaining this to Kayam now, and instead said, "I would think twice about going there if I was you!"

"Why? Who's going to forbid me?!" snapped Kayam.

"I don't want to forbid you, but I've heard about that place. I sometimes went there to play as a child, but then I abandoned it because it was evil—those who went there often never returned. At one time people used to carry stones back from the church to build their houses with, but they stopped doing it because lot of strange accidents were happening among the stone miners, and the houses built from these stones were inclined to collapse, causing many deaths. You really should think carefully about whether you want to go there, Kayam!"

"Well now you've piqued my curiosity, so I definitely want to go! In fact I'll stay there until I solve the mystery!"

Kayam suddenly noticed that Numo was holding a bottle of wine in his hand, and he snatched it from him. "Let me take this, because I may be there for awhile and I don't want to get thirsty. Well, I'm off!" he said, and dashed away on foot as he had not learned to ride a horse while he was living on the estate.

The church was located in a place that was truly worthy of it. It was practically a castle, at least one might say it was unusually and unnecessarily large for a church. That it was on the beach was only partially true. Generally most people would think of a beach as a sandy shore, which was fairly flat or at most slightly hilly, but this church was on the very top of an extremely steep cliff that almost dropped vertically into the sea. It must have been a good five hundred meters high. The church stood on its outermost edge, and the height of it was worthy of the cliff on which it was standing, its tower stretching at least a hundred meters from the base.

Kayam sighed as he looked up at the enthroned church of unrivaled height. The thought of climbing the mountain filled him with terror. But it had to be done if he wanted to know what was going on with the church, so he had to plod up there. Once he had decided to go somewhere there was no force that could stop him—he had proven this before when he was in the blizzard. As he made his way up the narrow serpentine path, wiping the sweat from his brow, he decided that as soon as possible he ought to gather enough knowledge to conjure up some kind of flying carpet. One heard so much about these things in fairy tales! Then he would not have to tire himself out to such a degree if he needed to get up high for some reason.

On the way up he grumbled, "You'd have to be stupid to carry stones from here! At least they'd only have to be carried down, but just getting up here is exhausting! It's no wonder they stopped this practice—it was a fool who began doing that! It's not even worth doing with an ox-wagon, because it would be just as grueling for the animals to get up here!"

From below the church seemed completely intact; he had to get closer to see how many stones had been exploited. As far as Kayam could determine, the greatest destruction in the sanctuary was not caused by humans but from some kind of earthquake. The church was not a single building but rather an entire complex of buildings, although from the seashore only the largest of them could be seen, and some had even caved in. The buildings were previously surrounded by wide stone pillars and triumphant arches, many of which had collapsed or were missing large pieces. Kayam figured that the people wouldn't have had to do much demolition here, as they could collect as much as they wanted from the stones that had fallen down. Kayam thought it likely they had left the church because they didn't want to rebuild it after the great destruction of the earthquake.

Interestingly, one of the most impressive sculptures had actually remained totally unscathed. It was at least a hundred and fifty meters long and depicted a massive snake, which coiled around several buildings, its body being used as a fence. Its mouth was wide open with horrible teeth

glinting inside, and it was almost biting its own tail. But not quite—there was a small gap between its tail and jaw that acted as a gate into the main square. Only a few scales had broken off its body, probably due to the earthquake.

Whether that was what had happened or not, Kayam did not particularly care. He was completely untouched by all the columns overgrown with moss, the vine tendrils hanging down from the triumphal arch, and the variation of cozy shady nooks and sunny spaces... everything that would have captured anybody else's attention, or soul, if they were visiting this place. Kayam was a true barbarian where artistic sensibility was concerned, and had a kind of tunnel vision—exclusively concerned with his goal and magic. He literally clomped into the largest tall building, ran across the beautiful carpet of flowers growing in the cracks of the pavement, and entered the gate. He didn't even take stock of the surroundings from this great height, although the view was stunning. The village of Odun could be seen far below, and five ships were flashing their white sails in the distant sea, but Kayam wasn't interested in any of that. Not in the slightest. He had entered this place purely to examine its ornamentation, and only a small section of it at that.

"Let's see if anyone has stolen my idea, and if so, to what extent!" he muttered, searching the place with the narrow observing eyes of a lynx.

Barely had he reached the foyer when he could already see various wall decorations that did in fact resemble the symbols he had invented for the different constellations and planets, although apart from one or two simple figures, none of them were identical to his images. He could not find anything that was the perfect equivalent of his talisman accumulator or even remotely resembled it. Nevertheless, the symbols were placed in some kind of strange system, and Kayam felt as if they were rippling. He only vaguely sensed that there was some system here, but he was not able to formulate what kind of system it was.

In his excitement his mouth became dry. He could feel his skin tingling from the energy in this place, the power almost coming in waves, and he swallowed. This made him notice his dry throat, and he remembered that he had a bottle of wine. He grabbed it and took a swig. The big mountain climb had made him thirsty. After polishing it off he went on, even forgetting to throw away the empty bottle. It swung in his hand as he continued looking at the patterns on the wall.

Before long he noticed that he was basically dealing with two different kinds of ornamentation—the original church decorations that consisted mainly of plant and animal figures as well as some horrible fictional monsters, and another type that was largely geometric patterns resembling Kayam's own symbols. These were more recent decorations than the previous ones, as evidenced by the fact that in many places they were drawn on top of the plant and animal forms, with no regard for having disfigured them. So these were not originally part of the church ornaments, they were made later by someone. Someone who this was important to. Kayam could guess why it was important to them—because it increased their magic power! Of course only if they were nearby, in the church...

Kayam went on further inside, where the shadows were darker. His eyes widened and he breathed deeply from the excitement—just like a bloodhound, bred to trace blood. Now he, Kayam, the Great, the Invincible, would find out who or what had moved into the church. Who dared to deal with magic in this area, where the Wondrous Kayam was operating?!

As he walked on, he noticed that here even the floor was covered with various symbols. There were also circles and squares among these symbols, forming an intricate pattern. "Fractals!" Kayam suddenly exclaimed. "Of course! Oh, how silly of me for not coming up with that earlier!"

It immediately dawned on him how he could increase the efficiency of his talisman accumulator—he would make tiny accumulators that generated small amounts of power, but he would unite them into a larger unit, and those into even larger units, according to the fractal principle...

Whoever had moved into this church had not yet reached that level. They had applied the fractal principle, but not the talisman accumulator. The symbols were combined into fractal units, but not small talisman accumulators. Nonetheless, Kayam felt the magic energy raging intensely in this direction.

Now he slowed down. He was not frightened, but realized that he was being too unguarded. Who knew what other surprises this bizarre place might have in store for him? He was just clomping ahead negligently, however his luck may not hold out for much longer.

He looked ahead. As far as he could tell he was in the main sanctuary of the church. Far in front of him was the altar, depicting a human figure sitting in a lotus position with wings and bullhorns on its head. It was an interesting construction because this bull-horned, winged person was a female figure with rather shapely breasts. On both sides of the altar a giant phallic statue thrust up into the air, one black and the other white. And on the altar itself lay an exquisite gemstone, the size of a fist. Even being modest, it was probably worth as much as a small country!

Kayam had no interest in this, nor did he care about ancient long-forgotten gods, however he was interested in the skeleton that was lying a short distance away from him on the floor. It was a human skeleton, and as his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness he noticed at least eight of them spread about here and there. Strangely, all the skeletons appeared to be lying inside a circle or square-shaped design, and he realized that it was impossible to get to the altar without stepping into one of these.

Kayam was very suspicious, and assumed so much malice from not only his fellow humans but the world itself that he immediately thought this must be a trap. The person who had moved into the church was not at all well-meaning; he liked to murder people, and was not only waiting for someone to come here so he could kill them, he was trying to lure people here, hence the large gem on the altar.

Now all he had to do was decide whether to try and obtain the gem or go home. After all, he had found out what he wanted to know, and it had been beneficial coming here as it had inspired new ideas for increasing the power of his future talismans. Or even if he had no interest in the gem, should he fight whatever force was lurking here, just so that it would no longer destroy people?

Kayam clearly saw three options before him, which he could ultimately narrow down to two—to fight or not fight. He didn't really care about people, nor the gem, but he did find the challenge appealing. As far as he could tell, the power of the force here was not necessarily greater than his, however there was a possibility that things might turn out badly for him. Nevertheless, although he had not yet committed himself to fighting his very first magic battle, a great curiosity arose in him to find out what kind of force he was actually dealing with.

He decided to show his hand, so that the master of the church would at least reveal himself. And this was a clear possibility if he tried to obtain the gem. Not because he was particularly interested in it, but because this was sure to spur its owner into action. Of course, it had to be carried out in such a way that he didn't walk into the trap.

He went out to the yard in search for some small pieces of stone, preferably flat stones, and began to draw various symbols on them with the chalk he always carried on him. When he was done with each one, he carried it into the sanctuary and laid it down directly in front of one of the outermost square traps. As he was coming and going, he noticed that a few ships had docked near the village and that several of the village buildings were burning.

"Pirates!" Kayam grimaced. "People are pursuing their favorite pastime again—killing each other! Oh well, it basically has no relevance to me, because I've got a completely different enemy to deal with right now!" He quickly forgot about the pirates, after all he was quite a safe distance from them, and continued the production of his hastily planned contra-talisman.

When he believed he was sufficiently prepared, he went into the sanctuary, took a deep breath and began implementing his plan. "I'm pretty sure that at least the clausuras containing human corpses are bound to be traps," he thought. "And I can guess what kind... One can go in there, but once in, can't get out again. Haha! But they're not going to fool me!"

He picked up one of the pieces of stone on which his favorite talisman accumulator was drawn, but its middle circle was now so small that he couldn't stand in it. Not that he was planning to. Instead he drew a crown inside it with noble simplicity, since he was the crown of the World! Just to be on the safe side, he drew the same series of symbols on the floor—an enlarged replica of the talisman accumulator—and stood inside the middle circle. He focused on the crown symbol drawn on the piece of stone in his hand being none other than himself, and then threw the stone into the closest circle where a skeleton lay. His thinking was that the talisman made by the opponent wizard should now perceive there being a real person in the circle—Kayam himself! After all, the crown did symbolize him. So it had to swing into action. Only now the crown was supported by an enormous energy force, all flowing into it from the talisman accumulator. Well, he would see what happened...

And indeed he did. Moments after the piece of stone was thrown into the circle, tongues of fire began to flicker within it, which however did not extend beyond the boundary of the circle. The whole thing looked like a pillar of flame. Now Kayam focused on sending commands remotely to his crown-symbol pseudo-self, so that he could attack the flames with counterfire. This caused the wall of fire to roar even more intensely, the red energy violently raging inside the circle, enough to burn any human being to a crisp. Then there was a sudden explosion and the tongues of flame flew in all directions, accompanied by a ferocious cascade of sparks. The circle drawn on the floor had disappeared because there was no longer a floor; it had been destroyed along with the skeleton, although a few of its bones could be found in some of the church's corners where the explosion had blasted them.

In the middle of the hole in the stone floor, Kayam's stone talisman lay intact.

"Yes! I hit the nail on the head! Brilliant!" said Kayam, and walked over to pick it up. "You see, I truly am the greater wizard! It wasn't even such a great trick, and I still defeated his magic circle! I'll just deal with all of them this way, and then..."

At that moment a hiss could be heard from the altar, but it was not a snake that emerged. White globs of mist began to appear in the air, which a few seconds later aggregated into some sort of blurry human form. However his body was not visible from the waist down, there was just a thinning tail that retreated under the altar.

"Aha, a sprite! Excellent! It's about time I actually saw one, rather than just hearing about them!" shouted Kayam contentedly, and quickly jumped back into his own magic circle. Although it was not because he was afraid. The thought that something bad could happen to him now didn't even occur to him. He may have been a little worried up till now, as he had not known who this wizard was that he was fighting, but now that he realized it wasn't a wizard but a sprite, he wasn't worried at all. How could sprites do him any harm when Tila had specifically trained him to be the master of all sprites?! It was his life's purpose and the reason he was born into the world, so it was absolutely impossible and unimaginable for him not to win! In the worst case scenario, the only thing that could happen was for the sprite to escape, but to be defeated by the sprite—well that was

pure fantastical nonsense and simply a mathematical impossibility! For a sprite to defeat the Great Kayam was just as likely as the division of zero!

Nowadays there are relatively few sprites wandering about the world, largely due to Kayam amassing so many of them in the interim, therefore the attributes of sprites are not as widely known as they once were, and only through hearsay and stories told about them. So it may be relevant to mention here that sprites are more or less able to perceive the emotions of humans to some degree, at least there is one emotion they sense particularly well—fear!

Therefore the sprite who was now hovering before Kayam, felt surprised that this human specimen opposite him was not frightened at all, in fact he seemed positively satisfied and even pleased that the sprite had appeared. So far every single human he had revealed himself to had gone into a wild panic, their faces distorted by fear as they tried to escape. But not this one...

This had the sprite, if not frightened, at least worried. "Who are you?!" he shouted at Kayam.

Kayam was not in the least opposed to chatting with this remarkable phenomenon, the first sprite he had met in his life. "I am the Great Kayam, for whose sake the entire Universe was created! The Wonderful and Invincible Kayam, who was born into the world so that you sprites could be forced into humility, submission and service. I'm glad you asked me who I am, because you are to know and remember it forever—that I am Kayam, Lord of the Sprites!"

"What do you mean, 'Lord of the Sprites'?! Are you saying that you're my master?!" he bellowed angrily.

"Well yes, unless perhaps you're not a sprite?" Kayam retorted.

"Of course I am, a sprite from the 'ifrit' cast!"

"Great, then how can you question whether or not I'm your master, you cloud-brained miserable nonentity?! Naturally that's what I am, now that you've confessed to being a sprite! And as your master, I command that you... let's see..." Kayam looked around, his eyes drawn to the empty, unbroken wine bottle he had thrown on the floor. "Yes, that's it! Excellent! I command you to climb into this," he said, pointing at the bottle. "And then I'll take you home and show you to Tila. After that you can come out, but it will be your duty to appear every time I rub the bottle and fulfill all my wishes!"

"What?! *Me*, fulfill *your* wishes, you vile human?!"

"I may be a human, but I'm not vile! In fact I'm a wizard, so I'm not really a true human."

"You really think I'm going to be constantly paying attention to when you rub the bottle, and..."

"What do I care whether you're paying attention or not?! Just do some magic that informs you when I'm rubbing it. The point is to show up immediately and do as I say!"

"Your self-importance truly deserves great punishment! Now I'll ensure that you get what's coming to you!" The sprite did not speak further, but attacked Kayam with a huge bolt of lightning.

Yet it was in vain, as Kayam's magic circle repelled it. It glanced off, bouncing back and forth in the church and wreaking terrible destruction to the wall ornamentation. However this pleased Kayam immensely because he suspected that the more of the sprite's magic patterns were destroyed, the weaker his power became. The sprite could also notice this, which enraged him further, and using a substantially smaller lightning bolt he shattered Kayam's wine bottle into pieces.

"You really shouldn't have done that! Those sorts of things make me rather annoyed, and I would advise a sprite against such rebelliousness!" said Kayam as if he had already captured a great many sprites. With that he began his magic. He threw the stone talisman in his hand, which flew in a circle in the air, surrounding both the altar and the sprite, and in its wake remained a luminous band of light. Kayam gestured with his hand and the band became increasingly narrower, constraining the area the sprite was in.

The sprite could see that this was no joke. He tried to cut a gap in Kayam's power-circle with an even larger bolt of lightning, but the lightning bounced off it and flew back and forth inside the circle containing the sprite, continuously losing energy whenever it bumped into the shining band or the floor. When it hit the floor it destroyed the sprite's magic signs and burned the skeletons to dust.

"Hah! That's fantastic! I love it when you destroy yourself using your own magic power!" Kayam mocked. Then seeing that a free path had opened between him and the altar, he held out his hand, focused intently, and the large diamond on the altar tilted and quickly flew into it. "Well, how about that!" said Kayam. "It's not as if I really need it, but I'd still prefer to side with humans than sprites, and you've trapped humans with this, so I am taking it away from you as your rightful punishment!"

It was not wrong of him to take it as it was undeniable that he had earned the large diamond, but in doing so part of his attention was focused on moving the gem, and during this time he was less concerned with the ring of light holding the sprite captive. The sprite decided to make use of this lapse of concentration, and with a desperate effort he lunged at the ring, broke it and fled from the church.

"Oh, damn it!" cursed Kayam angrily. "I shouldn't pass up this opportunity!" and he rushed after the sprite. In his excitement he forgot that he had stepped out of his magic circle, but for the time being the sprite was far too frightened to think about a counterattack. Even though the sprite was flying quickly, Kayam was also making great strides, and when he arrived at the front of the church he could see that the sprite had reached the area encircled by the large stone serpent.

Kayam had no hope of catching up to the fleeing sprite, since he was flying while Kayam lacked this ability. The sprite had an advantage. Yet Kayam was not someone who gave up easily; he thought fast and his ideas came rapidly. Immediately he noticed that one of the ribs of the stone snake was only two feet away from him. He jumped over, placed his hand on the rib as he focused his attention, and then uttered a few magic spells. A yellow flash ran through the snake's spine in both directions, and the two ends met at the tail and the mouth, creating a new magic circle that was of considerable size. It occupied the entire area, but the main thing was that the sprite was inside of it and he could not leave the place. He could rampage all he wanted in those few hundred square meters, but he could not come out!

It is true that after this Kayam could not enter the area or pass through it, because he would have been trapped within the sprite's destruction zone. If he wanted to get to the winding road that led down the mountain, he would have to stumble through all sorts of untrodden paths surrounding the circle of the stone snake, but he wasn't too bothered by that. He was pleased with himself. No sprite would escape him!

He drew a few magic symbols on the stone snake with his chalk, then tossing the diamond in his hand like a ball, he headed for the top of the winding road. Although he was not really interested in the road itself; he only wanted to gain access to the snake's head and the end of its tail. The circle wasn't properly closed up there, creating a weak point, and if he drew the two poles of the talisman accumulator on the head and tail, that would help keep the sprite in check.

When he reached his destination, he laid the diamond on the ground and then drew the two poles on the aforementioned locations. This caused the yellow band of light on the snake's spine to go out, but it didn't concern Kayam because he knew that the sprite was still trapped—only now the energy keeping him in captivity wasn't flowing above the snake but inside it. He sat down contentedly and leaned back against the stone snake, sighing with relief. Now he no longer had to maintain his concentration, as his beloved talisman accumulator was holding the sprite captive, and he had plenty of time to calmly figure out how to proceed. Since the plan had only been half

successful—the sprite was captured, but in a rather large space, and for the time being he was not prepared to fulfill his wishes...

Kayam sat there for at least an hour, and had never been so satisfied in his life. He had captured his very first sprite! Occasionally he would feel the ground tremble, indicating that the sprite was trying to break out of the circle, but he knew that it wouldn't succeed. Kayam just remained where he was, sitting cross-legged with his arms folded and smiling peacefully like a statue of Buddha. Although at that time Buddha did not exist yet. Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, was born many thousands of years after Kayam. Still, Kayam did very much resemble a Buddah statue. This serene image was not even disturbed by the sprite's sporadic intrusion, for in the strong sunlight he only emerged if he was right near Kayam, otherwise he was not visible. As time went on he stopped struggling and took a rest somewhere, most likely to consider his options.

"How pleased Tila will be when I tell her I've defeated my first sprite!" Kayam thought, his serene smile slowly becoming a smug grin. "She'll shower me with praise! Well I suppose it wasn't unexpected coming from me, since I am the Great Kayam! All I have to do now is figure out how to constrain the little bugger into a smaller space, and how to get him to serve me... And then, yes, then I will most definitely receive high praise from Tila! I'm sure it won't take me long to come up with a good plan!"

Perhaps Kayam would have eventually figured it out, but unfortunately everything turned out quite differently, even with regards to Tila's praise. It must be acknowledged, however, that even if Kayam was to blame for the events to come, it was not entirely his fault but to a large extent that of humans.

Kayam had been sitting there for a good while, and slowly the pleasure of complacency began to wear off. He was just thinking about what he should do with the sprite now when he heard footsteps on the road. A group of at least forty men appeared before Kayam; a ragged, tough-looking mob with wide sabers, daggers and knives. They were rather dirty, and some of them had torn clothing and were bloody from seemingly recent injuries. There was no doubt they were pirates, this was obvious at a glance—even to Kayam, who had no interest in people these days, now that all his attention was focused on the world of sprites and magic in general. The pirates had probably decided to rob the church, which did not seem ruined at all from down below.

Now that they were up here of course, they realized it was a very ruined building indeed, yet they had no intention of leaving because they spotted something else, something very valuable—the diamond at Kayam's feet. "Whoa, now this is what I call booty! Go ahead, boys!" shouted the pirate's captain.

It's possible that he wasn't the captain, just the leader of the group, but Kayam wasn't interested in that as much as the knives that were swinging past his ears. The leader noticed this and shouted, "Don't kill him, you morons! He's alone, he can't hurt us... We'll capture him and sell him as a slave instead!"

Kayam jumped up. "What?! Sell me, Kayam the mighty wizard, as a slave?!" he cried. "I don't think so, pals!" He bent down and drew a magic circle around him with a piece of stone he had quickly picked up, although he did not have time to piffle about drawing the talisman accumulator, so just to be on the safe side he drew in the symbol for the planet Jupiter. Jupiter was a nice big planet and it would provide a reasonable amount of power. He also picked the diamond up from the ground.

Suddenly a hellish idea came to him. "Do you want this then, this thing I've got here? Well you'll never get it!" And with a swift motion he threw it between the head and tail of the stone snake, into the space he knew the sprite was lurking somewhere.

The pirates were getting quite close, but for the moment none of them were interested in Kayam, only the diamond. They knew that their captain would give whoever found it a bigger share of the loot. All of them rushed after it, raising neither a hand nor a sword at Kayam, since they figured they would capture him alive after finding the diamond. So it had not been necessary for Kayam to create a clausura around himself after all. But he couldn't have known this ahead of time.

As the pirates ran into the circular space, Kayam watched, curious as to what their fate would be. Now he saw it. Within seconds the sprite appeared; not in the distance but right beside the entrance, so the pirates could not escape. And this was a very angry sprite. Because of Kayam he hated humans with a passion. He knew he was in captivity and was pleased to be able to let off some steam. He blew onto the closest pirate, however it wasn't some gentle breeze that emanated from him but a raging storm of fire, leaving nothing except a handful of ashes. The other pirates began screaming and ran off in various directions, no longer caring about the diamond, but it was futile because the sprite was a lot faster and within two minutes they were all dead.

"Huh! You had it coming to you, you dirty pigs! You insolent, slimy worms! You think you can get away with messing with me, hey?!" cheered Kayam, jumping up and down and rubbing his hands together in delight. "I certainly showed them, yes I did! Now I gave them what they deserved! I really got them good!"

Then his attention drifted towards the sea, where the pirate ships were still docked and a few houses remained burning, and he began to mutter, "Well I was planning to save people from this sprite, but if humans are going to be such sordid garbage and continue to taunt me... then fine, I'll just have to set the sprite on them! At least on the pirates. I already know what I'm going to do with this ifrit!" He grabbed his stone talisman and threw it into the middle of the space the sprite was trapped in. Then he uttered a few magic spells and focused his concentration, causing a bright circle to radiate from the talisman, which in obedience to Kayam's will grew increasingly larger. The sprite could no longer move across the whole area, only in a ring-shaped space between the stone snake and the new magic circle.

Eventually the inner circle expanded so much that the sprite had nowhere to hide, as the entire space was filled by Kayam's magic circle, and thus as a last refuge he was forced to climb into the stone snake itself. The fact that it was made of stone did not matter, because sprites were able to infiltrate solid objects. He was not able to get out of the snake sculpture, but using this method Kayam couldn't lock him into any tighter a prison, because his inner magic circle could not penetrate the stone. Nevertheless, the sprite was already quite terrified, and in a squeaky voice began to plead with Kayam to have mercy on him and let him go.

"Not a chance!" laughed Kayam. "This is how things should be... My name is Kayam, not Stupid! If you don't want to serve me then fine, don't, but you'll be imprisoned forever! Or at least until this sculpture has completely crumbled, which will take an exorbitantly long time, because I can see it's made of particularly robust material—it's as hard as rock!"

With that he began working diligently, drawing numerous magic symbols onto various places of the stone snake, on both the outside and inside surfaces. Then he eliminated the inner magic circle. He no longer had a need for it, as the sprite was now well and truly locked inside the stone snake. Kayam carried out further magic, resulting in some of the snake's joints becoming movable. The sprite immediately took advantage of this and tried to swat Kayam by moving the snake. But Kayam managed to jump into his magic circle in time, where the several-ton stone monster could not harm him.

"Your attempts are futile with me, and I can see that you're already quite tired!" he laughed. "But may I make a suggestion? Everything is easier in water, even movement, because any object

that's immersed in water loses as much weight as the water it displaces. Well, the sea is just over there... why don't you jump into that and go and live there! You will remain in this statue until I can figure out how to force you to serve me! Then I will find you. So don't even hope for an escape!"

The sprite roared wildly, but he could see that he was completely helpless, so he slid to the edge of the cliff and plunged five hundred-meters down into the sea. He hit the water with a tremendous crash and was instantly submerged, however the sprite thrashed about with the snake's tail until he floated back up to the surface. Right away he began swimming toward the pirate ships, for his hatred of humans gave him an urge to kill them. Kayam assumed this would happen, and he gratifyingly watched from the height of the church as the sea snake ruthlessly destroyed all the ships.

When the snake was done with the ships it crawled up onto the mainland, but soon realized that this damned wizard called Kayam was right, as it really was much easier to move in the water. So he changed his mind and slid back into the sea, then disappeared into the distance to search for other ships he could destroy.

Kayam was extremely pleased with his accomplishment. He found the diamond, and with a joyous smile on his face headed down the mountain whistling, to tell Tila of his great feat. Although it wasn't long before he discovered that his heroic deed was not really appreciated, and instead of praise he was thoroughly reprimanded.

"Do you realize what you've done, Kayam?!" snapped Tila immediately.

"Of course, I've purged the ruined church of a sprite and saved the villagers from the pirates!"

"No, damn it, you've unleashed a monster into the world! From now on no ship will be safe at sea because they'll be afraid of the sea snake!"

"Well I still saved the village, didn't I?!"

"Perhaps, but you've still caused a lot of trouble for them, because the ships that were destroyed by the snake may have contained a great many prisoners who were inhabitants of Odun, as well as prisoners from other villages, and now all of them have been destroyed! And anyway, I was thinking of all the other ships that will be sent to the bottom of the sea by the sea snake. Only a small fraction of these will be pirate ships. The majority of them will contain quite ordinary, innocent sailors! You've done a lot more harm than good, Kayam!"

Kayam stumbled off with a gloomy expression. This was truly not what he had expected after his "heroic deed". He would have liked to go after the sprite in order to fight him again and lock him up somewhere else, but he had no idea which direction he had swum off to. However for Kayam this only meant that his desire to find a sprite whom he could have total rule over was increased.

Kayam's desire was soon fulfilled, and this time coincidence didn't play the slightest role. Because it cannot be denied, and Kayam also had to acknowledge, that it was basically a coincidence that he happened to be near the first sprite who he had locked into the snake sculpture. And in a sense Kayam had squandered this opportunity, because he had only come close to capturing it. Whereas the sprite that he actually attained was entirely due to his own genius. And to a certain degree Tin's...

At this time it was well into summer, and Kayam had been complaining to Tila for weeks now that it was a pity sprites were such a rarity in the world, as he simply had no way of trying out his knowledge on them. What a great shame that there weren't sprites in every village, in fact on every street corner!

"You really are a fool, Kayam! Sprites may not be as common as blades of grass, but I wouldn't say they're a rarity!" replied Tila. "As far as I am concerned, the fewer there are the better! I dread

what will happen if the marid returns whom Djuli fought with. Because you can take my word for it that he has not gone far! And I dare not leave Tin alone, because she's incapable of defending herself. She can't do as much as me, and even if she could she wouldn't, because she's much more of an elf than I am!"

"I wouldn't mind one bit if the marid showed up, because I can't wait to force him into my service!"

"Don't be crazy, Kayam, you're not powerful enough to fight him yet! Just be glad that the marid hasn't noticed you, because if he does you're finished!"

"But you're wrong, Tila, because you recently told me that you've taught me everything you know, except for those things I'm incapable of learning, such as generating light clothing. Theoretically that's impossible for me, since I'm not an elf."

"Yes Kayam, that is true, and now it's up to you to determine what kind of wizard you will be, because I really have taught you all that I know. But don't forget these three technicalities... One—that I truly am just a child elf, so I only know a small portion of elf magic, most of which is fairly inconsequential. Two—that the things I have taught you are not yet ingrained in you at a skilled level. You only know them in theory, not in practice, because you haven't had time to practice them. And three—none of this magic is suitable against sprites!"

"This is all true, Tila, but you're forgetting that I've come up with a lot of extraordinary magic on my own, which you hadn't the faintest idea about before. You even admitted it, and in my humble opinion even your esteemed Great Elders haven't heard about what I can boldly call the Brilliant Ideas of Kayam! And they are indeed suitable against sprites, as I proved with my first sprite! Okay, okay, I admit that I dealt with it in a rather amateurish manner, and to be honest I let it go to waste, I can see that now. But it won't be a loss if I get a flying carpet—then I can search for it while I fly above the sea, and I'll capture it! Besides, the sprite wasn't even able to defeat me, in fact I actually won, because I imprisoned him by making him live inside the body of a stone snake. His fate was essentially like having to wear a heavy stone suit, so he certainly can't fly around anymore! At least three months have passed since then, and I've improved significantly in terms of practice and experimenting with new methods. I learned a great deal from the last incident too. The issue now, Tila, is that my further development in regard to sprites is being held back because there are no sprites to experiment on. I need to observe what their capabilities are, and what kinds of things I can do to them. Ideally I would need a few sprites, but at least one, and I can't even find that! Tell me, Tila, where do these things hang out?! It's your duty as a teacher to help me, because you have to admit that if I never get a chance to acquire any sprites, then it's absolutely impossible for me to master the magic against these creatures!"

Tila grimaced. She considered it a perverse idea for someone to not just fail to steer clear of the sprites but even seek out the company of these murderous beasts! But that was Kayam, and if she thought about it it was a good thing he was like this, since it benefited the elves for Kayam to create such a fierce hunting dog impression. Let him go after the sprites, don't give them a moment's peace!

Tila was very expressive when she grimaced; her sensitive nostrils moved gracefully. But her response was not as charming as her facial expression. "Kayam, you know I'd rather do anything other than protect the sprites, but all I can tell you is that a sprite can appear or disappear anywhere as they please. At best you might stumble upon them by accident, unless you can figure out a way to lure them to you. But I don't know how you would do this, and to tell you the truth I'm not very keen on the idea. Because it is possible that you'll attract more than one sprite, and if they join forces against you you'll be in real trouble! Even if only a single sprite comes, it could still be a

problem if it's not a weak sprite like your previous ifrit, but let's say a marid, because don't forget that you cannot go up into the astral plane to fight him!"

"Who cares about the astral plane?! I live in reality, and besides, I don't want to kill the sprites but capture them, and I don't believe I could do this on the astral plane. The astral plane may be a pleasant game, but I don't want to possess them in my imagination, I want to do it in practice! Anyway... I already have an idea as to how the sprites can be lured here."

"Before you say anything else, I kindly ask you, Kayam, that if you are going to start luring sprites, I want you to tell me well in advance so that I can make sure I'm very far away from you, okay?! Is that alright?! I don't care if you consider me a coward, but I'm simply terrified of them, they scare me senseless, so..."

"Okay, fine, of course I don't want to put women at risk... me Kayam, the Hero, the Great, the Strong, the Man! Me, the Warrior! The Lord of the Sprites! I'm not going to endanger such amateur wizards as the elves!"

"You truly are impudent, aren't you? I wasn't even aware of what this word meant before I started living here among humans, but being around you makes it impossible not to learn its meaning!"

"Listen Tila, in my own way I'm grateful to you for teaching me, but if I dare to fight a sprite and you don't, then you can't deny that I'm the greater wizard of us both!"

"Not necessarily! It could also be that you're an inferior wizard, only more reckless, audacious and overhasty, and that you are heading toward a wall of dangers you're not even aware of!"

"Well I think otherwise! And I believe I know how to lure a few sprites here!"

"I fear I'm about to hear some stupid nonsense, but let's hear it anyway, because I can see that you're not going to calm down until you've told me!"

"I know the perfect bait that would make these 'sprite-fish' bite!"

"Tell me, what is it?"

"Not *what*, but *who*. Tin," replied Kayam calmly.

"Whaaaat????!!!" cried Tila, her face paling.

"What are you so surprised about, my little elf? You yourself said that you didn't dare to leave her alone, because if the marid came she would be defenseless. Although I think it's futile for you to be with her since you couldn't do anything to help her!"

"But I could, now that I know how Djuli defeated him, and..."

"Oh, you poor thing—the naivety of you elves is unrivaled... truly unprecedented and inimitable! Djuli once surprised the marid with my Horks, but if the marid comes again, rest assured that he'll be prepared for this ruse, as the only reason he would dare to reappear is because he's figured out a way to defeat the Horks! So you don't stand a chance, in fact neither of you do. *I'm* the only one who stands a chance, because I've figured out a bunch of good tricks that the sprite couldn't even dream of!"

"Kayam, I'm amazed that you have the cheek to endanger an innocent child, this lovely little girl!" Tila caressed Tin's head, as she was right there with her and had heard every word. It was generally rare for Tin to move more than a few steps away from Tila.

"But there won't be any danger... that is to say, I very much hope the danger will be enormous, so great that no words could describe it, but not for Tin—for the sprites!"

"You talk as though you don't entrust the fight to such a weak woman as I. But you entrust it to Tin! Well that's nice!"

"I'm certainly not expecting Tin to fight! I'll do that myself! She's only required as bait!"

"I won't allow it! A fisherman may catch fish with bait and a hook, but most of the time the bait worm is more or less destroyed!"

"Just hear me out, Tila, you don't even know what I'm planning yet!"

"No! Tin will not be your bait, and neither will I!"

"You don't need to be—you wouldn't make good bait anyway! Tin is suitable because she's still a young elf, a tender appetizing morsel so to speak..."

"I'm a young elf too!"

"Sure, but the sprites might guess that you know something about magic. Tin on the other hand radiates innocence from miles away. And that's precisely what I need! Chiefly because you told me I should be careful not to fight with powerful sprites like the marids, so it's probably the less powerful sprites that will want to taste Tin, as they're not afraid of her. And then I'll pounce on them! Think about it Tila, this way I could gather a great many sprites who have probably eaten a lot of elf children similar to Tin, and are likely to continue eating them in the future! There will be no danger to Tin because I've got it all figured out!"

"How?" asked Tin.

"I won't allow it!" said Tila.

"Just let him tell us!" Tin urged.

"I can't let him, because I'm afraid that with his talented speaking skills he'll persuade you to become bait, and I would not be able to look into the eyes of the Great Elders if I have to confess that it was my fault you were killed! Don't let Kayam take you in with his smooth-talking, because we may debate about which of us is the greater wizard, but there isn't the slightest doubt that this Kayam is a totally selfish guy, who without hesitation is able to put anybody at great risk when it comes to achieving his own goals! Tin, despite the fact that you're still just a little girl, surely you've learned enough about Kayam to recognize that selflessness is a capability he lacks entirely, in fact he doesn't even know what it is! Even if he does something good for others, it's not purely out of altruism but because he hopes he'll be praised and glorified... because he has such a huge desire for validation. So you can't trust him, that would be a fatal mistake!"

"But Tila, even if I am just a child, I have enough sense to notice this quality in Kayam, in fact I've known it for a long time. If I agree to what he expects of me, you can be sure that I won't be doing it for his sake but because this immoral, selfish Kayam is basically right, and you know it—the sprites have eaten lots of elf children and will continue to eat them if they can! You admitted it too. If a sprite comes up to me and wants to eat me, you can't really feel sorry for him for wanting to snack on an elf. He would deserve his fate. I just want Kayam to promise that he won't kill the sprite under any circumstances. To me, to an elf, it would be unworthy to help destroy anything that's living, even a murdering sprite! But I have no objection at all to Kayam just capturing them, because the sprite he catches will no longer be able to destroy elves! I'm sure Kayam is about to tell us an idea which combines his genius with foolishness, and he'll use all his eloquence to prove that it's not dangerous for me, even though it really is. But if it's not too dangerous I'll agree to it, because I'm convinced that I could save the lives of many elves without any need for killing. I really hope this will be appreciated by the Great Elders when they come for you, Tila, and that they'll consider it a merit to me so I'll have a greater chance of being accepted into Elfland. And before you say anything, be aware that I'm honestly prepared to risk my life for the sake of being an elf, and you can't doubt me since so far I have lived a life worthy of an elf. Kayam really doesn't have much of a role in this!" Without even waiting for Tila's response, she looked at Kayam with a smile. "Let's hear what your plan is, but first you must swear that you won't kill the sprites!"

"I swear it, although it's completely superfluous because I've told you countless times already that I have no intention of killing the sprites. I don't need to kill them, I just want them to serve me! My plan is very simple. Tila has shown me some crystals that originated from Elfland. If she could give me at least one... and I don't even need to touch it because I know that she's very protective of them—she just has to give it to you, Tin. Keep it close to your body, for instance on a necklace. Then we'll go to a clearing someplace far away from here. Tila shouldn't be anywhere nearby, because apart from the fact that she wouldn't like this, there's no need for the sprites to see another greater elf. You'll sit down nicely in the middle of a magic circle I created, which will basically be a very carefully prepared talisman accumulator. Yet it won't be functioning yet. I'll prepare it to be almost ready, with only a small part of one line missing. But I'll be squatting beside it the whole time. And then when the sprite arrives, that is, when we see the sprite appear and come towards you, you'll notice it and do what is completely expected in this situation—you'll try to escape, obviously in the opposite direction of the sprite! The sprite won't be surprised by this at all, and will of course immediately go after you, but in doing so he will have to cross the border of the magic circle you've been sitting in. The moment he enters the circle—which as I said before, will not yet be functional—I will draw in the last line, ensuring that he won't be able to get out. You on the other hand will be able to. You're likely to already be out by this point, but even if you aren't, it won't be an issue because I'll prepare the magic circle in such a way that you can get out of it but not the sprites. Nothing can go wrong, for I'm very confident that you, a young little elf, will look like a very desirable snack, especially with the crystal of Elfland around your neck and with no older elves in the vicinity to protect you..."

"Older my ass! I'm still a child elf!" grumbled Tila in a surprisingly human manner.

"The sprite won't be afraid of me because he'll just see me as an ordinary human!" said Kayam, continuing to persuade Tin and paying no attention to Tila.

"And what happens if Tin can't escape the magic circle in time?!" asked Tila.

"Why wouldn't she be able to?"

"Because a sprite is very fast. It's quite conceivable that Tin won't notice it in time, and the sprite will catch her..."

"Well, in any case, Tin can be comforted by the knowledge that I've locked the sprite into the magic circle, so he won't get away with his deed," shrugged Kayam. "Besides, we'll be paying close attention!"

"And by this you're saying that there's no risk?!"

"All right, there is some risk, but I consider it relatively low!" replied Kayam.

"Yeah, because you're not the one taking the risk!" Tila muttered.

"I agree to it," said Tin, "but only on one condition. Since I don't have eyes on my back, Kayam has to create a magical protective line behind me so that the sprite can't enter the circle from that side. This will guarantee that I notice him if he appears, because he can only attack from the front. But this line has to be made so that I can easily step over it. If Kayam can do this, then we can go ahead!"

"I hope this lunatic isn't able to do it..." said Tila.

"Well I'm not really capable of it just yet, but I'll experiment with it over the next few days," responded Kayam confidently.

And so he did. As soon as the trap had been set up on the clearing, he informed Tin. Tila went out there too, although she did not want to stay for the duration of the experiment. As far as she could she checked Kayam's construction, however she was discouraged to find she did not even understand half of what Kayam had done. According to Tila, Kayam had such a strange and

perverse way of thinking that she was simply unable to follow it. It was not as if Kayam was hiding anything from her, in fact he had previously reported all his discoveries to Tila, simply because his vanity did not allow him to stifle them. But now Kayam was uniting these partial results into such complex constructions that Tila could not take stock of it. She could grasp why he had included the symbol of the star, which nowadays was called 'Epsilon Eridani', as well as the one called 'Tau Ceti', but there were also many other symbols that Kayam had apparently invented for this special occasion. He explained to Tila that this was the first time in his life he had seriously implemented the principle of fractal organization. He solemnly pointed at a line between the three circles, which had about ten centimeters missing. This was the key to the whole thing, and if he made a connection here the whole trap would spring into action!

With great suspicion Tila observed a fourth circle that also lacked a connection to the construction, and paraded in its middle was the symbol of the Sun. "What's that for?" she asked sternly.

"Well... to account for every contingency," Kayam shrugged. "But I basically have no intention whatsoever of turning it on, so don't worry! It's just that if the sprite was particularly powerful, you understand... and even then, I have every confidence that there won't be any problems because I've meticulously organized everything!"

"And if there are?!"

"Calm down, if the worst case happens and the sun explodes, then the sprite still wouldn't get away with it because he'll be destroyed along with us!"

"Thanks, that's not much of a consolation to me!"

"Not to him either! And anyway, I don't believe it would explode. After all, I didn't use any solar activity-enhancing magic. In the worst case the Earth will simply evaporate and the Sun will be depleted due to all its energy flowing here, cooling and collapsing into a sort of 'brown dwarf'. So there's no need to fret about that—it won't explode!"

"You really are a fool, Kayam!" replied Tila angrily, and walked off seeing there was nothing she could do.

It was useless talking to Kayam as all her arguments fell flat on him, and he would implement his idea at some point regardless. Unfortunately Kayam was a child who had been given an unnecessarily large amount of power. It was like handing one of Kayam's invented pistols to a baby! But that was just it—she had no other choice! The world needed Kayam to fight against the sprites. She could only hope that Kayam would not commit some catastrophic folly.

Kayam turned out to be right, however. Everything went smoothly, at least relatively smoothly...

Tin sat inside the magic circle and Kayam crouched down beside the line. Tila left in great haste because although she was burning with shame, she had to admit to herself that she felt incredibly afraid. In fact, terrified! It was astonishing to have to acknowledge that the tiny little Tin was braver than her. It wasn't Kayam who was the bravest. He wasn't brave at all, simply crazy, and had no idea what kind of power he was playing with. It is not courageous to take on danger when one isn't aware of the danger and how great it is. But Tin was very well aware, and yet she was still prepared to take it on!

As Tila was considering that perhaps she should stand in the circle herself to wait for a sprite to appear, sweat began beading on her forehead, and even on her back. She attempted to make a quick getaway, trusting that she would have plenty of time for this, since it seemed unlikely that a sprite would appear right at the very beginning. However she had barely taken twenty or thirty steps towards home when she heard Tin cry out, "There's one here already!"

Tila turned around and saw Tin running across the magic circle. Kayam made some small movement with his hand—probably drawing the line in, after which an intricate pattern of light appeared in the air above the lines drawn on the ground. Tila's jaw dropped in amazement as she watched, for the light pattern was eerily similar to the web of light that had appeared in Elfland at the Gate Opening. As to what the light pattern signified, Tila did not know. The Gate Openings were always organized and directed by the Great Elders, who were naturally aware of its significance and importance. And now in catching the sprite, Kayam was producing a very similar light pattern. It was on a smaller scale of course, but the intensity of light rivaled that which had flowed in the Circle at the memorable gate opening when Tila had fallen out of Elfland. This was astounding. Kayam already possessed a level of strength, energy and power that came close to that of the Great Elders?! And all this after a mere six months of training?! What would he be capable of later on?!

One thing was certain—it looked like the sprites were really going to get it now! Tila had always been sure that if one of the Great Elders decided to apply destructive magic against the sprites, they would have been in trouble long ago. It seemed very much that Kayam either possessed such power already, or if not, then he would reach that level very soon. Tila gave herself a pat on the back in her mind. She had done remarkable work, because in a sense she had managed to drive a Great Elder against the sprites!

Kayam was observing the dark swirls behind the streaks of light so calmly that Tila was sure everything was going well, and that the sprite was unable to break out. This gave her the irresistible desire to not run away in cowardice, but on the contrary sneak closer so that she could finally see a real sprite at close quarters while in perfect safety, like a dangerous beast locked in a cage. Yet she felt disappointed as she stepped closer. Behind the complex energy grid she could only see some formless dark mass rolling about.

"It was a great success, Tila!" declared Kayam confidently. "This is certainly a marid, although not one of the most powerful, it seems. I already suspected that marids are not equally powerful, but you may be right in saying that they are the most powerful of the sprites. It's not true, however, that every marid is exceedingly powerful. Still, it turned out to be even more successful than I anticipated, as I'm certain there's not just one marid locked in here but three!"

"How can you tell?!" said Tila surprised.

"Well, I can see them!"

"I don't see anything!"

"There is a way we can easily verify this!" And with that Kayam took a small wooden board out of his clothing that had barely visible tiny symbols drawn onto it, and threw it into the sprite trap. At that moment arcs of energy shot into the air from the wooden board, dividing the prison into two segments, and in each one the swirl of grayish black could be seen. "What you're seeing, Tila, is just a likeness," explained Kayam. "These three marids aren't really black."

"Right, so I'm color blind..." muttered Tila.

"No. They're actually white, but unfortunately the energy used in my trap alters the colors to the opposite spectrum. However I do think there's another marid in here!" Kayam threw another board into the trap, dividing it into three sections, and there was indeed a marid in each of them!

"What happens to the marids now?" asked Tila.

Kayam did not have time to answer her, for suddenly there was a terrified shriek, and when they turned around they saw little Tin screaming. A sprite had appeared almost ten meters away from her. This one was not as formless as those in the trap, but more like the one Kayam had locked into the stone snake. It must be an ifrit, not a marid. In any case, there was little doubt that he was eager to bite Tin.

Tila again felt an irresistible urge to run away, but at the same time it occurred to her that she couldn't let Tin down, who now had no magic circle to escape from. She decided she would try to throw the sprite into the astral plane and fight with him there using Djuli's method, that is if the sprite didn't yet know of this trick.

She was about to prepare for this when another four sprites appeared around Tin, not all of them ifrits, although Tila was not experienced in identifying sprite types. Nor was Kayam for that matter, at least not for the time being. In any case, Tila soon realized that she may be able to fight one sprite on the astral plane, but not five! She would never be able to throw that many up there, and even if just one remained here the whole thing would be worthless, because that one sprite would eat Tin!

But it turned out she didn't even have to act, since Kayam was shouting at her, "Escape, Tila! Run! Quickly!" He displayed surprising courage, for although he was also running it was towards Tin, and he caught the little girl as he rushed to the edge of the clearing. This spurred Tila into action, despite knowing very well that she was unable to run as fast as the sprites. She could only hope that the sprites went after Tin and Kayam, not after her.

The sprites were not stupid and stirred rather quickly. Only four of them went after Kayam and Tin, leaving a formless red blob quivering after Tila, which she instinctively considered particularly dangerous. Tila pelted along, and oddly the sprite wasn't able to fly with much greater speed than she was running, yet he was still somewhat faster and was gaining on her. Just as Tila reached the edge of the clearing, she stumbled into something and fell over. Beyond her awareness the same throat-tightening terror she experienced when encountering the marid overcame her, although in spite of this she was still compelled to scream as loud as she could. The fallen leaves that had filled her mouth muffled her cry.

The tumble had left her lying sprawled facing the clearing, and as she looked ahead she experienced something extraordinary. Across the other side, Kayam appeared from among the trees carrying Tin, and without any consideration he threw her to the ground, crouched down and fumbled about with something... In the next moment a pattern of light began shining around the entire clearing and up towards the sky, similar to the one above the sprite trap in the center, only much bigger.

Kayam jumped up and began to gambol frantically. "Aha! I did it! I showed them, I certainly did! Hihhi! Now they got what they deserve! They wanted to thwart me, the mighty Kayam?! Well there'll be none of that! I have far greater intellect and cunning than these vapor-brained creatures! Take note that I am Kayam, Lord of the Sprites, and you shall never escape me!" he declared, shaking his finger at the captive sprites.

Tila stood up, spitting angrily to clear her mouth of the rotten leaves, and trudged over to Kayam. She looked at Tin to see whether she was injured, but other than being in shock there was nothing wrong with her.

"How did you do that?" Tila asked Kayam.

"Simple! As a precaution I was anticipating that another sprite might appear when the trap was already occupied, and I decided that to be on the safe side I'd create a second, external trap around the entire clearing!"

"I didn't even notice it."

"That's because I didn't show it to you. But don't think I was being deliberately secretive, it just slipped my mind! Anyway, I really didn't expect this many sprites... it truly has been a lucky day! There are all sorts here, plenty to experiment with! It seems that Tin is very appealing to the sprites with the crystal around her neck—a real gourmet treat, and they flock to her like flies to a carcass!"

"You have such charming analogies," grumbled Tila, somewhat less enthusiastic than Kayam, for all she could think about was when the red sprite was chasing her and that she had almost peed herself in terror.

Now Tin turned to Kayam. "Well thanks for saving me and not leaving me in the circle with the sprites!"

"Of course I saved you! It's only natural, since if I had not done so I wouldn't have such a fail-safe sprite bait as you for next time! I would have been a fool to allow the sprites to eat you! How could I be capable of such wastefulness!"

"How infinitely kind you are, Kayam. I adore your selfless way of thinking..." muttered Tila, then said to Tin, "That's enough sprites for today, because I don't think Kayam has any further magic circles! Give me the crystal—it's likely that I, being old and senile, am not quite as tasty to them!"

Tin gave the crystal to Tila without a word, because she had also been frightened enough for one day. "I don't think I want to be bait again for a while," she said to Kayam.

This didn't bother Kayam, and it didn't even occur to him to thank Tin for her help. He was just excited about how many sprites he had in his possession.

"But they're still just prisoners—once the magic circle is destroyed they'll run away!" Tila warned him.

"It's alright, I've already decided on their fate," said Kayam.

"And what's that?"

"You said that our present world is nothing more than condensed thought..."

"I said that about matter."

"Yes. However it occurs to me that these sprites seem like rather insubstantial chaps."

"But you *have* gathered quite a few of them now!"

"I meant their consistency, their body, not their 'population density'! I will condense a part of their body into solid matter, and then I'll incorporate it into this ring!" He pointed at a large bronze ring on his finger. "This means that part of their body will permanently be tied to this ring. When I rub or tap the ring they'll feel it. I'll tell them that if I rub or tap it a particular way this will call a particular sprite, and if I tap it differently I'll be calling another sprite, and so on. Then they must appear before me!"

"But why would they?"

"Because if they don't do it I'll start torturing the ring, and because part of their body is built in to it, they'll feel it and it will cause them great pain!"

"But Kayam, if you let them out they'll immediately kill you! You can't stand in the clausura for the rest of your life!"

"That's true. However I prepared this ring in such a way that if I die the ring will be destroyed as well, which means the sprites connected to it will also die. And I'm sure the sprites won't want to commit suicide! Hahaha! So you can both go home now—I'll take care of the rest. It shouldn't be too difficult, and soon I'll have eight sprites at my disposal! Oh, what luck! Well it's not actually luck at all, it's knowledge, the result of my inherent crystallized genius!"

And within a few hours Kayam had achieved what he wanted—he had tethered the sprites to the ring, although one of them refused to serve him in this way. This made Kayam angry, so he asked Mr. Numo for a bottle, locked the disobedient sprite inside so he could not get out, and put a magic seal on the bottle's mouth, telling the sprite that he would stay in there until he came to his senses.

Kayam was pleased with himself beyond measure.

Chapter 16: The Liberation of the Elf Queen

After her brother had treated her so abominably, Varbilma sank into a deep depression. She did not dare go home to Numo. It was not just fear that kept her from doing so, but pride. For a while she drifted about in the village, and soon it became clear that she had two options if she didn't want to starve to death—she could either be a whore or a beggar. Neither of these appealed to her, but perhaps being a beggar would be preferable. Though not in the village of Odun, where everybody knew her...

So she went out into the wide world, however not in a totally random direction—she headed toward Atlantua because it was a foreign country. They didn't really know her there and would be less likely to mock her shame. She figured she would go to some of the larger cities like Sizon or Pakunda, because she was bound to receive more alms there. Plus she knew these cities to some extent, having been there once or twice.

It was a long journey on foot, but she managed to get to these places. Of course she needed something to eat along the way too, and so was forced to beg. When she reached Sizon, she was surprised to find that as far as donations were concerned, people she turned to in the smaller villages, especially on the farms, were much more benevolent towards her than in the cities. In every single city she visited she received far less charity than in the smaller places. The greater the population, the more kicking and mocking she received, but the less alms they gave her.

She wondered why there were still more beggars in the cities, as they must have realized this. But then she understood. The city people threw more money to the beggars; not because the citizens exuded benevolence but because there were more of them and they were richer, their pockets jingling with coins, unlike the farm dwellers. In the villages and farmsteads people spoke kindly to beggars, and they were more likely to stuff the beggar's bags with bread, loaves or fruit, and sometimes even a slab of bacon. And if Varbilma arrived around dinner time, it was rare for her not to receive a plate of warm food. Yet she almost never received money. It was not due to stinginess; the hosts simply didn't have any, or if they did it was very little. Besides, Varbilma knew that a peasant could live his whole life without ever seeing money.

Beggars went to the cities because most of them wanted money. They didn't want to be left with empty stomachs, but their main concern was being able to buy a few cups of wine or beer, preferably enough to get drunk and forget about their miserable lives until the bitterness of sobriety returned. Well one thing was certain—even if Varbilma did manage to get small amounts of wine from the farmsteads or villages, it was never enough to become drunk from, not even slightly intoxicated. And in the cities wine was not given on credit, only for cash. That's the reason beggars were flocking to the cities...

This realization was so valuable for Varbilma that its importance cannot be overemphasized. She didn't spend much time in the cities after that, a day or two at most while she was passing through. Instead she went to the countryside, to the small villages and scattered farmsteads, as her primary consideration was keeping her belly full, and she had no desire to sit on the steps of some church with dozens of other beggars, wrangling for the best spot. In this region the villages were densely packed and she could walk from one village to another in just half a day, so the only

difficulty Varbilma had was having to be constantly on the move and do a lot of walking every day. But her meals were assured. She even took care that if she returned to a village she had been to before, she did not ask for alms from the same houses.

She did not know how long she could live like this, but for the time being the method was working. Naturally she would have liked to find a more secure life for herself, however she didn't know what that would be. Nevertheless, she strongly believed that sooner or later her moment of fortune would come. She couldn't possibly remain a beggar forever! Her time of great fortune *had* to come, because she had a goal in life—to avenge those who had done this to her! Somehow she had to pay back Tin, Djuli, Tila and Numo. And Madun too, of course!

Although Madun was soon dropped from her revenge list, for as she wandered here and there and talked to various people, the news reached her that Djuli and the Horks had killed her brother. She was so pleased by this that she almost began to like Djuli. Almost. She would still gladly kill her if she got in her way. However her anger was strongest toward Tin. She felt deeply humiliated that the little girl did not hate her. She would have liked to be great and powerful, someone whom everything and everyone bowed before, whom everybody feared. That would be glorious! Then she could kill everyone who had wronged her, who was not submissive enough to her, who looked at her the wrong way... She would even kill those whom she had received alms from, taking revenge for being humiliated into accepting the alms...

At the moment she had no hope of gaining any kind of power, and should consider herself lucky that she had not been captured as a slave during all her roaming about or been raped, even though she was reasonably pretty for a middle-aged woman. However it didn't occur to her to be grateful to fate, and instead felt anger towards the whole world.

It was in this state of mind that she headed off towards Curse Valley, which was not far from the city of Pakunda. She had heard that there was once a small farm in that area, and perhaps it still existed. She decided to visit it to see if she could obtain some alms from the people living there. Even if she didn't find anyone, it wouldn't matter because for now her bag was full and she could always come back if she had to.

Curse Valley was a barren, infertile valley with only a small creek running through the middle, on the banks of which some meager crops might be grown. There were no houses for any peasants to live in. Then again... in the center of the valley stood a huge castle-like mansion, which looked nothing like a modest farmhouse! This castle had towers reaching up to the sky, higher than any tower Varbilma had ever seen. But that was not the strangest part—the castle was perfectly round! It looked as if somebody had drawn a huge circle on the ground and built a castle inside it, the outer walls strictly following the outline of the circle. In addition, there was no paved courtyard around the castle, no sculptures, no garden, nothing but the wild vegetation of the valley itself. Not even a single small path, let alone a road.

There was an entrance to the castle however. A wide stone staircase led up to a huge door, which happened to be wide open. Varbilma was so astonished at this unusual sight that for a few minutes she just stood there gaping silently, and in the meantime it occurred to her how strange it was to not see any movement in the castle. There were no people leaning out of the windows, nobody was coming in or out of the door, not a soul to be seen anywhere, as though the whole building was defunct. Varbilma's heart constricted in fear, although the castle was otherwise a very beautiful building. But people tend to be afraid of anything unusual.

Nonetheless, the question arose in Varbilma's mind of whether or not to enter. It was an important question, because during her months of begging she did not obtain the sort of clothing that would be appropriate for classy places. On the other hand, it was possible that some kind-

hearted lord inhabited the castle, who may be a little eccentric if he had his palace built far away from everybody, but he might still welcome her. Who knows, he may even marry her if he likes her! There was also a possibility that everyone inside was dead, for instance due to some great unforeseen epidemic, and Varbilma could become infected if she went in, but she couldn't be sure of that. Alternatively, it was conceivable that she might find lots of treasure inside, and that was worth the risk. After all, it wasn't right that the castle was not ruined at all and yet the door was wide open and there was no movement anywhere!

She had not made a decision yet, but moved closer to the building. Closer and closer. The nearer she got, the more her amazement grew. She was dubious, as many parts of the castle seemed to be made from solid gold, like the window frames, some of the statues and the door handles... The eyes of all the statues were made of diamonds, and they weren't the only gemstones here. The patterns on the walls were set with rubies, and the wide stone staircase was not actually made from stone but from pure silver...

Varbilma was no longer thinking and stepped onto the staircase, stumbling up to the wonder castle as if in a dream. There was no darkness inside. She entered a large lobby, and although there were no open windows here, an almost blinding light flooded the place. The light was not emanating from torches but from something else entirely. Along both sides of the walls of the big hall stood tree-like formations, and from their branches hung fist-size spheres made of a glassy material inside which a yellow core trembled, and this radiated the light. Varbilma could only gape at this spectacle. Beneath her the floor was comprised of hexagonal tiles, which were fashioned from gold, silver or various polished gemstones, many consisting of the purest diamond!

She stumbled across the great hall in astonishment and entered a room. She had chosen this room randomly out of the twenty-eight she had access to from the lobby. The walls of the room were made of some unknown yellowish-red material, and the room was completely empty apart from some kind of grapevine made of solid stone that was suspended from the ceiling. Strange berries hung from the vine, a little like clusters of grapes but white, and it was these that were providing the light. The walls were filled with reliefs, all depicting the human faces of men, women and children who were smiling kindly. They seemed extremely realistic and none were identical.

Varbilma moved on, wandering back and forth throughout the vast castle. She went into the towers, into small rooms and large rooms, and discovered that in every location the light source came from a strange plant-like statue; mostly from the fruits of the plants, but sometimes from the stems or the ends of the tendrils. The plants were not all the same type—some resembled grapevines, apricot or apple trees, as well as many other varieties.

The walls in every room displayed more of the human heads she had seen earlier, all with beautiful smiling faces, and again no two were the same. The rooms were either empty or contained one or two beautiful beds, and sometimes a table that was loaded with all sorts of delicious fruits, bread and cheeses. It was real edible food too, and Varbilma couldn't resist the temptation to thoroughly gorge herself.

Of course not all the rooms were identical. In the room she guessed to be around the middle of the castle she found a large swimming pool. The water in it was pleasantly lukewarm and very clean. The pool was constructed from the finest white marble, and there was a staircase leading into it made from some sort of silvery metal, the handrail made of gold...

Varbilma hesitated for long time, but in the end could not stop herself, and she tossed her clothes onto the edge of the pool and dived into the water.

She had been swimming for quite awhile, thoroughly enjoying the warm water and the joy of bathing, when she heard the pleasant voice of a woman from somewhere at the edge of the pool. Her voice gave the impression of youth.

"You may wash your clothes too if you like, because I can see that they are in great need of it!"

Varbilma turned her head, startled, and saw that these words were spoken by a tall, slender and breathtakingly beautiful young woman, who could not have been much older than twenty years of age. The woman was blond, and Varbilma was simply not able to determine what kind of dress she was wearing. It was as if she were dressed in brilliant stripes of light. Then suddenly she understood everything. "You're not human!" she exclaimed.

"Indeed," nodded the girl.

"You're an elf!" cried Varbilma, remembering that she had seen such a light dress on Tila when she was chopping up trees in the yard of the estate. "Is this the place they call Elfland?!"

"How do you know about Elfland?!" asked the elf curiously, her excitement growing.

"Well, ahh..." Varbilma had to think very quickly about whether to tell the truth or not. She somewhat regretted that she had committed herself. She was annoyed too, and angry with the elves because she felt that her present misery was ultimately caused by the elf they called Tila. At the same time, however, she was glad it was an elf she had encountered in this magnificent castle. As far as she could recall what Tila had said regarding elf customs, she did not have to be afraid that the elf would kill her or hurt her for bathing in the pool. Since elves had an almost nauseating abhorrence of causing discomfort to others. Suddenly it occurred to Varbilma that if this were the case, then there wouldn't be any trouble even if she gathered up a heap of diamonds and gold right under the elf's nose and left with it. The elf wouldn't be able to stop her because she was incapable of using violence against anyone!

This thought definitely perked her up. Well, she figured it was about time her luck changed! She was in such a good mood that she decided to graciously tell the truth. Why not? She may even benefit from it! For instance the elf might offer her a bunch of treasure as a gift. It was true that she could just take it, but it was possible that the elf would give her more than she could carry by conjuring up an ox-drawn wagon or something, and packing it full of gold... Besides, it might even be interesting to have a chat with this elf. Entertaining.

"I heard about Elfland from an elf called Tila," she told her.

"Tila... I don't know of any elf by that name," replied the elf thoughtfully. "Perhaps she was born during the time I've been away from Elfland," she added sadly. "So are you saying that there are elves around here?! You're not an elf, are you?!" she asked, her elation clearly visible.

"No. My name is Varbilma and I'm a human."

"I guessed that you were human. But then how did you meet Tila? Is Elfland somewhere around here?"

"I thought *this* was Elfland!" Varbilma gestured around her.

"Oh no, this... this is just my prison!" said the elf, and sat down at the edge of the pool.

"I'm sorry?! This... a *prison*?!" Varbilma exclaimed, wide-eyed. Her idea of a prison was quite different.

"A prison," nodded the elf. "My name is Luchilla, and I am the queen of the elves. At least I think 'queen' is the right word in the language I'm reading from your mind. What you see around me is nothing more than the magic circle of the marid who captured me a few thousand years ago. I've been imprisoned here ever since."

"I don't understand! The door is wide open—why don't you just leave?!"

"Because I'm not able to."

"Don't be ridiculous! I came in without any difficulty!"

"Of course, but you're a human."

"Well I don't believe you. What is a marid, anyway?"

"A sprite."

"Ah, now I have some idea what you're talking about... but I still don't believe you—no prison looks like this! All these beautiful things... it's more characteristic of Elfland! Anyway, why would the sprite leave the door open?"

"The marid has nothing to do with anything you see here. He simply created a powerful magic circle that I could not break out of, and put me into it. There were no doors or windows, no lock or key, no handcuffs... none of that was necessary. But during the thousands of years that have passed, in order to stave off the boredom and primarily to alleviate my sadness, I used magic to fill the area of the magic circle with all sorts of things that I found beautiful, particularly things that reminded me of my home, Elfland. For example I decorated the walls with portraits of all my elf friends. But that doesn't make it Elfland. It is just useless junk, a deception, an empty shell containing nothing! In Elfland the crystal trees and fruits radiate light on their own, but here they shine only because I nourish them with my power. As soon as I withdraw it, all the light will fade and the rooms will be covered in pitch black darkness. I could even make them radiate light on their own, but that wouldn't make sense since they still wouldn't supply any magic power. These are all just faint reflections of the wonders of Elfland, useless illusions, not reality!"

"But I don't understand—if the sprite captured you, how is it that you're still able to perform magic?!"

"I wasn't destroyed. I still possess all my powers within the sprite's magic circle. I just can't break out of here. But please tell me, what were you saying about an elf called Tila? How can you have met an elf if you haven't seen Elfland? How is it possible for an elf to be wandering about outside of Elfland? Isn't she afraid of the sprites?!"

"I honestly don't know. This dreadful Tila just suddenly appeared on my estate once, and turned my former slave girl, Tin, into an elf, which caused me quite a bother. So I'll tell you frankly, Luchilla, that I really don't like elves! In fact now that I think about it, I'm rather glad that you, their queen, have been captured by a sprite! Haha! If only I could meet with this Tila once more, then I'd tell her I've seen her captive elf queen. I hope it'll cause her great sadness! Well, now I think I'll get dressed and leave... but not empty handed!" And with that Varbilma put her clothes back on and stepped out into the lobby, heading toward the stairs leading outside. Along the way, as she passed by various small yet valuable ornaments made from gold or diamonds, she gathered these into her pockets or into the bundle she had twisted from her clothing, even if it meant breaking them off something. She also removed the food from her rucksack so that she could fit more gemstones and other valuables in there. "You have no right to forbid me from taking these with me because I'm rightfully entitled to them!" she said to Luchilla. "This is just a small compensation for the immeasurable suffering that befell me with the appearance of Tila. And you can't do anything to me because I will cling to these with my life, and anyway, elves aren't allowed to kill humans!"

She really hoped she was right and that Luchilla was not in fact willing to kill a human. She had mainly said it to remind Luchilla that she should not interfere or try to impede her thievery.

It seemed that Luchilla would not interfere. "You can certainly try to remove these things, Varbilma, I won't forbid it. I'm not going to obstruct you." She reiterated her statement, but with a strange emphasis, "Not *me*..."

"That would be advisable!" Varbilma threatened, without any basis. She hoisted the rather heavy bag up onto her shoulder, and with almost trembling knees dragged herself to the silver staircase.

She was able to walk down it too, without Luchilla placing a single obstacle in her way, not even a verbal objection. Yet a great surprise awaited Varbilma, for as she was stepping down from the last step onto the grassy ground of the valley, it was as if she had suddenly crashed into a stone wall. And it was so unexpected that she bumped her nose rather painfully, causing her nose to start bleeding. The drops of blood flecked the invisible wall as if they were hanging in the air, and slowly began to trickle down.

"You poor thing, now you can see what I was talking about! I didn't tell you because I knew that you wouldn't believe me," said Luchilla. She walked up to Varbilma, touching the crown of her head, and the pain and nosebleed ceased.

"You bastard! This was your fault! You *did* hurt me! You're not even a real elf!" shouted the woman, and shoved the elf queen away from her.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. As far as I'm concerned you may go, but what I'm saying is that nothing coming from within me can leave the marid's magic circle. And because this jewelry, these ornaments and treasures come from my magic power, none of it can leave here. But of course you yourself are free to leave at anytime—all you have to do is put down everything you've gathered from here."

"But... but.. I've eaten food from here... does that mean I have to stay here forever?!" stammered Varbilma in alarm.

"No. The food is created by the marid every few days, because he doesn't want me to starve," Luchilla reassured her.

Varbilma sat at the bottom of the steps despondently, her tears falling as she looked at all the treasures she now had to leave behind. "This is outrageous! What a great lady I could have been with all this... and now I have to leave everything behind! It's not fair! Can't I ever have any luck?!" Then with a sudden idea, she asked, "And when will that nasty marid die?"

"You won't live that long, Varbilma, because the marids, like me, live forever!"

"Bloody hell, how revoltingly fortunate for you!" swore Varbilma in her final despair. But she couldn't do anything about it because her heart was breaking at the sight of all those unattainable riches. "It's not enough that you're able to conjure up all this stuff whenever you want, but you also get to live forever?! Oh, how I'd love to be an elf!"

"Don't be too disheartened, eternal life has its drawbacks too," said Luchilla kindly, in an attempt to comfort Varbilma.

"Oh shut up! It's easy for you to jabber on about such ridiculous nonsense because you're immortal! But what about me?! Hey, I'd gladly trade these alleged 'drawbacks' with the ones I suffer from now! Eternal life, in fact eternal youth, because if I remember correctly you mentioned being more than a thousand years old, and you show no trace of old age!" she sighed enviously. "Damn it some people have it good! Even their prison is full of wonderful things! I didn't even live as well as this grubby elf here in her prison when I was a lady, and then she gets to stay young even after thousands of years have passed..."

"I don't mean to brag—I just like being accurate—however I'm not thousands but billions of years old," said Luchilla.

"What's a billion?" asked Varbilma, who had never really excelled in mathematics.

"A billion is a thousand million. And a million is a thousand times a thousand."

"You are several thousand times a thousand years old?! That's preposterous!" and Varbilma began to cry even more bitterly. "You elves truly are rotten scum! You're such great wizards, yet you refuse to give humans eternal life!"

"It's not that simple! Most elves are incapable of making a human live forever."

"Aha, so it's only *most* of them that can't?! That means some of them can! Surely being the queen, you should be the greatest wizard, right?"

"Not necessarily, but I can't deny that I do have the ability to make this happen. It's just that..."

"It's just that you don't want to! I always thought the elves were a nasty race!"

"That's not it at all, but you must understand..."

"Well, will you do it or not?!"

"You want to live forever?"

"Yes of course, isn't it obvious?! You really are stupid Luchilla, a brainless moron... I've been going on for ages about wanting eternal life, eternal youth, and you've only just picked that up now?! How did it not enter your consciousness earlier?!"

"I did grasp that, but you're not understanding me. You would be wise to listen, however, because although I could do this to you, it would have serious consequences!"

"Like what?! It's futile lying to me, because I won't believe you! After all, I can't possibly die if I'm immortal!"

"It's not about that. The sad truth is that although I still possess all my magic power, I don't have all the tools of Elfland. In order to make a human live forever I would need a certain crystal that comes from Elfland. But I don't have any. So the only way I could make you immortal now is if I give you my own eternal life. That is, the moment I cast the spell, I would begin to age as if I were an ordinary human being who was as old as I appear now in this body."

Varbilma began to smile very graciously. "Oh Luchilla, you're so kind... Would you please perform this magic for me? You have to admit that you've already lived long enough, and you'd only be bored here anyway! What's it to you to die after all this time? But I'm still so young, and you elves are supposedly infinitely kindhearted!"

"I wouldn't die, Varbilma! Once I step out of the magic circle I'd be able to use the power of my thoughts to call Elfland to me, because I may lose my eternal life but not my magic power. And as soon as I got back to Elfland I would easily find plenty of those crystals I mentioned earlier, and make myself immortal again. But the issue is this—the moment I perform this magic on you, *I* will be able to leave the magic circle, however *you* will not, even without these treasures! Do you understand?! Because the magic circle generated by the marid will be more likely to perceive *you* as an elf rather than me, so *I* won't be forbidden to step out, but you most certainly will! That's how it works, and you can believe me because I have a thorough understanding of magic, unlike you. So you would receive eternal life, and I can even make you look twenty years of age, but it would be of no use to you because you'd have to stay here forever as the marid's prisoner!"

Varbilma thought this over, and then asked, "So you'd be willing to do this then, it all just depends on my decision?"

"Not entirely. Because I couldn't do such a thing to a human. It is true that I'm unable to cause you any harm... You know this, since you said it yourself!"

"But this wouldn't harm me, it would be of great benefit! The only thing I'm afraid of is that the sprite will notice the exchange!"

"That is certainly a possibility, although I think it's very unlikely. Sprites don't pay as much attention to a person's external appearance as they do to their inner essence, which at a quick glance will be quite similar to mine. You wouldn't be able to do magic of course..."

"Oh, so all the wonders surrounding me would disappear?!"

"No, it's nothing for me to leave all this to you. But you really don't know what it is you're asking for... What benefit would you gain from eternal life as a prisoner?! Come to your senses! Just think it over for a bit, please!"

"What benefit?! You're such a foolish woman, Luchilla—you have no imagination! Sooner or later the marid is bound to have some accident. And I may have to stay here for a long time, perhaps thousands of years, but in the meantime the marid will feed me all sorts of delicious food like he did with you, and I won't have to be a beggar anymore! Everything here is beautiful, pleasant and comfortable, and if somebody kills the marid or he ends up in an accident then I'll be free and have eternal life!"

"It's going to be very boring being alone for so long... believe me, I would know because I've tried it!"

"It might be, yes, but one doesn't get something for nothing. I don't understand you, Luchilla! I'm sick and tired of your 'ifs' and 'buts'! What's your problem?! If you don't like being here, then you should be glad that somebody wants to take your place! I think you're just looking for excuses so you don't have to do me a favor! Because that's what all these are—just excuses! Justifications!"

"Okay. Listen Varbilma, I'm going to be upfront with you—I consider you a rather vile human being. You may not like us elves for some reason, but your behavior has given me no reason to like you. And I've truly had enough of being in captivity, so you'd better watch out, because if you keep talking like this then I *will* do what you wish, despite my better convictions!"

"Can I take that as a promise?" asked Varbilma sarcastically.

"You know what? Yes, I will do it! It is possible that to a small extent I will be doing good, because you're sure to enjoy this life for a while at least. And I shall search for this elf called Tila whom you spoke of, and help her because I strongly believe she is in trouble. So if you say another word, then I'll go ahead and do it!"

"Consider that I've spoken, as though I've been trying to persuade you for a year without rest!"

"Okay, but first I want you to tell me how I can get to Tila. And don't try to lie to me, because I will see it in you!"

Varbilma gave her directions, and was indeed truthful for fear that the elf queen would not make her immortal. When she was done, Luchilla asked, "You haven't changed your mind?"

"No, no, of course not! I hope you haven't either!"

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Of course I am!"

"So this is really and truly your final decision?!"

"Yes, yes, yes, just get on with it!"

"As you wish. Then I hope you're gormless enough to not get bored doing nothing for a very long time. I mean this sincerely!" With that Luchilla walked down the silver staircase. Off the last step too.

"Aha! You lied—you could get out of here!" cried Varbilma.

"You really are stupid, aren't you? It simply means that you have already received eternal life, and youth too. If you don't believe me, then find a mirror and see for yourself!" said the elf queen, who no longer cared about Varbilma.

Varbilma was impatient to search for a mirror in the huge castle, so she rushed over to the pool and looked at herself in the water. And she did indeed appear to be not just twenty but sixteen years old! She was very pleased, despite the fact that when she tried to leave the castle she couldn't, even without attempting to take any treasures with her...

Chapter 17: Kayam and the Marid

By the time Luchilla reached Numo's estate—which was already starting to seem more like Djuli and Tila's estate—a few days had passed. These had not been "quiet" days, in fact they were rather noisy on account of a scandal that had taken place. Luchilla could see evidence of this upon her arrival, with Tila being in the process of scolding Kayam. After all, it was Kayam's activities that had caused the scandal occupying the village and surrounding area.

However it was not only Kayam who was squatting in repentance before Tila, but Veeya too. She had also played a part in what had happened. Although the greater "merit", the lion's share, was undoubtedly attributable to Kayam, all the more so because the incident would not have been possible without the involvement of sprites, and at that time Kayam was the only person in the world who had sprites serving him. Kayam was probably unique in this respect throughout the whole Universe.

It should not be thought that he wanted to do wrong. Neither him nor Veeya. In fact it was quite clear that Kayam was driven by the greatest goodwill when he once again blessed humanity with a gift of dubious value. It was generally the case that he wanted to do good, yet although Tila had to acknowledge this, she could only say, "Kayam, as far as I've come to know the brain-crippling religious doctrines rampant here, I think what I'm about to tell you is rather fashionable—the road to Hell is paved with good intentions! I really wish you wouldn't try to do good for people quite so ardently, because if there are any more of these acts of goodwill humanity will go extinct!"

"And he calls this a good deed! What would happen if he wanted to harm them?!" Djuli murmured, shaking her head in horror. Which was all the more interesting because in this case Kayam had started the whole thing in order to help a group of slaves, and Djuli was generally inclined to look out for the welfare of slaves. There must have been a serious reason for Djuli to turn against Kayam.

And this reason was indeed serious. It all began after Kayam succeeded in taming some of the sprites. His self-confidence would have skyrocketed if he had not already reached stratospheric heights earlier. He diligently continued practicing magic and experimenting with his captured sprites, but when he was not engrossed in this, there were only two things that interested him—persuading Tin to be bait again so he could capture more sprites, and wandering about the place, bragging about how great a wizard he was. He usually did the latter, because Tin emphatically rejected Kayam's kind persuasions. She could accept that she had not received even a single word of thanks from Kayam, since her main concern was the elves' future opinion of her regarding her hopeful acceptance into Elfland, but she also knew that if a sprite ate her then she would never become an elf, neither in Elfland nor on Earth! And the recent sprite-capture endeavor had seemed very dangerous. It was true that Kayam had won in the end and reaped great success, but Tin did not forget that it was only a matter of perhaps two meters that prevented the sprite from catching up to them, even within the borders of the clearing's magic circle.

So when Kayam was not doing magic he often walked around the neighborhood, usually the nearby Odun village (which almost everybody called Snapp village now) and boasted. He found it

gratifying, despite not receiving recognition from everybody. In fact most people deplored him, as he had not benefited them as much as Tila had. At least initially Tila had healed them, but Kayam never healed anyone. He did not know how to. When Kayam had learned magic from Tila, she had shown him some of the healing magic and spoken in detail about serious biological subjects such as genetics and protein synthesis. Of course Kayam with his brilliant mind understood it at once and noted it, but like any other magic, healing magic could only be done well if one sacrificed the time to practice it. However although Tila had told Kayam that he was able to cultivate this type of magic, he did not bother to pursue it because he asserted that healing was not an effective tool for ruling over sprites, and that was his chief goal. Perhaps sometime later he would learn this, but for the time being it was more important to focus on the sprites. And Tila was sincerely obliged to agree with his assertion. The sprites really were the most important thing right now, and Kayam should be dealing with them!

Kayam *was* generally focused on dealing with the sprites, even though it sometimes seemed that he wasn't. This was merely a guise, because when he was not attending to the sprites he actually was, which may sound incomprehensible at first, but it can easily be clarified with the example that caused the scandal.

What happened was that Kayam realized something—he had truly come up with a brilliant idea when he chose to collect sprites as his life's goal, since the sprites were also able to perform magic, and that included a great many things that Kayam himself could not do. All he needed was to gain mastery over the magic required to keep the sprites in check, and then everything else could be done by the sprites at his command. This was quite easy to ascertain. Humans were much weaker than oxen, horses and cows, yet they still worked for humans and produced all sorts of things for them that humans would otherwise be unable to do, or only with great effort and fatigue. It was the animals that did the hard work. Humans only controlled the animals and directed them. A human could even discipline a very dangerous tiger if they were so inclined!

The half-dozen or so sprites Kayam now possessed had already significantly increased his possibilities. These were not even the most powerful sprites, yet they had done many things for Kayam that were beyond Tila's magic capabilities, or if she was capable she refused because she found it risky. One such thing was the creation of gold. That's right, the sprites were able to use magic to produce gold! Naturally not an endless supply, because they were small, weak sprites and the magic involving creation of matter exhausted even the most powerful of Kayam's sprites, and gold was undeniably matter. But they were able to produce two or three kilograms of gold per day for Kayam from nothing.

Kayam gave it all to Numo, Djuli and the others, who gratefully accepted it. But naturally after the first few days Kayam could not help boasting to the villagers that he was able to utilize the sprites to produce gold. And as one would expect, this caused all sorts of people to flock to Kayam, who flattered him in every conceivable way so that he would create gold for them. Kayam relished the attention, and did indeed produce gold for some of them. It should not be surprising that women made up the greater proportion of gold recipients, and also received a larger amount than the men. Some women even managed something that no man could—they got Kayam to produce gold for them on several occasions! This was due to a very simple secret. Women were able to do something men could not, and that was sleeping with Kayam. Initially purely as prostitutes, openly telling him that he could have them for a few grams of gold, however later when the novelty of this had worn off for Kayam they tried more subtle methods. They realized that Kayam was easily influenced by his vanity, and they no longer said they would sleep with him in exchange for gold. Instead they flattered him, telling him they loved him and would be his purely because they respected the great

wizard in him. And for a good while Kayam did not see through them. Perhaps he didn't want to, or if he did notice something he deliberately turned a blind eye because he was enjoying it. For the first time in his life he was tasting the pleasures of making love, and was doing it rather thoroughly. So thoroughly in fact that it is not an exaggeration to say that all the girls and married women of the village became Kayam's whores, except for the very young girls, whose age made them clearly unsuitable for this. It turned out that every woman without exception could be bought, in fact they even offered themselves voluntarily. It solely depended on the price, and it could not be denied that Kayam was able to pay astonishingly well. There was no luxury whore in Atlantua or Torgo who had ever earned more in her lifetime than Kayam could pay for a single night! For this reason the married men permitted what was happening, as their wives were earning good money, plus it was only an occasional event and they didn't have to be with Kayam all the time.

Even so, Kayam was not completely blind. He made the following passing remark, suggesting that although he enjoyed these women he also despised them, even if he didn't show it much. "I once heard someone say, 'All women are whores, they just haven't all met a rich enough man yet!' Well it seems that whoever said that back then was right..."

Still, it worked out well for everyone—for Kayam, the women and even the men. The trouble was not caused by the women Kayam slept with and paid; it came from somewhere else entirely. From a sprite. However this was not a sprite that Kayam could capture. It was the sprite that Djuli had hated profoundly before she even knew Tila and Kayam—the golden sprite of money! The one for whom Djuli was sold, because she had not forgotten that she was once sold for three gold pebbles! And now that Kayam was producing lots of gold, a multitude of small gold sprites had moved into the village, even if Kayam nor anyone else could see them, and they began working, turning the usual course of life upside down.

It all started with the fact that although Kayam was a true man who loved having fun in bed, he couldn't be with a limitless number of women. Even if he did nothing else all day, because his prominent male organ could not have taken it. Moreover, despite being in the midst of his greatest attack of vanity, he had still not forgotten that he had a goal. So he could not neglect magic, he had to practice it! But even if all this wasn't reason enough, for the time being his sprites were not able to produce an unlimited amount of gold. Therefore a great many circumstances existed that seriously limited his money-making potential.

Regardless, Kayam was still by far the wealthiest man in the area, and before long every pretty woman in the village became his lover at some point, even some from other settlements too. But in the end money itself was not worth anything. It was only worth as much as the useful things people were willing to exchange for it. And since there was now so much money in the village and the surrounding area, it soon resulted in the price of gold dropping, or more precisely, everything becoming more expensive because people could afford it. It was mainly unmarried men or ugly old women who were selling their goods at a high price, because Kayam had no need for them and thus the only way they were able to obtain any gold was through trading. They could get away with doing this since everybody had to eat, and Kayam only produced gold, not food.

It wasn't long before the villagers noticed that they weren't actually as rich as they thought. It was futile having lots of gold because they could not buy any more products than they had previously been able to buy with a few copper coins! It made no difference if one bought from a villager or from a foreign merchant, since the merchant's goods were also expensive. Naturally he had come to the village to do good business!

So there was a great deal of tension between the villagers, among those who had slept with Kayam or a relative who had indirectly benefited from him, and those who for some reason didn't or

couldn't do this. The latter did not like Kayam of course, and stated what was basically true—that Kayam was not benefiting the village but bringing it down! However before long, even those who had received gold from Kayam were not satisfied because they wanted even more of it. But Kayam was only one man with one dick, and he did not need more sex during this period of great expensiveness than he did before in the beginning. He was not able to sleep with more women, in fact his needs decreased somewhat because the novelty had worn off. And when they learned that Kayam for whatever reason couldn't or didn't want to give them any more gold, many of his former lovers became angry with him. Some were even remorseful for becoming whores, of course only after they realized that continuing this activity would be pointless because it was no longer benefiting them as much as they had hoped.

Nevertheless, some of the women had done quite well from it—those who had received gold from Kayam at the very beginning and spent it right away on something useful, for example buying a house, building a palace, purchasing a vineyard, arable land, animals or fishing boats. But the later someone realized that hoarding their gold at home was not wise, the less their fortune was worth.

Naturally people did not give up on trying to attain wealth. The women strove very hard to get Kayam to notice them as much as possible, since whoever was with the great wizard more often would receive more gold. They did not shrink from the most astonishing practices in order to do that. Some shaved their pubic hair, others introduced Kayam to the pleasures of anal and oral sex, and all this held Kayam's interest for a short while. But he soon became bored with it.

To the great sorrow of the villagers they discovered that although Kayam could easily be persuaded to do anything with his limitless vanity, it was only for a short time. And it was this temporary vanity that prevented him from taking full possession of the women. For Kayam longed so much to be considered exceptional that he was simply incapable of forgetting himself and indulging in the pleasures of the flesh as much as his lovers would have liked. On multiple occasions when he was "seeing to" a woman, or several beautiful women were attending to him, Kayam's eyes would begin to gleam feverishly and he would jump up and sometimes run back to the estate, completely naked, to try out some kind of magic. That's how geeky Kayam was... And when the women cried out despairingly after him, "But where are you going, mighty wizard?!" Kayam just waved his hand dismissively and shouted back, "It's irrelevant to you, because you wouldn't understand anyway. You're too vacuous to grasp my soaring thoughts!" That is, Kayam had enough sense to clearly see that these women could be his sexual partners, but never his intellectual partners.

One of Kayam's concubines once asked him why he was continuing with these tiresome boring studies, since surely he had quite enough power already. Why didn't he prefer to just enjoy life?

"Power is never enough," Kayam replied.

"But you have so many sprites..."

"They may be enough to fight against men, however if a very powerful sprite shows up, then they won't suffice!"

"But why, great wizard, do you want to fight against sprites at all?"

"Just because."

"I don't understand."

"I have a motto that states, 'Today I learn what others won't. Tomorrow I can do what others can't.' "

"But why do you want to do anything at all with such determination?!"

"Because I have another motto, which is, 'What you create determines who you really are'."

"But you've just been talking about power and learning."

"Obviously both are necessary for any serious creation!"

"Well I'm afraid I can't find any satisfaction in 'creation'! Why is it better to create something through laborious, exhausting work, than just simply *having* it, for example buying it with the gold you have? No offense, great wizard, but the way you approach the world seems rather bizarre to me. Because while you're doing this so-called 'creation' you're not enjoying life, so it's limiting the amount of time you have available. And if you have less time for enjoyment then you have less happiness, right?"

"Oh no, on the contrary my darling! You're entirely mistaken, and I think your delusion is founded on linguistic roots. I mean, the problem is that the word 'happiness' is not a base word but a derivative of the verb 'to happen'. Long ago, perhaps many centuries, this word 'happiness' had the meaning of some good event happening to us. So it was used when a favorable event either happened in the past or was going to happen in the future. Of course a pleasant event could actually be considered 'happiness', but only at a moderate level. Because if your happiness is based on external objects or procedures and therefore you yourself aren't the source of it, then first of all, you'll never have a sense of achievement. And secondly, you are at the mercy of other people, Nature, or random events... So I really don't think it's a wise approach to allow one's mood to be rooted in any third-party sources. To put it simply, the most important difference between our ideologies is that you have almost no control over your 'happiness', because it depends on so many things and you have no power over any of them. Meanwhile I create my own 'happiness' with active effort, with my talent and power! Of course, even talent and power is something that can be created and developed... It actually has unlimited potential for improvement as far as I'm concerned... But the essence of what I'm saying is that I think my 'happiness' is very different than yours. And far more valuable, noble... one might even say superior! It's a much deeper form of happiness, which really deserves it's own unique word... The act of creation is always more valuable than common possession, or random positive occurrences, therefore it provides us with far more 'happiness'! In my eyes, creators are clearly superior beings. And all this can be summarized with my aforementioned motto, 'What you create is what you really are!' "

"But creation requires such an incredible amount of knowledge, and learning all that is so tedious!"

"Learning can also be very exciting... But even if it is tedious, just think about the following— People can take everything away from you, deprive you of all that you now possess, except for ONE THING, and that's KNOWLEDGE! This is an eternal value, which if obtained once remains yours forever!"

"Sure, if that's what you say, great wizard, but I still think it's too tiring to strive for this kind of happiness..."

"You're right, my dear, it *is* very tiring! There's no doubt about that! That's the reason not everybody becomes a great wizard, a famous artist, or an inventor, scientist or author... thus a Creator! It is fatiguing, and a successful result isn't guaranteed at all! The thing is, anything Great comes with suffering, and we must accept that. Unfortunately, people are generally too addicted to comfort to ever sacrifice the present for a far better future gain. But some people believe that even the path they follow toward the faint traces of their distant goal is worth heading down, because the mere voyage into the Unknown provides them with such tremendous 'happiness' that nothing else can rival it! I have labeled this happiness Creators experience as 'True Happiness', which is

basically 'Meaningful Suffering'. Yes, it is suffering because as you just said, it's tiring. But if you follow this path and undertake this suffering, your life has a goal, a purpose... This path, that of the Creator, is the only one that makes a person a real Human, being more than a match for animals... I must frankly admit that in my opinion, those who only live for the small daily delights, who search purely for instant gratification because they have no endurance to fight for distant yet noble goals, they aren't even real humans, just speaking animals!"

"That was a very beautiful speech, but I'm afraid I couldn't memorize it because it was so long."

"That's okay. It's quite enough for you—or anybody who is going to change their idle, worthless life—to just remember the following short sentence, which is my absolute foremost motto: 'You'll never live this day again, so make it count!' "

It was very interesting that when it came to intellectual matters such as conversations about magic, Kayam felt the most understood by the women he had never slept with, who deeply condemned the dishonest whores. These were mostly women living on the estate, and among them two in particular—Djuli and Veeya, even though they understood no more about magic than what they had overheard from conversations between Tila and Kayam. Plus they had a trait Kayam desperately hated, which was not hesitating to scold him if he did something they didn't approve of. But it was precisely for this reason that Kayam tried to gain the recognition of these two women, because he felt that they were sincere. If they praised him then that praise had value, unlike that of his lovers in the village. Since the same thing applied to praise as to money—if there was too much of it, it was liable to inflation!

So by the time autumn came round, Kayam found Veeya to be far more pleasant company than the village honeybabies, even if he didn't really consider her attractive on account of her Hork eyes. And he preferred Veeya to Djuli because Djuli spent most of her time conversing with the Horks rather than him. Veeya would often accompany Kayam to the village, as she enjoyed him granting her his attention despite not sleeping with him. This made her feel rather special and valuable, and it improved her self-confidence because she had often been mocked due her strange eyes. Of course nobody dared to make fun of her beside Kayam, especially since the time he called out one of the sprites from his ring in front of the villagers, and told the sprite to eat a certain man. The sprite had done this with great pleasure of course, and in a sense the man deserved his fate because he had wanted to beat Kayam. Although Kayam hadn't really done anything wrong. It was true that he had slept with the man's wife and daughter, but the women themselves consented to it, and they didn't even tell him they belonged to anyone. Not that Kayam particularly cared about that... but still, they hadn't mentioned it! And now the jealous husband and father wanted revenge, however Kayam had managed to call the sprite in time.

Since then the villagers had not dared to tease Kayam. Those who feared for their wives' virtue moved away, although many of the female members of these families escaped and soon returned. But they could not do anything about Kayam. He was simply not able to satisfy the sexual desires of every woman in the village on his own, not to mention all the hookers who came here hoping to do good business. It was not only the sex he couldn't manage but also the gold, and it was this they lamented the most.

So in the absence of any other solution they were forced to compete with each other for the small amount of gold that existed. And surrounding Kayam with all sorts of fancy perverted promises was not the only way of competing. Gold could also be obtained from those who had received it from Kayam. This brought countless legions of thieves, robbers, assassins and other fortune hunters to the village of Odun, and within a short period the village became the least secure

settlement in the region. Especially because there were women who were not afraid to knock off some of their rivals who were most favored by Kayam, in order to reduce competition. Of course it would have been preferable to obtain gold from Kayam himself. That was the safest method and was not pursued by the law. They had achieved this so far by sexual means. But as the resource had proved finite and limited, it occurred to many women that others had a lot of gold right now too, and among them a significant number of men, who also liked this type of fun. And so among the fortune hunters came those who brought a great many female slaves with them, in order to satisfy the diverse needs of the male population in the village of Odun in exchange for good money.

Ever since Tila and the Horks had been living on Numo's estate, the number of slaves that had thoroughly flooded Odun previously had melted away to almost nothing. However there were plenty of people in the country who had not yet heard that it was unsafe to bring slaves here, unaware that if they escaped and reached Tila's estate they could live there freely. These people were now bringing many slaves to the village, the majority of whom were women. Of course not all the slaves knew where to escape to, and the villagers would have been fools to enlighten them. Even the slaves that did know couldn't all escape, because they had no way of doing so. There were also many slave merchants who had brought slaves here despite being well aware of the dangers, and were already dealing with a few escapes, but they considered it worth the risk in the hope that they could do good business. There were some who opened brothels where the slave women worked, mostly chained to the bed so they wouldn't escape.

It is fair to say that while Tila's activities had almost completely abolished slavery in Odun, Kayam had managed to restore it in a short period of time by distributing lots of money. In fact, not only had he flooded the village with slaves, but also murderers, swindlers, thieves and whores. Not a day passed without at least three murders taking place. There were milling crowds in the village of Odun, more than in the capital of Atlantua, but not all the villagers appreciated this. Many of them didn't, nor did they like Kayam. Of course they didn't dare say this to his face...

These changes had not escaped Tila's attention, however for the time being she didn't say anything to Kayam, not wanting to bother him. Besides, she was already cautious of getting involved in the affairs of humans. And Kayam was a human too. She understood his desire for these sorts of pleasures, since even elves enjoyed lovemaking, although naturally they didn't pay each other for it. To tell the truth, Tila did not really comprehend the complex interplay between these events and developments. Kayam liked lovemaking, she understood that. And some women were also keen on it, so they agreed to sleep with him. All perfectly logical. Women loved gold for some strange reason, and Kayam gave it to them. It seemed that Kayam was doing good as he was satisfying the women's desires, and eliminating another's sense of lack was a commendable act according to elf principles. So nowhere in this process so far was there anything that could be condemned, yet the consequences were simply horrendous! Nevertheless, Tila kept quiet because she was afraid that if she interfered things would only get worse. At the very least it would disturb Kayam, and that was impermissible. Let Kayam enjoy himself, since if he was in good spirits he was bound to learn magic faster!

Veeya strongly reprimanded Kayam for his debauchery—at least that was how she perceived his present behavior—and she never concealed her intense, boundless contempt for Kayam's lovers. At the same time Kayam tolerated all this from Veeya, because he vaguely felt that she was right; perhaps not about everything but for the most part. Veeya also acknowledged what the other women did not—that Kayam was a great wizard and a genius! She would not admit that Kayam was brilliant at *everything*, merely that his genius was indisputable in the fields of magic and mathematics, and that's what was most important to Kayam. It was precisely because Veeya didn't

acknowledge his genius in other areas that made Kayam certain that the girl truly believed what she was saying. Yes, he considered Veeya a much more valuable companion than all his lovers combined!

Even so, it was Veeya who had started the trouble and was the initiative for Tila scolding him. What happened was that one day Veeya heard news that a ship from a far-off land had docked in the harbor and brought in a number of obscure plants. She thought it might be a good idea to buy some so they could propagate them on the estate, and said she would go to the market and take a look at the plants. Kayam overheard this and was curious. And since he enjoyed Veeya's company he offered to come with her. Veeya had no objection, so they went together. It was just the two of them, however Veeya felt more secure than if she were surrounded by a dozen Horks.

The marketplace was much the same as usual, at least since the abundance of gold had dazzled the minds of the residents. While it used to be a modest little market that suited a small village, now it was so crowded that one could barely move. Anyone who ventured here was at risk of serious hearing damage, as all the merchants were shouting loudly in an attempt to overpower their neighbors. Some merchants paid a servant to trumpet his unrivaled goods to the world, giving preference to those with a loud voice.

The aforementioned ship rocked on the sea's azure waves nearby, as the harbor was not far from the marketplace. They spotted the ship's captain and crew up ahead. It was obvious that the captain was not from the village; he couldn't be a Torg or an Atlantuan because his skin was dark brown, and he wore a big, shaggy animal hide accompanied by a scabbard with flashing jewels. Veeya suspected that he may even be a pirate, although it didn't seem likely that he would want to rob anyone now. Their one ship did not contain enough men to prey on the entire village, since Odun was teeming with people. She was certain that he just wanted to trade. He had obviously heard somewhere that the people here possessed significant amounts of gold.

The captain did not know of Kayam and didn't even glance at him, but the villagers did. A wide path opened up for the young wizard among the dense crowd of people, and even the merchants and paid criers stopped praising their goods just to cheer for Kayam. Kayam was enjoying this immensely and puffed out his chest as he walked, moving about the marketplace like a pert rooster. Veeya couldn't restrain herself from saying, "Hey Kayam, don't you notice that you're a rooster on a pile of manure, not in a palace?! Listen, I understand that you enjoy being a lord, and that's fine, but this cesspit isn't worthy of you! Wouldn't you agree?!"

This had somewhat of an effect on Kayam's mind. It was an argument that even his Lordship of Vanity could accept. "Indeed! I am destined for more than this! You're right, you're absolutely right!" and he stroked Veeya's head.

However the girl immediately pulled away. "Don't ruffle my hair—I'm not a puppy!"

"But all women like that! A woman is supposed to like that!" Kayam uttered in amazement.

"Those bitches who warm your bed and your loins may well like it, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm not like them!" and with that Veeya walked on a few steps ahead of him so that Kayam couldn't touch her. This way nobody would think she was his lover because she was walking in front of him, and instead seemed more like some sort of officer or the wizard's secretary, which definitely increased her regard. This was compounded by her haughty smile, which although arrogant, was not like Kayam's smile. On Kayam it gave the impression that he enjoyed the deep respect of the crowd, however Veeya's smile expressed that this woman flouted the crowd's deference and was totally indifferent to it.

As Kayam wandered behind Veeya he had to acknowledge in irritation that her demeanor was considerably more refined than his, even though she had no understanding of magic. "I'd love to know how she achieves that!" he muttered.

He didn't have time to ponder this any further because they had arrived at the area where the captain and his sailors were offering their goods. It turned out that the captain had not only brought rare plants and spices, in fact these were only a minor portion of his merchandise. His major commodity was something else entirely—slaves! And no small quantity either... there were at least two hundred of them! All locked in iron chains of course. Among them were a small number of young boys and girls, as well as some handsome young men, however they were primarily attractive women suitable for taking to bed, and those interested could find an abundant selection.

These slaves seemed particularly enticing because although some of them looked of Atlantuan or Torg descent, most appeared to have come from a distant land. The eyes of the customers wandered over the beautiful cinnamon-skin girls, who, being naked, were able to be examined thoroughly. There were women here they had never seen in these parts before—some with black skin and hair and all sorts of other combinations, so everybody could find a type they liked best.

Veeya could see that by the time she and Kayam arrived some of the women had already been sold, although only a small portion, as the captain was aware of the specialty of his goods and had therefore set a price that even the inhabitants of Odun who were swimming in gold had to think twice about before parting with it for the merchandise. He had particular difficulty selling many of the males. One of his men praised them at the top of his voice to no avail, proclaiming that they were as strong as an ox, yet could also be utilized in the bedroom and enjoyed by both men and women alike. That a male prostitute could also provide great erotic pleasure for their master, since they were skilled in special lovemaking practices they had learned in faraway lands.

"We have virgins too!" shouted the captain now himself. "They're here on the right! Please feel free to choose any of them!"

"And what guarantee do I have that they really are virgins?" asked a bulky man, jostling his way to the front.

"What... what a question! Of course you're welcome to inspect her in that region if you wish. Just point out the one you're interested in and we'll spread her legs so you can examine her. But I'm warning you in advance that you're not permitted to rummage about in there with your fingers, because I won't let you ruin her! If you want to do anything like that you have to buy her first! As I always say—you can look, but don't touch!"

Veeya grimaced. "See what you've done, Kayam!" she said angrily to the wizard, and with her small fist jabbed him in the side.

"Heh?! What did I do?!" Kayam looked at her puzzled. "Or weren't you talking to me?"

"Who else would I be talking to?!"

"But I haven't done anything! I've just been calmly standing here, and..."

"What you see here before you is what you've done! This is what carelessly handing out lots of gold leads to!"

"Now listen here, my dear Veeya... Before I was a wizard I'd always wanted to own lots of money, and why shouldn't I have paid the women generously if they asked for it?! Especially if I was able to!"

"The answer to that is right here!" Veeya pointed at the slaves around her. "They are all suffering now because of your excessive desire for women! Those bitches in heat may have assuaged your lust, but the cost of doing so was the suffering of these people! As well as all the other slaves in Odun! Their suffering is the price for your pleasure!"

"That's ridiculous, I didn't want them to be brought here!"

"That's true, but it's also true that they wouldn't have brought them here and perhaps not even captured them as slaves if you hadn't given so much gold to the locals! Because the current situation, Kayam, is that they're here because the captain wants to obtain gold for them, the gold that you created for your women and everyone else! There were barely any slaves here before, thanks to Tila, but you ruined everything!"

"Hey, you freak, how dare you try to dissuade the wizard from doing good deeds!" snapped one of the nearby villagers upon hearing this, and stepped closer to Veeya menacingly. But Kayam promptly stopped him.

"Take it easy, Veeya is under my full protection!" He placed his hand paternally on Veeya's shoulder. This touch didn't bother the girl at all, unlike when he had ruffled her hair earlier.

"Kayam, these women are being just as humiliated as the ones you wanted to free from the castle that I was imprisoned in! Back then you didn't tolerate them being raped or killed! Anyone who is a slave will be raped, and so most of these women have probably already been raped several times. They may even be killed later on, because a master can do anything with his slave! And this is all your fault! You have to help them!"

"Me?! I have to help them?! Again?!"

"Yes, because it's your fault! Besides, a great wizard like you won't tolerate such a thing! Think about how grateful they'll be if you save them!"

Now the captain entered the conversation. "This gentleman is a great wizard? Well, then helping these people is quite simple. All he has to do is create lots of gold for me and he can have all the slaves right now! After that he can do whatever he wants with them, even let them go..."

"Okay, no problem!" said Kayam, and he rubbed his ring, causing a sprite to instantly appear. A rather large red sprite.

"What is your command, great wizard?" he asked politely. By this time he had learned that it was not advisable to make Kayam angry, as it would always result in much suffering.

"The usual!" Kayam gestured aristocratically. Then the sprite disappeared, but in its place was a block of gold, roughly the size of a man's head.

"There you go!" Kayam pointed at the gold. "It's yours!" he said to the captain. "So now the slaves are mine. Take off their chains, handcuffs and ropes, because I've decided that they will be freed and can go wherever they wish! I, Kayam the great wizard, hereby return their freedom!"

Those of the slaves who understood Atlantuan began to applaud Kayam joyously at the top of their voices. Their gratitude truly came from the heart.

However they had rejoiced too soon, because the captain looked at the gold block and said, "This isn't enough! You can get *some* slaves for that, but certainly not the whole lot."

"Why not all of them?!" asked Kayam with a frown, his irritation rising. Lately he had become accustomed to nobody opposing his will. He may have tolerated this from Tila, and perhaps to a lesser extent from Djuli, but never from the sprites, not to mention a common human being!

"For this amount you can have, let's say... eight to ten slaves. Maybe fifteen, if you're content with the ones that aren't that special. But definitely not all of them! After all, I have two hundred slaves in total and they're worth a tidy sum!"

"Don't listen to him," said Veeya immediately. "He wants to cheat you! For a block of gold this size, you could probably get a thousand slaves!"

"Perhaps, but not ones such as these!" replied the captain. "And not in this village, where everything is so expensive, including the slaves! Oh my dear young lady, that's precisely why I brought the slaves here—to get a good price for them!"

"Well I can't give you any more for them, since this is all the gold I'm capable of producing per day! And because Veeya wants the slaves I recommend that you accept this offer, as things won't go well for you if you taunt the Lord of the World!"

"Don't talk such nonsense, Kayam! Lord of the world... What's the world to you anyway?! Just stick with your sprites!" chided Veeya.

"Fine, then the Lord of the Sprites! That sounds even better! So, the slaves are mine then!"

"Not just yet," opposed the captain boldly. "These are my slaves, and I have the right to not sell them if I don't want to!"

"I'm not interested in your rights! I'm the wizard here, I do the commanding, and you've seen my sprite so you'd better not object! Angering a wizard is not the secret to a long life!"

"And you, a mighty wizard, would be capable of inflicting injustice on me?! You're willing to become a robber and take by force what is mine?!" the captain asked cunningly.

This discomfited Kayam. "Well... after all..." he muttered.

"Kayam, don't let yourself be fooled! He has no right to the slaves because every person belongs to themselves!" Veeya said to him.

"Yes, yes, of course, in a certain sense they do, but on the other hand..."

"Hey Kayam, you don't have to intervene if you don't want to. Let the captain have what he wants... we won't rob him of his slaves!"

"Finally a wise idea, Veeya! Besides, even Tila says she prefers not to interfere in the affairs of humans!"

"That's right, so let's leave this matter to the slaves. The captain says he has a right to these slaves because they're his. Well everybody has a right to something they own, so let him have what he wants. But he can't dispute your right to donate something to somebody. Say, couldn't you give the slaves a gift that would later enable them to gain back their freedom?"

"Hey, the slaves are mine!" said the captain in alarm.

"Of course—provided you can keep them in captivity. If you're stronger than them. Even the sprites only remain the great wizard Kayam's property if he's able to capture them and keep them in his power! Right, Kayam?" and she jabbed him in the side again to get his attention, for Kayam was gazing into the distance lost in thought.

"Oh, yes, yes, of course, there's no doubt about it, you're absolutely right! Your words are as valuable as gold!" Kayam nodded hastily.

"Please don't mention the word gold, because there's already too much of it in this village! Even you can see that! People have become so greedy that they won't even hand over their slaves to you for a giant block of gold. Not even this many, although only a year ago you could have bought at least five times as many for it, and I'm not exaggerating! You've seen for yourself, Kayam, what gold does to people, so please don't mention gold to me because Djuli was right to hate the stuff. Instead tell me what you're going to do about it!"

"The gold won't be a problem for much longer, Veeya, I promise. I've figured out a solution for this, as well as for helping the slaves." With that Kayam rubbed his ring, but this time in a different way and called out another sprite, saying to him, "I command that in the area within a day's walk from the point where I'm standing—excluding the place formerly owned by a man named Numo—you are to destroy all the gold and silver that exists, or you can sink it in the deepest part of the sea, or take it to the moon!"

"What?!" snorted the captain.

"Great Kayam, I beg for your grace to instead allow me to eat the gold and silver, because they're such delicious snacks!" the sprite pleaded. "If you have no need for it anyway..."

"Well all right, I'll allow it, and don't say I treat you badly!" said Kayam graciously. "But we're not done yet! Before you do that, all the slaves within this same area are to be magically altered in such a way that they are able to transform their bodies into wolves and back again at will!"

"I hear you and obey!" said the sprite, and disappeared. The block of gold before Kayam's feet disappeared as well.¹⁴

A slave woman who was keenly listening to Kayam's every word, asked him, "Can I now become a wolf if I want to?!"

"Of course, you just have to want it!" Veeya answered for him, having much confidence in Kayam's power.

And her confidence was justified, because at that moment the woman transformed into a sizable wolf... the same size as her human body. The shackles on her ankles now easily slid off, as they were designed for human legs, not those of a wolf, and she swiftly jumped at the captain and bit into his throat.

Shrieks arose from the spectators in the market, which only intensified when another girl turned into a wolf, who had been bought by a man not long before Kayam and Veeya arrived. Her master had stayed there, curious to hear what Kayam was speaking to the captain about, but to his peril because the slave girl also heard that she could now transform herself, and took the opportunity to do so. As soon as she had changed into a wolf she bit the customer, crippling his right wrist, then scampered off into the distance with giant leaps to escape the area as soon as possible. Within moments almost all the slaves had transformed into wolves, scattering all over the place like a windstorm. This was made easier by not having clothes to hinder their movement. It was advantageous having been brought here naked to show off their charms. However a big, hairy female wolf no longer generated such sensual thoughts in the men as the exotic-looking slave girls!

Soon even the slaves who didn't understand what Kayam had said turned into wolves. They could see the astonishing transformations of their companions, and thought about how good it would be if they too were wolves—and in the next moment they became one! This happened to the children too, since the youngest would have been no less than ten years old, and a ten-year old child had enough intelligence for these kinds of thoughts.

Everybody surrounding Kayam fled; not because they were afraid of him—even though Kayam could be dangerous at times, even without his sprites—but right now they were more frightened by all the wolves. After all, at least two hundred wolves had been "born" in under a minute, and such a large pack of wolves was rarely seen even in the woods, let alone in the middle of the village where the majority of people were unarmed. On top of all this came the superstitious terror. Those who had seen people turn into wolves were immediately inclined to believe that these wolves were special, invincible and even invulnerable, just because they had previously been human. They were werewolves! They had been created with magic and were therefore wizards as well!

Of course not a single word of this was true. No magic was necessary to turn into a wolf. It was obviously required in order to transform these slaves into such extraordinary beings, and this magic was carried out by the sprite under Kayam's command. After that, however, no magic was needed for the humans to transform between their wolf form and back again, simply because the sprite did not give the slaves any magic powers. He couldn't have, for he didn't have this ability. Instead he solved Kayam's command by altering their gene structure and the composition of protein and other

¹⁴ Dear Reader, I hope you now understand the reason why astronauts visiting the moon have not found any gold coins there. This is because the sprite did not take the gold to the Moon, but rather ate it. Therefore there is no gold on the Moon, and the mere fact of this proves that the story described in this book, from the first word to the last, is nothing but the truth!

substances in their bodies, including their muscles, so that with an appropriate thought impulse they could take on the shape of a wolf.

This may initially sound implausible. But if you think about it, there are several living creatures in the world that are well-known to everybody, that we consider entirely natural to exist in two very different forms. Take butterflies, for instance. As we know, they spend quite a lot of time in the form of caterpillars. And we must acknowledge that the caterpillar and butterfly that develops from it are basically the same creature, their gene structures being identical. The frog is likewise a dimorphic creature, since it has a tadpole form. The bee too, existing as larva as well as its winged form. The same goes for the potato beetle and the dragonfly, and endless others. So there was nothing strange or unusual about the sprite's action, only that he did an outstanding job, since the creatures were not only able to undergo a single transformation but could change back to their previous form at anytime. And it did not take as long as let's say a silkworm, nor did they have to pupate to enable the change. The whole transformation process took only a few seconds for these "mutable wolves". In any case, they did not need any magic. And of course they could be killed as a wolf when they were in wolf-form, or killed as a human if they were in human-form. But the people found this miracle very frightening and were inclined to think all kinds of silly thoughts.

At the far end of the marketplace nobody knew what had happened and why people were fleeing from that direction. Almost everyone believed that the foreigners selling these special slaves had turned out to be pirates, causing them to bolt in fear. When they saw the wolves, it only enhanced their desire to flee. However there were some who remained in order to buy something, and when they reached into their money pouch they were astonished to see that there wasn't even a single penny in there! It was all gone, since in Kayam's uncharacteristic sympathetic mood he had given the sprite permission to gobble up all the gold and silver. This of course resulted in the person immediately crying 'thief'. But perhaps it was still better than when the money they had taken out disappeared, disintegrating into nothing within seconds in the hands of the owner or seller!

One thing was certain—these events only exacerbated the general panic. The square soon emptied, leaving only the few who were dead or seriously injured; those who had almost been trampled to death by the fleeing crowd, and some who were bitten to death by the wolves. The majority of these people were sailors who were near the slaves at the moment of transformation. Those who survived frantically hurried back to the boat, which soon sailed off into the open sea.

"Wow, this magic seems to have made a huge impact!" said Veeya dumbfounded. "Well what do you know! Hats off to you, Kayam, seriously!"

It was as if Kayam had been patted on the back. "Indeed, so it has... You see, this is proof of my genius! I knew from the first moment that there was great potential in collecting sprites!"

"You're right about that, I'll readily admit it!" nodded Veeya. "Now you've given the slave-keepers what they deserve! And you've finally freed the inhabitants from all that gold trash! I really hope everything will go back to normal soon."

Before leaving Veeya gathered some interesting looking herbs and spices from the abandoned piles, and then they ambled off home. Kayam lumbered along beside her, smugly grinning from ear to ear.

Back at home they didn't conceal anything. They weren't able to, because the news of the werewolves preceded them and those who had remained on the estate asked them which aspects of these rumors were true and which were not. So they discussed what had happened. Kayam was very eager to talk about his heroic act, awaiting further admiration, but instead the smile soon melted from his face as Tila gave him everything but praise. Djuli, Tin and Mr. Numo were also present when they reported the facts, and they all shared Tila's following opinion.

"Kayam, are you out of your mind?! Have you even thought about what you've done?!"

"Of course I have, quite rigorously! I hope you don't intend to tell me that I had no right to make the gold that I produced myself disappear?! Okay, fine, I admit that the sprite has probably eaten some gold that wasn't produced by me, but that doesn't matter because much of the gold I produced was spent in places far away from here, where the sprite couldn't eat it. So as far as the sum total is concerned I don't think there's a big difference, and it may even be to my benefit that I didn't make as much vanish as I previously produced. Anyway, I only did good with this, Veeya said so, because now they won't have the money to keep slaves!"

"Kayam, come to your senses! That's not what Tila is talking about!" Djuli interjected. "As far as the gold is concerned, I imagine it will make everybody angry with us again, but that's entirely beside the point! I'm sure Tila didn't mean that but the werewolves, and I can already guess what she was about to say!"

"You don't have to tell him, Djuli—I'm trying to make him understand that... this..." But Tila did not articulate what she thought of Kayam, only gestured in despair. "This is just like when you let the sea-snake loose on humanity, except much worse, because I think these werewolves can reproduce!"

"Why wouldn't they be able to?" asked Kayam.

"That's just it, the fact that they can! And this is a big problem!"

"Why should it be a problem? As far as I can see it's a bonus for them. I'm well aware that mating is an extremely pleasurable activity, and now they can enjoy it in two different ways—as humans *and* as wolves! I'm serious, I almost envy them! I think I did them a great service, and Veeya is in complete agreement with me, since it's enabled them to escape slavery!"

"That's true. But what are they going to live on now?!"

"How should I know? Whatever other humans live on!" Kayam shrugged.

"No, they might also live on what other wolves live on—snatching people's sheep and goats! But that's the least of it... You can be sure that many of them will now live in such a way that if they need money or anything else, they'll just think the thought and turn into wolves, bite the person's throat and take whatever they have! Perhaps even eat them! And you wouldn't know who had done it, because it could have been a real wolf. Even if they suspected it was a werewolf, how could they determine which human is capable of turning into a wolf?! Tell me Kayam, what will the offspring of these creatures be—humans or werewolves?"

"I would hazard a guess that if they copulated with an actual wolf, then they would be real wolves, and if they mated with a human then their offspring would be human. Only if both parents were werewolves would they produce another werewolf."

"Ah, so their species really can multiply, if they have enough intelligence and solidarity to form a secret community... Well, you've given the world a lovely gift—you should be ashamed of yourself, Kayam!" said Djuli.

"But Djuli, you're the one who's always defending slaves!" shouted Kayam desperately.

"Yes, slaves! But these creatures aren't slaves anymore—they're something else entirely!"

"Are your Horks any better?!" shouted Veeya.

"Why of course! At least you can see what they are from a distance!"

"But they looked like such decent people..." began Kayam, but Tila interrupted.

She was very angry and it showed, for she was in her light dress, which was swirling with reddish-purple stripes. "Of course they seemed like decent people, and I'm sure they are. Now. Currently. But in time they'll realize the power they have, and I have learned that humans tend to

abuse their power! Even if they don't, we can't be sure that their future offspring will be equally benevolent. You must force the sprite to undo the whole thing!"

"I don't think that's possible!" Kayam shook his head. "You see, the situation is that..." But neither Tila nor the others were interested in the complicated explanation that would likely follow.

"Don't bother with your excuses, Kayam," said Djuli. "I've lost all respect for you. And you too, Veeya, because at least *you* should have had more sense!"

"But I didn't tell Kayam to do this..." began Veeya, however Tila cut her off.

"Don't try and justify yourself! You may not have told him to do it, but you later agreed with Kayam's stupidity, so you're just as guilty and thoughtless, not to mention foolish, as this brain-deficient man!"

"But what else could I have done?!" asked Kayam, truly forlorn.

"You could have simply gotten one of the sprites to eat the captain, and then removed the shackles from the slaves—a perfectly good solution!" replied Djuli sternly.

"Yes, you could have removed the shackles, but it would have been enough to just chase the captain back to the boat and have the sprite return the boat to the middle of the sea!" suggested Tila, with a less bloodthirsty version.

They argued for a long time, but Kayam would simply not be persuaded. Djuli even tried to get to his emotions by saying, "Hey Kayam, have I called you a 'calf' before?"

"No, why?"

"Because it wouldn't befit such a big cow as you!"

Although this did not make Kayam more sympathetic, just more resentful. He mentioned ingratitude... Then when Tila furiously asserted that Kayam should be grateful for the education he had received from her, he contained himself a little, lowering his head, but he was clearly doing it without conviction...

At that moment they heard an unfamiliar voice. "Why are you so angry, my beloved child?"

They turned to look and saw another elf approaching them. She did not appear to be much older than Tila, but that didn't mean anything as by then they were all aware of the immensely long lifespan and eternal youth of the elves. There was no doubt that this human-formed being was an elf, for she was wearing a sparkling light dress, similar to Tila's. This was truly marvelous! Until now they had believed Tila was the only elf around here, except for little Tin, who was almost an elf. However this woman was an elf too, an adult elf...

Now Tin happily shouted to the world what had occurred to everybody else, "Elfland has arrived! Oh how wonderful! This is fantastic, I'm so happy!" and she rushed over to the foreign woman, grabbed her hand excitedly and asked, "How can I get there?! Will you let me see the home of the elves?!"

"Unfortunately Elfland is not here yet, but it will arrive within days because I have notified them to come for us," said the woman. "But how is it, my little one, that you haven't seen Elfland yet? How can you be an elf if you weren't born there?"

Upon hearing this question Tila, who was very astute, suddenly understood everything. "You must be none other than Luchilla, our queen!"

"You're absolutely right," Luchilla nodded.

"But how did you manage to escape from the marid?! Did you kill him?!"

"Oh, goodness no... how could I kill a living creature?!" said Luchilla appalled, distinctly paling at the thought.

"Well, it's just that here on Earth killing is quite commonplace, so I've become accustomed to the idea, even if I don't like it very much," Tila shrugged. "And it's a reasonable question because I don't believe he would let you go just by asking him nicely!"

"No, that wasn't what happened," replied Luchilla, and she began telling the story. She spoke for a long time, as did Tila, who in turn told her own story of how she fell out of Elfland and how Tin became an elf. They really had a great deal to talk about.

Kayam and Djuli were also listening in. All the more so because near the end of the conversation they were telling Luchilla that Kayam was a true sprite expert; that he had already caught several sprites and was planning to discipline even more. Kayam relished seeing Luchilla the elf queen blinking at him with great respect, but was no longer so proud when Djuli told her about what Kayam had done with the sea snake, the creation of gold and the werewolves.

"Kayam may understand sprites very well, but as far as humans are concerned his competence is absolutely zilch. And that's embellishing the sad reality!" she declared firmly.

Upon hearing this, Kayam determined that Djuli was a very pretty woman in her own way, she even had intelligence, but she could be a real dragon! Veeya was far more kind and understanding. She did sometimes tell him off, but not as much and not in the way Djuli did. Yes, Veeya was not as beautiful as Djuli, but if necessary he would choose her over Djuli without hesitation!

They were all amazed that Luchilla owed her freedom to Varbilma. Looking at Tila, Djuli said, "Well, I have to admit that it seems we were right in not killing her that time!"

"Don't use the plural, Djuli, *I* never wanted to kill her!" said Tila vehemently.

"But Aunt Luchilla, if I may ask, how you could possibly keep Varbilma as a prisoner?!" Tin asked the elf queen.

"You believe this doesn't befit an elf?" Luchilla asked kindly.

"I may not be a real elf, so I'm cautious in making judgments about what is or isn't right for an elf. But I find it concerning enough to require an explanation," stated little Tin in an extremely grownup and serious manner.

Luchilla replied with a similar earnestness. "Look at it this way, Tin. Before there was a free human being—Varbilma, and an elf prisoner—me. Now there is still one prisoner and one who is free, it's just that these two beings have been switched. Varbilma wasn't happy before, and neither was I, but now I'm feeling considerably better and so is Varbilma. So for the time being only good has come from what I did. It's true that Varbilma will inevitably get tired of being imprisoned, and so that benefit will no longer exist, but then the situation will be same as it would have been without any of this magic—the marid will have a prisoner who isn't happy. Although until that time comes, the number of happy beings in the world has increased! So what I've done is not something I have to be proud of, but nor should I be ashamed of it. And this way I could at least help you and Tila because Tila isn't able to call Elfland with her thoughts, but I can and I've already done so. So taking all that into consideration, what I did was right."

"What you said about helping me... does that mean you accept me among the elves?!" asked Tin, eagerly awaiting the answer.

"I can assure you, my little one, that I can't see any reason for you not to be accepted. I consider you a real elf, although as far as I can judge from your inner essence, you'll be among those elves who will never be able to master magic at the highest level. But you will succeed to some degree if you are very diligent. You'll even be able to fly with the help of crystals, and so everyone will regard you as a real elf!" She caressed Tin's head.

"And I... I... I also have a request..." began Djuli timidly.

"Your case is not so simple, Djuli," said the elf queen, looking at her. "Since you're obviously not an elf. For you to be accepted would be something quite unprecedented. So I'm not saying yes for the moment, because I do have an idea, but I'll have to talk about it with the Great Elders first."

She expected Djuli to lour, but instead she was smiling so broadly that it exceeded any smile Kayam had ever expressed. She was certainly not sullen. This was perhaps the best news Djuli could ever have received! Never in her right mind could she believe that the elf queen would immediately decide to accept her among the elves, in fact she didn't even hope for this. All she had wanted was to ask Luchilla to allow her to see Elfland... and now the queen of the elves was talking about perhaps accepting her?! She didn't consider it completely impossible?! How wonderful that would be! After this she shut her mouth and didn't say a single word, for she didn't want to spoil anything and ruin her chances.

"And if possible, could I also..." began Mr. Numo.

But the elf queen gestured violently with her hand. "No! Absolutely not! I can't even promise Djuli anything definite, but anybody else is out of the question! And I have to say that even in Djuli's case I'm only considering it because, although Tila's story has shown me that Djuli doesn't think in an elf-like manner, she is better than most humans, and more importantly she helped this lost elf child as much as she could," she said, pointing at Tila. "I realize that it must have been incredibly difficult for her to live in this savage region the way she should, because I can see that even Tila, an elf by birth, has done many things that are unworthy of an elf. So what can I expect from somebody who has never known an elf life, and who can't use magic to defend herself a little? In any case, for these reasons I don't see Djuli as completely hopeless, and also because she longs so much to be an elf."

"She never said anything of the sort!" shouted Mr. Numo.

"She didn't have to. I can see her feelings as clearly as if she had spoken them. You, Numo, don't want it anywhere near as much as Djuli! Not to mention that you haven't lived a life that would make you worthy of it, like Djuli has. And Tin would be very sorry if Djuli couldn't come with her. But in spite of all this, I can't even promise anything to Djuli. Elfland is not only mine, there are others who also have to approve. However nobody else has any hope of being accepted. Not even Djuli's mother—I want to make this clear before Djuli says anything. The woman called Muchi—even if she did predict that Tila would fall here—she's not an elf, and apart from Djuli she has two other children. As a human she lives quite well beside the Emperor now, and she may not even want to come with us. But if she did, then next she'd be insisting that her son and other daughter come along too. If Yana comes then the Emperor would want to come, and there would be no end to it! A line has to be drawn somewhere, and I've decided that it will be at Tin because she's actually an elf. And perhaps at a stretch, Djuli may also be included within this boundary. Certainly no others! Not even Djuli's beloved Horks, in fact *definitely* not them! Djuli will have to say goodbye to them, and we'll leave her some time for that. She can even say goodbye to her mother if she ends up coming to Elfland, but for the time being this is irrelevant because nothing is certain. So let's not talk about it right now—I'm more interested in things that are definite!"

"Yes, Luchilla. But tell me, aren't you afraid that the marid will notice the exchange and come to get you before Elfland arrives?" asked Tila. "Then you'll not only lose your freedom but also your eternal life!"

"Yes, I am. But what else could I have done—wait another millennium for better chance, which may not even come?! I hope that Elfland arrives soon, because once I'm in there I can't get hurt."

"Something should be done in the meantime, though. You said you only needed one crystal. Well take these! I still have two crystals left, and you're more worthy of guarding them than I am!"

Tila handed the crystals over to the elf queen. "Feel free to use them, as they couldn't be used for a better purpose!"

"You're right. But one will be enough," said Luchilla, placing one into her mouth. No obvious change could be seen in her. "It has done its job, thank you. I consider myself truly fortunate, and I really appreciate the crystal, Tila. It was kind of you to think of me. I must admit that I feel much calmer."

"I believe you," said Tila, and shuddered. "Luchilla, since I encountered the sprites I no longer condemn the human ancestors who ran away. I almost did that myself at first. The only reason I didn't was because I was so terrified I could barely move, and the marid would have eaten me if Djuli hadn't brought me to my senses by slapping my face! And the second time, when Kayam set the trap and all the sprites came, I really did run away!"

"Don't be too ashamed—you couldn't protect yourself against them."

"Nor could the human ancestors! I can't condemn them, Luchilla. If I was born at that time, I would have been among them. Not everybody is as brave as you."

"I'm not as brave as you think," replied the elf queen surprisingly, and lowered her head.

"What do you mean?"

"I fled once too."

"But that's not possible!"

"Yes it is. It is possible, Tila. I ran away, but not many know of this in Elfland. Only a few, very few in fact, not even all the Great Elders."

"But now you're the elf queen!"

"Yes. Because I came back. After I had been trembling for some time in voluntary exile, feeling great loneliness and remorse, the idea of Elfland came to me. So I returned and found a handful of elves with whom I could build it, and we moved in. But believe me Tila, I would never have returned if I had not had that idea. I am just as cowardly as you," and she gave Tila a hug. Tila leaned into her side with understanding and love.

"Well *I'm* not a coward, not at all!" Kayam blared boastfully. "As far as the sprites are concerned, my unprecedented brilliance..."

"Shush, Kayam!" Djuli stopped him short, for she felt Kayam's bragging was inappropriate. Kayam could ruin the most intimate moods in seconds. He was like an elephant in a shop full of valuable porcelain!

* * *

The remainder of the day was spent in conversation, and they barely slept. It was well past midnight when they finally went to bed. But in the early dawn Dredd roused them from sleep, as a large number of villagers were approaching armed with hoes and scythes, some even with swords, bows and slingshots. The Horks could prevent them from getting in, but they could see that these villagers did not necessarily want to fight, because they were shouting that they wanted to talk to Numo, Tila, Djuli and Kayam.

"Well there you go, so much for my reputation! They didn't even mention me first!" Kayam fumed.

Djuli and Numo were blinking sleepily, fiercely rubbing their eyes. Luchilla and Tila however were quite alert, since elves do not require much sleep unless they are very excited or severely exhausted.

They got up and wandered outside to the villagers, who had stopped about five hundred meters from the mansion. They would have come closer, but the four Horks standing there made them wary of doing so. Nevertheless, they were not that scared as they knew they were superior in number, and without even waiting for Tila to ask them what they wanted, they all started shouting. Wildly and bitterly.

"So you've got yourselves another elf, hey!"

"That's the last thing we need!"

"All non-humans should clear out of here!"

"The Horks reek so bad they should dig themselves into a deep cesspit!"

"Shit-eaters! They eat bowels, and that's full of the stuff!"

"They're not even the biggest problem! Kayam dishonored our wives and didn't even pay for them!"

"That's true, he didn't... he's a robber, a thief, he's taken our money!"

"Give us our gold back!"

"Get rid of the elves!"

"And the Horks!"

"Kayam too! In fact get rid of him first, as quickly as possible!"

"We don't need any sprites, nor elves or Horks, nothing, we want to be left alone!"

"Yeah, get out of here!"

"Ever since you lot came here, everything's gotten worse! We may no longer have slaves, but instead there are werewolves, a lack of decent women, a town full of criminals and thieves, and now we don't even have any gold!"

"Give us our money back and get your stinky asses out of here, otherwise we'll fight you to the death!" they shouted, and a few arrows and knives came flying in their direction.

"Don't worry about them Luchilla, we've had this sort of thing happen before. I'll take care of it right away—I'll make them soil their pants!" said Tila to the elf queen.

"Stop!" Luchilla halted her. "You are not to do anything this time Tila—leave it to the adults! Now it's my turn. You shouldn't treat people however you wish, because they're right. They have a right to live their own lives, and we should leave here. And we will!" With that she stepped forward. At the same time a band of rainbow-colored light projected from both sides of her body, which provided a defensive shield for Numo, Djuli, Kayam and Tila behind her. All the arrows and knives fell harmlessly before it. Now Luchilla shouted stridently at the protesters, "Listen!"

"There's no need for a lecture, beat it!"

"Yeah, get the hell out of here! The Horks even dishonored our dead!"

"You're a bigger threat to the village than a flood, a plague and a war combined! Clear off to a warmer climate!"

"We will!" shouted Luchilla, and everybody went silent. She continued, "We will leave as you have requested. Just have a little patience. Tomorrow our home Elfland is arriving, the place where the elves live, and that's where we'll be going—me, Tila, Tin and probably Djuli too."

"What about the Horks? We want them gone too!"

"Yeah, we want this to be a Hork-free zone!" shouted another mockingly.

"It will be as you wish," replied Luchilla. "I'll have you know that I am none other than the elf queen herself, and I personally promise you that the day after tomorrow you won't see a single Hork here!"

"No!" shrieked Djuli. "I won't allow it! You can't hurt the Horks!" and she rushed over to Luchilla.

"Calm down, the Horks won't be harmed, in fact they'll be rather pleased with what I have planned. It will work out well for both them and these people. Trust me!" She pushed Djuli behind her.

"We don't want to see that goddamn Numo here either, nor the others!" the people shouted wildly with more and more demands.

"Numo won't be here, nor anyone else. Nobody will be here at all!" Luchilla reassured them. "We will remain here today, but tomorrow Elfland will come to get us and the day after tomorrow you are free to come here and check that there are only empty buildings left—no humans, horks, elves or anyone else!"

"We'll set the buildings on fire!" yelled the men.

"You may do whatever you wish."

"Give us back our gold!"

"There's no question of that happening because it only causes you harm! I've told you what you can expect, so wait patiently until the day after tomorrow, and please go home now!" Luchilla waved at them in the manner of a priestess and turned to leave, not looking back.

A few people tried to catch up to her, but Djuli ran toward them, shouting, "One more step and we're not going anywhere!"

It was either this that stopped the onslaught of attackers or the fact that four Horks had stepped in front of Djuli, protecting their goddess with their bodies, and Tila hurried beside them. Kayam joined them too, smiling so cunningly that it was obvious to everyone that he could hardly wait to show off. This put the villagers on guard, because they knew to expect absolutely anything from Kayam. So they turned around and went home, hoping that in two days time everything really would be back to normal. They didn't have any expectations of getting their gold back, and Luchilla's promise had reassured them and filled their souls with great hope. Both Tila and Djuli were pleased that the matter had ended peacefully. Kayam was the only one left unsatisfied because he couldn't do any magic, but nobody had asked for his opinion.

They waited until the last villager was a good distance away and could no longer be seen, then Djuli turned to the elf queen with the following question: "Luchilla, I value and respect you a great deal, and I would love to be accepted among the elves, but even at the risk of angering you and being rejected, I demand that you tell me right now what you plan to do with the Horks, who mean much more to me than humans! I want to know what fate you have in store for them! I have a right to know, because I have a responsibility to them!"

But Luchilla didn't seem to be paying attention to Djuli, instead staring somewhere behind her with a pale, frightened look on her face. This expression seemed eerily familiar to Djuli. She had seen it before somewhere. Yes, Tila had looked just like this, it was when...

Now Djuli grew pale as she turned around, and lo and behold, she saw exactly what she was afraid of—not far from them, perhaps ten feet away, stood the marid! Although "stood" was not really correct in this case—"floating" would be a more appropriate word.

"Quickly Tila, quickly!" she shouted to the elf girl. "Throw me into the astral plane with the marid!"

"There's no point, it won't help you now!" they heard the marid's voice say. "Anyway, Tila will be better off if she does nothing. If she behaves herself and doesn't interfere, I won't hurt her for the time being. It's Luchilla I've come for!"

"He's right—don't do anything. Then you can escape!" said Luchilla hastily to Tila, thinking that if the marid waited just a single day after he took her away, then Tila could get into Elfland and would be safe from any sprites.

In the meantime Kayam examined the marid curiously. He even stepped forward a little to see better, and if there had been a magnifying glass around he would have probably used that. Then he turned and said to Tila, "Tila, with all due respect I have to say that you're quite stupid, or at best completely colorblind! This marid is not black as you told me, it's dark red! I don't even think there are black marids, so far I've only met red and white ones."¹⁵

"Kayam, don't worry about that now, make a run for it! You have no sprite trap here!" said Tila in a panic, and although she was ashamed to forsake the queen, she slowly pulled back. She excused herself by the fact that the queen had advised her to do this.

Meanwhile the marid continued speaking: "Oh, how foolish you are Luchilla! How could you believe that I wouldn't be able to distinguish between an elf and a human?! I realized what you'd done straight away when I returned to visit. I didn't even have to ask the human you put there in your place—it was all quite obvious. But she'll get what she deserves too, I just want to bring you back. I'll deal with her punishment later, because you're the one who's important to me right now. However I suggest that you come with me willingly if you don't want me to be rough with you. You'll still be punished for escaping, but it will be worse if you try to resist!"

"Shut up, you red ink blob!" sounded a highly indignant male voice, and the marid was taken aback. Naturally it was Kayam who said this, and he continued on. "Shut your mouth, or didn't you notice me speaking?! Be aware that I hate it, I absolutely loathe it when somebody interrupts me, do you understand?! When did I allow you this appalling discourtesy, tell me?! So shut up, and only speak if I give you permission! Now as I was saying..." and Kayam took a deep breath, turning again to Tila. "In my opinion, anyone who has eyes and isn't blind can see that this thing is not black, just dark red!" and with his thumb he pointed over his shoulder in the direction of the marid. "I admit that this red color is exceedingly dark, but it is indeed red, not black, so it can be said that..."

"Who are you to dare speak to me like that?!" the marid snapped.

"He's interrupting me again, I don't believe it! This thing is completely hopeless!" said Kayam angrily. "But okay, so be it! If you must know I am Kayam, the Great Kayam himself in person, Kayam the World's Prodigy, in the flesh, and none other than the Lord of the Sprites! So don't go putting on a show with me, lowly sprite—you should be bowing down before me and serving me with humility, for you and your kind were only born into the world to serve me!"

"Kayam, don't taunt him—keep in mind that you're not standing in a clausura now!" Tila shouted at him.

"It doesn't matter because I'm the Great Kayam!"

"This marid is extremely dangerous! It's impossible for you to defeat him!"

"Well, it may not be easy—a fierce battle will be necessary—but it's inconceivable that defeating him is not possible! Difficult perhaps, but not impossible! I consider this my first real 'acid test'! I have no doubts at all that any obstacle can be overcome thanks to my unsurpassed Genius!"

"But he'll kill you in a flash!"

"Oh, you poor thing... You're always focusing solely on what you've been brought up on and trained to believe, ignoring the fact that I follow a different path than the one you elves tend to follow. You permanently adhere to the delusions that infect all elf-brains, and you'll never be ready to remove the bias that exists in your perception! But listen to me—I, the Great and Invincible

¹⁵ There are indeed black marids, but they are very rare. Even so, Kayam will meet one of them in the novel titled, "Kayam's Sweetheart". In order to avoid any misunderstanding, the word "sweetheart" here refers to a human being—a wizardess, not a sprite...

Kayam, am now teaching you one of my wisest Truths. In order to gain Success it is indispensable to first strongly believe that we Can! Because Success is an extremely finicky being, with wondrously sensitive and efficient organs. She can sniff out from a great distance whether you believe she is coming, and if she feels that you don't, that you have even the tiniest of doubts, then she'll do everything she can in order to avoid you as much as possible! Keep this teaching in mind, Tila, because I'm telling you that unfortunately all elves live in an illusory world, just because they're too scared to open their eyes to Reality!"

Now that Kayam had finished his teaching, he lost interest in Tila and continued talking to the sprite. "I hope you and all the other sprites are glad to finally know your life's purpose, which is serving me. This can only fill your inner being with the purest joy, because I know how good it feels to know your purpose in life. And now I shall call upon you to..."

But he could not finish his sentence, as the sprite interrupted. "Your arrogance reaches the sky, but now you're going to be destroyed by it!" And with that the sprite shot a giant lightning bolt at him, which was so intense that the earth within a two-meter perimeter around him melted into a glass-like mass.

Tila was convinced that there was no remnant left of Kayam, but that wasn't the case. When the flash had ceased blinding her eyes, she could see that Kayam was standing in the same place intact, but he seemed to be attired in different clothing. He was dressed in a kind of white cloak, on which an extremely intricate pattern was daubed with paint and black ink.

Kayam began jumping around like a madman, spinning and dancing triumphantly, all the while showing his fist to the marid. "Hihihi, hahaha, you thought you could kill me with this, didn't you, dimwit?! Hehehe, hahaha! I tricked you as easily as a hot knife through butter, haha! You're probably thinking it was the clausura, right?! Well no, actually! Although I do always carry my talisman ring on me. It's this outfit—you wouldn't have thought, would you?! You can burn my external clothes, but that achieves nothing. Now I'll show you who I really am! If you want to fight, then fine, let's fight! But don't be angry with me, because it's what you asked for! You underestimated me, and now it seems it is *your* arrogance and over-confidence that reaches the sky!"

"Kayam, I beg you not to fool about, the marid is very dangerous! This is a very powerful sprite! Concern yourself with the fight, that's what's important here!" shouted Tila.

But Kayam shouted back, "The important thing is fooling about reasonably, and not reasoning foolishly!"

However he did not forget that he couldn't leave time for a more serious attack from the marid or for him to escape. So he pulled something tiny from his clothing that the elves, Djuli and Numo could not see from a distance, and threw it away. It quickly surrounded the marid and returned to Kayam, leaving a yellow circle of light in its wake. The marid sensed the danger and tried to break out, but his first attempts proved unsuccessful. Upon seeing this Tila began to hope. "Maybe Kayam will defeat the marid!"

But Luchilla watched the scene ashen-faced. "I'm certain that he won't!" and Tila saw that the elf queen was generating a protective magic circle around them. It wasn't just a simple magic circle, but almost a miniature equivalent of Elfland, a small dome on which a complex grid of light appeared.

"But you said you couldn't protect yourself from the marid!" Tila told her.

"This won't protect me from the marid. It's to protect me from what the marid is about to do to Kayam!"

And Luchilla was right, as a miniature sun suddenly formed in the magic circle constraining the marid, and an explosion of astonishing force took place. The marid was not holding back, and threw as much energy into it as would be used in a small nuclear bomb. The magic circle could not take it and broke, allowing the marid to escape. But a considerable part of the energy flowed into the environment, burning the vegetation everywhere and even melting rocks along the way. Everything would have gone badly for Djuli, Numo and the Horks if Luchilla had not been farseeing enough to create a protective field.

The marid then floated over to Kayam, enveloping him like some strange cloud...

"This is the end!" said Luchilla resignedly as she watched.

But now it was Tila who objected. "I don't believe that's true. It's obvious that Kayam's completely crazy, but he's a crazy genius! Even what little I know about his methods is astounding, and he has a much greater chance against a sprite than us elves! He certainly knows more than I do, and besides, at the most unexpected moments he'll come up with some truly incredible idea. Even if he does end up losing, I'm sure it won't be right at the beginning, and we don't even know for sure that the marid will win. The marid doesn't know it, but I think he's now found himself a worthy opponent!"

She was right. Because in the next moment an even larger explosion shook the area than the one the marid had previously produced. The ground trembled violently beneath their feet, causing them all to fall, and a huge mushroom cloud rose high into the sky in the place Kayam was standing. Fortunately the atomic flash was dimmed by Luchilla's force field, otherwise they would have been blinded, but even so they were still blinking and wiping their tearing eyes. With the exception of them, the raging firestorm had destroyed everything within a distance of several hundred meters, and the zone of destruction from the shock wave spread even farther.

"Wow... I would not have believed he could do that!" marveled Luchilla. "As an elf, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to do anything to destroy the marid, but I must confess that I'd be happy for Kayam to do it! After all, I'm not doing anything, just not intervening. And there is nothing that says we elves are obliged to intervene in the fights of others! Anyway, somebody is going to be destroyed here—either Kayam or the marid, and I don't see why I shouldn't wish for Kayam to be the survivor instead of the marid, if only one of them can remain alive! You're right Tila, Kayam isn't just anybody. Now I'm starting to have hope too!"

"But I no longer am," replied Tila, and looked forlornly at Kayam, who appeared before them unscathed from the center of the atomic hell.

"How come?! You're losing heart *now*?!" asked Luchilla in amazement.

"Yes, because Kayam has given up! Kayam wanted to capture the sprite, not destroy it! At least until now. But he obviously got scared and tried to kill the sprite. Which he didn't succeed in doing, because look, the marid is coming at him again! Oh, this is the beginning of the end! If Kayam is trying to kill the sprite it means he's very frightened, and if someone is in control of a situation they have no fear!"

Tila's reasoning was entirely logical, however merely erroneous. Of course if Kayam had really wanted to kill the sprite, it would have meant that he was frightened and things were going badly. But nothing was further from Kayam's mind. The marid had enveloped him, resulting in him not being able to see anything, however he had realized in astonishment that the magical clothing forming his protective space was pressing against him. Naturally he didn't want to flatten like a pancake, so he felt it imperative to move the marid as far away from his body as possible, preferably in such a way that the sprite would no longer have any desire to attempt this again. He decided on a suitable weapon, something he had never tried before, but according to his theoretical

calculations should work—atomic energy! It did not even occur to him that by doing this he might be seriously endangering the lives of his friends. He knew the marid would survive it, but at the cost of intense pain. So he went ahead with his plan, and the marid certainly did hastily retreat from him, however was soon back again, standing ten feet away.

Now Kayam threw something else high above the marid, from which glowing rays shot out and enclosed the marid like a cage. Then Kayam quickly began drawing various magic symbols on the ground, but because it was still glowing cherry red, he had to solve this in an interesting way—he pointed back and forth with his finger, and wherever he pointed the ground cooled and the black non-glowing parts formed the magic symbols.

Tila assumed that Kayam was probably trying to reinforce the light cage, but unfortunately he had no time for that. Because the marid generated a counter-cage from black rays, which pressed against Kayam's cage, and the two forces struggled with each other for a while before Kayam's cage burst and the marid was free again. Now the marid directed this dark cage at Kayam, closing him in.

Naturally Kayam attempted to escape, but it didn't work. He tried all kinds of strategies in vain, and no matter what he shot at the cage, his rays either glanced off or disintegrated into nothing. But Kayam refused to give up. He made a few strange movements, his mouth opened to mutter a magic spell that Tila and the others couldn't hear, and atomic hell was again let loose. However it didn't leave the boundaries of the cage. The mini-sun lit up—but the cage held strong. Kayam couldn't be seen, since due to his imprisonment the raging energy was not dispersing and this obscured him from the others, that is if the wizard was even still alive!

The marid no longer cared about Kayam, and flitted over to Luchilla's protective field. "Are you going to let me in, or force me to fight you?!" he asked haughtily. "Kayam can't hurt me, as you can see!"

"Is he still alive?!" asked Tila.

"He's alive, but don't hold much hope in that! He's my prisoner. And he won't live long... He doesn't have any air, he'll suffocate!"

However this time the marid had miscalculated, and very badly. Nobody knew what Kayam had done, but he must have come up with something, as the cage suddenly disappeared and the unleashed nuclear force swept across the devastated landscape like a destructive cloud.

The marid was dumbfounded. He immediately turned away from Luchilla and sped towards Kayam, most likely to carry out some more magic. And this was no joke, because as far as Tila could judge, Kayam now looked terrified. He was a fair distance away, but elves had good eyes and she could see it clearly... She could understand why too. This marid was very powerful, possibly the most powerful of the sprites, and Kayam was justifiably frightened that, even if only for a short time, he had been locked in a cage and not the marid! And because of this he almost killed himself with a nuclear attack!

It seemed that Kayam had now reached the point Tila had previously assumed of him—he had conceded that he could not capture the marid. This meant he would have to kill him, because he was threatening his safety. He bent down, pulled off one of his shoes and threw it at the marid with all his strength. Then his mouth began to move...

What occurred next made the previous two nuclear explosions seem like harmless fireworks in comparison. A loud roar broke out, a terrible cacophony, although Luchilla's force field considerably attenuated the unpleasant sounds. It also dimmed the light, however the radiation was so blinding that when they closed their eyes and put their hands out in front of them, they could see the bones of their own hands. Luchilla's force field writhed from the immense energy, buckling and then smoothing out again, turning from a hemispherical shape into a depressed eggshell. Soon it

could take no more and was torn from the ground, flying through the air at rapid speed before crashing into a nearby hillside. Those protected inside it got thrown about and bruised in the process. But it wasn't over yet, as the fire storm that had blown away their bubble continued onward, also colliding with the hillside, and in a blink of an eye melted into a stream of lava that coursed over the bubble. It was only trickling down the back of it, since at the front all the lava was blown away by the torrent of energy that was still flowing. At least their force field was now stationary.

Luchilla quickly healed herself along with everybody else, meanwhile whispering fearfully, "It's an antimatter attack! Annihilation! The most formidable destructive magic enclosed in the Great Oak! If only I knew how Kayam figured this out!"

"Well, he wasn't messing about, that's for sure! He clearly wanted to destroy the marid... But did he succeed?!" asked Tila hopefully.

"I wouldn't expect so," said Luchilla. "It is possible to destroy a sprite this way, but it would require far more energy. It could be achieved with an antimatter attack, but that would cause such a huge explosion that my force field couldn't have taken it and we'd be destroyed! The only way Kayam could defeat the sprite using this method is if he blew up half the Earth! The mere fact that we're alive is proof that the attack was not successful. In all likelihood the marid has suffered serious injuries and is in a lot of pain, but he'll survive."

When they could finally see again, it became apparent that before the explosion Kayam had somehow expanded his force field or perhaps done something else, it was hard to tell, but he was now standing on a small rocky summit that was surrounded by a sea of wildly swirling lava. It stretched almost as far as they could see. Tila presumed that Numo's mansion had also been destroyed along with its inhabitants, however she could not determine it from here because the house was obscured from the battle scene by a large hill. The side of this hill was glowing white and it was also surrounded by the bubbling sea of lava.

And the marid was still alive! He was hovering above the lava sea and aiming a white ray at Kayam the thickness of an arm, which spread into a white sphere around him. What this was and what it wanted to do to Kayam Tila did not know, and she assumed that Luchilla herself didn't know either, but she was sure that the marid wasn't planning anything good for Kayam.

Kayam had the same thought, and he had to admit that now he was really scared. He would have been very pleased if the marid simply got up and left. But he could see that the marid had no intention of leaving. This made Kayam incredibly angry. So angry that it overpowered his fear. "All right!" he said. "You asked for it! If this is what you want... If you're going to force me to...! I know a form of magic that will most certainly destroy you. Perhaps me too, but definitely you!"

He recalled the general structure of a nucleus. There are electrons that surround the nucleus like a probability cloud. And inside the nucleus are protons and neutrons... If he pushed the electrons into the nucleus then they would fuse with the protons to form neutrons, and the differential energy would be released...

But that was still insufficient. This would preserve the neutron material and thus produce less energy than an antimatter explosion, which was not enough to fight the marid. Mmm, but what would happen if the neutron matter itself was compressed? Kayam suspected that the neutron—since it was electrically neutral—could be compressed to any density level after overcoming the weak repulsive force. And then... then Nothingness would come into existence! But a kind of Nothing that was actually Something, because it was made out of matter, so its mass would remain.

He only had a vague idea of how he could use this Nothing against the marid, but all his wizard instincts told him that if he directed this artificially made Nothing as close as possible to the marid,

it would be terribly unpleasant for him, in fact downright deadly. After all, the marid was definitely Something, not Nothing!

Now he began to prepare this formidable spell. For this he needed matter, and since he couldn't take matter from the bubbling lava around him he took off his other shoe... Then he threw the shoe at the marid while he carried out the corresponding spell.

There was no flash this time, no fire storm. The shoe simply disappeared. However there was a windstorm—not as forceful as an explosion, but more like the intensity of a violent gust of wind on a stormy night. All the air suddenly began flowing toward the empty place where the shoe had been. The shoe seemed to have fallen down into the lava lake, for at the point where the shoe was definitely NOT, a vortex emerged and the lava started moving. Everything was flowing in that direction, increasingly rapidly, and as soon as the tons of molten rock reached that location it strangely disappeared!

When Tila and Luchilla looked over, all they could see was some kind of dull blackness. It looked like a big dark hole into which everything was falling. But this hole was growing in size! Kayam cast another spell and the hole moved, emerging from the lake and flying toward the sprite in the air. It was almost invisible, and could only be noticed if looking directly at it. Then it was as if one went blind for a moment and could simply not see anything there!

Now Luchilla shouted hysterically, "Kayam really has gone crazy! He's generated a Black Hole! He's a lunatic, this will destroy the Earth in minutes! Us too, everyone, the entire planet, and after that the Solar System!"

Tila did not require further explanation. Black Holes were basically a kind of special Gate, and everybody in Elfland knew how Gates worked. A Gate was a hole in Space, or in a more general sense—a hole in the space-time continuum, through which one could get to another place or time, or both simultaneously. Even to another Universe. So it was a Gateway to Elsewhere and Elsewhen.

The elves were not yet able to produce a Gate opening to another time. They could however create a Gate that would take them to a different place within the universe, and also one which enabled them to travel between universes. There were many kinds of Gates, one of these being a Black Hole, where the Gate—the hole in space—was created by the tremendous gravity of matter concentrated in one place. A Black Hole was the only type that spontaneously generated from stars, the largest ones, at the end of their lives. But they could also be created artificially with magic, and this was not that difficult to do. In fact it was quite useful, since it was possible to survive the fall into it and use it as a Gate. Of course, the Black Holes generated by the stars were also Gates, but where they opened was random. The elves figured out long ago how to set up Black Holes in such a way that they could pass through them and reach their desired location. This didn't carry any danger, as small Black Holes burst quickly. Their Gate Openings did not litter the universe with Black Holes!

Black Holes do however have one rather iniquitous feature—they can't be stopped! The matter within it actually disappears, and all its characteristics are destroyed. The only thing that remains is its gravity, which attracts other nearby matter into the Hole. As more and more matter falls in, the gravitational pull of the Hole increases and therefore so does its size, enabling it to draw in matter from further distances...

Small Black Holes will fade away on their own. But this takes time, and the larger the Hole the longer its lifespan. If something falls into it, it lives on, and this also increases the chance of something else falling into it, again extending its life. That is the reason the inhabitants of Elfland open Gates far away from stars or anything else, if necessary. That way during the short period of

time the Hole is alive, a few hours at most, there are no more than one or two stray gas atoms that fall into it, which is nothing. Thus the Hole cannot obtain any "food" that would extend its lifespan.

But this crazy Kayam had opened his Black Hole on Earth! There was plenty of matter here. Even though the Hole was still small, here there was nothing to prevent it sucking everything in like a greedy monster, even the entire Globe! Nevertheless, Tila understood Kayam's plan. The Hole could not be stopped from the outside, but he could control its movement. If Kayam could fly it close enough to the marid, then the Hole would suck the marid in too, since he was also matter. As far as Tila knew, the sprites could survive a fall into a Black Hole, but only if they were very well prepared beforehand. In this respect the elves had an advantage over the sprites. It was not only Elfland that could survive the passage through the Gates; Tila had also survived when she fell through it near Earth. Elves could do this due to the energy armor they constantly carried with them, which protected them against extreme heat and cold.

But they had no idea where Kayam's Hole would fly them to. Even if they survived the fall, they may drop into unfriendly territory and find themselves not only lacking food, but air as well... And even if they did survive this event, what would happen to the Earth itself and all the people living on it? To the Horks? To the animals and plants?!

Barely had this crossed Tila's mind, when it became clear that the marid was not stupid. He realized Kayam's intention right away, and was now no less frightened than Kayam had been earlier. "This Kayam is truly insane!" said the marid in dismay. "He's willing to destroy himself just to hurt me?!"

Of course, not even a marid could stop a Black Hole. Virtually every Black Hole would explode over time, but the largest ones would take over a thousand billion years. There was no power that could stop them from the outside, not even magic, because ultimately every stoppage attempt involves sending energy, and the Hole would just laugh at that as it only gets bigger whenever matter or energy falls into it. Basically, if a human encounters a Black Hole and knows he won't survive the fall (because he's not an elf), then there is only one smart thing for him to do—try to avoid it!

The marid did indeed take this one smart course of action, and decided to swiftly try to get as far away as possible from Kayam and the Hole. It was fine if Kayam fell into it, but he still wanted to live!

Tila noticed that the marid had suddenly disappeared, and she could guess what that meant. He was frightened of the Black Hole and had escaped. That was clever of him. The only trouble was that the elves, humans and Horks couldn't escape the same way the marid had.

Kayam was also aware of his disappearance, and he shook his fist in the direction the marid had gone. "Coward! Cowardly worm!" he shouted at him. "You can run away now, but don't think you can do it forever! The fight isn't over yet! For I am Kayam, and I never give up! Never! It's impossible, and you'd best remember that! My power is growing day by day, and when we meet again it'll be even worse for you than your destruction would have been now, because I will lock you into a bottle and leave you there to rot for millions of years! For I am Kayam, Lord of the Sprites, the Invincible! You couldn't even defeat me now! Nobody can defeat me, especially a sprite! If you think otherwise, you cowardly nervous wreck, then come back so we can continue our fight!"

During his triumphant threats he even forgot about the Hole, which began hurtling towards the ground, and what is more, directly towards Kayam. At that moment, however, Luchilla ate the last crystal they had, and Kayam suddenly realized that the control of the Black Hole had been transferred to Luchilla. And even though lava and air were still flowing into the Hole, Luchilla

accelerated it to a tremendous speed and it flew up into the blue sky, from there leaving airspace and zooming off into outer space. She was careful not to direct it toward the Sun, and soon it reached second cosmic velocity and headed out of the Solar System. It may have sucked in some meteors, comets or asteroids along the way, but it wouldn't be large enough to pose a threat to Earth. There was even a good chance that it would burst soon, since it was still relatively small.

"My goodness, that was hard work! I'm exhausted, but I am relieved that we got through it!" Luchilla sighed, wiping her sweaty forehead.

Tila gave her a hug, and although the queen did not say anything, she knew what her task was. She performed some magic, and as a result huge storm clouds darkened the sky from which heavy raindrops began falling. At first they sizzled and evaporated on the lava lake, but soon the lava cooled and solidified into a crust that was no longer hot and could be walked on.

As soon as this happened Kayam immediately rushed over to them, strutting like a victorious warlord. "I drove away the marid!" he boasted.

"Yes. And you almost destroyed yourself and the Earth in the process!" snapped Tila.

"But in the end that didn't happen."

"Well no, but only because Luchilla stepped in. Otherwise it would have been the end of everything, because you, Kayam, couldn't have driven the Black Hole into outer space! You don't have the power and knowledge to do that."

"For the moment."

"Yes, but it so happens that 'the moment' is where we are right now!"

"But nothing went wrong!"

"No, but you couldn't have known that beforehand!"

"Come on, it was perfectly clear that nothing would go wrong, since I can't die!"

"Why not?!"

"Because the entire World was created for my sake, and..."

"You fool! It was Luchilla who saved your life just now!"

"Of course, but Luchilla is also part of the World. She exists so that I don't get into any trouble, therefore she was here because she had to be here, to make sure nothing would go wrong!"

"Let it go, Tila," said Luchilla. "He's not capable of understanding anyway. Let's see if anybody needs help."

And indeed, there were many such people. Fifteen inhabitants had disappeared from the estate and they didn't know what had happened to them; either the atomic explosion or the lava must have destroyed them. Two Horks were missing as well, and the survivors suffered great wounds. In addition to this of course, they all received severe radiation sickness from the nuclear explosions.

Luchilla healed all the survivors, and was able to treat the radiation sickness too.

"And what about the villagers?" asked Tila.

"They were too far away to pick up any radiation from the blast itself, and as for the radioactive clouds, I drove them away into outer space with the Black Hole," replied the queen.

* * *

As far as the marid was concerned, he was truly frightened. He considered himself to be quite powerful, and until now he had never been afraid of elves or wizards. He knew that there were a few wizards around, however they had no interest in sprites, so he had no interest in them either. On occasion he ate the odd human, but never a wizard. He was certain that he could defeat them, but

knew that it would be significantly more challenging than dealing with an ordinary human. After all, the marid was inherently lazy and preferred to remain comfortable.

However he was thoroughly prepared for all the kinds of magic he believed an elf or a wizard could use against him, so he was not afraid of anybody or anything. And even now everything had worked magnificently until the last moment. He had received some injuries from Kayam, as Kayam had unexpectedly turned out to be a very tough opponent, but there was no doubt that he was well on the way to destroying the wizard. Yet...

Yet he had been prepared for opponents who were normal, sensible elves and wizards. It certainly hadn't occurred to him that he may have to fight somebody who was crazy enough to commit suicidal magic—the sort that could destroy even the wizard himself!

The sprite knew very well that an elf could survive a fall through a Black Hole without any problems, especially if they had some crystals. A sprite was able to do the same thing after thorough preparations, however a wizard would die the moment he fell into it! And Kayam had dared to create a Black Hole... astonishing! This wizard didn't care if the entire planet was destroyed!

The marid was sure that if Kayam hadn't been able to carry out this magic but one that could destroy the whole Universe, he would have done it without hesitation, even if it killed him, just so that nobody could say Kayam had been defeated by somebody. "He's completely mad!" thought the marid, and as he flew, a shiver ran through his almost matterless cloud-body.

It was clear to him that he might only have seconds before the Black Hole engulfed the entire planet, along with everything in it. So now he flew as fast as he could to his magic circle in which he had previously held Luchilla, raised it up high in the sky and left Earth, moving straight into outer space. And once he'd left the Moon's orbit he began a rampage, smashing and destroying everything in the castle, everything Luchilla had built. Although he took care not to hurt Varbilma. In the end nothing remained except a large pile of dust, and the empty magic circle that hung in the middle of space. Within it squatted Varbilma, delirious with terror. Now she sorely regretted her decision to take on captivity under a marid's control! Not only was she frightened by the sprite's rage, but by the fact that there was no longer any visible ground beneath her feet. She seemed to be hanging freely in the middle of Nowhere!

The marid stood before her and said, "You deserve to die, you damned worm, for trying to deceive me! You degenerate human, did you really think you could make me believe you were the elf queen?! You don't just deserve death, but a thousand years of torture! And don't think that I spared your life out of goodwill—it was for a very different reason!" With that the marid looked out from the magic circle to the Earth. He wondered why it still existed. The Black Hole should have sunk into the center of the planet by now and sucked all of it in. But this had not happened. And that filled the sprite with even greater terror. Could it be that this Kayam was such a great wizard that he even knew the secret of how to stop the operation a Black Hole?! Because he knew this was completely impossible... But what if the sprites were mistaken and it was indeed possible?!

Then he should be prepared for the worst. For although the marid had fled quickly, he had heard Kayam's last words very clearly and was inclined to take them seriously.

He turned to speak to Varbilma again. "I have just fought with a wizard. A very strong and powerful wizard. He obviously didn't defeat me since I'm here, but I wasn't able to defeat him either. Wizards have eternal life—not from birth, but they soon learn the magic that makes it possible. And as time goes on their knowledge grows. Now this wizard is completely insane... So insane that he's willing to destroy the entire world rather than let anyone defeat him! In time we are bound to encounter each other again, perhaps only after a million years, but I don't even want that! I have to hide from him, in a way that he would never find me!"

Varbilma said nothing in response, just stood there trembling before the marid. Then she collapsed, as her legs were shaking so much that she could no longer stand on them.

"A wizard is able to recognize a sprite at any time, even if it takes on another form, including a human form," continued the marid. "So if I want to remain safe forever from this crazy wizard called Kayam, there is only one thing I can do—give up my sprite nature and transform into something else! And the only way to do this is to unite with somebody. Not sexually, as humans do, but completely... for eternity. We have to meld into one being. And this other being, this human that I want to unite with—I've decided it will be you!"

"M... me?!" stammered Varbilma.

"Yes, you. But only if you agree to it. Unfortunately without your consent, it won't succeed. You are free to say no, that's fine, but then I'll have to kill you and search for another person who's willing to do it. I'll tell you what's involved. You and I will merge together to create a new being, who will be neither sprite nor human, but something else entirely. By my calculations, this new being is sure to retain its magical powers and perhaps be an even greater wizard than I am now, because you will be inside it too, and humans are degenerated elves! It is likely that both our memories will be stored in its mind, so this way we won't lose our continuity and won't die. This new being won't be a sprite, so Kayam won't recognize me in it. Of course, this endeavor is risky because I've never done this kind of magic before... obviously, since then I wouldn't be me anymore! So what do you say—will you undertake it?"

Varbilma nodded hesitantly. Then again, this time more firmly, saying, "Yes, I'll undertake it! And not just out of fear, so you won't kill me... with pleasure! Oh sprite, you're so kind! This is fantastic! I will finally be great and powerful, respectable... I'll be able to do magic... Oh yes, this is going to be the highlight of my life! See, I could sense it—I just knew my time was coming! Please, go ahead and get started right away!"

The marid proceeded. He shrouded Varbilma with his body, and eliminated the magic circle. It could not be known what he did next, but a few moments later there was no Varbilma or marid. Only a dazzling flash of light that even obscured the Sun for a short time, and an extremely powerful wave of energy emanated from where the marid had been, traveling at the speed of light and traversing the Cosmos.

And its intensity did not diminish for thousands of years. Neither Varbilma nor the marid were reborn; they were nothing more than a wave of energy. A thousand years passed by, then two thousand, ten thousand, in fact thirty-five thousand years... And still they only existed within this energy wave.

Eventually, however, the inevitable happened—the energy wave collided with something. And that was what it needed. It would not have mattered if it had collided with a star, but it did not. It crashed into a planet, one that was fit for human life. It was already inhabited, and its inhabitants called this planet Tlaxan.

The wave of energy hit the planet like a strong lightning bolt, near the coast. It was immediately destroyed. But not without a trace. When the flash faded, a small child of about five years of age was left behind on the sand. A little girl. She was born from the union of Varbilma and the marid. She had inherited Varbilma's human form, that of a female, and even her face was a little similar. In fact it was almost identical, in as much as a little girl could resemble an adult woman. But she had none of Varbilma's memories, neither any of the marid's. She was a completely new being, devoid of memories. Consequently, it could be said that Varbilma and the sprite both died. After all, the essence of an intelligent being is essentially their memories.

Therefore this final act of magic by the marid turned out to be fatal to himself as well as Varbilma. Kayam had almost committed suicide for fear of the marid, but the marid had actually done it. This could be considered as him leaving offspring in the world, but he himself did in fact die. He had died because Kayam was right when he said that it was important to fool about reasonably, and not reason foolishly. And although Kayam often fooled about, he always did it reasonably. But the marid was so terrified of Kayam that it could truly be said that he had reasoned foolishly!

The little girl did not lay on the sand for more than an hour. She looked at her hands and feet giggling, and was able to look into the glaring sun without blinking. This would have already signaled to anyone who saw her that she was not human, but there was nobody there to notice.

However soon some women came by, wanting to collect salt, and they found the little girl on the shore. Once they established that she was all on her own, they discussed what should happen to her. Finally one of them said, "My young daughter died last year. I'll take this girl in her place, because she's so adorable! I'm certain that the gods have sent her to replace my dead child. I shall raise her and give her the name of my daughter!" She leaned down to the girl and said to her, "From now on your name will be Tyimilee!"

But Tyimilee's fate does not belong to the content of this novel. If the Reader wishes to learn about this, it can be found in the following two novels: 'Give me back my death!' and 'The Floating Island'

Chapter 18: Elfland Descends to Earth

"I hope that Elfland arrives soon, at least before the marid attacks again!" said Djuli anxiously to Luchilla.

"I'm sure that will be the case. They plan to arrive tomorrow, sometime in the morning. And I don't expect the marid would attack before then, if he even tries anything like that again."

"I really hope so. Because Kayam may be able to create another Black Hole, but we don't have any more crystals for you to use to save the Earth again, Luchilla!" said Tila.

"Yes, but it's precisely this that I can't get my head around—how was Kayam able to do such a thing on his own?! Since you know how the Gate Openings work back home..." the elf queen mused.

"I think we should ask Kayam himself," suggested Djuli. "Because I don't really know how he did it, but if Kayam knows something you don't, then the simplest solution is to ask him to explain it to you. I'm sure he'd be happy to, being as vain he is!"

And Kayam did indeed listen with immense satisfaction as the elf queen herself asked him to explain something to her. For in doing so she was acknowledging his singularity and immeasurable intelligence!

First of all, however, he asked how the elves opened Gates. When he learned this he grinned smugly, "Well yes, of course it must be very difficult this way. I'm not surprised, since you create it from pure energy! But to store energy in the form of energy... well, that seems rather toilsome! Why

would you do that, when matter itself is enough for the Hole? And there's plenty of matter around us! Tila explained to me that an enormous amount of energy exists in just a teeny amount of matter—she even wrote down the formula for me: $E=m \cdot C^2$! And if a drop of matter contains this much energy, why would I bother producing energy when we're surrounded by matter!"

"But Kayam, if you use matter as the source of energy for the Gate, you can't predetermine where it will open!" said Tila.

"That may be, but until now I didn't even know this kind of Hole could open anywhere at all, and I don't particularly care!" Kayam shrugged. Then he showed the elves how he had made the Hole, of course now being careful to ensure no Hole would be created by his actions and therefore not completing the whole magic sequence.

Later when Kayam had gone, Luchilla said to Tila, "I have realized that Kayam's method is actually suitable for creating our Gates, with some small modifications. So from now on we elves will be able to open Gates anywhere without suffering. But I'm not telling Kayam this because I don't trust him—he's a completely irresponsible fellow! It's better if he stays here for now, in this Universe."

Tila nodded in agreement to these words.

The appearance of the marid had temporarily distracted them from Djuli's question, but Djuli had not forgotten about her loyal Horks and again asked Luchilla what she was planning to do with them. Luchilla replied with the following: "Djuli, the thing is that I don't think Horks and humans are able to live peacefully side by side for very long."

"That's not the fault of the Horks!"

"Perhaps not. You've known them longer than I have, so I'm willing to believe you. But this is like the werewolves that Kayam created—the first generation you created may consist of perfectly nice, decent individuals, but you can't know how later generations will turn out, especially when they are great in number and become strong. But that's not the point. You've heard the villagers—people are already hostile to the Horks right now. Even if the Horks remain as they are forever, there still wouldn't be any peace! The human race cannot handle anything that is different to them, or more precisely, if it differs from the average represented by the specific group of people. We elves know this very well. Humans reject, mock and humiliate those who are much weaker, more foolish or crippled than they are, but even someone who is very smart or differs in skin or hair color, or some other characteristic. There are some corners of the Universe where those with blue eyes are cruelly oppressed, purely because their eyes are blue! You should be aware, Djuli, that the Universe is full of inhabited planets. And most of the women in these places live in great misery and suffer countless injustices due to the selfishness of men, simply because they're weaker! Such is the human race... and we elves are unable to change that. And that's not the worst of it, because the people on these planets are continually developing their technology. Without the use of any magic, they are capable of the sorts of explosions Kayam made, which we elves call nuclear explosions. Then, armed with weapons of this nature, they start waging war on each other, generally resulting in the destruction of all humans on the planet, and sometimes the animals and plants too. Occasionally a small group survives, who fall back into barbarism, and with terrible difficulty they attempt to clamber up again to what they call 'civilization', only to repeat this self-destruction a few thousand years later. The only reason humanity has not been eradicated from the World completely is because sometimes history evolves on a planet in such a way that before their self-destruction they discover a method to travel among the stars, and before obliterating themselves populate several other planets.

"It's such a sad thing, Djuli, that even Tila doesn't know about it, or at least she's not aware of the full ghastliness of the matter, since we don't want to upset young children too much with this knowledge. We only give this information to those who are at least ten or twenty thousand years old. Poor Tila fell here onto Earth in her very early youth, and obtained knowledge that was not appropriate for her age. But you, Djuli, have lived here all your life and you know that I'm right! It's in the interest of the Horks for them to leave here, otherwise humans will quickly unite against them, and regardless of their strength they'll be destroyed! But I don't want the Horks dead, Djuli, any more than you do. We elves know many planets that are not yet inhabited by intelligent species. We will take the Horks to one of those planets, and they will be alone there and free to live a life of their own choosing. Would that be all right? Do I have your consent? If so, then you can go and prepare them for it."

"All right Luchilla. I understand and I can see that you're right. All I ask is that if Elfland won't accept me, then I wish to be taken to wherever the Horks will be from now on."

"Have you really thought this through?"

"Of course—this is my firm decision!"

"Then I'll promise you that."

"And what about Numo and the others?"

"There's a lot of anger towards them in this place, so they should also move out of here. But they are humans, so they don't have to go to another planet. There are many islands here on Earth that are uninhabited, in fact I know of an entire continent in the east. We'll take them there before Elfland departs. I think it will be good for them, and I'm sure they'll be happy with this too. Please discuss it with them," said Luchilla.

Djuli obeyed.

Finally Elfland arrived. It was not quite the following morning but around noon, although it was done spectacularly. For the whole sky darkened as the huge disc floated towards them. The landscape was shadowed all around as Elfland descended to a height of about fifty meters and hovered there, since the elves could easily fly down from this distance if they had eaten a crystal.

A few elves emerged to greet the queen, and to Luchilla's great delight immediately brought her into Elfland, which was the only place she felt truly safe. She had been away from Elfland long enough. Tila and Tin came with her, although they had to carry Tin because she could not yet fly, even with a crystal.

The elves also took Djuli, allowing her to look at all the wonders of Elfland while they decided her fate. Djuli just walked around, moving from one marvel to another. She didn't know which one she liked best. Tin did the same and soon found some playmates, in particular befriending an elf girl called Iki. So now Tin had a "tour guide", but Djuli was not left alone as Tila took on the role of hostess. And it has to be said that Tila was extremely jittery about whether the Great Elders would accept Djuli. Because while Djuli was "touring" Elfland, the Great Elders—led by the elf queen—were deliberating over this. And Tila had not been invited to this meeting. They knew her opinion on this matter anyway.

At long last the decision was made. It was announced to Djuli under the Great Oak, as well as all the elves, as everyone was present on this remarkable occasion. Naturally it was the elf queen that spoke. "Djuli, you are not an elf. But you have helped one—Tila, plus another elf, Tin, since although Tin wasn't born in Elfland, we still consider her an elf. We regard it as a merit to you that Tin could only become an elf because you wanted to save her and because you persuaded Tila to take action. To whom we express recognition, not because she should have embarked on such risky healing—it would have been better to wait for us, since Tin was not dying— but at least it is

indisputable that she was exceptionally successful in accomplishing the task set before her. Her manner of healing was as brilliant as if she were an experienced elf healer of at least a hundred million years!"

Upon hearing these words, Tila stretched out so proudly that if Kayam had seen it he would have gone to her for lessons on pride!

"So you have great virtue, Djuli, however you are not an elf, therefore we can't accept you as one. But we cannot deny the fact that there is much more hope for you than the other humans. And it's not impossible that given enough time you could become an elf, as Tin's case proves that it is possible for a human to achieve this. The Great Elders have decided—although I won't deny that it was not unanimous at all, and only a small majority were in favor of this—they have nevertheless decided to give you a chance, if you wish. This means that you have a choice: we can either take you to your beloved Horks, or you can stay here on Earth—whether it's where we are now or where Numo and the others are going—or the other option is that you can eat two crystals and we'll carry out some painless magic on you, allowing you to live forever as though you were an elf. But this won't make you an elf—you won't be able to do magic and you won't have a light dress, although you will be able to fly after eating a crystal like us. Not instantly, but after a long period of learning. And you could live with us, not as an elf but as our guest, a guest of the elves. However if you want to do this you'll have to tolerate us constantly teaching you, and adapt to our customs. We will do all this to make an elf out of you without the use of violent methods, merely by means of persuasion and love. It will be a great experiment on our part to see how hopeful or hopeless humans are. I, the elf queen, believe that even if not all humans are suitable to be elves, some of them may be, the better ones, and you Djuli are among them. I'll make no secret of the fact that I was one of your main supporters in the meeting, even though I barely know you, but I trust Tila and she has said a lot of good things about you. So make your choice, Djuli."

"But... but how can you ask what I would choose, Luchilla, when I've already told you long ago what I wish for?! Is there any human at all who would not want to live in Elfland?!"

To this Tila said, "Djuli, it's possible that you're already an elf—perhaps not completely, but you're half-way there anyhow. You're beginning to know as little about humans as an average elf like me, when I was first here. Because as an elf who has lived among humans, I can tell you that I'm sure there are many humans who would gladly live in Elfland, but at least as many who would not!"

"Why not?!" interrupted Iki, the little elf girl.

"Because it would bore them! They would be bored to death here because they would not be allowed to pursue their favorite pastimes—hating and killing each other..."

"I can't believe that humans behave in that way!" shouted Iki. "Djuli doesn't!"

"No, I don't," replied Djuli. "But Tila's still right, unfortunately many humans are like that. That's why I don't want to live among them anymore, and I'm very grateful that you've accepted me. From now on my home is Elfland!"

* * *

Djuli was given time to say goodbye to her loved ones who were staying on Earth, as well as to the Horks. She began with the Horks, whom the elves shortly afterwards relocated to another planet, many light years away. This farewell was not without tears, and it was not only Djuli who cried but many of the Horks too. However the leader Dredd himself told Djuli that she would be better off among the elves, as she was more like them than the Horks. And it was unlikely that the Horks

would enjoy living in Elfland, given that there were no fresh carcasses there to eat, let alone aged ones...

Next the elves took Mr. Numo and his people to a remote continent. They became the first humans there, the natives. Djuli said goodbye to them too, although they were no way near as troubled to leave her as the Horks. In fact they were practically intoxicated by the idea that they had received an entire untouched continent, where nobody would bother them.

And nobody did bother them for a very long time. Not even their distant offspring. But people who are familiar with history know that peace and quiet cannot last forever, even in their case, particularly if it is mentioned that this continent is nowadays known as America...

Finally with Djuli "on board", Elfland flew over Valle, as it was there in the capital that Mother Muchi, Djuli's mother, lived. Here Djuli met with her half-brother and sister Yana and Simor for the first time, only to separate from them shortly afterwards. Mother Muchi did not lament too much over Djuli. She loved her, and precisely because of this was beside herself with joy. Since her daughter could not have been more fortunate—she would receive eternal life and be among the elves!

Mother Muchi did receive some reward, for although the elves did not accept her, they allowed her to spend an entire day in Elfland and see everything there. In addition, the elf queen restored her youth so that the shaman woman now looked like a twenty year-old girl, barely older than her own children!

Djuli could not help teasing her about this. "Watch out that you don't make my sister Yana jealous, because the Emperor might start having eyes for you too!"

"That wouldn't be such a terrible thing. Emperor Zor seems manly enough for two women, and that way we could handle him better. Zor may well be a smart man, but he could benefit from some feminine wisdom in politics!" exclaimed Mother Muchi. And she was serious too. She saw nothing wrong with the Emperor having two wives, as on rare occasions this sort of thing occurred in the Zunzan tribe too.

Now only Kayam's fate remained in question. Although Tila and Luchilla were both in agreement regarding this. "There's no question about what should happen to Kayam! He should be allowed to do whatever he wants and just stay here, because on the one hand we can't control him, and on the other hand he wouldn't listen to us anyway. It's unnecessary to take him to another planet, as he can collect sprites just as well here!"

So they were not very concerned about Kayam. Only Tila bid him farewell, and she tried to impress upon him not to create any more Black Holes, because now the elf queen would not be close by to save him. But Kayam just stretched out with immeasurable pride and said, "Let's get one thing straight—it wasn't her that saved me, but me who saved her!"

Tila just looked at him forlornly, waved her hand and said, "Hopeless!" And with that she flew off to Elfland.

"Hey, that's my expression!" shouted Kayam indignantly.

"You know what? Let it be yours, I'll give it to you!" Tila shouted back, and disappeared inside Elfland. That was their leave-taking.

And so Elfland departed. Djuli watched the departure from within, because Tila had led her to her favorite spot, the top of the mountain, and from there Djuli could see the receding Earth beautifully. She continued gazing at the Earth, even when it was only a tiny bright spot in the distance. Eventually Tila got bored and encouraged Djuli to come down, as there were still many interesting things below that she had not shown her yet.

"Wait, let me watch it..." pleaded Djuli, but Tila tugged on her arm.

"Come on! Look, I agree that the Earth is beautiful Djuli, but that's in the past now. You didn't come to be with us in order to contemplate the past, especially not to mourn it. Your future is down there!" She pointed at the light of Elfland, to the crystal trees, the speaking grapes, the bell peach and golden apple trees. "That's where your future is, so why don't you turn your head in that direction, because it's best not to dwell on the past but look to the future. Come on, let's go!"

And Djuli did as she was told.

Now Kayam was left alone. Or so he thought... After Elfland had flown away, he began thinking about his future and what he should do from here on, which was not simple at all because he had never thought before about what kind of life a wizard should lead in isolation. But then a female voice startled him from his rumination.

"Can we go, Kayam?"

"Heh?! What?! I'm sorry?! Where?!"

"How should I know? You're the one who has to tell me!" replied Veeya, as it was the hork-eyed girl who had spoken to him. "You're the wizard, and the man... I'm just an ordinary human, and a female. I'll follow you wherever you go. But one thing is certain—we have to go somewhere, because the villagers really hate you here!"

"But er... Veeya, I thought you'd gone with Numo and the others!"

"I considered it, but then I told the elves that I'd rather stay here, and they didn't mind."

"But why did you stay here?!"

"Because you stayed here. And we both understand each other so well, don't we?"

"But you've often criticized me about all sorts of things..."

"I know, because you deserved it! And I'll do it again if you deserve it. But I can also acknowledge that you have a brilliant mind, and that you're a great wizard. And although you're inclined to talk a lot of nonsense, if I'm going to be honest with you, I still consider you to be a genius, and even a genius sometimes makes great mistakes. Besides, who has more of a right to make great mistakes than a great human?! Those with little power can only make small mistakes, but those with great power can make bigger ones. It's very simple! How could it be otherwise when you're just starting out as a wizard, and beginners always make mistakes! You have to learn how to avoid mistakes. So... I was thinking, Kayam, that perhaps we could stay together for a while. What do you think?"

"Yeah! Sure, why not?!" Kayam's face lit up. He was delighted by the notion, as he really felt understood by Veeya. "It's just that I don't know where to go..." he muttered.

Veeya, determined to help him, asked, "Don't you have parents?"

"Hey, that's a really good idea! Let's go to them!" and with that he headed for Sizon...

They talked as they ambled along. "I'm glad we're going this way!" said Kayam. "Valle is in this direction, although it's a bit farther than Sizon. But after visiting my parents I definitely want to go to Valle, to see the Emperor."

"What for?"

"Because something occurred to me. You know the thing Luchilla called a 'nuclear explosion'? Well I've figured out a way to achieve the same result without any need of magic. It does require certain special materials, but by my calculations they must exist in their natural forms here on Earth too. I'm guessing that if we can acquire this material in a clean enough form, which I have termed 'uranium', and we put rods made from this uranium in an appropriate geometric structure, it will start a transformation that will lead to the kind of explosion I created earlier. My equations showed this clearly. I think Emperor Zor would appreciate this weapon, and it would allow him to conquer

Torgo sooner. But even if he can't do it, he can still make a record of this knowledge so his son or grandson can make these weapons!"

"I don't know... Are you sure, Kayam, that it's wise to put such a powerful weapon in the hands of the Emperor?!" Veeya questioned.

"Certainly, I have no doubts at all! The Emperor should conquer as much as possible, since then he can abolish slavery and that would be a very good thing! Besides, he's a great admirer of me, and whoever respects me can't be a bad person!"

That night Kayam had one of the sprites conjure up a small two-room hut for them. Veeya went to sleep in one room and Kayam in the other.

It was around this time, in a completely different place, that Badjaharata the great wizard was checking up on what his greatest mistake, Kayam, was doing. He looked closely at Kayam's most important activities to date, and his face became deathly pale. "This Kayam is a complete lunatic! He almost destroyed the entire Earth, and... and..."

He did not continue, but instead handed the sphere to Chinkramasila so that she could also be informed of Kayam's strange activities. After the girl had viewed what Kayam had done thus far, Badjaharata continued: "Kayam must be placed under some kind of surveillance immediately! This irresponsible imbecile wants to carry out an even more preposterous plan—now he's preparing to present Emperor Zor with an atomic bomb! I have no doubt that the Emperor is incapable of creating one at present, as the current level of Atlantuan technology is totally inadequate, but if they note down the method then it may be possible within two hundred years or so, if they're devoted enough. We cannot let that happen!"

Chinkramasila, who knew the atomic bomb well from a time before the Earth was even populated, nodded briskly.¹⁶

"No, we can't allow that at all! What is your plan, Prof?"

"Kayam can't really be controlled by anyone but himself. We have to teach him some modesty. It won't be possible to achieve a great degree, but perhaps at least a little. And I only see one way of doing this—we have to show him that he's not the greatest wizard on Earth, in fact, not the only one! We have to bring him here to the School of Wizardry!"

"But then his knowledge will develop even further!"

"Yes, but those few years that he gains from our teaching so he can learn faster, that's nothing! Unfortunately as a genius he will eventually discover everything on his own anyway, but in the meantime he may destroy the Earth and us too with his experiments! It will be better if he learns the correct methods right away. And here we can at least keep an eye on him somewhat..."

"Won't he disturb the others?"

"For sure! But we'll just have to tolerate that, Chinkramasila. Besides, I think for the most part he'll be collecting sprites, which I don't have a problem with. At least he'll be occupying himself with something!"

So when Kayam and Veeya had fallen asleep, Badjarahata stepped off his flying carpet in front of the hut and simply walked through the board wall, shaking Kayam awake.

"Heh?! What the hell?! Who is it that dares disturb my sleep?!" snapped Kayam as he sprang to his feet.

¹⁶ Dear Reader, you can read about how the Earth became populated by humans in more detail from the following three novels, which are titled in chronological order: *Y*; *Badjaharata*; *The Two-Holed Man*.

"My name is Badjazarata," said the human form before him, who could be seen very well since he was standing in a circle of light. Kayam guessed that it had to be some sort of magic protective field, and he was right. Badjazarata had generated this around him out of caution, for it was a rather dangerous thing to awaken a person as crazy as Kayam. His biggest Mistake!

"Are you a wizard?!" Kayam asked immediately as he wiped the sleepiness from his eyes, and took a good look at the white light circle.

"Yes, and a much greater wizard than you are!"

"That's not true—I'm the greatest wizard!"

"Then prove it by coming after me!" said Badjazarata, and he stepped through the wall of the hut without using its door.

Naturally Kayam was unable to do so. He had never practiced anything like that before.

"Well, are you coming?" asked Badjazarata, sticking only his head through the wall.

Kayam was very annoyed. He hated being proven ignorant of something. "Get out of here, and don't yell because you'll wake Veeya up!" he shouted, with much more volume than Badjazarata had used.

"Calm down, she can't hear anything because I shielded her room. Veeya's room is dead silent. So, would you like to know how I walk through walls?"

"Would you teach me?!" Kayam's eyes began to shine.

"That's precisely what I've come to offer you... If you like, I will be your teacher from now on. You could learn a great deal—how to make flying carpets, crystal balls, magic wands, and countless other things! There is a School of Wizardry on this planet, and I am its director. If you're interested, then climb out of your hut and we can go!"

Kayam rushed out of the hut so fast that he even forgot to put his shoes on.

"Jump up on it!" said Badjazarata, gesturing at the flying carpet that was floating in the air.

And Kayam, completely forgetting about Veeya, obeyed right away. The girl never entered his mind again, only after about thirty five thousand years...

But one thing was certain—Kayam became a great, famous, and in many ways notorious wizard, who had many interesting adventures. And although he occasionally did some very stupid things, in general he did more good than bad for the world. In addition he diligently collected sprites, which significantly facilitated the lives of the elves. And they were very grateful to Tila, for the elf girl's great idea...

THE END

Dear Reader, if you are wondering about the fate of the poor, abandoned hork-eyed Veeya, then read the story titled:
Kayam's grandchildren

Or if you loved the Horks (which is perfectly reasonable, since they have been given a completely unfounded bad reputation in so many novels, who's authors revel in the slander of their misdemeanors!) and still wish to hear about them, then please don't hesitate to read the book titled: *The Ghost of the Amber*

But I must tell You, dear Reader, that my Poliverse-series includes not only those books which have been mentioned thus far in this novel... For below is a list of the entire Poliverse-series in chronological order! The titles marked with an asterisk (*) are just short stories or "novellas", their length being less than 60,000 words. However the other titles without an asterisk are sometimes very, very long... Of course, these were written in my native language, Hungarian, which means that most of them are still waiting for an English translation. I am waiting for offers from publishers and film studios to publish this entire series or some works from it in English, or to make a film series! But I'll tell you in advance, I'm not interested in offers that require ME to pay a certain amount in ADVANCE, that I publish the works "privately"... My view is that it is my job to write, and the job of publishers and film studios is to publish the works, either in the form of a book or a film, and make business from it! So I'm waiting for applications from SERIOUS publishers who don't expect me to do the organizational and marketing work as well! Sorry, but I don't understand that. I can only write...

Please send offers to the following email address:

carnivorecaveman@protonmail.com

So here is the Poliverse series:

The Perfect Solution (*)

Breeding Humans (*)

Y

Badjazarata

Cripples (*)

The Two-holed Man (*)

The Sky-high Tree (*)

Kayam, the Mistake

Dark Truth (*)

Once Upon an Era... (*)

Kayam's Sweetheart

The First Invasion of the To-Be-Hanged

The Renegade (*)

Lord of Lightning (*)

Kayam

Kayam and the Diadem

Kayam and the Lord of Monsters

The Lost Princess (*)

Sittie, the Wizardhorse

Candiman (*)

Kayam and the Soothsayer

Kayam and the Hidden City

Rescuing Kayam

My Little Baby Spy

Daughter of the Priestess
Kayam in Captivity
The Book of Power (*)
Black Pearl
The Dwarf Witch
The Barbarian Woman
The Great Exodus
Kayam's Daughter
Path of the Silkworm
The Great Expansion
Remembrance of the Queen
The Bodyguard Horse
The Island of the Phallocrats
The Pirate Queen
The Triumph Token (*)
Kayam's Bet
Daughter of the Light (*)
Tiger-bridal
The Story of Nyau
Give me Back my Death!
The Floating Island
The Sexbombe (*)
Kayam as a Woman
Maua
Zardan the Tyrant
Traitors (*)
The Ghost of the Amber
Yummy Mummy (*)
Colossus
Sex-slaves (*)
The Writings of Kayam (*)
The Kayam Plan (*)
The Book of Kayam (*)
The Real Gold (*)
Empire of the Golden Father
Knights of Intellect
Psychological Novel (*)
Last Days (*)

The Eye (*)
Loveschild (*)
Mouse God (*)
Wraith-children
The Book of Fate (*)
Bio (*)
The Waste Princess (*)
Children of the Virgin Father
Revenge of the Chisees (*)
Barbarians (*)
The Heroes Return (*)
Kayam's Grandchildren
Kayam's Experiment (*)
Pull of Money
Kayam's Sprite
Kayam the Celeb
The Big Yearning
Island of the Earthquakes
Spirited Present
Kayam and the Gods
Soul-attendance (*)
The Legacy (*)
Money Talks
Whitekind
Fff
Brain
Alternative (*)
The place to be (*)
The Fugitive Groom (*)
Fatties (*)
Watchdevils (*)
Rock-music (*)
Matt (*)
Spring (*)
The Power of Music
Specialists
The Light-bearer
The Rebirth of Ofra Haza

Ofra Haza and Kayam

The Beloved Woman (*)

True Longing (*)

The Mistlanders

Children of Iron

The Planet of the Seven Suns

The Portable Hole

Kayam and History (*)

The Magical Carriage

The Big-eyed (*)

Aspia

United Planets of the Universe

Kayam's Light-Garment

You are destined for me

Vegania