



Oisín McGann

THE
HARVEST TIDE
PROJECT

PRAISE FOR *THE HARVEST TIDE PROJECT*

‘Inventive comic fantasy in which Lorkin and his sister Taya become involved in saving their tribe from the clutches of power-crazy neighbours: some wonderfully weird secondary characters.’

The Irish Times

‘I thoroughly enjoyed it. It’s one of those rare gems that are perfect for every age group.’

Evening Echo

‘I would definitely recommend this book to other readers, as it is a spectacular tale, full of adventure and magic. Because of its fast-moving plot and straightforward style, I think this book is suitable for 10 to 15 year olds.’

Teenager reviewer, Evening Echo

PRAISE FOR *THE GODS AND THEIR MACHINES*

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EOIN COLFER,

author of the Artemis Fowl trilogy and The Wish List

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CELIA REES, *author of Pirates!*

THE HARVEST TIDE PROJECT

THE ARCHISAN TALES

OISÍN MCGANN



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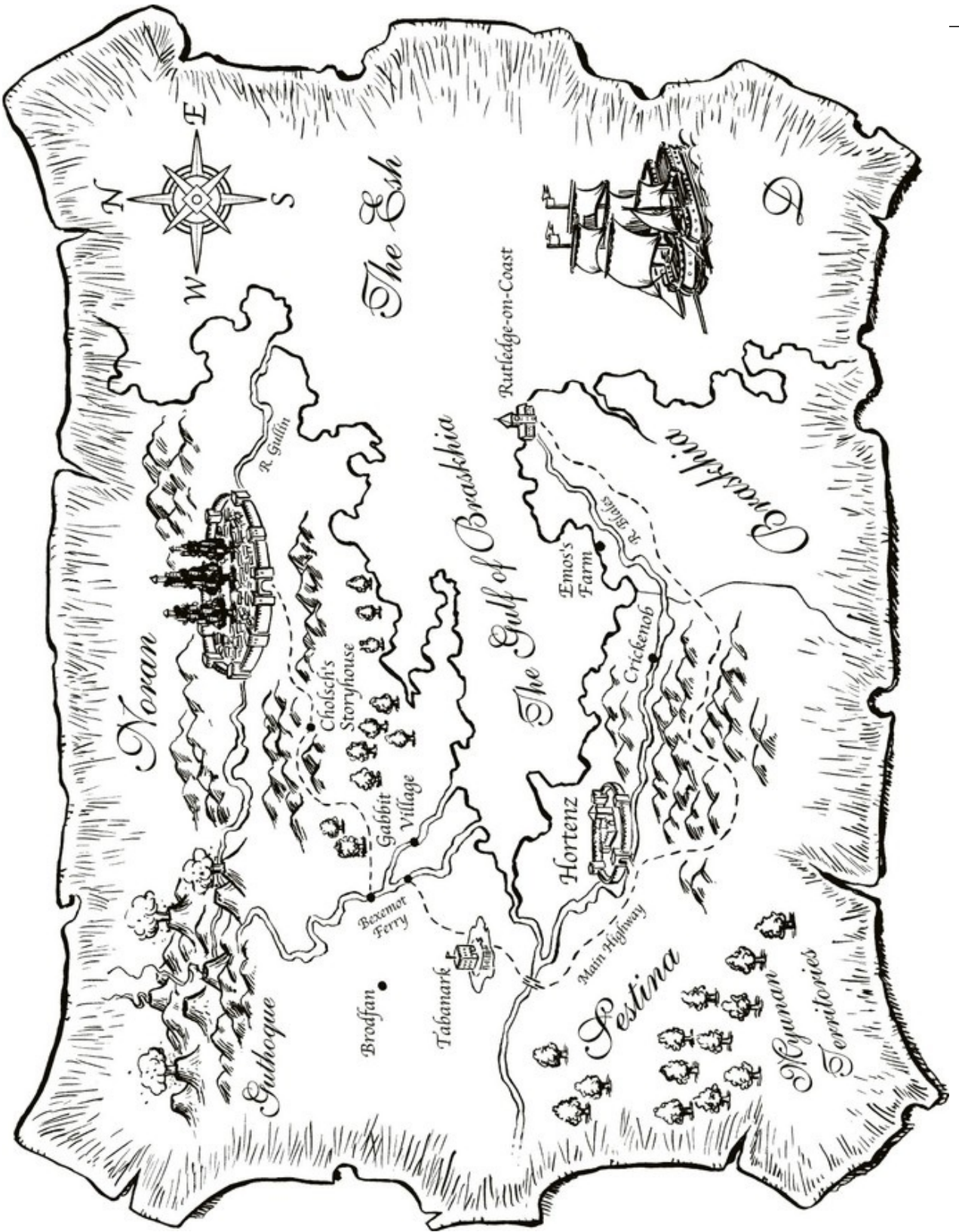
This is for my brother, Marek – for being there to talk stories when we were young.

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PROLOGUE



If Taya and Lorkrin Archisan had known how much trouble their curiosity would cause, they might have thought twice about searching for that door. But they would probably have gone and done it anyway.

It was Lorkrin who had first discovered that two of the rooms were too small for the house. The combined length of the two rooms that lay within the west side of their uncle's farmhouse was four paces shorter than the outside of the house. Walls just weren't that thick. So, like anyone else with a little imagination, they had come to the conclusion that they had found a secret room. All that remained was to find the door and figure out how to open it.

While Taya searched the dividing wall in each room, Lorkrin started pushing and pulling things in the hope of finding a hidden lever. He was disappointed with the lack of results. Not one of the candlesticks, books or pieces of sculpture caused any movement in the stone wall. But Taya did find something, a small gap between two of the stone blocks, hidden from sight behind a small tapestry. She called her brother in the next room and moved the embroidered picture out of the way to show him.

'That's got to be it,' he agreed. 'Have a go.'

They both knew that their uncle would not use a normal catch for his hidden door. He would have built something only a Myunan could open. Myunan flesh was unique; it could be shaped and reformed like modelling clay, allowing them to change their shape at will, an ability known as 'amorphing'.

Lorkrin watched as Taya pressed her right hand down on a side table, letting it go soft and kneading it out with the left until her wrist, palm and fingers tapered into a flat, knife-like shape. It was not thin enough to slip into the gap between the two blocks. In the cavity behind the wall, she felt a round handle and, keeping her wrist thin and flat, she let the rest of her hand go solid again and grasped the handle with her fingers. It turned smoothly and there was a click. The two children breathed out softly with excitement. They had found the entrance to their Uncle Emos's studio.

With a whirring sound, a section of wall swung inwards, and the two Myunans peered inside. A flight of steps led down into the darkness of a cellar. Taya slid her hand from the gap in the blocks and slunched, letting her arm return to its normal shape. Lorkrin found a lantern hanging just inside the door and fetched some matches from the kitchen to light it. Then the boy started down the steps, closely followed by his sister. The steps led further down than they would to a normal cellar. Taya counted fifty-two steps to the bottom, and what they saw there explained why it was so deep, so secret.

Here was the proof that their Uncle Emos practised the dark art of *transmorphing* – forcing other materials to become as pliable as his own flesh. The room was as big across as the whole farmhouse above it, with eight brick pillars supporting its roof and the walls lined with shelves and cupboards. One wall was given over entirely to a rack of deep, square pigeonholes to hold a huge collection of scrolls. Myunans did not use books; what little they did write down was in the form of pictograms on sheets of vellum.

Taya and Lorkrin had no interest in the scrolls, because all around them were several workbenches

where Emos practised his craft. On each was at least one work in progress. Pieces of metal, wood, even some living plants, had been twisted and contorted into weird and unnatural shapes. There was a cactus that had been sculpted into a winding centipede, a windblown tree crafted from dinner forks, and there was even a sheep's skeleton that had been transformed into an armchair. The plants were the most fascinating. Still living, they had been distorted beyond recognition as Emos honed his skills. Around the room, stumps of trees, shards of metal and other materials were in various stages of being twisted into human or animal figures. The half-finished pieces betrayed the unnatural way he could work any material as if it were clay, with fingerprints left in solid steel, and wood spread across bench-tops as if turned to liquid. So this was what transmorphing looked like. Emos Harprag was obviously a master at sculpting other objects as if they were extensions of his own malleable body. It went against everything Taya and Lorkrin had been taught, and it gave them the shivers. But the children walked around the room, spellbound.

'He's going to be really angry if he finds us here,' Taya whispered.

'He can't blame us for having a look around, can he?' Lorkrin argued. 'It's not like he *told* us to stay out, is it?'

'No, he didn't tell us anything about this place,' Taya said back. 'That's the whole point. This was supposed to be a secret.'

'Well, think of it this way,' her brother persisted. 'If he had told us he had a secret room somewhere, but he didn't want us looking for it or going into it, then he could be mad at us. But seeing as he didn't mention it, and we've just happened to find it ... it's sort of like we've earned the chance to have a look around, yeah?'

Taya gave her brother a withering glance and he could tell that she was not convinced. But then neither was he. Emos was away in Rutledge and would not be back for some time, so they decided to leave the worry about punishment for later. In the meantime, there was a fantastic new world to explore. Neither of them had seen transmorphing before; they had only ever heard stories about it. It was strictly forbidden for Myunans. Lorkrin picked up one of the curling hooks and admired the craftsmanship. He and Taya still only had novice tool sets, and, of course, they were only able to use the implements on themselves. Uncle Emos had the tools of a master.

'Ma and Pa said he'd stopped after Aunt Wyla died,' he said. 'Do you think they know about this?'

'Of course they know,' Taya grunted. 'Pa helped him build the house, didn't he? They just don't tell us anything, that's all.'

She came to a workbench near the centre of the room. On it were a few tools, some scrolls covered in sketches and a tray holding a clump of mushrooms that were on their way to becoming a crouching frog. She ran her fingers over one of the sheets of vellum and gasped. The notes on the calf skin were not made by ink; they seemed to have grown into the hide itself. The page was only half full, and there was a quill lying beside it. There was no bottle of ink in sight.

'Lorkrin, look at this! He can use the transmorphing to write.'

Lorkrin picked up the quill.

'He must save a fortune on ink,' he quipped.

Taya held up another sheet and studied the script. It was Sestinian, and she was not able to read some of it, but it was definitely describing some arcane techniques.

'Let me see!' Lorkrin snatched it from her to try to read it.

'Hey! I was looking at that!' his sister snapped and seized the page. Lorkrin pulled back automatically and the vellum stretched and tore. They froze, staring in horror at what they had done, and around them there was the sense of a breath being drawn. Then, from the very sheet in their hands

there came a sound like the shrieking of a cat. Staring down at it, they saw blood starting to ooze from the torn edges. They dropped the vellum to the floor and stepped back from it, covering their ears and block out the raucous crying.

‘It’s hexed!’ Lorkrin moaned. ‘Aw, bowels! What are we going to do?’

Taya didn’t answer. She was already heading full tilt towards the stairs. Lorkrin darted after her, covering her heels as she ran up the steps. At the top, they blew out the lantern, hung it back in its place and swung the heavy door shut. They leaned against it as if to hold it closed and tried to catch their breath. Lorkrin jumped as he realised he was still holding the quill. What should he do with it? He did not dare leave it out where their uncle might see it. He tucked the pen away in his tool roll and swore to himself to try to return it later.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Taya whimpered. ‘He’s going to kill us. He’s going to go insane. What are we going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ her brother muttered. ‘All I know is that I don’t want to be here when he gets back. And we can’t go home, because that would be just as bad as soon as he found us. We need to get out of here. I think we should run away.’

‘What ... again?’

‘Yeah, I think so. But not like the other times. I mean really far away, maybe Hortenz or even further. We went into a room we weren’t supposed to be in, tore a page we weren’t supposed to see and set off a hex. I think we need to get out of the country. We could go to Rutledge, hide on an esplanade boat and maybe get a ride up the coast.’

Taya considered this. It was drastic, that was true, but they had seen Uncle Emos angry before and they had been trying his patience lately as it was. He would not take this well. Taya looked into her brother’s frightened face. Deep beneath her feet, she could just hear the sobbing of the torn vellum. A lump rose in her throat and she gulped.

‘Let’s pack,’ she said.

1 THE DEAD MAN'S QUESTION



Emos Harprag sat quietly in the passenger seat of the wagon as it was driven into the town of Rutledge-on-Coast to see a dead man. The oil-powered engine took up the entire front half of the vehicle and belched smoke into the air over his head, stamping its sooty mark on the sky. It was still early in the morning, and Peddar Murriss drove the wagon at close to its top speed down the empty, winding streets. Emos was slightly amused and curious about his friend's urgency. Murriss was normally eager to talk but today he was quiet and pensive.

He had said little about why he had come all the way out to Emos's farm, asking only that the Myunan come back with him to Rutledge, but it had something to do with a dead body they had discovered. Some poor soul who had been murdered, his corpse dumped where it should never have been found. Emos would not have considered himself an expert on the dead. He had trouble enough relating to the living, and there were constables in Rutledge whose job it was to deal with such crimes, but Murriss seemed to think he was needed.

Emos Harprag was a lean man of average height, with long, grey hair and a solemn, almost stoic expression. His face was mature, but had few lines, as was common in Myunans. The triangular tattoo that he bore on his face attracted little attention in Rutledge-on-Coast, but it marked him out as an exile to Myunans everywhere. Because of his past, he could never live among his own people again.

As they turned onto the road that led down to the docks, the esh came into view and Emos could smell the tang of sessium on the breeze. Rutledge was on the coast of Braskhia, and like most of the other coastal towns, had made its life from the esh – for there was no water off the coast of Braskhia, at least none that could be seen. Stretching from the docks to the horizon was an ocean of gas, white with a warm yellow tinge, which lay like a blanket of cloud over everything east of Rutledge. The gas was called sessium, and it was so heavy it sank through air to lie thickly on the ground. The sea of sessium that stretched out before Emos's eyes was called the esh and the people of Braskhia had made their living from it for as long as anyone could remember.

'The body's still aboard the *Lightfoot*,' Murriss grunted, referring to his boat as he steered the wagon around the end of a warehouse and turned left along the docks. 'We didn't want to move him until you'd had a look at him. Bring a dead man down off a boat and soon every busybody in town will be hanging around wanting to know who he is. We figured it would be best to find out what we can about him first, before tongues start wagging. There are some odd things about this corpse ... and odd things do seem to be your speciality.'

Esh-boats lay at anchor in the harbour or moored to the docks. With three hulls and an array of masts, each one was lighter and more complex than any ship made for travelling on water. Murriss drove past a number of different kinds of vessel before bringing the wagon to a skidding halt at a jetty that led out to a fishing trawler.

Peddar Murriss was a stocky, jovial man with a bushy moustache that travelled down his cheeks and up to meet his sideburns. Despite the fact that as chief engineer on the *Lightfoot*, he was literally responsible for the lives of the crew by maintaining the hydrogen in its sealed hulls, Murriss was a relaxed and mellow-natured man. But his face was troubled now, as he led Emos along the jetty and up the gangplank. The Myunan experienced the brief feeling of vertigo that he always got when stepping onto the deck of an esh-boat; he could feel the shifting swell of the gas beneath the hull. The captain waved his pipe at them from the bridge above and gestured at them to wait. The eshtran was on the deck in front of them, giving the Last Blessing to the dead man.

According to Braskhiam beliefs, a man had to meet his god with pure air in his lungs, and the eshtran, a Braskhiam priest, was administering that final breath with a small bellows. After he had muttered a few words, he slipped the bellows into a scabbard on his belt and made a sign with his hand from his chest to his mouth and back again. Murriss walked over with Emos, both of them covering their noses and mouths against the smell.

‘Don’t mind the way the arms and legs are broken,’ Murriss told the Myunan. ‘The healer says that was done after he was dead. It probably happened when his body got caught on the boat’s anchor. The man suffocated.’

He held up a breathing mask and section of hose; the hose had been cut with a knife or other sharp tool. The man was also wearing a safety harness on his hips and the rope from this too had been cut.

‘Definitely murdered,’ Murriss added, confirming Emos’s unspoken thought. ‘He’d been diving in the esh and someone cut his air hose and safety line. He was left to die down there, out past Crofter’s Point. He didn’t have a hope of making it to land. The healer reckons by the extent of the rot that he’d been down there nearly two weeks. Things rot slow in the esh. It was a chance in a million that he got caught on our anchor. Someone killed him and left him where they thought he’d never be found. But it’s what he was doing diving out there in the first place that has us puzzled. Apart from the fishing there’s nothing of interest out there, just weeds and rocks. Nobody who has any business bein’ on the esh wastes their time diving off Crofter’s Point.’

‘Well, something down there must have been important to him.’ Emos studied the bulging eyes and bluish skin. The man’s tongue was protruding slightly and his lips were blue. Esh creatures had been taking nibbles out of him and there were open wounds, but no blood to speak of. His flesh was swelling as it decomposed and his clothes were tight on his body. The boots and harness were of military style, but this man had been frail, and wore a long beard; he was no soldier. The rest of his clothes were simple garments. The knees of his trousers were dirty as if he had done a lot of kneeling, and his jacket had pockets full of folded sheets of parchment. Emos unfolded a couple. They contained crumbs of soil. He checked the corpse’s hands.

‘He has earth under his fingernails – not the mark of a man who works out at esh,’ Emos remarked.

‘That’s not all,’ Murriss added. ‘He had a satchel around his neck when we pulled him in. Have a look at this.’

One of the men brought out the bag, handed it to Emos and stepped quickly back. Like other men among the crew, he seemed uneasy around Myunans. Emos was not bothered; it was still better than the treatment he received from his own people. He unbuckled the satchel and opened the flap, emptying its contents onto the deck. He frowned. There was a trowel, an auger, a gardening fork, a small pair of shears and some more soil samples. There was also a sheaf of notes on parchment.

‘None of us can read them,’ Murriss told him. ‘They’re in a language we’ve never seen before.’

‘Actually, I think you have,’ Emos replied. ‘It’s Sestinian, but he’s used shorthand, a type the scientists use for making quick notes. These are measurements for things like fertiliser, moisture

levels, temperature ... but what was this man doing walking around at the bottom of the esh?’

~~‘That’s what we’d like to know,’ Murriss said. ‘And why did someone feel the need to kill him?’~~

‘Well,’ Emos shrugged. ‘Judging by this, he was involved in nothing more mysterious than gardening, if in a slightly unusual location ...’

He stopped. One page in particular appeared to have been written in haste, as if the man was excited or upset. There was one last line scrawled across the bottom of the page. Murriss looked over his shoulder.

‘What does it say?’ he asked.

‘It says, “How many people will die?”’

Emos looked up at Murriss.

‘This might be something we need to know about.’



Emos Harprag lived on his small farm in Braskhia, a day’s walk from Rutledge-on-Coast, having given up the nomad life of a Myunan and settled down to make a living raising crops and livestock. The land was fertile and was also close enough to the esh to see the Harvest Tide every year. He had been exiled from his tribe years before, and his only contact now with the Myunans was the occasional, discreet visit from the Archisans: his sister, her husband and their two children. Sometimes they left his niece and nephew with him to stay for a few weeks. It was good for the children to experience a different way of life, and Emos was not the type to back down from a challenge.

It was late in the day when Murriss left him back to his gate and waved him goodbye. They were both troubled by what they had seen and the ominous warning in the dead man’s notes. With his mind mulling over the mystery, it took him some time to notice that there was no sign of his niece and nephew. From somewhere, he could hear the faint sound of a cat wailing.

The tapestry on the wall of his travel room was crooked. Breath hissing through gritted teeth, he opened the hidden door and hurried down the steps. Lorkrin and Taya had entered his studio. He should never have left them alone in the house for so long. A valuable sheet of ancient Parsinor curses shrieked from the floor at the bottom of the stairs. He silenced the hex by licking his finger and thumb and pinching the torn ends together. He soon discovered that the little maggots hadn’t stopped damaging the scroll. They’d made off with one of his transmorphing quills. He stormed back up the stairs and slammed the door shut behind him, his normally impassive face tensed in fury.

Emos packed his tools and some other essentials in a backpack, locked up his farmhouse and set out to track them down. He knew they would run, but he had tracked and killed more cunning predators than them and he would see them punished before the week was out.

They had left in such a hurry that they had not even bothered to try to hide their trail, so he followed at a fast pace, his eyes, ears and nose seeking out any sign of Taya and Lorkrin, but his mind occupied with what he had seen in Rutledge that day.

The mix of the dead man’s military and peasant equipment, the notes made by someone with scientific education, the way he had been murdered in cold blood – it was all very strange and, as Murriss had said, Emos was fascinated by strange things. Whoever this man had been, he had carried some terrible knowledge, and it was probable that someone had killed him to ensure his silence.

He reached a fork in the road, one way leading east towards Rutledge-on-Coast, the right turn leading west to Hortenz. Emos followed the faint tracks in the dust up the left-hand fork, but they soon

disappeared. He sighed, studying the hedges on either side, then backtracked and headed up the road Hortenz where he soon came upon their trail again despite the fading evening light. They were going to have to do better than that.



Hortenz was big and loud on the morning of market day. The market was in full swing and the voices of traders competed with the sound of engined wagons and various animal noises. Taya and Lorkrin walked down a street past a woman selling bottled smells, and a tanner's stall, and through a rendacrion auction. The huge, hairless, slug-like creatures sat bloated and sleepy and ready for slaughter, and buyers wandered among them trying to decide which would give the best meat. Taya was leaning in to pet one when her brother grabbed her, pulled her down off the fence and in behind some crates. He put a finger to his lips and pointed. There, in the throng of people milling around the market, was their uncle.

'How did he find us so fast?' she gasped. They had walked late into the night to reach the town before they had slept; their uncle would have had to walk all night, tracking them in darkness to catch them up so quickly.

'He hasn't found us yet,' Lorkrin whispered. 'But what are we going to do?'

Taya spotted a grate in the ground not far from them and nodded towards it. They crept up to it, and between the pair of them they were able to lift it up. There were some iron rungs in the wall below and they climbed down these, closing the grate above them. They found themselves in a sewer. Taya pinched her nose and grimaced.

'I thought the smell was from the rendacrions farting. If I'd known ...'

'Let's wait here for a bit, until we decide what to do. At least it's safe,' Lorkrin muttered, peering up through the grate. 'He can't stay up there forever. We'll hang around until it's dark, and then go.'

'All right then.' His sister searched around for a clean place to sit down. There wasn't any, so they walked down the tunnel a bit until they found a more open area with large pipes running across the floor and two support columns in the middle, Taya sat down on one of the pipes and rocked back and forth, thinking to herself. They were in awful trouble, and as usual it was Lorkrin's fault. Feelings of guilt about Uncle Emos's scroll gnawed at her conscience. She didn't say anything, because her brother would only laugh. He always said she only felt guilty when she knew she was going to get punished.

Lorkrin wandered down the length of tunnel to a junction where the path ended. A stream gurgled along a brick-walled gully in the middle of the tunnel, filled with things that Lorkrin did not want to think about. It emptied into a river that flowed through the junction. The only light in the sewer was from the grates spaced out in the arched roof, so he was careful where he put his feet. After a while, he got bored and went back to his sister. She was scraping her name on one of the support pillars with a stone.

Lorkrin was struck with a thought. Unrolling his tools, he pulled out the quill he had taken from their uncle's studio.

'Hey!' He held it up to his sister. 'I wonder if we can get this to work.'

Taya's eyes went wide:

'What are you doing with that? Weren't things bad enough without you going and stealing something as well?'

'I didn't steal it. I just took it by accident.'

‘Oh, well that doesn’t count then,’ she sneered. ‘I can’t wait to see you explain that one. “I took by *accident*, Uncle Emos.” Maybe he’ll only half kill you.’

‘You can’t half kill someone. Either you’re dead or you’re not. Anyway, do you want to see if the thing works, or not?’ Lorkrin brandished the quill at her.

Taya’s curiosity got the better of her.

‘Okay,’ she sniffed, trying to look bored by the idea.

Like all Myunan children, the pair had tried transmorphing on several occasions and had even gotten hold of a few chants. The fact that it was strictly banned by grown-ups was reason enough to attempt it, but the thought of changing the shape of anything the same way they could change themselves, extend their powers beyond their own bodies, was irresistible. They had never had any success, but then they had never had a genuine transmorphing tool before either. They were hoping that it would not need a special trigger or chant, that it would just work, but they were disappointed. When Lorkrin drew the quill across one of the bricks in the pillar, no line appeared. He sighed and tried again. Still nothing.

‘Try imagining that you’re sculpting yourself,’ Taya urged. ‘As if you’re using the pen like a normal amorphing tool; think of the pillar as an arm or a leg or something.’

Lorkrin pressed the nib lightly against the brickwork again, and concentrated. When he moved the quill this time, he felt a slight give in the brick’s surface, as if he had cut it with a knife.

‘I felt something! I think it’s working!’ He kept going, writing his name into the column, the pictograms appearing as if carved with a fine chisel. There was an unmistakable cutting sound, and yet it was as easy as writing with ink on vellum. Taya frowned and walked around the column to look at the other side.

‘Lorkrin, stop! Stop writing!’ she gasped.

He was about to scribble something else when the tone of her voice pulled him up short. Looking at her, he saw a frightened expression on her face. He came around to the other side and gazed at the opposite face of the pillar. His name was cut out of it in reverse. The writing had gone all the way through the brickwork, from one side to the other. The column groaned and there came a grating sound, the kind made by two hard surfaces grinding against each other.

‘It’s holding up the roof,’ Taya breathed. ‘And we’ve just cut through it.’



In the garden directly above the newly decorated pillar, Shessil Groach stood soaking in the morning light before the high wall that separated himself and his colleagues from the outside world. There were times when he wondered what life would be like outside the project, where normal people did normal things ... whatever normal things were. It had been a long time since he had been able to walk down the streets of a town, to visit shops and stalls. He had been too young to visit storyhouses and taverns then, but he could do so now, if he were allowed outside, near normal people ... which he wasn’t. He idly calculated the time it would take a tasherloc tree, one of the fastest-growing trees in the world, to grow high enough and strong enough for him to use it to climb over that wall. About two weeks, with regular watering, fertilisation and some violin music.

Other, more normal people might have considered using a ladder, but then as Groach would have been the first to admit, he was a little out of the ordinary. It was just as well then, that he was not really looking for a means of escape. He believed that he would one day be released from the project. He was not sure when, but surely not long now, now that he had solved a problem which the staff

the project had worked on for years.

~~It was only a pity that his friend, Haller Joculeb, would never see the successful completion of the project. Haller's death had been a shock to them all; a horrible accident had taken him only days before Groach had made his inspired discovery. Groach absent-mindedly patted the satchel that hung by his hip. He had not told anyone yet. Haller would have been so proud ... and excited. He had always been the most curious about the outside world and what went on beyond the walls. But now they were sure to be released; Groach would get to visit lots of different places and meet some normal people and folks who didn't talk about plants and earth and fertiliser all day.~~

In the meantime, there was work to do. He was about to turn away from the wall, when the ground shuddered beneath his feet. Groach looked down and was alarmed to discover cracks appearing in the ground at the base of the wall. There was a deep, hollow crack and then a rumble, and a section of the massive wall suddenly sank slightly, tearing more cracks in the stone and mortar structure. There were shouts and gasps from the garden behind him as some of his friends turned to see what was happening. Then the section collapsed altogether, crashing down through the ground in a cloud of mortar and dust and a bellowing cough. Groach just had time to realise he was in danger of following it when the ground beneath him gave way and the earth swallowed him whole.

2 A MEETING IN THE SEWER



Emos wandered through the marketplace, his senses alert for any sign of his niece and nephew. He came upon a tanner's stall, where leather wares were laid out neatly on display. Taking two small wooden sculptures from his bag, he caught the tanner's attention.

'I'm seeking two children, a boy and a girl. They look like this. They're brother and sister. Their names are Lorkrin and Taya Archisan. Have you seen them?'

Stopping work on the belt that he was cutting into shape, the tanner cast his eye over the two pieces of wood. Each was carved into a bust, the head and shoulders of a child. He did not know their faces.

'Sorry, sir. I haven't. Lost, are they?'

'I doubt it. Just missing ... and with a talent for mischief. Thanks, anyway.'

The sound of a crack made Emos spin around to look at the high, spiked wall that stood at the edge of the square, just across from the stall. A crack was creeping upwards, splitting the plaster. The tanner raised his head over the Myunan's shoulder to see. There was a rumble, and then part of the wall settled suddenly. Plaster burst off it, and the broken section of wall collapsed down through a hole in the ground. Shards of mortar and stone flew through the air – the tanner ducked down behind his counter, and Emos raised an arm to shield his face from the debris.

People were rushing about shouting, and many were coming over to have a look at what was going on. There was a large hole in the wall, and a cloud of dust was still floating like a thick fog, coating everything and everyone in a fine white powder. Through the gap, figures could be seen stepping over the debris and making their way into the marketplace.

They were men and women, all dressed in knee-length tunics and sandals. They were all different ages and appearance, but most had soil or grass stains on their knees, and some held a trowel or shears in their hands. The men wore beards and they all had long hair. Wiping dust from their eyes they peered around as if in some kind of new land. Several greeted the gathering crowd and one even shook hands with a bemused man standing near him. Emos watched as an old woman approached the tanner's stall and began examining the leatherwork with obvious delight. The simplest pieces of leatherwork fascinated her. The tanner, eager to seize the chance of a sale, offered some more of his wares for her perusal.

'Hello!' she chirped to Emos, as she examined a pair of sandals. 'Isn't this a splendid place? A veritable plethora of curiosities. Would ... pardon me, very forward of me, but ... would you happen to know where I might find some absinthe? It's been years since I've had a bit of tipple.'

'No,' Emos replied, politely gesturing towards the tanner. 'Sorry. Perhaps this man might know?'

'How do you like those sandals?' the trader enquired.

Emos turned to watch as the other newcomers wandered further into the market, scattering and finding objects of interest wherever they looked. They were all gentle-natured, polite and, the market traders noted, easy to please. The traders also noted that none of them seemed to have any money.

The Myunan was still trying to make sense of the strange group, when from the towers of the town walls, the horns sounded an alarm. The bass roar of engines and wheels was heard, and the catchwagons thundered into the square, manned by armed soldiers. Each wagon had an arm that swung from the top of its body, suspended from which was a man equipped with a net, a whip and a crossbow with restraining rope. They swung out above the crowd as the wagons circled the market and picked off the newcomers, snatching them where possible, shooting them down and dragging them back when they tried to run. The woman Emos had just spoken to went to hide behind the tanner's stall, but the trader wasn't about to tangle with soldiers. He pushed her away, causing her to stumble into Emos' arms.

'Sorry, missus, but I've my business to think about,' the trader grunted apologetically.

A pair of foot soldiers pushed through the crowd and grabbed hold of the woman, hauling her away from Emos' grasp.

'Make yourself scarce, Myunan, if you know what's good for you,' one of them snarled. 'This is Noranian business.'

Resisting the temptation to get involved, Emos watched in contempt as they pulled the distressed woman away. He could do nothing for her, and he had his niece and nephew to think about. He watched as the captives were dropped into cages on the backs of the trucks. The drivers of the vehicles gunned their engines, forcing their way through the crowd, barging past people who were too slow getting out of their way. Many were hurt by the steel-reinforced wooden chassis or the iron rims of the wheels. Screams mingled with the rumble of vehicles and the crack of the whips.

Then they were gone, the wagons disappeared back up the streets from which they came, and the foot soldiers closed in around the square, checking for any that the catchwagons might have missed and questioning the traders and customers. With their carapace armour, and vicious-looking weapons, they were a threatening presence, offering trouble to anyone they thought was looking for it.

While the foot soldiers bullied the people of the market, two more wagons drew up at the hole in the wall carrying enormous stones. These were lifted off the flat-bed carts with a hoist and used to build a makeshift, but solid barrier between the square and whatever lay behind the wall. The tanner, having failed to sell anything to the mysterious people from behind the wall, turned to see if the tattooed man would be interested in a purchase, but the Myunan was gone.



Groach spat dust out of his mouth and groaned. He ached all over and his head was spinning. He raised his head gingerly and squinted through the cloud of dust. There was a hole above and behind him in the ceiling (how was there a roof above him when he had been out in the garden?) and he was surrounded by rubble and debris from what looked like the garden wall and some other kind of brickwork. He was in a tunnel with curved walls that smelled suspiciously like a sewer. Sitting up, he discovered that he had landed on his backside, if the painful bruises were anything to go by. The contents of his satchel were scattered across the floor and someone was whispering nearby.

Peering through the settling dust, he could make out two figures, children by the size and shape, a boy and a girl.

'It wasn't our fault,' protested the boy.

'Well, it was ... sort of,' the girl piped up. 'But it was an accident.'

They both appeared to be frozen to the spot, as if they couldn't quite believe what had happened.

'I don't believe this,' the boy said to the girl, staring up at the hole in the roof. 'How much bad luck'

can we have?’

‘What have you done?’ Groach gasped. ‘How did you do it? Are you telling me you destroyed the place all by yourselves? You’d better stay there until someone comes to sort this out. This is wrong, what you’ve done. Just stay right where you are.’

He got to his feet stiffly and winced as something in his back clicked. Behind the children, the wall had collapsed. He was standing between them and the only way out. Leaning forward, he got a better look at the two children. They were in their early teens. It was hard to tell who was older. The girl was a little taller, with brown hair in a long, braided ponytail. The boy had blond hair, cropped short. They both wore tunics bound with cloth belts; the girl had leggings and the boy trousers. Their clothes had swirling patterns on them, the boy’s more angular and coloured in greys, greens and blues; the girl’s circular, in reds, oranges and browns. They had similar patterns on their skin, and it was hard in places to tell where their clothes stopped and their skin started. The two looked enough alike to be brother and sister. Voices sounded above them. Some of the others from the project were standing around the hole in the ceiling.

‘Shessil? Are you down there? Are you all right?’

‘Fetch Hovem!’ he called back. ‘There are some children down here. They’ve broken something in the sewer!’

‘I’ll say they have ...,’ came a voice from above. ‘Broken the whole damned sewer’s more like. We can smell it from here.’

‘You just hang on here for a bit,’ Groach told the pair. ‘There’ll be someone along any time now.’

‘I think you’d better let us go,’ the girl said quietly.

Behind her in the darkness, the boy had knelt down and unrolled some tools. Groach tried to see what he was doing, but it was difficult in the bad light. While he waited for Hovem, the Groundskeeper, he bent down to pick up the sheets of vellum, the quills, the bottle of ink and the other odds and ends that had fallen from his bag.

‘Look, we’re trying to be reasonable here,’ the girl continued. ‘If you’ll just let us go, we’ll go away and you’ll never see us again, we promise.’

Groach tried again to see past her. The boy seemed to be combing his ears back ... with a comb. The small figure twisted and dragged at his flesh, working quickly and skilfully with the tools from the roll of pouches on the floor. Then he stopped and lifted his head.

He moved out from the shadows, and Groach found himself facing a terrifying creature. It had the same colour and markings as the boy, but there the resemblance ended. Narrowed triangular eyes stared above a short, wide snout. A ridge of hair flowed back past small, pointed ears and down a muscular back covered in spikes and armour-like scales. Its back legs were short and powerful, its fore-legs longer, ending in paws that held vicious, curving claws. It had the biggest, sharpest teeth he had ever seen.

Groach’s breath caught in his throat, frozen in terror by the sight. The fiend let out a growl and launched itself at him. In a blind panic, Groach stumbled back, turned, sprinted down the tunnel and vaulted into the fast-moving river at the end of the path. The current caught him and swept him out of sight into the darkness. Lorkrin chuckled and slunched back into his natural shape.

‘I think you went a bit far,’ Taya said to her brother. ‘We just wanted him to go away.’

‘Well, he went away, didn’t he?’ Lorkrin said, shrugging.

‘After the fright you’ve just given him, I’d say he’ll keep on going. You always have to act like a monster, don’t you? You know how Uncle Emos is about us going around scaring people.’

‘That was brilliant, though. Did you see him jump into that stuff? I couldn’t even walk too close

it. This isn't turning out to be such a bad day after all.'

'Well, let's get out of here. Have you got the quill?' Taya asked.

Lorkrin knelt down by his tool roll, but then lifted his gaze to the pile of rubble under the hole in the ceiling.

'Aw, bowels!'

'Don't swear like that! What's wrong? Where is it?'

'I dropped it when the roof caved in.' He rolled up his tools and walked over to where Groach had been lying. 'It would have been about here. I can't see it.'

'He picked some things up ...' Taya started to say, then stopped.

They shared a look of horror.

'He's got the quill,' Lorkrin gulped. 'How far do you think we'll have to run away now?'

'How could you drop it, you idiot?'

'Sorry! I was busy trying not to be *killed*! How was I to know that ... that a man was going to fall through the roof and... and land right there and pick it up? How was I to know that?'

'We have to get it back; we have to find him,' his sister groaned.

'Well, we'd better do it fast, 'cos he's in that river and he's getting further away all the time.'

Whipping out their tool kits, they quickly fashioned their fingertips into claws and clambered up the wall where the path ended, then set off along it after the man they had just scared away.



The water went up Groach's nostrils and burned a path down his throat. He flailed and threw his head back, snatching a breath before going under again. Sound roared in his ears, which gummed up more every time he submerged. The world numbed around him as the fight to catch gulps of the fetid air became the only thing that mattered. He knew he was moving; he did not know where, and he had never been a very good swimmer. The deep water was alien and overwhelming, trying so hard to fill his lungs and cover his head. He had never felt so out of control. Then strong light washed over him and he was able to breathe. It lasted only an instant; he was falling out into daylight. He splashed down into more water, but this time his hands and feet dug into mud, or something soft anyway. He pushed upwards and was rewarded with fresh, clear air.

Groach heaved in gulps of it – heaven compared to the stench he had been struggling not to inhale moments earlier. He studied his surroundings. He was in a river, a real one. The pipe that had dumped him in here was above and behind him, gushing sewage into the muddy water. He was standing in it but it was bliss after the tunnel. His legs were knee-deep in the riverbed, his chin just above the waterline. The banks of the river were high and bare. Bushes and trees lined the top, but he could see no place to climb out. He waded out into cleaner water and found himself out of his depth. But he was too exhausted to care. He lay back and floated, drifting with the current.



Rak Ek Namen regarded the garden wall with an impassive face. The ruler of Noran was a tall, handsome man with wise eyes and a warm smile. Despite his greying hair and the few lines on his face, he was the youngest ever to reach this position. He had got there through a combination of cunning and charm and was used to having things go his way. The jagged gap, now filled with large rocks, was an irritation.

Hovem, the Groundskeeper, was a somewhat less impressive figure, and stood nervously by as the

Prime Ministrate surveyed the damage. He was struggling to come up with an explanation for how most of his staff had ended up wandering aimlessly around the marketplace.

‘And you say that there is still one man unaccounted for?’ Namen asked.

‘Yes, Prime Ministrate. Shessil Groach. At first, we thought he might have been buried beneath the rubble. He was standing by the wall when it collapsed. He wasn’t buried, but the wall crashed right down into the sewers and it’s possible he was lost down there. We still don’t know what caused the wall to collapse.’

‘You will tell the Catchmaster everything he needs to know about this Shessil Groach. I want him found. Every person on the project is valuable, as is the knowledge they carry. We cannot afford any more lost time. The success of this experiment is vital.’

The Groundsmaster almost asked his leader why, if their work was so vital, six of his best people were lying in the infirmary with crossbow wounds, just for taking a walk around the market. But he bit his tongue. Crossbow wounds could be catching for those who questioned the Prime Ministrate’s authority. He hoped Shessil was all right, and that he would find his way back before the soldiers had to seek him out. Ever since one of his team, Haller Joculeb, had been lost while diving under the esplanade, Hovem had been growing more and more uneasy about working for the Noranians. Rak Ek Namen was a charismatic leader, well respected by his people, but he had little patience for those who did not obey what they were told. Shessil was a dreamer and a bit naïve – he might not realise how much trouble he was facing.

The Prime Ministrate strode out of the large garden and through the main building, once the home of a wealthy landowner, now the temporary quarters for over a hundred men and women who normally worked and studied in the fortified city garden of the Noranian capital. They had been brought to Hortenz to be near the coast, near the esplanade.

The soldiers snapped to attention as he came out the front door. He ignored them and nodded to Cossock, his bodyguard. The huge creature, a towering figure of muscle and weapons, opened the door of the Prime Ministrate’s carriage. Namen stepped up into the vehicle and was joined by his personal assistant, Mungret. The carriage was of Braskhiam design; its carved wooden sides, inlaid with precious metals, rested on an iron chassis in front of the enormous, blue-oil engine. An iron plough-shaped cattle shunt hung from the front and served as a very effective method for getting through crowds. The driver sat on the top, looking through the windscreen over the large, wooden steering wheel and the panel of gauges and valves. Bigger, more armoured versions of the machine squatted in front and behind it; soldiers peered out through the slits of these monsters, crossbows at the ready.

‘Has he been found?’ Namen asked, as he settled into the velvet upholstery.

‘Not yet, Prime Ministrate,’ Mungret answered. ‘The gates have been closed since the alarm was given. It’s unlikely that he could have made it out before that. Someone might be hiding him, or he may have taken to the sewers, in which case he could be hopelessly lost or could have got beyond the town walls.’

‘Extend the search. Send out pigeons. Alert every town and village within two days’ walk of here. Get men into those sewers. Block off every exit. I want this man back safe in the grounds here tomorrow.’

‘Yes, Prime Ministrate.’

‘What other business have I to cover today?’

Mungret consulted the agenda.

‘The mayor of Wicklehoe has been keeping taxes from the treasury. You wanted to deal with that yourself, Prime Ministrate. There is the exhibition opening at the Ashglaft Gallery here in town

dinner with the High Priestess Malifluous ... and of course there're the negotiations with the Braskhians.'

'Ah, yes. How go the negotiations?'

'The Braskhians still refuse to build us any more warships, and the same goes for land-based weapons. They maintain that we are making plans for war and they want nothing to do with it.'

'Tell me something new, Mungret.'

'We have put it to them that we need stronger defences, especially in view of the Karthar build-ups and their raids into the Braskhian fishing territories. "If we can't defend ourselves, how can we help defend you", etc. but they won't have any of it. The council is afraid of upsetting the Karthars.'

'I think it is a bit late for that,' Namen grunted. 'If Braskhia were not so strong, it would have been part of Noran by now. But with their technology and their mastery of the esh ... If they were inclined to, they could build an empire for themselves. We must keep them on our side. The Karthars lie on our coast in readiness to invade and while they stay out on the esh, we can only watch and wait. Our fleet is no match for theirs.'

The Prime Ministrate fell silent, brooding. He had taken a failing empire and rebuilt it, making the Noranians one of the most powerful civilisations in history, but for all its might, the empire still relied on the ingenious technology from the nation of Braskhia.

'The Groundsman and his group are coming along well, but they still do not have results,' Namen continued. 'It could be some time yet before we're ready. We will have to tolerate the Karthars until we are ready to face them on my terms.'

He turned his attention to the street they were passing through. People were waving and cheering him. The Prime Ministrate flashed them a beaming smile and raised his hand in salute. The carriage passed out the gate and left the town behind. Namen sighed. Taking his pipe from his pocket, he stoked it with tobacco and lit it with a match, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. Mungret, who had a bad chest, muffled his coughs as best he could.



Shessil Groach felt himself carried gently with the flow of the river. He had tried swimming across the strong current and discovered that the more he thrashed around, the closer he came to drowning, so now he just relaxed and let the river take him wherever it wanted to go. It was quite pleasant.

As time wore on, however, he noticed that the light was fading. Evening was falling, and it would be getting cooler. It would not be wise to be floating down a strange river in the dark. Not having yet mastered swimming, he was not sure what he was going to do about getting out. A few minutes later he caught sight of a tree in the middle of the river.

It was an eb-tree. There was no mistaking the way it floated in mid-stream like that, supported by a wide base of roots and rotting vegetation. Slumped on this base under the leafy shade was a man, his fishing rod jammed into the roots beside him. He was obviously asleep, and was not going to stop Groach, who was floating right towards him.

'Hey!' Groach shouted. 'Hey you! Help me here, will you?'

The man awoke with a start and stared at the swimmer in surprise. He was standing up to get a better look when his fishing line started to jerk. Torn between reeling in the fish and helping the unknown man out of the water, the fisherman froze for a moment with indecision. His instincts took over and he seized the rod. Groach took the knotted roots of the tree full in the chest and hung there, stunned. The fisherman wound in the flapping carp with a practised motion and swiped its head

against the trunk, before dropping it into a waiting basket. He reached down and grabbed Groach, who was beginning to slide under the base, and hauled him, and his satchel, out of the water in much the same way he had done the fish.

‘Well you’re a drowned rat and no mistake,’ he grunted, as if he pulled people from the river on a regular basis. ‘Uncommon for someone to be swimmin’ with all their clothes on like that, but then I suppose it’s another one of these new trends.’

‘Thank you, sir. I’m very grateful,’ Groach panted.

The fisherman was tall and wiry; his long, thin arms were brown, as was his face, with sleepy dark eyes surrounded by wrinkles. Pigtales hung down either side of his face, and he had a long nose and a narrow mouth that was short of teeth. He was in a blue shirt and ruddy trousers that were cut short at the knees. He had long legs and, judging by his boots, his feet were enormous.

‘Brock Moffet’s my name,’ he said.

‘Shessil Groach. Delighted to meet you.’

‘Yes, well. Never seen you before. You must be from somewhere’s else.’

‘Yes, though to be honest, I’m not sure where I am now.’

‘Crickenob, or just west of it anyhow,’ Moffet replied. ‘You were in the river Blales, heading towards Rutledge-on-Coast.’

‘Ah, yes. Thank you,’ Groach lay on the hard roots and enjoyed the soothing motion of the tree over the water. He would have been happy to stay there for some time.

‘Would I be right in thinking you’ll need a place to stay for the night?’ Moffet enquired.

‘I could quite happily sleep here all night. It shouldn’t get that cold, I think.’

‘Nonsense, man. The wife and I would be glad to have you as our guest,’ exclaimed Moffet. ‘I wouldn’t have it said a person came through Crickenob and was not given a warm bed for the night. We’re not a rich village but we know how to treat a tourist.’

‘That’s very kind of you. Thank you very much.’ Groach shook his hand.

Brock Moffet had a boat moored on the other side of the tree. It was a small wooden dinghy, with just room enough for the two men and all of the fisherman’s gear. Groach stepped in unsteadily and almost lost his balance, but Moffet caught his arm and sat him down. Then he climbed in and sat with his back against Groach’s. He untied the line and cast off. With strong, smooth strokes, he propelled the dinghy towards the shore, and had soon pulled alongside the bank. He helped Groach out again and retrieved his fishing equipment.

The house was a short walk down the road, a white-washed cottage with a turf roof. There were flower pots arranged all around the house, from the gate all the way to the front door. But there was no garden, no grass, just brightly coloured flowers in earthenware pots sitting on a surface of gravel.

‘The wife loves flowers, but she’s scared of worms, see,’ Moffet explained. ‘I tell her they’re harmless and all that, but it does no good. Still, she keeps the place lookin’ nice, so I can’t complain really.’

He unlatched the front door, and they were hit by the rich smell of tomato soup. Groach realised he had not eaten all day. His mouth watered at the delicious aroma. A raucous shout greeted them:

‘Moffet! What kind of cold sodden creature have you brought home this evening?’ A squat, well-built woman stood on the far side of the warm kitchen. She looked Groach up and down and turned a questioning eye on her husband.

‘He was in the river, wife, and he needs a place to stay for the night.’

‘Well, put some hot tea in the man before he falls over. The soup will be a while yet.’ With that she turned back to the selection of pots on the stove. The smells made Groach’s stomach rumble.

‘Do you smoke a pipe, Shessil?’ Moffet asked, lifting a hot kettle from the big iron stove.

‘No, I can’t say that I do. Tobacco was forbidden where I come from. I’ve never tried it.’

‘There’s nothing to warm a man up like a good pipe. Have a seat there,’ Moffet pronounced waving to a battered armchair and eagerly stoking the two ends of his forked bone pipe. He lit it with a match and drew in a drag with relish.

‘Aye, there’s nothin’ to make a man lazy like a good pipe either, ya trog,’ Mrs Moffet scoffed. ‘You were making tea.’

‘I’m getting to it, wife. A kettle should sit for a bit before making a brew,’ her husband retorted.

‘You mean a man must sit for a bit before making a brew,’ she snapped back. ‘Get this man some dry clothes and some hot water and soap to wash with ... and a towel. And take your boots off my clean floor.’

Moffet carried a tin bathtub into a cluttered back room and filled it with water from a large pot on the stove. Then he went to dig out some fresh clothes while Groach had a soak. As he sat there, Groach pulled his long hair under his nose and smelled sewer on it. Two washes later, he could still smell it. The stink was in his beard too. Moffet had left him a straight razor and a mirror, and there was a pair of scissors on the shelf above him. After a long, thoughtful gaze into the mirror, he started cutting. He managed to make a half decent job of his hair by simply hacking it all off and cropping it close to his skull. Somehow it even made his thinning hairline and growing bald patch a little less noticeable. His hair was darker near the roots, and he quite liked the look of it. He had not shaved in years, so that was a little bit trickier and he nicked the skin with the razor a few times before he had finished, but in the end, a younger, very different and definitely less smelly Shessil Groach looked back out of the mirror at him. He cleared up the mass of sandy-coloured hair, intent on throwing it away, but Moffet declared with delight that it would make wonderful flies for bait. And lots of them too, by the looks of things.

After Groach had dressed in a shirt and trousers that were too long but comfortable nonetheless, he thanked his hosts and flopped into his seat again. Neither of them mentioned the fact that he looked utterly unlike the man who had walked into their house, thinking this might be rude where he came from. Mrs Moffet was brewing a fresh pot of tea. She was a good deal shorter than her husband, with a long, wrinkled face topped by red cheeks and a flat nose. She wore her brown hair back in a massive bun. The little woman was wearing an old but carefully cleaned green and blue striped dress.

‘Tea’ll be a few minutes,’ she said to her visitor. ‘The lump here did not introduce you. What’s your name and where are you from?’

‘Shessil Groach. I’m from the Harvest Tide Project.’

‘Are you really? Can’t say I’m familiar with it. Is that near Ashglaft?’

‘I’m not sure where it’s near, to be honest. It’s in a city, Noran, I think. We’re staying at a big house at the moment, in another town, closer to here.’ Groach shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had an extensive knowledge of geography, but had little experience of it personally. In the project, the city had always been ‘The City’. It was all they had needed to call it, as they were not allowed out to visit it anyway. He knew even less about the town the project staff were now staying in. ‘I don’t think it’s Ashglaft, but then I’m not sure.’

‘Odd, that,’ she sniffed. ‘Not knowing where you come from. Still, maybe that’s normal in strange parts. Tea’s ready. How do you take it?’

‘Do you have any honey?’ Groach asked timidly. He had a bit of a sweet tooth.

‘Hah! Yes! I like a drop in my tea myself.’ She reached up and pulled down a jar. Unplugging it, she put a couple of spoonfuls in Groach’s mug with some milk and handed it to him. He nodded gratefully.

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