

DAY FIVE

Cait was roused from her sleep by a loud knocking on the door. She yawned, got up, and prepared to kill the person who wouldn't let her sleep in on her day off. Going down the stairs to the front door, she opened it to find Henry, smelling like a burrick's carcass, on the doorstep. He was covered in a substance she preferred not to wonder about in great detail.

"Henry! What in the world..."

Henry reached out to grab her by the shoulders and plead about something, but before he could she backed away. "You touch me with whatever's stuck on you, and I'm going find a big pile of it and drown you headfirst in it."

Henry put his hands back at his sides. "All right, fine. Get me a hose and I'll tell you all about it."

About fifteen minutes and a quick change of garments later, Henry sat in Cait's kitchen, wearing a bright orange shirt and green pants. Both of which were three sizes too small.

Cait sat down with a mug of coffee. "Sorry, best I could do. My brother's old stuff, never got rid of it. He went through a little bit of a phase."

Henry tugged at the pants until they were slightly less uncomfortable. "Ah, and what sort of phase was that? Famine? Wasting disease? Theatre?"

"A little of all three, but forget that. What happened with you?"

Henry told her as much as he could, about wandering for the sewers for hours, nearly being devoured by pernicious zombies several times, until he found his way back out.

"But the crazy thing is, the tunnel I was in isn't on any of the maps I studied. I don't know if it's a new addition or if it was just left off, but I'm sure it may lead to one of their secret enclaves, or maybe even into the woods where we can start looking for the Seed!"

"Seed? What Seed?"

"You know, the Seed! You were there!"

"No, I wasn't. Yesterday you three blew out of here after breakfast, remember? Didn't even clean up your plates!"

Henry blushed. "Sorry. Won't happen again."

"I know it won't, because I'm not serving any of you breakfast. I checked. Jack ate me out of 13 silver worth of groceries. That's almost as much as I make in an evening."

"I know, he's ridiculous, isn't he? But the Seed is..."

Henry trailed off as a man entered the kitchen, scratched himself, and wandered over to the cabinet, searching it for early morning snacks.

Henry chucked a thumb at him. "What's he doing here?"

"Yes, what am I doing here?" Pete found a bowl and some dry oats and poured himself a bowl. "Cait was gracious enough to let me stay here after a dinner date went a little sour."

"A little sour? Dinner date? What are you talking about?"

"Other than don't eat French onion soup on a date, it's none of your business. Anyway, I needed a place to stay, since you had to the decency to destroy mine."

“Destroy? I didn’t des...” The light bulb in Henry’s mind went off. “You were living in your *puppet show*?”

“Yes, and thanks for asking.” Pete dug out a handful of oats and seemed to actually notice Henry for the first time. “Why are you wearing Cait’s brother’s Nutcracker costume?”

Henry slapped his hands on the table and stood. “You know what? I think I’m going to go down to the library to do a little looking around. When you’re done eating Cait out of house and home, go get Jack and meet me up there.” He turned to Cait. “Thanks for the change of clothes, I’ll return them later.” He stormed out of the room, slamming the front door as he went outside.

Cait shook her head and drank some coffee. “Some mornings there’s just no enough coffee in the world.”

Pete nodded, crunching thoughtfully.

The book in front of Henry slammed shut. He looked up to see Pete shutting it, grinning.

“So, o great Master of Larceny, is on the agenda for today? Staring at another dusty book for hours until we finally give up?”

Henry glared at Pete. “No. I actually have a lead, and it’s a good one.”

Jack waddled over from behind a set of stacks. He was holding a book, which wasn’t unusual in itself. What was unusual was not only that the book wasn’t made of chocolate or covered in mayonnaise, but that Jack actually looked like he hadn’t slept well the night before. The only time Jack looked like that was when...

“Father’s home, eh, Jack?”

Jack blearily turned to Henry, nodded, and collapsed noisily into a nearby chair. He opened the book and started poking through it.

Henry read the spine of Jack’s book. “Jack? I don’t think you’re going to like that.”

“Why not? Sounds like it would be a good read. Not too many pictures, though...”

“Because ‘Philosophical Intercourse’ doesn’t mean what you think it means. Now listen.”

Henry related the details of the traversing of the sewers, but between this telling and the one at Cait’s, he had added quite a few more zombies, misadventures involving a berserk leper colony, and encountering a charming magical weasel named Ed.

Pete nodded. “That sounds like a load of crap to me.”

“Well, I guess you had to be there. But the problem is, I’ve never seen that section of the sewers before. Ever. Not a trace of them. The only clue I have is a big letter ‘N.’”

“The letter N?”

“I noticed it just before the walls turned back into the brick I’m more familiar with: a big, crudely painted ‘N’ on the wall. I’m assuming it’s a section designation.”

“And you couldn’t just find your way back there without a map?”

Henry pointed an accusatory finger at Pete. "Listen, friend, *you* try finding your place when you can barely see five feet in front of you, when you're tired, and being chased by monsters half the night."

"I concede. But that puts us right back on square one. How do we find something if we don't know what we're looking for?"

"That's just it. The sewer systems in this book..." Henry slapped the top of the closed book, which kicked a cloud of dust and dead silverfish into the air. "...are all from a few years ago. It could very well be that we need a more recent schematic...or one that shows tunnels intentionally left *off* the map."

They thought in silence for a moment. Then Jack lowered his book. "We've got one."

Pete and Henry turned, simultaneously. "What?"

"Down at the Watch station. We've got a whole cabinet full of maps. Street maps, sewer maps, intercity road maps...I just never use 'em because I know the City so well."

Pete sighed. "Jack, you got lost on the way here. While following me."

"That's cause you was taking all the backwards ways. I know how to get here by other streets. But yeah, if you need a map, that's where you can get one."

Henry brightened. This was the best news he'd had in...well, it was hard to tell, because he hadn't slept proper since yesterday morning, and certain things start to run together after awhile. Also, Jack's book was slowly turning into a wonderful-looking ice cream sandwich, which only made things better. "Good work, Jack. But how are we going to get in there and make off with it?"

Jack walked into the Watch station, and waved at the commanding officer. Today, it happened to be Captain Percival, a man known for his short temper and fantastic pots of chili, which he made to celebrate birthdays, festivals, and sometimes just because he woke up that morning. It was probably a good thing that he was here; nobody else seemed to have bothered coming in.

"Morning, Captain!"

"Morning? *Morning?* Constable Roberts, you haven't reported for work since Friday! Where have you been all this time?"

Jack shrugged. "Been busy."

Captain Percival smiled. "Ah, I see. Busy, eh? Well, we all get busy at times. What do you need this fine Sunday morning?"

Jack pointed at the back room. "I need the maps for the sewer system."

"Oh, take them, my boy, by all means!"

Jack nodded, and walked into the back room. About thirty seconds later, he stuck his head out.

"I might have them for awhile."

"Oh, pish-posh! Constable Hardy's had the official gold truncheon for over a year now, and no one seems to mind. Haven't seen *him* in awhile, either."

"I think he died, sir. Three weeks ago."

"Really? How so?"

"Someone stove his head in with a gold truncheon and ran away."

“Blimey, what rotten luck. Should probably notify the family.”

“I’m sure they already have, sir.”

“Well, that’s Captain’s business as it is. You do your thing and go on your way.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

That was the nice thing about the Day Watch. As Jack gathered up an armful of tightly wrapped rolls of paper and waved his goodbyes to Captain Percival, he reflected that, sometimes, it was nice to know someone even stupider than you was out there.

After noon, they found it.

Rolled out on a table at the library, a schematic dated to last year showed a recent addition, so recent it was actually drawn on with a red pen. Leading off of the main sewage system, which more resembled the types of mazes one sees on a paper placemat at a low-end family restaurant than a properly constructed sanitation system, the addition led off in an almost singular path to the east, dumping off unceremoniously...well, somewhere. That was it. A tunnel that pretty much led off to nowhere in particular.

Since there were plenty of dump-out areas elsewhere, the new addition appeared to be for one purpose only: to allow the Pagans to quietly move in and out of the City without being harassed by anyone on the way.

“Wait, this doesn’t add up.” Pete scanned the tunnel again with his finger. “Who would have built the tunnel, and why put it on this map? I would have thought the Pagans would be a little more secretive than *this*.”

Henry sighed. “Don’t you remember Mayor Delbert? There were all those rumors flying around that he had all kinds of Pagan connections. I bet you he had it put in as a favor, and kept it out of the public eye so they wouldn’t go bothering his friends. The Watch probably need it just in case some criminal finds out about it and tries to escape through it.”

“Or an army finds it and tries to sneak in.”

“Well, nobody said it was *perfect*. But this just what we need. Jack, you hang onto this map. Try not to eat it.”

Jack rolled it up, giving Henry a sour expression. “I know, I know! Cripes, you don’t have to make fun of my weight *all* the time.”

“Just a friendly reminder to do some walking occasionally.”

Pete leaned against the bookcase behind him, which he stopped doing when it creaked menacingly. “What about supplies?”

“Just get a few simple things.”

“What about the stuff from the night before?”

“There was a little accident...at least, I *think* there was...”

Pete shrugged. “Whatever. I know a guy on Beggar’s Avenue. I can get some stuff from him. Won’t be too happy, though.”

“Good. We’ll meet up at the manhole on Pleasance at three, and we’ll go from there. I have a few things I have to do around here first.”

Pete and Jack left Henry alone at the table. He waited until he heard the front door shut, and then promptly fell asleep. The only noise in the library was his snoring and the occasional stamp from Mr. Codsodder.

Pete checked a nearby clock, just as Henry, a little disheveled, came running up. “You’re five minutes late.”

Henry leaned over, out of breath. “I know, I’m sorry, I just...ran into some armed guards that I had to dispatch...”

“Mm-hmm. I believe you.” Pete wrenched open the manhole, and gently pushed Jack in first. After ensuring that he could actually fit, the other two followed suit.

Even in daylight, the sewers were a grim place. As maintenance was made difficult by the not-quite-living inhabitants, the result was a series of rusting pipes, dripping foul-smelling filth on the walkways, thick green mold growing on the bricks in the humid air.

Henry had grown used to the fetid odors of the place, but Pete had apparently not. As soon as they hit bottom, Pete started coughing as if a lung was trying to escape his body and climb back to the surface.

“Oh, come on, it’s no worse than Jack’s bathroom.”

Jack cautiously sniffed the air, then smiled. “Nah, my bathroom’s *much* worse than this.”

“See? Now come off it.”

Between fits, Pete managed to pull out a lantern that operated by turning a crank, and after a few good spins it shone a weak light down the tunnels. Henry motioned to Jack to pull out the map, and they looked it over.

“Okay...we just head north up this way until we reach junction 3, then we head east...”

Henry heard a squeak and looked north. A six-inch-long rat was scuttling down the tunnel towards them, when a rotted hand reached out and grabbed the rodent from behind a wall. A second hand reached out from behind a wall across the way and grabbed the rat from its other end. The two played tug of war with the wretched, squeaking animal before they both ended up with half a rat each. As each half went behind the wall, the air was filled with moans and the crunching of bones.

When the sounds finally stopped, Henry returned to the map. “Ok, we head *east* from here, then north at junction 2 up to 3. Any problems? No? Ah, good, didn’t think so.”

They traveled down the dark, forbidding corridors, moving slowly and carefully to avoid incurring the wrath (or hunger) of anything that lurked ahead. At junction 3, they turned east (at least, they *hoped* it was east) and followed the winding tunnel.

They didn’t say much to each other, just the occasional check to see if everyone was still there and to ask Jack for the map to make sure they were still on course; that is, until they reached junction 16. Here, a valve burst, venting a considerable amount of steam, and there was nothing that could be done until the air cleared completely.

“So, Pete...” Henry prodded at a sodden brick in the wall, which almost crumbled at his touch. “You went on a date last night, eh?”

Behind Pete, a red light on the wall began to flash. “I thought I told you that was none of your business. But yeah, I did. Sort of.”

“I see. Anybody I know?”

A little buzzer underneath the red light made a noise like a toy helicopter stuck in a wood chipper. “Not sure. I think you saw her the other night, but you were too busy punching out Hammers to notice.”

The steam seemed to be dissipating a little bit. “So you met a Hammer? What’s she like?”

The red light and buzzer both shut off, though there seemed to be no explanation as to why. “She’s about what you would expect...devoted, disciplined, throwing around death threats.”

A red light came on behind Henry now. “Death threats?”

“Just a little perturbed that we stole the Builder’s Hammer. They want it back by...oh, tomorrow night around six.”

Just as the steam seemed to be reduced to a trickle, it suddenly shot out again at full force. “Have it back? But they *can’t* have it back! We stole it! It’s ours now! What’s the point of stealing things if you just gave all the stuff back at the end of the day?”

“Hey, you can do whatever you want with it. Either way they said there’d be torture and death; the only difference is the price they’re putting on our heads.”

Somewhere in the junction, a small pneumatic tube had been installed, as a new sort of endeavor, to deliver money to the bank from the safety of one’s home. A small bottle filled with gold coins went by as Pete finished, the coins jingling as they passed. Henry smiled, cautiously. “Price? There’s a price on our heads?”

“Well, there will be. 10,000 gold, wanted dead.”

The red light behind Henry turned off, and a green one turned on in its place. “Ha ha! We did it!” He grabbed both Jack and Pete by the shoulders and danced around, nearly dancing all three of them into the steam. “We finally made the big time! We’re *wanted criminals!*”

Jack frowned. “Wow, that’s really...super, I guess.”

“You guess? What do you mean, you guess? This is what we’ve been waiting for all our lives, gentlemen! The recognition! The fame! She’ll *really* like me now!”

Pete raised an eyebrow. “She?”

Henry stopped himself, just as a yellow light came on in the tunnel. “Well, of course, by she, I mean, you know, all the fine womenfolk of questionable breeding who will line up by the...dozens, yes, dozens...to meet fantastic fellows like us. That sounds correct, doesn’t it?” The yellow light went off, to be replaced by the green one again.

Pete viewed Henry askance, a board with a question mark painted on it lighting up behind him. “Yeah...I guess it does. I’m glad we had this talk.” He looked over at the steam, still billowing out. “How much more of this is there?”

Jack snapped his fingers. “Wait! I think I have it!” He went over to a small red wheel, almost hidden on the wall, and turned it a few times. The steam began to dissipate. “That should do it! I don’t know how long it will last, but it should hold it all in until we get back.”

With the cloud evaporating, it wasn’t long before they could continue forward. But the pipe was already beginning to percolate, and it wouldn’t be much longer before the symbolism...er, the steam poured out once again.

Even written on the map, Section N had turned out very difficult to find. The entrance had apparently been hidden by the clever use of perspective: a bend in the tunnel had been painted to resemble a solid brick wall, but by sticking one's hand out the illusion was quickly broken. Walking through the break, it was only a matter of seconds before the tunnel re-opened into the cylindrical, smooth surface Henry had found himself in the night before. He even found the door leading to the storage closet where he had been tossed; now armed with a light, he found himself wishing he hadn't known what he had been placing his hands on as he groped blindly around the room. He was just lucky he hadn't put his hands in the bear trap on the shelving unit.

Traversing the rest of the tunnel wasn't difficult, just time-consuming; wherever this tunnel finally ended, it certainly took its sweet time getting there. Pete ended up cranking the lantern at least twice more before they got to the end.

But it was worth it.

The tunnel led to a small clearing in the middle of a vast, ancient-looking forest. Even armed with the knowledge that this place couldn't have been much older than a century, it was still hard to believe. Creepers hung between trees like cobwebs; the trees themselves reached at least forty feet into the air, some much taller; the hoots and hollers of various birds and other life came from deep within, making a racket that would put the street markets of the City to shame.

Henry was simply thankful that the late afternoon sun still filtered through the treetops. He hated to think what came out to hunt out here during the night. Turning around, he looked at the opening of the tunnel, which tilted down at an angle back into the earth. Somehow, its presence seemed so incongruous in this primeval setting, like finding a "World's Greatest Mom" coffee mug in the middle of a battlefield. It was the only thing in the area *not* covered in grass, fungus, or heaps of animal droppings, which only made it even more ridiculous.

Pete peered into the woods, which was very difficult, as the approximate distance was about ten feet before darkness and flora made any further viewing impossible. "I'm guessing we're in the right place. Question is, where do we go from here?"

Henry reached into his jacket and pulled out the book of Pagan legends. Jack gasped. "Henry! You stole a *library* book?"

Henry shrugged. "Yes. I am a thief, remember? Besides, he won't even notice it's missing."

Back at the library, Mr. Codsfodder stamped his last book of the day. With a sigh of relief, he settled back, twiddled his thumbs, and looked over his domain. And then, he saw it. The empty spot on the shelf. The spot where he knew a book was supposed to go, and book he knew definitely shouldn't have been gone.

A book had been stolen.

His wail of anguish could be heard blocks away.

Pete heard a faint noise. "Did you hear that? Sounds like somebody's anguished wail."

“It’s the City, Pete. We get that a lot.” Henry flipped the book open to the page that showed the woodcutting of the forest. He compared it to his surroundings, and finding absolutely no frame of reference decided to wing it. “Well, if we came up somewhere around here...” He circled the general left hand side of the drawing with his finger. “We should be looking for it somewhere in that direction.” He pointed to his right.

Pete sighed. “Let me see the book.”

Henry pulled it away. “No. It’s mine.”

“No, it’s not. Don’t make me hit you again.”

Henry reluctantly handed it over. Pete looked at the drawing, realized it was useless, then scanned the legend itself for clues. “Ah, here we go. ‘And the Woodsie Lord hids His great treasure, and wanted for it to bes guarded by great championes. “Plants it in the grounds, wheres the oldsie manfools tears flows frees.”’”

Henry groaned. “Could you cut all the Paganspeak and just give it straight?”

Pete nodded. “Well, if you’d bothered to actually *read* this instead of just looking at the pictures, maybe *you* could have told us what it said. Let’s see...” “When the ground has given forth its bounty, take the new fruit and place it in the highest boughs of the mother treesie...” Sorry... “tree, for the champions to guard. Know that this is not a responsibility to take lightly, for those who take the Fruit from its boughs will find new life within them.” So spoke the Wood Lord, who again emphasized that the Seed within the Fruit was of very, very, super-deluxe top secret importance, and to keep it always from the Builder and his legions, for they are naughty, naughty people.’ That’s it. The next page is the story of the final battle between the Builder and the Trickster, which actually isn’t quite as fun as you might think it would be, according to this.”

Pete shut the book, and spent a few minutes pondering the meaning of the words. Henry sat down in thought on a massive toadstool. Jack tested to see if the toadstool was edible. He found very quickly it was not, but this didn’t stop him from eating a large chunk of it anyway.

“Oldsie manfools...old man...” Pete looked up at what he could see of the sky, looking for an answer.

And as he glanced to the south, he got it.

Jack bent down, cupped his hand, and took a sip of the water. He ran it around in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “It’s a bit salty, yes.”

The “old man” was a small mountain, barely a half mile high, a stub of a thing worn down by time. From the gradual, grassy slope on its north side ran several small streams, which gathered into a small pond at its base. One stream ejected from a hole a few feet above the pond, the water murkier than the rest thanks to its little trip through a sodium deposit within the mountain itself.

Not that anyone in the group cared; all they knew was they had found what they were looking for. While the salt water pond itself was interesting, what was even more interesting was the tree that grew above it. Naturally, most trees would die when their only source of water was exceptionally salty; then again, most trees didn’t reach one hundred twenty feet in height, either. Or, for that matter, were as big around at the base as a good-sized warehouse.

Pete whistled as he gazed up the entire length of the tree. “Now that has to be the third biggest tree I have ever seen.”

Henry pointed at the tree. “Now, see, what was the point of all this ‘Old Man’ rubbish? Why not simply say, ‘Look for the really big tree?’ I mean, look at it. It’s a little difficult to miss.”

“Well, the Seed needed to be *planted* before there was a really big tree, wouldn’t you say?” Pete dipped a toe in the water, finding it to be fairly warm. “Sort of hard to write ‘Really big tree’ before there is one.”

“Well, they could’ve guessed. What was it going to turn into, a wombat?”

Jack took another unadvised sip of salt water. “Can you really plant some wombat seeds? Always liked them.”

“Stop drinking that, Jack. You’ll get terrible skin problems and your mind will go all...well, you’ll get terrible skin problems. And no, wombats are made in the same way that all other creatures are made.”

“You mean, in the bedroom.”

“In a sense, yes. If you want to be correct, then no.”

Henry picked up a stone and tossed it against the side of the tree. The rock bounced off of it, and continued bouncing up the side towards the sky, with no apparent regard for gravity. He lost sight of it about halfway up. “That’s not something you see everyday.” A second later, a starling flew next to the tree, and a small bolt of static electricity shot from the trunk to the bird, which fell to the ground as some sort of smallish squirrel with razor-sharp teeth and glowing red eyes.

Pete smirked as the creature ran around in a circle, flinging foam around before scampering away into the dark of the forest. “Must be some sort of magical field surrounding the tree.”

“What, are you the bloody science officer now?” Henry rolled his eyes. “Magical fields...hey, tell you what, why don’t find a way for us to climb up to the top without us eating nuts for the rest of our lives?” He looked down to see Jack bent over the pool, his head below the surface, bubbles roiling up. “Or drowning ourselves unintentionally?” Henry reached down and pulled Jack’s hair, yanking the fellow’s sopping face out of the water. “I think you’ve had just about enough. I’m not your mother, but for Builder’s sake that’s just embarrassing.”

Jack burred and sputtered. “No, I saw something! Under the water! Oh, and it wasn’t food, if you were about to make another joke at my expense.”

Henry contemplated this, and shrugged. “I might have been. You can’t prove it, though. What did you see?”

“I saw something dark under the tree. I think it’s a tunnel.”

Pete, suddenly interested, came closer. “A tunnel? Why do you think that?”

“Cause there’s a set of steps at the bottom that leads up to it.”

Pete, curious, took a deep breath and dove into the water. After a minute or so, he resurfaced, rubbing his eyes vigorously. “Man, that burns! I don’t know how you can keep your eyes open under this stuff, Jack.”

Jack smiled. “It’s a gift.”

Henry nodded. “Yes, I wish we could all be blessed with your inhuman physique. I myself wish I could stick my head into a salty cauldron as well as devour two steaks in one sitting. Not doing so is my greatest regret.”

Pete scooped some water into his hand and splashed it in Henry's face. "Hey, would you leave him alone for once? Last time I checked, you invited him to come along on this whole scheme of yours; he doesn't have to take this abuse."

Jack looked up at Henry, surprised. "I don't?"

Henry patted Jack on the head. "I do it because I care. You might run into people someday who really want to hurt you and will say far more damaging things than I. For instance, I've never once called you 'Fatso,' have I?"

"Not until just now, no."

"Exactly! You have to learn that people will start to take advantage of your generous nature until you toughen up."

"But I never had any trouble while I was a part of the Watch."

Pete splashed the water. "Don't encourage him, Jack. You're just fine. Ignore him."

Henry turned towards Pete. "Ignore me? I'm the leader here! You can't ignore me!"

"Leader? Hah!" Pete backstroked a little until he was smack dab in the middle of the pool. "Tell me, when was the last time you did anything worth following?"

"I'll tell you what, I worked out this whole bloody caper, by myself, I might add, and I think that deserves a little respect!"

"Oh, now it's respect, huh? What about us? When did you ever show the two of us respect? We've done more to help than you've ever had! Remember Lord Farnsworth's? I opened the front door! I was the one who was shot by the...the...well, I was shot, okay?"

Henry put his hand behind his back, his fist balling up, turning white. "Shut up."

"And the Bonehoard?" Pete treaded water again, making little ripples in the stream. "Remember that vine? 'Why don't you go first, Pete?' And when Mordecai showed up? A good thing I came out of that door just then, wouldn't you say?"

"If Zantar hadn't thrown Sockman into that room, you wouldn't have *been* there now, would you?"

"And what about Jack? You keep giving him a good game, don't you, but he's been more helpful in getting this caper pulled off than you have! You should've *seen* the way he told off those guards!"

Henry reached down and picked up a sizeable rock. "Either shut up now, or say what you want to say and I'll use *this* to shut you up."

Pete looked back, nonplussed. "Henry, you are a lout, a loser, a liar, and best of all, despite all your years of 'study' us two 'sidekicks' are better at this than you. Does that work?"

Henry had had enough. He threw the rock as hard as he could, but Pete swam nimbly aside, the stone plunking into the water inches away. Henry screamed bloody murder, dove into the water, and blindly headed towards Pete, his fury unquenchable. All thought of the task ahead vanished; his new goal was simply to throttle Pete until there was nothing left to throttle.

Jack sat there on the riverbank, his head still dripping, as the pool erupted in a flood of bubbles and splashing as Pete and Henry engaged in the fight that would later be known as the "Old Man's Battle Royale." It wasn't the best name, owing to it not

technically being a battle most Royale, but it was probably the closest either of them would get to one.

Henry reached out and grabbed what he thought was a scrawny neck, but turned out to be Pete's upper arm. Pete spun Henry around and gave him a thump on the back of the neck. Henry, in pain, lashed out with his left and caught what he hoped was Pete's ribs, which this time did turn out to be Pete's ribs. Pete grabbed Henry's hair and pulled them both under the water, throwing blows only mildly dulled by the water. Henry's response, besides nearly breathing in a lungful of water, was to reach for Pete's underpants and yank them upwards as hard as he could before kicking Pete in the shins.

Pete pulled his legs backward and wrapped his left arm around Henry's neck, lifting them back out of the water, and squeezing. Henry instinctively grabbed Pete's arm with both hands, but immediately thought better of it and used his right elbow to hammer at Pete's solar plexus. When he heard Pete gasp for air, he yanked the choking arm away as quickly as he could and faced his opponent, pulled him close, and began giving Pete's groin the most vicious knee he could muster.

The battle lasted nearly five minutes, with each one getting the upper hand for a moment and losing it almost as quickly. Since neither one of them could be considered by any rules-fudging as 'Olympiads,' the brutal knee strikes and elbows soon dropped into weak face slappings and pushing aways, as trying to kill someone while staying afloat is a very difficult task. After a bit, they both wearily gave up, and swam back to dry land. Henry was barely able to pull himself up, but when he did he collapsed face up on the shoreline, breathing heavily. When he heard Pete trying to pull himself up as well, he tried kicking weakly in that direction, but Pete just waved him aside and climbed up.

They lay there, side by side, soaking wet, gazing up into the dimming light of the setting sun.

Henry sighed. "I hate you."

Pete turned away. "And I hate you."

"I guess that means we hate each other."

"I guess so."

Again, they were quiet. Then Henry noticed something, or rather, lack of something.

"Where's Jack?"

"I'm, uh, right here, guys."

Jack's face suddenly came into view, bending over them. He looked very pale. Pete sat up on his elbows. "What's wrong, Jack?"

"Um, well, it's not so much something is wrong, as it is someone wants to speak with you."

Henry also sat up. "Who?"

Behind Jack's face, two crossbows suddenly came into view, one pointed in each of Pete and Henry's faces. "Me."

The steps in the pool did lead up into the tree, which appeared to have been hollowed out by the hands of very diligent workers, human and otherwise. At the base of the trunk was a large chamber, apparently designated for ritualistic purposes, while spiraling up along the sides was a very long, very precarious staircase.

It was this staircase that Henry, Jack, and Pete were now being forced to march up by Xochar. Xochar had on a long, grey cloak, under which he probably had hidden numerous weapons and tools for the job at hand. Not that he necessarily needed more weapons, as he currently had visible a dozen knives hanging on his belt, a crossbow in each hand, and a spike mounted on a headband on his forehead in case he needed to headbutt someone to death.

Henry sighed, turning to Pete. "So, if you're the leader, what do we do now?"

Pete shrugged. If they still had all their gear with them, they might have been able to rectify the situation. That was probably the reason Xochar made them throw all that stuff into the pond before they swam up and into the tree. "Got me. I'm not stupid enough to try and take him on."

Xochar cocked the crossbows. "Shut up."

Henry nodded. "All right, fine, I will."

Xochar fired his crossbow into the back of Henry's leg. Henry immediately yelled out and fell over, nearly taking Jack and Pete over the edge.

"I said, shut up."

Pete went to help Henry up. "You heard him, keep..."

The second crossbow went off, going into Pete's shoulder. He grabbed the bolt instinctively, yelling and collapsing on the staircase, writhing.

Xochar looked at Jack. Jack looked back and saw his options were the dozen knives and cranium spike, and simply swallowed and nodded.

"Good."

The climb to the top was long, even longer when one of the climbers has a crossbow bolt sticking out his leg. Along the way, though they didn't have time to pause and watch, they saw warrens had been burrowed throughout the trees, and though they couldn't see anything, they heard the sounds of cackling and rats gnawing on things. Big rats. Rats that occasionally spouted off dialogue.

The top itself was a floor on its own, the staircase leading up to a landing made up of a relatively thin slice of the tree. Even though it seemed to bear their weight well enough, it still creaked and groaned with every step. Henry gulped, knowing that if the landing gave, it was a long way to the floor below with no way of stopping.

The landing itself consisted of a series of circular hallways, radiating inwards, with doorways set in a labyrinthine pattern. Occasionally they would walk the wrong way down the hall to find it dead ended with no branch off, and they'd have to turn around and walk the other way.

As Henry limped down the hall, a thought, something which had been eluding him lately, sprung to mind. *Wait a minute. What's with these corridors? Why this whole setup just to protect the Seed? It's not like this is a particularly hard maze or something... wait, what was that?*

Henry stopped short. Pete, who was walking next to him, stopped as well, and both Jack and Xochar bumped into them. Xochar waved his now re-loaded crossbows at them. "Move."

"There's something here. In the maze."

"I know. Keep moving."

Jack turned abruptly, his hands folded in pleading. "Mr. Xochar, please. Why are you keeping us alive? What do you want with us?"

Henry found this question to be a little unhelpful, as he didn't care *why* Xochar was keeping him alive just as long as he continued that policy. But it was a little strange; Xochar's M.O. didn't usually include prisoners.

"You know things about this Seed that I don't. When we get to it I want answers. Now move or I shove both of these up your ass."

Jack turned and started walking. "Well, when you put it *that* way..."

They continued up and around until they reached the next doorway, when Henry heard it again. It was loud breathing, but this time he heard something else. A scraping sound, like a knife against wood. He wanted to tell Xochar that something was definitely up ahead, but he knew it would do no good. The man was incapable of compassion or caution, and possibly even abstract thought. But when they rounded the bend, he could see in the dim glow of the phosphorescent moss that covered the walls a long set of claw marks, dug into the wall.

Whatever was in here, they were getting closer to it, and it didn't seem about ready to bake them a pie.

After traversing two more hallways, Henry thought he could make out a much brighter glow than the purplish haze they had been traveling by. The halls were also getting much smaller and easier to get through, but so was the danger. Henry could now hear a crunching under his feet, and when he looked down he saw bones of small rodents cracking as he trod on them. And that was the least of it; in the corners he saw much bigger bones, more human-sized, with flesh still attached.

And then they arrived.

The central room was maybe about twenty feet across, but there appeared to be no pedestal holding up the great artifact. Instead, dangling above them was a thick set of vines, obscuring the ceiling from view. From these vines grew all manner of fruit: plums, oranges, apples, quinces, mangoes, strawberries, all of them larger and plumper than the regular varieties one normally saw in the market. But one in particular looked unfamiliar. This fruit hung towards the back of the room, and though it was pear-shaped, it had a silver skin, and light shone forth from it, not too bright, but enough to show this was either the one they were looking for or the gardener had used plutonium rods for fertilizer.

Henry felt the crossbow in his back. "So, what's so special about this?"

Henry turned, seeing Xochar, whose expression changed less than the average oil painting. "The Seed, you mean?"

"Crack wise and you get another one of these." The crossbow waved menacingly.

"Oh, right, right. It said something about...Pete, what did it say?"

Pete fumbled, snapping his fingers trying to remember. "Oh, oh, oh, something about... 'He who takes the seed will have new life within him.' I think. Something close to that."

"You sure?"

"Well, that's my best guess since you made us throw the book into the water, thank you very much." *Click*, went the crossbow. "Not that I'm cracking wise or anything."

"Good." Xochar brushed past them and through the room, making long strides across until he reached the fruit. He reached out to it, ready to pluck it from the stalk...

Pete poked Henry in the side. Up on the ceiling, underneath the vines, there was movement. A scurrying, and a labored breathing. The movement headed in Xochar's direction, and then...*it* leapt down.

Henry didn't even want to know what this creature had been before the magic of the tree had twisted it. Like the bird that had flown by before, this must have been something else at one time, but being here, guarding the Fruit that contained the Seed, must have mutated it beyond all bounds of reason. It sort of resembled a squirrel, in that it had a coat of fur, a long tail, and those beady rodent eyes. The similarities ended there. Its arms were powerful, ending in long, sharp talons. Its mouth was filled with sharp teeth, its head armored with what appeared to be scales. Its body was enormous, barrel-chested, thickly muscled, and spikes of bone protruded along its spinal column. Claws also sprang from its feet, oddly twisted and shaped, possibly to make it capable of climbing around on the walls and ceilings more effectively.

This horror was enough to strike fear into anyone. What made it worse was when a *second* one dropped down, even more horrid and cancerous-looking than its cousin, behind where the fruit hung.

Even with his hurt shoulder, Pete still managed to join Jack and Henry as they clung to each other and balled up on the floor. Xochar, on the other hand, didn't appear even remotely concerned. Lifting his crossbows, he fired one at each of the monster's throats. The bolts sunk in, though they barely seemed to notice; as if in unison, they ripped the bolts free, taking chunks of gore along with them. They crouched low, ready to spring.

He now turned to the knives on his belt. Flinging them in rapid succession, the knives flew out towards the various parts of the monsters, catching one in the left eye, the other in where its bits ought to have been if they hadn't mutated away to a better place. When he was down to his last two, he held one in each hand, dancing with the creatures around the room, parrying their claw slashes with the ease of a conductor who knows the music all too well.

He moved both of them, somehow, into a corner, when he suddenly whipped back his cloak, pulled out two broadswords, and stabbed them both through the chests, pinning them to the wall. They kicked and screamed, their oversized limbs thrashing wildly. Then the man pulled out an object Henry didn't recognize. It was a burly thing, with a metal stock and a handle at one end and the strangest blade Henry had ever seen. It appeared to be smooth and shiny, but as Xochar pulled on a cord on the stock, the edges of the blade suddenly sprang to life with a terrific noise. Henry could now see the blade's edge was actually covered by a chain, with wicked looking hooks along its length. As the object buzzed, Xochar lowered it towards the neck of the nearest creature.

The results were somehow bloody, horrifying, nauseating, and yet somehow one of the coolest things Henry had ever seen.

Xochar's machine weapon came to a stop, too clogged with bone, fur, and gore to keep working any further. He threw it into a far corner, and proceeded to pick up what pieces of creature he had deemed worthy to keep. One of the creatures' arms he looked at, admired, then twisted it until all the blood had been wrung out of it. He then placed the 'trophy' somewhere in the folds of his cloak.

Jack and Pete, realizing that they were not dead, joined Henry in sitting up in shock, pale-faced and wide-eyed. Jack wiped a large dollop of post-monster away from his face, the chunk landing with a plop. “What just happened, Henry? Why aren’t we dead?”

“I don’t know. But I want to know where Xochar shops.”

Henry crawled over the chunks of mutant beast that now covered the walls and floors until he reached the strange machine. “So, Mr. Xochar, what is this?”

Xochar picked up a mangled ear, shook it off, and placed that in his cloak as well. “I saw a guy trying to cut down a tree with it a week ago. He didn’t want to give it up.”

“I..um, I take it you made him see the error of his ways?”

“No. I stabbed him in the ear. Five times.”

“You’re not much for euphemisms and metaphors, are you?”

Xochar shook his head. “I’m not really into foreign foods.”

“No, no, a ‘euphemism’ is a—”

“Shut it.” Xochar went over to the silvery fruit, rubbing his hands in anticipation. “So, that’s it, right? Something about new life? No spike traps or giant boulders?”

Pete scratched his head. “No, don’t think so. You should be all set.”

“Right.” Xochar reached out and plucked the fruit off of the vine, hefting it.

“Nice.” He turned to the three of them. “You’ve been a big help to me. Now, you do know I have to kill you all, right? It’s a business thing.”

Henry held the worthless hunk of previously-amazing cutting machine in front of him in defense, but soon realized it wouldn’t stop somebody as determined as Xochar. It didn’t stop him from holding it up, as a sort of safety blanket. “Um, I wouldn’t say that you *have* to kill us.”

“Oh, yeah, I do. You see, if I don’t, people will think I’ve gone soft, start getting ideas. I’d still kill them, yeah, but it’s a reputation thing. It’s not so much about the killing, which I like, don’t misunderstand, but then the rumors get started. ‘Oh, there goes Xochar, he let those three guys live once.’ You see how it is.”

“Rumors, yes, but *think* of the rumors!” Henry staggered over to Xochar, dragging his leg behind him sloppily. “People talking about you, singing your praises!”

Xochar raised an eyebrow. “Praises?”

“Let me rephrase that. Even bad rumors are better than no rumors at all. Don’t you see that it’s better to be talked about than *not* to be talked about?”

Thankfully, Henry said this many years before both Oscar Wilde and severe litigational penalties existed, or else he may have found his situation become a lot more awkward than it currently was.

Xochar rubbed his chin. “Eh. Whatever. So, Mouthy, you’re first then, I take it.”

Henry held up the broken machine again. Xochar calmly swiped it out of Henry’s hands, and pulled a broadsword out of the wall, releasing what little remained of one of the mutant beasts. Henry took a few steps back, falling over, holding his hands up.

“Wait! We can still work this out!”

“I think we have. Hold still, please.” Xochar took a step towards Henry and brought the sword down, cleaving Henry in two. He then pulled out two long poles with spikes on the ends of them and rammed them through Jack and Pete’s eye sockets.

At least, that was what Xochar had planned to have happen. While attempting to take a step forward, he found his foot wouldn’t move. Looking down to see if maybe it

had gotten caught on something, he noticed his left shoe didn't look quite right. It was the wrong shade of brown, and when he tapped it, it felt hard. Bringing the light of the silvery fruit nearer, he saw his foot wasn't stuck to the floor; he actually couldn't tell where his foot ended and the floor began. And as he watched, the brown color continued up his leg, and he found it impossible to bend his knee as the color washed over it.

Forced to stand, Xochar lifted the fruit high, and saw his hand, where he clutched it, had darkened as well, but now it was crystal clear what was happening, as several small branches popped painfully out of his wrists.

The process hastened. Xochar looked at the three, dumbfounded, as his skin toughened, thickening, turning into bark the sandy color of a redwood tree. At last, only his face remained untouched, and he faced them angrily.

"When I get out of this, I'm going to cut all your balls off."

With that last threat, he began to yell, and as his face was consumed, his mouth froze open in mid-scream, leaves and twigs growing out of the top of his head. Where Xochar once stood, now there was simply a tree-like, wooden statue, clutching the silvery fruit in its left hand.

After a moment, the fruit fell to the ground, and rolled gently to Henry's feet.

Nobody said anything for a long awhile. Then Pete got up, pulled Jack up to stand, and they walked next to Henry, eyes riveted on the strange fruit.

"You take it."

"No, you take it."

"Well, I'm not touching it."

"You might want to, Pete. It might be an improvement."

"Shut up."

"Come on, guys!" Jack stepped in front of them. "Stop fighting! Look, you don't have to be the best of friends or anything, all right, but at least let's figure out how to get this thing and get out of here before somebody who cares notices they have a new...um, display? Is that what you'd call it?"

Henry sighed. "All right. We'll call a truce."

Pete held up a finger. "But this is it. We get out of here, partnership's over. We go our separate ways and never speak to each other again."

Jack frowned. "What about me? I like both of you."

Henry smacked Jack on the back of the head. "Then you're an idiot. But agreed."

Jack stuffed the wrapped fruit into the back of his shorts. Hopefully, whatever strange, mystical, and frightening powers lurked within it, they'd know damn well that emerging from Jack's shorts was not the smartest thing to do. For a moment, Pete and Henry watched him, waiting to see if he exhibited any tree-like symptoms, but when it seemed obvious that one had to actually touch the thing with bare skin to kickstart germination they decided to leave.

The labyrinth passed without incident, and they were just about to start down the stairs when they heard noises. People noises. Quite a few people noises. Cautiously, Henry leaned over the edge of the stairs and looked down. "Can't really tell from here, but it looks like they're having a meeting."

Pete rubbed his chin, in thought. "How many?"
"I don't know...maybe five, maybe two-hundred and fifty?"
"Don't get uppity with me, Henry."
"Well, hell, I don't know, it's dark down there, and everything looks really small. You want to take a look? Be my guest. But I don't think we can just sneak past them."
"We have to try." Pete turned to Jack. "Do you have anything left of our equipment?"
Jack shook his head. "I swallowed a few things for safe-keeping, but I don't think we'll be getting them back now."
"Great. We'll just have to rely on skill to get out of here."
They sat there for a moment, thinking.
"We're screwed, aren't we?"
"Yes, Pete, I think we are."

Eleana held the rock in her hand. Waving her hand over it a few times, it began to glow, faintly at first, but building into a remarkable green light. After a second, the rock cracked, like an egg, and a tiny plant began to grow out of it. She knelt, placing it on the cloth in front of her, and as the plant grew and spread out the gathered group oohed and aahed.

"This bes only a simple magicks. In times, you will knows how to make plantsies twice this sizes, and powerful enoughts to crush the manfools in its vineses."

Melody leaned over to Gilly and whispered in her ear. "Wish she would grow some clothes to put on. Isn't she, like, 60?"

Gilly began to giggle, despite herself. Eleana, who had traded in the cloak covering her revealing leather straps for absolutely nothing, hissed at them both. "Dos not take the lessons lightlies, for there is great powers in the simplest thingsies."

Gilly immediately made herself look more serious. "Yes, Mistress Eleana."

"I told yous, stop calling mes that! Eleana is enoughtsies."

Amelie raised her hand.

"Yes?"

Amelie shifted her weight nervously. "I was, like, wondering, we've been coming here for, like, a couple of weeks now, and I wanted to know, like, when are we and the guys gonna, you know, get together and everything?"

Eleana's eyes narrowed. "Are you referings to mating?"

"No. I mean, like, there's this totally hot guy I met at the last retreat, and I totally dig him, but I don't know if he likes me, and I thought as Pagans we were going to go to one of those bonfire things, where we'd, like, get a chance to see if we liked each other enough to do it."

"That is mating."

"No! Guh, I'm talking about sex! There, I didn't want to say it, but it's out there, and now everyone is going to totally think I'm a slut or something."

Gilly rolled her eyes. Though she had her occasional moments of slippage, she thought at times she was the only one who was even trying. Amelie and Melody seemed to only be in it because they wanted to meet guys that were, to quote Amelie, "open to lots of new and interesting experiences." Apparently by interesting, they didn't seem to

mean watching a woman create a plant from nothing more than touching a rock, but that was beside the point.

Gilly, on the other hand, had been admiring the Pagans from a distance for years. She hadn't come from a particularly religious family; her father was a bookkeeper in Stonemarket and her mother remained blissfully unemployed, and for some reason that seemed to be more than enough for both of them. As a young girl, she had asked her mother why she never seemed to view herself as part of some larger, cosmological force, and was content to iron and cook all day long. All she got was, "Go ask your father."

During her formative years, not only did she become deeply involved in religious studies of all kinds, but she all found that she had a gift of healing. When she was 17 and attending an all-girls school, Our Lady of the Foundry, run by the Hammers, she managed to bring back to life approximately 14 butterflies that had collected in the windowsills simply by touching them. She was promptly expelled, officials touting that she was "Promoting the idea that 17-year-olds should meddle with firmly established laws of mortality and physics."

Since the Hammers had effectively banned her, she spent the next year or so trying to get an apprenticeship instead, but found her reputation preceded her; very few morticians wanted their apprentices to bestow life on the recently deceased, as zombies tended to reduce the flow of business. She finally bit the bullet and worked under her father, which turned out to be the break she needed. After only a week, she found a book that changed her life.

Well, not so much a book, but a pamphlet, entitled, "So You Want to Change Your Life." It essentially outlined the beginning of a series of outreach programs, like the ones she was now running, and coming to them she found that this was the answer she was looking for all her life; here was a philosophy, a guideline for living that fit with her needs and outlook. And it wasn't long before they noticed her gifts as well.

That began her meetings with Eleana. Eleana seemed a bitter harridan to most, but in private with her Gilly saw someone else. Yes, she was still harsh and unrelenting, but there was passion in her, a passion for the world of secrets and mystery. Gilly knew Eleana was a bit of an old-timer, still caught up in the ideas of ritualistic sacrifice, bloodletting, and chaos that even as little as a few years ago held sway over the Pagan philosophy, but that still didn't make her any less enthusiastic about her studies. Even in her fanaticism, Eleana had a wisdom and a deep compassion for life...well, *most* life, anyway. Well, most *non-human* life. Gilly noticed it as the plant hatched from its "egg" a moment ago; the fire in those deep brown eyes softened, the harsh lines around her lips disappeared. In those moments, the years seemed to drop away, and there again was a young, exuberant girl of Gilly's age, caught up in the beauty and gift of creation.

But then, the bitterness returned, as harsh and grating as ever. Eleana didn't talk about her past, so Gilly had no clue what made her that way, but vowed in her heart to never let herself become bitter like that, no matter how hard she tried.

Melody and Amelie were a different story. They had graduated Our Lady of the Foundry, Summa Cum Laude, but then decided against going into higher education because they just had too much fun hanging out with each other rather than learning anymore stuff. They were also the only two who still talked to Gilly after she had been thrown out, and she convinced them, hey, if they weren't doing anything better...

But maybe it had been a bad idea. Melody was failing every test put to her simply because she didn't bother to show up half the time and wise-cracked with Gilly when she did, and Amelie was always cruising for guys to score with. Gilly sincerely hoped that none of Amelie's dalliances didn't come back to haunt her permanent record.

Eleana now got to her feet, placing her hands on her very-scantily clothed hips. "Perhapsies this lessons is too hard for nows? Perhapsies you'd all prefers to clean upsies after the Woodnoks, would yous?"

Amelie snorted. "Eew, no way. They're, like, all rabid, and when they 'go' they can never hit their nest properly, and it smells—"

"It wasn't a requests. Go, nows, and takes Gillian and...yours other friend with yous." She gazed over the rest of the assembled crowd of young women. "Anybodies else wants to join them?"

Melody bit her lip and dropped her head. Eleana never remembered her name. Gilly gave her a supportive pat on the back, and the three went upstairs.

They got about halfway up before they heard another noise besides Eleana talking about another application for the "Green Thumb" technique, as she called it. The sound came from a small room on a landing nearby, and it sounded roughly like this:

"Would you get your finger out of there?"

"Sorry, I don't know where else to put it!"

"You try jamming it up your nose? I know for a fact that it often resides there."

"Henry, that's just rude."

"So is the location of your finger. Now move it."

"Would you two shut up? Somebody or *something* is going to hear us!"

Gilly, curious, snapped her fingers and a small wisp of light appeared. The light floated on its merry way over to where three shapes, smushed into an alcove in the corner of the cave, were quietly yelling and smacking each other in a desperate bid to hide in a space barely big enough for one of them to fit...in the case of the larger one, big enough for half of him.

As the light drew nearer and illuminated them clearly, they stopped fighting, and turned to face the three girls. They smiled, sheepishly, and waved. The tallest one stepped forward, squeezing his way out of the opening with a popping noise, like a cork from a bottle. "Um, hello, you must be wondering what we're doing here."

"I should say so." Gilly tried her best to appear threatening in that Eleana sort of way. Something about the way the guy tilted his head at her made her believe that she was not having that effect.

"Yes, um, you see, we're the...um...county tree inspectors."

"County tree inspectors?"

"Yes."

"Where's your badge?"

"In my other pants."

Gilly looked at his leg. "You're bleeding."

"On the job accident."

"Your job always involve somebody shooting crossbow bolts at you?"

"What makes you think it was a crossbow?"

"The bolt's still sticking out of your leg."

Henry looked down. "Oh, that? Just a little misunderstanding. My bookie, he gets a little cross when I don't get him his money on time."

"Mm-hmm. So, Mr. Tree Inspector, how do you explain your presence at the meeting the other night? Trying to set up an appointment?"

Henry swallowed, hard. "Um...shall I start again, maybe?"

Gilly shook her head. "Here's an idea. If you tell me what's really going on, I'll get that out of there and patch it up for you. If you don't, I'll find a way to make that bolt a permanent addition to your leg."

The guy looked like he was about to argue, but then his eyes drifted upwards, as if he were thinking about something upstairs, and he gulped. "All right, sounds like a fair trade."

As Gilly helped him over to a corner, Amelie peered into the room and saw the larger fellow make way for a fairly handsome, if wiry and disheveled, young man come out of the alcove. He rubbed his eyes. He turned to his portly friend.

"Jack, is it the blood loss, or are there three women actually talking to us?"

The larger one nodded.

"And what about the Marshmallow King and his friend the Bandit Kumquat?"

"I think that's definitely blood loss."

"Oh good. Could somebody help me, then?"

At that point, the one in black promptly passed out.

When Pete awoke, his shoulder was feeling much, much better. When he opened his eyes, that same blond girl was kneeling over him, smiling.

"Feeling any better?"

Pete rose up on his elbows. "Yes, a lot. Thank you."

The girl sighed with relief. "Oh, thank Ol' Woodsie. I'm so, like, not so good at doing all the healing stuff, like last week I was trying to heal this rabbit, it was, like, really cute, but I put a little too much into it and its head blew off, it was pretty gross."

Pete blinked. "Ah. Well, I'm glad you got it all worked out."

"Oh, no problem. I'm Amelie Chestnut, by the way, and you are?"

"Pete. Pete Williams." He looked around the room, and saw Henry talking to the brunette that had come in earlier. She seemed deep in thought, but also a little concerned. The other, shorter blonde was sitting in front of Jack and...having a conversation? Pete shook his head.

"You did blow my head off, didn't you? I'm dead."

"Eew, gross, no. Why would you say that?"

"Because girls like you don't talk to guys like us."

"Yeah, you said that before you fell over. What's the big deal?"

"Because you're very attractive. Most attractive women generally ignore us, or at worst, throw things at us. You know, stuff like pots, pans, burning garbage..."

Amelie chuckled. "You're funny. But that over there is Gilly, and that's Melody. We're all good friends, but, like, don't get any ideas or anything."

"Ideas about what?"

Amelie raised an eyebrow. "You know, ideas. Don't, like, guys gets ideas about three women?"

“I don’t even have any ideas about *one* woman.”

“Oh. Then, like, never mind, and stuff.”

As Pete tried to probe deeper into what Amelie meant by all this, Henry had tried to fill in Gilly as best he could to the predicament they were in.

“...And so we’ve got the fruit, and now we have to get out of here without losing our heads in the process.”

Gilly tapped her chin. “So, why do you need our fruit again? And I stress, the fruit that rightly and properly belongs to us?”

Henry sighed, hanging his head. “Believe me, you wouldn’t understand. Nobody else has up to this point.”

Gilly folded her arms. “Try me.”

Henry, sitting cross-legged, bounced his left foot up and down in the air. “Have you ever felt like you were supposed to do something, something great, but every time you turn around you end up doing something else? Have you ever sat down and thought about all the people you read about in the history books, all these extraordinary lives, and think to yourself, ‘that could be me?’ Do you think that maybe, just maybe, we all have at least one great adventure that we’re supposed to go on, that defines us as human beings?”

On the one hand, Gilly felt something in the pit of her chest stir, as something in Henry’s words touched off something that had been nagging at her mind for years. On the other, something about it sounded a little too fishy.

“And your grand adventure is to find a nice pear to munch on?”

“No, that’s just a part of it. It’s a much bigger scheme than that.”

“Two pears?”

“No!” Henry groaned. “All I’m asking is that you help us get out of here. That’s all.”

“And what makes you think I want to do that?”

“Because you think you know what you want, but you don’t. I don’t think you’re really happy here.”

Gilly frowned. “Whatever gives you that impression?”

“Two reasons: one, you’re *way* too nice to be a Pagan. I’ve run into a few in my time, and trust me, you think it’s all fun and games now...well, it’s not.”

“But we’re working to change all—”

“They say they’re changing, but some things never change. And number two: if your heart was in it, you would have had us thrown to the treants by now.”

Gilly was feeling her fists clench. How could he say such things? She had found such solace with the Pagans! Eleana was teaching her wonderful things! She had gifts, remarkable gifts, things that only the way of the Woodsie Lord could explain! The world was changing, becoming a much more tolerant place...wasn’t it?

And then she realized why she was angry. It was because this young man, this Henry was making her doubt. And no good could come of that. Well, she’d show him.

Let Eleana decide what to do.

Henry thought he was a good reader of people. Most would disagree, but he certainly thought so. Despite the often harsh realities life often threw at him, he believed

that for all people's crotchiness and vicious words, there was still a shred of humanity that could be bargained with.

Somehow he misjudged Gilly. He thought she looked a little unhappy, but apparently she wasn't. Maybe he was a little thrown by the fact that besides Cait, she was the only other woman to speak with him who wasn't his mother, Jack's mother, or one of the prostitutes who kept handing him his money back and saying, "Not on yer life, buster." But, still, he couldn't help thinking he was right in some respects.

However, even a blind, paralytic, deaf man could tell from the next county over that the tall, imposing woman with a clothing style resembling a trussed ham was not exactly the kind to make friends.

Eleana put her hand gently under Henry's chin, her long, surprisingly well-manicured fingernails digging slightly into the flesh there as she pulled him closer. "Ah, I remembers this one. What bringsie you to this place?"

Gilly stood with her arms folded to one side of Eleana. "He was trying to steal the sacred fruit with the Seed, Mistress."

For once, Eleana didn't seem to mind the Mistress comment. With a quick flick of the wrist, her hand came from underneath Henry's chin and across his face. Henry couldn't believe how much the slap hurt; he could taste blood in his mouth.

"Wretched manfools! The Seed is not yours! The Seed is for the Woodsie Lord himself! Mortals hands is not for its consumptions!"

Pete, standing in back of and to one side of Henry, smiled weakly. "Yeah, we sort of figured that out when the guy leading us here sort of turned into a tree or something. Just a thought, don't you think it's high time everybody started putting warning labels on all their ancient artifacts, so this kind of stuff doesn't happen so often?"

Eleana turned, slowly, to Pete. "Do not speaksie again. My patience is at its ends."

Melody and Amelie stood behind Gilly. Melody leaned forward. "Nice going, Gilly. Now she's going to kill them and it's all going to be your fault."

Gilly first thought the idea was silly. Eleana couldn't really want to kill anybody. After all, Eleana had said that whole thing with Imelda at the meeting the other night was an accident. "She made the Children angries, and they sometimes lose controlses," she had said. But she wasn't quite so certain now...

"Oh, hush. Why do you care anyway?"

Melody pouted. "Because Jack's a sweet guy. He's not too bright, I know, but he's really nice. It's hard to find a really nice guy these days. Everyone just wants to sleep with you, but I don't think he even really knows what that *means*."

Now Amelie wanted to get in on the action. "Yeah, and Pete, too. Nice going. First guy I get a chance to talk to now that I, like, have Pagan powers, and old Angry McBittie's going to off him."

Eleana shoved a finger in Amelie's face. "Nows is not the time for discussions!" She turned back to Henry, a smile crossing her face. It was a smile that said she was going to enjoy what came next, even if nobody else did. "Do you knows the crime for stealings the most precious of preciouses from the Woodsie Lord?"

Henry shook his head. "No, but something tells me I won't enjoy it."

"Oh, but I think you *wills*. For soon you will joins with the earth, and feeds the Children of the Lord himself." With that, Eleana made a fist, clenching her hand so hard

blood began to well out of the crevices. She punched the floor, very hard, and the reverberations echoed throughout the massive tree. A light began to shine underneath her fist, and the light spread out, in a straight line, across to opposite sides of the tree. The line touched the walls and rode up them, following a strange, spiral design that had been unnoticed on the tree until made visible by the light.

As the light flew up the tree, at each point it reached one of the burrow holes it flowed in. And a horrible chittering noise accompanied it. Shapes began to emerge, climbing headfirst down the sides of the tree, their claws digging into the wood. Some of them were humanoid, but with rat-like heads, shouting in high-pitched voices. Others were less definable, less humanoid, but with more eyes, more teeth, and louder roars.

Henry realized for the first time in his life, this would be the perfect time to wet himself. He silently cursed himself for taking that bathroom break on the stairs on the way down; even in his final moments he couldn't get anything right. He turned, and saw even Jack was stealing his thunder.

Only Pete gave the appearance that he was unfazed by all this. He certainly was fazed, of course, but actor to the end he fought every ounce of fear coursing through his system. If he was going to go out, he was going to go out with a little style.

“So, this is it, huh? This is the best you've got? Well, I haven't been able to shower in the past few days, so I hope I taste like underwear, you scumsuckers!”

Not the greatest last words, but heroic to a degree. Pete satisfied it was enough.

Eleana, on the other hand, was none too thrilled. “I said *no more speaksie!*” With that, a purple glow appeared in her hand, and it grew into a softball-sized ball of energy. She threw it at Pete, where it appeared to pass through him and into his stomach. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, Pete felt a pain unlike anything he had ever experienced. It felt like he had eaten a plate of broken glass, covered in hot sauce, washed it down with gasoline and a lit match, and then for dessert jammed a 10,000 volt electrical wire down his throat.

It wasn't quite as frightening as the cannons, but it certainly had more kick than a punch to the groin. He fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

Gilly watched the whole scene in abject horror. Three people she had just met, who, despite being a little on the low side of stupid, seemed nice enough in the scheme of things, were about to be ripped apart and eaten by a horde of the Woodsie Lord's Children. One of them had been hit by something Eleana had never taught her, and was actually now bouncing off the floor a few feet as pulses of energy rippled through his body. And Eleana was standing there, fire in her eyes, laughing at this.

And then Gilly realized: sometimes, people who are angry, mean-spirited, and distant are merely misunderstood, who have had a bad lot in life and need someone to re-open their eyes to a world of love. Sure, they get a little cranky at times, but deep down there's a good person just waiting to get out.

But as she watched Eleana laughing at the suffering of a human being, she thought, sometimes, they're just a mean old bitch who could use a nice boot up the ass to show them a thing or two.

Gilly didn't even notice the green light forming in her hands as she stared at Eleana, betrayal and anger making her vision blurry with tears.

“LEAVE...THEM...ALONE!” And with that, she pushed Eleana.

The green light leapt from her hands like a spark, and like a spark to a powder keg, there was a loud explosion. Eleana, who for a few moments had the audacity to look surprised, flew fifty feet across the room and slammed into the trunk of the tree. With a groan, she slid down it, leaving behind an impression nearly an inch deep, and fell to the floor unconscious.

Gilly stared at her hands in amazement, tiny bolts of green electricity leaping from finger to finger. The rest of the gathered crowd looked at it as well. Amelie came over and touched them. “Wow. That was, like, the coolest thing I have ever seen.”

Gilly shook Amelie away, pointing at Pete. “Don’t just stand there! Help him!”

Amelie ran over to Pete and helped him up. Now that Eleana had been knocked for a loop, he didn’t seem to be in much pain, just sort of groaning every alternate second. She headed for the underground exit, with Melody, arms wrapped around Jack, close behind. Henry, who found himself hypnotized by the descending horde, felt something tug on his sleeve. He turned, and filling his vision was the hooded form of Gilly, her eyes pleading with him to go.

“I...I...”

“Can we talk later? I just ruined my career as a Pagan in good standing for a complete stranger, and I would like to live to regret what I’ve done.”

“Good idea.”

The rest of the gathered crowd looked to each other nervously. One, a bit more alert than the rest, raised her hand, waving it at Gilly. “Um, what should we do now?”

Gilly pointed at the nearest rat-thing. “I think class is officially dismissed. I suggest you all learn the time-honored skill of running away.” Yanking Henry behind her, they just managed to get ahead of the group, who had decided that perhaps it would be best to run first and try to ask the rats not to eat them later.

Henry was noticeably surprised to come to the bottom of the stairs into a very salty and very dry river bed. Looking to each side, he saw the river water parted to either side. It was like that time he went to the City Aquarium, except there were much fewer fish and more of an unnerving sense that there was no glass separating him from the elements.

“How did you...”

“It’s magic.”

“And the flow of the river, how do you keep it from running over the ed—”

Gilly sighed. “Magic.”

“Oh, yes, thank you, that explains everything.”

“Do you mind not being sarcastic while I’m rescuing you?”

“I’d like to, but it seems to be getting harder and harder to stop doing it these days.” Even as they ran, he stuck a finger into the wall of water and pulled it back. He rubbed it in his fingers. “Would have been nice to know about this the first time we came in.”

They pulled themselves up the embankment, using a series of rock handholds that, when the riverbed was dry, worked as a makeshift ladder. When they reached the top, the screams of the following girls came after. They looked down briefly to see them pulling hair, kicking, punching, and generally being rude to each other to be the first one up the rocks. Gilly frowned.

“I really hope those things aren’t too hungry. I kinda liked some of them.”

“Some of them?”

“Ok, maybe one or two. They all meant well, anyway.”

“Maybe you can close the path? Maybe those things can’t swim?”

“Eleana’s the only one who knows how to do it. Only higher-ups can get in, after a couple of initiates held a party here two years ago. The Woodnoks didn’t sleep for a week.”

“Woodnoks?”

“Oh, the guardians of the Seed. You saw them, didn’t you?”

Henry couldn’t help but picture those gigantic, mutant beasts not being able to sleep. He also couldn’t help not feeling particularly sorry for them.

“Psst!”

Gilly and Henry turned to the bushes, where the other four were hiding, barely visible through the branches. Jack’s head emerged.

“Don’t you think we need to get going? I need to get home and get a change of pants.”

Henry nodded. “Um, right. Speaking of which, is that fruit still intact?”

“Either that, or I *really* need to change my pants.”

“Ah, lovely.”

The group took off, Gilly leading the way, and behind them they heard the sounds of many things searching the bushes, snuffling and weaving. Henry only turned once, and he saw a dark shape, much larger than himself, with glowing yellow eyes. He thought it looked a little familiar, and he remembered the meeting hall, and the things that patrolled outside. He didn’t want to remember the sounds Mrs. Imelda Brunly, but he did, and he wanted to make sure there was no repeat.

In fact, the rest of the evening was a blur. Too much had happened, too fast, and his mind simply couldn’t take it anymore. He barely remembered entering the sewer tunnels, groping past the steam vents, dodging zombies, and emerging safely into the confines of the City. The last thing he remembered before blacking out completely was the group going separate ways, and him telling Gilly he knew of a place they could go. Well, that, and one other thing, a thought that occurred to him as they crawled out of the sewer and he smelled the sweet, acrid air of civilization.

Ye gads, I hate nature so, so much.