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NANOWRIMO-15

by Sauvik Biswas

CHAPTER ONE

1 Triggering Event

A twelve year old boy walked into a bar.

The bartender looked up and said, 'Hnng, Kid! The milk booth is two buildings from here.' She wiped a section of the long wooden table, removed the two empty glasses and placed two clean coasters on the bar. 'I can serve you milk, too, but that would be costlier than the milk booth.'

'I am not here for milk,' the boy said, 'I need juice and information.' The boy rebelliously jumped onto a bar stool that was too high for him. He sat on the stool only to realise that he was too short to see the bar top. He stood up to level his line of sight with other patrons.

'So, kid, what information do you need?' the bartender asked.

'I am not a kid. I am Knudalce with a K. I need to find

Umami.'

The bartender looked at the twelve year old boy who called himself Knudalce. He was a short guy with roundish face. He wore thick, round glasses the likes of which could be carved out from the bottom of some of the vials she had in her bar.

'Have this juice, hnng,' the bartender said as she placed a small mug of orange juice in front of Knudalce. 'You must be reading a lot of fantasy stories. There's a reason why they call it mythical. That's because it is NOT REAL.'

The bartender lady came really close to Knudalce's face. She was probably in her late thirties and had a few teeth missing. 'She should fix those holes,' Knudalce thought to himself. He couldn't stand the bad breath that escaped the gaps between the teeth. It was stronger than the cigar smoke that the old man beside him was periodically exhaling.

'And even if t's there, it is impossible to sail,' the bartender said, 'You would surely know that.'

'Heya there,' a tall, muscular man barged in through the door. 'How are you doing, my darling Bai?'

'Hnng, fine, Zaan,' she said and kissed the guy in the lips. Knudalce felt a sense of disgust. He did not understand why two people would even want to put their lips together. He wondered if that guy called Zaan had problem with his sense of

smell.

'Oh!, you have a kid as your customer?'

'Yeah! He wants to know how to find Umami.'

'Really, Kid?,' Zaan asked Knudalce.

'I am not a kid. I am Knudalce with a K,' Knudalce protested.

'Ok! Ok! Mr. Knudalce with a K. I work at the dock as a loader. I see all these sailors who would one day like to explore the great seas and find these myths for themselves. But they can't. Do you know why?'

Knudalce did not know anything about sailing the seas. He shook his head.

'That's because this entire island and the small ones in its vicinity have currents surrounding them. As if they are isolated from the rest of the world.'

Bai placed a large pitcher with some dark liquid on the bar and poured some for herself. Zaan and Bai raised their glasses and celebrated. 'Cheers! To our marriage,' Zaan shouted. Knudalce did not know what to make of that.

'See, we are getting married in a few weeks. When I was young, I wanted to sail the seas and discover all these places for myself. Now I don't think of all these crazy adventures. Once we get married, we will save some money, obtain a license from Gall de Liver and open his franchisee. It will be far

better than this small bar.'

'Who is Gall de Liver?'

'He is the best brewer in the entire land of Toothache,' Bai said.

'I am surprised that you don't know his name,' Zaan said, 'You aren't from Toothache, are you?'

Knudalce shook his head again. 'I am from Coli Village in Bacterium islands.'

'Oh! We get a lot of cucumber from your village. They are the best.'

Knudalce had finished his orange juice. 'Is there any way that I can escape the currents?'

'I don't know about that. People have said that there are these gates that open themselves into the world from which we are isolated. But that is as much of myth as your Umami.'

'Do you mean to say that the gates aren't there?'

'That's not what I meant. The gate is there but it is just an architectural thing - an arch if you may say. It has been there since ages.'

'Have you seen it?' Knudalce eyes glowed.

'No, no. My father had once travelled there and had seen the gate for himself. He even walked through it. It is just a door frame made of carved stones. He thought it was someone's idea of a practical joke.'

Knudalce was disheartened. He paid for the orange juice.

'By the way, Mr. Knudalce with a K!' Zaan said while Knudalce walked away from the bar, 'If you need something cheap, try the milk booth.'

Knudalce turned around and said with a visibly angry expression, 'I am lactose intolerant.'

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Knudalce with a K, the lactose intolerant, twelve year old with thick glasses had to get to the heart of Toothache. He knew that sailing from the East was impossible. Maybe, the western seas were more merciful. Yet, he did not understand what Zaan meant by isolation of this land via currents. It took him two days to sail from Coli village to the port city of Tartar. He had to find some way to cross this land.

As he walked towards Tartar's border, he saw a huge commotion near the town square. A lot of people were gathered around something. It was hard for Knudalce to see anything through the dense crowd and his denser glasses.

'What's the matter?' Knudalce asked an old man who was standing at the periphery of the gathering.

'They have caught a thief. The thief is being punished. He will be left tied to that pole for four days without food or water.'

Knudalce couldn't see either the thief or the pole. He

did not bother and walked towards the border of the city. It took him about an hour but he knew that he was at the correct spot. There was a huge queue. People had lined up with their belongings. It was a check-post. The guards were really efficient. The queue moved quite fast. Occasionally, someone was taken off the queue and a thorough search was conducted. Sometimes, they were let go while at other times, they were sent back. Knudalce did not have much to worry about. There wasn't anything in the backpack he was carrying that would make the guards suspicious. It was heavier than what a twelve year old would normally be able to carry. He had some money, a few clothes and his Grandpa's diary. The diary was quite thick and contributed to bulk of the weight.

'Please show your citizenship ID,' the guard said. He gaze was still fixated on a sheet of paper lying on his desk.

'What's a citizenship ID?' Knudalce asked the guard.

'Where are you from?' the guard raised his head and asked Knudalce. Knudalce saw his thick moustaches bounce a bit.

'Coli Village from Bacterium Islands.'

'If you are not a citizen of Toothache, you must either have a work permit or an inner line permit to enter Toothache.'

'I thought I was already in Toothache.'

'Yes you are. This port city is exempted because of

economical reasons. Now if would move to the sides please.'

The guard waved his hand suggesting Knudalce to make way for the next person.

'Sir, where can I get an inner line permit?' Knudalce asked the guard.

'Kid, don't waste my time. Ask someone else.' He was visibly irritated. His thick moustache shivered a bit and conveyed his feelings of displeasure.

As Knudalce was walking away from the queue, someone tapped his shoulders. Knudalce turned around and saw an old, thin man waiting for his turn. 'The office that issues the permits is near the milk booth,' he said, 'If you hurry, you will be able to make it before it closes for the day.'

'Thanks, old man,' Knudalce said and ran towards East, trying to get back where he had come from. En route, he crossed the crowd. It seemed like they were still enjoying the thief's misery. Knudalce wanted to see his face but he did not bother. He was in a hurry.

It was another fifteen minutes before he reached the office. He had to ask two people to get to the office. The board was discoloured. It was hard to read what was written on the board as if they did not want people to know that such an office existed.

The office itself was huge inside. Stacks of paper

decorated the floor, the tables and the shelves. These stacks were garnished with an inch of dust that must have taken a decade to settle over. There wasn't anyone visible in the office. Was he late? Had the officials already left for the day?

'Hello! Is the anyone around here?' Knudalce shouted. He waited for a few moments and shouted again. On the third time a man emerged from a door that had a small board that said 'TOILET'. At least that board was more readable than the one that hung outside the office.

The man was visibly irritated. 'Can't a man even relieve himself in peace?' he said to himself and looked at Knudalce. The man looked filthy and disgusting. He had really long nostril hairs that bothered Knudalce. 'What do you want from me?' he asked, or maybe barked.

'I need to apply for inner land permit. What should I do?'

The man walked towards a heap of paper on one of the desks, took out a form, handed it to Knudalce and went back to tightening his belt. 'That would be thirty Druks. Fill it with a turquoise ink ball-point pen and bring it back,' he said.

'Where would I get a turquoise ink ball-point pen?'

'That is something you will only get here.' The officer opened one of the dusty shelves and took out a pen covered in

dust. 'Don't worry! The dust might be old but the pen is brand new. And that would be ten Druks more.'

Forty Druks was a lot of money. Knudalce could buy a week's worth of food for that much. He still had quite a bit of money that he had scrapped from his Grandpa's chest after his death.

Knudalce walked outside and found himself a small bench underneath a big tree just beside the office building. The form was huge. It was almost like disclosing his entire life that had accumulated itself in that body in the last twelve years. He filled his first name as Knudalce and left the surname blank. He did not know his family tree. He had to leave the details of his parents as blank, too. He never knew who they were anyways. He knew his Grandpa's name but the form did not ask for any one's name besides the parents of the applicant. There was an area where he had to write down the last three address he had stayed. He did not have three. As far as he knew, he had always stayed with his Grandpa in Coli Village of Bacterium Island just beside the small brook that passed through the village. There was a column for profession. He wrote the word 'SWANEW'. He was a trainee and a complete amateur but that's what he was getting good at.

It took him a long time to fill the form. He re-entered the office and saw the officer snoring on his desk. He

understood why the officer had such long nostril hairs. It was to filter out all the dust surrounding his head while he slept with his head on the table. He climbed a chair opposite to the officer and placed his form on the table with a loud bang. The sound woke the officer up.

'Hah! Done already? That was quick.' The officer took a look at the form through his half-closed eyes. 'Swanew,' he said, 'That's interesting.'

He pulled open the drawer on his right side and stamped the form. When he removed the stamp, Knudalce was terrified of the word that was spelled diagonally across the bottom of the form in red. 'DECLINED'!

'Why?'

'That's because you are a swanew. Don't you know that Toothache has a ban on swanews?'

Knudalce did not know that. He wondered what happened to the people who got ill if they had no swanews in Toothache.

'But, but, I am not even a proper swanew. I am just a trainee,' Knudalce protested.

'It doesn't matter,' the officer said, 'That "DECLINED" stamp is the only stamp I have.'

Knudalce did not know what to do. He hung his head low and walked out of the office.

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Knudalce sat down on the bench in front of the permit issuing office. It was night time. The office was closed and the filthy officer had left hours ago. Knudalce had bought some roasted meat for his dinner. There were several thoughts racing through his head that had suppressed the sensation of hunger. The very fact that his Grandpa's killer, Pasta Ferry, would already be on his way to Umami while he is stranded in a country that has outlawed swanews troubled him.

Knudalce had bought a map of Toothache from a novelty shop near the milk booth. This land was known as Toothache because it looked like an extracted tooth floating in an ocean. The cluster of islands near the North-East was where he had come from. There was no place called Umami. He had searched for the map of the entire world but such a thing was not to be found. At the very least, he had to get off this whole landmass that was trapped in ocean currents. There was a faint possibility that the western coast of Toothache was navigable. The East was not. Many years ago a group of explorers had sailed towards the East. They had their interviews featured and their pictures published on the Daily Parasyte, the state-run newspaper of the Bacterium Islands. Nobody had heard of them ever since. The south was an even more dangerous place. The waters were shallow and there were a lot of rocky islands. This place was known as Vessel's

Graveyard, aptly named so. The map had a dotted line drawn on the southern seas that roughly corresponded to that.

There was something funny about the South-Western part of the map, too. The coastline formed an arc and it appeared as if somebody had taken a bite of the small continent.

Knudalce wrapped the food and kept it in his backpack. He had nowhere to go. After that loss of forty Druks, it wouldn't be a bad idea to sleep outside and save some money. And besides, it was summer and the weather was pleasant, too. There were no signs of rain either.

'Ah, that thief! I wonder what he looks like,' Knudalce thought to himself. As he walked towards the town square, he was both terrified and curious.

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The town square was not as dark as the bench near the permit office. The roads were deserted and everyone had had gone home. Knudalce had crossed Bai's bar and there was quite a bit of commotion inside. Her business was doing well. Knudalce saw a figure tied to a pole right at the centre of the town square. His face wasn't visible from afar. As Knudalce came close he heard the thief snoring. The snoring sounds weren't that rhythmic. 'He must have got sleep disorders,' Knudalce thought to himself. The thief wasn't that

tall. In fact, he was even shorter than Knudalce. He squinted to have a clear look at his face. His face was swollen and bruised. That's when Knudalce realised that the thief wasn't snoring. He was hungry and his stomach was making strange noises!

Knudalce looked around. There wasn't anybody.

'Hey are you hungry?' Knudalce whispered.

The thief shook his head in affirmation and gave out a suppressed grunt. That's when Knudalce realised something. The thief wasn't a vertically challenged grown up but a kid! He looked around once more and double checked that no one was nearby. Then he proceeded to untie the kid. The kid barely had enough strength to stand up. Knudalce dragged him and made him away from the pole and made him sit on the pavement.

Knudalce offered the roasted chicken he had in his bag. He also took out a small packet of pills and gave the kid two pills. 'Shorty, have these before you finish the roast. These will help reduce the pain and the swelling.'

By the time Knudalce had offered the pills, the kid was already on his last piece of roast. 'Don't worry. You'll feel better in an hour,' Knudalce assured.

'So, Shorty, what were you caught stealing?'

'Chicken,' the kid replied, 'And I am not Shorty. I am Gopi Manchuri. I am short because I am eleven years old. I

will be tall when I grow up.'

'Gopi Manchuri is too long, I will call you Shorty.'

Knudalce felt like he could trust a thief more than the officials. 'Can I ask you something that might be illegal?'

'Do you think that stealing a live chicken was a legal thing to do?'

'Ah okay, that's why I thought you might be able to help me. How can I cross the barricade of Tartar and get into the mainland?'

Gopi Manchuri looked at Knudalce. 'You aren't from around here, are you?'

'I am from the Bacterium Islands. To worsen my chances, I am a swanew.'

'Really! You are a swanew. No wonder I feel already well.'

'Well, that has a very standard recipe. I learnt it from my Grandpa but I think every swanew on this earth knows it. Coming back to the point, do you know how I can escape into the heartlands.'

'It isn't cheap. I know of someone who will be able to take you across. In fact I had worked for him for a few months. It was too risky. If I get caught stealing, I will be tied to that pole for four days without food. But if I ever get caught smuggling some illegal immigrant, I will be sent to

the mines.'

Knudalce recalled that the map had a marking for mines. These were located somewhere in the North-West extreme of Toothache, much further from where he was right then. 'Can you take me to this person?'

'Right now?' Gopi Manchuri thought for a while. 'Well maybe we can try our luck.'

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When Gopi Manchuri led Knudalce to a misfit of a house near the southern wall of Tartar, it was already quite late. Even Bai's bar was closed. The house they stood before was barely a door, supported by bamboo sticks and tarpaulin. Gopi Manchuri knocked on the wooden door. Knudalce felt that the only reason why the door was wooden was so that somebody could knock on it.

A thin, tall, skeletal looking man with long, thin and curled moustache emerged out of the darkness. 'What's the deal with these funny moustaches?' Knudalce thought to himself but he decided to keep it to himself lest he offend the guy who could help him.

'Mr. P.P., this is my friend Noodles,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'It's Knudalce with a K. K-N-U-D-A-L-'

'Hora! I don't need to know how you are spelled, Mr. K. What brings you here?'

'I wanted to get into the heartland of Toothache.'

'Hmm! Gopi, are you sure he is not a spy of God El?' Mr. P.P. asked.

Gopi Manchuri nodded his head and said, 'I am sure. He saved me from going hungry for four days. Not that I am not used to that.'

'Very well. Get in you two!'

The inside of the shaggy tarpaulin and bamboo structure wasn't as bad at all. In fact, it was very much a habitable and cozy place.

'It was a good decision to come to me instead of that permit office. Most newbies waste forty Druks on the mandatory stationary. In fact, that office exists to lure travellers into their clever scheme to sell forms and ball point pens.'

'Eh...,' Knudalce hesitated a bit, 'Well I was happy to run into Shorty, I mean, Gopi Manchuri. He got me here.'

'Did you know he is a swanew?' Gopi Manchuri barged in with excitement.

'Is it so? If that is the case, I must warn you that your safety is not my concern. It wouldn't have been one anyways but I must state that explicitly.'

'Well, please don't worry about my safety,' Knudalce

replied, 'If I am safe, this story would be completely bland.'

'You have a valid point. But do you have the money?'

'How much would it require?'

'That would be four hundred Druks.'

'Four hundred! I can't afford that much.'

'Can you afford to buy the stationary from the permit office ten times then? I bet even that would not help you get into the heartland.'

'Mr P.P., I have promised him that you would give him a discount on the usual rates,' Gopi Manchuri whispered. The whisper volume was not low enough and Knudalce could hear him.

'Is that so? Very well, if you have promised, I will give you a discount.'

'Thank you very much, sir,' Knudalce rejoiced. 'How much would that be after discount.'

'Three hundred and ninety nine Druks.'

'That seems like a good deal,' Knudalce thought to himself and replied, 'Very well then, I will pay you.'

#

The next evening Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri waited for Mr. P.P near a small banana plantation. Knudalce was worried that even with deals, he would should deplete all his cash reserves. Gopi Manchuri looked better than the last day. The swelling on his face was gone. He still had some bruises. The

good part was that he was behaving like and energetic eleven year old.

'Shorty, I hope this Mr. P.P. doesn't escape with our money.'

'Hora! Mr. K., Gopi! How are you doing?'

Knudalce was relieved to see Mr. P.P.

'I couldn't go to the business district. El's men are still looking for me,' Gopi Manchuri said, 'After all they are still expecting me to serve three more days of Hungry Tied.'

'What's hungry tide?' Knudalce asked.

'Hungry Tied. It's a standard punishment. They leave you hungry and tied to the pole as a public display piece for a set number of days.'

'Ah! That's what I had rescued you from.'

'Enough of this banter. We must get to the waters before sunset,' Mr. P.P. interrupted their exchange of information.

Mr. P.P. walked ahead into the banana orchard and the other two followed him. He crossed the orchard and stood in front of a brick wall. The wall was pretty old. The plaster had peeled off at several places. In some places, even the bricks had eroded off. Mr. P.P. walked along the wall. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri followed him until he made a hand gesture to stop. Mr. P.P. kneeled and pushed a brick. It came off. He pushed a few more bricks until they all came off loose

to reveal a hole in the wall. Mr. P.P. crawled through to the other side. 'Come on,' he said, prompting Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri to do the same.

Knudalce was greeted to an open space. It was such a departure from the hustling port city of Tartar. Kudalce could see the ocean to his far East even though he knew that the shore was very far away.

'Don't we have to walk to the sea?' Knudalce asked Gopi Manchuri. Mr. P.P. was walking in the opposite direction, towards the one where Mr. Sun was slowly losing his intensity.

'No, there is another water body. It's still quite far.'

'If you know the route, why didn't you guide me yourself?' Knudalce asked, 'I could have saved some money.'

'I know the route to get there but I don't have the means.'

And the three walked until Mr. Sun was no more visible but only left an orangish glow in the sky. Mr. P.P. stood in front of a tree beside a body of flowing water and looked up. Being a swanew, Knudalce should have known what tree it was, but sadly he didn't. Maybe that's why he called himself a trainee. If his Grandpa was alive, he would have not only told him the name but also numerous uses of its roots, its bark, its leaves and its fruits.

Mr. P.P. climbed up the tree like a spider. Once he was

up there, he shouted, 'Lowering! Stand clear.' He lowered a small wooden raft with the help of some ropes. Well, it was more of a few narrow logs of wood tied together than a professionally built raft. Once the raft was lowered to the ground level, Mr. P.P. jumped from the tree in a manner that frightened Knudalce. Yet, he was perfectly fine - his long arms and legs absorbing the shock of his landing pretty well.

They sat underneath the tree until the last rays of Mr. Sun's orange wash disappeared from the sky.

'Hora, we shall make our move,' Mr. P.P. said, 'We need to cross Root Canal in the darkness. We do not want farmers to spot us.'

Root Canal. Knudalce had seen that in the map he bought at Tartar. It was a network of water canals that irrigated Eastern-Central Toothache. These ran between Yellow River in the north and the Gingivia River in the south. Tartar was right between the two rivers on the East coast of Toothache.

Mr. P.P. freed two ores that were tied to the body of the raft, gave one to Gopi Manchuri and kept one for himself. He pushed the raft into the water with his feet and jumped on it, perfectly landing at the centre of the raft. Gopi Manchuri and Knudalce did the same, although Knudalce did not do it as well as Mr. P.P. or Gopi Manchuri. His jump cased the raft to undulate a bit violently but Mr. P.P. pushed himself down on

the other side to stabilise the raft. He was a true professional and wanted to make sure that his customer received a satisfaction worth three hundred and ninety nine Druks.

Gopi Manchuri and Knudalce took turns to row the raft along with Mr. P.P.

'Shorty, you are getting tired pretty fast,' Knudalce said. Gopi Manchuri could barely row for fifteen minutes straight. Mr. P.P. was like a seasoned veteran. He was making perfect turns at corners even in the darkness.

'Malnutrition, hora! I keep telling that kid not to steal from fast food restaurants.'

'If you have some pill to cure malnutrition it would be nice,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'I don't have one on me,' Knudalce said, 'but I promise I will make you one once we land.'

It was hard to keep track of time. They had been rowing for quite sometime. The canal had a very gentle flow. In stretches where they had to row upstream in order to get to another distributary, it wasn't that difficult. Knudalce even got a hand of turning sharp corners while changing to a distributary from upstream. They had to row the raft slightly ahead of the mouth of the distributary and then they would have to turn it.

At times they would cross small clusters of lights. Knudalce knew that those were villages. They were too far for the villagers to either notice an infiltrator or for the infiltrator to use the lights as a visual guide. As time passed by, the villages that they passed no more had lights. People slept early compared to the cities or towns. Their only guide was a limited amount of light reflected via a thin slice of Mr. Moon that barely helped Knudalce to figure out the outlines of a village when he crossed it.

It was in one of those bouts of rowing upstream when Mr. P.P. suddenly said, 'Mr. K! Can you hear that?'

'Hear what?'

'Even I can't hear anything,' Gopi Manchuri added.

'No, no! Put your ears on the raft and listen closely,' Mr. P.P. said.

Both Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri stopped rowing and placed their ears against the logs of the raft. Knudalce heard a distant commotion. It was as if thousand men spoke simultaneously in an unintelligible manner. No, that was not it. Knudalce knew what it was.

'Hora! Hora! Get to the banks! Get to the banks!' Mr. P.P. shouted, ' They have opened the floodgates of the dam.'

Even with the thin slice of light source, Knudalce could make out that the bank was very far. They were rowing on a

major artery and a direct hit would be disastrous.

'No time! Hora! Kids, hold on to the raft tightly. Grip the ropes. Don't let it go.'

By the very tone of Mr. P.P.'s voice, Knudalce knew that they were in distress. Knudalce opened his glasses and dropped them into his backpack. He wrapped his left arm with a piece of rope and held Gopi Manchuri's arm with his right. Mr. P.P. swiftly made two nooses, laid face down and slipped his hand through them.

A huge wave of water jolted the raft and splashed water all over Knudalce. Knudalce's clothes and his backpack got completely drenched. Thankfully, Knudalce always wrapped his Grandpa's diary with a waterproof sheet.

When the raft settled, Mr. P.P. shouted, 'Hold tighter!'

Knudalce did not understand why until he squinted his eyes and focussed on the distant upstream. Even without glasses, he could make out that a large demon of a wave was fast approaching to engulf them. Knudalce squeezed hard. He felt like he was digging into Gopi Manchuri's flesh. The wave came and hit the raft harder than the last wave. The raft was airborne. Knudalce closed his eyes in fear only to realise that he is nearly blind without his glasses anyways. As the raft made its way back towards the canal, Knudalce knew that the demon of a wave would swallow the raft along with them.`

CHAPTER TWO

2 Characterization

It was dark. Town square was drowned in complete silence. The feeble lamp mounted on the lamppost was insufficient to illuminate the lonely pole, that until eighteen hours ago was accompanied by the bruised body of an eleven year old thief.

'This looks like the work of a professional,' a man called Jugo Nor Theist kneeled before the pole and inspected the ropes that were cut.

'Boss, wasn't he supposed to be Hungry Tied for four days?' his underling Jugo Shaowtest asked just like an obedient sidekick should have.

Jugo Nor Theist was the Executive Police Officer who headed of Office of Petty Theft in Tartar. He was a stout and well built fellow in his early fifties, who always wore a pristine and well polished suit. The only accessory adorning

his roundish, clean shaven face was a monocle trapped between his right eyebrow and cheek. In his career spanning three decades, he had single handedly brought down petty thieves like Noy Rorris, Chirard Marinez and Sharold Hipman. His deduction was second to none. There were even an instance where he was summoned by God El himself when his favourite tea cup was stolen. He couldn't believe that someone had the audacity to untie a convict right under his nose.

He walked towards the pavement and reeled through the grass. He picked up the femur bone of a chicken whose thigh meat was eaten off very recently. There were two more bones accompanying the piece.

'I think we have a racket that steals fast food,' Jugo Nor Theist remarked.

'That must be true, boss.'

Jugo Shaowtest was not related to his boss. They merely shared the same first names. Unlike his boss, he was tall and thin. He was jealous of his boss' deductive power and to call a cat a cat. Secretly, he wanted to take over his position but Jugo Nor Thiest had sixteen years of extra experience than him. In spite of the jealousy, he never got tired of panfrying his boss' ego with butter. In order to make his boss look better than him, he would often deliberately forget to shave and iron his shirt.

'Underling, are you merely echoing my impressions?' Jugo Nor Theist asked. 'How do you think I know that?'

'I am not as clever as you, boss,' Jugo Shaowtest replied. He hung his head in shame and twitched his fingers.

'Fool! How would you ever ascend to my position?' Jugo Nor Theist roared, 'You make me feel like I am grooming an idiot as my successor. Look at this closely,' he brought the piece of bone he was inspecting between his underling's eyes. The piece was so close to his nose that he could make out the freshness of the residue. 'This piece was eaten by the culprit after he was freed. Look at the red blood stains. Those must be from the bruises of the culprit. I can't imagine that such a finely roasted chicken meat will have bloody bone marrow.'

Jugo Shaowtest knew that his boss was right. No matter how much he tried, he could never come close to the deductive power of his superior.

'Do you know what this means, Mr. Shaowtest?'

'What boss?'

'This means that the racket finds it easier to steal fast food.'

'But boss, where could have he escaped to?'

'That's too simple, Jugo Junior. You must put your mind to it and deduce. It's a matter of logic.'

Jugo Shaowtest swallowed his pride and kept quite.

'He can no longer steal fast food in Tartar. If he ever tries - no let me clarify that - if his racket ever tries, they will be punished. He must have escaped to a place that is outside our jurisdiction.'

'But boss, this is the only place in the entire Toothache where they serve fast food. That too, they are there to cater to the merchants and labourers who come from the other sovereign islands. After the swanew ban, people of Toothache stopped eating fast food because no one was there to treat them in case they had a troubled stomach or food poisoning.'

'You are right, my subordinate. It feel just like yesterday that these food joints had such good business - even in the capital,' Jugo Nor Theist sighed like an old man nearing his retirement although he was ten years away from it.

'Still boss, I cannot fathom where this guy and his racket must have escaped to.'

'Elementary, my dear Shaowtest,' Jugo Nor Theist made a chuckling sound, 'When a serial stealer is robbed of his target, he always runs for the ingredients that make up the target. That is the psychology of a criminal.'

'Boss, you are a genius! I know where they must have escaped to!'

'Precisely! To the place that rears the liveliest chickens and cultivates the greenest farmlands, the land that

is irrigated by the Root Canal, our very own grassland - the Dental Moss.'

Jugo Shaowtest silently bowed at the flawless deduction of his boss, Jugo Nor Theist. The Executive Police Officer who headed of Office of Petty Theft in Tartar took out a toothpick from his coat's breast pocket and scraped the channel between his upper right canine and the incisor that preceded it. He placed his left arm on his underlings shoulder and together they walked off from the scene of escape.

'Come my protege, let's report our findings to our superiors.'

#

'We have a swanew who has made his way into the heartland,' a masked man told two other masked men.

Three masked men gathered many kilometres away from Tarter's western gate, inside the heartland of Toothache. It was the very same gate that Knudalce had visited two days ago. The first one to speak had legally crossed the gate and rode on a horse to reach the rendezvous point.

'It has been ages since we got hold of a swanew,' the second masked man told the other two. 'Are you sure?'

'I have a question,' the third one said to the other two, 'Which one of you is which?'

'You idiot! it is me, Hoarse Reddish. We have ridden together for five days to reach here!' Hoarse reddish took off his mask in frustration and showed his face.

'Whoa! Whoa! You shouldn't do that,' the first masked man said to Hoarse Reddish. 'What if one of us is a spy? Let's say our password on the count of three. One, Two, Three -'

'Violet Vegetables on Violet Beige Tables,' the two masked men and the unmasked man uttered in unison.

'Very well, we can take off our masks now,' the first one said and took off his mask.

'Ah so it's you, Brother Ginger!' Horse Reddish said, 'Meet one of our latest recruit, B. Troot.'

B. Troot had taken off her mask, too. 'Nice to meet you Brother Ginger! I have heard so much about you.'

'Oh, please don't call me "Brother".'

'Are you sure it is a swanew?' Hoarse Reddish asked Brother Ginger.

'I am positive. I have my sources.'

'It is so hard to get hold of them ever since that idiot of a dictator had banned swanews. Since he has managed to infiltrate into the heartland, I bet he is good?'

'I can't say much about that,' Brother Ginger sighed, 'He is only twelve years old.'

'Huh!' Hoarse Reddish was taken aback, 'That's

disappointing. Can he really call himself a swanew?'

'At the very least, he belongs to a bloodline of swanews. Unlike us, he would be able to make antidotes to the poison El has been feeding his subjects.'

Hoarse Reddish wasn't exactly convinced by that argument. Sure, one had to be from a bloodline of swanews in order to be a swanew but it was not like someone could readily create medication, antidotes, potions and poisons without any training.

'Brother Ginger, should we capture him?' B. Troot asked.

'I think it is better to find him and keep an eye on him. According to my sources, he was last spotted with a thief who had escaped his Hungry Tied punishment. If the Jugo idiots decide to track the convict and pass the information to the covert intelligence agency, I am afraid that this swanew might be meeting his end,' Brother Ginger replied and added, 'Oh, please don't call me "Brother".'

'By covert intelligence agency, do you mean the other idiots?' Hoarse Reddish asked.

'Yup, those guys,' Brother Ginger shook his head.

'I am surprised that a kid was able to fool the border guards.'

'Nope, he wasn't able to,' Brother Ginger said, 'He paid a transport smuggler to guide him through Root Canal.'

'I can't believe he had that much of money with him. Some of the transport smugglers charge a lot,' Hoarse Reddish said.

'Is it expensive?' B. Troot asked.

'It must be. I don't know the rates though,' Brother Ginger replied.

'Neither do I,' Hoarse Reddish said, 'But at least the kid was intelligent enough to pay a transport smuggler. Most guys would waste money in that useless permit office and get caught up in their clever scheme to sell forms and ball point pens.'

Brother Ginger smiled and said, 'I guess you guys should head south.'

'Thanks for your info,' Hoarse Reddish said.

'It was an honour to meet you,' B. Troot bowed.

Brother Ginger headed back towards Tartar. The faint light of an impending dawn was visible near the horizon. By the time he would reach Tartar's gate, Mr. Sun would be shining pretty bright and the border guards would have already opened the gate.

#

When Knudalce opened his eyes, it was bright and sunny. Mr. Sun shone directly in his eyes. There was a sharp pain in the back of his head. He touched the spot on his skull that pained the most. There was a bit of swelling. He tried to

recall the events of last night. The last thing he remembered was being airborne and plunging straight into the waters.

'Hora! Seems like Mr. K is awake,' Mr. P.P. said, who at that very moment stooped to see Knudalce's face and thus blocked the harsh glare of Mr. Sun's rays.

Knudalce was happy to know that he wasn't lost or deserted. He sat up and looked around. He was on a dry stretch of land that was ready to be ploughed and tilled like the ones neighbouring it. The canal was visible far away. He could even hear the water flow in the canal. It did not make such sounds when they got on the raft. 'What happened to me?' Knudalce asked.

'Maybe you got stuck by the raft when we plunged underwater. But hora, we'll never know.'

Knudalce was still in a daze and looked around with a blank expression. Mr. P.P. understood that Knudalce was still a bit confused.

'Hora! Don't worry, Mr. K,' Mr. P.P. said with an assuring tone, 'We were just unlucky to have the floodgates of the dam open while we were in the canal. Let's call it a passing misfortune.'

'Have we already reached our destination?' Knudalce asked.

'Well, technically, you had paid me to smuggle you into

the heartland. I can assure you that we are already there.'

'We were already in the heartland yesterday evening. Where are we now?' Knudalce said in an irritated voice.

'Errr, I can positively say that we are somewhere in Dental Moss. Don't ask me where exactly.'

Knudalce had seen that name scribbled on the map. He saw his backpack lying beside him. He took out the map from the backpack. Thankfully, he had kept it inside the waterproof cover along with his Grandpa's diary.

Dental Moss was written across the green patch of farmland through which the criss-crossed lines of Root Canal made their way to the sea in the East. The nearest notable city, Plaque, was towards the North.

'See that forest,' Mr. P.P. pointed out to the deep green coloured patch in the South of Dental Moss that read Forest of Baleen, 'That's the place where rebels live. You would want to steer away from that. And look at this place,' he pointed to the city of Dentasia, a large spot in North-Central Toothache, 'That's the capital. That's where God El and his gang operates from. You would also want to stay away from that.'

Knudalce realised that Gopi Manchuri wasn't visible.

'Where is Shorty?'

'You mean, Gopi? He has gone to get us our breakfast. Don't worry he will be back,' Mr. P.P. assured him.

There was not a man in sight. Knudalce sat in the scorching heat of Mr. Sun. As his clothes dried up, he felt better. After about an hour or so, Gopi Manchuri came back with lots of fruits. Well, it wasn't too much for Mr. P.P. but certainly quite a handful for Gopi. It was pretty apparent that Gopi Manchuri had stolen them from some orchard.

'Come on, let's leave,' Mr. P.P. said, 'We can eat while we walk.'

Mr. P.P. led the way while the other two followed. They walked on the aisles that separated two adjacent farmlands. Knudalce came across the usual crops - rice, wheat, and corn. He also came across a species that he wasn't familiar with. This particular crop yielded round, thorny fruit. In some of the fields, the fruits had ripened to become either bright orange or muted pink or deep maroon and were ready for harvest. Knudalce could tell that the fruits were from the same species because of the bright yellow spot at the top of the fruit no matter what its colour was. After a while, the sightings of this unknown plant became so frequent that Knudalce badly wanted to know what it was. Maybe it was in his Grandpa's diary. He had made so many sketches and observations on medicinal plants. But Knudalce did not want to stop and disrupt the pace. He thought of asking Mr. P.P. instead.

'Mr. P.P., what are these plants?' Knudalce asked

pointing towards a field that had yielded deep maroon fruits.

'Hora, those? We call them Discount plants.'

'That's a strange name.'

'It is a strange name and it is a strange plant. Here try the fruit,' Mr. P.P. plucked one and gave it to Knudalce.

Knudalce took a bite and immediately felt like throwing up. He stooped and spit until he was sure that every last molecule of that repulsive fruit was out of his mouth.

'Who would eat that?' Knudalce asked.

'Apparently God El and his men do. His men buy the Discount fruits and pays the farmers well. The farmer also gets a tax rebate. That's where the Discount plant gets its name from. It is not unusual for a farmer to plant at least a batch in one of the rotations. But hora, you have to be damn lucky. He only buys finite amounts of each of the Discount fruits.'

Gopi Manchuri had gone quite ahead of them. He hummed a tune that sounded so familiar to Knudalce. At times Gopi Manchuri would jump into the fields, run right through the crops (which were often taller than him) and emerge on a different aisle. Knudalce and Mr. P.P. stuck to their standard pathways.

'What are our plans?' Knudalce asked.

'We were supposed to emerge near the foothills of Fang

Shy. But right now we should focus on reaching the nearest village as early as possible. We'll pretend that we are weary travellers.'

#

It was a long walk and they were yet to see a village, or a house for that matter. Knudalce occasionally found few people toiling in the fields but they must have travelled quite a lot to reach their workplace. It must have been well into afternoon when Gopi Manchuri spotted a small hut. He jumped with joy and with all the exuberance, he ran towards the lone, old man who was working on some grafts in front of his house. The old man wore a bamboo hat and chewed a blade of grass. In spite of being fairly old, he had a lean and muscular body.

'Old man! Old man! Could you give us some drinking water,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'Sure kid, let me get a glass for you,' the old man replied and went inside his hut.

Knudalce and Mr. P.P. had caught up to Gopi Manchuri. Knudalce was tired and Mr. P.P. was already out of breath. The old man emerged out of his hut with a glass and a jug. 'Seems like you all need some water.'

Mr. P.P. was panting. He snatched the jug and poured the

water inside into his wide open mouth. His hands shook of exertion and spilled half of it on his body.

'Thank you, sir, thank you!' he said. He was still breathing through his mouth.

'Who are you guys, eh?' the old man asked in a nasal tone, 'It's been a long time since I have come across a few strangers. We don't see any new people in this part of the town, eh.'

'We have come from Plaque,' Knudalce said. He had seen the name of that town on the map. It was somewhere towards North-West of Dental Moss. 'My uncle here wanted to buy some farmland near the South.' Knudalce nudged Mr. P.P. with his elbow as a sign to continue the play.

'Hora, I mean, yes, sir,' Mr. P.P. said. His speech shook more than his hands. 'My father has left some money, you see, sir. We were on our way and, and... it became dark.'

'Planning to get rich with the Discount plants, eh?'

'Hehe,' Mr. P.P. chuckled, 'That's one thing. So many farmers have improved their lives in God El's country.'

'I can understand. These are low maintenance, too, eh. You don't need to employ too many labours or cut irrigation channels,' the old man said and sat on a crudely built wooden bench. He signalled the other's to take a seat. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri got on the bench, with the latter having

significant trouble climbing on it until the old man lend him a hand. Mr. P.P. sat on the grass in front of him, with his knees folded and tucked into his chest.

'By the way, I am Old McDonald, eh, the owner of this hut and the farmland surrounding it.'

'I am Mr. P.P. and these are my nephews, Mr. K and Gopi. It would be nice of you if you allowed us to spend the night here.'

'Haha, don't worry. I am plenty of space, eh. I am surprised that you would want to buy in the Southern parts of Dental Moss. Sometimes those rebels create a ruckus.'

'Haha, sir. I am aware of the problem. But sir, I don't have enough money to buy a farmland in a prime location - like this one of yours.'

'That's true, that's true,' Old McDonald said and shook his head. 'It might actually be better to plant a few rotations of Discount fruit until the soil is ready for proper crops. But then again,' Old McDonald looked into Mr. P.P.'s eyes intensely and said, 'You know that a lot of farmers who opt for Discount plant go broke, don't you, eh?'

'I am aware of that, hora sir. The Venerable Wisdom Tooth His Highness God El does not buy back all the Discount plants.'

'Hehe, eh, eh,' Old McDonald smirked as if he had a

streak of cunningness hidden in him. 'Do you want to know the secret behind hitting the jackpot with these Discount plants?'

Mr. P.P. flipped his lower lip, shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head sideways.

Old McDonald leaned towards Mr. P.P. and whispered, 'It's the Pink ones this year. Next year it would be the Maroon ones and the next year, it would be the Orange ones that would be in demand.'

'Hora sir! How do you know so much?'

'You need to understand the market.' Old McDonald chuckled. His right eyebrow danced as if he had deciphered a complex trend based on the discrepancy of supply and demand.

Knudalce was still listening to Old McDonald's and Mr. P.P.'s conversation. Gopi Manchuri was busy climbing the mango tree adjacent to the hut. Maybe he wanted to climb down onto the thatched roof via a branch that arched over the hut.

#

If there is one word that Knudalce would use to sum up Old McDonald, it would be chatterbox. During dinner that old man chattered on and on about his life as a farmer. If I went on to describe everything, this book should be renamed as "Old McDonald and the Art of Farming". In summary, he had inherited this piece of land from his father-in-law as a legacy. For years he paid no attention to it. About ten years ago, he lost

his wife and decided to take up farming in order to drive away boredom and loneliness. Some of the theories he had regarding plantation and crops would even challenge the knowledge of an experienced and knowledgeable swanew. Of course, he had little evidences to back his "scientific theories".

Knudalce felt tired. He did not want to sleep yet. Gopi Manchuri was already asleep beside him and was snoring. In the dining hall, Old McDonald and Mr. P.P. were engaged in a conversation. Well, it wasn't so much of a bidirectional conversation but rather a one-way sermon on the Art of Farming. Knudalce decided to take out his Grandpa's diary. This was the last remains of anything he could remotely call his family - a fragment of knowledge and memoir passed down by his Grandpa. Knudalce was not literate enough to read everything. The journal entries and many medicine crafting procedures were written in a script that Knudalce wasn't familiar with. The thick tome contained a section which served as a reference. Fortunately, most of that section was written in English for Knudalce's convenience.

Ever since Knudalce came across the Discount fruit, he had this hunch that he had seen it somewhere before. This was not the only catalogue of plants and minerals his Grandpa had but it was the largest. There was a greater probability of finding out what the fruit was really called in that journal

as compared to the smaller notebooks lying in his Grandpa's chest at his village in the Bacterium islands. Knudalce flipped through the pages. Occasionally, he came across a drawing that resembled the spiky exterior of the fruit, but the description of the plant itself got his hopes down and prompted him to proceed.

Until he reached the entry number two hundred and fifty two.

Octothorpe neurosium:

- orange, pink and maroon fruits on separate trees;
fruits have a single bright yellow spot

- Orange Pink & Maroon (OPM):

- ratio 3:3:4 of each colour, dominant
depending on the year, creates sedative

- regular intake -> dependency,
psychedelia

- life force: low

- leaves, stems and roots - useless.

- add. ref. Gorm shards.

Knudalce understood what the cryptic entry with its broken phrases conveyed. He had used the diary many times to prepare medication for his Grandpa's patients. Octothorpe neurosium, the proper name of Discount fruits, can be used to make a sedative called Orange, Pink & Maroon, also abbreviated

as OPM. The preparation required one of the colours of fruit to be a bit more than the other two, the choice of which depended on the year. 'Maybe that's what the old man was referring to when he shared the "secret" of being commercially successful in cultivating the plants,' Knudalce thought to himself.

Knudalce couldn't keep himself awake. He closed the diary, wrapped it in the waterproof cover and placed it back inside the bag. Pretty soon he himself was asleep and could no longer hear the snoring coming out of Gopi Manchuri's nose or the sermons coming out of Old McDonald's mouth.

#

When Knudalce woke up, his eyes were heavy, his head throbbed and he couldn't move his arms. He looked through his barely open eyelids. Gopi Manchuri was still asleep. He wasn't snoring and his hands and feet were tied. Knudalce realised he would be tied, too. His senses felt disjoint. He forced open his eyelids. Everything around him appeared as if they were coated with orange, pink and maroon paints.

'Wha 'a ay?' Knudalce tried to speak. In his head he had perfectly pronounced that question, yet his tongue betrayed him.

Old McDonald stood before Knudalce. He wasn't alone. There were two more guys behind him. One of those guys held an

unconscious and tied Mr. P.P. like a supple bag. Old McDonald was also not an old man anymore. Well he was an old person as well as a man but he did not appear to be the talkative old farmer Knudalce had seen him to be the day before. Instead, he wore a uniform with camouflage patterns usually found with the military, as did the two fellows behind him. Knudalce couldn't make out what colours his uniform was. Heck, he even saw Old McDonald's face to be orange.

'Seeing the colours of psychedelia, eh,' Old McDonald mocked, 'Did you really think that an escape convict and a swanew would be able to fool me, eh? You even paid some stupid guy to get yourself smuggled? Well, I'll give you props for that. At least you did not waste your money in that useless permit office and get caught up in their clever scheme to sell forms and ball point pens.'

'Hoo aaa uuu?' Knudalce tried his best to pronounce the words correctly.

Old McDonald pointed to the badge on his chest. The silhouette of a pair of pliers adorned the badge with an abbreviation embroidered right underneath it. 'Old McDonald,' he said, 'Elite and Intelligent Executives of the Intelligence Office, E.I.E.I.O.'

CHAPTER THREE

3 First major turning

It was hard to make out what the time was or where they were from the darkness inside the carriage van. The carriage was locked from the outside. A slit high up on the left side wall allowed a thin ribbon of light to enter the interior of the carriage. It was the only thing that stopped the carriage from being completely dark inside.

Knudalce's head felt much clearer. The chromatic distortion in his vision was gone, too. He could see that Gopi Manchuri was awake and was yawning. Mr. P.P. was still asleep under OPM's influence.

'I am sorry, Shorty,' Knudalce said, 'I did not want to drag you or anybody else into trouble.'

'That's okay. I was getting caught anyways.'

'What would your parents feel when they'll find you

missing?'

'Heh! That is if they were here. My father was killed in the massacre eleven years ago, before I was born. My mother overworked herself to death when I was seven.'

'What massacre?'

'Ah! You would not know that. Even the people of Toothache do not know the details well. I pieced it together from various stories. Eleven years ago, the Wisdom Teeth called for all the swanews of Toothache and their family to the ancient library of Udon. They bombed and destroyed the library along with the swanews. After that a law was enforced banning swanews.'

'Er-, was you father a swanew?'

'My mom said he was.'

'How did she survive if all of their families were killed.'

'You see, my mom never married my father. After that incident she never told anyone who my father was. When I was seven years old, my mom was already on her deathbed. That's when she told me everything about my father, except for his real name. She said that she did not want me find out anything about my father. She took it to her grave. Also, it is not like there are no swanews in Toothache. There are a few who are alive but they don't expose themselves.'

'If you are the son of a swanew, you must have got a lot of life force.'

'What's that?'

'You know, like the life force I use to make medicines.'

'You are not making any sense.'

'Like the bluish thing you use to make pills.'

'Eh?'

'Ah!' Knudalce sighed. He understood the futility of explaining a physical and visual object with words. 'I wish my hands were untied, I could show you how I make those things. You would know.'

'I could untie your hands,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'How?' Knudalce was surprised.

'Haha!' Gopi Manchuri laughed, lifted his arms upwards in a playful manner and said, 'Tada! Look I am free.' Gopi Manchuri untied Knudalce and said, 'These are tricks of the trade a petty thief has to learn. Those guys at Tartar use a different knot nowadays. These heartland fellows will have to catch up.'

Knudalce stood up on his toes and peeked through the slit. It was hard for him to stand like that when the carriage itself was moving on bad roads. He saw mountains far away peeking up the horizon. He wondered if that was Fang Shy. There weren't any other mountain ranges in the map. Knudalce

sat down and opened the backpack, which was fortunately thrown inside the carriage by the E.I.E.I.O. guys.

'Look, this is an ordinary Ario leaf.' Knudalce was holding a dried, almost roundish leaf in his palms. 'This can cure most of the common stomach ailments. You can eat it as it is and it will work on you. But that would be too slow.' Knudalce placed the leaf in his left palm and placed his index and middle finger on it. 'Now if I infuse the leaf with a bit of my life force, it will work much faster. It's like donating a bit of my life to the person who will eat the leaf. Here, look at -'

Knudalce couldn't finish his sentence. The carriage came to an abrupt halt. Knudalce was flung on to Gopi Manchuri, who himself banged his head against the carriage wall. The ordinary Ario leaf flew into some dark corner. Something or someone had halted the carriage as well as Knudalce's demonstration.

#

Unbeknownst to the three captives inside the nearly dark carriage, three men and a woman wearing masks and bearing swords and firearms had stopped the vehicle. Old McDonald pulled the carriage to a sudden stop. One of his accomplices, who was sitting on the top of the carriage, could not balance himself and fell face flat on the road.

'We will not harm you,' B. Troot, the masked lady holding a hacked off shotgun, said to Old McDonald, 'That is, if you behave like a civilised man.'

'What do you want?' Old McDonald asked. He had a long-barrelled rifle tucked beside him, conveniently between his and his fellow E.I.E.I.O member's seat. It would be futile to even try and reach for it. He had a small knife tucked in his boots. If he had any chance, he would have to take it out and throw it in one swift motion.

'Money,' B. Troot answered, 'Why else?'

Hoarse Reddish held a long sword in his hand. He picked up the E.I.E.I.O. agent who had crashed on the gravel and held him by his neck. His two underlings made their way towards the carriage and opened it.

'Boss, there are three people inside along with the trunk,' Rebel A said.

It was so dark earlier that Knudalce had not seen any object travelling with them. As soon as the door of the carriage was flung open, Knudalce saw the huge brown trunk. Mr. P.P.'s tied body was leaning on it. That lanky fellow was still asleep. Last night he was not only administered OPM but was also taught how to cultivate his own sources.

'Rebel B, fill up the bags. Rebel A, bring them here,' Hoarse Reddish ordered.

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri carefully got down and walked towards a masked Hoarse Reddish. The man whom they were addressing as Rebel A was pointing a firearm at them. Meanwhile, Rebel B sliced open the lock of the trunk and started transferring the contents of the entire trunk into two sacks.

'Which one of you is the swanew?' Hoarse Reddish asked.

Knudalce did not know if he should trust the guy. Divulging information to a masked stranger is the last thing Knudalce would do. He did not reply.

'Listen kids, if you tell me, I will let the other one go,' Hoarse Reddish said.

Gopi Manchuri kept quite. He rubbed his palms together to ease off the fear he felt in his stomach.

'Ok fine, if you don't tell me, we will take you both.'

'Boss, what should we do with this guy?' Rebel B held the two sacks in his right arm and a sleeping Mr. P.P. in another.

'Put them all on the horses.'

Rebel B flung Mr. P.P.'s sleeping body on one of the horses and the two sacks on another. He approached Knudalce with the intention to lift him on the third horse when he heard a shout.

'B. Troot, watch out!' Rebel A called out loud.

It was Old McDonald. He had already taken out the knife

and had flung it towards B. Troot. B. Troot was fortunate to have been blessed with good reflexes. She bent sideways to dodge the projectile's path. Simultaneously, she shot a bullet aiming squarely at Old McDonald's hand. She underestimated a seasoned veteran's cunningness. Old McDonald had already pulled his underling towards himself. The bullet, instead of hitting Old McDonald, hit the poor guy in his upper left arm.

Realising that it would take a great deal of effort on Old McDonald's part to push his underling away and reach for the rifle, B. Troot held her shotgun by the barrel and swung its stock like a club. The butt on impact with Old McDonald's head made a loud and blunt 'Thud!' sound and rendered him unconscious.

'Get the kids and move,' Hoarse Reddish shouted. 'We have to get away from here. The old guy might have his fellows looking for him.'

'But boss, where are the kids?' Rebel A asked.

'What?' Hoarse Reddish looked around in astonishment. The kids were nowhere nearby. 'Urgh! Kids these days, I say you. They cant even wait to grow up and become a rebel.'

#

Gopi Manchuri ran like never before. He was astonished to discover that his legs could move so fast. Knudalce was keeping up with the pace, too. For a moment Gopi Manchuri felt

like he was observing the fleeting moments of the past.

'Thanks for the pill,' Gopi Manchuri said, 'I never knew that you swanews could make someone go this fast.'

Knudalce could barely make out what Gopi Manchuri was speaking. They were running so fast that every syllable caused a tiny sonic boom. 'Don't be too happy,' he replied, 'It has it's own consequences.'

Gopi Manchuri did not understand a word that came out of Knudalce's mouth. He was just happy to feel and act like a superhero.

Our hero and his side-dish zoomed past miles and miles of green fields and plantations, badly designed huts, sparsely populated villages, broken windmills and mossy waterwheels. Even the enemies of the fast and furious - the wind and the mosquitoes - could not stop them. Heck, they did not even manage to reduce their speeds. When they reached the banks of River Gingivia, they had to stop.

There was no road ahead of them. All around them was a thick deposit of silt. River Gingivia was a wide monster. Standing on its Northern bank, Knudalce could not see what was on the other side, even with the help of his thick glasses. Just beyond the river was the Baleen whales.

'Shorty, it would be a good idea to get to the forest,' Knudalce said.

'Huh?'

'We can take shelter in the trees. Here the land is practically exposed. Who knows when we will be attacked by a stranger again.'

'Then Knudalce, we can swim across. You know how to swim, don't you?'

'Yes I do. But also remember that I am one year older than you. And older people don't have as much stamina as younger people. While you maybe able to do it, I don't think I will,' Knudalce thought for a while and added, 'I don't think we need to swim at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is a story that my Grandpa told me. Long time ago, there were swanews who would deceive commoners with things that they did not understand. To others it wasn't deception but a god-like ability, the miracles of the day. Like, say, moving on water. I think I know how they did it.'

'How will we do it?'

'It's simple,' Knudalce said and immediately grabbed Gopi Manchuri's hands. He ran towards the river, almost dragging Gopi Manchuri behind him.

It is said that a full grown man must run at forty meters per second in order to balance himself on water. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri were traversing much faster than that. Also,

their combined weight wasn't even close to that of a grown up. In no time they were running on water.

An old man in his seventh decade of existence was doing his laundry in a small puddle of water in the river banks. He saw two kids having a conversation, at which point he discarded it as a banal observation. The next thing he knew was that these kids were running on River Gingivia at incredible speeds. His eyes popped out, his mind blew up and his jaws fell. He stood up, raised his arm and with whatever was left of his head, he shouted, 'Miracles of the Messiah! Miracles of the Messiah.'

Of course, if in his place, it was a man who was well versed in the laws of nature, he would have thought, 'Darn! These kids are ageing slower than me.'

#

Gopi manchuri was about to slam against a large trunk of a tree, when Knudalce pulled him away. They were already on the other side of Gingivia river. Knudalce's sudden backward pull caused both of them to lose balance and fall on the soft silt. It was still better than getting hit on one's nose by a stationary tree.

'Whew Knudalce, that was fun,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'Shorty, I am sure if people had seen us, they would have called us saints or prophets.'

Gopi Manchuri sat up and then pushed the muddy river bed below him to stand up. That's when he realised that his legs had no strength. He fall back on the river bed.

'Got no strength?' Knudalce asked. He knew what was going on. Gopi Manchuri gave a blank look unable to understand what had happened. 'Shorty, the speed pill has worn off. You can't escape from the fact although your speed was facilitated by a pill, it was your own muscle that had to do the work,' Knudalce chuckled feeling sorry for the scenario. 'I don't think I can get up either?' Knudalce said.

'But we can't stay here for long. Mr. Sun would go down soon and we must find shelter.'

'Where can we find a shelter here?' Knudalce asked.

'The easiest thing would be to climb a tree.'

'Easy! Hahaha' Knudalce laughed so hard that he almost chocked on his saliva. 'How is that easy when we can't even walk.'

Gopi Manchuri, even with his short and lean frame of a body, had much more strength. 'Ok, we shall wait. I think my legs will recover by the time it is sunset.'

Gopi Manchuri and Knudalce lay on the muddy river bed for hours. Gopi Manchuri finally got up and pulled Knudalce up. With Knualce's one arm on his shoulders, he limped all the way into the forest.

'Do you have rope?' Gopi Manchuri asked.

Knudalce, who was leaning against a tree trunk, opened his backpack and took out a rope. Gopi Manchuri created a series of knots and lassoed it to a branch that was about three meters above the ground. That branch along with another branch right beside it created a nice cradle like shape. It was perfect for their night halt. Gopi Manchuri climbed up first. He untied the knots and threw the rope back to Knudalce. This time using a sophisticated system of knots, he pulled Knudalce up.

'I am surprised, Shorty!' Knudalce said, 'Where did you learn to work with a rope?'

'I have also operated as a load carrier for merchants who had to cross Tri Fang valley in Fang Shy mountains.'

'Impressive Curriculum Vitae you've got there.'

Knudalce could not feel his feet anymore. He took out a small bottle of a lotion and massaged his legs. He gave it to Gopi Manchuri and asked him to do the same. 'This will ensure that we can walk tomorrow,' he said, 'But you know what, Shorty? I don't know much about what swanews can do. I learned how to make a few basic potions and pills from my Grandpa. Now that he is know more, I need a mentor to teach me all the real stuff.'

'I don't know what real stuff is but it would be

impossible to get another swanew in Toothache. In case you forgot, they are all dead.'

The two kids, with their fatigued bodies, slept either like logs or babies. It depends on whom you ask. The only person who saw, decided not to disturb them until the next morning.

CHAPTER FOUR

4 Exposition

'Hello there, children?' a man popped his head out from the dense leaves. He was hanging upside down from a branch using his bent knee as a hook.

'Eeeek,' Gopi Manchuri was surprised to see a head drop from above like a pendulum. He jumped out of sleep only to be stopped midway. He realised that he had tied himself to the branch so that he did not fall.

The man was old. He was even older than Old MacDonald. His long, white hair, moustache and beard fell the other way obeying the command of Mr. Gravity. His face had innumerable lines of experience folded into his loose skin.

'Who are you?' Knudalce asked. The sudden ruckus had woken him up. He rubbed his eyes, wore his glasses and untied the bed-sheet that held him to the other branch.

'My child, that is not important,' he said and gave a wide smile, 'Did you say that you were a swanew?'

Knudalce did not reply. He was afraid that someone might catch him. He hesitated a bit. The old man sensed his hesitation.

'Don't be afraid. I am not with anybody. You can safely tell me,' he said and straightened his legs only to unmount himself from the branch. As soon as his legs were free and he started falling, he caught hold of the branch on which Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri were resting. In one swift motion, he lifted himself up and comfortably sat on the branch.

'You are very agile for your age,' Knudalce said.

'Thank you, my child. My old bones could benefit from a few dosages of compliment.'

'But who are you?' Gopi Manchuri asked, 'You nearly killed me.'

'Hahaha! I am a swanew, too. I couldn't help but overhear you kids' conversation. Wanna come to my house?'

Knudalce agreed but he whispered in Gopi Manchuri's ears, not to trust the man. He also gave him a few speed pills. This would help them make an escape in case something goes wrong.

They walked through the jungle. It was a labyrinth of similar looking trees. Unless someone was a seasoned veteran, it was impossible to navigate through them. The old man sure

was one.

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri got to know that the old man's name was Hungry Turkey. But that was a long time ago.

'We swanews sure lead a long life. Long ago, I had a seven siblings. My brothers travelled the world while I stayed back at home. I really did not want to go anywhere until our small home was engulfed by the ocean. My brother helped me get to this island and went off on his own journey. But look at fate. Who knew that the ruler of this land would kill all the swanews. I changed my name and escaped to this jungle. No one knows how to navigate this place.'

'Do you know Pasta Ferry?' Knudalce asked.

'Every swanew or their living family members know Pasta Ferry. He is the one who is responsible for this massacre. God El was just a tool.'

They reached an open space inside the forrest. A small hut was built using two trees as support. The grass in the front yard was trimmed and the entire area was fenced with shrub like trees.

'That's a nice house,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'What do you do in a place like this?' Knudalce asked.

'I don't always stay here. Sometimes I venture in to Dental Moss. I have my clients.'

'So you practice swanewship! And nobody reports to the

king!' Knudalce was astonished.

'No my child. I don't work as a swanew. I go there to tickle goats. A well tickled goat can actually give more amount of milk.'

'Really!' Gopi Manchuri exclaimed. 'My mom used to herd goats. She never used a goat tickler.'

'Hehe! It's a secret that people in our land knew.'

#

When Old McDonald regained his consciousness, he touched his head. There was a small lump and a possible blood clot. It has been ages since the route has been rebel free. First a swanew and now this. He had to notify El immediately. His best bet was reaching Plaque and contacting his deputy, Alice Wonderland. He wished one of his men was in his senses. Every limb on both of their bodies were flaccid.

He carried the two into the carriage and dumped them inside and rhode as fast as his aching head could to Plaque. Four hours on road, while Mr. Sun showed no mercy, seemed like a daunting task. In fact, when he reached the outskirts of Plaque, he was more exhausted than the horses.

One man and one lady, who were guarding the E.I.E.I.O. branch office rushed to Old McDonald's help.

'Call Alice,' he said, panting.

The two guards helped him walk to one of the rooms and

gave him some water to drink.

'There you are, sir,' Alice Wonderland said.

Alice Wonderland was a pretty nice looking lady, who was about twenty three years old. She always carried a no nonsense attitude and a rough mouth to match. Nobody has ever dared to ask her anything about her personal life. All that is known is the fact that she wrote the words 'ran away' when asked to fill the column 'Father' in the examination form she filled to qualify for E.I.E.I.O. She topped all the physical and aptitude tests in her batch. Old McDonald took notice of her talents and gave her an accelerated path. In a short time, she had risen to the ranks of deputy.

'The escapee we got the tip off from the Office of Petty Theft in Tartar,'

'Yes, sir. What about him?'

'He is with a wanted man as well as with a swanew.'

'That's a lot of banished people to travel with. Who is this wanted man?' she asked.

'He is rumoured to be a broker who smuggles foreigners across Tarter's fortification. He did not succeed actually. Our men got an early intel of the infiltration via Root Canal. They did an Operation Mouthwash by flooding the canal, thus foiling his plans. I was surprised to see my prey walk right into my hands. I even called two undercover officers to help

me capture them.'

'Where are they sir?'

'That is not the end of the story. I got attacked by the Viva la Resistance guys. They captured the wanted man and took him with them.'

'What about the other two, sir?'

'The kids escaped.'

'Kids?' she exclaimed. She did not expect any of Old McDonald's ex-prisoners to be a kid.

'Yeah. The swanew is twelve years old and the petty thief is eleven years old. They ran towards Gingivia River. Even if they manage to cross it, they will land into Baleen forest. I don't think they will have much chance.'

'That is true sir. Any thickhead who ventures into the forest will either be eaten by animals or captured by the Viva la Resistance guys. I swear sir, one day I will get hold of their kingpin, Bertrand Russell Sprouts.'

Old McDonald had regained some of his strength after drinking some water. His composure was back.

'That is exactly what I want to hear from my deputy,' Old McDonald said and then decided to change the subject. There was another burning issue in the hands of the Intelligent Officers. 'By the way, have you got any leads on the pamphlets? I say The Venerable Wisdom Tooth His Highness God

El is focussing on the wrong issue. If I was the Wisdom Teeth, I would have not thought about it until there was a crisis scenario.'

'Sir, do you mean to say that you would want to be The Wisdom Teeth of Toothache.'

'Err, no, no, that's not what I mean,' Old McDonald stuttered. Deep inside he knew that he wanted to rule the country with a heavy military arm. However, such a spark of rebellion might have worse consequences. With Gall de Liver under his control, that guy had become very powerful. 'I am merely saying that these Viva la Resistance guys have created another problem for us.'

'Sir, I don't think that the pamphlets are by the Viva la Resistance guys,' Alice Wonderland said with a stern face.

'Pray me, why do you think so?' Old McDonald asked. He knew that Alice Wonderland had excellent deductive powers.

'Sir, all the Viva la Resistance members we have caught, they were pretty much thickheads. The propaganda in the pamphlets are far from any superficial call for motion. They talk about representation of people in the functioning of the government and the abolishing of the notion of Wisdom Tooth. And that sir is not how a thickhead would think.'

'I think you have a valid point. What do you reckon?'

'I suggest we mobilise ourself to combat the Viva la

Resistance and ask for external help.'

Old McDonald was happy with the clarity of thought the woman possessed. A woman with better clarity of thought would be a woman who doesn't think at all. 'So, whom do we call?'

'I believe the two thickheads from the Office of Petty Theft in Tartar should do a fine job. Even if they fail miserably, no one will be hurt.'

'Except for those two,' Old McDonald chuckled.

#

'Here child, come, come. Let me teach you how to tickle goats,' Hungry Turkey said to Gopi Manchuri. He had an outline of a four-legged animal made of a log and four short branches stuck into it that pretended to be the log-torso's legs. He knelt down and with his index fingers rubbed the throat - or whatever one would imagine that position of the log to be. 'It is a delicate art and takes years of practice before one can call himself a goat tickler. You tickle the goat the wrong way, my child, you have a disaster at hand.'

Gopi Manchuri observed the whole process with great concentration. 'I have a query,' he said.

'Yes, my child, what is it?'

'It might not possible to train on this bad dummy. What if I mistake the goat's back for his front,' Gopi Manchuri said.

'Yeah! that's why I have asked your friend to make a head,' he said and waved at Knudalce, who was busy carving an L-shaped wooden piece from a branch with a knife that had not seen the surface of a rock in ages. Knudalce smiled back. In reality, he was desperately trying not to let his frustration with the job show on his face, for he had vested interest in pleasing the old man. 'Then again, you are right. When I was a newbie in this business, I have mistaken the goat's back for it's front. I have gotten a kick out of tickling the wrong side of the goat.'

'Really? Did you enjoy doing that?'

'Oh! Not at all. By that I mean I was kicked by the goat on my face.'

Knudalce had already finished preparing an L shaped wood piece. He used the blunt knife to carve holes and attached the piece on the torso using a peg. In the end it looked like a mini giraffe or a goat who has been trying for ages to free his head trapped in a stationary object.

'Hungry Turkey, I have to ask you something,' Knudalce said.

'Of course my child, I am the best goat tickler in the world. There isn't a single issue I can't solve.'

'It's actually not about goats. I wanted to show you something that my Grandpa left me.'

'Ah. Your Grandpa. Was he a swanew?'

'Yes, the best swanew I ever knew.'

'That is not true. Every swanew knows that the best swanew was U-Don Ferry, the father of Pasta Ferry. He was the fourth head of the Kishimen until he was killed by his own son.'

'Own son. Who is he? And what is this Kishimen?'

'U-Don Ferry was killed by the very man you are looking for - Pasta Ferry. Kishimen are a secret society that preserves the goodwill of the swanews. If a powerful swanew goes rogue, it was their job to pacify the rogue. U-Don was the strongest swanew the Kishimen had ever seen and yet, he was killed by a rogue swanew who turned out to be his own son.'

Knudalce was taken aback. He did not expect Pasta Ferry to be that dangerous. 'Why did he kill his own father?'

'I don't know. I was never interested in knowing the affairs of the world.'

'How do I know about him then?' Knudalce asked.

'You wouldn't know anything about him here. You must escape Toothache.'

'I don't know how to do that. No one in Toothache has been able to tell much about the outside world. I even asked the sailors of my land and they said that we are trapped by

the sea. There was no way to escape.'

'That is not true. There is a portal in Toothache. It is somewhere beyond Fang Shy on a plateau. Years ago, I arrived here via the portal. My child, that was some raw climbing. Then again you need a helping hand. You can't go through it just like that.'

Knudalce looked at Gopi Manchuri and thought that Shorty was there for him. Maybe, he could help him get through. He took his backpack off his shoulders and carefully unwrapped his Grandpa's diary. He gave it to Hungry Turkey and said, 'I don't understand most of the things here.'

Hungry Turkey smiled and took the diary. He kept it on the dummy goat's torso and opened the dairy, sorry, diary. As he flipped through the pages, his smile vanished. With each passing page, Knudalce saw the folds in his forehead intensify into a frown. He flipped through the middle section pretty quickly and landed into the recipe section that Knudalce was so used to using as a reference.

Hungry Turkey slowly closed the diary and asked, 'My child, I am not so well versed in Latensoglyph. I did not understand most of it myself but from whatever I could make out, it is not something you child should be exposed to. Where did you come across this?'

'My Grandpa gave it to me before he died. Where can I

learn Latensoglyph?'

'All my brothers, who were serious about becoming a swanew, know Latensoglyph. In fact it is the de facto script in which the information of swanews are preserved. But sadly, I do not know where they are, my child. I believe there would have been swanews in Toothache who would have known how to read this. Then again, you will have to invent a time machine to go there. The only man who managed to build a time machine was a swanew called Hugo Wells some centuries ago. Legend says that he disappeared with his time machine to some other time.'

'That doesn't help much,' Knudalce was very disappointed. He knew that he had to escape Toothache to get any information.

#

'I heard that this Alice girl is pretty shrewed,' Jugo Nor Theist said, 'Yet, she has called us here to solve a case she couldn't solve. Do you know what that means?'

'Boss, I think it means that we are awesome,' Jugo Shaowtest said while flipping through some samples of the pamphlets.

The room in which the Jugo duo were sitting was dark and smelt of an old library. A tiny lamp illuminated the table. The window on one of the sides kept the air circulation intact, otherwise Jugo Shaowest had sworn that he would have

died of suffocation.

'No, my undeserving protege, that is not the case. It means we are scapegoats. But fear not my underling. If we manage to solve this case, we might be given more funding.' Jugo Nor Theist puffed the dust from a long scroll. 'I can't believe someone would publish scrolls. They are so hard to handle.'

'That is true, boss. But how are going to find anything from this heap of papers?'

'Junior Jugo, don't underestimate the power of a common pulp. The trees that were killed in the process screams when a metal block tattoos its reversed manifesto onto it. Read and analyse.'

There was a sudden creak. The door of the room open a bit and Alice Wonderland's head popped through. 'How are you thickheads doing?'

'No leads so far, madam, but we are working on it,' Jugo Shaowtest said, 'We have gone through this pile and the paper has been absolutely the worst. I can't believe that someone would even bother to print double-sided on a paper this thin. I swear a master swordsman would be able to cut a standard sheet from a standard ream and get two sheets that are thinner than...'

'Shut up, thickhead. I don't need to hear your similes

and metaphors. Keep working. If you need anything at night, ask the guards outside. Tell me once you figure something out,' she said and banged the door.

Jugo Shaowtest was a bit shaken. He stopped breathing for a moment. He heard Alice's footsteps decaying as she walked away. He exhaled deeply from his nose and said, 'Boss, she is scary.'

The Jugo duo went on for hours and slept on the dusty desks. When they woke up, it was already mid-day. The sunlight had illuminated the otherwise dark room. Jugo Nor Theist felt a bit drained so he ordered two cups of tea and some eggs.

'Junior, did you find any clues?' Jugo Nor Theist looked at Jugo Shaowtest and burst in a fit of anger. 'This is not the time for reading your stupid pulp fiction.'

'But boss, I am just about to find out who is the estranged father of Countess Toten. I have a hunch that the begger, who called himself Tim the Enchanter is the one,' Jugo Shaowtest said. He has been gulping down the super suspense and excitement that only a seasoned author can build up. Austrain Jane's latest novel, You Only Dye Five Times a Month, has been sold out. It is a known fact that even God El was a huge fan and allowed her books to be sold in public.

'Gimme that book,' Jugo Nor Theist climbed on the table, stooped down and snatched the book from Jugo Shaowtest's

hands. 'Now let me check the page no. Hmmm, two hundred and ninety five! I will read the two hundred and ninety sixth page. If you slack off again I will tell you who is the father of this Countess Toten is.'

Jugo Shaowtest folded his hands and pleaded, 'No sir, please don't tell spoilers. Please. Please. I will give you my share of eggs, too.'

'That's more like-', Jugo Nor Theist paused mid sentence and looked into the book. He picked a pamphlet lying on the table and carried it, along with the book, to the window to have a proper look. He scanned page two hundred and ninety sixth page of You Only Dye Five Times a Month and the pamphlet very thoroughly. Jugo Shaowtest followed his boss and stood behind him.

'Look at this serif typeface. They don't have enough 'fl' ligatures and one of the E's has it's central horizontal bar damaged. Every page has that one 'E' that stands out,' Jugo Nor Theist pointed the faulty 'E' on the novel's page and showed it to Jugo Shaowtest.

Jugo Shaowtest immediately closed his eyes and screamed, 'Please don't show me sir. I am not ready to know who Countess Toten's father is.'

'Do you understand what this means?' Jugo Nor Theist's eyes were gleaming with the faintest roots of a potentially

great discovery.

'That a moveable type of 'fl' ligature hard to find and they need to buy a few more capital E's.'

'No my failure of a protege, it means that both this book and the pamphlet has been printed using the same printing machine,' Jugo Nor Theist said and slammed the book on the table. 'Here take it, and tell me the address.'

Jugo Shaowtest had his eyes closed. He opened one of his eyes and carefully closed the book so that he was not exposed to a single word. He then open his eyes properly and read the address on the back cover.

Glutenberger Printing and Publishing Partnership,

Bleeding Gum Marshlands,

South-Eastern Province, Toothache.

'Boss, this is where I come from!' Jugo Shaowtest exclaimed, 'But boss, they haven't mentioned the city.'

'They are clever my apprentice. We are more clever than they think of themselves,' Jugo Nor Theist picked up his fedora from the table and as he put it on his head, said, 'We have a lead. We can find this group.'

Deep inside, Jugo Shaowtest was a bit sad. He was a big fan of Austrain Jane and hoped that she had no direct connection with the rebels. But he was a rationalist who wanted to ascend to his boss's position as soon as possible.

He knew that the likelihood of such a scenario was pretty slim.

#

'So this is how we shall part, children,' Hungry Turkey said, 'I am sorry that I wasn't so much help to you.'

'Please don't be sorry,' Knudalce said, 'I did get some valuable information. I must now journey towards the plateau.'

'And I will one day learn to tickle goats the right way,' Gopi Manchuri said.

Hungry Turkey had bit of tears in his eyes. 'Even though I have not learnt much as a swanew, I wish you find success in your quest. But remember, you must be careful. There are people looking out for you.'

'We will be careful,' Knudalce said and waved goodbye. Both the kids disappeared into the forests of Baleen. They were headed towards the western coast of Toothache, just where the Fang Shy mountains start and stretch over the entire West coast up until the North. Even if they were on a plain field, it would have been about five days walk till the West coast. It would actually take longer as they were in the middle of jungle and there was a delta to cross.

'Hey Knudalce, should we have those pills?' Gopi Manchuri asked.

'I don't think it is a good idea, Shorty. If we run at

that speed we will smash ourselves against these trees.'

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri walked for days. Their only sense of direction was the rise and set of Mr. Sun. On the first day, they had travelled further South instead of West. That's when Knudalce decided that they should only walk when Mr. Sun was still in the sky. They slept on the trees and ate berries that were documented in Knudalce's Grandpa's diary. There weren't any so called harmful wild animals. Except for one time a venomous snake crossed their path and Knudalce freaked out. Gopi Manchuri, who was more accustomed to the sudden appearance of these creatures caught hold of Knudalce and gave him some confidence.

They knew that their strategy had worked, when on the fourth day they heard the slow moving sound of a nearby water body. The forest had thinned down considerably and the thick bushes had given way for the more gentler grass bed. The ground beneath was pretty soft. As Knudalce stood on the muddy land his eyes scanned the view through the gap of the trees. It was a sight to behold. Beyond the forest was a large waterbody whose end wasn't visible. Jutting out of that waterbody were trees in isolation, with their pneumatic roots exposed over water. Sometimes there was a pair, but mostly these were solitary trees separated from its nearest brethren by few hundred meters of water.

'Look Shorty, mangroves,' Knudalce shouted and ran towards the open land. Gopi manchuri followed him. 'Grandpa used to buy their roots. They have a lot of medicinal properties. Especially, stomach troubles.'

'Did you have these trees in Bacterium?' Gopi Manchuri asked.

'Nope. I thought they always got it from Toothache.'

'How do we cross this. We can't swim. There may be crocodiles and snakes in the water. And we can't take speed pills. You only said that we will hit into trees. Here, I can't even see a straight line to the other end.'

'Can you make a raft?' Knudalce asked.

'I did learn to make one when I was working with Mr. P.P. but where can we get good logs?'

'I wish I had stolen that dummy goat from Hungry Turkey! But I guess I can break a few branches. We would also need vines. A lot of vines.'

Knudalce silently watched as he saw Gopi manchuri spring into action. They had gathered a lot of small medium sized branches that had fallen from the forest trees. Knudalce had also gathered some thick vines. He had a difficult time cutting them with the blunt knife he had conveniently forgotten to return to Hungry Turkey. Gopi Manchuri bundled seven branches and tied them into a group. He made a lot of

such bundles. He neatly lined these bundles side by side and tied them using braids mad of vine to make a mat of rollable branches. He proceeded to make two more mats and placed them in a criss-crossed fashion over the first one. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri tied these layers together.

'Wow, Shorty! You are really good at this,' Knudalce said. The raft was not as neat as the one they had used to infiltrate the heartland, but it sure felt sturdier than that. Gopi Manchuri went inside the forest and came out with a long branch having a relatively flattened base that could be used as an oar.

'This isn't a good oar but it will do the trick.'

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri pushed the raft into the waters. It was pretty heavy and the soft land wasn't helping much. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri jumped on the raft. Thankfully, it only rocked a little bit and did not sink.

'Shorty, we should take turns rowing,' Knudalce said.

Gopi Manchuri gave the oar to Knudalce. The moment Knudalce tried rowing, he understood how difficult it would be. He had to alternate his rowing side to keep the raft moving in a straight line. His dominant right hand always made the left stroke tad bit harder than the right, which in turn rotated the raft towards the South. Knudalce had to constantly correct his direction by hitting a few compensatory left

strokes.

'Shorty, my arms are paining.'

'Keep rowing a bit more. We will have to keep rowing through the darkness of the night. I can row then.'

Gopi Manchuri was right. There was no where for them to rest until they reached the other side. Knudalce was tired and subconsciously drifted the raft towards one of the lone trees. 'Just for five minutes,' he said.

The green tree had bright red flowers with yellow stripes running through the centre of each of the thick petals. Knudalce took out the illegally borrowed blunt knife and sliced a few new roots and put them in his backpack.

Gopi Manchuri extended his hand to pluck one of the flowers. Knudalce saw it and shouted, 'Don't!' Gopi Manchuri stopped mid-motion and turned to Knudalce with a frown on his face. 'Look there,' Knudalce said and pointed to one of the flowers. A fairly large butterfly folded its wings and sat on the flower injecting its proboscis to suck some nectar. The petals slowly closed themselves and trapped the butterfly in its enclosure. Soon a whiff of pungent smelling greenish gas escaped the gaps between closed petals. For a whole two minutes, the two kids saw greenish vapours emitting out of the flower. When the emission of vapour ceased and petals slowly opened, there was no trace of the poor butterfly.

'Carnivorous,' Knudalce said.

'Hey Knudalce, we've got company,' Gopi Manchuri said.

This time it was not a carnivorous plant but a set of carnivorous animals. Knudalce could see floating logs approaching the raft. He knew that those were no ordinary logs but vicious crocodiles.

'Knudalce hold me,' Gopi manchuri said and nearly snatched the oar from Knudalce's hands. He struck the water with the oar and before Knudalce knew it, they were nearly skiing on water surface.

'Ah! Speed pills. Why didn't I think of that,' Knudalce was amazed at his own lapse of thinking. He never really thought that speed pills could make any muscle push its limits, not just one's quads and calves and hence could theoretically make anyone perform any physical task super fast.

Knudalce was not completely wrong. Just when the other end of the wide river mouth was visible, the hyper-speeding raft hit one of the roots and sling shot both of them into air. They fell on the dense foliage of the tall trees. A branch pierced Gopi Manchuri's vest and hung him like a fish at the end of a fishing pole. Knudalce, who had been holding Gopi Manchuri this entire time was dangling mid air while gripping on to his side dish.

'Knudalce, we still have got company.'

Knudalce saw sideways. The two kids were flanked by two ladies on either sides who had been camping on the trees. They each had metallic bows in their hands and lots of arrows in their quivers.

'Kids, today is your lucky day,' the lady on the right said and gave a sinister smile.

#

The two kids had their upper torso tied. The two ladies, who called themselves Subordinate P and Subordinate Q walked them through the jungle. Gopi Manchuri tried dashing but instead of a run, he stumbled upon a short stem and tripped. He realised that the effect of the speed pill had worn off.

'Who amongst you is the swanew?' the lady who called herself Subordinate Q asked. Subordinate Q was a tall lady, who wore an eyepatch on her right eye. The way she held the bow gave away the fact that she was a lefty.

'I am,' Knudalce replied. He was pretty frustrated with his scenario. This was the second time he had been caught.

'Are you with Old McDonald?' he asked.

'Hey, P, do you know who this kid is talking about?'

'Uh-uh,' Subordinate P said with a sidewise nod.

'He is with E.I.E.I.O.' Knudalce replied.

'Ah! I see,' Subordinate Q replied. 'So he was the one

Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot had attacked. I don't know why you ran away but you would have been pretty safe with us.'

'I don't see how we are safe. You have imprisoned us,' Knudalce replied.

'Otherwise, you would have ran away once more. There is a word going around amongst our groups. There are people who are actively trying to capture you,' Subordinate Q said and then looked at Gopi Manchuri, 'Not you kid. You just came with the package offer. I never thought that the wanted swanew would fall right into our hands. We were merely patrolling and hunting for food.'

'Who are you guys and what do you want from us?'

'Hey P, the kid wants to know who we are. Guess he doesn't know much about the strongest force in Toothache,' Subordinate Q said in a condescending tone.

Subordinate P did not reply. She kept her moth shut and concentrated on the sounds. There was a rustle in a bush a few meters ahead of Gopi Manchuri. Subordinate P was lightning quick to take out an arrow out of her quiver and shoot straight into the bush. There was a shriek and a fox, whose throat was pierced with arrow, came out. It wobbled for a few seconds and then fell on its side.

'We will have a good dinner tonight, won't we?'

Subordinate Q asked Subordinate P.

'Hmm!' Subordinate P said, while nodding her head up and down.

'By the way, Mr. Swanew, we are Viva la Resistance and we shall extract the Wisdom Tooth,' Subordinate P shouted and both the subordinates raised their bows above their head in unison and stopped. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri stopped as well. They were confused at the strange act in the middle of the jungle.

They waited until a distinct whistling tune composed of three notes were heard.

'Now we can proceed,' Subordinate Q said, 'That is our pass phrase. If I hadn't done that, we would have been captured by people hiding in those trees.'

Knudalce looked up. There weren't anybody in the trees. 'Knudalce, they seem to be well hidden,' Gopi Manchuri whispered. He had been limping all the way after he had hit his toe. Knudalce could heal him but for that they had to untie him.

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri were led through the trees to a relatively clean patch of land. There were houses, but unlike that of Hungry Turkey, these houses were not on the ground but on the trees. Each tree was like a multi-storeyed building. Some even had four houses built on them. Some of the more elaborate houses shared two trees. Some of the balconies

of the houses had people guarding with bows and arrows.

It was already getting dark inside the forest. The lights coming out of the small windows of the houses made for a surreal scenery. A rope dropped from one of the trees. Two men slid down and rushed towards Subordinates P and Q.

'Ah! Subordinate M, Subordinate C. Look we got the swanew that ran away from Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot,' Subordinate Q said.

'Captain Berty is waiting for the swanew,' Subordinate C said.

'But what shall we do with the other kid?' Subordinate M asked.

Subordinate P waved her palm and indicated the two male subordinates to carry him along, too and walked away to the back of the forest along with Subordinate Q.

Subordinate C untied Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri's ropes, while Subordinate M climbed up to a balcony of a very nice and elaborate tree house using a suspended rope and lowered a rope ladder for them. Knudalce knew that running away was futile. Using a speed pill in this dense forest was a sure shot way to slam oneself against tree trunks and if they tried to run normally, they might be killed by the people on the balconies or the ones who were camouflaged amongst the high foliage.

Knudalce obliged and whispered in Gopi Manchuri's ear,

'Did you ever come across these lunatics?'

Gopi Manchuri shook his head and said, 'No.'

'What are you kids discussing?' Subordinate C scolded,
'Climb up. Captain Berty needs you.'

#

The scorching heat of Mr. Sun was enough to melt a kid's ice cream before it reached their mouth. The Executive Police Officer who headed of Office of Petty Theft in Tartar and his favourite underling needed something to drink.

'Oh! Look junior! They have a Gall de Liver outlet here,' Jugo Nor Theist said, pointing to one of the larger shops situated on the beach of Mesodont, the largest town in the South-Eastern part of Toothache. 'Oh how I wish we had a Gall de Liver outlet in Tartar, too.'

'Yes, boss. I have heard good things about his ales,' Jugo Shaowtest said.

'Pray, from whom did you get to know all those good things?'

'From you, boss.'

'Long ago, Gall de Liver had just started off this business after his family was taken as prisoners by God El. He was rebuilding his life from scratch. I was on an important mission to Dentine, too. I visited his factory and tasted some

of his brews, Let me tell you, they might be the finest brews you can land your tongue on.'

'But boss, why was his family taken as prisoners?'

'Don't you know my protege? That's because he is a swanew. His wife and kid has been in Minefield ever since God El destroyed all the swanews.' Jugo Nor Theist brought his mouth closer to the ears of his subordinate and whispered, 'Don't tell anyone but apparently God El requires a swanew to make some brews for himself.'

'What kind, boss?'

'Who knows. They say that it has something to do with the Discount Plants. But enough of this speculation. Let's sooth our dried throat.'

Two Jugos walked into a bar.

'Hi bartender, what's your name?' Jugo Shaowtest asked as they sat on the high barstool.

'My name is El Diabolo. What can I get for you?' the bartender replied.

'That's an unusual name,' Jugo Nor Theist said, 'How in the name of The Venerable Wisdom Tooth His Holiness God El could anyone name their child as such?'

El Diabolo couldn't help but speak the truth when name of The Venerable Wisdom Tooth His Holiness God El's name was invoked. 'My parents named me Jugo Know Ware. Then again,

there were too many Jugos. So I decided to change my name,' El Diabolo replied, 'Er, consider that as my bartending name, sir.'

Both the Jugos were taken aback. For a moment both went silent. Jugo Nor Theist regained his composure and said, 'El Diabolo, hit me with Gall de Liver's best ale.'

'Right away sir,' he said and turned to Jugo Shaowtest. 'And kind sir, what would you like?'

Jugo Nor Theist interrupted El Diabolo and said, 'No need to ask him. Give him whatever I am having. This would be his first time tasting Gall de Liver's legendary brew.'

'That is true, sirs,' El Diabolo said as he poured Gall de Liver's signature brew into two large pitchers. 'It is legendary. I had to struggle for seven years before I could get a licence for franchisee. He sure is picky.'

'That is why he still has the best brew. Cheers!' the two Jugos celebrated the finesse of Gall de Liver's taste. I mean, the two Jugos who were going somewhere.

The bar was pretty crowded. It was mostly filled with the fishermen who had returned from the sea with their catch. Unlike the Northern part of East coast, where Tarter was located, the Southern part is relatively gentle. The preventive currents do not come close to the shore line. As a consequence, fishing drove the economy of this region.

There was a small stand in the corner where the bar patrons would be able to buy souvenirs and paraphernalia. Another small floor rack also kept the official newspaper on sale. The shelves behind that housed a few books, too. For example, The Miracles of His Holiness God El, Ten benefits of OPM, Minefield: A history of Treachery, etc. These were accompanied by novels written by bestselling authors like Austrain Jane. In fact, a sign read that her latest novel, You Only Dye Five Times a Month, was out of stock. There were quite a few copies of her equally successful earlier book, 'Till Death do us Part Three.

'Boss, they have Austrain Jane's books here,' Jugo Shaowtest screamed like a fanboy.

'Don't scream in public. Did that ale get to you so soon?' Jugo Nor Theist scolded the other Jugo who had come with him.

'Of course sir,' El Diabolo said, 'After all, her books sell like hot cakes.'

'Well, can you tell us where to find the publisher? You see, we are from Tartar and they don't stock Austrain Jane's works much. We might as well open our own outlet there.'

'That would be good sir, but you see. It's not so easy for the publisher. He has no particular office and he supplies on demand. He comes once a month to take stock and supplies

whatever titles we order the very next day.' El Diabolo noticed the empty pitcher in Jugo Shaowtest's hands. He filled another pitcher and placed it on the bar table. 'You are in luck. The new book is selling like hot cakes. He usually comes once every fortnight when a new title is released. I can introduce you to him.'

'So, when is he supposed to come?'

'That would be tomorrow.'

Jugo Nor Theist gave him a contact. It was the room number and the address of the inn where he was staying. If he had to stay there for a few more days, he might as well enjoy the hospitality, the beach, the ale. It was a state sponsored holiday for him. He could always delegate the strenuous tasks to his beloved protege. He took out his wallet and placed fifteen Druks on the table.

'Sir, I don't know what people find so good about Austrain Jane's books,' El Diabolo said while cleaning some washed pitchers and placing them on the rack. 'To me they are no better than candy - zero nutrient, high sugar content.'

'Hic, don't insult Miss Jane. She is the best! Hic, She is the best!' Jugo Shaowtest screamed.

'Shut up, you worthless underling!' Jugo Nor Theist scolded. All the patrons in the bar turned around to see a drunken man being scolded by another grown man. Jugo Nor

Theist pulled Jugo Shaowtest from his bar stool and carried him out. He placed junior Jugo and rushed back.

'Sorry for my junior's behaviour. Just so you know Gall de Liver hasn't lost his touch.'

'Sure sir. I always say so.'

'By the way, how much is that Austrain Jane's book, 'Till Death do us Part Three'?

'That would be twelve Druks. You can pick it up from the shelves yourself on your way out.'

'Thanks El Diabolo. Just let me know when the publisher comes to meet you.'

'Sure sir.'

Jugo Nor Theist stormed out carrying a copy of Austrain Jane's book, 'Till Death do us Part Three' and went straight to his room at the inn. He had no intention of reading it. There was a high chance that his junior must have a copy anyways. He threw the book into the garbage bin beside the reading table and went to sleep.

A few hours later, El Diabolo took a break from his bartending activities and walked out for some fresh air. He saw an intoxicated Jugo Shaowtest sleeping on the sandy beach just outside the entrance gate with a slip taped to his forehead. It said, 'If found please return this specimen to Room 14, Greater Mesodent Inn. Signed, JNT'

#

Alice Wonderland was only nine years old when his dad left her and her mom to chase a pipe dream. To a nine year old, Alice Wonderland, this made no sense. She could not comprehend why The Wisdom Teeth of toothache had forced her father to abandon his own family? What could have been more important than a person's own wife and daughter? In his heyday, her father was a famous poet and made substantial money being one. His poems have been published in innumerable compilations and travelling bards have made them into catchy songs. Yet, when he left, he left behind a sum of money that would have been enough for her and her mother in luxury for the rest of their entire lives.

Then again, misfortune is never alone. Her mother, left to fend for herself, slowly crept into depression in the years to come. Before she knew it, her mother had turned completely mad. She seldom spoke when when she spoke, it was a stream of incoherent statements. Her tendency to cause self inflicted wounds were more than what an eleven year old child could bear.

She looked out for a swanew, who could at least tell her what had happened to her mom but that wasn't the case. If anything, swanews were recently killed in Toothache and an embargo was placed prohibiting any swanew from stepping into

the land.

In all her bravery, she hired a carriage and took her mother to Dentine. She had heard that the only swanew on the land was someone called Gall de Liver who worked only with The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El. She stood in front of the large gates of God El's fortified palace, where she was barred to enter the compound by the guards. She stood there for days, weathering herself in the heat and the rain and watching her mother repeatedly hit her head against the thick walls of the palace.

On the seventh day, the guards were irritated, too, probably more irritated than the eleven year old girl who had to bear the burden for more than two years. They caught hold of her and her mother and threatened to have them imprisoned in Minefield.

That's when she met nearly Old McDonald. 'Leave her to me,' he said. The tall, thin, muscular and nearly old man took them inside. It wasn't God El's palace but another building inside the fortification that had the following words engraved - 'Elite and Intelligent Executives of the Intelligence Office.'

Alice Wonderland and her mom were given two seats beside a table. Her mom banged her forehead against the edge of the table and stained it with blood. The nearly Old McDonald asked

one of his men to get something. The man came back with a bottle of liquid.

'What's your name and where do you stay?' he asked, curious to know the girl, who even at such tender age showed such mental toughness.

'Alice Wonderland- I stay in a fishing village near Mesodont,' an eleven year old Alice Wonderland replied.

Nearly Old McDonald gave her the bottle and said, 'This bottle here, it costs one hundred and twenty Druks. We call it OPM. It will ease your mom's suffering. Sorry, we couldn't take you to The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El. Consider this gift as our apology.'

'What should I do?' Alice Wonderland asked.

'Go ahead. Pour about a teaspoon into your mom's mouth.'

Alice Wonderland obliged. Within minutes of pouring the liquid into her mom's mouth, she stopped banging her head against the edge of the table. Alice Wonderland took out a piece of blood-stained handkerchief and wiped the blood from her mother's forehead.

'I will pay. Where can I get more?' Alice Wonderland asked. She quickly calculated in her head that it would take three weeks for her mom to finish the bottle.

'You don't need to come this far. All you have to do is come till Plaque and you can pick up a bottle from our sub-

office,' nearly Old McDonald said and then added, 'But you have to pay the full price.'

'I will,' Alice Wonderland said.

Alice Wonderland hated her Father but hated the system even more. She hated the fact that she had to buy a liquid at premium price just because there wasn't any swanew to heal her mother. She hated Old McDonald for being a cog in the machine that she hated. Her hatred manifested as her desire to rise up and become a part of the machine that took away everything. If there was any chance to destroy this well oiled machine, it would be from the inside.

She enrolled herself in a reputed school in Plaque, a city that was far away from her home. This was a deliberate decision on her part. If she had to get inside E.I.E.I.O, she had to train herself mentally and physically. The distance would mean that she would have to run from her coastal village to the Mesodont, a distance of one hundred and twenty three kilometres and then ride a rented horse for another four and half hours to reach her school. For eight years she woke up at three O'Clock and did this seemingly daunting feat of travelling everyday. She even perfected the art of studying while riding the horse.

When she was nineteen years old, she became eligible to appear for the Annual Intelligence Examinations, a procedure

via which she could get into E.I.E.I.O. The examinations tested the physical and mental limits of the applicants. Her mother's condition was deteriorating. Her dependency on OPM was so much that she needed a bottle every week to even perform basic physiological functions without hurting herself. The E.I.E.I.O. had jacked up the prices of a bottle from one hundred and twenty Druks to two hundred and thirty Druks in eight years. In all these years, she met nearly Old McDonald five times and saw him transform from nearly Old to really Old. The funds that her father left her were thinning fast. She had come to realise that whatever OPM was, it wasn't good, but it kept her mom alive and that's all that mattered to her.

Alice Wonderland was one of the seventy-eight candidates that year and one of the twenty-five female candidates. She ended up securing a perfect score in the aptitude examination and outperformed even her male co-candidates in the various physical tests.

Just when eight years of hard work seemed to come to fruition, the unthinkable happened. Just before the day she was supposed to be inducted into E.I.E.I.O, her mother died of multiple organ failures. Instead of feeling sad, she was somewhat relieved. She had not talked to her real mother in ten years. She had stopped blaming her father, too. Somewhere deep inside, she understood that her father was actually

somewhere working against the machine that was crushing the people. At that very moment, she felt a strange connection to a figurative entity who was probably fighting for the country and that she would do the same. She wanted to meet him once but feared if he was still alive.

With a great deal of resolve to eradicate all thickheads, she became an elite and intelligent officer of E.I.E.I.O.

CHAPTER FIVE

5 Connect the dots

In the darkness of night, El Diabolo carried two bottles of Gall de Liver's finest ale. He knocked on the door of a house that stood alone in one of the large coconut fields located about fifty kilometres to the south of Mesodont. After the third knock, the door automatically opened. A sophisticated mechanism of pulleys and ropes was connected to the door and it was remotely operated. He entered the house, which was relatively empty except for an old cot with an even older mattress lying on it. He pulled the cot up and the floor came up, revealing stairs that went underground.

The stairs were dark but they were short and soon El Diabolo found himself in a cleaner chamber. The underground chamber was at least ten times the size of the room he had entered earlier. On one side there was a large printing

machine. The printing machine was much better maintained than the room above. On the right side a bunch of people sat discussing important affairs.

'Hey, Bronchitis, any news of P.P.?' El Diabolo asked.

Emily Bronchitis coughed and turned around to greet the intruder. '*cough*', I haven't heard from him. I hope that he has not been caught.'

'I hope, too,' El Diabolo said and then turned to Austrain Jane, 'By the way, your novels are selling like hot cakes. We can probably fund our operations till El's third incarnation.'

Austrain Jane was writing something for their next pamphlet. She had just published her latest blockbuster and didn't intend to write the next one immediately. She saw the bottles and asked, 'Are they Gall de Liver's? Or are they cheapo stuff like the last time?'

'Definitely Gall de Liver's Bilirubin! This is to celebrate the shipment of fifty thousand copies of your new book,' El Diabolo said, 'By the way, Mecha Traveller, you have done a tremendous job. Without you marketing and distribution would have been a nightmare.'

Emily Bronchitis had disappeared in the dark corner of the underground room to fetch some good quality glasses. These glasses were taken out only on special occasions. El Diabolo poured Gall de Liver's superior liquid in the glasses and

raised a toast. 'To Austrain Jane and her national bestseller, You Only Dye Five Times a Month.'

Everyone raised their glasses and chanted in unison, 'To Austrain Jane.'

El Diabolo took a sip and then said to Mecha Traveller, 'By the way, two idiots from Tartar are looking for you.'

'For what?'

'They say that they wanted to open a bookshop in Tartar.'

'That's good *cough* for our business,' Emily Bronchitis said. She had tried to write fiction, too. Years ago, she wrote a very sophisticated book called Bad Weather in Heist. It did not do well. It turned out that people prefer light hearted novels that touch upon drama, romance, action and suspense. Deep inside she was jealous of Austrain Jane's ability to touch the reader's heart but she always appeared composed any never made any public feud.

'No, Bronchitis, we must tread cautiously. These men cannot be trusted. I have never seen men walk around in suits and sunglasses in the hot sun. For all we know they could be spies.'

'Maybe not. How can you say so? What if this is a good business opportunity for us?' Mecha Traveller asked.

'No. No. *cough* *cough*, El Diabolo is right,' Emily Bronchitis sided El Diabolo. 'We have a good hold over

Tartar's *cough* market.'

Mecha Traveller thought for a while and said, 'Maybe you are right. Our best sales comes from the bars and we have ensured that the most popular bar, Bai's bar, is well stocked. Too bad, if it was a Gall de Liver franchisee, we would have got better sales.'

'For all I can say,' El Diabolo said, 'Both those guys are idiots. It wouldn't be that hard to catch them if they are caught.'

Austrain Jane, who was accustomed to choosing he words correctly cringed at El Diabolo's last sentence. She let it pass, 'By the way, what should we do if Mr. P.P. doesn't return any sooner?'

'*cough*, I am worried,' Emily Bronchitis said. 'I think we should head out and enquire.'

El Diabolo sighed and said, 'I don't think that would be required. I think our prospective book merchants would know more than what we think they know.'

'How do you *cough* know?' Emily Bronchitis asked.

'Call it my intuition,' El Diabolo said with an air of confidence.

The four members of the underground drank the two bottles and got merry. When there is sufficient Gall de Liver's Bilirubin in one's blood, everybody relies on El Diabolo's

intuition.

#

'Old McDonald was one of those people whom God El trusted blindly. Ideally, he should not, for there wasn't another shrewd person in his entire gang of enforcers who had the power or the ambition to take over as The Wisdom Teeth of toothache. But we, the readers know that Old McDonald had a farm and was best suited to become a farmer. He made sure that the meetings he had with God El were private. Hence, it was always held in a well ventilated reading room on the second floor of Dentine's palatial palace, where God El personally read and oversaw the books and pamphlets that would be published.

God El was a huge fan of Austrain Jane's pulp fiction. It was one of those things he had a soft corner for. He never sanctioned them but was afraid that if he stopped them, he wouldn't be able to know why does Chalk de Board kill his lover in 'Till Death do us Part Three. He eagerly waited for the revelation that 'Till Death do us Part Four would bring to him one day. At present he wasn't happy about the fact that one of his E.I.E.I.O. men wasn't able to grab a copy of You Only Dye Five Times a Month. He was so furious that he ordered an E.I.E.I.O. to capture a mountain lion, feed the failure of an officer to the lion and then release the mountain lion in

the mountains of Fang Shy. It was another issue altogether that two men died trying to capture the mountain lion. Nonetheless, Austrain Jane's work, although originating from an unknown place, was always allowed to pass. For him, from a content point of view, the books were harmless and had no propaganda hidden in them. Little did he know that the source of the propaganda pamphlets and the books were one and the same.

At present he wasn't waiting for 'Till Death do us Part Four but Old McDonald.

Old McDonald came in and handed him a package wrapped in the state newspaper. God El opened it and jumped with joy. It was a nearly brand new copy of Austrain Jane's latest work, You Only Dye Five Times a Month. It had a bit of bloodstain on the edges for which Old McDonald apologised, 'Sorry, The Venerable Wisdom Teeth. I wasn't able to snatch it cleanly from the guy who was reading. I had to cut his arms. Damn, that guy bled like a pig.'

God El was really happy and felt giddy. Yet, he retained his composure. As The Wisdom Teeth of Toothache, he was expected to behave in a certain way. 'Next time, send someone who can actually get a copy,' God El said with a stern face.

'The Venerable Wisdom Tooth must know that the swanew who has infiltrated into the heartland has escaped and is

somewhere in the South. He is also accompanied by a kid of his age who has criminal record in Tartar.'

'Is that so?' God El asked rhetorically. 'If that is the case, we must forget scanning the South. Eventually, he will know about the gate and will go there.'

'The one that Pasta Ferry used to leave?'

'Yes. I don;t think he will be able to cross it without a Helping Hand. Pasta Ferry had one of my Helping Hands. What do you say? Are there any more Helping Hands.'

'Maybe, The Venerable Wisdom Teeth. We killed all swanews but we cannot rule out the possibility that some swanew isn't hibernating in the forests or mountains. These are places where even the most trained officer would think a thousand times before stepping in.'

'Then again, you must. Viva la Resistance has been regrouping themselves. I've heard that their leader, what's his name...'

'Bertrand Russell Sprouts. His people call him Captain Berty,' Old McDonald cautiously tried to help God El complete his sentence.

'Yeah, yeah, that guy. What about him?' God El asked with a bit of irritation in his voice.

'Our intelligence says that he is suffering from some disorder. We don't know what but it has caused the entire Viva

la Resistance to go into defence mode. He had tried to capture the swanew but that kid managed to escape.'

'Ah I see. We must ensure that the swanew doesn't reach him. Or his men don't reach the swanew. If he is not cured, he would die. We must be able to storm into the Baleen forest and capture the rebels.'

'What if he is alive and dormant?'

'We must be able to storm into the Baleen forest and capture the rebels.'

'Does the Venerable Wisdom Teeth mean to say that we must attack them irrespective of any consideration?'

'Infer anything you want, Old McDonald. I need results. As for the swanew, I will personally take care of him. Let me know whenever your network tips off any information regarding the kids.'

Old McDonald bowed. He said, 'May The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El remain free of cavities.'

'May the pain be with you,' God El said just as Old McDonald was leaving.

'God El was happy that the conversation got over pretty quickly. He could get start reading his bloodstained copy of You Only Dye Five Times a Month. He read the opening lines and thought to himself, 'Damn! This lady is good.'

#

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri climbed up the ladder and stood on the balcony of the tree house. There was a strange fowl smell.

'Kids, you would want to wear these masks,' Subordinate C wore one and gave two to Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri.

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri wore the masks and went in. An armed soldier stood. He wore a more sophisticated gas mask as compared to what they were wearing. Knudalce noticed that there was a large chimney attached to the exhaust that opened up somewhere beyond the top foliage.

'We have to do that. Or else the entire habitat would be poisoned,' Subordinate C said.

The masked guard said, 'Please wait. Captain Berty in in the toilet.'

Knudalce felt disgusted. He knew that the fowl smell was the flatulence of an man who had severe stomach trouble. He heard the sound of flush. Soon, a fat man walked into the room. Physically, he was like two sticks for arms and two pegs stuck in a large barrel. In fact that would be a very accurate dummy for Captain Berty, unlike the 'four sticks in a log' model Hungry Turkey used to simulate a goat. He looked exhausted. He crashed into the bed, which was already partially crashed, and sipped a liquid from a large barrel.

'*Hic* Have they come to sooth my pain?

My awful stomach hurts again.

Is it worth trying?

I feel like dying.

I hate the novels of *hic* Austrain Jane.'

Captain Berty said and crouched while lying on the bed.

Knudalce felt sorry for the poor fellow. 'When did this problem start?'

'Two score *hic* days ago, I was fine

I enjoyed Gall de Liver's fine wine

Also, one of my men *hic*

Caught a lame chicken

The capital of Toothache is Dentine. *hic*'

'Captain Berty has been eating junk for quite some time,' Subordinate C said. He was wearing a mask. Hence it was difficult for him to hear anything.

'What's freedom without some pain?

How must we *hic* fight for our gain?

Not leave to chance *hic*

Viva la Resistance.

Hic! I have to visit the toilet again.'

Captain Berty said, took another sip from the barrel and left.

Knudalce couldn't stand the fowl smell, he said to Subordinate C, 'Let's leave. I can make the medicine somewhere

else.'

Knudalce, Gopi Manchuri and Subordinate C climbed down. Knudalce and Subordinate C removed their masks. Gopi Manchuri didn't. Knudalce noticed that Gopi Manchuri wasn't walking properly. He struggled to keep a flat pace. Gopi manchuri sang a weird song in the weirdest of tunes, 'Skyy's are blue...' through his mask.

'Oh my god! That kid is infected!' Subordinate C exclaimed.

'What is that?'

'Some people are not immune to the fowl gas. They slowly turn mad.'

Knudalce held Gopi Manchuri with both his arms and shook him, 'Shorty! Shorty! Are you all right?' Gopi Manchuri did not respond. He kept singing that weird song in a weirder tune. 'He is becoming tone deaf. Help him. Somebody call a swanew,' Knudalce panicked.

'You are the swanew,' Subordinate C reminded him. 'Don't worry. Most infected people recover in a few days. We usually lock them up in a pen so that they don't create a ruckus while the toxic gas drives their mental balance southside.'

Subordinate C called Subordinate M and asked him to escort Gopi Manchuri to the pen. Knudalce followed him. He was curious to see the state of other people affected. Gopi

Manchuri was pushed inside a metal cage that was clearly meant for oversized chicken. There were two other people.

'That one on the left,' Subordinate C pointed to the man who held his ears through his legs and hopped like a chicken, 'He was the last bodyguard of Captain Berty. He will be alright in a week but I don't know about the middle one. We did not even take him near our Captain. I don't know how he was infected.'

'Mr. K.! Gopi! Hora! Nice to see you,' he said.

'Mr. P.P.!' Knudalce was astonished to find the tall, lanky fellow with thin moustache trapped in a pen that was suited for someone quarter of his size.

'Let's go!' Subordinate C almost pulled Knudalce's hand and took him away from the pen.

Even when Knudalce was being dragged away, he could hear Mr. P.P. scream, 'I am not insane! Can you hora me? I am not insane.'

#

Knudalce sat with Subordinate C and Subordinate Q for dinner in one of the lower tree houses. They had to get the dinner from the central kitchen where all cooking is done before dawn and after dusk. The high chimney acting as an

exhaust to fumes aren't noticeable and thus it hides their accurate location from E.I.E.I.O.

'What it with the Mr. P.P.? Did he inhale the poisonous gas, too?' Knudalce asked.

'Actually he wasn't even taken closer to Captain Berty,' Subordinate Q said. 'After Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot handed him to us, he started blabbering about something on the lines of "You are God El's enemy, I am God El's enemy. Let's co-operate, blah, blah, blah." In fact, we did not bother much. We thought he was of no use and would release him in the woods. Then he started blabbering about some representation stuff, proportional democracy and what not. Such nonsense can only be uttered by a mad man. We decided to put him inside our asylum for our own good. Who knows he might leak our location. We can't take chances.'

Knudalce was writing something down on a piece of paper while listening to Subordinate Q's rant. His food was cooling itself down while listening to Subordinate Q's rant. Subordinate C wasn't listening to Subordinate Q' rant. He was busy eating the food before it could get cold.

Knudalce tore a piece of paper and gave it to Subordinate C. It had a list of ingredients he needed. Subordinate C glanced through that and spoke in an astonished tone, 'Shruberry! Where can we get shrubberries? I have never even

heard of that plant.'

Knudalce took out his Grandpa's diary and opened a page. The page was not written in a cryptic language. Subordinate C, who was a tad bit slow to read, slowly read the paragraph.

'First you must find another shrubbery! Then, when you have found the shrubbery, you must place it here, beside this shrubbery, only slightly higher so you get a two layer effect with a little path running down the middle. Then, you must cut down the mightiest tree in the forrest with a herring!'

'This is from an ancient book. Modern techniques allow us to do that with a single shrubbery,' Knudalce said, 'In fact, it was Grandpa who discovered that the whole herring thing is actually a red herring.'

'I will try,' Subordinate C said.

'What do you mean by "I will try"? Don't you think that saving our Captain Berty is of top priority for Viva la Resistance?' Subordinate Q was furious, 'We don't need half hearted people like you. Leave and we can recruit another person who can take up your alphabet.'

'What's with these alphabets?' Knudalce asked.

'When a person is recruited, he undergoes a series of gruelling training camps. On successful completion, Captain Berty assigns an alphabet to that person. At that point, he loses his past identity and severs all his ties with his

family and village. For us, he becomes Viva la Resistance. This also ensures that if a Viva la Member is caught, they can't track his family and torture them,' Subordinate Q said and sighed. She recalled her childhood days and her little sister whom she had left behind to fight for the country.

'Sometimes I feel Captain Berty just assigns letters so that he doesn't have to recall long names,' Subordinate C said.

'Don't you get confused as to who is what?' Knudalce asked.

'Nope,' Subordinate Q was quick to reply. 'We have Captain Berty, as well as few spies who don't use alphabets as their code names. Other than that, it's just twenty-seven of us sharing twenty-six letters.'

'Huh!' Knudalce gave a weird astonished look.

'Don't be astonished. Subordinate V was captured by God El's men. He was being careless. We thought that he was executed. We even ended up recruiting a young boy for his replacement. Two months later, he comes back. It seems like he had managed to escape his captors while he was being transported to Minefeld. He had no money and so he walked all the way to Baleen forest.'

'So how did you resolve the issue?'

'Simple, we called the new guy V2.'

#

It took over seven days for Captain Berty to completely heal. Gopi Manchuri had been fairing well, too and he was released from the pen along with Captain Berty's older bodyguard. Knudalce could stay there for ages if he had not got a more important task of finding Pasta Ferry. And for that he had to escape these guys as well as Toothache. He could hope that Viva la Resistance guys would eventually let him go free once their leader was fully healed.

It was a bright sunny morning and Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri sat on a small patch of land devoid of any grass.

'I feel sad for Mr. P.P.,' Gopi Manchuri said, 'I don't know why he is still inside that pen. He is a sane person.'

'Do you think they will listen to us, Shorty?' Knudalce asked. It was a rhetoric question and Gopi Manchuri knew that only a miracle could save Mr. P.P.

'So, what happened to Captain Berty?' Gopi manchuri asked.

'Superficially, it was diarrhoea coupled with food poisoning. Something tells me that it was a sabotage.'

'What do you mean?'

Knudalce did not know. It was merely a hunch. He did not have to reply. Captain Berty along with his bodyguard walked

towards Knudalce. Captain Berty walked with a staggering gait and had a bottle in his hand. His bodyguard still had the mask on.

'*Hic* To have a swanew here, I am thrilled.

That's why God El shouldn't have killed

Swanews at Minefield

And banish their guild.

Hic, Wow! This ale is really distilled!'

'Captain Berty, I hope you are feeling well,' Knudalce said.

Captain Berty's bodyguard shouted, 'Halt, kid!' Knudalce got startled. 'You never address O Captain! My Captain! with anything other than O Captain! My Captain! in his presence. If you repeat, you will be deemed insane and will be thrown into our mental asylum.'

Knudalce had no intention to go into that pen. He repeated his question with proper honourifics, 'O Captain! My Captain! Are you feeling well?'

'I haven't been feeling *hic* this good

In ages. I must have had poisoned food

Or a bad drink *hic*

That's what I think.

V2, got a good fashion sense, dude.'

Knudalce got to know that Captain Berty's current

bodyguard was Subordinate V2. Knudalce thought that the limericks were really stretched out. On the other hand, Gopi Manchuri enjoyed the exquisite rhyming schemes dished out by a drunk Captain Berty.

Subordinate Q came running. Subordinate P was following her, too. They were stationed at the edge of the delta as they always have been.

'O Captain! My Captain! A woman and her troops are crossing the waters on boats,' Subordinate Q said, 'He just had news delivered to us by Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot.'

'Where are those two now?' Subordinate V2 asked.

'They are riding through the forest towards the West. They said that the only way to escape is if we move along Fang Shy, following the West coast.'

'We might not have enough people to counter them,' Subordinate V2 said. He then asked Captain Berty, 'O Captain! My Captain! Should we oppose or retract? What do you recon?'

'They who understand *hic* these scars,
 They who nurture these farce,
 Of balance and trips
 Thus blood and wine (hic) mix.
 I hate the sound of acoustic guitars.'

'That is one complex limerick,' Subordinate Q said. She quickly wrote it down on a piece of paper and asked

Subordinate P to take it to Subordinate L. Subordinate L was the only person who could decipher the complex underlying meaning of the high art limericks.

Captain Berty was merrily taking sips from his bottle, jeopardising his sense of balance with each progressing gulp.

'*Hic* Let us sit out and drink *hic* some,
And allow our senses to suc *hic* cumb
To the ba...lance of this ale,
And chirps of the nightingale...'

Captain Berty could not finish his limerick. Subordinate M who came running bearing news for him, 'O Captain! My Captain! The lunatic is missing.' He stopped and said, 'He chewed his way out of the metal cages.'

'Seems like Mr. P.P. has escaped,' Knudalce whispered in Gopi Manchuri's ears.

Subordinate Q, Subordinate C and Subordinate V2's jaws opened so wide that they fell to the floor.

'What! Why are you guys so shocked?' Knudalce asked Subordinate Q, 'You just said that he was a useless fellow.'

'Kid, it's not Mr. P.P. I am afraid of. It's Subordinate M,' she said as she gasped for breath. 'You never, never ever, ever, ever interrupt O Captain! My Captain!'s limericks.'

Captain Berty took out a lighter from his pocket and flicked it open. He inhaled a large volume of air, brought the

lighter flame near his mouth and blew on it. A large flame exploded from the Captain's mouth and engulfed Subordinate M. He jumped around and then rolled to extinguish the stubborn flames. By the time he had extinguished every last bit of fire from his clothes, his hair was reduced to ashes and his burnt clothes barely covered his body.

The readers should never underestimate the power of undigested alcohol in the stomach of a person who has the capability of voluntary anti-peristalsis. As such, Captain Berty made sure that he always had some stock of undigested alcohol in his barrel of a stomach.

A later inspection revealed that Mr. P.P. had used his own teeth as wire-cutter and created a tiny gap through which his lean frame could pass through.

Meanwhile, Subordinate L, the most knowledgeable person in poetic forms amongst the Viva la Resistance recruits tried hard to make sense of the limerick that was handed to him by the beautiful Subordinate P. He thought to himself, 'Were they really Captain Berty's words or were they a cryptic confession of love by the ever beautiful Subordinate P? Was she referring to the scars in her heart? Did she want him to write a song on acoustic guitars?' His daydreams were suddenly fuelled with all these possibilities.

#

Knudalce and his side-dish Gopi Manchuri left the Viva la Resistance hideout. Knudalce had promised that even if he got caught, he would not divulge the location of Viva la Resistance's headquarters. Gopi Manchuri promised Captain Berty that he would not take part in a poorly constructed plot ever again. It was best that they left the place. There was a looming danger over that area. They say that surviving the Baleen forest is difficult. However, it is not impossible. From what Knudalce had heard about this Alice Wonderland character, she was a thick nut to crack.

This time their journey was easier. Captain Berty had asked Subordinate V to accompany them. The three of them travelled on a horse. Subordinate V said that they would reach the foothills of Feng Shy in two days. Knudalce had even sharpened the illegally borrowed knife in case it was needed. This side of the forest was thicker than the Eastern side. There were places where the ground foliage was too thick to traverse. Subordinate V carried a long sword like the others and used it to hack away the obstacles.

'Mr. V, I don't understand why don't you guys use guns?' Gopi Manchuri asked, 'I have seen quite a few of God El's men carry guns back in Tartar.'

'It is not like we don't want to carry guns,' Subordinate V replied, 'It's just that guns are not easily found in

Toothache or in Bacterium Islands. The problem is not the manufacturing of the guns that is a problem. It is that there isn't enough deposits of Sulphur and Phosphorus in this part of the land. Tartar is an exception. Arming the border force with guns is a priority for God El. Gunpowder is not cheap but they are scraping whatever amounts of Phosphorus they can dig up from Minefield and channeling that to the armed forces.'

'Will it not be difficult for you if Alice Wonderland attacks with guns?' Knudalce asked.

'It will be, but not that difficult, Mr. Swanew. Our marksmen can use bows and arrows much more effectively than E.I.E.I.O. In fact I don't think they carry bows and arrows at all. Also, we have a few members who can fire guns. The guns and gunpowder was snatched from El's men.'

As they rode, Knudalce observed that the forest was not only thinning, but the kind of trees were slowly changing. The trees were slightly longer and had thinner leaves. There was also a chill in the air. They were gaining height.

Subordinate V dropped them near a pass.

'Cross this pass and you'll be on the road that will lead you to the place that you are calling as gate. Just walk Northward. I haven't been there but I think you can trust Captain Berty. No one knows Toothache better than him. Also, take this,' Subordinate V took out device that had two folded

arms. One of them had a pointed end and the other had a cylindrical slot.

'Thank You,' Knudalce said, 'But what is this.'

'I have no idea why but Captain Berty had asked me to give you a compass. He said that it will help you in figuring out the direction. I think he was too drunk when he told me. Heaven knows how this will show you any direction.'

'Knudalce is smart, he will figure it out,' Gopi Manchuri said.

The two kids bid goodbye and proceeded North along the road. Far towards the Western side, they could see the endless and magnificent sea.

Knudalce gave the compass to Gopi Manchuri and said, 'You keep it. You can use the pointed end as a weapon.'

#

While Subordinate V was returning, he saw two familiar men zip by on a single horse.

'What's the matter?' he shouted.

'Run. We don't stand a chance,' Subordinate B said. He was with Subordinate Z or Subordinate X. Subordinate V couldn't recall who the second person was. He could hear the sound thinning and reducing in pitch as he received the information.

Subordinate V was a loyal man. Even if he was replaced

for an inexperienced chap, he couldn't let Captain Berty fall into the hands of God El's men; or women. He rode harder towards their headquarters. His horse galloped through the day and halted at midnight only to see a horrific sight.

Far towards the East, long red flames rose up into the sky. Subordinate V's heart skipped a beat. He knew what it was. Their entire headquarters were being engulfed by unforgiving flames. He got down from his horse, kneeled down and held his chest. He tried hard to control his emotions but he couldn't stop his tears from rolling down.

A flash of lighting followed by a crackling sound ripped the sky. Lightning? Clouds? Is it going to rain? So what if it rains? Subordinate V's ideals and his idol were getting engulfed in flames. He could hear horses approaching. The sporadic hits of a horse hoof on occasional hard grounds of the forest was something he was accustomed to. He would be soon caught. Unlike last time, he would not put up a fight. He had no reason to put up one. It had started to drizzle. The intensity wasn't enough to douse the flames. It was a good sign. Else the entire forest would be engulfed by the fire. Subordinate V was ready for that, too.

While he was looking down reflecting upon his state of misery, three horses stopped near him.

'Subordinate V. Get up. We must run,' It was the familiar

sound of Subordinate Q. 'I have Subordinate L and Captain Berty with me.'

Those words were like dew drops in Subordinate V's ears. 'O Captain! My Captain! You are alive,' Subordinate V rejoiced.

Subordinate Q interrupted him, 'He can't hear you. He is unconscious. Subordinate L was too late to decipher his limerick. When he did, we couldn't save others.'

Another lightning strike illuminated the sky. Subordinate V saw Subordinate L weeping.

'Others? Where are they?' Subordinate V asked.

'They have been captured,' Subordinate Q replied, 'I am not sure why but it almost seems like Alice Wonderland wanted to capture everyone alive. If you ask me, that lady has ulterior motives.'

Subordinate V got up on his horse and turned around. Together with Subordinates L, Q and Captain Berty, they galloped towards the west.

While riding through the dark night, Subordinate V got to know how Alice Wonderland and a group of fifteen E.I.E.I.O officers had defeated Captain Berty and twenty-six alphabets. It turned out that there was a fierce fight. Captain Berty had used his legendary Dragon's breath to confront Alice Wonderland but that lady was prepared. While most of her

troops were fighting, two of her men silently went around and coated the trees with inflammable liquid. That liquid had no odour or colour. It's stealth qualities were so good that it could be easily deduced that such a liquid must be made by a seasoned swanew. The suspicion squarely falls on Gall de Liver, the only swanew in Toothache. Alice Wonderland had positioned herself such that she could easily dodge Captain Berty's limericks and his Dragon's breath. The fire from Captain Berty's dragons breath ignited the liquid and the entire area was engulfed in fire. Sharpshooters on trees fell like ripe mangoes. Very few managed to escape. The rest were rounded up by the E.I.E.I.O. guys.

#

Jugo Shaowtest was busy reading Austrain Jane's latest, You only Dye Five Times a Month.

Jugo Nor Theist lay on the bed of Mesodont Inn. He was deeply engaged in some thought process. He wished he had asked Alice Wonderland for some backup. He wouldn't admit but the real reason he did not ask for help was because he feared that woman. He was chalking about how he should go around capturing the guys. For all he knew, it could be a huge racket. He decided to play it safe and use Jugo Shaowthest as a shield. His junior wasn't that bright, was gullible and was an ardent fan of a third-class writer.

Jugo Nor Theist checked his pocket. He made sure that the bottle of highly distilled OPM mixed with some concentrated knock-out ale was intact. He had to pay sic hundred and fifty Druks for that small bottle. God El doesn't shy away from doing business with his own officers.

There was a knock on the door. Jugo Nor Theist did not get up. He snatched the book from Jugo Shaowtest and said, 'Junior, check who's at the door.'

Jugo Shaowtet wasn't happy about it. He tried to resist but was reminded that if he disobeyed, Jugo Nor Theist would spoil the suspense. And Jugo Junior did not want to know who Countess Totem's lover was from Jugo Nor Theist's mouth. Once he knew who Countess Totem's real lover was, it would be trivial to figure out that the other person had murdered her father. However, there was a chance that her real lover was the real murder. Only a mistress of suspense like Austrain Jain could pull off a triple twist.

Jugo Shaowtest reluctantly opened the door. He saw Jugo Know Ware, or, El Diabolo standing. He had another man with him. He was quite short.

'He is Mecha Trveller, the distributor for Glutenberger Printing Press,' El Diabolo introduced him and proceeded to introduce the Jugo duo who still retained their given name, 'These are Mr. Jugo and Mr. Jugo. They want to open a book

shop in Tartar. Ain't I right, sir?' El Diabolo said with an almost mocking tone.

A thought crossed through Jugo Nor Theist's mind, 'Did that guy know who we really are?'

Mecha Traveller took out a a bottle of fancy ale, whose neck was decorated with a ribbon, and said to Jugo Shaowtest, 'Sir, why don't we sit down over a few glasses and discuss the prospects. We don't have good distribution of Austrain Jane's works in Tartar. A proposal like this is indeed godsend.'

'Please come in.' Jugo Shaowtest showed them inside. As soon as he turned around, Mecha Traveller flipped the bottle and caught hold of it's neck. He jumped high to bring the back of Jugo Shaowtest's head at his eye level. He used the inverted bottle as a club to land a heavy blow on Jugo Shaowtest's head.

'Damn, that idiot,' Jugo Nor Theist said. He was satisfied that he had taken precautions and was ready in case such an incident took place. He had a handkerchief soaked in the liquid mixture of OPM and Gall de Liver's ale. He rushed towards the two men, threw the bottle's content on Mecha Traveller and jumped on El Diabolo, pressing the soaked handkerchief on his face. El Diabolo struggled and in three seconds lost consciousness. In those three seconds, Mecha Traveller dashed towards Jugo Nor Theist with the broken

bottle held as a weapon but before he could reach Jugo Nor Theist, he too fell down senseless.

'Look at all these mess,' Jugo Nor Theist said to himself as he looked around and observed three unconscious bodies, shattered glass and wasted ale. He stepped out and latched the door. He decided to wait outside until the fumes of the anaesthesia had subsided.

#

Jugo Nor Theist couldn't wait. He needed backup. It would take him days to reach the nearest E.I.E.I.O. office at Plaque and the same amount of days to get back with reinforcements. He had no other choice but to use the National Pigeon Couriers. It would be very expensive. In fact, it might turn out to be costlier than the anaesthetic he had bought from Gall de Liver. They charged on each letter to be sent and also each letter of the alphabet.

The National Pigeon Courier shop was no more than a coop. A man in his mid thirties sat behind a small desk. He seemed like he wasn't much happy to another customer. Or it could be that his cheeks were experiencing greater attraction towards Mr. Gravity than the centre of his lips.

'I need to send some information to Plaque,' Jugo Nor Theist said.

'Two hundred and fifty for the transportation, five for

each letter, fifty for the form and ten for the pen, agreed?' the courier guy said as he extended a small piece of paper and a pen. Unlike other shops, who were busy welcoming customers for their own business, this man knew that people who came to him were in desperate need to send information as fast as possible. Without any competition, he wasn't obliged to please his customers.

'I don't need a pen. I have my own,' Jugo Nor Theist said.

'Does it have turquoise coloured ink?'

'Oh! Not again,' Jugo Nor Theist thought to himself, 'This guy must have trained himself in the Permit Office at Tartar.' Jugo Nor Theist decided not to argue. He took the sheet and wrote-

SEND BACKUP. NEED TO ATTACK THEIR OP BASE. HAVE TWO CULPRITS IN CUSTODY. - JUGO NOR THEIST.

The courier guy counted the letters. 'That would be seven hundred and sixty five Druks. Now select a Pigeon from category five.'

Jugo Nor Theist noticed that the pigeon coups had labels on them marking the category. 'What are these categories?' he asked.

'They are classified based on the distance they have been trained. For your distance, it would be best to choose a

category five. And that's what I have charged for.'

'Which would you recommend?'

The courier guy showed visible signs of irritation. 'I don't choose for my customers. The pigeons do have a eighty percent completion rate. I do not want to take the blame of choosing that one amongst five that fly away.' Jugo Nor Theist was worried and the courier guy sensed it. 'But don't worry. We have the best success rate. Also, the last to last one did not deliver its letter. Your chances of having a successful delivery is pretty high.'

Jugo Nor Theist paid that man seven hundred and sixty five Druks. 'Such exorbitant prices for such unreliability!' he thought to himself, 'When I retire, I will set up a better, cheaper and more efficient information network and send these crooks out of business.'

#

Mecha Traveller's head was throbbing. He was sure it wasn't as bad as Jugo Shaowtest. Both Mecha Traveller and El Diabolo were tied by their hands and their feet and were sitting in one corner of the room. Meanwhile, Jugo Shaowtest, with his head wrapped in bandage, sat on the cot, leaned against the wall and read Austrain Jane's latest masterpiece.

'Seems like you really like Austrain Jane's works,' Mecha Traveller said, trying to attract Jugo Shaowtest's attention.

Jugo Shaowtest ignored the comment and continued reading the masterpiece that was in his hands.

'You seem to be a real fan of her. I bet your partner doesn't even care about her books,' Mecha Traveller said.

Jugo Shaowtest looked up. What Mecha Traveller said was true. There have been multiple times when he had humiliated Austrain Jane's works. 'I guess you are right,' he replied, 'Last time I found a copy of 'Till Death do us Part Three lying in the garbage bin.'

'He bought it from my shop,' El Diabolo said.

'Look, I am very close to Austrain Jane,' Mecha Traveller said, 'I am the one who proofreads all her drafts. There is something that you might be interested in.'

'Huh?' Jugo Shaowtest put down his book.

Mecha Traveller nodded his head as a signal for him to come near him. Jugo Shaowtest got down from the cot and came closer to Mecha Traveller.

'I can do two things for you. I can introduce you to Austrain Jane and I can ask her to sign a draft copy of 'Till Death do us Part Four.'

'But, but, that is not even in the market!' Jugo Shaowtest's eyes gleamed with excitement.

'Exactly. I told you so. I am the proofreader of her novels,' Mecha Traveller said.

'What should I do?' Jugo Shaowtest asked.

'Well, for starters, you can untie us,' Mecha Traveller said.

Jugo Shaowtest touched the back of his head and rubbed it over the bandage. It was still paining. Mecha Traveller sensed his hesitation.

'I am sorry for yesterday,' Mecha Traveller said, 'See, if I had known that you were the real fan of Austrain Jane, I would not have hit you. I would have hit the other guy. He deserves a bit of punishment for defiling the great works of the greatest writer of our generation. Don't you think so?'

'Errr,' Jugo Shaowtest hesitated for a moment. Sure Jugo Nor Theist deserved some sort of punishment but he wasn't sure if breaking a bottle of ale was the right thing to do.'

He did not have to make the decision, though. A knock on the door interrupted his thought process.

'Damn, the other guy is back,' Mecha Traveller said.

'There goes your chances of duping that idiot,' El Diabolo whispered into Mecha Traveller's ears.

Jugo Shaowtest opened the door. He saw a tall, lanky man with long and thin moustache standing on the doorway. He was accompanied by two ladies.

'Hora! You must be one of the Jugo guys,' he said to Jugo Shaowtest.

The 'hora' was enough for El Diabolo and Mecha Traveller. They shouted simultaneously, 'Mr. P.P.!'

Of course it was Mr. P.P. along with Emily Bronchitis and Austrain Jane. If Jugo Shaowtest had known who the second lady was, he would have fainted with the joy only a true fanboy can experience. However, that tactic did not occur to Mr. P.P. Instead, he jumped on Jugo Shaowtest, pinned him on the floor and asked the two ladies to tie him.

Emily Bronchitis stood outside, keeping an eye for anyone who might cause a threat. Austrain Jane unwrapped the ropes from El Diabolo and Mecha Traveller and used them to tie Jugo Shaowtest instead.

Mecha Traveller laughed hard, 'Hah! Your idol is your nemesis. How do you feel now, fanboy?'

'What! Is that Austrain Jane?' Jugo Shaowtest shouted, his jaws opened wide in surprise.

'Of course I am,' Austrain Jane replied with a serious tone.

'Please give me an autograph, please, please, please,' Jugo Shaowtest pleaded even while he was immobilised by the tight ropes.

Austrain Jane walked up to him and with a marker signed on Jugo Shaowtest's forehead. Jugo Shaowtest let out a long sigh. He could now die without having a bath.

#

'Hora, Remember the glove that we hung in our underground office?' Mr. P.P. said, 'I got it with me.'

'Why did you get it? *cough* I always used it to hold the hot kettle when pouring tea,' Emily Bronchitis replied.

'I have finally found a kid who can use it,' Mr. P.P. said, 'I lost him for now but I think we can meet him if we cross Fang Shy.'

'*cough*, Our best bet would be to avoid the Cavity altogether and *cough* instead take the gentler Eastern slopes,' Emily Bronchitis said and opened up a map on the grass. 'If we cross the source dam of Root Canal, we might be able to use the North Pass and land in the forest. *cough* *cough* We cross the forest and wait for the kid. But, Mr. P.P. *cough*, are you sure that the kid is the right one.'

The Underground rebels had decided to shut their shop for a moment. This meant that the Gall de Liver franchisee that El's Diabolo owned would be closed and the fans would have to wait a little longer for 'Till Death do us Part Four.

Three men and two women head towards West on rented horses. They would have to cross the Fang Shy right at its heart to make it in time. Also, they had no intention of returning the horses.

CHAPTER SIX

6 Negative turning point

It had started to rain pretty heavily. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri had taken shelter inside a cave. The map that Knudalce had bought at Tartar showed that the cave was a part of a larger network of caves. This network was known as Cavity Caves.

'Knudalce, are you sure of this place where we will find the portal,' Gopi Manchuri asked.

'I am in the same state as you are. I do not know for sure,' Knudalce replied, 'I can only trust the words of Hungry Turkey and the limericks of Captain Berty.'

Gopi Manchuri was shivering. The rain, coupled with the mountain winds had lowered the temperature by quite a bit. Knudalce felt the chill, too.

'Hey look, it's a hailstorm,' Gopi Manchuri pointed out

in the open. Through the outer opening of the cave, the two kids could see large blocks of ice fall on the rocks and shatter into tiny pieces. Some of them rolled into the cave.

'Shorty, I think the temperature would fall even more. We should take precautions,' Knudalce said and took out a box. He took a solid candy like thing and gave it to Gopi Manchuri.

'Keep this under your tongue.'

'What is this?' Gopi manchuri asked.

'Grandpa used to call it Air-Conditioning pill. We always had it when we travelled to the higher mountains to get our ingredients.'

The two kids had no wood or dry leaves to light a fire. Soon, it would be nightfall. Gopi Manchuri waited for a window where the rain and the hail had ceded momentarily. He ran out and collected a few pieces of wood and brought it back. They was so wet that lightning a fire would be impossible. Only if they had Gall de Liver's super lighter fluid, it wouldn't have been a problem. The wood would have caught fire just like Viva la Resistance headquarter had. But the kids did not know about the tragedy that fell upon the place.

The Air-Conditioning pill worked pretty well.

'Hey Shorty, do you know where your father came from?'

'Not from this land. My mother said that he came from somewhere else. I wish I knew what his name was. I could have

asked these people we have been meeting. At least you know the name of the person you are chasing.'

'I understand that. You've at least known the love of your mother. I do not know the names of any of them. Grandpa never told me anything. Whenever I asked him, he would either divert the topic or would just silence me saying that it was no use to ask for people who abandoned me.'

'So your Grandpa did mention that you were abandoned.'

'The problem is not that. On his death bed he said to me something shocking. He said that he had lied to me and that my parents loved him greatly. Maybe he wanted to tell me their names but he couldn't.'

'That is surprising. Did your parents come from outside, too?'

'I don't know. I know that Grandpa had gone outside the wall of current. But that doesn't mean he isn't from Bacterium. He even showed me the place where he grew up. Maybe he found me outside but that's a thing I can only speculate.'

The rain had intensified. The sound echoed through the cavity, amplifying it even more.

#

It took a long time for Knudalce to light the damp firewood they had collected earlier. It was still raining but not as heavily as the last night. Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri

walked through the Cavity. It would at the very least help them cross Northward. For most of the stretch, the cave walls prohibited light and water from coming inside. At times, there were cracks and openings which had opened up quite wide due to years of weathering. The caves walls were pretty smooth inside. Gopi Manchuri rubbed his palm against the smooth surface of the walls as he walked forward. It was something that a kid of his age was expected to do.

Knudalce stopped at a junction. There was a rising slope inside a human sized hole on the deeper side of the cavity. Knudalce walked inside and called Gopi Manchuri. The slope was just rough enough to prevent slippage of their feet. They could see rocks up ahead which could be used to get up. The two kids climbed through the hole. The more they climbed, the narrower the hole became. Neither Knudalce, nor Gopi Manchuri had any trouble emerging out on top.

The upper level of the caves was more open than the lower one. The cave wall facing the sea was shattered at places. Rain water had moistened the walls and had made vertical and mossy lines.

Gopi Manchuri walked to a large opening that had a rock overhang protecting the entrance from the heavy rain.

'Knudalce, you should see this,' he said.

Knudalce followed Gopi Manchuri, stood beside him and

looked out towards the horizon.

For Knudalce it was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. In the absence of much vegetation, he could see till the distant sea even though the rain robbed nature of some of its visibility. The sea itself appeared to be surrounded by semi-circular land. It was a cove but it was one of the perfect coves he had ever seen. The shoreline was a perfect circle and it extended like a crescent moon only to let out the trapped water.

'Sometimes nature creates the most perfect circle,' Knudalce said, 'I wonder if we humans can ever make such a thing. I can't help but realise that my destination is beyond those waters. Only if I could jump and swim.'

'That is impossible. The currents will kill you.'

'Shorty, that was a figure of speech,' Knudalce replied.

The kids, after they had absorbed the beauty of the immobile land as much as they could, walked Northward, this time via the upper tunnels of Cavity.

After about an hour of walking through the winding tunnels, they arrived at a relatively large chamber. The walls surrounding this large chamber were decorated with drawings. The drawings were engraved into the stone walls and were mostly covered with moss. Knudalce was intrigued by the scribbles.

'Shorty, can you help me scrape off some of this moss?' Knudalce asked. Gopi Manchuri nodded his head in affirmation.

Knudalce sharpened the ends of two pieces of firewoods to make spatulas. He kept one for himself and gave the other to Gopi Manchuri. Together they started scraping the moss from the walls only to create a huge noise that was being amplified by the chamber.

Gopi Manchuri loved it when the scraping sound echoed and created a psychedelic sound. Just to have some fun, he shouted, 'Hello, hello, hello, hellhello, hellhellhellohell...'

The wall replied back, 'Yes, yes, yes, yeyes, yeyeyesyeyes...'

Both Gopi Manchuri and Knudalce jumped in astonishment. They did not expect the walls of Cavity to reply back. Then they realised it wasn't the cavity but an old man who had emerged out of nowhere. He walked towards the two boys and held their hands. Then he started pulling them towards the broken Western walls of the tunnel, away from the cavity.

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri saw a familiar face. 'Hungry Turkey!' they shouted simultaneously.

The two kids were dragged away from the cavity and hence the garbling of sounds due to reflections had reduced significantly. The old man squinted his eyes and brought his

face so close to Knudalce that his nose was almost about to touch the old man's.

'Who are you kids? What is Hungry Turkey?'

'Mr. Hungry Turkey, don't you remember? We met in Baleen forest,' Gopi Manchuri replied.

'I have not been to that leech-hole in ages. And my name is not Hungry Turkey. It's Silent Rooster.'

It took a while for Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri to realise that they had not met this man before. 'I am Knudalce with a K and this is Shorty, er... I mean Gopi Manchuri,' Knudalce replied.

'Heh! Strange names. You guys created such ruckus with all those scratching and scribbling that it woke me up,' Silent Rooster said in an irritated tone.

'Don't be angry, sir,' Knudalce said, 'We were just trying to see what was underneath the layer of moss.'

'Ah that's what you mean,' Silent Rooster tapped his head. 'There is a better preserved section inside.' He said and dragged the two kids through the small entrance that he had used to emerge into the chamber.

Silent Rooster guided them into an area which was larger than the earlier chamber. A small hole at the centre of the ceiling allowed the light and the rain to enter the space. There was a small container filled with water right underneath

the hole. It was overflowing with the rain water that was making its way through the hole. Silent Rooster went ahead, took an empty container and swapped the filled one with that.

I have to switch on the anti-echo audio filter for the sake of my readers.

'That's my drinking water,' Silent Rooster commented.

Knudalce did not pay attention to Silent Rooster's tumbler swapping. He was awestruck by the beautiful line sketches carved on the wall. The walls, being far away from the elements had still retained the ancient carvings. These were crude drawings depicting the life of the cave dwellers. There were pictures depicting people hunting, dancing, family activities, solo activities and people healing others. It was surprising how much of information can a human mind extract out of stick figures.

The drawings were interspersed with strange texts. Knudalce knew what they were - 'Latensoglyph'.

'Mr. Silent Rooster, were these caves inhabited by swanews?'

'What do you mean by 'was'? I am a swanew. Well, I used to be. I don't have much life left to even make medication for common cold. See, that's why I was spared by God El.'

'Really!' Knudalce was happy to find one. 'I am one,

too.'

'Oh! So you are the one. You know, I was asked to open the flood gates to Root Canal,' Silent Rooster said, 'That's my current job. I open the flood gates whenever I get an instruction via National Pigeon Couriers. Those freaking birds are so expensive that only God El's people can afford them.' The old man looked Knudalce in his eyes and said, 'Kid, get the hell outta here. That God El is coming for you.'

'But sir, I must escape Toothache, find Pasta Ferry and kill him.'

Silent Rooster gave such a big laugh that the laughter echoed and created a very scary sound. It was too scary for my echo filter. 'Ah! now I see. You guys are heading for the gate,' Silent Rooster thought for a while and then said, 'Hey kid, you can still escape this place if you have a Helping Hand. Mine is with God El himself. But killing Pasta Ferry is next to impossible. Only he knows where he is.'

Knudalce wanted to ask something else, too. 'Mr. Silent Rooster, can you read these writings?' Knudalce asked while pointing to the scribblings on the wall.

'I cannot,' he replied, 'Once upon a time it was the script of the common man. Over centuries, it was forgotten. The elite groups of swanews still clung on to these as most of their ancient texts are written in Latensoglyph. Now it is

merely a secret code that only an elite swanew can read,'
Silent Rooster, in an almost mocking tone, replied, 'Good luck
finding someone in Toothache!'

Silent Rooster was of not much help but he gave them some
pickled meat. It was enough for the two kids to survive the
length of the journey.

#

God El sat on a large rock, that bordered Rebound Falls,
the largest waterfall in Toothache. Old McDonald, along with
two of his E.I.E.I.O men were with him. One of them held an
umbrella that protected God El's head from the tiny droplets
of water that rebound after crashing on the rocks. They were
waiting for a swanew who had not heeded the ban that was
placed in the whole of Toothache.

'Are you sure he is coming this way?' God El asked Old
McDonald.

'Alice Wonderland is never wrong, The Venerable Wisdom
Teeth His Holiness God El,' Old McDonald replied.

Behind the four men was a large deciduous forest. The
waterfall split the land into a relatively shrub laden land
and the forest.

'How long will it take for them? We have been waiting
here for over ten hours,' God El replied.

Old McDonald knew that he was almost testing the limits of God El. If it wasn't for the latest book by Austrain Jane, he would have done something that would have been physically damaging for Old McDonald. 'If I consider Alice Wonderland's information, the time it took for the National Pigeon Courier to deliver the information, the normal walking speed of an eleven and half year old on a rocky terrain, and also incorporate the fact that the South-West is experiencing bad weather due to low pressure zones...'

'Yeah, yeah, keep the calculation to yourself,' Gold El interrupted Old McDonald. 'How long?'

'They should be here any minute now,' Old McDonald replied.

'What's with this eleven and half year old thing? You said that the kid was twelve year old,' God El asked.

'Err, there are two kids. One is eleven years old and the other is twelve. Taking an average seemed to be the sensible thing to do.'

'Keep your mathematics to yourself. I hope those idiots cross my path before the sunset,' God El looked at Old McDonald with fierce eyes. 'Or else, your mathematics would be crossing my path,' God El said and went back to reading the Austrain Jane's latest masterpiece You Only Dye Five Times a Month.

#

'I can't believe you were such a fool,' Jugo Nor Theist scolded his underling.

'I am sorry, boss,' Jugo Shaowtest said. He was indeed sorry for letting his prisoners go.

'They were audacious enough to sign on your forehead. How dare they?' Jugo Nor Theist said. 'Here, take this handkerchief. Erase that stupid scribble from your sorry face.'

'Eh boss. This is the autograph of Austrain Jane. I would like to...'

'Shut up you inferior Jugo!' Jugo Nor Theist was so angry that he screamed. 'You better erase that sign or I will erase you off the records.'

'Yes boss,' Jugo Shaowtest said and reluctantly rubbed his forehead with the handkerchief. Rubbing off the signature felt like peeling flakes from his dried heart. The last thing an eternal fan like him would do was to remove his idols autograph. Deep inside he resented Jugo senior for such an order.

'Now let us think. Where do you think they have gone?'

'Boss, they were discussing about some swanew and helping him.'

'Do you know what this means?'

'No boss!' Jugo Shaowtest replied as he hung his head in a facade of shame.

'This means that I have spent seven hundred and sixty five Druks for nothing,' Jugo Nor Theist shouted the final words, picked up the thick tome of You Only Dye Five Times a Month and smacked Jugo Shaowtest head with it several times while repeating the phrase, 'Now, who kills Countess Toten?'

Jugo Shaowtest wanted to correct his boss's wrong question for nobody kills Countess Toten. Yet, he remained silent because he failed to muster enough courage to stop his boss.

'We have go nothing but wait, apologise to the E.I.E.I.O. officials who will come here and ride with them back to Alice Wonderland.'

'Boss, can you give me that book? I still have fifty more pages...'

Jugo Nor Theist did not let Jugo Shaowtest finish. He aimed squarely at his temple and threw the book. The book hit Jugo Shaowtest pretty hard. It would swell up in a few minutes but Jugo Shaowtest was more than happy to get his book back. He still resented his boss, though.

#

The head and members of Viva la Resistance, who hadn't

been captured by Alice Wonderland travelled towards Dentine. It was a risky thing but that was all they could have done. All the stock of Gall de Liver's special ale were blown up by the fire and Captain Berty needed it to function. It was a special preparation that wasn't available even the franchisees.

Captain Berty was escorted by Subordinate L, Q and V in alphabetical order.

'Subordinate Q, are you sure that the lady isn't following us,' Subordinate V asked.

'I cannot be so sure,' she replied, 'What do you say, O Captain! My Captain?'

Captain Berty was nearly asleep. After the terrible episode with diarrhoea, where the frequent locomotion hampered his sleep, he was happy to sleep anywhere and everywhere. Sure, he couldn't sleep standing like a horse, but he could sleep on a horse.

'O all the friends *hic* who have fell,
 Will have their own stories to tell
 With some twist and curl *hic*
 To that fearless girl,
 Sea shores, she soars on the seize *hic* El.'

'O Captain, My Captain is furious but applauds the bravery of our alphabets who were captured. He admires the

assaulter, whose name we do not know, for her courage but declares war,' Subordinate L translated Captain Berty's cryptic limerick.

'Of course we should,' Subordinate Q re-affirmed her leader's thoughts. 'But we must head to Gall de Liver for your special ale.'

'Gall de Liver is friend very old,
hic What I need is the best he ever sold,
But I still have so much,
Inside my stomach. *hic*
Can swanews cure common cold?'

'Of course O Captain! My Captain!' Subordinate V replied. He was also a bit relieved that his captain had enough fuel till they could reach his fuelling station at Gall de Liver's factory in Dentine.

Barring a small incident which involved Subordinate L's horse getting stuck in the bamboo bridge that connected two sides of Gingivia River, they had ridden pretty efficiently. It was unlikely that anyone would have caught upto them. So, it caused quite a bit of panic when they heard the hoofs of a few horses approaching from behind.

'Someone is following us,' Subordinate Q said, 'We should ride harder.'

They increased their pace but the sound, instead of

fading away appeared to get closer. They could even see a group of five people approaching them from far behind. Captain Berty took out his lighter and prepared for his Dragon's breath. The group approached pretty close. As soon as Captain Berty flicked his lighter, the flame was extinguished by the wake of the air left behind by the speeding horses. The troop overtook Captain Berty and his alphabets. Someone amongst the passing troop shrieked in fear. Subordinate Q recognised his face.

'There goes the mad man who escaped the pen with his bare teeth,' she said, 'O Captain! My Captain, you don't have to spend your precious fuel on the mad man. I am surprised that he has accomplices.'

'*hic* *hic* The friend of a mad man's fault

Is to madden up his own assault.

For a mad man's head

Is light years ahead *hic*

I heard they have *hic* toothpaste *hic* with salt.'

'O Captain! My Captain! hates the taste of his current toothpaste. He would want the one where they have salt added to it,' Subordinate L explained his master's cryptic limerick to his fellow members.

The group got down their horses to have a quick bite. They did not have the luxury to halt anywhere. From the east,

two familiar faces approached them. They were Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot. Captain Berty's smile knew no bounds. He at least had his best people with him. However, his smile was very short lived. The two were tied to their respective horses. The sound of many galloping horses slowly emerged from all the directions until they realised that Alice Wonderland and her E.I.E.I.O members had completely surrounded them.

#

'For years I wanted to meet you, and now that I meet you, you are drunk,' Alice Wonderland said to Captain Berty. She stopped Hoarse Reddish's horse and pulled him down while he was still tied. Hoarse Reddish tripped and fell on the grass. Alice Wonderland unsheathed her sword and pointed its tip at the back of his head. 'And all these thickheads you have gathered, for what?'

Captain Berty took out his lighter but didn't light it.

'They who understand *hic* motherland's scar,

Their wrath must the inflictor incur.

My balance and trips

Thus blood and wine *hic* mix.

I hate the sound of acoustic guitar.'

'O Captain! My Captain says that your master, God El...,'
Subordinate L tried explaining the meaning behind his master's

cryptic verse but was interrupted by Alice Wonderland.

'Shut up, you thickhead! I very well know what he means. I don't support that thickhead of God El either but you guys have stirred up the entire E.I.E.I.O. And you, Mr. Bertrand Russell Sprouts should have been more careful.'

'Madam, you must address our master as O Captain, My Captain!' Subordinate L protested.

'Shut up you thickhead. Here can't you see your friend underneath my sword,' Alice Wonderland shouted. 'If you want him to be spared, get on that carriage waiting for you.'

B. Troot jumped off her horse and tried to run away. An E.I.E.I.O. member ran and caught her. It was one of the easiest thing to do. Captain Berty hit his forehead with his palm, as a reaction to her stupidity.

'Are these the best you could gather?' Alice Wonderland's voice soared. 'Look at all the people I have. You used to command them eleven years ago. And now? You are being hunted by the same people.'

'What?' All the Subordinate alphabets as well as Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot exclaimed in unison.

'It's true, all you that I head.

I was the man who commanded

Eleven years ago

The E.I.E.I.O. *hic*

I buy pizza for free garlic bread.'

Subordinate L wanted to expand the last line for he knew that unless you specify a discount code, the garlic bread isn't free. However, he did not want to be called a thickhead. So he remained quite.

'O Captain, My Captain! What shall we do?' Subordinate V asked.

Captain Berty flicked his lighter and brought near his mouth.

'Not again,' Alice Wonderland said in the most irritating voice possible.

The E.I.E.I.O. officers who were advancing Captain Berty from all sides rushed forward only to be cautioned by a fire that burst out of Captain Berty's mouth.

'Thou must keep your distance
Else prepare to erase thy existence
From Toothache's face
Burn without a trace
Viva, Viva, Viva la Resistance'

Captain Berty did not have hiccup. This was the first time Subordinate L had heard Captain Berty recite a limerick without any vapour of alcohol escaping his mouth. He was really proud of his leader. Subordinate V saw it a bit differently. He knew that Captain Berty was running out of

alcohol in his stomach. The Dragon's breath will be of no use.

#

'Give up you thickheads,' Alice Wonderland said, 'I have heard enough of your bad poems and thickheadedness.'

'O Captain! My Captain! What should we do?' Subordinate L asked.

'O loyal followers, behold the malice
Let's not forget our goal - the palace
Charge with your might,
Let's put on a fight.

Hmm...'

'Hmm...hmm...,' Captain Berty was lost. He scratched his head. Then he scratched his beard, Finally, he scratched his belly. He couldn't scratching believe himself! He was unable to rhyme the last line of his limerick! For a moment he felt clueless. When he realised his helplessness, he burst into tears and gave out a loud wail.

'What has happened to him now?' Alice Wonderland asked Subordinate L.

Subordinate V was trembling. 'We should look for alcohol,' he replied. 'O Captain! My Captain! loses his ability to rhyme when he is sober. Last time he was sober, he was so violent that he hit two of his own men.'

Indeed, Captain Berty did not have his fill ever since

their hideout was attacked. His own fire had burnt whatever rations they had stocked in their headquarters. Not even a bottle accompanied Captain Berty.

The sudden breakdown of their leader was unexpected. A wave of commotion disrupted the tiniest amount of orderliness that Viva la Resistance guys had exhibited so far. Both Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot looked helplessly as they couldn't help their leader.

'This is not good,' Subordinate V shouted from the middle of the pack, trying hard to surpass the panic and commotion that raced inside his own head. 'Comrades, forget everything. We must take him to Gall de Liver and save our O Captain! My Captain!'

Captain Berty dropped himself on the grass. He cried like a baby. Subordinate L knew that manufacturers did not make pacifiers of bigger size - one large enough to fit the wide open mouth of Captain Berty. That would have been a bad business decision on the manufacturer's part. He had no idea how to calm O Captain! His Captain!

'You thickhead was too busy explaining the meaning behind his poor excuse of a poetry,' Alice Wonderland said, 'Maybe you should try and complete his limerick.'

You should know a little about this character called Subordinate L. He had a name that he had left behind - W.B.

Yeast. W.B. wasn't an acronym. It was his real name. Ever since he was a kid, he wanted to become the greatest poet of all time. The poor farmers of South-East lowlands never understood the depth and metaphor of his poetry. O rejection! How artistic it was. Back when Captain Berty was the leader of E.I.E.I.O, Dental Moss saw the greatest flood of the last century. The rains were so bad that the flood gates of Root Canal had to be opened over and over again. The floods washed away everything - houses, crops, bovine, humankind. People hung onto whatever floating object they found. It was during this time that a sober Captain Berty ran a rescue mission and saved a lot of people with his valour and his limericks. His charisma and his rhyming skills inspired our misunderstood poet. Years later he had personally searched for the great poet who inspired him. He decided to join the ragtag band of people who called themselves the alphabets of Viva la Resistance. His wish to serve under Captain Berty came true. A great Captain should be able to mentor his talents. To add sorrow to his sadness, Captain Berty wasn't the same Captain Berty he had once seen. The Captain was rarely sober and had grown a large belly. He barely recognised his underlings - assigning them random letters, instead. It was painful for W.B. Yeast but there was something that hadn't changed - a drunk Captain's limerick. Thus, our budding poet, W.B. Yeast

decided to let go of his name and accepted a nondescript Roman letter as one instead.

Subordinate L walked towards the crying Captain and gently sat beside him.

'Our triumph shall wave on galleys,' Subordinate L whispered in Captain Berty's ears.

Captain Berty suddenly stopped crying and looked at Subordinate L. How sad his face looked! Subordinate L could clearly see that newer drops of tear were being manufactured by Captain's eyes and were about to flood them once more. Captain Berty's cries erupted again with renewed intensity. Once Captain Berty had saved Subordinate P from floods, now it was time for him to save his Captain from floods.

'We'll drink their blood from chalice,' Subordinate L gave one more try. Needless to say it was futile.

He tried once more, 'Let's ride through the valleys,' and followed it up with quite a few feeble attempts at non sequitur like his Captain - 'The rooster is of Genus Gallus' and 'Painted by Aurora Borealis'. The Captain still cried on as the few wounded rebels waited for their comrades to fetch alcohol for their Captain. Deep down Subordinate L knew that W.B. Yeast's poems lacked the impact and punch of a heavyweight like Captain Berty. Only Captain Berty could complete Captain Berty's limericks.

Alice Wonderland was frustrated. 'Open these guys and let's take this sad old person to Gall de Liver.'

#

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri was unaware of what or who waited for them. When they reached Rebound Falls, Gopi Manchuri spotted Old McDonald.

'Knudalce, turn around and run!' he said and did the same.

Too bad, they hadn't taken speed pills. A lightning bolt emerged out of nowhere and hit the ground near Knudalce's feet. Knudalce tripped and fell down. Gopi Manchuri extended his arm and pulled Knudalce up.

'So, which of these two is the swanew?' God El asked.

'The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El, it is the one with the backpack,' Old McDonald replied.

God El laughed a bit. He walked towards Knudalce. Gopi Manchuri had given up the idea of running away after seeing that lightning bolt. Both he and Knudalce wondered what could be the source of lightning.

God El stooped down and asked Knudalce, 'So kid, I hear your name is Knudalce with a K. Pray, how do you think you are going to cross the gate?'

'I don't know. Someone said that I need someone's help,' Knudalce said. He did not want to name Hungry Turkey or Silent

Rooster.

'Are you sure that's what you've heard. Or was it that you would need a helping hand?' God El spoke in a mocking tone.

'That could be it. I don't remember exactly.'

'You should have. See this -,' God El showed the glove he wore on his right hand. 'This is a Helping Hand. That bolt of lightning came from here.'

The Helping Hand was a very ornate glove. It was dark brown in colour and had golden lines emerging from the back of the hand to the tip of the fingers. Knudalce noticed that God El had numerous scratches on his right arm, some of them had turned black.

'Let me tell you a secret Mr. Swanew,' God El said as he folded his ring and pinky fingers to imitate the barrel of a gun with his index and middle. He placed it against Knudalce's chin. Knudalce felt a mild shock from the static electricity that had accumulated on the leathery surface of the Helping Hand. 'Do you know that only swanews can use a Helping Hand?'

Knudalce tried to distance his chin from God El's fingers but failed. He muttered, 'No.'

'I cannot hear you. Did you know that?' God El shouted. His voice echoed through the valley.

'No,' Knudalce said. 'Are you a swanew?'

'Good boy.' God El said with a cunning tone. 'Pretty sharp you are. What if I tell you I am not.'

'Then, then how are you using it?' Knudalce said. He was still stuttering in fear.

'That my friend, Mr. Swanew. You'll get to know in a few days time.'

#

'The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El, what shall we do with the boys?' Old McDonald said.

God El turned towards Old McDonald and said, 'The swanew can be of use, that is, if he cooperates. If he doesn't, he will face the same consequences as the swanews twelve years ago.'

'And what about the other kid?'

'Let's dispose him off.' God El said.

Gopi Manchuri was a silent spectator during God El's speeches. He had silently reached for the compass and with its pointed end rushed towards God El with the intention to stab him. God El suddenly turned and placed his left palm in the way. The sharp needle pierced through his palm. A few drops of blood trickled over the compass needle. Gopi Manchuri pulled it out. To his dismay, God El was unfazed. It appeared that he did not feel any pain at all. He gripped Gopi Manchuri's

throat with his bloody palm and squeezed it tight with the intention to choke him. Gopi Manchuri saw God El's eyes turn red with anger.

Suddenly, he eased the grip. Gopi Manchuri could breath. God El stood up and left Gopi Manchuri hanging while he held his neck between his fingers. Gopi manchuri faced God El while God El faced Old McDonald, who was still standing in front of the periphery of the forest.

'Wait, I don't want to choke you,' God El said in a calm tone. 'I have a better way of finishing you off. I can also teach Mr. Swanew some new tricks.' God El laughed so hard that it would have triggered an avalanche somewhere. His laughter was stopped by Gopi Manchuri who banged his head against God El. That caused blood to trickle through El's nose. Knudalce was surprised to find that no matter how much Gopi Manchuri hurt El.

'Now you my little friend, watch,' El looked at Knudalce. Nosebleed had turned his face even more sinister. Knudalce saw that Gopi Manchuri's forehead had blackened from the head butt. Knudalce saw Gopi manchuri trying to bite El's hand but his mouth couldn't reach the palm or the fingers encircling his own throat. 'You must first place your palm near your opponent and face it towards him,' God El instructed Knudalce as he did what he was instructing, 'Then you must bend your

middle and ring finger and hook it against the thumb. And then you flick both the fingers in one swift...'

God El did not finish his sentence. A large blue light engulfed his entire glove then shot itself out like a bolt of lightning through his palm. His left hand had already released Gopi Manchuri. The bolt of lightning from his right hand hit Gopi Manchuri's chest and he was sent flying into the forest.

'Shorty!' Knudalce shouted and ran towards Gopi Manchuri's flying body. He couldn't. God El held him by his collar. Knudalce knew that Gopi Manchuri couldn't hear him. That impact was fatal for an eleven year old body.

'He is dead. Now sleep,' God El said. He raised his gloved hand, made a fist and brought it down on Knudalce's head. As Knudalce lost consciousness, he saw Old McDonald approaching towards him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7 Antagonist Wins

The prisoners of Minefield silently chipped away shards of bluish rock trapped between molten granite. The sound of multiple pickaxes hitting the rocks, each with their own rhythm and intensity, was the only sound that Knudalce could hear. He was holding a pickaxe that was a few sizes larger than himself. Knudalce was furious about the amount of food he was given - half a bowl of lentil soup and half a bowl of porridge. The look and the smell of porridge was disgusting. He had no choice but to eat it. He did not want to get beaten up by the guards for wasting food. Also, if that was the only source of nutrients, he might as well have it. His filthy cellmate seemingly nullified all nutrients in his vicinity.

The partial building standing at Minefield was only two storeys high. They said that the building had a majestic tall

tower with a clock on it. All that remains are burnt and broken bricks that serves as a memorial of the clock tower that used to be present once upon a time. Whatever is left of it, has been transformed to the warden's office on the first floor and storage room for prisoners' belongings on the ground floor.

Knudalce wondered how was Gopi Manchuri faring. 'He must be doing better,' he thought, 'At least he can run if there is a danger. He does that pretty well even without the speed pills. What if he is attacked by an animal?' Knudalce was concerned but he consoled himself with some optimistic logic, 'Nah! He doesn't have enough flesh on his bones to warrant the attention of a hungry animal.'

Knudalce knew that if he was on half a bowl of lentil soup and half a bowl of rotten porridge everyday, he would also cease to warrant attention of hungry animals. Knudalce kept reminding himself that he had to escape the prison. He hadn't come to Toothache to excavate blue rocks for God El. He had to avenge his Grandpa's death and stop Pasta Ferry from finding the Golden Nectar. He had no idea how he would do it. Something hit Knudalce on his head. Knudalce turned around. An officer suffering from equal malnutrition stood behind Knudalce.

'You are slow, kid,' he said, 'one hour and only half a

basket of rocks! Even a five year old would do it better than you.'

You know how the adults mock other adults by saying, 'Even a twelve year old would do it better than you.' That statement falls flat when the receiver of mockery himself is twelve year old. When the evaluation yields, 'even a twelve year old would do it it better than a twelve year old', it doesn't have the same impact. Thus, the guard suffering from malnutrition was forced to use his knowledge of induction and knock down the reference age limit of that sentence.

'Yes, sir,' Knudalce said and continued hitting the rocks with his oversized pickaxe.

#

Knudalce held two nearly-deformed bowls and extended his hand to the server. The server, with a ladle in each hand filled one bowl with lentil soup and the other with porridge. This was the fourth time he was having the same set of food ever since he stepped in the prison the last day. The only saving grace was that the porridge did not smell as bad as it did in the morning. Either they had used fresher ingredients or Knudalce was slowly getting accustomed to the horrid smell - that latter of which was more likely. Knudalce looked around the open area surrounding the mine pit. People had made their own groups and sat in clusters. Two officers patrolled around

and kept an eye on the prisoners.

'Hey kid! Come here,' a woman in her fifties called out.
'Sit with us. Here! Here!' She pointed to a relative flat rock just beside her.

Knudalce took up the invitation and sat between the woman and a young man who shared similar eyes. Knudalce could tell. A pair of light green eyes is a rare sight. Two pairs was an even rarer sight. He was also happy to hear the warmth of someone's voice. His time in cells were lonely for his filthy cellmate could hardly string together two words to make sense.

'Are you two related?' Knudalce asked.

'Zubzub is my son.'

'Oh mom! Please don't call me that in public. It's a silly name. Why can't you call me by my real name - Items?'

'Haha, that sounds even more silly when you say it without the surname.'

'Items de Liver, nice to meet you,' he said to Knudalce.

'Knudalce with a K. Nice to meet you'

'You can call me Items' mom though my real name is Hepatos. What is a fine boy like you doing in this prison?' she asked.

'I was caught by God El for being a swanew.'

Items' mom gasped. There was a clear sense of horror in her reaction. Items was silent, too.

'Stop that chatter and finish your meal,' one of the patrolling officers came and interrupted them. Knudalce gulped down his food, thanked the mother and son and went back to his oversized pickaxe.

#

It was Knudalce's third day in Minefield and he already got to see something exciting.

There was a huge commotion in the mine pit. Two beefy looking men started a argument. As soon as the first one landed his fist on the second, people gathered around. Knudalce dropped his pickaxe and stood in the front row. It always baffled him how a large group of silent spectators always made a perfect circle to barricade the show at the centre.

'I said I do not want any more of your porridge,' the first one punched the second on in his face. A bit of blood escaped from the side of his lips. The second one clenched his fist and hit the first with even harder force. After that, the real reason of the fist fight was lost in the fury of the participants and the excitement of the spectators. The two patrolling officers broke through the crowd and entered the ring.

It would be too fantastic to even consider the situation where two men with malnourished body would be able to stop two

fists that weigh more than their eight limbs combined. No sooner did they reach the fighting prisoners than they were found lying on the rocks unconscious. In the volley of blows that were exchanged no one could figure out who hit whom.

Then suddenly someone shouted, 'Hark is here.'

There seems to be utter chaos. Knudalce found himself surrounded by people running in every direction possible. Suddenly, a bluish streak of lightning flashed before his eyes. The two fighting men, along with a few more spectators in the way of the lightning, were flung into the air. Knudalce was excited. 'My luck! A Helping Hand!' he smiled and said to himself.

'Make four lines,' Hark's voice echoed within the mine pit.

Everyone stopped running around and obediently joined one of the lines. Knudalce saw Item de Liver and his mother in the third line and tucked himself behind Item. When all the prisoners were settled in some line or the other, Knudalce saw a few prisoners from fourth line shivering in fear. A few even had tears rolling off their eyes.

'Items, what's the matter?' Knudalce whispered.

'Shh! Don't talk. You don't want to be punished like the shortest line,' Items de Liver whispered back.

This was the first time Knudalce had seen the man who was

known as Hark, the prison warden. Hark was a tall and broad man, a far cry from the malnourished officers of Minefield. It was as if he had hogged all the nourishment for himself. With all the woollen jacket and furry boots, his appearance was even more bulked up. He was blind in his right eye. A cut mark ran from his forehead, passed through his right eyelids and ended in his right cheek. That, coupled with a bald head and a face full of beard, made him even more menacing. He thumped his way to the beginning of the fourth line and placed his Helping Hand on the first man's chest. The prisoner screamed. Knudalce saw a small flash of light as the bluish streak of lightning threw the prisoner towards the mine pit wall. Hark did this to everyone on the fourth line. Knudalce watched the scene in horror. Every last bit of joy that came from the discovery of a Helping Hand was erased by its deeds.

When Hark left, the prisoners attended to their fellow inmates.

'If only I had some Miracurall leaves,' Knudalce told Items, who was poring some cold lentil soup over one of the injured inmates' head. 'They have taken away my backpack. I had some in there.'

'How long until you plan your escape?' Items asked in the coldest of tones, 'You know, right? They will eventually kill you.'

The injured prisoners were taken to the east wing for what the officers called as "recovery". The rest of them were reshuffled and allocated cells in pair. Something good came out of all this horror for Knudalce. Since he was behind Items in line, they got shoved into the same cell.

#

'Are you related to Gall de Liver?' Knudalce asked.

'So even you know him? I hate to call him my father. That guy is the reason why that God El is even alive.'

'Have you ever considered that he might be doing this to keep you and your mother safe?' Knudalce asked.

'Maybe. But that still doesn't take away his sins.'

'Your father is very well known, but not as a swanew. He brews drinks and sells them to his franchisee outlets. He is one of the biggest businessmen in Toothache. In fact even our village has one of his franchisees,' Knudalce said and then suddenly added, 'Say, are you a swanew, too?'

'You mean if I can manipulate my life force or not? If that is the question, I would say, yes. However, I can't call myself a swanew until I bind myself to the code of swanewship.'

'How did your father end up being like that?'

Items de Gall proceeded to narrate on of the saddest

stories of his childhood.

'Long ago, God El was a normal Wisdom Tooth, or at least he tried to be one by following his father's footsteps. The royal swanew at that time, Cod Lever Oyl was an old guy. He was one of those quacks who don't know what they are supposed to do. My father was an apprentice of Cod Lever Oyl. Well, he says that he got the job because Cod Lever Oyl found it amusing that my father had a Liver in his name. They were spelt differently but at least they sounded the same. For that he was one of his favourite apprentices. In spite of the favouritism my father received, he knew that Cod Lever Oyl wasn't a good swanew. My father would often go to other swanews and learn from them without letting Cod Lever Oyl know. Whenever he made a suggestion, Cod Lever Oyl would humour him and do whatever he thought he knew best. After a point of time my father stopped giving him any constructive suggestions lest he fall from the pedestal that Cod Lever Oyl had placed his apprentice.

'One fine day, God El came down with a stomachache. It was so severe that he was completely bedridden. Cod Lever Oyl fed him concoctions after concoctions. My father says that he was merely throwing darts in the darkness. Cod Lever Oyl was so proud that he did not even take any advise from his underlings - not that they were capable of giving advise in

the first place. Unlike my father, their source of knowledge was Cod Lever Oyl himself.

'After multiple days of playing darts, Cod Lever Oyl realised that God El cannot be saved. His eyes had sunk into the recess, his skin was pale and his tongue had darkened. Cod Lever Oyl hired four violinists to play soothing sounds to God El's ear, hoping that a soothing mind might have some psychosomatic effect in soothing his stomach. My father believed that secretly, Cod Lever Oyl harboured the desire to ascend to the throne himself. I do not know how much of it is true.'

'God El's life force seemed to be fading away. When all hope was lost, a strange man came from the East. He called himself Pasta Ferry -'

Knudalce interrupted the narration, 'Did you see him? I need to find him and stop him.'

'What do you mean?' Items de Liver asked.

'He is the person who killed my Grandpa.'

'But I thought he left Toothache for the Outer World.'

'Precisely. He extracted all the life force from my Grandpa's body leaving him only eleven and half years worth of life.'

'Isn't that one of the forbidden techniques?' Items de Liver asked and then realised something, 'Hey. I think it was

about eleven years ago that Pasta Ferry had set foot on this land. He changed the whole country for the worse. So, coming back to the history, Pasta Ferry was obviously a highly knowledgeable swanew. I don't know if he should be called a swanew at all. He met God El and cured him. This was not a very good news for Cod Lever Oyl. God El knew he couldn't trust that quack swanew. He ordered an execution. No one knows how he died but people say that Pasta Ferry squeezed his life force out of him. Call it poetic justice but the same four violinists were called to play the dirge at his funeral.'

'I am surprised that Pasta Ferry decided to help someone,' Knudalce said.

'I don't think he did it for free. He had his own motives. He needed a Helping Hand and the only person who could give it to him was God El.'

'Why did he need a Helping Hand?'

'Who knows. Maybe as a weapon. What was even more surprising is that he disappeared from this country without a trace. And if you know the geography of this continent, you will know that it is impossible to set sail.'

Knudalce nodded. It was too dark in the prison cell for Items de Liver to see that nod. Knudalce asked, 'But how did Pasta Ferry manage to destroy this nation?'

'An idea, Knudalce, an idea. That's all he needed. Why do

you think my father has not been killed by God El? That's because he makes one of the greatest hallucinogens. Pasta Ferry's recipe requires a swanew to put together some wild fruits. They make the people behave. They make people forget about pain. The cravings from repeated usage forces people to go back to God El. And that is what fuels this dangerous country.'

'Orange, Pink and Maroon?'

'Yes. OPM. So you have heard of it, too?'

'I have even seen the plants. Do you know they are no more wild. People cultivate them in farmlands.'

'What? How low can El stoop? Now, instead of grains they are cultivating the very ingredients of a poison. This is suicide. First he blocked the entire country from outsiders so that this information is contained. Any intervention from a coalition of the neighbouring countries and islands would be troubling.'

'But why did he kill the other swanews?'

'So that no one can make an antidote. The person who makes the antidote kills El's control.'

'Is it that addictive?' Knudalce asked. Something was bothering him.

'Yes. They say that within twenty-four hours, if a person is not given another dosage, their head throbs in pain. People

who have experienced it say that the pain is so much that people would prefer dying rather than go without some.'

'Why didn't I get that pain? Neither did Gopi Manchuri,' Knudalce said, 'We were given OPM, too. But for some reason we survived.'

'Hmm... That's strange. Did you come across an antidote?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Knudalce, try recalling what did you have before or after the drug was administered.'

Knudalce rewound and sequentially lived through every moment in his head since he woke up on the banks of Root Canal to the point when he and Gopi Manchuri reached the Baleen forest. Something odd struck him. The only odd thing that they both might have taken during this time was the Speedy Gonzalez 9000. They used it to escape the rebels and the E.I.E.I.O. guys. 'I think I know. I do not know which component it was but it was a pill we had taken. I knew it had side-effects but never knew that it had side-effects that could nullify one of the greatest hallucinogens.'

'Wow. You are only like what, fourteen years old. Who taught you?'

'I am twelve. Grandpa taught me.'

'Who is Grandpa?'

'His name was Thukpa. Everyone in our village called him

Grandpa.'

'What!!!' Items de Liver shouted so loud that his mother, who was in a different cell shouted, 'Zabzab, why are still awake? Go to bed!' Hearing this, another malnourished fellow shouted back, 'Quite. Else Hark the warden will flash you guys, too.'

'What!!!', Items de Liver whispered. 'Don't tell me you are the grandson of the great Thukpa. When did he marry? And grandkids?'

'He was my Grandpa but was not my grandfather. I don't even know where I come from. He was more than my teacher, though. He was both my father and mother.'

'If you are a swanew, your parents, or at least one of them, would be a swanew. You have inherited the most dominant genes.'

Items de Liver had narrated the entire history. They were silent for a long time. Then, Items de Liver broke the silence.

'Hey Knudalce, do you want to escape?'

'Yes. Is that even a question to be asked?'

'I have an idea. Do you know why those rocks we mine are blue?'

'Because, they contain life forces of swanews who were killed. I was told about the massacre.'

'Do you know why we mine them?

'Nope.'

'Because the Helping Hand needs the life force of a swanew to work. This gives me an idea.'

#

'Knudalce, meet this guy, Ayetobee,' Items de Liver had got some other prisoner with him. 'He is in charge of supplying these rock shards to Hark the Warden.'

'Hehehehe,' Ayetobee gave a nasal and cunning laugh.

'Can you do it?' Knudalce asked.

'Yes, yes, hehehehe.'

Knudalce reached into his pocket and took out some blue rock shards.

'Impressive, impressive,' even I cannot tell.

'Very well. Let's meet tomorrow.'

'Hehehehe, will you give me what you've promised?'

Items de Liver pulled Ayetobee towards him and whispered, 'He is a swanew. You don't need to get your fix from Hark the Warden. This kid can give you a lifetime's supply of OPM.'

'That would be nice of you. Hehehehe. It has been over two years that I have not had a proper dosage of OPM.'

'When should we do it?'

'Umm... day after tomorrow seems like a good day.'

#

Two days later, while Knudalce was busy swinging his oversized pickaxe on the rocks, he heard the thump of his heart louder than the sound of the pickaxe. Meanwhile, few feet away, Items de Liver and Ayetobee scanned the area. When they felt that it was time, Items de Liver ran towards Ayetobee and punched him in his stomach. Ayetobee was a bit taller than Items and hit him in his face.

'Not so hard, you idiot,' Items whispered and continued punching Ayetobee.

Two patrolling officers ran towards them. Items and Ayetobee turned towards them and punched them hard in their face. The malnourished officers were no match for that pair of punches. They flew and fell backwards.

The prisoners were in a panic. It was only three days ago that a large number of people were injured by Hark the Warden. Two of them ran towards the brawlers to stop them but they were greeted with punches just like the malnourished officers.

Hark the Warden walked out in the commotion. His expression was unchanged. In fact, Knudalce wondered if he ever showed any other expression for that matter. He looked at the two guys and proceeded to put his right hand out. As he opened his palm in the direction of the brawlers, he said, 'Et too, Ayetobee.' He flicked his middle finger with his thumb but it was a blank gesture. The glove did nothing. Not even a

missed spark. Hark the warden repeated the motion once more but to his despair the Helping Hand remained silent. In frustration, Hark the Warden gave out a growl and took off the Helping hand. That's when Knudalce noticed that Hark's right hand had numerous cut marks - most were blackened but a few were fresh and red. That was just like God El's arm that wore the Helping Hand. Knudalce wondered if the Helping Hand is a good thing to use at all.

While Hark the Warden was busy pouring the rock shards out of the gloves, Ayetobee ran forward and kicked Hark the Warden's hand really hard. The Helping Hand was thrown into mid air. Knudalce, along with a few more prisoners made for it. Items de Liver had to make way for Knudalce to catch the glove. He punched a few prisoners and cleared off Knudalce's path, who in turn jumped at the Helping Hand as if his life depended on it.

When Knudalce put on the Helping Hand an shiver of excitement ran through his body. The Helping Hand on its outside was too big for his tiny arm, yet unlike the pickaxe, it felt as if someone had made it to fit exactly in his arms. Knudalce opened his palm and directed it towards Hark the Warden. He flicked his middle finger against his thumb just like he had seen God El and Hark the Warden do. A stream of bluish lightning emerged from his palm. It was brighter and

thicker than what Hark the Warden or God El had produced. The recoil was so great that Knudalce's tiny body was flung back. Items ran and caught him.

The lightning had struck Hark the Warden right in his left leg. Hark the warden screamed so loud that it felt like the heavens would burst open. Hark the Warden limped towards Knudalce. Knudalce flicked another bolt out of his palm that hit his right leg. Hark the Warden's both legs were injured. He dropped down on his knees and yelled, 'Guards!'

The patrolling officers were shivering. Their malnourished bodies were no match for a weapon that had incapacitated Hark the Warden. Knudalce saw the large, steel gates opening behind Hark the Warden's massive body. Quite a few more guards with firearms barged in. Knudalce, without a moments hesitation, flicked his fingers twice. The first bolt created a hole in the wall and the second tore one of the halves of the gate and hit most of the armed guards.

'Drop your weapons or he will shoot at you,' Items de Liver shouted.

Fearing for their lives, the armed guards, who were still standing, dropped their weapons. This only created a lot of chaos. Many prisoners, like an angry mob, rushed towards the gate and started a fistfight with the guards. Few others approached Hark the Warden and started punching him. Although

his legs were damaged, he still had enough strength to punch, slap and fling them away. However, it was only a matter of time that he was outnumbered and overpowered.

Items de Liver ran to his mother and said, 'Take whomever you want with you and reach the shores towards North. I will find you.'

Items de Liver caught Knudalce's arm and pulled him with him.

'Hey, wait! I need to take my backpack,' Knudalce said. He was barely able to catch up to Items de Liver.

'Don't worry, Ayetobee has already taken it outside.'

Knudalce recalled that he had not seen Ayetobee after he kicked the Helping Hand out of Hark the Warden's hands.

'Sneaky fellow,' he said.

Sure enough, Ayetobee was waiting outside with Knudalce's backpack. Knudalce took it from him and thanked him.

'Hehehehe! What about the recipe?'

'I will get it for you. Right now run away. El and his henchmen will be here any minute.'

Knudalce and Items de Liver headed towards Fang Shy, whose majestic peaks protruded off the ground in the west. They ran for about half an hour. When Items de Liver was sure that no one, not even a prisoner was following them, he stopped to catch a breath.

'Hey those shards were not even properly painted. How did Hark get fooled?' Items de Liver asked.

'OPM causes temporary colourblindness. He was only able to see the colours orange, pink and maroon. It would have been impossible to say whether a rock shard is blue or green,' Knudalce replied and smiled.

'You are a clever boy. You will definitely make a good swanew someday,' Items de Liver laughed.

'I wonder where Shorty is right now. I hope he is alright,' Knudalce said.

#

It took twelve malnourished prison guards to pick Hark the Warden and carry him to the east wing "recovery" section where other prisoners injured by him were recovering and did not participate in the escape.

El was accompanied by Old McDonald, a few E.I.E.I.O. officers and the two officers from the Office of Petty Theft, Jugo Nor Thiest and Jugo Shaowtest, who were commissioned from Tartar. Knudalce stealing Helping Hand might be considered petty theft after all.

'Look boss, there is a hole in the wall,' Jugo Shaowtest said.

Jugo Nor Theist looked at the hole. 'It is large enough for a twelve year old boy,' he said, 'He must have escaped

through this hole.' He looked at God El and said, 'His Holiness can go and interrogate the warden. We shall inspect the scene of crime.'

God El and Old McDonald walked towards the east wing and found Hark the Warden. Few malnourished patrolling officers, who weren't injured were attending him. Old McDonald signalled them to move away and sit in one corner.

'I caught him and sent him here for one reason and one reason only. Who will make OPM when that Gall de Liver is dead? And you- you had one job, to keep the inmates here. You couldn't even keep a twelve year old in this fortification of yours'

'I am sorry, His Holiness,' Hark the Warden said. 'My Helping Hand did not work properly.'

'Stop these lame excuses. Should I show you how my Helping Hand works?'

'No, His Holiness,' Hark the Warden was shivering.

'Are all the preparations done?' God El whispered in Old McDonald's ears.

'Five minutes, sir,' Old McDonald replied.

'I should have put someone else in charge long back. You don't do your job - just sit and have fixes upon fixes of OPM. Now tell me one piece of information. Where are the rock shards?' God El reverted back to scolding Hark the Warden.

'They are in the storage room, ground floor adjacent to the clock tower,' he said and then quickly added, 'His Holiness, that will not happen again. Give me a chance. I will round up every last prisoner.'

'That will not be necessary. I believe this man here and his fellow E.I.E.I.O. members are more suited to that job. Very well, keep recuperating, you incompetent twack.'

Hark the Warden mumbled something but God El rushed out of the east wing. He reached the gate where the two officers from the from the Office of Petty Theft, Jugo Nor Thiest and Jugo Shaowtest, were inspecting the missing half of the gate.

'I say boss, why are there two escape routes? If the gate was gone, there was no need to make the hole in the wall,' Jugo Shaowtest tried his brains a reasoning.

'That's elementary my underling. That small hole in the wall is for people who are small while this large missing half of the gate is for the bigger guys. Do you know what that means?'

'That means that the kid must have escaped through the hole.'

'Excellent deduction. You have finally become worthy of being my successor,' Jugo Nor Theist said and patted his chest exhibiting great pride.

'We don't have to do much investigation here,' God El

said, 'I know where that swanew will go.'

'Where, His Holiness,' Old McDonald and the two Jugos asked simultaneously.

'To the old gate,' God El said and then chuckled, 'That kid thinks that gate works as a portal.' He looked at Old McDonald and asked, 'Did your men get enough stock of rock shards?'

'Yes sir, they would be waiting for your call.'

'Good. Then do it.'

Old McDonald lifted his hand and waved it at an E.I.E.I.O. officer waiting near the east wing. The officer waved back, sat down, did something and ran towards OldMcDonald. As he was his way, a sequence of huge explosions lightened up the east wing and shook the office building and the clock tower, which in its already dilapidated state, shed a bricks mourning the souls who were in the east wing. In no time, the entire block was reduced to rubbles and ashes with thick fumes darkening the sky.

'I hope a few inside were swanews,' God El said. 'We might get some extra bluish rock shards impregnated in the rubbles.'

#

Gopi Manchuri woke up in the forest. He must have flown a lot. There was still a burning sensation in his chest. He

looked at it and shrieked. There was a large, gaping, circular hole in his dress right on his chest. Through the hole he could see that his chest was all red and bruised. The last he recalled was getting hit by a bolt of lightning and flying off. What was he doing there? Where was he? Why was there a blanket on his legs?

Gopi Manchuri looked around. He realised that he wasn't alone. Although there was no one around him, there were signs of people. The residual charcoal of an extinguished bonfire puffed out a thin strand of smoke. Rocks with flat surfaces were placed in neat circle around the fire. There were thin bones and bloody feathers all around. People have been feasting.

Gopi Manchuri thought of escaping. He did not want to get caught again. He stood up but immediately sat down. His legs were weak and were shaking. Gopi Manchuri, who considered himself a fast runner, even without Knudalce's speed pills, found escaping to be a daunting task in his current state. He sat down and waited for his capturers or rescuers, whoever they were.

'Hora! Gopi is awake!'

Gopi Manchuri almost jumped with joy. It was Mr. P.P.'s familiar face. He was carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows in his shoulders and a few dead birds in his hand.

'Don't worry, the others are getting some rabbits and moles,' Mr. P.P. said, 'We will have a feast!'

A tall, well built woman arrived a few minutes after Mr. P.P. She was coughing violently.

'Those fumes troubling you dear?' Mr. P.P. asked. The lady nodded yes. 'This is Emily Bronchitis,' Mr. P.P. introduced her to Gopi Manchuri.

'Hi Gopi, *cough*. It's good to see that you are *cough* awake.'

Three more guys and another girl joined Mr. P.P. and Emily Bronchitis. Two of the guys had brought rabbits and moles while the other girl had caught a chicken.

'Where did you get that chicken in this kind of forest,' Mr. P.P. asked, suggesting the improbability of finding a chicken in high altitude, deciduous forest.

'Just saw it roaming. I think it's anatopism,' the girl who would later introduce herself as Austrain Jane said.

Gopi Manchuri felt hungry. His stomach growled. It was so loud that everyone thought that Gopi Manchuri was hiding a ferocious animal.

'Gopi, *cough*, we will not be having dinner before sunset,' Emily Bronchitis said, 'We cannot have thick fumes rising up and giving away our location.'

Austrain Jane took out some berries and offered them to

Gopi Manchuri. The berries would at least keep his hunger at bay.

When darkness fell, Mr. P.P lightened the bonfire. Emily Bronchitis coughed a lot but managed to put on a pot of water for tea.

'Did you know that the eastern slopes of Fang Shy are very gentle. Some of the world's best tea is produced there,' Mr. P.P. said to Gopi Manchuri, 'Hora! I also have a few friends who own a few estates.'

Two guys mounted the hunted animals and fowls on skewers and proceeded to slow roast them on fire. The berries Gopi Manchuri had in the morning weren't holding his hunger very well.

'You were knocked out for two whole days. The scar on your chest - seems like Helping Hand hit you pretty hard,' Mr. P.P. said to Gopi Manchuri. Mr. P.P. then said, 'I have a Helping Hand. I inherited that from my father. But I can't use it. He said that only swanews with a lot of life force in them can use it. I wonder how God El can use a helping hand. He doesn't have a strand of DNA belonging to a swanew.'

Gopi Manchuri did not understand much of what Mr. P.P. said about Helping Hand. Unlike Knudalce, who was used to using his life forces, he had no such abilities. Still, he knew that there were things that only a swanew could do.

#

'My parents never called me P.P. They named me Castor Oyl. My father was a famous swanew. He was executed by God El.'

'Did he get killed in the massacre?' Gopi manchuri asked.

'No Gopi. He was executed. One moment, I had all the luxury in this world and the very next moment I was a penniless orphan. The only thing that my father left me as a legacy was this Helping Hand. I never had any swanew abilities. Back then, when I was working at a fast food joint, I cursed by bad luck. However, fate works in mysterious ways. Since I did not have any abilities, I was able to escape the massacre at Minefield.'

'I made a few friends. See these people, they are also sons and daughters of swanews who were killed by God El. We knew that a dictatorship or a monarchy isn't going to help people. They need a democratically elected head of state. Thus the idea of an underground movement took its shape.'

'Isn't that what the rebels are doing?' Gopi Manchuri asked.

'Hora! Not at all. Not at all. They are overground, very much visible if you may say. We dug an entire underground building to house our most important weapon.'

'Helping Hand?'

'Nope Gopi. It's a printing press. We printed pamphlets and distributed them all around. Besides, none of us could use the Helping Hand.'

'God El regulates the printed text. How did you manage to sneak in your pamphlets?

'Hora! Do you think everything is easy? These men and women toiled night and day in forests, caves and bushes to facilitate such an action. How else do you think they have improved their hunting capabilities.'

'I still don't get it. How are you planning to overthrow that God El?'

'That's where your friend Knudalce comes into picture. Why do you think I gave him a discount while smuggling him in? By the way, where is he?'

'I think he was captured by God El. Last I saw, God El held him by his collar with his one hand and blasted me with the other hand. It would be a miracle if Knudalce has managed to escape.'

'Hora! This is bad. This is bad. I am sure, if he is caught, God El wouldn't kill him immediately. I hope that kid cooperates. God El might find him useful and let him live. After all, his current lifeline, Gall de Liver is getting old. God El needs a replacement.'

Mr. P.P. looked at Emily Bronchitis and said, 'Tomorrow,

let's head over to Minefield. If anything, we should look for a way to break in.'

'That would be an impossible task,' Austrain Jane said.

'But it might be our only hope,' Emily Bronchitis replied with some optimism.

Gopi Manchuri bit into the thigh of a roasted mole. It was one of the most delicious meat he had ever tasted. They say hunger s the best spice. 'Mr. P.P., what does P.P. mean?'

'Hora! Printing Press. Printing Press.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

8 Revelation

The gunpowder in Old McDonald's shotgun imploded and damaged the barrel. It also blackened Old McDonald's face. In tremendous fury, he threw it in Captain Berty's direction and unsheathed his longsword.

'Old guy, your heart is filled with malice.

Your God while he rules in his palace

Made of matchsticks

Would get a few kicks,

Err.. err..'

Something had happened to Captain Berty. It was unusual for him to falter. His tremendous aim with his Dragon's breath and his unwavering limericks had kept the Viva la Resistance guys alive. He scratched his head and then suddenly burst out in tears.

Everyone was astonished, including Old McDonald. Subordinate P ran towards Old McDonald and held him. 'Boss, boss, what has happened to you? What about the fifth line of the limerick.'

The word 'limerick' triggered a certain emotion in Captain Berty. He broke down even more.

'L, maybe you should help him out.'

Captain Berty got down his horse and dropped himself on the grass. He cried like a baby. Subordinate L knew that manufacturers did not make pacifiers of bigger size - one large enough to fit the wide open mouth of Captain Berty. That would have been a bad business decision on the manufacturer's part. He had no idea how to calm O Captain! His Captain!

'Maybe you should try and complete his limerick,' a Viva la Resistance member prompted Subordinate L.

You should know a little about this character called Subordinate L. He had a name - W.B. Yeast. W.B. wasn't an acronym. It was his real name. Ever since he was a kid, he wanted to become the greatest poet of all time. The poor farmers of Dental Moss never understood the depth and metaphor of his poetry. O rejection! How artistic it was. Back then Captain Berty was a famous poet. His works were published using the best typeface. Until eleven years ago, all printing presses became state controlled and Captain Berty could no

longer publish his works without the approval of a guy who never gave poetry its due. And for a kid like W.B. Yeast, it was like his hero was vanquished.

Subordinate L walked towards the crying Captain and gently sat beside him.

'Our triumph shall wave on galleys,' Subordinate L whispered in Captain Berty's ears.

Captain Berty suddenly stopped crying and looked at Subordinate L. How sad his face looked! Subordinate L could clearly see that newer drops of tear were being manufactured by Captain's eyes and were about to flood them once more. Captain Berty's cries erupted again with renewed intensity. Once Captain Berty had saved Subordinate P from floods, now it was time for him to save his Captain from floods.

'We'll drink their blood from chalice,' Subordinate L gave one more try. Needless to say it was futile.

He tried once more, 'Let's ride through the valleys,' and followed it up with quite a few feeble attempts at non sequitur like his Captain - 'The rooster is of Genus Gallus' and 'Painted by Aurora Borealis'. The Captain still cried on as the few wounded rebels waited for their comrades to fetch alcohol for their Captain. Deep down Subordinate L knew that W.B. Yeast's poems lacked the impact and punch of a heavyweight like Captain Berty. Only Captain Berty can

complete Captain Berty's limericks.

'This is getting annoying,' Old McDonald pointed his sword at Captain Berty, who was to welled up in tears to note a sharp object near his neck.

'Wait, sir,' Alice Wonderland shouted, 'Allow me to handle this thickhead.'

Old McDonald did not have to reply. He was interrupted by a messenger from God El.

'The Venerable Wisdom Tooth His Holiness God El summons you, Sir Old McDonald. There has been an incident at the Minefield. It is urgent,' the messenger told.

'Sir, take my shotgun,' Alice Wonderland said, 'and also your troop. Me and my troop can round these thickheads and take them to Dentine.'

'Very well then,' Old McDonald took the shotgun from Alice Wonderland and rode away with his troop.

'Phew! Good Riddance.' Alice Wonderland said to herself. She then turned to Captain Berty and said, 'Now, what's your problem? First fooling around with these thickheads and now crying like a baby?'

#

This part of Fang Shy was taller than the southern part. No wonder, the highest mountain of Toothache, Canine's Peak, was also towards the northern part of the majestic mountain

range. These snow covered mountains illuminated up the entire sky whenever the early rays of Mr. Sun fell on them.

Knudalce and Items de Liver had been walking for days. Knudalce noticed that Items de Liver was more used to hardships that most people he had met so far. They have been sleeping in the trees, resting on grasslands and halting near river banks. Items de Liver wasn't too good at hunting. They have been surviving on fruits and berries. Knudalce doubly checked his Gradpa's diary to ensure whatever they ate wasn't poisonous or hallucinatory. If there was any doubt regarding the side effects of something, they would avoid it altogether. Sure, they had to go half a day without food for the first day, but the thought of badly cooked porridge kept the motivation high.

Knudalce and Items de Liver were headed towards Lewis Offset, a mountain pass that would save them days of travel to reach the western shore. Their final destination was an abandoned lighthouse. Items de Liver had said that Knudalce would meet someone very important there. He is the only person in Toothache who can help Knudalce.

'So this Soaring Chicken guy you are saying, is he a swanew, too?' Knudalce asked.

'Yes, he is. He is the one who taught my father many things.'

'How come he is alive?'

'That's because no one other than my father, and later me, know that he is swanew. He is originally not from Toothache.'

'Is he from the Bacterium islands?'

'I do not know where he is from. You will have to ask that yourself. He is pretty old. I know, and this is what my father told me, that he has travelled the outer world.'

'Really?' Knudalce exclaimed with joy, 'Then he would know if Umami is really a fact or Myth.'

Items de Liver shrugged his shoulders. They were about two kilometres from Lewis Offset. In mountains, the aerial distance is deceptive. It was still an eight hour trek through the winding roads that wrapped themselves up against the slope of the mountains. Knudalce was not used to high altitudes. He had a bit of headache and nasal pain. There was medication to aid rapid high altitude ascent. He had even read about it in his Grandpa's diary. However, it was a wrong time to think about that. Even if he knew the procedure, he wouldn't be able to make anything. All around him, it was rocks and rocks. He would encounter an occasional cluster of bushes on the slopes. He made a note to himself in his aching head that whenever he gets time, he must prepare medication that will help him with extreme heat, extreme cold and extreme altitude.

'Are you feeling unwell?' Items de Liver asked.

'Just a headache. It's the altitude.'

'Endure it. Take long and deep breaths.'

Hours later, they had reached the bend that led up to Lewis Offset.

'Knudalce, can you hear that?' Items de Liver halted suddenly and placed his ears against the rocks. 'I can hear horses- Oh my god, you are bleeding.'

'Where?' Knudalce asked. He didn't know that he was bleeding from one of his noses.

'No time for that. We must hide,' Items de Liver said, caught Knudalce by his collar and climbed the gravel slopes. He was targeting a rock that jut out of the slope. The rock would hide them from others and being on higher grounds would give them some advantage if there was a confrontation.

Knudalce had Hark the Warden's Helping Hand in his backpack. Items de Liver had to resort to the loose pebbles surrounding him.

As the horses appeared out of the bend, Knudalce saw two familiar faces and shrieked with joy. One of the horses carried Mr. P.P. and Gopi Manchuri.

'Shorty!' Knudalce shouted.

'Hora! Mr. K. is here. And we thought you were still trapped in prison.'

Gopi Manchuri smiled like he had never smiled before.

'Oh! *cough* That's the Kid,' Emily Bronchitis said. She then turned to Knudalce and asked, 'When did you manage to escape *cough*?'

Items de Liver interrupted, 'Knudalce isn't that well. We should descend.'

Mr. P.P. saw a stain of blood near Knudalce's nostril. He turned to his comrades and said, 'I think we can carry them as pillions. Hora! Let's go.'

#

Mr. P.P. was unsure who this swanew was. He was old. His skin was wrinkled. His thick white eyebrows hid his eyes while his equally thick moustache and beard hid his lips. Sadly he did not have any hair to cover his head.

'Hungry Turkey! When did you shave your head,' Gopi Manchuri exclaimed. He was happy to see a familiar face.

'Nope, Shorty. I think that's Silent Rooster,' Knudalce tried correcting Gopi Manchuri. He was himself confused.

'Hora sir, are you Snoring Chicken or Hungry Turkey or Silent Rooster?' Mr. P.P. was confused.

'It's not Snoring, It's Soaring Chicken and not my battery brother Hungry Tukey,' he said, 'And I believe you are the swanew who wanted to meet me.'

'No sir, not him,' Items de Liver interrupted, 'This kid

here.'

'So you are the grandson of Thukpa. I did not know he had children.'

'I was adopted. I don't know who my parents are,' Knudalce said, 'He raised me and taught me everything I know.'

'What do you know?'

'I know how to make-'

'You don't know battery,' Soaring Chicken said, interrupting Knudalce's sentence midway.

'Battery?' Knudalce was astonished.

'Hah! This is a book for kids. I am not supposed to swear.'

Soaring Chicken lifted the eyebrow hair and looked around. 'Whoever is not a swanew, please leave. You guys can sleep downstairs.'

'I would want Shorty to stay,' Knudalce said.

Soaring Chicken thought for a while and said, 'Ah! Maybe an extra pair of ears wouldn't harm much.'

Knudalce, Items de Liver and Gopi manchuri stayed back while the rest left to sleep in the ground floor of the lighthouse.

'Scoring Chicken, please take care of the kids,' Mr P.P. said.

'It's battery Soaring Chicken, you battery. Get out!'

Soaring Chicken shouted.

When everyone left the room, Soaring Chicken asked Knudalce, 'Now tell me kid, what do you what to know?'

'Where is Umami and where can I find the Golden Nectar?'

'You disgust me, kid. I can't believe that even twelve year olds are now behind the elusive elixir of life force. What has become of this battery generation?'

'Sir, you've mistaken me. I must stop Pasta Ferry from reaching Umami and getting his hands on the Golden Nectar.'

Soaring Chicken was taken aback. 'Pasta Ferry? Did you say Pasta Ferry? The battery son of the great Ptagliatelle and his wife Pizzo Cherry? What do you have with him?'

'He took away the life force of Grandpa. I must avenge him.'

'Be grateful that your Grandpa was left with a few years of life force. He did not even spare his own parents and his infant brother,' Soaring Chicken was in deep thought. Something was troubling him. 'I do not know if Umami ever exists or not. Even if it exists, the elders had protected it with their own life force. It is said that incredible life force can alter seasons, tides and landmasses. The currents that prevent us from escaping Toothache is driven by an elder's life force. The half life of such a life force is so large that it would take over a thousand years for the

currents to reduce their intensity to half. But I can teach you how to swim in those currents.

'Kid do you know a legendary song about Umami? It goes like this-, ' Soaring Chicken said and sang the song with no regard to pitch or tempo. Had he sung that in a concert, the audience would have been kind enough to shower his performance with rotten tomatoes.

Every man is welcome on Butterflies chest
Who closes its wings like a Venus Fly Trap.
Thus conceals itself from the eyes of harm
And hides itself from the face of the map.

Remember the sacrifice, remember the dead
Four elders drowned, their bodies all gone
Their lives thus altered the nature of things
And till this day their spirits lives on.

"Stay happy," they said before the four slipped
Deep into the trenches in four corners of world
"We shall carry this knowledge to our graves
So a man may not feed the greed to control"

Four lives were lost in the quest for peace

Four elders whose life on earth was cut short.

"Stay content," they said, "but if you are not able
To do so, please contact customer support."

'Which means, no matter what we do, we are forever
trapped in this Toothache and the neighbouring islands, isn't
it?' Knudalce asked.

'It doesn't mean that we cannot escape Toothache. It is
possible, but only for a swanew.'

Knudalce was even more confused.

'Do you have a Helping Hand?' Soaring Chicken asked.

Knudalce nodded only to realise that Mr. Chicken couldn't
see a zilch unless he removed his eyebrow hair from the front
of his his eyelids. 'Yes, I do. In fact, I recently acquired
one.'

'Very well. These Helping Hand are not for usage as
weapons. While one may use them as weapons, they were
primarily designed to open up portals.'

'What kind of portal?' Items de Liver asked.

'Portals that can be opened only by swanews who possess
lot of life force.'

'He is talking about the gate!' Gopi Manchuri exclaimed.

'You mean the door frame made of stones? But we have just
been there.' Knudalce was astonished.

'Haha you battery, not without a Helping Hand.'

'But sir, God El had a Helping Hand,' Knudalce said. He was unable to piece together the logic.

'What did I say? Portals can be opened only by swanews. God El doesn't even have enough life force to make his own dysentry medication. And you think that he can open a portal? Huh. What kind of battery is this?'

Knudalce recalled that the lightning bolt he had generated in Minefield was far thicker and brighter than that of God El or Hark the Warden. A strange sense of optimism filled him. After all, maybe he could really chase Pasta Ferry.

'Knudalce, if you have a Helping Hand, I guess Mr. P.P's one will not be needed.'

'That is not true,' Knudalce said, 'We have some blue rock shards from Minefield. These contain life forces of deceased swanews. With these inside the glove, any person can use the Helping Hand as a weapon. In fact, God El has been using it exactly that way.'

'Kid, it was me who taught Gall de Liver to use the Helping Hand. You cant blame that battery for teaching that God battery El how to use it. He wanted to save his wife and children.'

'How do you know so much?' Items de Liver asked.

'Haha! When you have lived for two hundred years, you tend to know all these.'

'What do you mean?' Knudalce asked.

'Swanews have a longer life owing to their life force. When I came through that portal, I sacrificed a lot of my life. Kid, listen to me carefully. The very act of opening a portal draws a lot of life force out of you. You open four such doors and you would probably find yourself dead. I hated this country when I came here. I hated God El, I hated his men and I hated his subjects who were more happy to get their battery fix of hallucinogens. If I had any more strength or life force left, I would have left this place long ago.'

There was something that bothered Gopi Manchuri. He wondered how could a lonely man survive in a godforsaken lighthouse. He was so troubled that he ended up asking, 'Sir, if you cannot leave and ha what do you do for a living.'

The old man laughed really hard. So hard, that a boat passing by would mistake his laughter for a warning siren.

'Kid, I am a fish attractor by profession.'

Even Knudalce was confused. 'Fish attractor? What's that?'

'Being a swanew has its own perks. I put a special ointment on my body and swim around in the seas. The ointment attracts the fishes. These fishes are then caught by

fishermen. In a way, I seek remuneration for the services I provide to the fishermen.'

'Doesn't God El know that you are a swanew?' Knudalce asked.

'Eh. I don't think that battery of a Wisdom Teeth knows,' Soaring Chicken said and laughed really hard.

Gopi Manchuri did not know what to make out of that profession. 'Sir, aren't you in danger?'

'From El? Nah,' Soaring Chicken replied. 'Sometimes I am in greater danger from sharks who love the smell of that ointment. I have returned with piranhas biting my back. Of course, if that happens, I charge extra.'

Knudalce was not interested in attracting fishes. But then again, he wanted to know how he made the ointment. 'Sir Soaring Chicken, could you tell me how you make the ointment.'

'Hah! I am not giving my battery secret away,' Soaring Chicken replied with an air of possessiveness, 'You better focus on the pasta guy.'

'I will,' Knudalce replied, 'I will do everything I can to stop Pasta Ferry from reaching Umami. I know that he was the one responsible for the current state of this country. Who knows what he is doing to the places he hopping through?'

'Don't forget kid that while Pasta Ferry is your greatest enemy, you have a strong ally, too.'

'Shorty?' Knudalce said.

'Yes, he too. But I was talking about the author of this plot. He will protect you. Whenever in doubt, trust him.'

#

Captain Berty was still crying.

'I would have killed you if you were not a wanted man,' Alice Wonderland said, 'If that thickhead Old MacDee was here, he would have killed you for sure.' She looked at W.B. Yeast and asked, 'What does he need?'

'Madam, I think he needs Nirvana Punch.'

'What's that? Do you wear it or burn it?'

'It's Gall de Liver's special drink. Legend says that the drinker either forgets everything or attains enlightenment after drinking. Then also Gall de Liver...'

'Shut up, you thickhead.' She then turned to her troops and said. 'Let's go there.'

Alice Wonderland asked W.B. Yeast and Subordinate V to carry Captain Berty on a horse. They would be heading to Gall de Liver's factory.

Dentine was not that far from Plaque. Although the distance was merely a few hours by horse, it was Captain Berty's constant crying that irritated Alice.

'That thickhead irritated even my mother,' Alice Wonderland said, 'Always drunk and always stupid poems.'

'Madam, his limericks are excellent....,' W.B. Yeast protested.

'Shut up you thickhead.'

'But Miss, did your mother know him as well?' Subordinate V asked.

'Yeah! She was her husband.'

Both W.B. Yeast and Subordinate V choked on their own spit. A few gasps echoed through the cavalry.

'Does that mean you are his stepdaughter?' Subordinate V asked. His mouth was still open wide with his chocked saliva slowly making its way back.

'No, you thickhead. I am his daughter.'

That was a bombshell even for a seasoned spy like Hoarse Reddish. B. Troot was unmoved. She digested such information as if it was matter-of-fact. She was more busy concentrating on filing her fingernails while riding on a horse through a relatively smooth terrain.

'Miss B. Troot,' Hoarse Reddish asked, 'Aren't you baffled by the fact that our leader and the deputy E.I.E.I.O officer are father and daughter.'

'Not really,' she replied while still concentrating on getting the curvature of her left pinky right, 'I read Austrain Jane's pulp fictions. Such revelations are trivial when compared to her plot twists.'

#

Subordinate V and W.B. Yeast had to carry Captain Berty into the tasting chamber of Gall de Liver's factory. The tasting chamber was more like a nice cozy restaurant. It was made so that sensible business dealings could be made under the influence of a good brew. Captain Berty was in no condition for participating in sensible business dealings. He was sobbing most of the time.

'Oh my god! Brussel Sprouts? What happened to you?' Gall de Liver came out of the room where boilers and brass vessels passed liquids and grains around.

'He broke down when he wasn't able to finish his limerick,' W.B. Yeast said, 'Even I tried completing it on his behalf...'

'You thickhead, no one cares what you've tried. Tell him his problem,' Alice Wonderland said.

'Mr. Gall de Liver, you are the only swanew in this land. Help him. He needs Nirvana Punch.'

'Of course he needs Nirvana Punch. You don't need a swanew to make Nirvana Punch. You need me. For I hold the patents of the process.' Gall de Liver turned around and shouted 'Humid! Humid!'

A lanky boy wearing a dirty apron came out of the boiler

room and stood at the door. 'Yes, sir,' he said.

'Get the special barrel,' Gall de Liver ordered him and then with a smile turned to Alice Wonderland, 'He is my apprentice, Humid Al Kahol. Very fine boy. Long time ago, once his father's uncle had diarrhoea. Being one of the sixteen children of the Al Kahol family, his father's uncle definitely wanted some sort of...'

'Shut up, you thickesthead. What would I do with that story? What would the reader do with that story?'

Gall de Liver felt like he was a child being scolded in school. 'Well just wanted to say that he has been here for the last seven years.'

Humid Al Kahol came out rolling a large barrel. He also carried a transparent pipe with him. He shoved one end of the pipe into Captain Berty's mouth and put the other end into the barrel. Captain Berty sipped the entire content until not a drop was left inside the barrel.

'Still the same old guy. Even on her deathbed, my mom kept complaining about him,' Alice Wonderland said in a distressed tone.

'I know. Look at fate. We both competed for your mother's affection. This guy gets her and then leaves her and his nine year old daughter to set up some random troop of revolutionaries. Talk about undermining one's own

possessions.'

Meanwhile Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot were getting boared of watching a grown up man suck the contents of a large barrel. 'Let's bet, Enlightenment or Amnesia?' Hoarse Reddish asked B. Troot.

'Haha! You guys are silly,' Gall de Liver chuckled, 'That's just a catchphrase to sell my most expensive brew. Granted, it brings out the best in some men.' Gall de Liver saw his old friend rub his eyes. Captain Bertie had stopped sobbing quite some time ago but the blood red eyes would take some time to return to normal, 'Alice, looks like Brussel Sprouts is finally awake?'

'Alice, Alice, who the hell is Alice?' Captain Bertie said, thus completing the limerick that was left hanging a few chapters ago. W.B. Yeats was so happy that he cried.

Alice Wonderland wasn't too happy. She punched him in his face and said, 'Your own daughter, you thickhead.' The punch was strong enough to knock him unconscious. She turned to Gall de Liver and said, 'That's what I call a Nirvana Punch. He would either wake up enlightened or won't remember a thing.'

'By the way I had to tell you something,' Alice Wonderland said, 'There were a lot of prisoners who have escaped Minefield. I suspect your wife and son are amongst

them.'

Gall de Liver jumped into the air, clapped his hands and shrieked with joy.

Alice Wonderland interrupted him and said, 'Don't be too happy. That thickhead Old MacDee might be hunting for him. Sources say that he is with a swanew who has infiltrated the heartland.'

'His name is Knudalce. He was once with us. He even cured Captain Berty's perpetual stomach troubles.' Subordinate V said.

'I can't believe there is a swanew,' Gall de Liver said, 'Last time I had seen a swanew...'

'Another thing,' Alice Wonderland interrupted Gall de Liver. 'Where do you reckon than a swanew trying to escape Toothache would go?'

Gall de Liver thought for a while and then said, 'Maybe to the plateau where the stone gate is. It's just a story I heard from my master. He said that it is possible for a swanew to open the gate, provided he has the right equipment.'

'So, what kind of thickhead equipment will that thickhead kid need?'

'I don't know.'

That night Alice Wonderland, the E.I.E.I.O officers under her command and the members of Viva la Resistance slept on the

floors of Gall de Liver's tasting room. Well, except for two - Gall de Liver himself, who was to excited to meet his family again and Captain Berty, who wasn't technically sleeping but was unconscious.

CHAPTER NINE

9 Protagonist Wins

The gate was not far from the lighthouse. If the terrain was flat, it would take Knudalce, Gopi Manchuri, Mr. P.P. and the gang only a day to cover. However, that was not the case. The terrain required some serious hiking on horseback. It wasn't until the third day that they reached the plateau. Little did they know that there were men who awaited their arrival.

At the first steep ascent, known as the Gentle Step were fifteen armed men. All of them carried swords.

'You must not proceed any further,' One of the guys said, 'God El awaits the kid.'

'Hora! Which kid?' Mr. P.P. asked.

'I don't know. I am just a nondescript E.I.E.I.O guy. Send both of them.'

'Hora! I am not letting these kids go alone.'

'Mr. P.P.,' Knudalce interrupted, 'We will be fine.'

'Are you sure, Mr. K?'

'Yup. I don't think I can face Pasta Ferry if I don't defeat the monster he had created eleven years ago.'

Mr. P.P. was not convinced. Still, he helped Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri get off the horses.

'Don't worry, Soaring Chicken told me that someone always looks after me,' Knudalce said.

It was still a kilometre of uphill walk to reach the flat surface of the plateau. Knudalce had memorised the entire map of Toothache by now. It was a far better buy than the form and Turquoise inked pen he had bought for Forty Druks in Tartar.

While the two kids were on their way to meet their nemesis, Knudalce said, 'Shorty, I want you to take these and put them in your glove.' Knudalce gave him a bunch of blue rock shards he had dug out in Minefield. 'Then, even you can use your Helping Hand. But use it only if you have to.'

Gopi Manchuri nodded.

'Do you still have the speed pills with you?' Knudalce asked.

'I might have three more.'

'Pop one in your mouth. It might come more handy than that Helping Hand.'

#

'Deja Vu, isn't it?' the loud voice of God El echoed in the dusty, rocky terrain, 'I knew you would come again. What makes you think that I wouldn't kill you.'

God El was sitting on a rock beside the gate. Mr. Sun was unusually nasty that day. Old McDonald held an umbrella in one hand and a shotgun in another. His gun pointed in the general direction of the ragtag group. Knudalce and others stopped. They were far but not far enough to escape a bullet off the shotgun.

'Trusty servant, I say,' God El said. 'I believe he will not hesitate to blow any of your skulls out.'

Knudalce noticed that God El still wore his Helping Hand. He knew that he had some rock shards inside. Last time a bolt from that Helping Hand had hit Gopi Manchuri bang in the middle on his chest.

'I see that you have stolen that Helping Hand from Hark the Warden. I believe you had injured both his legs. Don't you want to know how he is doing now?'

Knudalce did not reply. He hated God El's sarcastic statements even more than God El himself.

God El got up, opened his palm and pointed it towards Knudalce. Then he slowly walked towards Knudalce and said, 'Why don't you ask him yourself once you are with him. I am

not talking about that Minefield.'

Knudalce realised that the shotgun was pointing towards Gopi Manchuri. While a lightning bolt impact would not be lethal unless it passes right through ones heart or brain, a shotgun's bullet might even rupture some other organs. He couldn't take risk.

God El flicked his fingers and a bolt hit Knudalce on his chest. He was flung back. Gopi Manchuri and Items simultaneously shouted, 'Knudalce!' Gopi Manchuri tried to move towards Knudalce but Knudalce held out his right arm with Helping Hand suggesting him to stop.

'Clever boy. Learn from him.' God El spoke to Gopi Manchuri in his mocking tone, 'You will be dead. Ah! What do I see? Helping Hand! Bet you are not a swanew like your friend here. That will help you from cold, sure.'

Knudalce's pain was not intense. As if, God El was deliberately trying to hurt him in bits and pieces. There was another bolt, and another. Knudalce curled up and was writhing in pain. God El flicked his hand several times until he felt a punch on his face. Only that it wasn't a punch but a bolt of lightning coming out of Gopi Manchuri's hands.

'Ah I see! Your friend gave you the rocks,' God El said as he held his injured face with his hand. He suddenly turned towards Old McDonald and shouted, 'Shoot him!'

Old McDonald was too slow. For Gopi Manchuri had swallowed a speed ball just few moments ago. A huge bolt of lightning hit him on his right leg. Knudalce had sat up. With one hand on his paining chest, he had fired the bolt with his Helping Hand. Old McDonald lost his balance and fell. Since, he had already pressed the trigger, the shotgun fired into the sky above. He hit his head on a rock and laid unconscious on the dust.

Well that's what God El saw. In reality, Gopi Manchuri had not only dodged the bullet, but also had run towards Old McDonald, head-butted him in his belly and had returned back to his original position even before Old McDonald fell on the floor.

'You!' God El shouted in fury and opened his palm. Knudalce quickly turned his palm and flicked his middle finger with his thumb. A quick bolt of lightning hit God El's right arm. His already injured arm from the overuse of Helping Hand felt numb. God El tried to make the flickering motion but his hand dropped towards his side, as if he had no control over his own arm. In desperation, he let out a really loud roar, made a fist with his left hand and proceeded to punch Knudalce. Before he could land a blow on Knudalce's face, another bolt of lightning hit his right hand. It was coming from Gopi Manchuri. Gopi Manchuri hit his right hand again and

again and again. It was so fast that the disjoint bolts of lightning did not even appear disjoint anymore.

Even with that speed of motion, Knudalce noticed that Gopi Manchuri was bleeding from his left hand. He was clenching his teeth in pain. 'Shorty, stop! You'll injure yourself. See this-', Knudalce said and pulled open God El's Helping Hand. The cut marks made his arm look horrible and made his arm look quite a bit deformed. It was worse than Hark the Warden's. Most cuts were deep and had blackened. Some of them were fresh wounds. 'They take OPM to suppress their sense of pain. I am sure if Old McDonald wasn't knocked out by that hit on his head, he would have still fought us.'

God El was on his knees. His control over his own hands had diminished. He felt a sense of numbness. In frustration, he looked at the sky and screamed.

A few E.I.E.I.O. guys had climbed up after hearing the shots and the shouts. Meanwhile, Gopi Manchuri had dragged Old McDonald's unconscious body near God El and sat on his six-pack abdominal muscles. He was also wearing two Helping Hands. One that he got from Mr. P.P. and the other confiscated from God El moments ago. Knudalce stood behind God El and kept his Helping Hand's palms open and arm extended.

#

Captain Berty and the other Viva la Resistance members,

along with Alice Wonderland, had reached the gate, too.

'Well, well, *hic*, What have we got here?

You're unconscious and God El in fear, *hic*.

You've found your gate,

We are fashionably late.

Ah! *hic* You've also got with you the pamphleteer.'

'I see very few. Where are the others?' Mr. P.P. asked.

'You thickhead,' Alice Wonderland said, 'Don't you know most were imprisoned. I heard that they have managed to escape Minefield.'

Items de Liver interrupted, 'I am sorry but not everyone might be alive. God El killed the ones who were injured and were unable to escape. The others might have escaped to the North-West coastal villages.'

'I think the faster we declare that God El is overthrown, the better it would be for us. Else we will have E.I.E.I.O. thickheads running around.'

'Aren't you in second chain of command after Old McDonald?' Items de Liver asked.

'Still, spreading word is not a simple task. These captured ones would be fine,' she said. She turned around and looked at the rows of E.I.E.I.O. officer's kneeling as prisoners. 'You thickheads, do you want to keep your job?'

The captured officers all nodded their heads in

affirmation. In fact, they were more worried about keeping their lives.

'Very well then; stand up, make a four groups and ride to the major cities. Effective this day forward, Captain Bertand Russles Sprouts a.k.a. Brussel Sprouts a.k.a. Captain Berty is the new king of the land.'

'What? Monarchy? Hora! I thought we were supposed to implement some form of democracy,' Mr. P.P. interrupted.

'You thickesthead,' Alice Wonderland scolded, 'We have plans for your ideas. If you want to put your speeches to good use, I reckon you visit my friend, Gall de Liver.'

Mr. P.P. had no idea how that would fall into his plans. 'Very well then, I will ride with my fellow Underground Rebels and meet him. I can't wait to discuss all these ideas with him.'

'Just you. Not your followers. I want these thickestheads to go and prepare pamphlet for distribution. We would need some of you to print the new king's speeche, sorry, limericks and publish it as a hope of a much better tomorrow. Now where is our king? Ah! There he is. Already flirting with his female subjects.'

Indeed, Captain Berty had gone straight towards Emily Bronchitis and Austrain Jane and was busy charming them with his excellent rhyming capability. He was in such a good mood

that he did not mind the interruption from the occasional '*cough*' of Emily Bronchitis.

'I would like to meet Gall de Liver, too. I have some score to settle,' Items de Liver said to Alice Wonderland, 'Where can I find him?'

'Ah! I see. Aren't you that little kid of his? Go with this frame of a man and settle your own family disputes. Like I care what you thickheads do!'

#

While the adults were busy having high profile discussions about division of labour, information transmission and restructuring of a political system, Knudalce was busy bandaging Gopi Manchuri's bruised arm. Gopi Manchuri was unusually quite.

'I don't think you should use the Helping Hand, anymore,' Knudalce said.

'I don't know how you could emit such a huge beam and still have no cuts?'

'Maybe it's because it's my own life force. And this is just my hypothesis. When you use your own life force to operate the Helping Hand, it readily flows. They say that life force can contain the will and memories even after the body has long been dead. Somewhere deep, these fragment of life forces trapped in rocks, do not want to be controlled by

someone else.'

Knudalce had finished bandaging Gopi's arm. 'Shorty, what will you do now?'

'I don't know. I have nowhere to go. You at least have your knowledge and your goal in life. I would love to go with you and explore the outer world.'

Knudalce sighed, 'Shorty, I never had a friend or brother. It will be nice to have someone. But the journey may be full of danger. It may even be worse than what we have faced so far.'

'In that case, I will get stronger. I cannot be responsible for holding you back.'

Knudalce laughed at Shorty's enthusiasm. 'Maybe then you can use the Helping Hand once in a while to save yourself or me.'

'What will we do with three of these?'

'I think we should give one back to a swanew.'

'Who? Items?'

'Nah. I have someone else in my mind. Besides, I don't even know how to open that gate.'

#

Soon, the E.I.E.I.O guys left the plateau in groups. Captain Berty along with many Viva La Resistance members tied both God El and Old McDonald and lumped them face down on

horses just like the sacks that carried their food, water and spare clothes.

The Underground Rebels sans Mr. P.P. waited for Alice Wonderland.

Mr. P.P. and Items both came to Knudalce and Shorty, who were sitting near the gate.

'Knudalce, have a safe journey,' Items de Liver shook his hand.

'Mr. K., have a safe journey, too. When you return, don't forget to drop by,' Mr. P.P. said.

'I think you won't have to smuggle people across Tartar anymore,' Knudalce laughed.

'Hora! No way! I have better things to do. I cannot stop until I have established democracy in this country.'

'Good luck with your venture,' Knudalce said.

After Alice Wonderland had finished sending most people off on their newly assigned duties, she came near Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri. 'What do you kids want to do?' she asked.

'Can you get us Soaring Chicken?' Knudalce said.

'Do you thicheads think I am running a restaurant?'

'Hora! Miss Alice, he is talking about the old swanew,' Mr. P.P. interrupted the conversation just to clarify.

'I thought all the old swanews on this land were dead, well, except your father,' she looked at Items de Liver.

'I know where he stays. We can probably get him here,'
Items de Liver said.

'Very well, let's do this thing before heading for Gall
de Liver.'

'Also, please tell him that I wanted to give him a
Helping Hand,' Knudalce said. He then turned to Items de Liver
and said, 'By the way, when you meet your dad, would you ask
him to allow a couple called Zaan and Bai to open his
franchisee. They don't have enough Druks to apply yet.'

'Ah! I will need a helping hand,' she said and looked
around and noticed Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot eating
something. 'Ah! We have Hoarse Reddish here,' she said and
called out for him. 'You come with us and get that Storing
Chicken to these kids.'

'Hora! Miss, its Soaring Chicken. That old man is very
particular...'

'Shut up, you thickhead.'

#

Gopi Manchuri was wearing one of Knudalce's clothes. His
ones were dirty and had a large hole right at the chest. The
borrowed clothes were tad bit larger for him. As a result, he
was able to sweep the dust around him while he walked around.
He used his old torn clothes to fashion a sling bag so that he

could carry stuff on his shoulders. He had kept the Helping Hand, which had some rock shards stuffed in its fingertips that were pressed tight with pieces of cloth, and some extra rock shards in the bag.

Gopi Manchuri had cleaned up a space and used some branches tacked in the crevices of rocks to make up the frame structure of a shelter. Some large leaves made up the actual shade. It wouldn't hold rains but the days were quite hot and there was very less chance that it would have rained.

Knudalce had gone to the slopes to gather some fruits and berries. These things were essential if he had to travel. There was no way to predict where they could get their next source of food. Knudalce was sad that Gopi Manchuri did not get to know who his father was. Neither the rebels, nor the Viva la Resistance, nor the E.I.E.I.O guys could say anything. He wondered if that made Gopi Manchuri sad. Then again, not everything in life has a closure.

It was two more days before the hoofs of horses were heard. Just when Mr. Sun was about to bid goodbye, Soaring Chicken arrived as a pillion rider on Hoarse Reddish's horse. Mrs. B. Troot had also accompanied them on another horse.

'So Kids, now what? I was pretty much resting.'

'Sir, do you want to get out of Toothache? I can open the portal for you,' Knudalce said and gave God El's helping hand

to Soaring Chicken. Soaring Chicken turned the glove, put it on his hand and stretched his fingers.

'Haha! Is that why you battery called me? I thought you called me because you couldn't figure out how to open the portal.'

'That is true. You can teach me and I can open it for you. Also, I need someone to teach me swanewship, too.'

'Kid, I am the last person who can teach you that. But if you want to, look out for a person in Fireball Swamp who can communicate with you without opening his mouth,' Soaring Chicken said with a stern face.

'But that sounds strange. Where can I even find that place?'

'Why aren't you searching for Umami? That's still all part of a myth. Fireball Swamp is a real place in the Outer World. Finding that should be very easy. That is assuming you remain alive,' Soaring Chicken said and proceeded to laugh for about thirty seconds non-stop.

Knudalce did not pay attention to the laughter. He said, 'When I reach there - and I will - how will I find him?'

'Not him but her. You don't find her. She finds people who interest her.'

'Very well, but sir why wouldn't you want to go with us?'

'That's because I am too old to travel. I have no job but

to wait for death. I might as well do it in Toothache. I can show you how to open the portal. In fact, let me open the portal for you. Consider that as my parting gift.'

'But that will reduce your life force,' Knudalce protested.

'Isn't it better that I use my remaining life force for someone's good rather than allow it to dissipate until nothing is left in me and I die?' He looked at Knudalce and noticed the frown. 'Battery! Don't worry. I will not die. Here let me show you. But first, put on your Helping Hands.'

Knudalce put on his backpack and wore the Helping Hand in his possession. Gopi Manchuri did the same. His fingers were small as compared to the finger cavities of the glove. The cloth pieces of the stuffing touched his own fingertips and made it a nice fit for his small palm. Not that it was needed at all, for all Helping Hands fit well inside no matter how small or big ones hand is.

Soaring Chicken made a fist, pointed it to the gate and slowly opened his palms. A soaring piece of music approached the crescendo. Soaring Chicken had a sudden thought and let loose his palms.

'Stop,' he instructed the four violinists. He looked at Knudalce and said, 'Battery my memory. I almost forgot to give you this.' Soaring Chicken reached for his pocket and gave

Knudalce a piece of paper.

Knudalce opened the folded sheet of paper. He could read the text but didn't know what the names were. 'What is it?' he asked.

'That's the recipe to make the fish attracting ointment.' Soaring Chicken said. Knudalce neatly folded the paper back and placed it inside his bag.

Soaring Chicken made a fist, pointed it to the gate and slowly opened his palms once more. The violin quartet restarted the soaring piece of music and approached the crescendo once more. A thin bluish translucent film appeared inside the stone frame of gate like a soap bubble. It was too faint to notice. The more Soaring Chicken opened his hand to expose the palm, the clearer the bluish, soapy film became and it became apparent that there was a bright wavy connection established between his palm and the film, essentially pulling the film slightly towards him like a rubber membrane.

'If I run through this I will reach the sibling gate to which this portal opens. It is hard for me to keep it open for long. Battery, now run.'

Knudalce and Gopi manchuri dashed towards the opened portal.

'Once you are on the other side, blast a beam.'

'What?' Knudalce exclaimed.

'Also, trust the author.'

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri could not hear the last sentence. They were already through the portal. Soaring Chicken slowly closed his fist as the film disappeared.

'Let's go,' he said to Hoarse Reddish and B. Troot in a calm, sombre tone, 'I don't think I will last another five years.'

#

Knudalce and Gopi Manchuri were falling from the sky. Well, apparently that was the case. The portal was at the mouth of a cave, situated underneath a rocky overhang of what appeared to be a nearly vertical wall of a mountain. The mouth was angled downward. As a result our hero and his side dish were plummeting straight to the ground, which at that point was at least thirty-two seconds away under standard gravitational acceleration, the density variation of air through height and the body profile of the two falling kids.

'I am going to dieeeeeee,' Gopi Manchuri screamed.

'Cliffhanger my foot,' Knudalce said, 'There not even a cliff to hang on to.'

CHAPTER TEN

10 Extras

The leader of the Kishimen slept with his wife and one month old baby. There was a knock on the door. The wife, who went by the name Taglia Telle, got up. and while rubbing her eyes, proceeded to open the door. She had been getting very less sleep. The baby, whom they had named Knudalce, kept her awake.

She opened the door and was surprised. It was her own elder son standing. Ten years ago, he had left his home to learn about all the swanewship while travelling around the world. These ten years had changed him.

Taglia Telle wanted to hug her son but Pasta Ferry stepped back.

'Mother, I have learnt one thing,' he said, 'If I have to find the Golden Nectar and become immortal, I need more

lifespan than what I have to even start with.'

'What are you saying?' she said, 'Come in. Rest. We can talk about this later.'

'Mother, you are a swanew. And one of the most knowledgeable one. You are the second most knowledgeable swanew I have seen after Father. You are even better than Thukpa. Or the one who was.' Pasta Ferry's eyes gleamed even in the darkness. It was a cold glow that even froze a mother's heart.

'Tell me you didn't do anything.' Even before Pasta Ferry spoke of anything, Taglia Telle's heart knew that the person who had returned home after ten years was a dangerous man. He had not even come seeking for the home he had left. Pasta Ferry, the boy genius, who had learnt every ancient scripture and could make the perfect potions, hailed as the next successor of the Kishimen leadership, had thrown everything away.

'I don't know how many hours or days or years Thukpa has,' Pasta Ferry said, 'I took away his life force.'

Taglia Telle gasped. She was horrified. 'Don't tell me you are using the forbidden rituals?'

The commotion had woken baby Knudalce. He started crying really loud. This had woken up U-Don Ferry, too. He saw that his wife wasn't in the bed. He picked up baby Knudalce in his

arms and rocked him gently in order to pacify his wailing.

'Taglia, what are you doing?' U-Don Ferry could barely complete his sentence. He saw his elder son, with his outstretched palms touching the forehead of his kneeling wife, draining the life force out of her. His presence had caused Pasta Ferry to startle. Yet, he did not remove his palm from her forehead.

'Pasta, what are you doing to your mother?' U-Don screamed.

'Sorry father, I cannot leave my job almost done like I did with Thukpa,' Pasta Ferry said. He unsheathed his sword with his left hand and pointed it at U-Don Ferry in order to keep him away.

U-Don Ferry couldn't do anything. His hands were occupied rocking baby Knudalce. He bent slightly to place his baby on the floor but was interrupted by his other son.

'Don't move. I will throw this on that kid. You wouldn't want your own son to be killed.'

'Pasta, he is not just my son but also your brother,' U-Don said.

Pasta Ferry removed his palm from Taglia's forehead. Her lifeless body dropped sideways. 'Do you think a person who has just committed matricide will be considerate towards his brother?'

Pasta Ferry turned towards his father holding a crying Knudalce. 'Knudalce, that's what my mom told me. Unlike you, his entire life force is still inside him. I can even stab you to death and drain all his life force.' U-Don Ferry was shocked. He did not expect his own blood to be this cold.

Pasta Ferry did not waste another second. He ran towards U-Don Ferry and stabbed him in his stomach. U-Don Ferry keeled down while still holding his baby son. He lifted the cloth on Knudalce's belly and placed his hand on Knudalce's bare skin. A flash of blue light between U-Don Ferry's palm and Knudalce's belly blinded Pasta Ferry momentarily. Pasta Ferry grabbed Knudalce and tried to pull him out of U-Don Ferry's grip.

A bolt of lightning hit Pasta Ferry. Pasta Ferry was thrown against the wall. Pasta Ferry sat and wiped the blood that was trickling from his forehead and licked it off his fingers. He saw Thukpa, the third head of Kishimen, standing at the doorway. He was wearing one of those Helping Hands. Pasta Ferry gave a faint chuckle at the old man.

'I should have drained every bit of life force out of you,' Pasta Ferry said, 'I am stronger than you. You wouldn't last another minute.'

Thukpa did not wait for Pasta Ferry to finish his sentence. He blasted another lightning bolt at him and rushed

towards baby Knudalce. U-Don Ferry's lifeless body protected him. Knudalce's clothes were drenched in his father's blood. Rigor Mortis had not set in. Thukpa pulled the baby out. While Pasta Ferry lay against the wall, bleeding from his forehead and breathing heavily.

Thukpa slammed the door shut and bolted it from the outside. He knew very well it was just a temporary obstacle. While he walked away with the kid, he could hear Pasta Ferry scream, 'One day, I will find that boy and absorb his life.'

Little did he know that one day the boy will venture on a journey to find the very person who wanted to kill him.

#

When Thukpa stepped on Bacterium Islands, he knew that travelling the seas, scaling the mountains and opening multiple portals on the way caused him to spend quite a lot of his life force. He did not know how long he would live. Ten more years perhaps. This was the place where he had grown up as a child. He was returning after a century.

At least he knew that Knudalce would grow up to fend for himself by the time he died. Maybe then he will tell how a man called Pasta Ferry was in search of Golden Nectar, the immortality drug. In the process, he was destroying everything in this world. It was better that he stayed inside Bacterium.

A threat looming around the world would surely keep him away from that world.

How wrong he was!

He decided not to tell Knudalce who he really was. It would hurt him when he knows that his own brother had killed his family.

#

God El did not like the man who headed E.I.E.I.O. Captain Bertrand Russell Sprouts, or B. Russell Sprouts as his underlings called him, was a man of principle. He had so much more control over the military that sometimes God El felt as if he was just a proxy Wisdom Teeth.

B. Russell Sprouts did not think the same way as God El. To him, whatever he did was duty. To him, that duty must be performed with the highest integrity. To him, that duty preceded his family commitments. That one time when the Root Canal was flooded, it was his bravery that managed to rescue so many people, or that time when a disease killed all the goats, he managed to find someone who could help people get more milk out of the few goats that survived.

To God El these acts of altruism were not something that he appreciated because in the process, it wasn't God El, but B. Russell Sprouts who became the face of goodwill for this country. In fact, it had been very difficult for him to raise

the taxes of the land or open up other avenues which would help him in accumulating some more of public wealth in his treasury. B. Russell Sprouts had no idea how difficult it had become to run the country and fund his lavish collection of mounted fish heads.

God El also hated the fact the B. Russell Sprouts was a celebrated poet and his own couplets weren't even half as good as his.

God El's bodyguard and escort, another officer from E.I.E.I.O, Old McDonald was more jealous of B. Russell Sprouts. He hated the fact that it was impossible for him to become the supreme leader of E.I.E.I.O. However, overturning a popular face wasn't that easy in the first place. Both God El and Old McDonald sucked their thumbs while Bertrand Russell Sprouts went around doing random acts of altruism.

One not so fine day, God El found himself with a severe case of stomachache. Cod Lever Oyl, the royal swanew was summoned. Cod Lever Oyl had encountered many such cases before. God El's love for junk food knew no bounds and Cod Lever Oyl knew that what he was experiencing was a direct consequence of that love.

Cod Lever Oyl had an underling called Gall de Liver. He had a soft corner for that guy because his own middle name and the young chap's last name were homonyms. At times he got

angry because Gall de Liver had a far greater accuracy in diagnosing people's problems. He wanted to kick him out of apprenticeship but sadly that soft corner kind of prevented him from doing so. When they were both summoned by God El, Gall de Liver suggested something which was quickly rejected by Cod Lever Oyl. This was not because Gall de Liver was wrong but because he did not want to take a chance where his junior would turn out to be more right than him. It eventually turned out in Gall de Liver's favour. We shall never know if Gall de Liver's diagnosis was correct or not but God El eventually knew that Cod Lever Oyl was wrong when no matter what, his stomach ailment pushed him towards the brink of death.

#

Pasta Ferry arrived as an omen to Toothache. He heard that God El, The Wisdom Tooth of Toothache was in need of a good swanew. He was also warned that the last royal swanew, Cod Lever Oyl was fed to a mountain lion. He was willing to take a risk. He had a solid mitigation placed. With the amount of life force he had fed himself, it would be a trivial task to kill even a whale.

Pasta Ferry requested an audience with God El, which he was granted. God El was more than happy to invite another swanew. At best, he would get healthier. At worst, a mountain lion in his kingdom would get some quality protein in his

diet.

Pasta Ferry had a long look. He knew what he had to do. The underling of the deceased royal swanew, Gall de Liver, was a very receptive and intelligent person. At best he could manipulate God El and this character. His vested interest was in getting God El to act as a barrier. He knew that any swanew that could threaten his goal would have to be trained by the only surviving Kishimen, Thukpa. Forcing Toothache into a swanew ban would buy him a lot of time. He also made a not of something. Once he exits Toothache, he would destroy the hill that led up to the portal in the Southern Island cluster.

It was not hard for him to figure out two things pertaining to the politics of Toothache. Firstly, a man called Bertrand Russell Sprouts had more votes in popularity polls than the Wisdom Teeth himself. Secondly, there was a person, Old McDonald, the bodyguard of God El, who wanted to take over that post.

He took out some seeds and gave them to Old McDonald. He asked him to plant them. It had no relationship with the treatment he was about to melt out to God El. However, he did not want any one to know that.

'If I cure you, will you promise to kill all swanews and block your eastern border?' Pasta Ferry asked.

God El was suffering a lot. He had no problem in blocking

the eastern route. In fact, he didn't care. He was ready to kill the swanews, too, but he had no clue what would happen afterwards, 'What if I have problems later?'

'Don't worry, I will train that guy, Gall de Liver, to create something that will help you in using this,' Pasta Ferry said and gave him a Helping Hand. God El was confused. Pasta Ferry understood his confusion and clarified, 'This is a Helping Hand. You can use it as a weapon. But to do that, you will need a swanew's life force. And I will tell you how to harness the life force of swanews whom you'll kill. But first, have this.' Pasta Ferry gave God El a liquid to drink. 'This will get you up and running in a week.'

The next day God El felt slightly better. God El summoned B. Russell Sprouts and told him his plan of killing all the swanews. He outrightly refused to succumb to such a low thought process. God El, with all his power, stripped him of his post for disobedience and replaced him with Old McDonald. That was such an easy process that he thought that he could have asked him to do something impossible altogether. That way he could have replaced him much earlier.

Bertrand Russell Sprout abandoned his career as a published poet and as the head of E.I.E.I.O. and went absconding. Not even the guys at E.I.E.I.O. knew where he had gone and where he had shifted his family. Little did they know

that he had abandoned his family, too.

The swanews of the land and their swanew kids were called for a massive conference in the clock tower of Minefield. It was a feast that was supposed to be one of its kind. This was especially important for them. Because of the currents preventing them from setting sail and in the absence of a Helping Hand, they could not pass through the portal and learn stuff from the swanews who existed outside. During the banquet, while they were busy eating and drinking the best food they ever had, their wives and children were getting rounded up by Old McDonald's men. Old McDonald himself had rigged the building with explosives that Pasta Ferry had made. In one large explosion, Toothache lost all the swanews. A portion of their will and power that resided in a portion of their life force, clung to whatever stone it found and created thin bluish strips.

Pasta Ferry took different coloured fruits of the plant he had asked OldMcDonald to cultivate. The orange, pink and maroon coloured fruits had to be mixed in a particular ratio to create one of the most potent sedatives and hallucinogens. He taught Gall de Liver how to make it. The drug, which came to be known as OPM was fed to God El, who lost the sense of pain on ingesting it. This drug would eventually become a cornerstone of agrarian economic sector in the coming days.

The killing of the swanews was not in vain. The thin bluish shards made by the life force of the dead were extremely important. Pasta Ferry gave God El his own Helping Hand and showed him how to use the shards and the glove as a weapon. By doing so, he made God El the most powerful man on Toothache. God El, with his new found power, declared that all his subjects must call him The Venerable Wisdom Teeth His Holiness God El.

Pasta Ferry did not need the Helping Hand. With the amount of life force he had, he could create a rift in the portal without it.

In a month, Toothache had transformed from a badly governed, yet relatively peaceful, country to a badly governed piece of mess. The farmers rejoiced. They could visit E.I.E.I.O office and get some plants which the government promised to buy back. Also, their land taxes were wavered for the period they cultivated the crop on their land. Farmers started to call it the Discount crop.

The eastern port town of Tartar was blocked for all outsiders. One E.I.E.I.O agent was clever enough to open an inner line permit office in Tartar and use it as a proxy to sell useless stationary goods.

Pasta Ferry was happy with what he had done. If any of Thukpa or his apprentice would come here, it would be

difficult for them to cross this place.

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