**Expedition
of the Magi**

By Hans Woodman and W. C. Stuart

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to Gazi, who drove the witches away and for whom adventure is a daily thing.

EXPEDITION

COMPOSED BY HANS WOODMAN
AND W C STUART

Chapter One - Hann

Nothing. The very thought is something, for if you can comprehend it, it isn’t it at all. Nothing is beyond darkness, because darkness is not only something, it is an entire world of imagination to a thing that does not exist.

Something. Something so deep and inconceivable. A single speck of feeling in the vacuous abyss of nothing.

"Then there it was - a particle of thought, there to ruin my perfect abyss. It was then that I realized the world of thought had already infected me. In trying to fix my wound, I had made it worse. In analyzing my world, it had slipped away from me forever."

“It was pure torture. If only I could go back until before I started this endless voyage, I thought, become the victim again, unaware of anything. I had neither thought nor feeling in my antipresent sleep. I didn't realize that I existed. For me, there was only a silenced and forgotten reality.

“But deep down somewhere an unexplained or unconceived sensation grew and grew. I began to know more and more that I existed. I did not think of it consciously, but somewhere I knew of my existence. Such is the responsibility of existence. As the feeling grew inside I screamed in agony. It stopped for a moment, quavering like the final note in a grand glissando, then it subsided.

“I threw myself back into a dreamless sleep and became a nothing again, slowly drowning my soul in the perfect void. Again it drifted into my mind, making me more and more real. I slowly ascended into conscious thought, and something slowly melted the darkness and I experienced a sense I had never imagined possible. A dim green light grew brighter and brighter, calming my pain. A plain, full of life. A spirit, so peaceful and calm. This place was so green and so clean of all evil. It was warm and quiet.”

It made him feel so free, but somehow he was still trapped. Soon the glorious vision faded, leaving him with nothing. The blackness soon turned cold and lifeless again.

From a world of silence and solitude. From the nothing that he had always known. Now it was no longer. Suddenly Hann was again sensing that sense, this time looking into a new place. This place was surely another vision, and after it had been had, he found himself looking into the eyes of two old men.

Hann could see now through the wilderness of his own energy, and he saw and felt, and heard the world around him.

“You are alive and awake. I am Morgen. I am your friend.”

All that day Hann spent lying on the floor and looking up at the ceiling. He could hear noises around him, but even though he was now having the first inklings of curiosity about them, he was too weak to investigate them.

After hours of lying there, gathering his senses and strengths, he went to investigate those sounds. There, he found another like him, crawling on the floor, just as he was. “Hi, my name is Hann.” he said to the thing, but it didn’t answer.

“What are you?” Again, no answer.

Slowly, the thing studied him as he said words, looking puzzled and later, panicked. Then it began to cry.

Chapter Two - Dro

All feelings and experiences indistinguishable from non-feelings and non-experience. This is all I knew. How could I have guessed at my heritage? If only I had known how remarkable it was that I should be in the place I was at that moment, I would have awakened immediately to joy and understanding beyond even that to which I am now initiate. However, without basis of comparison to sharpen the passionless sedimentary of my intellect, my awakening was painful, slow, and mostly unworthy of comment. As it stands:

I knew somewhere, somehow, on some day, that I was knowing something, and that something that I was knowing was happening in some place, and at some time, and by some means, though where, and when, and by what means were not questions I had the breadth of experience to ask, or if I did ask them, it made no difference because I did not have the breadth of experience to know whether I was asking a question at all.

Different parts were missing at different times. Some parts were missing twice and some once. It was very difficult to know or understand anything at first. Eventually, through a series of discoveries and revelations that were nothing short of miraculous, each one, I discovered stone - it was the only thing I had ever touched, and I was touching it then - on my back, it was on my back - then there were blue skies and green fields, blue on white on green on white on brown, earthy black-brown that stood up from the harsh grey earth with a passion and vibrancy befitting the source of life - a wan howl, the cipher, the glorious figure-head, and infinities beyond! Then all was stone again, stone, and the world was stone and that which was not stone. I was lying on the stone. Surely this would not do. What was this that was not stone? I must find its source and substance. No, I exceed myself. I insert into my thoughts those speculations which could not have been; I was barely more than nothing, but this stone was definitely there, in my mind, in this world, and it intrigued me. If nothing else is believed about me, let it be known that that stone was real, and the fact that it was real, that there was such a thing as real, and that I was somewhere, primarily somewhere in time and in place, that fact intrigued me.

Chapter Three - Day One

Though his surroundings were difficult at first to discover, Dro was so intrigued by this concept that he crawled over what felt like jagged glass to his unaccustomed body and noted that there was stone not only in the one direction, but in four others as well, leaving only the direction in which he could not crawl. He moved slowly about in the space between these stones, gingerly touching and prodding, careful to avoid brushing his hands against the rough walls, which hurt severely.

Finally, he decided he had figured out the system. The world had four edges, beyond which there was nothing. There was a fifth and sixth edge, too - the edge upon which he crawled, and the edge which extended to infinity. In the very center, upon which he had been laying when the thought entered his mind, was a large stone with a flattened top.

What to make of this, Dro was not sure. Words began to enter his mind, other words which he had not heard before. “Earth”. “Space”. “Sky”. Surely that central rock was “the Earth.” What wasn’t the Earth most surely was “the Space.” That place where he could not crawl, he dubbed “the Sky.” Earth, Space, Sky, and him. Feeling content that he had discovered this, he returned to the Earth to lie down again.

Though all was known to him, his thoughts did not disappear as he’d anticipated they would. After days of laying and crawling, his nerves were accustomed to the feeling of the stone floor and walls. He knew that his own body felt different than the stony surfaces of the walls. His teeth and shins were as hard as the stone, the balls of his feet were not, they were soft, and screamed with pain whenever they made contact with a sharp, loose pebble. What any of this meant, he could not say. He did not even wonder it.

One day while feeling around on one of the walls he discovered a large hole. Fearing this new path, he avoided it for many hours, knowing that beyond it was the edge of the Space and the unknown. It may have been another week before he decided to crawl through it. He pushed around and felt the walls, careful to stay near them for fear he may lose his way forever. Noticing the differences in texture in these new walls, he made his way gingerly outward, sliding his hands along the walls to steady himself as he made a few steps on two legs.

Suddenly, his hand slipped! He slid forward and down, pushing down with his feet with his whole might, until he came to rest on the floor again. His hand had fallen inside another hole! Tentatively he stepped in. These walls, too, felt unfamiliar. He felt his way around and discovered that these four new walls made up what felt like the Space, and, feeling tired, he made his way to where he thought the Earth should be. Sure enough, there was a raised rock here, and as his hand groped its flat surface, he touched something that was not rock. It was something like him!

Chapter Four - Day Ten

Immediately after Dro made this discovery, he felt himself being lifted off the ground by another thing like him! Though he wriggled around, trying to figure out what was going on, this thing was very strong, and carried him away, marching on swift feet, shaking Dro with every step.

When Dro was finally deposited, he was far, far away from the Earth and the Space. underneath him was a substance he had not felt before, it was not anything to which he was accustomed, and it was much, much softer than the stone to which he was used. Feeling it made him very upset, and he scrambled immediately as far as the ends of the Space had ever taken him, but there were no walls.

These same two hands that had held him before now held his hands, and squeezed them. This action was strangely calming to Dro, and so he sat up, and was about to go to sleep when something changed. He could not feel any change, it was as though he sensed it in another way. Soon the hands had left his and were pulling at his face. He couldn’t figure out what it was the hands were doing, and it began to frighten him again. Slowly, the hands went to grip his wrists, and he felt his wrists being pulled toward something. Then, his hands were touching a face, and though Dro wasn’t sure, he thought it was the face of the hands. He felt his fingers touch one part of the face, and the face made this motion over and over again, both up and down at the same time, then in reverse. Then his hands were being pushed toward his own face. His fingers were pressed against his face in the same way, and he tried to make the same motion the other face had made.

Three times he tried and failed, but on the fourth time, his face made the correct motions, and suddenly there was a definite something in front of him, but not a thing he could feel. It moved, and one of the hands squeezed his left hand, then pulled back. It moved the other way, and one of the hands squeezed the right. In and out this sense teased, up, down, until Dro learned to follow it with his face.

After some time, he learned that tiny motions with some muscles which he had not used before could do the same as his head had done, but at this point he was very tired and wanted only to sleep. The hands kept rousing him to wakefulness, but then, allowed him to curl up and sleep on this new, softer ground.

After Dro had fallen asleep, he began to see. Images of sunlight and wide plains and colors and grass, the sounds of the forest, things he had never touched, smells and senses which he did not understand. Still, they were all there, and he felt full of joy, a fulfilling emotion he had never before felt.

He ran and played, things he had not done, but instantly understood, and then, looking behind him, he saw a vast desert of gray dust, sand and ash. In its center stood a great stone, larger than any mountain and completely without color. To see it made Dro strangely happier, though he could not understand why.

The hands were shaking him now. He rolled to his side and opened his eyes - and saw standing in the candlelight a man in an orange robe. Around him were no grassy plains, no deserts or forests or even a blue sky - around him was an expanse of gray stone - he was in a cave, a cave that (and one glance down one of the corridors told Dro this) had no end.

Chapter Five - Day Eleven

This human’s new sense made Dro jealous at first, but he was determined to not be left out of it, and began to try and figure out what it was this new human was doing. He held out his hands, and the human placed them on its neck. Then it opened its mouth and moved it around again, and Dro felt movement in his throat unlike any he’d ever felt. This movement was so unnatural that he jerked his hands away after a few seconds, and became upset.

The new human grinned excitedly and pushed Dro’s hands up to his own throat. Dro felt that same vibration in his throat, and realized that he had done it even without knowing what he had done. Inwardly he searched, every time he felt that vibration, he tried to sense some new change. It took a few minutes, but he began to sense something new, and knew that he’d caught on to something important. He moved his mouth, and though it did not yet fit together, he became very excited indeed. The two men in orange robes came running, and this time he understood why - they sensed him without seeing him, and without feeling him.

“I can talk!” came to his lips as easily as he had first seen the candle. Instantly he remembered words from his dream, a whole world of things he knew about without knowing how he knew them. There was excitement, then pain in his ears as he heard and understood his own words.

“You can?” came a voice different from his. It was the voice of his own friend, in the orange robe.

“He can! I have taught him, Morgen!” This from the very thin one.

“Amazing! Most peculiar.” this one from the friend of the other human. He pointed gravely to himself, and spoke his name. “Morgen.”

Then, the friend of Dro did the same. “Trevanian.”

Then, the thin human. “Hann.”

Finally, Dro pointed to himself and spoke his own name, “Dro.”

Dro went off alone in the room full of dirt and practiced his new sense. It still felt wrong to do it, unnatural. He practiced and practiced, saying his name over and over again, until he felt he had got it quite right. Then, he started to notice other sounds, sounds much softer than the sound of feet along the dirt or the sound of breathing. Faint cries, like the sound of his own, echoed through the halls from somewhere far above. Also, there were other, even fainter sounds.

Delighted at having discovered these sounds, he listened carefully and decided that there were two types of these faintest sounds, some very high and some very low. These not even the friends could hear, who were called the Magi. They seemed the very sounds of existence, though how Dro knew their purpose he knew not, and the Magi enthusiastically told him that he was hearing the low sounds of the motions of planets and stars, and the high sounds of the movement of the fabric of time.

“It is now time,” said Morgen as he sat down Dro and Hann upon the dirt, “to teach you the laws of this place. You must never disobey a law, or else you will be severely punished. These laws are for your protection, because there are bad people around that will try and hurt you if you are unsafe.”

They both agreed with all their hearts to obey the rules, and the Magi continued. “First, wear these. This clothing is the only type allowed here in the caves.” to Dro and Hann he threw robes of sackcloth, which they put on as he had asked.

“Here are your candles.” Their friends handed them each a candle. “They are very special, and you must show them to nobody, unless you know they can be trusted. Here is how you light them.” Morgen touched the end of another candle with his finger, and light sprang forth from them, small at first, but then growing taller.

“Here are your paintbrushes.” Trevanian handed them both a paintbrush, which they stored in one of their many pockets under their robes. “You will use these for writing, when you have paint to do so. You must never let anyone see you when you are writing! It is illegal here.”

After that, they let this information sink in for a few minutes, and, in fact, almost let them fall asleep before they started again.

“Your bodies, they will give you information from your senses. Some of these will be painful. When you feel this pain, know this: your body is always striving for a sense of balance. When that which is around you is affected, it also affects the way you feel inside. This place is dark, which is why you want to sleep.”

“Some parts of your body will not get hurt easily. Your legs, for example, may be scraped and bruised, but they won’t break easily.

“Other parts of your body, though, will get hurt far more easily. Avoid touching or putting anything in your eyes, mouth, and ears. Don’t put the rocks in your mouth! You can break your teeth, and that can never be repaired. Your eyes, too. If your eyes hurt, close them! You may lose your ability to see forever if you don’t. Let nothing get in them! Your natural reaction will be to blink and tear up. That is good.”

“Pain,” Trevanian started right up where Morgen left off, “is the body’s way of telling you you’re hurting it, but it must often be endured, too. First, try and make the pain stop. Stop whatever you were doing to put yourself in that pain. If you cannot succeed without that pain, however, then put your body willfully through it. Sometimes pain can be a good thing. Trust in your instincts as judgment. Your instincts will return to you with time.

“These are only the laws of the body. Other laws there are, too. These laws even we must obey, and it is not evil humans in this cave against whom these laws provide safety, but it is from the nature of our own selves that we must be kept.”

“The elegant thought is the most correct thought. It is a law that we choose a simple beauty over the complexities of the esoteric mind. In complexities we create only confusion, and confusion is the greatest ally that evil has against us.

Once more it was Morgen’s time to speak. “When a thing has happened, no matter how mundane or well or ill this occurence is or seems to be, it has happened to us for a purpose. It is the responsibility of each one of us to examine that purpose, to appreciate our humanity in action, and then to take into ourselves some part of that thing. As we experience more, we will collect into ourselves these events, and we will see that all were triumphs, and by never forgetting where we have been, we can go where none have yet gone.

“There are many things we would tell you concerning these other laws, but already we’ve given you a lot to think about, a lot to swallow. For now this will have to do. Here, we’ll let you rest and think about it for a while, then we’ll tell you again.”

They slept some, and later that day the Magi woke them up and told them again, using the same words, the rules they had been told before. Then the Magi let them sleep again. Then they woke them early the next day, and told them a third time. Then they told them that their existence here was no more complicated than following those rules and one’s instincts. Then they left them alone.

Chapter Six - Day Thirteen

All that day Hann spent practicing the rules the Magi had taught him and trying to stand. Each time he stood free of the walls, he would collapse in a crumpled heap. The Magi had told him before they left today that he reminded them of a very young child, trying and failing to take its first steps. Hann did not stop trying, though. He spent hours gathering his strength, then a few minutes standing, wobbling about, and finally crashing to the floor. Seeing that this wasn’t getting him anywhere, Hann used the wall as balance and began to walk along it for support. Instead of stopping at the cave’s edge, he continued down a dark hallway and out of Dro’s sight.

In the caves, Hann saw more dark hallways and thousands, even tens of thousands of rooms such as the one in which he woke, (or, according to the terminology of Dro, Earths and Spaces) each one with a human being standing perfectly still atop that pedestal.

Further away now from the caves of black dirt than he had ever been, Hann saw things that he thought weren’t even possible. A single cave, unsmoothed and seemingly newer than the ones in which they usually walked, had a beautiful assortment of stalactites and stalagmites, in strange and wondrous shapes fit to stir one’s imagination. Wishing to light his candle to better see the wonder, but knowing the Magi’s caution, he turned around and headed back, hoping that he would be able to show it to Dro, and yet knowing he wouldn’t ever find it again.

“Hi Dro. You’ll never believe what I saw!”, Hann was waving enthusiastically from the other end of the room with black dirt.

“Hi Hann. Where were you? You went further than I could see.”

“I saw the most wonderful place... aren’t you going to ask me about it?”

“What did it sound like?”

“It didn’t really have a sound to it. But it looked so weird, it had big columns of rock hanging from the ceiling and other piles of rock sticking up from the floor. The place was full of magic.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t understand.”

“It was like a place I saw in a dream once...”

“With blue skies and green fields?”

“What?”

Dro told him all about the dream he had once had, about everything he had heard and seen. When he had finished, Hann looked at him gravely.

“Then you, too, have inspired me to make this decision.”

“What decision is that?”

“I’m going to find these places, wherever they are. I’m going to look for beautiful things and new worlds, though they may be far away from here. I know that these caves aren’t everything.”

“That’s really weird, Hann.”

“That’s not all, you’re going to come with me.”

“What?”

“Don’t you see? You have to find your blue skies and green fields.”

“That was only a dream. How do you know that your dreams are real?”

“I guess I just know. How come you don’t know?”

“I don’t know, it’s just a dream. Aren’t we happy enough where we are?”

“Happy enough? How will we know if we’re happy if we just sit here? Can you definitely say that what you experience now is happiness, if you’ve never experienced anything else?”

“When I woke up, I was in pain. Existence hurts. Even if we found those bright lights and loud sounds, it would hurt so much we couldn’t enjoy it.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No, but that’s exactly my point...”

“Was your dream painful?”

“Of course not.”

“Then don’t you want to go out there, feel that pain at first, but then have a whole new world to explore and enjoy?”

“It was only a dream!”

“Can I tell you about a dream I had?”

“Sure.”

“Right before I ascended to consciousness, I saw tons of life. There was small things and large things, and they were all in perfect harmony.”

“Like a forest.”

“Forest. That’s a great word for it. Anyway, above me I saw a bright green light. When I opened my eyes, that spot was where the candle burned. But I couldn’t stay awake, and so I fell asleep again. Again, I saw this place, only this time the green light was even brighter. I see a cave made by man, built underneath a great tree, and the green light was like the sun shining through the leaves.

“I went inside that man-made cave, I was frightened to go in, but I did it anyway. Inside I saw an old woman, who sat me down and told me many things. She told me that worlds go on forever, and that this place is only one among millions. She also told me that I could find any of these worlds I wished, if only I went against the current that led me to darkness. She told me that I had to stand up always for that which I believed, and that if I felt pain, that pain would heal me. She told me the most wonderful stories, Dro, and I’m sure if you could only hear the things she told me, you would see, too, why I have to go.

“It was then, Dro, that I knew I had found my true world, and that that place, with your blue skies and green fields and my forests, was where we could be happy - not this dark cave.”

“This cave, quiet as death.”

“So you see what I’m saying?”

“Your words ring true to me.”

“We used to live there, I think. And we’ve just forgotten.”

“How can that be? I have only been in this cave.”

“I think that long ago, we lived not in this cave, but that we lived in these places of which we dream. We’ve simply forgotten. I’d do anything to see that place again, I’d do anything that was necessary to get back. I want you to come with me, because you’re the only other person I know, and I think you were there with me, once.”

“Maybe, for sure. I think I will come with you. You insight has been wonderful, and I’m glad to have met you. But I don’t understand - if you want to get out so badly, why convince me to come with you? Why not go and not waste any more time?”

“Simple. It’s what I ought to have done, in my logic.”

“Then we should bring one other.”

“Another? But I thought that...”

“When I first left the Space, I felt another that was like us, another human. It was before I could see, but I can find my way back. I want to bring him with us, too.”

“Hmm... let me think about it.” Hann left for a while, and Dro thought to himself of the many great things he’d heard and seen in his dream, and of the wonderful emotions he had. After a short time Hann returned. “I think it’s the right thing to do. We should gather our strength for the journey.” And so they sat and pondered and gathered their strength, and the next day ventured into the darkness in the direction Dro had come.

Chapter Seven - Day Fourteen

“I think it’s right over here, Hann.”

“Okay, lead the way.”

“The walls looked darker and bleaker than ever before, the ceilings smoother and less jagged than the place of the Magi. Around them was an organized sea of rooms, each eighteen feet wide and eighteen feet deep and nine feet tall. Each one had a pedestal in the middle upon which stood a human - at least, it looked almost like a human, though it seemed faceless and soulless. Everything in these parts was silent as stone and monochromatic, and it carried with it the same smooth, hard texture.

The room in which Dro was once sleeping was slightly different. The floor was more rugged, with loose stones scattered about and walls that had a gravelly texture. The room in which Dro had spent more than three quarters of his life. It looked intensely smaller than Dro remembered it, and though it was rather upsetting to see it, he knew that when he’d found it, the other human would be nearby.

Around the corner they turned, Dro feeling the walls and trying to remember the way. His hands raked across the smoother surfaces and made a dry rubbing sound, like a snake slithering along grass. Finally he made his way to where his hand slipped - it almost did so again, he was paying so little attention to his other senses. Inside, standing straight and still as the semihuman things that stretched for miles in these underground rooms, was a human being.

Excitedly, he and Hann ran up to it, shaking it and calling its name. To their surprise, the human made no movement. Dro grabbed the human’s hands and squeezed them tightly, but there was still no sign of life. Hann decided that in order to wake him, they would need his candle, and so he went to retrieve it while Dro stayed at the new human’s side.

Upon Hann’s return, he and Dro called out do the new human, waving the lit candle in front of his face and continuing to try and reach him through sound. Dro shook him again, and through the three senses they tried again and again to reach him, until they were exhausted and sat at his side. Once, Dro thought he saw the new human twitch, but he wasn’t sure. After a while, the two decided to bring him back into the cave where there was dirt, and when they set him down, they both saw him twitch ever so slightly. The Magi returned, and the two greeted them excitedly.

“Look, we woke up another human!” said Hann.

“Yes, we saw him twitch a little.” said Dro with a smile.

“Did you now.” Trevanian looked puzzled. But after a few minutes and a shout or two, this new human flinched - and the Magi were genuinely shocked. So slowly, they gripped his hands and got him to squeeze back, then they pulled him to a sitting position and began the slow work of making his limbs function.

“There’s a problem with this one, Hann.” Morgen looked grim.

“What is it, my friend?”

“He doesn’t want to wake up. He doesn’t understand that there’s an outside world. He can’t make sense of what’s out here, and so he can’t accept the truth.

“You see, you two were very special because the truth came to you naturally. When we have to step in and try and make someone else realize the truth, it usually doesn’t work. I’m sorry, but we can leave him here and see if he makes any more progress, but even if we get him to move, I think he’ll just want to go back to his cell and sleep.”

“But, he’s like us! He has to want to come with us!”

“Perhaps. But he will have more trouble.”

For some days they waited, Hann delaying his journey in the hope that the being would soon wake and join them. At the end of a week when he had done little more than roll over once in a while, Morgen was about to tell Hann to let him be, when the human raised its head and said “Who are you?”

Those three little words caused everyone in the room to fall silent. Trevanian offered the first words: “We are your friends. You are awake. You can feel and hear.”

“I think my name is Amid, but...” his voice faded off into what sounded like a yawn, but it didn’t show on his face.

“Stick with it, then. We’ll call you Amid from now on.”

They taught him little of the laws, much less than they had taught Hann and Dro. Somehow they knew beforehand what occurred when Hann told him of his glorious vision and the sights of the outside world. He had never quite learned how to see, though he could sense it and follow around the light of a candle. Upon hearing Hann’s invitation to come with them, he grunted a little, pushed the hood of his cloak up over his head, and crawled his way out of the cave, telling them he was never going to come back.

Though Hann was disappointed, the Magi told him not to worry. “Everyone has their time,” the soothed. “His will come soon enough, and when that day comes, his path will cross yours.”

Not soon afterward, Hann decided it was time for then to go, and so he said farewell to the Magi and he and Dro ventured off in the direction they pointed him. For two days they walked in complete silence, saying very little to each other and instead staring at the endless hallways and the thousands of Earths and Spaces, each one occupied, no doubt, with some unfeeling human or semihuman.

Diverting some from the direction in which they’d been sent, Hann went exploring down one of these passages that was particularly dark, hoping to see someone with a sign of life in them. Dro was reluctant to follow, as his eyes were not as good, but he kept close behind as Hann peeked into rooms and shouted to any that may or may not hear.

What followed was a deep sound that only Dro could hear, and it was a frightening one, unlike any of the others he had heard. He walked toward its source, with Hann following close behind and keeping watch. what they found at its source was by far the most horrifying and yet interesting thing they had seen in their lives.

The tunnel opened into an enormous empty space, the floor disappeared into blackness and neither Hann nor Dro dared jump down it. In the distance Hann could see an endless march of tunnels opening into the wide room, each one looking like a worm with wide-open maw. Dro could make out several gray shapes, as well. In the center was a great stalactite and stalagmite that tapered severely, but met in the middle before widening again.

Hundreds of creatures seemed to be sleepwalking toward that column, others were carried by stranger creatures too dim in the darkness to see, though Hann dared not light his candle. there, near the center, the humans began to sink into the ground, and some were up to their necks, others in up to their waists, all slowly but surely sinking into the sand underneath. Upon seeing this Hann gave a small noise of surprise, but the two ran off before they could see if anyone had noticed them.

They made their way as quickly out of the corridor as possible, feeling a fear that had no logical reason for being. After their breathing slowed, the halls were every bit as quiet as they had been before, and they made their way in peace once again, this time without taking any detours.

Since they were making good enough progress and were both getting quite tired, they decided to stop for a while and discuss what they had seen. the apparition was so unnatural, however, that neither one was able to define it or even hypothesize a meaning for it.

Hann took a look around him. Every eighteen feet, without fail, was another door. As far as the eye could see in either direction, with the exception of another tunnel that branched off to the left. Dro heard the faint cries from above, and wondered if he would ever reach the mouths to which the voices were attached. He listened carefully to the motions of the planets, the slight variations in the fabric of time and space, and wondered if he would ever decipher their meaning.

Just then, another being like them came marching down the hall. Dro leapt to his feet at the sound, and soon afterward Hann turned to look, and stood up as well. They ran forward to greet him, but after they had done so they wished they hadn’t.

The first words out of his mouth made him seem as though he had learned to speak out of necessity, and hated the act. Hann later reminded himself that he probably did.

“What are you doing here?” his face was twisted into an ugly snarl. Hann noticed he was not wearing sackcloth, but stranger clothing with which he was unfamiliar. Something about his face made Hann wary of him, and subconsciously he took half a step back.

“We’re exploring the caves here. What are you doing?”

“You realize you’re not supposed to be out exploring here? You should get back inside. You should get back to sleep.”

“We were asleep. We woke up. We want to go exploring.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. That’s against the rules.”

“Not the rules we were given.”

“I’ll teach you to talk back to me!” and with a shout he raised his fists angrily and lunged toward Hann. Immediately Hann and Dro bolted with all their strength, with the frightening human close behind.

They ran, and Hann, being faster and walking more upright, quickly left Dro behind. Dro turned to see whether the man was yet gone, and yelled when he saw that he was only two feet away from the man who was so angry with them. Dro jumped back, but it was too late. The man’s fist flew, striking Dro in the jaw, knocking him backward. By some miracle Dro remained on his feet and kept running, this time much faster, until the man was quite a bit behind him.

Panting, they ducked behind a corner and tried to be as still as they could. Dro clearly heard the footsteps of the man growing louder and louder, then dimmer as he made a wrong turn. After a few seconds the footsteps stopped, and Dro wasn’t able to hear anything close by anymore. Then tap, tap, tap, the man’s footsteps started again. Quieter than mice, Dro and Hann huddled in the darkness, muscles aching, chest burning from their panicked run, Dro’s jaw now swollen and bruising.

Tap,

Tap,

Tap went the man’s shoes. Then another stop, then his voice, calling out almost cheerfully. “You don’t understand, I’m just here to help. You’ve lost your way. You’re confused. You’re looking for happiness where it cannot be found. I can lead you to the happiness you seek, if only you’ll follow me.”

The man’s voice dipped lower. “I can lead you to food. You’re very hungry, are you not?”

Puzzled, Hann and Dro realized that food had not yet occurred to them. Now, however, they felt weaker than they had ever felt, and hunger was beginning to burn in their stomachs and thirst began to itch in their mouths and throats. “I can give you food, yes, and then you may go wherever you wish.”

Twice Dro made to run to the man, but Hann held him back, keeping him quiet. Finally the man walked by their corridor, and they saw his profile in the shadows. Dro’s stomach picked the most wrong of times, and grumbled loudly.

A wide grin spread across the man’s face, and he turned directly toward the sound. His pupil had engulfed his entire right eye, and a dim, spiral-shaped scar, which they had not noticed before, glimmered on his forehead.

They ran. They ran past him and down the hall, with him in a half-tired pursuit. It was clear to them now that running and walking were things he was not fond of doing. Finally, it seemed as though he had given up. Gasping and wheezing, they sat against the walls of the halls to catch their breath and try and forget the look of the man’s face.

“So... what did that mean?” it was Dro that spoke first.

“I think that was one of the people that would hurt us severely if we disobeyed the rules.”

“Maybe. Or maybe he was just someone who was trying to help us and didn’t know how. Still, did you see how his face looked?”

“I’m trying not to remember.”

“I know. I don’t think I could ever accept help from someone who looked like that. Man, I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, me too. I wonder what it means.”

“I don’t know. But whatever it is, it isn’t going away. I told you this was going to be trouble. We really were happy where we were, and now you’ve gotten us into this mess!”

“Have some faith in me, Dro. We’ve only been out here two days. This isn’t the end of the world.”

“Well, how do you know? Maybe this feeling just gets worse and worse until we can’t go any further, and then what? Maybe that man will come back around and finish us off, did you ever think about that?!”

“Calm down, that can’t possibly be true. The Magi said that our bodies will always search for balance. I’m sure our bodies are just looking for some kind of balance, and they’ll find it further in the caves, and this pain will go away.”

“Well, we can’t stay here. That man may come after us again at any second. We’ve got to get into a more secluded spot to rest.”

“Maybe one of the cells?”

“I wouldn’t want to risk falling asleep again. Anyway, I always feel strange looking at them.”

“The rooms?”

“The humans. Isn’t it difficult for you to see them standing there, perfectly still?”

“Yes, a little. I want to go exploring, though, and find one that will listen to us.”

“I wish I saw what you see in this exploring.”

“I’m glad you’re still with me. I do wish the Magi had come with us, though.”

“Yeah, me too.” And with that they crawled off into a wide and dark side corridor to sleep.

Chapter Eight - Day Twenty four

The next time they awoke, Dro and Hann had to pass through that same hallway in which they’d encountered the rude man. They decided it would be best if he did not see them again, and when Hann spotted him, they ducked into a depression in the hallway until he was at a safe distance, then continued in the direction the Magi had pointed.

Along the way, they began to notice a change in the way the caverns were formed. The walls were no longer dark and smooth, in fact, they were often rough, and had interesting patterns in them. Dro heard the cries from above them louder now, along with strange echoes along the walls that often made him jump with their unusual formation.

Here is the cave as it looked at its deepest: no change in the look of the walls, floor, or ceiling. Endless expanses of black basalt, ground perfectly smooth, providing no directional cues. Your head will jerk down, expecting some creature to scurry past, but it doesn’t - it was only your imagination, for nothing walks these caves, silent and still as death itself. You hear a grating sound and stare wildly about you, though you can see almost nothing in the inky blackness. Nothing shows up, and soon after that you realize the grating sound was your own breath, taken in sharply due to lack of oxygen.

Now, this world was beginning to change. The walls made the air around you look brighter, a gray limestone slowly making its way into the composition of the walls, lightening them intensely.

Hann and Dro had only one other encounter with a human, and they avoided him as forcefully as they could, waiting some twenty minutes for him to pass before venturing out into the hallway again.

When change next found them, it did not take them at all by surprise. Afront of them were murmurs and cries, and Dro could hear very clearly that they were going to see many, many humans. This put both Dro and Hann on their guard, and when they came to the edge of the hallway and the opening to a great cavern, they watched carefully for any signs of people watching them, then bravely strode through.

What they saw was another famous first in their life experiences. The floor of the hallway continued for some eighty feet, though its walls fell away to encompass a giant cavern. As they emerged, they realized they were now walking on a wall. To either side of them were at least two hundred people, all of whom appeared to be awake and moving.

“Look at all of them! They’ll kill us if they see us!”

“See us? They must have already heard us, and not one of them is looking our direction. I don’t think this is a trap or a wrong turn. These people are like we were, I don’t think they can see or hear anything.”

“Then why are they moving? If they’re moving, doesn’t that mean they can sense us?”

“Well, you saw how Amid reacted. If there are many more like him, we have nothing to fear from this crowd, that’s for sure.”

Tentatively Dro came out on the ledge, with Hann close behind. They saw that at the end of the wall there were tall steps leading down to the floor of the cavern. They made their way down the steps and into the sea of people.

Just as Hann had thought, nobody appeared to notice them at all. Some were laying on the ground, looking dead or ready to sleep forever. Others looked only semihuman and wandered aimlessly about like zombies.

At ground level, all was madness. Dro and Hann tried hard not to lose each other as people tripped over one another and pushed each other about, moving in great currents that made momentum toward the center, then stopped and changed direction, all the time gaining and losing people until the group’s members had completely changed.

At first Dro and Hann moved to the right, but they were quickly caught up in a crowd of pushing people, that took them back against the wall again, then slowly drove them out and around to the back wall, where Hann saw nothing but a dead end, then around and back to where they had started. Not caring to take the loop again, they pushed their way out of the people and this time ventured right of the stairs. Not too long afterward another crowd of pushers came by, and try as they might, Dro and Hann could not avoid them.

This new crowd of pushers put them back against the wall along which they’d walked, but they went with the flow this time, to see where it would lead. Sure enough, it looped back around and drove them toward the back wall, where they spotted an iron curtain that was covering the only exit out of this place, save the way they had entered. They tried to make their way toward it, when all of a sudden another pusher crowd came from the opposite direction and carried them off again. They were brought back towards the stairs, when Hann tripped over a body laying on the ground and Dro fell down to help him. From this vantage point, they could see the paths of three pushing crowds, and to their surprise, the motion itself never changed - it just kept going round and round, as though it were on a track. With careful timing and a little planning from Dro, they made their way over to the iron curtain, where Hann sat down, and Dro joined him.

“Hann, why are we sitting down?”

“Outside this gate is what we’re looking for.”

“How do you know?”

“It just makes sense. I mean, why else would there be a gate barring our way?”

“You have a point. How do we get through the gate, though?”

“We wait until they throw someone else in, and then we push our way through and make a run for it.”

“That’s going to take a lot of strength, and I’m really hungry.”

“So am I. That’s why we have to sit and gather our strength.”

It actually took much longer than anticipated for them to open the door. Dro and Hann were tired, and so they slept there by the door in turns, each one ready to wake the other should the door open. It didn’t all through that night, and through most of the next day they waited, gathering strength and hoping that it would just open and end their anxiety. In fact, they were both becoming a little impatient when a break in the circular routine of the moving zombies made them both freeze.

Out of the crowd came one that was like them. He seemed to be actively searching them out, and he often pushed himself up above the crowd to have a look. It took him quite some time to get over to where they were sitting, and though they were both prepared to run, his kind face and young voice put them instantly at ease.

“You two look like you know something good. Hi, my name is Hev. Who are you?”

They introduced themselves, relieved to find someone that spoke, but did not try and hurt them. Hev continued. “I want to know what you know.”

“What do you mean, know what we know? We’ve learned quite a few things, and I’m not sure I’d be able to tell them all back to you just like that...”

“You guys came out of the Deep. Why do you want to go out instead of in?”

“Oh, that.” Hann looked excited, and eagerly told this new human about his dream and his desire to see new things. He told him some of what the Magi had told, though he said nothing about candles or writing. When he had finished, the new human looked eager to tell his own story, and so Hann allowed him to go ahead.

Chapter Nine - Day Twenty five

“You see, some time ago I found myself walking down a hallway, and I really wasn’t sure quite what I was doing or where I was going. I began to explore, just as you did, and I saw much of the places outside this gate. There’s a whole civilization of people just beyond this gate, and they all appear to have one thing on their minds: they feel the need to keep moving toward the darkness, into blacker and blacker places.

“There are many kinds of people there - people that seem to want to make their way further into the blackness, and many people who simply want to stay where they are for a while. There are even a few who want to move back into lighter spaces, but they never do that for very long.

“The fourth kind of people are very interesting indeed. They are like guides; they show great crowds of people the way into deeper and darker caves. They had something with them that they called ‘food.’ This food was something that smelled very sweet, and you can smell it from a long way off. However, I had the unfortunate opportunity to taste that soup, and I know now that its taste rivals the bitterness of Hell itself.”

At the mention of the word “food”, Dro and Hann both perked up, grabbing at their stomachs. When he was finished with his thought, however, both were horrified.

“So... this means my body desires something that will destroy it?”

“Sorely this pain hurts, you must understand. We are filled with hunger, and our body wants food.”

“I think that’s only what they called it. They told us that drinking it would fill us with joy. I had only a sip, but I know now its purpose - it brought me silence which I have only recently overcome, and it clouded my mind, destroyed my sense of judgment, which is how I ended up here.

“I had a dream once, that I should travel outward and not inward. I wrote down this dream on the cave walls. Though before I had tasted of the soup, I was always careful to make these actions discreet, with my mind clouded I went up to a wall of a busy cave and began painting a story I had invented, of how stupid all this was. In the story, there were people who searched for happiness, and found it by journeying away from the darkness.

“Needless to say, I was soon discovered, my paintings covered up, and I, punished. My punishment was banishment from my home, into this place. Before they put me here, though, they tried to convince me that I was wrong, and order me to apologize to my people whom I had offended. Eventually my faith was broken and I made my public confession. Then I was thrown in here forever. When I saw you waiting by the door, my faith was restored in what I once believed.”

“Really? Just by seeing us here your faith was restored?”

“Like I said before, I could tell that you knew something good.”

They stood and stared at one another for a moment, amazed that they had found others like themselves among so much empty space and empty life. Nothing more needed to be said. The walls, and the constant murmur and shuffle of the people around them said all the words they felt at that moment.

Waiting for the gate to open was now not such a difficult pastime for the three people. Dro and Hann had something to talk about other than their growing hunger, and Hev had many questions to ask and many to answer. They spent a whole day, gathering strength and discussing, and that night they took in three turns, each person in turn watching and waiting to wake up the other two if the door happened to open. After the night had passed, the three decided to do something else other than wait, as it seemed to be getting them nowhere.

“Are there others like us that you know about, Hev?” Dro was the one who asked the question, though Hev had been expecting it for some time.

“There must be at least one in this crowd. I’ve seen them enough to know that some of them don’t have the sense of direction that others do. See, let’s try.” And with that Hev immediately went to the center and climbed back up the stairs to stand on the wall, at the very center where all could see and hear.

“Gentlemen, if I could have your attention please.” Hev stomped the ground three times and the motion slowed to a halt. Four hundred eyes were boring into him, some angry, some discontent, others merely apathetic. All were watching when he began his first speech.

Chapter Ten - Day Twenty six

“I have a glorious dream, my good people. I have this dream every night. I dream of a hopeful place where you are free to live and experience life as you once were, in pure happiness and emotion. Here, you must admit, you have nothing. Well, you have a little, but you’ve simply forgotten how much you had to begin with! You used to be free to have all experiences, now you feel like you’re in a cage, like you’re no longer free to do what comes naturally.

“This dream, however, can never truly become reality. True freedom can itself be expressed only in one’s own mind - you are only as free as you are willing to work to be. I guess I really don’t know exactly what I’m saying, but I know what I feel. You feel, too, it’s just you don’t remember what feeling feels like.

“There is a way, however, to get closer to true freedom than you can here, and that is to look outside this place. If we all work as one, that door will fall, and we can escape into places of light and joy and wonders that we cannot even imagine!”

Among those in the crowd, there was a great cry of discontent. People were shouting angrily, even from those who had stopped paying any attention. People mocked and jeered him, and the cry of “Lunatic!” began to swell in the crowd. Everyone seemed to be taking up the cry, even those that had listened closely to the speech. Soon every human in the crowd was standing, and throwing their fists into the air as one. “Lunatic! Lunatic! Lunatic!”

There was nowhere to run. The great shout continued, then broke into a roar as hands began to grab at his ankles. He ran for his life, down the length of the wall and back into the cave. Three bodies clamored over the others and chased after him.

Hev made like he was running and secretly slipped back around a corner to the right. His two friends stopped there as well, and though the crowd’s shouting had died down, it sounded no less ominous. No others had seemed to follow them. Just then a loud scraping sound brought them all to attention. A scrape and a drag, a scrape and a drag, in succession, very close, to be heard over the angry shouts behind them. Suddenly a human turned the corner and made a noise that sounded like the yap of a tiny dog. There, before Dro, Hev, and Hann, hunched a blind man. They assumed he was blind because he crawled up to Hev and, scrambling his way up the wall to a standing position, felt the contours of his face.

The three of them turned to run, but the blind man did not try to follow them. He simply stood there, waiting. They too hesitated and finally asked him what he was doing there. When he spoke, immediately Dro knew who it was - it was Amid.

“You; who are you that says such good things?”

“Amid!” Dro was the one that spoke up first.

“Dro? is that you? Is Hann with you?”

“Here I am, Amid. The man who was talking was Hev.”

“Hev is his name? Hello, Hev. Your words have moved me. In them I felt truth.”

“Then,” and this was Hev that spoke, “Come with us on our quest, because we search for truth, and we also search for light. You see, because even if it’s scary and horrifying, we must go on for a greater cause. One day soon, we will see the light. Then, we will hold it, and replace this darkness for it.”

“What is light?”

And it was at that time the process began again. Since there was no light around, Hev asked if anyone knew how to make a bright light.

Hann told him that in his pocket he carried a candle, but after he had done this, he remembered the words of the Magi and covered his own mouth.

“Hann,” Hev coaxed. “don’t you understand what this could mean for all of us? He has a desire to learn, but only you can provide the tools. If we don’t do what’s in our hearts now, perhaps he will never reach his full potential.”

And so Hann relinquished his candle. Hev smashed the wick between a rock and the stone floor to light it, then he began to wave in front of Amid’s face.

“You see, it’s this orange thing - wait, you wouldn’t understand orange - it’s shaped kind of like this pebble here. Yeah, most of the time it’s shaped exactly like that, but it leans this way when I move it this way, and it sort of changes shape all the time, ever so slightly. No, don’t touch it! The flame will cause a great hurt to you.”

“But I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“Just try to be open to new senses, and have faith. Imagine there is truth in front of you, and you will see it.”

Amid’s eyes fluttered for a moment, then opened wide and stared directly into the candle. “I... can see it! I can see you! I see it perfectly!” Being sighted, he took the candle from Hev and stared into it for a few seconds, until Hann grabbed it and blew it out, then stuck it inside his cloak.

They made their way back to the cave of the gate, with Amid taking in all he could sense with his eyes, making comments here and there about how familiar everything seemed now that his eyes were open.

The crowds had died down, and they seemed not to notice Hev at all when he entered quite tentatively into their midst. The same three patterns had resumed, and Hann (having got rather good at this) led the way over to the gate with the greatest of ease. There they sat, and waited, and in the night there were now four to watch instead of three, and Amid took an extra hour because he enjoyed his new sense so much. They decided that if when the night was over, no people were dumped in, that the gate wasn’t going to open any time soon.

Sure enough, when the last watch was over and everyone was again awake, no changes had been made. The iron curtain had not moved an inch since Hann and Dro had first started waiting for it. Dejected, they hit their fists against the curtain, though they had barely done it when a voice came from behind them.

“You don’t want to make them angry, do you? I mean, I could understand why you would, but I could also understand why you wouldn’t.”

“What?” and behind them as they turned around stood a young girl, perhaps a year younger than Dro, who was in turn a year younger than any of the others. She spoke clearly and confidently, and was quite unlike any other human they had ever seen.

“Someone much older and wiser than me told me that the only way to get past this barrier is to go around it.” And with that she returned to the crowd, and though they tried to follow, a pusher crowd blocked their way until there was no way to know where she went.

Half a minute of looking was all the conversation needed. The four humans left the crowds of people and went back through the caves, keeping careful track of where it was they were and where it was they wanted to be.

Chapter Eleven - Day Twenty seven

There was a week of travel and exploration that followed, during which the humans encountered many unfamiliar caves, and also during which time the hunger in Hann and Dro grew.

In fact, it became all Dro thought about. Hunger, thirst, it was a curse that afflicted him far more greatly than it did Hann, and it began to enter his every word, a sound in his voice that craved food, could not go another step without food. This became a source of constant frustration for the others, who chided him day and night about not complaining about his troubles as the Magi had taught him.

Still, they made excellent time down each of the caves and went further around then they had anticipated they would have had to. They even found several unusual rock formations, in which Hev was the most interested, trying to quantify every feature so that he could tell someone in a story later (as the humans found out, Hev was an avid storyteller) to someone that had never seen such wonders. At the end of a small and winding tunnel they found a room full of stalactites and stalagmites, just as Hann had seen that had made him want to see new worlds in the first place. It was a source of inspiration to all of them.

Finally, they were along a route that seemed the most likely candidate for a secret entrance. The way was dark and narrow, so narrow that sometimes they would have to stand up tall and push themselves through. Breath came short in the tunnel and everyone was full of fright, and they all felt on the verge of screaming their heads off for no apparent reason.

At last the tunnel broadened some, and they were able to walk and crawl through with little effort. At the end of the difficult portion, they all stopped and felt the need to do something important, so they took some deep breaths and cut marks in the walls with rocks, spelling their names. Soon after that, footsteps real or imagined caused them to run for their lives, and so they did.

What they found was a tunnel that opened into a cave, with a small tunnel that, at its narrowest, seemed to be the crossing of the barrier. This tunnel quickly opened into a large cave, easily as tall from top to bottom as the Space was from side to side. The tunnel’s exit was more than halfway up the side of the cave, and there seemed no way to get down.

Hann was first out of the tunnel, and when he saw this, he told everyone that it was far too dangerous to try and jump from that height, and so he started to lead everyone backward when a laugh stopped everyone dead in their tracks.

It was the most lighthearted of laughs, one which could make someone feel at ease, and Dro knew the voice as the one of the girl from the gate. With another tiny laugh she was calling to everyone, telling them to calm down.

“Honestly, I thought that you guys could do this by yourselves. Good thing I decided to come along. I can guide you down, but you must listen carefully to what I have to say. Which one of you is in front?”

“Me!” shouted Hann.

“Which one is ‘Me!’?”

“Hann!”

“Okay, Hann, here’s what you’re going to have to do. turn yourself around and slowly lower yourself from the ledge. Make sure your hands have a tight grip on that ridge! Lower yourself all the way until you’re hanging by your arms.”

“Oh.... I’m doing it, but I can’t hold on to the rock very well!”

“Then I’ll talk quickly. To your right is a place on which you can rest your foot. put it on there!”

“Got it!”

“Now, there’s a ridge to your left and slightly above you. I need you to push as hard as you can on that rock with your right foot, and grab onto that ridge with your left hand. Push hard!”

“He’s got a hold of the ridge, miss, but he looks like he’s in too much stress to talk.”

“Now, there’s a ridge slightly right of the one you’ve got with your left hand, and slightly below the other. I need you to pull up with your left hand and swing your weight over to your left side, then I need you to dig in with your toes and grab that ridge with your right hand.”

“I... tell her I did it!”

“Great! Now, there’s a series of ridges just like the ones you’re on, that just progress downward. You just need to put hand under hand and leg under leg, until you’ve reached the ground.”

Then, silence.

Everyone waited with breath held in their chests as the sounds of skin scraping against rock echoed against the walls of the cave. Finally they heard a thump, and Hann gave a cry of relief. Soon all five of them were cheering and crying, and they all felt the magic of the moment, though they knew not how to express it in words.

He wasn’t the only one to have trouble, though. Twice Amid slipped trying to reach the uppermost ledge and almost fell to his death on the stalactites below. On his third try he succeeded, though, and one by one, the four humans made their way down. The young girl did not follow them, she simply congratulated them on a job well done and was heard scampering off.

Immediately out of the tunnel Hann noticed something that after a few yards was apparent to all. There was light coming from somewhere at the other end of this tunnel! Running, stumbling and crawling, they made their way along the tunnel with abandon. They had finally made it to the outside!

The tunnel happened to be particularly long and small, and it took more than just a short run to complete its length. The four of them became quite tired, but they continued running into the night.

Chapter Twelve - Day Thirty Five

Hunger. Hunger came in many different forms, it would stab at you right in the pit of your stomach, it could grind away dully in your back or chest, it might even come as an ache in the jaw that won’t go away with any amount of rubbing.

Thoughts of food came in different forms, as well. In eating something familiar, such as biting a rock in such a perfect way so as to make a sweet juice run forth from it, or in more unfamiliar things in dreams and such, where a feast was prepared of meat and drink and many such things, but when one reached out to seize any of it, it would disappear.

Now that Dro knew what it was, he wanted it, and he wanted it day and night, no matter what or when he could have it. Had he not been warned against putting things in his mouth, he would already have swallowed a whole family of rocks. Whatever comes at the end of this tunnel, he said to himself, had better stop this feeling, or I will perish joylessly.

The other three were making their way eagerly down the tunnel, as they had been doing all night. Dro lagged behind, unsure of his ability to continue or his usefulness to the others even if he could. He was losing his hope, losing his strength, losing himself to this feeling, and he did not want to be left behind. He struggled on, lagging a little but keeping the other three within sight.

Finally, the tunnel took a downward dip and the others made it to the tunnel’s end. Dro followed soon afterward, and the four of them looked amazedly at what they saw.

The tunnel opened up into a cavern such as they had never seen before. At its highest, it was beyond their view, even for Hann. It was no bigger around than the Space, but it was oddly shaped, with crevasses in the walls and irregular bumps and divots up its entire visible length. This was not the most amazing of discoveries, however. The room was covered in a dim, deep red light. Though they had only experienced such amounts of light from their candles, they knew instantly that this could not be from the tunnel, so deep and evil the color looked.

There were three tunnels, including the one from which they had come, and so the four humans decided to take the tunnel from which the light shined the most brightly. Along its length, they began to notice other things were changing about them, there were more noises from down at the tunnel’s end, and other things that they began to sense, but weren’t able to understand quite what it was they were sensing. The caves they were in began to lose their interesting features, and became smooth and dull as the ones they had seen long before.

This new red light, as it got brighter, seemed to get even deeper a shade of red than the one they had first seen. Many tunnels branched off to the left and right, but they turned to explore none of them, thinking only of the red light and what it could mean if they found it.

The red light was not as easy to get to as they thought, however. The tunnels continued onward, each time getting wider and wider, rounder and rounder, until it took two heights of a human to span the diameter. They began to walk in single file, but the curve of the ground underneath them made their knees and ankles hurt with each step.

When at last their tunnel ended, a nearby side-tunnel opened into a great cavern. There they heard the voices of many men, though they could not hear what they were saying. When they climbed down into the cavern, Hann stood back flat against the wall, as did everyone. The ceiling, even in the red light, was not visible. The wall to the right continued also to infinity, beyond their sight. The wall to the left, too, and there was no telling just how far away the opposite wall might be.

The shouts were less obscure now that the four humans’ ears had no walls obstructing them. “Come and get your soup!” shouted one. “Food so good you won’t be hungry for a thousand years!” barked another. “Smell our good food!” “Come end your hunger here!”

Dro and Hann were the first to start toward the sound, but the other two weren’t far behind. In the distance Hann could make out many shapes, standing in long lines, laying on the ground, just walking, like the crowds they had seen at the gate.

Hev stopped them both and turned them away from the sound. “Do you smell that smell?” he said sternly.

Very soon, the sense that Dro and Hann had been neglecting sprang to life, and the smell of the soup came to them. It smelled sweetly, like a hundred different kinds of flowers, and the smell of spring rain, and the smell of sea air all rolled into one. This smell caused Dro to tremble for want of food, and Hann to try and pull away from Hev and go toward it. But Hev held them.

“If you want to know what that soup will do to you, follow me. I know of a tunnel here that will take us right to where they are.” And so he started off in the direction of a tunnel behind and slightly to the right of them, and they followed.

The tunnel rose up twenty feet, and its end connected with the great cavern on its left side, as Hev said, directly in front of the action. What they saw was indeed nothing like they expected. People were receiving soup in long lines, then being taken to the side before they could take their first sip. once their first sip was taken, one of the helpers (they called them helpers because they had the word “helper” written on their shirts) would pin them down with one knee and take the bowl from them. Invariably the person who had eaten the soup would spit it out, but also invariably, the helper would hold their nose and their mouth open, then would force the contents of the bowl directly down their throat. The people would go into convulsions, but the helpers always had the upper hand. When the contents of the bowl were drained into the poor person’s mouth, his nose and mouth would be held until he had swallowed all. Then the helper would move on to another human.

The human would walk around dizzily for a few seconds, then often they would go into convulsions again, or simply cover their immediate surroundings with milky-white, sweet-smelling vomit. The soup would make it back out of them in gallons, it seemed, and they would lay in it and choke and then go completely limp.

What happened next was the most horrifying of all. Their hair would thin and change color, the skin around their mouths and throats would stretch and then begin to hang loosely about their faces. Their limbs would become thin and disfigured, and their eyes would sink deep into their skulls. When they next stood, they had become the semihumans that Dro and Hann had seen in the deepest portions of the caves. Two more helpers came out of the shadows to drag these away, or, if they could move, they would make their way themselves.

There were dozens upon dozens of helpers involved in the operation, and three enormous tanks of soup served into the bowls by three men that looked much like the one that had attacked Dro and Hann, but without the scars upon their foreheads. The place was filled with such an evil that Hann turned around and retched violently, though the contents of his stomach were empty and little more than air came out. Hev then turned to the three others and told them coldly, “This is the soup of which I tasted. Don’t ever take one sip of it, or what you have seen today will happen to you. I’ll tell you a story, as soon as we get down from this tunnel and back on the right path, of how it came to be that I tasted of it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Hev was sitting amongst the crowds of people, not thinking of anything, with mind completely blank. He was in a state of mind completely without creativity, and to even attempt to describe this state of mind would be doing it a great disservice. How long he was in this state he couldn’t say, as judging the passage of time was completely beyond his sphere of understanding.

As in chemistry, the mind seeks a state of equilibrium with its surroundings. Without creativity, the mind is like a vacuum into which can flow pure thought, if even the tiniest hole is opened. Even when no holes are opened, the area will implode unless something very strong is used to prevent that which is around it from crushing in upon it. It was in such a state that the tiniest bit of curiosity, in such amounts as can be found ambiently in the air around us, that Hev was filled with his first thought. As it was only the smallest of amounts, he did only the smallest of actions and lifted his eyelids.

He saw a man running into a tunnel, wearing long green robes, being followed by a little boy. They were not completely quiet, nor did they make any attempts to hide themselves, but not one other person paid any apparent attention to them. Out of this tiny sponge of curiosity Hev squeezed a question he had: Why weren’t they sitting down like everyone else? From where Hev was sitting he could see for quite a ways down any corridors, and so he continued to watch for this man and this boy.

He saw the man only a couple times after that, but often he saw the boy running with a dog, darting in and out of the tunnels and seeming always to avoid the masters, the helpers, and those that patrolled the caves.

Hev found next the creativity to stand, and to walk to a cave where no one could see him. It was there he wrote his first story. He wrote it about the boy and the dog, and the many adventures they had had together. Some of it he had seen with his own eyes, some of it he came up with on his own.

Immediately he became a container for such creativity as he had not before experienced. He wrote other stories, too, in other caves, most of the time drawing them in the dirt, but on other occasions using a black sort of mud he found near the soup servers and using it for painting on the walls.

He wrote about everything he had ever experienced, about how he had come to be and about the great things he had seen done and wanted to do. He wrote about people that existed only in his mind, and about things and places that only he knew about. He wrote about symbols and about how he felt when he wrote. Finally, he was ready to experience the only thing of which he was truly afraid - he wanted to taste the soup and write about it.

The soup servers and helpers, he thought, Will surely allow me just one sip, if I ask nicely. And so he came up to the line, and though they gave him odd looks, they gave him just one tiny scoopful in a wretched cup with cracks all up and down the sides. He took it into his secret cave, and dipped his finger down in the cup, taking out the smallest drop of the sweet-smelling liquid. Slowly, he forced himself to place the finger inside his mouth.

He was sick for what felt like hours. He chewed on the dirt only to spit it out of his mouth, vomiting white froth along with it. He rolled around in that cave, continuing to spit out that most horrible and bitter of tastes. When he finally regained his senses, he found, to his horror, that he had lost his sense of hearing.

He would never hear again! How could he expect to avoid the helpers if he could never again hear footsteps behind him? How could he ask any questions to the boy when he found him if he could no longer hear the answers? This was impossible. He had to tell the people in line what they were getting in to. He couldn’t let them all do what he had just done!

He gathered up more paint than he had ever before needed. He went to the wall of the main cavern and began to paint. At first no one could see that took any notice, but soon he had his entire story written, about what the taste of the soup was like, and how it did nothing for you except make you sick and dissatisfied and unable to enjoy anything about life. He wrote about how living where they were was dangerous and stupid, and that there were sure to be better places to live, in which joy could be found.

When at last the masters and helpers found his writing, they became very angry. Hev had mud all over his hands, and it was easy to track him down and catch him, due to his newly dulled senses. Already others had begun to gather around the writings, and talk amongst themselves about whether or not it really could be true. The helpers shouted at everyone to move back, and they got out more mud and began to cover over the things Hev had wrote, until they were obscured and could not be read.

Hev was taken to a place far below where he had ever gone, down into a pit that was shaped like an egg, out of which he could not escape. there they told him about the senses of heat and cold, and then showed him what it felt to feel warm, by using the warmth of a stone that had been heated by an underground vent. As the rock cooled, he became colder and colder, until he was shivering there at the bottom of the pit.

The shivering got worse, and he lay there for hours, perhaps days. The cold numbed his thoughts even further, and he began to lose the feeling of creativity he once had. When the masters and helpers returned, he was unable to fight.

There at the pits bottom two helpers descended, carrying with them a bowl of the fragrant soup. “You need to finish the rest of this,” they told him. He only saw their mouths and wondered what they had said. He wanted to struggle, but already the feeling of cold had taken him over, and he was not sure even if they were telling him the truth or a lie, or whether he or they were good or bad, or something else entirely.

The soup tasted just as bad as it had before. With two helpers on him, it was forced down his throat quickly, and then his mouth was held shut as he vomited through his nose and was forced to swallow it again. Every drop of that soup stayed inside him, and it did not take long before all went black.

 \* \* \*

“Why, then, didn’t you turn into one of those creatures?” Dro had interrupted the story, and Hev looked annoyed.

“I don’t know, I think it was because they never took my thoughts completely away from me. Anyway, as I was saying...”

\*
As the blackness descended, Hev began to hear again, only this time it seemed he was hearing a different world entirely, a world that seemed precisely the opposite of the one in which he lived. “forget everything,” came the hiss of some otherworldly being, “you will be here forever.”

 \* \* \*

“It wasn’t until a long time later that I learned of my fate. I had failed to transform, and so they put me in the pit of sleepers. All around me were heaps and piles of sleeping bodies, their breath smelling of soup. I woke again, in much the same way I had before, and immediately expelled from my body as much of the soup as I could before climbing my way out of the pit, back in the direction of the place I remembered before.

“Out of the pit of sleepers I climbed, and journeyed for some days before I found the cavern in which you met me and restored my faith.”

Hev was done with his story, and everyone was eager to continue down into the tunnels that followed the edge of the great cavern. When a connecting tunnel led steeply up and to the right, they followed it and soon found themselves at the entrance to another cavern entirely, this one very long, but not very wide or tall. In it were marching hundreds of people, and there were five or six pusher crowds in their midst, being led by five or six masters, who led them where they would and how they would.

In an adjoining tunnel Hev caught a glimpse of the man he had only seen with the boy before, but this time he was alone. Hev dashed off into the crowd to find him, and the others had no choice but to follow. The pusher crowds nearly put an end to the chase, but they all made their way to the tunnel safely and began to run on all fours, crouched over, to try and catch up with the mysterious human in green robes.

Thankfully, there were no other tunnels large enough for a man to crawl through, and so they went on their way quickly and without having to guess where they were going. It was a good three miles, and at its end all were too tired to say anything. There was still no sign of the man, and Hev suggested they return to one of the smaller side-tunnels when all of a sudden there was a little shift in the gravel which blocked their way and the brightest red light they had yet seen shone through. Hev and Dro were there at the first, pushing down the gravel and smoothing it so that Hev could poke his head through.

Chapter Fourteen - Day Thirty five

Finally the gravel was smoothed down, pushed around until it was underneath them and not in front of them, so that each could see for himself what Hev had seen when he had poked his head out of the tunnel. They had finally found the source of the red light.

A river of molten rock from far, far below, was the flame from which the red light escaped. It was brighter here than any light they had ever seen, apart from the candles of the Magi. They looked out upon what they saw, and apart from holes such as theirs that made Swiss cheese of their side of the rock, there was nothing on either side of the river but two sheer cliffs, floor to ceiling. They were looking down into a giant canyon, at whose bottom was a sure death, and whose other side appeared to house no holes at all, let alone ones into which one could crawl.

“What is this?” asked Amid, who could see only the red light and the solid sheet of rock on the opposite side of the canyon.

“This, my friends, is the Chasm. It is supposed to be the outermost boundary of civilization, beyond which no man has ever gone. Of course, it was the helpers that told us this.” Hev threw a rebellious look to no one in particular as he said this.

“What does it mean?” Dro asked.

“It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just another obstacle that we have to go around, is all. Now, let’s get moving and see if we can find a cave that will lead us above it. I’ve seen it before and it’s at least a dozen miles wide, so we’ll save going around it as a last resort.”

And so their journey began again. This time with Amid leading the way, they crawled back through the tunnel, where they found a smaller tunnel through which they could barely fit. Since it was the only way the man in green robes could have gone, they took that path and made their way slowly along a thousand yards of rock.

When they had reached the end, with bruised elbows, blistered knuckles and toes, and scratched and bleeding stomachs, they lay on the ground, exhausted and ready to sleep even before it was time for it. They could not sleep, however. A candle was burning in the room, and beside the candle there were four bowls of soup.

The two looked in such incongruence that immediately the four of them wanted to flee, when all of a sudden they heard a deep, and yet kind voice speak to them. “This soup is of the Magi. Eat it, and your time of hunger will be cured.”

Hev suspected a trap, but Dro went over and began immediately to scoop up the soup with his hands and lick it off his fingers. He stopped for a moment, and everyone waited with breath held to see how he would react. A smile spread slowly, but surely across his face, and he let out a yell of joy and began to drink the soup for all he was worth. In between long slurps he told everyone that the soup was wondrous and good, and that they should all start eating it and not stop until all was finished.

Hann was the next to walk up to the soup, with Amid close behind. Hev followed, and he sniffed deeply at the soup. It did not smell sweet at all, in fact, it smelled hardy and stern, a little bit like difficult advice. Hev took a tiny taste of it with the tip of his finger, and he, too, sat down and began to drink the soup. Amid and Hann were not close behind.

When all was finished, there was a stillness in the room. Finally Hev looked up at the ceiling and the empty space around him and shouted, “Who are you?”

The answer was as quick as it was assuring. “Come into my house, and I will tell you all.” This time the four of them were quite sure of the direction of the sound, their senses having been sharpened by the ending of their hunger, and they started down the tunnel, Amid picking up the candle and taking it with them.

The humans ended up having far more to tell their new friends than their new friends had to explain. The green-robed man was named Elose, and his young friend was called Noge. The dog was brushed off simply as a companion to Noge. There was little more conversation about them, apart from the fact that Elose had learned the soup’s recipe from a Magi, and that it was made of the good fruits of the caves, of mushrooms and mosses and deep roots that grew in all directions.

Not once did Elose or Noge ask a question about who their guests were or what they were doing. They practically didn’t have a chance. Hann started at the very beginning and told them how the story had gone, and when he had finished, Elose merely nodded. “So, what do you think?” This question had come from Dro.

“It is a noble quest. I have two brothers, deeper in Puhfervenherbm, who are guides to people such as yourselves.”

“Puhfervenherbm?” This was a word that none of the four had heard before. “Could you say that again?” Dro sat forward, straining to hear words in the mess that had just come out of Elose’s mouth.

“Puh-FER-ven-her-bm. Not only is it a word, it’s a name. It’s the name of the place we’re in now.”

“You mean your house?”

“Yes, and the cave connecting to it, and all the caves that there are in the entire place. Puhfervenherbm is the name of the entire system, not just the caves but all the people that sleep in the caves, and all the servants that try and drive people deeper into the caves.”

“Then everything is Puhfervenherbm?”

“Well, let me ask you a question. What did you feel before you gained your senses?”

“Nothing, I guess. We didn’t feel at all.”

“So, if Puhfervenherbm is full only of people that experience nothing, wouldn’t it be closer to the truth to say that the very entity that is Nothing is Puhfervenherbm?”

“So Nothing is Puhfervenherbm? But aren’t there some things that are Puhfervenherbm? Like us. I mean, we’re here, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we live in it, and that means there are things in Puhfervenherbm, but it’s far better to be in it than it is to be of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, this place, is only the place in which you live. You live in it. The servants and helpers and the millions upon millions just sitting around or sleeping, they are a part of it. You see what I mean?”

“I... think so. So, if Nothing is Puhfervenherbm, then what isn’t?”

“Lots. Not just us, either. There is a greater world, a whole world outside this one, full of light and life, the likes of which I still cannot believe I have ever seen. But I have seen it. Out there, life covers every surface, and even in the caves of the outside world, there is not darkness the likes of which one can find here.

“There are so many things, long, flat stretches of land covered in growth and life, mountains and valleys and rivers, whole rivers of clear water that travel constantly down to awaiting seas. And oh, what seas! The ocean is so beautiful, but more beautiful than any of it, is the sky. In the daytime, it is the brightest blue, and the clouds are the purest white. And at night, the sky darkens and one by one the stars show their heads, little points of light like a million distant candles burning at once.”

“Blue and white and candles dancing about in the air? No offense, but it sounds kind of freakish and scary.” Dro was the one that said it, but it was what they were thinking.

“Yes, I suppose it is. I’m sure I felt the same way when I first heard about it. Now, it feels better than anything just to think about it. I think I prefer freakish to impossibly normal, now that I’ve seen it. I mean, if normal makes people act the way they do down here, wouldn’t it be better to go the exact opposite?”

This got a respectful nod from everyone in the group. After silence settled in on the group, Hev sat forward and asked a question. “If you’ve seen all that, why are you here?”

“The three of us, me and my two brothers, got out of Puhfervenherbm when we were quite young, not much older than you are. We traveled far and wide, and we met three old men, who told us about the millions in need of our help back here. They taught us many things about life and how horrible it is to waste, and we decided to come back and help as many people as we could get out of this place.”

“I think, when we have seen the outside, I should like to do the same thing.” Hann was the one that spoke this.

“You just worry about getting yourself out first. Here, want some more soup?”

They did. Everyone ate soup until they were full, and they were all very happy. Then Elose took out some books and showed them pictures that his friend had drawn of the outside. They looked at the pictures and wondered what beauties they could represent.

Many books, too, filled to overflowing it seemed with words, came down off his shelves. In these books were written scientific methods and tools for reasoning which, Elose said, would prove invaluable in the dark and confusing caves.

Elose took Hann aside to another cave, and none of the others heard anything the two said to one another. When he came out, all Hann would say about it was “I am to become a Magi.”

After a night of good sleep, it came time for the humans and their friend to part. Elose said that he would be with them all shortly, and also told them that Noge the boy should come with them.

 \* \* \* \*

Three weeks of exploration passed by in a flash. The kinds of experiences that had set them on their journey were not occurring, and so they passed the days in peace and friendship. Noge turned out to be a great help to the company, for his sharp eyes (though not as sharp as Hann’s) were quick to observe any changes in the stillness of the caverns. Higher and higher roads they sought until they were sure they were above the Chasm, but there were no tunnels that went across at that height.

One day the company was taking their time crossing a watched hallway when a man, perhaps not quite twice their age, up from behind them and took them all by surprise. “Hello, sir.” Offered Dro.

“Same to you. Might I ask what you are doing?”

“We’re looking for a way across. What are you doing?”

“Oh, that. Don’t waste your time, there is no ‘across.’ There’s no such direction!”

“But there’s always a direction your can go if you can see where you’re going!”

“Not always. Only fools are certain. By the way, what are you people doing out as far as here? You should head back. Out here are bad parts, empty places.”

“We just came from back. We want to go forward now.”

“It’s not going to change the way that things are.”

“You won’t try to stop us?”

“Would it make you want to leave any more or less?”

“No.”

“Then there’s your answer. I only do what I can, and that means I’ve done all I can for you. So long.”

The company (as they were now calling themselves) tried their best for forget that man and others like him, but to hear such things, even from the mouths of the untrustworthy, was more than a little disheartening. Still, they were not totally down, but neither were their troubles any closer to ending.

Unable to cross above the Chasm, they tried to go around it, and discovered that it was every bit as wide as Hev had said it was, and more. Three more weeks passed just as quickly as the first three, and soon they found themselves in unfamiliar caves with the Chasm stretching still further than eye could see.

Twice the company was discovered by Masters. Twice they ran for their lives, and were chased away from the Chasm into deeper, darker caves, where they huddled in the cold which only Hev could feel until all trouble had passed.

During all those weeks of travel, there was not one repeated pattern in the rock, not one tiny hole on the other side of the Chasm. There was nothing, absolutely nothing that even hinted at life on the opposite side, or even if there was a world there.

Still, the company knew there was a world there. Elose had told them about it, as had the Magi. They knew that all they had to do was make their way through this place, and they would find a joy great as they had never before experienced.

One day, though, there was no denying it. After fifty days of searching, they had not found one way across this chasm. They had to return to Elose’s cave, and ask him if he could lead them out of this place.

No sooner than they had decided to turn back than they came upon the young girl from the cave of the gate. In the red light of the Chasm they could see her more clearly now. She wore sackcloth, as they did, but it was cut to flow like a gown as she walked. Her hair was a bright blue, and her voice was as sweet and playful as it had been when she guided them past the barrier.

“Where are you guys going?” she asked simply.

“We can’t find a way across the Chasm, and so we have to turn back to find our friend who can help us.” it was Hann that answered.

“Well, wouldn’t you say that’s just what you did?”

“What do you mean? You can help us get across?”

“I can. Unfortunately, I can only take one of you across at a time.”

“Well, can you show us where this place is?”

“Of course.”

“Well, will you?”

“Follow me.”

To the surprise of all, she did not head them back toward the Chasm. Instead, she led them to the right, and a little bit away from the chasm. Above them the caves’ heights got alternately very high and then head level, and below them the composition of the floor changed from dirt to a solid conglomerate.

It took them another three days, but they finally made it back to the Chasm. As it turned out, the Chasm was a giant ring around their caves. There were only two exits, one of which was certain death, and the other, which only the bravest and smartest could pass and survive.

Using a reasoning game Elose taught them out of one of his books, it was determined that Dro should be the first to travel with the girl, whose name was Canada, to the other side. When they had finished this, it was only a few steps to see through the hallway, at whose end lay the passage to the other side.

It was too dangerous for them all to approach, but they could all see some from where they were. The Chasm was at it’s thinnest point, at least the thinnest they had ever seen it, and across it was a solid-looking wooden bridge, with two guards standing on it, and two on each side. They were tall and they were dressed all in orange and black. From what the company could see in the distance, their faces were wrapped in black cloth, and they carried what looked like giant corkscrews on the ends of long sticks. They were the most frightening of all the helpers they had ever seen.

Canada and Dro snuck down there, and if the guardians had seen them, they did not take any notice. Canada talked to Dro, whispering many things in his ear that the others could not hear, and Dro walked down the long hallway on his own, until the guards took notice. They heard the voice of Dro and the deep voices of the guardians. They talked for some time before they let Dro in, but let him in they did.

Canada told the others upon her return that she couldn’t tell them exactly what had passed between Dro and herself. She did tell them that Dro deceived them, by telling them not what he was actually trying to do, but that he was doing something else. She had also taught him how to make a deal with them. She said that he must have been both brave and smart, or the guardians would not have been fooled enough to let him through.

Together the four of them left for Elose’s cave, but soon Canada was running off again, and where she could be found, none of the others knew. Before she left, though, she said she would find them when it was safe to send another across the Chasm. When the four humans came back, the cave was as empty as they’d left it - well, almost as empty.

Chapter Fifteen - Day Eighty eight

Clearly Elose had been back some time before, and had expected them back, because there was a pot of soup waiting for them when they came back. There they rested from their fifty days’ journey, and Noge read to them some of the stories from books in languages they could not understand. The time of rest was spent mostly in silence, however. After three days, Noge went out alone in search of Elose. He told them he would bring him back when he had found him.

When at the end of five days they had rested and Elose had not returned, Hann decided to begin his quest early, and asked everyone to try and get some of the people they had seen in the long and narrow cave to listen to them.

For that first time, he left by himself. Wishing he could take a shorter or longer route to avoid detection, he hurried along the narrow tunnel until he came to the long and very narrow room, slipped out of the hole unnoticed by the Masters, and then walked his way to the far end of the cave where the pusher crowds did not go.

Beneath his feet were many irregularly shaped stones, and he could tell that many people did not walk here. Those that did, he hoped, would be the ones that could understand what he was going to tell them.

“Hey, you?” He really hadn’t meant to ask it as a question, but he was nervous and had some trouble controlling his voice.

“What?”

“Why do you suppose you’re out here walking around?”

“Don’t know, and I don’t want to know.” and it was as though his ears were closed after that.

Then another. “We need to get out of here. The Masters are controlling your mind.”

“Out of where?” and again, it was as though his ears were closed.

Then yet another. And another. And another, until Hann began to be discouraged.

“Please listen to me! They’re trying to kill you. You’ll be forced to do things you don’t want to do!”

“Who are? Maybe you should report them.” And time after time, they’d make a short, often sharp statement, and then acting as though they did not hear him.

\*
After he had passed the gate, Dro looked at the tunnel. It was dark, and it led in only one direction: down. He had no choice, really, but to walk until he came to a place where he could make a choice, and then hope he made the right one.

But he did have a choice. He could turn back if he wished. He could tell the guard that his business was finished there. He could wait where he was until someone else came along, and then do... something else. He was just confused. If it was so important for him to be there, why was he letting himself go into such danger as this?

He thought all this while walking. When he came to the end of the tunnel (much shorter than he had expected it to be) he felt a blast of wind from his left. He whipped around, and there on the wall was carved deeply, floor-to-ceiling, the shape of a spiral, going round and round and round, deeper and deeper and deeper into the rock. From it came a voice - and immediately Dro felt his whole body go numb.

“Join me - or die.”

 \* \* \*

“Hey, Hann! You’re back!” Then Amid saw the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“By myself, there’s no use. They just won’t listen to one person.”

“Are you trying to tell us something?”

“Just come down there with me, all right? I think together, we can convince people of the goodness of our knowledge.”

“All right, but we’ve got to be back before nighttime. I don’t want to sleep anywhere else tonight.”

Together, Hann and Amid made their way back to the long and narrow cave. The cave had been steadily filling since they had first passed it, and now it was almost overflowing with people, running, pushing, and sleeping, all silent, except for the brush of sackcloth against sackcloth, the hitting of bodies against each other, hundreds breathing as one.

“You! Over there! Come over here!” Hann had picked out one that was walking along with the crowd, trying his best to look in a trance, but looking more like a zombie out of a bad movie.

“You there! We have something important to tell you.”

“What?” it was clear he looked frustrated and annoyed, and though he did not look over his shoulder, it was clear he did not want to be seen by anyone.

“There’s more in the world than what you see around you. Why do you want to force yourself to act like them when you know of your own thoughts?”

“Nobody’s forcing me. I’m just living by the rules, that’s all.”

“How do you know that you’re living by the right rules?”

“Because they’re the rules everyone lives by.”

“Okay, then name one.”

“Don’t hurt anyone else.”

“Do people still do it?”

“Of course, but they are punished.”

“Is there a law that says you cannot be happy?”

“Of course not.”

“Well then, are you happy?”

“I am.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve never had anyone else try and mess with my life, because the rules are there.”

“Do you follow all the rules?”

“Of course. In fact, if there’s a rule, I always do the exact opposite.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, I always take small steps to avoid hurting the rocks, and I move slowly to avoid disturbing the air.”

“Do you always do that? I mean, do you always follow the exaggerated rule?” Amid was the one that spoke up this time.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, say, what do you do when you step too hard on a rock?”

“I usually punish myself.”

“Does it make you happy?”

“It makes me content to know I am doing my part in this society.”

“Do you feel good when you punish yourself?”

“Of course not. If I did, that would defeat the purpose!” They had started walking and now they were heading toward one of the pusher crowds, when Hann and Amid stopped him.

“So, you punish yourself for breaking a rule that wasn’t a rule in the first place? Why do you do that?”

“Because in order to be part of a society, you have to do your part to make things run smoothly. I mean, if everyone did everything perfectly, then we wouldn’t have to get on each other’s case about it all the time and we wouldn’t have so much fighting, which leads to more rule-breaking and then we get punished by the helpers. But you antisocial types wouldn’t understand what it means to be a part of society.”

“Don’t you realize where you’re going? Eventually you’re going to stop doing anything for fear that it will be breaking a rule, then you’re going to stop sensing anything for fear that you’ll see someone or hear someone and it will somehow make you break a rule. Then, you’re not going to know when the helpers put you down in the deepest of caves and let you sink into that sand and die!”

“People are always going to do what they want. I only do what’s hard for me to do because my desire to do whatever, or walk around like you crazies do, isn’t as great as my desire to do my part in making the world run they way it’s supposed to.”

“The world is meant to run on happiness and free choice and understanding!”

“I have made my choice. I’ve chosen to work with and not against what is going on here. I have everything I’ve ever wanted here, and if there’s anything wrong, it’s because I’m an imperfect person working with a perfect system, which means things can only get better for me.”

“We’ve seen where your road leads.”

“Whatever.”

“Look at you! As soon as you find something with which you can’t argue, you just act ignorant!”

“You guys don’t see the world in the same way. I respect your right to an opinion, but I’m through with listening to you.”

“Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t take the easy way out!”

And again, it was as though his ears were closed.

“Wait, before you go: what’s your name?”

“My name? It’s Charles.”

“All right, Amid, let’s go.” They made their way back to the front of the cave, but something stopped them.

“Look, Amid, there’s a pusher crowd right in front of the cave!”

“And that means -“

“A master! We can’t go back now, we have to wait until tomorrow.”

“But... oh brother.”

 \*

Hoping that Hev wouldn’t try to follow them any time soon, they camped a few miles away, in a deserted cave whose entrance was directly from above, and so it took quite some scrambling and climbing to get inside.

When they got inside, however, it was a most magical place. Above them glistened crystals that had grown during the wetter times of the caves, and when Hann got up the courage to light his candle a whole rainbow of colors lit of the ceiling and walls, shimmering with multifaceted light.

Every day they would return and see the pusher crowd there again, just standing, and they hoped that the master had not discovered the hideout of Elose. They weren’t sure if they could forgive themselves if that was the case.

While inside the cave, Amid began to write down the story of their journeys on the walls, using a hard crystal and carving the words and pictures directly into the rock.

Unfortunately, they could not stay in the cave for long. Nearby in the long cave, they were filled to the brim, and people began to walk up and down the halls where they were sleeping at night, and, fearing detection, they moved to a cave even further away, and even began to worry that they should ever find their way back into that cave again.

Still, patience pays off, and when the time came they were able to make their way inside without anyone noticing. The crowds had become oppressive, and some of them even showed the occasional outburst of anger, for which they were taken by the helpers and not seen again.

When they returned, they asked Hev just how long it had been. He said he wasn’t sure, but that it had been about three weeks. They had no idea they had spent so much time outside of the cave. Though Amid did not want to leave again, they decided that they must, because they were endangering the hideout of Elose.

They met up with Noge at the end of the tunnel, he was sitting at the edge of the Chasm, looking out into its vast emptiness. “I wonder what it’s like on the other side,” he said. “Elose had told me a lot of things, but the thing that he tells me most of all is that what he tells me cannot compare to seeing it with my own eyes.”

“We all want to know, Noge. Every one of us wants to see the outside, and we want to get across that chasm just as much as you do.”

“And another thing. Why do I look so much younger than I am? I never get any older than this.”

“Wait, you’re not a child?”

“Hardly. I’m half again as old as any of you are.”

“So you never get stronger or bigger than anyone?”

“Nope.”

“Pretty sad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, a little. Do you think there’s a reason? Elose never mentioned it to me, and I guess I never really asked him.”

“How about we ask him when he gets back?”

“That may be a long time. He’s gone to visit his brothers. Last time, he wasn’t back for two and a half years.”

“Two and a half years? But, what about his books and things?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about those. His cave is always perfectly safe. No master can ever find it.”

“So now he tells us.” Amid looked at Hann mutinously.

“Wait, there’s somebody coming.” They backed their way into a dark cave and looked at the person coming toward them. When he should have gone on the main road, he turned. He wasn’t just walking toward them. He was walking straight for them!

Unsure of what to do, the three of them just stood there in the darkness, fearing to run in case it was Elose or Dro or even Charles coming to tell them he’d changed his mind, but fearing to stay, too, in case it was...

“A master! Quick, everyone, run!” But it was already too late. He called to them and immediately they felt their hearts freeze.

“Don’t run, you four. Hann, Noge, Amid, Hev. Things will just get much, much worse if you run.”

They stopped. They knew he was right. Masters were everywhere around these parts, and they could give the signal quickly and send helpers from every direction. They waited as the man walked to the edge of the tunnel down which they had tried to run, and then bade them come out into the light.

“I am a master of these parts. A master of masters, you could say, for I control the masters of this place.”

“We don’t believe in your order.”

“That doesn’t make you all that much different than the rest.”

“We’re willing to fight your order. We’re willing even to fight you.” Amid jabbed Hann in the shoulder to try and get him to stop talking.

“Evidently you are not all in agreement about that. Nevertheless, whether you believe or will fight or not doesn’t matter to me. I want to have the satisfaction of crushing you with my bare hands.” His fist was raised - Hann knew the look of it, and so he ran, alarm regardless. The others felt the tension in the room and ran with him. Soon they heard the loud thump of huge, heavy feet behind them. The master of masters wanted to give chase.

Left, then right, then right - Hann didn’t even care where he was going , he just wanted to get away and try and get to a place that was dark and safe, where the master could not find them. Left again, then the middle road - he couldn’t afford to be going in a circle at the moment. Behind them, thump, thump, thump came the boots of the running giant.

They heard the footsteps slow to a stop. From behind them came a laugh, which died down as they heard the thumps head off on a side tunnel. They only hesitated a moment, and then began again to run with full speed.

They came to a cave with a deep brown-red hue to its walls, and as they ran down its length, they heard a very unusual sound, almost like the sound it made when their robes brushed against the walls, but much louder, and getting still louder as they came out of the cave and entered a broad tunnel that wasn’t nearly as tall as it was wide.

Below them came a soft tapping sound, but they could barely hear it over the roar that had become the sound behind them. Finally Hann looked back and saw what had been following them. It was the master of masters, but he was riding a giant beast!

The creature was unlike anything they had ever seen, even in the picture books Elose had shown them. It had four feet, but they were not placed opposite one another to hold the weight - they were all down the front, and the only reason it seemed to be able to keep its balance was because it had dozens of tiny arms that branched of its sides, rubbing up against the walls as it ran and making that horrible sound.

The thing was too fast and the thing it was riding was faster still, so the four of them looked at one another and knew precisely what they needed to do: they needed to split up and head for Elose’s cave.

Behind them the beast scraped along, knocking off irregular bumps in the walls with its tentacles, smoothing out the cave as it chased them. The four went down four different paths, and the man charged full force - at Hann!

Hann turned abruptly down a smaller corridor and found himself sliding down a steep decline. The floor was too smooth where he was - he could feel no walls to either side of him, and so he slid until he came to a place where his feet would stop him and he looked around.

There was nothing about him - everything was obscured by darkness, the kind of darkness he had not seen in such a long time that for half and hour all he could see around him was blackness. It was clear the beast could not fit through the narrow entrance to wherever it was he was now, because they had not followed him.

 \* \*

The man stopped chasing them, and turned around and went back into the cave. He could see each one of them, and so they stopped to wait until he made his move before continuing back in the direction of Elose’s cave.

He seemed to wait there forever, just staring at them and they staring at him, though no more than a few minutes could have passed in this way.

In one smooth motion, he undid the string holding on the mask to his face and pulled it, along with his hood, back over his head. His face glowed with a faint white light - each one was able to see the features of his face with absolute clarity.

His head was almost twice as tall as theirs, it seemed, though no wider. Every one of his bones stuck out a mile. His face showed no blemish, not a single hair - not even on the top of his head, which was perfectly round. His nose stretched horribly beyond the reaches of the rest of his face, and the look in his eyes made them stop running.

The master of masters just stood there, staring at them all with those horrible eyes - eyes, that when you looked into them, made you feel as though you were falling - unmoving.

As one, they bolted. And he chased none of them.

\*
Hann knew that the others must be halfway to the tunnel by then, and, hopefully, that the master of masters had decided to chase one of them. Well, not exactly hopefully, he decided, and stationed himself near the left rock-wall where the ceiling and floor came their very closest, and began to push his way back up the steep slope with his feet to the ceiling and his back against the smooth floor of the cave. The stone felt cold against his back and on the soles of his feet.

He tried to think of what he was going to do if the master of masters was still there. Maybe he’d just go back down the slope, but then he might still come after him, and Hann didn’t know where the decline ended. Plus, if the master of masters knew where he was, it would be only too easy to send masters and helpers after him.

Slowly, using the rock-wall for support, Hann turned over onto his stomach and slithered the last few yards in utter quiet. Around him he could hear nothing, and as he finally reached the top, he poked his head very carefully out of the hole. Right side, all clear. The two caves were as empty as anything. Left side, uh oh.

There, sitting atop his four-footed, many-tentacled beast, he looked fouler in his impatience than at any other time Hann had seen him. His head shined the palest and faintest white; his eyes were grim and narrowed into slits, peering into the darkness with a look that meant complete contempt and pure hatred.

Immediately Hann ducked his head back into the cave. Could the master have seen him from where he was? Certainly not. But Hann could not leave yet. He had to wait there until the master was satisfied that Hann was not going to show himself, and that would probably take until night had come and gone. Hann set his teeth and moved himself sideways, out of the range of visibility from the doorway and into pitch blackness again.

 \* \*

“Where could he be? Do you think the master of masters got ahold of him?”

“Hann has more sense than that. I think he probably is still sitting there, waiting for the master of masters to make his move, so that he can escape.”

“Well, I don’t care what’s going on. I’m going back there to look for him. It’s been two hours already and he hasn’t returned. If he’s in trouble, we’ve got to be there for him!”

“That’s all well and good, Hev, but I’m not leaving.”

“Neither am I. And I don’t think you should either. He can avoid those guys better than any of us, maybe even all of us. He’ll be back.”

“But what if he needs our help?”

“Putting ourselves in more danger is more of a hurt to him than any help we could provide.”

“All right, fine. If you two are scared, I’ll leave on my own.”

As he left, Noge turned to Amid. “Watch, he’ll turn around and come back.”

Hev disappeared into the long and narrow cave, with the other two watching in disbelief.

Chapter Sixteen - Day One hundred seven

Hev tried hard to remember the path they had taken while running from the master of masters. Left, then right, then left? No, it was another right. Then a right, then they’d gone the center way. Yes, he was gaining speed now and started his way along the large cave. No sign of masters - that was good. He kept along that same route they’d followed, almost step for step, remembering the feel of the subtle changes in direction as they ran.

Finally, he came to the end of the cave. Now, where had Hann gone? That’s right, down there. He called for him. He used the special call he’d invented, hooting three notes, the first in the middle, then high, then low.

The three notes were returned to him, and Hann waved his hand in front of the cave’s entrance.

“Hann, it’s okay. Everyone’s gone.” He reached in a hand and pulled Hann out.

“Everyone’s... gone?” His eyes flickered over to the tunnel in which he’d seen the master of masters. He had indeed left. Hann breathed a sigh of relief.

Back they turned, Hev slapping him on the back and telling him how scared the others were to leave the cave, and how he’d had to come alone to see if Hann was all right. They turned left and were soon out of sight of the four lonely tunnels.

Behind them, in inhuman silence, the four-footed beast carried its misanthropist.

\*
“Come,” came the voice, paced perfectly with Dro’s thoughts of escape. “You can’t...walk away...in fact...now you must...sleep.” and with that word “sleep”, Dro collapsed on the floor. A low humming sound produced two helpers, who dragged Dro down a series of corridors and passageways, deep into tunnels and far into caves. Finally, they reached their destination, and dumped their cargo at the front of a giant throne.

Sitting to the left of the throne was a very strange man dressed most perfectly in orange. To the left of him was another man, dressed in orange with the exception of his belt, which happened to be yellow. To the left of him was another man clad mostly in orange. To the left of the throne, were ten people who had never before stepped outside of this room, lined up in the order of the amount of orange they were wearing.

There was nothing sitting on the throne when Dro came to. This did not mean it was unoccupied. There, carved into the back of the tall chair, was another spiral that curved inward into blackness.

“Hello, Dro. I want you to stay asleep.” immediately Dro stopped all movement. “Now, I want you to tell me everything you consciously remember. Start at the beginning and leave nothing out.”

 \*

Hev and Hann talked and joked while they were on their way back. Somewhere inside of them they felt some deeper connection, and as they shared stories they had invented or just remembered somehow, they seemed to know each other’s stories and could already guess what was going to happen next.

It was in this state that Hann turned around and thought he saw something moving in the darkness. The two of them looked around for several minutes, and, seeing nothing, continued to walk and talk. Then Hev turned around and saw a more definite shape go and sit in a dark part of the cave. First the two of them began to walk a little more quickly. Then they began to run. Then they began to run full steam.

Ever so faintly, they heard the sound of sackcloth rubbing against the stone wall behind them. They turned, and their worst nightmares were realized - behind them, they saw a halo of most unapparent white sitting atop a hideous creature, and that creature was not far behind them, and gaining ground.

Instinctively they dashed into a cave too small for the four-footed beast to be able to fit through. From there they ran - at least, they moved as quickly as they could - until they turned to see what the master of masters was doing next. Out of his cloak, he pulled an object and pointed it directly at them.

Without looking at it or wondering what it was, the two dove face-first toward the floor. Above them and afront of them, they heard a huge crack, like thunder, if they’d ever heard any. The sound of two great boulders striking together: very deep and very, very loud. Immediately the two jumped up and began to run for their lives, never looking back.

Tired and panting, they reached the end of the tunnel. Both Hann and Hev looked in wonder around them - the place they were in was rough and craggy, and there were passages that led up and right, and down and right, and up and left, and right down the middle - this place was not only unusual, but neither one of them had any idea where they were.

Between them and a decision-making game Elose taught them, they made a plan of action in case the man decided to follow them. They also decided which of the many passages to take - though the decision could have taken hours with all the personality the two of them had.

Right and down first - and if it didn’t work, straight center. Right seemed the best way to go at the moment, as it simply felt like the way back to where they were. Right and up looked like a dead end to both of them; they were in perfect agreement.

They spent the night in a secluded cave whose entrance was only apparent from the tiniest of angles. They found it quite on accident, and it was a stroke of luck for them. That night, Hann had a dream.

He dreamed that he was sitting on the top of a mountain, in perfect balance. He dreamed that he could see into everyone in the world, and that their complaints weighed him down and made him unhappy. Around him were the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of the forest and the taste of the distant wind in his mouth. At his right shoulder lighted a bird. He put it up to his ear and listened to what it had to say.

“Something’s going to happen very soon. To you it will seem like a great failure.”

“Morgen!”

“Yes, my friend, it is me.”

“Morgen, I’m going to become a Magi like you! Elose showed me how.”

“I know, he showed me how too. That was a very long time ago, though. I need to give you this message, and then I’m going to let you wake up.”

“Okay, my friend.”

“Sometime very soon, sooner than you think, something will happen that will seem like a great failure. Even though I am telling you this, you won’t forgive yourself for what happens. What I need to tell you, that you will keep inside your heart whether you remember it or not, is that it will happen to protect you. I wish it didn’t have to happen this way, but when it happens, I’m going to help you fail. That way your lives can be spared until such time as your are powerful enough to take on the new troubles that are about to start. That is all...”

“Wait! What’s the right way out of this cave?”

“Down and left. All the others are dead ends.”

And when Morgen had finished speaking, Hann woke up. And he knew the way.

Chapter Seventeen - Day One hundred eight

It wasn’t long before Hev and Hann were back in a cave with which they were familiar. They followed it until they came to a junction. There they went left, and they followed the other tunnel all the way into the great cavern, where they served soup.

“So, Hann.”

“Yes, Hev?”

“How do you think the master of masters knew exactly where to look for us? How he knew exactly what we had done?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, you guys!” Charles had approached from amongst the crowds of people waiting to get in line.

“Hi, Charles!”

“Did you guys have... a lot of fun yesterday?”

“It.... it wasn’t you, was it?”

“You can’t be serious. It wasn’t you, right, Charles?”

Charles’ face looked dumb for a second, then he disappeared back into the crowd and Hann and Hev weren’t able to find him again. When they couldn’t find him, they began to shout his name, loudly, so that helpers and everyone could hear that he’d been talking with one of them.

“Look, you two.” Charles’ voice was usually at a pleasant tempo, but that was now abandoned. “If you don’t shut up and get out of here right now, I’m going to call everyone. I’m going to make them all chase after you.”

“You don’t know what you’re doi- all right, I’m leaving. But you are missing out, whether you can see it or not.” Hev, who had remained silent since Charles came, uttered a quick “g’bye”, and the two of them turned back around and headed for the long, narrow cave.

Within three minutes of entering the cave, all negative thoughts of Charles and what he had done to them had disappeared. Elose had returned, and he and Noge and Amid were all playing a learning game, which involved communicating with mouth sounds other than words.

Immediately Hev and Hann opened up to him, and told him everything they had tried to do, and the reactions they had received, and their close encounter with the master of masters. Elose listened calmly, and then gave an emotionless nod when they had finished.

“You four are all very, very interesting. The things you think and do... you’re probably the four most interesting people I’ve ever met. However, what you have done is very dangerous, and though I don’t want to curb your courage, I think you should try and stay away from Charles and his kind - whenever or wherever you find them. He sounds like the type that will cause much more trouble in the future, even than he has caused for you now.”

“But... we were only talking, and we had no idea he would contact the master of...”

“There is no need to be defensive, Hann. I approve of what you’re doing. I’m only here to guide you, to give you a choice. There is another choice, and that is to wait during dangerous times, until others come to you. There are times for both, and I want you to do both, so that you can be the successful person... that you have always been inside.”

“Thank you, Elose. I am curious about one thing, though. Do you think Charles really did tell the masters about us? How would we find out?”

“Well, you could always go out and look for yourself. Don’t go all at once, though - This time, I think it would be best to send just one, as a scout. Two eyes can see about as much as eight can.”

They played another reasoning game and Hev was chosen as the two eyes of the group. He left the other three and went on his own, toward the cave where the soup was served.

\*
“Getting easier, isn’t it?” the voice from the throne echoed horribly off the walls, fear stinging Dro like needles from every direction.

“Yes, master.” his hand was around the neck of a helpless old woman, his fingers on her forehead, drawing information out of her mind like water out of a well. The analogy was better than Dro thought it would be, it never occurred to him just how homogenous information was until he had learned to deprive it from others.

“I can see you’re still having second thoughts about the betrayal of your friends. I have no patience for this!”

“Master, please! I’m doing all the exercises you taught me. Those thoughts will be gone!”

“If you want to keep your memories, you had better make sure you’re right.”

The world wasn’t all bad for Dro. Those sensations of light and feeling from which he had been deprived for so long were now beginning to take their fullest form - in the study of the innermost, most sought after secrets of the mind, those thoughts that could save or destroy. For the first time since he could remember, Dro felt powerful.

This wasn’t the kind of power he got from reaching others or achieving his goals or learning new things - this was the kind of power he got from manipulating others, from being the controlling factor in every situation. His trainer was the Master of Masters of Masters himself, the very soul of Puhfervenherbm: Orfacious.

Dro, unlike all of Orfacious’ other servants, was an experiment, to see if he could learn the secret ways of Orfacious and become his successor, or at the very least, gain mastery over half the system of caves, with Orfacious his continuing instructor.

Unfortunately, Dro wasn’t doing as well as Orfacious had hoped he would. He was learning the lessons well, and internalizing them, but he seemed unable to perform, as though some part of him were still holding on to the past. Since it had been at Dro’s own request that he retain his consciousness, if he did not make sufficient progress (a condition that, sorrowfully, he was not able to quantify) Orfacious could erase all his memories and turn him into the most base of servants: the mindless pusher.

Thankfully, everything seemed to be headed on the right path. Well, really Dro wasn’t sure. He was far too scared of Orfacious to really sense how he was seen by him, and his voice gave only negative cues about his performance as a master. He called out in his mind for help - from anyone, everyone - but there was no answer.

 \* \* \*

When Hev returned, he gave a full report on the events going on in the cave where soup was served. Hev being the storyteller he was, all was not finished until he had embellished every detail with descriptions, feelings, ambiguous hints and plenty of schmaltz.

“...Anyway, I slipped in by the skin of my teeth, careful as anything not to make my presence known to the horde of ominous beings standing no further away than I am from you now. They were in a rage about something, and though I only heard bits and pieces of their angry rant, it was enough: they were talking about us.

“The one was telling the group, ‘There are more than we originally estimated. Our security plans are going to fail us before the end of this month. Something must be done.’

“The other one was even less optimistic. ‘This whole thing is outrageous. Totally unacceptable. I think those responsible should be demoted. Most of all, every one of the instigators should be crushed. And I mean every one. I’m going to send all I’ve got on patrols, and I suggest to you all that you do the same.’

“It was that last part that got everyone else excited. They all agreed to put everyone on patrols.”

Hev looked very sober when he said what he said next. “I hope that doesn’t mean what I think it means, or else we’re all in big trouble.”

“Elose, what does this mean?! Will it be save to leave this cave ever again? Will this cave even be safe?”

“I’m not sure. One thing’s for certain, if everyone’s on patrols it’s probably not a good idea to leave this place for a while. You can rest in that cave in the back, and in a few days when everything’s died down, you can continue to explore.”

“I’m not sure if I want to explore anymore. Look at all the trouble we’ve caused!”

“Yes, and think of all the good that trouble is doing for those undecided! Soup will stop being served. People used to complete daily routine will now see their masters doing something different, and maybe that will give them the courage to try something different, too. There will be no one to tempt, no one to pressure, no one to push. All on account of you four.”

“Heh, yeah.” Hann broke into a broad grin. “I guess it is.”

 \* \* \*

One day, while the four of them were resting in the back cave and Elose had left to look for more ingredients for soup, something happened. They stopped sensing. They stopped dreaming. It came without purpose, without warning. They drifted into sleep and did not wake up.

When Hann realized what had happened, he went into a panic. All of a sudden, he wasn’t able to sense anything of the world around him! He wasn’t even able to dream! Something was wrong, very wrong, but what it was, he did not know.

Day after day, hour after hour, Hann tried to break himself out of this state. Nothing seemed to work. He imagined candles and trees and people telling him wondrous stories, but the candles gave no real light, and the trees did not do anything like they did in his dreams, and the stories were bland, made up from his own head.

Twice he thought he saw movement from the outside. Once he thought he heard Elose’s voice. But nothing ever happened beyond that. How long time lasted in this state he was not sure, but he hoped with his whole heart that it would be over soon.

When Elose shook him and drew him out of his sleep, he found out that it had been two months since he had last moved. Two months! All that time gone and wasted. What if Canada had returned to pick them up, and decided they weren’t ready? What if there were more people they could have talked to, but didn’t?

Elose seemed calm, but there was a pensive look on his face. “Hann, do you know why did you fell asleep like that? You were wholly unsensing, like I have only seen in the deepest part of the caves. Do you have any idea why that happened?”

“No! Elose, we weren’t doing anything wrong, that I could tell. I don’t know why it happened. I was really scared...”

“Don’t worry. I understand. Here, take a look outside, in the caves.” He led Hann, who was still unsteady on his feet, over to the tunnel which led to the long and narrow cave. To Hann’s surprise, the entire tunnel, floor to ceiling, was choked in mist. Beyond a few yards there was nothing except a dirty white to see.

“What’s that? What’s happening out there, Elose?” Hann covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve as he said this, the air around them smelling strongly of sulfur.

“I don’t know. I think you should go as a group and find out, though. Here, take these and chew them. The gases will have no effect on you that way.” Elose held up three bitter roots, and Hann took them.

“Which one of us is not coming, Elose?”

“Noge. He needs some extra help, I think. He’s not used to waking up from these states they way you three are.

“All right.” Hann then headed back into the cave, to wait until the others woke from their long, restless sleep.

“What... What happened?” Amid rolled over and sat up, scratching the side of his face as he said this. Hev, too, was awake, and though Noge was usually the lightest sleeper, he had not yet stirred from his position.

“There’s a curse on the caves, Amid. I think I know where it is, and I want you to help me stop it. Here, chew this. Elose told us each to chew one. It should keep us from falling asleep again.”

After spending so long in a helpless state, even the bitter roots tasted good to the company as they walked down the mist-obscured halls. What they would find, and where they would find it, none could say. Still, they kept alert and tried their best to be brave as they walked into the long and narrow tunnel, where people were pushing each other, or laying on the ground, both choking in the sulfurous smoke.

Chapter Eighteen - Day One hundred ninety five

The caves were unusually dark. The red light from the Chasm was now all but neutralized by the mist, and the area was so saturated that the three humans had to hold on to each other in order not to lose each other.

As they proceeded deeper into the caves, though, the mist cleared out somewhat, and it was easier to see longer distances. As a result, Hann and Hev sat down a minute to watch the mist for any signs of masters coming their way. Amid remained standing and did his best to guard the site as the other two talked.

“Well, do you see any masters?”

“...no, I don’t see anything interesting. Looks like under this mist everything’s as usual for the people down there.”

“Okay, then let’s keep goi-“

“Wait! I just saw something!”

“What did you see?

“Noge’s companion! The dog!”

“Where did it go?”

“Out that tunnel to the north! Let’s follow it!”

“We’ll never be able to catch up from over here!”

“No wait... there, there it is again! I think he’s waiting for us!”

“What would he be waiting for us for?”

“I don’t know, but why else would he be waiting around over there! C’mon, let’s not keep him waiting!”

“All right. But,” and Hann added this with a note of sarcasm, “we better not have to stay the night anywhere else.”

They regrouped and made their way through the thicker fogs in the center, over to where they had seen the dog. When they saw him disappear around the corner the moment they got there, Hann could have sworn he’d seen Elose turning there, and not Noge’s companion.

“Well?”

“Well, let’s follow him.”

The dog was the most energetic of tour guides. Unlike the rest of the people affected by the mist, he was not sluggish or angry. Actually, he was so bouncing and joyful that it began to scare them a little. Each time they turned a corner he was already halfway to the next, turning around and giving a scratchy bark to let them know he knew they were still following him.

Through unusual passageways and down long staircases, they walked through an area in which none of them had ever been. When the ceilings began to lower, they crawled through the tunnels, and, for the last three feet or so, slithered on their stomachs. Then the passageway opened up, and they came into a large cave, at whose center stood a great altar, shiny black, made of obsidian.

“Come here, Hev, take a look at this!”

“Look at what?”

“On this altar - in it, I mean. It’s like the stone is built into the altar!”

“What kind of stone is it?”

“Looks like hematite. Only in this light, it’s lost its silvery look, it just looks...”

“Jet black. Wait a second, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know, but I sure don’t like it. Get back!”

Hann pulled on Hev’s sleeve, and they fell back on each other and nearly knocked Amid off his balance. Out of the stone came a puff of mist, then another, and then huge billows of mist and smoke started pouring out of the machine, going up shafts and disappearing from sight. Soon the room was just as clear as it had been two minutes earlier.

“So, this is what has been creating the mist!”

“This is what the dog was leading us to!”

“We’ve got to tell Elose. Hurry!”

And so, without a second look at the blackest of black rocks, they started on their way back to Elose’s cave. When they got there, Elose asked them what had taken them five hours, and Hev told Elose everything he’d seen. “So what do we do?” was on the lips of all four, Hev, Hann, Amid, and Noge, but none of them needed to ask it. Elose seemed ready to advise them.

They could tell Elose was ready to advise because he always had a look about his face before he spoke that reminded them of just how old and wise he was.

“This thing has been sent as an obstacle from those who would stop you from watching them or talking to others or finding your way out of here. In order to progress, it must be destroyed.”

“We will do our best.” Amid was the one that said it, though it was typically Hev that spoke at those times. Elose seemed very pleased.

“You’re breaking out of your shell, Amid. You and the others. You’re all making new ideas come to life. Practice this, and no wall will bind you.”

With that, the original three led the way for Noge across the difficult passageways until again their feet rested on the dirt floor of the cave with the altar. The stone was there, as it had been before, though now a steady stream of mist continued to pour out, constantly rising to the vents above.

“Well, now we’ve got it, what do we do about it?” it was Hev that asked this.

“Let’s break it open, then we can break whatever is inside it that is producing the mist?”

“How do you know that breaking it will make any difference?”

“I just know. Here, give me one of those big rocks.” Amid picked up the rock and brought it down hard against the stone on the altar. The rock shattered and dust filled the room, mingling with the smoke to make the altar completely invisible for a few seconds.

Everyone waited with breath caught in throats and in lungs for that dust to settle. When it had, there was a collective confusion - the rock wasn’t broken! In fact, it looked as though it didn’t have a scratch on it!

Below them Noge thought he heard voices - the noise had indeed been a loud one, and anyone passing by might very well have been disturbed. Still, they had no choice. They tried a bigger and harder rock - this one a white marble that they saw to the side of the altar, already smoothed and cut with a fine edge.

Three times they swung at the rock, but the result was almost the same - no dents, and there was most certainly someone coming now, if there hadn’t been before. They made their way quickly out of the cave, frustrated, but clearly out of time and options.

When they returned again to the cave of Elose, he looked puzzled, then an idea came to his head. He took them to his shelf of books and brought out a particularly old and dusty one. The Art of Antinormal was its title, and in it were many pictures and stories about brave Magi all over the world, fighting cursed objects using various methods.

He turned to a large chapter of the book called Enchantments and Disenchantments, and started looking through the ‘M’ section (though it was only vaguely in alphabetical order) until he found what he was looking for. There, drawn crudely in old, runny ink, was a picture of the very thing they had seen just an hour or so earlier - “Machine, Bov” was its heading. Below, Elose began to read aloud to them of the machine’s function and origin.

“Cursed stones believed to be the result of the Failed Experiment of Life (see volume III, pp. 43-81), the Bov Machine has no recipe for creation. It is, therefore, difficult to come up with an antithetic, or perfect disenchantment. Effective disenchantments include:” the book went on to list a dozen or so names and page numbers.

Carefully marking the place with a flattened root, they began to search through the enormous book, reading each disenchantment and wondering how they could pull any of them off in a cave. Most of the disenchantments included sunlight, fresh plants, and other things that seemed to be so full of life, but were impossible to reach in this cave.

Finally, they were on the last listing. “Universal Disenchantment, p. 6” was all it said. Elose flipped the book to its front cover and pulled back three leaves. There, right where his fingers were still gripping the page, was a small article dedicated to the “Universal Disenchantment”. Elose read aloud again, though this time showing some excitement in his voice.

“When all else has failed you, return to the simplest principles of the struggle between good and evil. In a place where the bad is the ruling power, the presence of even a little good can counteract even the most powerful of enchantments. This disenchantment will work anywhere, at any time, if it is a time when it is most needed.

“Find an object endowed with goodness and the light of life. Its size shouldn’t matter, though an object of great evil may require a larger or more potent object of good. By allowing the two objects to touch each other and their influences combine, the two will counteract each other.”

“That’s just what we were looking for!” exclaimed Amid, jumping up from his chair.

“It’s a marvelous idea!” said Hann.

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“You’ve made remarkable improvement. Despite the fact that any simpleton with a free will can do this without effort, I am quite proud of you.” Dro stood there in his black robes, sweating and looking proudly on at the twitching body before him. This man had been dreaming about the outside. Dro only pulled it off because he knew he was guilty of the same.

“Yes, now you’re beginning to understand. My Servants and Helpers know only of me, but my Masters, as you, have their free will. They dream of places outside this cave. Some even know of them. It makes it easier to do what they have to do.”

“But the control...” Dro was still giddy with what he had just witnessed. Half an hour ago a quart of soup wouldn’t have fazed this man. Now there was nothing in his mind, except the memory of pain, and that, too, would soon be gone. Dro had done it from start to finish, approached the man in friendship, listened to what he had to say eagerly, then led him down the path to this place, all the time letting the man believe that they were headed for escape.

Deeper and deeper the man went, and Dro stopped leading and began following. The man hardly noticed the difference. When at long last he reached the Orfacian chamber, the place looked to him to be completely empty, and there appeared to be no entrances or exits. Dro had built the illusion. Then Dro told him, told him so convincingly that his dreams could not take him where he wanted to go, because where he wanted to go did not exist. Then in a swift motion he deprived the man of his sight entirely.

The man cried like a baby. Dro did not allow himself to take any more of the man’s thoughts, he wanted the man to undo himself, as the effect then would not be reversible. Dro did allow himself to listen inside the man’s mind for a moment, and he was pleased with what he heard:

“I knew it! I kept trying to tell myself otherwise, but deep down I knew it was true. How could I have been so stupid!”

The despair the man felt earned Dro a great deal of respect from the Descending Ten, who executed the will of Orfacious in this chamber. Above them and below them Dro could hear the voices of men under his control. He was now a Master. Orfacious was still sickened by his presence, and threatened ever more convincingly that he would erase his thoughts, but he was a Master now, and that was enough motivation for him to continue in his studies.

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The next day, a great noise came up from the depths of the cave. It was pulsating, impossibly deep, and yet it sounded like it might be just a cave or two away. The growl soon turned into a roar as the company left to pursue objects of obvious goodness.

In the noise’s ken, the tunnels seemed to wind longer, the caves grow darker with the mist that now hung like a spread hand in every corner and crevasse. The company were beginning to fear the noise and a great trembling came out of the ground, then the whole operation stopped entirely.

Quiet. The quiet was frustrating, following the terrible noise they had just heard. Now and again the noise’s echo would reach them from some far-off cave, but they weren’t sure if it was a different noise, or just the same one come back again.

Through the caves they wandered, and it seemed that each new cave was more bare than the last. Above and below them, now contained only smooth, gray limestone. The places of beauty that they had seen before now seemed to hide themselves, making themselves impossible to find. Frustrated, they were about to return to Elose when the sound started again.

Fainter, at a higher pitch, control of the caves. “You could wait here until the Machine’s effect wears off, but there’s no guarantee they don’t have a hundred or more subordinate stones, off which it leeches energy and preserves its own curse. These bitter roots should last you through a week. The only thing we can do is keep trying.”

On their way out, Hev stopped and turned back toward the cave. “Why did he say we should keep trying when he won’t even come with us! Here, hold these for me.” He handed his bundle of thin, white-brown tubers to Hann and ran back into the cave. When he came out, Noge’s companion, the dog, was with them. “Hey, guys, look who I found!” The dog was looking up at them with lively eyes, his coat an earthy orange.

It wasn’t long before the dog turned onto a separate path, though the tunnel he used was far too small for any of the rest of them to follow, except maybe Noge, who instead chose to go with the company.

Unfortunately, nothing had changed since they had first gone in search of beauty and goodness. The caves were impossibly bare, the passages seemed longer and more unfamiliar than ever. It was almost as though the whole cave system was stretching out, pulling the beautiful places out tight as a drum, making each mile, each step longer and more difficult. It was that difficulty that saved them, that kept them from succumbing entirely to the mist and darkness and the soundlessness of a whole world of blind, deaf, and numb people.

Seven days they searched through the caves. Seven days of only unfamiliar territory and perfectly polished, symmetrical ugliness. Even their days seemed to be following a pattern, as though they were perfectly scripted.

Wake up, Hann. Wake up, Hev. Hann and Hev wake up Noge and Amid. Look around the cave for signs of anyone. Nobody’s there. Continue walking down the path started last night. Reach dead end. Turn around. Next path to the left. Also dead end. Turn around. Two passages to the right. Good, we’re finally getting somewhere, mutters Amid. Right turn. New cave.

The entire day maintained that level of clarity, but the repetition didn’t serve to teach anything to the company. Seven days they followed a holding pattern, unsure even if the cave they were in was the same one they’d been in three days ago, or four, or if they’d ever been out of that cave.

Finally, they sat down, out of bitter roots and unsure of whether they could travel any further. “I don’t think we’re going to find any magical items this way.”

“Yeah, what’s the problem, anyway, Elose told us we could go find them, but now that we go, there’s nothing to find!”

“It’s like we’ve already lost the battle. The Machine has destroyed our every weapon against it.”

“Then it can never be destroyed, and we just used up the last of Elose’s bitter roots. It’ll take him months to find more, and they barely lasted us a week!”

“We can’t do anything else. We’ve got to head back to Elose’s cave.”

About that all four were in agreement.

They took flight back in the direction they came, careful to keep asking each other questions, keeping each other awake and moving. For two straight days they walked, afraid to take much time to sit or rest, for fear that they might fall asleep and be lost forever. For two straight days they choked their way through the caves, the ever-present mist seeming to descend upon them from the tallest places in the caves.

When they had made it back to the cave where soup was served, it looked large and impossible clean and flat. No longer was there movement in the crowds. Now they only stood, perfectly still and ominous in the cave’s new darkness.

In the long and narrow cave, the Masters were nowhere to be found, replaced now by great clouds of mist that moved in between the people, causing them to grow ever stiller. They were about to sneak off into Elose’s tunnel when one of the people, crouched over and perfectly slow and deliberate in manner, stood up in front of them and stared. One by one each of them rose, staring, murderous looks growing on their faces.

Hann bolted for Elose’s cave, and the other three followed him. Into the cave they went, but the eyes of the people did not follow them. They only stared into the one spot where the company had been, looking as though killing that empty space of air was their only thought.

When they finally dragged themselves into the cave, it was Amid that spoke first.

“Hi Elose. Hi Morgen. Hi Trevanian.”

Chapter Nineteen - Day Two hundred five

Five small lights entered the room as all the candles were lit and placed around the room. Hann greeted the Magi with a warm embrace, as did Amid.

“Who are these people?” The question was not meant rudely, but it was Hev that asked it, and the question was directed at the two brothers in orange robes.

“These men are Morgen and Trevanian, they are the Magi that brought me and Dro and Amid into existence.”

“Okay, then, what are they doing here?”

“We’ve come to pay our brother a visit, and to see how you have fared.” Morgen was the one that stood up, though it was Trevanian that spoke. “Also, the three Magi have not been together in quite a long time. We’re going to stay until the Dritseh, in which you, of course, are quite welcome to participate.”

“Wait, back up. Before I ask you about the... whatever it is you just said, I have a question.” Hev paused for a moment, screwing his eyes up and to the right. “Okay, never mind. What in the world did you just say?”

“The Dritseh. A most magical night, when great lights appear and great lights can be created. No Master, nor servant, can interrupt it. It is the time when candles can be made.” Morgen was speaking this time, and he looked at Hann as he said this. “Also, a time when evil is at its weakest, and can be conquered.”

“When is it going to happen?” Hann looked back at Morgen, interested. When Trevanian spoke, his head whipped around to face him.

“Four days from now. Until then, rest. You’re going to need most of your strength to participate in the Dritseh.”

After their two days’ run, resting was one instruction which they had no trouble making the most of. Every morning, Hann would tell the Magi some of the things the company had gone through, and the Magi would tell him stories about people long ago. Hev could tell these stories, but they weren’t the same coming from him. Somehow, listening to the stories seemed to give everyone an increased sense of awareness, a new perspective concerning life.

Amid, too, and Hev, would come into the main room of the cave and talk with these two very old men, ask them about many things, and receive their answers. They learned other reasoning games, learned old methods of discovery, and new ways of writing to track their progress.

At the end of four days, they were quite rested and becoming rather anxious about the upcoming whatever-it-was. The Magi had not told them another thing about it, they simply reminded them to keep building their strength and to keep their eyes closed as much as possible. Not once did the Machine or their failed attempts to destroy it enter their minds.

When evening arrived (it didn’t take long, the day went by in a hurry) the Magi led them low along the floor, and back through the caves, leaving through one of the tunnels connected to the cave where soup was served. They made a left turn, down a series of hallways which they had never before seen. Of course, they must have seen them at some time, but with everything stretched the way it was, there was no telling where they really were or where they would end up.

The mist piled higher and higher on the ceiling, like wet clay falling from a potter’s wheel, only in the reverse. Everywhere they went they had to crouch to avoid it, even when the tunnels were high enough to accommodate a running jump.

Now, it’s one thing to have to crawl through tunnels and sleep in tiny spaces, Hann thought to himself, but it’s a lot more difficult to know that you could stand up, but you would be overtaken by a great evil if you did. Somehow, it makes the ceiling even harder than stone. And yet... He looked above him. He could see the ceiling here. The mist was not very thick. Of course, it was much thicker than when they had searched for a magical object. He was with Magi, however. Magi with the power to heal or wake, or possibly even drive out an evil spirit.

It wasn’t very long at all before the Magi were far ahead of the company. They waited patiently for their friends to catch up, then continued walking. This cycle continued for at least another three rounds, each time, the company, out of breath and hot from all the crawling, the hot mist, and the feeling of crampedness. None of the company were sure just how much time passed, to them it seemed like the distance was some two hours on foot, on hands and knees it could easily have been triple that.

When they got to the cave that the Magi had chosen, Elose’s timepiece told them that they had only gone an hour, but in that hour, had traveled six miles. On foot it may have been possible, but on hands and knees? They must not have read the right time before they left. “Tonight is the Dritseh,” they were counseled. “Many unusual things happen on this night. Your quick movement will not be the first such thing. Do you now realize why you have gathered their strength?”

The four of the company sat down at one end of the cave as they were instructed, facing the three Magi and the empty cave around them. Hann instantly recognized this place as the one in which he had been placed immediately after his awakening. Of course, that can’t be possible, he said to himself, that place is much too far away from here.

After a while, Hann began to notice the differences that clearly separated his first memories with this new place. The similarities were there, too. The room was in the shape of a waning moon, there was dirt on the floor and rocks of all shapes and sizes stacked along the walls. One thing bothered Hann, though. The place was dark - very dark, and certainly not the kind of place he liked to stay.

When they were settled, Morgen stood before the company, arms spread wide. Trevanian sat on his left, and Elose on his right. Suddenly, the room became even darker than it had before, and none of them could see even the outlines of anything. A good smell came over the room - one of fresh air - and above them, they felt the mists depart.

Then, there came a noise, like the sound of tiny rocks being rolled against a hollow stone. The sound continued, and above them, they saw the ceiling begin to glow with the very faintest of gray light. In the light, they could see Trevanian in deep concentration sitting on Morgen’s right, and Morgen himself concentrating, his arms lifted high above his head.

The gray light grew brighter and brighter, until nothing resembling the original ceiling was left. Above them, it seemed the world had no end, just alternating swirls of white and gray, with the sound echoing around the room and coming at them from all sides.

Elose lowered his arms until he was holding them out to his sides, and some of the gray color drained out of the ceiling and splashed up against the walls. Around and around the white and gray swirled, and somewhere high above a faint yellow light began to glow, as well.

Next, Elose leaned forward and appeared to apply himself as the others had. The floor below them grew greener, as the ceiling grew grayer. soon the green spread to the walls as well, and the company found themselves in a world where green and gray were at war with one another, pushing against each other, each one carrying its own space.

Then, the sound stopped. Trevanian stood and walked toward Hann and Hev. “Hann, Hev, you must take the images from your own dreams and project them onto the walls. Do as we have done. Amid, Noge, I need you to provide us with sounds, and smells, and textures. Do also as we have done.”

Then, seven working as one, they sat and quietly pushed their minds to the limit, willing the walls to display what they had imagined or remembered. Hann pulled from his mind his second memory, that of the great expanse of trees, and the old woman’s cave. Hev pulled from his mind stories he had written long ago, of great oceans of water and of men living upon it in great floating cities. The opposite sides of the room began to take shape with their new colors and patterns.

Amid remembered the first echoes of his mind, and he placed them in between the trees he began to see form. Noge took sounds of wind and insect and the many movements of water and air, in their every combination.

Finally, From somewhere else entirely, came a blue sky - the grayness came off in great strips, though some part of it remained, and above them was an arrangement of the purest clear hues of blue that any of them had ever seen. It made the roof look a hundred times taller than it looked when they came in, but there was still something missing...

From Hann’s dream, he remembered the great light above him, and somehow it seemed important to add. Through the new sounds, he called to Morgen. “Morgen, what is missing from the sky?”

“Don’t worry, it will come later.” and so they concentrated, and blurry lines became sharp and clear, and indistinct noises had a direction and a source and a frequency. Finally, as though he were setting a great stone into a holder, Morgen dropped his hands. As he did so, Elose told them that they, too, could stop concentrating.

They opened their eyes. They were no longer standing in a cave. They were now standing in a forest.

Above them stretched an endless blue sky. To their right, trees without number blanketed the green expanse around them. Underneath their feet, they felt the softest of textures, that of grass and mud and moisture, unlike any feeling they had ever had. All around them came unusual noises and smells that were somehow very familiar.

To their left, they saw a great river emptying into a vast stretch of water. There they heard the call of wild animals, the roar of the water hitting against itself and where it met land, and they hear more noises and smelled more smells that seemed familiar only to a certain extent.

They dared not walk toward any of it, for fear they would break the spell. Hann threw caution to the winds and plucked up a flower from the ground. There, in his hands, was a piece of life. It was fragrant beyond compare, and though it faintly reminded him of the soup, it was clearly natural and good, whereas the other only reminded him of evil.

Elose gave the members of the company each a stone he had picked up from the ground. Noge put his down, and Elose did not argue. Looking at each of them deeply, Elose placed a hand on the head of Hann, then Hev, then Amid, and finally his hand came to rest upon Noge’s head. Noge picked up his rock again, and, bracing his legs, hurled it into the air. The other three gasped. Surely the rock would hit the ceiling and break the fragile vision they had created!

It did not. The rock sailed high into the air, defying everything the company knew. Morgen put a hand toward it, and it did not fall, instead it went higher and higher, until it, too, became part of that vast overhead painting of the sky.

Trevanian raised a hand, and a sound unlike any they had ever heard came out of the rock and floated to them below. Again and again it sounded - like many rocks hitting against many other rocks, but so much softer, more smoothly. Something about the sound filled them with a joy the could not describe, and as they looked, the rock began to flow brighter and brighter, so bright, that they could no longer open their eyes. As Hann stared from behind his eyelids, he saw again that bright green light he had seen before - he felt his eyes water, perhaps from the memory, perhaps only from the shock of the incredible light. Then, the light moved across the sky, and went behind the trees and disappeared.

Tentatively, each of the four opened their eyes. The vision was still there, now there was only a faint light coming from somewhere or everywhere behind the trees, and below them, all was much darker than it had been. The sky was now of a much deeper hue, and darkened visibly as they looked upon it.

Elose stood again in front of Hev, and this time motioned for him to do as Noge had done. Hev did not hold back, and his rock went yet higher into the air. Trevanian waved his hand, and the rock remained where it was, this time playing a sound very much like the one they had just heard, but different. Still slow, still soft, but somehow different in a way they could not yet sense. The rock began to glow, and Hann winced, closing his eyes. Brighter and brighter, too, this rock grew, but it never reached the brightness the other had.

Hann opened his eyes to behold a wonderful sight. The trees were swaying with the wind, the texture of the night air distinctly different, and almost flavorful in its aroma. He looked behind him and saw the calmness of the water, gently rolling and swaying in the night wind.

Hann turned to Morgen to ask him a question that returned suddenly to his mind. “Morgen, how can we acquire magical-“

“Now is not the time for questions, Hann. You, too have a stone. Now is the time for its use.” Hann turned to Elose, who gave him a nod, and Hann tensed his muscled and threw his stone into the air. At the same moment, Elose grabbed Amid’s wrists and sent his rock flying on a collision course with Hann’s.

When the two hit, there was another sound, but it was not the sound of rock hitting against rock, nor was it the kind of sound they had heard before. Instead, it was like a great rock falling from a great distance, or the sound of a rolling boulder hitting a wall. The sound hurt their ears, but by the time they had their hands up to cover them, the sound had stopped.

The Magi bade them look up. Above them they saw a thousand floating splinters of rock, spread across their whole view and hovering just inches above their heads. Morgen raised his hands to the sides of his head, and each of the tiny rocks began to glow with an intense light. The company were about to again shield their eyes when all three of the Magi raised their hands, and the rocks zoomed yet higher than either of the first had gone, arranging themselves in strange patterns as they went.

Slowly, the entire scene began to rotate, and the Magi then turned to the members of the company. “These sights and sounds cam out of your own minds, not ours. And yet, they are perfect replicas of places which you do not remember seeing, or hearing, or feeling before. Hann,” and it was Morgen that was speaking, “I want you to remember the look of this place, and keep it with you always during your adventures to the outside.”

“Amid,” and this was Trevanian, “You, too, need to remember the look of this place always. When you dream, you dream of this place. Inside you is the power to return to the place you dream about.”

“Hev, my friend Noge,” Elose came and held both of them by the shoulder, “Your eyes will behold these places. When you do, remember this day, and remember the many deeds which you have done that brought you to this day. Be proud. You have seen the Dritseh, seen by none save Magi and their friends, the future Magi.”

Finally, Hann asked his question. “How can we find magical items?”

Trevanian was the first to answer. “Magical items can be found in many places. Where you look determines what you’re looking for.”

“But we’ve looked for everything and can’t find anything.”

“Then you’ll want to make them instead, probably. That’s the proper way.”

“How can we make our own magical items, then?”

“Oh, well, that depends on your own taste. The making is up to you.”

“But I haven... we haven’t any idea where to begin!”

“You could begin with a magical occasion.” with that, he said no more.

“But... how can we have a magical occasion when we don’t know how to make magic by ourselves? Please, Trevanian, tell me how I can do this. I don’t know how.”

“The night is still young. Maybe you’ll come across a few good ideas.” It was Elose that spoke next, and gave Hann a wink.

“Hann, we have to leave. You can spend the night here, among this vision. It will disperse within the hour, but most every tunnel, every cave, will be a safe place, so long as you return to us before tomorrow evening. Now is the time for sleep, and when you wake, for an adventure. Good night!” Morgen spoke at the last, and the three Magi, two robed in orange, one green, passed single file through the veil of the vision and out of sight.

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“You are ready?”

“I am, master.” Dro pulled back his hood and stood in the crowded room. The noise they were making was incredible. Some were walking toward the outside, some toward the inside, others just stood there, and spoke to one another in loud voices. Each one of these people had their own free will. As his final test, Dro was to deprive them all of it.

He studied the situation for half an hour, letting his mind seek every corner and look into every mind. Here the people were all seeking something, something about which they were not sure. Beneath this lurked their more carnal desires, something Dro was certain could be used to his advantage.

Behind him, the Descending Ten were jeering. Dro had stolen much of their power since he had arrived, and they were glad to see he was so perplexed by the situation. They knew that this performance was timed, and if he was not quick enough, his mind would be erased and their power returned. None said a word, in the Orfacian way, they rejoiced in his mistakes, and allowed him to make as many of them as he could.

Orfacious watched silently, never once looking into Dro’s mind, as was his custom with these tests. Dro was the type to waste time, but he thought that Dro had been making such progress since he had begun his coaching. Every other Master of Masters had started immediately to control the weak and persecute the strong, but perhaps that was only because they were under more direct coaching. As it seemed now Dro would be unable to even attempt such an enormous task as this, Orfacious made a mental note that free will can only take someone so far before it fails them. It occurred to him ironically, that he, too, had this free will.

Dro looked into their minds, looked for patterns in the chaotic freedom of thought they enjoyed. He saw now that his only means of success would be in something radical, something which would make no sense to Orfacious or to the Descending Ten. Something came to mind, and he was sure it was not his own thought or the thought of Orfacious. This thought was from an entity still craftier than either of them.

Dro stood quickly, which awarded him a gasp from the Descending Ten, and raised his hands to his temples. His mind began to settle over the rock of the area, and it reached out and beckoned his thoughts. Soon he and the rock were one. Upon the rock, there began to appear colors and shapes, which slowly settled into one another to make pictures. Pictures of things on the outside, which these people did not know, but instantly recognized as familiar. Soon it seemed to them as though the cave never existed, only this place which they now knew as their home.

To the left and to the right they heard voices, people calling to them, beckoning, telling them about promises and light and things they desired. Food. Clothing. Companionship, beauty, and the promise of freedom and independence. Bright pictures hung on the walls appealed to their hungers and their lusts, to their desires of individuality and the growing thirst to fit in, be part of the bigger group.

Left and right they ran, spending their time staring at the things they could never have, some giving their very souls to gain what they saw in those pictures. And so, wearing brightly-colored clothing and carrying with them wealth and power and things of no use that they could not explain their desire for, they danced gleefully deeper into the caves. They were soon followed by the majority of the crowd, each one succumbing their free will to Orfacious simply for the chance to follow these people.

After that, there were the ones left in the room, unable to pay their souls for one reason or another. These were lost in loneliness and despair, and still others ran into darker places out of the sheer confusion of it all. Eventually, there were only three that retained their free will, and Dro took these over individually, imposing on them the fear of the passage of time.

“You can’t do that!” It was Descending Four, and behind him were Three and Five. “That’s not the way that it’s done! These people will forget your vision and return, and you will have failed!”

“Individuality was the purpose of my creation.” Dro said in a deadly tone. “Search their minds, they are every bit as doomed as you are now.” He said this last sentence with a grin on his face, and raised his hand. Their free wills dissipated into his, leaving only seven of the orange-clad aides.

“All right, that’s enough.” Orfacious’ voice made it clear that the test was over, and none of the Ten should say anything further. “It is not usual to say that any of these events constitutes an act of genius, but this has not been a usual event. In you, Dro, I can feel no more trace of love for your friends, for the Ten... not even for me. You love only the power, and I now know that I underestimated you.

“This act, however, constitutes a threat to my authority. For that reason, I cannot give you the power that you seek.” The Ten looked quite pleased at this, as they knew what would happen next. “I won’t however, take away the power you have won for yourself. You will retain your free will and everything I have given you. Also, you may return at any time to receive supplies from me.”

“What?! Master, but he has....”

“He did the task. I would let him destroy all of you and have him take your place, but he has done the task too well.” Dro knew what Orfacious was going to say next, but didn’t. Now even I fear him. Dro pulled his hood back up over his head and walked out of the enormous room, now empty, except for three blind and deaf wanderers, now standing, now laying, now sleeping.

 \* \* \*

Calmly and peacefully the four of them slept, tired from the rendering of the vision. Finally, a loud noise jolted them awake. Roused and scared of attack, they quickly remembered the words of the Magi and calmed down. Above them and to the right, the very bright light appeared again, only it, along with the rest of the vision, was fading.

Details began to blur and fade into the background. Like waking from a dream, everything was clearing away slowly, and the company made the transition from the world of the vision back into the world of reality.

It was as though the seams were breaking from a piece of fabric - big pieces of the vision were thrown off, small fibers scattered and melted into the walls and floor. Finally, all that was left were the faint rocks that had arranged themselves in patterns in the sky, the brightest rock, and the lesser one. Along with these stood a solitary tree.

With a sound that made them cringe, the light seemed to scatter in all directions, and around them they heard the noise of rocks hitting against the cave walls, rolling and bouncing and finally coming to a stop. The vision had ended.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Noge was the one that spoke. “I think I know how to get rid of the Machine.”

Chapter Twenty - Day Two Hundred Nine

It was still the dead of night. No one was tired, however. Suddenly they were filled with an excitement they hardly could understand. In their pockets they now held the magical items they needed, and nothing stood between them and the destruction of the Machine.

Carefully they picked their paths, making sure they didn’t lose their way as they crawled underneath the mist and into the cave where soup was served. Without the lights that they burned in the day, the room was dark and hard to navigate, but soon the company was on the path back to the stone.

“We’re going to do it! We’re going to destroy the Machine tonight!”

“I know, I can hardly believe it myself. The Magi are going to wake to quite a surprise!”

“Will they? I mean, they did drop us a hundred hints about tonight being the night.”

“Yeah, but how could they know that we would find these?” Hev’s hand pointed to his pocket.

“You’re right. They’ll probably be really surprised!”

Their course was a steady north, down those same tunnels and unusual stairways they had first encountered, now going forward, now turning left, then right. The mist grew thicker and thicker above them, until they could hardly stand the smell and their vision was restricted even when they had their faces to the ground.

From below them they could hear noises and the sound of metal hitting against stone. “The Machine must know we’re coming,” Amid tried to whisper, but in the silence around the company it sounded like hoarse shouting.

The stairways were getting steeper now, much, much steeper than they remembered, thin, brittle steps dropping down as far as three feet a step, until they were all hanging on for their lives, taking as carefully as they could one step at a time. Below them there was no mist, but fresh air did not reach their lungs. Instead, (and Amid was the first to notice this) they smelled a different smell, hard to explain, but different nonetheless.

Below them blackness hung in the air, grinning its deadly promise, each stair they could see below forming a sickly smile. At the lower steps, the stairs were already cracked, strange footprints already cutting into the dust, both signs that Masters had walked there. Hev came upon the first such stair and warned everyone to be on their guard when they reached the bottom. The company took his advice early and became frightened right then.

When at last the steps stopped and the tunnel continued, each of the four looked back up the steps, silently expressing their worry about ever getting up them again. The steps were chipped and brittle, and they had cracks all up their length. They didn’t look like they could survive the journey of even one more, and certainly not four. Hev then turned and walked to the end of the tunnel, the others following quickly behind him.

At the end of the tunnel, Hann peered into the darkness. The stone looked blacker than ever, and its mist was thicker and whiter than ever. In the darkness they saw four glowing spheres. One was attached to a face, the face of the Master of Masters that rode the strange beast. One, also, was attached to a face they had never seen, holding in his hand a stone shaped like an ear, in whose center was a spiral-shaped groove. That stone ear, too, shone with that palest of white lights. The last was coming from a face they could not see. The figure’s head was hooded in a black robe, and he stood upon the altar, straddling the dark stone, letting the mist wash over him.

At length Hann stared into this cave, filled with such evil as he had never seen in a single room. There were a dozen Guardians there of a kind which he had only seen guarding the bridge. Each held a forked spear, with two enormous barbs at the end. There were helpers there wearing black hoods, some carrying chains, some with pouches on their backs that could only carry one thing. All seemed to be focused on that stone, except the hooded one, who was facing the entrance. In fact, were he only to lift his head, he would see them! Immediately Hann pulled everyone past the cave’s opening and into a secret pit near the entrance.

“I believe,” came a voice smooth and flowing, nothing like the voices of the Masters they had heard, “that we are no longer alone in this room.”

\*
Dro was traveling faster now, trying to return to the place of safety before he lost his power entirely. Something was happening, everyone was losing control, and the caves were growing warmer, the motion of the air from somewhere high above them affecting the Masters in ways untold.

“What do you want?” the comment was directed at him, as he entered the now-empty throne room.

“Tell me,” Dro said, feeling weak but with enough strength to give voice to his anger, “why it is you must be reminded you are the better mind-reader between us. Is it ego? Or the product of having never used your brain for anything else?”

“You’re very funny,” Orfacious answered with a moment’s hesitation. “Actually, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, neither do I. Where are the Descending Seven?”

“Tell me,” Orfacious replied grimly, “why it is you must be reminded I am not the only mind-reader in the room. Is it stupidity? Or the product of having a butt glued to the top of your neck?”

“You’re very funny.” Dro said with little hesitation. “Stupidity. Is that like being stupid?”

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Dro left the cave and began to travel the route the Descending Seven had taken, leading to a place which he had never seen, but had heard of. A Machine created for the glory of man. He knew he would be ridiculed for being so strong and yet seeking aid, but he also knew the other choices weren’t nearly as good.

On the way, he discovered a pocket of rebels that were sleeping in a secluded cave. In his mind, he thought of how it felt to be one of them, and then went into the cave to deprive each one of that feeling. His presence excited the one on watch, and the man’s yelling caused all to wake in fear, some running for their lives in the opposite direction, others pressing themselves against the wall.

Fear, Dro began to remember from his lessons, is the first mistake. Intimidation unlocks the door. As they scattered and separated from each other, Dro soon realized that, disjointed as they were now, even if he left now, they would never recover. But he liked to make sure.

“I curse this cave,” and Dro spat upon the ground. “If any of you ever takes another step in it again, you will come under my control. You four are first, Zo, Ilb, Walm, Dug.”

 \* \* \* \*

Silently in that pit, Hann, Amid, and Noge began to panic. Hann was the first to vocalize his fears. “They know we’re here. What can we do? They’ll come looking for us.”

“But tonight is the Dritseh! The Magi said that every cave was safe!”

“They said most every cave was safe. Do you think that includes caves filled to the brim with Masters?”

“Maybe that one in black robes already saw us. They could be waiting for us out there!”

“Maybe they’re listening to every word we say!”

The three shut their mouths after this and tried not to make any noise of any kind.

Midnight passed. Elose’s timepiece wasn’t there to mark the hour, but they had heard it so often that they thought immediately of it when the time came. Hev stood up and positioned himself so that all three could see his face. He looked almost angry. The three prepared themselves for his words, and he began.

“These people know we’re coming. They know our intentions. They’re not going to leave, and they’re not going to abandon their machine to try and attack us. They have great power and they have said they will show us no mercy.

“None of that is in the least important, however. This night, the destruction of this machine, it means getting out or not. For me, personally, getting out is more important than life. I’ve spent a lot of time now with each of you, and I know that you are willing to die for this, too.

“Let’s push forward and fight this battle with all of our strength. Nothing else matters. If we never get out, but we destroy this machine, then we’ll have done enough.”

“But,” Hann stood, too as he spoke, “we’re not sure about this. We don’t have any proof that there is an outside. How can we know this is the truth?” The other three grumbled their approval.

“We do know! Yes, we do. Search deep inside you. It’s more than dreams or books or the Magi’s words. There’s something even deeper inside, and I’ve seen it in you, and I know you feel it, and all you have to do is pay attention to it.”

Four beings stood as one, and climbed out of the pit into the cave filled with monsters. Immediately the one in black robes wasn’t the only one looking at them. They turned away from the stone to face the intruders, looks in their eyes unlike any hatred the company had ever felt. The enormous Guardians raised their barbed spears and pointed them directly at them, some just inches away from their faces. The four froze, half in fear, half out of instinct, knowing that if they ran they would surely be killed.

The one in black robes stepped out of the smoke and stepped down from the altar. His face glowed so brightly now that they could see its outline through his robes. In one smooth motion he pulled them off his face, and the four had to squint for a moment to adjust to the new light.

“Hann, Noge, Amid, Hev. I have been waiting with such eagerness to meet you again.”

“Dro?” it was a collective word from all four, peering into the eyes of this Master with puzzled looks on their faces.

“I had such an interesting time on the other side. Wouldn’t you believe it? I went to the very edge of the caves. There is no exit, after all.”

Dro pointed to one of the guardians. The guardian immediately thrust the barbed spear into Amid’s neck. There was a loud snap, and Amid went limp.

\*
“I curse this cave,” and Dro spat upon the ground. “If any of you ever takes another step in it again, you will come under my control. You four are first, Zo, Ilb, Walm, Dug.”

Dro stretched out his hand and three of them were gone. But this one, Dug, was not affected. “Or perhaps die instead.” Dro drew on the negative energy in the area and sent it flying at the stubborn one. It was at that time Dro noticed something that made him completely powerless.

In Dug’s heart was a love for mankind, which extended even to the Master of Masters that was standing before him, and was trying his best to hurt him. Dug did not fear him! Immediately Dro felt his powers disperse. If there were more men like this out on a night such as this, his kind was in dire trouble.

"Come over here.” Dug said nothing else, he simply sat and began to meditate. Dro sat, staring at him, wondering how such power could come in such a simple shape. Dug was built strong, very strong, which was quite unlike any Master or rebel he had ever seen. He stared for some time, and then began to copy his actions.

It was not long before Dro knew. Maybe, he said to himself, no, definitely, this one can save me from Orfacious.

 \* \* \* \*

“Duck!” Hev shouted it, but the other two were already thinking it. The three flattened themselves immediately on the floor.

“Pull them out! Pull them out now!” Hev reached into his pocket and threw the brightest rock from their vision into the air. Immediately that strange sound returned, and the other stones flew out of their pockets. Out of Hann’s came the dimmer stone. Out of Noge’s came the green stone that had been the tree. Out of Amid’s pocket, though he hung limply from the barbed spear, came a thousand tiny pebbles. Each of them were glowing with a light every bit as bright as when they had seen the vision.

The brightest stone blinded everyone in the room. The Guardians threw out their spears, missed high, and stabbed each other in the legs and feet. Screams of pain were everywhere. The Guardians turned and fled, along with the rest of the monsters. The company heard Amid’s body fall limply to the floor, and then the clatter of the spear still attached to his neck hitting against the ground. For what felt like an hour they lay there, until they became accustomed to the light and were able to open their eyes. It was as bright as a thousand candles, or even more. The monsters had fled, and Dro with them.

- - - - -

With the monst ers go ne, the co mpan y h ad no trouble
walking u p to the s to ne . The roc ks f ell fro m
the sky an d int o the ir ha nd s. Be fore they p laced
them on the Mach ine, Ha nn r an ba ck t o Am i d .
“We c an’t ju st l eave h im h er e, we have to do som

ething !” So He v a n d th e ot hers tried t o

pul l out the spear . M i r ac u lo usly Ami d’s skin
smoot hly let t he sp e a r ou t, and it looked as
though i t ha d ne ve r b een p ierc ed. Together

they appr oac hed th e M ac hin e. A m id’s S

tones fell al so into h is hands. A feeling of
great evil filled th e room , as though this
Ev il thing was putt in g forth its

every resistance.

they p l ac ed the ston e s o n the Machine.

T h e r ock l o s t i t ‘s j et- black

lo o k . it bec am e a s any h e ma t i t e w

ould look , a du ll , me ta ll i c b rown. T he M
ist fa d ed as th o u gh it, to o , ha d only b e
en a v isi on. the fe e lin g, too, of ev il that
had been upo n t he m , w as g one . It wa s not long
b efore a gr eat cry ro s e up, whos e echoes came f r
om eve ry d irec ti on , a nd th e com pany fro ze in
its track s. T hos e s a me monst ers c ame out o f ev
ery pathway in to the ca ve, and t he company ran with
a ll th eir m ight up the now normal -sized s tairw ay.

- - - - -

Still running now, they caught a glimpse of what exactly was still behind them. It was Dro, and they were sure that not far beyond their range of vision the remainder of the monsters were still in pursuit. They ran, something to which they were no longer accustomed, after all their sleep and crawling through the caves. Thankfully, it was something to which he, too, was unaccustomed, and he did not gain ground.

Not knowing whether the left or right paths were safe, they ran in whichever one was wider, allowing them to keep up their speed. Through many dark places they ran, places in which they had been told not to run before. As Dro was left beyond their sight behind them and they slowed their run to a jog to conserve energy, Hann turned to everyone. “We’re not supposed to be here. These caves aren’t safe, either. I say the next time there’s even a tiny crack, we should go into it and off this road.”

“Okay, here’s one.” Hev pointed toward a crack some two hundred feet ahead of them. Hann saw it and the four of them squeezed their way into the crack.”

“Hann? Hev?” came a call from inside. It was the voice of Charles.

 \* \* \*

“What are you doing here?”

“Shh! Get to the side.” Charles pulled them away from the entrance just as Noge heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Soon everyone heard them - stomp, stomp, stomp. They were searching every cave and marching down the halls. Hann motioned for everyone to begin running again. Charles shook his head violently and tried to keep them away from the entrance. Hann turned and faced Charles, a look of anger burning in his eyes. “Why should we trust you?” he mouthed. Charles looked back at him with a look of deepest sorrow and truthfulness. “You have to trust me. Stay here and keep out of sight.”

The stomping sound grew ever louder, but the five of them could now barely hear it. In a long crack barely big enough for one person to stand in, they were squeezed, single-file, completely hidden from view. A Helper carrying soup marched into the room, studied it carefully for a few seconds, and then went came back into the formation marching down the hall.

The company made motions to come back out, but Charles raised his hand. Another Helper came in and followed the same process. Then another. And another. They did not count them, but at least seven Helpers entered the room, one at a time, to look at it, and finding nothing, left. It was not until the sound of marching was very faint indeed before Charles gave the signal to let everyone back out.

“What’s going on? Why did you help us?” Hann was still furious, and now looked even more so as Charles emerged from the crack, looking, as he had since he had first spoken to them, sorrowful and truthful.

“Your words in the cave that day, they really were true to me. But I can’t accept them.”

“Why can’t you accept them? What is so wrong with what we have to say?” Amid was speaking now, and he seemed as frustrated and angry as Hann.

“Nothing is wrong with what you have to say.” Charles took a deep breath, then began.

“If you can count something, that means there has to be a finite amount of it. Let’s say, you can look at this floor and see four loose pebbles.” Charles picked four pebbles out of his pocket and placed them on the floor. His voice was clear and unrushed. It was obvious that this was something about which he had thought plenty, and his speech would be words he had rehearsed.

“You could walk to everywhere in the caves, and other places besides, if such places exist, and count each loose pebble. That means there is a finite amount of pebbles.”

“There is a finite amount of everything that can be counted. You can count caves, and so there is an end to caves. You can count hours, and so there is an end to hours. You can count forward steps, and so there is an end to forward steps. When you talked to me before, it was about progression to infinite space, which is a lie. You only progress so far. Any other movement you do takes you further from the goal. This place of discipline and order and gratitude and safety and peace, this is the goal. Many people, like you, move from the goal. They are destroyed. I have seen them destroyed, not by the Helpers, but by their own foolish actions. Respect one another. Don’t hurt anything. This is wise counsel, and you know it. Do not be fooled that greater wisdom is a long journey from good wisdom.”

Though they found it hard to believe Charles would think that deeply, they knew in their hearts that he was not reciting the words of some Agent of Orfacious. This was his mind itself asserting its position.

“Thank you, Charles. You have shared yourself with us and we appreciate your truth. (Truth? Thought Amid, though he let Noge continue to speak) Since you brought it up, let us talk some more about rocks. This one here,” Noge held up a fist-sized rock in the corner of the little cave, “is just one. You can count it, and there is a finite number of rocks in my hand, one. But with a little effort, one becomes two.” and Noge brought the rock down hard on the stone beneath him, splitting it in half. The noise was loud and both Hann and Amid tried to stop him, then hurriedly went to the corridor to peer out at whatever evil may have been stirred. Before they could admonish Noge for his lask of discretion, he raised his finger and they were silent. This was not a time for fear.

“Now you can count them again. There are two rocks in my hand, a finte number. But two can become three, and three four, and so on, with a little effort. So really, there are as many rocks in my hand as I am willing to make. And should I decide, I could make a tower of pebbles that stretched from the lowest to the tallest of these caves. Infinite potential. Infinite amount.

“It is the same with anything. There are as many steps as I am willing to make my feet go. As many hours as I am willing to fill with adventure. As much progression as I am willing to earn with my frail little body. Which is an infinte amount. In my mind, I saw two rocks. And two rocks there are. In my mind, I see an escape from the caves and an end to Orfacious’ evil reign. In my mind I see a wisdom beyond the extremistic, narrow, and passionless wisdom of these caves. In my mind, I see us reaching that wisdom and going beyond it to still greater places. And I see you with us, Charles. Some day.”

Charles hesitated a moment. “But… this is my home! How can I leave this place? What will become of me when I leave? What’s out there?”

The others could see on his face a look of fear and uncertainty, and, all confusion gone, they knew now why he had helped them: He had lived in darkness, and had never seen the light. Hann thought instinctively of his candle, but somehow he knew that it would break the Magi’s rules to let someone like Charles see it.

“I can’t come with you. I’d be too afraid to go. Even if I went, it wouldn’t be long before I turned back. It’s better that I stay here, but there you are.” Charles pointed to the crack in which they had hid.

“That place is my secret tunnel. It runs all the way back to the big cave. Nobody has ever been in it but me. Here, I’ll come with you if you want.”

“No, that’s all right.” it was Amid that spoke, and they noticed now that his voice sounded a little different than when they had last heard it, a little deeper. Amid himself seemed a little surprised at this, but he spoke on. “Thank you for your help.”

When at last they made their way to the cave of the Magi, they found the three of them asleep. Immediately they collapsed next to them, exhausted.

Chapter Twenty One - Day Two hundred ten

That night, Dro dreamed of music. Music, rhythms within rhythms, harmonies played on a simple stringed instrument, six thin, strong strings, plucked by a masterful and skilled artist. He could not see the music, nor could he hear, specifically, what direction it came from. There it was, though, taking hold of his every sense, making him see and feel as well as hear the music. A living force it was, reminiscent of life itself, beautiful whether happy or sad, fast and complicated, slow and relaxed, the anticipation of a final note.

All over far too soon.

When he woke up, Dug was there. Dug said nothing, simply sat and watched until Dro was ready to wake up. He knew Dug watched everything that happened last night.

“Amid!”

“He’s all right.” Dug picked up his instrument and began again to play. A majestic tune this time, in a minor key, then switching quite unexpectedly into a major key. Back and forth he switched, never once repeating a melody or harmony. The first theme reminded Dro of long journeys he had taken, the second, of sitting at Elose’s feet and being told of whole nations of people that, like themselves, escaped Puhfervenherbm. The third, of the stories Hev had told of a grim, yet exciting past. The fourth, of their chance meetings, time and time again, with the blue-haired Canada. And on and on it went, each theme bringing back memories of adventure and the hope of greater things to come.

Dro finally felt his memories returning, his feelings, his soul. How lost he had been! Though he retained his free will, he had not used it. He was a slave to the very things which he used to enslave others. Fear, want, and hatred of the unknown.

Dug finished the song. It suddenly occurred to Dro just how long it may take to reverse his condition. His body was weak, and without Orfacious inside him he could not expect to overpower any of his old allies. He pushed himself up to a sitting position and turned to Dug.

“What will become of me?”

Dug’s reply did not come then. They sat there in silence, the empty air around them filling an hour of their lives. Dug opened his mouth and, as was his nature, said but few words. “You will recover, as fully as one such as you can recover. You will return to your friends. I will not come with you.”

“But... why not?” It was the one thing in which Dro had been the most excited. With Dug with them, surely anything would be possible.

“If I attempt it, I will be killed.”

“What?” But Dro didn’t really want the answer to this. Like the Magi, Dug seemed to be one whose advice you could follow exactly. Dug picked up his guitar and walked out of the cave. Struggling to get to his feet, Dro followed him.

Through the caves they walked, up staircases made in steep rock by a yet older generation of inhabitants, and into low-ceilinged caves lined on both sides with rare crystals that glowed in the darkness. As time passed and they walked on, Dro began again to hear the highest and lowest sounds, and as he heard the motions of the planets, he realized just how much time he had lost. So many months, wasted on empty activity, motivated by fear.

Every day they walked like this, for many days, so many that Dro lost count. He would wake to the sound of that instrument, and every day the tune changed, and every day a new memory was awakened in Dro’s mind. Like a second awakening, he felt himself opening up again to new truths and new senses. Every day, he felt less and less of Orfacious’ grip upon his mind.

At last, they made one final loop and returned to the cave where the soup was served. Dug would not follow him all the way to the Magi’s cave, but Dro did not expect him to. Dug went back into the caves, and Dro turned and went along the path to Elose’s cave.

 \* \* \* \*

When Dro entered the cave, the fright of their last encounter was gone. The joy of having been reunited was the only emotion present as Trevanian gave his greetings and the company hammered him with questions. What happened? Where had he gone? What had he done?

Dro told them, first, only about Dug, how he had saved him and returned him to normal. He told them about music and what a wonderful thing it was. In his mind he could still hear Dug playing, theme after theme, each one a memory of his own past. It was only when he had finished telling them of these happy times that he told them how he got to be where he was.

“This place is not some random happening,” he told them, his face serious. “This place is a factory of souls. It was designed to capture us forever and lead us to damnation. These people, they aren’t just doing what they’re doing because they think it’s wrong. They are against us, and when we do not progress, it is they who benefit.

“There is a mind. He is over them all, he knows them all, he controls them all, he watches over them all. He designs the plans for them, to capture us, to bring us to sleep forever.

“But there are more trying to escape than just us. They know the outside exists. Many even remember it. That is why we must get out of here. It does exist. And we can get there.”

When he had finished, giving as brief a description as he could of his actual journey into darkness, starting with his trip across the Chasm, a chill came over them all. Hann voiced their feelings. “That’s the only way out. If we can’t get past it, then we’re stuck in here forever.”

A smile spread across Dro’s face. “There is another way.”

“What? That can’t be true! Canada said there was only one way out.”

“This other way is far more dangerous, and far more secretive. The Agents there are trained to kill anyone seen walking on it in either direction, and they have never failed to do it.”

“Then we have no chance of passing it, so why even think about it?”

“Because I have been taught many secrets. Secret ways to travel along that road, and many others that we must pass on our way to the outside. I was taught many interesting things.”

Dro went on to explain to everyone the tall tower of castes, the functions of the teams of Servants, Helpers, Agents, Masters, and Masters of Masters, and their many sub castes and sub-laws. Orfacious’ point of view was their only point of view. It was an extremely efficient system, when you got down to it.

He told them about the weapons they had, not only the physical weapons, and not only the spiritual weapons used by the majority of Masters to keep people in control, but mental weapons, instruments that improved logic and memory, instruments that kept a person at a task without need for rest or food or sleep, other instruments that changed the emotions or shaped the opinions of those under their control. Most important, though, were the instruments that gave Masters of Masters far greater control over the signals their senses were already giving them - allowing other senses to fill in the gaps when one sense does not give enough information; also, the ability to blur the senses of others using the same method.

Excited, Hann asked for a demonstration. Dro handed him a pair of glasses and told him to put them on. He did.

“Wow, this is really weird!”

“What is? What can you see?”

“That’s the thing! I can’t tell! It’s like all I have is one sense, so I don’t know if what I’m seeing is actually what I’m hearing, or feeling, or tasting - even when I can tell, it’s very blurry.”

“Wow, let me try!”

Each one, in turn, put on the glasses. They tried to describe what it was they were sensing, and every time they put it into words, it got roars of laughter from the others. After everyone had a try, Dro put the glasses back in his robes.

Since Dro wasn’t ready to adventure again into the caves, and the company was done with their questions for the moment, the eight of them went back into Elose’s other caves to sleep.

That night, Dro and Hann had the same dream.

They were standing on a barren plain, dry, yellow dust cracking under their feet as they walked. They were marching, and to either side of them were five men carrying tall banners. They saw that behind them there were more men and more banners, each one black with a complicated gold symbol on the front. There were sixty banners flying in all, ten each of six different symbols. They were flying under one which looked as though it represented their destruction of the Machine on the Dritseh.

In the upper-right hand corner an orb of brightest yellow gold dominated the display. To its left was a crescent-shaped gold stamp. The bright orb had three lines drawn from it to the bottom left hand corner like rays of light shooting out, seeming to envelop a spiral-shaped symbol. All up and down the banner there were little bits of gold sewn in that shone like the many tiny rocks from their vision.

They stopped their march, and before them was a raised piece of wood, like an Earth, but large enough for ten people to stand on it. A man climbed on top of it and began to shout to the crowd. Dro and Hann heard and remembered every word he said.

“Potential. The power waiting to be unleashed in the greatest of human beings, the power to change the world. I have seen many places and seen many people. You - have potential. You are faced with a great challenge; in the face of this challenge you can attain glory.

“You aren’t, however, invincible. It was your choice to come here in the first place. Though you may have forgotten, long ago you chose to come here and become slaves. You sold something which cannot be regained without difficulty; your freedom of choice.

“It is that mistake, however, that gives you potential. Many who lose their liberty can never regain it. They are forever lost, for the choices they made that led them into slavery. Your position is a grave one. It is possible for every one of you to make this heroic exit, but only if you trust in who you are. You have many enemies, who are trying to bring you to destruction. You must press on, no matter what stands in your way. You can - You must.

“Far away from where you are now, there is a great war going on. That same being that now holds your liberty is winning. There are six hundred of you, and many more not present. If even eight of you here today make the journey and arrive at the field of battle, it may change the entire course of this great war.

“I’m not just saying any of these things. I trust in you. You have been done a great wrong. Now it’s time for you to settle the score. Show your captor that he, too, made a mistake in trying to take your liberty from you.”

The man looked like he was going to continue, when a great noise came up from somewhere behind them, and they all turned around. Out of the ground came a large and very quiet monster, which looked like it was made out of clay by someone who only had a vague idea what they wanted it to look like. Immediately all talking stopped. Wait, no, it was just dampened, the quiet of the monster was so powerful people had to shout to even be heard.

A message began to spread via shouts and hand motions among the crowd. “Hold your position. Fight together and win.” It was from the man in front, who began to run toward what was now the front of the crowd, charging directly at the monster.

When he got to the monster, he ran right into it - just as you’d expect a man to tackle someone his own size, not like you’d expect him to go at something fifty times his size. Still pushing against one of its five massive legs, lightning began to shoot out of his body, and apparently into the monster, because it pulled back hard on its leg, which crumpled under the weight of the monster’s body as it fell right onto it.

It was then the rearmost rank, which was now the frontmost rank, followed suit and went straight for another of the legs of the now-paralyzed creature. The backmost rank gave a shout and charged at the monster, and then the next rank did the same, and the next, and soon there were a hundred men on it, twenty-five to a leg, and then thirty or more, when another of the monster’s legs crumpled under.

A great cry escaped from the monster, and white mist came out of its mouth and nostrils and settled in a cloud over the people attacking the three remaining legs. Those hundred were scattered, some fell asleep, others were blinded. Hann looked at Dro and shouted a suggestion that they wake up now before the mist reached them. Dro was about to agree, when Hann saw four men descending from the sky behind them, to the raised spot which had been in front of them. With these men came strange things which neither Dro nor Hann had words to describe.

Immediately following their landing, the world was awash with noise. It was the first taste of music Hann had ever had. He was so moved by the sound that he began to shake, his whole body down to his very frame. When he calmed down after a second or two, he seemed filled with a resolve Dro had never seen in him before.

This new music was different from the music Dro had heard Dug play, but not all that different. The music was louder, and the instruments had a stronger sound to them than the stringed instrument Dug played. Also, along with the instruments the four men began to sing - something Dro had never heard before.

The music was so compelling that everyone still in their ranks began to stand a little straighter, clench their muscles a little tighter, narrow their gaze a little more to the beast they now knew as their one and only enemy, their one and only goal.

As one, they stepped in time with the music, marching closer and closer to the cloud of mist. As the first one approached, he did not flinch when he walked into the white wall. Immediately the mist parted like a torn piece of paper, spreading all around the marching party but never once touching them. The music began to play faster, and so the march picked up speed.

Hann could see the beast through the tunnel of smoke, and it seemed to have grown in size considerably since they saw it last. It was attaining a gray color and beginning to take a more definite shape, that of a giant scorpion.

The beast was gaining strength, too, and Dro could hear the screams of those injured by its powerful kicks or stepped on by its enormous legs. It then occurred to him that all of this was only a dream.

“Hey, Hann.”

“Dro?”

“This is just a dream, right?”

“Wait... yes, I guess it is, but so what?”

“So what? Why don’t we just make the monster disappear?”

“How?”

“It’s our dream, right? You and I can both concentrate hard enough on that monster disappearing to make it happen!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I used to do it so that Orfacious wouldn’t take away my dreams.”

They concentrated for some time, but the scorpion never disappeared. Finally, Hann was about to get out of the dream when Dro had another idea.

“You saw how that one guy did it! He ran into the monster and lightning came out! What if we did it just like that, only we made him disappear?”

“Let’s try it, but if it doesn’t work, I’m waking up. That mist is dangerous!”

“That mist is a dream, too.” But he didn’t reply anything more, instead he joined up with a team who were running toward the monster full-steam, and matched their pace. Hann was not far behind. They were heading for the front right leg. Crash! The tail, now fully formed, plunged into the ground right in front of them. The stinger’s every inch was covered in barbed hooks, each one with a huge dose of scorpion venom.

One, two, three, five, all ten. Everyone in the team broke off their attack. Everyone, that is, except Dro and Hann. This animal, they knew, had no venom, save it were the venom of fear. So they charged right at the stinger itself, which was at least as tall as they were, possibly taller. As soon as Dro hit the stinger the barbs sunk into his hands, arms, face and stomach. He felt no pain, however. Hann, too, slammed into the stinger fearlessly.

Immediately the scorpion was gone. There were cheers from every direction, and the four that made the music stopped playing. The man who had made the speech was running toward them. Hann turned to look at Dro, who nodded. They woke up.

Chapter Twenty Two - Year Two, Day Nine

“Elose, what is music, anyway?

“Music is sound organized in a way to stimulate emotion.”

Noge waited for several minutes before asking again. “I don’t understand. How do you organize sound?”

“Here, I’ll show you.” Elose went back to his cupboard, and came back into the room carrying a small, very strange object made of smooth marble. It was long and very thin, with a line of circular holes going up one side.

The spent the rest of that day listening to and exploring this new sense, learning about music and the powerful properties it contains to stir souls. When on the next day they left for the secret bridge, Elose presented Noge with a stringed instrument much like the one Dug played, and gave Amid the marble recorder he had been playing. From that day on, music was as essential to life for each of them as was rest and food.

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“Now, before we cross the Chasm, I should warn you of two things. One, these glasses are vital to our survival. When you wear them, though, you’re not going to be able to tell very well where you are going. We’re going to crawl very slowly across the bridge. The other, is simply that the world on the other side is much fiercer than this one. The people there are not quiet, and they are conscious. Many have decided to cross this Chasm, and their conviction makes them dangerous and violent to any that walk away from it.”

“I really wish you hadn’t said that right before we have to do this.”

“Just thought I’d give you early warning, since we probably won’t be able to talk about it in the open on the other side. Here it comes. Let’s put on the glasses now, and try not to make any loud noises.”

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“Ok, guys, all clear.” The company took off their glasses and behind them saw the spiral shape bend back into the long, thin, straight bridge they’d seen before. After that, they didn’t look back. They didn’t even have the thought to.

Around them, the color of the rocks seemed to change again. The gray limestone was replaced by a yet lighter color of rock, and the light reflecting off the walls made their skin look pale... or was it the walls themselves?

Hev put his hand on the wall and a thick white powder rose up from the spot where he touched. When he looked again at the palm of his hand, it had turned completely white! He turned in panic to Dro.

“Dro, what is this?! What did it do to my hand?”

Dro walked up to the wall, too, and rubbed his hand on it. White powder began to drizzle from the walls and make little piles on the floor. He turned back around and looked at Hev. “This isn’t anything. This white rock is called chalk. It is very soft, and comes off easily on to one’s hand. Don’t touch it, though. If we’re covered in white dust it will make us too easy to see.” No one else touched the walls. In just a few steps, though, the cave’s walls returned to the gray limestone they had seen before.

“Guys, I think I see something up ahead!” Hann was squinting, head low to the ground.

“What is it you see?”

“I... I don’t know if there’s even a word for it.”

“Well, can you describe it?” but it was too late. Hann was running now down the tunnel, and as the others ran to catch up, they, too, saw what Hann had not been able to describe.

Above them was a room. It was not a cave, though from their perspective it did not appear to be man-made. In front of it was a great arch, and though it may have been carved in years past, there was little evidence of that now. They stepped inside, and realized immediately that many people had their part in making this room, and that it had long ago been a very important room.

Inside the room, the ceiling was not straight, or smooth. It looked like it had been folded up, almost. As they explored the room, they searched, too, for the meaning of the new words they were hearing in their minds. The first appeared when they saw two great columns rising from somewhere below the floor to the unusual ceiling, carved up and down with deep grooves, still evident though water and dust had taken its toll on the lower part of the columns. High above them, much too high to see clearly, Hann thought he could almost make out a sculpture that attached the columns to the ceiling.

“Ionic.”

“What?”

“They’re Ionic columns. I remember now.”

“I... I think you’re right.”

“The people here were called the Arumi.” Dro walked to the front of the room again and began to dig into the dirt that covered the floor. He spent several minutes like this, while the others watched. Finally he lifted from the hole he had just made a single gray rock. There were carvings on it on only three sides, as though it was detached from a greater whole.

“This is part of the great door. The Arumi carved many things into the caves here such as this. The great door was the first defense against Orfacious, when he was young and weak, though no less evil. They knew that when this door was no longer enough to hold him, it would be time for them to leave. It was a very long time ago, but Orfacious tells it because it marks his first victory over mankind.

“The Arumi were not good people by any reckoning. They were violent and bloodthirsty, and even in this room here, they spilled much of their own blood. In their ignorance they kept no written record, and it was they, and not Orfacious, that first outlawed writing in this place.”

There was only one tunnel leading out from the room, and so they traveled along it. It was a wide enough tunnel, and it made their travel easy for many miles. Wider and wider it opened, and they saw the walls disappear on both sides around them. Then the ceiling, too, disappeared. Hann stopped and looked around him, and the others stopped, too.

They were standing now in a black void. They could see nothing except the floor around them, and each other. It was a place unlike any they had ever seen. Little sounds echoed off the walls. The sound of their hearts beating made a haphazard series of thumps that they could hear echoing off the walls far away. Hann lit his candle.

After taking a minute or so to adjust to the new light, they opened their eyes. Still, they could see no walls around them. They could see no ceiling, either. The emptiness around them was similar to only two things from their memory: their dreams of the outside, and the look of the vision on the Dritseh.

For hours it seemed they sat. Hann burned his candle and they played music. The place was filled with a peace, and a promise of the outside that filled them with a hunger for it. When it came time to leave, though, they came across a problem.

“Dro, which direction are we supposed to be going?”

“I don’t know. To walk past that first room was forbidden. It was beyond my territory.”

They began staring at the ground, trying to remember the look of the floor when they first got to it. It was useless, they could not navigate by anything except the walls, and they could not find those.

Hann kept his candle burning and they began to travel along a route everyone generally agreed upon. They had not taken ten steps, though, when they heard a voice from behind them, somewhere much further than they could see.

“Why are you going back the way you came?” Dro recognized the voice immediately as belonging to Trevanian. The five of them turned around immediately, and began to walk in exactly the opposite path they had taken.

In no time they could see the ceiling coming down upon them again, and soon, too, the walls came into view. “That was some good music you were playing. Who was its author?”

“It was Noge, he authored it right here where we were sitting.”

“Interesting indeed. The five of you have become musicians, as well as adventurers.” Trevanian was now visible in the distance, walking toward them. “Come this way, I will show you something.”

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They made their way to a breakaway cave though which they half walked, and half climbed. Up it led, up into a series of small rooms very much like Elose’s cave. There were books there, too, and a soup cabinet.

They did not have soup that night. Instead they slept, and early in the morning, awoke to the first meal they’d had in quite some time. As they ate, Hann and Amid asked Trevanian and Dro about the Arumi. They found out that the Arumi were very short people that had gained complete mastery over the caves in which they now walked.

“They are our past,” is what Trevanian told them as he cleared the bowls away. “They know these caves, truly. For that reason, when it comes time in the great war to seal up this place forever, they are also our future.”

“Where are they now?”

“Nobody knows. They are far away from here, more than likely, in a place where the sun shines often. Orfacious’ arrival really shook them up.” Dro was the one that said this.

“When he get out of here, can we go looking for them?”

“Yes, perhaps. Part of becoming a Magi is knowing the places of the world. When you are on your travels, maybe you will find them.”

“What else do you know?”

“They were musicians like yourselves. They would play great drums all day long in their halls. They would shout, too, and stop their feet.”

“Sometimes I do that.” They nodded their heads. Music was a powerful force, and sometimes they got a little carried away.

From somewhere below them they heard a very low noise. “Well, let’s go see who that is.” Trevanian got up from the table with a grin and led them down the tunnels again. There stood Elose and Morgen. Elose was playing a different recorder now. The tune he played was the same, just an octave lower, and Morgen was playing a drum. It was the low noise they had heard earlier. The echoes from the caves made the sound hit them from every direction, rattling on the walls and completely covering them in sound.

Still playing, they began to walk down a tunnel the company had not seen on the way in. Hann followed the most closely, with the others trailing not far behind.

While they walked, and Elose and Morgen played, Trevanian asked Amid about his neck, and what had happened the night of the Dritseh. Finally they came to a place where the caves began to branch off and curve away from each other, as they had in the caves on the other side of the Chasm. Morgen pointed at a cave to their left. “Hann, go into this cave.” Hann looked down into the cave, and inside, could see nothing. “Be careful on your way, but you must go in there. There is something you need to see.”

In the cave, there was a dead quiet, though Hann could sense the presence of thousands of beings, walking blindly along the balconies above him. He could sometimes feel eyes staring at him through the blackness, and could feel the hatred of Masters and Helpers that were all around him, above him, looking down upon him.

There in front of him, the cave became extremely narrow and short. For the first time since the Machine, he had to crawl on hands and knees to get through. The cave became still quieter, and the sound of his robe scraping the walls hurt his ears, it was so loud in comparison. He tried his best to make no noise, but as the cave narrowed even further, he found it wasn’t possible.

At the end of the cave he came to a round room. In the room’s center something was moving, but the whole place was so dark he could not tell what. Fearing the worst, he turned to run, when the words of Morgen echoed in his head. “You must go in there. There is something you need to see.” Hoping no one was around, he lit his candle.

“What in the world is that?” Something was suspended in the air in front of him, slowly rotating. It reflected the light of his candle, and for a second Hann thought it might be on fire. Drawing nearer to it to take a closer look, he saw that it was completely hollow, there was a hole right through the middle of it big enough for someone to crawl through. It was also very flat, and had carvings all along the edge of it. He walked closer, and tried to grab it.

Immediately he pulled his hand away. It was white-hot! He pulled his hand away and watched as a deep red burn appeared on his hand. Oh, how it hurt! That thing was the most evil thing he had ever felt! Again he turned to run out of the cave, but his thoughts of the Magi again caused him to turn around. He took a second look. Clearly Morgen would not have sent him this far just to touch something evil. There must be another lesson to be learned from this thing.

After a few minutes of study, he noticed that the carvings around the frame looked similar to the carvings on the door that Dro showed them in a lot of ways. He noticed how simple they were, though they looked very complex. Both used few straight lines. This frame was made by the Arumi, and he could tell that it was a thing of powerful and good magic. Something had cursed it, though, and now its magic was trapped inside, unusable.

When Hann made it back out of the cave, the Magi were gone. The others said that they had returned to the cave, and had instructed them to wait until Hann had returned. Hann told them what he had seen, and what he thought it meant.

“I think I know what the Magi sent you in there for.”

“What?”

“They want us to make it not evil anymore.”

“How can we even do that?” it was less a question and more an exclamation of impossibility.

“Can’t we use the Universal Disenchantment, like we did on the machine?”

“We don’t have any magic rocks!”

“That’s true, but it doesn’t have to be a magic rock, it can be anything. Remember what it said in the book?”

“I remember, but I don’t see how we can find anything magical in this-“

“Trust me, we will find something. I know we will.”

Dro and Hann left the others to keep the place while they went in search of something magical. Though they saw many an unusual place, things carved by the Arumi long ago, in two days of searching, they did not find anything. The hopelessness of finding something magical in this place returned, just as it had when the Machine had been running, and they turned and headed back toward the twisting caves, dejected.

That night, they heard noises from a cave very near to where they were. The noises were loud enough to wake Hann, who got Dro up and together they headed for the noise. It was coming out of a crack in the wall, one which seemed too small for them to fit through, but they tried anyway. After a little pulling and shoving, they got all the way through the crack and into a cave without any other entrances or exits.

They heard a laugh, and the cave began to fill with light. Around them they could see things growing, things they had only seen in dreams. There was Life in this room, and there, in the corner, sat two old and very happy gentlemen. The one laughed again, and Hann and Dro walked up to them, curiosity overtaking them.

“Oh, ‘allo! Yer a couple a’ funny-lookin’ fellows. ‘Ere, see if yer want somma this junk.” They pointed to a pile in front of them of the oddest assortment of things Hann had ever seen.

Clothes there were there, in an assortment of colors they though wasn’t even possible. There was gold and silver jewelry and lots of other things they weren’t quite sure about. In the pile there was a small leather flask. Hann seemed the most curious of all about it.

“Ah, good choice, there. Ol’ medicine man ‘ad that one, ‘e did. S’pose t’ave ‘eelin’ powers. Yeh, go a’ed. Take tha’ and be on yer way.”

“Wait! Aren’t yer gonna fill it with wa’er before yeh leave?” They looked behind them to see what he was talking about. There, in the other corner of the room, a small stream of water flowed out from a crack and went into another crack in the floor. Hann uncorked the flask and filled it. “All righ’ then, off yer go.”

When they returned, Hev and Noge and Amid were very excited about the flask, and the magical circumstances that had brought about their acquiring of it. They were most interested to hear about the men that seemed unaffected, untouched by the caves that surrounded them.

Hann was so eager now to get back to the round room, he ignored the people on the balconies and ran right through, crawling as fast as he could through the small tunnel. In no time at all, Hann was again in the round room, looking at the frame.

He uncorked the flask. He poured most of the contents of it onto the frame. The frame began to quake, and then stopped rotating. The brightest light that had ever been made burst forth from the frame and lit the room. Immediately Hann went blind.

Chapter Twenty Three - Year Two, Day Fourteen

Eyes! The pain was so intense Hann was completely unsure of what to do. He didn’t even move, he just lay there on the floor, motionless. The pain subsided a little, and he pulled his eyes open with his fingers. No! The Magi told him this was wrong a long time ago. If it hurts, don’t do it.

After some time, the pain subsided again, and now Hann began to hear something, someone, in the room with him. He tried to stand, but he couldn’t see where he was going. He walked away from the sound, and right into one of the walls. Which wall? Maybe he could get out by following them.

“It’s all right.” Like a harmonious note in the discord he had just experienced, those three words calmed him immediately.

“Canada?” It was less a question and more an exclamation. “Canada I’ve gone blind. Can you help me?”

“Just wait for a while until your eyes adjust. I’ll be here with you.”

Keeping his eyes closed made Hann all the more anxious to open them. Slowly, though, he could see the light glowing from somewhere in front of his eyes, and after about half an hour, he opened them. Immediately the pain died away.

Through the frame, Hann could see something that he did not entirely understand. The frame - through it, you could... feel? There was something on the other side. He walked around the room, and halfway there, he could already see the bright light that had engulfed him before.

The thought frightened him. Could he look into it again without going blind for good? In it, what would he see? There was certainly something there. He could see movement. Where did Canada go?

“Canada, where are you?”

“I’m right in here.” The noise came out of the frame! Hann ran over to it, squinting through the frame to see Canada - and something behind her.

“What’s that? Is it-“ Hann came right up to the frame and put his hands on it. He could feel the breeze blowing and the heat of the sun on himself. Unsure of what any of it meant, he reached through and tried to grab Canada’s hand.

She gripped his hand and pulled herself higher on what she was standing, so that now she was right in front of him, and took up the entire frame. “This is how I came inside. I came to help you.”

“Help me? How?”

“By giving you this.” Canada produced a stick from somewhere outside the frame’s view and handed it to Hann.

“What is it?”

“It is a small part of a tree. It is called a ‘wand’.”

“A wand? What does it do?”

“It will endow you with life, when you need it. For now, keep it hidden. Tell no one and show no one. You will know when it is the right time for it.”

“It’s a piece of life - of my own. Thank you Canada.” But something was bothering him.

“Hann?”

“Canada. Could I - go outside through here? I mean, like you came inside.”

“Yes. Do you want to?”

“Of course, but what about my friends?”

“It’s a hard decision, isn’t it? Here, let the frame show you something. It knows much more about this than I ever will.”

“It... knows?” But the image of Canada was now replaced by an image of the outside, and then of another, and another, and faster and faster until he was looking at everything at once, and just when he was on the brink of madness, he thought he saw something, a horrible image; his friends were laying there, as if dead, with spiral-shaped cuts in their foreheads. Dro was standing over them, laughing, dressed in bright orange.

Other people were there, too, people he had never met. Some were laying dead with his friends, others were walking around them, laughing. He was not among either party.

Then another image - one he couldn’t describe in words - something of the outside. Then another - Dro giving him some soup, and him drinking it. Then, he saw himself choking, and he fell on the ground, his face purple. The soup was solidifying in his throat, he could see it.

But it wasn’t a physical death he was experiencing. It was a spiritual death he feared, and it was one he was getting. He was becoming lost in darkness. Dro turned to look directly at him. His eyes had disappeared, and the very beginnings of that spiral shape were visible on his forehead. He laughed - right into the frame. He seemed overcome with laughter. Then, still laughing, he looked directly into Hann’s face through the frame. His face went very dark. He could see through the frame!

Sparks shot out of the frame as Hann tore his eyes away from the vision. Away he turned, and ran back, howling as terror overcame him.

“Hey, Hann’s back! What happened there, Hann?”

“It was pretty good. I poured the water over the frame, and I saw the real outside - not just a vision, I was actually there. Canada was there, too, and she told me I could go outside if I wanted, but that I needed to see something through the frame first.”

“What did you need to see?”

“Wait, where’s Dro?”

“Dro? He walked over that way. Wait, where are y-“

Hann had already run off.

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Hann found Dro somewhere down the tunnel. He was somehow quite different than when Hann had last saw him, but still nothing like he had seen in the frame. Dro ignored him as he walked, kicking rocks from time to time, but making no other sound.

“Something wrong?” Dro turned to look straight at Hann. There was a look of hatred in his eyes, but there was still much of the Dro that he had known all this time. Dro’s voice seemed different, somehow, when he spoke.

“Think about when we first woke up. Think about the bliss we felt, opening ourselves up to those first truths and experiencing everything with an edge of joy. I have to tell you something about that.”

“What?”

“I have never recaptured that bliss.”

“Of course you have! What about when we met Hev-“

“No! Never. Not once since you convinced me to leave. I think you haven’t either. You’re just being foolish. The closer I get to the outside the worse it gets for me here. You don’t know what I had to go through, when I was... down there.

“We have no proof that this ‘outside world’ even exists. Sure, we have a lot to believe in, but-“

“Yes, we do have proof. Listen, let me tell you about...”

“No, you listen. There is no proof. In fact, none of this really makes any sense. But that doesn’t matter. Even if there were some outside world beyond this one, it would be a worse place and not a better one. The more we grow and experience things around ourselves, the more we throw ourselves in harm’s way, the more we get hurt.

“You listen, and you listen well. What you’re chasing is a dream. It cannot be real. But that doesn’t matter either. In sleep and dreams can we find what we’re looking for. We can make our own dreams. I was taught how. All we have to do is drink a little bit of this, and immediately we’ll be in your ‘outside world’.” Solemnly Dro handed Hann a bowl. “If it doesn’t work, I can wake you up. All we have to do is try. I want to be outside just as much as you do. But I can only believe in things I’ve experienced for myself.”

Hann knocked the bowl away. The soup went flying out of it, and as it left the bowl it became thin as air, and disappeared right as it touched the stone.

Dro looked down at the empty, black, overturned bowl, in a clear state of distress. Then something entirely came over him. He looked right up at Hann, with a look in his eyes that filled Hann’s mind with horrible thoughts, thoughts of anger, and hatred, and destruction. Something was taking over Dro.

There he stood, and though nothing changed about him, there was a feeling that grew inside Hann as he looked at him. A feeling that made him want to scream. Darkness spread out of Dro and began to turn around and around in the room, finally bending lower, lower, until it threatened to swallow him up forever.

Forgetting everything else, Hann turned and ran, feeling again that same terror he had experienced during the vision of the frame. This time, he yelled to his friends, and at the end of the cave they met up with him. Dro was nowhere to be seen.

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“Shouldn’t we just leave him and go off on our own?”

“Leave him? Leave Dro? Of course we can’t.”

“Well, he did just try and destroy your soul.”

“Then we really can’t have him chasing us, either.”

“Should we fight against him?”

“No, no! We can’t talk about leaving him or fighting him. He’s in trouble out there, being attacked by something we have only before imagined. We have to save him.”

“How, then?”

“I think I can do it.” Noge hadn’t said anything since Hann returned with his story, but now everyone was staring at him. “I know what will fix him.”

“All right. Let’s go, then.”

“No, I have to go alone.”

“Good luck, then.”

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The Art of Antinormal had a whole chapter on possession, but Noge had only read part of the introduction. It said the only true weapon that a possessor has is the ability to produce fear in others. Everything else stems from physical contact with the possessed.

As long as he kept his distance, Noge kept telling himself, the possessor inside of Dro would not be able to come into him, too. At least, until he had control of his own fear.

There he was.

Funny, he didn’t seem all that frightening. Noge could tell he was possessed, though. He looked as though he was marching to some very strange tune that only he could hear.

Then he began to walk toward Noge. Noge backed up some, and tried to say something to him. “Dro, remember our Quest? Remember what we’re willing to die for?”

Dro kept walking. First left, then right. Then nothing. For two minutes he did nothing, he just stood, not quite looking in Noge’s direction. Noge looked into his own face reflected in Dro’s eyes, knowing that only after the possessed being threw his full force at him could he gain control.

Turning his head ever so slightly, Dro was now looking directly at Noge. Immediately Noge felt himself go completely cold. There was chaos inside him, and the chaos began to grow until he could no longer feel anything else, just pure discord, like a song without notes, just noise and more noise and awful screaming, squealing, screeching, wailing.

There he was, and in his eyes was a complete void, but Noge felt no fear. He walked boldly up to Dro, the blackness coming behind him and around him, but never touching him. He saw himself glow with a different light. Finally the monster threw out its full force and came out of Dro’s body. Instantly the blackness was gone and there was no more strangeness in Dro.

Hann came in from behind him, carrying the flask still half-full of water. Noge poured some of it into Dro’s mouth. Dro’s eyes opened - No longer black they were! - but he did not move a muscle.

“It’s all right now, Dro.” Noge put his hands on Dro’s forehead. “Here, have another drink.” He poured a little more into Dro’s mouth, and he swallowed it. Dro moved his lips, and a little noise came out. Noge put his ear up to Dro’s face, trying to hear what he was saying.

“Thank you. Now I remember everything; more than everything. I have seen Hann’s vision, I have seen his dream. I have seen the caves and where they end. we have not far to go. Though I never knew it for truth, now I know it is the only truth.” The words came out in a muffled stream, without pauses or accents, from Dro’s mouth before he again lost his strength to move. Noge and Hann carried him back to the others.

It was late. The five of them slept in that tunnel, not caring to hide themselves anymore. They knew they were now out of that kind of danger. When they woke again, they looked down each of the other caves for a while, exploring where they went. They chose one of the paths using a game of discernment that Elose had taught them, and walked down it all that morning until the middle of the day.

The five of them sensed the caves getting warmer now, and the feeling of things being hot or cold was very much a new sense for all of them, except Hev. The realization of it made everyone excited to tell the Magi. Dro remained tired-looking and quiet.

Hann walked quite a bit ahead of them. It seemed his excitement about finding the outside had grown still further since his experience with the frame, but it also seemed he was walking with new life inside him. Often he had to double back to find the others as they hurried along the tunnels and caverns, but he stayed with them always and together they traveled all that day, seeing nothing but caves and thinking nothing except of the outside.

When it became late evening, they stopped to rest. Hann went forward, and soon came running back. “I found another hall! One made by the Arumi!”

One by one they came into the room, and immediately their eyes were drawn upward. Above them were the strange ceilings they had seen before, and all around them were the same markings and carvings they had seen in the first room they found. There was a major difference, though - there was a hole in the ceiling, and out of the hole came a very faint glow.

“Do you think it’s really a hole all the way to the outside? How did they ever...” Hann looked up through the hole as the others crowded around him. “There is definitely something up there. What do you see, Hann?” Amid was directly underneath the hole now, and looking straight up into it.

“When you look at it just right, you can almost see a tiny point of light at the very end-“

“What could be up there? I have to see it!” Amid stepped out of the way as Hann stood directly underneath, staring long into the corridor leading to freedom, if only there were some means of traveling along it.

“O glory!” Hann reached up his hand, trying to grab at the light that was now even more brightly shining above them. The walls were the lightest of grays, and as Hann stared into the opening the whole room began to shine with an otherworldly light. Noge, too, had a look, but even as he looked the light began again to fade.

Again it was dark. The light they had seen, though, could only have come from one place - it was real. There was an outside - they were heading for it. That night they played music and slept in the ancient hall of the Arumi. In the morning they continued walking.

For days the caves climbed steeply higher. Sometimes they thought they saw the glow of that same light from other places, but they could never be sure. Hann, too, continued to walk faster than anyone else, having to double back three or four times in a day to make sure he was still with the company.

Days turned into weeks, and still higher they climbed, every day the world became a little brighter, every day the caves became wider and easier to travel. Every day their songs described better the world in which they lived, and the world to which they were going. Still, they saw no one and were met with no resistance.

Chapter Twenty Four - Year Two, Day Fifty Six

End of caves. End of travel. When they woke the next morning, there was a definite light shining from somewhere high above, reflecting off the walls and bathing the room and themselves in light. Exploring some of the other places in the room, they found two others were hiding in the darkness.

They had been there for some time, and told the company that only past this room did the caves continue outward. Their names were Krip and Yem, and they, too, had awakened from deep within the caves and made their way to this point, though their awakening had been many years before.

There wasn’t much else to say to one another. Now that the company knew the only way out of the caves was about 200 feet up, they sat drearily in that room, listening to the sounds from above and below and wondering what the Magi would do if they were there.

“Why don’t we just climb it? Not all of it is smooth, or straight up, either. There will be plenty of handholds along the way. Let’s at least try.”

And so, on Noge’s suggestion, they began to climb the wall. Each time they tried, though, they failed. Thirty feet. Forty feet. It didn’t matter. Finally Hev fell at fifty feet. He landed so hard it took him the rest of the day to recover. Nobody wanted to try again after that.

The nest day, Hev was preparing to leave. “There has to be some other way. Maybe our two explorer friends over there,” Hev pointed to Krip and Yem, who, as always, kept to themselves, “Didn’t explore as thoroughly as they thought. This wall is too dangerous. It will kill us with its very possibility.”

“Didn’t you once say this was worth more than our lives?” Amid was the one that spoke up this time, and with a boldness they did not see in him often. “Now, if we have nine lives, then you and I, and possibly Dro, are at least on eight. If we each die seven times and still reach our goal, then will it not be enough? We have to get up there somehow.”

“I’m never climbing that thing again, so if you’ll excuse me...” Hev turned and began to walk away. Amid stopped him.

“I didn’t say you had to. There will be some other way. We’ll find it. We’ll figure it out. The Magi sent us along this path because it’s the right one. No matter how hard it is to travel, it is the only path that will lead us to the outside. Now let’s get to work.”

“Work? On what?”

“Wait, Hev. Hann, you know how you’re always walking faster than everyone else?”

“Hm?” Hann turned to Dro now, whose eyes grew wider and wider as whatever it was he was thinking looked better and better to him. It took him a few seconds to speak.

“Well, let me hypnotize you for a moment.”

“Eh?” Hann turned to Noge, who nodded. Dro put his fingers on Hann’s forehead, and the room grew colder as energy was drawn out of it and into Hann’s mind. Hann pulled away. “Of course! Straight up we go!”

Here, wait for us! Dro and Hev were the first out to the middle of the room after Hann, who was already looking directly toward the ceiling, fire burning in his eyes.

“I can almost feel myself lifting off the ground already! Dro, how long will it take before we can lift ourselves off the ground?”

“Look down.” Hann looked. Though he felt his feet were still on the ground, there he was - floating in midair. With him were Hev and Dro, standing, too, in midair.

“How is this... even possible?” Hev stomped on the air below him, and it made a sound like foot against rock. The others were now looking at them now from below, wonder in their eyes.

“I think it might have something to do with this.” Hann pulled the wand out of his robes and showed it to them.

“Well, then, you might want to let Noge and Amid have some of it, too, so they can get up.”

There was a faint “Wait for us!” from somewhere below them, though they couldn’t quite tell where. It was Noge’s voice, and he sounded as though he were in a panic.

“You are the masters of yourselves. You, and you alone, decide what will happen to you. Look to your destination - you will be there.” Whether it was Dro or Hann or Hev that said this, they all weren’t sure - they let their minds think only about the destination. Their eyes and ears, and hearts were all facing toward it, focusing on it, completely entering it.

“This was a strange idea you put in my head, Dro.” It was Hann who broke the silence, which lasted five minutes, or possibly longer. “I wonder if Amid and Noge-“ Hann turned his face downward. He could see only the floor.

“Wait?” the confusion was evident as Hann’s statements turned into questions. “We were just levitating? Now we’re just on the...”

Hann stood up. The floor ended just out of his reach of vision. Behind him were Dro, Hev, Amid and Noge. He ran to the end of the hall and looked down.

They were on the balcony, two hundred feet above where they had just stood. Below them they could see Krip and Yem. Faintly, they could hear them talking.

“Wonder what madness got into’m.”

“Funny they should all climb up at once. After their friend got hurt I’d’ve hoped they stopped trying.”

“All fell after eighty feet. Would never have guessed that.”

“Too bad they didn’t make it. What were their names again?”

“Hev, Dro, someone-or-other. Oh well, let’s just do something with the bodies.

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“What I tasted on the balcony yesterday,” Dro began, “Was something I thought didn’t exist.”

“I know, I felt it too. It was like...”

“It was a new sense, is what it was. Something we couldn’t see or hear, smell, taste or touch. It was a new sense, and I can’t wait until I sense it again.”

“There is more of the world around us that we don’t yet know? Wouldn’t we have noticed something else was missing by now?”

“Maybe not. Maybe this is a sense like the kind Dro and I can tap in to. I can see things beyond the normal range of sight. Dro can hear things both too near and too far to be sensed as part of this world. This new sense you felt, Hev, might be something like that.”

“Or maybe it was just our imaginations.”

“Speaking of imaginations, what was with those two at the bottom? Were they just playing a joke on us, or could their minds just not take the fact that we floated up and made up a different story?”

“I don’t care. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“Let’s find a safer spot first. I can hear lots of noises up here, and not all of them sound good. Here, let’s go through this gap here in the rock.”

The next day they started walking down the tunnel leading away from the balcony, and almost immediately everyone began to hear the noises Dro had talked about earlier. No mention was again made of the experience at the balcony. No mention, either, was made again of the new sense that they had noticed for a moment and then was gone.

That day seemed to last forever. They walked without stopping, without caring about tiredness or pain, forever. The further they went, the noisier it seemed to become. The noises didn’t change though, or even get louder. It was a single noise - a whining noise - that got higher and higher and began to penetrate deeper and deeper into them. After some time the world seemed to lose its focus. Everything became fuzzy; candles lined the walls every mile or so, an absolute impossibility anywhere else in the caves they had ever been.

Confused and tired, but still walking, Hann pointed to the third of these candles they passed. “Do you think this means that this place is not in Orfacious’ power?”

After another ten candles or so, they found out.

The tunnel narrowed considerably, and then went steeply downward for about forty feet. They had to push with both arms and legs to stop themselves from sliding all the way down. Slowly they spidered their way down the walls and tried their best to look at what lay at the end of the tunnel.

Below them, Hann told them, there was about a ten-foot drop. The sound around them seemed to change, too. The noise was no longer of a whining, but of a weeping, in the highest of voices, a voice so beautiful it could belong only to an angel.

Down they dropped, one by one. Each one was made speechless by what they found there. They stood on a balcony. Below them was a sea of jet-black stones, each one the exact same size and color as the stone they had defeated earlier. In between, and in and out of these stones, wandered a sea of people, literally thousands.

Some were walking in through the dozens of tunnels that fed into the place. Some were leaving through these same tunnels. Some, like they had seen in the caves of pusher crowds, were sleeping, ignoring the fact that they were slowly being trodden to death by the feet walking on them.

Each of them looked as though they were fighting within themselves, confused, looking for something they could not quite put their finger on. Hann tried to escape back out the tunnel they came in, but it was no use. One of those tunnels below would mark the next leg of their journey.

Chapter Twenty Five - Year Two, Day Fifty eight

"I am looking for you, Dro. I want you back under my control. I made you powerful - you basked in your own power once. You will bask in it again. Yes, I can feel your desire still inside you. Your power still screams out from within-“

“Something wrong, Dro?” Hann sat up in the middle of the night and went over to where Dro was sitting, staring at the stringed instrument Noge had been given.

“Yeah. Just had a bad dream, is all.” Dro put his ear up to the strings and smiled halfway. He handed the instrument to Hann. “Listen. It is always playing music. It’s just very quiet.”

Hann put his ear up to the strings. The strings were vibrating, and in the absolute silence of the cave he could hear six voices, ringing out tremulously, timorously. They fought against stillness, silence and the emptiness of the air around them.

“I hear it, Dro. What do you think it means?”

“I think it means there’s hope. That music means there’s a sense out there we don’t yet know as our own. Every morning I listen to those strings play, and every morning they get a little louder.”

“Like they’re leading up to something.” But Hann didn’t get to say anything more, the noise from below them was again beginning, and the confusion below them began again, noisily, coming to full force almost instantaneously as those that had awakened began to wake others that were asleep.

The company carefully surveyed the scene below them. Below them they could feel the evil coming out of the stones, and they could see the confusion they bestowed upon those that walked among them. Their hearts beat a little harder in their chests as they lowered themselves down from the balcony that shielded them from the chaos they had only been casual witness to the day previous.

The crowds did not move as though they were controlled by Masters, but they were still a struggle to navigate. It was as though they were walking through a dreary city, everyone minding their own business, but the overall tone being one of depression. Not everyone talked at once - they could hear bits and pieces of conversation from different people at different pitches. There was a high conversation going on there, a soft and dynamic conversation over there, with words rapidly and quietly going back and forth. A one-sided conversation there. A crying child - A crying adult. There’s the one-sided conversation again.

Dreary as the atmosphere was, they knew they could never stop. Their spirits were now free - to give up that liberty was impossible. The black stones could not manipulate them. The people could not influence them. Boldly they walked toward the nearest exit, first on the left, and walked down it. Now, truly, there was nothing stopping them from reaching their goal.

“Wait, let’s go in here.” Noge ducked into a cave, and the rest of them followed. Soon they were all sitting in a circle. “Do you realize what just happened?”

“We walked through all those black stones and we weren’t even affected!”

“More than that. There were people in there talking. They weren’t just silent, they were talking, and as I listened to them I had this idea.”

“What?”

“I want to teach them. I want to bring some of them with us, to follow us. If they are talking to each other, maybe they’ll talk to us. Maybe if they can talk to us, they can listen to us, too.”

“Remember Charles. We weren’t supposed to talk like that to others. Elose told us that was a bad idea. He sent the Master of Masters after us!”

“But he also saved us when it was the most important. I think if we talk to people, we can bring out the best in them.”

“I don’t think just going and talking to them is going to be enough. It wasn’t enough to bring Charles with us.”

“Then maybe they can learn something from our experiences. Hev, we need a story. We need a story about us. We need our story, and I want to write it down right here on this cave wall, so that if one of them wanders in here, they can see what we did, and maybe tell others and maybe they’ll go on their own quest.”

Hev was the perfect choice for the writer of their story. He loved to write, and had written more than any of the others had in their entire lives (excepting Noge, who was a prodigy, none of the others had written anything at all). He also knew and remembered the whole story.

Dro was the least likely of the five to write the story. He was not only not present for some of it, most of his experience of that for which he was present was erased by Orfacious when he came under his control. He had never once written a single word. Still, it was Dro that ended up writing the story.

Dro asked Hann about much of the detail he lost during the time he spent with Orfacious. They discussed long and told each other their experiences during the time apart, and what Dro could no longer remember about their time together. Slowly, they pieced together the point in their own history about which Dro was first to write: the Awakening.

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The days stretched long as the company went back to the cave every day to talk to someone new about who they were and what they were about. Only a few listened. Of those that listened, none understood. Every day Dro and Hann stayed in the cave long hours, Hann describing, Dro interpreting, Hann explaining, and Dro writing. They wrote much about their early experiences.

Hann was the one that decided on the major plans of action for the book. He decided that their actual experiences may not make that much sense to their already confused reader. So he created a metaphor in which their world was represented. They were no longer trying to get outside, but instead it was about going from one tunnel to another. They made each event coincide with a smaller, more understandable world, in terms those that dwelled in the cave could understand.

For two weeks they wrote, and they continued writing on the wall of the cave, for the most part not changing the style of the characters in which they wrote, but sometimes accentuating their cave paintings by exaggerating the pictures they drew, forming groups of symbols into the shape of yet other symbols, sometimes painting in a different color they made especially for that day’s writing.

One day, the noise from Noge’s stringed instrument became loud enough to disturb his own sleep. He turned the instrument upside-down, so that the strings’ movement would stop. It did; at least, for a while.

One night, it turned over seemingly of its own accord, and the strings were so loud it woke everyone up. The conclusion was made that the company was being followed, and by something invisible, too. This was confirmed by Dro, who often heard footsteps that did not belong to them walk the distant hallways at night. They decided to leave the cave as soon as possible, possibly that very night.

Hann, luckily, had written a copy of the paintings on their cave in a very small script on stone tablets. Promising not to let them down, he carried them all, by himself, for almost four miles that night. There was no longer noise of instrument strings or invisible footsteps, but the company was still wary and did not sleep all at once. In fact, a couple of them did not sleep at all, they simply kept watch and kept each other awake with stories and jokes. A couple times they though they heard something outside the room, but both times it turned out to be nothing.

“Curiosity will drive a man to anything.”

“What?” Amid and Hev had just come back from the larger cave. Since they were quite a ways away from it now, the whole process took almost three days, and it had been just that long since Hann had seen them.

“That’s what the man said.” Amid went over to where Dro was painting the new cave wall with the information on the tablets and sat down. Hev headed toward Hann and Noge.

“We met this interesting man in the cave yesterday. He told us that curiosity would drive a man to anything.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I think I know.” Dro turned away from his drawings and went over to where the other three were sitting. “If someone wants to find out about an outside, they will. All we have to do is make them seriously consider the possibility.”

“Isn’t that all we’re trying to do now?”

“Maybe. I think we’re trying too hard to convince people. What he’s saying is we don’t have to convince anyone. They don’t have to come with us. They don’t even have to try and get out on their own. If we can just make them stop for a second and really wonder what they’re doing here and why we’re so convinced of all this, then they’ll do the rest.”

That night, they again heard the footsteps of their unseen follower. This time, though, its footsteps were combined with the footsteps of others, also unseen. There were three or more, and one by one they entered the cave. The first that entered the room was big enough and broad enough of shoulder to knock dust off the sides of the cave’s opening near the top, where none of them could touch both sides, even with arms outstretched.

Dro was the first to wake, and shook Hann awake too. The three beings entered quietly, so quietly it was almost impossible to tell their location at any one time. In a second moment, they turned around and headed out of the cave.

“Let’s follow them,” Dro mouthed to Hann.

“Why?”

“They might lead us to something.”

“What?”

“Let’s go!”

“No!” But Dro left anyway. Amid, whom neither had noticed was awake, followed him.

Amid caught up with Dro about fifty feet from where they had entered the tunnel. Dro was moving fast as he could. From in front of them came heavy footfalls, now, not bothering to hide themselves.

“Why are they running away?” Amid gasped to Dro.

“They aren’t running from us, they’re leading us.”

“Leading us to what?”

“To their secret.”

“What’s their secret?”

“We’re about to find out.” The invisible beings turned a corner, and then all noise stopped as they stopped running. Then the sound of Amid and Dro’s heavy breathing could be heard. There in the middle of the room was an instrument neither Dro nor Amid had ever seen.

The instrument was hexagonal in shape from both the top and from any side. On three of the edges were white-walled holes covered by glass. The entire machine was a mystery until those three holes lit up, and a phrase entered Dro’s and Amid’s minds: Follow your ears.

Suddenly a noise came out of the instrument. It started very low, and slowly it increased in pitch and decreased in volume until it was too high and too soft to be heard - wait, no, it could still be heard if one listened carefully enough.

The room was abandoned. The three invisible beings turned and went a different path, Dro and Amid turned and went out the way they came in, leaving the instrument untouched, still glowing.

“Dro! Amid!”

“Hann! Why are you out here?”

“I thought you two might be in trouble.”

“We’re ok, those invisible beings are leading us to their secret!”

“Really, wow!”

“No, you can’t come with us.”

“But- why?”

“It’s meant just for us. Like you and the frame.”

“You sure about this?”

“I’d like to talk this over, really, but we have to get going. We’ll see you back at the cave!”

The ringing in their ears led them in a wide circle around the caves. Sometimes it was specific even to which side of a tunnel they should walk, other times they could do nothing except hopelessly choose between three or four tunnels, it being unclear which of the four was being chosen by the ringing sound.

As they walked, they were joined by an unexpected visitor.

“Canada!” Amid stopped trying to listen to the sound and ran toward her.

“Hey guys! Took you long enough.”

“Long enough? For what?”

“The ringing.”

“You heard it too?”

“My niece, Gazi, built that machine.”

“Your niece? How can you have a niece old enough to build machines?”

“She’s here from the future. That’s why you can’t see or hear them. My niece and her friends.”

“What?”

“Ask Noge about them when you get back. Ask him about the Titans. He’ll have read about them from Elose, I’m sure.”

“Okay, we will.”

“That’s not all. They’ve brought their palace with them. It’s in this room over here.”

She led them through another tunnel and into a room whose walls and ceiling could not be seen, even in the comparative brightness of the caves. Slowly they walked forward, touching pillars they could not see and holding objects they could only barely feel. She sat down on a set of stone steps, also invisible, and they walked toward her, their steps echoing off every surface.

“Here. Sit down.” She motioned to her left and right, and they sat. “I’ve got something to tell you about your futures. Something my niece told me when she came from the future.”

“All right,” It didn’t sound like good news. Canada continued speaking in a low voice.

“I’m getting sick of all these caves. You guys know nothing but caves, and you still can’t tell the difference between one cave and the next. They’re designed to make people feel lost, and I do. Tomorrow I head for the exit. Chances are, you guys will try and follow me, but chances also are you don’t all make it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ruler of these caves is a very powerful being. He’s going to put forth all his power on just you. He won’t be satisfied with just putting you to sleep again. He’s going to kill you.”

“We’re strong! We have fought off ag-“

“She’s right. He is that much stronger. He might kill us.”

“That aside, even if you do get out, all but one of you will go back in and aid the Magi. The one that doesn’t is Amid. That’s why he was here too. He had a dream about me. Your dream, Amid?”

“Of you and I together?”

“It’s coming. It’s in our future.”

“R- really?”

“Yes, r-really. Now, I don’t have much time: this road will be hard. It will be difficult, and you will not make the right decision every time. That can’t be changed. You will think it can be changed. When that happens, just think back to this night. Trials aside, I want you to enjoy yourselves during your stay down here. That’s the only important thing. Hm.” She smiled. “They say we make quite a group on the other side, the six of us. If we all make it, that is.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Tonight will tell. Goodbye!” With that Canada made her way out of the room, and as she turned they thought they could almost see another girl standing next to her, purple-haired, pale-faced, and solemn.

The meeting left the pair filled with anticipation for the future, and joy at having known their possible success.

One. Two. Three. There was a noise that seemed to come from everywhere. It would start off suddenly, rumble and groan for a few seconds, then die down again. With the sound almost like a limping man, it came down around them and toward them. Then, it started.

“MACHINE! MACHINE! MACHINE!” They heard Canada scream from the tunnel ahead! Then they felt it too - the curse was upon them again! Everything around them fell away, and they fell off their invisible perches. Standing in panic, they saw that everything around them was a new shade of black. They could no longer see or remember where they had entered.

They stood there for a second, unsure even of what they were or what they were doing. Then they tried to walk forward. The air around them was now thick with a new mist, one that covered everything and penetrated everywhere. They felt their whole world being covered by a shield of darkness, as far out as their imagination ever took them. Dro yelled for Amid to follow him - his words, too, were drowned in the mist. Finally their eyes adjusted to the new level of light and they saw the exit. Slowly and deliberately, they pushed their way through the air around them toward the exit, all the way breathing in the cursed mist.

Outside the room, travel was somewhat easier, but the curse was so powerful that it took every ounce of concentration they had to remember their destination. They felt tired, and their muscles ached from straining at the air around them. Finally they could see their destination.

Once inside the cave and near their friends, it was much easier to breathe and move. They woke up Noge and Hev and told them everything they could remember. Hann was nowhere to be found. Dro thought that he heard Canada scream again, “No! Take me! Take me instead!”

Chapter Twenty Six - Year Two, Day Ninety

“Do you want to save your friend? Return to me. Inwardly it is your only desire. To stay yourself from it is to make me only angrier, and you can’t stay forever from me. This you know. This you must still remember, in spite of your recent idiocy.”

“Do you want to save your friend or not?” Dro woke with a start. That last phrase had come from Canada, and her usually cheery face was dark now, angry and uncertain.

“Dro. You’re awake. Help me wake up some of these lunkheads. Why did you all fall asleep? Didn’t you realize this is what would happen?”

“What do you mean? Didn’t we just-“

“You didn’t just anything. You’ve been asleep for a week. I’ve been shouting at you for the past ten minutes.”

“A week? But why am I still so-“

“Haven’t you been given some supplies from somewhere?” Suddenly Dro remembered the bitter roots. But it was too late.

An Agent entered the room. Then another. Then another. Canada turned to face them all. “No.” She waved her hand in front of them, and they turned away to leave, but then they stopped. They turned again.

“Noge! The writings!” Sleepily Noge picked up the writings and held them in his hands, backing away from the Agents until he has against the wall. So, too, did Hev and Amid wake and position themselves as far away from the Agents as possible.

“Stop... Stop... Stop...” Canada was holding her hands out now, and her full attention was on the Agents, still wandering about in the room, sometimes starting toward the four huddled in the corner, then turning away.

“They’re about to attack! Run! RUN!” They did. The agents turned and began to follow them. Then they began to run after them. Then they began to fly toward them!

Corners turning, all caution to the winds, they ran full-force. The Agents were still following them, and their pace, too, was energetic. Their feet no longer touched the ground.

The curse was stabbing at the chests of the company now running for their lives. It was a pain that started in the heart, then it spread down to the stomach and up to the head. It was sapping their strength, and they knew they could not go on much longer.

Suddenly they heard the footsteps of their invisible follower in front of them! A word entered their minds: “Duck.” They dove face first toward the ground, not caring about scrapes or bruises. The curse around them suddenly became very weak, and they hit hard.

Behind them they heard three loud cracking sounds in quick succession, and three lights flashed as one behind them. It reminded Hev of the thing the Master of Masters had thrown toward him. Then they heard one loud crash.

Noge, being at the top of the heap that had resulted from their face first dive, pulled himself off the others and turned around to look at whatever had happened. He could see nothing. The Agents had disappeared.

They found Hann in a cave nearby. He was completely cold, and shaking when they found him. They brought him back to the cave.

After they had all eaten some of their dried roots, Hann told them what had happened. He was on his way back when he saw a dead man in his path. “But, he wasn’t quite dead,” he told them, “his mind was dead. But he was still walking around. He had the spiral shape on his forehead. I looked into his eyes - his eyes went back, back, black and into nothingness. His voice was of darkness and ice. I tried to run away, but he grabbed me from behind as I ran and threw me against the wall.” He reached up with his hands and felt a lump now subsiding on his forehead.

When I came to, they had me in a different cave. He told me I was to go back and go to sleep. He told me I wasn’t going to go any further or cause any more trouble. He told me I was going to be a part of the system. The room was so cold I could not say anything, or even move.

Then they took me out of the cave, and I could walk and talk again, but only barely. There were four of them. They led me down a hall full of people. But they weren’t like us, or even like the people in the cave of stones. They were all completely under the control of Orfacious. They were shouting at me, telling me to become like them and become normal. I’m not sure how much of it I really saw, and how much of it they just made me see. But it was horrible. They left me alone in the room to be killed or put to sleep by the crowds of people. That’s when I ran. I got all the way here, and I heard them coming again and went in here. Then one of them came in the room, and I got all cold again. Then you showed up.”

“We didn’t see anyone else in the...” Dro suddenly felt very cold.

“Did you see where the fourth one went, Hann?”

Hann didn’t say anything, he simply pointed his finger.

Dro whipped around. Standing behind them at the cave’s mouth was something. It wasn’t an Agent. It was Canada.

Behind Canada stood something else. It walked in around her and stood in the middle of the room.

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“I’m here to
give you your
final warning.
this was said
by a voice
so alive
it commanded complete attention.
“You have nothing, and are alone. You
have much to learn about the true nature
of this place. Whether your journeys end at
the end of this adventure, or elsewhere, you
must learn to seek out those that will be
of greatest aid to you. In finding them
here, I can give only this advice: as long
as your attitude remains one of distrust and
fear, those that desire to join with you
will never be able to do so. You will
not see me again.” With this, he left.

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“I have had enough of this!” As he left, it was the end of any peace they had felt. Hann decided to continue through the caves, by himself, as none would follow him. Dro and Noge stayed to guard their writings. Hev and Amid, then, were left to discover the source of the curse, and try and end it.

Chapter Twenty Seven - Year Two, Some time later

We know they were successful. We hope they will return soon, but I hear not their footsteps. From Hamm we hear good things, he has found a new cave, higher up and closer to our goal. There he has taught many, in spite of Ofersind’s many attempts to kill him. This ends my writings here.

“Noge, that’s it for the writing. Noge?”

“Oh, sorry, I’d just fallen asleep. That’s it for the writing?”

“Yes, but I was just wondering something... Do you suppose we could write more? I mean, it’s not finished. Why don’t we try and finish it?”

“It wouldn’t be what really happened, though.”

“At least it would be something. Here, I’ll try writing just a little more.”

Just then, Seneda returned, bringing with her Hed and Amig. They had quite a story to tell.

“Dro? Hann?” The paint had barely come off Dro’s brush when Canada showed up, and with her, Hev and Amid, looking very tired. “They’ve got quite a story to tell.”

Dro turned to Noge, but he didn’t say anything then. He turned right back around and began to write something else.

That night they slept. When they awoke, they were amazed to see Moge was suddenly older, older even than they were! He had become strong, and he knew things he had not known when he went to sleep. He knew how they were to find the cave they were looking for.

Dro expected to find nothing new when he woke up. But there it was, plain as day: Noge, though he looked no older, woke up that morning stronger than anyone else in the room. His voice was louder, and he told them he knew the real ending of the story. He whispered this to Dro, who wrote his every word down on tablets, but did not read them, nor did he let anyone else read them. Instead, he let Hev and Amid tell their story.

“Things didn’t look good for us. The Magi were nowhere to be found. The curse on the caves got worse as we went inward, and the journey seemed to stretch longer and longer as we got closer to Elose’s cave. We saw Hann on the way, and he brought us to the cave where he’d seen what he did. There, we found that picture frame, but it was warped and broken. Hann gave Amid the frame, and me his piece of life, and told us to discharge the machine with those, if we could.

“The journey, as we said, wasn’t easy. There were things looking down at us from above, things that seemed suspended in midair around us. It felt bad all around us, sick and slow. There were no creatures on the bridge across the Chasm, in fact, there wasn’t much of anything, except that feeling that something was watching from above.

“Finally, we made our way to Elose’s cave. He wasn’t there, and there was only the vaguest sign that he had ever lived there. The books were gone, all his things were gone! We didn’t want to think about what that meant, and instead we kept going toward the place where we had seen the Machine.

“We went through Charles’ secret passageway, but we didn’t find Charles, either. It was like everyone was gone, like we were suddenly somewhere where no one had ever been. In the cave of the soup, there was no soup. There were no Helpers.

“When we entered the cave, we were as quiet as we could be. ‘If there was no one out there, then surely there would be a whole army in here’, we thought.

There was only one, however. He looked scared, and the spiral shape on his forehead was faint, and seemed almost to be disappearing.

“We watched and waited for him for several minutes, and finally, he, too, crawled away into a little tunnel, leaving only... the Machine.

“’This is not good,’ I said to Amid. The Machine seemed enough to drive us back, by its sheer will and its nature. As we walked toward it, it exerted more force upon us. Unspeakable energy poured out of it, and the world around us suddenly became very cold! We couldn’t move, we were frozen again to the spot. Then those entities above us began to take shape. They were great flying creatures, and their eyes burned with the fire of destruction.

“Now, again, we tried to pull out our magical items, but it seemed they would do us no good. The only thing that seemed worth doing at that very moment was letting them take us away, down into nothingness again.

“But they did not, or could not touch us. The law held true. They did nothing more than circle around us for a minute or two, and then they left.

“All was empty. We were left in silence. Then we took out the magical items. The silence did not stop, but in front of us, we could see the Machine seize up, stop working.

“Immediately we took in that first breath of new air. The mist we had been breathing was an invisible one, and far more deadly than the first, but now it was gone, and to take in that clean air, oh, what a feeling!

“Finally, we left those items on the Machine, and, sensing no danger, we waited there to see what would happen.

“The Machine lost its strength, slowly, and by degrees. It was as though it was now exhaling its last, life departing. It occurred to us that we were killing an entity, something living and now, could not live. ‘It is a sad thing,’ Amid said on our way back, ‘to have to deprive something else of life. What if we could have talked to it instead?’

“It gave a last cry, and we felt the curse again, but it was brief, and weak. There was no fear in the place. Finally, it seemed consigned to its fate, and slowly its very substance ebbed, made its last solid gesture, a single, crystalline noise, and disappeared completely.”

“All was quiet, but we felt music in our very hearts. I had a vision, that very moment.” Amid took over from here.

“I saw our goal. I saw the outside, everything we have worked so long to see with our eyes and not our minds. I saw the war. There were soldiers without number, men, women, children, I saw our future in it. I saw the great powers of our leaders on the outside, those that used their magic to awaken us in the first place. They need our help.

“I looked above us. I saw a great and blue sky, and it was the most beautiful thing! Never before have I even imagined such a thing. Oh, what skies! The world around me changed. The room which had so long been that placed we most feared suddenly became a place to be loved, and celebrated.

“I know only that we must find it. Blue without boundaries. Blue waters and blue skies. Music in the air. It is beyond even our ability to know more, until we see it.”

“Anyway, I found them at the bottom of that cliff you told me about.” It was Canada that spoke this time. “They’d fallen more than once, but I showed them a better way up.”

“And that,” said Hev with an air of storytelling finality, “is how we got back so fast.”

Everyone laughed. They’d been gone almost three months.

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That night, Hann dreamed of the Titans.

“I forgot to ask Noge about the Titans,” he thought, as the dream began.

The Titans began by introducing themselves. There were nine of them, and they looked much like other people, in fact, some looked like people he’d met before.

”I am the Forest Titan. I make Life where I can.” Standing there was Noge.

”I am the Wind Titan. Only in the Mind’s eye can I be seen.” Standing there was someone who looked like... no she was, Gazi, Canada’s niece, whom he had seen the night of the curse.

”I am the Lightning Titan. I am the Water current that is Motivation.” It was Hev.

”I am the Fire Titan. I am the Earth’s core.” Here was someone with whom he was not familiar.

”I am the Spirit Titan. One tree is not a Forest.” Here was someone he thought he saw in the caves, perhaps not long ago, though he could not remember.

”I am the Life Titan. The Winds of change, not even I can change.” It seemed this one was their leader. He had a spiral-shaped scar on his forehead! But, Hann noticed, it was going the other way. It seemed to him to be the right way.

”I am the Mind Titan. I prepare for the Lightning of inspiration.” Before him stood Dro.

”I am the Water Titan. Only by being what Fire is not can I gain its identity.” It was Amid.

“I am the Earth Titan. A kind act is etched on the Spirits of all involved.” It was the short being that had appeared the night of the curse.

Then, as they stood there, in the circle, each one powerful, and yet part of this greater team, it occurred to Hann that he, too, must rejoin his friends. His dream was one of the future, of his own future or the future of others in generations to come. They stood among stars, there were stars all around them, not just above them, not just in the sky. The ground, too, was made of stars, and the walls, and the trees. Everything was made of nighttime and sky. Then he was back in the cave, but, miraculously, joined now by these Titans which were but dream and now, flesh.

They showed him what it meant to use that sense, the world around himself that he had not yet seen. They held out a candle, but it was not a normal candle. As it burned, it created neither light nor heat. Yet Hann could sense what it was doing... it was pointing a way for him, a way through the caves, a way through his mind.

Hann woke up. He began to walk. He began to run. And the walls did not stop him.

Hamm woke up, and he knew the way out. He ran back to where his friends had been staying to show them how to get to the new cave.

Then, together they left for the new cave, and there were no obstacles to their journey.

“But wait,” Dil and Heev said. “Isn’t there at least one more we can bring with us?”

“Perhaps,” said Morning, “There are many more you can reach. Take your cave writings, for example. Why keep them hidden here, in this one place?”

One day Morning brought something strange, which would help the adventurers bring their message to many.

“It’s a book.” Morgen showed them the oddly-shaped, soft object, smooth and glistening beyond all they had ever seen. It was certainly unlike any book the Magi had ever shown them; printed not handwritten like the other books in the library of the Magi. “Make many copies. Know where they are always.”

One copy Dro kept with him always. One was given to Noge. One is kept, for better or worse, by distant witches. One is with Hann.

Another of these is now with someone about whom Hann and Dro and all the rest would like to know more; another wanderer in the cave, awakened to its nature and fearful of the consequences of that eternal sleep that Orfacious offers to all.

Who are you, reader?

Now that this book is in your hands, and you have read of the first and second year of our Awakening, do you want to know what years three and four have wrought? Do you want to know of the blue skies and green fields? Of the threat Orfacious now poses to places outside the cave?

The time is soon. The sooner you know, the sooner you will be able to participate in the adventure.

A Seal

I, W C Stuart, was once known by the name of Dro in the caves. I was schooled in the ways of the Magi and in the ways of the Masters of Masters, the way of Orfacious. I have stared him in the face, and I know that he is here, even now, and will not stop until his monopoly over mind is complete, until all have sunk into that dreadful sand. He will not win; not here or elsewhere, as long as we stand against him.

Even now we raise an army to go to battle with Orfacious himself. You can be part of that army. The time is not now, but it is soon. The sooner you know, the sooner you will be able to participate in the adventure. The world we fight to inherit is greater than anything we have yet experienced. We adventure and we inherit, and if you wander the caves now, you deserve to join our ranks and inherit in equal shares all we discover and enjoy.

The time is soon. The sooner you know, the sooner you will be able to participate in the adventure. It is in the spirit of the Magi and on their behalf I write and complete this seal.



An additional Note:

Orfacious has allies still more powerful than he, but we have little knowledge of them. In the Titans we have allies still more powerful than those, but the battle against all darkness is not a battle for which we are yet prepared. We fight now for this cave and the people inside it that can yet find the truth they have long sought but who, still under the powerful sway of Orfacious’ bitter mind, have only wandered lost, driven in circles by discreet and sinister forces. Without the Magi, we would not know the senses, nor the escape, nor the adventure. To know the Magi, you must be contacted by them. They cannot be conjured by any will but their own. Until that day comes for you, I offer what knowledge we have in an attempt to prepare you for the lightning of inspiration. The Mind Titan, whose purpose is to prepare for those moments, appeared in my image. It is therefore my responsibility to prepare those who stand in need of preparation.