

Prisoners of Perfection

Epic Fail: Book Two

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Chapter One

It was a rat that led the way, the first one ever seen in the forest prison world. It was Soma who saw it first. From high above the forest floor, perched on the top of a blue eucalyptus, she heard an unfamiliar scrabbling sound, and peered down between the leaves to see a creature sneaking its way among the duff. She assumed it was a squirrel, of course, since squirrels were familiar and fairly numerous, but this one was missing all the fur off its tail, and it was squeaking. Soma swung down from branch to branch and in moments had snatched it up by that very same tail, but quickly dropped it as it lifted and squirmed to bite her hand. The rat hit the ground running but Soma pounced again, and this time grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, so it couldn't reach her with its teeth. The rat struggled and kicked, but Soma held on tight, and carried it back to Bombarda's hut by the lake. He'd know what it was, she thought. Bombarda knew everything.

He was sitting by the fire in the middle of his house, warming his hands and watching the smoke curl up through the hole in the roof. It was not cold outside, but Bombarda was always cold inside. He felt the chill in his bones, his eternally sixty-four year old bones. Of all the luck, he was one of those cursed to stop aging when he was already old, not like Soma, or her near constant companion, Squee, who were both eight, and had been eight for so long now that no one could say how many years it had been. No one even tried to guess anymore. Since the day when The Hidden One had died, the inmates of the forest prison had hoped against hope that there might be a true cure for their immortality. All of them had been locked away, cast aside by a mortal civilization that could no longer tolerate their presence.

In the beginning, when the first of their lot had randomly turned up, not aging past some binary birthday, be it eight or sixteen or thirty two or sixty four, or even one hundred and twenty eight in the extremely rare case of The Hidden One, way back then the first reaction of the normal humans had been jealousy accompanied by fear, then anger and rage. The immortals were seized and eagerly experimented upon, even tortured and dismembered in a mad race to discover their secret, a secret that was never detected. It had to be something in the genes, but if it was, it was locked away in all the infinite so-called junk DNA that littered their bodies like everyone else's. Scientists failed, and doctors failed, and politicians failed, and the mob ruled in the end. They were tossed into this mutated forest prison, a jail whose infinity matched their own interminance. The forest had no boundaries, or none that anyone could determine. Anyone who came close to an edge, or thought they did, found themselves somehow transported, instantly and seamlessly, to another part of the woods entirely.

Bombarda, the old pulp fiction writer publicly known as Gowdy, had spent years, decades, maybe even centuries, seeking a way out. He had made many attempts. He had tried to burn down the forest, but the curious trees were resistant to flame. He had tried hacking away at them with sharpened stone axes, but the crazy trees grew back just as fast as he could cut them down. Just as the immortals could not become ill or seriously injured, neither did the trees ever seem to suffer any great or permanent

damage, no matter what anyone tried to do to them. Bombarda tried digging a tunnel. He set his Watchers about it, his gang of perpetual children who did whatever he ordered them to, who obeyed him because it suited their fancy, they enjoyed it, and anyway they were infinitely bored besides. The tunnel led them nowhere, only around in circles though they dug it as straight as could be. This prison was impossible, from its vegetation to its population, not a bit of it could be explained except by accidents of scientific research. The forest had once been a university arboretum, but it had expanded and changed and taken on a life of its own, eventually expelling its original inhabitants, who fled for fear of becoming forever lost in its tangles. That is when the government took it over and found it to be the perfect solution to its problem of the immortals, and what to do about them.

Anyone who did not age like a regular person, anyone who exhibited the symptoms, was rounded up and summarily tossed into the forest world. There were some cases of false diagnosis. These individuals lived and then died. The rest merely lived. The forest provided plenty in the way of fruits and berries and tubers. Hunger was not a problem, and neither was shelter or weather. The world had its own particular climate, not too hot, not too cold, and almost maddeningly unvarying. It rained a bit every day, and a bit every night. Clouds came and clouds went. The sun came up, the sun went down. The moon, however, never rose, though there were stars. No one ever understood about the moon. The lakes did have tides, but no one knew how. The moon must be there, they decided, but hiding. Without the moon and its phases, time was bereft of its markers. The stars always seemed to be in the very same places. The sun never altered its angle. It was almost as if, no, exactly as if, it was not the actual sun, and they were not the actual stars. It must be a fake. It was all a big fake.

Bombarda had once kept a marking of time, tallies scratched into rocks, but there weren't enough rocks in the forest to note all the days that went by. It had to be many thousands, he thought, hundreds of years if not more. There was never any word from outside. Already it had been a very long time since anyone new had arrived. The last of the prisoners were all veterans by now. The tribes, for the people naturally organized themselves, like among like, were all set and stable, and any old conflicts had long since resolved themselves in futility. There was no point in not getting along, in not letting each other alone. The cave dwellers stayed near their caves. The river folk camped on their banks. The tree people lived in the canopy and all the various groups kept out of the way of each other. Even the loners remained all alone. Altogether Bombarda figured they numbered a couple of thousand, no more. Most of them lived in the moment, hopeless and bereft of even a mere curiosity. Gone were the days of want and desire. Gone were the dreams of rescue or even escape. Nobody thought about that anymore, except for Bombarda, who still thought of little else.

His was a thirst for revenge. He had cultivated this lust for a very long time, and was not going to give it up easily. Even after all of his attempts had led to nothing but failure he still dreamed every night of discovering a way out, a way back into the civilized world, where he would find the people who'd done this to him, and he would show them no mercy at all. He had once been a quite famous author, who wrote bloodthirsty books of horror and carnage, bestsellers all, and had been living a life of luxury and adulation when somebody noticed there was something unusual about him. For at least twenty years he had stayed exactly the same. Not even a hair on his head was different after all of that time. His editor, his agent, his publicist, his fans, all of them had gotten much older, but not Gowdy, no, he didn't change. There were whispers of magic and witchcraft, of bargains made with the devil, just as in one of his books, but soon enough the agency put it together, and determined him to be an immortal. One night, while he was sleeping and dreaming of white puffy clouds, they knocked down his door, they seized him and dragged him away. Before he was even awake, or so it seemed to him later, he had found himself alone and abandoned in this cursed forest prison.

The first person he'd met was The Hidden One. She and her grand-daughter, Ember, a wise and precocious child, acted like gatekeepers back in those days, welcoming in all the new prisoners, and

showing them how to get along and get by. He'd never forgiven them for that cruel hospitality. Instead of helping him stay, they should have been helping him leave. He knew it wasn't their fault, and that his judgment was completely unjust, but that's how he felt, and he honored his feelings by staying loyal to them, regardless of situations or facts. He plotted and schemed, but it did him no good. He couldn't even enjoy the unquestionable beauty of his immediate surroundings, his self-built cottage on the banks of a lake, with the mountains in the distance, and the sparkling rivers that flowed in and flowed out. He sat by his fire and kept his inner fire burning.

He kept birds in cages. He had trained some of them to leave and return, and had set his Watchers to follow, hoping they would lead the way out, but the birds never did. They just flew around and came home. Now he hated them too, but he couldn't get rid of them. Even when he destroyed all the cages, the birds still came home, and nested on the roof or inside along the walls. He tried to ignore their singing and chirping. Let the children enjoy them, he thought, while I remain bitter and cold. The children did love all the birds, gave them names and chased them around. They had begged Bombarda to make them new cages, which he eventually reluctantly did. He would have reason to be glad he had done so.

Soma came bursting into the hut with her new prize possession, the curious rat. The rat sensed the presence of birds and perked up in her grasp, sniffing and twitching and hoping to get its claws into some of their bellies. The birds, for their part, those that could, flew right up and out through the hole in the roof with the smoke. Bombarda turned to look at the girl.

"What have you got for me now?" he asked. Soma was always bringing him something, if only a leaf, for him to identify and teach her about. She knew as much about the things in this world as he did, only her memory was not quite developed, and she had trouble holding on to her knowledge, or at least she pretended. The truth was she enjoyed making her mentor feel needed and important.

"I don't know," she said, and this was also the truth. "I thought it was a squirrel, but look at its tail."

"It's a rat," Bombarda said with a sneer. "Just a common, filthy rat."

"Can we keep it?" she asked. "We could put it in a cage."

"If you like," he shrugged as if the whole matter was of no interest to him, but he watched closely as she put it inside of an empty one.

"Where did you find it?" he said.

"Out there," she gestured. It didn't really matter to her where she'd found it. One place was the same as another in the forest.

"It must have come from somewhere," Bombarda murmured, suddenly intrigued. New things never happened anymore. New creatures never entered their world, and nothing ever left unless it was eaten. He stood up, creakily, and walked slowly towards the rat. He peered closely into the cage, and the rat peered just as closely at him.

"Will you show me the way?" he asked it, and the rat twitched its whiskers as if it answered, maybe. Maybe I will if you let me out of here, but then again, maybe I won't.

"This could be the very thing we've been waiting for all along," Bombarda said to Soma, who smiled, pleased to have possibly pleased him.

"But how," he turned back to the rat, "how can we make it show us the way, and how can we even keep up with him."

"That's easy," Soma said. "We tie him, right? Get a long vine and we tie him. Then we hold on to one end and see where he goes."

"You're the smart one," Bombarda said with as close to a smile as he could. "You always were the

smart one," he added, and gave her a small pat on her nearly bald little head. Soma grinned and said, "What do we name him?"

Chapter Two

A vote was held later that day, when a sufficient number of Watchers had gathered and submitted enough nominations to make it interesting. Bombarda's own suggestion was 'Retribution', but none of the children selected that one. A couple of popular choices were 'Squeak' and 'Smelly', but 'Squeak' was too close to 'Squee', who objected on the grounds that he didn't think he'd like people confusing him with a rat. He was all for 'Smelly', or 'Stinky', but in the end it was Soma's own name that carried the day, and the rat was from then on known as 'Scratch'. The rat itself seemed to approve of the name, because he swiped out with his claws whenever anyone got close enough and repeated his new name, drawing a little blood in one instance.

Although no one really bothered to have possessions in the forest, for there were few to be had and no sense in withholding anything from others, everyone in the group referred to Scratch as Soma's. She was the one who brought it seeds and grain, and who took it for walks after securing it with a leash of vine. She let it go this way and that, keeping a loose enough hold on it that the rat could feel he was free though knowing full well that he wasn't. He wasn't terribly useful at first, foraging only for food or for nesting materials for which he had no actual use, seeing as he still slept in the cage every night. Bombarda accompanied the two with sharp anticipation, but after several useless excursions he decided to remain at home, with Soma promising not to escape without him, should she ever be so fortunate.

Soma was certain that Scratch would show them the way, and she often talked to the rat about just that, encouraging him to lead her back to where he'd come into their world. She and Squee took him to all the old places they knew, the ones that they felt were right on the edge. Squee knew all of the tricks and the traps. He could place his whole arm just so, leaning off of a branch, that the arm disappeared and a friend he had placed several miles away later reported that he saw it dangling down from another distant tree. Much of the forest was illusion, especially, they believed, around its periphery. Soma and Squee had it all mapped out in their minds, a jagged polygon of corners and bends where the laws of motion stopped making sense and instead of going forward you twisted and turned and teleported halfway across instead. It was an invisible transportation device, a kind of transparent aerial subway whose carriages operated at warp speed. They took Scratch on tours of all of these sites, but Scratch merely sniffed his way around as if he might have been anywhere.

But Soma and Squee would never give up. Squee was always a rascal, climbing and leaping and jumping about. He'd pick the rat up and toss it into the air while Soma protested and reached out to catch the poor thing as it fell. The rat came to trust her, expecting her always to be there, and soon even seemed to enjoy Squee's outlandish surprises. The rat would clamber up and rest on Soma's shoulder, or even on top of her head, claws withdrawn, nose nuzzling into her neck. Soma felt that one day she'd take it off of its leash and the rat would stay with her and not run away. She was right. When that day came she tried it, just for a minute, she said to herself, and then just for a while. After that Scratch spent every night with her, up in the trees where she slept in a hollowed out bit of a trunk.

Scratch spoke to her then in a dream. He asked her if she wanted to see the big world, the bigger one outside of that place. Oh, did she ever, she told him. He promised to take her. Where is it, she asked. Over by the log bridge where the oak tree has fallen, he whispered. Soma knew just where that was. The next morning she went to Bombarda, with Scratch on her back peering out from her ear, and told him it was time to get going.

"Bring all your stuff," she sang out with a laugh.

"What stuff?" he replied, "I don't want anything we've got here."

"I'm bringing my magical pine cone," Squee shouted down from a tree as he swung out to join them.

"I'm bringing Scratch," Soma said. "But really he's bringing me, and you too."

"What about the guys?" Squee asked, meaning the other Watchers in their little tribe, but he already knew what their answer would be. It was the three of them only who were going to go. The others didn't even want to. Squee wasn't sure he wanted to, either. He liked it in there, in the trees, where he was the master of all things he required. Every twig, every stone was his friend and he felt he belonged. Each morning he woke up fresh and brand new, ready for the same old adventures he'd had many thousands of times, yet each day was just as exciting to him. Squee had the great gift of folly. Soma was fond of adventure as well, but she yearned for a new one, a limitless one, and imagined that the "big world" out there had no end, no beginning, and would never run out or repeat.

Armed with nothing, therefore, except a rat and a magical pine cone, the old man and his two child companions made their way to the log bridge where the oak tree had fallen over the river. The banks of the river were high at that point, six foot cliffs along either side, and the river was half of that depth but quite sleepy and slow. Soma put Scratch down on the log and he quickly scampered out to the middle, about ten feet from shore. He turned back and squeaked for Soma to follow but not on the log, but below, in the water. She jumped in and started wading across, the river coming up to her neck. Squee hopped in behind her, and then Bombarda descended carefully as well. Scratch was waiting for them on the log. When all three arrived, they felt a bit foolish, standing out there partly submerged in the chilly wide stream. Scratch began squeaking again, and edged his way over to Soma who held out her hand, but he didn't jump on it, but dug into the log with his claws and went upside down under beneath it. Soma didn't have to duck her head to follow, and neither did Squee, but Bombarda had to sink down even further into the water to pursue them under the log. When his head and his body were fully below, he noticed that they were all gone.

Then he was gone too. They were no longer in the forest, after all of those years, after all of that yearning and seeking they were finally out. Bombarda burst into tears. Soma and Squee grabbed hold of each other's hands and started dancing and twirling around and around on the beach, on the warm sunny beach where they were, next to a huge and magnificent ocean. Even Scratch seemed delighted as he scampered this way and that, thrilled to be home once again.

Chapter Three

Of all the eight year old immortals, none embraced his age more enthusiastically than Squee. He possessed an unlimited energy and a sense of sheer enjoyment to go along with it. All day long he was accustomed to flying through the trees, loudly emitting the grunts and groans and squeals that had led to his name. Able to scale a two hundred foot sequoia as fast as a raven could ascend the same distance, he had no match by branch or by air among his people. The Squee of the forest was barely glimpsed by ground-dwellers most of the time except for an occasional flash of his shoulder-length platinum blond hair or a patch of his well-bronzed skin, an elbow or a heel occasionally visible for a fraction of a second as high above he flung himself without fear or hesitation from one tree to the next in pursuit of absolutely nothing but thrills.

Now that he found himself suddenly thrust into an entirely strange new world, he was momentarily paralyzed like a puppy overwhelmed by a galaxy of unfamiliar smells. The hot shifting sand beneath his toes felt like nothing he had ever experienced, and the vast blue ocean stretching out before him was something unimaginable. Of course he'd been told stories about such things, but those were fairy tales as far as he knew, mere legends left over from the fragmentary and suspect memories of his fellow eternal inmates. In the very midst of it now he couldn't decide what to do first. Soma also seemed under the same spell while Gowdy was already kicking at the crumbly stuff and trying to figure out which

direction was which. He'd covered his eyes with his hand while ascertaining the sun's present location and studying its movement.

Squee fell to his knees and began furiously digging into the sand until he'd quickly formed a deep enough pit to leap into and begin to bury his body from the sides, shouting indefinite syllables until accidentally swallowing a bit of sand. Spitting it out he began to scream, bringing Soma rushing over to the side of the hole, where she stared down at him and, shaking her head, exclaimed,

"Squee! No! You can't eat it!"

"Know it," he yelled up at her. "Colder down here," he added, digging into the damp sand at the bottom of the hole.

"It's from the ocean," Soma told him, but Squee wasn't listening. Instead he was digging deeper and deeper, and finding the sand increasingly wetter, he just kept blinking and wondering and not comprehending the mystery. He had never been the smartest kid, and all the untold years had not added an iota to his mental capacity.

"Come on," Soma gestured for him to follow her. "Let's check out the water."

"Water!" Squee cried, and he leaped out of the hole, landing on his feet at the first try out of the six foot hole.

The two children raced each other across the beach towards the ocean, where Soma went first, being faster by land, and dashed into the water. At the first touch of it Squee generated yet another of his customized and meaningless grunts, and ran back onto the dry sand.

"COLD!" he yelled after Soma, but the girl was already into the water well over her head and swimming in ever-larger circles, each time back facing the beach encouraging Squee to come back in. After a few turns she gave up and headed out to where the waves were breaking. They had often swum at the lake by Gowdy's cabin, but it was a warm water there, and calm, nearly tideless. But Soma took to the waves as if she'd been riding them her entire life. She seemed to know instinctively how to catch one and let it take her outstretched body bumping and bouncing all the way back to the beach, where she jumped up and shook herself and again invited Squee in to join her. By that time, he had already dipped his toes in a few more times, and had decided that cold was nothing but a new thing to face head on and conquer. He ran into the ocean beside her and moments later was body-surfing like a champion.

Gowdy stood on the sand and watched the pair of youngsters playing in the surf. He felt no desire tugging at him to enter the sea, and the hot sun beating down on him was already making him sweat and feel anxious. He needed water, and scanned the area around for river inlets further down the coast. There was nothing and no one in sight, no sign of human habitation anywhere. He felt the forest behind him and wanted to get as far away from it as possible, but could not make out where it ended in either direction along the waterfront. He would have to make a decision which way to go, but based on no good information. He knew by now that the ocean was to the west, that the sun would set behind it, so that north was to the right, and south to the left. He had no reason to favor either one, but eventually decided to go right. After all, it was people of the north who'd been his enemies. It was there he would seek his revenge.

Chapter Four

Not only thirst, but hunger as well drove them on, so it was without resistance that Gowdy was able to gather the children in from the waves and follow along. It was already early afternoon and though the only shade was by the edge of the forest, none of them were eager to go near that borderline again, in case it somehow magically dragged them back inside. Gowdy was realizing, before it even occurred to Soma, let alone Squee, that many things were going to be different from now on, including the

acquisition of food. Eating was strictly required for the immortals. Many had tried to do without it in the early days, first as a form of hunger strike, in case anyone was watching from the outside, and later as a method of attempted suicide, but not eating simply left their bodies weak and their minds tired, much like a regular person might feel after running a marathon. They could not end their lives that way, only make themselves miserable. In the forest there was always plenty of readily available food but looking around Gowdy saw nothing that would serve the purpose.

He presumed there were fish in the sea, if eventually it came to that, but between the ocean and the forest there was only the wide strip of warm yellow sand. Soma and Squee went racing on ahead, running as fast as they could along the water until they were nearly out of sight. Then they would stop and splash in the waves until the old man caught up with them again. Gowdy was used to the noisy pleasures of the youth and didn't begrudge them their fun. For their part, it never occurred to them to try and cheer him up or get him to join in their games. They operated perfectly congruently in their separate ways.

Soma was the first to notice a sign of human habitation. Then again, she was typically the first in everything. Sharp-eyed, sharp-eared, always thinking, always curious, nothing escaped her attention for long, and though it was only a wisp of smoke at the edge of the horizon, practically indistinguishable from a patch of cloud, she hastened over to Gowdy's side to point it out to him. He had been walking slowly but steadily along but now he picked up his pace and marched directly towards the site. There would be fire, and maybe there would be people. Gowdy managed to keep his mind busy with worries and concerns no matter what the situation. He'd been doing that for so long it would have been impossible for him to stop for a moment, even to admire the scenery. What if it were merely a wildfire, and not people? But then, what if there were people, and the people were hostile? What if they were armed, and attacked? He could only hope! He was himself ready for conflict. Somebody had to pay, and with any luck it would be a lot of somebodies.

As they drew closer, they could see the smoke was indeed coming from a sort of structure. It looked like a narrow vertical box, like an old windowless phone booth made of thin boards tied together with vines, walled on three sides and open to the sea on the fourth. The smoke was streaming through a square hole in the thatched roof, and the fire itself was a small dwindling bundle of sticks on the middle of the floor, and was rapidly nearing its conclusion. Squee and Soma cautiously circled the small building several times as if expecting something or someone to pop out of it at any moment, while Gowdy scanned the area around it, which was the same strip of sand, no different than where they had come from except, and this exception made Gowdy's heart leap for an instant, the forest behind it was gone.

They must have passed its border some time before, because now they couldn't see it at all. The landscape behind the beach was utterly changed. Dunes swelled up behind the fire hut, dotted with clumps of thick grasses. Gowdy scrambled up the hillocks with the children rushing past him to reach the top first, and once above they saw a mostly flat land filled with low brush, bushes and shrubs and an occasional clump of short stubby trees, most of which surrounded small ponds. They could make out a few thin paths cutting through the marshland here and there, also leading to and between the tiny lakes, and Soma quickly ascertained that those paths were actually creeks and rivulets. She and Squee were already splashing their way through them, stopping once or twice to scoop up water in their hands and suck it down. Gowdy followed a short way and also drank, but stopped before getting too far away from the fire. He planned to keep watch over that place until someone arrived. He was sure they would. He signaled his intention to Soma with a gesture she immediately understood and let him know they'd be returning shortly.

Gowdy walked back up the other side of the dune and found a place in a thicket of grass where he could watch the smoking structure and keep himself hidden from ocean view. He settled in and began

what turned out to be a longer wait than he guessed. The fire went out completely within an hour or so, and by that time the children had returned with another surprise, a wild rabbit Squee had captured and was holding on under its forelegs while it kicked and struggled with its powerful back legs attempting to escape.

"Can we keep it?" the boy wanted to know, and Gowdy shrugged.

"Keep it where?" he asked. "Keep it how?"

"Maybe we should eat it," Squee said with a serious look on his face. They had all been vegetarians for so long it was a novel concept, and he didn't really mean any harm to the creature. Somehow he had the idea that they could keep it as a pet and eat it too.

"Ew," Soma made a face. "I think we should let her go."

"How do you know it's a she?" Squee demanded. Soma was always so sure of herself, and Squee never so, that he was always wanting her to prove what she claimed. Even though she always did, he was never satisfied to take her word for anything.

"It's got no, you know," she said, pointing at the rear of the creature's belly. Disgusted, or at least feigning disgust, Squee set the rabbit on the ground and let it go. It quickly scampered back down the dune and into the brush.

"We will have to eat something," Gowdy said, watching the creature flee. "Did you find any berries or fruits back there?"

"We found these," Soma produced a handful of small, shiny and squishy red balls.

"We tried one," she added. "They taste terrible, like yellow dirt."

"Probably poisonous," Gowdy remarked, taking one and studying it closely.

"Not for humans," he said, and popped it into his mouth. He rolled the thing around on his tongue before biting down on it, and making a disapproving face.

"Quite right," he said. "Juicy but bitter. Some nutritional value. They'll do fine."

Soma divided up the rest and handed them out and the three munched quietly while the afternoon continued to proceed towards dusk and still nobody arrived to check on the fire in the booth-like place. Squee settled down for a nap while Soma and Gowdy talked quietly about the possibility of heading toward what looked like mountains far off in the distance behind the wetlands. A strip of clouds had gathered there low along the horizon, which is what gave Gowdy the idea, although the mountains, if there were any, could not themselves be seen. Gowdy wanted to stay along the coast, thinking there was a better chance of finding people. Soma was not interested in finding people. She wanted to explore, and anything new and different was always good, in her mind. She wouldn't dream of heading off on her own, though. She was, like all of her kind, essentially a pack animal.

The sun was going down behind the water, glowing huge and red beneath the pinkening sky, when they heard the sounds of voices coming closer. The watchers scrambled to their knees and poked their heads out through the grass to see who was approaching.

Chapter Five

It seemed they came out of nowhere. One minute there was no one and the next there they were, two young people, a boy and a girl, or a man and a woman. Gowdy could not be sure of their ages. They looked very similar, extremely thin, nearly skeletal, with long straight blond hair and naked, dripping yellowish skin. They must have just come out of the water, he thought, but couldn't recall hearing any splashing. They walked side by side, straight up to the fire hut, speaking to each other in a familiar-

sounding language. As they came closer, he could make out some of the words and realized they were not only in English, but American English. Gowdy almost smiled. He was sure he was on the right track after all. He'd been worried they'd find themselves on the other side of the planet, far from the homeland of his enemies. He would have journeyed as far as he had to, but he'd rather not have to.

They watched as the two young people walked behind the hut, knelt down, and began to clear away an area of sand with their hands. They uncovered some sort of enclosure hidden below the beach, a box or a chest. They opened its lid and removed a neatly tied bundle of sticks which they set aside, then closed to top again, and covered it over with sand again. They stood and the male untied the bundle and carried the wood back around to the front of the hut while the female followed. Now they were hidden from view, Gowdy decided it was time to come out. He emerged from the grass and walked down from the dune with Soma and Squee right behind him. When they got to the fire hut, they saw the people again kneeling and both involved in arranging the sticks in a pile on the floor. They did not notice the strangers but silently went about their business.

Once all the sticks had been placed in the pyramid-like heap, they stood up and took two paces back from the entrance. The female bowed slightly and slowly raised her left hand, palm up, until it was level with her chin. At that moment, the sticks burst into flame, seemingly by themselves. The couple turned to each other and leaned their faces together to touch noses.

"How'd they do that?" Squee burst out, startling the couple. The man let out a shout, something like "ha!" as he turned and curled his fingers towards his palms in a gesture none of the immortals understood. Getting a good look at them for the first time, Gowdy noticed they had several folds of skin along the lines of their ribs, neat rows of flab that contrasted sharply with their otherwise bony bodies. Their fingers were much longer than a normal person, and their ears seem to be pinned back and welded to the skull rather than protruding.

"Hello," Soma said with a smile, stepping forward, holding her hands out in a friendly way. The couple both took a step back toward the fire and the man thrust his chin forward and made another grunting sound, this time like "er!". If he thought he was frightening the strangers, he was quite mistaken.

"Don't be afraid," Soma said. "We can be nice." She looked back at Gowdy and gestured for him to make a nicer face. She knew he could do it if he tried, and he did make an attempt, if not much of one. Squee imitated the man's recent grunting noise, which only had the effect of making the couple's eyes widen even more.

"What are you doing?" Soma asked, determined to get the conversation going. This time the female spoke up.

"Keeping the fire," she said.

"Why?" Soma asked, but there was no response.

"Do you live around here?" Soma asked. The woman shook her head.

"Where are your people?" Gowdy interrupted, prompting the man to answer this time, but not in words. He raised his hand and pointed out towards the ocean. Gowdy turned to look in that direction, then turned back.

"There's an island out there?"

The man shrugged, and looked at his companion. She seemed anxious and shook her head wildly. The man shifted his glance from Squee to Soma and finally to Gowdy.

"We have to do it now. Go away."

"Do what?" Gowdy asked as the woman grabbed the man's hand and started pulling him closer to her.

"Now," the man repeated. "Go away."

"I think we'd better back off," Soma suggested, and Gowdy reluctantly agreed. The couple's agitation was growing by the second. They were beginning to shake and quiver so violently it seemed they might burst. Soma led Gowdy and Squee back to the dunes behind the hut and, looking back, saw the couple fall on each other and begin to writhe on the sand and coil about each other like struggling serpents. It took her some moments to realize what was going on.

"Oh," she sighed as they reached their grass hiding place.

"Yes, that," Gowdy agreed. "Must be some sort of ritual."

"Did you see their bodies?" Soma asked.

"Very strange," Gowdy nodded.

"I think they're nice," Squee put in but the others ignored him.

The couple squirmed about on the beach for a few minutes, making a variety of noises that ranged from cooing to whistling while the immortals spied on them from their hidden spot. Then the two leaped up and ran plunging into the surf. Gowdy and the children came back down to the fire hut, hoping to catch the two in a better frame of body and mind after their horizontal dance, but the scrawny couple did not re-emerge from the ocean. Not once did they even come up to breathe, but were gone, submerged and lost from view for good.

Chapter Six

"Do you think they drowned?" Squee asked.

"Drowned," Gowdy corrected for what might have been the millionth time. Squee was not interested in retention.

"I don't think so," Soma said, picking up Scratch and giving him a good scratching behind the ears. The rat had stayed with them the entire time, straying for a time into the marshland but reappearing shortly after the new fire had been lit, and the smoke reached his nose.

"I think they live in the water," she added.

"But what are they?" Squee wanted to know.

"Must be mutants," Gowdy concluded.

"Like us?" Soma asked.

"Maybe, but different," he told her. "I wouldn't put anything past those humans. God only knows the mischief they've been up to since they locked us away. It's a wonder the planet's even still here! Last thing I remember they were cooking it up, burning everything in sight just to keep all their little motors running. Couldn't get along without burning."

"Maybe that's still true," Soma said, stepping closer to the fire inside the hut. "Did you see how it just turned itself on?"

"I'm wondering why they're hiding those bundles under the beach."

"Think we should take some with us?"

"Nah. I'd leave it. But we can camp out here for the night, I think."

The children needed no more encouraging, but plopped themselves right down on the sand near the warmth and promptly dozed off. Gowdy remained awake for a time, gazing out over the ocean and wondering. The strange mer-people had frightened him nearly as much as he had frightened them, he thought. What if it was all gone, everything he'd ever known? What if nothing was the same?

"At least they spoke English," he comforted himself, as if that one link would suffice to justify the

retribution he had in mind, and anyone who spoke it was eligible to take responsibility for everything they had suffered.

In the morning, they gathered some more of the red berries, and pulled out some satisfactory tubers from beneath the streams as well. The day had dawned warm already, especially by the fire which was amazingly long-lasting, the smallish sticks hardly burnt through at all, and since they had nothing in which to carry water, they drank to fill their bellies, and then proceeded north along the coastline. Gowdy had anticipated more little structures like the fire hut, but they did not encounter any, and the long day turned into a colder night, and then another's day march after that. On the evening of that second day, they finally came across something more promising.

From the distance it seemed like it must be a mirage, a gigantic pink castle floating above the waves around a gentle bend of the beach. Soma and Squee made a bet with each other that the building wasn't really there, and true to form raced off in pursuit, leaving Gowdy and the rat behind. They didn't stop a hundred yards ahead, as the old man expected, but kept going, until they reached it. Then they rushed back to inform Gowdy of their discovery. Soma was more out of breath so it was Squee who reported.

"It's a Grand Resort," he said, "Soma says so. There was a sign and she read it."

"Grand Hyatt Nomador," Soma wheezed, catching her breath.

"Grand Hyatt?" Gowdy could not believe it. "What about the people? Tell me about the people."

The kids glanced at each other and frowned in disappointment.

"We didn't see anybody," Squee admitted

"Of course we didn't look much," Soma brightened. "Come on and see," and she tugged at Gowdy's arm but he didn't need the encouragement. His old legs youthened enough to pick up the pace, and soon they were all together at the entrance of the great hotel.

The lobby was deserted, and completely quiet except for the occasional screeching of a bright red parrot who sat on a perch by a small marble pond. The stone floors were refreshing cool on their feet, and the luxurious surroundings made them all feel a bit strange. To one side, a long wooden desk shone with polish, while throughout the floor huge pillars held up a ceiling more than a hundred feet high, carved with images of angels and gods and exotic creatures. The walls were black-streaked marble and comfortable white lounge chairs were strategically arranged to afford the best views out the back of the room out onto the ocean. Everything was immaculately clean. Gowdy felt rooted to the floor at the entrance trying to take it all in. He had been in such a hotel, once upon a time. It must have been, he couldn't have calculated, possibly hundreds of years before, or maybe it was only decades. There was no way to know. He knew the year of his imprisonment, but not the year it was now. It occurred to him to hunt for clues, paper or computer, but he saw nothing like that. The desks were clear as were all the little tables arranged near the seats.

Eventually, the three began to move around, inspecting the place more closely. Squee naturally was interested most in the parrot, whom he tried to talk to but who did not correspond except with a squawks. Soma ran to every corner and peered down carpeted hallways, but didn't want to leave the general area by herself. Gowdy looked into the offices in search of any kind of text but found, again, not a trace of information. He rejoined the children by the parrot and was about to announce the next phase of the plan he had in mind, when he became aware of a whirring noise above him, and looked up to see a sort of disc hovering in the air a few feet above them. It was gray and metallic looking with a bubble in the middle and what appeared to be grooves like little windows all along the edges. Startled, Gowdy realized the thing looked exactly like old images of a flying saucer, only it was no more than a foot in diameter and a few inches in height.

The saucer shifted laterally and moved quite rapidly, zooming above each of their heads in succession

and making a short, subtle clicking noise each time, and then it was gone, as quickly as it had appeared. None of them could see which direction it went.

"Poof!" Squee exclaimed.

"What do you think?" Soma asked in a concerned tone.

"Spies," Gowdy pronounced with confidence. "Surveillance. Enemies." He seemed almost cheered by the notion.

"Now they know we're here," he continued, "it'll be their move. But we can act in the meantime. I suggest we stick together, though."

"Me, too," Soma nodded.

"Sure," Squee pitched in agreeably.

"Then lead on," Gowdy instructed Soma, who turned and led them down what she felt was the most promising hallway, one that wrapped around the perimeter of the building to the right of where they were, carpeted but under an arcade, exposed to the sea on the outside. They passed a series of metal doors on their right, which Gowdy informed them were called 'elevators' and were something they should look into later. Then they passed a large dining area fronted by a palm-laden stream which ran clear and swiftly beside white table-clothed tables with unlit candles upon them. After that the hallway turned to the left, and the doors they went by had numbers beside them, and smooth metal handles.

"These are the guest rooms," Gowdy told them. "Inside we'll find comfortable beds and other nice things," but Squee, tugging at the handles, complained they could never get in.

"We'll find a way," Gowdy said. "The thing to look for is people. Once we find them, well, then we will."

And yet there was no one. They climbed up stairs and walked down more halls, exploring not only the main building but the smaller ones off to the side. Out in the back there were pools and waterfalls and slides, all very well kept, all looking fresh and inviting, but no one was in them, not in the hot tubs, not in the ocean, not in the restaurants, not in the shops which they saw full of clothing and gadgets and items for every occasion. The hotel was a ghost town. All they did see were more of the small flying saucers, darting in and out of view every so often, and keeping well out of reach above their heads.

Chapter Seven

They scouted around the outer perimeter of the ground floor of main building once more, but from the outside all the shades were drawn and the patio doors closed and locked. There was no way into any of the rooms, and no way even to see inside them. Gowdy was thinking about finding a rock and hurling it through the glass but was all of a sudden knocked off his feet and bumped his head against the window instead.

"Woah," Squee was shrieking, "did you see that?"

"I don't know," Soma chattered, "I don't know what I saw. Something flying all right, went right passed us. Wait, there they are," and she pointed up to the top of the building. Gowdy, rubbing his head, looked up and caught a glimpse of what had to be people, but couldn't be. They reminded him of the mer-people in their skinny blondness but the extra folds of skin they had appeared to be on their arms and shoulders, not on their chests. Six, no seven of them, but as he finished counting they all together leaped off the roof and cycling in the air, turned about and disappeared over the building.

"I want to go up there," Squee declared, heading for the stairwell. Soma followed before Gowdy could get a word in. He was too tired, and only wanted to get into one of those suites and lie down on what he knew had to be the most comfortable bed he would have slept on in ages. Sighing, he returned to the

lobby and down the first hall they'd taken, planning on trying all the doors again, and maybe smashing one of the handles if he could. He'd barely reached the first room when a loud clicking noise reverberated all up and down the hall, and every single door swung open at the same instant. From each door, a single person emerged. There were both men and women, and like the creatures from the sea, they were all golden-skinned, blond and slender. They were all nude except for colorful boxer-type shorts, and proceeded to glide past him without a word as he stood back to let them pass.

He could distinguish the genders from the slight variations in shape, the females' hips and small breasts, the males' narrow waists and greater height. The men were all between six foot and six two or three. Gowdy was himself a bit over six feet but weighed at least fifty pounds more than these skeletal figures. They did sport different hair styles, practically their only distinguishing characteristic among them, for they all had the same shade of sky blue eyes, and appeared to be at least siblings, if not in fact actual clones of one another. None seemed to notice his existence, and after the last one - there had been at least twenty - had gone by him, he followed to see where they would go. He was not surprised when he saw them enter the patio dining area and seat themselves, four to a table, and sit quietly, glancing occasionally at one another, but not speaking until everyone had settled down.

That was when another figure entered the room from the opposite direction. This young man had curly and short auburn hair, his skin was more orange and his eyes somewhat brownish-green. He was wearing a light white suit and open-toed brown sandals. He stood in the center of the dining area and seemed to be counting the guests with his eyes. He was about to speak, but then he noticed Gowdy, standing at the edge of the patio, and raised his hand, motioning for Gowdy to enter and pointed at an empty table. Gowdy approached it, and at a further gesture, sat himself down. The man, who could either be host or servant, seemed satisfied and removed a small golden bell from his pants pocket. He gave it a little shake, at which a single pure high tone sounded, like a tuning fork. At that signal, the guests brought their right hands up and, using the middle finger, each tapped three times in rapid succession upon the table in front of them. Instantly, plates appeared, full of food, and utensils, napkins and liquid-filled glasses also popped out of nowhere, and everyone began to eat.

Gowdy's place alone remained foodless. The host - or servant - noticed this, and walked briskly over to him.

"You are not hungry, sir?" He asked politely.

"Oh, I'm hungry," Gowdy replied.

"Then tap," the man said. Gowdy hesitated and the man repeated his command.

"Tap," he encouraged. As Gowdy still did not move, the man leaned over and tapped on Gowdy's table for him. As with the others, food appeared.

"I did not know what you desired," the man apologized, "so I only ordered what I myself might like at this time." Gowdy blinked and stared at the meal, which consisted of grilled prawns and green beans, an avocado salad, fresh bread, and sparkling lemonade.

"It looks, it looks great," he sputtered, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Please, enjoy," said the man, who turned and walked away, leaving the room towards what Gowdy presumed must be the kitchen. Everyone else was eating, each with a different customized meal it seemed, and he was truly hungry, so he began to eat. The food was astonishingly delicious. It made him forget all about Squee and Soma and everything he'd been intending to do. He felt strangely light-headed as well, almost giddy. He ate slowly, determined to finish off every last crumb, and didn't notice how the others were rushing through their dinner, and had all departed soundlessly. When he finally did look up from his plate, he saw that all the tables were cleared and once again spotless and neat. Gowdy stood up, but almost immediately toppled to the floor as if his feet refused to hold him up. He tried to get up, but found he lacked the strength, and only managed to crawl a few feet before giving up and

lying down on the stone floor, exhausted. He lay there for some time, panting and feeling feverish. He imagined he had fallen asleep and was dreaming that someone was shaking him, and it took him a few minutes to realize that someone really was.

It was one of the blond men, a youth with impossibly tangled curls and very large teeth, or so it seemed to Gowdy. The teeth made quite an impression on him.

"Yo, dude," the man was saying, "you all right, man? You don't look so hot right now."

"What?" Gowdy was certain he was either dreaming or hallucinating. The kid spoke just like one of Gowdy's sons had so very long ago.

"Must have been the lemonade," the guy was saying, "Hector likes that stuff but no one else can really handle it. He sure did you one. Yeah, he sure did."

"Lemonade?" Gowdy murmured, while the man bent down and pulled Gowdy up to a sitting position, before sitting down beside him.

"You're like new here, right?" he said, "I can always tell when there's a new guy. Not like there ever is a new guy, but if there ever was, I'd be pretty sure that I could tell. For one thing, you're like really old. Or maybe it's just the lemonade gave you all those gray hairs? Could be, man, I wouldn't put it past it. That stuff's like literally retarded."

"No," Gowdy nearly growled, coming slowly back to his senses. "It wasn't the lemonade. Yes, I am, like you say, really old. And I do mean really, really old."

"I believe you, man," the young man laughed, "like, wow, like, I don't know. Like, woah." And he sat back, at a complete loss of words.

"Where are we?" Gowdy asked.

"Nomador," the young man replied at once, with a tone of surprise that anyone would even ask such a question.

"What country?" Gowdy asked, and before the man could answer, he added, "also what year is it?"

"Country? Year?" The young man shrugged as if those terms were utterly foreign to him.

"What's your name, then?" Gowdy asked, determined to learn at least something.

"Oh, you can call me Kai," the man said. "Everybody calls me Kai."

"All right," Gowdy said, and struggled to his feet. He stood a bit wobbly, but stood nevertheless. Kai also got up and held out his hand in an offer to help steady the old man, but Gowdy waved him off.

"What can you tell me about this place?" Gowdy asked. "We've come a long way and we don't know where we are."

Kai looked around to see if anyone else was there.

"We?" he asked.

"My friends," Gowdy said, "they went upstairs. To see about those, the flying people."

"Flying people?" Kai seemed confused.

"Yes," Gowdy said, "we saw, or we thought we saw, some people up there, it looked like they were flying."

"On the roof?" Kai said. "How can you fly on a roof? You'd have to fly in the, oh," he interrupted himself, "you mean the flock."

"The flock?"

"Yeah, yeah, the flock. Sometimes they perch up there on the ledge for a minute. But they don't fly o

the roof, man, they fly in the air."

"Right," Gowdy shook his head. "What else do they do?"

"The flock? They don't 'do' anything. They just flock around." Kai giggled at his joke and Gowdy waited patiently.

"What else can you tell me?"

"I don't know," said Kai. "Where did you come from? You said you came a long way. Where from?"

"We came up the beach," he started to explain, but Kai interrupted and said,\

"Well, duh. You couldn't have come from anywhere else."

"What about inland?" Gowdy asked.

"What's that?"

"Behind the beach, towards the mountains."

"Mountains?"

"Yes, look, I'll show you," Gowdy said, and started walking away, intending to show Kai the view from in front of the lobby. He'd only gone a few steps when he turned back and to his utter surprise, saw that Kai was gone, without a trace. Gowdy could not be sure if he'd simply imagined the entire episode and was still standing there, puzzled, when Soma appeared by his side and said,

"We found a way into a room, but Squee won't go in. He wants to sleep on the roof. Says he's happier up and out in the open."

"I'm sure he is," Gowdy nodded, as he followed Soma towards the stairs.

Chapter Eight

Gowdy felt as if he were still inside of a dream. Soma had led him to the room, a suite on the top floor of the hotel with two bedrooms, each with a plush king size bed, two bathrooms, a full kitchen and living room with leather seats and couches facing a glass wall overlooking the beach and the ocean below. He could see some figures splashing in the waves and assumed they were the same creatures he'd seen in the dining room earlier. Soma was peppering him with questions about the various articles she was pulling out of drawers and cabinets, objects he had only vague memories of, such as wine bottle openers, ice makers, potato mashers, crock pots, tumblers and toasters, but as he described their names and functions to her his own voice sounded to him like it was coming from deep below the surface of the sea. His head was spinning and he nearly lost his balance a couple of times. Soma could tell that something was wrong, so she led him into one of the bedrooms and had him lie down. She threw a blanket over him and sat down on a chair beside the bed. She spoke to him quietly.

"Bombarda?"

He didn't answer right away. His eyes were open and staring up at the ceiling. His face was very red and damp.

"Bombarda? What's wrong?" the girl asked. He turned towards her and muttered something. She had to make him repeat himself a few times before she understood he was saying that he'd eaten their food, and drank their beverage. He mentioned the names Hector and Kai and tried to tell her what he'd seen or imagined he'd seen but she couldn't follow any of it.

"I must be sick," he said, and realized it must have been decades or even centuries since he'd even known anyone to be ill. His kind could never have that experience, and yet, here he was, and he was having it. What could it mean?

"What is sick?" Soma wanted to know, but he couldn't explain it to her. He couldn't speak any more, but fell fast asleep. She stayed and watched him for a little while, trying to think of what she could possibly do to help him feel better, and realized she had not a single idea. Certainly it would do no good to ask Squee, but that idea sparked another one in her mind, the idea of getting some help from someone. She decided that Gowdy wouldn't be any worse off without her sitting there doing nothing, so she got up and went back downstairs, hoping to find someone to talk to.

The halls were deserted, as was the lobby and the dining room and the kitchen. She was just about to head out towards the beach when the bathers came striding in, single file just as they'd done earlier, alternating male, female, male, female, and all without making a sound. They were all completely dry and clean, and showed no signs of having been either in the water or on the beach, but she was certain she had seen them in the waves only minutes before from the windows upstairs. They moved past her without taking notice of her presence, and she determined to follow them, just as Gowdy had done before, only she was not content to hang back and just wait and watch. She picked one female and caught up with her, walked along next to her, struggling to keep up with the other's longer legs, and when they came to the door of her room, it opened by itself, and Soma slid right in along with the female.

Soma stood just inside the door and watched as the woman walked into the bathroom, closed the door, and emerged a minute or so later. The room was smaller than the suite upstairs, but was every bit as luxurious, from the leather seating to the polished wooden desk and table, the bedroom off to the side where she could see a neatly made bed with several fluffy pillows and a clean white comforter on top. The shades were drawn on the windows but still the room was full of light. When the woman reappeared, it seemed she still had not sensed Soma's presence.

"Hello?" Soma said, walking up to her. The woman did not hear and continued to walk on toward the bedroom. Soma went in right behind her and then briefly tugged on the woman's elbow. The female turned, blinked once or twice, did not look down, then turned back again and was about to climb into bed when Soma grabbed her arm again and this time did not let go.

"Hey," Soma said, louder. "Can you hear me? Can you see me? I'm right here."

After a few perplexing moments, while the woman looked to her right, then to her left, but still not down at her arm to see what was holding it, Soma jumped up and down a few times and managed to place herself momentarily in the woman's field of vision. The woman finally noticed her and wrinkled her nose in a sort of snarl.

"What is this?" she said out loud.

"I'm a person," Soma said. "What are you?"

The woman did not register the words. She repeated her earlier question and Soma saw that she was not talking to her, but was gazing at a spot high up on the opposite wall. Soma followed the woman's sight line and saw a small oval protrusion near the ceiling. It looked like a goose egg half stuck into the wall, mostly gray with some black spots. Soma looked back at the woman, who said, for the third time,

"What is this?"

"It is a little girl," came a gentle, man's voice from the lump in the wall. "No worries," it added.

The woman nodded, and with her hand carefully touched Soma's, and removed it from her arm. Then she proceeded to get into the bed and under the covers, where she instantly fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

While Soma searched throughout the hotel for Hector or Kai or anyone walking around at all, Squee

was up on the roof attempting to play with the flock. He'd found them all gathered on the edge, hopping about on their toes and flapping their arms wildly while shrieking odd noises as loud as they could. It seemed they were all trying to startle one another off of the building, and every now and then they succeeded, and one would slip or at least seem to slip and fall off the side, only to raise themselves up once again with rapid flutterings and kicks. Squee counted more than seven of them. There were not many more, but he tended to lose count after seven. At close range he noticed they were not so much like the sea people as he'd originally suspected. Yes, they had extra folds of skin, but these were loose and flappy, not bound to the bodies like the mer-people's were. Also, they weren't nearly as tall, ranging from only slightly taller than himself to maybe another six inches higher. They looked very young, too. He would have guessed they were more like the sixteen year olds of the forest than grown-ups. Most were boys. Only two appeared to be females, but he wasn't quite sure, since they all looked very similar and were crowded together in a bunch.

Every time he approached, and he tried to be as quiet and sneaky as possible, they took notice and blasted off altogether, flying to the opposite side of the building, where they landed in a heap and regrouped, much like pigeons or gulls. Their voices were not only loud but annoying as well, even to Squee, who could grunt and squeal with great volume but whose tone was not nearly as grating. They reminded him of amplified squirrels, but although he could pretty much understand everything a squirrel could say, the words of the flock were nonsense to him, and he realized it might take a long time to learn their peculiar language. There was something tremendously attractive about them, and Squee eventually settled into a corner and watched as the night began to fall and the flock went about their rituals and routines. Then, just as the sun was about to disappear for the day, they took off and flew away. Squee leaped up and ran to the edge to see if he could follow their track, but they soon vanished inland into the night.

After that, Squee couldn't rest. He paced up and down, back and forth, growing more restless by the minute. His thoughts began to get jumbled up, not at all like his usual mental wanderings. He wondered what happened to Soma and started to feel angry with her for not being with him. It occurred to him for the very first time that he had no idea whatsoever what he was even doing out there in that place, out of his old forest home and onto this strange and baffling shore, where the people didn't make any sense, and he was suddenly determined to go anywhere else but remain where he was. He rushed down the stairs and back to the room that Soma had found, where the door was still propped open, but inside now there was Gowdy, groaning and asleep on the bed.

Squee looked around and, seeing the sink, went over and turned it on to splash water all over his face. That didn't help. He was still as agitated as before, and didn't know what he would do if Soma didn't turn up. He might just go running off all by himself. Fortunately, she did come back to the room only minutes after Squee, having found nothing and no one after that one silly creature. Squee shouted to see her and jumped up and down before dashing over and grabbing her by the waist and squeezing her tightly. Soma had to wrest herself free and push him away, all the time trying to get him to hush.

"Ssh," she whispered, "look. Bombarda got sick. He ate some of their food. I think it was bad."

"Why'd he do that?" Squee said, and snorted his disapproval.

"I don't know," Soma told him, taking his arm and leading him away from the bedroom.

"I don't like it here," Squee told her, and she nodded.

"Me either," she said.

"I think we should go somewhere else."

"Me too," she agreed, "but I don't know what to do about him."

"We could leave him," Squee said and Soma looked shocked.

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