

**STRIPE & DUSK: A WEEKEND ODYSSEY**

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## **Abstract**

I love to take in and create playful fantasy, tales set in wild and fantastic worlds peopled by wild and fantastic characters – dragons and dinosaurs, knights and robots, stars and penguins. My novella is the story of a quest set in a colourful and wondrous fantasy universe. Along the journey's tumultuous trajectory fantasy tropes and protocols are encountered, subverted, teased at, appropriated, and renovated, in order to create something both original and familiar all at once. I am happy to acknowledge and salute the influences of Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, Walter Moers and Manuela Draeger.



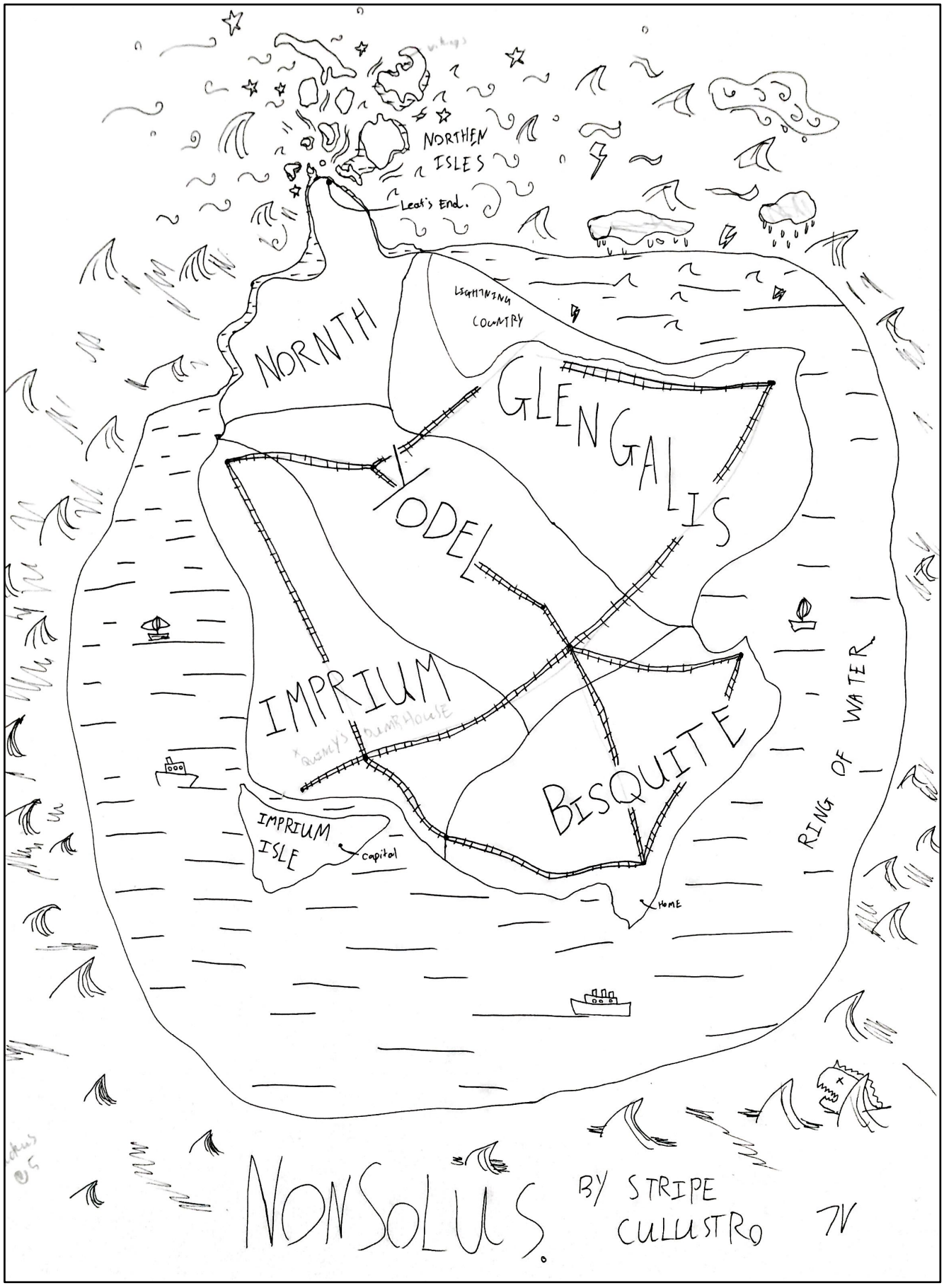
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“Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colours. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.”

— Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky* (2007, page 352)



# NONSOLUS

BY STRIPE CULLASTRO 7V

05

## PROLOGUE - DUSK

The Fury Sea is composed of dark water that tests the colour spectrum's boundaries between black and blue. The Fury Sea is fast and wild and choppy. The Fury Sea is full of strange creatures, some of which seem too transparent while others are quickly considered not transparent enough.

Hidden amongst these strange creatures of the Fury Sea, nestled between the crests of tall waves, is an island called Nonsolus. A thin ring of calm turquoise water shields Nonsolus from the wildness that surrounds it. The island is the only sizeable body of land adrift in The Fury Sea, so naturally it is recognised as 'the world' by the people who live on it.

In this world of Nonsolus, which is also an island, and also a country, people keep away from the Fury Sea as much as they can. They call the tame shallows of the coast the Ring of Water. In the Ring of Water the fish don't have spikes and can't unhinge their jaws, they are proper fish that are blue and silvery and edible. In the Ring of Water it is possible to swim and sail and rest on lilos to soak up the sun. Lilos have never been in the Fury Sea in the same way that guppies are not released into shark tanks. Taking a dip in the Ring of Water and going out in the Fury Sea could be compared to the difference between strolling up a mild slope to pick up a packet of chips at the café on the corner, and climbing a monstrous mountain.

The Ring of Water is thickest at the island's South and thinnest at its North where it's virtually non-existent. The North has long been deemed a strange, uncomfortable place due to the nearness of the deep dark water, as if the Fury Sea's strangeness has somehow seeped into the land itself. And at the most Northern point of Nonsolus's North rests Leaf's End.

Night in Leaf's End is darker and its stars are brighter. The sky is so clear that it reaches a kind of complexity far beyond the traditional black stretch spotted with lonely lights. The stars are so abundant up North they appear to be a sparkling spatter radiating like celestial froth in the immense current of infinity. Shades of dark blue, of mysterious purple and unknowable green, swirl and collide across the animated canvas of the night.

On this particular night, under it all, Dusk Culustro sits on his veranda. He wears the type of wide brimmed hat that would make anyone younger look ridiculous, but which is simply charming on him. White locks tumble down his forehead and part where a telescope is pressed against his eye.

Dusk has reached the age where he understands how far away the stars are, but feels closer to them all the same. His eyes seem faded by the amount they have seen, but they glow with how much he has enjoyed it all.

As his gaze pans over the night, he passes the emerald fire of the Mantis Nebula, slips across the pulsating channels of the Porpoise Constellation and curves slowly around a fiery halo crowning a distant mountain range. The journey isn't as smooth as it used to be: his trembling hands refuse to stay steady, shivering in tune with the shimmers of the sea.

Then Dusk's bushy eyebrows spring to meet his hat and his lips curl in a satisfied smile as he finally spots what he's been looking for. Dusk's smile is contagious. A subtle twist of the left corner of his lip that shifts his wizardly moustache lopsided. His breath puffs out in steamy wisps, a consequence of the northern evening ignoring the fact that spring is supposed to have started.

Dusk takes out a small fat envelope from his pocket and places it on the veranda table. He collapses his telescope and takes one final look at the universe: at the night, the stars, the mountains and the Fury Sea. Dusk smiles the goodbye of old friends and wanders inside, humming to himself.

In the morning Dusk is gone. And so is the envelope.

**LEAF'S END**

Stripe Culustro was 14 and like most 14-year-olds there was a lot he could do, and a lot he could not. Stripe could skip stones across lakes fairly well, but could not make pasta without challenging people's definitions of what was edible. Stripe could name any type of Electric Bicycle (the second most popular vehicle on Nonsolus) instantly, but struggled to do laundry without making his clothing turn into brand new psychedelic colours and shrink to impressively small sizes. Stripe had a mind that could generate complex questions about the nature and state of the universe, but could successfully shut down its processing core if his mom attempted to teach him about the virtues of making his bed in the morning. Stripe was not afraid of snakes or scorpions, but moderately terrified by girls.

Right now there was something Stripe Culustro could do just as well as anyone else and that was miss his grandfather. It was a fierce missing. A missing that lingered in objects and whispered constantly, day and night, a missing that could even take the sweetness out of Stripe's evening hot chocolate. It had been two days since the phone rang during breakfast and Stripe had seen his Dad crumple into a chair and deflate a little more with each garbled syllable from the other end of the line. It had never directly occurred to Stripe that his parents were capable of crying, so seeing his Dad's eyes turn red and his throat shake and his eyebrows crash together as if they were trying to hug each other had terrified him.

Stripe leaned against the car window and played the universal games of travel in his head while Wednesday afternoon rushed past him. He turned raindrops into racing comets or focused on the gaps between the echelons of lined pines whirring past in the mist, until the trees became fuzzy blurs and only the gaps were crystal clear. But these were surface distractions, scum and bubbles bobbling above the cold undercurrent of grief that he felt. The whole northward journey to Leaf's End was coded in Stripe's memory. It was not just a journey to his grandparents' home, but the journey into summer, the one his family set off on every year as soon as school had closed. Each signpost and bridge and roadside cafe had been seen by a growing series of younger Stripes each on their way to their respective summers.

Stripe thought about the things the previous Stripes had done with his grandfather who had always felt the same, ancient and unchanging just like Leaf's End. Each summer was part of an unchallenged pocket of youth that nestled in the folds of this visit like a Labrador in a king sized bed. This particular drive was shifting everything, a crease disrupting the pattern of Stripe's life. He had left school a week early and he still had a term after the upcoming break before his end of year holiday. As the scenery flitted past it

was all still shaded by the faded winter, the trees didn't give off that ripe feeling of greenness that Stripe loved so much.

The drive was a substantial one that demanded crossing four of Nonsolus's five provinces, leaving out only the political capital of Imprium on the west coast. It started by heading out of Stripe's home in southern Bisquite and following the coast up into the eastern province of Glengalis, famed for its rainy temperament, lightning farms and woolly yaks. After an overnight stop in Glengalis the journey went on into the northern parts of the central province of Yodel, which was mostly farmland. After leaving Yodel the drive worked its way into the fifth province of Nonsolus, Nornth. In Nornth the buildings began to spread further apart quite dramatically and the trees grew taller and the nights became colder. Beyond the centre of Nornth all the way up to the lonely coastline that stood against the darkness of the Furry Sea, at the very end of Nonsolus, lay Leaf's End. It was literally a drive across the whole of Nonsolus.



Stripe's attempts to distract himself with the landscape eventually subsided. A month ago he had had to draw a map of Nonsolus in geography and the exercise had made him think of his grandparents and begin to daydream about Leaf's End. The distance between Stripe and Dusk had made the whole of Nonsolus become a part of their relationship. Stripe had become so distracted while drawing his map that it came out lacking any respectable standard of neatness. His teacher had advised him to pay more respect to his map, as if it was some kind of living thing he'd let down. Stripe sighed. There was no refuge for him in the passing world outside. Time to think about something else. Stripe wondered what his friends would be doing now that the school day was over. Most likely getting ready for Saturday's ruckus.

Ruckus is played by two teams of 13 on a large field. Ruckus fields do not have to be a uniform shape, or flat, or even free of plant life, or benches, or other obstacles – this helps make each game fresh because of how variable the environments can be. There's nothing like someone running into a tree or falling backwards over a slope at a crucial moment to make a game exciting. Ruckus involves a slinger, who is tasked with using a slingshot to fire a ball down the pitch to their team's shielder. The shielder, as the name might suggest, wields a large shield and earns points every time the ball comes into contact with it. Between the slinger and the shielder is the opposing team's swinger who is armed with a large siege weapon of a racket. The swinger must intercept the slinger's shot and whack the ball out into the field. The field is populated by the slinging team's fielders and swinging team's anti-fielders. These two sets of players spend the game crashing, tackling and chasing each other after the ball.

Apart from the intense physical demands of ruckus, the game is laced with a strange element of debating and political negotiation amongst teams. Anti-fielders or fielders who catch the ball are in a position to swap places with their on-pitch teammates. However each team is under no obligation to diversify who is playing in which position. This opens up a further layer of conflict when teams and their egos are forced to openly argue over their own members' skill sets as well as where their personal abilities fit into the equation. Consequently ruckus is one of the few sports where fights break out *within* teams *during* play.

As puzzling as the rules of ruckus sound in abstract, the game is even more tumultuous in practice. It is essentially a blueprint for chaos and an excuse to hit things, shove people, run around and yell a lot. It is a very popular sport.

While Stripe was known to be quick on his feet during play, he shone as a diplomat. He was naturally good at defusing tensions and negotiating his team into cohesion.

Stripe knew his best friend Quincy would be at the game. Quincy loved ruckus, but he insisted he was better at analysing the sport than playing it. He was a large, easy-going boy who if given the chance to be a shielder, could manage to shove any swinger off the pitch; however, he tended to be pretty passive, which made him unsuited to the fieriness of the game. Though he didn't partake, Quincy would watch every match, giving feedback to Stripe which Stripe could then filter through to his teammates.

"It's what I do, man," Quincy would say with a shrug.

Stripe had befriended Quincy, who was originally from Imprium, two years ago after Quincy discovered Stripe routinely visited not only Nornth, but also Leaf's End. Quincy had approached Stripe wanting to know if he had ever seen any Viking relics. Quincy was fascinated with conspiracy theories including strange beliefs that Nonsolus had originally been settled by Vikings who had lived in a forgotten Northern Island that the government kept hidden.

"Why would the government keep the island hidden?" Stripe had asked.

"Because they don't want us to discover the Viking's ancient magic, man. It's why you got all those weird fossils up there and stuff," Quincy had answered, half-serious, half-playful. "Scan the beaches for Viking stuff, man. You can't discover the truth until you—"

"Look," squealed Stripe's younger sister Fispire shaking Stripe out of his recollections. She jerked forward excitedly pointing ahead and prompting the wild brown mop of her hair to flop into her face. She was eleven years old and a lot like her hair: incorrigible, free-spirited and charming. She flicked it out of her eyes to clear her view. A small bright object up in the sky was drifting across the horizon, just visible in the upper corner of the front window.

“Must be heading our way for the funeral,” said Stripe’s mother Ellen, glancing back at Stripe and Fispire in the rear-view mirror. Unlike Fispire her hair was neat and short, but she had a similar mischievous edge to her smile.

“What is it?” asked Fispire in wonder. The vehicle was composed of a coral-red balloon rocket about the size of a truck. A small boat shaped cabin hung suspended underneath the bright oval.

“That is a Zephyr,” said Stripe’s father Aero, turning around to look at Fispire through his thick black framed glasses. Aero loved technology and his face brightened at the opportunity to discuss the genealogy of human invention, he was an inventor after all, working for the government of Nonsolus. “What’s amazing about the Zephyr is that it’s not like our vehicles, well what I mean by that is, is that it’s not powered by electricity. So instead of the way we manage things,” all technology in Nonsolus came from its government, “Which is to harvest the electricity from the lightning farms, it relies on using gasses and fire to work. Imagine that? Grandpa Dusk was a very well-respected man, and was very good at making all sorts of friends.” Despite Aero’s enthusiasm, Stripe couldn’t help but notice the bags under his eyes.

“Do you think I could get to pilot it?” asked Fispire.

“Well you could certainly pilot your own one if you put your mind to it,” said Aero.

“But for now maybe just bargaining a ride would be a good place to start,” suggested Ellen with a quick reflected wink.

“I didn’t know people still used zephyrs anymore? Didn’t they stop making them after the lightning farms were set up? Why would anyone bother with a zephyr? Is it a Norinth thing?” said Stripe.

“It can be tricky to transport electricity to the northward isles,” explained Aero.

“Let’s put it this way,” said Ellen. “Dusk was the kind of person who would know the kind of people who still use Zephyrs.”



It was a strange feeling for the Culustro family when they crested the last hill and the view of Leaf’s End finally opened up before them. Stripe looked down at the scene that had always hailed good times – fire-places and climbing trees and the most vivid stars you’d ever find – knowing that it would never be the same. There were the tiny cobbled streets of the town and, behind them, the tall misty forests of Leaf’s End’s small northern isles and, further back still, the endless dark blue of the Furry Sea – all so ideal, like a living postcard – but still not quite the same. The small lake house on the fringes of the village did not have Edwin-Dusk Culustro waiting for them.

Stripe’s grandmother Maelstrom welcomed the family with her usual knowing stare and piercing blue eyes. She was a tall,

intimidating woman, with an air of youth, as if aging was an obligation she couldn't be bothered about. Her hair was long and silver, but her wrinkles were subtle and she carried herself with an astounding grace.

As soon as Stripe and Fispire hopped out of the car, Maelstrom's old pet badger Sally came excitedly over to Fispire and Stripe. Sally was greying and calm but reserved a special energy for the Culustro siblings. They both ruffled her hair lovingly. It was hard not to smile at Sally. Stripe had known her all his life.

It was only when Stripe greeted Maelstrom that the tension in her smile and the weighted softness of her voice revealed that she wasn't perfectly fine. Stripe's head had been so crowded with his grandfather's death that he didn't realise what a relief it was to see his grandmother again. As Stripe hugged Maelstrom he did it with extra force as if to affirm that she was still in the world and not going to disappear as suddenly as Dusk. Maelstrom matched the hug and it felt good to feel her strength.

Maelstrom had often made Stripe feel uncomfortable with her ability to outdo him in activities where his youth should have been an advantage. Stripe recalled two summers ago when she had once idly walked past Stripe skipping stones into the sea and paused to watch him. After intently examining Stripe make a four stone skip, a distance he was particularly proud of, she silently took a stone and made a six stone skip over twice the distance of Stripe's throw. She walked off without a word, a small smile on her face. At the time it had left Stripe feeling dismayed, especially after he'd failed to keep up with her on a family hike the day before. Today, however, Stripe couldn't have been happier that she was capable of such displays of health.



The house was surrounded by a collection of cars and motorbikes, as well as three ships and even, oddly, a bright yellow submarine – Maelstrom was clearly busy playing host. Fispire instantly decided that she was going to become a submarine pilot instead and dismissed zephyrs in general on the principle that you can see birds from the ground but can only really see marine life under the water. Stripe suggested you could see quite a fair amount of marine creatures above the water, to which Fispire testily replied, “Not the ones that glow and have sharp teeth,” and walked off.

The rest of the afternoon went by in a blur of handshakes and too many names. The home, while quite sizeable, was bursting with activity. At least two dozen strangers milled around the house. Normally Stripe would have been enthralled by the collection of scientists and eccentrics from the Northern isles, but they were all here for a funeral and Stripe couldn't take his thoughts away from

that. Stripe watched his Dad brightly discussing inventions and technology with the guests and had no idea how he managed it. A few days ago his dad had looked completely empty, but here he was being the life of the party.

After two hours of doing his best to look animated and charming he excused himself from the guests, interrupting Fispire grilling the nautical scientist about his submarine, and went to bed. Before Stripe fell asleep, Ellen slipped in and asked him gently if everything was okay. Stripe did his best to look all right and nodded and hugged his mom goodnight. When Stripe heard her close the door he allowed the deep sigh he'd been holding in all day deflate his lungs. It was incredibly important to Stripe that everyone think he was absolutely fine, because he felt it was his duty to appear cool and happy. He had always been cool and happy on the surface and he didn't want to upset his family even more by exposing how hopelessly unhappy his grandfather's death had made him feel. He rolled over, nestling deeper into the covers, breathing in the nostalgic woody smell of the room to try calm himself, and then flicked off the bedside lamp.

Normally when he was at the lake house, he stayed up as late as his parents would allow him so he could listen to his grandfather tell him stories by the fire, but that wasn't going to happen anymore. His eyes welled at the thought and a warm tear slipped down his cheek. He quickly scrunched up his face and shut his eyes as hard as he could manage. No crying. He hadn't cried yet and he wasn't going to start now. His family had enough to deal with.

Stripe looked out his small attic room window at the Fury Sea as if waiting for something to happen, but nothing did and he fell asleep. Stripe had no idea that outside in the cool darkness something had been watching him back.

## 2.

### AN INTERESTING FUNERAL

The dead don't attend their own funerals. With funerals it's the fact that the guest of honour can't come that warrants the occasion. Dusk's absence was met with an overwhelming presence on that Thursday morning. They were an eclectic bunch; ragged, weathered folk with thick boots made polite conversation with elegantly groomed, important-looking guests, while people with thick spectacles who looked a bit uncomfortable in sunlight stood nearby. And there were the people from Leaf's End, perhaps everyone from Leaf's End.

All the guests milled around a small one treed hill. It was the tree of Leaf's End. Legend has it that the tree had once produced a leaf that had sailed its way all around the world, back to the exact spot from which it had departed. Like all legends it came in a myriad of permutations and with dozens of embellishments, some involving the leaf setting out to see the world because it was bored by its leaf siblings and other versions even suggesting that there was no longer a tree when the wandering leaf finally returned but that it had landed right at the spot where the new tree would grow. Particularly inventive storytellers claimed that the leaf had settled in that treeless spot and grown the new tree itself. The scientists from the Northern isles would probably disagree with this version. Nevertheless, the spot had become the traditional place for the funerals of Leaf's End to be held. The place was scenic and had a nice circle of life feel to it.

Stripe wandered amongst the gathering droves of people automatically dispensing back pats, hugs and handshakes. There was an unprecedented amount of guests, the only consistency between them their respect for Dusk and items of deep navy blue clothing. It is a tradition in Nonsolus for funerals to have a death colour; a colour that was favoured by the deceased, which the guests all unite in facilitating. Whether it was a hat ribbon, or pocket square every guest carried at least a single item of Dusk's favourite colour on them.

Stripe refused an offer of navy blue champagne. Everyone here had meant something to Dusk and Stripe knew nothing about any of them, except second hand information about the notably famous people in attendance.

Stripe felt like an imposter, an unwelcome alien. What had that man with the safari hat and beaverish face meant to his grandfather? Had Dusk brought him some rare, luminous ghost butterfly from up North? Or that woman with the wide-brimmed dark hat and magnifying-glass spectacles that her tears sent sliding down her nose no matter how often she pushed them back up, like some novelty toy locked in a set sequence. Stripe felt lost in all the people, all the strangers – and then he noticed the strangest of them all.

The first one was a tall gnarled man with frosty hair wearing a horned helmet and an eye patch. He appeared to have made a half-hearted attempt to conceal his metallic headgear by wearing a black bowling hat on top of it. Needless to say this attempt had failed spectacularly and the bowler simply hung suspended between the helmet's two sharp horns. His suit strained over what appeared to be a full set of armour and his eye patch had a gaudy blue eye painted over it.

Standing next to him was a younger, leaner man, probably in his early thirties, who might have been less conspicuous if his suit hadn't been a bright canary yellow in the sea of sombre colours and navy blue. He had a pencil thin moustache, large ears and a fringe that looked very much like a tidal wave frozen with hair gel.

Stripe's eyes lingered on the taller of the men, trying not to laugh at his poorly obscured helmet when his gaze was met by fierce, unabashed eye contact. The man had a twitching left eyebrow and a relentless all-consuming gaze. Stripe thought of Quincy and his obsession with Vikings but before Stripe could do anything or ask anyone about the ridiculous duo Maelstrom was at his side accompanied by a large man with a sunken bulldog face and grey curly hair. Stripe immediately recognised him as Myles Orff, one of Nonsolus's major political players. The government of Nonsolus had always been the government of Nonsolus, there were no parties or votes. There was a saying in Nonsolus that the only thing that took longer to change than the members of the government was the policies that they promised to put out.

Myles gave Stripe a nod while looking at him as if as if he was a doctor trying to make a diagnosis. Stripe flashed him a nervous smile.

"Mr Orff this is Stripe." Stripe rushed to shake the man's hand terrified that he'd get arrested if he wasn't polite enough.

"A pleasure to meet you young Culustro. My deepest sympathies, on this sad day. If anything I hope you are inspired by what a remarkable life your grandfather led. You certainly have big boots to

fill.” He chortled as if laughing at an inside joke. Maelstrom cleared her throat.

“Stripe, it’s about time to get things going. Would you mind standing under the tree and giving everyone a little welcoming address?”

Stripe scanned Maelstrom’s face to see if she was joking. She wasn’t. Stripe felt his tongue turn into a fuzzy lump of static as he walked up the hill. Grandma Maelstrom always seemed to put Stripe into difficult situations that always felt perfectly reasonable as soon as Stripe thought about challenging them. Since he was nine, Stripe had begun to suspect that Maelstrom was testing him for some nefarious purpose. Stripe nodded goodbye to Myles Orff and took a quick peek to see if the guest with the yellow suit and his eye-patched friend were still around, but didn’t spot them.

As Stripe made his way up the hill, his heart and lungs joined forces to become one wild organ rattling in his chest like a prisoner desperate to escape.

He gazed down at the hordes of milling people, none of who had noticed Stripe.

“Hello and thank you for being here,” he called out to them. The crowd was only mildly affected. There must have been more than 200 people. “Hello?” he called again, winning a few more stares but hardly the whole crowd. Desperation seemed to bypass logical thought and Stripe found himself beginning to clap loudly. As soon as he realized what he was doing he felt like an idiot, but he continued. The crowd looked a bit puzzled but slowly began to congregate around the tree. The quieter things became, the more obtrusive and awkward Stripe’s clapping felt.

Eventually it was just Stripe and a horde of expectant onlookers. He cleared his throat.

“Right, excuse the clapping it just seemed like the best way to stand out at a funeral.” He paused, fumbling for the right words. “In many ways a funeral is like a painting of someone who has gone... You are all paint... well, the paint of the painting that this funeral is...”

Stripe’s hands were trembling and his forehead was sweating madly. There were a few coughs.

“My grandfather lived a very colourful and wondrous life. I’ve seen people here from all around Nonsolus – academics, explorers, politicians and Leaf’s Enders,” – a particularly proud Leaf’s Ender cheered triumphantly and then remembered himself – “and what amazes me is how my grandfather was capable of connecting with all

of you. I think all of you here say a lot about him in a way that I could not. So welcome and thank you.”

Stripe shuffled to his family. Maelstrom began to give a speech and Stripe stared vacantly at the crowd. Suddenly his eyes were met by the same furious gaze. The man wearing the Viking hat was staring up at him from the crowd. Realising the man was not going to look away, Stripe turned his eyes elsewhere. He made a show of browsing across the other faces, stared at his shoes a bit then glanced toward the man again. He appeared not to have moved a fraction, his live eye as unblinking as its painted partner. The Viking stared at Stripe as if he was trying to suck him in through his pupil. Stripe did his best to ignore him. The next few phases of the ceremony were an uncomfortable blend of Stripe listening to the proceedings and trying not to think about the strange Viking man who was probably still staring at him.

Eventually it came to the final rite during which Dusk’s ashes would be released into the wind to signify the funeral’s end. Stripe peeped back into the crowd and was relieved to see the helmeted man was gone. But before he could let out a sigh of relief, a burst of clapping erupted from the crowd. Stripe gazed in terror as the slim man in the yellow suit moved through the parting crowd, his hair bobbing above the funeral hats like a shark fin. The Viking man followed him. The suited man clapped in a strange ritualistic way as he walked and Stripe realized he was probably just copying what Stripe had done earlier to gather attention.

“Greetings, greetings everyone. Fellow friends of Dusk, excuse me – my name is Rastadam and this is Ragli.” The suited warrior grunted. “We are here on the behalf of Dusk.”

The crowd shifted to surround them until the odd duo stood at the funeral’s centre.

“As we all know,” continued Rastadam, “Dusk was an explorer and spent a considerable time advent – ahem – researching things up north. On the little islands. Yes, the very little islands. Looking at little plants, little animals, seaweed et cetera. As part of Dusk’s dying rites he has requested that his grandson Spot,” here the man paused and looked thoughtful. “Spot, Stripe that is, is to go up north and scatter a small portion of his ashes in a special spot chosen by Dusk himself. On one of the small islands up north.”

The crowd stared blankly.

The man ran his finger along his moustache. “Stripe do you accept the ques – ahem – request?”

Eyes began to flick to Stripe. He felt the weight of them taking him in, sizing him up. There were more than a few scowls, criticising his part in this undignified interruption. Stripe noticed Myles Orff looking at him with a red face that trembled as if trying to conceal he had just eaten a very hot chilly. Stripe wanted to get the gazes off him and racked his brain for a response that would not draw this mad moment out any longer. Consent seemed the quickest way to appease the strange men so Stripe simply stammered, "Um... sure."

"Good," said the yellow suited man. "You leave at dawn tomorrow. Simply row a boat up to the Long-Short bridge and then head over to the Map Fountain. Lady Maelstrom will help you." The man walked up to Dusk's urn, tipped out a fistful of ash and pocketed it. Gasps and murmurs of disapproval shot out from the crowd. Nobody had ever heard of the Long-Short bridge or knew what a map fountain was, Stripe included.

"A good day to you all," said Rastadum before pausing. "Also I thought we were meant to wear a whole outfit of our favourite colour and not one item of Dusk's favourite colour. Also I think he preferred green to be honest. Anyway..." and he shifted back into the crowd followed by his large companion.

After the strange duo had dissipated back into the funeral guests the rest of the ceremony went quite smoothly. The only other surprise, for Stripe at least, was the dispensing of his grandfather's ashes. While his grandmother had explained his grandfather's wishes and their significance to the crowd, Stripe had been distracted by Ragli's intense gaze.

Instead of the traditional throwing of fistfuls of ash from under the tree, Dusk's urn was placed on a small model ship, about the size of a hardcover book. Stripe's father gently lowered the ship into the water. A group of musicians began to play out a song that was simultaneously mournful and upbeat in some bittersweet contradiction. Stripe was shocked to see Maelstrom collect a bow and arrow from under a cloth at the foot of the tree and wade into the surf. Stripe's father took a moment to light the arrowhead, which burst into a fist-sized flame, crackling brightly. The boat had sailed a fair distance into the sea, but Maelstrom seemed unperturbed. She locked her gaze on the tiny ship, growing tinier still as it bounced over the increasingly rough water and released her arrow. The flame engulfed the urn in a colourful explosion. Cheers and applause rang out from the crowd.

Stripe turned and shared a look with Fispire. Her jaw was slack and her eyes bulging. They applauded along with the rest of the

audience, amongst mutters along the lines of “Oh Dusk” and “Of course he would have a funeral like this.”

### 3.

#### PACKING FOR A QUEST

During the post-ceremony small talk and packing up, there was a radius of evasiveness around Stripe. If he had arrived at the funeral by wading out of the ocean in a neon wetsuit with a sea-monster tube around his waist he would have probably made people less uncomfortable than he was making them right now. Eventually giving up on trying to blend in, Stripe found a spot at the shore's edge and looked out across the Fury Sea. His isolation was briefly broken by Fispire trundling up to him.

"I want to go on a quest," she said accusingly, before kicking a stone into the water and wandering off. Eventually Stripe's father came over and invited Stripe to walk back with him.

"So... A quest 'ey?" said Aero polishing his glasses.

Stripe stayed silent.

"Certainly a funeral to remember... typical of dad," Aero continued.

"Dad, did you... expect this?" asked Stripe, an idea slowly dawning on him.

"Well I knew about the whole arrow thing and the -,"

Stripe cut him off, "That's not what I meant."

"Right. Well yes and no. I knew there was a possibility that you'd be asked to go see the North, but I certainly didn't expect the invitation to arrive the way it did."

"How much do you know about what's going on? Who were those guys?" Stripe was trying his best to speak evenly but there was an edge of upset in his voice.

"Look Stripe, I know that was unexpected."

"Unexpected? Unexpected? One of them was wearing armour under his suit and a horned helmet! And *quest*? Why quest? Why not journey or something? Who says quest?"

"What's the difference?" asked Aero.

"I'm guessing the fact that he was wearing armour had something to do with it. Journeys don't require armour."

"Look Stripe, your family loves you and wouldn't just send you off if we thought you'd run into any... real danger."

"Great only false danger then... Like being humiliated and socially rejected at my granddad's funeral."

An unpleasant silence fell between them.

"You know hamsters eat their young when they get rejected," said Stripe trying to diffuse the tension.

"Good thing you're not a hamster," said his dad grabbing Stripe's arm jokingly. They both shared a smile. Stripe sighed.

"Dad, I don't want to go."

"Your grandfather wants you to."

"Wanted."

"Just because he's gone doesn't mean his influence on the world has also."

"So you're fine with me going off gallivanting—"

"Good word," interjected Aero.

"Thanks. Gallivanting while you're all stuck here mourning."

"It's hardly that dramatic Stripe. You'll be back before the weekend is over."

"So you do know what's going on!"

"What I do most certainly know is that you'll need to pack well."



The rest of the day was slightly surreal. Only slightly because nothing could compare to how severely surreal the two funeral guests had been. It was like witnessing an alien abduct a cow and then coming home to find a celebrity dining with your family. Both are very strange things certainly, but the first manages to make the latter seem less radical. Maelstrom took charge, giving Stripe a travel pack filled with whatever he might need including a water bottle, a packet of non-perishable foods and, quite suspiciously, a set of clothes designed for practical travelling as well as a sleeping bag. Stripe tried on a light navy blue long sleeved shirt that kept you cool in the heat, warm in the cold and was quick drying – it fitted him perfectly.

"Did you plan this whole thing?" he asked.

Maelstrom who had never pampered Stripe, replied curtly. "Little detective, you are. No I didn't 'plan this whole thing' but I did prepare for it." She squeezed his shoulder and smiled.

"I'm sorry that they just dropped it on you in-front of everybody. That wasn't the plan but, Rastadum has a will of his own. Note I used the word *will* and not *mind*."

"So you know them?" Stripe asked.

"Well, obviously," said Maelstrom gliding out of the room.

"Obviously," muttered Stripe, remembering her sudden expertise in firing flaming arrows at the funeral. Clearly anything was on the cards after that.

Ellen's contribution to Stripe's journey was a floppy sunhat with a picture of a duck on the front.

“Now, you’re probably thinking I’m being ridiculous but you’re going to be far more effective as a traveller without a headache and aching skin. Sunburn is one of the most easily avoidable hindrances.”

She handed the hat to Stripe and looked him in the eyes with a stare that ran straight through his corneas and down into the depths of his soul.

“It has a duck on it.”

“It’s just the logo. Promise me you’ll wear it, Stripe.”

“Yes, mom,” Stripe promised.

Fispire’s contribution was the insistence that Stripe pack a rope. “Ropes are very useful Stripe,” she repeated for the umpteenth time. She believed this so whole-heartedly that she kept following Stripe around the house with a rope and planting it in visible places as if he’d suddenly see it for the first time and excitedly pack it. Stripe didn’t entirely object to the rope, he was just in a whirlwind of activity and the rope was in the outer circumference of his to-do list. Socks had to be packed, walking sticks considered, binoculars debated; the rope was somewhere in the mix, just not his first priority. Eventually, while hurrying down a passage in search of a towel Stripe slammed face first into the floor. Fispire had tied the rope in a low tripline across the passage designed to send him flying. Stripe crashed into the ground and as if magically summoned by the opportunity Sally appeared out of nowhere licked the length of Stripe’s face and scuttled off. Stripe pushed himself up onto his elbows. A small scrawled note lay on the floor in front of him:



ROPES ARE USEFUL.

Stripe packed the rope immediately.

The rest of the day slipped away and eventually Stripe was alone in his room unable to sleep. The moon was full and beckoning and Stripe found himself out on the pier throwing stones into the water and thinking about Lurzwurgles and Wurzlurgles and his final conversation with his grandfather.



On the last night of every summer before it was time to head home, when the plates were clear and the bellies were full and the

fire had sung its song and everyone else was heading off to sleep Stripe would stay up with Dusk, just the two of them sitting near the calm midnight fireplace. Then they would take to unravelling the fabric of the universe. Stripe would ask Dusk Culustro about anything, absolutely anything, and his grandfather would answer. They'd stay up, the evening a small ship they steered together towards the morning and the truth. Stripe had once shared Quincy's theory about Nonsolus being settled by Vikings from a secret island. Dusk had laughed heartily.

"I'm glad you keep friends who have an imagination Stripe. He's got the story the wrong way around though. Vikings were rebels and outlaws who took refuge *from* the Nonsolus government within the Fury Sea a long time ago."

Their final discussion had been a big one. In hindsight Stripe thought that maybe they somehow knew it was their last moment together.

"So what is the meaning of life then, grandpa?" Stripe had asked. Dusk had stared out at the night as if he were draining celestial wisdom from the eternal stars. There was a moth struggling against its reflection on the window; it looked like it was trying to reunite its divided halves. Dusk pointed at it.

"Some animals inspire philosophy and debate about what life is. For us the creatures beyond and within the Fury Sea especially. Mostly because they're different enough to challenge what we know."

He paused.

"The phantom Penguins – from the isles up North – are often argued to be ghosts. Others say that just because they're large, dark, footless wisp-tailed, visibility challenged anomalies with glowing white eyes and strange powers doesn't mean they're ghosts."

If it was possible for Stripe to pay any more attention than he had been before, he did so now. When Stripe was younger Dusk would tell him stories about strange creatures from the North. Really strange creatures. Not the strange ones everyone sort of acknowledged existed or had existed. As Stripe grew older he grew more sceptical, but here was Dusk mentioning them again. From about the time he turned 10, Stripe had begun to see his grandfather's stories as colourful embellishments. Now his once-stable universe has being jostled with each word his grandfather spoke. Was this a joke or was his grandfather being serious? Maybe both if that was possible? Dusk smiled to himself.

“Another interesting creature is the Inverted Giraffe. I’ve had the good fortune of seeing one.”

Although his eyes were slightly glazed and pale they glistened as he spoke.

“It has a neck that’s over negative 12 feet long, which it uses to graze on subterranean root network matter. Of course all a spectator sees is a four legged body aimlessly wondering around a field. The neck and its head are said to be antimatter and the body serves as its anchor to reality... And then there is the Wurzlurgle and the Lurzwurgle. The Wurzlurgle is a medium sized fish-like creature. The Lurzwurgle, on the other hand resembles a sugar glider. Well, a sugar glider mixed with a weasel.

“Two entirely separate beings – except that they’re not. They’re the same beings. Lurzwurgle's are compelled by some unknown force to leap off heights and crash into large bodies of water. They then sink and out of their mouths – pop - a Wurzlurgle rockets out into existence. The Lurzwurgle’s pelt then drifts softly to the bottom of the ocean like a feather falling. The Wurzlurgle on the other hand beaches itself and out of its mouth a Lurzwurgle dashes, running away from the water’s edge into safety from aquatic predators. The Fury Sea actually used to be the Furry Sea you know. In times very few remember and even fewer wish to.

“The name was easier to change after we virtually drove the little fellows into extinction. The fact that they exist terribly upsets a lot of people and we’ve made a concerted effort in Nonsolus to try ignore it. If a scientist even mentions them they could ruin their career. People ignore the whole of Nornth, to be honest. It’s no coincidence we don’t have a railway going up here. They find it all too strange. It’s too inconsistent for them. It’s disturbingly inconsistent, magically inconsistent. It changes our understanding of everything. Everything gets classified, everything gets named and we know what those things are, but to have something that’s both a fish and a mammal - that’s ridiculous. We like bubbles, our whole world is a bubble and people put in a lot of effort to keep it that way. If only you knew how much, Stripe.

“In the past before they were rare enough to be denied as existing, some would rally against Wurzlurgles and Lurzwurgles being the same creature. Government types. There was a theory that they’re two separate creatures locked in a mutual partnership. The Lurzwurgle hibernates in the fish and the Wurzlurgle hibernates in the furry flying weasel creature and there is no natural connection

between the two. They are just conspiring partners in an audacious scheme to survive.”

Dusk looked to some place further than the eyes could see and smiled.

“Life is truly amazing.”

“But grandpa. You haven’t answered my question,” said Stripe. Not sure what to make of his grandfather’s story.

Dusk turned back and smiled.

“Come outside.”

They had walked out onto the same pier Stripe was sitting on now.

The morning was approaching and Dusk had led Stripe to the very edge of the walkway. He withdrew a chocolate biscuit from his pocket and tossed it across the sparkling water. It skipped three times and was suddenly intercepted by a large fish launching like a scaly missile out of the water. It swam its way up to Dusk and Stripe and looked at them with strikingly intelligent eyes. Without any warning the fish vaulted up onto the wooden walkway and thrashed around madly. Then it went limp and slumped onto the wood with a wet plop. After a brief stillness, a slender furry creature with a foxy copper coat burst out of its mouth and sat at Dusk’s shoes staring up attentively.

“Good job girl,” said Dusk and produced another biscuit. The creature took it and ran away past Stripe and into the garden.

“Took me ages to train her,” said a smiling Dusk. He paused and his face grew serious.

“If you want to know the meaning of life just look at the world Stripe. There are tons of meanings out there: Collect pollen and make honey. Howl at the moon and kill deer. Jump off an impossibly tall height shatter your bones and become a fish. Die and spit out a fuzzy iteration of yourself.... The possibilities are endless. One day you’ll get to choose your own.”

Stripe had spent the whole year considering that moment. Sometimes he was convinced it had been a dream and other times he was sure it wasn’t. People were aware of the mysterious islands that contained ancient creatures with a propensity to defy all logic and reason. They were mostly extinct and the isles tended to be frequented by archaeologists and palaeontologists. Now, alone on the pier, Stripe thought about all of the questions he had never got to ask his grandfather. Questions concerning Dusk’s old stories about giant caves that concealed ancient treasures, about Space Rivers flowing with dark inky infinity and sparkling stars or fearsome Lizzlers large enough to drag a grown man into the shadows and never let him go had gone from being six-year-old Stripe facts to ten-

year-old Stripe stories. The Lurzwurgle / Wurzlurgle incident last summer had certainly turned that upside down.

As they went inside Stripe had asked his grandfather a final question.

“Is magic real?”

Dusk had pointed to the fire.

“What’s that?”

“A fire,” answered Stripe.

“And how does it work?” said Dusk.

“Well it’s... it’s an area of intense heat that, um... turns into a red dancing thing...” Stripe went quiet, words clearly failing him.

“Sounds like magic to me,” said Dusk and went upstairs. That was the last time Stripe had seen him.

Stripe wondered what his travels would bring. How real had his grandfather’s playful adventure stories been? Stripe had tried mentioning his strange evening with his grandfather to Quincy who had thought it was a great joke and laughed at it amiably. The funeral seemed a clear indication that Stripe had stumbled across something real and that he should expect strange new things. He dug in his pocket and took out a chocolate biscuit salvaged from the kitchen. He tossed it into the water and went back to bed.

## ACROSS THE FURY SEA

The next morning Stripe had a small parcel waiting for him at the breakfast table. His family watched as he unwrapped it and found a dark ashen leaf that glimmered in speckles against the early light as if it was coated in a thousand pin sized drops of morning dew. The leaf's petiole split into two strands of fine chain that met again to form a necklace loop. Stripe gently put it down. A small note rested under the necklace.

This leaf has been  
crafted out of the ashes of  
Dust Culustro. He wishes it  
be released into the  
Endless River so that  
it may sail through and  
beyond everything he has  
ever known.

Stripe felt a lump grow in his throat as he read the note out to his family. He passed the necklace over to Ellen who examined it in wonder. In silence the leaf was passed slowly around the table until it made its way back to Stripe. Everyone watched as Stripe tenderly placed the necklace around his neck. It felt impossibly light and delicate, just like the small moment he had shared with his family. Even Fispire had surrendered to the tender quiet.

Talk between the Culustro family was light that morning, the kind of talk that was used to fill up life when it was waiting for something to happen before it could go on. Eventually Stripe found himself watching Ellen, Aero and Fispire wave goodbye to him while Maelstrom rowed him out across the dark, glimmering water of the Fury Sea. The water was choppy, a myriad of navy blue, crystalline mountains rising and falling endlessly. Then Maelstrom spoke.

"Stripe. I know this might seem out of character coming from me."  
Stripe felt himself tense.

“But I need you to know that I’ve never meant to be harsh on you. I’ve always been the one who’s had to push you so you can reach further than you ever thought you could.”

The words sunk in. Maelstrom had always given Stripe tough love, the kind of love that meant braving a tall, difficult mountain to pluck rare fruit, so that you could have your favourite-flavoured pie later in absolute comfort. He nodded. They rowed on in silence. Leaf’s End receding into the growing expanse of water and mist. As Stripe looked back he noticed a fish, with particularly bright eyes, riding in the boat’s slipstream.

“You’re right,” said Maelstrom.

“Right about what?” asked Stripe.

“It’s a Wurzlurgle,” said Maelstrom.

Stripe watched the fish’s acrobatics keep pace behind them like it was a clown auditioning for a moving circus that was leaving without it.

“I have no idea what I’m in for, do I?” said Stripe.

“No,” replied Maelstrom. “But I suppose that’s what makes it what it is.”

The boat began to draw near an island shrouded in mist. Mist seemed to be the chief export of this area. As the boat neared the shoreline Stripe noticed something that looked like a rabbit with antlers run into the dense foliage that webbed the rocky landscape. He shook his head, the glimpse being too quick for him to quite comprehend. He felt a sense of strangeness crawling in his gut as if the previous day’s peculiarity had fermented in his stomach and was now returning with a vengeance.

Stripe hugged Maelstrom goodbye, a hug that showed how much he appreciated what she’d said in the boat, and watched her row away in a trance. It was like this new world was a software update and he was suspended in a stupefied buffering state, his heart a fan whirring furiously and his mind a fuzzy cloud of scrambled data ironing itself out aching slowly. When Maelstrom was nearly out of sight, Stripe realised he didn’t know where to go, or how to get back once he’d been there. Before he could call out he noticed a slim silhouette creep up onto her shoulder and then she was gone. Maelstrom and the Wurzlurgle, now a Lurzwurgle, sailing away into the known and leaving Stripe in the realm of absolute strangeness.

The foliage was dense and undisciplined; nothing seemed to grow in isolation. Branches twisted into other branches and sprawling vines and leaves weaved across the entire forest like an endless botanic spider web. Stripe hovered before the trees like a lonely tennis ball that had been vaulted into some strange and distant

neighbour's alien garden. The musty and salty air tasted strange in Stripe's mouth. He felt his breathing growing heavy.

*Now what? Now what? Now what?* hammered his head and heart in synch. Stripe scanned his surroundings and to his relief spotted what appeared to be a path. It was a subtle path, more the suggestion of something that had once been a path and had given it up for some other career. But it was still a path all the same and Stripe followed the twisting and turning road into the gloom of the foliage.

Eventually, after 15 minutes of vaulting and scrambling, the vegetation receded and Stripe found himself walking along an empty grey clearing before the island's mountains. It was the kind of place where the wind was audible, not because it was particularly loud or strong, but because everything else was profoundly silent. The path crawled up to a slope where its parenthesis of stony mountain slipped suddenly and sheepishly away. As Stripe padded forward, the island's incorrigible swirling mist flowed around him like the eddies of a phantom river. The crunch of the gravel, the sound of his breath and the startling tick of his usually silent wristwatch punctuated each step. At the summit of the slope, the path ended and a long rickety bridge began. A decrepit sign crouched next to it:



'Fury' was spelt 'Furry' Stripe noted, before turning his attention to the bridge itself.

There was something grey and ancient about it, like it was older and had existed far longer than the landscape it leapt from. Its dangling ribs seemed to swell and distend with the breeze. Stripe paused, held his breath and gently stretched out his left foot toward the bridge as if testing a potentially freezing lake before a swim. It met his weight firmly, with a taut, agreeable creaking. Stripe couldn't help but notice the choppy expanse of the Furry Sea below him or how thin the bridge's shadow became along the water's surface. Nevertheless he continued, another step adding to his reassurance that the bridge was trustworthy. He turned to look back one last time and found that the opening which had marked the beginning of the bridge was extremely far away. It was as if, when

Stripe had turned his back, the geography had quickly got up and slinked away from him like some unreliable sheepdog, only to freeze nervously when his gaze returned. Stripe took a few more paces along the bridge and found the weather began to grow exponentially clearer. He turned back and flinched at the sight of the bridge stretching impossibly far from him under a clear day and over a bright blue body of water. The bridge's backward trajectory unfolded toward a distant cluster of clouds that Stripe could easily block out with a single raised palm.

Thoughtfully, Stripe took off his sun hat and looped it by its safety cord around the bridge's handrail. He turned his back to the hat took five paces and spun round to see the hat, small and distant, down the long path of the bridge. Stripe stepped toward the hat and it seemed to zoom towards him like an image on a screen. Stripe thoughtfully put his hat back on and felt an idea begin to burn through his mind.

He looked down The Long-Short Bridge and began to run.

The effect was instantaneous. The handrails alongside him began to blur past like threaded railway lines, the glistening sparkles of the ocean diffused into a radiant sheen and the bridge unfolded wildly like it was rushing towards him. Stripe slowed down for a moment, breathless, not quite used to the sensation he was discovering. He'd ridden on an electric train before, but there was an overwhelming directness in this. The speed and distance weren't filtered through screens or windows or a sense of being contained within some other motion. This was him. This was Stripe. It was like flight without wings. It was freedom.

Feeling his mind adjust to the physics of the bridge, Stripe took off again - this time at a full sprint. Clouds shot past like snowball meteors, the ocean became a silver glow, and as he gained speed the bridge began to feel like the only constant thing in the world. The weather unfolded like a painting in motion, the sky darkened, clouds crashed and twisted, rain and thunder flashed by. The storm dissipated in ten steps and suddenly a mass of land was blossoming in front of Stripe – rolling hills, green meadows and ancient stones all growing and expanding toward him.

Stripe was struck with the panging realizations:

- i. He was about to have crossed the Fury Sea.
- ii. He was, in fact, going to cross it a bit too well given his furious velocity.

A large, round figure burst into view at the bridge's end and in seconds Stripe smacked into it, sending them both rolling and tumbling to the ground. The two bodies lay sprawled against the earth, Stripe still feeling a sense of motion despite his face being buried in soil. He groggily pulled himself to his feet and, before he even had a chance to check on the other person, heard a furious wail. Pointing a large staff accusingly at Stripe with one hand and dusting its baggy robes with the other was a creature that looked like a tall raggedy rodent draped in a tablecloth. It had a gaping overbite, long wiry facial hair and an angry indignant quiver.

"Now I must do my entrance again," it screamed and trundled off behind a large bush near the bridge mouth. Stunned, Stripe stayed where he was staring at the now empty landscape. It felt like the world was holding its breath. The creature bobbed out again now with the hood of its robe covering its face.

"Go back then," it hissed. Stripe continued to stare. The creature lamely wavered its hands in the direction of the bridge. Obediently, Stripe walked back onto it.

"Bit further," came a call from behind the large bush. Stripe fractionally adjusted his feet and was suddenly looking at the end of the bridge from a dozen meters away.

As if by trigger, a glittering and swirling flourish of fantastic emerald smoke burst into life at the head of the bridge. The outline of the hooded creature expertly exposed itself, while remaining as a silhouette, and said, "Behold 'tis I, keeper of the bridge, lord of the keys, master of mysteries, Glubblegirth the Spiral-Tongued. I have..." It trailed off. Stripe was coughing furiously on the smoke, which had drifted down the bridge in his direction. The figure waited impatiently for him to stop, tapping his dark curved fingernails against his staff. There was a lull in Stripe's coughing fit and the creature grabbed the opportunity.

"Three riddles, all three for you, answer them swiftly, and answer them true and beyond..."

Gubblegirth the Spiral-Tongued stopped again as Stripe burst into another fit of wheezy hacks. Eventually they subsided.

"*Beyond*. Beyond the bridge, I'll let you through."

"But I'd already crossed it?" volunteered Stripe.

Gubblegirth deflated slightly.

Stripe took another step forward and Gubblegirth quickly snatched up a small pouch from the waistline of his belt.

"Take one step closer and I'll throw it at you."

“What is it?” said Stripe, expecting some vicious concoction that would eat his bones and dissolve his clothes.

“It’s one of my smoke bombs,” said the creature begrudgingly. Then added “They’re expensive you know,” as if that somehow loaned an extra level of threat to the situation.

“Right. Riddle one: What goes round and round, in the dark and in the light, belongs to few of us during the day and some of us toward the night?”

Stripe mused it over. Stripe had always been inclined to solve problems and answer questions, as well question answers. Admittedly he did tend to be drawn to the mysteries that sprouted and grew and flowered in his own head instead of ones that were forced upon him. Stripe was the kind of person who would relentlessly evade a standard school question appropriate for his age but would put hours into solving his own curiosities about the world. Ask Stripe about the lightning farms of Glengalis and he’d compile a passable answer at the last possible moment. Let Stripe find a seared light bulb out in a field while on holiday and he’d personally interview the local populace, trace it to the notorious Nonsolus Thunder Bandits, take out five books from the local library and within a week would have an impressive working knowledge of the history of the Glengalis lightning farms and know exactly where his mystery lightbulb fitted into it all. Unfortunately for Stripe Nonsolus library collections tended to ignore things like the mysteries of the Northern Isles and Vikings.

“Easy,” Stripe replied to Gubblegirth. “The answer is the moon.”

Gubblegirth burst into manic laughter, which sent his ragged whiskers quivering. “Incorrect, incorrect, incorrect. The correct answer was *Time*.”

Stripe felt as if he’d just been struck across the face. He had not had the slightest shred of doubt that his answer was correct. It was as if he’d put a plate of noodles in the microwave for two minutes and opened it up at the sound of the beep to find a bowl of rice inside.

“But my answer makes perfect sense,” said Stripe, outraged.

Gubblegirth replied slowly as if he was explaining something to a very small child. “The rotational ticking of a clock goes around all the time, because that is what it shows us – time going round. Most people, like *me*, have *jobs* to do during the day. A few – like you,” here he paused and gave Stripe a look of sad disapproval, “Do not. Which is probably what got you confused. More people have the

evening open to rest and engage in leisure and so time is only truly theirs then. *Understand?*”

Stripe didn't like how snidely the Creature had dismissed his lack of a job.

“Yes,” he said. “But the moon also constantly revolves around the world, during the day and the night although it is rarely visible during the day and is generally only visible at night depending where you are and how clear the sky is.”

Gubblegirth sniggered at Stripe. His sharp dirty nails wavering in some mock dance.

“Next riddle,” he said dismissively. “What has roots of stone, a lid of sky and in between neither you nor I?”

Stripe took this question to heart. There was something about the small mindedness of the bridge-keeper that infuriated him. He was like a personified multiple-choice question. Narrow minded, bureaucratic and incapable of any flexibility. *Roots of stone, roots of stone* he turned it over in his mind. It could be... well mountains had roots of stone and the azure could be considered a lid of sky, but in-between neither him nor the creature? It depended on which mountains. It could be the world, but again they were both in the world. A lid of sky – and suddenly Stripe had a flash memory of a story his grandfather had told him about a man that had to go down a well. It was something to do with a golden flute at the bottom. He had to fetch it out, or was it conceal it in its depths? Stripe wasn't sure. All he could remember was his grandfather describing somebody slowly descending down the darkness and looking up at the sky, like it was a receding full stop that told the story of life outside the endless shadows.

That was it! *A well. It had to be. Wells had roots of stone, lids of sky and certainly neither Stripe nor Gubblegirth were stuck down one.*

“A well,” replied Stripe again with confidence.

“Hmmm,” said Gubblegirth stroking his beard. “A well... yes I suppose I could see that ... see that it is wrong that is!” Gubblegirth burst into laughter. It sounded a bit forced in Stripe's opinion.

“The answer,” said Gubblegirth. “Is ‘over there’.” He pointed to a patch of rocky ground a few feet away from where the bridge ended.

Stripe was outraged.

“You could just point anywhere!” he cried indignantly. “That's stupid.”

"Look, do you want to see my credentials?" Gubblegirth asked. In the most pompous manner imaginable he withdrew a scroll and unrolled it.

## THE GROPE ACADEMY OF

### Gatekeepers, Riddlemakers, Obstacle Providers and Entranceblockers



Groping at Knowledge for Centuries

*'Winter is approaching and the summer has bled itself dry, on this day where the leaves are gold and fall out the sky - beholdeth here is the certified rise of another of our great Alumni!'*

### Gubblegirth 'The Spiral Tongued' Shadowtwit

### B.A. In Riddling & History of Bridges

Go fourth and confuse great things...



Signature of Dean-Baron-  
Lord Vice-Chancellor (whose  
name is a question no-one  
has ever answered):

-----

Date:

*The Season of  
Leaves and Leavers*

"Your surname is Shadowtwit?" Stripe asked, amused.

The creature smirked.

"Oh don't you worry I've heard it all, but that didn't stop me making the top five in Whooshology and Theory of Rhyme as well as Folk-Law. Now if you'll excuse me I have a final riddle to ask you." His blood shot eyes scrunched up as he cleared his throat.

"What has two legs in the morning, three in the afternoon and four in the evening?"

Stripe was about to burst out that everybody knew that one but suddenly realized that the details weren't quite right.

"Don't you mean what has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?"

"I mean what I mean," replied Gubblegirth 'The Spiral Tongued' Shadowtwit.

Stripe realised with a shock that he was stumped. Wasn't there some mythical creature that grew more legs as it travelled or was he making that up out of desperation? Had he come all this way only to get turned back at the door like some underage drinker bounced from a country pub? *Wait*, he thought. *A drinker.*

Stripe handled the fledgling, gently tugging it toward fullness as if he were carefully pulling a coin out of a gutter with a weak magnet tied to a string. Drinkers start standing upright. But after a few glasses they begin to lose their balance. So they need to lean on things or against things. They essentially needed three legs to support themselves and then even later on... well it got quite messy. Stripe had never been drunk, but he'd heard people make reference to crawling home.

"A drunkard?" he ventured, hoping the antiquated charm of the word would appeal to a person wearing a robe who occasionally spoke in rhyme.

"No!" cried Gubblegirth in triumph. The answer is 'a cow being painted really slowly'."

Stripe snapped. Perhaps it was the rush of the bridge journey or the obnoxiousness of the bridge keeper, but Stripe felt his nerves churn out adrenal energy.

"No, no, no! Not even you, not *even* you, can deny that my answer is way better than yours."

"It is not the quality of the answer that matters," replied Gubblegirth quite sniffily, "It is the truth. A key can be golden and glossy but it still needs to fit perfectly into the keyhole."

"That's rubbish. Your answer could apply to any quadruped being painted, somebody could start with the legs and then move onto the rest, and your idea that it happens over a day is ridiculous."

"It's a *metaphor* for the passage of time," said Gubblegirth. "Now if you excuse me you are barred entrance to this side of the bridge. Unless of course you pay the price..." Gubblegirth inflated himself. He was larger than Stripe had realised and his teeth were pretty violent looking.

"What price?" asked Stripe hopefully.

“Five thousand,” answered Gubblegirth flatly. Stripe didn’t even bother asking what currency he wanted. Stripe didn’t have any money on him anyway.

“What’s stopping me from just going through?” asked Stripe.

“Ah, the Folk-Law,” said Gubblegirth. “The Folk-Law stipulates that Bridgekeepers and Riddlemakers must be obeyed and that this can only be countered if they themselves are outsmarted. You certainly don’t want to mess with the GROPE Academy’s law enforcers. Nasty lot.”

“You mean there’s not actually any real law behind it? It sounds to me like you guys just say what you want and if people don’t follow your rules, you hurt them.”

“Isn’t that what law is though?” said Gubblegirth, leering toothily at Stripe.

Stripe felt red-hot anger seeping through his veins. This Gubblegirth was just one bully in a network of bullies. This wasn’t law; this was making cages around people with words and locking them in with power. This was not going to stop him from completing his grandfather’s quest. Not before it had even started.

“Fine,” said Stripe. “Here’s what I’m going to do Shadowtwit. I’m going to run back to the other side of this bridge and then sprint all the way back and whizz past you. There you’re outsmarted. Law obeyed.”

Gubblegirth looked taken aback, shock and anger twitching through his sly stare.

“My magic will counter you,” he said unconvincingly.

“Maybe, but whether I’m a frog or not, 3000 steps a second isn’t going to change the fact that I’ll roast you like a shooting star. Although since you’re such an expert in riddles how about I ask you three and if you get them all right I won’t try my crazy plan,” offered Stripe, who really didn’t want to try his crazy plan.

Gubblegirth was in a difficult position. His narrow-mindedness and pride were like two dissonant gears grinding together.

“As a master in riddles I can solve any. But I can’t stop you from just changing your answers in order to get past me.”

Stripe had prepared for this and came straight back at Gubblegirth. “I’ll write them down first.” Gubblegirth looked slightly terrified. Stripe grinned.

“Surely if the challenge is fair, a GROPE graduate will have no issue handling some wandering boy.”

*There* – Stripe’s trap was set. Gubblegirth reluctantly agreed.

Stripe counted ten exaggerated steps back down the bridge for some privacy and made all the preparations he needed to. He wrote out three riddles, grateful that he had agreed to his dad's suggestion that he bring some writing utensils with him. Before Stripe headed back he paused. Stripe suspected Gubblegirth may not play fair and so he prepared a fourth, less hypothetical answer to deal with him: he tied Fispire's rope across the bridge at his chest height (which he figured amounted to Gubblegirth's neck height). In the event that things went poorly, this might slow down any angry Gubblegirth chasing him.

Stripe walked back to the end of the bridge and handed the waiting Gubblegirth a folded piece of parchment containing his first riddle and its answer. Gubblegirth pocketed it within the recesses of his robe. Stripe watched him closely. He had decided that Gubblegirth was about as trustworthy as a grey maggoty peach with a sticker saying NOT EXPIRED on it.

Stripe began, "What has many roads but only one destination, for some it's a struggle for others pure elation?"

Gubblegirth's overbite stretched even further as if having more of his face inside of him would make him smarter.

"Hmmm... Well surely life has many roads, and death's the only destination. Both are indeed struggles for some though I'd say death is seldom-pure elation."

Stripe couldn't mask his enjoyment at Gubblegirth's direction. Gubblegirth seized upon it instantly pointing a crooked claw out at Stripe.

"Ah but given that you are a bitter circle boy," - Stripe frowned at the obscure insult - "you are clearly intent on using irony to try to make the impossible eventuality of me losing even more bitter. Ha! The answer is time." Gubblegirth spat phlegmily after his conclusion as if spitting the answer out.

"Wrong," said Stripe. "The answer is one of your riddles." Gubblegirth angrily fumbled for the answer note in his pocket, read it and stamped on it. He let out a furious hiss that crumpled his face behind a mouth of large yellow teeth covered in thin sinews of saliva. His breath was so foul that it was almost a physical force. It reminded Stripe of opening a long forgotten lunchbox and being assaulted by a pungent waft of food that had gone grey and fuzzy.

"Riddle two," said Stripe handing the answer over. Gubblegirth's clawed hands made to subtly flick it over but Stripe cleared his throat and the robed scoundrel quickly pocketed the answer.

“What has many parts, but moves in a small line, takes you to new places even though you’re seated all the time?”

Gubblegirth didn’t even hesitate with his answer.

“A book!” he cried triumphantly and did an impressively obnoxious celebratory jiggle.

“You’re wrong,” said Stripe cutting him short. “The answer is a train.”

Gubblegirth let out a creepy, aggressive chattering of his teeth. He’d come across as quite harmless at first but his brattish behaviour suggested a wealth of instability. Stripe felt a bead of sweat slip down his brow.

“Okay last riddle.”

Gubblegirth tore it from Stripe’s hand, scratching his wrist painfully, before shoving it into his pocket.

“What can appear in a flash, and fry your head, strikes fear in many but not those who handle it instead? Do it right and it’s the difference between making toast and eating bread.”

“You probably expect me to think fire, circle boy. You think we don’t have electricity in this land. Ah but we do. We have lightning and electricity. But we are also not as stupid as you think. The answer is an idea!”

Stripe’s heart froze. Things were about to go south.

“Actually the answer is fire. My answer at least. You know, the whole key, door thing.”

Gubblegirth snatched out his answer sheet crumpled it, threw it into his mouth and charged at Stripe. Stripe spun round and clambered down the bridge. Each step radiated amplified distance the scenery stretching out with every stride.

The density of every moment’s importance stretched out time for Stripe. *Seven steps* – he could feel the bridge rocking from Gubblegirth’s lumbering charge. *Eight steps* – he could feel Gubblegirth’s stretching talons swotting after him. *Nine steps* – Stripe’s back prickled a sense of presence behind him – *and ten steps* – *dive!*

Stripe dropped down and skidded along the bridge’s floor. Gubblegirth, who was racing along with the pace of a motorbike and inertia of a boulder had his upper half denied its speed by the rope while his lower half shot onward. In short Gubblegirth went from being upright to horizontal in the air at his own head height, to back-flipping over the side of the bridge and revolving seven times before crashing into the sea in a matter of seconds.

Lying down and swaying from side to side, Stripe thought, *Ropes can be very useful.*

**INGENIOUS FOOL'S GAMBIT**

With the bridge behind Stripe, the landscape rolled out into a tall dusty grass field with a small dirt path cutting through it. The sun was high and warm and the day felt far younger than it should've. The further Stripe followed the path, the taller and thicker the grass grew until it was at least twice his height. It changed in other ways too. Stripe began to notice how the tall strands weren't all the same colour. A dark brown blade, a bright yellow one, and a dull stone coloured one – the field's colour scheme was shifting.

The more Stripe walked on, the more noticeable it became. The default sepia tone of the grass was now completely gone. By the time the blades had grown three times Stripe's height and where as thick as street lamps, Stripe no longer felt like he was in a field. The shifting of the scenery had happened so gradually Stripe felt almost deceived. There was something anarchic in the way the once uniform grass had slowly unravelled into a brilliant mismatch of hues. Stripe moved amongst the bright pinks and neon oranges with growing caution.

Without warning a green orb shot out of the grass and hovered in front of Stripe, bobbing lightly, clearly unconcerned by gravity. Abruptly a cackling maroon orb whirred over Stripe's shoulder and collided with its green counterpart. They bumped into each other with a sound like wine glasses chinking. Instantaneously their colours swapped. The second orb let out a strange distorted laugh that echoed off the surrounding stalks, then it shot off back into the cover of the field. The once green orb, now maroon, let out an irritated squeal that sounded like a radio being tuned, and zapped off in pursuit. Stripe, who had fallen over in shock, got up warily to his feet. The glowing spheres seemed not to have noticed him.

As Stripe walked on, the wiry strands flanking the road would occasionally tremble and let out sounds. Taunts, squeals, laughs and grumbles darted around the path all of them tinny and distant as if they'd been filtered through old machinery. Occasionally Stripe would hear an ambient humming flickering around him, like the glittering of light on water turned to sound.

It seemed that some game was unfolding in between the stems, Stripe only catching glimpses. As he followed the path through the growing grass, Stripe became more and more certain that the game was following him like dolphins trailing the wake of a ship. Stripe would sporadically catch the orbs bursting up into the air and then

shooting down again like acrobatic fireworks. A formation of the spheres, some as small as ruckus balls, others as large as beach balls, zig-zagged across the path ricocheting against the gargantuan blades like some kaleidoscopic round of pinball, displaying a new colour scheme after each collision. Stripe felt a sudden rush of joy wrapped in an overwhelming sense of Déjà vu. Without thinking a loud cheer escaped his lips. It was met with an explosion of harmonic chiming and laughter reverberating from every direction. Stripe felt a warm surge of splendour throbbing through his entire being. He was in the middle of the most alien, magical experience he had ever had, and buried in all the oddness and colour and wonder there was a comforting sense of familiarity. It was perhaps too broad a feeling for Stripe to take in, whale song on a frequency beyond the capacity of human ears, but there all the same.

Stripe flinched as a little marble-sized orb burst out from the colourful meadow at his feet. It's momentum sent it crashing into his left foot. As soon as it made impact, his boot turned a wheaty gold and the orb flickered into his boot's former tan. The orb then bounced off a stone making the stone go tan and disappeared into the grass a grey crystalline blur. It happened so quickly that Stripe was too stunned to even call after the orb.

"My boot!" he cried, looking down at his footwear. One shoe was still tan while the other was now yellowish. Between his ridiculous sun hat and the mismatched boots he certainly wasn't going to be inconspicuous anymore.

As Stripe walked on the grass shrunk and shifted back to more natural shades of brown. It seemed that the orb's crazy paint palette was limited to a certain territory. Stripe paused for some water and noticed a dozen orbs peeping out of the grass at him like curious children, but as soon as his eyes locked on to them they shot back into the tall field, which flashed a multi-coloured echo in their wake. Stripe thought of Fispire and how much she would've enjoyed them. Then again, she'd probably use them to recolour all his clothing into garish combinations. He hadn't missed his family yet – he'd been far too busy to miss them, but the thought of Fispire made him wish they were here with him. This place was incredible.

Dusk must have come here during his expeditions North. Stripe had never pictured the islands being so immense. The Fury Sea was far away now. Stripe mused that if his grandfather had come here he must've also seen those creatures and been familiar with them. Perhaps he'd even known their names, and their diets and why they played their game of colour thefts. *Colour thieves*, thought Stripe, *that's what I'll think of them as.*

When the path eventually ended, a large valley basin lay open before Stripe. Stripe felt a nervous sensation in his stomach. While the path had been an obvious indication of where to go the openness of the valley meant Stripe could no longer ignore the lack of direction he'd been given for his journey. The valley's outer rim was sparse, but trees popped up sporadically toward the middle, gradually clustering into a compact forest that loomed over the valley like a tall, dark castle. Stripe suspected that the forest was the right place to go, most probably because it gave him an anxious feeling in his stomach. It looked like a tropical fortress. As he began to follow the incline down into the valley's basin, a sign sprouted out of the ground at his feet. It read:



IN THE VALLEY'S HEART LIES THE MAP FOUNTAIN.

Stripe felt a moment of relief knowing he was going the right way. He looked up at his destination and let out a sigh. Stripe looked back at the sign which was still proudly displaying its bold text and was surprised to see the message had changed:



THAT'LL BE 5 STARS PLEASE.

Stripe told the sign that he didn't have any money. It spun in a quick buzzing rotation and a new message appeared when it was facing Stripe again.



IN THAT CASE IT'S ACTUALLY NOT THERE.

"Um... sure," said Stripe.  
The sign twisted again.

ALSO YOU'RE A DOWNRIGHT FRAUD AND I HOPE – it twisted out again since its face was full- YOU GET LOST AND EATEN BY SOMETHING –spin – BY SOMETHING THAT – spin – EATS ITS PREY WHOLE – AND HAS A PARTICULARLY –SLOW AND ACIDIC DIGESTIVE SYSTEM – BUT THEN AN ALPHA PREDATOR – COMES ALONG AND IT

COUGHS YOU UP SO – IT CAN FLEE AND YOU FEEL THE SUNLIGHT  
AGAIN – ONLY TO BE STEPPED ON – AND FEASTED UPON BY-

Stripe ignored the abusive sign and kept walking. It seemed not to notice and kept spinning angrily at the world in general.

Stripe had reached the first of the valley's trees when a weird cry cut through the fading afternoon. Stripe couldn't quite tell whether it was pathetic or terrifying. Possibly both. A small blue-ish creature was sitting on top of a boulder. The creature looked like a cross between a mako shark and a pug. It was squat, no taller than Stripe's waist, had a dorsal fin flowing out the back of its head and wore small yellow boots. Stripe ducked behind a tree and watched it cautiously. Perhaps it was just crying to lure unsuspecting creatures into biting range. Perhaps there were more waiting to set up an ambush. Stripe decided to try sneak around it and go further into the forest. Keeping his position low Stripe crept towards another tree. SNAP. A large twig buckled under his heel and cracked loudly. The creature immediately stopped wailing and fell over itself behind the rock.

"Who's there?" it called nervously, peering up over the bolder.

"I'm just a traveller," called back Stripe. "I don't want any trouble."

"Are you going to try harm me?" asked the creature pitifully.

"No. Are you going to try harming me?"

"Not unless you try harm me."

"I said I wasn't going to try harm you."

"What if you forget?"

"Forget what?"

"Exactly!"

Stripe sighed.

"Look I just want to get to the Map Fountain, alright?" Stripe stepped out from behind his tree. "I'm not interested in hurting you. You just looked... Well, you looked fearsome. Sort of."

"I did?" The creature popped up from behind the rock, its dark puppy eyes gleaming and its huge smile stretching wide.

"Well it was a bit confusing because of the crying but you certainly have an impressive... jaw span," said Stripe.

The creature's face scrunched up as it contorted into a pre-school photo grin that revealed a few hundred thin sharp white teeth. The juxtaposition between the innocence of the pose and the damage potential of the teeth made Stripe gulp.

“I’m also trying to get a Map,” said the creature. “But the forest guardian keeps nabbing me. I’ve managed to figure out a little though.” It flipped over a fin revealing a collection of inky symbols transcribed like notes on its large flat palm.

“You see, the forest is a very, very big puzzle. It’s full of bridges and pits without bridges. It has ladders and ropes. It has routes with different colour schemes, it has levers and weights and passwords you have to remember. It’s this really big complex maze and here’s the worst part: it’s guarded by a Thoughtrantula, an Idea Spider.”

Stripe wanted to ask the creature what an Idea Spider was but it was getting worked up by its own story.

“You see, I keep getting pretty far and then I’ll get caught in his web or he’ll ambush me, like a, like a big fuzzy arm that will just, just wrap around me and then suddenly I lose my plan to get past the next obstacle – it’s just gone from my head. I’ll just suddenly be waist deep in mud with a large yellow ball and a sheep in a row boat behind me and a green arrow in front of me pointing left and a blue one pointing right and then I have no idea what my idea was. It’s like writing a test but as soon as you get one thing wrong you wake up the morning you’re supposed to write it and you’ve forgotten everything.”

The little creature spoke in a throaty voice, squeezing his words out carefully so that they’d survive the slobbery journey through his toothy mouth. He spoke with excitement and frustration, wheezing when he ran out of breath and then racing on.

“So, so I’ve been trying to write things down but, but – I think the ball is to open a door and the sheep is to trigger an opening lever, but he just keeps getting me! And it’s really hard to write with fins! I’m never going to get my Map and quest.”

The little creature looked down with sad watery eyes. Stripe gave him a hand up then turned and charged into the woods. The creature’s face creased in deep thought, then it shrugged and clambered after him.



Stripe bolted madly through the trees, running, running to outrun any stray thought or clever idea that could pop into his mind. His plan was to not have any plan at all and thus be immune to the spider, although he hadn’t even given himself time to fully comprehend even that. He began to yell nonsensical sounds. He passed a green sign and kicked it. He paused to catch his breath and

attempted to yell the alphabet backwards. He turned right and scaled a viney old stone block. He flung himself from the block and ploughed through a mushy pool. He zigzagged through trees ignoring any useful looking objects. He tripped over a ladder, picked it up and flung it. His heart was pounding, he was absolutely exhausted but still he carried on. From behind a dark mossy log a voice whispered out, "Tasty, tasty thoughts."

It was a deep voice that stretched out the s's and syllables as if they were tangy sweets. Stripe ignored it and continued to run around as unintelligently as he could. He charged down a dense bushy slope, knocking his shoulder into a tree. A sharp pain tore through him but he sprinted on regardless. The forest grew denser and the plants wilder and the trees more adept at ominously snagging pieces of clothing like gnarled hands. Nestling in a pool of mist, a gate to an underground passage loomed before Stripe. He began to run around it in circles.

"Sweet, sweet ideas."

The voice curled around the leaves like sonic cursive. Stripe countered it by trying to picture different animals in different kinds of hats, while he randomly lurched in a new direction. Soon he was too dizzy to think about anything at all except the dank smell of the forest. He skipped along a series of differently coloured stepping stones that stood firm in a babbling stream taking absolutely no interest in their inscribed symbols.

He tripped, falling face first into the cold water and the voice trickled around his ideas like a current.

"Delicious dreams and palatable plans – all so satisfying."

Stripe broke out of the water and stumbled along the ground and collapsed exhausted. He began to try figure out how many grains of rice it would take to fill a bowl. His train of thought was violently derailed when he noticed the bodies. All kinds of bodies, each a limp monument to the versatility of death. They rested in and along the river, grey and gaunt like stone figures carved by the current. Their shapes were all wrong. Angles that living things could not possibly be in. A surge of terror swelled up in him. Pulling him toward lucid thought. *Death, death, death.*

The forest was silent, nothing but the flicker of dust dancing in the faint beams that broke through the blanket of branches against the sky. Stripe panted exhausted and afraid and suddenly felt cold. His concentration, or lack thereof, was faltering pulled in by the grim weight of his situation and the weight of death on his mind.

There from atop the branches, reaching out of the dense nightshade foliage, eight thick, harrowing limbs surrounded Stripe like the claw of a toy-picking machine. They dropped with smooth control, almost lithely, and landed at Stripe's feet. Stripe furiously forced himself to consider what object to a human would be the equivalent size of a grain of rice to an ant.

Four dark, bowl sized eyes took in Stripe. They glowed with that unique entomological quality of a bug's gaze – simultaneously impenetrable and all consuming. They managed to look vacant and conniving all at once. The creature wore a tall battered top hat perched on its hairy head, resting above its bulbous eyes. The hat was as large as the grandfather clock Stripe's dad kept in his study. Book Lung spread out his mouth's appendages wide, each fat black stump the size of Stripe's forearms. The Thoughttrantula's fangs rattled menacingly, as if the creature was clearing its throat.

"I am Book Lung, guardian of the forest – so long and," it chuckled "thanks for the memories." The creature raised itself on its back legs and stretched out at Stripe, pawing at him as if bundling an invisible fly. Stripe felt consciousness slip away, the world fading into the black behind his eyes. The trees flickered out one by one, like a power outage chasing lampposts and Stripe could see distant strands of condensed images, like photographs that had been collaged and spindled, all strung out across the space that used to be forest. He was floating in an alien web of thoughts congealed into solid matter. A web that glowed and pulsed like the neural highways of a brain, electric and scentless. The ghosts of the minds of the river's dead. Stripe worked on his day dreaming, pushing it to the limit. He imagined pockets of the past in the corpses chests: all their hearts baby hearts singing in colour and cartoon brilliance. Stripe chased his abstract fuzzy thoughts away from where he was, away from the world, away from anything. He ploughed onward toward that anti-nirvana of brain deadness he managed to achieve during the final lesson on a Friday at school. A state in which no information could enter or leave him. A state beyond even fanciful weekend contemplation. A state in which his mind was a cocoon and his thoughts were neither caterpillar nor butterfly but something in between – and then Stripe felt as if he'd been dropped. He tore through the strange realm and crashed into awareness on the ground again. Book Lung was rearing back as if he was being punched by a swarm of invisible fists.

"Vacancy," he shrieked into Stripe's head. "Recklessness. Expired, creativity." Book Lung, Gatekeeper and Thought-Eater, reared

backward and fell over. He twitched twice and then in a final garbled murmur spat “Moronic poison to the divinity of dreams,” and lay still. The spider’s body began to dissolve into the earth and as if by some mutual reaction flowers burst out of the eyes and mouths of the dead until they flourished into a garden.

It seemed that Stripe’s plan, or lack thereof, had paid off. Or simply backfired so badly that it had torn down everything in its spectacular fall. He was battered and exhausted in the middle of a maze without any idea what to do next.

Leaves crackled and a wheezing sound bobbed in the distance. The shark creature hobbled up to Stripe.

“That was really stupid,” it said. “I think I like you.”

It grinned and then quickly stopped before a build up of saliva oozed out from between its sharp teeth. “My name is spliX,” it said. “Little s-p-l-i-capital X.” It reached out a flipper and helped Stripe up. “I’m Stripe,” said Stripe. “Why a capital X at the end?”

spliX shrugged. “gobliN thing,” he said vaguely.

“So you’re a goblin?”

“gobliN,” corrected spliX.

“gobliN,” said Stripe.

spliX nodded. “There’s a picture of a duck on your hat,” said spliX as if Stripe might not have noticed.

“It’s a logo,” said Stripe automatically.

spliX nodded. “Now that you’ve knocked out Book Lung I can take us to the fountain.”



spliX solved the rest of the forest maze with relish. He clambered over bridges, pulled levers, opened gates and moved objects with wide-eyed delight. It was like a toddler let loose at a carnival. The puzzles made Stripe think of his mother. Ellen Culustro had a natural problem solving ability. She could quite easily play Stripe at chess, help Fispire complete a jigsaw puzzle and do a crossword on the side simultaneously. What made it all the more impressive is that she would beat Stripe, place more puzzle pieces than Fispire and finish the crossword without any strain. Stripe recalled her green eyes glowing with contentment as she wrote down the answer to the last question of her crossword, *Phrase for final move in a game of chess* while voicing out checkmate and gliding her rook into a position that defeated Stripe. To this day Stripe wasn’t sure if the crossword had actually had a different answer and that she was just playing with

him or if she had really pulled off such a feat. When Stripe had asked her, her sharp features broke into her usual roguish smile and he knew that was all the answer he would get. His attempt to grab the newspaper was thwarted by Ellen pulling it away from Stripe's reach, placing a piece in Fispire's puzzle, which was a painting of a group of badgers playing cards in a bar, and leaving the room nonchalantly.

After an hour of running about and completing seemingly arbitrary errands spliX and Stripe stood before a tall gate draped in thick greenery.

spliX was holding a large battered bronze key about the size of a broom. Together they hauled it into its slot and with a considerable amount of effort twisted it round exactly two and a quarter turns. A resounding click whipped across the forest and the gates went loose, swinging outward. A path of light crept out of the doorway turning the green and mossy forest floor golden and autumnal. Stripe and spliX walked into the glare of a bright meadow.

Its grass was thick and lush, studded with brilliant clusters of flowers that wafted a sweet scent. With a shock Stripe realized the field wasn't connected to anything else, it was just floating suspended in an endless sky. In the meadow's centre an immense fountain stood against the horizon. It was about as tall as a small tree, with fresh flowing water glistening against its smooth contours. spliX charged up to it and dived straight into its basin. The little goblin wriggled and splashed and rubbed around the water in precisely the same way a dog rolls around in dirt *after* it has been bathed.

While spliX was submerged the fountain began to tremble. It shook softly at first but a deep rattle that made the earth growl began to build up through it. Almost simultaneously spliX jumped out of the basin and a small object rocketed out of the fountain's peak. spliX ran from the basin hurriedly but the object was fast and crashed into the back of his head making him fall over. Stripe began to laugh heartily but was interrupted by another object violently smacking into his face. It was a very tightly-rolled-up map. Before Stripe could even look at it, the fountain began to fade. Clouds could be seen drifting behind it and the sky began to take over the space where it had been. The fading effect spread rapidly, the meadow growing more transparent with each passing moment. Stripe caught a glimpse of an immense building appearing through the grass. An endless upside-down tower full of passages and books, like a literal well of knowledge.

The image faded as thick grass began to condense under Stripe's feet until he and spliX found themselves back in the valley basin in which they had met, completely the same except for their wrapped up scrolls. The sun was beginning to set and the sign that had harassed Stripe earlier was busy telling off an antlered rabbit. The rabbit ignored the sign completely, immersed in the patch of grass it was chewing contentedly.

"Care to camp with me tonight?" said spliX. "I have fish." He held out what was indeed a raw fish and smiled his toothy smile.

**NIGHT OF THE HUNTING STAR**

The campfire crackled brilliantly, the shadows of the forest whispering dances to the flame's song.

"So you're a circle boy?" asked spliX, looking at Stripe with enormous dark watery eyes. He wiped his nose with a fin.

"I've been called that by a riddle maker at a bridge," said Stripe.

"You're from across the Furry Sea," spliX explained.

"The Fury Sea," corrected Stripe automatically. "Well that's what most people call it on the other side."

"Definitely a circle boy," laughed spliX. "From that way." He pointed in what Stripe guessed was the direction of the bridge.

Stripe nodded thoughtfully.

"SpliX, I had no idea these islands were so, um big?" said Stripe.

spliX began to laugh so hard he started to choke on the dried fish he was chewing on. After a few minutes of coughing and gagging spliX recovered.

Stripe decided not to ask another question that would expose his ignorance in case it made spliX laugh so hard he ended up in the fire.

"So you're a goblin?" said Stripe conversationally. "Tell me about that," he added awkwardly as if asking about a hobby.

"Yes. Now I know what you're thinking and no, I don't steal boats. Or fish."

Stripe smiled politely in an effort to try concealing his face giving away that this certainly wasn't what he was thinking.

"I am a Land Explorer," spliX went on. "Whenever I grow tired of the depths of the underwater world, of the dullness of picking barnacles and oysters in the shallows of tropical lagoons, of the mundanity of riding walruses through thunderstorms and warring against sailors day in and night out, attending to the exhausting chores of running upside down along frozen ice and battling the Frost Warriors above – or even raiding in the great Tidal Wars – I come to the land. I have braved the peril of many a field and triumphed against the dryness of several inland roads." spliX spoke with a deep sense of pride.

"Once I even ran among the sheep," he said as if this was his idea of riding among a biker gang. spliX went on to tell Stripe of his daring adventures in greater detail. How he had left the waters of his lagoon cave home and caught a current to the coast. How he had risen from the ocean and walked along a beach early in the morning

under navy sky and infrequent stars. How he had spent three hours finding a grassy field with sheep – masters of the mysterious green lands beyond the ocean. How he had daringly walked amongst the beasts and in one instance patted a woolly rump. How the sheep had began to trot across the endless paddock and spliX boldly ran between them, a creature of the ocean at one with the lords of the land. Stripe nodded and tried his best to take spliX's account seriously. It seemed spliX considered sheep, or perhaps large quadrupeds in general, as masters of the land. It was, he supposed, the goblINs' equivalent of a human swimming with sharks or riding among wales.

"How long exactly can a goblIN last on land?" asked Stripe. "I mean I cannot last all that long in the ocean," added Stripe in case spliX took offence.

"It all depends on the dryness, the heat, how far inland I go," said spliX.

"Okay but I mean I can swim for a while but I'd drown eventually. How long can you adventure on land?"

spliX looked away.

"The land is in my heart, I have run with the sheep," he replied dismissively. Stripe decided not to risk challenging the goblIN's pride in his adventures. A silence hovered between the two, punctuated only by spliX's raspy breath. Stripe couldn't help but think that the difficulty in the goblIN's breathing wasn't entirely natural.

"spliX," ventured Stripe. "Do you know anything about Vikings?"

spliX nodded. "They steal stuff and wear silly hats."

Stripe paused, not quite getting as informative an answer as he wanted.

"Yes but do you know anything about their history?" asked Stripe hoping to get more of an answer. Again spliX nodded.

"They have stolen things and worn silly hats for many years," said spliX brightly.

"Yes, um... did they discover any *new places* to steal new things from and try new silly hats in? Maybe some place nearby that I might be familiar with? Perhaps the Fury Sea?"

spliX frowned and tapped his flipper against his dorsal fin.

"I think..." he began. Stripe leaned forward. "I think that they wear the same silly hats wherever they go."

Stripe nodded his head while sighing inside of it. He wasn't going to find any information related to Quincy's theories from spliX. The fire crackled.

“So what brings you to this part of the world?” asked spliX passing Stripe another fried fish.

“My grandfather. He used to love these islands. Anyway, he died and wanted me to scatter his ashes at an endless river or something.”

Stripe retold the Story of his grandfather’s funeral and the last few days between bites of fish. spliX listened attentively with his fins politely folded in his lap. When Stripe finished spliX walked softly up to him and rested a fin on each of Stripe’s hands. He gave Stripe a purposeful look that trembled with emotion and then raised his head. His eyes rolled back leaving nothing but their whites and he began to make a strange gagging sound. It was as if he had turned into some alien slot machine that was struggling to cough up a prize. Stripe reeled back but his shoulders were locked in spliX’s grip. He did his best to shield his face from the hacking bouts of mouth debris that were shooting up with spliX’s rhythmic huffing. spliX seemed to reach some crescendo and then reached into his mouth and pulled out a ragged tooth. His eyes spun back into a normal position and he handed the tooth to Stripe.

“For your journey, Circle Boy Stripe from across the Furry Sea.” Still trying to slow down his breathing to a normal rate Stripe gently took the tooth. Specifics were lost on him but he could tell that this was an honour and that he should respond accordingly. Stripe reached into his bag and blindly fumbled between the knick-knacks he had gathered in that hasty day of packing. He pulled out a bright green apple.

“What is that?” gasped spliX.

“It is a special fruit from my land,” said Stripe. “It grows amongst the sheep and cows and, err, goats and is a symbol of the green fields and the land. May you travel well, spliX the goblIN.”

spliX took the apple like a farm boy taking a star from a cherub or a sailor taking a starfish from a mermaid.

Later as the night began to wind down Stripe wandered to the fringes of the camp’s firelight to brush his teeth. spliX eyed him with curiosity.

“What are you doing?” asked spliX eventually.

“*WHSWHASHWHS-Brrush-sh-sh-shing ma-CHKACHKACHKA –gh-gh-gh teeth,*” Stripe explained, mouth full of bristles and toothpaste.

“Oh. Do you have rabies?”

“*WHSWHS -nNuuuuur. WHS - Wh-wha-wha-why?*”

“Then why are you doing that? And why is your mouth foaming?”

“*Toooof-paaaste.*”

"Your teeth secrete a paste? Disgusting!"

*"Nrrrr 'm jurst-sh-sh cleeeanin' thom."*

"You mean you don't just grow new ones?"

*"Nuuuur. Well, oonlee whon I was lit-t-t-tle. Buurt nw I don't."*

"You are nearing the end of your life-span?"

Stripe spat.

"No I just keep the same set until I die."

"How impractical," said spliX.



That night Stripe struggled to sleep. There were a lot of good reasons why he couldn't. Firstly, sleeping on the ground was something altogether new and uncomfortable to him. spliX had cleared a patch of ground and placed a stone as a headrest before telling Stripe that he had made him a bed. Stripe had awkwardly thanked him and decided to leave his sleeping bag packed so as not to undermine spilX's effort.

Secondly, the stranger he discovered this world to be the more estranged from his grandfather he felt. How well could he really have known Dusk if this was part of his world and Stripe hadn't had a clue about how far it stretched or how magical it was? He noticed something that looked like a porcupine crossed with a balloon floating along the night's breeze. Did his grandfather know about these creatures? And, if so, how many of them? Was this where the stories he used to tell Stripe came from? The possibility of the stories being true, of the stories being true, rattled his head with wonder and terror.

The final reason that sleep wasn't coming for Stripe was spliX. The little goblIN was shivering, chattering, coughing and just generally functioning like an electric bicycle that was running out of charge. Stripe dug an extra shoelace out of the bottom of his bag and fashioned it into a wrist bracelet that held the goblIN's tooth, his mind trying to spin random thoughts together while he did so. Eventually Stripe slipped off into slumber.

He dreamed quite pleasantly. He was four-years-old and holding Dusk's hand and walking through the bright colour wheel roulette fields he had passed through earlier that day. The bright orbs Stripe had decided to call Colour Thieves radiated their ambient electronic hums and played against the blue sky while Stripe jumped and laughed and Dusk smiled.

It felt like barely any time had passed at all when a scream prematurely plucked him from the comfort of his sleep. spliX was pointing at the night sky. "A hunting star!" he shrieked. "I just saw a hunting star!"

"What?" asked Stripe, still incoherent with sleep.

"It's a fierce predator that looks like a constellation. It chooses its prey and follows them each night, glowing brighter and brighter until it crashes down and takes you up into the darkness to eat you! Run!"

spliX whisked off into the woods. The little goblIN was beside himself, his eyes wide and his mouth foaming. He was surprisingly quick for his small frame and shot off through the trees with ease. Stripe stuffed his scattered belongings into his bag and chased after him, heart pounding. Part of Stripe thought that spliX had finally gone mad from being on land too long, but unless his eyes were deceiving him he noticed a bright light following him above the tree line. The depths of his panic grew deeper. It was at this point that Stripe found himself looking down a very steep slope ahead of him with a lot of momentum behind him. Before he even had time to cry out, the sky became the ground and the ground became the sky and the balance between the two broke and Stripe's world turned into a washing machine cycle of speed and pain.

**MIND YOUR STEP**

Stripe woke up in surprise. Surprise that he was alive and surprise that his body could be aching so much without being scattered in several pieces over a large area. His spine felt like it had been pulled right out of him and used as a racket in a really violent game of ruckus. His brain pounded as if it had been disassembled and put together hastily like a spongy jigsaw puzzle. His ribs ached with every breath. Stripe took in his surroundings. Behind him loomed the extreme curvature of the slope he'd fallen down. It seemed impossible that he'd survived. At the base of the slope a sign, this one fortunately showing no signals of any sentience or bad nature, said:



Stripe let out that special kind of laugh that's really just a cry with a sense of humour. The desert ahead was red and sparkling and endless. Dune, after dune, after dune. Ripples in a slow motion sea of sand. Stripe heard something clear its throat and jolted. His body was not up to jolting so the result was a deep wince.

"Don't be frightened, it's just me." The voice was coming from inside Stripe's pocket. Cautiously Stripe reached in and withdrew the only thing in his pocket, the rolled up map. He looked at it in astonishment.

"Could you unroll me please?" the voice said in a muffled tone. The map vibrated slightly when the voice spoke, like the tremble of a humming throat. Stripe unfolded it gently hoping a map with a voice don't mean a map with teeth.

"Ah, that's better," it said letting out a contented sigh. "Right, so I suppose you'll be wanting your quest now?"

Stripe felt fire rise in his stomach.

"Quest!? I think I'm half dead," he said.

"That's not bad at all," said the Map coolly. "I've had a quester who managed to become fully dead after being severely maimed for two hours." It paused thoughtfully, then asked, "Would you like to hear about it? Perhaps, it will cheer you up?"

“No thanks,” said Stripe.

“Alright then. I could tell you about people who failed less incredibly than that,” it went on. “I once guided a woman who made it to her destination, acquired the Maximum Fire Axe of Zog, but then she encountered a band of Armoured Scorpions in a cave filled with highly flammable chemicals. She certainly went out with a bang though.”

Stripe was starting to realise that the Map had one of the worst personalities possible: someone who cared but who just made things worse. Stripe recollected how Quincy had tried to comfort him after Dusk’s death by suggesting that maybe Stripe would inherit his telescope.

“I really don’t want to hear about all the failed quests you’ve been on,” said Stripe. Suddenly a thought struck him. “Wait a minute, if you’ve been on other quests that failed how are *you* still here?”

“A most good question. You see I exist outside of the paper. The paper you could say is just my incarnation per quest. I come from the Sky House Library, which lives underneath the great Map Fountain. I am part of that knowledge. My brothers and sisters and I exist in the library but can carry ourselves through maps to provide guidance and knowledge for those who set out on quests. We can come and go as we please. The map is no more our form than wood is the form of fire.” Stripe recalled the flash of the tower unwinding beneath the fading grass below the Map Fountain.

“So do you know where the Endless River is? And how long it will take to get there?”

Before the Map answered, Stripe felt a rush of anxiety. The leaf! The ashes! Stripe clutched at the small silver leaf that hung around his neck. Its malleability and strange weight felt unscathed. He let out a sigh of relief.

“Why certainly! It’s a three day journey from here if you travel well.”

“What do you mean by ‘travel well’?” asked Stripe.

“If you do not lose any major limbs, get eaten, captured, fall down a well or generally succumb to failure – then you are travelling well.”

Stripe licked his lips and swallowed nervously. He knew he wasn’t going to quit. Not yet.

“So what can you tell me?” asked Stripe.

“There’s a picture of a duck on your hat,” said the Map cheerily.

“It’s a logo,” said Stripe. “What I meant was where do I need to go now.”

The Map showed a feather swaying from side to side along the page as if it were slowly falling.

Suddenly two words filled up the Map:

MAP UNAVAILABLE

The words faded leaving nothing but a blank page.

Stripe tapped the page.

The words reappeared:

MAP UNAVAILABLE

Stripe began tapping the Map furiously, but to the same effect.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” he mumbled. He turned back to look at the long slope he’d tumbled down. It *really* was amazing that he’d survived. It was going to be a tough journey back up, but he wasn’t going to walk through a desert with a Map that wasn’t working. Stripe began to try picturing the route he’d take when he noticed a distant silhouette creep behind a bolder. It was quick and subtle but Stripe knew without a doubt there was something up there that didn’t want him to see it. He stood still and watched. There again, further up another figure was peeping at him from behind a patch of bushes; it quickly dipped when Stripe looked at it. Head throbbing, and heart pounding, Stripe quickly changed his decision and made off straight into the desert. He heard a wild indistinct call ring out from the slope and jogged off further into the sandy horizon running on a spurt of nervous energy. There was a part of him that thought the call had been his name, which disturbed him even more. Between the events of the previous evening, being in a river full of bodies while getting attacked by a giant psychic spider, and Gubblegirth’s attempt to chase him, Stripe had developed a distrust of this island. Who knew what monsters lurked beyond the horizon and what they were capable of? He’d take a desert over anything that could trick him or eat him.



It was incredibly slow going. The sand was fine and lazy and sucked at Stripe’s feet. The sun was relentless. Fierce enough to make Stripe appreciate his sun hat – which indeed was a testament to how hot the desert was. Once Stripe’s nerves had settled, he

began to question his choice to run off into the desert. He was shaken from last night's events and was perhaps being overly cautious. Making friends with spliX had certainly paid off, but then again the figures were definitely trying not to be seen and the yell they had let out when he set off into the desert was far from comforting. If they were friendly then great, but if they weren't Stripe was in no position to defend himself. That wasn't a good risk to take.

Half an hour of trundling through the desert left Stripe hopelessly lost. Nothing had changed, the dunes remained the same and the sun burned on. The map wasn't working either. Stripe had eaten his daily portion of dried meat but his stomach still grumbled. Stripe sat down in the sand, taking a moment to catch his breath.

"Map?" asked Stripe. There was no reply. He pulled it out. Still blank. He tapped the page and a feather spun round briefly. A message appeared:

BUFFERING ↻

Stripe sighed. Useless.

Stripe lowered the Map disappointedly and saw an arrow printed in the sand right in front of him. Curious, Stripe kicked some sand over it but the grains shifted to keep the arrow's shape consistent. Stripe looked around. He was completely alone. He kicked sand at the arrow again with the same result. Maybe the Map was responsible for the arrow?

"Map is that you?" asked Stripe. No reply. Stripe shrugged and cautiously began to follow the arrow, then he paused. There was something familiar about this. He continued to walk while turning over the elusive memory nagging at him. Two dunes later Stripe spotted another arrow. Heart racing, he ran towards it.

*"Be-dow-ltu-ers."* Stripe froze. The Map had just tried to say something.

"Map?" Stripe plucked out the scroll and looked at it.

*"War-sha-vul."* The Map faded.

Stripe waited to see if the Map would return, but it remained silent.

Cautiously Stripe continued.

He passed the arrow and kept walking.

*"Lea-int-tra-!"* a garbled yell came from the folds of Stripe's pocket. Angrily, Stripe pulled out the Map just in time for it to fade again.

Stripe shook the map angrily as if he could shake it awake. A single word appeared:

▼ULTURE.

## THE DUEL OF DIRECTIONS

Like a kernel bursting into popcorn, the impenetrable nugget of familiarity rattling around Stripe's head blossomed into an epiphany. Stripe remembered sitting by the fireplace with Dusk perched in his chair. It was late and the whole world was just the two of them, cocooned in the orange glow against the infinite night. Stripe must have been six or so. Through the hazy filter of his memory Stripe recalled Dusk talking about Arrow Vultures. Images began to tumble through Stripe's head. Horrible creatures with scythe faces jutting out of tattered bodies like worn dark rags stitched together.

Stripe remembered their chief trait: sharp taloned feet that unfold in the shapes of arrows. Arrow Vultures stomped across mud and snow and sand leading the lost and desperate into harm's way: into pools of quicksand, monster's caves or the edges of cliffs in misty plains. The Vultures were patient and would wait until they could slowly pick apart the scraps they'd reduced their victims to. The Vultures were malevolent and cunning. For fun, they'd pass by rural farms and lead residents to walk toward rakes lying in the grass so that they would whip up and smack their faces. Or wasp nests, or snake pits. Stripe couldn't recall the story detail for detail. The events rested in his head like an abstract painting of Dusk telling the story.

Stripe paused, considering his next move. An arrow in front of Stripe beckoned him onwards. Stripe bent down to pick up a stone and lob it ahead of the arrow to test if it led into a trap, but thought better of it. If he threw the stone and it exposed some kind of trap then the Arrow Vulture, or Vultures would know he was on to them. The trap would still have trapped him.

Stripe had the advantage of being able to play along. He tried to recall how Dusk had managed to get out of the situation. Something to do with simply going the opposite direction of the arrows and therefore finding where he wanted to go since they all pointed to where he *didn't* want to go. Nice in theory and good for a story but not practical. Not in real life.

Just because the arrows were pointing to danger did not mean that they were all facing the opposite direction of a way out of the desert. The sun was reaching its full peak and the horizon had melted into a blurry mirage. It was too hot to think. Stripe moved his heavy tongue around his dry mouth. His saliva was a thin paste and when

he swallowed his stinging throat bobbed emptily. If he was going around in circles it stood to reason that the Vulture was just trying to drive Stripe into complete exhaustion and dehydration. That being said, if Stripe decided to play on like he didn't know what was happening he could end up following the arrow right into a sinkhole or some monster hidden in the sand. Stripe tumbled over backwards like he'd lost his balance and rolled down a dune. It was a good way to make it look like he was avoiding the arrow accidentally.

Being on his back was instantly satisfying. Stripe was so exhausted it felt as if he was still falling even after he had hit the ground. He forced himself up. The desert was a burning carnelian hue that melted upward into the sky. In the dancing heat of the furthest dunes, Stripe saw his grandfather's fireplace and felt homesick. The weight of his hat made him think about his mother's smile and the grip of his backpack straps made him think of grandma Maelstrom, firm but caring. Stripe stumbled onward, every slope of sand he crossed an entire universe and each moment a sentence closer to the end of the final chapter of his life. Stripe thought about his father's inextinguishable optimism and then collapsed.

Stripe waited in the sand, exhausted, and after a few minutes had passed he felt a weight land near him as if it had come from nowhere. Stripe felt a long pointed leg harshly prod into his ribs and did his best to stay still. The smell was horrific. It was a smell that wanted to shut down the brain and summon your last meal out into the open world.

It was all he could do not to wince or gag as he felt a beak jab sharply into his shoulder. Stripe's body twitched then went still again. A sickening sensation welled up in Stripe as he felt the Vulture's weight creep up onto his chest and its stench keep creeping up his nostrils. Eyes shut, Stripe could feel his heart beating against the weight of the creature's talons. Stripe could just imagine the Vulture drooling over the warm blood that was still flowing inside him, its eyes greedily examining the veins on his neck like a diner eyeing a fresh forkful of spaghetti. Stripe felt a sudden shift in the Vulture's balance – it was going to strike. Stripe opened his eyes and lashed out at the Vulture, wrapping his hands around its crooked beak.

The Vulture thrashed wildly, but Stripe tackled it into the sand before it could claw at him. The two of them tumbled around in a dizzy scramble, kicking up dirt viciously, until Stripe had the Vulture on its back with a knee pressed against its chest and his hands still clamped around its mouth. Stripe caught his breath and then

increased the pressure of his right hand and eased out his trusty rope from the side of his backpack with his left.

After a convoluted dance of wrapping and knotting, Stripe sighed in satisfaction and sat down next to the bound up Vulture. Its eyes looked as if they'd been dried out and smoked up in an active volcano for a few hundred years, all yellow and orange with red bloodshot veins jutting out like roots holding them in place. Its dark pupils radiated hate. Stripe had never seen so much scorn in such a small space.

Panting, Stripe fished in his backpack and drew his water bottle and took a desperate gulp. The Vulture eyed Stripe greedily.

"Alright," said Stripe "here's the deal. You're going to lead me out of this desert, no tricks, and I'll spare your life."

The Vulture stared in silent anger at Stripe. It looked as if it was trying to squeeze bullets out of its pupils. Stripe unbound its mouth. The Vulture immediately let out an angry hiss like a kettle brimming with rage.

"Yes, yes," said Stripe not interested in its dramatics. "Now where?"

"I haven't agreed yet," squawked the Vulture irritably. Stripe wasn't even surprised that it could speak. He was dealing with a creature from a story his grandfather had told him after all.

"You don't have much of a choice," said Stripe.

"Untie the rest of me," spat the Vulture.

"No."

"Then how am I going to lead you?"

"Like this," said Stripe plucking the Vulture up from a loose strap of rope above its back. The vulture, tied from its neck down to its talons dangled next to Stripe like an angry travel bag.

"Now, you just give me directions and I'll follow you. Don't get any smart ideas, any trap that you try lead me into will also take you out. You're right by my side."

The Vulture, realising it was beaten for now, spat out a small bone spitefully and began to lead Stripe out of the desert. The worst of the heat had gone and the air was started to cool, though the sand was still soaked in splendid warmth. A gentle breeze fanned Stripe pleasantly and he began to enjoy strolling along and swinging the trussed Vulture at his side. When not giving Stripe directions the Vulture mumbled curses and bitter remarks under its breath. Most of the mutterings were incomprehensible but Stripe could make out a few:

"To think, me, Velgon the Spitter, trapped by some stupid child."

“I will spit bones into his eyes one day.”

Something to do with a lizard and a stalagmite.

“I will spit bones into his offspring’s eyes one day.”

“Du Waltz’s route for him. A thief and liar’s route for a thief and a liar.”

“Who’s Du Waltz?” asked Stripe growing tired of the Vulture’s angry ranting.

“A thief! A thief!” screamed the Vulture swinging back and forth in a frenzy. “He used to pass through this desert with all his thieving friends to smuggle objects of power around. He was the biggest thief of all! Worse than an egg snake even. Back and forth he came always carrying something precious that wasn’t his. Then one day he and his filthy loons steal the sweet flute from the lady of the desert!” At this Velgon the Spitter began to wail and writhe madly his anger erupting in a full rat’s skeleton being lobbed out of his mouth.

“So many nice meals used to come in the desert looking for her dreadful music. And Du Waltz took it away! A thief and a liar! Taking away that wretched music!”

Stripe decided not to talk for a while in fear that he’d trigger another ear bleeding rant from Velgon. The sky was beginning to darken now and the cool breeze was becoming sharper. Eventually Stripe’s curiosity got the better of him.

“So you spend your life making people get lost and then eating them. But you call Du Waltz a liar?” Stripe was prepared for the bird to explode, but it didn’t.

“Velgon makes an honest living out of deceit,” said Velgon plainly. Stripe couldn’t argue with that.

As the first stars began to pierce the end of the day Stripe reached the boundary of the desert. A dark sequence of flat stones breached the sand leading off into a mountain range.

“Velgon knows no more than this, dreadful human youth. This is where the desert ends. Now set Velgon free.”

Reluctantly Stripe unbound the Vulture who spat a thick bone into Stripe’s face and soared off into the desert screaming insults until it was gone. Stripe sat down against a rock and exhaled deeply. He would set up camp here tonight and head off tomorrow. Stripe took two gulps from his almost empty water bottle, ate an apple and reluctantly took a strip from his depleting supply of dried meat. He wanted to try savour his food but his hunger was like a separate force inside of him and nothing lasted long against his wolfish chewing. Stripe unrolled his sleeping bag down between two stones on the cooling sand and lay down with his head against his backpack.

Before he had a chance to let off a relaxed sigh a muffled tremble came from in his jacket. He pulled out the Map.

“I’m back!” said the Map cheerfully. “Can I help in any way? Happy to help.” Stripe grunted, not particularly impressed that it had decided to return now.

“Where were you?” he demanded.

“The desert is guarded by a strange force that was blocking me out. Fortunately it proved to be of little danger.”

Stripe was tempted to tear the Map in half. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“Oh, well when I realised I couldn’t say anything, well I couldn’t say anything really. A paradox. Well not really. That’s not really a paradox is it? It’s a, a – hmmm...”

Stripe tuned out from what the Map was saying supressing his desire to tell the Map how it was perhaps the most useless travel companion in the world, however it had managed to make him recall what little he knew about Arrow Vultures and it stood a chance to redeem itself tomorrow by getting him through the next leg of his journey. Maybe a combination of his near death experience and the day’s heat had made him a little moody. Stripe went through the motions of setting up his sleeping bag and brushing his teeth before lying down. He took one last look out at the desert and then fell asleep.

**ENLIGHTENMENT BY FIRE**

In the dark periphery between the night and the morning Stripe woke up with the sense that he was being watched. The desert was blank and the rocky landscape around him seemed empty. Stripe looked up and noticed a bright cluster of lights hanging low in the distance, which quickly blinked out as soon as he noticed them. The Hunting Star. "We need to go," whispered Stripe to the Map.

"Alright then, our next route is an underground pass in the valley ahead. Just look out for the ominous cave entrance and head down it."

Stripe wished the Map had a face so that he had a clear place to shoot angry looks towards. The way that it had said ominous so innocently was beyond comprehension. Quietly, Stripe rose up, gathered his things and continued along his way toward a series of dark mountains starkly visible against the pale morning sky. As Stripe continued, the sand thickened and darkened and crooked pines began to rise from the earth.

It wasn't long before he was moving through a forest that seemed to retain the cold and darkness of the night. Stripe had walked long enough to feel sure that he wasn't going the right way, when he suddenly caught sight of a glowing light ahead. The light spilled from a cave mouth flickering with fire and framed by stalactites and stalagmites. The cracked entrance broke out of a tall smooth mountain like a disfigured smile.

"So why are we doing this?" asked Stripe.

"It is the quickest route," said the Map.

"Why can't we just go around the mountains?"

"We could, but they're full of six-legged wolves. It's a sanctuary."

"A sanctuary?" said Stripe perplexed. "Who would build a sanctuary for six-legged wolves? I mean they must be pretty dangerous right?"

"Absolutely. Their legs can even grow back," said the Map. "It would have made more sense to build a sanctuary for the unfortunate victims of the six-legged wolves, but no—"

A strange alien howl echoed through the forest. Stripe ventured into the mountain's maw. As soon as he entered the cavern, the opening slammed shut with earth shuddering force. As the tunnel shook the light faded and slowly dissipated into a flaming torch resting on the wall. Stripe plucked it up. He had his battery-powered

torch in his backpack but there was something protective about fire. As he lifted the light he noticed a fire extinguisher drilled into the side of the cave. Before Stripe could investigate further he noticed words were etched into the cave's wall as if clawed by an animal.

They read:

## WELCOME TO THE HAPPY LABYRINTH

There was a little smiley face clawed in underneath.

"You've lead me into a labyrinth?" Stripe cried out in terror.

"It's a friendly labyrinth," said the Map.

"Is that going to stop me from getting lost?"

"Certainly not, I will stop you from getting lost," said the Map proudly. "Head straight."

"So how can a labyrinth be friendly?" asked Stripe while he walked.

"Well the labyrinth itself isn't friendly," said the Map. "Its denizens are."

Stripe stopped. "What kind of denizens?"

"Oh the usual: Minotaurs, reptilian beasts, creatures with red eyes and talons. Those kinds of things. Turn left."

"You've lead me into a labyrinth with Minotaurs?"

"Oh yes. Lovely people," said the Map. "Well not exactly people. Turn right."

"I'm sorry," said Stripe "But I thought they killed people. Isn't that the point of a labyrinth, to kill people?"

"They used to, but now they've stopped. Mostly."

"Mostly?" said Stripe.

"Well it's the wolves that do the killing now."

"The six-legged ones?"

"Yes... Ah! Here we go."

The labyrinth's passages had opened up into a small amphitheatre with a screen. A line of empty racks rested along a clawed message reading:

## LEAVE FLAMING TORCHES HERE

Stripe rested his torch in a bracket and entered the room.

"Sit down," said the Map. "This will explain everything."

Stripe cautiously took a seat. Despite having a number of spacious benches the room was empty apart from him. The screen fired up.

“Dear visitors, welcome to the Happy Labyrinth experience. Please note that, like the entire tour, this screening is free. A donation box will be available afterwards if you wish to contribute.”

Writing dramatically whooshed onto the screen.

“What is freedom?” boomed a voice-over. “What does it mean to be happy? What can you do to attain both? This is the story of the Happy Labyrinth.”

Dramatic orchestral music burst into life as the screen cut to an aerial view of an enormous city built atop a giant stone pyramid structure resting between two mountains. Stripe realised this was the same mountain range he had passed under in order to enter the labyrinth.

“Ten years ago the Grongan Empire was one of the area’s most powerful forces. But as they grew strong, they grew greedy.” The screen cut to a group of manic looking people in makeup and togas eating a large roasted feast while they laughed with reckless abandon, spilling wine and stuffing their faces with food.

“Over all of this ruled Lord Gorger. Gorger kept his citizens in check with relentless force.” The screen cut to an angry looking man in a blue toga wearing a powdered wig and makeup sitting on a golden throne. The man was screaming angrily at a smaller figure who was bowed over, weeping. “When things did not go Gorger’s way he released whoever or whatever he could blame into the labyrinth.” Suddenly the man on the throne pulled a lever and a trapdoor opened under the weeping man. The movie cut dramatically to a quick montage of things falling down trapdoors. An angry looking female soldier. A man in a toga with a tie and glasses. An empty wheelchair. An antlered rabbit.

“Gorger’s empire was literally built upon his infamous labyrinth system.” A diagram of the enormous pyramid mountain filled the screen with a series of blue lines dissecting it and twisting into a scrambled network of tunnels. A flap opened in the roof and a beach ball with X’s for eyes and a frown landed in the middle of the amphitheatre.

The screen cut to an image of the original small crying man crashing into a dark underground tunnel, the screen shook as a Minotaur, an armoured crab-like creature and giant serpent with horns loomed over the unfortunate offender.

“Then one day everything changed,” continued the voiceover loudly. The screen cut to Gorger in his powdered wig and blue toga playing chess with a young girl. The camera zoomed in on the girl moving her rook into checkmate. The move was amplified with a

close frame of the action and trembling bass as if the piece really were a tower and not just a finger sized model. "Gorger's daughter, Gregarious beat her father at chess. For years Gorger had grown vain and mad with everyone bowing to his will. This small act was the first crack heralding the collapse of his twisted status quo."

Suddenly Gregarious was seen plummeting through the dark, crying at the camera as she fell. "Abandoned in the labyrinth for her actions, Gregarious had to fend for her life." The young girl was shown running down a dark passage from a mass of twisting silhouettes. Suddenly she tripped and turned around. The horde of monsters was nearing her. She looked at what she had tripped over. It was a book. She brought it up to her face. The book shone like a light, bearing the name *Liberty is Very Nice When You Do It Properly* on its cover. "Nobody knows how *Voltaire's* timeless critique of hegemonic systems came to be in the labyrinth but it was this strange twist of fate that came to change everything. Gregarious used her wits and the book to barter for her life."

A picturesque image of Gregarious reading from the book to a collection of intent monsters filled the screen. "Using *Voltaire's* ideas of liberty, justice and equality Gregarious inspired the denizens of the labyrinth to stop living in the dark, and settling for bourgeois scraps when they could share the sun and delights of the land with all. It was time for peace and enlightenment."

The screen cut to a massive fiery battle. Monsters clambered out of the trapdoors and raided the city. "After three days of bloody battle, the war was over."

The screen cut to a parade of monsters carrying Gregarious above them, who herself was carrying the book *Liberty is Very Nice When You Do It Properly*. Suddenly the reel seemed to cut violently, leaving an awkward rattling sound. The screen rose up like a stage curtain, revealing a small set. Two medium sized creatures, what Stripe could only think of as monsters, were on the stage. One was a blue lizard with pointed walrus tusks and a turquoise mane. The other was a squat, orange, gingerbread man shaped creature with pincers. They both wore ruffles around their necks and had small caps perched on their heads that sprouted long plumes.

Stripe also noticed that they had fire extinguishers harnessed over their shoulders like jetpacks. The lizard creature was locked in a dramatic side profile position standing on a single leg, its yellow eye looking out at Stripe nervously. The gingerbread man monster appeared to be asleep and was snoring quite loudly. The lizard's leg was beginning to tremble wildly under the strain of holding up its

own weight. Eventually it gave up walked over to its pincerd companion and kicked it sharply. The orange creature sprang up, noticed Stripe and quickly followed its partner in declaring, "But there's more!"

The lizard did a clumsy back roll over its partner and walked downstage extending its hand to the heavens. "For while Gregarious helped use Revoltaire to spark the flames of justice" - the orange creature flicked a lighter on and off - "a fire on a candle is hardly free." The orange creature dropped to his knees.

"Gregarious wanted liberty, but she wanted it in democratic doses, in controlled conditions, in practical particles. She wanted us to submit to the oppressive system of voting! Where citizens are forced to take the responsibility to choose or not choose a leader to lead the country! Imagine that! Imagine how many people's feelings could get hurt by having to routinely make such a choice or deal with the guilt of refusing to make it!"

The tusked lizard stepped in.

"Or imagine how many party leaders' feelings could get hurt!"

"Furthermore, she advised that it was impractical for every citizen to carry around a fire-extinguisher all the time!" chimed in the pincerd thespian.

"What a tyrant!" wailed the lizard creature shaking its fist.

"It was then that our freedom was *truly* found!" yelled the two performers, splitting off into opposite wings.

"I am Tusks," came the lizard creature's voice from offstage.

"And I am Orange," came the pincerd creature's voice from offstage.

"And this is the true story of the Happy Labyrinth!" they cried together.

A rope lowered down a bright shining door which floated suspended above the ground while a noisy flute began to attempt to sputter out grandeur and whimsy. The two creatures walked back on stage, Tusks playing her pipe with difficulty given that her tusks seemed to get in the way. Orange cleared his throat. "The door to democracy. A system by which a room at the top of the city is left open and anyone can enter and lock themselves in and rule the city from! No longer are we subjected to the inherent otherness of a voice that speaks for all of us, or the forced inclusivity of a single voice that speaks for us all. We now have absolutely no clue who our leader or leaders are or may be. No idea about their age, or gender, or class - it could be anyone! All they have to do is go lock

themselves in the room and issue commands out of the mouth of wisdom.”

Tusks struggled to keep playing the flute while she pushed a letter through the door’s post slit from behind so that it shot out and fell onto the floor. “And now the city is not ruled or led by anyone but itself!” The lizard quickly swapped her flute for a marching drum and began to beat a military style rhythm.

Orange launched into an impassioned delivery. “Years later and things have never been better.” A fitting holding up the curtain’s rail broke causing the stage’s backdrop to slump slightly. “The city has introduced the Anti-Bigot act in which hundreds of bigots were exterminated from the city, including Gregarious. It implemented the six-legged wolf reserve to protect and preserve these vastly misunderstood creatures. It gave us the acclaimed spiritual successor to Revoltaire’s book; the city’s very own classic, *Enlightenment by Fire*, which is free of the linearity of having been created by a single author. Our society is now rid of the dangers of ladders, for no society can truly be free while it has ladders.”

Orange took a deep breath while Tusks’ militant drums continued to grow more ominous. “Ladders are dangerous and segregate people and you can fall off of them and get hurt. We now all have fire extinguishers. And living in multi-storey buildings has been banned since it symbolically marginalises those on the lower levels. We have also gotten rid of books and libraries since a society cannot be happy or free if there exist ideas that can hurt feelings or subject people to ideas they don’t like! The only book available is *Enlightenment by Fire*, because if you don’t like it you don’t like freedom and are therefore a bigot.”

Orange’s theatrical voice was starting to sound more like an angry yell. “We are the Happy Labyrinth and we are all happy, because if you are not happy in a truly free society you are a bigot!” The two creatures dug their hands (or pincers in Orange’s case) into their mouths and pulled them into wide grins and began to chant: “Happy, happy, happy, happy.” After the chant had reached a climax they paused and bowed.

Stripe sat in silence, his heart beating. He was terrified by whatever strange cult he was currently witnessing. Remembering himself, he quickly began to applaud. The performers bowed dramatically and repeatedly, clearly not having had anyone visit them for a while.

“We will now take donations for the Wolf Sanctuary,” said Tusks springing off the stage. The lizard acted as if the benches were full

scanning the room and then spotting Stripe nonchalantly. "Ah yes good sir, care to donate to the Wolf Sanctuary?"

"Sure," said Stripe. "Although I don't really have any money."

"That's alright," said Tusks. "You can donate yourself if you want."

The suggestion was given so naturally that it took Stripe a moment to realise what was meant. "I'm sorry?" he asked.

"You can donate yourself, to be given to the wolves as food," said Tusks in a friendly tone.

"Um... no thanks," said Stripe.

Tusks' eyes narrowed. "You're not a bigot, are you?"

"No."

"Then why don't you want to support the wolves? Don't you feel their lives are as valuable as others? Are you prejudiced? Think you're more important than them?"

"No... um... Look..." Stripe fumbled in his bag and pulled out a piece of dried meat. "Here, they can have this." He handed it the Lizard.

"Hey, Orange come over here," called Tusks to the other creature.

"What's going on?" asked Orange cheerfully.

"This one doesn't want to donate to the Wolves and is carrying around this strip of meat," said Tusks waving the meat. "I think we may have a bigot on our hands."

"You eat meat, mister?" said Orange squinting at Stripe.

"No," said Stripe automatically.

"Oh? So you were just carrying around some dried meat then?"

"For the wolves," suggested Stripe.

"You know what Tusks," said Orange. "I think we have not only an animal eater on our hands, but a liar." Orange snapped the meat from Stripe, popped it in his mouth and began to chew it angrily.

"Me too, Orange. And that's two counts of bigotry right there. Bigotry against animals and bigotry against the truth."

"So why don't you guys donate yourselves to the wolves?" asked Stripe scanning for the exit sign and spotting one at the other end of the amphitheatre.

"Oh, we have. We have. We've donated our lives to helping them via the arts and as soon as we die, that's where we'll go."

"Oh great, can I sign up for that then?" said Stripe. They ignored him.

"Why aren't you carrying a fire-extinguisher, then?" said Orange with his mouth full tapping his large curved pincers against Tusks backpack fire extinguisher with a metallic knocking.

"I don't have one," said Stripe exasperated.

“Oh really, because there was one at the entrance. Don’t you take the safety of those around you seriously?” said Tusks, starting to get quite worked up.

“Bigot,” hissed Orange, stepping closer to Stripe.

“Know what we do to bigots? We redeem them by donating them to the Wolves,” said Tusks, placing a scaly hand on Stripe’s shoulder.

Stripe quickly reached under Tusks’ arm grabbed the extinguisher valve and sprayed it into Orange’s face. Orange wailed and fell backwards swinging at Stripe, but taking Tusks down with him instead. Stripe vaulted over them and broke out into the amphitheatre’s exit. Tusks and Orange attempted to get up, but kept skidding and slipping over the extinguisher’s foam. Stripe burst through the door only to find himself back in the heart of the labyrinth. “Map. You better call out the right directions fast.”

The network of paths were as intricate and complex as the default tangle hosepipes and wires manage to arrange themselves into when no one is around. Stripe darted across the dark channels punctuated by flame, with the Map yelling “*Rightleftsecondleftrightstraight...*” like a sped up recording. Suddenly a wailing pierced the tunnels. **BIGOT ALERT BIGOT ALERT BIGOT ALERT** pounded down the passages from some invisible sound system.

The sporadic torches on the walls pulsed yellow and red to the sirens. Stripe heard the sound of Orange and Tusks screaming from behind him.

“Left,” called the Map, but as soon as Stripe turned the silhouette of an enormous horned creature flickering red and yellow against the dark stood blocking the path. “Recalculating,” said the Map. The creature took a lumbering step forward.

“Map!” said Stripe urgently.

“Recalculating,” said the Map again. The hulking figure took another step and another, building pace like a train. “Map.”

“Recalcu - Right then right then left.”

Stripe bolted to his right, following the instructions without pause for thought. A vicious roar shook dust from the ceiling. Frenzied cries of “Bigot!” bounced across the dark underground, lancing through the pulsating light. Stripe felt the trembling of the large creature that was hunting him reverberating through the wall to his right.

He took another turn and suddenly the monster’s rumbling came from behind him and not in front. Another corner and Stripe could tell light was nearby.

“We’re doing it Map!” he cried in relief and excitement.

Suddenly Stripe crashed straight into Tusks. The lizard bounced off him, but Stripe tripped in the collision. As Stripe clawed himself up, Tusks' long scaly hands snatched at his ankle and held on like they were throttling a neck. Stripe fell hard and felt a searing pain as Tusks bit into his leg. Stripe tried to get up and run but Tusks had locked her jaw like a clamp. The rumbling of Stripe's enormous unseen hunter returned.

Out of the shadows, the horned silhouette was gaining ground. Desperately Stripe sprung at a flaming torch mounted on the wall. Tusks' resistance pulled Stripe back so that he only made it halfway across the tunnel. A ravenous roar shook the ground. With everything he had he made another vault at the flaming torch, just managing to snatch it with the tips of his fingers before crashing back onto the sandy floor. He spun round and without thinking pressed the flame up against Tusks' ruffle collar. It burst into flame.

Tusks released her hold on Stripe to scream. Stripe felt his leg light with freedom. He stumbled to his feet and tore down the passage, lungs pumping the dusty air with everything they were worth. Behind him in the labyrinth he heard screams of "Fire! Fire!" followed by a phenomenal crashing. A blinded Tusks had run and tripped over whatever creature was closing in on Stripe. Sounds of screaming and fire extinguishers going off faded as Stripe broke out into sunlight. He kept pressing on, one trembling step after another, refusing to look back until eventually he could move no more.

"Changed a bit since I last visited," commented the Map casually as if the bloodthirsty maze were a hotel that had had a few refurbishments.

## A FIELD OF TOWERS

Stripe had decided to settle down in a forest opening at a waterfall, or Whirlpool Fall as the Map described it. A powerful pillar of cold sparkling water cascaded down a steep rocky drop while a furious rapid shot up alongside it. The rivers mirrored each other like a pair of natural escalators. The vertical stream flowed upward as though it were video footage being played in reverse.

The Whirlpool Fall flowed into a small dam that spun in a lazy circle like an aquatic baggage carousel. Stripe stripped down and waded into the pool to cool off. He could feel the grime from his journey disappearing into the fresh and mystical channels of the strange river. Mud from Book Lung's lair, sand from the Arrow Vulture's desert and dust from the Happy Labyrinth all peeled off him and rotated clockwise before ascending the upward chasm of the Whirlpool Fall. The wound on his right calf from Tusks' bite stung against the waters chill.

After his dip in the water Stripe applied disinfectant to all the cuts he'd gathered during his journey and wrapped a bandage tightly around his calf. When Stripe was satisfied that he had minimized his chances of getting any infected injuries he changed into fresh clothes, all warm from the sun. While he did so he began to process the fact that he'd encountered monsters. *Monsters. Wait till Quincy hears about that.* Quincy had had a great theory about monsters from the Furry Sea (by now Stripe had completely accepted Furry over Fury) which had gone on to live in the sewers of Imprium.

Stripe filled his water bottle and ate lunch. He found a fruit on a tree which the Map insisted was safe to eat. It was carrot shaped and coloured in a green and red spiral. To Stripe's amazement it tasted delicious: sweet with a tangy aftertaste like a strawberry descended from Granny Smith apples. Given the Map's track record, he was even more surprised to find it didn't have any unpleasant consequences.

Stripe kicked back and watched a troop of plump squat creatures collecting fruit. The little amphibious creatures lived in a sandcastle at the pool's edge. They were tailless and narwhal horns jutted from their foreheads. They moved slowly balanced on a collection of bristles that passed for legs and feet. Apart from collecting fruit, they seemed to enjoy drifting in the pool's current and playfully sparring with one another, horns raised like rapiers.

“What are they Map?” asked Stripe.

“Snigligs.”

A young sniglig came up to Stripe and offered him a berry skewered on its horn like a miniature fruit kebab. Stripe took the berry gently and repaid the Sniglig with some hard cheese that it seemed to enjoy.

In these quiet moments, the boiling tensions and dangers of Stripe’s journey began to cool, until they were no more than a gentle simmer in the back of his mind. Eventually Stripe felt strong again and knew he had to press on. The idea gave him the same sickly feeling he used to have on Sunday evenings before school. Though in this case, the combination of dread and anticipation wasn’t about work and the excitement of seeing his friends, it was about the danger and the strangeness of this new world which had wrapped him up in its glorious absurdity. And, although Stripe wouldn’t have admitted it to the Map, there was a part of him that was relishing the adventure. While Stripe was by normal standards quite adventurous, he was very cautious compared to Fispire. Fispire was always the one who’d dive into cold water first, or, if she had it her way, dive in after she had pushed Stripe in before her. But today, Stripe felt as if he was discovering his inner Fispire. Maybe it was because he wasn’t worrying about looking after anyone but himself.

Stripe gathered his things and followed the Map’s suggestion that he head toward the peak of a mountain beyond the trees. The forest faded and he found himself striding through a wide-open grassland. In the distance, the enormous mountain stood firm against the horizon. Something coppery jutted out of its side.

“The Unlocked Mountain,” said the Map. It was then that Stripe realised it was an enormous key embedded into the mountainside. Although the distance made it hard to judge, the key must have been immense.

“Alright, so where to next?” said Stripe.

“Across the lowland fields under the Unlocked Mountain there’s a cavern with a staircase that we want to take. So basically just keep heading left.”

“You know,” said Stripe. “For a map you don’t use north and south and all that often.”

“It would only confuse you,” said the Map merrily. Stripe shrugged and began to make his way left. The grass was green and lush under his feet and the air was fresh. The scale of the lowlands and the mountains beyond alarmed him. Just how big was this island? Even the Glengalis highlands weren’t this impressive. Stripe reached a

slope and surveyed the green fields unfolding beneath him. The moment of calm Stripe had enjoyed was broken, he was gazing at absolute chaos.

A grassy cove in the mountains was pockmarked with small house-sized fortresses. Thick, dark, buildings with castle features crouched in the turf. Suddenly a catapult on the roof of one of the fortresses sent a small boulder crashing against its neighbour. Arrows whizzed past constantly like fireworks at the end of the year. Armoured hordes charged at each other. The entire cove was a web of combat orchestrated between the small buildings. There must have been more than a hundred towers and there seemed to be absolutely no alliances between any of them at all. Stripe realised that he was looking down at a war zone in which each building appeared to stand only for itself.

The soldiers in question were a ragtag group of creatures, though not as diverse as the monsters Stripe had encountered in the labyrinth. There was something homogeneous about them. They had a uniform grimness.

“Er... care to tell me what’s going on Map?”

“One moment please.” The Map started humming to itself.

While Stripe waited, he witnessed a horde of warriors climb into barrels and roll down a hill at an oncoming brigade. The barrel riders ploughed through the enemy onslaught, but by the time they reached the bottom of the hill they were all too dizzy to put up much of a fight. This allowed another battalion to shove them back into their barrels and catapult them off into the frenzy on the other side of the arena like cove. Stripe’s attention drifted to a feathered beast riding a large angry badger that was tearing through soldiers, but the pair’s rampage was soon cut short by a trap door in the field opening, swallowing the duo, and then slamming shut.

“Alright, got it,” said the Map. “This area was originally going to be the site of a Dark Lord’s tower. Lord Yuzzlegust. Yuzzlegust had ordered his Hench-Creatures to build the tower however the Happy Labyrinth caught on to his plans.”

“What’s a Hench-Creature?” interjected Stripe.

“Varying life forms that have a shadowy appearance, yellowish eyes and a taste for working in mobs.”

“Sounds like my history class,” said Stripe.

“A joke,” said the Map in much the same way that someone points out something interesting in the sky. It continued.

“The Labyrinth insisted that a tower that high so close to the Wolf Sanctuary was against building regulations and sent an army to stop

it. After a savage three-day struggle Yuzzlegust was crushed in what is known as The Battle of the Wolves. The remaining Hench-Creatures were left without a master or purpose. However, several days later Yuzzlegust's sword appeared in the middle of the abandoned battlefield. The Sword of Quite A Substantial Amount of Doom, or *Sogasaod* for short. Whoever wields the sword-

"Obtains a quite a substantial amount of power?" suggested Stripe.

"Exactly. With nothing to do, Yuzzlegust's Hench-Creatures began to fight over it. The fighting grew so intense that factions began to form and as time passed the battalions began to appropriate the building materials intended for the tower. Step forward five years and that's where we are."

"This fight's been going on for five years non-stop?" Stripe marvelled as he stared out at the vicious scene before him.

It became clear that there was a rough doughnut shape to the formation of the fortresses. The central opening was mostly a frenzy of combat but at its heart Stripe could make out a thin red light hovering vertically above the ground. A small, dark, pointy-eared Hench-Creature made a break for the sword only to have a large rock shoot out of the clamour of battle and crack into the back of its head. A short armoured figure with horns burst from the combat and dived at the sword, only to have its ankle grabbed and yanked backward, cutting its reach short. Another impish figure crawled over the fallen warrior and made a dive for the blade and was stopped short. As it had disappeared back into the tumbling bodies, the short armoured figure had grabbed the imp soldier by its forked tail and dragged the creature along with it.

The entire struggle was like a matrix of combat sheathing the sword, a dark and violent wimmelbook scene radiating from the blade. Any chance of breaking out and grabbing the weapon seemed impossible - the entire battle was so evenly matched it was reduced to a continuous self-cancelling system.

"The entire valley is like a giant game of ruckus gone wrong. It's a battlefield," said Stripe.

"Yesiree," agreed the Map.

"And the mountain passage I need to get to is right on the periphery of all this?"

"Indeed," said the Map.

The ground trembled and Stripe turned to see an explosion rocking the centre of the battle with several grim figures flying into the air.

“How am I supposed to get through this alive?”

“By not dying,” suggested the Map with earnest enthusiasm.

Stripe crouched and headed down into the madness.



The journey was slow going. Stripe hid behind short walls, barrels, debris and at other times lay still on the ground like he was dead - anything he could do to advance around the heart of the combat. The smell of the cove was an assault on the senses all by itself. Industrial and smoky wafts drenched in sweat and decay stung Stripe's nostrils, brought tears to his eyes and made him feel dizzy. There was fire everywhere, angry patches of flame lit the battle zone in a bloodthirsty red, burning zits on the face of war. An immense shoal of sparkling arrows momentarily blocked out the sun like a passing cloud. Stripe heard a hiss behind him. He spun round to find a skeletal lizard creature that looked like it had survived being set on fire pointing a curved sword at his throat. Before he could react, a large round boulder swept it away, leaving an abandoned sword pointing at Stripe's back as he turned and fled.

Stripe had barely let out a sigh of relief when two large soldiers, each twice his height, crashed into the earth in front of him, locked in juggernaut combat. Stripe looped around their wrestling frames as the two pummelled each other into the ground and froze just in time to avoid a pack of Hench-Creatures on armoured bicycles whizzing past him toward the heart of the battle. Stripe awkwardly waited for them as though he were on some twisted pedestrian crossing until the smallest Hench-Creature, (which, curiously, had training wheels on its combat bike) had squeaked past. Stripe ruffled some ash out of his hair, clung onto the silver leaf around his neck and carried on.

It was as Stripe neared the periphery of the chaos and felt the excitement of escape welling up in his chest, that the trap went off. A net neatly scooped him up and left him suspended and tangled two feet above the ground. A small mob of Hench-Creatures with their sharp eyes and even sharper teeth surrounded him.

“What do we have here then?” jeered a crocodile-eyed member with a sharp trident. “Is it a spy? Or a distraction? Or maybe even a thief?”

“I'm definitely a distraction,” Stripe called back. “You should all quickly look around for the ambush that's on its way if you want to live.” All eyes stayed on Stripe except for one of the slower members

of the party who nervously turned around. The crocodile-eyed leader of the Hensch-Creatures licked across her pupils, her tongue swiping past them like a large rough rubbery windscreen wiper. Her gaze stayed locked on Stripe the whole time.

"Where are you from, boy?" she prodded Stripe with her trident. Stripe could tell she wasn't one to be easily fooled.

"I'm just passing through, I have no interest in your fight or sword or anything. Don't bother with me, you're wasting time that could be valuably used killing stuff."

Before Stripe could add anymore the trident pressed quickly through the net to rest against his throat.

"Where?" demanded the reptilian leader in a tone that closed all room for anything but direct answers.

"Across the Fury - Furry Sea." Stripe could feel the sharp weight of the metal press down on the hum of his throat.

Her eyes seemed to flicker at that. "Du Waltz," she spat. "Are you one of Du Waltz's?"

"The thief?" asked Stripe.

"Ah, so you know him then?"

"No, I only heard of him yesterday, but I'm not here to take anything. I'm just making my way to the Endless River."

"We've been expecting Dusk to try take away our sword," hissed Crocodile-Eyes.

Stripe had thought there wasn't room for any more shock in his present situation but he saw now that he had been very wrong. Before he could respond, a deafening chime rang across the valley.

"Renewal time! Renewal time!"

The group surrounding Stripe slackened. Their entire postures deflated like fists unclenching. They turned away as if Stripe were suddenly invisible. The entire battle appeared to have been paused. Warriors who were at each other's throats moments before stopped their fighting and began to drag away the wounded, collecting arrows and extinguishing fires. Swords were replaced by tools and armies began to work at repairing their fortresses. Wagons began to move around the field dispensing food and drink. It was as if the entire bloody battle was a film scene and the director had yelled cut.

Somewhere a song erupted and spread across the cove, infecting the Hensch-Creature warriors like a contagious disease.

*Renewal time, renewal time,  
Put down your blades, there's the chime,  
Renewal time, renewal time,*

*Take a moment and clear off the grime,  
War is hard and loss is high,  
Some of us are going to die,  
But let's do it with our heads held high  
Renewal time, renewal time  
Renewal time for you and I*

*Ooooooh!*

*Put that dagger in its sheath!  
Take a moment to find your teeth!  
And bury the dead underneath!*

*Renewal time, renewal time,  
Whatever you do, don't cross the line!*

Stripe twisted in his net to make out the sword stuck in the centre of the battlefield. There was a thick white line painted around it almost like the markings on a sports field. The zone had been cleared out for the break, like a field being vacated for half-time.

Stripe called out to the leader of his captors, "I'm sorry, but what about me?"

She was sitting on a large lifeless warrior, and eating what looked like a tuna sandwich. She glanced up at him, deeply unimpressed, as if Stripe were behaving audaciously. "It's my lunch break kid. You don't sustain a war this long without some down time," she went back to her sandwich.

"But—"

She put a finger to her lips and then continued eating.

Before Stripe could begin to press her further, a roar erupted from the centre of the valley and rattled out against the mountainous walls of the cove.

A small ratty Hench-Creature with trembly eyes had crossed the line and was making a break for the sword. Crocodile-Eyes along with almost every other Hench-Creature on the field withdrew a concealed weapon. Arrows, hammers, throwing blades and stones shot off into the centre of the circle. Stripe looked away. He was quite sure that while the would-be truce breaker was still in the circle, he was covering a lot more of it than he had been a few seconds before. Heated conversations broke out and Crocodile-Eyes wandered off, excited by the chance to yell at people. Stripe went quiet. How was he going to get out of this one?

The answer came to him at the sight of a Hench-Creature that looked like a jackal wearing a cello. It was hard at work mending an overturned cart.

“Sorry, sorry. Um... you with the tools, yes you.”

The fixer turned to Stripe.

“Yes, thank you,” continued Stripe. “You see my net, well the net that I’m in is breaking at the top. Would you mind fixing it?”

The fixer scrunched up his face. “I don’t see nothing wrong with it,” he said bluntly.

“Oh it’s very clear from my angle. One of the main lines is um... unravelling. Quite badly. I think by the end of recovery time it’ll be busted entirely.”

The fixer looked alarmed. “Well we can’t have that can we?” The fixer shuffled over to the trap and began to lower a lever. Stripe gently reached the ground.

“Why is there a picture of a duck on your hat?” asked the fixer, as he helped Stripe out of the net.

“It’s a logo,” said Stripe.

The fixer nodded and bent into the universal crouch of people who fix things. It’s a crouch that hones their senses and lets you know that they are totally engaged in whatever type of fixing may be on its way. “Say mister, I don’t see anything wrong?” said the Hench-Creature.

But Stripe was already running away as fast as his legs could carry him.

## OF MAPS AND MANTISES

“That perhaps wasn’t the safest route was it?” said the Map light-heartedly. “It’s a shame the other options were just so lengthy. Maybe next time I *can* try figure out a route that doesn’t cross it.”

Smearred in soot and ash, Stripe stumbled away from the chaos of the Field of Towers.

“Map, if you unnecessarily put me in a situation like that again I am going to make you into a paper aeroplane and throw you as hard as I can,” he said humourlessly.

The cleaner the air became as Stripe neared the foot of the mountain, the more the rush of his escape shifted into a trembling anger and frustration. Dusk. They had said Dusk. It was hardly a common name. Stripe’s mind rattled with possibilities. Was his grandfather really Dusk Du Waltz? If it was true, then could it be that he really was a thief? Is that what all those stories from his childhood were? Yarns spun out of his exploits while he headed up here and plundered these place’s riches? Stripe’s racing thoughts began to split furiously like an angry amoeba exploding into a chain of questions. Why had his parents let him come to this place since it was clearly dangerous? And just how big was it? Certainly not some small little island shrouded in smoke that you could through a stone halfway across.

Stripe plucked the Map out of his backpack and held it firmly as if he was expecting it to try escape. “Okay Map, I have a lot of questions and I really need you to give me some straight-up answers.”

If Stripe wasn’t so shaken he might have found it amusing that he’d just spoken like a tough detective to what was, after all, a map.

“What is this place?” Stripe demanded.

“The Unlocked Mountain is,”-

“No, Map. Not the Mountain, I’m not interested in the Mountain and whatever bloodthirsty creatures live in it. I want to know about this... this *world*. How big is it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that Stripe,” said the Map.

“Why?” shot back Stripe.

“Because nobody knows that.”

Stripe froze mid-step.

“It’s endless as far as we know.”

“But... I don’t understand. Could you show it to me? Where I live in proximity to all of this?”

Nonsolus and the Fury Sea appeared on the map. The image slowly began to shrink as if the map’s view were flying higher. Stripe saw the Long-Short-Bridge stretching out from the isles of Leaf’s End as if invisible hands were etching it out from the other side of the paper. As soon as the bridge reached its end a coastline flashed into existence and began to race out like fire consuming paper. The field Stripe had crossed, the Forest with Book-Lung – they all began to appear as Nonsolus continued to shrink into the Map’s centre.

The detailed landscapes raced relentlessly onward and the kilometres Stripe had crossed sank into millimetres on the map. Forests and deserts and mountains and lakes, turned into drip-sized blotches and still Nonsolus disappeared into the circumference of a pinhead. As the map began to grow denser Stripe realised that he wasn’t looking at distances the size of countries, or even hemispheres. He was looking at universes. Universes like continents, all linked by land and patched by sea and stars. Galaxies you could cross on foot if you had the lifespan to live out the infinite steps needed to do so. It was too much to comprehend. Stripe looked away his brain a dizzy paper boat spinning in whirlpool of revelation: The Fury Sea, no the *Furry Sea*, had borders. This place wasn’t an island, Nonsolus was the island. A small island in a sea that was now a speck on a map.

“Okay, okay Map. You can stop.” Stripe paused coming to terms with this revelation. “Does all of this,” he waved vaguely at the drawing of the world, “Does it have a name?”

“The Universe,” said the Map simply.

Stripe bit his tongue. *It actually makes sense*, he admitted to himself. *If all you’ve ever known, or will know, is this place, why would it be called anything other than the universe?*

“People from your world sometimes call it the Endless Land or even the Constellation Highway.”

“Ah, so people from my world... What’s the deal here? Why are we locked out of this?”

“Politics,” said the Map. “You’re not the only ones. Isolationism happens from time to time.”

“Right. And why does everyone from over here call it the Furry Sea and not the Fury Sea?”

“The ocean surrounding Nonsolus is the native habitat of Lurzwurgles and Wurzlurgles. Lurzwurgles are actually-”

“Little furry creatures that can be become Wurzlurgles which are fish,” said Stripe.

“Correct!” said the Map like an approving schoolteacher. “So when Lurzwurgles shed their pelts the coats often sink to the bottom of the sea or wash up on the shore. Since nothing eats them a large surplus of their furry skins build up in the sea and surrounding coasts. Travellers and traders from all over head to the Furry Sea to collect them. Skin diving is a fairly big industry, often practised by goblins.”

“But then why are they so rare near Nonsolus?”

“Because your people have hunted and chased them away. Instead you’re in the middle of a wild sea with a ferocious eco-system fuelled by abandoned fishy Wurzlurgle skins. Since your people are so terrified of the outside world you re-named the Furry Sea the Fury Sea, most likely to make people even more afraid of the outside world.”

Stripe shook his head. Dusk had given him little glimpses of all of this, bit by bit, year by year but they had seemed like a separate collection of playful yarns, not real world facts that all added up. Politics and isolation and people from Nonsolus knowing about this amazing world and wanting to hide from it. He definitely needed to start reading the newspaper and paying more attention to clues about all of this when he was home again. There was clearly a secret world within Nonsolus itself, hidden between the lines waiting for Stripe to uncover it.

“And my Grandfather? What’s his story?”

“I’m afraid he seems to have taken himself out of the story. There are scrolls missing in the library... I can’t find anything substantial about him.”

Stripe nodded. It made sense. If his grandfather was a thief then he would have been a creative one, a charming one, a cheeky one – he’d apply all of his usual talents to the practice of thievery.

“Okay Map, let’s stop before my brain bursts like an over-inflated balloon. Where are we going through now and what’s trying to kill us this time?”

“Aha! I see we are starting to build up a bit of a dynamic,” chuckled the Map. “Me guiding you and you being snarky to me, although I am very helpful.” The Map spoke with nothing but joy in its voice. “Very good, leftward you’ll find a path to an underground chasm and there’s nothing down there that will want to kill you.”



Near the base of the mountain a wild stone staircase curled down into the ground, winding its way into an extremely large cave system. Crystal growth coated the walls like ethereal lichen. Clear turquoise pools of water glowed a soft marine light that was amplified by the shiny rocks, giving the cavern a faint blue hum. After consulting the Map to check it was safe, Stripe took a moment to rinse his face in one of the pools. The cool water rolled down his skin soothingly. With each splash, Stripe felt more aware of the new world he found himself in. How endless it was, how mysterious it was. It was like his whole life he'd lived in a fishbowl and now found himself in the ocean. Stripe wondered about his grandfather. How far had he travelled? What had he stolen? And how had he profited from it? Did the others know? His mom and dad? Grandmother Maelstrom? Yes. Yes, Maelstrom definitely must have known. She even knew how to fire an arrow. Were they possibly even partners in crime?

Stripe reach for another scoop of water and saw two bright green orbs glowing in the water. For a second he was overjoyed by the thought that Colour Thieves lived in the cave. But then he realised that they were only reflections, reflections planted in the middle of a transparent insectoid face that was right behind him.

Stripe shot up. A large mantis monster stood looming over him. It was about the size of a llama, its armoured skin metallic and cool in the cave light. Its horizontal jaws twitched and played with each other like tumbling thumbs while its tall antennas whipped around contemplatively. Its eyes spun loosely with chameleon dexterity radiating a green glow.

Suddenly a single eye twitched and like a coloured globe being changed it turned a bright blue. Its next eye twitched and turned the same blue as its twin. The Mantis was looking intently at Stripe's neck with the sort of curious gaze only the alien blankness of a Mantis can pull off. It wasn't alone. From the shadows of the cave blue and green eyes danced around in the dark. Twenty, forty, sixty - the eyes continued to appear.

"Map?" croaked Stripe weakly.

"Not to worry, they don't want to kill you. They only prey on sentimental objects, hence their name: Profane Mantises'."

Stripe followed the creature's gaze down to the silver leaf around his neck.

"Well it's a good thing the purpose of this whole trip doesn't rely on a really sentimental object."

"Oh," said the Map sounding uncharacteristically deflated.

The creature's eyes continued to gaze at Stripe, occasionally flickering from green to blue. "They see the real world in blue and sentimentality in green," explained the Map.

The flock of eyes around Stripe spun around in green and blue flickers like a choreographed light show. They began to feed off each other's rhythm as if synchronising. Stripe began to feel dizzy, he looked down. A long silver antenna brushed past his cheek. There was always an answer, thought Stripe. Always some clever way to get out of things. That's how it worked, right? He always found something at the last minute to get him out of situations. But this time he had nothing.

"Make me a plane," cried the Map.

"I didn't really mean that, Map. It was just a joke."

"It could save you Stripe. After an adventure with an old quester of mine, I wrote a poem about her. It's very sentimental. I'll turn into it and then you throw me."

Stripe stepped back from the Mantis and began to furiously fold the Map. All the Profane Mantis's eyes flashed into blue. "Now!" yelled Stripe, hurling the paper plane. Green eyes flared into life like a dot-to-dot explosion as the Map transformed into a flying poem. The Mantis's all followed the Map as it whizzed around the cavern's ceiling.

"Go!" yelled the Map.

"I'll miss you Map! I actually really appreciate you and I know I didn't show it and—"

"I'm not actually this paper," called back the Map.

*Oh right*, thought Stripe and ran off feeling a blush warm his cheeks.

While the Map's poem was clearly enough to distract the Profane Mantises, whatever it was wasn't enough to drown out how ridiculously sentimental the silver leaf was. So Stripe ran, for what felt like the 100<sup>th</sup> time that weekend. He didn't look back, but he didn't need to either – he saw blue light flash against the cavern walls as he moved, eyes on him again.

The scuttle of an insectoid stampede rustled behind him like hissing rain. The Profane Mantises had no concern about gravity. As Stripe sprinted through the cavernous tunnels they took to the earthen walls and even the ceiling. A ring of spiky limbs and twitching feelers raced after him like a giant butterfly net. The further Stripe went, the smaller the tunnel grew, squeezing his chasers into a silver rocket of wild ligaments. Stripe could see the pinprick of light in the distance, the second time he'd been chased

out of a cave in one day. Except, instead of the clear light of morning that had welcomed him out of the Happy Labyrinth, now the red glow of twilight beckoned.

Stripe fell out of the cave mouth headfirst, crashing hard into the ground, hands clasped around his head. The Mantises charged on. Stripe scrunched up his face preparing for them to crash over him like an entomological tsunami. But the collision never came. Stripe turned tentatively. The Mantises stood frozen at the lip of the cavern, like pantomime prisoners caught in a searchlight. Stripe looked behind him but there was no impending threat. It was as if their cords had run taught and popped out.

Stripe looked down and saw the line of shade marking the cave's darkness and the day's fading light. His immediate guess was that they couldn't enter the sunshine, which also explained why they lived in a cave. He then turned and looked at the sky. It was growing steadily dimmer.

The Mantises would be free to find him in the night. Stripe shuddered at the thought, picked himself up and hurried away from their watching eyes.

## THE ENDLESS RIVER

The cave led out onto a thin beach. A large body of water lapped calmly against the cold sand. Stripe continued along the coastline, the Map no longer with him to give advice or even just to fill the silence. The beach was long and narrow with no sign of changing. Step after step, Stripe's shuffled through the endless hospital-white grains of sands. It was the most solitary his journey had been, as if a radio had been playing music in the background the whole time and only by it being turned off had Stripe noticed that it was gone. Even when Stripe had set out alone his head was still loud with nervous energy and crashing thoughts. Now everything was still. A sharp breeze rustled Stripe's hair and clothes. Maybe it was the setting sun, or the calm expanse of the water, or the loneliness of the beach but Stripe began to feel as if he had entered a new world further away and even more cut off from everything. As Stripe walked down the coast it became clear to him that there were no distractions. No colourful creatures or unusual pieces of geography. No cheery commentary from the Map. It was just Stripe, the beach, the sea and the horizon. Stripe walked on, his footsteps like droplets against the silence. He had felt alone before but this was different. It was as if the landscape was radiating solitude, like it had a melancholy buried within it.

Stripe followed the beach, the sound of the solemn lapping of the waves matching the pulse of his heart. He looked back at the beach receding away from him. A low wave crashed into his trailing footprints and stole them away into the ocean.

Just the disappearance of Stripe's footsteps made him feel like he had lost some non-existent companionship. No matter how deeply he pressed or hard he walked, the sea would take away his footprints. A sad thought swelled up in his his mind. *Did Dusk have any footprints left?* Somewhere out there, preserved in mud and shaded by ferns in a forest, or coated in dust resting in a garden shed. Stripe thought of the footprints as if they were little creatures, lonely and afraid; dreams left behind by someone no longer asleep. He thought about the billions and billions of footprints that had existed and how they would all disappear. Every single person he had ever met or loved. Stripe suddenly missed everyone he knew desperately. He had missed Dusk as soon as he knew he was dead, but now he realised the pain of Dusk's death had wordlessly crept into everything else. A death

doesn't only take, it also gives; it reminds those left behind that they are headed its way too. These were the thoughts that Stripe had been hiding from, and here on the beach they were laid out and amplified with no obstruction.

Like a blank page, the void of the beach teased Stripe and made him want to fill it with some retort. He thought about how every life was a footprint and every generation was just a new step. He pictured the lonely beach coming to life with every footprint that had ever pressed into it, like it was a mind playing every memory it had ever had at once and how even though he was so close to them in a way, they were also as far from him as any star. Stripe felt his ideas giving him a sense of company and courage.

*That's what death is really, he thought. It's something that you used to be able to touch leaving your reach forever, and your hand can remember what it misses and you can imagine what is gone filling your palm but you just have to accept that the closest that that something can ever be to you is no longer outside of you but within you.*

Stripe's realisation coincided with the abrupt end to his lonely journey. It was the view to end all views. The sand gave way to a giant sharp plateau that seemed to jut out into the clear air beyond. The sea followed the land's edge and melted into a shimmering stream that flowed through the plateau, forming a small lake at its edge before spilling out into an untethered river that wound its way out into the horizon and across the sky as far as the eye could see. The plateau blurred into a transparent pinkish hue, a crystal rock pool pointing to the edge of the world. Brilliant plants and trees stood suspended in the ground. Their root networks visible through the clear terrain, plunging down wildly into the ground like frozen lightning storms erupting from leafy clouds.

Stripe gasped as he noticed herds of what could only have been the Inverted Giraffes that his Grandfather had told him about. Each one a large powerful body without a neck walking across the glassy savannah. The bodies were a bright network of veins and light flashing inside a faint biological frame. In their centre, a deep pulsating glow throbbed like some fusion in the core of a reactor. Under their feet, like anchors below ships, twin pulsating lights glided along underground ploughing through roots.

Stripe walked across the strange and beautiful ecosystem clutching Dusk's leaf tightly. A weaselly creature with a marlin fin and banded tail bounded past Stripe seemingly weaving in and out of the ground like a ghost dolphin.

Stripe made his way toward the water's shore, where a lonely boat was tethered. As Stripe neared it, a tall robed figure rose out of the water. Under the robe was an intricate body that looked like a skeletal totem pole carved with inhuman skill.

"I am the keeper of the boat, the guardian of infinity's moat, I am the riddler, the tester, the gate, only I can allow passing this boundary to be your fate."

Stripe was about to ask the tall figure if he was part of GROPE, but there was something ancient and dignified about him that persuaded Stripe that he was the real deal.

"What must I do to pass?" asked Stripe.

"A riddle," boomed the guardian.

Stripe did his best not to look bemused.

"Again? Well, I am ready," said Stripe.

"What is the meaning of life?" asked the guardian. The question took Stripe off guard. He was expecting a jolly little rhyme, and maybe something to do with an egg or time.

"Is that even a riddle? It sounds more like an existential question?" probed Stripe, proud that the word 'existential' was in his vocabulary. The Guardian stood still like a statue. Only its robe moved in the first winds from the new and approaching night.

"Right."

Stripe sat down. It was a good question, but it wasn't exactly an easy one. Stripe had asked it himself. It had spawned countless books and even religions and nobody had seemed to have quite figured it out yet, had they? Stripe didn't feel too confident in solving the problem off the cuff in order to get access to a boat. It felt a bit disproportionate. He considered giving the dictionary definition for *life* but didn't think it would go down well.

Stripe fingered the ashy leaf and his thoughts went back to his grandfather. He remembered the night he'd asked Dusk the exact same question. Dusk had simply gone on about all of the creatures and how great they were.

The Inverted Giraffe and Lurzwurgles and Wurzlurgles. That wasn't the answer. Stripe couldn't just say there are lots of exciting animals. That's what it's about. Stripe looked out at the transparent lake. At its edge there was no earthly boundary between the water and the air. The lake simply ended and the sky began.

A creature like an octopus launched itself out into the sky and crashed mouth first into a bird. It quickly outstretched all of its tentacles and began to spin madly like a rubbery helicopter propeller hovering back into the lake with its dinner.

Inspiration hit Stripe. What was the meaning of life to that octopus? To spin madly, whether in sea or sky and collide into your lunch. What was the meaning of life for the Profane Mantises? To use your glowing eyes to collect things you considered valuable? For the warriors clashing in the Field of Towers? Get the sword. Die trying. Have tea in-between. For the Happy Labyrinth denizens – liberty, or something like it.

And then there was Velgon the Vulture and the Arrow Vultures as a species. Prey off the lost and if they're not lost make them. There was Book-Lung, feasting upon the ideas and dreams of others. There was spliX who despite being completely inapt for land travel, wanted it more than anything else. Ignore your gills, run with the sheep. There was Gubblegirth and the GROPE academy. Use certificates and dirty tactics to stop people from going where they want to go because it makes you feel important.

And then there was home and all the meanings there across the Furry Sea. Thousands of meanings all weaved together like a woollen jersey that wrapped around whoever wore it. Love your family and occasionally climb mountains. Survive school so you can ride an electric bicycle while the sky is still blue. Make your friends laugh, your parents smile and throw things at your sibling when nobody else is around. Smile at the stars and love creatures other people don't even know about.

What was it for Stripe? What was it right now? Take a boat to the sky and scatter your grandfather's ashes because he liked this place.

Stripe returned to Dusk's answers all those years ago. About all the animals and all their ways of living.

"I have an answer."

The guardian didn't break its stare.

"If life is a question then every living thing is an answer. Whether it's to collect pollen and make honey; howl at the moon and kill deer; jump off an impossibly tall height, shatter your bones and become a fish; die and spit out a weasel sugar glider; be a star that hunts in the depths of the night. We are the answers. You are an answer and I am an answer and everything in existence is the blueprint of an answer."

The guardian nodded and walked back into the water. The boat's tether untied itself and slid into its hull.



There was something disconcerting about how the water flowed into the sky. Stripe was terrified that he might paddle off the river and tumble into space. The boat was a hollowed out canoe with no seating inside, which made Stripe feel particularly unstable. The water began to condense and speed up as the lake fed into the thin band of water that stretched ever onward. Eventually it was like he was riding on a thin watery road winding out into the horizon. Stripe paddled out into the twilight, toward the setting sun.

The current pushed Stripe along and the air grew thinner and sharper. Icicles began to grow along the boat's bow. Stripe stopped, the river had begun to grow perilously thin. He looked out as the stream stretched on into the darkness of space amongst the stars, dissolving into a thin milky whip that wound onward without any perceivable end. The world was absolutely still. Stripe's fingers clasped the leaf around his neck. He felt its coolness resting in his palm. He thought of Dusk and his smile and his stories. Stripe held onto everything he knew about Dusk and everything he didn't know about Dusk and felt at peace with both of them.

To have known Dusk was enough, to have loved him was enough. Dusk has no longer out there in the world, he existed within Stripe and his family and everyone who remembered him. Stripe pulled the leaf's chain over his head and stretched out his hand. He uncurled his palm flatly with the leaf resting on it.

A tilt of his hand and the ash leaf slid off into the Endless River. As soon as it hit the water it dissolved into the frothy white stream and raced down the river blazing off across the stars.

"Goodbye," said Stripe and took a moment to take in all of the stars and the space river weaving amongst them. He had done it. His quest was complete.



Stripe sat in his canoe appreciating the endless river, his breath puffing cool clouds out into the darkness. When cold began to overtake his fulfilment he started to slowly turn around. Stripe paddled slowly weary of the immense abyss surrounding him. Vertigo fizzled in his stomach and rattled his knuckles. Suddenly a flash caught his eye. It was a cluster of bright lights and they were moving toward him. *Oh no*, thought Stripe. *I'm too tired for this. Not now. Of all the times not now.* But like it or not, the Hunting Star was moving towards him.

Stripe began to hurriedly spin the boat around and in his haste he fell out. He felt the cold current part against his weight and then a sickening sensation as his legs broke through the river into space. He desperately tried to kick but there was a terrifying sensation of there being nothing to kick against. Stripe felt the emptiness moving up along his spine as he sank. He clawed at the water but felt less and less of it brush past his hands until he was free and falling.

**HIDDEN THINGS**

Stripe's fall was broken by a brilliant sensation of weightlessness and blinding light. His world went instantly from cold to warm. He felt like he was a letter being delivered in a shooting star. The light parted and he was at the side of the lake. Slowly the glow that had carried Strike moved into a figure. It was like the opposite of a leopard, an inversion of a leopard... As the creature's would be dark spots and features were made of starlight the rest of it was a ghost that lived in-between the constellations. The figure was almost invisible but there was a faint second-handness about the air it occupied. Like the blurry gaps of space that bend around flames. The figure stood on the lake's surface, it's reflection a radiant shadow that mirrored its form in pools of light.

"I would compliment you on your evasiveness if I thought you had any mastery over it whatsoever," crooned the voice from the figure. "You've given me one of the worst headaches I've ever had and I don't even have a head." Stripe opened his mouth found that all his words were cowering amongst his teeth and shut it. The figure's glowing eyes glinted.

"So," ventured Stripe "what am I missing here? And who are you? Sorry I have to ask." Asking something as majestic and powerful as the star creature what it was felt rude, but Stripe had been through enough not to worry about anything like manners.

"I am what is known as a Constellation Leopard, and I don't have a name boy. Or age, or gender if you intend to ask like most do. Finite beings, you always like labels. I suppose it comes from your fixed forms. I knew your Grandfather; I'd almost call him a friend if I were capable of having friends. He asked me to help supervise you during your journey but you did a fantastic job of going off course and running away once that stupid little goblin got it into your head that I was a threat. I did manage to stop you from dying when you were tumbling down that slope though."

Stripe remembered being at the edge of the desert and wondering how he'd survived such a fall. It looked like today was the second time the Constellation Leopard had saved him.

The Constellation Leopard paused and watched the boat Stripe had fallen out of ride by itself to the shore and shift into the exact position Stripe had found it. The great celestial cat nodded approvingly.

“The others have been dumbstruck and panicked trying to find you. Well, more dumbstruck and panicked than they usually are.”

“I heard that!” came an out of breathe voice that was soon followed by the familiar face of Rastadum. He wasn’t wearing a yellow outfit this time. Ragli, the other strange funeral guest, followed him looking as threatening as ever especially since his armour was now no longer poorly concealed under a suit.

“You were meant to hear it,” replied the Constellation leopard drily.

“Stripe I’m both pleased and amazed to see that you’re alive,” said Rastadum, ruffling Stripe’s head quite painfully. “We almost had you when you fell off course, quite literally, but our calls appeared to startle you and you ran out into the Desert and its aura of misplacement and confusion just muddled everything. I’m sure you’re full of questions.”

Stripe nodded. So the figures that had driven him into the desert were Rastadum, or some of his affiliates. Rastadum opened his mouth to speak, then paused as if a sudden realisation had struck him.

“There’s a picture of a duck on your hat.”

“It’s a logo,” said Stripe.

“Right. Well let’s make a fire and I’ll tell you everything.” Ragli pushed Stripe over to a smooth log and forcefully wrapped him into a blanket while Rastadum began to prepare a fire. “Of course we could do it somewhere else but I do find this place so scenic,” said Rastadum. “It’s a fitting place to tell you everything.”

Stripe turned back to look at the Constellation Leopard but it was gone. “She does that,” nodded Rastadum “Although I must say amongst all the impossible things you’ve managed to pull off, making her lose track of you is one of the most impressive. Then again, she did fend off the team of wolves and hunters that the Happy Labyrinth sent after you earlier today, which is remarkable given that her strength comes from the night.”

It seemed that there was still a lot Stripe didn’t know about.



Stripe was brimming with questions. His mind felt like a crowded auditorium full of raised hands. “Alright,” said Rastadum, passing Stripe a steaming warm concoction of what looked like soup. “This is how we’ll do this. I’m going to just keep talking until I think everything that’s needed saying has been said. That fair?”

Stripe nodded.

"Firstly, what you need to know is that your world is just an island," began Rastadum.

"I know," said Stripe sipping his warm brew.

"Ah, good. Well let's not get into politics now but your little island is actually part of an infinite world. Or at least nobody in it has found any boundaries. The land just goes on and on. Occasionally it varies, there are canyons and caves large enough to have moons but in general this world, or should I say *the* world is endless and without end etcetera. Long ago *circumstances* drove Nonsolus to close itself off. Or at least those in power to make Nonsolus close itself off. The great forgetting we call it. Anyway like I said, let's not get into politics. Now, what you do need to know is your place in all this. Your grandfather was no ordinary man, he got up to some pretty high profile adventuring over here and I was one of his affiliates, accomplices and comrades etcetera etcetera."

"So you were a thief with him?"

"A thief!" exclaimed Rastadum. "We were nothing of the sort. We are Concealers and your grandfather was one of the greatest. Let me put it to you this way. Stories need ingredients. Magical swords, hidden relics, objects of power etcetera... These objects are always hidden away, tucked in and left waiting so that when the sparks of adventure begin they can catch and kindle them into what they need to be. We do not steal magical items from temples. We are the ones that put them there."

Stripe considered this.

"So that sword in the field of towers?"

"Yes that was Dusk. We couldn't afford all of those Hench-Creatures mucking about. So we devised that little set up to keep them busy."

Stripe looked back on his journey. The Vulture accusing Dusk of taking a magical flute and smuggling things across the desert. Dusks story about placing a flute down the bottom of a well. The items weren't stolen they were on their way to safety, to be placed somewhere where they would be of use (or usefully not of use).

"Okay so you guys and my grandfather used to go out here and hide things in order to create stories. Where do they come from and why do you do it?"

"Why indeed, mister Spot! Why indeed! For us, it's a very respectable and profitable career. Sometimes we do it for money. We go up to a Dark Lord or Evil King and we say, you've had a rough day taking over that castle and now you need to go hide the magic

necklace or whatever etcetera etcetera. For a small fee we will do it for you professionally.”

“So you get people to pay you to hide their stuff?” Stripe couldn’t help but smile at how outrageous that seemed.

“Correct. But we always have other motivations apart from the fun and profit. This is where Dusk comes in. Dusk was an official representative from your Island. We call it the Circle around here. He was what we call the Leaf. The Leaf’s job is to conduct the flow of stories and adventures in such a way that your island and its surrounding area remains isolated and safe from the fluctuations of the bigger world at hand. You passed through the Happy Labyrinth yes?”

“Yes,” nodded Stripe. “So you guys placed the book in the Labyrinth? The one that prompted the whole revolution?”

“Exactly! We concealed the book and set up the revolution. Had that empire grown it could have very well become a threat to your home.”

“So my grandfather is a figure called the Leaf that worked with your team of Concealers to conduct the flow of stories so that they leave Nonsolus alone.”

“Quite right,” said Rastadum. Ragli was busy scowling at the throbbing organs of a semi-transparent toad.

“So am I supposed to become the next Leaf?” said Stripe remembering how Myles Orff, the politician, had inspected him at Dusk’s funeral.

“The position of the Leaf has been handed down across generations. Not always within a family, your grandfather was the first in your line to do so. But it passes across people from your island. Your father was originally offered to take on the position but... it just wasn’t right for him. Your grandfather had hoped for you or your sister to take over his work and, while she is shaping up to be an excellent replacement, she is far too young to become the Leaf just yet.”

Stripe couldn’t help but feel the compliment to Fispire was a bit of a blow to him, but he had to admit it was certainly easy to imagine Fispire growing up to be an amazing adventurer.

Rastadum continued.

“Dusk’s last wish was for you too take his ashes to the endless river so that you could see the world – the real world, the whole world, and consider if you’d like it to be part of your future or just your past.”

“Sounds more like a concealing test to me,” thought Stripe out loud.

“Well, yes and no. Firstly, you went far off the intended course. The journey was supposed to be far simpler and less dangerous. You were meant to go across the bridge, through the forest around the Unlocked Mountain and then over to here. You weren’t going to pass anything incredibly threatening. Dusk had also arranged for Ragli and myself as well as the Constellation Leopard to monitor your progress and protect you. The leopard is a bit more lenient when it comes to safety than we are,” he said, as if slightly embarrassed.

A silence hung over the small group. Ragli and the toad remained locked in a staring contest and Rastadum gazed into the fire.

“If you think your grandfather didn’t care, Stripe, he really did. This was his way of letting you see the world, the universe etcetera. Whether you step out and become part of it or if you don’t is all up to you. He was not the bullying kind. He gave your father the same choice.”

“Why couldn’t he have done it with me?” said Stripe with longing in his voice.

“He would’ve loved to with you and your sister when you were both a bit older, but time ran out on him and so it was never to be. Now don’t panic, you have plenty of time to make your decision. We shall keep things running with Maelstrom as a representative of Nonsolus. You go back home and rest and think and ask and learn. And if you want to try this world out again, it will be waiting for you in the summer. You can only take on the position when you’re older anyway. For now, it’s time to go home.”

**ACROSS THE FURRY SEA**

They took a Zephyr back home. The same Zephyr that Stripe's family had seen on their ride to Leaf's End. It had only been a few days ago but it felt like months to Stripe. The Zephyr passed through the moonlit clouds of the Sunday evening like a ship braving a cotton sea. Stripe rested in the gondola half asleep, the warm feeling of homecoming wrapping around him. The night was fresh and clear and dark blue. A pleasant straw smell was cradled in the cabin and it reminded Stripe of passing out in the car when he was younger after a full day of playing and tumbling in fields and parks.

He had done it. He had done it haphazardly and not quite in the right way – but he had done it. The feeling of achievement and of excitement grew in Stripe the closer he came to Leaf's End where his family would be waiting for him.

Rastadum and Ragli left Stripe at the Long-Short Bridge, giving him a warm travelling cloak for the journey back. It wrapped around Stripe perfectly and made him feel extremely stylish. Each amplified step brought Stripe closer to home. It must have been nearing 10 o'clock but the moon was full and radiant and wondrous.

It took Stripe very little time at all to reach the coast. A boat lay waiting for him. As Stripe neared it a bright lamp turned on automatically as if in response to Stripe.

The boat glided easily into the water at Stripe's touch. He sprang into it before it drifted away and set out to cross the Furry Sea back home.

He had barely put in three strokes across the water when everything fell apart.

A wild scream accompanied by splashing sent a surge of dread up Stripe's spine, followed by the boat jolting and slowing down. Stripe spun round and there, haggard and mangy was Gubblegirth, the ex-bridge keeper, his sharp, skeletal hands dragging the boat back towards him. He looked like a half-drowned sewer rat. His hair was oily and wild, his eyes two cruel stones embedded in a scrunched up grimace of loathing. Stripe stood up preparing for Gubblegirth as the boat hopelessly slid into the shallows. A sudden lurch sent Stripe toppling over the bow and crashing into the water. Stripe could feel the water drenching his cloak and weighing it down, turning him into a clumsy, slow target. Stripe pushed himself up and began to desperately wade through the water with the kind of delayed

reaction usually found in nightmares. Gubblegirth lurched after him passing through the soft sand and dark water with a predatory efficiency.

“Where are your clever ideas now, boy?!” screeched Gubblegirth past sledgehammer sized incisors. He was almost upon Stripe. “Looks like you don’t have an answer to that question,” he spat, stomping on the end of Stripe’s cloak. The weight pulled at Stripe’s neck, knocking him off his feet and into Gubblegirth. Stripe felt sharp claws sink into his shoulders and pull him out of the water. Before he had time to breathe, strong hands slammed him back underneath the surface. Stripe plunged into a blurred darkness, his pulse throbbing between his ears like an unheard Morse alarm. Gubblegirth wrenched Stripe out of the water again.

“Can’t say anything clever with water down your mouth,” hissed Gubblegirth into Stripe’s ears. Stripe desperately sucked in air before being shoved back down into the darkness. His lungs shuddered demanding more oxygen and, as everything began to feel truly desperate, something strange happened. Stripe felt a cool weight nestle against his chest. As Stripe was hauled out of the water again, to both his and Gubblegirth’s surprise a large silvery fish rested in his arms. It was a Wurzlurgle. They both looked at it dumbfoundedly before a Lurzwurgle burst out of its fishy form like a furry missile shot from a scaly rocket launcher. The Lurzwurgle smacked into Gubblegirth’s face and began tearing at him in a volley of speedy swipes while its teeth sank into his snout.

Stripe watched in amazement while his lungs pumped in the fresh night air. He still held the Wurzlurgle skin and realised for perhaps the first time in his whole adventure that he had been armed with something more than his wits. He had never truly been alone. As Gubblegirth tore off his fuzzy assailant he caught the sight of Stripe hauling the fish by its tail back like a cricket bat. Stripe swung with everything left in him, the looseness of the fish’s elastic body adding an extra forceful sling into the mix. The fish skin collided with Gubblegirth’s face, crackling out a comical smack. Stripe swung again, catching Gubblegirth’s jaw and knocking him further back. Stripe went in for a third swing, but Gubblegirth rose to it clawing the fish skin out of Stripe’s grip. Before Gubblegirth could attack Stripe again the Lurzwurgle bit him hard between his shoulder blades, sending him reeling backwards. Stripe hadn’t even reacted when an arrow whistled through the night and thudded into Gubblegirth’s shoulder. The former Gatekeeper screamed out in pain and began to desperately scramble away.

Stripe looked out into the lake and there, standing in a boat and haloed by the moon, was Maelstrom. She lowered her bow and looked at him.

“Dinner’s waiting for you, Stripe,” she said, as if she had just popped into his room with some freshly folded linen. The moon caught her with just enough light for Stripe to make out the subtle curve at the corner of her mouth that marked Maelstrom’s recognizable smile.



“So what did you think of that side of the world?” said Maelstrom as they rowed together.

“It’s pretty big,” said Stripe, managing a smile despite his shock from the attack. Maelstrom gave him a wink. “So you know all about it all then?”

“I should think so,” said Maelstrom. “I was born there after all.” Stripe’s head shot up, his eyes growing wide.

“But that’s another story. I can tell you all about the formation of Nonsolus, the great forgetting and the Viking rebellions,” Stripe grinned at the mention of Vikings again, “and even how Dusk and I first met, but that’s all for another night. Other nights even. Your parents both have their stories too. First you should see the people you love and who love you and eat with them and take a warm bath and then sleep. That kind of sleep when you kick under the blankets because you’re so happy to be in a bed. Then we can trade stories. I’m sure you have plenty to ask. Don’t worry, so do I. Your whole family will be dying to hear about your stories but I tend to find the more questions you have answered the more questions there are.”

Stripe nodded at this. There were still plenty of questions and mysteries to be solved and that was all right. Questions and mysteries are the fuel of life. Stripe looked at the glowing windows of Maelstrom’s home and how their reflections danced on the water like billowing flags.

Before Stripe went back inside he took a moment to look out at the Furry Sea from the pier. He thought of how he and Dusk had stood here together. He thought of how when they had looked out across the water and sky, old Dusk had known what was out there and young Stripe hadn’t. And now he knew too. For the first time since his grandfather had died, Stripe let the tears flow freely. As the salty drops spilled from his eyes they followed the curvature of his smile.

THE END



