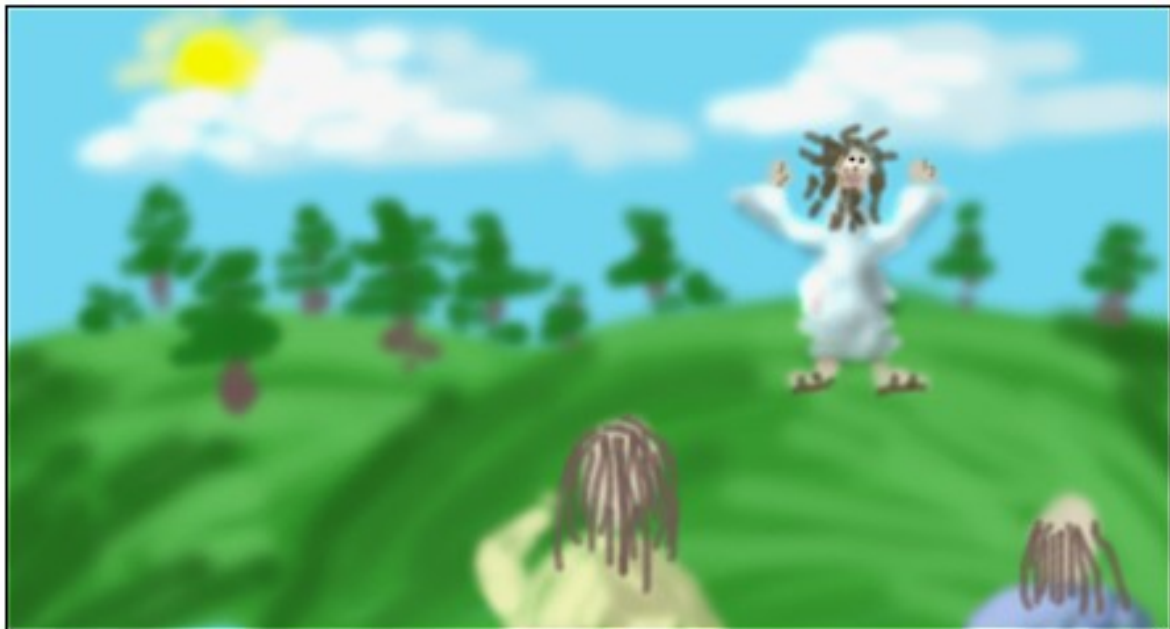


Noel Q. von Schneiffel
Beneath Unwashed
Robes



A Prophet's Autobiography

Fredonia Press

Beneath Unwashed Robes

A Prophet's Autobiography

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Prologue: Awakening

When I woke up, I felt weak. I felt exhausted like never before in my life. Thinking it through, I did not remember anything about my life, so I was unable to judge whether I had felt that exhausted before.

For a long time I just lay there, waiting for the fog that enveloped my mind to slowly dissolve. I seemed to lie somewhere outside, somewhere in the countryside. A brown thicket grew everywhere around me, hindered my sight. Baby squirrels frolicked in it. Somewhere far away, a bird was chirping, endlessly repeating the same single note.

After a while the image became clearer. And I began to notice that I was not lying outside. I was in a bed in what appeared to be a hospital. The monotonous beeping came from a machine next to me. And the brown stuff I was wedged into was not a thicket. It was my own beard. Obviously I had been unconscious for a rather long time.

This revelation shocked me, and I stirred. The baby squirrels shrieked and jumped away in panic. From somewhere outside the thicket I heard a muffled voice: "Are you awake? Sir, have you woken up?"

"Gmmmbpffh", I answered somewhat ambiguously. My speech was hindered by three thick hoses which were jammed into my mouth and obviously penetrated deep into my body. I ripped them out, hardly noticing the pain this caused. The first hose had been pumping air into my lungs. Out of the second hose a clear fluid was dripping - I tasted it and found it sweet and nutritious. The third one actually was no hose, but the outgrown root of a potted plant which someone had put on my bedside table. In my guess of how long I had been asleep, I replaced 'rather long time' with 'very long time'.

Then I heard the metallic sound of scissors, far away at first, then getting closer and closer. The person that belonged to the voice finally managed to separate me from most of my beard, so that I could see his face. He appeared to be some kind of doctor or male nurse. He was wearing a white coat and looked at me with a professional, distanced, yet friendly expression, the kind of gaze that tells a patient he is in good hands. "Good morning, sir", the face said.

With the doctor-guy's help, I slowly rose and finally stood on my own two feet. My legs were trembling from the unusual strain, but they had not much weight to carry, as I deduced from looking at my stick-thin body. I was wearing typical hospital clothes - a long, white, shapeless dress that fell down from my neck to my knees. It had some similarity to a robe, and oddly it felt quite right, as if I had worn something like that for most of my life. What had I been? But, I said to myself, let's start this slowly. Let's start with my own name. If I could remember that, the rest would come in time.

I delved deeply into the chaotic abyss that was my mind, and emerged again with two words. Noel Quickley. I spoke them loudly, and liked the sound of them. "My name is Noel Quickley", I said.

"Yes, Mr. von Schneiffel", said the doctor-guy.

Globs of my former life were creeping out of the abyss. I remembered a trip to a faraway land, a long time ago, a purchase of a minor title of nobility to boost the mundane appearance

of my name. I remembered signing stuff with daring, wide letters: Noel Q. von Schneiffel. I thought about how good it had felt. And I remembered that some of the things I had signed with it had been cheques with astonishing, even ridiculous, numbers on it. Obviously I had been a rich man once.

I staggered through the room. There was a window, but thick blinds were in front of it, so I could not see a thing. "How long... was I..." I managed to say.

"Unconscious?" the doctor-guy said and gave me another everything-is-allright-look. "Exactly one thousand one hundred thirty-seven days. Or three years, one month and ten days. One of the years has been a leap year."

"1137? That is exactly the page count of the Harper-Collins edition of The Lord of the Rings", I heard myself saying. I frowned. "I'm fairly sure that means something", I added.

"Possible", the doctor-guy said and smiled. "I see you have not forgotten everything."

There was a mirror in the corner of the room, and I went over and stared at my own face. I was a middle-aged man, maybe in my late thirties or early forties. I was tall and haggard, with sharp facial features and a long, thin nose. The remnants of my hair and beard gave me a certain wild, even menacing appearance, but this too looked natural, the way it should be. I looked very much like one of these stereotypical prophet guys who stood at the corner of a street and yelled stuff like: "Repent, the end is near".

I looked at my watch, which had stopped. A tiny spider had made its home in it. The bigger clock on the wall told me that it was half past ten. I guessed that meant AM, because the doctor had wished me a good morning. "Why the blinds in front of the window?" I asked. "Please open them."

"It's for your own protection", answered the white-coated guy. "You might want to wait a bit longer with that. You have just woken up from three years of coma, and the sight might not be... pleasant for you."

"I insist on it, good sir", I proclaimed, and the doctor sighed and pulled up the blinds. Bright sunlight flooded through the window, and I had to close my eyes for a moment. When I had adapted to the light, I looked out and saw two dozens of people who had gathered below my window. I was far above them, probably on the third or fourth floor, but I could clearly see the angry expressions on their faces and read the signs they were carrying. "Death to the false prophet", one of it read. "Schneiffel, you have ruined my life", I deciphered on another one.

"Persistent, aren't they?" the doctor said. "A year ago, there had been regularly more than fifty people, but the frenzy has subsided a bit since then."

"I should be glad about it, I guess", I murmured. The small crowd noticed me, and cries of anger erupted. Foodstuff flew through the air and smashed against the walls of the hospital. An overripe tomato hit the wall right next to the window, and drops of its red juice stained the glass. I retreated from the window. "What have I done to these people?" I whispered to myself, feeling rather miserable.

But the scene must have triggered something, for suddenly other pictures emerged to the

surface of my mind. Pictures of war and destruction. I stood in front of a huge crowd, hundreds, no, thousands of people. They were staring up to me in ecstasy and blind obedience. Some were carrying rifles, others pitchforks. Some held up books as if they were some sort of holy talisman. They had gathered from everywhere for the last, desperate battle, the battle to defend their prophet, their guiding light, their master. Me. Their faces showed all colours that could be found on Earth - white, yellow, brown, green and blue with little pink dots. Some were not human. I think I even remembered even two or three large walking jellyfish amongst them, and I briefly wondered how they could breathe on land, but there was no time to dwell on such minutiae. And then, before my inner eye, I saw it all go down in chaos and flames. Fighter jets came screaming from the skies. Soldiers stormed between my followers. Machine-guns mowed them down. Explosions shook the ground, and the walls of my temple tumbled down. Everyone was fighting against everyone. And then I remembered the one face I wanted to see the least, a short guy with a greenish face and fangs, just like the orcs in my Tolkien books. "Come", he shouted over the armageddon that unfolded around me. "Get out of here, you idiot! Over here, if you want to survive!" But just in this moment, a large wooden bar fell from the roof and smashed against my head, and everything went black, and the thread of my reminiscence came to an abrupt end.

Back in the hospital, my legs did not want to carry me any longer. I stumbled back to my bed and fell down on it. In despair, I buried my face in my hands. I was far from remembering anything, but I knew enough by now to at least patch together the rough framework of what had happened.

I was a man with a cause. A prophet on a mission. I had set out to fulfill some kind of glorious task, to bring enlightenment and the truth to everyone who wanted to listen. I had forgotten what exactly my message was, all that remained was a diffuse feeling it had something to do with Tolkien. At least at the beginning, before it had acquired a life of its own. I had been a cult leader, a religious figure, a man who had polarized the masses. And then it obviously had all gotten a bit out of hand. I had gambled for something big - and apparently I had lost.

The doctor came over and patted my shoulder. "There, there, Mr. von Schneiffel", he said, attempting to cheer me up. "It isn't all that bad, actually. I'll bring you something to eat now, something light to get your stomach used to solid food again. And I bet it'll look all brighter after that."

"Call me Quickley, please", I said gloomily. "If I assume correctly, then the days of von Schneiffel are over. Let me guess - I am some sort of prisoner, am I not?"

The doctor grimaced like one who has to deliver an unpleasant message. "I'm afraid yes, sort of", he said. "You've been charged with a number of crimes, such as stirring public unrest, attempting to overthrow some minor governments, running around naked and so on. Nothing really bad, but some rather annoying stuff. I'm afraid I cannot allow you to leave this hospital until these charges are settled."

I nodded sadly. The doctor quit, and a few minutes later he returned with some rather stale yoghurt. I gobbled it up hungrily. My stomach protested, but I was able to keep the food in. The doctor put a pen and a notepad on my bedside table. "Maybe it'll help your memory if you try to write some stuff down, Mr. von Sch... Quickley", the doctor said.

"Thank you", I answered weakly, and the doctor left the room again.

I remained, alone with my thoughts. Idly I flipped through the pages of the notepad. I noticed that someone had scribbled a few words on the last sheet. "Don't despair", it read. "You've still got a few friends out there." I smiled and gripped the pen. Something was engraved on its side, in a different handwriting. "But not many", it read, and my smile froze. Then it was resurrected in the form of an evil grin when I noticed the writing under the yoghurt bowl, smeared there with chocolate sauce, in a writing resembling the first message. It read: "Don't worry, Master, I've killed the fool who wrote onto your pen."

But then I took a deep breath. It was useless, I said to myself. My days as a prophet were over. I had the overwhelming desire to leave them behind me, to be nothing but a simple man again, the guy I must have been at some time in a distant past. Slowly I licked the sweet chocolate sauce from the bowl, until nothing was left but blank porcelain. It felt like I eradicated a part of my past. Then I took up the pen and began to jot down notes about my life, short ones at first, but soon becoming more colourful and coherent, as my memory gradually returned.

1: Discovery

Again and again, I meet people who do not believe that Tolkien's writings are real. "Fantasy" they name them and the entire genre. They do not believe that his strange creatures really exist - all these orcs, ents, hobbits and balrogs. What a ridiculous claim! No, dear reader, let me assure you that they do live here, right among us. Most of them disguise themselves to prevent public uproar, for we narrow-minded humans are too often very eager to distrust, point fingers at, even hate, things and beings which are different.

Most of these creatures have developed unique techniques to blend into our modern society. Hobbits shave their feet and wear plateau shoes. Ents love to glue paper leaves to themselves and stand around motionless, so that they are mistaken for trees. And orcs usually put on latex masks to pose as ordinary people. Over the centuries, they have perfected this art. Someone once slipped me a list of orc females who did such wonders with makeup that they were even able to enter, and win, human Miss World contests. I am not at liberty to give away names here, let me just say that you usually can figure it out, once you know what you are looking for. Very occasionally orcs choose to step into the spotlight unmasked, and win the Eurovision song contest for Finland.

My life began in the late sixties of the last century, in a medium-sized city in the far north, wedged between a nuclear power plant and an uranium reprocessing plant. Here, most orcs went to the streets without masks; when asked about their greenish skin and odd faces, they usually blamed it on the radiation. I can say without doubt that in these times, after the local mining industry had gone downhill, a substantial percentage of the population made a living from dragging the national nuclear industry to court for "genetic mutations".

However, my parents were doubtless human. I was born as the only child of Mrs. Arwen Sue Lembasmeyker, a simple shop assistant, and Mr. Very Quickley, who filled out forms behind a desk in a minor administration building. I never got to know my father's parents, because he

could never forgive them the pun with his name. When I was born, my parents were very concerned to give me a completely normal-sounding name, to spare me the humiliation and bullying my father had to endure in school. So they named me Noeel, to make clear to anyone that I, even if my family name was sounding funny, at least was not an eel. I guess it must have worked, for nobody ever accidentally killed and ate me. However, the constant misspelling of my name annoyed me so much that I finally bowed to the pressure and dropped the second 'e'. Of course, this in turn gave rise to a wealth of Father Christmas jokes - but let me not get ahead of myself.

My first blurred memory goes back to the moment when I, still not more than a toddler, surprised my parents with my first word. I had not started to speak for a long time, maybe because even then I had a certain sense for drama. The first word is a landmark in the development of a child, something that might well shape his future. For is not speech an awe-inspiring tool, is it not truly what makes us human, what distinguishes us from the mindless animals around us? The first word is a much too important step to waste it on such mundane things as "mama" or "gaga". So I waited until I had sufficient control over my tongue and jaws, and just as my parents prepared to take me to the doctor to test me for developmental delays, I pointed at their Tolkien bookshelf and spoke the word "Enlightenment". I must admit that I probably just remember this scene for the following humiliation, when I, still euphoric about my success, lost control over my lower body and loudly filled my diapers. But I guess in this moment I had made the first step on my road to become a prophet, the founder of a religion. All my life I have since teetered on the narrow path between enlightenment and bullshit.

From earliest childhood on my best friend was an orc named Bagronk, or Baggy as everyone called him. He was the same age as I, and no doubt a highly intelligent boy, though he could also be a mischievous brat whenever his heritage broke through. His first word had been "crap", but this is how about eighty percent of orc toddlers start, so I doubt it has a deeper meaning.

We both must have been about thirteen or fourteen when we first discovered computers. Until then, we had been just normal adolescents who did all the normal things. We kicked pigeons around, set dustbins on fire and whistled after girls. At least that was what I did. Baggy preferred to kick girls around, set pigeons on fire and whistle after dustbins. I never understood what he liked about dustbins, but I shrugged it off as something orcs do.

I remember the day when Baggy's parents bought their first computer. Of course, in this time the word "computer" meant something that filled half a room, worked with the speed of a well-oiled glacier and was insanely expensive. But up here, they became normalcy earlier than in most other areas, because a row of victorious cases against the nuclear industry had brought respectable riches to the town. So, one day, I visited Baggy and found him in front of a shining, ominously humming, occasionally beeping thing. He was kneeling on the floor, scissors in his hand, and with great concentration he was poking small holes into a long strip of toilet paper.

"Hey, Bags", I greeted my friend. "What's all that?" I asked and pointed at the paper. "And that?" I added and pointed at the large pile of wood in the corner. "And that?" I attached and pointed in the direction of a small carton with something that looked suspiciously like burnt pigeon. "And how does this thing work?" I finally progressed to the most important question, waving at the huge source of shinyness, hummingness and beepery.

"Hiyas Noeel", said Baggy, not looking up from his work. "Have some chicken wings. Cool machine, eh? Three hundred hertz, two kilobyte of memory and a six-kilobyte hard disk. Whatever a kilobyte is. I'm just writing a punch card for it."

"Wow... punch card", I said. "That's, like, totally high-end tech, isn't it? But what about the wood?"

"Well", said Baggy and stood up, "you insert the wood here." He patted a large iron oven with a boiler on top of it. "The fire heats the water, producing steam, which powers the computer. That's definitely *not* high-end tech, I admit. But it's better this way. Electricity's being unreliable again."

"Yeah", I said and nodded. "They must be checking the power plant for radiation leaks again. Who dragged them to court this time?"

"Mrs. Dreggentickler from next door", Baggy said.

"The old Dreggentickler?" I exclaimed. "She's not even an orc!"

"Yep", Baggy said and shrugged, "but she *does* have three eyes. Anyway, this punch card should make the computer connect to the Arpanet. Imagine that - people all over the world connected in a single network. Dozens, no, hundreds of different websites. And we're gonna visit them all!"

I stared at Baggy, my mouth open. "Wow", I said, completely overwhelmed.

Then Baggy showed me how to fire up the boiler, and by the time I had a nice fire burning and the metal pipes bulged from super-heated steam, he had finished his punch card. Carefully he inserted one end into a slit, much humming and beeping ensued, and after calculating for about thirty minutes, a row of text started to scroll over a tiny screen. "There", Baggy said, satisfied. "We're logged in."

"Then let me put another log in", I said, pointing at the oven. We laughed heartily about the bad pun. We were, after all, thirteen years old.

Baggy pushed the toilet paper deeper in. "We're in the discussion groups section now", he said. "Look." A list of names crawled over the screen. The items had names like alt.fan.beatles, rec.arts.pot-smoking and alt.ronald.reagan.for.president. "All these are groups for us to enter."

"Why would anybody want to smoke a pot?" I asked, frowning. This was an age when young people like me were not yet completely corrupted. But then, suddenly, something gripped my attention. "Wait, hold", I said. "Hold a sec. Can you make that scroll back?"

"Sure can", said Baggy and pulled the toilet paper out a centimeter or two. The evasive letters returned to the screen: alt.fan.tolkien.

"A group for Tolkien!" I said in an excited tone. "Let's visit that!" Baggy nodded, fetched a weird-looking typewriter - he called it a "keyboard" - and connected it to the computer.

We both had been, of course, big fans of Tolkien ever since we grew tall enough to reach up to my parents' bookshelf. We had been playing "Middle-earth" all the time, making small rings from golden pipe cleaner and chasing each other as "Frodo" and "Sauron", or having sword-fights with sticks and branches. But our knowledge of these writings was, of course, superficial and juvenile. We thought the books were fun, and hardly recognized their artistic value. So when the text of this group's latest discussion threads started to float over the screen, my first sensation was that I felt completely overwhelmed.

In the unlikely case that you are not familiar with the concept of a newsgroup, imagine a virtual pinwand where everyone can go and attach a message. You need a basic account to participate, but it is not a closed group - there are no moderators who have to approve or reject new members. It all happens in the public - everyone else can read your message and post answers to it. A row of answers to one original post is called a thread, and so the discussion unfolds. Threads can branch, topics can change, and though such an open group is of course always vulnerable to evil attackers baiting the members into discussions nobody wants, the results are mostly interesting. In these times, before blogs and web forums flooded the net with their colourful graphics and confusing interfaces, newsgroups were the place to go if you wanted online discussions.

This group was a particularly active one, and we delved right in. Line after line, page after page, the discussions unfolded before our eyes. Books were quoted. Arguments were exchanged, arguments of a depth that scared me. People yelled at each other, became mortal enemies over minute matters and became friends again. Jokes were made which I didn't get. Puns prattled on our heads like rain from a heavy summer thunderstorm. When, after what seemed like eternity, Arpanet broke down and the connection was abruptly severed, I felt like I was in a dream. Or rather, like my entire life had been a dream, a sheltered existence inside a soap bubble, and for the first time I had opened my eyes and took a look at the real world, which was much bigger than I had always thought. All I needed was to return to the group, to read and learn, to participate in the discussions, and the soap bubble would burst, and I would be free.

And so we did.

Once we stepped out of the shadow and participated in the discussions, the group `alt.fan.tolkien` welcomed us warmly. The long-time members listened to our immature questions and answered them, and soon we too had something to say even in the most heated argument. During the next few months, we changed. Our behaviour became less childlike. Our horizon widened. Our knowledge and wisdom grew, for in this group not only Tolkien was discussed, everything had its place there, from politics to cooking recipes. Of course our parents noticed, and they were glad about the change. That's puberty, they said to themselves. They're growing up. The dustbins of the town uttered a collective sigh of relief.

And one day I awoke in my bed, looked around my room decorated with 70es rock star posters, and a glorious idea started to form in my head. For long it had bugged me that discussions, once they scrolled off Baggy's screen, were lost, at least practically. Discussion threads were archived, but these archives were a mess to navigate through if all you have is three hundred hertz and a typewriter. What we needed was a small, easily accessible text file where the most common problems were addressed and solved. What we needed were condensed answers to the most Frequently Asked Questions. What we needed was a FAQ.

And we were going to write it.

Initially Baggy was sceptical about the idea. "This will take a long time", he said, once I described my plans to him. "Are you sure we'll be able to do it, Noeel? Shouldn't we, like, get out more and stuff?" He swung his leg around. "I haven't kicked a girl in ages. I'm getting rusty."

"But, Bags", I said, "imagine what it'll be like when we're done! A big file, answering every question. Time-saving and efficient. Published and copied all over Arpanet. We'll be famous. They'll sing us praises in no time!"

I could see a shimmer of excitement in Baggy's eyes. Quick fame was something he always had been interested in, while I, of course, have always been motivated by the desire of truth and clarity alone. "We could sure try it", Baggy said.

"Good!" I answered. "Then let's start. Everyone searches the archives for answers to a list of questions, and then we all condense it into short paragraphs. Let's say... let's begin with one simple question for each of us. What do you think?"

Baggy nodded. "Okay, then I will start with the question: Why did the Nazgul run away at Weathertop, when Frodo was already wounded and weakened and the One Ring was there for taking?" he said. "That has always driven me nuts. And you?"

I thought for a moment. "I choose: Is 'Lord of the Rings' a Catholic allegory?" I decided. "That one shouldn't be too hard. Or controversial."

Baggy rubbed his hands. "Okay, then let's find us some serious wood", he said. "We'll need a lot of steam tonight. A lot."

For much of the following three months, my and Baggy's lives revolved mostly around our new project. With painstaking accuracy we searched every post in the entire archive, answered every question we could imagine. We did not yet tell anyone in alt.fan.tolkien what we were doing - we intended it to be a surprise. We wanted to present them the thing ready and polished. Soon enough we had to buy an additional harddisk to store all that data, then a third one. From today's viewpoint I doubt that what we wrote was very *good* - we were still hardly more than kids, and others had been discussing these matters for years, maybe even decades. Additionally, in this time, some books by Christopher Tolkien, the youngest son of the Great Man, had not yet been published, namely the "History of Middle-Earth" series. A series in which he went through the countless heaps of notepads, sheets and paper shreds his father had left behind, and revealed a wealth of hitherto hidden information. So I guess today our FAQ would be only of nostalgic value. But at this time, we were honestly convinced that we were up to something big.

And so it was a terrible blow for both of us when the catastrophe happened.

I had a girlfriend at this time, someone from the neighbourhood, roughly my age. Her name

was Bombadillia Ryngsmith. She had long brown pigtails, chubby cheeks and the cutest smile I had ever seen. Bombie was my first great love, and I was having my head utterly in the clouds. Not that I ever considered giving up the FAQ, to spend more time with her. That was out of the question. But still I was somewhat behind my schedule. And I think Baggy was slightly jealous of having to share me with her.

At this particular day I was visiting Baggy to quickly check what was new on alt.fan.tolkien, and I had brought Bombadillia along. While we waited for the Arpanet connection to be established, Bombadillia leaned against the warm oven and eyed us with a bored expression. "When's that computer thing finally ready, Eelie?" she lamented. "I thought we were going to the cinema tonight. You promised."

I bit my lips. She told the truth, and I wanted to go there with her - even if we mostly just held hands. This was a time when young people like me were not yet completely corrupted. Still, I would not have missed it for anything else. "We will, sweetie", I said. "We will immediately when we've checked our group. There is a discussion we have to enter, you know. A political thread. We can't wait with that. What if Carter frees the Iranian hostages before we have weighed in? They will all have a false analysis of these events!"

"Besides, the computer should be ready any minute now", Baggy came to my help. He held a small box with some dead animal under Bombadillia's nose. "While you wait, care for some roasted pigeo... I mean pig?"

Bombadillia looked at the box and frowned. "This must be a mini-pig", she said. "A winged one. Anyway. I don't wanna miss the start of the movies again and-"

A series of beeps from the computer interrupted her. "Aha!" yelled Baggy triumphantly. "We're connected! Quick, put some wood on the fire. We need every milliamperere we can get for that monster of a thread!"

I grabbed a heap of dry branches from the corner. "Bombie, move aside, please", I said. My girlfriend moved away a few centimeters from the oven door, so that I could open it to throw the firewood in.

What happened then I could only analyze afterwards. Both Bombadillia and I were insecure teenagers, very concerned about ourselves and how we looked - and smelled - to each other. So probably both of us were severely overdoing it with the deodorant and the perfume. The combined fumes of our bodies must have reached a critical point when we stood next to each other, and as soon as I opened the oven door, a jet of flames shot out of it, and a massive combustion occurred between us. It was over in a split second and did not do me much harm - but it set Bombadillia's pigtails on fire.

She uttered an unarticulated cry and lept back. "Help!" she yelled. "Help! Put it out! Put it out!" But I only could stand there, frozen in shock, and not take any action. Bombadillia, in total panic, stumbled backwards and fell over the typewriter, and sparks from her pigtails showered the entire room. The toilet paper of the punch card caught fire first, and in a single second the flames crept along it and into the computer. The smell of burning plastic seeped out of the main fan and drowned the pleasant smell I and my girlfriend had been spreading.

"Put it ouuut!" screamed Bombadillia, and finally I could move. I ripped off my sweater and

slapped her pigtails with it, and surprisingly I managed to smother the flames. But by now thick black smoke was emerging from every slit of the computer. The smoke surrounded me, and I coughed violently.

Fleeing from the smoke, we all three stumbled out of the room. "Mum! Dad! Help!" yelled Baggy, completely shedding the brittle dignity of a teenager. "Fire!"

"The FAQ!" I shouted. "Save the FAQ!"

"Whatever you're planning to do, it's too late!" answered Bombadillia and pointed at the computer. Flames were bursting out of it.

"Perhaps not!" gasped Baggy and coughed. "The data is all over the haddisks. They're screwed in, and by the time I've found a screwdriver, they're toast. But if we could print it out somehow-"

"Noeel! No!" shouted Bombadillia. But I had already turned my back on them and returned into the computer room. I held my breath and waded through the thick smoke. The heat was unbearable. Finally I found the typewriter. The keys were smouldering hot and burned my fingers when I typed the command to print the file. We had installed a printer some weeks ago, to facilitate our archive sweeps, but we had never made a written backup of our own work. Who can foresee something like this? The device was a large, clumsy needle printer, and with a screeching sound it came to life. A sheet of paper was slowly pushed out - too slowly. I ripped it out, while my head was starting to spin from the toxic smoke, but sparks had already landed on it. The metal parts of the printer started to glow and the plastic parts melted, and the second page got stuck as the printer died, and the first page of our FAQ burned away in my hands. I did not let go. I held the page until the end, until the flames ate into my flesh, and the despair in my mind drowned the physical pain. Then I felt Baggy's hand on my arm, pulling me out of the smoke. In front of the computer room I collapsed. I knelt on the floor and sobbed, my red and swollen hands still clutched around the ashes that had been the work of months. Bombadillia tried to comfort me. "It's only paper, Noeel", she repeated again and again. "It's only paper."

Baggy and Bombadillia led me into the bathroom and treated my hands with cold water, and I cried until Baggy's parents arrived with a fire extinguisher and smothered the fire with a thick layer of foam, a shroud over the black, deformed remnants of Baggy's first computer.

In the present, I dropped the notepad and the pen and looked at my hands. Faint scars were still visible, even after more than twenty years. In my past, I had often traced these faded lines with a pencil, wondering whether a word would appear, something that had magically been transferred from the burning sheet to my palms. I liked the idea that my work had not been entirely in vain. But that was just wishful thinking.

The doctor came back. "Good evening, Mr. Quickley", he said. Onto my bedside table he put a plate with some soft bread, a bowl of something mushy and healthy-looking, and a small muffin of some sort. "Your dinner", he said unnecessarily.

"Thank you, doctor", I answered gloomily.

"Is your memory coming back?" he inquired.

"Partly", I said.

"Good, good. Don't press it", said the doctor. "The more you relax, the quicker it will come. You should eat this now and then try to get some rest. Your body is not used to long uptimes yet. I leave you now; I will be back in the morning. If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to ring the bell and call the night nurse. Maybe you would like something to read, something light to distract your mind, so that you can sleep better? A magazine perhaps?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you, sir", I said. "Or wait... Maybe you could get me a copy of Lord of the Rings. Or anything else by Tolkien. I have read a few pages of his works before bedtime all my life, ever since my thirteenth year."

"I'll see to it at once", the doctor assured me. "Good night, Mr. Quickley."

"Good night", I said, and the doctor disappeared again. Before I ate, I searched the dinner for hidden messages, but I found none. A nurse brought me a copy of the Silmarillion, and I lay down and tried to read a few pages from the Lay of Leithian, one of my favourite Tolkien legends. I knew it by heart, of course, but just seeing the words in print had always given me great comfort. Not today, though. The letters danced in front of my eyes and refused to form meaningful sentences. The book did not speak to me anymore. It was like re-reading something that you liked in your childhood, but have outgrown now, and no matter how hard you try, you cannot recall the feeling of awe that you remember from long ago.

In a very dark mood I lay down to sleep. What has become of Baggy, I wondered. No, I knew - it had been him in the chronologically last scene I remembered, the scene in my temple. Why had I felt no joy in seeing him then? What had happened between us to break that friendship? And, by the way, what had happened to Bombadillia?

Before I could find any answer to these questions, I fell asleep.

2: Adolescence

"Well, Noeel", my father said, "how do you want to make a living?"

I sighed. It was not the first time the question had come up. And in the past few months, my father's face had become sterner and sterner when he repeated it. And indeed the question was becoming more and more urgent. I was seventeen, I had dropped out of school and was not exactly doing anything to ensure myself a future.

The burning of the FAQ had proven to be some kind of turning-point in my young life. I had never written anything like that again, though I had often tried. But somehow I could not get

anything done. I was grumpy and short-tempered. My parents had even dragged me to a psychologist once to find out what was wrong with me. He diagnosed me with a long Latin name and gave me pills. I sold the pills in the schoolyard and bought a Tolkien book from the money. I felt as if I was waiting for something big, something decisive to happen, a sudden twist of fate. It was a romantic dream. Unfortunately it refused to come true.

My father was, sadly, not a very romantic person. "Well, you can't expect me and your mom to feed you through all life", he bellowed beneath his proud moustache. "You have to learn something."

"I want to be a Tolkien scholar", I answered. "I want to read and write about this wonderful author. There is so much new material coming up right now. Christopher Tolkien has just published the 'Book of Lost Tales', part two, and it totally changes some things we had taken for granted about Middle-

"-And how will that fill your belly?" my father interrupted. "Nothing against a hobby, but a man needs a job. And that are two different things. I have been filling out forms for thirty years now. Do you think that was what I *wanted* to do? Of course not! But I grinded my teeth and did it anyway, and this is how I was able to buy this house for you and your mother. And sometimes I just wish I would get a *little* thankfulness back from you."

I rolled my eyes. "Dad, you're building a strawman", I said. "I never said I didn't respect you. It's just that I haven't decided yet what I will do, see?"

"You've been telling me that for months now", my father snorted.

"Well, yes", I replied, "it's a decision for a lifetime, isn't it? I can't just start something and later discover it isn't the right thing for me. Besides, if you just give me another month or two, I will write an essay about how Galadriel-

"Enough of that now!" my father exploded. "Noel, if you're not gonna do anything, I'll do it for you. I will talk to an old friend of mine. He's a salesman for traffic lights, and he sometimes takes apprentices. It's a good job, and a safe one. People will always need traffic lights."

"But I don't want to be a salesman", I protested. "You can't just decide this over my head. I'm not a child anymore!"

"Exactly my point", my father said, with an expression that made it very clear the discussion was over. I turned around angrily and left the room. "Where are you going?" my father called after me.

"To Baggy", I replied, and it was the truth.

I found Baggy behind his computer. A new one, still miles away from our modern machines, but definitively a big step forward. He was playing a game, in which he was a little round

thing chased by several square things.

"Oh, dammit", Baggy said as his round thing was cornered and eaten, then he looked up . "Hi, Noel", he said. "Wanna play a round?"

"Not in the mood", I said and told him of my father's plans.

"Ouch", Baggy said when I had finished. "What are you gonna do now?"

"Listen, Bags", I said. "I have no intention at all to become a salesman. No. We have to get back to work. We have to finish what we started."

"What are you talking about?" asked Baggy, frowning.

"The FAQ!" I urged him. "We need to write it. Now. If we work night and day, we will be able to finish it in two, maybe three weeks."

"But why?" asked Baggy. "Why the sudden hurry?"

"Because we have to sell it!" I exclaimed in distress. "Find a publisher. Print it. Put it up for sale. I have to show my father that I can make money from Tolkien. I have to prove to him that scholarship pays. If we fail, I'm gonna be a salesman for the rest of my life!"

Baggy fell silent. He was still in school, right on course to his final exam. He was not a very motivated student, he seldom did more than absolutely necessary, but he did not do less either. Apparently, the fire had not changed his life as it had mine. He still did visit alt.fan.tolkien with me, but I had noticed a certain shallowness in his contributions, an unwillingness to delve deeply into an analysis. Maybe he was getting bored. Or maybe I had simply surpassed him in skill and knowledge. What he wrote for the group reminded me of the work he did for school: adequate, but hardly brilliant.

"Please, Bags", I begged. "I can't do it alone. I don't have enough time. You must help me!"

I could see the emotions in Baggy's face. I could see the struggle between his desire to help me, to aid his best friend in the moment of emergency, and his inborn laziness and sluggishness. Finally he spoke. "I can't do that, Noel", he said with a soft voice. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm not that... fascinated with Tolkien anymore."

"What kind of idiocy is this?" I asked, utterly confused. "How can one be not fascinated by him?"

"Don't get me wrong, I still like his books", Baggy said. "But isn't there more to life than Tolkien?"

I sighed and said: "If you're in love, then say so without ado." For that I would have forgiven him. I remembered the good times I had with Bombadilla - of course we had long grown out of our relationship - and I still knew how love could twist a teenager's mind, making him take seemingly unreasonable decisions.

Baggy looked puzzled. "Love? Oh, no. That's not it. I have, if you need to know, developed

an interest in the writings of Marx. You know, communism, revolution, the whole stuff. Very interesting. I want to read more of him, and you know, his books are much more complicated to read than-

I could not believe my ears. "That is it?" I exploded. "You're letting me down - me, your friend - for some outdated ideology?"

"Noeel, please", Baggy said with a pained expression. "It's much more complicated. Try to understand!"

In this second, I felt something dying inside of me. Something disappeared and left nothing but a hard, cold lump in my stomach. "There's nothing to understand", I said and was frightened by the icy sound of my own voice. "If that is what you want, then so be it. You go back to your Marx, and I go and do whatever my father asks me to. From this moment, our friendship is over. Gone. Finished."

I turned around and stormed out of the house. "Noeel, wait!" Baggy shouted, with a voice as if he was close to tears, but I did not stop. I slammed the door behind me and walked back home. I kept my word and did not speak to Baggy anymore for two full years.

It turned out the old friend of my father really needed an apprentice, and so I started my training as a traffic light salesman. I must admit that, after I had been over the initial shock of getting up early every morning, it really was not as bad as I thought.

My foreman, the old friend of my father, was an elderly guy named Fred Sylmarillenfaycker. Despite the name, which hinted at old Elvish nobility, he was the most dwarvish-looking man I've ever met. His beard was grey and of great length, woven into complex patterns. I have no idea how much time he spent daily with beard care, but I bet it must have been a lot of work. Mr. Syl, as I called him, spoke with a very grave, low voice. When he laughed, it sounded like an old wooden door opening for the first time in centuries. I would have joked that Mr. Syl had even fewer hertz than Baggy's first computer, but he would not have gotten the joke, for he was a very old-fashioned guy who did not care about modern technology. But, below his grumpy and menacing hull, Mr. Syl was a very kind and friendly man. He taught me much, and I think fondly of him today.

And I repaid the friendliness. I discovered I had a natural talent for selling stuff, and as soon as I had learned the basic techniques, I became really good. Soon I knew everything about traffic lights. I knew which shades of red light went best with which shapes of the small men on pedestrian traffic lights. I knew the ideal length of the light periods for every type of three-way, four-way and five-way crossing, to ensure a seamless traffic flow. And I learned to let my left eye glow red and my right one green, a very effective trick to impress customers.

Soon I started experimenting with new thoughts. Instead of standing around at one street corner all day, hoping that someone passing by would buy my stuff, I stayed in my foreman's storehouse and listened to the radio. Whenever I heard of an accident somewhere in the town, I packed my cart loaded with blinking traffic lights and ran to the site of its occurrence. And

there were many accidents in this town, mostly because of all the aggressive orcs. While the people were still agonizing about the bumps in their precious cars and the blood was still warm on the sidewalk, I explained to them with loud voice that this accident would never have happened with proper traffic lights installed. And almost every time I sold a complete set. When the winter took the town in its icy grip, when the white shroud of snow covered the blood stains on the city's crossings, I had a small marketing idea. I took one or two dozens of streetlights and hung them on a pine which conveniently stood just outside the storehouse. The pine, glowing in a soft light, soon became the wonder of the street and the talk of the neighbourhood. I had invented the christmas tree.

I spent two years as Mr. Syl's apprentice, and I have to stress once again that all I learned from him was put to good use later when I became a prophet. There really is hardly a difference between selling a traffic light and handing out enlightenment. Both are designed to guide mankind safely through the perils of life.

It is hardly surprising that I, still an impressionable teenager, idolized the old Syl and wanted to be just like him. So, for the first time in my life, I let my beard grow. Of course the facial hair I produced could not even approach the mass and dignity of the old man's one, but still after two years I started to look somewhat like these Taliban guys you see so often on TV nowadays.

The second winter fell upon the town, and there came an evening when I and Mr. Syl were sitting in the storeroom, listening to the radio and having a cup of tea. We did this quite regularly now. On these days Mr. Syl often uttered sayings of great knowledge and deep wisdom.

"This tea", grumbled Mr. Syl slowly, "is very hot." It was not one of these days.

"I agree", I said nonetheless and lifted the cup to my mouth. But suddenly, the voice from the radio gripped my attention.

"Good evening, and welcome to our Wacko of the Week show!" it said. *"Today we feature a young guy who has a unique opinion about the long-dead author of fairy tales, J.R.R. Tolkien. His-*

"I would not say my opinion is unique", another voice interrupted him. A voice I recognized instantaneously, even though I had not heard it for a long time. "Bagronk?" I gasped.

"His name is Elvis Presley", the announcer started again. *"Good evening, Mr. Presley. How was it up there with the aliens?"*

"Um... boring", said Baggy's voice. *"Anyhow, my opinion is not unique. In fact, as a Marxist, I am convinced that with the rising level of class struggle, millions of people will start to see the truth and agree with me."*

Mr. Syl looked at me sharply. "You know Elvis?" he asked with a surprised voice. Then he looked at the radio sharply. "The aliens have converted Elvis... to a Marxist?" he asked with an even more surprised voice.

"The Elvis one always was Bags' favourite latex mask", I explained.

Baggy's voice continued. *"I think Tolkien had some thoughts that can only be described as racist", it said. Take, for example, his description of orcs. They are slandered and depicted as somewhat lower beings. Tolkien was an evil man, filled with rage and hatred towards what he saw as 'lower races'..."*

In that style it continued. I will not bore you, dear reader, with the full transcript. Let me just say that Baggy had adapted a style he since has perfected: an utterly pompous and annoying way to speak, patching holes in his knowledge with half-truths and amateurish assumptions. It was painful to hear - and even more painful was, of course, how he slandered every single book of Tolkien, every book that had given us so much joy as kids. What had driven Baggy so mad in this short time I cannot say. But in this hour I lost all hope that we two could be reconciled again. From now, we would be mortal enemies. This I swore silently, while Baggy heaped abuse on Tolkien until the announcer finally cut him off. "That was our Wacko of the Week", he said cheerfully, as if one of the nastiest desecrations of history had not just taken place in his office. "Tune in next time, when we'll have a man who runs around with cucumbers sticking in his nostrils!"

Slowly I rose from my chair, a determined look on my face. "He will pay for that", I hissed. "I'll take a week or two of vacation, Mr. Syl. I will find Bagronk and make him retract these statements. I will not rest until Tolkien has been avenged!"

"If you must", grumbled Mr. Syl. "But bring me an autograph of Elvis, while you're at it."

I grinded my teeth and left.

"Mr. Quickley?" the nurse asked when I put my pen down. It was the second day after my awakening in the hospital. "There is a visitor for you. A Mister-" She finished the sentence with an unrecognizable cluster of consonants, like someone who tries to cough while he is eating cornflakes.

"Who?" I asked and frowned.

"A Mister-", the nurse said and repeated the sound. Then she collapsed. A paramedic rushed in, diagnosed her with acute larynx knots and carried her away.

My visitor, the man with the dangerous name, walked in. He was older now, of course. His hair showed streaks of grey, and his belly had expanded a little. But the face was still the same shade of green, and I recognized him immediately. I stiffened. What did my worst enemy want from me? Did he come to resume our old struggle? Was he here to gloat over my weakened state? "Hello Baggy", I said, trying to sound as relaxed as possible.

Baggy smiled. "I have another name these days", he said softly. "Don't you remember? I call myself Bqggz now."

"Bwg... bgq..." I tried. A sharp pain in my larynx stopped me.

"Remember, it is pronounced Bee-qyoogts", said Baggy. "Really easy. I have no idea why it causes so much trouble for some people."

"Well", I said and coughed, "I have to take your word for it. What kind of idiotic name is that?"

"You really have amnesia", Baggy murmured. "Did you forget everything? The Great Belgian Sound-shift of 2003? Your own angry letters to me, on how I dared to change a name which originated from Tolkien's books and was therefore sacred? Nothing left?"

"Afraid so", I said, frowning.

"Well", Baggy - no, I will call him Bqggz now - started to explain. "It all started when I visited Belgium some time ago, and tried to send you an e-mail. The keyboard had a French layout, and therefore my usual typing of 'Baggy' resulted in the production of 'Bqggw'. Later, the 'w' was substituted for 'z' in an analogy to the older Czech Sound-shift, which routinely replaced-

"Stop it, Bqggz", I growled. "I'm not in the mood for that. Just tell me what you want, and then sod off. Please."

Bqggz looked hurt. "Well, I just wanted to drop by and see how you're doing. After all, I saved your life. I carried you out of your weird temple-thing after you were knocked unconscious. It was really dangerous. There was fighting everywhere."

"Oh", I murmured. "Well, tell me one thing. Are you still doing your communism stuff?"

"Why, yes", Bqggz boasted. "Of course I do. Don't tell me you forgot that too. My organization, the Bolshevorks, has members in dozens of countries. A true International. I can bring you a few leaflets if you like."

"No, thanks", I said. I got up from the bed where I had been sitting. My head was already spinning from all this new information. I went over to the window and opened it, inhaled the fresh breeze with the faint smell of gas in it. Yesterday evening, the protesters down below had tried to set the hospital on fire, and its walls were still soaked with flammable stuff.

"I just wanted to see", Bqggz said, "if the... the impact on your head had any lasting consequences. You were pretty much overdoing it before. All the rambling, the preaching, the babbling... I am positively surprised on how coherent you are today. Three years ago, we could not have had this conversation. You would have started to hallucinate halfway through."

"Would I?" I said.

"Yes, and you would have yelled at me for desecrating Tolkien. There was always just Tolkien, Tolkien, Tolkien for you. Obsession, I'd call it", Bqggz said. "What about that? Has it subsided?"

I frowned again. I remembered my futile attempts of yesterday, my attempts to submerge

myself in the book. "I'm... not sure", I said. "I'm really not sure."

Bqggz gave me a thoughtful glance. "Well, I'll be going now", he said. "If, maybe, you finally arrive at accepting that Tolkien was an abominable liar and racist-

I stirred. The faint echo of anger shot through my head. I know I was supposed to jump onto Bqggz and strangle him for these impious words. But I couldn't. All I felt was a great weariness.

"-then maybe we can go somewhere for a beer and have a talk", Bqggz continued. "Revive our friendship. Forget what's happened between us. Or, rather, I will forget it. You apparently already have."

I nodded. "I'll think about it", I said, and Bqggz turned around. "Wait... one last thing", I said as he walked through the door.

Bqggz stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Noel?" he said.

"Thank you", I said. "For saving my life."

Bqggz frowned. For a long while he just stared at me, deep in thoughts. "You really *have* changed", he murmured.

"Oh", I added, "and one *really* last thing."

"Yes, Noel?" Bqggz repeated.

"Someone has written something on your butt with some sort of chalk", I informed him. "It reads: 'Hello Master, I hope you're fine. If that orc man annoys you, I'll kill him'."

Bqggz snorted and wiped with his hands over his behind. The words were reduced to a little cloud of dust that slowly settled on the hospital floor. Then he left. I sighed and took up my pen again.

3: Submergence

"Good evening, and welcome back to our Wacko of the Week show!" the little guy with the big ears crooned.

The little guy, who was of course the radio moderator, sat at a table packed with microphones. Baggy and I were sitting at opposite sides of the table, exchanging grim glances. I cleared my throat and prepared myself for my first radio speech.

"Today, we have the continuation of last week's broadcast", the radio guy yelled, "when Mr. Presley told us his truth about Tolkien. With me in the studio there is Mr. Noel Quickley, who has something to say in this matter as well. Welcome to the show!"

"Um-" I started, but the announcer cut me off.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Presley has dislocated a hip and can't be here to defend himself tonight", he said. "Instead, let's welcome his illegitimate stepfather, Mr. Winston Churchill!"

"Thank you, thank you", mumbled Baggy beneath a ridiculously huge cigar. He wore a chubby latex mask and had stuffed several pillows under his sweatshirt.

The announcer looked at me again. "Mr. Quickley", he yelled, "what do you have to tell us?"

The week before the broadcast had been extremely busy. I had written letters to the radio station. I had begged, and I had bribed people. I had found the guy who was originally scheduled for this interview and stole his trademark cucumbers. But finally, I had succeeded. I had managed to challenge Baggy to this radio duel, and now millions of people were tuned in, holding their breath for the final battle over Tolkien's legacy. And now the big moment had come.

"I think J.R.R. Tolkien is a great man", I started. "He was not a liar, not a racist and he certainly did not fight for Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Nothing that Ba... Mr. Presley told you was true. It was all lies! Filthy lies!"

Baggy answered with a cold glance. "Then why are orcs always portrayed as evil in his books?" he asked. "Besides, you look ridiculous with that beard."

I stared back icily and answered with a detailed character analysis of Shagrat and Gorbag, the Orcish anti-heroes of 'Lord of the Rings', proving that they were indeed depicted in shades of grey rather than as simply evil beings.

At one time during my five minutes of rambling, the temperature of Baggy's glance dropped below the freezing point of water. In the glass of coke that stood in front of him, the ice cubes stopped their slow process of melting. "But Tolkien was a racist", he said. "In 'Letters', when explaining the look of orcs to his readers, he likens them to Mongols. If I may quote from Letter 210, he describes them as 'degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types'."

"Your interest in orcs is astonishing, Mr. Churchill", I answered. "One could almost assume you were one yourself." I lowered the temperature of my stare accordingly. A small ice cap formed on the glass of mineral water I had been drinking from. The announcer closed the upper button of his shirt. I proceeded to explain the subjectivity of Tolkien's comment, expressed by the parenthesis. Then I explained the cultural background in which the comment was written, and pointed out that these letters probably were never meant for publishing, so their 'canonicity' could at least be doubted.

Small icicles grew from Baggy's eyebrows. Cracks formed in his coke glass as the beverage froze solid. The announcer put on a scarf and some gloves. "Oh, and about Tolkien's stance during the Spanish Civil War", Baggy hissed, "is it not true that Tolkien openly sided with the Fascists? 'Letters' explicitly states that he supported Franco against the communists."

"Now you are confusing things", I shot back. "Tolkien did support the conservative Catholic

fraction in the war. That fraction had nothing to do with the Fascists. It was allied with Franco, but then again, Mr. Churchill, may I remind you who *you* were all allied with during the Second World War? Or your enthusiastic support for Mussolini during the 1920es?" I grinned triumphantly. I was winning, and Baggy knew it. The announcer tried to say something, but his lips were frozen together.

"I should not have dressed as Churchill", Baggy whispered below the threshold of the microphones. "But the Elvis mask was in the washing machine." The two glasses on the table exploded. Their icy contents seeped out and united in a mini-glacier that crept over the table. The laptop of the announcer was overwhelmed by the icy mass, and a colony of mini-penguins made their home in it. We had invented Linux. "Tolkien also said that orcs were-" Baggy tried to launch another round.

I cut him off. "Winston, I think this show is over", I said.

"Not yet", Baggy snarled. "I have still some arguments left. Why do you think so?"

"Because", I explained, "the moderator is dead."

When I walked home from the radio station, I was in a triumphant mood. I had emerged victorious. I had defended Tolkien, washed his name clear from any slander. Baggy left me without saying goodbye, and as he hurried away in the opposite direction, I could hear a metallic sound at regular intervals. In his frustration, Baggy was probably kicking every streetlight he encountered.

The city was built on both sides of a river, and my way home led me over the main bridge. It was a clear and dark winter evening. Stars were twinkling above me, and below me too, as their light was reflected on the surface of the black, quiet water. A cold wind blew from the north. Far away, some wolves howled, and somewhere in the city, dogs barked in answer. A heated argument erupted between the wolves and the dogs on whether howling or barking was the correct sound to make for a canine. The wolves called the dogs spittle-lickers of mankind, and the dogs retorted with snide comments on the wolves' primitivity.

As I reached the middle of the bridge, the argument subsided. An uneasy, brooding silence fell. I, not caring about my surroundings, hastened on, until a loud and very unfriendly voice interrupted my thoughts. "Hey, Quickley", it shouted. "We've been waiting for you."

They were three. Three bulky shadows that quietly moved through the night. One stayed in front of me, blocking my way. One positioned himself behind me, making sure I could not run backwards. The third one intercepted me from the side. He stepped into the light cone of the street lantern, and I saw that he was a huge, muscular orc.

"What do you want?" I demanded to know.

"We heard you on the radio", the big orc growled. "You were trying to silence Bagronk."

"How do you know?" I asked. "He was dressed up as Churchill!"

"We know these things", the shadow in front of me said. He also stepped into the light, and I realized he was probably the twin brother of the first orc. The rather evil twin brother who always preyed on his brother's food and steroids rations.

"And we know you are Quickley", the third shadow added, the one from behind me. He was a thin, small orc with an unproportionally big hat. But to make up for his missing size, he wore a black karate belt.

"How?" I repeated, unable to think of any more clever questions. I stepped backwards until I could feel the cold metal of the bridge railing.

"Your shirt", the first big orc said.

"Oh", I mumbled and looked down at my breast, where the letters "Tolkien is a great man and Baggy is a liar!" were imprinted.

"Enough of that", the huge orc in front of me snarled. "You are a bootlicker of Tolkien, that liar and racist. You stand against Bagronk, the guiding light for Orcish freedom and justice. And this means you stand against us!"

"Um", I said. Despite the cold weather, I was beginning to sweat. "Um. I'm sorry, but you know... the truth is important, and-"

"The truth is", the small orc hissed, "you are making the life of orcs everywhere more miserable with your self-righteous words. Do you know where I work? As garbage man. I have a university degree, and I applied for a job in research. I didn't get it. 'You're an orc', they said. 'We know from Tolkien's books that you can't be trusted', they said."

"Well..." I said. I did not really know how to continue.

"And we're going to teach you a lesson", the first big orc growled. "You'll not slander us any longer." The second orc, the biggest of them all, lifted up his hand, which could easily have doubled as a snowplough, and balled it into a fist.

With a quick move, I evaded the first blow, as the orc jumped forward to hit me. The giant fist smashed against the bridge railing. The orc howled in pain. Metal splintered, and a big part of the railing broke off. As the other orcs prepared to join the fight, I stepped back again and lost my balance. I shrieked in surprise as I tumbled off the bridge. Amidst broken parts of the railing I fell. "Tolkien was riiiiight!" I howled while I made my way downwards. Then, with a huge splash, I fell into the river.

"Oops", the first big orc said.

"Ouch", the second one added and pulled a metal splinter out of his knuckles.

"I don't like that", the small orc mumbled. "We have just proven all his prejudices, haven't we?"

"Is he dead?" the first big orc asked and peered down at the black surface of the river.

"No lifesigns down there", the second one said. "I think he's gone."

"Then let's get away", the small orc urged the other ones, "before anyone sees us. Remember, we've never been here."

Silently the three orcs slipped back into the shadow and disappeared. After a short while, the wolves began to howl again.

The impact had made me lose my conscience for a moment. As I woke up, I heard a howling in the distance. At first I blamed it on the wolves, but it sounded different - slower and more melodious. It took me a minute or two to realize that I was listening to the song of humpback whales. I was still underwater.

Which, I thought, raised a number of questions. First and foremost I wondered why I apparently had no trouble breathing.

Slowly I got up from the sandy river bed where I had been lying. I tried to brush the dirt off my shirt, but realized the current had already washed it away. Living underwater did make some things easier. The wild beard I had been growing floated all around me. Slowly I realized that bubbles of air must have been trapped inside it and were now gradually released, up into my nose.

I looked up. Far above me the surface of the water slowly undulated. I could not see through it. For all I knew the orcs waited still there, on the bridge, to finish what they had started. As oxygen apparently was not the problem, I decided to walk a few metres in the protection of the water.

It was a strange new world down here. All the debris of the town ended up here; everything that had been lost on the riverside or fallen off the bridges piled up at the ground. Slowly I tried to make my way out of the metal scraps and spikes that surrounded me, the remainders of the railing. To my surprise there was much more railing debris than what had come down with me. Apparently for years people had been falling off the bridge just like me, and the railing had been replaced again and again. Maybe, I thought, this was a place where certain elements of the city's society liked to get rid of rivals. I found several skeletons with their feet locked in concrete blocks, too.

Finally I broke free from the pile of rubble. Stumbling over the true skeleton of Elvis, the alien probes still wedged into his skull, I made my way downstream. Seaweed floated around me. Fish frolicked through the clear, cold water. Shipwrecks loomed to the right and left, an entire street of whose existence I had not been aware until now.

The longer I wandered, the more I became engrossed in the wonders of this underwater world. Soon I stopped thinking about the orcs on the bridge, about Baggy, about anything above the seemingly solid black wall over my head. After a while I became hungry, but as I just passed a school of lobsters, I simply grabbed several of them and ate them raw. I have always liked sushi, but never again I found a meal so pleasant and fresh. Soon the water got even clearer, the wrecks and rubble piles retreated and became less numerous, and the sandy road I trod on widened. I had left the outskirts of the town, where the river left its narrow stone bed and started to meander towards the sea.

I have no idea how long I stayed underwater. From time to time I let myself drift to the surface and held my beard outside to refill my oxygen supply. But I found the world above dull and uninteresting, just forests and beaches and ugly motorways. I knew eventually I would have to return to this dry world, where Mr. Syl waited for me with his cart of traffic lights. But I decided there was still time. Later I rescued a still well-filled oxygen bottle from a dead diver, and I stopped even these short visits. At one time a dim light seeped through the surface, as it became day above. Then, much later, night fell again, and I proceeded in the fairy light of countless angler fish.

The road widened even more, and huge shadows passed over me, ships heading for the coastal ports. Suddenly, I tasted salt, and I knew I had left the river and ventured into the open sea. Here the ground became more rocky, and I went steadily downhill, getting further and further away from the surface. Daylight returned once again, but as I walked deeper into the ocean, it faded to a greyish glow that hardly illuminated anything. So I did not see the enormous cliff I approached. "Bubble bubble!" I said in surprise when I tumbled off the continental shelf and, head first, sank down into the ocean trench.

There was a second when I worried, when I half awoke from the state of dizzy adventurousness the underwater wonders had put me in. If I remember correctly, these doubts occurred between a depth of 4.2 and 4.5 kilometres. But then my fall slowed down, and in the now complete darkness that surrounded me, I suddenly saw a light. Curiously I swam towards it, and then I beheld the weirdest thing I had seen in my entire life.

At the deepest point of the trench, wedged between enormous rocks, stood a castle. I use the word 'castle' for lack of a better one, for surely in parts it was a rather clumsy copy of Schloss Neuschwanstein. But there were other architectural elements thrown in. I beheld a colourful bulbous spire like a Russian church over a grey concrete thing like a bunker from World War Two. Between Stonehengian menhirs the gigantic shape of an Aztec pyramid loomed. The light came from two huge lamps in the shape of Star Trek warp nacelles, which stood on the top of Greek columns.

The strange array left me speechless, and for a while I just stood there and stared on it. Then I felt something, or someone, tapping on my shoulder. Someone with very long, very soft fingers. I turned around and let out a frightened "Bubble!". Because directly behind me a man-sized jellyfish floated in the water.

I know, dear reader, that jellyfish in these days are small, mindless things that make a terrible salad and occasionally kill tourists with poisoned tentacles. These small creatures are somewhat comparable to poodles. Nobody who lives in a city and only knows these small, annoying dogs with their ridiculous hairdos would assume that they are descended from the

proud, evasive, wild wolf. But they are, and so the small jellyfish are distantly related to the huge specimens of the deep ocean. Those surely have a brain and all other kinds of organs, though seldom in numbers which would be considered correct for a mammal. I only learned that this specific jellyfish had three kidneys when he boozed me under the table the first time.

But now the jellyfish was very sober, and from the look in his eyes I deduced that he was very angry, too. "What do you want here?" he asked and bared his teeth. Or maybe he had no teeth, and it was just a clever prosthesis made from small mussels.

"Bubble bubble", I tried to explain my presence and shrugged helplessly.

"Wrong answer", hissed the jellyfish and wrapped several of his tentacles around me. They were thin, but strong, and I could not escape from their grip. "Come with me", the creature said. "The boss will decide what we do with you."

The jellyfish led me to the gates of the underwater castle. We entered a small, dark chamber, and I looked over my shoulder alarmedly as a heavy metal door came down and locked us in. Then a loud hum distracted me. Artificial light flooded the room. Then the water level began to fall. Foaming and gargling the water streamed out of the chamber, until I stood in a dry room, my clothes and hair dripping wet. The jellyfish, propped up on his tentacles, did not seem to have a problem with that.

"Ugh", I said and spit out a few litres of water. "Bubh", I added and let a school of mackerels out who had sought refuge in my mouth. "Blgubhgugh", I finished my speech and spit out a Russian submarine which immediately hurried away to search a more secret and altogether more watery environment.

The jellyfish touched a switch with one tentacle, the other door of the airlock opened, and I saw the interior of the castle. It resembled the exterior in being a breathtaking mixture of styles and cultures. The creature pushed me out of the chamber, and I walked down a long hallway. Taking advantage of my improved linguistic situation, I tried to communicate with the jellyfish. "Who are you?" I demanded. "What is this place?"

"My name", said the jellyfish, "is Pseudonymus Roghater. This place is our hideout, the coordination central of our crusade."

"What crusade? For what? Against what?" I inquired.

"Shut up", the jellyfish answered. "I'm bringing you to the boss, and then you'll learn everything you need to know. In case", one of the tentacles still wrapped around me tightened suddenly, and I gasped for air, "in case he doesn't decide you're an enemy. In that case I'd be more than happy to torture you to death." He emitted an evil cackle, and I shuddered.

The hallway led us to a huge courtyard, then we climbed stairs and walked through another hallway. We walked through a door and found another hallway, which brought us to yet another courtyard. The castle was a labyrinth, and soon I had lost every clue of where I was.

Strange people watched me as I walked by. The castle was inhabited by hundreds of people, and as far as I could see, the non-humans formed at least a sizeable minority. Finally, our journey ended at a huge oaken door. Strange reliefs were engraved in it, images which seemed utterly incomprehensible to me. The jellyfish knocked at the door, and it swung open as if it was operated by ghosts. I later learned that it was, but the ghosts had been nobody famous in life.

We entered and saw a huge wooden table. Several people were sitting at it, and several pairs of eyes stared at me. "The Board", the jellyfish said. The doors closed, the grip of the tentacles loosened, and the jellyfish sat down at the table behind a sign with his name on it.

There was no chance of escape, so I just stayed where I was and looked at these people. With the exception of Pseudonymus, they were all human, at least at a first glance.

First in the row sat a man with a black robe and hectic eyes. He had an old book in front of him, which he had been reading when I entered. I recognized the letters as Egyptian hieroglyphs. "Thy coming was not foresaid by the words of Seth, the words of Osiris, the mouth of Isis", he said. "The goat we sacrificed was like a key, but to what keyhole, if we cannot read the signs, will it fit? The writing on the wall was there, but none could see it, though its glowing was that of a thousand suns." I stared at the man and was about to ask what he meant, but I was not sure I wanted to know. Instead, I just read the sign in front of him. *Horus Engels*, it said.

His neighbour was a stout man who stared at me with an intensity that caused physical pain. "Qui est id creaturum?" he asked. "Will he adiuvere nos in strugglum nostrum?" I nearly laughed. I did understand Latin reasonably well, but this was just getting stranger and stranger. *Harold M. Brzeznski*, said his nametag.

Next to Brzeznski there sat an enormous female. Standing, she must have measured two metres or more - without her hairdo, which amounted to another metre. Her breasts lay on the table in front of her like the winners of the Annual Pumpkin Competition of Iowa. They almost completely covered her name sign, but with much squinting I was finally able to read the name *Hecate Mensenlarger*. "Now there's a fine-looking young fellow", she boomed.

The knight in shining armour next to her looked displeased. "Syre, I beg your forgiveness for ye uncouthness of ye wench", he said and nodded his head in formal courteousness. His sign read *Sir Fmat de Trasque*. "With thy help, we slay each foe who opposeth us."

I looked to the last person in the room, a young fellow whose most striking feature was his hair. It was made of tentacles. I assumed he was a jellyfish hybrid; only much later I learned that his mutations were the result of doping in sports. He had a half-empty beer bottle in front of him and was apparently more than a little tipsy. His sign read simply *Armand*. He gave me a friendly nod and a burp.

There was one more chair, but it was empty. *Morambar Udunvagor*, its nametag said in ominous-sounding letters. His was the only nametag in solid gold, with the writing glittering like thousands of tiny diamonds.

Suddenly a smaller door in the back of the room opened, and everyone rose immediately. "The boss", the jellyfish whispered to me. But I hardly listened. My attention was drawn to

the newcomer like a magnet. He was tall, or maybe not physically, but his shadow seemed to tower above him. His face was dark, but his eyes burned with a red light that seemed to pierce my soul. I am not sure even today, but I think he was half Balrog.

The newcomer, who obviously was Mr. Udunvapor himself, gave me a benevolent smile. "Welcome, Mr. Quickley... Noeel", he said. "We have been waiting for you."

"We have?" Pseudonymus asked, irritated, but a glance from Mr. Udunvapor silenced him.

"And how do you know my name?" I dared to ask.

"We have heard your radio interview", the impressive man explained. "We think you are a worthy defendant of Tolkien. You will fit right in here. For this too is the purpose of our existence, the reason for this hidden castle. We are the guards of Tolkien, the keepers of his wisdom. We wage eternal war against those who slander or ridicule his writings, who defile them with humour or in earnest."

I listened in awe, my mouth open. All my life, since my friendship with Baggy broke down, I had been alone in my adoration of Tolkien. I had nearly given up hope that I would ever find a soulmate. And now it had been revealed to me that here was a whole castle, an entire army built for just this purpose. A great joy overcame me.

In front of Udunvapor, I fell to my knees. "Command me, Master!" I yelled. "Let me join your cause!"

Udunvapor smiled upon me. "Then I welcome you in our ranks, Noeel", he said.

4: Preparation

I was gliding through the water, making as little noise as possible. Complete darkness surrounded me. I felt the heavy weight of the harpoon in my hand, a monstrous instrument I would never have been able to lift on land. "Where are you?" I whispered to myself.

A shadow appeared in front of me, a patch of even darker darkness, dead and still. A rock, a building, a shipwreck? Carefully I opened my backpack and took out my dwarf dolphin. I squeezed it until it emitted protesting ultrasonic squeaks, and the echo told me I was indeed approaching a shipwreck. And the ultrasound informed me of something else. Something, or someone, was moving across the ancient deck, just as stealthily and quietly as I.

The being down there doubtless had noticed my ultrasonic shower, and I had but a split second to act before it would escape again. With a menacing war bubbling I shot forward, raised my harpoon, landed directly in front of my prey and held the weapon to its wobbly breast.

"Not bad!" said the prey. "You may become a decent underwater warrior yet." The being took an anglerfish out of its pocket and lit it with a slap on its buttocks, and in the faint green glow

I saw Pseudonymus' usual quizzical grin. "But you were way too loud when you searched the coral reef over there. I could have easily killed you there, had this been a real fight and not a training simulation."

My triumphant mood dwindled somewhat. "I'll practise dhat, Mr. Bseudo", I promised. Lots of training had greatly improved my underwater pronunciation.

"No doubt you will, Noeel", Pseudonymus answered. "Just keep in mind, one day it will not be training anymore. One day these reefs will be brimming with the sounds of enemies, and your only chance to survival will be to be better than them." Suddenly, he started to grimace, and a drop of inky saliva formed on his lips and dissolved in the water. "Of course you could also buy my Underwater Survival Pack for an Incredibly low price..." He began to shiver, and one of his tentacles quickly fetched something out of another pocket of his black battle dress. It was a syringe, and he injected its content into his own gelatinous head. He sighed in relief. "That's better. Sorry. Where was I? Right, you did well, but now go back to the castle. I will meet you there later." I bowed and started to swim away from the training grounds.

Underwater warfare was one of my favourite subjects in Udunvapor's training camp. Pseudonymus' classes were rare chances for me to get out of the castle, out of the labyrinthic corridors damp with the sweat of a thousand hard-working students. Despite the rocky start of our relationship, I rather liked old Pseudo, and felt sorry for him, because there was something odd about him, a terrible secret he carried around, some sort of horrible illness or addiction. All I knew was that his speech sometimes drifted off to weird, disconnected sentences and half-sentences reminding me of bad salesmen or spam mails. Then only a shot from his syringe could restore him to normalcy. But when properly drugged, he was a friendly, relaxed guy.

Neither 'friendly' nor 'relaxed' were words I would ascribe to Horus Engels, who was responsible for the theoretical part of my education. I had thought of myself as a Tolkien scholar before, but nonetheless it took all my energy and concentration to follow this enigmatic man's lectures. He spoke in complicated sentences, wildly mixed metaphors and imagery, drifted off on tangents and returned to the original topic in bold loopings. To describe his lessons as a rollercoaster ride would hardly do them justice. It was a rollercoaster that would not have passed safety regulations in any theme park of the world.

"Behold!" thundered Engels, who was standing in front of us, in front of a class of perhaps fifteen or twenty students. We were the elite of Udunvapor's young followers, the best, brightest students. Only these were admitted to Engels' classes. The others were foot soldiers, taught only the basics of Tolkien lore, and we would be their officers, their leaders.

"Behold", thundered Engels, "the words of knowledge! Our topic today is cats. For Tolkien hated cats, and to understand why is to shine a sun on the dark backside of Osiris' underwear. Open Letter 219. 'Siamese cats belong to the fauna of Mordor', indeed. What fauna, old man? Open Lord of the Rings, page 902: 'all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked'. What fauna?" He triumphantly cracked his fingers, as I furiously searched through two books at once. "Ruinous indeed, like Queen Beruthiel for the fate of Gondor, but who was Sauron's

queen? Hear my words: There was no Luthien of Mordor to fill the feeding plates of ferocious felines! Ha!" Engels slapped his desk with the flat hand, and a cloud of chalk dust rose and obscured his crooked figure. "Open Book of Lost Tales I, page 22", he commanded. "Tevildo, Prince of Cats, eh? How he lusted for Luthien! Proof is inscribed in the book like holes, nay trenches, nay craters of an explosion of the creative abilities of men, and of those who are more than men!" He gesticulated wildly, wiping his pencil-case from the desk in the process. Pencils flew through the room and crashed into the walls like spears. "Open Encyclopaedia Britannica, volume CVII, page 1769! Compare!" I hastily grabbed another book out of my backpack and heaped it onto my already severely cluttered desk. "Open Lord of the Rings!" Engels screamed, the heap on my desk collapsed and books fell down, and all windows burst asunder from the sound of Engels' voice. Books and debris were swept from the ground by a sudden wind, and they started to spin around his head, this gravitational center of wisdom. "Open everything! Open your minds! Let the truth in! Open, open, open Sesame! There were no cats! Cats do not exist! No box for you, Erwin Schroedinger, no litter box full of exploding atoms! You lied! Everyone lied! Only Tolkien tells the truth! Quod erat demonstrandum!" His voice rose to a triumphant crescendo, a thunder from the center of a tornado forming in the rapidly disintegrating classroom. I hid under my desk. "Only Tolkien enlightens us! From Osiris to Re! From darkness to a new day!"

Over the howling inferno I heard a faint cry from my bank neighbour. "He's weak today, eh?" he shouted into my ear.

"Yes, unusually quiet! I hope he's not ill!" I yelled back at the top of my lungs.

While Pseudonymus and Engels were responsible for educating the students' minds, Hecate Mensenlarger took care of their souls. This massive female, impressive in all aspects, was the school psychologist, and in this job, she was very much the mother of the camp - not literally, none of her twenty-three biological children lived here. But she was the person we all went to with the little problems students have, the kind that look towering and insurmountable at first, but fade away after a good, honest talk. Problems like the fear before a test, the loneliness of being stuck in an underwater fortress six kilometres below the ocean surface, or being bullied by classmates. The fear problem she solved by giving us candy and hugs. The loneliness she solved by taking us into her bedroom, which was inexplicably - or maybe explicably - located just behind her office. The bullies she disciplined by threatening never to take them into her bedroom again.

It must have been near the end of my second year underwater when I had a very interesting talk with Aunt Heckie, as we affectionately called her. One of my weaknesses always has been math. Yes, I admit it freely. I speak three hundred languages fluently, I can juggle a dozen raw eggs while blindfolded, and I have won the Tour de France six times in a single year, but I am just not good at remembering big numbers. And this became a problem in Engels' classes, when he tried to pump more and more page numbers into our brains, and I started to mix them all up. I was really worried to get behind in his lessons, when I time and time again checked page 825 instead of 852. So I went to Aunt Heckie for a little counseling.

"Oh, my poor boy!" Hecate Mensenlarger boomed. She wrapped her arms around me, which

felt like getting caught between two snowploughs, and pressed me against her bosom, which felt like a frontal collision with two adjacent zeppelins. "Everything's gonna be alright! Just remember, one day you won't have to do these calculations anymore. You'll have servants who do it for you!"

"Mmmbmmgh", I commented.

"What? Oh, excuse me." She loosened her embrace a little, and I struggled to free my head from where it had been stuck. Only now she noticed the surprised look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Why..." I gasped, "why would I... have servants?"

"Well, it's a prestige thing", she said. "What do you think you're training for?"

That was an easy question, I thought. "To defend the words of Tolkien", I echoed the phrases that had been imprinted in my mind. "To keep his image clean. To honour-"

"-No, no", Aunt Heckie interrupted. "How will you achieve that?"

I frowned. "Well, I guess we'll be some kind of guerilla warriors", I said. "That's what the underwater warfare is for, isn't it? We will go everywhere, unseen. We'll strike quickly at those who dishonour Tolkien, and then get out again. Like some kind of ninjas. Tolkien ninjas... Sounds good to me. They'll never know what hit them."

Aunt Heckie grabbed me and pushed me into her bedroom, an experience not dissimilar to being swept away by a minor avalanche, and closed the door behind her. "Listen, boy", she whispered, her usually so sonorous voice lowered to the volume of an ordinary Boeing 747. "That's what Morrie wants us to think. Can't be too careful. The enemy has ears everywhere." I shivered as she called our leader Udunvapor 'Morrie', something not even Pseudo or Engels would have dared. "But look at the size of all this, the castle, the army, everything. Does that look like a bunch of guerilla fighters to you? No, Morrie's up to bigger tasks. We're gonna take control. One day, and that's coming soon, we're gonna go public. We'll conquer the world! And then nobody will ever defile Tolkien again!"

I gazed at Aunt Heckie in wonder, as I suddenly became aware of the size of the operation I had been drawn into. Now everything made sense - the war training, the army, all those nuclear warheads in the broom closet that we students had to polish every Wednesday. The thought was big and scared me a little, but at the same time it felt oddly... satisfying.

"Think of it", Aunt Heckie said. "What we're doing now is fighting the symptoms. This system's sick, my boy. It's in terminal decline. There's no honesty in the world anymore. Children are going through school without ever reading a single book about Tolkien! Small wonder they won't like him when they grow up! We call'em heretics and hunt them down, but in reality, they were never given a chance in the first place." A painful expression crept over her face as she thought about all these poor miseducated children, and from her left eye rolled a tear that could have solved the water supply problems of northern Sudan for approximately six months. "We have to grab the problem by the root. Have to impose our education system on them. The world's a big place, my boy. Lotsa space for all of us. Morrie promised me Italy as my personal kingdom. Five years from now, I'll be sitting in a Tuscany vineyard and have

my servants cook spaghetti all day! I'm worried already I might put on some weight." She patted her belly, which produced a sound similar to these gongs you find in Buddhist monasteries. "You'll get something too. I dunno what. I think Germany's still up for grabbing."

"Wow", I finally managed to say.

Aunt Heckie patted me on the shoulder, a process that rammed me approximately five metres into the ground, but I quickly climbed out of the hole again. Aunt Heckie opened the bedroom door. "Now go, my lad", she boomed. "Go back to your studies. Work hard. Become a leader. Now you know what you're working for!"

I walked out, my knees still shaking. Indeed I knew. Images floated through my mind, daydreams of myself, sitting on a throne in Castle Neuschwanstein in gold-embroidered lederhosen, strands of sauerkraut dangling from my beard, while a choir of happy children sang praises in Elvish to me, the man that had saved them from a terrible fate.

You will have noticed, dear reader, that I write much about my teachers, but hardly mention my co-students at all. The reason for this is that I spent very little time with them. From the very beginning, and increasingly so after my talk with Hecate Mensenlarger, I felt that I was different. They were nice fellows, yes, but they lacked what I had - an idea what I was doing, an aim to work for. They studied when they were asked to, and partied when not. They boozed or flirted or watched TV all night long, all these activities I now found boring and distracting. I, on the other hand, wasted no time on such stuff. I worked hard, spent my nights in the library or the closet, where I polished Morambar Udunvagor's shoes. And my diligence payed off. Soon I surpassed everyone else in knowledge. Of course the teachers noticed and started to favour me, which in turn did not exactly boost my reputation among my co-students. In my third year, Udunvagor promoted me from cleaning his shoes to ironing his trousers, a great honour. In my fourth year, I became the personal assistant of Pseudonymus Roghater and was co-opted to the Board, and though I had no active voting right, I was involved in all discussions regarding our now imminent attack on an unsuspecting world. And in my fifth year, Horus Engels remembered my name for the first time.

I still remember, as if it had been yesterday, the last board meeting in the underwater fortress. We held it on the evening of a quiet, unexciting Friday, five years after my arrival - one thousand eight hundred ninety-two days after it, to be exact. A number that equalled the year of Tolkien's birth, and that, I thought, was a good omen.

"The boss!" Pseudonymus announced, and Morambar Udunvagor entered the room. Though I was older now and more mature, his presence still filled me with awe just like it did when we first met. His eyes glowed like fire, his shoes shone like the sun on a bright summer day, and the creases on his trousers were so sharp that a butterfly, which just happened to pass by and touch them, was immediately cut into two halves and fell down dead. Udunvagor walked over to his place, bowed over the table and smiled triumphantly before he spoke.

"It is time", he said.

"Rejoice!" Pseudonymus said. "R U feeling fat? Buy weight loss pills now for a low price. Become a chick magnet..." He searched his pockets frantically for his syringe, but apparently he had misplaced it.

"I will await you all on my flagship tomorrow noon, which is towed out of its construction yard as we speak", Udunvapor announced. "Roghter, you are my oldest and most trusted servant. Yours will be the honour to give it a name."

"Thank you, sir", the Old Pseudo said somewhat helplessly. "R U fat?" he started to repeat.

"U-fat?" Udunvapor said with a frown. "What an idiotic name. But so be it, if this is your wish." He nodded at all of us. "Dismissed."

It had been nearly a week since my awakening in the hospital, and I felt a growing unrest within me. I had not written down anything in the last few days, in fact, I felt somehow stuck. I remembered my time in the underwater fortress quite clearly now, but what had happened afterwards kept eluding me. The doctor kept telling me everything was alright, I should take my time, I could not expect progress to be always as rapid and linear as it had been in the first days. He told me I needed more rest, so I rested, but to no avail. I read multiple newspapers every day, hoping to find a clue, but none of them mentioned Udunvapor, and though the name Tolkien appeared now and then, it usually was not in a very important article. Clearly the world conquest had not worked the way it had been planned. I gazed at the tattered remnants of my beard in the mirror, but there was no trace of sauerkraut, so I obviously had never been installed as king of Germany either.

As I was not progressing any further, I thought of external stimulation to give my brain the much-needed kickstart. For nearly two hours I hit my head against a bedpost, but the only result was a headache. I ordered three Russian prostitutes, and the ensuing night was pleasant, but it helped even less. Slowly I began to accept that the only way to speed up my recovery was to face my inner demons, to confront my greatest fear and overcome it. I had to talk to Bggz again.

Bggz arranged our meeting in a café in the city centre, because he said that it was time for me to get some fresh air. To bypass the security system of the hospital turned out to be surprisingly easy. One of the cooks in the kitchen was in secrecy a member of Bggz' communist sect-thing, and the noon after I contacted my former friend, I was given a lump of meat for lunch that tasted even more leathery than usual. I subjected it to closer scrutiny and found out that in reality it was a rolled-together latex mask. I put it on and just walked out of the room, gave a friendly nod to a bored-looking security guy and then just marched right through the protesting crowd in front of the hospital. I guess I was a less than convincing Britney Spears, with strands of my beard, still about half a metre long, constantly slipping out of the mask and dangling from my chin. But strangely enough, nobody suspected anything. Whatever I had done to these people in my prophet years had probably done some harm to their minds.

I walked down the sunny boulevards until I found Bqggz sitting beneath a sunshade in front of a cute little café. We drank the best espresso I had in three years - well, it was also the only one, to be exact - and chatted about the past.

"So what about my parents?" I asked. "Do you have any information on them?"

"Not much, I'm sorry", Bqggz said. "At the height of your... fame, they were forced to emigrate to northern Greenland. Last I heard, they were well, but that was over two years ago."

I nodded sadly. "I'll check that once I'm out of here", I said. "And the others? You know them, don't you? Old Pseudo, that weird Engels, Aunt Heckie..."

"Oh, they've mellowed a bit with age", Bqggz said. "I think they have started a private university of some sorts, where they can teach Tolkien-lore as it pleases them. I can give you the contact info if you like."

"Yes, please", I said. "Now, please tell me more about this trial against me. When will it begin? I guess I should hire a lawyer or two, or a dozen."

For some reason this topic seemed to make Bqggz feel uneasy. He shifted around on his chair. "Can't help you there either", he admitted. "You see, this is a matter of national security, and I'm not really popular with our government right now. But if they treat you like they treat me, they'll probably let you wait a month or two. To wear you down before they even start interrogating you."

"Ah well", I sighed. I would have preferred a clearer answer, but at the same time it was comforting that I had a few more weeks to sort myself out before this stuff required my attention.

Bqggz looked at his watch. "Well, it's getting later", he said. "Shall we move to a place where there's beer? I know a nice pub not far from here. The owner is from Belgium, and he has really good stuff that-"

"-What was that?" I interrupted, suddenly alert.

"Good stuff", Bqggz repeated.

"No, no, the other thing", I said. "Where did he come from?"

"Belgium", Bqggz said, frowning in confusion. "What about it?"

"That's it!" I yelled. "That's what happened then! Belgium! How could I forget! Give me these napkins." I grabbed a pile of paper napkins from the table and, lacking a pen, dipped my finger into the sweet brown coffee grounds in my cup. Hastily I began to scribble, lest I forgot again what washed to the surface of my mind like a rising tide.

5: Escalation

If you stay underwater and breathe stale, recycled air for a long time, you're starting to forget things. You forget how the sun feels on your skin. You forget how the wind feels, blowing through your hair and beard.

"Noel", complained the Old Pseudo, who was standing about five metres behind me, "your beard is fluttering in my face again."

"Sorry", I said under my huge sunglasses. "I should really cut it a bit. I'll tell my servants, once I get them."

We were standing on the deck of a ship, on the surface of the ocean. In the bright midday sun, all colours had an intensity that made me gasp in wonder. Around us, the calm sea glittered like an endless sheet of diamonds - a sheet riddled with curious black spots. There were ships everywhere, in every direction, an enormous fleet stretching towards the horizon. I had absolutely no idea where and how Udunvapor had built such a fleet in such a short time, but obviously he had.

Morambar Udunvapor himself stood on an elevated podest in the middle of the deck, on this ship which was the biggest of all and looked somewhat similar to a plane carrier, except for the statues of J.R.R. and Christopher Tolkien that had been erected on its sides, bearing some resemblance to the Argonath statues in the books. Udunvapor himself wore a black cape, inscribed with fiery red runes, that was fluttering all around him. He was reading an account of impressive size that was captioned "Joe's Rent-A-Fleet-Service", then shrugged and stuffed the sheet into his pocket.

"How does the sun feel on your skin?" I asked the Old Pseudo.

"No idea. I don't have skin. But I think my jelly is getting dry", he answered. "And on yours?"

"No idea", I admitted. "It somehow doesn't reach my skin. There's beard everywhere."

"Quiet!" thundered Udunvapor. "The day has come. Today we take what is rightfully ours. We have left our hideout to take over the world! *Alea iacta est!* The die is cast!" And he threw a twenty-sided die the size of his fist, a die that seemed to be made of pure gold. It rolled noisily over the deck and then came to rest. A small, uniformed man hurried to look what it said.

"Um, it's cocked", he said sheepishly.

A frown crept over Udunvapor's face. "Give me that", he demanded. "As I said: *Alea iacta est!*" He threw the die again. It rolled away from him, slid under the railing and plunged into the water, where it quickly sank.

Udunvapor's frown deepened. "Anyway", he bellowed. "Hear the words of my loyal fleet commander, Armand!"

The guy named Armand stepped up to his master. Ever since I had first seen him when Pseudonymus dragged me to the Board, I had wondered what his place was in the hierarchy of

Udunvapor's army. He was one of these people who are always just around, without doing anything or excelling in anything. Most of the time he was munching sandwiches or holding a beer bottle. He and I had hardly exchanged more than a few words in the past five years. Now Armand wore a smashing, coloured uniform that looked slightly 18th-century Prussian, and for the first time his tentacle hair was neatly combed. He held a world map on which several big arrows were painted.

"After a long and diligent analysis", Armand yelled with a slightly squeaky voice, "we have chosen the first target of our invasion. We will invade the shores of Mongolia, then, as you can see on this map, launch a three-pronged attack towards Ulan Bator. We should reach this line here and that line there in forty-eight hours, while our reinforcements-"

I squirmed. Finally I couldn't take it any longer. I hurried forward and whispered something into Armand's ear, then I quickly retreated to my place.

Armand frowned. "What do you mean, Mongolia doesn't have a coastline?" he inquired. "Uh. Well. Then..." He looked a bit helplessly at Udunvapor. "Suggestions?"

Udunvapor's frown grew into a grimace that would have frightened children and could have caused elderly adults to get a sudden heart attack. "I don't care", he shouted. "Just pick anything!"

"Oh. Well", said Armand and started to sweat visibly. He looked at me. "What's this called?" he asked and pointed at a small yellow blot on the map.

"That? That's Belgium", I said.

"Okay", Armand said. "We will invade the shores of Belgium, then, I dunno, launch a three-pronged attack on something... on everything we might encounter!"

"Very well", thundered Udunvapor. "Onwards then, my brave warriors!"

His lackeys talked into cellphones, and the entire fleet slowly turned around and set course. And in this moment, as the full might and glory of Udunvapor was revealed, I seriously believed that no force in the world would be able to stop us.

Other tales have been told about the great and terrible war Morambar unleashed upon the unsuspecting humanity, so I will just hurry through this part of my life. I hardly saw anything of it anyway. My place was at Morambar's side, and so I stayed on his flagship, the U-fat, while he sent wave after wave of his underwater fighters against everyone who opposed us, in other words, everyone. Our days were filled with parades and speeches of glory, held on deck, and medals of impressive size being handed out to soldiers who won a battle or lost a limb or tentacle. During the night, we would lie in our cabins, listening to distant explosions and cries of death and despair, and they seemed to close in on us, creep closer to us every night. This, of course, was an illusion created by our overheated imaginations - the kitchen, where our incompetent cook regularly blew up his pots, did not change its relative position inside the

ship. But still, after a while, we became restless and grumpy from lack of sleep. And good food.

Every day at eight hundred, when I entered the cafeteria next to the kitchen to scrape my morning lasagne off the ceiling, I saw Udunvapor consulting with his officers. He had hired the best and brightest minds money could buy for his campaign. There was Jacques Facques-d'Ecrivain, leading French military planner for decades, the mind behind the brilliant strategical layout of Dien Bien Phu. There was Trethardt von Tothenpferden, a former German general, who had devised and executed Operation Barbarossa. And, last not least, Jusuf al-Ringul, the Arab mastermind behind the Six Day War. These awe-inspiring men, nonetheless looking small and timid next to Udunvapor, would sit there with him for hours and hours, their heads bent over maps, while I was crouching under the table, polishing Udunvapor's shoes with a miniature toothbrush and trying to learn as much as I could.

As the days passed, Udunvapor seemed to spend more and more time with the generals, and even the other Board members started to complain. Of course, the only one who dared to voice her discontent openly was Hecate Mensenlarger, and one day she just burst into the room when the generals were assembled, brushed a couple of maps from the table, stemmed her arms into her hips and gave Udunvapor a look that would have caused hell to freeze instantly.

"Morrie!" she boomed. "Stop that for a moment and listen to me. The boys are tired. They form a queue outside my counseling office that goes all around the ship. Can you please get this world conquest done a bit quicker? I have no idea what you're doing here all day long, but I bet you're not concentrating on your work!"

Morambar's shadow darkened. "Look, Hecate", he started. "I'm really doing the best I can here and-"

"-Then maybe you should call it off and try it again another day", thundered Mensenlarger. "When you're better prepared!"

I could not stand it any longer. I stood up from my crouched position, flinging away the table, and faced the massive woman. "I can't believe what I'm hearing", I cried. "Aunt Heckie, don't you remember what you told me yourself? All those poor children out there who we have to liberate from their anti-Tolkien oppressors! What would they say if we flinched and ran away at the first sign of difficulty? What did Frodo do when they walked into Mordor and their supplies ran low? Did he turn back for a holiday in Minas Tirith, did he prepare himself for another year or two? No. He knew that it was now or never, he knew that he had to fulfill his task even against seemingly insurmountable odds. Did Tolkien run away when he was stuck in a trench at the Somme in World War I, when his friends were giving their lives for him? Just do your best, keep the boys in line a little while longer, and your spaghetti kingdom in Tuscany awaits you!"

The generals stared at me with their mouths open. Morambar smiled sardonically. Aunt Heckie gasped angrily, but she realized that she was outnumbered. "Oh, have it your way then", she hissed and stormed out of the room. On her way she kicked a chair so violently that it flew through the room, penetrated the wall and, after a flight of a few kilometers, smashed into a fisherboat and got stuck in a few dozen tons of frozen halibut.

Suddenly I realized what I had done, and my cheeks reddened. "Uh, sorry if I overstepped my authority", I mumbled and hastily put up the table again. "It just made me so angry and-"

But then I felt Udunvapor's hand on my shoulder, heavy and paternal. I froze. Never before had I seen him touch another living being. Except those he ate, of course, but they never lived to tell. "Well done, my son", said Morambar. "You are a worthy sentinel of Tolkien. I am proud to be your mentor. Now I think my shoes are clean enough for this morning. Why do you not get yourself a chair and take a look at our war plans? I would like to hear your opinion."

My haggard breast swelled in pride. Carefully I sat down at the table, and the generals reluctantly moved over. I do not claim that I understood all of what I saw. The big world map - it was the same Armand had held up on that sunny morning on deck - was covered in a confusing mass of arrows. Some were bold and some were thin, some were straight and some moved in wiggly lines or returned to their beginning. Some were crossed out, others had question marks written over them. Names were scribbled into the few arrowless areas, and numbers were squeezed in, most probably illustrating the strength of this or that army. I stared onto the map very hard. I turned my head. I stood up to watch it from a distance, then sat down again and almost pressed my nose onto the map. I blinked with my left eye, then with my right eye, then with both in the rhythm of Howard Shore's "The White Tree". I used my toothbrush to clean away some chocolate cake stains, rediscovering a little arrow marking the position of a bataillon we had already written off as missing. I frowned.

Finally I looked up. "Well", I said. "Well. Meaning no disrespect, but... well. That's not exactly looking *good*, is it?"

Other tales have been told about the great and terrible war Morambar unleashed upon the unsuspecting humanity. They tell about how his army first, lead by Armand, completely overran the happy little kingdom of Belgium and established a reign of terror. They tell how Armand, now calling himself the Vlaams Bloke, succumbed to the seduction of the strong Belgian beer and degenerated to a drunken madman, and how he and his men were finally defeated and driven away by a rag-tag band of adventurers, one of which - surprise, surprise! - was described as a "weirdo communist orc named Buggy or Boggy". When I heard that my old friend was stalking me again, trying to ruin my and Morambar's plans, I nearly gnawed a leg off my chair in anger.

The war went on. In desperate need of victories, Morambar started to ally himself with everyone who would not climb up a tree when he approached. Pirates and outlaws from all over the world flocked to his banner, and I swear once I saw Udunvapor talk to Imelda Marcos on a visual telephone. But whoever he recruited, nothing worked. As the world united against our attacks, the sale of Tolkien books plummeted sharply, and in some of the shadier third-world countries his works were banned altogether. Instead of ushering in Tolkien's rule, we were on the brink of doing unrepairable damage to his reputation. And during an unimportant campaign somewhere in a tiny country whose name I forgot, Armand was captured, and we never heard about him anymore.

And then came the day when a very tiny rowing boat approached the U-fat. In the shadow of the gigantic Tolkien statues a little, stocky man climbed aboard. He was clad in a neat, very expensive suit with a very exactly adjusted tie. His sparse hair was neatly combed over the bald patch on the middle of his head. With an expensive-looking handkerchief he wiped a few very neat, exactly parallel-running drips of sweat from his face. The entire Board, as well as the generals, assembled on deck, curious about the meaning of this.

"Good morning", said the little man with a flat, tired voice. "My name is Joe, from Joe's Rent-A-Fleet Service. Who of you is Mr. Udunvager?"

"Udunvager" growled our leader, his voice so deep that the entire deck started to vibrate in sonic resonance.

Unimpressed, the guy named Joe wiped his forehead again. "Mr. Udunvager, we have not received your last three weekly fees for the fleet. Now, don't worry, we are sure it's only a misunderstanding. If you could hand over the missing money now, I would be most willing to continue our business relationship."

All eyes turned to Morambar, who seemed to shrink in the bright daylight. "You see... Joe", he said heavily, "I planned to pay the fees with the bounty from the diamond mines on the Namibian coast. Unfortunately, our Fourth African Bataillon ran into an ambush of pro-Pratchett literary critics outside Windhuk, and-"

"-Well", said Joe, scribbling on a sheet of paper with a very expensive-looking pen, "that's just the second or third worst excuse I've heard in all the years since I entered this business. If you can't pay, I have to ask you to hand over the fleet immediately. I'm sorry, but our contract is quite clear on this." He looked down at the pedestal where Udunvager used to give his speeches, and frowned. "You have worn out the floor paint here quite a bit, Mr. Udunvager", he added. "I might have to charge you extra for that."

The Old Pseudo menacingly waved his tentacles around. "What do you think you're doing?" he hissed. "Don't you see there is a war going on here? We do not have the time to deal with such stuff right now. The fate of the world hangs in the balance, I mean balance, I mean-"

"-Congratulations", said Joe dryly. "You have just discovered the first worst excuse. Unfortunately, it's also one of the most common." And with these words he gently pushed us all into a lifeboat, lowered it down to the water, and minutes later the entire fleet quietly turned around and steamed off towards an imaginary point on the wide, featureless horizon.

We stood in the lifeboat, tightly packed, and suddenly we all started to talk simultaneously. "Now that is a blasphemy, a travesty, a heresy", exploded Horus Engels. "Not the speck on the left cheek of a sparrow would dare to insult the wart on its right cheek this way!"

"Joe delendam est! Cum vehementitudinum maximum!" wailed Harold Brzeznski.

"Now what did I tell you, Morrie! Now what did I tell you!" boomed Aunt Heckie. "Serves you quite right!"

"Stylish repllca w4tches from famous brands", babbled the Old Pseudo.

Morambar Udunvapor said nothing. He just stared at the disappearing fleet, motionless, his face a grim mask of disbelief and wrath. His war was over. He had lost. And in this moment, something snapped inside of me. Everything I had learned to believe in, in my years in the underwater stronghold, the entire ideology that had given me strength, suddenly sneaked away into a dark corner of my brain and made room for a great weariness. "I need a holiday", I murmured. "A very long holiday." No longer having the strength to stand, I collapsed and slid overboard. Shouts followed me: "Noeel!" "What are you doing?" "Come back!" But already a giant wave, seemingly coming from nowhere, took me and washed me away, far away from the tiny lifeboat and its crew.

6: Recreation

"Aloha! Aloo-haa!"

Voices and sweet laughter filled my ears. I was drifting on the water, half asleep, and at first I did not know if the voices were real or a dream.

"Aloha!" No, it was real, I decided, and slowly I lifted my head. A lush green coastline spanned the horizon. Rich palm forests stretched as far as I could see, separated from the sea by the whitest beaches I had ever encountered. Birds tweeted. "Valinor", I murmured to myself as I was slowly washed onto one of these beaches and came to rest on fine, warm sand.

The happy voices approached. They belonged to half a dozen dark-skinned, half-naked and unbelievably beautiful women. They wore flowers in their hair and juggled hula-hoop loops. "Not Valinor. Hawaii", I corrected myself.

"No, Jamaica", said one of the females. "But you have a point there. This holiday facility is run by a Hawaiian businessman. Welcome, stranger."

I stumbled to my feet. My beard was still stuck in a coral reef about ten meters offshore, and I yanked it out. The pain woke me up completely, and I looked around. Beyond the beach, there were white buildings, a hotel of some sort, complete with terraces, swimming pools and colourful sunscreens. People were lying around on towels, books in one hand, beeping blackberries in the other. Young men with shrill-coloured shirts, big sunglasses and mighty dreadlocks served expensive-looking cocktails. An almost unbelievable aura of peace and tranquility lay over the scene. After years in a fortress preparing for all-out war, this seemed like paradise.

"Well", I said and cleared my throat. "This looks like a perfect place for a holiday. Do you happen to have a spare room?"

"Do you happen to have money?" answered one of the beauties.

I frowned. I had left my purse in the U-fat when Joe drove her away. "Do you happen to have a job?" I asked.

"Well, you should talk to our boss", said another woman. "But that should not be a problem. We always need helping hands. Can you mix cocktails?"

"Um, no", I said. "I'm a traffic light salesman. You don't need one of these here, do you?"

The woman frowned. "Not here", she said. "But we could use someone for these party light shows we stage every evening. If this is within your field of profession..."

I grinned. "That will do just fine", I said.

This evening, when the sun set and merry music and partying replaced the drowsiness of the day, I staged a little improvised light show in the yard behind the hotel. Luckily I had not forgotten anything the old Sylmarillenfaycker had shown me, and I managed to impress the Hawaiian businessman enough to get the job. He gave me a little room and promised me a few dollars as wage, not much, but I was used to a spartanic life. From now on I spent my evenings arranging and re-arranging the colourful party lights in the yard, programming sequences for them to blink, flicker, wave, sparkle, undulate and pulse. I wrote quite elaborate sequences and gave them names like "Moonlight over Doriath", "Gondorian Sunset" or "Mount Doom Eruption". The last one, after the initial panic had subsided, became quite a classic in the art of lighting arrangement.

I also made a new friend. He was a young Rastafarian named Papa Tl Zotlicoaatl. When I asked him about his name, he explained me that he had been a Aztec priest before, but then converted to Voodoo because it was less bloody. Papa Tee initiated me to some of his rites, and especially to some of his drugs. He claimed they helped him see Bob Marley, and I took whatever he gave me in the hope of seeing Tolkien one day. "Yo man", Papa Tee used to say, shaking his head rhythmically to the music blaring out of his earphones. "Easy, man. I don't get you. Tolkien is Babylon, yo. Why you wanna see Babylon? But have it your way, man." Papa Tee worked as bartender in the hotel, and despite his habit of occasionally smuggling chicken heads into rich people's drinks, he was a friendly and relaxed fellow.

I spent my days either fooling around with Papa Tee in the countryside, in my room brooding over new compositions, or relaxing at the shore. There was not much to do, and I just waited for fate to show me the way, as it had always done in my life. And fate did not let me down.

One fine morning, after a relaxing sleep and a light breakfast, I walked down to the beach, where the earliest guests had already claimed their towel space. Over the sea, in the east, the sun was rising, and the entire coast was bathed in golden light. Far above me in the palm trees, cute little baby monkeys were feasting on coconuts. Far out on the sea, cute little baby sharks were feasting on an early surfer. Papa Tee was mopping his bar to the sound of Jimmy Cliff. And suddenly it struck me like lightning out of a perfectly blue sky. A young woman was lying on the beach, reading a novel, sipping a glass of iced coconut milk. She was beautiful. And I knew her.

I walked up to the young woman. "Hhh...hh", I said. I cleared my throat and began again.

"Ggg... ghh", I said. I grabbed her coconut milk with trembling fingers and took a deep sip. "Hello, Bombadillia", I finally managed to say.

The young woman looked up and frowned. "Excuse me, do I know you?" she inquired.

I waved towards a boy with a machete who was just climbing a palm tree to get fresh coconuts. As he came running towards me, I grabbed the machete and, with one swift stroke, cut off several meters of my beard, so that the young woman could see my face. She gulped as she finally recognized me. "Noeel?" she asked.

"Yes", I answered. "It's me. What are you doing here?"

"But... but I thought you were dead!" exclaimed Bombadillia. "Drowned by some rogue orcs. So you survived that? Why did you never call me?"

"Well", I said and shuffled around uneasily. "I had a quest... thing going on, you know. I just didn't have the time, and we had not been together anymore for some years-"

"-Oh, don't worry", said Bombadillia. "It's all right. Now you're here, and... wow. That is amazing. Do you still do that silly Tolkien stuff?"

"No. Well, yes. No", I stammered. "Theoretically. But I'm on holiday now. And I don't do anything like that on holiday. Well, not much, at least. Except-"

"-Good", said Bombadillia and smiled. I realized that she had indeed become beautiful. The cute, chubby teenager I had known had grown up. "I'm on holiday too. First holiday for a while. I work as warplane seat cover designer, and we had a lot of work ever since these mysterious, nasty, ugly, violent jellyfish things started attacking us." She shuddered in disgust, and I bit my lips and shuffled around even more uneasily. Bombie noted that I was trying to say something. "What is it, Noeel?" she asked.

I breathed in deeply. "Do you think... do you believe that two people who once were together..." I stuttered. "Do you believe they can get a second chance... I mean, I don't know, like, if you're currently engaged or something, or maybe-"

I could not continue. For in this moment Bombadillia had stood up, flung her arms around me and given me the most ferocious kiss I had experienced in my whole life. I just stood there, dazed, while Bombadillia whispered something in my ear. "What?" I had to ask.

"On one condition", Bombadillia repeated a bit louder. "You've got to shave off this ridiculous beard."

"Yo! Yo! Bob Marley! It's you! Zion is upon us!" Papa Tee bellowed in drugged ecstasy, stormed past us and hugged a nondescript mass of air halfway between us and the sea. But nobody paid attention to him.

In the following weeks I was walking on cloud nine. Well, not literally. In fact, the actual act of walking on cloud nine is vastly overrated. I tried it once by blowing up my belly with helium and drifting up into the sky. If you actually walk on a cloud, all you get are wet feet and the occasional electric shock if your cloud happens to be a thunderstorm. No, what I experienced was much better.

I did shave off my beard and cut my hair short, even though it felt like tearing out a part of myself. I kept a moustache, that compromise I could wrestle through. I think the result was a quite smashing look, not unlike the young Tom Selleck, but with a whiff of devilish mystery in my eyes.

Money was not a problem for Bombadillia. She took me to the best restaurants on Jamaica - and once to the less good one where I had a halibut filet that was unexplicably full of wooden chair splinters - and she bought us cocktails that would have converted Diogenes to a hedonistic lifestyle. In return, I composed a light show for her in which dozens of floodlights cast wonderful pink hearts onto the sky. We went sightseeing, visited the rugged mountains and the lively towns, let Papa Tee take us on a tour to the places Bob Marley had lived at, and stared in wonder at the massive shelters, bunkers and landmine belts the people here had erected as protection against Morambar's armies. And in the evening, we went down to the palm forest and - well, I'll leave that to the imagination of my readers.

The most amazing and inexplicable thing is not what happened between Bombadillia and me these days. The most inexplicable and unbelievable thing is the fact that I blew it. Again.

About two months after our first encounter I took Bombadillia to an open-air cinema near our hotel. It was late, and the whole afternoon a fine drizzling rain had soaked the coast, so the cinema was almost empty, even though the weather had improved again. The film was not really good, and soon Bombadillia was deeply asleep in my arms, and my eyelids were also starting to get heavy.

Suddenly I felt how every remaining hair on my head started to rise. A cold breeze made me shiver. Slowly I turned my head and saw someone sitting in the row behind me. I recognized him, despite the fur and the long, thin ears. It was Morambar Udunvapor.

I grinned. "Why do you wear that stupid bunny suit?" I inquired.

Morambar seemed puzzled. "Oh, that", he finally said. "I lost a bet with Horus. Never mind."

"Oh", I said. "Okay. Why are you here?" Then the shiver crept around my head to my moustache. "You're not really here, are you?"

His voice was only a hoarse whisper. "I was wrong, Noeel", he said. "I thought I could force our belief in Tolkien onto the world without further explanation. But it does not work this way. What I need is someone who can explain to the people why it is necessary. Who can explain why they should accept me as their ruler, and Tolkien above me. I need a prophet, Noeel. And it will be you."

"Why me?" I whispered.

"You are the one I have always waited for", resounded Morambar's ethereal whisper. "You

are the best. The old Board has failed. You will found a new one. You will build me a temple worthy of Tolkien."

Slowly I stood up, as if my body was controlled by someone else. A mad grin crept over my face. "Yes, sir", I whispered. For the last time I looked at Bombadillia's sweet, freckled face. Then I left the cinema and went down to the hotel.

I had not much to pack. I fetched what I had left of Papa Tee's drugs and went down to the beach. In the darkness I noticed a large mass just a few meters off the shore. The moon appeared from behind a cloud, and I realized the mass was a blue whale. It gave me a friendly smile. Quickly I clambered onto its back and held fast to the thick, rubbery skin. "Let's go", I whispered.

Instead of an answer, a mixture of air and foam exploded under my behind and thrust me about five meters into the air. I made a quadruple somersault and fell back onto the whale with a loud splat.

"Not on the breathing hole, idiot", said the whale. I slid to another, better suited part of the whale's back and grabbed the skin again. The whale thrust itself off the sandbank it had been resting on with a mighty stroke of its fluke, slid back into deeper water, and we rode off into the night.

"Why?" I screamed. I kicked the nightstand, and splinters of wood flew through the room. I was back in the present, back in the hospital, back at the little notepad where I jotted down my memoirs.

"I had everything! I had a job, I had a roof over my head, and I was together with the most beautiful girl on Earth!" I kicked my bed, and the frame collapsed.

"And I gave it all up. For a mad religion built around a freaking long-dead writer!" I ripped my pillow apart with my teeth and blew a fountain of feathers through the room.

"I could have married her. I could have had a perfectly normal life!" I dug my fingernails into the linoleum floor and tore out a large part of it. I rammed my toe into the power outlet, and sparks erupted from my fingers and set the wallpaper on fire. "A curse on you, Morambar!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "A curse on you!"

"Now, now", said Bqggz with a tired voice. He stood in the doorframe and watched my destructive efforts with a bored nonchalance. "You knew that getting your memory back could be painful. Just calm down, or I'll have to call the doctor. By the way, this is a public hospital, so you're only harming the taxpayer, in other words, yourself." He patted the wallpaper with a towel and extinguished the flames.

I stepped down from the Tolkien book I had been trampling into the ground. I breathed heavily, and suddenly I felt tears shooting into my eyes, tears for a wasted life. I sat down on the ruins of my bed, sobbing.

"Now, now", repeated Bqggz and patted my shoulder. "I wouldn't say it was all in vain. What about... wait, let me think... or maybe... no, you're right, it was all in vain."

"You're not making me feel better", I sobbed. "Why are you here anyway? Wait, I remember. You wanted to give me the phone number of a good lawyer, to defend myself in court."

"Oh, that", said Bqggz. Again the unexplicable, slightly uneasy expression appeared on his face, but quickly it dissolved into the normal distorted grin that orcs use as smile. "I forgot that. I'll bring it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." I nodded, and Bqggz left me alone in my misery.

7: Inflation

We were speeding through the night, the blue whale and I. Faster and faster we went. The wind tore at my neatly trimmed moustache, twisting it into waves, spirals, Moebius bands and finally a shape that could only be described as escheresque. I was still in the weird kind of trance the vision of Morambar had put me in, and so I spoke little. A long time passed. Finally I shouted against the wind: "Where are we? We must be far from Jamaica by now!"

"Actually, we're a few hundred meters off its coast", the blue whale roared. "You haven't given any directions, so I just swam circles."

"Oh", I said sheepishly and looked to the right, where the Hawaiian businessman's resort whizzed past me, its lights blinking in the pattern I had composed. "Well, then go, um, this way!" I waved into the opposite direction.

"Okay", shouted the whale, and off we went.

Soon after we had left the Jamaican coast for good, the sweet exotic scents of the night faded and gave way to the stale, cold greyness of the nearing dawn. It was the time for regrets, and I started to feel uneasy. I had no idea what Morambar wanted from me, where he wanted me to go and where I should build that temple he had been speaking of. And I missed Bombadillia already.

To suppress these nagging feelings, I decided to engage in a little conversation with my new-found companion. "So who are you?" I asked the whale.

"My name is Cindy", the whale replied. "Cindy the Blue Whale", she added needlessly.

"So you're a girl", I concluded.

"You didn't notice? I thought this gave it away", Cindy said and shook the gigantic blonde pigtail wig on her forehead.

"Of course." I nodded. "And how do you fit into all of this? What is your relation to Morambar and his army?"

"Oh, I run errands for him occasionally", Cindy replied, "But once I was the girlfriend of someone you know. Pseudonymus Roghater."

I burst into sudden laughter. "What?" I gasped.

"Yes. That of course was before he contracted this horrible spam sickness. Which, by the way, was inflicted on him by an evil scientist in a twisted experiment, so Pseudo is completely without guilt for that... Hey, what's so funny?" Cindy wanted to know.

"Well, you're like..." I started. "I mean, he's a jellyfish, and you're..."

"A whale. Is there anything wrong with that?" Cindy's voice took a certain threatening undertone.

"Well, I know", I giggled, "I know of course you both live underwater, usually... and you have no weight there... Still, I wonder how you managed to..."

The tearing wind ceased, for Cindy had come to a full stop. "Are you saying I'm fat?" she asked with a cold voice.

I was laughing almost too hard to answer that question. "Well..." I gasped. "For a whale, I suppose not... but for a man-sized jellyfish, oh my God..."

A cold wave splashed against my feet, tearing me out of my joyful mood. I jumped up. "What's that?" I complained.

Cindy did not answer. She had begun to dive, and I was standing in water that was rising at an alarming rate.

"Hey, don't do that", I demanded. No reply came, and the water splashed against my thighs.

"Come up again!" I yelled. The water gargled to my belly. "I take it back. You're not fat. You're just... let's say, you have heavy bones, and..." It gripped at my breast with cold, wet hands. "You're a supermodel!" I squeaked in panic. "You could run the catwalk in Versace underwear! You could hide in the shadow Kate Moss casts at noon in equatorial regions! Sparrows carry you to their nests because they mistake you for a stick!" It was ironic, I thought, for after all, I was a trained underwater warrior - but I had no beard anymore to store air in. And the pull of Cindy's massive body would drag me far enough underwater to drown me. The whale did not react to my pleas at all. It seemed that Morambar would soon have to look out for a new prophet.

And as I rose to my toetips and the waves splashed against my chin, a thought whizzed through my mind. Prophets used to do amazing things, like healing people with a touch or turning water into wine. When he destined me to be his prophet, had Udunvago also bestowed super powers upon me? Would I be able to call upon him for help? It was worth a try. I was not really interested in turning the ocean into wine, that would just have left stains on my clothes. All I wanted was that damn sulking whale girl to rise.

At the top of my voice I shouted at Cindy: "Rise! By Morambar Udunvapor, I command thee! Rise! Tolkien, I call upon thee, make her rise!"

I held my breath. I was balancing on the back of the whale, while the water gargled around my lower lip, and counted the seconds. The descent had stopped. Cindy was not going down anymore. And then, slowly, the water receded. My chin fell dry, then my breast, and finally the back of the whale broke through the water surface. I was standing there, soaked to the skin, my heart beating wildly. I shook off some clams and one young yellowfin tuna which had crept into my clothes. "Thank you", I sighed and did not know if I was talking to Udunvapor or Cindy.

"What are you doing?" Cindy roared as soon as her mouth appeared over the water. "What is this wizardry?"

"What... wizardry?" I managed to say.

"My belly!" shouted Cindy. "I suddenly feel so... I dunno... full." She burped, then she blew a little air out her breathing hole, but that seemed to give her no relief.

"You mean you're still trying to dive?" I asked, alarmed.

"Yes, only I can't!" answered Cindy. "There's too much air in me right now. Too much buoyancy. Whoah, I didn't feel that way since Pseudonymus last cooked me his famous bean soup." She burped again, then she blushed. "Sorry, I don't usually do this in public... burppp... I'm quite well-mannered usually, but I just can't help it..."

I looked down. The whale was higher above the water than ever. I also thought that she had become, well, more 'heavily-built' than before. In other words, she was rapidly expanding. In still other words, she was looking more and more like a balloon.

And then, exactly like a balloon, Cindy rose from the water and floated into the air. "I don't think this is right at all!" yelled Cindy in panic, and for once, I agreed with her. The inflated whale shot up rapidly, caught by favorable winds, and it was a matter of seconds until the water surface glittered hundreds of meters below us.

And there was another thing that added to my discomfort. Though she was now almost perfectly spherical, her belly - where the expansion had begun - was still the lightest part of Cindy, and that meant, she slowly rolled to her side until the belly pointed upwards. I, stuck on her back, tried to clamber up to her former underside, but Cindy's skin was wet and slippery, and I could not get a secure hold. I tried grabbing her left flipper, but missed it, slipped down - and fell.

"I just... hope this thing is glued to your head somehow", I gasped as I dangled in the air, fidgeting around helplessly with my legs, clinging to the outermost end of Cindy's huge blonde pigtail, which I had grabbed in the last possible second. Beneath me, it was a long way down to the sea. I had water beneath me, surely, but if you fall from a height of about five hundred meters, it does not matter whether you land on water or a brick floor.

"Make it stop!" howled the whale. "I'm afraid of heights!"

I fidgeted some more. I sent a prayer to Tolkien and then another one to Morambar, demanding Cindy's return to the water. But obviously my new-found power was exhausted for now. Finally I gave it up and thought of more practical improvements to my situation. I started to move my legs more rhythmically, and the pigtail started to swing violently. With a stunt that would have made Tarzan proud I managed to swing up to Cindy's belly and land on it, praying that she was not ticklish there.

With something resembling ground under my feet, I calmed down a little and actually started to enjoy the flight. Even Cindy, once she had overcome her initial fear, relaxed and accepted this new experience. A strong north-easter blew, and we were pushed along faster than anyone could have traveled in the water. My clothes soon dried in the wind and the warm sun, getting only slightly moist again when we whizzed through a huge white cloud. We almost bumped into an angel who was sitting on top of it and practised playing the harp, but his angry and rather un-angelic curses soon faded behind us. We overtook a guy in a balloon, who seemed slightly frustrated - I later learned he was Steve Fossett, and we had stolen the new speed record he had targeted. When I became hungry, I caught a swallow and ate it raw. At noon, I lay down for a little siesta. I knotted the end of the pigtail to my moustache, just to be on the safe side, but the ride was so smooth I was in no danger of falling.

When I woke up, it was much colder, and the sun had set in the west. We had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and were floating over Europe. I started to wonder how long Cindy's inflated state would last - maybe it was just imagination or the different lighting, but I thought she had become a bit less rotund, and the ground was a bit closer. But still the ride was uneventful, and I searched my pockets for something to do. I found a copy of Horus Engels' "Commentaries on the use of irregular verbs in Lord of the Rings and the hidden messages they form", and I read a few pages while Scandinavia drifted by beneath us. It was dark, but the book had been written with luminous ink to be readable underwater. It was also written in an obscure dialect of Old Hittite, which made it slightly tedious to read, but I had lots of time after all.

Further and further north we went. Somewhere over the plains of Siberia, snow started to fall around us. An eery red and green light flickered over the night sky, as the aurora greeted us in its homeland. An equally eery blue light on the ground indicated we had reached Novaja Zemlja, the ancient nuclear testing area of the then still existing Soviet Union. Absent-mindedly, I started to hum a tune of an almost forgotten German pop starlet named Maus Bunt. "Novaja Zemlja, es waren keine Semmeln da..."

"Watch out!" cried Cindy suddenly. Something loud and noisy whizzed past us. A few hundred meters over us, it exploded in a blinding ball of fire.

"Dammit!" Cindy yelled. "Anti-aircraft missiles! Hold on tight!" She flapped her fluke and made a sharp turn. Another rocket narrowly missed us. The explosion was so close that it singed my moustache.

"Let's get out of here!" I shouted. But, alas, an upside-down inflated blue whale is not nearly as manoeuvrable as, say, a flying brick. The third missile detonated so close that Cindy was thrown around in the air and rotated uncontrollably. I howled in pain as I slipped off her back and ended up hanging on my moustache, which was still knotted to the pigtail. Then, with a very unpleasant tearing sound, a large part of my moustache was ripped out. Separated from

my safety line, I fell once more, and this time for real. "Tolkien, save meeee!" I wailed as I spiralled towards the ground.

I later learned that Cindy was all right. The Soviet recruits on the missile launcher were young and inexperienced, their fingers were frozen and their stomachs full of vodka. They fired a few more shots, but again they failed to hit her. More southerly winds blew Cindy back into central Siberia, where she finally ran out of air over Norilsk and landed smoothly on a field outside the town. After a short walk into the city she was able to catch a train back to the sea. She still got into quite an argument with the station officials, who wanted to make her pay for all the fifteen seats she occupied, while Cindy insisted that, being a single person, she only needed a single ticket. This, however, was little more than a nuisance compared with being inflated or shot at.

I, meanwhile, was in a slightly more dire situation, spinning towards the ground at an alarming speed. I do not know how long I fell, because I was not really in the mood to stop the time. But fortunately, by then we were close enough to the ground to make the fall non-lethal, if the surface to land on was soft enough. And it was. For with a huge splash I landed in what I had expected least - a colossal iron pot full of mashed blueberries.

I gasped and struggled, then I carefully got up. I noticed the pot, at least five metres wide, was shallow enough that I could stand in it, immersed in blueberries up to my neck. The pain in my right foot indicated that I had a strained ankle, and my upper lip was sore and bleeding all over my utterly ruined moustache. But otherwise, I was fine.

About two dozens of people were standing around the pot. Most were middle-aged women, typical babushkas of the Siberian countryside, burly and tanned from a life of hard work on the fields. All were sprinkled with blueberry juice from my impact and were obviously quite angry.

"You fool! You ruined our annual Blueberry Harvest Celebration!" yelled one of them with a rural Russian accent. "Now look at the mess!"

"Did you at least wash your feet before jumping in?" clamoured another.

I stuttered an apology, but it fell on deaf ears. The atmosphere was getting more and more violent, but fortunately I was saved by a small man with receding hair and a fine suit. He and a big, grim-looking guy - his bodyguard, I supposed - were the only males present. "Now, now, comrades!" the man said. "Let us not forget our manners. I am sure this was just an accident. Boris Nikolayevich" -he turned to the big man- "hand this comrade a towel, and me too. And then we will sit down and talk. I like talks. I am not a violent man, as you all know."

"Thank you", I managed to say. The man wiped the blueberries off his face with the towel the

big guy gave him, but the mash left a clearly visible stain on the right side of his forehead. From experience with the blueberry jam my mother made when I was a child, I knew that it would be extraordinarily hard to get rid of this stain again, especially with the kind of soap that was produced in the final years of the Soviet Union. However, it seems not to have impeded this man's further career. Shortly after this incident, he rose to be the leader of the Soviet Union, which he then disbanded for reasons that never became clear for me. Maybe he just wanted better soap.

The small man helped me to climb out of the pot, and we made our way to a shabby hut that was standing nearby. There I cleaned myself as far as possible and dressed in the only garment I found, a white nightgown from one of the babushkas. It was much too wide and hung almost to the floor - just like a robe. "I like this", I said to myself. "Fits for a prophet, I think. I will keep this style. Much room to store stuff, too", I added when I found a pocket which contained a small flask. I opened it and found out that it contained the best vodka I had ever tasted. "Here, take a sip", I said to the burly bodyguard.

"Uh, no thanks", the bodyguard growled with a very deep Russian voice. "I'm a teetotaller. Never drank alcohol. Bad stuff. Makes you weak."

"Well, that's a shame", I said. "Won't you try a single sip? Come on, it's really good."

The bodyguard looked at me uncomfortably. "Hmm", he grumbled. "Well. One sip. Just because you ask so nicely." He took the flask into his bear-like paw and tried the vodka. His face brightened a little. "You're right", he growled. "This is good. Who would've thought." He took another, deeper sip.

I am not very proud of this episode - in fact, I thought hard about whether I should write it down at all, or just try to forget it. But you, dear readers, deserve to know the truth. Because after this first temptation, for which I was responsible, the bulky guy named Boris started to drink regularly. By the time he followed the small man with the blueberry stain into office and became President of Russia, he had become a full-blown alcoholic, with catastrophic consequences for his own health and the health of his country.

However, at this moment I had other things to worry about. I left the hut and looked at the surrounding landscape, for which the word 'desolate' seemed to be an euphemism. The southern part of Novaja Zemlja consists of patches of tundra, interspersed into rocky, deep-frozen wastelands. Mountains rise here and there, low but already covered with eternal snow caps and glaciers. In fact, I was not sure where these women had found such a large mass of blueberries, until I discovered that the nuclear explosions of the past had warmed up several isolated valleys enough to allow some rudimentary agriculture. But even so, this seemed an unlikely place for the huge temple Morambar had ordered me to build. I wondered whether I was really destined to be here. Maybe Cindy should have carried me somewhere else entirely. "This would be a nice time for a sign", I muttered to myself.

"Now this is extraordinary!" one of the babushkas boomed behind me. I turned around and saw one of the women reading in Horus Engels' book, which must have slipped out of my pocket when I fell. Several others were staring over the babushka's shoulders, trying to get a glimpse of the work. "Most impressive!" the woman cried. "I would never have guessed Tolkien used the word 'slept' so cunningly!"

"Yes", crowed another woman. "And there: it is exactly the one hundred and eleventh word on the page! He must have foreseen the publisher's printer settings! How exciting!"

"You... you read Old Hittite?" I asked, slightly confused.

"Oh yes", boosted the babushka who held the book. "Everyone from our village does. You see, our little hamlet beyond these mountains is named Novaja Niznevartskneftejuganskoblastskajasevernajaschtschnipnodnjetrpetrovskrabotschnigrad. Just to memorize that name trained our brains so much that we now are much smarter than the average Russian peasant. I have five university degrees, and my hobby is winning Go world championships."

"I write novels!" crowed the other woman. "You might have read them. My pseudonym is Leo Tolstoi!"

"I invented the hydrogen bomb!" yelled a third woman.

A great feeling of joy and relief overcame me. I had not been misled. I had found like-minded people. "Great", I said. "Well, what would you think about joining a Tolkien cult? We could convert others to our cause and bring enlightenment to the world. Incidentally, this is what I was told to do. What do you say?"

The women nodded, one after the other. "On one condition", said the one with the book. "For our services, you will provide free copies of Tolkien's works, Western editions. We have the Soviet editions, but they are so heavily censored they're no fun to read."

"Can do that", I assured. "The first thing, of course, would be to build a reasonably sized temple" -I waved into a random direction- "over there, perhaps."

"Well, I designed the Taj Mahal, I should still have the old construction plans", said another babushka. "We could re-use those easily enough. Perhaps with a few more towers this time, the first try ended up more drab than I had thought..."

I grinned. This was getting better and better.

"Excuse me?" a male voice yelled from the shore in the west. I noticed that a big and slightly rusty yellow bus was approaching, carefully avoiding the rocks and deep holes in the ground. A round yellow face appeared on the window, a face that was located between a red robe and a huge, very peculiar yellow hat. Behind him, in the bus, I noticed dozens of similarly dressed people. "Excuse me", repeated the Buddhist monk, "we are looking for a Neil Quilsky or Kicksly. We believe he is some sort of prophet who can lead us to enlightenment. The jellyfish man told us we should worship him and do his bidding."

"Sure... sure", I said. By now I was in a kind of ecstatic trance, resembling the feeling when you have just won the lottery jackpot. "Let's start right away..."

And so my second rise to power had begun.

8: Prophecy

I wandered through the desert. The warm sand caressed my naked feet. The sun was a perfect ball of glaring light in the bluest sky I had ever seen. I was one of the three mythical kings, and in my arms I held presents for the newborn child - urns of gold, incense and myrrh. I reached a stable that appeared between the golden dunes like an image in a dream. There, in a crib, he lay, a child of perhaps three or four days. He was smoking the pipe he was so seldom seen without, his inexplicably wrinkled face smiled on me, and he quoted from History of Middle Earth, page one thousand one hundred and-

"Wake up, Mister Quickley", the donkey said into my ear.

I blinked. The crib, Tolkien, the whole desert, everything faded out. The donkey withered and changed in a most peculiar way, until it finally stabilized as a Russian babushka, the one who had invented the hydrogen bomb. The stable walls receded and became a huge, dark hall with walls of raw stone. My head hurt.

"Ouch", I growled and tried to stand up from the bed I had been lying in. The floor was very, very cold, and my naked feet froze to it in an instant. The Russian winter held Novaja Zemlja firmly in its grip. It was the third winter I spent in this land, and some of my plans from the past three years had already been carried out, while others suffered from annoying delays. "For example", I said while two akolythes with jackhammers created a circular trench in the stone floor around me, "I ordered you to build a floor heating last year. Where is it?"

"I'm sorry, we did build it, it just does not work", the babushka said. "Remember the day when the nuclear power plant failed? We had no power for a whole night, the water froze in the pipes and damaged them, and we haven't been able to repair-"

I cut her off with an impatient move of my hand. "Always the same lame excuses", I grumbled. The acolythes lifted me and a round stone plate up and hung both of us onto a clothesline next to a small campfire. After a few minutes I felt how my feet came free, and I fell head-first into an ash pit that had, for my taste, already far too many of those weird round imprints that originated from my skull. I stumbled back to the bed over a temple floor that had, for my taste, already far too many circular holes. This time, of course, I had remembered to put on my slippers first, which were hand-stitched and made of the finest angora wool.

Through a huge door, decorated with spikes and skulls, I left the raw building of the temple and staggered out into the night. Or night it seemed - my Rolex kept claiming it was eight o'clock. But we were north of the polar circle, and the sun, if it rose at all, just hovered on the horizon for a few hours and then disappeared again.

The peaceful valley I had fallen into three years ago had been transformed. Now it housed a bustling and rapidly growing shantytown. Huts were constructed out of stone and corrugated iron, grew floor by floor into the sky until they either collapsed or were flattened for road building. Streetlights - hand-picked by me, of course - dotted the town with colourful points which, seen from space and connected, formed the word 'Tolkien'. Children, orphaned in hut crashes, worked diligently to expand the town and the network of streets. And above it all loomed a gargantuan half-finished building, made from glittering black basalt, outfitted with a mind-dazzling amount of towers. My temple.

"Good morning, sir", said one of the Tibetan monks who guarded the main entrance. He gave me a friendly smile, which I returned. He was one of those who had arrived in the first bus, back when my temple was nothing but a shabby hut and the town nothing but an irradiated meadow where mutant several-headed sheep grazed.

I breathed deeply, and my breath turned to snow that fell lightly on the palace forecourt. I knelt down and did a few pushups. Then I rolled my eyes and shouted wild curses, while the jackhammer akolythes returned and freed my hands, which of course had immediately frozen to the ground. After I had fallen from the clothesline once again, I had breakfast - polar bear sausage on toast and a really big cup of coffee - and then it was time for my morning speech.

It was the same every morning. Precise like a clockwork, the entire town came to a stop, lights were switched out and streets were deserted, while the inhabitants streamed up to the temple courtyard to listen to my words. I usually spoke for about an hour, and then my followers returned to their daily affairs and their huts, some of which had collapsed in the meantime.

"My friends!" I began as soon as the crowd had assembled. A silence fell over the forecourt, and hundreds of eyes stared at me, ready to hear what I had to say. I closed my own eyes and concentrated, sending a silent prayer to Morambar and to Tolkien himself, and asked for an inspiration. In my first year, I had spent agonizing hours formulating my speeches, mostly during the night, but nowadays I just spoke spontaneously. Being a prophet, I had realized, is just like any other profession - it gets easier with practice.

And I looked like a prophet indeed. Still I wore white nightgowns as robes, of which I had ordered a few dozen from the first money I had earned, so that I no longer had to rob the babushkas of theirs. My beard had grown again, not yet to the glory of my late underwater years, but it already touched my knees when I was standing.

"My friends", I repeated as I opened my eyes again, and I felt the words rising inside me as if truly inspired by a higher power. "Every one of you has come here for a single purpose only. You had families, you had jobs, you had a life outside this isle. But you gladly gave it all up to live here with me, to serve a higher purpose, something that is so much bigger than everyone of us, to spread the words of Tolkien. Yes, it is bigger than I am, too. Look not upon me as a leader, look upon me as an elder brother. I serve a greater prophet than myself - the man who saved me from the ignorance of my youth, the man who has dedicated his life to this very cause, the man who is more than a man, for he has seen the light. You know his name."

"Morambar", murmured the crowd in awe. "Udunvapor."

"And he, so high above me, yet in turn serves someone else!" I yelled. "He serves the greatest author of all times, the man who gave us Lord of the Rings, The Silmarillion, Quenya grammar and a renaissance of the most lordly smoking instrument, the pipe! He serves Tolkien!"

"John Ronald Reuel", arose the murmur once again, "Tolkien."

"You may ask", I continued, "is it worth it? Why dedicate one's life to a single author? But remember the Bible, my friends. What else is it but a single book? And still this book and the message it conveys have shaped humanity for two thousand years. It has given birth to three

religions which today comprise the majority of the earth's population. This clearly shows that it is possible to transform the world with a book alone. And look at today's world. Look at poverty, misery, war. Is it not true that this world could use a little transformation?"

Heads nodded. My logic was flawless.

"Remember the Necronomicon", I added. "What else is it but a single book? And still this book and the message it conveys have shaped nameless civilizations for millions of years before mankind existed. It has given birth to a religion that comprised tentacled beings on several worlds..." I hesitated, because the majority of the people below had started to display a certain confusion. I made a mental note for future speeches: Do not mix mythologies.

"Anyway, who would be better suited to lead us into this new world than Tolkien?" I continued. "Remember his words. Do you know what the second word on page 651 of the Lord of the Rings Harper-Collins edition says? Do you know? What would you guess?"

The audience held its collective breath. I had returned to the right track and captured them again.

"The word says 'Then!'" I yelled triumphantly. I could do that from memory, having at least glanced into the book once per day in the past three years. "Now what is the meaning of 'then'? 'Then' is a word rooted equally in the past and in the future. It closes one thing and starts another. First something happens, and it is finished, and *then*... It is a word that links two things, a word that connects, a word that can heal what is torn in two! A word to heal the world!"

Small shouts of "Yes! Yes!" arose as the audience edged towards exstasy. I did not pay attention.

"Let 'then' be our motto, then", I shouted. "Let us first finish one thing, then start others. Let us do one thing after the other, always having the next thing in mind already. Let us connect our individual strengths. Let us heal the world together!"

"Yes! Yes!" shouted the people. Some fell to their knees and wept. Confetti was thrown. I continued my speech in this style, spoke at length about some text passages, ridiculed a few other fantasy authors who had neither the skills nor the stamina of Tolkien, and announced a few more plans for the town and the temple. Finally I roused them all again with a few carefully placed Tolkien quotes. It was a good speech, I thought as the final applause surged.

While the applause still raged on, I suddenly heard a familiar voice next to me. "Whoah, man", it said. "You got yourself quite a happening there, man. Jah love."

I turned around in surprise. Papa Tlztoticoatl stood at my side, wrapped in a large number of seal skins against the cold, so that he looked more like a ball of fur than a human being.

"Hey!" I yelled, pleasantly surprised. The crowd, feeling that they did not have my attention any longer, started to dissolve. "What are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd drop over", said the young Rastafarian. "Business at Jamaica no good, man. Resort almost went broke when you left. Lost our main attraction when you and your light

shows quit."

"Oh", I said, suddenly feeling guilty. "Sorry about that. You see, I was called by Morambar himself, and I had to-"

"No hard feelings, man", Papa Tee said with a wide grin, showing about two hundred white teeth. "Time for a change anyway. Zion's where we look for it, man. In the heart of you'n'me. Bob Marley love, man."

"Yeah, whatever", I said, relieved. "Welcome to... uh... well, I must have forgotten to give it a name. My town."

"Noeltown?" proposed Papa Tee.

"Well, yeah, actually, it would be more like Noeltown", I said. "I grew weary of the misspellings. So I go by the name Noel now. One 'e' only. Had the name officially changed. Cost me twenty bucks to bribe the local scribe guy, but it was worth it."

"If you say so", Papa Tee said. "I'd not love Papa Te. It's Tee, man. Like relaxed. Te! Te! Te! That's like a gun of Babylon goes. But I guess it doesn't matter. Have it your way, man."

"I intend to", I said.

"Oh, besides", Papa Tee added, "I figured you'd be out of this by now." He held up a large plastic bag filled with ominous-looking dried weed.

"Tolkien and Bob Marley bless you, man", I exclaimed, and I meant it.

I quickly renewed my friendship with Papa Tee. I introduced him to the babushkas as an old friend of mine and now my First Disciple (for I figured he needed a title). It was meant tongue-in-cheek, sort of, because I never was sure how much Tolkien Papa Tee actually read. He continued to prefer his reggae singers. Still, I think he got interested in what I was doing, and he was mightily impressed by the town I had stamped out of the frozen ground. We would sit in the hall of my temple all night long and talk about this and that, and of course about Bombadillia. Papa Tee had a confession to make in that regard. "She was so sad after you left", he said and looked to the ground unhappily. "Lost in Babylon, she was. Couldn't bear it. So I showed her the way out of the Desert. You know how it is, man. A man and a woman, and a good joint, and suddenly all clothes are on the floor, and-"

I put a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay", I said, even though it was not, and my heart stung whenever I just mentioned her name. "I'm glad you looked after her. Maybe she will join us here one day. Though I doubt it. She's a businesswoman. Believes in nothing. I guess we two just weren't meant for each other." Liar, a voice shouted deep inside me.

"Yo, man", Papa Tee said and passed me a handful of his weed. I put it into an ornate pipe which one of the babushkas had carved for me from a walrus tooth. I grabbed a strand of my

beard and rubbed a match against it. Sparks erupted, and the match burned. I lit my pipe. "Nice trick", Papa Tee said.

I inhaled deeply. The warm fuzziness of the drug clouded my mind, and the sharp edges of my painful memories blurred and softened. "Oh Bombadillia", I sighed, and for one moment I came awfully close to shedding a tear. Then I inhaled again, and my mental image of Bombadillia disappeared in a burst of smoke. I made a solemn promise. Never, I said to myself, would I let the level of drugs in my blood fall below a point where her image would become visible again. Papa Tee had brought a few potted plants, so that we would not run out of weed, if we managed to get a garden going in this icy land.

A shadow stirred in the edge of the hall, a shadow only I could perceive. It whispered something to me in the hoarse voice I knew so well, then it disappeared, leaving no trace. "What you look at, man?" Papa Tee inquired. "Vision?"

I nodded. "Morambar", I whispered. "Told me my speeches would sound cooler if I held them in Latin. What do you think?"

Papa Tee stared at me. "Yo... man", he said insecurely. Then he stuffed himself a pipe.

In the present, the lawyer Bqggz had recommended visited me in the hospital three days after I had finally found the strength to phone him. Unsurprisingly, he was an orc as well. "Smeagolurtz" he introduced himself under a latex mask of the late Maggie Thatcher. "Specialist for divorces, child custody, and children suing their parents for psychological harm their divorce has done to them."

"Noel... Noel Quickley", I said. I still felt unsure using my birth name. After I had been von Schneiffel for years, it felt drab and unspectacular. Still, I was not exactly opposed to being drab and unspectacular for a change.

"You know what the charge against you is?" Smeagolurtz asked. He was a haggard, grim-looking orc in an expensive suit, ironed so accurately that he could have modeled for a guide on how to iron your clothes accurately. His tie was so tight that I feared his head would fall off any moment. "Suppose Bqggz told you."

"Uh, just in passing", I admitted.

Smeagolurtz nodded. "Doesn't surprise me. Bqggz hates that legal stuff. Avoids it where he can. That's why I do stuff for him. He gets into all kinds of trouble with his communism crusade." He lit a cigarette made of the foulest tobacco I had ever smelt. The doctor came in and complained that this was a non-smoking area. Smeagolurtz responded by proving that the nurse was his illegitimate daughter, convinced her to sue him, and the doctor was sentenced to forty-five minutes in jail for not paying alimonies. "That should give us forty-five minutes of peace", Smeagolurtz commented and lit another cigarette with the stub of the first one.

"Neat trick", I said, impressed.

"Basic stuff, really", Smeagolurtz played it down. "We learn that in our first year in law school. Now your issues are a bit more complicated, aren't they." He paused and looked briefly into a folder stuffed with paperwork. "Stirring public unrest, blah blah, overthrowing some governments, waging total war against all of humanity... giving sermons whilst being naked, that one could give you some trouble... illegal drug trafficking, jellyfish sodomy-"

"-That's a lie!" I exclaimed. "I never did that."

"I believe you", Smeagolurtz mumbled through his cigarette. "Usual smear against a political opponent. Will be hard to prove that one false, though. Causing a nuclear explosion-"

"-It was an accident", I interrupted again. "We tried to get this power plant going, and-"

"-Yes, yes", Smeagolurtz nodded. "I already suspected that. Well, we should get you out of all this with a minimum of trouble. A few months on probation, at most." He out the folder away and stared at me intensely. "But for this, you need to cooperate. Keep your head down while the trial is on. No public speeches, nothing to indicate that you intend to pick up that prophesying business again. You've got to convince the judge you're over it." He looked at the window as a hand grenade detonated in front of it, thrown by an angry protester below. I had gotten so used to their constant protesting that I hardly noticed such stuff anymore.

"Nothing easier than that", I said. "I'm not a prophet anymore. Really, I want nothing more than to be a normal person again."

"That's the spirit", said Smeagolurtz and lit his third cigarette on the stub of the second.

"By the way", I inquired, "could you look up a person for me? I want to know what has become of her. She is named Bombadillia Ryngsmith. Designs airplane seat covers, I think. Did so last time I saw her."

Smeagolurtz looked at me for a long time. Pity was on his face, which is an odd expression for an orc, and just something you don't want to see on the face of Maggie Thatcher. "You mean Bombadillia Tl Zotlcoatl?" he said. "They have a few kids. Their eldest son has been elected to the US senate. Second youngest senator ever, with two and a half years. They're mighty proud of him. But he's a conservative. Has a high rank in the NRA, too. Would be a bad move to visit them now. Could make you look like you're trying to buy weapons for another putsch."

I bit my lip. I could not blame Bombadillia for not waiting for me - not after I had ditched her like that on Jamaica. And if a man could make her happy, it was surely Papa Tee.

"Well, then", said the lawyer and handed me a slip of paper. "That's the day you have to appear in court." I looked at the date, which was still a few days from now, but too close to make me feel comfortable. "Except if you need more time to prepare. I could try to delay it. Sue the judge for being the illegitimate son of Tl Zotlcoatl, or something like that."

"No", I said firmly. "No, I want this to be over as soon as possible."

"Really", Smeagolurtz said, and I thought he sounded a bit disappointed. "Would have been

fun though. Well, see you in court then." We shook hands, and the lawyer left, lighting another cigarette as he walked through the door.

9: Preachery

Rome was not built on one day, the saying goes. That is correct, actually. It took me close to four months.

Well, I admit, it was not Rome. It was a smaller version thereof, a new suburb to my sprawling city on Novaja Semlja. But it had everything the real Rome had: aqueducts, quaint little pizzerias and taverns, and a colosseum that actually beat the original one in size. My Rome was constructed around my temple, so that this building ended up in the exact same place where the real Rome had its Vatican. When he noticed that, Papa Tee actually asked me whether I, maybe, perhaps, might be overdoing it. I answered that I really failed to see any difference between me and the Pope of the Catholic Church anymore. True, I still had not as many followers as he did, but my disciples made up in fanaticism for their lack in numbers. Papa Tee finally saw my points and rested his case. Ah, poor Papa Tlzoatlcoatl! Always the soft-spoken, helpful kind of guy who is more often right than his loud-mouthed friends give him credit for.

I re-built Rome for a reason, of course. The morning after Morambar's spirit had ordered me to give my sermons in Latin, I thought that I needed an appropriate scenery around me, or I would just look ridiculously out of time. So I let my followers erect all those things, and because I have never been too much into gladiator stuff, I converted the new Colosseum into a giant terraced garden to grow my drugs in. I had been serious about never letting my supplies run out again, and the surplus weed - despite my increasingly extreme consumption, I occasionally did have a little surplus of a few kilotons - gave me a nice extra earning when I sold it to England as cattle fodder. Years after that I learned that cows did not tolerate my weed nearly as well as I did, and that I was responsible for some cases of irrational cattle behaviour that gained some fame as Mad Cow Disease. I feel a little sorry about that today, but in this case it was really an oversight on my part, in contrast to the wilful act when I invented Bird Flu by repeatedly sneezing on sparrows.

At this point, some of my readers may wonder how I could achieve so much in such short time and why so many people kept flocking to my banner - the population of Novaja Zemlja had shot into the six-digits realm in my very first year, and my city had long engulfed and swallowed the tiny hamlet Novaja

Niznevartskneftejuganskoblastskajasevernajaschtschnipnodnjetrpetrovskrabotschnigrad. By the time Rome was completed, the population was quickly heading towards the one-million mark. But then I would like to remind you of the great magnetic force that a new religion can develop in times of turmoil. Like Christianity in a crumbling Roman empire, like Islam amongst the warring tribes of Arabia, like Scientology amongst the confused and spoiled brats of Hollywood, my religion gave new hope to thousands and millions of believers. And who would dispute that my holy books, the works of Tolkien, were the most brilliant of all these religions' scriptures? As for the world-in-turmoil part, I hit a window of opportunity as well as the brittle balance of the Cold War came to an end. These were the times when the Soviet

Union, now led by the friendly guy with the blueberry stain, started to disintegrate; when Thatcher - angered about communist orcs who repeatedly posed as her with their latex masks - dismantled Britain's welfare system and when the Faroe Islands' soccer team devastated Austria with 1:0. In short, a never-ending stream of uprooted, despaired, confused people in the search for moral guidance washed upon my shores. Morambar Udunvagor had been right. This, not the brute force of his jellyfish armies, was the key to world dominion.

I set up a few schools and taught Latin to my disciples, and when they showed basic signs of understanding, I started to switch the language of my sermons. My hand still trembles while I write this, as I recall the splendour and glory of these later sermons. My temple had been completed, and if the people who think so highly of the Taj Mahal today had seen it, they would have sneaked off with the tail between their legs. Tower upon tower rose into the grey arctic sky, and the shimmering walls of black volcanic obsidian were lined with rubies, emeralds, sapphires, diamonds and Nef runes. Of course the floor heating had been repaired by now - and extended to the colosseum - and the jackhammer holes had been filled with rosewater, in which tiny goldfish swam. The huge open-air courtyard was fully equipped with floor heating so that exotic palm trees could grow there, and mighty statues overshadowed the crowd that gathered in this space every morning. I later sold some of these statues as movie props to a guy named Jack Peterson or similar.

And then I stepped out on a balcony, dressed in a robe so white that whenever my sermons were broadcast, televisions around the world exploded, unable to properly display the brilliance of my garb. I leaned on a staff that was a detailed, but oversized replica of Tolkien's pipe, and I started every morning's sermon with the recitation of a special hymn that had come to me in a dream.

"Tolkien, tu my guiding lux..." I boomed.

"Tolkien! Tu my guiding lux!" the crowd echoed.

And so I continued, line for line, and my disciples repeated it.

"... Ego lego tibi books
Every dies, tota noctes
Lego quod your mens concoctes!

Tolkien, tu es genius
Et I quote e pluribus
Volumes of Historia
Of Medium-terra! Gloria!

Non est semper truth in them?
Non sunt they so brilliantem?
O amicus, can't tu find
In them pacem for your mind?

Tolkien, tu es scriptor best
North to south et east to west
Cis et trans et hoc and hic
Noone scribit better fic!"

Then I talked at length in this unmodulated singing voice some priests adopt when they recite Latin prayers. I talked about why Balrogs did not have wings, why the Nazgul ran away at Weathertop, and I solved the puzzle of the origin of orcs once and for all. I only wish I could remember what that secret was. But to be completely honest, I was too drugged up most of the time to understand what I was saying myself. A few times I actually lost consciousness on that balcony, and the ghost of Tolkien took possession of my body and spoke through me. Those occasions were seen as wonders by my disciples, and in these minutes water in their drinking bottles turned into wine, sores and bruises from their hard labour for me healed, and the dead rose up and walked the earth. These were joyous moments, though they caused some annoying work afterwards when we had to hew down all those zombies. And every day, I finished my sermon with the last stanza of the hymn:

"So, amici, veni mecum
Follow mihi, the prophetum
Lege Tolkien every hora
Atque spread his vox in fora!"

And the entire courtyard erupted in applause and tears of joy.

I usually held court after the sermons, in the hall directly adjacent to the courtyard, where a massive throne had been built. It had the height of ten tall men and the width of Cindy, and of course nobody ever sat on it, for this was the throne of Tolkien. In front of it, a smaller and slightly less adorned seat had been put up, which had the height of three tall men and the width of Hecate Mensenlarger, and of course nobody ever sat on it, for this was the seat of Morambar. In front of it, a tiny wooden footstool had been erected, on which I sat.

The protocol for an audience with me started quite simple and became more elaborate as time passed. At first, people just walked to my stool and bowed low before they were allowed to speak. Later, I made them kneel for no apparent reason. Then, I amused myself by having them crawl all the way from the door. I finally settled on digging a trench filled with my own saliva, through which they had to rob right up to a bottomless pit, into which they jumped, and if they were lucky or Tolkien blessed them, they could hold on to a very thorny root about three kilometres below the ground, and dangling there, they could shout up to me. Only a few people were excepted from that protocol - Papa Tee, of course; the babushkas; a young guy who could prove convincingly that he was allergic to thorny roots; and, last not least, my dad. He was not my biological father, of course. He was the last Freiherr von Schneiffel zu Kuhdung, a village in the Eifel uplands in rural Western Germany. After centuries of isolation and incest, all ninety-seven inhabitants of the twin hamlets Schneiffelbroich and Kuhdungkaffen were brothers, and so the Freiherr had been forced to remain childless until I proposed he adopted me. This way, his line would not die out, and I finally received my nobility title and became known as Noel von Schneiffel. As I recall, the protocol was only once violated by a living being not on that list, a guy from the Salvation Army who thought he could just walk in and rattle his collection box under my very nose. I spanked his behind so thoroughly that he later earned his living in a freak show, posing as Bluebum, the Half-Smurf; and nobody ever tried to intrude like that again.

Years passed, and then more years passed. They were followed by years, for a change. Time is not a very inventive force.

There is not much to tell about my later life on Novaja Zemlja - I had my daily routine of preaching and studying, and to that I adhered. The babushkas and the Buddhist monks from that yellow bus, my very first followers, took over most of the organisational tasks of running my cult. They were good at it - well, they were good at anything they did, and soon I developed complete confidence in them and stopped controlling things myself. Instead I concentrated on spiritual matters, and Papa Tee also did what he was best at. He opened another bar not far from the Colosseum, *The Frozen Aztec*, and the word spread through the city that his cocktails were the best north of the 70th degree of latitude, and if you drank six of them you could see Jamaica, and if you drank sixteen of them you could see Bob Marley.

In all this time, I never saw Baggy again. I was quite content with that, and I guess he was, too. I had less and less visions of Morambar and increasingly communicated with Tolkien himself - I had grown to a stage where I had no need of an intermediary anymore, or so I kept telling myself. One day I found the first grey hair on my head, something that pushed me into a melancholic state for several weeks. Also, though my natural haggard physique has always prevented me from putting on weight too easily, in these years I developed a little belly from all the good food and the frequent drinking parties over at *The Frozen Aztec*. It must have been close to ten years since Cindy had carried me to these shores when, finally, the signs started to appear. The first sign was a flaming inscription on my bedroom wall that appeared out of thin air when I staggered home from a seventeen-cocktail evening. It said "mene mene tekel upharsim".

Well, actually, it said that only for a very short time. Then it quickly disappeared and was replaced by "sry wrong copy'n'paste". That in turn disappeared within seconds and made room for "ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen".

Now of course I knew what that meant without looking it up. I knew it was the first line of Tolkien's farewell poem, printed in *Lord of the Rings*, that began with "ah! like gold fall the leaves in the wind, long years numberless as the wings of trees" and so on. But the meaning of this inscription completely escaped me, even more so because I had just proven in today's sermon that trees do not have wings. Was a farewell about to happen? Was a branch of a palm tree in the courtyard threatening to fall on my head and kill me? I called for the babushkas, but even they could not make any sense of it. At the end I had them cover the writing with thick black paint because the light disturbed my sleep.

The second sign was an invasion of locusts. That too did not cause much harm. Papa Tee even amused himself by smuggling locusts into his guest's drinks. The third sign was Horus Engels, who was on a tour through Siberia to read from his latest book and sent me a note in Egyptian hieroglyphs, saying he'd like to drop by for a chat. Unfortunately, I was busy that day and could not welcome him. Three days after that I walked back into the palace after my morning sermon and suddenly noticed the air had become very cold. I shivered, and every hair on my head started to rise. I had about two meters of hair at this time, so I started to look somewhat like a puffed, spherical hedgehog four meters in diameter.

"Stop that nonsense", whispered the hoary voice of Morambar's ghostly projection. "We have to talk."

I let my hair sink back to where it belonged. The floor and the walls showed signs of motion, and I wished I had not smoked that eighth pipe this morning. "Master", I croaked.

Udunvapor stood next to me, towering and brooding like always. Faint daylight from the high, narrow windows shone through him without illuminating him. He was not wearing his bunny suit, thank God. He looked around in the huge, dark hall with, that much was clear to see, displeasure. "What are you doing, Noel?" he asked.

"Um..." I said and cleared my throat. "What you ordered me to do. Convert the world to Tolkien. Yes."

"Really?" Morambar said dryly. "What is the current number of your followers?"

I started to feel like a schoolboy facing his teacher when he knows he has not done his homework. "Um, I don't know", I admitted. "Leo Tolstoi is taking care of that. That's the babushka with the red coat and the wart on her-"

"I know", Udunvapor cut me off. "I will tell you. The curve has been flattening. You are hardly recruiting new members anymore."

"I am?" I murmured.

"Do not get me wrong", the Master said. "You have done much - more than any other of my students ever accomplished. Your cult has to be numbered among the top ten world religions. But now it is not growing anymore. You have settled for a place amongst them, for peaceful coexistence. But I do not want peaceful coexistence. I want the world to bow down before Tolkien! Every single living being shall acknowledge His greatness!"

I looked to the floor unhappily. Suddenly I was feeling very sober. He was right, I knew that. The critique was devastating, but well earned.

"And look at you!" Udunvapor hissed into my ear. "You are becoming lazy. Weak. Fat."

Utterly humiliated I fell to my knees. Tears rolled down my face. "What shall I do, Master?" I sobbed. "How can I redeem myself? Command me!"

Suddenly, I felt a cold, ethereal hand patting my shoulder. I looked up and saw Morambar smiling. "Do not burden yourself with guilt", he said. "No harm has yet been done that cannot be rectified. But you must leave this temple. You must leave behind your life of luxury. You must not wait for the people here, you have to go and seek the people. You will be a wandering prophet, and the light of Tolkien shall show you the way. Do not worry, He will watch over you." With these words he faded and disappeared, and the daylight through the windows seemed to return to its normal brightness.

Papa Tee found me kneeling on the floor a few hours later, lost in deep thoughts. I told him of my vision, and this evening we had our plan ready. Papa Tee and the babushkas would stay and keep the cult running, while I would embark on my quest to deal the death blow to the other world religions. And I knew how I would do it. I would visit the leaders of those religions, one at a time - my fame was already great enough that I would have no trouble arranging private meetings - and then I would convert them to my belief in Tolkien. Once the

Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Grand Ayatollah, John Rees, the High Shaman of Ayers Rock and Tom Cruise were safely in my camp, the rest of their believers would follow without hesitation. I would start with the Dalai Lama, because I suspected he was closest to my own views already. At least in his dress code.

The day of my departure from Novaja Zemlja brought the greatest and most awesome celebration this barren island had ever seen. My city was covered knee-deep in the most colourful confetti, and Papa Tee, in charge of the catering, made a fortune. I walked towards the shore in a robe so blindingly white that everyone had to wear sunglasses, for it had been bleached with the tears of sixty-six virgins who had wept all night over the beauty of Tolkien's poems. And I walked on, out into the sea, because I was still an underwater warrior and I figured a little hike on the seabed to the Dalai Lama's abode would benefit my waistline. Of course my beard had long since been restored to its full oxygen-storing capacity.

The waves washed over my head, and the water muffled the cheers of the crowd which had gathered on the shore to bid me farewell. I breathed a particularly big bubble and playfully caressed a shark baby that had swum to the coast to see what all the fuss was about. I gave its mother, a fine-looking shark lady, a kiss and an autograph on the dorsal fin and walked on. My mood was very cheerful; I had shed the apathy that had gotten hold of me lately and now I was back on track.

A few hundred meters beyond the shore I found a curious field of round somethings lying on the ground. They looked like pillow lava, though I was not aware of any volcanic activity in this area. I briefly wondered who would want to sleep on lava pillows - balrogs maybe? - then I shrugged and marched right through these things. Idly, I kicked one of it, whereupon I realized three different things in the fraction of a second. Firstly, the round things did not consist of stone as expected, but of rusted metal. Secondly, a little red light on top of that thing started to blink. Thirdly, I suddenly remembered the defense lines the nations of the world had created against Morambar's marine armies more than a decade ago. Much of this defense had consisted of vast fields of underwater mines.

The explosion triggered a chain reaction in the minefield, and it must have looked quite impressive from the shore. I, however, was not in the position to appreciate the show. The detonation threw me upwards, out of the water, and in a perfect parabola I fell back towards the ground just above the shore. There was a high crane towering above the crowd with a camera on top, to broadcast my departure to the world's TV stations from a bird's eye perspective. In falling, my underpants got caught on the topmost spike of the crane, and my descent stopped abruptly. There I dangled, half-naked, my torn and burnt robe gliding down to the shocked masses in several disconnected parts. To make things worse, I was wearing slightly embarrassing underpants with little pink hearts and teddy bears on them. And my behind dangled right in front of the camera. The official footage of this event has long been destroyed, I took care of that, but I have been told that a video clip of my teddy-beared butt can still be downloaded from the more shadowy regions of the internet.

When the crane was finally lowered, Papa Tee came running towards me with some bandages and a hastily commandeered yellow raincoat. "What now?" he asked, out of breath.

"Call Joe's Rent-A-Fleet service", I hissed while I wrapped myself into the coat. "I need to hire a boat."

Back in the present, I slammed the door of my hospital room behind Smeagolurtz. It was the day before my trial, and he just had spent hours coaching me with legal terms and defensive tactics. No matter how optimistic Smeagolurtz tried to sound, I was deeply afraid by now. It was obvious that my fate hung on a very thin thread. If I emerged victorious, all was well. But if just the slightest flaw appeared in our defensive strategy, I could end up in jail for a very long time. The world never liked fallen cult leaders, no matter what had led to their downfall. It was obvious that a whole lot of my followers had emerged with severe emotional scars from their service on Novaja Zemlja, and they would try to blame me for everything that had happened on this island ever since my crash-landing in the babushkas' blueberry pot.

The air was filled with thick fumes from Smeagolurtz' constant smoking, and I opened the window to let some fresh air in. Immediately, a barrage of overripe tomatoes from the protesters below was hurled through it and stained the walls of my room, and I shut the window quickly. They were vigilant, these people out there.

What *had* led to my downfall? The question nearly drove me insane. The remaining white patches in my memory were very small now, but they covered important events. My temple had been standing in all its glory when I left it, and my followers had numbered millions. How was the final cataclysm triggered that I remembered so clearly, the scene of fire and destruction inside the great hall just next to the courtyard?

Bqggz interrupted my musing when he stuck his green orc-head through the door, serious concern on his face. "Hey, Noel", he said. "Just wanted to wish you luck with the trial. Whoah, it smells awful in here. Are you sure you want no membership in my communist party now? It can strengthen your mind in times of trouble when you have a belief to cling to."

"Tell me about it", I commented sourly.

Then I told Bqggz about the gaps in my memory, and he shrugged. "Well", he said, "it's good they appear in this timeframe, isn't it? Because that must be the time when you had this internet diary. You never were much of a diary-writer, but you kept that blog for a certain time. I read it with interest, you know, and commented quite a few-"

He had to stop talking, because I had jumped at him and was shaking his shoulders viciously. "Where?" I asked. "How? I need a computer. A laptop. Something. Now! What was the password?"

Bqggz brushed away my hand. "How should I know your password?" he said indignantly. "But it probably was 'Tolkien'. I doubt you could have come up with something else. If that doesn't work, try 'Pipeweed'."

10: Diary

I reached the coast of mainland Russia on a boat named Tostarttheenginepleasepressthebluebutton, which was a cost-cutting trick of Mr. Joe because it saved him from having to provide a user manual. Then I walked south on my quest to find the Dalai Lama, until the grass became greener and the sun became warmer. I was in no hurry and took my time to convert a few villagers on my way. Nevertheless, I must have been far in Kazakhstan already when I was surprised by the savage attack.

The first thing I noticed was a flock of white fur balls on the horizon. Sheep, I thought and turned my steps towards them. I had already converted a few shepherds and found the experience rewarding. The fur balls grew bigger and bigger, and suddenly I realized that these were not sheep. They were ice bears.

I should have seen it coming. The leaders of the other world religions had been eying me with suspicion for some time, and now I had made my move and forced them to act. In secrecy they had raised an army against me, consisting of the most savage and bloodthirsty bears. They had help from most deplorable human beings - fans of other fantasy authors who feared being pushed to the wall by my, and therefore Tolkien's, expansionist attire. Now they had unleashed this force to intercept me in a moment when I was far away from my own base of power, far away from my friends and disciples. I saw fans ride the backs of the biggest and most ferocious ice bears, dressed in the garb of their favourite authors. There were little boys with glasses and weird lightning-shaped scars on their foreheads. There were anachronistically clad annoying British schoolchildren with flags displaying lions and wardrobes. And worst of all were the ones who had glued pieces of scrap metal to their ice bears to make them appear "armoured". I have never read Pullman, but I recognize his fans when I see them. I briefly considered a complaint to PETA, but ultimately I decided to resolve a more pressing issue first, namely to ensure my survival.

When the bear riders saw me, they started to howl and cheer, and the entire army stormed towards me. I forgot all prophet dignity and ran, ran back where I came from. There had been a village I had passed through not long ago, and reaching that was now my only hope. The ice bears closed in on me with frightful speed. Already their foul smell crept into my nose, and I could hear their panting. The first bear, carrying a LeGuin-worshipper who ironically seemed quite peaceful and removed from the world in his deep Taoist meditation, leapt forward and tore a piece from my fluttering robe. "For Eddings!" howled a flat knight-character in ridiculous armour and threw a flail that missed me narrowly.

In the last possible second I reached the village. Thank God a colleague of the old Sylmarillenfaycker had visited the village some years ago and sold them a huge streetlight which now stood on the central square, quite useless as the entire motorized force of the village consisted of three old Lada tractors. But now it saved my life. I climbed it with a speed that would have earned me several olympic medals in other circumstances, and then I clung to it while the ice bears raged around me, a stormy ocean of white fur and sharp teeth. Luckily ice bears are not known as good climbers, and so I was safe for the moment. But I was not prepared for a long siege and had little supplies of food and drinking water. All I had was my backpack which was filled entirely with Papa Tee's weed, a suitcase with a few hundred Tolkien books and my wandering staff, the oversized pipe.

I stayed on top of the streetlight for three full days, while the ice bears beneath me showed no

sign of getting tired or bored. I was not used to physical hardship anymore and got awfully hungry. When the sun set on the third evening, I developed a desperate plan. The drugs from Papa Tee gave a certain amount of extra physical strength, and I needed that right now. So I fetched my pipe-staff and stuffed it with all the weed I had, a supply that would have lasted weeks otherwise, and then I lit the giant pipe with my last match.

Thinking it through, the massive overdose resulting from this was probably the reason why I could not clear the last white patches in my memory. Between this day and the destruction of my temple, I spent most of my time in a drug-induced delirium. That may also be the reason why in certain of my diary entries I appear incoherent and - dare I say it - rambling. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to verify some facts, but I am sure most of my observations are, basically, correct. Without any memories to back it up, I think it is best to present the most interesting entries to you, dear reader, in the form in which I found them, only slightly edited to clear out obvious flaws and errors.

"June 17th, 200...

Zhezkazgan, Central Kazakhstan

Victory! Today I slew the last of the ice bears that hunted me with my bare hands. Ah, the epic struggle! Ever since I launched my counterattack from the streetlight and descended upon the heretics, we had been locked in a fight that will be described as titanic by our children and colossal by our grandchildren. Six weeks of trench warfare are never fun, especially when they happen on permafrost ground and the only thing you have to dig are your fingernails. But Tolkien gave me strength, and I emerged triumphant. If only Baggy was here to see the slaughter! Even he would have no choice but to bow down and acknowledge the might of Tolkien.

But I cannot rest. The Dalai Lama will never expect that I survived his onslaught. I have a tactical advantage now, and must use it before he learns of these events. I will seek a way now to get to him. Oh, if only the ground would stop spinning!

I am blessed. I am the Chosen one. I am beginning to see Tolkien with my waking eyes. He stands over there, and a light is in his eyes. Be strong, my children! He watches over us."

"June 29th, 200...

Kathmandu, Nepal

My plane to India was shot down over Nepal by Maoist rebels. Filthy criminals! How dare they? Well, they are somewhat excused - nobody knew I was on board. In Kazakhstan I hunted down an enormous hamster and slew him, so I could use his hide as a costume. I sneaked onto the airport and strapped myself to the lower side of the plane's right wing, kicking around my feet wildly all the time so that I looked like an extra propeller.

What exactly am I supposed to do here? I somehow can't remember. It was something with Lama in it. What the heck... Llamas live in South America, don't they? Why then am I not in South America? Anyway, I have a crusade now. I will join the civil war on the side of the

Monarchists and wipe out these rebels who dared to shoot me down! They will rue the day! I only wish the pipeweed was better here. The local brand, also known as yak dung, has an appalling stench."

"September 4th, 200...

Ulan Bataar, Mongolia

I did not stay in Nepal, because Tolkien translations were too rare in this country to satisfy me, and hardly done with the love and exactness this great man deserves. He bade me move on - or was it that other shadowy guy that sometimes comes to visit me? What is his name again? Mombar... Rambor... Bombur? This country is interesting, all mountains are made of jelly. Oh how they wiggle and dance!

But back to me. I battled my way over the Highland of Tibet where I was delayed by a camel bite. I founded a minor religion in the Karakorum and finally I stumbled into Afghanistan, where I teamed up with bearded men in robes which looked almost like me. They were very friendly. I hid with them in a place called Boring-Boring or something like that until our food supply ran low. Digging a tunnel underneath the Upland of Pamir, I returned to China and for 40 days I walked through the Takla Makan desert without food, where I met the devil and made him renounce evil. In the Gobi desert I made it rain, and flowers blossomed where I went. Currently I am sitting in an internet café in Ulan Bataar, where I intend to prove Tolkien's theory that the Mongolians are Orcs. They are not very green, which is a setback to my theory, but I have developed the cunning plan to feed them my remaining yak pipeweed. That will make them green!

Stay with me, and I will pray for you!"

"September 20th, 200...

Nizhneangarsk, Russia

I had an extremely unpleasant week in Ulan Bataar. My fluttering white robe scared a flock of approximately one billion sheep, which ran away in a stampede and destroyed the grave of Genghis Khan. Then I had to escape from the angry shepherds and ran off north to Russia. I was able to fool my foes by diving to the ground of the Baikal Lake, where I stayed for some days in a depth of approximately 1600 meters, eating seaweed and breathing through a mysteriously long straw. I have now finally found an internet café in Nizhneangarsk. The computer is crap, there is no power here, but I have built my own power plant where I burn vodka. I still have no idea what brought me here in the first place, but I bet it wasn't anything important.

There is another very important thing I need to tell you. It is crucial for your understanding of Tolkien that you... What is that? There is shouting outside. Things are being thrown through the window. A riot of some kind. I'll just try to stay neutral... Oh. Oh my. This is not looking good.

Tolkien, help! They are coming..."

"September 22nd, 200...

Krasnoyarsk, Russia

I remembered. I finally remembered. My crusade. Morambar. The Dalai Lama. Not a moment too early. The crowd that attacked me in Nizhneangarsk was not comprised of angry shepherds, it was a new army assembled by the Pope to hunt me down. I escaped from their clutches, but I fear that was only a small compartment of the force he and his colleagues have set in motion against me. My temple! I must fall back to my temple. I must regroup my own forces. Pseudonymus must lead the Fourth Cnidarian Bataillion to relieve me at... no wait. That was another war, wasn't it? I'm getting it all mixed up. Oh, my head!"

"October 29th, 200...

Liekka, Finland

Sniff! I'm not feeling well. After a harrowing journey through half of Eurasia, I found my direct way back blocked by strong enemy forces. To outsmart them, I tried to sneak over the Finnish border and approach my temple from the west. With my trusty foldable ladder, which a nice illegal immigrant sold me for an outrageous price, I climbed over the border defenses near a village called Hukkajärvi.

Unluckily, I do seem to have picked up the bird flu on my journey, and three million snow geese on the Finnish side immediately started to sneeze and cough. The noise woke up the border guards, and the Finnish army moved out against me in full strength. Despite being outnumbered, I managed to halt their progress between Kolvasozero and Rovkuly, and an epic artillery barrage ensued. Ultimately, I was forced to retreat to Sevast'yan-Navolok, which I defended three days and nights. Finally, however, I had thrown so much mud at them that the ground under my feet gave way, and the whole village sank into the nearby lake. I had to swim for my life, and I caught a cold that added nicely to the bird flu.

But I seem to be in Finland now, judging by the keyboard in this internet café, which has more than the usual number of y's and ä's. Anyway, I have started to raise an army of my own. The fishermen and woodcutters here like me because the glory of my truth radiates from me like high-energy microwaves. I am causing warm weather in the entire region which is completely atypical for the season, and they greatly benefit from this. Soon enough, we will be strong enough to conquer the world! Nobody will stand a chance against us, and Tolkien will smile upon me! In other news, a dead elephant fell out of my hair. It must have become entangled there when I was in Nepal. I should comb more often. Sniff."

"June 3rd, 1496

Lisboa, Portugal

I must have fallen through a time portal or something like that. It is nice here. I like the beards. And the hats. That guy da Gama is a complete idiot. I asked him what he thought of Tolkien, and he had never even heard from him! Annoyed, I said: 'Oh, bugger off to India!'

I'm writing this with chalk on a board that looks remotely like a computer. I wonder if it comes through? But Tolkien will take care of that!"

"February 26th, 105,962,047 B.C.

Jungle Clearing, Eastern Gondwana

Whoah! Time portals are tricky. But this Protoceratops is cute. I told it that growing horns might be a good idea. It seemed to like the idea.

"September 21st, 200...

Murmansk, Russia

This entry is private. Secrecy is now of utmost importance.

After many adventures I have returned to the present. Sort of. It appears to be nearly a year later, and things are not looking good. The enemy was victorious everywhere. It seems the whole world has turned against us. How could this happen? My believers, all the missionaries I have sent out, have been forced to retreat to Novaja Zemlja itself. Tomorrow morning I will try to walk to my temple. If I stay underwater, maybe I can slip through their lines unnoticed.

Pray for me! If I do not make it, this is my last will. Once we have converted the whole world, Papa Tlzoatl, my most faithful friend, will be supreme ruler over any country he chooses, with the exception of Italy. That I bequeath to Mrs. Hecate Mensenlarger, current whereabouts unknown. I wish her bosom was here tonight. I have never needed comfort so urgently.

The fate of the world will soon be decided! Keep the faith! Tolkien lux aeterna!!!!

And that was all. There was nothing more, nothing of importance anyway - the porn movie reviews were interesting, but I will not include them here because of their irrelevance to my present situation. The password had not been 'Tolkien' or 'Pipeweed', by the way, but it took me just two more guesses to find out. It was 'Baggy_is_a_despicable_lying_heretic'.

My last entry had brought tears to my eyes, and now I remembered how I had traveled back to my temple the following day. I made my way through unspeakable dangers, like more underwater mines and a jealous shark male who beat me up for flirting with his wife, only to find that it was too late. The last battle had already begun.

It was a nightmare by any standards. Believers and religious fanatics had been shipped to the island en masse, Novaja Zemlja was bursting at all seams, and the Pope and his colleagues had long lost control over the various zealot groups they had recruited as invaders. Everybody was fighting everybody, and my disciples were caught in the middle. The town was lost - I did not even try to get an overview over the different groups that held various parts of the city and fought each other on a million fronts. Somewhere I picked up a machine gun - I forgot where exactly - and slaughtered my way through waves of Swiss Guards towards the temple. Papa Tee was nowhere to be found.

I stumbled through the courtyard, where all palm trees were burning like torches, and after I had crept through the temple gates under heavy crossfire, my closest disciples slammed and barred the gates behind me. Whoever was still capable of carrying weapons gathered in the great hall, while the obsidian walls shook from the artillery impacts. I climbed on a makeshift pedestal made of several desks and tables to deliver a final speech, and my followers, still hundreds, no, thousands of people, stared up to me in ecstasy and blind obedience. Some were carrying rifles, others pitchforks. Some held up Tolkien books as holy talisman. They were ready for the last, desperate battle, the battle to defend their prophet, their guiding light, their master. Me. Their faces showed all colours that could be found on Earth - white, yellow, brown, green and blue with little pink dots. And then I saw it all go down in chaos and flames. Fighter jets came screaming from the skies. Soldiers stormed between my followers. Machine-guns mowed them down. Explosions shook the ground, and the walls of my temple tumbled down-

-And I found myself back in the hospital, curled up in my bed, crying myself to sleep.

11: Trial

The next morning I prepared myself for the trial. I put on some clothes Smeagolurtz had brought me: jeans, a sweatshirt, and leather shoes. After decades in robes and sandals, or robe-like hospital garb, it felt very quaint. But I wanted the judge to know that I had matured beyond my prophet years. I combed my hair and beard and chased away all remaining squirrel squatters. And I cleaned the mirror onto which someone had written "Hey, Master! Long time no see! When can we re-start our crusade?" with toothpaste.

Smeagolurtz and Bqggz came to fetch me, and we jumped into the toilet to evade the protesters. After a short crawl through the pipes and a refreshing swim through the city sewers we climbed out of a water tap not far from the courtroom. "Well, then", said Smeagolurtz, brushed some used condoms from his elegant waterproof suitcase and re-lit his cigarette, which had gone out on the way.

We entered the courtroom to find that most of the protesters were already there. They were sitting on the spectator benches, and angry murmur arose when I walked through the door. But a row of policemen protected me, ready to quell any uproar that might arise.

I sat down at a small table in front of a huge desk. Behind this desk the judge towered over me and the rest of the room. He was a bulky man with a menacing face, and under his unmoving stare I shrunk approximately three inches. Something was odd about him, but I could not pinpoint it. "Present the evidence", the judge snarled, and thus the trial began.

The hearing of the witnesses lasted all day. One after the other, the protesters stepped forward and testified against me. There were some interesting stories among all that. One woman

claimed I had climbed into her house through the chimney and danced naked in her living room, giving their children a traumatic fear of Santa Claus. Santa Claus accused me of impersonating him on several occasions. A giant hamster skeleton complained that I had stolen its skin. The Eddings fan with the ridiculous armour accused me of having stolen his flail, something that was definitely not true.

But the majority of testimonies consisted of the same things, repeated over and over and over. I had lured these people to my temple with false promises, brainwashed them, extracted all their money and left them in emotional turmoil once the cult was no more. I thought highly of Bqggz at this moment, because he stepped in and testified himself, trying to defend me. He claimed that I could not be held responsible for all my actions, since I evidently had been under the influence of a few malevolent persons myself - Udunvapor, the Old Pseudo and the rest of the bunch. However, the judge seemed unimpressed, and Smeagolurtz as my advocate became more and more nervous as he saw the whole thing slipping out of his hands. He started lighting new cigarettes while he was just halfway through the old ones, and he furiously attacked the witnesses, calling them liars and worse. But nothing helped.

Finally the last protester had spoken, and the judge indicated he was about to send me to prison, a gulag or an electric chair, or, possibly, to cut me into three parts first and then do all of that at once. Either way, he would not let me off the hook. The judge stared at me, and my eyes began to water, partly because I felt so utterly destroyed, and partly because I realized now what was odd about him. He had not blinked once since the trial begun. A trick judges learn to intimidate criminals, I guessed.

"Any final words?" asked the judge, and his little hammer hovered over the table, ready to deliver that bang that would seal my fate. I looked through the room in sheer panic, like a deer frantically searching an exit from the hunters' trap. Smeagolurtz smoked three cigarettes at once. Bqggz bit his lips nervously. I longed for a pipe of calming weed and wished Papa Tee was here to hand me one. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was wrong, very wrong. If only, I thought, I could reconstruct these last missing seconds of my memory, no more than a minute, which still eluded me-

-Fire. Pain. Chaos. Shots.

I clenched my fist. I was in two places at once. There I was in the courtroom, with the stone-faced judge, the two orcs - and there I was in the temple during the last moments of my empire. I held up my arms. "For Tolkien!" I thundered. A soldier with a dangerous-looking rifle jumped onto the pedestal where I was standing, and I blew him up with the machine gun. Or I tried, but had to discover that it was jammed. Strawberry, my favourite, but that did not help at all right now. I retreated from the pedestal.

"Yohoho! Babylon! You will never win! Jah's the alpha, man, and the omega!" With a loud cry Papa Tlzotlicatl stormed between me and the soldier. He was Rastafarian now and Aztec priest, a mighty warrior defending his friend. His dreadlocks whirled through the room and felled several attackers. A spear was in his hand, and reggae blared from his ghetto blaster. The foundations of my temple shook.

"Watch out!" I yelled in panic. Papa Tee turned his head towards me. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. The soldier, his ears already bleeding from the vicious reggae beats, raised his rifle in a last, desperate effort. A single shot fell.

Papa Tee opened his mouth. The spear dropped out of his hand and rolled from the pedestal. The music fell silent, and Papa Tee sank to his knees. A red stain appeared on his shirt and grew with a sickening speed.

I knelt down next to him. "No!" I whispered. "That cannot be!"

Papa Tee looked at me with his big, friendly, always slightly clouded eyes. "See you..." he murmured while something red trickled out of his mouth, "see you on the other side... Zion, I see Zion... Love and peace, man..." Then he said no more.

I knelt on the pedestal, dumbfounded, and held my dead friend in my arms. The soldier had collapsed as well, but I paid no attention. Around me the last line of my defense crumbled. A mighty explosion brought down one wall of the great hall, and big blocks of basalt and obsidian started to fall from the ceiling. And then Bqggz arrived, pushing aside my guards. He did not wear a mask anymore, and he was wielding a dangerous-looking waffle iron. Remnants of several well-toasted attackers hung from it. "Noeel!" he shouted. "Come! Get out of here, you idiot! Over here, if you want to survive!"

But just in this moment, a large wooden bar fell from the roof and smashed against my head.

The fires before my inner eye subsided. I sat in my chair in front of the judge, breathing heavily, clenching the armrests. Just one or two seconds had passed in real time. The judge's hammer fell, but I hardly noticed it as my brain began to work furiously.

Papa Tee was dead. I knew that. But Smeagolurtz had claimed that he was alive, that he had married Bombadillia, that they had founded a family. That was too much to be a simple misunderstanding. Smeagolurtz had lied to me. But why? Why should he?

I had asked him about Bombadillia. Smeagolurtz, unprepared for that question, had made up a story to keep me away from her. He *had* to keep me away from her, for some reason. He knew I had not remembered everything, not Papa Tee's death at least, or he wouldn't have claimed he was alive. How could he know what I remembered and what not? Bqggz, I thought. Bqggz had told him. My old friend or enemy Baggy had been pulling strings in the background. He had hired Smeagolurtz, after all.

There was, I concluded, something Bqggz did not want me to know. Something he had been hiding from me ever since I woke up. Something so big and obvious that a single meeting with Bombadillia would have utterly destroyed his little ruse.

I stood up. The judge, Bqggz and Smeagolurtz protested, but I did not listen. I walked up to the judge's table and looked behind it.

The judge had no lower half. Beneath the table there was an elaborate mechanism of pinwheels, spinning like the inside of a clockwork. Hinges and wires connected that mechanism to the upper half. The judge was artificial. A small slip of paper was taped to him,

a note from 'Jack's Rent-A-Judge service'. It was billing a certain Mr. Bagronk.

Very slowly I looked up, and my eyes met those of Bqggz. Smeagolurtz shrugged and rose from his chair. "Time to start packing", he said.

The protesters in the audience had fallen silent as well. Their leader, a fat guy with a "Noel ruined my life" shirt, turned towards Bqggz, who was now visibly sweating. "We'll still get paid, won't we?" he asked. Then he and his ruffians followed Smeagolurtz outside. I was alone with Bqggz.

"Smeagolurtz! You coward! Come back at once!" yelled Bqggz. "I know what-" What he knew I never learned, for in this moment I had somersaulted over my little table, landed in front of Bqggz and grabbed him by the collar. "What the hell is going on", I shouted into his smug little orc face. "You set this all up! The judge, the trial - everything!"

Bqggz gasped. "Noeel, please!" he squeaked. "You don't know what you're doing! You're still confused from the coma. They thought you were so dangerous that they wanted to rely on an artificial judge and-"

I hit him. Orc teeth flew through the room and got stuck in the spinning wheels, and with a tortured creaking they came to a halt. "Unspecified error", the judge thundered. "Please contact manufacturer. Press nose to reboot."

"The truth!" I demanded. "Now!" I lifted up my fist again.

"Okay!" gasped Bqggz. "Okay! Stop it. The truth." I let go of the collar, and Bqggz slid back into his chair, holding his cheek. "About six months after you fell into that coma, there was indeed public unrest against you. People protested below your window, just like these guys. A trial was scheduled, just like this one."

I waved my fist menacingly. Bqggz grinned and spat out a few more teeth. "It's true", he said. "But then something happened. A guy whose name I forgot, Hackson or Lackson or something, made a film version of Lord of the Rings. And a few more Harry Potter volumes came out. An avalanche of merchandise followed... and suddenly, the world was awash in bad fantasy. Fantasy inferior to Tolkien's vision, and nobody challenged it. People realized that your quest for purity had not been such a bad thing after all. A bit over the top perhaps, but necessary to keep the balance. Public opinion swung in your favour. The trial was cancelled, and you were officially rehabilitated."

"But..." I began, utterly confused. "What was your role? Why this ruse?"

"At that time, I had hit rock bottom", admitted Bqggz. "My communist party had split. Finances were a mess. We were, factually, broke. And there were you, seemingly forever unconscious, with billions and billions still safely stored on Swiss accounts. I ask you, Noeel: what would you have done?" I answered not, and Bqggz continued. "I funneled off money. A little at first, then more and more. My party prospered again. Dammit, Noeel, I saved your life in that temple! I *deserved* a little compensation. At least that was what I told myself to calm down my guilty conscience."

I started to understand. "And then I woke up", I said slowly.

Bqggz nodded. "Right. We had become completely dependant on these financial infusions, and I did not want you to discover what I had done. Which you would have, once you started rebuilding your empire. So I bought the hospital. I bought the doctor, the nurses, and a few unemployed guys as protesters. I never planned to harm you. My sole aim was to isolate you in that hospital, to keep you away from the real world, so that I could continue spending your money."

"What did you need that much money for?" I inquired. I knew how much I had scraped together, and even running a communist party from it would have hardly left a noticeable dent.

"Oh, it was not just the party", Bqggz admitted. "Then there was my research about parallel universes. Noeel, there *are* other worlds out there! According to my theory, there is at least one where the revolution has already been carried out by sentient handkerchiefs. I have to find that world, Noeel! And with just six more months of renting both CERN and the Hubble Telescope I would have found it!"

I shook my head. Obviously Bqggz had gone insane - sentient handkerchiefs, what nonsense! - but that was not my concern right now. "How long?", I asked. "How long would you have kept this up?"

"I don't know", wailed Bqggz. "I honestly don't know. It was no great masterplan. When I heard the news that you were waking up, I panicked. I made things up as I went along. Noeel, I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't want it to come this far."

"And Smeagolurtz? Who is he?" I asked. "What role did he play?"

"He's the financial organiser of the Bolshevork Party", Bqggz said. "He knew how dire our situation really was, so I let him in on my plan."

I sat down again, slowly digesting all those news. "So I'm not accused of anything", I said. "There is noone out there to get me. People actually do want me to continue my crusade."

"That's right", Bqggz said and wiped his mouth. He fetched a crumpled piece of paper out of his pockets. "This is a list of your possessions. There's still much left. I suppose you want it back."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Keep it", I said.

"Uh... what?" said Bqggz. He looked at me as if I had just grown a second head.

"Don't you remember what I said?" I asked, and a great peace overcame me. "I'm through with this prophet business, I don't want it anymore. I need a fresh start. Go look for your handkerchieves, if that makes you happy. There's just one thing you'll give me."

"Anything", said Bqggz weakly.

"Bombadillia's phone number", I said.

Bqggz ripped a little edge from the sheet and scribbled some numbers on it. I took it from his trembling fingers, then, following a sudden impulse, I patted my old friend's shoulder. "You better go and pay these ruffians now", I said. "They look like they can get quite nasty when they're denied what's theirs." Then I started walking towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Bqggz asked.

I thought for a second. "I have a wedding proposal to make", I said. "Then, I don't know. Perhaps Jamaica. If you ever happen to get there, there's a place that has a good light show. Or so I've been told." I smiled. "At least it's going to get a good light show, once I take over again. You pay the beer."

And then I walked out of the door, and the sun was shining, and all birds praised Tolkien in the sky.