

Andrea Gibbons

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UNMASKING THE GODS:

An Oral History of the Recent Uprising

by Andrea Gibbons

CHAPTER ONE

LEO

(An excerpt from the unfinished autobiography by Leonard Pokowski, found among his papers at Aldcroft Hall)

Yeah yeah, I know the gods, I know their handlers, and I even know that huge creepy-ass snake plant. If you think about it it's not hard to explain how an ambitious guy like me first managed that. In fact, it's exactly what you think.

I started out as what you could call a purveyor of fine goods, mostly in the form of white powder, dried herbs, black tar, small sugar-coated pills that melt away in your mouth. I

was aiming for that high life: days lying on white beaches and nights spinning dice down long tables with a couple of hot blondes to breathe on me for luck. Just another pretty face among the beautiful people on their regular migrations from pleasure to pleasure. I always liked the sound of that, pleasure to pleasure. I deserve it, I work hard. I'm hell of good at what I do and because of that I've risen fast. Rising fast is the only thing that matters, because this is one fucked up world if you're on the bottom. I know, because I've been there.

We were almost civilised back in the old days, back before the wave. We had machines do all of our work for us then, carry us around across the land and the sea, fly us through the air even. We had contraptions that could do things we wouldn't even dream of now. The worst fucking thing is, it wasn't just the gods who had all this stuff, it was everyone. We got the rest of the world working to produce us cheap shit, and everyone had more than they even knew what to do with. Way I hear it, we had it made way back then. Way I hear it, it was the wave that ruined everything. The wave gave some people power, that new bastard god Nikolas used that power to stop all of the machines dead, and that was the good life straight out the fucking window.

We lost everything, because that handful of people touched by the damn wave took it. They also took the title of gods. Passed it down to their children and their children's children. A long line of silly rich kids who've had it all, while the rest of us got jack shit.

Official story of course, is that the wave and the gods saved us from ourselves, saved the whole fucking planet. I never believe official stories. I tried finding out what really happened from that goddamn plant thing first time it sent for me. You'd figure Nikolas's pet Maracoo-coo would know a thing or two, but the only things it would give me were orders and this history book about the wave. I swear that thing was laughing at me. That wasn't the only reason I was fucking furious; I'd never seen a book before and didn't care to see one

either. Took me a year or two to even pull the damn thing out of my junk drawer where I'd stuck it once I figured it wasn't worth selling.

I still remember that day, I was hell of sick. I couldn't get out of bed, and I was bored out of my fucking skull because Tiffany took off and didn't come back once she realised I wasn't asking her to just *play* nurse. I could reach that drawer from my bed and I was hoping maybe I had a little extra valium in there but all I found was that god damn book. After a few more hours staring at the ceiling, I opened it. By then even a stupid book seemed like an ok distraction. I was pretty surprised when I couldn't stop reading it.

I liked the way the guy wrote it, some guy who lived two hundred years ago when they used words I never heard. Like mango. I liked how it made me feel like I knew this guy, even though he was already dead. Like he was my dad or something, teaching me words and telling me about how things used to be. I wanted to do that. I wanted people to be listening to me like that after I was dead, but I didn't want to write the kind of bullshit you get in the fan mags so I studied shit like this:

The magic came as a great wave inundating the world, erupting from the earth itself to fly spuming out in a perfect circle of pale glimmering, smelling like rain. It gushed and eddied and roared across the earth in all directions, an expanding tidal wave with prised bubbles that broke into small rainbows over its surface. It left everything wet and shining behind it, a world of colour transformed, glazed with new richness and depth. It ripened the earth they say, like a mango, released its fragrance. They say the world's shadows never quite lost their silvered shine. But before the wave, the shadows never had teeth.

I know no one actually talks like that, guys like me would punch them in the teeth. But silvered shine? I admit I liked the sound of that. I appreciated how I didn't know what it

meant, but in my head I could sort of see the wave like it was made of colours not water. I thought a lot about the idea of shadows without teeth. That'd make this world a hell of a lot easier for someone in my line of business.

I liked this bit too:

It mostly brought life, whether animating the inanimate or waking new senses and powers into being among those already living. Its provenance was a mystery, just as how and when it melted away. What remained of its silver streaming pooled in the low places of the world, particularly in the big cities, to rise from the sewers with the tides.

I liked those words a lot. I got a kick out of saying 'provenance' and 'animating the inanimate', though I admit the guy sure used the word silver a lot. Maybe too much. I tried to copy him for a while, but I ended up just writing this like I talk. I figure I want you to remember my voice, not me copying some old dead guy's. This way it's easier too, just like you and me are having a conversation over a fifth. I didn't learn nothing new from all those fancy words anyway. Everyone knows that when magic came pouring out of the ground it didn't just create monsters and weird shit, but masters too. It turned people into gods, gave them powers to control the human race. It filled some lucky bastards with the power of electricity and magnetism and who knows what other mutant crap. I don't got a fundamental problem with the whole masters thing, I just got a problem with it as long as I'm not one of them. So to become one of them is exactly what I'd set out to do, and if I couldn't be a master myself because I wasn't lucky enough to be born one of them, then I'd still get closer than a mafia shave. I'd still get every damn thing I could.

CHAPTER TWO

ENRIQUETA

There had never been anything in our world like it.

It snaked endlessly along, Maracoc. It undulated long lines and deep faceted colours, flowered in extraordinary explosions of petals and stamens, illuminated the huge building's depths. Its strange fragrance whispered and hummed through the air, its narrow leaves sang jeweled welcomes. Giant roots soared and gnarled and interlaced arches and tunnels, their massive architecture remapping a domed and echoing space of stone and stained glass windows. If you did not care for all that was gaudy and gilded, you could look beyond its

great frilled flowers to the subtle and tender beauty that glimmered in its depths, half imagined in plantwoven cloisters. This thing Maracoc snaked lovingly up echoing stone columns and gently waved its tendrilled eyes.

(I closed my own eyes and thought of you. How I would like to slip into one of those caves and wind snakelike about you, twine all around you, slide sinuously along you and taste your skin with my tongue. I bit my lip and opened my eyes again. Maracoc called forth desires, made them visible, but I didn't have time for thoughts like that and you were so very far away. Even so, how easily you have always distracted me.)

So I glared up at the many strangely-lashed eyes, never straight ahead to the passionflowers themselves and the evocations of desire they pulled from my mind to coalesce around their petals. These glimmered close to irresistible, aching to draw me in and in and in. I felt their ache amplified within my body. If I'd moved closer, given in to this longing to touch, to reunite, the undulating lines of it would have twitched almost imperceptibly, the colours pulsing brighter, the song turning sweeter. Its tendrils would have snared me, wrapped me in close and hungry embrace. Even knowing they were there, I could not see the sticky filamented clouds surrounding it. They appeared only in sidelong glances, like spider webs to be sighted obliquely except when lined with digestive juices like beads of dew, sparkling drops of hallucinogenic acid to aid in breaking down skin and bone. I had seen them that way once, glistening in a delicate fretwork around someone newly trapped. I saw a face of death and rapture that I have never since been able to forget. A face soon to be sucked clean from its skull, like the flesh from its skeleton. I retched; that was the only time I left without the books I had come for. I was still one of only two of human beings I knew of who had walked away. But still, I came back.

I had no choice; Maracoc held the books. First my obsession, and then my living. A dangerous thing in a world where every attempt has been made to hoard or to destroy them. I

am lucky that I found one before I even knew to look. Before I risked my life to find them. I was very little; it was hidden away in an old ruined adobe house I had turned into my secret fort. I had been cleaning it out for several days when I cleared some bricks and found it. It had an old green cover, of a girl standing in front of a great ivy-covered wall. Ivy...I had never heard of such a thing. It was about another little girl's secret place, *The Secret Garden*; but everything else was so completely different from what I knew. I read it in stolen hours, stumbling over words, not understanding much, but I read it cover to cover. Read it again and yet again, many times. I liked to just stare at it, sitting there propped up on the shelf I made for it. I would explain its contents to the blue-bellied lizards on the wall, or read them whole chapters in the cool dark corner where we hid from the midday sun. I told them about Yorkshire and carrots and flowers I had never seen. I revelled in the impossible colours of these unknowns that I could now name, and therefore imagine.

Once I knew there was more, I wanted it of course. I wanted to escape into worlds far beyond the limits of the dust and the heat of my own. I was never a patient child. There were many ruins; so many people fled the desert when the gods declared that they would not continue the mass pumping of their water from afar, nor provide the electricity to cool them down. *Mi abuela* had always said good riddance, we had never wanted them in the first place. Only those who were mad like we were, who sucked up heat like the lizards and saw spirits dancing in the monsoon rains. We didn't need no *pinche* air-conditioning, she'd say. Then she'd laugh and beg the real God's pardon for swearing and tell me to forget all of it.

We'd always used the little gods' magazines in our outhouses, but I never understood that this was the highest and best use for such things until I read my first book. That was perhaps my first political thought. I might have been little, but even then I knew that there was a reward for turning books in to the authorities, and the gods knew we desperately needed the money and it's hard to live on nothing but beans and what you can glean from the

desert. But I couldn't turn them in. So I bore the guilt of my tiny hoard a long time, until I discovered there were others who would give what they could to keep books safe instead, and to share them. Enough for me to help my family with the food and goods they traded for my stock, and even the occasional money. A secret as sweet and delicious as the syrup we made from saguaro fruit. There were people who had rescued old hand-cranked mimeograph machines and laboriously copied the books that came into their hands, and others who wrote them out by hand on paper they made themselves or fan mags painted over, to be passed carefully and most cautiously along their spidered networks of trust. Every now and then someone would be caught by the Spinkertons to disappear forever, and the world would stop a moment in its grief. And then go on. We had our own book, one honouring the names of all those who had been taken. After so many years, we could hardly lift it.

Maracoc is from the beginning time, the very beginning, when magic first washed the world. The entire species of *passiflora foetida* was wakened into a very loose and low kind sentience, given the ability to broadcast hallucinations and desire. They have all moved well beyond being simply protocarniverous, but none of them grow beyond their original size, none of them speak, and none prey on humans. None but Maracoc, somehow changed into a rare intelligence and terrifying beauty. Brought to this place to remap and rebuild, to grow and to guard both the millions of books already here, and the millions more that Nikolas, the most powerful of the original gods, would bring it. The first time I came there, the image of a young Nikolas himself presided over it all. He sat enthroned in a great chair, clean shaven but for his moustaches in that ancient style, and his thick dark hair tamed down into only mild rebellion. He looked human but he did not blink, and though the mouth moved with Maracoc's words the expression never shifted. This was no golem nor faulty copy, but rather a symbol of age-old allegiance whose obvious and emotionless imperfection revealed where true power now lay.

Chilling. I never wanted to run so fast and so far in my life, psychoanalysing as I ran.

Nothing but books could have brought me or helped me hold my ground; I may search for wonders, but I am far too practical to go seeking out monsters as Xavi once did. Only such a mad treasure could have drawn me there that first time, trembling in the footsteps of the dead to face a thing of such power. Both Maracoc and I had lives that twined about the same objects. In no other way were we the same, and its attempts at a veneer of humanity remained simply that.

It always held to its veneer, however, it's mimicry of a conversational and philosophic humanity. We replayed the same argument every time I arrived. I would have happily forgone it, but it would invariably respond first to what I felt, and only then to what I said. I could never hide that my foremost emotions were always disgust and a fear that shaded into anger. I think it would have much preferred wonder to have been the first, and not the third. But bones processed to a strangely glossed finish everywhere reflected and refracted light. I remember I had first seen one, then suddenly seen them all, entwined without number in the plant's complex weavings, built into strange subtleties of stackings and crosshatchings and patterns whose sense hovered on the edge of my understanding but never yielded themselves fully. In my nightmares they had untangled themselves from the inlay of their arrangements and danced while their unborn children with empty eyes had whispered my name. I couldn't quite forgive Maracoc for that. Ever.

Yet here I was again, and we skirmished once more along the same old familiar battleground. Once I had changed my lines up every time, attempted to convince it. But now I simply paraphrased my argument knowing it would never change its own lines of defence, and having discovered that it would give me nothing at all if I did not play along sufficiently.

"Quetita. Welcome. Judgmental as always I see." Now Maracoc would become almost avuncular, and entirely disapproving. "You judge me, yet you know, of course, that

humans are things of simple greed. There could be no more worthy and deserving prey."

Always the same opening.

"A hunger for beauty and knowledge and words isn't necessarily greed." My stock response at the moment, and if plants could snort, Maracoc did so.

"Humans hunger for far more than they need. This is greed. Humans consume what they hunger for. Always. Rip it, tear it, swallow it whole or in pieces. Or they build themselves paltry dreams around it, asphyxiate it, feed on it for a lifetime. But they always destroy."

"No." I said. "They don't always do that. Knowledge? You can't destroy knowledge by seeking it out or making it your own."

"Humans twist small bits of knowledge, turn them, warp them. You see what you want to see, take what you want to take, fit it all together, form complex towers. You call that Truth, and imprison and kill those who disagree with you, destroy anything that might threaten it. Destroy the planet itself."

"Not all of us..."

"All of you."

"Bullshit." And it was, there were a few of us surely who did not. Plant laughter echoed through my head, I never failed to amuse it, but it was almost beginning to bore me. Of course, I still remember the argument when I had come back with love instead of knowledge. That had been very long and not at all pretty, if I ever wanted to spice up our relationship I could always try that again. But not today.

"And stop messing with the ambiance, depressing mood lighting will never get me to agree with you."

The faint music stopped, the air lightened, the smell of decay and cooking meat was replaced by that of flowers and sex once again. A trickster, Maracoc. Arguments involved all

of the senses. And a lot of bad words on my part. And I never won them, I simply refused to accept what it told me when I knew it to be untrue. That's not my kind of argument really, but the only one possible. Maracoc had a hell of an ego, and there was no establishing of common ground or shared quest for truth. I found the thought that such a thing might be possible almost unbearably exciting, but it only cat and moused with ideas, mocked all human morality. Right and wrong meant nothing to it, no matter how they were defined. Sometimes I still bothered to wonder what did. I knew it had considerations beyond survival but damned if I knew what they were. All I vaguely understood was its deep loyalty to a god long dead, alongside an equally strong and strange hatred of all the other gods, even Nikolas's descendants. Its old loyalties only seemed to go so far as to ensure it denied me certain kinds of books, anything on machinery or electricity or studies of the wave phenomenon for example. But it gave me anything else upon return of the previous loans after long and rigorous questioning over my thoughts and imaginings on their contents. It rarely talked about itself, and rarely responded to questions. Me, it saw right through much of me I know, and in the most embarrassing ways. When I had first come here and had not fallen for the flowers and the promised fulfilment of my every desire, it had plucked instead at nightmares from my very depths and brought them to life. It had wakened the dead children. But it hadn't absorbed me while I was trapped, motionless, paralysed by fear, even though it had left its mark burned into my face. No, it had waited to see if I would break, and when I did not, I somehow knew I would be safe. Within bounds. The why of that truly fascinated me; I did not test its boundaries.

Now it no longer bothered to speak through, or even project its master Nikolas; instead the god's skeleton reigned in solitary and silent state, held upright by the slenderest curling of green tendrils amidst the decay of carved and crumbling wood, the remnants of red velvet. Maracoc instead turned to only showing my desires, ranging from an iced lemonade to

. . . (You. And you were suddenly in the air there before me, turned perfect and three-dimensional, a foot tall and even so you set my heart beating faster. You made me smile, the way you always do. I so like your face. I felt a tendril creep up my calf, slowly, like the caress from the palm of your hand. Even as a shiver curled delightfully up my skin I sighed and stepped into you, and you wavered and disappeared.)

The tendril quickly curled in on itself, looking the other way as it disdainfully pretended it had not moved at all.

"You had to try I suppose."

Maracoc shimmered like laughter might.

"I like your eyebrows when they do that," it said.

"You won't get to see them anymore if you eat me."

"You are always too literal," it sniffed haughtily. "I do not eat. I absorb. An experience of the most sublime for everyone involved."

I considered arguing that point and decided against it. "Right."

"So what brings you to my enchanted forest?" Maracoc was old and wise beyond any imagining, which could explain why it did not seem to understand irony. It crossed my mind that forest might refer to its potential ability to hold some kind of communication with the rest of its kind the world over. A thought to give anyone pause, because there were many, and more all the time as they were assiduously cultivated by anyone more interested in a high than life. But I focused on the task at hand.

I listed the books that had been commissioned, and then the one that I myself wanted.

"Bogdanov, a book on blood transfusions..."

"Interesting choice, but surely you would prefer a properly scientific treatise on the subject? The last one to be written and actually based on reality?"

"What would I want with that? I don't actually care about blood transfusions."

"Then why this book? I have so many others."

"I want this one. Mad fascinating arguments? Victorian science? Socialism and semi-eternal life through the exchange of fluids? And Bogdanov actually died trying to prove it was possible? Damn it, could anything be better? I want the book."

"You'd be disappointed, believe me."

"Let me be disappointed then. And why don't you want me to read it?"

"It's terrible."

"Terrible is so often brilliant. And I want it."

"I don't have it."

"You don't have it?" I scoffed jokingly.

"I don't have it."

"You don't have it?" I repeated disbelievingly.

"I. Do. Not. Have. It." It sounded a bit embarrassed, whether at not having the book or the quality of our dialogue I am unsure. It was proud of its rhetoric.

"But that has never happened before!" I could hear the plaintiveness in my own voice. I have never taken disappointment well. "Did you never have it?"

"Oh, I had it once. I did tell you that it wasn't very good. So I lent it."

"You lent a book to someone else? But Xavier told me he'd never heard of it!"

"I didn't lend it to your . . . lover." Maracoc liked calling him that, rolling it off its tongue after a salacious pause, and usually it made me laugh. But I couldn't laugh given that I was stunned. Speechless. Someone else, some unknown person, coming here and casually borrowing books? Bogdanov? You could've knocked me over. I'd never seen anyone but . . . er . . . my lover and I, unless you counted the bones. And I tried not to, they scared me.

"Who on earth did you lend it to then?"

"A man." I rolled my eyes, it wasn't as though it didn't know every damn thing about this man, and I mean everything, down to every last dirty detail you'd never want to know. These were the things it often recounted to me in great detail as I waited for it to give me what I came for, forcing my patience for the twisted side of the human psyche and its desires to expand more than I believed possible over the course of our encounters. It most enjoyed a pseudo-scientific rumination on the particular images that had trapped its victims, beginning with the limited imagination of freudian psychology and covering things such as neurobiology, philosophy, and occasionally physics. Usually I couldn't get it to stop talking, but now the silence stretched uncomfortably.

"I think maybe his name was Howard," it said.

My breath caught, my eyes widened, and I asked in a voice that didn't sound much like my own "Howard who?" But I think I already knew the only crazy bastard who *might* have come here looking for a book, but more likely a new way to get high.

"Howard Pivens."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. You didn't." Under my breath I muttered "God damn *pinche planta*." I felt like throwing something at it. Howard Pivens. The tyrannical hippie pot head who sent people on 'quests' because some up-town do-gooder gods let him 'channel' their god damn stupid geas spell so he could give meaning and direction to people's lives.

You can tell we had met.

"Why the fuck didn't you absorb him then? If anyone deserves to be absorbed it's Howard. And I know he was all over those petals of yours, there's no way Howard could resist anything that looks like you. Or smells like you. Or sings like you. I'm amazed he's not still sitting here staring happily at all the pretty colours."

"That's why I had to give him the book."

"Oh. Right. But again, why didn't you just eat him?"

Maracoc shuddered, eloquently. It was a ripple of offended grace. "I absorb."

"Right. Sorry. So why?"

"You have no idea what I looked like to that...thing." Maracoc's voice swang low, and a thrill of horror skated along its underbelly. "Colours gaudy, clashing, swirling around, strange writhing lines, shapes instead of spaces, empty spaces instead of shapes. I was monstrosity, I was spinning, the inside of me was also spinning, going in opposite directions, I felt dizzy, sick, ill. He was poison, yet he walked. I should absorb that? I feared the spinning might go on forever. I gave him a book, I convinced him to go away."

"But damn it, couldn't you have just given him some cheap porn? He'd have liked that much better."

"I span. I grabbed the first book I touched, I threw it at his head. I have never seen myself on LSD, it was not nice."

"No." I sighed, "I suppose it wasn't. Nothing about Howard is nice."

"He also smelled bad. Worse than most people."

"Yes, yes I'm sure he did." I had never wanted to see, hear, or smell him again. But I did want that damn book. I can't tell you how excited I was to find out it existed. Though that was wearing off a bit maybe, still, I had always enjoyed the chase.

"So how long has he had it? In my time?"

"In your time?" a brief silence as Maracoc considered. "About four years."

"Four years? Oh, fuck me. He probably tried to smoke it all years ago. Or shredded it for the guinea pig cage. Or spread it with marmite and tried to eat it, or..."

"Used it to prop up a wonky yellow table."

"I'd have thought that'd be a bit too practical for Howard, though he's just the kind of guy who would have a . . ." and then the horrible specificity of it registered in my mind, ". . . wonky yellow table. Shit. You can see what happens to your books."

"Well seeing isn't quite correct, but something like that. You don't think I would just give them away and not keep track do you?"

"Oh." Damn it. I thought back rapidly. Damn it. "Can you see what happens in the general vicinity of your books?"

"No. I do, however, know all glorious details of what happens directly on top of them." Maracoc's lights positively twinkled.

"Oh." I felt the heat rushing to my cheeks.

"That can't have been very comfortable, I suppose it didn't matter at the time."

The book was still whole and unharmed, I'd just get it from Howard somehow. Because honestly, I didn't know when I'd be able to come back here, all of the flowers were smirking at me. But then I straightened my shoulders. No, it wouldn't have even mattered at that particular time, and I'd do it again. Hopefully before too long.

CHAPTER THREE

CHARLES

I was walking down a broad, well-lit street, making my way, or so I thought, to the house of my colleague Dr. K. I had received his earnest entreaty some few weeks before; urgent family matters called him out of The City where he had established a small medical practice, and he needed someone to cover any patient emergencies that might arise for the month he would be away.

The City! How my heart trembled in my breast upon reading those lines, for indeed, I had often desired to visit The City, to see the great hulking buildings of its centre and the

expansive outer ruins overflowing with kitchen gardens, see the courage of the many who continued living there and yet! How many scarcely believable tales of magic and danger had I heard from those whose veracity I could never lightly question? They claimed that the magic that had washed over the world remained stronger there, that it pooled in alley ways and potholes and sewers to manifest itself in strange, beautiful, and dangerous ways. I replied at once and told him that while I could not consider myself particularly well-qualified to confront the peculiarities such a situation might offer, I would not hesitate to come if he believed me adequate to the purpose, and could find no one from The City itself to attend his patients while he was away. I awaited his response in a decidedly unsettled frame of mind, unsure of whether I most hoped he would find my presence unnecessary, or if indeed he would ask me to finally make my way to the metropolis I had read so much of, had so long imagined, and had never dared visit.

I'm afraid to say I ate a great deal of cake.

Cake was unfortunately again at the forefront of my thoughts even now, as I made my heavily encumbered way down the broad street. I had eaten the last piece of Ms. Peabody's excellent chocolate gateau on the train, and upon inquiry at the station, found that not only was the baker not there on an alternate Thursday, but that carts for hire were also sadly not running as it was the new moon.

I thought it did not bode well.

Continuing my way on foot, for the map indicated clearly that I keep to the main thoroughfare for some time, I ruminated upon the possibility that I had indeed made a terrible mistake. I was unused to walking any distance; my shoes pinched my feet cruelly and my bag weighed heavily in my hand. I paid attention only to ensure I avoided all shadows, I thought it wise although I could not quite believe that some might indeed be of a carnivorous nature. Suddenly I awoke from my peculiarly focused reverie to realise that it

had been several minutes since I had passed anyone else on foot. And indeed, that this broad street had grown very much narrower, and, to my dismay, was become positively gloomy and dark of aspect. Shadows abounded. I had never understood what happened to them at night. I began to feel the slight pricklings of nervousness, and wondered if it were possible, preoccupied as I had been, that I had somehow strayed from the main road.

I had just decided to stop and turn back whence I came when I saw in the near distance a brightly lit sign, which I believed to be of that strange gaseous substance known as neon. It was a welcoming and healthy green, though admittedly not the traditional cross that stood as the universal signal for pharmacy, and appeared to be the only business in the vicinity. At the very least, I hoped, I could find someone there who might point me in the right direction and advise me as to the exact risk posed by the shadows.

It had a thick wooden door that I found to be wide open. Even so, I knocked and waited at the entrance as a glance inside had shewn me plainly that this was not a normal place of business such as I was accustomed to. I heard a cheery shout from within.

"Pizza! Come in! Come in!"

While I had no pizza, I decided such a friendly stranger would not mind if I entered simply to inquire my way. I passed timidly through a secondary barrier that seemed to be made up of nothing more than large glass beads hanging on a multitude of strings the length of the doorway. I had hardly taken a few steps into the dimly lit room, when a large shaggy man bounded forward to meet me with such enthusiasm that I fell back and set the beads swinging and clackering wildly, casting mad and grotesque shadows on the walls. His face fell when he caught sight of me.

"Hey, you're not the pizza delivery guy," he said accusingly and in curiously nasal tones. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Dr. Booth, and I am terribly sorry to have intruded in such a manner, but I am afraid that . . ." The poor man was staring fixedly at my doctor's bag with a curiously glassy stare of intense disappointment, and I did not believe he had listened to a word I had just said. I cleared my throat again.

"Shit," he interrupted before I could start into my next sentence, "did I prophesy a veterinarian instead of a vegetarian?" He spoke rather slowly, like a simple child might, and looked up at me with more than ordinary perplexity. His eyes were very large, and the pupils dilated. I wondered if perhaps he had just dosed himself with laudanum, or whether it was simply that the poor man's wits were slightly disordered. So I tried once more, speaking more slowly now, and enunciating with more than my usual clarity.

"I am NOT a veterinarian, but I AM lost, and would greatly appreciate some directions, thank you! I was hoping you could tell me how to get back to Charing Cross?"

He raised a solemn finger. "So let's get this straight . . . I did NOT order a veterinarian, and my vegetarian pizza IS still on its way?"

"I am not aware of your having ordered a veterinarian, nor could I fulfil your requirements had you done so, and I presume your pizza is indeed still on its way. But if you please, I would simply like directions to . . ."

He gave a little skip. "Thank the gods! You'd think eating most of the brownies would be enough, but damn it, I could eat both pizzas right now, and maybe even a calzone!"

"Charing Cross!" I enunciated rather loudly, and with some desperation. "I am trying to reach Charing Cross!"

"Charing Cross?" he repeated in surprise. But then he seemed to refocus himself, "did you say Charing Cross? My dear fellow, I am afraid to tell you . . ." he leaned towards me with conspiratorial whisper, an experience his breath made decidedly unpleasant, "that you absolutely cannot get there from here!" Then the rest of his breath seemed to leave his body

in a foul cloud, and he staggered backwards to collapse into a strange, shapeless, and bright purple blob of some kind on the floor with his head in his hands. I wondered if he were sobbing. I worried for his sanity, and upon realising that he actually seemed to be giggling uncontrollably I was scarcely reassured.

I heard a loud knock on the door.

"Pizza!" he shouted happily once again. "Come in! Come in!" He jumped up and pushed me roughly to one side.

"I don't want pizza," said the large stranger as he entered, most peevisly it must be said, as he was simultaneously fighting off the beads quite furiously with a great waving of meaty arms. He finally got through, and after glaring at the entryway, he planted himself squarely on both feet with his fists resting lightly on his hips in hackneyed stance. He wore a singularly eccentric assortment of clothes that appeared to have been assembled from several eras of moneyed taste, and the most extraordinarily enormous pair of shoes that seemed to betoken feet of unusual size. He took a deep breath before launching once more into speech, causing various buttons to strain at their stations.

"This does not look like the demesne of an arthropod collector. However, my mother told me that I could obtain a specimen of the rare green/yellow phase *extatosoma tiaratum* female, and that you had it reserved for me. You should find it under the name of Mandrake. Though I still do not understand why we could not have sent Alice."

"You haven't brought my pizza?" the older man positively wilted.

"I know nothing of any pizza. Now look here, have you the *extatosoma tiaratum*? I would like to examine it before buying of course."

"Man, what the hell are you talking about? I don't speak latin. And where is my damn pizza?"

The big man turned an interesting shade of red at this, becoming quite apoplectic, and I feared he might commit an act of violence or have a fit where he stood. It was most certainly time for me to leave, but where to go was the question, and so in the interests of changing the subject and keeping the peace, I plucked up my courage to intervene.

"Excuse me," I said. I suppose I was really rather confused and intimidated by the whole scenario unfolding before me, because my voice did not at all carry the firmness of its usual tone. I might possibly have squeaked. They both turned to me, and the silence rang loud in my ears. I cleared my throat and squared my shoulders. "Can you tell me how to get to Charing Cross from here?" I asked, addressing the newcomer. He looked at me rather as one might look at a small and very grotty child.

"You know very well you can't get there from here." I started to protest, but in vain, as he had turned again and begun loudly addressing the occupant who had once more sunk into the purple cushion in such an abject state of dejection I almost felt sorry for him.

"Is this, or is this not, 88 Saffron Lane?"

"It is."

"And is your name Howard Pivens?"

"For my sins."

"And yet you mean to tell me that you do not have an *extatosoma tiaratum* of the family *Phasmatidae*, or if you must be common, the giant prickly leaf bug, and that my devil of an interfering mother has sent me here to no purpose whatsoever? This in spite of the fact that I was in the middle of re-cataloging a vital part of The Collection according to my new numbering system and this little trip will have set me back several days?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But this is an outrage! Is a Mandrake to be treated thus? An entomologist of global standing, son of Lucious and grandson of Mortimer? Great-grandson of Bertie and great-great grandson of Sir Trismegistus Alfred Mandrake? Can it be possible?"

"I am very sorry but . . . wait a minute, did you say Mandrake?"

"I have now said Mandrake several times. Though it makes no difference if you do not have the specimen I require."

"Milo Mandrake?"

"Precisely, though as I said . . ."

"No shit, really? Andromilicus Mandrake? Son of Isabella Millicent Mandrake?"

"Ha, so you admit that you have had contact with my mother?"

"Contact? Only by letter, my boy, only by letter, don't you go worrying that your mother and I have had any other kind of contact. But how old are you son, forty?"

Milo turned even redder, "Thirty three, but that can be a fact of no importance."

He glared resentfully at Howard who had jumped up and opened an immensely large and very ancient looking book perched precariously on a very rickety metal cart which curiously sat on wheels. He was muttering to himself as his finger traced down one of the later pages. I have always found it difficult to trust a man who mutters to himself, though clearly nothing about this man was very trustworthy. I had quite decided to simply leave and try and find an explanation from someone else, but the emptiness of the remembered street daunted me somewhat, and I had to admit my curiosity was a bit piqued. I'm afraid to say I dithered, as I could not quite resolve myself to walk out of the place into the growing darkness without some kind of direction.

Howard's momentary frenzy had subsided somewhat, and he now leaned on the book tiredly, staring with almost blank expression into the ether. "Man, there's no way I can figure this out on an empty stomach. Why me, honestly?"

There was a third knock on the door.

"Pizza!" yelled Howard, ever the optimist. "Come in!"

"Two large vegetarian valhallas," said the tall, slim girl as she manoeuvred the pizza bag contemptuously through the beads.

"Thank the gods you are here!" raved Howard as he pounced on the boxes.

"You should thank them, they are precisely what brought me." Her eyes began a calculated search of the large apartment, and she made no move to leave after having the pizzas wrenched from her hands.

Howard had already sat cross-legged on the battered hard wood floor, flipped open the top to one of the boxes, and sunk his teeth into a large triangle, dripping tomato sauce most disgracefully down his front. After swallowing another enormous bite he looked up beaming.

"Hey man, sit down! Everyone! Join me in this feast!"

I eyed the floor with some misgivings, I did not think it would be kind to my trousers. But the room had filled with the succulent smell of the pizza, a city creation that I had never before tasted, and I could not say that any of the other available surfaces looked any cleaner. So with a slight creaking of joints I lowered myself to the ground. I saw that the large Mr. Mandrake was joining me; his was also a frame that probably required feeding at very regular intervals.

"Might I use your loo?" asked the girl politely.

"Mmph," nodded Howard, and managed to swallow, "down that hall, third door to your right."

A felicitous silence came over the room. It was even more felicitous after Howard had passed around the brownies.

We leaned back on our elbows in a happily contented state of true satiation. Howard had pulled out a hand rolled cigarette and I watched its smoke curl lazily through the air to join the rather dense cloud already hovering along the ceiling. I did not normally smoke cigarettes, but had forgotten my pipe and I had to acknowledge that tobacco was certainly very good after a meal as an aid to digestion. I had just begun dutifully thinking once again of how best to make my way to the home of Dr. K, when Howard broke the silence.

"Now Milo," he said dreamily, "I have had to rethink this whole thing, I thought you were a teenager you see, but clearly I was mistaken. Luckily pizza and the herb always settle my mind. We shall get to the leaf bug shortly, but am I right in assuming that you have never used one of the portals, have no knowledge of Moscow, and do not speak Russian?"

"I am involved in vital work that leaves me no time for self-indulgent tourism," replied Milo loftily, "and as you have been in some kind of contact with mother I cannot understand how you could imagine me a teenager." His intonation of the word teenager seemed to imply that he had, in fact, never been one, and was vaguely insulted by the accusation. For some reason I found that rather funny, and I'm afraid I giggled. Howard immediately turned to me.

"And you, Mister...?"

"Doctor. Doctor Charles Booth. What was the question again?"

"A doctor! Excellent. What kind of doctoring do you do, if I might be so bold?"

"Well, I'm a medical doctor you know. I run a general practice, and specialise in rare and sub-tropical disease. I am here to . . ."

"Rare and sub-tropical disease?" repeated Howard, interrupting me. "Oh, how wonderful! I'd say that fate was being extremely kind, which is a very good joke, do you know why?" He was giggling as he asked me, and for some reason I giggled in return.

"I'm afraid I don't!"

"Because," and he held his breath for a moment before bursting out loudly "I AM fate!" He then collapsed into inane laughter that was somehow quite contagious, and I heartily joined in.

"Fate?" I squeezed out between guffaws.

"That's me!" He roared back, tears now pouring down his face.

"Destiny?" I gasped, holding out my hand.

"Nice to meet you!" he bellowed, shaking it.

"Doom?" interjected Milo, who somehow had not even cracked a smile.

That sobered Howard up right away. "Oh no," he shuddered, "Doom is someone else entirely. Man, I certainly hope you never meet him. And of course, I'm not exactly Fate, just her trusted agent. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression about that," he looked shiftily about the room before mouthing a word I thought just might have been 'bugs' and pointing silently up at the chandelier. "Fate is absolutely one of the most benevolent and beautiful of all the gods and goddesses, and consistently works to make the world a better place by bringing meaning and purpose into the lives of others." He rattled it off as something well committed to memory and repeated many times.

I couldn't seem to stop giggling, it puzzled me exceedingly.

"You seem far too silly to be a doctor, and you sir," said Milo, looking most severely at Howard, "are an old fraud. I would like to collect my specimen and go home. Now. I have very important work to get back to."

"I'm overjoyed to tell you, Milo, that in fact your important work lies ahead! For I have a quest for you, an exciting adventure into the unknown, an opportunity for meaning and fulfilment in a life hitherto spent entirely within the confines of your ancestral home . . ."

"Are you telling me I lack meaning and fulfilment?" spluttered Milo dangerously, jumping up from the floor to stare threateningly downwards. "My ancestral home? What devil-woman's lies has my mother been telling you?"

"Not lies, Milo," tutted Howard soothingly, reclining back upon his elbows with a beatific smile. "She does everything entirely for your own good you know! She has one of those truly beautiful maternal spirits, your mum. She just wants you to grow, see the world, become the man she has always known you could be . . ."

Milo paced, heedless of this last outburst, muttering to himself and shaking the occasional fist in the air. "That venomous serpent! That babylonian whore! That wife of Bath! What is she planning now I wonder? What could she be planning . . ." he took a few more turns as I scrambled backwards so as to be close to some kind of cover, even while Howard watched with apparent unconcern.

"The mailman!" Milo suddenly shouted. "It has to be the mailman! They have probably even now moved my *Dynastidae* from the main bedroom so they can copulate like a randy pair of goats. My priceless *Trichogomphus mongol* might even now be in danger of being crushed by their layers of fat flailing obscenely in passionate embrace, I will not stand for it! And YOU!" he menaced, suddenly focusing back onto Howard, "you have been party to this pornographic plot? You have connived with that vicious vixen to evict me from my own home so she can sport with all of the men she can manage and make our family the talk of the entire neighbourhood? How dare you! I demand satisfaction!"

"Dude, chill out." Howard stood up lazily. "This is about YOU, man, you and your path upwards towards a greater embracing of your fullest potential and the flowering of your inner gifts. It isn't about your mother at all, though we all need love son and your mother is still a very beautiful woman. So why on earth you should object to her getting a little rumpy pumpy every now and then . . ."

Milo's fist flashed in a wide arc and connected squarely with Howard's chin. Howard flashed in a wide arc and landed squarely on the purple squashy bag, where he lay and stared up at the ceiling.

"God d—n!" said the girl delightedly as she re-entered the room, "I've always wanted to see someone do that to Howard!" She walked over to beam happily down on the nearly unconscious man, "I think rumpy pumpy might have been taking it just a little too far really, don't you agree?"

I wondered for a minute what on earth she had been doing in the W.C. all this time, but quickly banished a thought of such indelicacy. She did look an entirely different person when she smiled, I felt my gentlemanly instincts become aroused, and stood up with shoulders straight.

"Do I even know you?" groaned Howard as he slowly sat up and tried to bring his eyes into focus on her face. She said nothing, simply stared down happily a moment or two more.

"Well, I'll be off then!" She walked over and shook Milo's hand, "it has truly been a pleasure, I do hope you emerge from this relatively unscathed! And you as well, of course," she cheerily nodded at me.

"Ha!" roared Howard, albeit somewhat groggily as he struggled to his feet rubbing his chin. "You are Enriqueta O'Donovan! Object hunter, wise-woman, witch, adventuress! We have met before."

Her brows snapped together. "We have. And you mispronounce my name every d—n time. And I am only one of those four things, but you'll never know which one. I really must be leaving now."

"Not so fast," Howard replied craftily, "not so fast. I think I have a little job for you. Milo here is about to take a trip, and he really needs some companions on his quest,

especially someone with your specific manuscript-hunting skills." I glanced over at the avid bug collector, curious as to just how he was taking this startling news. He didn't appear to be listening, indeed, he was lightly pummelling the wall with his fists while continuing to curse to himself. I was tempted to cover my ears, but the stream of filth was oddly hypnotic. I hovered there, thinking someone at some time had to offer up the clue I needed to unravel what was happening.

"Now Howard," she said kindly, "you know I just brought you the pizza you prophesied."

"And?"

"And? I really do hate to disappoint you, but I have your bylaws here, and if you will just look at 232.1.3, section 10.z.ii., I think you can see clearly that as I have already completed one of your prophecies, I am exempted from any kind of quest related activity for the next 5 years, the minimum exemption as the first quest did not result in any loss of limb or mental capacity."

"My dear girl," replied Howard with great sweetness, "I do believe the version of the articles you are reading from are dated from before last Thursday? I see they are." Her eyebrows snapped together once again into what was quite frankly a terrifying glare, but Howard continued on in happy oblivion. "Well, we were forced to update them I'm afraid, and they were officially approved only two days ago at the board's quarterly Ibiza meeting. That precise section was being used as a bit of a loophole you see, by certain misguided people who were trying to get out of what was really in their own best interest. So I, as the Executive Director of Personal Fulfilment Through Fate, now have the discretionary power to override this provision if I think it the most beneficial course for the individual involved."

"Pending a full board review?" she shot back hopefully.

"Purely on my own discretion," he said with a smile.

She clearly had not given up, I could see her chewing her lip and thought that could only mean she was planning her next move. Even so, I jumped when she shouted.

"Where are you sending Milo again? To Russia? Really? Do you actually believe his mother wants him out of the house for his own good?"

Milo had jerked out of his abstracted ranting and he now moved toward Howard threateningly, "where does that scarlet temptress want you to send me? I won't go, let's just see you try to make me . . ."

Enriqueta's eyes suddenly met mine and I saw her lips form the word "run," even as she turned to follow her own advice. I seemed to lack all power of forward movement, but she had almost reached the door when I heard Howard shout. He had neatly evaded the lumbering Milo who had knocked over a plant stand and crashed headlong into an enormous and very dirty stuffed bear of pastel blue propped up incongruously in one corner.

"Enriqueta O'Donovan! Andromilicus Mandrake! Dr. Charles Booth! I charge you with the quest of the lost book!" There was a wild flash of light and a faint rumble of thunder. I smelled burning and quite frankly I cowered back into the corner, staring at the frightening and occult scene through my fingers. Enriqueta had screeched to a halt, her back rigid with fury. She pulled the beaded curtain off the door and ground it methodically under her booted heels as the shadows reeled crazily around her.

"F—k." I was deeply shocked to hear such language from a woman, and deeply saddened that it did not stop there, "f—k, f—k, f—king f—k." Slowly she turned. Step by step she walked up to Howard until she was an inch away from his face. "You f—king b—d. I should have killed you outright instead of trying to run. My small part in making the world a better place."

"You will all thank me in the end. My quests are unforgettable life-growth experiences." Howard said it with an air of saintly virtue and did not move an inch.

Her hands clenched into fists. Milo's hands were clenched into fists as well, now that he had succeeded in extricating himself from the immense toy teddy. The bear did not look at all good, and I thought it also looked quite bad for Howard himself.

After another few tense seconds, and much to my surprise, Enriqueta slowly uncurled her fists and stepped back with an angry sigh. She shook her hair from her face and I saw a thin spiral tattooed on her left temple, cutting across her eyebrow and almost reaching her eye itself. I wondered what such a thing could mean, but events were moving quickly.

"We can't hurt him now, I'm afraid," she said to Milo in a voice carrying the deepest of regret. "Not until we've gotten through the quest of the lost book. He's immune . . . But I can see you're going to try it anyway, completely understandable but don't say I didn't warn you."

Milo showed no sign of having heard her. His face purple with fury, he swung once more, his fist somehow sliding right past the grin on Howard's face, the force behind it propelling him straight into what appeared to have once been a lemon yellow wall. Enriqueta watched him sit up and shake his head groggily with great sympathy, before she disdainfully picked up a jumper lying across the back of a rickety chair and vigorously wiped down the seat. With a resigned sigh, she tossed the lime green garment onto the bear and settled down, crossing one elegant leg over the other.

"Someone will pay for this. Preferably you. But for now, what exactly do we have to do?"

"Ah," breathed Howard happily, "this is always my favourite part! Gather round queesteers, and listen well. For you will hear an epic story that shall inspire you to great deeds; the opportunity is yours, and yours alone, to right great wrongs . . ."

Enriqueta yawned ostentatiously. Howard ignored her, and waved with exaggerated grace to Milo and I.

"Come closer, come closer my good doctor, and you shall hear all! Milo, my brave child, come pull up a chair and listen to the tale that I shall tell . . ."

Milo stared at him mulishly a few seconds before the fight suddenly seemed to leave him and his shoulders sagged. "But I don't understand, what about my *extatosoma tiaratum*?"

"Just pull up a chair Milo," interjected Enriqueta kindly, "There are no leaf bugs here. It was a ruse, a trick, and now we're all stuck with this stupid quest. So the sooner he tells us what it is, the sooner we can start, and the sooner we can put all of this behind us."

"I do think it would be very helpful to rethink that attitude, my dear, not only for your own sake, but for that of your dear comrades." Howard then struck a thespian pose, his shaggy grey hair numinous in the dimly lit room. He held it even as Milo and I pulled our seats forward in line with that of Enriqueta. I am afraid I still had no idea of the immensity of what had just happened, in fact everything seemed to be happening at a rather great distance and through a fog of both smoke and incomprehensibility. Howard glanced from the corner of his eye to make sure that we were properly settled and then began to declaim.

A polish writer, I believe without peer
 he wrote so little, its value is clear
 not one book, not two, but three in all

He was interrupted by a massive fit of coughing, he paused with great annoyance even as Enriqueta wiped her streaming eyes.

"For f—k's sake, Howard, must you write this sh—t too? (I admit I winced once again, I was still entirely unused to such language from anyone at all, much less from what I considered at the time to be the gentler sex.) Must we have it in verse, and I'm sorry, but such

bad verse? I might have to kill myself here and now and be done with with your stupid quest, honestly. Can we please have it in prose, and I'll promise to be good?"

"That's pretty harsh," replied Howard stiffly. "But not everyone can appreciate genius, or how much background work goes into ensuring participant enjoyment and fulfilment. We don't have to do it you know. But having compiled and exhaustively analysed the exit interviews of all participants still alive and able to talk, we found that a good background story told in the grand manner is possibly the single greatest factor in quest satisfaction. And we're trying our best to be professionals here."

"Professionals," she smirked, "of course. I do appreciate the fact that now you've trapped me into something I don't want to do, you are trying to make it as pleasant as possible. But bad poetry is not helping your cause at all, so prose, if you don't mind."

"Whatever. You don't want the extras? You don't have to have them. Any objections gents?"

We both shook our heads. I remember wondering, nay hoping, that Milo was feeling as confused and numb as I was. I hadn't minded the poetry at all, it did seem more quest-like, but I bowed unhesitatingly to the lady. Milo simply looked blank, staring goggle eyed at the old man, his mouth slightly open.

"Right. So a very long time ago there was this writer. His name was Bruno Schulz and he lived in a small town in Poland and taught art and made these trippy drawings and wrote some even trippier stories. And then the Nazis came to town, so you know how this ends. Now Schulz had published two books, now considered to be masterpieces of Polish literature..."

"Any literature," snapped Enriqueta.

". . . of Polish literature." repeated Howard. "And there was a third book . . ."

"*The Messiah*," interjected Enriqueta.

"Do you want to hear your task or not?" thundered Howard. Enriqueta remained silent, though her eyebrows spoke most expressively for her.

"As I was saying, there was a third book. It fell into the hands of the Gestapo when they first captured Mr. Schulz. When the Russians came to liberate the village, all the Gestapo's papers were then passed on to the KGB. And with the KGB it has remained, deep in their secret vaults, which we believe to be in Moscow. And so," Howard made a grand flourish with his hands and executed a small bow, "your quest is revealed."

"We are supposed to go to Moscow, somehow find these vaults, retrieve the manuscript from the clutches of Russia's most feared secret police who yielded up nothing even when Nikolas himself demanded it, having their own god to protect them, and then waltz it on back to you?" Quetita sounded a little incredulous, and I could not wonder at the cause as I could imagine no assignment so difficult, so fraught with danger as this.

Howard bristled. "This isn't supposed to be a cake-walk you know! Running down to the corner store for some milk and eggs will not change you forever. This is a quest! It will test you, challenge you, force you to grow! Six out of ten respondents say our quests are the most worthwhile thing they have done in their entire lives!"

"And the other four are still sane and everyone else apart from those ten dead, I imagine. Do you have any helpful ideas about where we should start?"

"There is a woman named Adela in Moscow. She knows the prophecies. She has the stamp collection. She will help you."

"Right," said Quetita suddenly thoughtful, "the stamp collection. We have a chance at survival after all. But Adela can be very hard to find."

"She will find you."

"Right. And do you have any other hints or uselessly cryptic clues for us before we go?"

"You will find plenty of those along the way," replied Howard stiffly.

"Oh good. It's always nice to have something to look forward to."

Howard ignored her and pulled out a sheaf of papers from beneath a towering stack of dirty dishes perched perilously on the table. Their position was now even more perilous.

"Here is the manual explaining the general terms of your quest, I have one for each of you, please sign for proof of receipt here." He paused and handed each of us a rather sticky pen, we duly signed.

"Please note that the principal provision is that you must try and stay together, or you may be asked to perform an alternative quest in the future. You cannot cease from your attempts to complete the quest until you have a) succeeded, b) the object of your quest is destroyed, or c) you have sustained severe physical or psychological damage to be diagnosed by a PFTF certified doctor. You can see a list of eligible conditions on page 32, and a regional guide to doctors on page 165. I believe the rest is pretty standard stuff, so unless there are any further questions?" he paused a moment looking at each of us. "Good. Then I shall let you be on your way, as you've no idea the amount of paperwork I have to do."

I was the last to have been shooed out the door, and almost bumped into Henriqueta on the sidewalk, where she stood in reverie.

"I don't suppose you've ever read Shulz?" she asked me, and I shook my head. She actually laughed, and hardly seemed angry at all for a moment, her eyes taking on the far-away look of the dreamer. "Well, whatever happens now," she said, "I am sure it will be entirely extraordinary and very little to do with us."

Milo shook himself and suddenly exploded. "No one tells me what to do! Especially not some knavish unshaven hippy in orange trousers. It's absurd to think I would stop my vital work to go to Russia, and all to find a book I've never heard of. I do not read. I am going home to deal with my mother."

"I fully sympathise," said Enriqueta, "I truly do. If there were any way to get out of this, believe me, I would. But there isn't. We have to do it."

None of this sounded good at all, Dr. K was supposed to be leaving in two days, and I was responsible for his practice while he was away. It was impossible for me to undertake a quest.

"What happens if we don't fulfil the quest?" I asked her.

"It's hard to explain," Quetita paced up and down, and her face returned to that mixture of anger and resignation. "Very simply, bad things happen, getting gradually worse. Your milk goes sour and your food burns on the stove, your partner breaks up with you, your friends fight with you, your train breaks down, you break down . . . anything that can go wrong will go wrong until you pick up and go. And spontaneous combustion, while rare, has been known to happen."

"Rubbish," snorted Milo. "I am going home."

Enriqueta looked rather cross. "Fine, then, that's just fine. When you've come to your senses you can find me at the Yorkshire Grey. Just go to the second floor, ask for a glass of Amontillado and raise a toast to Quetita, which is what most people call me, all right? They'll tell you where to find me. Repeat that please."

"You're mad."

"Repeat it, and if I'm lying none of this matters anyway. But I'm not."

"Fine," the man was almost steaming at the ears he was so angry. "I go to the Yorkshire Grey. I go up to the second floor, I ask for a glass of Amontillado, and then I raise a toast to Kayteetah. Then they all have a good laugh at me, and then we set off for Moscow."

"Perfect. So make sure you bring everything you might need."

"Whatever. For the final time, I am going home." He turned and started walking away, immediately slipped, and sat down directly into an enormously deep puddle.

"Told you so!" she called.

"Coincidence!" he shouted, and he struggled up as though nothing had happened and strode off down the street. I believe I saw him fall down again at least once before he turned, but I couldn't quite be sure of it in the growing dusk. For myself, however, I was convinced and quite ready to leave that very minute, only pausing to send word to Dr. K of the disaster that had befallen me. That's when a strange eddy of wind suddenly picked up and carried my hat right off my head. I dropped my portmanteau and leapt into the street in pursuit. I had just managed to grab the old bowler with what I felt was rather admirable dexterity, when from behind me I heard Enriqueta yell something that sounded like 'high tide'. I looked up to see a strange creeping mist rolling down the street towards me, the first tendrils of which were already streaming across my shoes. And that's when I realised I couldn't walk back onto the sidewalk. And I was slowly turning around in spite of myself. I looked up speechlessly to Enriqueta still on the sidewalk.

"You're in for it now, I'm afraid," she yelled at me, "you're on a mistrip. It's not dangerous, just annoying." She was now walking carefully beside me on the sidewalk, and talking quickly as I poured down the street with the mist. "Just let it take you where it wants to take you, deal with what you find there, and then meet me at the Yorkshire Grey, you remember the instructions?" I nodded, craning my head to keep eye contact. "It's really too bad you getting smacked by fate twice on the same day. I suppose I'll have to take your bags with me. I expect to see you soon."

She seemed very confident, though I myself had no such expectations at all. Still, all I could think to say was thank you as there was no time for anything else, especially as she had stopped walking and I had not stopped moving. I racked my brain even as I continued most unwillingly down the street, to what destination I did not know. I vaguely remembered the

term mistrip, but could not remember anything else about this phenomenon I had once discounted as simply another product of a diseased urban imagination.

I knew I had made a terrible mistake coming to The City. And now I was on a quest to somewhere else entirely, two quests in total and neither of them the job I was bound to do by friendship and honour. I needed a cup of tea.