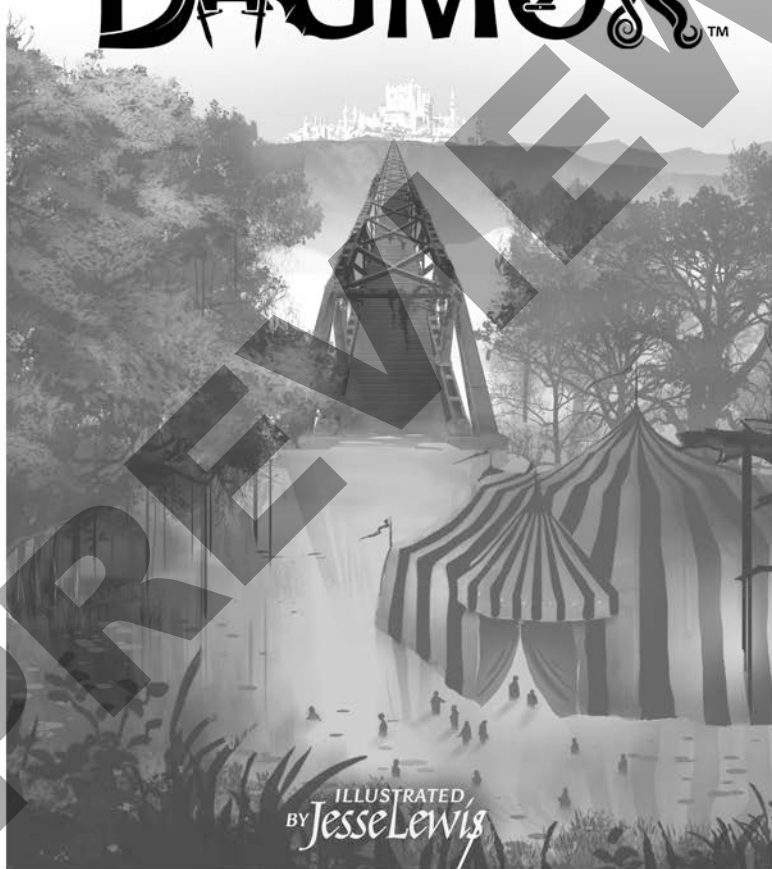


RLAKERS

THE CIRCUS OF
DAGMOR™



LEGENDS OF OVERTWIXT™

The Golden Age • Book 1

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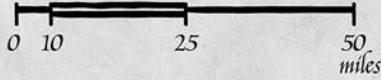
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magically inscribed
 by the *Wizard of Merlyn*
 greatest mortal practitioner of magic in history,
 during the single golden age of the merpeople

More specifically,
 374 H.E.

The Distant Upper Reaches of OVERTWIXT



access via
 cave/tunnels
 to Lugarth



LEGEND

LANDMARKS

- bridge to reality
- lugman warcamps
- The Hillfort Castle
- Backwater
- Stronghold

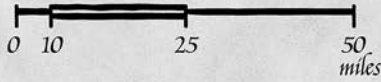
REPOSITORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

- Main Library
- Branch Libraries
- The Vault

magically inscribed
 by the *Wizard of Merlyn*
 greatest mortal practitioner of magic in history,
 during the single golden age of the merpeople

CAYMERLOT

and surrounding nilands



LEGEND

LANDMARKS

- bridge to reality
- Gatehenge
- The Crystal Keep
- Dagman circus

REPOSITORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

- Hidden Chamber
- The Monastery of Mysteries

For Nate,
who was more interested
in this tale from ancient history
than he was in Nachton's present-day adventure

Loremaster's Note

On my first visit to Overtwixt in 782 H.E., I was amazed to discover many volumes of history in the Grand Library of Huland which have been lost in our human real world. I was very excited by one collection of manuscripts written by an ancient human Poet (pompously annotated by a certain merman Wizard), as well as a cross-referenced work called *The Story of the King of Overtwixt*, by the Savant. But in the middle of my family's fight against the Vizier, I never had the chance to research any of this material further.

During my second visit in 784 H.E. (several real-world years later), I finally got that opportunity. Studying the Poet's and Savant's manuscripts, I discovered the fanciful tale which obviously inspired our human legend of Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table (as well as many tales from Greek mythology too). When I returned home later, I shared the details with a friend, and the book you now hold is the result: the first volume of a three-book series about the Golden Age of Overtwixt.

Of course, all of the events in this series happened so long ago that many details have been lost to history. Please understand that my friend and I had to make educated guesses sometimes, to fill in gaps in the story—meaning this is really just historical *fiction*. Even so, the tale of Caymerlot (as it was actually known in Overtwixt) reveals underlying principles about human nature and right vs. wrong, ancient truths which I find very enlightening.

One special word of caution. Dagmen (a race of fishlike people who are very important in this story) have a very... unusual... way of speaking. Their unique dialect is mostly understandable to our human ears, but it often breaks our rules about proper grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, which could confuse younger readers. As such, I have insisted on adding footnotes* as frequently as possible to clarify any dagman weirdness (and to explain other things as well).

If you read any other words that confuse you, please see the Glossary on page 299. I've also added new pages and corrections to my Reference Book, which comes right after the Glossary. You'll be happy to see that my penmanship has improved, and I'm now using ballpoint pens, lined notebook paper, and sticky notes—all of which I've fashioned using the magic of Overtwixt! I'm even experimenting with a typewriter prototype designed by my gnoman friend the Engineer. So while my older quill-and-ink notes are still difficult to read, you should find my newer Reference Book entries *much* easier to decipher.

But you're not here to listen to me ramble about myself. Without further delay, let me welcome you back to Overtwixt... as it existed a long, *long* time ago. May your visit be just as meaningful as before—and as the dagmen would say, “I hope you has a right jolly time!” †

Nachton Ollivatos

* This is a footnote. When you see a strange asterisk (*) or cross (†) in the middle of the story, you can look for that same symbol at the bottom of the page to find extra information.

† By which they would mean “I hope you *have* a right jolly time,” as in “a very good time.” —N

THE CIRCUS OF
DAGMOR™

PREVIEW

• the legend •

“Once upon a place and time, way back in the beginning of everyfing,* a powerful fella called the Sovereign created a magical world in the middle of nuffingness,” said the mother to her child. “And in that magical place, he created magical bridges to all the real worlds in all the different dimensions of the cosmos. And he invited all the peoples in those worlds to send representatives across the bridges to the new world he created. He called his magical world Overtwixt, on account of it existed over and betwixt all the different realities. †

“And all those people came together to form Epitopia, the first great society of O’ertwixt.* It was both a city and a country, the only city or country in all of O’ertwixt at the time, a place where everyone lived without pain or injustice or

* Dagmen sometimes pronounce “th” as “fff”—like in “anyfing, sumfing, everyfing, nuffing” (“anything, something, everything, nothing”). And in some other words, they leave out certain sounds entirely—like saying “O’ertwixt” (OR-twixt) instead of Overtwixt. See Glossary on page 287 for a complete list of “Dagmanisms.” —N

† “Betwixt” is actually a real word, meaning “between.”

4 • The CIRCUS of DAGMØR

oppression or inequality. In that place, at that time, all the races and peoples lived together in peace and harmony.”

“Weally?” squeaked the very young child, who was totally engrossed in the bedtime story. “What sorts of peoples, Mum?”

“Oh, every sort you can imagine, and countless more yeh ain’t never dreamed of.* Faeries and gobmen and orqs, centmen and mermen and luggernauts, men and women with great big wings and tiny types with no arms, legs, wings, or appendages at all—and of course folk from our world, just like you and me.

“So like I said,” the mother continued, “at first, everyfing was hunky dory. Everyone got along, and no one ever tried to take advantage of no one else. After all, there’d be no point. Everyone who lived in O’ertwixt had everyfing they needed, so there weren’t no reason to ever hurt or steal.

“But...” the mother grew sad. “It couldn’t last.”

“Why not?” demanded the child.

“Because... people is people. We gets jealous, and sometimes we lets ourselves believe lies about other people, just ‘cause we want to fink we’re better than everyone else. I don’t know exactly how the trouble began in Epitopia, but it probably started small—a gatling making fun of a squirman for his slippery nature, or a stigman starting a rumor about the merpeople, even though he knew it weren’t true. It don’t take much to trigger a mudslide: just a little rain causing a bog to overflow, then that stream of water dislodges built-up sedimentations, one after another, until next thing ya know,

* There are *many* examples of incorrect grammar on this page, as is the case anytime a dagman speaks. Just know that if you try to talk or write this way in an English class in *our* world, you probably won’t like the grades your teacher gives you! —N

half the countryside is sliding off into the sea in a flow of muck. That's what happened in O'ertwixt, except it was peoples' lives as got all muddy.

"The races turned against each other. Instead of trusting their old friends to be upfront the way they'd always done before, they began to mistrust other people just 'cause they looked different or talked different or *smelled* different. Politics was born. People started using words like weapons to get what they wanted, whether or not they needed it or deserved it.

"Then came the first war, and it was horrific, both for the terrible pain it caused then, and also for the ramekinations* it's had ever since that time. Thousands was vaporated, by which I mean they was defeated in battle and turned to yellow smoke—returned instantly to their real worlds and never able to cross the bridge to O'ertwixt again. It was them luggernauts who launched the first offensive. Being so big and muscly, they thought that gave 'em the right to conquer the faermen, be in charge over them. But you best be believing the faeries didn't agree; they fought back viscosly.† And the fae wasn't innocent neither. It turns out the faeries, though weaker than lugmen, was *smarter*—and when the riptide of the war turned in their direction, they began enslavin' the big lugs, making them servants and such.

"And all this was just the start, the tip of the iceberg. Hunnerds of other races got involved, the same story playing out a hunnerd different ways, until not a single race in O'ertwixt was at peace. There was dark forces at play, mind

* I think she means "ramifications," meaning the effects or consequences of an action.

† "Viscosly" means thickly, like it was oozing with stickiness or slime. I, um, think she probably meant to say "viciously." —N

ya, working from the shadows to bring all of this about for sinister purposes. But in the end, there weren't no one left standing as was free of guilt. No one but the Sovereign himself, of course.

"The Sovereign insisted on a truce, then gathered representatives of all the races to the old place of meeting, where he'd first brought 'em together in the very beginning. A riot almost broke out right then and there, but the Sovereign used his magic to enforce the peace. Then he began to create magical artifacts of enormous power—Relics, they was called—and he gave *four* of them to each of the races in attendance. But last of all, he created a Relic that was completely unique, and more powerful than all the ones he had made before—"

"One Welick to wule them all?" the little one asked.

"Nay, child—hush. That's an entire different legend you's finking of. But this Relic *was* meant to be carried by a very special person someday. The Sovereign declared that one day in the far future, a Hero would arise and finally undo all the wrongness which started in the First Epoch, using the power of this special Relic to do it. Wielding the Relic, he would usher in a true Golden Age of O'ertwixt, when all peoples became *one* people, united under a single monarch. And to ensure no one else was ever able to use that Relic except the Hero himself, the Sovereign left the Relic encased in Rock so only the Hero could remove it.

"Then the Sovereign shattered his perfect world into a million, thousand pieces—just like the peoples had already divided the great society of Epitopia into a million, thousand factions with their war. Each race was left with a single broken fragment of Sovereign's perfect creation, a floating island isolated from all others in the nuffingness of that world between worlds."

The mother honored the long, lost paradise with a moment of silence, while her child waited expectantly.

“In all the epochs and eras and eons and ages that followed,” she finally continued, “men and women have tried to put the pieces back together again. With the Sovereign’s help, many races built bridges to each other and came together fer mutual benefit. Others repeated the mistakes of the past, violating the Sovereign’s desires again and again by starting new wars, new campaigns to enslave, new shenanigans to undermine and politick and jockey fer position or power.

“And that is how O’ertwixt remains to this day, no matter what anyone might say to the contrary. Oh, maybe we’s built cities which rival that first metropolis of Epitopia—or at least we tell ourselfs they’s just as grand—and maybe we’s connected loads of nilands * together again with elaborate and beautiful bridges. But people is still people, always looking fer ways to take advantage over one another.

“But someday, a Hero *will* arise. That hero will take up the Relic-in-the-Rock, and he’ll embark upon adventures like you never imagined, fighting monsters, battling bad guys, and rescuing damsels on all the nilands of the realm. And when evil is vankished,† he will unite them nilands beneath his banner, and he will reign supreme with no one to stand against him—the most honored ruler ever, afore or after. His rule will be a time of peace and healing, and he will be loved by everyone. When the time of the Hero finally comes,” the mother concluded, “it can truly be said they lived happy ever after, one and all.”

* “Nilands” are what all those floating islands are called in Overtwixt, since they float in the middle of “nil” or nothingness.

† “vanquished,” as in defeated. —N

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The child sighed with deep satisfaction. “I wanna go to O’ertwixt so *I* can fwee da Welick-fwom-da-Wock and save everybodies from demselfs. That way *I* can be da Hero.”

The mother smiled. “I fink that’s a wonderful fmg to aspire to. But fer now...”

There was a groan. “Beddie time. But Mum,” the child asked seriously, “what *is* da Welick? Where can I find it in O’ertwixt?”

“Well, every race has its own version of this legend, and they all say different fings. Who am I to say which one is right? I can only tell you what our people believe... tomorrow night, maybe.”

“But da Hero *is* gonna be one of *our* people, wight, Mum? *Wight?*”

“Almost certainly,” the mother replied with a grin.

The child heaved another contented sigh and finally relaxed, settling back into the pile of blankets. “Oh, good.”

The mother kissed her child on the brow, then stood to leave. “Good night, my darling.”

“Mum?” came the sleepy voice. “Can you send Daddie to kiss me good night too?”

The mother smiled fondly. “Always.”

Part I

The Fool



PREVIEW



Planet Mersch
The Dagman Real World
in the 431st primal (circa 394 H.E.)

- (11) (37)

113 miles
 Dagmen seem obsessed
 with prime numbers. -N



• one •

Arthos Penn, son of the famous Pythagoras Penn, always dreamed that *he* would become the legendary Hero from Mum’s story. After all, that bloke was gonna have loads of adventures and excitement, but he was also gonna be in charge, which meant he’d never have to do anything he didn’t wanna do. And that was pretty much everyfing Arth wanted out of life—the respect of others without any sort of responsibility.

The cheerful and ambitious young dagman just needed to con his way into Overtwixt, then surely his dreams would come true.

He listened with half an ear as Mum retold the familiar story yet again, on the other side of the curtain which separated their small home into two rooms at nighttime. It wasn’t so long ago that Arthos and his twin brother Morthos had curled up in their blankets on that side of the curtain, hanging on Mum’s every word. But these days, their dagling* sister was the audience, while the boys practiced

* A very young dagman. You can add “-ling” to the end of any race name to imply a baby, toddler, or little kid. —N

their new job skills late into the night. After all, as Daddie liked to remind them, they weren't half-size lads no more, clutching to their Mum's scaly back. These days they was apprentice performers in Dad's world-renowned circus troupe, with ambitions of taking their rightful place as feature performers on the center stage someday.

Except those were *Dad's* ambitions. As Hero of Overtwixt, Arth wouldn't have time for circus performing, amidst all his quests to slay monsters and villains. He *certainly* wouldn't have time for studying or chores!

"Arthos," Dad interrupted his thoughts. "You's day-dreaming again. Back to yer studies, lad."

Arth grimaced, looking down at his textbook scroll and trying to do a better job of *pretending* to read. He sat comfortably on his heels, in the way of all dagmen, and ran a finger along the paper. Part of Arth wished he could share Dad's ambitions... but so far he hadn't shown the teensiest talent for song, story, or stunts, the circus's standard opening acts (the ones apprentices always learned first). Now Daddie was making him try something different. This textbook was about ventriloquy: the art of "throwing" your voice, so that it sounded like you were talking from somewhere else. It was a right neat-o idea, truth to



tell... except that Arth had shown no talent for this yet either.

Not that he was really trying at the moment. How could he focus on anything aside from Overtwixt, when tomorrow represented his best chance *ever* for getting into the blasted place... and he still didn't have a plan for making it happen?

Morth was in the same boat, of course. Squatting nearby, Arth's twin pretended to focus on his juggling, his forehead furrowed with concentration. But he must've been thinking about Overtwixt too, because the moment he tried to add a fourth ball to the ones already in the air, he fumbled and dropped the lot of them all over the floor.

Arth burst into laughter. "Sure and certain, that ain't the way, boyo."

"Oh, and you's the one to show me better?" Morth responded with a scowl. "Here—" he snatched a wooden ball from the ground and hurled it at Arth. "See if you can keep just *one* in the air, ya cheeky little noober."*

"Oopsy," Arth said, catching the ball and slinging it right back at his brother, who dove to the other side of the room to get away. "Oy, yer right. Guess I can't juggle even one." Despite their bickering, the young dagmen soon broke into matching grins. As twins, they shared a bond that could surely never be broken.

"Boys..." their father interrupted in a warning tone. He was squatting nearby too, looking over his travel papers one last time before his troupe's departure on the morrow.

* Dagmen have a vocabulary all their own, and in fact, they tend to make up or mispronounce words all the time, sometimes completely rearranging the order of syllables in long words. It's not that they're stupid. More like they're creative, and constantly tinkering with our language. In any case, "cheeky" means rude, while I think a "noober" would be a newbie or someone inexperienced. —N

“What have I told you ‘bout using those balls for play? Them’s tools of the trade, not toys.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Arth said contritely.

“Yeah, sure and sorry, Daddie,” Morth agreed.

“And Morthos is right, son,” Dad said, looking at Arth. “You shouldn’t laugh at him considering yer own jugglin’ ability is so...” He trailed off, then cleared his throat. “Um, how’s that ventrilikky coming?”*

Arth glanced at Morth and got a wink in return as his twin turned away casually, pretending to pick up his juggling props. Adopting a serious expression, Arth began mouthing words—while Morth, on the other side of the room, said loudly: “Ladies and dagmen! Daglins of all ages! Come one, come all of yehs, to tonight’s one-night-only extragavanza, † featuring the one, the only... Pythagoras Penn!”

The sounds coming out of Morth’s mouth didn’t remotely match the movement of Arth’s lips, but maybe that was the point. “Good, good,” Dad said. “Keep up the strong work, boyo. By the time I return, I expect yeh’ll be a true master of the art.” He turned back to his papers.

But Morth wasn’t done. “A moolhill among mountains, the monster of the menagerie—”

“Arthos...” Dad said in that warning tone again.

Arth’s eyes widened and he began gesturing desperately at Morth, but Morth kept on going.

“The Loudmouth of Lundunium, the Braggart of Bridagnon—”

* He means “ventriloquy,” of course.

† See what I mean about rearranging the order of syllables? He means “extragavanza,” the word for an elaborate performance. —N

“Arth!” Dad objected.

Fortunately, Mum chose that moment to appear, returning to this side of the room with a rustle of curtain fabric. She immediately dropped into a squat also and began collecting the rest of the juggling balls Morth had dropped.

“Oy, Mum,” Arth said loudly, speaking up and changing the subject before Morth could continue his prank, which would surely land Arth in trouble. “That story you was telling again tonight—the legend of the Hero of O’ertwixt and his Relic-in-the-Rock...” Arth said.

“Aye, dear?”

“What *do* our people believe?” he asked, trying to act all casual. “I mean, what kind of fmg is the Relic, really?”

“Yeah, and *where* is it?” Morth put in.

Mum glanced toward Daddie, but he wasn’t paying any attention to the conversation. “Well, no one really knows what it is,” she admitted. “But like most of the aquatic peoples, we believe the Hero’s Relic is on the niland of Caymerlot itself, in the courtyard of the Crystal Keep.”

The boys traded excited glances. This information would be helpful once they were in Overtwixt themselves.

“After all,” Mum went on, “there *is* sumfmg glittery sticking outta the rock there which no one’s been able to pull free in all the epochs since the Schism of the old world. According to the dagman version of the legend, whoever frees that whatchamawookiee in the courtyard on Caymerlot will be *King* over Caymerlot, not just Hero. Supposedly, anyone who wants can try their hand at tugging it out.”

“Codchowder,” Dad muttered, making it clear what he thought of all this. But he didn’t look up from his papers.

“Of course,” Mum went on, “every race finks the Hero will be one of *their* people.”

“He’s gonna be a dagman!” Arth insisted.

“Naturally,” Mum agreed, a twinkle in her eye. “But the karkmen think he’ll be a kark, the nymen think he’ll be a nymph, and even the kelpmen think he’ll be a kelpie.”

“And them mermen won’t be bowing down to no King except he be merman,” Daddie snorted.

“But that’s just the people of Caymerlot,” Mum said. “O’ertwixt is so much more than our little realm, an infinite world of floating islands and peoples, most of whom ain’t never heard of Caymerlot. You best be believin’ they all have their own legends and traditions saying the Hero’s Relic is on *their* niland and whatnot.”

Daddie gave one last snort, to make *doubly* sure no one doubted his opinion of all these legends and traditions.

“Hubby?” Mum called him sweetly. “You been requested to give our daughter one last kiss goodnight.”

“I already kissed her g’night,” Dad said distractedly.

“You have time,” Mum reminded him. “You gots nuffing to pack fer this trip, and nuffing left to do.” She was right, of course. Where Daddie and his troupe were going tomorrow, they wouldn’t need to bring tents or costumes; they wouldn’t even be *allowed* to bring their exotic animals. “You’s gonna be gone when yer little girlie wakes,” Mum concluded, “and the poor lass won’t see ya again fer a year.”

Dad looked up at that. “Here now, it won’t necessarily be a *year*—”

“Yer missing the point, my love. Daughter. Kiss. Now.”

The great Pythagoras Penn blustered for a moment, but of course he gave in. “Aye, dear. I do s’pose yer right.” He grinned, stood, and passed beyond the curtain.

As soon as Daddie was out of sight, Arth and his twin resumed the plea they had been arguing for the last month. “Why can’t we go with him tomorrow?” Arth demanded.

“We’s prackicly adults now, after all,” Morth put in.

“I’m almost fifteen,” Arth agreed. “And Morth ain’t far behind me.”

Morth snorted. “Aye, just sixty-and-one heartbeats—”

Mum raised both hands. “Calm yerselves, lads. You know ya can’t go, not this time.”

“But—”

“This is a right big honor for yer father,” she said yet again, as she had already said many times before. “A once-in-a-lifetime oppenturity, the culmination of his career, sumfing he’s worked all his life to achieve—”

“And simply put,” Daddie said, reappearing around the curtain, “yeh ain’t pros yet. I can only take so many, and I gotta choose performers at the top of their game. Not noobers just barely startin’ out.”

“But surely you can add just two more,” Morth begged.

“Yeah,” Arth begged also, “sure and surely you can make an exception fer yer own *sons*.”

“I wish I could,” Dad said sincerely, “but it’s all carefully regulated, ya see. I can take just nineteen, and them nineteen slots is already bespoken fer.”

With a huff, Arth crossed his arms, each hand grasping the fringes of the spiny fins on his opposite elbows. Then he noticed Morth doing the same thing and deliberately folded his hands in his lap instead.

Dad sighed and began rolling his folio, putting away his papers for the night. “Now give yer ole Daddie a hug. I’m headed to my blankets and up early in the mornin’, so I may

not see ya again.” He cracked a smile. “But you can be sure and certain I’ll have some stories for yeh when I return!”

“In a year,” Morth muttered.

“Yeah,” Arth agreed. “Phirteen whole months.”*

“You don’t know it’ll be that long!” Dad reminded them. “It’ll be a year for *me*, aye. But for you, it might just be a day or a week...”† He trailed off thoughtfully. “Though there was that time it went the other way. Poor old Axolocien Axolotl came back home to find his kids was older than *he* was, suddenly.” Dad waved a hand. “But that’s right uncommon, that is. Typically, folk come back from their year and it’s like no time at all has passed in the real world.”

“Hooray,” Arth muttered.

“Yeah,” Morth agreed. “That’s *extremely* uncouraging.”

Dad’s face fell. “So... no hug then?”

The twins both looked away.

Daddie’s shoulders slumped and he left the room, trudging up the stairs that were carved in the back wall, leading up to the roof where he and Mum slept under the open sky. Mum gave the boys a disappointed look, but she said nothing more either, just followed her husband from the room. That left Arth and Morth alone in the space where *they* usually slept once everyone else had gone to their blankets.

“No way we’s letting him leave without us,” Morth declared.

* Apparently, the dagman real world of Mersch takes thirteen months to orbit its sun, meaning that’s how long their year is (unlike the human real world of Earth, which orbits the Sun in just twelve months).

† As I discovered on my first visit to Overtwixt, time passes strangely there. Sometimes faster than the real world, sometimes slower, and sometimes different on one floating niland than another. (And don’t forget, time *always* passes more quickly in libraries.) —N

“Nope, no way,” Arth agreed. “So this is a once-in-a-lifetime oppenturity, is it? All the more reason to be takin’ us with him!”

“Well, we’s goin’ whether he likes it or not!”

“Right-o!” Arth rejoined. “I’m liking yer confidence.” But then he sagged a little. “Um, how exactly we gonna do that? Did you magickly come up with a plan in the last forty-and-seven heartbeats?”

Morth just grinned mischievously in response... and pointed to the folio of travel papers, which Dad had foolishly left behind.

Eyes wide, Arth scurried to the bottom of the stairs and looked up. “Coast’s clear,” he hissed.

Morth already had the folio unrolled. “*Excrement*,”* he breathed excitedly. “We gots everyfing we need, right here,” he added softly, a big grin spreading across his face. “You know what this means, don’t ya?”

Arth’s face split into a matching grin. “Oh, I know alright.”

“This time tomorrow,” Morth declared, “we *will* be in O’ertwixt.”

“Youbetcher bottoms!” Arth agreed. “And the day after that, I’ll be Hero and King!”

Morth scowled. “Leave off. *I’m* gonna be Hero and King!”

Arth shrugged, unable to stop grinning. “Either way, we’s goin’ to Caymerlot, boyo!”

* Morth is *definitely* using this word incorrectly.



• two •

The next morning, the twins wakened easily to Daddie's early departure, no matter how stealthy he tried to be collecting his papers and tip-toeing between their blanket-rolled bodies on his way out of the house. They waited exact fifty-three heartbeats, then slipped out of the house after him.

"We'll have to go the long way around," Arth warned his brother quietly. "On account of we don't want him turning and seein' us on the way."

Morth looked toward their Dad, some nineteen paces up the road already, but still easy to pick out among the other pedestrians in the predawn light. "Make way! Oy, make way, I say!" the renowned showman was announcing every several paces, with a flourish of his traveling cloak. "Pythagoras Penn be passing through!"

"Fat chance he'll notice anyone but hisself," Morth disagreed, disgusted at their father's antics. "He does know that kind of behavior is likely to *slow* his progress, right?" Already, more than a few wide-eyed daglings were pressing in on the man, probably hoping to get his autograph.

• 20 •

“Aye,” Arth sighed. “Even so, I fink we should go the long way—and that means we’d best be runnin’, boyo!”

The two young dagmen set off at a jog down a side street, embarking on a meandering route that would eventually take them to Bridge Port—the magic gateway into Overtwixt from the center of Lundunium—without crossing Dad’s more direct course at any point along the way.

Lundunium was already busy, despite the hour. A lot of it was folks afoot, of course (dagman bakers and shopkeeps and others who needed to start work early), but there were also plenty of mools pulling sledded carts. The amphibious equine creatures,* with their stubby legs and splayed toes, were perfectly suited for pulling heavy loads through mud or marsh. And that’s exactly what Lundunium was: a half-submerged marshland, all drab browns and grays, thick with the smell of decomposition.

Arth sucked in a lungful of the familiar air and smiled. What a glorious day! Flocks of sing-rays trilled their calls as they winged across the sky, while squirpents slithered along tree branches and took death-defying leaps from one kanban or chikerry tree to the next, chitter-hissing angrily at the dagmen and -women who passed beneath. It was all as familiar as the pebbled ridges on the back of Arth’s hand.

When the twins reached Bridge Port, they found their Daddie was already there. Surrounded now by the other eighteen members of his troupe, the renowned showman had stopped outside the main gate to talk to the crowd. Flourishing his cloak and patting the head of a nearby dagling as it clutched to its mother’s back, Pythagoras proclaimed, “Thank you! Thank you, one and all! Touched, I am, sure and

* “Equine” means horse-like. I’m guessing a “mool” is something like a mule from our real world, except that it’s “amphibious” (capable of living on land or in water, like a frog). —N

truly. There's no more adoring fans in all this world than the fans of Pythagoras Penn! Yes, thank you. But I shall be back afore ya know—the word of Pythagoras Penn on it!" And with that, Dad showed his travel papers to the gate agent and passed inside with the rest of his troupe.

The crowd roared as he disappeared beyond the Port's tall stone walls. Even this early in the morning, the gate into Bridge Port was besieged. Part of the crowd was certainly made up of well-wishers, but there were probably other people there to greet the incoming arrivals (folks coming *back* from Overtwixt). And there were some protestors as well, blokes carrying signs which read "Overtwixt for all!" Arth whistled softly at that. Apparently he and Morth weren't the only ones who thought the current arrangement unfair—the fact that only the rich, famous, or well-connected were allowed entrance to the magical world of bridges.

"C'mon," Morth urged, dragging Arth along after him as he began pushing through the crowd.

The gate agent looked surprised when the boys presented travel papers of their own. "Oy, I thought all the departing travelers was already 'counted fer," he said, inspecting their Portpasses carefully. The twins held their breath because *their* documents were forgeries, meticulously created last night after careful study of Dad's *genuine* Portpass. "Huh," the agent grunted. "They look real enuff."

Arth relaxed, trading a smile with Morth.

Then the agent began unrolling a scroll, and Arth recognized it as a list of performers in the troupe. He groaned. Of *course* security wouldn't be so lax. Forged travel papers weren't going to be enough to get the twins into Overtwixt.

But Morth was already reacting. Turning to a lad in the crowd next to him, he whispered, pointing, "Is that Pythagoras Penn again?!" The dagling's protuberant eyes

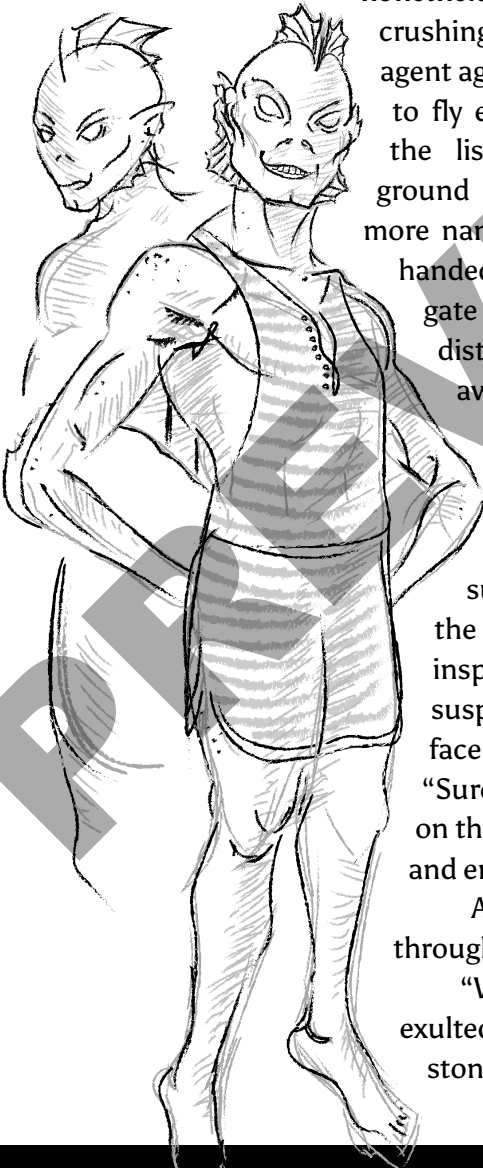
bugged out even bigger in excitement. Pointing past the gate, the little boy squeaked loudly, “It’s Pythagoras Penn! He’s coming back for autographs!”

It wasn’t Pythagoras Penn at all, of course, just another employee of the Port, walking their direction. But the crowd’s reaction was predictable and immediate nonetheless. They surged forward, crushing Arth and Morth and the gate agent against the wall, causing papers to fly everywhere. Morth snatched the list of performers from the ground and quickly scribbled two more names at the bottom. Then he handed all of the papers back to the gate agent, while that fella was still distracted yelling at folks to step away.

“Huh,” the agent said again, once he’d finally calmed the crowd. He inspected his scroll suspiciously, then inspected the Portpasses suspiciously, then inspected the twins most suspiciously of all. But finally his face cleared and he shrugged. “Sure and I was wrong. You boys is on the list after all. Watch yer step, and enjoy yer stay in O’ertwixt!”

And with that, he let them through the gate to the Port.

“Well, that was easy!” Morth exulted once they were inside the tall stone walls.



“I should hope so,” Arth told him, his own heart still racing. “I fink that *was* the easy part!”

The boys had just rounded the gatehouse, coming into view of the Bridge for the first time. Before them—at the center of the walled area—stretched a large swampy lake, its far side hidden by Lundunium’s ever-present mist. The Bridge itself disappeared into fog halfway across. This end of the overpass was wide, each huge stone mortared together and placed so that it leaned out over the ones beyond. With half of the Bridge hidden, it looked like the whole thing should fall over into the swamp water below, but obviously it must form an arch somewhere in the middle of that fog.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough mist on this side of the lake to hide the boys, and there was nowhere else to hide either—just a big open space from here to the water, and a small knot of people blocking entrance to the Bridge itself. The twins quickly ducked back behind the gatehouse again.

Most of the people standing or squatting at the base of the Bridge belonged to Dad’s troupe. The nineteen of them clustered around a self-important dagwoman who was apparently giving an orientation session; and thanks to all the moisture in the air, her words traveled easily to Arth’s ears. “—bound by Treaty signed by the Underlord of Caymerlot hisself,” she was saying in a raspy voice. She sounded bored. “The terms of the Treaty is ‘specially favorable to dagmen, ‘cause the people of Caymerlot recognize their need for the entertainment we provides. There’s always eleven troupes inside: four from the theater brigade, four from the carnival brigade, and three of yer circus troupes.’”*

* Unlike some peoples, dagmen don’t have armies of soldiers. They have armies of entertainers. —N

“Oy,” said the troupe’s burliest performer, interrupting in a resonant voice. This was Dad’s brother, in fact—Arth’s Uncle Bertie. “Why’s the thespians and carnies get to have more troupes than us circus blokes?”

“I’m sure it’s ‘cause the circus brigade is the most prestidigitous,” the dagwoman said flatly. *

The other members of Dad’s troupe all began nodding and smiling. “Aye, that makes sense,” said Uncle Bertie.

Arth was trying to do the math in his head, but the multi’cation tables he’d learned didn’t go that high, so he was now counting on his fingers instead. Eleven troupes times nineteen performers each would be...

“That’s two hunnerd and nine performers in O’ertwixt at all times,” the raspy-voiced woman went on, “for those of you who ain’t that great at maths. Plus me and my assistant makes two hunnerd and eleven, a more appropriate and pleasin’ number.” †

Again, all the performers nodded and smiled.

“Now listen,” the woman said, growing even more serious. “The number of dagmen in O’ertwixt is strictly relegated! ‡ As Portmistress, it my job to ensure there’s no funny business. The letter of the law must be upheld! There must be two hunnerd and eleven dagmen in O’ertwixt at all times—no more, no less—or else we’s in breach of contract.”

Arth’s palms were suddenly sweaty. Why was that specific number so important, aside from bein’ nice and pleasing? And what were the consequences if they strayed

* This... actually makes sense, kinda. Look up “prestidigitation” in the dictionary.

† Dagmen are infatuated with prime numbers (which cannot be divided by any other number except the number one).

‡ “regulated,” meaning that there are rules about it, and those rules are carefully enforced

from that number? If Arth and Morth succeeded in sneaking in, would that cause some sort of interdimensional incident?

Morth elbowed him hard in the side. “We been standing here too long. Look.”

Sure enough, another of the Port employees had noticed them, and he was walking their way with a frown.

Arth nudged his brother back. “Start movin’.”

“Aye, but where?!”

“I dunno, that way. Along the inside of the wall.” That would take them in a big circle around the swampy lake, right? It was pretty much the only direction they could go to get away from the employee without drawing the attention of the troupe—unless, of course, they gave up on this mad scheme and ran for the exit. But that wasn’t an option.

Unaware of the boys now striding along the perimeter wall, the Portmistress continued her speech. “Now, let’s talk logistics,” she rasped. “As I’m *sure* you all read in your orientation folios, yeh cannot bring anyfing with ya—no supplies, props, tents, or even animals. Just you.”

“Not even the shirt on meh back?” another performer demanded.

“Nay, not even that—”

“So we’s gonna arrive *nakey?*” the dagman demanded, causing the rest of the troupe to explode into laughter.

“No,” the official rasped. She still sounded so bored; it was obvious she’d heard this joke before. “O’ertwixt is a family-friendly place. It’ll magickly provide ya with clothes.”*

* This happened with my family too. Instead of tee shirts and jeans, we were suddenly wearing rough-spun tunics and stiff woolen trousers after we went through the gate (though the colors remained the same). You really can’t bring *anything* with you into Overtwixt aside from yourself! —N

“Oy,” said Bertie. “That’s a mite bit disappointing.”

“Now,” the Portmistress went on. “Yer troupe will be replacing Gorl Tintagnoramus’s circus, which is ending its one-year rotation in O’ertwixt. As such, yeh’ll assume stewardship of the supplies, props, tents, and gear—and yes, clothes and costumes—which that troupe has been usin’...”

“Slow down,” Morth hissed as Arth pulled ahead.

“That bloke is gaining on us,” Arth hissed back. “We gotta keep our distance.”

“Fine, but... I dunno, walk more casual or sumfing.”

“Note that I take my job very serious,” the Portmistress droned, on and on, her voice growing more muffled with distance. “If you do *anything* to violate or circumbendicate* the guidelines as was outlined in your packets—be it even the teensiest infraction—I *will* revoke your Portpasses *and* yer performin’ licenses and send you back to the real world forthwith.”†

Dad’s recognizable voice interrupted, sounding slightly alarmed. “But the numbers... wouldn’t *that* put our people in breach of contract too, not havin’ *enough* dagmen inside?”

“You let me worry ‘bout that,” the Portmistress shot back. Then she added grudgingly, “As you saw on your way into the Port this morning, there’s always dagmen who’d jump at a chance to see O’ertwixt on a moment’s notice.”

The twins were rounding the back of the lake now. Arth shot a quick glance toward the Bridge and was surprised to see the troupe and Portmistress were entirely obscured by fog, though the suspicious employee was still clearly visible behind the twins.

* “circumvent,” which means trying to get around something

† “forthwith” means “immediately”

“So do not test me!” the voice of the invisible Portmistress still carried easily across the water. “We all is representatives of the dagman people, and we’s expected to act like it,” she concluded in a deadly tone.

“Calamity,” Morth said in astonishment. “That dame *does* take her job serious!” He shook his head. “Which pretty much makes her the *worst* representative of the dagman people I ever did meet!”

“You ain’t actually met her,” Arth reminded him.

“Aye, well—”

“But if we don’t hurry, you’s probably gonna.” Arth glanced back and saw the Port employee was now running to catch up. “The gig’s up, boyo! Quick, into the water!”

Both boys dove into the swampy lake water, slipping in with barely a splash, as all dagmen are more than capable of doing. They immediately propelled themselves forward with powerful strokes of their finned arms and legs, scooping the water with webbed fingers and toes to increase speed. The employee would be in the water behind them soon, but if the twins stayed underwater for a while, he’d have a hard time locating them. Swampwater was murky, after all.

The boys didn’t need to discuss where they were going. They sped back toward Dad’s troupe, and more importantly, the entrance to the Bridge. Upon reaching the shallows at the shore, they surfaced slowly, their big bug-eyes already open as they came out of the swamp water. They glanced around quickly, not climbing out of the water until they were sure that the base of the Bridge was completely between them and the troupe, hiding them from view.

Without a word, Morth unsheathed his claws and began climbing the underside of the Bridge—upside down.

Arth’s heart climbed into his throat, but he quickly unsheathed his own claws, jammed them into the mortar

between stones, and followed his brother. It wasn't difficult for him to hold on, for all dagmen have claws on both their hands and their feet. No, his real concern was being *seen*, but thankfully the white mist quickly became even thicker. As fast as the boys were climbing, they would soon be far enough away from the shore—and high enough over the water—to be safely hidden from sight of anyone.

Then Arth's claws slipped. He scrambled, getting a better grip, but jarred loose a number of small chips of stone in the process. They clattered down, splashing loudly into the water below: *kerplunk, kerplunk, kersplish*.

The boys froze, staring back toward the base of the Bridge, which was still barely visible... and to their horror, a curious face came into view, peering around the side.

It was Daddie, the great Pythagoras Penn himself—and of course he recognized his own boys instantly. His gaze met theirs, eyes widening in disbelief... and then fury.

"What is it?" the Portmistress's raspy voice asked from out of sight. "Oy, Pythagoras?"

"*Move!*" Morth hissed at Arth. "To the side." Both boys scrambled sideways, still hanging upside down from the Bridge by their claws, until the bulk of the Bridge was between them and Dad. Whatever Dad said in response to the Portmistress, Arth missed it.

"What for?" Arth moaned. "He's already seen us."

"Yeah, but *he* ain't gonna turn us in. After that Portlady's big speech? Trust me. Dad cares too much about his career." And with that, Morth started climbing again. Taking a deep breath, Arth followed.

Soon, they couldn't even see the water below them anymore, much less the shoreline. They kept climbing. At one point, they heard voices again, and footsteps on stone—

but whether it was Dad's troupe departing, or the other troupe returning, they couldn't know. They kept climbing.

It felt like Arth climbed for an hour like that, upside down, muscles straining, growing more and more tired with each clawhold he dug between stones. And then, at last, they reached the peak of the arch.

Which meant they were only *halfway*.

Still, they kept climbing, even more upside down than before—because now, their heads were lower than their feet as they descended the far side of the Bridge. “Does that mean... we's now inside... O'ertwixt?” Arth puffed. “Since we's... you know... past halfway?”

Morth didn't answer. He was too focused on his own climbing.

Arth frowned, a new thought occurring to him. “Does that mean...” he puffed again, “there's no lake... beneath us... no more?” He tried to remember everything he'd learned about Overtwixt from Mum's stories. The bridges from the various real worlds typically joined the floating islands of Overtwixt at the perimeter* of those islands, which meant those bridges typically hung over empty nothingness.

Which meant *he* now hung over empty nothingness.

What would happen if he let go? Would he fall forever? Arth nearly fainted just thinking about it. He began losing control of himself, arms shaking from fatigue and vertigo. He lost his grip again, just one arm at first, but then a foot too. He scrambled, getting a better grip with his free hand, before his *other* foot suddenly ripped free. He scrambled, hanging now by his arms only, trying to pull his legs back up to get a grip, but he was too tired. He no longer had the upper body

* A perimeter is the outside border of something, like a wall around a city or the outer edge of a floating niland.

strength! What was he going to do? Did he dare pull one hand free in order to keep going, or—

At Arth's side, Morth's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. In his state of panic, it took Arth a long time to realize his twin wasn't hanging like Arth himself; he was *standing* there, both feet on spongy marshland (though the cliff edge into nothingness *was* just a few paces away).

Feeling silly, Arth retracted his claws and dropped. But his embarrassment didn't last long. They were here! They had reached Overtwixt! He raised a hand, and Morth gave him a high five, both boys grinning broadly.

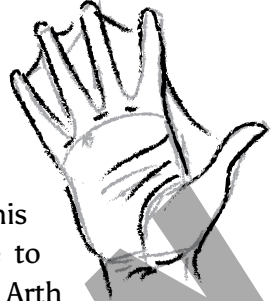
"Now hurry," Morth said. "I fink that was the other troupe we heard pass us by, going the other direction. The coast should be clear, but we only has a few minutes to get away from the Bridge afore Dad's troupe arrives."

Scrambling, the twins raced around the base of the Bridge—and Arth collided with Morth's back when the other boy came to a sudden stop. There, not eleven paces away, stood a strange creature. It looked a little like a mool, but with longer legs... and where the mool's head should be, instead there was the entire upper body of a dagman, arms and everything—except this creature had *hair* on its *face*!

The boys had not been very quiet, but somehow, the half-man, half-mool didn't hear them. Maybe this bloke was hard of hearing? It just stood there, looking down at its dagman-like hands, examining its cuticles casually.

"Hide," Arth hissed at his brother. "Hide, *now*!"

"There!" Morth hissed back, pointing at loads of packs and parcels—probably the tents, props, and other gear Dad's



troupe would be using—carefully wrapped in tarp and twine and draped with loose canvas.

Dashing over, the boys lifted a flap and threw themselves beneath the canvas... just as they heard footsteps approaching from over the Bridge.

PREVIEW



• three •

“Dagmen and dagwomen, visitors to Overtwixt,” came the sound of a deep, strong voice. “I bid you sincerest welcome. I trust your journey here was short, and thus pleasant?”

“Um, yes,” Daddie’s voice responded, sounding distracted. “Thank you.”

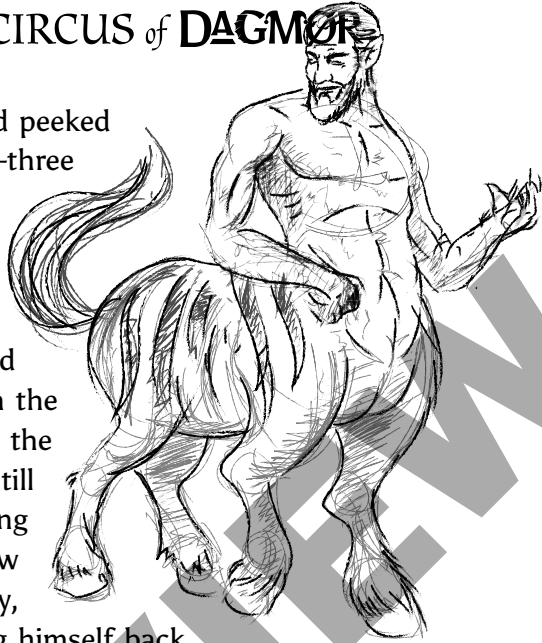
“Allow me to introduce myself,” said the first voice. “I am the Guide of Overtwixt.”

Arth, hidden beneath the canvas, smacked himself on the forehead. The Guide, of course! That would be the half-man, half-mool fella—centmen, they was called. Arth should’ve recognized the bloke on sight, considering how many times his Mum had described him in her stories.*

Outside the canvas, an awkward silence had fallen. Unable to restrain himself any longer, Arth carefully lifted an

* It’s funny to me how every race in Overtwixt describes the other races from their own perspective. As a human, I think of centmen like the Guide as being half human, half horse. As a dagman, Arth thinks of them as half dagman, half mool. —N

edge of the fabric and peeked out. Twenny-and-three paces away, most of Dad's circus troupe was now standing on this side of the Bridge, clustered around the Guide. In the distance beyond, the Portmistress was still approaching, bringing up the rear with a few stragglers. Oddly, instead of introducing himself back to the Guide, Dad was urgently looking in every direction *except* at the Guide—but trying to act all casual about it.



“He’s lookin’ fer *us*,” Morth whispered in Arth’s ear. Arth realized with a sinking feeling that his brother was right.

Uncle Bertie finally cleared his throat, sticking out a meaty hand to bump fists with the Guide. “I’s Roberthoras Penn, nice to meet ya. And please allow me to present the great Pythagoras Penn,” he went on to announce in a more formal tone, throwing out his hands in a grand gesture that ended with a flourish. “My favorite brother, but also the most renowned showman in all the south of Lundunium.”

The Guide held out a fist toward Arth’s Daddie. “I am genuinely delighted to make your acquaintance, Pythagoras Penn,” the centman said. “And how is Lundunium this time of year? Are the chikerry trees in blossom?”

Dad blinked, finally dragging his attention to the half-man, then blinking again when he noticed the fella’s strange appearance. “Eh, um... huh?” He belatedly bumped the fist

that the Guide was still holding out. “Aye, the blossoms is... um, blossoming.”

“Ah, Portmistress,” the Guide said, turning to the dagwoman as she pushed to the front of the troupe. He bowed, bending his forelegs partway and nodding his head at the same time. “Always a pleasure.”

“Guide,” she rasped back sharply, all business. “I’s pleased to report that this here troupe of nineteen circus performers is briefed and in full compliance with the Treaty.”

Even from this distance, Arth could see the centman’s lip twitch in a tiny smile. “Yes, of course.”

Dad’s head was slowly turning again, methodically searching for his sons, and he abruptly made eye contact with Arth. “Ah!” Dad groaned in dismay.

Arth froze, heart thumping.

“What?” the Portmistress demanded, craning her own neck to identify whatever Dad had seen. “What is it?”

Arth wanted to lower the canvas again, but he feared doing so would draw the woman’s eye. He couldn’t breathe. This was the moment of truth. Would Dad turn them in?

“The... erm... landscape,” Dad said lamely.

“Aye?”

“It’s, um, not what I expected. All swamps and kanban trees and such, just like the marshland back home.”

“Ah, sure,” Portmistress said, relaxing. “Portlands always look like the real world they represent. But wait ‘til yeh behold Caymerlot.”* For the very first time, the woman’s voice seemed to hold true excitement. “The purest water you

* As noted before, a “niland” is a landmass floating in nothingness. There are two types: portlands and hublands. See complete Glossary of Persons, Places, and Things on page 287.

ever did see, and actual grass! You don't know the meaning of the words *blue* nor *green* 'til you's seen Caymerlot—"

"Yes, Caymerlot—can't wait to see it fer mehself," Dad interrupted with a forced laugh. "It's the reason we's here, after all! Well, my people's orientated, and I see our gear stacked and waitin' fer us. Portmistress, Guide, you's done yer duty. Don't feel like ya gotta wait around on our behalfs!"

"But the Guide—" Portmistress began.

"Oy, of course," Dad interrupted again. "I suppose the tour guide better point us in the direction of Caymerlot. That way? Good. Thankee, yeh've done yer duty now. Goodbye."

The Guide was laughing heartily, genuinely amused by Dad's antics. Did he have any idea *why* the great Pythagoras Penn was so eager to get rid of him? Surely not. The centman hadn't seen Arth or Morth dive beneath the canvas, or else he would've sent the lot of 'em home for breaking the Treaty.

Even so, Dad couldn't get rid of the fella that easy, for the Guide still had another task to complete—his most sacred duty, in fact. Dad should've remembered that this centman was so much more than a mere tour guide.

"But before we part ways, and before you proceed any farther into Overtwixt," the Guide said, becoming serious, "you must each make a decision." His gaze swept across the assembled circus performers, meeting each and every set of eyes. Arth could've sworn he even glanced at the canvas where the twins hid. "My dear dagmen and dagwomen, during your time in Overtwixt... Who will YOU choose to be?"

Dad clapped a hand to his forehead. "Of course, how could I forget?"

The Portmistress stared at him. "Don't ask me. This was all spelt out in yer orientation folio."

"Sure and it surely was," Dad admitted. "A formal'ty, to be certain, but we gotta follow the forms!" He reached up

and clasped the Guide's shoulder in a familiar way. "As I am the leader of this troupe, I'll be Ringmaster, of course—"

"Ælfred Bartolomew," the Guide intoned, turning to focus his solemn gaze on the youngest member of the troupe—a fella everyone called Freddie, who was about eleven years older than the twins.

Freddie swallowed audibly, his eyes huge. "Um... me?"

The Guide's lip twitched in another tiny smile. "Yes, you." The centman seemed to forget about Arth's Dad, even though the famous showman still clasped his arm. "Three paths stand before you," the Guide told Freddie. "Will you be the Contortionist..." (which was his normal job back in the real world) "... or the Alchemist, or the Baker?"

"Here now," Dad broke in again, and *he* seemed to forget all about Arth and Morth. "We's a circus, not a confectionery. Freddie here can't simply change who he is!"

"If I's being honest, Contortionist ain't the most, er, comfortablest job," Freddie squeaked. "And I *has* always dreamt of opening meh own cupcake shop someday." His gaze shifted nervously from the Guide to Pythagoras, then back again. "Do I really get to choose?"

"Everyone gets to choose," the Guide assured him. "Everyone *must* choose."

Freddie tried to summon his courage, but wilted under Daddie's gaze. "I'll be the Contortionist," he mumbled.

The Guide inspected Freddie for a moment in silence, giving him a chance to reconsider. When the dagman stayed silent, he finally nodded. "Very well. I hereby recognize you as Contortionist. Bear this responsibility joyfully."

The choosing went more quickly after that. Following Freddie, the next youngest troupe member was Nicodermas Phaed, and Nico showed no hesitation choosing the role of

Tumbler. Then came the Juggler, Unicyclist, and Plate Spinner, the last of the opening acts. In each case, the Guide offered other, non-circus options, but no one showed any interest—perhaps because Dad hovered at the Guide’s shoulder through all of it, glaring daggers at each person.

Soon the entire troupe had decided, aside from Dad and Uncle Bertie, each one making the predictable choice: Acrobat and Hydrobat, Trapeze Artist and Escape Artist, and so on. Despite Dad treating this as formality, the Guide took the process very seriously, cementing each performer’s chosen role with a warning to “bear this responsibility loyally” or “modestly” or even “bravely.”

“Roberthoras Penn, three paths stand before you,” he said to Dad’s younger brother near the end. “Will you be the Strongman, the Bodybuilder, or the Massage Therapist?”

Bertie’s elbow fins started twitching—a sure sign of embarrassment in a dagman—and he quickly folded his arms, each hand grabbing the opposite elbow to hide that embarrassment. “The, uh, circus strongman, of course.”

The Guide’s lip twitched again. “Of course. Bear this responsibility honestly.”

Honestly? Was it possible to be a *dishonest* strongman? And did it really even matter if you were?

At last, it was Dad’s turn. “Pythagoras Penn, three paths stand before you.”

“Finally!” Dad interrupted. His patience was stretched to its breaking point. “I’ll be the Ringmaster, of course.”

“Will you be the Commander?” the Guide asked.

“Uh... I’ll be the Ringmaster.”

“Or the Mountain Climber?” the Guide continued.

“What? Of course not!” Dad blurted. “Ringmaster!”

“Or will you be the Ringmaster?” the Guide finished.

Daddie's shoulders sagged, whether in relief or simple exhaustion, Arth couldn't tell. "I'll be the Ringmaster."

"So be it," the Guide said levelly, though there was a twinkle in his eye. "Bear this responsibility wisely."

"Sure and I will," Dad told him. "Is we done, then? Can we be about our circusing now? 'Cause we only gots a year, and already we's wasted an hour of that standing 'round here doing nuffin' but yapping!"

The Guide simply nodded and took a step backwards, gesturing graciously toward Caymerlot. But the Portmistress pushed forward and blocked the troupe's way. "Don't ferget what we discussed," she rasped. "Represent our people well, obey every letter of every law, and enjoy yer year in O'ertwixt." She didn't sound like she cared one wit about anyone enjoying anything. "But at the end of that year, I expect to see every one of ya right here, ready to rotate back to the real world." She paused, a dangerous gleam in her eye. "For if yer not here waiting, or if you step a toe out of line in any other way, I'll make it my personal mission to hunt you down and exacticate* justice."

Daddie licked his lips nervously.

The Guide took the Portmistress's arm in his. "Paloma, I wonder if you might show me those chikerry blossoms."

The change that came over the dagwoman was instant and unexpected. "Why, um, yes," she sputtered, eyelids fluttering. "I'd be right honored."

"Then I bid you all farewell," the Guide told the rest of them, raising a friendly hand. "If ever you have need of

* I'm not sure if she's saying she will "exact" justice (which means to enforce justice, like with a punishment) or else "extricate" justice (which means to take something out of... like maybe she'll take a piece out of their hides). Eithers sounds scary. —N

guidance in any regard, please don't hesitate to call for me." Then, arm in arm, the Guide and Portmistress walked back up the Bridge and away from the circus performers. The unlikely pair made for another strange sight indeed.

But somehow, Arth knew, it was hardly the strangest sight he would behold during his stay in Overtwixt.

PREVIEW

Part II

The Wizard



Matron Bex

Like Mother Beach?

The Merman Real World

after the 2,625th hypertide

- 15 50 100 miles



Apparently, the capital city is at the north pole of the planet.
 Amerlon-Avalore -N

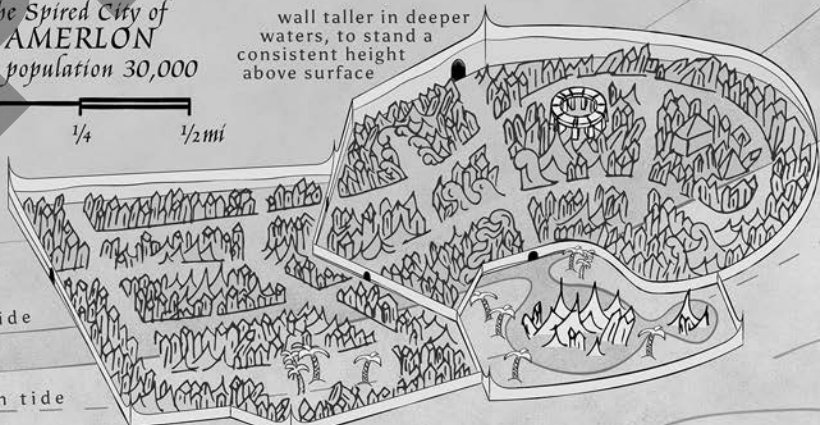
The Spired City of AMERLON
 est. population 30,000

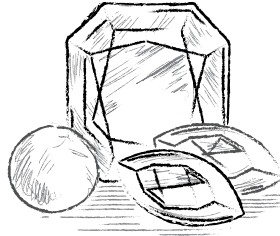
wall taller in deeper waters, to stand a consistent height above surface

- 1/4 1/2 mi

low tide

high tide





• nine •

Hembrose O'Hildirun, son of the outcast Moira O'Hildirun, always dreamed that *he* would become the legendary Hero from that bedtime tale which mams all told their kids. After all, that fellow would be powerful enough to make other people do what he wanted, which meant he would *have* to be respected. That was, in a conch shell, exactly what Hembrose desired out of life—the power to choose his own fate, and the respect he was due.

The resentful but ambitious young merman just needed to win a free trip to Overtwixt, then surely his dreams would come true.

He listened as the local herald finished reading the day's announcements from his scroll. The man had started with national news (the chancellor of Hybra-sil had opened trade negotiations with Mag-mer-Mel), then moved on to regional news (the foggy mists covering Amerlon were thicker than usual for this time of year), and was now wrapping up the local interest stories (Mrs. MagMurray's skow started a fire last night after kicking over a flamebowl). At last, the herald moved on to the part of his routine which

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all the merlads and mermaids were impatient to hear, the only reason Hembrose sat through this ritual every single morning: the reading of the daily lottery numbers.

“And finally,” the herald intoned in a bored voice, “today’s winning numbers are: three... three... five...”

“C’mon, c’mon,” muttered a lad nearby. Like Hembrose, he sat in the soft, wet sand of Hybra-sil’s long intracoastal beach, tail folded beneath him, his lottery slip clutched in one hand. “*Please*,” he begged under his breath.

“... five... zero...”

“Ugh!” The boy crumpled his slip and threw it down just as a wave surged up the beach. Without another word, he flung himself into the surf and disappeared.

“... three... three...”

By now all the rest of the teenagers had swum away too—but to Hembrose’s surprise, *he* was not yet disqualified.

“And the last number,” the herald concluded, still bored but making an attempt at sounding excited, “be six.”

Hembrose stared at his slip in shock. “That’s me,” he whispered. Then louder: “That’s me. That’s me!” he shouted excitedly. “I won the lottery! I’m going to Overtwixt!”

The herald looked up, only mildly surprised. Of course, he read the news and lottery numbers in a dozen villages along the coast; it wouldn’t be the first time he encountered a winner.

But the rest of the townspeople, seated around the village brown (the stretch of beach where folk gathered for public events) showed shock. The merwomen mending nets immediately began whispering behind their hands at each other. The old codgers cleaning fish started muttering—and one of the glassblowers, in his surprise, allowed his half-blown creation of hot glass to collapse on itself. *All* of them stared at Hembrose... because they knew who he was.

At least, they knew who his parents were, so they assumed they knew who he was too.

“Lemme see that, lad,” the herald called to Hembrose. “Ye ticket.”

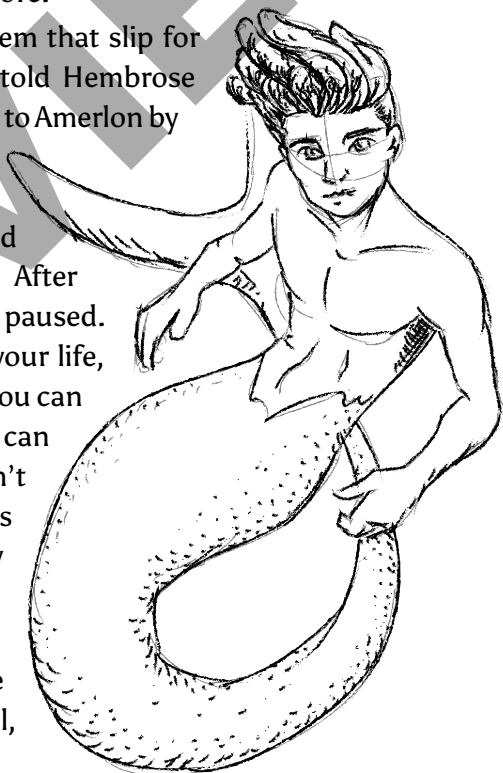
Hembrose used his arms to pull himself farther up the beach, dragging his large tail onto the hot dry sand, and held up his slip for the merman on the wooden crate to see.

“Sure enough,” the fellow said, in the lilting accent of all Hybra-sil’s residents. “You be a winner.”*

This set the townspeople to whispering and muttering even more excitedly than before.

“If you choose to redeem that slip for entrance to Overtwixt,” he told Hembrose quietly, “then make your way to Amerlon by end of day. Present your winning ticket at Gatehenge before sunset, and you’ll be granted admission. After sunset, it’s worthless.” He paused. “Until then, protect it with your life, as it’s ye only way to get in. You can give it away if you wish, or it can be stolen from you. It doesn’t matter. Whoever presents that slip before sunset today will be the next visitor to Overtwixt.”

And with that, the herald rolled up his scroll,



* Based on my observation in modern times, mermen from Hybra-sil have a musical accent like the Irish of our human real world. The mermen of Mag-mer-Mel have a more British way of speaking. —N

shoved it in his satchel, and dropped down from his crate to begin pulling himself toward the water. He still had more villages in which to read the day's news, after all.

Excitedly, Hembrose followed the herald into the water, then turned north, the opposite direction. Ignoring the suspicious glares of the townsfolk (of *course* they assumed he had cheated somehow), Hembrose clutched his ticket tightly and sped home, as fast as his tail could propel him.

For once, the familiar sights and sounds of his sleepy hometown didn't bother him. Above the surface, sky-gills wheeled in midair, squawking and diving as they hunted the insects which burrowed in the dry brown sand. Further inland, nypalm trees waved and rustled in the breeze, while gray clouds congregated in the sky beyond. Here in the shallows underwater, schools of fiff and shish scattered as Hembrose churned through their midst—even as a sky-gill crashed into the water next to him, just long enough to suck in a quick underwater breath before launching into the air again. Hembrose just smiled. How provincial this town was. How quaint, right down to the single-story glass houses all around him. For the first time, he looked on these sights *fondly*, knowing he was finally about to escape them.

Hembrose got more strange looks from other locals as he swam down the main avenue between houses. Here in the shallows was where the wealthy folk lived—their houses out of water at low tide but completely covered at high tide, a nice warm current blowing through their open windows the rest of the day. The middle-class folk lived farther up the beach, half-submerged only at low tide. But Hembrose came from the *other* side of town, deep amongst the shoals—always submerged, where folk had to leave home just to get a breath of fresh air. Mermen could hold their breath for hours, of course, so that wasn't exactly dangerous; but it *was*

uncomfortable at times. This injustice was one of his many reasons for bitterness against his neighbors. But today, Hembrose decided to smile even at them. He was leaving!

Turning down an alley between houses, he followed the sea floor as it got deeper, then cut through someone's back yard to enter the shoals. The water was cooler here, the light from above more scattered. Within minutes, he was charging through the front door of his own house.

"Mam!" he called. "Mam, guess what!"

At seven-and-forty years of age, Hembrose's aged mother Moira O'Hildirun remained remarkably youthful—both her hair and her temperament as fiery as it ever was. "Guess?" she repeated. "I don't have to guess. I already know ye forgot your morning chores. Now get out there and muck those plig stalls before I paddle ye backside."

"Mam!" Hembrose gasped, scandalized. "I'm a full-grown man of nineteen! Ye can't paddle me backside anymore."

"Care to lay a wager on it?" she asked him.

Hembrose straightened up, adopting a dignified pose. "There will be no wager *and* no paddling. And never again shall I *ever* muck a plig stall." Pligs were filthy, fat aquatic creatures with stubby pectoral fins and chubby tails. About the only thing they were good for was eating—and after a childhood of herding *and* eating the stupid creatures, Hembrose would just as soon never even *see* one again. "I be done with pligs forever."

"Oh, won the lottery, did ye?" she joked.

Hembrose broke into a wide grin. "I most certainly did." And he proudly showed her the winning slip.

The smile died on Mam's face. "So that's it, then?" she asked emotionlessly. "Ye be leaving me to care for the farm and the pligs all by me lonesome?"

“That’s right,” Hembrose said brightly. “I be leaving this very day, and not a day too soon.” He didn’t feel a single scrap of guilt about it, either. When life handed you an opportunity like this, you didn’t stop to worry how it might affect other people. You did whatever was best for yourself. That was what Hembrose had come to believe, at least.

“Ye be just like your old man, don’t ya know,” Moira said. “That one was a drifter too. Went wherever the currents took him.”

“I’m nothing like me father!” Hembrose shot back. “He never accomplished anything. But I’m going to accomplish *everything*.”

“Care to start by accomplishing the morning chores?”

Hembrose ground his teeth. “Just ye wait. I’m going to be powerful and well-respected, famous even—in Overtwixt *and* the real world.”

“And ye think that’ll make you happy?” Mam replied.

“Of course it’ll make me happy!”

Mam’s shoulders sagged, and Hembrose realized she was crying. (Underwater, it was sometimes hard to tell, because you couldn’t see the tears.) “I hope you do find happiness,” she told him quietly. “I hope you accomplish everything ye’ve ever dreamed about.”

“Thank you,” Hembrose said with a huff.

“I just know from experience that happiness is harder to find than ye think. And power and fame generally don’t bring happiness. Sometimes, they only chase it away.”

Hembrose rolled his eyes. “Spare me the lecture, Mam.”

She smiled, her lip trembling. “I thought maybe just one more lecture would be alright. For the road, don’t ya know.” She paused. “Ye really be leaving?”

Hembrose nodded firmly, turning towards the door.

“Right *now*?”

He nodded even more emphatically.

Moira swam up and wrapped her arms around him. “I love you so much, me son. And I will miss you more than ye can possibly understand. Make me proud. Chase your dreams... but try to remember that people are more important than power and reputation.”

Hembrose returned the hug for a moment, then pulled free. To his surprise, he realized something was still hugging his tail. Looking down, he discovered his pet skwid Slimy had wrapped its tentacles around him, like it often did when Hembrose left in the morning. The merlad scratched behind the skwid’s ear holes, and it grudgingly let go.

“Don’t worry, ye won’t really be alone,” Hembrose told his mother flippantly. “Ye’ll always have Slimy.”

“Thank you so much,” she told him drily.

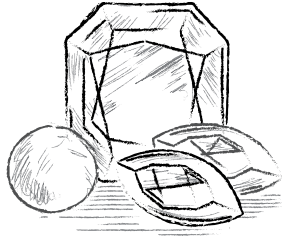
Hembrose swam out the door. Finally, he was escaping this boring, embarrassing life.

“Wait, son, just one more thing,” Moira called.

He turned back—just as she began paddling his bottom with a wooden spoon. “Mam!” he shrieked, horrified. “Mam, stop it! I’m a full-grown man!”

“That’s for skipping out on ye chores again!” she yelled after him as he swam away rapidly. “Chase your dreams, son—but if ye want to actually catch hold of them, try learning a little personal responsibility first!”

Cheeks burning with humiliation, Hembrose swam away and he didn’t look back. But he couldn’t help but laugh under his breath. Mam really was determined to give him one last lecture for the road.



• ten •

The mysterious city of Amerlon was so engulfed in mist and murk that Hembrose never would have seen it from a distance. If not for all the signposts directing him straight towards it, he might have swum past just a mile away and never known. Like all merman settlements, it had an elongated shape—in this case stretching two miles along the coast, but only half a mile into the sea and half that onto the sand. Since Amerlon was the capital of Hybra-sil, it was protected by a tall wall carved from coral on the sea floor; where that wall came out of the water and onto the beach, it transitioned to mortared stone. Only the top twenty paces of the wall (far above the surface of the water on the sea-side) were made from the mermen's signature glass.

Even once he was bobbing at the surface just inside Amerlon's main entrance, Hembrose could see very little—perhaps a hundred paces of that beautiful wall in either direction, and just a handful of buildings. Everything else was hidden by the ever-present mist, making it impossible to judge the size of the settlement. If he didn't already *know* Amerlon was the grandest city on the atoll, he wouldn't have realized this place was any bigger than his own wee village.

• 94 •

Well, except for that wall... and the hundreds of people going about their business in the wide waterways... and the fact that each of the buildings he *could* see was much taller and more elaborate than anything back home. Like the houses in his village, these buildings were formed of thick, structural glass, handblown by merman architects. *Unlike* back home, the buildings here stretched three or four stories into the air. And since some of them started underwater, that made them *much* taller than the single-story houses Hembrose was used to seeing on a daily basis. And each of *these* buildings was unique, topped by graceful spires and other decorative finishes—like fantastical sea creatures leaping out of raging surf—all formed from glass.

Very well, Hembrose admitted, even what little he could see of the cityscape was marvelous. But then he shrugged and resumed his journey, asking directions from the soldiers at the entrance. They traded looks and gave him small smiles, but they pointed the way. And with single-minded determination, Hembrose sped along the wide underwater avenues of the city, never lifting his eyes to the skyline again. No matter how amazing Amerlon might be, he knew it was nothing compared to the magical utopia of Caymerlot in Overtwixt—his ultimate destination this day.

Soon enough, he found himself at the entrance to Gatehenge. He was surprised to discover that it wasn't a gate at all, at least not in the way he was expecting. Gatehenge was a circle of rectangular stone pillars, joined at their tops by flat stone shelves. The circle of huge blocks stood directly on the sea floor. Compared to all the glass and coral, it was rather unimpressive; but Hembrose knew he'd found the right place, because every gap between two pillars was guarded by another merman soldier.

Swimming up to the closest soldier, Hembrose handed the man his winning lottery ticket. Without a word, the

soldier checked the number against a scroll he took from his pocket, then waved Hembrose inside the circle of stones.

Licking his lips uncertainly, the young merman entered Gatehenge.

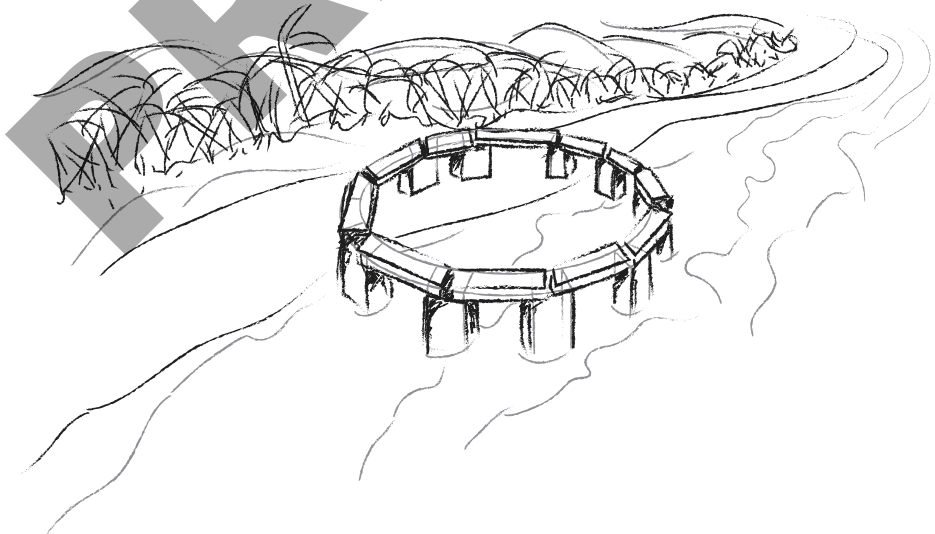
He came to a stop near the middle of the circle. “Um,” he called back toward the soldier. “What now? Am I supposed to say something? Or... be I waiting for someone?”

None of the soldiers answered. In fact, it was almost like they didn’t hear him.

Even more uncertain now, Hembrose turned a quick circle and raised his voice. “How do I get into Overtwixt?”

As soon as the last word left his mouth, a sudden strong current struck him, spinning him around in an underwater vortex. Hembrose cried out in surprise and terror.

And then the unthinkable happened—the vortex exploded outward, and the sea itself drained of water in an instant. Stunned, Hembrose fell onto his side in the center of the henge, coughing and sputtering now that he was surrounded by air instead of sea. He glanced around the circle of stones to see how the soldiers were doing, but they had completely disappeared.



There was, however, someone else inside the circle with him now. A person unlike anyone Hembrose had ever seen or imagined: the fellow had the familiar top half of a merman, but without any tail or fins below the waist. Instead, his bottom half had stiff arms just like his top half—*four* of them, but without hands, and with locked elbows. Somehow, the creature used these four extra arms to hold himself above the sandy ground in a standing position.

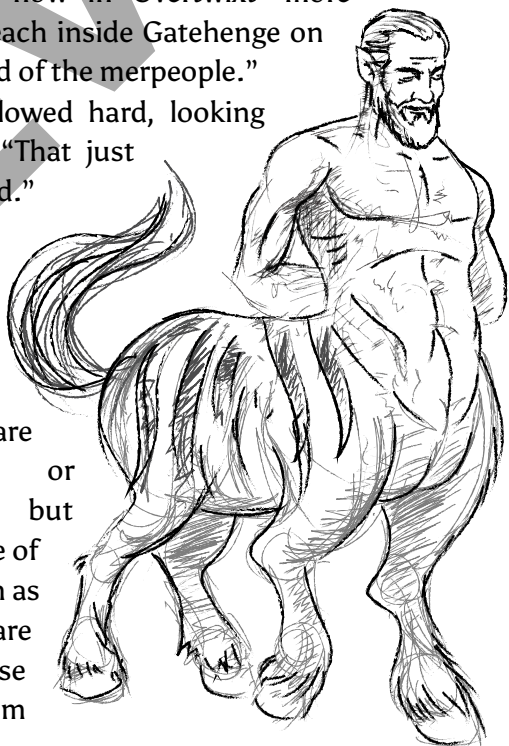
“Ah, young Hembrose,” the tall creature said in a deep, strong voice. “Welcome to Overtwixt.” He smiled down at the merlad and clasped a fist over his chest in the traditional merman greeting.

“Oh,” Hembrose said stupidly. “So that was it? I be in Overtwixt now?”

“Yes, you have crossed over the bridge from your real world, and you are now in Overtwixt—more specifically, on the beach inside Gatehenge on Merlyn, the port niland of the merpeople.”

Hembrose swallowed hard, looking around in wonder. “That just wasn’t what I expected.”

The strange fellow smiled even more warmly. “The bridges here in Overtwixt take many forms. Often they are traditional arch or suspension bridges, but such bridges would be of little value to one such as yourself. Others are bridges only in the sense of being a portal from



one place to another. The bridge you just crossed is of this variety, what we like to call a waterspout bridge.”

“I... see,” Hembrose said finally. It was an awful lot of information to take in all at once.

The half-man chuckled, as if he understood completely. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Guide.”

“Oh good!” Hembrose said, feeling relieved. “So I won’t have to figure this place out all on me own?”

“Not at all. I’m here to, well, *guide* you.”

“That’s fantastic! I can’t believe every single visitor to Overtwixt is assigned his own personal guide.”

The Guide cocked his head, clearly very amused. “What can I say? Overtwixt *is* a place of magic.”

Hearing the stranger say this excited Hembrose all the more. “How do I go about learning magic for meself? Are there academies? Or libraries? Or—”

“Overtwixt has all of these things aplenty. But even more so, Overtwixt offers you *time* in abundance. There is no need to be in such a hurry, young merman! Perhaps you should take time to appreciate the wonder of magic before attempting to manipulate it for your own purposes?”

Hembrose frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head. “I think I’m ready to get started, don’t ya know. Can ye take me to the closest library? Is it in Caymerlot?”

The Guide pointed along the sandy coast in one direction. “You can travel that way to find both, and I would be happy to accompany you. But first, you face a decision.”

“What’s that?”

“My dear merman, during your time in Overtwixt... Who will YOU choose to be?”

Hembrose blinked. “Oh, um... I don’t know. Meself, I guess? Unless I can be someone better than me?” Feeling suddenly uncertain, he asked, “Who do ye think I should be?”

“This is a choice for you alone. But don’t worry,” the Guide explained with a chuckle. “The opportunities available to you are specific and customized in light of your talents and personality. Unlike what you may have heard, few people can choose to be *anything* they desire in life. Rather, real life presents you with particular opportunities based on who you are and what the world needs.”*

“So this be like a multiple-choice question,” Hembrose realized, feeling relieved all over again.

The Guide smiled. “Something like that. I present options, and you choose.”

“So be it,” the merman said. “Let’s begin.”

“Will you be the Swineherd?”

His relief vanished. “What!? I only just escaped bein’ a plig farmer back home, and ye’d make me do that here too?”

“I will never *make* you do anything. As I said, this is a choice, for you alone.”

“Good, because I hated that job. Mucking out plig stalls made me miserable.”

The Guide cocked his head. “So you believe joy and fulfillment are dependent upon which job you perform?”

What kind of stupid question was that? It sounded like the sort of thing Hembrose’s Mam might ask. “Of course I believe that!” Satisfaction in life was based on many things, of course, but it was impossible to be *happy* doing something that made you *unhappy*—obviously!

The Guide just raised an eyebrow.

Something occurred to Hembrose. “Wait a moment. There *be* no animals in Overtwixt. So how could I be Swineherd or Shepherd or anything like that?”

* I remember this speech from my own first visit to Overtwixt. Oh, how I wish I had listened! —N

The stranger's eyes twinkled.

"Ye were *joking* with me?" Hembrose demanded.

"I simply seized an opportunity to have an important conversation."

Hembrose frowned at him suspiciously. "Did me Mam put you up to that?"

The Guide just smiled. "Have no fear, Swineherd is not truly one of your choices here." He raised his chin and seemed to become more formal, more official suddenly. "Hembrose O'Hildirun, three paths stand before you. Will you be the Surgeon, the Professor, or the Wizard?"

A slow smile spread across Hembrose's face. Now this was more like it. He thought long and hard, but in the end, the answer was obvious. "I choose to be the Wizard."

The Guide nodded solemnly. "Very well. Bear this responsibility humbly, Wizard of Merlyn."

Hembrose grinned even more broadly. He *really* liked the sound of that. Not that he knew the first thing about magic yet; obviously that would come in time. Except... how much time *would* he be granted in this place? This Guide had just offered him time in abundance, but what did that mean? "Um," he asked tentatively, "how long am I allowed to stay here? Am I expected to be leaving again after a while?"

"When you come and go is at your discretion."

"But back in me real world, there's a lottery system to decide who can enter Overtwixt. Surely they expect me to leave at some point to make room for future winners, right?"

The Guide's lips tightened for a moment. "Overtwixt is an infinite realm, already populated by representatives of all the infinite dimensions of the cosmos. So even if we add a few more people to the infinite population already here..."

Hembrose brightened as he realized what the Guide was saying. “Infinity plus any number is still infinity! So... I can stay however long I want?”

“Did the rulers of your world tell you differently?”

“No.”

“Then you needn’t be in a hurry to leave, so long as you recognize you are not meant to stay forever. But certainly, you must stay awhile if you are to complete your quest.”

Hembrose blinked. “Quest? What quest?”

“Hembrose O’Hildirun, Wizard of Merlyn,” the tall half-man said evenly, “I charge you with becoming the greatest mortal purveyor of magic Overtwixt has ever known, in this age or any age to come. You must uncover the absolute truths which have been lost to history, to aid you in overcoming the evil soon to come.”

The young merman’s eyes had gone wide.

“To succeed in this quest, you must discover what true greatness really is. And you must preserve your innocence, lest you become the very evil you are meant to help defeat.”

Hembrose recovered from his shock, brow furrowing as he tried to understand what the Guide was saying.

“Lastly,” the fellow concluded, “avoid the pitfall of envy, in matters of the realm as in matters of the heart. Hear me well: you will find no greater satisfaction in life than when you’re being who you were created to be—instead of trying to be someone you’re not. That is a path to misery.”

This caused Hembrose to frown. Somewhere along the way, this Guide’s explanation of his quest had turned into a whole lot of unsolicited advice-giving. “I beg your pardon, but could ye repeat the first part again?”

“You are to become the greatest mortal magicker Overtwixt has ever known, and uncover the absolute truths

which were lost to history,” the Guide repeated. Then he added, “Succeed in this, and you will save many lives.”

“I’ll be the Hero, ye mean?” Hembrose asked excitedly. It was exactly what he’d always dreamed of, and yet—could that dream really come true? Him? The Hero of Overtwixt?

“It is certainly within you to become a champion of the people,” the Guide answered carefully. “I suppose it will depend on whether heroism is your goal or only a side effect of doing what you know is right. Remember, your challenge will be maintaining your innocence.”

Hembrose shook his head in wonder. Hembrose himself, the Hero! Or at the very least, a powerful magic-wielder beloved by the people, who would pour glory and probably riches upon him! But what was all this business about innocence and envy? He had assumed the Guide was here to show him around Overtwixt, but the man was acting more like a counselor or mentor than a tour guide. Maybe Hembrose *didn’t* want the fellow tagging along with him on his adventures. He had only just escaped his Mam, after all; he didn’t need *another* person swimming in his wake, giving him lectures and advice!

“Caymerlot and the closest library are that way?” Hembrose clarified, pointing down the beach in the same direction the Guide had indicated earlier.

The Guide nodded.

“In that case, I thank ye for your guidance, and I wish you a nice day. Perhaps I’ll be seeing you around.”

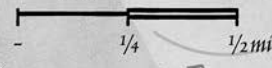
The Guide smiled one more time, though not as brightly as before. “Perhaps you will. Perhaps you will, at that.”

Part III
The Inventor





The Subterranean Suburb of
EAST HOLLOW
est. population 5,150



to Hollows & Conduit

The Market

Richden

Upper East Side

Literally a one-street town

Orphanage

0° Latitude

The Cliffs of Ingenuity

Confluence

Nautilus

Père

0° Obliquitude

LA MANCHE MORTELLE

GESUND HEIGHTS

BAY OF BISCOTTI

Le CENTRE de la PIERRE

0° Italitytude

* Hollows

HYSTÉRICA

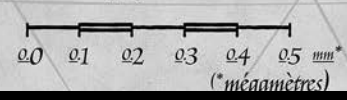
Springtown

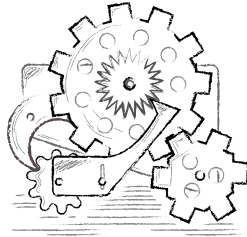
Note: Entirety of planet's land surface completely un-navigable, covered with stalagmites.

the vast SUBTERRANEAN SEA

"Father Stone"

Père Pierre
The Gnoman Real World
in the 999th anzium





• **nineteen** •

Pysyfal Rochelle, daughter of parents she never knew, always dreamed that *she* would become the legendary Hero from that story the orphanage headmistress told the boys at bedtime. After all, that guy actually mattered. Which was what Pysie really wanted from life—and it wasn't too much to ask, was it? She wanted to be loved and respected and *important*, and the easiest way to achieve that was by seizing her destiny as Hero. Nothing in the legend actually said the Hero had to be a *boy*, did it?

The spunky and ambitious young gnowoman just needed to escape to Overtwixt, then surely her dreams would come true.

In the meantime, it would be nice if Pysie could just stay out of trouble. But that was harder than it should have been, living at the orphanage. She was constantly getting in trouble with *someone*—whether the adults, the other children, or both. Today, for example, the headmistress had sent her into town to buy fresh vegetables for dinner. There was plenty of time to *walk* there and back, but instead Pysie decided to test the latest version of her new bicycle.

Of course, she'd had some mechanical difficulties. So now she was late getting back—and that meant she had to ride *fast*. Hurling along the subterranean tunnels of East Hollows in the country of Le Centre de la Pierre, she cried frequent warnings of “Move! Move!” and “Get outta zee way!”* Ahead of her, pedestrians jumped aside; but Pysie had no choice but to dodge the slower quony-drawn carts as their drivers shook angry fists at her.

Pysie hadn't invented the bicycle itself, of course. The gnomes were a fiercely innovative people, and they'd already dreamed up all the most obvious inventions within a couple hundred years after time began. But now, as their world Père Pierre approached its thousandth birthday, Pysie was working to modernize the bicycle. Her idea was to mount *multiple* gears on the axle of the bicycle's rear wheel, so the rider could switch between larger and smaller gears as needed. For instance, if traveling downhill, a smaller gear could be used to maximize speed; but if traveling uphill, a larger gear would minimize pedaling. As far as Pysie was concerned, that was the point of inventing *anything*—to make less work for yourself!

She was just having problems getting the contraption to transition smoothly between gears.



* For gnomes in this eon, hard “th” sounds come out more like “zzz,” especially in “zee” (“the”) but also in “zis, zat, zen, and zerr” (“this, that, then, and there”) and even “wiz” (“with”). —N

Her design was all tied together by a long metal chain, so that whenever she turned the pedals, the gears and wheels turned too. But Pysie's chain kept jamming when she tried to switch it from one gear to another... which of course caused the wheels to stop turning, which... Well, let's just say *that* wasn't a very comfortable experience for the driver.

Still, she'd done some more tinkering before leaving the market, and she *thought* she'd finally figured it out. So as she turned onto the orphanage's steep driveway corridor (yelling, "Move! Zis thing is coming through!"), she bravely attempted to shift gears again: pulling the chain-release lever, while physically kicking the gearbox sideways onto a larger gear.

The bicycle's wheels stopped turning.

Pysie continued to hurtle at top speed, but she left the bicycle behind. With a cry of frustration and fear, she flew over the handlebars and tumbled onto the ground, cracking her head on the stone wall of the passage. And there she lay, stunned, trying to catch her breath... until she heard footfalls quickly approaching.

They weren't coming to help, though. Of course not.

"Look at zis!" one voice taunted. "It's little Pysie."

"My, my," another voice answered. "She must be zee *worst* inventor in gnoman history."

Rubbing her head, Pysie forced herself into a sitting position. "Hugo, Gaul," she greeted the boys. "Fancy meeting you here." Hugo and Gaul were the only children at the orphanage older than Pysie herself, and they were constantly bullying her. They took *any* opportunity to make her feel unimportant and unloved, which was easy since she was small for her age *and* an orphan. There was nothing like being abandoned by your own parents to make a person feel like she really mattered!

"Zis meeting is no coincidence, zilly little Pysie," Gaul said. "Zee headmistress, she sent us to find you."

“Because you are so late wiz your big veggie delivery!” Hugo crooned.

Pysie stumbled to her hands and knees and began gathering up her groceries—the maters, tubers, and légumes which had flown free of the vegetable sack at the same time Pysie flew free of her bicycle seat.

“Oh no!” Hugo cried, pointing. “It is a speeder!”

Pysie squealed and leapt to her feet. “What?! *Where?*” She *hated* the freaky little eight-legged bugs, which were capable of incredible speed.

“Right zerr!” Hugo crushed one tuber under his foot like he was stomping a bug. “No, *zerr!*” He stomped another.

“I see it!” Gaul agreed, trampling a whole pile of légumes. “Don’t you worry, little Pysie! I weel protect you.”

“No,” Pysie sobbed. “Stop it!”

Gaul sniffed as if offended. “Well, if you do not want to be protected.” He brushed off his hands and resumed his descent from the orphanage. “Too bad we never found little Pysie,” he said conversationally to Hugo. “I would have carried zee vegetables home for her.”

Hugo agreed. “Yes, it is too bad. But you know Pysie, *so* unreliable. She could be anywhere.”

“Let us go into town and see if we can find zat girl.”

“Yes, let’s!”

Sniffing, Pysie swiped tears from her face, smearing some blood which trickled from her lip after the accident. It wasn’t the first time she’d been injured while experimenting, and certainly not the first time she’d been pushed around by those jerks. She would live. She finished gathering the vegetables, then fixed her bicycle well enough to walk home.

The narrow driveway tunnel leading to the orphanage was very steep, which was why Pysie wanted to design a better bicycle—so that *climbing* this hill everyday wouldn’t be

so tiring. And yet, here she was again, breathing hard as she hiked back to the place she most despised in all the world.

She never spared a glance for the bioluminescent lichen which grew in intricate designs along the walls. It was like that everywhere in Le Centre de la Pierre. Since gnomes lived where the light of the sun never reached, they needed *some* way to see. This fungus glowed with its own internal light, all soft greens and blues and purples—which was what “bioluminescence” meant, according to the teachers at the orphanage. It was a form of life (“bio”) which produced light (“luminescence”) just by being alive. There were lots of other living things down here which did this too, like firebugs, lamp flies, and glowworms. Even the quonies and other larger mammals exhaled glowing gases whenever they breathed out, so that they could see where they were going.

Personally, Pysie longed to see the sun, or even those Sky Lights she’d heard existed in Overtwixt. All this underground living couldn’t be healthy.

When the carved façade of the orphanage finally came into view, she hesitated at an unusual sight. There were quonies tied to a post out front—fine animals with saddles for riding, not the tired old cart quonies she normally saw in town. Excited, Pysie hid her bicycle among some stones overgrown with flowering lichen, then dashed inside carrying her sack of vegetables.

Her arrival interrupted the headmistress in discussion with five adult gnomes. “Pysyfal Rochelle!” the woman said sternly. “What have I told you about running?”

Pysie curtsied awkwardly with the sack in her arms. “Forgive me, mistress. I just—”

“And what has happened to your face?!”

“I only had an accident—”

“Are those zee vegetables?” the headmistress demanded. With each question she asked, her disapproval of Pysie grew more obvious, until she was openly scowling. “Give zem here.” She snatched the sack away and peered within. “These are worthless!”

“It’s not my fault!” Pysie objected.

“*You* are worthless!” the snowman went on. “I give you one simple task—”

“But Hugo and Gaul—” Pysie tried to explain.

The woman snorted. “I suppose you will blame zem for your bloody lip as well?”

“Well...”

“If I have told you once, I have told you a zousand times, Pysyfal! Girls are not to scuffle like boys. Boys are fighters! But girls must be ladies, polite and quiet.”

Pysie ground her teeth to avoid bursting into tears. She was never given a chance to explain herself. “But I wasn’t scuffling *or* fighting—”

“Go,” the headmistress said with firm finality. “Take zee vegetables to zee cook. Maybe she can make a soup from them. Then to zee water closet wiz you, to clean yourself up.”

Sniffing, Pysie began trudging across the orphanage common room toward the stairs.

Behind her, she heard the headmistress murmur some sort of apology to the men, who chuckled. “It iz no problem,” one of the men responded. “No problem at all. Now, as I was saying, we plan to leave for Overtwixt immediately.”

Pysie froze. Overtwixt! The world of bridges, the land of magic, the realm where people lived out under the open sky—where people said every orphan’s dreams come true.

“Take me wiz you!” Pysie blurted, spinning around.

The headmistress’s face looked carved out of stone—assuming stone could be furious. “Pysyfal Rochelle,” she

said, her voice dangerously quiet. “What have I told you time and again?”

Pysie blinked. “Um... no running in zee orphanage?”

The gnowoman’s voice grew even more quiet, more dangerous. “What else have I told you?”

“Girls are not to scuffle like boys?” she hurriedly added.

The headmistress’s jaw clenched.

“Oh! Don’t interrupt?”

“You are getting warm, finally. What *else*?”

“Girls are to be seen and not heard.”

The headmistress slowly nodded. “Now listen and obey. Go wash up.”

“No,” Pysie said, planting her hands on her hips. Then, just as quickly, she dropped to her knees and clasped her hands in front of her, turning pleading eyes upon the man. “*Please*,” she begged in a whisper. “Take me wiz you.”

“Well, that *is* why we’re here,” the man told the headmistress grandly. “We’re to be chevaliers,* gentleman adventurers in Overtwixt. And zat means we will need children who can be trained as pages and armorbearers, to care for our gear.”

Pysie’s dreams *were* coming true. “Take me! Take me!”

“Pyrsyfal!”

The man hesitated. “Well, armorbearers are traditionally *boys*, who later become chevaliers zemselves.”

“But I can do zat job better than *any* boy. Really I can!”

“Pyrsyfal Rochelle! I will not tolerate zis impudence another moment!” the headmistress warned.

But the adventurer was clearly considering it. “Can you sharpen swords? Zat would be one of your responsibilities.”

* A chevalier (*shehv-uh-LEER*) is a kind of knight. —N

“Yes!” Pysrie gushed, eyes shining with tears of joy. “I can sharpen! I can sharpen better and faster than anyone!”

The man seemed skeptical.

“It’s true! They make me sharpen knives here at zee orphanage all zee time.”

The headmistress hesitated, then nodded. “Zat *is* true.”

But some of the other chevaliers were now arguing with their leader. “She iz just a little girl,” one man complained.

“Let’s do a contest!” Pysrie tried. “A sword sharpening contest! Whichever orphan sharpens zee most blades, and does zee best job, gets to come wiz you to Overtwixt!”

The lead adventurer shrugged, drawing a beautiful short sword from his belt scabbard and placing it on the common room table. The sword was encrusted with gold and gems all over its handle. The other men followed his example, pulling swords and knives and daggers from belt sheaths and ankle sheathes and even up their sleeves. As the stack of weapons grew, Pysrie got a sinking feeling in her belly. The men finished by tossing all their whetstones on the pile too.

“I thought you planned to leave immediately,” the headmistress asked the man.

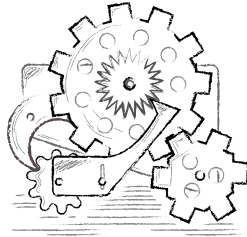
“Within zee hour!” he assured her.

A nasty smile formed on the headmistress’s lips. “Then zerr is too little time for a contest, no? How about zis... If young Pysryfal can do a good job sharpening *all* of these blades within zat time, she can go with you. Agreed?”

The men began to snort and laugh, more than one of them rolling his eyes. “Zat is fine,” the leader said.

Pysrie was aghast. “*What!?* Zat’s not fair! Zat’s not even a contest! Zee boys are terrible sharpeners. Zay barely know which end of zee sword to stick in zee enemy!”

The headmistress just smirked, placing her hourglass on the table. “You’re wasting time...”



• twenty •

The underappreciated little gnomaid threw herself into a chair at the table, took up a whetstone, and started running it along the blade of the gem-encrusted sword. The men, still chuckling, filed out after the headmistress as she led them deeper into the orphanage. “Come zis way,” Pysie heard her say. “You weel wish to take my best lads, Hugo and Gaul, but they have not yet returned from running zee errands. But here, let me introduce you to some of zee other boys...”

Pysie just ground her teeth and worked harder. She *would* win this “contest,” no matter how lopsided and unfair it was. She had to! It might be the best opportunity she ever got to escape this orphanage, much less get into Overtwixt.

Unfortunately, she quickly realized that her task was impossible. She couldn’t possibly sharpen so many blades in so little time. A few, perhaps, maybe even just one if she wanted to do a good job. But twenty? Ridiculous!

Well, whenever Pysie discovered something was impossible, that just meant she needed to find a different way of doing it. The issue here was speed and safety; her

hands just weren't fast enough. And even if they were, she'd risk cutting herself if she kept a whetstone down a blade over and over again, one stroke at a time. She needed a way to automate this process, maybe even make it continuous.

Inspiration struck.

Dropping the sword and whetstone, she ran outside to retrieve her bicycle. She ripped the seats out of two common room chairs so there was nothing left but wooden frames, then jammed the wheels of the bicycle inside—one wheel inside each chair hole. It took some finagling, but she finally secured the bicycle frame on top of the chair frames, in such a way that both wheels turned freely without contacting the floor. She also made sure it was balanced, so it wouldn't lean to either side once she climbed onto the bicycle seat.

Next, Pysie drew a roll of twine—one of her most prized possessions—from a pouch on her belt. She used it to begin tying all of the whetstones to one side of her bicycle chain. (She was glad that *all* of the men had left their whetstones, instead of just one or two.) Finally, Pysie shifted the chain onto her largest gear. She grabbed the sword she'd already started sharpening and sat down on the bicycle seat—then, gripping the flats of the blade between her knees, she started pedaling.

Within moments, she had increased her speed and was running the blade up and down along the line of fast-moving whetstones, throwing sparks. There was a trick to it, of course. If she caught the stones wrong, it jammed the chain just like when she'd been riding earlier. But she got the hang of it soon enough. Pysie was good at getting the hang of things quickly.

And so the little gnomaid sharpened the blades, very, *very* quickly. She wasn't quite done before the sand ran out of the hourglass, but she was a lot closer than any reasonable person could have expected. She just kept grinding anyway,

knowing the gnoman chevaliers wouldn't leave without her... or at least, not without their weapons.

Finally, as Pysie was finishing the very last dagger, the adventurers returned—along with the headmistress and five boys, Hugo and Gaul included.

“What iz this!?” the headmistress exclaimed, seeing the chairs Pysie had destroyed, not to mention the black scorch marks she'd left on the rug. Her contraption had been throwing a *lot* of sparks.

“Ooooh, little Pysie's gonna get it,” the older boys began taunting gleefully.

Pysie sniffed, finished sharpening that last dagger, then hopped off her bicycle and placed the blade on the table with all the others. She had lined them up from largest to smallest. “I did exactly what was asked of me,” she stated calmly. “I sharpened every zingle blade, and you won't find sharper anywhere. You have to take me wiz you.”

Eyeing Pysie's improvised mechanism skeptically, the lead chevalier moved to the table and picked up his gem-encrusted sword. His skepticism gave way to disbelief as he tested the edge against his thumb. “Zis is sharp!”

All the other men began collecting their weapons, and they were soon murmuring with awe and appreciation. One man yelped and dropped his weapon with a clatter, clutching his thumb. “It *is* sharp!” he exclaimed.

The first man turned to look at Pysie in wonder. “Well done, girl.”

“But... but...” the headmistress sputtered.

“So zis means I can go?” Pysie asked excitedly.

The man turned to look at the headmistress, and the gnowoman finally turned away with a sniff. “You won't hear *me* complaining. I am zick and tired of zee girl causing

problems around here, and I despair of ever turning her into zee proper lady anyway. You can have her!”

The man laughed and gave Pysrie a pat on the head. “Very well, girl. You may accompany us to Overtwixt.”

“Yippee zippee!” Pysrie cried, jumping up and down and spinning in a circle with glee. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*”

“What about zee other lads you already selected?” the headmistress wanted to know.

“We will take zem all,” the chevalier assured her.

Pysrie met Hugo and Gaul’s sullen stares and felt some of the joy go out of her, but then she shook her head. No. She would not let their good fortune ruin her own excitement.

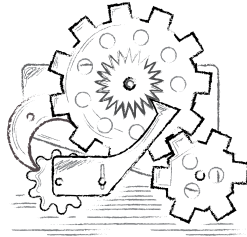
“What iz your name again, girl?” the leader asked.

“May it please you, sir,” she said, giving him a passable curtsy. “I am Pysryfal Rochelle. But my friends call me Pysrie.”

“Which means *no one* calls her Pysrie,” Gaul muttered.

But the man ignored Gaul. “Young Pysrie, I am Alain d’Creux, and very pleased to make your acquaintance. Stick wiz me, and I promise to teach you everyzing I know about being a gentleman adventurer, even if you *are* just a girl.”

For once, Pysrie wasn’t offended at the implication that she was somehow less valuable, just for being a girl. Not much, at least. She was going to Overtwixt!



• **twenty-one** •

The lead chevalier, Alain d’Creux, began telling Pysie about adventures in Overtwixt as soon as they left the orphanage. Of course, he was speaking to *all* the new apprentices—who, like Pysie, had already been tasked with carrying the adults’ gear—but she could tell he was talking to her especially. She imagined she would be *his* armorbearer, and what an honor that would be! Great training if she was destined to become the Hero of Overtwixt!

D’Creux’s tales were amazing and fantastical, perhaps a little unbelievable, but *very* exciting. “Zerr are dragons in Overtwixt,” he told them, his eyes sparkling as he led them toward the subterranean bridge between worlds. “All of my forebears,* they slew dragons on crusades like zis. Just as I too will slay a dragon in zee days to come.”

Like all the adult gnomian adventurers, d’Creux was riding his quony while the children tromped along on foot. Letting the quony choose its own way down the corridor, the lead chevalier drew his elaborate, gem-encrusted sword from

* A person’s “forebears” are his or her ancestors, people that came *before* him or her in lineage.

its scabbard. He smiled once again at the blade's newly sharpened edge.

“My own père* carried zis very sword into Overtwixt when I was little younger than you,” d’Creux went on. “He slew *two* dragons wiz zis blade, and countless other beasts besides. It is a place of magic, Overtwixt is, but of danger as well. And though you may not believe it, where we are going, all zee animals talk—even zee quonies!”

Everyone turned to regard the quonies that the chevaliers were riding. The noble steeds were oblivious to the attention as they walked, their glowing breath puffing out to illuminate the way forward. Truly, these were the finest saddle quonies Pysie had ever seen—but it was hard to imagine them *speaking*, much less saying anything intelligent!

“Don’t you worry, young Pysie,” d’Creux added, leaning down to pat his quony. “I weel protect you from all zee foul beasts, whether they can talk or not. I am sure your friends Huggie and Bawl will do zee same.”

Trudging along beneath heavy packs nearby, Hugo and Gaul gave Pysie matching scowls. They obviously didn’t like all the attention d’Creux was giving Pysie, or the fact that he remembered her name correctly but not theirs. “Oh yes, little Pysie,” Hugo muttered. “We weel take care of you, alright.”

By now they had traveled far outside the East Hollows city limits. At each intersection of tunnels their party reached, d’Creux consulted a map; or else he checked the directional signs painted on the tunnel walls, illuminated by bioluminescent lichen. Then he led them onward into the wilderness. The farther they got from civilization, the more they found themselves moving through naturally-occurring

* I think he means his father. This is the same word the French use for “father” in our real world, and it’s also part of the gnoman name for their world Père Pierre, which means “Father Stone.” —N

crevasses, chasms, and cavities as opposed to the smooth, manmade passages Pysie was used to.

“But zerr are more dangers in Overtwixt besides zee animals,” d’Creux continued. “You must always be on your guard, for it is not like zee real world. Here, we can dig and dig and never reach zee bottom. But if you dig too deep in Overtwixt, you come out zee other side! You can fall right out of zee world entirely, which brings you back to zee real world again. It would be very sad, should zat happen to any of you.”

D’Creux droned on and on, sharing one tall tale after another. Each thing he said was more incredible than the thing before, until even Pysie—eager to believe all of it—began to wonder just how reliable his information really was. At last, the stream of lore spewing from his mouth began to falter. And by the time they reached the Conduit, an hour after that, Alain d’Creux had run out of things to say.

“Conduit to Overtwixt” read the sign at the final intersection. Pausing in the middle of the fissure they’d been traveling, d’Creux regarded the sign and its painted arrow, which pointed along a branching, manmade passage.

“Very well, lads,” he said, his voice full of anticipation. “Take a load off and prepare yourselves.” He dismounted from his quony and began stretching, then drew his fancy sword and took a few practice swings. “Zerr is no telling what we may encounter when we come out zee other side.”

Pysie was surprised. “You don’t know? Haven’t you used zis bridge before?”

D’Creux seemed surprised. “Well, no,” he admitted.

Pysie narrowed her eyes. “But you *have* been to Overtwixt before, yes?”

“Well... no,” he admitted again, blushing furiously.

Swallowing hard, Pysie dropped the packs she’d been carrying and started stretching also. It didn’t surprise her to

hear that Overtwixt was a dangerous place, considering its reputation as the world of grand adventures. But now that she was almost there, she was suddenly nervous—and this man who had promised to protect her wasn't any more experienced than she was! “Can I have a sword too?” she asked. “In case we encounter zee danger first thing?”

To Pysie's dismay, however, the chevalier pretended not to hear. Clearly, she had embarrassed him. Hugo and Gaul snickered, though. “Don't worry your little head, Pysie. We weel protect you.” No one gave them swords either, but Hugo did own a pocket knife which he twirled in deft fingers.

Eventually, d'Creux gave the word, and the procession of adults, children, and quonies stepped into the Conduit on foot—the men leading their mounts by their reins, the orphans still carrying the heavy packs. The passage was dark, no lichen to light its walls, nothing alive in the corridor at all aside from the travelers. The way forward was illuminated only by the breath of the quonies and some braziers mounted on the walls, their glowing coals giving off a soft orange light. The troop moved slowly and quietly through the gloom, no one wishing to upset the mysterious mood.

Suddenly, Pysie was very aware that something was wrong. The packs she'd been carrying, filled with weapons and armor and gear, were suddenly... gone. One moment they were slung over her shoulders; the next moment they were not. Spinning on her heel, she searched the darkness behind her. Had she dropped her burden?

If so, she wasn't the only one. *Everyone* began crying out in alarm, all at once:

“My pack iz gone!”

“Where did my quony go?”

“What happened to my clothes?!”

Come to think of it, Pysie's clothes *did* feel different. She hurried to the closest brazier for a better look at herself, only it wasn't a brazier at all. The orange light here came from a simple stone, a *glowing* stone. Impossible.

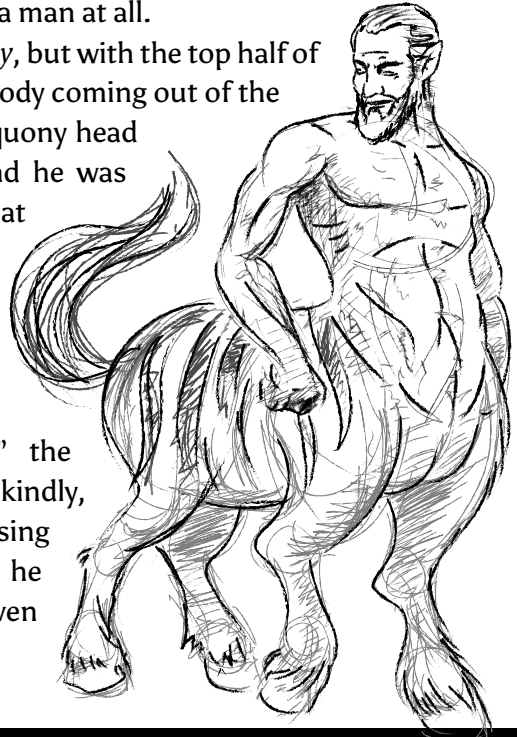
There was only one explanation for all of this. "We have passed into Overtwixt," Pysie whispered.

The adult gnomes began to grow upset, but then a deep, friendly voice reached their ears from the Conduit ahead of them: "Welcome, gnomes—and you as well, most lovely gnowoman. My dear visitors to Overtwixt, I bid you sincerest welcome. Please, join me here in the light."

Pysie hurried forward, on the heels of d'Creux and the others. Soon they stumbled out of the Conduit and into an open cavern, which seemed to be lit by real sunlight filtering down from cracks among the stalactites far above. And standing in the middle of that cavern, clearly illuminated by all that wonderful yellow light, was the man who had spoken to them—who was not a man at all.

He was like a *quony*, but with the top half of a very large gnome's body coming out of the quony's neck where a quony head should have been. And he was *tall*. Pysie stared up at him in wonder as she approached, while her mind tried to understand what she was seeing.

"There you are," the strange creature said kindly, his twinkling eyes passing over every face. When he came to Pysie, he even gave her a wink.



“Fiend!” d’Creux cried. He reached for the sword at his side, but it wasn’t there anymore. *None* of their stuff had made it through the Conduit to Overtwixt, not even their steeds. “What manner of beast might you be?” the adventurer cried, gesturing for the other gnomes to surround the tall stranger—though what they planned to do without weapons, Pysie couldn’t guess.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the half-man said. “I am the Guide. And I am no beast *or* fiend. I am simply a man of Overtwixt who has been tasked with welcoming and, well, *guiding* visitors when they arrive in this place.”

The leader of the chevaliers frowned, relaxing a little. “You call yourself a man?” he asked.

This creature called the Guide threw back his head and laughed, very loudly and very genuinely. “I understand your fear better than you know,” he assured d’Creux.

“Fear?” the chevalier blustered. “Zee great Alain d’Creux knows no fear!”

“Of course,” the Guide said, still smiling. “Forgive me. Still, I know the kinds of stories told about Overtwixt in Père Pierre. Though your kind comes and goes freely, fewer do so with each eon that passes. There is much misinformation these days. Yes, I am a man, for there are no animals in Overtwixt, only people. But then, some of the men and women here *are* dangerous enough to merit your caution.”

D’Creux gave a sharp nod, then made a show of crossing his arms and looking casual. “So... what now?”

“Now,” the Guide replied, “each of you must make a decision.” His eyes swept across the assembled adventurers. “My dear gnomes and gnowoman, during your time in Overtwixt... Who will YOU choose to be?”

The chevaliers traded confused glances. They had no better idea what the Guide was talking about than Pysie did,

which really shouldn't have surprised her at this point. Regardless, the tall half-man trotted up to the youngest of the orphans with a clip-clop of his strange hooves.

"Alexandre Léandre," the Guide addressed the lad seriously. "Three paths stand before you. Will you be the Painter, the Dentist, or the Bailiff?"

"Um... what iz Bailiff?" the little boy squeaked.

"A bailiff is something like a sheriff," the Guide explained. "He is an officer of the law and is sometimes called upon to arrest and expel lawbreakers from Overtwixt."

Tiny Alexandre's eyes became wide as saucers. "I weel be zis Bailiff," he whispered.

"Very well," the Guide smiled. "Bear this responsibility fairly."

The half-man offered the other children three options too, going through the orphans from youngest to oldest. When it should have been Pysie's turn, he focused on Gaul instead. "Gaulois Porcher, will you be the Swineherd—"

"What!?" Gaul demanded, his smile of expectation disappearing in horror. "Swineherd? You must be joking!"

The Guide inspected the bully closely, as if evaluating his worth. "No," he decided finally. "I made that joke for a visitor one time. But in your case, I am not joking. I think you could benefit from serving in such a capacity."

"But— but— Zerr are no animals in Overtwixt!" Gaul sputtered. "You just said so!"

"I'm sure we could figure something out, should you choose to follow this path," the Guide said drily. "But I will not force you. Your other options are Laborer and Clerk."

In the end, Gaul sullenly chose Clerk. Hugo came next, and his options weren't much better. Pysie tried not to laugh at the older boys, though it was difficult. They had been cruel to her over the years, but she was better than that.

Next came the adult gnomes, and their options weren't terribly exciting either. Not a single one got to be Chevalier or Adventurer or Crusader, despite all their plans and preparations (which did *not* bode well for Pysie's own dream of being Hero). Two of the gnomes, brothers, chose to become Conservationist and Conversationalist. Another man chose Architect, which was at least a respectable role in gnomish culture. D'Creux himself was initially disappointed in his three options: Protector, Planner, or Pilgrim. But ultimately he settled for Pilgrim, when he realized that perfectly described the role he had been playing all along as he organized this expedition into Overtwixt.*

Only when all the boys and men had chosen their roles did the Guide return, last and least, to Pysie. She was so nervous and excited that her breathing grew rapid.

"My dear Pysyfal Rochelle," he said—and his voice was so full of warmth that she immediately relaxed. Never had Pysie known the love of a father, but she imagined this was what it felt like. The Guide was completely alien, and yet his fond, undivided attention made her feel safe. "Three paths stand before you," he said. "Will you be the Advocate, or the Headmistress..." He trailed off at her expression.

"Why would I want to be zee Headmistress?" Pysie asked in disgust.

"Perhaps because you, better than most people, know the value of a *good* Headmistress," the Guide said gently. "Overtwixt is a place of wonder and magic, but it is no less broken than the world from which you come. There are orphans here too, and they need the protection of one who will cherish rather than scorn them."

* A "pilgrim" is someone who undertakes a long journey to a special place as part of a tradition or religious obligation. The trip itself might be called a "pilgrimage." —N

“I...” Pysie swallowed. “I don’t know.”

The Guide nodded his understanding. “The third path standing before you is that of Inventor.”

For the longest moment, Pysie thought she had misheard. She gaped at the half-man, her mouth literally hanging open. *All* of the gnomes did.

“Inventor?!” Gaul cried in disbelief.

“Zee most prized role you could give a gnomie, and you offer it to *her*?” d’Creux sputtered. “Zis child? Zis... *girl*?”

“How can she be zee one and only Inventor of Overtwixt?” Hugo demanded. “She must be zee *worst* inventor in gnomie history. Trust me, I have seen her inventions!”

But the Guide’s eyes were locked on Pysie, and he showed no intention of retracting the offer. With each objection raised by the others, his smile just got wider, and Pysie’s smile grew to mirror his.

“I will be zee Inventor,” she said with quiet certainty.

“So be it. I hereby recognize you as the Inventor of Overtwixt. Bear this responsibility gratefully.”

“I weel,” she promised him fervently.

“Now,” the fellow said, all business once more as he stepped back and clapped his hands. “There is the matter of quests.” And once again, he worked his way through the other gnomes from youngest to oldest.

Pysie was so stunned by her good fortune that she barely heard what he told the others. Pysie, recognized as a true inventor. Pysie, named *the* Inventor of Overtwixt. She only stirred from her reverie when the Guide came back to her, having left her for last again.

“Mistress Inventor,” he said, “for your quest, I charge you with locating and recovering the Diamond Grail, one of the long lost magical Relics of the Sovereign.”

“Grail?” Pysie asked. She had never heard that word before. If it was a magical relic, it must be a weapon of awesome power, but... “What is a grail? What does it do?”

The Guide chuckled. “Why, a grail is a cup. It holds a beverage—for drinking!”

Pysie blinked. That was *not* the sort of answer she’d been expecting. “So... what is so special about zis cup?”

“You will need it to fulfill the other half of your quest.”

“Which is?”

“To be a friend, and therefore to make a friend,” he said enigmatically. “And in so doing, to help defeat the greatest threat currently facing this region of Overtwixt.” He smiled slyly. “I enjoy a bit of irony, you see.* It amuses me to think that the unlikeliest representative of the little peoples will help defeat the most brutal martial force of this realm.”

Another slow smile spread across Pysie’s lips.

“Just remember: when you reach the end of your quest, and you fear all is lost, you need only ask for help and help will be rendered. But you must *ask*.”

The Guide turned then, and pointed down one of the corridors that branched from the cavern in which they all stood. Addressing the entire group of adventurers once more, he said, “That is the path to Denali, the capital den of Gnoburrow. Most of you can start your quests there. But if you ever have need of further guidance, please don’t hesitate to call my name.”

Pysie glanced the direction he pointed, as did all the others. By the time she looked back again, the Guide had disappeared.

* “Irony” is when something happens that is the opposite of what you would normally expect.