

THE MAGIC RING
OF SHAN-SHARA

BY SERGE RATZ

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A FANTASTIC STORY

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THE DEENS IN BERGUTS' LAND

The night hasn't yet descended. Along the rocks overgrown with wild barbera and raising for hundreds of kilometers two shadows were flying fast. Last rays of the setting sun set red flashes on these creatures' long flexible wings. Finally they landed on a ledge in the rock, turning their eyes to the highest peak behind which the last ray of the sun would hide very soon.

"Kirr died yesterday," one of them said, and his eyes flashed with green light. "He had been guarding the Thunder Path for sixteen long years. In all that time no deen ended up in the reks' claws."

“How did it happen, Tet?” the second one, with a young face and a cloud of golden hair, asked. “He was the bravest and the nimblest of us all. Do you remember, Tet, how at the Crystal Voice Festival he competed with Ai-Ko, dancing on the violet ray of the magical Shan-Shara ring. Only once Kirr took a wrong step and lost the competition... When he saw Lu give the cape woven from barbera smells and studded with the tiniest stars to the winner, he wanted to leave at once. Everyone knew about his love for her, but she preferred a stranger and gave him her heart. For the whole week the deens sang ecstatically about the winner and the young goddess. After bathing with Lu in the Kayfa Lake, Ai-Ko flew away, looking for adventures and heroic feats. He had to return One-Eyed Berbek’s sword to its owner. Nobody had seen the young hero after that, though. Perhaps he’s long dead.”

“He couldn’t have behaved otherwise. Our berguts’ tribe had chosen him, as tomorrow you will be chosen. Tomorrow you will be initiated as a warrior, tomorrow will be your day.”

Tet stroked the young man’s hair with his only hand. The other he lost long ago in one of his many fights with the reks.

“Tomorrow your chosen will give you a cape, just like the one Ai-Ko received, studded with tiniest stars. You’ll have only one day. One day only, remember!”

“I remember, Tet,” Ree answered quietly. “Look, here’s the last ray of the sun flashing and not wanting to stop its dance.”

“That’s Greel – the most restless and playful of the sun rays, he’s always the last to leave.”

And then there was darkness.

The old warrior stared into the darkness, searching it with his watchful green eyes, and said quietly:

“Let us be off. The darkness is the reks’ faithful friend, so some of them probably are already circling over the Thunder Path.”

Pushing off the ledge and spreading their delicate wings, they flew lower.

The brave deens tried to leave the cave to go the path only during the day. That was to lessen the risk of being caught by the reks’ grabby claws. But the way to the valley took

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more than a week. Often night caught the small deens on slippery ledges at the edge of the Abyss of Oblivion. They pressed close to each other, wrapping themselves in their warm capes, and, shivering, sang their favorite battle song:

We are not afraid, hey, hey,
The enemy, be gone,
And even falling from the rocks
We never feel alone.
To live around Kayfa Lake
Is real happiness,
Its waters give us wonder dreams,
They really are the best!

The reks were attracted by the deens' spirited voices. And they knew what prize awaited them: Mor, their ruler, gave the rek who had so distinguished himself a silver collar, and Risha the sorceress brought a black tooth full of intoxicant chundra. After drinking it all, the lucky rek usually fell insensible into his comrades' arms, and everyone around him whispered enviously: "He's already in the Scarlet Dreams country!"

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They said that the Great Mor himself was afraid of Risha. She could do such things, ugh...

Usually the deens' fight with the reks was furious but short. What could the small creatures do with their flint-headed lances and arrows against huge reks dressed in impenetrable chain mail with horn helmets on their heads?

The reks were cunning. They did not always approach the deens from the side of the abyss. At times they hid themselves in the splits in the rocks along the path, waiting patiently for the singing deens. Then, jumping out suddenly, a rek would catch a deen and jump into abyss with him, and only a feeble peep of the poor brave would be heard.

Two shadows looking like giant bats hovered over the Thunder Path. Those were the most cunning and sly reks that the Great Mor sent to spy. They had to survey the whole path, get down to the Kayfa Lake and, getting close to the tipsy deens, learn where goddess Lu hides her magic ring Shan-Shara.

Thing is, deens were careless. They loved to sing while working, during festivities and even in their sleep. Their merry and carefree

nature was the little creatures' most notable feature.

Usually after bathing in the Kayfa Lake they liked to drink some juice of the intoxicant barbera and then fell asleep, absolutely unprotected. And then the sleeping deens' harmonious song rose over the lake.

In their sleep they were flying. That was the dream of every deen: to fly, to see how their goddess Lu lives among berguts. The reks circled the lake one more time and quietly landed on its overgrown shore.

On the soft moss of the bank-sides the deens were sleeping. Only young princess Son-Li sat on a white stone bathed by bluish waters of the Kayfa Lake, her legs tucked under her. She was stringing tiny stars on threads woven from barbera smells. The princess had to finish this shining cape intended for her friend Ree before the morning came. By her legs a Ley was lying, leaning his round face on his paw. Sometimes he dived into the lake and brought out a pawful of stars which were in abundance on the bottom of the sandbank.

Ley never took its protuberant eyes from the princess and never stopped telling scary

stories, fairy tales or anecdotes from the life of berguts and reks.

"Honestly, Ley, do you think Ree likes me?" Son-Li asked. "He's so noble and tender and, I think, the best-looking of all the berguts."

"Huh, that pretty one," Ley snorted, his bright red forelock standing on its end, "of course he does! Don't you see how he keeps going round and round the tree on which you usually rest. I think he's crazy for you, any foolish deen would see that. But it's not the most important thing for him. I think he dreams of getting your uncle's shining cape, the 'lightning stroke' one, from you. He'd take a swim with you in the lake and then go searching for adventures..."

"Please, Ley, don't say things like that. I believe he's the noblest of all berguts. I can see it in his flight, at times lightning-fast and at times gently floating. I know Ree dreams of adventures, of performing heroic feats on the Thunder Path. He keeps imitating my father and uncle Tet in everything. He wants no deen ever to get captured by reks."

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"Oh, if not for my tail," at these words Ley struck the water with his tail so hard that foam spouted over the surface of the lake, "I'd fly to the Thunder Path myself and teach those reks a lesson."

"Don't get upset, Ley, we all love you anyway," Son-Li said, stroking his tousled forelock. "Tell me, Ley, why I don't have wings if my father is a famous bergut and my mother is goddess Lu?"

"You see, my dear, you don't get to be born a bergut, you need to become one."

"How? Please tell me now, my dear sweet Ley!" Son-Li exclaimed. "I'll become a bergut and fly away with Ree to the mountains."

Ley looked at Son-Li with eyes full of joy and adoration, took a bulky canteen out of a dip in his pocket, gulped down a bit of intoxicant barbera and started his story.

LEY'S STORY

Actually the deens' motherland is at the other side of the Blue Rock. The climate there is tough. The deens live in caves in winter and in huts in summer.

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They fight with another deen tribe for the best pastures, hunt the six-legged kreds, in the autumn bake scones from zimba grain, prepare jerked meat from the carcasses of three-headed krekos and pick up the parda fruit. After preparing lots of supplies the deens organize the great Blue Lights Festival. After merry dancing and singing the deens get into deep caves where the walls and floor are covered by downy hides, and start telling engrossing stories and, of course, sing their songs.

But the most amazing story, one that deens tell in a whisper and keep repeating through generations down, is the story of the flying bergut.

One summer night a huge winged creature with burning eyes fell on a grassy clearing where the whole singing deens' tribe used to gather. That was too much for the deens' imagination. And it was quite understandable — after all, there were no birds in their country.

It was a beautiful long-haired bergut who got a shoulder wound in a fight with the

reks. The bergut barely managed to avoid their grabby claws and, flying over the top of the Blue Rock, landed in the deens' country.

The little creatures did their best to nurse their wounded guest. They tried feeding him with six-legged kred's raw meat and giving him sharp-tasting juice of unripe parda to drink.

Seeing that the deens did not even have fire, the bergut took out the 'lightning strike' from its long sheath and sent a jet of fire into a pile of dry brushwood. Then he roasted a kred's carcass on the resulting huge fire and fed the whole tribe with flavory meat.

The bergut taught them to keep fires, to cut bows and arrows out of branches and to brew a fizzy drink out of parda fruit.

Before flying away he told them about the amazing country beyond the Blue Rock, about the Kayfa Lake, the intoxicant barbera, about the Thunder Path which provided a way down to the Kayfa Lake, about the sly reks and other miracles.

Many years have passed since the bergut had flown away. This story became a legend,

added more details and, of course, all the deens dreamed of getting to the Kayfa Lake Land. The most awful punishment for any little deens was to be told by their angered parents that even in their dreams they'd never get to the bergut land and would never swim in the Kayfa Lake.

And, of course, there were always brave and loud-singing deens who made their way through the Blue Rock's underground cave and came out to the Thunder Path...

"Go," one of the reks whistled softly. The other one blinked his dull eye in accordance and quietly slid closer, moving the bushes apart, approaching the stone where Ley and Son-Li went on with their endless talk.

"You know, I think someone has just whistled in the bushes," Ley said, pausing in his story and sniffing the air with his sensitive nose.

"You're such a little coward, Ley," Son-Li said, laughing.

"No, no, only reks can whistle like this. Let's swim further away from the shore, to-

wards the waterfalls, no one would be able to catch us there.”

But at the next moment the net deftly thrown by one of the reks covered the princess.

“Help me, Ley!” Son-Li yelled frantically.

Ley hurried towards the princess who was being dragged by the net towards the overgrown shore. He grabbed the net with his strong paws and started tearing it, trying to free his young pupil. Just a little more, and the princess would be free.

Suddenly, though, a ball of fire the size of a small deen’s fist flew over the water and hit Ley’s chest.

That was the rek shooting from a short tube hanging on his belt. The forceful blow made the kind and plumpish Ley turn over thrice in the air and tumble into the cove’s bluish waters.

“He is done for,” one of the reks whistled in triumph, while the other was gagging the princess with juicy barbera leaves.

Two winged shadows rushed over the smooth surface of the lake and disappeared in the darkness of the Blue Rock.

Thankfully, though, Ley did not die.

Heavily wounded in the chest, he managed to swim up to the stone. Then, using the last of his strength, he dragged out the silver horn hidden in the niche and drew a long and passionate sound out of it.

The call flew over the valley, woke up the deens and, hitting the Blue Rock, sent an echo fly up.

The reks were flying like lightning. They were sure no one was guarding the Thunder Path after the death of their worst enemy Kirr.

At this very moment Tet and Ree were floating slowly over the Thunder Path. Suddenly two unfamiliar silhouettes appeared in the darkness below them. One of those creatures was carrying something white and cocooned in its paws.

“Look, Tet, I think those were two reks below us, and one was holding some prey!” Ree exclaimed.

“Reks usually fly higher, but let’s check anyway,” Tet answered. And as soon as the old warrior said this, a disturbing echo caught up with them.

“Hurry on, Ree, these are really reks.

I recognized the alarm sound of Ley's magical horn," Tet said.

And they sped up, moving fast like falling stars.

BATTLE OVER THE ABYSS OF OBLIVION

The rek scouts approached the Black Rock, and out of its multiple caves their whole tribe hurried to meet them. Their black membranous wings flailing, they greeted their lucky compatriots. From far-away it looked as if the whole surface of the rock was crawling with nimble black creatures. Their thin triumphant whistle filled up space. The Great Mor himself came out to the balcony to meet the scouts and give them their deserved award.

And then suddenly two shining dots fell from above onto the reks flying with their prey. A quick lightning flashed; that was Ree throwing his first battle dart.

"All right, Ree, the second one is mine," Tet rumbled.

Another quick lightning and the reks, losing their prey and giving out their last whistle, fell

to the Abyss of Oblivion like flaming torches, throwing out tongues of flame to all sides.

Ree caught Son-Li easily, pressing her to his chest with one arm. The other one was holding deadly darts.

"Death to the berguts," the reks' battle cry sounded.

Several dozens of especially impatient reks hurried off to join the battle.

"The one to bring the princess here gets the Black Tooth and a silver collar," the Great Mor yelled after them.

Both of those things were the dearest wish of any rek.

"Be careful, reks, this is Tet the One-Armed, one that always strikes true!" the Great Mor was yelling, watching the battle through his field glass.

And at that very time the deens were gathering near the very top of the Blue Rock, where the exit from the caves was located and the Thunder Path began. They had just left the cave, singing their battle song, and wanted to move down the path already, when strange creatures started flying above the abyss. Thunder rumbled over the rocks,

quick lightnings pierced the space. The deens, terrified, were ready to turn back, but then a trumpet voice sounded over the abyss:

“Sing, deens, sing your battle song: it’s me, your old friend Tet the bergut, and I tell you to take up your arms and kill reks!”

A huge being with eyes flashing green lights and a black mane flying in the air whizzed over their heads. He was pursued by madly whistling reks who were screaming with anger unable to catch him and slash him with their daggers. That was Tet.

Suddenly he rose higher, did a loop in the air and, hovering for a moment over the enemy, hit another rek with his lightning. Another torch fell into the abyss.

Meanwhile Ree, shaking off a dozen of reks pursuing him, flew to the path where deens were preparing for battle and left the princess to their care.

Seeing that the young reks were dying without any glory, the Great Mor gave a signal, and the experienced warriors rushed into battle. Each had a black tube at the belt.

Fireballs started flashing in space: the reks surrounded the berguts and tried to bring

them down with shots from their pipes. But it was not that simple to take a bergut down. Most of the fireballs flew past and, hitting the rocks, scattered into hundreds of hissing drops of flame. Only rare shots reached their goals, but they did not bring any harm to the berguts.

The berguts’ weak spot, potentially deadly for them, was a slight depression between collar bones. The Great Mor knew about that. Unable to wait for the results any more, he joined the chase, and three dozens of his best reks followed him.

“Fly closer, they’re out of lightnings,” the reks’ leader whistled. The little deens at that moment surrounded their princess, singing their battle song:

We are not afraid, hey, hey,
The enemy, be gone,
And even falling from the rocks
We never feel alone.

They were shooting their bows and throwing lances at the reks who got close.

“Hold on, Ree, hit them with your wings,”

Tet rumbled, and the two berguts brought the enemy down with just that.

"Why aren't you using the 'lightning stroke', Tet?" Ree yelled.

"It's too early!" the old bergut answered.

His movements were getting slower, and the fireballs now reached his wings more often.

But when another flock of reks flew from behind the Black Rock, he again assumed the battle stance of a bergut who knew no defeat.

'It's time', the formidable Tet said to himself. He took out the 'lightning stroke' out of its long scabbard and directed a thin jet of fire into the center of the flying flock. A wheel of fire started rotating over Tet's head, a horrible omnivorous whirlwheel. But the Great Mor was precise in planning his strike.

He sent the fireball towards the princess and hit the old Tet who protected her with his body. The old bergut fell face up, spreading his huge wings.

"Call the berguts," the old warrior rasped to Son-Li. "Young Ree won't be able to hold them off. Quick, take the 'lightning stroke' and the magic horn!"

The princess had no time to blow the silver horn she took off the belt of the bergut who at last grew quiet, since at the next moment a fireball sent by Great Mor finally reached her. The horn tumbled in the air and flew into the abyss.

And then Son-Li jumped down, the 'lightning stroke' in her hand. And in a moment a sweet pain pierced her shoulder blades. Son-Li grew wings. She turned into a bergut girl.

The bergut tribe was already rushing to help Ree. Son-Li led them, her golden wings shining. She held the horn in one hand and the 'lightning stroke' in the other.

Mountains started rumbling from the lightning strikes. Dozens of reks fell flaming into the Abyss of Oblivion. Hundreds of fireballs pierced space. It was a horrible battle.

Ree caught up with the Great Mor and started hitting him with his wings. Mor took out his short tube and shot at Ree's chest. The young bergut fought off the fireball. At that moment Son-Li approached, holding the 'lightning stroke' in her hand. Its thin ray pierced the Great Mor, he flashed and disappeared forever.

EPILOG

Once a year the deens got together for a great Souls of Light Festival. They sat on the gentle hills around the Kayfa Lake, listening to stories Ley told about the berguts' heroic deeds, about the great battle with the reks, about the heroic act of the brothers Kirr and Tet, about the 'lightning stroke' and the emergence of a bergut girl, the beautiful Son-Li, and about her love for young bergut Ree.

The deens sang in honor of late heroes, toasted the health of goddess Lu and all the berguts with intoxicant barbera juice. And when the lovers Son-Li and Ree came, the deens always repeated for them the story about what happened to Tet One-Armed after he was heavily wounded by the ball sent by the Great Mor.

The witnesses said that as soon as the deens carried the wounded bergut into the cave and settled him on their capes, a huge shining crystal egg appeared out of the aperture in the cave vault. The body of the wounded warrior disappeared in it. The egg flashed and dissolved in the darkness, and no one saw it any more.

And the littlest deen said, sighing:

"I'd love such a cradle. I'd float in it in the sky and I'd be seeing everything."

This was how the deens got their legend about the crystal egg. Everyone was listening dreamily, thinking and looking at the stars.

"Tell me, my good Ley," Son-Li said quietly, "how goddess Lu got to the bergut land, and how she got the magic ring of Shan-Shara?"

Ley thought for a moment, gave everyone present a glance of his protruding eyes and then slapped his tail lightly against the surface of the lake. This way he reminded two little deens engrossed by his tale about their duty to keep filling the storyteller's goblet with the intoxicant barbera juice.

Taking a sip of his drink, Ley said:

"All right, then, I think, it's time to tell the story about the little bergut with big eyes called Ai-Ko, about the wondrous country of Three Floating Rocks where he was born. About his friends and enemies.

And you, my dear friends, are welcome to listen to this story too.

LITTLE BERGUT WITH BIG EYES

The bird woman Golden Voice spent all nights dancing reels with her friends: the shining Stars, the eternally young Moon, the boy Wind. They usually raided the Quiet Sadness Garden to eat as much of the sweetest mandoras as they could.

And then they would start such a ruckus in the Merry Dreams Palace, which was difficult to imagine without being there. Tired of games and entertainment, the carefree group would settle to rest on the softest cloud. As soon as the bird woman would nod to the wind, he would run off and in a moment he'd bring a cup of foaming shandra from

Rurre the dragon's magical spring. After trying the foaming drink, everyone would look impatiently at Aya — this was the name the bird woman's friends used to call her. And Aya would sing for her tired and intoxicated friends. If her tune was sad, everybody would be crying, if it was merry, then there would be such a dance that the sleepy cloud would wake up and throw the uninvited guests from its back. Then you would be able to see the falling Stars, the rotating Moon, the Wind picking up his sandals on the run and Aya smiling.

And when the first ray of the sun would kiss the bird woman's forehead, everyone would flow away to rest until the next night.

The nest to which Aya was flying that morning was situated on a ledge of a huge rock. It was so tall that Aya had never seen its base. And she wasn't particularly interested in seeing it; Aya was a celestial dweller. The bird woman was already anticipating curling up to sleep in her nest woven of the fluff the Wind had brought her from the Quiet Sadness Garden.

Having approached the ledge, Aya got frozen for a moment. Someone lay before her, on the edge of the abyss, huge wings spread. Aya realized at once that this was a dying bergut. She had heard about this tribe of courageous and noble beings, but she had never seen any of them.

Apparently someone wounded him seriously. The berguts were always fighting, saving those enslaved by mermiels or some other cruel tribes.

The bergut was still alive, the star on his white brow still shining. However, its shine was barely noticeable.

Without a pause for thought, Aya hurried towards Rurre the dragon's spring to get some foaming shandra, even though Aya couldn't stand the dragon.

She had almost no time. The light of the bergut's star was getting weaker, and it was, of course, difficult to find the Wind right away.

Rurre reclined in the shadow of the rock from which the spring was flowing. He was dozing, wrapped in a scarlet robe. Bats combed his bushy moustache and long beard,

and the long-legged spiders tickled his heels with their claws. The dragon was lazy, wise and greedy.

"You're asking for a bit of shandra, beautiful Aya? But for your sake I'm ready for more, just to hear your golden voice, your favourite song," and the dragon closed his eyes in delight.

It took no effort to persuade Aya, and she started singing.

I call to stars to save me from all harm,
 I call to stars to save me from all sickness,
 I call to stars to chase away the shades,
 To watch, protect, to care and to witness.
 I call to stars to see a bergut fly,
 To help, to follow such a shining light,
 I'll give my all, my voice and even wings,
 So that no enemy could stop his flight.

"You're still stuck on your hero," Rurre snorted, scratching his protruding belly. "Look what beauty you have before you. And you keep sighing about the bergut..."

And the bats and the spiders danced around, squealing:

“Stuck on your hero, stuck on your hero! Mangy bird!”

“Oh well, take as much as you can carry,” Rurre permitted mercifully. “And I hope some day you’ll appreciate me properly...”

After gathering handfuls of effervescent shandra Aya flitted away and up to her nest.

The bergut was slow in healing; the wound from the mermiel’s short dart was deep. But the effervescent shandra drink was doing its job and healing him. Also, the Wind that was always hanging around Aya, his favourite, each night brought in his transparent palms the shining aromatic balls made out of nectar and pollen from the Quiet Sadness Garden. Aya fed them to the bergut she saved. The bird woman’s friends, the mischievous Stars, the braggart Moon, the boy Wind, had left their games. Now each night they got together on the rock where Aya lived and listened to the bergut’s stories about his adventures and battles with sly reks and cruel mermiels. Seeing his listeners tremble with terror, he covered Aya with one of his wings and her friends with the other one. They sat

pressed close to the warm wings of the noble being and listened to him, transfixed. But Aya was the most transfixed of all. She fell in love with this stranger with burning eyes and huge wings.

When the bergut felt that the wound in his shoulder was fully closed and his wing was as strong and flexible as before, he hugged Aya and, looking straight into her eyes, said:

“Good-bye, Aya, I can’t stay here any more. My life is in dashing flights, adventures and battles. A bergut dies without this, turns into stone.”

As they said their goodbyes, Aya sang her favorite song to the bergut, and he gave her the shining ring of Shan-Shara as a remembrance. Then they parted.

Some time later Aya stopped flying with her carefree friends — she now had a tiny fluffy baby with huge shining eyes.

Some time passed. The baby with big eyes already learned to sing along with his mother. The bird woman called him Ai-Ko. Most of all he loved to listen to the story about the noble bergut in flight far away, fighting for

those who were hurt and in trouble. Also he loved to stuff himself with the sweetest mandoras. To get them his mother had to fly to Archonto the wizard in the Quiet Sadness garden; and this was something Ai-Ko didn't like at all. That is, he did not like his mother leaving him alone. He was just a bit afraid of the darkness and of the black abyss which opened its maw beyond the nest.

The old Archonto grew amazing flowers, fruit and vegetables in his garden. But lately Archonto became so avaricious that it was impossible to ask him even for a tiny fallen leaf of the laughter flower. Also, the old man's favourite doe Kyo had disappeared, which made Archonto lose his calm and his sleep. So Aya had to use her last resort. She sat down near the hammock where Archonto usually rested, combed his hair with the golden comb and, singing his most favourite song, calmed the wizard down, quietly lulling him to sleep. Aya's voice had that magnetic power. After the old man fell asleep, she gathered the most ripe mandora fruit and hurried to her nest where her fluffy little son waited for her impatiently. But of-

ten before Aya had time to leave the garden her careless friends, seeing that the old man was snoring happily, entered the garden in a noisy group and feasted there until early morning.

It happened so every night. Once Aya was tenderly watching Ai-Ko stuff himself with ripe mandoras. Taking a bite from another fruit, the baby said:

"You know, mom, my dad is back!"

"Dad? How did you recognize him?" Aya asked, worried.

"You know, mom, he's so hairy," Ai-Ko went on, slurping with pleasure, "with long moustache, and so funny. He said I'm just like him, fluffy and big-eyed. He wanted to take me with him till morning, carry me on his shoulders. But I said I didn't want to tire him, but when I have wings I'll definitely go flying with him. He promised me many more things, but for some reason disappeared when he saw you."

'That was Rurre the dragon,' Aya thought. 'I shouldn't leave Ai-Ko alone.' She did not say anything to the baby so as not to frighten him, and only stroked his soft fur.

"Ai-Ko, please don't come to the edge of

the abyss. You haven't got your wings yet. You might fall down straight into Rurre the dragon's paws."

"Don't you worry about Rurre, I'm not afraid of him," Ai-Ko squealed, feeling very brave. "I'll fly to his cave, take off his hide and make you a coat."

The dragon, hiding in the split in the rock, heard all of this.

'Just you wait, little brave, I'll give you a coat you deserve,' Rurre hissed through his teeth.

Aya seriously decided not to leave Ai-Ko alone in the nest. She couldn't forget the story of the disappearance of Archonto's doe. She was sure those were Rurre's tricks.

Next night the gang of carefree friends led by the Wind came to see Aya. They started asking her to fly to the Quiet Sadness Garden to put Archonto to sleep. Everyone wanted to try the golden kulies which had just ripened.

"Please, mommy, put Archonto to sleep and bring me some kulies," Ai-Ko whined. "And I'll grow up very strong and brave and give you a coat made from Rurre's hide."

Aya could not say no to her darling, so she agreed with a heavy sigh, but on condition that the Stars, the Moon and the Wind would look after her baby until she returned. Taking her basket, Aya disappeared in the darkness of the abyss.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the Wind laughed, rolling in the nest, holding his stomach. "He'll bring the coat, did you hear that? You can't even fly!"

"I can too, my daddy is a bergut!" Ai-Ko exclaimed, offended.

"You're a big-eyed mouse, not a bergut," the Wind kept teasing him.

"Oh yes, a really cute mouse," the stars agreed.

"No, I'm a bergut!" Ai-Ko yelled. "Look, I'm going to fly!"

And he jumped into the abyss.

The Wind, the Stars and the Moon hurried after him. He really scared them! They loved him, after all. Catching the little brave, they started hugging, petting and pinching him. And he just stared with his round eyes, unable to speak from fright.

At that moment Aya brought a full bas-

ket of juicy golden kulies. All the friends sat comfortably on the edge of the nest, swinging their legs over the abyss and enjoying the berries. Ai-Ko sat in the middle, in the center of everyone's attention. He had been petted enough to calm him down, and now kept chattering.

"When I grow up, I'll have wings like my daddy," Ai-Ko said, deftly spitting the pip right in the middle of the cloud below him.

"And a bergut's 'lightning stroke'," Aya added.

"Right, and a 'lightning stroke'," everybody repeated with excitement. "Then you will certainly give Rurre a thrashing!"

Rurre at that moment was hiding in the cloud. The pip Ai-Ko had spit caught him right at the nose, and the dragon sneezed so hard that rocks started falling into the abyss.

"Oh yes, stupid little one, you'll get your wings," Rurre whispered.

Next moment a shower of pips started falling on his head. Everyone sitting on the rock also wanted to see if they could hit the cloud with a pip and they started competing

merrily for the most accurate aim. The dragon couldn't stand it any more: he folded his wings and dropped down to his cave, thinking about teaching the little boaster and all this jolly company a lesson.

Once a year the sky-dwellers of the Three Floating Rocks country celebrated the Singing Lights Festival, which was held at the Merry Dreams Palace. That occasion made even Archonto the wizard leave his garden; the Merry Dreams brought huge baskets of ripe fruit and vegetables for the festival from Archonto's garden. Everyone had fun: Archonto played his pipe, Kyo the doe read poems, the Stars danced with Merry Dreams, the Wind dressed up as a joker. But Aya's singing usually made everyone freeze and stop whatever they were doing. Nobody could imagine the festival without the bird woman's golden voice. That's why, when she said she wouldn't be able to come, everyone grew really dismayed.

"I can't leave Ai-Ko alone," Aya said to the Wind and the Stars that came to fetch her.

"Don't you realize, Aya, that Archonto

said he wouldn't start the festival without you? Everyone's waiting for you," the Wind repeated insistently.

Aya glanced at Ai-Ko. He was sleeping tranquilly, curled up under his fluffy blanket.

"All right then," Aya said, "I'll sing just one song and then come back."

She took the Shan-Shara ring from her finger, threaded a string through it and put it on the neck of sleeping Ai-Ko.

"Hurrah, Aya will come with us!" the Stars and the Wind exclaimed.

They grasped the bird woman's hands and in a moment they all arrived in the Merry Dreams Palace.

Yes, my dear friend, Aya remembered this festival for her whole life. Never leave your sleeping babies alone, not even for a moment. Or the thing that happened to Ai-Ko might happen again.

Rurre the dragon was in an awful mood that day. He, the handsomest person in Three Floating Rocks, had not been invited to the festival!

'Of course, this is all the fault of the old Archonto who can't forget his doe,' Ru-

rre thought, drinking one cup of intoxicant shandra after another.

And he so wanted to show off his new satin robe embroidered with emeralds, with a wide belt studded with pearls. For a whole week the spiders and the bats had been working tirelessly, setting Rurre's soft mane in waves, curling its ends with golden sticks. The spiders made more than a thousand plaits! And what bows the bats made for him! Who would see it all now? Rurre looked at his reflection in the mirror again, and his heart cried out.

"I am so beautiful!" the poor dragon complained. "And no one will see it, no one will praise me!"

The tears of pity for himself fell from his protruding eyes. After drinking about a dozen more cups of sparkling shandra Rurre got completely tipsy and decided to fly to the festival even without an invitation.

Rurre kept weaving as he flew, and the drink wasn't helping him any more. At his arrival to the carved doors of the palace the dragon was already totally drunk. And no matter how he kept knocking and asking the

severe-looking doorkeepers to be let in, they did not open the door. Who wants a drunken uninvited guest? In annoyance Rurre kicked the door with his back leg and flew home.

And then the drunken Rurre lost his way and, returning to his cave, hit at full speed the rock where Aya lived. Getting himself a bump, the dragon fell down near the nest, where the little bergut slept securely, and gave out a groan. Ai-Ko opened his round eyes and, seeing Rurre sitting before him, exclaimed:

“Daddy, at last you came! You’re so beautiful today!”

“Am I?” Rurre moaned pitifully, scratching his huge purple bump.

“Very much so,” Ai-Ko went on, “especially the purple star on your forehead and the bows.”

Ai-Ko scrambled fast towards Rurre and pocked his forehead.

“Ugh,” the dragon yelped and thought, ‘At least this silly baby appreciated my dress. He’s so sweet. I’ll take him with me and make him a dragon.’

“You know, baby, if you want, I can give you a talking doe and then bring you both to your mother. She’d be so happy to see you.”

“Doe!” Ai-Ko exclaimed. “What is a doe?”

“It’s a fluffy creature on four legs with eyes round like yours. It will tell you stories.”

“Then let’s go, quick!” Ai-Ko exclaimed.

Rurre picked him up and carried him to his cave at the bottom of the rock.

Poor Aya! She didn’t find her baby when she came back to the nest.

AI-KO, SON OF RURRE

THE DRAGON

Years passed. Since the day Ai-Ko disappeared, the bird woman had stopped singing. Aya lost all hope to find her big-eyed baby. She had searched in so many places! And of course, she had come quite often to Rurre's spring. But he usually just shrugged, demonstrating he did not know anything, and screwed his sly protruding eyes in commiseration. During all this time Rurre was turning Ai-Ko into a real dragon. Ai-Ko grew blue-black membranous wings and also claws at the end of these wings, which were able to cut through any armour. The impenetrable scales cov-

ered his wide chest. A sorcerous brew made Ai-Ko lose his memory, and he was sure he had come out of an egg as a son of the incomparable dragon, the wisest who ever lived.

Rurre could not imagine that his sorcerous brew's action was counteracted by the enchantment of the Shan-Shara ring which was still on Ai-Ko's neck.

Rurre adored his fosterling. He taught him all the dragons' tricks. He tenderly watched over the young dragon cutting a century-old pine trunk by one swing of his wing and throwing huge rocks into the abyss.

Finally Rurre could stop worrying. Now he knew that the carefree sky-dwellers would steal no more foaming shandra. Well, once the Wind managed to gather an entire cup, but the young dragon caught him. After a nice long dip in the icy drink that the attentive guardian arranged for him, the Wind took care not to get too close to the spring again.

But one thing Rurre couldn't understand was Ai-Ko's attachment to the small gracious doe. Instead of having fun with bats and spiders, the young dragon usually flew

off somewhere with Kyo, tenderly holding her to his chest. Once Rurre decided to follow him. It was too hard! Who could fly as fast as a young dragon? Rurre really fell behind, and it was no surprise. Since his fosterling began guarding the spring, Rurre grew fat and his breathing became heavy. He spent all his time nodding off, watching the stars and drinking too much sparkling drink. But Rurre still managed to find the two friends.

They were sitting on the rock overhanging the abyss. Kyo the doe was curled up on the dragon's chest, telling him something. And he, his back pressed to the rock, listened to her, looking somewhere far away. Rurre did not show himself, immediately returning to the spring. He knew it was better not to disturb the young dragon in such a moment. Perhaps their life could've gone on like this, and Ai-Ko wouldn't have learned that a bergut's heart beat in his chest, under the dragon scales. And then something happened which disturbed the lives of sky-dwellers of Three Floating Rocks.

THE INVASION OF THE MERMIELS

That morning the young dragon and Kyo the doe settled up comfortably on the overgrown shore of a small lake. Kyo was telling him about the noble and strong beings which flew through the skies, always fighting, always helping those who needed help.

"I'd like to join them so much," the young dragon said dreamily. "And instead I have to guard the brook and chase off the Wind or the Stars."

As soon as he said that, the bushes behind his back rustled and he heard strange words: "Mordi, durdi, figdi!"

A hairy little round creature with birdlike clawed feet appeared before them, huffing, puffing and taking out the barbs stuck in its fur.

"I am Risha, a young friend of berguts," the creature said confidentially.

However, its nose, which looked a bit like a crooked old sausage, kept sniffing suspiciously in all directions. Risha sat down on a stone, took a long pipe out of her thick fur, and the reddish rings of smoke quickly

enveloped the heads of the doe and young dragon in a sweet haze.

"Oh," the doe said and immediately fell asleep, leaning her head on the dragon's palm.

Ai-Ko tried to rise, but his strength was up, and he fell to the ground. Risha jumped on him, took the Shan-Shara ring off the string around his neck and, putting the ring on her finger, rose over the glade with a triumphant yell.

Throwing a stealthy look around, she gave a whistle so loud that the mountains started shaking. Instantly a silver boat descended gently from a huge cloud hovering over the ravine. The boat landed softly on a glade, letting out a bunch of tall narrow-foreheaded creatures. Their bodies were covered by metallic fabric; quivers full of darts hung on their belts. Their small eyes gleamed with dim reddish light from under their metal helmets decorated with red tassels. Those were mermiels who came to the Three Floating Rocks land to take its treasures and to sell the people as slaves. Their chief Mone came first.

"You worked well, Risha," Mone said.

"Those will be splendid exhibits for my museum of dried figures... Oh, what do I see? You are wearing the Shan-Shara ring! Give it here," Mone stretched his hand towards her.

"But chief, you promised that the ring will now forever be mine!"

"I promised it in exchange for the singing bird woman. Where is she? I don't see her here! Following your advice I sent my two best luminescent boats to her nest, but the whirlwinds started buffeting them around, and now their remains are on the bottom of the ravine. No mermiel survived. And it's all your fault! You failed, Risha, you betrayed our trust. Give the ring to me!"

Risha cringed. She knew very well that Mone could just throw her out of the boat. Risha was truly very afraid of this; she dreamed of being eternally young. So, the next moment the Shan-Shara ring was shining on Mone's finger.

They carried the doe and the young dragon to one of the boats, and it rose easily, carrying Mone, his servants and his prey away from the glade. The sorceress was sitting on the

floor, smoking her pipe furiously, picking at her dirty clawed feet and thinking about how to get the singing bird woman for Mone.

Breaking through the doors of the Dream Palace, the luminescent boat landed lightly in the center of the hall. The Merry Dreams were looking out of the cracks and dark niches, their eyes shining. The strangers were getting ready for a feast.

Mone was lying on satin pillows, but he couldn't quite take a solemn pose. He kept glancing around and squirming, because it felt as if someone kept biting and pinching him. Risha was also scratching herself, but for her it was nothing unusual. Neither Mone nor the sorceress realized that this was the beginning of unannounced war which their unseen hosts and the sky-dwellers of Three Floating Rocks had already started.

"I know!" Risha exclaimed. "Tell them to bring here Archonto the wise as soon as possible. He's bound to know how to get the bird woman."

Mone obeyed, and some time later the small long-bearded old man was standing before the chief of the mermiels.

"All right, Mone, I'll tell you how to get the bird woman, but you have to return the doe stolen from me."

Mone looked at Risha. She jumped up and whispered something into his ear.

"Okay, take her," the mermiel chief said with a cunning squint of his eyes.

The wise man lifted the sleeping doe carefully and, holding her in his arms, approached the young enchanted dragon.

"Only he, the son of Rurre the dragon, can manage to get through the whirlwind and steal the bird woman. But you, Mone, have to give the ring back to him. Without it he won't be able to deal with the whirlwind. It contains the dragon's strength."

"Now that you shouldn't do!" Risha squealed, tugging Mone's ear so hard that he fell on the pillows.

"Risha! Take your charms off the dragon; I want to get the wonder bird to sing to me. But first get the old man and the doe out of here."

Mone's servants took away the wizard and the doe Archonto was carrying in his arms. Meanwhile Mone leaned over the

sleeping dragon and put the string with the ring on it over his neck.

"So he wants to be a bergut? Okay, let's give him that."

Against her will Risha had to start jumping around the dragon, at times yelling out magical words:

"Mordi, durdi, figdi!"

Coming to himself, the young dragon looked with excitement at everyone present and exclaimed:

"So you are the berguts!"

Mone embraced the dragon.

"Do you want to join our tribe?" he asked.

"Of course, I've been dreaming about this for the longest time."

"All right, but first you have to test your strength and ability. There's a bird woman who lives on the top of that rock. Bring her to us, and we'll all listen to her singing. Come on, be brave and you'll become a free bergut!"

"I'm ready, chief," the dragon said, ran off and jumped into the open door.

Aya was sitting in her nest, surrounded by her friends and thinking about her big-eyed baby. The Stars, the Moon and the Wind tried

to distract her from her sad thoughts as much as they could.

Suddenly the rock rumbled and stones started falling from the top.

"Those are my cousins, whirlwinds, playing hide-and-seek," the Wind said carelessly.

The mountain rumbled even louder. Black clouds enveloped its peak. There was a horrible roll of thunder and a flash of lightning. And when the temporarily blinded company regained their vision, they noticed that Aya had disappeared from the nest.

The young dragon hurried, holding the captive bird woman close to his chest. Here was the palace: the whole tribe of the noblest beings was greeting him. He'd be together with them now, forever. The dragon flew into the hall and carefully laid the kidnapped woman on a pillow. Poor Aya was in deep faint.

"Risha, bring him a whole tooth of chundra," the triumphant Mone commanded.

He couldn't look away from the bird woman.

'So here's how she looks! She will be mine and mine alone,' Mone thought.

Risha immediately took out a huge tooth filled with chundra and gave it to the dragon.

'Do drink, and then you'll never need anything again in this life,' Risha thought, smiling. Oh, she so desperately wanted to take the Shan-Shara ring from the dragon's neck.

Just when the young dragon wanted to try out his deadly drink, Kyo the doe ran into the hall. The Merry Dreams had opened the cage where she was put by Mone's orders. She took a couple of leaps to reach Ai-Ko, jumped and knocked the tooth out of the dragon's hand. The foaming scarlet liquid poured on Risha's head, and the sorceress flailed as if she was scalded.

Opening her eyes, the bird woman saw a slim noble youth with long black wings holding a graceful doe in his arms. The magic ring of Shan-Shara was sparkling on the youth's neck, throwing off rays of light.

"Ai-Ko, my Ai-Ko, I finally found you!" Aya exclaimed and ran towards the dragon.

"Ai-Ko, this is your mother," the doe

whispered. "And those are sly mermiels who lied to you and made you kidnap Aya."

"Mom, I remember you now! I remember our nest!"

"My ring!" Risha squealed.

That very moment she was hit in the forehead by a ball sent from a transparent pipe by one of the Merry Dreams.

"Hold them!" Mone yelled.

Taking out their darts, the mermiels attacked the young dragon. But this was, after all, Ai-Ko, Rurre the dragon's foster son. Scattering mermiels around, he ran to the open door and then flew up, carrying Aya and the doe with him. Two silver boats chased after them, their lights blinking.

"Carry her to Rurre, mom, and I'll hold them off," Ai-Ko said worriedly and gave the trembling doe into Aya's hands.

He hung the ring on her neck and then rushed to the luminescent boats.

Seeing the young dragon hurry towards them, the mermiels started shooting at him with their flame darts.

Ai-Ko hit the side of the boat at full speed

with his wing, making a gap in it. The lights on the boat went out and the boat overturned. The mermiels started falling into the abyss like peas out of a pod. However, shining umbrellas opened behind their backs. They started descending slowly down into the ravine where Rurre the dragon lived. The shock of the hit brought Ai-Ko unconscious and he fell to the shore of the spring, breaking the tops of the trees.

Mone was furious. To lose the bird woman, the doe and the Shan-Shara ring! They chained the young dragon to a tree.

"Risha, give me my fire sword," Mone rasped, infuriated. "And I swear by One-Eyed Berbek's Black Claw that if he does not tell me where Aya, the doe and the ring are, I'll cut him into pieces."

In a moment Risha brought him One-Eyed Berbek's two-handed fire sword in its black scabbard.

"Well!" Mone rasped. "Tell me, or you're dead!"

He raised the fire sword over his head to cut off Ai-Ko's head. The young dragon smiled boldly and said:

"How could you think, you despicable mermiel calling yourself a bergut, that I'd give up my heart?"

"Then die!" Mone yelled, raising the sword.

At this time a thundering voice sounded over the ravine:

"Stop, you wretch!"

It was Rurre the dragon, hurrying to help his son. His mane was flying behind him, his battle armor gleamed on his chest. He had a round shield in one paw and a shining sword in the other.

"How dare you raise One-Eyed Berbek's fire sword at a chained enemy?" Rurre thundered angrily, approaching the mermiels. "Now fight with someone who can do it, with the bravest warrior of Three Floating Rocks!"

There was a loud crash. It was Rurre hitting Mone on the head. After such a hit Mone fell down stunned, and One-Eyed Berbek's sword flew off to where Ai-Ko was standing chained to a tree. The mermiels surrounded the dragon, trying to get him with their darts. The darts stuck in his chain mail, and

the dragon was looking more and more fearful to mermiels. Rurre fought like a whirlwind – like a dozen whirlwinds, as the Wind would say later. All the sky-dwellers were there. Merry Dreams dropped thorns under the mermiels' collars. Aya hovered, encouraging the dragon. Meanwhile the Stars were biting through the chain holding Ai-Ko. The Moon tried to blind the mermiels.

In the middle of the battle the doe ran out of the cave where Aya had hidden her. The Shan-Shara ring was shining on her neck. Kyo knew that as soon as the ring returns to Ai-Ko, he'd be invincible. Seeing the doe, Risha hurried towards her. Another second, and the doe would have been in her grabby paws. But just at that moment there was a flash, and the doe turned into a young shining goddess. The Wind, first to recognize her, exclaimed:

"This is goddess Lu!"

The goddess called up a ray of light from the Shan-Shara ring and directed it to the chains holding Ai-Ko. The chains broke and fell to his feet. Ai-Ko was free. He held the fire sword of One-Eyed Berbek. Terrified

mermiels hurried towards their boats and soon disappeared behind the clouds, forgetting their chief.

"Ai-Ko, my son, help me!" Rurre moaned.

"Hold on, daddy, you're wounded, I'll fetch the foaming shandra."

But Ai-Ko didn't have to fly anywhere.

Young goddess Lu gave him a flask. They settled Rurre in the shadow and gave him the foaming shandra to drink. The Wind brought him pillows. Merry Dreams weaved happy dreams around Rurre's head. Aya whispered, leaning over him:

"Rurre, you are the noblest and most courageous of all the sky-dwellers. We love you very much."

And Aya kissed the dragon's forehead.

"We love you very much, Rurre, you are the most courageous and the noblest sky-dweller of Three Floating Rocks!" the Stars, Dreams, Wind and Moon cried out all together.

Rurre was moaning quietly, more from pleasure than from the wounds he had received.

SERGE RATZ

"From this day on drink as much foaming shandra as you want," Rurre said in a trembling voice.

Tears of tenderness shed from his protruding eyes.

'I'm so noble and probably very beautiful,' Rurre thought, 'and they're so nice and love me so much.'

"Hurray to Rurre!" the sky-dwellers exclaimed.

The Wind and the Stars immediately rushed to the spring and in a moment came back with cups and goblets filled with foaming shandra.

Aya clapped her hands and said:

"I want to sing for our Rurre!"

"Hurray, our Aya will be singing!" the sky-dwellers exclaimed excitedly.

The bird woman stroked Rurre's mane and started singing:

For Wind to fasten Rurre's flight,
For Stars to give him smiles so bright,
Let's all together sing.
To all sky-dwellers, small and grand,
Our Rurre gives a helping hand
And pours the healing drink.

SERGE RATZ

When Aya finished her song, the wizard Archonto spoke up:

"Listen to me, sky-dwellers. Today goddess Lu was freed from the enchantment. She helped to save a young bergut, the son of Rurre the dragon. She carries the Shan-Shara ring. According to the law of the berguts she now has to live among them and be their goddess. Now you listen to me, young bergut Ai-Ko, son of dragon Rurre. You'll have to carry goddess Lu to the berguts' country and then return the sword to One-Eyed Berbek. We, the sky-dwellers of Three Floating Rocks, will be always waiting for you, our beloved children."

Ai-Ko hugged Aya and Rurre the dragon.

"Don't worry about us, we'll be back!"

"We'll be waiting for you, son!" Aya and Rurre the dragon said together.

Ai-Ko and goddess Lu flew away to the berguts' land.

The Wind and the Merry Dreams barely managed to catch Risha. She kept jumping deftly from branch to branch on her bird's legs, and when the net finally caught her, she start-

ed biting, spitting and saying nasty things until Archonto put her to sleep. Then the sorceress and Mone, who finally came to himself, were placed in a great big glass vessel which was to be kept in the deepest cave of Three Floating Rocks. Only then the tired sky-dwellers went to restore order in their palaces and houses.

EPILOG

Little deens were crying bitterly.

"What's going on, silly little deens?" Ley asked, worried.

"We're sorry for Rurre the dragon and for Aya!" they exclaimed and cried even harder.

"Come on, don't cry," Ley, Ree and Son-Li answered, trying to calm them down.

"Tell me, my dear Ley, what happened to Ai-Ko, why hasn't he returned yet from visiting One-Eyed Berbek? He went away so long ago to take back to Berbek the fire sword that Risha had stolen, didn't he?" Son-Li asked.

"Well, my dear, Greel the sun ray told me this morning that the Black Admiral and his squadron came to Tresk Star just when Ai-Ko was there. Ai-Ko was wounded."

Son-Li and Ree exchanged looks. Ree righted the 'lightning stroke', the old Tet's present hanging at his belt. Needing no words to understand each other, they put their hands on Ley's shoulders.

"We're leaving for Tresk Star immediately. Good-bye, our dear sweet Ley, good-bye, little deens."

They rose into the sky at full speed, shining like two comets, and disappeared in the blue.

The deens sat hugging each other, singing the berguts' favorite song, sniffing and wiping their eyes with handkerchiefs huge as sails. One of the most serious deens frowned and said:

"I also want to be a bergut," and everyone repeated, "we too, we too!"

And the smallest and most big-eared deen said:

"There's no wings enough for all of you crybabies."

At this very moment a little deen called Golden Tail was sitting calmly in young bergut Ree's pocket looking quietly at the stars.

THE SWORD OF ONE-EYED BERBEK

One-Eyed Berbek moaned a little, scratching his back against the bark of the trunk of a giant tree.

The crown of the tree reeled a bit. Some of the nuts hanging from the branches cracked noisily, and newborn little fintures flew out of them, gleaming in the morning sunlight. Huge-eyed and adorned by fluffy orange tassels, they looked at the world around them with great interest. Their bodies were covered by tender golden fluff, long curious noses were upturned to the sky, and joyous trills came out of their scarlet lips which looked like pairs of frozen dewdrops.

'I wish I had your troubles,' One-Eyed Berbek thought. Leaning on a club which not even the Black Admiral could probably lift, he glanced around with his single eye. For now the tender lilac of the sky was totally clear, without any clouds. But at any moment an enemy could appear, be it the mermiels' luminescent boats, a pack of whistling reks or the Black Admiral's iron squadron.

All the space pirates were interested in the golden hides of the little singing creatures. One-Eyed Berbek knew that for a single live finture you could get a complete space knight's battle armor on the Tresk Star market.

The old warrior remembered how during the assault in the star castle of a noble mermiel he was the first to enter its central hall, and there he froze in surprise, forgetting the deadly fire darts flying over his head. Berbek saw a creature in the cage hanging above the throne. It was clenching the bars of the cage with its three-fingered paws equipped with sagging membranes. Huge eyes were imploring for help, full lips were barely moving. Tearing the bars of the

cage apart with his bare hands, the warrior took the almost weightless creature into his hands and found that thankfully it still had some spark of life in him. Wrapping it up in his warm cape, Berbek tried to pour several drops of the healing draught into its mouth, but the finture just shook his long nose. It was only much later that Berbek learned that the fintures do not live in captivity and die very quickly, since they eat and drink only the juice and pollen of the fintu tree, from the fruit of which they are born. "Listen to me, oh noble Berbek, the grandson of the great sorceress Alma," the finture had sung out, its voice tender like a reed. "You are destined to save our small planet. Hurry, carry my nut away and plant it near the Blue Brook."

A spark had flashed in its eyes, and its transparent lids closed forever. In the next moment the finture's body flared up in blue flame, and then there was a golden nut gleaming in Berbek's palm.

Berbek spent a long time traveling the space depths on his Noble Erg, until he finally found the motherland of the last fin-

ture, a small rocky planet. Once it was covered by impassable forests of giant fintu trees. Flocks of multicolored fintures lived on their branches. An occasional traveler resting in the shadow of the green canopies could enjoy their singing and endless stories about the past and the future of space. But all happiness is fleeting. Unruly wild tribes appeared in the dark asteroid caves. They were well-armed, greedy and power-hungry. They built metal castles and used them to rush about in the endless space, setting up terror and destruction. The attacks on fintures were getting more and more frequent. To get the singing golden nuts or to capture a finture the fintu trees were being cut down, and soon the last tree fell down under a stranger's axe. The small planet froze in horror, deprived of its voice and soul. And a small joyous flame of life in the universe got extinguished.

Berbek planted the nut on the shore of the brook, in a deep split, and together with his Noble Erg did not leave it alone even for a moment. Several days later a huge tree grew out of it.

Once on a calm and clear morning the two friends woke up from the tender touch and quiet trills of very small fintures who probably had been just hatched. They all stuck close to the Noble Erg and Berbek. As they liked to do, the little fintures tried to take care of their saviors. They combed the Erg's matted bangs and gave Berbek the juice of fintu tree flowers. They knew everything about the past, and the future opened to them quite easily. And the fintu tree rumbled, echoing its nurselings, swaying its paw branches. Thousands of golden nuts jingled, chiming in after their parent. Some of them, the most sonorous ones, tore off the branches and fell on the ground.

After gathering a full helmet of shining nuts, Berbek rode his loyal Erg all over the planet, planting these nuts. Soon it was once more covered by impassable fintu forests. The planet's soul sang, and soon the carefree and curious fintures were singing together with it.

Berbek kept a close watch on the peaceful atmosphere around Finturia. Several times a day he went flying on his brave Erg around

the planet. His sword turned many merriel bandits, reks and the Black Admiral's warriors to ashes.

During the long years he spent with the fintures Berbek grew old. He lost an eye in one of his fights with the Black Admiral's ship, and now wore an eye patch. That, though, did not worry him at all. He grew to love little fintures and their planet. The tale of the fearless and valiant warrior and his loyal comrade the Erg spread to the farthest reaches of space, and even the most reckless bandits tried to avoid this place.

But the golden jingling nuts and the finture soothsayers still remained an object of desire for their chiefs.

And then it happened, the event that broke the singing planet's flow of life.

"Hey, how long do you plan to sleep?" With those words the Noble Erg unceremoniously poked the drowsing Berbek with his horn. "We have a guest."

Berbek rubbed his only eye and saw Oyl the finture at the entrance of the cave. The long white hair covering his whole body stood on its end, shimmering in the morn-

ing sunlight. Only his huge forelock and long thin beard were still golden. This was the wisest and oldest soothsayer on the planet; he had been hatched out of a nut from the first fintu tree. Oyl held a clay cup in his hands; pink smoke rose over it, and sometimes there were sparks flashing there. The cave filled with pleasant aroma. Berbek sneezed, and suddenly he wasn't sleepy any more. The Erg crouched down, and they exchanged looks. They both knew that Oyl the finture never came just to sing songs.

"I had a dream today," Oyl said, pursed his lips sadly and after a pause went on, "that your grandmother Alma came to see you, and you were very glad, she brought many presents..." Oyl's voice trembled. "Don't take anything she gives you to drink! Or you'll lose what you hold most dear, and a great sorrow will come to Finturia."

With those words the little soothsayer disappeared.

Berbek sneezed once more and said:

"Well, what do you think about it? I can't believe my own grandmother would dope me like this..."

The old warrior scratched the back of his head and went on:

"What can I lose? My fire sword, but it's always with me, and I certainly won't lose you. And as long as we're together, nothing can threaten Finturia."

And he left the cave with an easy step, whistling an ancient battle song. The Erg dragged after him, clicking his hooves.

"I'm also not one to believe in dreams, but Oyl doesn't say stuff just because. Do you remember when your helmet was knocked off in that battle with reks and the little soothsayer clearly predicted that it was on the bottom of the Sleeping Moon lake?"

"I don't know — what if the fintures living on the nearby trees told that to old Oyl and he repeated that to me just to make himself more important? All right, let's get flying."

And then the never-ending current problems somehow made them forget the prediction of Oyl the little finture.

Once after a short fight with the mermiels' luminescent boat the friends were, as usual, returning to their caves to have some rest. The fintures usually brought Berbek several

clay cups with the drink made of the nectar of the fintu tree flowers, and the Noble Erg had spend at least a bit of time warming himself up under the direct rays of the sun. It was their warmth that fed him. After a ten-minute sunbath the six-legged creature could fly to a nearby planet without any difficulties.

They were already approaching the cave when the Erg froze in space and then landed near the rock so hard on all his six legs that Berbek almost fell out of the saddle.

The great sorceress Alma was sitting on a flat stone in the shadow near the entrance to the cave. Berbek couldn't believe it, but yes, that was really her, his grandmother with her huge shining eyes. Sorceress Alma was eternally young and beautiful. Her enchantments were irresistible and all-powerful. Her slim figure was covered by an orange cape. Her high hairdo was decorated with jade hairpins.

There was one strange thing, though: she had fluffy knitted mitts on her hands.

There were no finture trills in the air. No big-eyed little ones running around. The for-

est seemed to have frozen in caution. But our friends were so happy that they paid no attention to this. And it's easy to understand: after all, doesn't everyone love their grandmothers who taught them to walk, and then to fly, forgave them all their mischief, gave them jam and on Sundays carried them to Tresk Star to buy sun pastries which made you feel full of laughter and pleasantly dizzy; brought them to watch Parg the giant and gave them a new beam crossbow? Oh the carefree childhood, oh the sweet smoke of remembrance!

The space wanderers, sensitive to caress as are we all, lost their heads. Alma kissed Berbek's bald head, tickled the Erg's horn, neatly set up a picnic table, offering them long-forgotten pasties and sweet-smelling jam. And when the two friends felt thirsty, she poured them some compote from a silver flask and started smoking her pipe. The reddish smoke rings enveloped the friends' tired heads. The smell was unfamiliar, a bit too sweet. It drew them to sleep. One-Eyed Berbek yawned, admiring his grandmother from under half-closed lids. The Erg put his

head on his front paws, snoring softly. And Alma sang lullabies, at times sending out rings of reddish smoke.

"You're a darling to have found me, grandmother. Isn't it lovely here?" One-Eyed Berbek said, almost fully asleep by now.

"Yes, there are many golden nuts here," the sorceress's eyes flashed.

"And they all jingle in different voices, and little fintures can foretell your fate," Berbek said, falling asleep.

"And cost a lot of money," the sorceress said.

Her eyes looked more round, and she freed a clawed bird's foot from her mitt. But poor Berbek was not able to understand who was standing before him. Then Alma breathed out a jet of scarlet smoke which covered her from head to toe, and when the smoke dissolved, Risha the sorceress was skipping on the table on her bird's legs. She deftly picked up Berbek's cup with remaining brew and equally deftly poured its remains into his mouth. And the old warrior was still whispering something, probably remembering his childhood, his beautiful

and kind grandmother Alma and his green planet where he grew up as a barefoot little boy. Do believe in the soothsayers' dreams, my friends!

"Well, it's done!" Risha yelled in excitement.

Her paws were trembling while she was detaching the famous sword with its magical sigils from the warrior's belt.

"Of course he's sleeping, but I'm still afraid he'll awaken. That'll be the end of me — he'd squash me with one fingertip," the sorceress whispered, her voice trembling.

She cleverly tied up the sleeping warrior, and then put the mask specially forged by the mermiels on the Erg's head. Now the poor Erg became quite blind. No ray of sun could get past the metal plates. His will was also overcome; now the blind and powerless Erg was under control of the person sitting in his saddle and holding the reins.

Risha quickly jumped into the saddle and then tugged the reins so hard that the poor sleepy Erg rose into the sky. The sorceress gave such a loud whistle that the tops of the highest mountains on Finturia trembled, and

hurried to where the mermiels' luminescent boats were waiting for her.

Risha was all in a hurry to inform Mone, the leader of the mermiels, that the great warrior One-Eyed Berbek lay asleep, tied hand and foot! And now they could load thousands of jingling golden nuts into their boats, catch dozens of stupid fintures and bring all this to Tresk Star at the great Universe Fair day.

But the main thing was the One-Eyed Berbek! He'd have to have a steel mask put on him, and he'd become an obedient weapon in mermiels' hands, but what a weapon! He'd destroy any obstruction.

Hundreds of big-eyed little fintures surrounded Berbek, their pink noses sadly hanging down. Near his head the finture leader and soothsayer Oyl the wizard was sitting with his head in his paw. But what could these fluttering beings do with their transparent little paws? They weren't able to tear even a spider web. Oyl the finture was thinking hard. He knew that in a moment the mermiels' luminescent boats would come, and then it would be the end of the small

planet. Who would then give advice to people of the universe, who'd keep them from taking a wrong turn, who'd remind them of the past? Finally Oyl decided what to do.

"Fintures! Start singing all together, so that the everpresent Greel the sun ray would hear us. He'll help us! He's the only one who'd be able to come fast!"

With those words Oyl started singing, and all the fintures of the planet joined in his song. They stood hugging each other, from the littlest ones, barely out of their nuts and covered by golden fluff, to the soothsayer fintures with long beards. But they all had shining eyes, and their song immediately spread all over the Universe. Its disturbing echo flew over the Three Floating Rocks planet, over the berguts' land. All the warm-hearted sky-dwellers felt pain and knew that something bad happened somewhere.

As Oyl had surmised, Greel the ray of sun was the first to come to their aid.

As soon as the fintures finished the song which disturbed the hearts of the sky-dwellers of the universe, a golden ray fell on Berbek's chest. It flashed brightly, scattering

sparks, and then a slim boy the size of a big orange appeared in its place. In his hands he was holding a lamp. His peaked cap, his transparent cape, his sandals, everything was covered with smallest golden particles which diffused rays of light. Greel was jumping, whirling on one leg, swinging his lamp.

"Ah, ah, so cool! Sweet like a strawberry mousse! Such a nice life! But I'm in such a hurry, hurry, hurry!"

Greel whirled around some more on one leg.

"Good bye, time to go! You have so much light, no business for me! Ah, ah, so good!"

And he had almost flown away at once, since he was a very scatterbrained person.

"But your friend One-Eyed Berbek needs help," the old Oyl said, worried.

"Oh, right, Berbek, of course. I'll tell Grandma Alma everything about his tricks."

With those words he pointed his index finger to where the ropes wound tightly around the chest and arms of the unhappy Berbek. A slim ray of fire running from his fingertip cut the ropes. And then Greel flashed and disappeared. Only his voice could be heard,

repeating:

"Oh, I'm so busy, so busy, so busy! Just so cool, like a strawberry mousse!"

"Thank you, Greel!" the merry fintures yelled all together, but he, of course, did not hear them, since he was already very far away from this small planet.

Risha rushed ahead, riding on the Noble Erg, whistling and yelling. Two luminescent mermiel boats were moving ahead smoothly. In one of them Mone, the leader of mermiels, stood with One-Eyed Berbek's sword at his side. He was looking around through his field glass.

'Here's that very valley where the mysterious fintu tree grows and gives its golden nuts. Risha has done well,' Mone thought. He saw the sorceress fly between two giant rocks guarding the entrance to the valley and directed his obedient machine to follow her.

When the star pirates' boat was flying past the stone giants, a rock suddenly fell on it. It was angry Berbek who, standing on one of the peaks, worked this rock loose. The boat hull cracked, it swayed and hit ground.

From the boat hatch and from the breaks

mermiels in their tight shiny clothes started getting out. Mone was lucky to stay alive, and now he was giving terse orders to the survivors. The second boat hovered nearby; the mermiels from its crew started shooting darts and arrows at the courageous Berbek. Then the mermiels moved to assault the mountain, angry flashes shooting from the corners of their eyes. Soon a close battle began. Having sealed the warrior off, the alien intruders kept throwing darts and firing from their crossbows. Happily for Berbek, not far away from the place where he was fighting so hard was a fintu tree felled by a storm. The old warrior grabbed it by its top and started swinging it over his head, smashing his opponents so hard that it made the ground shake. Dozens of mermiels were hit and fell down into the abyss, but new warriors were taking their place. One-Eyed Berbek's strength was almost depleted.

"Push him into the abyss!" Mone was yelling.

Then Risha hurried there too, riding the Noble Erg, and started squealing in a piercing voice, egging the warriors on:

"Aim for the head! He's already just a bag of bones! Come on, just a bit more!"

The poor Erg could not help his friend; the steel mask still sealed his eyes tightly, paralyzing his will. One-Eyed Berbek looked around. Nowhere to retreat now. Behind his back, its maw opened predatorily, a bottomless abyss yawned. The warrior was still fighting, using his rage and the last of his strength.

The little fintures were close by, occupying the branches of the nearby trees. They tried to encourage the One-Eyed Berbek, singing songs about bravery and courage all together.

Suddenly a terrible lightning hit the attacking mermiels. There was a crash of thunder. Dozens of warriors fell down dead; others ran away, grabbing at their own heads. A huge creature with luminous wings was swooping down from the sky, shining in the sun. Light was coming out of his angrily shining eyes. He held the 'lightning strike' in his upraised hand.

"This is the Great Bergut; there's no one who could stand up to him in a fight. And

he has the 'lightning strike'! We're all dead," Risha barely managed to squeal.

"Run, Mone, he'll kill you!"

"No, I'm going to fight him. I have One-Eyed Berbek's magic sword, after all."

Another lightning flew from the Great Bergut's blade, directed towards the mermiels running away. There was a thunder of such power that the mountains shook. The bergut's thunderous voice rolled all over the valley, and its power and anger made the mermiels' blood freeze in their veins.

"You broke the law of the Universe by attacking helpless beings. Your tribe has to be destroyed."

"First try fighting me!" Mone said challengingly and stepped towards the bergut.

Two lightning swords met above the heads of the warriors. The ancient star smiths hammered the inexhaustible energy of the Universe into those shining blades.

When dark and evil forces got hold of such weapon, everything around seemed to freeze.

Two rays of fire intersected, throwing off deadly sparks for dozens of kilometers. They

pierced rocks and cut off the tops of the trees, and wisps of smoke rose from burned earth.

One-Eyed Berbek and Risha were watching the fight attentively. The old warrior was using his club to throw off the darts that mermiels directed to the bergut's back.

Risha looked around. Right under the Noble Erg's feet she saw a loaded crossbow that someone had left.

'Here's what I need,' the sorceress thought.

Jumping deftly out of her saddle, she picked up the crossbow and, leaping from rock to rock, got close to the fighters. The sorceress put the crossbow on the stone and started aiming at the bergut, but he kept spinning in place, smashing down his adversaries. Finally he turned his back to her. What luck! At once Risha pressed the trigger, and a short deadly arrow flew towards its goal. It probably would've killed the brave bergut, but at the last moment One-Eyed Berbek rushed to protect him with his own body. The hardened arrow hit Berbek's helmet, but its impact was so powerful that he felt everything going dark before his eyes. However,

the old warrior managed to send his club flying towards the attackers. It swept dozens of mermiels off their feet, and they went head over heels down into the cracks in the rock.

The fintures flew down from the branches, hurrying towards their wounded friend. They surrounded his unconscious body, pouring dew drops over it. At this moment the bergut delivered a powerful smash; unable to hold the fire sword, Mone fell down onto the ground. The Great Bergut looked at the impostor derisively and instantly forgot about his existence. He rose into the sky and immediately disappeared in a bright flash of light.

Meanwhile Risha picked up the magic sword, helped Mone, who was struggling to stay on his feet, to climb onto the Noble Erg and flew into the sky together with him. They were followed by one of the surviving mermiels' spaceboats.

One-Eyed Berbek came to himself in the shadow of the branches of his favorite fintu tree. Little fintures were bustling around him. They supported the warrior's head and brought him juice and spring water to drink out of clay cup.

The old soothsayer Oyl was standing nearby. He held a piece of crystal in his outstretched three-fingered paws, looking somewhere into the sky through it.

"Where is my old friend the Noble Erg?" the old warrior whispered with a moan.

"Mone and Risha have kidnapped him. Your magic sword has disappeared with them," Oyl answered softly.

"I need to go and set him free at once!" One-Eyed Berbeck exclaimed.

He tried to get up but soon fell on his back again, his strength depleted.

"Don't worry and be patient. In the near future the mermiels won't dare to approach us. The berguts will help us. They'll bring back your loyal friend and your magic sword. They'll be led by the son of the Great Bergut whose life you saved today. Remember the young man's name. He is called Ai-Ko," Oyl predicted quietly.

"And where is the Great Bergut now?"

"He flew away and now most probably is fighting again, saving people in trouble. And his son Ai-Ko will have great adventures before he frees your friend and returns your

sword. But I see that Ley the storyteller is already telling this story to his little deens."

It's difficult to say how long One-Eyed Berbek waited for the return of his loyal friend the Noble Erg and, of course, his magic sword. And then once, when the old warrior was feeling especially down and kept returning to his memories, he noticed the fintures singing as they never did before. They seemed to be composing a hymn to the sun and to renewal of life, singing with excitement and abandon. They were gathering in groups, and soon the hills surrounding the giant fintu tree were filled by merry singing creatures. Oyl the soothsayer made his appearance, carrying a clay cup in his paws; other finture wizards followed him solemnly.

'What does this all mean?' One-Eyed Berbek asked himself. 'Is the old Oyl's prediction finally coming true?' The fintures' song grew even more joyous. The littlest ones were pointing with their little paws somewhere into the sky. There, in the morning blue, One-Eyed Berbek saw fast-flying beings with shining wings behind their backs.

"Those are the berguts!" the fintures were yelling joyfully.

"Look, and our brave Noble Erg is racing ahead of them!"

Yes, it was he, his old friend and the favorite of the whole Finturia. His eyes were shining with happiness – and, most surprisingly, a long mane was flying behind his head.

"Good luck and happiness to Ai-Ko the son of Great Bergut and to all the noble tribe!"

And all the fintures repeated together: "Good luck and happiness to Ai-Ko and all the noble tribe."

The Erg was the first to throw himself into the One-Eyed Berbek's embrace.

The fintures immediately surrounded their favourite. They dragged him by the hair, pinched, squealed, gave him juice in clay pots, forgetting, of course, that the Noble Erg feeds on sunlight. At least One-Eyed Berbek deftly emptied his cups, explaining that he was very excited and needed to extinguish the fire burning in his soul.

Then the berguts arrived. Ai-Ko came

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first, carrying the magical sword in his outstretched hands.

“Take your sword, One-Eyed Berbek, and let it remain in your hands now and forever. Until your heart keeps beating, protect this small and joyous planet which is so much like a laughing child.”

A tear fell out of the Noble Erg’s huge shining eye, probably from overabundance of emotions. It fell into the luscious green grass and at once a clear and sparkling well appeared there.

‘Oh dear,’ Berbek thought, ‘after wandering for so long this old rogue got himself a soul.’

The calm and noble faces of the berguts showed little outward expression. Only their eyes were sending out starlight, warmth was coming from their bodies in unseen waves, and there was a trembling light over their heads.

“It’s time,” Ai-Ko said. “Farevell, fintures, farewell, One-Eyed Berbek and Noble Erg.”

“Farewell, Ai-Ko, farewell, berguts!” the fintures said, waving around bouquets of fintu tree flowers.

AI-KO’S ADVENTURES ON THE TRESK STAR

One quiet moonlit evening, when the little deens started singing one of the favorite songs of their goddess Lu, they heard the lingering call of Ley the storyteller’s silver horn.

“Come on, quick! Haven’t you heard Ley wants to tell us a new story before we go to sleep?” the deens exclaimed, running out of their peaked huts roofed with red rushes.

Soon, still singing, their merry crowd approached the shore of the lake.

The little ones held flowers, and the grown deens, clay vessels full of intoxicant barbera juice.

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Even the smallest deen who had just learned to walk knew that Ley wouldn't tell even the shortest story until he drank some intoxicant barbera and took one of them for a ride.

But this time they were mistaken.

"My dear little friends," Ley started without any further ceremonies. "I want to tell you the story of the noble bergut Ai-Ko who left us such a long time ago. Greel the sun ray told me today about his adventures on the Tresk Star. Soon, very soon he'll be with us and with our goddess Lu."

"Hurray, Ai-Ko's coming home! Hurray berguts and our goddess Lu!" the deens yelled all together.

Suddenly the top of the hill near the base of which the deens were sitting started shining. And then everyone heard the familiar voice of the goddess:

"My good Ley, my darling little deens, I'd also like to sit here with you and hear this story."

The Shan-Shara ring hanging from her neck was scattering multicolored rays. Reflected from the smooth surface of the lake,

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they turned into dancing girls made of light. The transparent beauties caught the squealing brave deens and wheeled them round the lake while the goddess was getting down the hill.

The deens were very happy. Each one tried to free some place for her by pushing others away. But poor dears kept stumbling against each other and falling down, and in the end all this pile of deens rolled down and fell into the lake. And before Ley started his story, he had to spend some time fishing out wet and disheveled little fidgets. Finally everyone got quiet.

And the goddess kept close the deens whose teeth were chattering with cold especially loudly, covering them with the folds of her shining cape.

LEY'S STORY

For a long time Ai-Ko rushed around the universe, trying to find the small planet of Finturia.

Flying past the Tresk Star he decided to find the location of the singing planet from local astronomers.

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The creatures that populated the Tresk Star called themselves byaks. They were ruled by bek Shabur. The bek's cousin prince Peapea once tried to get the throne, but that was quite long ago, and his army had been beaten. The leader of the rebellion disappeared in the Bamburian mountains and, as they said, was now growing the biggest and most juicy olbams in one of its valleys.

Without an opponent Shabur lost his taste for war and started writing memoirs and composing poems which he loved to read aloud on the Star Brothers Square before the audience that gathered there. He did it weekly, believing that his poems helped byaks live better.

Of course, the bek's talent had its admirers, especially from among his retinue. For example, Shirpa the privy councilor, treasurer and conman, and Garmut the chief bodyguard whose fat gut could take in more than a barrel of intoxicant drinks.

They both used to rob caravans and extort money from moneychangers and small-time merchants. Having saved some money, they started dressing better and bought official

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positions: Shirpa, the black hat of a tax collector, and Garmut, a red tassel of a junior officer. Both of them had made a splendid career during the years of war with prince Peapea. The first one became the bek's secret councilor and treasurer, and the second headed his bodyguards. But that did not keep them from nasty dealings; now they had people bringing them whole fat purses with money. One-Eared Dog's pack which dealt in kidnapping children paid to Shirpa, and Fat Navel's little bandits brought Garmut his toll from the markets, stalls and customs posts.

ON THE UNIVERSE FAIR

Ai-Ko was moving carefully through the screaming and whistling crowd which filled the pentangular Star Brothers Square.

His step was sure, his wings covered by a dark cape. Nimble boys were hurrying around the bergut's legs, selling jumping three-legged egas, speaking masks or bone stilts. Inflammable moneychangers offered to exchange square stone keshes for golden

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korris from the Paf Island. At the stalls of merchants dealing in stolen goods you could buy quite cheaply a ray barda or a scimitar from faraway caves of Bamburian Mountains. And what fruit they offered! It had the southern aroma of Sebarian stars. You could find anything on the fair, from a sorcererite box to a space knight's full armour, and the food and drinks offered there could make you dizzy with delight.

1) Sorcererite — a magic stone brought from the Blue planet.

And all this was due to the fair's modest organizer, the bek's treasurer Shirpa.

On his way Ai-Ko suddenly noticed a thin young man in a green chiton. He was selling flower pollen, evidently collected somewhere far away. Ai-Ko decided to ask him some questions but, after a couple of steps in that direction, he was overtaken by a company of young byaks looking very much alike. They all had round heads with hair cut short, pig-gish eyes and noses a bit like green cherries. Those byaks were dressed in green leather jackets, tight pants and braided slippers; fly-swatters were poking out from their belts and

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cards with some writing on them covered their barely noticeable foreheads. The bow-legged byaks closed up around the young man in a green chiton and then suddenly took out their flyswatters and swung at him, singing a grim song which made the onlookers around them feel goose bumps breaking out.

Good guys we are not,
 We'll get you on the spot.
 We'll prick you good and quick
 With a knife's tiny flick.
 We're really intense guys,
 When you aren't asking us nice,
 We'll make you a nasty deal
 Without a right to appeal.
 We really are first-class,
 We know you have money for us,
 You'd better say "thank you" and
"please",
 We're the guys you have to appease.

"Poor boy, looks like he hadn't paid — what will happen to him now?" someone in the crowd said.

"No guessing needed! The Fat Navel's

guys are serious guys, they'll just finish him off!"

"But how?"

"With a flyswatter, or course!" a long-eared byak exclaimed, annoyed by such naivety.

"No, really?!"

"Wait and see!"

"Well!" said the gang leader, a byak with a small head and a neck thick like the body of a well-fed three-year pig.

"You probably want the pine pollen. It's a symbol of nobility and courage," the young man answered.

"Are you stupid? Cough up the keshes!" the gang leader growled, stomping with his short crooked legs.

"Here, read this!" he yelled and pointed with his thick short finger to a tablet hanging right where normal people have foreheads.

"I killed one hundred and forty six flies and tread on forty four cockroaches," the young stranger read and then whispered: "It's awful and horrible."

"Proon!" the gang leader growled. "He needs a lesson. Start on it!"

Proon was a bow-legged byak whose height was up to the young man's waist. On his tablet it was written "Killed two flies, tore hind legs off one cockroach."

"Now, now, don't be so rash, guys!" a raspy and growly voice said from somewhere behind the backs of the warlike byaks with flyswatters.

They looked back and saw the dogs standing there, arms akimbo, dressed in bright-colored pants tucked into well-polished boots, short vests decorated with spangles, and wide belts.

In the middle of the group, his paws on his mates' shoulders, a one-eared dog in scarlet pants was standing. A heavy gold ring was hanging from his upraised ear.

"This boy is ours, he trades on our territory. Now get out of here!" One-Ear growled lazily.

"Who are you?" the chief flyswatterer byak asked challengingly.

"And who are you?"

"We're the Fat Navel's byaks," the bow-

legged one said. "Aren't you scared already? Ha, ha, ha!"

The bow-legged byaks in jackets started giggling, slapping their flyswatters against their palms. The one-eared dog spit dismissively and moved ahead with a skipping step.

"I'll get rid of your extra fat," he growled threateningly.

"And I'll take off your skin and make myself a fluffy hat."

The short bow-legged byaks in jackets at once started laughing loudly.

The little fat bow-legged byak was swishing his flyswatter threateningly. The dog walked around him, skipping, his paw stretched out. Everyone saw that one of his claws was significantly longer than the others and gleamed with metallic light. In the next moment the opponents went at each other, breathing heavily and growling. Their friends surrounded the fighters, howling, whistling and growling.

Finally One-Ear and the Navel grew tired.

"Okay," One-Ear said, "you take the pollen and we'll sell this stupid boy, deal?"

"Deal. Now that's fair," the fat bow-legged bandit said.

And they moved towards the young man in a green chiton. Without another word the flyswatterer byaks swept the packages with pollen from the counter into their bags. And the dogs started to put a collar with a long metal chain on the young man's neck, all very businesslike.

"What are you doing? I'm a free byak!" he cried out, trying to tear off the collar.

"Was free, ha, ha, ha!" the dogs and the small bow-legged bandits laughed and growled.

And then something amazing happened: both the gang leaders suddenly soared above the counter, lifted by the collar by the bergut's steel hands. Giving them a couple of good hard shakes, Ai-Ko threw them in different directions. Tumbling through the air, the fat flyswatterer and the one-eared dog, having flown considerable distances, fell into dust. Coming back to themselves, the bandits surrounded Ai-Ko closely. The frightened and trembling young man stood behind his back. The

bergut tore off his collar and threw it into the dogs' faces.

"Hey, hero, you're getting above yourself. It's our territory," One-Ear growled. "And it's our prey. You'll pay for your boldness with your life."

"I am a bergut! And I won't let anyone touch this young man."

Daggers appeared in the dogs' paws. The flyswatterers also puffed up, making scary faces, but they did not dare to come close. The stranger looked too powerful for that: tall, wide-shouldered, with a huge sword at his belt. One-Ear gave a signal, and the dogs' pack was almost ready to attack the bergut, but at that moment horns started playing, and the herald's sonorous voice sounded over the square.

"The great bek Shabur will read his poems to the byaks!"

"Hurray to Shabur! Hurray to our byak, poet and greatest ruler of all stars and peoples!" everybody echoed, the city inhabitants, merchants, moneychangers.

The motley procession crossed the square, moving towards its center where there was

a dais covered by multicolored silks. People were whistling, calling out, whispering:

"Bek's guard, bek's guard! Look, all the councilors are with him, and princess Cheena too!"

The dogs and the bow-legged flyswatterer byaks froze in place.

"Time to go, too many witnesses," One-Ear thought, and then growled aloud:

"We'll meet again, noble bergut, and we'll put a collar on you."

He nodded to his pack, and they dissolved, disappearing in the crowd of the onlookers. The Fat Navel's bandits hurried after them. That was all too dangerous. Their work grew too difficult.

At the head of the procession, mounted on a six-legged being with a shiny horn, bek Shabur was riding. He was nodding gracefully to his subjects and waved his plump hand. Near him the poet's modest assistants were riding: the secret councilor Shirpa and the chief bodyguard Garmut. Behind him hairy slaves from the Pak island were carrying princess Cheena and her friends in a covered litter.

"Come on, be braver! Let's go with me and listen to the poetry. I don't think you should stay here alone."

Ai-Ko put an arm over his companion shoulders, and the young man said:

"My name is Forest Violet. Thank you for helping me out. What's your name, amazing stranger? Your behavior is very unusual."

"My name is Ai-Ko. I'm searching for a mage who would tell me how to fly to a small planet of Finturia."

"I'll try to help you," the young man answered.

He gathered the remaining pollen packages into a basket, and they headed for the center of the square.

At this moment Shabur came to the edge of the dais, greeting those present. His eyes were shining, his red cheeks were pudgy, and his golden robe was so shiny it could blind.

"What beauty, oh, what beauty, and such a talent too!" people kept saying in the crowd.

"My dear byaks and byakas, brothers and sisters! I am the simplest byak, your mod-

est poet, your servant, who was born among you and whose muse serves you."

"What modesty!" byakas exclaimed in adoration.

Bek Shabur bowed and added self-consciously:

"I have been working on this collection for three nights. The first poem is tragic." He inflated his nostrils and started in a singsong voice:

I am a lonely byaka
Like cucumber I'm green,
Nobody wants to love me,
To ask me where I've been...

The first bouquets fell at the feet of the poet. Emboldened by his success, Shabur blotted his forehead with a handkerchief. He still couldn't keep his excitement in, but this at least was understandable: such a success!

Eventually Shabur grew bolder. Now he was ready to present his most intimate creation which, of course, would leave its mark in history.

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Frowning, flashing his eyes and pursing his full lips, he announced,

“Dedicated to the hero!”

The propeller on his peaked hat started rotating faster.

My fruit is green and sour
With a nasty worm within,
But if my life's dour,
If I am cold and poor,
I care not what it's been.
'Cause if a byak is brave,
He'll put down any knave,
And eat up anything.

A thunder of applause rolled through the square. All the byaks present joined in with the last lines:

And if a byak is brave,
He'll put down any knave
And eat up anything!

The herald declared an interval. The poet could barely control his excitement by now. The propeller started buzzing so hard

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that finally its rivet tore off and flew into the sky. The admirers of Shabur's poetic talent raced towards him, pushing each other.

“Your grace, you are a people's poet. Look what a great thought does – it flies into the sky. Look what an inspired word does – it captures all the byaks. So many simple hearts were inflamed by you, so many people got together around you. They are ready to die for you,” the secret councilor said, amazed.

The chief bodyguard wasn't able of making up such speeches, so he added with a soldier's directness:

“My Shabur, we'll stamp this poem in gold on the doors of all the battalions' barracks. Soldiers will give their lives for you, repeating them.”

“What can be more precious than the love of simple byaks and their acknowledgment?” Shabur answered modestly. “But it's time for me to go; my entrance, as the actors say.”

“You're so hard on yourself!” the secret councilor and the chief bodyguard yelled in a single voice.

“Oh my dears, the poet's fate is a difficult

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one, and all the glory passes sooner or later.
I'll complete the cycle with lyrics."

Once more Shabur dived into the sea of passions and refined poetry.

"Someone talented in one thing is talented in everything," Shirpa noted.

At that moment the bek started reciting the poem half moaning - his eyes closed, hands raised towards the sky:

I'll give my everything for love:
My pies, my pipes, the sky above.
I'll give my cows
And then my house.
But when a bunch of gambling debts
Will grow as troubling as it gets,
I'll sell my cows,
And then my house,
I'll sell my darling love's heart
To make another gamble start.

BLACK ADMIRAL

Seven shining pyramide-like ships hovered on the orbite of the Tresk Star. Their captains only waited for a signal which would send firewheels full of utter space pi-

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rate scoundrel rushing down to the planet, carrying death and destruction.

But there was no signal. The Universal Council of Condors declared Tresk a neutral planet. Too many space pirates from various planets of the universe sold their loot here, so that then it could be sold further on.

And the Universe Fair was in full play.

Princess Cheena and her friends flew up the stairs, ran to the dais and performed a bright and graceful dance.

When the applause died down, the girl started singing, accompanying herself on the lute:

Life is so furious and fast,
Do fall in love, do fall in love
Forget the disappointments past,
Remember stars above.
Breathe in the flower smell,
And dance in open space,
Don't hide in your old shell,
And join the beauty's race
Forgetting pain and strife,
For our sweetest dreams,
To nothingness of life
Where all is as it seems.

She was such an insufferable carefree girl! But the simple byaks loved her. She was a real beauty and the best dancer in the whole kingdom. And her voice... the flowers bloomed and the birds grew silent when she started to sing.

"The girl's so-so, but she has a nice voice," the Black Admiral drawled, watching the show on the huge screen of the starship. "Of course, she copied this poem from some old manuscript and declared it her own work."

With those words the old pirate pressed the tip of the hookah to his lips and, drawing it down, sent out a thin jet of green smoke.

"Of course she copied it," Fisa the fox echoed squeakily, standing behind the back of the armchair in which the commander of the best equipped and fastest star squadron was reclining.

What could the old space pirate find on a planet deep in the medieval darkness, covered by the fog of mysteries? On its every corner you could find snotty boy soothsayers, young fortunetellers, stargazers who needed

only a fistful of dried racha to show you the way to any distant planet of the universe better than the newest laser navigator. Also, you could always by chance offend some bony old man in a torn chiton who'd turn out to be a mage and with his curse would sent your ship to one of the black holes of space from where you wouldn't be able to return. The old pirate shivered.

Suddenly his attention was captured by a six-legged being with a huge shining horn, wearing a metal mask. 'I think I've found it,' the old pirate said and stared closely, his interest growing.

"That's an Erg! Here's what I need! I'll go get him," the Black Admiral exclaimed. "Fis! Tell them to get a firewheel ready and bring me my uniform!"

Fisa the fox silently disappeared in the oval of the matted hatch.

The firewheel landed several meters away from the steps leading up to the dais, hissing and throwing off sparks like a frying pan full of overheated oil. The admiral got out of it, wearing an elegant uniform tunic with golden shoulder cords and an admiral's star

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on his chest. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a scarlet plume on his head, a cutlass in silver scabbard on his hip and the cold of the destroyed stars was in his eyes. The officers of his personal guard came out after him.

The people on the square froze, not expecting anything good from such a visit. The reputation of the Black Admiral and his minions was well known.

Everyone turned to look at bek Shabur.

A hypocritical smile froze on the lips of the Great Poet of the Universe.

He felt like a man who had a fistful of cold woodlouse spilled under his collar and they ran everywhere under the fabric of his robe — just like the thoughts in bek's head at that moment; and it was impossible to stop them. The bek was frozen with horror. He knew very well that the next second these guests could turn into the masters of his palace, his country, his planet.

"Salute in honor of the bravest and noblest of the space knights!" the bek yelled in a trembling voice.

A salvo sounded, then another one. The bek finally came to himself.

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"Why so many ceremonies? No need to spend so much gunpowder just on us simple soldiers," the admiral drawled. "Hope we haven't interfered with anything."

The inhabitants of the capital expressed their approval noisily. Everyone realized what a difficult moment it was. They all felt they had to support their favourite, the simple byak who organized this festival, this carnival for them.

The Black Admiral was already imagining himself mounted on the Noble Erg during the tournament dedicated to the Great Condors of the Universe and feeling the envious and awestruck glares of the most famous space pirates.

Meanwhile Ai-Ko got rather bored with standing in the crowd of onlookers. He tried to remind the young man of his request. But Forest Violet saw nothing and heard nothing: he was instantly in love with the young princess Cheena.

MATAMBA'S CURSE

Suddenly Ai-Ko felt someone tugging the edge of his cape. He turned his head. A

creature of approximately wild sepo's height stood at his feet. Its small body was covered by a torn grey cape too big for it, which was belted with a rope, and a pointed hood covered a part of its round little face. His straight whiskers stood right up from under his little button of a nose; at times they spread like a fan, then gathered together into a plait. One eye gleamed like a small black bead through a narrow slit between the wrinkled eyelids. Instead of the other there was a protruding transparent and shining stone.

"Oh kind stranger, give a poor wanderer some money to buy a bit of dry chepo - I haven't eaten for a week," the creature with round face squeaked.

The whiskers under its nose bunched together in a tassel and interweaved around the small hole of the mouth.

"My dear poor wanderer, I do not know what chepo is and what they usually give to poor wanderers. But I will find out in a moment," the bergut answered.

Ai-Ko gave Forest Violet a light shake to bring the young man from the mist of love to reality. Seeing the little stranger, the

young man suddenly rushed towards him, picked up and spinned him in a dance, repeating:

"Matamba, Matamba, Matamba! I found you!"

"Hey, hey, not so hard, you youngster!" the creature was squealing.

"Ai-Ko, do you know who this is?" Forest Violet, agitated by the sudden meeting, was barely able to speak. "This is Matamba, the best known wizard and mage on our whole planet. He will tell us where Finturia is and how to get there, won't you, Matamba?"

"Of course I will, but first bring me at least one chepo berry. I'm terribly hungry," the little creature squealed, still held tightly by the young man.

His hood slipped down to his shoulders, opening a round head covered with wrinkly skin with sparse hair sticking up and transparent pointed ears on the back of it. The ears ended with golden tassels and moved like antennas taking a fix of the location.

Since neither Ai-Ko, nor Forest Violet had any money, near the forest store the friends got a fragrant and juicy bunch of chepo in

exchange for a small package of flower pollen. To the surprise of the bergut, the little mage swallowed it whole, and then spit out a cannonade of pips from the round pink mouth. Then his plump little hand dipped unceremoniously into the young man's basket; he took out a dozen packages and spent a long time smelling them. Then he chose one, sniffed the pollen, sneezed and closed his single eye.

Ai-Ko and Forest Violet were waiting patiently. They realized that the mage was enjoying life's little delights.

"Oh, right, Finturia, you say. I remember them, yes; I visited there about five hundred years ago, learned a lot. Nice, sweet and silly people. They know everything about everyone. This transparent stone was given to me by the old soothsayer Oyl himself.

Matamba fell into thought, mumbling something. Sparks were flashing in the transparent stone set in the mage's eye.

"A creature from the once powerful Erg tribe will show you the road to Finturia. You'll have to set him free, though, to

tear off his mask. Let's go, I'll show him to you," Matamba said.

He carefully got out of Forest Violet's arms and pattered along the path, dragging Ai-Ko by the end of his cape towards the scaffold where the Black Admiral and bek Shabur were finishing their negotiations.

"Here is your guide, Ai-Ko," the little mage said, pointing at the unhappy Erg with his head hung down dejectedly. "And give my regards to Rurre the dragon."

"You know him too?" Ai-Ko exclaimed in surprised.

"I know a lot of inhabitants of this universe," Matamba said quietly, "but you have to hurry because bek Shabur agreed to give the Erg to the admiral. He'd agree to much more just to get rid of those unwanted guests."

The bek and the admiral, both pleased by the deal, stood on the scaffold.

"I want to try him in flight at once," the admiral said excitedly.

"But this is too dangerous: it's a sullen creature," bek Shabur noted, alarmed.

"I have broken in some creatures that

were much harder," the admiral exclaimed and deftly jumped into the saddle on the Noble Erg's back.

However, he had no time to pull the reins. Perhaps they slipped out of the old pirate's hands, or something else like this happened, but next moment he was flying over the on-lookers, thrown by the Erg, and landed head-first in a heap of fruit. When the pirate got back on his legs, he was a sorry sight: there was a piece of well-gnawed blue peel on his head instead of a hat, and the remains of an overripe bunch of chepo on his shoulder. A wave of laughter ran through the square. The admiral roared. Grabbing a lash out of an officer's hand, he started beating the poor animal. The Erg trembled with his whole body, taking the cruel lashing silently.

Suddenly a slim girl appeared between the admiral and the poor Erg. That was princess Cheena. Her cheeks were flushed with anger, flames danced in her wide open eyes. She seemed to burn the pirate through with her look.

"Don't you dare to touch this dumb and gentle creature!" she yelled, raising her arms

adorned with tingling bracelets to protect the Erg.

"Get out of my way, girl, or you'll regret it!" the Black Admiral roared and lifted the lash over the princess's head.

At this moment Forest Violet ran out of the crowd. He grabbed the hand holding the lash and slapped the star pirate soundly.

"You're a scoundrel, a contemptible scoundrel! How dare you lift your hand against this heavenly creature!" the young man exclaimed loudly and angrily.

He was ready to die but not to give way to this black evil power. The admiral froze in surprise. He, the hero of a dozen battles, commanding the most powerful space squadron, was to be stopped by a boy who was easy enough to swat with the admiral's little finger.

"You are as good as finished," the space pirate rasped. "Take him to the ship and put him into the electric cage."

His guards ran towards the young man. They twisted his arms, threw him face down on the Erg's back and, leading the unhappy creature by its reins, made for the firewheel.

“Daddy, stop them! They’ll destroy this man, and he only wanted to protect me!” Cheena cried, running to bek Shabur.

The ruler of Tresk was silent. What could bek Shabur do to space pirates? He hated them, he was afraid of them and he was totally helpless against them. He was so envious of the unknown young hero, and admired his behavior so much! The bek kept silent, and meanwhile the admiral’s guards together with the captured youth and the Noble Erg approached the space boat. Another second or two, and they would disappear in it forever, like hundreds of other prisoners whose fate was only to be guessed at.

And then a wave of terror spread over the crowd of onlookers. A creature with dark blue membranous wings and a shiny iridescent cape behind its shoulders rushed over their heads and, cutting into the guard officers’ group, immediately scattered them around with its wings. With one movement of its hand it tore the metallic mask and the reins off the Erg’s head and threw them at the admiral’s feet. Easily tearing the belt off

Violet’s hands, it shook the young hero, put him into the saddle and whispered:

“Hold tight!”

And then, feeling his long-awaited freedom, the Erg jumped fast and rose, disappearing somewhere in the sky...

Nobody ever expected anything like that, neither the Black Admiral, nor bek Shabur, nor the onlookers.

Ai-Ko was left alone with the admiral’s furious guards, who were ready to tear him to bits. The officers knew how the offenders usually ended: in the cage with bloodsucker spider Chaak or in the grey puanda’s stomach. They rushed at him without waiting for orders, planning to throw him down and to tie him up. They had no way of knowing that it was Ai-Ko before them, the adopted son of dragon Rurre with the blood of the Great Bergut in his veins.

Ai-Ko did not draw the sword of One-Eyed Berbek. He knew the laws of the Universe Fair and despised his new enemies, nasty little worms who owned terrible weapons of destruction. At that moment he only wanted the only thing — to fly quick-

ly away from the square, to find the Noble Erg and to leave the troubled planet which slept with the dark and feverish sleeps of the ill.

With a slight sweep of his wings, he rose higher, not hurrying in his flight.

"Who is that wonderful warrior?" bek Shabur exclaimed. "I'd love such a body-guard!"

"This is Ai-Ko, daddy, a noble and fearless bergut," Cheena said in delight and amazement. "Look, the admiral's officers are shooting at the bergut. They're breaking the law of the Universe Fair!" the princess exclaimed.

Scarlet lightnings slashed the sky, throwing off sparks.

"Fire, fire until you bring him down, whoever he is!" the Black Admiral was shouting.

Seeing that her father froze in fear, the princess took him by his arm and dragged towards the admiral.

"Admiral, you're breaking the law," the bek managed to say in a weak trembling voice, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

"Our bekie's so brave, he'll stand up for

everyone, so brave!" people around started clamoring.

"I don't care about your law; fire!" the star pirate exclaimed, enraged.

The scarlet lightnings flashed around the bergut who was flying away. And then one of them pierced his wing and another one hit his back, hissing and scattering sparks. The bergut wheeled around and started falling, first slowly, then faster and faster. Ai-Ko was falling to the rocks of Hundred Singing Falls, overgrown with centuries-old trees.

"Finished at last!" the Black Admiral exclaimed with satisfaction. "Good work, guys!"

He went towards the firewheel and, turning his head to bek Shabur, added carelessly:

"I'll be expecting you in the morning with the Erg and the boy."

"Admiral, it's impossible!" the unhappy bek exclaimed.

"I'll turn the whole planet into ashes," the Black Admiral snarled threateningly.

And then the Black Admiral's passage was obstructed by Matamba who suddenly

appeared from nowhere. The small creature held up its thin arms. Sparse hair on its wrinkled head stood on its end, growing higher by a second. Its pink nails turned into long blue-black claws. The mage grinned at them and everyone saw his shining crooked fangs. The stone in place of one of the mage's eyes was scattering scarlet sparks around. Some unseen power was spreading around him, making the admiral and his minions freeze. They were filled with overwhelming terror.

"Get out of my way," the Black Admiral managed to say, feeling that the hair on the top of his head was moving.

"Shut up, murderer of child planets, you'll have to listen to Matamba," the mage said in a voice that shook the walls of the buildings round the square.

The scarlet sparks from his stone eye turned into blinding rays of light. Then they gathered into one constantly pulsing stream directed straight into the admiral's chest. Intolerable pain pierced the admiral's whole body.

"Remember, you trampled the law of the Universe, the law of our star. Your people

have shot down the noble bergut, you are threatening death to our planet," the voice of Matamba thundered somewhere high above the square.

Matamba himself grew to the size of the highest tower of the palace. His body grew transparent, surrounded by blue clouds of smoke. Only the light pouring from the stone grew even brighter.

"Now listen to me, you unfortunate wretch. I curse you with Matamba's most horrible curse," his voice was now thundering high from the sky. "I see—I see you enveloped by the space fire. You are writhing in agony; the fire carries you away and turns you into ashes!"

The mage's silhouette, wrapped in smoke, was moving away and up into the skies, and the echo of his horrible curses was still thundering:

"The fire carries you away and turns you into ashes!"

The thunder rolled for the last time, a lightning flashed. The blue cloud vanished in the sky. Returning from the state of frozen horror, the guard officers lifted the un-

conscious admiral and pushed him into the hatch of the firewheel. Rising up fast, the luminescent boat hurried towards the flagship to get help for their admiral.

Coming to himself on the board of his own spaceship after a dead faint, the old pirate, tormented by a horrendous presentiment, immediately ordered to turn on the engines.

Soon his squadron was already hurrying to space, as far away as possible from that terrible planet hidden in the mist of mysteries and puzzles, unassailable mountains and seething singing waterfalls.

Bek Shabur was the first to recover from the shock. Deftly climbing the dais, he thumped his chest and yelled:

"Did you see how Matamba and I frightened them?!"

"Hurray to the hero and savior of the planet!" yelled Garmut and Shirpa who had only just arrived at the square.

"Hurray to our savior, a simple byak, the great bek Shabur!" the people on the square echoed.

"I will write a heroic poem about this,"

the bek said and, surrounded by his retinue, left the scene to loud applause of the public.

"But what about the bergut, daddy?" Cheena exclaimed. "We must find him, he needs our help!"

Without taking much pause for thought, bek Shabur ordered Shirpa and Garmut to send the best and most experienced sleuths to search for the bergut. The bek, puffing out his fat cheeks, emphasized that to save the bergut was the matter of universal importance and the whole matter should be totally secret. The chief bodyguard and the secret advisor called their most loyal helpers: one, Fat Navel the chief of flyswatters, and the other, One-Ear the dog. The competing gang leaders exchanged looks. They both recognized that it was a chance to make a career and earn money, but on the other hand, it was risky to send their people at night to the mountains in the Hundred Singing Falls area where so many byaks had disappeared. And then the bergut himself... The gang leaders couldn't help shuddering when they remembered his long sword and steel arms.

“The great Shabur promised that the one to find the bergut will earn the honour of being carried in a litter under a baldachin, and other awards too,” the secret councilor said solemnly and clicked his fingers.

One-Ear and Fat Navel were thinking hard about whom to send on that errand. And then all the fuss started with the feast in honour of bek Shabur’s victory over the Black Admiral. Additional guards were needed for the palace, and all Fat Navel’s and One-Ear’s bandits were stationed in the most important places: in the throne room niches and under the table set for guests.

That’s why One-Ear had only one young pup to send, just a week in the gang. He was rather shy by nature, had dirty grayish coloring, and wore knee-length polka-dotted underpants and a vest with many holes. Pants and a sleeveless shirt were just a pipe dream for him, and he didn’t even dare to think about getting boots. Fat Navel managed to send a bow-legged flyswatterer called Proon.

By tradition, before undertaking such a difficult mission from which there might be

no return, both Proon and the young pup took a detour to the fat Brod’s tavern. They got there at about the same time.

The fat and cunning Brod realized at once that the Fat Navel’s flyswatterer and a dog of One-Ear’s did not just come in by chance. And when the guests ordered big mugs of viscous mandra and clay pipes, Brod had no doubts any more – that was clearly a matter of national importance. Time to prick up your ears and to entertain these guests handsomely – for free, of course. To tell the truth, neither flyswatterers nor dogs ever paid anything anyway.

Both guests kept meaningful silence, knowing what they were taking on. After the first drink of mandra the puppy let out a ring of yellowish smoke, coughed and said challengingly:

“Don’t you worry, I’ll find him first and drag him back.”

“Who do you think you are?” the short bow-legged flyswatterer said in annoyance. “Here, read this.”

He leaned over the table, getting his forehead with an inscription on it into the puppy’s face.

"Swatted two flies, torn back legs from one cockroach," the puppy read and added sarcastically, "and that was all you had the strength to do?"

"Do you even know what a cockroach it was?" Proon spread his short arms over the table to their whole length. "No, bigger than that, like these three tables together."

Those present in the tavern froze in horror. Everyone realized that a fight was inevitable and lots of blood could spill.

The puppy hiccupped, examined the size of the table with respect and said enviously:

"Five people could ride such a cockroach."

He couldn't think of anything like this and thus couldn't help respecting his adversary.

"They call me Grey Lightning," he said and offered his paw in a conciliatory manner.

"Proon," the flyswatterer answered shortly.

Everyone sighed with relief: there would be no knife-fight. After the guests had another drink, everyone present knew the details

of the planned operation and the promised reward.

The following mugs took only a couple of gulps for the little boasters to drink.

"It's time," Proon said grimly.

"One-Ear himself will pay for us," Grey Lightning said thickly and then gave a loud hiccup. "Or maybe even the bek..."

"Tsssh," the bow-legged flyswatterer whispered, looking around, "don't give out state secrets."

In an unsteady gait the competing braves headed for the exit.

"You'll hear about us again," the puppy added, hitching up his underpants meaningfully, "you definitely will..." Stumbling against the doorstep, they rolled out of the door.

"What gutsy guys! Real daredevils!" the guests of the tavern exclaimed noisily. Everyone felt a part of this business, and they all were drunk with excitement.

The satellite of the Tresk Star, round like an ancient silver coin, lit the way for the two brave sleuths. The path they were walking was winding between the roots of giant trees.

At times they felt that the giants' shadows were stretching their paws towards them, or that someone was quietly creeping after them. They kept freezing after each rustle. Then two green eyes flashed in the dark, and they clearly heard crackling laughter.

Grabbing each other tightly, not looking where they were going, the two braves ran ahead as fast as they could, breaking bushes and stumbling on branches.

Jumping onto the trunk of a fallen giant tree, they ran along it for some time and then lost their balance and tumbled into the seething waters of the waterfalls.

That would probably be the end of the adventure of the bow-legged flyswatterer and the puppy, but at the very moment when those little boasters were already drowning, something strong and invisible caught them and lifted up.

The wet and trembling dog ended up held by a being with the figure and face of a young woman, and a being with the face of a noble warrior held the bow-legged little robber. Both of those had wings shining behind their back. Those were the berguts, princess Son-Li and

her loyal friend Ree. They were flying to help Ai-Ko, but, having seen those two perishing in the water, the berguts dragged them out. Both the braves were alive but after what they had been through they weren't yet able to recover.

Soon the berguts found Ai-Ko. He was lying in the moss, on the ledge of a rock under a tree. The rock was bathed from both sides by the water from singing waterfalls.

Intoxicated by his freedom, the Noble Erg with Forest Violet riding him made several circles round the Tresk Star.

Both were worried about Ai-Ko. What did the Black Admiral's bandits do to him?

"Only princess Cheena can tell us what happened to him," Forest Violet said. "Let's fly to see her."

In a moment they were on the balcony of princess Cheena's castle. She seemed to have been waiting for them near the railing, watching the dark sky.

The girl told them that Ai-Ko was wounded and that she was ready to fly with them immediately to find and save the young hero. The Erg offered her its back, she jumped on deftly, holding on tightly

to Forest Violet with her tender hands, and the friends rose into the black sky. They were flying towards the singing waterfalls, watching the darkness of the night, listening to the growing sounds. At first they could barely distinguish it, but then they clearly heard the sound of horn accompanied by all the hundred waterfalls.

The horn's sound was at times lingering and patient, and at times it called to fight for every spark of life in the universe, telling stories of eternal love.

The Erg slowed its flight and started sliding slowly through space. Forest Violet and Cheena saw bright light pouring from a rock surrounded by the seething streams of the waterfalls.

Soon the friends saw the source of light. It was coming from three creatures with wings behind their backs. The light seemed alive; it played, destroying the darkness of the night, and every thing that got into its life-bringing stream was filled by joy and calm. The being standing in the middle of the stream used one hand to press a silver horn to his lips. That was Ai-Ko. His dark blue membranous

dragon wings disappeared, and the barely noticeable bergut wings were shining in their place. Princess Son-Li, his daughter, snuggled close to his chest. His eyes open wide, he was listening to the enchanting sounds of the magic horn. With his other hand Ai-Ko was leaning on the young bergut Ree's shoulder. Apparently he still felt the effects of his wound.

Princess Cheena and Forest Violet slipped down quietly from the Noble Erg's back, not wishing to disturb the singing bergut. Holding hands, walking noiselessly over the soft moss, the young man and the girl approached the shining creatures.

All sound grew quiet. The waterfalls became still. Silence descended on the forest.

"One-Eyed Berbek is waiting for us," Ai-Ko said to the berguts. "The Noble Erg found us."

Noticing Forest Violet, the bergut smiled at him in a friendly way.

"Where should I carry you? To the bek's palace?" Ai-Ko asked.

The young man and the girl looked at each other.

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"Please carry us to the Bamburian Mountains," Forest Violet asked.

"We'll build a hut there, and you'll be able to come and visit us," Cheena added.

"Okay, let it be the way you want," Ai-Ko said. "And what are we going to do with these braves?"

Everyone noticed the puppy and the bow-legged flyswatterer in a split in the rock. The braves had finally come to themselves and were drying their clothes near a small fire.

"Carry them to the palace, please," the princess asked.

"Let them come here," the bergut said.

The unhappy detectives stood with their heads hung and their eyes closed tightly.

"I hope today's lesson will be useful for you, and you'll leave flies and cockroaches and other people's pockets alone," the bergut said severely.

"We lied about everything and we got very, very afraid," Proon and Grey Lightning said together.

"Well, friends, we've got a long road ahead of us - let's fly!" Ai-Ko said.

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Like birds of fire, the shining creatures whizzed past the waterfall and rushed into the sky, where One-Eyed Berbek, little fin-tures and the singing planet were waiting for them.

IN BEK'S PALACE

The palace was full of alarming gossip and tiresome waiting. The princess disappeared. Someone had seen a six-legged Erg take her away. People were remembering what happened at the square, and the strange winged being which fell somewhere near the Singing Waterfalls. That only added to the worries. Fat Navel and One-Ear were questioned severely.

After learning that the most desperate cutthroats were sent to search for the bergut, the bek got a bit calmer.

Suddenly bow-legged Proon and Grey Lightning the puppy appeared in the room. They both looked frightened after having survived the lightning-fast flight and, presented to bek Shabur, did not quite know what to say.

The heroes' jaws were trembling, their hair stood on end. But when they saw One-Ear's threatening grin and Fat Navel's hairy fist, they began their story quite bravely.

Everyone was waiting, breathless, what the bek would say. He listened without interrupting. Getting bolder as his story went, in the end the pup was waving his paws before the bek's nose. Bloody battles with forest robbers, singing waterfalls, giants and monsters — all this flashed before his amazed listeners. Bek Shabur, impressionable by nature, was trembling a little from the horrid sights and seas of spilled blood that his imagination prompted.

The silent Proon only nodded grimly in agreement, envying his talkative partner a little.

Everyone was especially impressed by the touching story about how the bergut was saved. Bek Shabur started crying when he heard how princess Cheena with the aid of his modest and loyal servants found and healed the stranger.

"Just like her father, fearless, responsive and kind!" the bek exclaimed.

He was beginning to feel a bit sorry for himself. But when he learned that his daughter would certainly return to his loving father, his mood lifted.

His councilor, his guard, his servants — everyone echoed:

"Fearless, like her father, just like her father!"

The bek, moved, pressed the pup to his breast, hugged the bow-legged flyswatterer and exclaimed:

"Reward everyone who took part in the operation! And enlist these two as my bodyguards."

"Hurray to our noblest and most just bek Shabur!" everybody exclaimed.

And everyone was happy: Garmut and Shirpa got the right to move about on a litter under a canopy, Fat Navel and One-Ear received a silver goblet each, and the pup got silk pants and new boots. Proon was rewarded with a new flyswatter.

In the evening both gangs ordered a festive supper in the Long Dagger tavern in honor of the fearless heroes.

IN BERGUT LAND

Impressed by Ley's story, little deens sat quietly, their thoughts still far away on the Tresk Star; they kept worrying about the courageous Ai-Ko. Goddess Lu looked thoughtfully somewhere upstairs where the stars were shimmering.

She was tenderly stroking the head of a little deen snuggled on her lap.

"Please, tell us, dear sweet Ley, what happened to Forest Violet and Princess Cheena?" the little deen asked. "Where did Matamba disappear to?"

Some of the most impatient and reckless deens ran off to prepare their lances and bows for a fight with the Black Admiral.

"That's another story about the adventures of Cheena, Forest Violet and little mage Matamba in Bamburian mountains," Ley said, taking a big sip of barbera.

"But why is the One-Ear Dog so angry and cruel?" the curious deen wouldn't stop asking.

"He's more than just a dog: he's been ensorcered. I'll tell you about him some other time."

Suddenly a fiery flock of berguts appeared in the dark blue sky. The little deens started jumping in excitement. Finally Ai-Ko would meet his goddess.

The rays of light pouring out of the eternal lovers' white foreheads, and their shining wings were almost impossible to look at.

The deens sang their favorite song to their favorite young berguts, Ree and Son-Li. The festivities started, and everyone wanted the young berguts to tell about their adventures. And then a small deen called Golden Tail looked out of the pocket of Ree's pants.

"I will tell you about adventures, I'll tell you everything!" he squeaked. "I heard everything, and I saw everything!"

The berguts almost fell down laughing when they found out that the little one went with them all the way, travelling in Ree's pocket.

"What did you see, then, if you were in his pocket all the way?" the goddess Lu asked.

"I made a hole with my little finger and watched it all, with one eye only, though," the Golden Tail answered.

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And everyone present heard such things about the berguts' adventures that it was impossible to keep from laughing.

THE COMET MAN

““ I wonder,” Chara thought, slipping quietly out of her bed, “whether that shining young man with such big and sad eyes will appear again.”

Every night at the same hour the silver dwarf in the castle's brass tower struck the gong with his little hammer. He informed everyone that the planet was under the power of unearthly spirits. To this slow chime Chara stealthily made her way to the central hall and then stood near the giant crystal sphere for a long time. The sphere shimmered with light and filled the space with sounds that made the girl's heart tremble. Then she went out to the balcony and admired the starry sky. From her childhood the stars beckoned to

Chara; she understood their language. And then once she saw a flying starman. His head was framed by a mop of fiery locks. A purple cape flew from his shoulders, and tiny stars rained from the folds of his cape, forming a long radiant train behind him.

Flying over the balcony, the young man dropped a rosebud which fell at her feet and instantly blossomed. After that every night, flying over the balcony, the stranger dropped a rose at Chara's feet. These flowers were unusual; they did not wither as Chara put them in her room. The aroma of those roses made her heart flutter and filled her with a wish to fly to the stars. Oh, how she waited for another meeting with the mysterious stranger! How she wanted to talk to him! Alas, he always flew by, until one day the stars took pity on her and let her know the secret of the stranger with sad eyes.

That was the man called Comet. Fearless, free and lonely, he whizzed around the Universe.

The stars also whispered to her that her one-eyed grandfather, the Black Admiral, was hourly expected above the planet with

his fleet of starships. The Admiral and his people had just destroyed a young, barely formed planet, Enchanted Sandra. And Chara's brilliant father, the commander of the flag starship, would never come back. He was dead, turned into dust during a fight with the brave Ergs of the destroyed planet.

"Is the sky, created to strike the imagination of people, really so full of sadness?" the girl whispered.

Chara felt someone looking at her and turned her head. Right in front of her the Comet was gently swaying in the air. With a friendly look in his eyes he gestured for her to follow him. The girl saw the stranger fly and disappear near the base of the White Rock, at the very edge of the sea.

Chara remembered the words of the Black Admiral:

"If I ever manage to catch the Comet and to take off his shining cape, I'll become the grandest man in the Universe."

"I have to warn him quickly," Chara thought.

She walked along the narrow path bor-

dered from both sides by briar bushes. The path led towards the seashore. Somewhere in the darkness, above her head, she heard heavy sighs and soft whistles and saw small phosphoric eyes flickering about. That was the hairy pampa, one of the Black Admiral's loyal helpers. The girl felt as if his sharp-clawed paw would appear at any moment to take her away, so she hurried her steps.

A shadow silently followed the running girl. That was the fox Fisa, the admiral's loyal servant and secret advisor. He wore a silver bracelet on his forepaw as a token of special trust. A dark blue cape covered his whole flexible body.

"Hmmm," Fisa said to himself, "I should find out just where this tiresome girl is hurrying to."

Chara and Comet stood holding hands near the trunk of a giant pine. They looked like two people very close to each other who had met again after a long separation.

"You know, Chara, as I flew past your Blue planet, I saw the light of your eyes and understood that you are lonely," the young man said quietly.

The seagulls circling over their heads cried out: "Yes, she's lonely, very lonely, take her with you!"

The stars whispered: "Take her with you; she has a kind and loyal heart."

"Fly away, beloved, fly away," the girl whispered.

And no one, neither the seagulls, nor the carefree stars, nor cunning Fisa the fox, was surprised by her words. It was already clear that the Black Admiral's granddaughter fell in love with the Comet.

"My grandfather has long dreamed of destroying you and obtaining your cape," Chara went on quietly.

"My cape? But it is woven from sun rays, and it is dangerous for a mere mortal to own it."

"The Black Admiral thinks that by getting it he'll obtain power over the Universe," the girl added.

"How can it be possible to have power over the sun rays, the shimmering stars, and the blueness of the sky? He's crazy!"

"He ordered the destruction of the new planet Enchanted Sandra. The Great Moth-

er of our Universe is still crying over her child.”

“You shouldn’t stay with him. Come with me. I don’t know what love is, though,” he looked up. “I’m used to being alone and whizzing through space. I’m used to dangers, like my friend the Great Bergut. Would I be able to love you? My soul is still in deep sleep.”

“With you I am afraid of nothing. I would warm you with my breath and with the warmth of my hands. I can’t yet fly away with you, though, not until there’s a way to free thousands of souls caught in the crystal sphere.”

“Where is that sphere? Who captured those unfortunate souls?” the Comet asked, worried and angered.

“My grandfather captured them on various planets, but many of them are from the destroyed planet Enchanted Sandra. They sing, tell amazing legends and shimmer. They are alive. And now they feel really unwell, and their lights keep hitting the thick crystal walls of the vessel in vain. I can’t leave them – without me things will

be even worse for them. They may even go out. The lights say that I also have a soul in my breast, their sister, a small sparkling nubble. But it’s impossible to free them; only my grandfather the admiral can open the crystal sphere.”

“I lived on the Enchanted Sandra once; it was populated by kind and noble people. The planet was really beautiful. Let’s go,” the Comet said, his eyes flashing. “We’ll set them free!”

He held the girl by the shoulders tenderly, covering her by his wide shining cape, and in the next moment they speedily rose into the sky and disappeared in the darkness of the night. Only the train of stars showed the direction in which they went.

“Dammit,” Fisa the fox snarled, having overheard the whole talk, “I should raise an alarm and destroy the Comet as soon as possible. Otherwise...”

He imagined his own dried pelt hanging below the roof of the castle. That image made Fisa the fox shudder, and he rushed along the familiar path.

The lightning that flew from the tips of

the Comet's fingers made the castle shudder; a gap appeared in the wall, and the lovers flew inside. There was a crystal sphere in the middle of the hall. Thousands of shimmering lights inside it made the sphere shine. The lights kept moving. Suddenly their movements grew faster, a joyous tingle sounded, filling the whole space.

"Do you hear them singing, Comet?" the girl asked. "They're glad to see us."

Chara took the young man's hand and held it to her breast.

"Listen to my soul singing, responding to them."

"I hear its sweet voice — but why is my own soul sleeping? If it woke, it would sing in the same way and maybe I would fall in love with your soul," the Comet said softly.

"Don't be sad. It's just sleeping, you said so yourself, and I will wake it up."

The star wanderer and the girl approached the crystal sphere.

"Be careful, Comet!" the girl exclaimed.

Out of a dark niche the pampa came out. He was wearing barbed metal armor and held a two-handed sword in his hairy sharp-

clawed paws. His servants with hooks and axes followed him.

"Go away!" the Comet ordered in a thunderous voice and pointed at them with his index finger.

A lightning flew off the tip of his finger towards their attackers. Grey dust and some wisps of smoke were the only things left of the hairy evildoers.

Covering the girl with his cape, the Comet directed the next lightning to the crystal sphere. Thousands of shards flew every which way. For a moment it was very quiet. A swarm of singing shimmering souls hovered in place of the sphere, and then the youngest soul flew out of it. Sliding through the air, it approached the Comet and the girl standing nearby and whispered sweetly, flying over them:

"I'm your younger brother, Comet. Do you remember our Enchanted Sandra? You bounced me up towards the sun and gave me toys. We are so happy now! Goodbye, brother and sister, we'll be looking forward to seeing you again!"

The young soul kissed their foreheads and disappeared in the darkness of the gap in the wall. The swarm of lights rang with voices:

"Goodbye, brother and sister! We will never forget you!"

"Goodbye, goodbye!" the man and the girl heard themselves answer in voices which, it seemed, poured from the depth of their hearts.

And then the star wanderer noticed a creature with a long sly face; it held a shiny tube aimed at them. An orange ray struck from it. The Comet shielded the girl; the ray struck right into his breast. Fisa the fox saw the Comet fall, saw him thrown to the gap in the wall, noticed how he flew out of the gap, holding the girl tightly in his arms. He watched as they descended slowly towards the base of the White Rocks, wheeling through space.

"Got it!" Fisa the fox roared, jumping up and down. "Now the purple band and the stick with the golden head are mine!"

And he hurried to take the cape from the body of the Comet.

At that moment Chara kneeled near the body of the young man, speared by the ray, and called, sobbing:

"Oh seagulls, my winged sisters! Please help me save my beloved! In a moment the treacherous Fisa the fox will be here with a band of his servants. They will finish him off and take away his shining cape."

The seagulls instantly gathered together, raised the girl and the lifeless body of the young man and took them to the highest rock. There they settled the lovers in a deep cave in a sheer wall.

Almost before the seagulls flew away, Fisa the fox appeared near the wall, breathing heavily, accompanied by his servants. They sniffed around, but, not finding the young man's body, disappeared again in the green bushes.

Chara was sitting on the stones in the depth of the cave. She held the Comet's head in her lap.

"What can a poor girl give to bring her beloved back to life?" she was saying, sobbing. "Only her heart and her soul which are in his possession anyway. You said you couldn't love me since you did not know what love was. And I would fly with you, sharing all your troubles. You would know that you

have nothing to be afraid of in the darkest corners of the Universe, because you are not alone, you have me. You said you cannot live without wandering, without stars and dangers and your cape. Don't worry, beloved. I'll patch your cape up so well that no one will notice anything."

The girl was speaking, and her tears kept falling on the young man's pale face and wounded breast.

"Fly away, my soul, please, find and bring back his sleeping soul," Chara said quietly.

At this very moment a small light flew off her red lips and left the cave in search of the Comet's sleeping soul. So the girl put her head on the young man's shoulder and seemed to fall asleep.

Some time passed. It's difficult to say how far the Comet's sleeping soul went until Chara's soul light reached it. Suddenly the cave was filled by joyous sounds. Two bright lights appeared under its vaults, circling each other. It was the song of eternal life and eternal love. For a moment the lights joined into one pulsing, flaming sphere

which seemed to have the form of a human heart. And then they separated again into two shining little clouds. Oh those souls in love! They did not want to part, forgetting that people were waiting for them.

"We were so happy there, among our brothers and sisters!" the young man's soul exclaimed.

"Yes, it's so amazing there, full of light and joy – but Chara and Comet still have many good things to do. They are waiting for us. Come on, we won't part in any case. Never!"

After those words Comet and Chara took their first barely noticeable breath. The girl was the first to awake. The young man breathed evenly, and the wound in his breast was healing quickly.

Seeing Comet alive, the girl kissed his forehead and went to the cave entrance. She had to make a quick visit to the castle, to her room where in a black silver box she kept the ring with the Shan-Shara stone. She had to be faster than her awful grandfather. Chara knew about the power of the enchanted stone of eternal youth and strength. This

ring was a present from the girl's mother, Princess Oychan, whom the Black Admiral had kidnapped on Enchanted Sandra. Some said that she was carried away by shining beings that learned how unhappy she is in this world. Chara believed that the magic ring would help Comet in his travels and battles.

She called the seagulls; they caught her and carried her carefully down until they arrived to her bedroom. However, no sooner had Chara taken the ring that the door opened and Fisa the fox rushed into the room, followed by his servants. The seagulls flew into the window, frightened by the fox. Only one of them, the youngest, still flew rounds above the girl, trying to protect her.

Chara tossed the ring into the air and said:

"Give this ring to Comet and tell him I'll wait for him until the day I die!"

The seagull deftly caught the ring with its beak, rushed above the screaming fox and flew out of the room.

They grabbed the girl and took her to the Black Admiral.

"Come, baby girl, convince him to give up his cape voluntarily. He won't be able to rise over our planet even for three hundred ricks. My laser will turn him into dust. I have no time for waiting; do you hear me, baby girl?" The old admiral was almost snarling.

"Don't call me baby girl!" the girl exclaimed angrily. "I won't go anywhere!"

"Yes you will! You should know that tomorrow the Universe Council of Condors gives a grand reception in my honor. And if I appear at this reception in the Comet's cape, I will definitely be made a Grand Condor. Grand Condor, do you see, baby girl? Why are you objecting to me? Come, see what I have!"

At this the old admiral clicked his fingers, and Fisa the fox wheeled a tray with open boxes towards the girl. Each one held diamond-shaped stones shining as scarlet and blue rainbows. The look of them made the admiral widen his eyes, but after a pause he went on.

"These are Shan-Sharas. I brought them from my last trip to Enchanted Sandra. That

planet is no more, and the Shan-Sharas with their wondrous beauty will serve you forever. They have a unique ability to make you eternally young and beautiful. That will all be yours, just tell me where you hid the Comet."

"I won't tell you anything," the girl said proudly. "You are just a bandit, and he's noble. He won't be able to live without his cape."

"Fisa!" the admiral snarled. "Put her into electric cage and fry her until she tells all!"

The bars of the cage were already red-hot, and the girl felt that her light dress was smoldering already. At that very moment the Comet appeared in the open door. His cape was flowing, his eyes burning. The admiral's servants ran and hid away.

"Set Chara free!" the Comet thundered.

"Your cape," the admiral rasped, "and the girl is yours."

"Swear that you will let us leave the castle alive," the Comet said.

The young man made a bundle out of his cape and threw it under the admiral's feet.

"I swear," the admiral said, lifting his right hand in a steel glove.

As soon as the young man left, carrying the unconscious Chara in his arms, the admiral clapped his hands and yelled happily: "Send both of them to the Sleeping Dragon Island, to die without water and food!"

And Fisa the fox hurried to obey his orders.

The flower of the knighthood gathered in the Condor Council castle. Those were the luckiest and boldest space corsairs, known for their bloody raids.

Amazed whisper started flying over the knights' helmets when the old admiral walked unhurriedly through the hall, surrounded by the members of the Condor council. The Comet's cape flew behind his shoulders.

The horns thundered, and the grand feast for the Grand Condor began.

Suddenly, though, in the middle of the festivities an unseen force lifted the admiral up and carried him away. He spread his arms, trying to slow down his flight which grew faster and faster. His face was locked in

a grimace. Then suddenly his flowing cape got on fire. In the next moment his whole face was burning with unearthly fire.

"No!" the admiral cried out in a voice unlike any human.

His burning body with the flaming cape behind his shoulders flew out of the window, the shards of colored glass decorating it going every which way. A heated ball with a comet's fiery tail flew over the planet. Going round the planet, the comet destroyed the tops of the tallest mountains, and when it finished its round, it smashed into the wall of the castle. A lightning flashed, lighting up everything around for dozens of kilometers. That was how the curse of the little mage Matamba came to be true.

Neither wind nor stars nor free and fast-flying seagulls could approach the Sleeping Dragon Island. The dark forces stood over the sunburned rocks night and day. The prisoners brought to the island would die from thirst and the killing heat of the sun. But at their first night there the sky shook from thunder, thousands of lightnings appeared. It seemed that the unseen armies of darkness and light,

good and evil were battling in the sky. It was a fearful battle.

Some lightnings struck the rocks, breaking them into parts. In the middle of the raging sea of darkness, among the torn clouds, hundreds of shining beings with golden wings flew past them. They were holding naked swords which were sending lightnings from their blades.

"Look, Chara!" the young man exclaimed. "I recognized the leader of those noble beings. It's my friend the Great Bergut. They are all so brave!"

"Did they really come for our sake?" the girl asked.

"Of course! Berguts always come to the aid of those in danger", the Comet answered.

Finally the last detachments of the forces of darkness were dispersed. And then the stars appeared in the sky.

"Look, Comet! The Great Bergut is coming to see us!" Chara exclaimed.

The berguts came even closer to them. They picked up the young man and the girl and carried them to the splendid planet of the Singing Dreams.

As they said their goodbyes, the Comet gave the magic Shan-Shara ring to the Great Bergut.

The young man and the girl were standing long on the top of the Lonely Moon, watching the flight of the berguts hurrying off to help some souls in peril at another end of the universe, following their hearts.

On the soft moss of the shore of the Ringing Waterfall the young man and the girl finally hugged each other.

"You know, Chara, I think I know now what love is. It's when you give all of yourself to another person, without thinking. I thought I would find my happiness in discovering the truth. But while I wandered through the universe in search of that truth, I cooled my heart and nearly missed you, my happiness."

With those words he embraced the girl and kissed her tenderly.

EPILOG

The Comet became a teacher of astronomy and aeronautics. Chara was always with

him, never leaving. Her radiant look always made the Comet warm. He taught the children whose parents were lost in space expeditions.

The Comet knew that the souls of beings from the destroyed planet Enchanted Sandra settled into children born on the planet of Singing Dreams. He had even found the boy that had the soul of his younger brother, and since then they were inseparable.

Usually at about midnight a group of five or seven curious boys and girls got together on top of the Lonely Moon Rock. The children started a fire, settled comfortably, looked at the crackling embers and pondered. At the stroke of midnight the Comet flew in, as usual, together with Chara. The children adored his teacher. With bated breath they listened to his stories about faraway worlds lost in the depths of the Universe.

"Look," the Comet indicated three bright stars. "This is the Three Oranges constellation, and that is the Rose constellation. Perhaps you think it was named after a flower, but that's not so. It's the name of a girl, playful and capricious and very lovely. They say

she lived several thousand years ago on the faraway Blue planet, almost totally covered by the ocean. At that time spirits and mages still lived there, and mages wandered its roads. Perhaps she was a mage herself, since she managed to capture the young and tender heart of a young storyteller with one look only. In honor of their rebellious love that burned both of them the astronomers named this beautiful constellation by Rose's name. By the way, she looks a lot like my Chara."

The Comet fell silent, looking thoughtfully at the stars.

None of the children knew what his teacher was thinking about in such moments, and no one thought about it much, because Chara came in just then, bringing shining pasties she made from dew and nectar on the morning sun rays. The Comet Man clapped his hands and repeated the same long-awaited phrase:

"And now, my friends, let's start our flying lesson!"

And the Comet dived first into the abyss, arms spread wide, and Chara and all his stu-

dents went after him. Only in the morning, with the first rays of the sun, a shimmering cloud hurried back towards the top of the Lonely Moon Rock. Like a flight of huge birds with shining capes behind their shoulders, the group of flushed teenagers landed on top of the rock.

"Remember the law of the Universe! Whatever happens to you, after becoming a Comet each one of you has to save those who need help, even at the price of your own life, wherever they are, even at the remotest little corner of the Universe," the teacher said quietly.

And that was the way they lived. Probably even now the Comet gives his lessons and talks to children about his space adventures. His faithful companion is still with him, guarding his rest, warming him up with the light of her radiant eyes and making shining pasties for his students. And his students, growing older, hurry to the farthest corners of the Universe, carrying in their hands the hot embers of the fire they started as children on the top of the Lonely Moon Rock, and their singing souls keep for-

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ever the memory of their teacher the Comet, his faithful companion, of the whisper of the sea and the birds singing on their faraway planet of Singing Dreams.

THE SECRET OF THE BLACK ASTEROID

As Ai-Ko had promised, the berguts brought the Forest Violet and Cheena to the Bamburian Mountains. They settled near the Three Dreams waterfall in a hut that the young man built out of sweet-smelling and succulent reeds. It was so nice to live here! The mountain air was clear and transparent; in the night the clear-eyed dreams came to the hut to tell ancient legends, to sing quietly to the lovers, their songs leading to such shining distances that their hearts fluttered and there were tears in their eyes. Such songs made them want to embrace the whole world. The stars gath-

ered in groups, and some of them, flashing in a silver thread, fell into the darkness of the underbrush. It was impossible to take eye off that mystery. During the day Cheena and the Forest Violet were visited by orange butterflies covered by sweet-smelling pollen, by kind-hearted clumsy peems and by irrepressible long-eared freds which brought the gifts of the forest in their paws.

It so happened that the home of prince Peapea was near the lovers' place. Who knows, perhaps it was more than a coincidence.

Right after the war the unlucky prince went to live in one of the caves of the stocky bearded tandors. Those were skilled smiths who had lived in the caves of the Bamburian Mountains for a long time.

The tandors helped the prince to build a small house with a tower from unwieldy rough-hewn stones, made him a fireplace. Every week the grateful young man sent them a trolley full of ripe fruit and vegetables previously unseen in these lands. The prince grew all sorts of things in his small garden: giant juicy pinkish umbalas, lilac rikas with their

enticing smells, bunches of sweetest chepo from the vines that twined around the whole tower and the small terrace. Undoubtedly, the prince possessed a rare gift for gardening.

Peapea's hands gave off such warmth that it was enough for him to throw a chepo seed into plowed earth and to move his hands above that place for a flowering bush to grow there a few moments later, and in a day the bush was already bending under the strain of swelling bunches of fruit.

Once, wandering through the woods, the Forest Violet found a wounded little peem. The wound was deep and extensively bleeding.

Together with Cheena they barely managed to bring the unfortunate peem to the porch of the prince's house. It seemed impossible to help him. The poor soul looked at the friends imploringly, tears running from his round protuberant eyes. Peapea started stroking the wounded paw, and suddenly it stopped bleeding before their eyes and closed up. That way everybody learned about the healing power of the prince's warm hands. The news about the young healer spread over the Bamburian Mountains.

The prince healed everyone and refused no one. Everyone knew and loved him for that.

Cheena and the Forest Violet often visited the prince and stayed the night. They liked to watch the endless play of the stars, settling all together on top of the tower. The peem, their little friend, usually snored softly near them.

Once, lost in dreaming, they looked into the depths of the velvet sky. Suddenly a huge spiky ball of flame captured their attention. It tumbled down through the gaggles of stars and, without slowing down, smashed into the thick of the age-old forest near Peapea's house. There was a bump. Huge trees flied every which way with their branches twisted and broken. Then everything got quiet again.

"This is the Black Asteroid," the Forest Violet said. "Matamba told me about it."

"Oh," the prince exclaimed, bringing his hand to his breast, "something pricked my heart."

"Look," Cheena exclaimed, gesturing at the sky. A black cloud looking a bit like the

silhouette of the bird of prey called tega covered the stars as if swallowing them.

"For some reason I feel afraid," the girl whispered softly.

In the morning the Forest Violet went to inspect the place where the strange star had fallen down. He had his bow and a quiver full of arrows behind his back. However, he only used it to knock off the round shaki full of the fragrant laughter pollen, which usually grew on the very tops of the trees.

The forest was quiet. It seemed that everything around was frozen by fear, as if waiting for something to happen. Only the cunning and rapacious tegas gathered together, the whole pack of them, at the place where the strange space giant fell down. The winged predators sat on almost every branch of the trees nearby without making any sound. That was strange. The unblinking eyes of the huge birds, shining with red light, were riveted to the gaping fissure on the surface of the asteroid. It was radiating waves of green and blue sparks. Coming closer, the young man noticed that the sparks were coming

from the inscriptions someone had put on the surface. And, of course, he could not decipher the meaning of the symbols.

Suddenly the Forest Violet thought he heard a familiar voice somewhere above: "Don't go! Something awful for our whole planet can happen!" He looked around and saw no one.

"Just an illusion," he thought. Curiosity kept pushing him ahead. He wanted to have at least one look at what was inside that huge capsule.

Slipping inside the gaping fracture, the Forest Violet froze. At his feet in the dim orange light he saw a seemingly lifeless being.

The white skin of its face made it seem bloodless. Long straight coppery hair combed up smoothly was held by a diadem with a shining stone, eyes covered by dark blue eyelids. Its nose, curved like a bird of prey's beak, covered its black and blue upper lip. A bird's spurred feet emerged from velvet breeches fastened under the knees with silver buckles. Its scales and spurs sparked with metallic light. Behind its back broken bluish wings looked out of the flaps of its

doublet. Its breathing was jerky, blood trickled out of the corner of its mouth. The drops of blood turned into dark purple crystals as they were falling down and bounced from the floor with a melodic tingle.

Without thinking, the young man picked up the alien's almost weightless body, soon laying it down on the terrace of the prince's house. Peapea used all the magical energy in his palms to save the wounded alien, and soon he started breathing more evenly. The danger was past. The bleeding stopped.

But the young man could not imagine that he had saved the Great Shrakra, black mage and Black Hole Warlock, imprisoned by the berguts in a capsule asteroid and thrown into space.

Shrakra's was the name that brought terror to the whole universe. It was his inexhaustible black energy that created the mermiel and rek tribes. His will led the Black Admiral to destroy the baby planets. It was by his direction that Risha stole the Noble Erg and the One-Eyed Berbek's sword. For some time the Shan-Shara ring had been shining on his ring finger. It increased the magician's black

power, making him invincible. Only berguts were opponents strong enough for him. In their last battle the Great Bergut, Ai-Ko's father, cut off his hand together with the Shan-Shara ring. Shrakra was captured, imprisoned in a capsule asteroid and thrown into space for eternal wandering and torment. The capsule was covered by magical formulas and signs. They created images around the black mage which pierced his conscience like heated iron, bringing him constant torments. For several thousand years Shrakra flailed around space in his magical asteroid capsule. During that time the armies of darkness, beset by the berguts, grew much smaller. The leader of the rek tribe was killed. Somewhere his favorites, Mone, the leader of mermiel tribe, and Risha the sorceress, were suffering, imprisoned. The Black Admiral's life was in danger. But it was on the Tresk Star that the chvak tribes lived, and the merciless tribe of winged tegas, and in the caves of Bamburian Mountains the famous brew of Farda the sorceress still boiled. It was her, his beloved niece, who brought the capsule asteroid closer to Tresk star by her spells.

It was, of course, not that simple. And now he was here, though not as powerful as before — the berguts had taken away his Shan-Shara ring. However, when he would find it, he would take his revenge and get back his power and his lost possessions.

PLAYING FOR A WISH

The unusual guest was settled in one of the rooms on the first floor of the house. As the prince told his friends, the stranger was not doing anything, and at nights he usually climbed to the top of the tower and looked somewhere in the direction of the highest rock of the Bamburian Mountains, stretching the healed but probably still weak wings for a long time. And several cunning tegas always hovered in the dark sky over the house at this time. Seeing the one-armed guest on the tower, they started crying harshly, as if greeting him.

One quiet evening the Forest Violet and Cheena sat at the table on the terrace peacefully discussing with the prince the new breed of dwarf tree he had just raised. Its

spreading branches bent under the weight of rich fruit.

Suddenly their talk was interrupted by Shrakra who came out of the door. He examined all the present with an unblinking look of his yellow eyes and said softly:

“Let us play a merry game for a wish.”

There were three dice in his single gloved hand.

The people at the table exchanged looks.

The atmosphere was full of leaden silence.

“I know you have wishes, prince. Like a wish of my leaving your house sooner, isn’t it true?”

“Yes, we did get a bit tired of your presence,” the prince answered, suddenly growing pale.

“Then let us play. Even if I win, I’ll fulfill your wish. And my wish would be just a trifle for you to fulfill,” their guest said in the same soft and even voice.

Peapea did not want to play, but it was as if some force made him take the dice and throw them.

“Three fives,” Cheena and the Forest Violet exclaimed happily.

“Your turn,” the prince said.

Shrakra threw the dice absentmindedly, without looking at the table.

“Three sixes!?” the disconcerted supporters of Peapea exclaimed unanimously. “You won!”

“All right, I’ll leave at once. I’ll tell you about my wish later. It won’t give you any trouble. More than that, you’ll like fulfilling it.”

With a solemn bow their one-armed guest left the terrace, and some time later a shadow with huge wings left the tower, hurrying somewhere towards the Scarlet Visions rock. In his flight he was accompanied by a flock of tegas suddenly appearing from somewhere. Their cry was unusually piercing, as if they were greeting their chief.

My dear friends, never gamble with a stranger, or the same thing that happened to the unhappy Peapea might happen to you.

“I guess he’ll ask me to produce a new type of some wondrous fruit,” the prince uttered, deep in thoughts.

“Or a saiko bush, covered by everblooming lovers’ flowers,” Cheena said excitedly.

"I don't think so," the Forest Violet said grimly. "I have a bad feeling about this. I've heard the voice of Matamba, and he warns about danger."

"What nonsense," Peapea remarked with sudden haughtiness. "I have nothing to fear; I'm a prince, after all, and your Matamba is just a wretched charlatan. Anyway, I'm tired of sitting in this dump, growing fruit and vegetables. That's not what I was born for."

The Forest Violet and Cheena, amazed, stared at the prince. His face was now longer and paler, yellow sparks flickered excitedly in his eyes.

It was a stranger sitting before them, someone totally unlike the kind and sensitive young man they used to know.

"I don't want you to stay the night. I need to be alone," the prince said.

"But it's late night out there," Cheena said timidly, cringing a bit.

"Will you ever leave me alone?" the prince said, annoyed, and left the terrace, looking haughty and cold.

Then, of course, his two guests had no

choice but to leave the house they loved so much.

They made their way through the dark forest, and somewhere over the treetops the tegas rushed back and forth and roared with laughter, inspiring fear in every living being.

"Something awful happened to Peapea," Cheena said, sitting near the entrance to their hut and warming her hands over the fire the Forest Violet had started.

"I think this is all that alien's fault. He bewitched our prince," the young man said.

"We have to save him quickly," the girl answered resolutely.

"But how shall we do it?" the Forest Violet inquired thoughtfully.

Suddenly they heard the voice they knew well:

"A terrible danger has come to our planet. Stay brave. Forest Violet, you must at once go to the caves of the Scarlet Dreams Rock. There you will learn how to help the prince and the whole planet. Be careful. Shrakra arrived at the Tresk Star."

The voice got softer.

"Help us, Matamba!" they cried out.

"I am very, very far away from you!" the voice said, barely audible.

"Shrakra!" the Forest Violet exclaimed.

"The stranger from space that we saved is the most dangerous and evil person in the Universe!"

"I am afraid," Cheena said, "but you still have to go. I'll be waiting for you."

"Take care of yourself!" This was the only thing the Forest Violet said before hugging his beloved goodbye.

IN FARDA'S CAVES

The Forest Violet knew that even fearless and courageous tandors avoided the grim Scarlet Visions Rock alone. It was said that the visions led the brave visitors into the bottomless passages of the caves and nobody saw them ever after. It was also said, in whispers, that Farda the sorceress turned them into horribly looking beings or animals. They wandered the world until a well-aimed arrow of some hunter or warrior stopped their

torment. Of course, the sorceress could return them to their former appearance if they did the atrocities or crimes she commanded them to do, but not everybody could bring themselves to this, often preferring the existence in an animal's skin to surrendering their souls completely to the forces of darkness.

Jumping lightly over the gaping fissures and the stones covered by some plant with huge thorns, the Forest Violet reached the base of the Scarlet Visions Rock, where the multitude of caves yawned open like some fetid holes.

Hungry predator visions and evil spirits stood around, searching for prey in every bush. Some broke tops of the trees in their fury. Other howled softly, hiding somewhere in a fissure or behind a broken rock.

At the entrance to one of the caves the young man noticed a transparent silhouette of a slim girl. Cheena! How did she come to be here? Her eyes pleaded for help and called to come after her. The girl slipped into the darkness of the cave and disappeared.

"Cheena, Cheena!" the young man called

and ran after her without looking where he was going.

Almost by touch he hurried through one passage, then another. No one there. Then he heard a moan followed by sobbing somewhere close by, in the depth beyond the next turn. Without thinking, the young man took another step and then froze on the spot. Cheena was standing right before him, her arms outstretched towards him. She looked even more beautiful than usual. Her body was transparent and it seemed that dim scarlet light was flowing out of it.

"Come, I've been waiting for you," the vision-Cheena whispered.

It seemed that the Forest Violet was totally under her spell, ready to follow her to the edge of the Earth — and then something invisible whapped him on the back of his head. And then the familiar voice fully brought him to himself.

"Shove the package with the pollen under her nose and then run without looking back."

And that was what he did. The sound of the Scarlet Vision sneezing loudly and con-

tinuously followed him for a long time after that.

Soon the corridor grew narrower, leading the Forest Violet to a stone step on the cave wall. The light from many torches brought flashes of all the colors of the rainbow from the facets of the jewels covering the whole of its surface. A piece of dark sky could be seen somewhere above, at unimaginable height. And below, under this very step, some brew was boiling in a tub carved out of the whole rock. Clouds of greenish sharp-smelling steam rose over its surface and that made the Forest Violet feel a bit faint.

The young man barely had time to look around when he heard a rumble behind him. The roof of the passage he just sneaked through fell down. He had no way to go back.

A person with huge head and a mane of tousled curly hair trotted to and fro around the tube. Her head seemed to grow straight out of her shoulders. That was Farda the sorceress. She was energetically stirring her brew with a huge ladle with a bony handle and adding some powders. Her upper limbs,

covered by red hair, seemed to have no bones and ended in long grasping pincers. Nearby in a tall-backed stone armchair the great mage Shrakra was resting, sprawled, his clawed feet stretched out. It looked as if he were sleeping. A sweaty one-eyed puny creature with long ears was cleaning and polishing his claws. Another one, bug-eyed and with similarly long ears, dodged around Farda, handing her pots and pouches. He had an impudent look about him.

"Put more poison, more poison!" the bug-eyed one yelled in a squeaky voice.

"Will you shut up!" the sorceress roared, knocking it on the forehead with her ladle. "Knee-high to a grasshopper, and already giving advice."

"But I want to help!" the bug-eyed creature mumbled, offended, and rubbed its bump.

"There, better try this," Farda said sweetly and, holding his head deftly, poured some brew into the creature's mouth.

The bug-eyed creature squirmed and kicked, but all in vain: it still swallowed the brew. Its hairy grey face wrinkled and grew

black, and it fell down at the feel of the great potion-maker, his crooked paws twitching. Its eyes rolled up and fell off and it shed the hair from its face and back.

"Very bad," Farda mumbled to herself, looking at the result. "Not all the hair has shed."

"My darling baldy," the sorceress whispered lovingly and gave a brief kiss on the back of the bug-eyed creature which was lying there with no traces of life.

Something flashed in the muddy green eyes of the poor creature, and it moved.

"Here, look in the mirror!" the sorceress squeaked, flailing her pincers about in excitement. "Such a pretty, pretty look."

Farda stuck a mirror right into the bug-eyed one's mangy face.

"Oh, you destroyed my wonderful fur," it moaned. "And my ears, my lovely pink ears."

"You're such an idiot," Farda said playfully and took off her fluffy hairpiece, opening her shiny bald knobby head. "Many already lost their heads because of this perfect form."

"But I don't wanna!" the bug-eyed creature squeaked rebelliously.

"I'll give you 'Don't wanna'," Farda snarled.

She screwed coquettishly her nose, round and black as an olive, rouged her flabby cheeks and her lips. Her eyebrows, which looked like huge fuzzy caterpillars, at times rose up and then went down, covering small indented beady eyes.

"Well, darling," Farda said to herself, without taking her eyes off her mirror, "time to dress up: the guests are coming. My clothes, my lovely clothes! Hey, One-Eye, if you overlook any froth, I'll feed you to the tegas."

Having thrown a handful of fangs and some bits of a rattler yangala's skin into the boiling brew, the sorceress gave herself up to the pleasure of spending hours changing clothes before the mirror. Even an earthquake couldn't tear her away from this.

Two spitting glatun worms held the mirror on two sides with their froglike little paws.

Out of the tips of their flattened tails they

squeezed out drops of slime on the sorceress's bald head, carefully rubbing it into her skin.

Sprawling in an armchair wide enough to fit her bloated body, Farda was moaning quietly with pleasure.

Two young toothless tegas the sorceress took in sat on the back of her chair licking her bald head clean and shiny with their rough black tongues. The bug-eyed creature at the same time rushed to and fro like a shuttle, bringing her more and more baubles, mirrors, bracelets, rings, several strings of beads made out of the teeth of destroyed animals, aliens from other worlds and young byakas.

A narrow slip-cover embroidered with jewels and adorned with a fan on its end was with some difficulty slipped onto the sorceress's long hairless tail. Her shining robe made of the skins of poor fintures tingled with every movement, since it was trimmed with little bells. It took many whims and many beatings of the poor servants to choose a hat. The final choice was a velvet hat with fairly narrow brim and voile. Elegant slippers with

high golden heels gave the finishing touch to the ensemble.

"Here, darling, you're just lovely," Farda said, smacking her lips, posing before the mirror.

"I don't hear anything!" she yelled threateningly.

"Just lovely, just lovely," the frightened servants squeaked in a chorus.

Her shiny tail with the fan wide open floated behind her head. The sorceress threw a lightning look to the tub with the steamy brew. The boiling stopped. The sorcerous brew was ready for use.

SHRAKRA'S PLAN

Meanwhile the Forest Violet lay on top of the ledge of the cave wall; he was listening with bated breath. He understood that he had to find out what was the plan of the evil sorcerers and to find his way out of the trap.

Limping, Farda approached the Black Hole mage and, kissing his cheek, squeaked:

"Well, uncle, aren't you proud of your little darling?"

"What do you want for setting me free?" he croaked.

"To become the ruler of Navrus! And of all the byaks!" the sorceress whispered. "It's not too much for the freedom of the Great Shrakra."

"The capital of the Tresk star is quite enough for such a clever and pretty girl," the mage answered, chuckling. "But you'll have to work for it."

"And I also want a prince, a pretty prince!" the sorceress whined.

"And a prince too, of course," Shrakra said, nodding at the mirror. "Look!"

A silhouette appeared in the violet haze of the mirror, and then it became clearer. That was prince Peapea. He had a sword in his hand, with which he furiously hacked branches and buds off rampant rose bushes.

"What a reckless pretty man! I like him," Farda exclaimed. "But how will he take the crown without an army?"

"He'll lead the chvak tribes, they will capture Navrus and enslave the byaks," the mage explained. "He dreams of retaking the throne from byak Shabur, this self-enam-

oured poet fool. The prince lost more than a wish to me. See, this is his soul — take it!”

Shrakra pointed at the stone table where a golden nut gleamed in a crystal flask.

“The more souls I ruin, the stronger I become. But to fight the berguts and take the Shan-Shara ring from their goddess I have to steal the souls of everything living on the Tresk Star, with your help, of course. And when the ring will shine on my claw again, I will rule the Universe.”

Shrakra’s eyes were full of yellow flame, a bump grew out on his forehead because of strain, and his tuft of copper hair stood on its end. With every movement of the mage sparks flew off him.

“Look!” the sorcerer exclaimed. “They will tell the prince my wish right now.”

The sorceress stared avidly into the mirror with her unblinking snake eyes.

Peapea was still furiously chopping the rose bushes with his sword. Suddenly a giant tega appeared in front of him and, his bald head inclined in a formal bow, gave the prince a scroll. With trembling hands the young man unfurled it and read the mes-

sage aloud. “Here is my wish: lead the chvak tribes and take what is yours by right — the city of Navrus, the capital of the Tresk Star.”

“Hurrah!” the prince exclaimed, kissing the scroll. “Oh Shrakra, I have been waiting so long for this moment! Tell him I will fulfill his wish at any cost. And I’ll do it with all my pleasure. Long live great mage Shrakra! Let him send the chvaks as soon as possible, and we will destroy everyone who tries to obstruct us.”

Full of sudden emotions, the prince jumped up and ran into the thick of the forest, breaking and destroying everything on his way.

Struck by everything she had seen, the sorceress stood still looking into the mirror.

“You’re a genius of darkness, Uncle! What a fine work!”

“And now look what I will do with his soul,” Shrakra said and took the glove off his single clawed paw, using his teeth.

Then he pointed his paw towards the crystal flask where the starry soul of prince Peapea was struggling fitfully.

A predatory-looking eye opened in the

sorcerer's paw. It seemed as if the cold and bottomless darkness of the Black Hole itself was looking out of it, searching for a new victim. A muddy-purple ray slid over the crystal surface of the flask, lighting the suddenly frozen little star. It flashed and turned into a transparent curly little toddler. She cried, drying her tears with plump little fists, and stretched out her hands, encountering an impassable barrier everywhere.

"What a blinding sight!" the sorceress exclaimed. "She's so defenceless and so pure!"

"Every newborn has such a soul, but later people start treating it like a worn out old thing. They put it into a dirty dark corner and forget about it. And I pick it up. And suck out their whole energy, using it to feed and to gather my power," Shrakra said. "All right, that's enough for now."

The eye in the sorcerer's paw closed.

The toddler flashed brightly and turned back into a star. The sorceress helped Shrakra to put the glove onto his clawed paw.

Suddenly stones started falling down from above. The tegas' guttural yells could be heard; some desperate fight was definite-

ly taking place up there. The mage and the sorceress leaned to look at the mirror, which was only showing dim shadows flitting here and there. The sorceress slapped the mirror surface impatiently, and they immediately got a clear picture. Yelling furiously, two tegas attacked a slim young man, trying to grip him and to throw him into abyss. A tandorian dagger was flashing like a lightning in his hand.

He contrived to take off one tega's head and another one's wing. Two bodies fell like stones down into the abyss where the subterranean current roared, shuddering in the wild whirlpool.

"We were overheard!" the black mage and the sorceress exclaimed together.

"I know him! It's Forest Violet!" Shrakra croaked. "Kill him, Farda!"

The sorceress whistled so loudly that the walls shook. The flock of tegas, eyes shining, attacked the young man who stood proudly on the ledge, clearly wishing to sell his life dearly.

"In a minute they will be taking out his heart," Farda said, giggling.

But strangely, more and more cut heads and ugly bodies were falling into abyss. The young warrior fought recklessly, since he had nowhere to retreat.

"Your minute's already up," Shrakra croaked. "Give me the boreholer; I want to have some fun. You know, I used to be a good shot."

A long shiny tube appeared in the mage's paw, and he started taking aim.

Suddenly Forest Violet heard a familiar voice somewhere behind his back: "Jump into the abyss! Jump!"

'No, that's too scary, I'd better perish here,' the young man hardly had the time to word his thought when he got such a push below his back that with a surprised yell he fell, turning in the air, into the roaring abyss.

Shrakra had no time to shoot.

"That's the end of him," the sorceress squeaked. "There's no way out of this abyss."

Suddenly the mage grew paler, and the yellow light in his eyes grew brighter. He said:

"No guests will be coming; the chvaks started a bloody strife. I have to be there. Let

them slaughter each other for now, and then I'll reconcile them by pouring the sorcerous brew into their hungry throats. Tell the tegas to take as much of it as they can. I think the chvaks will like it. While I'm away, start working on Navrus. Initiate rumors about the imminent arrival of the true ruler, prince Peapea. Think about how to get rid of bek Shabur and his heirs. Send your most cunning, foul and ruthless helpers to the capital. Don't spare any keshes!"

Shrakra attached the boreholer to his belt.

"See you soon, my darling."

He spread his huge dark blue wings and hurried up, to an uneven opening in the rock through which several stars were shining on the black sky. The flock of tegas followed him with joyous guttural cries. In their clawed feet they held tightly the leather caskets full of the sorcerous brew.

The evil, hungry and greedy, flew out of the Scarlet Visions Rock, quickly spreading through the Tresk star territory.

FOREST VIOLET IN THE GOLDEN FERIKS' COUNTRY

The hissing current of the subterranean river brought Forest Violet to the other side of the Bamburian Mountains. It's hard to say how he managed to stay afloat and did not drown. The powerful river carried many things on its surface: tree trunks, bits of fire wood, everything the hungry whirlpool sucked in. On one of these bits of wood the young man lay flat on his back with his arms spread wide, deeply unconscious but still clenching the tandorian dagger in his fist.

All the endless lands beyond the Bam-

burian Mountains, crossed by valleys overgrown with thick forests, belonged to the half-wild and belligerent chvak tribes. The river wound through the territory controlled by the unruly chvak-marak tribe and then met the Violet Dreams Sea.

The mouth of the river was near a narrow rocky strip connecting a huge peninsula with the chvaks' lands. Giant statues on both sides of the peninsula protected it from winds. In their stone hands the statues held cups made out of a golden metal. The fire lit in those cups was reflected in their impassive faces turned towards the Shivamba Star. The isthmus was constantly covered by violet fog which seemed to keep the mysteries of the rocky peninsula.

The golden feriks' tribe lived there. Their arrival to the Tresk Star was surrounded by legends and riddles. They rarely visited the Universe Fair. At times they were seen browsing pieces of old statuettes or dark glass vessels at antique shops. No one knew what they were looking for. These wanderers never bought weapons, and everyone knew the golden keshes did not matter much for

them. Their tribe took no part in fights and wars; it was said that killing was forbidden by their laws. They made no difference between sentient beings and animals, and ate only fruit and vegetables. The little byaks, however, followed them everywhere, and the strangers permitted every whim of these little ruffians. It was quite usual to see a tall lean ferik with three or four joyously yelling byaks sitting on him. The tiny tots held presents from feriks: trinkets, animal figurines, pouches with dried sweets. Feriks couldn't stand tears, especially children's tears. The byak mothers from all the Navrus brought their children to them if they fell ill. The worst disease left a sufferer's body after the touch of a ferik's hot and dry palm. The faces of the strangers were full of bliss and calmness; they did not know anger and annoyance.

Once, though, some young roughs from the Fat Navel's gang tried to tear a hoop made of golden metal with three black crystals off a ferik's head. Surprise and anger flashed in the alien's radiant eyes. Lightnings flashed from the black crystal. In the next moment the young bandits fell on all fours, howling

like dogs, and then, squealing, ran off to the city's dirtiest alleyways. Long after that those bow-legged bandits could be seen, dirty, hungry and hirsute, running around with wild dogs. Everyone called them Dog Byaks. Then finally they disappeared somewhere.

After that no one tried to offend or hurt the strange aliens.

It was said that they were sorcerers from another, unfamiliar world. People feared them and tried to stay away.

At times the feriks made some melodic sounds. The tiny byak tots understood them without words; that was a mystery too. Every ten or fifteen years the golden feriks appeared at the fair, coming out of a fluffy violet cloud. After wandering several hours among the stands of the fair, they suddenly got off the ground, flying towards the violet cloud, and seemed to have sunk into it. The cloud threw out some blinding rays and then at once disappeared. People called them flying sorcerers. Bek Shabur once said about them at the meeting of his associates: "They are very strange, but useful, and they do not try to extort anything. There should be more

such sorcerers." He gave a secret order to Shirpa and Garmut to have the flying sorcerers left alone.

The great friends of the golden feriks were the long-legged jumping leyfs. They were impossible to find during the day: they faded into the colors of objects surrounding them. By night, though, their smooth skins were luminous. Those curious and lively creatures loved to play tag. From outside it looked as if someone started fireworks out of bright green jumping fires over the rocks of the peninsula.

Almost weightless silver horns that looked like delicate crowns decorated their gracious heads set on slim necks. In the leyfs' hooves the green crystal originated, which gave to the creatures power and long life. Twice a year the influence of Shivamba, the star of quiet sadness, on the Tresk Star was so strong that the sea had to move back. The isthmus, impassable just the day before because of the sharp spikes of the rock, during low tide grew wider thanks to a smooth narrow strip of orange sand which was now in the open.

And then it happened, the thing that even the initiated ferik wizards did not try to re-search. The giant ray shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow fell from the Shivamba Star into the center of the isthmus of a small seashore country. Under this ray the leyfs became gentler, and small shiny dots appeared over their horn crowns. Drops from those dots seeped down into the hollow of their crowns, filling them. That was the sky nectar. Moving carefully out of the circle, the leyfs poured the luminous liquid into golden vessels which were carefully held by the loveliest girls of the golden feriks' tribe.

The sky nectar was the only thing keeping the noble tribe of alien giants from dying out. So the close attention with which they surrounded the young and tireless jumpers was quite understandable. During the low tide the light big-eyed leyfs could get so involved in playing that they wouldn't notice getting to the other side of the isthmus.

There, in the tall lush grass, their predatory eyes glinting, they were ambushed by the chvaks-maraks. Made out of unbreakable sinews, ruthless and lightning fast,

they waited patiently for the leyf that fell behind.

They valued everything in this being: the color-changing skin, the horn crown, but the hooves were most precious of all. They contained green crystal which later got polished and made into amulets. The chvaks believed that the possessor of such an amulet held almost fantastic powers; he was invulnerable even to a dagger or arrow poisoned with uch poison; he grew ten times stronger and became fearless. It's evident why each chvak-marak dreamed of catching at least one leyf. A couple of hooves, and no more troubles for the rest of your life. The leyfs were two-legged cloven-footed beings.

It so happened that during the night when the leyfs, having poured the sky nectar into the offered cups, moved in easy jumps along the sand bar to keep playing, Forest Violet jumped off a tree root on the shore of the mouth of the river. He felt great; he just couldn't understand where he was and who he was. The inborn gift to feel acutely every vibration and the whole atmosphere around him told him that the air was full of danger.

Today the chvaks were especially lucky; they managed to ensnare the whole flock away from the isthmus and, having surrounded them, were capturing them using a lasso. The attack was led by the chvak-marak lord, the ruthless and temperamental Molka. His round green eyes were alit with excitement, his short smooth fur stood on its end.

Seeing how the savages were cruelly killing the noble and timid beings, the Forest Violet quickly sneaked towards the hill where the leader of the chvak-maraks stood. There was no time — the leyfs were dying. A lightning-fast movement, and the arrow sent by the young warrior's steady hand hit the back of Molka's head. Unconscious, he fell down on top of the hill. Some ten arrows more whizzed through the air, catching the hateful target. Then, picking up the dropped torch which had been just recently used by chvak-maraks to entrap the curious leyfs, Forest Violet set off quickly towards the isthmus as if some force was leading him there.

Instantly recognizing the young man as their savior, the leyf flock followed him with fast leaps. Meanwhile the tide started. Only

a very narrow violet strip of sand was still free. The Forest Violet never ran so fast in his whole life. And then he was already on the saving isthmus, waving the torch about, calling the leyfs to him. The arrows with silicone points whizzed very near him. One of them did pierce his shoulder. The young man managed to keep his balance and went on waving the torch until the last of the leyfs passed him in a sweeping jump. And then the violet fog covered the isthmus with an impenetrable curtain, and the sea covered the sand bar. Forest Violet, however, did not see any of this. His unconscious body was being carefully carried away by the ferik giants.

Feriks, being skillful healers, took no time in healing Forest Violet's shoulder. They quickly appreciated the pure soul of the fearless warrior and decided to share some of their secrets with him, realizing that he would use them wisely for the good of all the living.

Zhar the wizard became the one to teach the young man. It was difficult to say just how old he was: maybe five or six hundred years. He was considered to be a middle-aged ferik.

His skin was still golden and silky. The wizard taught the young man to drink the sky nectar in the morning, which made the body weightless and strong. During the nights they worked to grasp the complexities of the labyrinths of constellations, and during the day swam and dived. The more of the sky nectar the young man drank, the sharper his inner hearing became. One day Forest Violet wouldn't have to talk with Zhar using gestures. His brain would be able to catch and understand a thought sent to him from the farthest corner of the isthmus.

His wizard teacher told him a legend, according to which about ten or twenty thousand years before a tribe of noble giants had lived on the Shivamba Star. They reached such a level of development of their bodies and souls that they could freely move through space, bringing the sparks of wisdom and knowledge to the farthest corners of the Universe.

And then the trouble came. On the farthest continent of the planet, in the inapproachable mountains a tribe of black narrow-eyed dwarves landed in their steel

flying castles. Soon they occupied the entire continent. The noble and kind giants retreated further and further without fighting. The cunning narrow-eyed dwarves did everything to destroy them. The cities were destructed by meteor showers. Storms and diseases killed off the giants. And even then they doubted whether to use their power as a weapon against the occupiers. When they possessed only a small piece of land, an island with statues and libraries, the repositories of sacred knowledge, the decision was finally taken. But it was too late. Waves of wily and avaricious creatures attacked the island from the air and from the sea. Hundreds and thousands of those mindless creatures turned wild and crazy by the power of the dwarves' order, led by their rage and bloodlust. Hordes of rampant monsters wandered through the island like fiery lava, destroying everything alive.

At the council of the wizards a decision was taken to leave the planet. So the giants disappeared, after having lowered their island to the bottom of the ocean. Most of them came to the Tresk Star. Dozens of thousands

of years deprived them of their unique talent to move in space at any distance. They kept trying to get this ability back.

The cave of luminescent hieroglyphs told them that they would regain this lost gift on Shivamba only, and that the way would be shown to them by a creature from a worthless and carefree tribe but on condition that one of the feriks would do at least one heroic act to protect the suffering.

The golden feriks realized that it wasn't mere accident that had brought the brave youth to them. Fate had trials in store for them. Meanwhile time went on. The memories of Forest Violet did not come back. He still did not know who he was and where his motherland was. The wise giants did not hurry to share with him the mystery of his origins. Forest Violet's teacher, a most clever initiated mage, did everything he could so that the young man would possess all the mysteries as soon as he could. The wise giants saw what a huge cloud of evil hung at the borders of Byakundia. At any moment the all-devouring rain could pour on the heads of the carefree little slatterns. And then a

wave of wild chvaks would follow into their country. That was why the golden feriks saw their own deliverance in saving Navrus and all the Byakundia.

Once, playing tag with the leyfs, Forest Violet came to the farthest area of the peninsula, covered by white polished rocks. Hiding from his lively and untiring pursuers, he started jumping from rock to rock and suddenly, to his own surprise, managed to fly.

An insistent inner voice told him to rise higher, to the top of the highest rock. There Forest Violet saw an oval entrance decorated by magical signs. Then an endless gallery of white stone columns opened before him. His eyes filled with unusually bright and warm light. The young man flew so fast that he had no time to get afraid before he saw its source. Before him, dressed in robes of shining gold, her palms open, a tall and slender woman was standing. Warmth and love poured out of her eyes, piercing the young man. The space around him seemed to be filled by melodic sounds of hundreds of voices. Forest Violet felt the wave of heat in his breast, and then he heard another singing voice.

That was his soul singing, first quietly and then more and more bravely. Young girls appeared in the niches behind the goddess's back. Having dressed Forest Violet in white, they stopped behind his back. Forest Violet heard the goddess's bright and sonorous voice in his mind:

"You saved the tribe of carefree leyf jumpers and by this you rendered an invaluable service to all of us. We disclosed many secrets to you; and finally you flew. Your power is huge. Your body grew light and invulnerable. You learned to drink the sky nectar and are able to obtain him yourself. But remember, you can use the gift we gave you out of gratitude only for the good. We'll grant your request. And now wait for your time. It hasn't come yet. Good-bye."

Forest Violet came to himself on the sea shore. A band of golden metal with three black crystals sat tightly on his head.

DISTURBANCE

Arriving to the chvak country with a flock of tegas, Shrakra held a feast in honor of the leaders of all the tribes populating the vastness beyond the Bamburian Mountains. Many fires were burning around the giant hill on top of which the mage's tent stood, peaked and decorated with black leather. The heady manchaga frothed in the cauldrons, spreading an intoxicating aroma. Flayed souls of pims, kvaks, and perls were being charbroiled on spits. Though the bloody discord stopped, the leaders of the tribes arrived accompanied by bodyguards armed to their teeth, slaves in harness dragging the carts and concubines. Shrakra invited the most powerful leaders of chvak

maraks, chvak dyaks and chvak kulaks to his tent. Others, less noble, were seated on spread animal skins around the tent.

The feast went on for several weeks. The guests drank amazing amounts of intoxicate manchaga, whole flocks of various animals were killed and roasted. Shrakra spared no expense. Leather pouches full of golden keshes and shiny jewels, metal weapons and precious fabrics came to the possession of the chvak chiefs. The cunning tegas kept adding to the cups of the feasting chiefs the brew from leather caskets prepared by Farda the sorceress precisely for this. The idea of conquering and robbing Navrus was met with yells of approval. Some of the chiefs tried to refuse for some reason, but those were carried away by tegas and drowned in the nearby lake. A treaty written on a huge parchment was signed in blood by the chiefs present. Scarlet crosses seemed aflame on the ancient parchment; of course the chvaks weren't literate. According to Shrakra's plan the united tribes should soon cross the Bamburian Mountains. Once the tador smiths were enslaved, they could start preparing for the

invasion of Byakundia. The chvaks would be led through the impassable wilderness and the dangerous areas of the Hundred Singing Falls by prince Peapea. Acknowledged as their supreme chief, he would lead their march for Navrus. The chvaks, used to military cunning, understood that with his help their task would be significantly easier. And once the capital was in their claws... well, they'd see who'd be sitting on the throne.

A waterfall of blood rushed through Bamburian Mountains. In three winding motley files the chvaks invaded the tador smiths' country through mountainous rocky passages. The nature here was bountiful with its gifts: trees with branches bent under the load of fruit bursting with juice, unimaginable vegetables, and bushes covered in berries. The giant trees in the forest seemed to hold up the sky with their crowns. A band of ten or fifteen fully armed warriors could find refuge in the hollow of the trunk of a medium-sized tree. You could throw a dart or a lance almost without taking aim, and in several moments a flayed carcass of a swift-footed gayn would be

roasting over a fire. The clear creeks, transparent lakes and waterfalls were teeming with fish and birds.

In a short time the caves where dozens of generations of tandors had worked on their craft were conquered by the chvaks.

The march to Navrus required an enormous amount of weapons. Night and day the once free masters, now chained, worked with their hammers, preparing swords and daggers, arrow-heads and lance points, helmets and shields. The punishment for the smallest disobedience was death in agony.

Prince Peapea was bursting with pride. Ten tribe leaders came to visit him, galloping on temperamental fire-eyes kardamahs, and, bending their knee, swore their fealty to him. The once cozy quiet house was now full of hairy muscular creatures in horn helmets with bright feathers and with metallic rings on their limbs. Scout parties of five or six chvaks were already sneaking around on the borders of Byakundia, kidnapping peaceful byaks. The conquerors needed guides, carrier slaves and builders of assault machines.

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IN NAVRUS

While the great mage of the Black Hole was occupied by preparing the chvaks for the invasion, life in Navrus went on as usual. Everyone in the capital kept talking about the recently opened tavern called My Sweet Midget. It was owned by the incomparable black-eyed foreigner Hai Lai. Everything in that tavern was unusual: foreign dishes, intoxicating drinks, sharp-tasting sauces and the maddening green straws. At the low tables covered by animal skins and in cozy cabins you could meet noble byaks from bek Shabur's inner circle, guard officers, rich money-changers, gang leaders, poets and actors. Fresh gossip kept floating around, spiced by a mug of strongest viscous mandra. Around midnight the tavern was usually visited by a plump byak in a golden half-mask, accompanied by bodyguards recognizable to every street dog in Navrus. Of course everyone recognized Shabur and his entourage, but nobody let that show. The noble "stranger" loved everything mysterious and unusual so he changed clothes each time, trying not to be

recognized. His bodyguards, Grey Lightning and Proon, weren't happy about this but had no chance for objections. Their master was a great one for such fantasies, a connoisseur of everything beautiful and a person whose actions often couldn't be predicted. So his life bodyguards took all the difficulties of their service with great dignity and courage. This time their adored master ordered them to put on scarlet jackets with golden stars, red fezzes with tassels and masks of the same color. And, inevitably, splendid false mustaches. A rumor was started beforehand about a visit of a purok delegation to the fashionable tavern.

The guests of honor were seated in a cabin in front of the small and well-lit scene. Some tipsy poet byak jumped on the table and read a touching ode in honor of bek Shabur. The guests applauded him until someone finally dragged him off the table.

"What a rascal — now his career is provided for," the other byaks whispered enviously among themselves.

"They love me so," the bek thought tenderly, and whispered to the Grey Lightning:

"Tomorrow give a pouch of keshes to that poet. The poet byaks are usually poor, but they love to have some fun as well as anyone. And include the ode in the monthly state roll collection. Just don't tell him who sent him the gift."

He was impatiently expecting the entrance of the incomparable one. According to the reports of Shirpa detectives, the flamboyant foreigner arrived on her own ship from the faraway island of Paf and at once turned out to be a great success among the worldly inhabitants of the capital. A veritable multitude of talents was hidden in this small plump body: a dancer, a soothsayer, a storyteller. They said that the bek was seriously smitten with her; people were very understanding about this, realizing that the person of such standing needs such things to recover his energy for state matters. Of course, any wrong word could make the gossip lose his position or, in the worst case, to be exiled for five or six years to the rocky and distant Blue Dream Island.

Finally Hai Lai the dancer was carried on a shiny tray to the scene lit by torches.

Her golden adornment sparkling, she was shining like some foreign butterfly and pounding her tambourine. Her audience loved it. The bek, forgetting himself for a moment, yelled "Bravo!" and applauded loudly. Then she demonstrated her trick. The person ready to take part in it was seated on a low bench in the middle of the scene. A pale pink head of a giant worm with protruding unblinking eyes appeared from the opened hatch at his feet. Hai Lai walked round it on her toes, whispering something. Then the giant maw opened and the byak which was the subject of this experiment walked into it, his knees trembling. The worm swallowed with deep bubbling sounds. The magician's two assistants, Bug-Eye and One-Eye, were running around the room with trays in their paws, yelling happily:

"Whoever pays most, can order Nyam-Nyak spit that brave out!"

Bek Shabur liked that trick most of all.

Beckoning Bug-Eye one to himself, he threw a heavy pouch full of keshes to his tray and, since there were no competitors, ordered in a ringing voice:

“Spit him out at once!”

There was a clapping sound a bit like the one that a peg makes when shooting out of a casket of mandra which got hard. Accompanied by everyone’s laughter, the byak covered in slaver flew out of the worm’s maw, tumbling through the air. It took a long time to wash him and make him come to himself.

Then for a pile of keshes Hai Lai offered to change the appearance of any byak. Finally they found a candidate; that was byak Shrumpomboraha, a bon vivant well known in the city who was heavily in debt. He had nothing to lose and wanted very much to receive a pouch of keshes for several moments of torment and shame. The assistants made Shrumpomboraha, who was casting worried glances around, kneel in the centre of the scene and hold his eyes firmly closed.

“Most respected audience,” Hai Lai said, bowing deeply. “A very dangerous trick and a unique experiment, turning a byak into a jumping long-tailed myak!”

She opened the byak’s mouth smartly and poured greenish evil-smelling liquid into it. Everyone froze. Before their very eyes

the byak’s smooth face got covered by dark purple fur, his eyes turned rounder, he grew a tail and started miaowing. Pushing the assistants away, his eyes flashing, he suddenly jumped to the nearby table, tearing off the tablecloth with all the tableware. A byak woman screamed hysterically, but after some efforts the panic was stopped.

Suddenly Shirpa and Garmut entered the cabin of the mysterious byak in the golden mask and whispered something into his ear. Then bek Shabur together with his bodyguards left the tavern in a hurry. People started whispering worriedly about the war approaching. Many byaks left the performance following bek Shabur. The transformation trick was disrupted, and Hai Lai was full of indignation. She did not know the details of what happened. Her assistants left the scene after her. They were in such hurry that they forgot to give to the unfortunate victim of the trick the brew which could restore his old looks. The byak myak let out his claws, clutched the promised pouch with two paws and jumped out of the window.

The same night the dimly lit sitting room of the My Sweet Midget tavern held a secret meeting. Shirpa and Garmut, their faces yellow-green with fear, stood, trembling, before Farda the sorceress who was sprawling in an armchair. The crumpled costume of Hai Lai the dancer and her fluffy hairpiece lay at her feet. She had thrown on her robe rather carelessly, so that her round hairy body could be seen under it. Her long tail was tapping nervously on the floor. Bug-Eye and One-Eye were washing her thin paws in a bowl.

"You bastards!" the sorceress screamed. "Why am I the last to know about the invasion of chvaks into Byakundia?"

Her thin tail started slapping mercilessly at the well-fed faces of the chief of bodyguards and of the secret advisor of bek Shabur.

"You want to spend some more time in the skins of animals?" she hissed threateningly. "You did a couple of nasty things and thought it would be enough?"

"Forgive us, mistress!" Shirpa and Garmut yelled in a single voice and fell down on their knees."

"Now listen attentively. You, Shirpa, will

spread a rumor that bek Shabur is a traitor through your loyal byaks. The lawful ruler prince Peapea will soon arrive in Navrus. You, Garmut, will arrest the bek and imprison him in a tower. Until Peapea with the chvaks comes to the capital, the two of you will temporarily rule Navrus. At my signal you will open the city gates to the chvaks. And to deal with the princess I'll send..."

Farda turned her bald head towards a dark corner. She was not shy of people that were close to her.

"One-Ear," she squeaked.

Ferociously grinning, One-Ear appeared from behind a thick screen, moving in a skipping gait.

"I hear and obey, my mistress!" he said between his teeth.

Chain armor covered his wide and muscular chest, a sword clanked on his belt.

"Take some of your cutthroats, come to the Bamburian Mountains and kill off princess Cheena. Only then you will lose your animal skin and become the fighting byak of old."

One-Ear left grinding his teeth.

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“He hadn’t liked that,” Farda giggled.
“You two, get out too.”

Shirpa and Garmut, all sweaty, left the fashionable tavern.

GOLDEN FINGER

The required time passed, and princess Cheena gave birth to a tiny pink-cheeked boy. All the friends and neighbors decided to pay a courtesy visit. Everybody came in or flew in holding presents in their paws and beaks: butterflies with pollen and nectar in baskets, fil-fils with tenderest fluff for pillows, pifs with juicy berries, jariks with diapers and blankets woven from spider’s web. And, of course, the ever-present Greel the sun ray could not miss such an event. He was spinning round on one leg, throwing off sparks and blinding the guests. The white-bearded tandor smiths brought a sword for a present. There were winged beings and some mysterious signs cleverly

embossed on its blade. Pulgors, the underground gnomes, left a clay pot filled with shining jewel stones near the entrance to the hut. Cheena took her baby outside in a transparent diaper. He sent his smile to the sun, the world and creatures surrounding him. His dark brown eyes were full of warmth, love and amusement. Cheena couldn't take her eyes off him.

"What's his name?" everybody was asking.

"I don't yet know," the princess said quietly.

"Look!" Greel exclaimed suddenly. "He's got a golden finger!"

And it was true; everyone could see the baby's plump hand on which the index finger was glittering with golden sparks.

"Golden Finger, Golden Finger!" everybody exclaimed joyously. "That's what his name is!"

"And I! And I! And I will be his godfather!" Greel exclaimed, flying rounds over them.

He kissed the baby on his forehead and his heel with a loud smack and disappeared

with a bright flash. Only his clear voice could be heard, slowly getting quieter:

"Oh, Golden Finger! Golden Finger! That's so splendid! But I'm busy, busy, busy! I'll fly by later."

The baby was not ordinary. He seemed to distinguish all the voices of the world surrounding him. The multicolored butterflies danced the strangest reels over his head. The red-beaked fil-fils sat on the baby's shoulders and knees, cooing gently, as if telling him something. The tireless pim, who had grown to a kind-hearted giant by that time, was carrying the Golden Finger on his back, enjoying the role of a tender nanny.

Once on a hot midday Cheena left home to fetch some water from the Crystal Creek. Coming back, she froze in horror. Her baby was sitting in the middle of the coils of the twenty-meter-long body of a grey puanda, covered by rich shining fur. There were countless grim stories about her ravenous appetite and her ability for lightning-fast attacks. That was Shirsha, the queen of Bam-burian puandas, able to snap an adult pim in half by a single movement of her jaw. Her

almost triangular head with a silver horn on her forehead and long straight whiskers was nestled near the Golden Finger's legs, touching them with her wet black nose.

Her protruding eyes were covered by fluffy eyelashes. The puanda seemed to be deep in sleep. Only her long tasseled ears moved lightly, catching even the slightest whisper of a movement. No, the puanda was not sleeping; something was happening to her. Cheena froze, knowing that her smallest movement might disturb Shirsha and then a tragedy would happen. Out of the corner of her eye the princess could see the giant pim who was lying on his side, paralyzed by the puanda's look. The pil-pils lay with their wings spread and legs stretched up. At times a meter-and-a-half long purple tongue sneaked out of the puanda's maw and licked the bleeding bump in one of the coils of her body. The puanda had a deadly wound. Who could've opposed her? The puandas had no enemies that were equal to them.

And the Golden Finger... The boy had no trace of fear or worry on his face. On

the contrary, he was looking at the wound with all his attention, his little hands moving over it in circles. His finger was alight with blinding golden light, and there was a transparent golden cloud over the baby's head. The movements of the palms of the tiny healer were growing faster and faster. The golden cloud grew, covering the Golden Finger and the puanda with a fiery curtain. The fluffy tail end of the beast, which could still be seen, started to convulse. Then there was a pitiful howl turning into a roar from which the foliage on nearby trees started falling down. Cheena imagined the worst and, unable to stand the strain, lost her consciousness.

The poor mother came to herself from the pim's rough and wide tongue licking her cheeks and forehead. Her dearest Golden Finger was sitting on a stone and holding a razor-sharp broken lance-point in his hands, examining it carefully. Sparks were still running over the puanda's smooth grey fur; she was also watching the deadly tool with her unblinking yellow protruding eyes which held an expression of triumph. She

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seemed to whisper something to her savior. Suddenly she leaned her huge head towards his plump knees, rubbed them with her nose and with a joyous roar jumped up, disappearing in the impassable wildness of the forest. Cheena ran to her son and picked him up.

There was worry in the boy's eyes. He whispered in the ancient landrin language:

"Mommy, Shirsha told me that peril came to Bamburian Mountains. She was seriously wounded by the blood-thirsty chvaks. We have to leave this place quickly. Very soon the chvaks will be here."

Cheena patted the boy's head tenderly.

"All right," she said softly, "we do not have much to gather."

Cheena was not surprised that her three-month-old baby understood the thoughts of the animals, had learned to run, befriended and healed a puanda and started talking in the language of the people of legend. With her woman's intuition she could feel the ancient wisdom in the Golden Finger and was ready to follow his advice blindly.

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THE OATH ON THE TANDOR SWORD

Out of the bushes three pairs of eyes were watching attentively the events on the clearing near the hut. Those were One-Ear and his friends, the most loyal and fearless robber dogs Rag and Pag. Rag leaned his shaggy slope-eared head on a spiked club. The blunt-nosed smooth-furred Pag held a pole-axe between his paws. Chain mail covered their muscular bodies, ready for battle.

"Hey guys, our Cheena grew so pretty!" Rag roared. "And this fearless little one is, of course, her son, the heir of Byakundia."

"Okay, Shirpa tricked us. Peapea is an usurper!" Pag answered grimly. "I'm gonna cut his throat."

'Let me be damned by Matamba and stay as a dog forever,' the One-Ear thought, 'if me and my guys do even an ounce of harm to the baby heir and his mother. We'll save them, and destroy the traitors of Navrus.'

And as soon as One-Ear thought that, he noticed that the baby looked at them intently and beckoned them closer with his golden

finger. An unknown force made the dogs move towards the hill. Their prince, the legitimate heir of Navrus, stood before them, clothed in light golden robes. Acting in accordance with the ritual, the dogs knelt before him and stated that they were ready to give their lives for him. The prince started speaking in a language they did not know, but they understood quite well what he was telling them: they had to give an oath on the sword. They weren't even surprised that their little ruler held a naked two-handed sword so easily. The three put their clawed paws on the blade.

"Blood and loyalty!" they roared in a single voice.

Suddenly the calm of the surrounding forest was disturbed by the chvaks' battle cry.

Bending close to the backs of their mounts, the half wild kardamahs, chvak maraks approached in giant leaps. Kardamahs leaped using their hind paws, and the claws on their front paws were sharpened. In battle they used those as daggers to slash enemies. Hearing their furious cry, Cheena ran out of the hut, hurrying towards the Golden Finger.

Seeing such a tasty prey, the maraks splitted into two groups. One of them changed the direction and hurried towards her.

"Rag, Pag! Save princess Cheena!" the One-Ear roared, taking out the sword. "I'll stay with the heir."

Rag crushed two leading riders with his club. Pag finished off the furiously yelling fallen maraks with his poleaxe. Throwing aside some more maraks, the dogs got to Cheena, guarding her with their bodies, but in the process they got separated from One-Ear. His fur sparkled in the sun, reflecting a dozen maraks who surrounded the hill with the Golden Finger still sitting quietly on the stone. Stamping over the bushes and tearing up the turf with their hooves, squealing and meowing, the main group of attackers moved closer to Rag and Pag who kept fighting them off. The princess threw the pot with jewels under their feet and that held them up for some time.

Then the long axes and short heavy lances of the nomads started whizzing through the air again. Some dozen arrows got caught in the robber dogs' chain mail without causing

them any harm. Their energy seemed inexhaustible. Rag's club got broken; the blade of Pag's poleaxe got bent. They had their daggers left, so they used them. And finally the bloody tangle of scrabbling and roaring bodies got quiet. The dog knights sold their lives dearly. In an instant the maraks' claws caught the princess, she was thrown across a kardamah's saddle and they hurried away in giant leaps.

Perhaps the prey they caught would have been enough for the maraks, but they saw a shining sword on top of the hill. Their greed was stronger than their fear of death. They attacked One-Ear with doubled energy. The sword he used to fight got broken, and the dog took up the two-handed tandorian sword which lay at the Golden Finger's feet. It was clear that maraks had never met with such a weapon before. About a dozen of maraks fell down cut in two at the foot of the hill; but they were stubborn. The nomads fell back, taking their bows, and a cloud of arrows flew towards One-Ear. Perhaps, that would have been the end of him. Surprisingly, though, the arrows weren't reaching their

aim; they caught fire in the air and fell down at his feet. The dog looked back and saw the baby standing up, plump little hands raised. Scarlet light came from his palms, and his eyes were full of tears: his mommy was taken away from him.

Part of the base of the hill on which One-Ear was fighting joined a rock; that was why the attackers could not surround him. The maraks could see that their opponent hung by the skin of his teeth. The fur on his face was matted with blood, an arrow gouged his eye. His chain mail was torn in many places. He stood, swaying, on one paw; the other was numbed from a horrible hit with a club. Getting together and putting out their lances, the nomads attacked with a furious yell to tear apart the hateful dog. Roaring, with bristling fur, his sword raised high over his head, One-Ear was ready for his last battle.

And then it seemed as if a whirlwind rushed over One-Ear's head. That was Shirsha, the queen of grey puandas, throwing herself in a lightning-fast movement from the top of the rock and getting into the middle of the attackers. There was the

cracking of the maraks' breaking skulls, the gnashing of the puanda's daggerlike teeth, and the whizzing of her tail with its sword-like bone feathers. In a few seconds the warriors turned into a bleeding heap of hashed and mauled bodies, and Shirsha coiled her huge flexible body around it. She lifted her head high, hissing victoriously and sticking out her scarlet tongue.

All the strength left One-Ear at the moment when he saw that the heir was safe. The dog fell down unconscious without letting the sword out of his hand.

Sliding towards the top of the hill, Shirsha lowered her head at the Golden Finger's feet. He climbed on her forehead and sat down comfortably, holding her horn with his little hands. The puanda whistled and hurried along the trail of the maraks who had kidnapped Cheena. Six giant grey shadows joined the chase. Those were the puanda males, horrible and all-powerful in their anger.

The nomads were ecstatic after a successful raid. What loot! Kardamahs trotted lazily as if catching their masters' mood.

Of course, half of their band was down, hashed up by those fierce dogs. But they could request tandorian weapons and expensive fabrics from their chief in exchange for the white-skinned beauty and all the shiny stones. The warriors already imagined the flow of intoxicate manchaga to their throats and endless dances round the fire.

Suddenly the kardamahs roared wildly. The grey puandas had finally caught up with their prey.

The monsters' deadly attacks threw the riders off their mounts and they were quickly torn into bits. Some maddened kardamahs ran towards the abyss. One of the warriors still held in his paws the princess's unconscious body. A leap, then another one, and kardamahs carrying the screaming maraks one after another threw themselves into the pink haze of tiniest drops which were rising in waves from the boiling bottom of the Lost Byaks' Abyss.

Shirsha, hurried on by the Golden Finger, was too late. The princess was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly the baby cried out:

"I can see mommy, I can see her! She's be-

ing carried away by shiny winged creatures, and she is transparent now!"

High in the sky over the rocks of the abyss the familiar voice of princess Cheena sounded:

"Don't worry about me, my baby! I am quite all right. One-Ear the dog will be your loyal friend now."

Golden Finger stood on the edge of the abyss in his silvery shirt and kept watching the violet depth of the sky. With one hand he hugged the puanda's supple body, and with the other, smeared his tears over his cheeks. He was still a baby, after all, even though he was a mage baby.

"Don't cry, silly, I'll carry you to your friend," Shirsha hissed. "Your help will soon be needed in Navrus."

THE MEMORIES OF THE ROBBER DOG

The Hundred Singing Falls, washing with their colored jets the rocks of Bamburian Mountains, created the full-flowing Sweet Rains River.

It moved its waters to the south, towards

the lovely city of Navrus, and then further on towards the Scarlet Sea.

A small boat cradled by transparent jets of water slipped quietly downstream. Two runaways, the one-eared dog and Golden Finger, comfortable settled in it.

The silver rays of the huge Shivamba Star danced on the chain mail of the wounded warrior, ran over the handle of the tandorian sword and then finally tangled themselves in the baby's curls. Cradled close to the bandit's chest, swaddled in his cape, he felt warm and safe.

"Sleep, little one," One-Ear growled. "Soon we will be in Navrus, and we'll have a lot of work to do there."

"Please tell me a tale before I go to sleep, One-Ear, only let it be a tale with a happy end," Golden Finger asked quietly.

"A tale?" the bandit snorted. "Let me better tell you a story about how I became a dog."

"Became a dog? So that your fangs, your skin, it's all someone's surface covering?" the baby asked, surprised.

"Yes," One-Ear answered with a short growl. "So, listen carefully and remember."

THE STAR DOG'S STORY

I was born in a small transparent vessel on board of the patrol spacecraft 'Hovering Seagull'.

The fate was kind to me, and a soul flitted into my frail screaming body. Of course, as in vengeance for this unnatural experiment I had a cruel fate awaiting me.

Loved and petted by all the crewmembers, simple and courageous people, I thought that was going to last forever.

Even in danger my floating into any part of the spacecraft made the spacers' hearts beat faster, smoothed out their silent faces and brought a light into their eyes. Now I understand them. Times before they also had a carefree childhood.

They did so many lovely things for me: luminous balls, singing little robots, talking flowers, not natural ones, though. Of course I spent most of the time at the captain's plot. I would hover over the screen like a transparent little ball and spend hours watching stars, planets and galaxies rushing on its surface. Even today I can read star maps without any difficulties and lay any route according to the position of the stars.

Once the captain got an order from the Council of the Wise to change the route and to send 'Hovering Seagull' to the Black Hole area where several merchant ships and three small scouting vessels had disappeared in a short time. Once we were in that area, we started drifting, slowly and carefully studying every inch of space, our ship bristling with deep probes, supercharged lasers and rapid-fire close combat arrays. However, strange things started happening to some of the crewmembers. Two of them jumped into a plasma boiler, turning instantly into steam. Several spacers went to open space and did not return. A rumor appeared that a devilish creature was on board of the ship. The technicians said that they'd seen it around the plasma boiler. It wandered around, looking half like a man, half like a bird. Its claws tapped over the metal floor, its eyes flickered and a fitful bubbling sound came out of its scarlet lips.

The spacers are as superstitious as anyone in a dangerous occupation. Everybody decided that someone cursed the 'Hovering Seagull'. There was talk of evil powers rul-

ing that area. The captain had to call the crew mage-astrologer, and he talked with him for several hours, locked behind the armored door of his cabin.

Then he gave an order for all the senior officers to gather quickly in the chart room. The only exception was for the mage-astrologer, who was a junior officer but had to make a report.

The young man's face was paler than the Uch star. However, before he could say a word, a predatory face with an eagle nose and eyes full of unearthly fire appeared on the screen which took the most part of the chart room's semiovale wall. Those eyes pierced the astrologer as a laser, and he fell at the feet of his colleagues, convulsing wildly. An unimaginably powerful sound filled the space. People were falling on the floor, covering their ears.

They heard frightening laughter, and then the vision disappeared. All the devices stopped functioning. And when the screen lit up again, people noticed fast approaching metal beads on it. An alarm was sounded, but that did not help. Time was lost. With-

out making any shots the 'Hovering Seagull' was boarded by the Black Admiral's fleet. The crewmembers were offered to join the crews of the pirate vessels. Everyone who refused, including our captain, was soldered into capsules and thrown into open space.

I was put in a separate cabin of the flagship. The admiral had a son, and, as fate would have it, we were the same age.

So my adventures continued I still had to live through my adventures, now as a cabin boy on board of the pirate starship."

"Hey, baby," One-Eared Dog said, pausing in his story. "I put you to sleep with my long story."

Golden Finger was sleeping softly, his care-free soul floating in a faraway shining world.

The bandit dog's fine hearing caught the clatter of weapons — people were fighting somewhere nearby. At that moment the current carried the boat around the turn of the river, and a view of the ancient Navrus, old capital of Byakundia, opened before One-Ear.

The Sweet Rains River divided the capital into two parts: the Lower City with its twisty

streets, which was built by Ambal the Honest seven hundred years ago, and the Upper City, green for its gardens, with Azure Dream, the palace of bek Shabur.

Thousands of fires flickered on ancient walls and unassailable towers of the Lower City. The swarm of fires was flickering on the Star Brothers Square, throwing bloody shadows on the prison in the Quiet Solitude Tower. He heard the moans of the wounded, the clatter of weapons, and the triumphal yells of the victors.

One-Ear had no doubt that the armies of the chvaks had invaded the Lower City.

FIRES IN NAVRUS

The boat with the runaways touched the stony shore near the Long Daggers tavern. One-Ear jumped off lightly and slipped towards the heavy door like a grey shadow. He clutched his precious burden, the heir of Navrus who was still sleeping quietly, to his breast.

Even though his wounds troubled him, One-Ear showed no trace of that, as usual.

With an easy and swaggering gait he passed through the whole room and took his place.

A murmur of surprise and approval spread among the dogs present and a smattering of byaks. His torn chain mail and bloody dressing told their own story.

Their leader got into a dangerous mess, but the luck was with him, as usual! What a shining tandorian sword at his side! And a baby in his cape. That's a whole treasure!

"Manchaga for everybody!" One-Ear roared. "Let us drink to our loyal comrades Rag and Pag who died as heroes in battle with chvaks."

And he emptied a huge horn with a single gulp. The dogs and the byaks silently followed his example.

"Well," One-Ear growled to the fat Brod. "Tell me what has been happening in Navrus."

Brod, flattered by this attention, came to the middle of the room, holding a huge hatchet in his hand, and started his story.

BROD'S STORY

About two weeks before the town crier announced on the Star Brothers Square that

bek Shabur was a traitor to Byakundia. He was arrested and put into the Quiet Solitude Tower. It became known that bek used black magic to obtain the throne and secretly harmed the byaks, sending them plague and calamities. And he wrote his poems and songs to make the life of ordinary byaks intolerable. Now all the songs were forbidden and the parchment rolls were burned on the square. Navrus was temporarily under the rule of Shirpa and Garmut. The chief of the bodyguards arrested the bek together with the Fat Navel's flyswatters, since his soldiers refused to follow his order and scattered all over the city. Then they announced that the legitimate heir was prince Peapea who entered the Lower City that very day at the head of the chvak tribes. The savages were still robbing the city.

'They say Shabur renounced the throne and tomorrow prince Peapea will enter the Azure Dream as a new ruler'.

* * *

"That's not true!" a clear and sonorous voice sounded behind the dogs' backs. Ev-

everyone turned to look, and they saw a baby sitting on the bench, swaddled in the folds of One-Ear's cape.

"Bek Shabur did not sign the renunciation, he tore that parchment apart!"

"Hey, One-Ear, who is this brave and wise little boy?" everyone wanted to know.

The leader of the gang came closer to Golden Finger, picked him up carefully and lifted high above his head.

"Here's the real heir of Navrus, son of princess Cheena and grandson of bek Shabur."

Everyone froze, amazed. The boy's body was shining, and his index finger was practically impossible to look at. No one could doubt that this was a miraculous baby sitting in their leader's paws and swinging his legs, that this was their future bek.

"We won't let the impostor win!" One-Ear growled. "We'll throw the chvaks out of Navrus. We'll tear the traitors' throats! Hurrah to bek Shabur and his heir Golden Finger!"

A dozen of people echoed:

"Hurrah to bek Shabur and his heir! Let's tear the throats of chvaks and traitors!"

It was decided to inform the inhabitants

of the Lower City about the betrayal at once. That was the work for the merriest of the byaks, the little drummers. Those spunky little roosters ran quickly through all the streets, drumming at the windows and doors of byak houses. One of them composed a merry little song which everyone repeated,

Silly prince Peapea
Is only able to pee.
Our byak Shabur
Is clever and cool.

The dramatic news at once got round the whole Lower City.

“Let’s leave, let’s leave quickly,” the byaks kept repeating. “Let’s fight the chvaks!” Everyone was hurrying to cross the river over the three stone bridges joining the banks.

The invaders were so sure of their victory that they only posted minimal patrols at the bridges. And since Navrus had been since ancient times famous by its strong liquor, their robberies brought to chvaks a great number of full barrels, caskets and flasks. And, of course, the chvak warriors guarding

the bridges that day could not withstand the temptation of trying some of the foreign liquor. When the robber dogs led by One-Ear burst on the central Singing Water Bridge, they found a group of byaks busily throwing the snoring chvak warriors into the water. And the byaks kept arriving. Soon a flow of runaways hurried over the bridges, moved only by their intent to fight the enemy.

One-Ear was soon joined by officers and soldiers who refused to serve the traitors, volunteer byaks who could handle weapons and a team of flyswatterevs led by Proon, the former bodyguard of the bek. He managed to get away and now brought his friends to help. The flyswatters looked guilty: after all, they did take part in arresting the bek. They swore to get revenge for this trick and to fight down to the last bandit.

The northern end of the Lower City included the Star Brothers Square with princess Cheena’s castle bordering it, the dark mass of the Quiet Solitude Tower, the Crooked Oph Bridge, the houses of the nobles and My Sweet Midget tavern. A fifteen meter high wall with battlements and with giant wings

of wrought gates separated it from the rest of Lower City where the greatest part of the Navrus population lived.

The majority of the chvaks settled on the Star Brothers Square where they were roasting animal carcasses on huge fires. Drinks flowed in a river, making people dizzy. That led to bloody quarrels and wild and unbridled dances.

One-Ear realized that their plans could be discovered at any moment. They needed time to gather strength to move the peaceful inhabitants to the Upper City. He ordered the soldiers to get to the Crooked Oph Bridge as soon as possible and to blow it up. Then the chvaks would only be able to cross the river if they got to the Singing Water Bridge and Hunchback Aga Bridge through the Three Mages Gate which joined both parts of the Lower City. Luckily for the rebels, they weren't guarded, so One-Ear's dogs and volunteer byaks were able to close them without any trouble. The flyswatters headed by Proon were sent to occupy the Hunchback Aga Bridge in case their defenses would be attacked from the south. Some twenty chvaks

they caught, barely able to stand straight, were tied up and imprisoned. The grids of the western gates of the Far Road Tower and the southern gates of the oldest giant tower Lucky Charpenta were lowered quickly. However, no one was planning to defend them; the fate of Navrus hung in the balance at the Three Mages Gate.

An enormous explosion shook the towers and walls of Navrus. The Crooked Oph Bridge was no more. Maddened and sobered chvaks were rushing all over the square, getting under the hooves of the kardamahs. The maraks started an attack of the Three Mages Gate. Before the attackers, its metal parts clacking, a terrible invention of Shrakra the mage was moving. An eight-meter steel turtle made by tandorian master, with a tower on top of its shell and a huge head with battering spikes, started pounding at the gate, destroying the wood and the metal from which the powerful gate was made.

Brave little drummers climbed on top of the gate and whistled and hooted from there, teasing the attackers. Cheel, the small-

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est drummer, made up a song which all their gang took up:

Chvaks are dumb and evil,
Send them to the devil!
Dogs will tear you up
For your nasty trap.

And even though it was a difficult moment, the volunteer byaks and bandit dogs sitting in the ambush behind the gate fell down laughing until it hurt. The last lines were repeated by a powerful chorus:

Dogs will tear you up
For your nasty trap.

A cloud of arrows flew towards the little braves. And then they struck their drums, warning the defenders about the beginning of the assault.

It took only a few hits by the steel turtle's horrid head to break the powerful gate. The first wave of the fierce and savage chvak maraks rushed into the resulting gap. The clatter of weapons, the gnashing of teeth and

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the moans of the wounded — everything mixed in the furious bloody battle.

The invaders did not expect such a stubborn opposition. They encountered a line of warriors dressed from head to toe in armor and chain mail, bristling with shining swords, lances and battle axes. The center of this line was taken by giant dogs in knee-length chain mail and with two-hand swords in their paws. The first attack was repelled. Gnashing their teeth furiously, chvaks carried away their wounded to the whistling and joyous yells of the little drummers.

IN PRINCESS CHEENA'S CASTLE

After bek Shabur was arrested and imprisoned in the Quiet Solitude Tower, Farda the sorceress, known in the city as Hai Lai the dancer, immediately moved to princess Cheena's castle, making it her temporary residence. She ran ragged Shirpa and Garmut's spies who sneaked all over the city collecting the rumors and gossip about recent events. Bug-Eye and One-Eye, transformed by Farda into mangy teenage dogs, became

constant visitors to the fat Brod's tavern where One-Ear's pack usually met. During the nights the young tegas flew into the attics of byaks' houses and listened to their intimate talks. Farda was pleased. Most of the byaks had believed in the story that the bek was a warlock and for the last hundred years kept sending plague and various calamities to Byakundia. The gate for chvaks led by her long-awaited prince opened practically by itself.

The night when One-Ear and Golden Finger arrived secretly in Navrus, on the second floor of the castle Shrakra the mage arranged a feast on the occasion of the united chvak armies entering Navrus. He was sitting at the head of the huge table, on the throne which once belonged to Shabur's grandfather, bek Ambal the Serene. His bottomless eyes were opened wide, and under their scrutiny food got stuck in the throats of his noble byak guests.

The chvak chiefs sprawling in soft armchairs wrapped themselves in brightest fabrics. Priceless weapons seized in Navrus clanked at their belts. Their clawed paws

were loaded with rings. Furry faces were half-covered by unbelievably huge turbans with fluttering sultans made from feathers of foreign birds. The table groaned with glittering goblets, bowls and crystal glasses from which ruby jets of strong liquors poured playfully. The young byak slaves kept bringing them new dishes. Sweet music caressed their ears. Shrakra the mage announced tomorrow's coronation of the lawful heir prince Peapea and his marriage to the incomparable Hai Lai. The young dancer sat near the heir, her almond-shaped eyes, huge like the sea, cast down, and an exciting smile never left her scarlet lips. Shirpa and Garmut, sitting across him, were talking in whispers about the accomplishments about Peapea's future wife loudly enough to be clearly heard by both the prince and Hai Lai. The prince was beyond himself with happiness. Besides his great luck, fate gave him this amazing present, this tender, gentle and exotic being. He could not take his eyes off her. The thing that amazed the prince the most in the incomparable one's costume was the fan that fluttered above the dancer's head. The prince,

who was curious by nature, kept wondering how it worked and where it was attached.

His curiosity was stronger than his politeness, and his hand slipped to her waist, feeling something cold, flexible and narrow there.

"Now that's technology!" the prince thought, amazed.

He was in awe of technical novelties.

'I should ask Hai Lai show me how that works.' But as soon as he thought that, he noticed a thin mangy teenage puppy dressed in a dirty and torn tunic. He pushed through the servants impudently and put his sly bug-eyed face between the backs of the chairs on which the prince and the dancer were sitting. Then he yapped something to the bride in some incomprehensible barbarian language.

"Traitor! I'll flay One-Ear alive!" Hai Lai yawped. However, her scream was drowned out by an explosion of such power that the colorful stained glass, ringing, flew out from the room's window. Shrakra was the first to run out to the balcony, and from there he saw that the Crooked Oph Bridge was no more, the Three Magas Gate was closed tightly and

maddened kardamahs were running about on the square, knocking down and stamping on chvak warriors. The mage instantly realized what was going on: there was a rebellion in the city, and the whole plan was on the brink of failure. At the order of the mage the tribal chief rushed out to bring their warriors to themselves. The merciless and fearless lord Molka was the first to lead his ruffians to the assault of the gates already broken by the giant steel turtle. The night assault brought no success to the attackers. The council of chiefs decided to start the general battle in the morning and to break into Upper City.

THE SECRET WEAPON

First rays of the sun slid over the top of the Quiet Solitude Tower where bek Shabur, pressing closer to the battlements, could not take sad eyes off his city. Those rays lit up the top of princess Cheena's castle where in a shadowy room Shrakra, surrounded by his retinue, gave last orders before the beginning of the battle. They also played around

the spires of the Azure Dream Palace where on one of the balconies fat Brod stood, holding Golden Finger in his arms. But then the morning quiet was broken by the resonant drum-roll which warned the defenders about the beginning of the assault. A terrible roar sounded over the city: the chvaks, enraged by their night failure, ran to attack the Three Mages Gate. Hundreds of arrows rose into the air. Heavy lances whizzed by. A melee started in a narrow passage. Lord Molka and other chiefs waited near the gates, their mounts prancing, and got madder and madder with impatience, sending hundreds of new warriors into the gap. But all was in vain. The pile of defeated chvaks grew higher, and their opponents wouldn't surrender. Only seven from One-Ear's pack were still standing. Wounded, their chainmail torn, they were standing in the middle of the passage shoulder to shoulder, striking the squealing chvaks with their huge shining swords. The officers of bek's guard and volunteer byaks courageously fought off the attacks of the furious savages next to the dogs, but there were too few of them left too. One-Ear tried

to reassure his comrades by inflicting killing blows on the enemy.

"Hold on, guys!" he roared.

The dog knew that on the other side of the bridge the soldiers were quickly building fortifications and giving weapons to city byaks.

Seeing that the furious attacks on the gate all came to nothing, Shrakra climbed the tower of the steel turtle and led it to ram the wall. Clouds of smoke and sparks flew from its steel armor. Rumbling and throwing flame out of its unwieldy head, its whole terrible mechanism creaking, the turtle hit the wall at great speed. There was an awful booming sound. The wall fell down, and the giant machine climbed out on its other side, snorting and throwing pieces of masonry everywhere. And then the chvaks rushed into the resulting gap. The steel turtle crept towards the bridge, gathering speed. Shrakra's plan was clear. Of course he wanted to pass the central bridge quickly and invade the Upper City. One-Ear looked around and realized that if the steel turtle were not stopped next moment, it'd force its way to the bridge, tear

down the fortifications, and that'd be the end of the lovely city of Navrus.

"Follow me, guys!" the dog roared. "Let's squash this tin pot!" Roaring and crushing the chvaks, the dog pack rushed with giant leaps to intercept the hissing steel monster.

"Faster, guys, faster," One-Ear growled.

But no matter how the fast-running dogs hurried, they were too late. Throwing out a jet of flame out of its ugly head, destroying everything alive and clanking with its scaly paws, the steel turtle was walking over the bridge.

The Singing Water Bridge was the only one to have a lifting deck. The heavy forged chains moved by a mechanism in the Tandorian Daggers Tower could move its sides apart, if necessary. However, for the last three hundred years no one touched the levers used for lifting the deck. Shrakra also knew that if the turtle broke the chains, the bridge will be in the chvaks' hands. And that would mean that the road to the heart of Navrus would be open. The mage saw through the sighting slit all the scurry of the tiny byaks who would rather die at the gate of the tower but

not get off the path of the mechanical monster. Shrakra giggled evilly, pressing the lever, increasing the speed. Only several meters remained and it seemed there was no salvation.

Suddenly Cheel, the young street fighter, appeared in the black smoke near the turtle's steel paws. Behind his back his drum hung over his shoulder and he held three small dark brown crackers. He swiftly climbed the carapace and started to approach the tower carefully. The defenders of Navrus almost stopped breathing.

One-Ear instantly realized that it was fire crackers that the brave drummer was holding. Those were used during festivities. They cracked very loudly and let out huge amounts of multicolored smoke. Of course neither Shrakra nor chvak shooters sitting at the gun slit of the turtle tower could see him. Cheel climbed the tower and threw the crackers into the hatch one by one. Clouds of multicolored smoke were coming out of the tower slits. The turtle gave a jolt and sagged, and then, its paws twitching, lost control and lurched, breaking the rails.

“Be careful, Cheel!” One-Ear roared.
 “Jump, jump quickly!”

The young drummer stood on top of the metal tower where he could be seen from everywhere. And then they heard his clear voice. Cheel started singing a line from a forbidden song:

And if a byak is brave,
 He'll put down any knave!

And then he started drumming. He sang and drummed like crazy, and the chvaks' arrows whizzed past his head. People joined his song — on the walls, on the towers, in the whole of Navrus. Dozens of drums started their music. And Cheel kept drumming and singing, his head held high. Spitting out sparks, smoke and fire, the turtle lurched some more. One more moment, and it would fall into the water.

One-Ear and the dogs were fighting near the entrance to the bridge, holding back the chvaks' attacks.

The steel monster, surrounded by clouds of orange smoke, fell down the bridge,

throwing off sparks. Another moment and the river's transparent waters swallowed the roaring mechanism. Some moments later the furious and wet Shrakra the mage came out of the water on one bank, and on the other bank the citizens and the soldiers, yelling excitedly, passed the little brave, perfectly safe, from hands to hands. The chvaks, enraged by another failure, increased the strength of their attack, trying to capture the bridge at any price. The position of the small group of dog bandits, still fighting them off furiously, was hopeless. Bek Shabur paced like a caged animal, watching the battle from the top of the tower prison.

“Lift the deck! Lift the deck!” he yelled, holding his hands together like a trumpet. “What are they waiting for? One-Ear won't hold long!”

Anyone could see that as soon as another dog warrior died another new star, small but bright, lit in the sky over the city. And then One-Ear was alone, and in the sky a new seven-star constellation was shining and sparkling, looking like a sword in its shape.

Finally the byaks in the Tandorian Dag-

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gers Tower, sweaty from their efforts, managed to start up the ancient lifting mechanism. The creaking rusty chains slowly and unwillingly started lifting the deck.

The two-handed sword of the giant dog flashed in the air, parting the waves of the attackers. The deck was lifting oh so very slowly...

"Jump, One-Ear, jump!" the byak defenders yelled, together with Shabur and everyone who were watching the fight.

"Lift it faster! I'll hold them up. Faster!" the dog roared, slashing enemies right and left.

The impatient lord Molka fought his way to the first line to deal with the wounded dog personally. But the lord had scarcely lifted his axe for a blow when he was cut in two by the warrior dog's terrible sword. And the deck rose higher and higher, and now it was clear to everybody: One-Ear, the fearless robber, the favorite of Navrus, was fighting his last fight before their very eyes. Suddenly the dog started singing an old robbers' song, and people on the walls and towers of Navrus took it up.

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We'll be flying down the river,
All my guys and me,
We'll be fighting any foe
For the world to see.
Our luck will keep us fighting,
All my guys and me,
Our swords will flash like lightning,
Just you wait and see...

Spinning his fearsome weapon over his head, with a fierce growl One-Ear leaped into the thick of the enemies. There was screaming from fallen chvaks, whizzing of arms and gnashing of teeth. The surrounded dog kept fighting, slashing, cutting off the chvaks' heads and paws. The ring of enemies around him became tighter. About ten lances struck the chain mail hugging the dog's chest. Another moment and the brave robber would be dead. Suddenly a dark violet cloud hovered over the part of the bridge where One-Ear was fighting. Short lightnings flew out of its depth, hitting the maddening chvaks.

The cloud covered the wounded dog and his dead comrades.

Throwing their weapons away, chvaks

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jumped into water, stamping over each other, hurrying away from the bridge in their panic. Everybody froze, surprised. Throwing out the last lightning, the violet cloud rose, drawing the fallen bodies of One-Ear and his friends into itself, then hovered like a shaggy hat over the top of the Tandor Daggers Tower. There was a horrendous thunder, a bright flash blinded everyone for a while, and when the byaks wiped their eyes, the cloud was not there. On top of the tower, surrounded by three ferik giants, Forest Violet stood, holding the unconscious One-Ear carefully in his arms.

“One-Ear is alive!” Cheel the drummer yelled joyously. “The flying sorcerers are with us!”

One of the feriks waved One-Ear’s sword over his head in a threatening manner. Two others were already helping the small byaks to finish lifting the deck of the bridge, thus separating two banks of the river. The pause that the defenders needed so much finally had come.

Bek Shabur looked, enraptured, at the new bright constellation, and at the same

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time he wiped off involuntary tears and kept repeating, “Heroes, such heroes!” Then he sat down and immediately wrote an edict about renaming the Singing Water Bridge. From that moment on it would be called the Robber Dogs Bridge. That’d be only just, the bek said to himself and signed the edict.

EMMA THE DOG

A southern night fell on the city, bringing a short pause for rest to the defenders of Navrus. The Seven Hero Dogs constellation reflected as a double-edged sword on the pearly surface of the smoothly flowing waters of the great river. The inhabitants of Navrus offered their naïve prayers to the newborn stars shining with purity, intuitively seeing in them their new celestial protectors. The lights from vigilant guards’ torches flashed on the dark shapes of walls and towers of the Upper City. On the Star Brothers Square huge funeral fires were ablaze, devouring the remains of dead chvaks. The kardamahs growled, groups of barbarian warriors patrolling the bank called to one another in

some strange language. A narrow raft cleverly directed by Farda's spies slid noiselessly over the water. Dark shadows one after another crept towards the Long Daggers tavern, almost without touching the pavement. The bug-eyed mangy young dog crept first, a dagger in his paw. The Fat Navel went next, puffing and panting, and after him the most experienced chvak cutthroats. A young tega hovered silently over their heads and showed them the way, his eyes like flashlights.

Seeing that they couldn't take the Upper City at one fell swoop, the sorceress and Shrakra the mage decided to crown prince Peapea on the next day. But the lawful heir Golden Finger had to die that night.

It so happened that besides Emma the dog, her seven puppies and the heir of Navrus there was no one in the tavern. At Golden Finger's request fat Brod had hurried to help carrying the wounded One-Ear to his home. The future heir patiently taught the puppies to walk on their hind paws. The little ones squealed happily, and Golden Finger sang a song. The puppies, holding each other's paws, danced a reel

around him to the song's melody and sang along earnestly. They were old enough to wear identical dungarees their mother had made for them shortly before. The fluffy children put on airs, proud to show their new clothes to their young teacher and friend. Emma looked at them with tenderness, slowly setting the table. The firewood was crackling merrily in the giant fireplace. A brew was bubbling in the kettle, filling the room with an appetizing savor. Emma was waiting for guests. She neatly threw a bundle of firewood into the fire. The spurts of flame went up to the dark throat of the chimney. Somebody screeched and hooted there. Soot and ashes cascaded on the kettle lid. The dog cocked her ears: she thought that the wrought gate squeaked, and some shadows slipped by the window. 'Hmm,' Emma said to herself, 'Uncle Brod usually kicks the gate open. Those must be some intruders.' And as soon as she thought that, she saw a thin dagger blade with which someone was carefully raising the door catch. Emma growled, the fur on the back of her neck bristling, but she had no time to

do anything – the catch was thrown back and the door flung open. The first to rush inside were the bug-eyed pup and the Fat Navel, then cutthroat chvaks and the young tega, scorched and sooted.

“Give us the boy, Emma!” Bug-Eye yapped cheekily. “Or there’ll be trouble, and you have such nice kids.”

“Give up the heir,” Fat Navel grumbled, “and we’ll leave you alone.”

Emma the dog seemed to have grown taller in seconds. Her fur was bristling, and she bared her fangs that bit through steel rods as if those were noodles. Her eyes became bloodshot.

“Hey, Navel,” Emma growled challengingly, “has your brain grown bloated? You ate too much brew at my house and forgot that I brought up the most dangerous ruffians in the whole Navrus. One-Ear will be here soon.”

“Oh Emma, I’m so sorry to tell you,” Bug-Eye giggled, “they are all cut to pieces by our friends, and One-Ear too. There’ll be no one to help you, so give us the boy!”

“You bastard, and here I was wonder-

ing who’s stinking up this room! I should’ve guessed!”

“Enough talking,” Fat Navel growled. “Get the heir of Navrus here.”

“First you deal with me,” Emma answered threateningly, and next moment the fat Brod’s huge hatchet was in her paw.

“Finish her off,” Fat Navel ordered.

But before any of the attackers could move, Emma the dog roared and ran at them.

It was as if a waterfall boiling with fury and indomitable energy fell on the enemies and scattered them around like straw.

Fat Brod and his robber friends were carefully carrying One-Ear when the bug-eyed pup ran past them, squealing, holding the stub of his tail. A tega, lame and plucked half-bald, ran after him.

“Well, well,” Brod snorted, “looks like good old Emma gave uninvited guests a good welcome.”

The only thing left from the chvaks were scraps of fur lying here and there, but Emma was already sweeping them up. She sighed with relief, seeing that she would manage

to get everything back in order before the owner came back.

"Golden Finger, children," Emma called softly, "the supper is cooling, go wash your paws."

Fat Navel with a scratch on his nose was sitting sadly in a corner, tied up. The fluffy pups and Golden Finger looked at the rumpiled bandit with curiosity.

"Mommy, mommy, why did you put this man in the corner?" one of them asked.

"His heart has overgrown with moss," Golden Finger answered instead of Emma.

"And how long will he be sitting there?" the curious pup inquired.

"Until uncle Brod comes home and tears off his ears together with his head," his mother said severely. "Now get to the table!"

But in the end the pups and Golden Finger did not manage to get to the table, since at that moment fat Brod and his friends carried One-Ear in. Everybody started rushing about. They fed the wounded dog and settled him to sleep. The pups surrounded their uncle Brod. Golden Finger asked to repeat for six or seven times the part of the story

where One-Ear and his friends defended the bridge and where Cheel triumphed over the steel turtle and when the new constellation appeared.

Ultimately Brod kept talking and gesturing till morning and became so involved in his role that he was seeing himself at times a brave drummer, at times a courageous robber.

And One-Ear slept so deeply that he, of course, did not hear the picturesque story. He was getting better. His hide was crackling a bit, his joints creaking. He dreamed he was a little boy on some faraway Blue planet, sitting in his father's arms, loved and petted. And he was feeling so calm, afraid of nothing, and the sky was blue, and the sun was shining brightly. And Emma was listening to Brod's story, sitting on the bench quietly, her face in her paw. She couldn't stop crying. She was remembering all seven robbers who got killed. Once they were small homeless puppies who found a home with kind and brave Emma the dog. And once the story ended, Emma asked to show those stars to her. They all came out into the yard and looked at the new constellation for a long time. Suddenly the stars flashed brightly.

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It seemed that they had sent their rays to console and inspire Emma, their foster mother.

So they stood like this, Emma the dog, fat Brod surrounded by fluffy puppies and holding Golden Finger in his arms, and robber dogs, until the sky grew light again.

The second day of defense of glorious city of Navrus had begun.

"Uncle Brod," Golden Finger said in a whiny voice, "please take me to the Tandorian Daggers Tower. I want to win over a steel turtle like Cheel."

"We'll be like robber dogs and we will kill every chvak," the pups decided unanimously.

"No, no, don't you dare," Brod was almost yelling and flailing his arms. "It's very dangerous."

"Then we'll swim the river without asking you, take the Lower City and set bek Shabur free," Golden Finger said challengingly.

"Let's take it, let's take it and set bek Shabur free," the puppies echoed unanimously.

Fat Brod grew thoughtful; this plan did not suit him at all.

"Oh well, nothing for it, just keep close to me," he finally said, grumbling.

Fat Brod was striding solemnly through the twisty paved streets of the surrounded city. Golden Finger, happy, sat on his shoulder like in a wide armchair. Here was Navrus! The puppies were following them, full of dignity. The last one, an adopted pup with bandy paws, led the tied Fat Navel on a string. Little byak kids, beautiful byak women, bold drummers headed by Cheel immediately joined the procession. They whistled, laughed, joked saucily about the unlucky kidnapppers. But, of course, Fat Navel got the most of the ridicule, and it was totally deserved. Cheel started singing merrily:

Poor Fat Navel
Almost in his grave,
Helping chvaks to rob,
Dogs will turn you into blob.

BATTLE OF GIANTS

The headquarters of the defenders of Navrus was located in the ancient and huge Tandorian Daggers Tower, girded by three circles of battlements. After One-Ear's seri-

ous wound it was led by Forest Violet. The giant feriks kept helping their student tirelessly. Zhar the wizard locked himself in the honey tower where, they said, he was working on a secret weapon. He requested that all the sweets of Navrus were sent to him. One couldn't help admiring the patriotism of the byaks who fished out the last sugary ball on a stick or a lolly whistle out of their pockets, not to mention sticky rolls. Barely managing to stifle their sighs of regret, courageous byaks dealt with their passion for sweets and gave them up to the energetic drummers' trays, their hands trembling.

Something kept snapping inside the tower. Clouds of multicolored smoke rose out of the chimney, and everyone could see the smoke getting denser, taking the well-known form of buns covered by sweet-smelling pulp that the people of the city loved so well. And after such an experiment the byak boys would bring from the flat roofs of the city full baskets of hot well-baked tasty things and then give them to the defenders. That way the problem of food was solved. After some time the cloud abruptly changed its color and a

sweet rain fell on the city, followed by a hail of sour-sweet candy.

So, the work on the secret weapon went full on.

Another giant repaired the artillery which consisted of three guns which were last used at the bek Shabur's anniversary. During the test a stone cannon ball was driven into each gun. After the shot two of the guns were torn to pieces and for a long time no one could find the giant ferik. So Forest Violet decided that using cannon balls was too dangerous and offered to use sticky lollipops. The byak artillerymen approved of his idea warmly. The third ferik was working on the draughts and kept asking Cheel for feathers, mica, mother-of-pearl, thin strips of wood and string.

The news about the appearance of the lawful heir of Navrus quickly flew around the city.

"It's your son," Zhar the wizard said to Forest Violet. "Go meet him."

"I have a son!" Forest Violet exclaimed.

And, jumping over ten steps at once, he ran down towards the tower entrance.

Fat Brod was practically swimming over

the sea of city inhabitants, like a giant iceberg. He held a smiling baby high over his head.

"Daddy!" Golden Finger chirped. "I knew I'll meet you in Navrus. And these are my friends, uncle Brod and aunt Emma's pups."

Proudly and carefully the fat man gave Golden Finger over into Forest Violet's arms.

"You are so like your mother," Forest Violet whispered, hugging the child close. "Where is she?"

"Shining beings took her away. She said she was all right there."

"I will definitely find her," Forest Violet said.

As soon as he said those words, somewhere above them from the top of the tower an agitated voice of the soldier on duty sounded:

"Alarm! Tegas in the air!"

Huge shadows flashed overhead, and then rocks started falling on the heads of the inhabitants of the city, thrown by the clawed paws of the sly predators.

The frightened byaks ran every which way. Forest Violet, Golden Finger, Brod and the pups hid in a tower niche. The rocks were breaking roofs, destroying battlements, they turned over the gun. Shrakra and Farda the sorceress were standing on the balcony of princess Cheena's castle. The mage kept sending more tegas with the dangerous and heavy cargo. Some of the predators had their blue meter-long tongues falling out of their jaws because of overstretching, but they still were circling over the Upper City, spreading fear and destruction. It seemed that the defenders' spirit got down.

"Well," Farda screamed, "time for the assault. Send the terrorkiller and that'll be the end of the byaks."

The mage looked over the approaches to the city. It was all going quite well. While the tegas were bombarding the besieged with rocks and diverted their attention, the mage managed to prepare a sudden assault along the Hunchback Aga Bridge. It was guarded by a flyswatterer brigade headed by the bek's bodyguard Proon.

The terrorkiller was a huge machine which

looked a bit like a monster giant. It stood securely on two four-fingered paws. At the levers near the tower's horizontal embrasures Bug-Eye, the sorceress's favorite, was standing frozen. He was waiting for an order.

At the mechanical monster's feet the chosen chvak troops were standing silent, headed by prince Peapea.

"It's time," Shrakra growled through his teeth and gave the sign to start the attack.

Bug-Eye pulled the levers. The machine rumbled, discarded some clouds of smoke behind it and took its first twenty-meter step. Tearing meter-deep holes with its steel claws, the mechanical monster was fast approaching the bridge where a whole brigade of flyswatterers was sleeping carelessly on. The brave bandits' snore could be heard even near the Three Mages Gate. When something thundered over their heads, they sprang up, teeth chattering, and ran towards the attackers with such a yell of horrors that those threw away their weapons and ran every which way. Panic set up. The opposing commanders spent a long time collecting their soldiers to start the battle again. The

bow-legged bandits were the first to realize their advantage. Grabbing the chvaks' left weapons, they returned to the bridge with rich kill. Proon was parading in prince Peapea's cape and helmet, swishing his sword.

Bek Shabur, seeing his favorite's brilliant success, kept repeating: "What tactics, what tactics! He'll be a minister of the military one day!"

The terrorkiller did not drop any speed. This rumbling giant was approaching the closest — and most ancient — Crusty Pie Tower. There a ferik giant with his closest assistants tried to restore a broken cannon. One mechanical claw of the monster was digging into a tower wall. The other threw the cannon together with the soldiers off the top of the tower as if that was a bit of fluff and reached for the ferik. Bug-Eye was overjoyed. Now he'd get revenge for all the mockery, for his tail being cut off. Now he'd bite the ferik in two, destroy the tower and then Farda would give him back his former look of a sweet and plump byak. Bug-Eye pressed the lever some more, but the claw was slow in moving and couldn't catch the ferik who

was agile and jumped well. Bug-Eye yapped angrily into the mouthpiece hanging before his face:

“Hey, you, on the tower, don’t spare any arrows, destroy the ferik! All launchers fire on Tandorian Daggers Tower!”

Cannonballs flew from behind the wrought shoulders of the giant machine. Deadly arrows whizzed out of the sighting splits of its tower head. Shrakra was pleased; the terrorkiller showed all its strength. The wounded ferik managed to avoid the horrendous steel claw, but the mechanical monster seemed invulnerable. On the joints of its paws propellers were rotating at tremendous speed. Their vanes were sharpened like razors.

Behind the terrorkiller’s back a platform was hanging on wrought chains; byak slaves ran back and forth there, incessantly throwing pieces of wood into the furnace. Chvak overseers hurried those unfortunates with their long whips. The steel claws scattered the top of the tower and were tearing out a gap in the wall. Of course, arrows and cannonballs were flying towards the mechani-

cal monster from the neighboring towers. The byak officers were making desperate attempts to set afire the terrorkiller’s paw but they were all falling down, stricken by sharpened vanes. The situation was critical. After several cuffs that Hai Lai gave to the timid general, the prince led chvaks to attack the bridge, a new sword in his hand.

And then, in the heat of the battle, Shrakra noticed three giant shining butterflies, clearly noticeable against the cloudless sea. The butterflies were holding tightly some transparent multicolored iridescent balls. The first butterfly suddenly folded its wings and fell like a stone to intercept the chvak column which had almost reached the bridge.

A transparent drop fell from its paws and hit the middle of the attackers’ column. Thousands of small drops flew every which way among the lines of the attackers, tangling them in sticky threads.

That was rather an obstacle to attacking.

The second butterfly also threw its transparent drop on the chvaks’ heads. The third was increasing its speed and, working its

wings energetically, was hurrying towards the terrorkiller.

Shrakra the mage and Farda the sorceress instantly understood that they were seeing the secret weapon of the defenders of Navrus. They clearly realized that if the butterfly would drop its sticky cargo on the tower of the terrorkiller, the expensive machine the mage was so proud of would stop working.

"Farda!" the mage growled. "Send the tegas at once! Let the birds eat the butterflies."

The fastest and most sharp-sighted tegas hurried to intercept the weightless shining creatures. The predators tried to catch those flying machines by darting ahead unexpectedly. That attempt, however, was unsuccessful. Three brave young drummers led by Cheel were deftly maneuvering the machines. Cheel's weightless mechanism was getting closer and closer to its goal, the growling terrorkiller whose claws scattered half of the tower and the wall. Several tegas kept attacking the nimble flying machines. Suddenly one of them fell down with a pitiful cry, and then another, their wings

stuck together. The snapping from the flying mechanisms became more frequent: the bold drummers were shooting at the attacking tegas from boreholers using sticky sweets instead of bullets. Then some more tegas with their wings stuck fell down into the river, tumbling through the air.

"My birds!" Shrakra was yelling. "My darling birds!"

Meanwhile Cheel and his friends, sitting in their saddles, were turning the threadles faster and faster. The speed of the flying mechanisms was increasing. They started circling over the tower head of the mechanical monster. Cheel tugged the lever, and the transparent drop flashed, parting into hundreds of shining beads, and stuck to the chvak shooters in a sticky web. Then the boreholers made their last snap. The attackers' supplies of bullets and bomb drops had ended. The flying predators didn't wait long for their chance. Their flock much decreased, they hurried to tear up the nimble and weightless machines. With a cry of triumph a tega tore out one machine's wing. Spinning clumsily, the butterfly fell down outside of the city walls. The little

drummer in another machine fell out of his saddle. Several tegas at once were hunting Cheel's machine. Finally one of them managed to tear out its triangular tail.

The machine dipped its nose and started losing altitude. Without hesitation Cheel sent it towards the tower head. There was a sound of sighting splits breaking, and of the chvaks squealing.

After brushing the remains of the shooters off the tower, the butterfly whirled round like a petal and fell into the river with a splash. As it was hitting the tower, Cheel deftly jumped out of his saddle seat and fell onto the platform where the chained byaks were carrying pieces of wood for the boiling furnace of the terrorkiller. After the sticky drop fell on the tower, the chvak overseers left their positions, horrified, and ran away.

In one of the chained slaves the drummer recognized Grey Lightning, the former bodyguard of bek Shabur. With one stroke of his dagger he severed the long chain which bound Grey Lightning.

"Go and set free the others," Grey Lightning whispered and disappeared in the en-

gine room; he knew how do put the heart of the mechanism out of order.

Even though the butterflies had done some serious damage to the terrorkiller, it still growled and worked on making a gap in the wall. Bug-Eye wouldn't leave the levers; he kept yipping into the dangling megaphone:

"Fire, fire, more fire, don't spare firewood, let the launchers fire at the towers!"

Bug-Eye was turning the tower head alternately to the left and to the right; he was quite pleased by the results of the horrible work of his machine. Some more effort and the terrorkiller would be able to get through the gap and enter the city. And then Bug-Eye would show them what an invulnerable steel giant could do.

But at that moment Grey Lightning rushed into the tower. He threw himself at Bug-Eye, pushing him away from the controls. They started rolling on the floor, tearing bits of fur off each other.

Suddenly something creaked, and the tower head started spinning to one side. The speed of this spinning was increasing; the tower moved like a bolt. There was a rumbling sound that kept getting louder.

The tower was torn from its base; turning in the air, it whizzed over the Lower City, and then, gaining altitude, disappeared somewhere in the direction of Bamburian Mountains.

Terrorkiller made some more movements. Its claws went up. The smoke was getting stronger. Sparks were raining from the hole where the tower head had been recently located. Cheel was the first to realize that explosion was imminent.

“Jump, everybody jump!” the young drummer exclaimed and threw himself down.

The byaks followed him, throwing themselves off the hated platform, and then hid wherever they could. A horrible explosion tore apart the giant monster that had brought so many misfortunes.

THE KIDNAPPING OF BEK SHABUR

The golden feriks, Forest Violet, fat Brod, guard officers, the defenders of Navrus — everybody watched the air battle, unable to take their eyes away. And when a horrible explosion tore the giant machine to little pieces, the

city grew full of joyous yells of its defenders. Of course, at such an intense moment no one noticed the absence of Golden Finger. Quietly, on his toes, the boy sneaked out into the terrace of the tower where another butterfly, the invention of a wise ferik, stood ready for the flight, all its four paws a bit bent. The baby got into the saddle and started turning the hand treadles.

It has to be said that the apparatus was very simple in operation. It was enough to press the hand threadles lightly, and it rose into the air. The leg treadles directed the movement of the butterfly to the left, to the right, up and down. Special goggles and a communication helmet covered the young pilot's head, a boreholer with a cylinder stuck out of the holster at his wide belt, and he had special leather gloves on his hand. His costume was completed by a leather jacket and pants with shiny rivets. Of course, those clothes were a bit big for him, but Golden Finger did not want to leave them, since Zhar the wizard once said that the real pilots only fly in uniform. And the baby so much wanted to look like a real pilot. So,

clad in a full pilot's costume, he jumped into the saddle and the sensitive machine got into air easily and flew noiselessly towards the Lower City. The fat Brod's tavern, the blue surface of Sweet Rains River, the battlements of the Lower City, the Star Brothers Square flew under the fluttering wings of the butterfly. To avoid being noticed, the boy decided to fly around the north side of princess Cheena's castle. He moved his right leg slightly, and the machine immediately changed direction. So cool, and so breathtaking! And then there was the dark mass of the Quiet Solitude Tower where his grandfather Shabur was being kept.

For a while the butterfly hovered over the tower, and then it landed at the feet of the surprised bek Shabur.

"Bekie, bekie," a leather doll with protruding glass eyes squeaked, "quick, get into the saddle and let's flow away."

"Bekie?" Shabur repeated in annoyance. He did not approve of undue familiarity.

"I'm your grandson Golden Finger, bekie," the leather doll kept squealing. "Let's get out of here fast, the tegas are sniffing around."

"I have no grandchildren," the bek answered, puzzled.

"If you don't believe me, then look," the leather doll squealed and then tore the helmet and the goggles off his head.

Bek Shabur saw a sweet little face with a cute upturned nose and shining eyes. The bek looked carefully into his own reflection in the cardboard mirror.

'Really a copy of me, especially the nose and the lips,' bek Shabur thought, but still asked the key question:

"What's your mother's name, then?"

"Princess Cheena!" the little boy answered proudly.

"My little boy!" the happy grandfather exclaimed and picked up his brave grandson.

There were no doubts. As soon as the bek sat in the saddle and placed Golden Finger before him, two tegas came whistling and attacked them.

"Bekie!" the little boy said in a commanding tone. "Quick, you turn the treadles so they won't tear our heads off, and I'm going to fight them off."

He whipped the boreholer out of its hol-

ster and, holding it with both hands, shot the approaching tega twice. The sticky candy hit the predator's head and hung in sweet threads on its wings. The predator started wheeling in the air, hit the edge of the tower and stuck to it.

"Great!" the bek exclaimed delightedly, pressing at the hand treadles with all his might.

Even with the additional weight the butterfly rose in the air quite easily.

Everyone stared in surprise at how bek Shabur was kidnapped before the very eyes of the superior forces of the enemy. Shrakra gnashed his teeth, realizing quite well that if by some miracle the bek flies into the Upper City the battle will be almost impossible to win.

Fat Brod was the first to notice the disappearance of Golden Finger. And when Zhar the wizard informed them about the disappearance of the butterfly, Brod realized that it was piloted by his pupil.

"The tegas intercepted the butterfly on the way to the Upper City, they want to destroy them!" Forest Violet exclaimed.

Golden Finger had used all the ammunition and now, together with his grandfather, maneuvered between the attacking tegas. One of those managed to catch a wing with his claws, the other tore out half of the tail. The machine was still moving through the air, but it was quite clear that it was on its last breath. And that would be the end of the good and wise bek Shabur and his fearless heir.

"Kill them, kill them!" Shrakra yelled, beside himself with fury.

"Tear their heads off!" Farda the sorceress screamed.

Holding the boreholer by its muzzle, the bek used it like a club against the screaming tegas. Golden Finger still managed to direct the flying machine. The butterfly kept vibrating left and right, like an autumn leaf in the wind.

"Hold on, bekie, give them hell!" the bek's grandson supported him. "Look out, there's a tega behind you!"

A huge tega fell on bek Shabur with all his weight and tore the boreholer out of his hand. The tegas were already celebrating their victory.

A sweet morcel was coming towards their hungry mouths practically all by itself.

Suddenly a bright sunray lit up in the air above the fighters. Everyone heard a clear and sonorous voice:

“Oh, carousel, such a carousel! And what a butterfly! So lovely!”

A transparent and weightless boy sat on the butterfly’s nose, swinging his legs carelessly.

Thousands of sun rays were dropping from his clothes, face and hands. He raised his shining eyes towards the sky and said dreamily:

“It’s all so unusual here at your place, Golden Finger, and so fresh, a very comfortable place... but those nasty birds are a bit of a nuisance.”

The sun boy pointed his index finger at the nearest tega. A bright ray flew from the finger and hit the predator. The blinded tega flew away with a guttural cry. The sun boy raised both his hands and opened his palms towards the screaming flock. A dozen or rays flew from his fingers. The blinded tegas hurried away, screaming with pain.

The damaged apparatus dipped its nose again and, losing height, started falling straight on the Hunchback Aga Bridge. The speed of the falling butterfly kept increasing.

The sun boy was still sitting on the nose part. He looked up again, yawned and said:

“It’s really very fresh here, and such a lovely view on the city. But I’m in such a hurry, such a hurry, I’ll stay longer next time.” He lit up and disappeared. The butterfly with its brave pilots rushed towards the center of the bridge. The tragedy seemed inevitable.

“What a sweet boy,” the bek said.

His hat fell from his head because of the speed with which they were falling.

“How do you know him?”

“It was he who gave me my name,” Golden Finger answered. “This is Greel, the ray of sun that goes everywhere.”

“Tell Greel I’ll take him on as a page,” the bek announced solemnly. “Now, I think it’s the Hunchback Aga Bridge. I see the brave flyswatterers greeting us. I can imagine what a grand sight I am now.”

Bek Shabur smiled graciously and started waving to his loyal servants.

SERGE RATZ

"Bekie, you're so pretty, it takes my breath away!" Golden Finger said sincerely.

"Mine too!" bek Shabur exclaimed. "I think we're landing."

Some ten meters above the bridge the giant hands caught the tiny butterfly with its two pilots.

Those were the giant feriks who managed to help the grandfather and his grandson at the last moment. They carefully lowered the flying machine on the bridge. To the applause and yells of the inhabitants of the city Zhar the wizard carried bek Shabur in one hand, and his heir Golden Finger in the other.

SWORN BROTHERS

Thousands of inhabitants of the city, led by Forest Violet, moved to meet the giant ferik who carried the bek and Golden Finger in his hands.

"Forward, my friends, to our enemy! Let's free the good city of Navrus from the chvaks!" bek Shabur exclaimed.

Like a giant iceberg, the ferik floated in the sea of people, holding bek Shabur on

SERGE RATZ

his shoulder. The stream of screaming byaks rushed towards the bridge. The feriks walked ahead, scattering the numb chvaks everywhere. Hundreds of boats full of armed byaks hurried to assault the other bank of the river where the worried chvaks were hurrying here and there.

The giant feriks entered the battle with fiercely fighting chvaks. A wave of screaming byaks rushed over the Hunchback Aga Bridge, sweeping away the chvaks' troops. Ahead of them, destroying everything on their way, a detachment of flyswatterers was running, headed by Proon. Despite heavy wounds, One-Ear also took part in the battle. His dogs were the first to land on the bank near the Star Brothers Square.

"Go, guys, go!" One-Ear was yelling. "Let's destroy Shrakra and his traitors right in their lair!"

The streams of byaks rushed through the streets and squares of the Lower City.

The chvaks fought fiercely, but their leaders already saw that the battle for the city was lost. So, leaving their loot, they hurried to leave the city, either in groups or by themselves.

The byaks headed by ferik giants ran under the vaults of the Three Mage Gates, and in a moment spread all over the Star Brothers Square. The feriks put the armed byaks on their wide palms and carried them over the battlements of Princess Cheena's castle, occupied by desperately fighting chvaks.

One-Ear's cutthroats were the first to run into one of the lower halls of the castle. The leader of the dogs looked awful: his left paw was on a sling, his head and one eye heavily bandaged. He did not seem to notice his wounds, though, and kept striking chvaks by dozens. He knew Farda the sorceress was somewhere around, on the second floor, in princess Cheena's room. The dog rushed ahead, scattering the chvaks. He had to take the sorceress and make her lift the sorcery off him. He took a huge leap to the inner terrace of the second floor. Here it was, the precious door to princess Cheena's inner rooms. Suddenly he was attacked by the mage's bodyguards waiting in the side niches. Fresh and strong and armed by sharpened lances and daggers, they attacked the wounded robber, tired by his fight.

One-Ear's loyal friends were fighting somewhere on the first floor and, of course, could not quickly come to his aid.

One-Ear was fighting off enemies right and left, but for all his sword work, the steel stings of the lances were coming closer to his throat. Suddenly the mosaic stained glass to the right of the fighting dog fell to pieces from the smash of the ferik's giant fist. Amazed, chvaks let off their attack for some moments. And then the giant's open fist appeared in the dark gap of the window. Forest Violet was sitting here, his feet swinging, each hand holding a huge boreholer. Their barrels spat up flame in the chvaks' direction. It was as if a hurricane rushed through the gallery, licking off the chvak warriors with its flame tongue. The smoking embers and ash piles were all that was left from the belligerent enemies.

Forest Violet jumped off the giant's palm and hurried towards the wounded dog.

"You saved my life twice," One-Ear rasped, getting up. "And once at a fair my robbers almost took you away to be sold as a slave, remember?"

"Yes, many things would've happened otherwise if not for the noble bergut," the young man said thoughtfully. "I'm grateful to you; you did so much for my son. I want to give you this thing as a sign of our friendship."

Forest Violet took a silvery band with a dark stone off his head and carefully put it on One-Ear's head.

"This hoop is from the faraway land of Golden Feriks, it has mysterious qualities."

"Well then," One-Ear rasped, touched, "let's become blood brothers, if you don't mind."

"I don't," Forest Violet said seriously and offered his hand to the robber.

With a long metal claw the dog scratched the skin on the outside of Forest Violet's hand, and a drop of blood immediately appeared. The dog added his own blood into the wound.

"Now we're blood brothers," he growled with added energy. "Together we can get over everything."

"I have to free prince Peapea from the sorceress's enchantment," Forest Violet said.

"I also need to find Farda," One-Ear roared. "Forward!"

The door fell down from their smash, and Forest Violet and One-Ear rushed into the hall adjoining Farda's rooms.

Part of the hall was blocked by a curtain of a very expensive iridescent fabric. It seemed that the wondrous beasts and birds pictured on it would come alive any moment.

In the center, in front of the curtain, arms akimbo, two of the sorceress's loyal servants stood insolently, the mangy One-Eye and the young tega with plucked tail. Each of Farda's minions held a shining blade in his paws, swinging it at times. Both of them stood in threatening poses, whistling and hissing. Someone was growling, a long and eerie sound from behind the curtain.

The powerful breath of some unseen creature was making the curtain flutter.

Forest Violet and One-Ear exchanged looks.

"Farda prepared a surprise for us," Forest Violet said quietly.

"We'll find out soon," the robber dog answered also quietly.

It took one hit for him to smash the weapons out of his opponents' paws; pushing them into the corner, he roared:

"Where's Farda? Answer quickly!"

"You're in too much a hurry to fly into the Black Hole, One-Ear," One-Eye said as impudently as before. "First meet her new masterpiece."

Then a horrendous roar sounded from behind the curtain; it made all the present get goosebumps, and their hair stood on its end. There was a rumbling sound of someone's footsteps which made the floor and the walls tremble.

Then the familiar squeaky voice filled the whole of the room:

"My hero, my beloved friend, get at the enemy bravely, destroy them all!"

The answering howl made the glass fall from the windows.

Forest Violet could not stand it any more; he ran towards the curtain and slashed the cable with a precise movement of his sword. The curtain fell down.

One-Ear and Forest Violet froze on the spot. From the pool in the farthest part of the

hall, with dark red clouds of smoke over it, a creature with elephant-like body was moving towards them slowly on all fours. Then it got up on its hindpaws, showed that its blunt and round face had fangs in its mouth, roared and moved towards the two friends with long strides. Its small piglet eyes were flashing.

"Forward, my beloved friend, my hero, destroy them!" Farda squealed jogging behind the giant's back.

The spiked club held in three-fingered paw whizzed in a circle over his round bumpy head.

"This is Fat Navel!" One-Ear roared. "What did she do to him? It would have been better for him to be killed by my paw back then at the fair!"

Despite its giant height and weight the creature moved fast and wielded its horrible club easily, delivering deadly smashing hits.

Forest Violet and One-Ear, chased by the horrible giant, ran out to the wide balcony. A panoramic view of the Star Brothers Square opened before them. The furi-

ous battle for princess Cheena's castle went on. From the upper side tower Shrakra was throwing fire darts at the attackers. He was helped by Shirpa and Garmut. Prince Peapea with several dozens of chvak maraks fought fiercely, defending the central arch. The ferik giants threw rocks at the besieged and helped the wounded.

Suddenly two figures appeared on the second floor balcony. Of course everyone recognized the heroes of Navrus, the robber dog and Forest Violet. They rushed towards the railing and jumped over it without pausing, not fearing to break their legs.

The monster jumped after them, roaring threateningly, and got into the middle of the fight. With its horrendous club the creature was felling the dozens of byaks surrounding it.

Farda rushed back and forth over his head, mounted on the plucked young tega. She held a long whip in her paw; cracking it, she squealed:

"Kill them, kill them all, Fruh!"

A young ferik giant, the wizard Zhar's

brother, moved to meet Fruh, and a battle of two giants began in the middle of the square.

Both giants were more or less the same height, but beside the slim and athletic ferik Fruh looked terrifying. The horn-plated spikes covering his shoulders, elbows and back were in constant movement. The lower part of the body was covered by thick dark brown fur. His hindpaws ended in three-fingered hooves with spiked spurs. The first hit of Fruh's club smashed into tiny little bits the marble column dedicated to the discovery of the Crystal Dreams Island by Ambal the Serene. The second one mutilated a dozen of bronze busts to the modest poet of the Universe bek Shabur.

"What is he doing? Stop this vandal!" bek Shabur exclaimed in horror, still sitting on Zhar the wizard's shoulder. "This belongs to the people! Where are my braves?"

"Your Grace, the ferik will deal with him in a moment, even though he doesn't have any experience," One-Ear growled. "He has my sword in his hand."

The fight was very short. The ferik knocked

out his opponent's weapon and then easily lifted the screaming and roaring giant over his head and threw him against the castle wall. The ugly creation of sorceress Farda's imagination stuck to the ancient masonry as a lump of some slime.

"Hurray to the feriks! Hurray to the flying wizards!" little byaks yelled in a triumphant chorus.

Gnashing his teeth, Shrakra threw another lightning that turned several byaks into embers.

Shrakra went on hovering slowly over the Star Brothers Square, looking for a new victim. And then more and more byaks and dogs came to the same end.

Bek Shabur stamped in impatience with his short legs:

"Now, who will be the one to finally stop him? Are there no more decent wizards in Navrus?"

The giant ferik, encouraged by his victory and by the friendly support of the little creatures around him, filled his lungs with air, did a pirouette and rose in the air above the amazed byaks.

"Give him a good thrashing!" One-Ear growled to him.

The ferik was flying fast, his young face burning with anger.

"You bastard! Do you know who you're attacking?" the ferik yelled. "Defend yourself!" And he lifted the shining tandorian sword above his head.

"Ha, ha, ha," the wizard laughed with a frightening rumbling sound. The lightning crackled, leaving the mage's clawed paws, and pierced the giant in his flight. Everyone present cried out with pain and regret. A huge bright flash blinded everyone for a moment. The sparks were falling and hissing like the little creatures' hot tears. Everyone realized that the city of Navrus had just lost a loyal friend. And when the defenders could see again, they noticed a transparent blue cloud in the shape of a giant rising fast.

"The prediction finally came true," Zhar the wizard said, agitated. "Our young hero will be the first to return to our motherland, the star Shivamba. He opened the way to the whole ferik tribe. I'm grateful to fate that it finally happened."

THE RETURN OF MATAMBA

Meanwhile Forest Violet and One-Ear had climbed the spiral stars in giant leaps and reached the terrace of princess Cheena's castle. They found the sword that fell from the dead ferik's hand. A monumental view opened before them. They saw groups of chvaks on kardamahs leaving the city by giant leaps through the Lucky Charpenta and Happy Hoof Gates. And even though two shadows were still hovering over the city and spreading death, the friends realized that the long-awaited victory was soon to come.

One-Ear started waving his sword, and Forest Violet yelled loud enough to be heard down on the square:

"Chvaks are leaving the city! We won!"

"We won!" bek Shabur yelled.

A wave of joy spread through the square, through the Lower City and the Upper City.

"You're celebrating too early," Shrakra growled. "I'll destroy your merry city and your star and nobody would remember that you sang and loved here."

After those words dark blue clouds covered the sky. Then balls of fire appeared, hovering and spewing deadly lightnings. The black army called by the mage appeared from the Black Hole to destroy Navrus. The roofs of some houses were already on fire.

Before the eyes of the amazed byaks one of the flaming balls turned into a gnome covered by red fur. The fur was smoking and giving out an unbearable smell of burnt sulphur. His three-fingered paws were in constant movement, deftly throwing hissing embers at the heads of the inhabitants of the city. The other ball turned into a black rider mounted on the skeleton of a horse with fire eyes. The flaming arrows he was sending out spread death.

And above them a giant was dancing, starting whirlwinds by the sweep of his cape.

"Here they are, my Knights of the Black Hole!" Shrakra exclaimed.

Darkness fell onto the city and everyone felt it was the end of the world. And then suddenly a thin ray of light pierced the thundering, lightning-spewing darkness. The ray coiled into a

spiral of light over the city, and everybody saw a small being going down it like it was an ice slide. This being had something shining in its hand, and a torn and patched cape flying behind its shoulder. And the strange thing about him was that one of its eyes was full of light like a submarine's searchlight.

"This is Matamba," Forest Violet said in agitation. "I knew he was somewhere close and would send us help."

The end of the ray rested upon the wide chest of Zhar the wizard who still held Golden Finger on his shoulder and had bek Shabur looking out from under the tail of his robe. The bek was lively, but felt a bit feverish, and his teeth kept chattering. To those surrounding him he explained that he was shaking from belligerent fervor and natural temper.

Like a kitten, Matamba jumped down from the ray and hurried towards Golden Finger, moving his little paws as fast as he could.

"Ugh, I was in such a hurry," he said, breathing heavily. "Here, baby, quick, put this magic ring on your finger and wish

whatever you want right now. This ring was sent to you by berguts."

The little mage gave the ring to a still surprised heir of Navrus, and the Star Brothers Square immediately shone with all the colors of the rainbow. The darkness disappeared, and together with it, hissing and crackling, the forces of the Black Hole called up by Shrakra disappeared too.

"This is the magic ring of Shan-Shara!" Shrakra growled furiously. "Let's get out of here or it'll be the end of us."

Farda hit the tega so hard on the back of his head that he flew fast as an arrow, far away from Navrus, following the mage.

A glass flask fell out of the wide fold of the sorceress's flowing clothes and landed in the middle of the square, smashing to little bits.

And at that very place a nut-sized golden sphere flashed. They said later that a joyous voice sounded out of the floating golden nut:

"What a clear sunny day! It's so wonderful out here! I am free, I want to dance! We are all free!"

Throwing off golden flashes, the nut flew through the suddenly numb byak crowds and then increased its speed, moving towards prince Peapea.

The young prince was still fighting the byaks, holding his broken sword. The shining golden sphere hit the prince's chest and disappeared inside.

"Oh," the young man exclaimed, and the sword fell out of his hand. "It feels so hot inside my chest!"

A smile suddenly appeared on his face, and his glassy eyes lit up with unearthly light of love and warmth.

"What a clear sunny day!" the prince exclaimed excitedly. "It's so wonderful here! I am free, I want to dance!"

He looked around and, his arms spread as if he wanted to embrace all of Byakundia, exclaimed:

"We are all free, we all shall dance!"

Dancing and beating time with his heels, Peapea moved towards the center of the square. Of course he started dancing the rousing old dance barbadola. How could he hold out?

Bek Shabur, his cheeks puffed, moved slowly to meet his nephew in mincing steps, clattering his heels and clicking his fingers.

'Oh, how he dances, damn him,' the bek thought, 'but I'll outdance him.' The merry little drummers appeared from somewhere, someone gave a whistle, and then the drums started all at once. A huge reel of byaks and dogs started beating out a merry and rousing dance.

The former secret councilor Shirpa and chief bodyguard Garmut clapped, encouraging byak Shabur, and yelled louder than anyone else:

"Here's the true example of folk art, an incomparable dancer of the whole Universe!"

Hearing such praise, bek Shabur puffed his cheeks even more.

"Everyone gets a free drink on the state's account," the bek said solemnly. "Shirpa, make up the lists of everybody who distinguished themselves. Oh, by the way, where were you and Garmut when all the country spilt blood?"

"My Shabur," Garmut said with modest

dignity, looking down, "Shirpa and I were fulfilling your personal secret order in the enemy camp."

"I guess I forgot that," the bek noticed. "Were you successful?"

"As you see, the enemy is running," Shirpa and Garmut answered together.

"Include yourselves in the awards list, then," the bek said. "I always knew I have reliable assistants."

Meanwhile the wizard Zhar carefully walked into the middle of the square, trying not to step on anyone's feet. He raised his hand over his head; on the his open palm the little mage Matamba and Golden Finger were sitting, their feet swinging. The magic ring of Shan-Shara was shining on the heir's hand.

"Why aren't you saying your wish?" the mage asked.

"I wish, I wish there would be a golden shower and all the byaks would love each other and there would be no war."

The baby sighed and then added:

"And I want very much to see Mom, but I guess that's impossible."

Matamba giggled.

"There's nothing impossible for Shan-Shara. Look up."

Golden Finger lifted his eyes to the sky and his heart started beating faster.

On the background of the clear dark blue sky he saw the transparent silhouette of his beloved mother, princess Cheena.

Tenderness and love shone from her clear eyes. Her voluminous tresses were flying in the air.

"Don't worry about me, my baby, I am quite all right here," Cheena said.

"But where are you, mommy?" Golden Finger managed to ask.

"I am in the noble berguts' land," Cheena answered, and her image dissolved.

"Good bye, mommy, I love you very much!" the little heir of Navrus exclaimed.

"Good bye, my boy," a voice somewhere above answered, getting quieter with every second.

"Don't be sad, little one," Matamba said. "Look, what joyous festivities there are all around us. Let's go for a walk. Do you want me to show you a speaking mask? It pronounces the 'r' sound in such a funny way.

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"Let's go, Matamba," the little boy said gladly. "I'd like very much to see a talking mask and to listen to your stories."

Zhar the wizard lowered them down and, holding hands, the little mage and Golden Finger disappeared in the merry byak reel.

And bek Shabur, his cheeks puffed, kept dancing, justifying his reputation of the premier dancer of the Universe.

BERGUTS FIRE AND SKY

Prince Peapea had already left the circle of dancing and joyously yelling byaks and quietly went up the spiral stairs to the terrace where, as he felt, someone was waiting for him.

Golden rain was falling on the city of Navrus. Of course it wasn't the rain of the type that we on Earth are used to seeing. The golden blessed rays filled the city. Flowers were blooming, birds were singing. Byaks were smiling at each other and, for some reason, crying.

Cheel the drummer beat a clear rhythm

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and then sang a new song which was immediately taken up by everybody:

Don't you worry about Navrus,
Navrus is all right.
Navrus's blooming all around us,
Morning, day and night.
Don't you worry about Navrus,
Navrus is all right...

Prince Peapea stood fascinated in the rays of golden rain brought by Golden Finger's naïve wish. At the side of the terrace he saw the silhouettes of two amazing beings in a golden aura and became a witness to their talk. That made the soul that returned to prince Peapea's body groan quietly.

"Forest Violet, you have wings behind your back!" a creature with a shock of copper-tinted wavy hair exclaimed. "And my heart is beating so fast!"

"And you are so beautiful, One-Ear!" the creature with violet eyes answered quietly. "We are berguts! I feel weightless and I want to fly."

"The dog One-Ear is no more, Farda's

enchantment has left me," the creature with flashing golden eyes said excitedly.

"There's only bergut Fire," his companion answered.

"And his brother bergut Sky," Fire said with a smile.

They hugged each other.

"Do you know where we are flying now?" bergut Fire asked.

"Of course, we have to catch Shrakra and Farda," Sky answered.

"And what about Navrus? And our Golden Finger?" Fire asked.

"Don't you worry about Navrus, Navrus is all right," Sky answered with the words of Cheel the drummer's song. "And Golden Finger has his own fate, and he doesn't need our help any longer. Come, let's fly!"

"Let's fly," Fire answered. "Now our life will be eternal battle. I am happy."

"And you, prince," Sky the bergut said to Peapea, "can return to the Bamburian Mountains, to grow the sweetest pandoras there, and in the evening to enjoy the birds singing. Like once with Cheena, if you remember..."

"Forest Violet!" Peapea exclaimed. "Take me with you!"

"Dear friend," the bergut with transparent light blue wings answered, "Forest Violet is no more. You see bergut Sky, the eternal wanderer, before you. Wait for us! Maybe we will return one day, to watch the falling stars together and to make wishes."

"Good bye - and don't ever gamble again!" Sky added.

Two sparkling creatures with flexible wings rose into the air and headed up. They made a last huge circle above the city. On the Star Brothers Square and the surrounding streets festivities were in full swing. Bek Shabur was still dancing, beating a loud rhythm with his heels on the pavement of the square. Zhar the wizard went to rebuild the destroyed bridge over the river. In the Upper City flowers were blooming in the gardens of the Azure Dream Palace. Golden Finger and the little mage, tired after their long walk, were sitting on the bank of Sweet Rains River and throwing stones into its gently flowing waters. The mage squinted with his single eye and noted:

"Look, little one, there are berguts flying over us."

The heir of Navrus looked up.

"They're so noble and beautiful. Look, Matamba, one of them has One-Ear's tandorian sword at his belt and a hoop with a black stone which my father Forest Violet had. I wonder who they are."

At that moment the berguts flying past heard his words.

"Don't you recognize us?" they exclaimed. "I'm your father, bergut Sky, and my brother is your close friend One-Ear, bergut Fire!"

"One-Ear, daddy!" Golden Finger exclaimed. "You became berguts! That's so cool! Where are you flying, then?"

"We have to catch Shrakra and Farda. And also..." bergut Sky paused. "I want to see your mother."

"I want to fly too, like you," the little boy said. "I want to fight too. One-Ear, you promised to tell me five hundred ninety nine stories, and now you're flying away."

"Hey, little one," said the bergut with the tandorian sword at his belt. "Our friend

Matamba will tell you all the stories, all right?"

"Matamba and I will also learn to fly and catch up with you," the heir of Navrus said firmly. "Right, Matamba?"

"Of course," the little mage answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Good bye, berguts," Golden Finger said.

"Good bye, Matamba! Good bye, Golden Finger!" the berguts exclaimed together and started rising higher.

"Yes," Matamba whispered thoughtfully, "Ley the storyteller was absolutely right to say that no one is born a bergut, you have to become one."

"Matamba," Golden Finger inquired, "but who's Ley?"

"Ley is such a creature... An old friend of mine, to put it short. Has great imagination, but always tells the truth and nothing but the truth. Lives in the bergut land, and he's a great swimmer."

"Oh, Matamba, this is so interesting - please tell me more."

They sat hugging each other. The small hairy being in torn cape was flailing its paws

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and flashing its crystal eye. And Golden Finger was sitting before him, his mouth opened, and listened transfixed about the amazing adventures of berguts and little deens, about the Black Admiral...

NAVRUS IS ALL RIGHT

Bek Shabur came to the palace late. He was tired but pleased.

'I was so good,' the bek thought, stroking tenderly the silver boot which was the award to the first dancer of the Universe.

He saw an unrolled scroll on the table, picked it up and read aloud:

"Dear bekie, don't expect me to breakfast! I've flown to see goddess Lu in berguts' land on the ship of my dreams. Don't worry, I'm not alone but with my friend Matamba.

Your Golden Finger."

"It's always like this - everyone goes off to do heroics and travels all they want, and the prosaic matters are left to me," the incomparable bek Shabur exclaimed in annoyance. "Enough wars and destruction. We need to

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work. All byaks need to work. We'll begin a new life!"

He clapped his hands. His loyal servants Shirpa and Garmut entered with light steps, almost fluttering inside the room.

"Let's prepare for our festival," the bek said seriously. "Tomorrow we open the Universe Fair. The whole country will start a new life."

The bek thought a bit more.

"And start planning a program for an all-year carnival. The byaks are tired. We have to lift their spirits and strengthen them. To show everyone that Navrus is all right."

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GLOSSARY OF FANTASTIC WORDS

- Barbera* — a plant blooming in the early morning, has intoxicating smell and taste.
- Berguts* — noble flying beings.
- Greel* — the everpresent ray of sun.
- Deen* — a singing sentient being, 40-50 cm tall, lives for 200-250 years.
- Ley* — sentient being, a skillful storyteller and swimmer.
- Mermiels* — a rattler tribe born on asteroids.
- Risha* — sorceress of the Black Hole.
- Reks* — flying tribe of sentient predators.
- Grey Puanda* — a cunning furry creature belonging to the dragon tribe.
- Sepo* — merry long-eared lilliputs from the Pef island.
- Sorcerite* (charoite) — a sorcerers' stone brought from the Blue planet.
- Chundra* — an intoxicate drink.
- Shandra* — a healing drink.
- Shan-Shara* — magic ring of eternal happiness.
- Erg* — brilliant and tireless six-legged friend.

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