

FROM THE FILES OF GENE SPEILMAN

3/17/07

We've been moving almost nonstop for two days. Four hours to sleep every night, which I've hardly been taking advantage of. I'm a fucking wreck: my feet are sore (even with hiking boots and two pairs of socks) and I've probably got permanent scars on my shoulders from the straps of the backpack weighted down with all the extra gear. To top it all off, I'm probably going to be dead by sometime tomorrow afternoon, judging by the way things are going. And for what? This is so incredibly frustrating. They made me come. I HAD NO CHOICE.

Okay. Let me back up a little bit. Here I am again. Tired. Too tired to sleep. Wired, or something.

Alright.

alight allwhite awrrrritey

Look. Laptop. How's about I make you a deal, awrittey? You let me type what I want to for awhile, uninterrupted, and I'll leave you on all night to blabber to your heart's content, type whatever you want. Deal?

allwhitey

Okay. In the morning, after I last wrote, I woke up to the languorous sound of flutes. Kimbod (of Ev) was up in an old oak tree, legs akimbo, tucked into a wide spot between several large branches. The song that came from his flute was beautifully eerie, like some chill breeze from an

ancient summer, hanging in the air somehow, magically, for centuries. The tree was gently swaying, obviously digging it.

Gombo, the winged monkey, was sprawled on a big carpet near the ashes of the campfire, harmonizing on a similar wooden flute. Obviously, these guys had no trouble entertaining themselves during downtime.

Ralph sauntered up to me, quietly, sleep still creasing his features, and asked, “Well, whataya think?”

Everything was taking on grand, hallucinogenic proportions.

“What do I think about what?” I said.

“Whatever.”

I decided to change the subject. “I met your friend last night.”

His eyes widened considerably. “You met Nick? No. Shit. When was this?”

“After you went to sleep. I couldn’t, so we stayed up and had astronomy lessons. Is he, uh —” I searched for the proper phrasing.

Ralph looked around once, quickly. “Nuts?”

“Well, no, that’s not what I was asking.” I tried again, so as not to sound ridiculous if I was wrong. “Is he who I think he is?”

“Uh huh.” He smiled, and started a little two-step, quietly sang, “*If I only hadda heaaaaaart.*” Ralph nudged his lips with his index finger, maybe to remind himself to shut up, covered his mouth for a second. “I thought you’d get a kick outa that. Yeah, well, he does have a heart, a big one, and he’s also nuts. Somewhere between wacky, happy-go-lucky nuts and dangerously insane, depending on who he’s with, and what’s going on.” He pointed at me. “I figured he’d like you.”

I was beginning to think maybe Ralph, too, was a few dollars short of cab fare, but reserved comment. He had saved my life after all, and seemed to know with deadly accuracy what was going on here. I, on the other hand ...

“I told him what you wanted to tell him.”

Ralph looked at me warily. “How did you know what I wanted to tell him?”

“Well, I didn’t. He asked me what you wanted to tell him, and I told him I didn’t know, so I sort of gave him a rundown — ”

“You didn’t tell him about —” He looked around, lowered his voice. “Gutierrez, did you? Did you?”

My look told it all.

Ralph spun in a circle, did a petulant child dance. “Awww, fuck. Fuck!”

“What?”

“I was going to tell him that the Ogres were dangerously close, nothing more. You have screwed the pooch, pal. Not only have you compromised U.S. intelligence — there’s no telling what — he —”

Just as I was about to tell him that U.S.intelligence had been compromised for some time, Nick strode out of his tent, in all his glory, looking about ten feet tall, gleaming in the morning sun. He was much scarier in the daylight.

His boys gathered around him from out of nowhere: the five I’d seen before, and a few others who must have been in their tents the night before. They hung around him, waiting for him to speak.

Nick stood stark still for about thirty seconds, then said, “We move out.” He eyed Ralph and me, waved the hilt of his ax absently in our direction. “You, too.” Then he spun around on his heels and went back into his tent.

The band of merry men immediately started into a frenzy of activity, pulling tents down, packing gear away.

I’d just about had it. I don’t like being led around by the nose, even if I am on unfamiliar turf. Past a certain point, I’d rather take my chances. And this was getting just too weird for me.

“Look,” I said to Ralph, “I’m sorry if I told Nick something I wasn’t supposed to. Thank you for saving my ass so far. But I think it’s about time for me to cut out. Now, if you’re going with these guys, good luck and all that, but I’ve got a friend in Emerald who’s expecting me. If you —”

He was shaking his head, smiling that smile of his. “Are you crazy? It wasn’t a request, man. He wants us along, we go along. Wherever. You don’t argue with the Tinman. Or you don’t — exist, get it?”

I thought about it for a few seconds, thought about my first meeting with Nick the night before, the bone-chilling certainty that this creature

could do away with me without batting his remaining eyelash. I thought about it.

“What do you think they’re having for breakfast around here?” I asked.



Breakfast wasn’t half bad. A couple of eggs, strange oblong green biscuits, my first taste of dried Goomer jerky. I was hungry.

Less than an hour later, we were heading northeast, first through the genuine forest that the oak grove had stuck out from, then cross-country over broad, flat hills with sparse patches of trees that look sort of like Sonoma valley, or Marin.

Three hours into the march, Ralph went up to Nick and talked to him for a few minutes. Then he hung back to where I’d been quizzing Kimbod about the flute music.

Ralph was looking miserable. I’d begun to get a sense, which has increased with time, that it is a bad thing when Ralph looks miserable. We backed up to the end of the line.

“This sucks,” he said, “this really sucks.”

“What sucks,” I asked, “besides being kidnapped by Colonel Kurtz over there, heading at full speed in the opposite direction from where we’re going? What could possibly suck?”

“Well, for starters, I thought we were just going to do some reconnaissance, but now it turns out — why the hell did you have to tell him about Gutierrez?”

I was really sick of hearing that guy’s name. He had been bad luck since before I got here. I mean, he was the one who got beheaded and all, but he was continuing to put a serious dent in my plans. I told Ralph as much.

“Well,” he said, “I forgive you; you didn’t know what you were saying. I should have warned you. I was tired, it was late.”

“You forgive me. Oh good, I was worried. Ralph, where are we going?”

He said it like he didn’t quite want me to hear it, turned his head kinda sideways: “Hollow Man’s Fortress.”

“Hollow Man’s Fortress. Hollow Man ... Hollow Man ... doesn’t ring a bell.”

He looked pained. “You wouldn’t have heard about him. Nobody’s been really worried about him until recently. Wasn’t much to worry about, outside of the usual Bad Guy stuff. There’s always been wicked witches, and plenty of wanabees hanging around when one of ’em slips on a banana peel or gets it with a bucket of water or whatever it is that happens when they lose their edge—

“Hollow Man’s an outworlder. Some say he came over from across the Deadly Desert; people in Ix will tell you he came from across the Ocean. Farther than our survey maps go, anyway. He’s become a very nasty wizard, or warlock, or some kind of shit. Bad, whatever it is, real bad.

“He started out as a little straw boss up in a town to the extreme northeast, Togollu. But he’s working fast. Now he controls half of Munchkinland, and he’s working on getting the rest of it, and beyond. And — oh — he’s that jolly green giant’s fearless leader, if you hadn’t figured that out already.”

I hadn’t. Call me stupid, but there was a lot going on right then. I chewed on that for a few seconds, then started in again.

“Okay. Hollow. Man. Hollow Man. Why the name? Is he indeed — hollow?”

Ralph looked at me really strangely, as if I’d said something to spook him all of the sudden. “Yeah. He is. At least that’s what I’ve been told. He calls himself Bennie, how about that? Spells it B-h-j-e-n-n-i-g-h, but it sounds the same. He started out pretty normal looking, for an evil bastard, and gradually started going ... all black. Wait. I’m not saying this right.”

We all started climbing up a particularly gnarly hill right then, so conversation stopped for a little while, as we had to devote all of our attention to breathing. When we got to the top, everybody rested for a few minutes, and Ralph continued.

“He’s not like, black on the outside, like a black man — ”

“No, I guess they would call him the Black Man if that were the case.”

“Shut up. They say when you look at him, into where his eyes used to be, it’s dull black. More than that. Like the absence of light. And when he opens up his mouth, you can’t see teeth, or that little thing — ”

“Uvula.”

“Thank you. It’s just black. And little things floating in the air, dust, smoke, just kind of suck in towards him, like there was some kind of vacuum, or gravity pulling them in.”

“Maybe like a black hole ... ” I offered.

“Yeah,” he said, “like a black hole. Anyway, they say that every day there’s a little more of the Hollow, and a little less of the Man. And logic would dictate that maybe that would make him go away eventually. But it’s making him stronger, whatever it is. There’s a Something in the Nothing.”

Inexplicably, I started thinking of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Well, not inexplicably, because what Ralph was saying was giving me the same creepy feeling I used to get when I was a little kid, chills up and down my spine during that song, when you got to the part about “someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah, someone’s in the kitchen I knoo-oo-oo-ooow ... ” Like, who the hell is it exactly in the kitchen with Dinah? Where did he come from out of nowhere in the middle of this nice railroad song?

I think that was what freaked out Ralph, too. In a land of already insane physical impossibilities, here was something so mysterious and terrible that nobody knew what it was, where it came from, what the fuck it was doing in the kitchen with Dinah — and it was trying to Take Over.

We moved out over a ridge not quite as steep as the last one, and Nick called a halt. Everyone got really quiet. I looked off where I saw Nick looking, and saw smoke coming up, far away. Thick, acrid looking black smoke, six tall columns rising up, evenly spaced over about a third of the horizon. It reminded me of something, something terrible, but I couldn’t think of it right then. Later, I remembered: it was like descriptions I’d heard of the ovens at Auschwitz. I didn’t know at the time how right on that was.

Nick Chopper turned around, and from the looks of him, was about ready to give some more orders. But he didn't. Instead, he got a really preoccupied look on his face, and headed back down the ridge toward us.

Gombo folded his wings across each other, and perched on his tail, using it like a tripod. Sool, a squat, peach-colored guy with purple-gray dreds, sat down next to him, and they both started smoking pipes of something, as if sure that we'd get an extra long break. The others seemed to take their cue from this, and relaxed into various leisurely activities: pissing, smoking, scratching.

As he passed us, Nick said, "Ralph, Gene of Los Angeles — with me."

Our eyes widened at each other, and we followed him down to a little copse of funny-looking skinny trees, next to some big boulders. We sat on some of the smaller rocks, and were silent, waiting.

"Gentlemen," the Woodsman said, "I am at a loss." Then he shut up again. He took out a little stone, and started honing the blade of his ax, slowly, delicately.

Ralph waited a bit, then, with his brow properly furrowed, said, "Nick, do you mean, about what to do next, or ...?"

Nick fixed him with a pleasant Charles Manson-meets-Fred Astaire smile and replied, "Yes, of course." More honing.

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me, Nick," I said, "I don't know what I was thinking of, maybe I'd gotten too much oxygen; I was temporarily insane. "Nick, why don't you do something like you did in the movie? You know, like when you guys snuck into the witch's castle?"

He actually stopped honing, turned towards me. I couldn't tell if his look meant "I'm interested, go on," or he was marveling at the incomprehensible hogwash I was spouting, waiting for the perfect moment to split me in half. Ralph was behind him, waving his arms, pantomiming, trying to make me shut up. But I was on a roll, and I guess I just didn't give a shit right then.

"Movie?"

"Yeah, you know. Don't you? *The Wizard of Oz*? Anyway, you dressed up like the Winkies in the witches' army uniforms, and got inside the castle to save Dorothy."

He was looking, then, inside of himself at something impossibly remote, impossibly long ago. “It didn’t happen quite that way,” he said, looking down at his metal feet. Then he got up. “But what a good idea. Hmm. Disguises.”

Then he stomped off back up the hill, spouting orders to make camp for the night, leaving Ralph and me perched on our rocks with our jaws hanging open, each for a different reason.

I slept a little bit last night, but mostly sat around the fire with Kimbod and another guy, Zem. Zem was a Quadling, who tended toward the classic Quadling features, according to “So You’re Going to Oz”: straight coarse white hair, pale, almost vampire-white skin, covered with dark brown to black freckles, wide faces, almost like somebody wearing a stocking over his head. It took me a while to resist the urge to put my hands up, or give him my wallet.

Zem the Quadling was really quiet all night, let Kimbod and me do all the talking, occasionally grunting at something we’d say. This seemed a little strange to me, as he’d talked my ear off the night before at dinner; I’d actually wanted him to shut up and let me enjoy a few minutes peace, but hadn’t said anything.

Also, while Kimbod and I talked, Zem would disappear into the woods every once in a while. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, figuring maybe something wasn’t agreeing with him and had the trots, and that it also accounted for why he wasn’t speaking.

I found out the real reason later.

Kimbod told me about the land of Ev for a while, all about his family, about all the different wacky royalty they have; I guess he was homesick. I told him about my trip east, and how we have truckstops and Walmarts and titty bars out in our deserts, how ours don’t directly kill you if you step on ’em, like the Deadly one.

He hunched his cadaverous frame in toward the crackling blaze. “I haven’t been back for awhile,” he said. “It’s getting harder and harder to find a quick sandboat or a zeppelin these days.”

“Yeah,” I replied dreamily, half hypnotized by the brilliant glow of a dry branches’s combustion, like I knew all about that problem, “I know what you mean.”

The conversation flagged after that, and I eventually climbed into my sleeping bag, gazing up at the moon through the crisscrossed skeletal tree limbs. I started to freak out then, a little bit, thinking stuff like the branches were dried-up witch-claws bending down to grab me. Then I noticed an owl up there, high up on top of one of the witch's thumbs. It had a half-chewed mouse in one of its talons — I guessed carnivores had a special dispensation when it came to the cannibalism thing — or maybe they only ate stupid mice? I filed the question away for another Ralph conversation.

“Whoooo?” it called quietly.

I wasn't sure if it was asking a question or was just being an owl, but I figured — why not?

“Gene Speilman” I said.

As it flew off, I wondered if I'd just now subscribed to some weird Oz version of a mailing list somewhere. And whose list? I should have kept my mouth shut, I finally decided. But it was too late.

The next morning, *this* morning in fact, the flute music was conspicuously absent. We had our breakfast, packed up and started marching again. My legs were sore from yesterday, and it was tough going until I warmed up a little.

Early on, we paused briefly in the middle of a vast meadow, while Gombo and Nick wandered off and had an earnest conversation with a large pig wearing some sort of pig overalls. I wondered how he got in and out of them, and how much of a nuisance it must be to wear clothes if you had no hands. I said as much to Ralph.

“Most of 'em don't,” he said. “This one's kinda ritzy for a pig, if you ask me. He must be somebody important.”

Later we found out from Gombo that he was the traditional spiritual leader for the pigs who lived in an area half contained within the domain of the Hollow Man, half in Quadling. Part of his vows were to keep his body covered at all times except when bathing. The reason it came up in conversation was this:

Around noon, we noticed Nick hanging back to talk to Zem, the Quadling I'd been sitting with the night before. Nick put his arm around the guy and spoke quietly into his ear, as if imparting a great

secret. Then, faster than I could follow, he swung his ax around and up, and Zem's head flew off into the shrubbery. The rest of him stood there for a second spouting blood, as if not sure what had happened, wobbled on its legs a little, and collapsed.

After I finished puking, I heard the Tin Man addressing the rest of his men.

"You are all my brothers," he said, as he wiped his ax down with a cloth, "but this one has betrayed me. My heart is broken. But I would do no less to ANY of you. To ANY of you. If you dare to do what this one has done. This — treachery."

And then he reached down into the canvas sack the man had been carrying, and pulled out a contraption that looked like a mirrored lantern, with a sliding cover on one side.

"The Hoyteb of the Quadling Pigs saw some interesting signals coming from our camp last night. This is where they came from." Nick heaved the lantern over in the same direction the lobbed head went.

The mood has been pretty somber from then on, to say the least, and as we hiked, the scenery began more and more to match it. The sky was darkening, clouding over, and the vegetation started to look decidedly sickly and lacking in chlorophyll, like it had all been growing under some rock. We occasionally spied a farm that had the same sort of sick look, even though crops were growing, and animals were grazing in the fields. The trees, of the long skinny witch-claw variety, turned towards us as we passed, and gradually grew more and more cheeky, trying to trip us with low branches, dropping nuts and birds nests on our heads. A few well-placed thwacks from Nick's ax seemed to spread the word quickly that we weren't to be messed with.

Luckily, there were still language bushes to be found every so often, which is something I continue to be glad of. The only thing I can think of that's worse than being in this situation is being in the middle of all this shit and not being able to understand anyone. I continue to be polite as hell to every bush I pick on.

By late afternoon, it was starting to look full-on like Halloween. Great big clouds of bats flew overhead, perhaps emptying out from a cave nearby, and and it seemed as though massive gothic spiderwebs

spanned every available gap. A pale bug twitched in one of them, as a huge arachnid with glowing purple eyes made its way down towards dinner.

This, of course got me thinking about the whole cannibal thing again.

As I leaned up towards the web, I could hear a tiny voice shouting, "Help me! Help me!" Yeah, I know.

This was just too much for me, of course. I reached into the web, and grabbed out the little pale-green insect, much to the dismay of the spider, who started yelling, "Hey, you bastard!" in an equally tiny voice, "that was my dinner, asshole! How'd you like a nice welt on your ankle for a few weeks?"

I helped to disentangle the little insect from what was left of his bonds. He dropped down prostrate on the palm of my hand, I guess to thank me, and then tore ass out of there as fast as he could fly.

"What's the deal here, anyway? Isn't that cannibalism?" I asked the spider, "Eating another sentient life form? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

The rest of my party was getting ahead of me; Ralph hung back and called to me to hurry it up.

"Look, shitheel," he said, purple glow-eyes pulsing, "If I don't eat the insects, I starve. My body chemistry requires it. That's bad enough. But if I don't eat those insects, you know what happens? A lot more bugs with a lot of time on their hands, making more bugs. Suddenly, there's not enough leaves for them to eat. They start to starve. Lots of them die, slowly, miserably. Not to mention all the plant life. My way is relatively painless. So next time you see one of us about to chow down, mind your own business, okay?"

I didn't have time to argue with him. I caught up with Ralph and told him what had just happened.

"I guess it's really a question of degree," he said. "Humans, other large animals have a choice. Some don't. When you're part of a delicate ecosystem like most of the critters out here, there isn't much of a choice. Sure, the prey doesn't want to get caught, but they accept it as a possible way to die, an act of God. They don't see the Hawk or the Spider as evil.

They see them as part of a dance, a balancing act, whatever, that's been going on forever.

"Usually farm animals have unions, make deals with their farmers, are generally well-treated. Alternatives to eating them have been worked out for ages. These kinds of beings are as socialized as we are. But that stuff just doesn't exist out in the wild. Part of Hollow Man's whole argument is that this 'law of the jungle' should extend to man. That man, an omnivore, should be eating the other animals because it's nature's way. We've been given the means to eat them. We have opposable thumbs and all that shit.

"I mean, there's definitely a gray area, but you can usually scope it out and obviously see whether it's wrong or not. Usually."

I really had to think about that one — I'm still thinking about it.

After a little more hiking, the word got passed back for everyone to shut up. We stopped while Pimbi and another guy were sent forward to scout something out. They were back in about five minutes. I couldn't hear what they were saying to Nick Chopper, but it looked like something fairly serious was about to go down.

Ralph confirmed what I was feeling. "Whatever happens," he said, "just hang back and stay out of the way. Nobody here expects you to fight. But take this, just in case."

He opened his coat up. He took a really big pistol out of a leather holster and handed it to me. "This is my One That Got Through. Don't fuck it up."

It looked like one of those ones from the Dirty Harry movies, a .357 Magnum. I couldn't be sure; I know nothing about guns.

"I don't believe this." I muttered. The gravity of the situation was starting to sink in. "How do you work this?"

Ralph took it back, unlatched the safety.

"Be *really careful*, first of all. Then if something really ugly and scary heads your way and tries to kill you, aim this and pull the trigger. And try to hunker down before you do — this thing has a hell of a kick."

"What are you gonna use?"

He pulled a little dagger out of his pocket. It glowed blue, and wiggled a bit. Then it started telescoping out, growing like Pinocchio's

nose or the biggest steel boner in the world, until it was a fearsome samurai blade. “This, and a few tricks I picked up from the Navy Seals.”

For the first time, I saw Gombo remove his cloak and start to beat his wings. They were enormous, with a span almost half again as wide as he was tall, looking more like a bat’s wings than a bird’s. He rose into the air, hovered, and flew off towards the north.

Nick called everyone together.

“There is a small garrison of Bhjennigh’s troops not far up a road on the other side of those trees,” he whispered, pointing off to where Gombo had flown. “With me now, quickly, no prisoners. Clean and silent.”

And everyone started off at a run towards the road.

What? I thought. No prisoners? What exactly are we doing? I trotted down the road with everyone else, still not quite getting it. I had seen already that Nick Chopper was deadly serious, fanatically persuing some end that I didn’t understand, dragging me along for god knows what reason, but I hadn’t been sucked headlong into the vortex yet.

About thirty seconds before we reached an ugly brick building, three or four of the giant green guys noticed us. They stood in front of the building, like statues, legs apart, with their axes at the ready, waiting.

Nick and company charged — silent, determined, lethal.

Jesus, I’m really gonna die, I thought. This is insane. I held the gun out in front of me, aiming it at the ground.

Trees started rustling, crashing against each other on the other side of the building, accompanied by an ear-splitting trumpeting. I saw Gombo come charging through on the back of a massive, red elephant. It reared up, and down it came, pulping one of the soldiers under the weight of its front feet.

Ah, I thought, element of surprise. I leaned against a tree, aimed the gun at nothing in particular. And watched the carnage.

It was over in seconds. During the distraction, Nick, Ralph and the merry men had taken out the entire garrison, inside and out of the building — fifteen very scary individuals, half of them of the ugly green variety.

Except one.

I heard the whoosh of air before I saw anything; I whipped myself out of the way just in time to see the ax blade sink into the tree with a thunk. While the old boy was trying to get the blade out, cursing a blue streak, I fired the Magnum at him. I fell flat on my ass, knocked back by the recoil, and blood and organs sprayed all over me. I guess the gun was in super-enhanced working order, because the entire upper part of the guy's torso was missing.

I leaned sideways to heave, again, surprised there was anything left in my stomach from the last time. I guess it takes a while to get used to being surrounded by wholesale slaughter.

Most of the others were covered with varying degrees of gore, too, some of it from their own wounds, though it didn't appear that anyone was injured too badly. At the Tin Man's instructions, they had started to strip off the clothes of the dead soldiers, and replace their own clothes with the leather and chain-mail outfits.

I realized then that all the killing had been the result of my casual suggestion to Nick that he find some disguises. I remembered him saying that it hadn't actually happened the way it did in the movie. My mind ran through several gruesome variations based on what I had just seen.

Though I still can't picture a vicious, bloodcurdling Scarecrow. It just makes me think of a really bad horror movie. He must be just about as useless as I am in a situation like this. I started wondering then just what kind of a creature his legend was based on anyway.

"I see that came in handy," called Ralph, running up, nodding toward the gun. He grimaced at the result. "Nice shot."

"He suprised me," I replied spacily, still shocked I'd actually done it. I know it was a question of me or him, but I'd never shot anyone before. I hope to never do it again.

After a few minutes, I snapped out of it, and started helping. That was a mistake. The next half hour or so was spent trying to fit into the ogre suits that we'd disentangled from the bloody corpses. This was worse than shooting someone.

We grappled with the smelly, mangled bodies, and pulled off some clothing and accessories that seemed like they might fit. Then Pimbi,

Tiltel and I went to a well in back of the building, where we rinsed off the outfits we'd assembled. They cleaned up surprisingly well. I guess if they'd been cotton and silk instead of leather and chain mail, they might not have done so nicely.

It wasn't as easy actually putting them on. Most of these guys were much bigger than we were, and we had to use leaves and grass to stuff them out so that they'd fit. In the end, we didn't exactly look like the Biker-Nazi guys, but were close enough. From a distance, nobody'd probably bat an eyelash.

I walked around through the barracks building. It was nothing to write home about. Like its former inhabitants, it smelled really bad. There was half-eaten food lying around everywhere, straw pallets with blankets on them, and a big hearth with the remnants of a spit-roasted pig in it. It took me a few seconds to realize what was wrong with that picture, then I remembered that here, pigs sometimes wear clothes and have religious leaders. I hustled out the front door in a hurry.

Nick had put on these amazing boots that covered up most of his legs. His cloak fit under a leather breastplate studded with spikes. Somehow, he'd cut off some ogre's long hair and fashioned a wig-hat from that and one of the horned Nazi-type helmets. His own big gloves covered his hands.

All the action had made him downright cheery. He smiled as he saw me looking over his costume, half of his face complying. "Pretty good?" he asked rhetorically.

"Yeah," I said, "You look like you're from Gwar or something."

"Bad place, is it?"

I decided not to press my luck. "Oh yeah. Yeah."

"Now there," he said, gesturing off across the decidedly blue forest valley, towards the center of the towers of smoke, "there's a bad place."

I looked and saw, over the tops of far trees, through the mist, a gray monolith on the horizon. A tower rose from the center of it, menacing the landscape.

"That would be the Hollow Man's Fortress? Freddie's?"

"Bhjennigh's. That is correct. We'll be there tomorrow."

And he stalked off, without another word.

I'd absentmindedly stuck my hands into the pockets of the ogre-vest I was wearing. I felt something cool and rounded against my right hand. It was a cylinder of some kind. I pulled it out to have a look. It was a little gold jar, a little smaller than a soda can, with a tin cover on it.

I unscrewed the cover and found that the top was covered with little holes, like a salt shaker. I shook it — it was filled with some kind of powder. There were curlicues engraved in the gold all the way around, and a word engraved in equally fancy style, it wasn't English, but thanks to the Language Bush, I knew that it said "Life." I wondered if I'd stumbled on the equivalent of somebody's coke stash, and decided to scrutinize the contents later on, when I had some time. Back in the pocket it went.

A gigantic shadow loomed in front of me. I turned around to see the red elephant, looking over my shoulder and kind of leering at me. If you've never had an elephant leer at you, you've never lived. He'd seen what I'd found.

"You want to be careful with that shit," he warned, in a deep basso profundo. "More trouble than it's worth." Then he winked, and bounded off into the foliage, trumpeting out a song, sounding like nothing so much as a demented tuba soloist.

Not much after that, after having stacked the corpses neatly behind the barracks, we headed out again, straight through the blue forest. I later found out it was, in fact, named "The Blue Forest." Nick had deemed it necessary to remain out of sight, at least until we couldn't help it any longer. Staying at the barracks would have just invited trouble, as some other soldiers of Bjennigh would happen by sooner or later. They'd all debated the possibilities of hanging around for more, as the last bunch had been such jolly fun, but finally, Nick decided that, while killing several more of the soldiers would be a hoot, it was low priority at the moment. I still didn't know what exactly was high priority, except heading straight into Spookyland over there.

I guess I will find out tomorrow. If I don't get some sleep, I won't be in proper shape to be drawn and quartered, or whatever's going to happen. I can't imagine whatever it is will be very pleasant.

Poor Aurora. She's going to think I'm some kind of idiot. I'm here for five seconds, and instead of turning up for Mexican food in Emerald like I'm supposed to, I end up in some Arnold Schwarzenegger movie on acid.

Well goodnight, Thing in the Laptop. You've been quiet, thank God, so I'll leave you on like I promised. A deal's a deal.

Go for it.