

Abarat 2

Days of Magic, Nights of War



Clive Barker

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Abarat 2: Days of Magic, Nights of War

Аннотация

A dazzling fantasy adventure for all ages, the second part of a quartet appearing at two yearly intervals, richly illustrated by the author. Film rights sold to Disney for \$8 million on the paintings alone. The Abarat; a magical otherworld composed on an archipelago of twenty-five islands – one for each hour of the day, plus an island out of time. Candy Quackenbush, escaping her dull, dull life from the most boring place in our world, Chickentown, USA, finds that in the Abarat she has another existence entirely, one which links her to marvels and mysteries—and even to murder... In this, the second volume in Clive Barker's extraordinary fantasy for both adults and children, Candy's adventures in the amazing world of the Abarat are getting more strange by the Hour. Christopher Carrion, the Lord of Midnight, has sent his henchmen to capture her. Why? she wonders. What would Carrion want with a girl from Minnesota? And why is Candy beginning to feel that the world of the Abarat is familiar to her? Why can she speak words of magic she doesn't even remember learning? There is a mystery here. And Carrion, along with his fiendish grandmother, Mater Motley, suspects that whatever Candy is, she could spoil his plans to take control of the Abarat. Now Candy's companions must

race against time to save her from the clutches of Carrion, and she must solve the mystery of her past before the forces of Night and Day clash and Absolute Midnight descends upon the islands. A final war is about to begin. And Candy is going to need to make some choices that will change her life forever...

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HARPER
Voyager

For my mother, Joan
I dreamed I spoke in another's language,
I dreamed I lived in another's skin,
I dreamed I was my own beloved,
I dreamed I was a tiger's kin.
I dreamed that Eden lived inside me,
And when I breathed a garden came,
I dreamed I knew all of Creation,
I dreamed I knew the Creator's name.
I dreamed—and this dream was the finest—
That all I dreamed was real and true,
And we would live in joy forever,
You in me, and me in you.
C.B.

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About The Author

ALSO BY CLIVE BARKER

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About the Publisher

PROLOGUE HUNGER

Here is a list of fearful things:

The jaws of sharks, a vulture's wings,

The rabid bite of the dogs of war,

The voice of one who went before.

But most of all the mirror's gaze,

Which counts us out our numbered days.

—Righteous Bandy, the nomad Poet of Abarat

OTTO HOULIHAN SAT IN the dark room and listened to the two creatures who had brought him here—a three-eyed thing by the name of Lazaru and its sidekick, Baby Pink-Eye—playing Knock the Devil Down in the corner. After their twenty-second game his nervousness and irritation began to get the better of him.

“How much longer am I going to have to wait?” he asked them.

Baby Pink-Eye, who had large reptilian claws and the face of a demented infant, puffed on a blue cigar and blew a cloud of acrid smoke in Houlihan's direction.

“They call you the Criss-Cross Man, don't they?” he said.

Houlihan nodded, giving Pink-Eye his coldest gaze, the kind of gaze that usually made men weak with fear. The creature was unimpressed.

“Think you're scary, do you?” he said. “Ha! This is Gorgossium, Criss-Cross Man. This is the island of the Midnight

Hour. Every dark, unthinkable thing that has ever happened at the dead of night has happened right here. So don't try scaring me. You're wasting your time."

"I just asked—"

"Yes, yes, we heard you," said Lazaru, the eye in the middle of her forehead rolling back and forth in a very unsettling fashion. "You'll have to be patient. The Lord of Midnight will see you when he's ready to see you."

"Got some urgent news for him, have you?" said Baby Pink-Eye.

"That's between him and me."

"I warn you, he doesn't like bad news," said Lazaru. "He gets in a fury, doesn't he, Pink-Eye?"

"*Crazy* is what he gets! Tears people apart with his bare hands."

They glanced conspiratorially at each other. Houlihan said nothing. They were just trying to frighten him, and it wouldn't work. He got up and went to the narrow window, looking out onto the tumorous landscape of the Midnight Island, phosphorescent with corruption. This much of what Baby Pink-Eye had said was true: Gorgossium *was* a place of terrors. He could see the glistening forms of countless monsters as they moved through the littered landscape; he could smell spicy-sweet incense rising from the mausoleums in the mist-shrouded cemetery; he could hear the shrill din of drills from the mines where the mud that filled Midnight's armies of stitchlings was produced. Though he

wasn't going to let Lazaru or Pink-Eye see his unease, he would be glad when he'd made his report and he could leave for less terrifying places.

There was some murmuring behind him, and a moment later Lazaru announced: "The Prince of Midnight is ready to see you."

Houlihan turned from the window to see that the door on the far side of the chamber was open and Baby Pink-Eye was gesturing for him to step through it.

"Hurry, hurry," the infant said.

Houlihan went to the door and stood on the threshold. Out of the darkness of the room came the voice of Christopher Carrion, deep and joyless.

"Enter, enter. You're just in time to watch the feeding."

Houlihan followed the sound of Carrion's voice. There was a flickering in the darkness, which grew more intense by degrees, and as it brightened he saw the Lord of Midnight standing perhaps ten yards from him. He was dressed in gray robes and was wearing gloves that looked as though they were made of fine chain mail.

"Not many people get to see this, Criss-Cross Man. My nightmares are hungry, so I'm going to feed them." Houlihan shuddered. "*Watch*, man! Don't stare at the floor."

Reluctantly, the Criss-Cross Man raised his eyes. The nightmares Carrion had spoken of were swimming in a blue fluid, which all but filled a high transparent collar around Carrion's head. Two pipes emerged from the base of the Lord

of Midnight's skull, and it was through these that the nightmares had emerged, swimming directly out of Carrion's skull. They were barely more than long threads of light; but there was something about their restless motion, the way they roved the collar, sometimes touching Carrion's face, more often pressing against the glass, that spoke of their hunger.

Carrion reached up into the collar. One of the nightmares made a quick motion, like a striking snake, and delivered itself into its creator's hand. Carrion lifted it out of the fluid and studied it with a curious tenderness.

"It doesn't look like much, does it?" Carrion said. Houlihan didn't comment. He just wanted Carrion to keep the thing away from him. "But when these things are coiled in my brain they show me such delicious horrors." The nightmare writhed around in Carrion's hand, letting out a thin, high-pitched squeal. "So every now and then I reward them with a nice fat meal of fear. They love fear. And it's hard for me to feel much of it these days. I've seen too many horrors in my time. So I provide them with someone who *will* feel fear."

So saying, he let the nightmare go. It slithered out of his grip, hitting the stone floor. It knew exactly where it was going. It wove across the ground, flickering with excitement, the light out of its thin form illuminating its victim: a large, bearded man squatted against the wall.

"Mercy, my Lord..." he sobbed. "I'm just a Todo miner."

"Oh, now be quiet," Carrion said as though he were speaking

to a troublesome child. "Look, you have a visitor."

He turned and pointed to the ground where the nightmare slithered. Then, without waiting to see what happened next, he turned and approached Houlihan. "So, now," he said. "Tell me about the girl."

Thoroughly unnerved by the fact that the nightmare was loose and might at any moment turn on him, Houlihan fumbled for words: "Oh yes...yes...the girl. She escaped me in Ninnyhammer. Along with a geshrat called Malingo. Now they're traveling together. And I got close to them again on Soma Plume. But she slipped away among some pilgrim monks."

"So she's escaped you twice? I expect better."

"She has power in her," Houlihan said by way of self-justification.

"Does she indeed?" Carrion said. As he spoke he carefully lifted a second nightmare out of his collar. It spat and hissed. Directing it toward the man in the corner, he let the creature go from his hands, and it wove away to be with its companion. "She must at all costs be apprehended, Otto," Carrion went on. "Do you understand me? *At all costs*. I want to meet her. More than that. *I want to understand her*."

"How will you do that, Lord?"

"By finding out what's ticking away in that human head of hers. By reading her *dreams*, for one thing. Which reminds me...*Lazaru!*"

While he waited for his servant to appear at the door, Carrion

brought out yet another nightmare from his collar and loosed it. Houlihan watched as it went to join the others. They had come very close to the man, but had not yet struck. They seemed to be waiting for a word from their master.

The miner was still begging. Indeed he had not ceased begging throughout the entire conversation between Carrion and Houlihan. "Please, Lord," he kept saying. "What have I done to deserve this?"

Carrion finally replied to him. "You've done nothing," he said. "I just picked you out of the crowd today because you were bullying one of your brother miners." He glanced back at his victim. "There's always fear in men who are cruel to other men." Then he looked away again, while the nightmares waited, their tails lashing in anticipation. "Where's Lazaru?" Carrion said.

"Here."

"Find me the dreaming device. You know the one."

"Of course."

"Clean it up. I'm going to need it when the Criss-Cross Man has done his work." His gaze shifted toward Houlihan. "As for you," he said. "Get the chase over with."

"Yes, Lord."

"Capture Candy Quackenbush and bring her to me. Alive."

"I won't fail you."

"You'd better not. If you do, Houlihan, then the next man sitting in that corner will be *you*." He whispered some words in Old Abaratian. "*Thakram noosa rah. Haaas!*"

This was the instruction the nightmares had been waiting for. In a heartbeat they attacked. The man struggled to keep them from climbing up his body, but it was a lost cause. Once they reached his neck they proceeded to wrap their flickering lengths around his head, as though to mummify him. They partially muffled his cries a little, but he could still be heard, his appeals for mercy from Carrion deteriorating into shrieks and screams. As his terror mounted the nightmares grew fatter, giving off brighter and brighter flashes of sickly luminescence as they were nourished. The man continued to kick and struggle for a while, but soon his shrieks declined into sobs and finally even the sobs ceased. So, at last, did his struggle.

“Oh, that’s a disappointment,” Carrion said, kicking the man’s foot to confirm that fear had indeed killed him. “I thought he’d last longer than that.”

He spoke again in the old language, and—nourished, now, and slothful—the nightmares unknotted themselves from around their victim’s head and began to return to Carrion. Houlihan couldn’t help but retreat a step or two in case the nightmares mistook him for another source of food.

“Go on, then,” Carrion said to him. “You’ve got work to do. *Find me Candy Quackenbush!*”

“It’s as good as done,” Houlihan replied, and without looking back, even a glance, he hurried away from the chamber of terrors and down the stairs of the Twelfth Tower.

PART ONE FREAKS, FOOLS AND FUGITIVES

Nothing

After a battle lasting many ages, The Devil won, And he said to God (who had been his Maker): “Lord, We are about to witness the unmaking of Creation By my hand. I would not wish you to think me cruel, So I beg you, take three things From this world before I destroy it. Three things, and then the rest will be wiped away.”

God thought for a little time. And at last He said: “No, there is nothing.” The Devil was surprised. “Not even you, Lord?” he said. And God said: “No. Not even me.”

—From *Memories of the World's End* Author unknown
(Christopher Carrion's favorite poem)

1 PORTRAIT OF GIRL AND GESHRAT

LET'S GET OUR PHOTOGRAPH taken," Candy said to Malingo. They were walking down a street in Tazmagor, where—this being on the island of Qualm Hah—it was Nine O'clock in the Morning. The Tazmagorian market was in full swing, and in the middle of all this buying and selling a photographer called Guumat had set up a makeshift studio. He'd hung a crudely painted backcloth from a couple of poles and set his camera, a massive device mounted on a polished wood tripod, in front of it. His assistant, a youth who shared his father's coxcomb hair and lightly striped blue-and-black skin, was parading a board on which examples of Guumat the Elder's photos were pinned.

"You like to be pictured by the great Guumat?" the youth said to Malingo. "He make you look real good."

Malingo grinned. "How much?"

"Two paterzem," said the father, gently pressing his offspring aside so as to close the sale.

"For both of us?" Candy said.

"One picture, same price. Two paterzem."

"We can afford that," Candy said to Malingo.

"Maybe you like costumes. Hats?" Guumat asked them, glancing at them up and down. "No extra cost."

“He’s politely telling us we look like vagabonds,” Malingo said.

“Well, we *are* vagabonds,” Candy replied.

Hearing this, Guumat looked suspicious. “You can pay?” he said.

“Yes, of course,” said Candy, and dug in the pocket of her brightly patterned trousers, held up with a belt of woven biffel-reeds, and pulled out some coins, sorting through them to give Guumat the paterzem.

“Good! Good!” he said. “Jamjam! Get the young lady a mirror. How old are you?”

“Almost sixteen, why?”

“You wear something much more ladylike, huh? We got nice things. Like I say, no extra charge.”

“I’m fine. Thank you. I want to remember this the way it really was.” She smiled at Malingo. “Two wanderers in Tazmagor, tired but happy.”

“That’s what you want, that’s what I give you,” Guumat said.

Jamjam handed her a little mirror and Candy consulted her reflection. She was a mess, no doubt about it. She’d cut her hair very short a couple of weeks before so she could hide from Houlihan among some monks on Soma Plume, but the haircut had been very hurried, and it was growing out at all angles.

“You look fine,” Malingo said.

“So do you. Here, see for yourself.”

She handed him the mirror. Her friends back in Chickentown

would have thought Malingo's face—with his deep orange hide and the fans of leathery skin to either side of his head—fit only for Halloween. But in the time they'd been traveling together through the islands, Candy had come to love the soul inside that skin: tenderhearted and brave.

Guumat arranged them in front of his camera.

"You need to stand very, very still," he instructed them. "If you move, you'll be blurred in the picture. So, now let me get the camera ready. Give me a minute or two."

"What made you want a photograph?" Malingo said from the corner of his mouth.

"Just to have. So I won't forget anything."

"As if," said Malingo.

"Please," said Guumat. "Be very still. I have to focus."

Candy and Malingo were silent for a moment.

"What are you thinking about?" Malingo murmured.

"Being on Yzil, at Noon."

"Oh yes. That's something we're sure to remember."

"Especially seeing *her*..."

"The Princess Breath."

Now, without Guumat requesting it, they both fell silent for a long moment, remembering their brief encounter with the Goddess on the Noon-Day island of Yzil. Candy had seen her first: a pale, beautiful woman in red and orange standing in a patch of warm light, *breathing out* a living creature, a purplish squid. This, it was said, was the means by which most of the

species in the Abarat had been brought into Creation. They had been breathed out by the Creatrix, who had then let the soft wind that constantly blew through the trees and vines of Yzil claim the newborn from her arms and carry them off to the sea.

“That was the most amazing—”

“I’m ready!” Guumat announced from beneath the black cloth he’d ducked under. “On the count of three we take the picture. One! Two! Three! Hold it! Don’t move! Don’t move! *Seven seconds.*” He lifted his head out from under the cloth and consulted his stopwatch. “Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. That’s it!” Guumat slipped a plate into his camera to stop the exposure. “Picture taken! Now we have to wait a few minutes while I prepare a print for you.”

“No problem,” Candy said.

“Are you going down to the ferry?” Jamjam asked her.

“Yes,” said Candy.

“You look like you’ve been on the move.”

“Oh, we have,” said Malingo. “We’ve seen a lot in the last few weeks, traveling around.”

“I’m jealous. I’ve never left Qualm Hah. I’d love to go adventuring.”

A minute later Jamjam’s father appeared with the photograph, which was still wet. “I can sell you a very nice frame, very cheap.”

“No, thanks,” said Candy. “It’s fine like this.”

She and Malingo looked at the photograph. The colors weren’t quite true, but Guumat caught them looking like a pair of happy

tourists, with their brightly colored, rumpled clothes, so they were quite happy.

Photograph in hand, they headed down the steep hill to the harbor and the ferry.

“You know, I’ve been thinking...” Candy said as they made their way through the crowd.

“Uh-oh.”

“Seeing the Princess Breath made me want to *learn* more. About magic.”

“No, Candy.”

“Come on, Malingo! Teach me. You know all about conjurations—”

“A little. Just a little.”

“It’s more than a little. You told me once that you spent every hour that Wolfswinkel was asleep studying his grimoires and his treatises.”

The subject of the wizard Wolfswinkel wasn’t often raised between them: the memories were so painful for Malingo. He’d been sold into slavery as a child (by his own father), and his life as Wolfswinkel’s possession had been an endless round of beatings and humiliations. It had only been Candy’s arrival at the wizard’s house that had given him the opportunity to finally escape his enslavement.

“Magic can be dangerous,” Malingo said. “There are laws and rules. Suppose I teach you the wrong things and we start to unknit the fabric of time and space? Don’t laugh! It’s possible. I read in

one of Wolfswinkel's books that magic was the beginning of the world. It could be the end too."

Candy looked irritated.

"Don't be cross," Malingo said. "I just don't have the right to teach you things that I don't really understand myself."

Candy walked for a while in silence. "Okay," she said finally.

Malingo cast Candy a sideways glance. "Are we still friends?" he said.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Of course," she said. "Always."

2 WHAT THERE IS TO SEE

AFTER THAT CONVERSATION THEY never mentioned the subject of magic again. They just went on with their island hopping, using the time-honored guide to the islands, *Klepp's Almenak*, as their chief source of information. Every now and again they'd get a feeling that the Criss-Cross Man was closing in on them, and they'd cut short their exploring and move on. About ten days after they'd left Tazmagor, their travels brought them to the island of Orlando's Cap. It was little more than a bare rock with an asylum for the insane built on its highest point. The asylum had been vacated many years before, but its interior bore the unmistakable signs of the madness of its occupants. The white walls were covered with strange scrawlings that here and there became a recognizable image—a lizard, a bird—only to dwindle into scrawlings again.

“What happened to all the people who used to be in here?” Candy wondered.

Malingo didn't know. But they quickly agreed that this wasn't a spot where they wanted to linger. The asylum had strange, sad echoes. So they went back to the tiny harbor to wait for another boat. There was an old man sitting on the dock, coiling a length of frayed rope. He had the strangest look on his face, his eyes all knotted up, as though he were blind. This wasn't the case, however. As soon as Candy and Malingo arrived, he began to

stare at them.

“You shouldn’t have come back here,” he growled.

“Me?” Malingo said.

“No, not you. Her. *Her!*” He pointed at Candy. “They’ll lock you away.”

“Who will?”

“*They* will, soon as they know what you are,” the man said, getting to his feet.

“You keep your distance,” Malingo warned.

“I’m not going to touch her,” the man replied. “I’m not that brave. But I see. Oh, I *see*. I know what you are, girl, and I know what you’ll do.” He shook his head. “Don’t you worry, I won’t touch you. No sir. I wouldn’t do a damn-fool thing like that.”

And so saying he edged around them, being sure to keep his distance, and ran off down the creaking dock, disappearing among the rocks.

“Well, I guess that’s what happens when you let the crazy folks out,” Malingo said with forced brightness.

“What was he seeing?”

“He was crazy, lady.”

“No, he really seemed to be seeing something. The way he was staring at me.”

Malingo shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. He had his copy of the *Almenak* open and used it to nimbly change the subject. “You know I’ve always wanted to see Hap’s Vault,” he said.

“Really?” said Candy, still staring at the rocks where the man

had fled. “Isn’t it just a cave?”

“Well, this is what Klepp says—” Malingo read aloud from the *Almenak*. “*Huffaker*—Hap’s Vault’s on Huffaker, which is at Nine O’clock in the Evening—*Huffaker is an impressive island, topographically speaking. Its rock formations—especially those below ground—are both vast and elaborately beautiful, resembling natural cathedrals and temples.*’ Interesting, huh? You want to go?”

Candy was still distracted. Her yes was barely audible.

“But listen to this,” Malingo went on, doing his best to draw her thoughts away from the old man’s talk. “*The greatest of these is Hap’s Vault*...blah, blah, blah...*‘discovered by Lydia Hap*...blah, blah, blah...*‘It is Miss Hap who was the first to suggest the Chamber of the Skein.’*”

“What’s the Skein?” Candy said, becoming a little more interested now.

“I quote: *‘It is the thread that joins all things—living and dead, sentient and unthinking—to all other things—’*”

Now Candy was interested. She came to stand beside Malingo, looking at the *Almenak* over his shoulder. He went on reading aloud. “*‘According to the persuasive Miss Hap, the thread originates in the Vault at Huffaker, appearing momentarily as a kind of flickering light before winding its way invisibly through the Abarat...connecting us, one to another.*” He closed the *Almenak*. “Don’t you think we should see this?”

“Why not?”

The island of Huffaker stood just one Hour from the Yebba Dim Day, the first island Candy had ever visited when she'd come to the Abarat. But whereas the great carved head of the Yebba Dim Day still had a few streaks of late light in the sky above it, Huffaker was smothered in darkness, a thick mass of clouds obscuring the stars. Candy and Malingo stayed in a threadbare hotel close to the harbor, where they ate and laid their plans for the journey, and after a few hours of sleep they set out on the dark but well sign-posted road that led to the Vault. They'd had the foresight to pack food and drink, which they needed. The journey was considerably longer than they'd been led to expect by the owner of the hotel, who'd given them some directions. Occasionally they'd hear the sound of an animal pursuing and bringing down another in the murk, but otherwise the journey was uneventful.

When they finally reached the caves themselves, they found that a few of the steep passageways had flaming torches mounted in brackets along the cold walls to illuminate the route. Surprisingly, given how extraordinary the phenomenon sounded, there were no other visitors here to witness it. They were alone as they followed the steeply inclined passageway that led them into the Vault. But they needed no guide to tell them when they had reached their destination.

“Oh Lordy Lou...” said Malingo. “Look at this place.”

His voice echoed back and forth across the vast cavern they had come into. From its ceiling—which was so far beyond the

reach of the torches' light as to be in total darkness—there hung dozens of stalactites. They were immense, each easily the size of an inverted church spire. They were the roosts of Abaratian bats, a detail Klepp had failed to mention in his *Almenak*. The creatures were much larger than any bat Candy had seen in the Abarat, and they boasted a constellation of seven bright eyes.

As for the depths of the cavern, they were as inky black as the ceiling.

"It's so much bigger than I expected it to be," Candy said.

"But where's the Skein?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll see it if we stand in the middle of the bridge."

Malingo gave her an uneasy look. The bridge that hung over the unfathomable darkness of the Vault didn't look very secure. Its timbers were cracked and antiquated, its ropes frayed and thin.

"Well, we've come *this* far," Candy said. "We may as well see what there is to see."

She set a tentative foot on the bridge. It didn't give way, so she ventured farther. Malingo followed. The bridge groaned and swayed, its boards (which were laid several inches apart) creaking with every step they took.

"Listen..." Candy whispered as they reached the middle of the bridge.

Above them they could hear the chittering of a chatty bat. And from far, far below the rushing of water.

"There's a river down there," Candy said.

"The *Almenak* doesn't—"

Before Malingo could finish his sentence, a third voice came out of the darkness and echoed around the Vault.

"As I live and breathe, will you look at that? *Candy Quackenbush!*"

The shout stirred up a few bats. They swooped from their roosts down into the dark air, and in doing so they disturbed hundreds of their siblings, so that in a matter of a few seconds countless bats were on the move; a churning cloud pierced by shifting constellations.

"Was that—?"

"Houlihan?" Candy said. "I'm afraid it was."

She'd no sooner spoken than there was a footfall at the far end of the bridge, and the Criss-Cross Man stepped into the torchlight.

"Finally," he said. "I have you where you cannot run."

Candy glanced back along the bridge. One of Houlihan's stitchling companions had appeared from the shadows and was striding toward them. It was a big, ill-shapen thing, with the teeth of a death's head, and as soon as it set foot on the bridge the frail structure began to sway from side to side. The stitchling clearly liked the sensation, because it proceeded to throw its weight back and forth, making the motion more and more violent. Candy grabbed hold of the railings, and Malingo did the same, but the frayed ropes offered little comfort. They were trapped. Houlihan

was now advancing from his end of the bridge. He had taken the flaming torch from the wall and held it ahead of him as he advanced. His face, with its criss-crossed tattoos, was gleaming with sweat and triumph.

Overhead, the cloud of bats continued to swell, as events on the bridge disturbed more and more of them. A few of the largest, intending perhaps to drive out these trespassers, swooped down on Candy and Malingo, letting out shrill shrieks. Candy did her best to ignore them: she was much more concerned with the Criss-Cross Man, who was now no more than seven or eight feet away.

“You’re coming with me, girl,” he said to her. “Carrion wants to see you in Gorgossium.”

He suddenly tossed the torch over the railing, and with both hands free he raced at Candy. She had nowhere left to run. “What now?” he said.

She shrugged. Desperate, she looked around at Malingo. “We may as well see—”

“What is there to see?” he replied.

She smiled, the tiniest smile, and then, without even glancing up at their pursuers again, they both threw themselves headfirst over the rope railing.

As they plunged into the darkness, Malingo let out a wild whoop of exhilaration, or perhaps fear, perhaps both. Seconds passed, and still they fell and fell and fell. And now everything was dark around them and the shrieking of the bats was gone,

erased by the noise of the river below.

Candy had time to think: *If we hit the water at this speed we'll break our necks*, and then suddenly Malingo had hold of her hand, and using some trick of acrobatics he'd learned hanging upside down from Wolfswinkel's ceiling, he managed to flip them both over, so that they were now falling feet first.

Two, three, four seconds later, they hit the water.

It wasn't cold. At least not icy. Their speed carried them deep, however, and the impact separated them. For Candy there was a panicky moment when she thought she'd used up all her breath. Then—God bless him!—Malingo had hold of her hand again, and gasping for air, they broke surface together.

"No bones broken?" Candy gasped.

"No. I'm fine. You?"

"No," she said, scarcely believing it. "I thought he had us."

"So did I. So did *he*."

Candy laughed.

They looked up, and for a moment she thought she glimpsed the dark ragged line of the bridge high above. Then the river's current carried them away, and whatever she'd seen was eclipsed by the roof of the cavern through which these waters ran. They had no choice but to go wherever it was going. Darkness was all around them, so the only clues they had to the size of caverns through which the river traveled was the way the water grew more tempestuous when the channel narrowed, and how its rushing din mellowed when the way widened again.

Once, for just a few tantalizing seconds, they caught a glimpse of what looked like a bright thread—like the Skein of Lydia Hap’s account—running through the air or the rock above them.

“Did you see that?” Malingo said.

“Yes,” said Candy, smiling in the darkness. “I saw it.”

“Well, at least we saw what we came to see.”

It was impossible to judge the passage of time in such a formless place, but some while after their glimpsing of the Skein they caught sight of another light, a long way ahead: a luminescence which steadily grew brighter as the river carried them toward it.

“That’s starlight,” Candy said.

“You think so?”

She was right; it was. After a few more minutes, the river finally brought them out of Huffaker’s caverns and into that quiet time just after nightfall. A fine net of cloud had been cast over the sky, and the stars caught in it were turning the Izabella silver.

Their journey by water wasn’t over, however. The river current quickly carried them too far from the dark cliffs of Huffaker to attempt to swim back to it and bore them out into the straits between Nine and Ten O’clock. Now the Izabella took charge, her waters holding them up without their needing to exert themselves with swimming. They were carried effortlessly out past Ninnyhammer (where the lights burned bright in the cracked dome of Kaspar Wolfswinkel’s house) and south, into the light, to the bright, tropical waters that surrounded the island

of the Nonce. The sleepy smell of an endless afternoon came off the island, which stood at Three O'clock, and the breeze carried dancing seeds from the lush slopes of that Hour. But the Nonce was not to be their destination. The Izabella's currents carried them on past the Afternoon to the vicinity of the island of Gnomon.

Before they could be delivered to the shores of that island, however, Malingo caught sight of their salvation.

"I see a sail!" he said, and started yelling to whoever might be up on deck. "Over here! *Here!*"

"They see us!" Candy said. "They see us!"

3 ON THE *PARROTO PARROTO*

THE LITTLE VESSEL MALINGO'S sharp eyes had spotted wasn't moving, so they were able to let the gentle current carry them toward it. It was a humble fishing boat no more than fifteen feet in length and in a very dilapidated condition. Its crew members were hard at work hauling up onto the deck a net full to bursting with tens of thousands of small mottled turquoise-and-orange fish, called smatterlings. Hungry seabirds, raucous and aggressive, wheeled around the boat or bobbed on the water close by, waiting to snatch up those smatterlings that the fishermen failed to get out of the net, onto the deck and into the hold of their boat quickly enough.

By the time Candy and Malingo were within hailing distance of the little vessel, most of the hard labor was over, and the happy crew members (there were only four on the boat) were singing a song of the sea as they folded the nets.

"Fishes, feed me! Fishes fine! Swim in the nets And catch the line! Feed my children! Fill my dishes! That's why I love you, Little fishes!"

When they were done with the song, Malingo called to them from out of the water.

"Excuse me!" he yelled. "There are still two more fishes down here!"

"I see you!" said a young man among the crew.

“Throw them a line,” said the wiry bearded man in the wheelhouse, who was apparently the Captain.

It didn’t take very long for Candy and Malingo to be brought up over the side of the boat and onto the stinking deck.

“Welcome aboard the *Parroto Parroto*,” said the Captain. “Somebody get ’em some blankets, will you?”

Though the sun was still reasonably warm in this region between Four O’clock in the Afternoon and Five, their time in the water had chilled both Candy and Malingo to the bone, and they were glad of the blankets and the deep bowls of spicy fish soup that they were given a few minutes later.

“I’m Perbo Skebble,” said the Captain. “The old man is Mizzel, the cabin girl is Galatea, and the young fellow there is my son Charry. We’re from Efreet, and we’re heading back there with our hold full.”

“Good fishin’,” Charry said. He had a broad, happy face, which fell naturally into an expression of easy contentment.

“There’ll be consequences,” Mizzel said, his own features as naturally joyless as Charry’s were naturally happy.

“Why do you always have to be so *grim*?” Galatea said, staring contemptuously at Mizzel. Her hair was shaved so close to her scalp, it was little more than a shadow. Her muscular arms were decorated with elaborate tattoos. “Didn’t we just save two souls from drowning? We’re all on the Creatrix’ side on this boat. Nothing bad’s going to happen to us.”

Mizzel just sneered at her, rudely snatching the empty soup

bowls from Candy and Malingo. “We’ve still got to get past Gorgossium,” he said as he headed down into the galley with the bowls. He cast a sly, faintly threatening glance back at Candy as he departed, as though to see whether he’d succeeded in sowing the seeds of fear in her.

“What did he mean by that?” Malingo said.

“Nothing,” said Skebble.

“Oh, let’s tell the truth here,” said Galatea. “We’re not going to lie to these people. That would be shameful.”

“Then you tell ’em,” Skebble said. “Charry, come, lad. I want to be sure the catch is properly stowed.”

“What’s the problem?” Candy said to Galatea, when the father and son had gone about their work.

“You have to understand that there’s no ice on this boat, so we’ve got to get the catch back to Efrete before the fish go rotten on us. Which means...let me show you.”

She led them to the wheelhouse, where there was an old and much-weathered map pinned up on the wall. She pointed a well-bitten fingernail at a place between the islands of Soma Plume and Gnomon.

“We’re about here,” she said. “And we’ve got to get...up to here.” Their destination lay past the Twenty-Fifth Hour, way to the north of the archipelago. “If we had more time, we’d take the long way back, hugging the coast of Gnomon and then passing the Nonce and heading north between Ninnyhammer and Jibarish, and rounding the Twenty-Fifth till we get back to our

village.”

The Twenty-Fifth, Candy thought: she'd been there briefly with the women of the Fantomaya. She'd seen all kinds of visions, including one that she'd dreamed of many times since: a woman walking on a sky full of birds, while fish swam in the watery heavens around her head.

“There's no chance you could drop us off at the Twenty-Fifth, is there?” Candy said.

But even as she spoke she remembered the dark side of life on the Twenty-Fifth. She'd been pursued there by a pair of monsters called the Fugit Brothers, whose features moved around their faces on clicking legs.

“You know what?” she said. “Maybe that's not such a good idea after all.”

“Well, we can't do it anyway,” Galatea told her. “It'll take too long. The fish'll rot.”

“So which way are we going?” Malingo said.

Candy had guessed already, from looking at the map.

“We're going between the Pyramids of Xuxux and Gorgossium.”

Galatea grinned. Every other tooth in her mouth was missing. “You should be a-fishing, you should,” she said. “Yep, that's where we're going. Mizzel thinks it's a bad plan. He says there's all manner of things that live on the island of Midnight. Monsterosities, he says. Horridy things that will come flapping over and attack the ship.”

“Why would they do that?” Candy asked.

“Because they want to eat the fish. Or else they want to eat us. Maybe both. I don’t know. Whatever it is, it ain’t good news. Anyhow, we can’t be squibbies about this—”

“Squibbies?” said Candy.

“Cowards,” Malingo said.

“We gotta sail past Midnight whether we like it or not,” Galatea went on. “Either that or we lose the fish, and a lot of people will go hungry.”

“Not a good choice,” said Skebble as he climbed out of the hold. “But like the girl says, we got no choice. And...’fraid you got no choice but to come with us. Either that or we dumps you in the water again.”

“I think we’d rather stay on board,” Candy said, giving Malingo an anxious look.

They headed north, out of the bright afternoon waters of the straits between Four and Five into the dark seas that surrounded Midnight. It wasn’t a subtle change. One minute the Sea of Izabella was glittering with golden sunlight and they were warm; the next, waves of darkness covered the sun and a bitter cold swept in to surround them. Off to their port side they could see the immense island of Gorgossium. Even from a considerable distance they could pick out the windows of the thirteen towers of the fortress of Inquisit and the lights that burned around the Todo mines.

“You want a closer look?” said Mizzel to Candy.

He passed her his battered old telescope, and she studied the island through it. There seemed to be immense heads carved from some of the stony outcrops of the island. Something that looked like a wolf's head, something that looked vaguely human. But far more chilling were the vast insects she saw crawling around the island: like fleas or lice grown to the size of trucks. They made her shudder, even at such a safe distance.

"Not a pretty place, is it?" Skebble said.

"No, not really," said Candy.

"Plenty of folks like it though," the Captain went on. "If you've got a darkness in your heart, that be the place you go, huh? That be the place you feel *at home*."

"Home..." Candy murmured.

Malingo was standing beside her and heard her speak the word.

"Homesick?" he said.

"No. *No*. Well...sometimes. A little. Just about my mom, really. But no, that wasn't what I was thinking." She nodded toward Gorgossium. "It's just strange to think of somebody calling that dismal place their home."

"*Each to their Hour*, as the poet wrote," Malingo said.

"Which is your Hour?" Candy asked him. "Where do you belong?"

"I don't know," Malingo said sadly. "I lost my family a long time ago—or at least they lost me—and I don't expect to see them again in this life."

“We could try and find them for you.”

“One day, maybe.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “When we don’t have so many teeth nipping at our heels.”

There was a sudden explosion of laughter from the wheelhouse, which brought the conversation to an end. Candy wandered over to see what was going on. There was a small television (which had red curtains to either side of the screen, like a little theater) placed on the floor. Mizzel, Charry and Galatea were watching it, much entertained by the antics of a cartoon boy.

“It’s the Commexo Kid!” Charry said. “He’s so wild!”

Candy had seen the Kid’s image many times now. It was hard to go very far in the Abarat without meeting his perpetually smiling face on a billboard or a wall. His antics and his catchphrases were used to sell everything from cradles to coffins, and all that anybody would want in between. Candy watched the flickering blue screen for a little while, thinking back to her encounter with the man who had created the character: Rojo Pixler. She’d met him on Ninnyhammer, briefly, and in the many weeks since she’d half expected to see him again at some turn in the road. He was part of her future, she knew, though she didn’t know how or why.

On screen the Kid was playing tricks, as usual, much to the amusement of his little audience. It was simple, knockabout stuff. Paint was spattered; food was thrown. And through it all jogged the relentlessly cheerful figure of the Commexo Kid, dispensing smiles, pies and “just a li’l bit o’ love” (as he would

round off every show saying) to the world.

“Hey, Miss Misery,” said Mizzel, glancing around at Candy. “You don’t laugh!”

“I just don’t think it’s very funny, that’s all.”

“He’s the best!” Charry said. “Lordy Lou, the things he says!”

“*Happy! Happy! Happy!*” said Galatea, perfectly copying the Kid’s squeaky voice. “*That’s what I is! Happy! Happy! Hap—*”

She was interrupted by a panicked shout from Malingo. “We’ve got *trouble!*” he yelled. “*And it’s coming from Gorgossium!*”

4 THE SCAVENGERS

CANDY WAS THE FIRST out of the wheelhouse and back on deck. Malingo had Mizzel's telescope to his eye and was studying the threatening skies in the direction of Gorgossium. There were four dark-winged creatures flying toward the fishing boat. They were visible because their innards glowed through their translucent flesh, as though lit by some bitter fire. They gibbered as they approached, the chatter of mad, hungry things.

"What are they?" Candy said.

"They're zethekaratchia," Mizzel informed her. "Zethek for short. The ever-hungry ones. They can never eat enough. That's why we can see their bones."

"Not good news," Candy guessed.

"Not good news."

"They'll take the fish!" Skebble said, appearing from the bowels of the ship. He'd apparently been attending to the engine, because he was covered with oil stains and carried a large hammer and an even more sizeable wrench.

"Lock down the holds!" he yelled to his little crew. *"Quickly, or we'll lose all the fish!"* He pointed a stubby finger at Malingo and Candy. *"That means you as well!"*

"If they can't get to the fish, won't they come after us?" Malingo said.

"We have to save the fish," Skebble insisted. He caught hold

of Malingo's arm and pressed him toward the brimming holds. "Don't argue!" he said. "I don't want to lose the catch! And they're getting closer!"

Candy followed his gaze skyward. The zethek were less than ten yards from the boat now, swooping down over the twilight sea to begin their scavenging. Candy didn't like the idea of trying to protect herself against them unarmed, so she grabbed hold of the wrench in Skebble's left hand. "If you don't mind, I'll take that!" she said, surprising even herself.

"Take it!" he said, and went to help the rest of the crew with the labor of closing the holds.

Candy headed for the ladder on the side of the wheelhouse. She put the wrench between her teeth (not a pleasant experience: it tasted of fish oil and Skebble's sweat) and clambered up the ladder, turning to face the zethek once she reached the top. The sight of her standing on the wheelhouse, the wrench in her hand like a club, had put a little doubt in them. They were no longer swooping down on the *Parroto Parroto* but hovering ten or twelve feet above it.

"Come on down!" Candy yelled to them. "I dare you!"

"Are you crazy?" Charry hollered.

"Get down!" Malingo called to her. "*Candy, get—*"

Too late! The closest zethek took Candy's bait and swooped down, its long, bone-bright fingers reaching to snatch at her head.

"Good boy!" she said. "Look what I've got for you."

She swung the wrench in a wide arc. The tool was heavy,

and in truth she had very little control over it, so it was more by accident than intention that she actually struck the creature. That said, it was quite a blow. The zethek dropped out of the sky as if shot, striking the boards of the wheelhouse so hard they cracked.

For a second he lay still.

“You killed him!” said Galatea. “Ha-ha! Good for you!”

“I...don’t *think* he’s dead...” Candy said.

What Galatea couldn’t hear, Candy could. The zethek was *growling*. Very slowly he raised his gargoylish head. Dark blood ran from his nose.

“You...hurt...me...”

“Well, come over here,” Candy said, beckoning to the beast across the fractured boards of the roof. “I’ll do it again.”

“The girl’s suicidal,” Mizzel remarked.

“Your friend is right,” the zethek said. “You *are* suicidal.”

Having spoken, the zethekaratchia opened his mouth *and kept opening it, wider and wider*, until it was literally large enough to bite off the top of Candy’s head. In fact, that seemed to be his intention, because he lunged forward, leaping across the hole in the roof and throwing Candy down on her back. Then he jumped on top of her. The wrench flew out of her hand; she had no time to pick it up. The zethek was upon her, his mouth vast—

She closed her eyes as a cloud of the beast’s breath broke against her face. She had seconds to live. And then suddenly Skebble was there, hammer in hand.

“Leave the girl alone,” he hollered, and brought the hammer

down on the zethek's skull, delivering it such a calamitous blow that he simply fell backward into the wheelhouse through the hole in the roof, dead.

"That was brave, girl," he said, hauling Candy to her feet.

She patted the top of her head just to be sure it was still there.

It was.

"One down," said Candy. "Three to—"

"Help, somebody!" Mizzel yelled. "*Help!*"

Candy turned around to find that another of these wretched things had caught hold of Mizzel and was pinning him to the deck, preparing to make a meal of him.

"*No, you don't!*" she yelled, and ran for the ladder.

Only when she was halfway down did she remember that she'd left the wrench on the roof. It was too late to go back for it.

The deck, when she reached it, was slick with fish oil and water, and instead of running she found herself sliding over it, completely out of control. She hollered for someone to stop her, but there was no one close enough. Straight ahead was the hold, its door already opened by one of the beasts. Her only hope of stopping herself was to reach out and grab the zethek that was assaulting Mizzel. But she'd have to be quick, before the opportunity slid by. She put out her hand and made a grab for the beast. The zethek saw her coming and turned to ward her off, but he wasn't fast enough: she caught hold of his hair. He squawked like an enraged macaw and struggled to free himself, but Candy held on. Unfortunately, her momentum was too great to bring her

to a halt. Quite the reverse. Instead, the creature came along with her, reaching up to try and untangle her fingers from his ratty locks even as they both slid toward the gaping hold.

Over the edge they went and down among the fish. Luckily it wasn't a long fall; the hold was almost filled with smatterlings. But it wasn't a pleasant landing, a thousand fish sliding beneath them, cold and wet and very dead.

Candy still had her grip on the zethek's hair, so that when the creature stood up—which he did instantly—she was hauled to her feet too.

The creature wasn't used to being held by anybody, especially some scrap of a girl. He writhed and raged, snapping at her with his over-sized mouth one moment, the next attempting to shrug her loose by shaking his body so violently that his bones clattered.

Finally, apparently despairing of escape, the zethek called to his surviving comrades: *"Kud! Nattum! Here! In the hold! Now!"*

A few seconds after the call had gone out, Kud and Nattum appeared over the edge of the hold.

"Methis!" Nattum said, grinning. "You have a girl for me!"

So saying, he opened his mouth and inhaled so powerfully that Candy had to fight to keep herself from being pulled straight into the maw.

Kud wasn't interested in such tricks. He shoved Nattum aside. "I take her!" he said. "I'm hungry."

Nattum shoved back.

"So am I!" he growled.

While she was being fought over, Candy took the opportunity to yell for help.

“Somebody! *Malingo? Charry?*”

“Too late,” said Kud, and leaning over the edge of the hold he caught hold of her and pulled her up. He was so quick and violent that Candy lost her grip on Methis. Her feet slid over the slimy fish for a moment; then she was in the air, being hauled toward Kud’s mouth, which now also opened like a toothed tunnel.

The next moment everything went dark. Her head—much to her horror—was in the mouth of the beast.

5 THE SPEAKING OF A WORD

THOUGH HER ENTIRE SKULL was suddenly enclosed by the zethek's mouth, Candy was still able to hear one thing from the outside world. Just one stupid thing. It was the squeaking voice of the Commexo Kid, singing his eternally optimistic little song.

“Happy! Happy! Happy!” it squealed.

She offered up a little prayer in that dark moment, to ask any God or Goddess, of Abarat or the Hereafter, who would listen. It was a very simple prayer. It simply said: *Please don't let that ridiculous Kid be the last thing I hear before I die—*

And, thank the divinities, her prayer was answered.

There was a dull thud directly above her, and she felt the tension of Kud's jaws relax. She instantly pulled her head out of his mouth. This time the slickness of the fish beneath her was to her advantage. She slid across the carpet of smatterlings in time to see Kud collapse among the fish. She took her eyes off him and looked up at her savior.

It was Malingo. He was standing there with Skebble's hammer in his hand. He smiled at Candy. But his moment of triumph was short. In the next instant Kud rose up roaring from his slimy bed of fish and pulled the legs out from under Malingo, who fell down on his back.

“Ah-ha!” Kud yelled, laying eyes on the hammer that slipped

out of Malingo's hand when he fell. Kud snatched it up and got to his feet. The brightness in his bones had become a furious blaze in the last few minutes. In the sockets of his skull, two dots of scarlet rage flickered as he turned his stare toward Candy. He looked like something from a ghost-train ride. Wielding the hammer, he raced at Candy.

"Run!" Malingo yelled.

But she had nowhere to run to. There was a zethek to the left of her and one to the right, and behind her a solid wall. A skeletal smile spread over Kud's face.

"Any last words?" he said as he lifted the hammer above his head.

"Come on," he growled. "You must have something in your head."

Curiously, she did have something in her head: a word she could not even remember hearing until this moment—

Kud seemed to see the confusion in her eyes.

"Speak!" he said, striking the wall to the left of her head with the hammer. The reverberations echoed all around the hold. The dead smatterlings convulsed, as though they'd been given a spasm of life. *"Talk to me!"* Kud said, striking the wall to the right of Candy's head. Showers of sparks erupted from the spot, and the fish jumped a second time.

Candy put her hand up to her throat. There was a word there. She could feel it, like something she'd eaten but not quite swallowed. It wanted to be spoken. That she was certain about.

It wanted to be spoken.

And who was she to deny it its ambitions? She let the syllables rise up, unbidden. And spoke them.

“Jassassakya-thüim!”

she said.

From the corner of her eye she saw Malingo sit bolt upright on the bed of fish.

“Oh Lordy Lou...” he said, his voice hushed with awe. “How do you know that word?”

“I don’t,” Candy said.

But the *air* knew it. The *walls* knew it. No sooner were the syllables out of her lips than everything began to vibrate in response to the sound of whatever Candy had said. And with each vibration the air and the walls repeated the syllables in their own strange fashion.

Jassassakya-thüim!

Jassassakya-thüim!

Jassassakya-thüim!

“What...have...you...done...girl?” Kud said.

Candy didn’t know. Malingo, on the other hand, did.

“She’s uttered a Word of Power,” he said.

“I have?” Candy replied. “I mean, *I have*. That’s what I’ve done.”

“Magic?” Kud said. He began to retreat from her now, the hammer sliding out of his fingers. “I knew there was something about you from the beginning. You’re a witch-girl! That’s what

you are! A witchgirl!”

As the zethek’s panic grew, so did the reverberations. With each repetition they gathered strength.

Jassassakya-thüim!

Jassassakya-thüim!

Jassassakya-thüim!

“I think you should get out of here now,” Malingo yelled to Candy as the din climbed.

“What?”

“I said: *Get out! Out!*”

As he spoke he stumbled toward her through the fish, which were also vibrating in rhythm with the words. The zetheks paid no attention to him, nor to Candy. They were suffering from the effects of the word. They had their hands clamped over their ears, as though they were afraid it was deafening them, which perhaps it was.

“This is *not* a safe place to be,” Malingo said when he got to Candy’s side.

She nodded. She was beginning to feel the distressing influence of the vibrations herself. Galatea was there to lift her up onto the deck. Then both girls turned to help Malingo, reaching down to catch hold of his long arms. Candy counted:

“One, two, three—”

And they hauled together, lifting him up with surprising ease.

The scene in the hold had become surreal. The Word was making the catch vibrate so violently that at first glance the fish

seemed to be alive again. As for the zethek, they were like three flies caught in a jar, propelled back and forth across the hold, slamming against the sides. They seemed to have forgotten all about the possibility of escape. The word had made them crazy, or stupid, or both.

Skebble was standing on the opposite side of the hold. He pointed to Candy and yelled at her: “*Make it stop!* Or you’re going to shake my boat apart!”

He was right about the boat. The vibrations in the hold had spread throughout the vessel. The boards were shaking so violently nails were being spat into the air, the already cracked wheelhouse was rocking to and fro, the rigging was vibrating like the strings of a huge guitar; even the mast was swaying.

Candy looked over at Malingo.

“See?” she said. “If you’d taught me some magic I’d know how to turn this *off*.”

“Well, wait,” Malingo said. “Where did you learn that word?”

“I didn’t learn it.”

“You must have heard it somewhere.”

“No. I swear. It just appeared in my throat. I don’t know where it came from.”

“If you two have quite finished chatting?” Skebble hollered over the din. “My boat—”

“Yes!” Candy shouted back. “I know, I know!”

“Inhale it!” Malingo said.

“What?”

“*The Word!* Inhale the Word!”

“Inhale it?”

“Do as he says!” Galatea yelled. “Before the boat sinks!”

Everything was now shaking to the rhythm of the Word. There wasn’t a board or a rope or a hook from bow to stern that wasn’t in motion. In the hold the three zetheks were still being pitched around, sobbing for mercy.

Candy closed her eyes. Strangely enough, she could *see* the word that she’d uttered in her mind’s eye. There it was, clear as crystal.

Jass...assa...kya...thiim...

She emptied her lungs through her nostrils. Then, still keeping her eyes tightly shut, she drew a deep breath.

The word in her mind’s eye *shook*. Then it cracked, and it seemed to fly apart. Was it just her imagination, or could she feel it coming back into her throat? She swallowed hard, and the word was gone.

The reaction was instantaneous. The vibrations died away. The boards dropped back into place, peppered by nails. The mast stopped lurching to and fro. The fish stopped their grotesque cavorting.

The zetheks quickly realized that the attack had ceased. They unstopped their ears and shook their heads, as though to put their thoughts back in order.

“Go, brothers!” Nattum said. “Before the witch-girl tries some new trick!”

He didn't wait to see that his siblings were doing as he suggested. He started to beat his wings furiously and climbed into the air, weaving a zigzag course skyward. Methis was about to follow; then he turned to Kud.

"Let's ruin their catch!"

Skebble let out a howl of complaint. "*No!*" he yelled. "*Don't—*"

His cry was ignored. The two creatures squatted down among the fish, and the vilest smell Candy had ever smelled in her life rose up from the hold.

"Are they—?"

Malingo nodded grimly.

"The catch! The catch!" Skebble was howling. "Oh, Lord, no! No!"

Methis and Kud thought all this was hugely amusing. Having done their worst, they beat their wings and lifted off.

"Damn you! Damn you!" Skebble yelled as they flew past.

"That was enough fish to feed the village for half a season," Galatea said mournfully.

"And they poisoned it?" Malingo said.

"What do you think? Smell that stink. Who could ever eat something that smelled like that?"

Kud had by now escaped into the darkness, following Nattum back to Gorgossium. But Methis was so busy laughing at what they'd just done that he accidentally clipped the top of the mast with his wing. For a moment he struggled to recover himself but lost his momentum and fell back toward the *Parroto Parroto*,

hitting the edge of the wheelhouse roof and bouncing off onto the deck, where he lay unconscious.

There was a moment of surprised silence from everybody on deck. The whole sequence of events—from Candy’s speaking of the Word to Methis’ crash—had taken at most a couple of minutes.

It was old Mizzel who broke the hush.

“Charry?” he said.

“Yes?”

“Get a rope. And you, Galatea, help him. Tie up this burden of filth.”

“What for?”

“Just do it!” Mizzel said. “And be quick about it, before the damn thing wakes up!”

6 TWO CONVERSATIONS

“SO,” SAID MIZZEL, ONCE the stunned zethek was firmly secured. “You want to know my plan?”

They were all sitting at the bow of the boat, as far from the stink of the hold as they could get. Candy was still in a mild state of shock: what she’d just witnessed herself doing (speaking a word she didn’t even know she knew) needed to be thought about very carefully. But now was not the time to do the thinking. Mizzel had a plan, and he wanted to share it.

“We’re going to have to dump out all the smatterlings. Every last fish.”

“A lot of people are going to go hungry,” Galatea said.

“Not necessarily,” Mizzel replied. He had a sly expression on his scarred and weatherworn face. “To the west of us lies the island of Six O’clock...”

“Babilonium,” Candy said.

“Precisely. Babilonium. The Carnival Island. Masques and parades and fairs and bug wrestling and music and dancing and *freaks*.”

“Freaks?” said Galatea. “What kind of freaks?”

“Every kind. Things that are too small, things that are too large, things with three heads, things with no head at all. If you want to see freaks and monsters, then Babilonium’s the place to find them.”

While the old man was speaking, Skebble had gotten up and gone to the door to study the bound zethek.

“Have you *seen* these freak shows on Babilonium?” he said to Mizzel.

“Certainly. I worked in Babilonium in my youth. Made a lot of money too.”

“Doing what?” said Galatea.

Mizzel looked a little uncomfortable. “I don’t want to go into details,” he said. “Let me just say it involved...um, bodily gases...and flame.”

Nobody said anything for a moment or two. Then Charry piped up. “You farted fire?” he said.

Everybody subdued their amusement with a great effort of will. All except for Skebble, who let out a whoop of laughter. “You did!” he said. “You did, didn’t you?”

“It was a living,” Mizzel said, staring fiercely at Charry, his ears bright red. “Now can I *please* get on with my story?”

“Go on,” said Skebble. “Get to the point.”

“Well, it seems to me if we could sail this damn boat to Babilonium, we would sure as certain find somebody to buy that zethek and put him in one of them freak shows.”

“Would we make much money from a deal like that?”

“We’ll make sure we do. And when we’ve done the deal we’ll sail to Tazmagor, get the hold scrubbed out and *buy* a new supply of fish.”

“What do you think?” Candy said to Skebble.

He glanced out at the bound creature, scratching at his tatty beard.

“No harm in trying,” he replied.

“Babilonium, huh?” Candy said.

“What, you have a problem with this?” Skebble said testily. It had been a grim and eventful couple of hours. He was obviously weary, his energies exhausted. “If you don’t want to come with us—”

“No, no, we’ll come,” said Candy. “I’ve never been to Babilonium.”

“The playground of the Abarat!” Malingo said. “Fun for all the family!”

“Well, then...what are we waiting for?” said Galatea. “We can dump the smatterlings as we go!”

By chance Otto Houlihan was on Gorgossium at that time, waiting for an audience with the Lord of Midnight. It was not an appetizing prospect. He was going to have to report that though he came very close to capturing the girl in Hap’s Vault he had failed, and that she and her geshrat companion had most likely thrown themselves to their deaths. The news would not make Carrion happy, he knew. This made Houlihan nervous. He remembered all too well the feeding of the nightmares he’d witnessed in the Twelfth Tower. He didn’t want to die the same way as the wretched miner had died. In an attempt to put these troubling thoughts from his mind, he slipped away to a little inn called The Fool in Chains where he could drink

some Hobarookian vodka. Perhaps it was time—he thought as he drank—to cease his life as a hunter and find a less risky means of making money. As a bug-wrestling promoter, perhaps; or a knife juggler. Anything, as long as he never had to come back to Gorgossium and *wait*...

His clammy meditations were interrupted by the sound of laughter from outside. He staggered out to see what all the fuss was about. Several customers, many in states of inebriation as bad or worse than his own, were standing in a rough circle, pointing to something on the ground in their midst.

The Criss-Cross Man went to see. There in the dirt was one of the uglier occupants of Gorgossium: a large zethek. He had apparently collided with a tree and had fallen to earth, under which he was now standing, looking very confused, picking leaves out of his hair and spitting out dirt. The drunkards just kept laughing at him.

“Go on, *laugh at me!*” the creature said. “Kud seen a thing you be way afraid of. A terrible thing I seen.”

“Oh yeah?” said one of the drunks. “And what was that?”

Kud spat out one last mouthful of dirt. “A *witch-girl*,” he said. “*Does bad magic on me. Almost kills me with her Word.*”

Houlihan elbowed his way through the crowd and grabbed hold of the zethek’s wing so that he wouldn’t try to escape. Then he peered into his broken, confounded face. “You said you *fought* with this girl?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Was she alone?”

“No. She was with a geshrat.”

“You’re sure?”

“You saying I don’t know what a geshrat looks like? I’ve been drinking their blood since I was a baby.”

“Never mind about the geshrat. Talk to me about the girl.”

“Don’t shake me! I will not be shaken. I’m—”

“Kud the zethek. Yes, I heard. And I’m Otto Houlihan, the Criss-Cross Man.”

The moment Houlihan offered up his name, the crowd that had been pressing around Kud suddenly melted away.

“I’ve heard of you,” Kud said. “You’re dangerous.”

“Not to my friends,” Otto replied. “You want to be my friend, Kud?”

The zethek took but a moment to think on this.

“Of course,” the creature said, bowing his head respectfully.

“Good,” said the Criss-Cross Man. “Then back to the girl. Did you catch her name?”

“The geshrat called her—” He frowned. “What was it? Mandy? Dandy?”

“Candy?”

“Candy! Yes! He called her Candy!”

“And on what island did you last see this girl?”

“No island,” Kud replied. “I saw her on a boat, out there—” He pointed behind him, toward the lightless waters of the Izabella. “You go after her?”

“Why?”

Kud looked nervous. “Magic in her,” he said. “Monstrous. She’s monstrous.”

Houlihan didn’t remark on the oddity of a creature like Kud calling Candy a monster. He simply said: “Where do I find her?”

“Follow your nose. We spoiled their catch by befouling their hold.”

“Very sophisticated,” Houlihan said, and turned his back on the befuddled beast to consider his options. If he stayed on Gorgossium he would eventually be admitted into Carrion’s presence and be obliged to explain how once again the girl had outmaneuvered him. The alternative was to leave Midnight and hope he would be able to find Candy and get some answers *from* her *before* Carrion summoned him back and demanded answers. Yes! That was better. A lot better.

“Are you finished with me?” the zethek growled.

Houlihan glanced back at the wretched thing.

“Yes, yes. Go,” he said. “I’ve got work to do, following your *stink*.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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