

*Il lungo viaggio di Garry Hop*

The Long Voyage of Garry Hop

by

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## Second Chapter

### TABULA ELOQUENS

Garry Hop held the map of the Island of Hunnia in his hands. It was perfectly drawn. Each zone had a specific name and symbol. On the edge of the scroll there were tiny descriptions flanked by alphanumeric codes, sequences of letters and numbers still incomprehensible to him.

Standing out at the top of the scroll were the words “Tabula Eloquens.” His mother had taught him the ancient tongue, so he knew that “tabula” meant table. But “eloquens”? He had no idea.

He was entranced by the island’s form. It was a rocky mass of an unusual shape, which Odelia had often tried to describe as she was recounting her childhood with Bando Gropius.

The Island of Hunnia looked like a giant mushroom of solid rock resting on the Sea of Blaseno: the base of its rocky stem sunk into the seafloor, and only at low tide was the island accessible via a sandy shore flecked with jagged rocks. That “beach” emerged every 6 hours and made it possible to reach the rocky shaft and attempt the climb up to the top of the island. There, like a flattened cupola it expanded into a platform rich in trees and plants that touched the clouds. But in order to walk amid the flourishing vegetation you had to get past the spikes of white and pink rock that lined the plateau’s perimeter. Snowy mountains, meadows and valleys stretched into the interior. At the exact center of the island was the Emerald Forest, and there, after a journey of several miles, lay the great hut of Gropius.

“Fantastic!” thought Garry, astonished. As he looked at the map, he felt like he was already surrounded by Hunnia’s magical landscape.

With his curiosity erupting like a volcano, he began to reading all the various descriptions in the map’s margins. But he wasn’t even able to finish the description of the Emerald Forest when, all of a sudden, the map and writing vanished leaving the scroll bare and silent, just an insignificant sheet of whitish paper.

“What happened?” he said in disbelief.

He glanced at the mirror which still lay on the bed, then grabbed it and held it up close to the scroll. He thought that if it had been able to make the book's pages come unstuck, it might work its magic on the scroll as well. But nothing happened.

"What the heck do I have to do?" he wondered, staring at the Or'Imago.

Then he heard his mom's feeble voice, like a faint song: "Garry, don't get upset. Warm the mirror in your hands." Odelia was whispering, awakened from her sleep induced by the herbal tea.

The boy approached her, his heart pounding. "Are you feeling better? Has the pain subsided?"

"The Blue Herb helped me get some rest. Do you really want to go to Hunnia?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Garry's reply was immediate: "I'm doing it for you. Before you drifted off to sleep you whispered 'Or'Imago.'" You gave me the first clue. And look at this, the mirror magically made the pages come unstuck. Can you tell me anything else?"

"My son, I'm afraid. Very afraid. To me, you're still a boy. How will you ever manage to reach Hunnia?"

"I'll find a way, mom. I have to try. It's our only choice. We need the magical herbs. We need the cure to help you and all the others who are suffering. We can't just give up. Do you want to die? Do you want Elly and me to be all alone?"

Odelia gave her son a pained nod. "Go, Garry. I trust you. But if anything were to happen to you ..." and her sentence trailed off, perhaps from exhaustion or perhaps from dread.

The boy held the mirror in his hands and they slowly warmed it up. "Now what do I do?"

"You must not be scared by what you're about to see. That map is the "Tabula Eloquens." In the ancient tongue "tabula" means not only table but also map. And "eloquens" means expressive or talking. It is a talking map," Odelia explained.

"*Talking?* A piece of paper that *talks*?" Garry was stunned.

"Yes. Gropius created it when I was on the island. Thanks to that map I never lost my way and always knew where to gather the ingredients for the potions," she quickly explained.

"You mean the map even answers questions?" said Garry, a touch of skepticism in his voice.

With a sigh and a blink, his mother realized that she had a lot of explaining to do, and that now was the time to do it. "Most certainly. Many years have passed and I hope it still works. I haven't needed it since I left the island and came back to live in Karan, where I met your father.

Back then there was no war and the Fiderbi were a friendly people, and we shared Gropius's miraculous medicines with them. The old shaman sent us shipments of herbs and flowers with the Donarius."

Garry was confused. "*Donarius?*"

"The Donarius was a large rowboat, guided by a group of Great Hands ..." Odelia didn't finish the sentence.

Garry smiled. He'd already read about the Great Hands. "Gorillas with silver fur and golden eyes!"

"Right, the big gorillas loaded the cases, then rowed and steered the boat carefully up to the cliffs. Here they climbed up ladders made of a special, very resistant rope and left their cargo for the Fiderbi and us. This way both peoples had what they needed. I've always made the potions I learned from Gropius, even the most complex of them. And I prepared them for the Fiderbi too, as you know. They're all written down in this book," his mom explained.

"It makes me so angry. Now the Fiderbi are our enemies ... they killed dad!" the boy exclaimed harshly.

"War quickly destroys what it has taken a long time to build," Odelia replied sadly.

A fire burned in Garry's heart. He wanted to learn, to know, to understand. But most of all, he wanted to act!

"Mom, are you saying that before the war there were no ships or sailboats except Gropius's Donarius?"

"Exactly," said Odelia. "Karan is far from the sea, which is why you've never seen the cliffs. The city of Bessia, on the other hand, is next to Akor Bridge, which is where the cliffs are. There's no simple way to reach the sea, which is why it's difficult to travel to the Island of Hunnia. And no one ever considered setting sail and crossing the sea, because it had never been necessary."

"And Bando Gropius? How did he come to Hunnia? And what about you? You've never told me." Garry had so many questions.

Patently but wearily, his mother continued: "Bando Gropius has always lived on the island. No one knows how he got there. He's never told anyone. As he grew older, he decided he needed an assistant and journeyed to Karan to find one. He chose me because in his opinion I had the ability to understand Hunnia's magical environment, so he appointed me "Healer of the Two

Peoples.” We went to Akor Bridge, where he had built the Donarius. We climbed on board and crossed over Assassin Falls. I was so afraid. The drop was terrible and the boat capsized, but Bando managed to sail it anyway thanks to the floats attached to its sides. That’s how we managed to cross the Sea of Blaseno.”

“Floats? A boat with floats?” The boy couldn’t imagine such a vessel.

“The floats served to better navigate the Assassin and break your fall when you eventually plunged into the sea.” Odelia tried to explain things quickly since she wasn’t much of an expert on ships and navigation, but also because the memory of this experience still made her tremble.

The thought alone of having to face an adventure like that was enough to terrify Garry!

“When we reached Hunnia, I was exhausted.”

“Assassin Falls, sure. I’ve always wondered what a waterfall looks like. Dad talked to me about them,” Garry said, lowering his eyes.

Odelia fell silent as if to help numb the pain of their loss, but then continued, forcing herself not to cry. “With the war everything changed. That’s why the two peoples began building boats and sailing ships whose sides are reinforced with iron: they both wanted to reach the island. Taking on the Assassin is extremely dangerous. Many have died trying,” she added sorrowfully.

The young Hop grew worried: “But if no one has ever managed to conquer the island, then how have they returned? I mean, the captains of the ships and the warriors who’ve survived the Assassin, how have they made it home?”

“Some have swum back to the cliffs and climbed up using the rope ladders. Like the gorillas of Hunnia used to do when to deliver their loads of plants and flowers,” said Odelia, as these images of the past ran through her mind.

“Unbelievable! People continue dying because of this ridiculous idea of conquering the island of magical plants! It’s absurd! Everyone should have these medicines!” The young Hop clenched his fists. He hated war. He hated weapons. With his mother gazing at him tenderly he reached for the book. “Shall we see if the map works?”

“Okay, let’s try. Now you’re going to hear its voice. The Tabula has a strange way of speaking, you’ll have to get used to it. Give me the Or’Imago and come closer,” she said, preparing to reveal something she’d never told anyone.

She took the still-warm mirror and, after a deep breath, pressed it lightly against the map. After a few seconds there was a rustling sound.

The scroll lit up like a sheet of light. The smell of the sea filled the room. It was the sweet scent of the breeze that caressed the Island of Hunnia.

Then Odelia pronounced four words, the four words that awakened the map: “Wandering child, stealthy stride.”

At those words the sheet of light began to pulsate, giving life to the clearest of voices. A voice of purity and enchantment.

*Odelia Wilson, fair wandering child  
a pleasure it is to hear your voice anew  
Dust covers the time spent in solitude  
and no more services have you requested of me  
In what part of Hunnia are you now?  
And what must you find with such urgency?*

Garry Hop jumped back in amazement, his eyes and mouth wide open.

Odelia gestured at him to stay calm and whispered in his ear: “I’m going to pretend to be in Hunnia, so pay attention to what I say.”

The woman had never lied to the map, but now she had to show her son how Gropius’s scroll worked.

“Tabula Eloquens, pardon my long silence. I am now in the middle of the Primary Mountains and I have to create the formula for the Gentle Compresses, code H23-FM90. I need Hawkweed and False Mint.”

*Walk you must displaying a smile  
The long road you soon shall find  
to gather what you need for your alchemical work.*

Instantly the scroll filled with symbols and words, and map of the entire Island of Hunnia clearly reappeared. The zone of the Pointed Meadow, in the west, was colored in yellow. The boundaries of the Emerald Forest, Brawny Caves, and the Lake of Stars clearly emerged.

Simultaneously, some words on the left side of the map began to glow, indicating the codes for Hawkweed H23 and False Mint FM90.

Then the voice gave the desired instructions:

*To the Pointed Meadow you must go  
but not before traversing the Emerald Forest  
Sadly follow the Moody Trail  
the enchantment of the Lake of Stars will gladden your journey  
But remember, do not irritate the Dwarf Fox,  
who only if calm will offer up his sweet saliva*

At that point Odelia turned to her son. “Are you beginning to understand?”

Garry didn’t take his eyes off the map. “It’s incredible! If you were really in Hunnia now, you’d know exactly where to go.”

“Correct. Each alchemical formula for creating salubrious medicines is composed of flowers, plants, leaves and other elements that you’ll discover for yourself. Everything has a code and each place corresponds to a symbol. See?” and she pointed out the tiny marks distinguishing the island’s various zones.

The Pointed Meadow had a symbol similar to a D with a trunk next to it, while the Emerald Forest was recognizable by its size and the geometric design of a rectangle propped up by branches and leaves.

“Strange drawings, symbols I’ve never seen.” The boy was increasingly fascinated by that world so different from his own.

“Hunnia’s vegetation is magical and the flowers, trees and plants don’t always grow in the same place. That’s why the Tabula Eloquens is indispensable: so you always know where to gather what you need. When I was a girl I used it quite a bit and I have to thank Gropius not only for teaching me to make these potions, but for helping me avoid certain animals it’s best to steer clear of.”

Exhausted by all these explanations, Odelia began to feel faint. Her fever was once again on the rise.

While he was concerned to see her suffering, Garry was overwhelmed by a sort of euphoria for everything he was learning and he couldn't stop asking questions. "Animals to avoid? You mean like the Dwarf Fox? What makes it so dangerous?"

"Oh, it isn't aggressive, just a little irritable. It loves to be alone and doesn't want to be disturbed. Its saliva is sweet and used for many potions. If you annoy it or ask it questions, it spits his precious saliva at you in spite," she replied, already imagining her son's reaction.

"Spits? How disgusting!"

Garry grimaced, hoping he would never run into that particular animal.

Odelia knew all the animals of Hunnia. They were magical and generally good-natured, though with some of them you could get into serious trouble. If Garry really did manage to reach the island he would have to face war, a thousand different dangers, and potentially life-threatening situations. With all the risks he would be taking, running into the Dwarf Fox would be a walk in the park.

At that point Odelia made a decision that was indispensable for helping her son. She turned once more to the Or'Imago and asked it another question, hoping that the map would reply:

"Wandering child, stealthy stride."

The Tabula Eloquens quivered to life and let its voice be heard.

*Odelia Wilson, fair wandering child*

*What is it you require?*

"I have an important request. From now on you will respond to Garry Hop. Do you agree?" Odelia hoped the map would accept. Otherwise her son would never have been able to consult it.

*Bizarre is your query*

*Odelia is no longer to your liking?*

"Garry Hop is my son. Help him and I will be grateful to you."

*Now Garry Hop I must remember*

*but this is an unexpected change of name*



*Has our illustrious Bando Gropius been informed?*

The woman took a deep breath and got up her nerve: “No, Gropius doesn’t know. But he will be pleased.”

*Transgressing the rule of Gropius is not right  
I do not know if it is in my power to grant such a request*

Odelia’s face darkened; she absolutely had to convince the map. “I only ask that you listen to my son’s voice. I beg you.”

*Investigate I must to assess his loyalty  
If his intent is noble  
my services will be his.  
But you know well that wisdom demands I be rigorous.*

The woman lowered her head and passed the mirror to Garry. Now it was up to him to convince the map to speak.

The boy hesitated. “What do I ask? I don’t know the codes! And how do I prove my loyalty?”

“I’ll tell you what to ask. But remember the four opening words. Without them the Tabula Eloquens won’t talk. Introduce yourself sincerely. Tell it who you are and why you want its help.”

Garry was trembling with emotion. He tried to steady his nerves and spoke the four words: “Wandering child, stealthy stride.”

To Odelia’s great satisfaction and the boy’s amazement, the map replied right away:

*Garry Hop, wandering child.  
It is the first time that I hear your voice  
Speak to me with sincerity  
For only the truth of your words  
shall grant answers to your questions.*

The boy cleared his throat and, staring into the glowing scroll, began to speak: “My name is Garry Hop, son of Odelia Wilson and Eric Hop. My father died at the hands of an unjust war. My mother is sick, just like many of our people. In the city of Karan there is a great need for the herbs and flowers of Hunnia, but the war prevents Gropius from sending them. This is why I’ve decided to journey to the island. This is the truth.”

The map quivered three times and its light shone outwards like a rainbow, illuminating the room.

*Garry Hop, sincere is your speech  
but scarce is your knowledge.  
Study you must the Alchemical Herba,  
and the Codex Naturae engrave in your memory.*

“I promise! I swear!” he exclaimed, gazing at his mother, who was crying tears of joy. Garry felt his body absorb the energy of the rainbow’s colored light and his heart started pounding. His cry of joy reached up to the curved ceiling. But this euphoria also brought a sudden end to conversation with the map.

The Tabula Eloquens ceased glowing and went blank once more. No map. No words or symbols.

Suddenly the door to the room flew open.

“What’s going on in here? We heard yelling,” Rosalet began, coming in alongside Elly.

Odelia laid her head back on the pillow and coughed repeatedly.

Baffled by what had happened, Garry was sitting on the bed, the mirror in his hand pointed toward the open book. “It was me. I yelled because I finally have permission to read the *Alchemical Herba!*” he replied quickly.

Elly covered her mouth to stop herself from saying what was on the tip of her tongue. But Rosalet furrowed her brow. “What’s this I hear?”

Odelia was annoyed at this unexpected interruption. “Quiet, quiet ... my fever is getting worse. Let Garry read the book. I told him he could.”

The governess turned serious and, after feeling Odelia's forehead, became even more upset. "She's boiling like a pot over the fire. Sleep and Blue Herb Tea! That's what's needed here!"

Then she pointed to the door. "Everybody out! Your mother can't afford to waste her energy."

Garry grabbed the book and the mirror and left, followed by Elly, who tried to catch a glimpse of the pages to see if she could read a few words.

"Can you at least show me the drawings?" the little girl asked.

"Quit it! This is no time for playing around. This is serious business!" he replied, going toward the kitchen window.

The sound of lances clashing and horses trotting nervously could be heard outside: the procession of warrior heading towards Karan's train station showed no signs of letting up.

His nose pressed to the glass, Garry observed the chaotic comings and goings.

"I need to go ... I need to go," he said to himself, gritting his teeth.

Elly tugged on his jacket, which was already in pretty bad shape. "Go? You want to leave, too? But you're not a warrior like dad."

Her brother turned around and his proud expression left her breathless. "Promise me you'll be good and won't make mom angry. Pray for me."

He slipped on his coarse wool coat, pulled down his cap, and tightened the laces on his thick-soled shoes. In a worn-out knapsack he placed two loaves of bread, a piece of dry cheese and small jar of honey. Then he filled his old canteen with water and, last but not least, took a couple of candles and the small oil lantern that hung on the wall.

Elly stared at him in disbelief. "Are you really doing this?"

"Absolutely. You have to trust me. I'll be back soon ... at least I hope I will." He caressed her cheek.

As he stepped out the door, a gust of snow burst inside and made the flames dance in the fireplace.

(...)

It didn't take long for the entire city of Karan to find out that the young Hop, who had already lost his father and now risked losing his mother, had snuck onto the train with the warriors. For everyone Garry Hop became the courageous boy who defied the war to find the medicine for his mother and the entire Verroti people.

Unaware that Dilun has found out so soon about his escape, Garry was focused on his journey. Though the car was more than 18 feet tall and forty-five feet long and there were at least 8 small, barred windows, the air was foul, and not just because of the presence of the horses. The odor of rotting food, the hay made damp by the snow, and the piles of lard for greasing the lances created an awful stench.

The wood and iron cars slowly began to advance. Now the journey had begun, and there was no turning back.

Albin had managed to reach the other end of the car by pushing his way past the other horses, who snorted at him aggressively. He shook his mane and agitated his tail, causing the sack hanging down from his belly to rock back and forth. Garry's stomach leapt up into his throat like it was attached to a spring.

"That's a good boy, Albin. Now I can come out," he said, peeking out from under the blanket. He freed first one leg, then the other. With a jump his shoes finally touched down on the rusty, dirty floor.

The light filtering in through the windows made it possible to see in the dim surroundings, but night would soon come and darkness along with it.

Garry had a look around, dragging his knapsack with him, and touched the pile of hay that lay off to one side, beside the merchant's trunk. He looked for the driest hay and took enough of it to make a bed for himself, then sat down on it and crossed his legs.

"It'll take at least 12 hours to get to Akor Bridge. And that's if the snowstorm doesn't create any problems. It's an old train and I hope the locomotive can tow such a heavy load," he said, turning to Albin. The horse neighed, then licked Garry's face.

"Don't worry, my friend, we'll find a way to avoid the guards on the way out as well," he said, opening the book to page 112. He had promised the Tabula Eloquens to study the pages of the *Codex Naturae* as best he could and there wasn't a minute to waste.

He took off his coat and checked that his father's medal and the Or'Imago were still safely in the right-hand pocket. Then he took the small oil lantern out of his knapsack and made sure that the scroll was safely tucked into the book: he didn't need the map for the moment. What mattered now was reading the formulas and learning them by heart. He took a bite of bread and felt ready to face the challenge of Gropius's alchemical secrets.

He almost didn't feel the drafts coming in through the cracks in the old car, the cold muffled by the imposing presence of the horses, whose breath warmed the air like fire.

“So, VR556 Velvet Roses, only when the sun is setting. Never gather the odd-numbered petals ...”

Garry repeated the words four times at least, but when he came to the next one he already began to feel uncertain. “EB322 Elastic Bark, say thank you as you tear. Avoid the Little Runes by leaving 10 Gray Peach Skins GPS01.” He was flummoxed. “Say thank you to whom? And who are the Little Runes?” he exclaimed, scratching his head.

The young Hop didn't want to give up at the first sign of difficulties; after all, there would certainly be no shortage of questions that he simply couldn't answer on his own. He read with great interest, carefully enunciating every word. But one thing was clear: the letters in the codes were the initials of the substances. VR stood for Velvet Roses, EB corresponded to Elastic Bark, and so on!

But what about the numbers? What did they correspond to? His mother hadn't had time to explain it.

He continued to study, repeating everything out loud as the train crawled forward. The wind had begun to howl threateningly and walnut-sized snowflakes were falling outside the windows. The storm was gaining strength and with nightfall the fear of the train being blocked by ice became all the more real. The tracks crossed miles of freezing wasteland. No rivers, no shelter. That was why the warriors hadn't traveled on horseback. The train was the only means of reaching Akor Bridge without having to face the brunt of this nasty weather. Once they reached their destination, the troops would assemble to cross the bridge, overrun the enemy's frontier base, and invade the city of Bessia.

The rattling of the cars alternated with the pounding of the horses' hoofs on the rusty floor. It wasn't easy to concentrate with all that racket.

Jostled by the rocking of the train, Garry tried to stabilize himself by leaning against one of Albin's legs. "I can't do it! With all this shaking it's difficult to read!" he cursed, taking off his cap.

Roughly four hours had passed since the train's departure and night had fallen, darkening the landscape that until a short time ago had been visible through the windows. The snow was coming down thick and fast. Garry partially closed his eyes, overcome by his exhaustion and the cold.

Suddenly there was a piercing shriek and the car swerved violently, knocking the horses off their feet. The trunk and Kornelius's chest slid from one wall to the other and Garry Hop found himself upside-down, covered in hay, and within inches of Albin's massive body that was sprawled out on the floor.

The train had jumped the rails.

## Third Chapter

### FERRUM PUGIONIS

All the cars had derailed in the midst of the thick, frozen brush. The last of them was tilted precariously. The hooks linking it to the rest of the train had snapped and the friction had created bluish sparks which fizzed out in contact with the snow.

Five alarm whistles sounded from the locomotive. The cries of the warriors, entrapped between the window panes and sheets of metal that blocked the doors, were carried away on the wind of the blizzard.

Garry Hop opened his eyes wide, picked up his book of alchemy that had landed a short distance away from his knapsack, and tried to get back to his feet. Trembling, he brushed the hay off of him and grabbed the lantern which was miraculously intact, as was the small mirror in the right-hand pocket of his jacket.

“Or’Imago!” he exclaimed with a sigh. His heart was pounding: luckily it wasn’t broken. He immediately put it back in his pocket, where he could feel the metallic coldness of his father’s medal.

He shook his head. The mirror and the medal, together: the two objects now in his possession meant a great deal to his family and made him feel even closer to his parents.

Nothing would stop him from reaching Hunnia, the island of hope. As this thought passed through this mind he looked around, and for a moment his combative spirit made way for discouragement. He choked down the cry that was rising in his throat and took a deep breath with mouth wide open.

The light from the lantern illuminated the frantic eyes of Albin, who was struggling to hoist himself up on his powerful, furry legs, his tail whipping through the air. The other horses, thrown against the wall of the car that was hanging down off the tracks, continued voicing their acute whinnies of distress.

Garry suddenly felt his feet all wet and looked down: his shoes were drenched in an oily liquid. The wooden crate containing food and other supplies had cracked open and was leaking scented oil.

To avoid falling on the slanted, slippery floor, the boy shifted a good part of the hay onto the oily puddle in order to absorb the liquid.

Frightened by this unforeseen incident, Garry was plagued with anxiety: what was he supposed to do now? Go out in the middle of the blizzard, or stay hidden until the warriors managed to get the strain running again?

Garry was thinking out loud and talking to Albin, his only companion on an adventurous journey that had gotten off to a very bad start.

The creaking and squeaking he heard suggested that the situation was worsening: that last car, now detached from the others, was probably about to complete its suspended fall, crashing down into the brush along with the others.

He grabbed Albin's reins and told him: "Whatever happens, we're going to stay together! We're Verroti and nothing can frighten us."

The horse lowered his head and shook his thick mane, moving his mouth and turning his snout toward Kornelius's great chest, which had slid over against the wall along with the other horses.

From beneath the heavy top, which had opened partially upon smashing into the wall, two hands suddenly appeared.

Garry froze, incredulous, gripping his book to his chest, holding his breath.

The hands pushed forcefully against the cover, and with an athletic leap a young girl with long, disheveled blond hair jumped out. Her face was grim and dirty, but even in the half-light it was impossible not to notice her big blue eyes. She skillfully plucked a large dagger from the chest, which happened to be full of weapons, took a couple of deep breaths, and assumed an attacking position.

"Show me what you've got! I'll give you a taste of the blade of my Ferrum Pugionis," she said viciously.

Garry Hop backed away, but the oily substance on the ground made him slip and lose his balance. He grabbed onto Albin with one hand, without letting go of his book in the other.

"Who are you?"



“Alina Obradet,” the girl announced with a smirk, “niece of Kornelius Gunterof. I’m a Fiderbi and you’re a dirty Verroti! I heard you talking to your horse.”

“You’re the niece of the merchant? The one with the scar and the gold teeth?” he exclaimed, surprised and afraid of the weapon she was holding.

“Exactly. My uncle only cares about business, but I don’t want to have anything to do with your people. You’re barbarians, ruthless killers ...” and as she spoke she made her way out from between the horses, maintaining her balance despite the car’s steep incline.

“Listen, little girl, show some respect. If anyone has blood on their hands, it’s your people. You’re the killers.”

Garry felt his anger raging, and his temples began to pound.

Alina raised her head: the duel had begun. With a leap she was in front of him.

A quick stab and she sliced cut into his hand, the one that was holding the book.

The *Alchemical Herba* fell and ended up in the middle of the oil-soaked hay, but luckily the map stayed safely between the pages.

From Garry’s wound trickled drops of blood that landed on the floor, now covered with a nauseous slop of oil, rust and blood.

The boy didn’t as much as groan, gritting his teeth and stepping away from Albin, who was kicking out nervously.

He looked at his bloody hand, then turned his eyes on the girl, who was ready to strike him again.

“You’re crazy!” he yelled, glaring at her.

Alina pointed the *Ferrum Pugionis* at his face: “If you try anything, I’ll kill you!”

Unarmed and with no chance of fighting an even battle, he crouched down and picked up the book, staining the cover with blood.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, standing tall. The boots she wore had thick soles that prevented her from falling even on the slippery floor.

“Yeah, yeah ... I won’t. I just need to get ...” Garry replied, but as he opened his knapsack, he was on the receiving end of a kick in the face. “Hey! I just want to bandage my hand! In my knapsack I should have a handkerchief or a scarf. Stop attacking me.”

The girl pulled the knife back and stuck it in between her sweater and the belt of her black pants. “Then answer my questions. Based on your answers, I’ll decide whether or not to spare you.”

The girl’s firmness made things look pretty bleak: there seemed to be no end to her wickedness!

In the knapsack Garry found an old, rolled up shoe with which he improvised a bandage to stop the bleeding. “Ask me what you want to know. But then it’s my turn: I have some questions for you, too!”

“What’s your name and why are you on this train?” Alina asked.

“I’m Garry Hop, son of Eric, the heroic Verroti warrior imprisoned and barbarously killed by the Fiderbi! I’ll tell you why I got on this train if you tell me what you’re doing hiding here, too,” he said defiantly.

Alina fixed a lock of her hair that was hanging down in front of her face and lowered her voice: “I get it ... your father died. That happens in war. Especially if he was a soldier.”

“Yeah. It happens ... But it shouldn’t happen. War doesn’t spare anyone,” the boy continued bitterly.

“Coward, you’re nothing but a yellow-bellied Verroti who’s afraid of confronting the enemy. We Fiderbi are strong, we even killed your Ministerials,” Alina shot back, spitting out her words like poison.

“They were led into a trap. They thought they were going to make peace, but instead ...” Garry felt his muscles quivering with anger.

“Our Great Counselor Osborn Mitkofen and his consort, Gherilda Beetova, would never shake hands with your silly leaders. Peace is not possible! Your entire people must be annihilated,” the girl concluded.

“You do know that this train is transporting the warriors that will avenge us, don’t you? Osborn and Gherilda won’t be around for much longer.” For the first time young Hop spoke with a feeling of deep hatred for that arrogant girl.

“They’ll never succeed! And you’ll see them fail with your own eyes ... assuming I don’t decide it to get rid of you before we get to Akor Bridge.”

Garry could no longer bear being treated this way. He got up and, ignoring the pain in his hand, stared the girl down. He was so close he could smell the acrid smell she was giving off.

“You stink of iron. You’ve absorbed the smell of that chest full of lethal weapons! Of spears and swords that pierce and kill,” he exclaimed in disgust.

“Sit down! Stay away from me, or ...” But before she could finish, Garry pushed her and she fell to the ground. Right in the middle of the oil and blood.

“I don’t hit girls. Usually. So I suggest you stop provoking me, or I’m going to get really nasty. Now tell me why you’re on this damn train.”

Alina didn’t get up. She tried crawling backward, but was blocked by Albin’s imposing presence. The horse stamped his feet, and the girl sat completely still for fear of being kicked.

Garry decided to be a gentleman, reaching out his left hand to help her, while the other held on tightly to the book. “Come on, get up. But first, get rid of that dagger! It’s too easy for you to threaten me while I don’t have a sword or even a spear to defend myself.”

Reluctantly, Alina tossed away the Ferrum Pugionis which, with perfect aim, planted itself into the crate of food. “There. Now we’re even.”

The boy grabbed her hand and helped her up. Alina and Garry: enemies in fact, travel companions by fate. They now stood facing each other. Every word could become a source of further division, or the beginning of a possible dialogue between peers.

“So, tell me. What were you doing in that chest?” Garry asked again, staring straight into the girl’s eyes.

“My uncle always takes me with him. Naturally I can’t be seen by the warriors. I carry out orders and help him.”

“I see. Well I don’t take orders from anyone. All I want to do is reach Akor Bridge,” he said curtly.

But Alina wasn’t satisfied with that explanation. “I heard you talking about Hunnia. And you were saying strange names. Alchemical names. I know a little bit about herbs. My uncle is a good merchant, so he’s interested in healing potions. There’s a great demand for them.”

“Potions? Yes, of course. A lot of people are sick – it’s not only soldiers who die in war,” the boy replied, and as he spoke his expression darkened. He was thinking about his mother and the suffering she was going through.

“Show me the book you were reading,” said the girl, putting out her hand.

“Not a chance. This is none of your business!”

The response was definitive, and Garry hugged the *Alchemical Herba* to his chest.

Despite this, Alina tried to rip the book out of his hands but the boy was quicker and by simply sticking his leg out he tripped her and she fell to the ground again. Flat on her face. A stabbing pain suddenly shot through her foot. Her cry blended in with the angry voices coming from outside.

“Quiet, or they’ll find us!” Garry said anxiously through gritted teeth.

“It hurts! I twisted it really badly. And it’s all your fault!”

Alina dragged herself all the way to the chest, while Garry, making his way beneath the bellies of the horses were still lying against the lower wall of the tilted car, peered out through the cracks and saw a large group of warriors approaching. Kornelius was with them!

“They’re coming this way. They’re checking the damage to the cars, and your uncle’s with them,” Garry said. Instinctively he turned to his horse, but the blanket that had served to conceal him had been torn to shreds. Now where could he hide?

Alina got back into the chest full of weapons and curly sheepskins. She was careful, biting her tongue despite the pain as she bent her legs to get inside. Her foot had swelled up and the boot was now so tight that it was blocking her blood circulation.

“Move over ... there’s room for both of us,” said the boy, who had found no other solution.

Alina grabbed the top of the chest, ready to close it: “Forget about it! You’re on your own!”

Garry ignored her, taking his knapsack and, gripping the book with his injured hand, eased himself inside between pointed blades and sharp swords, trying to curl up on one of the soft curly sheepskins. It was not a comfortable position, and both of them risked cutting themselves with one false move, but at least they were hidden. Together.

Garry’s nose grazed Alina’s. In the dark of the chest their faces were just millimeters apart. Her breath mixed with his. Cautious, with their pupils dilated and bodies almost on top of each other, they were giving off an energy that was anything but friendly.

Alina wanted to yell out her uncle’s name and free herself from this nuisance of an enemy. Garry, for his part, couldn’t bear this physical contact with a Fiderbi who had offended and wounded him, and not just in the hand.

The warriors’ pushing caused the car to rock back and forth, the shaking made the horses agitated and they began to kick out, breaking Garry’s small lantern. Pieces of glass were scattered all over the floor, and the flame went out beneath the horses’ shoes. The darkness

increased the two children's fear. Outside the temperature was freezing and the blizzard continued to rage.

After a couple of blows against the dented door, an opening was made. The first ones to enter the car were five warriors. The flame of their torches lit up their faces, battered and wounded. Their looks expressed their dismay at the train's derailing, an accident that was putting the entire journey at risk. Patiently they managed to calm the horses down while the merchant searched for his chest and the crate to see if his wares were intact.

A pair of horses jumped out into the freezing cold, but Albin showed no intention of moving. He rose up on his hind legs, his nose almost touching the ceiling of the car, and let out a shrill sound. The warriors, exhausted, gave up trying to calm him. The powerful horse showed clear signs of aggressiveness.

"He's crazy, there's no point in insisting. And it's no use, anyway, this car is lost as well. Too much damage!" they commented, letting the merchant by.

Kornelius, though frightened by Albin's reaction, made his way to the chest, lighting his way with a torch. He immediately realized that on the ground, in addition to the scented oil that had spilled out of the crate, there were traces of blood, glass fragments, a small rolled-up coat, a cap, and a long, frayed blanket.

Then he saw Alina's Ferrum Pugionis stuck into the crate.

Whose was that blood on the ground? What were that small coat, cap, and blanket doing there?

With all those questions in his head, Kornelius Gunterof loosened his overcoat and took several steps more, his boots crushing the shards of glass.

"A broken lantern," he thought, trying to figure out what had happened in that car.

He was startled by the calls of the warriors telling him to come out, but he managed to play for time: "Yes ... yes, I'm coming. I just have to check the merchandise. I'll deal with the white horse. You go ahead and check the other cars," he said, adjusting his cap.

When the warriors had left, he laid his hands on the chest. As soon as he did, Albin, who was behind him, became even more agitated.

"Keep still! It's ok, ok, nobody wants to hurt you," the merchant said as he lowered his torch. The horse finally put his front legs back down on the floor.

In that moment the cover of the chest moved.

Kornelius lifted it up suddenly, and the first thing he saw were Alina's blue eyes.

"Uncle! Finally!" the girl exclaimed.

The merchant didn't respond, stunned to see a boy's face staring out fearfully at him.

"And who is this? What's he doing in there?" he asked.

Garry was terrorized by the ugliness of the man's face: Kornelius's deep scar and protruding gold teeth gave him an unsettling appearance. Nor did the stench of the merchant's breath do much to improve the situation.

The boy was transfixed and, with his heart pounding, he found himself staring up at the pins stuck into the man's cap: they looked like the eyes of a devil.

"His name is Garry Hop, one of those despicable Verroti! He made me fall and I hurt my left foot really badly," Alina replied immediately, venting all her hatred for the boy.

"Garry Hop! Good ... good. You're a lousy thief! Planning on stealing my food and weapons, were you?" The merchant grabbed him by the collar and, in doing so, realized that one of his hands was bandaged and bloodstained.

"Who wounded you? And what are you holding onto so tightly? A book? Did you steal it?"

Garry finally managed to speak: "The book is mine. I'm not a thief. My hand is bleeding because Alina stabbed me, so I reacted and ..."

The girl struggled to her feet and with her uncle's help hopped down from the chest. "Sure, I stabbed him! So what? He's one of them!" she said, taking off the boot that was squeezing her injured foot like a vise.

Kornelius pointed his torch at Garry. The heat of the flame so close to him turned his face red.

"Come on out and show yourself!" ordered Goldteeth.

The boy tried to avoid hurting himself any further on the spear tips that were jutting out from the pile of weapons, grabbed the side of the chest with his left hand, and without ever letting go of the book, leaped down and stood before the bony merchant.

At that point Albin approached in a threatening manner, but all it took was a pat from Garry to calm him down: "Everything's ok, don't be upset."

Kornelius looked suspiciously at this boy who had seemingly appeared from out of nowhere: "Nice horse! White and obedient."

"Yes, he belonged to my father," Garry Hop replied instinctively.

Alina couldn't resist: "Yeah ... to his father. He was a warrior, but now he's dead!"

Kornelius reacted coldly: “Ah, so he’s an orphan, like you! War affects us all.”

Garry felt his heart sink: so Alina, too, had suffered a terrible loss. He didn’t have time to think about it, however, because he was bombarded with questions: “So? What are you doing here?” began Kornelius, anxious to discover the truth.

“I have to reach Akor Bridge, so I snuck onto the car with Albin.”

“Akor Bridge? That’s no place for children. There are only us merchants and the warriors ready for battle,” the man commented, circling. He saw that the boy was wearing a pretty well-worn jacket, and concluded that he was not the son of a wealthy Verroti family.

“I know. But I’m not afraid,” Garry replied, forcing himself to overcome his disgust and look the man in the face. “And what’s that book for? Are you selling it because you need money? It’s got a strange cover ...” and in saying so he extended his hand to take it. Garry recoiled. “No. It’s not for sale.” Now it was Alina’s turn to fuel interest in this most mysterious volume: “It must be one special book. He was reading it out loud. Alchemical words. Strange names. And, most importantly, it talks about the island of Hunnia.”

“Hunnia?” Kornelius repeated. His expression turned menacing.

Now the torch illuminated Garry’s pallor.

All alone, in front of this scar-faced merchant and a girl who was anything but friendly, he didn’t know what to say.

“My dear Garry Hop, you can trust me. I’m a friend of your people and I know full well that the conquest of the Island of Hunnia is crucial for the Verroti. So, if I can help you ...” the merchant’s tone of voice became almost sweet.

Alina Obradet’s expression changed, being all too familiar with her uncle’s skills of persuasion. If he was trying to lure the boy into his confidence, there was certainly a business deal behind it. Maybe this runaway from Karan could be a resource for them as well, so she decided to play along with Kornelius, trying to be more accommodating.

“Well, Garry, I might have been a bit aggressive, but I had no way of knowing whether you were a threat to me and my uncle’s merchandise. But now you have nothing to fear, you can speak freely,” she said in a sugary-sweet voice.

Meanwhile Goldteeth placed his hands on the young Verroti’s shoulders: “I’m sure you have a good reason for risking your life and stowing away on a train full of warriors. Akor Bridge is quite far from here. To say nothing of Hunnia, and the dangerous Assassin Falls.”

“The Assassin, yes ... I know it’s difficult getting past them,” Garry mumbled, thinking back to his father and the stories of his mother.

“So you know that getting in a boat and launching yourself over the falls means quite likely dying,” said the merchant.

“I’m not stupid. I know I’ll need lots of courage,” Garry replied without hesitation. “Why are you carrying a book that talks about the island that caused this war in the first place? What use is it to you?” continued Kornelius suspiciously. “I have to find the magical herbs that cure diseases,” the young Verroti replied truthfully. “Oh, sure! Everyone wants the plants from Hunnia!” the merchant sneered, laughing thunderously. “They’re for my mother. She’s very sick. Her name is Odelia Wilson, but everyone knew her as the Healer. She made many medicines for the Fiderbi as well, while we were at peace. But now she’s in dire need of the healing potions herself,” Garry added, hoping he hadn’t revealed too much.

Kornelius’s face darkened once again: “Odelia Wilson, but of course! That name is familiar to me. In Bessia people often spoke about the Healer and the medicines she prepared with the herbs of Hunnia.”

Alina straightened up, surprised at this revelation: this hateful boy was the Healer’s son!

Kornelius caressed Garry’s head. “If it’s for your mother that you’ve undertaken this journey, then I promise to help you. We can be friends. I provide your people with food and weapons, but I’m more than just a merchant.”

Those words made Alina start. The girl remained silent; she wanted to figure out exactly what her uncle was plotting now, to the boy’s detriment.

Garry knit his brow, unable to figure out who this thin, scarred man really was. What dark truth was he hiding behind this facade?

“You say you’re more than just a merchant? Well, then what are you?” the young Hop risked saying.

“I’m a merchant-herbalist. A healer, like your mother. I’m very familiar with the powers of the magic plants of Hunnia. I made abundant use of them before the war broke out. They helped me save many lives in Bessia. So as you can see, it wasn’t just your mother who made curative potions ...” the man explained with a burst of emotion.



“You received shipments from the island before the war? Did you really treat the citizens of Bessia?” asked Garry, increasingly astonished.

“Yes, I was very busy. Then, with the war, everything changed. Bando’s ship full of herbs and flowers stopped coming from Hunnia. And people got sick. Many died because of trivial complications,” he continued fervently.

“So you’ve seen the Donarius too??” Garry exclaimed.

“The Donarius, right ... Bando’s ship. The huge gorillas carried the spices and crates of flowers. Not that I ever got too close to them. I waited, like all the other merchants, for them to leave the shipment at the edge of the cliffs,” Kornelius said.

“And then the Great Hands went back down the ladder and climbed back aboard the Donarius to cross the sea and return to Hunnia ...” Garry concluded, increasingly excited and happy to finally be able to share with someone the things he’d learned from his mother.

“I see that you know a great many things. Yet no child, Verroti or Fiderbi, has ever received permission to go to the cliffs. Which means that the Healer told you all of this,” the merchant added, adjusting his cap. “Your mother helped many people. And now both the Fiderbi and the Verroti are in need of medicine. In Karan as in Bessia, children are dying.” Kornelius’s words moved the young Hop.

Yet a doubt continued to gnaw at the boy: “In times of peace, how were you able to create the potions if you didn’t know the doses, or the healing powers of the various flowers and leaves? My mother knows them because she studied with Gropius, but as far as I know she was his only pupil.”

Kornelius cleared his throat; Garry had put him in a tight spot. Alina was on tenterhooks as well, waiting to see what preposterous reply her uncle would come up with now.

“I’m not familiar with all of Hunnia’s plants, but I know what’s necessary to make people feel better. I do what I can. Nothing like your mother, of course,” he said, evading the question. “My dear young Verroti, like the Healer I, too, want to be able to continue to save people. So I try to stay on good terms with the warriors of your people because I hope they’ll bring me to the island so I can get what I need.”

“But why didn’t you go with the warriors of your own people?” Garry asked, catching him off guard. Kornelius Gunterof’s eyes narrowed suddenly, now mere slits. “They’ll never allow him to reach Hunnia. They don’t understand that I’m not doing it for money and greed. The Verroti

warriors, on the other hand, have welcomed me without any problems, and in exchange I provide them with weapons and food. Understand?”

“So they’re going to take you to Hunnia? You’re going to cross the Assassin with them?” The boy was starting to think he might be able to tag along.

“Well ... yes, sooner or later they’ll let me,” mumbled the clever merchant.

Garry Hop felt his stomach tighten: if this man, so off-putting in appearance, was in fact good and generous, then he could trust him.

Meanwhile Kornelius, who was thinking over the boy’s words, continued probing for information: “So your mother was a pupil of the shaman Bando Gropius ...”

The merchant’s concern was clear: by purest chance he’d come face to face with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He fixed his stare on the young boy from Karan, determined to find out everything he knew about Hunnia.

“Yes, my mom lived on the island when she was younger. But, as I told you, now she’s sick and I ...” Garry wanted to reveal more, but he still felt something in his heart telling him to hold back.

Alina crossed her arms: “Your story’s interesting, it would be worth hearing the whole thing.” Although she’d changed her attitude, to Garry the girl still inspired doubt and diffidence, and in fact he didn’t bother to reply. Kornelius, on the other hand, proceeded with his work of persuasion. He took Garry’s wounded hand and stroked it, flashing a benevolent smile that was ruined by those awful gold teeth.

“If I had the right leaves I’d make a compress to ease your pain,” the merchant said carelessly.

“The pain’s not so bad. It might leave a scar, but that doesn’t matter. But if you could, which leaves would you use?” Garry asked, putting him on the spot.

“Well ... leaves that are ... big ... green ... scented. But I don’t have them right now, and anyway we have more urgent things to do, wouldn’t you say?”

Kornelius’s response was not convincing. He hadn’t said the name of any plant or tree, much less a code. By now Garry knew that all of Hunnia’s vegetation had been scrupulously catalogued by Gropius.

Concerned, the boy picked up his coat and shook the hay off of it, put his cap back on, and stuck the book in his knapsack. The cold wind, gusting in past the rickety door, gave him chills all over his body and made the flame of the torch flicker.

Kornelius couldn't stay in the car much longer: soon the warriors would be back.

"I have to go ... you know quite well that children aren't allowed on war trains. Garry, you and my niece are stowaways, and at all costs you must avoid going outside or making noise or being seen in any way. And take care of that horse - if he gets agitated there'll be trouble. I'll return as soon as I can, and I'll find a solution for reaching Akor Bridge."

The merchant handed Alina the torch, climbed down from the car, and disappeared into the darkness of night.

The two children were alone once more, warmed only ever so slightly by the heat given off by the torch. And Albin's presence wasn't enough to keep it in.

Garry watched each and every movement Alina made, and she did likewise, pretending not to watch her enemy but, in reality, not taking her eyes off that intriguing and awkward travel companion.

Despite Kornelius's intervention, things between the two were still very tense.

Alina planted the torch in a large crack in the floor and sat down in front of it. Garry approached the flame as well, but as he did so the Or'Imago slipped out of his pocket. The little mirror hit the floor and ended up right next to the torch. Almost immediately, the heat from the flame provoked an extraordinary reaction: the Or'Imago lit up. Simultaneously, from inside the knapsack a crackling could be heard, which Garry Hop recognized right away.

The Tabula Eloquens was about to wake up!

With a quick gesture he opened his knapsack, took out the book and noticed a slight swelling appearing from inside it.

Alina didn't waste any time: "What are you doing?"

And as she spoke, from inside the book burst forth a greenish glow.

Panicking, the boy picked up the mirror and put it back in his pocket, then grabbed the book and shut it, nice and tight. The map, however, was pushing to get out: it was unrolling and the edge of the parchment stuck out from the bottom of the book.

"It's nothing ... everything's under control," said Garry, breaking into a nervous sweat.

He quickly tossed the book back into his knapsack, which was already quite full, causing a bread roll and piece of dried cheese to fall out.

Confused and increasingly agitated, he looked at Alina's wide-eyed expression and stood stock-still.

“Well? You want to explain that?” the girl pressed him.

“There’s nothing to explain. Nothing happened.” Garry tried to hide what was all too evident.

Alina frowned: “Are you joking? I saw a glow coming from that book, and then that mirror lit up ... By the way, what did you bring mirror with you for anyway?”

Garry Hop reacted with irritation: “It’s none of your business and you wouldn’t be able to understand anyway!”

“It’s magic! You’re a sneaky Verroti wizard!” was her touchy reply.

“You’re talking nonsense. You were hallucinating,” Garry said, trying what seemed at this point to be the only way forward: deny the evidence.

The torch flame began to flicker, reflecting in Alina’s eyes and giving them the color of fire. The girl would have liked to react with greater vehemence, but she knew she needed to stay calm. The more time went by, the greater dislike she felt for her undesired travel companion. But her uncle was very interested in him and his many secrets, so it was up to her to discover whether Garry really did know how to use magic.

“Knowing alchemical potions, using magic instruments, reading mysterious books ... it isn’t really that dangerous, is it?” she asked, almost hissing.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t know anything about magic,” Garry replied with annoyance.

Alina decided not to press him any further on the matter and changed the subject. Perhaps if the young Hop calmed down she would be able to get him to talk, and discover his secrets.

“It’s stopped snowing,” said the girl, attempting a normal conversation.

“Yeah, good sign, but we’re still going to freeze tonight,” was his brusque reply.

“Got any brothers or sisters?” Alina said, trying to get him to open up.

“A little sister, Elly. She’s seven. She’s a bit of a pain, but I still love her.” Garry’s expression changed.

“Well I’m an only child. Which is why, ever since my parents died, I’ve been with my uncle.”

The young Hop looked up, gazing at her with unexpected tenderness: “How did they die?”

“Killed by Verroti warriors. That’s why I hate you all so much!”

Her words, tinged with pain and contempt, seemed to burst out, wounding Garry more than being stabbed in the hand.

“I’m ... sorry,” he managed to say.

“Yeah, sure ... you’re sorry. I couldn’t care less about what you think. I’ll never be able to forgive your people. Just like you’ll never be able to forgive mine, since your father was killed as well.”

“Maybe you’re right. So there’s no point in talking. We have nothing to say to each other.” Garry ended the conversation and turned the other way.

He picked up the bread and dried cheese. He bit into them cautiously at first, but then began chewing hungrily. In the silence, the growling of Alina’s stomach was clearly audible. And hunger is a powerful thing: it puts even the fiercest of enemies in the same boat.

“Good?” she asked him, giving in to her appetite.

“Yeah, it’s edible. But when I think about Rosalet’s cooking ...” Garry replied, remembering the delicious desserts of his old governess.

“Rosalet? Who’s that?” Alina asked, obviously curious.

“Our governess. Elly and I grew up in fear of her reprimands, but we sure love her fantastic cakes.”

And as soon as he said it, he smiled. Rosalet’s image appeared in his mind, immediately followed by that of his mother.

“You two are lucky, despite everything,” Alina whispered. “Would you like a piece?” the boy offered. Her face twisted into a funny-looking frown: “Thanks, the food in my uncle’s crate got ruined. The scented oil got all over everything and now none of it can be eaten.”

They split what little Garry had brought from home. Despite the fact that sharing a roll and some cheese had brought them together in hunger, no amount of small talk could resolve the clear contrast that remained between them. The wait to find out what would happen inside and outside that train car became unbearable.

Now and then they heard the agitated voices of the warriors who, along with the group of merchants headed by Kornelius, were trying to round up the horses in a clearing illuminated by a dozen torches stuck into the ice. Getting the train back on the tracks was impossible, which meant only one thing: they would have to set up their tents to make it through the freezing night.

A night which, for Garry and Alina, seemed to go on forever.

## Seventh Chapter

### THE ASCENSUS

(...)

The children turned toward the cone of stone and saw a strange contraption, which hadn't been there before. A sort of large box of black wood, connected with four thick ropes that hung down from the rock.

Albin was first to approach, sniffing it several times and then kicking out at it so hard that the strange container swung smack into the stone wall.

In a flash Garry collected his knapsack, map, book and mirror. He and Alina saw the ropes attached up at the top of the stone wall, to the spikes that surrounded Hunnia's giant platform.

"What is it? Who lowered this thing down?" the girl asked, touching the edge of it. No sooner had she grazed it than one of the box's panels popped open.

"It's a door! We can go inside ..." Garry was excited by that strange discovery and immediately became aware of a rather rusted metal plate on the back wall. A barely legible engraving read: "ASCENSUS".

"I think that in the ancient tongue that means to go up or something similar," he added, stepping into the tight space. As soon as his feet touched the wooden surface the box creaked noisily, making it seem extremely fragile.

"This contraption doesn't seem safe to me at all. Even the hooks securing the ropes are rusted over, and the wood is in pretty bad shape. I think Gropius used it to load the salubrious herbs before the war broke out. He transported them from here with his famous boat, the Donarius. What do you think, Alina? Will the Ascensus be able to take us all the way to the top?"

But Garry's question remained unanswered because Alina, overcome with curiosity, had already gone inside with Albin.

The Ascensus was so large that even the horse had no trouble fitting in.

Once they were inside the door snapped shut and the ropes began rubbing against the rock.

"We're moving!" exclaimed Alina, looking up.

With a violent jerk the Ascensus left the rocky base and slowly rose toward the platform.

The further they climbed, the more surprised and enthusiastic they became at the view of the Sea of Blaseno far below. It was calm, like a great green stain caressed by the sun. In the distance they could make out the wall of rain like a grayish barrier. And as the contraption slowly hoisted them up, the air became cooler and more aromatic as the smells of Hunnia's vegetation reached them. Leafy vines hanging from the edge of the platform swayed back and forth in the breeze and the stone glittered in an increasingly blue sky.

"Amazing! It's like the higher we go, the more beautiful this island becomes. I simply can't believe we're finally here," she said, inhaling the delicate aromas of the flowers that poked out from the crevices in the cone of stone.

At the very top, just a few yards from where they would be set down, four enormous beasts were pulling the ropes of the Ascensus.

"The Great Hands! There they are, the gorillas with the golden eyes!" Garry exulted.

No fear. No uncertainty. The young Hop knew these animals were strong but kind. But Alina huddled in a corner shaking her head. "No. I'm not getting out. I don't want to get anywhere close to those huge beasts. They're even scarier than the Tauri."

While Garry tried to reassure his friend, Albin unexpectedly began to rise up on his back hoofs and kick out in a show of mistrust. The Ascensus, thrown off balance by the horse's sudden movements, began swinging back and forth. Only the timely intervention of the four gorillas managed to avoid a potentially tragic accident. With their hairy, muscular arms they quickly steadied the ropes until the shaky contraption was safely down on the grassy surface.

Enormous, with a wide face, gentle expression and silver-speckled fur, the Great Hands crinkled their noses when they saw the unexpected guests. They welcomed them with a grunt.

Holding tightly to one of Albin's legs, Alina peered out fearfully at those imposing creatures, of which she couldn't help being afraid.

One gorilla, whose fur was all silver, lowered its head and gave Garry a good sniff. The boy froze, gripping the book and the map, but the great animal pointed with its fingers that it wanted to see what he was hiding. The young Hop swallowed, got his courage up, and handed over both treasures to the Great Hand, which moved its large head and let out a sweet sound, opening its mouth ever so slightly.

“Do you know this book and map? They belong to my mother, Odelia Wilson.” Garry talked to it as though the magical animal could understand him.

And so it was. The Great Hand beat its chest with its fists and bowed. The other three gorillas did likewise.

“You met my mother! Yes ... that explains it!” Garry exclaimed, in a whirlwind of emotion. He couldn’t believe he was actually standing in front of those animals, the same ones he had seen in the book’s illustrations.

“My mom is sick. She needs the salubrious herbs. I have to speak with Gropius as soon as possible,” the boy implored.

The gorillas raised their heads and together let out a rough, harsh sound, which sounded like a cry of alarm.

Garry backtracked in fear, but not Alina, who seemed to feel more confident now. Astonished by the Great Hands’ behavior, she advanced barefoot and looked at them with tenderness.

“They’re communicating something. Maybe they’re calling the shaman himself. It seems like they understood what you were saying, like they’re intelligent ...”

Garry Hop finally smiled. “They’re magical. We’re in Hunnia. We’re standing on the grass of the Pointed Meadow, I recognized the area. And just look around.”

The trees of the Emerald Forest soared to great heights, their leaves and branches reaching up to the clear sky. Further in the distance, the Primary Mountains rose on the horizon. And to their left of them, beyond the Pointed Meadow, you could just make out the Brawny Caves inhabited by bears called the White Teeth.

Flowers and scents, colors and sparkles lingered in the air filled with the magic that gave life to Hunnia’s unique environment.

Suddenly Alina jumped up and down excitedly. “Look out there, beyond those rocks. I see the prow of a boat!”



Garry Hop's face lit up when he realized it was the great vessel belonging to Bandeo Gropius. "The Donarius! Yes, that's the boat the shaman used to ship his herbs."

But the boat was in sad shape: the floats on its sides were completely deflated, the prow was ruined, and the hull was in an awful state. And then there were the oars: all broken. The Donarius was practically unusable.

"It's this horrible war! That's exactly what will happen if the warriors take this island! They'll destroy everything. Nothing Bandeo has cultivated will be saved," Alina said through gritted teeth. Right then she hated both of their peoples, hers and Garry's.

The young Hop nodded. "You know what? We'll never be like the warriors, Verroti or Fiderbi! That's what Hunnia teaches!"

The warmth given off by the fertile soil made possible the rapid growth of giant flowers that blossomed everywhere. Tufts of Blue Herb popped up among the green blades of fresh grass, soft sparks and inebriating scents made the environment calm and harmonious. Alina bent down to gather some Hawkweed, a white ivy with soothing powers.

Then Garry had an idea. "Hawkweed! If we rub it on our wounds, we'll heal. I just hope it works even if we can't reduce it to a mush and boil it for two hours like the recipe says."

Alina bent down and rubbed some of the plant's leaves on her arms and face. At the slightest touch her skin was regenerated. Her wounds and cuts immediately began to heal. Garry followed suit: his wounds began to disappear, and even the pain in his legs and arms became more bearable.

"Natural magic. I'm almost afraid to step foot on the meadow and risk interfering with the workings of this extraordinary land," said the young Hop.

But the image of his mother and her suffering brought a cloud over his face. He needed to get home as quickly as he could. He'd made a promise.

Albin shook his mane: his hunger was making his stomach growl. He began grazing on some grass and small blue flowers, which tasted like the sea.

Having interrupted their cries, the gorillas looked at the horse with interest and made their way over to him with a strange gait, forming a circle around him.

No animals like Albin existed on the island and they were curious to get to know him. They even tried petting his thick tail, but Albin stamped his hoofs on the meadow, indicating that he didn't appreciate that sort of attention. This sudden noise alarmed a small group of Slow Winks

who were down in their tunnels. These moles popped up from between the stones and stared with puzzlement at the children and the horse.

Alina started to laugh: “How funny! This place really is surprising. There’s no cold. There’s no snow. The weather is so mild, it feels like springtime! And these animals ... they’re so different from the ones we know.”

“These are the Slow Winks. They help Gropius keep the island in order by digging and cleaning. They’re the ones who plant new seeds,” Garry explained to her, setting the book and map down on the grass. They were still wet, and he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to activate the *Tabula Eloquens*.

As the boy tried to come up with a solution, the gorillas started making noises again.

After a few seconds the ground shook once more. The Slow Winks dove back into their holes and Albin neighed and stomped his hoofs nervously, kicking up stones and grass. From their left came a loud noise similar to the trotting of horses. But these were no steeds, but rather six great White Teeth! They came running out of their caves and, with great bounds on their furry paws, crossed the Pointed Meadow and reached the group. These bears, with fur as white as Albin, came to a halt next to the Great Hands, who welcomed them happily.

Alina jumped into Garry’s arms. “What are they going to do to us? Are they dangerous?”

The young Hop’s heart was in his throat, he had no idea how to deal with the situation. But two of the bears took the initiative: they lumbered over to the two children and plopped down at their feet, showing that they weren’t aggressive.

As Alina looked on in amazement and terror, Garry tried to pick up the map and the book to prevent the bears from stepping on them. But before he could do so, the two animals opened their mouths, displaying terrifying teeth, and began blowing hot air on the still-wet pages.

Garry had read that the White Teeth could breathe fire, so when he saw them at work, he feared they might turn everything to ash. How could he complete his mission if the map and the talking book were incinerated?

But the bears continued blowing delicately, ignoring the children’s reaction, and in no time the book and map were back in perfect condition.

“Incredible! No one will believe me when I tell them what I’ve seen!” Alina exclaimed, cupping her hands around her face.

“Yes, maybe they were expecting us. They were waiting for someone to come to Hunnia without weapons or hatred. They understand. They’re wise animals, raised by Gropius who defends and loves them,” said Garry, who couldn’t take his eyes off the bears and gorillas, who were just sitting there in front of him, as if they were all old friends.

“And they even remember your mother. You only had to pronounce her name and the impossible happened. They also seem to recognize the *Tabula Eloquens* and even the *Alchemical Herba*, which your mother used. That’s why they’re helping us.” The girl was no longer afraid. She went toward the bears and put out her hand to caress their soft, white fur. When they gave her a generous lick on the face, her laughter was contagious. Even the gorillas turned their heads left and right, rocking playfully.

Garry couldn’t help but be distracted by the scene and thought back to the long journey he’d undertaken with Alina: their meeting on the train, their struggle with the Tauri, the terrible plunge into the Assassin, and the shipwreck. They had cheated death on numerous occasions. And now there they were, on the magical island that both their peoples wanted to conquer. Two enemy peoples who were destroying all hopes of peace.

The thought of the terrible war broke the spell of that extraordinary encounter: they had to find Bando Gropius as quickly as they could.

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