

Gypsy Down Under Or Gypsy Overboard!

“So, which way today,” asked Tatianna, “Northward?”
“No, too cold,” answered Junio, in that thick accent so indicative of the Karkovna clan.
“East then?”
“Towards the coast? Too far.”
“Not to the dwarves,” Tatianna said, making a sour face.
“South it is, then,” Junio said with a pleased look. “To Parthia.”
“That’s always fun.”

The gypsies set off at a brisk, invigorated pace, eager to see what trouble they could get into before the day was through. The weather was good and the cousins’ moods were bright. The last time they went into Parthia, they’d had a little fun with a supposed “cursed” raccoon. People would think twice before stuffing and mounting small forest creatures from now on!

Their usual destination was Tharmont, the northernmost city in Parthia, and today was no exception. Tharmont, the City of Diplomats, was way too serious for their liking, and in dire need of loosening up. Tatianna and Junio saw it as their responsibility to do just that. Their first tactic was the manner in which they dressed, with their gaudy mix of bright silks, velvets and leathers guaranteed to cause a stir. And if Tatianna’s tunics and vests ever became too much of a burden, she simply went without them.

Tatianna was not shy.

Junio was no slouch, however: he had an uncanny ability to harass half a dozen women at once. And the noblewomen were always the most fun. The trick was to do it without spending any time in jail. It was a delicate balance, but somehow he always managed.

The trip to Tharmont took the better part of the day, the gypsies choosing to walk and enjoy the scenery. Horses or a wagon would be faster, but that tended to cut out a lot of chance for adventure, with the countryside rushing by like that. They arrived in time for a late lunch, for which they found a street vendor and purchased some of the more exotic fruits from the jungles of Xanthos.

“What’s this thing called again?” asked Junio, studying the red pitted fruit.

“Pomegranite,” mumbled Tatianna, her mouth full.

“Sweet and tart,” mused Junio.

“Like me!” Tatianna seemed pleased at her clever remark, and they both nearly sprayed seeds everywhere as they giggled at each other.

Tharmont was beautiful as usual, its tall, decorated walls shining in the sunlight. The buildings were large and intricately designed, quite worthy of the type of travellers they received from all over the world. Tharmont overlooked Brightwater Lake whose waters were particularly brilliant on this spring day. The cousins sat at the end of the dock, feet dangling over the water, pondering their next move. Perhaps an excursion on the lake...

Tatianna let out a gasp, pointing at the water below them. “Look!”

Junio leaned forward straining to see into the depths of the lake. “What? Where?”

“Right...there!” Tatianna emphasized her last word by giving Junio a solid shove that sent him flying into the chilly water with a gigantic, flailing splash. She couldn’t contain her mirth. Tatianna rolled around on the dock, contorting with uproarious laughter. She hadn’t played that prank in a long time. Junio surfaced, pushing his wet hair out of his face and gasping for air.

“I can’t believe you did that!” yelled Junio, as he treaded water.

“I can’t believe you fell for that, cousin!” Tatianna yelled back.

Junio playfully spit a stream of lake water at her, which she unsuccessfully attempted to block with her hands. As if that wasn’t enough, Junio directed a huge splash directly at her, soaking Tatianna completely.

“Fair is fair,” quipped Junio.

“All right, all right, you win,” acquiesced Tatianna. “Come on, lets go find a sunny spot to dry off in.”

Tatianna began to wring out her hair, waiting for Junio to climb out of the lake.

“Hurry up!” she called.

But there was no response. She looked over the edge of the dock and underneath. She saw no sign of Junio.

“I said ‘you win’,” she reiterated. “Save your invisibility spells for later.”

Still no response. “I’m not jumping in there after you. And your not going to pull me...in.” Her speech faltered, as one of Junio’s blue shoes floated to the surface. Without a second thought, Tatianna kicked off her shoes and began to undo her vest. Quickly, she muttered a simple invocation that would allow her to breathe underwater. The last words left her lips a second before she hit the water, diving strong and deep into the cool waters of the lake. Though Brightwater was clean and her vision relatively clear, all Tatianna had to follow was a small trail of bubbles that lead straight down to the cold, murky bottom. Tatianna kicked and paddled as hard as she could, plunging deeper and deeper into the depths. The light began to disappear quickly, the further she got from the surface. With visibility nearing zero, she thought of casting a spell to illuminate the surrounding area, but Tatianna had never cast underwater before, and without that knowledge, the spell would probably fail.

There was no time. She pushed on furiously, hoping to reach the bottom or find something to guide her soon. She knew that Junio probably hadn’t had time to get a spell off before he was pulled under. Unless this was one of his elaborate jokes. A very sick joke.

Tatianna was now in complete darkness, and she didn’t even feel any of the underwater plant life reaching up to brush against her. Which way? Where was he?! Maybe he had surfaced. Maybe whatever had taken him had surfaced. Or perhaps a bystander had seen something.

She began to head towards the surface, or what she thought was the surface, being able only to guess at the direction in the consuming blackness. Finally, she saw a light. She was going the right way. But something was...different. This wasn’t the broad glow of daylight. It was...smaller. Tatianna quickly realized that she was looking at several points of light. Perhaps Junio had found a way to illuminate his location. She swam towards the beacons with renewed vigor. A vague shape began to form around the lights, outlined by their glow. It was bulky with several spikes protruding from it. A sea serpent?! No, it was stationary and at an odd angle. Tatianna got within 100 feet of it

before she realized that she was looking at a ship. A sunken ship! Junio had to be in there. She prayed that he was.

Tatianna swam past the bow of the ship, which was covered with algae and other things she didn't recognize. In the gloom, she was barely able to discern the name: *Crystal Crown*. She had heard the name before, floating around the rumors of Vagabonds Tavern. Rumors that soon became a ghost story that frightened children and some adults as well. The *Crystal Crown* was a ship sailing on Brightwater Lake when the first storms of the Ice Age hit with such ferocity that it sank within minutes. There was some confusion as to whether it was a warship, a merchant vessel or a fisherman's yacht. Regardless, the ship was frozen, along with the lake and everything in it, or so the story went. Finally, after almost a thousand years, the Ice Age ended and the lake thawed. Most of the ship's crew had died, and their spirits were said to haunt the docks of Tharmont to this very day.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

Apparently, some of the crew had survived, perfectly preserved in their frozen state, with one important difference: being underwater for a millennium had changed them into savage, aquatic creatures, bitter at their cruel fate and hungry for revenge. In the 250 years since the ice receded, many small fishing boats had disappeared mysteriously without a trace. It is said that these disappearances were always preceded by an uncharacteristically strong, cold wind. These stories also spawned the fisherman's euphemism "don't get crowned".

Tatianna approached one of the glowing portholes and peered inside. To her surprise, not only was the interior perfectly intact, but richly decorated as well. Light emanated from several lanterns positioned around the luxurious room. From her vantage point, it seemed that the room was not filled with water as it should be. But what was keeping it from flooding the entire ship? Magic? She gently put her hand through the open porthole and was shocked to feel warm air on the other side. She pulled her arm back and decided to try and squeeze through the porthole, head first. She might have found an easier entrance, but she didn't want to waste time looking for one when Junio may still be in danger. Plus, at least she knew this room was safe.

Luckily, Tatianna was rather lithe and limber. All of those acrobatics lessons were paying off now. She wriggled her way in through the porthole and dropped onto a rather comfortable couch. She appeared to be in a study of some kind, one with many shelves and scrolls. Not sparing any time to investigate further, Tatianna hopped to her feet and crossed the room to its only door, slipping a gold scroll case off of the desk and into her pocket along the way.

Old habits were hard to break.

Tatianna gently unlatched the door and opened it just enough to peek into the next chamber. Her narrow field of vision only allowed her a small glimpse of the lavishly decorated state room where she saw Junio lying on the floor, still soaking wet and apparently unconscious. Looming over him was a hideous looking old man, face marred by time and the elements. He scarcely appeared human, more fish-like with wrinkles so bad that they took on the appearance of scales. His skin bulged grotesquely in various places and a pus-like fluid leaked from a few of these boils. Conversely, his embroidered robes seemed to be of the finest materials, sporting many mystical and astrological insignias, some that Tatianna didn't even recognize.

With all of the evidence that she had gathered thus far, there could be no doubt as to this creature's identity as a sorcerer, and the fact that he was mumbling an arcane chant confirmed it. Small wisps of light and smoke began to take form around Junio, emanating from the wizard's hands. He was casting a spell over her cousin! Tatianna wasn't about to let him transform Junio into some beast as foul as he!

She quickly went into a tuck and roll, hurling herself into the room with as much force as she could muster. Her stunt found the mark and, catching the wizard off guard, she took his legs right out from under him. The wizard flew back and his head struck the wall with a loud 'thunk'. Tatianna gracefully leaped to her feet, ready to fend off his attack but none came. The wizard lay unmoving on the carpeted floor, knocked out by his fall. She rushed to Junio's side, hoping he was still alive.

"Junio! Junio, wake up! It's Anna."

He didn't move. Tatianna started to get frantic, slapping him gently on the cheek.

"Come on, cousin. Don't leave me here with fish-face."

Junio's eyelids gently fluttered open. He began to choke out the remaining water in his lungs, coughing heavily. Finally, after clearing his throat, he sat upright, painfully.

"And they say the lake isn't polluted. Yuck!"

Tatianna smiled at his humor, which always seemed to come through, even after near-drownings.

"Well, get ready, because we have to go through it one more time. And I can't get you to the surface on my own."

"And why would you want to do that?" came a voice from behind them, a voice that sounded like a slurred lisp.

"Fish-face?" asked Junio, in a whisper.

"Yep," answered Tatianna.

They both turned to face the sorcerer. Tatianna stood, but Junio remained sitting, still getting his breath back.

"After all," he continued, "the surface is such an ugly place."

"You're one to talk," quipped Junio. Tatianna gently kicked him.

"Oh, I'm long past such insults," blubbered the wizard, as drool (or some other substance) dripped from his lips.

"Are you one of the crew?" asked Tatianna, "Were you on this ship when it sank?"

The sickly-looking sorcerer smiled a foul smile at Tatianna's inquiry. "I'm glad you think so, but no. Believe it or not, I'm not much older than yourselves. I had a promising career ahead of me. I was going to be a famous wizard, giving counsel to all the heads of state. Then this happened." The sorcerer picked up a small silver hand mirror from the table next to him and gazed into it resignedly. "Some idiot of a student couldn't get the inflections right in his spellcasting," he explained, combing back what was left of his stringy hair, which, Tatianna realized, looked a lot like seaweed. "He became frustrated and, in his anger, spat out a spell he wasn't supposed to cast. I just happened to be in the way."

Though Tatianna was morbidly fascinated with his story, she was still aware enough to notice that Junio had inched his way closer to the door. She decided to keep fish-face talking while she slipped that way as well. "Do go on," she pleaded.

“With my career and my face ruined I had nowhere to go. I had heard the tales of the *Crystal Crown* and decided to make use of them to my advantage.” He put the mirror down and gave Tatianna a repulsive, toothless grin. “Everything has worked out perfectly. I’ve even had time to study and become the mage I’ve always wanted to be.”

“But why bring all the people down here?” Tatianna asked, genuinely interested.

“Conversation,” he said, simply. “Once in a while I try to find a good chef so I can get a nice home cooked meal. Though I do occasionally feel guilty about using my magic to force women to pleasure me.”

That was all Tatianna needed to hear. She and Junio simultaneously bolted through the door and into the study. “How do we get out of here?” he asked, hurriedly.

“Squeeze through the portholes!” she yelled.

Junio sized up the portholes quickly. “I can’t fit through those! He must have brought me through another way!”

“Indeed I did,” the wizard said ominously, stalking into the room, “And the only way to reach that exit is through me.”

“Fine then!” Junio spat out, as he began to invoke a minor enchantment. Junio’s hands began to crackle with electricity as he leaped at the wizard, reaching for his throat. The sorcerer merely stood, impassive as Junio’s shocking grasp reacted violently, but harmlessly with his own magical energy shield. The wizard threw his arm outward, forcefully, and Junio flew across the room, landing and bouncing clumsily off of the plush couch.

“I don’t want to hurt either of you,” the sorcerer insisted, “just use you for a while.”

Tatianna became frantic, desperately searching for a way out. She considered burning through the hull of the ship, but the flood of water would probably drown them. At least it was a better fate than what fish-face had in store. Tatianna stepped in front of Junio, protecting him as the wizard came to stand directly over them. She was out of options. She couldn’t compete with the wizard’s power, and she couldn’t escape without leaving Junio behind, as he lay dazed on the floor. She crouched and held Junio in her arms tightly.

The wizard was saying something about ‘being gentle with them’ when Tatianna noticed a movement behind him. There was a face at one of the portholes, a horrible, zombie-like face even more disfigured than the wizard. She looked at the other portholes and saw a face at each of them. What could be more disgusting than the man that stood before her? The sorcerer was beginning to cast some kind of spell and didn’t notice her furtive glances behind him. Tatianna let out a gasp as the zombies began to slip through the portholes and into the room, not making a sound. Fish-face spread his arms wide, as his spellcasting came to a climax. Four pairs of clawed hands went up and came down heavily upon the wizard’s head and back. The look of shock added one final disfigurement to the sorcerer’s face as he was ripped apart by the undead beasts.

With the wizard’s death came the death of his magic, and the waterproof barriers that kept the lake water out of the ship burst, creating a violent gusher that was filling the room at an alarming rate. Tatianna quickly circumvented the carnage that was going on, dragging Junio behind her. The water threatened to knock them aside and pull them under, and that same force prevented them from recasting their spells that allowed them to breathe underwater.

They made it back into the stateroom, where Tatianna spied the hatch that led topside. This room was smaller and had completely filled with water, so she opened the hatch without difficulty. Tatianna assisted Junio, pushing him out of the room and then she followed. Neither one looked back, for fear of what might be chasing them, as they rose quickly through the darkness and to the surface.

Both gasped for breath and quickly swam to the shore, where they wasted no time in getting back to the dock to recover their discarded clothes. As Junio retied his shoes, he noticed a gold object sticking partly out of Tatianna's pocket.

"What's that?" he asked.

Tatianna reached down and pulled the scroll case from her pocket, breaking the wax seal on the end. "Something I lifted from the study." She peered inside, then removed the piece of parchment and unrolled it. Both studied its markings curiously.

"Looks like a treasure map," concluded Junio.

"Yes," Tatianna agreed, "Shall we?"

"Maybe tomorrow, Anna," said Junio, "Maybe tomorrow."

Tatianna merely shrugged. "Yeah. Tomorrow."