

Knights of the Snail - Book One

The First Two Tales

The Sloath is Sworn

The Queen was dead and the King of the Curlicue throne was sad.

All day he slept and wept and, as the sun fell through the empty air towards the terminating line of night, he woke and pushed away his salt-encrusted sheets and walked to the balconies deepening void to stare into the dying summer light, while the Fool, Ham Floret, waited in his shadow tensing his legs to leap in case the king should try to jump.

The King did not jump. He simply looked into the gathering gloom, counting the drawn storms as they marched across the velvet horizon and the sun bled red across the land.

No-one saw the Kings face as he stared into the dark, or made out the half-whispered words that fell from his mouth like dry leaves, they only heard the scratching of the monarchs nails on the old oak of the balconys lip.

The King stood through the night on the border of the lightless room. No-one looked up but everyone below him knew that he was there. No-one could see him clearly in the dark but the Fool Ham Floret could trace his immoveable outline against the stars behind the parting clouds, which he was very glad of as it showed the King had still not jumped.

This went on for several days, then several months, then several years.

Ham Florets legs began to cramp.

'This is quite enough.' He thought and, technically committing treason, he stole the kings spiralling seal and summoned the Knights of the Snail.

Slowly, and by spiral paths, the Snail Knights came.

First arrived Sir Bird Spiralling, then Sir Chesslike Hand upon his snail of gold. Sir Babbling of Broms-burg, who had a flaw upon his tongue, came next, Sir Twine Devise, Sir Lucent Void, who looked oddly at the ink-stained fingers of the Fool, and then Sir Duno Chrime, who believed that he was made of glass, came carefully and slow upon his many-cushioned snail.

Then quickly came a row of seven snails. Sir Tangling Chase, Sir Bedlam Frail, Sir Furnace of Furness, Sir Rime Grotesque, Sir Tumble-The-Tin Perchance, Sir Lightly Gloom and last of these, sitting thinking on his snail, was Sir Coagulate Fast, the wisest of the knights some said. Then Sir Griev Go-let, who no-one knew. Then appeared Sir Voretix Frail, Sir Max Bassoon and finally in tumult came Sir Whirl.

So there were seventeen Knights of the Snail all there, (plus Ham Floret)

"I am here!" Cried Sir Whirl. "I have raced the very wind in my attempt. Am I the first?"

"In fact you are the last," said the Fool Ham Floret, "you could not be more late."

"In fact of fact," said Vortex Frail, "the last you cannot be, for Sir Sextant Wrought the Permanently Lost is neither here nor there."

"I believe," said Duno Chrime, "I saw him on the way, yet ere night fell I lost him in the dark and never a sight of his snail have I seen since."

Then spoke Sir Fast, the Thinking Knight, and though he did not raise his head the room grew quiet.

"You all forget," he said in his still and level voice, "Sir Gorget Vile."

"The Black Snail Knight!" Cried Max Bassoon. "Tis well for him he did not come, for who here has not learned to hate by word or deed that honourless and crafty rogue? No Knight is he say I!"

Few there hesitated to agree.

"Yet," said Sir Bird Spiralling, "he *is* a knight, The King who knighted him has knighted us."

"The King!" said Twine Devise, "Where is the King? He summoned me direct."

"And I!" cried Sir Whirl.

"And I!" went on Sir Tangling Chase.

"And I! And I!" Cried every Knight, and they waved their summons in the air until it seemed as if a great affray of paper might take place. Except Sir Fast who sat silently with his chin upon his fist, and Sir Lucent Void, who looked suspiciously at Ham Floret, (who was looking with suspicion upon Sir Griev Go-let).

"The King," said Sir Bird Spiralling "is the only one in all the land who may command by speech or written word the Wonderous Knights of the Snail. At his request we stand ready to attempt any adventure. Yet here we come and find no King but you instead."

"A regrettable deception" said Ham Floret massaging his thighs.

"Treason!" Cried Sir Whirl and picked the Fool up by his feet, whirling him around to bash his brains out on the shelf.

"Pro Patria!" cried Ham Floret, "Excessive love of country!", though he had to shout it several time as Sir Whirl built up centrifugal speed and the exact division of his words was hard to place, sounding; "OPE RAT RAP HER! OPE RAT RAP HER!"

"Stop." said Sir Bird Spiralling, "release the fool. And *not*" he quickly added "not straight away Sir Whirl, but first reduce his speed and bring him to a relative stop and only then let go."

"As you wish." Sighed Sir Whirl in disappointment.

"I can explain" said Ham Floret after his dizziness had calmed. "The King is sad. In the day he sleeps and weeps and as the sun goes down he puts aside his salt encrusted sheets and walks to stare into the darkness left by the falling sun and count the storms on the velvet horizon."

"Will he jump?" Asked Max Bassoon.

"He has not yet" replied the Fool "but I am prepared to catch him if he does. He simply waits and watches the dark, speaking quietly and scratching the wood of the rail. Then, as morning comes, he returns to his bed. In the afternoons as his eyes twitch under their lids, I sneak berries into his murmuring mouth and he eats them without waking up and so he has not starved to death."

"It is a sombre duty." Said Sir Whirl.

"It's been three years!" Cried the Fool. "Every method has been tried! Priests, poetry, women, art, winsome children, sombre songs, elixirs of the Sun and Moon, the Nightmare drugs of Thaum. Nothing moves the King at all! The laws go un-confirmed and the taxes unreformed, the ceremonies wither on the branch, the Birds of Crime steal ever more, the awful things that used to fear the sun are now seen openly at morning from the corner of the eye, there are bandits behind every hedge, an enchantress in every tower and Gorget Vile the Black Snail Knight grows ever more cunning and cruel in his schemes!"

"(The cursed coward)" Muttered Sir Griev Go-let.

At this the Snail Knights stood downcast and stared at the cracks in the floor.

"The land is in a sorry state." Said Bedlam Frail.

"In some ways it is worse" whispered Ham Floret "than to have no King at all. At least then" he muttered under his breath "some kind of democratic constitution might be worked out.."

"Enough of that." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "For we are the Knight of the Snail, and what are Knights without a King, or a King without Knights?"

"Surely soon" said Tangling Chase "this grief must end. Each passion has its season and its time. As day follows night or summer melts the snows, eventually the King must come back to the world."

"But how much time?" said Twine Devise.

Then spoke the quiet Sir Fast with his chin upon his fist. "His sorrow" said he "will be as long as love was deep."

"Then surely we are doomed" said Max Bassoon "for no-one ever loved so true."

"She was the days light to him." Said the Fool.

With that, the Knights all hung their heads, the room grew still and the shadows moved across the floor.

"I must away" spoke the Fool after a time "soon he will arise and stand before the dark and I must be there to see he does not jump."

"Wait" said Sir Bird Spiralling "are we not the heroes of the land? Sir Chrime, is any man of nobler heart than you? And you Sir Whirl, has any man been less afraid? Sir Rime Grotesque, is any knight of finer craft? Sir Vortex Frail, hath ever sweeter soul been matched with firmer hand than yours? And you Sir Hand, would any man dare more in service to his friends? Sir Lucent Void, does any man dream deeper thoughts of ancient lore? And you Sir Fast, is any knight of greater penetrating thought?"

"Perhaps" replied Sir Fast "Sir Gorget Vile."

"Enough!" said Sir Bird Spiralling "We are the Knights of the Snail!"

"Huzzah!" Cried approximately one third of the Knights of the Snail.

"There is no key without a lock, no night without a dawn, no grief without an end. The land is wide and wild and strange and bordered by impossibilities yet unexplored. What fear have we of danger or mischance? Whatever ails the King, let us go forth!"

"Indeed!" Cried approximately two thirds of the Knight of the Snail.

"Somewhere in the weird and turning world must lie some unknown thing or durance strange that can unlock the sorrows of the King." So speaking he stood up on the table knocking over a basket of fruit and drawing his gleaming sword.

"I make my sloath!" cried Sir Bird Spiralling (for so are named the 'Slow Oaths' of the Snail Knights) "I swear that I shall range the whole world wide, dare any danger, brave any foe, seek any mystery and venture any unknown path until I find some means to ease the sorrows of the King!"

"Hooray!" Cried ninety four per cent of the Knights of the Snail and drew their blades and waved them in the air, all except Sir Fast, who sat quietly with his chin upon his fist.

"I think" said he "there can very well be keys without a lock, a night without a day must come at last, and grief is no bounded kingdom to be noted on the map, for it is edgeless, vast and dark."

At this the Snail Knights paused. Their hearts grew cold, their eyes grew dull and swords began to droop.

"And yet" went on Sir Fast "the King is kind, and has always been my friend, and so" he calmly drew and raised his sword "I add my sloath to yours."

"The King!" cried one hundred per-cent of the Knights of the Snail (barring Sir Sextant Wrought).

And so, with this great sloath their famous quests began.

The Tale of Sir Bird Spiralling

No sooner had his sloath been spake and even as the Snail Knights cheered "The King!", but Sir Bird Spiralling leapt from the table, ran from the room, mounted his snail 'Caribas' (whose swirls were shaded like autumnal leaves) and, without even sheathing his sword he had travelled several leagues at speed into the soft and growling country that closed in round the castle of the Curlicue Throne.

As he rode the light died slowly in the air and as the leaves let go their green the ziggurat moon arrived and gilded them in silver robes.

"Caribas I am lost" said Sir Bird Spiralling "and I am a fool. For, so much do I love the king and doing all things right and good that I have set upon my quest without thinking where to go or why, and this is not wise action for a knight."

And so speaking he sheathed his sword which burned in the moonlight like a white sail in the stars and looked about to see what he could see.

Behind him he saw the suns lees staining the sky and, drawn on the horizon like a fleck of ink, was a tiny line straight up and down.

"There Caribas is the tallest tower of the castle of the curlicue throne" said Bird Spiralling "and in its highest window is the King, gazing, as do I, at the sun falling from the sky, and there I may not go for I will seem the biggest fool alive to have run from the room as I did without knowing where to go or why, and the other knights will laugh."

So he turned to the fore and looked into the moonlit growling lands to see what he could see, and there, where the margin of the moon met the forest dressed in silver light, he saw another tiny pencil scratch of black.

"Here Caribas is a tower unknown to me" said Sir Bird Spiralling. "Well, there is nothing to do but brazen it out and go on and hope to meet with one well versed in lore who will advise me on the nature of my quest."

And so he guided Caribas towards the shadowed tower.

The Tower of Webs

The forest then came quickly on, looking up, its branches seemed to wrestle with the meagre stars and the growls and grunts of that grim land grumbled at his heels.

"Caribas" he said "I would the night were a little less dark and the trees a little less close." but then he took a breath. "But this is not brave speaking for a knight." And so he fell silent and gripped his sword and shared no more his fears with Caribas, and after several dreamlike hours a strange and twanging sound came creeping through the trees and as he followed it the tower that crossed the moons eye came in sight.

In a clearing in the forest was a mighty swirl of stone like the shell of a gigantic snail, which made a spiral hill, and on the summit of that hill there was no tower, but a black titanic tree was wrapped entirely up in silk, and this was not the pleasant kind of silk for it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that these were many wreathes of spiders webs.

"Caribas, this troubles me" said Sir Bird Spiralling "and yet, it does seem that something makes this nest of webs their home, for look, a light burns somewhere up above, and some spaces there are that might be windows, and listen Caribas, someone here is playing the Sitar."

And in truth the soft mangling of a badly-played Sitar did echo oddly through the woods for its player was of passing clumsy hand, although Sir Bird Spiralling was too honourable and kind to mention this to Caribas.

"Perhaps Caribas, there is some comely maiden captured and kept prisoner in this tower of webs by aid of dark enchantment or a spider of enormous size, whiling away her lonely hours by learning the Sitar, awaiting rescue by some knight."

Then he paused a moment and thought:

"Probably the dark enchanter turns into a spider, or visa versa, it seems like the kind of thing that they would do."

So he rode towards the tower and waved his sword which, dark through it was, still caught the faint allowance of the gloomy stars and shone like a cresting wave.

"Ho there! O Master of the tower of webs, come forth!"

The twanging wrangling of the Sitar ceased and the light inside the tower of webs shifted and came forth to a space and he saw a lady and a lamp, and the lamp was passing bright and the lady passing dark and in the moon her hair and eyes seemed like a dark and stormy sea in bands of gold and white.

"*Master* call you?" she said "Who cries so and disturbs the dark? Who calls for the *master* of the tower? And, if you met them what would you do then? And why?"

"I am Sir Bird Spiralling, Knight of the Snail" said Sir Bird Spiralling "and I would challenge him to feats of arms, and as to why, have found it is a complex question, with a beginning but no easily determined end. Let me say only that a lady passing fair such as yourself might need and require rescue from this durance vile."

"Might I?" said the lady with the lamp "Let's have a little more of the why."

"Well, began Sir Bird Spiralling, "the code of chivalry, as handed down from ages past.."

"Not quite that far" said the lady with the lamp "only go back a little beyond tonight."

Sir Bird Spiralling thought for a moment. "The King is cloaked in sorrows deep and grief that seems to have no end and I have sworn to range the whole world wide to find some answer for his pain. As," he added "have numerous other Knights of the Snail."

"How fortunate to be a King," said the lady "whose every sorrow brings forth noble sloaths. How long Sir Bird have you adventured in this quest, and what great heroic acts have you achieved?"

"My name is Bird Spiralling, and not Sir Bird" said Sir Bird Spiralling "as I think you know well." And then he paused. "So far my quest has lasted perhaps twelve hours and all that I have done is come here and speak to you. And I think" he added darkly "that you, in fact, are Mistress of this tower and an Enchantress and that you mock my sloath and require no aid from either me or any other knight."

"Not that slow then." said the lady with the lamp "And what will you do now Sir Spiralling Bird?"

Sir Bird Spiralling sank in his saddle. "In truth I do not know. I must seek a bane of sorrow but know not what or where that is, for, I was so set upon my sloath and so much love the King and all things right and good that I dashed away upon the venture without requesting wisdom from my fellow knights, which I see now that I should have done."

"Do you ever lie?" said the lady with the lamp.

"A true knight never does." said Sir Bird Spiralling "Yet I shall speak no more by shouting in the dark and I shall leave you to your spiders and the songs of your Sitar. On Caribas." And so he turned to leave.

As he moved away the light went out and the Caribas moved slitherly into dark between the trees he heard the sound of feet running swiftly over grass and a voice said:

"Wait."

And Caribas probed his antlers in the gloom, for snails can travel very neatly in the dark should they wish, though knights not always can. And the voice said again:

"Wait Sir Bird Spiralling, I am in need of aid."

Sir Bird Spiralling turned in his saddle and he saw the lady was much harmed, for her skin was dark and her silks were bright and bands of gold were on her arms and in the bands were sets and clasps for seven jewels and all the jewels were gone and torn away and there were scars upon her arms and on her face for an eye had been taken from her head.

"My Lady!" cried Sir Bird Spiralling, and he leapt from his saddle and knelt upon one knee and offered the hilt of his sword.

"My Lady I beg your forgiveness for I see you are much harmed and robbed of your rich attire and are in great need of protection. Only name the villains who have done this and I swear as a knight I shall avenge you and return your gems."

"It was the Birds of Crime" she said "and your protection is a little late. Eyes do not grow back and they have taken more from me than eyes or gems." But she reached down gently to his hand where it held up the hilt of his sword. "And consider this Sir Knight, if you swear to me as well as to your King, which sloath takes precedence? How serve you both at once? You must think a little more before you act."

So Sir Bird Spiralling thought.

"Yet you say you are in need of aid. Perhaps if you could lend me some assistance in my quest I might in return give you the aid you need and by accountancy could count the two quests one."

"Perhaps I could." she said "I am called Ilvoyne." (Which nealy rhymes with 'Scone'). "Come with me inside my tower of webs and I will tell you a tale that may be of some use."

"My Lady" said Sir Bird Spiralling "your tower lacks a door."

"I climb" she replied, then noting his sceptical looks she said "Do not fear I will speak to the spiders and ask them to make you a door."

"I had not known that spiders spoke." replied the knight.

"It is a very silent speech" said the Enchantress "and people rarely listen well."

So she brought him inside her tower of veils and gave the knight good cheer and this is the story she told:

"When the world was very young the sky at night was full of stars much brighter than today and when people then were sad they would go out under the bright night sky and look up into the river of light and their sorrows would drift away like breath freezing in the winter air.

But then the stars grew perilous and strange and people grew afraid. A shield was made and the sky at night grew dull and black with only the meagre trundling gleams we see today.

Then, from the furthest corner of the world, ice came like a beating drum. It grew and grew and seemed to have no reason and no end.

A man then had an idea about the ice and wanted to find out if it was true. He could not find out alone, so he took his daughter with and went to speak to a silver city that strode (they did that then) and asked for it to take them deep into the waste where nothing lived. The city said it would. And so they went.

It was a long journey with many perils and adventures but eventually they came the furthest limit of the world.

"It is the bodies of the sorrows" said the man "all the sorrows of the world collect, with nowhere left for them to go they sit and die and freeze. And sorrow has no end, and neither will the ice."

At this his daughter was much dole, so he said "Perhaps there's something we can do."

What he did nobody knows, only the city returned, but the ice slowed down and stopped and things calmed down and so they stand today."

Then she saw the knight was sleeping in his armour in his chair, and she smiled and went to bed.

He Leaves without Speaking

She woke to find him gone, in rage she grabbed her sitar and ran out.

As luck would have it snails are neither swift nor often of great stealth and the trail of Caribas was neither long or hard to find.

"WHAT" said Ilvoyne the Enchantress, "do you mean Sir Knight by leaving without speaking, thanks or cause? This is not good action for a knight." And the glare from her dark eye was like the gleaming of a poisoned spoon.

"Oh." Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and stopped Caribas. "I had not thought of that. It only seemed quite clear when I woke up that I should find at once the man who solved the riddle of the endless ice and thereby learn the secrets of sorrow and so save my king and the sooner that quest is done the

sooner I shall be able to offer you all necessary aid, so I set off at once with the sun. I see now I was rude."

"Rude and stupid." Said Ilvonye. "For do you not think it would be wiser to seek out the silver city since *that* was the last thing to see them alive? And would you not require a guide and aid in such a quest for, since yesterday you did not even know that it *was*, today you still do not know where it *is*?"

"But where am I to find such a guide?" said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"Shift a bit." Ilvoyne said, and without waiting she climbed Caribas and sat cross-legged on his shell.

"This is irregular and strange!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. "To carry an Enchantress about on Caribas. What will I say and what will people think?"

"Say you found a one-eyed woman in the woods and offered her protection and she came to aid you on your quest." And then she said no more but only sat squinting her eye and plucking slow but fiercely on the strings of her sitar.

Many Winters Pass

The Silver City and Sir Tergol Geiv

Time passed on its march. They searched for many winters and the trials and adventures of their quest, (which have been spoke of in other books) shall not be repeated here, but eventually it came in sight. A silver city with a single spire that moved with swift solemnity on silver legs, never ceasing, ever-stepping, always somewhat out of reach, blinking on the headlands like a mote, passing through the silent valleys, ghosting past the still hills and frightening the hovering hawks that saw it loom beneath them a few feet.

Long leagues they made the chase, sometimes the Knight kept watch, sometimes Ilvoyne, and the snail Caribas never tired or ceased, his horns reached forwards and he quested fiercely with all his speed.

Yet, the speed of snails is never great, and though they travelled madly through the turning cycle of the world, the city grew no closer, but seemed always a little further on, like the head of a pin at the back of an unused room.

"It wearies me to see it so." said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"If words were speed we'd be there now." replied Ilvoyne.

"Chase you the silver city?" said a voice.

"Who goes there?" said Sir Bird Spiralling, and "shift over" as he and Ilvoyne awkwardly swapped places and he took his place at the reins of Caribas.

When they looked to see who spoke they saw a hoary knight, grey from the dust of the road and bent with age.

"Who goes there?" Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"It is only I, Sir Tergol Geiv" said the old man leaning on his broken lance. "Oh!" he said "I see you are a hardy man, full-armed, and with a lady prisoner. Ware you Sir, though I be old, I am yet fierce and though my quest has claimed these many years I shall not stand to see a damsel endangered." And so he staggered forth to bar their way.

"Again?" Said Ilvoyne. "I can't see."

"Fear not my friend!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling "for it is I, Sir Bird Spiralling, Knight of the Snail. This Lady is not my prisoner but my friend and I, like you, am on a noble quest, which (I hesitate to mention) you currently obstruct."

"A quest?" said the old man. Then he paused for a moment and glinted gleamingly at them. "Ahh, you seek the silver city with the single spire."

"Indeed Sir Giev, and even as I watch it slips from view."

"It does" exclaimed the grey old knight "I tell you now this quest is also mine. For long uncounted years I chased its gleaming limbs, I chased so long my snail died under me."

"Seven sorrows!" cried Sir Bird Spiralling "such fate is dole indeed."

"It is" said the grey Sir Giev "and his head fell and face moved into shadow, though his eye still gleamed. "It is very dole and sorrowful twice, for only lately did I learn a thing which might have brought me safe unto its silver legs, yet with no snail to climb them, it matters not."

"Who is this man?" Said Ilvoyne, sticking her head around the shoulder of Sir Bird Spiralling, turning awkwardly on Caribas.

"Ah ha!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling "this is good news indeed, for, as our aims converge, we may do one another aid."

"Aid me?" cried the knight in grey "Ahh ha ha ha. Whist not I know your scheme. You are some knight of crimes and secret thought, wandering the world with an enchantress at your side, I doubt not you shall smile for my secret and, once gained, bash in my brain-pan with a brick."

And he gripped his broken lance in shaking hands and made as if to run.

"By my Sloath good Sir and by my honour as a Snail Knight True, flee not! For I am as likely to pull down a cloud from the sky as to work wrake upon a gentleman so steeped in Time."

And with that Sir Bird Spiralling leapt down from the back of Caribas and knelt upon the earth, while Ilvoyne the Enchantress, now seeing clearly for the first, observed the scene.

"A sir, you make a noble figure on the earth." Replied the grey old knight. "Perhaps the make of things is as you say and you are what you seem and my fears are the madness of a lonely lost old man whose snail is dead."

"I swear it is so." Replied Sir Bird Spiralling.

"Wait." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne.

"A but do you truly swear?" said the knight so grey with dust. "Do you swear on your honour as a Snail Knight true that you shall neither offer me harm or.." he paused "or even lay a hand to stay my course? Do you swear it as a knight?"

"I do so swear." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "By the great faith and trust that I hold in my duty as a knight that I shall never do you harm in any way, or even lay a hand to stay your course."

"Hhn." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne with her head in her hands.

"It is done then." Said the dusty knight in grey. "Come and I shall tell you the secret of the city with the silver spire."

So he lead them to an outcropping of rock where the mountain tilted like a counterfeit weight.

"Here," he pointed down below "the thing shall pass close by, and if, at the moments of its passing it should hear and see a certain thing then it shall pause. Pause long enough for your snail to reach its way to near the top of one of its long limbs."

"What is the thing it needs to hear and see?" Said Ilvoyne as she peered the long way down.

"A scream and the body of a girl." Replied the knight in grey.

"How curious that you should know this." Said Ilvoyne.

"It is a sad city." Replied the grey knight.

"This is excellent!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling, for you Ilvoyne can simply descend to the bottom of the valley, wait for the city to approach, scream and lie down. On its pause Caribas and I"

"And I" Sais Sir Geiv.

"And Sir Giev" went on Sir Bird Spiralling "will mount its silver leg and enter the city on its back."

"I should not go so far from you." Said Ilvoyne.

"Oh but you are an excellent climber, as you have proven many times. You will be quite safe." Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"I may be Bird, but you may not." Replied Ilvoyne.

"The Spire approaches even now." Said Tergol Geiv. "And it shall not return for many years. Will you make the adventure and seek out the secret of your quest? Or do you dare it not?"

"I will board, discover the secret and return to you with Caribas." Said Sir Bird Spiralling to Ilvoyne.

"This is unwise." She said.

"This is our only chance!" he replied. "Are we to chase and wander for so long only to surrender at the leap? It was your advice and stirring tale that brought us here."

"It was." She said. "Be safe." And so she slipped over the edge of the ledge and went down.

"That woman climbs like a spider." Said Sir Tergol Geiv. As she nimble-limbed her way across the rock.

"It is curious you should say so." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "For she learnt it from the spiders at the same time they taught her their tongue."

"It is a thing I do not know." Said the knight in grey, and a darkness passed across his eyes. "Look." He pointed to the valleys head. And the light of the nearly-set sun the spire gleamed and showed itself among the hills.

Sir Bird Spiralling waved to Ilvoyne where she waited, a patch of colour on the gloomy ground.

"A!" went Ilvoyne, and fell flat upon her back and went entirely still.

The city came in sight. It was beautiful and tall with many legs. The legs were so long and the movements of the city so continuous and smooth that where their feet flicked silently back and forth to the ground, there was nothing but a silver blur, like the shadow motion of a horses hooves, which at a gallop move too fast for the eye to apprehend, though the body of the speeding horse is quite clear.

Sir Bird Spiralling saw the rolling legs as they advanced and looked down at Ilvoyne where she waited in the dark and he became afraid.

"I have made a terrible mistake." He said quietly to himself.

"No time for that boy." Said the knight in grey, though, now he looked more closely it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that the armour under the road dust and the grey cloak was a darker colour still. But it was too late to think.

"It is here!" Said Tergol Geiv. And it was so. Directly in front of them, only a few feet away, the silver leg of the city stood like the trunk of a strong tree, and above, only a short snail-climb, were the silver battlements.

"NoW!" Said Tergol Geiv. "Now! Now! Now!"

"On Caribas." Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and Caribas bravely reached out to find purchase in the silver limb with his snail-foot.

An Empty City, Beautiful as Bone

Down down far below, the Enchantress Ilvoyne peeked through her almost closed eyes up into the shadow of the city as it stood directly up above her head. A silver limb landed close by and she knew that so great was the weight of the city that, even spread over so many legs, if even one should touch her, it would pop her like a bubble and leave nothing but a smear upon the ground.

She did not move, but waited patiently while the city paused, and she thought about the distance to the closest leg.

Then Caribas, the knights and the Enchantress all heard a voice like many bells that briefly filled the valley like a song.

"It is not her." Said the voice, and the city made again to move.

"Now Caribas it must be now." Whispered Sir Bird Spiralling, and as the limb shifted out of place, Caribas adhered just enough of his snail foot and they swung out over the abyss with both knights clinging to the saddle on his shell.

Far far below in the darkness of the oncoming night and the shadow of the living city, the Enchantress Ilvoyne leapt to her feet and sprang. At the moment of its movement she hung on the silver limb and though it swung with the speed of a whips tip and the world blurred around her and her hair lashed in a halo round her face she still clung firmly on. And slowly and surely she began to climb the silver leg and mutter to herself "knights .. knights.. knights".

Now turn we to Caribas, for he had climbed the cities battlements and those two clinging on saw for the first time the shining colonnades and metallic plazas that gleamed like polished zinc and gave back the light of even the dull swirling stars that remained. Its halls and temples seemed sometimes like shells, or the wind-carved boles of blasted trees, or sometimes like strange works of mechanical art. The streets were clear and clean and empty of all life, it was a beautiful as bone, darker than a dying thought and as empty as a skeletons head. Not one light burned anywhere, except at the tip of the silver spire.

"There" pointed the now quite dark-grey knight "there it is, leave this slow snail and let us go."

But Sir Bird Spiralling only looked worriedly over the battlements into the dark beneath the city as it passed. He did not see the speck of coloured silk slowly inching its way up the leg.

"Pft" said Tergol Geiv "stay or go it matters not to me." But then he turned and looked into the darkness of the cities streets, and seemed for a moment to be afraid. "My friend" he said "the sooner this is done, the sooner you shall see her again. Come with me, let us run."

And so they ran together through the enfolding dark, with Caribas reaching forwards with his telescoping eyes, bravely but slowly following after them into the night.

The Enchantress Ilvoyne did not see them leave, but only climbed her way by cunning holds that only the smallest spider could possibly find, and as she made that long impossible climb she muttered further to herself "knights, snails, birds" and "crime" and "gems gems gems". She went up like an insect up a trouser leg and the higher she got the faster she could go as the swinging of the city-limb was less.

The two knights arrived panting at the base of the silver spire.

"There is no doorway." Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and it was so for, except for some small irregular holes, the wall was smooth and without breach though higher up a window could be seen.

The other knight did not reply but took the shaft he wielded and, counting under his breath, he jammed it into one of the holes, and so a silver door appeared and, like a curtain being pulled aside, revealed a way inside.

"It was not a lance at all." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. Sir Tergol Geiv did not reply but grinned in the darkness and, snatching the shaft from its place he dashed inside. Sir Bird Spiralling saw that the silver curtain was about to close and so quickly dived inside as well.

At the battlements of the city, the Enchantress Ilvoyne, shaking with wrake and ruin and running with sweat, clasped her final hand and rolled onto the cities streets.

"That was the worst climb I have ever had." She said, and found that, so mighty was her deed and hard her path that she could barely raise an arm for her hands shook like trembling leaves.

"Where are they now?" She said and rolled onto her feet. And then she saw the trail of Caribas shining twice silver on the already silvery ground.

Inside the silver spire Sir Bird Spiralling raced up a darkened spiral stair with Tergol Geiv running ahead, always disappearing out of sight.

"Who are you?" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. "What scheme is this?" And then he burst into a well lit room at the top of the silvery spire. On one wall was a silver mirror, vast and curved, in the other was a window from which it seemed he could see the whole world, so far above the ground they were, and in the centre was a crystal sword lodged in a clasp of stone.

"A magic sword!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"No sword, no lance, no Tergol Geiv!" Laughed the knight, and he went to grasp the crystal blade.

"I know now well what I did not see before." Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and he drew his sword which burned in the moonlight like a sail in the stars and barred the way. "For you are Gorget Vile, the Black Snail knight."

"**Ha Ha Ha.**" Said Gorget Vile.

"**I am**, and I am unarmed and at the mercy of your blade. But.." He paused. "I do seem to recall a recent oath. One made by you. What was it?" He tilted his head and thought. "Ah, I remember, then he spoke in a cruel mock of Sir Bird Spirallings voice "*By the great faith and trust that I hold in my duty as a knight, that I shall never do you harm in any way, or*" and here Gorget Vile smiled his terrible smile "'or even lay a hand to stay your course'. Do I have that right?" And he reached out and pressed his empty hand slowly against Bird Spiralling's bare blade.

It was at this time that the Enchantress Ilvoyne arrived exhausted at the base of the silver spire, for she found that Caribas had stopped, finding nowhere else to go.

"It is you Caribas." She said, and leaned on him and cooled her forehead on his shell. "Are they inside? Is there no door? Something is very wrong Caribas."

Then she looked up to the window at the top and saw in that light, the shadows of moving men.

"There! Do you see?" And she pointed upwards to the light. "Climb Caribas. Can you climb? For I cannot and I fear he is in danger from that dark suspicious knight."

Caribas did not hesitate but reached out his snail foot and began to climb that featureless tall tower, Ilvoyne rapped his reins around her shaking arms and hung on as she could.

"I .." said Sir Bird Spiralling, and though he did not lower his blade, he stepped slowly back as the bare skin of the hand of Gorget Vile pressed against its edge. And so the Black Snail Knight came quietly on.

"Many years and many harms have brought me here." Whispered Gorget Vile as he slowly strode towards the crystal sword. "And many secrets cruelly bought. City," he said aloud "City do you hear me?"

And the voice like silver bells again rang out. "I do."

"City," said Gorget Vile "tell this poor fool what that thing is." And he pointed to the crystal sword.

"It is my mind." said the ringing voice.

"And," said Gorget Vile "If someone else should hold your mind?"

"I must obey." Replied the voice.

"And so you see" said Gorget Vile "all this city shall be mine." they both looked down and saw that the crystal blade was close "and from it I shall reave this world." And he reached down and drew it forth.

But not in full. For as he reached Sir Bird Spiralling cried "No!" and he dropped his sword and knelt down to grasp the icy edges of the crystal blade with his bare hands.

And outside on the surface of the spire, Ilvoyne the Enchantress heard his cry and shouted "Faster Caribas, faster!"

But snails are rarely swift.

"Fool!" Said Gorget Vile, and he looked to Sir Bird Spiralling's sword lying naked on the ground, then thought again. He pressed his foot against the snail knights head and trod him down and heaved with all his might at the handle of the crystal blade.

But, though the blade bit into his hands and his blood watered the silver floor and Sir Gorget Vile kicked and beat against his head with awful blows, Sir Bird Spiralling would not unlace his hands from around that ice-sharp edge.

"City!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. "Do you hear me?"

"I do." Said the bell-like voice.

"City!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling as Gorget Vile forced his head down into his own blood which ran through his fingers like wine. "What happened to the man and girl you took into the ice so long ago? What is the secret of the sorrowful ice?"

"I LEFT HER THERE!" Cried the city in a ringing voice so sad and loud that the two knights held for a second in their strife.

"I promised to protect her. I took them to the furthest point and both went in and neither one came out. I waited many years. The ice grew slowly round my feet. I was afraid. I ran. And ever since I have looked for her. But I will not find her. She is dead. She is dead because I left her in the ice."

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile, and with one heave he drew at last the blood-stained crystal blade.

"Wait." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne. And she leapt in through the window from the back of Caribas, picked up the sword of Sir Bird Spiralling and with the very last of the strength of her arm she swung it lightly once against the crystal blade which broke like dawn and fell in shining pieces on the ground.

"Aaaa" said Gorget Vile.

"At last." Whispered the voice like bells.

"Ilvoyne." Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

And the silver city fell down dead to the earth, and Sir Bird Spiralling picked up Ilvoyne and leapt from the window to Caribas, and Caribas opened his huge snail foot and enfolded them both in his slime and curled around them softly as they fell.

And as the city tilted and collapsed, Caribas fell for many a long while. He fell the length of the silver spire and he fell again the height of the cities silver limbs and he smashed to pieces on the ground and died, and when in the day Sir Bird Spiralling awoke and saw the ruined pieces of his snail he wept.

And they were sorrowful times that came.

Sorrow

Slowly, with rags wrapped around his wounded hands, Sir Bird Spiralling began his walk towards the furthest corner of the world. Neither he nor the Enchantress Ilvoyne paused to search the fallen silver ruin where it lay, or checked to see if Gorget Vile still lived.

He did. He always does, except for once. But that is dealt with in another tale.

Though the lady and the knight walked for many leagues and their feet trod down the slow time of the world, there were no adventures and no happy meetings on this journey. The world grew sparse and cold. The earth turned first to frost and then to ice. Once day they saw no blades of grass, one day they saw no stone.

They had walked for so long and such rough miles that few who looked upon them would have thought they looked upon an Enchantress and a Knight of the Snail.

But no-one looked at all. There was no-one there to speak or see, and they spoke but little to each other, only trudging on with the cold as their compass. Wherever the path was most fearful and frozen, that way they went, the bearded man with wounded hands and behind him a few steps, the bent woman carrying an instrument on her back.

When Sir Bird Spiralling spoke, it was not to Ilvoyne, but Caribas.

"You would not like these sharp stones Caribas, the cold would chill your foot."

The air turned white and the sun became an unseen blur. Their faces froze. They passed the wrecks of ruined ships rising up out of the ice like black splinters from a frozen wound.

One day they both saw towers rise up from the unending turquoise deeps. They hurried towards them, but found only the spikes of an ancient city, one swallowed by the ice long ago and almost visible as a black blur many fathoms down.

"This is not the furthest corner of the world." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. And they went on.

Sir Bird Spiralling began to know that he would die. He felt the cold air eating at his lungs and felt the tremors in his legs. He counted his breaths and the beats of his heart and he measured the distance in his mind to the nearest water and the nearest warmth.

He said "You must leave me."

"That, I will not do." Said Ilvoyne.

Perilous Stars

That night a strange thing took place.

"Wake up." Said Ilvoyne "and look."

The sky was made of many strands of interlocking light. Like paint from many cans spilled in a curling maze, or long ribbons of interwoven storm, or like a trees rings in the polished surface of an Arm d'ore. Like paint-brush clouds of powdered gem. So many were the colours of the sky and so deeply did they glimmer and reflect that the silent ice became a kind of mirror wonderland.

"Perhaps," said Ilvoyne "some other knight has succeeded in their quest and this is the result."

"It is good" said Sir Bird Spiralling "for you may use this light to gain a march on your way home."

"I will not go." Said Ilvoyne.

"It is strange you should not" said Sir Bird Spiralling "for I have neither need nor use for you."

"Why speak you so?" Said Ilvoyne.

"Why?" Said Sir Bird Spiralling "Why speak so to a liar and a fraud? To a magician whose first words to me were lies, whose deeds are manipulations? Why speak so to a woman who has followed me about, hiding her wiles under the protection of my sword, who's tales and lies have lead us here to certain death, a woman whose delusions and exaggerations and deceits have wrecked my quest and cursed my life and killed my only snail?"

"That is not true." Said Ilvoyne.

"Not true? Do you deny that you first thoughts on meeting me were towards your own advantage? That if you had never spoken and we had never met, that neither of us would be here, that the silver city would still live and that Caribas would be alive as well?"

"You speak so to drive me away." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne.

"Indeed I do! And why would I not you stinking, stupid hag? Do you think I prize your wittering words? Or the awful cursed twangs of your Sitar? An instrument" he added "which you simply do not know how to play? To you think I like your noise? It is vile. I have tolerated you. This is what I think of your Sitar."

And he rose up his foot and stamped it to pieces in the frozen ground.

"No!" Cried Ilvoyne, but there were only fragments left. "What is this? What knight is this? Have you forgotten the Sloath you made me on the night we met?"

"Forget!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling "it is you who have forgotten! For at *your advice* I MADE NO SLOATH TO YOU! And the very first morning that I could I left you sleeping in your horrid webs! Ever since then you have followed me! And all that I have done over the long time of our quest is to tolerate your female stupidity with an even face, as is my duty as a knight! Did you think" he came closer "that I felt something more? For you? An ugly and deranged one-eyed enchantress covered with spiders?"

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "You are ridiculous and sad. By all means follow me. Follow me to your pointless death. For you mean nothing to me. Nothing at all."

And he smiled a terrible smile.

And the Enchantress Ilvoyne stood silently under the perilous bright stars for a good long while. And then she turned and walked away.

And Sir Bird Spiralling went on into the ice.

Sounds and Voices

There were sounds and voices in the ice that people could not hear unless they were alone. And now Sir Bird Spiralling was very alone indeed. The voices came creaking up out of the deep blue darkness and they moved in skitters through the cracks, they came first only in the night where the ice shined madly under the multi-coloured stars, then they came also in the pale white days and told him things he did not wish to know, and made music from his memories.

The knight cried out to the voices in the ice, at night he cried out to the perilous stars. Sometimes he could be seen with his sword drawn to challenge enemies that would not show themselves, sometimes he called out 'Ilvoyne' or 'Caribas'.

The tears froze on his cheeks into a mask of ice and his beard grew long and few who saw him would have guessed that he was indeed a man, let alone a one-time knight.

And it seemed he wandered so a good long while, until, one shining night, he saw a bright flickering in the distance, and following it he came upon a castle in the ice.

It was the Engine of Sorrows and it was a great machine of steel and iron and frozen pain. And before it was a lightning bridge, and standing in the centre of the bridge there was a knight.

As Sir Bird Spiralling came closer, he saw the knight was terrible indeed. Tall and strong and armoured head to foot in the blue-black prised darkness that waited miles beneath the frozen world. The sword which this knight carried ate light like an eclipsed moon and his shield was as smooth and as hard as a glaciers heart. It seemed the knight had waited a long while, and was content to wait a long while more, for he took no notice of the cold or the howling wind nor the awful perilous stars, of the softly moaning voices from the ice or the insane crackling of the lightning bridge. And the features of this knight could not be seen, though it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that he somehow recognised this man, like a memory of a dream. And though the breath of Sir Bird Spiralling formed a pulsing plume of frost against his mouth, the knight upon the bridge gave out no breath at all.

"To cross is death." Said the knight upon the bridge.

"Who is this Caribas?" Said Sir Bird Spiralling. And he waited, but no answer came. He drew his sword.

"I require of you, by the trust and honour of your position as a knight" said Sir Bird Spiralling as he stepped one foot upon the raging bridge "that you reveal to me your name!" Though at this time Sir Bird Spiralling looked more like a ragged madman than a knight of any kind.

"You know me well" replied the knight upon the bridge, "I am Sir Sans Coeur. Do you deny me?"

"I know you not!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and took another step.

"Come then, and die." Replied Sir Sans Coeur.

At this Sir Bird Spiralling screamed and the two knights came together beneath the perilous stars like two contending storms.

Sir Bird Spiralling rained mad blows upon Sir Sans Coeur and so great was the strength of his hate that the bridge itself shook a little under the swings of his shining sword which came down like star-stones striking the earth.

Yet Sir Sans Coeur remained unmoved. Every blow rebounded from his shield of ice or from his frozen armour, and he replied to every stroke with feigns and traverses so fast they were like the licking tongues of snakes, so that the blood of Sir Bird Spiralling dripped down his legs and left the frozen prints of bloody feet upon the bridge.

These frozen prints moved backwards step by step.

With one last scream of rage Sir Bird Spiralling put every piece of strength that he possessed into his blade and brought it down with the speed and force of a guillotine in a blow so mighty that it seemed that it could cleave the very earth. And it cut even through the shield of ice wielded by Sir Sans Coeur, and stuck there.

And with the flick of a wrist Sir Sans Coeur snatched the sword from Sir Bird Spirallings hand and it skittered away and Sir Bird Spiralling fell to his knees and he saw as Sir Sans Coeur moved his shield that the ice-armoured knight had, where his heart should be, a void like the hole left in the surface of

a thickly frozen pond when a stone is flung through it and the ice has re-formed, sending out straight strands and serrated teeth and yet it cannot close the gap, and he looked into the eyes of Sir Sans Coeur and felt his frozen blade press its point upon his heart.

The Engine of Sorrows

It was at that moment that the shield of the sky closed and the dim trundling stars returned to their accustomed state and the ice darkened and the land became quiet.

And Sir Bird Spiralling saw that there was no lightning on the bridge and that the Engine of Sorrows, though still real, was now a comprehensible size, and he heard the voices coming from the ice reduce and fade, though, for the rest of his life they never entirely went away. And he looked upon the bridge and saw the splatters of his frozen blood and the red ice footprints of his feet where it seemed he had contended with a mighty foe, and the signs of much combat both upon the bridge and upon his own flesh.

But he could not see Sir Sans Coeur, and when he looked down at his hands he saw that the pommel of his sword was lodged within the ice, and its tip was at its heart and with one move he was about to throw himself upon the sword and die.

He held there for a good long while.

Then he stood, and using his sword as a crutch, for he was much harmed, he limped across the bridge and into the engine of sorrows.

And there he found a sleeping girl.

The engine, though strange, was neatly made and near its entrance was a room with many frozen stores and the body of a man.

"How long have you been here?" Said Sir Bird Spiralling "For it seems you could have died at any time." And as he looked closer he saw the face of the man seemed neither fearful, nor hopeful, but quiet, as if prepared to wait.

Sir Bird Spiralling walked on into the angles of the strange machine and after a time he came to its centre and he found a strange bed and a girl sleeping upon it, and she was moaning softly in her sleep as if she was afraid and so he reached down gently and woke her up.

"Father?" Said the girl, and though her face was young her hair was long and grey and her eyes were old.

"No." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "It is I, Sir Bird Spiralling, once named Knight of the Snail. Do not be afraid."

"You should not wake me up." Replied the girl. "Though I am glad you did. But now the ice will grow." And even as she spoke it seemed the ice groaned a little around them and stretched out its limbs.

"Please," said Sir Bird Spiralling "I have come far and endured much to find the secret of the sorrows. Please tell me what this is and why, and who you are and whence you came."

"It is a machine to stop the ice," Explained the girl. "The stars turn perilous and strange and with them has come madness and despair."

"This I know well." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "And I am glad that they are seen no more."

"A shield was built around the world to protect us from the fierce stars, but within are trapped the sorrows of the world. The sorrows turned to ice. And so my father brought me here and built this terrible machine. For as long as someone lies here and dreams the sorrows of the world they will not turn to ice. And they will dream without age or time. But now you have woken me the ice will grow once more. And as to who I am and whence I came I do not know, for I have been dreaming the sorrows of the world for so long that little of my self remains."

"This is a sad fate for a lady fair." Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"I asked for it" replied the girl, "for it hurt me so much to see my father lying here in pain that I woke him and said that I would take his place for a short while."

"It has been longer than a while." Said Sir Bird Spiralling "and I am sorry to inform you that your Father neither stayed nor left but is no more."

"It is as I thought" replied the girl "for I thought I dreamed my own face long ago and those were the final sorrows of his soul."

"Would you like to leave?" Asked Sir Bird Spiralling.

"I would" she said "but", and she turned to look at the sorrowful machine "this dream is grim and dark and without any end and I would not lay it as a burden even on a soul I hate."

"I would" said Sir Bird Spiralling, and he knelt and offered her his hand.

"My Lady, I see you are much harmed and in need of aid. I am a petty knight. I have failed in my duty to my king. I have wasted the years of my youth. I have caused the destruction of the city that brought you here, which quested for you all the days of its life, I have lead the one I love into the waste and I have betrayed and abandoned her, I have torn up the root of my heart and nothing remains there but a void colder than any ice. I beg of you, allow me to take your place here in this engine of sorrows so that at least, at the last, I may do one good thing and release you from your pain and perhaps shame less the honour of my knighthood which I have so badly failed."

"I will go and come back" she said "for I will not leave you here."

"The ice is very cold" said Sir Bird Spiralling "and should you survive it once I urge you not to try again." And he handed her his sword, which still shone like a white sail under starlight, even in the gloom of the great machine. "Take this to protect you from the dangers in the ice, for though I have failed it, the blade has never failed me in return."

And he lay down on the bed.

"If you are lonely," said Sir Bird Spiralling "speak to it and call it 'Caribas', and perhaps it will reply." And he lowered his head and slept.

And that is the tale of Sir Bird Spiralling.

The Tale of Sir Duno Chime

We turn now to Sir Duno Chime, the noble-hearted Knight who thought that he was made of glass.

Sir Chime had passed the summer of his life and when the message from the king arrived he had been reading quietly from a book with his daughter Trystia Chime sitting silently a few feet to his left, and they had been so for some hours. She looked up from her book and said;

"The King?"

"It is." Said Duno Chime.

"You should not go." Said Trystia Chime.

"But I am a Snail Knight, and I must." replied Sir Duno Chime, and so he saddled his snail Governayle, who had swirls of blue and white like a summer sky, and, careful to pad the shell against the breakage of his delicate glass limbs, he made his way to the castle of the Curlicue Throne.

When Sir Bird Spiralling first cried 'We are the Knights of the Snail', Sir Chime did not speak out for he was fearful of the armoured Knights who pressed around him very close and did not know that he was made of glass and could be smashed at any time.

When Sir Bird Spiralling stood upon the table and drew his gleaming sword, Sir Chime saw the fruit he knocked fall thudding to the earth, and flinched.

"That fruit will bruise." He said.

But when Sir Bird Spiralling began 'I make my Sloath' Sir Chime thought of the King, for he had seen the king grow up from very small and remembered when he was only melon-sized and wailed. And then Sir Chime remembered the wife that he loved, who had died with the birth of their child, and so the memories of the child, the king, the wife, tangled together in his heart so that when Sir Bird Spiralling said 'to ease the sorrows of the King', Sir Chime raised up his sword and made Sloath as well.

It was the last Sloath he would ever swear and though he was not among the first to make it, neither was he last.

When Sir Bird Spiralling ran from the room, Sir Duno Chime said;

"There is a young mans haste."

But no-one listened, for they were distracted by the Whirling of Sir Whirl, who stormed from the gates to match the impetuous speed of Sir Bird Spiralling, and by the silent thinking of Sir Fast whose furrowed brow gave off dramatic airs so that those who saw him inevitably said "There is a Knight well versed in Thought."

Chrim Hall

So Sir Chrim climbed carefully back onto Governayle and made his slow way home to Chrim Hall, where Trystia Chrim was waiting and pacing and scowling and knotting her arms, but when she saw her father back she smiled and ran to help him down.

"Is it done?" she said.

"Oh no no no" said Sir Duno Chrim "the quest is just begun."

"The quest?" said Trystia Chrim "what quest is this?"

So Sir Chrim explained about the sadness of the King and named his Sloath.

"WHAT" said Trystia Chrim "do these Snail Knights mean by forcing such adventures on the old? Do they forget so soon the brave deeds of your youth? The trials and pain you had in service to the throne all the long years of your life? Have you not done enough?"

Then she wept and knelt and took his hands.

"You are like the days light to me" she said "I love nothing in the world so much as you. Please do not go. You are brave but you are in the Autumn of your life and" here she whispered "and you think that you are made of glass. The world will break you. Stay with me and let the king deal with his sorrows by himself as any normal man."

"He was always a sensitive boy." Said Sir Chrim, partly to himself. "Moody when his teeth came through." He turned to Trystia Chrim. "A Knight should not leave things undone" he said "especially relating to the King. Or what would be the point of all of this? As I have been so shall I be, even to the end. Now," he patted Trystia on the arm "do not be afraid, I am still strong, and I have it in mind to seek the Sword of Springs Shade." And he wandered off to his library to look for a book.

So Trystia Chrim laid her forehead on the coolness of the shell of Governayle. "Ah Governayle, what shall I do?" she said. "For he is set do to it, life or death."

Later over dinner Sir Chrim opened a book and read his daughter this:

"Once there was a season betwixt the Summer and the Spring. A pleasant time which held the finest elements of both. But the turning of the world was changed and the sword which gave the door to Springs Shade was entrusted to a Knight of Iron, and the Knight was lost within a mist and the sword was never seen again' well what do you think of that? To return a lost season to the sky. That might do it. That might be the very thing."

And Trystia Chrim replied "Let me come too."

"Impossible." Said Duno Chrim.

"Do not go out to die alone." Said Trystia Chrim

"NO!" Said Duno Chrim. "You will stay here and be safe for ever more! Neither adventure nor danger nor sorrow shall you know. A quest is no place for a woman! There are horrors on the road and in the world. You will stay here, find a husband and live quietly and in peace. I could not bear to

think of you out there. Your mothers loss was bad enough. You stay. I command and desire that you remain and I will never change my mind!"

At this Trystia Chrime sat and stared at her father for a good long while, then she stood up and walked away in silence and so far as he knew, he never saw her again as long as he lived.

The next day Sir Duno Chrime prepared his padded saddle and stowed on Governayle the accoutrements of quest, with as few books as he thought that he would need, and he waited before the gateway of Chrime Hall and called "Trystia!"

No answer came.

"Trystia I am leaving!" shouted Sir Duno Chrime, but all the halls were still and quiet and not a single voice or sound came calling in response.

He waited there in the silence before the empty hall. The shadows grew upon the ground. And then he left.

Viol Chrime-Forgot

Sir Duno Chrime had not been riding very long when he came across a figure in the road.

"Ahoy!" Cried the boy, for so it seemed to be. "Ahoy there, Snail Knight, ho!"

Sir Chrime turned to the voice and saw what looked to be a young man with hastily cut hair in a jacket and a pair of pantaloons.

"Avaste their mate!" Said the boy "You are a Snail Knight are you not?"

"I am." Said Duno Chrime.

"Know ye of Sir Duno Chrime, a Snail Knight of Chrime Hall?" shouted the apparent scamp.

"I am Duno Chrime." Said Duno Chrime. "Why seek you me?"

"Why Sir!" replied the boy "I am Viol Chrime-Forgot! The son of Violet Chrime-Forgot, an aunt-in-law three times removed, on the matrilineal side, of the Long-Forgotten Chrimes. I am a sailing lad, the seas my home, yet I have lived since I was young on the tales of Knighthood told me by my dear sweet ma, and she said that if I should ever aim to be a knight and hand away my roving life for one of honour and good deeds, to seek you out and ask if I could be your squire. For there was never a knight so honourable and wise as Sir Duno Chrime."

"I had not thought the sea was close." Said Duno Chrime.

"It is distant indeed" said Viol Chrime-Forgot "so far have I travelled from my rumbling waves in search of knighthood and adventure."

"Your clothes seems strange to me." Said Duno Chrime, and he gestured to the pantaloons the jacket loose and the vest beneath which seemed so closely bound.

"They are the fashions of the sea." replied the boy.

"And I do not recall a Violet Chrime-Forgot" said Duno Chrime "on either family side. Although," he sighed "I have not spoken to the family on my wifes side for very long indeed. Come here boy and give me clear sight of you."

Viol Chrime-Forgot seemed to pause for a moment on the side of the road.

"Come on lad, a knight should never fear to show their face." Said Sir Duno Chrime.

So Viol Chrime-Forgot approached directly, and it seemed that he was very young for he was light of foot and had not a hair upon his cheeks or chin. And Duno Chrime looked him directly in the eyes.

"I see now", said Duno Chrime "what I did not see before, and it is very clear. I know you now."

"You do." said Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"Of course!" replied Sir Chrime "You have the Chrime nose! And the Chrime eyes! And it is as you say, the matrilineal side, for the set of your face reminds me of my wife! Yes, it is clear we are related."

"Of course!" said Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"Of course" said Sir Chrime. "But" he clenched pensively "but it happens that I have, very recently in fact, begun upon a quest."

"A quest!" said Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"A quest most dire in old-rooted danger and time. One that may take me to my end. To bring a boy along..."

"A, Sir" said Viol Chrime-Forgot "if not for danger, how would young lads like myself ever hope to become Knights?"

"It is so" said Sir Chrime "that has always been the way."

"And" went on Viol "I am certainly in danger on my own. At least, if by your side, I would be protected from the horrors of the road and perhaps, eventually, learn enough of manly arts to be able to defend myself, and others too."

"That is Knightly said." said Sir Duno Chrime. "Very well, you may walk beside for now and we shall see how you do. Now come, for we seek the Sword of Springs Shade."

"That sounds a tale-wrapped artefact my lord!" Said Squire Viol.

"It is. Yet, now I come to think of it, there are other things you should learn first."

And so Sir Chrime began to speak about the care of Snails, in particular the kind of leaves that they should eat and he ignored no detail nor digression in his speech and became so engrossed in its

elucidation that he forgot that he was made of glass, yet it seemed he spoke not long before Squire Viol pointed and called out:

"Look Sir, upon that point where two paths cross, beneath the mangled branches of that gruneous pine, a Snail! And a Knight upon its shell! And see, he flourishes his lance!"

"A joust!" said Sir Duno Chime, "You shall see now Squire Viol how the Knights of the Snail make combats and battle for the honour of their knighthood and their king, for, as this knight defends the crossing of the gruneous pine, to pass him I needs must joust, and once the tips of our weapons touch the joust is then begun and whomever should retreat beyond a weapons length shall be the worse. But look you and tell me what colours has that snail."

"Sir," said Squire Viol, "that snail is coloured oddly, carmine, blue and white."

"It is Sir Sextant Wrought!" Said Duno Chime. "Now you shall see buffets and breaks indeed for he is a crafty knight! Though sadly he is permanently lost."

But then Sir Duno Chime remembered he was made of glass, and he became afraid for he knew that in the joust his limbs would break and leave jagged agonising splinters where hands and arms should be, and all the other knights would see, and know then what he was inside; no true knight but only glass, and he would be destroyed. And he fell silent then and would not speak.

Then Viol Chime-Forgot said "Sir, I would request of you a boon."

"Yes." replied Sir Duno Chime as he gazed fixedly upon the crossroads knight who grew slowly closer with each passing breath.

"I beg of you that you allow me to make combat with this knight."

"What!" Said Duno Chime. "Impossible! To send a Squire to fight instead of me? It is not Knightly. A Knight, Mr Chime-Forgot, must never ask of others risk they will not take themselves, nor put the weaker party into hazard, or be ever reverse or recreant in mortality. It is a knights duty always to go forwards, into danger, and death if they must. I see that you have much to learn of knighthood!"

"A, Sir" replied the Squire "I ask only because the danger, to you, is very little. For surely of this combat you have the advantage, and because I hunger so greatly for honour and risk that to have the privilege of facing such a knight as Sir Sextant Wrought would rebound greatly to my worship and my name, and surely" he went on "Sir Wrought is not the man to kill or maim a younger opponent, but will act Knightly towards me and show mercy and succour should he prevail."

"It is true" said Duno Chime "We were knighted at the same time and though the chance has never come for me to know him well, his is a fellowship that I have always sought for Sir Wrought is the most honourable and worshipful of men."

"And Sir," said the Squire "it is your duty, is it not, to train and equip me with the skills and arms that I must have to be a knight? And what better way to do so than allow me practice in the noble art of joust? I beg you Sir, it would be a great privilege and honour to me if I could encounter with him even a little on foot. And," he added "you did say 'yes' when I asked of you a boon, and a knight should never break their word."

"I did." Said Sir Duno Chime. "I did say that. Very well, I will go and ask if sir Wrought will do you the honour of a brief, a very brief, encounter on foot. A training bout. I will request it."

Sir Sextant Wrought

So he went to Sir Wrought and spoke his need.

"Ho Ho!" Said Sextant Wrought. "A new Squire is it? Want to see if the boy has sand to stand? A fine idea! I will parry with him a little if you like."

"I thank you Sir" said Duno Chime and returned to his Squire to arm him for the fight.

But then he thought again and returned again to Sir Sextant Wrought.

"You will be careful Sir? For he is young and slight and green of limb and has never fought before. You will not buffet or break him?"

"Never fear!" Said Sextant Wrought. "I'll just knock him about a little!"

With this Sir Duno Chime seemed less than pleased, but he returned to his Squire and armed him with a spare shield and lesser sword and put a helm upon his head.

"Be careful boy!" He said. "Remember, once your blades touch, do not retreat. And keep your shield up! And if he lays on you hard then submit. And watch your feet for you stand a little womanish. Put them 'here' and 'here'." And he showed Squire Viol where to place his feet.

"I am sure I will be well" Said Squire Viol, then he looked at Sir Sextant Wrought, who stood waiting, armed and armoured in full array "and I thank you for the combat." So he advanced towards Sir Sextant Wrought and said "Sir! I challenge you for passage of this road!"

"Knightly said!" Said Sir Wrought. Then, in the manner of the Snail Knights, they both crept and side-stepped slowly closer, spiralling inwards until the tips of their blades just barely touched. And then Sir Sextant Wrought laid upon the Squire such a blistering buffet of blows that it seemed a hail of hammers, and the Squire was knocked so hard that he turned almost a full circle in the air and landed on his back.

"I submit" wheezed Squire Viol as he was somewhat winded and his shield arm was shaking as he stared up into the knotted branches of the gruneous pine.

"Sir!" cried Sir Duno Chime who made to interpose "This is not knightly! He is only a boy and you have crashed him and bashed him and flurried him arse over tip!"

"He did alright" said Sextant Wrought, and he approached the Squire where he lay wheezing on the ground, and he held the tip of his blade to the boys throat.

"Now Sir," said Sextant Wrought "You have offered combat and have lost, and that is a serious thing, and real, now I require of you a boon."

"Ay Sir" said Viol Chime-Forgot.

"I require and request you on your honour as a knight-to-be, to attend closely to your teacher, Sir Duno Chime, to obey him and never abandon his trust, and, in short, to be in all ways the best student and the closest study of knighthood that you have it in you to be."

"I accept." Said Squire Viol.

"A, that is Knightly spoken!" Said Sir Sextant Wrought, and he sheathed his blade and held out his hand to help the Squire to his feet. "And you did not do so badly son, though you are a little weak. You did not run away or drop the sword, and those are the primary points."

"Certainly, certainly" said Sir Duno Chime "you held not ill, though you are young-rooted still. Balance" he patted the Squire on the back "balance comes with focus and with time."

"Chime!" said Sir Sextant Wrought "I clear forgot. Do you not know? The King has called the Snail Knights home! I go there even now. A great adventure breathes its first and we must be there at its birth! Not too old yet my friend, not too old yet, we have one final grasp at legend in our reach, whatever those young fellows say!"

"Oh Sir Wrought." Replied Sir Duno Chime.

At this Sir Sextant Wrought lost all the colour from his face and the pennant of his heart hung low.

"No." He said. "Not again."

"I am so sorry Sir Wrought." Said Sir Duno Chime. "The adventure is begun and all Snail Knights have sworn a mighty Sloath to ease the sorrows of the King."

And then Sir Sextant Wrought made pale and silent wrath, like a ghost behind a glass and he tore his hair and howled such dole that he alarmed his snail La Beal Pampoyle.

"Curse life!" Cried Sextant Wrought. "Curse seven times this crooked path! I am lost! I am apart! Never shall I share for I am always out of joint. Late! Lost! Reminded out of time and never where I mean to be! Living life in piecemeal and never in the full."

Then he sat and wept strong tears and Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot did what they could to comfort him and ease his heart.

"Never fear." Said Duno Chime after some time. "For I have it in mind to seek the Sword of Springs Shade."

"A storied object." Wept Sir Wrought.

"I would welcome greatly your fellowship on such perilous quest." Said Sir Duno Chime.

"A, Sir Chime!" Said Sextant Wrought. "You do me much honour, for all the long years of our knighthood our paths never entwined and I saw you only from afar and spoke to you barely at all, yet of all the Snail Knights yours is the fellowship I have most sought and now at last we shall en-quest together!"

And he took the hand of Sir Duno Chime.

"I swear" said Sextant Wrought "that I shall aid you however I can. I will not rest or stop until the sword is found!"

"Well!" said Duno Chime. "That is Knightly said!" And together they made as good cheer as either had known.

But then, after a time, Sir Sextant Wrought said "Wait," and he glanced raptorish into the growling pines, then leant in and whispered to Sir Chime.

"I hear something out there."

"Indeed." Said Duno Chime, though he heard nothing himself.

"Hold you still and make no sign" said Sir Wrought "I will investigate." And he took his snail La Beal Pampoyle and lead her silently into the waiting trees.

Sir Chime and Squire Viol waited for him to return or make a sign. Then they waited more.

"Perhaps he has been taken by an enemy." Said Squire Viol, and they searched together for him through the forest, but not a single leaf was out of place.

Then they waited longer, and the shadows grew.

"Sir Wrought!" Cried out Sir Duno Chime. "Sir Wrought are you still there?"

But all the trees were still and quiet and not a single voice or sound came calling in response.

"He is lost." Said Duno Chime. "We must go on."

And so they went, with heavy hearts.

Sir Max Bassoon

They adventured together for some time, asking everywhere they went for a Knight of Iron, for secret mist and for the Sword of Springs shade, and no sign did they find. Yet Sir Chime spoke often of Knighthood and the duties thereof, and did his best to educate Viol Chime-Forgot in the usage of the sword and lance, and the riding of a snail, though the Squire remained quite small.

"You are a little weak." Said Duno Chime one day as they traversed their swords in practice-play. "You must remember always; use your reach, do not contest things weight-for-weight."

And Squire Viol did not reply but pointed and called out;

"Look Sir, beside the sharp corner of that oddly-angled mere. A Snail, with Knight upon its shell."

"What colours?" Said Sir Duno Chime.

"Sir," said Viol Chime-Forgot "that snail is coloured black and white."

"Pfft" said Duno Chrime "this is Sir Max Bassoon. A rather trying lesser knight. Though perhaps he will have news."

As they approached they saw the knight beside the mere raise up his lance as if he meant to joust. Without speaking, Sir Chrime raised his lance as well. The Squire, Viol, looked upon Sir Chrime and saw his hand pale as it clasped around his spear and saw the tightness in his jaw and the fixedness of his gaze and said;

"Sir, I request of you a boon."

"No." Said Duno Chrime. "There is nothing you can learn from the play of this mans sword. Never recreant. This joust must be and you may only watch." And the Squire saw the Knights hands shaking. "This is Knighthood." Said Duno Chrime.

Then Viol Chrime-Forgot left the side of Sir Chrime and went over and looked closely at Sir Max Bassoon, and he was fiddling with his straps and swapping his lance from hand to hand.

"Boy," said Max Bassoon "who is that knight."

"Sir," replied the Squire. That is Sir Duno Chrime."

"A, He is an old fell-handed man!" Said Sir Max Bassoon and he shifted his weight in his seat. And Squire Viol saw he had a fiddle by his side.

"Ho Knight, Ahoy!" Said Squire Viol. "See I a fiddle by your sheath?"

"You might, you do." Replied Sir Max Bassoon as his Snail crawled on towards Sir Duno Chrime. "What of it?"

"Do you duel with the air as well?"

"I might" said Max bassoon, "I may. Wait!" He cried. "I do!" And he pulled out his fiddle and played a sweet air.

"What is this?" Cried Duno Chrime as Goernayle crept closer still.

"It is joust-chanson" replied Sir Max Bassoon. "It is a legal form."

"To duel with music!" Said Sir Duno Chrime. "But that is for a ladies heart. Not roadside passage."

"It is still legal is it not?" Replied Sir Max Bassoon. "I pray you Sir, accept my joust. I know full well that you are a proven man of his hands and may account me as you wish, but I beg you shall accept. I offered battle only for the sake of form, and it would be a sad dawn for Snail Knights to slay one another by this dreary oddly-angled mere, especially when so few of us survive."

"So few?" Said Duno Chrime. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only," said Max Bassoon "that Sir Bird Spiralling is thought lost, or murdered by Sir Gorget Vile, and that Sir Coagulate Fast and the six knights that followed him have disappeared as well."

"This is grim" replied Sir Chime "grim news indeed. Very well Sir Bassoon, I shall accept your joust and combat you in song. But ware you well Sir, this is a joust entire and whomever should prevail shall have the passage, and the loser must provide a boon."

"I accept." Said Max Bassoon and so the joust began.

Sir Max Bassoon played first his fiddle low and sweet, he played like summer sunlight on a running stream, and so fair was the path from his heart to his hand that eels in the mere popped up to listen and look and small birds landed on their heads to watch and even smaller insects landed on those birds and none hurt the other so long as he played on.

Then Sir Chime began to sing, and his voice was low and long as shadows of a summer eve or the suns arc on a winter day, and he sang of his friends that were gone and of the wife he had lost and of the child he thought that he would never see again. And rolling underneath his words were bells of glass that spoke of the closeness of death.

And at this the eels sank back into the mere and the birds slowly hauled themselves away, except for one that grew so sad it drowned, and a light rain began upon the mere and Sir Bassoon said;

"A, Sir I pray you sing no more, your voice has thorned my heart. I submit. The path is yours."

And they looked over to see Viol Chime-Forgot crouching on his knees and hiding his face in his hands and shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Now Squire Viol," said Sir Duon Chime "these are soft tears for a knight! It is true Sir Wrought wept, but those were tears of duty, and perhaps a knight might weep for a ladies heart or a friends death, but really sir, tears at this time are un-chivalrous and somewhat meek. You must restrain yourself."

"I apologise my lord" said Viol Chime-Forgot, weeping "I will attempt to clench the tap."

"It is well," said Duno Chime "now, Sir Bassoon, your boon." And Sir Chime took Sir Max Bassoon some distance away and spoke to him quietly. Then they returned to the Squire who was wiping his reddened eyes.

"Now, Squire Viol," said Sir Chime, holding hand in hand behind his straightened back and looking meaningfully into the middle distance, which Viol Chime-Forgot knew of old to be a sign that his brain was on a knotted path, "now Squire, you are a young man still, and somewhat... That is to say you are not entirely.. But never mind that. You see there are many forms and processes of knighthood and I have attempted to educate you as best I can in what I know. Yet, there are some aspects of knight-errantry in which I am, perhaps, not the most....."

They waited.

"... the most. In which I am not expert," went on Sir Chime. "There is the issue with the towers, and veils, and tokens of various kinds. Do you understand?"

"I regret, my lord" said Viol Chime-Forgot "that I do not."

"I met my wife very young you see," said Duno Chime "and everything proceeded quite simply. So the issue of poetry, and roses.. Yet" he went on "it is spoken of in many books of chivalry, and is the centrepiece of many tales. Certainly it must be considered part of knighthood. Therefore" and here

he began to speak quite quickly and to step backwards away from Viol Chime-Forgot and Sir Max Bassoon "therefore I have arranged with this young man to teach you the wooing of ladies and paramours and so I will leave you to learn." And then he went some distance away and read a book so deeply it seemed that he might fall in.

And so Sir Max Bassoon travelled with them for some time, and attempted to teach Squire Viol Chime-Forgot the wooing of ladies and paramours, and it did not go well at all for anyone involved for the Squire and Max Bassoon fell very much in love, and Sir Duno Chime was not happy at this. But that is spoken of in other tales.

The Bridge of Catastrophic Wood

We turn now to some time past that, when their quest for the Sword of Springs Shade had brought Sir Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot to a red-banked river and a crooked black bridge which crossed it in a single span.

"That bridge is made of Catastrophic Wood," said Duno Chime "hewn from the Catastrophe tree which grows on pain and loss."

"I had not heard," replied his Squire "of such a tree."

"We have been lucky here," said Duno Chime "but in other lands such trees grow well. It is a treasonous and knotted wood which bounces back the axe and drops dead limbs on peoples heads. Yet it is strong. To make a bridge of it is a strange.

Viol Chime-Forgot could just make out far on the opposite bank an armoured figure with a sword waiting by the bridges other end. He flicked his eyes at Duno Chime and saw the failure of the knights old gaze, for Duno Chime peered, squinting like a blinded owl.

"I think I hear a distant roar." Said Duno Chime.

"It is late my lord," said the Squire "let us sleep here under the trees and cross the bridge tomorrow if we must."

"Nonsense," said Duno Chime "we must go on! Ever forward Squire Viol, do you forget so soon? Knighthood!" And as he stepped upon the bridge the black planks kissed each other and rubbed together under the weight of his tread and gave a subtle yowl, like the faint whine of a hideous cat.

"Strange indeed," said Duno Chime, then he saw the armoured figure waiting on the other side.

"A Knight!" he said "Perhaps he will contest the bridge." And then he paused a while, and he turned to Squire Viol and said.

"Did you know that man was there?"

Then Viol Chime-Forgot saw the knight was shaking.

"What is this?" said Duno Chime "That you would deceive me so? What is your thought?"

"I swear my lord," said the Squire "I did not see the man across the way. But, since he is there then let us wait. If he should choose to cross then we may challenge him, or not, as we prefer. And see he has no Snail and may not even be a knight. If, when the new day dawns, we still wish to use the bridge then we may cross at our leisure and face any challenge fresh-winded and in our own good time. It is not recreant my lord, to simply wait."

"Well," said Duno Chrime, "perhaps. Perhaps it is well for us to wait. But I caution you Squire, if tomorrow we cross against challenge then I shall be in front and shall take the adventure whatever it be. There will be no tricks and schemes. Do not think to stand between old men and death. I have lived many years and I fear nothing more than an empty and honourless end, if it should come in knightly manner I shall face it in like kind and be glad."

"I understand my lord," said the Squire.

"Ah now boy, do not look so sad," said Duno Chrime, "this is the duty of men, and though you are a little... different, it is your duty too."

And so he lay down under the shadows of the leaves and slept while the Squire Viol Chrime-Forgot kept watch.

That night the stars grew perilous and strange. A dusty web of colour spun itself across the sky, the country gleamed beneath the sparkling light and it seemed to the Squire that the world was a snail falling through a slow maelstrom of hateful colours in an ocean without boundary or shore. And he gripped the hilt of his sword and looked on Sir Duno Chrime, who still slept soundly, and he looked across the way and thought he saw the armoured figure move.

So he stood up and moved towards the bridge, and on the other side the other man did too.

It was hard to tell who stepped first upon the catastrophic wood, but the Squire could see the mad light from the sky gleaming from the armour of the other man, so he seemed a knight of many colours, or a knight of the sky itself.

And as they slowly treaded closer on the softly yowling bridge the other knight said; "False."

"Name yourself." Said Viol Chrime-Forgot

"False. False." Replied the knight of many colours. "You are not what you seem. A liar. Treacherous false knight."

And the Squire drew his sword, and the other knight did too, and still they slowly closed the gap.

"Be you a knight of the Snail?" said Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"The knights of the Snail are doomed" replied the knight "they are lost beneath the earth, or killed by Gorget Vile, Sir Babbling of Broms-Burgh is dead, Sir Vortex Frail is captured beyond rescue by the Birds of Crime, the king is mad and fled, the Curlicue Throne will fall and from his tilted silver city Gorget Vile will rule. The land is doomed."

"You lie!" Said Viol Chrime-Forgot, and at that moment the tips of their blades touched and both attacked at once.

With no room to manoeuvre on the bridge, they fought a deadly game, each foigned, like needles trying to thread each others eye. The Squire held up his shield and the many-coloured knight was armoured full from head to foot. Though Viol Chrime-Forgot was smaller, he had his speed upon him and made no false steps and the blade of his opponent was flicked like the tip of a towel from the edge of his sword. They parried and pierced and clashed backwards and forth under the madly whirling stars and each pierced and cut the other full sore. The blood dripped down their bodies and oiled the black wood of the bridge, which seemed to moan beneath their feet.

Slowly though, the size and madness of the many coloured knight began to tell, for he fought like a man who sought to throw himself away, and step by step he pushed Viol Chrime-Forgot back across the bridge.

The Squire saw the figure of the armoured man advance, a knight a head as high again as he, and each blow shocked his hand which numbed where it gripped the hilt of his sword, the edges of his shield were hewn till it was liked a toothy cog and his feet slipped on his own blood, and in the armour of his foe he saw the colours of the whirling sky, and he felt his strength scrape at its ebb and knew that he would lose and that the many coloured knight would cross and kill Sir Duno Chrime.

"Curse you!" Said Viol Chrime-Forgot. "And curse men! Curse their cruelty and their codes of selfish harm! And curse all knights!" And the Squire dashed his shield into the face of the opposing knight and ducked under his blade like a diving bird and drove his sword between his chest plate and his arm and heaving he bent the knight unexpectedly against the black wood of the bridge, then risking all he leapt with both feet and kicked the many-coloured knight so hard he tumbled arse over tip and fell into the river with a splash.

Then the squire fell down onto his hands and knees and heaved and tried to breathe.

"What is this?" said Duno Chrime, where he stood by rivers red banks observing all that passed. "Curse knighthood? What have you done?" And he looked as old as his long years told and his eyes gleamed oddly in the whirling light.

"I..." said Viol Chrime-Forgot, but his words were spent with his breath and he struggled to stand and had nothing left to say inside.

"You have done it again." Said Sir Duno Chrime. "You have tricked me, as you have tricked me times before. You have lied to me and stolen back my life to do with as you wish. You have preyed upon my secret fears and made of me a coward and a toy."

And Viol Chrime-Forgot drove his bloodied sword into the black wood of the bridge and screamed. He screamed like no man living ever screamed before. And when he was done he cried;

"For love of you! I have lied and cheated and deceived and bent my life into a untelling shape. To keep you safe! A stupid mad old man so full of self consuming dreams he abandoned his home and ONLY DAUGHTER, all to serve the memory of a maddened king! I have made myself insane for love of you!"

"You have stolen my knighthood!" Said Duno Chrime. "Sir, put up your sword!" And he drew his blade and advanced upon Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"I will not fight you." Said the squire.

"Recreant coward!" Cried Duno Chime. "You are no true knight!" And he made as if to strike the squire down.

"I will not fight." replied the boy, and bowed his head.

With that Sir Duno Chime near wept with rage and shame, and in his wrath he screamed and hacked at the surface of the wooden bridge. And it was true that in his youth he had been a known fell-handed man, for his cuts went deep and the bridge screamed and shook.

"Traitor!" Said Sir Duno Chime and hacked, "You are no squire of mine!" and hacked again, and the bridge shook, "Your promises are null and void!" and again the bridge screamed and seemed to know its pain, and it tilted a little, "live then!" and a blow of his blade cut half way through and torsional force twisted the black wood half a full turn, "live and keep you from me! I seek never to see you again!" and with that the black bridge cracked and both Sir Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot fell into the red-banked river, one quite near the shore, the other deeper in. And Sir Chime crawled back to his shore and the Squire swam to the other side.

And as they pulled themselves to solid ground they both tasted the same thing, and for a moment thought it to be blood. For they both tasted metal in their mouths and spat it out.

"Iron." Said Duno Chime and

"Iron." Said Viol Chime-Forgot and then each looked to the rivers red banks and took some of red sand there and put it in their mouths, and it was rust. Then the soaking pair grew quiet, and through the pounding of their hearts they heard a distant roar.

"Water falling." Whispered Viol Chime-Forgot.

Then both stood and looked across the river gleaming in the insane light of the multi-coloured sky, each at the other figure standing in the dancing gloom. Then each looked upriver as far as they could see, and separately, both of them set off to seek the distant sound.

The City of Rusted Iron

The river widened as they walked and in time each came, and saw, a mighty fall of water whiter than a sheet of dawn and wider than a titans open arms. The boiling spume fell like a diving hawk and the voice of the falls was so strong it drowned out any other sound. Where the hurling water pooled upon the base it sent up mist, a curling curtain of never-ending fog that rose back up the falling sheet and nearly hid the isle upon its lip. For there, at the centre of the waterfall could be seen the shadowed shape of a dark and rocky island and on the island something stranger loomed. Though the mist hid it, it looked like curves and jags of black protruding iron.

And on one side of the waterfall, Sir Duno Chime urged on Governayle and the snail began to climb, and on the other side Viol Chime-Forgot clambered into the scree and broken rock and also made to climb.

It was a long adventure for them both and when they reached the top, each moved along the reedy and mist-darkened shore looking for some means to reach the looming isle.

Sir Duno Chime found a rotted dock with ancient boats of caulked goblin wood with hulls of catastrophic plank.

"You wait here Governayle," he said to his snail, "for these unpleasant ships I will not risk. And if I do not return.."

He waited there for a while and touched the shell of Governayle.

"If I do not return, you must then be 'Governayle La Sauvage' and lyst as you will as a snail of the wilds."

And so he stepped into a beetling boat.

"You have been a good snail Governayle." He said, and sculled with a plank into the blank enfolding mist.

On the other bank, Viol Chime-Forgot found only a rotten black log, but he pushed it into the water upstream and hung on and kicked with their legs towards the looming isle.

As Sir Duno Chime approached the isle the noise of the falls grew once more so that it blotted any other sound. He looked up to the hanging shadows reaching from the rock into the air. The curves and compressions of the interlocking walls confused his eye.

"It looks," he said out loud, though he could not even hear himself "like the shell of an enormous knight, fallen, dead and crouching on the isle, and there seems a gout or rent of some perilous lance that no doubt dealt the killing blow. I had not thought," he said "a knight could ever be so big. It is sad that so mighty a fellow should be struck down from behind. We must hope his cause was just, and won."

Then the keel shuddered as his boat encountered that iron shore and he stepped carefully onto the isle.

He saw then that the island was a strange city, with iron walls and winding streets, and that the people of the city had built with black wood in and around the armour of the fallen knight, and he saw there, white figures wandering, and they were terrible indeed. The people of that city were so thin they did not seem alive and they were naked but for a wet winding sheet that gagged and sprouted from their open mouths and they staggered to and fro on spindle legs, witless with unseeing eyes like empty pits.

"I will not speak to these people," said Sir Duno Chime "for they seem to me not quite right." And he hid himself behind the iron folds of the citys rusting walls.

Viol Chime-Forgot did not look up as he kicked furiously against his log, but when they landed on the isle they saw the same thing as Sir Duno Chime; curved and rusting walls of old black iron, a maze of woodwork and narrow streets, a reeking damp and fog that infiltrated everywhere and a white noise that battered at their head so they could barely think.

Then Viol saw a skeleton of black bone overlooking all, and the skeleton was full of surging foam and white water, as if it were placed beneath a waterfall and the spume and spray flowed through its eyes and ribs and never stopped, yet the water came from nowhere and went to no place they could see, and the skeleton had on its head a blackened crown.

"I will be somewhat recreant in this," said Viol Chime-Forgot, "for I doubt this king loves visitors and I do not wish to bother him." And they also hid as best they could behind a wall.

Sir Duno Chime moved by creaking stealth towards the centre of the foggy isle and found there at its core, a hole.

"No doubt this was a mining town," said Duno Chime "for all roads lead to and come from here and there are wheels and levers to lift enormous loads. If anything is still secure around this place, it must be there." And he glanced about him and ran to the hole and climbed in.

Inside he found a mine of strange design, for it proceeded downwards and across. The caverns mainly edged upon the falls, so that, if the water of the falls should ever stop and the curtain be pulled aside, it would expose within the wall of the rock all the linked caverns of the mine like the tunnels of ants in a glass-sided nest.

But the water never stopped and this meant most caverns in the mine had one wall of endlessly torrenting white and they were full of mist and damp and polarised white light. Sir Duno Chime climbed carefully on the ladders and links of black iron that lead down, for he was very aware of their damp and did not wish to slip and fall. He knew that to fall only a short way would be to shatter one of his glass limbs and then he would be trapped and likely die.

As he moved from place to place Sir Chime came upon a horrid corpse. It was a being of earth and poison, one of its hands was huge and clubbed and must have dragged upon the ground, its other hand was small and sharp and curled up by its horrid face. But it was dead and had sword-signs in its poisoned flesh.

"Some Snail Knight has done this deed." Said Duno Chime, and he felt a little less afraid, though he could not hear his own words, but only the unending roar.

In the iron city some way up, Viol Chime-Forgot also found the gateway to the central mine and stealthily they entered in and climbed carefully the long way down. Though they did not see and could not hear the crowned skeleton of white water and black bone that witnessed them and followed them into the earth.

At about this time Sir Duno Chime approached the deepest cave.

"I am somewhere near the bottom of the falls." He said, and so he found a cracked and rotted gorge six feet across, and beyond it a mighty cavern where stalactites and stalagmites of pearly stone meshed like the teeth of an enormous jaw, and he saw there the signs of furious battle and a mighty feathered corpse, much gnawed, and a treasure pile of silver coins.

"Here, if anywhere at all," he said "is the Sword of Springs Shade." And, fearfully, he made to jump across the six foot gap.

When Viol Chime-Forgot found the oddly-limbed corpse of the poisonous thing, he knew not what to make of it.

"This is sad circumstance." He said.

Then in the corner of his eye he saw a glimpse of living fur. He froze and looked more closely and observed, moving on the ceiling, what seemed to be the body of a gigantic hairy snake. The creature was thick with shaggy fur, the same dull grey-white as the walls and dripped constantly in the mist. It had rows of grasping claws that helped it hang on to the walls and roof and it curled and writhed like a serpent.

Viol Chime-Forgot drew his sword, then realised the creatures head was out of sight. He was looking at its rear, and, as nothing in this place could hear anything else over the roaring of the falls, it was unaware of him.

"This creature hunts someone ahead of me," he said, "and who knows how far, for it is very long." And he followed the creatures tail as it wove between the stalactites of the roof. He followed so closely that he did not think to turn around and see the king of black bone that had followed him into the earth.

Sir Duno Chime held his sword close. "Never recreant," he whispered to himself, and he leapt across the six foot gap and landed on the other side. Shaking, he checked his limbs of glass. "No cracks," he said, "thank snails and shells." and he near wept for relief. Then he went across the cavern to the treasure pile.

He saw there signs of great mortality.

"A mighty battle has took place." He said.

And he found the corpse of a terrible creature of the air. "Perhaps this is the Fearful Shrike of which the stories speak." The corpse of the creature had been badly gnawed by something large and it lay upon a pile of tarnished silver coins and on the coins there was the body of a knight.

"This is Sir Babbling of Broms-Burgh!" Said Duno Chime. "Oh brave end."

But then he looked closer and saw that Sir Babbling of Broms-Burgh had been killed with a single blow to the back of his un-armoured head, and the knight was near a chest and it seemed indeed that this was the Sword of Springs Shade for the chest had subtle workings on its side of Summer and the Spring. Then Sir Chime leant down to open it, and he wiped away something that dripped on the back of his neck, and he saw inside the chest nothing but an empty space where a sword should be and in the lid, written in letters of the dead knights blood were these three words;

HA. HA. HA.

It was then that Viol Chime-Forgot entered the cavern and saw Sir Duno Chime kneeling before a chest, and above him, curled in the stalactites was the shape of a gargantuan centripetal wolf, for the Fog Dog had a head just like a heavy hound, and it had pale blue eyes and it reached its gargantuan teeth down out of the ceiling of the cave directly above the bent head of Sir Duno Chime, and the dripping on his neck was the drool from its hungry lips and it was about to snap his neck and gulp him down.

And Viol Chime-Forgot screamed like no man living ever screamed before. It was louder even than the rivers pale rage.

Sir Duno Chime looked up, and he saw his squire, Viol Chime-Forgot, whose face was twisted in a scream he could not hear. And he saw his squire was in great danger for behind him was a king of

black bone with robes of water rushing through its ribs, and that the King reached out to push the boy into the gorge.

Duno Chrime saw that his squire was like to lose his life, and Viol Chrime-Forgot saw his knight was like to lose his life, and without thinking or speaking Sir Duno Chrime leapt across the broken gorge to defend Viol Chrime-Forgot, and at the same time Viol Chrime-Forgot leapt across the gorge to defend Sir Duno Chrime, and they passed each other in the air to some surprise.

And it surprised the skeleton and dog as well, for they had not expected this at all. So a great battle began, for Sir Duno Chrime crashed his sword against the black ribs of the King of Falling Water, and Viol Chrime-Forgot drove his blade full fast against the terrible centripetal hound. But the skeleton was of great strength, for it was cursed of old with all the power of the falls and as long as the river ran and water fell it could not die. The hound as well was very strong, and long, it lashed like a serpent and bit like a wolf and curled all over the walls and ceiling snapping at Viol Chrime-Forgot who knew not where to strike or defend.

And the battle traysed and traversed across the cavern with the monsters and the fighting men sometimes crossing, sometimes swapping, sometimes fighting back to back, all in the fierce silence of the raging river, for no sound they shaped was heard.

And the blood of Viol Chrime-Forgot ran into the water pools upon the floor, and mixed there with the blood of the centripetal hound, for they both wounded each other full sore, yet the hound was very large and in time its advantage told for it could both bite and also cut with the claws of its numerous limbs and it made to curl around Viol to crush him for good.

And against the King of Falling Water, Sir Chrime defended himself carefully and well, for it was true what had been said, he was in his youth a known fell-handed man, but he sensed and he felt from its terrible strength that it would not fall easily to any natural force, and he saw the wounds on Viol Chrime-Forgot and knew that the end of that boys life must be at hand.

So he backed away as the King of Falling Water battered at his shield and as the Fog Dog curled around Viol Chrime-Forgot to crush and constrict him to death, Sir Chrime leapt over its coils as they closed, and he placed his head gently on the back of the Squires head, and their eyes met and they fell together to the soaking floor.

And the King of Falling Water, enraged by the invasion of his home, leapt with his terrible strength straight into the closing coils, and the Fog Dog who had feasted on the body of the Fearful Shrike closed its coils to crush the hated man who stole its food.

And as the Chrime and Chrime-Forgot ducked down, the hound closed on the king, and they struck at each other in rage, for their strength was close to equal.

And as it was distracted, Viol Chrime-Forgot rose up and with one blow he struck off the head of the enormous hound and its blood sprayed everywhere and drenched the cave. Its body twitched and spasmed madly in its death, crushing the Crowned King of Falling Water, and as it did so, Duno Chrime and Viol Chrime-Forgot together kicked it out into the water of the falls where it disappeared from view.

Then Viol Chrime-Forgot and Sir Duno Chrime held each other tightly and wept sweet tears and Sir Duno Chrime swore that he did not care if his squire was a little strange and that he would never abandon him again so long as he lived and Viol Chrime-Forgot said he did not care if Duno Chrime

was old, or mad or thought that he was made of glass, for he would never be apart from him again no matter what adventure fell, and though neither could hear each other over the roaring of the endless falls, or see each others tears for the misty dripping of the cave each knew what the other said and meant, and so they were friends again and remained so for as long as they both lived.

So Sleeps Sir Babbling

We turn now to a short time on, where Sir Duno Chrim and Squire Viol (and Governayle as well) stood on the rivers banks and looked into a boat in which lay the body of Sir Babbling of Bronborough.

(As to the story of the escape of Duno Chrim and Viol Chrim-Forgot from the Iron Isle of the King of Falling Water, it is logistically complex and quite uninteresting and appears neither in this tale or in any other. Let it simply be said they are there.)

The body of Sir Babbling was laid out with his sword and the heads of the Fog Dog and of the Fearful Shrike were laid at his feet.

"Sir Babbling," said Sir Duno Chrim "I did not know you at all, for I confess I always found you quite a silly knight. I see now I was wrong. You achieved an adventure in which I have till this day failed. You discovered the Sword of Springs Shade and to do so you battled many terrors and defeated monsters of which I dare not dream.

At the last, you were betrayed, but this is no fault of yours, for no worsypful knight could know or understand the deadly schemes of that evil and honourless man Sir Gorget Vile, that craven, criminal, abominable shit!"

At this Sir Duno Chrim was forced to excuse himself due to an excess of wrath.

"I apologise Sir Babbling, for my hatred overwhelms me and that is not good practice for a knight. My squire Viol Chrim-Forgot must continue. I assure you he is an entirely honourable man who will one day be a Snail Knight of renown."

Then Viol Chrim-Forgot said this;

"Know this knight, if still you watch; the arrogance of Gorget Vile will be his end. For so secure in cleverness was that man that he stopped to leave a message in your blood, and in doing so he sealed his doom.

We will find Gorget Vile and ease our hearts upon him with our hands, and when we do and the Sword of Springs Shade is recovered once again, we will tell everywhere the tale of Sir Babbling of Bronborough, how he found the secret isle, dared its deathless guardians, defeated the asymmetric horror with the poisoned hands and battled the Fearful Shrike where it guarded and gloated in its pile of silver coins. How he had brave single-handed victory over that terrible foe and in the end, ignoring the forgotten treasure of the ancient past, he sought only the Sword of Springs Shade and returned it as he swore to do, and if in any future time the free peoples of this land take joy or comfort in the season between summer and spring, it shall be your name that they think of and your story that they tell, and the name of Gorget Vile will be nothing but a stupid joke that people think of not-at-all."

"This I swear." Said Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot.

And so they went to seek the tilted silver city of Sir Gorget Vile.

The Silver City of Sir Gorget Vile

And, upon adventure, they found just that, for many evil creatures and cruel men had come to know that city well. It was said that there the Black Knight ruled upon a slant, that every criminal and evil thing was free to come and go, and that no Snail Knight had ever gone there and survived. They said that Gorget Vile had defeated and outwitted every Snail Knight that he met, that he stole the city from them and ruled there from a throne of broken shell, that he took as he wished from the Knights of the Snail and feared none of them, except, some whispered, Sir Coagulate Fast, the Knight of the Mind, who had disappeared into the earth some time ago.

They said the place was full of evil things and there Gorget Vile held dark revels and planned to take the throne for good.

And it came that one night, Sir Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot overlooked the tilted city from a darkened hill, and they lay there quiet as mice for fear that some unseen eye would make them out, for light and music and laughter and screams all issued from beneath, and sometimes a shadow fled shaped like a fleeing man, but always they were shot down before they left the margin of the light, and laughter rang like bells as they died.

"This is a complex problem," said Viol Chime-Forgot. "I submit to you Sir Chime, that we may access the city by neither open force or silent stealth."

"I accept this as an open fact," said Sir Duno Chime, and he shifted his old glass bones upon the cold and lumpy ground, "yet I fear and suspect that you seek to present some third, and perhaps un-knightly choice."

"Disguise." Said Viol Chime-Forgot.

"He will see through it," said Duno Chime, "for he is cunning and a master of disguise himself."

"He may, perhaps, see through in part," said Viol Chime-Forgot "it is a matter in which I have some skill. But I ask you this; what is the greatest weakness of Sir Gorget Vile?"

"Arrogance," said Duno Chime, "and desperate need to prove himself the cleverest and best. He is a man not whole of heart."

"Then I suggest the following; you disguise yourself as some ill-omened knight and together we will ask entry to the horrid feast, and even if Sir Gorget Vile should see through part of our disguise (and he will not see through it all) then his arrogance will lead him to bring both of us quite close. Then once we have him close at hand we strike him down at once."

"It is an awful plan," said Duno Chime, "I would much rather challenge him directly to a joust as true knight should. However, he is a pig and will shoot us both to death, therefore I think yours the least bad scheme of which I am aware. Yet I must warn you Squire Viol, my powers of guile are close to nil. I am not an imaginative man and lying is a skill I do not have."

"As to that," replied the Squire, "do not worry overmuch for I shall do the talking. Only remember this; if Gorget Vile, or anyone, asks you any question of quality or sense, only think for a moment and say the Exact Opposite of what you really think. The Exact Opposite. Do you understand?"

At this Sir Duno Chime looked quite confused.

"I think I do." He said.

"Very well," said the Squire "that will serve well for you I think. Now I shall prepare by disguise while you paint Governayle in darker shades."

So Sir Duno Chime painted the shell of Governayle in shades of blood and bile.

"Now Governayle," he said, "you must pretend to be a very evil snail, you must be 'Governayle Malade'."

When Viol Chime-Forgot returned he had changed a great deal, for he wore a darkish damsel's dress and seemed to have long hair and appeared in every respect like a woman.

"Well that is very well done Sir!" Said Duno Chime, "You counterfeited a woman very well. Perhaps even enough to fool Sir Gorget Vile."

"I thank you Sir," said Viol Chime-Forgot "I am the Damsel Miscarry Tithe, a dark enchantress."

"Well that is a very ill-omened name indeed, and quite correct. You even sound very much like a woman." Though, "Sir Duno Chime hesitated, "you stand a little mannish." And it was true, Viol Chime-Forgot did carry himself entirely like a man. "Instead, try placing your feet say.. here and so. There. You must watch your stance for anyone who sees you walk will think you are a man."

"Never mind that," said Viol Chime-Forgot, "I will look to it. What shall be your name O' Evil Knight?"

"I have considered," said Duno Chime, "and I believe that I shall be Sir Enrich Doum."

"Excellent." Said Squire Viol. "Let us be about it then."

"There is one thing more." Said Duno Chime. "I must ask of you a boon."

"If it is within my power to give, I shall." Replied the Squire.

"I have, some time ago, left my daughter Trystia Chime secured safely in Chime Hall, which I am very glad of for only the knowledge she is safe at home has allowed me to go on at all. Yet we left each other not well when last we spoke. I am old and we embark now upon a scheme most perilous. Should it be that you survive and I do not, I ask that you return to Chime Hall and tell my daughter that I love her and hold nothing against her for our parting. And I pray sir that you make as good a tale of my end as can be told."

Viol Chime-Forgot said; "She shall know."

"A, Sir, do not be sad," said Duno Chime, "these are soft tears for a knight." And he gently brushed the tears from the squire's cheek.

So said, they crept through the hills and came openly unto the tilted silver city of Sir Gorget Vile. Where many awful things were seen, and whatever horrors they passed on the way, towards whomever asked they only said that they were The Damsel Miscarry Tithe and her evil knight Sir Enrich Doum, and that they were on the way to join the feast of Gorget Vile.

And though many turned their heads to watch them pass, no one raised a hand against them, for what good Snail Knight would ever come openly of their own free will into the hands of Gorget Vile? (And the snail Governayle retched and bubbled horribly and rasped his radula at any who came close, so that he seemed a wild and rabid snail.)

So they came and climbed throughout the darkened silver streets to a great hall of catastrophic wood, and from the hall grew a tall and silver tower which lanced out an enormous length at an angle into the dark. From within came light and heat and cheers and screams.

Viol Chime-Forgot knocked three times upon the door.

And they waited.

Then Sir Chime took the hilt of his sword and struck the door three mighty blows that echoed through the night.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

The noise within the hall grew still, a voice sounded and then the door cracked open and a vile vylane said;

"Who is this?"

And Sir Chime replied "I am Sir Enrich Doum, a very evil knight, and this is my Damsel Miscarry Tithe who is very bad as well, and we wish to come inside to speak to Gorget Vile of evil things."

The vylane relayed these words to those inside, and then a strident voice replied;

"Ha Ha Ha. Bring them in."

And the door swung wide and they saw the feast of Gorget Vile.

The hall was tilted like the city, and cut into great steps. Inside a mighty table stretched its length. At the bottom, vile vylanes brawled, scrabbled and stabbed for scraps and fragments from the feast, and fought in the straw for their lives while those who watched made bets, and as the vylanes fought, they knocked over the cups and glasses on the tables edge, and now and then one would tumble to the ground and smash, and so the floor was strewn with blood and straw and food and broken glass.

Then above them came a host of felonious fools, evil entertainers masked with paint who played with knives and poisons and bantered with ironic words and the fools made combats of spoken cruelty to see whom could hurt the other most, and those watching laughed to see them mock each other into dirt.

Above them came a coven of evil enchantresses, and they were fell and fey and beautiful and cruel and they bantered with dark magic and compared manipulations and spoke of wells they had poisoned, ships they had sunk, families they had ruined and knights they had brought low.

Higher still they saw a gang of cannibal knights, huge rust-armoured blood-stained men who carried mighty cleavers and wore the ears and fingers of their enemies, and laced their hair with finger bones and all bit hungrily at chunks of bloodied meat whose source could not be told.

Still higher came four Abhorrent Gentlemen who looked like human slugs, and they sweated and picked daintily at silver plates that dripped with food, and they talked in numbers all the time and laughed amongst themselves and smoked the Nightmare Herbs of Thaum.

Near the top of the tilted hall they saw six Birds of Crime. Each bird was very large, dirty and rank like huge ravens with twisted beaks that did not meet, and the birds glanced intelligently at Duno Chime and Viol Chime-Forgot as if they could see straight away what they were. They shuffled and cawed softly 'crime, crime' and shifted on their perches and picked at golden plates piled with human eyes.

And the perches of the Birds of Crime were little boys and girls who stood naked and terrified, and each boy and each girl had one eye torn from their head with terrible force, and the bird that ruled them stood upon their heads and cut their dirty scalp with its terrible claws as they held up the golden plates of eyes from which the Birds of Crime could eat.

Then they saw Sir Gorget Vile, the Black Snail Knight, who sat full-armoured on a throne of broken autumn-shaded shell, overlooking all.

"Welcome to my feast," said Gorget Vile, "Sir Enrich Doum, and you the Damsel Tithe. Tell me," he said, "is that a Snail you ride?"

"Indeed it is my lord," replied Viol Chime-Forgot, "for Sir Doum hates the knights of the snail and killed one and took this snail from him."

"Is this true?" Said Gorget Vile.

But Sir Duno Chime was looking at the broken glass upon the floor, and watching as a single crystal cup came rolling closer to the edge. Then he looked up and met the eyes of Gorget Vile, and with a hand he reached out and gently stopped the rolling cup, and said;

"Yes. I hate Snail Knights."

"Excellent!" Cried Gorget Vile, kick aside some scum, and sit, and tell me of your hatred for those knights, for I had thought to never find another with loathing for them greater than my own."

So Sir Chime and Squire Viol kicked aside some vile vylanes and sat, and Sir Gorget Vile smiled and fixed his eyes upon them and grinned.

"Well?" He said.

"Well," said Duno Chime, "the thing I most hate about the Snail Knights is..."

"Yes?" Said Gorget Vile, and the hall grew quiet, and all eyes turned to look upon Sir Duno Chime.

"Their honour..," said Sir Chrime, "Because.. they do not really believe in it, or act upon it, and they only make the pretence of it because each is afraid of being found out, and in truth..." Sir Chrime thought very hard, "they are all fearful little men huddling together, trying to be as much like each other as possible out of terror of thinking for themselves!" and he sighed and relaxed in his chair breathing heavily.

"EXACTLY!" Shouted Sir Gorget Vile, and he smacked the table with both hands. "Finally someone other than me has said the simple truth! But I pray you sir," he smile ingratiatingly, "please kick aside a fool and sit a little closer."

So Sir Chrime and Squire Viol each kicked aside a felonious fool and sat a little closer to the top.

Then Viol Chrime-Forgot said, "A, my lord Vile, Sir Doum has spoken to me many times of his many hatreds for those knights."

And Sir Gorget Vile replied;

"Yes? Indeed?"

"Yes." said Duno Chrime. "For, another thing I hate about the Snail Knights is..."

"Yes?" Said Gorget Vile and leaned to listen.

"Their politeness..." said Sir Chrime, "because.. it is only a veil for the strength of their swords. It is a scheming lie. A toy of words passed back and forth between violent men to hide their snide contempt. And the worst part of it is..."

"Yes?" Said Gorget Vile.

"the worst part is..." went on Sir Chrime "that it is merely a tool of social control, intended to sustain a narrow clique!"

"INDEED IT IS!" Said Gorget Vile. "And I have said so many times before! But I pray you Sir and Damsel, move aside an enchantress each and sit a little closer for I grow to like you very much."

So they each nudged aside an enchantress and sat. And then Sir Duno Chrime, who had settled into something of a rhythm, smiled and said.

"Another thing I hate.."

"Yes?" Said Gorget Vile. "Do please go on, for you elucidate upon their flaws in style."

"Is jousting."

"JOUSTING!" Shouted Gorget Vile. "What is even the point?"

"Indeed," replied Sir Chrime, "it is an utterly ridiculous form. Why make such extended theatre of violence? If the intent is to harm, why not simply harm? To engage in such a silly game with fatal consequence is contemptible and dumb. I venture," he went on "that in a rational sense, it would be more reasonable to simply stab somebody in the back."

"AT LEAST IT WOULD BE DIRECT!" Said Gorget Vile. "Ha Ha Ha. But I do beg you, Damsel, Sir, do sit a little closer to me and tell me more of your deep hatred for those knights of the Curlicue Throne, so soon to fall."

So Sir Chrim and Squire Viol each sat between some cannibals, and Sir Chrim thought long and deep and said;

"One more thing I loathe about those knights..."

"Mmm?" Said Gorget Vile.

"Is.." here Sir Chrim paused "is their weak and stupid maddened king."

"The useless little shit!" Said Gorget Vile.

"Yes," replied Sir Chrim, grinning a very tight grin, "he was always weak, and his queen was both ugly and stupid. One would think," he went on, "that he would be glad to be rid of her, such a miserable and crapulent drudge that she was."

"I never liked her." Said Sir Gorget Vile. "But Sir, and Lady, it is hard for me to hear you over the sound of the crowd, I beg you, move a little closer."

So two Abhorrent Gentlemen both smiled and moved aside and Duno Chrim and Viol Chrim-Forgot both sat a little closer to the throne.

"There is one thing" whispered Duno Chime to Gorget Vile "that I hate about the Snail Knights even more."

"And what is that?" Said Gorget Vile, picking his teeth with an unknown bone.

"It is their code of never hurting women and children. For I like to hurt them very much." Said Duno Chrim, and Viol Chrim-Forgot looked quite aghast.

"Yesss." Said Gorget Vile. "Ha Ha Ha. I like to do so too. Tell me Sir Doum, which do you think is best, to hurt a woman or a child?"

"Women," said Duno Chrim, "make excellent noises when cut, but a child can be kicked and broken time after time after time, and," he gestured to the perches of the Birds of Crime, "like these children here, when it is done a handy servant can be made."

"This is quite true." Said Gorget Vile, "and I intend to make good use of it myself. But I beg you Sir Doum, sit here, directly next to me, for I like to hear you speak."

So Sir Duno Chrim and Viol Chrim-Forgot both moved to sit directly next to Gorget Vile.

"Tell me Sir," said Gorget Vile, "do you like my throne? For I took it from a Snail Knight whose snail I crushed to death."

"Ha Ha Ha" said Duno Chrim and he grinned madly, "I like it very much, for I shall tell you secret Sir Vile if you wish."

"Yes?" Said Gorget Vile and leaned quite close.

"I hate snails." Whispered Sir Duno Chrime into the ear of Gorget Vile.

"SNAILS!" Screamed Gorget Vile. "They are the stupidest thing of all! What a pointless ridiculous mount! What inanity! Fruitless, crapulent, parasitic slimy things! And slow! So cursed slow! I HATE SNAILS! I hate them!"

Then he clutched the table and breathed heavily for some time.

"Sir Doum" went on Gorget Vile as he leaned in close and hissed into his ear "would you like to see a Snail Knight that I have captured in my cells?"

"I would like it very much." Said Duno Chrime. "For I think you the finest and cleverest man alive."

"Of course." Said Gorget Vile. "It grows late and this feast is dull." Then he rose up to his full height and slammed his mace upon the table.

"GET OUT!" He screamed. "Get out you scum! I wish to be alone!"

And so the vile vylanes, the felonious fools, the evil enchantresses, the cannibal knights and even the abhorrent gentlemen all left the hall, and finally the Birds of Crime snapped at their living perches and they rose.

The largest bird of all turned one by one to look at Duno Chrime and Viol Chrime-Forgot, then turned again to Gorget Vile and whispered;

"Crime."

"I will speak to you tomorrow night." Said Gorget Vile. "For now I pray and request that you leave my hall."

And the Birds of Crime cawed softly and the terrified children that they rode rose silently and filed out of the hall, and it seemed almost as if the Birds of Crime were laughing as they went.

"I am glad they are gone," said Gorget Vile, "for they unnerve me. Now, come with me and see the trophies I have taken from the Knights of the Snail.

So they followed Gorget Vile into the darkness of his hall and he took them to a mighty cage and within they saw a Snail of Gold.

"This," said Gorget Vile, "I took from Sir Chesslike Hand. I would not usually steal a snail for I loath them so, but here I may watch it slowly starve to death, and when that is done I will melt down its shell for golden coins which I will use to pay for war."

"This pleases me greatly." Said Sir Duno Chrime, and he grinned a terrible grin.

Then Gorget Vile took them to a great iron box and they saw within a crystal blade which glittered with the last clear light of spring.

"This," said Gorget Vile, "I took from a very stupid knight whom I tricked very simply and left dead. I do not recall his name. When I am king it will place the very seasons in my hands."

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Sir Duno Chrime, and his eyelid spasmed in a troubling way.

"It is a kind of curse of the Snail Knights," said Gorget Vile, "that they are almost totally unable to penetrate a disguise."

"Indeed?" Replied Sir Chrime.

"Yes," said Gorget Vile. "There is not one I have encountered whom I have not easily deceived."

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Enrich Doum

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile. "Here, you see, I keep my various accoutrements of war," said Gorget Vile, "which I shall use to arm my Vile Vylanes when we march upon the castle of the Curlicue Throne."

And it was true for he had arranged there a mighty store of swords and shields, maces, pikes and great hammers to crack the shells of Snails.

"What excellent weapons!" Said Viol Chrime-Forgot.

"And here," said Gorget Vile, "I keep my Snail Knight prisoner." And he pulled back the iron shutter on a narrow cell.

"Look," he said, "for yourself."

Then Viol Chrime-Forgot looked into the darkness of the cell, and there, naked, blind and wrapped in heavy chains, he saw Sir Max Bassoon.

"A, Sir!" Cried the Damisel Miscarry Tithe, and hid her face.

"Women." Hissed Gorget Vile. "Look you Sir Doum and see the knight I have."

And Sir Doum looked.

"I think," he said, "of all the things that I have seen I like this most of all. It makes me wish to raise you up Sir Gorget Vile, to the greatest possible heights. I would honour you as man has never been honoured before. In fact, I submit that no reward, no matter how great, is great enough for you."

"You are too kind." Said Gorget Vile. "This knight here fell quite easily into my hands, and though he does little now but moan for some maiden and the Sword of Springs Shade in fact he brought me a much greater treasure."

"Did he indeed?" Said Sir Duno Chrime.

"Yes," replied Sir Gorget Vile, and he held out between his finger and thumb a single tear-shaped gem which he kept on a chain around his neck.

"Look," said Gorget Vile, "one of the Tears of Mab."

"I am not familiar with them." Replied Sir Duno Chrime.

"They are said to be able to reverse the very flow of time, and un-do what has been" said Gorget Vile, "but this FOOL will not reveal to me the nature of its use. Will you fool?"

And he banged upon the cell door with the hilt of his mace. Within, Sir Sextant Wrought moaned in dread.

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile. "I fed his eyes to owls and still he would not speak, but only muttered of his duty, his music, some woman and his friend Sir Duno Chrime."

"I am Duno Chrime." Said Duno Chrime.

"What?" Said Gorget Vile.

"Now die." Said Duno Chrime and he swung fiercely at Sir Gorget Vile.

"A!" Said Gorget Vile. But, though he was an evil man and never took a risk without a cause, regrettably he was neither stupid, cowardly nor slow, and he pulled up the hilt of his mace and deflected the blow.

"Treason!" Shouted Gorget Vile, but there was no-one there to hear him.

"Justice." Said Viol Chrime-Forgot, and they spring from the shadows armed with a sword they had taken from the Black Knights stores.

And then a great melee began.

Chrime and Chrime-Forgot pressed full heavy on Sir Gorget Vile, and Sir Chrime put all of the age of his skill into his careful blows and Viol Chrime-Forgot unleashed her speed and her blade darted like a vipers tongue.

But Duno Chrime was very old, and Viol Chrime-Forgot, though brave, was shorter than Sir Gorget Vile, and slenderer by far, and though together they stabbed and foigned and circled him and drove him pace upon pace back back into the hall and whipped flecks of his blood onto the walls, he was still a tall, strong, crafty and well-armoured knight fighting an unarmoured woman and an old old man. (For the truth is, Viol Chrime-Forgot was in fact the lady Trystia Chrime and always had been, even from the first they met.)

Sir Vile backed and parried carefully and used his weight and strength to batter back Sir Duno Chrime. And he felt the old man flinch with each bruising impact, but try as he might, he could bring them to no narrow space and they circled him cleverly and attacked him at once.

The three knights fought into the feasting hall and Trystia Chrime saw that Gorget Vile intended to back towards the doorway and escape. She dashed to the halls end and with all of her strength she pushed the lowest table segment on its side and blocked the only exit out.

And as she did so, the glasses and the crystal cups tumbled and fell onto the floor.

And sir Duno Chime witnessed this and his face lost its colour and the pennant of his heart hung low.

"This is interesting." Said Gorget Vile. "I had thought you an old fell-handed man. But perhaps you have a heart..." and he reached out a finger gently, and slowly he tipped over a crystal cup upon the tables edge, "of glass."

And the crystal cup fell and shattered on the floor. And Duno Chime twitched visibly and stepped back.

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile, and he swept his arm and a flood of shining glass plunged like a waterfall into the stone and shattered like a breaking wave beneath the feet of Duno Chime.

And Duno Chime screamed and ducked away.

And Sir Gorget Vile leapt past him in a moment and ran towards a broken lance which he kept by an old tapestry at the rear of the hall, and he pulled the curtain aside to reveal a silver wall with several irregular holes, and he jammed the lance into a certain hole, and so a silver door appeared and, like a curtain being pulled aside, revealed a way inside.

Sir Gorget Vile dashed into the doorway, snatching the lance as he ran.

"After him!" Cried Duno Chime, and both he and Trystia Chime ran towards the silver door and entered just before it closed.

They raced behind the fleeing knight, crawling and clambering up what seemed like a spiral of dark and endless stairs which hung at an unnatural angle and scraped and bruised them terribly. Ahead of them they heard the voice of Gorget Vile crying 'Ha Ha Ha' as he disappeared just out of sight.

Then they both burst into an empty room. On one wall was a silver mirror, vast and curved, in the centre was a clasp of bloodstained stone and in the higher wall was a window through which the starlight shone.

"Out you come," they heard the voice of Gorget Vile, "one-by-one, for there is not room for both to climb at once. No more dodging and surrounding, no more circling and spiralling, you may face me here head-on as true knights should."

And Trystia Chime looked at Duno Chime and said;

"Do not go."

"Never recreant." Said Sir Duno Chime, and smiled. "But fear not, for you shall be behind me and shall avenge me if I fall."

Then Duno Chime leapt for the upper window and in one hoist he pulled himself up into the clear starlit air.

But Gorget Vile was waiting for him, and with a great two-handed blow he swung his mace and crushed the arm of Duno Chime.

The knight felt the shattering of his glass bones and screamed. Trytia Chime climbed up behind, but the smooth surface of the silver tower was curved so that only standing directly on its arc allowed anyone at all to keep their feet. To move at all would be to slip and fall the long long way onto the darkened rocks below.

Duno Chime reached to pull his own sword from the fingers of his broken arm. But he was old, and slow, and Gorget Vile swing again with all his might and shattered his other arm and the sword of Duno Chime went skittering over the edge and disappeared.

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile. "HA HA HA. HA HA HA! This is the best fun I have ever had!" And he swung again and shattered the old knights leg. The old man screamed.

"I thank you for the entertainment!" Said Gorget Vile, and he kicked Duno Chime so that he fell directly on his back, and in a single leap he crossed the old mans body and brought his mace down upon the sword of Trystia Chime and drove her down.

"Did you think that you could win?" Laughed Gorget Vile, as he swing and dashed his heavy mace. "You stupid cunt, I'll break your arms and legs and cut you for fun!" Then he said; "A!"

For; Sir Duno Chime let the angle of the tower slide him onto his one whole leg, and in a smooth leap, he hopped up on his one whole foot, and put his head over the shoulder of Gorget Vile, who turned to see what was, and he bit deeply of the nose of Gorget Vile. He bit so deep and hard his teeth near met, but not quite, for he hung on the Black Knights face as a dead weight. And Gorget Vile went;

"EEEEEEEEE"

For he had not expected this at all, and so surprised was he that, for a moment, for one single second of his whole long life, he lost his cleverness, and slipped.

And Gorget Vile and Duno Chime tumbled together a long way through black air above the city, no longer as beautiful as bone, down, down to the cold, sharp metal of the streets of the Silver City, which had been waiting for Sir Gorget Vile for quite some time.

And there they both lay dead dead dead.

And there ends the story of Sir Duno Chime.

