



Once upon a time...

Flowious and Diptidulla arrived at Fort Richmond. It was a massive golden fort in the middle of the Sea of Sand. It was at least a half mile in each wall length and was made entirely of solid 2-by-4 solid gold reflective metallic bricks. They walked up to the gate. Two heavily armed guards asked them, "Who are you to see and your relationship to them?"

Flowious said, "We are here to see Silch Levi. We are, ah, friends I guess."

The guard said, "The cost is fifty gold pounds."

Flowious said, "We don't have any gold."

The guard ordered, "Then get out of line."

They watched a cart of one-hundred pounds of gold being exchanged for admission into the fort. At sundown a man in a cloak appeared. He tapped Diptidulla on the shoulder. They followed him to a tavern in a nearby hamlet around an oasis. The tavern had its own security tower to keep out bandits. He introduced himself, "Hello, I am High Tower."

Flowious asked, "High Tower?"

High Tower explained, "That is a code name. I am a private eye."

He then began, "I have been hired to investigate Fort Richmond. You best not get into it."

Flowious asked, "Why not?"

High Tower replied, "Figures pay big money to get inside. But few leave. Inside is a door to the first layer of the Departed Realm. The dead cannot leave, but the living can necromance with those who died within a year."

Diptidulla asked, "Necromance?"

Flowious explained, "It means talk to the dead."

High Tower further explained, "Richmond Nacl charges an exorbitant amount to let figures speak to dead friends, even more for dead grandparents, even more for dead parents, even more than that for dead spouses and siblings, and the greatest cost for dead children. People waste their fortunes and lives away trying to spend as much time as possible with their departed loved ones. There is no floodwall against the gauging he inflicts. The living don't belong in the halls of the departed. The livings' lives belongs to the still living."

Flowious asked, "Do you know Silch Levi?"

High Tower enthusiastically replied, "No. I am sorry. But you could hire me to look for him."

Flowious said, "No."

High Tower sighed and walked to the next table. After eating eye of mud newt, Flowious and Diptidulla crossed the nighttime desert back to Fort Richmond. Guards were on the wall patrolling with lanterns. When no guard was looking they ran up to the fifty-foot tall wall. Diptidulla blasted Flowious with wind and he glided to the top of the wall, where he froze two guards in ice. Diptidulla used the lanterns to slowly melt the ice and Flowious used Blaze's fire power to steel the guards golden armor, which, unwisely, was extensive enough to cover their

faces. They sent the two guards over the wall but cushioned them with an updraft of wind as they fell. After about eight hours new guards arrived to take their shift. Flowious and Diptidulla snuck around the massive fort, through the barracks, the mess hall, the masters mansion, and the super-secure vault until they arrived at a building called "The Lobby". Inside was a swirling green portal on the wall opposite the entrance, on the other two sides were solid steel walls, not gold. They reluctantly walked through the portal. On the other side was a massive atrium with eighty-five floors, hundreds of hallways on each floor, and hundreds of little rooms on each hallway. At the front desk in the atrium was a lady at a desk which was filled with card catalogs. She asked the two Monk siblings, "Name of the one who has departed?"

Out of curiosity Flowious said, "Fun Dashaus Genin."

The forewoman went through the boxes until she got to the wooden box with the name, "Fun Dashaus" on it. In alphabetical order she found "G". She went down the lines on the card until she found "Genin". She read the number next to it, "Floor thirty-one, hallway NFC, room 789."

She wrote it down on a sticky note and handed it to Flowious. Taking the stairs to floor thirty-one was exhausting. They couldn't imagine having to go all the way to the eighty-fifth floor.

They found hallway NFC and walked past seven-hundred-and-eighty-eight tiny rooms before arriving at the one labeled Fun Dashaus Genin. They opened the door and walked in. Inside was the two-month-old baby laying on a bed staring boredly at the ceiling. Out of her belly-button was a tube which was plugged into the wall behind the bed. A sign read, "Please do not pull plug on departed. Departed will enter next stage of departed."

Genin looked amazed at Flowious and Diptidulla. Ever since Genin died they felt a small hole of grief in their hearts. They felt overwhelmed with joy that this glorious figure was still alive in some form. Genin reached up at Flowious. She grabbed his hand and smiled. The room was grey on every wall and there were no toys or regular visitors. This child would grow up to know a small grey room and possibly not get another visitor before entering the next stage of being departed. Diyi couldn't visit Genin, as that would mean pulling his own plug. She would be sad and most likely alone in this room for the next ten months before entering the dreamless sleep stage of being departed. Diptidulla said, "We can't leave her. Little children need fun and excitement, not to be bed-ridden."

Flowious added, "This building is filled with millions of departed, how can we stand leaving any of them?"

They left and came back to Genin's room with some stuffed animals from a salesman in the atrium.

After getting a smile out of Genin they left for the forewoman. They asked for their grandmother, Monk Stonious, as it was possible she could have died in the last few weeks since they last saw her, which she had. They went to her room on the fiftieth-eighth floor. Their grandmother sighed, "Oh great. It's my two grandchildren."

Flowious said, "I thought you would be happy to see us, all locked up in this tiny room."

"What do you want?" She scoffed. Flowious said, "Just to cheer you up."

"I don't need any cheering up. Now go. The living don't belong in the halls of the departed," she demanded. Stonious had taught Flowious so much. He would have never grown up to be caring for Ahimsa without her and now she was departed. Flowious sat in a chair by her bed and began to cry. She scoffed, "What is it, my little man, my warrior of stone? This isn't a soap opera. You don't see Diptidulla crying."

Flowious bellowed, "You are gone now. I will be here with you for the next eleven months until you pass to the next stage of being departed."

Stonious said, "I am sorry. Your duty is to the living. I asked the building to expedite me leaving here. I am ready to face my dreamless sleep. But you must promise me, you will treat your heart like flesh, blood, and bone and not stone. I want to know you forgive me for leaving sooner than expected."

"I am watching you leave and you won't even try to stay here longer. How can I forgive you for being so hateful to love me, then leave me?" Flowious cried. Stonious said, "I am leaving you early, because I want you to know I am at peace, so you don't have to feel sorry for me. I am at peace with this; I hope you can find peace with it too."

After a few hours Flowious and Diptidulla left for the mess hall in Fort Richmond. They put their helmets back on so other guards wouldn't realize they were new. Soon Flowious felt a tapping on his shoulder. He turned around and saw Sage. Diptidulla turned and saw him too. Flowious asked, "Who, what, where, when, why, and how?"

Sage whispered to them, "I have snuck in to find you. A man at a tavern told me you might be here. They didn't have any tea, it was so disappointing. I also need to visit someone in the Departed Realm."

Diptidulla asked, "How did you sneak in by yourself?"

Sage replied, "One of my many skills. Sometimes to be a ninja you have to travel by shadows."

Flowious and Diptidulla immediately left with Sage so he wouldn't be noticed. They went to the atrium and Sage asked the forewoman, "Sage Sleeping Bag."

Flowious and Diptidulla looked at each other. They went with their master to floor eighty-five, hallway UNO, room one. Inside was a goose feather sleeping bag on the bed with an umbilical cord going to the wall. Confused, Diptidulla asked, "You miss this sleeping bag?"

Sage explained, "I owe my life to this sleeping bag. It was the blizzard of fifty-five. I was on a mission in the Thousand-Mile-Thick Mountain Range and it snowed in subzero temperatures for ten days. At night it was even colder. I would not be here today without this sleeping bag. Now I am unsure if I can survive the next winter."

Diptidulla argued, "It is just a sleeping bag. It can be replaced. It isn't a human being."

Sage then advised, "Flowious, whoever you are staying to see you can live without."

Flowious said, "I am not sure."

Sage said, "It is easy. You aren't a child anymore. You don't need guidance and protection given by others. You are self-reliant enough to know to bring a good sleeping bag when you might face a blizzard. Just take care of yourself and you can survive. You have the power to live

and thrive, so don't be afraid of loved ones dying. Amber is the element of friendship; as a Master of Amber you tend to forget you are all you need, you and you alone."

Flowious said, "You are right. I don't need grandma, I am eighteen. I don't even need Ahimsa, I want her, but I don't need her. I am all I need because I am prepared."

Diptidulla said, "Yes, now let's find Silch Levi in this fort."

They left the Departed Realm and didn't return. They circled the lobby but couldn't find a secret door to where Levi might have been. In the steel wall they did however find where a rivet had fallen out. They put their eyes up to it, but it faced a bookcase and they couldn't see the rest of the room. Flowious said, "Let me handle this."

He took off a piece of the gold armor and angled it near the rivet hole bending the light. He looked at the armor and saw in the reflection the inside of the room. It was warped and gilded, but he saw the older version of the man in the old picture at the Monk mansion. It was Levi. He put his mouth up to the hole and yelled, "Levi."

Soon a face appeared at the hole. He had a few scars on his crooked and solemn face. Flowious said, "I am Flowious and this is Diptidulla. We are Arjuna's and Winnie's offspring."

"Hello, yes, I am Silch Levi. You're their children. I can't believe this." The figure said. He then insisted, "Don't try and free me. Richmond Nacl is a vengeful man."

Diptidulla said, "Mom and Dad miss you dearly. We will go get them and bring them back to you."

"No, you won't." A voice said from behind them. Standing there was a man in a golden suit, with a golden gun in his hand. Flowious, Sage, and Diptidulla raised their hands. Flowious said, "We don't mean you any trouble, and just for the record I am telling you now we can beat you."

The suited man said, "I am Richmond Nacl. I suggest you don't fight me. My Silver Bullet Gun can hit multiple targets at once without even aiming."

Flowious asked, "How is that possible?"

Nacl said, "It is amazing the destination this man's imprisonment can get you. The Charon has bought me money, and money has bought me power. The world has limitless greed, I can turn that greed into power. I have found a source without a source; it isn't the sources stone, it is the silver bullet."

Flowious snarled, "You found a shortcut. Excluding others from the equation."

"Very smart," Nacl complimented. He then ordered, "Don't free the Charon or I will make it my life's purpose to haunt you."

Diptidulla said, "We have to. Our parents miss him."

Flowious argued, "She didn't mean that."

Diptidulla insisted, "Yes I did."

Nacl pulled the trigger. It clipped off both of Diptidulla's earrings. The three dropped their weapons and were led to the dungeon in the fort. There they were changed into prison clothes and put in shackles. Flowious asked, "So, if you are a warlord in the Sea of Sand and you own the only Silver Bullet Gun, what has stopped you from taking over this land?"

Nacl disclosed, "Yangban Herold is to thank for that. That Elemental Master of Metal can't be harmed by a bullet, even a silver one. Once I kill his mother he will come to visit her in the Departed Realm. I will exchange him visiting her for his Elemental Power using my chrono-steel. Everyone craves something. That is how people like me stay in control. We simply ally with others by giving them what they want. It is a win-win."

Sage advised, "You cannot control every figure. You fear those who fear nothing. One day Herold the Warlord will fear nothing."

Nacl nodded no and said, "Everyone fears something."

Flowious then asked, "But why keep us alive?"

Nacl snarled, "I want those who challenge me to die after years of being tortured. You will meet a fate worse than death, but don't get me wrong. Try to escape and I will have you killed."

Nacl left and the three were left with a guard, so they decided not to discuss escape.