

SCALES LIKE DIAMONDS

Katalin Szavai

Two steps into approximately the twenty-thousand-and-first dance of the twin suns – which meant an unusually hot and bright day in Manchester – a crowd gathered on the cobbles in front of the Town Hall. There was purple bunting and the Town Hall's clock face was tinted purple for the occasion. Ghalom got onto the podium and removed his sunglasses to look into the sea of faces.

Thousands of Carcasses stood in silence. They absent-mindedly continued to wave the purple ribbons, as they would at every public speech of their elected leader but, really, they were taken aback by the fact that they could see Ghalom's bare face.

He looked much older than they remembered, and more vulnerable. Maybe presidency had worn him down. His scales still sparkled like diamonds and the tentacles on his head were still gelled up to show youthful energy, but there were wrinkles under all of his eyes.

'A crack in the amphora that holds our precious grain,' thought Bhiwers, the poet, who was stood at the back of the crowd. He liked to observe and capture moments in metaphors and similes and had already likened the jagged spikes of the Town Hall to the back of a horned zilgard, to set the scene. Later on, he would try to put together these impressions in the hope that when Car-

casses read them, they would remember the moment that inspired them, but remember it the way Bhiwers saw it. So far, no Carcass had read Bhiwers' poems, so his theory stood untested.

Bhiwers now saw an old, tired Carcass, who was about to deliver some difficult news after spending two dances of the suns talking about success and strength and striving. Bhiwers felt under his skin, in his core, that there wouldn't be many words beginning with 's' this time, and there would be no alliteration at all.

Ghalom cleared his throat and leaned closer to the microphone. 'I have unearthed a knowledge. It is the same knowledge many presidents have found before me. They decided to keep it quiet. I am not going to keep it quiet, I am going to share it with you.' He paused.

The crowd now stood still, their tentacles hanging by their sides helplessly. The purple ribbons fell onto the dusty cobbles instead of waving in the air.

'The first thing to do when there is trouble is to admit it,' Ghalom declared.

The crowd listened in shocked silence. A baby cried.

'I wanted to give every Carcass a roof above their tentacles, a cool bed to sleep in, a yacht to sail across the Nine Seas during the beautiful fifth step in each dance of the twin suns. I wanted to give every Carcass a pantry full of food.'

The crowd murmured at the thought of the Nine Seas.

'I cannot give this. There are too many of us.' He rested his eyes on the crowd. A mother was hugging her child so tightly it looked like she was shielding it from a magnetic storm out in the wilderness.

Ghalom raised his head and roared, 'But I will not

compromise!’

The crowd took a moment to process the message. After a noticeable pause some cheered and lifted their ribbons again. The ribbon ends were now slightly dusty, but they were flapping in the air just the same. There were fewer ribbons than before because not everyone cheered.

Bhiwers saw the mum cheering but still holding the head of her baby close to her core. ‘His words curl tight around our hearts,’ Bhiwers thought and wrote it down. He also started to make a sketch of her so he could remember her later.

Ghalom was now energetic, his eyes burning with a faraway vision. He waved his tentacles about. He did this every time he tried to paint a magnificent picture. At the moment, only he could see it. But if others managed to comprehend, together, they could make it reality. Most Carcasses didn’t tend to have such visions. They looked to Ghalom for that.

‘I cannot give you roof, I cannot give you food, I cannot give you a yacht, but I will give you something better: I will give you dreams!’ Ghalom roared.

The cheering stopped. There was muttering in the crowd. Ribbons returned to the ground.

The problem was that Carcasses already had dreams. Every night, their minds would recollect recent events and combine these to help them prepare for the future. A typical dream was that a Carcass would leave his keys at home or get soaked by the fountain at Piccadilly Gardens by accidentally walking into it or get on the 192 bus but not have the right change for a ticket. This prepared them to avoid such events the next day.

Every now and then, a Carcass would have an unusual

REVOLUTIONS 2

dream, such as being stuck in a giant bowl of salad. They would find this irritating, as it did not prepare them for any likely events.

When Ghalom promised them dreams they thought that they would much prefer sailing through the Nine Seas on a yacht.

'These are not dreams as you know them,' Ghalom declared. 'They are bigger and better, they are Dreams with a capital D!'

The crowd still did not look impressed.

'And I myself tested them,' Ghalom added.

This caught the Carcasses' curiosity. Ghalom himself tested the Dreams; now, that was fancy.

'Now, that is fancy,' said a Carcass in front of Bhiwers, and he wrote it down in his notebook.

Ghalom caught the mood of the crowd and raised his tentacles higher. 'Instead of getting on my yacht to sail the Nine Seas, like I usually do around this step in the dance of the twin suns, I used a Dream to show me the Nine Seas. The colour of the Nine Seas was even more iridescent than in real life. I felt wonder. I felt ecstasy. And I didn't need to leave home.' Ghalom smiled his famous smile. He had his teeth filed down for extra sharpness, like most of the wealthy. His eyes expressed an alluring hedonism. 'By the time the twin suns begin their ninth step, everyone will have a Dream,' he proclaimed.

He left the podium amid cheers.



Dreams were transmitted through the equipment previously used to transmit information. No one had previously thought to feed Dreams into the devices. But now, sets that used to show news articles and the latest research pulsed with Dreams of the Nine Seas, which, of

SCALES LIKE DIAMONDS

course, proved to be more iridescent than veracity required. Their waves turned over in slow motion and music played too, which it didn't do in reality.

'You can work all day, then go home and sail on the Nine Seas,' remarked a colleague of Bhiwers at the water cooler in his office. 'It really is something.'

Bhiwers nodded. He still hadn't tried the Dreams yet. A lot of Carcasses refused, out of solidarity for the Carcasses who didn't have a roof over their tentacles and also didn't have a device for receiving Dreams. Even in highly-developed Manchester, safely away from the swamp, things weren't always easy and the reason Ghalom was elected was because he said he would do something about the no-roof problem. So, a group of Carcasses tried to keep him to his words, raising awareness and refusing to Dream. They even made friends with Pit-Carcasses and gave them food.

The twin suns neared the end of the eighth step of their dance. The air was cooler, and the magnetic storms reached deeper and deeper into the city. The slithery zilgards burrowed in the ground of the canals, because they knew that the water would evaporate soon. The underground railway and foot passages opened up for traffic and, finally, the seasonal magnetic shields were erected in town so that Carcasses could still walk about in the city centre and get to work and buy groceries without dying. The Pit-Carcasses, with no roof over their tentacles, huddled in the pits they dug all over the city. They had no protection from the cold and the sizzle-rain and they had no Dreams.

Ghalom's closing words in his speech were, 'By the time the twin suns begin their ninth step, everyone will have a Dream!' His progress report was due very soon.



When the time came, the crowd returned to Albert Square.

Ghalom stepped to the podium, his trademark sunglasses masking his eyes. 'Yesterday, I went into the streets in disguise and I spoke to some of you,' he said.

The crowd gasped. 'Did he speak to me?' they thought, with a sad jolt in their core because to have spoken to Ghalom and not known it would be just as sad as to never have spoken with him at all. But Ghalom hadn't realised this. He did not think that speaking to him should be a special memory for a Carcass. That's why he was so likeable. He wasn't even going to wear a disguise, but his advisors explained that common Carcasses were keen to touch anyone who had scales like him. His scales were like diamonds, from the suns and the sailing and the good care he took of his body. He'd had to rub dust on them to make himself look like an average Carcass when he went out in disguise.

'I have also spoken to the desperate Carcasses who dig pits to shelter themselves from the storms. I have offered them a solution that I have tested myself at length.' He took off his sunglasses.

The crowd was now in shock. First, they were told they may have spoken to Ghalom themselves just yesterday, and they were *that* close to touching someone with sparkly scales. Then they were told that even though they probably hadn't spoken to Ghalom, a simple Pit-Carcass had. That made them envious of Pit-Carcasses, which was a confusing feeling. Then they were gifted a glimpse of his eyes again... but the Carcasses stopped short of euphoria. Ghalom's eyes were full of broken veins and a washed-out colour, not at all

SCALES LIKE DIAMONDS

healthy looking.

There was silence.

Ghalom sensed that something wasn't right, so he put his sunglasses back on.

'I have delivered them our Dreams!' he bellowed, and he smiled his mesmerising smile and stepped back from the podium, the awkward moment with his eyes somewhat forgiven.

Bhiwers was trying to commit to memory what Ghalom's eyes looked like. He had seen tired Carcasses before – he had been a tired Carcass before and would become a tired Carcass again – but this was something else. It reminded him of that day when all the slithery zilgards in the canals died and floated up to the top of the water, casting an intricate web of lines over the murky surface. 'I'll never see eyes like that again,' he wrote down, excitedly.

He was completely wrong – eyes like that became very common during the next dance of the twin suns.

In fact, Bhiwers saw a set of eyes exactly like that not long after. It was one of those awkward incidents that rarely happened to an average Carcass, partly because their nightly dreams taught them to avoid it, partly because they were, in general, more focused than Bhiwers.

Bhiwers was not focused at all. There were days when he did nothing but tinker with his similes, not hearing anything around him in the office.

On those days, he'd often be walking home across Piccadilly Gardens and fail to notice a pit dug by a Carcass who had no home and he'd fall into it. The Carcass would be very polite about it and Bhiwers would humbly apologise for disturbing him in his makeshift home and give him some food or currency. The Carcass would say, 'no

trouble and thank you for helping me get by,' and then dust off Bhiwers' coat and help him climb out of the pit.

This time, Bhiwers was thinking of a simile for hunger. He fell in a pit as usual, and was ready to humbly apologise, but the Carcass was lying down, unresponsive. His eyes were open, but they were not looking at Bhiwers. They were not looking anywhere.

And they were like Ghalom's eyes.

Bhiwers saw lots of empty purple packets in the pit. He remembered having seen them in the street, but he had thought they were candy wrappers. He crouched down and picked up a packet with the remains of a purple powder in it and saw that it said 'DREAM'. The Carcass was Dreaming. Dreams were now distributed without devices.

Bhiwers climbed out of the pit and dusted himself off. 'Well, I guess I can try Dreaming now,' he said.

He went home and turned on his set and he sailed across the Nine Seas. He went skiing in the Three Mountains. He sat with other witty Carcasses with sparkly scales, who made jokes that made him roll with laughter. When he tuned out from the Dreams it was time to go to bed and get up early for work. He was amazed by the Dreams, but it also made him feel a little hollow.

He noticed that Carcasses in the office became shinier, their scales brighter. It was probably a new conditioner they all used. The Carcasses in the pit started to look duller. It was probably a result of them not moving about that much anymore.

It was as if Bhiwers was looking to find fault in society. He stopped writing down impressions and started calculating implications, drawing diagrams, trying to detect what was bothering him about the new arrange-

SCALES LIKE DIAMONDS

ment. While Ghalom was painting Dreams with his words, Bhiwers was sketching data into a chart to visualise the impact these Dreams had on the Carcasses' happiness.

The resulting chart looked like two waves on the Nine Seas, just as high and just as angular. It seemed as if everyone's life had been split in two: their non-Dream lives were somewhat shrinking but their Dream-lives had been vastly improved.

The top wave showed the everyday Carcasses. Their Dream-lives were high, scoring around nine out of ten, and their non-Dream lives crawled right in the middle of the axis, neither bad nor good, just nothing.

The bottom wave showed the Pit-Carcasses, the long Dream-life highs interrupted by short non-Dream lows that approached zero. The Pit-Carcasses' Dream-life was improved beyond imagination, but their non-Dream life was killing them.

Across the two waves Bhiwers drew a straight horizon: Ghalom's life.

Ghalom only had a non-Dream life: he sailed the real Nine Seas, but the seas in reality weren't half as iridescent as they were in the Dreams and maybe there were storms when he would be hunched over the side of the boat and throw up for hours. That never happened in Dreams. In Dreams there would be pirates and the Carcass would stand on the deck and fight bravely with a sword.

Bhiwers kept re-drawing the lines until Ghalom's happiness looked like a distant and dark horizon dictating the waves. Eventually, Bhiwers went as far as to add the sub-Carcasses into the diagram. These were Carcasses born with brains too small for them to have a job or

REVOLUTIONS 2

even to talk. These Carcasses were kept in a pen and milked until they reached adult age, and then they were killed and eaten. They were never given Dreams. Their line was trembling and thin, running right near the zero, before tumbling onto the axis and quietly exiting.

Bhiwers was working for a company that distributed sub-Carcass flesh, so for him to draw such negative view of this practice was a large step away from society.

Eventually, Bhiwers was Dreaming when he thought, 'I can Dream better than this,' and so he tried writing a Dream. It was a majestic tragedy, but the other Carcasses thought it was a throwaway comedy and loved it.

It became so successful that it was remade and distributed through the devices and the sachets. The Carcasses laughed so much that everyone walked around with a smile on their face for days. And Bhiwers got an invite to meet Ghalom on his yacht on the Nine Seas.

He went.



The sea wasn't as iridescent as it was in Dreams, but there was fresh air.

'This feels better than any Dream,' Bhiwers thought. He quickly adjusted the diagram in his notebook, drawing the horizon line of Ghalom's happiness above everyone else's.

When he got to sit down next to Ghalom, after he was searched by two guards, Bhiwers looked around and said, 'This is better than any Dream.'

'I don't know,' said Ghalom, reaching for a cold drink. He was wearing tailored swimming trunks and a light shirt, unbuttoned and gently rustled by a mild breeze. Bhiwers couldn't help but look at the beautiful scales running down Ghalom's legs and the perfectly shiny and

SCALES LIKE DIAMONDS

muscular core he had. Not a lot of Carcasses got to see Ghalom like that, so bare yet so strong.

'I tried Dreams and they were pretty good. I still think of the powdered stuff,' Ghalom said, with a look of sadness. 'I think that Dreaming from the sachet may have been the happiest time of my life.'

'The sachet Dreams ruined this for you?' Bhiwers couldn't believe what he was hearing. He got out his happiness diagram to adjust it, crossing out the horizon. Ghalom peered over his shoulder and shook his head. 'I was always lower than that. I'm just not the content type.'

'No one is,' said Bhiwers, disappointed. His diagram was losing its meaning and his reasoning was melting.

He was on a yacht on the Nine Seas and he was not happy. He was sat next to this exceptional Carcass who was also on a yacht on the Nine Seas and also not happy. Somewhere, in a pit in Piccadilly Gardens, there was a Carcass stretched out, lifeless, Dreaming, but not happy. Elsewhere, in the suburbs of the city, there were Carcasses Dream-fighting pirates on the Nine Seas, and they were probably happy. There were Carcasses with too small brains in pens, being milked or impregnated or herded to be slaughtered and sold.

'Maybe we ought to give up on chasing happiness and get busy doing something else,' Bhiwers said.

Ghalom leaned forward, his muscles forming shiny ripples under his shirt. He looked curious and alert. He liked new things.

'Like what?' he asked, all excited.