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Dream Engine

by Tim Pratt



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The Stolen State, The Magpie City, The Nex, The Ax -- this is the place where I live, and hover, and chafe in my service; the place where I take my small bodiless pleasures where I may. Nexington-on-Axis is the proper name, the one the Regent uses in his infrequent public addresses, but most of the residents call it other things, and my -- prisoner? partner? charge? trust? -- my associate, Howlaa Moor, calls it The Cage, at least when zie is feeling sorry for zimsel.

The day the fat man began his killing spree, I woke early, while Howlaa slept on, in a human form that snored. I looked down on the streets of our neighborhood, home to low-level government servants and the wretchedly poor. The sky was bleak, and rain filled the potholes. The royal orphans had snatched a storm from somewhere, which was good, as the district's roof gardens needed rain.

I saw a messenger approach through the cratered street. I didn't recognize his species -- he was bipedal, with a tail, and his skin glistened like a salamander's, though his gait was birdlike -- but I recognized the red plume jutting from his headband, which allowed him to go unmolested through this rough quarter.

"Howlaa," I said. "Wake. A messenger approaches."

Howlaa stirred on the heaped bedding, furs and silks piled indiscriminately with burlap and canvas and even coarser fabrics, because Howlaa's kind enjoy having as much tactile variety as possible. And, I suspect, because Howlaa likes to taunt me with reminders of the physical sensations I can not experience.

"Shushit, Wisp," Howlaa said. My name is not Wisp, but that is what zie calls me, and I have long since given up on changing the habit. "The messenger could be coming for anyone. There are four score civil servants on this block alone. Let me sleep." Howlaa picked up a piece of half-eaten globe-fruit and hurled it at me. It

passed through me without effect, of course, but it annoyed me, which was Howlaa's intent.

"The messenger has a red plume, skinshifter," I said, making my voice resonate, making it creep and rattle in tissues and bones, so sleep or shutting-me-out would be impossible.

"Ah. Blood business, then." Howlaa threw off furs, rose, and stretched, arms growing more joints and bends as zie moved, unfolding like origami in flesh. I could not help a little subvocal gasp of wonder as zir skin rippled and shifted and settled into Howlaa's chosen morning shape. I have no body, and am filled with wonder at Howlaa's mastery of physical form.

Howlaa settled into the form of a male Nagalinda, a biped with long limbs, a broad face with opalescent eyes, and a lipless mouth full of triangular teeth. Nagalinda are fearsome creatures with a reputation for viciousness, though I have found them no more uniformly monstrous than any other species; their cultural penchant for devouring their enemies has earned them a certain amount of notoriety even in the Ax, though. Howlaa liked to take on such forms to terrify government messengers if zie could. Such behavior was insubordinate, but it was such a small rebellion that the Regent didn't even bother to reprimand Howlaa for it -- and having such willfully rude behavior so completely disregarded only served to annoy How laa further.

The Regent knew how to control us, which levers to tug and which leads to jerk, which is why he was the Regent, and we were in his employ. I often think the Regent controls the city as skillfully as Howlaa controls zir own form, and it is a pretty analogy, for the Ax is almost as mutable as How laa's body.

The buzzer buzzed. "Why don't you get that?" Howlaa said, grinning. "Oh, yes, right, no hands, makes opening the door tricky. I'll get it, then."

Howlaa opened the door to the messenger, who didn't find the Nagalinda form especially terrifying. The messenger was too frightened of the fat man and the Regent to spare any fear for Howlaa.

#

I floated. Howlaa ambled. The messenger hurried ahead, hurried back, hurried ahead again, like an anxious pet. Howlaa could not be rushed, and I went at the pace Howlaa chose, of necessity, but I sympathized with the messenger's discomfort. Being bound so closely to the Regent's will made even tardiness cause for bone-deep anxiety.

"He's a fat human, with no shirt on, carrying a giant battle-axe, and he chopped up a brace of Beetleboys armed with dung-muskets?" Howlaa's voice was blandly curious, but I knew zie was incredulous, just as I was.

"So the messenger reports," I said.

"And then he disappeared, in full view of everyone in Moth Moon Market?"

"Why do you repeat things?" I asked.

"I just wondered if it would sound more plausible coming from my own mouth. But even my vast reserves of personal conviction fail to lend the story weight. Perhaps the Regent made it all up, and plans to execute me when I arrive." Howlaa sounded almost hopeful. "Would you tell me, little Wisp, if that were his plan?"

Howlaa imagines I have a closer relationship with the Regent than I do, and has always believed I willingly became a civil servant. Howlaa does not know I am bound to community service for my past crimes, just as Howlaa is, and I allow this misconception because it allows me to act superior and, on occasion, even condescend, which is one of the small pleasures available to we bodiless ones. "I think you are still too valuable and tractable for the Regent to kill," I said.

"Perhaps. But I find the whole tale rather unlikely."

Howlaa walked along with zir mouth open, letting the rain fall into zir mouth, tasting the weather of other worlds, looking at the clouds.

I looked everywhere at once, because it is my duty and burden to look, and record, and, when called upon, to bear witness. I never sleep, but every day I go into a small dark closet and look at the darkness for hours, to escape my own senses. So I saw everything in the streets we passed, for the thousandth time, and though details were changed, the essential nature of the neighborhood was the same. The buildings were mostly brute and functional, structures stolen from dockyards, ghettos, and public housing projects, taken from the worst parts of the thousand thousand worlds that grind around and above Nexington-on-Axis in the complicated gearwork that supports the structure of all the universes. We live in the pivot, and all times and places turns past us eventually, and we residents of the Ax grab what we can from those worlds in the moment of their passing -- and so our city grows, and our traders trade, and our government prospers. It is kleptocracy on a grand scale.

But sometimes we grasp too hastily, and the great snatch-engines tended by the Regent's brood of royal orphans become overzealous in their cross-dimensional thieving, and we take things we didn't want after all, things the other worlds must be glad to have lost. Unfortunate imports of that sort can be a problem, because they sometimes disrupt the profitable chaos of the city, which the Regent cannot allow. Solving such problems is Howlaa's job.

We passed out of our neighborhood into a more flamboyant one, filled with emptied crypts, tombs, and other oddments of necropoli, from chipped marble angels to fragments of ornamental wrought iron. To counteract this funereal air, the residents had decorated their few square blocks as brightly and ostentatiously as possible, so that great papier-mâché birds clung to railings, and tombs were painted yellow and red and blue. In the central plaza, where the pavement was made of ancient headstones laid flat, a midday market was well underway. The pale vendors sold the usual trinkets, obtained with privately-owned low-yield snatch-engines, along with the district's sole specialty, the exotic mushrooms grown in cadaver-earth deep in the underground catacombs. Citizens shied away from the red-plumed messenger, bearer of bloody news, and shied further away at the sight of Howlaa, because Nagalinda seldom strayed from their own part of the city, except on errands of menace.

As we neared the edge of the plaza there was a great crack and whoosh, and a wind whipped through the square, eddying the weakly-linked charged particles that made up my barely-physical form.

A naked man appeared in the center of the square. He did not rise from a hidden trapdoor, did not drop from a passing airship, did not slip in from an adjoining alley. Anyone else might have thought he'd arrived by such an avenue, but I see in all directions, to the limits of vision, and the man was simply there.

Such magics were not unheard of, but they were never associated with someone like this. He appeared human, about six-feet tall, bare-chested and obese, pale skin smeared with blood. He was bald, and his features were brutish, almost like a child's clay figure of a man.

He held an absurd sword in his right hand, the blade as long as he was tall, but curved like a scimitar in a theatrical production about air-pirates, and it appeared to be made of gold, an impractical metal for weaponry. When he smiled, his lips peeled back to show an amazing array of yellow stump-teeth. He reared back his right arm and swung the sword, striking a merrow-woman swaddled all over in wet towels, nearly severing her arm. The square plunged into chaos, with vendors, customers, and passers-by screaming and fleeing in all directions, while the fat man kept swinging his sword, moving no more than a step or two in any direction, chopping people down as they ran.

"The reports were accurate after all," Howlaa said. "I'll go sort this." The messenger stood behind us, whimpering, tugging at Howlaa's arm, trying to get him to leave.

"No," I said. "We were ordered to report to the Regent, and that's what we'll do."

Howlaa spoke with exaggerated patience. "The Regent will only tell me to find and kill this man. Why not spare myself the walk, and kill him now? Or do you think the Regent would prefer that I let him kill more of the city's residents?"

We both knew the Regent was uninterested in the well-being of individual citizens -- more residents were just a snatch-and-grab away, after all -- but I could tell Howlaa would not be swayed. I considered invoking my sole real power over Howlaa, but I was under orders to take that extreme step only in the event that Howlaa tried to escape the Ax or harm one of the royal orphans. "I do not condone this," I said.

"I don't care." Howlaa strode into the still-flurrying mass of people. In a few moments she was within range of the fat man's swinging sword. Howlaa ducked under the man's wild swings, and reached up with a long arm to grab the man's wrist. By now most of the people able to escape the square had done so, and I had a clear view of the action.

The fat man looked down at Howlaa as if she were a minor annoyance, then shook his arm as if to displace a biting fly.

Howlaa flew through the air and struck a red-and-white striped crypt headfirst, landing in a heap.

The fat man caught sight of the messenger -- who was now rather pointlessly trying to cower behind me -- and sauntered over. The fat man was extraordinarily bow-legged, his chest hair was gray, and his genitals were entirely hidden under the generous flop of his belly-rolls.

As always in these situations, I wondered what it would be like to fear for my physical existence, and regretted that I would never know.

Behind the fat man, Howlaa rose, rippled, and transformed, taking on her most fearsome shape, a creature I had never otherwise encountered, that Howlaa called a Rendigo. It was reptilian, armored in sharpened bony plates, with a long snout reminiscent of the were-crocodiles that lived in the sewer labyrinths below the Regent's palace. The Rendigo's four arms were useless for anything but killing, paws gauntleted in razor scales, with claws that dripped blinding toxins, and its four legs were capable of great speed and leaps. Howlaa seldom resorted to this form, because it came with a heavy freight of biochemical killing rage that could be hard to shake off afterward. Howlaa leapt at the fat man, landing on his back with unimaginable force, poison-wet claws flashing.

The fat man swiveled at the waist and flung Howlaa off his back, not even breaking stride, raising his sword over the messenger. The fat man was uninjured; all the blood and nastiness that streaked his body came from his victims. His sword passed through me and cleaved the messenger nearly in two.

The fat man smiled, looking at his work, then frowned, and blinked. His body flickered, becoming transparent in places, and he moaned before disappearing.

Howlaa, back in Nagalinda form, crouched and vomited out a sizzling stream of Rendigo venom and biochemical rage-agents.

Howlaa wiped her mouth, then stood up, glancing at the dead messenger. "Let's try it your way, Wisp. On to the Regent's palace. Perhaps he has an idea for... another approach to the problem."

I thought about saying "I told you so." I couldn't think of any reason to refrain. "I told you so," I said.

"Shushit," Howlaa said, preoccupied, thinking, doing what she did best, assessing complex problems and trying to figure out the easiest way to kill the source of those problems, so I let her be, and didn't taunt further.

#

Before we entered the Palace, Howlaa took on one of her common working shapes, that of a human woman with a trim assassin-athlete's body, short dark hair, and deceptively innocent-looking brown eyes. The Regent -- who had begun his life as human, though long contact with the royal orphans had wrought certain changes in him physiologically and otherwise -- found this form attractive, as I had often sensed from fluctuations in his body heat. I'd made the mistake of sharing that information with Howlaa once, and now Howlaa wore this shape every time we met with the Regent, in hopes of discomforting him. I thought it was a wasted effort, as the Regent simply looked, and enjoyed, and was untroubled by Howlaa's unavailability.

We went up the cloudy white stone steps of the palace, which had been a great king's residence in some world far away, and was unlike any other architecture in Nexington-on-Axis. Some said the palace was alive, a growing thing, which seemed borne out by the ever-shifting arrangement of minarets and spires, the way the hallways meandered organically, and walls that appeared and disappeared.

Others said it was not alive but simply magical. I had been reliably informed that the palace, unable to grow out because of the press of other government buildings on all sides, was growing down, adding a new sub-basement every five years or so. No one knew where the excavated dirt went, or where the building materials came from -- no one, that is, except possibly the royal orphans, who were not likely to share the knowledge with anyone.

Two armored Nagalinda guards escorted us into the palace. That was a better reason for Howlaa to change shape -- Nagalinda didn't like seeing skinshifters wearing their forms, because it meant that at some point the skinshifter had ingested some portion of a Nagalinda's body, and while their species enjoyed eating their enemies, they didn't tolerate being eaten by others.

We were escorted, not to the audience room, but into one of the sub-basements. We were working members of the government, and received no pomp or ceremony. As we walked, the Nagalinda guards muttered to one another, complaining of bad dreams that had kept them up all night. I hadn't even realized that Nagalinda could dream.

We reached the underground heart of the palace, where the Regent stood at a railing looking down into the great pit that held the royal snatch-engines. He was tall, dressed in simple linen, white-haired, old but not elderly. We joined him, waiting to be spoken to, and as always I was staggered at the scale of the machinery that brought new buildings and land and large flora and fauna to the Ax.

The snatch-engines were towering coils of copper and silver and gleaming adamant, baroque machines that wheezed and rumbled and squealed, with huge gears turning, stacks venting steam, and catwalks criss-crossing down to the unseen bottom of the engine-shaft. The royal orphans scuttled along the catwalks and on the machinery itself, their bodies feathered and insect-like, scaled and horned, multi-legged, some winged, all of them chittering and squeaking to one another, making subtle and gross refinements to the engines their long-dead parents, the Queen and Kings of Nexington-on-Axis, had built so many centuries ago. The orphans all had the inherent ability to steal things from passing worlds, but the engines augmented their powers by many orders of magnitude. The Queen and Kings had been able to communicate with other species, it was said, though they'd seldom bothered to do so; their orphans, each unlike its siblings except for the bizarre chimera-like make-up of their bodies, communicated with no one except the Regent.

"I understand you attempted to stop the killer on your way here," the Regent said, turning to face us. While his eyes were alert, his bearing was less upright than usual. He looked tired. "That was profoundly stupid."

"I've never encountered anything my Rendigo form couldn't kill," Howlaa said.

"I don't think that's a true statement anymore. You should have come to me first. I have something that might help you." The Regent stifled a yawn, then snapped his fingers. One of the royal orphans -- a trundling thing with translucent skin through which deep blue organs could be seen -- scrambled up to the railing, carrying a smoked-glass vial in one tiny hand. The Regent bowed formally, took the vial, and shooed the orphan away. "This is the blood of a questing beast. You may drink it."

"A questing beast!" I said. "How did you ever capture one?"

"We have our secrets," the Regent said.

Howlaa snorted. "Even questing beasts die sometime, Wisp. The snatch-engines probably grabbed the corpse of one." Howlaa was pretending to be unimpressed, but I saw zir hands shake as they took the vial.

Questing beasts were near-legendary apex predators, the only creatures able to hunt extra-dimensional creatures. They could pursue prey across dimensions, grasping their victims with tendrils of math and magic, and chasing them forever, even across branching worlds.

"Wherever the killer disappears to, you'll be able to follow him, once you shift into the skin of a questing beast," the Regent said.

"Yes, I've grasped the implications," Howlaa said.

"Then you've also grasped the possible avenues of escape this skin will provide you," the Regent said. "But if you think of leaving this world for frivolous reasons, or of not returning when your mission is complete, there will be... consequences."

"I know," Howlaa said, squeezing the vial. "That's what my little Wisp is for."

"I will be vigilant, Regent," I said.

"Oh, indeed, I'm sure," the Regent said. "Away, then. Go into the city. The killer seems to favor marketplaces and restaurants, places with a high concentration of victims -- he has appeared in five such locations since yesterday. Take this." He passed Howlaa a misshapen sapphire, cloudy and cracked, dangling on a thin metal chain. "If any civil servant sees the killer, they will notify you through this, and, once you drink the blood of the questing beast, you will be able to 'port yourself to the location instantly."

Howlaa nodded. I would go wherever Howlaa did, for my particulate substance was inextricably entangled with zir gross anatomy. Howlaa uncapped the vial and drank the blood. Zir body, through the arcane processes of the skinshifter race, sequenced the genetic information of the questing beast, the macro-in-the-micro implicit in the blood, and incorporated the properties of the beast. Howlaa shivered, closed zir eyes, swallowed, and whined deep in zir throat. Then, with a little sigh of pleasure, Howlaa opened zir eyes and said, voice only slightly trembling, "Let's go, Wisp. On with the hunt."

#

The killer did not reappear that day. Howlaa and I went to the Western Outskirts, one of the few safe open spaces in the Ax, so zie could practice being the questing beast. It's dangerous to loiter in empty lots in the city proper, because the royal snatch-engines are configured to look for buildings that can fill available gaps. Thus, a space that is at one moment a weed-filled lot can in another instant be occupied by an apartment building full of bewildered humans, or a plaster-hive of angrily jostled buzz-men, or stranger things -- and anyone who happened to be standing in the empty lot when the building appeared would be flattened. But the Western Outskirts are set aside for outdoor recreations, acre upon acre of playing fields, ramshackle wooden sky-diving platforms, lakes of various liquids for swimming or bathing or dueling, obstacle courses, consensual-cannibalism hunting grounds, and similar public spaces. Howlaa chose an empty field marked off with white lines for some unknown game, and transformed into the questing beast.

As one of the bodiless, dedicated to observation, it shames me to admit I could make little sense of Howlaa's new form; too much of zir body occupied non-visible dimensions. I saw limbs, golden fur, the impression of claws, something flickering that might have been a tail pendulum-swinging in and out of phase, but nothing my vision could settle on or hold. Looking at Howlaa in this form agitated me. If I had a stomach, I might have found it nauseating.

Howlaa flickered back to female human form and spent some minutes curled on the ground, moaning. "Coming back to this body is a bit of a shock," zie said after a while. "But I think I get the general idea. I can go anywhere just by finding the right trail of scent."

"But you won't go anywhere. You won't try to escape."

Howlaa threw a clod of dirt at me. "Correct, Wisp, I won't. But not because you'd try to stop me -- "

"I would stop you."

-- only because I don't like being tossed aside in a fight. I'm going to follow this fat bastard, and I'm going to chew on him. You can't lose a questing beast once it gets its claws in you."

"So... now we wait."

"Now you wait. I'm going to drink. One of the advantages of wearing a human skin is that something as cheap and plentiful as alcohol provides such a fine buzz."

"Is this the best time to become intoxicated?" We bodiless have a reputation for being prudish and judgmental, which is not unwarranted. I can never get drunk, can never pleasantly impair my own faculties, and I am resentful of (and confused by) those bodied creatures that can.

"Which time? This time, when I might be killed by a fat man with a golden sword tomorrow? Yes, I'd say that's the best time for intoxication."

#

The next morning, we went to a den of vile iniquity near the palace. While Howlaa drank, I observed, and listened. I learned that a plague of nightmares was troubling the city center, and many of the bar's patrons had gone to stay with relatives in more far-flung districts in order to get some sleep. At least Howlaa and I wouldn't be called upon to deal with that crisis -- bad dreams were rather too metaphysical a problem for Howlaa's methods to solve.

After a morning of Howlaa's hard drinking, the sing-charm the Regent had given us began to sound. Howlaa was underneath a table, talking to zimsel, and seemed oblivious to the gem's keening, though everyone else in the bar heard, and went silent.

"Howlaa," I said, rumbling my voice in zir bones. Howlaa scowled, then skinshifted into a Nagalinda form, becoming instantly sober. Nagalinda process alcohol as easily as humans process water.

"Off we go," Howlaa said, and rushed into the street, transforming into the questing beast once zie was far enough away to avoid inadvertently snagging any of the bar patrons with extra-dimensional tendrils.

We traveled, the city folding and flickering around us, buildings bleeding light, darkness pressing in from odd angles until I was hopelessly disoriented. Seconds later we were in the middle of the Landlock Sea, on a floating wooden platform so large it barely seemed to move. The sea-market nearby was in chaos, fishermen and hunters of various species -- Manipogos, Hydrans, Mhorags, others -- running wildly for boats and bridges or diving into the water to get away from the fat man, who was now armed with a golden trident. He speared people, laughing, and Howlaa went for him and grappled, flashing tendrils wrapping around the fat man's bulk, barely-seen limbs knocking aside his weapon. The fat man stumbled, staggered, and fell to his knees. Howlaa's ferocious lashings didn't penetrate the man's impossibly durable flesh, but at least he'd been prevented from further acts of murder.

Then the man vanished, and Howlaa with him, and I was pulled along in their wake, on my way to wherever the fat man went when he wasn't killing residents of the Ax for sport.

#

For a moment, I looked down on the Ax, which spun as sedately as a gear in a great machine, and other universes flashed past, their edges blue- and red-shifting as they went by at tremendous speeds, briefly touching the Ax, sparks flying at the contact, the royal snatch-engines making their cross-dimensional depredations. Then we plummeted into an oncoming blur of blue-green-white, and after a period of blackness, I found myself in another world.

#

"Wisp," Howlaa hissed as I came back into focus. I had never been unconscious before -- even my "sleep" is just a blessed respite from sensory input, not a loss of consciousness -- and I did not like the sensation. Our passage from the Ax to this other plane had agitated my particles so severely that I'd lost cohesion, and, thus, awareness.

Now that my faculties were in control of me again, I saw a star-flecked night sky above, and Howlaa in human-female form, crouching by bushes beside a brick wall. I did not see the fat man anywhere.

"What -- " I began.

"Quiet," Howlaa whispered, looking around nervously. I looked, but saw nothing to worry about. Grass, flowerbeds, and beside us a single-story brick house of a sort sometimes seen in the blander sections of the Middling Residential District. "The fat man got away," Howlaa said. "Only he actually melted away, or misted away, or... My tentacles didn't slip. He didn't slip through them. He just disappeared. Nothing can escape a questing beast."

"Perhaps the legends exaggerate the beast's powers," I said.

"Perhaps you'd best shushit and listen, Wisp. There's an open window just over there, and I can almost hear..."

I did not have to settle for almost. I floated above the bushes a few feet to the window, which opened onto a bedroom occupied by two humans, neither of them the fat man. The man and woman were both in bed, illuminated by a single bedside lamp. The man, who was pigeon-chested and had thinning hair, gestured excitedly, and the woman, an exhausted-looking blonde, lay propped on one elbow, looking at him through half-closed eyelids.

I listened, and because Howlaa is (I grudgingly admit) better at data analysis than I am, I let zir listen, too, by extending a portion of my attenuated substance down toward zim, a probing presence that Howlaa sensed and accepted. My vision blurred, and sounds took on strange echoes, but then I found my focus and stopped picking up residuals of Howlaa's sensory input -- but zie would see and hear everything as clearly as I did.

"It's amazing," the man was saying. "They get more real all the time. I know you think it's stupid, but lucid dreaming is amazing, I'm so glad I took that seminar. It's like living a whole other life while I'm asleep!"

"What did you do this time?" She leaned back and closed her eyes.

The man hesitated. "I was in a sort of fish-market. There were fish-people, mermaids, selkies, things like that, and ordinary people, too, all buying and selling things. There was a lake, or an inland sea, and we were all on a wooden platform floating on the water..."

"You get seasick just stepping over a puddle," she said.

He looked at her, mouth a tense line, eyes narrowed, and I think if she had seen his expression she would have leapt from the bed in fear for her life. Unless long association with this man had dulled her awareness to the dark currents in him I saw so clearly.

"My dream body doesn't get sick," he said. "It's part of my positive visualization technique. My dream body is impervious to harm."

"And I bet you look like a movie star, too."

Another hesitation, this one accompanied by a troubled frown. "Something like that."

I wondered what his dream self really looked like -- his father? An old enemy? A figure from a childhood nightmare that he could not escape, but was eventually able to embody?

He continued. "The only problem is, I can't seem to control where I go. The teacher at the seminar said that was the best part, being able to go to the mountains or the beach or outer space as easily as thinking it. But I just find myself in this city full of strange people and creatures, and..."

"Do you sleep with any of those strange people?" she asked.

"No. It's not like that."

"What good's having control of your dreams if you can't wish yourself into an erotic dream? Seems like that would be the best part."

"I want to go back to sleep," he said. "I want to try again."

"You don't have to ask my permission. I was sleeping fine until you sat up and started yelling. Doesn't sound like lucid dreaming is doing you much good -- you're still having nightmares."

"The nightmares are different now," he said. "I'm in control." But she just turned over and pulled the sheet up to her neck.

"He's the fat man," Howlaa said, speaking silently into me, able to share thoughts as easily as we shared senses. "He goes to the Ax in his dreams, and he kills us for pleasure. That's why the questing beast couldn't hold the killer, why he melted away, because he has no substance beyond the borders of the Ax."

"Madness," I said, though Howlaa's intuitive leaps had proven right more often than my resultant skepticism.

"No, I think I've figured it. The Regent has consulted with many oneiromancers, lucid dreamers, and archetype-hunters over the years -- I know, because I was sent to kidnap and press-gang many of them into civil service. I never knew why he wanted them before. I think that, with the Regent's help, the royal orphans have constructed a machine to steal dreams. A dream engine, that grabs mental figments and makes them real. But they locked on to this mad man's dream, and now his dream-self will keep coming, and killing, until this world spirals too far from the Ax for the engine to reach, which could take years."

"A dream engine," I repeated. "The activity of such a machine might explain the plague of nightmares in the city center."

"I doubt the Regent would worry overmuch about properly shielding any strange radiations," Howlaa said. "This is a new low for him. It's not enough that he grows rich through the orphan's thefts -- now he wants to pillage our dreams, too."

The man lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. Despite his words, he did not seem eager to sleep again. If Howlaa was right, the man had just been chased out of his fantasy of infinite strength by the monstrous questing-beast, which would be enough to give any dreamer pause.

"If you're right, we have to kill him," I said.

"Or not," Howlaa said.

Howlaa severed our connection, swirling my motes, and so it took me a moment to realize she was transforming into the questing beast again -- and I knew why. To jump away from this world, to another plane, adjacent to this one but not necessarily adjacent to the Ax. A few dimensional leaps, a little time, and Howlaa would be far beyond the Ax's influence, beyond the grasp of even the greatest snatch-engines.

But I still had a chance, this brief moment between transformations, to strike, and I did. I performed the one act that Howlaa could not resist, the power I was given permission to use only in circumstances as extreme as these.

I took possession of Howlaa's body.

#

Howlaa fought, and I batted zir efforts aside, then simply reveled in having a body, especially a body as sensitive as the questing beast's, seeing into higher dimensions, seeing colors that only exist between worlds. I wanted to fly through suns, roll across jagged stones, immerse myself in lava, feel feel feel this forever.

Howlaa was laughing at me, a tinny internal sound. "Shushit," I said, not speaking aloud. I didn't even know if this body had vocal cords. "You didn't escape. You failed. We're going to kill this man, and then return to the Ax."

"Go on then," Howlaa said. "Best of luck."

I attempted to take a step forward, and everything blurred. My head rang with odd chimes, and bizarre scents assailed me. I had never been in a body so sensitive to smell -- each scent was like a line attached to me, tugging me in one direction or another. I paused, and the chaos of sensory input lessened. I took another step toward the dream-killer's window, and this time a whole new set of sensations struck me, making me fall to the ground.

"This form will not do," I said.

"Why not? Because you have no finesse, Wisp? Because you can control gross motor functions, but the intricacies are lost to you? In the questing beast's form, even the most trivial movement is intricate. Then why not take another form, a simpler one?"

I felt rage -- glandular rage, pumping up from somewhere in this body, a biological response to a mental state. I never get used to that, the feedback loop of mind and body that the corporeal undergo constantly, and I tried to dismiss its effects. I couldn't shift into another form. That was far too intricate a task for my understanding of how to control a body. If Howlaa had been in a human form, I could have broken into the man's house, stabbed him with a knife, and walked out again -- such simple physical manipulation was within my powers. But as the questing beast...

"We have reached an impasse," I said.

"And what do you propose?"

"Kill this man," I said. "And I will not report your attempt to escape."

Howlaa laughed. "Oh, please, don't report me. What will they do? Sentence me to another lifetime of servitude?"

"Just kill him! That's why we came."

"I came to kill an invulnerable fat man with the golden weapons, Wisp, not a mentally disturbed human in his bed."

"They are the same!"

"They are not the same. This man is mad, but he is not the killer -- he simply dreams of killing."

"But... his dreams are evil..."

"You would hold us responsible for our dreams now? If so, I am a regicide a thousand times over, for in my dreams, I rip the Regent and his orphans to wet bits every night. The Regent is the guilty party in this -- he has made a machine that steals dreams, and he brought the killer to our city."

"What do you recommend?"

"Fixing this problem at the source. Which is what I was trying to do when you so rudely possessed me."

"You were trying to escape," I said.

"No, Wisp, I was trying to return to Nexington-on-Axis. Sorry I didn't consult you -- my understanding was that you're an observer, here to lend me support."

"I am here to make sure you serve your duty," I replied, wondering if zie was telling the truth.

"I will. But my duty is not to the Regent. I serve the welfare of Nexington-on-Axis. Come, Wisp, and I'll show you I do have a sense of responsibility. Such a strong one, in fact, that I won't kill an innocent madman for the Regent's crimes."

I gave up control of Howlaa's body, and with more shifting, we returned to the Ax.

#

We appeared in the Regent's private chambers, which should have been impossible, as there were safeguards against teleportation there. The Regent sat in a wingback chair, holding a ledger in his lap, and he raised his eyebrows when we appeared.

Howlaa shifted to female human form, only swaying a bit on zir feet in the aftermath of being the beast. "Huh," zie said. "I wondered if that would work. It's said nothing can stop a questing beast from coming and going as it pleases."

"Mmm," the Regent said. "I trust you solved our problem, and disposed of the fat man? I'll see you get something extra in your next pay allotment. Now, go away. I'm busy." He looked back down at his ledger.

Howlaa cleared zir throat. "Regent. I require your assistance in the fulfillment of my duties."

The Regent looked up. "You didn't kill the fat man?"

"My investigation is ongoing. I need to see the new snatch-engine, the one that steals dreams, and I may have some questions regarding its operation."

The Regent set his ledger aside and stared at Howlaa for a long moment. "Well," he said. "You are not famed for your powers of deduction, Howlaa Moor, but for your powers of destruction. I had not expected you to make inquiries, and I did not ask you to. You are dismissed from this case. I will assign someone else to deal with the fat man."

"Respectfully, sir, you may not interfere with any legitimate inquiries I care to make in an ongoing investigation. My contract prohibits such interference. Again, please have me escorted to the new snatch-engine, and provide someone knowledgeable to answer any questions I might have. Or do you believe this line of inquiry is without cause? If so, I would be happy to bring my evidence before the magisters." Howlaa smiled.

I was in awe at zir audacity. To confront the Regent this way! And zie had no evidence, just intuition and inference. If the Regent called the bluff... But no. He didn't want any evidence Howlaa might possess brought before the magisters and, indirectly, the citizens of the Ax.

"I am the Regent, Moor. You take orders from me."

"Indeed. But my contract states that I serve the city, and not the ruler. You may not lawfully inhibit me. Break my contract, if you like, and I'll not trouble you again. Otherwise, you are obliged to cooperate."

"I could have you executed for treason."

Howlaa bowed. "You are welcome to try, sir." Skinshifters could be executed, but it was difficult, since a long-lived member of the species would have forms resistant to most obvious methods of execution. "But if you choose not to execute me or break my contract, then I must ask, for the third time, that you take me to the dream engine and provide --"

"Yes," the Regent snapped. "Fine."

I was astonished. Howlaa's bluff had succeeded. Zie was too valuable for the Regent to dismiss from duty or kill, and his own laws prevented any other action.

The Regent couldn't simply disregard these laws, for they were the source of his power. Without his laws, there would be no city of Nexington-on-Axis, just a giant junkheap full of things snatched at random by the orphans, indiscriminate slaves to their magpie impulses. "But I am about to show you a state secret."

"That's fine," Howlaa said. "My contract gives me any necessary clearances to fulfill my duties --"

"I know what your contract says, Moor. I wrote it myself, so you would be forced to serve the city in perpetuity, even in the event of my death. Now shut up about it. I'm taking you where you want to go. If you speak a word about this device to anyone, you will be executed for treason. We have methods designed for your kind. There's a special chamber in one of the basements for disposing of skinshifters."

"I serve the state," Howlaa said. "I will not betray it."

I wondered what kind of execution chamber the Regent had that could hold a questing beast, since the safeguards on his private chambers had been insufficient to keep the beast out. I didn't think the Regent realized what kind of power he was giving Howlaa by letting him drink the questing beast's blood.

We set off down the shifting opalescent corridors of the palace, and the walls groaned around us as they moved.

"You think the killer is a dream-being, snatched here by the experimental engine," the Regent said as we walked.

"I'll submit my report when my investigation is complete," Howlaa said. "Along with my recommendations for how to rectify the problem."

The Regent scowled, but kept walking. Finally we reached a door of black iron. The stone around it was discolored and cracked -- the substance of the palace apparently had an allergy to iron, but the heavy metal had certain shielding properties that made its use necessary on occasion. The Regent knocked, a complex rhythm, his unbreakable adamant signet ring clanging against the metal with each rap.

The door swung open silently, and the Regent ushered us into the dimly-lit place beyond.

"This is the dream engine," the Regent said. "Not what you expected, I wager."

"No," Howlaa murmured. "It's not."

Unlike the snatch-engines, there were no gears here, no oiled pistons, no sparking ladders of electricity, no bell-shaped domes of glass, no miles of copper pipes for coolant. There was only a throbbing organic mass in a web of wires, a red-and-green slick thing with no visible eyes or limbs, though it did have vestigial wings, prismatic like a dragonfly's, which drooped to the floor. A royal orphan, pinned in a web of wires.

Howlaa crossed his arms. "So it's psychic, then."

The Regent smiled. "In a way. It sees dreams. More importantly, it covets dreams. And what the royal orphans covet, they get. Much of the process of governing Nexington-on-Axis is making sure the orphans want things the city needs. They don't care what happens to the things they snatch. They simply live for the process of snatching. This one is no different, except for the sorts of thing it snatches."

"You haven't been successful making this one want things the city needs, since it pulled a madman's murderous dream to this world."

"You're certain of that?" the Regent said.

Howlaa just nodded, and the Regent sighed. "I'll have to spend some time tuning the process. It's still experimental. I trust you found and killed the dreamer, to prevent another incident?"

"I did not," Howlaa said. "If I had known for certain about the existence of this dream engine, I would have tried, but I only had suspicions. When I grabbed the fat man, I was carried to another world, surrounded by houses filled with sleeping humans, with no sign of the fat man anywhere. That's when I began to suspect that I'd grabbed a dream-figment -- I remembered your studies with various experts on dreaming, Platonic ideals, the collective unconscious, things of that nature."

"You have quite a memory," the Regent said.

"I drank the blood of an elephant once," Howlaa said, and I almost laughed. "Since I wasn't sure the killer was a dream-thing, I came back here to inquire further."

"We should talk in the hall," the Regent said abruptly. "Vibrations disturb the engine." Indeed, the vestigial wings were flickering, weakly, and we left the room. Once in the hall, the Regent said "How do you intend to proceed?"

"When the killer appears again, I'll grab him, and when he sweeps me back to the human world with him again... well, I think it's safe to assume that the dangerous dreamer will be somewhere in the general vicinity of the place where I land. I'll simply kill everyone within a mile or so. It will take time, but I have some forms that are suited to the task."

I was stunned. I knew Howlaa was lying. We knew very well who the dreamer was, and Howlaa had shown no inclination to kill him. So what was he planning?

"Very good," the Regent said. "But if you mention a word about the contents of that room, I'll have you flayed into your component atoms. Understood?"

"The authorities appreciate your cooperation," Howlaa said. The Regent sniffed and walked away.

"Come, Wisp. Back to our eternal vigilance."

"Back to the bar, you mean."

"Just so." Howlaa grimaced, touching zir stomach. "Shit. I've got a pain in my gut."

"Are you all right?"

"Probably something I ate in another form, that doesn't agree with this one. I'll be all right." Howlaa shivered, stretched, and became the questing beast. We traveled.

#

I tried to get some sense out of Howlaa at the bar, before zie drank too many red bulldozers, primal screams, and gravity wells to maintain a coherent conversation. I slipped a tendril into zir mind and said "What is your plan?"

"Assume what I told the Regent is true," Howlaa said, smiling at the human bartender, who looked appreciatively at Howlaa's human breasts as she mixed drinks. "If things work out, it won't matter, but if things go badly, you'll need all the plausible deniability you can get. No reason for you to go down with me if I fail. This way you can honestly claim ignorance of my plans."

"You want to protect me from getting in trouble with the Regent?" I said, almost touched.

Zie laughed aloud and gulped a fizzing reddish concoction. "No, Wisp. But on the off chance that they imprison me instead of putting me to death, I don't want to be stuck in a cell with you forever."

After that, zie wouldn't talk to me at all, but had fun as only Howlaa on the eve of potential death can.

Zie vomited more often than usual, though.

#

A day passed, and Howlaa was sober and bored at home, playing five-deck solitaire while I made desultory suggestions, before the fat man reappeared. The singing gem keened at mid-day. Howlaa cocked zir head, taking information from the gem.

Zie became the questing beast, and we were away.

This time we landed in the city center. The fat man sat on the obsidian steps of the Courthouse of Lesser Infractions, face turned up to the sun, smiling up at the light. He held a golden scythe across his knees, and blood and bodies lay strewn all over the steps around him, many wearing the star-patterned robes of magisters.

Howlaa did not hesitate, but traveled again, this time appearing directly in front of the fat man and lashing out with barely-visible hooked appendages to grasp the killer. Then Howlaa traveled again. We reappeared in the racing precinct, startling the spectators and scattering the thoroughbred chimeras. The fat man struggled in the hoof-churned mud, his weapon gone.

I had barely overcome my disorientation before Howlaa traveled again. I knew it was Howlaa controlling the movement, for the sensation was quite different from the swirling transcendence that came when the fat man dragged us to that other world. This time we appeared in another populated area, the vaulted gray halls of the Chapel of Blessed Increase in the monastic quarter. We flickered again, Howlaa and the fat man still locked in struggle, and flashed briefly through another dozen places around the city, all filled with startled citizens -- in the adder's pit, the ladder to the stars, the moss forest, the monster farm, the glass park, the burning island. We even passed through the Regent's inner chamber, briefly, though he was not there, and through other rooms in the palace, courtrooms, dungeons, and chambers of government. There was a fair amount of incidental damage in many of these instances, as the fat man rolled around, kicked, and thrashed.

Then we appeared in the dream engine's chamber, and everything in my full-circle visual field wobbled and ran, either as an aftereffect of all that spatial violation, or because bringing a dream into such proximity with the dream engine set up unstable resonances.

Howlaa and the fat man thrashed right into the pulsing royal orphan in its tangle of wires. The orphan's wings fluttered as it broke free from the mountings, and the ovoid body fell to the floor with a sick, liquid sound, like a piece of rotten fruit dropping onto pavement. The fat man broke free of Howlaa -- though that wasn't possible, so Howlaa must have let him go. He attacked Howlaa, who flickered and reappeared on the far side of the weakly pulsing royal orphan. The fat man roared and strode forward, a new weapon suddenly in his hand, a six-foot polearm covered in barbs and hooks. He tread on the royal orphan, which popped and deflated, a wet, ripe odor filling

the room. The fat man swung at the unmoving Howlaa, but the weapon disappeared in mid-arc. The fat man stumbled, falling to one knee, then moaned and came apart. It was like seeing a shadow-sculpture dissolve at the wave of an artist's hand, his substance darkening, becoming transparent, and finally melting away.

Howlaa became human, fell to zir knees, and shivered. "Feel sick," zie said, grimacing.

I was terrified. The Regent might kill us for this. We'd stopped the fat man, yes, but at the cost of a royal orphan's life. "We have to go, Howlaa," I said. "Become the questing beast. I won't try to stop you -- let's flee across the worlds. We have to get away."

But Howlaa did not hear, for zie was vomiting now, violently, zir whole body heaving, red and milky white and translucent syrupy stuff coming from zir mouth, mingling with the ichor from the dead orphan on the floor.

The door opened. The Regent and two Nagalinda guards entered. "No!" the Regent cried. "No, no, no!" The guards seized Howlaa, who was still vomiting, and dragged zim away. I floated along inexorably behind. The Regent stayed, kneeling by the dead orphan, gently touching its unmoving rainbow wings.

#

"Feeling better, traitor?," the Regent said. Howlaa sat, pale and still unwell, on a hard wooden bench before the Regent's desk.

"A bit," Howlaa said.

The Regent smiled. "You didn't think I'd let you be the questing beast forever, did you? I couldn't risk your escape. Wisp is one line of defense against that, but I felt another was needed, so I laced the blood with poison and bound their substances together. When the poison activated, your body expelled it, along with all the questing beast's genetic material. You've lost the power to take that form."

"I've never vomited up an entire shape before," Howlaa said. "It was an unpleasant experience."

"The first of many, for a traitor like you."

"Regent," I said. "As Howlaa's witness, I must inform you that you are incorrect. Howlaa did not mean to harm the orphan. The fat man appeared and disappeared, and Howlaa and I were simply carried along with him. Surely there are others who can attest to that, testify that we appeared all over the city, fighting? Howlaa held on, hoping the fat man would fade and we would be taken to the world of the dreamer, but before that could happen... well. The dream engine was damaged."

"The orphan was killed," the Regent said. "You expect me to believe that, by coincidence, the last place Howlaa and the killer appeared was in that room?"

"We could hardly appear anywhere after that, Regent, since the dream engine was destroyed, dissolving the fat man in the process." I spoke respectfully. "Had that not happened, I cannot tell you where the fat man might have traveled next."

"He was a lucid dreamer," Howlaa said. "He'd learned to move around at will. He was trying to shake me off, bouncing all over the city."

The Regent stared at Howlaa. "That orphan was the result of decades of research, cloning, cross-breeding -- the pinnacle of the bloodline. With a bit of practice, it would have been the most powerful of the orphans, and this city would have flourished as never before. We would have entered an age of dreams."

"It is a great loss, Regent," Howlaa said. "And we certainly deserve no honor or glory for our work -- I failed to kill the dreamer. He killed himself. But I did not kill the orphan, either. The fat man tread upon it."

"Wisp," the Regent said. "You affirm, on your honor as a witness, that this is true?"

My honor as a witness. My honor demanded that I respect Howlaa's elegant solution, which had saved the city further murder and also destroyed the Regent's wicked dream engine. I think the Regent misunderstood the oath he requested. "Yes," I said.

"Get out of here, both of you," he said. "There will be no bonus pay for this farce. No pay at all, in fact, until I decide to reinstate you to active duty."

"As you say, Regent," Howlaa and I said together, and took our leave.

#

"You lied for me, Wisp," Howlaa said that night, reclining on a heap of soft furs and coarse fabrics.

"I provided an interpretation that fit the objectively available facts," I said.

"You knew I was the one dragging the killer around the city, not vice-versa."

"So it seemed to me subjectively," I said. "But if the Regent chose to access my memory and see things as I had seen them, there would be no such subjectivity, so it hardly seemed relevant to the discussion."

"I owe you one, Wisp," Howlaa said.

"I did what I thought best. We are partners."

"No, you misunderstand. I owe you one, and I want you to take it, right now." Howlaa held out zir hand.

After a moment, I understood. I drifted down to Howlaa's body, and into it, taking over zir body. Howlaa did not resist, and the sensation was utterly different from the other times I had taken possession, when most of my attention went to fighting for control. I sank back in the furs and fabrics, shivering in ecstasy at the sensations on zir -- on my -- skin.

"The body is yours for the night," Howlaa said in my -- our -- mind. "Do with it what you will."

"Thank you."

"You had the right of it," Howlaa said. "We are partners. Finally, and for the first time, partners."

I buried myself in furs, and reveled in the tactile experience until the exquisite, never-before-experienced sensation of drowsiness overtook me. I fell asleep in that body, and in sleep I dreamed my own dreams, the first dreams of my life. They were beautiful, and lush, and could not be stolen.



Artwork by Kevin Wasden

The Adjoa Gambit

by Rick Novy

Shannon pressed the door firmly closed before embarking on the long walk to the rationing station. Today marked the sixth anniversary of her arrival at ARIP, the Antarctic Reservation for Indigenous Population, but she still couldn't get used to the bitter cold. Shannon's mind drifted to the memories of a warm Phoenix evening from somewhere in her childhood, then shook it off to concentrate on the task at hand -- collecting the family's food ration for the week.

As she approached the rationing station, Shannon saw the line snaking around the corner of the two-story corrugated aluminum building. The wait would be at least an hour today. She adjusted the empty bag slung over her shoulder and hastened to the end of the line, settling in behind a woman with three children. The woman was struggling to keep her children from complaining about the cold.

"Most of us leave the children back in the domes," Shannon said.

When the woman turned around, Shannon could see that her face was very dark. She said something in a language Shannon never heard before, maybe an African language. Life at ARIP was rougher on some people than others. English was the default common-tongue, and the newcomers who didn't speak English really struggled until they could learn.

The tallest of the woman's children said something in their language, then they conversed for several seconds before the little girl, no more than ten years old, turned to Shannon and said, "We don't have a dome."

No dome? Everyone had a dome. The little girl had to be lying.

The line edged forward three steps. The girl helped her mother to chase the two younger children back into the line before they moved.

The girl had a look on her face. It was the look of a person numbed by trauma, as if Shannon could disembowel someone and the girl wouldn't blink. It was the look of acceptance that death was inevitable, and soon in coming, and the look that the good times were gone forever, if they ever existed at all for this little girl.

Shannon felt pity for the girl and her family, even though her own situation was not much better. "Where are you staying until you get a dome?"

The girl conversed again with her mother, but this time, the woman grabbed her shoulder and turned her away from Shannon. A few moments passed and the line shuffled forward another few steps. As the girl moved, she turned her head and mouthed, "Nowhere." The mother placed a gloved hand on the girl's head and turned her around.

The girl remained silent until they reached the entrance, just a wooden door propped open to allow the snaking line to slither inside.

Upon entering the building, the African family was confronted by a guard, a big, leather-skinned troglodyte of a Proc. He sat behind a folding table, and a worn deck of cards rested near his left elbow.

He looked grumpy. Most Procs were grumpy, or worse. Rumor said that their planet in the Procyon system was largely tropical jungles and swamps, and they hated the cold. As a result, only the dregs of their society ended up at ARIP as guards.

The African woman began to cry as the Proc gestured with wild incomprehensibility. Shannon was terrified despite being able to understand the guard with her meager vocabulary of the Proc language. At first, he was waving around the deck of cards, then he was just trying to get the woman to sign in with her thumbprint.

A gap formed in the line ahead of the African family. Shannon tried to approach the little girl to explain the situation, but retreated when the troglodyte growled at her. The woman finally seemed to understand, pressed her thumb against the reader, then filled the gap in the line.

The Proc waved the cards at Shannon, but she just pressed her thumb against the reader and continued on her way, ignoring the Proc.

The line flowed quickly once past the gatekeeper. Shannon exchanged her food coupon for a box of rations, dropped it into her bag, then made her way to the door. She passed the African family on the way out. The little girl was talking to Larry, a black preacher from Oakland. Her mother stood nearby, wrestling to keep the girl's two younger siblings from running off. Shannon waved when the girl glanced in her direction, but the girl quickly turned her attention back to Larry.

#

Back in her dome that evening, Shannon had just put her little one to bed when she heard a knock on the door. Who would come to call at this hour? Sure, there was still daylight at this hour, but protocol . . . She opened the door until it was stopped by the chain, then looked out the crack to see Larry and the African family. The children were shivering from the cold.

Shannon unlatched the chain then opened the door wide. "Come in, get out of the cold."

Larry let the family file past. The mother was still carrying her box of rations. Larry entered last. "Thank you for letting us in." Shannon closed the door as Larry continued. "I have a favor to ask of you."

Interesting. This woman who would have nothing to do with Shannon earlier was now sitting in her dome. And Larry, he was usually on the granting end of favors. "What kind of favor?"

The two now joined the African family in the living chamber. Larry took a seat on the sofa next to the woman, and Shannon sat on a packing crate she used as an extra chair. Larry waited until everyone was seated before answering Shannon's question.

"This is the Olympio family." He waved his hand in their direction. "They are in need of shelter, and my dome is far too small."

So, the little girl was telling the truth. They really didn't have a dome -- but why? "What happened to the dome they were issued by the Procs?"

Larry and the oldest girl, the girl who understood some English, exchanged glances before he answered. "They lost it."

"Would you mind explaining how one loses something the size of a dome?" Shannon asked, hoping that the tone of voice didn't sound overly condescending.

The little girl answered. "The dome is still there."

Shannon's face must have telegraphed her confusion, because Larry spoke as she looked toward the little girl. "They lost title to the dome to a Proc. They love to gamble, you know."

After six years at ARIP, of course Shannon knew of the Proc penchant for gambling. She'd just never heard of anyone stupid enough to bet their dome -- or desperate enough.

"I know what you're thinking," Larry said, "but they were duped." He shook his head. "So many of our people are being duped, but never anything like this. They've been forcing people to bet their ration coupons for quite some time. I fear this family might be the first of many to lose their dome."

"I didn't realize it was that bad a problem," Shannon said.

"People talk to me, it's part of the job of being a preacher."

"How long do they need to stay?" She asked, but she already knew what the answer would be.

"I don't know, Shannon."

Her instinct was right, the answer was indefinitely.

Larry continued. "The town council plans to discuss a course of action this evening." He glanced at his wristwatch. "In fact, I must be going if I'm to be there on time."

Shannon let Larry out, then turned her attention to her unexpected guests. The African woman, tired and haggard-looking, sat at the end of the sofa, picking absently at the thread on the arm that was pulled loose when it snagged on the door latch the day Shannon moved it into the dome.

The oldest child, the one who could speak some English, sat still, staring at the door. The other two children had already fallen asleep. An odor wafted through the room. One of the children must have farted.

Shannon closed her eyes so the family wouldn't see her roll them, then she sat back on the packing crate and addressed the oldest girl. "Did you eat?"

The girl shook her head almost imperceptibly. Something had definitely changed the little girl. She seemed eager to talk in line, now she was so closed up. The mother had stopped playing with the thread and was now using her fingernail to trace the scratches on the end table left when Shannon's son pushed a brick across the surface.

She glanced back and forth between the two Africans as she realized that she still didn't even know their names. She left them there to fetch extra blankets and pillows from the linen closet. When she returned with arms full of bedding, they hadn't moved.

"You can sleep in this room," Shannon said as she set the pile of blankets on the floor in front of the sofa. Nobody moved, so she walked away. A glance at the clock accompanied by a yawn told her that she needed sleep, too.

#

Shannon awoke with the feeling she was being watched. She opened her eyes to see the oldest African girl standing arm's length away from the bed, then struggled to revive enough mental capacity to talk.

"What is it, honey?"

The little girl didn't move at first. Shannon was about to say something when the little girl spoke in a quiet voice. "We didn't mumble mumble."

"What did you say, sweetie?" She propped herself on one elbow as the little girl repeated what she said.

"We didn't need to lose our dome."

"I don't understand."

The little girl fidgeted before she replied. Her voice remained quiet. "The Procs aren't good players. I know how to beat them, but my mother wouldn't listen to me because I'm just a kid."

Shannon's mind was still groggy with sleep, so what the girl said wasn't really sinking in. She thought about it for a moment, fighting the urge to go back to sleep. Finally, she asked the girl, "What do you mean they aren't good players?"

She put her head down and kicked at the carpet with her right foot as she replied. "They are sloppy. They try to scare you to make you sloppier than them, but I know they're sloppy so I can beat them. I'm not sloppy."

Confused, Shannon pushed herself to a seated position. "I don't understand why you're telling me this."

The little girl stopped fidgeting now. She looked Shannon square in the eye and said, "Because I need your help."

What did this little girl really want? It couldn't be just a place to sleep. Shannon had a feeling there was something more. Something

dangerous. "You need my help? With what?"

There was great determination in those dark little eyes. Whatever the girl wanted, Shannon was sure she would get it.

"I'm going to get my dome back." Not her family's dome now, her dome. "I need you to bet with the Proc. I'll tell you exactly what to do. Trust me."

Trust her? Shannon didn't even know the girl's name! And then, bet with a Proc? Bet what? The only thing of any value was her own dome. Why repeat somebody else's mistake? No, betting with a Proc was out of the question.

Shannon had to give the girl some kind of answer so they both could get back to sleep. But, what to say?

"Why don't you have your mother help you?"

The little girl's face contorted in anger. "She didn't listen to me the last time, what makes you think she'll listen this time?" She made an exaggerated sigh. "Besides, she doesn't have anything left to bet."

The girl had a point, but that wasn't good enough for Shannon to risk her own dome. "What's in it for me?" Shannon stared down the girl as she would an adult. "Why should I risk my dome to try winning back the dome of complete strangers?"

The girl looked hurt. "But we're staying at your house. We aren't strangers."

"I don't even know your names!"

"Really?" The girl's face softened. "Now that I think about it, I don't know your name either."

Shannon extended her arm. "I'm Shannon. My son Alvin is asleep in his room. You'll meet him in the morning."

The girl took Shannon's hand and as they shook, the girl said, "My name is Adjoa Olympio. My mother's name is Amima. My sister is Ama, my brother is Kossi."

Shannon couldn't help but pry. "Where is your father?"

"His name was Koffi. He was killed in the resistance." She gazed down at her feet. "A lot of the dads died in the resistance in Togo."

Shannon pulled young Adjoa closer. "A lot of dads died in the resistance in every country. And so, the Procs send the women and children here along with the few remaining men, like the preacher, Larry." With Adjoa opening up, Shannon wanted to get as much information out of her as possible. "Your mother, she doesn't speak any English?"

"She can only speak in Ewe."

Shannon tried to pronounce it. "Elway?"

"That's close," she said, "but without the L. It's named after my tribe." There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Adjoa continued. "Will you help me?"

Shannon sighed. "Let me sleep on it."

#

Shannon had already made her decision not to do it, but wanted to save the inevitable fight for morning. Morning came, and she still didn't know how to tell Adjoa that there would be no betting. Reluctantly, she threw off the covers and was about to make her way to the kitchen for breakfast when her son, Alvin, burst into the room in tears, boogers flowing out his nose.

"Mommy! There's strangers in our house!"

She brought the boy close to comfort him, then pulled a tissue from the box on the nightstand to wipe his nose. He knew the routine, and waited patiently while Shannon wiped it away.

"The people in our house arrived after you went to sleep." She stood to put on a robe. "They don't have a dome, baby." She tied the

robe then picked up the boy.

"Everybody has a dome," Alvin said.

Shannon smiled at the innocence of the three-year-old. "They don't. That's why they're staying here."

"Why don't they have a dome?" Sometimes Shannon wondered what it was like to know nothing other than ARIP -- to never have seen Arizona, highways, cacti, a lake, or even dirt free of ice and snow.

"I don't know." How would the kids get along? As far as she knew, Adjoa was the only English-speaker in the group. How would Alvin react to children his age that spoke only, what was that language? Elway? She asked her son, "Do you want to meet them?"

The boy nodded, barely perceptible, but it was a nod nonetheless. Shannon carried the boy out to the living chamber, where Amima, the mother, was folding her blanket, and her three children were still asleep.

Adjoa looked surprisingly childlike in her slumber; nothing like the girl Shannon spoke with in the night. Deceptively peaceful. She set Alvin on the small kitchen counter. Amima had finished folding the blanket and was now placing it on the floor next to the sofa, then she walked toward the kitchen.

"Good morning, Amima."

If the woman was surprised that Shannon knew her name, she certainly didn't show it. Instead, she nodded at Shannon with a curt smile.

"There's no coffee," Shannon said. "Hasn't been any coffee for three years. I have some tea." She reached into the cupboard and handed the box to Amima. The African woman studied the box, turning it end-over-end. Finally, she opened the box and put it to her nose. She smiled, a real smile this time, then removed one of the tea bags and handed the box back to Shannon, who took one herself before putting it back in the cupboard. When it was put away, she walked to the small electric burner to heat some water. As the water boiled, Adjoa stirred from her sleep and stumbled into the kitchen.

Alvin, still sitting on the counter watching the activity, was the first to notice her. "Joa," he said.

"You must be Alvin," she said. "Good morning, Alvin. Good morning, Shannon." She turned to her mother next, and they exchanged a few words in what had to be Ewe.

"I have oatmeal," Shannon said. "It's not much, but my rations are only for two people."

"Please," Adjoa said. Shannon poured the boiling water into two cups then filled the pan with water, setting it on the stove before she went digging for the oatmeal.

Adjoa stood in the middle of the kitchen doorway watching. Finally, as the water started to boil, the girl said, "Have you decided?"

It was time. "Yeah," Shannon said as she turned off the burner. She poured the hot water into two bowls then dumped in the instant oatmeal. She spoke again only after she started to stir the oatmeal. "I'm not going to be able to help you." A hurt look imprinted itself onto Adjoa's face. "I'm sorry, but there it doesn't make sense for me to bet my dome to win yours back." She lifted Alvin from the counter and handed him one bowl of oatmeal. "If I win," she continued, "I gain nothing, if I lose, I lose everything. It's a bad risk."

That argument didn't seem to persuade Adjoa. "You won't lose. I know how to beat them," she said.

Poor girl. She's been through so much that she believes her story. "I'm sorry, Adjoa. I've made my decision." Shannon tried to hand the other bowl of oatmeal to her, but she refused to take it. Instead, she turned and walked away. Not letting them in would have been so much easier.

Amima looked at Shannon with eyes that said she didn't know what was wrong with her daughter. She followed Adjoa into the other room and a heated discussion in Ewe followed. Shame to waste the oatmeal. Shannon ate the second bowl herself.

The water was running low, and Shannon wanted to leave Alvin with Amima in order to fetch some ice from the quarry. Adjoa was still too angry to act as an interpreter for the two adults, so Shannon gesticulated as best she could. Amima clearly didn't understand.

She sighed as she pulled Alvin's coat from the closet. Amima started barking orders to the children. Shannon really didn't want the woman along. She didn't want Alvin along either, but at least he would sit still. A gentle touch on the shoulder and a shake of the

head was enough to communicate to Amima that she was to stay here.

Shannon pulled Alvin's coat from the closet, but Amima shook her head this time, then took Alvin by the arm to gently pull him toward the other children. Maybe progress was being made. Shannon put Alvin's coat back on the plastic hanger and into the closet it went. Instead, she pulled out her own parka, complete with the zipper torn away from the fabric for the bottom three inches. She took one last look at Alvin, but he was already busy playing with Ama and Kossi. She left him playing and went to get the ice.

She grabbed the pull sled at the side of the dome then began walking toward the ice quarry. The quarry was still on the outskirts of town, even with the steady population increase. If the Procs kept finding people to relocate, the quarry would be in town within the next two years. If.

The wind was still, so the arctic air was almost bearable. She walked quickly after she was out of town. A small mountain separated the quarry from the town. As she walked around the mountain she was stopped by a Proc guard. Tall and ugly as a troll, the Proc fondled her parka, perhaps appraising its worth.

The Proc ran its hand up and down the seams and along the zipper. When he discovered the small tear where the zipper had separated from the fabric, he inspected it carefully. Then, suddenly, he stood and said in horribly mangled English, "I want to bet for your garment."

Shannon rolled her eyes. Same troll, once a week at least. "I'm not interested in placing any bets."

The gargoyle took a step closer to Shannon, spreading his arms to make himself look as large as possible. "I think you should reconsider."

"And I think you should invest in a toothbrush," Shannon said. "Your breath stinks." She took a few more steps, still pulling the sled behind.

The Proc shuffled after her. "I could have your dome destroyed," he said.

Shannon smiled because she knew all the Proc tricks. "Get real," she said.

"You bet me the garment."

Shannon stopped and turned around. "What's in it for me?"

"Ah, you interested. Good." The Proc smiled as if it was pleased at itself. "I bet you extra meal to-day."

"What is the game?" Shannon asked.

"Morningstar."

Shannon shook her head. "Too risky. Give me a game with better odds."

"Morningstar with wild card."

Shannon turned her back on the Proc and continued to the ice quarry. Upon the return trip, she discovered the same Proc, only this time, he was wearing an ill-fitting white fur coat. She just shook her head, hoping the alien would go away. Anywhere.

When she got back to the dome, a strange smell was in the air. Shannon opened the door to discover Amima cooking bananas in a skillet. She decided it was some strange African recipe. As long as the kids ate them, she didn't mind. ARIP was not a place to waste food.

She walked into the kitchen and stood looking over Amima's shoulder. The African woman turned to her and said, "Kele Wele."

"Kele Wele," Shannon repeated.

"It's not going to be as good as it is at home." Shannon looked around to find Adjoa laying on the floor in the next room. "There are no plantains, so we had to use regular bananas, and there are no hot peppers anywhere."

Shannon smiled, happy that the girl seemed to have forgotten the betting idea. "I'm sure it will still taste good."

"Well," Adjoa said as she propped herself up on one elbow. "After we win back our dome, maybe we can get some plantains and hot peppers from Togo."

Naïve little girl.

#

As the weeks passed, Shannon and the Olympio family grew closer. Amima liked to eat the Mexican dishes that Shannon cooked whenever meat was available, and Amima cooked Kele Wele whenever bananas were available. Shannon found Kele Wele a bit too spicy for something that was meant as a dessert, but all the kids liked it, including Alvin.

Early one morning as the children were all eating a breakfast of oatmeal, there came a knock on the door. Shannon peered out the peephole and saw a uniformed Proc accompanied by a human. This didn't bode well. She opened the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," the human said. "I am Blockman Jones and this is Sergeant Ukk of the ARIP Security Force. Sgt. Ukk would like you to know that a new ordinance was passed today restricting single-family domes to single families."

The Blockman's declaration didn't make sense to Shannon. "Why? That's a stupid ordinance."

Ukk grunted, followed by a one-sided conversation, the Blockman nodding as the Proc spoke. When he was finished, he turned to Shannon and said, "The other family living with you must leave your dome immediately."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why?"

"I don't make the law." He pointed with his thumb at the Proc standing next to them. "I only enforce it."

The Blockman and Proc both continued to stand in the doorway. Shannon made a slow turn and walked into the living chamber with her mind in a state of shock and disbelief. Where would they go? To throw these people out into the cold with no shelter was tantamount to murder. There had to be a way out. She couldn't throw out this family she was becoming attached to. Her conscience wouldn't allow.

As she entered the living chamber, her eyes went directly to Adjoa. She was about to call the girl over to help translate the situation into Ewe, but she checked that when she had an idea, a desperate idea. Someone once said, desperate times call for desperate measures. She turned her back to the living chamber and walked back to the door.

"Blockman," she said, "Ask this Proc - Ukk was it? - if he would like to make a little wager."

The Blockman shifted nervously from foot to foot as Shannon finished speaking. He looked up at the Proc, then back at Shannon before he said, "Procs always are willing to wager." He smiled. "What is it you have in mind?"

Shannon snuck a quick glance over her shoulder to Adjoa, who was creeping toward the door. "I want to win a dome for this family."

The Blockman laughed with more conviction this time. He motioned for the Proc to bend down, then he whispered something into the Proc's ear. The Proc stood, then emitted an enormous belly-laugh. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, then said in thickly accented English, "Of course!"

What had she gotten herself into?

The Blockman whispered with the Proc for another moment, then declared, "The wager will be dome for dome. If you lose, you forfeit your dome."

"I understand that."

"Good," the Blockman said. "Meet us in the main square in one hour. As the challenger, you have the right to name the game."

"Blackjack."

It was the voice of Adjoa, now standing at arm's length behind Shannon, and something told her to trust the girl. "Blackjack it is," Shannon said.

The Blockman turned to leave, but the Proc hesitated. He looked Shannon in the eyes and said, "Make sure you arrive on time."

With that, he turned to leave, following the Blockman out the door.

Shannon looked down at the little girl whose words may decide whether they all would live or die.

"You must find a way to allow me to play blackjack against the Proc," Adjoa said.

"Impossible," Shannon said. "The Procs won't allow a minor to gamble." Impossible, but crucial because she didn't even know how to play.

"You must teach me to play blackjack, Adjoa."

The girl was animated, waving her arms and pacing the floor. "No, I must be the one to play."

"They will not allow."

Adjoa's face melted, then it brightened again as she voiced another idea, "Maybe I can walk you through the game as it's played."

"I doubt it," Shannon said. "I've never seen a child at any gambling event, much less helping to play the game." She shook her head. "Out of the question. Teach me the game and I'll manage on my own."

"No, you will lose," Adjoa said with passion. "The trick to beating a Proc isn't in the game, it's in his head. I know how to do it, you don't."

The Proc just wouldn't be willing to wait until Adjoa turned eighteen. The game would begin at noon, and Shannon had to face him alone.

#

As high noon approached, Shannon fed the fish, then left Alvin with Amima and walked to the main square alone. No point in looking back. In an hour, there would most likely be no place to call home. Adjoa had taught her the basics of blackjack, but she didn't have a good feel for how to play -- when to draw and when to stand. She quickened her pace.

At the main square, a table had been set up, and a crowd of people had already gathered around, hoping for a chance to watch the destruction of the stupid human girl. She took her seat to the applause of the crowd. A Blockman acted as announcer, and began to speak through a megaphone.

"The rules to the contest are plain. The game is simple blackjack. Each contestant is being given one hundred red chips. The first contestant to gain all the chips is the winner."

A dealer stood at the head of the table, and Shannon sat opposite her opponent, Ukk. Each player threw in one red chip, then the first cards were dealt. The Proc had face-up the queen of diamonds. Shannon was dealt the three of clubs face-up, and the ace of hearts face-down.

The Blockman indicated Ukk as the first to play, but Ukk motioned that he wanted no cards. At the same time, Shannon felt something on her leg. She looked down to see Adjoa under the table.

Ukk must have noticed her eyes leaving the table. "What is she hiding!"

The blockman came around to Shannon and discovered Adjoa under the table. He grabbed the girl's parka in the back and pulled her to her feet. "What kind of deception is this?"

"I should be playing the Proc!" Adjoa shouted, but the big Proc laughed so hard he almost fell off his chair.

"That child against me!" Ukk snorted as he inhaled. "Imagine, that child against me!"

Shannon had an idea. "You think you can beat that child?" The crowd gasped at the very idea of a Proc gambling against a child. Even the Blockman was taken aback. "I think she can beat you."

"Ah! It would be like taking candy." The Proc couldn't stop laughing.

"Then, since we haven't completed the first hand, I would like to change the game."

"What!" The Proc didn't like that idea.

"The stakes remain the same, but the game is now a bet that this little girl can beat you at blackjack."

The Proc looked to the Blockman. "Is that legal?"

The Blockman nodded. "Technically, it is still the woman who is gambling. The minor is just a component of the game. Yes, the bet is legal."

"Then I accept the new terms. Sit, child. Continue this hand." Shannon got out of the chair and let Adjoa sit.

The little girl looked at the Proc, who waved at the dealer. The dealer turned his attention to Adjoa.

"Hit." The five of clubs fell to the table. Not enough. Shannon was shaking with nerves.

"Hit." The two of hearts fell to the table, and she waved off the dealer. The little girl tossed two more chips into the pot, and Ukk matched it. The two players showed their cards and Ukk pushed the chips to her.

"Lucky hand," he said.

Adjoa's face lit up with a smile. "You let a little girl beat you! Ha, you're a loser!"

The skin around the proc's eyes wrinkled in irritation. He slammed five red chips into the pot. Adjoa matched it as the dealer shuffled the deck. The cards soon began falling, and the three of diamonds landed face-up for Ukk. The ace of Hearts landed face-up for Adjoa, and she was dealt the three of spades face-down.

"A little girl beat you," Adjoa whispered.

The dealer looked at Adjoa and she waved him away. She took no cards. Attention turned to Ukk.

"Hit." The two of spades fell.

"Hit." The five of hearts fell. Ukk was breathing harder.

"HIT!" The jack of clubs fell, and Ukk threw his cards into the pot. "Bust."

Adjoa scooped the ten chips and pulled them to her end of the table. "A little girl beat you again."

Shannon leaned over Adjoa's shoulder and whispered into her ear. "Don't egg him on too much, he might eat you."

She turned her head and whispered back. "No. There are too many people here."

Ukk was not amused. "You playing?"

"I'm winning," Adjoa said.

"Gaaaah!" Ukk gathered his chips and pushed them all into the pot. Adjoa took her time counting out ninety-two chips, setting the few remaining chips carefully aside. Ukk fidgeted as Adjoa slowly counted, dragging it out as long as possible, but the Proc said nothing. Finally, she pushed her pile of chips into the pot.

"I'm ready," she said.

Ukk just groaned in response. The deal came. Ukk received a face-up nine of clubs. Adjoa received a three of clubs face-up and a seven of hearts face-down. Shannon was nervous, but Adjoa only smiled.

She started whispering again. "Don't let the little girl win. What would all the other Procs say if you lost everything to a little girl?"

The Proc reacted with a growl. "Hit." The eight of spades fell to the table, and Ukk threw the card in his hand to the ground. He

stood, pushed his chair to the ground, and pushed the bystanders aside as he walked around the table to Shannon to put the key to the Olympio dome into her hand. His aim was poor, and it fell to the ground. As Shannon picked up the key, the Proc stormed away. When Ukk was ten paces on his way, the crowd erupted in cheers.

Shannon handed the key to Adjoa. "Go find your family. You just won back your home."

Adjoa took the key, but she shook her head. "No," she said. "I only won back the dome. Winning back my home -- our home -- that's going to take more than one game."

The Box of Beautiful Things

by Brian Dolton



Artwork by Laura Givens

Yi Qin came to visit Weng Hao's Grand Carnival Of Curiosities on a spring day, with the air sharp and clear. She was humbly dressed, not like an emissary of the Emperor at all, and she took her place in the line, and she handed over her quarter-teng piece. She looked at the tigers, pacing back and forth in their cages. She watched the acrobats perform, tumbling and swooping and spinning. She listened to the story-teller, and laughed when he recounted the tale of the Little Fisherman and the Seven Foolish Demons.

She had not come, however, to see these things. They were diversions; amusing in their way, but no more than that. No; she had come, like everyone else, to see the Box Of Beautiful Things.

But not for the same reason.

There was a long line. Even though the carnival was camped in the middle of a dusty plain, people had come from a hundred li in every direction, spurred on by rumor. Weng Hao himself was marshalling the customers. As Yi Qin waited for her turn (for no more than ten people at a time were allowed into the tent where the Box Of Beautiful Things was kept), she studied him. He was a big man; bigger, almost, than his skin could withstand. His cheeks seemed distended, and his eyes were thin black slits that he could barely open. He had a long black moustache and wore gaudy silks.

His voice boomed out, from time to time. The wait is worth it, he would cry. Why, a wait of a Great Year would be worth it, to see the Box Of Beautiful Things. Such things as you have never before seen. Such things as you could not even imagine! Gaze upon

beauty, and let your heart lift, to know that there is still such wonder in the world!

Yi Qin had seen many wonders, and by no means all of them were beautiful. She shuffled forwards as the line moved, and folded her hands together under her sleeves. Her thumb sought the point of one of the darts she kept hidden. Not yet, she told herself. Not until you can see the Box Of Beautiful Things.

#

The sun was low in the west by the time she reached the head of the line. She bowed politely to Weng Hao, who was still beaming, and whose eyes could still not be seen. The Seven Ways taught that the eyes were mirrors of the soul. Yi Qin wondered what she would have read, if she could have seen into his eyes.

She wondered, too, what he might be able to read in hers; and looked away.

Inside the tent, there were only two lanterns. Curtains hung, thick velvet, fringed with tassels. The Box Of Beautiful Things was resting on some kind of platform. It was black, smooth and shiny, lacquered and inset with mother of pearl. It stood as tall as a man, as broad as a man's reach. Its doors were open wide. And inside it...

Yi Qin pricked her thumb with the dart, and withdrew her hand. She smeared the blood onto her forehead, drawing the sign that was the Fourth Unspoken Word; the Word That Allows The Truth To Be Discerned.

There was nothing beautiful in the box.

There was nothing inside it at all.

In front of her, nine other people were marvelling, and whispering to one another as they pointed out one beautiful thing after another. Yi Qin stood slightly apart from them, and looked into the empty box. When another woman asked her what she thought of the red cheongsam, with the silver dragon picked out in meticulous detail, she smiled politely and agreed that it was exquisite. When a man loudly declared he had never seen such fine goldwork - and he was a goldsmith himself, who could only dream of creating such beauty - she nodded with the others. And, after the others were drunk on beauty, and could endure no more of it, she filed out carefully behind them. She lifted a red cloth to her face, dabbing away the blood from her brow, under the pretence of mopping up tears that had been brought forth by unworldly beauty.

Then she sat down on a rock nearby, and waited for the fall of night.

A man came to her, as the sun was just dipping behind the western mountains.

"Your pardon, lady, but the carnival is closing. You must be away from here."

"I was hoping," she told him, "that I might speak with the estimable Weng Hao."

"Master Weng Hao is a busy man," he said. "I can bear him a message, perhaps. But it is not possible to speak with him."

"I must insist," she said, rising to her feet. "Perhaps, if you tell him what I have shown you, he will wish to talk?"

"You have not shown me anything, lady," the man said.

In response, Yi Qin reached inside the bag she carried, and withdrew a tablet. The last rays of the setting sun caught the embossed symbols carved on it. The man bowed, very low.

"Your pardon, noble lady. Please, forgive me. I did not know you were an emissary of the Emperor."

"There is nothing to forgive," she told him, tucking the tablet back into her bag. "But you will tell Weng Hao that I wish to speak with him, concerning the Box Of Beautiful Things?"

"I will tell him, noble lady" the man said, and bowed again.

Yi Qin sat down again on her rock, and waited. The sun slid below the horizon; First Moon followed it down, while Third Moon shone big and pale in the eastern sky.

"I am honoured," a voice said from nearby. "An emissary of the Emperor himself, come to my humble carnival! Truly, this is a blessing. How may I be of service, noble lady?"

Yi Qin rose, and bowed towards Weng Hao, who was approaching, bearing a lantern.

"I would talk, Weng Hao,"

"By all means! I love to talk!" He laughed, expansively. "But this is no place for it. Come to my pavilion! I will offer you food, and rice wine, and listen eagerly to what you have to say."

"I would prefer, Weng Hao, to talk here, under the eye of Third Moon."

He bowed. "If that is what the Emperor's Emissary wishes, then that is what shall be! As a loyal subject..."

"Are you a loyal subject of the Emperor?" Yi Qin asked, mildly.

Insofar as it was possible to tell, behind the smooth face and inflated cheeks, Weng Hao looked surprised.

"Do you doubt it?"

"If I may speak frankly, Weng Hao; then yes, I doubt it. I have seen certain things, today, which give me cause to doubt that you are a loyal subject of the Emperor. Which make me doubt, even, whether your name is truly Weng Hao."

"And why do you doubt these things, lady?"

"Because you are a charlatan, Weng Hao."

"A charlatan? If so noble a person as the Emperor's Emissary tells me, then it must be so; and yet, I do not understand. I would be grateful beyond measure if you could explain this to me."

"A thousand people come to your carnival every day, Weng Hao. They come, because you have a tent, in which there is a Box Of Beautiful Things. But the box is empty, Weng Hao. There is nothing beautiful in illusion; in conjuring."

"In conjuring? And how, pray enlighten me, did you discern that the Box Of Beautiful Things was empty?"

"By revealing the truth."

"And this truth was revealed by what means? By conjuring, perhaps?"

"Just so," she said, with a small tilt of the head. "But it is truth, nonetheless."

"If only the truth were so simple. A thousand people came to my carnival today. All but one have left with gladness in their hearts. They will remember for many years all the beautiful and wonderful things that they have seen at my carnival."

"That they believe they have seen."

"And what is stronger than belief? Go to them, Emissary. Ask them what they saw. Tell them, if you wish, that it was but conjuring; a trick. They will not believe you. They believe what they have seen."

"They believe a lie."

"And the truth is so valuable? What is the virtue of truth, Emissary? Can you say that you have never told a lie, in all your life?"

"I have told many lies," she admitted. "Where it has been necessary. You lie, sir, purely for your own convenience. You lie, to draw people to your Carnival. You have fine tigers, and nimble acrobats, and talented storytellers; but there are a dozen carnivals which can boast such things. It is trickery and illusion that draws people to come here, and to place a quarter-teng piece into a bowl. You are a wealthy man, Weng Hao, but your wealth has come from lies."

"I am accounted a wealthy man by some," he admitted. "But wealth is a relative thing. I force no-one to come to my carnival. It is the word that brings people here; the word of mouth. People speak of the beauty they have seen. 'You must go to Weng Hao's Grand Carnival Of Curiosities,' they say. 'You must see the Box Of Beautiful Things. Such beauty, such wonderful things, as you can not imagine!' This is why they come, Emissary. They pay but a quarter teng, to see things that they will remember for years to come; things they will tell even to their grandchildren. They buy beauty, and the memory of beauty."

"They buy lies," Yi Qin maintained.

Weng Hao shrugged. "If you say so. But I wonder, perhaps, if they see a truth that you can not. You did not wish to see beauty, when you came here, did you? You wished only to uncover your truth; but your truth is a sad, mean-spirited thing. You would deprive the world of beauty, Emissary. You would steal its dreams."

Yi Qin said nothing. The night folded itself around the carnival tents. Geckos barked to one another in the dusty plain.

"Show me the Box Of Beautiful Things," she said, eventually. Weng Hao smiled.

"But of course! Come, let me enumerate its wondrous contents." He rose, and carried on speaking as they walked to the tent where the Box Of Beautiful Things was kept. "There is the most magnificent gold filigree, jewelry that surpasses the work of even Grand Master Lin Fu! There is porcelain, so fine that it is translucent, so delicate that even the Emperor has none to equal it. And the silks... colors, my lady, that you have never seen; colors that only your dreams have ever held."

"Please," she said. "Do not recount these things. Let me see for myself."

He ushered her through the opening of the tent, and followed her inside. The lamps had been extinguished; but he lifted the lantern he held, and its orange light spilled into the open box.

Yi Qin, her arms folded together under her sleeves, looked into the Box Of Beautiful Things.

A necklace of gold filigree, delicate as a spiderweb, bright as the morning sun on Mount Yang. A jade dragon, smooth as water, cool as a blessing. Silks, as vivid as dreams. Porcelain, pale as milk. Pearls and rubies and feathers. Shapes and colors and textures that made her heart ache.

She knew none of it was real. Her thumb pressed, lightly, against the dart under her sleeve; but so lightly that it did not pierce the skin, and draw forth blood.

She looked into the Box Of Beautiful Things for a long time.

Then she sighed, and pressed her thumb hard onto the point of the dart. With swift, precise movements, she withdrew her bloody hand, and reached forwards, and inscribed the First Unspoken Word onto the beautiful black, lacquered wood.

The First Unspoken Word; The Word That Releases Hungry Flames.

Weng Hao shrieked, and flapped his sleeves in alarm, but there was nothing he could do. In a moment, the lacquered box was ablaze; spitting and crackling and consuming itself. Flames leapt to the heavy drapery, and in a moment the whole tent was alive with fire. Yi Qin walked, very calmly, out into the night air, and stood aside, watching the tent burn, watching Weng Hao's men bustle uselessly around it, for there was not enough water, here in this dry place, to have the slightest hope of quenching the fire.

Weng Hao stood in front of Yi Qin and cried.

"Why have you done this? You have destroyed it! You have destroyed the box! You have destroyed my livelihood!".

"You have a carnival, Weng Hao," she answered him, quiet and adamant against the torrent of his emotions. "You have a carnival like any other, with tigers, and acrobats, and storytellers. Settle for that, and make your living without the Box Of Beautiful Things."

She was sure that, if she had not been an Emissary of the Emperor, he would have killed her where she stood; or would, rather, have attempted it. Instead, he merely dropped to his knees. Tears spilled out onto his enormous cheeks.

"You have destroyed beauty," he wailed. "You are wicked, Emissary. Wicked beyond measure! These are not just my tears! These are the tears of thousands, who will come to my carnival, because they have heard tales of the Box Of Beautiful Things, and wish only to see it for themselves; and I must tell them that it is no more. That it was burnt. That the beauty is gone, forever."

"Until you find another conjuror," Yi Qin said, quietly, calmly, "who can work such magic for you. It is not, I think, as if you lack the money to pay for such a thing? But next time, Weng Hao; next time, I advise you this. Create a little less beauty. Create colors that are wondrous, but which people have seen before. Create jewelry that is no more than the equal of the work of Master Lin Fu. You have reached too high, Weng Hao. The Emperor does not care to think that, in all his realm, there is such beauty owned by another."

Weng Hao stared at her.

"The Emperor is jealous? You have burnt my Box Of Beautiful Things because the Emperor is jealous?"

Yi Qin said nothing. There was nothing she could say. She simply turned, and walked away into the night, and remembered beauty.

Xoco's Fire

by Oliver Dale



Artwork by Julie Dillon

Though the smoke rose in sprightly wisps above the beach, Xoco knew that Sea and Sky had no hand in it. It was the breeze rolling off the surf that coaxed the billowing cloud to dance. She threw another whitefish onto the flames and watched its silver scales bubble and boil, gills puffing in the moonlight.

Xoco prayed again for an answer and cast her desires into the rising plume. Kimpana village was functioning again, she thought, if in a limited way. The gardens were producing. The fish were returning, slowly, of their own accord. Does the Shaman still need to hurt me, pin me against the floor of his hut and subject me to his savagery?

I will do anything, she thought. Anything, if you let me kill him. Let me feel his blood on my hands. Let it course down my body, soothe the burns and cuts that scar my thighs and spirit. But when there appeared no response, she sat back, worried. Her hand unconsciously rubbed the rigid bulge of her abdomen, comforting the twin gods that roosted within.

Xoco knew she wouldn't have another chance; the Shaman had gone up the mountain of prayers to meditate, to commune with the gods about the Gambi tribe that continued to harass and steal from them. She needed her answer now.

The tide rolled in slowly, consuming the black sands of the beach, gently lapping first at feet and then ankles and then calves. Salt water snuffed out the fire. As she sat and pondered, Xoco suffered a constriction of her belly. She waited breathlessly then felt another. Warm water seeped from between her legs, mingling with the cool waves of the sea. Was this her answer?

Xoco felt a sharp pain in her lower abdomen and pelvis; she couldn't prevent the scream that clawed its way from her throat.

"Mother, help," she whispered, but though she tried to lift her voice with a prayer, the suffering of childbirth wasn't enough to drive it through the palm trees, back to the village. She needed a sacrifice.

In desperation, Xoco searched through the water, lunging for a fish she saw beached on the sand. It was an Angelfish, with a white stripe that glowed like starlight. Ignoring the short spikes that dug into her palm, she ripped it in two. Chilly blood and gore gushed down her forearms. It was not a delicate prayer; there was no fire, no smoke, but there was pain, there was suffering. It would do.

"Sea and Sky, I offer this creature to you. I ask only one favor in return: take my voice and lift it with the breeze, with the mist and foam. Carry it to my mother for without her help, I fear we three will not survive this tribulation."

Their answer was immediate. Xoco felt the familiar slick sheen of the prayer covering her body, the unseen light that dropped from the sky and sank in through her ears, her eyes, her mouth and nose like inhaled smoke. It invaded her lungs, encircled the delicate flesh of her organs. When it consumed her completely, she closed her eyes and whispered.

"Mother, help." Her voice floated like feathers, past the tree line of creepers and ferns, off toward Kimpana where her Mother slumbered. And then the pain threatened to split her apart from the spine forward. She screamed.

Mother arrived in moments at the head of a war party of spearmen, no doubt afraid that her daughter had been attacked by a wild boar or a Gambi raiding party. She wouldn't have suspected that Xoco was in labor. The twins weren't supposed to be born for another moon cycle, at least, and while Xoco knew that twins rarely carried to full-term, it was still too soon.

Mother splashed through the water to reach her, dropping to a knee, cradling Xoco's body in outstretched arms. The burn-scars on Mother's face were smooth and shone in the moonlight and the Shaman's most recent work was evident in her swollen eye. What had that gained the village? A season of maize? A hundred sea bass? The fertility of a dozen cattle?

"Xoco, what happened?" Mother asked. She hadn't even bothered to drape herself in a sarong to ward off the night's chill. "Are you all right? What are you doing out here alone. You know better." Mother's hand found Xoco's belly; her fingers probed Xoco's skin.

"It's happening," Mother said. "It's too soon."

"Perhaps you can convince these children to wait."

"These?" Her eyebrow raised. Xoco nodded and was about to speak her confirmation when Mother cut her off.

"Hush," said Mother. "Breathe, child."

A silent moment passed between them; all that was heard were the gentle white tongues of the ocean lapping at their legs.

"Send the spearmen away," said Xoco. She glanced to where the men gathered, their faces a tangle of black tattoo ink and nervousness. "They shouldn't be here for this."

Mother clucked her tongue. "We may need them yet."

"Send them away," Xoco asserted. "The village turned a blind eye when these babies were put in me; they don't deserve to be here when they come back out." Another contraction and Xoco gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut against it.

Mother understood the tone of Xoco's voice and her face contorted slightly. With understanding? With grief? She dismissed the warriors with a loose gesture. "You have more strength in you than I can imagine, Child."

When the hunters were gone, Xoco looked up into her mother's eyes with severity.

"This birth, right now. This is our answered prayer. We can be free of him now that his children are born."

"How can you know these things? From a fire and the moon? I have been reading the souls of smoked fish for longer than you, Child. Even I can't be so sure of their answers."

"I am sure," said Xoco. "These children will defeat him, Mother, and Kimpana will see that we no longer need him, that we can protect and provide for ourselves. They will be gods of deliverance."

"Your father, your children's father," Mother swallowed. "The Shaman. He is not going anywhere. He has won the whole village over. Even the elders have grown fat with his fishes and fruits and meat. The young ones have become lazy. They will never return to that life of labor, Child. Moving from place to place when the land gives up. And with Gambi threatening us, with all the men off fighting or practicing their spears, there is no way. This is nonsense. Keep quiet. Concentrate on your breathing." Mother cupped some water in her hand and dripped it over Xoco's hot forehead, brushing away her hair. "Besides, you are about to give him two children. He will leave you be. You might already be free of him."

Xoco couldn't restrain a cynical huff. "Just as you were free of him when you bore me?" She traced her fingertips lightly over the shape of Mother's swollen eye, felt the almost-glossy burn scars.

It pained Mother to hear and Xoco regretted having said it. But truth was something that, in the war for survival against the Shaman, they had promised each other never to abandon.

"The Kimpana may be lazy," said Xoco. "They may have condemned us with their indifference and selfishness, but they are a good people, Mother. You will see. We need only offer them a chance."

Another contraction. Xoco winced, moaned.

"We must get you back to the village. Lavria can help."

"No, Mother. I want them born here, in sight of Sea and Sky. To remind them what freedom looks like, should they ever forget."

"Child, I'm sorry, but in this you have no say."

Mother yelled to the spearmen and they came at a run. She directed the men to gently lift Xoco under the arms and legs, supporting her back and being careful not to jostle or disturb the children that were so adamant in achieving their escape.

Xoco felt herself being lifted out of the water, almost as if she were experiencing it through a story told by someone else. When the water stopped dripping, something warm from between her legs took its place. Xoco heard her mother curse the gods, something she'd never heard her do before.

"Hurry," hissed Mother. And the group of them spirited Xoco back into the jungle, carefully stepping over the deadfall and vines that obscured the floors in a patchwork of greens and browns – all shades of gray under the dappled light of the moon. The pain drifted from the center of Xoco's mind. She noticed it like she would a garment, not core to her being but secondary, as though it draped her consciousness but didn't consume it. The world continued to darken. She knew she was bleeding; she could feel the hot runnels of blood trickling down her underside. She worried only about her children.

Unnoticed by Xoco, Mother had run ahead of them. When they finally made it to the village, past the thatched roofs of the main cook buildings and the small overhanging huts where families peered sleepily from entryways, Lavria was already waiting in her home. Her gray, brittle hair stretched unruly from her head and she rubbed sleep from her eyes.

The men set Xoco down like the gods' own treasure and Lavria stirred hot coals, adding twigs and grass, just wet enough to produce more smoke than flame.

At another contraction, Xoco let a cry escape her throat.

"What shall we do?" whispered Mother. "Need I find some fish to offer? Work your prayers, Lavria."

But the old woman quietly lay her hands on Xoco's belly. She positioned herself between Xoco's propped up legs and murmured thoughts and observations that Xoco couldn't discern.

"Bring a calf," said Lavria.

The hunters looked at each other. It seemed obvious what they were thinking. No such lavish gift had ever been offered on anyone else's behalf. And a calf, one of few that they had remaining, was a handsome offering.

Lavria didn't look up at them. "If you don't do as I say, you will explain your actions to the Shaman himself. Because if you continue to delay, either child or mother, or maybe both, will surely die tonight."

Three of them ran at her words, no doubt to find the nearest calf to be slain and burned to protect Xoco's children. But the suggestion that they might die frightened Xoco. She was willing to part with her life if need be, but never her children.

Lavria cupped her hands and pulled the smoke over Xoco's body, praying. It blanketed Xoco like fresh rainfall, coating her completely. It was a prayer for sleep so that they may deliver her babies, or perhaps a prayer to lessen the pain. Xoco's vision swam and her consciousness faded as the gods whispered lullabies through the prayer smoke.

She became scared then that she'd be absent at the birth of her own children. Xoco felt the darkness falling and resisted its arrival. She forced her eyes open.

One of the warriors returned with a squirming, squealing calf and Lavria, without ceremony, slid a knife across its throat. Xoco felt the warm blood splash against her thigh.

"Sky and Sea," said Xoco.

The group stopped and turned to her.

Mother asked, "What, child?"

"I want them to be named Sky and Sea."

After the gods, she thought. For they will be gods. They will deliver us from the Shaman and his cruelty.

Mother nodded. It would be so.

Xoco's head lolled. She caught flashes of red and brown, screams and conversation, the putrid, bitter smell of drying blood mixed with smoke.

"What is it?" she heard a voice ask.

"Three legs?" asked another.

"Four."

She felt pain. She heard a knife being pulled from a sheath. More, different pain.

"Twin girls," and then, "Joined at the spine."

Gasps. Muffled prayers.

"Can they live?"

"I can not know." And fear stabbed through the darkness, so much sharper than pain. "But yes, I think so. For now."

With that bit of reassurance, Xoco allowed her mind to glide out of her body, into darkness, away from the pain. Into the land of sleep, of Sea and Sky.

#

The night brought restless dreams, and the morning brought sweet ones. But with it, too, the morning brought the Shaman back down the mountain of prayers. Xoco sensed his approach and woke.

The hut was empty. Sunlight trickled in through the thatched roof, rays of dust, like ribbon, sliced the air. Two babies cried in the distance and Xoco sat up, igniting a fire below her waist. She could not help but moan from the pain. In a different time and a different world, one in which she didn't have children, Xoco would have continued lying there until the aching and cramping abated. But her babies were crying, and her tender nipples leaked fluid, and she could think of nothing else but getting to them, filling their bellies, making the crying and fear go away.

So with her elbows and legs, she gently rolled onto her side and pushed herself to her feet. She rocked for a moment, letting the blood in her system redistribute itself, her vision growing dim before returning to normal. Xoco pushed aside the hanging tapa door and stepped out into the mid-morning sun.

Women were singing, chanting. Their voices ghosted from a different part of the village. Xoco could hear their words punctuated with the whacks of beaters as they struck mulberry bark to make cloth.

The Shaman sat in the shade of the main cookhouse, the spiritual paint of the mountain still on his body, black tattooed lines, like lightning, scrawled across his cheeks. His scalp was freshly shaved but for the center strip from which his long hair hung low.

In his arms, Sea and Sky lay awkwardly, fused at the back, one looking in toward the Shaman's chest, the other peering away. Little mouths quivered with the force of their mewling.

Xoco's arms prickled at seeing him with the babies, but she measured his actions for a moment, watched the way the corners of his mouth curled up in a tight smile. He was almost fatherly the way he held them, comforted them, rocked them back and forth. He dangled a copper medallion in front of their faces, trying to entice their attentions with its gleaming surface. His head turned; he spotted her and his smile vanished.

"Come here," he said.

Xoco walked gingerly forward, hands held at her stomach as though to prevent her organs from falling out. She heard the distant voices of men back in the forest, burning and cutting the inedible plants to make room for the nutritious ones.

"They're hungry," he said. The Shaman lifted the children. He handed them to Xoco who struggled to find a position that would both make them comfortable and wouldn't suffocate either.

Her breath caught at the up-close sight of two babies stitched together at the back. Xoco had heard of twins born with parts of themselves in the other but she had thought those were nothing more than tales told at gatherings, around cook fires late at night. But she couldn't be surprised that her children were so mythical as to be joined. They would free her and her people; they were gods. Gods should be unique.

Sitting in the shade, Xoco placed a breast at the mouth of a babe and winced as the child latched on. She didn't even know which child was Sky, which was Sea.

As though he knew her thoughts, the Shaman spoke. "That one that now suckles, that is Sea." He stood before her. "What do you mean by naming these children after the gods? Such immodesty can do no good. You will bring their disfavor on this village."

"I didn't mean to offend," said Xoco.

"What will you do if the gods, in their scorn, no longer grant me the power to summon the fishes or to cause the berries and the maize to flourish? Will you explain to the people that it was your vanity that causes their hunger?"

I will explain all that and more, thought Xoco. I will explain how the gods sent these children as a blessing for us, to be rid of you and be finished with our dependence on you. Xoco decided to say nothing; it was a mistake.

The Shaman slapped her with the back of his hand. Xoco felt the familiar sting of knuckles against her cheekbone and while the blow itself was manageable, the way it jostled her tender stomach stung far worse.

"You will answer me."

"I will explain it to them. I will explain that it is my fault."

He placed a hand under her chin, lifted her gaze to meet his. "Aren't you going to welcome your father back home?" His voice was quiet, but full of insinuation.

"You just returned from the mountain. Even now it still prays," said Xoco. And she gestured up to the clouds of smoke that raised ever-skyward from the wound in the mountain's peak. "Surely we have enough to sup on for now."

Then the Shaman leaned back and with his hand resting on his stomach, he barked a loud laugh. At Xoco's fear? Her vulnerability?

"Fine," he said. "But the village is growing. There are more and more mouths to feed. We may have to increase our efforts." He began to walk away, off toward the banyans, but then he stopped and turned back. "And get Lavria to change your poultice. I can smell the blood from here." Then he was gone.

Xoco sat a while. She turned the twins around and fed Sky, all the while playing with Sea's hand, rubbing her arm, keeping her occupied while her sister ate. When they were finished and Xoco found the strength to move, she walked to the women's building. Her mother and Lavria sat grinding grain with a stone to make coarse flour and other women struck mulberry bark, placing the thin, finished sheets in buckets to soak. As soon as they saw her, they paused and stood, clucking their tongues.

"You should not be up running about, Child," said Mother. "You need to sleep. Those babies nearly drained all the blood right out of you." With a practiced hand, she lifted the children from Xoco's arms, smiled at them, made soft cooing noises.

Lavria lifted the front of Xoco's sarong, pulled at the blood-soaked cloth tied there. When she peeled it away, she saw the cut was an angry red and puffy.

"We have to watch this closely," said Lavria. "It could turn bad. For now, we will change this cloth and keep the wound clean."

Xoco noticed the women eyeing the joined babies. When they realized that she had noticed them, they busied themselves with beating the tapa, silently this time.

"It's a shame about them," said Lavria. "They'll never live full lives. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," snapped Xoco. "I'm not. Their bodies were an intentional act of the gods. There is a purpose in all things."

Lavria nodded.

Then a realization came to Xoco. "I want to tattoo them."

"They're too young," said Mother. "You must wait until they are old enough to realize what it is they're receiving. Besides, it may be too much to take for young ones like this."

"Lavria doesn't think they will survive very long. I want them to receive my mark while they are alive so that they will be sealed to me."

And so Lavria retrieved the sharpened tusk which Xoco used to tap her mark into the wrinkled sides of the twins. They didn't cry. They didn't make a single noise. The other women murmured about this amongst themselves at great length.

When the shape was finished, Xoco gently rubbed soot and sap into the design, providing its color. After, she poured sun-warmed water over it and observed her work and was pleased. On each of the twins' sides was half of Xoco's heart such that it joined where they did, at their backs.

There were screams from the other end of Kimpana; the roars of hunters and warriors filled the air. Xoco held the twins close to her body. She heard the sounds of wood striking metal striking wood. More screams.

"Gambi," hissed Lavria.

Around the corner ran a team of Gambi warriors, ten or twelve, clubs and spears dancing, faces painted in bloodroot paste. They spotted Xoco's children and started toward them with singular intent.

"Run. Find the Shaman," said Xoco before staggering in the opposite direction, her unsteady legs threatening to buckle. She didn't look to see if Mother and Lavria followed her instructions. She didn't have time; there were two infants that were relying on her.

Into the woods Xoco hobbled. The pain below her waist grew more intense with her motion, but she didn't slow. She twisted around the tall slender trees, passed by the brush and brambles with spines and star-shaped fruit. Xoco could only think of the beach, of the fish there that could help.

"Sea and Sky, guide my path," she whispered.

The sounds of pursuit clamored behind her. She heard men shouting, branches snapping and breaking underfoot. Xoco felt blood seeping into the cloth over her cut as she aggravated it again. And with the pain came something else. Like liquid smoke coating her body, she felt the gods' presence come over her, fall down onto her head and then shoulders, cascading to her feet.

A faint but recognizable path emerged in the jungle. Vines, limbs pulled away as she approached, revealing fresh and uncluttered ground, only to close and mesh together again as she passed. Xoco made it to the beach well ahead of the hunters. Sky and Sea wailed in her arms but she couldn't spare the moment to calm them.

Splashing through the surf, her head snapped from side to side, searching the water for anything alive. She found nothing but black sand and murky waters until a dead bass washed ashore at her feet. Though she'd never be able to divine an answer with it, some have said that even rotten, lifeless flesh held a certain power. There was great suffering to be harvested from death.

She leaned over, ignoring the firestorm in her belly, cradling her children the best she could in one arm, and plucked the slippery fish from the beach.

Xoco squeezed the creature in her hand, felt it squish between her fingertips while chanting: "Sea and Sky, lend us your protection. Just as you saw our need at the hour of delivery, now too we require your assistance."

A fog of gnats, of flies, of sickly dark smoke rose out of the carcass in her hand. It began to gather and thicken as four Gambi warriors charged out of the bushes. Xoco could make out terrified noises drifting back from Kimpana.

And without waiting, the swarm of insects and malice charged at the nearest warrior. It engulfed his head and beneath the shroud of their bodies, Xoco could make out blood burgeoning where they nipped and bit and clawed with unearthly skill. Flesh fell away as they gnawed on his skull. The horror of the sight was paralleled only by the wail that escaped his mouth.

The other three warriors were aghast. Fueled by fear and newfound hatred, they turned to Xoco. The dead fish, the gods, they had done her bidding and still it was not enough.

The nearest warrior swung a club that smashed against her temple. A blinding white light. And then darkness.

#

Movement. Xoco's body shifted and pitched, as though being carried. Light stained red through her eyelids. Then she heard her children crying and the world flooded back in on her. When she opened her eyes, Xoco saw the sky -- blue with great, billowing clouds, carefree, distant.

She realized that she *was* being carried. Her arms and legs were bound with rope of woven tapa. Another encircled her midsection and secured her to the makeshift litter she rode, carried by two Gambi warriors. When she tried to speak, to ask permission to feed her babies, Xoco tasted cloth in her mouth. She could only moan and half-shout to let them know that she was awake.

Her efforts garnered no response. Sea and Sky were getting angry at being ignored, and Xoco's breasts leaked from their mewling.

The Gambi at her head said something to the four other warriors that trailed behind. One of them held her children with obvious disdain. Xoco wanted to break his back.

It wasn't until she lifted her head, to fully glare at him, that she observed where they were taking her. The terrain had steadily become less green, more inclined. Volcanic rocks appeared in greater numbers and she noticed their elevation was increasing. It was a path none of the Kimpana were allowed to walk, but one Xoco had envisioned in a thousand dreams. They were taking her up the mountain of prayers.

Xoco tried to imagine what they intended to do with her, why they had come into Kimpana looking specifically for her and the babies. From her experience with the Shaman, Xoco could only think of one thing that these warriors would want with her. But they must know she had just born twin children. Surely she wasn't the most attractive object of their desire; surely there was someone more suitable. And then Xoco felt immense shame. She had come dangerously close to wishing her torment on another woman of the village and that was something she would curse no Kimpana with. The village had turned away from her family's pain in order to benefit from the Shaman's works, but no woman deserved to be any man's pet, to be used to satisfy the flesh and then discarded.

The Gambi were conversing now. Xoco wished she knew what they were saying. When Sea let out a cry of renewed strength, the lead Gambi growled something at the man holding the twins who then quite scornfully started to bounce them up and down, attempting to calm them. It only riled them more.

A warrior leaned over Xoco and scowled. "Shut up," he stammered. Xoco first thought he was talking to her, but then she realized he was referring to the children. He wanted her to shut *them* up. She gestured with her bound hands and the warrior scowled and cut the rope. Xoco reached for her gag, but the man holding the litter's base shook his head dangerously at her in warning.

Xoco shifted a bit, slid the rope down to her waist so she could sit up, if awkwardly, and then motioned for the warrior to hand her Sea and Sky. They walked in silence as Xoco fed the twins.

Xoco did her best to focus on her children. She played with their tiny fists, ran her fingers delicately through their soft tufts of hair, inhaled their sweet fragrance. If she never saw them again, Xoco intended to take every last detail of the twins with her into the afterlife.

The day was spent traversing the switchbacks. They led her up the mountain backwards so she couldn't see what approached. Near sunset, when the sun painted the sky with blood and fire, they reached the summit. For some time Xoco had heard the sounds of struggling, a female voice, drifting down the slope and now they grew louder. It set her on edge. Whatever they planned to do to her, they had already begun on someone else. Xoco wondered if anyone would ever find her up there, if they'd even think to look. It probably wouldn't be until the Shaman returned to the mountain, to summon the elements that would again feed their village for a time. He'd find her body splayed and battered, feasted upon by maggots.

But when they turned her around, Xoco saw that the Shaman was already there. He leaned over a woman, a fist full of her hair in his hand, a dagger in the other. It only took one scream for Xoco to realize who lay on the ground; she pulled the gag from her mouth.

Xoco slipped free of the rope about her waist and stood. "Mother!"

A Gambi turned and kicked Xoco in the back driving the wind from her lungs, knocking her to her knees. It was all Xoco could do to keep the twins in her grip. Miraculously, they didn't cry. They just lay in her arms in divine peace, oblivious to the danger around them, counting on their mother's protection.

"Welcome, daughter," said the Shaman. Then he spat what sounded like an order to the Gambi holding Xoco. A warrior untied her feet and released her. Since when could he speak Gambi, and why were they obeying his commands?

"Mother, are you all right?" asked Xoco. She looked to where her mother lay on the ground, her head pitched forward so that the hair not clenched in the Shaman's fist hung in a curtain to the ground, blocking her face. Soft moans issued from her direction. All the while, the Shaman grinned above her.

"What are you doing with these Gambi warriors, Shaman?" Her head pounded; her abdomen burned. Xoco gathered the strength from deep within. "They harass our village, steal our chickens and tools, all the while you pray to the gods to save us from them."

His grin melted into a sneer. "I explain myself to no one, Daughter. The Kimpana, the Gambi, you, your children," then he looked down at Mother who quivered beneath him, "this creature. You are all mine, my possessions. And a master does not explain his actions to slaves."

His confidence was terrifying. But Xoco had her children to fight for, a village of oppressed people.

"You are finished, Shaman. The gods have sent Sea and Sky to finish you."

The Shaman laughed, a mirthless and cold sound. "You speak of your vision? That pathetic prayer on the beach? Did you actually mean to deify those abominations in your arms?"

Though Xoco said nothing, she could not keep the surprise from showing on her face.

"Oh yes," he said. "I know. You play with fish and fire, surely you didn't think to keep such a thing from me?"

Mother raised her head; her eyes found Xoco's. Her face was withered and worn, old, wrinkled, ravaged by the smooth scars of long-healed burns, devoid of life. Blood gushed from her mouth like an upturned cup. And then Xoco realized why Mother hadn't said anything -- her tongue had been cut out.

The Shaman pushed the point of his dagger through Mother's throat, sliding the length of it into flesh, hilt deep, until pink metal poked through the back. With a wrenching twist of his wrist, her head rolled off onto the ground. Blood spilled everywhere.

"No!" Xoco screamed and lurched forward. Gambi warriors held her by the arms. Xoco watched as the Shaman chanted soundlessly; she saw the last fragments of gray dissolve from his hair, she noticed the creases and cracks of his face fill and the skin of his body grow tight and reinvigorated. He was becoming younger.

Without thought, Xoco clutched Sea and Sky to her chest tighter than before, rocking them, cocooning them with her body.

Blood had splattered onto the Shaman's face and he wiped at it with the back of his forearm, spreading the crimson fluid in a sinister smear across his cheeks. His eyes were large, white, and wild, like a cougar finding an antelope, an eagle spotting a trout. Drunk with bloodlust, he sauntered to where Xoco kneeled. She hardly noticed the burning below her waist. It was such a distant, insignificant wound.

"They'll come looking for us," said Xoco. "When we don't return, they'll send a search party of spearmen."

Xoco felt the power emanating from him, the cold heat of a malformed prayer. It wasn't the sweet caresses that had come to her when she spoke with the gods. It was a harsh, unforgiving presence that prickled her skin.

He grabbed Xoco by the chin, as he often did. His voice was almost sweet, sincere. "I am the hunting party. After the Gambi took you, as I asked them to, I assured the Kimpana that I would come and find you. Tragically, I was too late as your mother already died. You, too, unfortunately didn't make it. Run through by a Gambi spear."

There came chuckling behind her.

Bittersweet vindication swept over Xoco. "And how will you summon the rain without me, without Mother? How will you conjure your prayers without our suffering? You need us."

"No Daughter, I don't. I did at one time, that is true. But you've given me fresh blood. I will kill you, as I killed your mother. I will take from you whatever life you've got left. But your children will live."

Nausea, dizziness. Xoco found it hard to breath. Sweat glistened all over her body.

"No," she hissed.

"Oh yes, child."

And as fast as the lightning inked into his face, the Shaman's hands darted out and stole the twins from Xoco's arms. She lunged forward, but Gambi warriors held her down.

He walked back to Mother's corpse, splashed through the small puddle now congealing around the stump of her neck, sending dirt, muddied from her blood, flying in all directions. He was like a child playing after a rainstorm.

"And the Kimpana will love me for it. 'Oh, poor Shaman. He arrived too late to save his wife and daughter. But look what he returned. Sea and Sky themselves!'"

It was almost too much for Xoco as she sensed the truth in his words. The Kimpana would be fooled. They would let themselves be fooled. Because though the Shaman brought darkness for some, onto others he shined only light, and staring into the sun harbors no shadows.

"The gods cannot allow this. Not this."

The Shaman waved the dagger around as he danced. "A little cut here, a little slice there. Off comes a toe, out comes an eye. Two twisted, deformed bodies and enough suffering to drive the tide."

Xoco thought of her Mother, of their last night together on the beach when Xoco had felt pain and called to her and she had come to help. She thought of their talk of gods and deliverance. She remembered her mother saying that Xoco was strong. Now mother lay dead at the hands of the Shaman. Xoco would be next, and then later, so would her twin girls.

There burned a righteous anger in her gut.

"You are a worthless, cowardly man."

The Shaman froze. His body spun on his heels to face Xoco as though from foot to head he was chiseled from one piece of granite.

"What did you say?" His voice was quiet but lethal, a snake lying coiled in the grass. Xoco felt something sinister mounting, like thickening air before a storm. The fine hair on her arms and neck stood on end. But it was too late to stop; she was too furious.

"Urinate on the ground and at least you can use that mud to patch the walls of a hut. You are worse than that," she spat. "You are piss-mud without the dirt."

Even if the Gambi standing behind her couldn't understand her words, they seemed to recognize the reddening of the Shaman's face. Xoco heard them pull long knives from their belts. The knife tips pressed painfully against Xoco's back.

"Maybe I won't let these mutants take your place," whispered the Shaman. "Maybe I'll keep you around after all."

Xoco's heart constricted at this. She hadn't realized how much she was looking forward to death, an afterlife without the Shaman. But she couldn't leave her children alone with him.

The Shaman's gaze connected with Xoco's. His eyes were clouded over and distant. Xoco knew that, even now, the suffering he inflicted in her was strengthening him.

Finally, he said, "I wonder what we should do with them, then?"

And grabbing an ankle of both Sea and Sky, he pulled the twins in opposite directions, ripping them apart. Xoco froze. Her mind stopped. Her eyes barely registered the arc of blood that shot into the air, that misted and caught up in the wind and painted the ground red with its volume. The sound of cracking bones and tearing flesh resonated and pounded in her ears and she thought she'd never hear anything else ever again.

The Shaman leaned his head back, a near orgasmic expression spreading across his face. He dropped her daughters on the dirt. Xoco felt him drinking her strength like the dry ground after a rain.

So much suffering; he could destroy the world.

But she felt something else, too, float over her: comforting, vindictive whispers in her ear.

The Shaman had made one mistake, she realized. With every cut dug into Xoco's flesh, the well of her pain grew deeper. Each night she wept on the floor of his hut, ten lifetimes of torment bottled themselves in her skull. For each toll of suffering he extracted to work his wonders, he left a thousand scars on her soul. And now her mother. Her babies.

There was a great power in suffering, and Xoco had plenty in reserve.

"Sea and Sky, take me. Let me be your avatar." She prayed to the gods, her children. She prayed for deliverance.

Unlike the other times when the gods drifted lightly over her, Xoco felt their presence consume her like an inferno. It was immediate, intense, painful.

The Shaman must have heard her prayer, must have noticed the change in her posture, for his smile was abruptly replaced by confusion.

"What have you--"

But there was no time for him to finish. Without even standing, without so much as a thought, Xoco flung out a hand toward him. Great coils of black lightning, thick as tree trunks, howling, crackling, lit from her fingertips and slammed into his chest. It wrenched torso from legs and the two pieces of the Shaman landed a hundred paces from each other; a ghastly spray of gore and bone fragments fountained into the air.

Xoco stumbled over to where her twins lay lifeless, their backs torn out like gutted fish, her tattooed heart a split mess of black ink. She removed her sarong, unashamed by her nakedness, and wrapped them tightly in it, held them to her chest. She pleaded with the gods, then. Asked them to assist her, begged them for help. I will give you anything, my life, she thought. And she felt the last of her strength drifting through her body, soaking through her arms and into the twins until, finally, she felt them stir in her arms.

The Gambi warriors, previously transfixed by the afternoon's gore, saw Xoco rise, saw the twins draw new breath. They dropped spears and fled but their legs could not carry them fast enough.

The twins renewed her.

Xoco spun to warriors, one arm clutching the babies to her breasts, the other sending a plume of fire and death that leapt from man to man, consuming each one's skin and bones, before leaping to the next. With them, off toward the Gambi village, she sent a message. The clear sky clouded and drops of fire rained down, torching trees and farms. She heard screaming echoed up the mountainside.

Xoco walked down the mountain with Sky and Sea. What had taken the warriors all day to carry her up took less than an hour for her to descend. Her feet glided over stone and debris and the path cleared itself at her approach. She rocked Sea and Sky softly in her arms. The wounds along their backs had closed up. Their pallid flesh had pinked.

When Xoco arrived, the Kimpana had gathered in the village center. They had seen the lightning and fire on the mountaintop. They had heard the thunder.

"The Shaman is dead," proclaimed Xoco. "I killed him."

There were gasps. Mothers clung to protectively to their children and brave men trembled. When the old woman Lavria stepped forward, the Kimpana gathered behind her.

"Xoco, we were not proud of what your father did to you, but what could we do? We were powerless to stop him. We needed him for our food, for our protection. What will we do now that he is gone? Where will we find another like him? Surely you cannot blame us?"

And despite her hope, Xoco knew then that they had not changed, that they were still willing to sacrifice the lives of others to make theirs filled with ease.

"I *can* blame you," she said. "The Shaman presented you with two options. Eat of his fruit, his meat, his grain and allow the torment of his family. Or work, eat honest fruit and meat, and deliver his family from the evil of his works."

Xoco turned from them. "And you each chose evil."

"What of the Gambi?"

"They have been taken care of."

There was silence then. Xoco looked to the mountaintop where smoke and ash signaled the volcano's awakening. It would coat the land in dust but would harm no one. It was a sign, then. A monument to the events that had just transpired there.

"I'm sorry, Xoco," said Lavria. The sincerity cut to Xoco's heart. Surprised tears filled her eyes and she felt grateful for her turned back, grateful that no one would see them being shed.

"I am not one of you anymore," said Xoco. "The land will be difficult for you. You will labor hard to cultivate your fields. The fish will evade your nets. The rain will dry up. Yet, to live, you will work harder. You will fish longer. You will break your backs to plow rows for maize. This is your punishment and the mountain seals it."

Xoco took a step, and then another, content to leave the village behind. She had no attachment to this plot of earth, this particular dirt. With her mother dead, there was nothing left of her family here.

"Where will you go?" asked Lavria.

"Out. Into the world," said Xoco. "I delivered my children so that they could show me how to deliver my people. And now I'm free of this place. We're free."

She walked all night, never looking back.

Sea and Sky nuzzled her as she traveled. They had not been the wrathful gods that Xoco had envisioned, but they had been instruments of freedom, for it was their lives that enabled Xoco to tap the torment she had hidden deep inside.

As she walked, she felt the presence of the gods flake off her like dew evaporating in the morning sunlight. It was the pain, the horror that had fueled it. Like her arms, that void of suffering had been filled with something much more potent. Sea and Sky, forgiveness, freedom.

And she was happy for it.



Artwork by James Owen

To Know All Things That Are in the Earth

by James Maxey

Allen Frost assumed the first cherub he spotted was part of the restaurant's Valentine's decorations. He and Mary sat on the enclosed patio at Zorba's. He'd taken a pause to sip his wine when he first saw the cherub behind the string of red foil hearts that hung in the window. The cherub was outside, looking like a baby doll with a pair of pasted-on wings.

A second cherub fluttered down, wings flapping. A third descended to join them, then a fourth. Allen thought it was a little late in the evening to still be putting up decorations, but he appreciated the work someone had put into the dolls. Their wings moved in a way that struck him as quite realistic, if realistic was a word that could be used to describe a flying baby.

Then the first cherub punched the window and the glass shattered. Everyone in the room started screaming. The cherubs darted into the restaurant, followed by a half dozen more swooping from the sky. Mary jumped up, her chair falling. Before it clattered against the tile floor, a cherub had grabbed her arm. She shrieked, hitting it with her free hand, trying to knock it loose, until another cherub grabbed her by the wrist.

Allen lunged forward, grabbing one of the cherubs by the leg, trying to pull it free. He felt insane -- the higher parts of his brain protested that this couldn't be happening. Nonetheless, his sensory, animal self knew what was real. His fingers were wrapped around the warm, soft skin of a baby's leg. White swan wings held the infant aloft. A ring of golden light the size of a coffee cup rim hovered above the angel's wispy locks. The whole room smelled of ozone and honeysuckle. The cherub's fat baby belly jiggled as Allen punched it.

The angel cast a disapproving gaze at Allen, its dark blue eyes looking right down to Allen's soul. Allen suddenly stopped struggling. He felt inexplicably naked and ashamed in the face of this creature. He averted his eyes, only to find himself staring at the angel's penis, the tiny organ simultaneously mundane and divine and rude. He still had a death grip on the cherub's leg. Gently, the cherub's stubby hands wrapped around Allen's middle and ring fingers. The cherub jerked Allen's fingers back with a SNAP, leaving his fingernails flat against the back of his wrist.

Allen fell to his knees in pain. Mary vanished behind a rush of angels, a flurry of wings white as the cotton in a bottle of aspirin. Her screams vanished beneath the flapping cacophony. Somewhere far in the distance, a trumpet sounded.

#

The Rapture was badly timed for Allen Frost. He taught biology at the local community college while working on his doctorate. This semester, he had a girl in his class, Rachael Young, who wouldn't shut up about intelligent design. She monopolized his classroom time. Her endless string of leading questions were thinly disguised arguments trying to prove Darwin was crap. He'd been blowing off steam about Rachael when he'd said something really stupid, in retrospect.

"People who believe in intelligent design are mush-brained idiots," he said. "The idea that some God --"

"I believe in God," Mary said.

"But, you know, not in *God* God," Allen explained. "You're open-minded. You're spiritual, but not religious."

Mary's eyes narrowed into little slits. "I have very strong beliefs. You just never take the time to listen to them."

Allen sighed. "Don't be like this," he said. "I'm only saying you're not a fundamentalist."

Mary still looked wounded.

Allen felt trapped. Most of the time, he and Mary enjoyed a good relationship. They agreed on so much. But when talk turned to religion, he felt, deep in his heart, they were doomed. Their most heartfelt beliefs could never be reconciled.

Allen lifted his wineglass to his lips and took a long sip, not so much to taste the wine as to shut up before he dug his hole any deeper. He turned his attention to the cherubs outside the window. Then his brains turned to mush.

Because, when you're wrestling an angel -- its powerful wings beating the air, its dark, all-knowing eyes looking right through you -- you can't help but notice evolution really doesn't explain such a creature. The most die-hard atheist must swallow his pride and admit the obvious. An angel is the product of intelligent design.

#

A year after the Rapture, Allen tossed his grandmother's living room furniture onto the lawn, then whitewashed the floor.

When he was done, Allen went out to the porch to read while the floor dried. It had been four hours, eleven minutes since he'd put his current book down. He'd grown addicted to reading, feeling as uncomfortable without a book in hand as a smoker without a cigarette. He purchased his reading material, and the occasional groceries, with income he made reading tarot cards; he was well known to his neighbors as a magician. He always informed his hopeful visitors he didn't know any real magic. They came anyway. The arcane symbols painted all over the house gave people certain ideas about him.

The books that lined the shelves of his library only added to his reputation for mysticism. He was forever studying some new system of magic -- from voodoo to alchemy to cabala. Much of the global economy had collapsed after the Rapture, but supernatural literature experienced a boom.

He did most of his trading over the internet. The world, for the most part, was intact. It wasn't as if the angels came down and ripped out power lines or burned cities. They had simply dragged off God's chosen. No one was even certain how many people were gone -- some said a billion, but the official UN estimate was a comically understated one hundred thousand. The real hit to the economy came in the aftermath of the rapture; a lot of people didn't show up for work the next day. Allen suspected he could have found a reason to do his job if he'd been a fireman or a cop or a doctor. But a biology teacher? There was no reason for him to get out of bed. He'd spent the day hugging Mary's pillow, wondering how he'd been so wrong. He spent the day after that reading her Bible.

He hadn't understood it. Even in the aftermath of the Rapture, it didn't make sense to him. So he'd begun reading books written to explain the symbolic language of the Bible, which later led him to study cabala, which set him on his quest to understand the world he lived in by understanding its underlying magical foundations.

Jobless, unable to pay his rent, he'd moved into his grandmother's abandoned house where he'd studied every book he could buy, trade or borrow to learn magic. So far, every book was crap. Alchemy, astrology, chaos magic, witchcraft -- bullshit of the highest order. Yet, he kept reading. He tested the various theories, chanting spells, mixing potions, and divining tea leaves. He was hungry for answers. How did the world really work? Pre-rapture, science answered that question.

But science, quite bluntly, had been falsified. The army of angels had carried away his understanding of the world.

Allen now lived in a universe unbounded by natural laws. He lived in a reality where everything was possible. Books were his only maps into this terra incognita.

The whitewash dried, leaving a blank sheet twenty feet across. It was pristine as angel wings. Allen crept carefully across it, having bathed his feet in rainwater. He wore pale, threadbare cotton. He'd shaved his head, even his eyebrows. The only dark things in the room were his eyes and the shaft of charcoal he carried. He crouched, recited the prayer he'd studied, then used his left hand to trace the outer arc of the summoning circle. The last rays of daylight faded from the window. His goal, before dawn, was to speak with an angel.

With the circle complete, he started scribing arcane glyphs around its edges. This part was nerve-wracking; a single misplaced stroke could ruin the spell. When the glyphs were done, Allen filled the ring with questions. Where was Mary? Would he see her again? Was there hope of reunion? These and a dozen other queries were marked in shaky, scrawled letters. His hand ached. His legs cramped from crouching. He pushed through the pain to craft graceful angelic script.

It was past midnight when he finished. He placed seven cones of incense along the edge of the circle and lit them. The air smelled like cheap after-shave.

He retrieved the polished sword from his bedroom and carried it into the circle, along with Solomon's Manual. He opened to the bookmarked incantation. Almost immediately, a bright light approached the house. Shadows danced on the wall. A low, bass rumble rattled the windows.

A large truck with no muffler was clawing its way up the gravel driveway.

Disgusted by the interruption, Allen stepped outside the circle and went to the front porch, book and sword still in hand. The air was bracing -- the kind of chill February night where every last bit of moisture has frozen out of the sky, leaving the stars crisp. The bright moon cast stark shadows over the couch, end-tables, and lamps cluttering the lawn.

Allen lived in the mountains of southern Virginia, miles from the nearest town. His remote location let him know all his neighbors -- and the vehicle in his driveway didn't belong to any of them. It was a flatbed truck. Like many vehicles these days, it was heavily armed. A gunner sat on the back, manning a giant machinegun bolted to the truck bed. The fact that the gunner sat in a rocking chair took an edge from the menace a gun this large should have projected. Gear and luggage were stacked on the truck bed precariously. A giant, wolfish dog stood next to the gunner, its eyes golden in the moonlight.

The truck shuddered to a halt, the motor sputtering into silence. Loud bluegrass music seeped through the cab windows. It clicked off, and the passenger door opened. A woman got out, dressed in camouflage fatigues. She looked toward the porch, where Allen stood in shadows, then said, "Mr. Frost?"

Allen assumed they were asking about his grandfather. The mailbox down at the road still bore his name -- his grandmother never changed it after he died, nor had Allen bothered with it after his grandmother had vanished.

"If you're looking for Nathan Frost, he died years ago."

"No," the woman said, in a vaguely familiar voice. "Allen Frost."

"Why do you want him? Who are you?"

"My name is Rachael Young," she answered.

The voice and face clicked. The intelligent design girl from his last class. "Oh," he said. "Yes. You've found me."

The driver's door opened and closed. A long-haired man with a white beard down to his waist came around the front of the truck. "Well now," the old man said, in a thick Kentucky accent. "You're the famous science fella."

"Famous?" asked Allen.

"My granddaughter's been talking you up for nigh on a year," said Old Man Young. "Says you're gonna have answers."

"We looked all over for you," said Rachael. "The college said you'd gone to live with your grandmother in Texas."

"Texas? I don't have any relatives in Texas."

"No shit," the gunner on the flatbed said. "Been all over this damn country, chasin' one wild goose after another. You better not be a

waste of our time." The dog beside him began to snarl as it studied Allen.

"Luke," said Old Man Young. "Mind your language. Haul down the ice-chest."

"Sorry we got here so late, Mr. Frost," Rachael said, walking toward him. She was looking at the sword and book. "Have we, uh, interrupted something?"

"Maybe," Allen said. "Look, I'm a little confused. Why, exactly, have you been looking for me?"

"You're the only scientist I trust," she said. "When we used to have our conversations in class, you always impressed me. I really respected you. You knew your stuff. Since your specialty is biology, we want you to look at what we've got in the cooler and tell us what it is."

Allen wasn't sure what struck him as harder to swallow -- that she'd spent a year tracking him down, or that she remembered the tedious cross-examinations she'd subjected him to as conversations.

Luke, the gunner, hopped off the truck carrying a large green Coleman cooler. It made sloshing noises as he lugged it to the porch. Luke was middle-aged, heavyset, crew cut. Rachael's father?

Luke placed the container at Rachael's feet. Rachael leaned over and unsnapped the clasp. "Get ready for a smell," she said, lifting the lid.

Strong alcohol fumes washed over the porch. Allen's eyes watered. The fumes carried strange undertones -- corn soaked in battery acid, plus a touch of rotten teeth, mixed with a not-unpleasant trace of cedar.

"We popped this thing into Uncle Luke's moonshine to preserve it," Rachael said.

Despite the moonlight, it was too dark for Allen to make out what he was looking at. Rachael stepped back, removing her shadow from the contents. Allen was horrified to find these crazy people had brought him the corpse of a baby with a gunshot wound to its face. The top of its head was missing. The baby was naked, bleached pale by the brew in which it floated. There was something under it, paler still, like a blanket. Only, as his eyes adjusted, Allen realized the baby wasn't sharing the cooler with a blanket, but with some kind of bird -- he could make out the feathers.

When he finally understood what he was looking at, his hands shook so hard he dropped his sword, and just missed losing a toe.

#

Allen lit the oil lamps while Luke lugged the cooler into the kitchen. Allen only had a couple of hours worth of gasoline left for the generator; he wanted to save every last drop until he was ready to examine the dead cherub. While Luke sat the corpse in the sink to let the alcohol drain off, Allen gathered up all the tools he thought he might need -- knives, kitchen shears, rubber gloves, Tupperware. Rachael was outside, taking care of the dog, and Old Man Young was off, in his words, "to secure the perimeter."

"That means he's gone to pee," Rachael had explained once her grandfather was out of earshot.

To take notes during the autopsy, Allen found a black Sharpie and a loose-leaf notebook half filled with notes he'd made learning ancient Greek. As he flipped to a blank page, he said, "I can't believe you shot one of these. I thought they were invulnerable. I saw video where a cop emptied his pistol into one. The bullets bounced off."

"Invulnerable?" Luke asked. "Like Superman?"

"Sure. Bulletproof."

"You think a brick wall is invulnerable?" Luke asked.

"Is this a rhetorical question?"

"Suppose you took a tack hammer to brick wall," Luke said. "Would it be invulnerable?"

"Close to it," said Allen.

"How about a sledgehammer?" asked Luke.

"Then, no, of course not."

"A cop's pistol is a tack hammer," said Luke, as he freed the rifle slung over his shoulder. "This is a sledgehammer. .50-caliber. Single shot, but one is all I need. This thing will punch a hole through a cast iron skillet."

He nodded toward the cherub draining in the sink. "This pickled punk never stood a chance."

"Not a particularly reverent man, are you Luke?" said Allen. "That's pretty harsh language to be calling an angel."

The back door to the kitchen opened and Rachael came in, followed by Old Man Young.

"Whatever the hell this is," said Luke, "it ain't no damn angel."

"It looks like an angel," said Allen. "I got up close to one during the Rapture."

"Shut your fool mouth!" snapped Old Man Young. To punctuate his sentence, he spat on the floor. "*Rapture*. Rachael, I thought this fella was smart."

"He *is* smart," said Rachael.

"He's a mush-brained idiot if he thinks the Rapture has happened," Old Man Young said.

Allen was confused. "You think it hasn't?"

"I'm still here, ain't I?" Old Man Young said. "I've been washed in the blood of the lamb, boy. I'm born again! When the Rapture comes, I'm gonna be borne away!"

Allen cast a glance at the sink. "Maybe Luke shot your ride."

"Naw," said Luke. "I was at the Happy Mart when this little monster started dragging off some Hindu guy. I ran to the truck and got Lucille." Luke patted the rifle. "Saved that fella from a fate worse than death."

"But --" said Allen.

"But nothing!" Old Man Young said. "Second Samuel, 14:20, says that it is the wisdom of angels to know all things that are in the earth!"

"A real angel would have known to duck," said Luke.

"And it wasn't the Rapture," said Rachael. "The creatures took people at random. Yeah, they grabbed some self-proclaimed Christians. But they also took Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and Scientologists. They took Tom Cruise right in the middle of shooting a film."

"Yeah," said Allen. "I saw that."

"Heaven ain't open to his kind," said Old Man Young.

"So how do you explained what happened?" asked Allen.

"Demons," said Old Man Young.

"Aliens, maybe," said Rachael.

"Government black ops," said Luke.

Allen had heard these theories before, and a dozen others. The Young's weren't the first people to disbelieve the Rapture. None of the alternative explanations made sense. Genetic manipulation gone awry, mass psychosis, a quantum bleed into an alternate reality - all required paranoid pretzel logic to work. He was still scientist enough to employ Occam's Razor, cutting away all the distracting

theories to arrive at the simplest conclusion: God did it.

"I admit, what happened doesn't match popular ideas of the Rapture," Allen said. "I've studied Revelations in the original Greek, and can't make everything line up. I'm no longer convinced any ancient text has a complete answer. But I get little glimpses of insight from different sources. Maybe God used to try to communicate with Mankind directly. Maybe he spoke as clearly as possible, in God language, but people weren't up to the task of understanding him. They all came away with these little shards of truth; no one got the big picture."

"Son, I'm up to the task of understanding," said Old Man Young. "The good ol' King James Version spells out everything. If you don't understand, you don't want to understand."

"If you think it was the Rapture," asked Rachael, "why would God have been so random? He took rich and poor, young and old, the kind and the wicked. It makes no sense."

"To us," said Allen. "But when I was a senior at State, I helped out on this big study involving mice. We did some blood work, identified mice with the required genes, then separated them from the general population and took them to a different lab. I wonder if the mice left behind sat around wondering why they weren't chosen. They would never understand our reasons."

"That's your theory?" asked Rachael. "We're lab mice?"

"No. But maybe the gap between our intellect and God's mind is larger than the gap between man and mice. Our inability to understand His selection criteria doesn't mean He acted at random."

"Son, you're proving what I always say," said Old Man Young. "Thinking too much makes you stupid."

Allen nodded. "Thinking too much hasn't made me any wiser or happier."

"Don't pay attention to Grandpa," said Rachael. "We need a thinker. We need someone who can study this body and tell us what it is."

"Why didn't you take it to the cops?" asked Allen.

"If the government knew we had this, we'd already be dead," Luke said.

Rachael frowned. "I think we might be endangering the world by not showing this to the government. Not that there's much government left."

"Which is more proof it weren't the Rapture," said Old Man Young. "No Antichrist."

Which was true. America had been through eight presidents in the last year. Anyone displaying even modest leadership skills quickly became a target of the legions of Antichrist stalkers roaming the capitals of the world. What was left of day to day civilization was staggering on more due to momentum than competent leadership.

"This is what the Illuminati want," said Luke. "Chaos. When they seize power, people will kiss their asses with gratitude."

"Since Uncle Luke shot it, he gets to decide who sees it," said Rachael. "Also, it's his cooler."

"I'm not the trusting sort," Luke said. "But Rachael says you're a good guy, and smart."

Allen rubbed his temples. "You think I'll know the difference between an alien, a demon, or a black-ops sci-fi construct?"

All three Youngs looked at him hopefully.

"Okay," he said. "I'll go power up the generator."

"I'll come with you," said Rachael. "Jeremiah's stalking around out there and you don't want to run into him alone."

"Jeremiah?"

"Our dog," said Luke. "He's killed more men than I have."

For a second, Allen considered whether the oil lanterns might not provide enough light after all. Then, he clenched his jaw and headed for the back door. If you're going to cut open an angel, you may as well do the job right.

#

The corpse looked slightly yellow under electric light. Allen weighed the angel on his bathroom scale and found it barely topped ten pounds. Aerodynamics wasn't his specialty, but the cherub's wings seemed slightly more plausible. Swan-sized wings could support a swan, after all, and they weighed more than ten pounds.

Allen started his exam in the obvious place -- the hollow bowl of the skull. He'd never dissected a human before, but what was left of the cranium looked normal. It was bone. He recognized bone. Somehow, he'd expected angels to be crafted of material more grand.

His first real clue he was well outside the realm of known biology was when he took a close look at the torn skin peeling away from the skull. He found a visible, subcutaneous layer of something that shouldn't have been there, on a human body at least. It was a thin, fibrous material, like cloth. He tugged on a frayed thread carefully with his tweezers. He couldn't pull a strand of the tightly knitted material free. He could see, though, that it was porous -- blood vessels and nerve fibers ran through it. Whatever this was, it had grown under the skin, rather than being implanted.

"I've never seen anything like this."

"I've eyeballed it up close," said Luke. "It looks like Kevlar. Sort of."

"Score one for black-ops," said Allen, pausing to jot a few notes.

"Aliens could use Kevlar too," said Rachael. "Stuff better than Kevlar."

Allen moved on to the wings. After twelve months soaking in moonshine, they had a dull, grayish tone to them. It wasn't difficult to pull a feather free. Without the body on the butcher's block, he would have supposed he was looking at a seagull feather. Intuitively, this made sense. If God had designed feathers as the perfect tool of flight, why not use the same blueprint for both angel and bird?

But flight wasn't simply a matter of having feathers, as any chicken could attest. A cherub's chest didn't have the depth to support the muscles to power these wings, did it?

He flipped the cherub over and felt its breasts. The muscles under the soggy skin were rock hard. He noted the cherub had nipples and a belly button. Was God simply fond of this look? Or was there a cycle of life in Heaven? Angel fetuses developing in angel wombs, angel babes suckling at the breasts of angel mothers?

He tried to cut open the cherub's chest. It proved impervious to the butcher knife.

"Try this," Luke said, handing him a folded knife. Allen flipped the knife open to reveal a ceramic blade, black as onyx and razor sharp.

"Fancy," said Allen. He tried it against the skin. The knife's edge scraped away the surface easily, but the subcutaneous material thwarted further advance. Whatever it was, it couldn't be pierced.

Not willing to give up, Allen tried a different approach. He peeled back the torn flesh of the skull and slipped the knife along the edge of the fibrous layer. To his delight, the torn edge yielded to the knife as he applied steady, firm pressure. Slowly, he worked the knife forward, peeling the flesh from the cherub's face, working his way down the throat. He discovered cherubs had tracheas and jugular veins. He confirmed they had collarbones. After a long, tedious operation, slicing the flesh a millimeter at a time, he peeled the angel's skin back from its torso and found . . . muscle. Bones. Fatty deposits.

Ordinary matter.

He stepped back from the table and stretched his neck. He'd been bent over the cherub a long time; his muscles were stiff.

"Want some water?" Rachael asked, breaking the silence.

"No, thank you," Allen said, staring at the flayed thing before him. It was a relief, in a way, to know what his nightmares would be for the rest of his life. An angel opened, peeled like the fetal pigs he'd taken apart in freshman biology. He had taken something divine, an occupant of Heaven, and treated it with all the respect he might show a frog in formaldehyde.

If he wasn't damned before, he certainly was now.

And yet . . . and yet he couldn't turn back. Blasphemous as it was, he was going to keep cutting. His need for knowledge overrode his fear of offending the divine. Who knew what his next cut might reveal?

The muscle of the chest looked like meat, but was dense and unyielding, even to the ceramic knife. He managed to scrape off several strands of the tough muscle fibers – he would have traded every book in the house for a microscope at that moment.

He tried the stomach. The muscle here was also impervious, but a thin gap of ligament beneath the ribs showed good results when he sawed at it with the knife. In less than five minutes, he'd cut a hole into the chest cavity.

He leaned over to peer inside, seeing nothing but gray, bleached tissue -- the angel's lungs? Of course, if it had a trachea, it would have lungs. As near as he could tell, with the exception of the bulletproof skin, the cherub was constructed like other animals. It had breathed air. It had fed its muscles with a complex network of arteries and veins. It commanded its body with a nervous system. What did this mean?

In frustration, completely ignoring any rational, measured approach, he dug his fingers into the cherub's chest and began to feel around. His fingers sent indecipherable signals as they pushed against objects both slimy and leathery, both hard and yielding. Was this the liver? His hand was buried to the wrist. These had to be intestines. This hard thing . . . a kidney? Feces in the gut? Clear fluid suddenly gushed from the penis. He'd found the bladder.

He turned his hand up, in search of the heart. Where the heart should have been, he found an egg.

At least, it felt like an egg, smooth, oval, hard, of a size that might earn it a Grade A Large. He wriggled his fingers around it, trying to get a better understanding. The angel gurgled as his efforts freed some last teaspoon of air from the lungs.

And then, with a *POP*, the egg came free. He closed his fingers and pulled it out with a sloppy, wet, farting sound.

His hand was covered with gray goop.

He opened his fingers to reveal something beautiful.

An ovoid object, gleaming yellow in the lamplight.

A golden egg.

Allen placed it in the Tupperware as everyone came over for a closer look.

"Told you," said Luke. "It's a cyborg. This is the power source."

"It's alien technology," Rachael said.

"The devil's handiwork," said Old Man Young.

Allen didn't know. Allen felt completely empty of opinion, thought, or emotion. Confronted with something so far beyond his understanding, he felt unreal. The egg, he'd held it, he could see it, it was reality. He must be the thing out of place.

Then, to compound his sense of unreality, the egg moved on its own power, rocking lengthwise, coming to rest upright on its small end, seeming, almost, to hover.

The lights flickered. Allen's skin tingled as the air began to smell of rain.

"What's happening?" Rachael asked.

The lights went out.

There was a terrible hush. No one breathed. Slowly, Allen's eyes adjusted to the dim starlight seeping through the window. The faces of his guests were pale and ghostlike.

At last, Rachael whispered, "I don't hear the generator."

Allen breathed. Right. The generator. "It must have run out of gas," he said. "I thought I had enough for a couple of hours."

"It's been a couple of hours," said Luke. "You needed more gas, you shoulda said something. I got a five gallon can in back of the truck."

"I'll help you get it," said Old Man Young.

"I'll come too. I need some fresh air," Rachael said.

Allen didn't know if the Young's were trying to ditch him, but he wasn't going to play along if they were. He didn't want to be alone in the kitchen with . . . with whatever the golden egg was.

They went out to the front yard. He waited with Rachael on the porch while Luke and the grandfather walked down to the truck.

He could tell she wanted him to say something. She wanted him to say there was nothing to be afraid of.

He couldn't bring himself to speak the words.

The moon was low on the horizon; fingers of shadow grasped the yard. The still air carried the footsteps of the men walking across the gravel. The winter night was silent otherwise. Except . . . except, from a distance, a soft beat, like a muffled drum being struck. Then another, somewhat louder, then louder still when it repeated an instant later. A shadow grew across the yard and Allen understood he was listening to angel wings.

Luke heard them too. He looked up, freeing the big rifle from his shoulder. He was looking at something Allen couldn't see, something hidden by the roof of the porch. The first angel floated into view, descending as gracefully as an owl coming to rest on a branch. This was nothing like the cherubs. This was an adult-sized angel on wings the size of a small plane. The angel's body was covered in silver armor, but enough of the face showed through the helmet that Allen judged the angel to be female. The sword by her side showed she had come for war.

Luke fired. The bullet smacked into the angel's breastplate. She didn't flinch, continuing her descent to earth, landing mere feet in front of Luke, who was hastily reloading. With a casual gesture, the angel extended her arm, catching Luke in the chest and throwing him backward, far past the end of the truck. Luke landed limp and didn't move.

With a sudden flap of wings, a second angel swooped down, kicking Old Man Young as he scrambled onto the truck bed, perhaps going for the mounted gun.

Allen grabbed Rachael by the arm and pushed her toward the door to the living room.

"The circle!" he said. "Get into it!"

He stooped to retrieve his sword and the Manual of Solomon from where he'd left them on the porch. He heard the angel wings behind him, beating once, twice. The light faded as the shadows cast by the angel's wings approached. Not daring to look back, Allen dashed through the door, leaping for the circle. He was relieved to find Rachael had placed herself inside the protective drawing without smudging the edges. Then he realized she was still moving; she had wound up in the circle purely by accident.

"Stop!" he yelled, and to his relief, she froze. "We're safe here. They can't touch us!"

"Are you sure?" she said, spinning around, looking panicked.

"No," said Allen. "But if we're not safe here, where can we run?"

He turned to face the doorway, and found it filled with the bright form of the angel. The angel walked calmly toward the circle, her eyes fixed on Allen. She approached to arm's length before stopping. Rachael clung tightly to Allen's arm, digging her nails into his biceps. Allen gripped the sword tightly, then thrust it forward and said, "I . . . I command you in the name of --"

The angel smirked, and swatted the tip of the sword with her gauntlet-clad hand. The force of the blow twisted the weapon from Allen's grasp, sending it clattering across the floor.

"You have no idea what you are doing," the angel said, walking around the circle, studying the symbols. Her voice was deep and operatic, heavenly. "You've copied this without understanding it."

"Yes," said Allen, seeing no advantage in lying.

The angel completed her orbit of the circle, nodding appreciatively. She asked, "If a shaman from deep in the jungle were to be transported to a modern city, would he think of writing as magic? He would have no idea what the letters spelling 'KEEP OUT' or 'EMERGENCY EXIT' might mean, only that people respected them, and stayed away. He might even learn to copy the strange symbols. Tell me: would that be magic?"

"If it isn't magic," Allen said, "I think you would already have killed us."

As he spoke, there was a distant sound of barking.

"Jeremiah!" said Rachael. "They'll kill him!"

Glancing back to the door, Allen saw the second angel stepping onto the porch. She had Old Man Young draped across her shoulder, and was dragging Luke by the collar. The barking grew closer by the second.

The second angel stepped through the door, tossing her limp passengers roughly into the corner. Allen saw Jeremiah round the truck and turn at a sharp angle, skidding in the gravel before bolting toward the house.

The angel closed the door with seconds to spare. Jeremiah collided with a *THUMP*. A brief instant of silence followed before the dog resumed his frantic barking, clawing at the door.

The first angel said to the second, "Get the body."

The second angel nodded and vanished into the kitchen.

The remaining angel drew her sword. The weapon burst into flame. Allen cringed from the heat, holding on to Rachael to keep her from leaving the circle.

"Let us pretend I can't enter your little drawing," the angel said. "Does that make you feel safe?"

"No," said Allen. "I haven't felt safe for a long time. I've been frightened. I've been lost. I want . . . I need answers."

"Answers?" said the angel. "You're drowning in answers. Every molecule of your body vibrates with answers. You don't lack answers. You lack the wisdom to recognize them. Tonight, you've cut open an angel. You've held its soul in your hands. What did you learn?"

"I don't know," said Allen.

"You have a few more minutes to think it over," said the angel, moving toward the interior wall. "Before the smoke kills you." With a solid thrust, the angel pushed her flaming sword through the wall. On the other side there was a bookcase. Allen heard books and papers crash to the floor. Instantly, the air smelled of smoke. Allen clenched his fists, wanting to run and pull the sword free, but fear nailed his feet to the floor.

The room took on an eerie hush. Old Man Young groaned in his unconsciousness. Rachael began to sob.

Allen noticed Jeremiah had stopped barking.

The living room window exploded inward, shards of glass flying, as a gray snarling streak of fur and teeth smashed through. The angel turned, quickly, fluidly, and a second too slow. Jeremiah buried his teeth into the angel's left wing at its junction with the back, an area free of armor.

The angel gasped, stumbling in pain, trying to knock Jeremiah free. Allen held his ground in the circle, reaching back to grab Rachael's hand.

But Rachael wasn't there.

The door to the living room slammed against the wall as she dashed down the porch steps.

Allen watched the fight between dog and angel. The angel reached back, grabbing Jeremiah by a hind leg, tugging. The angel's face twisted in terrible pain. Jeremiah hung on as long as he could, snarling, struggling, but the angel was too strong. Allen winced at the sound of bones cracking. Jeremiah yelped as the angel yanked him free. The angel spun, swinging the dog in an arc. Allen ducked to

avoid being knocked over. Then, by accident or design, the angel released Jeremiah in mid-swing and the dog sailed cleanly out the broken window.

By then Rachael was once again beside Allen, aiming the .50-caliber rifle.

"Nobody hurts my dog," she said, and fired. It was like lightning struck the room. The shot knocked Rachael off her feet, and left Allen with ringing ears and spots before his eyes.

A bright red circle appeared on the wall behind the angel's neck. The bare, armorless area just below her chin was dark and wet. The angel's eyes closed as she fell to her knees and sat there, slumped against the wall, her head drooped at an unnatural angle, her arms limp and lifeless by her side.

The room was filling with smoke. The second angel came back from the kitchen. Rachael fumbled with the bolt of the rifle, her hands trembling.

The second angel grabbed the body of the first, pulled the flaming sword from the wall and moved back into the kitchen. Allen heard the back door open. By now, the smoke was blinding.

Rachael slipped the new round into the chamber and closed it with a satisfying clack. "Ready," she said.

"I think . . . I think you chased them off," Allen said.

"I'm willing to take that chance," she said.

"Get outside. Watch the skies. I'll get your grandfather and your uncle."

By now, Old Man Young was coughing, and his eyes fluttered open. He whispered, "I heard . . . I heard Jeremiah. Is he okay?"

"Come on," Allen said, helping him rise. "The house is on fire!"

"Weren't we outside?" he asked, sounding only half-awake.

"Follow me," Allen said, dragging Luke toward the open door. To his relief, Old Man Young obeyed. Soon, Allen had dragged Luke down the front steps, down to the truck, where Rachael now manned the machinegun. Luke's breathing was ragged, but Allen didn't know how to help him. The main thing he knew about first aid was not to move a person who might have internal injuries, and he'd just dragged Luke fifty feet.

Allen scanned the skies. Bright white sparks flew into the night as flames nibbled through the roof. It wouldn't be long before the house was gone, taking his collected books, his months of notes and sweat and theories, to say nothing of his family history.

He took a deep breath and ran back inside.

The living room was oven hot. There wasn't much in here to burn, though -- just the floorboards and the wall studs. It was lucky he'd stripped the room down to drywall. He pushed forward, trying to reach the library, but it was no use. The heat from the open door was unbearable. The hair on his arms began to singe.

Allen stepped back, then staggered toward the kitchen. The back door stood open. Burning wallpaper lit the room a flickering red. Dark smoke rolled along the ceiling. He could see the butcher's block, now empty. The golden egg was gone.

Allen crouched, searching for fresher air. He noticed the wet red spot on the wall next to him. Angel blood.

Walls appear solid and impervious through most of daily life. In reality, most drywall is only an adult male fist and a surge of adrenaline away from having a good-sized hole knocked through it. Allen punched that hole, then a second, then a third. His knuckles were bleeding. He grabbed the edges of the punctured drywall, grunting as he tried to break free the section splattered with angel blood. The drywall wasn't on fire, but it was crazy hot. Allen wouldn't let go. He tugged with all his strength but the nails held tight. The wall was winning. In frustration, he screamed -- a primal, animal howl of rage and pain, a sound that frightened him.

With a crack, the drywall twisted free. Allen stumbled outside clutching a three-foot chunk of the stuff to his chest.

Allen sat on the frozen ground as the house behind him roared into the night sky. He was dimly aware that Luke was awake now, sitting next to the trunk, drinking something from a thermos. He was also distantly conscious of something walking toward him,

limping, panting, smelling like dog.

It *was* a dog. Jeremiah sat beside Allen. Allen looked into the dog's eyes. They were full of emotions, far more recognizable than what he'd seen in the eyes of the angel. Jeremiah was in obvious pain. Yet, Jeremiah looked concerned, as if worried about Allen's health. What's more, the dog had a cocky tilt to his head, and angel pinfeathers stuck between his teeth, which combined into reassuring vow of, "I've got your back."

Allen had angel blood all over his hands and chest. Or maybe it was his own blood after punching through the wall. He couldn't tell where his blood ended and the angel's began.

Blood. He'd expected angels to be full of divine secrets, to be filled with miraculous matter. Tonight he'd seen a hint of this, of things beyond his understanding. But, he'd seen far more things he'd understood intimately as a biologist -- muscle and bone and blood.

Every molecule of his body vibrated with answers. Did he have the wisdom to understand them?

Jeremiah left his side to greet Rachael, who was approaching. "You okay?" she asked.

"I think so," said Allen.

"I guess it's still an open question," she said. "Whether those were aliens, I mean."

"I don't think so," said Allen.

"Black ops?"

"No," said Allen. "I think they were angels. I think they were created by God."

"Oh," said Rachael.

"I thought they would be full of divine material," said Allen raising his bloody hands. "Of strange and wondrous stuff. And what if they were?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if they *were* made of divine material? What if we all are? You, me, Jeremiah. The ground under us, the sky above . . . what if what we think of as ordinary matter is actually the building blocks of the divine? The laws of biology, of physics, of chemistry -- these are the rules God follows. These are the ways He works His will. Science turns out to be the study of His divine mechanics."

As he said the words, he believed them. He didn't know if it was deduction, intuition, or simply faith, but he felt a powerful calm settle over him. He would probably never know the "why" of God. Why the Rapture? Why take Mary? Why create angels and men and dogs? Why the world? But the how -- the how was knowable. Before the detour of this past year, he'd learned with some detail the "how." He'd thought that angels falsified science. But, studying the angel blood on the drywall on the grass, he understood, in their ordinary matter, angels confirmed science as the path to understanding the mind of God.

"Uncle Luke thinks he's broken a couple of ribs," said Rachael, apparently not knowing how to respond to his little epiphany.

"There's a hospital in Roanoke," said Allen. "We can be there in an hour."

He stood up and carried the chunk of drywall carefully, hoping not to contaminate it more than it already was. The next step in understanding the angels was beyond Allen's expertise. But part of the fun of being a scientist was talking to people who knew a lot more than you did about their specialties. In retrospect, he'd botched the autopsy of the angel, big time. If he'd gone to experts, asked for help, who knows what they could have learned? At least he had a shot at redeeming himself. You can collect a lot of DNA from a blood-spattered chunk of drywall.

He walked toward the truck, Jeremiah limping beside him. Allen knew of a vet down the road. Hopefully Luke could survive a detour to drop off Jeremiah. In the battle between man and angel, the dog had made his loyalties clear, and deserved whatever care could be provided.

Old Man Young already had the truck revved up. It was decided that Luke and Jeremiah would ride in the cab due to their injuries. Allen and Rachael would have to ride on the back. Rachael abandoned the rocking chair and pressed up next to Allen against the cab as the truck began to pitch and sway down the driveway. From the jumbled mounds of gear, she produced a heavy quilt and pulled it

over them.

It was disturbingly intimate, to be sharing a blanket with a woman with whom he'd shared such an adventure. He'd not thought about women at all since Mary was taken. He had a lot on his mind, as he watched his house burn, filling the heavens with a plume of sparks and smoke. He was, in the front of his mind, still trying to figure out what the night's events meant. But something in the back of his mind was more concerned with whether or not he should put his arm around Rachael, who was leaning her head on his shoulder.

Rachael, her voice soft and caring said, "I'm so sorry about your house."

Allen shrugged. It was what it was. He knew, deep in his gut, that the chapter of his life the house represented was over. The house for him represented magical thinking -- the notion that there were things that could happen outside the laws of science. He was almost glad to be rid of it.

"Things will be alright," he said. To his own ears, his voice was tired and thin, battered by stress and smoke. His lungs felt sandpapered, and his hands were starting to blister. To show that he meant the reassuring words, he put his arm around Rachael, and drew her closer. It felt right. More importantly, the world felt right. The night had brought him a newfound faith in the essential sensibleness of the universe.

"Can I ask you a question?" Rachael said, her face inches from his.

"Sure."

"Why did you have that circle drawn on your floor?"

Allen rolled his eyes. "It'll sound stupid."

"What?"

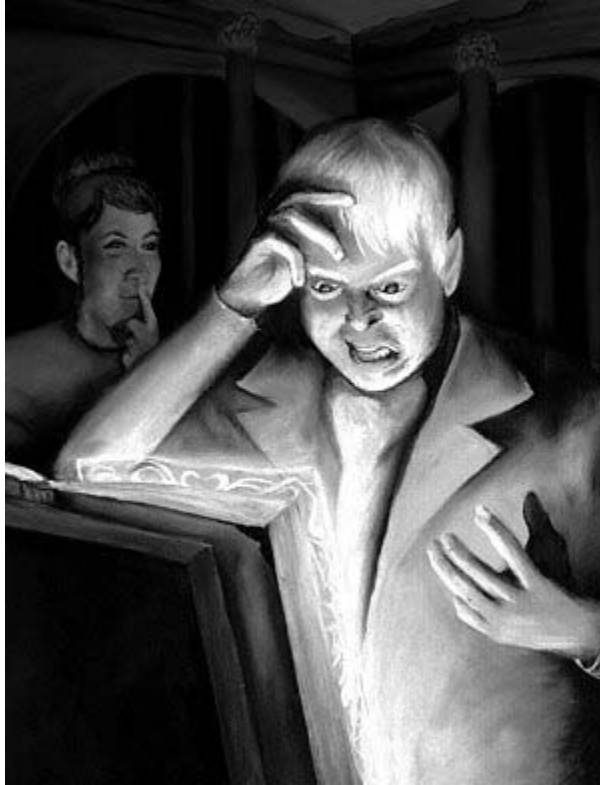
"I was trying to summon an angel."

"Guess it worked," said Rachael.

Allen's mouth went dry. Rachael's arrival with the cherub had just been a coincidence, hadn't it? Old Man Young turned the truck onto the road and gunned the engine. Allen pulled the quilt tighter around them, to fend off the chill night air.

Small Magics

by Alethea Kontis



Artwork by Deena Warner

Minna tried to stand still in front of the mirror, but it wasn't working. Effie jerked Minna's hips from side to side, trying to adjust the bustle of her sateen French cream walking dress. Minna stared at the print of the Luck etching she held, then closed her eyes and pressed it to her breast, wishing with all her might for the magic she had given it to seep back into her.

"Would you like some glue?" Minna's eyes snapped open as her friend's voice sounded in her ear, dark and exotic as the Greek gypsy girl herself.

"See, now," said Minna, pointing at their reflections, "your head looks better on this dress than mine does." Minna folded the Luck etching and tucked it inside her sleeve, desperate for its closeness.

Effie noticed. "Luck doesn't always mean the good kind."

"Yes, but Lady Luck is my favorite. At the very least, she'll make life interesting. And if I'm lucky," Minna wrinkled her nose, "it'll all be good."

"Silly," said Effie. "You can't fool me with that brave act. You're scared to death, admit it."

Minna sighed and wove her fingers together. "It is true. I am a little scared. Who wouldn't be? This interview with Lord Aster is so important..."

Effie turned Minna back to the mirror and started pinning up her

hair. "I'm still not certain it's a good idea. This Society of Natural Scientists could be a bunch of fools for all you know. They are men, after all."

Minna tried to look up at Effie, but her friend forced her head back down and mercilessly drove home another bobby pin. "I need an Alchemist, Effie. A true magic user. I need someone to guide me. My powers have already outgrown anything our mothers can teach."

"Yes, but you're a woman," said Effie. She bent down so that her chin rested atop Minna's coiffed head. Her thick, wavy locks fell to Minna's shoulders. "And they are men. So they cannot be trusted." She gave Minna a playful wink before stepping back a pace and putting her hands on her hips. Minna stopped worrying her hands together and dropped them to her sides.

"Perfection. All you lack now are gloves."

Minna looked at her hands. The skin of her fingertips was stained with etcher's ink, their pads callused from acid. Her father's legacy. Daddy's little girl.

Jack Willows had been a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers. He had taught his daughter how to handle the cutting tools and the acid, so that Minna might make etchings of her own. He had taught his wife as well -- and well enough that a number of Mother's etchings had even appeared in the newspapers. Minna learned the art from her father, but she learned the magic from her mother. Few people had ever noticed the simple magics Mother had taught her to add to the etchings. Even her father had not known.

Mother had counseled Minna to hold her tongue, to never mention to her father the meanings of the tiny symbols hidden in the details. It was woman's magic, her mother had whispered to her. Small magic. Old magic. Tales and superstitions handed down through the years. Her father never would have held with such nonsense.

But it wasn't nonsense. The symbols they etched into the pictures did mean something. They could evoke emotions and protections. Minna had the knack for incorporating patterns of symbols and creating new ones. So her mother had made sure that Minna learned as much as she could from her father.

After his death, the Society had invited her mother to take her husband's seat and join the ranks of the elite Lady Etchers. Now Minna helped her mother, and continued to learn herself, but at the price of the smooth skin on her hands. Her vanity hated her for it, and her heart broke a little every time she looked at her ruined skin and remembered her father. He had been ignorant of her gift, but still always so proud of her.

Effie's throaty laugh derailed Minna's train of thought, and a pair of black kid six-button gloves was thrust into her hands. "Stop looking so serious. You're not going to a funeral."

"It will be a funeral if Mother catches me. My funeral."

"Auntie Charlotte is too busy back at your house scolding some chambermaid for letting mice into the attic."

Minna could tell Effie was quite pleased with herself over that little prank. She still wasn't sure how exactly Effie had managed to get them all there. Her magic came from a darker place. It was gypsy magic -- ancient, quiet magic that was more felt than seen. Minna's only jealousy was that it didn't have to be confined to printed art. But it was nothing compared to what Minna could do if given half a chance. She was sure of it.

"Even if she does catch you," Effie went on, "you simply tell her that you are paying a professional visit."

"Mother does not consider the Society of Natural Sciences to be professional."

"Only because they are not as willing to let women into their ranks as the Painter-Etchers or the Artists are. That makes me question their intelligence -- I will agree with her on that. But if Science is what you want, Dearest, then you shall have it. Don't let anything step in your way, man or mother. Lord Aster will see that you are a bright, intelligent woman, and if he is any man at all he will give you a chance to prove yourself." She glanced up at the clock. "And if you are late, that will not make a good impression at all."

"I wish you could come with me," Minna pleaded.

"Beatrice will be with you."

"A chaperone hardly counts."

"Certainly she does. Come now. And you mustn't forget your book," Effie said, thrusting the slim black volume into Minna's hands. "If I didn't have to help Mama with her séance tonight, I would be fast to your side."

"I know." Minna followed Effie down the stairs.

Effie halted at the door, poked her head around, and then motioned for Minna to come. They tiptoed through the parlor, Minna's smart boots making tiny clicks and clacks against the wooden floor. She was grateful she had Effie to follow through the dark room. A few small gas lamps were lit here and there, only shedding enough light to cast large, wavering shadows on the wall. She caught the faint, warm scent of incense. Effie's mother was busy preparing the back room for her evening guests and would not trouble them, but they didn't want to risk drawing attention.

They met stout and silent Beatrice at the back door, where the hired carriage was waiting.

Effie turned to her once more. "Penny in your shoe?"

Minna nodded.

"Evil eye?"

Minna nodded again, placing a hand on her breast where the small blue charm was pinned beneath her bodice.

"Then you are all set, Dearest." Effie hugged her tightly. She kissed Minna on either cheek, turned her head to the right and made a spitting sound towards the floor. More luck. "One look at your little book, and Lord Aster will throw himself at your feet, begging you to be his personal apprentice."

"Well, I don't know about all that," said Minna.

"Bah," said Effie. "You will be marvelous."

"Only because you say so," said Minna.

"Extol my virtues later." Effie turned Minna around and pushed her out the door. "Now go! Go quickly so you can come back and tell me everything!"

Minna dashed into the carriage before she could think up another reason to dally.

The ride to the headquarters of the Royal Society of Natural Scientists was too long and at the same time too short. Beatrice's silence gave Minna too much time to think about what she was about to do. Outside looking in, it all made perfectly good sense. She was a talented artist, and could etch magic into metal better than her mother. It was only natural that the next step be to study with a true Alchemist, someone who could shape her abilities and steer her beyond her mother's limitations.

Minna needed to believe that she was meant for greater things than granting luck or easing birth pains. Not that she wanted to stop doing these things, but she wanted to learn a more economical way of doing them. One that didn't require hours on end spent with knives and acid. She wanted to learn about the world, how it worked, and more importantly how to see it working. She wanted to learn about the stars, what was in them, how to read them. She wanted to learn about people, how to cure them completely and not just stop a cough or break a fever. So she was going to meet with Lord Aster, head of the Society, and plead her case for apprenticeship. She flipped through her small book of illustrations, some of which had already been etched, others that were just waiting for the time to be right. It was a respectable enough sample of her work to impress him. She did not want to leave herself looking like a fool.

She shivered at the thought. Impress Lord Aster? Much easier said than done. Look like a fool? Well that was an unfortunately easy feat to achieve. Lord Aster, Edmond Chamberlain by name, was terrifying even from a distance; a fact Minna had garnered from a few rare glimpses of him at social gatherings. He was uncommonly tall and his shoulders were eternally stooped from bending over to speak to smaller people and reading notes from a podium. His hair was a shock of silver. Grayness befit most men his age, but Lord Aster's shining silver-white was unsettling. And he was gaunt, a thinness that made his eyes appear shadowed and sunken. He was the very spectre of a man, and looked as though at any moment he could slip into death without giving anyone cause to notice.

Minna had been surprised that he had responded to her request for an appointment -- he was well known for his gruff and rather disagreeable nature. Her mother certainly did not care for him, and was quick to voice her opinion to anyone who stood still long enough to listen. But Minna still believed, deep down in her heart, that Lord Aster would see how talented she was and as a result would not be able to turn her away.

She took the glove off one hand and reached into her sleeve to feel the smooth paper of the Luck etching again. She could not feel the ink, but she knew by heart what symbols were hidden in the delicate lines of the portrait. She needed the reassuring touch of the paper against her skin. It was the first print from Minna's Lady Luck etching; the older the print and the closer to the body, the stronger the magic it offered.

But she knew luck alone would not see her through this interview. Perseverance had gotten her here. She had to rely on her talent now in order to succeed.

The carriage came to a halt, and Minna frantically pulled her gloves back on. Beatrice followed her to the front door, where an equally stout butler led her to a sitting room.

"Miss Willows, Sir."

"Thank you, Harrison." His voice was rich and deep. Minna steeled herself and stepped through the doorway. In front of her stood a dashing young man in a dark suit. The white of his cravat matched the unnatural white of his hair, yet he was very evidently not Lord Aster. He snapped a small bow to her. Minna had the presence of mind to bend her knees, but she did not tip her head. Her mind raced. What was going on here?

"Miss Willows, please. First let me apologize. You have been played false, but with all good intention. I intercepted your missive to my uncle and answered it in his stead. I am intrigued by your interest, and wish to discuss it with you. I assure you, had he even deigned to open your letter, he most certainly would not have made this appointment. As it is, we must consider ourselves fortunate that I managed to save it from the fireplace."

Lord Aster had not even read her letter? He did not even know she was here? All her careful planning and intrigue was for naught, all the nerves unwarranted. She was not on her way to becoming a scientist. She could see it now. Her head swam. She would become a laughingstock. She was a woman! Who was she to think that she could simply be accepted into the most exclusively male Society of them all?

The man must have noticed her floundering, because he offered her a chair. "I apologize again, I did not mean to distress you. Please, sit. Harrison?" he called over his shoulder, "can you please have Mrs. Whitebridge send up a tray?"

The butler stepped out. Minna sat on the couch and looked down at her gloves. The man took a chair opposite her. Her eyes went again to his hair, and the rest of what he had said began to sink in.

"You are Lord Aster's nephew?"

"More apologies, I am afraid. I seem destined to apologize to you until the end of days. Gabriel Chamberlain, at your service. My father is Lord Aster's considerably younger half-brother. He decided I was in desperate need of some city refinement, so I have been banished

from our country estates until after Christmas." There was a twinkle in his eye, as though he expected Minna to comment or laugh, but she remained quiet. "I think it's more a punishment for my uncle than it is for me. Personally, I've been enjoying the amusements provided by his little Society."

Minna couldn't help but smile.

"You should do that more often," said Gabriel.

"Do what?"

"Smile. If I may make so bold, it is quite becoming." He straightened. "But exploring such a topic will have you calling me a rogue no doubt, so we will not dwell upon it. You must tell me about the aspirations you expressed in your letter. I would like to know how a bright, beautiful and no doubt talented woman such as yourself comes to have an interest in the Natural Sciences."

Minna recognized that he was being amusing and charming to put her ease, and despite her disappointment at the way the meeting had turned out, she found herself appreciating his efforts. At the very least, she would have a wonderful story to tell Effie when she returned. Harrison brought the tray, and a moment later Beatrice came forward to serve the tea.

"Are you familiar with my family's work?" Minna asked him.

"Yes, indeed," Gabriel said, his large hands dwarfing the fragile teacup. "I have seen the works of both Mr. and Mrs. Jack Willows printed in the Times, and samples grace the walls of many an affluent household. Do you etch as well?"

Minna knew that now was hardly the time for modesty. "Yes, and I believe I am quite talented."

"As any Willows progeny would be," said Gabriel. "Might you have a sample of your work with you now?"

She thought he'd never ask. Minna opened her volume to the first page, an illustrated copy of the Luck etching she had secreted in her bodice, and handed him the book. He set down his tea and took a moment to examine the portrait. He excused himself, and stepped over to the lamp to have more light. "You are very talented. The detail on this is fascinating. You must have the patience of Job to fashion it so precisely. Who is the woman?"

"No one," Minna replied offhandedly. "Just someone I made up. I call her Lady Luck."

He moved to sit again. "Why do you call her that?"

"Because it's for a Luck etching." Had he not noticed? Her father had missed it, of course, but her father had not been an Alchemist.

"A what?" Gabriel asked.

Surely her talents were not as insignificant as all that. Maybe he was testing her. "An etching for Luck. I have the original print here." She unfolded the paper and traded him for the book. "Look there," she pointed to the woman's collar. "Do you not see the symbols?"

Gabriel held the small paper a few inches from his face and angled it to better catch the light. "Why you're right. My heavens, what precision. If I ever had doubts about your skill as an artist, I certainly don't now. Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable."

"I know it's small magic," she added quickly, "and you are used to things on a much grander scale. That's why I've come. I believe that I have learned all I can in this area, and I'd like to move on. I was hoping to apprentice myself to one of your Alchemists or perhaps..." she trailed off.

Gabriel stared at her; his dark eyes fixed, his brows furrowed. Oh, no. She had let her mouth run away with her again. When would she ever learn to stop? Silence was called golden for a reason. Gabriel probably had the same ideas as his uncle about women overstepping their bounds and was shocked at what she was suggesting. Well, it was too late now. The words were out, and there was no net that could catch them and bring them back.

Desperate, Minna smiled and attempted to make light of the conversation. "Should I be the one apologizing now?"

Gabriel snapped out of whatever trance he was in, and grinned. "I'm afraid I mistook your words for a moment, Miss Willows. I am sure what you meant to say was that this was a luck charm, like any other superstitious fancy." He held up the paper. "There is no magic here."

Minna leapt to her feet, and Gabriel stumbled to do so as well. "Now see here," she said. "You must admit that the womanly arts have less available to them, more limitations, tighter boundaries inside which they must remain. You may be much better at it than a girl of seventeen, but your lifestyle has afforded you the opportunity to study it at great length. I believe that I am proficient at enough magic to know what it is I'm doing. Since I do not have the freedom of quantity, I practice quality. It may be small, but you cannot deny that it is perfect."

"My good woman," Gabriel replied rather condescendingly, "It is neither you nor your talents I doubt, but the existence of magic itself."

"I am not a child, Mister Chamberlain. You do not have to feign ignorance on my behalf. You are a scientist yourself. If you are involved in your uncle's Society, I cannot believe that you do not know about this simple force of Nature."

"I can honestly say I have no experience with it."

No experience? Well, she could certainly remedy that. Minna opened the book in her hand to a page near the middle, a picture of a house by a stream. The illustration did not hold as much magic as the original etching itself but the symbols were still there, echoes of the promise of magic. She held it out to him.

"I have already told you," he said, leaning in, "your work is breathtaking, my dear." He stepped closer. "Fantastic. Charming. Quite the most amazing thing I've ever seen." He reached out to snatch the book away. "Do you have a print of this etching? I must have it. No, I must have the master itself. It is so simple and yet so... haunting. I must have it. I will give you absolutely anything your heart desires to have it."

"Turn the page," she said with confidence.

He flipped to the next page, revealing a simple pastoral setting with a church. A mother and a daughter were on their way inside. The calmness of the image belied the true intent of the hidden symbol.

"This is horrible," he spat. "Tragic. Sad." His face contorted with disgust. "You are a despicable woman. Vile. What a wretched woman you are for showing me such a thing. And what a nosy busybody you are for coming here in the first place. You may be able to draw passably well, but your nose is far too large and your insolence..."

Minna had heard enough from that one. She reached out and turned the page herself this time. The illustration here was of a vee of ducks, passing over a stream at sunset.

Gabriel looked at her, his dark eyes pleading. She watched him mouth shape the words: I am so sorry, but no sound escaped. He lifted a hand to his throat. His next silent words were something along the lines of What the Devil...

And in that silence, Minna heard the hammering of a determined fist on the front door.

"My daughter is in there, and I demand to see her at once!"

The bark of her mother's voice down the hallway snapped Minna to attention. She was caught. Her heart raced as her mother's voice drew closer, grumbling down the hall and overshadowing the pleas of the butler trailing in her furious wake. Minna winced as the door flew open.

Her mother swept past her in a flurry of rose skirts and snatched the book from Gabriel's hands. She gave him a withering look, causing the young man to falter before he snapped a bow to her. Finding his voice, he barely managed to croak, "Gabriel Chamberlain."

"I gathered that from your shining head, young man. God did not choose that color for many of his servants, and it's a blessed good thing." She turned to Minna. "Miss Willows does not realize that this cloud has no silver lining. It would have been decent of you to have informed her of that immediately and sent her on her way instead of leading her a merry dance. Such behavior is unbecoming."

"You are correct, Mrs. Willows," Gabriel stammered. "I... Please forgive me."

"Forgiven, and I trust never to be repeated. Good night, Mister Chamberlain."

"Good night, Mrs. Willows. Miss Willows." He bowed again, meeting Minna's eyes for a heartbeat. "It was...illuminating." Minna was not allowed the luxury of time to bid her farewell before her mother ushered her out of the door.

The ride home was silent. Not merely silent, cold. The longer her mother was quiet, the stronger her voice was when she decided to use it. Minna removed her gloves and picked at the rough spots on her fingertips. She risked a glance at Beatrice. Beatrice met it knowingly. Minna pursed her lips. No need to investigate who had betrayed her.

When the carriage came to a halt, Minna was surprised to find herself not at home, but back at the steps of Effie's house. Her mother strode up to and through the door determinedly. As luck would have it, someone was there to open it for her. Had there not been, Minna was sure she would have seen the door torn from its hinges as her mother passed.

There was no other carriage in sight, so the séance must have been "successful" and therefore brief. The house was still eerily dark, however, the incense much stronger than it had been when she had left.

Minna's mother stormed through the house, through the entrance hall and into the kitchen where Effie's mother was boiling water for coffee in a copper pan on the stove.

"Theodosia, they have gone too far." Mother did not speak loudly when addressing Effie's mother by her full name, but her tone roared through Minna's ears. She tossed the black book on the table. Its slight clatter was akin to the clang of the blacksmith's hammer on an anvil.

Effie came down the stairs to investigate the commotion, and without misplacing a single step on the stairway performed a perfect pirouette and headed straight back up them.

"Oh no you don't. Come back down here at once young lady." Effie stopped mid-step and turned, wincing. "Come along with you, girl."

Effie trudged back down the stairs, exchanging worried looks with Minna as the pair of them were ushered into the kitchen.

"Sit," Minna's mother ordered.

Minna drew up a dining chair and Effie took her time crossing the room to sit beside her. Thea Theda -- "Aunt" Theda, as Minna referred to her friend's mother -- was still concentrating on the water. She added four spoonfuls of coffee, and matched them with four more of sugar. She watched it boil up once, twice, then a third time.

Minna felt Effie's hand searching for hers under the table. She reached out and held it tightly.

Thea Theda poured the coffee into four small cups and handed them out. Minna leaned over her cup and breathed in the dark heady aroma. The addictive smell was deceiving. She didn't really enjoy the vile brew, sugar or not. But if she could make it down to the mud, Thea Theda would spin it and read the grinds for her. The séances may have been just for show, but there was most assuredly more to her gypsy friends than candles and incense. They were nothing more than tricks to gull the naive.

Minna watched her mother crack open the book and thumb through the pages until she found the second picture she had shown Gabriel, the one with the cottage he was desperate to possess. Thea Theda made a small circle in the air with her finger above the picture, protecting herself from the effect of the illustration before moving in closer to examine it more thoroughly.

"Desire," Thea Theda muttered, her accent as thick as the coffee.

Mother turned the page.

"Hate," The H was guttural, scraping down Minna's already frayed nerves.

The next.

"Silence." She stuck a bit of her tongue between her teeth and took a sip of her coffee. "You are very talented, pedi."

"Don't encourage her, Theda!" Mother closed the book. "Did you teach her this?"

"No." Thea Theda took another silent sip and stared across the table at Effie. Old chocolate brown eyes met young ones. Effie's hand squeezed Minna's painfully.

"You said I could learn the magic. You never said I couldn't read the books!" Effie cried.

Thea Theda's voice was deadly calm. "Neh, pethimou, but you should have asked me first."

"Why? You didn't ask your mother how to have visions, did you?" Effie spat.

"No," Thea Theda said curtly. "But I did ask her about it when I had them."

"Listen to me, girls," Mother laid her hand on the cover of the book, "there are rules to this kind of thing. Limits. There have to be. Otherwise, it gets out of hand."

Minna had heard this argument one too many times. If Effie could be passionate, so could she. "I know there are limits! But I want to go beyond them! Don't you understand? I am better than that! I have the talent! I'm old enough to know!"

Mother's jaw clenched as she lowered her voice as much as Minna had raised hers. The difference was frightening. "You never did listen did you? You heard, but you never did listen. There is no limit to what you can do. The limits are those you must impose on yourself. Mark me, girls, pay heed for once in your short lives. Those limitations are to keep you from becoming dangerous. You are old enough to see the power only, and naturally you crave that power. What you need to do now is be mature enough to realize that it is the small magics that make the biggest difference."

Minna let out an exasperated breath and threw her free hand in the air. "How am I going to grow by etching 'Luck' and 'Fertility'?"

Mother turned to the page for Silence and spun it around to Minna. "If you can stop a voice, who is to say that you cannot stop a breath? Answer me that, girl! Where does it end?"

Minna leaned in beside Effie to look at the ducks, idly flying to the south before winter approached. The almost indistinguishable symbols ran along the ripples in the water they flew over, and along the blades of grass that bent in the wind. And there, at the tip of a cattail, was the symbol for speech. Change a line here, a curve there, cross it... her breath caught in her throat as the implications of what she was hearing, what she saw, hit their mark.

She felt Effie's hand tremble in her own, and could not bring herself to let go. She realized she was crying. It didn't matter.

Mother closed the book again, and stretched a hand out to her daughter. Their ink-stained fingers intertwined. "You must only put good things out into the world, for whatever you put out into the world comes back to you."

"Three times," added Thea Theda.

"Some people believe that, yes," her mother said to Thea Theda. "Personally, I think that saying was simply made up so that you would be sure to judge the consequences of your actions."

Thea Theda threw a hand in the air, as if waving that nonsense away.

"This is one of the reasons why the ways of these magics have been passed down from mother to daughter. Long ago, when men had the gift and could harness their power, and as a result caused great devastation. So God withdrew his gift and took the power away from them."

Minna drew in a breath and held it. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. She always thought they had kept the magic a secret from Father because women were not permitted to practice it. She never would have imagined that Father had not known how to do it. That he had never known. That no man knew.

"No help," said Thea Theda. "They make their machines and destroy the world anyway."

Mother stood slowly. "You may stay here with Effie for the night, though I need to see the carriage home. Good night, everyone." And with that, her mother left the kitchen.

"Come on," Effie said. "It has been a long night. Let us get some sleep." Minna nodded and started to follow her out of the kitchen.

"No fortune?" Thea Theda called, waving at Minna's untouched cup. Even at this point, Minna would always swallow the lukewarm drink like medicine so that she might have a glimpse of things that had happened long ago, or that hadn't happened yet. Better than the fortune, she liked the stories Thea Theda saw there.

But not tonight.

She had had enough of small magics for tonight.

"No thank you," Minna replied. "I don't think I want to know." She left both cup and book behind and trudged wearily up the stairs.

Even as she stepped into the bedroom Effie started pulling at Minna's clothes. "Start talking, leave nothing out until you're done and start with Gabriel." She sang his name teasingly.

Minna began and retold the story over and over until Effie fell asleep in the bed beside her.

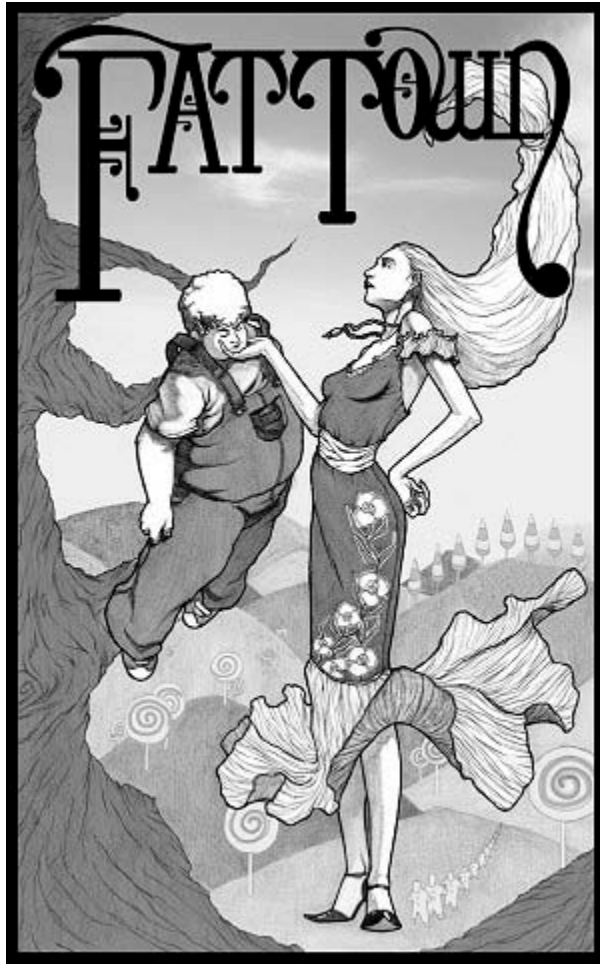
Minna reached over and drew a symbol on her friend's olive skin with her finger. Sweet dreams. She could have done more, added a swirl, have Effie going off on a ship to be a pirate. Intersect that line with another, and she could have given her flowers and rainbows and love and happiness. But they would not be Effie's own thoughts and dreams; they would be ones of Minna's making.

No.

She laid her hands over the invisible lines she had drawn. Sweet dreams. That was enough. She drew the symbol on the back of her own hand, turned her head into the soft pillow, and slept.

Fat Town

by [Jose Mojica](#)



Artwork by Jin Han

Let's face it, Herb was fat. He was thirteen and he was big. Not exactly Michelin man big, but a close relative, a cousin maybe -- you could definitely see the resemblance. And the seatbelt was killing him. He'd been wearing it for nearly fourteen hours. It made his stomach look like a human white cell engulfing a foreign substance.

His skinny, soon-to-be sixteen-year-old sister, Fran, was surely having an extremely-cool-to-the-max trip. Or so she had said non-stop since they had left. Not him. He'd had to go to the bathroom six times already and each one had been followed by a lecture from his mom. The first lecture had been about how eating vegetables and fruits, instead of Quarter Pounders, was good for the digestion, and the last one had been about how with gasoline prices so high, it would be nice to cut down on any extra weight.

Fran had been kind enough to add, "Don't you want friends for once? If you don't care about your reputation in school, at least think of mine."

She also got to sit in the front the whole way.

The only one here who liked him was his five-year old sister, sitting next to him, Beck. But she didn't speak much. Not because she'd had some type of speech impediment, or because she'd gone through some horrible childhood experience. Speaking just wasn't her thing. Her thing was smiling. She'd had a big smile from the second Herb first saw her when she came home from the hospital.

Of course, Fran said Beck only smiled like that because she was stupid. "Stupid people smile a lot because they're too stupid to know other people think they're stupid, so they have nothing to feel self-conscious about, so they have nothing to worry about, so they smile." But she'd only said that because Beck would never play with her. She only wanted to play with her big brother Herb. Her Herbie.

The only other person who liked him wasn't invited to come, on account of the divorce. It had barely been a day and he already missed his Dad. He'd wanted to stay with him in Michigan. He'd begged to stay. Now, he probably wouldn't get to see him until Christmas. On top of that he'd have to meet a new set of people. Everyone would pretend to be nice on the outside, but on the inside they'd be comparing him to his sister and mom and humming, "One is not like the others," from *Sesame Street*. And in a week, high school would start. Ninth grade.

His stomach made a loud rumbling noise.

"Thunder!" Beck said, startled.

"No Beck," Herb said. "It was Herbie." He put a hand on his sister's head to comfort her. She was afraid of thunder.

"We're here," his mom said.

Outside, closest to his side of the car, a billboard seemed to appear out of nowhere. It read: "Welcome to Sunken Valley Virginia, The Sweetest Place On Earth."

He'd thought his mom had made that up about going to live in the sweetest place on earth, but it was right there on the sign.

Under the town's name was a picture that looked like a still from a Hallmark movie. It had a family, dressed in their best Sunday clothes, holding onto each other tightly. If the background hadn't been of a nice summer day, he'd guess they were trying to keep themselves from freezing to death. That's how tightly they seemed to be holding onto each other. They faced a church. On the top left corner, covering a

portion of the church's cross was the picture of a lady. A skinny lady, with thick blond hair, tanned skin, and blue eyes. A perfect face. Except for the nose -- it was just a little crooked at the top. She was smiling, but in a way that didn't look right. Something about her smile and her eyes didn't go together. Under the lady's picture was written, Mayor: Endora Blair.

Herb's stomach made another loud rumbling noise. Beck jumped and he patted her head to calm her down.

They drove through the small town of Sunken Valley.

"It's perfect Mom," Fran said. "I totally love all the little shops. They're so awesome."

He never knew what his sister was talking about. Awesome? For one thing all the stores were closed, and it was only five. There wasn't a single person walking around. He hadn't seen a video store yet, or even a fast food restaurant. All he could see were clothing stores, and shops with little figurine stuff. But that wasn't the worst part. He had already counted three dentists within a few blocks of each other.

"When I get home I'm going to work on a new cheer," Fran said. "Do we have any paper to write on?"

His sister had been on the cheerleading team the last two years, ever since she had gotten skinny. She'd been almost his size before that. The whole family had been. But then his mom had gone on a diet when she turned forty and Fran had joined her. Dad hadn't and Herb, well, he wasn't sure why he hadn't, except he really didn't like the way his mom tried to motivate his dad -- by nagging, yelling and calling him names.

His mom took a deep exaggerated breath and let it out with a loud slow hmm. "This. This is what I wanted. Now, we're getting somewhere."

"Can I call Dad to tell him we're here?" Herb asked, but his mom ignored him. She took another deep breath and sighed.

They turned on a street that headed away from the shops and entered a neighborhood. The houses were all white with two stories. Herb saw little kid toys in front of the houses: balls, Big Wheels, cars. The backyards had sandboxes or swings, and almost every garage had a basketball hoop. But where were the kids? Where was everyone? On a Wednesday afternoon he hadn't expected to see a lot of people, but he'd expected to see at least one.

Outside one of the houses was a short, plump lady, holding a stack of folders against her chest with one hand, while waving furiously with the other. His mom turned in the driveway where the lady was standing. The car stopped and everyone got out.

"I'm so glad you made it," the lady said. "My husband didn't think you'd make it until eight at the earliest, but what does he know? And who do we have here?" She paused to look at each of them. "I want to meet everyone, don't be shy. Call me Aunt Marcy. Okay? I live five minutes away."

"Kids," Mom said, "This is Mrs. Lenheart --"

Mrs. Lenheart cleared her throat.

"Sorry," Mom said. "This is Aunt Marcy. She's the lady who sold us the house."

Mom introduced each of them. "...and this is the little one, Beck."

"Oh my," Mrs. Lenheart said. "What a beauty." She crouched in front of Beck and stared at her.

Beck took a step back and reached for Herb's hand. His hand felt so big around hers. It was like her hand was a ballerina, and his hand was the snow globe around it.

"I've always wanted a little girl just like you," Mrs. Lenheart said.

"Beck, don't be shy. Say hello to the nice lady," Mom said. But Beck squeezed Herb's hand tighter.

Mrs. Lenheart got up to her feet. "Sorry. Bill and I...Anyway...Come, come, I want to show you the house."

Herb stayed behind with Beck while the others rushed inside. Fran did a cartwheel on the way in.

Someone, next door, was looking at him from behind closed blinds. He thought he'd seen fingers sticking out between the blades and now the blinds swung from side to side.

"I want to call Daddy too," Beck said. Herb had barely processed Beck's words when he heard a scream from inside. The two of them hurried inside. Herb hated running. He felt out of breath just doing this little bit.

The inside was furnished. He'd been expecting it to be empty. On the couch, he found Mrs. Lenheart fanning herself with her own hand and his mom holding the other hand. Fran was kneeling in front of Mrs. Lenheart asking her if she was okay. She was enunciating each word slowly so that it sounded like, "Are. You. O. Kay?"

Mrs. Lenheart didn't look okay. She was crying. "They told me they were going to clean the house," she said.

"It looks fine," Mom said.

Fran repeated it. "It. Looks. Fieeene."

For once he agreed with his mom and sister. It did look fine. In fact it looked better than fine. It had furniture and a big screen TV. Then he noticed something on a smaller couch across from them. There were people cookies. Two gingerbread cookies. One looked like a woman cookie and one like a man cookie. They had been propped up against the back of the couch as if they were watching television.

"Do you mean these?" Herb asked. He walked over to the cookies. Mrs. Lenheart cried louder.

"No problem," Herb said. He picked them up and took them to the kitchen. The kitchen cabinets already had plates in them. He considered taking a bite out of one of the cookies before putting them on the plate. But there was something about biting a cookie that looked like a person. It was the same as biting the ears off a chocolate bunny. It wasn't his style.

He put the two cookies on a plate. Those were some detailed cookies. They were practically works of art. The man had shorts on and a t-shirt. The man cookie was even wearing a watch on his left hand. The lady cookie had a dress with flowers, and a necklace, in the shape of a heart. He'd never guessed they could put that much detail on a cookie.

When he walked back, Mrs. Lenheart was still sobbing. "How does she expect me to do this? I knew the Thompsons."

She pulled a Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose. Then she stood up and, holding Mom's hand, walked with her over to the dining room with the folders of papers. There were a lot of papers for Mom to sign. When they were done Mrs. Lenheart said goodbye and walked out of the house. Before the door closed, she said, "I forgot the most important thing." Mrs. Lenheart reached into the trunk of her car and pulled out two large bags. They were the biggest candy bags Herb had ever seen. Each looked like a transparent pillowcase, filled with all kinds of hard candies, candy canes, and chocolates.

"Endora's Sweet Creations. Courtesy of Mrs. Endora Blair herself. She's the mayor...And the judge...And the school principal." She handed the bags to Herb. "Don't forget about Friday," was the last thing she said as her car pulled out of the driveway.

#

Friday came. There was a town picnic that afternoon in a big park within walking distance. His mom always said things were walking distance now matter how far they were to try to get him to exercise.

"Try not to embarrass me," Fran said in her pajamas on the way to the bathroom. "Mom, should I wear my black mini-skirt or my pink shorts?"

His room was nearly put together. His poster of John Candy, his dad's favorite comedian, had survived. Only a couple of his assembled Lego creations had gotten broken. He put them back together and put them on top of various pieces of furniture. From his bedroom window he could see the equivalent of his bedroom in the neighbors' house. If there was someone there, watching him, he didn't know -- it was too dark to see. All he had left to put away were his winter clothes.

"You can take the winter clothes to the attic," he heard his mom say on her way to her bedroom.

He heard a loud thump coming from the bathroom, followed by yelling. "Mom!" Fran shouted. Mom rushed to the bathroom door.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Mom said.

Herb set the box of winter clothes down and listened.

"Stupid scale!" Fran shouted. Followed by another thump. Herb now recognized the thump as the sound a scale would make when it came into sudden contact with the floor. "Stupid scale!"

"Let me see," Mom said. The door to the bathroom opened and Mom went inside. "What's the problem?" The door closed behind Mom. Herb walked closer to it.

"Go ahead, let me see..." he heard his mom say, followed by, "Wow. That much?"

"See. See, what I mean." Fran said.

"Let me try it," his mom said. "You're right. It's broken. There's no way we've both gained five pounds in two days."

But Herb knew there was a way. He'd been watching them since they got here. The bags of candy were gone before he or Beck could have a single one. The only sweets they had not eaten were the gingerbread cookies, which was surprising considering the rate at which they had consumed the rest.

The door opened and Herb picked his box back up. His mom came out of the bathroom, carrying the scale with her. His sister followed. She glared at him. He ignored her and walked over to the attic. Beck had apparently heard Mom say where the winter clothes went. She was dragging a box bigger than her by the flaps, full of her winter things.

"Do you want me to put those up there too?" Herb asked.

Beck nodded and smiled.

"I might need help," Herb said. He didn't really, but he wanted the company.

Beck shook her head. "Spiders," she said.

"I understand." He picked up the boxes and went up.

It was cleaner than he'd expected but there were a few spider webs, which he cleared off by using the smaller box as a shield and waving it in front of him. As he made his way around the beams he noticed a shoebox wedged between one of the beams and the roof. He set the boxes down and reached for the shoebox. The top read, Pictures. Herb opened the box. There was a single picture inside it. It was the picture of a dad and a mom and two little girls. The girls were riding piggyback on each parent. It looked like a nice summer day. There was water from a sprinkler in the background. But there was something else. It was hard to see with the little bit of sunlight in the attic. Herb walked over to the light. Behind the family, a few houses back, he could see two other grownups. It was their expressions that caught his eye. It was as if they were glaring at the family whose picture was being taken. Did they know they were going to be in the picture? They looked so angry. They almost ruined the picture.

He put the picture back in the box and climbed downstairs.

"I thought you were going to wear a mini-skirt or shorts?" Herb said.

"Try not to embarrass me," Fran said and walked downstairs, wearing a pair of sweats instead.

Before leaving for the park, Herb grabbed his mom's cell phone to try to call his dad. But there was no reception. Dead. The regular phones had not been installed yet, either. And even though the cable company had come already, internet was not a service they provided.

They walked over to the picnic.

"I can't wait to meet some guys," Fran said. "Mom, you should meet someone too."

"It's too soon," Mom said, and Herb felt relieved. He didn't think they'd get back together any time soon, but the thought of his mom running around this soon trying to find someone, and what was his sister doing suggesting it? Didn't she care at all about their dad? What had he done to them except not go along with their stupid plans for conformity?

"I'm just saying, how could they not fall for you?" she said.

When they reached the park, Herb felt like he was going to die from all the walking. He was breathing so hard, if he shut his mouth he'd explode. He was really out of shape. But dying before seeing what he saw next would have been a shame because he would have missed the expression on his sister's face. Everyone, from child age to the elderly here, was overweight. Sunken Valley was fat capital of the world.

Herb walked around with Beck in hand. None of the food was the typical picnic food and yet, it all was the typical picnic food. There were burgers, but they were not made out of meat. They were chocolate burgers and the buns were honey buns. The hot dogs were actually gummy worms shaped like hot dogs. And on every table there were treasure boxes filled with chocolate coins with the picture of that lady he'd seen on the sign, Endora Blair, the mayor, and principal, and whatever else Mrs. Lenheart had said.

"Help yourselves," a woman said as she walked past him. "Don't be shy."

He grabbed a plate and started loading it with everything he saw. The best part was that no one was watching him. No one was looking at him as if he were some type of wanted criminal. As if he were single-handedly responsible for the kids on TV not getting enough to eat. He put everything he could fit. Then he grabbed a large glass of fruit punch and sat down. Before taking a bite he noticed that his sister, Fran, and his mom were doing the same.

Beck stood in front of him. "I'm not hungry," she said. "Can we go play now?"

"Just a sec, Beck, I'm hungry."

"I'm going to go play in the sandbox," she said.

Herb nodded. The sandbox wasn't too far and he could still keep an eye on her. He grabbed the honey bun - chocolate burger and held it. Honey dripped down his fingers. He lifted it up to his lips. It looked so good and it smelled even better. Before taking a bite of it, he looked over at his sister. She was sitting next to a group of high-schoolers. She was eating away and smiling. How did she do that? How did she always manage to become the center of attention? And these people looked different than her. Of course, at the rate she was eating, that was bound to change soon.

His mom was doing the same. Looking happy. Smiling. Eating candy, after candy. She was talking to a group of grownups, each twice her size. Didn't she notice them? Weren't they as unattractive as his dad? How could she say all those things about him and then do this?

Just before driving away, his dad had said, "Just don't say you're doing what's best for all of us."

He set his burger down without taking a single bite.

"Psst."

A girl who looked his age sat next to him and set her plate down too.

"You've got to make it look like you're eating," she said. She was talking from the side of her mouth as if half of it had been glued together. He guessed she was trying to be inconspicuous. "And you can't look unhappy while you're pretending to eat. That's how they know you're resistant."

"What are you talking about?" Herb said without any pretense of being quiet.

Two parents waved at the girl next to him.

"I took them out of the house before the cleaning crew came, and then I put them back so that you'd find them," she said. "And the picture too." Then she shouted to her parents, "Just a minute." She took his hand in hers. Herb felt goose bumps cover his arms. "Here," she said. She handed him something. "Don't eat the candy." And with that she ran back to her parents.

Without looking at it, Herb knew what she had handed him from the texture. His mom had tried handing him a lot of these. It was a carrot. He stuffed it in his pocket as best he could and went to fetch Beck.

Don't eat the candy? The picture. Who was that girl? Her hand had felt nice and cool and soft against his. She didn't look as big as the rest of them.

Over at the sandbox, Mrs. Lenheart, the realtor, was offering a slice of cake to Beck. Beck was shaking her head. Herb rushed over.

"Your sister doesn't like cake?" Mrs. Lenheart said. She turned to Beck, "Becky, you don't like cakey? It's good cake."

Beck reached for Herb's hand and Herb grabbed it. "I think she's tired. Thanks, anyway," Herb said and walked over to his mom. His mom didn't want to go home yet. Neither did Fran. His mom was starting a game of cards and Fran was showing her friends her new cheer.

Herb walked Beck home.

"I miss Dad," Beck said.

"I do too."

"I'm hungry, but I want real food," Beck said.

His stomach was growling. He pulled out the carrot in his front pocket and gave it to her.

"Beck, don't eat the candy, okay. Not yet. Not until I figure it out."

That night he went to bed hungry. The light in the room next door was on and this time the blinds were open. The same girl that had sat with him at the picnic was there. She was his next-door neighbor.

He tried to wave at her but she quickly turned off the lights.

#

He was going to have to do something about food. His stomach was growling something fierce. There was the food they had brought with them from Michigan -- non-perishables. That's what he had been eating all week, he and Beck. His mom and sister had gone through the bags of candy the first two days and now, there were two new bags of candy on the table. They had brought those back from the picnic, along with other leftovers. When he mentioned grocery shopping to his mom she just waved him away and flopped on the couch to watch TV. She was looking, like... Well, she was starting to look like her old self. The self before she'd turned forty and the crazy diets had started. So was Fran. She was sitting on the other couch, reading one of her teen magazines, eating chocolate. He poured a bowl of Cheerios for Beck and sat down next to her.

"Something's wrong, Beck," Herb said.

Beck nodded.

"Promise you won't eat the candy, okay?" he said.

She nodded again.

"I'm going to go find some food. But first, I've got to see something," Herb said. He put his empty bowl in the sink. His pants were falling down. He had a suspicion that for every pound his mom and sister were gaining, he was losing one. He walked upstairs to the attic.

"While you're up there, can you see if you can find my box with my old clothes?" Fran said.

"You mean, your fat clothes?" Herb asked.

"Whatever," she said. "What's the matter with you anyway?" She sat up, probably to start an argument. "You don't look like your usual self. Something's different."

She'd noticed too -- he was losing weight. Herb shrugged. Fran lay back down, popped some more candy in her mouth, and turned the page of her magazine.

He went to the attic and pulled out the picture box he had found. His girl neighbor had said something about the picture. I put them back. And the picture too. Them, who was them? And what did that have to do with the picture? If them referred to one of the sets of people in the picture, how do you put them back?

He put the picture in his front pocket and walked back downstairs. Back in the kitchen, his little sister was watching cartoons.

"I'll be right back. I've gotta go next door," he said.

He'd leave after he did one more thing. He opened the closet where the garbage was hidden. The bathroom scale was sitting there next to the wastebasket.

He dropped it on the floor and stepped on it. He had lost five pounds in the last few days.

His mom and older sister were both asleep in front of the TV. He slipped by them without having to explain where he was going. He wanted to see if he could talk to his neighbor -- ask her what in the world she was talking about. Why not just tell him straight out? Obviously she was afraid, but of whom, and what was wrong with the candy, other than Mom and Fran not being able to stop eating it?

There was a knock on the door. A policeman stood on the other side of the screen door. He was overweight, and had a black thick mustache, and was wearing dark sunglasses that covered half his face. Behind him, parked in the driveway was a police car with another policeman inside -- a taller one. The policeman looked Herb over.

"Is your mom around?" he said.

"She's sleeping."

The policeman pressed his face to the screen and cupped his hands around his eyes. Was he in some kind of trouble? He couldn't see how. Had they seen him talking to the girl at the picnic?

"Mayor Blair likes for us to visit everyone new and make sure everything's okay with their transition here."

Herb didn't know what to say. "Thanks."

"How do you like the candy?" he asked.

"Good. It's very good," Herb answered. That might have come out fake.

"If you need more, we can give you more," the policeman said. "Hey, little girl, how are you doing?"

Herb turned to see Beck standing behind him.

"How about you? How do you like the candy?" he said. Herb put his arm around her.

"I'll tell my mom you came," Herb said.

The policeman adjusted his hat. What were his eyes saying behind the sunglasses?

"Try to stay out of trouble," he said. "Have a nice day." And with that he walked back to the police car. "Tell your mom we'll come back later to welcome her to the neighborhood."

The police car drove away.

"Keep the door locked," Herb told Beck. "I have a weird feeling," he said. His stomach was feeling worse than ever. Lately, it seemed right on the fence of holding steady, or sending him running to the bathroom, and it was that state of stomach indecision he hated more than actually getting sick.

He stepped outside and walked over to his neighbor's house.

"Psst," he heard again. He was hoping for this. The girl came up behind him and grabbed his hand. Bad candy or not, this was worth it. A girl was holding his hand. His stomach was doing something different now. It was doing the butterfly thing instead of the getting sick thing.

#

He'd followed her hand-in-hand to the park. Once there, she led him to a bench near some trees. He knew they were there just to talk but being led to the edge of the woods by a girl was making his heart race more than if he'd had to do a whole lap around track in gym.

"Why can't we eat the candy?" he asked.

"I don't know everything, and we can't talk much. Too many policemen. I think they're already watching you. You're losing too much weight. You have to drink a lot of sugar soda. That's what I do. You can't get skinny. You're going to have to do something about your sister too."

"She doesn't drink soda," Herb said.

"Do you believe in magic?" she asked and looked into his eyes.

"Do you mean like the McDonald's song?" he said. But he knew he'd said the wrong thing the second it came out of his lips.

She shook her head. "Look. I know you'll probably think I'm a nut job, but I don't care. I've seen kids taken away and given to other parents. And I've seen kids disappear. Right before they turn sixteen, the police come and take them away."

"I don't think you're nuts. I know something's weird about this town."

She lowered her voice. "We moved here last year. I looked pretty much the same. My parents were very skinny. Always bugging me about my weight. As soon as I came, the lady who lived where you live, sat down next to me, the way that I sat down next to you at the picnic. She told me not to eat the candy. I had just gotten a plate full like yours. But I wouldn't have eaten it anyway. Even if she hadn't told me not to. My parents had said a lot of junk about my weight, and there they were, eating like pigs. I hated that. And you know what? When I first saw everyone, I was so happy. I thought I'd fit in."

Herb knew what she meant. He'd felt the same thing when he saw that everyone was his size. He tried to ask a question but she stopped him. "Then she showed me the picture."

Herb pulled it out of his front pocket.

"That's the one. You found it. These are the Thompsons," she said and pointed at the people standing in the back. "The Thompsons had had an older daughter of fifteen and two younger daughters. Right before the oldest turned sixteen the police came and took her. That's what made them snap. I think it's strong emotions that break the spell. But it's hard because you can't normally feel anything while you're in the trance. Losing their daughter did it for them. The Thompsons stopped eating the candy. And they stopped giving it to their kids. The whole family got skinny. That's how Principal Blair knew they'd stopped eating the candy. Then the police came, took their younger kids away, and gave them to another family." She pointed at the smiling kids in the front of the picture. "But that's not the worst part," she added, "The worst part was that within an hour, their kids had completely forgotten about them. They couldn't remember their old parents. And didn't care who their parents were. They just wanted the candy. Principal Blair is an evil woman."

"Every time I look at her picture I get a stomachache," Herb said.

"She's got powers. She's the one who makes the candy, and when people disappear, they always find gingerbread cookies in their place."

"Why don't people leave? Why don't they just run away?" Herb asked.

"I asked them the same thing. It's the contract they sign when they move in. It's a magical contract. It keeps you here. If you try to drive away, your car suddenly appears on a different road, and you forget where you were going. If you try to ride your bike out, you'll suddenly find yourself going the opposite way. Have you ever heard of people getting lost in the woods? How they're sure they know the way out, but the more they walk the more turned around they get?"

He had heard of that from stories in books -- fairy tales.

They heard a siren come on for a second. A police car drove by.

"We better go home."

"One more thing," Herb said before standing up. "Why us? Why didn't we eat the candy? I wanted to, but then I didn't."

She sighed. "I'm not sure. Maybe because we were already fat. Or maybe because we were always picked on. I think it's because we care. I've seen the way you hang out with your sister. I used to have a little sister too. She died before we moved. I took care of her, like you take care of yours. Maybe it's because we care about someone else."

He liked that answer. He didn't know how he was going to protect Beck, but he had to do something.

They walked back together, their hands almost touching.

"Be careful in school tomorrow," she whispered. "She'll be there. Don't look at her eyes. They flash red. I've seen them from a distance and they made my knees weak. There are no supermarkets. I'll show you how to get fresh vegetables and fruits from places in town," she said and ran up to her house. Before going inside she ran back and said, "My name is Lisa, but my friends, when I had friends, called me Lou."

The next morning they had more Cheerios for breakfast. They'd had cereal for lunch and dinner the day before as well. The cereal boxes were almost empty. They'd have to do something else soon.

It was Beck's first day of school. Herb had to wake up Mom in the morning. She'd been doing less and less around the house, and she had nearly gained all her weight back. But he never thought that she wouldn't be excited, or sad, or something about Beck's first day of school. Fran had nearly gained all her weight back too, but she hadn't lost her energy. In fact, she could still do a cartwheel and that was all she needed to do to be excited about the first day of school.

Beck started school after Herb and Fran. Before leaving, Herb knelt before Beck and said, "Remember. No candy. And don't tell anyone that you're not having any candy. Okay?"

She nodded. As he walked towards the bus stop with Fran, Beck stepped outside and waved. She had an extra big smile on her face. She was a big girl now. She knew that school would be scary. She knew they would try to give her candy. And she saw that Mom had gained all that weight back. But she still smiled.

No one better lay a finger on her.

At the bus stop and on the ride to school Fran decided to give him some tips. The proper way to walk into school. How to introduce himself, how to spot losers, and loners, and most importantly how to join the A crowd.

He wished someone would shut up his older sister.

When they arrived at school, Herb had to run to the bathroom. He'd been thinking so hard about not eating candy and about having to see the principal that he never worried about other high school things. Like homework, tests and even though he was still fat enough to not rouse suspicion -- he was nervous. It only took the sight of lockers and the smell of unopened-all-summer school to send his stomach over the edge.

When the bell rang he went to homeroom. He thought this would be it, that Mayor Endora Blair would walk in to greet all the new students. It wasn't it. A short, bald, stocky, Biology teacher walked in instead. For lunch he sat down with Lou. She had brought in carrots and tomatoes and showed him how to hide them between plates of candy stuff.

When the last period came, he began to relax. He was almost home free. This wouldn't be so bad. He could hang out with Lou during lunches and as long as he avoided running into...

"Principal Blair would like to see you," his sixth period teacher said before he stepped into the classroom. He gave her a puzzled expression and she added, "New families orientation." That's why she hadn't been to homeroom, she only met with students that had just moved.

Herb walked slowly to the principal's office. Inside, a secretary told him to sit and wait. Principal Blair's office was full of candy. On her wall were several strange pictures. One was a still frame from the Wizard of Oz. It was of a scene where the scarecrow was catching on fire. Another one looked like a magazine photo. It had a whole family inside of a large oven. The title read, "The world's largest oven." On her desk there were many bowls with candies. And behind her there was a model of a house. It was a house completely made out of candy. But what was on the wall on the right made him more nervous than all this candy combined. There was a tall glass cabinet. Herb walked up to it. It was full of gingerbread cookies. Each cookie as detailed as the ones he'd seen in his house.

He heard a noise behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Fran said. "I thought the mayor wanted to see me."

"It's a family orientation," he whispered. He walked over to where she was sitting and whispered. "Fran. I know we don't get along, but listen, you can't look into her eyes."

A woman cleared her throat. Herb quickly sat down next to Fran. A pretty lady stepped into the room. Pretty lady was not a phrase he normally thought of, but there was no other way of describing her. The second he saw her, he felt instantly relaxed. He wasn't even sure why he had been so worried. Her hair looked so soft. He wanted to touch it. He wanted to kiss her. She was way too old for him, but he didn't care. He'd do anything to feel her face. He'd do anything for her. And her eyes. They weren't blue as they were in the picture, they were dark purple.

She smiled at them and said, "Welcome to Sunken Valley. I am terribly sorry I didn't have a chance to meet you sooner. You must be Herb." She stepped closer and reached for his hand. When he shook hers, a shiver went up his spine.

"Nice firm grip. I like it," she said. She then shook Fran's hand. "Fran, you are almost sixteen, aren't you? And Herb, you just started high school. Congratulations. Well, I only have one rule. Candy. Eat as much as you can. A big body is a healthy body." It was those words that brought Herb back to his senses. A big body? She was the only skinny person in town.

She stared at him and he looked down. From the corner of his eye he thought he saw a flash of red.

"Do you need anything? Any tutoring?" Principal Blair asked. Herb shook his head, still looking down. "Your parents feeding you enough?" Herb nodded.

"Well, if you ever need anything, don't hesitate to stop by. Back to class, then," she said.

"Do we have to?" Fran asked. When Principal Blair said yes, Fran grabbed a handful of candy from the bowl and left. Then, Herb felt something ice cold touch him. Principal Blair had grabbed the back of his neck.

She pulled him closer and whispered, "I saw her not eating candy. I fed her one myself. It would be wise for you to eat some as well."

He felt his heart skip a beat. She pushed him outside the door and shut it behind him.

Herb ran out of the school. He didn't wait for it to be over, and he couldn't wait for the bus either. He ran as fast as he could home, which wasn't very fast for him. He had been completely out of breath half way through but he didn't care. He heard the bus arrive at the corner a few seconds behind him.

"Beck," he said. "Where are you?"

"We're here," his mom said. The voice was coming from the dining room. Beck and his mom were sitting at the kitchen table eating a slice of chocolate cake with ice cream on top.

"She's doing better, now," Mom said. "They should let us keep her, no problem."

Beck wasn't smiling. A tear ran down her cheek and she took another bite out of her cake.

He heard sirens outside. He walked back to the front door to see what was happening. Two police cars had parked in the driveway.

"Mom, we have to leave. Now," Herb said. He meant to run back to the dining room, but he couldn't. His feet felt as if they were stapled to the floor.

Mrs. Lenheart stepped out of one of the police cars with a policeman. Fran was making her way to the house but she looked confused, not her usual peppy self. This scared Herb even more. A policeman came out of the other police car and grabbed Fran.

Herb ran out. "No!" he yelled. The police car with Fran in it drove away. When he turned he saw Mrs. Lenheart carrying Beck. Beck was smiling but tears were coming out of her eyes.

"But, I did what you asked," his mom ran out saying. "She was eating cake. Please don't take her."

The car door slammed shut and the police car went out with Beck inside it. Herb ran after it. A hand grabbed his shirt.

"You can't do anything, now. We need to have a plan," a voice said. He tried to run some more but he couldn't. He just couldn't. He fell to the floor. "We'll get her back." Lou put her arms around him and held him on the sidewalk. "Okay? We'll get her back."

#

Herb followed Lou back to his house. His mom sat at the kitchen table.

"They said they would let me keep her," Mom said. She raised a fork to her mouth with a piece of chocolate cake and stared at it. She put the fork back down.

"How do we get Beck back?" Herb asked.

Lou put a hand on his arm. "I think we need to get Fran back first."

"How do we get Beck back?" Herb repeated.

"I know. But, just listen. Beck is alive and will be alive. Fran. That woman eats people."

"You said, she'd forget in an hour. You said that in an hour the kids of the people who lived here forgot their parents."

Lou nodded.

"Why did you stop me?" Herb asked.

"I didn't think you would catch up to the car," Lou said.

"Because I'm fat. Right. It's all because I'm fat."

She didn't look at him. "I'm fat too."

He was just a kid. Thirteen years old. That's it. How was he supposed to do anything? He kicked one of the dining room chairs.

"If you want to save Fran, we have to hurry," Lou said and looked straight into his eyes. "Parents are not going to help us."

"I want to kill her." He'd never felt like killing before. Even with all the jokes, the teasing, and even with his mom having left his dad only because he wouldn't lose a few pounds, he'd never felt like killing someone. Until now.

"I'm pretty sure she's a witch," Lou said. "All the signs are there. Red eyes, crooked nose, candy, turning people to gingerbread. It all fits."

"How do you kill a witch?" Herb asked.

"I don't know. Fire? Water? Dropping a house on her?" Lou said.

"We'll try everything. Except the house," Herb said and Lou gave a nervous giggle. "You can get a container from the kitchen and fill it with water. I'll find the matches."

#

It's not every day two people in their teens decide to melt a person, or set said person on fire, even if they know that person is a witch. So, it's no big surprise that Herb and Lou didn't feel particularly prepared for the experience.

Herb carried a rag he'd drenched in gas from his mom's car and some matches, while Lou carried a pail of water. Together they were as threatening as a brick was to the planet Saturn, but Herb didn't care. No one was eating Fran tonight.

Having lived in town for a whole year, Lou knew the way to Mayor Endora Blair's house. It was the big one at the edge of town. They walked there and neither of them complained about the hike. The sun was up. The sky was clear. It was really a pretty time of the day to be going to the witch's castle. It wasn't really a castle. It was more like a mansion -- the kind you might see in movies, where the mob boss lives.

"How are we going to get over the fence," Lou asked. Herb didn't answer. He didn't have to. As they got closer they saw that the front gate was wide open. There was no guard in the guardhouse. No vicious animal came to greet them either.

Herb didn't like the feel of this. He'd seen too many movies not to know that this was just too easy.

At least they had enough sense not to walk straight to the front door. Instead they decided to crouch and go down the right side of the house and see if there was another entrance. Aside from the house there was another building in the back of the house. A warehouse. Beyond that there was a parking structure for large trucks. The warehouse and the parking structure were well lit. The trucks had a picture of Endora Blair and under it the name: Endora's Sweet Creations. There was a back door.

"What now?" Lou asked in a whisper.

"I don't know. I should probably light this," Herb said. He pulled out his matches and tried to light one. The first one broke in halves. The second one lit, but then burned his fingers so he dropped it.

"Hurry. I think I hear footsteps," Lou said.

The back door opened.

"Are you coming in or what?" Principal Blair stood in front of them, wearing a short, black dress.

Herb and Lou sighed. Principal Blair walked in and Herb and Lou followed her.

"I'm just getting dinner ready," the principal said.

The house was more modern than Herb had imagined. It had a large kitchen. No surprise there and plasma screens in every room. The floor was made out of a tile that looked like flat rocks glued together. Principal Blair walked behind the back of a kitchen island and picked up a knife. She began chopping onions.

"I'm not going to let you eat Fran. I don't care if you kill me," Herb said.

"Eat Fran?" Principal Blair said. "What do you mean eat Fran?" She laughed. "Did you really think I was going to eat Fran?" She shook her head. When the principal said it, it didn't sound as likely as it had sounded before. Maybe he had made a mistake? Maybe --

"I haven't eaten anyone in like five hundred years," she said.

Herb and Lou looked at each other.

"Oh my, what is this?" she said as she looked at each of the kids' hands. "I do believe you had intentions to do me harm."

Herb and Lou raised their weapons. "Where is she?" Herb asked.

"Patience. Young people have no patience. I'll take you to Fran in a second. First, just in case you get any ideas. Bring that rag and that water pail over here, please."

Herb held his ground.

"Fine," Principal Blair said. "Here." She grabbed a napkin from the kitchen counter. Then she turned on the stove and touched one of the burners with the napkin. After a couple of seconds the napkin caught on fire. Principal Blair then pressed the fire against her arm.

"And that's why I'm still around. See, when Gretel locked me in my own oven, not my brightest moment, I'll grant you that, I just waited for another kid to get curious and unlock the oven. I'm fire proof. And as for the water..." She opened the faucet. First she put out the napkin and then ran her arm under the water. "Water proof too. Then I got me thinking. The whole eating kid thing is not that great of a gig. The real money is in selling candy. Highly addictive candy is the best." She took off her apron and put the knife down. "Do you want to see Fran? Okay, follow me."

Herb and Lou set their things down by the kitchen island and followed their principal.

"But why make people fat?" Lou asked.

They followed her. Herb wondered if he was just walking into a dungeon where she'd put them in chains and then eat him. He didn't believe she'd lost her appetite completely.

They walked over to the warehouse they'd seen when they came in.

"I give you, Endora's Sweet Creations, Inc.," she said and walked inside the warehouse.

About a thousand people were inside, working. The place was a factory, with many assembly lines. The first thing Herb noticed was that the workers seemed like zombies. They didn't show any emotions in their faces.

"The fat part is just a side effect of the candy. The candy makes it so that you do exactly what I say. People can't get enough of it. So, they keep gaining weight. Near sixteen is the perfect time to put them to work."

Fran was here somewhere. Herb needed to find her.

The principal continued, "Once you pay people, there's unemployment, vacation time, benefits, birthday lists. It's much easier when they're catatonic. No one's even asked for a raise."

"I want my sister back," Herb said.

Principal Blair's eyes glowed red. She walked quickly in front of him and grabbed his shirt. Then she lifted him easily, so that they were face to face.

"I'm losing my patience with you," the witch said with a growl. Her face then straightened and she put Herb down. Herb couldn't stop himself from shaking. He hoped Lou didn't think he was scared.

"Are you a betting man? Not that you're a man yet, but you get the point," she said. "I am feeling generous. If you convince your sister to leave with you, then I will let you go. If you do not, then you are going to do something for me. You are going to feed one of my candies to your new girlfriend. And then you are going to eat one yourself. And you're going to do that or I will eat Fran. And not just Fran. That little sister of yours should make a nice dessert. I think all this talk of eating people has reawakened the old desires, and I'm getting a little nibbly."

He had spotted his sister down in the middle of an aisle. He wasn't sure how much time had passed but he guessed it had been close to an hour. If he didn't do something quick he'd lose both Fran and Beck. But what if he lost? How could he do that to Lou?

"Do it," Lou whispered on his ear and gave him a kiss on the cheek. A blast of energy shot through his body. He imagined it was the same type of energy that makes people jump out of planes.

"I'll do it," he said.

"Go," the witch said.

Herb ran over to where his sister was. She didn't look at him. In fact she didn't look at what she was doing either. Whenever a candy passed, her arm would automatically grab it and put in a box.

"Fran, we need to go," he said. He grabbed her arm and started pulling her. She wouldn't budge. Lou ran over to where he was and the two of them tried to pull her. She didn't move an inch.

"Fran. Mom is waiting for us at home. Please, come with me," Herb said.

"Yeah, it's nice in your home," Lou said.

But it was really hard to tell if Fran was even listening.

"Give up?" the witch said.

"Fran. You are the best cheerleader in the world. How does that new cheer go? Why don't you show me at home."

Nothing. Fran kept putting candies inside the box.

"You're looking really thin," Herb said.

"Don't lie," Lou said.

"Shh." Then it came to him. The thing that broke the trance for the family that had been living at his house -- a strong emotion. "Fran. I know I don't say this much..."

"C'mon, I'm not going to let you go on all night," the witch said.

"I love you Fran. I love you as much as I love Beck," he said. Fran lowered her arms. Candy passed by the belt, but she ignored it. Herb continued, "When they took you, and Beck, I wanted to get Beck. But then I thought you might get eaten. I didn't want you to get eaten. Would you forgive me for having favorites?"

Fran turned her head. "You're so embarrassing," she said. "Let's go."

"What!" the witch said. "How?"

"You wouldn't understand," Lou said.

Herb grabbed his older sister's hand and started walking towards the door.

"This is not over. Your little sister doesn't even know your name by now. See you in school tomorrow, you two." The witch walked passed them and walked towards the door.

A strong emotion is what it took to wake up his sister. There were thousands here. How could he rescue them all? He couldn't make them feel love like he had done for his sister, but maybe...

"Double or nothing," Herb shouted.

The witch turned around and smiled. She adjusted her bra strap and said, "You're on."

Herb whispered something in Fran's ear. Fran shook her head.

"You can do it," Herb said. "I know you can."

"What are we doing?" Lou asked.

Fran scanned the room.

"What's going on?" the witch asked. "C'mon, get on with it."

Herb saw what Fran had looked her eyes on. Perfect. Ahead of them, there was a platform. A microphone hung from the ceiling.

"You can do it," Herb repeated.

Fran took a deep breath and started running towards the stage. Her chin raised high. Her arms made into fists in front of her, holding invisible pom-poms. The same invisible pom-poms Herb had seen her practice with time and time again at home. When she got up on stage she kicked her right leg up high. Not as high as Herb had seen her do it when she was thinner but with a lot moreumph than he'd ever seen. If the witch had been standing right in front of her, she would have definitely felt it.

"Yeah! C'mon, everybody," Fran yelled. She put her invisible pom-poms down and did a back flip. The stage shook.

"The microphone," Herb yelled and pointed at his ear. "We can't hear you."

Fran found the switch on the microphone and turned it on. Then she bent down and picked up her invisible pom-poms again.

"Okay, everybody," she said. "This is a new cheer I have been working on all summer. Well...I can't really do that one. I wrote it before I knew the whole witch town thing. Okay, here's a cheer I'm going to make up as I go along. Ready?"

No response from the crowd. Lou took a few steps forward. "Yeah," she said and motioned for Herb to do the same. Herb clapped a couple of times.

"This ought to be good," the witch said. "After she's done, they're going to beg me to give them more candy. 'Please Mrs. Blair, give us more candy. We can't possibly go another night with the nightmare of seeing that much mass jumping up and down on stage'. Pitiful."

Herb didn't answer. Lou took Herb's hand and squeezed it. Fran began her cheer.

"Working without pay is lame.

"Eating candy every day.

"Not caring about life, or... or..., something, something that rhymes with Blair... hair. Not caring about life or hair.

"We all hate Blair."

Fran paused. Silence, except for the machinery, and the witch -- she was bent forward, holding her stomach, as if she were vomiting, except the only thing spewing out of her mouth was laughter. "Great strategy," she said. "Make me laugh to death. I haven't laughed this hard since Edmund fell for the Turkish Delight in the Narnia books."

"C'mon Fran. You can do it. Don't listen to her," Herb said.

Fran arched her back and raised her chin even higher. "Life or hair, we hate Blair," she repeated into the microphone.

A few kids stopped working and turned towards Fran. She repeated the last part of the cheer again, "Life or hair, we hate Blair." More people turned to face Fran.

A piece of candy flew out of nowhere.

"Ouch," the witch yelped. The candy had struck the back of her head.

Herb and Lou turned around. Another piece of candy was making its way towards the witch. A tall boy with a big blond Afro said, "I used to care about my hair. We hate Blair," and threw another piece of candy at the witch.

A girl with straight black hair standing nearby said, "Well, I've never liked my hair. I can never get it to do anything; it just stays flat. But I hate Blair too."

More people started feeling their hair and chanting, "We hate Blair."

"Stop," the witch yelled and ran towards the stage. Herb and Lou ran after her. The witch reached for Fran, but Fran did a cartwheel, forgetting all about the invisible pom-poms. The place erupted in cheers.

"We hate Blair. We hate Blair," the whole factory was chanting.

The witch looked at Herb and Lou and then looked around the room. It looked as if she were trying to find a way out. But every door was blocked by people.

The boy with the blond Afro jumped on stage, grabbed the microphone, and shouted, "Let's get her."

It was like watching people in a football game rushing the field after their favorite team had won. Twenty or more people grabbed the witch and held her up on her back like a rock star that had plunged from stage onto the crowd of fans.

"What should we do with her?" Afro kid asked Fran. Fran looked at Herb. The room became silent. They were all looking at Herb.

He'd been thinking about this since he figured out that fire and water wouldn't work. "How about cold?" he asked Lou.

Lou shrugged. "Nothing I've read says witches die with cold, but we should try everything."

There were a few murmurs from the crowd. Some were debating whether cold would be the right approach and others were just wondering what was taking so long -- they should stuff her in a freezer and be done with her.

Herb was wondering why the witch looked so calm. She hadn't flinched when he'd mentioned the cold. In fact she had stopped squirming and looked almost peaceful. Was she patiently waiting for her death? Herb didn't think so.

A kid rushed to a panel with hooks on the wall. He grabbed some keys from one of the hooks and said, "The trucks are refrigerated. Let's put her in truck twelve, and see what happens."

There were many cheers. The crowd started carrying the witch towards the exit with the trucks.

The witch was still calm. Herb ran in front of them and put a hand up to stop them. "Wait," he said.

The crowd stopped.

Cold wasn't going to work. It was all about emotions. The trance was broken with strong emotions. Love had done it for his sister, and hate had done it for the rest of them. Cold was just like heat and water, it was a physical thing. It wouldn't work.

Suddenly, the witch was back on her feet. On the floor next to her were two gingerbread cookies. The rest of the people who had been holding her tumbled backwards. The witch dashed over to Lou and grabbed her.

"Anyone touches me, and she's dead dough," the witch said. She had her left arm around Lou's neck. With her right hand she formed a pretend gun out of her index finger and thumb and pointed it directly at Lou's heart.

If Herb had been in a trance, this would have set him free for sure. In one night he'd let three people he cared about get captured -- first Fran, then Beck, and now Lou. He had to figure out a way to get rid of this witch.

Everyone held still except for a girl who bent forward and picked up the cookies before anyone stepped on them.

"In case you're wondering, cold can't kill me either," the witch said. "Nothing can. But if you think I'm going to spend another hundred years locked up, then there's no emotion strong enough to cure your stupidity. So just back up."

Herb took a step back. Everyone standing next to him did the same.

"Don't worry about me," Lou said. "Think of saving Beck."

The witch's eyes flashed red for a second. "Shut up," she said.

For the first time, Herb noticed a strand of gray in the witch's hair. And the witch's face, which he'd thought of as perfectly smooth, had wrinkles. Had he just not noticed them before?

The witch took a few more steps. Around her, people parted to let her through.

"I'll take those keys," she said, looking at the kid with the keys for truck twelve. The kid sighed, then threw the keys at her. She pocketed the keys and moved her finger quickly back over Lou's heart.

Then Herb remembered something Lou had told him back in the park.

He rushed forward towards the witch. The witch looked surprised at first, but then she smiled and tapped her index finger on Lou's chest.

Nothing happened.

The witch tapped Lou's chest again. And a third time. Still nothing happened.

"She can't hurt you if you care about someone else and not yourself," Herb said.

A wart appeared on the witch's left cheek. She pushed Lou back into the crowd and aimed her index finger directly at Herb's heart.

"Hold it," the witch said to Herb. "Have you thought about what getting rid of me will mean for you? What will happen when they stop eating the candy?"

A few people closed in around the witch and held their ground.

"Who's going to care about you?" the witch continued. "If I'm gone, your sister will get thin again. The only reason she loves you now is because she looks as bad as you do. But what about when she's pretty? Your mom will get thin too. How was that working for you before? In fact, most of the people here will get thin. You know they're only listening to you now because you look like them. It's not going to be easy when you're the last one around the track in gym. I'm even willing to bet your girlfriend here will get thin. Sure, she'll pretend she doesn't care about being fat at first, but wait until it's time for homecoming. She'll lose weight for the pictures, there's no question about that...And do you think she'll want you standing next to her looking like that?"

"Don't listen to her," Lou said.

Herb paused. He was trying not to listen to the witch, but it was true that Fran would get thin again. Within a month she'd be giving him advice on how not to embarrass her. His mom would get back in shape too, and if that happened then she'd never get back together with his dad. There was a chance even Lou would get thin. After all, she'd been eating vegetables for the last year. The only reason she was overweight now was to protect herself from the witch. But with the witch gone...

"Your dad abandoned you, and your little sister doesn't remember you by now. Are you sure this is what you want?" the witch asked. She closed one eye for a better aim and adjusted her finger.

Herb looked at his sister, who was still on stage and said, "I don't care if you hate me again because you're thin and I'm not. I still want to help you." He then turned to Afro kid and said, "And I don't care if you forget that I was the one who came to kill the witch and you begin to pick on me at school. I want to help you too."

The wart on the witch's cheek burst open and a worm crawled out of it. She grabbed the worm, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it. She stopped aiming her finger at Herb and used her hand to cover the hole.

Herb walked a few more steps forward. Lou followed him. "I don't care what happens to me. I just want everyone to be safe."

"Fine," the witch said. "Take me to the freezer. As long as I don't have to hear this mushy babble." She waited, but no one picked her up.

Lou looked at the witch and then at Herb and smiled. "Who cares about homecoming pictures? I want you to have a good time, whether you ask me or not."

"Enough," the witch yelled. One of her teeth fell to the ground.

"Dude," Afro kid said. He was still up on stage behind the microphone. "I would personally cut my hair off if it would stop people from picking on you at school." Herb wasn't sure how cutting hair equaled not getting picked on at school, but it didn't matter -- it had worked. The witch's skin began to peel.

Others noticed what was happening and joined in. One by one they began to say things they would do for other people even if it meant giving up something they liked. With each word the witch's hair turned whiter.

More of the witch's teeth fell out. She tried to hold them back with her forearm, while plugging the hole in her cheek, but there were too many to contain.

Fran jumped off the stage and ran over to where the witch was standing. When she reached the witch she stopped and faced Herb. "Oh, okay. You know what I'd do?" she asked and paused. "I would stay fat. If it's the only way you and I can hang out without hating each other, I'd do it. There. I've said it. I'd stay fat. Even though I'm not as good of a cheerleader fat."

The witch exploded into a cloud of dust. The dust filled the entire warehouse for an instant and then vanished, scattered by the warehouse's fans. Pieces of the witch's clothes flew in every direction. One of the pieces fell on Fran's head.

"Gross," Fran said and shook it off. Others grabbed the rags and suggested burning them, or putting them in the freezer, just to make sure the witch was all gone.

The crowd began to cheer and to congratulate Herb and one another. Some got up on stage and began bouncing and dancing. A few of the girls walked up to Fran and asked her if she could teach them some of her moves.

Fran ignored them and walked towards Herb. When she reached him she said, "Go already. Go get Beck."

Lou nodded. "Go. We have to get rid of the candy."

Herb pushed his way through pats on the back, congratulations, and more comments about how they'd consider staying fat too, maybe.

#

He ran home until he was completely out of breath, then he walked as fast as he could. The witch was dead, but did that mean that everything would go back to normal? Maybe that only happened in movies. He hadn't waited long enough to see if the gingerbread cookies had turned back to people. And besides, Mrs. Lenheart was flesh and bone, as far as he knew. What if she refused to let Beck go? He could get the police but would they be happy that he'd killed the candy maker, the principal, and the mayor?

He rushed inside the house. "Mom. I need to know where Mrs. Lenheart..."

At first he couldn't make sense of what he was seeing. Mrs. Lenheart was there, in the living room, standing over his mom. His mom was on the floor in front of the couch clutching his sister. Beck. Beck was here.

Herb dashed into the room. He put himself between Mrs. Lenheart and Mom and Beck and glared at Mrs. Lenheart. "What have you done to her?"

Mrs. Lenheart looked scared. She put two hands up to protect herself and took a step back. "I couldn't do it. I'm sorry. Bill and I wanted a little girl so badly."

Herb bent down and reached for his sister. Beck looked up. Her eyes were still teary. "Herbie," she said. She still remembered him. But how?

"After an hour had passed she was still crying," Mrs. Lenheart said. "She wanted to see her mom. She was never going to be ours -- she'd never gone under the trance. We didn't want a daughter that way. We didn't care if we got turned into gingerbread cookies or not."

"We didn't care either," Herb heard a man's voice say. He looked up and saw two people standing by the kitchen door. They were the people from the photo -- the Thompsons. Mr. Thompson was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and Mrs. Thompson was wearing a dress with flowers and around her neck was a necklace. The same heart shaped necklace he'd seen on the gingerbread cookie. Mrs. Thompson looked at Mr. Thompson and flicked off some cookie crumbs from his shirt.

Mrs. Lenheart took a step back. "How?" she asked and looked at Herb.

"I'd say that something must have happened to the witch," Mr. Thompson said.

Herb nodded.

"It's not easy being a cookie, wondering if someone is going to eat you, feeling like you're dead but still being afraid of dying..." Mr. Thompson said.

"Let's go find our children," Mrs. Thompson said, urging Mr. Thompson forward.

"...but we'd do it again if we had to," Mr. Thompson said.

The Thompsons walked towards the front door. "I guess we're going to have to find a new place to live too, seeing how you folks are here now," Mr. Thompson said. He smiled at Herb and patted him on the shoulder.

Herb waved them goodbye.

Outside, families were walking. Two kids on bicycles passed by. Across the street, and two houses over, a dad and his son were playing basketball. They weren't moving very fast because of their weight, but they would get thin again, just like the witch had said. And what about him? Would he get thin? Maybe, or maybe not. One thing was for sure -- this time he was going to choose his weight for himself. He wasn't going to be fat because he resented his mom and sister, and he wasn't going to be thin to fit in. He was going to be whatever he wanted just for himself. And that thought made him feel lighter already.

Down the street he saw Fran and Lou walking back towards the house. Afro kid was with them. He and Fran seemed to be hitting it off.

There was only one person missing.

His mom put a hand on his shoulder. "You know," she started, "there are worse things than being overweight. Losing your family is one of them...Let's call your dad," Mom said.

Herb and Beck looked at each other and smiled.

Cheater

by Orson Scott Card



Artwork by Jin Han

Han Tzu was the bright and shining hope of his family. He wore a monitor embedded in the back of his skull, near the top of his spine. Once, when he was very little, his father held him between mirrors in the bathroom. He saw that a little red light glowed there. He asked his father why he had a light on him when he had never seen another child with a light.

"Because you're important," said Father. "You will bring our family back to the position that was taken from us many years ago by the Communists."

Tzu was not sure how a little red light on his neck would raise his family up. Nor did he know what a Communist was. But he remembered the words and when he learned to read, he tried to find stories about Communists or about the family Han or about children with little red lights. There were none to be found.

His father played with him several times a day. He grew up with his father's loving hands caressing him, cuffing him playfully; he grew up with his father's smile. His father praised him whenever he learned something; it became Tzu's endeavor every day to learn something so he could tell Father.

"You spell my name Tzu," said Tzu, "even though it's pronounced just like the word 'zi.' T-Z-U is the old way of spelling, called ... 'Wade-Giles.' The new way is 'pinyin.'"

"Very good, my Tzu, my Little Master," said Father.

"There's another way of writing even older than that, where each word has its own letter. It was very hard to learn and even harder to put on computer so the government changed all the books to pinyin."

"You are a brilliant little boy," said Father.

"So now people give their children names spelled the old Wade-

Giles way because they don't want to let go of the lost glories of ancient China."

Father stopped smiling. "Who told you that?"

"It was in the book," said Tzu. He was worried that somehow he had disappointed Father.

"Well, it's true. China has lost its glory. But someday it will have that glory back and all the world will see that we are still the Middle Kingdom. And do you know who will bring that glory back to China?"

"Who, Father?"

"My son, my little Master, Han Tzu."

"Where did China's glory go, so I can bring it back?"

"China was the center of the world," said Father. "We invented everything. All the barbarian kingdoms around China stole our ideas and turned them into terrible weapons. We left them in peace, but they would not leave us in peace, so they came and broke the power of the emperors. But still the Chinese resisted. Our glorious ancestor, Yuan Shikai, was the greatest general in the last age of the emperors.

"The emperors were weak, and the revolutionaries were strong. Yuan Shikai could see that weak emperors could not protect China. So he took control of the government. He pretended to agree with the revolutionaries of Sun Yat-sen, but then destroyed them and seized the imperial throne. He started a new dynasty, but then he was poisoned by traitors and died, just as the Japanese invaded.

"The Chinese people were punished for the death of Yuan Shikai. First the Japanese invaded China and many died. Then the Communists took over the government and ruled as evil emperors for a hundred years, growing rich from the slavery of the Chinese people. Oh, how they yearned for the day of Yuan Shikai! Oh how they wished he had not been slain before he could unite China against the barbarians and the oppressors!"

There was a light in Father's eyes that made Tzu a little afraid and yet also very excited. "Why would they poison him if our glorious ancestor was so good for China?" he asked.

"Because they wanted China to fail," said Father. "They wanted China to be weak among the nations. They wanted China to be ruled by America and Russia, by India and Japan. But China always swallows up the barbarians and rises again, triumphant over all. Don't you forget that." Father tapped Tzu's temples. "The hope of China is in there."

"In my head?"

"To do what Yuan Shikai did, you must first become a great general. That's why you have that monitor on the back of your neck."

Tzu touched the little black box. "Do great generals all have these?"

"You are being watched. This monitor will protect you and keep you safe. I made sure you had the perfect mama to make you very, very smart. Someday they'll give you tests. They'll see that the blood of Yuan Shikai runs true in your veins."

"Where's Mama?" asked Tzu, who at that age had no idea of what 'tests' were or why someone else's blood would be in his veins.

"She's at the university, of course, doing all the smart things she does. Your mother is one of the reasons that our city of Nanyang and our province of Henan are now leaders in Chinese manufacturing."

Tzu had heard of manufacturing. "Does she make cars?"

"Your mother invented the process that allows almost half of the light of the sun to be converted directly to electricity. That's why the air in Nanyang is always clean and our cars sell better than any others in the world."

"Then Mama should be emperor!" said Tzu.

"But your father is very important, too," said Father. "Because I worked hard when I was young, and I made a lot of money, and I used that money to pay for her research when nobody else thought it would lead to anything."

"Then you be emperor," said Tzu.

"I am one of the richest men in China," said Father, "certainly the richest in Henan province. But being rich is not enough to be emperor. Neither is being smart. Though from your mother and me, you will grow up to be both."

"What does it take to be emperor?"

"You must crush all your enemies and win the love and obedience of the people."

Tzu made a fist with his hand, as tight and strong a fist as he could. "I can crush bugs," he said. "I crushed a beetle once."

"You're very strong," said Father. "I'm proud of you all the time."

Tzu got to his feet and went around the garden looking for things to crush. He tried a stone, but it wasn't crushable. He broke a twig, but when he tried to crush the pieces, it hurt his hand. He crushed a worm and it made his hands smeary with ichor. The worm was dead. What good was a crushed worm? What was an enemy? Would it look like this when he crushed one?

He hoped his enemies were softer than stone. He couldn't crush stones at all. But it was messy and unpleasant to crush worms, too. It was much more fun to let them crawl across his hand.

Tutors began to come to the house. None of them played with him for very long at a time, and each one had his own kind of games. Some of them were fun, and Tzu was very good at many of them. Children were also brought to him, boys who liked to wrestle and race, girls who wanted to play with dolls and dress up in adult clothing. "I don't like to play with girls so much," said Tzu to his father, but Father only answered, "You must know all kinds of people when you rule over them someday. Girls will show you what to care about. Boys will show you how to win."

So Tzu learned he should care about tending babies and bringing home things for the pretend mama to cook, though his own mama never cooked. He also learned to run as fast as he could and to wrestle hard and cleverly and never give up.

When he was five years old, he read and did his numbers far better than the average for his age, and his tutors were well-satisfied with his progress. Each of them told him so.

Then one day he had a new tutor. This tutor seemed to be more important than all the others. Tzu played with him five or six times a day, fifteen minutes at a time. And the games were new ones. There would be shapes. He would be given a red one that was eight small blocks stuck together, and then from a group of pictures of blocks he had to choose which one was the same shape. "Not the same color - it can be a different color. The same shape," said the tutor.

Soon Tzu was very good at finding that shape no matter how the picture was turned around and twisted, and no matter what color it was. Then the tutor would bring out a new shape, and they'd start over.

He was also given logic questions that made him think for a long time, but soon he learned to find the classifications that were being used. All dogs have four legs. This animal has four legs. Is it a dog? Maybe. Only mammals have fur. This animal has fur. Is it a mammal? Yes. All dogs have four legs. This animal has three legs. Is it a dog? It might be an injured dog -- some injured dogs have only three legs. But I said all dogs have four legs. And I said some dogs have only three legs because they're broken but they're still dogs! And the tutor smiled and agreed with him.

Then there were the memorization tests. He learned to memorize longer and longer lists of things by putting them inside a toy cupboard the tutor told him to create in his mind, or by mentally stacking them on top of each other, or putting them inside each other. This was fun for a while, though pretty soon he got sick of having all kinds of meaningless lists perfectly memorized. It wasn't funny after a while to have the ball come out of the fish which came out of the tree which came out of the car which came out of the briefcase, but he couldn't get it out of his memory.

Once he had played them often enough, Tzu became bored with all the games. That was when he realized that they were not games at all. "But you must go on," the tutor would say. "Your father wants you to."

"He didn't say so."

"He told me. That's why he brought me here. So you would become very good at these games."

"I am very good at them."

"But we want you to be the best."

"Who is better? You?"

"I'm an adult."

"How can I be best if nobody is worst?"

"We want you to be one of the best of all the five-year-old children in the world."

"Why?"

The tutor paused, considering. Tzu knew that this meant he would probably tell a lie. "There are people who go around playing these games with children, and they give a prize to the best ones."

"What's the prize?" asked Tzu suspiciously.

"What do you want it to be?" asked the tutor playfully. Tzu hated it when he acted playful.

"Mama to be home more. She never plays with me."

"Your mama is very busy. And that can't be the prize because the people who give the prize aren't your mama."

"That's what I want."

"What if the prize was a ride in a spaceship?" said the tutor.

"I don't care about a ride in a spaceship," said Tzu. "I saw the pictures. It's just more stars out there, the same as you see from here in Nanyang. Only Earth is little and far away. I don't want to be far away."

"Don't worry," said the tutor. "The prize will make you very happy and it will make your father very proud."

"If I win," said Tzu. He thought of the times that other children beat him in races and wrestling. He usually won but not always. He tried to think how they would turn these games into a contest. Would he have to make shapes for the other child to guess, and the child would make shapes for him? He tried to think up logic questions and lists to memorize. Lists that you couldn't put inside each other or stack up. Except that he could always imagine something going inside something else. He could imagine anything. He just ended up with more stupid lists he couldn't forget.

Life was getting dull. He wanted to go outside of the garden walls and walk around the noisy streets. He could hear cars and people and bicycles on the other side of the gate, and when he stuck his eye right up against the crack in the gate he could see them whiz by on the street. Most of the pedestrians were talking Chinese, like the servants, instead of Common, like Father and the tutors, but he understood both languages very well, and Father was proud of that, too. "Chinese is the language of Emperors," said Father, "but Common is the language that the rest of the world understands. You will be fluent in both."

But even though Tzu knew Chinese, he could hardly understand what was said by the passersby. They spoke so quickly and their voices rose and fell in pitch, so it was hard to hear, and they were talking about things he didn't understand. There was a whole world he knew nothing about and he never got to see it because he was always inside the garden playing with tutors.

"Let's go outside the walls today," he said to his Common tutor.

"But I'm here for us to read together," she said.

"Let's go outside the walls and read today," said Tzu.

"I can't," she said. "I don't have the key."

"Mu-ren has a key," said Tzu. He had seen the cook go out of the gate to shop for food in the market and come back with a cart. "Pei-Tian has a key, too." That was Father's driver, who brought the car in and out through the gate.

"But I don't have a key."

Was she really this stupid? Tzu ran to Mu-ren and said, "Wei Dun-nuan needs a key to the gate."

"She does?" said Mu-ren. "Whatever for."

"So we can go outside and read."

By then Mu-ren had caught up with him. She shook her head at Mu-ren. Mu-ren squatted in front of Tzu. "Little master," she said, "you don't need to go outside. Your papa doesn't want you out on the street."

That was when Tzu realized he was a prisoner.

They come here and teach me what Father wants me to learn. I'm supposed to become the best child. Even the children that come here are the ones they pick for me. How do I know if I'm the best, when I never get to find children on my own? And what does it matter if I'm best at boring games? Why can't I ever leave this house and garden?

"To keep you safe," Father explained that evening. Mu-ren or the tutor must have told him about the key. "You're a very important little boy. I don't want you to be hurt."

"I won't be hurt."

"That's because you won't go out there until you're ready," said Father. "Right now you have more important things to do. Our garden is very large. You can explore anywhere you want."

"I've looked at all of it."

"Look again," said Father. "There's always more to find."

"I don't want to be the best child," said Tzu. "I want to see what's outside the gate."

"After you take the tests," said Father, laughing. "Plenty of time. You're still very very young. Your life isn't over yet."

The tests. He had to take the tests first. He had to be best child before he could go out of the garden.

So he worked hard at his games with the tutors, trying to get better and better so he could win the tests and go outside. Meanwhile, he also studied all the walls of the garden to see if there was a way to get through or under or over them without waiting.

Once he thought he found a place where he could squeeze under a fence, but he no sooner had his arm through than one of the tutors found him and dragged him back in. The next time that place had tight metal mesh between the bottom of the fence and the ground.

Another time he tried to climb a box set on top of a bin, and when he got to the top he could see the street, and it was glorious, hundreds of people moving in all directions but almost never bumping into each other, the bicycles zipping along and not falling over, and the silent cars crawling through as people moved out of the way for them. Everyone wore bright colors and looked happy or at least interested. Every single person had more freedom than Tzu did.

What kind of emperor will I be if I let people keep me inside a cage like a pet bird?

So he tried to swing his leg up onto the top of the wall, but once again, before he could even get his body weight onto the top, along came a tutor, all in a dither, to drag him down and scold him. And when he came back to the place, the bin was no longer near the wall. Nothing was ever near the garden walls again.

Hurry up with the tests, then, thought Tzu. I want to be out there with all the people. There were children out there, some of them holding onto their mothers' hands, but some of them not holding onto anybody. Just ... loose. I want to be loose.

Then one day the newest tutor, Shen Guo-rong, the one with the logic games and lists, stood outside Tzu's room and talked with his father in a low voice for a long time. He came in with a paper, which he looked at long and hard.

"What's on that paper?"

"A note from your father."

"Can I read it?" asked Tzu.

"It's not a note to you, it's a note to me," said Guo-rong.

But when he set it down, it wasn't a note at all. It was covered with diagrams and words. And that day, all their games were chosen by Guo-rong after consulting with the paper.

It went like that for days. Always the same answers, until Tzu knew them all in order and could start reciting them before the questions were asked.

"No," said Guo-rong. "You must always wait for the question to be completely finished before you answer."

"Why?"

"That's the rule of the game," he said. "If you answer any question too fast, then the whole game is over and you lose."

That was a stupid rule, but Tzu obeyed it. "This is boring," he said.

"The test will be soon," said Guo-rong. "And you'll be completely ready for it. But don't tell the testers about any of your practice with me."

"Why not?"

"It will look better for you if they don't know about me, that's all."

That was the first time that Tzu realized that there might be something wrong with the way he was being prepared for the tests. But he had little time to think about it, because the very next day, a strange woman and a strange man came to the house. They had no folds over their eyes and had strange ruddy skin, and they wore uniforms he recognized from the vids. They were with the I.F., the International Fleet.

"He's fluent in Common?" the man said.

"Yes," said Father -- Father was home! Tzu ran into the room and hugged his father. "This is a special day," Father told him as he hugged him back. "These people are going to play some games with you. A kind of test."

Tzu turned and looked at them. He didn't know the test was from soldiers. But now it became clear to him. Father wanted him to become a great general like Yuan Shikai. The beginning of that would be to enter the military. Not the Chinese Army, but the fleet of the whole world.

But he didn't want to go into space. He just wanted to go out on the street.

He knew Father would not want him to ask about this, however. So he smiled at the man and the woman and bowed to each in turn. They bowed back, smiling also.

Soon Tzu was alone in his playroom with the two of them. No tutors, no servants, no Father.

The woman spread out some papers and brought out shapes, just like the ones he had practiced with.

"Have you seen these before?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Where?"

Then he remembered he wasn't supposed to talk about Guo-Rong, so he just shrugged.

"You don't remember?"

He shrugged again.

She explained the game to him -- it was just like the one Guo-Rong had played. And when she held up a shape, it was the very one they had practiced with, and he instantly recognized it from the choices on the paper. He pointed.

"Good," she said.

And so it went with the next two shapes. They were exactly the ones Guo-rong had shown him, and the answer was exactly the one that had been on the note from Father.

Suddenly Tzu understood it all. Father had cheated. Father had found out the answers to the test and had given them to Guo-rong so that Tzu would know all the answers to all the questions.

It took only a moment to make the next leap. In a way, it was a logic problem. The best child is the one who scores the best on this test. He wants me to be best child. So I must score the best on this test.

But if I score the best because I was given the answers in advance and trained to memorize them, then this test won't prove I'm the best child, it will only prove that I can memorize answers.

If Father believed I was best child, then he would not need to get these answers in advance. But he did get the answers. Therefore he must believe that I would not have won the test without having special help. Therefore Father does not believe I am best child, he just wants to fool other people into believing that I am.

It was all he could do to keep from crying. But even though his eyes burned and he felt a sob gathering behind his nose and in his throat, he kept his face calm. He would not let the people know that his father had given him the answers. But he would also not pretend to be best child when he really wasn't.

So the next question he got wrong.

And the next.

And all the others.

Even though he knew the answer to every single one, before they even finished the question, he got every one of them wrong.

The woman and man from the International Fleet showed no sign of whether they liked his answers or not. They smiled cheerfully all the time, and when they were done, they thanked him and left.

Afterward, Father and Guo-rong came into the room where Tzu waited for them. "How did it go?" asked Father.

"Did you know the answers?" asked Guo-rong.

"Yes," said Tzu.

"All of them?" asked Father.

"Yes," said Tzu.

"Did you answer all the questions?" asked Guo-rong.

"Yes," said Tzu.

"Then you did very well," said Father. "I'm proud of you."

You're not proud of me, thought Tzu as his father hugged him. You didn't believe I'd pass the test on my own. You didn't think I was best child. Even now, you're not proud of me, you're proud of yourself for getting all the answers.

There was a special dinner that night. All the tutors ate with Father and Tzu at the main table. Father was laughing and happy. Tzu could not help but smile at all the smiling people. But he knew that he had answered all but the first three questions wrong, and Father would not be happy when he found that out.

When dinner was over, Tzu asked, "Can I go outside the gate now?"

"Tomorrow," said Father. "In daylight."

"The sun is still up," said Tzu. "Take me now, Father."

"Why not?" said Father. He rose to his feet and took Tzu by the hand and they walked, not to the gate where the car came in and out, but to the front door of the house. It let out onto another garden, and for a moment Tzu thought his father was going to try to fool him into thinking this was the outside when it was really more garden. But soon the path led to a metal gate which opened at Father's touch, and beyond the gate was a wide road with many cars on it -- more cars than people. It was a different world from what Tzu had seen over the back fence. It was so quiet. The cars glided silently by, their tires hissing on the pavement, though there were some that had no tires and merely hovered over the concrete of the road.

"Where are all the people and bicycles?" asked Tzu.

"Behind the house is a back road," said Father. "Where poor people go about their business. This is the main road. It connects to the highway. These cars could be going anywhere. Xiangfan. Zhengzhou. Kaifeng. Even Wunan or Beijing or Shanghai. Great cities, where powerful people live. Millions of them. In the richest and greatest of all nations." Then Father picked Tzu up and held him on his hip so their faces were close. "But you are the best child in all those cities."

"No I'm not," said Tzu.

"Of course you are," said Father.

"You know that I'm not," said Tzu.

"What makes you say that?"

"If you thought I was best child, you wouldn't have given Guo-rong all the answers."

Father just looked at him for a moment. "I was just making sure. You didn't need them."

"Then why did you have him teach them to me?" said Tzu.

"To be sure."

"So you weren't sure."

"Of course I was," said Father.

But Tzu had been studying logic. "If you were sure I would know the answers on my own, then you wouldn't have to make it sure by getting the answers. But you got the answers. So you weren't sure."

Father looked a little bit upset.

"I'm sorry, Father, but it's how we play the logic game. Maybe you need to play it more."

"I am sure that you're the best child," said Father. "Don't you ever doubt it." He set Tzu down and took his hand again. They went through the gate and walked up the street.

Tzu wasn't interested in this road. There were no people here, except in cars, and they went by too fast for Tzu to hear them. There were no children. So when they came to a side street, Tzu began to pull his father that direction. "This way," he said. "Here's all the people!"

"That's why it isn't safe," said Father. But then he laughed and let Tzu lead him on into the crowds. After a while it was so jammed with people and bicycles that Father picked him up. That was much better. Tzu could see the people's faces. He could hear their conversations. Some of them looked at Tzu, being held up by his father, and smiled at them both. Tzu smiled and waved back.

Father walked slowly alongside a high fence, which Tzu realized was the back fence around their garden. Eventually came to a gate, which Tzu knew was the gate to their garden. "Don't go in yet," said Tzu.

"What?"

"This is our gate, but don't go in."

"How did you know it was our gate? You've never been on this side of it before."

"Father," said Tzu impatiently, "I'm very smart. I know this is our gate. What else could it be? We've just made a circle. Let me see more before we go in."

So they walked past the gate, and on into one of the streets that seemed to go on forever, more and more people, flowing into and out of the buildings. Starting and stopping, buying and selling, calling out and keeping still, laughing and serious-faced, talking on phones and gesturing, or listening to music and dancing as they walked.

"Is this China, Father?" asked Tzu.

"A very small part of it. There are hundreds of cities, and lots of open country, too. Farmland and mountains, forest and beaches. Seaports and manufacturing centers and highways and deserts and rice paddies and wheatfields and millions and millions and millions of people."

"Thank you," said Tzu.

"For what?"

"For letting me see China before I go off into space."

"What are you talking about?"

"The man and woman with the test, they were from the International Fleet."

"Who told you that?"

"They wore the uniforms," said Tzu impatiently. But then he realized: He hadn't passed the test. He answered the questions wrong. He wouldn't be going to space after all. "Never mind," he said. "I'm staying."

Father laughed and held him close. "Sometimes I have no idea what you're talking about, Little Master."

Tzu wondered if he should tell him that he answered the questions wrong, but he decided against it. Father was so happy. Tzu didn't want to make him angry tonight.

The next morning, Tzu was eating breakfast in the kitchen with Mu-ren when someone came to the door. The visitor did not wait for old Iron-head, as Mu-Ren and Tzu secretly called him, to fetch Father. Instead, many feet began walking briskly through the house.

The kitchen door was flung open. A soldier with a weapon in his hand stepped in and looked around. "Is Han Pei-mu here?" he asked sternly.

Mu-ren shook her head.

"What about Shen Guo-rong?"

Again, the head shake.

"Guo-rong doesn't come till later," said Tzu.

"You two stay right here in the kitchen, please," said the soldier. He continued to stand in the doorway. "Keep eating, please."

Tzu continued eating, trying to think what the soldiers were there for. Mu-ren's hands were shaking. "Are you cold?" asked Tzu. "Or are you scared?"

Mu-ren only shook her head and kept eating.

After a while he could hear his father shouting. "Let me at least explain to the boy!" he was saying. "Let me see my son!"

Tzu got up from his mat on the floor and jogged toward the kitchen door. The soldier put his hand on his shoulder to stop him.

Tzu slapped his hand and said to him fiercely, "Don't touch me!" Then he jogged on down the hallway to Father's room, the soldier right behind him.

The door opened just before Tzu got to it, and there was the man from the test yesterday. "Apparently someone already decided," said the man. He ushered Tzu into the room.

Father's hands were bound together behind his back, but now one of the soldiers loosed them and he reached out to Tzu. Tzu ran to him and hugged him. "Are you under arrest?" asked Tzu. He had seen arrests on the vids.

"Yes," said Father.

"Is it because of the answers?" asked Tzu. It was the only thing he could think of that his father had ever done wrong.

"Yes," said Father.

Tzu pulled away from him and faced the man from the tests. "But it was all right," said Tzu. "I didn't use those answers."

"I know you didn't," said the man.

"What?" said Father.

Tzu turned around to face him. "I didn't like it that you were only going to pretend I was best child. So I didn't use any of the answers. I didn't want to be called best child if I wasn't really." He turned back to the man from the fleet. "Why are you arresting him when I didn't use the answers?"

The man smiled confidently. "It doesn't matter whether you used them or not. What matters is that he obtained them."

"I'm sorry," said Father. "But if my son did not answer the questions correctly, how can you prove that any cheating took place?"

"For one thing, we've been recording this entire interview," said the man from the fleet. "The fact that he knew he had been given the right answers and chose to answer incorrectly does not change the fact that you trained him to take the test."

"Maybe what you need is a little better security with the answers," said Father angrily.

"Sir," said the man from the fleet, "we always allow people to buy the test if they try to get it. Then we watch and see what they do with it. A child as bright as this one could not possibly have answered every question wrong unless he absolutely had the entire test down cold."

"I got the first three right," said Tzu.

"Yes, all but three were wrong," said the man from the fleet. "Even children of very limited intellect get some of them right by random chance."

Father's demeanor changed again. "The blame is entirely mine," he said. "The boy's mother had no idea I was doing this."

"We're quite aware of that. She will not be bothered, except of course to inform her. The penalty is not severe, sir, but you will certainly be convicted and serve the days in prison. The fleet makes no exceptions for anyone. We need to make a public example of those who try to cheat."

"Why, if you let them cheat whenever they want?" said Father bitterly.

"If we didn't let people buy the answers, they might figure out much cleverer ways to cheat the test. Ways we wouldn't necessarily catch."

"Aren't you smart."

Father was being sarcastic, but Tzu thought they were smart. He wished he had thought of that.

"Father," said Tzu. "I'm sorry about Yuan Shikai."

Father glanced furtively toward the soldiers. "Don't worry about that," he said.

"But I was thinking. It's been so many hundred years since Yuan Shikai lived that he must have hundreds of descendants now. Maybe thousands. It doesn't have to be me, does it? It could be one of them."

"Only you," said Father softly. He kissed him good-bye. They bound his wrists behind his back and led him out of the house.

The woman from the test stayed with Tzu and kept him from following to watch them take Father away. "Where will they take him?" asked Tzu.

"Not far," said the woman. "He won't be imprisoned for very long, and he'll be quite comfortable there."

"But he'll be ashamed," said Tzu.

"For a man with so much pride in his family," said the woman, "that is the harshest penalty."

"I should have answered most of the questions right," said Tzu. "It's my fault."

"It's not your fault," said the woman. "You're only a child."

"I'm almost six," said Tzu.

"Besides," said the woman, "we watched Guo-rong coaching you. Teaching you the test."

"How?" asked Tzu.

She tapped the little monitor on the back of his neck.

"Father said that was just to keep me safe. To make sure my heart was beating and I didn't get lost."

"Everything your eyes see," said the woman, "we see. Everything you hear, we hear."

"You lied, then," said Tzu. "You cheated too."

"Yes," said the woman. "But we're fighting a war. We're allowed to."

"It must have been boring, watching everything I see. I never get to see anything."

"Until last night," she said.

He nodded.

"So many people on the streets," she said. "More than you can count."

"I didn't try to count them," said Tzu. "They were going all different directions and in and out of buildings and up and down the side streets. I stopped after three thousand."

"You counted three thousand?"

"I'm always counting," said Tzu. "I mean my counter is."

"Your counter?"

"In my head. It counts everything and tells me the number when I need it."

"Ah," she said. She took his hand. "Let's go back to your room and take another test."

"Why?"

"This test you don't know the answers to."

"I bet I do," said Tzu. "I bet I figure them out."

"Ah," said the woman. "A different kind of pride."

Tzu sat down and waited for her to set up the test.

Hats Off

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

Freddy and I were busting our butts cleaning out his parents' tool shed. Freddy's father had offered us each a couple of bucks to do the work, which was fine with me. Of course, it turned out to be a lot more work than either of us counted on.

"Man, it's amazing how much junk you can put in one of these sheds," I said as I collapsed on the ground next to a huge stack of tools and boxes.

"Tell me about it," Freddy said. He opened a small box. I remembered it since it had weighed about eight million pounds and I'd nearly busted my gut carrying it out of the shed.

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Fishing magazines," Freddy said. "Dad hasn't fished in years. Guess it goes in the recycling pile."

I helped him drag it over. We'd decided to sort everything into three piles: recycle, keep, and throw out. Toward the end of the cleanup, I opened a box that was filled with hats.

"HEY DAD!" Freddy yelled toward the house. "You want any

hats?"

"No," his father called back through the open window. "Toss 'em."

"We should keep these," I said, lifting one of the hats from the box. It looked like a baseball cap, but it didn't have a team name. All it said over the brim was *ENERGY*. I put it on my head.

And I felt great.

"Hey," Let's load those recyclables into your Dad's van," I said.

"Hold on," Freddy said. "I'm beat."

"Not me," I said, lifting the box of magazines. "I've got tons of --"

"Tons of what?" Freddy asked.

"Weird," I muttered. I'd been about to say *energy*.

"What?" Freddy asked again.

I reached into the hat box and grabbed another one. It promised *HAPPINESS*. Before Freddy could say anything, I plunked the hat on his head.

"All right!" Freddy shouted, grinning at me. "Come on. Let's get moving. Man, I'm glad we're doing this." He laughed and grabbed a box.

That was fine with me. We loaded the van. I'd just put in the last box when I heard Freddy say, "Hey, what a great surprise. There's Millard Thwaxton. Hey, Millard, how ya doing?"

"Hold it," I said, grabbing Freddy by the arm. But it was too late. Millard was the meanest kid in town. And Freddy just got his attention.

I snatched at Freddy's hat, figuring he was too happy for our own good. It was stuck. I reached up and tried to get mine off. It was stuck, too, like a jar lid that's threaded on the wrong way. I felt it might come off if I worked on it, but I didn't have the time right now. Millard was rumbling our way.

"Keep talking," I said, running toward the back yard. I tore through the box of hats and searched for one that might save us. I passed on *ANGER* and *CURIOSITY*. The first would get us killed and the second didn't seem too promising, especially if it made Millard curious about the best way to cause us pain. I grabbed *KINDNESS*. That would do the trick, and make the world a better place.

I got back to the front just in time. Millard had reached Freddy and was playing that bully game where the other player always loses.

"What did you say to me?" he asked.

"I said hi," Freddy told him. "And I meant it. I'm awful happy to see you."

"That some kind of a joke?" Millard asked.

"Hey, have a hat," I said, tossing the cap to Millard.

He grabbed it and stared at me. I was afraid he'd just throw the hat away. Or throw me away. But he put it on.

He shoved it on his head. Backwards. With the brim facing away. I wondered what that would do to the kindness.

I found out right away.

"I'm gonna smash both of you," Millard said.

Freddy and I took off. At least I had lots of energy for running. And Freddy seemed pretty happy. For the moment. But when meanness caught up with him, it wouldn't be pretty.

Running Out of Air

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

Deeva sucked air and dug for the strength to hold her place in the middle of the pack. One more lap and it was over. For today, at least. Stay in the middle and you won't get killed, she thought, risking a glance over her shoulder where the stragglers tailed out, one pair running slowly with awkward gaits, two more barely jogging, and one last girl desperately swinging her arms in a pathetic attempt to make her walk look like a run.

"Move it, you lazy bitches!" Ms. Pelham screamed, cutting across the track toward the laggards. "This is supposed to be exercise." She grabbed the whistle that hung from her neck and blew an ear-piercing blast.

"They should fire her," Kate Wilson muttered as she ran just ahead of Deeva.

They've tried, Deeva thought. She'd heard stories. They'd all heard stories. Each fall, the first thing every girl at Smithfield High did was check her schedule to see which gym teacher she'd been assigned. Deeva was zero for two, drawing Ms. Pelham last year, and again this year. Across the field, near the bleachers, Ms. Bright was teaching her class an Irish dance step.

It was almost comic. Or cosmic. Bright and Pelham. Heaven and hell. Good and evil. Ms. Bright smiled. She encouraged all the girls. She baked cookies. Ms. Pelham snarled. She screamed at every student, except for the few star athletes who could do no wrong. But she saved a special level of venom for the slackers -- the fat, the weak, the uncoordinated, the sickly. If you couldn't run laps, Ms. Pelham would eat you up. Three times a week.

Deeva finished her last lap, then turned to watch the final scene of the drama.

"You're gonna fail," Ms. Pelham screamed. She waved her stop watch at the girls. "You miserable, lazy cows. You're not even trying."

The slow runners, Debby Munez and Tonya Hark, stumbled in. Then the joggers, Amber Weiss and Tabitha Jordan, made it across the line. Behind them, the walking, gasping, red-faced mess of Betty Lozer staggered toward the finish.

"Run!" Ms. Pelham screamed. She glanced briefly away to lash the rest of the class with her favorite phrase. "Keep your nose where it belongs."

Betty moved her lips, but Deeva was sure the girl didn't have the air for speech. Even so, she knew what Betty was trying to say. Asthma. One word. An explanation that any sane person would understand. Asthma.

But Deeva had seen Ms. Pelham dismiss all infirmities short of broken bones as nothing more than pathetic excuses. The invisible remained unacceptable. Asthma wouldn't stop a girl who really wanted to run. Deeva could imagine Ms. Pelham walking through a plague-struck village during the dark ages, screaming Get up! On your feet, you lazy fakers! at the dying who littered the streets.

Deeva let out her own breath as Betty finished the lap. Her sense of injustice was tinged with relief. Betty took a lot of the heat, leaving less of Ms. Pelham's attention for the others. Deeva's relief was tinged with guilt. Someone should do something about this. But those words, Keep your nose where it belongs, hovered at the edge of her thoughts like a wasp.

The class filed inside as Ms. Pelham berated them for their poor display of soccer skills. "We're going to keep drilling until you get it right," she told them. "We'll do it until you drop, if that's what it takes."

Deeva got her clothes from her locker. On the bench just across from her, she saw the four other laggards clustered around Betty. The girl was a sobbing, wet wreck now, sucking on her inhaler and drawing wheezy gasps of air.

"Get a doctor's note," Amber told her.

Betty nodded, then wiped her nose with her sleeve.

"You have to do something," Tabitha said.

"Friday," Betty said.

"You have an appointment?" Amber asked.

"Yeah."

"Hang in there," Tabitha said. "Just one more class. Then you're free."

The talk died for a moment as Ms. Pelham walked by, holding a sheet of paper and a roll of masking tape. A moment later, she passed by again in the other direction.

Deeva shoved her gym clothes in her bag. Through the glass window that separated the coaches' area from the locker room, she could see Ms. Pelham at her desk, eating grapes from a large plastic produce bag. She seemed to live on fruit, though Deeva was sure that when nobody was looking Ms. Pelham gorged on burgers and fries.

On the way out of the locker room, Deeva passed the spot where Ms. Pelham had taped up the latest grades. The teacher was murder on grade-point averages. Next to slow runners, she seemed to hate good students the most. The smart, the ambitious, the college bound, were at her mercy. The best and the brightest served only to fuel her rage. She rubbed in the damage with weekly grade postings, hand-written and secured to the wall with masking tape, a dangling display of low numbers laid out for all the world to see.

Deeva winced at the 83 next to her name. She knew she deserved better, but there wasn't much she could do about it. Ms. Pelham had branded her as a low 80s student, and that's where she'd stay no matter how hard she tried or how well she played.

Betty walked over and leaned toward the sheet. She gasped, then said, "That's not fair."

It was worse than unfair, Deeva thought. Ms. Pelham had given Betty a 59. Failing. But tauntingly close to passing. Worse, the grade threatened to ruin Betty's summer with a make-up gym class.

The marking period ended on Friday. Even with a doctor's note for next marking period, there was nothing that could erase the F that Betty was about to get.

Deeva watched Betty walk over to the coaches' room. Don't do it, she thought as she drifted closer.

Betty opened the door. "What can I do to raise my grade?" she asked.

Ms. Pelham glanced up from her snack and regarded Betty with contempt. "Try harder."

"I'm trying as hard as I can," Betty said.

"Then you'll fail."

Betty walked off and joined her waiting friends.

Deeva headed out, too. At least gym was over for the day. And at least she was passing.

#

They played soccer again on Wednesday, though a damp chill cut through the air. Deeva inhaled slowly. Fast breaths hurt her lungs. She noticed that Betty kept glancing at the track.

When Ms. Pelham blew the whistle and sent them to do their laps, Betty asked the teacher, "How fast do I have to go to pass?"

Ms. Pelham told her.

As Betty fell behind the pack, her four friends stayed with her, encouraging her.

Deeva dropped back toward the rear of the main group. It was safe. She knew Ms. Pelham wouldn't be watching her today.

Betty's gasps grew louder as she struggled to run.

Deeva clenched her teeth, wishing there was some way she could lend strength to Betty. Or sanity. Just stop, she thought. There weren't any degrees of failure here. A 50 was no worse than a 59. Even a zero was no worse.

As Betty ran, Ms. Pelham kept waving her stopwatch. "You're way behind," she said. "If you don't hurry, you'll never make it."

Deeva gasped as Betty put on a burst of speed. It only lasted for a couple steps. She stumbled and fell to the cinders. She pushed herself to her feet, took two more steps, then fell again.

She lay on the track, her chest heaving, one cheek pressed to the track, her mouth open like a dying fish.

Ms. Pelham walked away. Betty's friends rushed over to her.

"She can't breathe," Amber yelled.

Ms. Pelham shook her head in disgust. "Nikki," she called to her favorite pupil, "go get the nurse."

Nikki ran off. Ms. Pelham walked back to Betty and stared down. Her expression showed nothing but annoyance. "Finish your laps," she screamed at Betty's friends. "You've already lost points. Last one in gets an F."

The girls dashed off.

Deeva finished running, then huddled with the others, watching as the nurse came. And then the ambulance.

The story spread rapidly, growing and changing, mutating the way all school events do. But two points remained relatively unaltered. Betty was in bad shape. And Ms. Pelham wasn't in trouble. She'd told the administration that she'd done everything she could to keep Betty from overexerting herself, but the girl just wouldn't listen.

The next day, Deeva stayed late to audition for the school play. At one point, as she waited her turn, she saw four figures pass by in the hallway. Betty's friends.

There was something about the way they walked that caught her attention. After Deeva read her lines, she left the auditorium and headed toward the gym.

As she reached the end of the corridor, she heard voices coming from the locker room. She slipped the door open and moved inside, ducking down and staying close to the lockers. Ahead, she saw five clustered figures -- Debby, Tonya, Amber, and Tabitha. At the center was Ms. Pelham.

Her posture seemed odd. It took Deeva a moment to realize why. Ms. Pelham's hands were behind her back. In the light spilling from the coachs' room, Deeva saw that the gym teacher's wrists had been bound with masking tape. The office showed signs of a brief struggle. The teacher's chair was turned over. Her desk lamp was on it's side. An apple and a handful of grapes were spilled across the desk. A couple stray grapes had fallen to the floor.

"You girls are in big trouble," Ms. Pelham said.

"Hey, we can lie just as good as you," Tonya told her. "Nobody knows we're here."

"It's our word against yours," Amber said, tossing the roll of masking tape up in the air and catching it. "Nobody would believe nice girls like us would do anything bad. And we wouldn't. Not normally. But you're a special case."

The girls seemed to be waiting for something. Deeva sat and made herself comfortable. Time passed. She heard faint sounds through the wall as the boys came in from football practice, followed by more noise as they left the building. Soon after that, Debby slipped out and went to the back door, opened it briefly, then returned to the coachs' room. "It's clear. Come on. Let's go." She gave Ms. Pelham a push.

Deeva crept outside, keeping far enough back so they wouldn't spot her. The girls took Ms. Pelham to the track.

"It's very simple," Debby said. "We're going to run a race. Just one lap. You win, we cut off the tape."

Ms. Pelham laughed. "A race? Against you girls? It doesn't matter if my hands are tied. I'm an athlete. A real athlete. Not like you girls who can't even --"

"On your marks," Amber said.

The other three girls turned to face forward on the track.

Ms. Pelham shook her head. "You are in so much trouble." A smile crossed her lips, as if she was already planning her revenge, or perhaps relishing her coming victory on the track.

"Get set," Amber said.

The girls crouched in poor imitation of sprinters.

"When this is over, you're all going to suffer," Ms. Pelham said. She leaned at the waist and put one foot forward. "But first, I'm going to make you eat dust. Stupid bitches."

"Wait. I almost forgot." Amber stuck her hand in her pocket. Deeva heard a crinkling sound. Then Amber reached toward Ms. Pelham and slipped something over her head.

Deeva smothered a gasp as she watched Amber strip a length of masking tape from the roll and fasten the plastic produce bag around Ms. Pelham's neck.

"Go." Amber said.

The other three girls jogged off.

Ms. Pelham froze for an instant, her head swiveling rapidly from Amber to the runners, who were already widening their lead.

"Go," Amber said again, as if speaking very patiently to someone who wasn't bright at all.

Deeva saw the bag puff out as Ms. Pelham exhaled, then cling to her face as she drew a panicked breath. The clear plastic, fogged with moisture now, flattened on either side of her nose.

Deeva opened her mouth. One shout would put a stop to this. As she looked at the figures on the track, scenes from the past flooded her mind, along with a phrase she'd heard shouted far too often. Keep your nose where it belongs, Deeva thought.

Taking a slow, deep breath of the cold night air, Deeva turned and walked back to the locker room. Behind her, the crunch of feet on cinders faded, like the tail end of a dying gasp.

Sci-fi & Fantasy Literature

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by Melissa Griffin

Snow White

Snow White is one of the many timeless fairy tales that is still popular today because of its classic underlying themes. This story has been retold for centuries; first through oral tradition from mother to child; then it was recorded in the early 1800's through the efforts of mediators like the Grimm brothers. The Grimm brothers originally recorded "Snow-white" in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although the original Grimm brothers' version of the story can be easily found and read today, it is not the popularly known version of the story.

As time has passed and societies have changed so have fairy tales. The fairy tale of Snow White has been used as a tool to teach children throughout centuries. The story told in the time of the Grimm brothers was reflective of the society and history of that time. During the early 1800s Europe was experiencing the Napoleonic Era. According to Valerie Paradiz, in her book *Clever Maids: The Secret History of The Grimm Fairy Tales*, the French Occupation of Germany proved very difficult for those affected by it. Napoleon's Civil Code was enforced wherever the French Army invaded which added to the suffering not only of those who weren't French, but particularly of women. Women were especially affected through legal inequalities. The issue of morality is an example of instances where women were dealt with more harshly than men. If a woman was even accused of adultery by a man, the punishments were immediate and harsh, with no evidence required; whereas if a woman was accusing a man of adultery she had to prove, through evidence, that adultery was committed in their own house. Women were also limited in the use of money and owning land. "In essence, under this ruthless system, a wife's obedience to her husband was a legal duty" (Paradiz 53).

The stories that were being told by mothers to children during this time contained many lessons in female virtues and how to act appropriately as an adult. They also held the underlying message of how difficult it was to be a woman and an individual.

Stories were a means of socializing children, especially young girls so they would be able to grow to fill their expected role in society or suffer the consequences. Many of the fairy tales told during this time displayed violent enforcement of punishments for those who broke social rules. In many cases these stories were passed down to protect children. If children didn't understand the consequences of their actions, the punishments of the time period, whether applied legally or through natural consequences, were deadly and violent. In Paradiz's research she found the stories to reflect:

Bad girls lose limbs and fingers in punishment for being stubborn, or they willingly allow their hands to be chopped off in selfless acts of sacrifice. Murderous rapists pursue maidens in the woods. Little men threaten to steal a married woman's children away. Girls' fathers abandon them, pledge them to despicable men in wedlock, or sell them to the devil (53).

In her research on the history of the Grimm's fairy tales she also discovered that these themes were not only common in fairy tales but were also very real in society during their time period.

The potential for severe punishment always lurked around the corner, and, as fairy tales repeated over and over again, puberty and marriage in particular were times in a young woman's life when a great deal was at stake: her honor, her prospects for happiness, and her marital well-being (52).

These same themes are consistent through out the Grimm brother's version of Snow White and other fair tales.

Snow-white, in the original collection of the Grimm's fairy tales, opens with a winter scene. A Queen is working at a window with an embroidery frame made of ebony. The queen pricks her finger and three drops of blood fall onto the snow. The Queen then says to herself, "Oh, that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the embroidery-frame (Grimm 219)." Soon after this child was born the Queen died. The King took another wife. This new step-mother to Snow-white had a magic "looking glass" and would converse with it concerning her vanity.

"Looking glass upon the wall,

Who is the fairest of them all?"

And the looking glass would answer,

"You are the fairest of them all."

And she was contented, for she knew that the looking-glass spoke the truth" (Grimm 220).

Snow-white grew up and by the time she was seven her beauty had surpassed the Queen's. The looking-glass, of course, informed the Queen of this, causing the Queen to be unable to have peace day or night. A huntsman was sent by the Queen to kill Snow-white and bring back her heart. Snow-white was able to get out of being killed because she promised to run away into the woods. In this version of

the story the text also says that the Huntsman let her go because "...she was so lovely....," and this beauty made the Huntsman feel "...as if a stone had been rolled away from his heart when he spared to put her to death (Grimm 221)."

Snow-white happened upon a little house and eventually the seven little dwarfs. Snow-white told them her story and she was allowed to stay on the condition that she clean, cook, knit, and sew for them. She in turn was promised that she would lack nothing. The dwarfs left in the morning to dig for gold and when they came home in the evening, "their supper had to be ready for them" (Grimm 223). Snow-white was warned by the dwarfs that her stepmother, the Queen, would come for her soon so Snow-white was not to let anyone in.

The Queen thinks Snow-white had been killed and had eaten the boar's heart that the Huntsman brought back to her, thinking it was Snow-white's. The magic looking-glass informs the Queen that Snow-white is still alive and that she is living with the seven dwarfs. The Queen, in a disguise, visits Snow-white and tries to kill her three different times. First she gave Snow-white a lace that is tied too tight, then a poisoned hair comb, and finally a poisoned apple.

The dwarfs are not able to rescue Snow-white from the last encounter with the queen. They mourn the loss of Snow-white and can only bear to lay her in a coffin made of glass and keep it near enough that someone can be watching over her day and night.

One day a Prince comes and begs the dwarfs to give or sell him the coffin with the beautiful girl in it. The Prince insists that he can't live without looking at Snow-white and he offers the seven dwarfs honor with the promise to care for them as his brothers. The dwarfs consent and as the Prince's servants carry her away they trip and the poison apple is shaken loose from Snow-white's throat.

Snow-white wakes up and goes with the Prince because she, Snow-white, "was kind". They are to be married with "pomp and great splendor". The Queen is invited to the wedding not knowing that it is Snow-white's; but she knows, because of the looking-glass, that the bride is more beautiful than the Queen. The fairy tale ends at the wedding with the Queen's final encounter with Snow-white:

And when she saw her she knew her for Snow-white, and could not stir from the place for anger and terror. For they had ready red-hot iron shoes, in which she had to dance until she fell down dead (Grimm 231).

The fairy tale of Snow White remains a commonly known one in present society; however, the story has changed since its original recording. "Snow-white", in Grimm's fairy tales, displays many themes and elements that were commonplace and stereotypical of fairy tales of the time. A virtuous and very beautiful girl who is in trouble is taken in and taken care of, if she in turn keeps up with the domestic work that needs to be done. This may seem chauvinistic and demeaning, but it was appropriate for that time period. Snow-white wasn't asked to do more than what women did normally during that time period. The dwarfs didn't require her dig gold with them, pay them rent, or get a job, they just required that she help by doing things that she probably already knew how to do.

A more prominent theme that is seen in the history of the fairy tales is the relationships between women. In these fairy tales, the bond between Mother and child can be very strong. The opposite also holds true. Women within these tales are often at war with each other. In Snow-white, the bond between mother and child seems to transcend death. The gift that arose from the Snow-white's mother's wish, of features red as blood, black as ebony, and white as snow, remained with Snow-white even after the death of her mother. This gift was especially vital because of how important beauty was, not only within the story, but also within the time period. The relationship between Snow-white and her stepmother teaches that beauty alone is not enough, but must be accompanied by humility (which the stepmother did not have), virtue, and a good work ethic.

In the story by the Grimm brothers, this gift of "beauty" from her mother was indeed the reason for her stepmother to want to kill Snow-white but it also saved Snow-white's life at other vital times in the story. Snow-white's life was spared because of her beauty in the encounter in the woods with the Huntsman, who was sent to kill Snow-white and cut her heart out. In this case Snow-white's beauty outweighed the Stepmother's, and probably added to the Stepmother's fury once she found out Snow-white was still alive. These murderous furies showed the lack of virtuousness in the character of the Stepmother (and, for that matter, the Stepmother's lack of a work ethic, for she should have done the dirty work herself).

Following that incident Snow-white was again spared and taken into the home of the seven dwarfs. When they saw a "beautiful child" asleep in one of the small beds, they decide to let her stay and tried to teach her how to stay safe from the murderous Stepmother. (This mirrors how mothers were using fairy tales to teach and protect their own children from danger.)

In the end of the fairy tale, Snow-white's beauty, given to her by her mother, protected her when the evil Stepmother finally thought she had killed Snow-white (showing that she improved her work ethic too late, because she was still unsuccessful) and the seven dwarfs preserved the beautiful unconscious girl above the ground in a glass coffin, so that her beauty could be seen on all sides. Her beauty saved her from being buried alive.

The handsome prince then saw Snow-white's glass coffin. He ended up bringing Snow-white back to life and marrying her because he could not live without seeing her beauty. Not only did her virtuous beauty save Snow-white's life, but it also brought her the ultimate reward of the time period, marrying well. This great reward was received by Snow-white because of the gift given to her by her mother.

This version of the story also shows the very gruesome side of fairytales told at this time by showing the vain Queen being punished with red-hot iron shoes that she had to dance in until she died. The text is unclear as to who does the punishing. The punishment for hurting the beautiful and hardworking woman seems violent compared to the fairy tales that are told to children of today's society.

A more recent version of the story is *Mira, Mirror* by Mette Ivie Harrison. This book focuses on a different character in the Snow-white story. Harrison assumes the reader knows the basic story line of Snow-white and the Seven Dwarfs and shows the reader the life of the mirror.

Harrison starts out her book by telling a story of the relationship between two young girls. The main character in the story is Mira, who is one of two young apprentices for a witch. Mira is sold to the witch and left without any family connections. Mira and the other apprentice, who is also sold and abandoned by her family quickly, decide that they are going to be sisters.

They work and learn together, but it is obvious that Mira's sister is dominating and manipulative toward Mira. In the story, magic is not readily available; it is only obtained when a life is ending. Mira's sister keeps most of the magic that they take from dying animals and bugs for her self. She uses it to make herself more beautiful and to give herself more power over others and Mira.

One day Mira's sister uses her magic to trap Mira in a mirror. The mirror, from that point on, is only given enough magic to make her sister, now a Queen more beautiful. Mira is kept in a little cabin in the wood and visited by her sister less and less as time goes by. Mira hopes that one day her sister will restore Mira to her natural state.

The sister eventually stops coming and Mira is left alone. After one hundred years Mira the mirror, is able to convince a girl, Ivana, who is hiding near by to take her from the cabin. Mira, who is bitter from the actions of her sister, is untrusting and manipulative toward her rescuer. Mira acts kind and convinces Ivana that she can help her; but Mira is just trying to get Ivana to take her to a place where Mira can get enough magic to turn herself back into a human.

Ivana is a runaway and has abandoned her family because her abusive father has arranged a marriage to an abusive old man in exchange for a horse. Ivana is willing to do anything to get away from her terrible future. Mira convinced Ivan to dress as a merchant's daughter and trick a passing merchant into picking her up from the side of the road. The merchant that stops has a daughter as well, who convinces her father to take this girl in as family. Ivana is treated well by the merchant and his daughter, Talia. Mira the mirror convinces Ivana to let her use magic to trade Ivana's face with Talia's and take Talia's place, so that then Ivana would have a better life. Mira does this in hopes that she herself can use this new lifestyle to eventually get enough magic to change back into a human.

After the trade of faces, Talia surprisingly welcomes the change, because she too has been promised in marriage to some one she does not want to marry. The two girls develop a strong relationship as sisters, and although Mira continues to selfishly pursue her desire to find more magic, her heart is slowly softened and she sees that not all sisters or family relationships are self-serving.

Mira grows to see these girls as her own family. The merchant, the girls, and Mira go to meet Talia's betrothed. Mira senses magic near by. She puts the girls in terrible danger to try to get this magic. The source of the magic turns out to be Mira's witch sister. Mira is stolen by the Witch, who doesn't remember Mira or any other part of their past together as a result of interactions with the princess Snow White, whose father the witch had married to become Queen. Mira wants to do something good by helping her sister. Mira is able to aid her sister in remembering who she is and who Mira is through Mira's love and compassion that was learned from watching the relationship of Ivana and Talia. Love turns out to be more powerful than magic. The sisterly love returns Mira and her witch sister to their very old selves and they are able to die together, having repaired their relationship.

This novel, written two hundred years after the Grimm brothers collected their stories, reflects similar themes as the Grimms' version. In *Mira, Mirror* and "Snow-white", familial relationships have vital roles in the story. In both stories the main character loses immediate family members, is taken into an adopted family that turns out to provide negative relationships within the family, and then is finally taken into a good family relationship that results in a "happy" and resolved ending.

It seems that the relationships between the women in both the stories play very diverse roles. On one side there is the negative relationship between the wicked Queen Stepmother and Snow-white, as well as between Mira and her Witch sister (who was also the wicked Queen Stepmother). On the opposite side, there are good and enduring relationships between women in these stories. The good female relationship in "Snow-white" is between the birth mother and Snow-white. This relationship is short but the effects are long lasting. This relationship also seems to be carried on by the dwarfs and the handsome Prince, who, although they are male, play the nurturing role of taking care of Snow-white's needs. The dwarfs not only took care of Snow-white's needs but they also tried to teach her to protect herself from her Stepmother (just as the mothers who told and tell this story tried and try to teach their children to protect themselves). The Prince was so nurturing that he not only takes care of Snow-white but he also provides care for the seven dwarfs as well. This was a reward in and of itself especially for the time period it was told in.

The importance of a child learning the lesson that they need to marry well has changed drastically with society. A good marriage, one that is healthy and loving, doesn't seem to be as crucial in today's society nor is it as vital to one's survival. In today's society both men and women have many ways of providing for themselves and their families with out being dependant on a spouse.

In *Mira, Mirror*, Mira not only develops a good motherly relationship with two young girls, but children can learn that through a good relationship she is able to learn how to repair the bad relationship between herself and her own sister. This story is reflective of today's society because the story was more focused on effective relationships rather than on being virtuous and beautiful enough to find a spouse.

Red as Blood by Tanith Lee is another more recently written version of the Snow White story. The story began with a beautiful Witch Queen who opened an Ivory case of the magic mirror. The Witch Queen asked the mirror who it saw. The mirror replied, "I see you,

mistress...And all in the land. But one (Lee 26)." The Witch Queen asked who the mirror did not see and the mirror told her that it did not see Bianca and the Witch Queen crossed her self. The story then flashes back 14 years to when there was another Queen. This first Queen was "far gone with child (Lee 26)." The first queen was out walking in the garden in the snow. This Queen pricked her finger with a needle and shook three drops of blood on to the ground and said,

"Let my daughter have," said the woman, "hair black as mine, black as these warped and arcane trees. Let her have skin like mine, white as the snow. And let her have my mouth, red as my blood."

The text explains that the Queen was wearing a crown that glowed like a star at dusk. Dusk was the only time that the Queen went near the sun light because she did not like the day (Lee 27). The first Queen died at childbirth and rumors went around the kingdom about how a drop of holy water splashed on the Queen's body and on her dead flesh had smoked. The Kingdom had been experiencing an incurable plague that had arrived at the same time as the Queen so the kingdom had reckoned her unlucky. Seven years after the first Queen's death the King remarried. The new Witch Queen was introduced to the king's daughter, Bianca. The Witch Queen invited Bianca to come and look into the magic mirror but Bianca said she didn't like mirrors. The King explained to the Witch Queen that Bianca was modest and delicate. Bianca, like her Mother, didn't go out side during the day because the sun distressed her. This night was the first night that the Witch Queen looked into her mirror and found that the mirror couldn't see Bianca. The Witch Queen tried to offer Bianca a crucifix as a present. Bianca did not accept it, but ran to her father and claimed, "I am afraid. I do not like to think of Our Lord dying in agony on His cross. She means to frighten me. Tell her to take it away (Lee 28)". The queen tried to do nice things for or with Bianca but Bianca continues to claim that the Witch Queen was trying to scare or hurt her. When Bianca was thirteen the Witch Queen suggested to the King that Bianca is confirmed in the Church so that she could take the communion with them. The King said that Bianca had not been christened and would not be confirmed because it was against Bianca's late mother's religion and wishes. The Witch Queen tried to talk to Bianca about being confirmed but Bianca went to her Father again and claimed that the Witch Queen was trying to torment her and wished for her to betray her Mother. On the day that Bianca awoke to a red stain on her bed and was now "a woman" Bianca went out at dusk with her Mother's crown. The crown also glowed for her as it did her mother. The plague that had ended when Bianca's mother died suddenly returned. The Witch queen looked out her window and saw Bianca walking in the garden. The Witch Queen called the huntsman and pointed out Bianca in the garden. The Witch Queen asked the huntsman if he could see if Bianca was evil and if he was brave enough to kill Bianca. When he told her he did and was the Witch Queen gave him a crucifix and he left to kill her. The huntsman went to Bianca and convinced her to follow him to the forest and told her the Queen wanted to kill her. They stopped to rest and as the huntsman pulled out his knife Bianca whispered some thing that her mother had taught her. As the huntsman grabbed Bianca by the hair to slit her throat Bianca's face and hair turned into the Witch Queen's face and hair. In the form of the Witch Queen Bianca told him she knew that he loved her and she acted like she loved him. The huntsman fell for the facade and Bianca leaned in to kiss his neck and gave him a fatal bite to the throat. Bianca summoned seven gnarly trees that where living in the garden she walked. She stayed in the forest in a sepulcher with the seven trees near by. The Witch Queen found out that Bianca was still alive and had killed the huntsmen. The Witch Queen calls upon Lucifiel (Satan) for help. The Witch Queen is turned into a wretched old hag by Lucifiel. The Witch Queen, disguised as a hag, went to Bianca. She told Bianca that the other local witches feared her and wanted to offer her gifts to gain her favor. Bianca consulted with her seven trees. The trees warned her about the gifts and the hag but Bianca wanted the gifts any way. The gifts where: a girdle of human hair, a comb from the sea, and an apple. Before Bianca accepted the last gift she told the hag to take a bite of the apple first. The hag took a bite and was fine but when Bianca took a bite she screamed and choked, for the apple had a piece of, "the flesh of Christ, the sacred wafer, the Eucharist (Lee 34)." The hag left to return to her kingdom and return to her normal self. When she returned and looked in the mirror, the mirror told her that it could not see Bianca but just a coffin. The piece of Eucharist had not killed Bianca but had only gotten stuck in her throat. Bianca's seven trees protected her coffin in the forest until one day a Prince came by and asked if the coffin was Bianca's coffin. The trees didn't want the Prince to take Bianca and as they tried to move their roots shook her and shook the Eucharist loose. The coffin shattered and as Bianca moved to go with the prince she went through a transformation and in turned into a white dove and landed on The Prince's shoulder. The story ended with the Witch Queen looking into the magic mirror and it told her that it can now see Bianca. Bianca is taken back to the time when she was seven and was able to live her life again as her newly transformed self.

This version of the story, in switching the roles of who is good and who is evil, seems to tell readers that society today has need for stories that teach about trust. The roles of both the Witch Queen and The Snow White character, Bianca, are reversed causing readers who are familiar with the more well-known version of the story to be caught off guard. It is untraditional for the Snow White figure to be the antagonist who brings a plague to her kingdom and is killing in her early teens; and the Queen to be the Protagonist who is trying to save the kingdom from the ill effects of her step daughter. This role reversal alone tells the reader that people aren't always what they seem. It also teaches that we need to be careful who we perceive as "good guys" in today's society because they may turn out to bring misery or commit murder.

Even though these aren't traditional roles for these characters the use of a story to teach the reader to be careful of whom they trust is a common theme in today's society. It is also a common theme amongst all three stories. In all three versions of the story the relationships between the Witch and the Snow White characters are enough to cause a person to be wary of whom they put their trust in. This need to have stories to teach children to be careful who they trust may have been an issue when the Grimm brothers first recorded the story of Snow White but it seems to be an even stronger dilemma today. With all of the access children have to the world around them and the access the world has to children it is practically impossible for parents to control every influence upon their children. Stories such as these can be useful in helping to teach children to be careful in their relationships with others and in whom they put their trust.

With common themes, such as the roles of good and bad relationships and happy endings for the characters that do good things, the fairy tale of Snow White is still being shared between generations. The necessity to have stories to teach children is the same but because society has changed so much in the last two hundred years the focus for what children learn from these stories is not the same. Although fairy tales, society, and society's standards change over time the story within the fairy tales share common themes that allow them to continue to be around in modern times.

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