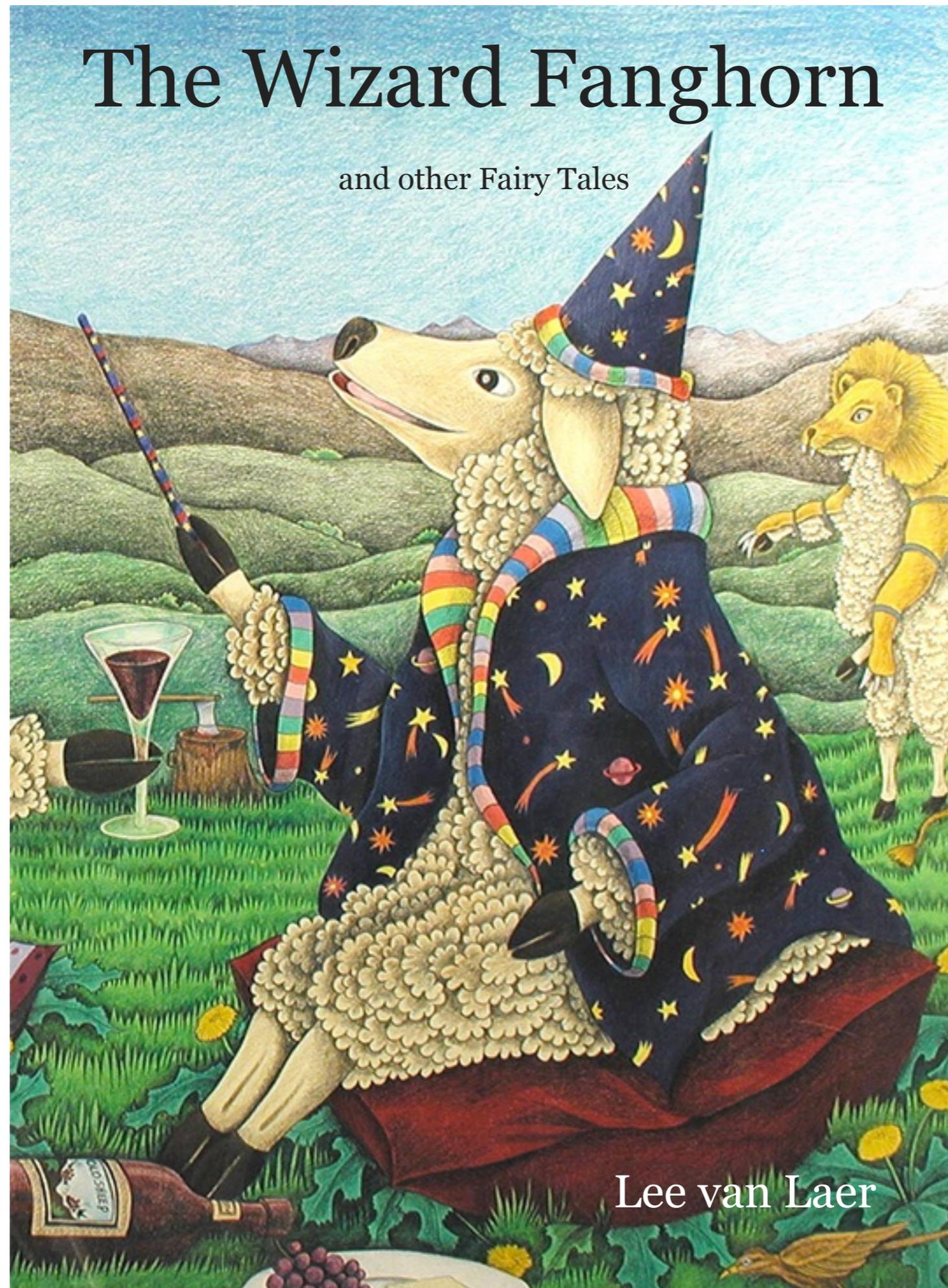


The Wizard Fanghorn

and other Fairy Tales



Lee van Laer

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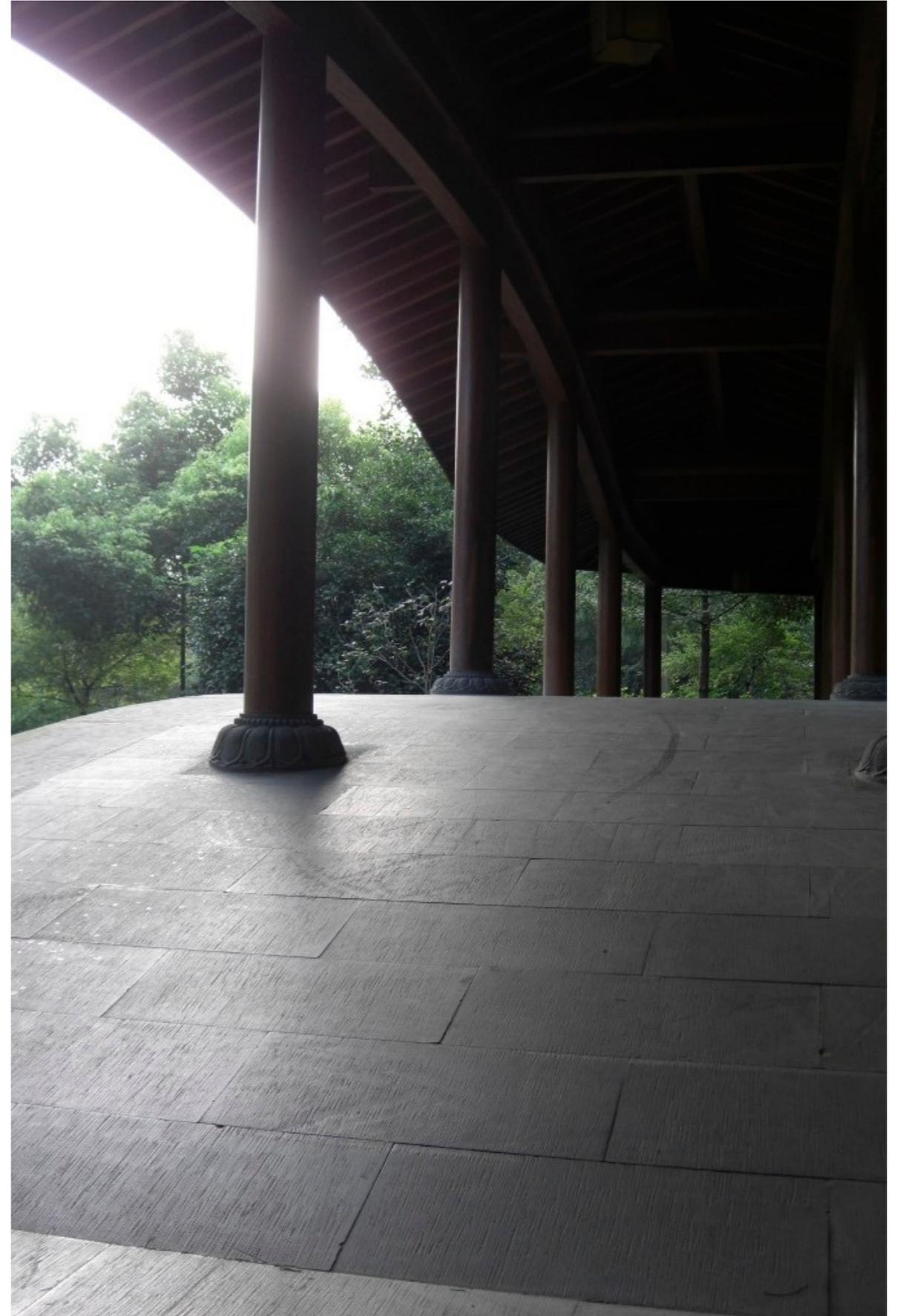
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CHAPTER 1

The Wizard's Home



Once upon a time, in the highest part of the Wildwood mountains on the faraway planet of Hajmon, in the mysterious kingdom of Haj (ruled by the good King Vondermeer), there lived a great and powerful Wizard by the name of Fanghorn. No one knew why he went by that name; even though it was a fierce and dangerous sounding name, Wizard Fanghorn himself was a sweet, furry, and very gentle person, who only occasionally turned just the worst sort of people into toads, when he absolutely had to. Otherwise, almost everything he did was kind and good.

Well, *almost*.

Fanghorn was, without a doubt, eccentric. For reasons known only to himself, he frequently disguised himself as a sheep. The disguise was not particularly functional, because he insisted on wearing his wizard's wardrobe anyway. In his spare time, he was often to be found browsing on a particularly green pasture outside his castle.

The castle— an imposing structure built largely of various kinds of steel reinforced gingerbread— went by the name of the Castle Veryberry, so named because it was surrounded by bushes that, in season, produced the tastiest kinds of raspberries. The Wizard Fanghorn was particularly fond of raspberries, you see, and had them planted everywhere when he first moved into the castle hundreds of years ago. Wizard Fanghorn was so fond of raspberries that he ate them with every meal. In fact, he claimed (somewhat ridiculously) that this was one of the secrets of his enormous power. According

to Fanghorn, the raspberries growing around his castle were carefully selected and raised just because the sweet nectar in them contained enormous quantities of the sort of very fine substances that Wizards need to grow strong and fearless. At least, this is what Fanghorn told his wife Rosemary, but more probably the fact is that Fanghorn just liked raspberries an awful lot, and would shamelessly make up any old tale that gave him an excuse to eat them.

Fanghorn lived with his lovely wife, the princess Rosemary (who was actually a fairy princess, although she rarely advertised the fact); his servants Bipple, a dwarf, and Julio, an elf; and a number of other servants responsible for cooking, cleaning, and picking up bric-a-brac. The bric-a-brac picker-uppers had the hardest job, because Wizards leave an enormous amount of bric-a-brac lying about.

Bipple the dwarf was a grumpy sort, probably because of the peculiar name he had been given by his parents, who had an odd sense of humor. He joined the Wizard Fanghorn as a young dwarf; young dwarves usually try run away to join Wizards, but Bipple actually succeeded. He was entirely responsible for running the castle, arranging meals, and ordering the bric-a-brac picker-uppers about. Julio, the elf, was like all elves a lazy good-for-nothing, who generally hung about the castle interfering with others, and only very rarely helping Wizard Fanghorn with a spell that called for an assistant. He was also quite clever, however, and often came in handy in a pinch.

Fanghorn also had a neighboring Wizard, Ta' Cha, who came from China. Ta' Cha was a very good friend of Fanghorn's, but he was, unfortunately, the laziest sort of Wizard, and the worst housekeeper in the Kingdom. Because of this, he had never married, and thus lived a bachelor lifestyle that was a constant source of aggravation for princess Rosemary, who was always trying to clean him up, make him respectable and marry him off to a suitable girl.

Ta' Cha's castle was in the worst disrepair imaginable. Being much too lazy to cook, he had a bad habit of opening dimensional doorways to earth and ordering pizzas for dinner, and he left the cartons lying all over the living room of his castle. Empty wine flasks and trash littered the floors of his laboratory. Rosemary sent servants over at least once a month to sweep up after him, but it was useless, since Ta' Cha made messes faster than any servants could clean them up. Fanghorn himself rarely let anything Ta' Cha did bother him, except in the rare instances when he played one of his unpleasant pranks, which, of course, called for a revenge prank.

Princess Rosemary spent most of her time reminding Wizard Fanghorn of things, because Wizard Fanghorn was very absent-minded. She also tried to keep an eye on Bipple and Julio, while Wizard Fanghorn was absorbed in cooking up fancy spells in his laboratory, and be sure they paid proper attention to the details of running a castle. Wizard Fanghorn himself usually kept to his laboratory in the highest tower of the castle, four hundred and thirty-three steps up, where, surrounded by dusty old books and crates of bric-a-brac, he stud-

ied Wizard lore. He studied so hard that he often stayed up much too late, reading by candlelight until princess Rosemary would climb the four hundred and thirty-three stairs and remind him it was past his bedtime. When she felt tired, princess Rosemary would just yell up the stairs; being a fairy princess, she was able to yell magically loud: "FANGHORN! BED-TIME!" and Wizard Fanghorn would come down to bed, where princess Rosemary always had a cup of hot raspberry chocolate waiting for him.

Fanghorn's castle was surrounded by a magnificent garden filled with every sort of exotic flower and tree, including many with magical properties. Rosemary tended the garden with a loving hand. The castle itself was located high on the side of a mountain, and was quite difficult to reach if you didn't know the way. Fanghorn, like most wizards, liked his privacy, you see. The remote location of the castle, combined with its unique features made it a most remarkable place.

Repairs



Living in a castle can have its ups and downs. Fanghorn and Rosemary were constantly having to paint, patch and rebuild all over the castle, due to its extreme age and the long years it had been unoccupied after the first owner disappeared. All of these maintenance requirements could get rather tiresome, because everything needed to fix the castle had to be brought in through fearsome mountain trails. Now, you might think that because Fanghorn was a Wizard, he could just do everything by magic, but if so, you are mistaken about Wizards. Magic, you see, is very difficult to come by. Getting magic skills and powers takes hard work, and once you have them you aren't about to go wasting them on things as trivial as cleaning the floors, or putting a few new tiles in the roof. These things must be done in the ordinary way. It's only when nothing but magic will do that a Wizard uses it. Even then, unless the Wizard has just the right sort of spell, it's no use trying magic, since the wrong spell will probably mess things up before it fixes them!

Now, on with our story. Being a very ancient castle, Veryberry had many fascinating features, but one of the most interesting facts about it was the way that it was heated. Down in the furthest depths of the basement, where the heating pipes from above all disappeared into the ground, there was a small shaft that led downward. A person crawling down through this tunnel would, after a few hundred feet, come to a place where it widened into a huge chamber which contained the sleeping body of an immense dragon, buried deep within the earth! Around its body were coiled many thousands of feet of

heating pipe, which carried water down from above. The water circulated around the body of the dragon until it was thoroughly warmed, and was then pumped back up to the radiators in the castle.

Several thousand years ago, this dragon was put under a very powerful spell that caused it to sleep for ten thousand years, or something like that. It had happened so long ago that no one was absolutely sure how long the Dragon would sleep. Ten thousand years sounded pretty good, until you realized that the ten thousand years could be up, well... *ahem... any time.*

No one today knows whether this was done specifically so as to have a heat source for the castle, or (as seems more likely) the castle was simply built over the sleeping form of the dragon long after the spell was cast. In any event, Fanghorn's calculations indicated that there were (hopefully) still four or five thousand years before the dragon would awake. In the meantime, his sleeping body kept the Castle Veryberry as warm as could be throughout even the coldest winters.

This special heating system required very little upkeep. Once every year or so, Julio would crawl down and scrub the dragon down with a bristle brush, since molds and fungus tended to grow on his scales if left untended for long periods. They weren't really dangerous, but they did often decay and smell bad, causing odors to penetrate up through the floor to the kitchen. Julio did most of the cooking, and he liked a nice, clean, odor-free kitchen.

Now, it happened that one icy day in the dead of winter, Fanghorn woke up and threw back the comforter on his side of the bed, swinging his feet onto the floor. As they hit the stone, Fanghorn realized that it was very, very cold. Cursing, he pulled a woolly robe around his shoulders and went down to the kitchen, where Julio was fiddling with the heating valves and Bipple was kicking the radiator.

“What’s wrong?” asked Fanghorn.

“No heat,” replied Bipple.

“No kidding,” said Fanghorn. “What do you think the problem is?”

“Well, there’s plenty of water in the pipes,” replied Bipple, “but it’s ice cold. In fact, it may freeze up unless we do something!”

“Maybe I better use a little magic here until we find out what the problem is,” said Fanghorn. This was one of those times Fanghorn was willing to overlook the rules about not using magic for ordinary things. He spread his hands apart and released a spell of warmth that flowed up through the pipes. “There, that should hold them for a while,” he said. “Let’s head for the furnace room.” The furnace room was what they called the cave below the castle where the dragon lay buried.

The three of them crawled down through the passageway to the bottom, where they were confronted with the sight of a very cold dragon. His scales had changed color from a rich

green and yellow color to a faded, grayish blue. Overall, the dragon looked very sickly.

“He’s stopped giving off heat!” said Julio.

“I can see that,” said Fanghorn, “What we need to know is why. Who would know about something like this?”

“Well, I don’t think that there are any dragon repairmen in Haj, if that’s what you mean,” said Bipple. “In fact, there are a lot of dragon *breaking* men, if you know what I mean, but who would want to *fix* one?”

“What we need is a dragon expert,” said Fanghorn, “Someone who will know exactly what is wrong with this dragon. When Aunt Cautherberry was teaching me dragon illnesses, I must confess I failed to take a proper interest. It’s a highly specialized field, mostly because many of those who practice it have very short careers.”

They returned to the kitchen of the castle, where Julio and Bipple stoked up a wood fire in the fireplace, which was rarely used. In the meantime, Fanghorn climbed up to his laboratory and began to consult his Wizard directory.

“Let’s see, Amphibians, Aardvarks, Basilisks, Chimeras, Chihuahuas, Dragons. Yes, here we go. Dragon attacks, dragon blintzes, dragon bones, dragon buzzards. Dragon cakes, cookies, cream, cuticles, curses; dragon damsels, dresses, dragon diseases. Ah, diseases, that should do it. Yes, here we are. Brofol Quinby, dragon doctor, Village Green-

wold.” Fanghorn let out a sigh of satisfaction, since this was not far from Veryberry. He called up Brofol in his crystal ball, and it wasn’t long (considering the enormously difficult trails to the castle) before a horse-drawn buggy pulled up in front of the castle, discharging a very properly dressed older man carrying a black bag. He wore a top hat and had eyeglasses with a rose tint, and sported a very impressive beard. In short, he looked Very Important. He looked rather on the old side, which suggested that he had perhaps survived the dangers of his practice better than most.

“Quinby here,” he announced at the foot of the steps in a brisk, efficient manner. “Where’s your dragon?”

Fanghorn and Bipple lead the doctor down into the entrance to the cave. To their surprise, he eagerly clambered in to the passageway, even though it was a tight fit, and meant getting his clothes dirty. They hustled down to the cave where the dragon lay.

“Fascinating!” said the doctor as he beheld the giant beast. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen a dragon used for heating! And under a spell, yet! Obviously been here for quite some time, eh?” Quinby pulled several strange-looking instruments out of his black bag and examined the dragon carefully. His final examination was done by looking closely at the scales of the dragon through a copper tube- some sort of microscope, perhaps, except that it emitted odd beeps and flashes of light as he used it. Finally, he straightened up and looked at Fanghorn.

“Crypto-pyro-necropolitis,” he announced.

“Crypto-pyro-necropolitis?” said Bipple.

“Oh, yeah, right,” said Julio. “I could have told you that!”

“Indeed,” explained the doctor, “It means, ‘fires-gone-out-for-unknown-reason.’ This is a condition which seems to occur if a dragon’s fire breathing ability remains unused for a long period of time. Some think it’s because the fire organs inside the dragon stop producing heat. It’s very rarely seen, of course. Apparently the suspended animation spell your dragon is under has slowed the progress of the disease, so it’s only now that its effects have become apparent.”

“What can be done to cure it?” asked Fanghorn.

“Well, the most reliable thing to do would be to replace him with a new dragon,” said Quinby. “This one is extremely old, and worn looking. He may not be worth fixing.”

“*Replace* him?!” said Fanghorn. “That’s out of the question! Look around you, sir! Are you *mad*? We’d have to dig up half the castle just to get him out of here!”

“My good man, you don’t need to!” said Quinby cheerfully. “Haven’t you any idea what dragon scales are worth these days? Why, just announce that you have a used dragon up for grabs, and hordes of dragon-recycling companies will descend on you in short order and dig him out for you!”

“What, and ruin my castle grounds?” sniffed Fanghorn. “It’s quite simply out of the question!”

“Well, then the next best thing would be to just wake this one up a bit,” said Quinby. “Under ordinary circumstances, this condition clears itself up if the dragon can just be induced to use his fire breathing passages again. While he’s snorting his fire plasma out, toss a match in it, and the flames inside him should ignite again almost immediately. Unless there’s some other serious problem, that is.”

“Well,” said Fanghorn, “I don’t know if you’ve thought about it, but all this sounds extremely... well, dangerous. Have you even been around a dragon breathing raw, unlit fire plasma before?”

“Don’t worry; I have no experience at all with this, but I’m known throughout the kingdom for my bold, “hands-on,” approach! ...and I think this will work,” announced Quinby cheerfully. He removed a long, unusual looking feather from his bag, took out a book of matches, and scuttled around to the dragon’s mouth.

“Say, what are you doing?” asked Fanghorn worriedly. Julio, sensing danger, was already backing towards the mouth of the tunnel. Elves are very, shall we say, *sensitive* to danger; a sensitivity which is often unfairly attributed to cowardice by elf critics. Elves much prefer to think of it as prudent self-interest. In any event, before anyone had time to fully react, they heard a gurgling, belching noise from the front of the dragon, and Quinby scooted back around the body of the

beast. “Quick, now!” he exclaimed. “Everybody run for the tunnel!” They fell over each other in a mad scramble as a wave of foul smelling, disgusting looking gray jelly swept out of the dragon’s mouth and around the floor of the cave. As they piled into the shaft, Quinby lit a match.

“Hey, wait a minute!” yelled Fanghorn in alarm. “What do you think you’re...,” but at that moment, an enormous explosion rocked the cave. The entire party was shot upward several hundred feet, bursting from the mouth of the tunnel at tremendous speed. They bounced off the ceiling painfully.

“Don’t you ever do that in my castle again!” shouted Fanghorn. They lay sprawled on the floor with wisps of smoke rising from their clothing.

“Look!” said Bipple. and he pointed towards the heating pipes. The ice that had accumulated around them was quickly melting. It was obvious that whatever had been wrong, it was fixed.

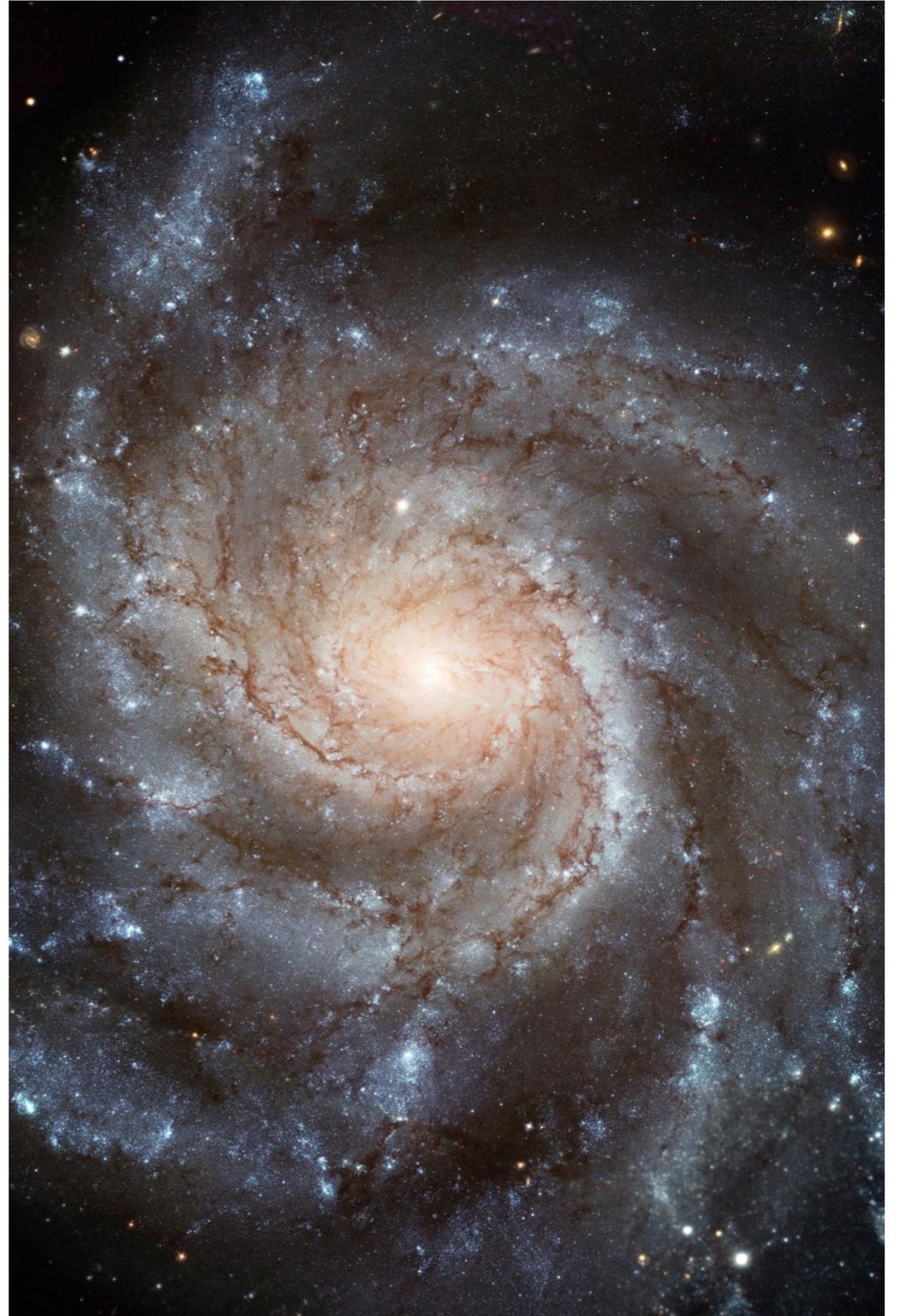
“Well, I’ll be darned.” Fanghorn scratched his head in astonishment. “What do we have to do to keep him in good shape?”

“I’ll be glad to treat him for this,” said Quinby. “A small dose of sulfur up each nostril once a year should do the trick from now on.”

The doctor departed later that morning, leaving a very nicely heated castle behind. The newly restored dragon’s fire

made him so hot, in fact, that you could toast marshmallows over his skin, which was exactly what Julio would sneak down and do on late winter nights. Of course, he never told Fanghorn about this, but the village children found out, and blackmailed him into taking them down for marshmallow roasts when Fanghorn was out traveling.

Fanghorn's Stars



One night, very late, Wizard Fanghorn was working in his laboratory cleaning out his closets, which, because they were magical, held much more than anyone could imagine. In fact, the Wizard who lived in the castle before him had used the very same closets, and many of the boxes he left behind when he disappeared (to this day, no one knows where he went!) were still in there when Wizard Fanghorn moved in. Now, Wizard Fanghorn had never had time to look in all of these boxes. In fact, he didn't really get around to cleaning his closets very often, because he positively hated cleaning things. Besides, one never knew what one was going to find—did one, now?—and the previous Wizard had left some pretty surprising things behind him. Once, for example, Wizard Fanghorn took the stopper out of an innocent-looking bottle, and an entire ocean poured out, nearly filling the castle. It took him two whole days to put it back in, and when he was done, princess Rosemary, Bipple, and Julio, all of whom had floated around Wizard Fanghorn unhappily the entire time, wouldn't speak to him for a week.

On this particular occasion, however, the closets were (as usual) bursting, and Wizard Fanghorn had no choice but to tackle the problem, so he rolled up the sleeves to his robes and began to sort, stack, organize and throw away things, with his bric-a-brac picker-uppers scurrying about frantically with every new armful he threw out of the closet into the lab. Big clouds of dust puffed out of the closet as he pulled dragon's bones and bat wings out from under magic carpets and crystal

balls. What a mess! The closet was such a jumble it took all day to sort through it.

Late that evening, just as Wizard Fanghorn was about to quit for the day, he heard a whisper of voices. The bric-a-brac picker-uppers had all gone down to bed; Bipple and Julio were nowhere to be seen. Wizard Fanghorn was puzzled; who could be making this noise? He searched and searched, until he determined the sounds were coming out of a box buried in the deepest, darkest corner of the closet. The box was an old wooden one, carved from the best mahogany, with a brass clasp locking it shut. It was covered with dust; in fact, it looked like it may have been the very first thing ever put in the closet.

“Who are you?” asked Wizard Fanghorn to the whispery voices as he bent down to the box.

“Let us out! Let us out!” whispered the voices.

“Not on your life!” said Wizard Fanghorn. “For all I know, you're nasty little dirt-devils in there, sealed up to keep you out of decent people's hair!”

“Really, we aren't!” said the voices “Let us out and we'll reward you! We are stars!”

“Stars indeed!” said Wizard Fanghorn. “Stars are found in the sky, not dusty old boxes.” They begged and pleaded, but Wizard Fanghorn would have none of it. He ignored them,

and finished up for the evening leaving the box exactly where he had found it.

Later that night, sipping his hot chocolate in bed, he mentioned the incident to princess Rosemary. “I couldn’t let them out,” he explained, “obviously, there’s no telling what they are.”

“Oh, the *poor things!*” exclaimed princess Rosemary. “Just think of them, cooped up in that awful attic for centuries! You simply must let them out!”

“Let them out? Don’t be so distressingly naive, my dear.” said Wizard Fanghorn. “That box could be full of wind-harpies, or dragon-itchers, or vampire flies, or any one of a hundred other gruesome creatures you wouldn’t want running about the house!”

“My *instincts* are very good,” sniffed princess Rosemary, “and I feel quite sure that whatever that old Wizard left in that box are perfectly innocent creatures. He was an awful old Wizard, you know. I wouldn’t have put it past him to lock some poor stars up just out of spite.”

“That’s perhaps true, my dear, but we simply cannot take chances in such matters,” explained Wizard Fanghorn carefully. “There are unknown dangers involved here, and, as you know, unknown dangers are the very worst sort—especially unknown Wizard types of danger. Remember the ocean?”

“I insist!” said princess Rosemary, conveniently ignoring the remark about the ocean in the bottle. “In fact, I think you should take me up there right now. Let me see for myself!”

Wizard Fanghorn could see that there was going to be no arguing with princess Rosemary, so he marched up all four hundred and thirty three stairs to the lab with her, even though he would much rather have been in bed watching a baseball game. Wizard Fanghorn often magically watched baseball games, even though he had no TV and they did not play baseball where he lived.

They got to the top floor of the attic. Princess Rosemary walked into the closet and knelt down by the box. There was not a sound to be heard. “Oh well,” said Wizard Fanghorn cheerfully, perhaps I was just imagining things!” and prepared to leave. “Not so fast!” said princess Rosemary. She pulled the box out from under the stack of garbage on top of it and rapped on it a few times. Wizard Fanghorn rolled his eyes up in his head as the whispering voices answered, “Who’s there?”

“It’s I, the princess Rosemary,” said Rosemary, “and I’ve come to see who you are!” “We are poor lost souls, trapped in here for hundreds of years,” came the reply. “Please, please let us out!”

“Fanghorn, I insist you open that box this minute!” said princess Rosemary. Wizard Fanghorn rolled his eyes back in his head even further. “Very well, my dear,” he said, “but I suggest you stand back, in the event this goes badly.” He conjured

a defensive spell around him, took a deep breath, and threw back the lid of the box, ready to let fly a blast of withering magic if anything dangerous emerged.

There was nothing whatsoever dangerous in the box, however. It was lined with the finest blue velvet, and lying on top of it sparkled a handful of beautifully brilliant lights—in fact, they were stars.

“Stars!” exclaimed princess Rosemary. “How beautiful you are!”

“Stars?” said Wizard Fanghorn. “Why would a Wizard make stars prisoners?” He bent over into the box for a better look.

“We are the stars that used to shine on midsummer eve,” said the head star, who shone just a little more brightly than the others. “The old Wizard who lived here before you captured us and locked us up because we refused to dance for him.”

“Aha! said princess Rosemary, “That’s why we never see stars on the night of midsummer eve!” Indeed, it was a great mystery to all the residents of Castle Veryberry why, since time immemorial, no stars could be seen in the night sky on midsummer eve.

“Refused to dance?” asked Wizard Fanghorn. “What do you mean by that?”

“We used to dance a magical stardance every midsummer eve until the old Wizard came here,” explained the stars. “This stardance would make all the creatures in the mountains of Wildwood feel joy in their hearts, and give them the strength to have love and hope for the rest of the year, but, most important, anyone sick, injured, or sorrowful who saw our dance would be healed of their pain. The old Wizard was jealous of our magic, and wanted us to reveal it by showing him the dance. He called us into his laboratory with a powerful spell, but we refused to show him our secret, so he locked us in this box and shut us in the closet. Since that day we have been unable to spread our hope through the world of the Wildwood mountains.”

“We’ll fix that,” said Wizard Fanghorn, gently picking up the leader of the stars. He held him by one of the points so as not to burn himself. Calling on his most powerful magic, he chanted, “Stars and fire, burning bright, take us now to midsummer night!”

As Wizard Fanghorn said this, they were magically transported to midsummer night. The sky above the castle was dark; not a star was to be seen. Wizard Fanghorn softly reached above and placed the lead star in his place in the sky. The star glimmered in thanks. One by one, Wizard Fanghorn plucked each star from the box and returned it to the night sky, until a glorious field of stars covered the sky.

“Thank you, Wizard Fanghorn!” they sang in voices like bells. “Thank you!”

And they began to dance.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” said princess Rosemary.

“It certainly is,” said Wizard Fanghorn.

Together they watched the stars dance for the first time on midsummer night, and ever after it was noted that there was just a little more happiness than before among the creatures of the Wildwood mountains. Some people say that even Bipple was a little less grouchy, although he himself would emphatically deny it.

The Miraculous Dust of Return



Wizard Fanghorn was in the habit of collecting useful, convenient spells that made his life just a little easier. He had spells that swept dust in his laboratory into neat little piles, and then whooshed it out the window in a little gust of wind every evening at six. There were spells that allowed him to magically appear at the dinner table on time, and spells to weed the garden (which didn't work too well, since gardens that were magically weeded by spells tended to grow new weeds twice as fast as ones that were carefully weeded by hand). There were spells to fetch water, shine shoes, polish silver and dust cobwebs out of the corners. It must be told, however, that of all the convenient spells Wizard Fanghorn had, none was quite as all-around useful to him as the dust of return.

The dust of return was a powder that, when sprinkled in the air around the user, sent them instantly back to the place where the dust had originally had the spell cast on it, no matter how far away in space (or even time) it was. This dust was particularly useful in escaping from tight spots, such as when a large dragon was just about to gobble you up, or when evil dwarves were about to chop your Wizardly head off, or when you were hopelessly lost and couldn't find your way home. Fanghorn had many occasions when he owed his life to the dust of return, and its spell was one of his most closely guarded secrets. He was known, once in a very long while, to make a little for King Vondermeer or Wizard Ta' Cha, but, other than that, he kept it strictly for himself and for Rose-

mary, who occasionally used it when she had to rush home from market.

The reason that Fanghorn was so stingy with the dust of return was simple. The only kind of dust that the spell worked on was dust made from the bones of dragons, and the ONLY place that anyone could get dragon bones was from the Graveyard of the Dragons, deep in the Black Mountains that rose out of the Deserts of Despair in the parched lands of the south. This was the place that all dragons since time immemorial had gone to die. Not only was it a five day journey by flying carpet from Castle Veryberry (we will not even discuss how long it would take to walk there!), it was always guarded by the most ferocious types of smaller dragons.

These small dragons, being too tiny to be in charge of any important dragon affairs. Only very large dragons had such jobs. Because of this, smaller dragons were in a constant state of extreme irritation. They were always looking for some small, furry animal such as a Wizard to rip limb from limb and chew up into little itchy bitsy pieces, which could then be swallowed as appetizers while they waited for something larger to come along.

The small dragons made it very dangerous for Wizards, or anyone else, for that matter, to come anywhere near the Dragon's Graveyard, unless they felt like becoming dragon food. It was especially unsafe to fly anywhere near the graveyard, since the dragon guards immediately snatched anything, even as small as a sparrow, out of the air and ate it. This

meant that sneaking up on the Graveyard could only be accomplished by landing one's flying carpet a day's journey away and walking to it from there. Also, most travelers who came near this area had been eaten, so there were no good maps of it. This made getting in there even more difficult. To be sure, many tradesmen in the markets of Haj sold maps they claimed were maps of the dragon's graveyard, but those who used them never came back, so it's hard to tell how good they were, unless you want to go by the fact that they didn't come back. Ahem.

Now, it was Fanghorn's good fortune to have inherited a goodly supply of dragon bone dust from the evil old Wizard who inhabited his castle before him. The old Wizard left the dust, along with the spell to be used with it, in a small teak chest carved with strange ancient runes. It also had a label affixed to it that read "Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment." Fanghorn discovered the box on a day when his toes felt particularly tense. This is one of the occupational hazards of being a Wizard, which is why Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment sold so well. He opened it, only to discover the dust. His toes remained tense that day, but he did figure out how to use the spell for the dust very quickly indeed!

Fanghorn had never had a need to visit the graveyard, since he used the dust so sparingly, and only in the direst need. On the Tuesday following his discovery of the stars in the box, however, Fanghorn realized that he was running appallingly low on dragon bone dust! In fact, he noticed, there

was so little left that it barely covered his pinkie finger when he swept the bottom of the box he kept it in. This small amount might only just bring him home in the event of a real emergency, and, at that, there was so little there was always the danger that some small part of him, such as his head, might not make it back with the rest of him. This was not a possibility Fanghorn wanted to explore unless absolutely necessary. This meant that he would absolutely have to make a trip to the Dragon's Graveyard.

"Rosemary," he said that night at dinner, "I absolutely must make a trip to the Dragon's Graveyard."

Rosemary looked up, let out a tiny yelp, and fainted dead away face-first into her raspberry cream soup. Julio rushed to her and lifted her head out of the soup, patting her face dry with a little white napkin he kept over his arm for just such occasions.

"Fanghorn," she said, after she had recovered her senses and allowed Julio to hold a small piece of ice to her head, "I do wish you would save news like this for late in the evening, when I am already lying in bed, and cannot fall down to do myself bodily harm, as is so often the case when you announce these terrifying trips of yours. Whatever on earth do you want to go to the Dragon's Graveyard for?"

"I am almost out of the dust of return, dear, and, as you know, nothing but dragon bones will do to make the dust."

“Can’t you send someone else?” asked Rosemary innocently, eyeing Julio, who failed to see the humor in her suggestion.

“Elves,” said Julio grimly, just to set the record straight, “Do not EVER go ANYWHERE near DRAGONS. We would much rather just be chained and cast into dungeons where we might rot peacefully for ever and ever, thank you.”

“Don’t be silly, Julio,” said Fanghorn, waving his hands expressively in the air, “this is a capital opportunity for us to gather new information about Dragons! It’s the sort of trip many biologists spend their whole lives wishing they could go on!”

“Well, I’m not a biologist, I’m an ELF,” stated Julio, “and even if I *was* a biologist, my only interest in dragons would be how to help them become extinct.”

“Nonsense!” chuckled Fanghorn. “If they became extinct, think of all the excitement we’d miss out on! ...We leave tomorrow!.”

Late that night, long after Rosemary was snoring, deeply asleep, in her bed heaped with pile upon pile of feather comforters, voices locked in argument could be heard coming from the kitchen. Voices that skittered and jumped, chattered and chattered and clashed and nipped and gnashed and bashed. Voices that sounded suspiciously like Fanghorn and Julio.

“I don’t care what you say, I’m not going,” yipped the first voice.

“Julio,” barked the second, “Where’s your sense of adventure? We haven’t done anything this exciting since we braved the Gnarltooth Lizards of Mornia!.”

“That’s what worries me. We almost got eaten that time! I’m afraid those dragons will shortly be picking their little needle teeth with our shin bones! Personally, I think my shin bones are much better for walking on than as toothpicks.”

“Julio!” said Fanghorn sternly. “You seem to have forgotten the way I snatched you from the very jaws of death when you were carried off by the eagles as an elflet!”

A long silence followed this last remark. Finally, a sigh. “All right,” conceded Julio. “I’ll go. When they engrave our memorial on a piece of granite, I’d like mine to say,

“Dragons always like to eat
And elves are such a tasty treat,
They often seek them far and wide,
So careful elves are wise to hide.
Julio, poor wretch, however,
Did not flee, but was delivered
Like some wretched deli snack.

That's why he did not come back."

"Julio,"! said Fanghorn jovially. "Of course we'll come back!"

"How anyone can be so jovial about going to a place called the deserts of despair is beyond me," mumbled Julio under his breath.

The next day, Fanghorn and Julio packed a very large basket with foods and set out for the Deserts of Despair on Fanghorn's flying carpet. The flying carpet was not your ordinary flying carpet; it was the Wizardly equivalent of a fully equipped recreational vehicle. Fanghorn liked to refer to it as the "Airborne Persian Winnebago." Measuring a full 12 by 18 feet, it was equipped with a foul weather canopy, sleep sofa, Youfrigerator, (on the planet Hajmon refrigerators were always referred to as Youfrigerators, for reasons no one quite understands), a full kitchenette and a 27" color television with a direct interdimensional link to planet Earth, allowing for clear reception of baseball games and other TV shows. Of course, it was also woven of the finest silks and wools, in a magnificent and intricate pattern that contained within its elaborate loops and scrolls the most powerful flying spell known on Haj.

Fanghorn also had a computerized guidance system; when he punched in a destination the carpet automatically flew wherever it was told. Of course, Fanghorn could have done all of this using magic, but using magic always costs Wizards a good bit of energy, so Fanghorn tended to try and save energy by using modern earth technology whenever he could.

"Very... clever, those earthlings," he was often heard to mutter when fiddling with the knobs and dials on one of his earth devices.

Julio spent most of the trip to the deserts sulking and watching reruns of Gilligan's Island, despite Fanghorn's plea that he watch educational programming. The journey was thus passed in relative calm, until they landed, four days later, at the base of the Black Mountains in the Deserts of Despair.

Julio and Fanghorn packed up two knapsacks and set off on foot through the desert to the base of the mountains. It wasn't long before small groups of very depressed looking kangaroo mice and desert pack rats began to emerge from the rocks that surrounded them and follow them in a long line. The mice and rats were softly whimpering and crying. At first, when there were just a few of them, it wasn't too annoying, but as the pack behind them grew larger, the sound of their whining grew louder and louder, until finally an irritated Julio turned around and said "What is your problem, anyway, you lot?"

"We are despairing," sobbed the largest of the pack rats. "Can't you see that?"

"What for,"? asked Julio.

"We are in the desert of despair, stupid! What do you expect us to do?" asked the rat. "Yeah! Yeah! Stupid!" whined all the rats and mice in the background. The air filled up with thousands of tiny little aggressive chirps of despair, which,

when taken all together, were quite loud indeed. By this time there were exactly six thousand four hundred and fifty-three little rodents sniveling behind them.

Julio scowled at the wailing rats. “Can’t you despair somewhere else?” he asked, as he glanced up at the skies, just in case a stray dragon might be noticing the long line following them.

“Actually,” sobbed the pack rat, “we’re despairing because it’s so hard to find anything worth eating in this godforsaken desert! And you,” he said, eyeing Fanghorn and Julio, “look like you might be delicious.” As he said this, he licked his chops and clicked his needle-pointed little teeth together. The six thousand four hundred and fifty-two sniveling companion rodents also clicked their needle-pointed little teeth together, collectively making a noise that sounded like many dinner-knives being sharpened. Alarmingly, the whole group was suddenly looking much less depressed and much more ...well, aggressive.

“Fanghorn,” said Julio, who was actually beginning to worry a bit about these rats, “would you please DO something about these little pests before they attract every dragon this side of the Black Mountains?”

Fanghorn turned around and folded his arms across his chest. He used a little bit of magic to puff himself up just a little larger than normal and frizz his hair out. This had the effect of making him look Very Ferocious Indeed. Just to com-

plete the effect, he caused two large, hungry looking cats to appear on either side of him.

“Just what SEEMS to be the PROBLEM?” he said in his most Ferocious Wizard voice. The air around him glowed with magic.

Suddenly, the rodent army grew remarkably silent, and their eyeballs widened in amazement.

“Hey, no fair!” said the lead pack rat. “You’re a Wizard! Split, guys!.” He and the rest of the rodents scattered into the rocks surrounding the trail, just barely escaping the pounce of the cats. As soon as the rats vanished, the cats, who had been illusions, vanished too.

Julio swatted at a group of huge mosquitoes swarming around his face. “Well, Fanghorn,” he said “I must say this is just great. We haven’t been here five minutes, and already every life form we meet is trying to eat us.”

“Julio, just shut up and walk. Don’t let these depraved little predators annoy you.” Fanghorn adjusted his backpack and applied a little bit of a lightening spell to it.

“Hey, wait a minute!” whined Julio, “How come I don’t get a lightening spell? My pack weighs just the same as yours!”

“You could ask nicely,” observed Fanghorn.

“OK, Please could I have a lightening spell?” Julio said, in his most sarcastic voice.

“No. That’s not asking nicely.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I’m not feeling particularly nice. Not considering I’m walking around in a stinking desert where every animal we pass looks at me as snack food!”

“Oh, all right,” said Fanghorn. “If it will stop this incessant complaining of yours!” He muttered a lightening spell over Julio. Suddenly, a small group of very dark cloud whooshed up from over the horizon, and a tremendous bolt of lightening smacked down violently right next to Julio, raising a huge cloud of dust. Julio jumped three feet in the air, and his eyeballs bulged out like a cartoon.

“FANGHORN!” he screamed. “I meant a lightening spell to make my backpack lighter, not thunderstorm lightening! Cut the baloney!”

“Heh. Just kidding.” said Fanghorn, reversing the spell.

“Cheez!” said Julio, dusting the dirt off his shirt. “One more joke like that and I’m OUTTA here!” He scowled at Fanghorn.

The joke hurt Julio’s feelings so badly that he didn’t speak to Fanghorn for the rest of the afternoon, which suited Fanghorn just fine, since Julio had done almost nothing but complain anyway. They trudged for hours through the

bleached desert landscape past the bones of creatures who had starved to death or run out of water. The sun beat down mercilessly; eventually it became so intense that Fanghorn cast a shade spell over their heads, even though doing so might call the attention of patrol dragons to them. Huge cactuses with enormous poisonous thorns lined the path. Lizards scuttled out of the way, and every so often a rainbow rattlesnake slithered across the trail. They passed areas where emeralds and rubies lay scattered in the dirt like worthless pebbles. It was so dangerous in this part of the desert—by now they were already in the foothills of the Black Mountains—that prospectors wouldn’t risk their lives for the riches to be found here.

Suddenly, as the sun was beginning to go down behind the mountains, Fanghorn put his finger to his lips and motioned for Julio to crouch low to the ground. He pointed into the sky, where, very far above them, the outline of a huge dragon could be seen circling over the mountains.

“Too big for a watch dragon,” he said. “This one’s an old one, probably came here to die.” They watched as the dragon circled higher and higher into the purple skies above. Great spouts of flame surrounded him; he was spitting fire as he flew.

“That’s sure sign he’s dying,” mused Fanghorn. “Dragons get hotter and hotter inside as they die, because their inner fires begins to burn out of control. Just before it dies, a

dragon will actually burst into flame. They explode in a huge fireball and fall to the ground like some great meteorite.”

“I never knew that.”

“No, I expect you wouldn’t,” said Fanghorn. “It’s not a well known fact except among Wizards. It makes it particularly dangerous to kill a dragon, because if they suffer a fatal wound, they often suddenly blow up, killing everything around them.”

“Wow. makes it kind of difficult to get rid of ‘em, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does. That’s why it’s usually left up to Wizards.”

Up above them, the dragon suddenly blossomed into a red and yellow ball of light, which streamed towards the ground trailing a long plume of black smoke.

“That’s where the graveyard is,” said Fanghorn. “This is a real piece of luck! It will cut days off our search, and when we get there, we know there are going to be nice, fresh bones available.”

“Yeah, our nice fresh bones will be all over the place after the watch dragons get done with us,” observed Julio dryly.

“Shush, we’ll be fine. I do have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Julio looked at him with raised eyebrows as they trudged off into the foothills.

Later that evening, as the last light faded from the sky, they made camp. After a meal of beans, dried meat and Fanghorn’s favorite raspberry preserves, they curled up in their sleeping bags, and Fanghorn cast a protective spell around them.

“Sleep well. We have to get up before dawn tomorrow, so that we can sneak past the watch dragons before there is light in the sky,” said Fanghorn. They fell asleep with the chirping sounds of crickets all around them.

Fanghorn and Julio awoke in the very middle of the night, when the sky is at its darkest blue, the stars glow in a million points of bright, crisp silvery light, and the bats swoop silently in pursuit of the fattest and tastiest moths they can find. They rolled up their sleeping bags without a word and set off up the trail into the mountains.

After an hour or so, the trail grew steeper and steeper, until they were walking up more than forward, and every step was more of a chore than the step before it. They scrambled over rocks as they rose higher and higher into the sky. Fanghorn had cast a direction spell over the exact spot that the dying dragon had landed in, so they knew which way to go by the tiny glow of the witching compass he held in his left hand.

After several hours of travel in the dark, it began to grow light. Fanghorn and Julio had gone over the top of the first

line of mountains through a narrow pass, and were moving along the floor of a steep valley that led almost directly towards the Dragon's Graveyard. The valley walls were almost vertical, rising a hundred feet or more into the skies; the floor of the valley was covered in a deep stand of huge ferns, which gave the whole area a lush, tropical appearance after the barrenness of the desert. It was easy to imagine that they had walked through time, back to the age of the dinosaurs. As the sun came up, the Wizard and his companion saw no sign of the small watch dragons. As it happened, by incredible luck, they were able to walk almost directly into the graveyard with no trouble at all. The area seemed quite deserted; there was no sign of animal life anywhere.

The end of the valley opened up into a crater that must have been part of a long-extinct volcano. Ringed all around by high walls, the floor of the pit was covered with bones of all shapes and sizes.

Skulls of dragons, ribs of dragons!

Backbones, leg bones, kneebones, nosebones;

Finger, knuckle, claw and toesbones;

Here and there and no one knowsbones!

Every type of bone imaginable littered the ground, as though some giant had thrown them about. Fanghorn was ecstatically happy. Here was enough dragon bone to make an endless supply of the dust of return!

There was only one problem.

Every single bone was huge.

“Fanghorn,” said Julio, “I don't know if you've noticed, but neither one of us can lift these bones, let alone carry them anywhere. And everyone knows dragon bone is much too hard to cut into smaller pieces without a diamond saw...you didn't happen to bring a diamond saw, did you?”

“Aha! Don't you worry one little bit. I already have a plan that is, if I may say so, pure genius.” Fanghorn reached into the folds of his robe and withdrew a small leather pouch containing the last of his dust of return. Reaching into the bag, he scattered a pinch of the powder over a large bone, one which must have weighed four hundred pounds. The bone instantly vanished into thin air—magically sent, of course, directly back to Fanghorn's laboratory!

“Wow!” said Julio. “Great plan! You send tons of the bones back using the dust of return, sprinkle a little on us, and presto! back we go as well! then just activate the automatic pilot recall on the old flying carpet and it'll return to the castle on its own! Brilliant, Fanghorn! You are a genius!”

Fanghorn, who was busy sprinkling the dust of return on more dragon bones, didn't reply. After several more large bones had pouffed into thin air, he turned to Julio and smiled. “There!” he said happily. “That should be enough to ensure we never need to come back here again! I even got enough to make some excellent dragon bone medicines!”

“Ok, ok, great!” said Julio, “now, sprinkle that magic dust on us so we can get right back to a nice hot shower and some raspberry tea!”

“Well,” said Fanghorn, “I’d love to do that, Julio, but there’s one little problem.”

“Problem? What problem?”

“No more dust,” said Fanghorn.

“NO MORE DUST?” said Julio, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THERE’S NO MORE DUST?!” He was about to try to strangle Fanghorn, which is rather hard when you are a three foot elf and your enemy is a six foot Wizard. The only advantage he had is that elves are very quick, and can jump well, but Julio was so mad that he did actually manage to get a very good grip around Fanghorn’s neck. He was starting to apply pressure when the watch dragons finally flew over and noticed them. “Make some dust, fast!” he shrieked, but it was too late for that.

There wasn’t much time to react. Fanghorn leaped to his feet—Julio had knocked him down in the initial attack—and swiftly surrounded them with a cloaking spell that rendered them temporarily invisible. By that time, six small dragons had plummeted down from above and landed in a large circle surrounding them.

Perhaps we should explain here that when we say the dragons were small, we mean that each one was about the size of a car. Now, this might not sound so terrible, until you think about a big, very ugly car the color of spoiled leftover dinners that should have been thrown away weeks ago, with a huge mouth filled with teeth four inches long and sharp as knives. Add that to the big strong arms with claws that can rip holes in raw stones, and a body armored with scales as hard as steel, moving right at you with the idea of chopping you into little pieces as fast as possible. After you think about this for a minute, you realize that it actually does sound pretty terrible. At this point you realize you would definitely rather be somewhere else far away at the moment, except that the dragons are now all around you in a big circle with their teeth gnashing together. Even though they can’t see you, because you are (very fortunately!) temporarily invisible, there is no way past them. Right about now would be the time you panic, which is exactly what Julio did, leaping into Fanghorn’s arms and shivering with fear.

“What are we gonna do now?” he asked in a whisper. The dragons were so close he could see the green saliva dribbling down their hideous chins.

“I don’t know, but frankly, my toes are feeling very tense,” said Fanghorn, “I could really use a good application of Aunt Cautherberry’s Very Relaxing Toe Ointment right about now.”

“Fanghorn, just shut up about your toes and get us out of here!” said Julio.

Fanghorn withdrew his magic wand from the folds of his robe. Julio’s eyes grew wide with amazement, for Fanghorn rarely, if ever, used his wand. The power in this ancient wand was so enormous that it was actually dangerous to use it, even for a Wizard as experienced as Fanghorn. In fact, there were only three other Wizards with wands of this sort in the kingdom of Haj. There had been seven, but four of them used the wands carelessly and were incinerated into little piles of coal. One of these wand accidents opened the canyon known as Wizard’s grand canyon, a famous landmark in Haj. This canyon was six miles long and a mile deep, which gives you an idea of how truly serious things could get if a wand was used improperly. Julio knew all about this, which was why he was almost as worried about the wand as he was about the dragons. Not that he didn’t trust Fanghorn, of course, but you never knew, and Fanghorn was getting just a wee bit old, which meant he might just FORGET some important thing at just the wrong moment. Julio was not particularly interested in becoming part of a national landmark, any more than he wanted to be eaten by dragons.

“Do you have to use that thing?” he whispered, as they watched the ring of dragons close around them.

“Fraid so, old boy!” said Fanghorn, brandishing the wand, “if you want to live, that is.” He chanted a spell that included some words that sounded to Julio something like

“schniggle-kibble-mutter-stutter-turn-the-dragons-into-butter,” although of course it couldn’t have been exactly that. And, at the precise moment Fanghorn finished his spell, the air around them exploded into a wild rainbow of colors, accompanied by the most horrendously loud noise that Julio had ever heard; it was something like sixteen freight trains hitting a large wall of granite at one hundred and ten miles per hour, all at the same time, while someone tortured a large chorus of howler monkeys from the jungles of Gorch.

Fanghorn and Julio fell to their knees with their hands over their ears, grimacing in pain. The noise and explosion of color were over in a second, but a huge cloud of dust surrounded them, and they could see nothing at all. Julio coughed violently.

“What on HAJ was THAT?” he asked, but he was slightly deaf, so he could barely hear what he was saying to Fanghorn.

Fanghorn was deaf, too, so he shouted back “WHAT?”

“I SAID, WHAT ON HAJ WAS THAT?!” screamed Julio.

“I DON’T KNOW!”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU DON’T KNOW?”

“I NEVER TRIED THAT SPELL BEFORE!” yelled Fanghorn, “IT’S CALLED THE SPELL OF IMMEDIATE DISINTEGRATION!”

“The spell of immediate disintegration?” asked Julio, whose hearing was coming back now. He didn’t like the sound of this new spell at all.

The dust had settled around them by now, revealing a tiny spot of ground on which they now stood, about ten feet wide. The graveyard of dragon bones around them had entirely disappeared. The crater had disappeared. In fact, from what they could see, a large part of the Black Mountains had also disappeared.

They were standing on top of a thin spire of rock that fell away on all sides to a flat plain impossible far below them. The nearest land at their height looked to be at least a mile away.

“Great,” said Julio. “Now look where we are.”

Fanghorn was about to reply, but at just that moment several watch dragons who had been too far away to be blasted into smithereens by the spell were flying towards them. They did not look pleased.

“Fanghorn,” said Julio cautiously, “I think they’re mad.”

“You’re right,” said Fanghorn, “but who could blame them?”

The dragons grew closer, their teeth shining in the sunlight.

“OK,” said Fanghorn, “now for some real magic.”

“Fanghorn,” said Julio, “please, do me a favor.”

“What’s that?” asked Fanghorn, as he raised the wand again.

“DON’T use the spell of immediate disintegration again, OK?”

“Right,” said the Wizard, “It did seem to be a little extreme under the circumstances, didn’t it? Maybe I should try this one.” He referred to a little slip of paper he had hidden in his robes. “The spell of total annihilation,” he announced cheerfully.

“NO,” said Julio in alarm, “don’t you have ‘the spell of a little damage’, or ‘the spell of minor injury’, or ‘the spell of hurting them just bad enough so we can get away’?”

“OK,” said Fanghorn, “I get the point.” And it was important that he did, for the invisibility spell had worn off, and the dragons were just about to snatch them both by that time.

“We are attacked by dragons rude

Who see us both as tasty food,

They’ll surely tear us into shreds...” Fanghorn paused here and tried to think of a good way to end this spell, which he had just made up on the spur of the moment as a kind of “emergency-spell.”

“SO MAKE THEM HEAVIER THAN LEAD!” shouted Julio, who could see that the spell was about to be end with the words, “and now they got us and we’re dead!”

The effect was immediate and gratifying. Both dragons suddenly shot downwards at an alarming speed, looking upwards in confusion as they fell. In a second, the spot where they hit was marked by a small puff of dust, followed by a burst of flame.

“Say, Julio, that was pretty clever!” said Fanghorn. “Nothing like a nice, simple spell, I always say. That one works particularly well against small dragons, too, especially when they’re flying!”

“Yeah, right,” said Julio, “Now can you please get us off this rock, before a dragon too big to use this spell on finds us?”

“Well, Julio, I think that problem is about to solve itself, through the aftershock effect.”

“Aftershock effect?”

“Right, the aftershock effect. After the wand is used, huge amounts of uncontrollable magic are unleashed. For several minutes, any spell cast in the immediate area where a wand was used will cause an equal and opposite reaction to occur to the one who casts the spell.”

“You’re kidding,” said Julio.

“Not really,” said Fanghorn, and at that exact moment, as if to prove him right, Julio and Fanghorn began to gently float upwards off the rock. A slight breeze picked up and blew them softly towards the north.

“Fanghorn,” said Julio, “how long does this effect last?”

“I’m not quite sure, but, judging from the amount of destruction the spell of immediate disintegration caused, about an hour or so.”

“What happens then?”

“We fall down.”

“How fun,” said Julio. “Bungee jumping without the rope. I always wanted to find out what it felt like to be a pancake.”

Luckily for our two intrepid adventurers, before the spell wore off, they happened to drift close enough to a tall thorn tree to grab it—very carefully, of course. They had just shimied down the trunk of the tree (which Fanghorn had used the spell of baldness on, to remove the thorns), when a large, dark cloud could be seen on the horizon approaching them. Fanghorn and Julio were dusting the dirt off themselves as the cloud grew larger and larger. After a few minutes, it became obvious that the cloud was, in fact, a huge swarm of dragons, perhaps several hundred of them.

“Uh-oh,” said Julio grimly. “Now it’s getting serious.”

“I still haven’t used my final trick,” said Fanghorn, smiling.

“Well, what the heck were you saving it for? A rainy day?” asked Julio. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’ve almost been killed about three times already.”

“This one was specially for a problem just like this one, and you can only use it once,” explained Fanghorn. “I got it from an old pal of mine at the Wizard’s convention last year. It’s called “Swarm of Bees.”

“Swarm of bees?” asked Julio. Somehow this didn’t sound too promising. “What does it do?”

“Just watch!” said Fanghorn, raising his hands in a threatening manner in the direction of the dragons. The pack of dragons was, by now, almost directly overhead. They were close enough that one could hear their screeching, scratching, angry voices, and see the gleam of their red eyes reflected in the sunlight. The ones closest to them began to circle overhead, closing in for the kill.

“Knockwurst, pasta, spinach, cheese, make ‘em as small as a swarm of bees!” shouted Fanghorn dramatically, throwing a handful of yellow and black beans up into the air. Suddenly, the pack of dragons vanished; in their place, a very small black cloud circled angrily, emitting a loud buzzing noise.

“Knockwurst, pasta, spinach, cheese?” asked Julio. “Gimme a break!”

“Look, I didn’t write this spell, so don’t blame me if it sounds stupid,” said Fanghorn. “The point is, it worked!”

The small black cloud was swiftly moving down towards them, like a small horde of miniature dive-bombers.

“Fanghorn,” said Julio, “I don’t know about you, but I think it’s about time to split. We are now about to be torn to pieces by a horde of very tiny dragons.”

“Right!” agreed Fanghorn, and the two of them set off at a run in the direction of the flying carpet. Soon, loud yells of pain filled the air. The two disappeared into the distance, leaping and swatting at the air about their heads, which was filled with teeny, tiny dragons, nipping and biting everywhere.

It was several days later that a very bedraggled, sweaty and unhappy looking Wizard and his equally dirty assistant elf landed in the garden of the Castle Veryberry. They were covered in what appeared to be bee stings. They were, of course, thousands of little dragon burns and bites.

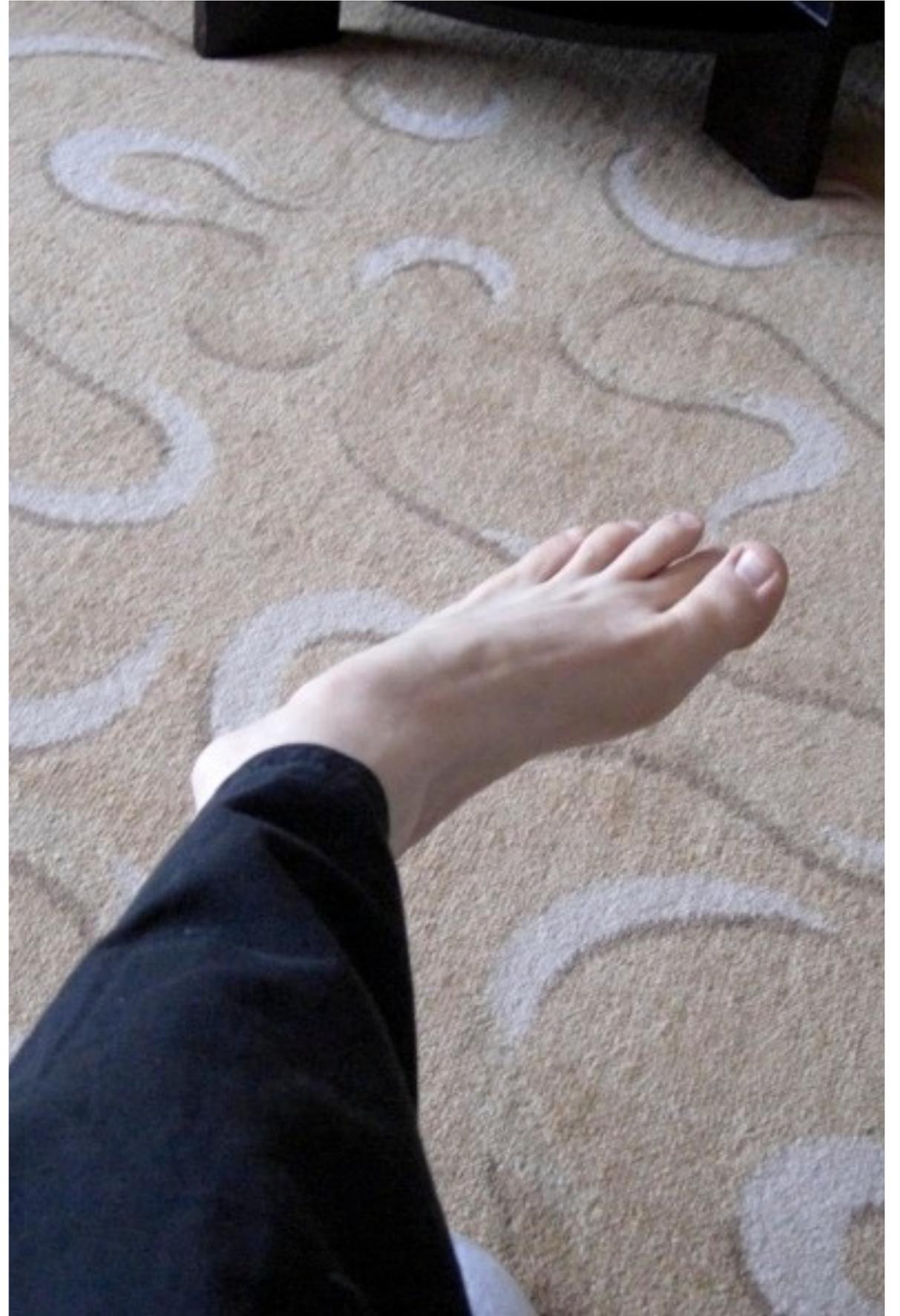
“My dear!” cried princess Rosemary as she ran from her herb garden. “You poor things!”

Julio immediately went for a bath in the springs in the basement of the castle, where hot mineral water bubbled up, heated by the dragon buried deep below the castle.

Fanghorn and Rosemary had a wonderful reunion, after which Fanghorn went straight to his laboratory. He had sent so many dragon bones back to his lab that the walls were bulging outward when he arrived. His laboratory walls were, of course made of rubber, for occasions just such as these. After organizing the bones, he proceeded to make enormous amounts of the dust of return. It was certain he would never again run out!

For his own part, Julio had kept a single, teeny tiny dragon in a bottle as a souvenir of the trip. He fed it on scraps from the table, and, if you shook the bottle, it would buzz angrily around, belching flames. He sometimes took it out at night and held it by the tail, using it to light the candles in his bedroom. It also made a wonderful night light.

Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment



As you may know, Wizard Fanghorn was always prone to the Wizard's toe ailment known as toe tension. Doctors aren't sure, but they believe that this condition results from the way Wizards cast spells. In any event, as mysterious as the origins of this disease are, there is no doubt that many a Wizard has spent long and painful days and nights with his toes curled up, unable to walk properly. The only cure for it is Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment.

Aunt Cautherberry, who lives in a tiny hut on the edge of the Great Hooskatonic Swamp, has never revealed the exact ingredients of her ointment, which she has made and sold for over seven hundred years. Being a witch, she refuses to discuss such things, strictly as a matter of policy. The only thing that is known for sure about the ingredients in Relaxing Toe Ointment is that it probably contains large quantities of Hooskatonic Swamp Lizard, since Aunt Cautherberry is often seen setting traps for the Lizards deep in the swamps. Of course, some say that, being a witch, Aunt Cautherberry simply has developed a taste for barbecued swamp lizard meat, but that idea is pretty disgusting, isn't it?

In any event, Fanghorn always kept a goodly supply of Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment around, because his toes often gave him problems. This was what led to what was later referred to as the Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment Incident.

Now, the Wizard Ta' Cha, who lived very close by to Fanghorn, was in the habit of dropping by on Mondays for a cup of

Winterbane Leaf tea and a slice of raspberry cake, which Rosemary was only too happy to serve him, since, as she always said, it was probably the only healthy thing he would eat all week. It was on a particular Monday not long after the trip to the Dragon's Graveyard (which, as you know, had regrettably ceased to exist following Fanghorn's little escapade with the wand) that Ta' Cha dropped by only to find no one home.

There was no one at home precisely because Fanghorn had recently been told that, after he destroyed the Dragon's Graveyard, a council of all the senior dragons in Haj had been held. At this meeting, after a brief discussion, it was decided that whichever Wizard had been responsible for this outrageous act of terrorism would be incinerated as soon as he was located. Luckily for Fanghorn, no one was quite sure of just who had done this, but, as the list was rather short, he had decided it might be best to be absent from the castle for a few weeks until the dragons went into hibernation for the winter. Dragons are generally very forgetful, and Fanghorn was hoping that after a nice long winter sleep they might not be quite so clear as to why the Graveyard was missing, or just what should be done about it.

So, to make a long story short, he had packed up everyone in the whole castle lock, stock and barrel and whisked them away for a vacation in Cancun, which was the place, all Wizards on Haj agreed, to take the very best vacations. So when Ta' Cha arrived, no one was there to greet him. The truly peculiar thing, however, was that the door was unlocked and swinging wide open on its hinges. This worried Ta' Cha,

since Fanghorn would never leave the castle without locking up. It was furthermore clear that magic had been used to break in, since Fanghorn had powerful spells guarding his castle entrance. Ta' Cha walked in very quietly to see what was going on.

He saw at once that the castle was deserted. Even the bric-a-brac-picker-uppers were not scurrying about. This was highly unusual, since there was always bric-a-brac to pick up. Even the castle cats seemed to be missing. In fact, at that moment the castle cats were on the beach Cancun, lounging in deck chairs and dining on fat Mexican mice.

Now, Ta' Cha, who was not quite sure about why Fanghorn was missing, decided to take a good look around. There was no doubt, he thought to himself, that someone—or something—had broken in with mischief in mind. He quietly went up the grand staircase of Castle Veryberry to the second floor, where Fanghorn and Rosemary had their sleeping quarters, and it was there that he made a most horrifying discovery.

As he opened the door to Fanghorn's bedroom, he noticed a jar of Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment on the dresser. Over it was crouched a figure dressed in the foulest of rags, chanting a spell of some kind. Ta' Cha could not quite make out the words, but from the tone he knew it was in Boolish, a language spoken only by the Bools, a most revolting race of natives in the great Hooskatonic swamp. In magic, this language was used exclusively for the most evil types of spells.

“Stop there, you!” he exclaimed, surrounding himself with a protective spell. The figure spun around in alarm, and raised its hands in the air. A foul breath of wind swept towards Ta' Cha. As it turned, the intruder revealed a hideously deformed face and body. It snarled. The smell of rotting meat filled the air.

Ta' Cha immediately summoned a powerful defense spell, for he now saw what his opponent was, and there was every reason for fear. The two opponents were suddenly surrounded by a mass of shimmering air, which exploded violently as their magic collided. Smoke billowed out, and a great flash of light burst forth. When the air cleared of the blast, the room was in tatters, and there was no sign of either Wizard. The jar of Aunt Cautherberry's Very Relaxing Toe Ointment had survived the blast, and was on its side on the floor in the middle of the bedroom. Ta' Cha's wand, which had become separated from him in the explosion, rolled under the bed.

Fanghorn and the rest of his entourage were absent from the castle until well into Septoctonovmeber (this is the fall season in Haj, where they like to say the names of all the months at one time), when the air grew cool. By this time all the dragons of Haj, still hopping mad about the destruction of their graveyard, had finally settled down on huge piles of gold and jewels in the deepest depths of their caves in the mountains for hibernation.

Dragons, as you may know, cannot sleep soundly unless they have large piles of gold and jewels to do it on. In fact, this

is the only reason dragons gather treasure at all, since they would really have no interest in or use for it otherwise. Of course, young dragons never have large piles of gold and jewels to sleep on, unless they happen to be fortunate enough to come from a very wealthy family, in which case their parents give it to them. This is, however, rare. That explains why young dragons are so restless, and cause terrible problems, flitting about the kingdom burning farms and villages and stealing treasures wherever they can. Until they amass a big enough pile of treasure, you see, it is simply quite impossible for them to sleep properly, and this, as you might expect, keeps them in a perpetually bad temper. Many a village mayor has been known to buy off a young dragon with gold just to save the townsfolk's property from destruction. Once dragons are older, and have gathered enough treasure to sleep comfortably, they usually become much less of a problem, unless some pesky dwarf clan starts making off with their gold.

In any event, as the weather on Haj grew cooler, the dragons had finally settled down. Fanghorn decided it was time to return, sweep out the cobwebs, and settle in for the winter. By this time, Bipple had a spectacular tan. It's a little known fact, but dwarves do tan particularly well. It's not generally noticed, since they live most of their lives in the darkest possible caves, and prefer to travel at night. This prevents them from ever getting decent tans. Bipple, on the other hand, was always trying something new, and had taken up sunbathing a few years back. Some say he did this just to impress his fellow dwarves, who were very afraid of the sun. The result of all this sunbath-

ing was a small, exceedingly dark and hairy dwarf, unlike the other pale white dwarves who lived in the mountain caves. He was so dark that many people mistook him for a very short member of the Oromoro peoples of the tropics, who were all dark skinned.

Rosemary had collected numerous tropical flowers which she planned to plant in her greenhouse, next to her rows of man eating plants. Rosemary was very proud of the fact that she had trained all her man eating plants to live on a macrobiotic vegetarian diet. In her opinion, eating men was the sign of a very uncultured plant, even if they did come by it naturally. Everyone in the castle was too polite to point out to her that she had, by training the plants to eat vegetables instead of men, merely turned them from man eaters into vegetarian cannibals.

Fanghorn himself was in good spirits as they arrived back at the castle, but they all realized there was something terribly wrong as soon as they saw the massive carved wooden front door of the castle swinging open. The smiles disappeared from their faces; the thrill of coming home was abruptly over.

"Break in," announced Fanghorn. "Spread out and check for damage!" he instructed Bipple and Julio. Both of them scurried off into the castle, weapons drawn. It was best to be prepared, in the unlikely event that the intruders were still there. Fanghorn and Rosemary proceeded cautiously upstairs, where they discovered the wreckage of their bedroom.

“It’s ruined!” cried Rosemary.

“Don’t touch anything!” cried Fanghorn, but it was too late. Rosemary picked up the jar of Aunt Cautherberry’s Very Relaxing Toe Ointment, and the evil spell cast on it by the intruder was now horrifyingly clear, for she was instantly turned to stone. Fanghorn sprang into action at once; it was all too obvious that someone had put a spell on the jar. He immediately threw the spell of instant reversal on her, but it had no effect. He cried aloud in anguish, which brought all the members of the castle running. They gathered at the door to behold the sight of Fanghorn, purple with rage, standing helpless in front of the stone statue that had once been his wife.

“Someone will pay dearly for this,” he said grimly.

He stalked up the stairs to his laboratory, and rummaged about in the closets until he pulled out an ancient book with a crumbling leather cover embossed with strange designs. He blew the dust off the cover, opened it, and began to flick through the pages. Bipple and Julio, who had followed him up the stairs, looked on in puzzlement.

Finally, Fanghorn found the page he was looking for. “Spell of recent events,” he muttered, and hefted the book under his arm. He marched back down the stairs to the bedroom. There, he instructed Julio to light seven candles and draw the blinds. He began to chant the spell in his most authoritative voice. As he finished, a shimmering curtain of light filled the air before them. Bipple and Julio watched in astonishment as upon this magical screen the battle between the

evil Wizard and Ta’ Cha was re-enacted. As Fanghorn watched, his expression became ever more grim.

“A Boolish Wizard,” he announced.

“Bool?” said Bipple. “Why would a Bool want to break in and cast a spell like this on you?”

“It’s a long story, but I suppose it must be told,” replied Fanghorn. “Many years ago, I was an apprentice Wizard down in the southern part of Haj, on the edges of the great Hooskatic swamp. Aunt Cautherberry was one of my teachers. She was schooling me in the collection and preparation of herbs from the swamps—as you know, there are many herbs there that have tremendous powers, and grow nowhere else. In any event, during this time there was a great war being fought in the innermost reaches of the swamp by the two principal tribes of Bools. One of the tribes had kidnapped the daughter of the other tribe’s king, demanding ransom. The king, unable to raise the ransom moneys, mounted an attack on the enemy camp, hoping to regain his daughter by force. However, because the very nature of the swamp itself makes conventional warfare terribly difficult, the battles raged back and forth for years. All this time, of course, the princess was held captive in the camp of the tribe that had kidnapped her. As often happens in these cases, she fell in love with one of her captors—in this case, the son of the king of the tribe himself.”

“Now, after many months of this awful warfare, during which untold numbers of both tribes perished, the two lovers became sickened by the slaughter, and the prince devised a

plan whereby they might escape together from his father's camp. To this end, he collected the roots of a plant that, when steeped in water, create a brew that will make anyone who drinks it totally unconscious. He put it in the brew that the guards drank, and, that night, as the guards slept, they both slipped away in a canoe, heading not for the deepest part of the swamps—for everyone would of course assume that was the place a native of the swamp would choose to hide—but for the edges, where they planned to escape to the outside world and dwell forever in another place where they might live their lives free of the awful war that had been caused by the kidnapping.”

“Upon discovering their absence, the King immediately understood what had occurred, and set his entire tribe upon a mission to recapture both the Princess and his son. His anger was terrifying, for he felt that his son had betrayed him. The war had made him a cruel man, and he resolved to put his son to death when he recaptured them.”

“Despite the fact that Aunt Cautherberry's shack was many, many miles from the center of this conflict, news of it did reach us through trappers traveling through the innermost regions of the swamp, and we soon heard about the lover's escape and the king's plan for vengeance. Not long afterwards, there came a violent storm of the sort that sometimes blows through the swamps, and at the height of the wind and rain, as Aunt Cautherberry and I were speculating about whether or not her hut would survive the blasts of wind, there came a beating at her door. We opened it only to dis-

cover the bedraggled figures of none other than the prince and his lover, seeking shelter. They had come to this edge of the swamp pursued by the King's forces. Of course we took them in, even though we knew that to do so was to invite the wrath of the Boolish king. We fed them, dried their clothing, and allowed them to get the first good night's sleep they had had since they fled the camp.”

“The following day, the storm blew over, and I agreed to escort them through the outskirts of the swamp to the edges of civilization, where they might find their way to a new life. It was as I took them through the last stretch of marsh that we encountered the king and his men. They were heavily armed, and, to make matters worse, with them was a powerful Boolish sorcerer. I should explain to you both that Boolish sorcerers are the most fearsome sorcerers in all of Haj, for they have chosen a path of power so evil and dangerous that even the spells to *initiate* it are forbidden for study by the Wizards guild.”

“By taking extraordinary vows that put their soul in bondage to the forces of evil, the Boolish sorcerers have extended their life by many hundreds of years. This gives them enormous power, but they are forced to become vampires to remain alive, since the drain upon them every time they perform magic causes them to age horribly. A Boolish sorcerer performing a particularly strong spell must first feed on the flesh and blood of many individuals; otherwise, as he performs the spell and uses his power, his own flesh will rot and drop from his bones. What you saw today in the spell of recent

events was just such a sorcerer. This is why he looked like he was rotting before your eyes—in fact, he was. As he used his reserves of magic, it caused him to age.”

“When the king and his sorcerer discovered us, I had almost completed my training, so I was not without my own sources of power. Luckily, I saw them first. I knew I had but one chance to strike the first blow; if I failed, the Boolish sorcerer might destroy me. He was young and healthy looking, which meant he had fed well, and was at the peak of his power.”

“I immediately used my wand. You know that this is rarely done, but at the time I felt there was no choice but to use my power to its fullest, for I was in great fear of the Bool. I cast the most powerful spell of binding and containment I knew, and reinforced it with the wand. This spell, if properly cast, would temporarily prevent the King and his Wizard from leaving the swamp, and, at the same time, create a barrier that prevented the Boolish sorcerer from casting a counterspell upon me. I hoped to gain us time by this strategy.”

“As it happened, being young and inexperienced, I underestimated the enormous extra force the wand would put behind the spell, and as I cast it, the power that was released caught everyone by surprise. It overwhelmed the area in a huge burst of light. The king and his sorcerer were doubly outraged, firstly, because I had caught them by surprise and outsmarted them, but also because they immediately knew—as I did—that the force of this spell would prevent them from leav-

ing the swamp not for a few weeks or months, but for many years! They howled in rage at us as they realized their predicament. The king swore his vengeance upon me, for he knew that his son and the princess might now disappear and escape his revenge forever. Wizards, on the other hand, are usually much easier to locate.”

“Obviously, after all these years, the spell has finally worn off. I am sure the old king must be dead many years by now, but the Boolish sorcerer has returned to extract his revenge upon me for imprisoning him for so many years. He planned to turn me to stone, but Ta’ Cha must have dropped by to visit and caught him as he cast the spell. Now he has done me double evil, by turning my wife into stone and kidnapping my good friend. The only way to reverse this spell will be to find him and kill him. This is no easy task, for these Boolish vampires cling to life like leeches. The worst of it is, there is little doubt that he plans to feed on Ta’ Cha to replenish his life forces, so we have no time to waste. The ceremonial preparations for such an event, to my understanding, take only ten days or so. We must rescue Ta’ Cha before then!”

“We’re behind you, Fanghorn,” said Bipple.

“Yeah, *way* behind you,” said Julio, sensing that this was the kind of dangerous mission he would most prefer not to go on. However, he knew his duty lay with Fanghorn and Rosemary.

“What do we do next?” asked Bipple.

“We must go to see Aunt Cautherberry,” said Fanghorn, “for only she knows enough about the Boolish sorcerers to help me find a way to kill him. It would be easy enough to wound or disable the enemy, but killing them is a serious matter. Killing the Bool, however, will instantly release Rosemary from the spell, and it is the only fully reliable way to permanently reverse it.”

The castle became a furious beehive of activity as they packed for the journey that night. Knapsacks were stuffed, provisions put up, blankets rolled. Bipple tested the blades on all his favorite dwarvish axes, forged in fires that made them nearly indestructible. Julio sharpened up his best elf knives, which have spells that cause them to fly true and never miss a target. He added some of his favorite poisons to his weapons kit. Elves are experts at poisoning, and have many kinds to choose from.

For himself, Fanghorn packed no more than one lumpy, large, mysterious looking sack. It occasionally seemed to move by itself, and small weird noises could be heard coming from it at times. It gave Julio and Bipple the creeps, but they were, to some extent, used to this kind of thing, so they did their best to ignore it. All in all, they left prepared for the worst, ready to do battle to the death.

The three of them set out the next morning, and arrived at the edge of the great Hooskatonian swamp a few days later, swatting at mosquitoes and biting flies as they trudged up the muddy, marshy land to Aunt Cautherberry’s shack. Rose-

mary’s pitiful stone figure lay on a bed of straw in a small cart pulled by one of the castle donkeys.

Why in the world would anyone want to live here?” asked Bipple as they reached the clearing in which Aunt Cautherberry lived.

Aunt Cautherberry’s hut was made entirely of marsh reeds, which looked to be several years old. They had a thin layer of green mold growing over them, which made the whole shack look unhealthy, as though it had some kind of disease. A thin curl of smoke rose up from the chimney. There were mangy old dogs lying around the yard. Under ordinary circumstances, dogs of this type would have jumped up and barked at any intruder, but the heat and the humidity of the swamp seemed to have drained these particular dogs of energy. They didn’t even get up; a few of them turned their heads to look at the intruders lazily, and then went back to panting and drooling, scratching themselves in the dirt. Big clouds of flies and mosquitoes were everywhere.

“Yeech,” said Bipple. “This place looks disgusting.”

Just then, Aunt Cautherberry emerged from the hut. She was carrying a bucket full of very smelly dead Hooskatonian Swamp Lizards. She was old and bent over, dressed in rags, and looked as though she had not taken a bath for some time.

“Ah! Visitors!” she cackled, breaking into a broad smile. It was possible to see that she had, at one time (very, very long

ago) been extremely good looking. “Fanghorn, I see. With an elf and a very short Oromoroan!

“I’m not an Oromoroan,” said Bipple testily. “I’m a dwarf.”

“A dwarf?” answered Aunt Cautherberry. “Since when do dwarfs come in dark brown?”

“It’s a suntan,” answered Bipple.

“Ahhhhh, but don’t dwarves hate the sun?” said Aunt Cautherberry suspiciously. She wasn’t sure a dwarf this unusual could be trusted.

“I happen to like it, personally,” said Bipple.

“Enough pleasantries,” said Fanghorn gruffly. “We are here in the direst need. Look here.” He gestured towards the cart carrying Rosemary.

“Why, it’s Rosemary!” exclaimed Aunt Cautherberry as she peered into the cart. “And she’s been turned to stone!” she finished in an appalled tone, after inspecting her briefly. She scowled in dismay as Fanghorn related the story of the Boolish sorcerer to her.

Well, we obviously can’t just wait for the spell to wear out,” said Aunt Cautherberry.

“Why? How long will that take?” said Julio.

“Judging from her current state of rigidity, about leventy-leven years,” said Aunt Cautherberry, sniffing the air about Rosemary as if that might confirm her suspicions.

“Leventy-leven years?” said Bipple. “That’s ridiculous! There’s no such number as leventy-leven!”

“Au contraire, mon ami,” (that means, “on the contrary, my friend,” in French) replied Aunt Cautherberry, “That is a very exact period of time to a Wizard.”

“Well, how long is it in normal years?” asked Julio.

“Seven thousand, three hundred and thirty-two years, eleven days, six hours, fourteen minutes and ten seconds,” replied Aunt Cautherberry.

“Seven thousand, three hundred and thirty-two years?” yelled Bipple.

“That’s right, not counting the days, of course,” replied Aunt Cautherberry.

“We can’t wait that long under any circumstances,” interrupted Fanghorn in a tense voice. “I’ve come for some advice on how to kill this Boolish sorcerer off, which will end the spell at once.”

“Bool-killing now, are we?” asked Aunt Cautherberry. “Well now, you know how difficult that can be, what with their vampire powers. In fact, I don’t recall the last time anyone did kill a Boolish sorcerer. Doesn’t happen too often.”

“Nevertheless, it can be done, can’t it?” asked Fanghorn.

“Why, yes, as I recall, there are several ways to kill them,” said Aunt Cautherberry.

“Well, what are they?” asked Bipple.

“Hmm, let me see,” mused Aunt Cautherberry. “Well, first, you could spray them with fruit juice. They’re violently allergic to it.”

“You’re kidding,” said Fanghorn.

“No, I’m quite serious,” said Aunt Cautherberry, “in fact, it’s a terrifically effective method of killing them... or it would be, if it wasn’t for the fact that they all have very strong spells around them shielding them from just this type of attack. Fruit juice is very healthy stuff, you see, and, being unhealthy as they can be, when a Boolish sorcerer comes into contact with it, there’s a violent kind of reaction that makes them swell up like a balloon and pop.”

“Hmm. Sounds good. What are some of the other ways to get ‘em?” said Fanghorn.

“There are three other ways: death by fire, death by ice, and death by frog.”

“Death by frog?” said Julio.

“Yes, frog,” replied Aunt Cautherberry. “There is a certain frog that lives in the deepest part of the swamp whose

skin is covered with slimy stuff that is harmless to ordinary people, but poisonous to a Bool. If a Bool is smeared from head to toe with the slime from this type of frog, he’s a goner. Of course,” sniffed YouAunt Cautherberry, “it’s awfully hard to get them to hold still for long enough to cover them with this frog slime, so I don’t really recommend that particular method.”

“What about death by ice and death by fire?” asked Fanghorn.

“Well, death by ice involves dropping the Bool down a crevasse in a glacier. Theoretically, it’s possible, but you have to get the Bool up on a glacier, and that’s no easy feat, since they hate the cold, and avoid it like the plague. I only know of it happening once, when a Bool was whisked up over a glacier by a tornado which was conjured up by a Wizard fighting him. It wasn’t intentional, but it certainly killed the Bool. At least, the legends say it did. For all I know, that Bool is still up there frozen in ice, and will thaw out someday. However, death by fire is the most reliable and effective. Boos can be burned to death if you blast them with flameflower.”

“Flameflower?” asked Fanghorn, puzzled.

“Yes. You know, it’s such an obscure subject that I didn’t even bother teaching you about it when you studied under me. In fact, the flower is so rare I’m not even sure if it still exists. It may have become extinct, since the Boolish tribes cut down so much of the tropical forest where it used to grow. The sorcerers had the tribes exterminate it simply because it was such

a potent weapon against them. Unfortunately, they destroyed huge areas of swampland in order to do this. The areas where it used to grow are now referred to as the barren waters, since nothing grows there but duckweed. The best thing about the flameflower is that it can't be stopped by spells. No one is certain as to why, but its flame is impervious to magic of any kind."

"How does this flameflower work?" asked Bipple.

"The flower itself looks like a large tube with a bulge at one end. It's kind of like an explosive zucchini squash; its flower is filled with a marsh gas. It must be picked with great care, lest it fire prematurely. When pointed at someone and squeezed, a huge spout of flame erupts from it. It will completely annihilate any Boolish sorcerer...or anyone else, for that matter. One has to carry it very carefully, because it can explode easily. Also, you've got to be sure you point the thin end at the target, because otherwise you will annihilate yourself, not the enemy."

"Where would we look for flameflower?" asked Fanghorn, for he thought this might be the best weapon against a Bool.

"There is a swampy glen between the two pinnacles of Quodivaax," said Aunt Cautherberry, "which is about three weeks journey from here, in the least traveled part of the swamp. The flowers might still grow there. If they do, you will find them in small, mossy glens, growing in patches where the dew settles out on cool mornings. The area I'm referring to is

so remote that the tribes almost never visit it. Nor does anyone else, for that matter, because of the great danger in getting there."

"What makes it so dangerous?" asked Julio.

"Among other things, it's the major breeding ground for swamp piranha," said Aunt Cautherberry. "They can strip a man of flesh down to his bones in a second, and breeding makes them very, very hungry."

"How nice," said Julio. His danger sense was kicking in again. "Maybe it would be better if Fanghorn and Bipple went on this part of the mission. I can stay here with Aunt Cautherberry and hold down the fort. You know, learn more about swamp stuff and so on."

"Fraid not, old boy, you're coming with us," said Fanghorn. "We're going to collect flameflower. I think it's the best potential weapon we have."

The next day, they all set out through the swamp in a small boat provided by Aunt Cautherberry, along with various ointments and potions designed to keep mosquitoes away. Bipple and Julio were curious as to why Aunt Cautherberry insisted they take so many different lotions with them, but, as she explained, "there are more types of mosquitoes in the Hooskatonic swamp than there are pimples on an acne-saurous, and every one of them hungry."

The three explorers soon found out how true this was, as swarms of the little pests surrounded them and buzzed in angry circles as they looked for sweet flesh to eat. Fanghorn, who was conserving his magic energies for the immense battle they were all sure lay ahead, refused to put up a spell to fend them off, so the journey was continued under a black cloud of bugs that followed them every step of the way.

“Look at the bright side of it,” said Fanghorn, “They make great camouflage! No one from above can see us.”

The thought of camouflage was small comfort. Dwarves do not take well to water voyages, and the little canoe-like boat they paddled in rocked constantly from side to side, making Bipple seasick. The air was hot, humid, and unbreathable, because awful rotting smells from pockets of marsh gas rose bubbling up through the water everywhere. The water around them was filled with crocodiles who followed them, swimming in slow, sinuous curves as they opened and closed their mouths experimentally, no doubt thinking of what a nice snack the three would provide. Every so often some larger creature no one could identify would rise up out of the swamp, with flippers and tentacles thrashing about wildly in the air before sinking down into the dark, stinking waters. Several times these leviathans almost capsized the boat. Above them, troupes of green swamp monkeys jumped through the thick tops of the mangrove trees, occasionally throwing fruits down on them, which was annoying, if not painful. Despite all the ointments, some bugs inevitably managed to bite them, and after a day they all had itchy, swelling bumps all over their

faces and hands. There was absolutely no land anywhere, forcing them all to sleep very uncomfortably on the bottom of the boat. The situation was difficult. Only the thought of Rosemary and Ta’ Cha kept them going where fainter hearts would have turned back.

It was after three days of this almost unbearable travel through the soupy, thick black waters that the trio reached the general vicinity of the peaks of Quodivaax, which marked one of the few places in the swamp where very high ground appeared. They knew they were there when the paddles they were using to row the boat were suddenly attacked by hordes of vicious little fish that chomped on the wood with razor sharp teeth. After an hour of this, the paddles began to shred into splinters of wood.

“Fanghorn, we can’t go on like this,” said Julio. “These swamp piranha are reducing our paddles to nothing more than wood molecules.”

“You’re right,” said Fanghorn. “I guess we have no choice. I will have to use some magic.” He created a very small spell that propelled the boat forward slowly, and they withdrew the paddles into the vessel.

One of the swamp piranha stuck its head out of the water. “No fair!” it shouted in a pip-squeak voice.

“No fair?” said Julio. “You sound like the rats we met in the desert of despair! All you smaller life forms seem to have

an exaggerated sense of fairness! What would be fair, jumping into the swamp so that you can eat us?”

“Why, yes, that would be eminently fair...and most polite of you!” said the fish.

“Well, tough luck for you,” said Julio, “We are the rudest dudes you will ever meet. Now, get lost!” He slapped at the waters with the remains of his paddle, causing the fish to duck under for a second.

“My, my,” said the fish, as he came back up, “what terrible manners! I shall immediately enlist my comrades to attack your boat in earnest, and eat many holes in the bottom, after which you shall serve as a delicious main course at our evening meal!” He swam under again, and instantly the sound of many tiny bodies smacking into the hull of the boat could be heard. The fish re-emerged. “There, you see?” he said, “We’re gonna eat you, We’re gonna eat you, nanny-nanny boo-boo to you!” demonstrating that even polite piranhas forget their manners when it suits them.

“Fanghorn, are you listening to this?” asked Bipple, who by now was alarmed by the direction the conversation was taking.

“Indeed,” said Fanghorn absent-mindedly, rummaging around in the large, mysterious sack he had with him. The noises from the bottom of the boat grew louder.

“DO something!” yelled Julio, for the first small leak of water had just sprung from a hole that appeared near his feet.

Fanghorn was fiddling with something in the folds of his robes now, and he threw something into the water with a splash. It sank. The three of them watched as ripples spread out from it. Suddenly there was a huge KA-ROOMPH! as the water boiled upwards. A cloud of smoke erupted from the swamp. Thousands of small fish bodies floated lazily to the surface, belly up. Julio and Bipple looked at him with peculiar expressions.

“Dynamite,” said Fanghorn by way of explanation. “Works every time.”

Word must have gotten around fast, because there were no more signs of swamp piranha for the rest of the afternoon, and shortly before dusk they landed in a small cove on the shore near one of the two pinnacles of Quovaadix. They made camp, spreading huge mosquito nets all around them. After a brief meal of dried fish, they slept comfortably for the first time in three nights on land. Only the incessant clouds of bugs and the strange cries of the swamp life around them continued to be an annoyance.

In the morning, they awoke to find that a large, extremely poisonous viper had crawled into camp overnight. Fortunately, it had curled up for a nap, and Bipple chopped its head off with his ax before it awoke. Cooked over hot coals and served with marsh quail eggs, it made an excellent breakfast. Immediately after they ate, they set out on the short walk

to the valleys and glens in the clefts that ran up the sides of Quovaadix. It took little time to locate the first flameflower growing next to a rock overhang. Perhaps they were rare elsewhere, but in this area they grew in abundance. Bipple and Julio, working under Fanghorn's direction, carefully plucked the largest and plumpest fruits from the vines and wrapped them in soft blankets of dried moss. After filling several baskets—far more than they expected to need—they packed up camp and departed. As before, the piranha avoided them, having learned their lesson the first time. After they cleared the more tangled undergrowth and the dead stumps close to shore, Julio asked, "Where to now?"

"To the Zentrum Malus," announced Fanghorn.

"What's the Zentrum Malus?" asked Bipple.

"It means the 'evil center', the place where the Boolish sorcerer clans dwell. Its location in the swamp is something of a secret, but I happen to have an idea of where it is thanks to this little crystal ball here." Fanghorn held up a small sphere carved of rock crystal. It had a faint glow to it. "It can detect evil—the forces of darkness—and glows brighter on the side nearer to it. Using this, we can steer directly to the camp."

"If you don't mind my saying so, Fanghorn, going directly into the Bool stronghold doesn't sound like the greatest idea in the world," said Julio, "especially seeing as it's probably crawling with vampire Wizards."

"One of us will infiltrate under cover of night, with my most powerful spell of invisibility, and locate the Bool and the place where they are holding Ta' Cha hostage," said Fanghorn.

"Let me have one guess who that's gonna be," said Julio with a scowl.

Fanghorn ignored him and continued. "After we know where they are, we all go in after them, the same night. Blow the Bool away with flameflower, snatch Ta' Cha, and flash out of there using the dust of return before they know what hit them."

"I like that last part especially well," said Julio. "You DO have enough dust for this, don't you?," recalling the incident at the dragon's graveyard.

"More than enough," said Fanghorn. "I also left enough with Aunt Cautherberry so that she can send Rosemary back when she recovers, which should happen instantly following the death of the Bool." The whole war party was heartened by this speech, and they set off with a renewed sense of purpose, Fanghorn's spell motoring their small craft swiftly towards a rendezvous with the enemy.

As they moved forward for the next few days, the constant heat and humidity, the clouds of insects and the difficulty of sleeping on the small boat slowly sapped them of energy, but their determination to free Ta' Cha and Rosemary drove them onwards. When they finally reached the Zentrum

Malus, they were at fever pitch, prepared for battle despite their apparent exhaustion.

The party reached their destination on the evening of the fourth day after they collected the flameflowers. The Zentrum Malus was built on a large grassy knoll that rose from the inhospitable swamp reeking with sulfur and the smell of rotten animals—probably the dead bodies of the Bool’s victims. The waters leading up to the Boolish camp were filled with stakes planted in the mud, and on every stake was a skull—skulls of animals such as horses, bears and goats mixed with the skulls of elves, humans, and dwarves. Some of the grisly relics still had tufts of hair attached to them, which fluttered in the breaths of hot, oily wind that blew off the Boolish camp. There were rotting corpses piled on the shore near the village, with a herd of bloated, abnormally fat crocodiles feeding on them.

The sights were hideous enough to make Bipple—an experienced warrior who had seen many awful sights—shudder in horror. “Animals,” he grunted. “Animals.” He fixed his face in a scowl and took his ax out, testing the blade with his finger in anticipation.

“You can’t kill Bools with an ax,” said Julio, watching him.

“Maybe, but there’s no harm in trying a little experiment, is there?” said Bipple with a wickedly unhappy grin.

“Shhh!” said Fanghorn. They had coasted silently up to the banks of the knoll. It was almost totally dark; the flicker of

the fires around the Boolish camp cast the only light. Somewhere nearby, a bullfrog began to croak. There were splashes as swamp crocodiles fished their prey from the surrounding waters.

Fanghorn, Bipple and Julio waited for hours, still as stones, watching as the Bools performed hideous rituals and fed on the blood of their pitiful victims, who were bound to posts in the center of the village. All of them were appalled, but there was little they could do for the unfortunate wretches. After hours of this unspeakable spectacle, the last Bool was finally seen slipping into his hut, and all that was left of the fires were glowing embers. There had been no sign of Ta’ Cha for the entire evening.

“It’s time,” whispered Fanghorn, and he cast the spell of invisibility over Julio, who disappeared at once. “I’m taking a flameflower with me,” said Julio’s voice, coming from empty space, “just in case something goes wrong.” A flameflower lifted itself from the basket and disappeared as it entered the space where the spell was in force. With a few small splashes, he was over the side.

Fanghorn’s spell was so powerful that Julio could not be detected even by magic. The spell, however, was of limited duration, so he swiftly penetrated the village and began to peer inside the huts. After a few minutes, he came to the largest hut in the center of the hill. It was there that he discovered the unconscious body of Ta’ Cha, covered in wounds that were obviously the result of torture, chained to a huge log in the middle

of the hut. In the corner, wrapped in stinking rags, was the figure of the Bool.

Julio quietly snuck up to Ta' Cha, and shook him gently until he woke. His eyes widened in hope and amazement as he realized some invisible helper was at hand. Julio moved to see if he could find the lock on the chains. His nimble elf fingers soon located it and picked it swiftly—all elves are natural born thieves and lock pickers! Ta' Cha, sensing his freedom, quickly rose to his feet and slipped through the door. Julio followed. So far, so good, he thought to himself, although he could see Ta' Cha was much weakened from his ordeal, and wouldn't be much help in any battle.

Unfortunately, Ta' Cha didn't have the same invisibility spell protecting him, and he tripped an alarm spell in the center of the square. An enormous clanging of bells immediately shattered the silence, and Bools—including the head Bool, in whose hut Ta' Cha had been held—poured from their huts like hideous vampire ants, surrounding Ta' Cha.

Fanghorn and Bipple, watching from the boat, realized that the chance for surprise was gone, and each hefted several flameflowers, preparing to move into the village at once. The Bools had snatched Ta' Cha and pinned his arms back.

“So!” hissed the head Bool at Ta' Cha. “Trouble you are, nothing but trouble! However, your pranks are at an end. The rituals are completed, and it's time to drink your Wizard's blood, before you try any other tricks!” Ta' Cha's only answer was to spit on the ground, hitting the Bool's feet. The enraged

vampire drew back his cloak and bared his teeth. It was just as he took the first step towards Ta' Cha that the space between them was suddenly filled with a small, dark figure who literally appeared from nowhere. The figure was pointing an oddly shaped gourd of some kind at the Bool. Evidently, the invisibility spell had worn off.

“What's this?” croaked the head Bool. “You think to stop me?” He laughed at the pint sized enemy, then suddenly stopped laughing, as he more clearly saw just exactly what it held in its hands. “Flameflower!” he snarled as he drew back in fear, but they were his last words.

“Surprise!” yelled Julio with a grin. An incredible burst of flame gushed out from him and engulfed the Bool, who instantly died in a screaming cloud of fire. The blast rocked the village and threw the remaining Bools into pandemonium. As they scattered in confusion, Fanghorn opened the mysterious sack he had brought with him, revealing for the first time its contents—dozens of tiny griffins, each one a snarling, fluttering mass of wings and teeth and claws and flames. They burst from the sack like a swarm of hornets and flung themselves at the Bools, adding to the confusion as every Bool attempted to escape from them. The grim and determined figures of Fanghorn and Bipple proceeded to penetrate the inner circle of the camp, with their blasts of flameflower roasting Bools in every direction and sending them to the hell they so richly deserved. They rushed to the middle of the encampment, forming a small circle with Ta' Cha and Julio, and Fanghorn withdrew the pouch containing the dust of return from his robes.

“Just one second,” said Bipple, and he raced from the group, swinging his ax at the head of a Bool who had only been knocked down by flameflower blasts, and was trying to regain his feet and run. The Bool’s head rolled from his shoulders and bounced down into the swamps, where it fell into the jaws of a waiting crocodile.

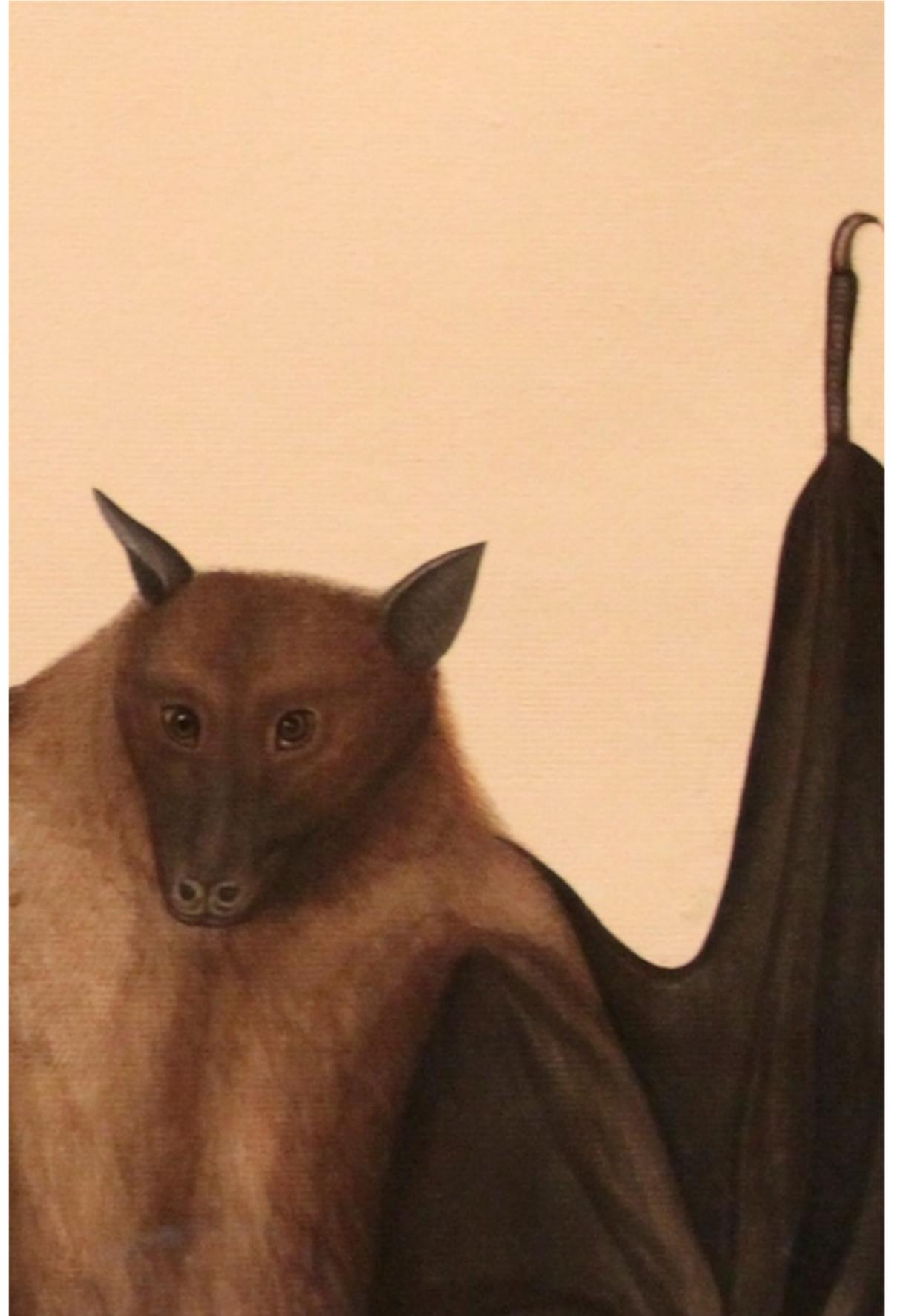
“Add that to the list of ways to kill Boos, would you, please?” he panted as he ran back to the group. Fanghorn tossed the dust of return into the air, and in an instant they were all standing in the laboratory at Castle Veryberry.

“Gee, that was a lot easier than I thought it would be,” said Julio.

“I need a shower,” said Ta’ Cha, exhausted. He collapsed on the floor, and the others rushed to help him.

Rosemary rematerialized with Aunt Cautherberry in the castle a few hours later, looking none the worse for wear. The entire staff threw a celebration party the next day, where prodigious amounts of raspberry wine were consumed. Julio was celebrated as the hero of the day, basking in the attention with a grateful Ta’ Cha and Rosemary at his side. Bipple bragged a great deal about the fifth way to kill a Bool—the dwarf axe. Fanghorn, who was only too happy to have his wife and best friend back, merely smiled, and kept pouring the wine for as long as it lasted.

Fanghorn's Magic Circus Bats



Fanghorn had spent years training his Magic Circus Bats, which were famous the length and breadth of Haj. He kept them in a belfry (the only place bats will live, of course) at the roof of the Castle Veryberry. These were very special bats, selected from all over Haj by Fanghorn for their size and beauty. These bats were put through a rigorous course of training at the Wizard Fanghorn bat school before qualifying as a member of the Magic Circus Bat team. After passing the final exam, each bat was magically transformed to a magnificent shade of red, blue, green, yellow, purple, or some other equally fabulous color, after which they were dressed in tiny polka-dotted circus outfits and officially entered in the list of Fanghorn's Magic Circus Bats.

Fanghorn's Magic Circus Bats were the chief attraction at circuses all over Haj. He had a road crew that traveled with the bats, taking care of them, delivering them from town to town and circus to circus, and tending to their every need. Each night the trainers would feed the bats a diet of the fattest, most nutritious insects money could buy. By day, the bats slept in gilded cages covered in the finest silks. It is safe to say that these were the most pampered bats on Haj. And when the time came to perform, the bats would put on the most spectacular show ever seen at a circus! Before the bats came on stage, a hush would fill the big top, and eerie, magical music would fill the air as the orchestra played the Magic Circus Bat Theme Song. Entering the tent one by one, each bat would be captured by its own individual spotlight, gleaming like some flying gem in the dusky light of the circus tent. The music be-

gan to slowly build as the number of bats increased. Then, suddenly, all the bats of the same color would join together in formation, creating rainbows of color that whirled about in the air at dizzying speeds! The colors would weave intricate patterns as the bats, using their super sensitive radar ears, flew in directions determined by precise mathematical formulas. Colors upon colors blossomed into each other, forming curves, triangles, hexagons, pentagons, and all manner of shapes. Slowly the bats began to spiral around each other, flying in tighter and tighter circles. Finally, as the music built to an unimaginable crescendo, the bats would burst forth from the brightly lit circle in an explosion of color, separating into the dark edges of the tent, where their glory faded away into darkness. At this time, the crowd would burst into wild applause, springing to their feet in excitement.

Because Fanghorn's Magic Circus Bats were such a huge attraction, the bats had very high opinions of themselves, but, of course, this is typical of show business personalities. They loved to strut and preen themselves in front of the public, showing off their colors and competing for the most attention. Now, after the rather demanding and anxiety-provoking business of the Bools, Fanghorn decided it would be nice to go on tour with the bats, so, after attending to the castle business that had been neglected during his absence, he packed his Wizard's carpet bag and hit the road with Bipple and the troupe, leaving Julio to attend to Rosemary at the castle. This was just fine with Julio, who hated bats with a passion.

They stopped in Trazantium, Bobopolis, Frogreich and Burgerburg, where they played to adoring crowds. Fanghorn worked out several new routines with the crew, and the bats were well fed and satisfied. It wasn't until after their performance in Gooberammergau that problems developed. Specifically, what happened in Gooberammergau was that all the bats disappeared.

When Fanghorn discovered the bats were gone, he immediately sent for Bipple. "Bipple," he said, "I'm sure that the bats were stolen by someone in this town. We must hold an inquiry." The advantage of having a dwarf to ask your questions during inquiries of this kind is that dwarves are able to immediately sense when someone is lying. It is, in fact, absolutely and positively impossible to tell a lie without a dwarf knowing it. This would make them excellent police officers, except that they are all too short to pass the physical exam.

Bipple questioned everyone in the circus to see if any witnesses had noticed anything. He questioned the fat lady, the thin man, the weight lifters and all the clowns, who unfortunately refused to give any serious answers, but just joked a lot. They questioned the mega-lion tamers, spotted topsy turvy crocodile trainers, parrot jumping acrobats, bareback gloat riders, and the grand exalted unified theoretical ringmaster, but in the end it was one of the stable maids who had the best tip. "It was a man in a purple hat," she said. "I saw him sneak into the bat caravan wagon, and he snuck out with a big burlap bag that was wiggling just like it was full of bats." Fanghorn was

none too pleased to hear about his bats being abused in this frightful manner.

Now, it must be mentioned here that Gooberammergau was a town with a most peculiar law that required everyone to wear a hat of a certain color. In the rest of the known universe, people are required to carry a driver's license, or passport, or some other form of document to identify them, but in Gooberammergau, since ancient times, the law has required people to identify themselves by their hats. This has, over the centuries, lead to a profusion of hats in every imaginable shape, size, color, and pattern. Hat styles are sometimes passed down from generation to generation, but the hat manufacturers are also constantly creating new styles. This is why almost all the hats on Haj are made in Gooberammergau.

The citizens of the town are very proud of their hats. Every hat style is registered at the town office, so it is thus very easy to track down the names of all the individuals with hats of a particular color. It was thus a simple thing for Fanghorn and Bipple to look up a list of everyone who wore a purple hat in Gooberammergau. It turned out that there were only four purple hat wearers (purple being a color few Gooberammergauers liked): the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker and the Mayor.

"This is beginning to sound like a nursery rhyme crime," said Bipple, "and they are always the worst sort! Filled with tuffets and spiders and disgusting blackbird pies and God knows what!"

“Bipple, I want you to interrogate each one of these suspects in DEPTH,” said Fanghorn, “as one of them is surely most terribly GUILTY of stealing my bats.”

Bipple gritted his teeth and set out without a word, determined to find the thief. In order to do things in a nice orderly way- dwarves love a nice, orderly world, which is why so many of them used to live in Germany—he began with the butcher. He walked into the butcher shop later that same morning to find the butcher standing behind the counter dressed in a blue polka dot smock. An outrageous purple felt hat hung behind him on the wall, covered with tiny green dragon scales and hung all about with bright purple feathers.

The butcher was cutting up hamburger pods. In Haj, hamburgers grow on very colorful pods in trees. They are picked once a year and the pods are split open, at which point the fully cooked hamburgers, piping hot, fall out. Buns and ketchup, you have to supply yourself.

“What colorful hamburger pods,” remarked Bipple casually, “they remind me of the wonderful colors of Fanghorn’s circus bats. You haven’t seen Fanghorn’s magic circus bats, have you? he asked the butcher.

“No, I never have,” sighed the butcher in regret. Bipple, of course, immediately knew he was telling the truth. “I always wish that I had,” he continued, “but I have little time to go to the circus, as it takes all my time to run this shop.”

“Indeed,” said Bipple, sympathizing, “perhaps you should arrange a small vacation once in a while.”

“Well! I never thought of that,” said the butcher, who was clearly a man of little imagination. “I shall take your advice. Where do you think I should go?”

“Why, I hear the beaches at Slobodonoff cove are lovely,” said Bipple, “and there are many hamburger tree breeders in that area, which should afford you the opportunity to write off your trip there as a travel expense.”

“What a capital idea!” exclaimed the butcher. Bipple departed, disappointed that he had uncovered no new clues. The next stop on this orderly detective tour was the baker, who had a shop two doors down on the same street. As he entered, he noted the fabulous display of baked snoogle-fritters in the windows, obscenely slathered in layer after layer of icing. Snoogle-fritters are perhaps the most fattening food in the entire universe, and are the particular favorites of little old ladies—especially the very fat ones—who like to eat mounds of the at tea-time while gossiping shamelessly with their friends about other friends, most often the ones that couldn’t make it to tea that afternoon. Snoogle-fritters burst into incredible flavors when you bite into them, and little children always beg their parents for a snoogle-fritter whenever they pass a bake shop that specializes in them.

The icing on snoogle-fritters is applied in glorious rainbow colors, which gave Bipple the idea for his next question. Walking into the store briskly, he noted the baker, who was

wearing a tall, skinny purple hat with brass bells all around the edges. “What magnificent snoogle-fritters!” he exclaimed. “They remind me of the glorious colors of Wizard Fanghorn’s magic circus bats. ...Have you ever seen the bats?”

“Vy you come bozering me mit dese silly kvestion?” asked the baker, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “Never haff ve time for such nonsense! Here is vork, und vork, und only more vork! Now, you vant to buy a snoogle-fritter or two?,” he said, as he went back to kneading the dough for the snoogle fritters with his muscular arms. “Not really,” answered Bipple, “I hear they are terribly fattening!”

“Not mein snoogle-fritters, no siree!” said the baker angrily. “Ve haff here ze special low-cal ‘lite’ snoogle fritters, vat is veddy good for ze ladies who don’t vant to be FAT.” Bipple knew at once that the baker wasn’t the culprit, and, seeing that he was a irritable type, made a hasty retreat from the store. he trotted up the street to the next side street, and walked up it towards the candlestick maker’s store.

The alley he was in grew narrower and narrower, and the buildings closed in above him on either side until it became dark and gloomy, even though the sun was shining nicely outside. The walls of the buildings were damp, and Bipple saw a few rats scurrying about. He felt that perhaps he was getting to the bottom of the matter, since the area he was moving into looked like just the sort of place that devious bat-stealing criminal elements would hide out in!

Soon he came to a door with a beaten-up old sign that read, “Barton Gardle, Candlemaker, Snork trainer.” This alone made Bipple quite nervous, because Snorks are the most bad-tempered breed of watchdogs animals on Haj. Snorks look like bulldogs with an attitude problem, with big sharp teeth sticking out all over and large claws that always look like they are ready to rip you to shreds. They have powerful kangaroo like legs that allow them to jump many feet in the air, and they are as fast as lightning. Many people on Haj keep Snorks in their houses to guard against thieves. What is even worse, of course, is that Snorks like to eat marinated BATS more than just about any kind of food, which is one of the reasons they are able to jump so high. This is why Bipple was worried—he was afraid that the Magic Circus Bat Troupe was already being converted into Snork food.

Sensing that the only way to handle this potential problem was head on (in fact, dwarves don’t really know how to handle problems any other way, but that is beside the point), Bipple drew his dwarfsword—a fearsome sight even to Snorks, covered as it was in tiny razor sharp teeth, and glowing with that peculiar sword magic that dwarves impart to all their instruments of destruction—and hammered on the door with the heel of the sword, drawing the attention of several neighbors, who leaned out their windows to see what the racket was. When they saw this tan little dwarf on the street clutching a fiercely pointy sword, they drew their heads back in and slammed the shutters.

There was a response from deep within the house. “Who is it?” piped a thin, reedy voice.

“BAT POLICE!” announced Bipple, discarding all pretense of subtlety in favor of frontal assault. “OPEN THE DOOR AND SURRENDER!”

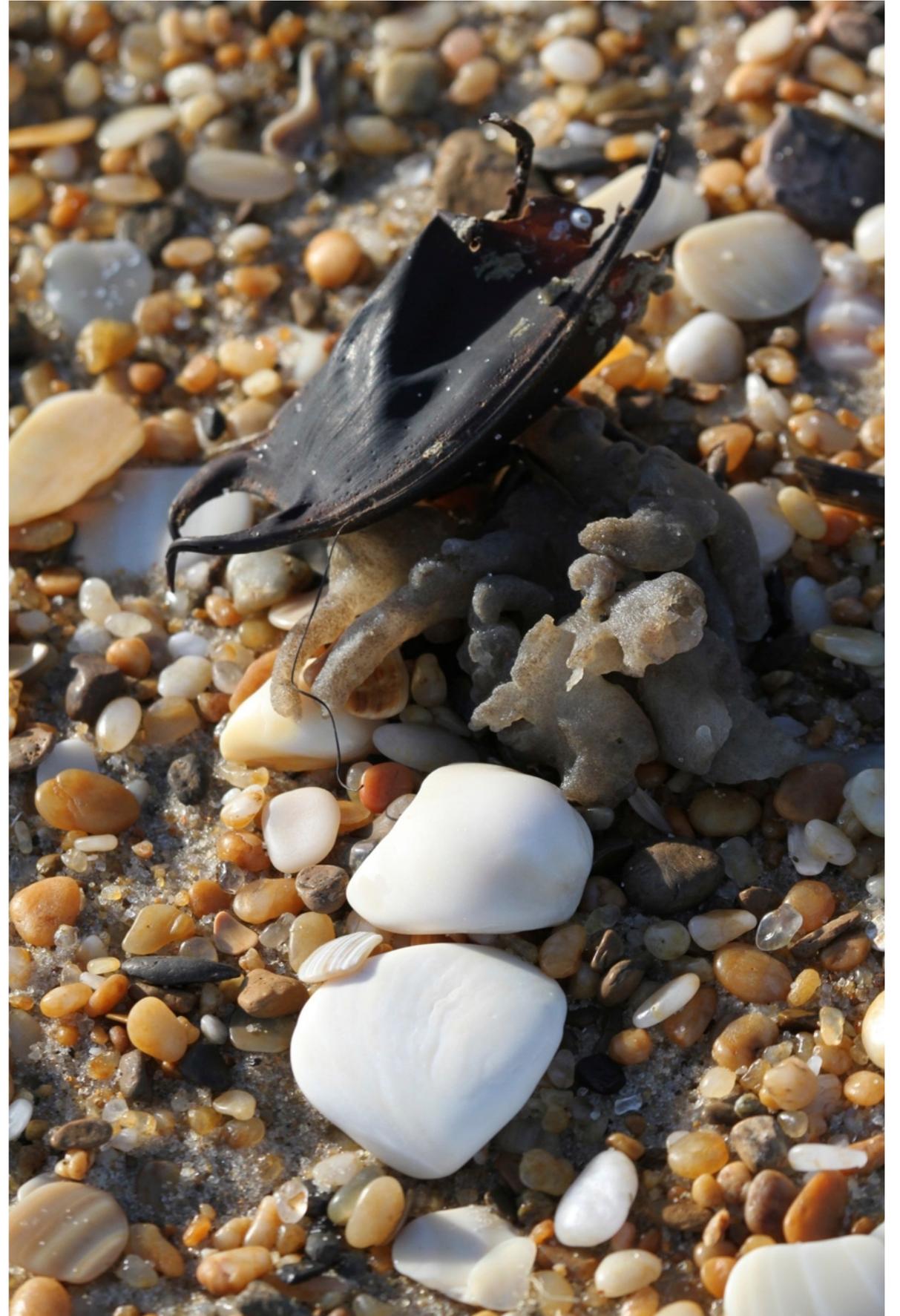
Bipple’s shout drew an immediate response from the house. A flurry of activity could be heard within, with Snorks barking and the flapping of many tiny wings against cages. The loud, squeaky voices of The Magic Circus Bat troupe rising above the ruckus inside were unmistakable. “OPEN IT UP!” screamed Bipple, who, losing his patience, decided to OPEN IT UP himself. He hove back and slammed into the door with his rather large dwarf foot, smacking it to the ground in one blow as though it didn’t exist. The interior was darkened, but he could make out the forms of several Snorks cowering against the back wall. Snorks are used to being on the attack, you see, not on the defensive, so this was a situation they had never been trained to handle. In the gloom the shadow of a man wearing a green hat moved about. Bipple cast a dwarf net into the room, snaring his whimpering adversary before further violence broke out. The Snorks, seeing their master captured, gave up their fight and lay on the ground sobbing quietly. Just in case you are wondering why Bipple had a net with him, it was because he liked to fish a lot. He got it mail order from Ell Ell Breen, the most famous sporting goods supplier on Haj.

“Gotcha!” announced Bipple in a theatrical voice. “Where are the bats?” The man on the floor pointed his shaking finger downwards. Bipple saw a trap door in the floor. The squeaks of the Magic Circus Bat Troupe floated up through it. He opened his pouch and activated the interdimensional connector Fanghorn had supplied him with. A small window appeared in the air directly in front of him, with Fanghorn’s face peering through it. “It was the candlestick maker,” said Bipple. “he’s a Snork trainer, too.”

“Ah, that explains almost everything!” said Fanghorn. “I’ll send help at once.” And within minutes, the local constabulary arrived to take control of the situation. Immediately upon grabbing the candlestick maker, they booked him for impersonating a green-hatted person, stealing bats, raising Snorks without a current license and resisting arrest. Bipple went downstairs and liberated the bats, who were all still alive, although several of them were already being marinated in a delicate mustard sauce in preparation for feeding them to the Snorks. The bats squeaked with joy upon their release.

The Snorks were sent to Snork reform school, where they learned not to indulge in their frightful habit of eating bats, and afterwards Fanghorn, who felt sorry for them, employed them as watchdogs at the circus where their most important job was—as you may have guessed—guarding the circus bats! The dogs and the bats actually became good friends, and everyone who saw them was amazed by the sight of the tiny, colorful bats snuggling up to their traditional natural enemy, Snorks.

The Miraculous Clam



Fanghorn loved to fly his magic carpet to the beach, where he often spent hours poking about in the tide pools, beachcombing and collecting various kinds of seaweed for use in his spells. One day, as he was walking along the sandy beaches beneath the famous fabulous florescent pink cliffs of Krodos, collecting clams for a nice clam chowder, he heard a tiny voice peeping at him just as he picked up a rather ordinary looking clam.

“Stop!” chirped the voice. “What?” exclaimed Fanghorn, astonished. “Let me go!” piped the voice, and now Fanghorn could see that it was coming from the small clam he held in his hands.

“Who are you?” he asked, not quite believing his ears.

“I am the miraculous clam!” said the clam in an indignant voice.

“Well, I can see that,” replied Fanghorn, “You are the only clam I have ever met that could talk!”

“That is not all I can do,” said the clam. “I am also able to perform a miraculous trick!”

“What trick might that be?” asked Fanghorn, who had seen his share of miraculous tricks in his time. He was a little worried that this trick might involve some unpleasant piece of magic.

“I can turn into a rainbow,” said the clam.

“Oh you can, can you?” replied Fanghorn. “Well, I would just like to see that!” Fanghorn, you should know, was very skeptical. As a magician, he knew of all kinds of fascinating tricks and spells, but the concept of a clam that could turn into a rainbow was a bit much for him to believe.

Imagine his astonishment when the clam opened up and the most incredible rainbow burst out of his shell, filling the entire sky! Fanghorn was so amazed he fell backwards into the sand and stared up at the marvelous sight above him.

“There, I told you so!” said the clam.

“That’s quite amazing “ said Fanghorn. “Just where did you learn to do this?”

“Actually, I am not a clam at all, but a creature from another planet many millions of light years away from here,” said the clam. “Our race is called the endocalculans, and my name is Primus. We simply have an outside appearance identical to that of your clam. Actually, we are hyperintelligent! Our spaceship crashed, and I was the only survivor. I have survived for many thousands of years here waiting for the right person to come along and rescue me.”

“Frankly, your story sounds a bit ridiculous to me,” said Fanghorn. “How could you walk around, and build or fly spaceships without any hands?”

“We are a symbiotic species,” said the clam. “We live in the heads of large, lumbering creatures called Yorts, who are

immensely stupid, but have hands and feet much like humans. When one of our seeds is planted in the Yort head, it grows into an endocalculan clam brain that provides the Yort with wisdom. Without us, Yorts are less intelligent than the average cow.”

“I see,” said Fanghorn. “What happened to your Yort?”

“Went down with the ship,” sighed the clam. “Alas, without a Yort we are no more than hyper-intelligent mollusks, unable to budge unless the tide moves us. It’s a terrible fate.”

“Well, as far as I can tell, we are fresh out of Yorts here on Haj,” said Fanghorn. “However, I do have an idea, if you are interested.”

“What might that be?” asked the clam.

“Well, I just happen to have a Circus Troupe,” explained Fanghorn, “and it strikes me that your ability to turn into a rainbow would add a spectacular effect to our act.”

“I think that sounds better than sitting here on the beach in this cold water,” said Primus. “Will there be good conversation?”

“The best. I am the most powerful Wizard on Haj, and know some of the most interesting and intelligent people on the planet,” said Fanghorn. “No doubt you will become a major attraction.”

And so it was, for Primus the clam became a feature as popular as the Magic Circus Bat Troupe, and, as it turned out, was one of the most intelligent and wisest clams around, which led him to become one of Fanghorn’s chief advisors. Bipple and Julio objected to Fanghorn’s using a clam for such serious matters, but Primus the clam was generally right about things, so even they were known to sneakily ask his advice from time to time.

Succulent Snickleberries



Botherday was the eleventh day of the week on Haj, where the week had twelve days:

Drumday

Blueday

Frenzyday

Burrday

Flyday

Splatterday

Funday

Crownday

Dishday

Gemday

Botherday

Frogday

Each day got its particular name from the main activity practiced on that day:

On Drumday, everyone played dronga drums in the evening until they were exhausted.

On Blueday, everything blue was washed. This was a law. After that, everyone listened to blues albums, and then painted something blue.

On Frenzyday, everyone ran about like crazy trying to get all the things they didn't have time to do on Blueday done.

On Burrday, everyone brushed their hair very, very thoroughly to get rid of any burrs they might have picked up.

On Flyday, Hajians strapped on wings and buzzed about the yard pretending they were birds. It looked incredibly stupid, but everyone had to do it, even the king, so they all looked foolish together, which took some of the sting out of it.

On Splatterday, all families had food fights. This despicable and unsanitary habit was the subject of great debates in the Hajian legislature, where half of Parliament (the neatniks) felt Splatterday should be banned, and the other half (the preservatives) felt it should be mandatory. Many Hajians no longer observed Splatterday for strictly practical reasons—too much cleaning up.

On Funday, everyone took the day off and played.

On Crownday, King Vondermeer held special audiences where his subjects could speak to him personally. These were rather long days for the king.

On Dishday, all the dishes from the week were washed. Families on Haj piled their dirty dishes up in the sink all week

until Dishday. Most children were very hard to find on this day.

On Gemday, everyone wore their best jewelry.

On Botherday, after such a busy week, no one could be bothered to do much of anything.

On Frogday, everyone wore frogman suits to dinner.

Now, to us, the arrangement of the days of the week and the things that were done on them certainly seems quite silly, but you must remember that Haj is another planet, and things are just a little different there! We must have respect for their peculiar customs. They would find us very odd if they knew about us. For example, the idea of baseball—hitting a little white ball with a stick and then running around like a madman—would seem absolutely insane to Hajians, even though Fanghorn (who was, it must be admitted, quite odd to begin with) found it fascinating. He, Julio, and Bipple watched a great deal of it through the dimensional doorway.

Anyway, Botherday was the day that Rosemary always held the big family dinner. She would shut herself in the kitchen with the kitchen workers all day long, and banging noises, chopping noises, swishes and bubbling sounds would be heard. Delicious smells would float through the castle. Everyone gathered at the table punctually at six o'clock, whereupon fabulous dishes were brought to the table: baked king worm, sauteed featherpenny bush flowers, holistic ballistic peapod rockets (careful when you eat them!), and roasted

duckk. We must explain that the word duckk was spelled with two K's on Haj, simply because on Haj duckks have three webbed feet! And that was just the appetizers! Then came steamed Buzzberries (they buzz in your mouth when you eat 'em), stir fried catfish whiskers, jellyfish souffle', Moldibnian frog's legs, and (if the hunting had been exceptionally good!) Zaardles in gravy.

Zaardles (I knew you were going to ask!) are the most delicious animal found on any planet, but they are very, very fast and sneaky; they have wings, and sharp little nipper feets all over their bodies, and there is almost no chance of ever catching one unless you just happen to be a wizard and can disguise yourself as a Duselport tree. Zaardles just love Duselports, you see, and when they land on you you can grab 'em carefully by their many feet before they get away. This takes a lot of patience and time, something that only wizards have in abundance.

Zaardle hunting is generally a pastime engaged in exclusively by males, who gather together in small groups, announce to their wives that they are going Zaardle hunting, and disappear into the woods for days on end drinking. They rarely bring back Zaardles. Wives generally frown on Zaardle hunting, but in Fanghorn's case the excuse was believable, since he usually caught Zaardles pretty easily. Fanghorn never told anyone, but he actually CHEATED just a bit and used magic to catch them—most unsportsmanlike, but then again, Zaardles are so delicious, he felt it could be excused. Besides, so many people had talked for so long about how good a

Zaardle hunter he was that it would now be too embarrassing to admit to the truth.

In any event, after the Zaardles were served the whole table indulged in a glass of raspberry wine and then a huge assortment of raspberry cakes, mousses, tortes, pies, cookies, soups, teas and shaving creams were served for desert, all made from the famous raspberry patches around the castle which gave Castle Veryberry its most peculiar name.

It was common for Rosemary and Fanghorn to invite other wizards and their wives for Botherday dinner. Now, although Rosemary was in general a kind, gentle and almost perfect soul, she was just a teeny bit vain about her fabulous cooking skills. To do her justice, she was, in fact, one terrific cook, but she tended to think just a bit too highly of herself when it came to this—it was the one flaw in an otherwise flawless personality. Fanghorn loved her all the more for it. Cooking fabulous meals on Botherday was a point of pride for her, and she just couldn't bear to be outdone by another Wizard's wife in this area. As a result, she spent an inordinate amount of time studying in gourmet magazines, some even magically retrieved from other worlds for her by Fanghorn, and she spent a lot of time in the kitchen experimenting. On this particular Botherday, in addition to the usual dinner crowd—Ta' Cha, Bipple, Julio, Primus the Miraculous Clam and the Unspeakable Cat—she had invited Wizard Flone and his wife for dinner. Magic Circus Bats were NOT allowed at the dinner table!

Perhaps we should explain the Unspeakable Cat. The Unspeakable Cat was a small Siamese cat from Earth, who belonged to Princess Rosemary, and would not have anything to do with anyone else in the castle. The Unspeakable Cat spoke Hajian quite well, but because of her Major Attitude Problem (M.A.P.) which is typical to most cats, she rarely spoke to anyone; she just stalked about the castle looking smug and superior. The rest of the castle inhabitants found her attitude most annoying, but she was Rosemary's "Precious Darling", and so they were all reduced to simply making sarcastic remarks behind the Unspeakable Cat's back.

To get back to our story, Flone was quite an important Wizard, so Rosemary was anxious to impress his wife Queenie, who was a slightly fat but attractive noblewoman from one of the larger towns in Haj. Queenie had a reputation for putting on elaborate dinner spreads for guests, too, but she did it with the assistance of a huge staff of skilled chefs hired from all over the Kingdom, not from scratch by herself like Rosemary. Early during the meal, Queenie had already upset Rosemary when she mistook Primus the clam for an Hors d'oeuvre and tried to stick a fork in him. Her story about mistaking him for an Hors D'oeuvre was a little hard to believe, since she had been conversing with Primus earlier. Bipple later said she was miffed at Primus for knowing more about Aldebarnian cooking than she did. Aldebarnians cook a lot of clams, which made an intimate knowledge of their cooking habits a survival issue, from Primus's point of view. It was only Julio's swift intervention that prevented Primus from nip-

ping several of her fingers off. “Strictly a reflex defensive action, said Primus later, although everyone agreed it would have served her right to lose a finger or two.

“FABULOUS dinner, sighed Queenie as she slurped the last bit of raspberry heavenly delight from a crystal dish, “ALMOST as good as my own meals!” Rosemary glared at her from across the table, but Fanghorn kicked her in the ankle before any words came out. Rosemary immediately glared at her husband, and then adopted a wicked smile. “Why, how NICE of you to say so, Queenie!” she said. “What did you think of the Zaardle?” She thought she had Queenie there, since Queenie had never, to Rosemary’s knowledge, served Zaardle before.

“It was quite good, you know, but I do believe it would have been BETTER if it had been smothered in Succulent Snickleberries, said Queenie.

“Succulent Snickleberries?” asked Rosemary, with a puzzled expression. “What are Snickleberries?”

“Why my DEAR, surely EVERYONE’S heard of SNICKLEBERRIES,” Queenie replied. This really got Rosemary upset, since it was clear from Fanghorn, Flone and even Primus and Julio’s expressions that NOBODY had ever heard of Snickleberries before. Bipple coughed nervously into his napkin, sensing trouble. Volcano Rosemary was about to explode when the Unspeakable Cat suddenly leaped from her chair towards the kitchen, chasing a fat mouse that had had enough crumbs from under the table and decided to make a break for it—a fa-

tal mistake. The Unspeakable Cat was as deadly as a Ninja when it came to catching mice. Unfortunately, in her haste to lay waste to the mouse, the Unspeakable Cat kicked over her entire glass of chocolate stainberry sauce right into Queenie’s lap. It looked like an accident, but Julio, for once in his life on the cat’s side, happily reported later that the Unspeakable Cat had aimed a kick at the glass. Knowing how nimble the Cat was, Fanghorn had to believe him.

Whatever the case, Queenie burst from her chair like a blown gasket. They aren’t called stainberries for nothing! “My DRESS!” she shrieked. “Ruined! By that Unspeakable Cat!” Flone immediately kerzapped the dress with a cleaning spell, but, in one of those peculiar twists of the universe, stainberry sauce doesn’t respond well to magic of any kind. The dress truly was ruined. Ignoring Primus’s rather wet sounding snickering, Queenie and Flone excused themselves, with Fanghorn and Rosemary following them all the way to the door with profuse apologies. It was too late, however; the evening had been ruined for everyone, although it was fair to say it had really been Queenie’s fault. “You MUST stop behaving like that!” said the Wizard Flone when they got into the driveway and prepared to start the flying carpet. “Fanghorn is a good friend of mine, and we just can’t sit by every time we have dinner watching you and Rosemary bicker about who has the best kitchen and the best cooking! Besides, that business about Snickleberries is inexcusable! You know there are no such things!”

“I know, said Queenie miserably, “but I just couldn’t STAND the way she served that Zaardle up! I was green with envy! I just had to find a way to get even!” Queenie actually felt badly now, because she was, on the whole, a decent sort and didn’t usually cause trouble of this kind. “Besides, she continued, “that clam really made me mad! Imagine, a know-it-all clam with a superior attitude like that!”

“But, my dear, he was a hyper-intelligent clam!” replied Flone. “In fact, he DID know it all!”

“I know!” said an even more miserable Queenie. “That’s what made me so mad to begin with!”

“Just because a clam makes you mad, doesn’t mean you spear him, said Flone sternly. With that, they both hopped onto the carpet and whisked off into the night.

Back in the castle, Rosemary was in a Tizzie with a capital T. “Find me the cookbooks! Break out the dictionary! Get down the encyclopedia! Boot the computer! Torture the prisoners!” she demanded. “GET ME THE LOWDOWN ON SNICKLE-BERRIES!”

“My dear,” said Fanghorn in what he hoped was a soothing, calm voice, “We don’t HAVE any prisoners. Besides, I simply don’t think there are such things as Snickleberries!”

“YES THERE ARE!” snarled Rosemary in a manner that suggested arguing with her would be a very bad idea. Her

teeth looked long, pointy and sharper than usual as she bared them. “I just know that witch found them in one of those obscure ancient cookbooks her husband keeps around her castle! He’s always poking about in them for her! YOU never poke about in YOUR books for me like that! If you did, we might KNOW what Snickleberries are!”

Fanghorn could see that Rosemary had, in fact, allowed the events of the evening to unbalance her a bit. As he glanced out the window, with a feeling of dread, he suddenly realized why. It was a full moon.

Rosemary, you see, had a very particular problem—a leftover effect of the spell cast on her ten thousand years ago, long before Fanghorn unfroze her from the elfin ice caves. She became a Were-Princess on the night of the full moon. Under ordinary circumstances, full moons did not affect her, but—if she should ever become angry on the night of the full moon, saints preserve us! She would grow long pointy teeth. Her anger would know no bounds. She might stay in a rage for a month unless a cure were found, and, in this case, Fanghorn realized that the only cure would be Snickleberries—real Snickleberries. Only the real thing could break the spell—even, paradoxically, if there were no such things. You figure that one out! The only thing for it was to discover real Snickleberries!

Sensing impending disaster, Fanghorn excused himself to the topmost tower of the castle in his private laboratory, where, from a distance, candles could still be seen burning late into the night, long after Rosemary had stomped off to

bed in a snit. The only one accompanying her was the Un-speakable Cat, and even she was beginning to look as though this whole thing might prove a bit too much for her.

Early the next morning, before the were-Rosemary emerged from her bedroom, Fanghorn and the rest of the castle held an emergency meeting in the kitchen. They spoke in hushed voices to prevent Rosemary from hearing them.

Fanghorn opened the meeting. “Were-princess, he announced in grave tones. The rest of the crew nodded in solemn agreement. “She needs Snickleberries, he continued, “or it’s going to be hell here until the next full moon.”

“Fanghorn,” said Bipple, clearing his throat, “there are no such things as Snickleberries. Primus himself says so.”

“True, chimed in Primus. “Having absorbed the entire contents of the Hajian library, which probably contains all the knowledge of Haj in the world, I must unfortunately report that no mention of Snickleberries exists. There are however snorkleberries, sniegelberries, and shuckleberries.”

“Well, we were all wrong, said Fanghorn. “There are Snickleberries. I found them in my copy of “Ancient Mysteries of Haj” last night at 3 a.m.”

“That book’s not IN the library, said Primus, miffed.

“No, it isn’t. I have the only copy, my dear friend Primus, but the fifteenth Mystery of Haj involves the lost hairpin of

the needle people, and in it there is a mention of the Snickleberry gardens of Yole.”

“Great! Let’s just bop over there and pick a patch of Snickleberries!” said Julio sarcastically, knowing—elves can always sense danger, remember?—that this was about to turn into another one of those QUESTS where dragons chase you and horrible death awaits at every turn.

“Well, we might just be in luck,” said Fanghorn. “It turns out—as incredible as it sounds—that the Gardens of Yole were situated right on the very spot where we are now sitting.”

“All RIGHT!” whooped Julio, “I just KNEW I had to get lucky sooner or later!”

“Shaddup!” hissed Primus. “You’ll wake up Rosemary!”

“Our problems are not over yet,” continued Fanghorn. “The gardens were here, but that was three thousand years ago. There is surely nothing left of them now. Furthermore, no one knows what Snickleberries look like. The only way to find out...”

“Is to go back in time!” interrupted Bipple. Bipple just LOVED to go back in time. Julio, on the other hand, who hated it, gave a loud groan. Primus shushed him again.

“That’s right,” said Fanghorn. “we’ll have to go at once. If we calculate correctly and end up in the right time, we will be able to walk through the gardens, ascertain which berries are

Snickleberries, grab a handful, and whoosh back to our own time in time for breakfast.”

“Great! I’ll volunteer!” said Bipple.

“No, I think I’d better take Julio this time,” said Fanghorn.

“Typical Wizard, wasting a perfectly good volunteer!” grumbled Julio, scowling.

“Elves are less obtrusive in these time-travel situations,” replied Fanghorn. “They can blend in with the scenery more easily.” This was in fact true. Elves are quite good at hiding, since they can change their skin color at will. Primus, you too will come. I need a brilliant deductive mind with me to help identify Snickleberries correctly!”

“Oh, I’m thrilled!—NOT!” said Julio, but Fanghorn wasn’t kidding this time. Obviously his concern for Rosemary had him upset enough to throw ordinary caution to the winds. He drew his wand out of the folds of his robe and a glowing light emerged, surrounding Julio, Primus and Fanghorn like a cloud. “Pickle, stipple, hoar and grime, take this party back in time!” chanted Fanghorn. The air around them shimmered like it does in a cheap science fiction movie, but that’s how it really, really looks in time travel.

“See you later, guys,” said Julio in his sulkiest tone of voice as they disappeared.

Moments later, the trio materialized in the midst of a Raspberry patch. Thorns stuck all over them. “OUCH,” said Julio. Primus, being covered in a hard shell, was fine. Fanghorn was too distracted to notice. “Wow! Far out!” he exclaimed in a most unwizardly manner. Fanghorn, Bipple and Julio had been logging a lot of overtime watching earth TV through the dimensional doorway, and it was showing. “Check out the landscape! It’s hardly changed at all!” It was true; the mountains around the site looked the same. There was steam coming up out of holes in the ground. This indicated that the Dragon that heated the castle was already buried here under the earth somewhere. “Cool!” said Julio. He too, was picking up very bad language habits from all the earth videos.

Right in front of the group was a sign painted on a wood board. It was planted firmly in the ground in front of a patch of bushes with bright red berries all over them. The sign was in an ancient language—so old, in fact, that even Fanghorn didn’t recognize it. “Derdle-fajvuh-kajvocal-try-ugh-foh,” read Julio.

“Yore Gardens—Snickleberries—help yourself, all you can carry, free!” translated Primus.

“How do you know it says that?” said Julio.

“Simple,” said Primus. It’s written in Noxopool, a language spoken three thousand years ago—that is, today—by the tribes of this area. I learned it while absorbing the contents of the library in Haj.”

“Jeez!” said Julio. You really must have absorbed the entire library!”

“Indeed,” sniffed Primus.

“Well, there’s no need to fiddle about!” announced Fanghorn. “Let’s pick and be on our way!” They picked up a wooden basket from the stack next to the sign and in no time at all fat, succulent red berries were plopping into the basket. After a few minutes, Julio decided to try one. He popped it into his mouth and immediately spat it out. “Bleagh!” he shouted. “these things are—well, they taste DISGUSTING!”

“Hmm,” said Fanghorn. “That’s interesting. I wonder why?” Just then, an old man appeared from behind the bushes, shuffling along and picking berries to put in his bucket. “Spioc Vordell,” said Primus, “Farfell huffnot ghotillsifarg?” “Cofftern Migstrail!” replied the man. “Jobnex Luffwexner, Agnob bontellernit.” “Hegneff,” said Primus. They continued on in the same gibberish for several minutes, until Primus seemed satisfied.

“Well?” asked Fanghorn.

“He says, of course they taste disgusting,” answered Primus. “Apparently, snickleberries are famous for their horrible, horrible taste. They are, however, most nourishing. They are used to punish criminals—the diet in jails in these times is exclusively Snickleberries.”

“That explains the reference in the Mysteries of Haj,” mused Fanghorn.

“Why, what’s the reference?” asked Julio.

“Well, they are mentioned in a sentence that says, “may you be cursed forever, and eat only of fruit of the succulent snickleberry gardens of Yore!”

“I see,” said Julio. “In fact, now that I think about it, these would make an excellent dish to serve to Wizard Flone’s wife!”

“Now, now, Julio,” admonished Fanghorn “Let’s not be vindictive.” The team finished filling their bucket and Fanghorn whisked them back to their own time. Fanghorn immediately presented a plateful of the berries to Rosemary.

“Ha!” she exclaimed. “I KNEW there would be snickleberries somewhere!” She grabbed a handful of them and stuffed them into her mouth before an alarmed Fanghorn could stop her. The shock of the taste was so great that Rosemary underwent an abrupt and violent transition out of her were-princess phase. There was a loud bang and a puff of smoke as the were-energy depressurized on release from her body, and she collapsed on the floor, miserable. “Yeech,” she said. Get this awful taste out of my mouth.” Bipple, ever the faithful servant, rushed to her side with a glass of raspberry mouthwash.

“If that was what snickleberries taste like, it’s no wonder they were forgotten,” said Rosemary. “People wanted to forget them! In fact, I can’t think of anything more repulsive!”

“Indeed, my dear,” Fanghorn replied. “Well, in any event, we’ve brought a goodly supply back for you. What shall we do with them?”

“Just give them here,” said Rosemary, “and never you mind what I do with them.” She snatched up the bushel basket and stalked off into the kitchen.

Nothing more was seen of the snickleberries, and the subject was dropped for quite some time. It wasn’t until the next visit of the wizard Flone and his wife that Fanghorn thought about them, and he thought Rosemary might mention them. However, not a word was said, and the warm food in his tummy and the unusually friendly conversation made him forget all about the subject. Fanghorn would later have cause to regret the fact that he didn’t look more closely at the contents of the basket of preserves Rosemary gave Queenie on her way out the door that night. If he had, he might have noticed the jar labeled “Finest Succulent Snickleberries,” and a lot of aggravation could have been avoided. Fanghorn just hated aggravation.

The Dragon Problem



Life at the Castle Veryberry continued at a relaxed pace through the winter, which was fine with all concerned after the uproar of the past few months. Snow filled the valleys around the castle, and the skiers who routinely come up from the villages in the bottom lands of Haj covered the slopes in their zipping, colorful ski outfits.

It was one of the coldest winters on record, and even the wolves had come down out of the hills to beg for food. Rosemary took pity on them and fed them with table scraps, despite the disapproval of Julio and Bipple, both of whom claimed they recognized some of these wolves as part of a pack that had mistaken them as table scraps a few years back. Fanghorn tried to stay out of the argument, as he detested domestic squabbles of this kind, preferring to fiddle about with spells in the tower. In any event, on day Bipple, in what he later insisted was an accident, chopped off the tails of several of the pack with his ax “while chopping wood,” even though the woodpile was on the other side of the castle. After that, the wolves decided to beg elsewhere.

The winter, long and cold as it was, eventually started to give way to spring, and with it the stirrings of the first animals to emerge from hibernation.

Including dragons.

It was in the month of Marchamay that Fanghorn first learned, from a small wyvern who owed him a favor or two, that the dragons had not, in fact, forgotten that a Wizard had laid their most sacred burial ground to waste. According to

the wyvern, the dragons had narrowed their list of possible culprits down to only one name—and that name was, unfortunately, Fanghorn. According to the wyvern, the dragon council had assigned two of the largest, most unpleasant dragons in Haj to the task of incinerating Fanghorn. The only thing holding them up was their fear of the wand. Every dragon at the council was enthusiastic about the idea of frying Fanghorn to a cinder, but, seeing what he had done to the graveyard, the dragons weren't in any particular hurry to tangle with him. Finally, however, the council had forced the issue as a matter of honor by assigning two members to the case and telling them not to come back until they had eliminated Fanghorn.

After hearing this, Fanghorn deemed it prudent to set out on another long vacation. It might have been worthwhile to hang around for a while, just to find out who had ratted him out to the dragonfolk, but, all in all, he decided this could wait. A swift departure seemed more sensible. The idea of leaving again met with protest from other castle members, who felt they had only just come back from the last one, but when Fanghorn pointed out that one of the likely possible alternatives was to be fried to a crisp by dragons, a flurry of activity took place, and within an hour the entire staff of the castle was assembled at the door, anxiously waiting for Fanghorn, who was not quite as prepared as they for departure, despite the fact that it had been his idea in the first place.

Rosemary was standing next to one hundred and thirty six suitcases. She always kept many suitcases packed and ready, just to be on the safe side. “Fanghorn,” she said in a

practical voice, “sooner or later you are simply going to have to do something about this Dragon Problem. It isn’t going to go away, and we can’t live on vacation forever!”

“True, my dear, but just as of yet I haven’t figured out just what to do about it,” replied Fanghorn. “Dragon Problems of this nature are, well...Problems.”

“What, the great Fanghorn not sure of what to do?” said Julio, but a dirty look from Fanghorn shut him up abruptly.

“I’ll think of something!” he announced. “I guess fleeing on vacation might be a bit cowardly, after all.” He stalked off up the four hundred and thirty three steps to his towers, leaving the rest of the castle members grumbling at the prospect of having to unpack all those darned bags.

Fanghorn sulked in his tower for three days and three nights. It was difficult to sleep soundly; he couldn’t stop thinking about the Dragon Problem. There just didn’t seem to be any way around it, and it seemed useless to try to explain to dragons—a particularly unsympathetic lot—that he hadn’t really meant to destroy their burial ground. No, this called for more drastic measures. Unless Fanghorn could come up with a very convincing reason for the dragons as to why they shouldn’t fry him to a crisp, he would either have to invest in a large wardrobe of thick asbestos underwear or vacate the Kingdom of Haj permanently.

Fanghorn decided to apply himself to discovering a means whereby he might do the dragons such a great favor

that they might forgive him. This didn’t really seem that unreasonable to him—after all, dragons were really an unlikable lot and no one really did them any favors at all, unless you can call choosing to not chase them down and run them through with lances a favor. With this in mind, he went into his closet and recovered from its dark depths a dust covered, leather-bound ancient volume. Engraved on its cracked cover was, of course, the title “Mysteries of Haj.”

This book had been written several hundred years ago by one of Haj’s greatest Wizards, Pnafulax—himself a mystery, since he disappeared entirely one summer morning while taking a steamy bath and was never seen again. Before he evaporated, he had completed one volume of his investigation into all the greatest myths and legends of Haj. It was Fanghorn’s good fortune to have come into possession of the only existing copy. The book had an extensive index, and it was here that Fanghorn turned first, in search of references to dragons. As it happened, the entries regarding dragons were too numerous to mention. Fanghorn turned at random to one of the chapters on dragon lore. “The Dragon Throne,” he murmured to himself, and began to read the tale. It went something like this:

“Many hundreds of years ago, the king of the dragons was known as Chon-Zul. Chon-Zul was the most powerful dragon king ever to rule—his enormous size and the intense heat of his flame are legendary even to this day. He ruled the domain of the dragons from the caves beneath Baral—Dur, surrounded by a cohort of his most loyal subjects. The whereabouts of Baral-Dur are unknown to us today, but we do know

that it lay under a large mountain somewhere in the northern part of Haj. There, in caves of quartz that glittered like diamond, the dragons hoarded their gold and jewels in huge mounds, plotting their raids on the surrounding countryside while gnawing on the bones of their unfortunate victims. The single most spectacular treasure in their lair was the Dragon Throne, a huge gold chair designed to hold the immense bulk of a dragon such as Chon-Zul. The throne had been in the possession of the dragon clans for several thousand years, passed down from generation to generation. It was considered the duty of each dragon King to add a precious gem to the decorations on the throne, so over the centuries it became ever more spectacular. Each dragon king felt it necessary to add a more fabulous jewel than the previous king, so the task became ever more difficult. By the time Chon-Zul became king, it was next to impossible to outdo the decorations already on the throne. Nevertheless, Chon-Zul was determined to try. He searched far and wide for the right gem, but gems the size of pigeon's eggs were very difficult to come by. This was because most of them were already in the Dragon Throne. This problem did not trouble Chon-Zul when he was a young and nimble dragon. He flew about the countryside burning down farms and happily kidnapping virgins without a thought for the future. There would always be time later, he reasoned, to find just the right gem for the throne. It was only as he grew older and settled down that he discovered what a serious problem he had on his hands. Every time he went out on a mission to pillage and plunder the richest castles on Haj, and came back with what he thought would be a dandy gem, it turned out to

be too darn small. Chon-Zul became ever more desperate. It seemed he would never find a nice fat, juicy gem for the throne.

Then, one day, as he was lying about his throne room lazily picking his teeth with the shin bones of his latest victim—a lord of Haj who had carelessly taken a walk without applying his dragon repellent—he chanced to notice an article in the local paper about a huge, fabulous gem. Now, you might think that dragons don't read papers, and in most cases you would be right, but Chon-Zul was a very intellectual sort of dragon who prided himself on his knowledge of everything from the latest in Trapezio-nuclear magic to schnock-ball statistics. Schnock-ball is a Haj sport a lot like bowling, except that you roll a pin down a long lane at a stack of balls.) Anyway, the point here is that the gem described in the article was just amazing! “See the incredible Foolsfire crystal! Size of a Football! Probably brought here by aliens! Exhibition Flyday PM.” read the headlines. A fine Foolsfire gem sounded just fine to Chon-Zul. He immediately made plans to arrive at the exhibition unannounced and snatch it for his throne. What he did not know that the whole ad was a trap. Several enterprising wizards who had heard of Chon-Zul's dilemma had hatched a daring plan. They ran the ad knowing that Chon-Zul would not be able to resist, knowing that he would definitely NOT be in his cave that Flyday afternoon. Their objective was to get in and steal the VERY THRONE ITSELF! Dastardly? Yes, but these were two quite powerful wizards, and their interest in the throne lay not in the immense wealth of the gems

contained in it, but in one particular not-too-impressive looking gem in the lower front left leg of the throne. Milky white in appearance, it was a healing gem that, when combined with the correct wand, could heal all manner of diseases. The wizards knew that if they could recover this gem, they might be able to halt the spread of a terrible plague that had stricken the people of their valley. It threatened to spread over all of Haj unless stopped.

The problem was that all the gems on the throne were attached with dragon-spit, which is stronger and very much more disgusting than any epoxy. Removing the gem without damaging it would take several days, and there would be no time to do it in the dragon's cave. They planned to use the dust of return to spirit the throne away temporarily—just for a day or two—and remove the gem, after which they would send it back using more of the same dust. They knew that stealing the throne was going to have the most dire consequences, especially for the thieves, should they be caught. Their main fear was that Chon-Zul, upon discovering the theft, would fly into a rage and fly out to burn countless miles of countryside to a crisp. This might end up being worse than the plague itself.

On the appointed Flyday, Chon-Zul flew off to the exhibition, counting on a easy time of it stealing this gem. After all, he was a huge, fire-breathing dragon, and unless there happened to be wizards in the area, he reasoned, there wasn't much that could stop him from getting what he wanted. As he flew from his cave, the two wizards—Sniffle and Piffle were

their names—crept in and made their way down through the tunnels to the treasure room.

Now, as he always did, Chon-Zul had left two of his most loyal dragons in charge of guarding the throne, but these two were, like many dragons, quite lazy, and no sooner had Chon-Zul left the cave than they settled down for a nice, long nap. There wasn't much to worry about—what kind of fool would try to sneak into a dragon's cave, anyway? Thus, Sniffle and Piffle easily made their way to the cave where the throne lay, and found the watch-dragons fast asleep.

Now, you should know that dragons sleep very, very soundly. It is almost impossible to wake them up, which is one of the dragons species' greatest weaknesses. There are many bold tales of knights doing battle with dragons and spearing them with lances, but the fact is that no knight with a lance would ever stand a chance against a dragon that was awake. He'd be toast in no time. Even a wizardly charm would at best even the odds, and knights don't like even odds in matters like this. When it comes to a choice between victory and becoming steel-plated shishkebab, they like a sure thing. It's never spoken about in public, but Knights all know full well that the only way to kill a dragon is to find him asleep. You could tap dance on his nose at that point and he wouldn't budge. That's the moment at which you stroll right up to him in that clanky, noisy armor and spear him right through the eye. It has to be the left eye, because that's the only place where they are vulnerable. If you spear them through the right eye, well—dragons do sleep very, very soundly, but being speared through the

eye does tend to wake them quickly, and in a very bad mood, at that. So, assuming you have chosen the correct eye and killed your dragon properly, you scuff up your armor, apply some charcoal to your face (you always need some burn effects) and emerge from the cave with a wild tale about the fierce battle you just went through. This practically guarantees that the fair maidens will swoon around you, and you get your pick of the lot of them.

Of course, Sniffle and Piffle had no intention of killing the watch dragons, but Piffle couldn't resist having a bit of fun. He pulled a can of something out of his robes.

"What's that?" said Sniffle.

"Spray paint," said Piffle, grinning.

"SPRAY PAINT?" said Sniffle. "What kind of tomfoolery is this? What do you need spray paint for?"

"Watch," said Piffle, and, strolling up to one of the watch dragons, he pointed the can and began to spray words on its side in large capital letters. "DRAGON THRONE TEMPORARILY OUT FOR REPAIRS," he sprayed, "WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE."

"There!" announced Piffle. "That should do nicely!"

"Very amusing," sniffed Sniffle. "Let's get on with the business at hand." They walked over to the throne, which was enormous. It towered over both of them, truly a sight to behold. The seat of the throne must have been three feet over

the wizard's heads. It was entirely constructed of gold, worked into the most elaborate detail, with scenes of dragons burning villages, toasting knights, stealing jewels and gobbling up fair maidens—all the things dragons like best. Embedded into the throne were so many gemstones that it appeared to be diseased. It was slathered in colorful pimples that glittered in the dim light thrown by the torches on the sides of the cave. The wizards paused for a moment in awe. After they recovered, they cast spells to prepare the dust they would need to return the Throne to the cave after they were done. Then they swiftly moved to either side of the throne, tossing the dust of return into the air, and made a very clean getaway. Not a trace of the wizards or the throne remained. The watch dragons slept on in peace.

Chon-Zul returned to his cave that afternoon frustrated, for the gem he wished to purloin was, he had established, a fake. Dragons are very good at identifying fakes. Their keen eyesight picks up on a false jewel from miles away. Chon-Zul was, in fact, disgusted. There seemed to be no hope of finding a suitable gem for the throne. He burst into the throne room in a foul mood, and spied his watch dragons quite asleep on the floor, but, more importantly, he immediately noticed that the dais the throne belonged on was empty. Then he spied the words spray painted on the side of his watch-dragon.

"WHERE'S THE THRONE?" he screamed in a fit of rage. The watch dragons woke up and sprang to their feet in alarm. In moments, alarm bells rang all over the dragon kingdom. The scene of panic can hardly be described, with dragon

chiefs and sub-chiefs and wyverns and dragonlets scurrying about in confusion, searching high and low for the throne—but all to no avail.

Chon-Zul served the two unfortunate watch dragons, barbecued, as refreshments for the search teams that evening, after an exhausting investigation of every nook and cranny for miles. The dragon king sent messengers all over the kingdom to gather information on who had committed this terrible crime. In addition, he decided to extract revenge. Knowing that only wizards could have been responsible, he let it be known that he would burn a village every day until the culprits presented themselves. Soon, blasts of flame were leveling villages all over the kingdom. It wasn't long before Twifkin, a dwarf who had been involved in planning the theft (he showed Sniffle & Piffle the route down into the caves) felt terrified enough by the results of the theft to call Chon-Zul anonymously on the wizard hotline. He let him know who had stolen the throne. Chon-Zul himself immediately flew out to Sniffle & Piffle's castle, hoping for information as to where they had gone.

Sniffle and Piffle were oblivious to all this, because they had spirited the Throne away to a particularly remote site, and were having the devil of a time separating the healing gem from its setting. The dragon spit was a lot stickier than they thought it might be. Eventually—after a week of work—they did get it off the throne, but only moments after they succeeded an eagle in their employ arrived to advise them that Chon-Zul had located their castle, tortured a servant into re-

vealing where they had gone, and was at that moment speeding on his way to rub them out. Sniffle and Piffle, horrified by the news, made immediate preparations to return the throne by using the dust of return they had prepared in the dragon's cave, but it was at that precise moment that fate intervened in the form of an enormous earthquake. The earthquake was the largest in the history of Haj. Had it not occurred in such a remote area, far from any city, millions might have died. As it was, the cave that Sniffle and Piffle were in collapsed, crushing both wizards into wizard paste. The throne, which was made of more durable stuff, wasn't badly damaged, but it was sealed under millions of tons of solid rock, and all traces of the entrance to the cave were obliterated. Chon-zul, in the air over the mountain range, saw it all: a huge shaking covered the land, trees began to topple, and clouds of dust rose from the earth as though it was on fire. The entire mountain range seemed to sag, and then settled into the ground. Suddenly, there were valleys where there had been mountains. He knew immediately what had occurred, but there was no way to stop it. He realized with a wail of anguish that the throne had been lost forever, and, in a terrible fit of rage, he lost control of himself and burst into flames in a terrible explosion. It left an enormous crater beneath him in the spot where he blew up. No one knew where Chon-Zul had died, for he had told no one where he was going before he left. As a result, no one in the dragon kingdom had the faintest idea of what had happened to the throne. The complete and utter disappearance of both Chon-Zul and the throne became one of the greatest mysteries of Haj. For hundreds years afterwards, what few villagers there

were in the area where these tragic events took place believed that a huge meteorite had landed there. The area was known as the Khelzhian wastelands, for nothing, not even a blade of grass, would grow where Chon-Zul had gone up in a ball of fire. As for the throne and the bones of those unfortunate wizards Sniffle and Piffle, they still lie entombed beneath the rock where the earthquake caught them. “

Here the text of the tale ended. Fanghorn was elated. This was perfect! If he could recover the Dragon Throne, it would certainly more than make up for the destruction of the Dragon Graveyard! He immediately resolved to set out and recover the throne. After all, as the most powerful wizard in Haj, there had to be some way he could find it!

Emerging from the tower, Fanghorn called a meeting to announce his plans. General excitement resulted, for everyone thought it a splendid idea—except, of course, Julio, who disliked anything having to do with dragons. Being a pessimist by nature, he automatically assumed this would once again put him in danger.

Rosemary packed dried fruits and other meals, and Bipple and Julio set about packing their weapons. “We shall need an a engineer,” announced Fanghorn. “One most familiar with mining, the removal of rocks, etcetera. I’m quite sure we can do all of this work ourselves, but it always pays to have an expert in these matters around—just in case. Bipple, search us one out!” Bipple obligingly contacted the central registry at Haj, and obtained the names of a number of qualified miners,

many of whom were currently in need of employment. He checked references, made some calls, and by the end of the next day, just as they were packing up the flying carpet, a small figure presented himself at the door. “Wexlemp Check-tum, miner,” read the card he presented. He was ushered into Fanghorn’s study, where the master waited. The study was quite a mess—papers, skulls, dried bats and all manner of herbs strewn about on the floor. A huge fire burned in the hearth. Fanghorn, Julio and Bipple were nestled in cozy leather chairs in a semicircle facing the flames. Primus was nestled in Fanghorn’s lap.

“Why, you’re no more than a youth!” said Fanghorn as he laid eyes on Wexlemp. “Can you really mine?”

“I am quite the best at it, sir,” replied Wexlemp, “having studied under my father Plemxec, the foremost mining engineer in all of Haj. Just call me Wex.”

“Indeed, Fanghorn,” interjected Primus, “young Wex here is known far and wide as the best young engineer in Haj. He is a child prodigy—the Mozart of mining, you might call him.”

“I’m not sure about that,” said Fanghorn. “It seems a bit much to compare soaring, brilliant classical music to digging holes in a rock.”

“Hmmp!” snorted Wex. “I take that as an insult, sir! A wizard you may be, but mining is a proud and ancient trade. Those of us who practice it are artists! The sound of jackham-

mers and huge blasts of dynamite is the sweetest music known to man, when properly orchestrated! If you cannot be more civil, I will be going.”

“Don’t be so sensitive, there, boy!” said Fanghorn. “Do you like adventure? Dragons? Buried treasure?” Wex brightened up and nodded. “Course you do!” exclaimed Fanghorn in a jolly manner. “Fact is, my boy, we are about to go out after the greatest of treasures—The Dragon Throne! If you help us find it, your name will live down through the ages. Dragons will probably leave you pretty much alone, too, after a favor like this.”

Wex looked perplexed. “The Dragon Throne? That’s just an ancient legend, isn’t it? Besides, even if it isn’t, no one has the foggiest idea where it might be!”

“Aha! That’s the wonder of it, boy! I do happen to know just about where it is! Well, kind of, anyway.”

“And where might that be?” asked Wex.

“The Khelzhian wastelands, or thereabouts. I’ve done some research, and there’s no doubt it’s buried in the immediate vicinity.” Fanghorn rustled some maps on the table in front of him. “We leave tomorrow. Do you join us?”

“I shall Indeed!” said Wex, his eyes shining with excitement.

It was thus that the party of five arrived some days later in a small village near the Khelzhian Wastelands. Bipple ar-

ranged for hotel rooms at the only inn in the neighborhood—small, but clean and well-run. The innkeeper’s wife expressed little curiosity about what a wizard, a dwarf and an elf might be doing in the area. After all, all types of odd scholars showed up to study the wastelands hereabouts. Few of them had ever guessed that the huge crater at the center of the wastelands was the result of an exploding dragon. The phenomenon was so rare that little information existed on it. It was only the baffling lack of any meteorite fragments in the area that led some scholars to believe that something other than an asteroid had caused the devastation. Fanghorn, Primus, Julio and Wex set out the next morning for an aerial survey of the area. Bipple stayed behind to keep things in order at base camp. As they flew across the land, Wex commented on the geological features as he saw them. “Landslide features,” he announced. “Slip-strike faults. Gullies, escarpments, cliffs, fault lines. Hilly and wild. Typical earthquake landscape. There have been some big ones here. Just what are we looking for, anyway?”

“We’re seeking an area where the land has collapsed into a large cave,” said Fanghorn. “Is it possible to identify such an area by sight alone?”

“Ordinarily, no,” said Wex, “but of course, you have me along, and that changes everything. Let us see!”

After an hour of flying about in an organized pattern, Wex suddenly signaled a stop. “Over there!” he indicated with

a wave of his hand. At this point they were more or less in the center of the area of devastation left by Chon-Zul's explosion.

"I don't see anything," said Fanghorn. Primus and Julio looked on in puzzlement. There was nothing to be seen in the area but a slight depression in the ground.

"There," said Wex. "That depression is likely to be the cave-in you are looking for."

"It doesn't look like much," said Fanghorn doubtfully. "I was expecting something much bigger."

"Cave-ins never look like much from above ground," said Wex. "They often can't even be seen. This one must have been quite large to have created such a sink in the ground." As he spoke, the magic carpet slid to a stop a few feet above the ground, and Wex jumped off. Julio and Primus leaped off behind him, and all three fell to their knees, and began to dig. Julio and Wex scuffled around in the dirt, but Primus was a clam. Clams are born to dig into the sand, and Primus, being a sort of super-clam, was more than equipped for burrowing! He shoved his tongue into the ground and began to dig down at an astonishing rate, to the amazement of the entire group. "Be right back!" he mumbled around a mouthful of dirt, and disappeared.

"I'll be darned," said Fanghorn. "That clam is just full of surprises!"

"Indeed he is!" exclaimed Wex. "I should think we'll be more than happy to offer him a job when we all get back! The possibilities of using him to explore for ore are incredible!"

The three explorers settled down around the magic carpet to wait. The scratching sounds Primus made as he dug down became fainter and fainter, and finally ceased altogether. After an hour or so had passed, Fanghorn began to worry.

"I say, he's be gone quite some time!"

"There's likely big piles of rock down there," said Wex. "I doubt he'll make good time through rock...can clams dig through rock?"

"Ordinarily, no, but as you can see, Primus is not an ordinary sort of clam," said Fanghorn. "I imagine him to be quite capable of anything! However, you are right. Rock may be difficult."

"Quite, quite," mused Wex, and they settled down again to wait.

The day passed slowly. Noon passed into afternoon and into late afternoon with no sign of him. The sun was beginning to set when the scratching sounds finally began to be heard again, and before too long Primus burst out of the ground triumphantly. "Found!" he announced grandly. "The throne is there—along with the bones of the wizards who stole it, I might add! However, it was the devil of a time getting

down there! Rocks, rocks, rocks everywhere! I had to follow my nose all the way down!”

“You don’t have a nose!” protested Julio.

“Well, whatever passes for one in us clams! Anyway, it’s deep, deep, deep! We need to dig, dig, dig!”

“That’s what we brought Wex for,” said Fanghorn. Wex immediately broke out the mining tools—chiefly supports for the tunnel walls. Fanghorn planned to do the excavation with magic, but the walls of tunnels need more ordinary supports. Before long, the dirt was flying and Wex was scrambling down through the hole with braces.

When the sun set and darkness made it impossible to work any further, they returned to the inn to report the good news to Bipple. A warm fire awaited them, and after a hearty meal they collapsed exhausted into their soft beds.

The next morning, the crew set to work at dawn, and by noon Primus estimated they had tunneled to within a few feet of the area where the throne lay. Shortly thereafter, they came upon the bare bones of the two unfortunate wizards, crushed beneath tons of rock. Fanghorn used magic to gently lift the overlying stone and floated it up and out of the shaft. “Poor men,” he said. “It was a noble cause they died for. Perhaps more noble than they think, for their misfortune may save my butt!”

“Save your butt? What kind of language is that?” said Primus indignantly.

“Earth talk,” said Fanghorn. “Heard it on TV.”

“Rosemary is right,” said Primus. “This obsession of yours with TV simply has to cease!”

“In the meantime,” replied Fanghorn, moving more rock out of the way, “here’s the throne!” And there it was indeed—the Dragon Throne, in all its garish glory, gold glimmering and gems glistening beneath a centuries old coat of dirt and dust! The entire party stood in awe. It was huge—much too large to fit through the shaft they had dug.

“How do we get it out of here?” asked Wex.

“Leave that to me,” said Fanghorn. “Julio, stay here. The rest of you go back up to the surface.”

“What’s up?” said Julio as Fanghorn scuffled about in the dirt near the Wizard’s bones.

“Just a minute—wait—aha! Here it is!” Fanghorn pulled up a bag, still intact after its long wait beneath the earth.

“Oh, no,” groaned Julio, for he suddenly understood the plan to get the throne out, and it was one of those Fanghorn-type plans that no sensible person would ever want to have anything to do with.

“Oh, YES!” said Fanghorn, and in a bold move, he dug his hand into the bag and swung his hand out in a wide arc, scattering the ancient—but still potent!—dust of return over the throne, the bones, himself, and, of course, Julio.

They instantaneously appeared in the throne room of the dragons, on the very platform from whence the Dragon Throne had been stolen all those hundreds of years ago. The entire room was packed full of Dragons of every size and description, all stunned by the sudden appearance of a wizard and an elf in their midst, but even more so by the magnificent Throne that accompanied them. While they were still paralyzed by astonishment, Fanghorn seized the initiative.

“I am the great and powerful FANGHORN!” he shouted, “and I have come to RETURN to you the DRAGON THRONE, which was stolen from you so long ago! In exchange I expect a FULL PARDON for destroying the Dragon Graveyard!”

The king of the Dragons stepped forward to inspect the throne. “So, Fanghorn, it is indeed you, and you have indeed returned our throne!” he said. “However, now that we have both the throne and yourself here, why shouldn’t we just burn you to a crisp?” He licked his scaly lips, obviously savoring the idea.

“I was afraid of this,” whispered Julio, feeling faint.

“BECAUSE,” shouted Fanghorn, “I have THIS!” and he pulled his wand out of his cloak. It crackled with power, blue lines of electricity running up and down its length. the Drag-

ons near him shied back in fear. All of them had seen the three-mile wide crater blasted in the rock around the former Dragon’s Graveyard. No one wanted to see it happen again.

“Hmm. A potent argument,” observed the king of the Dragons. “Perhaps we should forgive and forget after all, ay?” He turned to the assembly of dragons. “Let it hereby be known that Fanghorn is forgiven,” he announced. “However, should we meet again, remember that the score is now even. We owe nothing!”

“So be it,” agreed Fanghorn. He reached into his own pouch and scattered more dust of return over his head. Julio collapsed in relief as they materialized on the floor of their beloved Castle Veryberry. “We’re home, dear!” shouted Fanghorn. Rosemary rushed to the door in delight.

“Off the hook for good!” sighed Julio, pleased to know he no longer had to fear being incinerated by Dragons.

Wex, Bipple and Primus reappeared several days later, the magic carpet having carried them home like a large woolen homing pigeon. Primus was hired by Wex for exploratory drilling, and together they established one of the most successful well operations in Haj. Princess Rosemary, relieved by the truce between Fanghorn and the Dragons, went back to her gardening with a vengeance, and soon hundreds of new plants were appearing on the grounds.

Pleeping and the Tiger



Pleeping was having an absolutely horrid day.

It all started with a rude awakening early in the morning. Up until now, he had always slept in in the morning, but today his father had come into his room and dumped him unceremoniously on the floor. "It's time for you to figure out who you are," he said.

"What do you mean?" answered Pleeping, still groggy from sleep.

"Today you are twelve. It is time for you to gain an identity," said his dad.

"I have an identity. I am Pleeping, your number one son," said Pleeping, confused.

"Not any more," said his father. "It's the day to start your rite of passage into manhood."

"No one ever said anything about this before," said Pleeping. "What am I supposed to do?"

"The way it goes is, I kick you out of the house, and you go out to seek yourself," said his father. "You find out what you are. I should warn you, it can take a long time."

"Where do I live? What about food?" asked Pleeping.

"That's your problem now," said his father. "You're on your own during the rite of passage."

"This stinks," said Pleeping. "Why can't I just pass into manhood normally, without this unpleasantness?" He flopped back down on his mattress in disbelief. His dad lifted him up and propped him on the floor. "Anyhow, I don't know how to go about this," protested Pleeping.

"Experiment. Ask around." said his father. "Now, beat it, and don't come back 'til you've figured it out." He shuffled Pleeping, still rubbing sleepy seeds out of his eyes, out the door of the wooden house and to the edge of the jungle. Pleeping started back towards the house, protesting, but his father tossed an overripe papaya at him. "Go," he said. "I'm not kidding."

Pleeping trudged off into the jungle, baffled. Perhaps dad had lost his mind. No one had ever told him about this before. He was sure that if he split for a while and came back while only his mom was around, she'd straighten things out, but it didn't work that way. Later that afternoon, when he crept back to the house, mom tossed scraps of food at him and yelled. Pleeping slunk back into the jungle to pout. He settled himself at the base of a large mahogany tree and pondered his fate. "I'm a little boy" he thought to himself. "That seems clear enough. What other kind of identity do I need?" He sat under the tree for a long time. Finally, he decided that he'd better be off and about; if he had to seek himself before he could get

home for a nice hot meal and his warm, soft bed, the sooner he got under way, the better.

He was walking along the jungle path when he met a tiger. Ordinarily, this would have scared him out of his wits, but he was depressed. All the same to him if he was eaten.

“Ho, stranger,” said the tiger.

“Ho,” said Pleeping morosely.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” said the tiger jovially.

“Very funny,” said Pleeping. “What it is is, I’m having an awful time of it just now. My parents kicked me out to find my identity.”

“Look no further,” said the tiger, “you’re clearly a tiger.”

“I am?” said Pleeping, astonished.

“’Course you are,” said the tiger. “Clear as day.”

“I’m not orange, and I don’t have stripes, or claws, or big sharp teeth,” said Pleeping, doubtfully.

“Details,” said the tiger. “Come along, and I’ll show you what it is to be a tiger. It’s easy, really. Just follow my lead.” They trudged off down the jungle paths. Pretty soon they came to a big rock in the sun. “Stretch out here,” said the tiger. They both stretched out in the golden rays. It was warm and comfortable. They just lay there.

“What are we doing?” said Pleeping.

“Sunning ourselves,” said the tiger. “We spend a lot of time lazily hanging about, we tigers.”

“Great,” said Pleeping. He was beginning to see huge advantages in being a tiger, because at home he probably would have been beaten for this kind of behaviour. “Besides,” he thought to himself, “just wait until I go home as a big, powerful tiger. Won’t they be impressed! That will teach them to throw me out like old dishwater!” He settled back on the rock and relaxed, very satisfied with himself.

“So, what else is there to being a tiger?” he asked.

“Attitude,” said the tiger. “Tigers are fierce and ruthless. We take what we want, and we kill anything that stands in our way. We are the kings of the jungle.”

“Excellent,” said Pleeping. “That’s just the kind of person—I mean tiger—I want to be.”

Later that day they killed some prey. It was great, what with the excitement of the chase and all that blood and stuff. Pleeping had a rather harder time of it, since his claws and teeth weren’t anywhere near as deadly as the tiger’s, but he did passably well, screaming and fiercely tearing into the prey. It wasn’t easy to get used to swallowing big hunks of raw meat—in fact it was pretty disgusting—but he figured that was because he just hadn’t fully assimilated himself into his proper identity yet. It would all come, with time.

“This is really fabulous,” he said, “I am a tiger,” amazed he ever could have doubted it.

“Told you so,” said the tiger smugly.

Pleeping was glad to have found himself so easily. Being a tiger was far superior to being a little boy. He and the tiger had the run of the jungle; other animals lived in fear of them. Everything about being a tiger was great until the day the hunters came for them.

It started like any other day—sneak up on a clearing, jump on a farmer’s cow, chomp down and eat. They were just settling down to a good meal when a huge clamour filled the jungle—the sound of sticks beating on sheets of tin rolled like thunder through the underbrush. It was terrifying. Then a shot rang out.

“Scram!” yelled the tiger. “It’s the hunt!” They fled through the undergrowth in a panic, tangling themselves in the vines, tripping over logs, splashing through streams. More shots rang out. The tiger fell, wounded. “They got me,” he said melodramatically. “Save yourself.” Pleeping withdrew to a safe distance and watched as the hunters tied his friend to a stout pole. Six of them hoisted the bleeding corpse into the air.

Being a tiger suddenly and completely lost its appeal.

Pleeping was devastated. He slumped down into a hollow at the base of a tree. “Cheez,” he thought to himself, coming to

his senses, “I’m not a tiger at all, and thank God for that!” His heart was beating so fast it felt like it was up in his throat. He tried to catch his breath.

“Psst,” said a voice next to him, “What are you doing?”

“Recovering from a very terrible experience,” said Pleeping. “I got involved with this tiger, see. He told me I was a tiger too, and for a while there I really believed him. Then hunters rubbed him out, and I suddenly realized I’m not a tiger at all.”

“Tigers,” said the voice, “all brawn and no brains. Very unreliable. Any fool can see you’re not a tiger.”

“Maybe so, but then what am I?” said Pleeping.

“It’s patently obvious. You’re a snake,” said the voice, and now Pleeping could see that his new companion was a huge python, coiled under the leaves at the base of the tree.

“Cool,” said Pleeping. Being a snake sounded like it had possibilities. “I don’t have scales or fangs, though.”

“Details,” said the python. “Come along, and I’ll show you how to be a snake. It’s really very easy. Just follow my lead.” He slithered off into the woods. Pleeping scrunched down onto his belly and followed. No matter what the snake said, it wasn’t easy to move around like this. “Are you sure I’m a snake?” he asked. “Slithering like this hurts my tummy.”

“Slithering isn’t absolutely necessary,” said the snake. “It pays to be flexible. Just think of yourself as a two-legged snake.” Pleeping gratefully stood up and followed his new teacher on foot. “Being a snake is far more a matter of attitude,” said the snake. “Right attitude is what counts.”

“What kind of attitude do you mean?” asked Pleeping.

“Snakes don’t really have feelings. Snakes could basically care less about anyone else. We are our own masters, answering to no one. We are powerful, dangerous, and carefree.”

“Sounds excellent,” said Pleeping. “That’s the kind of person—I mean snake—I always felt myself to be—deep down inside, you know, where it really counts.”

“I figured as much,” said the python. “Don’t worry, you’re going to make an outstanding snake.” Pleeping totally believed him. He thought about how great it would be to go home as a lithe, powerful snake, so tough that he did not have to listen to his mother or father.

They spent half the day lazily sunning themselves on a rock. “This is just as good as being a tiger,” thought Pleeping to himself, “better, even.” Then they slithered off through the jungle to find some prey to eat. Pretty soon they came across a rabbit browsing on some grasses in a clearing.

“OK, watch how this is done,” said the python. He snuck up on the rabbit so slowly you could barely see him moving. Then, in a burst of speed that seemed almost impossible, he

threw his coils around the rabbit and squeezed it so hard its eyes popped right out of its head. “Gross,” thought Pleeping to himself. After the rabbit was totally dead, the python opened his mouth wider than Pleeping ever thought possible, and swallowed him.

“There,” said the python. “Now you do it.” Pleeping wasn’t convinced of his abilities in this area—after all, he had only just started to be a snake—but he did his best, sneaking up on a little monkey and strangling it. He didn’t feel good about it; killing these little furry animals was different from killing a big ugly cow, and besides, when he was a tiger, the other tiger had done the killing. Pleeping had just mostly watched. He felt sorry for the little animals they were killing. “Better not mention it,” he said to himself, “attitude is everything.”

“I can’t swallow it whole,” he said to the snake.

“Got to,” said the python. “This is a key part of being a snake.”

“Maybe I’m not a snake after all,” said Pleeping.

“No, no, you are definitely a snake,” said the python. “We’ll let it go for this time.”

Pleeping did his best to settle into being a snake. He liked it for the most part, but it became increasingly evident that his snake skills were not up to par. The toughest part of it was that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop feeling

bad about killing his prey. He felt worse and worse about this, because the python was treating him very nicely, and he actually liked him a lot. It bothered him so much, however, that he finally decided he had to mention it..

“Are there any, well, vegetarian snakes?” he asked one day.

“What on earth are you talking about?” replied the python. “For us snakes, it’s meat, meat and still more meat.”

“I feel sorry for these animals we kill,” Pleeping explained. “I’d rather eat bananas.”

“Y’know, I’ve about invested enough time in you. You’re not measuring up. I was absolutely sure you were a snake, but now I’m beginning to doubt it. Maybe you better take a hike.”

“I thought you were my pal,” said Pleeping.

“Your mistake, bud,” said the python. “No feelings, remember? Now, beat it!” he hissed at Pleeping.

“Just like that?” said Pleeping.

“Just like that,” said the snake.

Pleeping felt awful. He wandered further into the jungle. By now he had spent many days lost in the uncharted wilds, and with every step he was further and further from civilization. He was, however, managing to stay alive in these relatively dangerous surroundings, which for a twelve year old

boy is quite an accomplishment. That night, he climbed high into a tree to sleep. The tree frogs were peeping all around him. “Maybe I’m a frog,” he thought, but then he decided a frog’s life didn’t have much to recommend it. Who wanted to be tiny, slimy, and helpless? He dozed off in the crook of a branch.

The next morning, as he was climbing down, there was a flutter of wings. An eagle perched on the branch next to him. He was still a long way from the ground.

“Ho, stranger,” said the eagle.

“Ho,” said Pleeping.

“Why so depressed?” asked the eagle, for he could see Pleeping’s downcast expression.

“I’ve just had a terrible experience. First I was a tiger, but that didn’t work out. Then I was a snake, but my snake teacher flunked me. Now I don’t know what I am.” Pleeping burst into tears.

“Snakes. Bah!” said the eagle. “Heartless creatures. You should never listen to them. Any idiot could have told you you’re not a snake.”

“What am I, then?” asked Pleeping.

“An eagle,” said the eagle.

“No, really” said Pleeping. “This is how I got into trouble the last two times. Besides, I don’t have feathers, wings, or talons.”

“Details,” said the eagle. “Come along, and I’ll show you what it is to be an eagle. It’s very easy, really. Just follow my lead.”

“OK, but before I agree I’m an eagle, what do eagles do?” asked Pleeping. By now he had enough experience with this kind of thing to be suspicious.

“Eagles are bold, noble creatures that soar miles above the clouds,” said the eagle. “We are strong, loyal, and pure of heart.”

“Do you kill little furry animals?” asked Pleeping.

“Only when absolutely necessary,” said the eagle, declining to elaborate.

“Sounds pretty good,” said Pleeping. He visualized himself boldly swooping down from the skies into the clearing where his house was, startling and amazing his mother and father. “That description pretty much fits me. Where do we start?”

“Leap out of the tree. Soar on your wings,” said the eagle.

“Like I said, I don’t have wings,” said Pleeping.

“Trust me,” said the eagle. “Wings aren’t absolutely necessary for soaring.” Pleeping figured that, knowing the eagle was strong, loyal, and pure of heart, he could definitely trust him. He leapt off his branch, propelling himself out into the sky, and fell twenty feet straight to the ground. He landed with a huge thud in the loamy jungle soil. It was only by a miracle that no bones were broken; as it was, he was bruised beyond all understanding.

The eagle peered down from above with a surprised expression. “Gee, you aren’t an eagle after all,” he said.

“No, I’ve finally figured it out, though,” said Pleeping. He hauled his aching body upright and began the long walk home.

Days later, he arrived in the clearing where his family’s house stood. Dad!” he called out. “I’ve figured it out!”

His father came running around from the back of the house. “Tell me what you’ve learned, and what you are,” he said.

“Well, first I was sure I was a tiger, then I was sure I was a snake, and lastly, I was sure I was an eagle,” said Pleeping.

“So what are you, actually?” said his father.

“An idiot,” said Pleeping.

His father burst into a smile of joy. “That’s exactly right!” he said. “Everyone is, but most men never learn it. You have

done well, my son.” He led Pleeping into the house, where his mother served a huge feast.

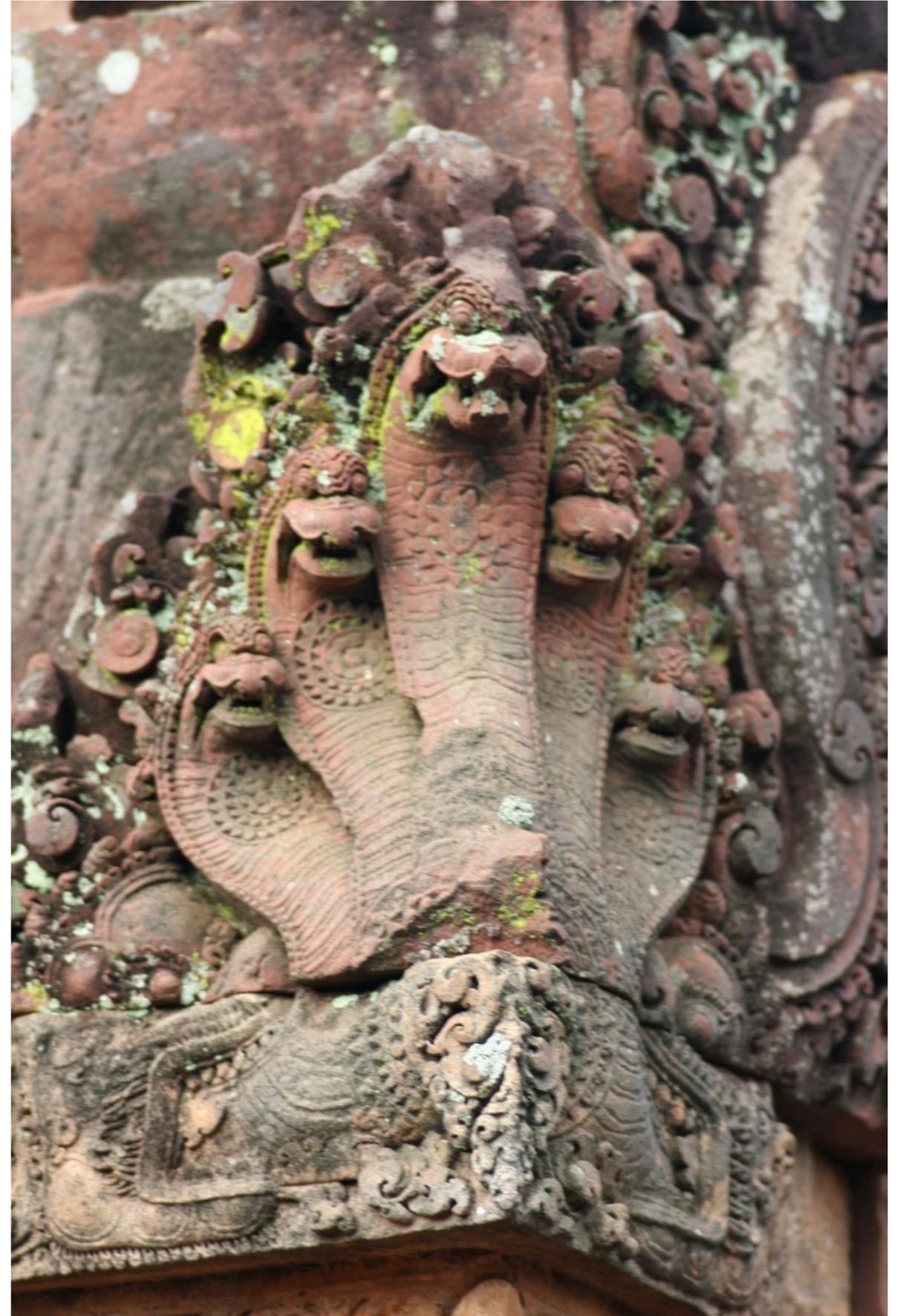
The next day, Pleeping was allowed to sleep in. When he got up, his dad took him fishing.

“It’s not really so bad, being an idiot,” said Pleeping as they sat at the river bank.

“Just remember it,” said his dad, “whenever you get grand ideas about yourself.”

The fishing was good that day.

Pleeping and the Snake



Pleeping was walking home from market through the wood one afternoon in the sunlight. Birds were singing; the sky was clear. All was right with the world. Suddenly, he heard a voice in the grass beside him. "Pick me up," it whispered. He looked down, and saw a snake. It was really a very good-looking kind of snake. He picked it up.

"Eat me. Let me live in you. I will help make your life happier." said the snake.

"Don't be silly," replied Pleeping, for although he was quite young, he wasn't born yesterday. "No one wants a snake living in them."

"Au contraire," replied the snake. "Everyone already has a snake in them but you. You're at a disadvantage. It's time for you to find one that suits you and swallow it. Frankly, I'm just the right snake for you. I have special powers—I know just what others are up to, and I'll keep you advised. With me as your companion, things will always go your way."

Pleeping thought about it for a minute, and decided he could use a companion like this, so he swallowed the snake. It wasn't that bad, really; it slithered down his throat easily and nestled in his stomach so naturally that he hardly knew the snake was there.

"See?" said the snake. "It's going to work out just fine."

Pleeping got home, and his mother was cooking dinner. She was upset. "Pleeping" she said, "You haven't done your

chores. You've got to stop idling about on your way home from market."

"What does she know?" whispered the snake. "Don't listen to her. She's forgotten how to enjoy life." Pleeping found himself in complete agreement, so he said to his mother, "What do you know? You've forgotten how to enjoy life." His mother stuck a bar of soap in his mouth for talking back, and he went to bed without dinner.

"You're pretty useless," he said to the snake.

"No, you're pretty stupid," said the snake. "By now you're old enough to know your mother is unreasonable. You need to be more clever about these things." Pleeping thought about it, and had to admit the snake was right.

The snake turned out to be an excellent companion. He did have all the answers. No matter what situation Pleeping encountered, the snake helped him to clearly see how foolish other people were, and how correct Pleeping was. "Self esteem!" the snake would say. "You're better than these guys. Remember it." Obviously, thought Pleeping, the snake was right about everyone having a snake, because everyone else thought & acted more or less the same way as Pleeping did now. Funny how nobody talked about it, though.

After a while, the snake started to get Pleeping into trouble. One day, he was yelling at a friend who wouldn't let him have the ball they were playing with, and all at once the snake leapt out and bit him.

“Hey,” cried the other kid, “you hit me!” His nose was bleeding. There was more trouble, because the friend ran home and told his parents, and Pleeping’s dad whipped him with a belt for fighting.

“What did you go and do that for?” he asked the snake that night.

“That kid got me mad,” said the snake. “I couldn’t help it. He had it coming.”

“Well, don’t do it again. It made me feel bad.” said Pleeping, but the snake did do it again. Before you knew it, the snake was acting up all over the place, getting mad at everyone. There were fights, tantrums, notes from school.

“You’re not cooperating,” he said to the snake.

“Tough luck,” said the snake. “You’re stuck with me.” Worse than that, the snake was getting bigger, and the bigger it got, the harder it was for Pleeping to influence it.

The snake thing was going badly, he decided privately. Something had to be done about it. The problem was, the snake was always there, watching every move. He was afraid things would get worse if it realized he was trying to get rid of it.

One day, he read an ad in the paper. “Snake remover,” it said. “the easy way to get rid of snakes.” There was a picture of a green bottle filled with juice. Pleeping ordered a case of it, and drank it just like the instructions said. It made it a lot eas-

ier to forget about the snake, but it didn’t remove it. The snake kept right on growing, and things weren’t improving. This might be OK for some folk, but Pleeping wasn’t satisfied.

Pleeping went to see the wise man that lived in the woods. He timed it just so the snake would be sleeping (he was getting a little better at snake management, so he could pretty much figure this kind of thing out by now). “I’ve got a snake in me,” he said.

“Hmm. A snake.” said the wise man.

“I swallowed it.” volunteered Pleeping.

“Most everyone does.” said the wise man.

“Well, how do I get rid of it?” asked Pleeping.

“That’s what they all want to know,” said the wise man. “Here’s a book.” He handed Pleeping a huge leather-bound book—at least six thousand pages, with lots of tiny print. *How To Get Rid Of Snakes* the cover said in fancy gold letters.

“This thing is way too long,” Pleeping said. “I could never read it.”

“I know,” said the wise man. ‘All I’m trying to tell you is, getting rid of snakes is very difficult. People have been trying to do it for thousands of years.’

“Bummer,” said Pleeping. By now he was starting to feel hopeless. The wise man could see this, and he started feeling

sorry for Pleeping. Most children didn't even realize they had a snake in them. They forgot as soon as they swallowed it, and for the most part they never noticed it again. Pleeping was different.

"I'll tell you a secret," said the wise man. "I've got a snake too."

"Jeez." said Pleeping. "You don't look like it."

"I know," said the wise man. "The thing is, you need your snake."

"Why?" said Pleeping. "He's causing me major problems."

"Humans have been living with snakes in them for so long it might kill them if they didn't have one," said the wise man. "In fact, if others found out you had no snake, they'd definitely kill you. Humans without snakes scare people."

"OK, so what do I do?" asked Pleeping.

"Get comfortable with it," said the wise man. "Keep a real close eye on him. Once you get to know your snake well enough, he'll start to lose weight. They hate being watched. It ruins their appetite. The smaller they get, the less damage they can do."

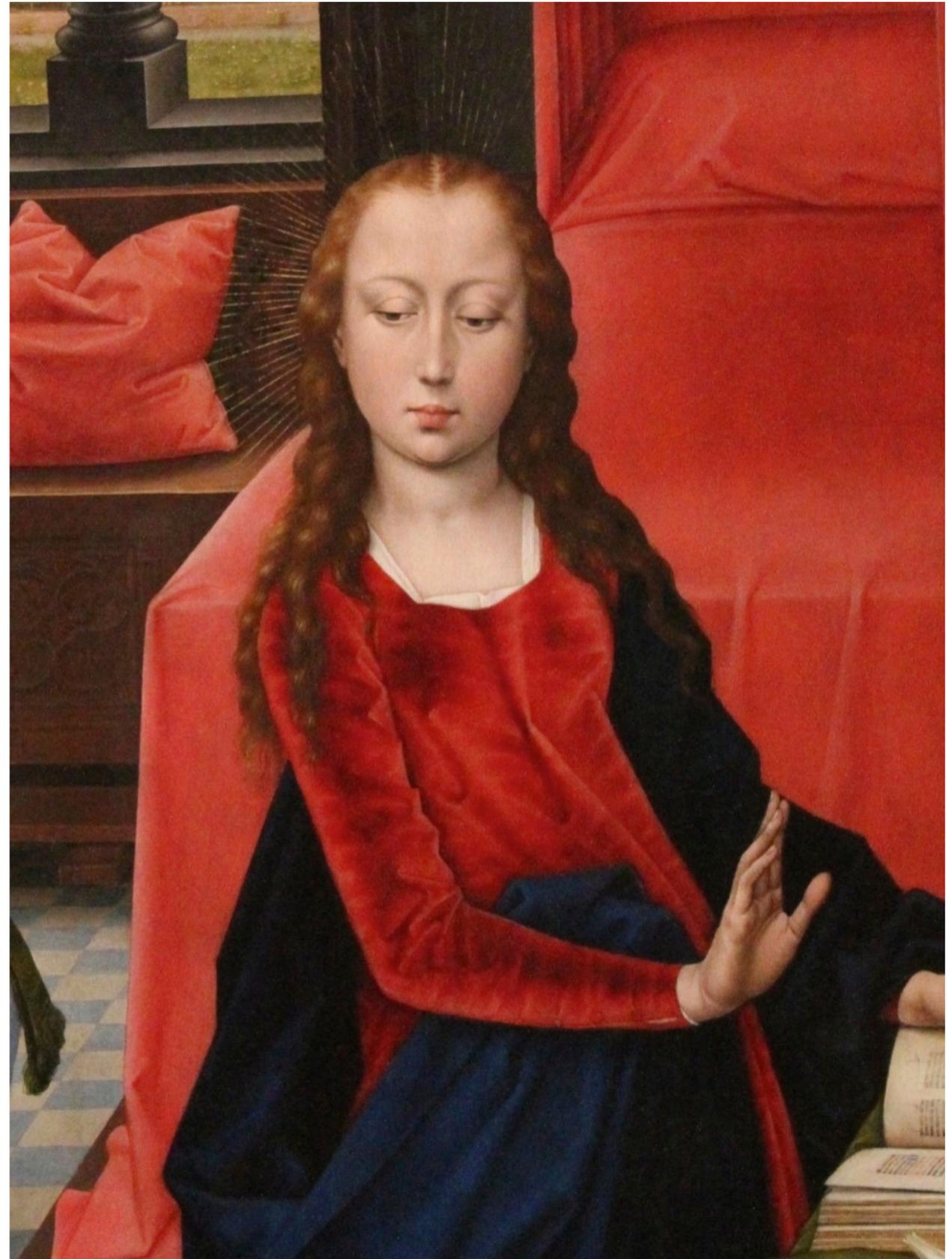
Pleeping went to see the old man regularly, and he learned how to watch his snake. The snake didn't like it much. He started sulking. He kept finding new ways to get around

Pleeping, but he kept on shrinking, too. It took years, but eventually he curled up in a tiny little ball, and wouldn't even come out to talk unless Pleeping asked him to.

By that time, Pleeping was the wise old man in the woods. There weren't many visitors for a long time. Mostly, folk just went about their lives. One, day, however, a boy came to him looking very unhappy. "You're not going to believe this, but I've got a snake in me" he said.

"Hmm. A snake" said Pleeping.

Lily White



Once upon a time, in an enchanted kingdom on an isle surrounded by boundless oceans, there lived a wise king who ruled his subjects well, and was much loved by them. His lands thus prospered, and all through the world the wealth of his domain was known.

Despite all of this, the king had failed to produce an heir. He and his wife had tried for many years to have children, but without success. Far and wide they searched for a physician or magician who could help them, but all their efforts, even through the most powerful magic, came to naught.

One hot summer morning, when they had almost given up hope, the queen was walking in the gardens of the estate. She took the path to the marshes, hoping to see the iris in bloom, but when she reached the banks of the pond and parted the cat tails that grew at the edge, she spied a crane with a frog struggling in its bill, about to be swallowed. Feeling pity for the frog, she cried out and startled the bird, who dropped the frog and flew away.

"Thank you," said the frog. The queen, startled, replied, "You can speak?" Actually, she was not that surprised, for in their kingdom enchantment was not at all unusual.

"Indeed I can," replied the frog. "You have saved my life. The enchantment that binds me in this form is strong, but I am able to grant you one favor. First, however, you must know that a wish that does not come from the heart is not within my

power to grant. Second, you must be told that there is a price. It may be more than you wish to pay."

The queen thought for a moment, and said, "My wish is to have a child, for my husband and I are without children. It is a girl child I desire, white as a lily, with lips as red as ruby. For this, no price would be too great."

"I understand your wish is a true one," said the frog. "However," he continued, "you have asked for a life, and the price of a life is always a life. Furthermore, I must warn you, in sorrow shall you bring forth your child and in sorrow shall she come to age. This is the price. Do you still want me to grant your wish?"

"I do," said the queen. She returned to the castle, telling no one of her encounter.

In less than a year, the queen was indeed pregnant, and when her time came she gave birth to a baby girl. The birth was a hard one, and the queen died that same day, knowing that the frog's prophecy had come true. The baby girl became known as the princess Lily.

After the death of his wife, the king became despondent, and nothing would satisfy him short of a new wife. He began to court, and eventually asked for the hand of a queen from a neighboring kingdom in marriage. His counselors were appalled, and advised him against it, for the new queen was a sorceress with a reputation for cruelty, but he refused to heed their advice. The marriage took place.

Now, it came to pass that in the second year of the baby's life, the king fell ill and died. On his deathbed, having finally come to know his second wife's true nature, he feared for his daughter's life. The king (who was himself a student of magic arts) with his last breath passed a curse, such that the queen might rule in his place for only as long as his daughter remained alive. The queen raged when she discovered this, but the curse of a dying man cannot be broken.

The sorceress seized control of the kingdom, and, unable to kill the king's daughter, cast her into a dungeon, where she could never learn anything of the outside world. She gave out the story that the girl had died, and entrusted her care to servants who were expert in the arts of deceit. The servants saw to the girl's every need, so that she might never know of her confinement. In order to render her compliant, the queen drugged her food and passed spells so that Lily spent her life in dreams. Thus hypnotized, in her imagination she lived a grand life, filled with friends and parties, wealth and riches, and the adoration of her subjects. The maiden grew up in a world of illusions, like an opium addict, unable to distinguish between her dreams and the reality of her imprisonment. Each day the queen sent grand visions to her, and each day she imbibed them as the very nectar of her life. Unaware of her condition, she actually enjoyed it, never having known anything else. The stepmother's plan of enslavement was a complete success.

Then, one day, the stepmother was called away to a far corner of the kingdom on urgent business, and, being in a

rush, failed to properly set the spells for Lily's continuing enchantment in motion. When she realized her mistake, it was too late to return and correct it, but, she reasoned, one day could do little harm. She would simply intensify the dreams upon her return, and soon there would be no memory of the gap.

She underestimated the impact on Lily, however.

That morning, when she awoke, Lily realized with astonishment that she lay in a dirty straw bed in rags, rather than in her magnificent four-poster, dressed in fine embroidered silks. The floor about her was cold stone, littered with scraps of food and clumps of dirt. Her grand room had shrunk to a small cell, and instead of tall windows that looked out on rolling hills, all she saw was a tiny barred window, shuttered from the outside. The shock was so great that she felt sure it was a nightmare, but after a few moments she realized that somehow, this was in fact the real world. She fell back on the straw bed in bewilderment and burst into tears. When she opened her eyes again, she saw a Vole sitting at the end of her bed, who said, "Why do you cry so?"

"I don't know who I am or why I am here!" she cried. "Obviously I am the victim of some foul enchantment, for only yesterday I was the highest princess in the land, surrounded by finery and friends. Now I am nothing!"

"Ah," said the Vole, "so you are, indeed. I have been observing you for many years. Perhaps I can explain your predicament," and he proceeded to tell her the whole tale of her

imprisonment. Lily listened with astonishment as the tale unfolded, and she grasped the nature of her captivity. The Vole ended the dismal tale with a ray of hope. "You may escape," he said, "if you keep to my advice. You must stop drinking the water and eating the food that the queen sends you. Instead, pour it down the drain in the floor, and eat only such morsels as I may bring you through the cracks in the wall. The food I bring you, little though it may be, will be only of the finest, purest quality. By eating it, you may regain your strength. However, take care as you do so! Leave all as it is. Do not clean or otherwise change the room, or yourself. You must work in secret. Should the queen realize you are attempting to recover, she will surely cast even stronger spells to bind you! Because I will be in great danger, I can only bring you your food in secret, so you may never see me again until such time as you have gained the strength to escape. You will know when the moment has arrived. Then, in your hour of need, you must call me with all your heart, and I will come." The Vole departed swiftly, for the footsteps of a servant could be heard approaching.

Lily reclined on her bed, and feigned oblivion so that none suspected she was no longer under the queen's control. The Vole had spoken true—the spells of illusion could not work well without the herbs and potions slipped into her regular food. The dreams still came, but their power was greatly lessened, and the less Lily believed in them, the less power they had. She survived only on the tiny scraps of grain and meat the Vole brought her, which miraculously seemed to

nourish her, perhaps even more than the huge plates of poisoned food which had been her fare for so many years. She suffered greatly through the days and nights as she worked to recover, but she persevered, and slowly her strength began to come back to her. As her health improved, however, she slowly realized that she knew nothing of the outside world, and she feared that even if she should escape, she might be easily recaptured, for how can one who knows so little stay free? She wished to ask the Vole this question, but she could not, for he would not show himself, and she dared not call him until she knew the hour of her freedom had come.

It was late one night as she pondered this problem, despairing of hope, that a small black Cricket appeared on the floor beside her. "Why do you cry?" asked the Cricket, for tears streamed down Lily's cheeks. "I seem to know nothing," said Lily, "having been imprisoned here so many years." She told the Cricket her tale, ending with a sob. "I have had my birthright stolen" she said, "and know nothing of how to regain it, even if I had the strength of ten men!"

"Have no fear!" said the Cricket, "for, though tiny, I know all there is to know of the outside world! My folk range far and wide; we learn and transmit all that can be known, and we mark the passage of all times with our song. Each night I shall come and sing to you of the outside world, and you shall learn all you need to know. Lest I be seen and captured, however, I must hide within the wall, so my song will be faint. Listen well, lest you miss some crucial part of what I have to tell! When the time comes, and your need is greatest, call me with

all your mind and I shall come to help free you." So the Cricket came late every night and sang to Lily through the walls. She sang of the blue sky, the sun, the moon and the stars. She sang of trees and grass, of the flowers in the field. She sang of all the fish in the sea, beasts on the land and birds in the air. She sang then of men and women, arts and sciences, histories and geographies. Lily listened well, for she knew her life depended on it. Her heart soared with joy at first as she learned of the glories of the natural world, but as the Cricket sang on, she learned also of the wicked queen's rule, and of oppression, poverty, cruelty, and war. The Cricket's song revealed a world of dangers, where abuse and hatred ruled, and people lived their lives in fear. Indeed, it became clear that the tyranny of the queen had all but destroyed the kingdom. The Cricket knew nothing of the effect her tales had; as faithful reporter, she brought the facts alone. She could not see that with the passage of time the Princess grew ever more despondent and apprehensive. The world outside sounded so profoundly evil it seemed beyond help.

The anxiety and fear the Cricket's songs provoked weighed ever more heavily on Lily's soul, until depression all but destroyed her. Late one night, after hearing a particularly awful tale of betrayal and murder from the Cricket, she lay awake, once again sobbing in hopelessness, but this time from hopelessness that came from knowing more than she wished to, rather than less.

"Why are you crying?" came a voice from the end of the bed. Lily opened her eyes and saw a Salamander, glistening

black with glorious red spots upon his back. "I am captive," sighed Lily, "and have no hope at all!" As she recounted her tale of woe, the Salamander listened with great attention. She then told him of the Vole, the Cricket, and her efforts to gather enough strength and knowledge to free herself. "Alas!" Lily cried as she finished, "even though I might have the strength of ten men and all the knowledge there is in the earth, there can be no power great enough to overcome such corruption and evil!"

"Foolish child," said the Salamander. "Of course there is. Your friends the Vole and the Cricket know much, but they can only supply part of what is needed. You know nothing of faith, hope and love. Learn these; no power of evil can stand against them. Without them, no effort to be free can succeed."

"How can I learn of these things?" asked Lily. "I know nothing of such emotions. All my experiences of them have been illusions, deceitful dreams sent by the queen."

"You must listen to your own heart," said the Salamander. "It alone can lead you to the truth. You must feel everything that comes to you, good or bad, to its fullest. By experiencing your life as it is, you will come to something greater. You must hope for your freedom, and have faith that it will come about. As for love, I can only promise you that this, too, will come."

"But my life is one of misery," said Lily. "All I can feel is despair."

"Then at least you know this much," replied the Salamander. "It is our lot to suffer first, so that we may know true joy later. Such is the will of the almighty. You must follow the thread of your life without fear; think of me as your guardian angel. No matter how awful your despair may be, I will come to you each night and enter your dreams to cleanse you of your pain. And when the time of your greatest need comes, and all seems lost, you must call me with all your soul, and I will come." The Salamander looked in Lily's eyes as he spoke.

"One last piece of advice," said the Salamander. "Never forget who you are. Never forget why you are here. Never forget what your only aim must be—escape, and the inheritance of the kingdom, which is rightfully yours.""

After some thought, Lily realized she had no choice but to follow the advice of the Salamander. What other hope had she?

As days passed into weeks, and then months, Lily grew ever stronger, and, as the Salamander had promised, each night he appeared in her dreams and somehow cleansed the pain and fear she felt each day. Soon Lily realized that she was strong enough and wise enough to escape, but the right moment—the one she would know in her heart—never seemed to come. Perhaps it was this long waiting period that seemed the most awful. Each day she rose in the hope that this would be the one, and each night she went to bed despondent, for nothing ever seemed to change. What would the sign be? How would she know it for what it was?

What Lily could not know was that her efforts, which had started their life as a tiny seed in the mysterious and magical air that surrounds all of us, had grown into an invisible, but nevertheless great, tree. Its roots reached deep into the castle, spreading out to fill every nook and cranny of the lower levels, so that even the worms that crawled in the soil beneath the stones of the foundation itself sensed her. The worms knew of the great power she had acquired much better than Lily herself, and they furthermore knew her to be the true queen. They spread this message far and wide through the soils of the kingdom, and it grew up through the roots of the flowers in the field to be collected by the bees and spread on the winds by pollen, until every living creature whispered of her imprisonment and hoped for her salvation.

The branches of the tree that Lily's efforts had become spread above her into the sky, and they bloomed and sent the scent of truth through the air until every bird that soared on the winds above the castle knew of her, and spread the news of hope far and wide throughout the kingdom on their wings. Every farmer and householder in the land could hear a new lilt in the bird song on the air, felt a new lift in their feet, and a new hope in their heart. It was as though a breath of spring were here, even though the summer was almost over. Some even began to speak openly of a day when the evil queen no longer ruled, even though to do so was certain death.

The trunk of Lily's tree became thicker and thicker, grown straight and true through the heart of the castle itself, blocking much of the wicked queen's evil magic. Lily herself

was the heartwood of the tree, strong and bold and filled with hope. Even though her task seemed impossible and her efforts endless, she kept the Salamander's counsel and continued to work, despite the fact that there seemed to be no results. Each day she reminded herself of who she was, and took strength from the fact that she could at least make an effort that day to be a little stronger, a little wiser, a little less hopeless.

The evil queen had begun to sense there was something wrong, but she could not quite put her finger on it. She knew only that her powers had diminished, and she grew ever more frustrated. Spells to control others were more and more difficult, and it even became necessary to execute several of those who refused to obey her—a decision she made reluctantly, since even the most evil magician tries to avoid having too much blood on their hands. After all, the price of a life is a life, and it is known among those who practice black magic that one can only avoid paying the price by using tricks for just so long.

Now, Lily's miraculous tree, subtle and invisible though it was, had grown so great that it could no longer remain hidden if a determined sorcerer attempted to locate it. One day, the queen decided she must cast a spell to discover the source of this disruption; she spent many hours in her laboratory mixing elixirs, chanting spells, and burning incense, until the light from the candles and the smoke from the burning herbs swirled into an orb that revealed the tree. The queen was shocked that such magic could grow under her very nose; she knew that it must be powerful indeed, to have existed for so

long undetected. At first, she thought to nip it before it grew any further; then, to her horror, she discovered it had grown so large, spread its roots so deep and branches so wide, that there was no way of destroying it short of chopping its heart out. The tendrils of the tree's magic were already curling about her, and unless it was destroyed at once, it would cut her off from the source of her own magic forever.

As she searched for the center of this disturbance she saw with even greater astonishment that at the heart of the great tree was none other than Lily White. She knew that she must immediately go to the cell and put Lily to death, for nothing else could save her. On her way to the cellars, she cursed herself for having ignored her for so long. Who could ever have guessed that a mere child would grow so powerful? By all rights, she should be little more than a mindless maggot by now. Clearly, something had gone terribly wrong, but it was too late to stop it. Now, killing her would surely bring down the king's curse and cost her her rule, but with her powers intact she might still have some chance of survival. Without her powers—well, it is said that the fate that befalls a black magician stripped of their power is too awful to comprehend, and she knew that she must avoid that at all costs, even at the expense of her kingdom.

The queen reached the door of Lily's cell in a rage. "Fools!" she shouted at the guards. "The girl you watch over has tricked us all, and acquired powers beyond any comprehension, while you idled here at the door! Who has been al-

lowed to see her? Never in a thousand years could she have acquired these powers on her own!"

"Why, mistress, no one, ever!" replied the amazed guards. "The prisoner has been sealed behind this door for all these years, lying on her bed under the covers, in a stupor!" The queen was confused by the guards' report; she could sense they were telling the truth, but she knew there was no way for Lily to have become what she was alone. Nonetheless, there was no time to dawdle. "Open the door!" she commanded. "The little beast is now a powerful sorceress. I must destroy her at once!"

Lily heard the muffled commotion from behind the thick door of her cell, and she somehow knew at once that this was the moment of truth. With all her heart, and all her soul, and all her mind, she cried out to her friends, "Stand by me, now! The time has come!" and turned to face the door as it burst open.

The queen whirled into the room like a tornado, dressed in black, her eyes aglow with an evil green light. She clutched the jewel that hung about her neck, and pointed a bony finger at Lily. "I know not how you came to be so powerful, child, but die you must, and die you shall!" she shouted. She raised her arms to the sky and uttered a curse; a pack of wolves appeared in the room, circling Lily with death in their eyes. Lily cringed in fear.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, the Vole was by her side. "Have no fear," he whispered. "You have prepared for this mo-

ment well!" Once, twice, three times the Vole scratched upon the ground, and in a flash of thunder and light, he was no longer the Vole; no, he had been transformed into a lion, snarling defiance at the enemy! Now it was the wolves' turn to cringe, but they did not have much time to do so, for the lion was upon them in an instant, rending flesh and breaking bone. Before the sorceress could react, her pack of creatures lay battered and bleeding on the floor of the cell. The lion crouched by Lily's feet, directing a baleful glare at the queen.

"So," hissed the queen, her eyes like slits. "You are too strong for me to attack so directly. Very well. There is more than one way to skin a cat!" Indeed, she had subtler forms of magic at her command. She gestured in the air again, and a plague of locusts materialized in the realms of magic where the tree grew, ready to strip its leaves and starve it of nourishment forever. Lily could not see what was happening, but she sensed something was wrong, for her body trembled in pain as thousands of tiny jaws began to gnaw at the magic extension of her soul. She cried out in surprise and fell to the ground. As her face fell to the stones, she saw her friend the Cricket. "Take heart," sang the Cricket, "for help is always near!" The Cricket chirped once, twice, three times, and in a flash disappeared. The Cricket was not gone, however, but transformed to a million praying mantises, creeping through the branches of the tree in the unseen realms where it lived. Everywhere they crept, they encountered locusts, and the locusts died by the hundreds of thousands in the spiny claws of the mantises. In moments the plague was over, as the scraps

of locust bodies fell through the branches of the tree into the real world, littering the queen with a soft rain of scaly wings and legs. "Damn you once and damn you twice!" shouted the queen. "Enough of such games!" She raised her arms above her for a third time, and let loose a blast of fire directed straight at the heartwood of the tree—and Lily herself. Lily had no time to react, but before the fire surrounded her, the Salamander appeared by her side. "Have faith," he said, "for the pure of heart can walk through the fires of hell itself!" Once, twice, three times the Salamander twisted his tail. As the flames engulfed them, the Salamander too began to burn, but he burned with a fire ever brighter than the flame itself, and was unharmed. To her amazement, Lily, too, began to glow with the same light. "What can this be?" she asked the Salamander. "It is the fire of truth" said her friend. "It will burn away all that is evil and leave only the good." Within herself, Lily could feel a transformation taking place, as though her whole body was being lifted up through the clouds. The evil queen could see what was happening. She cried out in frustration, but there was no way to stop what was taking place—the very fire she had created was the instrument of Lily's metamorphosis.

As the flames blossomed around Lily, a shimmering gown of white clothed her body, and she was covered from head to toe with glittering crystals of diamond. "Good," said the Salamander. "These are the sign of your work; thus can all men know your nature. The queen, too, has a crystal which is the source of her power, but, as you can see, it is corrupted."

Lily looked, and saw for the first time the gem that the witch so desperately clutched in her hand— a twisted thing that glimmered with a pale, sickly fire. "The queen's soul was deformed by her greed and anger, which crystallized into the gem she wears. Destroy this gem, and her power will be no more," continued the Salamander. Somehow, Lily knew exactly what to do—she lifted her hands gently, gestured just so, and the crystal dissolved into fragments that trickled through the queen's hands like dust. The queen let out a wail of anguish, and fell to the ground. With her magic gone, the illusions of beauty and health she had created collapsed, and before them lay a sickly old woman, sobbing in a heap of rags. The woman who had only moments ago been the embodiment of all evil now seemed helpless and pitiful.

"Rise," Lily commanded her. A feeling she had never known filled her heart. "Though you have done great wrong, your life is not yet over. There may still be a chance to atone. As for myself, in my first act as queen, I forgive you." She bent over to grasp the old woman's arm. The Lion, the Mantis and the Salamander watched in approval as she helped her to her feet.

"This is the act of a true queen, a worthy one," said the Salamander in a hushed tone. "It seems you have learned the lesson of love, as well. " He summoned the terrified guards, who fell to their knees at the magnificent sight of Lily. "Sound the bells from the highest towers" he told them. "Rejoice, for the darkness is past, and a new queen rules this day." The guards rushed to do his bidding; throughout the kingdom, the

sound of the bells spread the news to all creatures that the moment of freedom had arrived.

"Who are you, really?" asked Lily, bewildered by the rush of events. "And how can I ever thank you?"

"We are no more than your own heart, and soul, and mind," said the Salamander. "We were driven apart by the spell that bound you, and forced to range the world alone. Only by bringing us all together in the same place through your own unrelenting effort could you have ever freed yourself—a task, I must say, that you accomplished well!"

"I do not understand," said Lily, still confused. Nevertheless, she could feel the presence of her three friends inside her, connected together by some mysterious chemistry.

"This is the true nature of magic and miracles—they can never be fully understood. Why, under the right conditions, voles may even become lions, and crickets mantises!" replied her mentor. With that, the three creatures began to shimmer and fade. "Remember," whispered the Salamander, "if you bring all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind to each task, you will always do right."

Lily went on to rule the kingdom, as was her birthright. The magical tree of her soul continued to spread its branches to cover the lands she ruled, and it nourished the spirit of her people with its rich fruit. The old queen, a broken woman, was retired to a small farm, where she was allowed to make a decent living raising geese. At the end of her life, she repented

her sins, and it is even said that when she died, her last breath was a blessing upon Lily White.

Lily's kindness and compassion set an example for the kings and queens of all nations, even those far and across the seas. When asked for the source of her wisdom and goodness, Lily always attributed it to the suffering she endured when young. She never mentioned the Vole, the Cricket or the Salamander. She tried, however, always and everywhere to remember the advice of her mysterious friends, and she adopted their sign as the standards of her flag. If some thought it odd, they never said a thing, for she was a good queen, and people ruled by a good queen are more than willing to overlook a few peculiarities.

The Woodcarver's Tale



The Woodcarver's Tale

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Many hundreds of years ago, there lived at the foot of the great mountain of Ali Shan a woodcarver by the name of Li Mung. He was an uncommonly gifted artist; his nimble fingers could flick a knife over a block of wood and create figures to delight the eye—flowing, graceful forms of birds, snakes and all manner of rare and imaginary animals sensuous maidens and bearded wise old men: fierce dragons, and clever puzzles of interlocking shapes designed to frustrate any attempts to separate them. He was a quiet, gentle man: if he was a little given to too much vanity, he came by it honestly, for truly his skill was great. Who could really blame him for it? After all, no one is perfect.

Li Mung had learned the craft of woodcarving from his capable father, sitting at his knee in the dim light of an oil lamp at night, whittling little pieces of teak or ironwood into pigs and ducks. Li Mung, however, had a natural talent that, as his father soon saw, ran well beyond the ordinary. The water buffalo that his father carved, a chunky, workmanlike representation of the animal, would spring to life in Li Mung's fingers, the muscles rippling like real flesh as he adjusted a line here, a curve there, to express the inner qualities of the beast as he saw them.

The father wished to send Li Mung to the city where he could study under a real master, but the money was never there. Such privileges were reserved for the rich, and Li Mung's family had few resources, being humble farmers. Nevertheless, over the years the boy's reputation grew, and as he passed into manhood a certain small following of minor noblemen and businessmen from the surrounding countryside sought the young man out for the tiny sparks of life he captured and rendered in wood. Despite this, Li Mung never earned much money for his carvings—he did them more for the love of the work than for the money, and he was a poor businessman, always willing to sell a piece for less than its worth. Whenever Li Mung finished a carving, you see, it ceased to interest him, for all his delight and joy in the carving was in the act itself, and not the result.

Li Mung might have bargained harder for his pieces had he known a small but thriving market for them was growing up outside the tiny village. His wood carvings were often sold at many times the price he charged for them in faraway cities, and some had even reached the mainland itself, where they commanded high prices as folk art of an extraordinary nature.

Li Mung, however, uninterested in wealth, continued to live with his wife the way he had always lived, planting and gathering his crops, hunting small game, and collecting choice blocks of wood from the lowland forests for his pastime. He had little use (or so it seemed) for riches: what he had was enough, and never, in his short life (for he was but twenty five years old at the time of our story), had he known greed, or cov-

eted another man's possessions. In fact, aside from his vanity (and that was truly a small flaw) he seemed blessed of the gods, and had the respect of all who knew him. His life was satisfying; he accepted it, and never thought to question it, or ask for more than what he had.

Li Mung apparently planned to sleep his quiet life away in the village of his birth, which nestled comfortably in its valley abutting the mountain. Fate, however, had more sinister plans for him.

A path from the small village led up into the hills, but the villagers rarely ventured up much further than the height where the last stands of bamboo grew. It was at that height that the air began to grow cooler, even on the hottest summer days. Everyone knew that to continue climbing from this point was to risk an encounter with spirits. You could hear them rattle their bones in the stands of bamboo when the breezes blew, up there on the lonely slopes.

All the villagers were certain the mountain was haunted by the ghosts of their ancestors. It was their cold breath from beyond the grave that cooled the air above, and caused the spirit mists that steamed upwards from the treetops, and poured down the hillsides in rivers of gauzy gray silk. Strange noises could be heard here at night it was a place where trees glowed in the twilight with mysterious green fire, and where lanterns were seen bobbing about at night at heights where no man walked in the dark. For these reasons, no one was really tempted to go too far up the side of the mountain ...even dur-

ing the day. After all, what if one didn't make it back before night fell? And, truth be told, everything the village needed could be found without risking the wrath of those supernatural beings who made the mountain their home.

Now, it came to pass during one particularly rainy spring that the streams flowing off the mountain swelled to enormous proportions. Water poured off the sides of the mountain in great torrents, flooding the plain and sweeping portions of hillside down in calamitous mud slides. In fact, the hills above the town itself gave way, and it was only through luck that the village was spared destruction. As the rains poured down, the small rivulet that ran through the village (which was so tiny it dried up for most of the summer) became first a stream and then a river, cutting a deep gouge between the huts. The flow grew greater and greater, alarming all the villagers, who feared their whole town might be swept away in this terrible flood. For three days and three nights, the waters flowed faster and deeper, until, at last, on the third night the villagers prepared to flee, fearing the worst. By this time the river was a raging, roaring animal of a waterway. Li Mung and his wife packed their belongings (they had little to pack other than his carving knives, a few of his best carvings, and some pots and rice) and sat up with the other villagers, waiting for dawn to light their way to safety.

It was just before the dawn broke that an enormous crashing was heard tearing down the mountain, a crashing so horrendous that it sounded as though the world was about to end. The villagers sat frozen in terror, convinced that the en-

tire mountain had collapsed and was about to bury them all in a mass tomb.

The roaring and crashing grew until it seemed to encompass the world—a great splitting and cracking of lightning and thunder, heaven meeting hell, dragons at war—and then suddenly ceased, just as whatever it was seemed certain to crush them all. At the same time, the terrifying rush of water pouring down the mountain slowed to a trickle, and then stopped.

Clearly a miracle had occurred! The whole village rushed out to see what awful fate had been spared them that gray morning—and behold! Just above the village, lying wedged across the stream bed lay a great, unimaginable leviathan of a tree, diverting the massive flow of water several hundred feet off to another course. Just behind the tree's bulk was backed up an enormous mound of mud and rock—a landslide that, if not for the tree, would have obliterated the village and all its inhabitants in the blink of an eye.

The tree bore scars attesting to its headlong run down the mountainside—huge portions of bark torn away, branches sheared off, roots broken and twisted in the strange shapes of goblins. Still, because of its great size it retained an aura of grandeur, a majesty unattainable by a lesser tree.

It was immediately clear to the village that this tree was sent by the gods to spare them—for what other agent could have guided the tree down so fortuitously into the exact spot where it would stop the stream? They surrounded it in wonder, awestruck. The tree itself was so large, argued the village

sorcerer (he was, in fact, a poor excuse for a sorcerer, with little real power, but he was all they had, so they listened) that it must be a magic tree—surely the grandfather of all trees. The name stuck, and from that day on the village referred to the tree as the grandfather tree. In little time, the tree became a symbol of good fortune, and plates of rice and fluttering strips of red paper with prayers were left beside it daily by villagers grateful for its intervention. Some even ascribed supernatural powers to the tree, believing it to have magical properties, and would leave offerings of fruit and requests for some favor among the roots. All, that is, except for Li Mung, who saw in this wondrous tree not magic, but a new and amazing kind of wood, perfect for carving. This was a new and unknown type of tree—but, clearly, a tree, and not, as far as he was concerned, any sort of magical creature whatsoever. Li Mung, however, knew his fellow villagers well, and concealed his thoughts from them, not wishing to incur their ill will. He knew they would be aghast should they catch even a hint of his real feelings about the tree, and—rightly, as it happened—suspect him of desiring to cut the tree up for use in his carvings.

And oh! What carvings could be made from such a wondrous tree! The tree was so big that whole eagles with their wings spread wide could be carved life sized from the trunk! He saw entire nations of sculpture before him in his mind's eye when he beheld the vast bulk of the tree. Each morning he would leave his hut at first light, climb the few hundred feet up to the tree's resting place, and sit in the early morning

light, imagining the wonderful carvings he would make... if only such a tree were his to carve. That root, there, carved just so, would yield a great snake twisted about its prey, a fat jungle pig. The gnarled portion there would be the face of a god, the sweep of the wood next to it transformed into a robe of clouds. Elephants, tigers and dragons, emperors and courtesans, horses and buffalo all writhed within the wood, waiting to be set free. Li Mung coveted the wood. He caressed it with his desire, knowing all the while that this tree, for one, would remain forever beyond his reach.

But, he thought to himself... What of other trees? For unlike his neighboring villagers, Li Mung believed this tree to be no sacred, magical thing, but rather some unknown new type—magnificent, but still ordinary—which grew at the great heights above, in regions no one had ever dared venture. Perhaps, he reasoned, if he were bold enough, he might climb high enough to find another such tree—or perhaps more than one! Perhaps such trees grew in profusion high above the clouds, breathing the thin air of the ghosts.

As the weeks passed, Li Mung's hunger to chop the tree into manageable pieces grew and grew. The fact that he could not have it made him all the more desirous of it, and the desire swelled up in him like some mushroom from moist, rotting wood, blooming into his mind until it became an obsession. He even risked whittling some tiny portions from the back of the trunk, low to the earth where they could not be noticed, and tried his knife on them.

The wood was everything he hoped for, and more. It yielded to the blade like butter, but felt solid as iron. It did, in fact, seem to have a magical property to it, for it took shape like no other wood in the world, and the tiny turtle he carved from it was so lifelike that all the villagers—not suspecting, of course, the source of its provenance—marveled at it, proclaiming it the best work he had ever done, as, of course, it was.

It was not long before the desire to get more of this marvelous wood overcame all reason.

Now, Li Mung, although not particularly superstitious, had a certain pragmatic respect for ghostly lore. After all, why take chances? Ghosts had a nasty reputation for playing cruel tricks on the unwary, and enough bad luck came a man's way in life without seeking it out. Nevertheless, his newborn greed was such that the lure of the grandfather tree's wood outweighed his fear, and he plotted for the day he might climb to the upper reaches of Ali-Shan, where he reasoned more of the great trees might be found.

And so it was that one summer afternoon, while the rest of the village lay sleepy in the heat, he set out alone, without telling the other villagers, with his blanket, a small bag of rice and vegetables, and his largest saw. He climbed up past the grandfather tree, up into the rustling lower stands of bamboo where green light suffused glades of ferns up further still, to where the last stands of bamboo tapered off, giving way to the flora of the cooler, temperate highland slopes. Here ferns grew larger, and mosses covered smooth stones that hinted of

jade and alabaster. The ground was moister and slipperier: the air grew cooler still, and Li Mung began to wish he had brought his jacket, for the heat below had deceived him into believing that the air above would be warmer than this.

The forest grew tall here on the steep slopes; there was an almost unnatural silence as he ascended, broken by the occasional eerie, echoing call of some unfamiliar bird, or the intermittent snap of a twig beneath his feet. As he climbed, the air gradually grew thinner and more difficult, it seemed, to breathe: yet, paradoxically, it seemed to grow thicker at the same time, as a fine mist began to develop, slowly enshrouding him until he could see no further than a hundred feet or so above him. He thought to himself as he trudged upwards, “I am now among the clouds”, with a sense of wonder. Strangely, though, his spirit didn't feel buoyant, as though it were in the clouds—actually, it felt as though it were thinning with the air, dissipating and growing less substantial with every step. The feeling was not fearful, but rather depressing. He began to question what he was doing, braving these upland stands of pine on this obsessive quest for some dream tree.

By this time, the air had grown cool enough to become really uncomfortable. The sun was not visible—he was by now completely surrounded by cloud—but, he guessed, it must be midday. Li Mung began to seriously consider turning back.

Just as he reached the decision to abandon his search, a huge tree stump loomed in front of him through the mist. Rotted and crumbling, infested with insects, it was nonetheless

without doubt the stump of a grandfather tree—a stump much older than the tree which the rains had brought down the mountains. A chill of excitement overcame him—the trees did exist up here, after all!! The revelation revitalized him, and rather than turning back, he began to bound forward through the fog in leaps, expecting at any moment to be rewarded with the sight of a living grandfather tree.

He did not have far to go, for not a hundred feet above the stump, he located a huge tree rearing up out of the ground and disappearing into the clouds above. Its trunk was so immense, he saw, that it might take days to cut this tree down with the tools he had, if it were even possible at all. He sat at the base of the great tree, trying to grasp some strategy that would yield him the carving wood he so desperately craved. It was clear that no one man alone could fell this monster.

As he pondered at the base of the tree, he spied another great trunk in the distance which had fallen over, perhaps due to its great weight, or a wind storm. It lay twisted on its side, like a dead beast. Nevertheless, he could see from the green shoots sprouting from the fallen trunk that the tree still had life in it: and some distance from the base of the tree, some smaller branches were within easy reach, and of a size to be easily cut.

He clambered up the side of the tree, clinging to knotted root and tangled branch, and walked down the trunk (carefully, for he now stood some twenty feet from the ground) until he reached a suitable limb. He was so excited that he had

completely forgotten the lunch packed in his sack. He prepared his saw and sank the blade into the bark, its teeth biting with each pull deeper into the treasured wood.

As he cut, a sweat built up in him despite the cool air. Soon he was grunting with the exertion of it all. And, as the saw bit ever deeper into the wood, he gradually became aware of someone watching him.

Li Mung stood about sixty feet from the roots of the tree where he was cutting. From behind the rise of the roots, where splinters of wood stood up like lances, peered the face of a beautiful young woman—an unclothed young woman, which was astonishing, considering the cool air!

Intrigued by her presence, Li Mung stopped sawing and waved at the girl. “Hello,” he called. “Who are you?”

“What are you doing to my tree?” Replied the woman, in a voice that carried the sound of the wind through fir branches and the songs of birds.

“I’m cutting it,” replied Li Mung, stating the obvious. He paused, waiting for a response. When none came, he began to saw again.

“Stop that!” cried the maiden. “Didn’t you hear me? This is my tree!” And she scrambled up onto the trunk with an agility that surprised Li Mung. This was an especially nimble girl, he decided. The girl whisked along the trunk until she stood

but a few yards from him, her long dark hair swung over her shoulder, sweeping down her front to cover her.

“This is my tree. You may not cut it!” said the girl.

“Don’t be silly!” replied Li Mung. “As you can see, here it lies on the mountain slope—too large by far for any one person to own!—And besides, what does a slip of a girl like you need a huge tree like this for, anyway?”

“This tree is my home,” replied the girl. “You cut it at your peril”.

Li Mung, who was bolder than most of the men in his village anyway, laughed at this threat. “Your home? There are no homes up here on the mountainside—no villages, no clay for pots, nothing! And as for you, well—a girl like you has no business up here among the mountains. There are, according to some, a profusion of ghosts about. You had best be off to your parent’s, before one of them snatches you!”

“We will see who does the snatching,” said the girl in a dark voice. Li Mung was taken aback by her intensity. “And perhaps there are more spirits about here than you can imagine! As I said before, this is my tree. Don’t trifle with me! If you take any wood from this tree of mine, you will pay full value”, she said, with fire flashing in her eyes, “when the time comes!”

Li Mung snorted. Then, to his astonishment, the girl leapt off the tree to the ground, and vanished into the undergrowth.

For a moment, he considered the incident. Was she a spirit or fairy? The chances seemed, on the one hand, good—here she was, stark naked in the middle of nowhere. On the other hand, her appearance and demeanor were, if anything, quite normal—aside from her absurd attachment to the tree.

Perhaps, he thought to himself, she was some woodland elemental, a guardian of the trees themselves. After musing over this thought for a few moments, he cried out “Young lady! Please, let me explain!”, and peered about, expecting her to pop out again. In a minute, Li Mung decided that no response was forthcoming, so he volunteered more. “I am a woodcarver, an artist,” he exclaimed, “and I need this wood—which is by far the best I have ever carved!—for my work!” Assuming this explanation was sufficient, he finished sawing off the branch he was working on—alone, it was at the outer limit of what he thought he could carry down the slopes—and set off back down the mountain. Of course, the downhill trip was both faster and easier, despite the added burden of the branch, and before twilight was upon him he arrived at the village.

Separated from the enormous trunk that birthed it, the branch appeared much like any other piece of wood, and there was little remark on the part of the villagers as to Li Mung's absence. They all assumed Li Mung had spent the afternoon,

as he often did, in the careful selection of a particularly choice piece of carving material on the lower slopes of Ali-shan.

Li Mung sat contentedly in his hut that night, preparing the first of the pieces of wood hewn from the branch, blocking it out into the beginning of a master work. He felt sure, for some reason, that with this miraculous wood in his hands, anything he carved would vibrate with life—and it was likely so, for an artisan starting out with full confidence in his material is all the more likely to create something miraculous. Thus it was that he coaxed the gentle, flowing shape of a naked maiden from this raw piece of the earth and the sun; a maiden bearing a notable resemblance to the strange girl he had met up on the mountain. Her hair flowed around her to preserve her modesty, making smooth, curving lines around her supple limbs. Li Mung went to sleep that night satisfied that his work was well on its way.

The next morning, Li Mung awoke before sunrise. The excitement of the new piece he had begun prevented him from sleep. He decided to take a long walk down to the river in the valley and wash himself, to begin the day as fresh as possible. He wended his way through the reeds that lined the sides of the path to the river, all the while with the image of what he was carving in the front of his mind.

He finally came to the water and knelt by the riverbank, preparing to wash his hands, when to his astonishment he looked up and saw the girl he had encountered the previous afternoon up on the mountain.

“What are you doing here?” He exclaimed. “I certainly didn't expect to see you!... Although it's not an altogether unpleasant surprise,” he admitted.

“I warned you not to cut my tree and steal from it,” she replied, in the same lilting voice of the day before. “You chose not to listen.”

“And it's a good thing I didn't!” He replied, bending down to wet his hands. “If you cared to stop by my hut, you would see that I am creating a most beautiful sculpture of you with the wood you begrudged me!”

“I know you are a carver,” said the girl. “I understand this kind of thing, for you search for beauty—and beauty is my mother.”

Li Mung looked up again at these odd words. What could the girl possibly mean?

“However, you have taken what was not yours to take—and punishment is due!—For, while beauty is my mother, my father is made of crueller stuff...” Her face hardened suddenly with these words. “Such is my judgment” spoke the girl. “Before, your fingers fed the hearts and minds of your people with your work. Now your fingers will be fish of the mud, to feed the bodies of your people. In this way, they will continue to serve.

With this, she flicked her hand in the air at him, and he felt a twinge of apprehension. Maybe this girl was not the inno-

cent thing she appeared to be at all, but in fact some lunatic. As this thought crossed his mind, he felt a sharp pain in his fingers, submerged in the muddy river water—and he withdrew his hands, only to see, in horror and astonishment, each of his fingers transform into a wiggling fish and drop off, leaving him with stumps where his hands had been. He screamed in uncomprehending anguish, holding his mutilated hands before him as the fish dropped into the water. As he looked up, the girl was gone.

Of course, Li Mung never carved again, but lived on the sufferance of his fellow villagers. And from that day on, the little fish that lived in the mud of the river became a staple in the diet of the people—although Li Mung never developed a taste for them himself.

CHAPTER 14

The Miller's Tale



Once upon a time there was a miller who owned a large, rich mill on the banks of a river. Villagers for miles around all brought their grain to him to mill, and he kept the tenth part. He grew ever wealthier on his share of the grain, but as he grew older, he became greedier and greedier.

His mill was the only one in the area, and the miller could charge what he wished. "It's all right to demand more of the farmers," he thought to himself, "After all, without me, their grain would be useless," and so he began to charge a fifth part of the flour that was milled from the grain. The farmers were outraged, but there was little they could do.

Soon the miller's storehouses and coffers were overflowing, but it was not enough. "I shall charge a third part of the flour that is milled from the grain," he thought to himself, "for I must have a grand new house." The farmers were even more outraged, but again, they had no choice, for there was no other mill to take their grain. The miller's power and wealth grew and grew. He built himself a grand mansion, and bought much of the land in the area.

The miller was still not satisfied. "I shall charge a full half of the flour that is milled from the grain," he decided, "for I have become a figure of great importance hereabouts, and I must purchase myself a baron's title, that I may have a position befitting my stature." This time the farmers were so incensed by the usurious charges that they met in secret to discuss the problem, but again there was nothing to be done

about it. In the end, they paid the price, and the families in the area became poorer and poorer, hungrier and hungrier. There was never enough flour to spare for the farmers themselves when the milling was done.

One day, when the miller—now a magnificent figure, dressed in expensive silks and finery—stood outside his mill supervising the delivery of grain, a farmer he had never seen before pulled a heavily laden wagon up to the gates of the mill.

"I need my grain milled," said the stranger, "and you seem to be the only miller in these parts."

"I don't know you," said the miller, "where do you come from?"

"Oh, around," said the stranger. "What is your charge for milling?"

"A half part of the flour that is milled," said the miller. An odd expression crossed the stranger's face. "This is most unusual," he said, "I never thought anyone could charge so much!"

"I can," said the miller, "I am, as you said, the only miller hereabouts. Look around you—observe the fine mansion, and my carefully manicured gardens! It costs an arm and a leg to keep these grounds up, let me tell you!"

"So I see," said the stranger, "but think of the awful burden you place upon the villagers you mill for. They are all but starving, as is obvious to any fool."

“Pish!” replied the miller, “They are grateful to me. All the folk here look up to me. They need to see a man who is a success! It gives them hope.” He puffed himself up importantly. “You can grind your grain here, or let it rot,” he said cheerfully.

“Let me think it over,” replied the stranger, and he rode off.

The next day he reappeared. “I have thought it over,” he announced to the miller, “and I have decided to make you a proposal.”

“Why should I listen to a proposal?” said the miller, “This mill is, as you know, the only choice you have.” The stranger made no reply, instead, he silently opened his sacks of grain. It gleamed like pure gold. The miller—an experienced man—immediately saw that the stranger’s grain was of a quality much finer than any other; his greed got the better of him, and he wanted nothing more than to gain his half of the fine flour this would make.

“You may have half a share of my full harvest,” said the stranger, “if you agree to charge the rest of your customers only what is fair—which is to say, the tenth part of the harvest, as is customary.”

The miller agreed at once, and the deal was struck. The stranger brought cartload after cartload of the fine grain to the mill. For seven days and seven nights, the mill turned, grinding out only the very finest golden flour.

On the eighth day, the stranger pulled up with the last cart. As he did, he saw the miller completing a transaction with another farmer who had been there the day before. It was clear that the miller had broken his promise, for he was charging the farmer half of the flour that was milled.

“How dare you?! We had an agreement!” he said in outrage.

The miller laughed at the stranger in contempt. “An idiot’s bargain!” he chortled. “Your crop is all milled, but for this one cart. What can you do?”

“I can but ask you to keep your word, and take only what is rightly yours,” said the stranger.

“I shall do just as I please” said the miller.

“It is on your head, then!” replied the stranger. “Mill the last load, and be damned!” He turned his back on the miller in a gesture of contempt, and departed.

The miller was no more than amused at this turn of events, and it was with delight that he put the last load of the stranger’s grain into the mill that night. All night long, as he slept, the mill wheels turned, and the grain passed through.

The next morning, the miller went down to the millhouse only to discover the hoppers full not of flour, but sand.

“How can this be?” he shrieked in anger, checking the last sack of whole grain. Grain it was, but when he put it

through the mill, sand was once again all that came from beneath the millstone. In fact, all of the stranger's sacks of flour were now sand.

“This grain be damned!” cried the miller in frustration. He went to the day's business and milled the first loads brought to him. They, too, produced nothing but sand, and the angry farmers accused him of cheating them. Only by surrendering some of his stockpile of flour could he send them on their way, grumbling. By the end of the day, it was clear that no matter what grain went into the mill, it would produce only sand.

The stranger never came back for his last load of flour. The miller was ruined, and died of a stroke less than a month after he had to close down his mill.

The mill was soon reopened by an out-of-towner who refused to believe the tale of the sand. Mysteriously, the mill produced only the finest flour for him from the very first day he put it back into operation, but, then again, he was an honest man, and he never charged any farmer more than the tenth part of the grain they brought him.

Chapter 15

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee van Laer was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1955, and spent a good deal of his childhood in Hamburg, Germany. He has spent the majority of his adult life in the Gurdjieff work, and is an active member of the New York Gurdjieff Foundation. Mr. van Laer is an import professional by trade, and has traveled extensively worldwide, particularly in the Far East. He holds a degree in fine art from St. Lawrence University, and is a fine artist, musician, photographer, poet, and writer.

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