

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – LETTERS OF THE LIGHT AFFECTED by Trevor Lissauer. Mr. Lissauer is an actor and singer-songwriter recognized for his role as Miles Goodman on Sabrina the Teen-age Witch. His work spans screen and stage, with screenplays optioned and songs licensed. He continues to create stories across film, music, and writing, blending performance with a passion for storytelling.

Page 11 – THE GOOD DEEDS CONTEST by Jeremy Pelletier. Mr. Pelletier is a life-long Minnesotan and a software engineer by trade. He has enjoyed much of his time on wilderness canoe trips, playing in chess tournaments and riding in organized cycling events. He has been writing in a wide variety of genres, but has not had anything published yet.

Page 17 – JUNGLE ROT by Chris Bunton. Mr. Bunton is a writer, poet and artist from Southern Illinois.

Page 21 – INVERSION by Alexander Krasnopolski The author writes, “Briefly about myself: Education: Technical University. Since 2000, Engineer at the Materials Research Center at Ariel University in Israel. Publication on English (Books 1 – 4) here: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08CG264D1?binding=paperback&ref=dbs_dp_sirpi

Page 24 – DIV’S LITTLE GIRL by Mersedeh Ghanbari. Ms Ghanbari is from Iran and this tale is her first published work. Inspired by the rich history and mythology of Iran, she began writing fantasy about three years ago. Aside from creative writing, she works in the conservation sector in the UK, where she studied international law.



“LETTERS OF THE LIGHT AFFECTED”

by TREVOR LISSAUER

LETTER 1

A deep darkness has taken root in my mind... How ironic that it was light that put it there. I write this with the least amount of confidence that this will be read let alone understood... And it's only because of the NEED... the NEED TO BE WRONG... the DESIRE, the HOPE... that I am... that I do.

This is by far the most... I don't even know... the most... screwed up, completely UNFATHOMABLE letter I have ever and will ever write in my lifetime. The reality of this is hitting me harder right now than it did a few weeks ago... I guess there's this part of me that's been in major denial, hoping that as we drew nearer to the edge of this unavoidable cliff that some proverbial Superman would swoop in and save us... But no... No such luck. Now here at the precipice, my mind doesn't know what to do... Every thought leads to the same doorway and when I pass through it there's nothing on the other side but more of the same PANIC and FEAR that makes up this NIGHTMARISH... reality.

My name is, your, OUR NAME is Mark Brown. I was born October 29, 1973 in Los Angeles, CA and I am a piano player... or I WAS a piano player... By time you read this... IF you read this... I won't even know what a piano is... I usually played with bands both on tour and

in the studio... and uh... Who gives a rat's ass... Gimme sec...

Okay... Okay... Mom... Mom's name was Barbara and she was a full-time parent, said she had a perfect view of the Hollywood sign from her hospital window the day I was born, and knew that it meant I was destined for the arts... Maybe she was psychic. She always said she was but I never saw anything that swayed me one way or the other. She was always drawn to artist types and entertainers which always made me wonder how she ended up with Dad, who was an accountant, so might've just been wishful thinking on her part... or maybe she was the real deal.

Lately, I keep playing the theme song from the 1982 TV show St. Elsewhere on my old upright, the one I learned on as a kid... It was a good show, started the career of Denzel Washington and also starred William Daniels who voiced K.I.T.T., the cool heavily modified 1982 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am in the show Knight Rider... I really loved those shows... I really did... And I really loved the look of those tan colored seats, like racing seats... just something cool about them... But the St. Elsewhere composition was the very first song I learned how to play, taught to me by the very beautiful Ms. McMichael. At the time I was more interested in her than the lessons but I also knew the more I paid attention and learned the more my mom

would see fit to keep having her back. Eventually I got so good I surpassed her and off she went... Never saw those perfect legs again. Mom died a year ago, heart attack and Dad died a little less than a year after, about three weeks ago to be precise, from what some say was a broken heart.

As much I miss them both I'm glad they're not here to go through this shit.

They were pretty great together. Growing up I witnessed a lot of uncomfortable fights between some of my friend's parents, like Jeremy Smith's. His folks would fight at the drop of a freakin' hat, not giving a shit that they were sitting at a dinner table with two eleven-year-olds. They'd call each other every name one could imagine, and not imagine. One name that always stood out to me, that his mom would use frequently, was "shit-ass piece of dick-tard". I never used that one myself but I remember always trying to figure out what that might look like. My point is, is that my friends and I never witnessed anything like that between my parents. They were really good people... Of course I'm assuming I'll even still know what a mom and dad is... I'm actually writing this letter in their house, the one they raised me in and it's all mine now... yours. Would've been nice to enjoy it. Maybe you will. Probably not though.

I'm married as well to a beautiful woman named Patricia... Patricia Brown... but it's a bit complicated. She left me about six months ago. Really she asked me to move out of our apartment, which I did and in with my dad. In a way I guess it was good that I was closer to him in the last part of his life, very depressing as well. All the joy in him seemed to have been sucked out when Mom died, which I understand how that could be with Patricia. She does this thing where she listens to a piece of my music and

then tells me what it's about. She creates these fanciful stories with rich characters and lush scenery, making me think I'm a better composer than I probably am. She's several years younger than me. She's kind and smart and I'm a big dumbass for not jumping at the chance to have a family with her due to my fears of being a father while not having reached my career goals yet, so she ended it, and rightfully so... BUT I've been trying to get her back ever since and have had some pretty nice moments with her so far, even though my fears of fatherhood have still not fully subsided. My dad always told me I just never wanted to grow up and says as soon as you have a kid you're forced to and I just don't want to. Maybe he's right... But Patricia is worth it and it just really sucks to high hell that I'm only just NOW FINALLY REALIZING IT!

So why am I writing this? The nitty gritty, also the name of my first solo piano album back in 2000... Never saw this coming back then... But no one did... or could. Ha!

So now I'm going to explain to you the best I can of what's what... There's a space station that's been orbiting Earth for a few years now, crews of two come and go. I guess they do space experiments and things of that nature... So, this one crew was coming to the end of their five-month mission when a routine scan picks up an anomaly, some kind of non-physical light. A waveform thing. It wasn't any known type of light or radiation they say. One of the astronauts, a Commander Pilot James Emrick, AKA "The First", was out in a scout vessel at the time and went to investigate. As he drew near to the source of whatever "it" was, his comms went dead. His other crew member a Sarah Winn, some science person, couldn't reach him for about an hour or so and when Emrick finally

came back online he had no idea who he was or where he was, which means he didn't know how to operate his ship so Winn had to talk him through it from scratch, along with getting him back through the airlock at the station. They say it took hours... I can't imagine what was going through her head that whole time not knowing anything... I mean...

Medical scans showed no damage but still no personal memories remained. He was totally functional but erased with a childlike innocence and what she called an eerie stillness. It was later determined that the light he encountered was the cause. Winn consulted with top scientists back on Earth from all over the world who thought they had stumbled upon an exotic waveform, an unknown form of electromagnetic radiation. They somehow figured out that the light exists outside of the known spectrum. It's not infrared, UV, gamma or anything that anyone on this planet is aware of but a newly discovered wavelength or particle-wave hybrid thing which creates what they are calling Quantum Disruption. Also, please don't confuse this info I'm spewing with me being smarter than I am. It's part from a pamphlet that was distributed to all of us along with hearing the story over and over again every day on TV and radio. So, this freak light affects the quantum coherence in the brain, interfering with memory consolidation and identity structures at the quantum level, and this light is not allowing any of this to happen. It's just saying NO. So it basically makes us forget everything about ourselves but we can still talk and read and write in the language we're used to. At least, the Emrick guy still can... I keep trying to think what future conversations between the "The Light Affected" are gonna be like. That's what they're calling our future selves by the way, also the "TLA" for

short... They should just call us "The Totally Fucked".

They say that there's no way to know for sure where this light came from but there is a "theory" being thrown around by the space nerds that it originated from a dying neutron quasar, whatever the hell that is, but that it collapsed into a quantum anomaly and that the light has been traveling for billions of years ever since but none of that really matters now because as of three weeks ago all of the great leaders of the world informed us that it's headed straight for Earth with no way to stop it.

Isn't that just great?! And then I think, if there's nothing they can do about it, why even tell us? Just let us live our lives and then it happens and we wouldn't have to deal with this HORRENDOUS WAITING part... The idea that it gives us a chance to be with our loved ones and say goodbye and prepare... We can't PREPARE FOR THIS SHIT!!!!!!! And these ridiculous letters we're supposed to write to our "future selves"?! We won't even know if they'll even be read... Probably some BS psychologist's or "feel good" therapist's idea... "go within" "get some closure" BEFORE YOU LOSE IT ALL! SCREW YOU! And why letters and not selfie-videos? Cause YOU... YOU READING THIS... won't even know what a phone is let alone how to operate one. So we put ink to paper... We go back to how it was before the tech made mindless scrollers us... This is what it took us to put down our damn phones... HaHa!

I don't know... I really... I just don't know... There's been talk of blasting nuclear missiles at it but the repercussions of that they say could make things even worse, which is so laughable... Like how exactly could it get any worse?!

Some folks think the light is from God or is God, the "rapture" or "the end of the world"

or the “apocalypse” and maybe it is... I mean it’s definitely the end of the world as we know it. People stopped going to work, understandably. Cults have sprung up welcoming the light, riots have formed, looting, you name it.

The whole thing is absolutely just... I mean...WHAT ARE WE if we can’t remember our past? What about people in prisons? Are they keeping them locked up? Don’t get me wrong I don’t want killers and psychos out there pulling some Mad Max shit but what are they gonna think when they see that they’re in a cell, not even knowing what one is? Also, if they don’t know who they are, are they still criminals? Are we being liberated from identity? What happens to a newborn who’s only a day old with practically no memories at all? Is the light re-sculpting us leaving us only with what’s essential, freeing us from our fears, our worries, our conditioning and if so is it going to be better? What happens to the love we feel for another person? I love Patricia. I LOVE HER SO MUCH. I can’t fathom not knowing that... I mentioned earlier that I’ve been trying to get her back and that we’ve had some nice times and well, she just told me she’s pregnant. PREGNANT!!!! That’s INSANE ON SO MANY LEVEL!!!! Will I know my kid? Will the baby be able to be delivered? Will we care even?

The light is supposed to reach us tonight... TONIGHT! They say you can become so scared that it numbs you. But I don’t feel numb... I feel scared... Most I’ve ever been. Patricia and I are gonna sit out on the porch holding hands with our notes in the other... I wonder what the first thing will be that will go through our heads when he look at each other, feel each others hands. Will we like it or will we let go, not even being sure what it means to hold hands? Maybe our notes which just fall to the ground.

To not know who I am is basically death. It’s death. I... I just... I just HOPE that there is some REASON for this... Or YOU find something that makes it all make sense... Please... PLEASE...

Take care of us.

LETTER 2

The first four lines in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” keep playing on repeat in my mind...

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could”

I’m trying... I’m really, really, REALLY, REALLY TRYING!... But I know I can’t. And I go from being super angry to super emotional to... things I can’t define, being that wishing to see the things that will never be... is a pointless endeavor... For me it’s like trying to see every angle of the aftermath of a train wreck... all the bent and twisted pieces of metal and bones and flesh... You cant possibly see it all... It’s just this incredible, horrific awe that swallows me whole... I am left as nothing...

It’s taken me for what feels like forever to get my life to the exact place where I feel I could be the happiest and now it’s all going to be OBLITERATED!!!!

Lift up your left pant leg. If you even know what pants are. If you do, look at your shin, which is the part of the leg between your knee and your foot... again, if you even actually know what those things are. So, on the shin part of your left leg, you’ll see an indented scar that kind of looks like a soaring bird. What’s a bird? Those animals that fly in the sky. If they still fly

in the sky. What's the sky?... I don't have the energy... Just know that, that scar is proof that you are Patricia Brown.

Brown is my married name; before Brown it was Wallace. Not that it matters... I'm not going to reveal my age. I never believed in "age." When I turned 17, I had this thought: I'm not 17 years old. I am an infinite being who's been a visitor on the planet Earth for 17 Earth-years. And I've stuck to that ever since. So, as far as age goes I'm infinite. Very old but also very young at heart.

The scar? I got it when I was five. My older brother Kyle used to torment me but doesn't anymore. He's sweet as pie now, and I love him so much. Kyle lives in Paris. He's an art major and gives tours at the Louvre Museum, or used to, something I now regret never taking him up on. He always wanted me to come visit. Anyway, when we were kids, there was this one day he was being extra mean, which is saying a lot, and he chased me around the backyard with arms stretched out aiming his fists at me. Each fist held three or four of his die cast Hot Wheels cars in between his fingers making them stick out like some kind of medieval weapon. I eventually got tired of running and decided to stop and face him. In that moment, he tripped and bashed the cars into my left shin. It fractured my leg and left me the bird shaped scar. Thing is, as much as it hurt and bled and it bled a lot, I didn't cry. Not one single tear. And after that, Kyle thought I was the coolest girl in the world and we became closer than ever. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to cry. My instinct WAS to cry, but something inside me wouldn't let it out. I resisted. I don't know exactly why. Maybe it was just to show him up. And I've been that way ever since. There's only ONE person I cry in front of now and it's rare but it has happened,

recently, even. And that wonderful person is Mark Brown, my husband. He's an amazing piano player and composer. I love him more than anything else in this world. I love him so much that I actually left him when he said he didn't want to have kids with me. Fast forward, he's changed his mind because he can't live without me, which I already knew because I can't live without him. It's frustrating knowing things before the people around you do and having to wait for them to catch up. So now we're having a baby and by the time it arrives... I'm crying now... GODDAMMIT!!!!. Okay... I've stopped... I'm taking deep breaths. That helps.. Now I'm thinking... Now I'm overthinking... Why am I writing all of this down? Every minuscule thought?... Because it's these little pieces of me that make up WHO I AM!!!! And I want to KNOW ME!!!!!! I WANT TO KNOW ME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!. And I am scared to death of it all vanishing like some forgotten dream. My love for Mark. For Kyle. My excitement over being a mother. All the kids I teach. I'm a teacher, by the way. I teach 8th grade English. And I'm damn good at it too. I keep a close eye on all my students. I'm fair. I don't let a single kid leave my classroom feeling bad or sad or dejected or like a failure in any way. Ever. I used to come in early to tutor kids who were struggling and I'd stay after school for them, too. Every English teacher I ever had were always THE BEST teachers I have ever known. And I aimed to be just as good, if not better than all of them combined. If I could. And I had planned to carry all of that into motherhood. AND I AM SO PISSED OFF THAT THIS OPPORTUNITY IS BEING STOLEN FROM ME!!!! STOLEN FROM MY CHILD!!!! STOLEN FROM MARK!!! STOLEN FROM ALL THE KIDS I TEACH AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES THEY COULD'VE

HAD TO LOVE, TO LIVE, TO FIND THEMSELVES AS I HAVE!!! ALL THESE LIVES JUST FORGOTTEN!!! Where is GOD RIGHT NOW!!!! Where is ANYTHING!!!!!!!!....

So, here's the main takeaway: I LOVE Mark. He'll be the closest person that is physically next to me when the light hits. I NEED TO STAY WITH HIM, even if I have no idea who he is, even if he doesn't want me near him! If there is any of him still left within him, he will come around eventually. I believe that!... I have to... And there is a beautiful, BEAUTIFUL life inside me, waiting to be LOVED by Mark and I. And I HOPE... And I PRAY... that whoever I end up becoming after this... this thing... that the motherly instinct I feel RIGHT NOW, STILL EXISTS...

Also, if my child is a boy, name him Kyle. And if it's a girl, name her Charlotte, after the spider in the book I always loved as a kid, and still do.

PB

LETTER 3

I had a dream last night I was floating in space without a space suit. I can't remember if I was breathing or not... Now that I think about it I don't think I've ever noticed if I'm breathing in my dreams...or not. There was a stillness within me I had never felt before... I wasn't happy and I wasn't sad... I... I guess I would say I was... perfect yet I had no thought of myself, but I knew who I was at the same time... Hard to put into words... I always dream more when James on his missions... I don't know why. This one felt different though... I had completely forgotten that my waking life existed...

I just was... floating... A momentary break from

the shitstorm that is coming.

There's nothing... There IS nothing I can do. NOTHING!!!!!!!!!!!!!! James is gone... He's really gone... I can't... I just... It feels like I'm in a car with my family and we're moving 1000 Miles Per Second toward a brick wall and I can't do a damn thing to stop it... But I have to watch it happen. I have no choice. I have to completely witness every minute detail leading up to our demise and within that I am stuck in this endless loop of imagining what it's going to be like when we finally slam into... I HATE YOU!!!!!! I HATE WHOEVER, WHATEVER IS MAKING THIS HAPPEN!!! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WE GO THROUGH IN OUR LIVES!!!!!! The TIME SPENT and then you just take it all AWAY!!!!!! First with death and then with this... this... WAKING DEATH!!!!!!

I'm sorry to start this off on such a downer but I can't seem to see what's happening any other way. My name is Suzan Felicia Emrick... I never liked Felicia and I NEVER use it. The name belonged to my great aunt who was cross eyed, mean and fat, and I mean really, really fat. I have nothing against fat people but she seemed to carry her meanness in every part of her big fat body and I could feel it every time she walked into a room when she'd come to visit. My dad said he felt pressured by his mother, who was her younger sister to pass the name along... One time she was babysitting me and my younger sister Claire when I got my first period. No one had ever talked to me about it before so when I saw the blood I ran out of the bathroom horrified, thinking I was dying... She said I was and let me drown in that fear until my parents came home 4 hours later... What a heartless bitch she was... She's dead now though. Long time ago. Don't know anything about it, never asked. Never cared... I wonder

how her fat-ass would be dealing with this... She'd probably greet it with a 12 pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon... She was a mean drunk... It's funny... I rarely ever think about her... but I guess... she's always somewhere in there none-the-less... As bad as she was... I don't want to forget her...

My husband, James is very famous now but not for something good, but for something terrifying. At least something that appears terrifying... James doesn't seem to be scared... But he's lost himself. A fate we are all going to share... James... James, James, James.... He was a pilot in the US Navy and then a test pilot and then an astronaut. He's very handsome, perfect crystal clear blue eyes... He never had a problem with the ladies, especially with me. I've always been putty in his hands. Strong hands, very strong. He's also a very good man... or was... maybe somewhere inside him he still is... I'm hoping anyways... for all our sakes. The last conversation we had was through a screen. He doesn't know the meaning of many words, like wife... and daughter. He doesn't know his own daughter, our daughter, Olive. He doesn't know us... and we don't know him, anymore. I've been racking my brain trying to think of things I would want myself to know and I can't really think of much except that I loved "my" James very much... and I love our daughter Olive more than anything else in the world. She loves orange sherbet ice cream, horses, Taylor Swift and a boy named Charlie, though she doesn't know that I know... And the top of her ears bend forward a bit when she laughs... which always makes me smile... reminds me of a puppy... but I can't ever think of what kind... The last time I saw James in person was when he left the house to go on his mission. He kissed me goodbye and told me not to worry but I always do... I always

worry.

LETTER 4

olive emrick

grade 4

8 years old

dad works in outer space mom does not have job

said I need to write about me

no more school mom says

got to see my dad on my ipad he looked funny

his talk was funny but mom it made her cry

Things I Like

Taylor Swift

colors Red and Pink

unicorns

dancing and dance videos

dots candi

boy name starts with c but he doesn't know

Things I Don't Like

dog poo

getting stung by a wasp

fish, YUCK!

math

dad goes away to work

LETTER 5

I'm Sarah Winn and I am a Mission Specialist / Science Officer and the 2nd woman born out of Murfreesboro, Tennessee to become an astronaut. At one time in my life that accomplishment made me feel real good knowin' that... Like I had really done somethin' great with my life... But even a feelin' as amazin' as that you can't hold it, you can't lock it away somewhere and keep it safe... You can try... but eventually other circumstances eclipse it...

I know that if I end up readin' this in the future I won't give a good goddamn about anythin' in it and that puts a big 'ole smile on my face. Contrary to what most are feelin' right now back home, I can't wait to forget!

I'm 38, NEVER MARRIED got dumped by the man I was sure I was GONNA MARRY and he did it as he dropped my ass off at the FUCKIN' AIRPORT on the way to my mission. He then proceeded to tell me that he'd been plannin' this for the LAST YEAR and wanted to wait 'til he got his own place first. NARCISSISTIC, SOCIOPATH, SELFISH ASSHOLE!!!!!! No thought of speakin' to me on his feelin's, no thought on seein' how I was feelin', could it be worked out, not a goddamn thought in his head of me, only ALL ABOUT HIM!!!!!! Of course it's all my fault for choosin' him or lettin' him choose me. So in the end I'M A COMPLETE LOSER!!!!!!!!!!

On my 30th birthday I got to watch my mother die right in front of me on the kitchen floor completely out of the blue from a brain aneurysm. Lucky for me just before she hit the floor and convulsed she accidentally spilled a pot of pippin' hot coffee on my arm leavin' an ugly-ass scar to remember the moment by.

The only family I have left is my father who was diagnosed with Dementia 6 months ago and doesn't even know who the hell I am most of the time. Last conversation we had he yelled at me thinkin' I was his father, my Papa Joe, who wouldn't let him go to the his school dance because he didn't do a good enough job cleanin' up the garage. At one time he was a really great dad to me but mom dying fucked us both up. Him gettin' Dementia was probably the best that could've happened to him.

I started crushin' hard on James shortly

after boardin' the station a miserable broken mess. Two months in I came onto him, hard, and we slept together and the next day he came to me in tears all tore up over it. He'd never cheated on his wife before. He'd never cheated on anyone before. And he never would've if not for me. I felt like shit over it. I have nothin' and no one. I'm needy and desperate and lonely. All I'm good for is bein' shot out into space doin' experiments on subjects no gives a good goddamn about and will never have any lastin' impact on the world whatsoever. But I guess nothin' will now. So when that beautiful light comes for me I'm gonna suck up as much of it as I can. Take me the hell away from the shit show of a life.

LETTER 6

I am in a shit-hole cause I have Dementia they say, but I don't believe 'em. Goddammit turn down the damn TV Mrs. Smith! I tell 'em over and over and over again not to give her the damn remote. She just turns it all the way up to deafen us... Good, they turned it off.

I can't find my Blueberry. Blueberry are you still flyin' around up there? I'm so proud of you.. So proud of my Blueberry.

Your mother met me when they still called me Dicky and that was before it made people think of the wiggle swingin' between my legs.

So pretty she was, like you my dear Sarah. You look so much like her Blueberry. Oh but she died my sweet. Don't cry... She died... Kitchen... I don't want coffee ever again. Keep it away from me!

Richard Winn is what my parents named me. They hated when my friends called me

Dicky. I have Dementia they tell me, but I don't believe 'em. Sarah's gonna fetch me any day now. My sweet Blueberry

I was a damn good salesman once. I sold ladies dress shoes. One time sold a pair of high heels to a woman with no feet. No feet I tell you. And I looked sharp while doin' it to. A gentleman's handkerchief must always match hit tie.

I was also a magician. Not so great with rabbits but wonderful with coins. I could make them disappear and reappear for days and you'd never see 'em comin'. I got so good I started performin' at children's birthday parties. Blueberry, you're my assistant. Do we have a show today? No!... Today we will go to the magic shop and I'll buy one trick for you and one for me. Then we'll go home and put on a show for your mother. Your mother is so beautiful Blueberry and you look so much like her.

My room is cold when I want it to be warm and too damn hot when I want it to be cold! Goddammit not again with that damn tv! Turn it down I said! Turn it down! Where's my blanket? She took it! Where's Blueberry? I'm not doin' this anymore.

LETTER 7

My name is James Emrick, so I am told. I am a human man from the planet Earth, age 44. I am an astronaut who is a Commander Pilot and I am currently residing in a space station that is orbiting Earth and I am slowly understanding what a space station is along with most everything else but I can speak, read and write in my language of origin, or so I am told.

When I put on a shirt and my hand starts to make the journey down the hole of what is

called a "sleeve" I see it vanish and then as I know it has not for I feel it still there, my corresponding hand emerges from the darkness at the cuff. My crew woman Sarah Winn laughs at my wonderment of this. She laughs at many things but sometimes she does not and liquid... water... tears... yes, tears fall from her eyes and she moves away from my immediate space.

I am also referred to as "The First". As of one month, two weeks, two days, eleven hours and 32 seconds ago I have been forever changed... so I am told... I have no sense of identity. I am constantly in the present moment, from the perspective of Sarah Winn and scientists and doctors I have communicated with on screens. But I ask what other moment is there but the here and now?

I have a wife and child whom I do not know. Even the meaning or idea of a wife and child is foreign to me yet I am told it involves love. A word, a feeling, a moment... a passing moment... still a moment in a life made up of many moments. The kind of love Sarah Winn speaks of when speaking to me does not feel accurate... but also cannot truly be explained. Nor can I explain why it does not feel accurate. It is like trying to explain the feeling of seeing the planet Earth from where I am to people on Earth who have only seen something close to my perspective artificially as from photos or films, which I have now seen some myself, mostly on the subject of space and the mission I was on before my change, but I cannot say any more than that on the experience.

I was asked to describe the last thing I remember just before the light overtook me. I told them that there was a light and from it I am here and that is all. The answer did not please them but the answer is the truth.

I am told that the light that born me, will

eventually born Sarah Winn along with everyone on Earth, my wife and child included. I have been asked how I feel about it but had no answer. They tell me they fear becoming like me. They say I don't have feelings or compassion but I ask isn't it possible that what they know as feelings and compassion is not that at all but a delusion, something they have shaped and molded in order to fit into a box in order give it a name to fulfill an unconscious desire to control. If we name it, we can relate to it and then we can control it. But wouldn't control be the opposite of compassion?

I have yet to feel angry or excited or sad or joyful, so I am told. I am told I appear to be in a constant state of "calm". I do not know "calm". I have no preference to feeling. And I would say having preference would take one out of the present moment. And because it is the only moment I know, it would be impossible for me to feel any of the feelings listed above.

JOURNAL ENTRY

This is Richard Winn, one of the newly "Light Affected". An hour ago I found myself sitting on the edge of a bed in a room facing a window which looks out to a suburban street. I have clarity in my mind like I have never had before. I found a piece of paper sitting on a desk in the corner of the room. The top left corner had been ripped away as if torn from the pages of a book. Under the table I found this empty journal with the first page all but gone except for the corner. On the back cover is writing "For you Dad, Blueberry All My Love". I guess you wanted me to write. Well now I am. The paper contained a letter, more like ramblings in my handwriting, or some other

version of it. One thing that seemed for certain was that I reside here due to having Dementia, which could explain my poor penmanship at the time of writing the letter. Well if I did have Dementia, I most certainly do not have it now. Not even close. I remember my entire life in great detail, every moment of it I can recall as if going through a rolodex I my mind... All but the last year or so that is. Everything up to, I guess me having Dementia. I cannot say for sure but that feels right. I walked around the facility and everyone is different. Meaning, not like me, at least no one I've encountered. They can communicate but have no memories. No one knows what's going on, yet no one seems to be bothered by the fact, or by anything at all. I found pamphlets all over the building explaining about the light that is coming and that it will make everyone forget themselves. Big posters that read "Write Your Letter" cover the walls and letters cover the hallway floors and from what I can see from my window, both the streets and sidewalks as well. Blueberry, I remember everything. Every smile, every kiss, every touch, every laugh we've ever shared. Why do I remember who I am? Are there others who do as well? I will continue to write in hopes that one day we will see each other again, my Blueberry. Your loving father ❖

“THE GOOD DEEDS CONTEST”

by JEREMY PELLETIER

Mike Jurgenson staggered into his apartment, dropped his messenger bag at the door and dropped himself down on the couch next to Sophie Hamm, his roommate. He let out a sigh of exasperation.

“I cannot believe what filthy mouths people have these days!” Mike vented.

“Mike, you’re a dental hygienist,” said Sophie. “People go there for you to clean their mouths.”

“I know, but lately it seems most of my patients are purposely trying to eat the grossest stuff they can find right before coming in for their cleanings. It’s awful! I don’t even want to talk about the types of stuff I’m seeing in people’s mouths the last couple weeks. I almost vomited a few times today. Many of them took selfies of me cleaning their disgusting mouths!”

Sophie laughed a bit, then settled down and tried to be sympathetic. “They probably think it’s funny. I’m sure they don’t realize how bad it is for you when all your patients do that. I’m sure it’s just a fad that will fade away soon.”

“I sure hope so,” said Mike. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out with a big yawn. “You know what? I bet Ralph Lavina is behind this somehow. He is probably running some type of contest on which patient can gross me out the worst.”

“Oh, Mike! You are being paranoid. Not everything bad that happens is because of Ralph

Lavina.”

“Maybe not everything. But most of the bad things that happen to me can be traced back to Ralph one way or another. Maybe you’re right. Society, in general, seems to be on its way out these days. Everyone is so nasty to each other. Why can’t people be nice to each other anymore?”

There was a knock at the door and Benny Castor let himself in without waiting for a response.

“Hey, guys!” he said as he squeezed himself in between Mike and Sophie. “Have you taken a gander at the latest Otto Flavia Podcast? The one with tech mogul Lawrence Bently?”

“I don’t follow podcasts much,” said Mike. “And I don’t know why I would care what a tech mogul has to say unless he is giving away all his money and I get a lot of it.”

“I tune in to Otto Flavia sometimes,” said Sophia. “But I haven’t for a few weeks. What does Bently have to say?”

Benny pulled out his tablet and opened the podcast. The volume was turned way down at first, but he quickly turned it up high.

“Let me welcome Lawrence Bently to our podcast!” said Otto. “The billionaire founder, chairman and CEO of Zarko Tech. Welcome Mr. Bently!”

“Thank you, Otto. It’s great to be here with you this morning. I have a big announcement

to make and I will be making it first right here on Flavia of the Week”

“I won’t waste anyone’s time on small talk for this episode,” said Otto. “What is your big announcement? Something that will change the world?”

“I sure hope so, Otto. This world needs to change direction, and soon. People are just not courteous or nice to each other anymore. In fact, they are downright mean most of the time. I was trying to think of some way to fix that, and I think we at Zarko Tech came up with something that just might do that.”

“That sounds like quite a challenge, Mr. Bently. What is it you came up with? Implanting niceness chips in everyone’s head?”

“Nothing of the sort,” chuckled Mr. Bently. “And I want to assure everyone that the chips we are working on to implant into people’s brains will not change their personality in the least. What I am here to announce today is that we have created an app that monitors the behaviors of the owners of the devices they get installed on...”

“Now hold on there Mr. Bently,” interrupted Otto. “That sounds like Big Brother stuff to me. I mean we all know our devices monitor us for our spending habits and conversations, but that’s just to market products to us. It sounds like you are trying to control people’s behavior by keeping a constant eye on everything we do.”

“Nothing of the sort, my good friend Otto! Nothing like Big Brother. Installing the app will be completely voluntary, and it can be removed at any time. The idea is to have a good deeds contest as it were. The app will calculate a score for each good deed the device owner does. For instance, helping a disabled person with their weekly groceries might score somewhere between one hundred and five hundred

points. The points are allotted by an algorithm that determines how much impact the deed had on the life of the person who was helped. Each person who earns a million points will be awarded a million draggles. And you all have my personal guarantee that the app will never be used for anything other than calculating any points the consumer has earned.”

“I see. I see. So, this app is like a game that gives people financial incentive to be kind to each other. That makes some sense, I guess. Do you really think it will work?”

“Money makes the world go ‘round, Otto. I am just hoping this idea will help it go ‘round a bit more smoothly. My big hope is that doing these good deeds for the contest will form habits that continue on long after the contest is finished.”

“And when will the contest be finished? When the first person earns the prize?”

“The contest will run for six months. Everyone who earns the million points gets the prize. And, if anyone can get to two million points, they will get a second prize of one million draggles.”

Benny shut off the podcast after it showed how to download the app. “It has started already,” he said. There was a musical chime from his phone. He opened the app on his phone. It showed an ad for hair tonic before displaying his point total and recent increases. “See? I got one hundred points for showing you two the podcast. I’m going out now to help one thousand points worth of people cross streets!” He got up and quickly walked out the door.

“Let’s get started on that!” said Sophia. “I don’t know if we can get to a million points, but it will be fun to try. What can it hurt?”

“I don’t know, Sophie,” said Mike. “Bribing people to be kind to each other seems a bit

iffy to me. I have a bad feeling about this.” He reluctantly downloaded the app despite his misgivings and they headed out.

It was nearly midnight when Mike and Sophie met at the entrance to their building. They each had smiles on their faces from the good feeling of being kind to strangers they saw. It felt good to watch most of the other people out in public doing the same. The mood of the entire neighborhood felt light and optimistic. Mike had accumulated eight hundred and twenty-five points, where Sophie had over one thousand.

A large man shoved his way between them and got to the door first. He opened it and flamboyantly waved them to go on through. A familiar chime of new points for the Good Deeds App rang from his phone.

“Good evening, Mike and Sophie!” said Ralph Lavina. “Opening this door for you two just got me another hundred points!”

They thanked him grudgingly and stepped inside.

“And that’s not all the points I am going to get from you right now, Mike.” He pulled out a handful of flyers and shoved them into Mike’s face. “I am also telling you now that I’m stopping this promotion for my club.”

Mike looked the flyers over. It was offering customers to Ralph’s jazz and comedy club a twenty-percent discount for their entire bill for an evening if they had a selfie and story of eating really gross things right before having Mike clean their teeth. It even had a list of horrible things to eat as suggestions before their teeth cleaning sessions.

“So, it was you!” shouted Mike. “You are giving people big discounts if they go out of their way to make my job miserable for me! My, how neighborly of you.”

Ralph laughed long and hard at Mike. “Sounds like it was a successful prank. I didn’t really give any discounts. I actually raised my prices twenty-five percent first. Don’t be so mad. My little prank drove lots of business to both of us!

“I get paid by the hour, Ralph. You just gave me more work for each of those hours and made it so much more disgusting!”

“Well, I’m ending the promotion now,” said Ralph. His phone chimed again. He waited through an ad for appliance insurance. “Another fifty points. I was hoping for more. But every little bit counts. I am up over eight thousand four hundred points now. I bet you two are barely over two thousand.”

Ralph went on ahead and got into the elevator. He held the door open for Mike and Sophie. His app chimed with more points.

“No thank you,” said Sophie. “We’ll take the stairs.”

“All done now, Mrs. Granger,” said Mike as he took the bib off the old lady in his chair. “Your teeth are back to gleaming clean. It was really great to catch up with you again. If you can settle your copay at the front desk.”

“It was so good to see you again Mikey,” she grinned. “I don’t know what to do now. I was forced to retire last year and my retirement insurance doesn’t cover teeth cleaning. I’m not sure how I will pay for this.”

Mike sighed and thought for a few seconds. “I tell you what, Mrs. Granger. You were my favorite teacher back in grade school. I will take care of your bill for you.”

“Are you sure, Mikey? That would be a big relief for me.” Mike nodded. There was a familiar chime on his phone from inside his messenger bag. “I am so sorry about eating all

that rotten stuff right before I got here. My grandkids told me that's what people do these days before getting their teeth cleaned. I feel really bad about it."

Mike sighed again. "It is what people have been doing lately. It was started as a promotion from one of my neighbors as a prank on me. He said he would end the promotion, but it caught on and people just keep doing it. I appreciate your apology."

"Thank you so much for not charging me for this session. Next time I will come here with the cleanest mouth you have seen before you do your thing." She walked out.

Mike looked at his phone. After waiting through an ad for laundry detergent, he saw his point total had gone up another five hundred points. Helping out his old teacher had felt good. Getting points for it on that app made Mike feel dirty about the whole thing.

A week into the Good Deeds Contest Mike and Sophie were at the store getting their weekly supply of groceries. It seemed everyone was so eager to help everyone else with every little thing they were fighting each other about it. Several major brawls broke out in the produce section as people were trying to force produce into other people's baskets when it wasn't what they wanted. Six people started throwing punches at each other for the privilege of being the one to carry an old lady's groceries out to her car for her. The shelves were nearly empty because everyone was pulling products off them to force them into other people's baskets. Outside, the streets were littered with people fighting over who would be the one to help people cross streets. The people being helped were fighting against all of them because they didn't want to cross those streets.

Down the block, Mike and Sophie saw the familiar large figure of Ralph trying to force a man in a wheelchair and military uniform across a street. Ralph's size and strength won out. He forced the man and his wheelchair out into the street right as a bus went by.

Ralph yelled at the bus as it screeched to a stop too late to spare the disabled veteran. He looked horrified as he pulled out his phone to check his point total. He waited fifteen seconds for an ad to finish. "Ten thousand points!" he shouted. "I GAINED ten thousand points! That puts me up over seven hundred thousand. I'm almost there. Another few more days and I'll be a millionaire."

Mike stood there in shock. Sophie had her face buried in his chest and was sobbing. "He killed that man!" she cried. "How could he gain points for killing someone? This contest is awful!"

"Lawrence Bently did say the points are awarded based on how much the action effected someone's life," said Mike. "It seems it failed to check on if was a positive impact of negative impact. I think we need to get home and lock ourselves inside. It's a good thing we were able to get the groceries we got. If we make it home, I don't want to leave until this nightmare is over."

Word spread like wildfire about getting more points for harming people than for helping them. Mike and Sophie witnessed over a dozen murders and many other assaults before they got to their apartment building. They had to run or fight several times to avoid being victims themselves. As they entered the building, they heard someone around the corner shout that the app awards fifty thousand points for killing healthy kids. Mike did not want to know how that person found that out.

A few days later the contest was suspended and global martial law had been declared to stop the murders, assaults, robberies and other crimes being committed for points on the app. Data from the app was deemed admissible evidence in the criminal cases against those who broke laws.

Mike and Sophie were nearly out of food in their apartment. They were watching as their television showed the world slowly starting to be rebuilt. There was a knock at their door. "This is the police!" a voice boomed from the other side. "If you are in there, do you know a Benny Castor? He requested a police escort to come visit with you."

"We know Benny," Sophie called back as Mike got up to unlock and open the door.

Two officers stood behind Benny in the hallway. Benny gave Mike a sheepish grin as he held up two large pizza boxes and a twelve pack of beer. "Thank you for bringing him here safely, officers," Mike said as he pulled Benny inside. He closed and locked the door behind him. From the hallway the officers' phones sounded familiar chimes.

"I'm glad to see you two are still alive," said Benny. "I brought pizza and beer as you can see. Looks like I got here just in time. You guys are out of food. Have you seen the latest podcast from Flavia of the Week?"

"Ugh!" groaned Sophie. "I don't want to hear about his podcast ever again."

"I think you'll like this one," said Benny. "Bently was back on the show trying to... Well, just watch it."

He pulled out his tablet and started the podcast. "Let me welcome once again Mr. Lawrence Bently, CEO of Zarko Tech. Welcome, Mr. Bently. You told us you had another

major announcement to make about your Good Deeds Contest."

Mr. Bently looked meek and disheveled as he hunched over in his seat. "That is correct, Otto. Some terrible mistakes were made in our algorithm for our initial launch of the contest. That version has been permanently suspended. We have overhauled the algorithm. It now only counts good deeds that are welcomed by the people they are done for. Any acts of violence or harm to people will result in points being deducted proportionally from the person's total. As will forced kindnesses that are clearly done to people against their will. Governments worldwide have signed off on my proposal to sentence those with negative scores to one hour of community service per negative point to be worked at one of Zarko Tech's facilities."

"It sounds like I was correct in calling this app Big Brother," said Otto. "It spies on people and they are punished for things the app catches them doing. Do you still give us your personal guarantee you gave everyone when this started?"

"I strongly resent that, Otto!" snarled Bently. "This app is to the benefit of society. For the greater good. Nowhere do the words 'Big Brother' appear in our app. It is out there to make the world a better place!"

"This does seem to be becoming an ominous invasion of privacy and free will," said Otto. "But let me ask you this. Has it ever occurred to you that kindness and civility are things that shouldn't be monetized?"

"I don't understand," responded Lawrence Bently. "If there is one thing I have learned in my life leading corporations it is that everything can and should be monetized. Money is what separates greatness from those other people. Our mistake was in rushing this contest out

before it was ready. We did not do enough testing. We will do better beta testing in real-world environments going forward.”

Bently worked on his phone for a moment. “I do not like your insinuations, Otto,” He sneered. “I have just purchased the company that owns the company that hosts your platform. You are out of a job, Otto. Is that Big Brother enough for you?” ❖



“JUNGLE ROT”

by CHRIS BUNTON

The four-man Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) team moved silently through the humid Vietnam jungle.

The Vietcong operated heavily in this area and the team had moved invisibly among them for weeks, as they gathered intel on NVA and Cong movements.

Click click clack click.

The radio man sent a Morse code message to the fire base while the team squatted down, backs to each other, weapons facing outward.

Their tiger stripe camo and floppy boonie hats blended in with the jungle flora around them. They were virtually invisible.

The team spoke to each other using hand signals as much as possible. They had learned quite a few hand motions that conveyed every word they could need in this situation.

They moved to higher ground and found a camp full of NVA below them. The smoke from cook fires rose up, with the smell of rice and fish.

Sgt. Wells pointed at the camp. Then, at the radio carried by Corporal Morales, then at the sky and then made a boosh noise spreading his fingers wide, like explosions.

Meaning he wanted Morales to call in an artillery strike on the camp.

Normally the LRRPs would avoid anything that might expose them to detection. But this was a great prize.

Morales clacked out the Morse Code for the order.

Within minutes, the sound of pomp, pomp, pomp, could be heard in the distance, as the artillery shells were fired from base.

The artillery shells fell from the sky, screaming through the treetops and exploding with savage roars, as the NVA troops ran screaming.

The shells ripped trees apart blasting shrapnel everywhere, like high-speed razor blades tearing through flesh.

Sgt. Wells, watched through binos and spoke new coordinates to Morales.

There was no need to be quiet right now.

“Fire for effect,” he told the Corporal.

“Fire for effect,” Morales spoke into the radio hand mic.

The sound of pomp, pomp, pomp, came from the distance as the team quickly moved in the opposite direction of the devastated camp below them.

They moved a few yards then stopped. A few yards more. Then stopped. Trying to use the situation for speed but still keeping security tight. There could be wandering NVA Survivors, or Vietcong around.

They moved faster as the pounding of explosives rocked the Earth behind them.

It was time for silence again as the rain washed the jungle around them clean.

They moved deeper into the ancient world than they had gone before. The sounds of the birds, bugs and frogs were deafening.

Morales tapped on the radio mic and shook it.

Private Johnson whispered into his ear.

"What's wrong?"

Morales shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, indicating that the radio wasn't working.

Sgt Wells pointed to the sky and made a whirly gig motion indicating that they needed extraction.

Morales shrugged.

The team moved to higher ground to try and get a bearing.

The heat was becoming unbearable. They had never encountered this level of temperature change in all their time in the god-forsaken land.

Sweat poured off their faces as they moved silently and slowly through the jungle up hill. Shadows shifted with light as the leaves of the trees waved in the breeze above the canopy. The motions constantly making it seem like an enemy was appearing around them.

They reached the top of the hill and Private Danvers pointed toward what he thought was the South China sea, to the east.

Sgt Wells pulled out his compass and attempted to shoot an azimuth, but the compass just slowly spun. He slightly shook it. But it still spun.

He showed it to Morales.

"Compass is spinning. What's going on?" Wells whispered.

Morales shook his head and shrugged.

"Well, that's the sea. So, we head that way," Wells said.

"It could be a mirage," Johnson said.

"What?"

"The heat, the sun and moisture could make a reflection off the trees," Johnson said.

"We don't even know if we are in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos right now," Morales said.

"You just gotta make things worse, don't you Morales?" Wells said.

"Let's find true north, then we can at least know we are heading east to the sea or south toward friendly territory," Danvers said.

"Unless we are in Cambodia or Laos," Morales said with a smile.

"Ok, we'll set up the sticks so we can measure the movement of the sun," Wells said.

"Then we wait."

"Why is there no shadow?" Danvers asked.

"I don't know. It's been at least two hours, the sun is out, but no shadow on our sticks. Shadows everywhere but not our sticks."

Wells looked at his watch.

"My watch is spinning just like the compass," he said.

They all checked their time pieces and nodded.

"We can't stay here. We gotta move. We are going to head toward what we think is the sea."

They all spread out and started moving again. Down the side of a hill into a dark mist covered valley.

The men trekked silently through the jungle. It was a slow process to avoid detection.

Wells whispered to Morales.

"There's no animal sounds or even a breeze. Nothing is moving."

"Yeah, it's creepy. The Cong might be around," Morales said.

"I don't know. Everything feels different. There's a weight in the air and the light's weird,

with the shadows. It reminds me of an eclipse. I can't get my head around those shadow sticks not working."

"Well, we're headed in the right direction at least," Morales said.

"Are we?"

Morales shrugged his shoulders.

They kept trudging on through the tangled terrain.

Johnson turned, raised his rifle and fired 3 rounds into Danvers.

Wells and Morales hit the dirt, pulling security, and looking for targets. Johnson joined them.

"It was 'Charlie,' man. He was right there," Johnson said.

"Where's Danvers?" Wells asked.

"Charlie must have got him," Johnson said.

"You shot him. I saw it," Morales said.

"What? I shot 'Charlie'," Johnson said.

Wells crawled over to where Danvers should be. The rest of the team followed.

Danvers lay sprawled out dead.

"Oh! That's Danvers!" Johnson said.

"You shot him," Morales said.

"It was 'Cong'. Black pajamas, Ak-47. It was 'Charlie!'" Johnson demanded.

"Ok, it was friendly fire. An accident. Get his usable gear and move out," Wells said.

"We can't leave him," Morales said.

"We have to. We cannot carry him and can't call for a pickup. The enemy heard the shots. We gotta move. This is Recon. He knew this when he signed up," Wells said, grabbing canteens and ammo off Danver's body.

They continued on, sweating, with dark thoughts plaguing the mind.

Johnson was on point and ran straight into a

solid stone wall.

"What is this?"

They backed away and tried to see what was there before them, but the jungle made it hard to take in its entire size.

It was some sort of building, made of huge stones fitting together in impossible fashion. It was covered in lichens and moss. Vines grew all over it making it hard to see.

They walked along a wall till they came to a slight clearing in the jungle. There were steps. Massive steps up to a porch and an entrance five times the size of a man.

"It's an old Buddhist temple," Wells said.

"How do you know it's Buddhist? It looks older," Johnson said.

"Way older. It looks like one of the Mayan temples my grandma talked about in Mexico," Morales said.

"It's creepy," Wells said.

"Let's go inside," Johnson said.

"That's not our mission," Morales protested.

"We are recon. That means we check stuff out," Johnson argued back.

"Ok. Morales you pull watch out here. Johnson, come with me," Wells said as he entered the gaping maw of the ancient structure.

Morales squatted down beside a pillar like object, watching the jungle for signs of the enemy.

Light filtered into the temple through slits in the tops of the walls. It was a strange dim greenish filtered light.

The walls of the hall were lined with statues of weird inhuman description. Some free standing, and others carved into the walls in bas-relief.

Wells could not escape the feeling of being watched. He held his M-16 rifle at the ready

while Johnson followed behind.

In the middle of the floor, at the end of the hall was a perfectly round stone lined pit. It was at least 10 feet in diameter.

Wells and Johnson moved up to the edge.

They peered inside.

About a foot from the top swirled a thick black liquid. It moved as though it was being stirred, and there was no telling how deep the pit it filled was.

“What is that?” Johnson asked as he watched the swirling pudding like liquid.

“No clue,” Wells said as he stared as well.

Both men stood mesmerized as they watched the swirling fluid.

Then without a word they walked out of the temple and shot Morales.

Then, Johnson turned to Wells and dropped his weapon. He looked at Wells with a blank stare. His mouth open, while drool dripped out.

Wells raised his weapon and shot Johnson in the head dropping him into an eternity of darkness on the steps of the forgotten ancient temple.

Wells let his rifle slip from his grasp to the stone surface below him. He gazed into the distance, drool coming from his gaping mouth. He turned and walked back into the temple.

He reached the edge of the pit and kept walking straight off into the thick black goop.

He did not struggle. He just slowly sunk, until only his head was above the fluid.

Then a froglike head appeared full of razor teeth, and devoured Wells’ head with one quick snap.

Then, it sunk back into the ever-swirling slop of chaos. ❖

“INVERSION”

by ALEXANDER KRASNOPOLSKI

Bus travel is a tedious affair, and were it not for the tiresome necessity of commuting to work and back, I would never subject myself to it. The problem, I believe, lies chiefly in the scenery—or rather, the appalling lack thereof. When one observes the same drab panorama day after day, year after year, one inevitably descends into a state of primitive savagery.

I have tried audiobooks. I have tried sleep. All prove equally futile. These diversions provide temporary relief, but eventually... well, everything returns to its dreary equilibrium.

Today, the mere thought of boarding the bus nearly induced nausea. Yet one can hardly spend the night at the office, can one? So, I performed my usual ritual of reluctant locomotion. Fortune smiled on me, slightly — I secured a seat right away. Emboldened by this small triumph, I dozed off, opening my eyes periodically to ensure I wouldn't overshoot my stop.

Upon one such awakening, I confirmed that at least twenty minutes of travel remained. I was preparing to surrender once more to my cheerless reveries when... I saw it.

My neighbor — the gentleman seated beside me — was a goat. In the most literal sense of the term. From the neck down, everything appeared perfectly ordinary: worn jeans, a jacket, a bag clutched on his lap as though thieves lurked behind every seat. But from the neck upward—the head, that is — decidedly caprine. Complete with

horns.

The impression was so overwhelming that I nearly sprang to my feet. But recovering my composure just in time, I collected myself, shut my eyes, then cautiously reopened them and looked again... A goat remained a goat. Marvelous.

Since no one else on the bus seemed disturbed by this zoological development, I surveyed my fellow passengers. Humans were remarkably scarce. Predominantly animals. From the neck up, that is. Below the neck — perfectly human. Above — a veritable menagerie.

I pondered this. Delirium tremens seemed unlikely, as I've never indulged in binges. I drink moderately, like any civilized person—on appropriate occasions, holidays. Psychosis? That seemed more probable.

The bus approached my stop, and I began elbowing my way toward the exit, squeezing past dogs, cats, pigs, and various other fauna.

Upon reaching fresh air, I intended to head home but decided a stroll might do me good—clear the head, as it were. Looking around, I beheld more beasts. This plunged me into despondency. I wondered: what manner of creature was I?

Around the corner stood a clothing store — I headed there immediately. Entering without ceremony, I peered into the nearest fitting room and confronted the mirror.

A rooster. Splendid.

This struck me as odd. I'd always associated myself with other animals, but never a rooster. Upon exiting, I considered lighting a cigarette, but the image of a smoking rooster gave me pause. Ridiculous, all of it.

Lost in thought, I barely noticed my arrival home. Ascending to the apartment, I entered cautiously. My wife was in the bedroom, arranging freshly laundered linens on the shelves. Glancing at her melancholy eyes and drooping ears, I muttered something indistinct and proceeded to the kitchen.

A dog, then. Like our downstairs neighbor's. Basset hound, I believe.

Dinner held no appeal. A single thought drilled through my skull: something must be done. Should I present myself at a hospital? Ex-

cavating my memory, I recalled a conversation—we'd been sitting in McDonald's with the guys, and my right-hand neighbor, Steve, had brought along an acquaintance who worked at some military biological institute.

Why did I remember him? Nothing better occurred to me, so I trotted off to Steve's. Fortunately, he lived in the adjacent courtyard.

Steve — the walrus — didn't immediately grasp my predicament. Nevertheless, promises and entreaties worked their magic, and we proceeded two blocks to his acquaintance — John.

John lived alone, his security clearance precluding matrimony. Mercifully, he was home and nearly sober. Upon seeing us, he registered no surprise. Nor did I, frankly; his face had always betrayed a certain piscine essence.



I explained the situation as coherently as possible, adding that he, as a representative of Science, was duty-bound to assist me.

"Well," John gurgled, "this could stem from anything. Environmental toxins, most likely."

"And now what?"

"We'll conduct an experiment," John decided. "What do you see when you look at me?"

"Well, a fish. Salmon," I lied. In truth, he resembled a carp.

"Now drink this."

John splashed whiskey into a glass. I had no desire to drink, but if this was Science... I downed it, chased with the proffered pickle, exhaled — and beheld John: slightly puffy, unhealthy complexion, but human. Joy surged through my body.

"This calls for celebration!"

"No, no, no — let's wait," John withdrew the bottle. "We must observe the transformation of consciousness."

Seeing the question on my face, he explained: "The sobering process."

The dose's effects lasted barely ten minutes. Fish and walrus once more. Despair flooded my soul. The asylum, then. Silence lengthened.

"You need inversion, that's what," John finally muttered. Seeing my confusion, he elaborated: "So everything's reversed: sober — humans; intoxicated—beasts. But inversion is no simple matter."

I decisively stemmed his flow of eloquence, silently emptied my pockets, and laid all the money on the table. The sum was not impressive — \$75. Sighing, John accepted the payment, fetched a slide rule from his room (I remembered such things from school), and plunged into calculations.

Steve and I, meanwhile, discussed the situation in hushed tones.

Finally, John finished and ordered me to close

my eyes. I resisted, but he was adamant. Squeezing my eyes shut, I was about to say something... when he struck my jaw with such force that I tumbled from the stool and sprawled across the floor.

Leaping up and seizing the bottle from the table, I was about to—when suddenly I saw John. Not a fish — his actual face.

"Well?" he asked intently.

"Seems fine. I see you and Steve too."

"Excellent. Let's continue the experiment."

He poured a second shot. Upon drinking, I saw fish and walrus again, which I joyfully reported. After about ten minutes, everything returned to normal.

"Inversion," John pronounced solemnly, and citing exhaustion from his calculations, expelled Steve and me from his apartment.

"I wonder what he actually does at that institute of his? I always thought he was a quartermaster," Steve mused. "But who really knows with military types?"

"Classified," I confirmed, and proceeded homeward in considerably improved spirits. ❖

“DIV’S LITTLE GIRL”

by MERSEDEH GHANBARI

In the highest room of the tallest tower, a girl lived forever. No one saw or heard her and maybe that’s why they hate her. If they were to see her, they would scream at the long cascade of spiderweb like hair, at the blue eyes so light, they blended in with the sclera. They’d recoil from her skin so white, fresh bones were dark in comparison. They would be cruel, forgetting the girl was indeed a child with no companion but her overly explored tower, that her fangs although monstrous were never used, and that being cursed by a parent’s love was a universal fate.

A girl lived in the tower and everyone knew it, for when she cried, water drenched them, when she angered, the earth rumbled beneath them. Some shouted to god, “rid our land of the cursed child, lord. We are slaves to you, not to the devil spawn.” Some wished for the child to live forever, for the land was hers, they merely lived on it. And some foolish ones, who thought themselves unbound by mortal wounds and folly, dared to venture inside her fortress in search of wealth and glory. And much like all who were enthralled by the promise of overnight success, they would end up disillusioned. For the tower did not toy with the safety of its charge.

The newest flock of fools currently stood by the entrance of the tower, now. Looking a little worse for wear, because even the journey to the

tower was somewhat treacherous, filled with murderous monsters and jagged toothed creatures. They patted each other’s backs, congratulating one another for making it this far, none of the four adventurers even reflected on the cowardice that rooted their feet to the ground.

When silence reigned for a little too long after the congratulatory mood subsided, the self prescribed leader of the group, said “well, shall we then?” Azure gestured to the entrance, as if there could be doubt as to what she meant. She had a lilting voice, perfect for a bard or even a performer. But someone had filled her head with stories of adventures, battles and bravery. No one had quite mentioned sleeping in the roughs, moulding travel rations or even injuries.

Her companions looked at her, gawked really. They did not gnaw at their lips or scuff their feet, for a lot of time had been spent on preparation, a lot of risk taken in the journey and the concept of sunk cost fallacy, had not yet been invented. They nodded, wishing one of them would back down, raise an objection or get unseriously injured. Seriously, but not mortally would also suffice. At this very moment, all but one were remembering the horror stories told not just about the child but also the tower. Very few had seen the inside of the tower and survived, and the ones that did, were in no condition to tell the tale.

The single member of the group who was

not contemplating their life choices was Azure. Because when others were developing their brains and common sense she was working on her muscles and swordsmanship.

So she pushed the double doors and with a creak they opened to...not much, honestly. The first floor of the tallest tower was desolate, dusty and decrepit. Or at least that was what they were allowed to see but they did not know that yet. For now, barely inside the tower, they beheld a rather large room, specks of dust liberally coating the floor, less so in the centre where a rug had once resided. The walls were coated with mold and a smell of damp that would put a water cave to shame.

Azure deflated on the spot, she had put a world of hope on this adventure, for her family, complete with two little ones, an aging mother and memory of a loving father, relied on her income. Desperate eyes landed on Kaveh, the most senior member of the group who grunted and pushed past Azure. He began to search the room, for he understood the first floor of the tower was the one most explored. He also understood that adventurers, naturally hasty people, often left valuables behind.

In the face of Kaveh's ever existing pragmatism, the rest of the group joined him. Diaco pulled his hat down and, making sure it covered his ears, a nervous gesture, the reason for it is... actually his secret to tell, began searching under the floor boards. He had a talent for finding and assessing treasure, saving the team the bother of hiring someone to evaluate their finds and therefore, an exorbitant amount of gold. He often thought that was the only reason they kept him around, for he had a somewhat fatal flaw. The boy never kept his guard up. The only thing Diaco routinely remembered was his hat and nothing else.

It did not matter much, for Haami always remembered to have ~~his~~ back, their back, everyone's back. Haami always had everyone's back. She nodded to herself, satisfied with the thought. She clutched her precious turquoise wand gifted to her by her father who was almost as supportive as he was rich. For the longest time Haami left the wand at home, for fear of being called spoiled or not taken seriously. Though she had stopped the habit when Kaveh admonished her for not taking advantage of all she was given, Azure pitied her for caring too much about what people thought. Diaco had understood not wanting to be bothered but remained quiet anyway.

Hammi's eyes roamed almost 365 degrees in her vigilant search for danger. Although, soon after, even Kaveh decided there was not much hope in searching this floor. He shook his head at his team mates with a shrug. There was no point in spending too much time on the first floor anyway but there was one problem. "Where are the stairs?" Diaco asked, looking around as though they might materialise out of thin air. They didn't of course, for the little girl who lived in the highest room had not finished pleading with her tower.

The little girl's - she had never been named and from this point on we will call her Girl - imagination only expands so far. Anyway, Girl knew about the adventurers, of course. She had first seen them outside from the window in her room. One might think it was too far away to see but being mostly a monster had its perks. She had begged the tower to let them in, as she was pleading now for them to come up. It was an affair with no words or even discernable cognition, no one had taught Girl how to speak

and, robbed of language, she was an animalistic little thing, making the stories about her almost true.

At the moment she was batting her eyes for the tower, a vision that would make even the steeliest of stomachs hurl but it was slightly working on the building. Her tower tried to resist, even making the walls close around her so she would run to her rooms but Girl knew it was incapable of hurting her, which was something of a design flaw.

So a staircase appeared downstairs, naturally to the adventurers it had always been there and the rumbling and creaking was merely the old infrastructure. Girl laughed loudly, a sound that did not reach the occupants of the now second floor.

Her beady white eyes darted from the luminescent lilac light of Haami's wand to the large sword in Azure's hands. Girl did not linger much on Kaveh, but she could sense Diaco. The fact that Girl could see the adventurers and not the other way around is a testament to why we should have more sentient architecture, the benefits are astounding and the excuse of impossibility, was frankly old.

But more on the child later. For now let us focus on Haami who felt watched, there was movement at the periphery of her vision, sounds that no one else seemed to notice. She placed her back to a wall, not knowing their capricious nature, and watched the room. The second floor had many nooks and crannies and a kitchen, the existence of which was highly confusing to Haami. She tried not to think or even register what looked like snake sheddings on the floor. The room was sparse of furniture but for the rug tapestry hung on the wall, Diaco had gasped almost in pain from seeing it, what would have been a priceless artifact was marred

by teeth marks. Haami couldn't fathom what manner of creature could have left them, as the tapestry was hung high up.

Her nervous eyes took in the span of the large room only to land again on Kaveh and Diaco, rummaging about. At this point Haami heard a hissing noise to her left, whipping to see the source she was faced with nothing. She clutched her wand, trying not to wipe her sweaty palms on her tunic, jumping every time Azure banged open and slammed shut cabinets in her search for gold and silverware.

Haami's head hurt, a familiar searing pain starting from the nape of her neck, she thanked her God for the lack of nausea that usually accompanied her affliction. With her free hand she reached up to wipe the sweat from the back of her neck. And whirled around when her hand came back crimson with blood.

Adventuring was an odd job, take Haami for example, she had slain multiple monsters of various varieties yet when faced with the creature, a hideous thing that even the monster guides and seasoned adventures would run from, all she managed to do was screech. She did not question the disappearance of the wall that was behind her, nor did she remember to use the turquoise wand in her hands.

She was frozen, her gaze locked with the black eyes of what looked like a hastily assembled man in front of her. The creature was gaunt with wrinkled sagging skin, white frayed hair clinging to his scalp in patches. And protruding out of each collar bone were two pythons, hissing and writhing towards her with crazed hunger. One of the snakes had blood dripping from its fangs, her blood.

"Welcome to my domain, children. Are you my salvation?" The old man rattled in a voice breaking with disuse. He cooed at the snakes,

petting each of them as they nipped and bit at his hands. "They have hungered, do not begrudge them their inhospitality." He frowned at Haami's rigid trembling posture. "When did people stop bowing to their sovereign? Tsk, tsk, tsk." Haami just noticed the jagged crown atop his head, the edge infused with his skin from long wear. The crown and the ragged gray loin cloth were the only items of clothing he wore and Haami felt so much worse for that fact.

"That's Zahak," came the out of breath voice of Diaco. If you are unaware about who Zahak is, do not be ashamed, you are not alone. Consult your preferred local library. For now, know that Zahak was a feared king, known for misdeeds and evil that would not surprise you for we have far surpassed the tendencies of ancient wrongdoers. But it is imperative information especially for our adventurers that Zahak was famous for feeding human brains to his snakes.

Zahak opened his mouth, its corners twisted upwards, he was about to say something when his head toppled down, rolling on the floor, his snakes slithering to drink his blood.

"His crown is valuable, right?" Azure's head popped up behind the now headless corpse, her sword drenched in crimson blood. Her grin faded when the shock on Diaco's face did not dissipate. "Run," Diaco bellowed, taking Hammi's hand and running away. "What? Why?" Azure asked, running behind him, ushering Kaveh to follow.

"You have to behead all three heads at the exact same time, otherwise he does not die." Diaco ran the span of an unexplored corridor with no destination in mind. Still running, Azure looked back because according to her mother she had been cursed with curiosity and courage. Zahak stood still headless and all, the stub that

was his neck was now growing. To her horror his head regrew inside out, so Azure had a clear view of the inside of a man's brain, muscle and tissue. A knowledge that would haunt the remainder of her short life.

"Only beheading works?" Kaveh asked, his voice steady through the exertion and fear. Zahak's body was twitching and convulsing, his head reassembled halfway. "Only beheading," Diaco panted, he halted to a stop, the hallway ending abruptly as hallways do and the tower was not inclined to make them any more convenient routes.

Behind them Zahak with a newly assembled head was foggy and confused. When his gaze landed on the four adventurers, his obsidian eyes were amused no more but filled with menace, rage and a little bit of thrill for bloodshed, the sick freak. He began walking languidly towards the group, Aure looked at Kaveh and Diaco and with a nod they moved to join him in battle, the sick freaks.

Zahak raised a gnarled finger with long grimy nails, he murmured something inaudible to the adventurers and because they lacked luck, light the color of Zahak's eyes coalesced around his fingers. In the speed of a blink, the spell shot towards Kaveh, surrounding him in a barrier without air. Even though his heart was speeding and his mind filled with panic, he knew most barrier spells shattered with enough force. He smashed his shoulders against the spell, repeatedly. Twirling his mace, he crashed it against the barrier. No visible cracks appeared. His lungs began to burn, his heartbeat echoed in his head. He brought his considerable weight against it and the barrier just vanished.

Kaveh did not have time to look back at Haami but he knew she was to thank for, somehow she had realised the nature of the spell. He

could see her in his mind's eye, eyebrows furrowed, wand blazing. Zahak's eyes darted passed Kaveh to Haami and blocking Azure's sword thrust, he nodded to her in respect.

Kaveh knew two things with certainty of a seasoned adventurer, one that Zahak was a strong magic user for the barrier had not budged at all and two, most people with magic were lacking in hand-to-hand combat. With a gulp of air he joined his friends.

Zahak was hurling spells at Azure and Diaco. Sharp slashes of water and air that would slice through bones. It took both of them and Haami to stop him from injuring the group fatally. The three adventurers were circling Zahak, lunging forward to attack yet the decrepit man seemed a few steps ahead of them at all times.

Kaveh needed to pierce his space, to force the old king to forgo his magic. He caught Azure's eyes, communicating with her the way people who had nearly died together a couple hundred times, did. The moment Azure nodded, Kaveh went into a flurry of attacks. He aimed for the snakes, the frail knees, thighs, back. He was not concerned with defence only to hold Zahak's attention, for a second. Trusting that Haami would keep his vitals safe. Zahak threw obsidian spells at him that cut mercilessly at his cheeks, dominant hand and one even near enough to his eye that Kaveh halted. Blood burning him as it ran into his eye.

Azure, who had successfully avoided the attention of Zahak, sneaked behind him, one of the snakes was looking at her but that was the point. She swung her sword to behead the king again, but at the last moment Zahak turned, blocking the weapon with his forearm. Azure gasped, the man's arm should have been sliced off but the sword clanged against it as if it were made of metal. Only his heads and his heads

alone were penetrable.

Zahak grabbed her sword and kicked Azure in the chest so hard she went flying, if she had held on to the sword, her hand would have popped off from her shoulder. As she flew, Diaco beheaded one of the snakes and Kaveh began counting. The experiment had proved two things, Zahak could see through the eyes of the snakes and that it took twenty seconds for the head to reassemble.

Zahak snarled, grasping Diaco by the throat. Panic set in as Diaco's neck began to burn, he screamed from the heat. Azure was too far away to help but Kaveh finally got his chance to get into his enemy's space. To avoid the snakes reaching him, he ran, sliding down and pushed Zahak to the floor. Zahak fell forwards chin first and Kaveh pinned him down with as much pressure as he could. Just in time for Azure to reclaim her sword and slice through the head of one snake. They had twenty seconds and Diaco, still coughing, stopped clawing at his burnt neck and beheaded the other snake. Haami had begun to run the moment Zahak had hit the floor. She wrapped her whip around the old man's neck. One side in her hands and the other in Azure's. Five seconds. The two women pulled at each side of the taught cord.

"5...4...3...", Kaveh panted, still struggling to keep the king down. Before he could reach one, Zahak's head thudded to the floor with a wet sound. For a second no one breathed let alone utter a word, everyone expecting the monster to grow back. But the corpse remained still.

"Let me heal you." Haami broke the silence looking at Diaco whose neck had already begun to blister. "You should heal yourself first," Diaco said, gesturing to Haami's blood soaked back. She looked pale either from using magic too much or loss of blood, or more likely both.

Haami slumped down on the floor, right next to the king they had just desecrated as is the life of an adventurer.

“So is his crown valuable?” Somehow Azure had grabbed the crown, in between running and fighting for her life. No one could deny Azure had her priorities straight. She took it out of her satchel, handing it to Diaco for inspection.

“We just met a mythological king?” Diaco said, his eyes were far away. He clutched the crown with both hands, entirely unbelieving.

“I wish his attacks were mythological, too.” Kaveh looked abused, cuts and bruises on every surface of his body.

“If this is merely one of the monsters in the tower, I wonder what the girl is going to be like.” Azure was rubbing her back where a wall had graciously slowed down her fall.

“Grandma said she had four eyes, two in the back of her bald head,” Haami said, remembering all the times she had been sent to bed with the threat of the child coming to get her.

“I heard it steals kids to wear their bodies, that’s how it has remained a child.” Kaveh hissed as he shifted his weight. Haami touched her wand to his wounds and they began to dissipate, she repeated the action for Diaco but Azure waved her away, only her pride had been severely wounded, not much else.

“As the myth goes, she remains a child because her father wished for her to never grow up and Morghe Amin heard and made it come true.” Diaco had great knowledge about where history and mythology met. A short side tangent to explain Morghe Amin, it is a chicken that flies around and grants wishes, good or bad. And if you find that silly or stupid I dare you to consult your own culture’s mythology and see if you can still remain on your high horse.

At the moment, the girl who did not have

four eyes, was not bald, and did not steal children, was mouthing the words the adventurers said, not really understanding the context.

“WeAr theer bodies,” Girl said, butcher-ing the language, as it was a child’s wont. She clapped her hands, twirling in glee, her white nightdress dancing around her ankles. The tower was slightly shaky, an immortal king had died. Greater foes had not slain the monster yet four raggedy adventurers from the streets had waltzed in and killed him with power of friendship and teamwork?

There were many monsters roaming the place of course, most of which the tower did not control for the primary purpose of it was to protect Girl and none of the monsters and their mothers would come near Girl before soiling themselves and throwing up at the same time. But even if it had control over them, it would steer them away from the adventurers, for he could feel Girl giggling in glee, something she had not felt in a long time.

A child needed more than protection, a thing the white Div, her father, had not thought of before he fell in battle. Girl was not an unhappy child, sure she had desultory moods that brought the winter or drought about. But she lacked for love and companionship, she often looked at the white mountain from the roof, thinking of what could have been or strained her eyes in futile effort to see the village. She sometimes resorted to the monsters in her tower, trying to catch them and befriend them but often the soiling and vomiting happened which discouraged even a child starved of attention.

The adventures had come at a bad time the tower thought, but it thought the same every time they came. The tower was so preoccupied with the thoughts of Girl and Zahak’s death that it did not notice the adventures, now

healed by the grace of Haami, went to the third floor via a staircase that the tower did not make for them.

Haami was babbling, not noticing the sudden wind in the staircase, she was gesticulating wildly with her hands and talking faster than thought could catch up. The exhaustion of battle was replaced by the awe for their opponents. "Did you notice his speed, he could conjure a spell a second at a time," Haami said to no one in particular, even Diaco was not paying attention to her. He touched the walls of the staircase wondering why they were covered in pollen.

Haami looked at her companions who merely hmm'd. Not noticing where she was going, Haami collided with Azure's back. Her three companions stood still at the entrance to the third floor, their mouths open wide. "What?" Azure breathed out, she looked around the room, her eyes must be deceiving her, for she saw a vast, open ended meadow, flowers blooming under a sun that should not exist, she looked back at the stone staircase that wasn't there anymore, neither was any hint of the tower.

"Illusion?" Kaveh asked, three sets of eyes turned to Haami, their magical expert. A few hours ago Haami would have said in no uncertain terms but the girl had been humbled thoroughly, the way the rest of them hadn't been.

She raised her wand concentrating her magic. "Reveal," she whispered and nothing happened. Haami was not convinced. She took a hesitant step forward, watching to make sure the grass moved beneath her feet. She plucked a flower and much to the horror of the rest of her group ate it. Granted it was an unhinged thing

to do but the method behind her madness is that illusory objects are visual things, and do not taste of anything.

"It is real." Haami spat out the half-chewed flower, wiping her tongue with her sleeve. She looked around the greenery, she could see trees at the edge of her vision and hear rushing water but what caught her attention were two boxes at the centre of the meadow.

Azure looked at her companions, who gave a variety of gestures all meaning i dunno! Without a staircase going up or even down, the only direction was towards the boxes. Once the group was close enough to the boxes they could see they were large enough to fit a human inside. To the left of them and now visible, was a third box made of light? The group could not be sure because it was excruciatingly painful to look at.

"Who are you?" A voice asked from behind them. Diaco jumped, making an undignified yet hilarious sound. The group turned to see... beauty with a sword pointed towards Diaco's heart but that was less important right now.

Azure looked at the man that had just materialized out of nowhere and wondered if she had wished him into existence. Every belief about the objectivity of beauty or being in the eyes of the beholder vanished, ugly people said that or even just people. This creature, whatever he may be, was sui generis. If Azure was capable of thinking with anything but the yearning thing in her pants, she would have noticed the creature's butterfly wings and slightly transparent skin that marked the man as a pari. The creatures that were famous for bewitching and seducing although he was not doing either now. Kaveh was trying to work moisture in his suddenly dried mouth, and Haami looked about to propose or hurl.

"I am Diaco," he responded to the forgotten question, as if that answered anything.

"Tell me of your purpose here?" The pari asked, pretending he hadn't taken advantage of the tower's inattention to bring the adventurers up here. He had a beautiful voice, and Haami, unable to register the words, wanted him to sing.

"Adventuring?" It was not that Diaco was immune to the pari's beauty, he was just less interested in physical beauty, allowing him to keep his head. Granted, if you were to choose a head in a crisis, don't choose Diaco's, he once confused an ass with a horse.

"I see. Fool me I had thought you might be heroes in a quest to rescue us," The pari said, his wings fluttered behind him as his shoulders slumped. The adventurers had vastly different reactions to the sentence.

Azure: "I can rescue you!"

Diaco: "who is us?"

Kaveh: "Are you enchanting us?"

Haami: "ouch."

Haami's reaction was less about the sentence, more because she bit her tongue hard enough to bring her to tears. She slapped the back of Azure's head as well. They were not enchanted of course but physical pain always helped if one was acting a fool. Azure shook her head looking at the man's ears and not his beautiful face, even the man's wings, swirling in colour and catching the light like a stained glass window was mesmerising.

"What is going on?" Azure asked in a firm voice.

"I would not presume to enchant you, good people. In all honesty, I will bow before you if you were to acquiesce to grant me assistance. The lesser legions of jinn have imprisoned my sistren and thus me in this goodness forsaken

tower." The pari gestured to the three boxes. Diaco narrowed his eyes, he knew pari were not necessarily a force of evil but they were not to be explicitly trusted either.

"Why would we help you?" Diaco asked.

"If not from the goodness of your heart then for this." The pari reached to the satchel at his side and brought out a helmet made out of the white Div head. The head resembled a human man, if thrice the size. its features were distorted and made ugly, every facet big enough to become grotesque. Fangs protruding out of too wide a mouth, a face too white to be human, curved horns sharp enough to cut, deep eye sockets that had bleed dry.

"It's beautiful," Azure said, pinching herself in disbelief, the existence of the helmet was a known myth. The stories told of the fantastic hero that slayed the white Div and fashioned the helmet.

"I must have it," Azure declared, baring her sword and looking at the boxes as though she were about to charge them.

"How did you get that?" Kaveh asked.

"From an adventurer much like yourselves, rest assured it was through no bloodshed. I merely convinced the adventurer to not leave unless he released my companions. He was unsuccessful," the pari said in such a matter of fact tone the adventurers almost did not catch the myriad of red flags in the sentence. Pretty people get away with everything.

"We will try but we will leave if unsuccessful, is that understood?" Azure asked, her sword still bared.

"I do not control your way up nor down, my good women," The pari said because he, like most of his ilk, was a pathological liar. If the adventurers did help, he would return the favour just as easily as he would watch them die

if they didn't. Whether an immortal lifetime of imprisonment had made him desperate and cruel or he was simply born that way is none of our business.

Regardless, the adventurers circled the boxes, trying to figure them out, as the pari explained what he knew. "The jinn legion have delusions of grandiosity so these are meant to be three trials. One is purely made of concentrated sunlight, one is as heavy as the white mountain outside of the tower, and the other is... something"

"That is not much to go by," Haami said, looking at the light box with a furrowed brow.

"I don't remember much of what happened that day but the poem they sang, and the hopeless faces of my siblings when they were shoved inside."

"What was the poem?" Azure asked, her eyes already angry as they were anytime anyone suffered the slightest injustice. She was so beautifully simple like that, she could hear about the death of thousands and not blink but she would burn an entire neighbourhood for the tears of one child.

"They were shoving my sister in that box...", the pari said gesturing to the heavy box, "and sang you should know of this metal's fate, no one but you can better relate, for strength and beauty ever praised, under fire and ice you remain unfazed, but we mock what you hide within, the cracks under your crystal skin." The pari looked at his almost translucent arms.

The hatred and anger the pari felt was a lid for the unbearable grief he had for life times stolen from himself and his family. The emotions were somewhat undermined when Azure reached a tentative hand towards the light box and screeched the moment her fingers neared it. She swore in an impressive streak,

shaking her hand rapidly. "What about made of pure concentrated sunlight makes you think, ooh should touch?" Kaveh asked, genuinely perplexed. Azure shrugged, she shook off her injury. Deciding the first trial was not for her, she pushed the heavy box and screeched again, as her back gave out.

"That hurt!" Azure declared looking at her companion as if she expected the same amount of shock from them.

"Is she... always like...this?" The pari asked Haami, who sat down in front of the light box. The light was cohesive but she knew it would be, it reminded her of the magic tests her tutor had put her through but for some reason she doubted a simple protective barrier would suffice. She plucked another flower.

Concentrating her mana around the flower she honestly made a pretty good protective barrier. She threw the flower at the box, it disintegrated into ash before contact. "Thought so," She whispered to herself, ignoring Kaveh and Azure who had found a door on the heavy box and were trying to pull it open. She conjured an ice block taking water out of the air, making it as hard and thick as she could. After wrapping the ice in another protective barrier, she used air to push it towards the box. It did not melt immediately, allowing a less than a second glimpse into the box.

The view was too brief to make any sense of, but the pari who had been watching her with furrowed brows, blanched. His eyes the colour and vitality of grass widened, as he got dangerously close to the box. He turned to Haami, reaching tentatively to clasp both of her hands in his. "Lady of Arcana, with a fleeting glance, you have given hope back to me. For that I am forever indebted to you." He kissed the back of her hands and pressed it against his forehead,

an old gesture of thanks only Diaco knew the significance of.

Haami smiled, her cheeks rosy, for she did not understand the pari, whose nights had turned into a declaration of another day lost. He had been confined to the meadow not by chains or cages but by loyalty. A thing that wavered, that on days when his voice, the only sound he heard, became grating to his own ears, days when he contemplated leaving or walking through the light box unprotected, almost broke.

To hammi helping was merely something she could do, was happy to do, she enjoyed challenges but the pari knew how rare that was. He had met many adventures here in the days that bled into centuries, and if they did not try to kill him on sight, they did when he showed them the helmet. He had enthralled some and charmed others, but to no avail.

Haami was biting down on her nails, deep in thought, sunlight was not something she had much magical experience with. She glared at the box conjuring an area around it and suddenly removed the oxygen from it. As expected nothing happened, it was not a fire after all. She conjured steam conscious of her dwindling magic supply. She had used too much magic today but there were no physical signs yet so she was fine, probably. Ignoring the fact that physical symptoms like visible dehydration, temperature and dizziness were signs of overuse not a gentle suggestion to maybe now you should stop.

Haami cooled down the temperature around her, which was harder than previously anticipated because of the heat radiating from the box. She had entered that almost manic stage of needing to do this thing or hurt everyone around her, as if the box was a tied up necklace or a stubborn knot. Both Kaveh and

Diaco looked at her debating whether they should intervene. The only mage Azure knew was Haami, who did stupid nonsense like that often so she didn't know to be concerned.

The clouds overburdened by steam and cooler temperature released their charge and rained on and around the box, the water droplets evaporating before even making it near the box. Haami swore screaming at the top of her lungs at the box.

She marched around the light box, her mind working faster than she could process information. The problem was not the light but the heat, but air and water were out of the question, the dirt in the meadow was too contaminated to still be inflammable, she didn't have access to any metal that might withstand the heat rock would just turn into...

"Hello," Haami bellowed near the box, her cheeks flaming from the heat. A muffled sound of confused greeting came from inside. "Is it boiling hot in there?"

"Um...no!" The pari trapped inside responded. Haami nodded to herself, she walked to what she thought of as their pari, the man was asking if Diaco needed help in what looked like fingering a hole in the third box. She sat down on the floor, suddenly too tired to move, she put her forefinger and thumb in her mouth and whistled. Everyone jumped and came to huddle around the slightly unhinged mage.

"Sir, I must ask permission from you, I have a plan that might jeopardize the life of the pari inside but it might also work." Haami needed precision and speed in her magic and her ego had been utterly demolished by the king, who used magic as fast as others used their limbs.

"I reckon at this point even death is a mercy," the pari answered.

"The moment I give you the signal, you

three will get the pari out, no matter what,” Haami demanded, looking at Kaveh. she did not stand, not trusting her knees to remain steady but she gathered an exorbitant amount of magic.

With her heart beating in her ears, Haami used half of the gathered magic to form rocks around the box, the rocks began to melt immediately turning into red and orange lava from the pressure of the heat, she waited long enough for all of the rock to melt, knowing she probably was cutting off the oxygen for the pari inside but it would take time for the air in the box to run out.

When she was sure all the rocks were melted she used the rest of her magic to turn the temperature down, it was too hard for her now, her lips were beginning to tremble from the cold and concentration. She looked down at her hands, the skin taught and veins visible, her mouth was dry.

The rocks were darker now, almost solid again but she couldn't make the temperature any cooler so she conjured wind blowing it from all directions to the rocks until part of the rocks exploded. Haami did not have time to give the signal, or one might argue the explosion was enough of a signal. For Azure and Kaveh who had ducked down at the minor explosion sprinted towards the box. Kaveh battered the rock where the explosion had been until the rock cracked enough for a pari to be squeezed out. Haami saw their pari rush to the newly freed one, crushing her to himself, satisfied she promptly passed out.

Shivering Diaco picked Haami up, he knew this was going to happen but was honestly too scared to stop her, the magic had clearly dehydrated her and she was too warm to the touch, but an ice cube would be warm to his touch at

the moment. He placed the mage down gently, placing his satchel under her head, coaxing her to drink some water. She would need food when she woke up but for now he let her sleep. He brushed her hair away from her face, watching her for a stolen moment.

“Is she alright?” The male pari asked, Diaco just realized, they had not asked the man for his name. He assured him, she was fine, just exhausted. The two paris went and stood by Haami's sleeping figure. With the meadow behind them and their unattainable beauty, the scene looked like a fairytale come to life, two guards protecting their slumbering princess.

“Have you a name?” Diaco asked them both.

“Pari,” they said in unison, their lives must be extremely confusing. Sure, Haami was as comfortable as she could be, Diaco walked back to the box with a small hole in the side of it, big enough to fit two fingers inside. The pari... pari A had already told Diaco that the hole was much longer than it looked and there was some sort of mechanism inside that needed to be engaged.

Diaco fiddled with the pins keeping his hat secure, looking at the box, it looked cool to the touch but not as much as it should be with what Haami had done. Azure had already tried pushing/ slashing/ insulting both remaining boxes to no avail, so Diaco thought the box was nigh impossible to break.

He grabbed a stick, wriggling it to fit the hole, he pushed the stick further and further in until the left side of the box shot about half a foot downwards making everyone but pari A jump in surprise.

“It does that sometimes, I think there are buttons inside,” pari A explained, he was talking to pari B in a hushed tone, their bodies

as close to each other as they could be without touching each other constantly.

Diaco pushed the stick further in, but it was not long enough. When he retrieved the stick the left side of the box slammed back into place as if nothing had moved at all. Diaco went to investigate where the box had moved and saw nothing. There were no cracks, to the naked eye, or touch. He would have sworn the box was just that, a solid box.

He grabbed Hammi's whip from her belt, knowing nothing could wake her up and pushed that in the hole, the left side went down into the earth again, he maneuvered the cord further in and after a long while the section underneath the box jammed forwards and clashed against Diaco's foot. He hopped on one foot quietly cursing, hoping he hadn't broken a toe or something.

"Azure that sword will break if you throw it against that damn box and then I will break ev-

ery bone in your body," Kaveh shouted at Azure who slowly lowered her sword, looking Kaveh in the eyes, in that daring look she got when anybody challenged her.

"You think you can?" Azure responded, she was itching for a fight, both of them had spent too much time trying to lift the door, push it and pull, lift the entire box altogether to no avail. Azure did not like her strength being questioned.

"Azure, I warn you," Kaveh growled and Azure brought one hand up in surrender but with a shrug and a defiant look threw the sword with all her strength against the box. The box shattered and Kaveh lunged towards Azure twisting her arms to throw her off of his shoulder, with her free hand Azure punched Kaveh in his diaphragm. Azure landed on the floor with the thud and tackled Kaveh's knees, he was pushing her off but she bit his calf. With a yelp, Kaveh pulled a handful of her hair. But she was



not relenting.

"Enough. Look!" Diaco shouted in his voice of command, pointing at, and reiteration is necessary here, the shattered box.

"I hate it here," Azure said, disentangling from Kaveh and watching as pari A and pari B ran to embrace pari C.

"Crystal skin." Kaveh slapped his forehead, remembering the poem pari A had recited for them. "I thought they were being racist."

"Probably both. Two things can be true," Azure replied and Kaveh slapped the back of her head. Looking at the three paris hurt, partly because they held each other so tight fearing that without the other's touch they would crumble or get separated again. Because they wept openly for the relief of reunion as well of the grief of lifetimes lost. But mostly it hurt to look at them because they were just so damn hot.

Azure rubbed the back of her head, walking to the sleeping Haami. Diaco had set up a little nest for her makeshift pillows under her head, food and water readily available for when she woke up ravenous. Azure took her jacket off, covering her friend with it. She couldn't take her eyes off of paris, she missed her own siblings, something fierce at that moment, being apart from them meant she saw them in every child she met, in every sibling dynamics she encountered.

It was a wonder that she didn't hate every jinn for this crime, but Diaco who was generous with his knowledge was to thank for that. He often told them about the difference between different kinds of jinn, ones of high rank with powers of persuasion, shapeshifting or more common ones that were thoughtless monsters.

As Kaveh squatted to check the brittle metal, Diaco went back to the third box, making sure not to clash with the bottom bit of the box

again. Haami's whip was at its end and when Diaco pulled it back the box went back to normal, no sign of discrepancy anywhere.

Diaco looked at where Haami and Azure where, pari A was walking towards him, the tears on his translucent skin shimmering like sunlight against the sea.

"Do you have magic?" Diaco asked, something about the pari did not allow for comment or sympathy especially not from Diaco. But the adventurer had a plan, a crazy one by nature of its simplicity.

"I am of magic but compel none. Out of all in your group I assumed you would." pari looked at Diaco, trying for the sake of all the kindness his group had offered him, to conceal his hatred.

"I am neither of magic nor do I compel it. And though it is worth little I am sorry for what has been done to you and yours."

"The fault is not yours, but the gratitude is. And it is for that I warn you, do not trust the tower and whatever you do, don't underestimate it. All is not as it seems." Diaco bowed his neck in thanks.

"Do you mean illusions are at play?"

"There are ways around illusions, cousin. Not so with the tower. Find the child before you search the tower for loot, all will be revealed then." The pari put a hand against the box, his fingers spread out as if he could will the thing to open. The hope in his eyes, worried Diaco who had rarely ever been the recipient of that much trust from anyone outside of his group.

He regarded the hole on the side of the box. He wished he could somehow calculate how long the opening was, but he didn't have a mind for this kind of math or any brilliant ideas. With Haami asleep the overall intelligence of the group was basically in the nega-

tives.

Diaco beckoned to Kaveh. "I need a lot of water, can you make it happen?" Diaco said, without saying anything they both decided not to wake Haami to conjure it.

"I think there is a stream here somewhere, give me some time," Kaveh said, rushing towards the sound of water, in the meantime Diaco found a long piece of wood and carved the inside of it out. He blew into the hole making sure the wood was entirely hollow now. Not long after that Kaveh came back surprisingly no longer wearing his leather trousers. "Is this enough?" Kaveh held his trousers by the waist, the legs tied securely at the hem, dripping slowly with water.

Kaveh was tall and bulky so the trouser contained quite a lot of water indeed. "What else could I possibly do?" Kaveh responded to Diaco's raised eyebrows, the younger looking boy wanted to laugh but there was no time as the trousers did not make the best of waterskins. He directed Kaveh to hold the trousers on top of the hole and careful not to spill too much water inserted one end of the hollowed out wood in the tied up trouser leg and the other into the hole in the box.

Water began to flow into the hole, making the left side of the box to yet again go into the ground and the bottom to yet again hit Diaco in the same exact foot. After a while the top part of the box slammed to the left, the paris circled the small opening but it was too miniscule to see the inside let alone for the imprisoned pari to fly out. Diaco checked the trousers, there was one leg worth of water left and he prayed to deities he no longer believed in that it would be enough. Minutes passed and their water depleted, some to the ground and some to the hole, but there was no sign of any more locks open-

ing.

"Azure, go get more water," Diaco shouted.

"Give me your trousers, I will not strip."

"Go." Azure glowered but left anyway.

Kaveh had bunched up one leg of the trouser to make whatever water remained easier to access but Diaco could see it wasn't enough.

"Azure hurry," He bellowed, not knowing if she could hear him or not. There was no water left anymore, Kaveh scrunched up the trousers to get all he could out of them. Diaco sat down for a moment, defeated and he slowly took the wood out of the opening.

Diaco didn't know what else to do, he looked around the meadow for something that would help but all he could come up with was steam and he didn't have any way to produce the amount he needed, anyway. He could hear clinking from inside the box, but he wasn't paying attention nor did he notice that the sides of the box had not slammed back.

"Get away," Kaveh shouted to Diaco moments before the front of the box fell to the ground with a heavy thud, freeing a pari from her prison.

Kaveh and Diaco looked at each other in amazement, two fools whose stubbornness paid off just like they always believed. The paris were delirious with joy and rejuvenated with glee. The only person upset was Azure who came back with trousers full of water and a half bare behind.

The three conscious adventurers sat down, listening to the sound of the paris reveling in reunion, circling over the skies of the meadow.

The goodbyes between the adventurers and the paris was surprisingly emotional, all the paris cried from the joy of reunion and a debt that could never be repaid, Haami was teary eyed,

Kaveh cried getting back inside his wet leather trouser and Azure cried when she put on the white Div helmet.

The tower had forgotten about the adventurers, it had no vision into the meadow, but no one ever came out of that place. Girl was disappointed, of course but she would...

...The tower jolted, as it felt the adventurers again, they were coming up another set of stairs it had not controlled. What was that petulant pari thinking? Girl who had noticed them too, brightened, but her broad smile died when she saw Azure, who wore her father's head as a prize, one she hadn't even earned. Girl screamed, running towards the adventurers, tears streaming down her cheeks, her hands in tiny fists that never held enough power.

The tower expanded the corridor the child was on, connecting it to her bedroom. She raged when she reached it, sudden lightning followed her screams. Such rain poured down, that left only the memory of the sun that was shining moments ago. Girl kicked at the walls of her tower, tore out her bedroom, sobbed in rhythm to the pattering of rain outside.

Girl hated Azure, wanted to rip out her heart. Though her grief was old, it remained the centre of her life, for progress, change, and passage of time had been banned to her. She was and always would be, the dead Div's little girl. And what a torment that was.

The tower decided the adventurers had to go, well... die, but let's not be too morbid about it. Oblivious to all, the group of adventurers were exploring a bathhouse. Diaco had let them know about his conversation with pari A and they decided to heed his advice. It personally hurt Kaveh not to investigate the bathhouse, not only because they might miss something valuable but also because of its decaying beauty.

The tall archways covered in colourful tile work that was once vibrant, the rotted pool in the middle devoid of its water.

"Can you hear that?" Kaveh said he was standing in the corner of a room, his mace held ready. Azure listened, beyond the sound of Haami's footsteps, she could faintly hear scuttling from afar.

"Probably rats, but be on your guard anyway." She bared her sword, signaling Haami to be on the lookout as well. Azure ventured deeper leaving the rest behind. The bathhouse was a thing to behold, they had one in the village of course, they were not heathens from the west, but nothing like this. From what she could tell, there were three or four rooms, for private use, a warm and cold room that she had only heard of in bard stories about kings and nobles. The group separated in their quest to find a way up.

Azure was beginning to believe the pari when she came through an archway, the place looked like an exit or entrance depending on which side of the tower you entered. There were stalls for changing clothes, moldy and tattered towels and at the far end a door.

"I think I found a way up," she bellowed to her companions, she opened the door without waiting for them to reach her. The sound of scuttling grew tenfold the moment the door opened. "Kaveh!" was all that Azure had time to scream before being swarmed by jinn.

The image of them was enough to make her want to quit adventuring. The jinn, Diaco would probably know their name, but that was neither here nor there, poured inside in a legion, toppling over one another in their haste. There were so many that the floor became invisible beneath them.

The jinn were crimson, composed of two thick legs topped with a human head, and

nothing else, no torso, hands or neck. Their bare feet scuttled at the tile work like nails on a board. They bit at Azure baring their long fangs, frenzied in their thirst for blood.

Very quickly Azure became too boxed in by the press of them, unable to swing her sword. She was brought to her knees, her eyes watering from the smell of meat and feet. They scratched at her with their toes, biting chunks of her skin off with their teeth. She screamed using all her strength to push them away, but there were just too many of them. The moment she punched at one or pivoted her sword through one's mouth another would replace it.

Kaveh saw Azure disappear beneath the swarm of jinn, and he started swinging his mace. The creatures flew away yet he did not make it any closer to Azure. The jinns were not particularly strong but their sheer number was enough to tire him out. Soon his arms began to burn with overuse.

Haami's wand was expelling fire in all directions, sending screeching jinn flat on their nonexistent bottoms. But even with magic she couldn't protect herself from all sides, she was bitten, scratched and at this point she would die by a thousand cuts. She needed to get to Azure and Kaveh but the few steps separating them might as well be an ocean. She couldn't even see Azure anymore, just a cluster of jinn huddled near the entrance being toppled by the rest of the mob.

"Enough!" Haami heard a command from behind her so powerful that it made her stop. For a single moment she was almost paralysed by fear. The voice was one she was sure she had never heard before, but when she turned around, she saw Diaco, the crown of Zahaak atop his hat. With every step he took, the jinn took a step back. He put his back against the

staircase and guided the creatures away. He gestured to the adventurers to leave. His group baffled and bleeding rushed to the door, stamping over the jinn that were too injured or dead to follow Diaco's demands.

If you are wondering, wait, that makes no sense, you would not be alone. "Wait, that makes no sense," Haami said once she was on a new floor, she was out of breath and out of... everything, they all were, bar Diaco, who did not bear a single scratch.

"How did you do that?" Haami asked Diaco who was hastily shoving the crown back in his satchel, pulling his hat down.

"It was the crown, I think." Diaco pretended to take in the new room, investigating their surroundings.

"The crown? Why? She is literally wearing the head of their general and they were eating her in chunks." Haami gestured to Azure who looked uncomfortable, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"Probably enchanted," Diaco said over his shoulders, in a too controlled and conversational tone.

"But you didn't say." Haami rubbed her arm and winced. A part of her flesh was missing. No one else was questioning Diaco and she wondered if she was being too dramatic.

"When did I have time? It just worked ok?" Diaco snapped, his voice echoing in the room. Haami recoiled, remembering the voice of command that had nearly stopped her in her tracks.

"I'm glad it did. Good thinking." Azure put in hastily, slapping Diaco in the back. Diaco nodded, avoiding everyone. Haami touched her wand on Azure and Kaveh's wounds, healing them, as Diaco went back to pretending the large bedroom, less dilapidated than everywhere else, held all of his attention. There was a bed, soft pillows and blankets laid over it ready for

use, and though it smelled musty and moldy, it was so inviting that Diaco yawned. The warmth in the room settled over the adventurers like a cosy blanket. Azure sat on the divan and couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped her.

"Maybe we should rest a bit," Haami said, conscious of the fact that the only person who'd had any sleep was herself. She opened the little window to the heart of the night, letting the sound of rain in. She dug in her satchel handing out rations as Azure built a crackling fire in the tiny fireplace.

"I'll take first watch," Kaveh said, after finishing his food. He sank down in the plush armchair. And the rest of the adventurers found their own beds for the night.

Now you might think, they are being stupid, why didn't they sleep in the meadow? Why would they sleep in this clearly god forsaken tower at all? Why are the shadows moving? Why is Diaco being weird? And there is a simple answer to all of that: have some patience, and keep reading. Tsk.

The night moved in as Kaveh tried to survey the room, the little light coming from the fire Azure had made before sleeping, waned and wavered like the winter's sun. The rain pattered down in the background as the fire cracked and burned, Kaveh shifted his weight in the armchair, resting his head against the padding, warring to keep his fluttering eyes open. A fresh cool breeze came from the window but Kaveh's blanket kept him warm.

The blanket wriggled up as Kaveh pulled it, covering his legs and thighs, stomach and chest, he brought it up just below his neck and almost defecated from fear when he came face to face with the 'blanket.' He definitely would have, especially if he wasn't paralysed from head to toe. The blanket, bakhtak or sleep paralysis demon,

nestled on Kaveh's unmoving chest, the thing was black as night with two white stars for eyes. A thin humanoid creature with bones jutting out of its collar bones, chest and back. It was not entirely corporeal. When Kaveh focused his eyes on one part of the being, the rest of it seemed to cast off in black shadows. It seemed to consume the meager light around him instead of reflecting it.

Kaveh tried to scream, tried to thrash around, to throw the bakhtak off of himself but all he managed to do was produce a murmur, a single twitch of his fingers. Kaveh couldn't even feel his heartbeat even though he knew it was pounding. He watched as the black thing laid on top of him, moved to squat on his chest, looking at his eyes, his head cocked to one side, it bent close to his mouth and took a deep breath.

With a motion of the bakhtak's hand, three bodies simultaneously stood, making no sound and no unnecessary movement. From the periphery of his vision Kaveh could see his three friends. It was said that the bakhtak liked to be watched when it tormented a life. Although there was no light in his friend's eyes, no movement in their limbs apart from the slow and methodic rise and fall of their chest, Kaveh knew they would remember every detail of the night.

The bakhtak giggled silently, his hands moved and Azure jerked towards Kaveh bearing her sword. Even though Kaveh knew bakhtak did not kill their prey, he couldn't help but be terrified. Kaveh closed his eyes, waiting almost praying for the thing to get bored and flee.

So Kaveh did not see the tower's temper tantrum, well it was not much to see but the dark void dropping on his bum, clutching his head as the tower, put all the force it had on the little prankster. The tower wanted the adven-

turers gone and it didn't care that the bakhtak never got a plaything.

The bakhtak rubbed the back of his head to make the pain go away, tsking. If you could look past the darkness and horrid shape of him, you would see the little tear that soaked his cheeks, the poor thing just wanted to play. Pouting, it reasserted its hold on Azure, who had almost woken up.

Azure jerked upright again. Somehow she knew she was asleep, that this was a dream, so she didn't fight back, when her limbs moved towards Kaveh, she didn't protest when her hands raised her sword on Kaveh's chest. She reassured herself that she was having the worst nightmare possible as she drove her sword down and into Kaveh's chest. I will wake up now, Azure thought when Kaveh's blood spurted out, soaking her hands.

Leaving the sword in Kaveh, Azure turned to face Diaco who unsheathed his daggers as if they had all the time in the world. The tower hastened the bakhtak, screaming and tugging its mind. All of the tower's attention was focused on the bakhtak and the adventurers, so no one noticed a door opening and a white child size shape jumping on the armchair and on top of the bakhtak's head.

Let us go back in time to a child, a tantrum and a tasteless helmet. After Girl saw Azure's now most prized position, the helmet fashioned out of the white Div's head, she flew into a rage that left her bedroom in tatters, the tower in a murderous mood and the entire region flooding. Even after all these years, Girl went up on the roof when her heart was too broken for her little chest. She sat facing the white mountain, her tears washed away by the rain. But her rage never subsided.

As you are very well aware, immortals

forced into eternal childhood do not have the best decision-making skills. So Girl, taking advantage of the tower's inattention, snuck up on the adventurers. It is suspected that the purpose of the act is a mystery even to Girl herself. Note to architects out there, make your sentient buildings also omniscient.

Circling back to the present, the poor bakhtak was reeling on the ground throwing up and defecating in fear of Girl. The monster was so terrified it released its hold on the adventurers who snapped out of their anxiety riddled dream.

Haami gasped as she looked at Kaveh bleeding out and rushed to him. Seeing as jumping on people had worked, Girl jumped on Azure's back. Her small hands wrapped around her neck, squeezing with a surprising force. Azure clawed at the girl, turning purple from lack of air. "Diaco, help her," Haami screamed, she was kneeling near Kaveh's sofa, her wand and hand being soaked with his blood as she desperately tried to heal him.

Diaco did not move however, one hand pressed to his stomach, his legs buckling, breathing hard as he saw Azure, struggling to get Girl off of her back. He doubled over and emptied his stomach on the floor. Girl clawed at Azure's head, trying to get the helmet off but in a moment of reprieve from being choked to an inch of her life, Azure body slammed Girl to the floor, where she hit her head at the foot of Kaveh's armchair and promptly passed out.

Azure, with her active imagination and the myriad of actual monsters she had fought, had built quite a picture of Girl in her mind, but it is important to note that Girl looks a lot more like a child than a monster. She was so little, barely tall enough to reach Azure's belly. Her hand, small enough to fit in the palm of Azure's

hand. She was a child and confronted with that fact Azure panicked. Proving once again that travelling back in time to kill a significant villain as a baby is harder than people assume.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” Azure rushed towards Girl. The entire tower was shaking and Azure barely noticed. Diaco steadied himself against a wall, rocking back and forth, his eyes never leaving Girl. He didn’t see Haami open and close her mouth, glancing at Diaco, the crumpled bakhtak and back at Diaco’s hat. Kaveh was no longer bleeding but his wound was not closing up, Haami had used all the magic she could without putting him in harm’s way.

Reassured by the rise and fall of Girl’s chest the tower surrounded the adventurers minus Azure who was cradling Girl, by walls that came up to their necks, and in Kaveh’s case a tomb that left his head out.

“Azure,” Haami said her voice panicked, she did not enjoy enclosed spaces she couldn’t see anyone but Diaco and she couldn’t look him in the eyes either.

“Haami, she is not getting up. Can you heal her from there?” Azure pleaded, already knowing the answer, Haami needed to touch a patient to heal them, a fact that disappointed the tower and Azure both.

“We are here to kill her,” Diaco said. The walls had snapped him out of whatever trance he was under but he looked a shade between yellow and green that could only be named vomit.

“We are here to kill the Div’s daughter, not an actual child. I thought she would be a div, a monster at best, not a slightly ugly kid.” The tower rumbled at the words but even it was surprised at Azure’s honest worry over Girl.

“She is still a monster,” Diaco shouted, he was wiggling trying desperately to get at least his

hands out of the walls.

“You’re the one to talk.” Haami spat back, Kaveh coughed slightly, groaning pain beyond belief.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Diaco asked, knowing exactly what it was supposed to mean.

“That means I know you have been lying to us for the past years,” Haami jerked her head towards the bakhtak who was trying to climb out of the window, “if that kid is a monster so are you. Aren’t you?” She had finally put two and two together, his command over the jinn, his identical reaction to Girl, the stupid hat he never took off.

“Whoa. That is a bit too far. I’m mad too but I think we are all entitled to some privacy,” Azure said, not looking directly at any of her teammates.

“You knew?” Haami gasped, her expression changed from utter outrage to pure pain.

“What are you talking about?” Kaveh murmured just at the same time Azure protested. “What? No! I’m just clearly more tolerant than...”

“Shut up, Azure. You pretend to be such a warrior but the moment your feelings are involved you’re useless. Point A, point B.” Haami jerked her chin towards Diaco and then Girl. If she had looked directly at Diaco maybe she would have seen the world of pain she was causing, maybe she would stop or maybe she was too hurt.

“No, you shut up. Maybe if you weren’t so self-centred you would have known Diaco is a jinn too.” Kaveh made a quiet oh sound but did not dare to get in between the girls. Even though Azure wasn’t shouting, her words had the same effect as if they were screamed and battered towards Haami.

Azure looked at Kaveh, his face still drained of colour. In the silence that followed, his hacking coughs were jarring. She placed Girl's head on the floor as gently as you would any other sleeping child but before she could move, Girl slowly opened her eyes.

Girl's skull pounded and she was groggy but none of it mattered for she saw a white face she had been longing to see, looking down at her. She reached up to touch the fur, she used to snuggle against lifetimes ago, and though only the socket remained of the eyes, she remembered the times they held so much love for her. She reached up to the horns that she used to hold on to, when she rode on her father's shoulders.

Memory was coming back bringing grief and loneliness with it, so before she could catch up, before her father could die again, Girl looped her hands around his neck and hugged her dad fiercely, nuzzling against a face that was no longer warm.

Azure hugged Girl back, and even though she did not understand the nuance, she did know a child in need of a hug when she saw one. Girl finally let go and awkwardly sat up. Her eyes were red from crying, cheeks blotchy and her spirit low with despair. Azure took the helmet off, placing it on Girl's legs. It wasn't a comforting gesture, nor a beautiful or even tragic scene. Girl tried to get up, taking the head with her, but it was too awkward to maneuver. She looked at Azure with eyes that pleaded and demanded in turn. Azure took the helmet getting up, Girl slipped her tiny hands inside Azure's and guided her outside the room.

Haami and Diaco protested but Azure barely even heard them. Girl took her upstairs, the tower did not obstruct her, because it knew where she was headed, but most importantly

of all, it knew how long she had dreamt of this. The sixth floor of the tower was no more odd than the rest of it to Azure, Girl's speed did not leave much room for observation, however. Though Azure paused her eyes making out a manticore prowling towards them. Growling in the back of its throat, the human face snarling at the two girls, showing three rows of teeth.

Azure positioned Girl behind her legs, baring her sword. Her mind was racing, fighting a manticore wasn't something she could do alone. Her group had fought a pack of them once and had nearly died a bunch of times. And that was when they had prepared and the four of them were present. Azure's grip on Girl's hands tightened but before she could command Girl to run or go back down, the little child tsked at the manticore. The large cat yelped, hair standing up. Girl took a single step forward and the manticore bolted.

Azure's jaw dropped to her chest, Girl looked at her and shrugged wondering why the so-called adventurer couldn't do that herself, maybe she wasn't that good at her job. The tower made shortcuts for the girls, so they didn't have to walk through the room of stolen children, or swim through the, you guessed it, ocean room.

Instead, Azure and Girl finally reached the highest room of the tallest tower, where Girl lived. Azure gasped when she entered the room, it was a different world from the rest of the tower, pink was sprinkled liberally on the walls, the bedding. There was nary a spec of dust nor dirt, a fruit bowl was left on a writing desk and fresh flowers on the bedside table. But Girl who was too young by far to appreciate the awesome room, just pulled Azure to the set of stairs that led to the roof.

Azure was worried about her friends of

course, but she needn't have been for currently, four paris, who were masters of knowing when the tower was preoccupied, were helping them escape their bonds. Besides, the bakhtak had already plummeted down the tower.

Up on the roof, the weather was cold despite the early hours of the day. Up on the roof the entire world was under Azure's feet. Up on the roof, you could not deny that the white mountain was the Div's decapitated body. Girl tugged at Azure's hand, her expression belonged to someone older, someone who had been through much more than was fair.

Without being told, Azure knew what Girl desired. She handed the helmet to the child, it was too big for her to maneuver perfectly, but it was something she had to do. Azure knelt and after a few seconds of miming, Girl knew to get on her shoulders. Azure walked to the edge of the roof, hands straining and eyes streaming, a little girl put her dad's head back on his body.

The head fused together with the body, whole once again but alive nevermore. It was enough for the abandoned child, it had to be. Girl didn't persevere through her grief, she did not rise from its ashes, changed for the better, she was not stronger or healed with the passage of time. She was a child who lost her dad and the rest was its own story. That is not to say returning the head was insignificant, no, it was a burial, last thing to do for a loved one. A proper goodbye.

The tower changed not because of the white div but because it no longer felt the need for secrecy. Azure and Girl were still on the roof ignorant of the sudden transformation of the once decayed tower.

Haami, Diaco and Kaveh who until now were deep in an awkward silence that Kaveh had given up on breaking, noticed. The ramshack-

led room around them was now nothing short of pristine, silken sheets, the scent of roses, the walls adorned with artwork and beauty that made the beholder weep. Diaco understood now what pari A had meant.

The paris halted in their futile efforts, looking around in awe, it was obvious that they had not seen the tower's glory either. The box around the three adventurers disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. Haami rushed to Kaveh who was mostly healed by now yet still shaken his body believing himself very much near death, still.

She rose when she was sure Kaveh would be fine, emotionally scarred but what else was new? She turned and caught Diaco's eyes.

"You lied to me?" She whispered, containing the trust that had been shattered.

"When would I have told you? When we met, Azure would have turned me into a colander. And when I had your trust, we would be in the same situation." Diaco's features were soft, his arms holding him. Though he had dreamt about telling his friends, Haami especially, he had never been brave enough.

"Humans have forgotten that some jinns have a choice between good and evil, just as much as you do in fact." Diaco rushed to add.

Haami began to protest to say that he was wrong, she did know that, she knew the difference between different jinns but she paused, remembering where she knew that from. Diaco had often lectured the group about the morality of some jinns. All the campfire stories Diaco had recited were about good jinns who helped in the war against evil. She blinked, a dark part of her wondered if he had been manipulating them into believing he was good or maybe he was justifying his existence through example.

She reached out towards his friend, and

when he grasped her hands, she pulled him closer. They were inches apart, their eyes locked in a conversation of their own. When Haami reached up towards his head, Diaco almost flinched away but she hardened her grip on him, and took his hat off. Revealing his pointed tiny horns, the only part of him he could not change. Haami smiled.

“So can you make my wishes come true?”

“I hate that stereotype. But for you, I’ll do my best.”

That night the adventurers did not venture out of the tower, nor the next night or even the one after. The villagers believed them dead, destroyed by the girl that lived in the highest room in the tallest tower. They had no storms, droughts or earthquakes for a long time after but that was by the grace of God, anything else

was blasphemy. And when the adventurers did go out to explore, they left three paris to keep a girl company and they always returned, bruised and abused but the adventurers were nomads no more.

The tower was widely unchanged, still despising the adventurers that took Girl outside sometimes, where she could be harmed, probably eaten, most definitely taught weird stuff, still ever changing, but far more anxious, even if his little girl had so many more protectors now.

Girl had a few friends, four paris that taught her mischief and flew her around their meadow, four adventurers set on teaching her how to fight, a useless skill for the monster of monsters. She still went up the roof, more often in fact, but her visits did not make the sky cry. Often after her visits the sky was clear with warm sun on top of the white Div that looked down on his cursed child. ❖

END TRANSMISSION