

## **The Blank Miner**

For seven years I did not see Meva, though I heard her name in passing. I did not love her, because I did not know her by name, but I loved her presence in the universe, her person. Even if she knew me, she could not love me, for I was unlovable. Back in the mine, she was spared the worst of me. Though Meva would come to be the focus of my desire, my attraction to her could not be expressed by the brute that I was. I was but a few steps up from an animal, yet my desire for her was beyond anything else I knew or loved. It was worship.

I was raised in a Blank Mine. Blanks are slices of rock, which are held to the forehead so a thought can self-scribe onto the surface. When a blank has been scribed it is called a Thought Rock. Some are more valuable than others. Thoughts usually come with greater meaning when they are scribed on a blank.

The laws of our civilization are inscribed upon a series of blanks. The best Thought Rocks are displayed in museums and studied. Whole libraries full of Thought Rocks are preserved and handed down, for future generations to enjoy. In threat of war, Thought Rocks are moved underground, or protected by armies.

While Thought Rocks are important, mere blanks are considered mundane. They are inexpensive to mine, in part because the labor to mine them is cheap. It is the task of the lower class to dig them out of the ground. Because I have no honorable blood in my line, I was given no education, and no other option for work, I was destined to be a Blank Miner. I am Tzurk.

The foreman of the Blank Mine was a broad shouldered, ambitious, loud man named Jockson Reckson. It was he who told us where to dig, and for how long. His favorite miners were given Top Level duty. I was not his favorite, but my productivity was of importance to him. Top Level duty meant we were digging at the highest level of the mine, and usually got to see light at least four times a day, when the haul of blanks were taken to the surface. And we got to sleep above ground in tents, while crews from other levels had to sleep in the mines.

I had worked my way up from the lowest levels of duty to finally gain a place among the Top Level. Jockson Reckson liked having me there because the yield increased when I joined, and he could trust me even when he wasn't watching.

This is when I first saw Meva.

Jockson Reckson was far braver than I, and his blood superior to mine. He came from an intimidating level of education and power, so of course she would willingly be his. Every day he would come to work and speak of the beautiful Meva. At first I was disinterested. But the more he talked of her, the more my interest grew. Still, I had not yet seen her.

Then one day, when I was near his office alone and unwatched, I decided I would sneak a look at the Thought Rock with her image that Jocksen said was upon his desk. I remember the day well, for it was the pivot on which the rest of my life turned. It was the moment I discovered love.

The office was dusty and cluttered with piles of Thought Rocks. Natural light streamed in through a single hole in the ceiling, a perk of being a foreman of this mine. And bathed in that light was the Thought Rock with Meva's face inscribed upon it.

I was like a creature waking from hibernation. I stood stunned, unable to move. Her beauty was beyond anything I could ever have thought. I would have gladly given a thousand days in the surface light to meet her face to face. Her features were wondrous. I studied every detail.

Approaching footsteps interrupted my trance. I put the slate back on the desk and pressed my back against the wall behind a stack of Thought Rocks. Jockson Reckson entered, walking right past me. He went to a stack of Thought Rocks at the back of the office and began searching through them. In his moment of distraction, I fled unnoticed.

Borox, my tent mate, always slept with his eyes open, so it seemed like he was staring at me. This disturbed me, but that night I didn't even notice.

They say that working in the Blank Mines puts blank particles into your body. Some say blank particles soak into the skin via pores. That would explain a lot, because Meva's face was inscribed into my mind as if my brain was a blank, and the image of her has not faded since.

The next morning, we were back to mining on Top Level duty, but I could not concentrate on carving blanks from the rock walls. My heart was still on that image of Meva. In a moment of passion I threw down my tool and leaned against the wall of the mine. I told myself to stop thinking of her. After all, I did not know her, and she would never know a thing like me!

At that moment, the image of Meva etched itself into the mine wall before me! I looked to either side, terrified that a fellow miner had seen it. But my crew was working a little further down the shaft, and no one was looking my way. Quickly, I cut the image of Meva from the rock and tucked it into my pocket. But I was not to be so lucky. Another image of Meva inscribed itself into the blank cave wall, but this time it was eight heads tall! There was no way I could hide it!

To my horror, images of Meva scrawled all over the walls and ceiling of the cave. The members of my crew cried out in shock when images of Meva appeared in front of them. I was terrified of what Jocksen Reckson would do to me. But the sheer number of images saved me. It was impossible to tell who was responsible because they were everywhere, even in front of Jocksen Reckson! I regained my head and feigned ignorance. "What's going on?" I asked.

Jocksen Reckson threw his stool in rage. Not only was one of us obviously thinking of his gal, but of the day's yield of blank rocks was ruined. "Who did this?" He screamed. All eyes went down. No one spoke. He repeated the question. Again, there was no response. I feared him too much to tell the truth. In a fit of jealous rage, Jocksen Reckson switched the entire Top Crew with the lowest crew in the mine, The Ditch Mongers! Ditch Mongers saw the light of day once a month, at best. They slept in the mine in sleeping bags, because the eight-mile walk to the surface would take up too much of the workday. We had nothing but old dirty sleeping bags to warm us in those dank caves.

It was on the first night in the deep caves, while I lay in my sleeping bag, that I discovered the Thought Rock of Meva I had tucked into my pocket. I had forgotten it. But now, it warmed me in a way that the light of day could not.

And now, more than ever, I wanted to see her, face to face.

### **The Ditch Mongers**

We worked by lamp light in the lowest of the Blank Mines, our eyes strained to adjust to the pitch black. My crew numbered just over twenty, but I was closest to Borox. Not that we had anything in common. He was of noble blood, caught beating a servant and sent to prison for a year. Upon release, his father arranged for him to work with the Top Level crew, to develop his character before going back into surface society. The only thing it gave Borox was new victims.

Borox had a nose for finding weakness in others, and exploiting it to his advantage. When a new member was added to the team, Borox would bully them, first verbally then physically, until they fought back. It was how he tested them. He found their breaking point.

Even though I was the lowest of the low, he never attacked me. At the time, I didn't know why. I now think it was because we were assigned together as tent mates while on the Top Level. Borox probably thought it unwise to create strife with the person in which he shared sleeping quarters. Now demoted to Ditch Mongers, sleeping in the open caves, Borox's abstinence of abuse towards me continued.

Some members of our crew were captured in the Wanati Desert and sold to the mine as slaves. Two of them, Jeg and Jo, were wrinkled twin brothers, who talked to the walls as they mined the rock. They would apologize to the mountain for the injury they were about to administer. It was all in their Watanese language, and they would translate their favorite sayings to us. The brothers took turns pounding the same chunk of rock while chanting in unison, "Armikrog, Armikrog, Armikrog."

There was another Blank Miner I feared. Though not in the way others feared Borox. This Miner had a thin frame and a nervous smile. His face was caked with black earth. His smile exposed jagged, yellow teeth. To be near him was akin to walking past an open grave at night. His name was Weave.

My first assignment as a Ditch Monger, was to work side by side with Weave in a narrow shaft. The Blanks we cut were stacked on a hoist, which, when fully loaded, was pulled up and out of the shaft, unloaded by others, and then lowered again to us. This was the first time I had worked alongside Weave, and it was unnerving. He would mumble all day long using my name as if we were having a conversation. "Tzurk, you work long? Yes, Tzurk work long." But when I tried to reply, he would argue that he hadn't said anything.

I grew to despise Weave, and began to calculate how I could get Borox to ill-treat him. I was still, you will remember, not much higher than an animal. Though my heart was filled with Meva, my soul was dark. Borox refused to beat Weave. I'm sure he abstained because he did not like the idea of doing so because it was my idea.

After two weeks of working alongside Weave, I was desperate to be rid of him. It was then that I decided to ask The Abominate. Since he worked chained to a steel ball, each member of the crew had to take a turn carrying his lunchtime meal to him. As luck would have it, it was my turn. I approached The Abominate, and set the food down on the ground, just barely within his reach. He did not look at me, or acknowledge my presence. His massive form was seated on the cave floor, turned away from me.

I waited for a moment, my words faltering, for my mind was taking in the mystery of the creature. Finally, I swallowed and whispered, "I need a favor."

"No." His voice was like a deep rumble.

"But you don't even know what..."

"I will not kill for you. Not Weave. Not anyone."

His words disarmed me. I had expected an oaf, an idiot, but he was well spoken. His appearance did not match his speech.

"You have worked for weeks next to that sewer urchin. Anyone forced to do so would soon desire him dead."

But The Abominate was not done. He turned his ugly face towards me. His eyes seemed to drill deep into me.

"I know why your crew is working as Ditch Mongers. It's your fault. It was you whose mind etched Meva's face on the mine walls."

A bolt of horror struck me. My knees felt weak and I nearly collapsed. How could he know? He had been chained to his steel ball in the deepest mines for years! I wanted to lie, but what use would it have been? Even if he were only guessing, the expression on my face had already confessed.

"Your secret will be well kept with me."

"Why?" I stammered.

"Because it is a secret of love."

The Abominate got up, and came over to where I had set the food. Instinctively, I took a step back from the massive form towering over me. Perhaps it was because he promised to keep my secret that I felt that I could ask him a question about himself.

"Is it true...what they say about your wife?" I asked.

Rage exploded across his face. A bellow of anger burst from his lips that sounded like a hundred wild animals. His hands snapped out towards me. Before I could act they had encircled my head, yet they did not touch my skin. There was murder in his eyes.

"Ask me again about my wife, and I will eat your corpse before it cools."

He turned away from me, and I fled.

### **To Strike A Mountain**

I awake in my sleeping bag.

Through squinting eyes, I see Borox's face. His eyes wide, but sleeping. Always sleeping with those wide eyes.

Out of my sack. On with my undergarments, work robe and pill hat. My chest is soaked from a dream sweat. I had been running in the dream. Was I being pursued? I cannot remember.

Some of the others are stirring. A stench fills the air from a bedpan used during the night. I choke on the foul odor.

Walking down the mineshaft to our last work area, I hear only my own footfalls, and the distant moan of the billows forcing air down into this lowest circle of hell.

My coarse, cracked fingers clutch the pick handle. Lamplight illuminates a circle before me. My free hand skims the wall as I walk, bouncing over roughly hewn rock.

There are eight hundred miners, but not a sound of hammering on the mountain walls. I will be the first. Today, my hammer will be the first. I rear back with my tool, my mighty weapon, the one that gnaws at mountains and fells them. I strike the wall, and my life is changed forever.

### **The Heart of the Mountain**

The rock face splits before my pick, and I am struck. Not my body. My being is struck... my very soul.

I teeter away from the wall, putting out a foot to steady myself. My hand goes to my chest, rubbing the plate that covers my internal workings. But why? My soul cannot reside there for it is immaterial.

Lamp light from my helmet casts wild shadows along the rock wall. Suddenly, my vision is filled with a purple mass. A purple ball of fuzz, held in a crevice of the rock. Reaching in with bare hands, my fingers sink into the hairy surface. It is the size of my fist. It is pulsating, beating.

I fall into the wall, like diving into a pool. I am weightless. I am looking back at the surface. I am looking back at myself. I am looking back at me "Tzurk" my arm outstretched, hand gripping the new me.

Tzurk's face is blank. His, I mean, my old body falls limp to the ground. His helmet rolls across the floor, and bumps against the wall. The lamp flickers.

I am the mountain. This is what it is to be the mountain. My feet go deep into the planet's surface. I do not feel large, for the sky above is wide and deep. I feel small. Clouds encircle me. They are a shroud over my shoulders, a garland around my head.

Rivers of water bubble up from inside me, and pour down my face, back, and arms, until they fall from my fingertips into the valley lake. Though made of many kinds of rock, I am not dead. My form is teeming with life. I am a home for bugs, animals, molds, and fish in the water of my belly. The assortment of greens that course in and out of me is beyond count. The roots conspire with the water to split me open, and I give them ground, then take it back from elsewhere.

My mind takes in the array of mined passages cut into me. The miners have cut them, like ants, burrowing down from the surface they have come. Downward I search the tunnels. But what am I seeking?

My mind rests upon the lowest crew, the Ditch Mongers. I see one lying on the cave floor. He seems to be a long forgotten memory. A vision of something from a millennia ago. Then, I know it is my body. But what was my name?

The rest of the Ditch Monger's are coming. They are coming with their tools to work. They will find the fallen body. They will bury it, because it is dead. A decision must be made. Do I remain as I am, or return to what I was?

Meva.

I will go back for that name!

Though I know she will visit this mountain, she will not know it is me. If only I could make her into the mountain to stand alongside me! How we would tower into the heavens together. Our roots would entangle and we would face the storms together. Our unfailing bodies would endure together, forever.

But if she never comes, I will never meet her. A rage burns inside my person, and I feel lava bubbling in the bowels of my foundation! If remaining here means being isolated from Meva, then curse this mountain! I must return to my old, frail, worm-of-a-mortal body! But what was my name? ruckT? ZKrut? KurtZ?

A Ditch Monger's voice booms out, "Anyone seen Tzurk?"

Tzurk! That was my name!

The Ditch Monger crew is coming. They will find my body on the ground. Assume I had been killed by the mountain or by the one whose touch is death. They will bury my body, and I will be trapped here.

How do I return? It must be by the same path by which I came so long ago. The purple ball of fuzz! It rests in its crevice. Tzurk must touch it again for me to return. But he lies prostrate. Dead. He cannot come to me; I must go to him.

My thoughts go to the weakness of the rock that surrounds the purple fuzz-ball. With a small effort, I split the slab of rock free. It shatters on the cave floor, sending a shower of rock across Tzurk's body. With it, the fuzz-ball is carried, until it touches Tzurk.

I am swimming up from the depths of the pool. My head breaches the surface, and I sit up in my old body, just as the rest of the Ditch Monger crew arrives.

Borox runs to me, "Tzurk! That whole wall just broke across you! Are you hurt?"

I cover the fuzz-ball with my fingers. But my mind can't form a response, so I nod. The crew begins their work. I hide the fuzz-ball in my helmet, and put it back on. I look up. The Abominate is watching me.

### **A Visit From Corporate**

It was the day after I found the purple fuzz-ball. The Ditch Monger crew was now working in the same area where I had found it. A familiar horn echoed through the halls. It was the one to announce Jockson Reckson. Looking up, we saw him coming down the shaft with two workers in white body suits. They were carrying a device between them by long handles that protruded out of its sides. Soot settled on the pure white suits. Wherever they bumped into the mine walls, they left dark skid marks.

I had never known Jockson Reckson to come to the bottom level of the mine. When we were Top Level, he had always sent someone else down when inspections were needed. But he never came himself.

"Step away from the walls!" he screamed.

We complied. The two workers stepped forward, adjusting their grip on the device. One of them flipped a switch, and it began to hum. A screen came to life, its glow turning the white of their suits red. They maneuvered the device along the cave wall, guided by something on the screen.

They stopped in front of the spot in the wall where I'd dug out the purple fuzz-ball. The device was giving off a different tone now. They switched it off. One of them pulled on a rubber glove, and stuck his fingers into the crack. A chill went down my spine. Now I knew what they were looking for. A moment later, the inspector withdrew his hand, shaking his head.

Jockson Reckson looked agitated. His face was red and wet with sweat. My instincts told me this inspection wasn't his idea. It had come from further up the food chain. But I knew I had to remain calm.

"They must be searched." The inspector said.

Jockson Reckson smiled, wickedly. "Of course." He replied. Then to us he said, "You will each submit to a thorough search of your body. Remove your clothes."

We all scowled and grumbled at this, but we had to obey him. So each began to take off his clothing.

I was in trouble now. The purple fuzz-ball was still inside my helmet. I started pulling off my shoes, my mind racing for a solution. I was close to the end of the line, near Abominate. I had to take a chance that he would help me.

"I have what they are looking for." I whispered to him.

"You have the heart of the mountain?"

I nodded. "Help me hide it."

"I cannot touch it. A beating heart will stop in my hands."

The inspectors were already working their way down the line of shivering forms. Weave was searched by two inspectors. He was squirming uncomfortably. I took the opportunity to drop the purple fuzz-ball out of my hat, and onto the floor. I covered it with my right foot.

Borox's eyes were full of rage, "We don't have anything but our tools, Reckson! Why not search our camp?"

Jockson Reckson gathered his composure, and spoke through clenched teeth, "The entire camp has already been searched, Borox! Do you think I would come down here to smell your stink if I did not have to?"

The men in white carefully checked their rubber gloves for holes before inspecting every crevice of The Abominate. He laughed at them, "If you go any deeper you are going to find something you may wish you hadn't!"

The Ditch Monger crew laughed.

The inspectors checked The Abominate's pile of clothes, reaching into the toe of each boot before tossing them aside.

Now, it was my turn. They began searching my clothes. "You're looking for the purple fuzz-ball, are you not?" I whispered.

They leaned in towards me. "Where is it?"

I nodded with my head towards Jackson Reckson. "I saw him dig it out of the very spot where your machine guided you."

They nodded, "We will inspect him too..."

One of them went back to searching my clothes, the other to searching me.

"If he has it with him, he will surely hide it before you are finished with us." I said, hoping they would leave me. My heart sank when only the inspector searching my clothes stopped to go search Jackson Reckson, and the other continued.

"Please lift your feet." He said.

Suddenly his eyes closed, and he fell to the floor, dead. The Abominate stood over him. I expected to hear the terrified screams of the Ditch Mongers and Jackson Reckson, screaming for The Abominate's blood. But all was silent.

I had been so intent on hiding the fuzz-ball that I had not seen what The Abominate had done. Looking around now, I saw that everyone was dead, even Jackson and the other inspector.

"Are you...going to kill me?" I trembled.

The Abominate shook his head, "They would have killed us all, even if you gave it to them. Now, a gift."

The Abominate splayed his hand open against the wall, and using a pickaxe, he cut off his little finger! He wrapped it in a sock and gave it to me.

"This is your weapon in case we get separated."

## **The Escape**

The Ditch Monger camp had been ransacked. Sleeping bags were torn into pieces, their stuffing strewn about the campsite. Our personal packs had been dumped out in a heap on the floor. The Abominate had been right. They did not intend to leave us alive.

Weave had owned a spare headlamp, which he used as a reading light. I tried to locate it in the mixed up heap of our belongings. There was a picture of a child between two proud parents. Perhaps this was Weave when he was younger. He was smiling in the picture, and held a ball.

My hand touched something hairy and warm, but lifeless. It was a dead krat, but still soft. Rigor had not yet set in. Weave had cared for the animal like it was a child. Apparently the men in white suits didn't feel the same. I found Weave's headlamp and put it in my pocket.

Looking over the camp, I was stunned by our lack of belongings. There wasn't much for the inspectors to ransack. All of our life spent in a mine, but for what? What was this purple thing hidden in my helmet? Those who did this did not just see us as miners, digging the mountain; they saw us as nothing. They thought of us as expendable. And we were all used up.

Passing into the main hub that lead to the mezzanine level, I saw crews of miners interrogated by many more white suits. Every level of management at the mine assisted them in searches, going through tents and even bedpans. The men in white suits were so preoccupied with searching workers, that they did not notice me.

A siren sounded, starting deep in the mine and making its way up to the top level. They found the dead bodies. The entire mine was on lockdown. Men in white suits produced weapons from their coat pockets, and strapped them to their hands. The weapons looked to be a mechanical joint with a needle on the end that folded out from the palm.

A white suited inspector shouted for me to get down on my stomach. My instincts told me to run, but I was scared. I hugged the ground. He kicked my knees apart, still shouting. Then I remembered The Abominate's gift. When the white suit turned away for a moment, I pulled out the

bloody, soiled sock The Abominate gave me, and folded back the cloth to expose the severed finger inside. I put the severed finger against his boot, and ran it up his leg until it met flesh. He dropped to the ground like a rag doll.

I carefully unstrapped the needle device from his palm, and put it on my own. When the hand closed into a fist, the needle retracted into the palm so that it did not harm the wielder. But when the hand was opened, the mechanical arm stretched out from the palm about eight inches, where a needle protruded that was brown and striped, like the stinger of a wasp.

I got up and ran. Some white suits I ran past. Others I stung with the needle before they even saw me. I killed many with The Abominate's finger. It was not physically difficult to kill. My conscience was what was difficult to overcome. I had never been in a position where my life was demanded of me, where the only way I could survive was to kill. But my soul was troubled by killing so many. I was right to kill a few in self-defense, but was I right to kill one hundred in my attempt to escape?

As I reached the higher levels, I saw fewer inspectors, and more soldiers. These were military men, owned by the state. They demanded total compliance from even the men in white suits. One of the men in white did not clearly hear an order given to him, so he asked for clarification. The soldier smacked him to the ground with the butt of his weapon. When I heard them coming, I threw Weave's spare headlamp down the hall, and doused my own. I got down on the ground, stretching out flat beside the wall like the dead. The soldiers marched past me to inspect the decoy lamp. By the time they reached it, I was gone.

I was very near the surface now. I took cover against a wall, out of reach of the swirl of spotlights. I looked down at the needle weapon in my hand and decided not to use it again. I didn't need to have a needle weapon when I also had The Abominate's finger. A platoon of soldiers was hopping off a hover vehicle and marching away in the direction I had just come. It was strange to think that these inspectors and military had always been so close at hand. Then I put it all together. The mining company was not really interested in mining blank rock. Otherwise, they wouldn't have dug so deep. There was plenty close to the surface to mine for years. They had dug deep and in so many directions looking for what I now had hidden in my helmet, the heart of the mountain.

The last of the soldiers disappeared down the shaft. I slipped underneath the hover vehicle, and found a place in its working I could climb up into. The hover vehicle moved on. After some time, it emerged onto the surface. It was night, so there was no sun to greet me. But even the cool, fresh air felt wonderful.

I was free of the mine!

### **Tools, Weapons, Food, Plants, Medicine, Magic and Pets**

I found myself on a military base. The surface design was stark and open, leaving me few places to hide. The suns were just starting to rise, and with the forest over a mile away in any direction, I had no choice but to find a quiet building in which to hide and perhaps, get some sleep.

There were over fifty buildings, some teeming with activity, and others unused. I cracked the door of the closest building that seemed unoccupied, and went inside. The interior was dark. The room had row upon row of shelving; the only light came in through the opaque windows that let in a faint orange haze from the rising suns. Nobody could see through those windows.

I smelled food! This was not the mere gruel we were served in the blank mines; these were special items that were probably reserved for top-ranking military personnel.

I found the makings for a Chip-buttly on the shelf. There were slices of bread, scrap gleaned from a fryer and deep-fried roots, ready to be combined. There were slices of dried, degreased cheese backed on flattened dough. It was stored on top of a big bowl of Kompot smothered in Camonadiac Curry. There was a bowl of guacamole made of Manocado and the usual boxes of Wexarodujo, and someone's dried pet Benjamin Bango.

A tin can sported a green beard. I put this can in my pocket. When steeped properly, dried Spykle's Beard mold makes an excellent tea. There was a slight glow cast across the shelf by Frotz-o-matic



Elixir of Self-Illumination. I did not want to glow in the dark, so I left that on the shelf. I also chose to leave the gavno untouched. It is always good not to touch gavno, especially when it is cold.

A medicine cabinet held Groboh Juice, and while I could use some short term invisibility just about now, it was against my code of conduct to use a product created by the Groboh regime. I picked up a bottle of Minocent's Majesty but it was empty. Just my luck. I placed a NummyNum towel on my forehead to quickly bring a little peace and comfort to my nerves. When I leaned my head against the shelf, I knocked over a potion of Palinka. Not really my thing, so I left the bottle where it fell. I took some Kayla medicine that helped my aching feet.

Further into the building, I heard the scuttle of animals in cages. Each animal had wires protruding from their body. At the time I didn't know why, but I'm sure now the wires were probably used to harvest the diverse animal energy. There was a Denrus, a Feure Katze (an orange, cat, useful for distraction in battle), a mated pair of Gelletsaur, and a Jivtone. A Novimus (also known as Novi) looked cuddly enough but didn't trust me enough to let me pet it. One cage held a tiny, three eared rabbit and it was labeled Johnny Horse. A rusty cage held a Hungry Grumplin, and an elusive white-tufted bed devil. A wiry, dog-sized Soph-Soph ran in circles in his cage while a Flat Faced Tentacle Mane Cephala Kraken blinked his lazy eye. A spring-powered servant, called Judith Butler fed the inhabitants of the cages.

One animal was labeled Artimenius, and there were burn marks along the door of its enclosure. Next to it was a caged feral moon cat, who kept howling, "I am Oscarina!" There was a neglected cage of animals called Shtutnik, Waga Shnaga and Ramy. They looked malnourished, so I threw handfuls of food in with them.

I realized how bright the room had grown with the rising of the suns. If anyone came into this building, it would be hard to hide. I needed to find a place to hide, and sleep until nightfall. I pulled down a painting of a black hole, and set it on a Magnificently Monotone Mandolin. When I lifted the painting the triple M was gone. But there was enough space cleared on the shelf for me to lay down. I squeezed onto the shelf. A tool belt hung down hiding me. It had a Cheesefork, a Koolspott, an Eye of Asterion, an old Hobbyhox, two MacGuffins, an Oily Flogskin Croak and a Panic Button.

My eyes drooped closed, and I dreamed of a digital Renzim Set. In my dreams, I could see a floating Spatlas. Space never looked more broad and full of adventure than in that deep sleep-state. It was as if I was looking at the altered light of an R.G. Ba'bomb. I found a pile of dirt and started digging with a Tectonic Universal Extractor (T.U.E.). Though I was speaking, my words were not being heard by anyone. It was like I was speaking into a Talebox, or perhaps I had been hit with a Procrastinator Ray. My hands were as cold as the Seventh Ring of Eureka, so I used a Tinderkrog to warm them. A Zugguz took me back in time thirty seconds, but I was just back to digging in the dirt. Something came down on my head with a loud SNAP! I reached out my dream hand and stopped a stick from hitting me again. I read the carving in the stick's bark, "Derpal the Oddly Shaped Stick of 823 3/7 Whacks." This was weird because it only hit me once, and it did not appear to be very oddly shaped. This was turning into a less than stellar dream. I used an Ellerd to smack myself in the face and wake up.

When I awoke from my blissful slumber, the suns were going down. The room was taking on a cooler hue. I crawled out from the shelf. I reached into my pocket and felt the sock with The Abominate's finger. I considered taking more weapons from the building. There were Karschtongs, a Marader (my axe fighting is terrible), a Novus Shield, an Obsrigillaton, a Sandwich Bazooka (I will regret not picking this up if I ever need to kill a sandwich), The Repulsive Shield and a Yarborough. None of these weapons could do what The Abominate's severed finger could do in an instant.

Under cover of darkness, I left the warehouse, running from building to building toward the woods. Soldiers came in by hovercraft, then left again. The air was abuzz with frustration and panic. What they were looking for was missing. I knew this because what they were looking for was in my helmet.

### **Alone on the Outside**

At the outskirts of the base, there were guards at one hundred foot intervals. Some had needle weapons strapped to their hands; others had rifles. There was no way I could make it around them

without a confrontation. I gripped the sock housing The Abominate's finger, and walked casually up to the closest guard. When he saw me, he leveled his rifle at me.

"Do not come any closer." He grunted.

"I have orders from Jackson Reckson." I said, holding up my hands.

The other guards turned to see what the commotion was about.

The guard didn't believe me, but it was as good of an excuse as I could think of on such short notice. I could see the woods just beyond. It would be the perfect place to hide. If I could make it into the woods, I would be free.

I yelled at him, "You must listen to me right now!" A bluff only works if you're completely committed to it.

The guard shined a bright light on my face, "You're a miner? I need to see your identification."

I threw the finger sock to him and he caught it.

"What is this?"

"My identification." I replied.

He opened the sock and stuck his hand inside. I was already running toward him when he went limp and fell to the ground. The surrounding guards were confused at the moment so I scooped up the finger sock and ran for the trees.

The rest of the guards snapped into action. Bullets and darts shot past me, but their hesitation was enough for me to reach the tree line before any of them could take good aim. I reached the first tree and slid into the perfect darkness of its shadow.

"Fan out! After him!"

I pressed deeper into the woods, switching my headlamp on to light my way, then off to hide. Behind me, I could hear the soldiers coming.

I ran into a clearing, and nearly over the edge of a deep ravine. At its edge, I skidded to a stop. Behind me, there was already the sound of the soldiers approaching. I pulled the purple fuzz-ball, still beating, from my helmet and tucked it into my pocket. Then I threw the headlamp off the cliff and into the ravine. It was far enough down that the light was just visible, but the helmet itself could not be seen.

I ran to the left, along the ravine's edge, over waist high scrub brush, and a few boulders. Most of our people were right handed. We wrote from left to right, so I hoped the soldiers would think I went to the right. Without the headlamp, I could easily have fallen into another ravine, but I was counting on luck this time. I only had a few seconds before the guards would come into the clearing, and I would have to move in silence.

Two guards broke into the clearing, and I dropped to the ground. I froze on all fours, watching them stop at the ravine's edge and look over the side at the helmet lamp's light below. My lungs were dying for air, but I had to breath slowly to keep from being heard. The first one said, "Did he fall? That light's not moving."

I was crawling away from them as the second guard said, "He either fell or he's trying to get us to think he fell."

They decided that if I fell, I would be too injured to get away. So they fanned out to search the area in case I had not fallen. The soldiers may not have been fooled by my trick but they didn't have the confidence of their convictions on their hunt. They did not confirm that I did not fall, yet it gnawed in the back of their mind that I might yet be down there. Still, they had lamps and I did not. They split up, the first guard heading away from me to their left, the second right toward me.

On my belly, in the grass, I waited for the second guard to pass by. As he clunked through the grass he scared up insects and chipmunks who ran ahead of him. Just as he passed me, I hopped up and touched the back of his neck with the finger. He dropped silently to the ground. I stayed down low hoping to get out of the clearing and back into the cover of wood. My eyes adjusted to the darkness and it was practically bright compared to the darkness I was used to in the mines.

In the silence of those woods, every tree creak, every blade of grass that turned in a slight breeze could be heard. Yet I did not hear the hoof beats of the hulking white stag that stood before me! Jockson Reckson described this beast as a monster. It was The Eelk, a mythical creature that has evaded hunters for a generation. He had a huge rack of horns but he did not have fur like other Eelk. He had shiny, scaled skin that made him repulsive to his own kind. There is some supernatural way inside him that produces bolts of electricity when he finds another of his kind that he likes. Therefore, he cannot find love. He cannot find friendship. His family had to abandon him. He was the great symbol of broken hearts and by the looks of him, was a powerful creature not to be trifled with.

The Eelk bowed his head to me. The horns came down to my face and I could see tiny pops and ripples of electricity web between the spikes. I can't explain how I knew this, but he was seeking revenge on Jockson Reckson. He intended to break the heart of my ex-boss. The Eelk turned and left into the woods as if to have me follow. As soon as he disappeared into the dark I could hear the clamoring of more guards enter the clearing behind me.

There were three guards, they ran to the ravine, then fanned out. One tripped on the body of the first guard and called out to the others. I dove into a pile of leaves, burying myself in them. It would have been a terrible hiding place in the daylight, but in the darkness of night it would suffice. They all took off in the wrong direction, assuming they were on my trail.

Once the sound of their receding footsteps grew silent, I crawled out of the pile of leaves and continued to the right, after The Eelk, deeper into the woods.

It was then, in that darkness, that I was seized by a terrible loneliness. Truly, I was no more free stumbling through those woods than I had been in the mine. The image of Meva came back to me, but it was not a comfort to me. My heart was sick. Nobody loved me and I loved no one. I had seen hog-dogs that were more loved than I.

Would I ever know love?

Someone save me. Find me. Love me.

### **A Meeting in the Woods**

When daylight broke, I could hear the chatter of chipmunks even over my burning leg muscles. My clothes were cut to shreds from walking among the low-hanging tree branches. I decided it would be best to find a hiding place, assisted by the light of day, then rest until nightfall.

I found a large nest of coiled branches just above head-height in a tree. The nest was still warm, as if the occupant just left. There was no chatter of chipmunks in this eerily, silent place. Then I saw several three inch, triangular teeth lying on the floor of the nest. It was the nest of an Ichthusian Saw Worm! I decided to find a new hiding place.

Movement. I saw movement coming from my right periphery. Next there was movement from the left; a white cylindrical shape crawling along the ground. Another link of white cylinder crawled from a log just in front of me and the pieces were drawn to each other. It was the Ichthusian Saw Worm assembling into a whole! I darted before it could come together but I couldn't make it out of the clearing before the great worm exploded out of the ground in front of me. Its brutal maw was a spinning buzz-saw of triangular teeth! The head split open longwise to make the shape of a bear-trap. The Saw Worm had seen the shape of a bear-trap and it was a master of imitating other shapes because its nerve net-of-a-brain had no creativity of its own.

It lunged at me then tumbled into a coil of white tubes, spitting and frothing it was so hungry and desperate for me. The mouth spun and shot loose teeth at me that hit the tree beside me with a

THUNK-THUNK-THUNK! I looked for the best exit and I admit that I was in such a panic that I couldn't tell where I was or which way to go. But the Saw Worm was back underground.

I took out The Abominate's finger out of my pocket and was ready for the resurfacing worm when I felt a tap on my shoulder. When I turned around I was in such a shock that I stood in awe. The Ichthusian Saw Worm has reassembled into an image of my own likeness. It clearly was not me, but it was the best image the Saw Worm could pull off. Links of meat put together to build a frame stood there aping my posture. Its eyes stared through me like a dead man. It looked to hold a finger in its hand just like me. Before I could lunge at the creature its mouth ripped open and triangular teeth shot out at me THUNK into the wood beside me, THUNK in my shoulder and WHIFF off into the grass behind me. The Abominate's finger fell to the ground, I don't know where.

The beast leapt upon me and I put a hand on the top and bottom of its mouth as the saw blades spun and came down to my face. I reached up and felt the purple fuzz-ball... I turned my head away and everything went into slow motion. I was aware of dirt settling in front of me, my fingers reached out for an acorn and stuck the purple fuzz-ball against it then jammed them both into the Saw Worm's face. The Saw Worm went limp as its being went into the acorn! I put the fuzz-ball away and held up the acorn in my hand. A chipmunk came out from his hiding spot sniffing the air. I tossed the acorn onto the ground and the chipmunk put it in his teeth, then scurried back into his hole. I picked up The Abominate's finger.

Having left the Saw Worm clearing, I found a cool stream, and drank deeply from it. The chilling cascade satisfied my dry throat. I washed my face. A baptism.

When I opened my eyes, there was a green, female child standing across the river. I froze. She watched me for a moment with her huge eyes. She took a couple steps back, staring at me the whole time. A smile broke across her face. I realized that she was challenging me to catch her. I had heard enough fairy stories to know that one should not chase little green girls into a forest. It cannot end well.

"I am Tzurk."

I stood up, and she took a few more steps back, still watching me, still smiling. My instincts failed me. The right decision seemed to be the wrong one, and the wrong decision seemed to be the right one.

"Who are you?" I asked.

This time she scowled at me, her eyebrows coming down, her nose wrinkling up in anger. She shook her head and waved her finger at me. The motion of her waving finger produced sparkles that traced her every gesture, and momentarily hung in the air before dissipating.

She took a few more steps back, her smile returning. This time, I took the bait. I chased her. Laughter exploded from her lips, and she ran. Her laughter was so true and free, that my heart was lifted from despair at the sound of it. And for the first time in a long time, I laughed.

She was so quick. My feet struggled to keep up, let alone gain on her. Then my feet found the beat of the forest, like a rhythm in the woods, that my body had to match. And when it did, my feet moved all the more swiftly.

I lost the green girl in a thicket. Unsure which way she went, I stopped to listen for her footfalls. A pinecone hit me right in the forehead and I heard her giggle. I moved toward the sound of her voice. I caught sight of her foot sticking out from behind a fern. The fern was shaking with her laughter. I dove for her foot, grabbing it with both hands. My chest and face slammed into the rich, black soil. She screamed with delight, and the next instant we were both on the ground, rolling and laughing.

I helped her up. She smiled at me.

"I caught you!" She said.

"It is not you who caught me!"

I was surrounded on all sides by green people. They came out of the shadows of the trees and bushes, watching us. The men among them held bows or long spears. A shimmer of sparkles hung in the air around them.

I held my hands up in surrender. There were too many of them. I could not escape, even with the help of The Abominate's finger. The nearest of them motioned for me to lie down on the ground, which I did.

One of the men let out a laugh. I did not think the situation was funny at all. I scowled, which seemed to trigger even more laughter. The little girl got down next to me and imitated my position and scowl. More laughter.

All at once the laughter stopped. Glancing around, I saw that the people had all disappeared. When I turned back to the little girl, she too was gone.

I got up on my knees and called out, "Hello?"

A female voice not far off replied, "Did someone say, 'hello'?"

"It was me!" I answered.

Nearby, bushes were shaking. It sounded like she was having a difficult time making her way through them.

"Well, who is 'me?'" asked the stranger.

"My name is Tzurk! Who are you?" I called back.

Then she stepped out of the bushes and into the clearing. Her long brown hair parted and I saw her face. My heart stopped. It was Meva.

### **When Worlds Collide**

"What are you doing here, Meva?" I asked, trying to mask my excitement.

She seemed puzzled by something. As if I'd just woken her from a dream.

"I was supposed to meet my fiancé, Jockson Reckson, but he had a work emergency in the blank mine and then..." Her voice trailed off.

"Jockson Reckson." I mumbled.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I work... I worked in the blank mine. I knew him."

"Do you know what's happening there?"

I nodded, "Yes. I found something in the mine, something they desperately want. I will tell you everything, but we need to leave here before the green people come back."

Meva grabbed my arm, "Did you see a little green girl too?"

"Yes."

She continued, "I was waiting for Jockson Reckson next to the forest when this little green girl appeared. I followed her here."

"Me too! She made me get down on my knees and be quiet or it looked like her fellow green people were going to kill me!"

Meva was putting something together in her mind. "They disappeared, did they not?"

I nodded.

"It's as if they wanted us to find each other." She said.

These words were like fuel on the fire of my heart. Here she was, standing before me and she was perfect. Her face was perfect. It looked like a planet. No, planets are too busy. Her face was more like a moon. Standing out in the darkness, pale and beautiful.

She waved her hand in front of my face. I realized she'd been talking while I was lost in adoration.

"Hello? Tzurk, What do you want to do?"

"Love you." The words flew out of my mouth before I could pull them back in.

I was embarrassed and terrified. My face turned red, and I could not look at her. For a moment, I waited for her to strike me for my impudence. But she didn't. I pulled the slate from my pocket with her face scribed on it, and held it up. This was going to sound crazy no matter how it came out. But I had to say it. She had to know.

"Meva, I saw your image on Jockson Reckson's desk. When I returned to work, this and image self scribed on the cave walls! I know they came from me. My entire crew was in danger because I could not stop it. One the members of my crew died from my passion for you. He gave his life to cover up for my mistakes, and helped me escape. My love for you has sustained me in the darkness."

She hadn't slapped me yet, so I continued.

"I will never be the same. Just seeing your face has wrecked me for life. But my response to being ruined is not sadness, because it is my great joy to be heartbroken by you. Even now, if you want me to die, just give the word and it will be so. Ask me to die, ask me to move a mountain into the sea, ask me anything, just don't send me away."

I tore the hem of my garment, "Damn! I'm such a fool! I can't believe I'm saying this to you, but I don't care! I don't care what you think or what anyone else thinks. I don't even care what I think! My soul was lost in the mountain, and my body had no life in it. I could not wake, until I heard your name. Meva. Meva. MEVA! How your name is my favorite song. Let me sing to you, Meva."

I held my arms out wide and sang as loud as I could, not caring who could hear me:

"There is a name that slays me in the name of love.

There is a name that is the weapon of weapons.

It sustained the soul of this man in the underworld

And will sustain me forever in the overworld!"

I did not care if she responded. I was too terrified by the possibilities. But seeing my silence, she reached into the pocket of her skirt, and pulled out a rock.

My heart nearly burst, for there, scribed on her rock's surface, was my face.

### **The Courting of Meva**

"Where did you get that?" I asked in astonishment.

She explained that when the image of her face appeared all over the blank mines, her father was alerted. They brought him a few pieces of etched stone as evidence. Her father demanded to know who had done it, so this person could be punished. But Meva wanted to know for a different reason. She knew that the tiles could not have emanated from Jockson Reckson, because he did not love

her. Marrying Meva would put Jockson Reckson in a better position to manipulate the blank mining operation. That is all he desired, not her.

So Meva took one of the blanks with her face and visited her aunt, who was known as Witchy Lady, though few had courage to call her that to her face. Her aunt's predictions were a mixed bag. Sometimes she was right, but was often wrong. At one time, she had been involved in guiding the mining operation to the richest veins of blank slate, but after a few costly wrong predictions, she was no longer asked.

But Meva was desperate, and had no one else in which to turn. Her aunt flipped the tile over in her hands, running her fingers along the edges. Then she gave Meva a blank tile and told her to keep it close at all times, and an answer would come. This was not the answer Meva had hoped for, but she took the tile home and put it under her pillow. That night she dreamt that she was getting married to someone with no face. And when she awoke, my face was etched into the tile.

When I heard this I was emboldened. I took her hand and asked her to come with me. She nodded.

We didn't know exactly where to go, so we chose a direction that was away from the mine. We stuck close to main roads to avoid the wild animals in the deeper woods, but we didn't walk on the road, for fear of capture. As the days wore on, the sound of hover vehicle engines lessened, then ceased all together.

I remember one day in particular. We were walking over rolling hills that followed a river. I agreed to play a game of sorts. We would take turns asking a question. The other person had to answer with total honesty. She went first.

"Do you believe in love at first sight, Tzurk?"

I said I did not see how it could be true. How could someone love another when they had only seen their face? Love is more than infatuation. Love is more than a feeling. So how could the mere sight of another bring about such depth of commitment, self-sacrifice and revelation?

She reminded me that I was supposed to be answering her question, not asking my own.

So I told her, in earnest, that I had seen many pretty females before I had seen her face etched into that blank, and it had always been infatuation. But when I saw her face, it was different; Maybe not love, but not infatuation. I knew she was someone I needed to love.

My turn.

"Do you love Jockson Reckson?" I asked.

She did not. But the marriage was something she agreed to because there was no alternative. Her family wanted it. His family wanted it. What point was there in resisting? But now things were different, with the dream and my face etched onto the blank in her pocket.

"How did you come to be a miner?" She asked.

I feared her reaction to this question. But I told her anyway. I told her how my two brothers and I were sold into servitude when I was very young. I told her how we ended up in mining, though my older brothers were near to being sent into the military. I told her about the day I got word that they had both died when a mineshaft collapsed on them. And so, not knowing anything about my parents, I was alone in the world.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

She took some time to think about her response. Then she said that she wasn't sure. She needed to know me better.

So it went between us all that day, and as the day wore on, I realized that what I had felt at the sight of her face, back in Jockson Reckson's office, was changing, blossoming like a flower. If I had

been back in that mine shaft with my hand on the wall, I would not have etched her face into the blanks, I would have etched her very soul.

### **Punishment and Crime**

We came to an area where the terrain grew suddenly steep. We struggled to ascend, clutching at trees and bushes to pull ourselves upward. The road, off to our right, was very tempting. But even though we were far from the mine, I still feared exposure if we walked openly on a road so close to populated areas.

We climbed over a particularly large boulder, only to be greeted by a wide area of broken stones. The trees and bushes were gone, leaving us exposed. It was no use hiding. We decided we might as well go up onto the road.

I took Meva's hand, and helped her up the slope to the road. When we reached the top, she didn't let go. We walked hand in hand, then arm in arm. The game of questions had grown sporadic as our minds ran out of things to talk about, so we walked in silence, just happy to be together.

Meva's footsteps had a different cadence than mine; I had a shuffle and a kick that developed from walking through dark mine shafts. The shuffle was to make sure there were no unseen boulders in my path. The kick was to knock smaller rocks off the path, as a courtesy to the miners coming up behind. Meva, however, glided over the ground with a grace that matched her upbringing amid a class that valued poise, balance, and dance.

We rounded a corner, and there was a small army of royal guards who had been hiding along the side of the road. I hated myself for not being more vigilant. They were all highly trained, fully armed, strike-proof-vested guards. There were two groups: one dressed in red, and one in black. Their leader was the tallest one; the one they called "Baboot." He was the only one wearing both red and black. All of their faces were obscured by helmets sporting tall red plumes.

"Stop!" Commanded the one they called Baboot.

We complied. Meva clutched my arm tightly. The one called Baboot quickly motioned to the guards dressed in red, calling out each of their names.

"Regiment Blood: Tanik, Stribog, Valval, Albinoid, Yourick, Alabar, Ken Keystador, Hannaxidus, Pflerbrt, Ayeka Kern, John Aubrey, Roboburger Rogergoggles, Rosscott Mitchell Hot Coals!"

The red guards held up their hands to show the projectile needles strapped to their palms.

"Step away from her!" Baboot called out to me.

They clearly knew who we were. We were pretty easy to identify; me in my dirty rags, and Meva in her fine garments of the upper class, a miner and a princess.

I tried to step away from Meva, but she pulled me in even tighter then opened my cloak and pulled it around herself to block any shot that might come our way.

"No! You cannot shoot him without hitting me!"

Baboot chuckled, then nodded to the guards dressed in black and quickly called each of their names as they pointed their arms toward us, taking aim.

"Regiment Death: Dark Leth, Madillonaut, Fang Lazorheart, Edgarbob Lemmings, Flippy Jankerson, Eithel Scoot, Olli Cannoli, Marmoset Ellipse, Astridamus Undershafft, Anthony AJ Reed, Dr. Spot Pawn Breath Hansen, That-Was-My-Exit Louie, The Grate Fifi!"

I had no doubt they were good enough shots to hit me without harming Meva.

Meva yelled again, "If you shoot him, I will pluck the dart out of him and stab myself! Then what will you tell my father as he removes your heads?"



All of the guards remained ready to fire but hesitated, then looked to Baboot for direction, as they weren't sure what to do.

### **The Double Cross**

The one called Baboot looked at Meva and said, "Is this not your kidnapper?"

Meva shouted back at him, "My father is my kidnapper, my ex-fiance is my kidnapper, loneliness is my kidnapper, but this miner is not my kidnapper!"

Baboot paused, then called out to two of the guards, one from each group.

"Tanik, Dark Leth!"

As the two guards stepped forward, Baboot ordered all of the others to return to their base.

The small sense of relief I felt by the exit of the guards was quickly wiped away as the one called Baboot slowly leaned in to whisper to the two other guards. With eyes fixed on us, they were clearly formulating some sort of plan.

Suddenly, the two guards charged at us. I pushed Meva away.

"Run!" I screamed.

The first guard swung his needled-fist at me. I ducked, bringing my fist up into his stomach. He fell back, clutching himself, struggling for air. The second guard kicked out my legs, and I fell onto my back. He brought his needle down on me, but I caught his wrist, stopping the needle just inches from my chest. We strained against each other for a moment. Suddenly he went limp, and rolled off me.

I looked up to see Baboot standing over me with his needle hand pointing towards me. But suddenly, he lowered it. Then I realized he had shot both of the other guards! Needles protruded from their backs.

Meva and I shared puzzled looks.

The one called Baboot took off his helmet, revealing long hair that fell free, almost reaching the ground.

"Quace!" Meva cried out, and ran to her.

They embraced. Later, Meva told me that Quace had been one of her playmates when they were growing up. She had gotten her name when once she had bet her whole inheritance on a single hand of cards, and won with a quace.

It was clear to me in that moment that Meva was no ordinary person. In the company of Quace, she seemed elevated to her royal position again. They talked of nannies, summer cottages, exotic pets, travels to meet dignitaries in other countries, and little sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

Finally, the conversation returned to the situation at hand. Quace told us that there was a massive hunt going on for us. A lifetime of wages had been promised to anyone who turned us in. The only condition was that Meva must be brought in alive and I must be brought in dead.

Quace opened a map, and showed us the placement of guards and which areas to avoid. Luckily, the search was concentrated away from us, because they thought I was heading in the opposite direction. Quace knew of a safe house that at one time belonged to an old widow, who later died of food poisoning.

Meva was puzzled by this news, and asked how Quace knew of this safe-house. For years Quace worked with a criminal underground, helping thieves escape from the royal family's dungeons. Meva was stunned at first, but realized this could work in our favor.

Quace told us that there was one problem with the safe-house; if we stayed in it for more than two days we would be transformed into baby goats.

Meva pointed her finger up the river on the map not far from the safe-house. Quace told us to find a boat, and float down to the town of Grint. The town was rural, and many outsiders came to buy and sell, so we would not stand out. Then we could make our way to yet another cottage in the mountains. That place was even more rural, so nobody would find us for as long as we wanted to stay, and we wouldn't be turned into baby goats.

Quace gave us the map. I took the backpacks from the dead guards, giving one to Meva and taking the other one myself. Meva and Quace hugged each other. Quace begged forgiveness for her treachery.

Meva said, "I cannot pardon you as a member of the royal family, but I do as a friend."

They embraced and we left Quace standing there alone in the road.

We got off the main path at the point Quace indicated on the map. For several days, we threaded our way through trees and over streams, until finally we reached the safe-house.

It was a simple shack of wood with a roof of straw. Inside, the air smelled of mold, and the floor was bare dirt. The walls were covered with simple paintings of goats. A fireplace made of stacked stones towered up through the thatch roof. I couldn't imagine anyone staying long, even without the threat of turning into a baby goat.

Using blankets from the guard's packs, I made a bed for Meva beside the fireplace, and a second for myself in front of the door.

That night, as I lay in my bed watching the light of the fire dance across the tangled straw of the ceiling, I thought about what Meva had done to protect me from the guards and their needles. Finally, I asked her the question I had not found the courage to ask before, "Do you want your dream of marriage to come true for us?"  
"Are you asking me to marry you, Tzurk?"

I thought for a moment. I was a nobody. A lowly miner, and she was not only of royal blood, but beautiful and true. No, I couldn't think of that. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Meva, will you marry me?"

"I will."

### **The Boat**

We left the safe-house the next day. Although Quace said we could stay two days, neither of us wanted to risk turning into a baby goat.

Avoiding the trails, we made our way down to the river Quace had shown us on the map. We reached the river and turned, following it downstream, hoping to find a boat.

After several hours, we did find a boat tethered to a tree with two oars inside. It seemed like the boat was there just for us. But I suppose that is what anyone who steals says.

I helped Meva into the boat and climbed in myself. Cutting the rope, I rowed out into the main current of the stream. After that, the current did the work for us.

### **The Significance of Grint**

Our boat drifted downstream while we slept under a blanket. When awoken but the chirp of cricks, I would poke my head up, look around, and adjust the oars to keep us in the center of the current.

Meva slept on my chest, mumbling in her dreams. Her eyes darted back and forth under her eyelids. The only word I could understand was, "I am giant." And then she would sigh and be silent again.

A quadracrane cocked his head back, poised to spear a passing filfrog or filfish. The water stirred a few feet in front of him, and the stirring swirled away from him, then closer, meandering this way then that before the hunter's beak blurred into the water, and ended the dance. It caught neither a filfrog, nor a filfish. Instead, it gulped down a younger quadracrane.

The sun came up and a shadow came over us cast from a bridge. We were near a small town, probably Grint.

Grint was an agricultural town. Farmers brought their wares there to sell. It would be a good place for us to find food and satisfy our grumbling bellies.

Once past the bridge, I pulled our boat up onto shore, and hid it in a clump of trees. We made sure the boat was hidden, just in case those who pursued us looked along the river.

We climbed up the banks then over boulders. A bustling farmer's market unfurled before us. We tried to blend in though seemingly unnecessary, for no one paid any attention to us. Meva found an acrofruit vendor, and gave him a few coins for two portions of fruit.

The people of Grint could be heard whistling a tune that was their anthem. I tried to whistle it too, but not to deceive them into thinking I was one of them. No outsider could ever whistle a town's theme in quite the same way as the locals, but trying to whistle the tune meant that you were friendly, that you deferred to the local cultures and traditions out of respect. Attempting to whistle a local tune might gain a shopkeeper's favor and find his prices may suddenly come down for you or the local law enforcement may choose not to stop you or harass you.

I gripped Meva's hand and pulled it close to my chest. I loved the way she tucked her head against my shoulder. Her feet now walked in a rhythm that matched my own, so she could remain close to me. My cloak nearly covered her to people who might look at us from the side.

Meva kept looking back over my shoulder. So finally, I asked her what she was looking at.

Her eyes darted to me, then back up over my shoulder, "Is that a temple up there?"

I turned and saw a rectangular building that twisted up into the air. It had little windows cut into its sides, and a ring of gold spikes adorning its top like a crown. She continued, "They perform marriages up there."

I did not know much about these temples, "Are you saying that you want to...I mean, now?"

She smiled. My heart skipped a beat.

We hiked up to the temple and came before the priest. I had a distrust of priests, simply because priests were picked in a secret ceremony behind doors, and nobody knew the criteria for which they were selected. This always bothered me though it has been done for thousands of years.

He addressed me first, "Tzurk, I do not know you, so forgive me if I ask you questions I ought to know if we were members of the same congregation."

"I am not a member of any congregation." I said, hoping to tweak him just a little.

He ignored my comment and put a hand on my shoulder, "You are known as Tzurk?"

"I am."

He gestured to Meva, "You are known as Meva?"

"I am."

He turned back to me and asked, "Tzurk, will you forsake all others?"

"I will."

"Will you keep Meva the focus of your desire?"

"I will."

"Will you be a loving father to your children?"

"I will."

"Finally, will you die for her?"

"Without hesitation." I said.

He took his hand off of my shoulder, and put our hands together. This was a gesture that my role was to be performed regardless of her oath.

"Meva, will you forsake all others?"

"I will."

"Will you remind Tzurk of the complexities of life?"

"I will."

"Will you only bear the children of Tzurk and no other?"

"I will."

"Finally, will you submit to him? Will you defer to him in conflict?"

"With hesitation." she said.

He declared us married. The color began to drain out of me and into her through her right hand. Her color did the same, moving into my right hand then up my arm as my own color receded. When the colors had been exchanged, we kissed.

The priest escorted us to a narrow door at the back of the temple, used only by newly weds such as ourselves. The path beyond was rocky and twisting. It was often so difficult that we had to help each other to continue. Finally, it ended in a small garden with a spring of cool running water.

### **Leaving Grint**

We left Grint, the food in our packs replenished, and our hearts united. Meva recognized an area on the map called the Valley of the Dronk. Her grandfather had taken her there many years before, when she was a child. It was a vague memory to her, but because of its connection to her grandfather, it was special. I knew she wished to go there, and so we took a detour to see the valley as a part of our honeymoon.

### **Valley of the Dronk**

I told Meva about my experience of becoming the mountain and showed her the purple fuzz-ball, but I did not let her touch it. The extent of its power was unclear. What if she touched it and was transferred into a grain of sand? How could I ever find her again?

Meva told me that it was her grandfather who started the search for the legendary "heart of the mountain" many years before. He had convinced the mining company to dig for it, promising them they would own it once his soul was safely transferred into a younger, more virile body.

I started thinking of a device that could control the heart of the mountain's soul transferring powers. But even though I was a capable builder, I did not know how to make the device I conceived.

Meva knew of a tribe of rock beings called Dronk, who lived in secret. They were the guardians of the mountains.

Meva's grandfather had signed a treaty with them, which allowed the Blank mining crews to dig the richest veins, while avoiding the Dronk's sacred chambers. Her grandfather had honored every word of the treaty. It was the key to the company being able to mine where so many others had failed.

Previous companies had tried to dig further and deeper without the approval of the Dronk. Then, the mining would inevitably break into a sacred Dronk chamber. The Dronk would demand the operations stop. Fighting would break out, but the Dronk always won. They were, after all, made of rock.

Meva said that the Dronk were capable of building complex mechanical structures from a magic rock. They had a mysterious and powerful device that allowed them to create nearly anything. This could be just what we needed to house and control the purple fuzz-ball!

Meva led us to a narrow canyon, where walls stood adorned with strange carvings I could not decipher. Every angle was perfect and the walls were smooth as glass. I realized that the canyon had not been formed naturally. The canyon walls had been carved by the Dronk.

We came to a circle of polished white stones inlaid into the floor. Meva said that in order for us to see the Dronk, the stones must be stepped on in a precise pattern. Once this was done, the Dronk would come. Her grandfather had studied these stones and eventually discovered the pattern. The pattern had been taught to her when she was a child, as a sort of dance. She thought she was learning a kata or a family ritual. Not until much later did she realize it was the key to unlocking the Dronk's stones.

She completed the dance, and the final stone she stepped on sank into the ground two inches. I could hear the clinking of underground mechanisms as stone slid against stone. Spires of minerals covered in crystals sprouted from the ground in neat rows. Black, tangled orchards of petrified trees rose against the canyon walls. All was silent. We stood waiting for three hours. At one point, Meva pointed behind me, and I spun around to see three stone beings. They had a simple form, like a children's drawing. Their heads were huge rectangles with coarse holes cut clear through the head, allowing the light of the sky to shine through. Their bodies were rectangular stone. Their legs and arms were slabs.

Two Dronk pulled a third from a white stone monolith. They pulled out the body, setting it aside. Then they pulled out an arm and hung it on the body. This process continued until the third Dronk was completed.

"Do you see that, Tzurk? They're giving birth!" Meva whispered to me.

The newly formed Dronk was the same size as the other two, but he walked awkwardly, staggering as they guided his first steps. One of the Dronks used his finger to carve a symbol onto the new Dronk's forehead.

"You will hunt for us." He said. "Your name shall be Hunt."

When this was done, the Dronk turned to us. He welcomed Meva. He said he knew her, from long ago, when she had come to the valley with her grandfather. Meva bowed. The Dronk said he'd seen her as a baby, and he never forgot a bloodline. His name was Grel, he was the one who used the creation table and gave names.

Meva asked him if he could build a device for us to contain the heart of the mountain, and motioned for me to show him. Grel looked long and hard at the purple fuzz-ball, when I held it up to him.

Then he said, "We have no use for this, because we cannot die, but this has been hunted for by mortals for as long as time has spun. Everyone who found it before you, was either killed or vanished."

"Does this mean I will die also, or was I meant to have it?" I asked.

"Neither or both." Grel replied.

He motioned for us to follow him to the monolith, which he called, the Skeev Table.

Grel stirred the shiny white surface of the monolith like it was liquid. It didn't move at all like solid rock. After a moment, he drew out a device that had an open hatch and two hinged arms on either side. Taking the purple fuzz-ball from me, he placed it in the top compartment and snapped the lid shut. Drel handed the device back to me, "These mechanical arms can pull the soul from one thing and hold it temporarily in the machine or transfer it into another object or body."

Grel put the corner of his stone head on Meva's hand as if to kiss it. "Visit us again, Meva. Now go in peace."

### **Leaving Dronk**

We left the Valley of the Dronk, and continued our trek to the cottage Quace had shown us on the map.

It was well off the main path, surrounded by thick woods; A much more inviting place to stay than the safe-house, and with no threat of turning into baby goats. The roof was tiled with bark shingles and the walls were of split logs. The front door was flanked by small windows.

Inside, the cottage was dry and warm. There was a rocking chair, a rug made of angora elephant, a framed bed, and a painting over the fireplace.

After dumping our packs on the bed, we went outside and explored the area around the cabin. Not far off, there was a grove of wild Mink-Mer trees. Their branches hung low from the weight of the fruit on them. I plucked one and we shared it, the sugary juice running down our chins.

To the south, a stream trickled down from nearby mountain peaks, run off from the thawing snows many miles above us.

I've looked back on our time in that cabin, and longed to return to those memories. It was the best time of our life. We were free from worry and concern, and our love continued to deepen. I can only think of one moment when it all went stink-bad.

### **The Baby Gardens**

Meva went outside in the cool of the morning and paced off a large square field, then a second field in the shape of a giant circle. The square field was for boys, and the circular was for girls. By our custom it was mandatory to build both fields, and to decide which field would house the seed only after both were complete. Some couples demanded only males. Some demanded only females. Some demanded the exact same amount of each sex. Some decided to plant all of the offspring in one season. Still others chose not to plant any seed at all.

We had long walks around the two fields, Meva gleaning every weed from the area so that it looked pristine. All rocks and pebbles were moved to the outskirts of the fields, making an accidental sweeping rock path around them. She set up boarder markers of stick then drew a string taught between them. We gathered smaller sticks and placed them along the string to mark the border. She sang a song about the family inside the border, and how one day they would meet the family outside the border. The land was rich for reproduction.

It came time to plant. I exhaled, and a small sack lowered from the bottom of my torso. Where I am from, the sacks have three black marks on them; two of them look like circles for eyes and one mark below looks like a smile. Inside of the sack contains any number of seeds from one to ninety-

nine. We are forbidden from checking the count of seeds in the sack, so the day of planting is always a surprise.

The next part of the planting ritual is up to Meva. She pokes her finger into the "right eye" mark of the sack, and the line that looks like a mouth opens up and says, "YAAAARRR!" then the number of seeds we are to plant that day come out of the mouth. In our case, one seed came out and landed in Meva's open hand. Next she was to choose which field would receive the seed. Would it be the square field or the circular field? But before she could make her choice, something terrible happened. The seed withered in her hand and blew apart in a puff of smoke.

Shock came over Meva's face as she considered the seed obliteration in her hand. She looked up at me to see how I would respond. I was not sure how to act. The first thing that came to mind was what people would call her from now on, "Obliterator." I pushed that word out of my mind because-- OBLITERATOR. No! Not Meva! She would not be known as an obliterator! It is true that other obl iterators who did not want to be known by that name often claimed that they never tried to have children in the first place. But that was hard to do for the couples who more publicly built their square and circle fields in thickly populated areas. Sometimes the husband took the blame, claiming that no seed was ever produced from the sack in the first place. He would be known as "Seedless." That is a name so shameful that we would shout that curse to our enemies on the other side of the battlefield, "Seedless! Seedless! Seedless!"

Meva wept in my arms, and said I could leave and find another female. I told her that I would rather be married to even an obl iterator than any non-Meva female!

She had the desperate idea to use the soul transfer device to put her into the body of a viable female, but the idea was wrought with difficulties. The first would be to find a female who wanted to be pulled from her body into Meva's. Why would a female want to be removed from her own body? Perhaps if she had an incurable disease! If she was going to die anyway, she would want to switch bodies with Meva, then Meva could bring us a baby, and we could figure out something else to do with her incurable disease. Perhaps I could build her a mechanical body in which to house her soul in case of an emergency.

Meva was willing to do this, but I did not like the idea of using the soul transfer machine lightly. It was for emergencies, and it needed much more experimentation before we knew the limits of its power. I was not sure how trustworthy the housing device we got from the rock people would be. What would happen if the device failed? What would happen if the device killed the purple fuzz-ball in the middle of a soul transfer? I assumed the body would be obliterated, and the soul could be cast into the air, a homeless ghost in search of a body! No! Experimenting on Meva would not do! She was already sad enough by not being able to bring us children.

We did not turn the two fields under, but we did not keep nature from claiming the ground for the forest again. Trees grew in those fields, male trees where the square was and female trees where the circle field used to be. Rocks tumbled back over the ground, male rocks where the square field used to be and female rocks where the circle used to be. The weeds came.

Meva and I never brought up what happened in those two fields again.

## **Artism**

Five years passed, and we had thoroughly researched the soul transfer device. I took most of the notes, and Meva formally put everything in her secret journal. We concluded our experiments, having grown weary of research, and put the soul transfer device in storage under the bed.

With the diversion of research over, I noticed Meva spent long hours staring out the window. She was looking at the baby gardens, now barely visible under a thick patch of weeds.

One day, Meva went outside to draw shapes in the soil using sticks. She told me it was a new art theory she was working on called Drawshapism. Then she pushed sticks into the ground and call it Stickism.

Not to be outdone, I piled rocks up in front of our cabin and called it Rockism.

Soon her stick artworks began to fill the yard, leaving little room for my rock expressions. With no place left on our property to properly display my art, I decided to pioneer a new undiscovered genre of fine art. I plucked pinecones from the surrounding trees and re-hung them from the branches. I called it Pineconeism.

Meva thought I was mocking her art. I asked her why she didn't think I was just mocking Rockism. She claimed intuition. She said that Pineconeism was redundant and derivative, which infuriated me.

Out of spite, I tied the pinecones onto the exact place from where I plucked them, inciting more criticism from Meva. She said she couldn't tell if the pinecones were growing naturally from the tree, or if I had plucked and tied them back onto the branch. I feigned offense and yelled, "You do not have an eye for art or you would recognize Pineconeism when you saw it!"

She declared a new form of Pineconeism, where the artist did not pluck the pinecone from the branch and retie it before declaring it a work of art. I thought this was obviously silly, and said as much. She yelled, "You are just jealous of my superior form of expression, Tzurk! You know that I have discovered an authentic movement known as Pineconeism!"

"You are not even making art, Meva!" I yelled. "What you are doing is called NATURE, not art!"

She glared at me, "That is what all stupid people said about great art when it was first discovered! They did not have the mind to understand such things. I am shocked to know that you are one of those people!"

I pointed to the ground, "Fine! I just discovered Groundism! It is when the ground is just the ground. In fact, the whole world is already my work of art because it is all covered with the ground. I will sign my name to the world."

I snapped a stick from the ground, and signed my name to the ground.

Meva's face turned red with anger, "You just broke off one of my stickist artworks!"

"Well, there weren't any other sticks I could use to sign my name!" I shouted back, "Someone picked them all and stuck them into the ground!"

That night, Meva moved out of our bed and set up a pile of clothes to sleep on in the corner. I saw the stupidity of our fight and said so. But she would not talk to me, and would not return to our bed.

That night I did not sleep. When we slept together, I rested my hand on her hip. The empty space she left in the bed was haunting. I kept looking over at Meva in the corner, and could not believe I acted so stupid to her. I realized that she was really trying to be an artist. She needed to create. She hadn't started Stickism to spite me. She was expressing herself. I was the fraud. I was the one acting in spite.

That lonely bed was a warning that if I continued to disrespect my treasured wife, I may just end up alone... forever.

The next morning, I saw her stirring, so I went and lay down beside her. I apologized to her and admitted my spite.

She held up her hand to quiet me. "I curse my love of art. I put it before you. I forgive you, but I don't want to pursue Stickism or my fraudulent form of Pineconeism anymore."

She took my hand and placed it on her hip. She said, "I have a new form of art. I call it Tzurkism, and I will only ever be a Tzurkist!"

"And I am a Mevaist. I will only be obsessed with Mevaism forever!"

## **Research**



I threw myself into the study of the soul transfer machine. Meva documented everything in a secret journal (Undisclosed location. Trust me, don't even bother trying). When I first turned the machine on, we could feel it drawing power from the surrounding environment. If we used it too often, the surrounding trees would droop from exhaustion and the grass would lose its color. Though we didn't feel anything, it was my suspicion that the soul transfer machine could even be drawing its power from Meva and I.

With the use of some handmade baskets and some string, I was able to trap small spirds on which to experiment. We always had a few in cages along the back wall of our cabin, and took them outside when weather permitted. The first specimen I caught was an adult spird that looked healthy. We called him "Specimen A". I put him in one of the transfer machine's claws, and had the other claw touching a rock. This was to emulate my first experience in the blank mines when I touched the purple fuzz-ball and went into the mountain.

I pushed the button to power the device, and it began to hum. Then, with a flip of a switch, Specimen A went suddenly limp, and the soul transfer machine cut its own power. Meva pushed her fingers through Specimen A's feathers, feeling for a pulse. But there was none to be found.

We inspected the rock. I picked it up and held it up to my face. It was cooler than room temperature, but there were no visible signs that anything was different.

"If you are in there, little spird, hold on tight and we will bring you back to your body!" I said.

The claw of the machine was, once again, attached to the rock. The claw on Specimen A remained and we turned the machine on. With a flip of the switch, the spird sprang back to life. Its head snapped up, and its feet clenched. We kept Specimen A in a cage just long enough to make sure there were no lasting side effects. Later that spring, we set Specimen A loose, and he built a nest in a tree that grew from what used to be our circular field.

It was not clear exactly what happened in the event of soul transfer. We were not sure if the soul got extracted from the body, and that caused the heart to stop, or if the soul transfer stopped the body's heart, which released the soul to be transferred.

Meva and I spent many weeks trying to come up with an experiment that would give us clear results to our hypothesis.

Many other experiments were conducted, most of them mundane. I will not bore you with the details, but I will bore you with the results. We found that most living bodies could go without a soul for some amount of time. It may only be a few seconds, but none of the bodies could survive without a soul for longer than two minutes under normal room conditions. We tried a soul transfer in the winter on a hibernating hamstel, and its body survived after four minutes without a soul, but most did not survive that long of an ordeal. There were problems with the bodies we were using in that the stopped heart removed the ability to deliver oxygen to the subject's brain. So some soul transfers were successful, but the brain damage of the body was often so great that the spird was incapable of flight, had no memory, or died some time later. We hated being the cause of these spird's deaths, so we tried to return their souls to their bodies within two minutes.

### **The Disintegration of Specimen X**

Specimen X was lost when we unhooked the claw from the spird's body midway through a transfer. The body went transparent, then vanished completely. It was unclear what happened to the spird's soul, but we could hear it chirping in the air around us even after the body was disposed. This was strange, since the spird's soul was not attached to a body's vocal chords, and yet both Meva and I could hear it. Specimen X's chirping went more and more distant before it went silent, never to be heard again. It was unclear to us if the body was disintegrated by choice of the purple fuzz-ball, or because of the disconnect of the soul transfer machine. This brings us to Specimen Y.

### **The Disintegration of Specimen Y**

During the soul transfer of Specimen Y, I prodded the purple fuzz-ball with a stick, and everything in the room came to a stop. The lamp in the room remained lit, but it went dim. For a moment, I experienced what Specimen Y was feeling, and at the same time I could see his body splitting from

his soul. I felt my heart beating in my chest, then saw my body from Specimen Y's point of view. I felt terrified. My body looked like a giant, poking the purple fuzz-ball with a stick and standing across from my little spird's body. The room went bright white, and I was slammed back into my Tzurk body. Meva and I were flung across the room, our bodies pressed against the wall by an unseen force. When the room went back to normal, Specimen Y's body was gone, as was the rock his soul was supposed to be cast into. The stick was still in my hand, but it made chirping sounds. The stick chirped for several days, but faded as the days went on, until the voice died entirely.

### **The Visit**

We were eating breakfast when the cabin was shaken. It stopped. An intermittent hum came from the backyard. We rushed out to find a space ship covered in stars floating just above the ground.

It was half the size of our cabin. We walked around it. I put my hand on the hull. It was cool to the touch, and the ship moved even under the slightest pressure of my hand like a balloon.

"I wonder if it has a door?" I said.

Just then, as if by coincidence, the edge of a door appeared, then it disappeared again. Meva saw it too.

We tried to find the edge of the door with our fingers, but the remained smooth aside from two large gashes to the left of where the door was.

"I wonder if someone is inside."

Again the edge of the door appeared, opening only slightly, but enough to allow sound to escape from the ship's interior.

"WAAAAaaahhH!" a cry came from inside. Not the cry of something big but of something small.

"That sounded like a child!" Meva gasped. "We have to get in!"

As if moved by her demand, the hatch opened wide, a small set of stairs extending to the ground. The cry came louder now that the hatch was open. We couldn't see inside because white lights flooded from inside. Meva was halfway up the stairs before I grabbed her arm.

"Meva! We don't know if it's safe!"

"WaaaaahhhhH!" came the baby cry again.

There was fire in Meva's eyes. "Someone needs us! We'll find out if it's safe later!"

She pulled me up into the bright light. I stumbled on the steps, and then we were inside. Meva tripped over something beyond the door, and she gasped. We stood there for a moment, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the light. From inside the craft, it was hard to make out any sounds beyond the hum of engines and the crying.

Finally, through squinted eyes we saw what Meva had tripped on. Two beings lay on the floor together, arm in arm. I would have thought they were asleep, but their faces were gaunt, their skin already stretching around the shape of their skulls, eyeballs dried and sunken. Meva covered her face.

I knew what had killed them. I had seen it before in the mines. When a miner was being punished for something particularly terrible, he would have his rations taken away. These were the effects of starvation.

Again, the crying. This time Meva stepped over the corpses and went in search of the source.

"What if it is a trap? That cry could be a universal distress signal to attract victims! Maybe this is not a ship! Maybe it is a living entity and it hopes to kill and eat us?!"

"You have a great imagination, Tzurk." Meva called over her shoulder.

I followed.

We passed a small room that caught my attention. Wires traced their way around the ceiling, walls, and floor. They came together at a power grid covered in little crystals inserted into gaps. The crystals were a dull greenish color.

In a small chamber, Meva found a baby in a padded pod, chained to a console. The room was filled with the stench of feces. When Meva lifted the child from her bed, it was easy to see that the smell was coming from her overflowing diaper. Even its pod was smeared with it.

"Tzurk, quickly, give me your robe!" Meva said.

Meva removed the dirty wrapping and tossed them back into the pod. Taking my robe, she gently wrapped the child. Though sullied, the child seemed comforted by its new found freedom from the soggy diaper. Her cries sputtered to a stop.

Meva rocked the girl in her arms, singing softly. The baby watched her with wide eyes. The little thing spoke, "P." She burped a green bubble. I popped the bubble, and a small crystal fell from it, landing on the floor. It looked just like the crystals I had seen inserted into the grid, except this one was bright green.

The baby nuzzled her head into Meva's arms, her eyes closing in exhaustion. Meva looked around the room.

"She hasn't been changed her for days." Meva observed.

It didn't make sense that the two beings on the stairs starved to death while the child seemed to be so well fed. I turned the crystal over in my hand, trying to understand. Then it came to me.

"They starved themselves to feed the child!" I said, "The crystals come from her! They power the ship. She was their only chance for their survival. After they died, the ship ran out of power, and drifted into our backyard."

Meva smiled, "She found us, Tzurk! We could not ... she found us. You did see where the ship landed, right?"

I shook my head.

"... on the female baby garden. She will be OUR child!"

I saw the look of renewed hope in Meva's eyes. Though I doubted any cosmic will was bent on bringing us this female child, I did not want to hurt Meva's feelings. Whatever the cause of this coincidence, it was a good thing for Meva's heart to have a child in her arms... a child that needed her.

We took P off the ship and brought her into the house. That night, she slept between us, and we could hear her breathing. I put my hand on Meva's hip, and she put her hand on the baby's back. Just before we drifted into a deep and peaceful sleep, I heard Meva say, "You're safe now, P. I love you." A giggle. A burp. POP! A crystal clatters on the floor.

## **The Signal**

There were several mornings that Meva dreamt the same thing. She saw P being born in the center of a planet, hundreds of thousands of years ago. The dream was strange enough, but its recurrence was troubling.

Another oddity was P's diet. It was non-existent. Again and again, Meva tried to get P to eat something, but she would just laugh until she burped up a green bubble. In the corner of the cabin lay a burlap sack half full of green crystals.

"She is not eating, Tzurk. And she doesn't even seem hungry!" Meva said.

It was quite the puzzle. We had both seen her waste inside the ship, so she had to eat something, or at least be capable of it. Meva held P close, and the little green baby smiled, wrinkled her nose, then burped until a huge green bubble formed in the air! I popped it, and it revealed a slightly larger green crystal, about the size of an egg. I picked up the crystal and examined it.

It reminded me of something we had once found in the mine. We had found a crystal similar in shape and size, but it was blue. After discovering it, Jockson Reckson was noticeably excited. He ripped it from my hands and examined it in the light of one of our headlamps. He said it was K-tonium. He said something about selling it and buying a new house. He slipped it into his pocket, and we never saw it again.

Could these little green crystals be similar?

That evening, we were sitting on the front porch, enjoying the cool mountain air. Meva was teasing P with a little straw doll she'd made, and P was giggling, as usual. I examined the crystal. Where was a low hum, not from the crystal, but from beyond the trees, from the valley road. What I saw was like a boot to the stomach.

Three military hover pods stopped on the road. Scores of soldiers poured from them and disappearing into the trees between us.

"How did they find us?" Meva cried.

I looked down at the green crystal in my hand. P was emitting a source of power that would show up on the radar of every military vehicle across the country. How could I be so stupid? They were not coming for us. They were coming for her!

We ran back into the cabin. I dug out the sock with The Abominate's finger. Even if I managed to kill some of the soldiers, I would never stop all of them. Escape was our only option.

"Quick, Meva. To the ship!"

We ran out the back door, just as soldiers reached the front of the cabin.

"Open the hatch!" I yelled at the ship, and it obeyed.

Meva scrambled in with P, but then I remembered something. The soul transfer device was still inside the cabin. I nodded to send Meva into the ship as I ran back to the cabin.

"Close hatch!" I yelled over my shoulder, and the ship obeyed.

Inside the cabin, the front door groaned against its rusty hinges as the soldiers pounded the other side. I saw shadows pass the side windows. They're going around the back! I fell onto my belly in front of the bed, and pulled the device out. I was nearly back outside when the front door gave, bursting inwards. Darts bit into the doorframe around me, and I slammed the back door closed on them.

Soldiers came around the sides of the cabin.

"Open!" I screamed at the ship as darts pinged off the ship's doorframe.

I dove inside before the stairs even had time to extend. I shouted for the hatch to close, and not a moment too soon. BOOM! A concussion bomb made the ship reel.

Meva was thrown against the wall, her arms shielding P. I held up the device for her to see, and she nodded. Another concussion hit the ship, throwing me to the floor.

"They're shelling us!" she yelled.

We ran into the control room together, but none of the controls made any sense.

Meva was in despair, "How do we take off?"

Suddenly I remembered the green crystal in my pocket. It was a bright green, like the sun casting through a new spring leaf. Power! The ship needed power. I raced down the hall and into the room with the grid. I tore out a dull green crystal and threw it aside. I inserted the new bright green crystal in its place. A voice from overhead said, "P-tonium accepted. 12 percent charge."

Instantly the ship turned on an unseen pivot and shot upwards, pressing us into the floor. The whole room rumbled and shook as we gained speed.

From where I lay on the floor, I could see Meva, but I could not get up to be with her. She was pinned to the wall, clutching little P in her hands, straining against the pressure. She tried to hide the fear on her face.

All went silent. We had pierced the atmosphere. The resistance was gone, and the vacuum of space enveloped us.

Meva and I scrambled into the control room. The knobs, levers and buttons were a complete cipher.

"Does anything look familiar to you?" said Meva.

"I'm a miner, Meva. Not an astronaut."

"Don't worry, Tzurk." Meva said, "We are a family now. I would rather be here with you and P than back in my father's palace. Though hurling through space, I can say that in this moment, I am complete."

I laughed and my heart great stronger.

I said, "You are Armikrog! That is what I shall call you from now on."

Meva's face contorted, "That's a horrible sounding word! What does it mean?"

"A wrinkled man of the Wanati desert tribe was sold into slavery, and worked with our mining crew. Whenever his hammer fell on walls that were too hard to be chipped, he would shout 'ARMIKROG' at the rock. That's you. The immovable rock!"

Meva shook her head and laughed. "Never call me that ugly name!"

"Okay" I said, then mumbled under my breath, "... Armikrog."

"I heard that!"

### **Desperation**

No water for four days. Could be five.

Everything is empty. There is no food on this craft.

P does not seem to mind. She remains healthy, but seems sad at the sight of Meva and I starving. No more giggling. No more crystals.

For awhile, we could make her laugh, and she would provide the P-tonium to power the ship.

We are too weak.

The ship is moving but we don't know where it is going. If I take the last crystal out of the grid, the ship will stop, but so will the life support system. The color in the last crystal is fading. We could be dead soon.

I have tried in vain to learn the controls... too alien and strange.  
I declare my love for Meva to whoever finds this.

## **More Desperation**

I have decided to do the only thing that might save us. I will use the soul transfer device to put myself into the ship. Then I might be able to figure out how to operate the ship's foreign controls.

At first, Meva begged me not to do it. She reminded me of the risks and of the strange things that had happened to some of the spirids. But eventually, even she saw the necessity of it. I would either die from starvation, lying on the floor of the ship, or I would die trying to save us. Meva kissed me and relented.

## **A Crazy Plan**

We clamped one of the soul transfer device's arms onto the control panel, and the other onto my arm. Meva reminded me that she would only give me one minute. She wasn't going to risk any more time. I nodded and she pushed the button. The purple fuzz-ball beating inside the device cast light around the room, and I went into the ship.

The first sensation I felt was a lack of feelings. The aching hunger was gone. The pangs of starvation that wracked my body had slipped away in an instant. It was a relief. But then I remembered the short time I had and turned my mind to other things.

I could sense our place in space. Nearby planets and stars took shape in my mind and their names came to me, although I'd never seen them before. I realized the ship must have some navigational computer or log. At this thought more information poured into me. I could see the ship's entire history in a moment. But my mind grasped at another image; P's crib.

P's crib was being pulled aboard by a desperate looking crew during the heat of battle. The ship's door was sealed before taking off. The crib was chained to the wall. P was force-fed cans of beans to increase her output of P-tonium. She didn't laugh or smile. The crew's planet needed the P-tonium to survive. There were other planets that wanted the P-tonium too, and were willing to kill for it. As far as the ship's computer identified P as the last of her kind.

Meva's voice echoed inside me. She was telling me to hurry. She was going to transfer me back.

In a panic, I pulled my mind from the computer, though there were so many more questions I knew it could answer, but I had to get to that control panel. Its levers and knobs were instantly familiar to me. I dimmed the bright lights that made it difficult to sleep. I discovered a water generator had been switched off. I turned it on, and the ship's water storage began to fill.

But something was wrong. Not all of the controls were working. I could only make a minor adjustment to our speed. I could not reverse our course, and I could not change our trajectory. I dove deeper into these controls, tracing their connections until I found the problem. There were two dents in the hull where the ship had been hit by missiles while escaping. One had torn the metal open and damaged the ship's controls.

I used the navigational computer to quickly chart a course. We were headed for a nearby planet. I calculated how long it would take to reach it.

At that moment, I woke up to the sensation of liquid on my face. Meva had pulled me out. She was smiling, holding a container of cool water. I drank it down in big gulps, but it did little to satiate the gnawing hunger in my stomach, or the growing fear in my mind.

I told her the bad news. We were about to crash land, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

## **Life After the Crash**

A crash landing is difficult to describe with accuracy. When in the middle of it, I did not think the tumbling would end. It was more like an assault than an event to my mind. Surrounded by noise and violence, papers, paneling and even my own clothing blurred past my face. I remember the weird details in times of crisis that come for no apparent reason; I saw a metal tool tumble by, I looked at my own hand and considered my own anatomy in slow motion. I do not know why these are the things I remember.

When it was finally over, we climbed from the wreckage, with few injuries. Meva's arm was broken. I was bleeding from a gash in my forehead. P's crib had landed on top of her, but instead of harming her it kept objects from crushing her. At the time I thought it probably saved her life.

Behind us was a jagged line scratched into the planet's surface that documented the trajectory of our landing. Pieces of our ship was ripped from the hull by trees and rocks and scattered to either side of that line. The air was thicker than our home planet, but gravity was comparable and a yellow haze protected us from direct sunlight.

Meva knew enough of the healing arts to talk me through resetting her arm ... a difficult ordeal. She and P took shelter under low hanging branches while I went in search of anything that could be salvaged from the wreckage.

Over the course of that day I dragged chunks of the ship's carcass back to Meva, where she, using her one good arm, assembled a makeshift shelter. P seemed oblivious to the peril of our situation. I would put bushes on my head and dance around for her which consistently made her giggle. P's happiness was a comfort to Meva.

The first night we huddled together in our shelter and listened to strange animal noises that put a chill in our bones. This planet sounded all the more threatening and I knew it would be a matter of time before a beast broke into our temporary housing.

Most days I worked on the water generator. The few stores of water we had were nearly exhausted, and a survey of the area revealed no water though there were plants growing on the hillside that I assumed used water to survive. The water generator wouldn't power on and I considered leaving Meva and P to go on a more exhaustive search for water. Another howl, deep and brooding came from the forest as if to threaten me if I ventured too far from camp.

Our love for P motivated us to keep trying and it kept us from falling into despair.

I fused three wires on the water generator and it came on for a few seconds, then made a popping sound and seized up in a cloud of smoke. I feared I might have damaged it beyond repair so in desperation I used the soul transfer device to put myself into that infernal machine! Once inside, I could clearly see what must be done. I also discovered that the water generator was actually a matter generator. It could pull water from anywhere because it changed the array of any molecule into water. With a little work, the water generator became a matter generator. I was able to make simple objects with it. I started with bricks, then made hammers, screws, bolts and basic levers.

I repaired the power grid! Using the green engine room as a power generator, we fed Ptonium into the grid it offered more than enough power for anything we needed.

### **Previous Visitors**

During the day when there were less animals roaming around, Meva and I explored the surrounding area to discover we landed on the far end of a long valley. On the opposite end of the valley we found a rock with testimonies of previous visitors scratched onto its great surface. We do not know who wrote them, but wrote a commentary on each of them to acknowledge that they are part of our history:

#### **BOHRAM**

He was a great scientist who flew to this planet hoping to perform experiments using an artifact of time bending. The date next to Bohram's name suggests that he landed on the planet some five hundred in the future, and the space maps he drew are beyond the accuracy and scope of contemporary maps. Bohram discovered a planet he named 26229 and was considered by the future scientific establishment as having similar parameters to his home planet. Bohram applied his time bending theories to space travel and blasted off to live on planet 26229. His last words are here carved into stone before leaving, "Let us get this show on the road."

#### **OKROG**

He was a great military commander. Okrog's body was so badly injured in various wars that it was mostly replaced by machine parts, including fifteen-foot robotic legs. One day his suit was so badly

injured in battle that he used a furnace-tending suit as a replacement. He could no longer fight in wars, but he could still tend to the furnace so he remained thankful. He had a strange pet, a flat faced Tentacle Mane Cephalopod Kraken.

#### ZILETH

An adventurous blind girl named Zileth wore the 7th Ring of Eureka while hiking and it transported her to a far away land. She lost her old guide animal and went hunting for a new guide animal, known as a half-mongrel. A half-mongrel will not tolerate being stared at so he never got mad at blind Zileth. She scratched his soft fur and felt his facial expressions to learn his moods. They became inseparable friends. Zileth never returned home but always had company to keep her warm thanks to her half-mongrel.

#### HEVERKROG

There was once a scientist who spent so much time in his laboratory alone that he went mad. This is Heverkrog, the inventor of the Procrastinator Ray. He hated this planet but found he could not leave. This made him angry because he thought that he was so smart (and he was smart) that he would be able to find a way off of the planet. He began work on a portal to another dimension. This technology is fictional at best, but he claimed to get the idea from his deceased wife who visited him in a dream while in feverish delirium. Heverkrog built his interdimensional gate, which looked like four logs bound together by rope.

We found "the gate", but also found a book of Heverkrog's mad theories next to his skeleton which lay at the base of the gate. For reasons of my own, I believe Heverkrog has something to do with the disappearance of Bohram.

#### BLACKTON

Claimed to discover cave walls covered in ancient finger-paintings. His devices of measurement dated the paint used on the wall to be at least five thousand years old. These could be the oldest inhabitants of the planet. The most fascinating thing about the cave paintings was that they depicted ninety nine generations who came before them. The first of that line could be the first being ever to live. The long lineage could also imply that this lineage went on forever into the past and that only ninety-nine beings could fit on the wall before the most recent generation ran out of space. One other being is scribbled on the edge of the wall, he has a head, two arms and two legs like most beings we know, but he is covered in warm flesh, has hair on his head and wears unique hat and shoes. A translation of the inscription under this cave painting says sounds something like, "HUMUN BING. FRUM URTH" but none of us know what that means.

#### LUGNESS

Lugness is an honorable and noble being who lived just over twelve hundred years ago. He invented an R.G.Ba'bomb that altered the light of any area within a stone's throw. Lugness discovered a distant star that radiated green Ptonium energy. One day, that distant planet mysteriously stopped emitting Ptonium energy. This is speculation but could this have something to do with P?

#### NICKELNAUT

Walter "Nickel" Naut was the first astronaut from the planet Ixen to find this world some two hundred and seventy two years ago. His ship did not run on Ntonium, but on magic. That was back when magic was real. He came to this planet entirely by accident when he crossed a then-unknown hyperspace lane. Nickelnaut was jettisoned across the universe sideways before ejecting from his craft just before crashing to the planet surface.

This concludes my commentary on the history written on stone.

### **Building Statues**

I used the generator to build statues of my own likeness and I gave them simple mechanized skeletons so they could help me work. They were capable of working even if I left the room. They were linked by a nerve net so if I transferred my soul into one, I could move between them. With my crew of mechanical workers we built three great towers and one lesser tower that would be modeled after Meva's likeness. A great surrounding wall was erected to keep any hostile animals out.



Meva and I wrote out laws on walls, over doorposts, and in journals. Even the statues were capable of repeating the laws. We wanted P to be raised in a family that respected each other first and the self, second. We assume that P would long outlive us. It is our desire that these laws be the foundation of our little society.

### **The Name**

This fortress has been built to protect my family and our ways.

These words have been written so that you may know us better.

If you are friend, then take shelter, for to you we freely give this place.

But be warned, however, if you seek to bring harm to this family, I have already bent my will against you. Though I am a kind and gentle friend, I am an even fiercer, terrifying enemy. If your designs are for harm, I will unleash Meva's wrath upon you. The three engines will ignite and the harbinger will be awakened!

Enemies, know the name of this fortress and fear it; "Armikrog."