

NaNoWriMo 2004

Author: ripvanwormer

When space ate itself and shat out time the whichaways were. When time ate its mother and divorced itself from speed, space took a holiday and the whichaways were there or then and therefore as well. Wherefore, they said. Wherefore?

Then there was. Making, there was more. Making, more still. The whichaways were not angry. They do not make and they do not unmake. They only distort, but this made the makers mismake, and then there was. And was changed, and was again. But change and was could not agree, though was implied change. That which was became imprisoned, something only seen in past tense. Except by the whichaways. But makers were, and they wished to be.

This was the first war.

The moon fell through my window like a wreaking machine

The notorious thief known to the press as Breath of the Dragon crept through the tiers, alleys, and metallic rooftops of the City of Brass. The topography seemed to undulate like flame, and as quickly, so swift was she, so much of the metropolis did she cover in her nightly rounds

And in the morning the prized only daughter of the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, known to her father as Glowing Jewel of the Moon, woke up, stretched like a cat, blinked her sleepy eyes and complained that once again she did not sleep well. Perhaps if her mattress was made of finer silk, or stuffed with softer down, at last she could get the sleep she so badly required for the role her father needed so desperately for her to play.

Every day she was granted her request, and what happened to her previous sheets and pillows and mattresses and illustrated storybooks and nightgowns and curtains and candles and nightcaps and blindfolds and tapestries and bed stands and canopies and stuffed animals and soft, purring mephits after they were taken away, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador cared little about. Certainly, her daughter could not be bothered with such trivia.

Every night, the rogue Breath of the Dragon would appear at another palisade or temple or mosque or villa or money-lender or jeweler or embassy or brothel or gaming-house or milliner or bookshop or palazzo or artificer or glassblower or automaton-maker or golemist or haberdasher or museum or apothecary or architect or barber or holy slayer or sculptor or painter or clerk or dance-studio or train station or wheelwright or saucemaker or shipyard or mercer or embroiderer or necromancer or organmaker or oracle or far-seer or smithery and distract everyone with an outrageous display of swirling fabrics or incense or melted wax or soft, purring mephits, and she would make another clean getaway.

Despite her gifts, the daughter of the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador was still not sleeping. Her father feared she would waste away, for although she inherited from him the powerful yang blood of the fabled and mighty

Yellow Dragons of the Celestial Bureaucracy, mortal blood flowed through her veins as well, and diluted some of the potency that should rightfully belong to a dragon's daughter. He had no idea what maladies and afflictions and feminine problems she might pick up during the hours when her soul untethered from her mortal husk and wandered the country of dreams, lost and alone with no great dragons to guide her, there in the wild regions where the Bureaucracy had little control. The last dragon to act as Esteemed Celestial Ambassador to the Dreaming Court had turned into a walking pumpkin and then, after so many adventures it would take another book the size of this one to recount them all, and even then it would be more like a list of the names of those adventures than a proper book with an understandable plot, the pumpkin who had been a dragon who later became a tree that bled silver tears and later still became a small silver ball that ricocheted through a Baroque contrivance filled with hellish ringing sounds and lights flashing like a deva's eyes, finally emerged from the dreamlands as a minor god, who shortly picked up a modest cult somewhere in the barbarian lands, where the Bureau had little motivation to attempt a rescue if they even knew what to do with the poor transformed creature assuming they successfully brought it back.

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, still trying to help his daughter, tried employing a Mesmerist, an elderly yuan-ti who came well recommended by his friends at the Grand Sultan's court. With his golden watch and soothing words, the serpent-man put young Glowing Jewel of the Moon into a trance, and told her firmly and urgently that she would shortly experience a deep, relaxing sleep with an absolute minimum of dreams and other such unpleasantness, excepting that which her species required for proper functioning during the day.

The next morning Glowing Jewel of the Moon, still beautiful but with red eyes and dark circles underneath them, and hair in tangles from too much thrashing around in her bed (no doubt from those damnable dreams), gently and respectfully informed her father that Mesmerism was so much hokum and what she really needed was still softer sheets, perhaps of a more relaxing hue. As a personal favor to the Ambassador, the Grand Sultan of the City of Brass had the old yuan-ti Mesmerist snake-man put to death, but still the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador pulled his whiskers out in frustration, for nothing would help his poor, helpless china-doll of a half-mortal daughter.

That night, the nefarious and brilliant Breath of the Dragon stole a glistening orb said to have been wrested from the skull of the beholder Great Mother from the curio-shop that had been displaying it, and as she ran off in a swirl of sheets of a not-so-relaxing hue, she laughed at her stupid father and the stupid Sultan and the stupid Mesmerist and the stupid curio-shop owner and the stupid Great Mother, and as she leaped from an aqueduct into the window of an unoccupied tract-house she thought about how much she loved her life, and how much better stealing things was than sleeping anyway. And where she put that glistening orb, the owner of the curio shop and the soldiers of the Great Sultan cared very much about, but the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador cared very little and certainly his beloved fragile daughter could not be bothered about such trivia. The nefarious and brilliant thief of glistening, slimy orbs that might have come out of mad old beholder deities, meanwhile, climbed into bed and fell

deeply asleep.

In the morning Glowing Jewel of the Moon forced herself awake and complained very convincingly that she had hardly slept at all, and no one who heard her doubted that her sleep-deprived ire was genuine.

But it was too late. The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador needed to present his beautiful daughter to the court, for the ambassador of the Rakshasa Court of Light and Illusion had come to call and the Grand Sultan had demanded that she adorn his court for this special occasion. If because of her terrible curse she was somewhat less than perfect, well, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador had better make her perfect anyway, or expect to make up for the faux pas in other, probably more difficult ways. The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador had not been an Ambassador in the City of Brass for 35,000 years without knowing when it was time to get on the good side of the Grand Sultan, so he hired the best beauty consultant he could find and told her to work miracles on his protesting child, miracles that would please even a rakshasa ambassador from the Court of Light and Illusion, even a Grand Sultan of the City of Brass, even a celestial dragon.

Gather these familiar shadows

The beauty consultant in question was a cambion of remarkably dark complexion and a suspicious number of fingers. He wore a tidy suit of expensive fabric and neutral colors.

"Ah!" he gushed. "You must be Glowing Jewel of the Moon ! You are more beautiful, truly, even than I was led to believe."

"Uh huh," said Glowing Jewel of the Moon. "Look, can we get this over with?"

"Oh, my dear," said the Beauty Consultant. "There is so much we must do before your big event, and my words, my praise of you, are actually an important part of it. To achieve complete beauty, I must convince you of it. You must embrace Beauty in both body and mind."

"Is this going to take a long time?" asked Glowing Jewel of the Moon.

"My lady," said the Beauty Consultant. "Beauty is a lifelong quest. It begins in the womb, or in the Positive Energy Plane with the preincarnate souls, or perhaps in the Ethereal Plane as raw potential. It continues in the afterlife and in every reincarnation you earn. It is a never-ending struggle; it is the greatest desire and ultimate goal of the multiverse itself. If you are referring to this particular consultation, however, we can cut this short."

He shot her with a dart dipped in sleeping poison and spirited her away.

A length of time passed.

When the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador discovered his daughter was missing, he went into a blind panic for a time, transforming into his dragon aspect and trying to destroy all the local buildings with

fire. This didn't work, of course, because the City of Brass is the greatest city in all the lands of elemental flame, and quite impregnable to such attacks. Except for the vehicles and kiosks of lesser races, no one was harmed, and no one important was killed.

When he finally calmed down, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador summoned his spies, Mr. White and Mr. Black, and demanded to know where his daughter was.

"Mr. White," he said, "You are in charge of knowing everything that happens during the period of waking. And Mr. Black, you in charge of knowing all that goes on in this city during the period of sleep. What have your contacts and underlings told you? Why has my daughter been allowed to leave the Embassy unescorted?"

Mr. White was human in appearance, though he hadn't been human since his death three hundred years before at the age of sixteen. It had been almost two hundred years since he had replaced the previous Mr. White in the City of Brass; he had been recommended for the job by his tutor, the governor of spirits in a large city on the material plane. Every spirit magistrate in the Celestial Bureaucracy had a Mr. Black and Mr. White; of course, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador was such a magistrate, though he would never use this title in front of the Grand Sultan. Mr. White wore a formal white suit, unadorned except for his prized jade cufflinks. Despite his youthful looks he had a severe, no-nonsense appearance, though in his actual youth he was thought to be a loose cannon and troublemaker; it had taken some long persuading before the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador agreed to take him on, especially since his previous Mr. White had been killed in a duel with an efreeti, and he was looking for a calmer sort.

Mr. Black was not human in appearance and probably never had been. He was a squat, lizardlike creature with dark purple scales that shone in the city's red-orange light with a slight iridescence, but looked black when in shadow. Although humanoid, he did not wear clothes. He had served the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador as his Mr. Black for the past five thousand years, and before that he had been a guardian of the Embassy's doors for another three thousand. Before that his history was unknown; it was believed that he had wandered the planes for centuries. After a demonstration of his abilities, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador had hired him on the spot.

"There is no indication of how or where she left," Mr. White admitted. "One moment she was consulting with the advisor you hired for her; the next both she and he were gone. The minders I sent to watch her woke up an hour later with small puncture marks on their skins. This 'Beauty Advisor' is a well-respected, if eccentric, member of the aristocratic circles. He has practiced his trade here for nearly seventy years with no known incidents. Before that, he was known to practice similar skills in Sylvania, where he received his training. His parentage is unknown, but this is naturally not unusual for a half-fiend."

"I see," said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador in an ominous tone of voice. "And you, Mr. Black? What have you found out?"

Mr. Black's voice was very normal-sounding for a ranking Celestial agent, with perfect inflection and

accent in over eighty languages. He was also a fine singer, a baritone with perfect pitch. Of course, he had had thousands of years to practice. Eight thousand years ago his voice had been a raspy, barely comprehensible hiss when he bothered to talk at all, his vocabulary limited to a few hundred words in the planar trade tongue and a sprinkling of Draconic curses. Incidentally, his scales had been a bright emerald green.

"None of the denizens of the night know anything, sir. The Beauty Consultant retires to his apartment alone, or he goes to parties held by one of the efreeti nobles. While of course no efreeti noble is above suspicion, he has had no unusual contacts that might indicate extraplanar influence."

"And that's it? Where, in your two experienced opinions, is my daughter?"

There was a pause. Finally Mr. White spoke. "Your honor, we must consult your predecessor on this. That is my experienced opinion."

The Ambassador's eyes narrowed. "And what would my predecessor know about my daughter that I do not?" Flame flickered between his narrow lips.

Mr. Black came to his colleague's rescue. "Your predecessor knows something about everyone," he said. "There are none more cognizant of plots and mysteries in this city, save the Mistress of Secrets and the Grand Sultan himself. We could ask them..."

"No," the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador said quickly. "We will keep this to ourselves for now. Perhaps it is time to give the old man a call."

and she, a goddess, smashed his chariot yoke

The district in which the former Esteemed Celestial Ambassador lived was raucous and filthy, a haven for the kind of decadence and revelry the Grand Sultan and his sycophants claimed to disapprove of but ended up encouraging with their unofficial policies. It was filled with bars and nightclubs and opium dens and sex tourism, underground newspapers, unapproved art galleries and improvised dance clubs in abandoned warehouses. Most of the shops were fronts for smuggling rings. The buildings were all in poor shape and covered in piss, vomit, ash, refuse, and graffiti in two dozen languages and a million colors. The celestial dragon known as the Fallen Pole Star, former ambassador for the Celestial Bureaucracy, was the center of it all.

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador remembered when he had first met his predecessor. He had been a young dragon, then, only recently graduated from pulling divine chariots and ready for more intellectual responsibilities. He had scored high in his service examinations - suspiciously high, some said, suggesting he had somehow pulled strings with the examiners. It was true that the young dragon had carefully cultivated friendships with several of them, but he had also studied hard, carefully memorizing the analects and scriptures an official in the Bureaucracy was expected to know. And it was only proper that the committee look at a candidate's breeding as well as his other credentials. The end result was that he could pick and choose where he would be placed.

At first, the young dragon found his choices overwhelming - there were 75 departments in the Celestial Bureaucracy, after all, including Fire, Thunder, Earth, Mountain, Wind, Heaven, Water, Wood, Metal, Radiance, Steam, Minerals, Mud, Molten Stone, Ice, Dust, Ash, Salt, Void, Smoke, Life (minister: Shou Hsing), Death (minister: Yen-Wang-Yeh), Mist, Dualism, Letters, Equality, Words, Laws, Doctrine (K'ung Fu-tzu), Agriculturists (Liu), Tolerance, Eclectic, Thieves (Sung Chiang), Murderers, Mysticism (Lao Tzu), War (Kuan-ti), Priestly Powers, Truth in Testing (Chung Kuel), Salaries and Functionaries (Lu Hsing), Mortal Affairs, Immortal Affairs, Archery, Textiles, Mercy, Epidemics, the North Star, Happiness, Weather Other Than Wind and Thunder, Sun, Moon, Creation, Victorious Strife, Ethics, and Animals. And there were so very many subcategories in each. Why, the Bureau of Animals alone was divided into those belonging to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those to be trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous ones, stray dogs, those included in the eighth classification, those that tremble as if they were mad, innumerable ones, those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, others, those that have just broken a flower vase, and those that from a long way off look like flies, and each of these sub-departments had to have its chief bureaucrat, general, and the many warden beasts and major, intermediate, lesser, and minor animal spirits underneath.

What really interested the young dragon was that the various bureaus had magistrates placed to oversee all the major and minor cities and villages in the spirit realms, as well as the places where mortals frequented. He had considered both Yetsirah and Malsheem for a time, and the Court of Ice and Steel, or the Middle Kingdom, or the Sevenfold Mazework, or the Citadel of Ten Thousand Pearls, or Regulus, or Dis, or the Court of Stars, or even Sigil - the last was a bit of a backwater, but it was quiet and its central location couldn't be more convenient. He finally decided on the City of the Brass, based largely on the reputation of the ranking magistrate there. According to his new friends the examiners, the Ambassador in the City of Brass was brilliant and terribly cunning, secretly controlling the city - and through it, the entire plane - without the Sultan realizing a thing. He had effectively brought the efreet under the control of the Celestial Bureaucracy, and word was Prime Minister Dong-yo da-di couldn't be happier. The young dragon was extremely excited at the thought of working with him, learning from him. He soon learned he couldn't have been more wrong.

The old Ambassador was difficult from the start. He hadn't been happy accepting the young dragon as his new Mr. White; he had another choice picked out, but his superiors in the Bureau of Fire had insisted. "Personally," the old Ambassador had told him right to his face, "I see you more as the spirit of a bridge or pothole somewhere. Perhaps you would make a decent bogeyman, assuming we get you a mask. The cost for one would be deducted from your salary, of course."

The younger dragon had been crushed, humiliated. This was not a feeling he was used to, and this strange new sensation forced him to take measures he otherwise would not have taken. It wasn't a simple matter to conspire with his friends in the upper hierarchy to destroy a kingdom of faithful mortals on the material plane and make it look like the spirit magistrate of the City of Brass was to blame for this, but his humiliation compelled him to this difficult act nonetheless. Only then, with the old bully gone and he installed in his place, was he satisfied.

And yet the older dragon didn't go away, not entirely. In light of his exemplary service prior to the unfortunate occurrence in the Middle Kingdom, the former Ambassador was not imprisoned at the

bottom of a lake, which was the usual punishment for rogue dragons. Instead he was allowed to retire wherever he wanted, and if he wanted to retire in the same City of Brass which had once been under his jurisdiction, stranger requests had certainly been granted. And the dragon now known as Fallen Pole Star did not find that his influence over the city had disappeared entirely. Instead, it became inverted, perverted, not descending from the highest ranks down but absurdly from the bottom up, beginning with the lowest of the city's residents and including those not affiliated all with the spirit hierarchy of the Celestial Bureaucracy. It was, as his successor often complained, the damndest thing he had ever seen.

Thirty-five thousand years passed.

The current Esteemed Celestial Ambassador and his small entourage were able to locate Fallen Pole Star by the simple method of following the trails of multicolored smoke back to their point of origin and greatest density. The building was large and impressive; three or four millennia ago it would have been the height of fashion. Although smoke-darkened and cracked, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador knew it was deceptively stable. There was no graffiti on it; none dared.

They were met at the door by two large fiery genies who had been remade by occult rituals, turning their skin into adamantine and doubling their available number of arms. One of them had very wide eyes, even the third one, and looked like if he could sweat he would have taken the opportunity and ran with it. The other looked merely sly.

"You're looking for the Star," said the wide-eyed one. It wasn't a question, naturally. The Ambassador nodded. The genie made a gesture and a fiery, bat-winged mephit alighted on his shoulder. The genie made another sign, and the creature flew off into the building. Mr. White whistled softly at this display of discipline in a species known for their difficult nature.

Fifteen heartbeats later - if any of the assembled had heartbeats - the mephit returned and made an obscure gesture of its own: three fingers pointed toward the sky and one to the ground.

The doors opened to another world. Not literally, as far as the visitors could tell, but it was far from the chaos of the street. The room was huge, at least a mile long. Everything was covered in the most luxurious silken carpets in vivid reds, yellows, purples, blues, and greens. Fine silk cushions were scattered lazily about the floor, where concubines and courtesans danced and made love. Magical light cast in a ghastly purple hue, causing white fabrics to seem to glow. The censers burned with frankincense, hashish, tobacco, myrrh, and stranger substances that made abstract shapes and colors vivid as the carpeting, filling the environment and looking like nothing so much as the mists of the Ethereal Plane, but by far the most smoke came from Fallen Pole Star himself.

Fallen Pole Star sat at the far end of the room in his full draconic aspect, a serpentine creature over eight hundred feet long with a massive rack of antlers, long, sensitive whiskers, and large, yellow, fishlike scales. In his five-taloned forepaws he held a water pipe the size of one of the city's water towers. He thoughtfully sucked smoke from this, his demon eyes closed and seemingly oblivious to his guests. He was coiled comfortably on a cushion as big as he was.

In his human aspect, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador approached, followed closely by his Mr. Black and Mr. White.

“Hello, fishy,” said Fallen Pole Star, without turning his head. “Fishy, fishy. Little fishling, trying to swim upstream. Finally made it to the spawning ground.”

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador grimaced, but he bowed. “Ancient magistrate,” he said. “The civil service has missed you in your long absence. We have need of you again.”

One enormous eyelid opened slightly. “The fishling needs me, is what it means. The fishling needs a bigger fish to chew through its net. The fishy wriggles; it cannot swim straight.”

“Very well,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, grinding his teeth. “I need you. I need you to tell me where my daughter might have disappeared to. My house is proof against planar travel. None of my spies saw her leave. She is expected at the Sultan’s court this very evening.”

“The Sultan doesn’t need the fishling’s fishling,” said Fallen Pole Star. “The Sultan just likes to see fishies jump through hoops.”

“He’s a tricky son of a bitch,‘ said the pot, referring to the kettle,” said Mr. White. Mr. Black nudged him.

“Be that as it may,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador continued, ignoring Mr. Black and Mr. White. “My job is a lot easier when the Sultan is happy. And I’m very worried about my daughter; she’s never disappeared like this before, and she’s not well.”

Fallen Pole Star laughed, and his voice sounded like the chiming of a gong. “Is that what the fishy thinks? “

“Yes,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador stiffly. “That is what the fishy thinks.”

“The fishy knows nothing,” Fallen Pole Star gloated. “The little fishling’s fishling escapes nightly; she evades your guards using the tools the fishy gives her. She leaves a simulacrum in her place. She is beyond sleep, beyond the fishling and the fishling’s bowl. She is in my bowl now; and what does the fishy think of that?”

“Spill it, Pole,” said Mr. White, surprising everyone with his forthrightness. “What do you know?”

The elder dragon opened his other eye, and turned to regard his new inquisitor. Then he began to laugh again, louder this time. He set his water pipe down, held up a single talon, and wagged it.

The room disappeared - dancers, cushions, minions, smoke, and all - replaced with void and tangled dimensions. Left was right was up was down was yesterday was rotated 360 degrees and inside out, exchanged with its long lost twin, transsexed, and revealed in the last act to be its own father, mother,

and worst enemy, but that was so last season.

“I will show you my bowl,” said the elder dragon.

The dimensions crawled over everyone’s’ faces like writhing spiders of space-time.

“An illusion,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador hopefully.

“No,” said Mr. Black with certainty.

“The other room was the illusion?”

“No,” said Mr. Black, after the briefest flicker of pause.

We’re the whichaways, said the whichaways. We’re everywhere, and now then always we’re here.

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, or possibly Mr. White, had a sarcastic comment ready for that, but it was distorted into nonexistence.

Not so fast, Not so fast, said the whichaways. Not so slow, not so regular-like. Not so backwards! Not so yellow, not so oblong! We’ll distort you so hard!

“What is this?” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador intended to demand.

In the everything there was a hint of an infinite, crocodilian smile, twisting in a figure-eight, circling around and through and coiling inside the assembled company. The voice of Fallen Pole Star associated itself with this assemblage.

“There’s more to this city and this existence than even your dreams can dream they dream,” said Fallen Pole Star.

Oh, my vision is blurred again

“What was that?” demanded Glowing Jewel of the Moon.

“Whichaways,” said her Beauty Consultant. “Handy things.”

“What... where are we?” Behind her, around her, was emptiness of burnished silver, dotted with the distant hulks of floating islands. Tiny constellations like faded memories seemed to hover just beyond her reach.

“Beyond,” said the Beauty Consultant. “Between.”

“This isn’t possible at all,” Glowing Jewel of the Moon argued. “Our home is proof against planar travel.”

“Who says we traveled? The whichaways changed everything else, while we stayed still.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“The multiverse is nonsense, Moon.”

“What? No way. I can’t agree.”

“The multiverse doesn’t care.”

“I... I thought we would just hide somewhere and leave while they were out looking for us.”

“That wouldn’t have worked, Moon,” said the Beauty Consultant. “You can get out at will, but only by stealing your own image. You’re the best thief I’ve ever met, Moon, which is why we need you. You know that. You can steal anything, but left on your plane they’d eventually find you. We needed to get Between, so we could move Beyond.”

“The Ethereal is supposed to be next,” said Glowing Jewel of the Moon.. “Not the Astral; the Ethereal.”

“We didn’t move in the conventional order,” said the Beauty Consultant patiently. “Technically speaking, we didn’t move at all. The city moved, and we’re Between. That cuts across the standard shells. It’s an advantage the whichaways bring.”

“But what are they?”

“Distortions, viruses, ripples, predators. Great manglers. They feed on and excrete the stuff of the planes. We found them in the Plane of Shadow, in a place called the Veil. It’s like a great cyclone in shadowstuff and Beyond. They were that place, I think, somehow. Or they intersected it. It, they, we... were willing to discuss an interaction of some kind.”

Glowing Jewel of the Moon shook her head as if to clear it. “And you’ve just been sitting on this discovery for all this time, while you pretended to be just a beauty consultant for the wealthy?”

“I am a Beauty Consultant. It’s who I am. It’s who we all are. It’s just that our definition of Beauty might take a little getting used to. I should mention, also, that I haven’t actually been in the City of Brass for nearly as long as people think. Fallen Pole Star helped forge some documents for me, and even some memories.”

“You should have told me more of this earlier,” said Glowing Jewel of the Moon. “I wasn’t nearly as prepared as I thought I would be. I thought we’d be hiding out with your friend Pole Star for a while, or maybe in the Wormhole with the salamander-folk. This is... bizarre. I don’t know what to make of any of this.”

“You feel like a fish out of water, huh?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” said the Beauty Consultant bemusedly. “Just something Fallen Pole Star used to say.”

“You know I love you,” said Glowing Jewel of the Moon. “But don’t talk to me that way. I’m not stupid.”

“Of course not. You’ve been a brilliant pupil. You’ve been ready for months; it was only now that I was able to convince your father to let me see you during the day.”

“Because of that meeting he wanted me to attend,” Glowing Jewel of the Moon agreed. “What do you make of that?”

“I don’t make anything of it. It’s politics as usual; not my concern at all. We have bigger fishlings to fry.”

“So,” said Glowing Jewel of the Moon. “Where to next?”

“Arborea,” said the Beauty Consultant. “The City of Brass was fun, but I’m anxious to catch up with the others.”

“Right. And how do we get there?”

“There’s a hole in the void, a wound in the multiverse that bleeds Color of a rich sapphire hue. We must follow our highest passions to get there; it lies beyond the Sargasso of Forgotten Dreams.”

“Great,” said his companion. “Before we do this, let me establish off the bat that it would really help if you call me Breath of the Dragon.”

“That doesn’t sound very flattering. Halitosis isn’t one of your flaws.”

“Look, it’s a Taoist thing, okay? I’m honoring my Yang aspect. I’ve been using it lately during my missions, and I think it’s starting to catch on. Would you just do it?”

The Beauty Consultant shrugged. “As my lady wishes.”

“And none of that ‘my lady’ stuff, ‘kay?”

“All right, Miss Dragon Breath, if you’re ready, then it’s time to get passionate.”

The Breath of the Dragon smiled. “Right here?”

“Right here,” the Beauty Consultant said calmly. “Relax: everything is mental here. We just have to get in the mood.”

“Not that I mind, but what happened to the ‘whichaways?’”

“Our agreement doesn’t hold so far from Fallen Pole Star’s domain. Come on, Moon: relax and close your eyes.”

She did so.

“Imagine that you’re pure energy; mostly, because that’s what you are here, if not everywhere. You know: chi.”

“I knew what you meant,” Breath of the Dragon said irritably.

“Now, I’m serious: relax. Breathe slowly.”

“Is there even any air here? I don’t think I’ve breathed at all since we arrived.”

“Well, no,” said the Beauty Consultant. “You don’t breathe air here. Concentrate on the whispers in the back of your mind: feel them flow through the void. Feel your body acknowledge them. Feel them pass through. Treat them like you would the air in your own home.”

“I do feel it,” Breath of the Dragon said.

“Those are the psychic winds,” said the Beauty Consultant. “Everything anyone thinks or feels on any of the other planes blows into the Between. They can become tangible here, even dangerous. But now we are in a calm, and they will only nourish your spirit. Keep relaxing your body, and concentrate on the winds.” He began to massage her neck and shoulders.

“What are you doing?” asked Breath of the Dragon, opening her eyes.

“Keep your eyes closed! Your father is paying good money for this consultation.”

“I don’t think this is what he had in mind!”

“But this is what we had in mind,” the Beauty Consultant reminded her. “Come on, please. You said you’d do this for me, O Dragon Mistress.”

“All right, all right.”

“Keep them closed this time. Now: feel the psychic winds flowing through you. Feel them stoking fires near your tailbone and moving up your spine toward the crown of your head. Feel the fires burn brighter, brighter, filling your body. Want them. Need them! Your whole body is fire, which is passion, and your desire burns with it. It fills your mind. Your mind and body move as fire does, upward, ever upward, toward their ultimate source: the stars themselves.

"Keep going, burning like the dragon's breath!

"Keep going..."

"Further...

"Brighter..

"Now!

“Quickly!” the Beauty Consultant gasped a mindful of psychic wind. “Imagine yourself moving along the vector of Desire.”

Breath of the Dragon concentrated.

“No! That’s Ecstasy - a completely different place. Concentrate on wanting, not feeling.”

Suddenly she was. She moved like energy, like fire, like lightning through the astral void. The Beauty Consultant hitched a ride as she arced across the silver sky.

And just as quickly they stopped dead.

Breath of the Dragon opened her eyes.

The silver was barely visible now, for the wisps of remembering surrounded them thick as the ocean’s flames. Fragments of houses, forests, people, lost pets, ambiguous faces, abstract shapes, emotions: wishes, fears, terrors, passions, longings, bliss; dreams of life and birth and sex and death and blindness and running and fighting and eating and pissing and working and learning and forgetting and loving bobbing up and down and circling gently around her and rippling through her mind. They felt cool and hot and wet and dry and tasty and textured and awful and colored and black-and-white..

“Why have we stopped?” asked Breath of the Dragon.

“This is the Sargasso of Forgotten Dreams. Every dream ever dreamt ends up in the Beyond eventually, and many of them end up here in this stillness where nothing moves far. It’s a natural occurrence, I think. Better a sargasso than a storm.”

Breath of the Dragon made a face. “Well, how do we get out again?” she asked, sounding slightly peeved.

“We have an advantage the dreams don’t. We can swim.”

“Speak for yourself,” she said. “Where would I have learned to swim? On my home plane, I’d burn to death.”

“Everyone knows how to swim. We’re born from water. The tricky part is learning how to breathe while you’re doing it, and here that isn’t a problem.”

He began to breaststroke. “The dreams are solid enough that you can push against them with your hands and kick against them with your feet. Like this.”

Somewhat dubiously, she imitated him. To her surprise she began moving quickly forward. “Wow,” said Breath of the Dragon. “This is actually pretty fun.”

“I told you,” he smiled.

“You didn’t say it would be fun. If you had, I would have tried sooner.”

They continued for what felt like hours. Strangely, Breath of the Dragon didn’t feel tired at all, and the dreams themselves kept her entertained with their endless and ever-changing variety.

“Why aren’t I getting tired?” she asked., her swimming powerful as when she began.

“You’re not really using your muscles,” answered the Beauty Consultant. “Everything is mental here, remember, even your body.”

“Huh. Where’s my real body?”

“Your mind is your real body. What you’ve felt before now is just the way it interacts with the physical planes. Here Between the planes it doesn’t need to do that - it doesn’t have any room to do that, actually, since there’s no true space. And no time to do it in, for that matter.”

“No space or time, huh?” she asked, all skepticism. “And how do you know that?”

The Beauty Consultant paused, considering. “It’s somewhat tautological; we know there’s no space because no one has a physical body. No one has a physical body because there’s no space. Someone wiser in the subject might actually have better evidence than that, but that’s all I know. The time part’s easy, though; you can stay her forever and not age. You won’t need to eat or drink or breathe or rest, either. As soon as you’re back in one of the other planes, though, you’d better watch out; time catches up with you.”

“But if there’s no true space, why can’t we get anywhere on this plane instantaneously?”

“Well, you’ve seen how fast you were able to move for a while there. Normally your speed is limited only by how fast you can think, and how strong your mind is; in certain states of mind you can travel even faster, and natives can often move faster still. It’s a matter of moving through the various thoughts and concepts in between where you are and where you want to go. You were doing a good job in moving toward Passion, which is most concentrated in the outer plane of Arborea, where I want to go. Unfortunately the Sargasso was in the way; it’s kind of a concept in and of itself.”

“That’s pretty neat, I guess. Is there any way to tell how much time is passing elsewhere?”

“Not really; timepieces and the like don’t work. It’s usually about as long as it feels like it is, though; Time doesn’t play any of those ‘one year here is a century over there’ tricks with the Beyond; there’s no time to do it in. The Sargasso isn’t that wide here, though; maybe another day, day and a half’s

worth of a swim.”

“A day and a half? Really? That sounds like it could get tedious.”

“It probably will,” the Beauty Consultant sighed. “Most people get sick of dreaming after eight hours or so. How long do you usually sleep?”

“I don’t sleep,” said Breath of the Dragon firmly.

The Beauty Consultant wrinkled his forehead. “You’ve got to sleep sometime…”

“I don’t.”

“What, never? You’ve never slept?”

“I used to sleep,” Breath of the Dragon said reluctantly. “I stopped.”

“When you started training with me, you mean?”

“No,” she said. “Long before that.”

To her left a random cluster of dreams began forming the image of a dragon flying across a full moon. The moon became a bowl of soup, which became the wheel of a carriage, which became a fiery sea of burning oil. Within the oily sea floated an amorphous bag of flesh. Small orifices on its body leaked vapor of a sepia hue.

The Beauty Consultant cursed loudly.

“What is it?”

“It’s a native,” he said. “A hallucinaught. Swim as fast as you can.”

The hallucinaught grew bigger as it moved out of the dream, and it swam faster than they did.

“Okay, stop,” said the Beauty Consultant. “Looks like we’re going to have to stand and fight. Ever fought in zero-G before?”

“First time for everything,” said Breath of the Dragon.

“Looks like this is it,” said the Beauty Consultant, pulling out a slim wand from his boot.

And it arrived.

The hallucinaught looked like nothing so much as a stomach floating disembodied in the dreaming sea, or a blob of dough in boiling water. Beside the tendrils of mist that erupted from its many toothless mouths, two wispy tentacles sprouted from its body, writhing and undulating in the surrounding dreams.

The Beauty Consultant pointed his wand at the dream-spawned abomination, spitting out a command word in a language Breath of the Dragon hadn't heard before. Lightning erupted from its tip, crackling outward and around the hallucinaught in a fifty-foot radius, barely ending before it reached the two companions.

The Beauty Consultant grinned wryly. "Magic is enhanced on this plane; I forget."

Breath of the Dragon jackknifed above the blast, then dove down toward her opponent. Pulling silken bed sheets out of nowhere in particular, she cracked them against the fleshy blob as if they were bullwhips. Their ends wrapped around the beast and she pulled them tight, attempting to strangle it to death. The creature jerked back and forth rapidly as it tested the limits of her strength, then it disappeared.

She cursed. "Where did it go?"

"Behind you!"

Before she could turn around, Breath of the Dragon felt the horror's tentacles wrap around her. Now it was she who struggled against a powerful enemy. It began pulling her closer, toward its convulsing orifices and poisonous-looking vapors. Breath of the Dragon struggled harder.

"I'm coming!" shouted the Beauty Consultant, pulling out a short steel blade. With powerful strokes, his sword brandished, he moved toward their foe.

Then he stopped, reeling as if struck by an invisible force.

"What are you doing?" screamed Breath of the Dragon.

"It's blinded me!" he screamed back. Then he reeled again.

"An' deafen'd me!" he shouted, his voice distorted. He reeled a third time. "An' I can't think straight!"

"It's up to me, then," said Breath of the Dragon. Knowing that struggling against the hallucinaught was useless, she kicked her way toward the thing, hoping to catch it off guard. With one free hand, she pulled a sharpened bedpost out of a hidden pocket.

It seemed to anticipate her moves, jerking its body away just when would have reached it. She cursed again. Then she began to smell the vapors.

Her minds soared as pleasure filled every part of her body. The heightened passion that had gotten her here had been nothing compared to this. This was better than sex, better than opium, better than anything.

A wave of mental energy hit her at about that time, scrambling her thoughts. No longer sure where dreams and thoughts and pleasure ended, she wondered if it what she had been attacking. Was this what

sleep was like? She couldn't remember.

Something still lucid in her mind rebelled against that thought. She couldn't sleep, not her. It wasn't possible. Never again.

Another bolt of psionic power hit. Of course she could sleep, said the bolt. Everyone could sleep. It was necessary, healthy, inevitable.

Breath of the Dragon's eyes flashed open. "Not for me, it's not." She thrust downward with her wooden spike, directly into the body of the creature that was by now right up against her, feeding on her slowly liquefying brain.

A mental scream pierced her own mind. Blood leaked from her nose and ears; it drifted around her in perfect scarlet orbs. Still almost lost in the pleasure, she couldn't feel a thing. Ignoring the unbroken shriek, she continued stabbing the fleshy hulk, again and again reaching deeper and deeper into the wet and fragile organs housed within. It was more like stirring a fork inside a giant tomato than stabbing any normal animal. She couldn't be sure what, if any, part of it was vital. Only barely cognizant of what she was doing, she screamed herself, her audible howl mingling with the hallucinaught's inaudible one. Like a mindless animal she continued to tear her enemy apart from inside. By now she was covered in its ichor; she had her entire head and body inside of it; she was swimming in the thing, ripping at it with her hands and feet and teeth. Tearing and scratching and kicking and stabbing became her entire world. She couldn't be sure how long it lasted.

Breath of the Dragon fell unconscious.

[Note: the hallucinaught is from Races of Renown: Aasimar & Tiefling (A Guidebook to the Planetouched) by Robert J. Schwalb, published by Green Ronin Publishing]

the ocean doesn't want me today

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador and his two chief spies were in an emptiness of tarnish, once silver perhaps but now dark and gloomy. Demon winds howled around them, snatching at their thoughts and pulling at their essences. In the back of their heads they heard the continuous tormented moaning, as if all of the ghosts of everyone who ever died were trapped here, forever lost in a maelstrom that never calmed.

The winds grew stronger and more vicious as they advanced. None of them doubted where they were: the edges of Gu'n'ragh, the Spirit Tempest, the Doom of Dead Gods, the mind's most deepest chaos written large as the silver sky between and beyond.

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador spent several minutes cursing Fallen Pole Star. When he ran out of words in the common tongue he began going through the other languages he knew. This ate up quite a bit of time, but after a while his pauses while he tried to think of new profanities began to grow annoyingly long.

“Sir?” said Mr. White. “Can we just focus on the task at hand?” The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador gave him an “Oh, you’re so fired,” look, but at this point Mr. White didn’t care.

Mr. Black ignored Mr. White, adopting a look of intense concentration. “There’s a simple solution to this,” he said.

The others looked at him expectantly.

“It’s just thoughts,” Mr. Black mused.

“Everything’s just thoughts here,” said Mr. White. “Maybe everywhere, depending on how you look at it. Thoughts are the only things that are knowable.”

“Shut up,” said Mr. Black. His long black tongue briefly flickered out, tasting the air. “How good are you two at thinking like storms?”

“I’m a dragon,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “We make storms.”

“You’re kind don’t,” Mr. Black reminded him. “You drag chariots around the outer planes, and you boss everyone else around.”

“That’s true,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador agreed thoughtfully.

“I’m a storm,” muttered Mr. White under his breath. “I’m a storm, I’m a storm, I’m a storm.”

“Stop that!” said Mr. Black. “Don’t forget your training!”

“Right,” said Mr. White. He put himself into a trance.

“Now you do it,” Mr. Black told his master. “Danger comes from resistance. If we’re going to survive this, we have to resist the storm as little as possible. We must become one with the winds.”

“I haven’t done this in a long time,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador warned. But soon he, too, had altered his state of consciousness.

That’s when Mr. Black saw the lost souls.

They seemed tiny in the distant winds, but as the storm drew closer details became apparent. They looked like small children of every conceivable race, each with a silvery thread attached to it, whipping wildly about in the psychic storm.

They stared with eyes empty of all thoughts except hunger, suffering, and desperation. Mr. Black had no way of estimating how long they had been caught in the maelstrom, caught on their way to whatever afterlife was destined for them. It had worn at their spirits, though; it had eaten them away from the inside out.

The ancient spy did some fast calculations. If he woke his companions from their trances, they could fight off the swarming soul-shells; however, they might not survive the psychic hurricane, and they might all become lost souls themselves. If they remained one with the winds, perhaps the vampiric sprits would ignore them; Mr. Black didn't have much hope for that proposition.

Mr. Black decided that there was really only one option: he would remain awake and fend off the hungry souls while his companions rode the winds, one with the winds, oblivious to what was going on. Mr. Black decided there was no point in informing them of his decision.

He floated silently between the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador and Mr. White. mentally preparing himself for the ordeal to come. Using some rope of Mr. White's, he lashed himself to the other two, hoping they could still be convincingly windy with this added bondage.

He eyed the coming storm, watching it approach.

And it hit, souls spinning shrieking around them. The three spiraled with the furious winds; the rope pulled taut, leaving brief instants of dizzying freedom before abruptly jerking Mr. Black toward the others. They, on the other hand, seemed to suffer no discontinuities at all; they moved at precisely the wind's speed, so the rope was for them neither too loose nor too tight.

The souls shrieked suffering at Mr. Black, and, suffering, they continued to shriek. Their cries were maddening, appalling; they were rough claws across the fabric of his sanity and his will.

Still he endured, and he had claws of his own; sheathes around his natural claws forged from a ghost-touch alloy useful in his long career policing the inhabitants of the spirit world in the City of Brass. Their uncanny sharpness could cut incorporeal beings, and their tips of jade were of superior effectiveness against unclean spiritual beings. "Ghost-Touch Jade Claws!" he yelled as he scattered them, for panache. In those moments when the rope slackened, Mr. Black moved quickly where he needed to be. In those longer intervals when the rope was tight he watched and prepared himself for where he would go next. And all the time he used his claws to keep the lost souls at bay.

Despite his prowess, the little ghosts were taking their toll; every time one howled a piece of Mr. Black's mind was broken; every time one touched him something of his will was lost. The ride on the winds alone stretched and contorted his muscles terribly, and fragments of debris pelted him continuously, leaving welts and bruises and lacerating his scaly hide. Mr. Black knew that some of the hard grains abraising him were literally pieces of dead gods whose bodies had been torn asunder by the storm of Gu'n'ragh, but it was difficult to appreciate the honor of being touched by the divine when the divine was tiny and sharp and drawing blood. The other two, again, seemed immune to the grit; they remained perpetually one step ahead of it, and one step behind.

A larger chunk of something or other, hard as steel, hit Mr. Black on the back of the head. He almost blacked out, but here the screaming of the wind-trapped souls worked to his advantage, keeping him awake and focused if not entirely rational. He looked ahead and saw they were nearing the far side of the whirl; swift as the winds were, the storm was so broad that it had taken a long time for them to

move even 180 degrees. One advantage of being awake, thought Mr. Black, is that he could in theory propel them free of the winds on the other side instead of waiting for the storm to spit them out on its own. His windy companions would certainly feel the interruption and be jerked out of their trances, but by then they would be free of the storm and free of the lost ghosts trapped within it. Assuming, that is, that everything went according to plan. While he was thinking this he continued to dart toward the starving spirits, screaming back at them in an attempt to drown them out.

Keeping close track of how far they had progressed, Mr. Black gauged the exact moment to push forward with his mind, pulling everyone out of Gu'n'ragh.

One...

Two...

Three...

Leap!

Spreading out his arms and legs as if to aid in his gliding, Mr. Black launched. The eyes of Mr. White and the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador opened wide as they suddenly went from integral breezes of the wind itself to very solid weights on the ends of an uncomfortable rope. Their heads turned just in time to see Mr. Black make full-body contact with a truculent boulder, ripping one of his arms off as he plummeted alone into the storm. An eye blink later he was as completely lost as the souls who still gnashed their spectral teeth in the demon winds.

In the relative quiet (but still the raging, tumultuous howl of the wind and the spirits crying inside could be heard over everything) on the other side of the astral hurricane, the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador regarded the severed arm tethered to him by the rope. Blood leaked from it in copious amounts, floating through the tarnished silver sky as bright red gelatinous spheres.

“The storm must have really gotten to him,” was all he could say. “Normally he would have dodged that rock.”

Though saddened by the death of someone who had been his partner, his colleague, his teacher, and his friend, Mr. White could only agree.

Then he snatched one of his employers' sleeves. “We have to get out of here,” he said. “The storm's coming back this way.”

“Not again,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador mourned.

“We can't outrun it for long,” said Mr. White. “We need to find a portal out!” He scanned the silver distance. “There!” he said, pointing at a glint of color.

With no clue of its nature, their minds could only move toward it mechanically, unable to synch fully

with its conceptual qualities. The flight over was nerve-wracking, nail-biting, agonizing torture. Several times Mr. White was afraid he had lost their target, that it had healed up or flickered out of existence. The force of the winds grew stronger, threatening to snatch them off their path like the talons of an eagle. Their blood ran cold at the wailing and gibbering of those for whom the afterlife had taken a turn into mental oblivion. With screeching winds and terrified souls close at their heels they arrived with moments to spare.

It was a pulsating hole in the fabric of the multiverse, Ruby light poured from it, reminding them both uncomfortably of their late companion's blood. The other side was difficult to decipher through the impossible angles of distorted space-time, but it could hardly be worse than where they were.

Mr. White and the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador jumped through.

They fell.

[Note: Gu'n'ragh is from the Planar Handbook, published by Wizards of the Coast. The Lost Soul is from Races of Renown: Aasimar & Tiefling]

we can jump out of the train

Now the action skips to the iron battle-plains of Acheron, where a certain cube the size of a large island or small continent rotates gently in the air, occasionally striking nearby cubes, mostly larger, with a loud clanging sound like that of sword against shield magnified a million fold.

Once, it was believed, the universe of Acheron was a single metallic field constructed for the swift transportation of a spirit army in the days of the first war. Something happened to that army as it marched toward its destined battle; it became increasingly clannish, cliquish, as if its hierarchy were breeding smaller hierarchies in a geometric progression. The individual units stopped communicating as the command structures within them became increasingly redundant, and increasingly more important than the army's overall mission. Insularity began to breed hatred, and it wasn't long the army began to fight itself.

They were barely soldiers at that point. They were composite life forms, living swarms, the embodiments of hierarchy and tribalism in a thousand incompatible expressions, each attempting to eradicate all the others until one military order again reigned supreme. The spiritual schism was too much, and the field itself shattered into innumerable fragments; each perfect representations of symmetrical cubic order; each animated with a violence that prevented it from working in tandem with its neighbors. Every one was the size of a world, at first, though later many would break into fragments smaller still, each piece still a perfect cube of dark iron.

And among the literal clashing of the cubes, the soldiers still fought, recruiting new warriors from among the souls of those who died for meaningless causes on other worlds, eternally certain that only their mission was right. Even if they no longer remembered what that cause had been, they had supreme confidence in their orders, and the idea of orders. The armies grew bigger, swallowed others,

and divided again like spear-strewn protozoa. In the wild air between carrion birds flew, never lacking a feast.

In a certain group of cubes there dwelled a race of evil spirit-creatures who had been waging a different kind of war, their battleground the mortal world, their primary foe the race called Man. Called the rakshasas, they were said to have been born from the primal rage of the multiverse against those mortals hubristic enough to think they controlled it, but most now lived disciplined existences under their great rajas.

Pan closer, now, back to that particular island-sized cube, one face seemingly covered in lush jungle foliage and rain forest like the others in its cluster. Masked by centuries of growth were the ruins of a city. Once it must have been a great factory of pain, a place of vile learning and study; now it is shattered rubble and ash. Perhaps the magicks of its natives failed, and the city was struck directly by another cube.

This was an illusion.

In reality the city was as thriving as ever, cleaned daily of all refuse by diligent slaves. The ministries of agony still functioned; stolen souls still waited in long lines to be devoured.

And there were illusions within illusions: few of the city's inhabitants knew of how they appeared to outsiders. Fewer still knew who truly led them. The rakshasas remembered Khara the mighty, brother of Ravana himself, with his twin ass heads and seven tiger heads. Khara's supplicants believed they bowed to him and offered him daily tribute. They were wrong.

Two-and-a-third centuries ago, a rakshasa princess named Minakshi, daughter of Kuvera who ruled the rakshasas before Ravana, conquered the city and burned it to the cube, leaving only rubble and ash. At least, that was the perception she allowed the outside worlds. Within, the coup was bloodless and completely unnoticed. Minakshi, with her inner circle, ruled in utter secrecy, for of all rakshasa rajas her mastery of illusions and deception was supreme.

Yet she has allowed knowledge to leak out that somewhere, among the battle-plains of Acheron, a rakshasa Court of Light and Illusion exists. The mystery that surrounded it had made it even more feared throughout the planes. The few rakshasa raiders that came out of it were not connected with the Court itself; they themselves had no idea of their link to that fabled city. Neither were they connected with the city most of the planes believe destroyed; illusions masked the name the raiders used so that responsibility went to one of a dozen others.

The rakshasas of the hidden city knew only of the great prosperity their lord had brought them, and the amazing success they had in their wars against the inhabitants of the Material Plane. And this, too, was mostly an illusion. Minakshi conserved her troops, giving them the sensation of victory when normally they fought only phantasms of her creation, in illusory worlds she has prepared. She wanted to have as large a force as possible when the time comes.

It was true, of course, that occasionally a rakshasa would be seen to fall. Sometimes this meant that

Minakshi had seen fit to execute this or that wretch for having learned too much. Sometimes it meant she had decided to let the troublemaker into her inner circle, revealing just enough knowledge to make him or her useful in controlling others. With the city believing a rakshasa dead, the special operative moved in secret in a thousand different shapes.

One city on one cube, of course, was never enough to satisfy Minakshi's ambitions. Ultimately she wanted them all; the whole plane must fall to her lies, and then who knows?

This was the dream that Khara himself lived. Far from being killed by Minakshi, she used him to fulfill her fantasies by proxy, at least within her illusions. Daily the triumphs of Khara grew more extravagant; beyond his sight Minakshi watched the illusion only they shared, and imagined that it her puppet was herself.

So it was that for the first time the mystery surrounding the Court of Light and Illusion was broken, at least a tiny bit, and an ambassador was allowed to come to the City of Brass. A treaty with one of the most fabled of the rakshasa courts; surely the Sultan was interested? The Maharaji had such sights to show him...

we can act like we're above it

On another plane, far more given to chaos but no less to war, there was an ivory palace with 66 domed towers and one hundred frigid, mirror-lined circular halls. Each of these halls was likewise capped with vast white domes whose inner mirrors seemed to contain something of the light of the sky, though they were without windows or skylights. From this palace ruled the Dark Man, the Prince of Shadows, the Black Pharaoh many called Graz'zt. He was a demon; he had bright green eyes alive with capricious wit and dark humor; he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot; his face was young, handsome, and intelligent with all of the blasphemous magnetism a fallen angel might be expected to have; around him danced at least three distinct shadows; his teeth came to carnivorous points. He was nude, although he wore anklets and armllets of gold. His skin was black - not the honest black of night-time or a Siamese cat, but the lying black that hides what's good and true merely for the spite of it. Whether there was anything good in Graz'zt was doubtful; he was only the darkness itself, and if any true light existed he kept it hidden in his dungeons, or on display as another trophy of his conquests.

As demons went, Graz'zt was big on cultivating alliances. He was also big on employing spies, and some of these spies told him of an alliance that might soon be made between the City of Brass and one of the most notorious rakshasa hosts. If he could get in on it, this might not be such a bad thing at all. If they shut him out, however, he would have to destroy them. The shift in the balance of power would be too great.

Graz'zt spoke about this at length with his vizier and most trusted advisor, one Verin. Verin seemed to be his master's opposite in many ways; he was frightfully thin where Graz'zt was well-muscled; where Graz'zt's eyes were vividly green, with the slitted pupils of a snake or a cat, Verin's were blood red and without any pupils at all; where Graz'zt wore little or nothing, Verin wore a gray, high-collared suit that revealed nothing but his face and hands; where Graz'zt's posture was lazy and casual, Verin was formal and upright; where Graz'zt's skin was black, Verin was every bit as much an albino. The

lightness of Verin's skin offered no more comfort than the darkness of Graz'zt's, however; if Graz'zt's darkness seemed to have hidden the truth far away, Verin's utter whiteness seemed to have bleached any such virtue out of existence. Both were handsome in their very different ways, and both wore their hair (of colors appropriate to their skins) long and unbound. The two demons understood one another very well, and frequently had long conversations in this way, often diverting in strange tangents or launching into word-games unannounced.

They were alone at this time, which was unusual; it was rare that Graz'zt left his fawning piles of concubines even for a moment, or that he dismissed his musicians with their strange, ethereal notes. Incense still burned in the censers, however, and the mirrored dome shone with colors unknown to the spectra of the mortal plane. The theme of this particular hall was secrecy, and so from the walls hung the severed tongues and ears of six thousand and six hundred individuals both demonic and otherwise. On tables arranged around the room were bowls filled with nuts, pods, and other foods whose shells held unknown interiors. Most commonly these contained writhing worms of venomous nature, but others contained more unusual surprises.

Graz'zt's voice was echoing and often seemed to come as much from the mirrored walls as his mouth. This was to be expected, as the palace was almost as much a part of his being as his apparent body was. His voice was also very sweet - some would say honeyed - but with a wildness about it that prevented it from being entirely comforting. Verin's voice was more severe and tinged with melancholy; he tended to speak more quietly, even lapse into whispers at times. He too had a queer melody in his voice that could charm when he wanted it to, though never comfort. Occasionally the voices of both would wander into the minds of those who might (at other times) be listening, distorting memories and dreams before abandoning their hosts for another. Perhaps you've heard them in your own dreams, burrowed within your most secret, shameful self. Perhaps they've convinced you to do things you would never tell anyone, and which you would forever regret. Perhaps they stole your regret away. They are the untamed and untamable part of you that seduces everything into chaos and horror and the dark.

The two fiends spoke of the upcoming meeting in the City of Brass; they spoke of children and time and death; they spoke also of the nature of order and theories they had about governing and those who seek to be governed; they hypothesized on the nature of anarchy and passion and the unconstrained will; they pontificated on darkness and light, fire and ash; they speculated about the consuming, crawling chaos they hoped would ultimately overwhelm all of existence. At last Graz'zt began to weary of this, and after confirming the details of their plan, he retired back to his concubines waiting in a room whose theme was suffocation and its delights.

So it was that an ambassador from Graz'zt's halls came too to the City of Brass to see what he might see and gain what advantage he might get.

the view of the creatures, and the imposition of Names

In the glades of Olympus, beyond the Spire of Thorns and before the Sea of Mothersblood, the spirits of the wild danced and sang.

The colors were brighter; even in darkness objects seemed to have a hidden glow they were only waiting to reveal. The wind tasted better. There was a feeling that everyone was the protagonist in a story written especially for them.

The glades were full of whispers and shadows of secrets, living mysteries, full of drama and passion. They were beautiful, every one, with golden skins decorated with henna and complex tattoos, and hair like shining metal of black and red and blue and green, each taking their beauty to the fustest extremes of individuality. They called themselves eladrins, or the Elder Folk. They were freedom itself; the freedom that seeks to propagate itself unrestrained across the planes; the freedom that will sacrifice everything it is and stop at nothing to conquer all that opposes it. It was to these that the cambion and his half-dragon companion came, crawling out of the cracks in reality to join them.

The one who called herself Breath of the Dragon was in poor shape. Though her eyes were open and she walked at the same speed as the Beauty Consultant, she seemed completely unaware of her surroundings. She reacted only to things that were not there.

The Elder Folk gathered around her in concern.

"Just leave her alone," said the Beauty Consultant. "Please."

And they did, respecting his wishes.

With his friend in tow, the Beauty Consultant walked slowly into an unoccupied cabin in the glade. It had borne so many radically varying coats of paint, so many different additions and sidings and renovations. Now it was empty, perhaps because the eladrins knew the couple needed some space, and who are the personifications of benevolent individuality to deny someone their space?

The eladrins did not pry. They did not snoop. They didn't come near the house until its occupants invited them, so they didn't hear the muffled sobbing coming from the throat of the Beauty Consultant.

At last he came out, and asked for a dreamweaver.

Because the eladrins are kindly folk, one was brought. Her name was Aine; the description of her soul was Worker of Trouble. She was a shiere of the Ye-me tribe, they who worked their raptures on a loom. She had worked as an apsara, inflaming and toying with the passions of the recently departed, but she had tired of that life. She was tall but somewhat stooped from her work; her skin was nut-brown and her eyes were pink with concentric rings of green. Her hair, which was the color of birch bark, was filled with living birds who came and went at will. Her clothes were perfectly, if oddly, tailored, missing shoulders and knees at disconcerting intervals. "Bring me the girl," she said, her hands moving rapidly as she spoke. "I'll find out what's going on inside."

While Breath of the Dragon was walked to Aine's house, she muttered about jam jars and sea gods and Clovis points. They laid her down next to the loom, and she whispered about what lightning thinks when it is snubbed at a dance.

"I don't even need to use my loom," said Aine. "The problem is obvious: she's full of dreams and has no way to experience them. When was the last time she slept?"

"Never," said the Beauty Consultant. "As far as I can tell. Or close enough."

"Any idea why?" asked Aine, as if he was deliberately obfuscating.

The Beauty Consultant responded negatively, with kind of a confused grunt.

Breath of the Dragon said something about a triptych of rooms representing the different ages of the world.

"This I will need my loom for," said Aine. She made a "hm" sound and clicked her teeth. Sitting down at her loom, she began moving the shuttle. Translucent vapor rose from Breath of the Dragon and, spinning into the loom, became a shining cloth.

"This won't hurt her, will it?" asked the Beauty Consultant, instantly feeling stupid that he had asked it.

"I'm just saving the dreams from an Astral grave," said Aine, not looking up from her work. "They're much nicer to wear than to swim through."

"They would have to be," said the Beauty Consultant, though he had enjoyed the dreams themselves; it was only the predators within that he had a problem with. "What do you see?" he asked after a moment.

"I see a story," said Aine.

Days will turn into nights

This is the story of how Glowing Jewel of the Moon lost her dreams.

She was very young, not quite into her second decade. She went to bed, as she did every night, after kissing her father lightly on his cheek. Most nights she dreamt she was being chastised for falling behind in her studies; or that she showed up at the Great Sultan's court and forgot what she had been told to say; or that she needed to use the lavatory but wasn't allowed; or that she had been promised she could meet her mother but it never quite seemed to happen; or that her father had become the new Great Sultan and she was being forced, for some reason, to marry him; or she was one of the ancient efreeti heroes, bravely stealing treasures from the djinn; or that her father had become the new Celestial Emperor and she was being forced, for some reason, to become the new Chief Bureaucrat of Hell; or that she had fallen off the edge of the city and was burning to death in the surrounding flames.

This night (although there are no true cycles of light and dark on the Plane of Fire) was different. She

dreamt she was in a place she had never before seen, a blank white room of plaster and silk. There was nothing in the room but a mirror. In the mirror her reflection was grotesquely distorted, her face stretched in several directions at once. For some reason she found this utterly terrifying, far more so than her usual nightmares, but she could not wake up. It was even worse when this hideous caricature of herself began to speak, its mouth moving completely independently of her own, the voice sounding eerily like hers.

“Don’t be afraid, Moon,” said her reflection. It didn’t help; she still was.

“Moon,” said her reflection. “We’re going to need you to stay away from this place for a while, until your task is done. “ It disappeared, and then Glowing Jewel of the Moon had no reflection at all. This didn’t comfort her at all. She began to scream.

The screaming woke her up. A servant - a small, candle-sized spirit of fire - rushed to her bedside and asked what the matter was, and what it could do to solve her problem.

“It was just a dream, I think,” she assured her servant. Then she brightened as she remembered, through the haze of waking, what her reflection had said. “Don’t worry,” she told the elemental. “I don’t think I’ll be having any of those for a while.”

The elemental servant, who did not dream itself (unless the fires of the mortal world were its dreams) was confused by this response. But then, mortal dreams always confused it, and it decided that the Ambassador’s daughter would be well rid of them. Nodding with the same satisfaction it would have felt if it had actually done anything, the fire spirit returned to the brass lantern that it lived in when not needed.

The following night, Glowing Jewel of the Moon did not sleep. Nor did she the night after that. In fact, she never slept again.

For a while she did nothing but lie in bed and think about what dreams had been like and how glad she was she didn't have them anymore. Then she grew bored with this, and she began to make plans instead. It would be nice if she were allowed out of her room, she thought. She could walk around and not be so bored. She made plans about that.

These plans were not immediately achievable. It seemed that her father had eyes everywhere, the guards were ever-vigilant, and there was utterly no chance of slipping out undetected. She tried digging a tunnel under her bed, but there was nothing there but a basalt foundation. She tried burrowing through the walls, but her father's room was on one side and the other sides were hallways, thick with guards. She tried cutting a hole in the ceiling, but there was no way to hide her progress and she was punished and told to go to sleep.

Glowing Jewel of the Moon took to pretending she had slept, just so her father and his doctors would leave her alone.

It took many years before she realized that her father and his doctors were the answer, and not just the

problem. Years of lying awake at night had given her a lot of time to think, and she began to gain insights that she was sure she would not have thought of if she had wasted all that time dreaming. One of the thoughts that occurred to her late at night and very early in the morning was that her father and his guards would not prevent her from leaving if they were sure she had not.

Her skills did not come easily to her. For years she practiced the silent arts, teaching herself to move without sound, to craft perfect simulacra out of ordinary household items, and how to use them as weapons. Eventually, though, she became a master such as the City of Brass had never encountered.

Our prison strong, this huge convex of Fire

They hit bottom on a flat, barren, dusty plain. The soil was the color of blood; so was the sky. A range of black mountains, shining in the crimson light, was visible in the distance.

That is not what the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador and Mr. White thought of first when they opened their eyes. Their first thoughts were of the incredible mental oppression over everything. It reminded them of the eyes of the Great Sultan of the City of Brass, when he stared at someone he was displeased at. There was no Sultan here, though; only the plane itself boring into them with a blood-red gaze of its own.

“Baator!” was the first word Mr. White said.

“The Nine Hells,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador agreed.

“Avernus,” said Mr. White. “It’s got to be.”

“This is unfortunate,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

There was a pause as neither of them wanted to say anything. Finally Mr. White decided to agree with him with a simple “Yes.”

“Let’s go this way,” said Mr. White finally.

“Why this particular direction?” asked the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, though he was already following the smaller man.

“It has a familiar feeling about it,” said Mr. White. “Not quite like freedom, but I think it’s where we have to go, assuming we don’t want to be plunged into the front of the Blood War.”

“That would be unfortunate,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, paraphrasing himself.

The ground was treacherous and savage, continually tripping them and scratching them with its quartz and obsidian stones, drawing blood to feed the tortured faces trapped within.

“Ah,” said Mr. White, after a day or so. Time was difficult to estimate on this unfamiliar plane. Except for unpredictable balls of exploding flame (sometimes frighteningly close), there were no celestial orbs

here. “Finally: a settlement.”

They both eyed it with a healthy amount of skepticism.

“This must be Sovereignty,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

The town was nothing more than a huge, sprawling military encampment. It seemed to extend all the way to the horizon, something Mr. White and the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador knew was even more illusory here than it was on your typical planet. The terrain literally extended forever, without any kind of break or even a curve. From this vantage, the ramshackle, improvised soldier-town seemed to end in a faint haze thousands of miles away.

“It’s even bigger now than it was the last time I was here,” said Mr. White.

“You’ve been here before, then?”

“Yeah,” said Mr. White. “Shortly before I signed up with you, I fought a duel here with an oni no wakeru; I can understand why the baatezu must have wanted it to fight in their war, because that thing was nasty. Every time I hacked one of its limbs off, the thing grew into a smaller version of the creature. It took me forever to kill all the pieces.”

“Hm. You say the town is bigger now? I wonder why?”

“I don’t know, sir. In the City of Brass there are rumors that one of the hell-gods has died, and most of its servants were slaughtered. Perhaps some of them ended up here.”

“Perhaps,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador mused. “Has the Bureaucracy assigned this place a magistrate yet? If so, we could ask him.”

“I doubt it, sir. I don’t think the big boys want to antagonize the rulers of the Hells. Nobody thinks Sovereignty will be allowed to last very long, in any case.”

“Yes, I agree. The local powers probably think of this as more of a concentration camp for their enemies than a military camp. But then, the pit fiend Bel has always been a tricky one; he may find a use for this force yet.”

“So I understand,” said Mr. White politely.

“Aha!” said the Ambassador. “A tavern. We can ask there.”

A tavern in Baator is a rough place. A tavern in an outlawed town populated solely by refugees of the Blood War is rougher than most. Still they went in.

The patrons were mainly barbazu, fearless devils with ratty, disease-infested beards, and abishai, reptilian devils with batlike wings. Tiny winged devils covered in fierce spines were sprinkled in, as were a few mortal mercenaries.

They eyed the newcomers with hatred, many of them enhancing this effect with eyes glowing with baleful red fire.

“You there!” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador pointed at a dark-haired human drinking at a corner table. “Are you any good at intelligence gathering?”

“Me?” the stranger asked. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes! You.”

“Are you kidding? This is the Hells! If I wasn’t, I’d be dead, wouldn’t I?”

“What?” exclaimed Mr. White.

“Good enough,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “You’re my new Mr. Black.”

“Oh,” said the new Mr. Black. “Mr. Black: I like that. It’s got style. All right: you’ve got yourself a deal, mate. How much does it pay?”

“How can you do this?” Mr. White insisted.

“The job pays nothing right now, as most of my currency is at home. When we get back to the City of Brass, you will be rewarded handsomely, I assure you. I am an important man. And relax, Mr. White. It’s not as if I had any confidence in you when you were hired, either.”

“Fair enough,” said Mr. Black. “I’ve got nothing else on my plate. And if it turns out you’re lying, I can always ransom you to someone. Or if they won’t take you, I can kill you both and sell your corpses to a necromancer. Sounds like a win/win situation to me.”

“I’d like to see you try,” said Mr. White, drawing his sword.

“I like your honesty,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “I think we’ll get along well.”

“You’re really going to do this, aren’t you?” said Mr. White.

“Cheer up, mate,” Smirking, Mr. Black hit Mr. White on his arm. “We’re going to be one big, happy family, you and me and the Boss here .”

The other patrons had settled down by this point; as long as the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador wasn’t a Blood War recruiter, he was welcome to hire a human or two.

Mr. White sheathed his sword, growling.

“So, Mr. Black,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “What do you know about the recent influx in citizens in this town?”

“The Dark Queen died,” Mr. Black explained. “One moment everything seemed to be going so well for her minions; dragons bigger than any we had ever seen were moving through her realm, and so many souls had flooded in that the bureaucrats couldn’t process them all. Then the ground shook and everything began to implode. Everyone got out as quickly as they could. Her tanar’ri servants didn’t stand a chance; there was no way they could get out of the plane fast enough with Bel’s servants guarding all of the portals. Most of them were slaughtered within the space of a single watch. Her baatezu servants were too used to the notion of united evil to want to fight in the War; most of them fled here. Bel still hasn’t made a move against the town yet, despite it tripling in size overnight. There’s a lot of tension, here. The locals don’t like it when you call it fear.” He said the last in a stage whisper, to the obvious displeasure of his neighbors.

“I think we’ve learned all we need to know,” said Mr. White. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Relax, little mate,” Mr. Black laughed. “Old Mr. Black will take care of you.”

“Permission to strike him, sir?”

“Granted,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador said casually.

Faster than the eye could follow, Mr. White’s sword whipped out of its sheath and struck Mr. Black in the chest with the flat of the blade. Simultaneously, Mr. White’s right foot snaked out and tripped him. With Mr. Black on his back, Mr. White stood over him and kicked him in the side.

“Don’t ever call me ‘little,’” he said, his young face as stern as ever.

“Relax, mate,” said Mr. Black. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Just being friendly, like.”

Mr. White kicked him again.

“And don’t call me ‘mate.’”

“Right,” Mr. Black said, his good humor dampened a little.

“Right,” Mr. White repeated. “Now let’s go.”

A brief history of the jinn

Six children sat in a semi-circle around their tutor. The children, much larger than human young, had skin the color of basalt, hair like brass (aflame with red and smoky highlights), and fiery eyes. They were efreet, genies of fire, young nobles of their kind. The tutor assigned to teach them the history of their people had been a harim servant, and was still shaped primarily for that task. It was not clear what nation of genies he had belonged to before he was castrated and tasked to be a guardian, protector, and storyteller for the Great Sultan's wives and concubines; the reshaping process had changed his appearance too greatly. Now he was tall, much taller than the children, taller than a full-grown efreeti, but he lacked the fiery appearance of the efreet. He had been shaped to intimidate those who would threaten his charges, but there was nothing monstrous or terrifying about him. He had been made to comfort those who he protected as much as dissuade intruders. If he had been smaller and less imposing, he might have been mistaken for one of the jann, the genies of the material plane.

Now his storytelling skills, honed from many long years of entertaining bored concubines, were needed to teach the sons and daughters of those concubines and wives some of the knowledge they would need as adults.

He smacked the wall with a heavy stick, instantly ending the chatter of the young ones. Sure he had gotten their attention, he cleared his throat and began.

"Possibility," he said. "Began on the first day."

"Some say it was made by the makers, but without it the makers, those roly-poly invisible carpenters of the cosmos, could never have made. Some say that it and the makers are one thing, but this grossly overestimates the proactivity of possibility and is rather insulting, in fact. Possibility need not make. It only needs to leave the door of opportunity open in case the desire should arise."

A male child, whose long hair was unbound and unruly about his small black face, raised his hand.

"Yes," said the storyteller. "Wahib?"

"I didn't understand any of that," Wahib complained. "My father told me we would learn about the history of the efreet. What are these 'makers?' They sound dangerously heretical."

There were murmurs of agreement among his friends.

"They're an intellectual construct," said the harim servant. "A hypothesis, nothing more. When it was necessary to explain the process of spontaneous genesis - for example, the way fire elementals arise, seemingly on their own, from concentrations of flame - some sages invented the notion of 'makers,' or demiurges, invisible intelligences whose will causes this to happen in the absence of other reasonable explanations, such as the action of the gods and powers. My apologies, young masters; I assumed your previous tutor had told you about them. In the future, I will be more basic in my explanations.

"Now, there are many such hypotheses bandied about by this or that authority. Some say a lot of things,

but these are always the uninvolved observers, judging things without being a part of them. How can they be subjective? Without subjectivity, how can they really believe? If you don't believe in something, how can it be real?"

The children nodded at this statement. Though few in the elemental realms bothered with notions of belief and power, the Sultan of the efreet encouraged such notions, believing any advantage against their hated enemies, the djinn, was worth pursuing.

"Before there was possibility, there was only the cool silver emptiness of the beyond. Possibility has never had much to do with the beyond, occupied as it was by its own concerns; possibility, moreover, is handicapped in the absence of time. The amount of possibilities in the still shining moment of Beyond are relatively few.

"Possibility is, at its heart, a universe of colored mists always on the verge of becoming something solid and real. This is why it is called ethereal. It takes, however, only the slightest nudge for a piece of the mists to become actual, and it takes only a little time for an is to dissolve back into a maybe.

"It was within the heart of possibility, in what is commonly called the deep ethereal, that the Nexus was born. The Nexus was, at the beginning, a chaotic maelstrom of possibility gone mad, ignoring and transforming all limitations of that which is. And yet, as the substance of the Nexus spread out from its own heart patterns began to form, ley lines and nodes in a web of infinite length, criss-crossing across possibility and the beyond, and everything that formed within both realms. From the chaos of the Nexus came order, and from the order of the infinite pattern came quite a lot of chaos, for the name of the energy the Nexus produced is magic.

"One name for the ley lines of the web was Dragon Roads, because dragons have always been interested in the energy found there. They're hardly the only ones, of course, but they are among the most able of magic-users. It is said that the original dragon tongue was made up of the true words of magic itself, the primal vocabulary the ley lines spell out.

"And yet, as able manipulators of the arcane as dragons are, they could never have hoped to match that of those born from the Nexus itself, the first intelligences formed from coalescing magic at time's dawn - the ones called the jinn. For the jinn, magic was easier than words, deeper than thought. They were magic, and their nature transcended all words and laws and restraints.

"There were gods in those days, just as there were dragons. For nine thousand years all three races got along in relative peace (though some believe that this was only because the insurrection of the dragons had been thoroughly crushed long before, and I don't even want to talk about the giants).

"Then came Gian ben Gian, the great leader, who united them and drew them into a new destiny. "We are magic!" said ben Gian. "We are the greatest power there is; we will not submit to the rule of gods as the dragons did and the giants did and the indescribable elder powers did even before all that other mess happened."

"Perhaps he was miffed that the gods didn't invite him over to dinner often enough, or perhaps their

compliments on his wardrobe seemed slightly condescending. In any case, he plunged his entire species into war with the self-proclaimed masters of all created things.

"His first act was to cut off the supply lines of the gods, blocking their access to even divine magic. Fortifying his own troops with the extra mana flow, he launched them against the divine realms. There, they were forced to defend themselves with mere primal energy, the raw sustaining flow of the planes themselves, far more primitive than magic and bound by the primal order of things.

"Some of these attacks actually succeeded, and for a time the jinn had hope of winning. It turned out, unfortunately for them, that the gods' boasting of their mastery over Creation wasn't completely idle, and with mere primal energy they defended themselves adequately, if with less flexibility and flair than the jinn were able to muster.

"It is commonly said by the jinn that the war's decisive point was the slaying of Gian ben Gian himself, when an amesha spenta was dispatched by the gods as a celestial assassin. Without magic he navigated his way to ben Gian's fortress through bleeding holes in the planes and tumultuous cross-planar storms. Without the aid of magic to bless his flight or to hide his approach he scaled the infinity of the Nexus to its metaphorical height, broke into Gian ben Gian's own quarters and fought him with a sword of mundane iron against the jinn's falchion of magical flame.

"Somehow, he won."

There was a chorus of boos from the children in the audience.

"Yet," continued the harim servant. "Those who concentrate on the celestial's legendary victory ignore the work being done behind the scenes, as the greatest gods and their engineers labored long to sew the fabric of the planes shut around the Nexus, sealing it shut from any who might try to enter it, trapping a minority of demoralized jinn and a comparative trickle of magic on the other side.

"The victorious gods banished their enemies to the elemental realms so that they would burn in eternal fire, fall endlessly through airy void, be crushed beneath infinite stone, become lost in shadow, and rot forever beneath the currents, tides, and silt.

"That's horrible!" shouted Wahib. "If the gods did that to us, why do we worship them today?"

"The gods work in mysterious ways, child," said the harim servant. "Their ways are not ours, and purposes that might not be apparent at the time may become clear with the passing of time. If we had never been sent to this plane, we would not be its undisputed masters today. Would you really have us live anywhere else?"

"Well," said Wahib. "I guess..."

"Also," said the harim servant. "We had not yet learned the ways of the Loregiver. At the time she was simply a pretty girl that Gian ben Gian had once taken a fancy to. The Enlightened ways had not yet become common in any race. Of the Loregiver and the spread of her teachings, I will expand upon later.

"As I was saying, the jinn adapted, for they were magic itself. They focused their arcane strength on the nature of their elemental prisons until they moved through them and manipulated them as easily as did the elementals who were native to them. But after Gian ben Gian, they never again had a common ruler."

"At least," he hastily corrected. "Not until our current great Sultan, who will shortly bring the other nations under his rule. Allow me to take this time to list these nations:

"The jinn of air called themselves the *djinn*; their caliph traced his descent from one of Gian ben Gian's daughters; they claimed to be the only rightful inheritors of ben Gian's rule, though did not seek to conquer their fellows.

"The jinn of fire eventually took the name *efreeti*; the efreet were rallied by one of ben Gian's former generals, and claimed that he and only he had been named the true heir by ben Gian himself in the latter days of his reign. The general's line became known as the sultans of the City of Brass.

"The jinn of earth fell under the command of the strongest and most clever of them, a khan capable of uniting their feuding tribes. They claimed to care nothing about who ben Gian might have considered a fitting heir, as they were only ever loose allies with the other jinn. Once known as the *shaitan*, they took the name *dao* to emphasize their connections with the earth.

"The jinn of water, the *marids*, were even less concerned than the dao were about what Gian ben Gian might have said or thought. They insisted their own nobles had been the true rulers of the jinn long before ben Gian had ever gained a single follower. They claimed, further, that they were the rightful rulers still, but they only rarely pressed this claim, as their specialized water magics were of little use in the other elemental realms.

The jinn of shadow, the *al-muthlimun*, dispersed in the Plane of Shadow, where none heard from them again.

"There were three other major jinn nations: the *jann*, whose prison had been the deserts of the material plane; the *divs*, who followed the celestial who had killed Gian ben Gian into the infernal regions; and the *malakim*, who never left the gods' service. Further, minor nations formed from these: the *ghuls*, who were jann corrupted by the lure of necromancy and undeath; the *markeen*, banished from the ranks of the divs when they refused to war against the human race, forced to take on human form in ironic punishment of their disobedience; the *sollux*, outcast brothers of the efreet.

"The sollux were the product of one of the few civil wars fought in the City of Brass. Of the exact circumstances of how this happened, I am forbidden to tell you. It'll be good for you to try root out that information on your own, anyway. Those who learn how to suss out secrets without getting executed will go far. The end result was that the sollux live on the Material Plane, in magma-filled caves deep beneath the crust of earth on which most of that plane's inhabitants tread. The sollux have sworn to destroy the City of Brass, but of course our troops will soon destroy them instead."

The children waited for him to continue his history.

He beamed at them.

this is nothing like we ever dreamt

The days in Arborea passed slowly, then quickly, then slowly again.

The nights were similarly irregular in subjective duration, and what other kind of duration really matters on a plane made from belief, from passion, from epic tales and pious prayers, from the celebration of the individual at the center of all things?

This was Arborea, and the chief difficulty that the Beauty Consultant and the eladrin Aine were having in rehabilitating their patient was her conviction that she was, in fact, perfectly fine.

She fluttered through the eladrin camp like a butterfly, or so she claimed. She told everyone she encountered of her dreams, sometimes loudly and insistently. She spoke of her imaginings as if they were the most important thing in this or any world.

For all intents and purposes, Breath of the Dragon was completely and hopelessly insane.

At least twice a day, Aine would use her loom to attempt to unravel the complexity of what had happened to Breath of the Dragon's subconscious, thus far to no avail.

And the stars would wheel in the sky. Constellations would reenact the legends of a thousand thousand worlds. Tiny wind gods would blow amusing secrets into everyone's ear. The land and forests would heave and sigh with delight with the passage of the eladrins and their friends.

None of this was helping at all. If anything, it was making things worse.

One night the Beauty Consultant and Aine were lying on a softly forested hill, watching winged creatures sport with insectoid sunflies, pearl-skinned arylths, filthy ulzaqs, and glowing, self-sacrificing matrym. All five races were about the same small size, minor creatures of good incarnate, mostly heavily chaotic, and seemed to enjoy one another's company immensely. The Beauty Consultant and Aine had shed their clothes several days ago. No one had seemed to notice, particularly not Breath of the Dragon, who in any case had been garbed only irregularly since she arrived.

Aine turned her long, lean body around in the Beauty Consultant's arms. The patterns on her bare skin shimmered with energy barely held in check. "I can't do any more for her," she told her new lover.

"Are you sure?" he asked, honest worry in his voice.

"Positive," she said. "The plane itself seems to be encouraging her journey inside herself."

"Can't you, I don't know, compensate somehow? I mean, you are this plane, you and the rest of your people. Can't you put in a good word? You're goodness and passion and all that incarnate!"

“You think so?” she asked, grinning as she wiggled distractingly.

“I know so,” said the Beauty Consultant, smiling a bit himself.

“Look,” said Aine. “I can’t convince the plane to do anything it doesn’t want to do, just like you can’t convince me to do anything I don’t want to do. The plane has it’s purpose, and we just have to trust it sometimes.”

“I guess so,” said the Beauty Consultant, his small smile fading.

Aine sat up and put her hands on her hips. “She’ll get better,” she told him. “Or she won’t. That doesn’t mean she can’t be of help to you on the next stage of your journey.”

“My journey?”

“You came here for a reason, right? It’s past time to resume your quest.”

The Beauty Consultant was incredulous. “You want her to travel with me in that condition? I thought she’d stay here, with you.”

“No way,” said Aine. “Things are going to be far too interesting if we keep her with us when we go.”

“We,” breathed the Beauty Consultant, the syllable oozing gratitude and relief.

“Yes, we,” said Aine. “Look, the plane wants it this way, okay?”

“I guess I have to take your word for that,” said the Beauty Consultant. “Considering you’re part of it.”

“That’s right,” said Aine, licking his nose.

for the new day of running

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador and his two color-coded assistants continued through the bloody hell-plain of Avernus, which in its turn continued to be just as disagreeable and malicious as before, tripping and tearing at them whenever it found an opportunity to do so.

"Uh, guys?" said the new Mr. Black. "I know I'm new here, and perhaps it's a bit early for me to start trying to tell you all what to do. But. That is. There's an easier way, you know."

"Out with it, man," the Ambassador sighed. "I didn't hire you to stutter."

"Right," said Mr. Black, instantly shifting back to his comfortable mode. "I got to Sovereignty by using the paths. We can get back to Darkspine the same way."

"One of Baator's paths?" said Mr. White. "I don't like the sound of that."

“Neither do I,” the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador said. “But what choice do we have?”

“We always have a choice,” said Mr. White.

“Of course, of course,” said the Ambassador. “We have the choice to get lost on the torturous, literally blood-thirsty plain of the first circle of Hell, wearing ourselves out while we wait for the landscape to disembowel us, the occasional fireballs to consume us, or the natives to arrest us or, worse yet, bargain with us. Those always fine, fine choices.”

“I have been here before,” said Mr. White.

“How did you get out that time?”

“I had a magic cube programmed to take me back to the Outlands,” said Mr. White.

“Do you have it now?” asked the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “Have you been holding out on me?”

“Of course not,” said Mr. White.

“Well, then, do you have an alternative to our Mr. Black’s suggestion, other than the one involving getting lost?”

“Not as such,” said Mr. White, “though I believe I can find my way around...”

“You can’t,” said Mr. Black. “This is Baator, mate. The Pit. The Inferno. Perdition. Hell. It’ll twist your senses and devour your soul if you don’t follow its rules. You’ll wander till the end of time and not realize you’ve become a charred, hollow skeleton a few millennia back.”

“So we should follow the paths the plane has conveniently laid out for us?” Mr. White shot back. “Out of the goodness of its heart, I assume? You think that doing what the plane wants is going to be healthy for you and your little soul? Is that what you’re saying? ‘Oh, look at me! I’m suddenly Mr. Black now and I’m probably in my mid-twenties! By the power of the prodigious virtue I’ve gained from nearly two whole decades of experience I recommend suicide for everyone!’ No wonder you ended up stuck in Sovereignty; you must seek out death traps like they were bordellos.”

Mr. Black blinked at him calmly. “Have you seen many tanar’ri around, then?”

“What?”

“Tanar’ri. Demons of chaos. Many-formed abominations of living hate and vulgar lusts. Look like various animals welded together badly and pissed off at you in particular, just for living.”

“You know I haven’t,” said Mr. White. “This is Baator.”

“Yeah, mate,” said Mr. Black. “So we’ve established. So why isn’t this place crawling with tanar’ri?”

“Because the tanar’ri don’t live in Baator,” said Mr. White, as if to a mentally damaged and extremely ugly child who had just messed herself. “They live in the Abyss. We’re four planes away.”

“Aha,” said Mr. Black. “But they’d like to conquer Baator, wouldn’t they?”

“Like to, yes,” said Mr. White, sarcasm still his weapon of choice. “That’s probably why they’ve been trying to since the beginning of time.”

“And why haven’t they succeeded?” asked Mr. Black, as if he had just made a particularly insightful point.

“Because Baator has an extremely well-trained and well-organized army,” Mr. White said cuttingly. “And the tanar’ri have to defend against invasions from both the baatezu and one another. And because the tanar’ri couldn’t organize themselves if they were coated in metal and all sat on a giant magnet.”

“Disorganized, are they?” asked Mr. Black. “Shall we say, chaotic?”

“Yes,” said Mr. White. “They’re demons of chaos incarnate. They’re, as you say, rather chaotic.”

“I’ll bet they have an advantage on a plane of law like this one, then,” said Mr. Black.

“What?”

“Not playing by the rules. I bet it helps them get around. I bet the plane doesn’t turn against them and, while I’m at it, I’ll bet it doesn’t target them particularly. I’ll bet it doesn’t single them out because they’re doing the exact opposite of what everyone else on the plane is doing. I’ll bet it just lies prone on its back and admits defeat because breaking the rules is such a clever and successful survival strategy here. So why haven’t the tanar’ri won yet?”

“For the love of Shang-ti,” Mr. White moaned. “So you think you can outsmart the plane at its own game?”

“No,” said Mr. Black. “I think if we lay low and follow the paths of least resistance, we might not have to play the game at all.”

“If you’re in Baator,” said Mr. White, “You’re always playing.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Black. “But the question is, ‘How big of a role do you want?’” asked Mr. Black.

“Myself, I’d prefer a small one. You guys aren’t trying to slay an archfiend or rescue something the baatezu want to keep. You don’t want to deal with them at all. You don’t want to thwart the manifest destiny of regimented evil, do you? You’re just ordinary blokes out for a stroll and trying to find the exit. Are we going to get a little dirty just by being here? Are we going to bring a little bit of the plane with us when we leave? Yes, of course. But there’s a difference between getting a little dirty and a lot dirty. Stick with me, and not so much of Baator will stick to you. There’s no reason we can’t stay under the Lord of the First’s omniscience for now.”

“Show us your path,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “No more arguments, Mr. White.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. White, showing no emotion.

Mr. Black smiled and bowed to his new master. “This way,” he said, gesturing grandly.

The trip to the path was much quicker. The land seemed to withdraw its thorns, letting them pass through it, for once, with no resistance.

“We’re here,” said Mr. Black, pointing at a particular knoll that almost looked like a horned humanoid figure.

“This doesn’t look much like a path,” said Mr. White. There was, in fact, nothing to indicate that it was a path at all.

“They’re subtle,” said Mr. Black. “Trust me; I’ve been walking this path for some time now.”

They walked the ‘path’ in silence for some time, Mr. Black sporadically changing direction with no evident provocation. Their journey described a strange, twisting, abstract shape whose greater pattern was not clear, but there was never any doubt in any of their minds that the pattern was there.

An iron bridge crossing a river of sickly yellow fluid was the first sign of the more formal path. The bridge was wide, its curve gentle. The road that joined its two sides was equally well-designed for marching troops. Mr. Black guided them on to the road.

Half a day on the Celestial Ambassador, Mr. White, and Mr. Black came to a place where a railroad line crossed the highway. There the baatezu had built a large train yard where the damned were processed. Most of them were half-melted creatures, barely solid, their flesh running down their bodies like wax. Others had already been twisted into exotic new configurations, steel rings piercing their skulls, their limbs and internal organs wrapped and braided around their harnesses.

These souls were on their way to the Bronze Citadel where they would join the diabolic armies as cannon fodder. A few with exceptional strength and endurance would be promoted, forged into new fiendish shapes suitable for more thoughtful works.

The faceless nupperibos, a slightly higher caste of damned brought from birthing orifices throughout the plane, were kept in separate cars. Unless they were melted down and demoted to the status of lemures, the common damned, they would rise no higher. Most would be killed in combat or sold as mute and senseless slaves to other lower planar races.

An engineer stood outside one of the cars, chatting with an inferior. It was a large creature covered in horny barbs and scales, dressed in the neat uniform of its profession.

"I say," called the Celestial Ambassador. "You seem to be going our way. Do you think we could get a

ride on your vehicle?"

The engineer grinned, showing several rows of pointed fangs. "For a price," it said in a voice like a dozen hissing snakes, "I'll take you wherever you want to go."

"We were headed toward the City of Brass," said the Celestial Ambassador.

"Ah," said the baatezu. "There's a portal there in Zogumurbad, in Iblistan. We have a stop there."

"Lord Ambassador!" Mr. White stage-whispered. "No deals with the devils!"

"Really, Mr. White," said the Ambassador. "The Bureaucracy deals with baatezu all the time, just as they do with every planar race. I personally deal with them every day at the Sultan's court."

"That's not the same thing," said Mr. White. Then he shrugged. "Heh. Do what you want."

The Celestial Ambassador turned back toward the engineer. "What's the price?" he asked.

"A favor," said the engineer. "To be named later."

"Done," said the Celestial Ambassador. Mr. White rolled his eyes.

"We'll ride in style now," said the Ambassador to his companions. "We don't have to worry about paths anymore."

"The train is part of the path," said Mr. Black. "Don't think it'll let you go that easily."

The Celestial Ambassador's human visage grew still; for the first time he seemed to obviously contemplate his actions. Mr. White remembered that the yellow dragon lord had survived in the City of Brass - literally a hotbed of intrigue and double-dealing - for millennia beyond counting. The baatezu engineer could hardly be older than a few thousand years.

The Celestial Ambassador might, Mr. White allowed, actually know what he was doing.

The train's whistle blew with a sound like the howling of the damned. That might be confusing, thought Mr. White, considering the actual howling of the damned coming from the filthy, overcrowded cable cars.

The three travelers were seated in one of the few passenger cars alongside a pair of horse-headed oni, a blue-skinned ogre mage, a supercilious-looking half-human with green, scaly skin and bat-like wings and his green-haired tiefling bride, and a squat, eagle-winged baatezu of the *amnizu* caste. The *amnizu* was dressed in a powdered wig and wore the black robes of a Hell Judge. Recognizing a fellow bureaucrat, the Celestial Ambassador approached the justice.

"How's the temptation game?" the Ambassador asked, trying to make conversation.

"I don't do that," said the amnizu, though it didn't sound offended. "Others tempt; I condemn."

"Ah," said the Celestial Ambassador. "And how is that going?"

"The market is thriving," the amnizu replied. It grinned, showing a single row of tiny needle-like teeth.

"Good," the Celestial Ambassador said politely. "Where are you headed, if I may ask? To Iblistan?"

"Oh, no," said the amnizu. "The divs fill most such roles there. I'm all the way to Darkspine. We're opening a whole new courthouse to handle the recent influx from Ribcage."

"Refugees?" the Celestial Ambassador hazarded.

"Not if I can help it," the amnizu smiled.

"Yes," said the Celestial Bureaucrat. "Well, you do exemplary work, I'm certain."

"That's very kind of you to say," said the amnizu. It licked the lipless edges of its mouth with a long black tongue. "And might I add you are very..." It hesitated. "Your mind is quite difficult to penetrate."

"I should hope so," said the Celestial Ambassador, taking this as the complement it was. "I've had enough practice among the efreet."

"Ah, the efreet!" the amnizu exclaimed. "A fascinating race; very powerful. Although, their leaders haven't managed to quite tame them yet, have they?"

"Alas," said the Ambassador. "No, not yet. They've made great progress in my time among them, however. When I began, they were almost as wild as the djinn."

"No! Surely not!"

"Indeed! Their alliance with your people has done wonders, and their capital is itself a city of wonders."

"Your interest in the efreet must explain your expedition to the divs' principality, then."

"In a way," said the Celestial Ambassador evasively.

"Please go on. Forgive me, but I was a tempter, an erinyes, in my previous position, and old habits are difficult to break. Have you visited Iblistan before?"

"Yes," said the Celestial Ambassador. "They are. As for your question, however, the answer is no. I've never been there. Another has responsibility for that district. My own interaction with the baatezu on this plane has largely been confined to the layer of Phlegethos."

"The Ring of Fire!" the amnizu said in approval. "I've never been permitted there personally, though I hope to be consigned to suffer in the burning lake in the process of being forged into the shape of

subsequent castes."

"I'm sure there are none more deserving," the Ambassador said, still being polite.

"Thank you again," said the amnizu, performing a small bow.

"I imagine an important justice such as yourself knows everything that goes on locally," said the Celestial Ambassador.

The amnizu nodded in acknowledgement of this fact. "My caste is fabled for our observational skills," it said.

"So you would know, for example, if a young female half-dragon were to arrive unexpectedly..." the Celestial Ambassador trailed off. Something in his eyes hardened. "No. My first duty is, as always, to my city. I must return before the diplomats arrive. Thank you, Justice, for your conversation." He turned and rejoined his companions on the other side of the car. Mr. Black was blatantly hitting on the tiefling woman, to her companion's obvious consternation. Mr. White was talking shop with one of the oni, discussing martial arts techniques and the latest happenings in the Yama courts.

"Did you ask the amnizu if your daughter might have also passed this way?" Mr. White asked his master penetratingly.

"It doesn't matter," the Celestial Ambassador said. "We have a responsibility to return to the Sultan's court; only afterwards will I be free to pursue my own interests."

"The plane's already getting to you, then," Mr. White said, permitting his disappointment to show in his eyes. A subtle gesture, but meaningful.

"Mr. White," said the Ambassador. "Are you suggesting that I'm being tempted by this plane - or this path, or that hell-judge - into doing my duty? I'm a magistrate of the Celestial Bureaucracy! They need hardly tempt me to do what I am honor-bound to do already!"

"Don't forget," said Mr. White. "This is a plane formed as much of law as it is of evil. It is completely in its character to attempt to convince you to choose bureaucratic inflexibility over filial duty."

"He's right, mate," said Mr. Black. "The path cuts through temptation as much as locale. There should be three tests, for each of us."

"I told you this was a bad idea,," said Mr. White.

"No," said Mr. Black. "This is how it must be done. Believe me, mate, when I say the alternatives are worse."

The Celestial Ambassador said nothing. He seemed thoughtful.

After brief stops to load weeping souls from the towns of Sacrifuco and Agaetis, the train at last came

to where the spires of Zogumurbad were visible on Avernus' dim horizon.

"My god," said Mr. White, addressing the Celestial Ambassador. "It looks so much like the City of Brass!"

"Smaller," the minor deity agreed. "Dirtier. But yes."

The spires and minarets of the div capital were indeed smaller than those of the City of Brass. This, however, was like noting that Mount Olympus was smaller than Mount Celestia; certainly true, but the fact did not diminish the enormity of the smaller realm in the least.

The train pulled into the station. The shriek of its brakes momentarily drowned out the cries of the tortured souls. As the Celestial Ambassador and his White and Black stepped out of their car, two things immediately became apparent:

First, the primary inhabitants greatly resembled the efreet of their own city, but with much less diversity in other races. The *div* genies were, in addition, much more fiendish-looking than the efreet, with long bullish horns and spires protruding from their backs, the fires in their eyes clearly mimicking the infernal fireballs of Avernus instead of the clean fires of the elemental planes. The second obvious thing was the filth coating everything from the robes of the divs to the buildings and streets. They seemed to positively rejoice in the disgusting and profane. "Zogumurbad!" shouted the engineer. "Everyone disembarking at Iblistan out here!"

At the first sight of the three travelers, armed soldiers instantly appeared. With malicious grins on their faces, they approached.

"Humans," the lead guard said with a sadistic leer.

There was a burst of smoke and the Celestial Ambassador stretched out to his full serpentine glory. He coiled protectively around his employees.

The divs took a step back, but they did not lower their weapons.

"I claim diplomatic immunity, for my servants and myself," the Ambassador roared in a voice like the chiming of a gong. "By the authority of the Celestial Empire and the Personage of Jade."

The div captain appeared to think for a moment. "Come with me, he said curtly.

Traveling through the city, the visitors could see it was more diverse than it had initially appeared. While the fiendish-looking div were dominant, there were also a smattering of representatives from the other races of jinn: dao slavers, efreeti merchants, janni servants, and tasked genies of all types. There were also lesser baatezu of various castes, yugoloth mercenaries, *marrash* plague spirits, even wicked sphinxes and manticores.

The captain pointed out the diplomats' entrance to the imposing fortress-palace of Junnatazol. The three visitors walked warily through the checkpoints, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the foul smell.

The diplomacy room in Junnatazol was spare, a nearly empty room of plain stone, almost a dungeon cell thick with the reek of vomit and urine.

In there already was a mantis-headed rakshasa and, to the Celestial Ambassador's surprise, another celestial dragon.

"Duke of Falsehood?" the Ambassador said in confusion.

"Rat Scholar!" said the other dragon, using the Celestial Ambassador's old nickname, a pun on the similar-sounding words for 'rat' and 'book.' "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I'm the ch'eng huang assigned to protect this precinct," Duke of Falsehood explained.

"What? I thought you were going to Malsheem!"

"That... didn't work out," Duke of Falsehood said wryly. "I was placed here instead. It was claimed that there were more spirits of the Bureaucracy here, but I doubt even the Jade Emperor knows what the baatezu keep in Malsheem. The high gods know I feel like a prisoner here, but I imagine it would be so much worse in the Ninth Pit. Where are you stationed these days?"

"The City of Brass," said the Celestial Ambassador softly. "Just as I planned."

"Ah," said Duke of Falsehood. "I hear it is beautiful."

"It is."

"Treasure its memory, Rat Scholar. You won't see it in person ever again."

The Celestial Ambassador's reptilian face worked in a variety of expressions. He seemed ready to unleash his sacred fire.

"Careful what you do now, mate," said Mr. Black. "We're still on the path."

Mr. White's mouth opened soundlessly for a few seconds. "We are?"

"Oh yes," said Mr. Black.

"So," said Mr. White. "You knew we would end up here? And it would be like this?"

"Course not," said Mr. Black. "I just know the path won't let us go that easily. This is our second test."

The Celestial Ambassador swallowed, and slowly resumed human form. The other dragon leaned on one of his elbows as he watched to see what his fellow ch'eng huang would do next.

[This chapter aided greatly by “The Tripartite Path of Baator” by Heiner de Wendt, posted originally to the Pits of Evil message board. Sovereignty is from the Mimir. The name of the capital and palace of the deev is from Epic of Aerth by Gary Gygax]

one day we can live on the moon

“Sir,” said Mr. White. “I think we should call in the big boys.”

The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador only nodded. From his jacket pocket he pulled out an eight-sided jade disk. In the center was an eight-sided hole. He raised the disk to his lips and, speaking softly into the hole, he said:

“Speaker of Jade? This is the *ch'eng huang* of the City of Brass. Yes. I must humbly request a meeting with the Celestial Personage of Jade. That I am not worthy of, yes. Right; humbly abase myself. I acknowledge that he is a busy man. It's an emergency! Oh, you can suddenly get me an appointment with Dong-yo da-di but not the big man? How is that possible? Dong-yo da-di does all the work! No! I didn't mean that! I was nervous; I didn't know what I was saying! Wait! Don't break the connection! No, I can't wait that long! Wait, please! Innocent lives are at stake! Really! Really? Really! I had no idea he did that kind of thing. Well, thank you. Yes. I bow to your ancestors as well. Good day.”

“What just happened?” asked Mr. White, feeling a bit dazed by what he had heard of the exchange.

“They're going to send in the Buddha,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

“What? Which one?”

“The Buddha! Siddhartha Gautama!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“They can't get you the Celestial Emperor but they can get you the Buddha?”

“Nobody can “get” the Buddha,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “He comes and goes when he wants. You know the Buddha.”

“Ha ha!” said Mr. White. “That Buddha!”

“Yes, he's quite the character, isn't he? But seriously; he should be here at any moment.”

“How does my hair look?” asked Mr. Black.

The others looked at him sternly.

“Sorry,” said Mr. Black.

There was a knock at the door.

Everyone froze.

“Someone answer that!” yelled the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador after a minute.

Mr. Black stumbled toward the door. He opened it.

Standing there was a small, thin man in crumpled red robes. His hair and beard were unshaven. He looked very young.

“Um,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador. “Siddhartha Gautama, I presume?”

The Buddha shook his head. “Nah,” he said. “You guys really thought you’d get him?” He laughed, a friendly sound. “No, I’m Tripitaka, the Buddha of Precocious Merit. What seems to be the problem?”

The disappointment on the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador’s face was thick enough to keep in a cement truck. “Not Siddhartha?” he asked hopelessly.

“No,” Tripitaka said slowly. “Although I have met him. Nice guy. Very serene. But I’m a Buddha too. How can I be of service to your enlightenment needs?”

“I don’t need to be enlightened!” said the Ambassador. “I’m already a god!”

“You’re a god?” Tripitaka said skeptically.

“A little bit,” said the Ambassador.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what are you god of?”

“Er, protection of the City of Brass. I administrate local spirits of fire and the minor gods of walls and ditches, and I send ancestors off to the Palace of Judgment.”

“Ah, a cheng-huang. I respect your calling, Magistrate, but what happens when you die? Even the greatest of gods die eventually, and you’ll just be reincarnated and forced to deal with all this kind of crap all over again. Wouldn’t you rather be enlightened?”

“No! I don’t want to be enlightened! I want my daughter back!”

Tripitaka’s mild face bobbed along with the rest of his head. "Don't worry, I can handle it. I'm an adventurer."

A piercing animal scream interrupted them.

Tripitaka's confidence turned to worry. "Monkey?" he asked hesitantly.

adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury adventury
adventury adventury adventury adventure! Extra apicy adventure! Ha ha! Extra sweet and spicy
adventure with pork! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure!
Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure!
Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure!
Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure!
Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Adventure! Ad! Venture! Ad! Venture! Ad! Ventch! Ur! Aaad!
Churr! Ventchy! Ventch! Ventch! Yay! Adventure!”

“Monkey,” said Tripitaka, smiling. “That’s enough. We have to think of our new friends.”

“Don’t mind me, mate,” said Mr. Black. The Esteemed Celestial Ambassador glowered at him.

“Adventure!” shouted Monkey, leaping on top of the Buddha’s head. Tripitaka staggered beneath his weight. “Let’s get the whole band back together!” he crooned. “What’s Piggy doing?”

“Piggy is fine,” said Tripitaka cautiously.

“Piggy!” screamed Monkey, leaping into the air. He disappeared.

“Looks like a third’s coming,” said the Buddha with a shrug.

Monkey was back in another instant. A squat humanoid creature with a head indistinguishable from that of a swine stood next to him, kicking at the floor with his hooved feet. Piggy eyed each of the others.

“You said there’d be girls here,” he complained to Monkey. His voice was deep and guttural, a continuous oink.

“There will be!” said Monkey, wagging his tongue rudely at his friend. “When we find them!”

“Hi, Piggy,” said Tripitaka. Though he was not five feet away, he waved exaggeratedly.

“Hi, ‘Taka,” said Piggy, waving back.

“Hi, Piggy,” said Monkey.

“Hi, Monkey,” said Tripitaka.

“Hi,” said Piggy.

“Hi, ‘Taka,” said Monkey.

“Hi, Monkey,” said Tripitaka.

“Hi, Dragon,” said Monkey to the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

“Urhmm,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

“Hi, Ghost,” said Monkey to Mr. White.

“Uh, hello,” said Mr. White.

“Hi, Warrior,” said Monkey to Mr. Black.

“Hello,” said Mr. Black. “Mate.”

“Hi, Piggy,” said Monkey.

Piggy grunted. “Those girls aren’t going to find themselves, I assume?”

“Let me be clear,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, “that you’re not getting anywhere with my daughter.”

“Excuse me for breathing,” said Piggy. “Did I say anything about your specific daughter? Have I just met the one man who has sired any being who might possibly merit the appellation of ‘girl?’ What a coincidence that is! This is indeed an amazing day. Yes sir, one for the books.”

“Piggy,” said Tripitaka. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” said Piggy. “What’s with this guy? Is he always like this?”

“Probably,” said Tripitaka, looking at the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador with an appraising eye.

“Can we get going?” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador, raising his voice slightly.

“I hope so,” said Piggy. “That’s the most sensible thing you’ve said yet.”

“Then we’re off,” said Tripitaka.

Monkey giggled hysterically.

“Off we go,” said Mr. White.

“I’m walking out the door,” confided Mr. Black.

“Finally,” said the Esteemed Celestial Ambassador.

“I’m with you, man,” said Piggy.

And so they went. For real this time.

the one for which you loved and dreamed is here among the others

I should say something more about the City of Brass.

First of all, the scale of it is much greater than you've probably so far imagined. The primary inhabitants - the ones the city was built for - are giants by human standards, several times larger than those children of clay.

To say that the palace of the Grand Sultan in the City of Brass was opulent is like saying that the seas of elemental flame beneath and surrounding it were hot; strictly true, but a bit of an understatement.

It was so opulent that I, your humble narrator, can't even describe it. If I tried, my inner sight would be blinded forever and my tongue would be burnt to a crisp. You'll just have to trust me: it was a pretty nice place.

Somewhere within this massive shrine to glamour and wealth was a bench. It was a finely crafted bench made of fine oak leaved with gold and upholstered with silken cushions. It wasn't as nice as the bed of Glowing Jewel of the Moon, but it was pretty damn good for a bench.

On the bench sat two strangers, both to the city and to one another. Both were humanoid. The one on the left side of the bench was covered in fur patterned like a tiger's stripes, though his facial features were closer to those of an ape. His hair was long and dark, tied neatly in the back. His suit was formal and slightly exotic. His clawed hands faced the opposite way from what you might expect. This, however, was not what anyone who looked at him saw. A casual observer would have seen a beautiful, dusky-skinned female, slightly taller than the human norm and swathed in black robes and veils so that only her copper-colored eyes showed. A more observant observer, perhaps gifted with magical insight, would have noticed the woman had three breasts in place of the normal two in a single row, though they were in the usual place on the front of her chest.

To the cloaked stranger's right was a hulking wolflike creature with dark gray fur and massive claws. A third arm, smaller and frailer than the other two, was attached to one shoulder. His scarlet eyes burned with terrible knowledge, and he wore the simple robe of a wandering monk. The casual observer we mentioned earlier, however, would have seen in the same robe a wizened, lanky, yellow-skinned man with large pointed ears and catlike eyes. His head was shaved nearly bald except for a long topknot stiffened with wax and less savory compounds. The more observant observer might have noticed something about the way he grinned that was off; if he knew a lot about the various races of the planes he might even have remembered that the githzerai, a race who this man seemed to be an example of, almost never smiled. They simply didn't have the reflex; it had been bred out of them long ago as a useless luxury. Githzerai only smiled when someone reminded them to.

The two strangers were engaged in idle chat, at least for a while. The one on the left was put off the habit of repeating things three times, or arranging everything in triads, that the other stranger incessantly engaged in. The stranger on the right seemed to be put off by nothing, and moreover intensely amused by his new companion's discomfort. After a while their conversation faded away,

although occasionally the stranger of the right would point out three tangently related objects, passerby, or concepts. Upon gaining no reaction from these, he would fall silent until moved to speak again. This happened fairly regularly; it seemed the stranger on the right was a compulsive talker, and he didn't seem to mind whether anyone was listening or not.

The stranger on the left was finally rescued from this by a ringing sound from within his garments. Pulling out a tiny gold watch, he glanced at the time, shut the alarm off, and stood up. In a soft woman's voice he announced to his neighbor that it was time for him to go; regretfully, the Great Sultan himself was expecting him and he could not talk anymore. The other stranger smiled more broadly and said that he, too, regretted that their new friendship should end so soon; he was happy they had met, he was happy that they had at least this last moment together, and he was even more happy to announce that he had been invited to that very same meeting, and that they could therefore enjoy one another's company in the very near future.

The stranger on the left seemed to be restraining the onset of a nervous twitch. At first he was about to deny the others' statement; then he very nearly tried indignation; at last he smiled politely and asked if his new friend would like to walk with him. The other stranger accepted graciously, three times.

the skull is echoing with webs

The storm gods tossed bowling balls to one another in the sky. Since they were catching them rather than hurling them toward celestial pins, this made something that was not so much a thundering sound as a lot of appreciative grunts and some rude laughter.

It would have to do.

The Beauty Consultant, the dream-struck Breath of the Dragon, and the weaver Aine left the eladrin camp and began their expedition to Polykeptolon in the realm of Olympus. This was where the Beauty Consultant's contacts were waiting, presumably with less patience than they might have had several weeks before.

The three walked through woods and glades of titanic size, carefully leaving offerings to the nature spirits as they passed. Travel through Arborea did mean travel through passion, through emotional ups and downs, and to some extent it meant transformation as well: the Beauty Consultant seemed to grow less fiendish in appearance as their journey progressed, while Aine seemed to take on attributes of the rivers, mountains, and trees that they passed, subtly changing coloration and height. Breath of the Dragon seemed the same as ever: small, pale, deceptively fragile-looking, almost doll-like, straight black hair and luminous brown eyes. She had cut her own hair at the eladrin camp, sometime in the middle of the night, badly. Where once it had streamed down to her waist, now it rarely reached her shoulders. In some parts of her scalp, it had been shaved off completely.

"The moose dropped from the seventh sun," she muttered as she walked. "Aye, what if it's snowing, oh?"

She didn't see the woods, the glades, the sunlight, the starlight, or the heavy moon with its triple goddess. She walked through landscapes of an altogether stranger sort, and under far more alien skies. For long periods she was separated into two beings, a human and a dragon walking side by side, or a human flying on a dragon's back, or vice versa.

"Hi," said Breath of the Dragon to no one in particular. "Breath of the Dragon here, though Father calls me Glowing Jewel of the Moon. To my left is Dragon Me. That's what I call her. She's a yellow dragon like Father is, though she's never driven a divine chariot to my knowledge. Who knows, though? Gods take many forms, don't they? I might not have known their faces, or their chariots."

In other dreams they were one being, and Breath of the Dragon had a long, serpentine dragon body such as she had never worn in waking life combined in some way with her human features.

A Medusa risen from the depths of the collective subconscious, perhaps somewhere in the neighborhood of the Bad Mother archetype, attacked the party. She parted her veils to reveal scales of bronze and a deadly petrifying gaze. Aine and the Beauty Consultant instantly averted their eyes. Only Breath of the Dragon looked openly at the assailant; because what she saw was not in this world, she was unaffected.

"The effects of her gaze can only be neutralized by her tears," Breath of the Dragon recited. "Ordinary onions won't do it. She might be shown memorabilia of her former life as a nymph. Or she might be splashed with her own tears that someone stored. Or she might be exposed to the deadly Onion of Legend; the most fearsome vegetable since the killer tomato and the fabled leader of the mini onions of Set."

"That's minions of Set," the Beauty Consultant corrected her, before accidentally seeing Medusa and turning to stone. This was all that saved him from a rain of venom falling from Medusa's viper hair.

Aine lashed at Medusa with her invisible vorpal sword. The birds who had been living in her hair attacked the serpent-hair from above. The blood that spilled from Medusa's wounds became still more snakes as they hit the ground, each as venomous as the last.

Aine worked raptures, weaving ice and color and illusions to distract the gorgon.

Breath of the Dragon stared in consternation at the creature. "Penguins don't fly?" she said hesitantly. She pulled a futon out of dreams and used it as a cudgel against the disobedient bird. She hurled dinner-plates at the monster's body. One took off Medusa's head. She dodged the ensuing tsunami of blood and poison, which became giants and pegasi as it mingled with the soil.

"A vorpal plate?" Aine asked in confusion. She looked, distraught, at the stone Beauty Consultant. "What about that thing you said about tears?"

"The Pumpkin King breaks the Sabbath," Breath of the Dragon said helpfully.

A pegasus colt whinnied, staggering awkwardly on its newborn legs. A giant tried to pet it, but the colt

backed away, flapping its sticky wings.

"No," said Aine carefully. "Tears." She sighed and wove some from Breath of the Dragon's dreams.

"That hurt," Breath of the Dragon complained.

"Sorry," said Aine. Pouring the salty water on the Beauty Consultant, the stone ran off as if it were sand.

"That was odd," said the Beauty Consultant when his mouth was free.

"Being stone?" said Aine. "I don't mind it so much, personally. It has its place."

"The other stones talk too loud," said the Beauty Consultant. "And they sing songs that I've heard far too much before."

"They are a little behind the times," Aine acknowledged.

"What have they got in their pocketses?" Breath of the Dragon wondered aloud.
