

Helena

by

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The sound told Mawei that humans were close. It was a loud screech that almost sounded like a screaming bird, followed by a thunderclap that reverberated off of the craggy rock ledge above her. Mawei was travelling in unfamiliar territory but she knew that a human road was nearby. Most yetis flee at the first sign of human activity, but Mawei was both young and curious, and her curiosity sometimes made her brave. She decided to investigate.

She was coming up the side of a snow-covered gully when the wind died down and she became aware of an intense smell. She didn't know it was gasoline, just that it burned her nostrils and was highly unpleasant. She could also detect traces of exhaust, a smell she was familiar with. Mawei climbed down a steep embankment to the road, which was covered in a thin layer of ice, and carefully followed it to a bend where she knew by the intensity of the gasoline smell that she was close. There was a drop off on the outside of the road and Mawei looked down at the remains of a violent wreck. The car was upside down and smashed against a tree at the bottom of the hill. Mawei smelled blood and sap mixed with the gasoline and exhaust.

She stood at the edge of the road and considered the mangled car below. A light snow had begun to fall and Mawei knew that she should leave the car and its unfortunate occupants and get back to her travels. She was on her way to a Gather and she still had a long way to go. Being late to a Gather was considered rude, and Mawei's mother would be angry with her if she didn't manage to get there on time, but something kept her from leaving. Human beings had been of great interest to Mawei when she was little, and it had even been said that she took after her uncle Rei, whose obsession with humans was legendary. Mawei felt that she owed it to that younger version of herself to fully live this human moment.

She got an all fours and arched her back so that if the human or humans inside the car saw her, they would think she was a bear. At eight feet tall, Mawei would be an exceptionally large bear, but she thought if anyone was still alive in the car she wouldn't have to fool them for long before she could get away. She descended the hill as a bear, and concentrated on darkening her auburn fur until it was almost black, a trick she had only recently mastered.

The car's wheels were still spinning and Mawei saw blood dripping from the broken windshield. She approached cautiously and looked in a side window. It was a man and woman who had awoken from the dream of this world and left behind only messy corpses. Mawei supposed that this was a common occurrence among humans, but she couldn't help feeling sorry for the couple. She stood, not worried about looking like a bear anymore, and let her fur change back to its natural color. She put her nose near the open window. Mawei wanted to remember every detail of the sad scene.

It was the scent of shampoo that caught her attention. There was a trace of something sweet-smelling behind the corpses of the man and woman. Mawei walked around and looked through the broken-out back window of the car and saw two brown eyes looking back at her. She jumped, startled, and looked again. It was a small human face, upside down and attached to a small human body in a shell that was strapped to the seat. The child looked completely calm, although being upside down had turned its face bright red.

The sympathy Mawei felt for this child was sudden and overwhelming. She knew that the dead bodies belonged to its mother and father, and that soon the child would be dead too.

Reaching into the car, she intended to free it from the shell so that it would have a fighting chance at survival.

The straps were tougher than she thought they would be. She had to rip at them with her claws before she was able to get the child out of the shell and pull it through the window into the biting December air. The snow had picked up a bit, and the transition from the relative warmth of the car to the cold outside sent the child into a crying fit.

When Mawei set the child on the snow-covered ground it sat down immediately and screamed a fierce little cry up at her. She knew that she should leave immediately. More humans could come along and she might not notice with the wind blowing and the snow overpowering their scent. If it had been a badger trapped under a rock there would be no question- she would free the creature and be on her way. But this was different, this human was small and very weak. She didn't have to be an expert on humans to know that the child wouldn't survive on its own.

Mawei lifted the child by a wrist and wrapped her long arm around it, hugging it close. The child was wearing black leggings under a green, long-sleeved dress, with pink sneakers covering its tiny feet. Mawei knew that since human fur was patchy at best, they constructed artificial fur for themselves in fancy shapes and colors, but she had never seen any of this 'fur' up close, let alone touched it. It felt pleasant to her, like a sort of dry moss.

The child didn't seem to have enough breath for the anguish of its cries, and it began heaving between desperate shouts. Mawei put her hand on the back of the child's head and pressed its cheek against her shoulder. The child began flailing, throwing its little arms and legs around and Mawei caught hold of a little hand and looked at it. It was so small and fragile, the whole hand fitting into Mawei's palm with plenty of room left over. She saw that the child's claws were nothing but translucent flakes on the ends of its fingers, fine delicate little slivers. Leaving the child alone seemed cruel all of a sudden, and Mawei knew she couldn't do it.

No, the child was coming with her. She couldn't waste any more time though, she had a Gather to get to and if she didn't get there before the grand call her mother would be mad. She would have to figure out what to do with the little human on the way.

By taking the human Mawei was breaking a rule of yeti culture that had been set down by her ancestors long ago. Yetis go to great lengths to avoid humans, and most yetis in Mawei's position would've left the child to die, not out of cruelty, but out of fear. Yetis see the human race as magic run amok.

From a young age yetis are taught that human beings are not technically real, but are a thought-form or 'tulpa' created by longhaired plains-yetis in ancient times. This tribe of yetis is said to have accidentally started the human race, conjuring it into existence through the repetition of stories told to the young. So many plains-yetis had grown up believing stories about humans that the force of their belief gave humans a physical form. Eventually humans became real enough to make war on the plains-yetis, and wiped them off the face of the earth. From then on the four remaining tribes avoided contact with humans at all cost.

Mawei had been told many times that humans were the most dangerous creatures in the world, but she felt no threat from the little one she held in her arms. It was young and helpless, and besides, she knew that humans left yetis alone because they didn't believe in them, and she thought that if humans were anything like yetis their beliefs wouldn't be changed by the words of a child.

In any case she told herself that her contact with the human would be brief. She would leave it on the outskirts of a village and it would be found and cared for by other humans. After a few miles the child's crying stopped and it took hold of Mawei's fur with both hands and clenched its fists. Every time Mawei looked down, it was looking back up at her with its big, penetrating eyes. Mawei could tell that the child thought it was dreaming and she made her movements more fluid so that she wouldn't break the spell.

The snowstorm was getting worse and Mawei was afraid she'd never find a human village, but eventually she caught a whiff of exhaust and followed it to a highway. It was dark by the time she got there and the child had fallen asleep. The cars going by had their hateful yellow eyes lit, illuminating horizontal cones of snowfall as they sped by. It was a sight that entranced Mawei, and she watched for a while before deciding she could solve her predicament right then and there.

The highway was four lanes wide, two in each direction, and there were cars and trucks coming in groups of two or three every minute or so. Mawei held the child, who was snoring gently, and crept down to the tree line. She watched a couple of cars go by and then moved quickly out to the edge of the road. She set the child down in the right lane, thinking a human would be more likely to stop if the child was directly in its path. The little human shifted around, uncomfortable on the wet concrete. There were large snowflakes accumulating in the child's hair and eyelashes, and Mawei hesitated for a second before she darted back to the edge of the forest.

She put her back against a tree and darkened her fur. There was a car coming on the other side of the road and she wanted to make sure the little bird was safely picked up before she left. It was a black car with two humans inside and it passed without even slowing down. The car woke the child, who looked around, confused, and scrambled to get up as another car was coming on the same side of the highway. It roared past in the left lane, and as its red taillights faded into the snowy dark the child stumbled backward and cried out.

Mawei was surprised. She knew that human eyesight was bad, but surely they could see a child less than ten feet away from them. The little human, sitting in the right lane of the wet highway, began to cry. Mawei thought that maybe humans cared less for their young than yetis did, and maybe no one would bother to save a helpless child. For all Mawei knew humans ate their orphans.

As she was thinking this, a truck was coming and Mawei could see that it was on a collision course with the child. She bolted toward the highway, skidding a bit on some gravel before getting an arm around the child and pulling it out of the way of the eighteen wheeler that was flying by at that precise moment.

If a human had seen it, they would think Mawei's fast reaction time and movements were supernatural, but they would be wrong. Yetis are able to move at incredibly fast speeds because of the way they perceive time. What a human being calls 'the present' is actually one fourteenth of a second that slides along the timeline, but for a yeti the present much shorter. This means that the number of things a yeti can accomplish in any period of time is far greater than that of a human. Mawei had gone from the trees to the road and saved the child in the time it would've taken a human to realize it was too late.

Mawei held the child tighter than before and pressed deep into the forest. She felt they were moving away from death, toward life, as the black forest crackling with ice and fresh snow enveloped them.

There's only one yeti in the world who can help me, Mawei thought, *and that's my uncle Rei*. The problem was that she didn't know enough about humans to know how to proceed. Her uncle would know. In his quest to become an authority on the strange creatures he had lived for a number of years undetected in one of their villages, an experiment that had been the subject of much discussion. He would be headed to the Gather too, so if she traveled east she should pick up his trail. She sniffed at the air hopefully, but there was no trace of him.

The snowfall had lightened and the child was asleep again in Mawei's arms as she trudged over hills, through creeks, and across snowy fields, deftly cutting a path through the black wilderness. The child's dreams were growing stronger, and Mawei felt her own thinking being affected by their sleepy logic, so she decided to bed down for a couple of hours rest. She found a little nook next to a fallen tree on a grassy incline and curled the child's legs under her arm and draped her forearm and hand across the human's torso for warmth. Mawei rested her head on a mound of dirt.

She awoke a while later when she felt the child urinating. Apparently neither having to go, nor even the wetness had stirred the child, so Mawei assumed it was another peculiar human trait and went back to sleep.

She awoke again, just after dawn, when the child climbed off of her and began running down the hill. Mawei stretched out lazily and watched the child push past some bushes and out of sight. She sat up and thought about letting the child run for awhile to wear itself out, but then decided it was a bad idea. She didn't know how aware of its surroundings the little human was, and she was afraid it would hurt itself.

She caught up to the child in about five steps and lifted the kicking human off the ground, turning it to face her. "Don't run off little bird, you might hurt yourself." She said, speaking to the child the way a human might speak to a dog or cat, expecting no response.

The child looked directly at Mawei and said, in perfect yeti, one word:
"Monster."

Yetis don't communicate through sounds as humans do, they communicate through a combination of micro facial expressions, posture and something akin to sign language. This language can be reduced to eye or hand movements alone, or expanded to include the whole body depending on the situation. It is a very intuitive language and yetis are born knowing the basic vocabulary, which becomes more subtle and nuanced as they age. Mawei was surprised the child had said 'monster,' but it wasn't a particularly difficult word, so she thought it might've said it by accident.

"I'm not a monster, I'm your friend." She said. In response the little human bit Mawei's hand, causing Mawei to drop the child.

It recovered from the fall quickly and began running again. Mawei caught the child's arm before it got far and turned it around. It was seething hostility toward her. "Let go!" The child said, speaking in perfect yeti. "I want to go home!"

Mawei let go of the child's arm and stepped back, thinking she must be dreaming. She checked the chronology leading up to that moment, as her father had taught her to do whenever she wasn't sure if she was dreaming or awake. Before Mawei could be sure, the child spoke

again. “You can’t just come out of nothing and drag me all over the forest, I’ll call the police on you!”

Any word that can be thought can be expressed in yeti, including words that a yeti wouldn’t understand, like ‘police.’ Mawei still couldn’t process what was happening. She crouched down, closer to the child. “Can you really speak?” She asked.

“No.” The human said. It looked around as if plotting its next escape attempt.

Mawei put a hand on the child’s shoulder. “How can you be talking to me?”

“It isn’t real talking monster, don’t be dumb. I want my mommy, understand? Where’s mommy?”

Mawei struggled to keep her posture neutral and not show how much she didn’t want to answer the question. “What’s your name?” She asked.

In response the child made a sound, and Mawei thought the little human had ignored the question. “It’s cold,” the human said.

Mawei scooped up the little genius animal that could speak yeti and held it close, gripping its legs to warm them, and asked if it was ready for the day’s travels. She was curious whether it could understand yeti when it was expressed with the eyes alone, and to her surprise the child answered, also speaking only with its eyes.

“No,” the little human said. “Where are we going?”

“To find my uncle. He’ll take you someplace safe and warm.”

“To my mommy?”

Mawei couldn’t help the flicker of pain that tightened her expression for a moment. “If your mommy were here what would she do?” Mawei asked.

“Make me feel better.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” the child said, “she’d give me some food and make me wear my coat. She’d sing me a song.”

“What’s ‘sing me a song?’” Mawei asked.

The little human began making noises and Mawei understood. She tried to imitate the sound the child was making but the little one held its hand up to Mawei’s mouth to stop her.

Mawei made a yeti gesture that could be translated as ‘worth a shot,’ or ‘no harm in trying.’ “Let’s go find my uncle little bird, he’ll know what to do.”

The child again gripped Mawei’s fur as Mawei bounded into the forest. It was a cold morning, but blue sky could be seen beyond the treetops, and there were little clouds traveling fast, as if they were also a day late and in a rush to get somewhere.

Mawei didn't stop moving until the afternoon. The little human had been making whining noises for some time and Mawei thought it might be thirsty or hungry so she stopped at a creek and set the child down. The child looked around like it wanted to run, but instead watched Mawei bend down to the creek and scoop some water up to her mouth. "Have a drink." She said.

The human frowned and crouched down by the creek, putting a hand in the water and then pulling it back quickly. "It's too cold! It hurts my hand."

"Sorry little one." Mawei said. She dipped her hand back into the creek and brought some water to the child's lips and was relieved when it drank. Mawei repeated the process three more times before the child had had enough. "Are you hungry?" Mawei asked.

"I'll have some Graham crackers." The child said, knowing the monster wouldn't understand.

Mawei lifted and held the child so they could see each other better. "I think I smell some berries not too far away."

"French fries." The child said.

"You're welcome." Mawei answered.

She found the bush about a half-mile away, at the edge of a muddy scrubland. She pulled a few berries off and gave them to the child, who just held them and frowned. Mawei took a couple back and ate them herself. "We're lucky to have found berries so late in the season." She said.

The child reluctantly put a berry in its mouth and bit into it making a sour face, and then opened its mouth and let the chewed-up berry fall out. "Yuck," the child said, "that's not food."

"Of course it is." Mawei said, popping a few more into her mouth.

The child threw the remaining berries on the ground. "Rocks in there!"

"Well if you won't eat berries, what do you want?" Mawei asked.

"I want pie." The child said.

Mawei was about to ask what 'pie' was, but she heard a noise that startled her. She scooped up the child and prepared to run before she saw that it was just her uncle Rei. He was upwind, making his way toward them in a posture of confused concern. He had a strange lump on his back with two straps over his shoulders.

"Hi uncle." Mawei said.

Rei stood and stared at them. "Mawei, what dream have you brought me into? Why are you holding a human child?"

"It's sort of complicated." She said.

"When I caught wind of it I said to myself, *is my niece covered in human urine? This can't be.* I had to investigate and here you are, holding a human child."

"Not just any human child, a very unusual one." Mawei said.

Rei looked at the child up close and sniffed its hair, provoking a shudder. "Aside from the fact that my niece is holding it, I don't see anything unusual." He said. "Do you know how much trouble you could get in for this?"

"I'll put it down so you can see what I mean." Mawei said.

The child stood there and looked up at Mawei and then Rei. "What?" The child asked.

“What are you staring at? I’m not your pet, so you can both point your ugly eyes somewhere else.”

“Did this human just speak?” Rei asked.

“Not only does it speak,” Mawei said, “it hurls insults.”

The little human turned and ran off into the forest, so Mawei took the opportunity to explain to Rei what had happened to the child’s parents. She told him all about the smashed windshield, the blood and the spinning wheels. “The child seems to have no idea that its parents were killed. It couldn’t see them from where it was strapped in, and the accident must’ve happened very suddenly.” They both began walking after the child. “And then this morning the human started speaking to me. Do other humans speak yeti? Is it normal?”

“No,” Rei said, “humans communicate through noises made with their mouths, grunting and burbling at each other. It’s a brute sort of language, but they manage all right. They don’t even acknowledge body posture as a form of communication. If a human spoke kindness with his mouth while holding a hostile body posture, the kindness would be believed and the hostility ignored. It’s just their way.”

The child saw them following and began moving faster. The two yetis could easily keep up and continue their conversation. “But uncle, what if two humans were talking and there were other humans nearby –wouldn’t they also hear the conversation, whether they wanted to or not?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Rei said.

“And what if two humans wanted to talk but they were too far away from each other to hear?”

“In that case they would just shout their conversation.” Rei said.

Mawei laughed and thought for a moment. “Are their names sounds too?”

“Yes, yes,” Rei said, “each human has a sound that they identify as their name.”

Mawei reached down and stopped the child, turning it around to face them. “What is your name little bird?”

“*Helena*.” The child told Mawei for the second time. Mawei tried to imitate the sound but could only manage ‘*Lala*’. The child frowned at Mawei and her uncle. “No more monsters. I want to go home. I’m hungry.”

“It won’t eat berries uncle. I don’t know what to do.”

At this her uncle seemed delighted. He pulled the lump off of his back, and Mawei saw that it was made out of a similar substance to the coverings that the child wore. “I brought some human food to show the council of elders at the Gather.” Rei said.

“What is that thing uncle?”

“It is a human device for transporting objects.” He reached into it and pulled out a strange smelling little cylinder. “There’s human food in this. Human beings love to put things inside of other things. They would never just carry food, they’d carry a container with food inside it, and put that inside another container like the one that was strapped to my back.” He bit into the edge of the can and ripped the top open with his teeth. “She will eat this.” He said.

“She? The child is female?”

“Yes.” Rei said. “A girl like you Mawei. *Lan-hah*, come.” He said, trying to say the girl’s name in human sound language. “Come eat.”

Helena felt like screaming as loud as she could. In all her six years she had never been as hungry as she was then, and she didn’t like being cold either. She wasn’t like some of the kids in her class that would cry in any new situation, she was tough. Sometimes she would even laugh when she took a fall that would’ve made most girls her age cry. But now she was on the verge of

having what her Nana would call a ‘major meltdown.’

Rei poured some beige goop from the ripped open can onto his hand. He held it down near Helena’s face and she sniffed at it suspiciously. After the berries she knew she had to be careful of food offered by the monsters. It smelled sweet so she scooped some into her mouth. “Pie!” She said to Mawei.

She was right. Rei had brought twelve cans of pumpkin pie filling, stolen in the pre-dawn hours from a palette on the loading dock behind a supermarket in the town of West Fork.

Little Helena scooped the rest of the pie filling out of Rei’s giant hand and slurped it down, getting a good portion on her face in the process. Rei poured more into his hand and held it down for the little girl. As she ate he turned to his niece. “There are two possibilities,” he said as Helena happily gobbled down the sweet sludge, “either this child is somehow special, and you happened on the only child in the world who could speak yeti, or all humans can speak yeti but they just don’t. The second option seems more likely. I’d say small children can do it, but then they forget as they learn the crude human sound language.”

“Maybe so.” Mawei said. “What do you think we should do with her?”

“Children her age might speak yeti to each other and the adult humans just never notice.” He poured the rest of the can into his hand and held it down for her. “When I was in the village I often saw young humans playing near where I lived, but I never recognized any yeti language.”

“What should we do uncle?”

“Well, she can speak,” Rei said, “let’s ask her.” He leaned down to the child. “Do you speak to other children in the same way you speak to us?”

“Where’s the bathroom?” Helena asked.

“The what?”

“I have to poop.”

“Oh.” Rei said. “You can go behind that bush if you’d like some privacy.” She groaned and went around the bush to do her business. “Interesting fact about humans,” Rei said to Mawei, “they poop into bowls of fresh water. It’s all sucked down into tubes that run underneath their villages. The village itself is like a living creature with guts, it’s all in my report.”

“What report?”

“Why do you think I’ve lived among the humans for the last five years? The council of elders sent me to find out as much as I could about them. It’s strange that the most interesting fact that I’ve discovered comes from my young niece and not from my own observations.” He frowned at his hand, still messy from the pie filling. “Why should a human be able to speak yeti? This might give some clue as to the true nature of their origin. It’s very puzzling.”

“Please uncle, we have a long way to go, we’ll be late for the Gather if we don’t hurry. Let’s take the little bird to a human village and be done with it.”

“This child could teach us so much about humans.” Rei said. He found a few flat leaves on the ground, shook the snow off them, and handed them over the bush to the child. “Humans are very fastidious.” He said to Mawei.

“Uncle, please- if I don’t leave now and travel as fast as I can through the night, I’ll be late and my mother will be angry. I can’t miss the grand call or the first cycle of the Chronicle.”

“Yes you’re right,” Rei said, “Mawei, I always forget how young you are. Go, don’t be late for the Gather. I’ll see that the child remains safe.”

“You’ll take it to a human village?”

“Mawei, you did the right thing bringing this child to me.” Rei said. “Don’t tell a soul about her, she’s my responsibility now. Go before any more time passes.”

Helena came back around the bushes, looking annoyed that Mawei and her uncle were still there. The child seemed like a helpless little bald chick, and Mawei hated to part with her, but she thought her uncle had things under control. *After all*, she told herself, *he's my elder. He knows what he's doing*. She didn't want to confuse the child with a long goodbye, so she bent down and touched her nose to Helena's and was on her way.

She'd only gone a few miles before she stopped, realizing that she would probably never see the human again. She thought about running back, but she didn't do it. She looked up at the clouds for awhile. *You did everything you could for her*, she told herself, *you saved her life, and now that the adventure is over it's time to put it in the past*.

Helena knew a bit about monsters, and the main thing she knew was that they ate little girls. Yes, these particular monsters seemed nice, and yes, it might be fun to have monster friends, but she still couldn't forget that they were monsters and she was a little girl. Farmer Andy brought piglets to the earth day festival at her school, and he was nice to them too, even though they were really just food. The piglets probably thought Farmer Andy was their friend, but farmers eat pigs and monsters eat little girls. Too bad, but that's just the way it is.

Helena wasn't going to be breakfast lunch or dinner for any monster, no way. She had to escape. She couldn't outrun them, that was for sure, but maybe she could outsmart them. If she could slip away and tell a grownup then these monsters would find out what happens to kidnapers. Maybe it would be like Little Red Riding Hood, the hunter with the ax, chop, chop, chopping up the big bad wolf.

Oh honey, don't read that part, it's too violent.

Well sorry mommy, these monsters just have to learn, and chop, chop, chop, is the only way to teach them. Helena wouldn't do anything to stop the chopping. Friends are friends and food is food, and friends can't be food and food can't be friends as much as certain furry, smiling faces wanted to pretend different.

So Helena decided to keep on the lookout for an opportunity to escape. But for now she would smile at the big one, who smelled like the elephant cage at the zoo, and talk to him in their eyeball language if that's what he wanted. If Mr. Elephant Cage thought she was dumb, she decided it was best to just let him think it. "You don't have a thing to worry about little bird," Rei was saying to Helena, "I'll take good care of you."

"When you bring me home everyone will say thank you, and they'll give you food and money." Helena said, thinking chop, chop, chop.

"What is money?" Rei asked her.

Helena thought for a second. "That's what makes certain things too expensive." She said. "Otherwise everyone would just grab everything and it wouldn't be fair, right?" Helena's mom and dad would often ask her questions that they knew the answers to, to test her knowledge, and that was how she took Rei's question about money.

"Yes," Rei said, "to measure how difficult something is."

"What?"

"That's money."

Helena rolled her eyes. "No, wrong." She said. "I'm cold, are you taking me to my mommy or not?"

"I can't," Rei said, "but I can warm you up myself." He lifted her into his arms. "That's better isn't it?" Helena almost gagged from the smell, but then went back to fake-smiling at Rei. "I can tell that you want to get away from me." Rei said. "But can I ask you some questions first? Would that be alright?"

"I guess."

"Then I'll get you back to other humans."

"Okay, ask." Helena said.

"Are sounds the only way that humans talk to each other?"

“Sounds? No,” Helena said, “there’s letters, texts, emails, Christmas cards.”

Rei didn’t know any of those words. “What is letters?” He asked picking the first example she’d given.

“It’s a piece of paper the mailman takes.”

“What’s paper?”

Helena groaned. “Paper is the stuff you write on.” Rei just looked confused. “Forget it!” Helena said. She looked down at the terrain around them. “I want to play a game, okay? Do you want to learn a game?”

“A human game?” He asked.

“Yeah, a human game. It’s a game called hide and go seek, ever heard of it?”

“No.”

“First, put me down.” She said. Rei put her down on the snowy ground. Helena’s shoes were wet, and she thought her toes were so cold they might fall off. “Okay, you’re it,” she said, “so you have to cover your eyes and count to um... Five hundred. While you’re counting I’ll go hide, and then you can come looking for me, understand?”

“Five hundred what?”

Helena sighed. “Fine, just cover your eyes for a long time. A really long time, and then come looking for me. And no peeking! That’s not allowed.”

“Alright.” He said. “Should I start now?”

“Yes.” Helena said.

As soon as he closed his eyes she ran. *Boy, is he a dummy!* She thought, vaulting a fallen tree and crashing through some tall grass. *All I needed was a good head start.*

She slipped and fell coming down a hill, getting mud on her dress and ripping a hole in her leggings, but she got up quick and kept moving. She was thinking about how brave she was, running from a monster. *I tricked him, and now I'm going to escape.* She could almost hear her father praising her. He often told her that if she didn't know what to do she should listen for the little voice in her head. 'The little voice is hardly ever wrong,' he would say. Well sometimes the little voice isn't so little, sometimes it's a big voice, and sometimes it screams 'RUN!'

She was tearing across a rocky patch of ground and almost went over a steep drop off, but turned in time and ran along the edge until she found a safe place to jump down. She took a moment to look back, but she didn't see any sign of the monster. *He's probably still got his eyes closed,* she told herself. She would be miles away before he opened his eyes. Helena was a fast runner, she would be the fastest kid in her class if it weren't for KJ, and he was so tall that the comparison really wasn't fair.

Even so, after an hour of running she was getting a bit tired, and the trees and bushes wouldn't let her go in a straight line. She was constantly having to turn one way or the other, which made her worry that she might wind up going in a big circle and get nowhere. It was a thought that made her want to give in to exhaustion and stop to rest for a moment.

No, she told herself, picturing the monster's teeth, *keep running!*

She started up a steep hill, and had to push herself to keep going. *Soon there will be a house,* she thought. *Maybe on the other side of this hill I'll see a swing-set or an above-ground pool, maybe this is all someone's backyard.* She imagined running up to a house and banging on the backdoor, 'Hey let me in! I been kidnapped! I need help!'

But when Helena got to the top of the hill she saw how wrong she was. There was a view out into the valley, and there was nothing but trees stretching as far as she could see. There were no houses or any sign of human activity anywhere in the vast expanse of green. That was when she knew exactly where she was: nowhere.

She slumped down to the ground and began to cry. Helena knew without a doubt that that no matter what she did, she would eventually be monster food. *I won't even be a good meal, I'm too skinny.* She thought. *Maybe they'll try to fatten me up first, like the witch from Hansel and Gretel.*

Something about that story had always bothered Helena, but she didn't know what it was until that moment. What bothered her was that the witch had a whole candy-house setup just to catch kids. She'd obviously put a lot of work into it, and Hansel and Gretel probably weren't the first kids to come along. Maybe she'd fattened up and eaten hundreds of kids before Gretel and her dumb little brother came a-munching on her windowsill. Nobody told those stories, so it was like those kids never existed. That would be her. Some kid would come along later and outsmart the monsters, and everyone would hear about it, but she would just be a girl who'd disappeared. No happy ending, no story, no Helena.

Her despair was turning to anger as she pictured that kid who had her same story only with a happy ending. She was picturing a blonde boy with a nice haircut and new clothes, telling how he had pretended to be the monster's friend so he could slip away. Helena hated him.

"That's my story!" She shouted, standing up. She looked down into the valley again. *It's not*

so bad, she told herself, there's probably houses down there that I can't see. She began to move again, picturing that perfect blonde kid. Nice try jerk. I'm gonna keep running until I find help. I'll keep going a week, a month, a year even. I might have to eat crickets and frogs to stay alive, but it's still better than being a happy-meal.

She ran down the other side of the ridge, and made her way toward the valley. She was past exhaustion, and as hours went by she kept putting one foot in front of the other automatically, without thought or effort. By the evening she'd travelled almost seven miles. She hadn't seen any sign of the monster, and she figured he would've gotten her by then if he knew where she was. The sun was going down and it was getting cold and Helena was thinking about how she was going to stay alive in the wilderness. She decided to look for a hiding place where she could spend the night.

And food?

She tried to put it out of her head, but her stomach kept pulling her thoughts back to the pumpkin pie filling she'd had that morning. *Pumpkin pie filling is exactly what you would feed a kid if you were trying to fatten them up.* Even the thought of food made Helena sleepy. Her feet were dragging and she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open.

Helena saw a large bush with branches that curved over, forming an alcove underneath. She thought she'd be hidden in there if the monster came by, so she pushed her way in. There was more space further back, so Helena moved another set of branches and kept going. There was a lot of space under the bush, and she decided to go as deep as she could. She was almost at the center when she noticed something reddish brown behind the thickest set of branches. She squinted at the shape, thinking it was a trick of the evening light, but it moved and she saw Rei's furry face looking directly at her.

Helena screamed, startling the yeti, and scrambled back out of the bush. Before she had time to run she felt his giant hands lifting her. "You found me!" He said. "You won the game!"

"No, that's not how you play," Helena said. "I was supposed to hide and *you* were supposed to find *me*."

"I'm sorry little one, I didn't know the game took so long. We don't have time to play anymore, I have to get to the Gather to give my report. I'll have to find somewhere for you to wait nearby. A Gather is no place for a human."

Helena groaned. "Why don't you just eat me now?"

"Don't be silly." Rei said. He sniffed at her hair. "When we get closer I'll take off your coverings and dress you in river mud."

His words fought their way through her exhaustion and she tried to understand what he'd said. "You're going to do what?"

"Take off your coverings and coat your body with river mud."

"Why?"

"To cover your smell." Rei said.

Helena reeled back. "**MY SMELL?**" She was shouting at him in English. "**MY SMELL? LOOK WHO'S TALKING, YA BIG STINKY OOF!**"

Every seven years at around the time of the winter solstice, the four tribes of North American yetis gather. A Gather lasts three days, and each of the tribes has a duty to perform. That year's Gather was in northern California, just south of the Oregon state line, at a sudden clearing in an immense evergreen forest, bordered on one side by a cliff and opening on the other side to an impressive view of snowy peaks in the distance. The clearing was a bit more than two miles across at its widest point, and there was a rocky mound at its center that was perfect for a yeti speaker to be seen by many viewers.

Mawei arrived just before dawn and began looking for her mother. Fog was rising thick off the cold ground and there were yetis in pairs and small groups making their way toward the clearing or standing around talking. The sense of anticipation was growing with the lightening of the sky. Mawei finally spotted the familiar shape of her mother's posture in the haze. She was in conversation with Mawei's aunt Weseil and two night-yetis she didn't recognize. She showed her dissatisfaction with her daughter in her posture as Mawei approached. "Why are you just arriving now?" She asked. "And look at you -you look like you've been running all night. What distracted you this time? Did you get in an argument with a cloud?"

"No mama," Mawei said, "I got a bit off track and had to go miles out of my way to avoid a human village."

Mawei's mother leaned toward her and they touched noses. "And when did you see your uncle Rei?" She asked.

"Two days ago." Mawei said. She was surprised that her mother could still smell Rei after so long. "He was wearing a strange-smelling lump on his back that he took from the humans -a device for carrying food." Mawei brought this up in case her mother could also smell the child, maybe she would think it was Rei's lump that she smelled.

"And was he alone?"

"Yes mama, why?"

"Rachiel's niece said she passed him in the hills on the other side of the west mountain range, and that he was *with a human*." She said. "Everyone is talking about it."

"No mama, he had a human device for carrying objects, that's all. It's a lump that he carries on his back."

"Who could mistake a lump for a human?" She said. "I'm afraid your uncle might've gotten himself in real trouble this time."

"Wait a minute," Mawei's aunt Weseil said, "we're talking about Rachiel's niece Bobber? Everybody knows she's a trouble-maker. This might be some sort of hateful lie. You know how that family feels about humans, and Rei is giving his report tomorrow. She's probably trying to discredit him before he speaks. It's exactly the sort of thing she would do."

"Maybe," Mawei's mother said. She sniffed at the air for a sign of her brother.

Mawei did her best to appear innocent but she was afraid she wasn't very convincing. Why would Rei still have little Helena on the other side of the west mountain range? Surly he could've gotten her to a human village before then.

"Rei's an unusual fellow," one of the night-yetis said, "it's not surprising he would be the subject of gossip and rumors."

“Do you know him?” Mawei asked.

“Of course.” He said. “Many of us are looking forward to his report. Your uncle has become quite famous for his sojourn among the humans.”

Mawei’s mother could see that she didn’t recognize the night-yeti who was speaking.

“Mawei, this is Eiser, you knew him when you were just a pup.”

“You don’t remember me?” He said. “I taught you how to eat crawdads.” He put his face close to Mawei’s and took a sniff. Mawei closed her eyes until it was over. “This is my young cousin Ruffer,” he said, indicating the smaller night-yeti next to him. “He also lives among humans.”

“Stop it Eiser,” the smaller night-yeti said, “I’m tired of the joke now.”

“Ruffer is taking his first turn at the mound today,” Weseil said, giving Mawei a sly look, “and he’s not even a little bit nervous.”

“I never said that I wasn’t nervous,” Ruffer said, “just that I know my part from tip to tail.”

“I think it’s wonderful to see a youth who’s so self-confident.” Weseil said, never taking her eyes off Mawei. “It’s very rare.”

Mawei’s mother wished Ruffer good luck and pulled her daughter away from the group, toward the clearing. “I’m not happy that you ran all night to get here on time.” She said. “If you had come directly you would’ve gotten here last night.”

“But mama, I wasn’t late.” Mawei said.

“No I guess not.”

“Mama, what if Rei *was* with a human like Bobber said? What would happen then?”

“He would be shunned and the human would be destroyed.” She said. “Why, do you know something about it that you haven’t told me?”

“Of course not.” Mawei said. Her mother looked at her as if waiting for a confession. “Why did Eiser say that Ruffer also lived among humans?” Mawei asked, changing the subject.

“Because a human built a small shelter in a corner of his wild.” She said. “It’s not his fault, poor boy, there’s nothing he can do about it. Many less-fortunate yetis have human roads through their wilds, but once they start building shelters there’s no getting rid of them.”

They decided to sit under a twisted pine that had roots bulging up from the ground which provided a good backrest. There were yetis up in the trees or sitting like Mawei and her mother, and even some highland-yetis up on the cliff, and all were watching the group of night-yetis standing near the mound. The grand call was coming and everyone was looking around, waiting for someone to get it started. Finally a cry went up at the other side of the clearing and soon more were joining and Mawei and her mother joined in the call too. At Mawei’s first Gather, when she was little, the grand call had scared her terribly, but now she was used to it, and even enjoyed it a little.

As if in response to the call the cloud cover tore open above them, revealing a shockingly blue sky and the wind picked up and bent the trees over the crowd of yetis. The fog had burned away and it seemed like the whole world was telling the night-yetis to hurry up and start the Chronicle. As the wind ripped across the clearing, a withered old grey night-yeti was helped onto the mound and a wave of electricity pulsed through the audience as she was recognized. “This is a very special day.” Mawei’s mother told her. “That’s Sorchel, she’s a great-great-great grandmother, and she is over four hundred years old.” She spoke distractedly, watching Sorchel stand motionless on the mound.

“Can she still give the Chronicle mama? Even as old as she is?” Mawei asked.

“People still talk about the last time she did. She’s legendary. Be still now Mawei, let’s

watch.”

The old yeti stood stooped over and not moving except for the wind rustling her grey fur. It seemed to Mawei that even at her distance she could see a glint in Sorchel’s eye. The old yeti had moved so slowly that Mawei hadn’t even noticed, but now she saw that the speaker on the mound had formed, with her whole body, the first word of the Chronicle: Nothingness.

Mawei knew the first line of the Chronicle by heart and watched for the next words, which Sorchel arrived at and passed over very slowly. The quality of her movements was like ice melting. She continued, stretching out each word, and somehow giving meaning to the movements between words as well as to the words themselves. “Nothingness-was-pierced-by-the-mind-of-a-dreamer-asleep-in-a-distant-realm.”

She would punctuate certain words with flares of intensity in her eyes. Every yeti in attendance felt at some point during her recitation that the great Sorchel was looking directly at them. Mawei thought that the old yeti could read her mind when their eyes met.

It was the late afternoon and the seventh night-yeti was on the mound when Mawei's mother left to attend to her duties preparing the feast. Mawei was too young to have any official duties at the Gather, and she was in no hurry to start. Even the highland-yeti's duty of organizing a night of terror, called the horripilation, seemed more enjoyable than preparing a meal. So it was with some jealousy that Mawei watched Ruffer take the mound for the first time.

He started a little too fast, talking about a time of war when tribal boundaries were held to be sacrosanct. Back then yetis that crossed tribal boundaries were cast out along with their young. Ruffer spoke of an outcast yeti, born of highland and night-yeti parents, who was forced to take a wild on a beach, far from food sources. By necessity this yeti had learned to swim and catch fish in the ocean. Ruffer, taking an artistic choice, would give the parts of the story when the outcast was swimming as if he were underwater. He had a knack for making his fur look like it was floating. When he began many viewers had been in conversation and the crowd was abuzz with movement, but by the time he'd gotten to the turning point in the story there was stillness all around.

In the story an unprecedented drought had come over the land, causing famine. All the yetis in the area had to come to this outcast to learn how to swim and catch fish in the ocean. It was one story among many about how the fluidity between the yeti tribes was eventually accepted and finally embraced. Mawei was a forest-yeti, but she was one-quarter highland, so she thought that back in those days she would've been an outcast too. Her father even claimed he had a snow-yeti far back on his family tree.

Mawei's aunt Weseil came over to sit with her for the apotheosis, and the moment it was over a loud cry went up from the crowd. All the yetis in attendance flooded the clearing, going to where the night-yetis were gathered by the mound and congratulating them on another memorable Chronicle. Weseil saw Mawei looking at Ruffer. "Well," she said, "aren't you going to go over and tell him he did a good job?"

"Why?" Mawei asked.

She smiled. "Because he did," she said, "and because you like him."

"What? I do *not*."

"Come on, I'll go with you." She took Mawei by the arm and led her over to Ruffer. "That was a very impressive debut." She told him. "Didn't you think so Mawei?"

"Yes," Mawei said to Ruffer, "you did a good job."

"No," he said, "I rushed the beginning. I've done it much better on my own."

"I thought it was good." Mawei said.

"No, you're wrong," he said, "it wasn't good."

Mawei looked at her aunt, but she was too amused by the awkward conversation to offer any help. "Okay, if you say so." Mawei said. "Sorry it didn't go well."

"Mawei!" Her aunt said. "He did a wonderful job. He's just being modest."

"He said himself that he rushed the beginning." Mawei said. "But then he slowed down and it was okay." Ruffer looked confused all of a sudden. "I really liked the swimming parts."

"Thanks." He said.

"We'll see you at the feast." Weseil said, pulling her niece away. When they were safely

away from the clearing she scolded Mawei. “Why did you criticize his performance? You hurt his feelings.”

“I told him he did a good job, but he said no. He said I was wrong. What was I supposed to do, argue him on how great he is?”

“The boy might be a bit slow,” she said, “but you could’ve argued a little.”

“He’s a dope,” Mawei said. “That’s what I should’ve told him.” Weseil laughed and they went arm in arm to the feast.

In the woods just south of the clearing, all the types of food that the forest had to offer were set out in front of different trees so that the hungry yetis could wander from place to place, trying different things. The full moon illuminated the feast, and a gentle breeze carried the smells of mushrooms, fish, berries, insects and edible leaves and plants of all sorts into the nostrils of the yetis who’d spent the entire day immersed in their history and were now famished.

Mawei ate, but she was having a hard time enjoying the food. She kept thinking about the little human. “Is something bothering you?” Mawei’s aunt asked her.

“No,” Mawei said. She thought for a moment. “Do you think there’s any truth to what Bobber said about Rei?”

“No.” Weseil said. “Rei’s weird but he’s not stupid. Even if he had consorted with a human, he wouldn’t bring one to a Gather. Don’t worry yourself Mawei.”

“You’re right.” Mawei said. She felt a bit better and ate some pine nuts watching the flow of yetis going back and forth from station to station. She was hoping to get a glimpse of Rei, but didn’t see him. It was getting late so she decided to find her father at the mushroom tree. She said goodnight to her aunt and they touched noses.

It had been a warm, wet fall, so there were enough mushrooms for all the yetis to have their fill. When the last yeti had finally stopped eating and wandered off, Mawei and her father lay down under the tree and curled up together. There was an opening in the branches above them and they could see the night sky.

Mawei turned so that her father could see her face. “Papa, do you think the great dreamer is a boy or a girl?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “From what I’ve seen of its sense of humor I’d guess it was female. Does it matter?”

“No, I guess not.” She said. “Papa, do you think another type of creature could speak yeti?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like maybe a bear or a mountain lion? I mean has anyone ever really tried to talk to other creatures?”

“Mawei, don’t be silly.” He said. Mawei shifted around, trying to get comfortable and then looked up at the night sky.

She was on the verge of sleep when she saw a bright shooting star streak by. “Papa, did you see that?” She asked, but he was already asleep.

Rei was on the mound and four withered old yetis, the council of elders, sat facing him. There was a large audience for his report, and Mawei had to push her way to the front to see what was going on. It was early and she'd left her father asleep under the tree. She'd almost overslept, but a little red bird had started chirping close to where she and her father were curled up together against the cold. Usually the council of elders meeting was only attended by those with a direct interest in what was being discussed, but there was a lot of curiosity about Rei's adventure among the humans. By the time Mawei had pushed her way to the edge of the clearing for a better view, Rei had already gotten through his preliminaries and had been addressing the elders and the crowd for a few minutes.

"...human beings live in a world of light." He said. "They have many varieties of artificial light. Even during the daytime they stay in their cave-like dwellings with artificial light shining. This is why their vision is limited. They are so accustomed to light that if you take it away they can't see anything at all. On a moonless night in the forest they would be practically blind. Their vision is also bad at long distances. They create environments for themselves where everything that there is to see is within twenty feet or so. Even outside of their dwellings they never have to see anything more than a mile or two away. I believe that they could improve with practice, but in their villages they have no reason to stretch their eyes out..."

Rachim, the night-yeti elder, stood to ask a question, interrupting Rei. "Is their poor vision the reason you were able to live in their village undetected for so long?"

"Yes." Rei said. "There are places within a village that are created to appear natural. The humans enjoy running as fast as possible through a place with trees in it before going back into their dwellings where they spend most of their time. I hid myself in such a place and the human's poor vision let me move around freely at nighttime. When it was dark I could look into their dwellings because all human dwellings have rectangular openings in their walls, covered with transparent panels. At night I was free to look in and see what the odd creatures were up to."

"And what did you find?" Rachim asked.

"Humans, as I have said, are obsessed with light, and in their dwellings are strange surfaces that emit a flickering light designed to put them into a low-level trance. They will stare at this flickering light for many hours. Some even carry miniature light boxes around with them, and they walk around the village staring into them, entranced."

"That's very silly." The old night-yeti said.

"Sure, but many of the yetis gathered here today might spend hours staring at clouds or at a river, and maybe that would seem silly to the humans. I've tried to avoid making judgments about human behavior. They're just different."

Rinser, the highland-yeti elder and the only female on the council, stood next to Rachim in an aggravated posture. "Perhaps you've stared into the flickering light of the humans too long," she said, "I have no problem judging the humans because I see them for what they are: vile, unclean creatures."

"Forgive me, but that's not true," Rei said, "in fact they are constantly cleaning and grooming themselves."

"Then how do you account for their horrid smell?" She asked.

“They’re hard-of-smelling. They cover themselves in smells that they consider to be clean. They can’t discern the aspects of these smells that repel us. They wash away their natural odor and replace it with balms that smell of rotten sap and pustulent flowers. It smells good to them, I assure you.”

Rinser sat down, and Rachim, the night-yeti elder, spoke again. “You say their vision and smelling is bad, how is their hearing?”

“I can’t say.” Rei answered. “The village is filled with vibrations that never cease. There are lines that crisscross through the air that never stop buzzing loudly, and then there are the cars that are quite loud. There are also many boxes and contraptions of indeterminate purpose that constantly produce low frequency vibrations. Living in a human village is like living next to a waterfall, after a while you become so used to the noise that you don’t even hear it anymore.”

“And their biting power?” Rachim asked.

“Very poor.” Rei said. “They can only eat the softest foods you can think of. They eat meat, but they burn the toughness out of it first.”

“And their claws?” He asked.

“They have none.” Rei answered. “Just a thin gloss on the ends of their fingers. I’ve never seen a human rip into anything.”

“And what about their strength? Can they lift a great deal of weight?” The old yeti asked.

“No.” Rei said. “Aside from lifting their young or small containers it was very rare that I saw them lift or push anything.”

Again Rinser stood next to Rachim, this time in an even more aggravated posture than before. “These creatures have poor vision and little sense of smell,” she said, “they can’t bite, scratch or crush, and yet they are excellent murderers. Can you explain this?”

“Yes.” Rei said. “The reports are true. The humans can kill instantly at great distances but it’s not magic. The humans are very good at transfiguring objects and materials to suit their own needs. They use a loud contraption that spits teeth. It looks like a straight branch, and I’ve seen it spit with enough force to rip through the flesh and bone of a deer, killing it instantly. The humans make these things for this very purpose. They are skillful in that regard -if you don’t believe me just look at how a human travels. I’ve heard it said that cars are also a kind of magic, but I don’t believe it. I believe that cars are constructed by the humans out of other things. The humans build them...”

“You saw them build a car?”

“No,” Rei admitted, “but everything in their world is something that they have transfigured out of something else. Cars are no different.”

“They could be tulpas.” She said.

“But the humans themselves are tulpas.” Rachim said. “Is it possible for a thought-form to create another thought-form?”

Sonna, the snow-yeti elder, being the most well-versed in metaphysics, answered the question. “Yes,” he said, “if the thought-form has reached maturity it can create other thought-forms.”

Having settled this, Rinser and Rachim sat down and waited for Rei’s response. “I witnessed the humans creating a dwelling.” He said. “They were using wood from a forest that must’ve been very far away judging by its scent. I saw them put the whole thing together over four or five cycles of the moon.”

“No one suggested that their dwellings were tulpas.” Monchier, the forest-yeti elder said. “Just their cars and killing sticks. Did you see them create either of those things?”

“No.” Rei said.

“So we just don’t know.” Monchier said. “Some things the humans use may be transfigured from other materials, and others may be thought-forms.”

“I suppose so.” Rei said.

“What else have you learned about the humans?” Rachim asked.

Rei thought for a moment, unsure of where to get back into his report after so many distracting questions from the council. The elders waited patiently for him to continue. “Their language is made up of sounds that they make by contorting their mouths and licking their teeth.” Rei said. “If you were to cover a human’s mouth or ears they would be unable to communicate...”

“If it’s based on mouth-noises I’m not sure you should call it a language.” Rinser said.

Rei thought for a moment. “It’s primitive,” he said, “but humans can communicate with each other while looking in opposite directions. Yetis have to be able to *see* each other to communicate...”

Sonna, the snow-yeti elder, stood up, cutting him off. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, “but that’s the second time you’ve compared the human’s culture to our own. I must ask you to stop doing that. You risk offending our ancestors.”

“But sir,” Rei said, “I’m a yeti. What else do I have to compare it to?”

“I think what my brother elder is saying,” said Rinser, the highland-yeti elder who had never lost her posture of antipathy toward Rei, “is that you shouldn’t compare the two on equal terms. You must remember the type of creature we’re discussing here.”

Rei seemed at a loss for a moment. “I come to my work with a balanced perspective,” he said finally. “I study the humans as if they were a foreign yeti tribe, or as if they were a lost tribe.”

This set the entire crowd watching in motion. A yeti near Mawei told his companion that Rei must’ve gone mad to say such a thing. Rinser was on her feet. “I suppose I have to remind you that there is in fact a lost yeti tribe,” she said, “lost because they were slaughtered by the humans! You’ve certainly given offense to the ancestors. The reptiles that you would elevate to our level are little murderers who would kill every yeti here if they weren’t deaf, blind, hard-of-smelling and stupid.” The crowd settled down to watch with satisfaction as the elder reprimanded Rei. “Why do you think we granted your request to study them?” She asked.

Rei looked out at the audience and his eyes briefly met Mawei’s before he looked back down at the elders. “You told me you wanted to know more about humans.”

“Because they constantly make incursions onto our sacred lands.” She said. “And because we must know as much about them as possible if we’re going to allow an active defense against them.”

“Forgive me,” Rei said, “but what do you mean by ‘active defense?’”

“Human beings are extremely dangerous.” Sonna said. “It is only a matter of time before they spill yeti blood again. We’re not advocating aggression against them, just self-defense. They’re so dangerous that their mere presence should be viewed as an attack. If a human enters a yeti’s wild, that yeti has the right to defend himself up to and including the destruction of the human. This has been agreed to by the council unanimously, and it will be law at the conclusion of this Gather.”

Rei looked like he wanted to choose his next words carefully. “You advocate murder,” he said, “the same crime that you condemn the humans for.”

“Tell me,” said Monchier, the forest-yeti elder, “the deer that you saw the humans kill, had it

intruded onto the human's sacred land?"

"No," Rei said, "but a human would eat a deer. It's a food source for them. We kill fish without a second thought."

"Fish lay eggs." The old forest-yeti said. "The fact that a human would eat something milk-fed only proves how dangerous they really are. They're practically cannibals."

At this Rei took the position of someone backing down from an argument. Clouds had rolled in and a cold wind was blowing. "What if we could communicate with humans?" Rei asked. "Surely that would change your minds."

The council of elders and many viewers laughed at the suggestion. "Should we walk into a human village and start grunting?" Rinser asked.

Rei looked at Mawei again and she could see that he was trying to control his anger. "I suppose the notion that a human might be able to speak yeti is ridiculous to you."

"Yes it is," Sonna said, "and consorting with a human would put us all at risk. It would be an unforgivable crime that I'm sure none would dare commit, not even you. Go on with your report. Tell us more of what you've learned."

"I've learned a great deal but I'm not going to speak another word." Rei said. "I thought my investigation was for furthering our knowledge of the humans. I have no intention of giving you information to use in a war against them."

"Very well," Monchier said, "we'll move on to other business."

Rei turned and stepped off the mound and began walking in Mawei's direction. He made a slight indication for her to follow him, disguised in a flamboyant gesture of disgust so that no one watching would notice it. He went into the woods and Mawei followed. He was moving fast but she finally chased him down on a muddy incline a half mile from the clearing. "Uncle," she said, grabbing his arm, "wait."

He stopped and looked around and then pulled Mawei close. "There are two yetis following me right now," he said with his eyes. "I'm going to lose them up in the foothills and come back down this afternoon, I should have some help from the weather. I'll meet you in the giant pine forest south of the creek -you must go get the little bird and wait for me there. She's in more danger than I ever imagined."

"You brought her here?"

"She's far from where anyone would find her. I left her high up in a tree down by the creek. If you head south you'll see her halfway up the highest tree after you come down the second hill, now go before they see us talking." He turned and moved away from her before she could ask why he hadn't taken the child to a village.

She made her way up a rocky slope and had started toward the creek when she ran into Ruffer. He stood in her way without the slightest idea that she might not want to stop. "Hi," he said, "I'm glad I bumped into you. I just saw Rei's report, he's your uncle, right? Do you know which way he went? I was hoping to talk to him."

"About what?" Mawei asked.

"Humans." He said. "Do you know where he went?"

"I just saw him a moment ago, he was heading southwest." Mawei said, giving Ruffer the wrong direction. "You'd better hurry if you want to catch up with him."

"Thanks." Ruffer said. Mawei started to leave but he stopped her. "Wait, I forgot your name."

"I'm Mawei."

"Oh right, Mawei. I'm Ruffer."

“You’ll have to run to catch him.” Mawei said. “Just head that way.” She pointed southwest and he thanked her again and ran off. She started running too, south toward Helena. Her uncle, who was often praised for his intelligence, had brought the little human to a Gather and left her high up in a tree, all alone. Mawei wondered how someone could be highly intelligent in their thoughts and words, and at the same time incredibly stupid in their actions.

Mawei was almost to the creek when it began to rain fat cold raindrops that soaked her, matting her fur and bringing a chill to her bones. She found Helena high up in a tree, far from the clearing. There weren't any yetis nearby, which was good because even in the downpour she was hard to miss. She was sitting with her legs through the straps of the backpack which had been attached to a broken branch to create a precarious cradle. Mawei was surprised to find the child completely naked.

With the rain Mawei had to use her claws to climb, digging into the wet wood and hauling her large body upwards much more slowly than she could've gone in dry weather. The child was slick with cold rainwater, eyes clenched shut, gripping the straps of the backpack with hands that had turned an odd pale blue color. Her legs looked like strangely shaped purple rocks to Mawei and her teeth were chattering. Mawei touched Helena's shoulder and the child flinched violently and lost her grip. She almost fell but Mawei caught her by her frozen little arm and lifted her out of the straps. She was so cold that Mawei thought she probably couldn't feel her arms or legs, so she pulled her into a tight little ball and sat on a thick branch, leaning back against the trunk and draping her leg over the edge for stability. She wrapped her arms around the child and leaned over her to protect her from the rain.

Mawei was so busy trying to warm the little human that she almost missed what was going on below her. Luckily a flash of white between two trees caught her eye and she looked down to see two snow-yetis making their way across the wet grass toward them. Mawei concentrated on darkening her fur so that it would match the wet tree trunk she was up against. The sensation of blood rushing to her skin made her shudder, but soon she was camouflaged. Darkening also had the effect of warming her, and Helena's shivers and chattering began to subside.

Mawei recognized the two yetis. They were twins, Sinker and Sichil, rambunctious little males about fifteen years younger than herself. Twins are considered a good omen among yetis and are rare, so they were well known. With the rain coming down Mawei felt safe because as close as they were she couldn't smell them, which meant they couldn't smell her. The twins passed under the tree and continued toward the creek, moving quickly and looking all around them as they went. They were far from the Gather and she knew they were after her.

She thought the yetis watching her uncle must've seen them talking and sent the twins after her. There were important yetis who saw him as a threat because of his views on humans, and Mawei realized that she had become a threat too, just from having been seen talking with him.

She stayed in the tree for a long time, directing her breath downward at the child in an attempt to warm her. After a couple of hours had passed Mawei looked at little Helena and asked if she was feeling better. "I coulda died." Helena said. "I hate you."

"It wasn't me little bird, it was Rei." Mawei said. "Can you wiggle your toes?"

"My toes don't wiggle for monsters." She said. "If you're not going to eat me why don't you just let me go?"

"Go where?" Mawei asked.

"Home!" She said. "My mommy and daddy are going to be so mad."

Mawei didn't know what to say. She thought maybe she should use the opportunity to explain to the child what happened to her parents, but she didn't know if she could bring herself

to do it. "Little bird, do you remember when I took you out of the car?"

"Yes." She said.

"Do you remember what happened just before that?"

"Yeah," Helena said, "my daddy said a bad word and it woke me up. Then we had a car-smash and I was upside down."

"If you couldn't go back to your mommy and daddy where would you go?" She asked.

Helena thought about it. "Anywhere," she said, "school, the library, the mall. I would go anywhere where it's warm and they got regular food."

"I understand." Mawei said.

"But you have to take me home first," she said, "so I can get some clothes on me."

"Yes, your coverings. What happened to them?"

"The other monster took them off me and threw them on the ground. He put mud all over me because he said I smell."

"Oh, I see."

"I hate him so much." Helena said.

Helena had warmed up and the rain was slowing, so Mawei decided to get to the giant pine forest south of the creek to wait for her uncle. She hadn't seen the twins since they passed and although it was still hard to smell much, she figured they would be far away by then. She held Helena under her arm and climbed down, jumping the last twelve feet or so. Having been followed made Mawei nervous, and her senses were more alert to her surroundings than usual. She was thinking about those twins and what they would do when they realized the trail had gone cold. If they were good trackers they would loop back around, so she still had to be careful.

The creek was swollen with rainwater, and Mawei put Helena on her shoulders to cross. Even as tall as Mawei was the creek was up to her armpits, and when Helena's toes touched the water, she shrieked and clutched at Mawei's head. On the far side Mawei scolded the child. "You can't scream little one, we're trying not to draw attention to ourselves."

"I don't care," she said.

Mawei saw something out of the corner of her eye, some movement on the other side of the creek, but when she looked there was nothing there but rocks. She wished she'd stayed in the tree where at least she was hidden.

She moved fast, and soon she was in the woods among giant pine trees that loomed high above her. She hadn't been around trees that size since she had gone with her father to see the redwood forest many years before. She suddenly felt small, which made her think about the child she was carrying. Smallness was a strange feeling and she wondered if the child felt that way all the time. The large trees provided some protection from the rain, and Mawei travelled into the breeze for a while so her uncle could find her. She hoped he would pick up her scent before the twins.

She sat on a rock with the child on her lap and thought about what a strange Gather it had been so far. In the past she had always gotten a special feeling at a Gather, like a warmth that went all the way through her, from the tips of her claws to the crown of her head, but it had been absent that year. Watching Sorchel give the Chronicle had almost brought it back, but she had to admit to herself that the feeling wasn't quite there. *Maybe it's just that I'm getting older* she thought. A shiver went down her back and she squeezed Helena close.

Rei came up fast, flaring his nostrils. "Who's here, is someone with you?"

"No uncle, the snow-yeti twins were chasing me but they passed in the downpour. Someone must've sent them after me, did you manage to shake your pursuers?"

"Yes," he said, "thanks to the storm. I had no idea the council would be so hostile. They attacked me for merely comparing our culture to the human's. Imagine if they found out about our little bird?"

"They know." Mawei said. "Bobber saw you with the child on the other side of the west mountain range. The whole Gather was talking about it."

"Bobber? She couldn't have seen me," Rei said, "if she was close enough to see me I would've known she was there. Anyway she's a gossip, no one pays any attention to her."

"But why did you bring the child here? You were supposed to take her to a human village," Mawei curled her upper lip at her uncle. "She nearly froze up in that tree." Helena let out an annoyed groan and threw her body forward, making Mawei reach to catch her. She put the child

back on her lap. “The twins could come back at any moment, we have to get her out of here. It was stupid to bring her so close to a Gather.”

“But Mawei, she has every right to be here.” Rei said.

“What?”

“She has every right to be at a Gather.” He said.

“And why is that?”

“When this human began speaking something became clear to me. I had been on the verge of understanding a deep truth about the humans, and after two days with the child it’s become obvious. In fact it’s so obvious that I don’t know why I never thought of it before.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What became clear to me is this: human beings *are* yetis. They are the fifth tribe! Don’t you see? Humans didn’t kill off the longhaired plains-yetis, the longhaired plains-yetis *became* human.”

Mawei looked at the child who seemed to be thinking of something far away from her present circumstances. “Because this human can speak yeti, you think she’s one of us?”

“No, not one of us exactly, but a distant relative. Down on the open plains the longhaired yetis would’ve been exposed to constant sunlight and moonlight, and everyone knows that celestial light has transformative qualities. Look at what sunlight does to a seed, or moonlight to a vine-flower. The yetis living on the plains would’ve been exposed to far more sunlight and moonlight than yetis living in caves or in the forest. That kind of constant exposure, through many generations, over thousands of years, would certainly have changed the way they look.”

“But humans are smaller than yetis and the sun makes things grow, not shrink.”

“When it comes to plants maybe, but an animal is different,” he said, “every animal that lives in a desert is small isn’t it?”

“Maybe you’re right, but we still have to decide what to do with the human.” Mawei said. Helena had drifted off to sleep.

“You are the only one I can talk to about this. Can you imagine if I were to explain to the council that humans *are* the tribe they are thought to have slaughtered? They would certainly condemn me. They already accused me of offending our ancestors.” Rei sat down. “Oh the report was a disaster wasn’t it?”

“It wasn’t good.” Mawei said.

Rei put his head in his hands and Mawei looked at her uncle’s despair for a moment and then reached over and nudged him. “Don’t turn glum on me.” She said.

“I can see now that my whole life was leading up to the moment that child spoke to me.” Rei said. “It was like everything I had learned, everything I had observed, all suddenly lined up and I knew: this is it. This is the thing I was working toward without even knowing it. I’m supposed to bring this one truth to light -that human beings are the fifth tribe. The proof is right there in your arms. It will take years to convince others though, they aren’t ready. If they knew she was here now they would just kill her and shun me.”

Little Helena shifted around as if she’d comprehended Rei’s words in her sleep somehow. “They must know that humans are different from other creatures.” Mawei said. “A mountain lion is deadly too, but they don’t go killing mountain lions.”

“Yes,” Rei said, “when a mountain lion kills they don’t see it as evil, but they do with a human. They hold the humans to a yeti code of morality, so they must know on some level that a human is closely related to a yeti. I can’t spring the truth on them when they’re in a group, it’s too dangerous, but maybe I can change their minds one at a time. I can invite certain influential

yetis to my wild to interact with the little human. Word will go around and more yetis will come to see a human raised as a yeti, functioning as a yeti, speaking as a yeti, and when they see that they will be easily persuaded that she *is* a yeti...”

“You’re going to keep her?”

“Then seven years from now at the next Gather I will make a special report and the elders will have to agree that I am right. By then everyone will know about the human and no one will be shocked –they’ll all want to meet her.”

“You’re really going to keep her?” Mawei asked.

“She’ll become an emissary between the world of the humans and our world. She could usher in a new era of understanding and cooperation. The humans will see that they have a forgotten history and we can help them remember their language and culture. Perhaps in time there will even be intermarriage. Just think of it Mawei...”

“Uncle!” Mawei said. “You can’t keep her!”

“Why not?”

“She should be with her own kind.” Mawei said. “She must have family.”

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” Rei asked. “She *is* with her own kind. We are all of the same kind. Mawei the child’s parents are dead, you said so yourself. We can’t just drop her in a human village, she would be ignored.”

Mawei thought about the cars driving by the child without slowing down. “They would just ignore her?” She asked.

“Yes, humans can be very cruel.” Rei said. “In the place where I hid within the village there were humans who lived outside of dwellings. At first I thought that they had just chosen a more sensible lifestyle, but for some reason they were all miserable. Their posture was defeated, as if they’d been robbed of their dignity. These people were a puzzle to me until I finally realized that they had no families, so the other humans acted as if they didn’t exist.”

“But everyone has some family.” Mawei said. “Those humans must’ve had cousins or aunts and uncles.”

“I’m telling you Mawei, humans are cruel to one another. These people had no one. This child could end up unloved and alone. Mawei, she has more, right here in these woods, than she has in the whole human world. I can raise her as my own, in the proper yeti manner.”

“I don’t know uncle Rei, your plan seems a little too hopeful.”

“Well this is the course I’ve chosen,” Rei said, “and I wish you would support my decision because I need your help raising her.”

Mawei thought for a moment. “You need my help?”

“Yes, I couldn’t possibly do it without you.”

“And you’ll care for the child as if she were your own?” Mawei asked.

“Yes,” he said, “the little bird means so much to me -she could be my legacy. She’ll help me expose the truth of our history and prove the elders wrong.” Rei stood up now, invigorated by his imaginary future redemption. “Don’t you see Mawei? We’re on the road to greatness. Someday they’ll add our story to the Chronicle. We’re advancing yeti culture with this step. The child is our savior.” He shook Helena awake. “*Henana*,” he said, trying her sound-language name, “you mean everything to me, do you know that?”

Helena looked at Mawei and back to Rei. “No.” She said. “I don’t even care.”

“You will, my little treasure, you will.” He took the child and put her up on his shoulders. She grabbed onto the fur on the top of his head. “We should get moving, it’s a long journey to my wild.”

“Rei, many suspect you are in contact with a human. You must be extremely careful.”

“Don’t worry yourself Mawei, no harm will come to her. Say goodbye now.” He leaned over so Mawei could be at eye level with Helena.

“Be good for Rei,” she said, “I’ll come visit you soon.”

Helena looked worried.

“Don’t tell a soul about the child,” Rei said, “not even your mother. I need time to yetify her.”

Mawei tried to remind him to keep the child warm, but he was off, into the woods. She watched until she couldn’t see them anymore.

Mawei stayed sitting on the rock, looking up at the treetops and thinking about the future. The child would grow up and Mawei could show her things. Maybe her wild would be near Mawei's and she would come to stay with Mawei on nights when the moon was gone from the sky. Mawei would comfort her, she thought, and they would talk about the mysteries of life. The wind was blowing the giant pines in rhythmic pulses all around her and their movement made them seem even bigger than they were. There were two brilliant flashes of light and Mawei listened for the thunder, which came quickly and sounded close.

A twig snapped somewhere behind the rock she was sitting on, and in that moment Mawei could smell a yeti close by. She stayed still and listened carefully. It was difficult to hear anything with the wind blowing and the rain coming down, but she caught the faint sound of fur against a branch, farther away than the sound of the twig snap. That meant that whoever it was would probably have their back to her based on the direction they were going.

Mawei slowly stood and saw a night-yeti moving through the woods away from her. Mawei's fear drove her into the night-yeti's back. She realized it was a male as they fell together. She was on top of him and she slashed her claws across his back before he managed to turn and push her off. As he got to his feet Mawei saw that it was Ruffer. He was standing and she was still on the ground so she bit his thigh, not breaking the skin, but hard enough to bruise him. She felt his elbow hit the side of her head hard, and she released his thigh and swung her leg across his ankles, tripping him. She scrambled to her feet and stood at a safe distance. "What are you doing here?" She asked.

"You bit me," he said. "Why are you scratching and biting me? I didn't do anything to you."

"You followed me here." She said. "Why?"

He got up again and flared his nostrils at her. "Why did you lie to me about where your uncle went?"

"Because my uncle's location is none of your business. If you think I'm afraid of you, you have delusions of grandeur. You may be older than me, but I'm bigger than you. Whatever you thought you could do to me, you were wrong, I'm not a fat fish."

"You should speak more gently to me," he said, "considering I know your secret."

"My secret?" She said. "What would that be?"

"You and your uncle harbor a human."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I saw it with my own eyes, a tiny human that can be smelled even in a rainstorm."

"It's a child you half-wit."

"It's a human." He said. "Maybe you don't realize how much trouble you could get in for that. I know what's going on, your uncle dragged you into some crazy scheme. It's none of my business, I just thought I could help, that's all."

Mawei considered the smallish night-yeti in front of her. "Why do you want to help me?" She asked. "Why should you care?"

"Because most yetis are stupid when it comes to humans." He said. "I'm not."

"I never asked for your help and you don't know a thing about me, my uncle, or human beings." Mawei said.

More lightning strikes flashed and wind bent the trees over them and the thunder arrived, louder than before. The rain started picking up again and a few ice-cold raindrops found their way through the tree cover to Mawei who was staring Ruffer down in a stance of aggression. “I know one thing,” Ruffer said, “and that’s that the twins, Sinker and Sichil were coming from these woods not long ago.”

“Did they see the human?”

“I don’t know, but *I* found you without any trouble.”

“Which way were they going?” Mawei asked. “Were they following Rei?”

“No.” Ruffer said. “They were heading north, toward the Gather.”

“You really think they saw the child?”

“I can’t say for sure,” he said, “but if they did, they’ll certainly tell what they saw.”

“What can I do?” Mawei asked.

“They’re young, you could deny everything and hope to throw enough doubt on their story to cloud matters. Just say that you have no idea what they’re talking about. I can back you up if you want. I’ll say that I was with you all afternoon.”

“You would do that?”

“Yeah,” he said, “a human child shouldn’t die just because your uncle is crazy.”

The sound of movement nearby sent Mawei ducking and looking behind her. She heard something hit the ground next to her and soon there were little noises all around and she realized that it had begun to hail. “The weather’s turning bad,” Mawei said, “I’m leaving.”

“I know a place, not too far from here,” Ruffer said, “a rock overhang where we can take cover.”

The ice falling from the sky was getting larger and more frequent. “Alright,” Mawei said, “I’ll go with you, but I still think you’re a pest.”

Rei was not headed directly to his wild. He left the great pine forest in the direction of his brother Cal's wild, and outran the hail storm that was pummeling Mawei and Ruffer. Cal was Rei's half-brother, although yetis don't make such distinctions, and Rei had good reason to want to see him.

A Yeti is free to adopt any pup who might need a parent, all they have to do is to get the approval of an elder family member, and even this is considered to be just a formality. Rei decided that since the pup he was adopting happened to be human it would be best to make sure all the formalities were observed. He also wanted his brother on his side because Cal's wild contained an immense cave system, which could provide a multitude of places to hide the little human if it came to that.

Rei stopped off at a stream that he knew was always full of fish, and set Helena down on the shore. He waded into a pool and stood looking down into the water while Helena curled herself into a ball and hugged her knees, shivering in the cold evening air. Rei lunged into the pool and came out holding a trout in each hand. He bit the heads off both fish in one bite and spat them back into the water. He came onto the rocky shore and shook as much water off himself as he could, and then went over to Helena, holding a fish out to her.

"I don't want your bloody old fish." Helena said. "I want some clothes."

"You'll get used to being without coverings soon." Rei said. "You must be hungry. You should eat." He forced the headless fish into the little girl's hands, but she dropped it immediately. "I know you're not used to our food," he said, "but humans eat fish. I've seen it."

"I like tuna fish but only the way mommy makes it -no celery or relish." She began to cry. "I'm cold, I want to go home and I want some real food. I hate all you monsters, you're all dumb."

Rei put his hand on Helena's shoulder and he was surprised at how cold she was. He kneeled down to be closer to her. "I'm sorry little one, I really am, but trout fish is probably just as good as tuna fish if you try it."

"Tuna fish is mushy and white, it doesn't have blood and it's not all slimy."

Rei thought for a moment and then picked up the fish that Helena had dropped. He used a claw to rip a seam down the belly of the fish and then he pulled most of the skin off. He scraped the meat from the bones, creating a little pile of raw meat chunks. When he was finished he held it out to her. "Mushy." He said.

Helena was famished so she scooped some of the fish into her mouth and tried to swallow it fast, without tasting it. She actually found that it wasn't bad, and ate the rest from Rei's giant hand. Rei repeated the process with the other fish and watched her eat that too. "Thanks." Helena said.

"You don't have to thank me little bird." Rei said. "You and I are going to be spending a lot of time together, I want you to be as comfortable as possible." He picked her up and rubbed her legs, trying to warm her.

"Okay monster, if you want me to be comfortable then get me some clothes." Helena said.

"Don't call me monster little bird, from now on I want you to call me dad."

Helena looked into his eyes and a shiver went down her spine as she realized what he'd

meant. She tried not to throw up the fish she'd just eaten. "No." She said. "I'm not calling you that."

"Okay," he said, "daddy, father, papa, call me whatever you want."

It was better when he was going to eat me, Helena thought. She considered trying to run again, but his fur was the only thing that was keeping her from freezing. He'd begun to move, carrying her through the forest at an incredibly fast speed. Before he'd gone five miles she was asleep in his arms.

The overhang provided shelter from the hail, but it was a small space and Mawei and Ruffer had to sit so close together that their legs were touching. “Why were you trying to chase down my uncle after his report?” Mawei asked. “What was so important?”

“The council laughed at him when he suggested it might be possible to communicate with humans,” he said, “but *I* happen to know a human being who can speak yeti.”

“Really?” Mawei laughed. “I thought our little bird might be the only one.”

“Your little human can speak too? I thought *mine* was the only one.” Ruffer said.

“Are you talking about the human that lives in your wild?”

“Oh, you heard about that? I guess some find it very amusing.” He made a dismissive gesture. “Let them laugh, I don’t mind having the human in my wild, and I happen to know that he can speak yeti because I had a long conversation with him. He speaks better yeti than some of my relatives.”

“Ruffer, you showed yourself to a fully-grown human? I had no choice but to help the child, but a fully-grown human is dangerous.”

“I never felt threatened by him.”

“Yes, but you put every yeti walking the earth at risk.” Mawei said, expressing her fears about what she herself had done.

“We communicated once.” Ruffer said. “I didn’t bring him to a Gather.”

“Our little bird thinks we’re monsters.” Mawei said. “Even if she could explain what she’s been through, I don’t think an adult human would believe her.”

“And how did you come to be her guardian? Did your uncle kidnap her?” Ruffer asked.

“Of course not, I rescued her. She was trapped in a wrecked car, high up on a mountain road, and her parents didn’t survive. I saved her life, so even if she could, I doubt she’d do anything to hurt me.”

“Well, I’m not worried about *my* human.” Ruffer said. “He is a special sort of human who lives in a tree. He built a wooden platform high up on a tree in my wild, and on the platform he put a blue dome filled with all sorts of human contraptions.” Some hail blew in on them and Ruffer wiped the ice off his legs and wiped some off of Mawei’s too. He looked at her strangely for a second and then continued. “I became fascinated with this human and began watching him daily. After awhile I even started to like him a little. One evening I saw him collecting and eating poisonous mushrooms so I decided to intervene to save his life.”

“He wasn’t scared of you?”

“No he wasn’t.” Ruffer said. “Not only wasn’t he scared, but I found that he could understand and speak yeti. He was quite articulate but he thought we were speaking through some sort of magic, directly from my brain to his. He wasn’t aware of his micro-facial expressions, eye movements, or even posture. He did it all unconsciously.”

“That’s strange.” Mawei said. “What did you talk about?”

“I warned him about the mushrooms and then asked him why he chose to live so far from his own kind. His answer was hard to understand, but I think he believes that human activity is somehow separate from the rest of the world. In his mind he has divided the world into two halves: the world of the human, and everything else.”

“They alter the landscape in their villages quite a bit.” Mawei said. “I guess it *is* sort of otherworldly.”

“Yes, but that’s not even the most bizarre part. He ascribes positive and negative values to each half of the world as he sees it, but not in the way you would think. He views the *human* half as negative and everything else as positive.”

“He’s opposed to his own species?”

“Yes, in a way.” Ruffer said. “He views the world as having a natural balance and he thinks that humans have upset it.”

“But surely he can see how unbalanced the world is.” Mawei said.

“That’s what I told him too, but his beliefs couldn’t be shaken. He’s trying to set a good example for his fellow humans -he communicates with them through strange devices, and he wants to show them a way to live that doesn’t upset his fantasy of a balanced world. That’s why I’m not worried about him, he told me that if humans ever found out about yetis that they would try to capture or kill us, and that he would never forgive himself if he caused that. When I heard what your uncle said about communicating with humans, I thought I could help.” He said. “My human is safe. Maybe your uncle and I could go talk with him and explain what’s going on. There could be a lot of bloodshed if we don’t understand each other. The elders are talking about an ‘active defense’ which means killing humans. The humans will surely react and that could lead to an all-out war.”

The hail had stopped, but the wind was still whipping the treetops and the clouds were still threateningly dark. “Right now I have more immediate problems.” Mawei said. “What will happen to the little girl if the twins saw her?”

“I don’t know.” Ruffer said. “What was Rei going to do with her?”

“He wants to raise her as his own.” She said. “He wants her to become an emissary between the world of the yetis and the world of the humans.”

“That would be incredible!” Ruffer said. “Think about it Mawei. If he’s successful it could change everything.”

“And if he’s unsuccessful?”

Ruffer thought a moment. “I guess the first thing to do is to get back to the Gather and see if those twins are snitching. The horripilation will begin soon, and that might slow them down. If we can get to them first maybe we can find out what they saw.” He stood up. “The storm’s passed, let’s go.”

Mawei stood and looked at the sky. The clouds were moving away, and they were all lit pink and yellow by the setting sun. She could hear the sound of water dripping off the rocks and branches all around them as she followed Ruffer north, toward the Gather, wondering what the night would bring.

At past Gathers Mawei had spent the horripilation at her mother's side, trembling in fear, but this year she wasn't afraid of anything the mischievous highland-yetis had come up with because she had something real to be afraid of -those horrid, nosy little twins. She thought they were probably already talking, telling everything they'd seen in the giant pine forest south of the creek. Ruffer and Mawei had decided on a classic strategy: deny everything and make counter accusations.

Within the highland tribe there was a group that worked with fire and smoke, and when they reached the hill overlooking the clearing, Mawei and Ruffer could see that their work was well underway. The smoke was coming up, black and dark grey from all around the woods, and the scene was illuminated by the waning moon, shining its pale light from behind lingering clouds.

Mawei and Ruffer were making their way down the hill, through a stand of young evergreens, when they became aware of the sound of breathing, deep inhalations and loud exhalations, happening in unison. They both looked around, but they couldn't see the source of the noise. Neither of them said a word, they just kept moving.

A loud shriek from above sent Mawei closer to Ruffer and they looked up to a highland-yeti, up at the very top of a nearby tree. He began taking short ragged breaths loudly, which shook the tree in a strange way. The sound started to multiply and Mawei realized that there were yetis at the tops of all the trees, and all the trees began to shake in the same way.

The yetis up in the treetops began making a piercing chirping sound, signaling each other, and soon the trees stopped shaking and began swaying, slowly at first, but then increasing in speed and range. All the trees around them were swaying and it seemed to Mawei that the whole world was unstable and on the verge of collapse.

Mawei was trying to mimic Ruffer's casual walk, but when the eerie, high-pitched screeching began she couldn't hide her fear. "It's okay Mawei, they're just trying to scare you." Ruffer said.

Mawei looked at him, "there's a spider on your face," she said. He brushed the spider from his cheek and Mawei wondered where it could've come from when she felt something land on the back of her head. She jumped and began frantically swatting at it and felt two more hit her arm. Ruffer realized what was going on and he took her hand and they ran toward the clearing while the yetis in the trees continued to pelt them with a seemingly endless supply of big furry wolf-spiders.

They were finally out of the stand of trees and were running and pulling spiders off of each other when they noticed a night-yeti coming toward them. "There you are!" He said. "You two are in serious trouble. You're coming with me."

Mawei and Ruffer looked at each other. "In trouble for what?" Ruffer asked.

"You know," he said, "come on, I'm not the one you have to explain yourselves to."

He turned and began walking and Mawei and Ruffer followed. "Do you know him?" Mawei asked Ruffer with her eyes.

"No," Ruffer said, "but he looks familiar. I guess there's nothing we can do but go with him."

Mawei grit her teeth and clenched her fists. She couldn't think of any way to get out of it,

she was guilty, and pretty soon everyone would know. Her mother, her aunt, her father, everyone. She probably wouldn't even get a chance to explain herself, she would just be shunned and her parents would be ashamed of her. The council would send emissaries to find Rei and they would kill Helena and it would be all her fault.

The big night-yeti took them to the edge of the clearing and down a little slope toward a patch of leaves. Mawei was looking at his back and she saw that his black fur was slightly lighter than before. "Look," she said to Ruffer, "his fur's not really black, he's darkening."

Ruffer looked at his back closely, and as they crossed the patch of leaves Mawei noticed that the yeti leading them seemed to be stepping with great care. That was when the ground gave out beneath her. She fell to the bottom of a deep pit and before she knew what had happened Ruffer's body landed on top of her. She caught a shin to the head and Ruffer was upended.

Mawei looked up and saw the opening in the darkness above her where they had come through the leaves and branches covering the hole. There was a yeti looking down at them, a highland-yeti, not a night-yeti. He looked satisfied with himself, but he wasn't finished. He leaned over, smiling, and dropped a clutch of live snakes down the hole. One hit Mawei's head and she frantically pushed it off onto Ruffer, who was sitting, and immediately jumped up, brushing at his legs. It was the last thing Mawei saw before the yeti who had tricked them covered the hole they'd fallen through, sealing them in complete darkness.

Mawei felt snakes brushing against her leg and she stomped down, connecting with one and sending it into hyper violent thrashing and hissing which the other snakes joined. In a panic she began clawing at the side of the pit, at first trying to climb up, but then just pulling dirt down onto the snakes, which kept wriggling by her feet and up her legs. She inhaled some of the dirt and started coughing, trying to catch her breath in suffocating desperate gasps. She felt Ruffer's hands moving to her hands in the darkness. He held them tightly and stopped her from clawing at the walls. His hands felt calm and she wished she could see his face. The snakes were biting and she stomped again but Ruffer moved one of his hands to her leg, telling her without words to stop.

He began to push her upwards, lifting her away from the hissing and thrashing. She put her hands against the side of the hole for stability and let him push her up, until she was standing on his shoulders. She realized that he was trying to push her up and out of the pit. She reached up from where she was but could barely feel the leaves at the end of a claw. She stretched up and tugged at the branch, and brought a rain of debris down on herself and Ruffer below. She could see his face in the moonlight, twisted in pain and fear. "Can you reach the top?" He asked her.

"Not from here." She said. There was an orange striped snake climbing up his torso as he focused on holding her. He moved his hands to her ankles and lifted with all his strength while Mawei tried to keep her balance and reach up at the same time. She managed to get her hand on the outer edge of the hole, but it wasn't enough for her to pull herself out. He gave way a little and she almost fell, but then he took hold of her feet and shoved upward.

Mawei got an elbow above the lip of the hole and hauled a leg up and over. She pulled herself up and looked around for the trickster. It was smoky and she couldn't see much, but she thought he had probably gone. She lay at the edge of the hole and reached down to Ruffer who strained to reach back. "The branch." Mawei said, pointing to one of the branches that had been used to camouflage the hole.

He took it in both hands and held it up to her and she gripped it as tightly as she could. He climbed up, digging his feet into the walls and reached, grabbing onto both of her forearms. Mawei dropped the branch and dragged Ruffer out of the hole. Two snakes had taken a ride up

with him and Mawei and Ruffer lay on the dirt, exhausted as the snakes slithered off.

“If I ever see that yeti that tricked us again, I’ll bite his face off.” Mawei said. “If I hadn’t been with you I’d still be down there.”

“I could say the same thing.” Ruffer said. “We’d better stay together.” He sat up and looked around. The smoke cleared a little and they could see the woods not far in the distance. “Let’s walk single-file a few feet apart, I’ll go in front, and that way if I fall into a trap you can help me out.”

“Okay, but don’t get too far ahead.” As she stood she had the strange feeling of being very high up. Ruffer was walking away and she wanted to follow, but she couldn’t move her feet. It was as if she’d been planted to the spot. Ruffer moved into the smoke and Mawei lost sight of him. She looked down at her feet, wondering why they wouldn’t move. They looked normal but she couldn’t lift them. With every second that went by Mawei knew that Ruffer was getting farther away. She concentrated on lifting her foot and managed to start to lift it, but it weighed a ton and she had to put it down again. She was all alone and she couldn’t move.

She was about to give up when Ruffer emerged from the smoke. “What are you doing? Why aren’t you following me?”

“I... I can’t move.” She said.

“What?”

“Ruffer, do you think that yeti put us down in the hole because he knew about the human?” She squinted her eyes against the smoke. “He said he knew what we did.”

“No,” Ruffer said, “he was just trying to get us to follow him, it was just a trick.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too.” Mawei said. “Ruffer, could you do something for me please? Could you pull me?”

“What?”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, I can’t move my feet.” She held out her hand to Ruffer. “Just yank me out of this spot -I’m stuck.” She almost changed her mind, but it was too late, he had her hand and he pulled her forward. She stumbled, heart racing and sure she was about to fall into another black pit, but she didn’t. She just stumbled and felt foolish. “Sorry,” she said, “I’m okay now. Go on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I just needed some help. Go, I’ll follow.” Ruffer shrugged and began walking with Mawei close behind.

The first thing they saw when they entered the smoky woods was a highland-yeti painted with red mud and ashes from head to foot. She was moving very slowly, as if in a trance, and she didn't seem to see them so they passed without saying anything. The smoke was beginning to increase in volume and it smelled musty, like old moss. The whole forest was engulfed in a thick grey smoke and Mawei was afraid she'd lose sight of Ruffer, so she kept close. They'd been headed east, toward the stream, for what seemed like longer than it should've taken to get there.

They came to another yeti covered in red mud and ashes, or, Mawei thought, maybe it was the same one, which would mean they had gone in a circle. This one was also moving in a slow, trance-like way. Mawei looked up and tried to find the moon or any stars, but couldn't see anything through the haze.

There was coughing nearby and both Mawei and Ruffer stopped and looked toward where it had come from. Ruffer moved in the direction of the sound with Mawei following, and a blurry, twisting shape came into view. As they got closer they discovered that it was a snow-yeti, hanging upside down by his ankles. He was about five feet off the ground, secured by thin branches that had been woven together to form a strong vine, and tied high up in a tree. "I thought I'd have to stay here all night," he said, tilting his head to try to get a right-side-up view of Mawei and Ruffer. "Could you please help me?"

Ruffer looked at how the vine was wrapped around his ankles and saw that it was the trapped yeti's own weight that had him lashed tight. He took the yeti's shoulder and began to lift, which created enough slack for him to get one foot free. He had to be lifted higher to free the other, so Mawei went to the opposite shoulder and helped Ruffer haul him upwards, until finally he came tumbling down, hitting the ground awkwardly. He got to his feet and stood in a posture of bruised dignity. "Thank you," he said, "I got lost in this smoke and didn't see that silly trap."

"Do you know the direction to the stream?" Mawei asked him.

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit turned around." He said.

"I'll find the way." Ruffer said, looking up at the tree. "If I climb to the top I bet I can find the right direction."

"Good lad." The snow-yeti said.

Ruffer started climbing, and when he arrived at the first level of branches a cloud of smoke blew in. Mawei looked at the yeti across from her and tried to think of something to say. He looked like he was afraid and working hard to maintain his composure. "If they're not careful they'll set the whole forest on fire." She said. He just gave her a strange look and stepped back away from her. The smoke was coming in thick and soon the strange yeti looked like a white blob in Mawei's field of vision. The smoke was stinging her eyes, and she wiped some tears away and tried to focus on the yeti, but there was only smoke. She waved away as much as she could, but still couldn't see him. When the smoke lifted she knew that he was gone. She wondered if he'd ever existed at all.

Ruffer was climbing but he could barely see where he was going. The smoke was thick so he had to blindly reach up for branches that might not be there. He'd been climbing so long he started to wonder if he'd happened to find the tallest tree in the forest, and after awhile he could barely remember a time when hadn't been climbing. Just when he was convinced that the tree

would go on forever, he noticed a dark figure, sitting far out on a limb. The moment he saw it, although it was just an indistinct shape, he recognized it as his mother. *She's come back*, he thought, *her travels are over and by some strange coincidence I've run into her here, in this tree, on the night of the horripilation*. The smoke was too thick and he had to get closer to be certain, although he wasn't sure the limb could handle his weight. *Yes*, he said to himself, *it's her -it even smells like her*. She sat motionless and hadn't acknowledged him. *Maybe she can't see me with all the smoke*.

He noticed that she had a strange look on her face and there was something in her mouth, but he had to get closer to see what it was. He carefully moved himself farther and farther out on the branch. When some of the smoke cleared he could see what it was in her mouth -thousands of squirming grey maggots. His reaction caused a loud crack and he was falling and falling and falling.

Mawei looked up, trying to see Ruffer, but she couldn't find him. She listened but couldn't hear him either, and she realized that she couldn't hear anything. Not crickets, not the wind -nothing. The night was so silent that she thought she must've been struck deaf. She tilted her head back and made the night call, loud and long, but there was no response. She couldn't think of a reason nobody would answer her call. Smoke came in heavy again, wafting around her head. Maybe no one could hear it for some reason, or maybe she hadn't really made the call at all, she couldn't remember what it had sounded like. Maybe she'd just meant to give the call and in her fear had gotten confused and thought she'd already done it. She put her hand on the tree, and was glad to feel something solid under her claws. The way she was feeling she wouldn't have been surprised if it had turned into a wisp of ectoplasm.

She decided to forget it and keep moving but something stopped her. She was holding onto a tree and it seemed important that she stay near it but she couldn't remember why. It had something to do with the little human child.

"*Lala.*" She said in sound language. As she spoke the name she heard a rustling above her and a loud crack and then Ruffer slammed into the ground, bringing a large branch down with him.

Her confusion evaporated quickly and she ran over to Ruffer who hadn't moved since he'd hit the dirt. She turned him over and saw that he was conscious and terrified. He stood and brushed some small branches off his shoulder and chest. "Are you okay?" Mawei asked, but he had already started walking away fast. Mawei caught up to him and put a hand on his arm as they walked. "That was a bad fall," she said, "are you alright?"

His expression frightened her. He didn't seem like the yeti she'd taken cover from the storm with, he seemed hallowed-out and empty—a walking husk. Mawei grabbed onto his arm and stopped him. "Ruffer!" She said. "Talk to me. What's the matter?"

He looked at her and she saw a spark of recognition. "Nothing," he said, "I'm fine."

"Did you hear my call?"

"No." He shut his eyes and shook his head as if trying to erase his memory. "I mean maybe, I'm not sure. I heard a lot of things, but it doesn't matter. Come on, I'll stay with you until you find your mom or dad." He turned and began walking again. This time Mawei stayed beside him.

Soon they came to a fire. They'd reached the edge of the forest and found that where the stream should've been was a wall of flames. Mawei thought for a moment that the highland-yetis had somehow set the stream itself on fire, but then realized they had just built the fire up along its banks. The way that the valley was situated below them, the wind came rushing up the hill and blew the smoke into the forest. From where Mawei and Ruffer stood they could see highland-yetis up in the trees with big fans made of woven leaves, pulsing the smoke downward. It seemed that every other tree in the woods had a yeti at the top with a giant fan, making the whole forest look like it was on fire with smoke rising from every area.

There were groups of yetis feeding the fire, some with large armfuls of dead wood and pinecones, which sent plumes of sparks into the night sky and made a cacophonous chorus of cracks and pops. "We should try to go around the fire." Ruffer said. "If we can get to the other side of the stream we might get a break from this madness."

They stayed on the edge of the tree line, out of sight of the highland-yetis, and moved quickly. They scrambled up a steep hill and came to a boulder that jutted out of the mud, high above their heads at an obtuse angle. It was too smooth to climb so they went along its base, which took them down into a small alcove where the rock formed a little bowl with moss growing down the side. They continued along the base until they found a safe way up the rock formation, and they started to climb. It didn't take long for them to climb higher than the treetops, and when they reached the top of the huge rock they had a view of all the surrounding terrain.

Beyond the smoky woods they could see the clearing and there seemed to be some ritual going on there, with yetis covered in red mud and ash, thirteen of them, moving in unison in a snaking line. The trees on the hill far away were still swaying, and the fire, near enough that they could feel its heat, was burning bright.

Mawei had the sudden urge to hold Ruffer's hand, but he still seemed distracted. "Mawei, call out and maybe your mom will hear it and respond." He said.

"If you want to leave, go ahead," Mawei said, "you don't have to pass me to my parents like I was a pup. You're not that much older than me."

Ruffer looked at Mawei as if trying to decipher her. "Do whatever you want, I don't care, but if my mom were at this Gather I'd be looking for her, and besides, your mother would know if those twins snitched."

"You've been acting strange ever since that fall," Mawei said, "are you sure you're okay?"
"I'm fine."

Mawei tilted her head back and made the night call again. They listened for a moment and heard a response far off in the distance and then a few muffled ones from the woods and some from across the stream. Soon all the calls had died down except one. Mawei recognized it as her mother. "She's down there, on the other side of the stream." She looked at the drop off from the rock to the water. "You feel like going for a dip?" She asked.

Ruffer looked over the edge. "It's too dangerous to jump from here," he said, "you don't know how deep that water is."

Mawei was surprised. It didn't look like that far of a drop, maybe thirty-five or forty feet, and the water looked deep enough to break the fall. "Are you scared?" She asked.

"Of course not," he said, "but why risk breaking your leg when we can go around?"

"You are scared!" She said. "It's okay, I'll go first."

"No Mawei, come on," he said, "let's go around."

"I'll wave to you if it's okay." She said. She looked over the edge and almost hesitated but then decided not to, and jumped. An exhilarating moment of wind rushing through her fur and then she was wet, plunging down into the cold water, to the bottom of the stream, and springing up towards the surface. She treaded water for a moment and looked up to Ruffer. She could see the outline of his head poking out from the ledge above her. She waved her arms, letting him know it was safe and then began swimming to shore.

She got out on the rocky bank and shook as much water off of herself as she could. She didn't see Ruffer anymore and thought maybe he was climbing down the other side. She squinted up into the darkness but he wasn't there. *Maybe he isn't afraid of heights*, she thought, *maybe he took the opportunity to ditch me, and I'll never see him again*. Her mother and aunt Weseil were coming down the hill toward her. She peered back up to the top of the rock one more time but there was no sign of him.

“We were so relieved when we heard your call.” Mawei’s mother said. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“We thought you might’ve ended up in some awful trap.” Weseil said.

“Are you alone?” Mawei’s mother asked. “Where’s your uncle?”

“My uncle? Uncle Rei?” Mawei took a confused posture. “How should I know? I haven’t seen him since his report this morning.”

“Well those twins Sinker and Sichil said they saw you with Rei, and that you had a human child with you!”

“What?” Mawei did her best to look shocked and offended. “That’s a lie! Those little twerps said I was with a human?” There was a loud splash that told Mawei that Ruffer hadn’t ditched her after all.

“Who’s that?” Mawei’s mother asked.

“Ruffer.” She said. “I ran into him during the storm and we took shelter together.” Weseil gave Mawei’s mother a knowing look that annoyed Mawei. “He’s just a friend.” She said.

He climbed out of the stream and shook off. “A good looking friend.” Weseil said.

Ruffer came up offering formal salutations to the two older yetis. Mawei’s mother acknowledged him and turned back to Mawei. “Where would Sinker and Sichil have gotten such an idea?”

“They were lying mama. They’re just trying to get me in trouble.” Mawei said. She had never lied to her mother about anything this serious before, and she wasn’t sure it was working, but she continued. “I got in a fight with them after Rei’s report. They hate humans and they said uncle Rei was a traitor, so I had to fight them. I won the fight and sent the two of them running, so they must’ve invented their silly story as payback.”

“If they made it up they’ll be in serious trouble.” Mawei’s mother said. “The council believed them and sent a pair of yetis to Rei’s wild to check. I thought Rei might’ve done something really stupid this time.”

“They sent yetis to his wild?” Mawei asked.

“Of course they did. If your uncle was consorting with a human, then that human would have to be destroyed. It’s part of the new ‘active defense.’” She said. “The humans are just too dangerous.”

“They would kill the human?”

“Kill is a strong word.” Mawei’s mother said. “Don’t forget that humans are tulpas, they can’t really be killed. They can only be made to cease existing...”

“Rei means well,” Weseil said, “but he might try something crazy like befriending a human. Ever since he was your age he’s been obsessed. Imagine how he must’ve felt when he realized all his work studying humans was just to determine how difficult it would be to make war on them.”

“And this is the second report of Rei travelling with a human.” Mawei’s mother said. “So when the twins came spouting fairy tales they were believed. He’ll have more than harsh words for the pair that are tracking him. He’ll certainly try to fight them.”

“Who did the council send after him?” Mawei asked.

“The twins father Sanai, and a big highland-yeti named Hatcher. I don’t think Rei would stand a chance against those two.” Mawei’s mother said. “Did you and Ruffer get caught in the smoky woods?”

“Yes,” Mawei said, “it was awful, wasn’t it Ruffer?”

Ruffer shrugged. “Not really. It was much worse at the last Gather.”

“I guess we should leave these youngsters by themselves to enjoy the rest of the horripilation.” Weseil said to Mawei’s mother.

“Yes I guess so.” She looked strangely at her daughter. “Mawei are you feeling okay? You look worried or distracted.”

“I’m fine mama.” Mawei said. “I’m still thinking about the smoky woods.”

“Don’t worry,” Weseil said, “Ruffer will protect you, won’t you honey?”

“Yes ma’am.” Ruffer said.

Weseil took Mawei’s mother by the arm and they went back into the forest, giggling. As soon as they were out of sight Mawei began to run. She was fast and Ruffer had to push himself to get out in front of her. “Where are you going?”

“Get out of my way,” Mawei said, “I’m going to save the child.”

“But what about the snow-yeti’s blessing tomorrow? If you aren’t there your mother will be suspicious- she’ll know that you lied about the human.”

“You think I care about getting in trouble for lying? The child’s life is at stake, you can stay if you want -I’ll go without you.”

“No, I want to go,” he said. “I can help, I just can’t miss the blessing this year. Can’t we go tomorrow morning, after it’s over?”

“I’m leaving now.” Mawei said. “Come or stay, I don’t care.”

She tried to go around him but he got ahold of her arm and held tight, keeping her in place. “You don’t understand,” he said, “I saw something up in that tree Mawei, something that hurt me. I haven’t felt right since. I’m all messed up inside and I need the blessing. I feel like everything in the world is wrong. *Everything* Mawei.”

“What did you see up there?”

He shut his eyes and shook his head again. “Talking about it will just make it worse.”

Mawei pulled her arm free. “I’m sorry Ruffer, I have to go.” She said. “You stay and get your blessing, I’m leaving.”

“You really think they’d kill the little human?” He asked.

“I know they would.” She said.

Ruffer thought for a second. “Maybe I could find a snow-yeti who would bless me after we save the child.”

“Santie gives blessings anytime of year if you bring her some fish or mushrooms.” Mawei said. She started walking and Ruffer hesitated a moment and then caught up and fell in step beside her.

“Santie,” he said, “I’ve heard of her.”

“If you help me save the child I’ll show you the way,” Mawei said, “but we have to hurry. Rei’s wild is a two day journey, but we can make it by tomorrow night if we go fast.”

Helena woke up on the ground someplace very dark. For the first time in a long time she wasn't cold, and she might've even been hot if she'd had a stitch of clothing on. She couldn't see anything, but the smell of wet rock and dirt told her that she was in some kind of cavern.

Under normal circumstances her situation would be cause for panic, but the fact that she was warm and that she didn't hear or smell Mr. Elephant Cage kept her calm. She'd been passed from monster to monster and stripped naked and left high up in a tree in a rainstorm and forced to eat raw fish, so any change in circumstances was welcome. Helena stretched out sleepily and waited for her eyes to adjust, but the more she strained to make out her surroundings the less she saw.

She sat up and reached out in the darkness, trying to get a sense of her surroundings by touch. She was sitting on a smooth stone surface, and there was a jagged rock wall behind her. "Hello?" She called out, more for herself than for anyone who might hear. The sound told her that the space wasn't large.

She started to stand but hit her head. She crouched down and put one hand on the rocks behind her and moved along them, keeping low. She stumbled off the edge of the stone she'd been sleeping on and found that she could stand, and that she'd been on a sort of ledge in the wall. Slowly, she began moving, taking every step carefully and keeping one hand on the wall. She came down a steep grade, turned a corner and then stopped and peered into the darkness.

There was a faint cloud of bluish-green light hovering in the distance. It was softly undulating, becoming brighter and darker in places, and changing color very slightly over time. She stared at it, trying to make out what it was, and after awhile decided to get a closer look. As she continued along the wall, she could see a light underneath the cloud, and soon she saw that it wasn't a cloud at all, but a reflection shining onto the rocks from a pool of water below.

Helena moved to the edge of the pool and looked down into its depths at a multitude of tiny luminous plankton. There were millions of dots of light all pulsing brighter and darker at irregular intervals. She got down on her knees and leaned over the pool to get a closer look at the mysterious creatures. The longer she watched, the more she became convinced that the lightening and darkening was a form of communication among them. She could trace a bright streak that would arc down deep across thousands of the creatures and spiral its way back to the surface. It was like nothing she'd ever seen. They were putting on a magic light show just for her.

She wanted to reach in and touch them, but when she put her hand into the ice-cold water the luminous plankton all retreated from it. Helena kept her hand still and little by little they came back and soon she was watching them swim around her fingers, as if exploring a new feature of their environment. Helena noticed that she could see more of the cavern now, and she thought her eyes were adjusting, but then she realized it was a shaft of sunlight that was streaming down onto the pool. The plankton all excitedly moved to the surface as if it were food coming down instead of light.

She was so transfixed by the sight that she didn't notice that Rei had come into the cavern. She jumped when she felt his big hands lift her away from the water. She thought vaguely that she should've run when she had the chance, but she didn't know the way out of the cave, and

besides, she was naked. She could run away and live in the wilderness and eat crickets and search for help, but she wasn't going to do it naked.

Rei took her into the cold, bright morning, exiting the cavern onto a rock precipice. He climbed down to some young woods where his brother Cal was waiting by a creek. He was sitting, leaning up against a tree, and Helena thought he looked very old with his slumped posture and grey hair. Rei put Helena down on the rocky shore of the creek in front of his brother. She looked from Cal to Rei, feeling the calm that comes with being in a hopeless situation. "See?" Rei said to his brother, "she doesn't fear us."

The cold bit into Helena's skin after the warmth of the cavern. She crouched down and wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "The human is cold." Cal said. He yawned and flared his nostrils at his brother. "It already polluted my warm chamber with its dreams, if it freezes to death in my wild it'll bring bad luck."

"But Cal, just wait until you see the little human speak." Rei said. He reached down and nudged Helena, "go on, say something." Helena just stared back at Rei, concentrating on keeping her mind blank so that no yeti words would escape by accident. "Please," Rei said, "demonstrate your ability to speak our language to my brother. He doesn't believe you can do it."

Helena just stared at him, saying nothing. She squeezed herself tighter against the cold. Cal stood up and stretched out, looking at his brother with a mixture of annoyance and pity. "Your human fixation is just a way to avoid forming any real bonds with other yetis." He said. "We've had this discussion before. It's time that you found a mate and had a pup of your own instead of practicing on a little bald human. It's not good for you or for the human. Do you think a mature female wants to spend time with an eccentric who lives among filthy animals? Obsession has made you blind to the fact that you're embarrassing yourself."

Rei leaned in and looked at Helena up close. "Speak!" He said. "Please little bird, say something -anything." Helena just stared. Rei looked up at his brother. "I know how you feel about me, and about humans, but I'm telling you I've made an important discovery here. I just need time to prove it. I'll adopt her with or without your consent, but I'd rather have it. It would cost you nothing to give."

"You think having a brother like you is without cost? No, I'd never consent to such insanity."

Rei picked up Helena and made a well-known yeti gesture that could be translated as 'life is futile' or some other, more profane human expressions. He walked until he was out of his brother's wild and then he began to run.

Mawei and Ruffer had trekked through the night and they arrived at the foothills of the Siskiyou mountain range at dawn. There was a low cloud overhead, but they could still see the outline of snowy peaks above them. The stream they'd been following veered off to the south so Mawei and Ruffer stopped to take a drink, knowing there would be little water across the pass. While they were drinking Mawei saw a spotted owl returning from its night hunt holding a small mouse in its talons. She pointed it out to Ruffer and he said it was a good sign.

They began their climb and soon the trees were getting smaller and more widely separated and the ground was becoming harder. Mawei recognized a rock formation that her mother had called 'elbow rock' when they'd been to visit Ruffer when she was little. They began up the steepest part of the long climb, both dead tired but continuing on. The clouds had dispersed and the sun was shining, but it was competing with an icy wind. They were almost to the pass when Mawei stumbled on some loose rocks. "You're exhausted." Ruffer said. "I am too, we should take a break."

"How far ahead of us do you think Sanai and Hatcher are?" Mawei asked.

"They had about a two hour head start, but they wouldn't have been in a hurry and they might've taken a rest before the climb. I think we can afford a few minutes."

"Okay but you have to talk to me so I don't fall asleep." There was a rock outcropping that offered a little shelter from the wind so Mawei sat down and Ruffer sat next to her. "I'm so hungry." She said. "I haven't eaten since the feast."

"Me neither." Ruffer said. "It was a good feast this year. Did you help prepare it?"

"No." Mawei said. "At the next Gather I'll be collecting berries or crickets, but I'm not thrilled about it. You have a much better obligation -I think the Chronicle is incredibly beautiful."

"I guess it can be," he said, "if it's performed well."

"Not just the performance but the stories themselves. Sometimes if I'm bored or having a bad time I think of something from the Chronicle and it makes me happy."

"I don't know," he said, "some of the stories are okay, but to me the enjoyment is all in how it's told. Did you see Sorchel? She could be saying anything and it would be amazing. She could be naming different types of trees or describing every rock in her wild and it would be mesmerizing."

"But what about the story you performed? You did it well, but it's also a great story." Mawei said.

"I thought so too at first, but the more I think about that story the more I hate it."

"How can you say that?"

Ruffer shrugged. "The yeti in my story was driven off her wild because of who she was, and then the skills that she learned out of necessity, in order to survive, became useful to the yetis who had shunned her. Suddenly she's a hero who can save all the same yetis who wanted her dead before. If drought hadn't come, we wouldn't know her story. Imagine how many yetis were driven off their wilds or killed who we'll never hear about because they were never useful to their persecutors. What about their stories? The Chronicle leaves them out."

Mawei hugged her knees. "That's a sad thought," she said.

“If it were me I’m not so sure I would’ve helped the ones who’d thrown me aside. They forced her to take a wild on the beach because they wanted her to starve –then when *they* were starving they wanted her help! They must’ve thought pretty highly of themselves to even ask. I’d have told them to go starve!”

“Maybe that’s why it’s a great story.” Mawei said. “Because she forgave them.”

“Not once in the story is she praised for having forgiven them.” Ruffer said. “It’s made out as some happy ending that she’s accepted by the yetis that tried to kill her. I hate that stupid story.”

Mawei thought that if she stayed sitting any longer she might fall asleep so she stood up quickly. “Come on.” She pulled Ruffer up. “It’s not too far from here, let’s keep moving.” Coming over the pass they had a good view down into the valley with its three small lakes. Rei’s wild was in the dense forest on the southern shore of the third lake from the north. The wind was mostly blowing from the west, so it told her nothing.

They decided on a risky shortcut, descending a shale rock face that they thought might buy them an hour or so. Soon they were practically skiing a mini rock avalanche and Mawei knew that the dust they were kicking up would give away their position to anyone who happened to be looking up at the pass.

There was some cloud cover coming in and a few small flakes of snow began to fall as the shale gave way to patchy grass and bushes. Mawei led, with Ruffer close behind, through a stand of stunted evergreens and around a large boulder. It was late afternoon and they’d been travelling for nearly twenty hours.

When they reached the northern shore of the third lake the snow had started to accumulate on the ground, and was coming down more heavily. Ruffer was so tired that he couldn’t feel his legs anymore, even as they carried him forward. As tired as he was, he knew that if he could put his head down he wouldn’t be able to sleep. If he shut his eyes all he would be able to see would be maggots.

He tried to concentrate on Mawei’s back and not think about the horrifying vision he’d had in the smoky woods. He knew that what he’d seen was just a waking dream, but he also knew that those kinds of dreams could hold truth in them. Ruffer’s mother had left on a journey eight years earlier, and there was no telling where she might be, or when she would be back, or if she were alive or dead. The snow-yeti blessing could’ve healed his heart, but he was too mixed up with this strange forest-yeti female and her human problems. He suddenly felt very protective of her. He had only known her a couple of days, but he felt that they’d formed a bond somehow.

Ruffer hadn’t realized that he was practically sleepwalking until a yeti call from across the lake snapped him out of it. It was Rei’s battle call and it sounded half-strangled and desperate. Without saying a word Ruffer and Mawei began to run, their exhaustion evaporating in the anticipation of violence.

As they got closer they could hear the sounds of fighting, branches and trees breaking and cries of pain and exertion coming from deep within the pine forest. Running through the falling snow in the dark gave Mawei the impression that she was moving much faster than she was, and she seemed to be observing this strange sensation at a remove from herself. She wondered if it was a product of fear, exhaustion, or both. It was as if she were hovering somewhere just above her own head.

She would've run right into the midst of the fight if Ruffer hadn't stopped her. Her eyesight wasn't as good as his in the darkness. "They're right down there," Ruffer said.

Mawei could see nothing, but she could hear the fight going on in the black forest below her. "Is the child there?" She asked.

"I don't see it." Ruffer said. "They're moving now. They don't want to fight anymore, but your uncle keeps attacking."

"I'm going down there."

"Wait, we need a plan." Ruffer said, but Mawei was already partway down the hill, screaming a call she had never made before, the battle call. As she got closer she could see Sanai the snow-yeti on the ground with her uncle, struggling in a mass of white and auburn fur. The highland-yeti, Hatcher, was in a fighting stance and looking into the darkness for the source of her call.

Mawei hit him high in the shoulder, grabbing onto his arm, and brought him down in a twisting motion as her father had taught her. He landed half on top of her and Mawei used her legs to shove him upwards, cartwheeling him into the darkness behind her. She caught a glimpse of his legs flailing out of view, and heard his cry of pain and surprise before she got herself upright. She hadn't meant to scratch him, but she could feel chunks of his flesh under her claws.

Mawei stood at the ready, expecting a counter attack from the direction she'd flung Hatcher, but it came from behind. Something slammed into the back of her knees, and as she tried to recover she saw a flash of white fur and felt an eruption of pain in her face that dissolved into little blinking lights. After a fractured moment she was inhaling snow and she started to cough. She felt hands pulling her up and recognized vaguely that it was her uncle.

"What are you doing here?" Rei asked her. His left shoulder was punctured, sending a stream of blood dripping off of his elbow onto the fresh snow. Mawei thought it was probably a bite wound.

"I'm here to help you fight." Mawei said. Sanai and Hatcher laughed. They had regrouped and were standing at a safe distance. Ruffer was nowhere to be seen.

"Listen child," Sanai said, "you and your uncle are not invincible. We just came to ask him some questions and he reacted violently. If he would stop attacking he would be in no danger, and neither would you."

"You are intruders and you will be repelled!" Rei said.

Mawei glanced into the darkness behind them and made her words big. "You two should leave immediately before you anger the demon."

"What are you talking about?" Hatcher asked.

"I'm talking about the disemboweling demon who protects these woods." Mawei said.

“You’re a good niece,” Sanai said, “but your lies wont help your uncle. Rei, we know you harbor a human and we must know where it is. Tell us.”

“I’ll tell you nothing except to leave my wild or die.”

“You’ve been warned,” Mawei said, “you leave me no choice.” She took a wide stance, clapped her hands loudly above her head and let out an ear-piercing high-pitched shriek. A black streak flashed behind the two intruders and they both fell to their knees calling out in pain.

“Something got the back of my leg.” Hatcher said, trying to stand.

“Mine too.” The snow-yeti said, helping his companion to his feet. A rock hit the tree beside them, and then another rock hit Hatcher in the head and the black streak flew by again, sending both yetis back to the ground. Mawei let her eyes roll back so they showed only white, and held her hands up, moaning as if she were in contact with the spirit realm. She was having fun.

More rocks came in, two hitting Sanai’s back and another hitting Hatcher in the head again. Ruffer streaked by, slashing a claw across both of their backs in one fluid motion before disappearing into the darkness. Hatcher looked panicked. He scrambled to a tree and pressed himself against it, looking around to see where the next attack was coming from.

Sanai was determined to maintain his composure and stood up straight. “The talk of demons is unconvincing,” he said, “but we’re clearly at a disadvantage now...” a rock hit him just above the temple and Hatcher screeched in pain as Ruffer rushed in and took a chunk out of his side. Sanai continued, “like all things, your success is temporary. We *will* find and destroy the human -you can be certain of that.” There was blood coming down the side of his face. Hatcher was already running away and Sanai followed. Rei and Mawei laughed at their disorganized retreat.

“Where is the child?” Mawei asked, pressing the palm of her hand onto Rei’s puncture wound to staunch the flow of blood.

“She’s safe, not far from here.” He said. “Who is our disemboweling demon?”

“A friend of mine named Ruffer.” Mawei said. “Uncle the human is probably very cold, didn’t you notice how sensitive she is to it?”

“Ruffer? I don’t know him.” He cocked his head toward the darkness. “Listen, he’s still harassing them.”

“The child has no fur.” Mawei said. “Take me to her.”

“She’ll have to get used to the cold if she’s going to live as a yeti,” Rei said, “anyway, shouldn’t we wait for your helpful friend?”

“He’ll find us. He’s a night-yeti, he can see in the dark.”

Mawei released the pressure on her uncle’s wound and he led her down a hill and around a snowy bramble to a large fallen tree. “She’s in there,” he said, “it’s hallow.”

“You left her in a hallow log?” Mawei didn’t wait for his response, she started brushing the snow off of the tree, looking for the opening. She found it and reached up inside, but felt nothing. She turned to her uncle. “She’s not there. Are you sure this is the right tree?”

“Yes, of course.” Rei said. He pushed Mawei out of the way and stuffed his hand into the opening. “You’re right. Where could she have gone?”

Mawei sniffed at the air but smelled only snow. The snowfall had also covered any tracks that the child might’ve left. Mawei showed her teeth to her uncle. “Sanai shouldn’t worry about the human, you’re doing a fine job destroying her yourself!” Rei tilted his head back and made the night call, and somewhere not far off Ruffer joined in. “What’s the point of that?” Mawei asked. “The child doesn’t know a night call. Come on she couldn’t have gotten far on those little legs. Let’s look for her.”

Before they started their search Ruffer came out of the snowy dark carrying the child. “Look

what I found.” He said. “She feels like a lump of ice.” Rei had again smeared the little human from head to foot in river mud that had dried into a kind of cracked second skin. She was curled into a ball and was shaking violently.

Mawei took Helena from Ruffer and sat down, cradling the child between her body and her thighs and darkened her fur to warm the shivering human. While she was busy with Helena, Rei introduced himself to Ruffer. “Thanks for the help,” Rei said, “I could’ve handled either of those two on their own, but together they were too much for me.”

“They’ll be back.” Ruffer said. “We should get the child out of here.”

“I’m glad you came to our aid,” Rei said, “but I have to ask why you did. You risk a lot.”

“I have some experience with humans, so I don’t fear them.” Ruffer said. “And I want to help Mawei and the child.”

“She’s suffering from the cold.” Mawei said. “When she recovers we can get moving. I guess the best thing to do would be to take her to your wild Ruffer.”

“To my wild?”

“That’s a good idea.” Rei said. “They’ll look here and if they don’t find her they’ll go to Mawei’s, but they don’t know you’re involved. You can hide her away until they decide the human is gone or that there was no human in the first place. When they’ve given up looking you can bring her back to me. I’ll make sure she’s fully yetified before anyone knows she’s here.”

“Uncle Rei, when they come back, don’t fight them.” Mawei said. “Just let them do what they want. You’ve already injured yourself. Is your shoulder hurt badly?”

“No,” he said, “and I would gladly suffer much worse to protect the little bird.” He turned his attention to Ruffer. “Wait two cycles of the moon and then bring her back to me. You must keep her warm and feed her once a day. Keep her covered in mud and bear in mind that she has poor vision and little sense of smell. Her teeth are not strong and she’s picky about food. She’ll eat fish if you mush it properly.” He looked down at little Helena, who was warming up but was still in a sort of shock from having been abandoned naked in what was turning into one of the worst snowstorms of the season.

“I’ve only just met you.” Rei said to Ruffer. “But I’m entrusting you with the most important thing I’ve ever done. The fact that my niece trusts you is enough for me. If you bring the child back to me safely you’ll have a friend for life.”

Ruffer gave Rei his word that no harm would come to the child, and then he helped Mawei to her feet. Mawei did her best to protect Helena from the cold and snow as they started out. Rei followed them to the edge of his woods and then stopped and watched them go. He stood in a defeated posture that nevertheless spoke of a small sliver of hope in an overwhelming tide of hopelessness.

Helena knew why the monsters were running -the police were after them. The crime? Kidnapping. The Punishment? Death. Run, run, run, even in a blizzard. She didn't blame them for running, but she knew it was no use, the bad guys always got caught. She'd tell them so herself, but she'd made a firm decision to stop talking to the monsters. How many times did she have to say 'take me home,' 'let me go,' 'get me some clothes,' 'I hate you.' They didn't pay any attention anyway so why bother?

Helena nuzzled into Mawei's arms as the yetis trudged through snow up to their knees. Sometimes Helena's feet would fall between Mawei's arm and her body, and her toes would feel the sting of frozen air and she would tuck them back up under the warm fur. The snow was coming down in sheets but the monsters kept running. Helena couldn't understand how they could keep going without rest. They finally stopped next to a swollen stream and Ruffer held Helena while Mawei caught some fish. Helena ate, but she still wouldn't talk.

The red girl-monster kept telling the all-black monster that Helena really could speak their language. "The little human probably just doesn't feel like talking right now." She said. Helena thought it was funny and took it as a sign that she was doing the right thing. Maybe they would lose interest in her and leave her alone. Helena kept herself from accidentally saying something in yeti by humming a tune she remembered from a television commercial.

The monsters ran all night and into the next day, and the snow kept falling. Sometime in the afternoon on that second day they must've gotten tired, because they huddled together in an alcove where two large boulders leaned up against each other. The red girl-monster was staring at her. "Please little bird, I'm worried about you. Say something." She said.

Helena almost said 'no' but caught herself and began humming again. She was tired and she put her face into Mawei's fur and had a brilliant flight of ideas and images and then she was asleep. Somewhere far off she heard her daddy shout a bad word and she jerked awake. She must've been asleep a long time because it was dark and she was in the all-black monster's arms. The monsters were running again, through the cold wet night. Helena tried to get comfortable and go back to sleep, but she could only get halfway there.

She thought the running would never end until finally they stopped at the edge of a snow covered meadow in the evening of the next day. When Helena looked around she couldn't believe what she saw. It was a house. It was small, but there was a porch, a chimney, windows, and a roof. The monsters were talking but Helena couldn't see what they were saying because she was straining to get a better view. She was about to bite the all-black monster and run for it, but they started out across the field toward the old cabin. *Maybe they're giving themselves up,* she thought, *or maybe they'll put me close by and run.*

Mawei stepped onto the porch, ducking down to avoid hitting her head, and she pushed the front door open. Helena looked in and saw clouds and trees and thought something was wrong. She realized that the back wall and half of the roof had caved in. It was clear that no one had lived there in many years.

Ruffer climbed in the house behind Mawei, and set Helena down on a badly stained throw rug. "It's a human shelter," Mawei said to Helena, "just like home, right little bird?"

Helena couldn't take it. "No!" She said. "It's not like home, it's like a cruddy shack in the

middle of nowhere. Look, it's snowing in the kitchen, there's an ax chopped into the wall, the only chair in the whole place is broken!"

"Yes, but it's already having a good effect on you, you're talking again. Wouldn't you rather stay here than out in the woods someplace?" Mawei looked back and said something to Ruffer that Helena couldn't see and then turned back. "Ruffer's wild isn't too far." She said. "What do you think, should we stay here tonight?"

"I don't care," Helena said, "you're just going to do whatever you want anyway."

"This'll be fun." Ruffer said to Helena. "Just for tonight we can all pretend to be humans..." He looked at Mawei with a blank expression and began making jabbering noises. Mawei laughed and jabbered back at him.

"No, stop!" Helena said. "I hate you both. If you want to do something human, make a fire. There's a fireplace right there and I'm cold."

"Oh, is that what that's for?" Ruffer asked. He went over to the stone fireplace and inspected it, looking up and seeing that it opened all the way to the sky to let the smoke escape. "That's clever," he said, "but I don't know how to make a fire, do you Mawei?"

"I saw a highland-yeti do it two Gathers ago, but I didn't get a good look. I think it has something to do with stones."

"No, no." Helena said. "You start a fire with matches."

"Little bird, we don't know any of your human devices." Ruffer said. "We don't need fire, our fur keeps us warm."

"Well mud isn't fur, and I'm not a monster."

Ruffer picked up a metal container by the fireplace and shook it. There were objects inside and he pried the lid off with a claw and brought it over to the child. "Are any of these things matches?"

"No," she said, "but there's a lighter in there. That's for starting a fire." She reached in and pulled out a red plastic lighter that only had a little fluid left in it. "My aunt Beezy has one of these, but I've never used it. I'm not allowed."

"It'll be okay this once." Mawei said. Ruffer pulled some boards off of the collapsed roof and broke them into pieces that would fit in the fireplace. Soon the chair was also smashed up and the pile grew to fill the whole hearth. "We need dry grass or bark." Mawei said. "That's how the highland-yeti do it. They don't start with big pieces of wood."

"Use the newspapers." Helena said, pointing to a stack of yellowing papers near the door. Ruffer shredded a bunch of the papers with his claws and arranged a pile around the base of the wood.

When he'd finished he stepped back away from the fireplace and the two yetis watched Helena, waiting for her to start the fire. She looked closely at the mechanism at the top of the lighter. "You do it with your thumb and the fire comes out here," she said. She put her thumb on the rough little wheel and pushed downward quickly, making a spark but nothing more. "*Dang.*" She said in sound language. She quickly tried three more times, creating a short-lived flame when she accidentally hit the button on the third try. She tried again and this time pressed the button down and kept the flame going. She held it down to the newspaper which caught fire quickly and soon some pieces of the chair caught too, and there was a real fire going.

Mawei, Helena and Ruffer all sat in front of the fire and stared into the flames. "Little bird, sing me a song." Mawei said. Traveling through snow over a foot deep carrying a naked human child for three days had been exhausting and Mawei felt she was on the verge of a deep sleep. Ruffer seemed to be hypnotized by the fire and stared intently into the flames. Helena started the

itsy bitsy spider, but she couldn't do the fingers right and it made her miss her mom so she switched to twinkle-twinkle.

Ruffer collected some more planks from what was left of the roof and threw them in the fire to keep it going. Soon Helena and Mawei were asleep on the floor and Ruffer lay next to them wondering where a thing like fire came from.

Early the next morning the sound of a squirrel running across the part of the roof that remained intact woke Mawei. She listened to it scramble down the snow-covered incline and jump onto a nearby tree. She looked up at the wooden planks above her and wondered what could've gotten a squirrel out in the snow. She stretched and moved the child over onto Ruffer so she could get up. She decided to go outside to get some fresh air in her lungs and see what she could smell. She went out and sunk her feet into the snow, enjoying the cold between her toes.

She looked out and was surprised to see some deer moving, far off across the meadow. She squinted and saw that there was an albino deer, but then no, she realized it wasn't a deer at all, it was a yeti, two yetis, and they had seen her too.

Mawei ducked into the structure and slammed her head on a crossbeam. She took Helena under her arm and pulled Ruffer to his feet before he was fully awake and he stumbled into the cabin wall, cracking it and breaking a window. He recovered quickly and was right behind Mawei as she climbed out the back, over the collapsed roof.

She was running as fast as she could, and Ruffer understood vaguely what must've happened. He followed her into the woods and they jumped down a series of small cliffs into a gully. They splashed across a half-frozen creek and up the other side. Helena, who was crying from having been woken up so violently, began screaming when the water hit her, and she clutched at Mawei's fur.

Ruffer stopped Mawei and told her to follow him. They were close to his wild and he said he knew a place where they could lose their pursuers. He began heading south, and soon had them coming down a steep rock face that didn't look passable from above. Sanai and Hatcher would have to go around it, which would take at least an hour.

"We should split up." Ruffer said to Mawei. "You take the little bird to my wild and hide. I'll draw them off your trail and let them catch up with me tonight somewhere far south of here. They don't know where my wild is, and they won't know where to look for you. When I'm sure they're not following me I'll come find you and we'll take her east."

"What do you mean 'take her east' -take her where?" Mawei asked.

"Someplace where they won't look for us. We'll find new wilds and raise the child ourselves." Ruffer said. "Your uncle would certainly get her killed."

"But what'll happen when they catch you?" Mawei asked.

"They might hurt me, but they won't kill me. We can save her. Come on, I know where we can split up without them knowing."

He led them to the edge of a cliff that dropped about twenty feet down to a small creek. They ran along the rim until they reached a stand of trees, all growing at a precarious angle and straining for light against the steep slope. Ruffer stopped at a fallen cypress that had bridged the chasm above the creek, connecting to a rocky ledge on the other side. "Cross here," he said, "and when you get to the other side push the tree down into the gulch. I'll continue on this way. Head south with the creek until it meets a larger stream, go in the direction of the current until you come to a clearing with woods on the far side. That's my wild. Hide anywhere in those woods and I'll find you."

"Ruffer, thank you." Mawei said. "I'm sorry I got you into this."

“I got myself into it.” He said. Mawei wanted to say something meaningful, but couldn’t think of anything. She leaned in and touched her nose to his, surprising him. “Go.” He said.

She put Helena on her back and told her to hang on, and then started across. When she got to the other side she turned to push the tree down and saw that Ruffer had already gone.

There was a strong wind blowing and Ruffer knew that if he ran straight into it Sanai and Hatcher would become suspicious. On the other hand if he ran *with* the wind he might actually escape their pursuit, which wasn't good either because then they would most likely circle back and they might pick up Mawei and the little human's trail. Ruffer decided to go diagonally against the wind, and sometimes turn crossways to it, making tracking difficult but not impossible.

The problem was that he couldn't be sure that anyone was really following him. The two yetis might've figured out that he and Mawei had split up, and they could be going after her. He might be running for nothing. Mawei could've already lost the little human to the murderous Sanai and his toady Hatcher. The thought kept nagging at him as he ran. He'd been running for hours in the deep snow and he decided he had to find out.

He was in familiar country and he knew that a highway and human village were close. He decided to backtrack along the highway, so the exhaust and asphalt would mask his smell. When he thought he'd gone far enough he cut back up into the woods, hoping to find Sanai and Hatcher's trail. If he could pursue his pursuers he would have control of when and where the inevitable confrontation happened.

He made his way up the hill, sniffing for a trace of Sanai and Hatcher, but the exhaust that was covering his scent was also covering theirs, and he was face to face with them before he knew that he'd made a mistake. They'd been much farther behind him than he'd thought, and instead of coming up behind them he'd met them head on.

Sanai searched Ruffer with his eyes. "Who are you?" He asked.

"This is Ruffer, son of Raf." Hatcher told him.

"And you are Hatcher and Sanai, both far from home." Ruffer said.

"Happily far from home." Sanai said. "This land is infested with humans. Did you run back to fight us so your little friend could get away?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Ruffer said. "But if you're looking for a fight I'll oblige."

"We'll get past you and catch up with her whether we fight or not," Sanai said, "you might as well just let us pass and save yourself the embarrassment of defeat."

Ruffer pretended to think about it for a moment. "Nah." He said. He lunged at Sanai's neck but the snow-yeti ducked in time and Ruffer's fangs sank into his shoulder as they both tumbled. Ruffer tasted blood mixed with fur and snow, and he felt claws rip at his side.

He released Sanai and scrambled to his feet in time to feel Hatcher's claws tear open three seams down the front of his face. Ruffer grabbed the hand that hurt him, blind for the moment, and jerked it down, slamming Hatcher into a tree by sheer luck.

There was a flash and the world jumped and Ruffer was feeling pain that increased past the point of maximum intensity and kept going. He realized he'd been hit in the back of the head with a rock as he staggered past trees, down a hill. It hurt to see anything, and there was blood in one of his eyes. He tried to wipe it away as he ran, and looked back but couldn't see either of the yetis he knew were chasing him.

He stopped running and put his hands on his knees, He couldn't catch his breath or make his

eyes focus. He heard the sound of footsteps in the snow behind him and tried to remember ways to keep fighting after you've been defeated. He let himself fall forward and he lay motionless in the wet snow. It was a strategy, but he was also glad for the rest. He heard Sanai and Hatcher approaching slowly and he kept his breathing slow and shallow.

They stood a few feet away from him, and he thought they were most likely discussing whether he was dead, dying or just badly hurt, and whether they should help him or press on after Mawei and the human. If they'd murdered him, two against one, they would be shunned as cowards, but if all they'd done was maim him, he would be considered foolish for having taken them on.

Ruffer heard one of them move in his direction. He lay still, not even breathing, and waited. Finally he felt a hand on his shoulder, turning him over. He instantly had Sanai's arm and he pulled the surprised yeti down sharply, kneeling him in the side on his way to the ground, and then he rolled on top of him, pinning his arms. He slammed his head against Sanai's and jumped up to face Hatcher, but he wasn't there. He turned and glimpsed some brown fur just in time to duck a strike. Ruffer started running again, with Hatcher close behind.

Ruffer was getting closer and closer to the highway, dodging trees as he ran. He was trying to think of a way he could use the highway to his advantage, but before he could get there Hatcher's hands shoved him off course, forcing him to run directly into a tree.

It was lights out for a split second, but then Ruffer spun around slashing his claws blindly and was surprised that he actually connected, slicing the highland-yeti's arm. Hatcher jumped back and grabbed at his arm while Ruffer went through a convulsion of pain. He saw Sanai coming and he turned and ran for the highway.

Ruffer had a lot of experience crossing human roads, but there was blood in his eyes and he was in excruciating pain and desperate. He leapt up onto the highway and staggered toward the center divider. He heard the dissonant bleat of a horn and the squealing of breaks as he cleared the low cement wall. There was the sound of a crash behind him as he ran across the other two lanes and into the woods, stumbling when he came to a steep slope. He ran headlong down the hill for a few steps before he finally lost all control and tumbled and rolled and went over another cement wall. He fell twelve feet straight down and landed on pavement.

It was easy for Mawei to locate the tree dwelling of Ruffer's human by smell. It was in one of the tallest trees in the forest and she could see the platform, which sat where the tree trunk split into three large branches, thirty or so feet from the ground. It was tied in place with rope and there was an odd chemical smell coming from up there. Mawei put Helena on her back and told her to hang on, and then began to climb.

Mawei would be willing to run off with Ruffer and raise Helena as a yeti if she believed her uncle's theory, that the child could be yetified, but she didn't believe it. Whatever human beings' true origin, living like a yeti was clearly damaging the little bird. If humans had once lived like yetis, that time had long passed and there was no going back. She hoped Ruffer's human would know what to do.

The chemical smell was coming from a blue dome that took up most of the triangular platform. There was just enough room for Helena to stand while Mawei propped herself up on an elbow and wondered what to do. She knew there was a human inside, but she wasn't sure how to draw him out of the strange shelter. She poked at it with a claw and thought about ripping a small hole, but before she could decide if it was a good idea, Helena unzipped the tent's front flap. "*Emergency, emergency!*" She called out to the person inside. "*Call 911!*"

Mawei looked over Helena's shoulder and saw a very frightened and confused human with long hair and a long beard, cowering at the back of the enclosure. "We mean you no harm." Mawei said in yeti. The human showed no sign of understanding her.

Helena climbed into the tent as the man stared at her in disbelief. "*Do you have any real food?*" She asked in sound language. "*I'm hungry. Will you take me home?*"

"Ruffer told us about you." Mawei said in yeti, looking directly into the human's confused eyes. "I thought maybe you could help us." Mawei could see that his heart was beating incredibly fast and hard, and that he felt trapped and wanted to run. "We mean you no harm," she repeated, and with that the human fainted -slumping onto the floor of the tent with a thud.

"Is he okay?" Helena asked Mawei.

"I think so, here, let me stretch him out." Mawei pulled herself partway up onto the platform and reached into the little tent. She could only get her arm and head through the entrance, but that was enough to pull the man into a more natural position on his back. He blinked up at Mawei.

Helena stuck her face in front of his and frowned at him. "*Whatsa Matter?*"

"*Little girl, get back!*" He said, sitting up quickly and pulling Helena behind him. "*Wh-what is this, a joke?*" He was speaking in sound language and Mawei couldn't understand him, but his posture expressed disbelief and confusion.

"Calm down human." Mawei said.

"*How did you say that?*" He asked. "*Are you in my head?*"

"You've met a yeti before," Mawei said, "a night-yeti named Ruffer. Your dwelling is in his wild. He told me you two had a long conversation."

The human reeled and looked like he was going to faint again, but recovered. "*Is he black?*" He asked loudly.

"I don't speak your language." Mawei told him. "I thought you spoke mine."

“Yes he’s all black.” Helena said in English. “The monsters don’t know words, they speak eyeball language. It’s easy.”

“The night I spoke with him was a crazy night, I... I thought I had imagined it.”

“She doesn’t understand you.” Helena said to the man, then switching to yeti she told him to say it with his eyeballs.

The man looked at Mawei. “I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid. This is a dream.” He said in yeti.

“I’m glad that you’re not afraid, but I can assure you that this is no dream.”

“You can understand me.” He said, rubbing his beard.

“Yes and you understand me.” Mawei said. “We need your help.”

“Why is this child naked and covered in mud and where did she come from? Who is she?”

“My name is Helena.” She said. “I’m hungry.”

“Do you like chocolate?” The man asked her.

“YES!” She screamed. He opened a box and pulled out a package containing many Hershey bars. He ripped open the plastic, spilling the bars on the floor and told Helena to help herself. She already had the wrapper off of one and was gobbling it down in big chunks.

“We don’t have a lot of time.” Mawei said. “The child is in danger and we have to get her to safety. Can you help us?”

“Where are her parents?” The human asked.

Mawei looked at Helena and saw that she was occupied with her sweet-smelling bean concoction. “Gone,” she said. “Their car slid off the road and they were crushed. The little bird was in the back unharmed, so I took her with me.”

“Her parents are dead?” He asked. “How long ago was this?”

Helena had looked up from her second chocolate bar in time to catch what the man had said. “What?” She said. “You mean mommy and daddy?”

“Don’t worry yourself little one, eat your food.” Mawei said.

“What happened to mommy and daddy?”

“They loved you very much, but they had to leave.”

“Where?”

“No one can answer that.” Mawei said. “It’s a mystery. When you were upside down in the car and I came and got you out, your mother and father were in the front and they were dead. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but they didn’t survive the crash.”

There was chocolate all over Helena’s face and fingers and she let a piece fall from her hands. “But... That’s not true!” She said. “Don’t lie monster! Don’t be mean!” She put her hands up to her face and smeared chocolate on her eyelids. Mawei reached into the tent and pulled one of Helena’s little hands away from her face. She wanted to tell her how sorry she was, but Helena pulled her hand away from Mawei. “Don’t touch me!” She said. She showed her teeth and flared her nostrils. “Chop, chop, chop, that’s what you get!”

The color was draining from Helena’s face and her lips were turning blue. She looked like she was going to cough, but then she vomited all the chocolate she’d eaten onto the floor of the tent. Tears were streaming down her face and she began heaving and coughing and crying all together.

The man put his hand on her back and told her to get it all out. “You need some clothes,” he told her. “You’re half frozen.” He took a rag and wiped Helena’s mouth and nose, cleaning her up a bit. He pulled a shirt over her head and got her arms through the sleeves. She gave him no help and looked as if she were thinking about something far away.

The man lifted little Helena and put her into his sleeping bag, which was on an air mattress that took up almost half the space in the tent. He zipped her into it and then pulled a black wool hat onto her head. Mawei watched all this from her uncomfortable perch, half on the snowy platform with her arm and head inside the tent. The man was very concerned about the child, and she knew she'd made the right decision to bring her there.

Helena seemed to be in pain, but also looked like she might drift off to sleep. "She's angry with me." Mawei said to the human when he looked at her.

"She's in shock." He said. "I think I am too. I never dreamed that a creature like you even existed, let alone that we would be able to communicate. We're having a conversation somehow, but I don't understand. We can see each other's thoughts."

"No, you project your thoughts through your eyes, face, and posture. Your inner thoughts are still your own." Mawei looked at Helena, shivering in the strange smelling cocoon the man had inside the shell of the tent. She remembered her uncle telling her that humans put things inside of other things. "I'm only here because of the child. She's in danger and I thought you could help."

"What danger is she in?" He asked.

Mawei told him that contact with humans was forbidden among her kind, and that some yetis had found out about the child and wanted to destroy her. "If they knew I was talking with you they would want to destroy you too." Mawei said. "I thought it was worth the risk for the sake of the little one. I think Ruffer, the night-yeti you spoke with, has drawn them off our trail but I can't be sure. I want to get the child to safety as soon as possible."

"I understand," he said. "First we need to know more about her. Where and when was this car accident?"

"Seven days ago, far northwest of here."

"I'll see if I can find any information about her." He turned to Helena and asked her in sound language what her last name was.

She stared up at the underside of the blue tent. "*I... I forget.*" She said. She started crying again.

"*It's okay,*" he said, "*we'll figure it out.*" He pulled a laptop computer out of a padded bag and began to type.

Mawei nudged his leg and he stopped and looked at her. "What are you doing?" She asked.

"This machine is a way that humans share information. If two people were killed in a car accident seven days ago, information about it will be on here."

"How does the information get there?" Mawei asked, leaning in and taking a closer look at the flickering screen.

"Through the air." He said. "This is a special machine that sends a signal up to a satellite in space. It's powered by rays from the sun that come through cells I placed in the treetops."

Mawei had no idea what he was talking about but pretended she understood. She thought that humans had created a hive-mind like bees or ants. A shudder went through her body. "Will other humans know that we are with you through this device?"

"No, not unless I tell them," he said. "And I'm not going to tell them. If I put this on my blog no one would believe me anyway." He went back to looking at the screen as Mawei thought about how profoundly weird and perplexing humans were. "*Here's something,*" he said with his voice, "*is your last name Polson?*"

"*Yes.*" Helena said. "*Helena Polson is me. Helena Polson, Helena Polson, Helena Polson.*" She repeated it to herself as if she might forget.

The human looked at the screen for a while and then at Mawei. “The accident caused quite a stir.” He said. “The investigators assumed that she was eaten by a bear. They said they found claw marks in the back seat and bear tracks in the area. It’s considered a big deal because a human hasn’t been attacked by a bear in this state in years.” He went back to reading his screen. “They quote the child’s grandmother –she’s devastated of course. The poor woman thinks a bear ate her granddaughter. Her name is *Linda Banter* and it says she lives in *Willow Creek*.” He spoke the woman’s name and the name of the town in sound language. “They were coming from her house when they had the accident. I’ll see if I can find her address.” He tapped some buttons and stared at the screen. “Yes, here,” he said, “*32 Otter Lane*, that’s where she lives.”

“You’ll take us there?” Mawei asked.

“No, I don’t have a car.” He said. “I could call a friend who brings me supplies sometimes. He’d take the girl to her grandmother’s house.”

“*Nana?*” Helena asked in sound language.

“Yes,” he said, “*how does that sound?*”

“*She’s my mommy’s mommy- she’ll give me a bath.*”

“*She misses you very much.*” The man said. He put his laptop down and pulled out a smaller glowing device. He touched it a few times and held it up to his ear. He told the person on the other end that he needed help. “*Yeah I know it’s Christmas Eve man, but this is an emergency. I wouldn’t ask otherwise.*” It took Mawei a moment to realize he was speaking to someone who was far away. “*No I’ll explain when you get here ok? Just come.*”

Every Christmas Eve St James Episcopal Church in Three Pines holds a living nativity with live actors portraying Mary, Joseph, and the three wise men. The newborn Jesus is usually portrayed by two or three babies in rotation, or by a doll when a live baby isn't available. Various types of farm animals are brought in for the occasion, so it doubles as a kind of petting zoo for the kids. It's an all-day event with a catered lunch and a bonfire after sundown.

It was a tradition that had grown over the years so that not only the entire population of Three Pines came out, but families from as far away as West Fork. The church was at the bottom of a hill, down below the highway, and the parking lot where the living nativity took place was bordered by a high rock cliff. Throughout the day people would come and look at the nativity and get a bite to eat, and the kids would play with the animals and the grownups would put some money in the donation jar and be on their way.

There were about thirty people milling around when Ruffer fell off the cliff and landed behind Mary and Joseph, among the piglets and sheep. The actors in the nativity were supposed to remain still, but the sound of Ruffer hitting the pavement and the reaction of the crowd made them break character. The man playing Joseph was an experienced outdoorsman, and he looked at the mass of black fur calmly. "It's a bear." He said to the cast and astonished audience. "They can be dangerous when they're injured, we better get all these people into the church quick."

"I got a rifle in my truck." One of the wise men said.

"Good," Joseph said, "get it." The parents began rounding up their kids and everyone was trying to get into the church without panicking. Pastor William, who'd seen the whole thing, was already on the phone to the police.

Ruffer had been unconscious for about thirty seconds and when he came-to he heard the sound of humans talking excitedly and a sheep baa, baa, baaing near his ear. He sat up and took in his surroundings, looking for a place to hide from the humans before they saw him, but it was too late. Two humans with fake fur on their faces were staring at him, and they looked very scared. One of them was pointing a black branch at him and Ruffer remembered Rei's talk about devices that spit teeth. He took the stick from the man and stood up. Joseph and the wise man stepped back away from him, looking at him as if he were a ghost.

Ruffer tossed the man's rifle over his shoulder and it hit the cliff and broke in two. He brushed the men to the ground with the back of his hand, and staggered toward the trees down by the creek. He seemed to disappear when he got there, and the incident became a story that was much told around Three Pines, but not very much believed.

It took nearly four hours to get to the meeting point. If Mawei had known the way she could've gotten there much faster, but she had to follow this longhaired human who seemed to move with an excess of caution. Helena was still wearing the man's shirt and hat, and he'd given her socks too, but on their journey one had fallen off, leaving a foot exposed to the cold. Mawei held the naked foot in her hand to keep it warm as they slowly picked their way through the snowy woods.

Eventually they got to an empty two-lane mountain road, and walked about a half a mile on it before they came to a pickup truck idling on the shoulder. They approached it from behind and Mawei could see a thin man in a baseball cap sitting in the driver's seat. He was listening to the radio and he didn't notice them until they were right outside his window. He looked up at Mawei and, in a blind panic, scrambled back in his seat away from her before recovering enough to throw the truck into drive and tear out of there with a screech. Ruffer's longhaired human screamed for him to stop and ran after the truck waving his arms, but it went around a bend and was gone.

"I guess he didn't like the look of us." Mawei said to the man as he walked back to her and Helena.

"He's just scared. Hang on I'll call him." He took out his small glowing device and dialed up his friend. He sounded angry and was standing in a posture of annoyance. When he was finished he put the device back into the front pocket of his army coat. "He's coming back," he said.

"Would he tell other humans about this?" Mawei asked.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't worry about it. He's not exactly what you would call a reliable witness, and I'll make sure he doesn't get any pictures."

Mawei didn't know what he meant by 'pictures' but she felt reassured. The truck came around the bend and moved toward them slowly. It stopped about forty feet away and the lights flashed. The longhaired human told Mawei and Helena to wait and ran up the road to the truck. He spoke for a long time to the man, who kept looking out the window at Mawei and Helena, as if he wanted to make sure he wasn't imagining the whole thing.

Ruffer's human jogged back to them and shook his head, a gesture Mawei didn't recognize. "He's afraid," he said in yeti. "He wants to help, but if you give the child to us and we bring her to her grandmother's house there will be questions. We can't say a beast with large-feet brought her to us, and no one would believe that she survived in the wilderness all this time on her own. They'll want to know why we didn't bring her home sooner."

"You don't understand." Mawei said. "I'm not going to just hand the child to you. She's my responsibility and I have to see her to safety myself. I just want you to show me which dwelling belongs to her grandmother because they all look the same to me. Tell your friend that all he has to do is get us there and I'll do the rest. No other humans need to know you're involved."

The longhaired man jogged back to his friend and they spoke for a minute before he waved for them to come to the truck. As Mawei approached, carrying little Helena, the man in the truck stared at her, slack-jawed.

"You can lie flat in the back of the truck with the tarp over you and no one will see you back

there.” Ruffer’s human said. “The girl can ride up front with us.”

“No.” Mawei said. “She’ll ride with me in the back.” Mawei stepped into the bed of the truck, lowering it considerably on its shocks, and sat down with Helena beside her. She shook the snow off of the tarp and pulled it up, halfway over them. Mawei’s large body took up most of the space in the bed of the truck, and even lying on a diagonal she had to bend her legs to fit. Helena curled up in the crook of her arm and Mawei pulled the tarp the rest of the way over them. It had a strange smell and the light coming through turned Mawei and the child blue. Mawei held Helena close to her as the truck began to move.

It was a winding mountain road and Mawei and Helena were being pushed from side to side with the turns. Mawei felt every bump in the road through the bed of the truck slamming into her hip, but she grit her teeth and took the pain without comment. When they went around a particularly sharp curve she noticed Helena looking at her. “What?” Mawei asked.

“You’re scared.” Helena said.

“I’ve never been in one of these things before.” Mawei said. “We’re going very fast.”

“You’re scared of riding in a truck.” The child said. They went over a bump and Mawei winced.

Eventually the blue light coming through the tarp started to fade as evening turned to night. Mawei wasn’t sure how long they’d been traveling because the smell of the tarp mixed with gasoline and exhaust had made her lightheaded and seemed to be warping her perception of time. It could have been one hour or three, she couldn’t tell.

The truck began moving at a much slower speed and finally stopped. Mawei pulled the tarp back and sat up, breathing in the fresh air. The road they were on had human dwellings on either side in neat rows. “*This is my Nana’s street!*” Helena said in sound language, jumping up in the back of the truck.

Mawei could see what her uncle had meant when he said that humans lived in a world of light. Each dwelling had rectangular openings with light shining from inside, and there were also strings of small, multicolored lights on the houses and even on some of the trees.

Mawei climbed out of the back of the truck and picked up Helena. The longhaired human got out of the cab. “This is it,” he said in yeti. “The girl’s grandmother lives in the one back there that doesn’t have any lights up.”

“Thank you for your help.” Mawei said.

The man stuck his hand out sideways at Mawei. “Humans grasp each other’s right hand as a sign of respect.” He said.

Mawei took his little hand in hers and held it for a moment. He looked directly in her eyes, as if he were afraid he would miss some detail of the moment, and then turned to Helena. “*You’re a very lucky little girl,*” he said, “*you should try to remember this.*” He got back in the truck and shut the door, and Mawei watched it move down the road, hoping she would never have to ride in another human vehicle ever again.

She went toward the only dark house on the street. It was a small place with yellow paint peeling off the front porch. There were no lights coming from any of the windows, but Mawei saw a bluish glow coming from around back. She crunched her way up the gravel driveway, past a beat-up old car, and came into a small backyard. The glow she’d seen was coming from a television that flickered in the living room, behind sliding glass doors. Mawei went up onto the cement patio, holding little Helena, and walked up to the glass. At first she thought the room was empty, but there was a woman sitting on an old couch. “Is that your grandmother?” Mawei asked the child.

“I can’t see.” Helena said. She reached up and banged her tiny fist against the glass three times. “*Hey Nana!*” She shouted.

The woman in the room jumped to her feet as if ready to fight or run. She stared at the sliding door, unable to make out what was on the other side. Helena banged her fist on the glass again. “*Nana let us in!*” The woman held her hands up to her mouth and cried out as if she were being tormented by evil spirits or just plain losing her mind. She walked stiffly to the sliding door and opened it just enough to stick her head out. She saw Helena and stepped onto the patio, but then froze when she got a clear view of Mawei.

Mawei set little Helena down, and the child walked over to her grandmother in the too-big shirt and one bare foot. The woman silently fell to her knees, took the wool cap off of her granddaughter, looked at her for a moment, and then threw her arms around her. Tears were streaming down the woman’s face and she was shaking violently.

She looked up at Mawei and then stood, lifting Helena. Mawei could see that she was terrified and couldn’t understand what was happening. It was as if her reality had ripped open and Mawei had stepped through the breach. Mawei slowly, unthreateningly, walked toward them. “I have to go now little bird.” She said to the child.

Helena scrunched up her nose at Mawei. “I’m glad the police didn’t catch you.” She said.

“Thanks.” Mawei said. She leaned in and touched her nose to Helena’s and then turned and left. She went back down the gravel driveway and began running when she reached the road. The woods were only a half-mile away and she wanted to get there as fast as she could and leave the human village behind her. A light snow began to fall as she ran toward the welcoming darkness of the forest.

THE END

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