

Four Fiends

Four Fiends

Countdown Chronicles No. 1



Nikki Bennett



FIREDRAKE BOOKS, LLC
Set your imagination on fire

Four Fiends

Text copyright © 2012, 2014 by Nicole A. Bennett

Illustrations and cover design copyright © 2015

by Stephen R. Bennett IV

Edited by Helen McCarthy

Published by Firedrake Books, LLC. All
rights reserved.

ISBN 10: 1-941036-26-0

ISBN 13: 978-1-941036-26-6

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner and are not to be constructed as real.

Printed in the United States of America



Dedication

to all my nieces and nephews
your loving Aunt Nikki



Contents

The Cave	1
The Church	5
The Lighthouse	8
The Mountain	13
The Yellow Dragon	18
Pietro's Problem	29
Hongjun	43
The Showdown	53
Saburo's Spoon	64
Miz Leeds	74
The Cyclone	87
Kate and the Parrot	98
Maka	110
Kate's Downfall	126
Jinjing's Quest	142
The Girl and the Goat	152
The Final Fight	160
Home	178

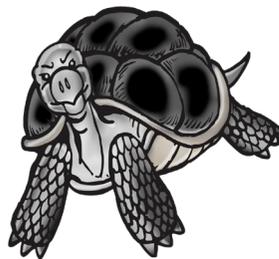
Ages ago, before humans sailed the seven seas, before saber toothed tigers roamed ancient valleys, even before the dinosaurs stomped through history, a golden dragon lived on a small island in a vast sea.

This magical creature had one great limitation. It was bound to the island and could not leave it. However, it had four friends that traveled where they pleased, and using the dragon's great wisdom these Four protected the world.

The Vermillion Bird roosted in the southern lands, the Azure Dragon guarded the eastern realms, the White Tiger prowled the western wilds, and the Black Tortoise shared its knowledge with those in the north. Occasionally they visited the dragon to report the latest news and ask for advice.

Suddenly, the Four vanished. Something terrible had happened to the dragon's friends. They needed to be rescued. But the dragon could not leave its island.

It needed someone who could find the guardians. And save the world.



The Cave

Hong Kong–November

JINJING VESTA COOK *knew* she was a monster.

The other kids never used her real name. They called her “Godzilla” or “Mount Everest.” They shouted “Fe-Fi-Fo-Fum!” as she walked past. She towered over them, and that made her a freak.

If she had been tall but athletic, or large but friendly, she might have been all right. She wasn’t. She was gigantic, chunky, shy and awkward all at once, a lumbering mountain with feet, the perfect victim for swaggering bullies, egotistical pretty girls, and harassed nerds who took great joy in finding someone even *they* could pick on.

Jinjing meant clear, like crystal, and *Vesta* was a Roman goddess. *Cook* came from her father, an Englishman who moved to Hong Kong, married a pretty lady

Four Friends

from Kowloon, and welcomed his beautiful daughter into the world.

But she didn't fit her name. From the start she was awkward and slow, and although her parents loved her, she knew they were disappointed. Only Jinjing's grandfather, her *gong-gong*, loved her just the way she was.

Gong-gong worked in an antique shop, and every day after school, Jinjing rode the long escalator up the streets of SoHo all the way to Hollywood Road. In Gong-gong's shop she learned about the antiques he sold: their history, how they were made, what they were worth. Jinjing loved smelling the rich aroma of wood, the dry tang of paint on canvas, and the dusty fragrance of objects crammed with ancient secrets and mysterious pasts.

If Gong-gong was busy with a customer, Jinjing would wander out of the shop and tramp through SoHo, past the art dealers and antique collectors, beyond the bustling restaurants and clubs that swamped Staunton Street, and up the Central-Mid Level Escalator, the longest escalator in the world. It ran almost a kilometer from Des Voeux Road down near Victoria Harbor all the way to Conduit Road where the buildings ended and the steep slopes of Victoria Peak began.

Close to the end of the escalator's route Jinjing would hop off, meander down a small street, and enter a quiet garden untouched by Hong Kong's hustle and bustle. The garden was open to the public but no one ever came there. It was tucked away in a sleepy, forgotten spot. The one interruption to the tranquility was a rush of water gurgling through the garden.

The Cave

The water flowed out of a cave.

At least, that's what Jinjing pretended. A dark, mysterious cave. In reality, it was a manmade rainwater tunnel. A peaked archway embedded in a wall of faded gray stone made up the entrance to Jinjing's "cave," and a small stream flowed out and rushed down a concrete ditch to the harbor far below.

One day, near December but still very warm out, Jinjing sat on a bench and stared into her cave, wondering. If she followed the dark passage, where would it lead? She dreamt that it might take her to a different world. A world where people loved and adored her.

She rubbed a spot on her arm where a girl at school had "accidentally" popped her with a swinging backpack.

A world where she was witty and pretty and popular. Maybe that's what lay at the end of the tunnel. She wished she had the courage to go in and find out.

She knew better. Dark tunnels were full of insects and spiders and maybe even monsters (although she didn't *really* believe in monsters.) So she contented herself by gazing at the dark passageway and dreaming.

And then it happened.

A flash of blinding light pulsed out of the tunnel. Beautiful white light—it made the dirty stones sparkle—and then it vanished. It hadn't lasted for more than a second. Jinjing leapt up, her heart racing, and stared.

Another pulse broke through the darkness. And another. And another.

Four Fiends

They were like beacons, sending bright signals for somebody to answer. For *her* to answer. An electric thrill shot through the girl as she clambered over the barrier with no more hesitation, thumped into the ditch, and plowed through the rushing water, towards the entrance of her cave.

Towards the beautiful white light.

2

The Church

Italy—December

PIETRO FOUND IT in the *Chiesa di Santo Augusto*—the Church of St. Augustus.

The place fascinated him. In ancient times they buried dead people right under the church floor. The more important the person, the closer to the front of the church he was buried. The most important person was Saint Augustus himself. He lay in prominence right under the altar.

That was where he found it.

On that day he was supposed to help in his father's olive orchard, but a cold wind whipped through the trees and he craved the warm indoors. Most of the olives had been harvested in October, only a few still clung to the trees, and he thought: *they don't need my help*. So when his father and brother had their backs

Four Fiends

turned, Pietro sprinted through the chilly orchard and headed for the sheltered church.

He skidded to a halt at the stone steps and gasped. Silvery light pulsed out the windows and through a crack in the collapsed wooden door. He peered through the crack. The church was empty except for the bursts of silver light.

Pietro wasn't afraid. He stared at the light in excitement. The hairs on his arms prickled as he crept down the aisle. The light's source lay on St. Augustus' tomb.

It looked like a small, gray worm—but it *glowed*. He picked it up and it wriggled and made his palm tingle. It was no bigger than his thumb. The bursts of light stopped as the worm curled up on his hand. He closed his fist around it and ran back to the orchard where his brother Luigi was packing up for the afternoon.

"Look at this," Pietro whispered, opening his fist. The little worm wriggled and glowed. Luigi grunted.

"Look at what, stupido? Your dirty palm?"

"The worm! See? It's glowing. And you can see right through it. What's that called, transparent?"

"Pietro, quit playing," Luigi said. "There's nothing there."

"Pietro, where were you?" his father, trudging up the road and rubbing his tired back, asked. "You were supposed to help today."

Luigi shot Pietro an evil grin. "He was playing in the chiesa again, Papa."

Pietro's father grimaced. "Son, you need to stay away from that place. It's dangerous."

The Church

“Oh, no it isn’t,” Pietro said.

“You’ll think different if a wall falls on your head.”

“Anyway, Papa, look what I found.” Pietro held out his hand.

His father sighed. “Pietro, there’s nothing there. Stop with this foolishness. Your games aren’t funny. You make up things. This is not good.”

They couldn’t see the worm.

They thought he was making up stories. They *always* thought he made up stories. True, sometimes he did, but not now. He felt frustrated that he couldn’t convince them. So, he took the worm to his room and stopped talking about it. *He* knew it was real.

He decided to keep it as a pet, and wondered what to feed it. It had a large hole on one end that Pietro thought must be a mouth. He figured worms would eat dirt so he put some in the hole. The dirt just dribbled back out. He tried lettuce and cheese and even a piece of salami, but the worm refused to eat any of it.

Pietro was stumped. It didn’t matter—the worm grew without eating a thing. Every day it grew longer and fatter, and after two weeks, it was as long and wide as Pietro’s arm.

And nobody saw it except him.

3

The Lighthouse

USA - January

SHE NAMED HIM Bo after her pet parrot that had flown away in October, never to return. She had mourned and cried over that bird and waited every night by her bedroom window, hoping he'd fly back. He never had.

She found her replacement pet on an "educational trip" to the Cape May lighthouse. Her father loved visiting lighthouses and towed his uninterested daughter along. As he droned on about how the lighthouse was rebuilt in the 1800's due to the encroaching shoreline, she counted steps. The lighthouse had almost two hundred steps total, and she had counted to almost that much when she saw the red glow pulsing above her.

She reached the top of the stairs. There he was.

A month later Kate had discovered many interesting things about her very odd pet. One: he was invisible to

The Lighthouse

everyone except her. This didn't bother Kate. It made him even more special. Two: even though he didn't eat anything, he grew and grew. In no time he was as long as Kate was tall. And three: her new companion was hollow inside. His undulating body contained no guts or brains or heart, or *anything* except a huge mouth on one end and a long hollow tube inside. When he was smaller, she could stick her finger in his mouth and push it all the way in. He wiggled but didn't seem to mind, and after he grew longer, she could fit her whole hand in there. Bo molded to fit the form of her hand. He felt nice and smooth and cool and she could wiggle her fingers and pick up things just like she was wearing a glowing red glove. When she took her hand away, the odd creature reverted to his tubular shape.

He also had an electric charge. Kate didn't feel it much, but one day her father got too close and he jumped back and yelled "Ow!" He couldn't *see* Kate's pet but he sure *felt* him. The little amount of hair he had frizzed and smoldered and he wandered away, scratching his head and looking perplexed.

After that, Bo steered clear of everyone except Kate. When he was small, he stayed tucked in her room, but by the time he measured four feet long he started following her around like a dog. He'd glide behind her when she went to see her friends and he'd slither on top of the bus, ride it to school and hover outside, waiting for her. If Kate looked out the classroom window, she could see the top of his glowing head.

Four Friends

At least she *assumed* it was his head. She had no idea which was his top and which was his bottom. Sometimes he crawled with the big hole in front; sometimes he moved the other way. He didn't seem to have a specific top or bottom so Kate had to assume that whatever end was facing her must be the leading end that particular day.

One day at lunchtime, a very strange incident happened. Kate made her customary swing by the school restroom, put some lipstick on (even though her father warned her she was too young to be wearing it) brushed her hair, and met Josie and Mary in the cafeteria. The three girls had been friends ever since they could crawl, but she hadn't told them about Bo. She hadn't told anybody about him. He was her special secret.

"Did you see the new boy?" Mary said.

Kate had. He was in her third period class. He looked and acted as if he were king of the world.

Mary sighed. "He's the cutest boy I've ever seen."

Kate snorted.

"He's a jerk," Josie said. "He was in my science class and he spilled acid on my book, on purpose. See?" She held up the mutilated text for inspection.

"I can't believe he'd do that," Mary said.

"Believe it. And don't get any ideas. You don't want him as a boyfriend, and he wouldn't like you anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because, no matter how nice your clothes are and how much you curl your hair, you still wear glasses

The Lighthouse

and have braces and you're nerdy, like me," Josie said, "and cute guys don't go for nerds. They go for pretty girls like Kate who sing and dance and do cheerleader things."

Kate grinned. "Are you saying I'm all puffy nothingness with no brains?"

"You *know* what I mean."

"Maybe he likes smart girls," Mary said.

"He doesn't like them, he bullies them. Case in point, my science book."

"He's coming this way," Kate said. The other girls dropped their eyes and studied their lunch trays. Kate didn't. She wasn't afraid of boys. They were afraid of *her*. It had something to do with her wavy red hair and her perky smile and the fact that she thought all boys were morons who didn't deserve the time of day.

A shadow fell over their table. Kate looked up. The new kid stood next to Josie. That smirk made his handsome features much less agreeable. Kate looked away in disgust, and was startled to see Bo squeezing through a window. He *never* came into the school, but there he was, winding his way between kids holding teetering lunch trays. He managed to slide up to Kate without electrifying anybody.

"You need a new book," the kid laughed at Josie, who was grimacing at her tray and crushing her milk carton in one hand.

Kate glared at him. "It was fine 'till you showed up."

"Well, maybe I'll just take it off her hands then," the boy said, making a grab for the book.

Four Fiends

A jolt of anger rocketed right through Kate. She jumped up and yanked the book back, her eyes blazing. Mary and Josie shrunk behind her.

The boy's eyes widened, and then he *grinned*. Bad mistake. Kate shot the kid a dirty look before turning her attention back to Bo. He moved protectively toward her, and the next thing she knew, she was encased in a red cocoon. Her pet had completely covered her. His mouth was now down at her feet and her entire body was enclosed in a thick, red skin. She could move her arms and her legs easy enough so she took a step towards the glowering boy, her fists clenched.

Kate felt both exhilarated and invincible. "You'd better get out of here, boy."

"Says who?" The boy took a menacing step nearer.

Kate put out her hands and tapped his shoulder. He jerked backwards and fell to the floor, howling in pain and fright. His short hair frizzled and smoked. Kate laughed. This felt good.

"What's going on?" a cafeteria worker yelled, stomping over to see what the howling was all about.

The boy scrambled to his feet and ran right out of the cafeteria. Kate smirked as her protective pet slipped off her and slithered out the window. She sat down, smoothed her hair, and began eating her lunch.

Josie stared, her mouth hanging open.

"What just happened?" Mary whispered.

Kate laughed. "Beats me. I guess he couldn't handle my shocking personality."

4

The Mountain

Japan - February

THE SHRINE PERCHED ON the mountain behind Saburo's village. It was built when his great-grandfather was growing up. Saburo's grandfather used to tell him the story of how the shrine got there.

During World War II, after the government confiscated the villagers' rice to feed the soldiers, Saburo's great-grandfather hiked up the mountain and planted rice. Tall trees shrouded the rice paddy, which was so far up the mountain that they knew nobody would ever find it. He climbed the mountain every day, lugging heavy pails to water the rice. When there was no other food left, the grain they harvested in the autumn kept his family from starving.

When they could once again plant rice in the village, they built the shrine near the old paddy. They built

Four Fiends

it to always remind them of the sacrifices they had to make during the war.

Saburo hiked the mountain every week. He hated the climb but he enjoyed the view. He could see for miles: the village far below, rows of mountains further out, and, on very clear days, the Seto Inland Sea sparkling in the distance. Sometimes he would lie and read in the grassy area where the rice paddy once stood. Occasionally he'd climb the stone steps to the shrine.

That was where he found Oni.

In Japanese mythology, the *oni* were large, bulky, ogre-like demons with horns growing out of their heads. They carried heavy clubs and wore loincloths of tiger skins. Other kids thought they were scary. Saburo found them fascinating.

His Oni wasn't a demon, though. Saburo thought maybe he was a worm. A strange, blue worm. And he knew that Oni was a hero.

Once, on the walk to school, a big dog ran out from behind a house and headed straight for the boy, growling. Saburo froze in fear. Before the dog could attack, Oni shot forward and the dog bounced backwards and scampered off, yapping in fright.

And once, when he was getting ready for bed, his brother Jiro started to pick a fight. Saburo tried to keep the peace but Jiro was in a bad mood and took it out on his little brother. Then Oni inched up and bumped him from behind. The shock shut him up.

The main reason Oni was Saburo's hero was this: When Saburo was little, his mother ran their car

The Mountain

off the road and Saburo's hip and legs were broken. Several operations later he still limped and his legs always ached. He couldn't run with the other kids or play sports very well, and his balance was so bad, he stopped riding his bike. The constant spills he took frustrated him way too much.

He couldn't do the things others took for granted, and the kids teased him relentlessly, which made him angry. His mother decided he should strengthen his legs so every weekend she made him climb the mountain. He griped and complained but had no choice in the matter. At first he only got a little way. Each time he got a little further, and soon he could trudge to the top.

One day, after Oni had grown from a little speck to over five feet long, Saburo's mother sent him out on his weekend walk. He was in a bad mood and didn't see the point in trudging up the steep slope yet again. It was cold out and his legs felt stiff. Oni slunk behind him like a big blue slug. Finally Saburo plunked down on a rock, rubbing his legs.

"Forget it, Oni-chan," he said. "I'm not climbing all the way up there today."

And then it happened. Oni glided right up to the boy, opened his wide mouth, and sucked Saburo in. headfirst.

The next thing Saburo knew, Oni sped up the mountain, faster and faster until there they were, looking down at the village below. Saburo whooped, but Oni wasn't finished. He flew on, past trees and rocks until they were sliding down the mountain's other side. They

Four Fiends

went faster and faster, and it was incredible, amazing, stupendous. Saburo had never felt so alive and free.

He thought: *maybe my mother might worry if I don't come home soon.* Right on cue, Oni headed back to the village. In no time they were at Saburo's front door. Oni popped off the boy and lay there as if nothing had even happened.

From then on, whenever Saburo thought: *I'd like to go somewhere fast,* Oni would gulp him down and they'd shoot down the road. It was better than any bike, faster than any car, more exhilarating than anything Saburo had ever known. And much easier than walking.

One day they were flying down a small road without many cars on it. Whenever a car *did* pass, Oni would dive for cover. Even though nobody could see Oni, the boy was still visible. Saburo laughed to think how shocked people would be if they saw him lying on his belly and shooting down the road with no visible transport.

The sunlight dimmed and Saburo thought: *let's go back home now.*

This time Oni didn't turn around. He plowed forward, and Saburo got a little nervous. Just a little. He trusted his hero and knew Oni wouldn't let any harm come to him, but he didn't want his mother to worry. He tried to communicate this to his pet. Oni wasn't listening.

They veered away from the road, speeding through frosty fields and over stony mountains. The sea came into view, flat and gray in the dimming light.

The Mountain

Oni didn't slow down. He shot off a cliff and plopped into the icy water.

Saburo didn't feel the cold or the wetness. He was warm and toasty and dry and he could breathe. They were swimming under water and he could *breathe*, and he was so excited by this, he forgot about his mother, the approaching night, or anything else. This was fantastic!

He stared into the murky water. Oni glowed just enough for him to glimpse the sea floor speeding under them as they zoomed onwards, flying along the sea bed, faster and faster.

He thought: *I wonder where Oni is taking me.*

5

The Yellow Dragon

AT FIRST THERE was one. He sat on a rock, swinging his legs and gazing at the white beach and sapphire sea behind it. Warm wind whipped through his black hair. A smile was plastered on his face.

Then, out of the jungle came another. He walked from under the shadowy branches into the bright sunlight, brushed his long bangs away from his eyes, and blinked. He saw the boy sitting on the rock and waved.

“Ciao!”

“Konnichiwa!” the boy on the rock answered.

They perused each other, not knowing what to say after the initial hello, but they were boys. They understood each other. They ran laughing towards the beach—one sprinting gracefully, the other trailing behind and limping slightly—and fell into the frothy water. They swam and dove for shells and body surfed

The Yellow Dragon

the small breakers until they were tired, then they dragged their bodies onto the warm sand.

“Saburo,” the first boy said.

The second boy nodded, grinning. “Pietro.”

They couldn’t communicate any further. Neither knew the other’s language.

The third came.

She lumbered up the beach. She had short black hair and a sallow face. She was dressed in a blue school uniform with a long skirt. The boys waved. She stopped at a distance, watching them with shy interest.

The last to appear strode up the beach. Her red hair was tied in a ponytail. A short skirt revealed long, athletic legs. One of the boys whistled. She frowned, moved to a large rock and perched on its edge.

“Hey! Does anybody know what we’re doing here?”

The large girl walked over to her. “They can’t understand you. The black haired boy looks like he’s from Japan, the other sounds Italian. I’m from Hong Kong. What about you?”

“America,” the red headed girl said. “Do they speak English in Hong Kong?”

The large girl nodded. She looked nervous, like it was taking all her courage to speak. “English and Cantonese. I speak a little Mandarin too, but I don’t understand what the boys are saying.”

The other girl grinned. “They probably aren’t saying much. They *are* boys after all. How did you get here?”

“My...um...pet took me here. It’s hard to explain...”

Four Fiends

"You have one too? Is it long and red and glows and shocks people if they get too close?"

"Yes," the big girl said, sighing with relief. "Except mine is white, not red. My name is Jinjing."

"I'm Kate. Do you think the boys have them too?"

"They must," Jinjing said. "Mine left me as soon as we got here. What about yours?"

"Same thing," Kate said. "It feels weird, not having him around. I wonder where they went."

The question had just escaped her mouth when they spotted four sleek, wormy-looking things gliding up the beach. The white and red ones veered toward them, rose up and encapsulated them both. Jinjing and Kate stared at each other, laughing.

Jinjing gave the other girl a smile. "You look all red."

"Hey!" one of the boys yelled. "You have them too!" He ran towards the girls. The Japanese boy, who was covered in blue, followed. The first boy gave them an excited smile through his gray worm.

"We understand each other now!" the Japanese boy, who introduced himself as Saburo, said.

"Without the worms we couldn't," Pietro said.

Kate made a face. "Worms?" Is that what they are?"

"Well," Pietro said, "I don't know *what* they are, but that's the closest thing I could think of."

"Typical boy," Kate said.

"Well what would you call them?"

"I call mine Bo after my old pet parrot."

"My worm's name is Oni," Saburo said. "That's a horned demon that carries a big club."

The Yellow Dragon

“I named mine Zeus, the king of all the Greek gods. What about you?” Pietro asked Jinjing, who looked upset.

“I didn’t know we were *supposed* to name them,” she said. “I guess I’ll call mine Ru. That’s short for ru-chong. Which means worm. I’m not too creative when it comes to names, I guess. I called my cat ‘kitty’ and my doll ‘dolly.’ When I was little, I mean,” she added. “I don’t have a doll now.”

“I wonder why they brought us here,” Pietro said. He felt a tug as his “worm” lowered itself to the ground.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Kate said, as they glided away from the beach and into the tangled jungle.



IT COILED AROUND a rocky hill. Fiery eyes gazed at them from a blocky yellow head. Sharp horns protruded from the head, and two long whiskers snaked away from either side of the red nostrils. The whiskers undulated in the air, moving as if on their own accord.

The dragon’s snaky body wrapped around the hill and tapered to a thin, whippy tail with a tuft of hair at the end. Every so often, the tuft burst into a beautiful golden flame that traveled up the dragon’s spines until the entire creature was ablaze. Then, abruptly the fire went out. A few minutes later, the tail reignited and the whole thing began again.

“Wow,” Jinjing said.

Kate stared at the dragon. “Is it real?”

It looked real to Pietro. In fact, it almost looked too real to *be* real.

Four Fiends

The dragon turned its mesmerizing eyes towards them. They waited for something to happen. Then Pietro gasped as he stared into the dragon's eyes. The harder he stared, the more he saw. Things. Moving, writhing things. A slithering blue dragon. A prowling white tiger. A fluttering red bird. And a black tortoise that lifted its thick head and stared directly into Pietro's wide eyes.

He told the others what he had seen.

Jinjing gasped. "Are you talking about the Four Guardians of the world?"

"The *what*?" Kate said.

Pietro nodded. "They're missing. He needs to find them."

"Who's missing?" Kate said. "Why can't the rest of us see these things?"

"Because they're not here. I see them in his eyes."

"The Four Guardians," Jinjing said, "are mythological creatures. They guard the four parts of the world."

"How'd you know that?" Kate asked.

Jinjing looked surprised. "*Everyone* knows that."

"Everyone in Hong Kong maybe," Kate said. "Not me."

Pietro ignored the conversation and immersed himself in the visions. The four creatures blurred and faded and a commanding voice replaced it as the dragon uncoiled and slithered towards a dark hole in the hill's center. The worms followed.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," Saburo said, not liking the looks of the hole one bit.

The Yellow Dragon

“Nothing good will come of this,” Kate agreed as her worm pushed her forward.

“Maybe it won’t hurt us,” Jinjing said. “It’s a dragon. Dragons are nice.”

“Are you crazy?” Kate said. “Dragons are evil. They breathe fire, capture maidens, charbroil knights, the whole bit.”

“Maybe in *your* country,” Jinjing said, “but most Chinese dragons are good. And that is definitely a Chinese dragon. Didn’t you see the whiskers? He looks just like the dragon statues my grandfather sells at his shop.”

They fell quiet as their worms propelled them down the hole and into a large cavern lit by thousands of glowing rocky spires hanging from the ceiling.

“Stalactites,” Pietro said.

“Yeah, except they’re all covered with diamonds,” Kate said. She stared, mesmerized. The gems emitted a faint but beautiful light.

There was nothing else in the cavern except themselves, the dragon, the opening behind them, and four smaller holes at the room’s other end. The dragon settled on the ground, crossed its front paws, and resumed its staring contest with Pietro.

“We are now,” Pietro said, “at the world’s exact center.”

“Stop it,” Kate said. “You’re freaking me out.”

Jinjing’s face lit up in comprehension. “It’s the Yellow Dragon! Am I right, Pietro?”

“I think so,” Pietro said.

Four Fiends

Jinjing's dark eyes shone. "I know this! The Four Guardians: the Azure Dragon of the east, the Vermilion Bird of the south, the White Tiger of the west, and the Black Tortoise of the north. And this is the Yellow Dragon of the center. He's the leader."

"The Tiger, the Bird, the Dragon and the Tortoise guard the world," Pietro said. "They keep harmony and balance in it, but they're missing. And if they stay missing, the world will fall into chaos. The Yellow Dragon is trying to find them so he can bring them back, but he can't leave the island."

"Why not?" Kate asked.

"I don't know," Pietro said. "He just can't. He wants us to find them instead."

"Why us?" Jinjing said. "We're nothing special."

"He needs us each to give him something," Pietro said. "Something we have on us right now. Anything. Find something and give it to me."

He unclipped a water bottle from his belt. Kate searched her pockets and came up with a lipstick tube. Jinjing unclipped a long barrette from her hair. Saburo found a key chain in his back pocket. They handed the objects to Pietro, who carried them right up to the dragon and held them out with his bare hands.

The Yellow Dragon lowered its head, brushed its whiskers on the objects, and breathed a shimmering silver smoke over them. Pietro brought the objects back to their owners.

"He says not to lose them," Pietro said. "He's enchanted them. To help us on our journey."

The Yellow Dragon

Saburo groaned. "We're going on a journey?" Journeys always meant a lot of walking.

Kate opened her lipstick tube. It looked exactly the same as before the dragon had breathed on it.

Pietro shook his head. "I don't think the magic will work here. I think we have to wait."

<<◇>>

PIETRO LOOKED OVER at Jinjing. "Have you ever heard of the Four Fiends?"

Jinjing thought hard to remember. "Gluttony, Chaos, Ignorance and Deviousness. Those are the Four Fiends. I think. Am I right?"

Pietro nodded. "He says that the Four Guardians keep balance in the world but there are also Four Fiends, and their mission is to disrupt that balance any way they can. He thinks that somehow these fiends have captured the guardians and taken them prisoner."

"How is he telling you all this stuff, and why can't we hear it too?" Kate said. "Or are you making all this up?"

"I'm *not* making it up. I don't know why I hear him and you don't. Maybe he can only talk to one of us at a time."

He turned his attention back to the dragon, whose fiery eyes focused on the boy as if the others weren't even in the room. "They take on different shapes so they'll be hard to locate. The Four Fiends, that is," Pietro said. "If we find the fiends, we'll find the guardians."

Jinjing shuddered. She wasn't sure she wanted to find a fiend. "We aren't going to have to try to kill them or anything, are we?"

Four Fiends

"He says maybe," Pietro said, "but we'll most likely have to fight ourselves to beat the fiends. Whatever that means."

"A test, that we have to pass." Saburo sighed. He *hated* tests.

"Something like that. If we pass the test, the guardians will be freed, and they'll return to this island," Pietro said.

He broke eye contact with the dragon and looked at the others. "There are four guardians, four fiends, and four of us. We each must fight a fiend to free a guardian. The fiend we most resemble."

"Well," Jinjing said, staring at her massive frame, "maybe Gluttony is my fiend. Even though I don't eat a lot. I was born chunky."

"Chaos, that's me," Pietro said.

"I'm *not* ignorant," Kate said, "and I'm not devious either. I'm not a glutton or chaotic. I'm none of 'em."

"Is there one for bigheadedness?" Pietro said, grinning. "You could be that."

Kate glowered at Pietro.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Jinjing said.

Pietro nodded towards the holes. "We go down one of those."

Jinjing shuddered. "Do we *have* to?"

"The dragon says those tunnels will take us to the right place and time to meet each fiend and free each guardian." Pietro wasn't quite sure what the dragon meant by *right place and time*, but figured they'd find out soon enough.

The Yellow Dragon

“Before we go anywhere,” Kate said, “we need some answers first.”

Pietro glanced at the dragon. “He says we can ask one question each.”

“Are the worms actual worms?” Saburo asked. “Because I don’t think they are.”

“That’s a wasted question!” Kate snapped, but it was too late.

Pietro stared at the dragon. “They aren’t worms. They’re a part of us. That’s why he sent them to us when they were just forming. As they grew, they absorbed our likes, fears, hopes and dreams, but they aren’t alive. They’re magic. The dragon made them to protect us and to take us where we need to go. Nothing can do us harm while we are inside them.”

“I’m going to call them ‘worms’ anyway,” Saburo said. “It’s easier that way.”

“If nothing can harm us,” Jinjing said, “it should be easy to defeat the fiends, shouldn’t it?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “You shouldn’t have said that in the form of a question.”

“He say’s they’ll protect us from the fiends, but they won’t protect us from ourselves.” Pietro turned to the dragon. “What does that mean?”

Kate moaned.

“Oh. He says we’ll find out,” Pietro said, grinning.

“Now that you’ve all wasted your questions, I’ll ask something that matters. How do these magical things work?” Kate asked, waving her lipstick tube in the air.

Four Fiends

Pietro laughed. "He says we'll find that out too, in time. That was a good question all right," he grinned as the dragon turned away from them and slid out the hole from which they had entered.

"What do we do now?" Jinjing said.

"We pick a hole and go down it," Pietro said.

They stared at the four gaping holes. "I don't get any of this," Kate said, "but if we have to do it, let's get it over with. Let's start with the hole to the left."

Saburo nodded. "Sounds good to me."

They didn't have to discuss any further. Their worms began wriggling that way.

6

Pietro's Problem

PIETRO LOVED TAKING dares.

He once pushed the school bully on a dare and wore the black eye that followed with pride. He ate a worm on a dare. He kissed Angela Calabretta after his brother Luigi dared him to do it. And last year he jumped on Signore Falcone's prize bull and stayed on for a full six seconds before the bull flung him into a thorny bush. Was he hurt? Yes. Was he sorry he did it?

Absolutely not.

Pietro never turned down a dare, but only one changed his life. That was the day Marcello Falcone dared him to run all the way to town and back after Pietro boasted he could run further than anyone in the neighborhood. The challenge required him to run the entire distance without stopping, close to ten kilometers. He made it to three before he fell to the ground, exhausted.

Four Fiends

It hurt his ego and reputation to lose a dare, and Pietro vowed to practice until he could run the entire distance. At first it was difficult, but after much practice, he could run it without a hitch in stride or a gasp for breath. Soon he forgot about the dare and ran for the sheer love of it. He began carrying a water bottle strapped to his belt. He'd chug the water as he ran, then fill it at the town fountain before heading back home.

The water bottle was just an old plastic container, but it was Pietro's most prized possession. One day, he took a permanent marker to it and drew a turtle sitting on a rock. The turtle had a wise look about it, and Pietro thought it was a pretty good drawing, considering he had never had the inclination to sketch anything before or since.

When he wasn't running and felt bored, he used the bottle as a squirt gun. He'd squeeze it and make the water shoot out the top. He had it confiscated more than once after squirting water at girls, and had to think up several convincing lies to get the bottle back.

After getting sprayed right into his eye, Pietro's father threatened to throw the bottle into the sea. Pietro didn't want *that* to happen, so he decided he'd better only aim the water at bugs and rocks and trees and things that didn't care if they got a little wet.

One hot summer day, as Pietro sat on the chiesa's steps, bored and restless, he squirted some water onto the ground. He watched the rivulets trickle crazy patterns in the dusty soil, and then his eyes opened wide. Those random waterlines were forming letters.

Pietro's Problem

BEWARE THE NI...

He peered at the letters, but they were running together. Beware the *Ni*? What was a *ni*? He squirted more water onto the ground. The droplets trickled through the words and washed away the message.

He meandered home, his thoughts a jumble. By the time he reached his front steps he decided it had all been a weird series of coincidences, or maybe his eyes had played tricks on him.

He tried to tell his father about it anyway. He thought it was important enough.

His father gave him the usual sigh. "Pietro, how many times do I have to tell you not to make things up?" "I'm *not*," Pietro said.

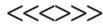
His father gave him a withering stare, and it dawned on Pietro how the boy who cried wolf must have felt. He knew he wasn't *quite* honest all the time. Like when he told his younger cousin that a whole family of trolls lived under the cliffs but they could only be seen at low tide. So his cousin did just that, and almost drowned when the high tide came in.

Pietro got in big trouble for that.

Another time, he boasted to Mariella Castiglia, a girl he liked, that he had sailed a boat all the way to Greece and back, by himself, and had found the island where the Cyclops lived. When he got to the part about fighting off the Cyclops with just a rubber band, Mariella snorted and walked away. He just couldn't stop himself.

Four Fiends

So when his father didn't believe him about the letters in the dirt, he let it drop. And it didn't take long before he forgot it had ever even happened.



THEY LANDED WITH a thud.

Crazy, colorful light swirled around them. It took Pietro a moment to realize the light was coming from the worms; red, blue, silver and white mixing and pulsing together. Behind the light lay complete blackness.

He felt absolute calm. He wondered what the others were thinking and studied their faces. The large girl looked scared to death. The pretty girl with the fiery hair just looked impatient.

Saburo gazed around, frowning. "Where are we now?"

"Wherever it is, it's sure dark," Kate said.

Pietro glanced at Jinjing, who looked nervous.

"Don't worry, nothing can hurt us while we have the worms. You're not afraid of the dark are you?"

The girl whimpered and nodded her head.

"It's nothing," Pietro said. "The dark isn't scary. Once I slept outside by myself, in a *graveyard*, every night for a week."

"Really?" Jinjing sounded impressed.

A puffy, exalted sensation filled Pietro's chest. He got that feeling whenever he stretched the truth and people (especially girls) fell for the lie.

Kate laughed. "You were stupid enough to sleep for a week in a graveyard?" Pietro's chest deflated.

Pietro's Problem

They weren't sure what to do next. The worms did not take them any further. They couldn't see anything in the dark. Jinjing whimpered that she was thirsty.

"I have some water in my bottle," Pietro said, unhooking it from his jeans. "I'm not sure how to pass it to you though," he said, "since Zeus is covering me."

Zeus promptly popped off and slithered to the side. The others' worms did the same. Pietro shivered. It was very cold in this place, without his worm to keep him warm. He brought the bottle to his lips, took a swig, and coughed.

He peered into the bottle. The water *wasn't* water. It tasted like cola. It even fizzed like cola, but Pietro only put water in his bottle. Anything else would have messed up the insides and been impossible to clean out.

He took a second swig and handed the bottle to Jinjing. She took a grateful gulp, smacked her lips and smiled after she drank, then passed it on. After everyone had a taste, Pietro, teeth chattering, looked at Zeus, who covered him up. Instantly he felt warmer.

"I put water in that bottle," he told the others, "but it tasted like cola, didn't it?"

"No," Saburo said. "hot chocolate."

Kate shook her head. "It tasted like orange juice."

Jinjing smiled. "Green tea for me. You gave your bottle to the Yellow Dragon. It's a magical bottle now, isn't it?"

Pietro stared at his bottle in excitement. "It must give us whatever drink we like best."

Four Fiends

“If your bottle works now,” Jinjing said, “will our stuff work too?”

Kate grabbed her lipstick tube and opened it. Nothing happened. Saburo rattled his key chain and Jinjing unclipped her barrette.

The objects lay motionless in their hands.

Saburo stared at his key chain. “Only Pietro’s works.”

Pietro opened his bottle and tried to take a drink. The bottle was bone-dry. “Maybe we have to be *out* of the worms for them to work,” he said.

“Well, that’s inconvenient,” Saburo said. “What if we need protection while we’re getting a drink? We’re completely exposed without the worms.”

“Just *try* it,” Pietro said.

Saburo slipped out of his worm and held up his key chain. He lifted his lone key into the air. Nothing happened. He lifted a small wooden spoon hanging from the chain, waving it in the cold breeze. The spoon began to smoke. Saburo was so surprised, he almost dropped it.

“Look at that,” Kate said, as the silver smoke spiraled downwards. It glistened like a million smoky diamonds, and crept over the ground, covering their shoes.

Jinjing shuffled away from the smoke. “What’s it doing?”

The smoke cleared, revealing a small, brown pot. Saburo grabbed it and opened the lid.

“That does it,” Kate said, shrugging off her worm.

“It’s a bowl of noodles,” Jinjing said.

Pietro's Problem

Saburo pulled a pair of chopsticks from the pot, grinned in amazement, and handed his key chain to Kate who seized it, waved it in the air, tapped her foot as the smoke congealed and cleared, and grabbed a plate topped with cheeseburger and fries. Kate tossed the spoon to Jinjing.

Pietro thought of what he'd want most: chicken cacciatore with his grandmother's homemade pasta and slices of fresh bread. He pulled off his worm—almost like undressing—and listened to his stomach grumble as Jinjing conjured up a huge slab of pepperoni pizza.

After they finished with the magical spoon, they sat on a log and Pietro passed his water bottle around. They ate and drank until they were stuffed and sleepy. They piled their plates and bowls on the ground.

Kate pulled out her lipstick tube and opened it. An orange flame popped out of the tube. Kate grinned. The flame grew and shrank as she twisted the tube's bottom back and forth.

Pietro jumped up and piled some twigs near the log. Kate lowered her lipstick tube and the little flame licked over the twigs, making them sparkle and snap. They huddled around the fire, holding their cold hands over it. Pietro motioned to Jinjing's hair.

Jinjing gave him a puzzled look, then her eyes widened in understanding and she reached up and unclipped her barrette. As she waved it, it morphed into a long, thin knife with a small wooden handle. She grinned.

Four Fiends

They climbed back in their worms. Jinjing's knife flipped back into a barrette, the fire went out with a *pop!* and the plates and bowls vanished. They all laughed.

"So we have food, water, fire and a weapon," Kate said, yawning. "How convenient."

"What should we do now?" Jinjing said.

Pietro felt warm, full and drowsy. "I think we'll be okay if we sleep right here."

"But we don't even know where we are yet," Jinjing said.

"And this place doesn't look to comfortable," Saburo said, grimacing at the stony ground.

Pietro lay down. "So? See, I don't even feel the rocks. Zeus acts like a nice spongy mattress. And since the Yellow Dragon said nothing can hurt us if we're inside the worms, we don't have to worry about keeping a lookout."

They lay down next to each other. Pietro stared at the shadowy branches covering them like a canopy.

He felt safe. And content. And very, very sleepy...



HE WASN'T SURE why he made up stories.

There must have been a time where he didn't, but he couldn't remember how long ago that was. He always felt compelled to stretch the truth. Plain reality was never interesting enough. The bad thing was that he *knew* his more exaggerated stories were unbelievable and the truth would have gotten him into far less trouble, but weaving a wild tale was much more entertaining than telling the simple truth.

Pietro's Problem

He had a tough time pulling a fast one on his father or brother. The kids at school were a bit more gullible, especially the girls. True, Mariella hadn't bought his story about the Cyclops, and when he told Signora Santarpia that a mad dog had chased him up a tree and a humongous bird nabbed his notepad to use as nest material, which was why he didn't have his homework, she just gave him an incredulous look and sent him to see the headmaster. Overall, though, females were easier to dupe. Even if they knew he was lying, they still acted enthralled with his stories, which was enough motivation to keep it up.

He didn't see any reason to stop now.

"Do you think our parents are worried?" Jinjing said.

They were sitting on the log in early morning semi-darkness, waiting for the others to wake up. A hard frost covered the ground but they were warm and cozy in their worms.

"My papa doesn't worry about me," Pietro said. "He's used to me leaving on wild adventures. I do it all the time."

"You do?" She looked impressed. Pietro's mind whirred.

"Absolutely. Just last week I was kidnapped by pirates."

He waited for the girl to give him an incredulous look. She didn't. Pirates must not be as uncommon around Hong Kong as they were in Italy.

"They made me their deckhand, but I escaped with a whole hoard of treasure."

Four Fiends

“How did you get the treasure home?”

“I didn’t, I had to bury it. It’s on a secret island so I can’t tell you where it is.”

“I can keep secrets,” Jinjing said.

“I know, but what if somebody tried to torture it out of you? Anyway, I hid it and rowed back home. I was gone for two whole weeks. Papa was glad to see me, but he didn’t worry. He knows I can take care of myself.”

“You weren’t afraid?”

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“I am,” Jinjing said. “What if we’re out here for days and days?”

Pietro shrugged. He was much too excited to care. “Well, I guess your parents will just have to worry about you until you get back then.”

Jinjing frowned. Pietro gazed at her. She looked sad and he felt as though he should comfort her, but wasn’t sure how. He wondered what she was so sad about. It was a strange emotion to him, he rarely felt sad about anything.

He decided to ask.

“Why are you so unhappy? Don’t you think this is fun?”

She sighed. “I just feel scared. I’m not as brave as you, I guess.”

Pietro felt his chest puff up.

“And I don’t know what good it is for me to be here. I can’t do anything to help.”

“Sure you can. You knew about the Yellow Dragon and the Four Guardians and the Four Fiends,” Pietro said. “That’s more than the rest of us knew.”

Pietro's Problem

"But the dragon could have explained it to you anyway since you understood him," Jinjing said. "You didn't need me." She folded her hands in her lap and stared at her shoes.

Pietro didn't know what else to say. He looked up at her again. It was funny, looking up at a girl. Pietro wasn't tall, in fact he was one of the smallest boys in his class, but he was still taller than most girls. Jinjing, however, towered over him. He decided he'd better say something.

"Maybe you're our protector since you're so big and all."

That was the *wrong* thing to say. Jinjing's eyes filled with tears. "I mean, because you have the knife," Pietro added. "Your barrette, it turned into a knife. Like a real weapon. That makes you more important than me. *I'm* just the water boy."

He grinned, and Jinjing let out a hesitant smile. When she didn't have that dejected frown on her face, she was kind of pretty.

"But why did the dragon talk to you and nobody else?"

"I don't know," Pietro said. He felt uncomfortable with the conversation focused on him so he kicked Saburo's worm. "Saburo, wake up. We want breakfast."

By the time they had eaten the sun was out and shining. Pietro stared around. Tall thin pines surrounded them. A path ran between the pines, near where they had slept, and they followed it. They weren't sure which direction they should go. They ended up heading towards the sun. Towards the east. That felt right, somehow.

Four Fiends

They walked. The worms hung limp and unresponsive around them. "This would be a lot faster if they'd just coast along, like they did when they brought us to the island," Saburo grumbled. "Why aren't they helping us out now?"

"I guess we're supposed to walk ourselves," Pietro said, feeling constrained. Walking was too slow. He wanted to move.

"I'm going to go on ahead," he told the others. "Scout things out a bit."

"Shouldn't we stay together?" Jinjing said.

"I won't go far. And I'll come right back. I need to run, I'm used to doing it every morning," Pietro explained.

It felt good to run. His legs pumped as the trees sped by. He saw a tall hill ahead and chugged up it. He stopped at the top. The trees cleared here, and he could see for miles. Far in the distance a thin, blue line stretched across the horizon. A sea or an ocean, he thought. Behind him a rugged column of gray mountains climbed into the sky. And just below he spotted something else.

He ran to the others. "I saw smoke, like from a chimney."

"How far away?" Kate asked.

"A couple kilometers maybe." Saburo groaned.

"You okay?" Jinjing asked the limping boy.

"I guess," Saburo said, "except my leg hurts. What good are these worms if they won't take us where we need to go?"

"Maybe we don't all have to go," Pietro said. "I'll run and check out where the smoke is coming from."

Pietro's Problem

"You can run that far?" Saburo asked, sounding impressed.

"Sure, it's only a couple kilometers. I run ten kilometers every morning before breakfast back home, on hills steeper than these."

That was just a bit of a stretch. He ran to the village and back maybe once or twice a week. And never before breakfast. And the hills weren't any steeper. Apart from all that, it wasn't *much* of a lie.

"Sounds good to me," Kate said. "I'd rather stay here than skulk around somebody's house. Especially since we don't know who that somebody is."

"One of us should go with Pietro," Jinjing said.

"Okay, why don't you then?"

Jinjing hesitated. "All right, I will. But do we have to run?"

Pietro felt less pent-up after his earlier jog, "No, we can walk."

They trudged up the hill. "I don't think she likes me much," Jinjing muttered.

"Who, Kate? That's just because she's jealous," Pietro said.

Jinjing gave him an incredulous stare. "Why would she be jealous of me?"

Pietro shrugged. "I don't know, but she is. Jealous girls always have a certain look, you know."

"They do?"

"Yup. Maybe you can't see it, but boys can. When girls get jealous, they look like they've just smelled something funny. They get all squinty around the nose."

Four Fiends

Jinjing laughed. She had a nice laugh, like tinkling bells. Pietro laughed too. Then they ran up the hill.

7

Hongjun

THE MONK SAT in his hut and shivered. He kept his eyes closed and concentrated on warm thoughts, like blue waves lapping on balmy sand. It did no good, he was too cold. His pitiful attempt at a fire wasn't helping at all. Worse, he couldn't concentrate on his meditations. He sighed and opened his eyes. His stomach rumbled as he tried to remember the last time he had something warm to eat.

That would have been before the villagers left. They always gave him some tidbit for his dinner, but every last villager had moved into the mountains two days ago, leaving him to face his doom, hungry and alone.

The village elder had broken the news to him. The monster was coming. It came every year at this time. Every year there was bloodshed as the ravenous beast ransacked the villagers' houses. This year, they had

Four Fiends

decided to hide in the mountains and leave a sacrifice. They hoped it would appease the monster and he would leave them alone.

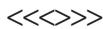
They had decided the monk would be the sacrifice.

He sighed. It hurt his feelings to be so little thought of that they'd leave him behind as if his old dry bones would appease such a hungry beast. More likely the monster would be infuriated at receiving such a pitiful morsel.

Once, when he was young and strong, he had some clout. He was revered, even feared a bit. He was above all those common villagers who didn't understand the mystical world beyond the realm of mortal man. He had studied the gods and understood them. He had provided wisdom and guidance to these miserable peasants, and this was the thanks he got.

He shivered again although this time not due to the cold. What a horrible way to die, eaten by a hideous monster for dinner. And he was too old and feeble to try running away. The beast would be here any time now. He felt it in his thin bones.

He heard footsteps. He cowered into a ball on the dusty floor and waited for the end.



IT WASN'T A house, it wasn't even a shack. It was a few sticks stuck together with a slap of mud. Pietro watched the smoke spiral through a hole in the shabby roof and wondered how whatever fire caused the smoke didn't burn the whole building down to ashes.

Jinjing stopped. "There must be somebody in there if there's a fire. Maybe we should go away."

"Maybe we should ask where we are," Pietro said. "We can't wander around without talking to *anybody*."

He trotted up to the shack while Jinjing hung back. "Hello?"

He heard a noise and a shuffle. A head emerged from a spot where the sticks didn't quite fit together. A mass of gray hair covered a sunken, sallow face. A long beard and moustache covered the man's mouth from view. Two glimmering slits stared out from under bushy eyebrows.

"What is he?" Pietro asked. "Chinese?"

Jinjing shrugged. "Maybe. It's hard to tell."

They must look odd, Pietro in jeans and a t-shirt and Jinjing in her school uniform, but the old man eyed them with relief.

"Who are you?" he said.

Pietro cleared his throat. "We come from a distant land. Can you tell us where we are?"

The old man stared at him. Jinjing tried next.

"Could you please tell us where we are?"

The man nodded. "This is the City of the Flowers."

"Now why couldn't he understand me, but he knew what you were saying?" Pietro whispered. "We said the same thing."

"Except you said it in Italian, and I said it in Mandarin," Jinjing said. "He doesn't have a worm translator like we do. We understand him, but he can't understand us unless we speak in a language he knows. So we must be in China."

Four Fiends

“Oh yeah,” Pietro said. He had almost forgotten that Jinjing’s mouth didn’t quite match up to her words when she talked. He had gotten used to it.

“What are you children doing outside?” the old man said. “There’s danger about. You must go hide in the mountains with the others.”

“What others?” Jinjing said.

“The other villagers. You should beware the Ni...”

An electric thrill shot through Pietro, and he gasped. *Beware the Ni.*

“..an. Beware the Nian.” The old man stared at Pietro with fearful eyes.

Pietro was flummoxed. Jinjing gasped.

“What’s a Nian?” he said. Jinjing wasn’t listening.

“Hongjun?” she asked. The man nodded.

“This is Hongjun Laozu,” Jinjing whispered. Pietro waited for Jinjing to explain who on Earth Hongjun Laozu was, but she didn’t. She wandered over to a large rock and plopped down on it, staring with wonder at the monk.

“What is it?” Pietro said. “You know something, let me in on it. What’s a Nian? How do you know who this old man is?”

Jinjing ignored him. “The Nian is coming?”

The old man nodded. Jinjing turned to Pietro.

“It goes like this. Long ago in China, there lived a monster called the Nian. It came from the sea and feasted on the villagers. The villagers left offerings for the Nian, but he still attacked them. So they took refuge in the mountains.

Hongjun

“The Nian came every year in winter. The people were desperate. They didn’t know what to do. Finally, a monk called Hongjun Laozu said he knew how to stop the Nian. He said that it was afraid of the color red and loud noises so the people covered their doors with red and lit off fireworks and made all sorts of noise when the Nian came near. That scared it and drove it away.”

“How do you *know* this stuff?” Pietro said, impressed.

“*Everybody* knows it. It’s the story of the Chinese New Year. We must be back in time, way back when the Nian still terrorized the people and they didn’t know how to stop it.”

“That’s crazy,” Pietro said. “It’s just a myth. It’s not real.”

“The Yellow Dragon is a myth too,” Jinjing said. “And the Four Guardians. But here we are.”

<<◇>>

“WHO’S HE?” KATE asked when they showed up with the monk in tow.

“This is Hongjun,” Jinjing said, “and we think we know what we have to do here. We have to show him how to defeat the Nian.”

Kate looked perplexed. Saburo sucked in his breath. *He* had heard of the Nian.

They explained things to Kate. “If we’re in China, where’s the wall?” she said.

Pietro blinked. “The what?”

“You know, the Wall. The Big Wall or Huge Wall, or something like that.”

Four Fiends

"The Great Wall," Jinjing said, "and we might not be anywhere near it. China is a very large country."

"Yeah, it might not even be built yet, for all we know," Pietro said.

"Well, that's no fun," Kate said. "If we're here, we should at least get to see the Wall. And find someplace that serves sweet 'n sour chicken."

"I don't think that's going to happen," Jinjing said.

"Fine then, where do we find this Nian thingy?"

"It comes up from the sea," Jinjing said. "We should wait for it in the village. I've already tried to explain to Hongjun how to defeat it, but I don't think he believes me. Or he's too afraid to try."

"You've gotta admit, it *does* sound goofy," Kate said. "A ferocious monster afraid of the color red and some firecrackers?"

"That's how the legend goes," Jinjing said.

"Okay, fine. But how do we do it? We don't have any fireworks or anything red."

"Your worm is red," Pietro said.

"But nobody can see it, can they?"

"Pietro," Saburo said, "the Yellow Dragon said we must rescue a guardian by defeating a fiend, right? Do you think the Nian is a fiend?"

"Maybe," Pietro said.

"The Four Fiends are Gluttony, Chaos, Ignorance and Deviousness," Jinjing said. "They don't have any form."

"The dragon said they'd take on different forms, remember?" Kate said. "Maybe one of 'em has taken on the form of this Nian thingy."

"Maybe," Jinjing said.

"So we have to defeat the Nian..." Saburo said.

"One of us has to defeat it," Pietro said. "Just one, but who?"

Jinjing pondered the problem. "It's winter here."

"So?" Kate said.

"So, each guardian represents a different season. The Tortoise symbolizes Winter. So maybe it's you," she said to Pietro.

"Why me?" Pietro said.

"The Tortoise is black. Your worm is gray. Not quite black, but it's a shade of black anyway. Maybe you represent the Black Tortoise."

"That's stretching it, don't you think?" Kate said.

Pietro whistled. "No, it makes sense. Look what I drew on my water bottle, way back," he said, showing the others his one attempt at art.

"Not a bad turtle," Saburo said.

"So if Pietro is the tortoise, what are the rest of us?" Kate asked.

"Well, you've got the red worm," Jinjing said. "Red is the Vermillion Bird's color. And Saburo's worm is blue..."

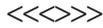
Saburo grinned. "The Azure Dragon is blue. I must be the Azure Dragon."

"Right. And I must represent the White Tiger since my worm is white."

"Easy enough," Pietro said, "except the Yellow Dragon also said we were each like one of the fiends. Which one am I most like?"

Four Fiends

Jinjing shrugged. "I don't know. I guess that's something we're going to have to figure out."



PIETRO HAD VISITED Rome when he was nine, for his older cousin's wedding. He didn't remember the wedding because what happened *after* it blotted out any other memory.

They had decided to spend a few days in Rome sight-seeing. On the first day, Pietro's father lugged him and his brother to the Vatican, which didn't excite him much. True St. Peter's Cathedral was magnificent, and seeing all the popes' tombs buried under it was satisfactorily creepy. The mummies in the Vatican museum were disturbing enough to hold his interest, but the other halls were full of junky statues, maps and boring tapestries. Even the Sistine Chapel didn't impress. Pietro got tired craning his neck to gaze at the paintings on the ceiling. He was glad when the day was over.

The next day was more appealing. They visited the Coliseum, and Pietro and Luigi pretended they were gladiators about to battle man-eating tigers. They walked down the Via Sacra, the ancient road that passed through the crumbling Roman Forum, and saw the funeral pyre where Julius Caesar was burned. They visited the Circus Maximus and pretended they were chariot racers. They climbed the Palatine, one of the ancient Seven Hills of Rome and played next to the ruins.

His father wanted to visit churches the next day, which bored Pietro completely. After a while, all the

churches looked the same. Towards the end of the day they reached one old building with a line of people standing next to it.

“What are they waiting for?” Pietro asked, yawning.

“They’re waiting to put their hand in *la Bocca della Verita*,” his father said.

“La what?”

“*La Bocca della Verita*, the Mouth of Truth. Ever since medieval times, it’s believed if you tell a lie the Mouth will bite your hand right off.”

“Wow,” Pietro said. “Has it ever worked?”

“Yes,” his father said. “Lots of times.”

“Wow,” Pietro said again. He stood on tiptoe, trying to see the Mouth, but too many tall people blocked his view. He stamped his foot in annoyance.

“Would you like to put your hand in and see if it gets bitten?” his father asked, smiling.

Pietro hesitated.

“It won’t really, you dummy,” Luigi said.

“Papa said it had before,” Pietro whispered, staring with some fear at his brother.

Luigi smirked. “Are you afraid?”

Pietro held his head up high. “No. I’m not.”

So they waited, and Pietro laughed when he saw Mouth of Truth. It was just a round flat stone with a man’s face in the middle. A stone moustache drooped over a dark hole. Luigi stuck his hand in the Mouth.

“Now ask me a question,” he said.

“Who is the greatest brother in the world?” Pietro asked.

Four Friends

“You are. No wait...” Luigi said, and then he began to moan and writhe around.

“It’s got me, Pietro! Avenge my death...”

“Stop it,” Pietro said, shoving him. “Let me try.”

Luigi moved his arm away and Pietro thrust his in the Mouth.

The Mouth closed with a snap.

“Hey!” Pietro yelled.

Luigi grinned. “Pietro, you haven’t even told a lie yet. Don’t pretend like it has bitten you until you make up a good lie.”

“It *has* bitten me!”

“Pietro, move out of the way and let someone else have a turn,” his father said.

Pietro pulled. His hand was stuck fast. He wondered if the mouth had bitten it clean off and it was lying in the dirt somewhere. He tugged.

“Pietro, move!” his father ordered.

“I can’t, it’s got me,” Pietro said. “See?” He yanked again but the Mouth held on.

His father grabbed Pietro and tugged. The Mouth snapped open. Pietro’s hand came out, still attached.

And a hollow voice came out of the Mouth. It said three words.

“*Don’t hesitate, Pietro.*”

The Showdown

THE VILLAGE WAS dead empty. No stray dogs lurking about, no cats meowing, not even a smoldering fire remained. The small huts huddling around the weedy square looked as if they hadn't been lived in for years although Hongjun said the people left just two days ago.

"I was left here as the sacrifice," he said, "although I believe the Nian will realize the people are hiding in the mountain and will head that way to find his food."

"We'll stop him here then," Pietro said.

"How're we going to do that?" Kate asked.

"Well, if I have to fight this thing, then I will. I'm not afraid. We find something red, figure out how to make some loud noises, and *voilà*, the problem is solved."

"It seems too easy," Saburo said.

"It *will* be easy," Pietro said. "How about some lunch?"

Four Fiends

When the monk saw food appear out of the silvery smoke, he fell trembling to his knees. Jinjing offered him some soup. He took it and studied it before he ventured to sip the comforting broth. The others gobbled up their lunch and made themselves seconds.

“What does this Nian thing look like anyway?” Kate asked.

“Well,” Jinjing said, “in pictures it looks a big lion. It’s supposed to be big enough to swallow several people at once. Of course there are many versions since it’s a myth.”

She asked Hongjun the question. He shook his head and babbled.

“I don’t think he want to talk about it,” Pietro said.

“It’s bad luck to talk about the Nian so close to the new year,” the old man said.

“Do you think he will come soon?” Jinjing asked.

“He will come tonight, I’m sure of it. There is a full moon tonight.”

“So we wait,” Pietro, who hated waiting for anything, said.

They day dragged on. A light snow fell in the afternoon. They built a large fire using Kate’s lipstick tube and huddled around it. They made dinner. The sun sunk behind the mountains.

Then they heard it.

An eerie scream pierced the sky. The monk dropped his bowl with a thud and jumped up. Kate, Jinjing and Saburo glanced around with mild interest.

A frightening jolt went right through Pietro’s gut. He stopped eating.

The Showdown

He had never felt such a strong sensation before. He stared at his wobbling legs. A strange weakness spread from his torso to his arms and then his lips, which began to tremble.

For the first time in his life, Pietro was terrified.

The monk scuttled into a nearby hut. The other three stood together, their worms protecting them. Pietro didn't see Zeus anywhere. He bolted after the monk.

"Where's he going?" Kate asked.

"Boy, he sure can run," Saburo said, as he watched the frightened boy fly for the hut.

"He lied about not being afraid," Jinjing whispered.

"Of course," Kate said. "Boys lie about everything."

"We do not," Saburo said.

"Sorry. *Most* boys."

The high-pitched scream sounded again. It floated over them but they didn't feel afraid. Their worms would protect them.

"Poor Pietro," Jinjing said. "I wonder why his worm doesn't help him."

Saburo shrugged. "Maybe the worm *can't* help him. Maybe he has to fight the Nian using Jinjing's knife. If he's covered by the worm, he can't use the knife."

Jinjing ran to the hut where she found Pietro cowering behind the terrified monk. "Here," she said, unsnapping her barrette, and kicking it out from under her worm. "Take it."

Pietro stared at her, trembling. She knew he couldn't understand her without his worm, but she yelled, "Pick it up you dummy!" anyway.

Four Fiends

She ran back to Kate. "Give me your lipstick."

"Why? What do you need it for?"

"Just give it!"

Kate looked ready to argue, but thought better of it. She stuck her hand out from under her worm and passed the lipstick tube to Jinjing.

Saburo grinned. "Here, take my spoon too. I'm not sure how much good it'll do, but maybe it'll help. And that was brave," he whispered, nodding towards Kate. "I don't think she's used to taking orders from anybody."

Jinjing flashed him a smile and trotted back to Pietro's hut. She pushed the magical objects towards the boy. He crouched on the floor and refused to look at them.

Hongjun picked them up instead.



THE MONK ROLLED the objects around in his hands and gazed at the boy huddling on the ground. He felt a rush of pity and took a step towards Pietro, then stopped. He stared at the objects and tried to remember what they did. He opened the funny metal tube. Nothing happened. When the red-haired girl opened it, fire had come out.

He knew then that these children were great magicians come to battle the Nian and save the village. He remembered what the girl Jinjing had said, that the Nian could be defeated by the color red and fireworks.

Was it true? Could such a fierce, immortal monster be banished so easily? It did him no good now, not

The Showdown

this time. He had no fireworks, and no idea where to find anything red. And the beast would be here any minute, from the sound of its screams.

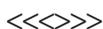
He poked his head out of the hut. The three children were standing together, staring at the woods, waiting for the Nian. They weren't afraid. He steeled himself, and wobbled out to them. They would protect him. He reached out to touch Jinjing's shoulder.

Before he could touch her, a funny feeling came over him. He wondered at this feeling. He remembered once, during a horrendous thunderstorm, fire from the sky hit a man's house, causing it to rupture in flames. A man had died that day. Hongjun was close to the house and had felt the same sensation then. Little electric prickles ran up his skin. He took a step backwards, fearful of these wondrous people.

Jinjing saw the magical objects in his hand. "You have to give them to the boy," she said.

Hongjun shook his head. "He will not take them. You must use them to save us from the Nian."

"I can't," she said. "The boy must do it. Give them to the boy."



PIETRO COULDN'T THINK. The Nian's horrible screams filled his head. He stared at the ground, focusing on the dirt and pebbles, anything to keep from looking up. He didn't want to see what was coming.

Something in his mind rebelled against this cowardice. A far-away voice told him this was *it*, this was the greatest dare he'd ever face: standing up to this

Four Fiends

monster and defeating it. Something even closer muffled that voice like a thick, black veil.

Something else landed on his shoulder.

He shrieked before realizing it was just the monk's hand. The old man pushed the objects towards him. Pietro stared at them. It took a full minute before he comprehended what they were.

The monk kept his hand on the boy's shoulder. Pietro felt comforted by the touch. This man was doomed to become the Nian's evening snack and he wasn't huddled on the floor sobbing like a baby. He might be afraid, but he was at least trying to do something about it. Pietro wiped his eyes, tried to stop shaking, and hoisted himself to his feet.

He took the objects. He unscrewed his water bottle and took a drink. He had no idea what he was drinking but it warmed him from the tip of his head to the soles of his feet.

He opened the lipstick tube. Red sparks shot into the air.

The monk put the sparks out before they set the hut ablaze, and turned towards Pietro, grinning a toothless grin. Pietro smiled back in understanding.

He had found his weapon.

<<◇◇>>

THEY SAW ITS light before it reached the village, a dull, reddish glow shining through the trees and casting eerie shadows. The ground vibrated with every step the monster took. Whatever it was, it was *really* big.

"Wow," Kate said.

The Showdown

“Are you sure the worms will keep us safe?” Jinjing whispered.

“They’d better,” Saburo said, doubting it a little.

“Here it comes,” Kate said.

It crashed out of the woods. Jagged white fangs glinted in the starlight as it roared. Two huge red eyes glowered from under heavy, sagging eyelids. Sharp claws tore at the ground as it lumbered closer. A long, spiky tail thrashed about, cutting down trees quicker than a chain saw. It heaved its hairy body forward like a big fat spider scuttling towards its prey. It didn’t look at all like the pictures and statues Jinjing had seen; it was too disgustingly ugly for anyone to ever capture in art. It was the stuff of nightmares.

It hissed but didn’t approach. It moved around them, snarling, and headed for the monk.

Hongjun stood rooted to the spot, staring in horror as the beast neared. Jinjing yelled at him to run, to get inside, although she knew it wouldn’t do him any good. That monster could knock down a whole house with one sweep from its spiky tail. She tried to close her eyes so she wouldn’t see the end, but they refused to shut.

The Nian let out a triumphant scream as it bore down on the terrified monk.

And then, a small, nimble figure whooshed past the monk and headed towards the Nian. Jinjing’s heart leapt as Pietro skidded to a stop in front of the monster and aimed Kate’s lipstick tube high over his head. Jinjing found herself screaming:

Four Fiends

“Don’t hesitate, Pietro!”

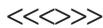
The boy grinned. He opened the tube.

What followed was the most glorious fireworks display they had ever seen. Red, blue, green and gold sparks whizzed, screamed, and spiraled from the tube in a cacophony of the most wonderful noise ever to hit their ears. Jinjing laughed as the Nian morphed from a terrifying fiend into a confused wreck. It thrashed about, desperate to escape the colorful embers that, no matter how it tried to avoid them, managed to land on either its head or rump.

“If it wasn’t afraid of fireworks before,” Saburo said, “it will be forever after this.”

“That way, you stupid brute!” Kate yelled, pointing to the path the Nian had first entered by. “Go that way!”

And, after squashing several huts and breaking every tree in a hundred foot radius, the Nian ran howling down the path, and away from the village.



PIETRO BARELY HAD time to let out an exhilarated whoop before his worm shot out from the trees, gulped him down, and zoomed after the Nian. It ran fast but Zeus moved faster. The Nian sped up, its tail thrashing behind it.

The sea lay ahead, a long, dark line just visible under the twinkling stars. The Nian plunged in and they followed, shooting through the water at a dizzying speed. Deeper and deeper they dove until they were skimming along the seabed, past coral mountains and valleys of wavering seaweed. The Nian swam faster than a fish, its

The Showdown

large body pulsing and its tail thrashing, and then it dove deep down into a dark chasm.

They followed. They zoomed towards a large rock wall and chased the monster into a hole, wiggled through it and shot out onto a graveled shore. Pietro's worm came to a halt. Its gray glow shimmered enough to let Pietro see that they were inside a small cave.

"Where are we?" Jinjing asked.

Pietro hadn't realized the others had followed him. He turned and smiled at Jinjing. She gave him a frosty look. She had seen him frightened and cowering like an idiot after all the bragging he had done, and she didn't think much of him at the moment.

"It must be the Nian's lair," Saburo suggested. "We should be deep under the ocean, but there's air here."

"What do we do now?" Kate asked, gazing around.

Pietro knew. He had known the moment his worm dove into the sea. "Follow me."

They walked along the shore. They clambered over a few big rocks before finding a large round one. Pietro tapped the black rock. It moved.

"That's not a rock," Saburo said.

"No," Pietro said, "it's the Tortoise."

Two glinting eyes peered at them from under the ebony shell as the Tortoise raised its wrinkled head. It turned its gaze towards Pietro. He squirmed. He knew what it was going to tell him.

"Jinjing," he said, "you know I lied to you, right?"

"About the pirates?" Jinjing said.

Four Friends

“Yes, about the pirates. And about not ever being scared. I *did* sleep in a graveyard once. Just for one night though, not a whole week.”

“Why would you want to lie about things like that?” Jinjing asked.

“I don’t know why,” Pietro said. “I guess I feel better when I make things up. I’ve *always* made stories up. Ever since...”

“Ever since what?” Jinjing said.

Pietro felt the tears welling up behind his eyelids. “Ever since my mother died. I was just a little kid. I think it started then. I don’t know why. Maybe I wanted more attention. Anyway, I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

“Okay,” Jinjing said, “if you promise not to do it again.”

Pietro almost said he wouldn’t. Then he thought, that just might be a lie too.

“I’ll try. And if you ever ask me if what I said was a lie, I promise I’ll tell you if it is or isn’t. Is that good enough?”

Jinjing looked puzzled. Then she smiled and said, “Okay.”

They were quiet for a while. Kate looked at the others. “Now what do we do?”

Pietro took a deep breath. “We take the Tortoise back to the Yellow Dragon.”

“How?”

Pietro gazed into the Tortoise’s eyes. “Climb on his back. He’ll take us there.”

The Showdown

“What about the Nian?” Saburo asked.

“Leave him,” Jinjing said. “Hongjun knows how to scare him now. He’ll tell the villagers, and now they’ll have the fireworks ready every year when the Nian comes.”

Kate grinned. “And so the Chinese New Year is born.”

9

Saburo's Spoon

"SO HERE WE are again," Pietro said.

The Yellow Dragon lay in the cavern's center, its snaky body coiled in a comfortable ball. The Black Tortoise shuffled to a darker corner and pulled its head and legs back into its shell.

The dragon turned its intent gaze on Saburo, who stared back, mesmerized.

"See it now?" Pietro said.

"Yes," Saburo said, "can you?"

"Not any more. It must be your turn."

"What does he want us to do now?" Kate asked, yawning. "I hope it involves a hot meal and a nice warm bed."

"No, we have to leave. The Yellow Dragon says there's no food for us and our magical objects won't work in the cave so we can't stay here."

Saburo's Spoon

"Geez, if the dragon could make the objects, you'd think he could conjure up a positive feast," Kate said.

"He can't. Not here."

Saburo gazed into those deep eyes. They told him time was running short. He wondered if time was even relevant here. They had just gone back in time a few hundred, maybe even a couple thousand years. But time was running out just the same.

"They're getting worried," he said. "The other fiends. Now that we have the Black Tortoise, they're on to us. Saving the other guardians will be harder."

"Speaking of which," Pietro said, "ask him which fiend I beat. I haven't a clue."

"Deviousness," Jinjing said.

"I'm not devious," Pietro said.

"Yes you are," Jinjing said. "Lying is devious. Whether you mean it or not."

Pietro was about to argue but Jinjing stared hard at him and he decided maybe she was right.

"So what do we do now?" he asked.

"We enter the next hole," Saburo said, as his worm moved out of the dark tunnel and into sunlight.

"Well, this is nicer," Kate said.

They had landed in a meadow full of buttercups. Crickets chirped in the wavering grass. In the distance a cow mooed. A bright red farmhouse perched on a hill; smoke spiraling out of its chimney.

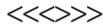
Kate sighed. "This feels almost homey. We aren't too far back in the future if there are houses like *that* lying around."

Four Friends

“Where are we?” Jinjing said.

Saburo didn't care. They had left China at night, and he was ready for bed. It wasn't night here, more like mid-morning, but he couldn't take any more. “I'm exhausted,” he said. “Can't we sleep a while?”

They all agreed and flopped down in the inviting grass.



HE HAD ALMOST forgotten about it. It happened so long ago, he thought maybe he had just dreamt it. Now, drowsing in a warm meadow, it came back as clear as if it had happened yesterday.

He was six. His mother had taken the whole family—Taro, Jiro, and himself—to the Daisho-in Temple. The train ride was a long one and Saburo sat with his nose pressed to the glass, watching the houses whiz by as the train sped them along the edge of the Seto Inland Sea. It was a very blue day. The sun sparkled on the water as they boarded the ferry that would take them to Miyajima Island.

They passed the giant red torii gate that rose out of the rippling water. Saburo gazed at the beautiful five-storied pagoda nestled on the mountain behind it. He was so excited, his mother had to grab him to keep him from falling right over the railing.

The trek to the temple was a long one. They walked under a huge stone torii gate, passed the floating Itsukushima shrine, and began the steep climb. Saburo's legs grew tired. He stumbled along, getting grumpier and grumpier until his oldest brother

Saburo's Spoon

Taro lifted him up and let the little boy ride on his broad shoulders.

As they neared the top of the temple's long flight of steps, Taro let Saburo down. Saburo scrambled up to the large bell and he and Jiro pulled the heavy rope. The rope was connected to a board that struck the big bell. A deep gonging echoed down the mountain. Saburo laughed.

Near the gong stood a funny statue. It sat with its arms and legs crossed and looked very sullen. It had a beaky nose and its eyes peeked out from under a mop of stony hair. The top of its head was scooped out, resembling a shallow bowl. Some rainwater puddled there. Saburo dabbled his hand in the water.

Jiro laughed. "Don't get too close Saburo. That's a *kappa*, a water demon. It likes to trick little children and eat them."

Saburo pulled his hand away.

"Jiro, don't scare your brother," his mother said.

They moved on. Saburo turned to get one last glimpse of the stone *kappa*.

It *winked* at him. Saburo yelled and ran all the way to the temple's main courtyard.

A stone owl stood in the courtyard. It wore a pointed straw hat and a yellow robe and cupped a wooden bowl in its wings. Saburo forgot about the *kappa* and went to investigate this new statue.

"You won't eat me will you?" he whispered. The owl rustled its feathers and hooted.

"Go find the Buddha with the dragon," it said. "The dragon wants to talk with you."

Four Fiends

"Alright," Saburo said.

Hundreds of statues lined the courtyard. Some were scary, some were solemn, most were fat Buddhas with comical expressions that made Saburo laugh. But he didn't see a Buddha with a dragon.

They climbed more steps. "Look Saburo," Taro said, taking him by the hand, "here are the twelve signs of the zodiac. There's the horse, that's my sign. There's the Rooster, that's Jiro's sign."

"What about my sign?" Saburo asked.

"Oh, you have the most important one," Jiro said. "See, here he is. He's the dragon."

Saburo crouched in front of a fat Buddha clutching a walking stick. The stick's top was carved in the shape of a head. Saburo stared at the head while his brothers wandered away. The dragon stared back and blinked its stony eyes.

"Hello Saburo."

"Hello," Saburo whispered. "The owl said you wanted to talk with me."

"I wanted to give you some advice," the dragon said. "When you get a little older and stronger, you must climb the mountain behind your house as often as you can."

That sounded like a lot of work. "Why?"

"Someday you will find something very important on top."

"Oh," Saburo said, feeling confused. "What?"

"Something *Important*," the dragon said. "Do you see the path behind me? Follow it. It will take you to the Great Dragon Head. He wants to talk with you too."

Saburo's Spoon

Saburo got up and trundled down the path. He came to a wooden temple with two ferocious dragons carved along the roofline. The first dragon saw Saburo and motioned to the second one.

The second dragon's mouth curved in a sinister smirk over sharp teeth. White, ghostly eyes glared down at the small boy but the deep voice was kind. "Here you are at last," it said.

"The dragon walking stick said you wanted to see me," Saburo said.

"I have some advice for you," the dragon said. "Get a wooden spoon."

"A wooden spoon?"

"Yes. Make sure you carry it with you at all times. Some day it will come in handy."

"Why?"

"Just do it," the dragon said.

And it went still.

Saburo jogged back to his family, who had started to wonder where the boy was. They left the temple and climbed down the long set of steps. Saburo kept well away from the kappa. On the trek down the mountain they stopped at a souvenir shop full of wooden spoons.

"Why are there so many spoons?" he asked his mother.

"They are for good luck," she said. "Would you like one?"

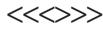
"Yes please," he said so she bought him a little spoon dangling from a pretty red string and kissed him on the forehead.

Four Fiends

“Now you will be lucky.”

That night, as they drove home from the train station, his mother wrecked the car. Except in hazy dreams he never remembered the trip to Miyajima.

Until now.



“HAVE YOU EVER had weird things happen?” he asked Pietro as they lay in the grass waiting for the girls to wake up. “Things you forgot about, things that happened when you were little?”

“Like what?” Pietro said.

Saburo told him about the statues. Pietro shook his head. “If you told me this a few weeks ago, I’d say you were lying,” he said, “but weird stuff happened to me too.” He told Saburo about the Mouth of Truth.

“I wonder if strange things happened to the girls too,” Saburo said.

“If they have, I bet they don’t remember it. Not yet anyway. I couldn’t remember what happened to me until we reached China. And you didn’t remember your weird story until you got here. Wherever here is.”

“And this is my turn,” Saburo sighed. “I wonder what my fiend will be. And what obstacle I’ll need to overcome.”

“Well,” Pietro said, “what do you have the hardest time with? For me, it was lying and boasting that I was never afraid of things.”

“I don’t know. I try not to lie and I’m afraid of plenty of things, like centipedes and going to the dentist. And I’m not afraid to say so.”

Saburo's Spoon

"Then it must be something else," Pietro said. "Hey, do you hear something?"

Saburo strained his ears. He *did* hear something. The sound wafted towards them on a gentle breeze. It was rhythmic and almost cheerful.

Pietro reached over and shook Kate. "Wake up! Something's coming this way."

Saburo nodded. "A lot of somethings by the sound of it."

Kate moaned, rolled over, mumbled, "Cat's got the toothbrush," and fell back asleep.

Jinjing sat up and rubbed her sleepy eyes. "Did you say something?"

"Yes," Pietro said, shaking Kate even harder. "Hear that sound?"

Jinjing listened. "It sounds like marching."

"A *lot* of people marching," Saburo said. "And they're coming this way."

He strained his eyes toward the sound. Flashes of light glimmered on the horizon. They waited and the flashes moved closer.

"It's an army," Pietro said. "I see the light shining off their bayonets."

"Can they see us?" Jinjing whispered.

"Not if we lay low in the grass," Saburo said. "And even if they could, so what? We've got the worms."

"Still," Jinjing said, "I don't want them to see us."

"I want to see them though. If we figure out what army it is, we'll know where and when we are. Kate, wake up!"

Four Fiends

“Whazza...” Kate mumbled. She sat up and yawned. “What’s that noise?”

“Shh...” Pietro said. “They’re getting closer.”

The marching feet stomped towards them; the sound mixed with clanking canteens and the clip-clopping of horses bringing up the rear. A flag waved in the breeze. Saburo stared at it. It looked like the American flag, except the stars were in the wrong places.

“Kate,” Pietro said, reading Saburo’s thoughts, “is that an American flag?”

Kate sat up and yawned. “Maybe. There aren’t as many stars though, but it’s definitely...yes! There’s a New Jersey flag right behind it!”

She jumped up, fully awake and excited. “What’s New Jersey?” Saburo asked.

“What, are you kidding me? It’s my state. I live here. I wonder how far from home I am?”

“It won’t do you much good,” Jinjing said. “I doubt we’re at the same point in history.”

Kate stared at the soldiers. “No, we aren’t.”

Saburo scrutinized the ranks as they stomped along the dirt road running alongside the meadow. The soldiers wore blue uniforms and had funny, slouchy hats, almost like baseball caps but not quite. “When are we then?”

“Those are Civil War soldiers,” Kate said. “And the Civil War happened in the 1860’s. That’s why there aren’t as many stars on the flag. There weren’t fifty states then.”

They watched the soldiers file past. After the last man trudged by, Saburo said, “What should we do?”

Saburo's Spoon

"Maybe we should follow them and see where they're headed," Kate said.

Saburo sighed. "I don't want to follow anything. My leg hurts." He rubbed it, and felt a wave of relief as Oni moved forward. He relaxed.

"Great," Kate said, echoing Saburo's thoughts. "This is much easier than walking."

"I'd rather run," Pietro said. "Although I can't run as fast or as long as the worms. But they're going the wrong way."

He was right. The troops were heading south, but the worms glided north down the dirt road. Saburo wondered why they landed at that spot if they weren't going to follow the soldiers. At least now they knew they were in America, during its Civil War. Maybe that was why the worms showed them the soldiers.

His mind raced, wondering what sort of fiend would be roaming around America in the nineteenth century. And how he would defeat it.

Miz Leeds

THE OLD WOMAN lived in a swamp so she never had any visitors. That was fine with her, as she didn't much care for company. She potted alone in her weedy garden and grew turnips and potatoes, and she plodded alone through the swamp catching fish and frogs, and she stomped among the trees hunting rabbits and squirrels, and she was content.

Every so often, she put on the one bonnet she owned and her one nice dress and walked the five miles to town. She would buy a sack of flour and a sack of cornmeal and carry them back home, the whole five miles. She hated going to town so she made the flour and cornmeal last as long as possible. No matter how early she left she would always end up trudging home in the dark, which she didn't like. There were thieves and murders stalking the roads at night. Or so she told herself.

Miz Leeds

That day she had one cup of cornmeal left and no flour so she brushed off her bonnet, put on her dress, and trudged up the weedy path that meandered through the swamp's drier spots. She arrived at the town a little past one o'clock. She stopped at the inn and took a drink from the outdoor pump then trudged on to MacCready's Mercantile Shop. Mr. MacCready sold food as well as fabric for making clothes, hardware, books, tobacco, and even perfume straight from Paris, for the folks who could afford it.

Today, a crowd filled the shop and the old woman gritted her teeth (the few she had left) in frustration. There was nothing she hated worse than a crowd. She steeled herself and pushed her way in.

"Afternoon, Miz Leeds!" Mr. MacCready said. He was far too jovial, with his red cheeks and fat stomach. His life was much too easy. She grunted.

Mr. MacCready, understanding this was the most genial salutation he would receive, gathered her customary flour and cornmeal. He asked, as he always did, if she needed help carrying the bags and she replied, as she always did, that she was perfectly able to carry the bags herself and stop treating her like a decrepit old lady.

"That'll be three dollars," Mr. MacCready said.

The old woman's eyes narrowed. "That's outrageous! I don't have that much with me."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we're in the middle of a war if you haven't noticed. Flour's getting scarcer."

Four Fiends

She slammed two dollars onto the counter. "That's all I'll pay. Don't tell me you're going to let an old woman starve just because there's a war on."

Mr. MacCready sighed. She had no problem using the "old woman" card if it suited her, and he knew it. "Very well," he said, "this once. But I can't give you a discount every time you come in. Prices will keep going up until this blasted war is over."

"Then let's hope it's over quick," she spat as she shouldered the bags and stomped out of the shop. Three dollars! The man was obviously upping the price for his own benefit. She noticed he had a brand new jacket on. Most likely the old one no longer covered his bloated stomach.

She trudged home, stopping only for a drink at a spring near the road and to eat the cold johnnycakes she had made that morning with the last of her corn-meal. The sun sunk in the sky as she turned off the main road and picked her way down the slippery swamp path.

The sky grew dark. The full moon disappeared behind thick clouds. If she hadn't known her way so well, she would have slipped right into the swamp as she moved along the thin path. She kept her eyes down, studying the wet ground.

She didn't hear it until it was right behind her.

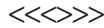
A harsh, grating sound filled her ears. Hot, steamy breath blew the gray hair off her neck. She froze. She turned around.

She saw red, evil eyes.

Miz Leeds

Her voice wouldn't work. She couldn't scream. But she *could* run. She heaved her bags at those red eyes and ran as fast as her old legs would carry her.

It wasn't very long before she ran right off the road and slid headfirst into the black, murky swamp.



SABURO COULDN'T GET up the nerve to talk to Kate.

He was fine with the other kids, but was afraid of her. She had red hair. He had never seen anyone with real red hair, except on TV. Some teenagers in his village dyed their hair red, but that wasn't their real color.

In Japanese mythology, women with red hair were evil demons. Saburo knew this wasn't true, but he was still overawed by Kate. She was feisty and demanding and confident and very, very pretty. He felt tongue-tied around her. He glanced over at her. Even encased in her red worm she was intimidating.

"We're in the Pine Barrens," she yelled.

They had entered a huge forest that seemed to stretch on forever. Night had fallen and Saburo could hardly see anything.

"The what?" he said.

"The Pine Barrens! We're in New Jersey, I'm sure of it. Can we get these things to stop?"

They couldn't. The worms kept sliding along as they had all evening. Pietro was dead asleep in his worm. Jinjing yawned and blinked. Saburo edged his worm closer to Kate's and forced himself to ask another question.

"What is the Pine Barrens?"

Four Fiends

“This. This forest. It covers almost a quarter of the entire state. It runs right down to the ocean and is full of swamps and strange things. I wonder if there’d be any creature here that would fit the bill of a fiend. Wait, I’ve got it! Of course, it couldn’t be anything else.”

“What?” Saburo asked, his heart thumping.

“The Jersey Devil. It lives here in the Barrens, or so the legend goes.”

“Do you know much about it?”

“Sure. I’m from Jersey after all. Everybody knows about the Jersey Devil. We even have a hockey team named after it. It’s a monster, sort of a cross between a horse and a bird. It’s got a horse head and horse hooves but it has wings too.”

“Like a Pegasus,” Jinjing said, yawning.

“Yeah, except it’s a monster. Not like a Pegasus at all,” Kate said.

Saburo was liking the sound of this thing less and less. “What does it do?”

“It causes chaos and mayhem. It kills livestock and tramples things and makes a nuisance out of itself. People find its hoof marks all over the place.”

“Does it kill people too?”

“Well,” Kate said, “when we tell ghost stories, we always make up creepy stuff about the Devil. I’m not sure if it has killed people or not. It’s all just a legend, of course. It’s a cursed baby, or something.”

“A *what?*” Jinjing asked, fully waking up at this statement.

Miz Leeds

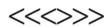
“A cursed baby. Way back in the Revolutionary War there was this lady called Mrs. Leeds and she had a gazillion babies so by the time she got to the last one, she was so sick of babies she called it the Devil and it became one.”

Jinjing laughed. “That makes no sense.”

“Yeah, well none of this makes any sense, does it? But here we are, in the Pine Barrens, in New Jersey. And Saburo gets to fight himself a Jersey Devil.”

Saburo wondered how he was supposed to fight it. They had a spoon, a knife, a lipstick tube, and Pietro’s water bottle. When the time came, he’d have to figure out something using those things. And he’d have to do it without his worm.

He thought about his family in Japan. He hadn’t missed them much until right then. He felt very far from home.



SABURO DIDN’T REMEMBER much about the hospital except as a blurred, painful memory. He sometimes wondered if he forgot it on purpose, as well as the painstaking weeks that rolled by before he could walk without using a crutch. It was as if that whole year happened to someone else, he felt so detached from it.

Saburo was wrapped up in his own struggles as he recuperated from his injuries. It was quite a while before he noticed the change in Jiro. His once happy-go-lucky brother had transformed into a sullen, angry boy. Saburo couldn’t understand this. Why should Jiro, who didn’t go through any tormenting physical pain, be so angry?

Four Fiends

His mother said it was guilt. She broke her arm in the accident and Taro got a nasty scar on his face. Jiro walked away from the scene without a scratch.

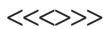
Saburo didn't remember the accident. Taro told him that Jiro had been teasing and tickling Saburo in the back seat. They were making so much noise that their mother, getting annoyed, turned her head and yelled at them to stop. In that second the car veered a fraction, slid off the road, and smashed right into the front of a bike shop.

So it was Jiro's fault. And only Jiro didn't get hurt.

Saburo thought maybe Jiro had been hurt the worst. The others struggled with physical pain. Jiro wrestled with something much worse. No matter how his mother consoled him, Jiro knew that he was responsible for all their suffering. Even though everyone else forgave him, he could not forgive himself.

Saburo wanted to comfort his brother, tell him it was all right. He just couldn't summon the courage to do it. Jiro was so unapproachable. Any time Saburo tried, his brother would tease him or laugh or tell him to go away. So he stopped trying.

It was much easier to stop trying, he decided, than to bother trying at all.



THE CABIN SAT in a miserable spot. Thin trees clustered around it, blocking out the moonlight. A few persistent beams penetrated the foliage and illuminate a weedy garden near the house. The rest of the yard was filled with thorny plants and muddy spots where nothing grew. The air felt heavy and rotten.

Miz Leeds

Pietro yawned. "What is this place?"

"Not sure," Kate said, "but since the worms took us here, we should see if anybody lives in that shack."

They walked up to the front porch, avoiding the rotting floorboards. Saburo tapped on the door. It creaked open. Two frightened eyes peeked around the edge of it.

"Hello," Kate said.

"Who are you?" a mouth below the twitching eyes asked.

"We're friends. Honest!" Kate said. "Are you okay?"

"You'd better come in," the mouth said. "It still might be out there."

They clambered into the room. Saburo kicked off his shoes gazed around. A small stove was tucked in one corner and a mattress was stuffed in another. The room was very cramped with five people crowding in. They stayed as far away from the old woman as they could. They didn't want their worms to shock her by mistake.

The poor lady looked a mess. She was covered with mud and her hands were trembling.

"What do you think is out there?" Jinjing asked.

"I don't know. But it attacked me. It took my flour. Now I have nothing."

"You're shivering," Kate said. "You should get out of those wet clothes. What happened?"

"I ran," the woman said. "I fell into the swamp. The—whatever it was—was too busy with my food to come after me. I have nothing. Nothing to eat."

Four Fiends

And there's a war on. And Mr. MacCready wants three dollars."

"She's babbling," Saburo said.

"You boys go out onto the porch," Kate said, "and we'll help her get into some dry clothes. Whoever she is, she's in shock."

Saburo put his shoes back on and tromped onto the porch with Pietro. He pulled out his spoon. "I'll make her something nice to eat. What kind of food do you think she'd like?"

"Make her something simple," Pietro said. "Somebody who lives in a swamp probably doesn't eat fancy things. I'll go look for her flour, maybe there's some left."

After some thought, Saburo decided on a loaf of bread and a hot vegetable soup. He slipped out of his worm. Pietro came back lugging two sacks.

"These are heavy. I don't think whatever was chasing her even touched them."

They brought the food in. Pietro dropped the sacks in a corner, took the bread and broth from Saburo and placed it on the rickety table. The old lady stared.

"Don't ask us where we got it," Kate said, "just eat. We have plenty of food."

"Thank you," the woman said.

Saburo removed his shoes and stood in a corner as the woman ate. The room was filthy, and if it hadn't been such an in-grained habit to take his shoes off whenever he entered a house, he would have left them on. He felt the grit slide around under his socks as he stood on the rough floor.

“Do you think the monster that chased her was the Jersey Devil?” he asked.

The old woman eyed him with suspicion. She had probably never heard or seen a Japanese boy before. He smiled at her, but it didn’t help.

“Maybe,” Kate said. She turned to the woman. “Ma’am, have you ever heard of the Jersey Devil?”

The old woman spat. “Don’t mention that name. My family’s been cursed with that stupid story since it started.”

“Oh yeah?” Kate said.

“It’s all phooey. A vicious rumor sparked by my mother’s jealous sister. She couldn’t have children, see.”

“Who, your mother?” Saburo asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” Kate said. “If her mother couldn’t have children, she wouldn’t be here.”

Saburo shrank further into the corner, feeling idiotic.

“Couldn’t have children, my aunt,” the old woman said. “My mother had thirteen of ‘em. The last one, well, it was a little different.”

“Of course it was,” Kate said.

“It wasn’t right. My mother loved it of course. Her sister called it a devil.”

“A slight twist to the story,” Kate said.

“What story?” Pietro, who had been asleep during Kate’s earlier explanation asked.

“She called it a devil and then it died. But it didn’t die in a normal way, oh no.” the woman hissed. “*She* killed it. Out of hatred and jealousy, she did. And then she started that rumor. And we’ve never been at peace

Four Fiends

since. I'm the last one still alive, and look at me. I live in a swamp just to avoid all those horrible people who whisper about Mother Leeds and her devil baby."

"Please eat and we'll be right back," Kate said, pulling the others back out onto the porch.

"This lady is nuts," Pietro said.

"She's loony all right," Kate said, "although this pretty much confirms what we need to do here."

"Which is?" Pietro asked, still sounding baffled.

"The Jersey Devil must have captured a guardian," Kate said. "Saburo has to fight it to get the guardian back. And it must be somewhere close if it chased this old lady tonight. Whether she believes the story or not."



SABURO LOVED PLAYING in the sea. It was a long drive, and his mother didn't have much time to take the children to the beach so he didn't get to do it often. Every once in a while, they would pile in the car and drive either down to the Seto Inland Sea with its lapping waves and panoramic view of island after island, or up to the deep blue Sea of Japan with its tide pools and cliffs.

Saburo's favorite spot was near the town of Hagi. The beach there was full of large rocks. The two biggest rocks leaned against each other, forming a small cave. At high tide the water would lap into the cave and Saburo enjoyed splashing in the small pool and pretending he was a pirate and this was his hideout.

Once, while his brothers were out playing in the larger waves, Saburo sat in his pool, stirring his finger in the water. He jumped back in surprise as the water

in the pool began to gurgle. Saburo stared as bubbles popped to the surface and watched in fascination as the sand moved upwards. A brown crab with long legs pushed its way out of the sand and scuttled onto a rock beside the boy.

The crab's shell had a face on it.

Saburo recognized it as a Heike Crab. He had seen this type of crab before and always laughed at the funny face on the shell. His mother said that a long time ago there was a great battle in the waters between Honshu, Japan's main island, and Kyushu, the island below it. Many soldiers drowned in the fast current and the spirits of those dead soldiers lived in the Heike Crabs. This is why their shells resembled faces. It was only a myth, she said, but the story was creepy enough to interest any boy.

He stared at the crab and reached out a finger to poke it.

"Hey!" a high squeaky voice said. Saburo yelped and pulled his hand away.

The smiling face on the crab's shell turned into a frown.

"How rude of you, Saburo," the face said.

"I'm...I'm sorry," Saburo whispered, staring at the stern expression. "Are...are you one of the samurai warriors?"

"My name is Taira no Norimori, and I perished in the Battle of Dan-no-ura, many hundred years ago."

"I know," Saburo said, "about the battle. I've been to the shrine there, the one built for the Emperor Antoku."

Four Fiends

“He was a young boy when he died with us in the sea,” the face of Taira no Norimori said, “Only eight years old. Just about your age.”

“And...” Saburo whispered, “...and how did *you* die?”

“I jumped in the water rather than surrender to our enemies. We threw ourselves in the sea after our foes attacked the Emperor’s boat.”

“That’s too bad,” Saburo said. “And now you live in a crab?”

“For many centuries, yes. But I have traveled here to tell you something important, Saburo.”

“What is it?” Saburo whispered, leaning closer.

“A time will come when you must be strong. When you must stand your ground and not give in to your weakness. It won’t be easy or comfortable. But remember, it must be done. Woe to you if you admit defeat and let your weakness conquer you. A million blessings if you remain tough and true.”

“What is my weakness?” Saburo asked.

“You will know when the time comes,” the face said as the crab scuttled into the pool and disappeared under the sand. Saburo shoved his hands down, trying to catch it. He dug and dug but the crab had disappeared forever.

II

The Cyclone

“HERE’S WHAT I’M still trying to figure out,” Saburo said. “You fought the fiend that represented deviousness. Which one am I fighting? I mean, I’m not a glutton, I hardly eat anything. I suppose I’m ignorant about a lot of things. Most people are. And Chaos — what does it even mean? That’s what bugging me most. I have no idea what I’m getting myself into.”

“It’s just how it is,” Pietro said. “I didn’t know all my boasting about not being afraid was what would get me in the end. But it did. And I ended up petrified.”

“I don’t want to be scared,” Saburo said. “I *hate* being scared. And not knowing how I’m going to get scared is what’s scaring me. If that makes any sense.”

“Best thing is not worry about it,” Pietro said. “Like visiting the doctor. Worry all you want, but it won’t change the fact that you must go. Don’t even waste

Four Friends

your time getting all upset about something that has to happen.”

“Easier said than done,” Saburo said. “When will the girls let us back in?”

Pietro stared into a grimy window at the shadowy figures inside. “They won’t. I don’t think Miz Leeds thinks it’s proper that we stay in the same room as the girls. Maybe we’ll contaminate them, or something.”

“So we have to sleep out on this porch all night?” Saburo shivered. He wasn’t cold, his worm kept him snug, but spending the night outside in a swamp with a strange monster lurking about wasn’t a pleasant idea.

They sat in silence. Saburo glanced up. A few stars twinkled between the tangled branches. He sighed. “Do you have any brothers, Pietro?”

“One. Luigi. He’s my older brother.”

“Does he ever tease you?”

“Are you kidding? Every day. In fact, he teases me much more than he *doesn’t* tease me. Why?”

“I have two brothers,” Saburo said. “My brother Jiro, he teased me all the time. I hated his teasing. Now I miss it.”

“I miss my brother too,” Pietro said. He turned his attention to the magical objects, lying in a neat row. “Which one will work against the Jersey Devil?”

Saburo shrugged. “I’m not sure. Kate couldn’t tell us what the Devil was afraid of.” He hesitated. “Pietro, do you like Kate?”

“She’s okay,” Pietro said. “Why?”

The Cyclone

“You don’t think she’s pretty?”

Pietro looked at Saburo and then laughed. “You have a crush on Kate!”

“Shh! Don’t say it so loud. “I just think she’s pretty, that’s all.”

“She *is* kind of pretty,” Pietro said, and Saburo experienced a sudden rush of anger towards the boy, “but she’s too bossy and impatient, and she annoys me. I’d rather talk with Jinjing.”

The anger left Saburo as quickly as it came, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He turned his attention to the magical objects.

“Do you think I’ll have to kill it?” he asked, staring at the barrette that would turn into a knife if he needed it to.

Pietro shrugged.

“I hate this,” Saburo said. “Not knowing how to plan for anything, it’s driving me crazy.”

<<◇>>

SABURO WAS UNCOMFORTABLE. It wasn’t due to the hard wood porch, Oni kept him nice and cozy. It was more that he hadn’t had a bath in two days. His clothes had been through a lot, they were dirty and stinky, and his warm socks were making his feet itch.

Pietro was snoring in his silvery cocoon and Saburo decided not to bug him. Instead he tiptoed down the porch, scooted behind the cabin and pulled off Oni, along with all his clothes.

He perused the water bottle. As long as whatever he wished for was a liquid, the water bottle should

Four Fiends

produce it. Right now he just wanted some clean water to wash himself with.

The water poured out in a warm stream and he let it splash all over himself until he was soaked through. Then he concentrated, squeezed the bottle, and out gushed liquid soap. Saburo scrubbed until he felt good and clean, then he let the water bottle wash the soap off.

He wasn't sure what to do about his dusty and stained clothes. He couldn't wait for them to dry. He decided to at least wash his underwear and socks. He hung them on a tree branch and put his shirt, jeans and shoes back on, feeling refreshed.

He looked around for Oni. His protector was nowhere to be seen.

He clipped the water bottle to his belt strap, his hands shaking. He felt for the other magical objects. They jingled in his pocket.

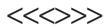
He peered into the murky darkness.

A fog had descended on the swamp and the watery moonlight illuminated strange, misty shapes. Even the cabin, which stood a few feet away, could hardly be seen. The fog had wrapped it like a spider wraps its prey. Saburo shivered.

He heard the squelching sound of something moving through the swampy soil.

He hoped it was Pietro.

He knew that it wasn't.



PIETRO STORMED INTO the cabin. "Where's Saburo?"

The Cyclone

Kate rubbed her eyes. "Huh?" she said. "Isn't he out there with you?"

"If he were, I wouldn't be asking you, would I? He's gone! All except his underwear and socks."

"What?" Jinjing said, sitting bolt upright.

"I woke up because I had to pee," Pietro said, blushing since he was telling this to girls, "and he wasn't there. I went out back and found these hanging on a branch." He waved Saburo's underthings in front of the girls.

"Ew," Kate said, "stop it."

"Did you see any footprints?" Jinjing asked.

"Yeah," Pietro said, looking glum, "I did."

He fell onto a chair. Kate and Jinjing stood up. Old Miz Leeds blinked, not following the conversation since it was half spoken in Italian.

"Saburo's footprints went around the back of the cabin, but they didn't go any further. There were other tracks too."

"What kind of tracks?" Kate said.

"Hoof prints," Pietro whispered, "like a horse."

They stared at each other. "Oh, this isn't good," Jinjing said.

"It gets even stranger," Pietro said. "There are tracks coming and no tracks leaving. Saburo's footprints and the...whatever it was...meet at the same spot. They don't go anywhere else. But there's no one there."

"They've disappeared," Jinjing whispered.

"No," Kate said, "they've flown away."



Four Fiends

SABURO WASN'T SURE how he ended up on Jersey Devil's back. All he knew was that they were flying very high and very fast, and he was clutching the beast's mane or feathers, or whatever it had on its neck. The cold wind whipped around him. He wished he had a warm coat, or better yet, Oni.

He wasn't afraid. He was exhilarated. Flying was even better than speeding along the ground in his worm. His teeth chattered and he shivered from the cold, but he didn't ever want this flight to stop. *This* was freedom. *This* was wonderful.

They left the Pine Barrens and spiraled downward, swooping over tilled fields and meadows dotted with cows. The Devil lit down in a grassy field and Saburo slipped off its back. He watched as the monster lowered its head and began to graze.

It was both eerily beautiful and hideously wrong. Its body looked like a horse's except for the wings, but its head was shaped like a goat with two short horns jutting out of it. It had a donkey's tail, long and thin with a tuft of hair at the end. The wings were brown and leathery like a bat and the neck was feathery, like a bird. The bright red eyes were the most frightening things about the monster. They were piercing and cold.

Saburo knew the Jersey Devil was one of the Four Fiends, but was having a difficult time figuring out what he must do to beat it. It hadn't attacked him like the Nian had with Pietro so he didn't think he had to fight it or chase it off. The monster acted almost friendly towards him. He figured this must be a trick although that hadn't

The Cyclone

stopped him from climbing onto the animal's back and letting it take him miles away from the safety of his worm and the others.

It ignored him now so he sat down in the cold grass and thought. What was he supposed to do?

From Kate's description, this animal must represent Chaos although the calm creature innocently nibbling grass didn't seem like a great candidate for Chaos. He tried to remember what the Yellow Dragon had told him, that the fiends knew they were being hunted down and would do anything to stop them. Why hadn't the Jersey Devil killed him outright at Miz Leed's shack? It could have tromped him with its hard hooves or gored him with its sharp horns. It must have some other way to dispose of him. But what?

A soft breeze ruffled the Devil's feathers and it raised its head. Those piercing red eyes shot through the dark. Saburo peered too, but he only saw the faint shapes of the cows. The wind picked up.

Loud snorts and moos filled the air as the cattle stampeded. The wind buffeted Saburo backwards and he reached out to steady himself. His hand closed on the Jersey Devil's wing.

It wasn't paying any attention to him. It stared at the stampeding cattle. Every muscle in its body was tense, Saburo could feel it through his fingers. An overwhelming feeling came over him — the feeling that they were not alone.

The cattle disappeared in a whirlwind of dust and noise. *A cyclone*. Saburo had never seen one before, not

Four Fiends

counting the fake cyclone whipping about a soundstage in *The Wizard of Oz*, but what he was seeing *must* be a cyclone. Except the stars still twinkled in the clear black sky. The cyclone, if that's what it was, was localized in the meadow.

He felt a nudge. The Jersey Devil gazed at him with its red eyes, and he understood. He pulled himself onto the Devil's warm back. He had a sinking feeling that he knew what was going to happen next.

They shot towards the maelstrom. Saburo flung his arms around the Devil's neck. The wind smashed into him with enough force to almost topple him off the monster's back. He heard the cows screaming so close he feared they might crash into one. He shut his eyes. Everything was a mass of wind and confusion. He had no idea which way was up and which way was down. He squeezed his arms tight around the Devil's neck and gripped as hard as he could. His hip throbbed.

It was all he could do to hold on. His head pounded with the noise and effort, his legs ached as if they couldn't grip another second longer. *I can't do this*, he thought, and then a voice drifted through his head.

Woe to you if you admit defeat and let your weakness conquer you. A million blessings if you remain tough and true.

He *must* hold on. He couldn't let his legs give out even if they screamed in agony. If he let go, all would be lost. The wind threatened to tear him away from the Devil but he gripped harder and kept his eyes shut, willing it to all be over soon.

The Cyclone

And then it was. The air grew still, the roaring faint. Saburo opened his eyes a fraction and looked down. They floated above the cyclone. They must have flown right up it and now it coiled and writhed beneath them as if it was *angry* they had escaped.

The Jersey Devil hung in mid-air. Saburo squinted down at the mass of whirling debris. Then the realization hit him. He didn't need to defeat the Devil. Not at all. The fiend was that spinning, chaotic mass below them.

It spiraled upwards, reaching out for them. The Devil didn't move. It was waiting for him to do something. Now was the time. He loosened his grip around the Devil's neck and even though he had to grit his teeth to keep from screaming, he tightened his throbbing legs around the monster's body so he could free his hands. He reached for the magical objects. The first one he touched was Pietro's water bottle.

He opened it. Water shot into the sky then barreled back down, multiplying into millions of heavy raindrops that pelted towards the rising cyclone. Saburo held the bottle high over his head and stared down. The mass of wind roared with anger and thrashed upward. The rain beat it back, tearing and drilling it lower and lower. The water hissed as it slashed through the black wind and slowly, very slowly, the cyclone began to shrink. Like the Wicked Witch it was melting, melting.

He told himself that he must stay strong and keep the water bottle open. Until the cyclone monster was

Four Fiends

entirely washed away, it might reform itself and come back. He must hold tight a little longer...

It felt like hours. He was sopping wet and his legs had gone completely numb, but finally the rushing, whirling wind was gone. All that was left was a dark shape lying on the ground.

Saburo capped the water bottle and the Jersey Devil dove down towards the thing in the grass.

<<◇>>

THEY WERE WAITING for him, even Oni. "How did you get here?" Saburo gasped, sliding off the Devil and rubbing his legs as Oni covered him in a comforting blue cloud.

"The worms, of course. Just about the time Pietro noticed you were missing, they decided it was time for another road trek," Kate said, "so here we are. What's that?"

Saburo studied the lump in the grass. "I don't know."

"What about the monster?" Jinjing said, nodding towards the Devil placidly chomping grass. "You didn't defeat it."

"It *wasn't* the monster," Saburo said. "The worms brought us to it so it could help us."

"But that's the Jersey Devil," Kate said.

Saburo nodded. "I know. But I think all those rumors about the Jersey Devil were wrong. It's the Pine Barrens' protector. The cyclone thing I fought, that's the monster causing chaos and mayhem in these parts. The Devil is here to fight it."

Kate looked skeptical. Saburo held his breath, hoping she wouldn't call him stupid again.

The Cyclone

“Well, you must be right,” she said, and Saburo let out his breath in a long sigh.

“He still looks scary,” Jinjing said.

“Maybe,” Saburo said, “but he’s not.”

They turned their attention to the thing lying in the grass. It rose and uncurled. The large lump stretched into a long neck, an even longer tail and two massive wings...

“The Azure Dragon!” Pietro shouted.

“That cyclone monster must’ve been keeping it captive inside itself,” Saburo said. “Now, the dragon is free.”

“Does that mean we’re done here?” Jinjing asked.

“Yes,” Saburo said, “but before we go, I’ve got to say goodbye.” He hobbled over to the Jersey Devil. It raised its head, stared at the boy with its red eyes, and nuzzled him. Saburo stroked its feathers.

“Sayonara, my friend,” he whispered. “Thank you for showing me how to be strong.”

He gave it a final pat before Oni pulled him back to the magnificent blue dragon who was waiting to fly them away.

Kate and the Parrot

“So,” PIETRO SAID, “who hears him now?”

“I do,” Kate said.

“What’s he saying?”

Kate gazed into the Yellow Dragon’s eyes. “He says thank you,” she said, “and there’s only two more to go.”

“And if you’re next,” Jinjing said, “we must be after the Vermillion Bird.”

“And either Ignorance or Gluttony,” Pietro added.

“Which means,” Saburo said, “that I fought Chaos. Why was Chaos mine? My life isn’t chaotic.”

“Maybe it is,” Jinjing suggested. “Maybe your greatest fear is chaos.”

Saburo thought about this. “Maybe that’s true. I don’t like complications or problems. And I hate confrontations. I guess I don’t like the thought of Chaos at all.”

Kate and the Parrot

“So which fiend do you think you represent?” he asked Kate. “Ignorance or Gluttony?”

Kate snorted. “I’m neither of those things,” she said. “I’m always dieting and I know lots.”

“Nobody knows everything,” Jinjing said.

“I know enough to know that I know more than you,” Kate said.

Jinjing looked down at the ground. “Leave her alone,” Pietro said. “She’s right. Nobody knows *everything*.”

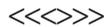
“Fine,” Kate said. “Let’s just get down one of these holes and get it over with, then.”

She paused as the Dragon lowered its golden head towards hers. She looked into its eyes.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

“What’d he say?” Saburo asked.

Kate took a deep breath and looked away. “Nothing,” she said. “Let’s go.”



KATE REMEMBERED ALMOST every detail of her eighth birthday. She wore a pink dress. She invited eight friends and they all stacked their presents, shimmering in coats of colorful wrapping paper, on the dining room table. Her mother bought a chocolate cake decorated with pink candy roses and she blew out all eight candles in one breath.

She remembered opening her presents but she never could recollect what any of them were. They were overshadowed by the memory of her father striding in the room, holding the shiny birdcage with an excited smile plastered on his face. And the memory of her

Four Friends

mother grimacing as the bird inside the cage screeched, “Out of the way, you lousy ingrates!”

His name was Bo and he had an extensive vocabulary. Kate’s father had gotten him from a coworker who couldn’t stand the noisy creature in her house another second. By best estimates he was about eight years old himself, which bonded Kate even closer to her new pet.

Her mother wasn’t happy about it.

“He’ll make a mess,” she said. “You’ll have to change the newspaper in his cage every day.”

“Okay,” Kate said, as Bo jumped on her shoulder amid the shrieks and giggles of the other girls.

“Turn that TV down!” the bird screeched.

“They say he’s an Eclectus Parrot,” her father said, “whatever that is.”

“He’s beautiful,” Kate whispered.

The bird knew she was talking about him and preened. His body was bright green highlighted with dark blue feathers under the wings and tail, and he had a very orange beak and intelligent black eyes. He rubbed his fat beak on Kate’s nose and shouted: “Shut up in there!”

“He sounds like a person!” Kate’s friend Josie said.

“Wash your ears!” the parrot squawked.

Bo was the life of the party and enjoyed all the attention the girls heaped on him. Kate took him to her room and put his cage on the dresser near her bed. As she turned out the lights, Bo ruffled his feathers and cawed “Lights out!”

Kate and the Parrot

“That’s right, you’re very smart,” Kate said. “Good night, now.”

“Good night! Good night!” Bo screeched.

Kate closed her eyes, exhausted from her exciting day. She had just lapsed into a wonderful dream when Bo woke her up.

“Clean up this pig sty!”

Kate yawned. “Boy, whoever you lived with before me sure was a grump. Didn’t you learn anything that doesn’t sound like a nag?”

“Turn out the light!” Bo squawked.

“It *is* out,” Kate said. “Go to sleep.”

Her mother stomped in and threw a sheet over the cage. “You’ve got to cover him,” she said, “otherwise he won’t shut up. Stupid bird.”

“He is *not*,” Kate said.

“Stupid bird!” Bo called from under his sheet.

He was quiet after that, and Kate slept through the night.

Every morning Bo rode Kate’s shoulder to breakfast and every night he sat on her desk and cackled as she did her homework. He mostly spouted out insulting quotes, his favorites being “Shut up you ugly crow!” He also did a great impersonation of a door creaking open. Kate’s mother was always running to the front door, worried that somebody was breaking in.

At night, after Kate threw the sheet over his cage, Bo would stop his squawking. At first he was quiet. After a few weeks, he began talking in a low whisper.

Four Friends

It wasn't the crazy, tantrummy parrot talk he usually spouted. The first night Kate heard him whisper, "It's out there somewhere."

"What is?" Kate smiled, not expecting an answer.

"It," Bo said. "Remember it's out there."

Kate inched closer. "Do I *need* to remember?"

"You do," Bo whispered.

Kate's fingers trembled as she grabbed the sheet and yanked it away. Bo stared at her, his eyes gleaming.

"Pick up your socks!"

She threw the sheet back over the cage.



"I HAD A bird," she said, "that told me things."

They sat on a rock in the pitch dark. They had landed at night, which was wonderful for Jinjing and Pietro because they were ready for bed. Kate was too worked up to sleep, and Saburo's legs still ached. He couldn't get comfortable, even in his worm. Plus, there was no way he was sleeping if Kate was willing to talk with him. So they sat on the rock while the others snored on the sandy ground.

"What did your bird tell you?" he said.

"Well, mostly it was just stuff he was taught, you know, like 'shut your trap' and 'kick the ball stupid', but sometimes at night he'd say things to me. A real conversation, you know? He always talked about this *thing*...he always worried it was coming for him."

"What kind of thing?"

"I don't know. Something evil I think. It always terrified me when he brought it up."

Kate and the Parrot

Saburo shook his head. "Did he say what it was called? Maybe it's the monster you have to fight."

"He might've. I'd always forget by morning. In fact, I'd forget everything by morning. Now I remember. Funny, huh?"

"Not really," Saburo said. "We're all remembering weird things when it's our turn. First Pietro, then me, now you. I suppose Jinjing is next."

"Yeah," Kate said, looking over at the slumbering girl with a stab of annoyance. She wasn't sure why but she didn't like Jinjing. There was something too weak about her. Except the one time when Pietro faced the Nian and she came to life, Jinjing was nothing but a huge, wussy baby. Kate had no respect for anyone so whimpery. Every time she heard the girl whine she wanted to smack her.

"So where do you think we are?" she asked, changing the subject.

Saburo thought. "I hear waves. Maybe we're near the ocean. The ground is so nice and sandy here."

Kate strained her ears. "I hear them too." She stood up.

Saburo hesitated then asked, "Do you want company?"

"No," Kate said, "I want to think a bit by myself. You know, get my mind ready for the challenge ahead and that sort of thing."

"Oh," Saburo said, sounding a little hurt. "Okay. My legs still ache anyway, I guess I should rest them a bit."

Kate headed towards the rumbling waves, happy in her solitude. She didn't mind Pietro or Saburo even

Four Fiends

though they were boys. Pietro was funny and Saburo was nice, except he was too shy and didn't talk much. But she was glad to have some time alone.

She wasn't afraid. She mulled over what she might be up against. She couldn't imagine what either Ignorance or Gluttony would be like, but she felt confident she could handle whatever tricks they had in store. After all, Pietro and Saburo conquered their fiends, and they were only boys.

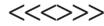
As she walked she hummed. She wasn't sure what the tune was, the melody just popped into her head while she was walking. It had a beachy feel, very upbeat and happy. She wondered if any words went along with it.

She scrambled over a sand dune and tumbled onto the beach. The moonlight glinted off the cresting waves and shimmered on the sand. She waited for the salty smell to hit her nose and the sea breeze to ruffle her hair, but they didn't.

That was one big problem with the worms. Bo kept her nice and comfortable but didn't let her *feel* anything. If it was cold out, she couldn't tell, and if it were hot out, she'd never know. She pulled Bo off and breathed. The salty air felt like heaven. She undid her ponytail and let the breeze whip through her hair. She kicked off her shoes and ran to meet the waves. The warm water frothed around her ankles.

In the moonlight she watched palm trees swaying in the breeze. Kate walked back to her shoes, sat down in the soft sand and sighed. If she *must* fight a fiend, at least this was a nice place for it.

Kate and the Parrot



“THE VERMILLION BIRD is from the south,” Jinjing said, “so we must be somewhere below the equator.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Kate said. “I mean, the Azure Dragon is from the east, but we ended up in New Jersey of all places.”

“That is east,” Jinjing said. “From Hong Kong anyway.”

“But Asia, that’s the Far East,” Kate said. “If Asia’s the Far East, then how can Jersey be east? Isn’t America in the west?”

“You two are confusing me,” Pietro said. “Let’s make breakfast before we discuss this.”

“Maybe,” Saburo said, “the directions come from wherever the Yellow Dragon’s island is.”

“Come again?” Kate said.

“Well, think about it. The Black Tortoise was the protector of the north, right? And the north was in China. The Azure Dragon was from the east, which ended up being in North America. So maybe the Yellow Dragon’s island is somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. That would make China north and America east.”

“So if we’re now in the south, maybe we’re in the South Pacific,” Kate sighed. “Like Tahiti. Or Bora Bora.”

“The Four Guardians also have seasons which correspond to them,” Jinjing said. “The Tortoise’s season is winter, which is why we were in China during the New Year. The Azure Dragon’s season is spring.”

“It felt springy in New Jersey,” Pietro said. “The buttercups were out.”

Four Fiends

“The Vermillion Bird’s season is summer,” Jinjing said.

Pietro yawned. “Summer in the South Pacific. Sounds fantastic. I hope it takes us a few days to find whatever fiend we’re searching for.”

“Me too,” Kate said. “The water here is so nice and warm, even at night. And the sand is softer than cotton balls. I could stay here forever.”

“Did you see any people last night?” Pietro said.

“Nope. Everything was nice and dark.” Kate gazed around. Insects buzzed in the thick vegetation, but she couldn’t hear or see anything else.

“Maybe there aren’t any people here,” Saburo said. “Maybe we’re on a deserted island somewhere.”

“Like Robinson Crusoe,” Jinjing said.

They discontinued the conversation and made breakfast. Once they had finished, they got back in their worms and headed to the beach. It was even more fabulous in the daylight. Soft, pink sand stretched out in a crescent shape around a beautiful blue-green lagoon. Small waves broke on the shore with larger waves rumbling further out past the coral reef. Palm trees lined the beach, dipping their long fronds over the water. Behind them the rich jungle foliage crept up the side of a mountain.

“I want a coconut,” Pietro said, staring at a palm tree. “I see two up there. Think I can get them?”

“I don’t know...” Jinjing said.

“Sure he can,” Kate argued, annoyed with the girl’s hesitation. “Go for it, Pietro.”

“What if he falls and breaks his arm?” Jinjing said.

Kate and the Parrot

“He’s got his worm with him,” Kate said. “He’ll be fine.”

Pietro ran towards the tree and shimmied up it. Saburo gazed after him. “Wish I could do that.”

“You could try,” Kate said.

Saburo shook his head. “Just watching this is making my legs hurt.”

Pietro had climbed almost to the top and was shaking the coconuts. Jinjing cringed.

“Geez, *stop* it,” Kate said. “If he fell, his worm would bounce him back over here. Quit acting like a complete baby, Jinjing.”

Jinjing screwed up her face as if she wanted to either cry or yell. Kate hoped she’d yell. Anything would be better than crying. Then Jinjing’s expression changed from upset to shock. “Look at *that*.”

Kate turned around. Smoke poured out of the top of the mountain.

“It’s a volcano,” Saburo said.

“Cool,” Kate said. “Maybe it’ll blow while we’re here.”

“Do you want to *die*?” Jinjing said, staring at her in total disbelief.

“Oh geez, we aren’t going to die. We’ve got the worms, remember? Nothing bad will happen to us with the worms. You keep forgetting, Jinjing, but I don’t. I’m not afraid of that mountain as long as Bo is with me.”

“What if he leaves you?” Saburo asked.

“He won’t,” Kate said.

“Oh yes he will,” Jinjing said. “Saburo’s worm left him when he fought the cyclone monster and Pietro’s

Four Fiends

left him when the Nian showed up. Yours will leave you too, and then we'll see how brave you are."

"I'm brave," Kate said. "Just as brave as Saburo or Pietro, and definitely braver than *you*."

"Hey, did you see the mountain?" Pietro yelled, running up and breaking the tension. "Here, I've got the coconuts. I'm not sure how we'll open them though."

"Try using this," Jinjing said, handing him her barrette.

Pietro slipped out of his worm, grasped the barrette and watched as it turned into a thin knife. He pressed the knife to the nut and it sliced a nice hole in the shell. "That was easy," he said.

"And they say coconuts are hard to open," Saburo said.

Kate laughed. "That's 'cause *they* don't have a magic barrette."

Pietro took a gulp of coconut milk, smacked his lips, and handed the coconut to Kate. She got out of her worm, sipped it and grimaced. "Ew," she said, "I don't like it."

"I'll take it then," Jinjing said, grabbing the coconut from Kate's hand and walking off with it.

"Hey!" Kate yelled, pulling Bo back over her head. "Bring that back!"

Jinjing tromped up the beach and ignored her.

"You've got to admit, you deserved that," Saburo said as he watched Pietro work the knife into the other coconut. "You should go easier on her. She's here to help too, just like the rest of us."

Kate snorted.

Kate and the Parrot

“Jinjing’s okay,” Saburo said. “Why don’t you like her?”

“I’m not answering that,” Kate said, partly because she was annoyed with the question but mostly because she didn’t have a good answer to give.

Maka

“LISTEN UP, AND I’LL tell you a story,” Bo said.

Kate pulled her blanket over her eyes. “Is it scary?”

“All stories are scary where I come from,” the parrot said.

“Where is that?”

“A long way from here, in a place warm and wet and full of birds. It was a beautiful place, remote enough so humans weren’t interested in living there, and the parrots ruled the skies. That place was full of fruit and insects and the other animals were even smaller than us birds, and we had a wonderful existence. Until *it* came.”

“What was it?” The little girl shuddered and buried her face under the covers.

“It came from the mountain,” Bo whispered. “When *It* came, our peaceful existence was over.”

“Was it a monster?”

“A monster, yes. It destroyed our wonderful world and we scattered like feathers in the wind. Those who survived were driven away. Far away. To the world of humans, who captured us and turned us into pets living in small cages.”

“Why didn’t you try to escape?”

“Because,” the bird whispered, “I needed to protect you. Someday you will help us rid our land of the evil monster. And until then, I’ll be here to guard you.”

“Guard me from what?”

The parrot peered around the room with its sharp eyes.

“From *it*. If *it* ever finds out where you are.”

<<◇>>

“THAT’S ONE PARANOID bird,” Saburo said.

“Bo left a few months ago,” Kate said. “He disappeared one night. I thought it was because I left the window open. But maybe he knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That the time was coming. Look at that mountain.”

Black smoke rose from it, puffing upwards and drifting into the sky. “It’s a volcano, not a mountain,” Saburo said, “but it has the weirdest smoke I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen volcanos.”

Kate had never seen one until now. “Really?”

“Sure. We have volcanoes all over Japan. There’s a big one called Mount Aso. It’s always giving off steam. You can stand right on the rim and watch this huge pool of green sulfur bubbling below.”

Four Fiends

“Does it ever blow?”

“Yes. They still let you go up there, though. They put bunkers all over the rim to hide in if the volcano erupts. But the smoke there is white, like steam. And it doesn’t come out in little puffs like this one. This almost looks like smoke from an old steam train, doesn’t it?”

Kate stared at the ominous smoke.

“In Polynesian myth,” Saburo said, “the goddess of fire is a woman called Pele.”

“Who?”

“Pele. You’ve never heard of her? She’s talked about in Hawaiian stories. I’ve always wanted to visit Hawaii.”

Kate sat in the sand and bit her lip, thinking. “Was Pele a bad goddess?”

“In some stories. In others, she created the islands of Hawaii. There are a lot of myths about Pele. Why?”

Kate didn’t answer. She stared at the black smoke curling into the sky. She nodded towards the volcano. “Do you think we can get up there?”

Saburo sighed. “It’s a long walk.” He had a bad feeling the worms wouldn’t help them much on the trek. He stared at the steep slope with trepidation.

“I’m climbing it,” Kate said. “Stay here if you want.”

“No,” Saburo said, struggling to his feet. “I’ll go with you. What do you think is up there?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said, biting her lip and surveying the volcano, “but I know I need to go up it. Did you get any feelings like that when it was your turn?”

“Yes. When I met the Jersey Devil, I knew I had to get on its back. I didn’t think twice about it. Do you want to go up there, just the two of us?”

“I don’t think the others would be happy if we left them,” Kate said, and she yelled at the two figures sitting together on the beach. “Hey! Let’s go!”

“Where to?” Pietro yelled back.

“Up there!” Kate pointed to the volcano. She glanced at Jinjing, wondering if the other girl would put up a protest.

Jinjing shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

<<<>>

THEY HID IN the shadows and watched. The four strange figures passed so close, they could hear them breathe.

They liked these creatures that walked on two legs and talked using such odd sounds. One tried to copy the sounds, but he was too loud and they heard him. The large creature dressed in blue whipped her head around.

“What was that?”

“What?” the one with the long red hair said. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Saburo said ‘I’m tired,’ and then I heard someone else say it. Further down the path.”

“Maybe you heard an echo,” the small boy with the black hair said.

The birds cocked their heads and listened to these strange noises. They didn’t understand the words, but they enjoyed the sound. They would have tried to mimic the voices if the largest bird hadn’t given

Four Fiends

them a very warning glance. They understood. They must observe these animals, observe and not be seen.

They watched as the humans trudged up the tangled path. The small one with the black hair was struggling. What an absurd way to travel, walking on the ground. If they had wings, now then their journey would be much more enjoyable.

The birds flittered from branch to branch, watching the progress. They knew where the group was heading and they grew more anxious as they neared the mountain's top. They *never* flew all the way up. Especially when it was smoldering.

The larger bird pushed them on. A few of the more nervous birds bowed out and flew back to the beach. The braver ones stuck with it until they had reached the rim. They huddled behind a small bush and waited.

Kate moved right up to the edge. She didn't see anything except rocks and bushes and smoke seeping out a crack. The volcano must not have blown for a very long time. It was covered with vegetation. If she hadn't seen the smoke with her own two eyes, she wouldn't have even realized she was standing on the rim of one.

"What do we do now?" Pietro said.

Saburo flopped on a rock, panting. "We rest. Will our magical objects produce anything to cure a leg ache?"

"I don't think so," Pietro said, "unless you conjure up some aspirin with the spoon."

"You'd have to get out of your worm," Jinjing said.

Saburo stared at the thick smoke. "I'd rather not."

Kate climbed over the rim.

“What are you doing?” Jinjing said.

“I’m going down and check out the smoke. It’s not steep, and I don’t see any big holes. I’ll be okay.”

The others didn’t follow her. She didn’t expect them to. She wanted to do this on her own anyway. She made her way to the crack. The smoke may have been hot but she was enveloped in her worm and didn’t feel it. She put her head right in the crack, trying to peer through the smoke. She couldn’t see anything. But she could *hear* something.

She heard a song. The same song she had hummed on the beach last night. There were no words. Just a beautiful melody sung by the clearest and prettiest voice Kate had ever heard. She listened, fascinated. She wondered if she could crawl down the crack and find the singer of that song. She felt exhilarated. She shoved her head further in and pushed forward.

Something pulled her back.

As soon as her head exited the smoke she lost the sound. She turned around, angry. Saburo stood behind her.

“Don’t,” he said. “I have a bad feeling about that.”

“Maybe,” Kate said, “but I have a very *good* feeling about it. There’s something down there. It’s singing to me. Listen.”

She waved toward the crack. Saburo put his head in the smoke. Kate waited in breathless silence. Saburo pulled his head back out and shook it, puzzled.

“Did you hear it?” she said.

Four Friends

“All I heard was growling,” Saburo said. “It didn’t sound very friendly, either.”

“It was the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard,” Kate said. “And the funny thing about it is I know the tune. I was humming it earlier.”

“What song is it?” Saburo asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t remember hearing it before, but it popped into my head when I was on the beach last night. And I can’t get it out of my head. I want to hear it again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Saburo said.

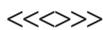
“I don’t care what you think. I *need* to hear it.” Kate tried to walk back to the crack, but she couldn’t move.

“See,” Saburo said. “Bo doesn’t want you going near that smoke either.”

Kate moaned as her worm pulled her away from the rim. She couldn’t explain it, even to herself, but she had to hear that song again. The melody was so beautiful and the singer so mysterious. And maybe there was some meaning in the song she needed to understand. The further Bo moved her from the smoke the more desperate she became.

Her worm stopped at the rim. Kate stared at the smoke and hummed.

The birds listened. They understood.



“SHE LEFT TODAY,” Kate said.

Bo cocked his head and for once didn’t respond with a loud and obnoxious outburst. He knew she was miserable.

“She said she wasn’t coming back.” Kate said, wiping her nose. “Maybe I won’t ever see her again.” She stared at the portrait of them all—Kate in her favorite pink dress, her father with his glasses perched on the end of his nose, smiling, and her mother. Even in the family photo her mother wasn’t happy. She wouldn’t even face the camera. She was looking somewhere else, boredom plastered across her beautiful face.

“I didn’t see it coming.” Kate wiped her nose and sat up, feeling angry. “We don’t need her, do we?”

Bo chirped and rubbed his beak on her cheek.

Kate took a deep breath and turned to her pet. “I’m going to teach you something so pay attention.”

The bird cocked his head and ruffled his feathers.

“Bo loves Kate,” the little girl said, staring into the parrot’s bright eyes. “Say it.”

Bo tilted his head sideways as if he were trying very hard to understand.

“Bo loves Kate. BolovesKate, BolovesKate, BolovesKate,” Kate repeated.

Bo tilted his head the other way and started preening. Kate sighed.

That night, as she was crying herself to sleep, the sheet over the birdcage rustled. She stifled her sobs and waited.

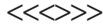
“Bo loves Kate,” the bird whispered.

“And you’ll never leave me, right?” Kate said.

The parrot repeated, “Bo loves Kate.”

“And Kate loves Bo,” Kate said. “And I always will, don’t you forget it.”

Four Friends



“DO YOU THINK she’ll be okay?” Pietro asked, staring at Kate, who paced up and down the beach.

Saburo shook his head. “She’s obsessed with that song. It’s a trick, I’m sure of it. Something wants to lure her into the volcano. She said it was a song, but all I heard was growling. Like an angry dog.”

“It’s a good thing her worm won’t let her back up there,” Pietro said, as Kate fell on the sand in frustration.

“Maybe we should go talk to her,” Saburo said.

“What’ll we say?” Jinjing said. “She won’t take advice from any of us, especially me. She’ll just yell at us and tell us to leave her alone. Maybe we should keep away from her until she acts nicer.”

“We should at least give her our things,” Saburo said.

“What things?”

“You know, the magical things. My spoon, your barrette, Pietro’s water bottle.”

“Why should I give her my barrette? She doesn’t deserve it.”

Pietro sighed. “Just because she’s made you mad, doesn’t mean you should forget why we’re here, Jinjing. Whatever Kate’s struggling with, she needs the magical objects to help her through it. The same way I needed them and Saburo needed them, and you’ll need them too when it’s your turn.”

“Fine.” Jinjing pulled out her barrette. “You give them to her then.”

“I’ll do it,” Saburo said, taking the barrette and water bottle. He limped to where Kate lay on the sand.

“Hi Kate,” he said. “Feeling any better?”

“No,” Kate said, “not really.”

“I’ve got some things for you,” Saburo said.

“Unless you’ve got a way to get back up the volcano, I’m not interested.”

Saburo sat down. “I know you’re mad at me,” he said, “but I really think there’s something evil down there.”

“Of *course* there’s something evil. And I’m supposed to fight it right?”

“Yes,” Saburo said, “except maybe, in your state of mind, you won’t be able to fight it. You’ll give in to it.”

“Why do you think that? I’m as strong as Pietro and as brave as you. I can fight off anything as easy as either of you.”

“It *wasn’t* easy,” Saburo said.

“I can still do it if this stupid worm would let me go back up there.”

“Maybe the time isn’t right yet.”

Kate closed her eyes. “Then leave me alone until it is.”

Saburo sighed, placed the magical objects on the sand, and went back to join the others.

Kate lay with her eyes shut. The beautiful song in her head drowned out the pounding waves. She felt frustrated. Like Saburo and Pietro, she *knew* what she had to do. She had to get into the volcano and find the maker of that song. So why wasn’t her worm letting her go? Why was it waiting?



Four Fiends

THE BIRDS CONGREGATED in front of a grass shack. They cawed until a small woman hobbled out of it. She gave the birds an annoyed glare as they crowded around her.

The woman was very old. Her tan skin hung in wrinkled folds. She had no teeth left. One eye scanned the birds with sharp acuity, the other eye sat in its socket, cloudy and useless. A few wisps of gray hair grew from her skull at odd angles. Bare, gnarled feet protruded from under a thin dress. The cloth had once been full of vibrant colors. Now it was almost pure white, bleached by the relentless sun.

She stared at the birds with her one good eye. "Does it look like I have anything for you to eat? I do not. I have one small fish left and that is *my* dinner, not yours. Go away and find your own."

The largest bird settled on the woman's bony shoulder and whispered something into her ear. She grinned a toothless grin.

"Aah," she cackled. "Well that's good news, good news. And what happened?"

The other birds cocked their heads in interest as their leader conversed with the woman. Then they began to sing.

They sang the song Kate had sung and the old woman's smile grew even broader. "Interesting," she said, "interesting indeed. She must be either very stupid or very weak. We know she is not stupid." The woman sighed. "Oh, we know it well. So she must be weak. That's good, good. Or..." she paused. "Or it's a trap.

Maka

Of course. A trap.” She sighed again and glanced at the bird sitting on her shoulder.

“Well then, my feathered friend, you know what to do, do you not?”

The bird gave an understanding chirp. Then he and the rest of the flock soared into the air and headed up the mountain. The wizened woman watched them go, shaking her head and sighing. She disappeared into her grass shack and came out wearing a straw hat and carrying a knotty, twisted cane. Her bare feet slapped down the dusty trail as she hobbled towards the beach.



KATE WOKE AT dusk. The others were gone. The beach was deserted. And her worm had left. She jumped up. Nothing was stopping her now from hearing her song again.

She almost forgot the magical objects lying half buried in the sand. She scooped them up as she churned towards the path that would take her up the volcano. The dimming light made it hard to find the path. Kate pulled out her lipstick tube and unscrewed it. A bright beam shone from it, illuminating the path as she walked.

She climbed halfway up the volcano before she realized she had forgotten her shoes. The sandy path had turned rocky and she grimaced as the jagged stones cut into her feet. She gritted her teeth and hurried onward. What did it matter if her feet were a bloody mess by the time she reached the top? It didn't matter at all.

Four Friends

As she neared the rim she noticed a red glow ahead. The air grew warmer and she began to sweat. She wondered if she could get into the volcano without her worm. What if she burned up halfway down?

Even this thought didn't slow her speed. The worry was surpassed by the burning desire to hear that voice again. To hear the song, that was all that mattered.

<<◇>>

"I'M HUNGRY," SABURO said. "Let's go find Kate and make some lunch."

"Let's not," Jinjing said, hoping to stay as far away from the unpleasant girl as possible.

"You can't avoid her forever," Pietro said. "The rest of us shouldn't have to suffer just because you two aren't getting along. I'm hungry too."

"Fine," Jinjing said. "Go back and make me a pizza."

"You should eat something besides pizza," Saburo said.

Jinjing glared at him. "Why? Because I'm big and fat?"

"You're not fat," Pietro said.

Saburo sighed. "Because it isn't *good* for you. Not every day anyway. You need some vegetables."

"Make me a pizza with vegetables on it then," Jinjing said. "And a ginger ale."

"Fine," Pietro said, "Let's go Saburo."

Jinjing sat on her rock, arms folded, feeling mutinous. She didn't want to be around Kate one second longer than she had to.

"I hate her," she said.

"Why?"

Jinjing jumped and whipped her head around.

The old woman stood behind her, grinning her toothless grin. Jinjing took a deep, steadying breath.

“She’s mean to me,” she said.

“She’s not to be hated,” the old woman said. “She is to be pitied.”

“No she isn’t,” Jinjing said. “She’s pretty, she’s braver than me, and she thinks she knows everything.”

The woman raised her knotty cane and prodded Ru-Chong with it.

“Move,” she told the worm. “I want to sit.”

Jinjing gasped. “You can see my worm!”

“Of course I can. I may have only one working eye, but it works very well. Scoot over and let a tired old woman rest her feet. I’ve been walking all afternoon. And your friend *is* to be pitied. She may be pretty and brave and thinks she knows everything. She doesn’t. How do I know?” The woman pushed up against Jinjing’s worm and gazed up at the girl’s angry face. “Because people who think they know everything usually don’t know squat. And your friend doesn’t know squat. Ignorance is bliss.”

“You’re not getting electrified,” Jinjing said.

“What?” the old lady said. “Speak up, you’re talking into my bad ear.”

“He shocks everyone else. Ru Chong, I mean.”

“Of course he does, dearie. But not me.”

“Who *are* you?”

“Oh my,” the little woman cackled, “I have forgotten my manners. You may call me Maka.”

Four Friends

"My name is Jinjing. Do you live here?"

"Unfortunately my dear, I do. All by my lonesome, I'm afraid. Except my sister although I don't see her much."

"Why not?"

"Oh, she is very bad-tempered and holds a grudge. Now, I am here to tell you that your friend, the friend you say you hate, needs your help."

Jinjing snorted. "Why should I help her?"

"Because she can't help herself, you see. She is weak even though she doesn't think so. My sister is the same way. Would you like to hear a story?"

Jinjing nodded, not knowing what else to say.

"It isn't a long one. When we were younger, she stole my husband from me. I hated her for it."

"That's horrible," Jinjing said.

"It was indeed. I was so mad that I chased her far and wide. She always ran from me. She was much faster so I could never catch her. I hated her for years for something far worse than how your friend has acted."

"So what happened?"

"Well, somewhere along the line I stopped hating. She *is* my sister after all. We still don't get along, she is a little too mischievous you see, and is always getting into trouble, but she's the only sister I've got. She annoys me and I know I annoy her, but we rub along as best we can. Most of the time."

"And she lives here too?"

"Sometimes. Right now she's in the volcano your friend is climbing."

Maka

Jinjing thought about this. This woman's sister lives inside a volcano? It made no sense. Then she thought about something else and she jumped up.

"Kate's heading up the mountain?"

"If I have it right, she should almost be at the top by now." Maka waved her cane in the air. "The minute her protector left her she grabbed those interesting trinkets you carry and headed up."

"She doesn't have her *worm*? She'll be burnt to a crisp up there!"

Maka yawned. "Possibly, if you don't go do something about it."

"I should go get the boys," Jinjing said.

"Maybe," the old woman said, "if you think you have time. Myself, I don't think you do. The path is right there. I suggest you prod your lovely but lethargic worm and get him moving. Before it's too late."

Kate's Downfall

THE BIRDS WAITED at the top.

They perched on the volcano's rim and surrounded the fiery crack that Kate knew she must enter. The largest bird balanced on a rock behind the crack and stared at her. Kate stared back.

"Bo?"

Bo didn't answer in words, like he used to. She still understood what his stare meant. *It* was down there. *It* was waiting.

For the first time she paused. She had always been afraid when Bo talked about *it*. She remembered having nightmares on nights he brought the subject up. Horrible dreams full of fire and a growling demon. *It*.

Was that what waited for her down there? Saburo said he heard growling when he put his ear to the

Kate's Downfall

crack. She heard a beautiful melody. What if he was right? What if it were a trick?

"What do I do?" she asked the parrot. Bo cocked his head, flew to her shoulder and nuzzled her ear. Kate sighed. She felt lonely and detached from the others even after all they'd been through together. Bo reminded her of home. She wondered how her father was coping without her.

She knew Bo was there to stop her from squirming into the red-hot crack, and she was both grateful and upset. Grateful because she was happy someone cared about her and upset because she wanted to hear the song again. Plus, the Vermillion Bird was down there waiting for her to save it.

"Hey!"

Kate whipped around, wincing as Bo dug his claws into her shoulder so he wouldn't fall off his perch. She watched, amazed, as Jinjing strode over. The large girl looked mad. Very mad. Kate refused to feel intimidated.

"Hey what?" she said, putting as much contempt into her voice as possible.

"You can't go down there."

"Tell me something you three haven't told me already. I *have* to go down there. I've got to rescue that bird thingy from whatever monster it is I'm supposed to rescue it from."

"Pele," Jinjing said. "You have to rescue it from Pele, and she isn't in a very good mood."

"And how do you know that?"

Four Fiends

"Her sister told me. Pele is okay except when she's moody and right now she's moody. That's why the volcano is smoking. And you'll get burned to a crisp if you go down there. You can't do it without your worm."

"My worm is gone," Kate said.

"I know. So you'll have to get into mine."

"You'll let me have your worm?" Kate almost felt touched by this generous offer.

"No, Ru-Chong won't let me out. But he'll let you in. We'll both go."

Kate hesitated. There was something very personal about going down there. She didn't want anyone else intruding, especially Jinjing. Bo nudged her ear and chirped something soft into it. He didn't say any words. Still, she understood. This way was safe. This was the only way.

"Do you have the magical objects?" Jinjing asked.

"Yes," Kate said.

"Then get in and let's go before I chicken out," Jinjing said. Kate smiled.

"You won't," she said. "I won't let you."



"SO YOU'RE PELE'S sister?" Saburo asked.

"That's right," the old woman said. She crouched near the ground and blew on a small spark she had conjured the old fashioned way, by rubbing two sticks together with her knobby hands.

"Doesn't that make you a goddess?" Pietro said. "Can't you just *make* fire appear?"

Kate's Downfall

"Don't be silly, boy. I'm no fire goddess. That'd be my sister. No, I'm goddess of the ocean. Which explains why there's a pile of fish sitting here ready for cooking. Didn't have to fish for 'em, did I?"

"How'd you get them then?" Saburo asked, eyeing the fish, his stomach rumbling.

"Mmm, the ocean is plentiful. I just need to ask."

"If you're the goddess of the ocean, why do you live on land?" Pietro said.

"It annoys my sister. As long as I'm lurking about, she can't leave. She must stay in that volcano."

"And why do you want her to stay there?"

Maka straightened up as best as her crooked frame would allow and gave the boy a hard stare. "Now why would you think, young 'un? You know what she's keeping down there!"

"The Vermillion Bird?" Pietro said.

"Exactly. And I'm not letting her leave until your big friend does something about rescuing it."

"Kate's not so big," Pietro said.

Maka snorted. "Not her. The other one."

"You mean Jinjing?"

"Mhm. Hand me those fish, boy. I like 'em raw, but I don't suppose you'd care for it that way."

"I would," Saburo said. "I *love* sashimi."

"Got anything to cut it with?"

"No," Saburo said. "Kate has the knife."

"Then we'll cook it. I won't have you biting into a raw fish while its head is still attached. That's not proper table etiquette."

Four Friends

She cooked in silence. Saburo watched the old woman, fascinated. "Is your sister old too? In all the myths she's young and beautiful."

"What a rude question. Of course she's beautiful, but she's not young. I'm beautiful too, normally."

"Normally?"

"Mmm. When I'm in the ocean. This dry land and blasted sun aren't good for me. My skin's all dehydrated, don't you know. A few days back in the ocean and I'll be as good as new. And I hope it happens soon. If your friend rescues the Vermillion Bird from my sister, that is."

"It seems funny," Pietro said. "Why is your sister so evil while you are so good?"

Maka chuckled. "I'm not so good. And she's not so evil. She just can't resist pretty things. She's always wanted the Vermillion Bird as a pet, you see. It is fiery and it sings beautifully. My sister can't sing. She's tone-deaf, but even she is entranced by the Bird's song. As is your friend."

"Kate and Pele sound a lot alike," Pietro said.

"They're both strong in some ways and weak in others," the old woman said. "My sister won't give up the bird without a fight."

"Can we reason with her?" Saburo asked. "The Yellow Dragon told us chaos would take over the world if we didn't get all Four Guardians back to his island. She wouldn't want that, would she?"

"She would not care. A Fire Goddess's life is filled with chaos. She creates it. She would revel in that kind

Kate's Downfall

of world. No, reasoning with her would do no good. It would only fuel her desire to keep the Bird."

"What can Jinjing do to get it back then?" Saburo asked.

"The one way is to use something she values even more than the Vermillion Bird. Something she values and fears too. Only then can your friend rescue it."

"What would she value more than the Bird?" Pietro said.

"Pele has many weaknesses," the Ocean Goddess said, winking her one good eye, "and I know her biggest. And now so does your friend. Fish is ready. Hungry?"



"LET ME HAVE the magical things," Jinjing said.

"No," Kate said. "I'm supposed to use them."

"Alright then, at least give me Saburo's spoon. You won't need it, it just makes food. And I'll bet you'll need the water bottle to fight Pele. Water puts out fire after all."

Kate nodded. "They won't work anyway," she said, handing over the spoon, "since we're still in this worm."

"He'll let us out," Jinjing said. "Once we reach our destination, I think it'll be safe. Once we get through all this fire."

They couldn't see anything except white from the heat although it didn't feel hot in the worm, and the bright flames didn't bother their eyes. After a while, Ru-Chong veered sideways and they left the fire behind and plunged into a dark, rocky tunnel.

"We must be miles below the surface by now," Kate said. "Where's the beautiful song I heard? It

Four Fiends

sounded so clear before. Maybe we're going the wrong way."

"I don't think Ru-Chong would mislead us," Jinjing said. "He knows where he's going."

They stopped in a small cavern filled with a strange reddish light. "I think you can get out here," Jinjing said.

"We should keep going. This isn't the right place; there's nothing here and I don't hear it. I want to go where the song is. I'm sure that's where we'll find the Vermillion Bird."

"Well, I think you'll have to get out and walk," Jinjing said. "My worm is done."

Kate crawled out of Jinjing's worm and stood. The hot air fell over her like a blanket. It was almost too stifling to breathe. She wiped the sweat off her brow, pulled out Pietro's bottle and took a long drink. Cool water slid down her throat. She looked around.

The tunnel they came through lay behind her. Another tunnel lay ahead. She headed that way.

This tunnel was so bright she didn't even need to use her lipstick tube as a flashlight. The smooth floor made walking easy and she trudged a good distance before stopping to take another gulp of water.

Then she heard it. The song filled the tunnel, bouncing off the walls and amplifying into millions of beautiful notes. "Wow, that *is* pretty," Jinjing said.

Kate broke into a trot. "Are you still following me? I thought your worm wouldn't go any further."

"Not with you in it," Jinjing said. "But I think he wants me to stay close to you."

Kate's Downfall

"Not necessary." Kate stopped talking and concentrated on the widening tunnel. The song was getting louder. She was close. She sped up and pelted out of the tunnel.

The large cavern she entered glistened and shimmered. Thousands of crystal stalactites clung to the ceiling, looking more like icicles than rock. Stumpy stalagmites littered the floor like ice sculptures sparkling in the soft light. In the center perched the Vermillion Bird. Kate gasped and stared at it, unable to pull her eyes away. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Instead of feathers the Bird was covered with moving, shimmering streaks of red, yellow and gold flames that wavered and twisted as it moved. The bird's golden beak was open wide as it sang, and it stared at them with pleading eyes.

It did not want to sing, Jinjing realized. It was being forced to sing. "This is a trap," she said. "The bird was singing to lure you down here."

"No," Kate said, "it was singing to let me know where it was. So I could rescue it."

"I don't think so," Jinjing said.

Kate moved towards the bird. "I don't care what you think."

She was so entranced with the Bird, she didn't notice the dark red glow that began filling the room. It was coming from the tunnel they had exited, the only tunnel, Jinjing realized, that connected with this room. Whatever was approaching was blocking their one escape route.

Four Friends

A trap. With no escape.

“Kate!” she yelled. “Something’s coming!”

Kate was too mesmerized by the song to care. “You deal with it,” she whispered as she swayed back and forth with the rhythm. “Just leave me alone.”

Jinjing turned towards the tunnel. She wasn’t sure what to expect, but she knew she was the only one sensible enough to face it. “You should go,” she said to Ru-Chong.

The worm slid away and hunkered in a corner. Jinjing gripped Saburo’s spoon. If this didn’t work, they were in big trouble. There was no other way out.

She hoped Maka was right.



HER HEAD WAS crowned with cascading ringlets of fiery light. Her lips glowed red and her eyes were deep flickering amber. She was the most beautiful person Kate had ever seen. She entered the room with a gracious smile. Her red robes flickered about her and trailed behind her like leftover embers from a fast-moving forest fire.

“You have met my bird,” she said, and her voice was almost as sing-song as the bird’s beautiful tune. Kate turned her ears towards this new sound as the Vermillion Bird fell silent.

“He’s beautiful, is he not?” Pele asked. Kate nodded.

The goddess took a step into the room and stopped. She waved her graceful arms in the air. A jet of fire escaped her robes and swept around the room, enclosing Jinjing, Kate and the Vermillion Bird in

Kate's Downfall

an impenetrable ring. She still smiled but Jinjing sensed malice in that smile. She gripped the spoon and shielded the food it had produced from Pele's view. She waited.

"My dear," Pele purred, "you are so beautiful. What wonderful fiery hair. Do you like my pet?" She waved an elegant hand towards the Bird.

"Yes," Kate said. She was fascinated by this woman, and had half-forgot the bird already.

"He has a wonderful song," Pele said. "Entrancing, isn't it? You must have much love of beautiful melodies to have traveled so far. Would you like to hear another?" She stepped another pace into the room.

"Yes, please," Kate whispered, her eyes glowing.

"No," Jinjing said. "No more singing."

Pele's amber eyes widened. "Your friend must not have an ear for music. Why did you bring her?"

"I didn't want to," Kate said. "She made me take her."

"Maybe we should dispatch her then," Pele still smiled at Kate, but stared at Jinjing with malice that Kate, in her raptures, did not see. Jinjing shuddered but stood firm.

"Maybe a present first," Jinjing said, and she stepped aside. Both Pele and Kate stared at the thing Saburo's spoon had produced. Kate laughed and pointed to the dusty tuber lying on the stone floor.

"It's a potato. Why would you offer a goddess a potato?"

Jinjing took a deep breath, steadying herself. "It isn't a potato. It's taro."

Four Fiends

“What?” Kate asked. Jinjing ignored her and watched the fascinating and fearful change taking place in Pele. As soon as the goddess’s amber eyes had locked on the taro root she had gone very white. Now the color was returning and her eyes were flashing fire. Real fire. Jinjing looked for Ru-Chong. He was on the other side of the fire circle and he wasn’t coming in. She was on her own.

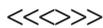
She forced herself to stare back at those raging eyes. The goddess strode in the room and moved towards her, fast. In a few seconds, the white-hot flames now spiraling off Pele’s dress would engulf her. She held her ground and waited.

She heard a hissing sound. She pulled her eyes away from the approaching flames and looked down. The taro root had burst open and white smoke seeped out of it, rising and congealing into something solid.

A man with dark skin and brown eyes moved towards Pele. The raging goddess halted so fast, she left smoldering skid marks on the ground behind her. She backed up, fear filling her face.

“What’s going on?” Kate whispered. “Who’s he? Where’d he come from?”

“I don’t know,” Jinjing said. “But he came out of the taro. And I don’t think she likes it very much.”



KATE DIDN’T KNOW what to think. Part of her wanted to push Jinjing away. Didn’t she realize the goddess had promised her another song? Couldn’t she wait until the song was over?

Kate's Downfall

A small voice in the back of her head told her that this was why they came here, to stop this fiend and save the Bird. She shushed it. She didn't want to hear it.

She watched Jinjing through a fog. She wasn't even sure what the other girl was doing there. Then the man that stepped out of the taro root looked at her. It was a quick but meaningful look that jolted right through her foggy brain. She realized with a start that she had failed and Jinjing—wussy, frightened Jinjing—had taken control of the situation and was doing what she was supposed to do.

The quick flash of anger was drowned by desperate sadness. She had failed. She, Kate. The girl who had boasted she could handle her fiend as easy as the boys. And now Jinjing was showing her up. Jinjing had done what she couldn't. What she had failed to do.

And it was too late. The best she could do was sit and watch and hope Jinjing had done the right thing.

She moved closer to the other girl, defeated.

"He must be a god," Jinjing whispered. "Otherwise she wouldn't be so scared of him."

"What are you doing here?" Pele screeched. She looked frantic. The ring of fire encircling them had disappeared. Ru-Chong crept towards them.

"Pele, you have no right." The man's voice was deep and warm and echoed through the cavern. Kate took a steadying breath. She reached for Jinjing's hand and grasped it. The last of the Bird's treacherous song left her ears. She felt stronger now.

Four Fiends

"You have no right to be here!" Pele shrieked, still backing away towards the tunnel. Kate glanced at the Vermillion Bird. Its alert eyes were trained on the man, waiting.

The man's booming voice filled the room. "Go home, Pele. Leave this place. The Bird is no longer yours to claim."

A cool sensation passed over Kate and she gazed at the man through a white haze. Ru-Chong had covered her and Jinjing in his protective skin and she sighed. Then she began to cry.

"What is it?" Jinjing whispered.

"It's all wrong! This was *my* task, I was supposed to do it. And I failed. How could I fail?"

"Maybe it doesn't matter," Jinjing said, "as long as one of us does it."

"But it should have been me! I have the red worm, I'm supposed to save the Vermillion Bird. And I didn't do it. You did it, not me. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't stop listening. It was so beautiful, why couldn't I stop?"

"You're babbling," Jinjing said. "Take some deep breaths and calm down."

"Is she okay?" Saburo said.

Kate sniffled and turned around. Saburo and Pietro stood next to an old woman who hobbled with glee. Or was she dancing?

"You did it, girl," the old woman cackled. "You put her right in her place, you did!"

"Is she gone?" Kate couldn't spot either the Fire Goddess or the strange man.

Kate's Downfall

"Yes, she's gone," Maka said. "She was sent packing."

"Who *was* that guy?" Jinjing asked. "The one who came out of the taro root?"

"What's a taro root?" Pietro asked.

"It's a tuber," Saburo said. "Like a potato, but different. They have them in Hawaii. They make poi out of taro."

"Poi?"

"Yes, it's the traditional dish of Hawaii."

"What was a man doing inside it?" Jinjing asked.

"That was no man," Maka said, grinning. "That was Haloa. The greatest god of Hawaii. The Hawaiian people believe Haloa's spirit lives in the taro root. That is why it is sacred food."

"Well, I guess we proved he *does* live in the taro root," Jinjing laughed. "But why was Pele so afraid of him? Didn't she create Hawaii?"

"She shapes the land," Maka said, "with lava and steam. But she didn't create it. Hawaii isn't hers. It belongs to Haloa. And Haloa can control Pele. She fears him, but she loves him too. He'll drive her away from this island long enough for the Bird to escape."

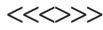
"So is that where we are?" Saburo asked. "Hawaii?"

"No," Maka said. "No, we are far south of those islands. This," she said, waving her arm about, "is an old island, much older than most. It is where Pele was born, and where I was born too. And that is why she came here after she kidnapped the Bird. She thought she could hide it here."

"She didn't expect *us*," Pietro said.

Four Fiends

“She did,” Maka said, “but she never thought you would figure out how to best her. What she didn’t count on,” the old woman said with a wink, “was me.” She let out a crazy laugh. “Oh, she’ll never forgive me for this! *Now* we’re even.”



“WILL YOU SING me the song again?” Kate whispered. “Just one more time?”

The Vermillion Bird gazed at her, its red eyes soft and sad. Kate wiped her eyes and understood. She would never hear that song again. She didn’t deserve to hear it.

“The Bird will take us back to the Yellow Dragon,” Jinjing said, “once you’re ready.”

Kate nodded. They climbed on its back. The flames covering it didn’t bother them, not inside their worms.

They didn’t bother Maka either. She clambered aboard too. The bird shot through the tunnel and into the open sunshine. “Drop me off somewhere over there!” Maka yelled, waving a crooked finger towards the sparkling ocean. The Bird veered into the air, then dove down and skimmed the water.

“Thanks for everything Maka,” Jinjing said. The old woman grinned and fell backwards, landing with a splash.

The Vermillion Bird soared upwards. The water rose into a wave below Kate and she thought she glimpsed a woman through the cascading foam. A beautiful woman with seaweed in her hair. But she might have been mistaken.

Kate's Downfall

The wave crashed down and Kate lifted her eyes. A green speck shone against the blue sky. It grew bigger as it flew closer. She waved.

Bo couldn't keep pace with the Vermillion Bird but his call drifting through the air as he arced back towards the island, his home. "Bo Loves Kate!" he cawed. "Bo Loves Kate!"

"And Kate loves Bo!" she yelled, half laughing, half crying. "And I always will, don't you forget it!"

Jinjing's Quest

"HERE'S YOUR SHOES," Saburo said, handing them to Kate. "You left them on the beach."

Kate stopped sniffing and wiped her nose. "I'm tired of this," she said. "I want to go home."

"We have one more fiend to beat," Saburo said. "Then we can go home."

"No, I'm done. I want to go home *now*."

"Not possible," Pietro said. "We're stuck here until we finish."

"Well, do it without me. I'm no help, I couldn't even defeat my own fiend. Jinjing had to do it for me. I'll just stay here in this cave until you're done."

"Maybe we got it wrong," Saburo said. "Maybe that fiend was Jinjing's."

"No it wasn't. It was summer and the Bird, and my worm is red. *I* should have rescued the Bird. Jinjing is

Jinjing's Quest

supposed to rescue the Tiger. I couldn't do it. I couldn't pass my test."

"What *was* your test?" Pietro asked.

Kate wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I don't know. But I failed."

"If your fiend was Gluttony," Pietro said, "then I don't get how you failed it. I don't understand how the fiend was Gluttony to begin with. You didn't have to eat anything."

"Gluttony isn't just eating a lot," Jinjing said.

"So what is it then?"

"Well," Jinjing said, "Kate was obsessed with the song. She couldn't get enough of it even after everybody warned her that she needed to leave it alone. I guess that's a *form* of gluttony."

"And she failed because?" Pietro said.

"It blinded her to everything else. She wasn't strong enough to resist it."

"And I couldn't," Kate said. "It's not fair. Everybody else fought their fiends. Why did the Yellow Dragon even pick me to begin with if I'm such a failure?"

Jinjing didn't say anything. A part of her felt sorry for Kate. Another part felt smug. She didn't like to admit it, but besting the other girl felt good. Up until now, she had felt inadequate next to beautiful, spunky Kate. Now she felt like she was the stronger one after all. Maybe it was wrong to take pleasure in these thoughts, but she felt like she had earned it.

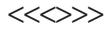
She gazed up at the dragon. She gasped as she looked in its eyes. She saw a swirling mass of light.

Four Fiends

Every color under the sun pulsed and writhed in a tangled, spinning ball. She felt like she was being sucked into it.

“What is it?” she whispered.

The Yellow Dragon told her.



“COME HERE, MY child,” the old man said, beckoning with a crooked finger. “I have a gift for you.”

“What is it, Gong-gong?” Jinjing asked, staring at her grandfather’s cupped hands. She tried to peer between his fingers.

“My mother gave me this,” Gong-gong said. “Now I’m giving it to you.”

He opened his hand. A small jar lay on his palm. Jinjing stared at it then touched it with one tentative finger. It was a round brass jar, shallow on the inside. The top had a strange carved animal that acted as a handle. She pinched the animal, pulled off the top and peered inside.

“It’s beautiful Gong-gong,” she whispered.

Gong-gong placed the jar on her palm. She felt the cold, heavy weight. She put the top back on and stared at the handle. “What animal is that?”

“It’s a tiger, I think,” Gong-gong said, “although this is an old Greek jar so I’m not sure where the tiger came from since they didn’t have them in Greece.”

Jinjing stroked the tiger’s back with her finger.

“See what’s on the sides?” Gong-gong said. Jinjing peered at the jar. Etched along the edges were five symbols: an owl, a hammer, a scallop shell, a deer and a bird. A raven maybe, Jinjing decided.

Jinjing's Quest

"What do they mean?" she asked.

Gong-gong shrugged. "Any guess is good, but since I am confident this jar came from Greece, I believe the symbols stand for Greek gods. Athena had great wisdom so her symbol was the owl. Hermes' sacred animal was a deer. fleet-footed like the messenger god. Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, had the scallop shell. Hephaestus, the god of fire, wielded a hammer, and the raven belongs to Apollo."

"This is a great present," Jinjing said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Gong-gong smiled. "Promise me you'll keep it safe. It is very special. You, like me, love old things and I know you will take good care of it."

Jinjing almost asked why Gong-gong hadn't given her mother the jar, but she thought she knew the answer. Her mother was not at all interested in antiques. If it wasn't ultra-modern, she could care less. She would never have appreciated such an ancient relic.

"Do you know how old it is?"

"It is very old. And I believe it is a very important piece although I am still not sure of its true origin or purpose. It has puzzled me greatly over the years. Now it is your turn to try solving its mysteries. You will take very good care of it, won't you Jinjing?"

Jinjing grasped the cool jar in her hands and clasped it to her heart. "I will, Gong-gong," she whispered. "I promise I will."



JINJING GAZED AROUND. "So where are we now?"

Four Friends

"I don't know," Pietro said, "but we must be in the west somewhere. And it should be autumn now."

"And it looks like it should also be time for breakfast, by the way the sun is rising over those hills," Saburo said, pulling out his spoon.

They all agreed except Kate who mumbled that she wasn't hungry and went off to find an isolated spot to be miserable in. "I hope she's okay," Saburo said.

"She'll get over it," Pietro said. "She's not used to failing, that's all. It's good for her. She's way too overconfident."

"You should know," Jinjing said, grinning. Pietro smiled back.

"And a little bit of humiliation did me good, I hope," he said.

They pulled off their worms and spent the meal in silence. It was nice that they couldn't communicate with each other all the time. They didn't talk when the worms were off and Jinjing could think about things in peace and quiet. It was almost as if she were alone.

She missed being alone. She was used to it. Spending time with these kids was great, she had always dreamed of having close friends, but she wanted some time for herself too. Chomping her breakfast in silence was the closest she could get to it here.

She thought about home. She wondered if her parents missed her. She worried if Gong-gong was okay. He was older, he might be more upset with her disappearance. She hoped that her being gone wasn't making him sick.

Jinjing's Quest

Then she pondered the task ahead. At least it was narrowed down. She knew they were in the west. She knew it would be autumn.

And she knew what they had to fight.

She hadn't told the others yet. She wasn't sure how. What the Yellow Dragon's eyes had shown her was so unbelievable, she hadn't quite wrapped her own mind around it yet. Something told her she should keep quiet about what she knew. She would tell the others when the time was right.

They looked around as the sun rose. They were in a rough, rocky place surrounded by stubby trees with thick, gnarled trunks.

"Olive trees," Pietro said. "We're in an olive orchard." He plucked an olive from a tree branch. "This tree is full of them. It must be October, close to harvesting time."

"Do you think we're in Italy?" Saburo said.

"No," Jinjing said, "we're in Greece."

"How do you know?" Pietro said.

"I just do. Come on."

She moved through the trees and the others followed. They walked until they reached a rocky cliff. A mountainous landscape stretched for miles below them and disappeared in the clouds far below.

"We're pretty high up," Pietro said, staring down.

"We're on Mount Olympus," Jinjing said.

Pietro laughed. "Olive groves on Mount Olympus? I don't think so."

Jinjing nodded. "They're the olive orchards of the gods."

Four Fiends

"The gods?"

"Yes, you know. Zeus and Hera and Hades and all those guys. The Greek gods. This is their home."

"And how do you know that's where we are?" Pietro said.

"I just do."

"You're holding out," Saburo said. "The Yellow Dragon told you something and you're not letting us in on it."

"That's because I can't explain it," Jinjing said. "Not now, anyway."

"We're really on Mount Olympus?" Kate asked. It was the first time she had opened her mouth all morning.

"Yes," Jinjing said.

"Do you think we'll meet a god?"

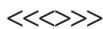
"That's probably why the worms brought us here," Jinjing said.

"Maybe we should find Athena," Kate said. "She's the goddess of wisdom, she could help us out."

"We'll go back the way we came then," Jinjing said. "There must be someone further in."

Saburo sighed. "And I don't supposed the worms will help us out here either." He stared up the rocky path they had just come down.

"The God's home must be at the top," Jinjing said. "Let's go."



FOR A LONG time, Jimjing didn't put anything in her jar. It was too special and none of her meager possessions were worthy enough. Then, on her tenth

Jinjing's Quest

birthday, Gong-gong gave her another present, a jade necklace, her first piece of real jewelry. She knew it wasn't the finest jade but that didn't matter. Her first necklace that wasn't made of fake beads or cheap stones deserved a perfect home. And since the necklace was a gift from Gong-gong, it was fitting the home should be in the mysterious jar.

She laid the necklace in the jar. It barely fit. She placed the lid on the jar. It felt warm and electric in her hand. She stared at it, frowning. She grabbed the tiger handle and lifted the lid.

The necklace was gone.

Jinjing stared into the jar. She ran her finger along the cool brass inside. There was nothing there.

She put the jar on the table and ran back to her bed, frantically searching through the covers and on the floor. She *thought* she had put the necklace in the jar; she must have dropped it instead. Was she losing her mind? How could the necklace be in one place if it wasn't?

She gave up her search and went back to the jar. The necklace lay inside.

Jinjing dropped into a chair and blinked. She closed the lid and opened it. The necklace was still in the jar. Jinjing shook her head and closed the lid a final time.

She decided to forget about what had happened. It was some trick her mind had played on her. Maybe she was tired. Or dizzy from lack of food. Not enough food. That must be it.

Four Fiends

She tromped downstairs, got something to eat, and let the matter fall from her memory.

<<◇>>

HE SAT ON a boulder, chin resting in his hand. He was either thinking hard about something important or he was daydreaming. He *glowed*. His long blond hair gleamed, like sunlight glinting off a gilded cup. His skin was sun-kissed and he stared into the sky with eyes so blue she could tell what color they were even though they were several yards away.

He didn't notice them as they approached. "That," Kate whispered, "is the most beautiful man I've ever seen."

"He's not a man, he's a god," Jinjing said. "No mortal man would shine like that. He looks like he's been rubbed with polish."

Kate chuckled. She was getting over her mopiness, which was good. An outspoken, haughty Kate was annoying but a grumpy, morose Kate was even worse.

"Which god do you think he is?" Saburo said.

Something flashed in Jinjing's subconscious. A bird. A raven. She blinked, and knew with certainty who sat in on the rock. "Apollo. That's Apollo."

"How do you know?" Kate asked again.

"I just do," Jinjing said. "Come on."

The others followed as she strode towards the thoughtful figure sitting on the rock. He saw them and lifted his chin from his hand, surprised.

"You are not gods. What is your business here?"

Did he actually say it? What came from his mouth sounded more like music than words, but Jinjing

Jinjing's Quest

comprehended him nevertheless. The others looked at him, perplexed. They had not understood a word.

"We need your help," Jinjing said. "We were sent here by the Yellow Dragon."

Apollo frowned. "I know not of this Yellow Dragon that you speak. Why would he send you here?"

Jinjing floundered. "I'm not sure."

Apollo rose. He towered above her, bathing her in the golden light emanating all around him. "I do not understand what you require from me, nor how you, mere mortals, dared to set foot upon our sacred mountain. It is forbidden. I should take you to Zeus if you can't tell me why you are here."

A thought came to Jinjing. "I'm not sure *why* we're here," she said again, "but I think it has something to do with this."

She picked up a stick and drew a picture of her jar in the dusty soil, as well as she could from memory. Apollo squinted then straightened up, his eyes filled with fear.

"Do you know what this is?" he whispered.

"Yes," Jinjing said. The Dragon had told her.

"How do you know of it?"

"Because I own it," she said. "It's sitting in my bedroom in Hong Kong, as we speak."

16

The Girl and the Goat

THE LITTLE GIRL lived in a beautiful valley. Rocky mountains rose all around it, stark and gray and foreboding. But her valley brimmed with lush plants and colorful flowers, babbling streams and gentle animals. Evil things did not enter that valley. The girl picked fruits from the olive and pomegranate trees and milked the sure-footed goats nibbling on lush grass. Bees left honey for her to eat and she slept warm and snug in a sandy cave lined with soft heather.

She didn't know her name, or remember anything from her past. She lived alone, the solitary human inhabitant in that protected glen. But every once in a while, strange visitors appeared in her valley. They were wonderful, beautiful beings. They looked like her but somehow were different.

The Girl and the Goat

These visitors taught her things. A graceful woman with long auburn hair showed her how to gather nuts and berries. A handsome man with curly locks taught her how to talk and herd the goats. An old man with fiery hair explained how to gather wood and make sparkling fires to stay warm and cook things on. A solemn lady with black tresses instructed her how to run and swim. And a beautiful man with golden hair trained her to sing and dance.

They never stayed long, these visitors. They disappeared as quickly as they arrived, and although she tried and tried, she never discovered where they came from or how they left. They must have come from over the mountains, outside her valley.

That got her thinking.

If there was a way for these ethereal beings to cross the mountains and visit her, there must be a way to leave her home and visit other places. What would she find if she left her protected little valley? What lay on the other side of the mountains?

As the months went by the visitors came less and less until they rarely came at all. And as she grew older she became lonesome. She wondered if she were alone in the world or if there were others like her, beyond the gray, craggy mountains.

This girl had many fine traits. She was beautiful, with long, shining black hair flowing around a soft oval face. She was strong and could run long distances without getting the least bit tired, or lift things most girls her age wouldn't have the strength to budge. She

Four Friends

was gentle and kind, and loved the goats and the bees and the rabbits as if they were her own family.

But she was also a very smart and curious girl, one who wasn't content to live in tranquility all her life. She wanted to learn new things and to explore.

One day she was out in the meadow tending the goats. Her favorite goat, a nimble animal covered in coarse black hair, followed her about like a dog as she made her way through the long, wavering grass. His name was Skia, or shadow. After a while, Skia butted her and tripped towards the mountains. The girl stared after him, wondering. It was as if he were telling her *now* was the time.

Skia trotted away and then turned around, bleating with some insistence. She hesitated. He skipped to the edge of the meadow, where a small, goat-type path she had never noticed before zigzagged up the mountain. Skia stepped on the path. The girl followed.

They climbed until at last the girl turned around and gazed back on her meadow. It lay there, small and green, a tiny dot so far away, it didn't seem real. Skia bleated again, and, with one sorrowful glance upon the only home she knew, she followed Skia over the mountain and into the Wider World. She was not afraid. She was excited. She hoped to learn new things and discover new wonders.

Most of all, she hoped to find somebody else like her. Another human being.



The Girl and the Goat

“SO WHAT WAS all that about?” Pietro said, as they tried to keep up with Apollo’s long strides.

“What was what?” Jinjing said.

“You know. Why could *you* understand him if the rest of us couldn’t?”

“I don’t know. What did he sound like to you?”

“Like music. It was weird. I could tell he was saying something, I just couldn’t hear anything through all that crazy music.”

Kate nodded. “It sounded like tinkling bells, with a very pretty melody behind it. And I got the same feeling. As if he was talking, except it was in a language of music that I didn’t understand.”

“I thought the same thing too,” Saburo said, “but try as I might, I couldn’t figure out what he was saying.”

“I could,” Jinjing said. “I don’t know why though.”

“At least fill us in on what you were talking about,” Pietro said.

Jinjing told them about her jar.

“And he knew what the jar was? He looked scared,” Kate said. “What’s in it?”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you,” Jinjing said.

“Course we will,” Pietro said. “The stuff we’ve seen the last few days, we’ll believe anything.”

Jinjing took a deep breath. “Okay. Have you ever heard of Pandora?”

“You’re kidding,” Kate said.

“No,” Saburo said. “Who’s Pandora?”

“Well, there’s this Greek myth about this lady called Pandora. She had a jar which contained all the evil

Four Fiends

things in it and she opened it up, and all the evil escaped into the world.”

“And you think her jar is the same as your jar?”

Jinjing laughed, knowing how absurd this all sounded. “Yes. My grandfather gave it to me on my birthday a few years ago. He said it was old. He didn’t realize how old it truly was.”

“Wait a minute,” Kate said. “You have *the* box? Pandora’s Box? Sitting in your bedroom?”

“I thought she said it was a jar,” Saburo said.

“Where I come from, we call it Pandora’s Box, not Pandora’s Jar.”

“It’s not a box,” Jinjing said. “It’s a jar. And I have it.”

“With all the evil in it?” Pietro asked.

“No, the evil was already let out, way back at the beginning of the world. There’s nothing in it now, except my necklace.” She explained how once the necklace had disappeared and then came back. “I should have known it was a magical jar then,” she said, “but I forgot about it until now.”

“So I wonder if we’re now back at a time *before* Pandora opened the jar,” Pietro said.

“Maybe we’re supposed to stop her from opening it,” Saburo said.

“No,” Jinjing said. “I don’t think so.”

“Then what?”

Jinjing remembered what she had seen in the Yellow Dragon’s eyes. Horrible things, writhing and floating around, eager to get out into the world and feed on it, destroy it. It wasn’t a pretty vision.

The Girl and the Goat

“There’s no way we can stop Pandora from opening the jar. The world needs some evil in order for there to be good, you see.”

“I don’t get it,” Pietro said. “Why would we want *any* evil?”

“Maybe life would be too perfect then?” Kate suggested. “I mean, if there were no evil you would never lie, I would never get all snitty, Saburo wouldn’t moan and groan about his legs, Jinjing wouldn’t be miserable, and everything would be perfect. Which sounds good, but maybe it isn’t.”

“That’s not exactly evil,” Pietro said. “Murderers and wars, those are evil. Lying once in a while isn’t.”

“Maybe,” Jinjing said, “but like Kate said, take away all evil and life would be perfect. And maybe we can’t exist that way.”

“So if Pandora gets to open the jar,” Saburo said, “then what are we doing here?”

“I think,” Jinjing said, “we must fight something that comes out of the jar. Not everything, just one evil thing.”

“Which is?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know,” Jinjing said. “Whatever it is, it’s got the White Tiger.”

“And it’s all contained in your jar?” Pietro grinned. “It must be a pretty big jar.”

Jinjing smiled. “It fits in the palm of my hand.”

Kate laughed. “A pint-sized Pandora’s Box. That’s funny.”

“So where’s he taking us?” Pietro asked, motioning to the golden haired god striding ahead of them.

Four Fiends

“To the Gods,” Jinjing said, striding forward. “To the top of Mount Olympus.”

<<◇>>

THE LITTLE GIRL was cold. She shivered as her feet stumbled over the sharp rocks. Skia bleated in encouragement, but she was tired and hungry and needed to rest. She sat down on a rock and stared around. Other than a few brambles poking through the rocks, there was nothing else. No berries, no trees laden with fruit. No water. She sighed.

“If you were a girl goat, I could at least milk you.”

Skia pattered over to a thorny bush and nibbled on it. He gave the girl a plaintive look as he munched.

The girl sighed. “I can’t eat *that*. Maybe goats can, but not me.”

She scanned the area. Long ago she had lost sight of her valley, now all she saw were desolate gray rocks turning ever grayer as nighttime crept over the mountains. The thin dress made of fine goat hair she had spun wasn’t enough to keep her warm. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

She wasn’t afraid yet. She had never been cold before so the shivery sensation was new. Unpleasant, but interesting nonetheless. She had never gone hungry before, so the hollow rumble in her stomach was puzzling but not unbearable. She had never known thirst, so the raspiness in her voice almost made her laugh. And she had never known pain before, so she rubbed her throbbing feet but did not pay much attention to it.

The Girl and the Goat

The goat, however, knew a little more about survival in the mountains than the girl. Before he had wandered into the valley, the mountains had been his home. He had rambled over giant boulders and skittered down great precipices, he had clambered through gorges and he had braved rockslides in the summer and avalanches in the winter. He knew how to survive. He was perplexed that the girl, who he had always thought so wise, did not.

So after he munched his thorns and observed that the girl did not join in, he got up and trundled forward. He was not cold; his thick hair kept the chill out. The girl didn't look as comfortable. He knew a place where she might be warmer, a cave resembling the one she slept in down in the valley. Maybe she would be happier if she stayed in there.

The goat bleated and moved forward. The girl stumbled after Skia until he turned off the path and skittered into a small hole. She got down on her hands and knees and followed.

The hole opened into a dry room with soft dirt on the floor. A crack in the ceiling let in the last few rays of the day so the girl peered around. There was nothing in the cave except herself and Skia. She sunk to the ground. It wasn't much warmer in the cave, but it was a little better than the cold wind outside and, lying close to Skia's warm body, she felt comforted. It had been an exciting day and a very long climb.

The little girl curled herself into a ball, hugged the goat in her arms, and fell into a deep sleep.

17

The Final Fight

JINJING BLINKED. SHE couldn't grasp what she was seeing.

They sat on marble benches surrounding a tinkling fountain. The tiles under their feet gleamed scarlet with the setting sun's dying rays. In front of them stood five gods. *Actual* gods.

A tall, stern goddess with jet-black hair tied up in a complicated bun stood closest to her. The goddess was dressed in flowing golden robes, and a small owl perched on her shoulder. Athena, goddess of wisdom.

The other goddess, who was the most beautiful woman Jinjing had ever seen, wore gleaming white robes that cascaded to the ground. Long auburn hair fell in tresses down her back, and a circlet of roses adorned her head. Aphrodite, goddess of love.

A grizzled, hunched god stood next to Aphrodite. Beads of sweat stuck to his forehead and grime clung

The Final Fight

to his clothes. He shifted on a grotesque, clubbed foot. Hephaestus, god of fire.

A tall young god with curly brown hair and bright hazel eyes leaned against a pillar near the fountain. He held a lyre in his arms and plucked the strings with one finger. The soft music floated through the glade. Jinjing glanced at the god's feet. They were clad in sandals with bits of fabric on the sides that fluttered in the breeze. No, not fabric. They were wings. Winged sandals. Hermes, the messenger god.

Apollo stood next to Hermes, looking nervous.

Aphrodite spoke first. Her voice was musical, beautiful.

"I don't understand what the problem is,."

"The problem," Athena said, "is this girl..." here she gestured an elegant hand towards Jinjing, "...knows of the jar."

"The jar is well concealed, Athena," Apollo said. "I hid it myself. It will never be found."

"*She* says it will be found," Athena says. "By Pandora, of all people."

"Pandora is a child. She is safe in her valley, where we put her."

"When was the last time we visited her?" Aphrodite asked. "It has been a while, has it not?"

Apollo frowned. "I don't remember. Time is different there than it is on our mountain. It might have been weeks. Or months."

"Or years," Hephaestus rumbled. "We can't be certain she is still in her valley."

Four Fiends

"It is well protected, Hephaestus," Apollo said. "Nothing can get in the valley if we do not allow it."

"Nothing can get in," Athena said, "but can she get out?"

Silence fell. The gods glanced at each other.

Jinjing plucked up her courage. "I'm sorry, is this Pandora in some sort of prison?"

Aphrodite let out a tinkling laugh. Athena turned to the girl and smiled.

"You are a brave mortal. And you resemble her. You are a girl."

"Yes," Jinjing said, "so is Kate. Is that important?"

"It is," Athena said. "Up until now, the only girl in the world was Pandora."

"We created her," Hermes said. "Zeus ordered it. Hephaestus shaped her from a special rock found deep in the volcano and brought her to life with his fire. Aphrodite gave her beauty, Athena gave her knowledge, and I, Hermes, taught her to speak. And since she is the first, she is the most special. We have kept her hidden for her own protection."

"I taught her to sing," Apollo mumbled.

"Yes, and you were supposed to guard her too, and look what kind of job you've done," Hephaestus said.

"If Pandora is the only girl in the world," Aphrodite said, "then where did these two come from?" She nodded her graceful head towards Jinjing and Kate.

"We came from the future," Jinjing said. "From thousands of years in the future. If Pandora is the first girl,

The Final Fight

maybe we are her descendents. So, she would have to leave her valley. Wouldn't she?"

"And you say she opens the jar? How do you know this?"

"That's what all the legends say," Jinjing said. "And I believe it. I have the jar. Not now, in the future. I own it. And there's nothing in it now except my necklace. The evil's all gone from it."

Athena turned to Apollo, a stern look on her face. "Where did you hide it?"

"She won't find it," Apollo said although his darting eyes displayed some doubt.

"Where did you hide it?" Athena asked again, her voice rising. "Don't make me go and get Zeus. He'll be angry enough as it is if he hears about this."

"It's in a cave," Apollo said.

Athena glowered at him. "A cave where?"

Apollo shuffled his feet and stared at the ground. "It *might* be near her valley. But it's high up in the mountains. She would never go there."

Athena rolled her eyes. "Why did we entrust you to hide it?"

"It doesn't matter at this point," Hermes said. "What's done is done. Now we must find the girl and stop her from opening the jar."

"You can't," Jinjing said.

Five pairs of surprised eyes turned on her. Jinjing took a steadying breath.

"You can't keep her from opening it. She must open it. But there's an evil in the jar we must fight.

Four Fiends

That evil has stolen something and we need to get it back.”

“And how do we do that?” Athena said.

“You can’t do anything,” Jinjing said.

Aphrodite gasped at the girl’s impertinence. Hephaestus growled, Hermes frowned, even Apollo looked sullen. Athena peered with interest at this being who would dare contradict the gods.

“We are Gods,” she said, “we can do anything we please.”

“You can’t do this,” Jinjing said. “But *we* can.”



SKIA BLEATED AND the girl woke. She was hungry and sore and very thirsty.

“Maybe we should go back,” she told the goat. “I don’t care what’s out here in this world if it is all barren and rocky like this. I’ve had enough adventures. I want to go home.”

She rolled to her hands and knees and crawled forward. Her hand struck something hard.

It glinted in the early morning rays shining through the crack in the ceiling. The girl brushed some dirt aside and stared. She hadn’t stubbed her hand on a rock. It was something else.

Skia came to investigate. He prodded the object with his wet nose and licked the dirt off it. The girl dug the dirt from around it and picked it up. It fit perfectly in her hand.

“Look,” she said. “What do you think it is?”

Skia bleated and licked the object until it shone. The girl stared at it, her stomach rumbling.

The Final Fight

“It is too small to contain food,” she said. “Still, maybe there’s something in it that will help us. Maybe it is magical and will provide for us. Should I open it?”

The goat turned away. He didn’t have any interest in it once he realized it wasn’t any good to eat.

The girl stared at the handle. “I have never seen this type of beast,” she said. “What do you think it is, Skia?”

She searched for her goat, but he had already ambled out of the cave. She followed, into the warm sunlight, and sat on a broad rock.

“I’m going to open it,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Skia wasn’t listening. He was busy gnawing on a thorny bush. Pandora pinched the tiger handle with her fingers, took a deep breath, and opened the box.

<<◇>>

“WOULD YOU LOOK at that,” Kate said.

A mass of color swirled in front of them: fiery reds and venomous greens, sickly yellows and shots of black and gray. The color shot into the air like lava from a volcano, spreading across the sky and drifting away to mingle with the clouds.

Apollo groaned. “We are too late.”

“I hope the little girl’s okay,” Pietro said.

They hurtled towards the color, the gods in a swirl of light, the children in their worms. They all went at the same speed. The spinning mass was still some distance ahead.

“What if we really *are* too late?” Kate said.

Four Fiends

"We won't be," Jinjing said. "Not everything's out yet, and the fiend will come out last."

"And just what fiend," Saburo said, "is that?"

"Well, what haven't we fought yet?" Jinjing asked.

"Ignorance," Kate said.

"Ignorance?" Pietro said, shaking his head in disbelief. "*That's* the greatest evil in the world?"

"Well," Jinjing said, "ignorance caused Pandora to open the jar in the first place. She didn't know any better, and ended up letting everything out."

"Wait," Saburo said. "I'm getting confused. If there was no evil in the world, then how could Pandora have been ignorant if Ignorance was still in the jar?"

"Stop muddling things," Kate said. "Who cares about the piddly details? How do we *fight* Ignorance? That's the important question."

"We've used all the magical objects," Saburo said, "except Jinjing's knife."

"You think we'll have to kill something?" Pietro said.

"I hope not," Kate said. "I sure wouldn't want that on my conscience."

"If it means saving the world from something super evil, then I guess I could deal with it," Pietro said. "Anyway, it's not my turn. I already dealt with my fiend."

"So did I," Saburo said.

"Jinjing got rid of my fiend," Kate sighed, "so maybe I'm stuck with this one."

"If this is the biggest Evil and the worst fiend, maybe we all have to fight it together," Jinjing said. "The

The Final Fight

Yellow Dragon said we should keep our magical objects ready, which means that we'll need to use all of them to save the White Tiger."

She glanced over at the gods. They were listening, taking in everything she was saying. Athena spoke.

"We will help you if you need assistance."

Somewhere in the journey the gods must have come to a decision. Jinjing thought about what she knew of the Greek gods. They had all the characteristics of regular people: vain, sly, jealous, loving. They ate and drank, they suffered, they laughed, they wept. And although they were gods, they mingled with mortals and other god-like creatures: titans, nymphs, dryads. So, they probably weren't very surprised by the sudden appearance of Jinjing and her friends. This sort of thing must happen all the time.

Most importantly, the gods had decided this wasn't their fight, it belonged to the four humans gliding beside them in the magical worms. Jinjing was glad they had accepted this. And she was glad she now had such a powerful back-up plan, in case anything went wrong.

"Thank you," she said. Athena nodded.



PANDORA HUDDLED IN her cave, clutching Skia who shivered with fear. The little girl shook too. For the first time in her life she was terrified. The swirling colors spewing from the jar sounded and smelled horrible: gassy and pungent, loud and hissing. They didn't enter her cave, they shot straight into the sky.

Four Fiends

Pandora hoped they would go away soon. The little jar contained a huge quantity of the foul stuff. She tried not to breathe.

After what seemed like hours, the sounds and smells died down and Skia clattered to the cave's entrance to investigate. Pandora followed, creeping on her hands and knees. The jar lay on the flat rock, small puffs of inky smoke emanating from it. It wasn't quite done.

She was about to scoot back into her cave when she saw them. Five she recognized but the other four she did not. And despite her terror, her heart leapt. She realized these four were like her. They were human. She rose to her feet, her legs trembling beneath her.

She ripped her gaze away from the humans and turned her eyes towards the gods, expecting anger, punishment. Instead she saw worry for her safety and for what she had done. Athena pointed to the cave. The girl was sensible enough to understand an order and scooted back into her little sanctuary. She stayed as close to the cave's mouth as she could. She may have been frightened, but she still wanted to know what would happen next.



PIETRO STARED AT the sputtering jar. "Now what?"

"We wait until it comes out," Jinjing said.

"And then?" Pietro clutched his water bottle. It took every bit of nerve he had to not run and join the little girl in her cowering. He felt like he had when he faced the Nian in China. He hated feeling scared, but he wouldn't run this time.

The Final Fight

Saburo felt a bit more confident. He trusted that when the time came, he would know what to do. That's what happened last time, and he had to believe it would happen again.

Kate gripped her lipstick tube. She would *not* fail again.

They looked at Jinjing and she realized that even though all four had to deal with this fiend, it was still her task. She thought about the White Tiger's traits: he was a protector, a peacemaker. He was a leader. Now, so was she. And the others, even Kate, were counting on her for guidance.

A strange, shimmery silver smoke rose from the jar.
Ignorance is bliss.

The phrase just popped into Jinjing's head. Now why would she think that? She blinked, her mind whirring.

What did Maka say, back on the island? *Kate thinks she knew everything but she doesn't. Ignorance is bliss.* That's what she said.

"Kate," she said. "Get ready."

"For what?" Kate asked.

"It's coming for you first."

Kate gripped her lipstick tube. "How do you know that?"

Jinjing stared at the swirling smoke, shining like diamonds and inching towards Kate. *Ignorance is bliss.*

"Kate," she said, "I think it's going to try and wipe your memory. So you don't remember anything. You won't even remember what you're doing here."

Kate felt her panic building. "What should I do?"

Four Fiends

“Block it. Send it away. Before it gets to you. Do it quick!”

Kate steeled herself, shrugged off her worm and wrenched open the lipstick tube. A thick jet of flame spewed forward. The smoke melded right through it and kept coming.

“Try something else,” Jinjing said.

“What else am I supposed to do? It’s not stopping. How do I get it to stop?”

“Slow down, relax. Think. What will send smoke away?”

Kate took some deep breaths. Then it came to her. She thought hard and the flames turned to a gush of hot air. It pushed the smoke away, sending it spiraling in the opposite direction.

“Keep it up,” Jinjing said. “Don’t let it stop, not even for a second.”

Kate nodded, concentrating hard on the air blowing out the tube. It would revert to flames if she didn’t stay focused. She felt confident now that she could keep it up. The smoke drifted further and further away.

Jinjing kept her eyes on the jar. She knew this wasn’t it, the jar had more in store. She watched as a different smoke exited its container. The pure-white smoke settled on the ground and crept towards them.

“I can’t fight both of them,” Kate said through clenched teeth. “If I stop the air from pushing away the silver smoke, it’ll come back.”

“Don’t worry about the white smoke,” Jinjing said. “It’s not yours, it’s Pietro’s.”

The Final Fight

The smoke crept towards the boy as another saying flashed through Jinjing's mind. *Ignorance leads to fear.*

"Pietro, why are you shaking?"

Pietro gulped. "I don't know what it is. How can I fight something if I don't even know what it is?"

"You just do it," Jinjing said, "whether you understand it or not."

Pietro nodded. His hand trembled as he unscrewed the water bottle cap. "Water won't stop smoke," he said.

"No," Jinjing said, "but what does that smoke remind you of?"

Pietro shook his head. Fear filled his brain, and he couldn't concentrate.

"Dry ice," Jinjing said. "Like at a rock concert when they let it go all over the stage."

"Dry ice is the solid form of carbon dioxide," Kate managed to say without taking her eyes off her smoke. "You add water to get it to gas so water wouldn't be good to use on it."

"How on Earth did you know *that*?" Jinjing asked, sounding impressed.

"I had a crazy science teacher who stuffed our heads with lots of weird facts," Kate said. "And for some reason, I remember that one."

"It doesn't help me stop it though," Pietro said. His voice was shaking. He opened up his water bottle, hoping something would come out. The bottle remained empty and the weird smoke crept closer.

"You're still in your worm," Jinjing said.

Four Fiends

“Turn it back to a solid state,” Saburo said. “That might stop it.”

“Pietro,” Jinjing said, “I know your bottle makes water, but do you think it can collect it too?”

“What are you talking about?” Pietro said. He was inching backwards, away from the creeping fog.

“If you can get the water away from the carbon dioxide, it might turn solid again. Try it.”

Pietro hesitated.

“If it reaches you, you’ll be too afraid to do anything, Pietro.” Jinjing said. “Do it now!”

Pietro gulped. He pushed his worm away and stared at the bottle. *Get the water*, he thought. He forced himself to focus on the menacing white vapor now only inches away.

A mist rose and floated into his bottle. The closest edge of the white smoke crumpled and turned to dust.

“Keep it up Pietro,” Jinjing said. He couldn’t understand her without his worm, but he nodded anyway, his face resolute. A poisonous yellow cloud billowed out of the jar.

Saburo gripped his spoon. “Is this mine or yours?”

Another thought flitted through Jinjing’s mind. *The greatest ignorance is to reject something you know nothing about*. Who would that refer to? Did that describe Saburo? He was always quick to say things couldn’t be done. It might fit. “I think it’s yours,” Jinjing said.

“How am I supposed to fight this with a spoon? This thing only gives us stuff we want to eat. It’s no good here.”

The Final Fight

This was *definitely* Saburo's.

"It'll work," Jinjing said. "Think, Saburo."

Saburo gulped. "What will the cloud do? Pietro's makes him afraid, Kate's erases her memory, what about mine?"

"I don't know. You're always so skeptical, maybe it'll make you not want to try anything. It'll make you useless."

"I don't *want* to try anything now since I can't think of a good enough idea," Saburo complained.

"That smoke smells funny," Kate said through gritted teeth. "Like rotten eggs. Hydrogen sulfide, I bet. Except hydrogen sulfide is colorless, not icky yellow."

Jinjing grinned. "You're smarter than we thought."

"Same crazy science teacher." Kate grinned back, but kept her eyes focused on her smoke.

"It's coming fast," Saburo said. Oni scooted away, joining the other worms. The spoon dropped to Saburo's side. Then, right before the cloud enveloped him, he desperately waved the spoon in the air.

The cloud stopped and wavered along with the spoon. Saburo, fear turning to fascination, waved the spoon in a circular motion as if he were stirring a large pot. The gas swirled. The faster Saburo stirred, the more the gas swirled until it had congealed into a small vortex that looked like the cyclone monster Saburo had fought, except smaller and yellow. It didn't come any closer. It was almost as if it were too preoccupied to finish its mission.

"I can keep it away from me if I do this," he yelled, "but I can't get rid of it."

Four Fiends

Jinjing's eyes focused back on the jar. "Keep it busy then, until I deal with whatever else comes out."

She told Ru-Chong to leave, gripped her barrette, and stared at the jar. Something else had to come out of it. Sure enough, a thick gray cloud seeped out, blocking everything behind it; the cave, the mountains and the gods who grouped together on a little hill near the cave's entrance.

The cloud hung there, not coming any closer. Jinjing waited. She heard the words:

Evil comes of ignorance. Good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.

Pandora burst out of the smoke. "I can't take it anymore! The smoke is filling up my cave. Help me!"

Jinjing gripped the barrette and watched, unsurprised, as it morphed into a long, thin sword. She stared at the girl's innocent face and understood. Good intentions like helping this poor girl would not work. That girl wasn't Pandora. She was a hallucination, a trick. There was one way to get rid of her.

And if she didn't? She hesitated. What if she did nothing? What would happen then? What could a little girl do to her, hallucination or not?

Pandora approached her, entreating her with large, pleading eyes. Jinjing wavered. She couldn't do it.

Athena was at her side.

"You can do it," she said. "She's not Pandora. We've seen Pandora, she's in the cave, well protected."

Still Jinjing hesitated. Her gentle soul rebelled at the idea of actually using her sword on somebody.

The Final Fight

“Do it, Jinjing!” Pietro yelled in Italian. “I can’t hold out much longer here.”

“Hurry up!” Kate said.

“My arms are killing me,” Saburo groaned. “Do it or we’re done for!”

Jinjing gulped. Then she closed her eyes. She shut out the girl’s pleadings and all the other sounds. She held the sword in front of her. She charged.

<<<>>>

“YOU SHOULD HAVE seen it,” Pietro said. “It was disgusting.”

“No, she didn’t want to see it,” Kate said. “It was horrible.”

“What was?” Jinjing asked.

They sat on the flat stone, covered once again by their worms. Pandora peeked out of her cave and, seeing it was safe, joined them, along with the Gods.

“That thing. It morphed from Pandora into this hideous monster as soon as you got close to it with your sword. It was a good thing you had your eyes shut or you’d have been terrified,” Kate said.

“And then what?” Jinjing only remembered running forward, and when she opened her eyes, she was standing near the cave. She didn’t remember stabbing anything with the sword. She certainly hadn’t felt anything.

“As soon as your sword hit it, it vanished,” Pietro said, “along with everything else.”

“So I defeated Ignorance?”

“We *all* defeated it,” Kate said.

“And it’s gone now?” Jinjing asked, feeling a bit anticlimactic.

Four Fiends

"It's gone," Athena said in her rich voice, "along with all the other evil contained in the jar. Gone to make trouble elsewhere."

She bent over and picked up the innocent brass vial. "Nothing is left in it now," she sighed.

"Except Hope," Jinjing said.

"What?"

"Hope. Hope was left in the jar. That's what the legends say anyway."

Athena smiled and picked up the lid. She placed it on the jar and handed the jar to Jinjing.

"It's yours. Yours to guard. Keep it well."

Jinjing clasped the familiar shape in her hands. "I will." She turned from the goddess to the great white beast padding towards them and smiled.

"What is that?" Pandora asked.

"That," Jinjing said, "is the guardian of the west. The White Tiger we came to rescue."

"Is he a God?" Apollo asked, joining them.

"Something like that," Jinjing said. "And now we must take him home."

"He'll take *us* home," Pietro said. "Or at least to the Yellow Dragon's island."

"And what will happen to me?" Pandora asked. "Can I go home? To my valley?"

"No, child," Athena said. "You opened the jar, and so evil has now escaped. Your valley is no longer any safer than the rest of the world. We will rejoin you with your own people, and you will be happier there than living by yourself."

The Final Fight

“Are you mad at me?”

“No,” Athena said. “You were destined to open the jar. You couldn’t help it. Neither could we.”

Jinjing smiled at the White Tiger. It nodded its regal head in response. She was exhausted. And happy. They had done it. They had defeated the Four Fiends and now they could go home.

Home

“CAN WE KEEP the worms?” Pietro asked.

They sat in a circle, the four children and the Four Guardians, around the Yellow Dragon, who curled in the center. It touched noses with the Tiger, the Tortoise, the Dragon and the Bird and then turned its bright eyes on the humans.

The answer was No.

Pietro sighed.

“More importantly,” Saburo said, “will we ever see each other again?”

“We’ll stay in touch,” Pietro said. “We can call each other and talk on the internet.”

“But we won’t understand what each other is saying,” Kate said. “I mean, I can understand Jinjing if she speaks English, but not if she speaks Chinese.”

“Cantonese,” Jinjing said.

Home

Kate grinned. "Whatever."

"Well," Saburo said, "I've learned a little English in school and I'll keep learning it until I'm good at it. And I'll learn Italian too."

"I'll try learning Japanese," Kate said, "although it sounds super complicated."

"It's not as complicated as English," Saburo said, "but if you learn some of my language and I learn some of yours, then maybe we can still talk to each other." He gave her a shy smile. She smiled back.

"What about the magical objects?" Pietro said.

Saburo sighed. "I'll bet they don't *stay* magical."

"Don't we get any reward for all our help?" Kate asked the Yellow Dragon. "Like getting a wish granted or something?"

"Jinjing gets to keep Pandora's Jar," Pietro said.

Jinjing gasped. "The jar. It's gone!"

"No it isn't," Pietro said, "it's back at your house in Hong Kong. It's where you left it before you came on this crazy adventure. The jar Athena gave you had to stay in its own time period so it could come to your grandfather, and then to you."

"Still," Kate said, "she *does* get something. What about the rest of us?" She stared up with hopeful eyes. The Yellow Dragon gazed back.

"Oh," she said.

"What?" Saburo asked. "What did the dragon say?"

"It said I *did* get something. I learned an important lesson." She sighed. "I'd rather have gold or jewels or something a bit more solid than just a lesson."

Four Fiends

“Or a special power,” Saburo said. “That would be nice. Like using my spoon to get food. Imagine if you always had a spoon that gave you food whenever you wanted. Or a bottle that gave you your favorite drink.”

“I don’t think it would work in the real world,” Jinjing said.

“Were the places we visited not in the real world then?” Pietro asked.

“They *couldn’t* have been,” Jinjing said. “In the real world, you’d never see a Greek God or a Nian.”

“Maybe it was the same world,” Pietro said, “but in a different dimension. A dimension where you can see all those things.”

“Maybe,” Jinjing said.

“What about here?” Saburo said. “This island. Is this in the real world?”

Jinjing shrugged. She wasn’t sure.

“If it is, it’s only a place the worms can find,” she said. “And the Four Guardians, of course.”

“I wonder why he can’t leave it,” Pietro said, nodding towards the Yellow Dragon. “Who made the magic that binds him to this island?”

Jinjing shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“So will the worms at least take us home?” Kate asked.

“I think so,” Jinjing said. “One last time.”



KATE DIDN’T FEEL quite right. Everything felt wrong. Even her own room looked different, somehow.

Her father, it turned out, hadn’t noticed her absence at all. They had worried for nothing. Time,

Home

in this dimension anyway, had stayed the same as when they'd left.

But something *had* changed. She couldn't put her finger on what. Was everything little brighter? More colorful? Was she imagining it, or did people treat her different? Like she was a stranger they didn't recognize?

She wondered about it. Even her two best friends didn't act the same around her. She asked them why.

"Are we treating you different?" Josie said. "I didn't think we were."

"Maybe we are a little bit," Mary said, "but that's because you *seem* a little different."

"How?" Kate asked.

Josie looked embarrassed. Mary wasn't afraid to say it.

"You're nicer," she said.

Kate laughed. "I am?"

"A little bit," Josie said.

"Wasn't I always nice?" Kate teased, knowing she always wasn't.

Josie smiled. "Most of the time. But now, well, you *do* seem nicer."

Kate grinned. "It won't last." Then she sighed. "Lunchtime. What I wouldn't give for Saburo's spoon right now. Get some real food instead of this cafeteria slop."

"Who's Saburo?" Josie said.

"Oh, nobody you know," Kate said. "Just a friend."

Four Friends

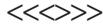
"A boy friend?" Mary said, her eyes widening. "I thought all boys were beneath you."

"Not all of 'em," Kate said, laughing. "Just most."

After lunch, she went to the bathroom. She pulled out her lipstick tube. It seemed odd to see actual lipstick rising out of it.

The lipstick sparkled. Like it was covered with thousands of tiny diamonds.

Kate gazed at it, smiling.



SABURO PUSHED UP the mountain. It was much more difficult without Oni to accompany him. He did it anyway. Every day he trudged up the path. And every day his legs grew stronger. His goal was to one day run up it, like Pietro.

He made it to the top and flopped down on the dewy grass. He pulled out his key chain and swung it in the air as he stared at the treetops. He felt good today.

Today his brother hadn't teased him once. Saburo asked why. Jiro just grinned and shook his head.

"I don't know why," he said. "Maybe because you're not a baby any more."

Saburo laughed. "Since when did I stop being the baby?"

Jiro shrugged. He couldn't say, but Saburo knew. It was the day he came back from the Yellow Dragon's island. That day Jiro changed from a bullying big brother into a friend.

He pondered the reason. Was he different? He must be. Just the other day his mother ruffled his hair and

Home

said what a good, strong boy he was becoming. He thought she meant strong in his legs, but maybe she meant strong in a different way. In the heart and mind, not just the body.

He *felt* stronger. And happier. He stared at the clear sky, day-dreaming. Of dragons and Greek Gods and a girl with flowing red hair.

The spoon sparkled.

He stopped twirling it and stared, wondering what was happening now.

“Hello?” the spoon said. Saburo put his ear near it and listened.

“Kate is that you?” He glanced around the old paddy field although he knew no one else was there.

“Saburo? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Saburo said, “and I understand you too! My spoon turned sparkly and then I heard your voice.”

“Me too,” Kate said. “I mean, my lipstick starting shining. I knew something must be happening. How are you?”

“I’m doing great,” Saburo said. The whole world was perfect at the moment.

“Have you heard from the others?”

“No,” Saburo said, “just you. So, I guess the Yellow Dragon did give us a gift after all.”

“Yes,” Kate said, “he sure did. I wonder why?”

<<◇>>

“I’M GOING FOR a run,” Pietro said, “if that’s all right.”

“Of course,” his papa said. “Just make sure you’re back in time for dinner.”

Four Friends

Pietro filled his water bottle, hooked it onto his belt, and trotted out the door. He jogged down the road in slow, easy strides, relishing the cool breeze and the bright sun.

He heard someone calling his name. Mariella Castiglia ran hard to catch up with him. He slowed down.

“Hello, Pietro!” Mariella said as she gasped for breath. “How are you today?”

“Fine,” Pietro said, jogging in place so Mariella could get her breath back. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’m fine too,” she said, sounding shy. “Where are you headed?”

“To the village,” Pietro said. “Want to come?”

“I don’t think I can run that far. Why do you always run there anyway?”

Pietro shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s just a nice run.”

“Is that all?” She sounded disappointed. Pietro realized she was waiting for a fantastic story. Like how he was under an evil enchantment and if he didn’t run every day, the enchantment would break and the world would end. Or a madman was about to blow up the town hall if Pietro wasn’t there to stop it. Something crazy like that.

“That’s all,” he said. “It’s a nice day for running. I’ll see you later then.”

“Okay,” she said, “see you later.”

Pietro chugged down the road. About halfway to the village he pulled out his water bottle and popped the top off. He was about to take a swig when he realized the water in the bottle was bubbling.

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared. Then he whispered, "Hello?"

"Pietro?" The voice sounded very familiar.

"Jinjing! How'd you get in my water bottle?"

"I'm not in your bottle, dummy. I'm at my house. I was holding my barrette just now and it started glowing. Then I heard your voice."

"That's great," Pietro said, putting his ear to the bottle so he could hear her better. "I wonder if we can contact Saburo and Kate this way too?"

"I think so," Jinjing said. "And it doesn't matter that you're talking in Italian and I'm speaking Cantonese. We still understand each other, just like when we were in our worms."

"Do you think the Yellow Dragon did this so we can keep in touch?" Pietro asked. "Or do you think there's some other reason?"

"Like what?" Jinjing said.

"I don't know. Like maybe we'll all meet again. Maybe he'll have something else for us to do. Maybe we'll get our worms back too."

"Maybe," Jinjing said. "I guess we won't know until it happens."

"Still," Pietro said, "it's good to hear your voice. I miss talking with you."

"Me too. Been on any crazy adventures lately?" she teased.

Pietro laughed. "Just the one with you. I don't think I could make up a better story than that."

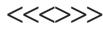
"Have you told anybody about it?"

Four Friends

"No," Pietro said. "I haven't wanted to." He hadn't. Not at all.

"Me neither. It's good to hear your voice again, Pietro."

"It's good to hear yours too," Pietro said, smiling.



JINJING STOOD IN front of her cave, leaning on the railing that ran along the concrete spillway. She watched the water trickle down the hill and sighed.

She felt restless. She moved away from the rail and began the trek back to Gong-gong's shop. She left the park, passed the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and walked to Shelley Street and the long escalator that would take her down to Hollywood Road.

It was a beautiful day. The sun shone and the air was crisp, almost cool, which was rare for Hong Kong this time of year. Usually it was sweltering by now. Today was unusual, different. Jinjing felt good. She smiled at people strolling by, and they smiled back. She entered the shop and beamed at the perfect stranger Gong-gong was waiting on.

"Something's different about you," Gong-gong said after the customer had exited the building. "You used to never smile at my customers. You'd stare at the floor until they had left."

"Did I?" Jinjing said. "Well, that's silly, isn't it?"

Gong-gong shook his head and changed the subject. "How was school today?"

"Oh, it was fine," Jinjing said. "We're learning about Ancient Greece."

“Anything interesting?”

“Nothing you haven’t already taught me. By the way, I have a theory about the jar you gave me.”

“Oh?” Gong-gong asked as he dusted a vase displayed in the window.

“Mhm. You remember the story of Pandora?”

“Of course,” Gong-gong said.

“I think the jar belonged to her.”

Gong-gong grinned. “You certainly dream big. Pandora’s jar was a *pithos*, a huge jar. Much too big to fit in your hand.”

“Well,” Jinjing said, “that’s what history might say, but it doesn’t mean they’re right. They also say Pandora was a grown woman, but she wasn’t. She was a little girl.”

Gong-gong laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re rewriting mythology now.”

“Maybe,” Jinjing said, laughing too. He didn’t believe her. She hadn’t expected him to.

“It’s a nice theory though,” Gong-gong said. “Although the history behind your jar probably isn’t that exciting.”

“Maybe not,” Jinjing said, “but it’s much more fun to think that it is.”

When she got home, Jinjing did what she did every night. She opened the jar and peered inside. Her necklace lay there, the jade glinting in the lamplight. She watched as it began to glow. It grew brighter and brighter until the green was almost white in color. Then it faded until nothing remained except the plain stone lying in its jar.

Four Friends

After all the evil had been let out, the one thing remaining in the jar was Hope. Jinjing smiled and closed the lid. She stared out the window, to the busy harbor below. Hope. It was a funny word. What did she hope for most? She used to hope she would make some friends. Now she had them. Three good friends.

She hoped she would see them soon.

About The Author

Originally from Virginia, Nikki Bennett moved to Japan in her forties and developed a love of Asian mythology and history. Now she lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband Steve.

This story would have never come about if Nikki and Steve hadn't taken a wrong turn when exiting the Escalator in Hong Kong. They stumbled upon a hidden garden and Jinjing's "cave" (yes, it really does exist!) The question was--how to work the "cave" into a story? This book is the result of that question!

Check out Nikki's other titles at:

www.nikkibennettart.com

www.firedrakebooks.com

Three Treasures Sneak Peek

The Rat Boy

THE BOY KNEW he was a god. He was absolutely sure of this fact.

He lived in the city of Deshnoke, in northeast India. This special city boasted a one-of-a-kind temple dedicated exclusively to rats. Thousands of black rats made the temple their home, along with a few special white ones rumored to be the reincarnation of the great goddess Karni Mata's family. Catching a glimpse of these pure white rodents was a blessing, and for one to run across your bare feet while you walked through the temple was considered quite an honor.

Just a few months ago, a new animal appeared at the temple. This rat differed from the rest. Brilliant white fur covered it, and green eyes sparkled in its tiny face. Murmurs circulated that this rat was the reincarnation of Karni Mata herself. No one had ever seen a rat with green eyes. She was a special animal indeed.

People far and wide traipsed to Deshnoke to see the elusive rodent, but it avoided all contact. It refused to run over worshipper's feet or lap milk from a bowl with its human subordinates like the other rats. It hid, scuttling out every so often, enough for the excited worshippers to catch a swift peek. No one could get near it.

Then Raahi entered the temple. He came with his father, who desired a fleeting glimpse of Karni Mata. Raahi didn't care about the rat. He was thinking of more important things that day. Two kids at school had borrowed money from him, and he was busy deciding the meanest way to get the money back. Beating them up after class, maybe. Or, more subtly, sending some well-phrased threats. He pondered his options as he followed his father into the temple.

They meandered over the cool marble floor as rats scurried across their path. They passed a large metal bowl filled with milk; rats and humans drank together, a solemn ritual. They passed men sitting in serene contentment against the wall as rats scuttled over their shoulders, down their arms, and across their laps. Raahi's father sat against the wall also.

"Maybe," he whispered, "if we are still and quiet, we will see the special rat."

Raahi sighed and sank down beside his father. He stared sullenly at the far wall, where a few rats nibbled some fruit. Behind the fruit, two eyes peered from a hole in the wall.

Two sparkling green eyes.

Raahi watched as the pure white reincarnation of Karni Mata emerged and scuttled towards him. Gasps echoed through the room before everyone fell silent.

She was a beautiful creature. White fur glowed in the dim light, dainty pink feet glided over the tiles, and a graceful tail wavered in the gentle breeze. Her

eyes locked with the boy's. She scuttled right up to Raahi and, while others gasped in amazement, the great goddess rat climbed up his leg and sat in his lap.

Raahi stared into the rat's eyes, mesmerized. She stared back.

"Incredible," his father said.

Karni Mata, hearing the voice, turned, and bolted to her hole.

"She has blessed you," Raahi's father whispered.

"You scared her away." Raahi glared up with accusing eyes. He wouldn't speak to his father for the rest of the day.

The next time he visited the temple, Raahi went alone. Again the rat chose him among the many others roaming through the halls. She scuttled all the way up his arm and sat on his shoulder. When a man, yearning for a glimpse, moved too close, the rat bolted for her hole. Raahi, although only a boy, scolded the man, who walked away, head down, abashed.

Whenever Raahi visited the temple, Karni Mata would meet him. She never approached anyone else. The locals who frequented the temple learned to stay away from the two. They watched, awed, from a respectful distance. And the more they gazed with reverence at Raahi and his rat, the more important Raahi felt.

He decided since Karni Mata chose him, he must be a reincarnated god too.

But which one?

Raahi wasn't that religious. Earthly things interested him more, like figuring out ways to scam money

from kids at school, bullying classmates into doing his homework, even stealing from his favorite candy shop when he could. It wasn't that he didn't have money. His parents both had good jobs, and he made a tidy sum from his victims on the playground. But he stole anyway, just to see if he could get away with it. The adults who ran the shops never suspected Raahi. He spoke courteously to them and besides, everyone knew the white rat favored him. Even the adults couldn't deny his greatness.

The others at school, as much as they hated him, learned about the rat and became fearful. When Raahi's gang spread the rumor that he was a reincarnated god, their fear ran deeper. Now if Raahi wanted money or homework, he didn't resort to bullying. He didn't need to. Whatever he wanted, kids handed over without question.

So whether he actually believed he was a god or not, it suited his purpose and he had no qualms using the deception for his own benefit. He decided he must be Ganesh, the god with the elephant head. After all, his father said Ganesh rode on a rat when he traveled. The two fit together. He was Ganesh.

It took little time for the boy to believe this. His swagger increased, as did his cruelty. Some people use power for good and some for evil, and Raahi fell into the last category. He recruited the strong and mistreated the weak. He used his God status to take rather than give. He was all-powerful. Nothing could stand in his way.

Now when he entered the temple and the rat ran up to him, he didn't see a goddess in those emerald eyes. He saw a servant. For she wasn't as important as Ganesh. Even in her own temple, Raahi looked down on Karni Mata.

"You're just my servant," he told her. "Ganesh *rides* on a rat, you know."

The rat stared at him and squeaked. She scurried down his arm and sat on the floor, grooming herself.

Raahi looked around. The few people present in the temple weren't looking his way. He glanced at the rodent. She crouched not more than two feet from him, washing her paws. He got to his feet. A crazy thought had entered his brain, and now he couldn't get rid of it, but to prove his Ganesh theory, shouldn't he ride the rat? If she held up under his weight, he'd know for sure.

He didn't stop to consider that he'd squish the poor animal while testing his assumption. He took a step forward. The rat paid no attention. He glanced around the room again. The coast was still clear. He raised his right foot and lowered it onto the rat's head.

A small squeak issued from under his shoe. Then silence.

Then, something incredible happened. Soft, pearly smoke billowed from under his foot. It filled the spaces around him until Raahi could see nothing but white. He sucked in his breath. Smoke filled his lungs. He coughed and tried calling for help, but besides the coughing, no sound came from his mouth. He couldn't

move his legs. His hands tingled. Panic enveloped him but he couldn't run, couldn't escape the smoke. He crumpled to the floor.

A squeak and a low hiss filled his ears. The last things he saw were the two green eyes. They grew into eyes belonging to an animal much, much larger than a rat. The eyes blinked, and he remembered no more.

