

Prologue

She picked up the baby and carried him out of the yurt on a sheepskin blanket. She didn't think she was the best caretaker for Olo. Instead of getting him help, she saw a well and threw him down into it. "The coyotes can have their supper tonight," she scoffed and walked away down the road.

Chapter 1

If you are looking for Olo Yang, good luck finding him. After many years fine-tuning his athletic abilities he's finally able to toss a decent frisbee in Central Park. You'd be surprised how a young boy who started throwing stones became so strong. He was nicknamed *the stone thrower*.

To understand his story, it would be wise to hold your breath. You see, Olo Yang was given a welcome so hospitable in a town called Urumqi. He was a scrawny boy living on his own in the prairie when an old man saved him. The boy barely had enough to eat and was living off elderberries.

When the townspeople met him, the boy realized some of them were beasts. These beasts were called *centaurs* and they lived alongside humans.

A centaur was a creature with the head, arms, and torso of a *human* and the body and legs of a *horse*. One such centaur was Gains Fallow. Gains lost his luck at an early age of eight when he entered the property on Two Track Road and threw a stick he had sharpened into a sharp stick called a *jiantou*.

And because he was a mischief-maker he broke the window of a girl named Fern with this *jiantou*. He did it because he liked her. And he considered this sort of behavior a playful courtship.

She lived on Two Track Road and was a *human*. Her parents tended the grasslands and harvested grains. They were devoutly superstitious parents and considered centaurs responsible for a lot of the famine in their town.

Fern wasn't let out of her house after Gains threw that *jiantou*. Her parents were protecting their daughter from centaurs and homeschooled her. She never saw Gains again.

They told the townsman to beware of a centaur they nicknamed the notorious *Jiantou*. That's how Gains got his reputation as a brutish centaur. It made him furious and he didn't like humans after that.

Urumqi citizens continued to live together in villages where humans farmed the land and centaurs hunted prey. They coexisted rather peacefully in the region of Xinjiang and were known for radiating warmth and hospitality. Except for Fern's family on Two Track Road.

Because of the incident with Gains, they kept the gates of Two Track Road bolted shut with a giant iron lock. Visitors were never invited down their lane. Fern and her parents prided themselves on their own private family life filled with a unique artistic culture filled with grotto paintings.

Hunting on the grassland area or the Nalati Grassland as they called it, was considered a treat of the senses for centaurs. Gains grew into a teen hunting livestock and feasting on a wide variety of animals.

"No animal ever entered the terrain and left hungry," bragged their Secretariat General Naryn Kuqa. He was an elderly human in tribal khaki uniform with grey whiskers and an oak cane that curved in the handles.

He spotted Olo Yang running along the Nalati Grassland.

"Are you alone, young boy?" asked the Secretariat General.

"Yes, I am," responded Olo.

"Where is your family?" asked the old man.

"The coyotes are my family and the wilderness is my home," he answered.

"Eat for this is plentiful, drink for rain water will always fall, and prosper Olo Yang. Come and live in our village with the humans and grow into a man here. We have the best education in swordsmanship and the centaurs can teach you about hunting," the Secretariat General told him.

"The beauty of Urumqi is like nothing I have ever seen," proclaimed Olo Yang most appreciatively to the Secretariat Kuqa. "I have walked the Silk Road from the inland basin to the Great Wall of China and have seen the Terracotta Warriors in Xian, the Sangke Grassland in Xiah, the Jiahe Ruins in Turpan and the Bund in Shanghai. I've gone through the coastal metropolis for many days and have yet to see a town of centaurs."

The Secretariat General smiled and thought of something to do with this appreciative guest, "It has been a tired journey, please entertain my civic pride and come to the Apsani Village for a welcome dinner. My name is Naryn Kuqa, the Secretariat General of Urumqi."

"Thank you, Naryn," Olo told him. "But why Secretariat General?"

"It is a title given to me by the humans. Sometimes they are in fear of centaurs and we have to defend ourselves. The Secretariat position is mostly a position of peace."

Secretariat Kuqa pointed his cane at a shuttle arriving toward them, "I know your journey was completed with footsteps but let's get a lift into Apsani for the rest of

the way. I'm old and hobbling."

A cart with two horses pulled up. It was shaded by a large carpet. As they got inside Secretariat Kuqa warned him, "Be careful you may never want to leave. Nomadic herdsman sometimes get tired and settle down from time to time."

"I look forward to moving here," replied Olo Yang.

In a town with such abundance, it would be hard to see why anyone would have problems with Olo Yang. There was plenty of food to spare and running water. The feeling of resentment and jealousy toward Olo only happened because of the centaur Gains Fallow.

Through the years Gains had grown spiteful of all humans, never forgiving the family on Two Track Road. He never forgot that they had filed a complaint with the office of the Secretariat Kuqa and incited the townspeople against him. Not to mention the nefarious title they gave him, *Jiantou*.

The night the Secretariat Kuqa welcomed Olo, Gains was furious. They were welcoming this boy into the Urumqi tribe. The local citizens joined Secretariat Kuqa in Guizi Hall to entertain their young and weary traveler. They had a meal of lime-pheasant, salty-tomato soup, and saffron-rice especially made for him. The local residents raised their glasses to their honored guest.

"I would like to invite Olo Yang to a hunting expedition through the Urumqi Gate!" said Knight Lavo, a centaur sitting sideways on his chair.

"Olo from Tash Rabat, we hope you stay, and never return home," proclaimed a centaur named Bisho O'Woar -- "I hope that you can enjoy all the scenery of Urumqi and the fine merchandise at my store, *Barge Khalifa*."

"A toast to Olo Yang!" announced Secretariat Kuqa.

Olo raised his glass of plum juice to his new friends. Famished, he charged into his saffron-rice with a pair of chopsticks.

Chapter 2 The Gate of Han

In life everyone is tested, it's the burden of proof. For Olo Yang his test came when he traveled the Silk Road and into the town of Urumqi. Although the Urumqi welcomed him in the dinner, he was nervous that they were continuing to announce his arrival with so much excitement. They held a stone throwing competition at the Urumqi Pass where they asked Olo to show his arm strength.

The purpose of the Urumqi Pass was to welcome centaurs and people into the Gate of Han. It stood at the Western end of the Gansu Wall and was decorated with curly dragons welcoming visitors into Urumqi. The Gate of Han was a sacred and ceremonious passage because all travelers are required to throw a stone to test their strength.

"The legend is that the boy who would break the Gate would be the strongest man under the clouds," Bisho said.

Knight the centaur swung the Sword of Shan between his two hands. The Sword of Shan was forged by the sword maker in Luoyang. It had a molten center that emitted fire off the blade. He stabbed the Sword of Shan into a straw dummy dressed in armor hanging from the Fort.

Knight pulled the sword out of the straw dummy as the fire from the blade lit the straw aflame. He was impatiently waiting for Olo Yang to throw the stone. "Olo is the smallest boy in Urumqi and he expects us to watch him do an impossible feat."

Olo Yang was nervous he hadn't expected to be tested. "So you've heard that I throw a mean curve ball?"

"Then let's see it!" shouted Knight from his position atop Urumqi Fort on the tower as he looked down at the crowd.

The entire town was invited to view the scrawny boy Olo Yang at the Gate of Han. Secretariat Kuqa was waiting for him at podium of the Urumqi Gate and saw Fern joining the townspeople in the arena. It had been a long time since Fern had been out. Her skin was pale and she was excited for the human boy.

"Welcome back, Fern. A human boy is the next stone thrower," Bisho called to her.

Down in the sand, Olo searched and dug into the rubble. His thin arms tossing rocks from one hand to the other to test their weight. He got to the bottom of the rubble rather quickly as his arms had super human speed and pulled up a bluestone, a very heavy bluestone and so big that when he pulled it out the ground, the earth caved in from the pressure.

As a young boy, Olo became sought after for his ability to push and pull heavy

equipment like no other and helping to get the roads paved, terrain cleared, dams built, and trees cut. He preferred as a child to live silently in prairie with coyotes. He never told anyone that he was abandoned without a family.

The crowds forming at the arena made him very nervous. So nervous that he picked up a bluestone. He had picked a stone that could very well break the Wall of Han.

He was sweating in his hands. His nerves made his palm shaky. He feared dropping the stone. He shook the sweat pouring down his head and it showered into the audience and onto Tessia. When his eyes focused, he saw Tessia, a beautiful centaur with hair like a flame, flowing out of a headdress made of felt and topped with beads and goose feather. Tessia looked back up at him and her eyes met his.

She smiled and that contact made him confident in his abilities, but he wished she knew the real story, "This skill that Secretariat Kuqa speaks of was a skill that once rendered me useless and unloved that my parents abandoned me completely to a cruel nursemaid who threw me into a well to die."

In the flash of her glistening eye, he thought of one thing -- what he would tell her when he met her.

Fern pushed her way closer to Tessia in hopes of getting a closer look at him.

"It appears both you and I both want to know who Olo Yang is," Fern said, giggling at the thought of them both cheering on the handsome traveler.

"Olo would be the one to do it, Fern. I *believe* in him. He's may be *scrawny* but the sport of stone throwing is open to all creatures, human or centaur. A human may win," Tessia told her.

"Coming from a centaur, I'm surprised that you put your faith in this boy," Fern replied.

"He's really *different*. Not in a human way," remarked Tessia.

She watched him as he wiped the nervous sweat from his forehead and she pulled her long mane back and down her swopping back. Olo pulled his arms back from his shoulders and sucked in his abdominals and pulsed his chest. The centaur looked impressed at him, he thought. Her human face attached to horses body was the most thrilling sight Olo had ever witnessed.

A hawk undulated its wings and sprang its toes up. It bounced off the Secretariat Kuqa's shoulder.

"Fly to the tower," the Secretariat told his hawk.

The Secretariat had gathered persimmons from his tree and sent the hawk to share his bounty with the centaurs, his friends. The hawk dropped the persimmon onto the crowd as it hit Fern and the soft fruit exploded onto her creating an orange slush on her shirt.

Knight watched her from the Tower, "Look who came out of her lockbox, that troublemaker Fern."

Fern was frenzied, cheering for Olo with Tessia. They shouted in unison, "Break the Wall!" The more they cheered, the more people starting joining them.

Knight spoke under his breath from the Tower, "If the stone that he throws crumbles and breaks into sand it means he has picked the easiest rock. If he picks the heaviest stone and breaks the Gate of Han, we have the greatest fighter in our midst and we..."

Bisho finished his sentence, "...We will be left to mop his dirt as we do for that bumbling Secretariat Kuqa."

"Get the strongest rock and prove it!" shouted Fern.

The hawk flew toward Bisho and circled his head. It bended its wings and lashed at the centaurs. Bisho hunched down as the hawk turned back and flew down to grab him.

"It's the Secretariat's hawk." Knight grimaced and squirmed.

"Hawks symbolize the start of war," Bisho told him.

"It's not enough that the Secretariat has brought Olo Yang but now his hawk is attacking centaurs. Centaurs will be history. We won't be needed anymore to do the hunting and they will shoot us off our pastures," replied a snappy Knight.

Knight held the handle of the Sword of Shan and red fire sizzled from inside the scabbard.

"Sharpen your tip and stop them," ordered Bisho. "An attack by this hawk signals that we should be cautious, those humans will start a war to get rid of us. Olo Yang is their symbol of hope. Look how they thunder and shout. They've never done that for me. The old Secretariat has betrayed me by sending an attack hawk. He wants to start a war. Don't you see, they are all turning against us."

"There aren't enough of us to fight them," Knight said.

Knight pulled his sword out and descended the Tower. Walking into the crowd he sent his sword straight into back of the hawk and sliced the hawk dead. Upon hearing the hawk being extinguished by the flaming sword, the other hawks escaped their falconry.

“The balance of nature is harmed when these birds behave as if they are in the wild. They are not attack birds,” a concerned Secretariat watched as his falconry escaped.

The Secretariat’s falconry hunted in a pack to find Knight. They flew into the crowd and started a commotion between humans and centaurs. The raptors lay their flight plan to attack Knight and he flung his sword to strike the birds. Their wings flapped upward and they escaped.

Chapter 3 The Well

"Every boy in Urumqi has tried to break the Gate of Han and no one has ever been able to do it," Bisho announced to the spectators in the arena. "Let us start the stone throwing competition with Olo Yang."

"Olo, Olo! Olo!"

They showered him with cheers as he held the largest bluestone they had ever seen in front of them.

Olo looked at the Gate of Han and imagined thrusting the large bluestone through the thick gates. A fear came over him.

The stone started to feel too heavy. He started to imagine that he missed the Gate. It didn't feel right on his shoulder and he hesitated. Suddenly he dropped the stone.

"It's the *wrong* stone," he explained to the crowd.

They were not amused. They booed and hissed.

"They changed their opinion rather quickly in Urumqi," he said to Gains Fallow.

Gains picked up the stone he just dropped.

"Give me the stone and I will prove it," replied Gains.

"Let Gains Fallow show us!" shouted Knight Lavo.

"Are you ready Gains?" echoed Bisho O'Woar.

Gains took the bluestone that Olo Yang had chosen and readied to throw the giant stone into the gate.

"Gains! Gains! Gains!" cheered the crowd.

"No," Olo told him.

But the crowd booed. They did not want him back. Olo returned with a different stone, smaller and lighter with a longer width. It was smooth and iridescent and Olo placed it on his shoulder in an aerodynamic tilt.

The crowd was still not impressed. They booed some more.

"Go back to where you came from."

"Give us Gains Fallow!" they shouted forgetting that Gains had tried many times to break the gate.

Tessia called out to the crowd, "Gains Fallow has been tested before and the Gate still stands there, give us someone else a chance. Give us...*Olo*."

Olo saw the face of Tessia Lei speaking for him. As she walked towards him, her hair turned from auburn to a lighter pinkish hue in the sun. As she got closer, he smelled the scent of honeydew.

She whispered in his ear a request, "Tell them this...*cover your ears*."

He smiled knowing that she knew his plan.

"I will throw a faster stone than the larger one that Gain's holds and it will crush the Gate in a loud bang," he whispered back to Tessia.

Bisho interrupted them.

"Stand away from this foolish wanderer, Tessia!"

"He'll leave as fast as he got here!" shouted Gains Fallow.

"What can he do with a puny stone?" added Knight Lavo wielding his Sword of Shan. "Lets see him even try."

"Cover your ears," Olo shouted to the crowd. He swung his left arm back propelling the bluestone off his shoulder.

His lanky arm sprang out of its socket as the stone flew off into fast turns. Turning and rotating the stone in a whooshing sound until its sharp front edge hit the Gates of Han like a blade.

It was the crushing throw that made the crowd cheer once again. It was the deafening crash out of nowhere that defeated their doubt.

Gains Fallow dropped the bluestone back into the rubble. The gate was gone. He had spent his whole life building his strength to tear it down, but throw after throw he couldn't do it. Olo finally broke the Gate of Han and the earth shuddered beneath all of them.

What isn't known, that Secretariat Kuqa and the people of Urumqi would never know amidst the commotion with the hawks, was that Olo Yang felt a special connection to centaurs. Though he did not have four-legs himself, he spent his childhood raised by another pack of four-legged creatures, coyotes.

The day he was born, Olo's parents turned away a caravan of visiting families trekking across the snowy high terrain to welcome this baby who would grow up to be Olo Yang. He was in born in a humble yurt, a one-room tent to a couple with six kids in Tash Rabat.

When he came out of her womb a nursemaid told his mother, "It's the worst day of my life to give you the bad news. Your son is born *physically* challenged."

"Will he be alright?" begged his mother.

The nursemaid's tone was cold, "Though he doesn't cry. He does have a fever."

"Bring him to me, so I can see him," his mother replied.

"He's eyes are covered in grey mucus," the nursemaid announced.

The family of six siblings responded by taking turns holding the newborn and kissing him on the forehead.

"Will you give him to me?" asked Olo's father.

His face was distraught when he saw his eyes. They were grey and cloudy. He waved his hands over his son's eyes and Olo did not blink nor cry.

"I know a doctor. Your son has a fever and needs to see this doctor right away," the nursemaid said.

"Take him please to this doctor," asked his father.

He gave the nursemaid a bag of coins.

"This is everything we have, please take him quickly!"

"I will see what I can do," replied the nursemaid.

She picked up the baby and carried him out of the yurt on a sheepskin blanket. She didn't think she was the best caretaker for Olo. Instead of getting him help, she saw a well and threw him down into it. "The coyotes can have their supper tonight," she scoffed and walked away down the road.

The coyotes howled as supper was thrown in the well. It was as if the nursemaid had rung a dinner bell for them.

But no coyote would eat that sick baby. On that bright night the coyotes could see inside the well and had mercy on him. It was there that a coyote dribbled milk down for the baby and howled "Olo!"

They climbed over the ledge of the well to look down and they saw the baby looking up at the stars in the night sky. They could see that they had some nursing to do.

"There is nothing wrong with this baby," said a coyote.

"We will feed him until he crawls out."

The coyote visited Olo morning, noon, and night and showered milk. The first week he was there, the coyote threw a line of rope into the well hoping he was strong enough to hold it.

"Keep practicing your grasp," the coyote said.

"Olo," the coyotes called him.

Olo matched his cooing to the coyote's howl. He had been whimpering and howling and learned how to enunciate his howls into words.

"Whoo" for *more* and "Woof" for *play*.

"Woothapoot" for *give me* and "Roawaw" for *rope*.

"Roawaw" was the word he used the most. He said it whenever he grasped the rope.

A rope would be tossed down every day until one day Olo was able to curl his fingers around the rope. He practiced holding onto the rope and swinging his arm from side to side and getting his arm strength. The coyotes poured more milk down the well and he learned to catch it with his mouth so it wouldn't dribble down his neck. He let the milk soak his linen shawl so he could suckle on the milk later as a snack.

Olo learned how to sleep at night and play in the day with the shadows against the stone well. He wasn't scared of being there alone.

One day, he called "Raowaw" to the coyotes.

As the coyotes threw the rope, he grasped it with his hand. He had been developing the skill that would save his life...his arm strength. It was getting him further and further up toward the top of the well.

The coyotes cheered "Olo! Olo, Olo-- Olo! Olo! Olo-Olo! Olo, Oooloooo!"

As the rope got to the top, he pulled himself over the ledge and rolled off onto the first day on solid ground.

Olo grew up with these coyotes in the middle of an oasis town in the Hexi Corridor. Although he would see humans, he never bothered them or approached them. He would watch from behind trees.

When he was older, he moved his home into the inhospitable mountains where he taught himself how to draw pictographs on cave walls. He went down into the part where humans gathered at the Yangtze River because he preferred fishing

to hunting game. He wasn't accustomed to approaching humans but a crossing guard holding up a sign was looking at him.

"I have seen you many times, do you live up in the Mogao Caves?"

Olo nodded yes to the friendly crossing guard.

"Everyone knows that's coyote territory. How do you live with coyotes and not get killed?" he asked him.

Olo nodded and looked at the crossing guard's sign.

The sign said, "Stop."

He laughed when he saw this because the letters of the alphabet was the same as the pictograph he had drawn in the Mogao Caves.

The crossing guard look at Olo with curiosity, "Where are you from?"

Olo mumbled, "*Whootapat*" and the crossing guard laughed.

"You act as if you have been raised by a pack of wolves."

Olo pointed to his sign to ask what it was.

"My sign says stop," explained the crossing guard.

Olo nodded his head as if he understood.

The crossing guard introduced himself, "I am Wind Samoke, crossing guard for the Hexi Corridor."

Olo replied by pointing to his chest and howling to the moon, "Olo."

"Olo -- hold on, can you stay here? Hold up the sign like this."

Wind gave him the sign and looked around to see if anybody in the caravan was looking.

"Hold the sign straight so they can see you."

Wind ran to his bike parked on the other side of the road and pulled out a book. He ran back and gave it to Olo.

"There are maps in here you ought to look at. Read them and practice how to speak, then you can join the caravan. I will teach you how to read and mouth the words if you show me how you can live amongst coyotes."

That night he made a fire in the cave and when all the coyotes curled up and

went to sleep, he brought Wind inside. He opened a map of the region and Olo's grey eyes lit up. It was larger than he had ever dreamed. He couldn't imagine that dry deserts on either side surrounded the entire mountain range. He had always lived in the fertile forest. He mouthed the word, "*da*," which meant "*big*."

After learning how to talk, he journeyed outside the Hexi Corridor and onto the Silk Road. It was on the Silk Road that he entered Xinjiang, an area populated by centaurs. It was in the secret village of Urumqi that the Gate of Han stood for centuries waiting for the stone thrower to arrive.

Chapter 4 Peneus the River God

It was the river god, Peneus River that guided life on earth. The towns in which the centaurs and humans thrive were at his mercy. At a sudden notice, Peneus could dry up the land and make them move for new water supplies. The water level rose and fell based on the whims of the Gods.

It was the Gods who gave Olo secret skills. They intervened at the Gate of Han and gave Olo superhuman strength. After Olo tossed the bluestone, Peneus River blew a mighty wind. The bluestone traveled faster lifting the Gates off the wall. The river god blew another gust of wind. It moved the Gates off the Wall through the sky where it traveled for miles until it hit the mountainside. The Gates landed there, carving itself into the mountain.

Bisho O'Woar scolded Gains Fallow the day Olo broke the Gates, "You are stronger than Olo Yang, what's the matter with you? How could you let a human challenge you and break the Gate?"

Bisho flashed a mystical Gorini eye at Gains -- hypnotizing him. He whispered to Knight, "Shut him down with the Gorini eye, let's save Gains for a fight when there aren't so many of them around."

"The Gorini eye controls Gains Fallow," Knight Lavo snickered as Bisho hid the Gorini eye back into this shirt as Gains fell into a trance.

"I'm tired I'm sorry I can't stay longer, I better go," Gains whispered not knowing he had been hypnotized into a competition against Olo Yang.

When centaurs were left to their own devices, they used their powers to thwart Olo Yang. The Gods intervened when the centaurs used the Gorini eye.

Knight Lavo dipped the Sword of Shan into the river. The hot flames shot waves into the air that evaporated into cool mists. Peneus River turned the water into ice. Knight's Sword of Shan made Peneus River wary of an eminent fight.

Fruit Chen was the god of fire. She lit the fire on Knight's Sword of Shan. Just like Peneus River, she was responsible for the balance of humans and centaurs.

The God's also punished humans. Fern was one such example. When Tessia asked Fern about Olo, she thwarted Tessia from seeing him.

"Is Olo back from the Gansu Wall? I know they are carving his portrait next to the dragons along the relief," Tessia asked her.

"How would I know?" scoffed Fern.

"I saw you looking at Olo. You didn't like that Gains Fallow was competing against him. It's a wonder anyone would stay in Urumqi. What do you know about civilized people like us Tessia, you are only a centaur who lives in a pasture."

Fruit Chen descended from the clouds when she heard Fern's mocking. As the God of Dharma she wanted to teach Fern that centaurs were not inferior. It was Fern's parents who had taught Fern to disrespect centaurs at a young age. It started when Gains broke her window and they called him *jiantou*.

"Unrefined, uncivilized, and unequal" was their description for centaurs.

In all animals big and small, Fruit had seen this behavior. It was equal from both sides and what she vowed to do was to turn Fern into a tree. But she would only be a tree when the time was right and the entire townspeople could see it.

"We will just wait for that time," she said "when its most important for Fern to know that people are equal no matter if they are a centaur or a two-legged folk."

When Fern received an invitation from Secretariat Kuqa to meet Olo Yang in person at Guizi Hall that evening, she made sure not to let Tessia go. She wanted to meet Olo alone.

She picked a new dress for the occasion and sent it a clothing yurt for alterations. To impress him, she straightened her hair with sticky bees wax she had harvested from a beehive of deadly bees. She shaved her hairy legs with a sharp blade. Finally, her mom fussed over her cheeks and swept petunia flowers on them to give her a rosy complexion.

All in an effort to be the *prettiest* girl in Urumqi.

"And the future wife of Olo Yang, the most powerful arm under the clouds," Fern told herself.

That afternoon, Tessia called on her to go to the Peony Festival. Fern pretended to be sick in bed. She had her mother get rid of Tessia.

"May I bring her some petunia soup to clear out her chest congestion?" asked Tessia.

"No thank you," her Mother said shutting the door on Tessia.

"Alright. As she heard anything about Olo Yang?" Tessia asked.

"Olo Yang? Who is that?" replied Fern's Mother who was acting like she had never heard of the wayfarer.

"Olo Yang...the stone thrower," explained Tessia.

"Olo Yang left Urumqi," she fibbed.

"He...he did? Well, I've disturbed you enough already. Please tell Fern that I will attend the Peony Festival without her and it won't be the same."

With that Tessia sauntered off on her four legs and journeyed to the other side of town through a short cut in the woods. Along the way she picked up peonies, the indigenous flower of Urumqi.

Tessia was happy that her favorite flower was being celebrated at the Peony Festival. The flowers represented peace. She hoped that the centaurs would find happiness living close to humans.

When she was a young centaur she would pick peonies with her Mom, Oneeva. One day while they were picking peonies, a group of tribesmen were hunting for them. They chased them through the forest. They slung arrows hitting Oneeva and Tessia was left without a mother.

Tessia visited the forest that day remembering her Mother. She jumped into the lake and swam until a pile of leaves piled atop of her. She looked up and it was none other than Olo Yang swinging from the tree vines. He had swung so fast it loosened the branches.

"Olo Yang -- is *still* here," she said softly.

At the sight of her he was mesmerized.

"I tossed the bluestone so fast through the clouds to show you my strength. Were you impressed that I broke the Gate for you?" he asked her.

"*Broke* the Gate...for me?" Tessia asked him.

"Yes. Just so I could stay here," Olo replied.

"I can't believe it. You're still here," she responded.

"I don't want to leave Tessia. Are you coming to dinner at Guizi Hall?"

"Um, I hadn't been invited."

"Well you must come. *With* me."

Chapter 5 Peony Festival

"I'll let you in on a secret. The God's are behind this," Barge confided to the Secretariat Kuqa.

Secretariat Kuqa nodded his head in agreement.

"Hard to believe but the traveler from just days ago is now the hero of Urumqi."

Barge just arrived at the Peony Festival with Secretariat Kuqa. He was a local artist hired by the Secretariat for an art commission. A portrait relief in stone of Olo Yang.

Barge was often invited to dinners with Secretariat Kuqa at Guizi Hall. He carved the Baluster dining tables and made them extra long so the centaurs could dine together. He followed his father, Deli Khalifa's trade as a wood carver.

Deli was dexterous. He apprenticed at a Dutch shipyard where he designed ships with moveable ladders, which allowed to access upper shelves in small spaces. He crafted solid walnut furniture with Bolection-molded cornices and raised panels, leaving the hand-finished wood an exquisite patina.

Some of his wood pieces were painted and portrayed real life, such as the flooding of the Euphrates. They were crafted with walnut and iron and written in Kharosthi script - an ancient alphabet.

"This is the biggest gathering we have ever had. I want to get a look up close at Olo's face so I can chisel his strong jaw," Barge said.

Barge spotted Olo in the crowd and studied his profile. Olo was surrounded by young boys. They were curious to meet him. Barge was able to catch a good view and he began sketching Olo's face in his notebook.

"Show us how you broke the Gate of Han," the boys wanted to know.

Olo was uncomfortable showing-off his thin arms. They were flexible but he had never thought his arms were *extraordinary*.

"Flex your arm, Olo," asked a youngster.

Olo looked to see if Tessia was watching and demonstrated for the boys.

"First, I pulled my arm up over my shoulder and then I swing it backwards and let it go in reverse. Then, I got my arm down and then swing it up and just let go...and it flies very far away," explained Olo.

"How heavy was the stone?" asked another boy.

"*Heavier* than you and your friends together," responded Olo.

"Pick him up and show us!" asked another boy.

Olo picked up the child and swung him around before placing him down on the grass. His lanky arms were burning. He picked up another boy and then another. They all jumped up and down.

"Olo, how long have you been practicing your swing?" asked a boy. "We want to know."

Olo hesitated to explain. He hadn't practiced much stone throwing in his life. He grew up in the woods with coyotes. Not in a traditional home with parents like them. He didn't know to explain this until he noticed Tessia watching them.

She smiled and he stopped feeling tense. If she was confident in him, Olo Yang thought, "*then these boys will look up to me too.*"

The Peony Festival was the annual fair celebrating the indigenous flower of Urumqi. It was held in April and was the first festival that mixed centaurs and humans.

Together they would celebrate, dine, and dance through the night. Centaurs arrived together with their families and humans arrived on donkeys, horses, and camels, which they tied to posts. Their animals fed on brushes, tamarisk, and balsam poplar, and wheat grass.

He didn't want to disappoint Tessia at the Peony Festival. So he shared a story with the boys about growing up with coyotes.

"Well, from the time I can remember I have been working on my curve ball."

Olo motioned his arm to twist with his waist.

"Coyotes would run to find the ball. I would pick a spot to throw it that they wouldn't find very easily. That's how I came up with this, the *curve throw*."

In between the "oohs" and "aahs" the children were amused. Olo may have been scrawny when he arrived, but now he had a hero's stature. He stood taller next to Tessia wanting to impress her and the local boys.

"It's not easy being the new muscle man in Urumqi," the Secretariat Kuqa told Barge.

"Olo is carrying a basket of peonies for a centaur. Do you know who she is?" asked the Secretariat.

Barge looked up from his notebook and instantly recognized her.

"That is Tessia Lei. Her Mother used to take her to my spice shop when she was alive," Barge told him.

Barge opened his pouch wrapped around his neck and took out his turmeric and saffron. He was born in Aleppo, the oldest inhabited city in the world. The city's souk was a marketplace stocked with spices and anything else you would get at a grocery store. When he moved to Urumqi, he opened a spice shop with the help of Bisho. He stocked it with spices from Kashgar.

"I have the best array of spices this side of Tehran! West of the Tehran, I have the best spices as well, welcome to my world of spices!" he announced at the Peony Festival.

"Olo, can I offer you some spices from my spice shop?"

Olo noticed Barge in his bright yellow frock immediately.

"Thank you."

Olo took the spices. He had never seen a man dressed in a yellow frock and liked him right away. When Barge went to shake his hand, Olo clenched it hard and tight and flexed his small arm muscles.

"How are you recovering from yesterday's events?" Secretariat Kuqa asked.

"Very well, thank you."

Olo moved his arm to Tessia's waist. He was nervous and needed her touch. Something about her calmed him. Barge noticed and couldn't wait any longer to tell Olo the good news.

"The Fates are involved in this. I can tell. They are in charge of all of this. Good! Because I'm going to carve a portrait of you next to dragons on the Gansu Wall."

Olo sighed. The Fates scared him.

"At the Gansu Wall? No. Thank you. That is really...unnecessary. I don't see why anyone would be interested in my portrait." Olo said.

"No. Olo. Don't decline this. It means everything to the boys," the Secretariat told him.

Olo looked at the boys. They looked disappointed for the first time.

"Be careful what you do and say. They are eavesdropping at everything," Barge whispered to him.

"Barge is a nice man, Olo" Tessia said, "he carves and designs wood tablets. One of the tablets shot a bolt of lightning through my fingers."

"That's the Futura-matic. That was electricity you were feeling," Barge explained.

"I'm sorry. But I came here with someone...e/se," Olo said looking at Tessia. "I didn't expect all this at the Peony Festival. Now if you'll excuse me, let's continue to have a great time. The fanfare is *really*...unnecessary."

The music floated through the festival. Olo swung Tessia onto the dance floor. He swung her hard, away from the crowd following them. Tessia's four-legs swung in the air and landed smoothly with each turn away from them.

Another crowd formed around them and they were getting even more attention for dancing.

"I've only been here for two days and this town has an interest in everything we're doing," Olo told Tessia when they were out of earshot.

"I'm not used to this either, Olo," Tessia replied.

She was nervous about crossing paths with anybody who didn't like her with Olo. He twirled her around and around. The townspeople cheered for him to go faster.

"Olo. I'm getting...dizzy," she winced.

Her head was spinning. Olo stopped twirling her but a swarm of young boys were approaching them on the dance floor.

"That's enough for one day. Let's get some space."

Olo took her to a tent to get some privacy. Inside the tent, they found a local jewelry store that had set up shop. Bracelets lined the tables with various motifs. They were decorated with shells, wings, acorns, birds, and peonies hammered in silver. Twisted in hemp and yarn, were precious stones.

"Will you mind wearing one, if we pick one that you like?" Olo asked her.

"Yes, of course."

They browsed the selection and picked a ruby, hemp, and acorn bracelet for Tessia.

"Let me tie it on your wrist in an invisible knot so it will never come undone," Olo said.

"It's beautiful, thank you Olo," Tessia tilted her wrist and admired the natural filigree on the acorn.

"Sailors at sea call this a boating knot," Olo explained tying the rope. "You tie a line of rope to an anchor to hitch, so it never comes undone."

Olo made three loops around her wrist with the long string and tied it into a heart shaped twist. When she raised her hand to look at the knot, he pulled her in and kissed her.

“That’s my first kiss, Olo.”

“Don’t worry. Nobody’s *watching*. I promise you that they won’t bother us again.”

Chapter 6 Gorini Eye

The excitement around Olo and Tessia at the Peony Festival spread across Urumqi. The new couple drew the curiosity of Bisho and Knight.

"I hear Olo's been carrying on like casanova with Tessia," remarked Knight.

"I'll swing the Gorini eye like a pendulum back and forth in front of Gains to fight him."

Bisho pulled out a necklace with the Gorini eye, a moving eyeball that bounced up and down in a silver mandala. It secretly was a mental control device that hypnotized anyone who looked into it.

"If this worked on Gains, we can use it on Olo."

"How will we use it without him knowing?"

"Let's invite Olo to attend school with us."

"#1 High School of Urumqi doesn't need more humans."

"We'll be able to use him if he's closer to us...we'll even get his powers with the girls."

They decided to befriend Olo by inviting him to Bisho's house for dinner. Being the kind newcomer, Olo accepted. He did his best to curtail any tension with the centaurs.

"Tessia, I'm attending a dinner at Bisho's. This will ease the animosity that Gains might be having with me." Olo explained as they were sitting on the couch of Tessia's home.

Tessia watched Olo carefully. They hadn't been apart since the Peony Festival.

"Bisho's house? Are you sure about him, Olo?"

"I have to go, Tessia. This will keep them from prying. I'll befriend them and they will leave us alone." Olo told her.

Tessia was surprised. "I don't know why you would. He will use Gains Fallow and turn him against you, Olo. Are you going to get caught in their battle against Naryn Kuqa? Barge Khalifa warned me about them. Stay out of their fight Olo."

Olo hugged her close and brushed his hand through her hair.

"Don't worry. I won't stay long. I'll be back soon."

Tessia winced when Gains knocked at the door. Olo jumped off the couch and

was really leaving with him.

"I get you, you're a shell Olo Yang. Just like that... you're leaving. So I'm not invited to go with you?"

"This is *just* for the guys," Gains warned her.

Tessia slammed the door shut, watching from the window. Olo left without saying goodbye. She picked up a broom to sweep up the leaves that had blown into her house.

She turned on the television to watch the news. They were showing Olo on television being interviewed at the Gate of Han in the news story.

"Now that he's famous on the 24-hour new channel, I don't imagine he'll want to come back." Tessia cried as she watched him on TV.

Tessia cut the yarn bracelet Olo had given her. The shells, wings, acorns, birds, peonies hammered in silver fell off the yarn.

"Olo is definitely all over town. I'll hope he *remembers* me." Tessia said exasperated.

Oneeva Lei lived in the spirit world worrying about her daughter Tessia. She hadn't been alive for five years and she visited Tessia by conjuring herself out of the Amitaba scroll to communicate from the *other side*.

The Amitaba scroll was on the wall behind the couch where Tessia was sitting. It was next to an ancestor altar.

Tessia summoned her Mother from the secret scroll. Amidst twelve generations of Lei, she emerged from the bright scroll. Tessia summoned her by saying a prayer to the ancestral shrine.

"Come back Mother, nobody's here. We're safe." Tessia prayed.

Dried peonies flew off the altar as a gust of wind breezed in.

Oneeva looked at her daughter. She was an apparition from the spirit world and her daughter was concentrating on her Mother's conjuring. She came out of the artwork in a physical state.

"Today, I welcomed a boy into our home," Tessia told her.

"I know. I've been watching you," Oneeva said shaking her head.

Like her daughter, she was disappointed in Olo leaving so soon. As a Mother she would always be there in spirit to investigate Olo's true intentions.

"Olo will have to bow at the ancestral altar before he can ever truly know who you are. It's too soon to tell him our *secret*," she said.

"When can I tell him? That my Mother *is here* as a ghost?" Tessia asked.

"I'm still protective of you and maybe more from the spirit world. Your nature is too easy to please. You got silly about him, Tessia and shouldn't tell him anything until he has proven himself as worthy."

"Olo will be more fearful of you than the centaurs once he finds out."

"Give him time Tessia, his true intentions will reveal itself."

Tessia looked at the Amitaba scroll. The scrolls slowly formed into figures of her deceased ancestors, one of them being her grandfather Fraidon Lei. He emerged from the scroll.

"Giving your heart away so soon?" Fraidon asked her.

"I can't believe it...*Grandfather!*" said Tessia.

"Even when you don't think you need us...we are here," Oneeva replied, emerging out of the scroll behind Fraidon.

"Why won't Olo *listen*?" Tessia asked them.

"Gains is not himself lately, he is under the wings of Bisho and Knight."

"Don't worry about these boys," said Oneeva accidentally pushed a bowl of water onto the floor.

Tessia picked up a mop to dry the floor, "I wished for Olo not to leave. Mother, I think I've scared him *away*."

"I wish for you that he doesn't come *back*," replied Oneeva.

"Why?" asked Tessia.

"You'll be left cleaning up after him," Oneeva warned as Tessia moped.

"Let Olo find his way back on his own," Fraidon encouraged her.

A table was set for four in Bisho's stone fortified home in the east end of Urumqi. Gains brought Olo up the long driveway.

"Pretend to welcome him." Bisho scoffed as he watched from the window.

"I'm brewing a round of tonic," said Knight.

He threw twisted bark and tonics into a bubbling cauldron.

"This tonic will weaken Olo. I spiked it with potion."

The door swung open and Olo and Gains entered. Knight put the Gorini eye under his shirt and shushed the eyeball, "Not a peep out of you."

"Welcome to my home." Bisho motioned through the smoke to sit at the table.

"A toast to the both of you," Knight raised the tonic to them.

They drank and Gains was suddenly sweating.

"I'm not feeling so good." Gains put down the goblet. "Can someone please open the window?"

Olo got up to open a window. He picked up Gains and stuck his head outside the window for air.

"He's going to pass out in here," Olo told them.

Bisho feigned concern. Olo was a good Samaritan and it annoyed him. The drink had not even affected him.

"He's made of something else. Plough him with another drink," Bisho whispered to Knight as he mixed bark and tonic into the cauldron for another round.

"When they finish their drinks, swing Gorini into their eye," Knight said.

He rubbed his hands together and threw locusts into the cauldron. They sizzled and exploded and the room filled with smoke

"Look here!" Bisho waved the Gorini eye at both of them.

Gains pulled his head back from the window and looked into it. He was being hypnotized. But the Gorini eye had no effect on Olo.

"Wh-what was in the tonic?" Gains asked. "My mind is numb."

Olo grabbed a chair for Gains who fell down into it, nearly missing the ground.

Olo thought of Tessia's warnings. He looked at the goblet and realized they had spiked it with bitters. Gains had finished all of his drink.

"And what about you, Olo?" asked Knight.

"I'm sorry I hate to leave but it appears my friend is not himself tonight."

The door creaked open and the visit was cut short. Olo picked up Gains and was

heading out their door. From the foggy window Knight saw Olo's figure carrying Gains down the hill.

"Amazing. Even the drink has no effect on him. Olo's stomach is as tough as parchment," said Bisho.

"This new friendship of theirs is irking. It will be harder to break them apart once Olo stays in town," Knight replied.

"Don't worry. He'll be attending #1 Sr. High School of Urumqi with us. We can handle him then."

From the cloud above them Fruit Chen's *Sexton* hummed and turned. The *Sexton* was a circular wheel that rotated with images. It showed her an image of what was going on down below her at Bisho's house. Bisho was swinging the Gorini eye from side to side.

"He has the Gorini's eye. In the wrong hands, the eye has the power of *Gorini*."

The last time Fruit had seen the Gorini eye, it belonged to Euphrates Corfu and it was on a red silk string.

"How did Bisho get a hold it it?" Fruit asked the *Sexton*.

Fruit rotated the *Sexton* to the left and it showed her images of Costa Corfu placing the necklace over Euphrates's head on their wedding day. It was the seeing eye of his mother Gorini Corfu, a lioness whose eye blazed and softened those that looked into them.

The *Sexton* proceeded to broadcast the story of what happened.

When pirates landed on the island, Gorini was sent to greet them. Her beautiful eyes had the ability to spellbound invaders. The pirates fell into a trance at their beauty and gave up all their gold, silver, and goods. They left her in peace, continuing on their journey in empty vessels. That's how powerful her spell was.

Gorini was able to keep good relations with the seafaring pirates throughout her life with this secret ability. The pirates returned to the island after every expedition leaving cargo and sailed away in empty ships. *Never knowing why*.

When Gorini was hit with malaria and typhus, she called for her sons.

"Costa and Peneus, please keep my eyes in case you need them when the pirates return. Have the rest of my remains embalmed with myrrh and cassia."

Peneus knowing the power of his Mother's eyes did not want to risk the ire of the pirates. If could never find out that they had been hypnotized under Gorini's spell. He motioned for the waves to prevent the pirates return.

"In the wrong hands Gorini's eye is dangerous," he said putting her eye in a silver box and burying it in a trunk deep in the sea.

His brother Costa, enamored by his wife Euphrates wanted her to wear the other eye belonging to his mother. He hoped that she would turn into a lioness.

"In case you ever need it, the power my Mother had to change minds, will be yours with this necklace."

He had the necklace secured in a silver mandala frame designed by his friend Barge Khalifa. Costa had Barge fashion a red silk cord around the silver frame.

"May the powers of my mother rest on your neck," he proclaimed when he placed it over her head.

Euphrates was fearful of Peneus warnings.

"It's dangerous. I want to be myself as you met me Costa, and not have a power that is not my own," she explained.

She took off the necklace and put it in her dresser.

One of Euphrates maidens, Sonoyra watched her. She wanted the power of the Gorini eye. She stole the necklace from the dresser. She used its power to convince a dressmaker to cancel her debts. When the dressmaker picked up her clothespins, she spotted the Gorini eye on Sonoyra's neck and realized she had been manipulated. Furious, the dressmaker ripped the necklace off of Sonoyra and took the Gorini eye.

She never returned to the island and wandered into the town of Urumqi. It's in Urumqi where she sold the Gorini eye to Bisho.

The Sexton flashed the last images of Bisho and Knight with the Gorini eye. It stopped spinning when it was finished broadcasting its history to Fruit Chen.

Fruit was satisfied. "The purity of the stone thrower makes the Gorini obsolete when flashed into his eyes. His strength is from the Gods."

CHAPTER 7 Fruit Chen and the Sexton

"Fruit Chen will be the death of me," Lady Pan scowled from her secret crystal chamber.

When she was a young girl Lady Pan had ambitions to be queen. She had wanted so badly to rule and dabbled in witchcraft as a young lady in waiting. She had heard of a beautiful girl named Fruit Chen.

"Is there a more beautiful lady than me?" Lady Pan asked her crystal prisms.

"Yes there is. Her name is Fruit Chen. She is destined to be the Goddess of Dharma," the crystals told her.

"Then I will curse her and everything she is doing," Lady Pan replied.

Ever since then Lady Pan followed Fruit, watching her through her crystals in her secret chamber. She moved to Urumqi and though she did not marry the Emperor found a suitable match in Naryn Kuqa. He would become the Secretariat with her *help*.

Lady Pan campaigned for Naryn for the office of Secretariat. She enlisted the centaurs to strike fear in humans. In doing so they voted for the Secretariat who would protect them. The alliance of centaurs and humans was started by Lady Pan to keep Urumqi quiet and controllable.

With the arrival of Olo, the Secretariat needed his wife Lady Pan to supervise the centaurs. He needed them to be more subservient.

"Naryn," Lady Pan said, "I will pay a secret visit to Bisho and find out what the centaurs are doing with Olo Yang."

"Make sure the centaurs keep the peace," Naryn asked her.

"I'll do it in my *own way*," Lady Pan hissed.

She closed the drapes around her and a dark cloud of smoke floated into the room. When the smoke cleared she walked out of the drapes and was transported like magic into Bisho's house.

In the hall of his house was a knife collection. Knight was polishing a set of brutality instruments lining the pewter paned wall.

In his collection there was a curved Maox sword that tipped backward in a curve Ikano swope. A Balkh knife had a gemstone handle. A Euvervin stabbing knife with a knobby wood handle. A Rayvich serrated aluminum blade. And a Himaloth rebel switch blade, a gift from the mercenaries in the mountains.

Bisho was studying a map by the fireplace. When Lady Pan snuck behind him, he didn't see her. She crept up behind Knight as he was cleaning his blade and swiped the Gorini eye from his neck. She started swinging it in front of Bisho.

He closed his eyes so the Gorini eye wouldn't affect him.

"She ripped it right off of me," said Knight.

"Lady Pan. How did you get in? Don't you knock?" Bisho asked.

"Didn't feel a thing, did you?" Lady Pan asked sitting down on a chair. "I get into *everything*, don't I?" scoffed Lady Pan.

She twirled the chain around her second finger and stirred the tonic with her long talons.

"I didn't hear you come in." Bisho said.

He quickly rolled up his map, hiding it under the bookshelf.

Lady Pan crossed her leg, her red veins popping out of her thin skin.

"I've been known for making eye-popping entrances," she replied.

"Lady Constance Pan, or shall I call you our *Secretariat's wife*. How do you do?" said Bisho.

"I'm here for an update on your dinner with Olo Yang."

"Our mercenary Gains has Olo."

"Did you find anything else?" asked Lady Pan.

"He'll be attending school with us and we will find out anything you need to know. Soon we will be classmates and it shouldn't be too hard to learn anything new about him. Now, I have one favor to ask you Lady Pan."

Bisho pulled out a map from under the bookshelf and unrolled it onto the table.

"Yes, certainly," Lady Pan replied.

"The Himaloths will be crossing through the Gansu Wall. They are exceptional warriors that carry ten times more than the average person. Living in high elevation they have developed incredible lung capacity and should be arriving in one day. They are on their way from the Gulf of Tonkin. They will be joining us for a secret attack from the Gansu Wall to fight our enemies and depose of your husband's entire cabinet." "

Bisho pointed his spear to the location of his conscript army.

"They are going to attack us? So you need me to tell my husband to let them in? *Let them invade us?*" Lady Pan asked him.

"Yes. Then, we'll let Olo fight them like a good hero he thinks he is. We will take over from here."

"Impressive," remarked Lady Pan. "Give me Fruit Chen when you are done and you have a deal."

"Let's shake hands on it," Bisho said. "Make sure you tell no one."

"Your secret plan is safe with me."

Lady Pan pulled out a crystal prism to show him something.

"Just get me Fruit Chen. I've been trying to scare her out of Urumqi but she's not leaving. I threw her in the lake yesterday."

Bisho looked in the prism. The video appeared on it from the day before. Lady Pan was pushing Fruit off her cloud into the lake below.

Not knowing how to swim, Fruit paddled with her arms but couldn't reach the shore. She kicked her legs to keep her head up. A cloud of water droplets formed and sea foam floated up from under Fruit's legs. It blew into a shape of a cloud pushing her up out of the water.

Lady Pan watched the crystal prism, chagrined as Fruit floated back up on another cloud.

"You see, Fruit is impossible to stop. Her clouds keep saving her. My crystal prism will show you where she is. I'll leave the prism here. You'll need it to keep track of her."

Since the time Lady Pan worked at a textile factory, she feared the lyrical Fruit Chen. Legend said that Fruit was born out of the Emperor's clamshell. Lady Pan was furious because she vowed to marry the Emperor. But the I-ching had told her that the young Fruit lived in a castle and would grow up to be a Goddess.

"The Goddess of Compassion." Lady Pan said mockingly.

Lady Pan was so fearful to be diminished that she vowed to put a stop to it.

"I will find a way inside the Emperor's castle. If I don't stop her she will marry *my* Emperor."

She weaved a Mongerilia blanket as a present for Fruit. It was plucked from hairs of Mongerilia rodents. Lady Pan cast a spell on the cloth through her crystal prism.

"When she sleeps, the Mongerilia blanket will turn her dreams into nightmares so frightening. She will leave the Emperor's household."

Lady Pan wrapped the Mongerilia blanket in crispy paper. It crinkled when Fruit opened the gift.

"A present from the Emperor," she thought.

"May nightmares always haunt your life," scoffed Lady Pan as she spied on Fruit falling asleep with the blanket through her crystal prism.

In the castle lived two songbirds, Eulilah and Brent. They saw what was happening and chirped to wake Fruit up.

"Brent, Eulilah, you woke me up." Fruit said rubbing her eyes.

"You have to get out of here," Brent told her. "Lady Pan sent you this blanket. Its powers have made you sick."

Now that Fruit Chen had seen the Gorini eye, she knew nothing was beneath Lady Pan.

"Let's get out of here." Fruit told then.

She opened the window and whistled. A cloud appeared and she stepped onto it.

"The shortest way from 43.8250° N, 87.6000° E to 39.5833° N, 19.8667° E is through the *middler*," she said as she tapped the coordinates on the Sexton.

She navigated her trips with the Sexton, her finger tapping one of the eight spokes that protruded from each side of the wood wheel. It was fashioned with wood bark and tied together with twigs by Brent and Eulilah. The songbirds made the instrument to get Fruit Chen out of her home.

Flicks of ice charted their flight pattern along the middler. The middler was a highway for birds traveling along the transcontinental skyway.

"Poor Fruit's wish is to fly," explained Eulilah when she designed the Sexton.

Brent carried the eight wood spokes on his beak one at a time, in multiple trips. Eulilah tied them together to make a wood steering wheel.

"Look! The center of the eight spokes is where I put the circular lotus," said Brent.

"Inside; the images have a bird's eye view of what's down below. Welcome to cloud 1.2, the vehicle of choice in our friendly skies."

"Round and round we go, where it stops nobody knows," Fruit turned the Sexton

clockwise and it spun fast turns moving the vehicle.

"You did it Brent and Eulilah!"

"Fruity, how does it feel to be on a maiden voyage?" Eulilah asked.

"How's that? All I know is that you *two* are my official travel partners. The red zone is for loading and unloading passengers. All *other* vehicles will be towed." Fruit announced to the songbirds.

"*Told you we'd get her moving...*" said Eulilah.

"She just needed a steering wheel!" Brent said, admiring the Sexton they had fashioned with bark and twigs.

"It's woven as tight as a nest," Eulilah told her.

"Clouds approaching at 0-800," warned Fruit.

"Fly higher and pass those clouds," said Eulilah.

Fruit held the Sexton in both her hands and pulled the Sexton back lifting her up and away past the rooftops. They flew over the lake where Lady Pan had pushed her. A koi fish named Mr. Flippee did a back flip to welcome her back.

"Fruit, the cloud 1.2 is *this* big, we are *this* small," Brent flapped his wings. "So watch the airspace. The skyway is *this* narrow."

Fruit nodded her head and asked him, "So how do you make a right turn on this?"

"Clockwise on the Sexton."

Fruit breathed a sigh of relief. Lady Pan was gone.

The middler skyway was unreachable through the spectrums of her crystal prism.

On her first long distance flight, Fruit had one little problem, "How do I land?"

"You don't," said Brent.

"Jump off the cloud and let it fly past and dissipate," explained Eulilah.

"Don't worry," said Brent, "The droplets come back together again."

"I have to jump off?" Fruit said.

"Yes -- oh you are about to hit the Pavilion...steer left, right away!"

Fruit steered the Sexton to the left and the cloud turned. Puffs of clouds bounced against them spraying water all over.

"Rain showers," Eulilah warned her, "that happens when the clouds hit each other and condense."

"Hold on," Brent said as Fruit gripped the Sexton tighter, "it's going to be a bouncy ride."

A gust of wind and hail hit them. Fruit leaned back and pulled on the Sexton so they would fly above the rain shower.

"Not bouncy enough," Fruit explained as she pulled a U-turn and got out from the other clouds.

Suddenly, the rain stopped and the clouds were below them along with bi-planes. They pilots in the planes blinked their lights as they flew through the cloud formations.

Fruit flew over them and kept going until she saw a safe landing area.

"It's a landing strip. Angle the cloud in a 180. Approaching, descending at 250 knots straight on. I'm pulling the Sexton far back and setting the speed at 200."

The cloud descended and when it got to solid ground, released a gaseous hydrogen pop.

"When do we go again?" Fruit said jumping off the cloud.

"Tomorrow night," replied Eulilah.

"I'll meet you with a rain coat," said Brent.

"Don't need one," replied Fruit. "That spell that Lady Pan had cast on me was released when I traveled on the cloud."

Brent and Eulilah cheered, "Then the I-ching has come to fruition -- Fruit you do have friends."

Chapter 8 Twin Lions at the Central Library

"Welcome to my, *not so home sweet home*," Gains said stuttering.

He could barely speak. The potion and Gorini eye stagnitized his head. His ears were ringing since that night at Bisho's house. Olo had brought him home to his tent-like yurt in the prairie of Urumqi.

He tossed Gains half asleep on a hanging hammock. Gains rolled off and tumbled on to the floor.

Olo picked him up again. This time he got tired of carrying him. He laid himself on the hammock across from Gains. He was falling asleep and as soon as his back curved against the hammock string.

A loud bang.

Gains rolled off the hammock and tumbled once again to the floor. Olo got up and pulled him back onto the hammock.

Olo looked at his furniture to see what he could use to construct a steadier bed for him. He piled some blankets on the side of the hammock so that when he fell it would cushion his landing.

Olo walked into the kitchen. It had an array of pipes. A hand pipe. A cooking pipe that held a pot of water and a larger pipe that was used as a space heater. A pair of hooks on the wall stacked them from small to large.

The pipes were handy because they had an opening to light a fire. The long neck of the pipe helped the smoke reach the outside of the yurt.

For light Olo noticed that Gains had filled lamps with oil. He hung them on eight corners of the circular yurt. He kept one oiled and lighted. The rest was reserved for when he had company was over, which was very rare. Olo was the only guest he ever had.

Suddenly, a bomb exploded from miles away.

Gains awakened from the noise.

"Great. The Himaloths are launching rockets again," he told Olo.

They were down in the prairie doing target practice. They had plenty of ammo.

"Whoever is on the other side either doesn't want us here or doesn't know where to aim their rockets." Olo told him.

"That's why they put up the Gates of Han to protect us. Which you so *easily* took down," explained Gains.

"I'm sorry about that," Olo apologized. "I grew up with coyotes...that explains my manors."

"How's that?" asked Gains looking at his two legs. "I'd take you for a *human*. By the looks of you."

"Looks can be deceiving. My only memory is taking my first steps with a group of coyotes," Olo recounted.

Olo rushed outside the yurt onto the grassland howling. He faced the mountains to the south and howled.

He thought of the Himaloths and their rocket launchers. He howled a coyote cry. He faced North and howled again, and then West and howled and finally east and howled.

He took his front arms down and pawed the ground digging through the dirt and leaves. Dirt was flying as he dug inside the ground laying the earth until it opened into a hole.

He howled once again, continuing to dig the ditch on all fours until he made a hole where ground water leaked at the bottom in oily bubbles.

It was oil.

He smelled it. In it, he saw his reflection as a baby with coyotes surrounding him as he looked up from the well. The soothing feeling of being in a well and seeing coyotes, calmed him.

He looked at the oil in the muddy ditch. He dug into it and saw the face of Gains and Bisho and Knight surrounding him for each side. They were pouring him a drink from that cauldron.

Olo slowed down and breathed. He was having visions again.

He saw something else in the oil. The sword that Knight always carried. He had it at the Gates of Han. He was sitting on the roof of the Fort with it.

Olo knew it wasn't quite the peaceful weapon that they wanted him to believe. Olo saw a fire blazing from inside the base of the sword where Knight was holding it. It was a sinister flame that glowed inside the steel like lava.

Gains tapped him on the shoulder. He had something pressing on his mind.

"I have to show you something..." Gains told him. "-- At the Central Library, after breakfast let's go."

Breakfast was a morning brew of muddy coffee that was served in metal bowls

and spooned like porridge. The dirt at the bottom rose up to the top. The tannins and the acid of the coffee entered his bloodstream.

Gains shook off the patch of his foggy mind before heading out with Olo.

When they got into the Central Library, a hall of books lined the shelves from the back wall to the front. The floor to ceiling windows had a view of the Gates of Han. Olo stopped at the window to look.

"I think it looks better without the Gates, what do you think?" he said to Gains but he couldn't find him.

Gains was at the bookshelf marked "O" of the history section. He pulled out a book called *Centaurian History*. By the time Olo had found him, he was leaning over a table reading the book.

"Required reading for our generation," Gains said showing him the cover.

"Aha, a history buff."

Olo took the book from him and read the cover, "Centaurian History by Bisho O'Woar."

"Bisho wrote the history of centaurs," Gain's informed him.

Olo noticed something out of the ordinary at the library.

"Bisho is everywhere."

The row of books in "O" were all written by the same name. That name was Bisho O'Woar.

"He's also an *author*," Gains added.

"Look. Bisho's name is in gold-pressed letters on the spine of these books."

Acting as bookends were statues of *twin lions* standing at each side of the bookshelf holding the row of "O" books together.

The lions were identical green granite statues sitting on wood stands. They had carved tousled hair, curled to the ends in wavy undulating lines. They posed facing out like guardians at the gate.

Gains read an excerpt from *Centaurian History*.

"Humans were originally created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Fearing their power they got split into two separate beings. Condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves..."

He stopped reading.

Someone caught his eye. Tessia was walking toward Gains. Olo knocked over the books as he turned and hid in between the bookshelves.

"Where are you going now?" Gains asked.

"I think she's mad at me," Olo told him.

"Who?" asked Gains.

"*Tessia*" responded Olo, "She's...here, what do you say to her..."

Gains waved Tessia over and she approached him. He continued reading.

"It wasn't long ago that Plato himself recalled when we roamed the road and stopped onto this side of the Desert," Gains recited from the book.

Tessia saw Olo hiding between the book shelves and stopped.

"What's the matter Tessia, you looked like you've seen a ghost," Gains was concerned.

"Olo hasn't been forthright in what he is doing here," Tessia said. "What are you two still doing together?"

Olo stepped out of the bookshelf. "Frankly, I haven't been doing much else but hanging out with Gains."

"Fern brought something to my attention after you..." replied Tessia. "After you left without saying goodbye, Fern took it upon herself to clear the air. That centaurs will not be admitted to Guizi Hall and if I wouldn't mind...not attending."

Gains slammed the book shut.

"That centaurs are not admitted to Guizi Hall? I've heard enough. Step aside Tessia."

He took a swing at Olo, knocking him into the bookshelf. Gains toppled the twin lions along with the entire "O" section when Olo fell back into the bookshelf.

"What are you doing with Fern? I thought *we* were friends. I just read *Centaurian History* to you! I would have thought you were on the centaur side when I brought you into our group."

"You have to believe me, I have never spoken to Fern." Olo told them.

He picked himself up from the pile of Bisho's books.

"This event at Guizi Hall has been planned without my knowing anything. My motto is *show up to everything*."

"You just show up? Who do you think you are," Tessia demanded, "I trusted you."

"Quiet Tessia, you barely know him. It's your fault for talking to him. This is a library...can we finish him outside?" Gains said.

He slammed Olo onto the table.

"If you recall, I was the one *carrying you*," Olo grimaced, "And now you just shattered my back against the bookshelf."

"I should've spotted an owl feeding off fur the minute we met." Gains pulled him up and shoved him into the center of the library where a group of centaurs surrounded him.

"So we're not going to be friends, are we?" Olo replied calmly.

"If I hadn't killed you with an arrow! But I guess after I saw you breaking the Gates of Gates...I changed my mind and am using my bare hands," snarled Gains.

"Bare hands? More like hoofs if you ask me. Try sitting down and talking to me about this before you attack," Olo told him.

He kicked Gains to the floor and straddled him. He pulled the leather straps off the curtains and tied Gains legs and hands together with them.

"Ok, ok...lets sit and talk about it, I changed my mind, *lets be friends*," Gains said as he loosened the straps. "Tell me, what happened with Tessia..."

Gains pulled the straps off his legs and hurled his body at Olo knocking him to the ground. He punched his face before choking him.

"*You change your mind too frequently to be friends*," Olo scolded him.

Olo wrapped the long leather strap back on Gains and tied it to the doorknob. He slammed the door shut as the other centaurs chased him out of the Central Library.

Chapter 9 No.1 Senior High School of Ürümqi

The morning bell was ringing and Olo was late.

It was the first day of school. He cruised in five minutes after the 9AM bell. The classes were empty and the entire school was outside for roll call.

"Welcome to the fall quarter students and teachers of No. 1 Senior High of Urumqi " said Principal Qiz Qiz from the podium.

Olo stood in back of the morning gathering far away from Gains Fallow. Tessia, Knight, and Bisho stood with the centaurs who were the majority of the school.

Principal Qiz Qiz gawked at her pink hair; it was black the last school year, "Something has to be done with Tessia's mane."

Knight was saving a place for her in the flag ceremony, "Come sit with us like you always do."

"I'm not so sure it's going to be the same this year," she replied.

"You changed your hair color, we know," Knight yawned.

Principal Qiz Qiz saluted the flag, "Please stand for the flag-raising ceremony."

It was school policy to introduce the newest students in the start of the new school year.

"Olo Yang, Tash Rabat, that is all that is known, make yourself visible so we can all meet you."

The students greeted him, stating their names –

"Bisho O'Woar."

"Knight Lavo."

"Tessia Lei."

Olo nodded his head. Most all the students he recognized from the Central Library. Underneath he could feel the razors under their school uniforms. They filed in single file line back to their classrooms and the new school year began.

Their teacher picked up a chalk stick and hit the chalkboard casting chalk everywhere-- the chalk stick thumped against the clay board for the next few hours.

Olo was satisfied that he had burned all bridges with the centaurs -- he was not in the habit of being anything more than himself, a stranger who was too shy to

introduce himself as anything other than, "Student #801 at #1 High School of Urumqi."

Tessia's pink hair slathered in the sunlight next to the window -- he wrote a note and folded it slipping it under her arm just as the teacher was tapping the chalkboard with characters.

The note said: "I know not everyone gets a second chance...but won't you give me one?"

Tessia read Olo's writing in Uyghur before crumpling it in her hand. The teacher turned around and Olo went back to taking notes in the Turkic language that the teacher preferred to teach in.

"Great...that leaves me three languages to study in tonight," he sighed.

Math was one of those languages he couldn't comprehend - it was in a matrix vocabulary: Decimal points were reversed into divisions that had bars over and under numbers with crosses that looked like "X" markings for pirate's booty.

It came time to write in their textbooks: a *fangcheng* problem with 0 conditions in 9 unknowns of the form of a generalized...

"Well problem." Olo said.

He realized he was learning all of this to stay in town -- for *Tessia*.

"How does anyone learn all this? It's funny how much our teacher can fit onto a chalkboard," he said aloud to his classmate sitting next to him.

"No doubt about that. Let's be quiet or else they will call you out at roll call tomorrow to explain tonight's homework which is reading Bisho O'Woar's book." His classmate told him.

"It's not *Centaurian History* is it?"

"No. It's another one...*The History of Urumqi* by Bisho O'Woar. In *English*."

"Ahhhhh! Bisho writes everything!" Olo rubbed his temples.

His mind caved from all the pressure.

"Are there cliff notes on his stuff?" he asked as the bell finally rang.

The lunch break was long enough for Olo to finish eating and finally get the courage to sit next to Tessia in the school cafeteria.

"Um, *Tessia*. Can we talk."

Gains Fallow walked to their lunch table with a tray full food. He sat on the other side of Tessia, opening her orange juice and sticking a straw in it for her.

"I can do that for myself..." she told him.

Gains snarled at Olo who was sitting on the other side of her, "You haven't been able to do much for yourself by the looks of it."

Tessia picked up her lunch tray to move to another table.

Gains took the tray from her, "Aren't you one of us?"

She looked at him and pulled the tray out his hands.

"You've done enough, the damage is already done," she told him.

"My mind doesn't work like his; I can't disguise my intentions the way Olo does...what happened at the library is going to happen again. Mark my words." Gains warned her.

Bisho and Knight walked over and parked their trays across from them.

"Just wanted to see what you three lovebirds are doing..." Knight told them.

"I've lost my appetite," Tessia said.

She took her tray and threw it in the trash. The first day was early dismissal and Tessia got her backpack, relieved to be out of school. She walked out to the field to the caravan stop.

"You want the rest of my sandwich?" a voice told her.

She turned around and it was Olo. He was parked in the field under a tree eating his lunch, alone.

She jumped. "You left pretty fast."

"Gains invited me to go with him that night. It was a mistake to leave you Tessia. I'm sorry. When I saw you at the Central Library I was learning about your history. I am fascinated. I want you to know, I'm not going anywhere."

"Stop. Don't say it...I feel more a part of you than any of them."

She finally said it.

The first drops of rain started to fall.

"If you don't get out of the rain, we'll both drown," Olo told her as they walked home together that afternoon.

Tessia walked into his new dome shaped yurt he had built off the road from her place.

"I stayed up late last night building a yurt for *us*."

Rainfall was pouring but Olo had convinced her to see it.

"In whatever you do, you always put everything into it don't you," she observed, surprised that it was already furnished.

"I decided to live in a deserted place off the prairie far away from the nosy onlookers at the Central Library," he told her. "After the surveyor took off the sign, I bought bales of wool, cloth, canvas, twisted yarn and fibers, and chopped wood for the beams and posts."

The swing of the chandelier in his new yurt was bracing itself for a storm and it was hard to leave it without wondering if it would fall. She noticed a wire running from the chandelier.

Tessia ran her hands from the wire to the electricity outlet near the dining table, "you have electricity?"

"Just installed it with Barge after we laid the first nails onto the soil and secured the muslin."

She looked around. He had made the chandelier with twigs -- three layers of wood made it reminiscent of the Wuda Forest.

"I hate to rush you but there's a storm coming tonight," he warned her. "The brave thing is for me to walk you home and hold the fort."

"What's that? The storms not bad, I've been through worse," Tessia remarked.

"You've got nothing to lose, have you Tessia? It always works out for you. I have a good feeling like that, about you and not many other centaurs." Olo leaned in and smelled her hair.

"There's a saying in Urumqi, that if you want to find a home, find that someone special to stay there with," she told him.

Olo dropped a big bale of sheepskin to the ground to cover the wet floor. "Then I have all that I need," replied Olo.

"You *need* anything else?" she asked.

"Hot running water would be nice, but hey it's raining, we're soaked anyways." Olo laughed as he picked her up and swing her from side to side.

Chapter 10 For Olo's Auto-Rickshaw, Press *2

Olo was determined not to let the students of #1 Senior High School get the best of him. If they were #1, he was *2. He couldn't afford to take Tessia out, but at least he was wired for electricity in his yurt.

"I can even hook up your Wi-Fi," said Barge Khalifa.

Olo didn't have a book or a home to his name before he came to Urumqi - but now he had both.

"One step at a time," he told Barge. "I have to work and get a job."

"There's nothing like a hard day's labor," Barge told him after twisting the last of the copper wires for electricity, "this will cost you 20RMB, power lines included, Wi-Fi sold separately."

"It's not a bundle?" Olo scratched his head. "Can I pay you next time; let's see... maybe in the next day, two...week?" asked Olo.

Barge shook hands on it, "Deal. I'll leave the transmitter in my rickshaw for later."

Olo had to find a source of income and fast. He wanted Wi-Fi and Barge was leaving with the transmitter. He saw the sign on his rickshaw - DON'T PEDDLE TOO CLOSE -- and had an idea...

"I know what to do for work," he put on a t-shirt and ran out off the yurt.

Down a dirt path to the sandy hills of the Taklamakan Desert he remembered something -- an abandoned ship.

It was visible when he descended the northwest sector of the desert. Olo had seen it before he first arrived into Urumqi. A remnant of Central Asia's dried up sea. Peneus, the river God was harsh. Receding what had been an ocean to the point of a desert.

"Is anyone here?" shouted Olo.

No response.

The abandoned fishing ship lying sideways on the sand was as good as his. A dust storm kicked up as he climbed inside. He tested the ship's steering. It could still turn a rudder. He positioned the ship toward Urumqi and it started to lift with a cloud under it. Instead of sailing, it flew in the wind.

"Welcome to the maiden voyage of my *auto-rickshaw*!" Olo shouted in delight.

"Look Mom, I got a job," he called out to the desert as the wind pushed the ship

over the sand; it lifted into the air, past a dozen camels turning their heads to see him flying over them.

When Olo landed at the taxi stand in downtown Urumqi, he waited behind two rickshaw drivers before a lady got into his vehicle.

"A ride to Nanjing please," she asked him.

"Press *2," Olo said in his most professional voice. He pulled a cap over his eyes and hunched his shoulders. He looked like he had been driving longer than his sixteen years.

The lady pressed *2 on a monitor between their seats and a map popped up. Nanjing was 3,622 kilometers away.

"Fasten your seatbelt," Olo shouted to the Lady in the backseat.

The whizzing of the ship's rudder pulled the vehicle off the ground. He looked at his rear view mirror, his passenger was not a typical Urumqi lady, but he was neither a normal driver. He had never driven anything in his life.

"I just need this job to pay my debt to Barge."

He crossed his fingers that she wouldn't notice they were traveling by ship. To his surprise she was relieved that they were traveling in his *auto-rickshaw*.

"This is not a typical vehicle. I have never been in something so spacious. Are you a new company?" she asked him.

"Yes we *just* started and you are the first passenger," he replied in a low manly voice. "There's a jug of water in the back if you are thirsty."

She nodded at the leather jug in the cup holder. "I brought dates and cherries so I'll be *fine*," she told him -- the wrinkles on her face appeared when she emphasized "*fine*."

This will pay off my debts he thought to himself -- I'm traveling to Nanjing. He looked at the shadows under her eyes from the rear view mirror as she slept over the long journey. When she woke up from her nap, she pulled out the dates and cherries and finally started eating.

"We've just passed over Beijing," he told her pointing to the Great Wall.

"I'm relieved that I didn't take a caravan," she told him.

"Yes ma'am," he replied cool and unaffected.

The lady placed her hands on the back of his seat and looked at her driver. "My, you are awfully young to be a rickshaw auto-pilot."

Olo's face was covered with the cap and his features fascinated her. "You must have gone to pilot school to do this..."

"Yes ma'am."

She was concerned about his age. "Where are you from?" she asked.

His discomfort was obvious. He took the cap off his face to wipe the sweat of his forehead and she looked at her rickshaw driver closely before he put it back on. She thought he looked familiar but didn't say anything.

Something in his voice stirred her memories.

His eyes were grey. His demeanor was unassuming.

"What's your origin? You don't look like anyone here," she asked him.

"Um. Who wants to know?" Olo was uncomfortable revealing too much about himself to nosy passengers. But it was his first day on the job and he did see rickshaw drivers chatting with customers from time to time.

"Tash Rabat. I'm from Tash Rabat."

"That's an altogether unfamiliar place," she replied.

She lied.

She knew Tash Rabat and had been there sixteen years ago as a starving performer in her troupe. She had posed as a nursemaid for money having no idea what a nursemaid did.

"The Netherland region is what they call it, because it's Netherland."

She nodded her head pretending to not understand anything he told her for the rest of the ride to Nanjing.

When they arrived, she choked as she inserted the payment into the money machine in the auto-rickshaw. The ride from Urumqi to Nanjing cost 305,928,503 RMB

"Thank you," he said as she paid with her travel identity tag. He looked at the picture on her tag before handing it back to her - "Lady Constance Pan, I hope to give you a ride back to Urumqi whenever that may be."

The veins popped out of her neck and a shudder through her body - "Goosebumps, I have goose bumps. I am returning home to Nanjing. The elevation in Urumqi doesn't seem to suit me."

He took off his cap and nodded -- her hollowed face was hiding something. When

she got out of the auto-rickshaw, she walked briskly away -- years of guilt wearing down her brow.

"The boy looks too familiar for me not to know him," she said to herself as he parked his auto-rickshaw behind her.

Olo got out to explore the city. She was nervous that he wasn't leaving.

"A wayfarer never stays in one place," she told herself.

Just sixteen years ago, she had been just as curious as this rickshaw driver.

As she got farther away she jumped, "He's been driving me in...a ship!" She gasped.

She remembered now. Sixteen years earlier - something about this driver looked too familiar. Memories flooded back to her. *If this boy was that baby.*

She was the nursemaid that threw him in the well.

What was she to do?

A father who looked like him lived in Tash Rabat and had asked for a nurse to help them deliver a baby. She was sitting on a hill stand on a snowy day when she was offered that unusual job. She was a gypsy wanderer and took on various roles when she was in her troupe. And that day she took on the role of being a nursemaid. December 14 - the even remembered the date of her rickshaw driver's birth -- she threw him into a well. She never forgot his father's face when he gave her a bag of coins.

"This is all we have," he had begged her, "please take him to the hospital and save his life."

Her legs started to shake. She grabbed a chair as she stepped into a restaurant. She could barely hold herself up. She felt her knees buckle and she fainted.

When she woke up her husband was calling her, "Constance, what are you doing here...we weren't expecting you until next week...Constance?"

Naryn pulled her up. "The party has started. You've decided to surprise me early? I have a surprise for you. You've arrived just in time for the fireworks...Constance, your mouth is quivering. You look like you've seen a ghost. You've arrived early just in time for the fireworks show and the guests are here."

The guests took off their umbrellas in unison just as the first boom popped in the sky. A red explosion and thunder of the firecrackers lasted just long enough for Constance to see Tessia outside on the balcony -- with the rickshaw driver.

"Naryn -- the rickshaw driver next to Tessia. He drove me here...in a ship. You'll never believe it but...I think I know him." Lady Pan held her breath as she spoke.

"Was *Olo* your rickshaw driver? You hadn't met Olo yet have you?" asked her husband Secretariat Kuqa.

Lady Pan realized that her husband knew her rickshaw driver as Olo.

"He must not come close to me - we will be in trouble when he finds out who I am."

"There is no reason to be upset. He is a hero. He is the boy that broke the Gate of Han. He is here to celebrate with us at our re-election party." Secretariat said as he raised a glass to Olo.

"You didn't tell me *everything*. That he was from Tash Rabat, Naryn. I know his family. In Tash Rabat," Lady Pan spoke nervously.

"What does it matter where he is from? Our hero is coming to Guizi Hall - but don't tell him. Let us surprise them with the good news."

"What's the good news?" she asked.

"That we are honoring him at Guizi Hall. I had misgivings before about celebrating with centaurs. We've told Fern but not Tessia, but Tessia and Olo don't seem to be apart very often."

"I will write a letter to his family in Tash Rabat and send a caravan for them right away but I ask that you never tell anybody why. I won't be able to attend. It will be sealed and signed by the Secretariat himself but you must never tell Olo how you know where his parent live."

"What did you do Constance to have these secrets? What else are you hiding?"

From the window, Naryn watched Tessia and Olo. "I realize separating them has been a mistake. They get along. The centaurs never get along with us..."

"Naryn, the more you try to tame the beast the more it will become your undoing. Isn't that what you told me?" he turned around her lips were quivering.

She slumped back in her chair and passed out.

"What have you done Constance?"

He looked at his wife's face. She had fainted.

"How...did Olo get you to Nanjing on a rickshaw in one day and you not even know who he was? Where has my wife been?"

CHAPTER 11 A Fern Display

“Students of #1 High School of Urumqi. In honor of our first Diversity Day, things are changing. As you know, we continue to add students from all over the world as we celebrate the beauty of our culture. Today, I would like to invite Fruit Chen to speak to you about our first Diversity Dinner at Guizi Hall. Everyone is welcome to attend.”

Principal Qiz Qiz spoke on stage in the school auditorium. Next to him was Fruit Chen. He had invited her to speak at the school assembly for Diversity Day.

The Principal passed the microphone to Fruit and she spoke:

“At tonight’s function each student is asked to bring a friend as their guests from a different nationality or ethnicity than their own. Centaurs are invited to bring a human. And humans are invited to reach out to a centaur and bring them to our dinner.”

The idea behind Diversity Dinner is to create a place of inclusion and diversity.

A free meal will be provided as a way to welcome our guest of honor, Olo Yang. We will be reuniting him tonight with his long lost family who just arrived here from Tash Rabat. Students, let us welcome them to Urumqi.”

Olo’s family was brought onto the stage by Principal Qiz Qiz. The students cheered. Olo was surprised at Fruit Chen’s speech. Her compassion reassured him. He stepped onstage and greeted his family for the first time.

“Father, Mother, it is good to *finally* meet you.” Olo said tearing up.

“Thank you students of Urumqi for sharing in this special day. See you all tonight at Guizi Hall.”

Tessia was in the auditorium watching him. When the assembly was over she returned with Olo to their classroom.

Bisho was already in the class standing in front of the chalkboard. He was giving a speech to his classmates.

“Humans grow up to marry *humans*.” Bisho told them.

Olo sat down as Tessia stomped her hoof.

“Enough already. We just had an assembly. Why are we studying Centurian History again?”

“I’m not complaining about Diversity Day,” scolded Bisho. “But my book

Centaurian History is required reading for all students.”

Bisho turned on the slide machine and faced it to the chalkboard. He showed them a slide show of centaurs.

“Welcome to *Centaurian History 101*. What you are about to learn is what was written in the oral history and on the entablature of our walls. Carvings on stone dictating passages of family history carved into the headboards of their beds, murals, plate settings, buildings, and even books, many of them written by *me*.”

Bisho had taken over the classroom. For the next hour he spoke entirely of centaur history. He thought he did a nice job filling in for his sick history teacher.

Now that Tessia was back at #1 Senior High School of Urumqi with *pink* hair, he didn't feel that she deserved an “A” in history. So he gave her a “C”

“C for centaur,” he explained.

“Why a C? I took notes and passed with A's on my test,” she wondered.

“Honestly, Tessia. You've been chitchatting during the entire class.”

Bisho listed the mistakes she had made:

One: that her hair actually blinded a classmate when they were reading his books

Two: that she was consumed with Olo Yang and coaching him during class

Three: that she had fallen for a human and was behaving like a *teenager*

He recommended that she change her hair color back to the natural brown.

“I hope we don't see her at any festivities, we don't want to see that *hair*,” he told Knight after the bell rang.

“Right, how can anyone concentrate on the IOE exam? Olo doesn't read and Tessia coaches him to distraction!” Knight snapped.

“The pink in her hair is a transmutation,” Gains explained to Bisho. “Urumqi has radioactive waste from the Solo Company.”

Bisho was silent.

“Do not bring up my father's company,” he warned Gains, “The Solo Company is off limits to you, never discuss it with anyone again.”

Little of the O'Woar's history was made known to anyone.

For example, they were made exempt from having to explain their sudden

migration to the Autonomous Region and from having to make family trees when Bisho attended Urumqi Middle School.

O'Woar history was even missing from Bisho's *Centaurian History* books. No one knew just how many brothers and sisters he had and most people were afraid to ask how many survived.

Because nothing was recorded or spoken, the locals turned a blind eye to radioactive waste in Urumqi. The acidic burn of their drinking water was mostly ignored.

The only time a dispute had happened in the recorded history of Urumqi was on the day of Olo Yang's arrival at Guizi Hall.

When Olo returned from Nanjing, he surprised the townsfolk by announcing that he had an auto-rickshaw company.

"The maiden voyage went well. I flew my auto-rickshaw to Nanjing in *one* day," he explained, "after parking my auto-rickshaw, I saw Tessia crossing the street. She was on the way to Secretariat's re-election fundraiser and the rest was fireworks between us."

Olo became known as the personal driver to their Secretariat's wife Lady Pan.

It made Bisho, Knight, and Gains gossip about him.

"Did I mention Olo was there, dropping off Lady Pan...that he drives a *rickshaw*?"

"Lady Pan? The Secretariat's wife? Olo brought her there...on that *junky* rickshaw?"

"Centaur's gossip just as much, if not even more than humans do," Tessia complained to Olo.

At school, she was openly seeing him and most of the centaurs kept away from them.

"What ever happened to Lady Pan? Is she dead?" a classmate asked Olo.

"She's staying in Nanjing *for now*."

Olo didn't know how frightened Lady Pan was of meeting him. He had so much luck in Urumqi that she was convinced that all her sorcery had backfired on her.

Upon seeing the ghost of a child she once held and threw in a well -- she was shocked into a catatonic state and silenced. The double-edge sword threatened her husband's re-election.

She stopped using her curses on Fruit Chen. Her husband, Secretariat Kuqa fell

sick and feeble at the news of his wife's bitter feuds.

"She's a warlock." He realized.

The Secretariat arrived back to Urumqi in a wheelchair. He wobbled in his cane and couldn't walk any further since Nanjing. He fell when he realized the predicament in which his wife had put him.

He had pressing matters to attend to when he returned to Urumqi. He met with Bisho's father Sherlock, who was the President of the Solo Company.

Sherlock paced back and forth when he got to the Secretariat's office. He was more upset than he let on.

"Well, well, well – how does Olo have such a twisted fate with your wife? My son cannot even control him. Did you know he doesn't even read *Centaurian History* without Tessia."

"Thwarted love is stronger love," the Secretariat whimpered.

He sipped his herbal tea made of matrimony vine and holy basil.

"Back to what we were discussing, Naryn. The walls are no longer fortified and we are defenseless. A town without defenses is still too high of a risk. There is always the chance of mercenaries and the Himaloths," stated Sherlock.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying about the Himaloths? My back is *killing* me since we got back from Nanjing," the Secretariat said.

He rolled his wheelchair and took a mulkhiya twig off a plant. He placed it into his herbal tea.

He rolled back to his desk and picked up a piece of paper. His hands were shaking as he gave it to Sherlock.

Sherlock read the note and put it back on his desk.

"If you allow this relationship between a centaur and Olo to take place you will have lost the support of the centaurs. The re-election will be disaster. What are you doing about this *hairy* situation?"

The Secretariat hesitated to respond. He rolled his wheelchair to the window and watching the gathering at Guizi Hall.

"His family has arrived from Tash Rabat. We sent for them ourselves. I cannot tell Olo Yang who he can and cannot be with. The Diversity Dinner will appease him. He will do better in school. Be a *better* citizen."

"That is exactly what I am afraid of," Sherlock replied.

"Nobody could have resolved our differences," reasoned the Secretariat.

"That is the nature of being a wayfaring city and opening up the trade routes. Different people come in and once in a while sulfur dioxide hangs around for a little too long."

Secretariat Kuqa opened his shutters, signaling an end to their meeting.

Outside his office, music was coming out of the Guizi Hall. Secretariat Kuqa and Sherlock made their way into the Hall and said nothing more. Olo's family reunion had become a town event. The display at Guizi Hall was filled with matrimony vine, peonies, and hibiscus welcoming them.

Sitting in rows on the left were centaurs and across from them on the right were human folk. The centaurs kept their tails to themselves tucked discreetly in back and next to their legs.

They were a quiet sort when it came to official displays. Their physical feats like running and jumping was kept in the prairies.

Tessia's hair was brushed up in a headdress and she sparkled. Powder dandelion was misted over her face.

When Fern set eyes on Tessia she was startled. Fern stammered at her beauty.

"You can't see Olo. It hasn't been made legal."

"-- And its never been made *illegal*," Tessia remarked.

Fern cried with disgust.

"Centaurs and humans can't mix, Tessia."

Gains stepped into the Hall and saw Fern for the first time since his childhood. He went to console her. When he touched her – Fruit stopped him. She pushed a gust of wind that separated them and cast a spell on her.

"“Fern has interfered in Olo and Tessia's fate once again. I will teach her a lesson by turning Fern into a *fern*,” Fruit whispered.

Her skin turned green and it grew into a vine, then a leaf, and then a frond.

She screamed when she turned brown as tree bark. Roots popping out from her toes and into the floor until she was secured tightly into the soil.

Fern had been turned into a tree. This was Fruit Chen's curse on her.

Fern's voice echoed from within the hollows of wood, never to be seen as a human but as a giant tree in the middle of Guizi Hall.

Chapter 12 Cloud to Forbidden City

Tessia wore black for the next few days at school. She would only take bites of her snack at lunchtime. The blue gogi berries were sour in her mouth.

She winced at their lack of taste. Her appetite was small. And, she lost the desire for a hot lunch.

“Here, have a bite of my burger Tessia.” Olo said concerned.

“No thanks, Olo. I’m a vegetarian.”

“Since when?” he asked quizzically. “You ate meat before.”

“Guizi Hall was a disaster. Fern is...*gone*. This is how I cope with it,” she told him.

“But you’ve lost so much weight Tessia.”

“Have I?” she said.

The two of them sat in the cafeteria. The other students looked them with guilty expressions. Nothing much else was said about Fern. The local superstition was that she had been cursed competing with Tessia for Olo Yang.

“I feel so bad about what happened to her. I’m mourning the fact that she’s turned into a tree!”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Olo reassured her.

Even Barge couldn’t explain the human foliage growing through the roof of Guizi Hall. Back at the Secretariat Kuqa’s office he met with the Secretariat, Sherlock, and Xages – the Deputy of Enforcement. They were crowded in this office scratching their heads about the new fern tree.

"Just plain out of the ordinary things that only time will reveal," explained Barge Khalifa.

"Who can explain will and phenomena?" asked Xages.

“I say we lock Guizi Hall for good.” Sherlock told them.

He pointed to the Gorini eye around Xage’s neck. There were so many copycats of his son Bisho’s Gorini eye.

“Take that off. My son is the *only* one who shall wear one. Everyone wants power. What you’re wearing Xages, is a knock-off. It isn’t the Gorini eye!” Sherlock told him.

"And so it is. *History is written by the victors*. Is that why your son claims so much power. Writing *Centaurian History*?" the Secretariat asked him.

Sherlock nodded his head. He was using his office to command the centaurs to change some laws. He ordered Xages to write down a new decree.

Xages took a stylus to press wedge-shaped words onto a wet clay tablet.

"The decree of unlawful union was announced on this day. Olo has crossed a bridge to which he shall never return. The centaurs must push back when we are threatened as a species. We have not asked Olo for his thumbs, his hands, or even a lock of hair and he has depraved the sanctity of centaurs -- when we once were in green pastures, to which once we shall return."

Xages poured ink into the clay tablet and pressed a paper over it. The familiar document writing with new propositions was made. After the paper was dry he handed it over to the Secretariat:

THE DECREE OF UNLAWFUL UNION

The marriage of centaurs and humans is punishable by 4 years in prison

"Sign it. Make it law."

Sherlock ordered Secretariat Kuqa to sign the document.

When Sherlock wanted something. He usually got it with the Secretariat's help. Just the week before a merchant was removed for growing barley plants too close to his wheat fields - he built a sewer system right under them - with the Secretariat approving and signing it.

"I'm not concerned with amassing a large amount of wealth. You can keep your money this time. This is between you centaurs and Olo. The money we had, my wife has given to Olo," Secretariat Kuqa told him.

He had had enough of Sherlock ordering him to do political favors.

"I filled your coffers, and this is how you repay me by making my enemy rich?" asked Sherlock.

"It was my wife. Constance pushed *2 for a rickshaw ride and deposited everything we have into his account."

"Is this a joke? This is not about re-election anymore! Olo's parents...his brothers and sisters have moved into our town because of you. They're taking over. Do you want me to tell them who Lady Constance *really* is?" warned Sherlock.

Secretariat fell back in this chair, his heart palpitating in fear. He could no longer

move without a wheelchair.

"I'd be at odds with the entire city if they ever found out that my wife threw him into a well.

"Well...well...*well*," Sherlock warned him.

The Secretariat picked up the document.

"Forgive me, my manners."

He pressed his stamp with his logo Φ into the inkpad and pounded his signature into the document.

"Circulate this decree with the authorization of the Secretary General," Sherlock instructed Xages. "And make sure Olo gets it. The separation of centaurs and himself is now the law."

Xages left the Secretariat's office with the document. He delivered it to Olo's home in the forest of green spruce trees.

Olo was out with his family getting the pieces to build another yurt when Xages saw them walking down the hill.

There was no answer when Xages knocked at his door. He tied the decree to Olo's doorknob and left.

That afternoon Olo gathered wood and nails, wool, jute, linen and carried it down the hinterland-- steam rising off the salt lake to the west of the Tianshan Mountains. His brothers huddled in front of a fire - roasting the cuisine of 'six stans' and warming their fingers at the same time. The Bogda Peak was ice capped and a long winter was ahead.

His sisters Mehrigül, Arzigül, Etirgül, prepared for the impending cold spell by weaving strands of hand-spun jute to make woven carpet for the floor.

His mother Cui Qi assembled a blanket from thick layers of yarns and crisscrossing braids to keep the blanket nice and thick.

His brothers Able and Cyer constructed more furniture from wood - a desk of poplar wood and a bed made of redwood. For the bathroom they built a working water system and hammered copper sinks and pine nut fixtures.

His father Baobi played a string instrument with a peacock feather while they worked.

"Music is the center of our home just as it was when you were born, Olo." Baobi told him.

He played for his son a song he had written for him on his *erhu*. It was a string instrument that looked like a guitar. When he strummed a chord, the sound lifted like a song in flight.

"Father, this music sounds like birds humming," Olo said.

His father smiled. Olo had finally been reunited with them.

"After all these years. I'm grateful to have my son back."

"I never thought I would say the word *father*. I never believed I ever had one," Olo told him.

His brothers assembled a second yurt. Attending to each knot and loose string. They hammered the wood together to make a sturdy base to make a solid foundation.

Building yurts is a lot quicker with brothers, Olo realized.

"If I had known I had brothers I wouldn't have attempted the first yurt without them."

His brothers were big and sturdy, tall and handy at cutting trees.

"Hmm." Able looked at him. Olo was smaller than him but they looked alike.

"We have a similar expressions...when you are picking something up that's heavy, you frown in the same place," he explained to Olo.

Olo looked in the mirror.

"Especially around the nose and mouth area, I look like Cyer."

Cyer was even taller than the both of them. He toppled the tree with his hand ax and chopped it into forty-six pieces for the outer wall. He carved the entrance door with intricate designs from their mother Cuiqi's drawings of peacocks. He installed the designs into the mainframe with clamps.

"You guys don't take a break, do you?" Olo asked.

"Never," Cyer told him. "You can't with winter coming."

Olo looked at the door he had made by himself.

It wasn't nearly as intricate and ornate as the one Cyer had carved. Barge had helped him install it with double-strap hinges and they forgot to measure it with a carpenter's level. The door was crooked and he hoped his brothers hadn't noticed.

"You have mail," Tessia told him.

She was working on a knitting pattern inside his yurt. It was her first time knitting. Interior design didn't come easy to her. She was a prairie girl and needed adjusting to life indoors.

"Mail? No one's delivers mail up here." Olo said surprised.

He looked around and saw a paper on his door handle. He pulled the paper off. It was the document left by Xages.

"*The decree of unlawful union.* It has the signature stamp from the Secretariat Kuqa." He told her.

Olo put the letter on his desk and walked away. He was hungry and it was time for dinner.

His mother Cui Qi was mixing a nang bread in a makeshift food stand on the other side of the yurt -- kneading and baking it in an oven fashioned from a pile of bedrock.

"Kneading and knitting," Tessia said. "What else do you do in the prairie when you are indoors."

Tessia pulled the needle and it stabbed her thumb. Blood leaked on her hands. She looked to find something to wipe the blood.

Olo had left the letter on the desk so she patted her finger on it. Blood covered some of the words, but she could still read it.

"It's about us...the decree of unlawful union. Olo!"

She took the paper with her outside and showed him.

"Do you know even want to know what it says...about us. We can't be together. It's forbidden. They've issued a decree," Tessia said frightened.

"Tessia, you knew when you met me, I was strange." Olo put the paper down and disregarded it.

"You're not surprised?" Tessia asked him.

"It means nothing. It's just a document that I can't even read. There's plenty of land for all of us, nobody's going to stop me from doing anything. And nobody should be stopping you. You will be fine."

"How can you be so sure that everything will be alright?"

"Everything always works out for you." Olo reminded her.

His family was watching them, curious about what was on the paper. He threw the paper into the fire.

"Don't worry," he reassured them.

That night Olo tossed in his bed. He couldn't sleep - the letter. The stupid Decree of Unlawful Union. He was bothered that Tessia had read it.

Fruit Chen was outside on a cloud. She looked at the two yurts next to each other.

"Which one is Olo in...Pssst. Olo. Olo?"

Olo turned in his bed. Someone was calling his name. Fruit Chen was sitting on a cloud in between the two yurts trying to find him.

He walked out and got pulled up into a cloud.

The cloud floated next to a second cloud where a centaur was sleeping. It was Tessia.

"Soft as a pillow" he said as he brushed her hair.

Like a puff of cool dew they breezed up into the sky where they linked up to a separate cloud - the clouds blended and started flying...Together as if a chain of islands being tossed by waves.

There were other people on the cloud.

"She has the location for us...the Forbidden City," said a passenger named Baggily.

Tessia awoke and grabbed Olo.

"God...This is really high."

"You two over there..."

Tessia and Olo laughed.

"You can't mean us?"

"My name's Baggily," the man told him lifting two wood buckets off his shoulder and setting them down next to them.

"You can call me Badge. Bag. Or B. Just don't call me late."

He took his hand out and Olo shook it.

"Mighty pleased to meet you tiger balm," Baggily told him.

"Tiger balm? Excuse me?" Olo asked him.

"You're Olo. That's what they call you down in Urumqi, right? You're the tiger balm. Whatever you are doing keep doing it 'cause you're really good at fighting."

"What...?" Olo was curious about Baggily.

"And building yurts. Two yurts. A village your building, isn't it? You're building a compound over by Bodga Peak and it's real nice. We were excited to pick you up. Nifty and crafty part of town you live in. And I've heard about electricity and Wi-Fi...and the townspeople don't even know about that stuff. Don't tell them. They aren't ready for make their life easier. The easier way to travel is to float on this cloud." Baggily told him excited.

"Where are we going?" Olo asked.

Up at the front of the cloud, Fruit Chen waved her hands at them.

"Welcome aboard! This is Fruit Chen your captain speaking onboard the flight to the Forbidden City."

"The Forbidden City? That's so far away."

"We'll be there soon enough. Fruit's the cloud driver, you know?" Baggily told them.

Fruit nodded. "Show them your cuties," she told him.

Baggily pointed to his twins sitting in wood buckets.

"I put them in these car seats for longer rides."

Out popped two babies sitting inside his buckets.

"*Children* are onboard? This late at night?" Tessia got up startled.

"It's a school night. We should be in bed." Olo chimed in.

Behind Baggily and his bucket of kids -- something familiar was approaching them on the horizon.

It was Olo's auto-rickshaw.

"Somebody is driving my rickshaw," Olo said as he looked up in the cloud.

The auto-rickshaw pulled up next to them.

"Ah no you didn't leave your keys in the rickshaw did you?" asked Baggily.

"That's why I only fly with a Sexton." said Fruit Chen.

The scent of roses and jasmine flowed from her dress and breezed in the air.

Baggily pointed to the people sneaking on the cloud carrying lanterns, their faces covered in masks.

"Masked intruders? Not on my flight," Fruit told Baggily.

"Excuse me, can I see some I.D.?" He warned the masked bandits.

Baggily pulled the buckets over his shoulders on a plank with each twin on his side.

"I got this." Olo told him.

But before he could do anything, Olo knocked the bandits and they wrestled on the cloud.

After Olo had fought them, Fruit tied their arms together.

Tessia pulled off their masks.

"We got Fruit, and we got Olo. Baggily and his kids. Anyone else want to take us on? Send shock waves through the astroplane?"

"Whoosh." The auto-rickshaw took a swing sideways and was about to crash into the cloud.

Olo jumped inside.

"Aha."

A child was piloting the rickshaw. When he saw Olo he let go of the steering and the rickshaw plummeted.

Olo grabbed the steering wheel and plopped the boy onto the passenger seat.

"What do you know about astrophotography," he asked the boy.

"Who wants to know?" the boy snapped back.

Olo hesitated to tell him. "Principal Qiz Qiz..."

The boy was startled. "How do you know where go to school?"

"No. 1 Sr. High School of Urumqi...I couldn't put your face to your name but I

know you're in Knight Lavo's astrophotography group -- Amateur astronomy."

"We're explorers," he told him.

"Explorers don't hijack clouds and pull up in my auto-rickshaw in face-masks."

"We just wanted to find out how to get the *2 button to work...so we followed you."

"It needs a passcode," said Olo.

"What is it?" the boy asked him.

"What's your name, where do you live, and why the heck do you need my passcode?" Olo demanded to know.

"Joie. Joie Chan," the boy answered him.

"Name and address."

"14556 Taklimakan Road, Saybag District, Urumqi, 830000."

"I hate to interrupt -- but we're descending."

It was Tessia walking in off the cloud.

"Who's that?"

The cloud descended quickly down into the Forbidden City. From the bottom a series of steps went straight upward into long wood buildings. They arched at every corner with winged tips.

"The lattice work on the roof look like a dragon's skin. Hurry."

Tessia jumped off the cloud and hurried up the steps leading to the Forbidden City.

"Olo I'm up here!"

Tessia was already halfway up the stairs.

Olo was still at the bottom. He was standing in the center of the square transfixed by Tessia's legs.

"You are walking as a human now. The centaur legs are gone!"

Tessia looked down.

Olo, Fruit, Baggily were all staring at her. Olo pointed to her legs.

"Tessia, look! You're the last centaur in the Forbidden City."

"I'm the last centaur?"

She realized what had happened.

"That's why we came isn't it? To change, who I am?"

"Here...we are all the same," Fruit told her.

Tessia tripped, unable to stand from the shock. She braced herself on the spired handrails carved like dragon's tails.

"Everything is moving in the Forbidden City. Everything is made of dragons."

Her voice echoed through the center of the buildings.

"We gave you a new pair of legs Tessia," shouted Fruit. "Anyone that enters the Forbidden City will do so as a human."

"And what about leaving? What do I leave as?" Tessia ask her.

"You leave as the *new* Tessia."

Fruit congratulated her and boarded the cloud. The cloud arrived back to Bodga Peak with Olo and Tessia the next morning.

Snow was just starting to fall. Breakfast was cooking on the fire - mutton kebab, grilled buns, and fragrant milk tea. The area between the green spruce had turned into a bazaar.

Baobi hymned a grassland folk tune. The rest of the family sang along with him.

"When we were in green pastures...we were young and running."

They spent the morning traditional folk dancing.

Olo twirled her around the campfire. Tessia was careful to hide her new pairs of legs in a long skirt.

She winced. The loss of her legs sent pain up her spine.

"Am I ever getting my legs back?" she asked Olo.

CHAPTER 13 CUTTING CORDS

Tessia opened an old television box and pushed her TV into it.

Moving boxes filled her living room. Inside were her clothing, toiletries, and kitchen supplies.

She lit an incense stick and stuck it into the rice pot at the ancestor shrine.

“Mother. Please come back. I need you,” she said looking at the ancestor scroll.

Her Mother conjured herself out of the scroll and appeared.

“Tessia. What has become of you?” she asked.

“I have something to tell you. I’m moving in with Olo Yang.”

Her Mother sat down not knowing what to say.

“Say you approve. It’s been over a year now that I’ve turned human. And I don’t fit into school. I have no friends. I can’t hide what I’ve become and Olo’s asked me to move to Bogda Peak.” Tessia stated.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve summoned me. I didn’t want to interfere. Olo’s became a seafarer and really much better with his knots.”

“Yes. We graduated early. I’ve been reading *Centaurian History* to Olo for the past year and he passed all the tests.”

“I’m always here for you Tessia. I will try and help you again from the other side. Place the ancestor scroll inside Olo’s yurt and I’ll always be there.”

“Thank you Mother.”

A loud vroom interrupted them outside. The auto-rickshaw was landing.

“Olo’s just pulled up in his rickshaw. I’d better put the ancestor scroll away. He’ll move it into the yurt and I’ll hang it again. See you soon.”

“Before I go, Tessia. I have to remind you that we centaurs have a long *history*. It’s important to remember that you were once a centaur. Our civilization is changing with this technology that the humans bring. Everything we invented has been duplicated in their factories. The old rickshaw outside is transformed into a modern invention. If Olo is your future, then you will be part of his...”

“Sssssh. Olo’s coming,” Tessia said.

They watched Olo as he got out of his rickshaw.

"I didn't realize how big he's become," Oneeva said.

"That's because his family feeds a lot. You should see the spread."

"Do they live in Bogda Peak, too?"

"Yes. You'll see."

Olo opened the door and Oneeva jumped back into the painting.

"Hello Olo." Tessia got up to greet him.

"What were you doing? I saw you talking to someone through the window."

"I was just reminding myself to pack this painting of my ancestors," she told him.

Tessia pulled the nails off the scroll and rolled it.

"It should take two trips to get all your stuff up there," he said looking around.

She handed him the ancestor scroll.

"Let's put this in first so we don't forget it. I'll hang it in the living area to keep us company."

"Why?"

"My ancestors are inside the painting."

"Oh my." Olo sighed. "What about this giant television, Tessia. Where are we planning to put that?"

"Is there room in the living room?"

"What are we? Coach potatoes? We hardly watch television."

"It's been a crazy year! My new year's resolution is to sit in your yurt and watch soap operas all day."

"You can watch your soaps if I can hook your TV to my gaming system. How about that?"

"Deal." Tessia said.

Olo picked up the television box and put the rolled up ancestor scroll on top of it. He put them inside the auto rickshaw where they hardly fit. He pushed the box

further in toward the pilot seat. The ancestor scroll moved by itself to the passenger side and rolled open.

“Careful, Olo.” Tessia warned him.

Olo rolled the scroll together and tied it.

“That should be tight enough,” he said.

When they got back to Bogda Peak, Tessia unrolled the scroll.

“Whew. It hasn’t been damaged,” she said.

“Welcome home, Tessia.” Olo told her.

Tessia picked up right where she left off. They made a second trip to get the rest of her boxes. She put her giant television in the middle of the living area and rehung the ancestor scroll. When her Mother came out of the scroll she was happier for her daughter.

“My. This is a modern home,” Oneeva commented one day.

“It’s called a *smart* house. A lot of the appliances are controlled by technology.”

Olo connected most of her appliances to his laptop so they could turn them on and off from anywhere. Oneeva scared him by coming out of the ancestor scroll.

One time, she juiced carrots in the kitchen to make Tessia carrot juice.

“I’m old fashioned,” Oneeva whispered to Tessia. “I still enjoy cooking. It’s as if I’m alive again cooking for you.”

Oneeva turned on the kitchen appliances *manually* without a computer.

“Sssh. Mother! You’re scaring him. Olo prides himself on the way his gadgets run.”

Appliances turned on sporadically in his yurt and Olo got confused how they started.

“Something must be wrong with the electrical wiring, I’ll ask Barge for help.”

“No! Don’t call Barge. I’ve been juicing. I flip the switches on when I’m hungry.”

“You sure have been spending a lot of time in the kitchen.” Olo said.

He reasoned to himself that she must be a master cook.

"I can't wait to try your food."

"Ok. I'll make you shepard's pie."

Olo sat on the couch while Tessia pretended to cook. Oneeva stood next to her making the meal for them in the kitchen.

Olo gobbled down the dinner and complimented Tessia.

"Tessia! I didn't know what a *domestic goddess* you'd turn out to be! Your shepard's pie is the best I've ever had."

"It's my Mother's recipe," Tessia told him.

She winked at her Mother.

"You'll have to show my family how to cook. We should make every meal in the mess hall with them. Our kitchen's so small."

By the time the leaves turned in the fall, Tessia had caught up on her favorite soap opera *General Hospital*. She liked watching the lead character Monica Quartermaine perform surgeries in the E.R.

"I relate to *General Hospital* now that I'm a human. So many women on this show have a *past*," she explained to Olo.

"Tessia! It's 3 o'clock. Time to switch to my Xbox console."

After the soap opera ended, Olo switched the plugs on the television and turned on his *Injustice 2* Game. He was wrapped up in playing and turned the volume up loud.

Tessia opened the Turpan Index and located the direction down Bogda Peak.

"Olo can be opinionated and bossy once he gets on Xbox," Tessia thought to herself.

Tessia walked out of the yurt pretending not to care. She covered her legs in a silk skirt and her body was heavier. She had spent months eating on the couch and watching TV.

Her body felt uneven. The rest of her limbs pushed all her weight onto just two legs.

"The sacrifices I make to be human for Olo, never cease to amaze me," she giggled.

She remembered the first time she stomped in her four heels when she first learned to walk. She moved a lot quicker as a centaur.

She swung her hip around but she couldn't prance like she could before. She swung her hip the other way and it was just the same-- without hind legs she was useless in the fields and couldn't get herself down the hill and back without taking the regular roads. It's on the regular roads that Olo would send her back home if he saw her.

She walked down the slippery wet roads. It would be a short trip, her walk into the city. She hadn't left the mountains in ages and missed Urumqi.

She thought of the first present Olo had given her. A bracelet. The first day she met him at the pond he was smitten by her.

"Maybe I'm more exciting as a centaur," she told herself.

She was curious about cutting the cord and roaming again.

"I'd better come back this evening before his sisters notice that I'm missing from mess hall."

Mess hall was a family tradition that they shared together. With his three sisters they prepared a giant feast of peppery squabs of acorn seeds, turmeric radishes, and pheasant roast with hints of saffron.

Olo was too preoccupied with his 3 o'clock gaming time to do much with her or his family. His brothers timbered the land around the mountain and made a good living selling lumber to the furniture maker. They delivered the timber down the hill in sleds.

After a long walk back up to Bodga Peak she noticed a centaur had followed her back from Urumqi. He ran into the bushes when she stopped.

"Watch out, Tessia," said Able.

Olo's brothers were pulling their sleds up the hill. They had just finished up the wood delivery while Olo was playing his Xbox console.

"I walked to the city by myself. Olo's developed a gaming addiction since I brought the giant TV into his house," she told his brothers.

"We know it's a real habit of his. Did you see the centaur over there?" he asked her.

"Yes."

He jumped into the bushes and grabbed the centaur.

"You again!" Able said pulling Gains out from behind a juniper tree.

"I recognize you. Are you back to finish off my brother Olo?"

Gains scratched the bark and pulled his head back behind it. A tense standoff was going to commence and Olo's brothers surrounded him.

"Walk back down the hill and return to Urumqi," Cyer ordered Gains.

"I'm not here to see Olo. Just Tessia. I followed her on the road."

Gains looked at her concerned.

"Tessia you haven't aged. You look even better with a little weight on you."

"Able, let Gains go. He'll go home on his own. Won't you, Gains?" Tessia asked.

"But I have to tell you something. Tessia, the Secretariat has died. I just wanted to fill you in on what's been happening."

"This can't be. Come talk to Olo and tell us together."

Gains followed Tessia back to the yurt with his brother's escorting them. Olo was still playing video games on the couch. Tessia turned off the television and sat down next to him.

"Olo! I came up the mountain to warn you that Secretariat Kuqa's passing has made Urumqi very unstable," Gains told him.

"Secretariat Kuqa has passed. When?" Olo asked.

"He died in his sleep a few months ago. I figured when you didn't attend the funeral with Tessia that you two had run away together." Gains told them.

"I told the Secretariat that I wouldn't attend any more functions after the disaster with Fern at Guizi Hall. After that he didn't contact me. We haven't spoken since then."

"We were concerned about Tessia. She's changed into a human. Now that you've taken her away, you've crossed the bridge of no return." Gains warned him.

"Now that the Secretariat's past away, its time for bygones to be bygones," Olo said.

He got up and gave Gains a handshake.

"Thank you for bringing Tessia back home. Its good to see you my friend."

Gains left the yurt to walk back down the hill. Tessia followed them out but Olo stopped her.

"Let him go, Tessia."

“Olo. Don’t stop me this time. I have unfinished business with the centaurs.”

“Unfinished business? They nearly killed me. High school was a terrible experience for us. How could you want to go back and reconnect with them? They are a band of unconscious narrow-minded, uncivilized heathens. And you’re not one of them anymore.”

“But, Olo! He’s leaving.”

“You’re *my* family now. Let me make a stronger commitment to you. I know I’ve been on Xbox for too long and I hardly noticed you left. But, I’ve been contemplating you the whole time. My brothers have been helping us by working for our family...so we could spend more time together at home. It’s called *bonding*. That’s a human trait, sweetheart.”

“Human trait? So...centaurs can’t have feelings, too?” Tessia complained.

Olo put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. Coyotes howled outside.

“What do I have to do to convince you that you are a human? I mean we both run, don’t we? If there’s an animal outside like a coyote don’t we go and rough it out with them? That’s all I’d do all day if I had a chance. I’d just be the coyote in the wild. I know it’s crazy but that’s the only thing I would prefer to be than a human. Is a coyote.”

He took Tessia’s hand and walked her outside. A group of coyotes were running up the hill. They were howling. They circled around them as Olo whistled.

Tessia was scared.

Suddenly, Bodga Peak was covered with coyotes.

CHAPTER 14 SOUTH GATE TO MT TAI

It happened that Olo did meet his true love at an early age -- but it seemed that *love* was hit on corners by a jagged edge waiting to rip apart everyone outside of Bogda Peak. The peak was the only safe haven they had. Life outside of the hill was uncertain.

"Tessia, will you marry me?"

Olo got down on his knee and opened a box with a sparkling diamond.

"Are you serious?" she asked him.

"You look like you should be on the cover of Vogue Magazine! Everyday that we've been together feels like I'm with a model. Of course I'm asking you to marry me. I've been waiting for ages to get a ring."

Tessia looked at the ring pensively.

"I don't know what to say, this *diamond* is huge!"

From the view from his knees, Olo could see her long legs.

"You're much taller as a human and quite statuesque. I have to thank Fruit Chen for your long legs," he joked.

"Of course I'll marry you. I even moved to Bodga Peak with a bunch of coyotes to be with you, didn't I?"

Olo put the ring on her finger and twirled her around.

"I could walk a mile with you now and not have to worry about catching up to a centaur." Olo told her.

He was relieved. She had said yes to his marriage proposal.

"Tess, we have a lot common you and I. But fashion is not one of them. How do we explain *this*?"

"Explain what?"

"Your sense of style. You don't have a proper wardrobe. Most of your dresses, you've donated to Goodwill."

Olo went to the computer and googled *wedding dress shops*.

"You're seriously doing a web search for my wedding dress?" she asked him.

“Yes. You and I lead different lives from the *folks*. My folks are a little more dismissive of technology. Are you alright if I make an appointment for you at the bridal salon?”

He pointed to a wedding dress store called *Panache* on his computer. He clicked and it directed them to their website. He clicked on the appointment page and inputted her information.

“Olo, you don’t have to go to all that trouble. I already own a white dress,” she explained.

“But it’s not a *wedding dress*.”

Olo draped a black velvet coat over her tense shoulders and stood her in front of him. He tied a bow at her neckline and closed the coat over her chest and covered her legs with the ruffled ends of the long velvet.

“Come on. Lets go to town. I just booked a bridal appointment for this afternoon.”

Tessia giggled.

She was still barefoot and hadn’t put on her shoes. Olo noticed her feet. So soft and delicate. He touched them and put a pair of sandals on her.

“Olo! Shoes still tickle my feet. Wouldn’t you rather go hiking than shop? I miss the warmth of the soil under my hoof.”

“Another day, Tessia. What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“For *you* to say...yes?”

“To what...?”

“To marrying me back.”

“Yes!” Olo exclaimed.

They planned their wedding for the winter when snowflakes fell and the green foliage turned white.

Tessia stepped out of their yurt in the wedding dress from *Panache*. The dress was made of embroidered lace that had a high slit to show off her legs. A white cloak with gold trim was tied with a velvet ribbon to keep her neck warm.

Olo had on a black tuxedo with his hair slicked back. He was waiting for her in front of his rickshaw.

His sisters, Mehriğül, Arziğül, Etirğül were huddled around the fire. They covered their bridesmaids gowns in silk shawls that blew in the wind.

Baobi was in a sheepskin hat playing a matrimony song he had written on his erhu. His wife, Cuiqi was warm in her winter cocoon, a furry hat that covered her ears and a matching coat. She wore elevated shoes to keep from vanishing in the snow.

They boarded Olo's auto-rickshaw and he flew for a long time. They were getting nervous and ploughed Olo with questions. Tessia quietly looked out the window. Olo had insisted on keeping the wedding location a secret.

"Where are we going? The erhu's getting heavy on my lap."

"Must your wedding be so hush-hush?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Will there be others attending?"

"Olo...what are you waiting for...lets land this thing."

Finally, Olo pulled the lever and the auto-rickshaw descended. They had been flying over clouds the entire day with no sign of land until a peak popped up.

Tessia pulled her shiny hair into the velvet cap. The dress designer at *Panache* had especially accessorized the dress for a winter destination wedding. She was getting excited that they arrived at the peak.

"This is a very tall mountain, Olo. It's higher than the clouds! What is it?"

"Mount Tianshan," he told her.

"This is such a surprise," his father chimed in.

"The lengths you take to get us here. Why I've never seen a mountain covered in clouds."

The auto-rickshaw landed directly on the peak of Mt. Tianshan at the South Gate known as Mt. Tai.

Olo jumped out of the cockpit and pulled open the door for his bride. Tessia pulled up the dress to get out of the rickshaw.

Cuiqi saw her legs.

"That dress is too sexy!"

She fainted and fell into the snow. Her elevated shoes keeled over her head. They rushed to pull her out of the snow.

Tessia tapped Cuiqi and dusted the snow off her.

"I didn't mean to scare you with the high slits on my dress. We didn't want to hide my legs. I hope it's not offensive for a wedding."

"Yes, I'm fine. But when I got married to Olo's father, it was in more traditional wedding attire." Cuiqi replied.

Olo interrupted them. He went over and picked up his long legged beauty.

"Mom, leave Tessia alone. This dress is the latest fashion. Dad, can you take some wedding shots of us?"

Together they walked into a building with the words, *Jengish Choqusu* printed on the entrance.

Down the stairs of *Jengish Choqusu* was a dressing room and in the dressing room a large window. Tessia could see from the window what lay beneath the clouds. A mountain range covered in glaciers, forests, and large undulating rocks.

"Tess?" Mehrigül knocked on the door.

"Come in," Tessia responded.

The sisters carried a large headdress into the dressing room.

"Now you can marry Olo. In this. It's something traditional. Mom insisted we put it on you. This is something *borrowed* and your dress is something *new*," Arzigül reassured her.

"It's starting to snow," said Cyer calling from upstairs.

Olo brought down an extra cloak and wrapped it over Tessia. The wind outside was racing and her headdress was being pinned on with needle and thread.

Olo winked.

"It's also tradition not to see the bride before the wedding. I'd better wait upstairs," he said.

That snowy afternoon, Tessia walked out in an old fashioned Chinese headdress and a *modern* wedding dress. She said her vows in them on Mt. Tai.

One of the vows she made was to watch less television. Olo's vow to her was to put his Xbox away. They kissed after their vows.

That night they returned home and didn't turn on the television. Olo put the Xbox in the trash and sat on the couch twiddling his thumbs.

"Now what do we do?" he sighed.

CHAPTER 15 EDGE OF THE SKY

After the wedding, Olo devoted himself to working in the timber business. He joined his brothers in the timber trade by delivering wood in his rickshaw.

For Tessia, that meant postponing their honeymoon.

"This is the high season for work. I'm sorry but we can't go on a honeymoon until all the deliveries are made." Olo explained to her.

Tessia opened her laptop and typed in "*honeymoon staycation*."

"I'll research a place nearby for our honeymoon, Olo."

"No. I can take you on a seafaring expedition Tessia, after. I promise."

"A staycation will be more relaxing. It will be somewhere close to home. I don't need an expedition far away," she told him.

"Don't worry about distance Tessia, we'll take the rickshaw when I get back."

Tessia stop her search for the staycation. Olo rarely left her. She worried about sleeping alone in the yurt while he was on this trip.

"I'll summon my Mother out of the ancestor scroll to keep me company. We'll bake and play scrabble," she thought to herself.

An architect hired Olo all the way from the Fujian Province to build a series of circular *tolou*. A tolou was a hut designed in concentric circles. It housed many families from the Hakka mountainous region against invaders. To make multiple tolou required tons of timber.

Olo's job was to make multiple deliveries of wood in his auto-rickshaw.

"I can supply the timber," he told the Hakka architect, "and the shipment of Tianshan timber will arrive in two days."

He lifted the timber with his brothers. They smelled the freshly cut ends and slid them down Bodga Peak.

Olo said goodbye to Tessia when the rickshaw was loaded.

"Pack you suitcase Tess. I'll be back for you once we get the hut up and running."

Olo and his brothers waved goodbye to their family. Tessia ducked under the rickshaw as it flew past her.

When they got to Fujian they worked with the Hakka and built 46 circular huts.

They lay ground on a housing complex that stood several stories high. Slathering mud to piece together the building. Olo and his brothers blended them into earthly hillsides.

The residents walked in from the tea fields to watch.

One tolou could fit over 820 residents. It would be the largest single residence in Fujian.

The residents talked about the brothers. They found Olo to be entertaining with stories of being the stone thrower.

"Olo. The locals call you the Tianshen muscle arm," the architect told him.

After long day in the rice fields, they were impressed by Olo but squirming about the hole in their fortress.

The architect was startled.

"The residents were anxious about invaders. You've forgotten to put in a gate to protect the entrance of the tolou!"

Olo looked around. There was an opening at the entrance.

"Sorry, I hadn't noticed."

"Quickly, can you build us a gate before you return home. *Impenetrable* with iron doors. The entrance...is open. The residents can't see into the dark forest but invaders can see the residents inside."

Olo heated iron to make a gate. He melted bronze into the bulleted circular medallions on the gates and bolted them into the entrance of the tolou. He shut the gates and designed a lock for it.

"I will throw a stone into the Gate to test its strength," he explained to his brother Cyer.

"Not again," shouted Cyer.

Olo carried a large stone and balanced it on his shoulder.

"I will test the strength of the gate to make sure the residents are safe. If I break it with this stone, I will build them another gate."

He threw the stone into the gate that he had constructed for the residents. It didn't bend or shatter.

"This gate has the durability of shatter proof frames. I have finally made something that is unbreakable!"

The locals cheered and were satisfied.

With that, he took his brothers home to Bodga Peak. Tessia was waiting there to go on their honeymoon voyage.

"Where are we going?" she said when he picked her up in the rickshaw.

They had flown over the sea and she was feeling nauseous from the long air travel. Olo finally descended onto the ocean like a duck floating from air to water.

"*Tianya Haijiao.*"

"What's that?"

"*Edge of the Sky. Tian Ya Hai Jiao....*"

Olo hesitated and turned the ship around.

"Look! The winds pushing us toward Monkey Island! There are many islands here. Let's go to Monkey Island instead."

Olo pulled the rudder and turned it toward Monkey Island. She noticed that the ship was moving against the direction of the wind and changing course from Edge of the Sky.

"Olo. I've always wanted to go to an uninhabited tropical island. Monkey Island is filled with *smelly* monkeys."

"Edge of the Sky is nothing but beaches. Everywhere the sea will be facing us. Let's go to Monkey Island instead. I'll turn into stone from boredom because I forgot my electronics."

"Hmm, your *iphone* isn't that important! The sea has a lot to teach us, Olo. We can go sailing on your rickshaw. Especially since it was made to float in water."

"Facing the sea and just watching the waves roll in for hours is not my idea of relaxation."

"As opposed to *monkeying* around on another island?"

"Tessia. We just have different things we want to do. Watching the undulating waves crash into sand has no meaning," Olo explained.

"You're being difficult. Or shall I say making things difficult, I don't want to sit around with monkeys climbing over my head!"

"We have different ideas about what a resort is suppose to be."

Tessia took the wheel on his auto-rickshaw and landed at Edge of the Sky. She

wasn't looking forward to Monkey Island.

Olo laughed.

For days he watched Tessia relax on the beach. She jumped in waves and swam in the ocean.

"What do you like so much about being here, Tessia?"

"Facing the sea, we have no escape. You make escaping a part of your reality Olo! The past month has been about you going out and doing stuff. Here, it's me taking in the weather. I don't have to do anything but let the ocean move me to shore..."

"What are you saying?"

"The waves teach me a lot...I could sit here and learn more about you even. Just from watching the shore I learn a lot of things."

"What are they?"

"That you can't sit down for one minute Olo without doing something. That you can't sit for one *moment*--"

The thundering above zapped the air and they jumped. A palm tree next to Olo broke open, thunder piercing it at the exposed root. They looked at it as it swayed back and forth in the wind. The neck of the tree bent like rubber.

"How come we can't stay here and enjoy this island for a moment and just sit and watch stuff like that happen?"

"Because I'm the one that's usually chopping the tree and carrying it for lumber."

"Why don't you just pull this tree off and take it to Monkey Island with you?"

"Alright, today then! I was ready to leave three days ago."

"We are *not* leaving..."

"Why not?"

"Olo! We're expecting a *baby*. I've had morning sickness *all* month."

She ran to a garbage can and threw up.

"Why didn't you tell me? This explains why you've been wanting to do nothing but sit on the beach," Olo said.

He finally sat down and watched the waves together.

"I'm sorry you've been feeling sick, Tessia. If Edge of the Sky is for you to get some R&R, let's stay longer."

The young couple stayed at Edge of the Sky for three more days. It seemed like eternity for Olo, but Tessia needed the rest.

When they finally departed for Monkey Island, Tessia put a *baby on board* sign in the back window.

"We have another traveler on board the auto-rickshaw. Sail slowly, Olo...there's a baby on board."

CHAPTER 16 MONKEY ISLAND

"Plato's Symposium."

"What's that, Olo?"

"Plato's Symposium? Bisho copied it when he wrote *Centaurian History*. What else did he take from Plato -- is *any* part of the book, his?"

"Olo, stop it right now. Bisho isn't here." Tessia scolded him.

Olo was distracted. Even on their honeymoon, Bisho still bothered him.

"Bisho plagiarized our school books! I can't just sit at the Edge of the Earth and *not* doing anything. He can't get away with it."

Tessia shook her head.

"Bisho couldn't have plagiarized *Centaurian History* --"

"Yes he did! Plato wrote it."

Tessia let out a cry.

A monkey was waving a pistol at her. It had snuck on board the auto-rickshaw while they were debating *Centaurian History*.

"Don't shoot! What do you want?" Tessia asked the monkey.

"Ooh ooh ooh eee eee eee aah aah aah," it told her.

"Jane Goodall, *hardly*. I can't translate monkey noises into english."

The monkey lost its patience with Tessia. It pushed the pistol into her chest and she raised her hands. It moved the pistol to her back and forced her out, to the top of the rickshaw.

Another monkey climbed down the sails. It moved her arms to her back and tied her wrists with rope.

"Olo, help! I've been captured by monkeys!" she called out.

"I'm coming for you, Tessia!"

Suddenly, Olo was surrounded. A dozen monkeys circled him. They took over the steering of his rickshaw. He looked down at the sea below. A bevy of ships were firing canons in their direction.

“They’re turning my ship in the direction of a flotilla!”

Olo tried to get back into the driver's seat. The monkeys jumped on his head and pulled his hair.

He reached his arm and pulled a lever. The ship lifted farther up into the sky. It flew up toward the clouds just as a cannonball was released at them.

Tessia hopped up and loosened the rope. She ran up the rig of the square sail.

The monkeys jabbered and their banter turned petulant. Something jostled and fell from the roof of the rickshaw.

"Tess!" Olo screamed.

He felt something hitting the roof.

"Hold on. I'm on the way!"

He thought Tessia might have fallen up on the sail. He ran up the stairs of the rickshaw and Tessia was standing on top of the rig.

He looked out and monkeys were pounding their fists. They pointed to something floating in the ocean below. Olo pulled himself up on the ropes to see what they were looking at.

Hundreds of barrels floated in the ocean.

He realized why the monkeys had hijacked his auto-rickshaw.

“They need us to get those barrels. They must have spotted us while we were flying over them.”

They flew over the flotilla and viewed the warships and the maritime bomb vessels in the ocean. They were at war over the barrels and were trying to get the oil barrels into their warships.

“The barrels are floating away. Let's see what's inside them.”

Olo dipped the auto-rickshaw down from the sky.

“There's a safe spot to land in the water.”

The monkeys jumped out and rolled a barrel toward his vessel. Olo helped them lift it inside the auto-rickshaw.

He pulled out his Swiss army knife and cut a hole into the barrel. Black liquid

spilled out.

"It's oil," he told Tessia.

"There's more floating around. Get them."

Olo jumped into the ocean to retrieve another barrel. He pulled it out with the help of the monkeys and they went back to get more. They spend the next hour pulling barrels into the rickshaw.

"The sun hasn't even set and we have ninety barrels in the auto-rickshaw!" Olo said excited.

Tessia held her stomach.

"We have to leave the rest of the barrels. They're too heavy. We can't bring them all."

"Alright," Olo agreed.

"What's the closest landing?"

"Monkey Island."

Far away at the flotilla, a pirate named Jabi Pando watched Olo in his binoculars. Jabi was a Himaloth trading in the straits. He reported to his shipmates what happened.

"Listen crewmen! While you were asleep last night, our shipment was stolen. A group of monkeys loosened the door and tossed our oil into the ocean."

The pirates started to get angry. They were rather lazy and Olo was quicker about retrieving the oil barrels into his auto-rickshaw.

One of the pirates looked into his binoculars.

"Don't worry. I can see just two *teenagers* on a small vessel taking the oil. We'll intercept them when they get to shore," he told them.

"Will we get them back? Are you sure of that," another pirate asked him.

"There's only one place they can go to with those monkeys and that's Monkey Island."

Jabi looked into the binoculars and gasped.

"Wait! The vessel with our oil has disappeared."

He moved his binoculars up and around to look for them. He pulled his neck back

and spotted Olo's auto-rickshaw in the sky.

"*Holy saints!* It's a *ghost* ship!"

Jabi rubbed his neck. They were up against a *flying* ship!

Up in the sky, the auto-rickshaw was flying quickly. Olo pushed its sails against the wind.

Inside the cockpit, Tessia rubbed Olo's shoulders. He had carried so much oil that his back was sore.

"Can you believe we evaded the pirates?" Tessia asked him.

"Those pirates are barely behind us. If the wind conditions were any less, we wouldn't have lifted off. We've hardly *evaded* them," Olo warned her.

"These monkeys are definitely an omen. They're turned our honeymoon into a trading adventure. How far away are we from the flotilla?" she wondered.

"We're going 100 miles an hour with the trade wind at our heels. That should take us far enough away from the warships."

Tessia looked across the ocean through a pair of binoculars. Monkey Island was finally visible.

Olo landed the auto-rickshaw in the center of the island. He hid the ship under palm fronds so the pirates wouldn't be able to find them.

They found a hut nearby and unpacked their suitcases. The monkeys jumped out of the auto-rickshaw and climbed a banana tree. Tessia opened the window and a monkey brought a couple of bananas to her.

"Thank you," she said rubbing the monkey's head.

"They're reminding us to eat, Tessia."

Olo peeled the banana for her and she bit into it.

The natural sugars hit her brain and she suddenly remembered something. A new journal was in her backpack. She got it out.

"Olo! Since I was a young um, *centaur*. I've wanted to be a writer. It's just three paragraphs but I'm finally writing. I started this at Edge of the Sky. Can I read it to you?"

"As long as you replace *Centaurian History* as a must read," Olo begged her.

"I'm writing down the history of our lives," she laughed.

Tessia read the journal:

After our wedding, Olo went to Fujian. He had his family's timber trade to attend to and worked for weeks building homes. I packed my suitcase and waited for him to take us on our honeymoon. While he was gone, I thought about picking up an occupation. I thought about being a journalist. I would like to document people's lives and record their history.

When Olo returned from work, I left Xinjiang for the first time on his auto-rickshaw. One of the most amazing things I've done is having the courage to ride in this amazing vehicle. It's a shipping vessel that flies. Olo's turned it into a modern day rickshaw. He can carry passengers, cargo, and even timber.

The first stop on our honeymoon was Edge of the Sky. I stretched out my legs on the beach and wanted to sit there forever. I've never enjoyed the warm water so much and I sipped coconut water from a real coconut. The funniest part of our honeymoon is telling Olo the good news. That I'm pregnant. Olo can't believe it. It's probably the most surprising thing that's ever happened to us. One adventure at a time.

Olo clapped after she read it to him. Tessia cried. It was the first time she had ever impressed him.

"It's usually always been you that got the *oohs* and *aahs*! Its about time I throw the stone myself and start an occupation!"

"But you're *Mrs. Stone Thrower*. Throw the stone with your words and keep writing. You know the saying, *turning poison into medicine*? That's what it feels like."

Tessia sat down on the bed.

"So that's your secret. You've found a way to channel all your pain into something. Even the way you are with monkeys...you're so good with them."

"You didn't understand Plato's Symposium did you, Tessia? You gave up all *that* to be with me. Haven't you realized that *I'm* your other half."

"What's Plato's Symposium? You've mentioned it...tell me again."

"It's a book by the Greek philosopher Plato. In it, humans were originally created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Fearing their power they got split into two separate beings in search of their other half."

"Two separate beings...*really*?" Tessia asked.

"I admit it's not explainable. You're the last centaur. You're the only centaur to *turn* human...for love."

“That explains why I suddenly want to write. I bought a magic pen from Barge Khalifa *and* this journal. I’m going to write everything that happens. A modern update of *Plato’s Symposium*.”

That night the island was dark. There was no electricity to light the hut. Olo and Tessia went to sleep early.

A pirate’s ship crept into the harbor. It had followed the band of monkeys back to the island from the flotilla.

A voice called to the shore, "Ahoy, anyone want to trade?"

It was Jabi Pando. He docked with his band of Himaloths. They were looking for the *ghost* ship.

There was a little known monkey language called haikou. Jabi spoke in it to a monkey. He asked for information on the whereabouts of the flying ship.

"Monkey knows what a barrel of oil is worth to the Silk Trader. Lead me to my barrels and we will pay you for finding them."

The monkey took them to the hut. Olo was barely asleep and could hear the pirates trampling through the sand.

He threw his shirt on and walked outside. Jabi Pando was waiting for him.

"Care to explain what you are doing with my oil?" Jabi asked him. He was menacing and charming at the same time.

"Who are you?" Olo asked him.

“Jabi Pando. You have something that belongs to us. There's an army waiting for these barrels in the Taklamakan Desert. We are supplying them with this oil.”

The group of pirates looked around the hut. They uncovered the auto-rickshaw and pulled open the door.

“The barrels are inside!” a pirate said.

The pirates dragged out Tessia in a harpoon and tied her to the tree.

"Leave Tessia alone! This is between you and the monkeys!"

Tessia motioned for Olo to be quiet. She had a magic pen in her hand.

"Don't give them the oil, Olo. Just wait," she whispered.

The pirates went inside the auto rickshaw to count the barrels of oil.

When they weren't looking, the monkeys pulled off the harpoon. Tessia was free. She gave the monkeys her magic pen.

Olo freed himself with the pocketknife and the monkey pulled off the layers of netting that had twisted around his legs. He ran into the auto-rickshaw and started the engine. The auto-rickshaw floated off and Tessia jumped inside.

One by one, the pirates fought Olo. By the time the rickshaw flew over the shore Olo had thrown them back into the sea.

Olo found one last pirate in the back seat. Jabi Pando.

"Just drop me off on the mainland *with* the oil," Jabi asked him.

"Where are you from?" Olo demanded to know.

Jabi was quiet. The auto-rickshaw was soaring higher and higher into the atmosphere. His face turned pale and he grabbed onto Olo.

"Get me off this *ghost* ship!"

Olo picked up Jabi and threw him into the sea. He swam to his pirate ship.

A mermaid statue glistened at the front of the pirate ship. It was made from carved wood. Flanking the mermaid was an array of armory and precision weapons and satellites.

Olo examined their ship.

"Why do they have a radar system on the top of their vessel?" he asked Tessia.

"It's a heavily armed destroyer," she told him.

She pointed to the flotilla across the harbor.

"Looks like the pirates work for someone bigger than we think. We're caught in enemy lines. They are waiting to take the barrels and seize us. If I hadn't traded my magic pen, the monkey's wouldn't have helped us to escape."

CHAPTER 17 ZANDER AND THE CLOCHE

Tessia and Olo flew North in the auto-rickshaw. They had narrowly escaped Monkey Island. He looked at the barrels in back of rickshaw.

"These barrels are weighing down the rickshaw.. We have to unload them somewhere. Do you think Barge would know what to do with these, Tessia?"

"He knew how to trade spices. I'm sure he can trade them too. Once we get home, you can ask him."

Olo looked at her stomach. It was growling.

"Do you want to stop in Lijiang? I heard they have delicious food."

"Yes!"

Olo put the auto-rickshaw on autopilot. He felt her stomach. They heard a kicking in the auto-rickshaw and Olo thought it was the baby.

"Is the baby kicking already?"

They heard a kicking again and he felt the other side of her belly.

"That's funny. It's not the baby."

Someone was kicking his driver's seat. He turned around and realized it a monkey.

"We have a straggler from Monkey Island," she said.

"I thought your stomach was growling but it's a cute little monkey."

The monkey made thumping noises with its paws. It twisted his head left and right and pulled his ears.

"My stomach *is* growling, I'm so hungry. Where can we get something to eat that's quick?" Tessia asked him.

Olo pointed to a village outside.

"Look! The old town of Lijiang. I'll look for a place to land."

A waterway flowed in the middle of a beautifully preserved town below them. He descended into the waterway and landed the auto-rickshaw on water.

They floated under a bridge and the waterway carried the auto-rickshaw through

Jade Water Village.

He stopped the auto-rickshaw at a restaurant. The sign was printed in Chinese.

“What’s that say?” she asked Olo.

“Meizou Dongpo,” he told her.

“It’s a Chinese restaurant?”

“Yes.”

Olo looked at the menu posted outside.

“Their specialties are Peking duck, dumplings, and hot buns.”

“I’d like everything on the menu.”

A waitress came to seat them. She stopped when she saw the monkey.

“There’s no monkey’s allowed in the restaurant,” the waitress said.

“We’ve adopted this monkey. And believe me, it has table manners,” Tessia told her.

The waitress shrugged her shoulders and seated them far away from the other patrons.

Olo ordered from the menu. When the dishes arrived, Tessia wrapped the Peking duck in Mandarin pancakes. She dipped it into plum sauce and chewed.

“It’s pretty tasty! I’ve never eaten duck. How come your family’s never made it at mess hall?” she said.

“Peking duck is a regional dish from Beijing. It’s an *imperial* dish. My parents are from Tash Rabat. The food is different there.”

The waitress plopped a plate of steamed dumplings in front of Tessia. It was something she never had either.

“Try our shrimp dumplings, ma’am.”

“Olo, the waitress called me *ma’am*. Do I look like a older woman now that I’m pregnant?”

“You are a little more bossy, so maybe that’s why you look older.”

Tessia kicked him under the table.

“That’s not funny. Nobody has ever called me *ma’am*, before.”

Tessia picked the dumplings up with a pair of chopsticks. The dumpling slipped out of them.

“Do you need a *fork*?” Olo asked her.

“Why? Let me try again.”

Olo watched as Tessia picked up the dumpling again with the chopstick. She squeezed the chopstick tight and pushed the dumpling in her mouth.

The hot juice from the dumpling squirted out and hit Olo in the eye.

“Tessia! You’re eating too fast.”

“I’m eating for two,” she told him.

The monkey pointed at the dumpling and opened its mouth. Tessia fed it with the chopsticks.

“*Little monkey*. What do we call you?” Olo asked him.

“Can we give you a name?” Tessia asked.

“I have a name for him...*Zander*.”

“Zander?”

“It’s modern and edgy. It has a sporty and exotic ring to it. Let’s call him Zander.”

“Don’t you want to save that name for our baby?”

“We are creative enough to come up with another cool name, Tessia.”

The monkey was done eating and jumped on the table.

“Zander!” Tessia said.

The monkey ignored her and jumped from table to table. Olo chased after it, but Zander got away. Olo followed the monkey next door to an antique shop.

“Yikes. Zander is playing with expensive antiques!”

Zander banged an antique vase on the shelf. It had fine filigree designs from the 15th century. He dropped the vase and it crashed on the floor.

“Oh my!” the shopkeeper said.

She took a broom and started sweeping.

"I don't want your monkey's feet to cut on the glass," she explained.

"I'm sorry for the damage. How much as the vase?" Olo asked.

"200 RMB."

Olo gave the shopkeeper a gold coin. He had earned it building the tolou in Fujian.

"Thank you. That's more than enough to pay for the vase." The shopkeeper told him.

The monkey grabbed a glass cloche. Olo winced. Zander wasn't finished playing.

"This is costing us a fortune to be in this shop."

The shopkeeper pried the cloche out of Zander's hand. She put it back on the shelf.

When she went back to the counter, Zander picked up the cloche again. This time he ran out of the shop.

"Your monkey has taken the cloche," the shopkeeper told Olo.

"I'm sorry. We'll buy it. Zander come back!" Olo called him.

Olo chased the monkey outside and wrestled the glass cloche out of Zander's hands. He went back to the store and brought it back to the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper wrapped the cloche in bubble wrap and put it into a bag.

"Here. The cloche you've bought is five hundred years old. It once housed the gold dragon. We don't sale dragons here. But if you put a dragon in it, your wishes come true."

Olo put another gold coin on the counter for the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper pushed it away.

"You've already paid. *Put a dragon in the cloche.*"

Tessia was waiting outside. She saw Olo and entered the antique store.

"Tessia. I bought you a present."

Olo showed her the antique cloche. Tessia gave him a hug. She was feeling better now that she had eaten.

"Olo! Is this a present from our honeymoon?"

"The shopkeeper told me to put it over a gold dragon and see what happens. *Put a dragon in the cloche*, she told me."

"*Put a dragon in the cloche?*" she asked him.

"Yes. Where's Zander?"

"Don't worry. I buckled him in the rickshaw. He's waiting for us."

They boarded the auto-rickshaw and Olo took them home.

When they flew pass Urumqi, Olo saw Guizi Hall.

"Before he died, Secretariat Naryn brought me to his council chambers there." Olo told her.

"What ever happened to his wife Constance?"

"You mean Lady Pan? She moved to Shanghai."

As they flew over the state buildings, Olo remembered seeing something. On the Secretariat's table was a gold dragon.

When they got back to Bogda Peak, Olo waited until Tessia feel asleep. He slipped on his moccasins and walked down into Urumqi.

Now that Secretariat Kuqa had past away, he wanted to see if the dragon was still in his office.

He was curious about Urumqi. If anything had changed in town, if Tessia would be safe there. He doubted it. He vowed never to flaunt his wife and family around centaurs.

Suddenly, a tree bristled behind him.

"Is anyone there?"

No answer.

He had taken a short cut through the woods and someone was trailing him. He turned around and an evergreen branch jostled. It nearly hit him.

"Hello?" Olo asked.

A shiver went down his spine.

Again. No answer.

He continued walking until he got to the bottom of the mountain. The moonlight from above him shined down like a flashlight. It led him straight into town.

He walked past Central Library on the cobblestone road and saw the Hall of Records. Nothing much had changed.

A couple of steps later, he reached Guizi Hall. There was a lock on the front door. Ever since Fern had turned into a tree, no one had been allowed back inside.

He followed the moonlight and veered to the right. The Secretariat's office was in front of him.

A light shined on a special back door entrance that only the Secretariat used. Olo knocked on the door and twisted the handle open.

"The secret chamber," Olo whispered.

He walked inside and lit the oil lamp.

"So this is it," Olo sighed.

The gold dragon was sitting on top of the Secretariat's desk. Olo sat down and examined the Secretariat's treasure. He remembered the shopkeeper's advice.

"Put a dragon in the cloche."

He put the dragon statue inside his shirt and blew the oil lamp off. He shut the door to Secretariat's office and walked down the cobblestone road.

Suddenly, something landed on his shoulder. He jumped and grabbed it.

"Zander! It's you!"

He pulled Zander off and sat him on the cobblestone street.

"You followed me through the forest and scared me half to death!"

Zander saw the bump in Olo's shirt and reached his hand inside. He pulled out the gold dragon and ran back to Bodga Peak. Olo chased him up the hill.

Olo huffed and puffed. He had never run so fast.

When they got back to the yurt, Tado put the gold dragon in the cloche. The cloche stood on a wood cheese board in the kitchen overnight.

The next morning Olo woke up strangely energized.

"We now have the luck of the dragon," he told Tessia over breakfast.

"The shopkeeper in Lijiang was right. The dragon fits right inside the cloche," she said.

"I'm going to Barge Khalifa to ask him about the barrels."

"You're going to ask Barge to trade them?" she asked.

"There's no one better," he replied.

"Take Zander with you. He's not good about staying home."

She hesitated to go anywhere and rubbed her belly. She was already nine months pregnant.

"The townspeople might notice my stomach."

"Goodbye Tessia," Olo said.

When he started the engine, she thought he looked like a father with his son.

"Are you ready to be a Father? You've carried Zander everywhere like a baby," she said proudly.

The auto-rickshaw flew into the Taklamakan Desert. It parked near a tent belonging to Barge Khalifa.

The sign on Barge's shop said "CLOSED"

"What day is it?" Olo asked himself.

He had forgotten to check the calendar.

"It's Sunday. He's at the Kashgar Marketplace getting saffron," he remembered.

Olo covered his jacket over the dragon he had brought. Zander took the dragon out from Olo's hiding place and ran his hands over the dragon's skin, mesmerized by the many folds and undulating curves.

"You like this?" Olo asked his monkey.

Zander nodded.

"It is yours after all, too. But you have to share it. Share it with Tessia and share it with the baby."

Olo took the dragon back and put it in the auto-rickshaw.

"Zander, if you are going to live with us, I'll share a secret with you."

Zander took the dragon while he spoke.

"Ah no, that goes back into the cloche!"

Zander ignored him.

"Like I said, your mother and I make the rules around here. You ought to sit down so I can drive home. We are about to have a baby!"

Zander finally gave the dragon back to him and sat down. He let out a load yawn and fell asleep on the auto-rickshaw ride to Kashgar Marketplace.

"Tess is due very soon and I want to get her everything she needs."

He picked up the rucksack from his auto-rickshaw and they walked into the marketplace. Olo wanted to pick up some groceries and make something for supper.

Olo bought meat from the butcher and asked him the whereabouts of Barge Khalifa.

"Have you seen Barge Khalifa?"

"Who wants to know?" the butcher replied.

"Olo Yang. We need to talk," he told him.

The butcher pointed at Barge's stand at the end of the marketplace. Barge was sitting on his stool sifting turmeric into bottles.

Olo walked up to his stand and greeted him.

"Barge! Hello."

"Olo, great to see you. How is Tessia?" Barge asked.

"Tessia is expecting our baby any day now."

"Really?"

"You have to give her this..."

Barge put a tin of saffron in his hands.

"And send her my best."

"Barge, we have a question for you. We found oil near Monkey Island."

Zander scratched his head wondering if he should sit or walk around the

marketplace. Olo was having an important conversation.

Barge got up from his stool.

"Lets go for a walk, your monkey looks hungry."

Olo and Barge took Zander down the alleys of the Kashgar Marketplace. Zander grabbed some bananas off a stand. Olo paid for it and bought more groceries as they talked.

"You're flying too high in that auto-rickshaw of yours Olo," Barge warned him.

"Why do you say that?"

"You see my stand Olo? I sell turmeric and only spices for a living," explained Barge.

"Do you to trade oil with us? We have ninety barrels of it." Olo said.

"Oil? Definitely. Never. They stabbed me in the back to warn me not to trade that stuff. Not all things are for sell, Olo. The oil barrels don't even belong to the Himaloths. That's why your monkeys took them away. The oil is for only a select few. It's not for you to deal with. I watched them build a pipeline through my home to transport oil all the way to the sea. You think the seafaring trade is for you?"

"What are you saying? That I can't fly my ship?"

"What you are flying Olo...is a *ghost* ship. The sea is dried up now. In my youth it was filled with traders journeying back and forth trading silk."

"A *ghost* ship? Is that why it flies, Barge?"

"Yes. The wind carries it wherever it needs to go. It's not being controlled by you."

"So this ship is taking the oil barrels home?"

"A ghost only wants to complete its mission. And in the mission it has chosen you to be the driver..."

"Maybe it's Secretariat Kuqa ghost. He has chosen me to help him before. When he invited me off the Silk Road."

"Be careful. Captains of *ghost* ships need to keep that information to themselves," Barge warned.

"I will." Olo reassured him.

“Goodbye, Olo!” Barge said.

He excused himself and walked back to his stall.

Olo picked up Zandor and they waved goodbye. He carried their groceries back to the auto-rickshaw.

He spent the afternoon flying and studying the terrain and a mental map was formed in his head. When they flew over the Taklamakan Desert he saw the pipeline leading out from Urumqi to the sea.

When they landed back to Bodga Peak, his whole family was outside his yurt. Tessia was talking to them carrying a newborn baby.

"We missed the delivery!" Olo yelled jumping out of the auto-rickshaw.

Tessia loosened her ponytail as she did when she was upset and sighed.

"Olo. I couldn't wait any longer. Our baby came as soon as you left!"

Olo took the baby in his arms. He noticed right away that it was a girl.

“What do we name her?”

"How about...*Raine*?" she asked him.

“Like *Raine Yang*? That’s a beautiful name,” he told her.

“I’m glad you like it. Raine and Zander are the names of our two children. May they grow up together in peace and harmony.”

Zander brought Tessia the groceries from the Kashgar Marketplace.

"I'm starving! What are you cooking?" Tessia asked.

“I’m going to make a Sichuan specialty,” Olo told her.

He took the 5-spice powder out of his shoulder bag. He toasted Sichuan peppers on the skillet over the fire. When they popped he added star anise and ginger. He pounded them in a mortar until it became fine powder. Then he mixed it over a bowl of beef, scallions, and salt. Finally, he packed all the ingredients between his hands into meatballs.

When the sesame oil was smoking over the skillet he tossed the meatballs into them. They sizzled and sparked.

“Congratulations,” his family said as they toasted him.

His father raised his glass of elderflower.

"The beauty of life is what...for you, Tessia?"

She handed Cuiqi the baby from her arms so she could make a toast.

"The beauty of life, for me is...that Olo gets to come home to cook meatballs."

Tessia toasted the family. She ignored Olo when he raised his glass to her. When they had started eating Tessia pulled Olo aside.

"We've been counting the minutes and hours until you came back. Where have you been?"

CHAPTER 18 A CLOAK IN TIME

"I'm going to Luoyang to get a sword," Olo announced.

Tessia was startled. She dropped a set of glass tubes out of her shaky hands and they broke on the floor.

They were in her hobby shop. It was filled with clocks, cloches, medicine vials, and glasses. Tessia had made hand blown vials and tubes as a lab for the kids when Raine turned five.

Raine spent most of the day learning chemistry experiments at the shop.

"Now that I'm seven, can I go with Daddy to Luoyang?" she told her parents.

"No, Raine. Please take Zander home. I need to talk to your father."

Olo was trying to convince Tessia about a sword he wanted to buy. He pointed to a map he had drawn on the wall. It was a map of the autonomous region. He was going to Luoyang to buy it.

Xander mixed red cabbage juice to make a pH indicator. He added the juice into a vial and dipped paper strips into them, examining their pH levels.

"Zander doesn't want to leave his chemistry experiment."

"What is he doing with my red cabbage?" Tessia asked.

"Red cabbage contains an anthocyanin. We're testing the acidic solutions for pH," Raine replied.

She often spoke for Zander. Even though he learned to speak very well...*when* he wanted to.

He had a lazy drawl and moaned at the end of his sentences when he was frustrated. Overall he was a healthy monkey with excellent communication skills.

"It's neutral," Zander told her.

He was pulling one of the strips of paper. It turned purplish. His nostrils flared when he got excited.

Tessia sighed. She gave into Olo and the kids much to often.

"Alright, stay if it's important."

When Zander wanted something, he was the only one in the family that could get anyway with almost anything.

"Monkey *brains*," whispered Raine.

"That's a redundant nickname for your brother," Tessia told her.

Olo turned to Tessia and tapped his fingers on the glass vials.

"Why would you need a sword from Luoyang?" Tessia asked him.

Olo was hesitant to answer. He leaned and whispered in Tessia's ear.

"Ever since the Secretariat passed away, Urumqi has become unstable. Bisho and his family have run Urumqi to the ground. They can't get away with it."

Raine learned to listen extra carefully when her parent's whispered to each other.

"Mom, Dad! What are you discussing?"

"Nothing, honey." Tessia reassured her.

Raine didn't believe them. Her parents had very few friends. They mostly kept to themselves in Bodga Peak.

Sometimes, her parents let her say hi and goodbye to people on the rustic side. But they never went to Urumqi.

"Raine," Zander said.

"I'm trying to hear what Mom and Dad are saying."

"Ask them why we're home-schooled?"

"We live too far away from town. That's why they haven't enrolled us in school," Raine told him.

Zander put his head on the table.

"I'm tired of staying up here. I want to go to school."

"So do I."

Tessia and Olo were too embroiled in their discussion to hear them.

"Olo, I don't think a sword is necessary, your reaction to Secretariat's passing is so strange..."

Before she was finished talking, he got up to leave.

"I have to go kids. Take care of your Mom," Olo told them.

The door closed.

Tessia went to get a mop. The vials she dropped spilled liquid on the floor.

"I'm so disappointed in your father for leaving us," she told the kids.

There was a knock at the door. Zander got up and opened it.

Raine jumped when they walked in. There were two of them.

Centaur.

One had long red hair and lipstick and the other had a sword on the side of his left hip. Fire glowed inside the iron handle.

Mother quickly grabbed Raine and stood in front of her. She didn't want her daughter meeting centaurs.

The centaur couple recognized Tessia. But she was hesitant to make eye contact with them.

"It's been awhile, Tessia," the centaur told her.

He had a sword hanging over his waist on the left leg. The sword sat in a holder detailed with mother-of-pearl and bone tiles inlaid into geometric patterns.

"Hello...Knight," Tessia gulped.

She took a sip from the vial of cabbage juice.

"Mom, I was using that," Zander said.

He shook the table. He could go bananas when he was frustrated.

Tessia was too tense to answer. The centaurs were making her frightened. They picked up a glass cloche and looked at Raine.

"Is that your daughter?" Knight asked her.

No response. Tessia hadn't seen Knight since they attended #1 High School of Urumqi.

Zander added water to the cabbage juice, the acid level had changed.

He was frustrated about the pH level.

"It's not working. You drank my experiment!" he barked at Tessia.

He pounded his chest and Tessia pulled him off the table.

"It's time to go."

Raine looked at the centaurs with their four legs and giggled.

"Are you really, centaurs?"

Knight slammed the cloche back into the shelf. He was furious. He looked at Raine and her legs.

"You disgraceful humanoid. How can you mock us!"

"Uh-oh."

Raine regretted laughing. She covered her mouth and apologized.

"I'm sorry. I've never met a centaur," she told him.

Knight was not amused. He pulled out his sword at Tessia.

"Leave your *bratty* kid here. Your coming back to Urumqi," he told her.

Tessia shook her head no, but it was too late. Olo wasn't there to protect them. He had left for Luoyang to get a sword but Knight was already here. \

From the corner of her eye, she saw Zander getting up from his chemistry experiment. He was sensing trouble. Monkeys could often sense danger and could escape a trap faster than humans.

Tessia relied on his monkey senses to help them out.

Zander opened the cloche behind the register and retrieved the golden dragon. Its emerald eyes were shining at him.

"Zander! Run!" Tessia said frightened.

Zander carried it out of the hobby shop. He had already crossed the drawbridge by the time Raine followed him out.

"Zander! Wait for the drawbridge to come down!" she told him.

"Hello, young lady what is your name?" a very stern voice interrupted her.

A centaur was standing at the drawbridge stop. His face was covered in an iron mask and he was watching her from the hole.

"Who wants to know?" Raine responded.

She couldn't help to wonder why he was hiding his face.

"Do you have something to do with the centaurs spying on my mom in her hobby shop?" she asked him.

He was quiet. All she could hear was breathing from the hole in the iron mask.

"Take off your mask," Raine told him.

But the centaur in the mask walked away. He got on board a canoe. Knight waved his sword at Tessia and she sat in the canoe with them.

"Mom! Wait for me!" Raine called from the drawbridge.

Tessia waved at her daughter.

"Don't be scared. Get Zander and bring him home. Everything will be alright."

The centaurs were talking to each other while her mom looked back at her daughter.

Raine watched the canoe go down the river. They were too far away for her to jump in.

CHAPTER 19 THE ETERNITY

Tessia went missing for days. Zander ran off with the golden dragon and hadn't come home. Olo was still in Luoyang.

Raine spent the last few days waiting for them in the yurt.

"Mother would've wanted me to get help."

She stood in the yurt and prayed to the ancestor alter.

"That's what Mom does when she's stressed," Raine said.

One of her ancestors came out the scroll. It was Grandmother Oneeva Lei.

"Your mother would've been able to tell you what the centaurs were doing with her. But she's not here," Oneeva told her.

"Why did she leave with them?"

"Your mother has *personal* demons from the past. She must reconcile them with the centaurs."

"But I want to find her. I want her back."

"Go to the Kashgar Marketplace. Do you remember how to get there?"

"I've only been there in Father's rickshaw, but I remember the winding roads. I saw them from the sky."

"Take the road and find Barge Khalifa. He will help you."

"Ok, Grandmother."

Oneeva disappeared back into the scroll.

Raine put on her running shoes and tied the laces. She ran down Bogda Peak to the Taklamakan Desert. She took a road that twisted and turned to the Kashgar Marketplace.

When she got to Barge's stall, he was in a meeting.

Two women were talking to him. They were sitting in his stall examining the growth of their saffron fields on his tablet. He was rummaging through his tins when he noticed Raine.

"Young Raine. Here for groceries?"

"There's something more important than saffron, Barge! I can't find my mother. I

need your help.”

"Where is your father?" he asked.

"He went to Luoyang to get a sword.”

The women in the stall looked up from the tablet. The one wearing a colorful head wrap and emerald caftan spoke up first. Her name was Winnie.

"May we help, young lady?"

"Yes, you can. Centaurs have taken my mother. They kidnapped her in a canoe.”

Barge dropped his tin.

"Centaurs?"

"Yes. A centaur couple walked into our hobby shop. One had a sword. He took her on his boat. Mother told me to go home and find Zander. We were separated at the drawbridge."

Barge and his friends got up to examine her.

"The feather of truth. You could weigh your heart against it. Olo and Tessia have a human child. The stone thrower does have magic. I should have helped Olo sell those barrels. What are they? At 40 a barrel now?" Barge counted his fingers. "How many barrels were there?"

"What barrels?" asked Raine.

No response. Barge was busy sending a radar signal from his tablet. Using a GPS locator, he talked into the microphone.

"Search for barrels in the 500 miles radius."

The satellite searched for barrels in the region. Stacks of barrels were located in the desert. A satellite video image popped up on his tablet.

"Did you locate the oil, Barge?"

"Yes, I have found them."

"And you, child. Are you unharmed?" Winnie asked her.

"Who are you?" asked Raine.

"I'm Winnie, an old friend from Barge. I traveled from Africa to trade some spices. When I was your age, I couldn't say anything...couldn't touch the oil that was leaking from the ground even if it was right beneath my own bed."

The lady next to her got up and introduced herself.

"I'm Fruit Chen. I think the centaurs were too quick to judge your parents. When they first met, nobody was kind to them. It was their first time seeing a centaur with a boy."

Raine looked confused.

"What are you saying, that my mom was a centaur? Is that why they took her away?"

"Yes." Fruit nodded her head. "Unfortunately, I had to turn your mother into a human. The world's mistakes are few and far between. It was the only thing we could do to help."

Barge interrupted them.

"Guizi Hall. The barrels have been in hiding inside Guizi Hall."

His video went static on the tablet. He tapped it and they watched as an explosion took place on the video.

"A bomb just exploded on the roof of Guizi Hall. A group of centaurs are driving into the building in a humvee."

Barge typed a series of codes on his tablet and hacked into the mainframe.

"What's a humvee?" Raine asked him.

"A high mobility multipurpose vehicle. It's kind of like your father's auto-rickshaw, but it doesn't fly."

"I'm going to take the cloud and search for Tessia," announced Fruit Chen.

"My brother ran past the drawbridge, can you look for him too?" Raine asked her.

"Yes, of course....and Raine? It was nice to finally meet you. I'm always wanted to know what happened to Olo and Tessia."

Fruit gave Raine a hug. She was pleased to meet their child.

A cloud arrived outside and Fruit picked up her Sexton. She jumped on the cloud and floated off.

Barge put some samples of his spices on his stand. The marketplace was busy but nobody seemed to notice him working on his tablet.

"I can't figure out what they are saying in the video," he explained.

Winnie took the tablet from him and hooked up her microphone set. She listened from the earpiece.

"*Hammurabi*. I heard them say the word Hammurabi in the video," Winnie told him.

Barge got a notepad and wrote the word *Hammurabi*.

"That humvee belongs to the Himaloths. They are communicating in code from a hidden location. They are writing their transmission in secret. It's starting from a humvee in the Taklamakan Desert to someone inside Guizi Hall."

"There's someone sending radar out off Guizi Hall?" Raine asked them.

"Yes. But it's in code. We need a code breaker to read it."

Raine looked at the surveillance video. There was movement in the video image. Centaurs appeared in the screen.

"Those are the same centaurs who took my mother!" Raine warned them.

"I'm sorry Raine. I can't decipher what their plans are or else we could find out where she is," Winnie said.

"We need Eco. He can tell us what the code says. I can't read it either," Barge told them.

"Whose Eco?" asked Raine.

"The code breaker," explained Winnie.

"They are communicating in a secret language so we can't foil their plans. Everyone knows everything, except us."

Barge pulled upon his spice rack and revealed a hidden drawer. Inside was his counter surveillance gear.

"Tablet, voice changer, zoom scope, frequency finder, and business card."

Barge put everything into his shoulder bag and dialed the number on the business card.

"What's that number?" Raine asked him.

"It's the cell phone number of Eco the code breaker. I'm dialing from my work phone so he knows it's me."

"I thought you were a spice trader?"

"We are members of the *Eternity*. We don't have time to explain," Winnie told her.

Winnie pressed a button under the saffron tin. Barge unrolled the carpet.

Below his stall in the Kashgar Marketplace was a secret passageway.

"Come inside. I've installed a personal tunnel that leads back to the city," he told Raine.

Winnie and Barge step down into the tunnel. Barge held his hand out for Raine.

"Step down carefully and make sure nobody sees you."

Raine looked around.

A couple of shoppers were engrossed in free samples of spices. She jumped in and closed the door. A carpet automatically rolled back over it. .

Down in Urumqi, a humvee maneuvered through the fields with ease. The soft hills of the prairie was smooth right down to the Hexi Corridor.

Jabi Pando wasn't worried. His sea missions were much more treacherous. He was invited to Urumqi at the request of the Solo Company.

The Solo Company was headed by a group of centaurs. Sherlock O'Woar was the President of the company. He called Jabi to help him transport oil barrels.

"Most international companies lacked a defensive strategy. That's why we need you and the Himaloths," Sherlock said.

"I consider this diplomatic assistance more than anything else," Jabi told him.

"When can you arrive?"

"My team of mercenaries can get to Urumqi in a few days," Jabi said.

Fruit Chen watched from the clouds as the humvees rolled through the prairies. She flew past them until she got to the drawbridge at the end of Bodga Peak.

The water from the Heavenly Pool flowed down the peak and flooded the river. Where the river narrowed near the drawbridge is where she spotted Zander. He was flying the golden dragon in the fields.

"We need your dragon," Fruit told him.

Zander gave it to her and climbed aboard the cloud.

"They are bringing heavy artillery in their cavalcade," she warned the monkey.

They watched from the clouds as the Himaloths entered Urumqi.

She flew on the cloud to the top of the mountain and dropped the golden dragon from the sky. As the golden dragon fell, its wings opened and expanded into a giant flying blue and yellow creature. Its emerald eyes glowed and turned into real dragon eyes.

"Luck the dragon has come alive!" Fruit clapped.

Luck stretched its wings and inhaled deeply. He yawned as if he had been asleep for years.

When the dragon exhaled, a ball of fire exploded and burned a patch of land in the mountain.

The dragon flew to the Gate of Han. The Gate was still buried in the mountain where Olo had thrown it with the bluestone.

Wrapping its talons around the Gate of Han, Luck pulled it off the mountain.

The dragon flew with the Gate back to Urumqi. It passed the cavalcade of Himaloths and blew a cloud of fire destroying the road leading into the city.

Luck flew faster as he got closer to the Urumqi Wall. He pushed the Gates of Han back into the wall with a loud bang.

The entire town shook.

Barge opened the tunnel from the Kashgar Marketplace. Winnie and Raine followed him.

"Look! We've arrived just in time. Luck the dragon has returned. He's putting the gates back!" Barge said.

They watched as the dragon blew fire melting the iron gates. The gates welded back into the Urumqi Wall.

"So it's true. Dragons do exist," Raine said.

She looked at the Gansu Wall. A stone relief of her father Olo was carved into it.

"Why is Father's portrait in this place?" she wondered.

"He was the Stone Thrower," Barge told her.

A dozen humvees drove in. The townspeople saw the artillery on them and came to help.

"Shut the Gates and locked them in. We are being attacked by the Himaloths,"

Barge said.

He pushed the Gates together and shut them. From Guizi Hall, Bisho heard the gates closing.

"Hurry and get the barrels inside the Humvees!" Bisho told the Himaloths.

They pushed the barrels out of the Guizi Hall toward the first humvee. Jabi Pando got out. He looked at a message on his telecommunicator.

KATTAC 54Q3R.

It was in a secret code. He deciphered it.

KATTAC was code for *ATTACK*.

"Bisho is taking this too far. He's messaging me to attack his own city. We've got to stop him," Jabi said.

Jabi looked at his phone. Barge was calling him.

"Hello, Barge! For a few barrels of oil, Bisho has started a war in Urumqi."

"This is not your war, Jabi. Look in front of you. We've just arrived to Guizi Hall."

Jabi hung up the phone and saw Barge. Next to him was Winnie and Raine.

"Thank you for your help, *Eco*." Barge told him.

Raine looked at Jabi Pando with amusement.

"So you're *Eco*, the code breaker?"

"Yes. Code name, Jabi Pando. We work as a team called the *Eternity*."

"And how does one join the *Eternity*?" Raine asked them.

CHAPTER 20 THE GHOST SHIP

Knight stabbed his sword of Shan into the Gate of Han.

"Anyone want to test the sword of Shan, come at me now! See how I cut you into quarters."

"What a homecoming," Olo scoffed.

Olo watched him thrashing the Sword of Shan at him. He brandished his own sword. It was wet from the rain that had pelted his return from Luoyang.

"Knight! I accept your challenge."

Olo threw a long rope from his auto-rickshaw and swung down with one arm. He landed on the soil next to Knight.

This fight has been going on far too long," Olo told him.

"Like a cornered crook, Olo stands in front of me. Ready to die."

"Where's Tessia?" Olo demanded to know.

Knight brandished his sword at Olo.

"Tessia is with *us*, now. She came back with me to Guizi Hall."

Olo pulled out his sword from Luoyang. He had hung it from back straps and swung it at Knight.

Knight swung his own sword back at him.

The swords clanged loudly through the Urumqi Wall. The Himaloths joined Olo by aiming their artillery at Knight.

"Olo!"

Tessia called out to him. She ran out of Guizi Hall when she heard the clangs.

"Olo! You've come back from Luoyang."

Olo ducked as the flaming sword of Shan missed his head. Tessia tossed him a shield.

"Use this shield, it will keep the fire from hurting you!"

"Thank you, Tessia!"

Knight tripped and landed on his left leg. He got up and galloped toward Olo. He

aimed the sword straight at him.

Olo jumped onto a horse and held up the shield. Knight thrust the sword at him, but the shield blocked the way.

"Olo, watch your backside he's..." Tessia shouted.

But it was too late.

Knight jammed his sword into Olo's shoulder. He fell of the horse, wincing in pain.

"Got you!" Knight congratulated himself.

"Just this time," Olo sighed.

When he got his breath he got back on the horse. He turned it back around so it was facing Knight.

"Shall we?"

"If don't give up soon enough the Himaloths will have you for supper," Knight told him.

"Stop!"

Jabi Pando interrupted the sword fight. He pulled the lever on the Humvee. It sent a missile straight up to the sky.

Knight was struck by one of Jabi's missiles. His armor sparked and his scabbard sizzled when the Himaloth armory pelted him.

He brushed his sides with an iron cloth. The melted iron scrapped his body. He was bleeding and couldn't get back up.

"Tessia!" Olo called out.

He looked everywhere but couldn't find her.

Knight was in a foggy haze on the ground. His armory had melted into his body and he was burning inside from the heat.

"Tessia is gone! While I've been distracting you in our duel, Bisho has been finalizing our plans to take over Urumqi. She left on her own accord with Bisho."

"Where have he taken her?" Olo demanded.

"To Central Library," he told him.

Olo grabbed his rope hanging from the auto-rickshaw. He swung straight up in the air and jumped into the driver's seat.

The auto-rickshaw wouldn't start.

"Come on, don't fail me now. I've got to get Tessia," Olo said frustrated.

The engine started for a brief moment. Then it stalled. The auto-rickshaw floated above the Gate of Han.

"The engine's dead," he sighed as he took his foot off the pedal.

Olo looked through his binoculars to see if the Himaloth's were done releasing missiles.

A few miles down the road, Olo saw a fire. A trail of humvees and tankers were behind the blaze.

Barge was extinguishing the flames with the help of someone in a white linen seafaring uniform. It was Jabi Pando, the pirate from Monkey Island.

Olo focused the binoculars so he could look further down the road. In the area where smoke was rising, the Himaloths were loading barrels of oil into tankers. A woman in a green head wrap was directing them. It was Winnie.

Standing in back of her was Raine. She was rolling a barrel and helping the Himaloths load it into tanks.

"Jabi has recruited my daughter! If there's going to be a pirate in Urumqi, it might as well be me," Olo said.

He dropped his rope down from the auto-rickshaw and kicked with his feet. He swung a few times, building momentum. When his swing was wide enough to reach the top of the Gansu Wall, he jumped.

His feet landed just in time as the rope unloosened and fell. He tripped as the rope glided between his legs. Olo jumped before he could fall off the roof.

"Near miss," he said as sweat poured down his chest.

He bent down and caught the rope. Olo swung it back around the other side of the Gate of Han.

The humvees were outside the Gate.

"I'll be darn!"

He looked down at the Gate of Han. The dragon had melted back the bolts on the wall and put the Gates firmly back into place.

"Who put the Gate of Han back?"

He had broken the Gate of Han years before. Olo brushed sweat from his forehead. He was just as nervous now as he was when he first entered Urumqi.

"And why is the Gate closed?" he asked.

Olo wrapped the rope around his wrist. His palms were sweaty. He wiped them on his pants.

He pushed off with his legs and swung on the rope. He swung down to the bottom of the wall.

He landed on the top of an empty humvee. He got into the driver seat and started the engine.

The humvee was fast. Olo raced into the desert toward the fire that the dragon had started. The area where his daughter was loading the barrels of oil was near the flames.

"Those barrels are flammable. They have to stop moving the barrels!" Olo said.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. He drove faster and finally caught sight of Barge.

"Barge! The fire is spreading!" Olo shouted.

"I'm doing my best to contain it," Barge told him.

One of the barrels exploded near Barge and the fire spread even further. The tanker driver reversed the tank down the embankment. Raine was in the tank.

"She's in the tanker," Winnie said.

She pointed at the place where Raine was hiding from the fire. Olo drove over to them and they got in.

"Jump in," he told them.

Raine got inside the humvee.

"Dad! Where have you been?" she asked him.

"Unimaginable things you don't think could happen... always do," Olo explained.

Raine pointed outside the window. Olo looked at the direction she was pointing.

The barrels were floating by themselves up into the auto-rickshaw. One by one they were floating up as if gravity was missing and they were orbiting in the solar

system.

"Our auto-rickshaw is a flying ghost ship," he told her.

"Why?" Raine asked.

Winnie looked out of the window. She picked up her walkie-talkie and called Barge.

"Barge, get a load of this. The cargo has floated by itself into Olo's auto-rickshaw. Most of the barrels have floated up."

Olo drove to the area where the Himaloths were extinguishing the fire. He stopped the humvee and Winnie got out.

The oil barrels stacked themselves like cargo in the ghost ship. They were inside Olo's auto-rickshaw.

The auto-rickshaw floated to the tanker. Jabi Pando picked up the lid of a barrel that had exploded. It floated up to the auto-rickshaw above him. He was still holding on and was being lifted with the lid.

"There's no time, we have to leave them with the ship. It's not worth it. The ghost ship is moving things in the future. We have to leave it behind. We have to get your mom at Central Library," Olo told Raine.

He pulled the humvee back on the road.

"Did you know, that I found out that Mom was a centaur?"

"How did you discover she was a centaur?" Olo wondered.

He was surprised that her secret was revealed.

"When you left for Luoyang, the centaurs came and got her." Raine told him.

"We don't have much time. I have to take the back route to the Central Library. The gate is closed." Olo said.

"Hurry," she warned him.

"Can you find Jabi Pando?" he asked her pointing to the radio transmitter in the humvee.

"Yes, I'll try."

"Never mind," Olo said.

He was uncertain how to operate all the control switches to get Jabi to

communicate from the ghost ship.

"I don't know if it's safe to talk on the radio transmitter," he explained.

"Dad. Don't worry. You'll always be *safe* with me. I'm part of the *Eternity* now," she told him.

She pushed a button and a laser projection keyboard beamed out of the radio transmitter.

She typed out a message to Barge on the keyboard --

JOWL AJIL PFOMO OK OPUM SU OR TRACENL BIELIBY

The optics tracked her fingers as she typed.

Raine was hard at work tracking down the whereabouts of Jabi. When she found his location, she beamed the message toward the flying ghost ship.

"He's up in the sky...so is Zander. Fruit took him on a cloud. They are on the way to return the golden dragon," she told Olo.

Olo squeezed the wheel of the humvee. The golden dragon belonged to the Secretariat Kuqa. He had taken it for safekeeping after he died. It was sitting in the cloche of the hobby shop when he left for Luoyang to get the sword. It couldn't have been moved.

"Why would Fruit have known where to find it? She couldn't see everything could she?" he asked Raine.

"Dad, is Luoyang that far? Cause you sure have missed a lot! Let me fill you in on everything that's happened. When the centaurs came into the hobby shop, Zander took the dragon out the cloche. Fruit picked him up in the cloud and she took it from him. She dropped the dragon into the sky. We saw the dragon turn into a *real* dragon and take the Gates off the mountain! Did you know I ran to the Kashgar Market alone to get help from Barge? We took his tunnel leading to the Gate and saw the dragon put the Gate back. It had the same golden hue as the dragon in the cloche."

Raine described the curves on the dragon and its hue. Olo knew it was the same serpentine creature that the Secretariat had in his office.

"Before you were born. Urumqi was governed by a Secretariat named Naryn Kuqa. He owned the dragon. He must have learned the dragon's mysteries. It must operate on a calendar rearranging the paradigm of power," he said.

"I hope we get to Mom in time," Raine said.

The back way to the Central Library took them over a steep mountain. The building was lit and they could see movement inside the stained glass.

They were approaching on the bumpy roads. All the jostling hurt Olo's back. He had been swinging on ropes and jousting with Knight.

"Nothings changed much since the time of the centaurs. Since I was a teenager, we've been fighting. I forgot sometimes how old these feuds are. Your mom was better off becoming human. Let's go get here," he explained to his daughter.

Olo thought of the time he flew with Tessia to the Edge of the Sky. Nothing he could do would change the direction of his auto-rickshaw. It was a ghost ship, after all.

Raine looked confused.

"Dad, how did your auto-rickshaw get here before us?"

Olo slammed on the brakes as they pulled into the Central Library. Raine pointed to the ghost ship. It had already gotten to the Central Library and was parked in front of them.

CHAPTER 21 PATTERN FAMILIAS

"The ship's hardwired. I never was going to have a say in where it really wanted to go," Olo said.

Olo jumped out of the Humvee. They were at Central Library. He looked at the scanner.

A beam of high frequency signals released out in green lights. The lights shot out in straight lasers into the sky for miles. It was a locator for the Himaloths whom were following the beams from miles away.

"In a few moments. She'll be out. Don't send for them. We can get her ourselves. This is *mom* we are talking about."

Raine reasoned with her father to turn off the beams.

"I'll get her myself if you aren't coming in."

"It's not that," Olo explained, "I'm not scared of her leaving the centaurs. You weren't there when it happened. They're not what you think they are."

"I'm going in."

Raine ran into the Central Library and slammed the doors shut. Inside, a group of centaurs were reading books.

Purposefully they picked out the books from the shelves.

"Was it by choice that your books all have the same titles and bound in hard velvet?" Raine asked them.

She looked at the text running from left to right. The paragraphs were indented but only lasted until a thought was finished.

"I wish paragraphs would run forever," she said running her hands along the gold leaf titles, "Centaur's have a fondness for literature."

"It's time for *another* book," she heard a woman say.

She was loud, stern, and authoritative.

The centaurs listened to the woman and lifted their heads out of the books. They looked around, picking *another* book.

"They even read like it's a group activity," Raine noticed.

Silence.

Heads rolled back down to their books and back to reading.

The voice spoke out again.

"*Black robe nigh to fawn this reverie till the moon hits the peak...every there,*" the reader said.

The centaurs read along to the reader's narration. She had skipped to the end, Chapter 12.

"*Every...*what does that mean?" Raine asked.

She walked up to the centaur.

"You skipped to Chapter 12. The conclusion. It's confusing because we just opened this book. What is the beginning say?"

"No," the reader told her.

She wouldn't let Raine get a word in.

"You don't get to chose the ending. I'm *giving* it to you. *And* we never start from the beginning. Leave the beginning alone! It was great how it started. You are a human and going to ruin everything by coming in here."

"Alright," Raine said.

She watched the book reader take her book and sit back down sideways on the chair.

"You have been warned. To leave," the reader warned her.

"I want to know everything about you," Raine told her.

"Everything could cost you," the reader replied.

Raine took a chair and moved it next to her. The book had a picture in it and it looked familiar. She moved the chair even closer until she got a good look.

"It's a photo of my mother in this book!" Raine said surprised.

Tessia was in the book wearing a gown and a headdress. Her hair was pinkish.

Raine looked at the book's spine.

Pater Familias. It was the book's title.

"The leading figure in a movement that remains is what's known as *Pater Familias*."

Raine pointed at the picture of her mother.

"But what is she doing in this book? I can't read the writing. The language is unique. Can you tell me please what it says under her picture?"

The reader couldn't respond. She was busy reading.

"So I guess, I'm not suppose to know," Raine told her.

She got up and picked up another book off the shelf. It looked like the same one she had just read.

"It's the same book. *Pater familias*. This is more like *pattern familias*," she scoffed.

Suddenly, a bird flew in from the open window. She went to the window and closed it. When she looked out of the window a group of centaurs were racing each other outside.

She looked up at the clock tower in the middle of the Central Library as it struck midnight. Bang. Bang. Bang. The chimes rang and the number 12 turned into 60.

"Why is there a sudden change in the number 12?" she asked the reader.

The reader picked up her book and left without responding.

The clock turned again. This time 60 was now 00. One minute had past.

"The library is now closed," the reader said from the microphone.

The room began emptying.

Boom!

A sudden thud came from under her table. The table jumped a few inches and she got out of her chair and looked at the floor.

Bang!

The chair jumped off the floor and hit the ground with a thud. There was movement beneath the floor and the chair pushed up. The floorboards didn't have a lot of room and was pushing up against her chair.

She moved the furniture and pulled at a plank until it loosened. Underneath her was a room. Someone was typing right beneath her.

It was Tessia writing something on a typewriter.

"Mom? What are you doing down there? It's such a tight space. Was I sitting on

you?"

Raine lifted her leg inside the plank and jumped in. It was barely lit underneath with just a wood table, a chair and one glass of water.

A typewriter had pearl finger pieces with an alphabet she had never seen before. The language had curves and undulated like dance notes.

"I've been writing," Tessia explained.

The paper she was typing on looked like it written notes for a musical composition.

"The music never stops." Tessia said.

She pushed her typing table back into the corner of the room.

"It was my favorite story, you know? The music of my heart."

She picked up the only lantern and blew it out. She climbed out of the floorboard and into the library.

Raine was breathless. She pulled herself out of the room and followed her mom. She put the plank back in and pushed the table back over it.

"Mom has her secrets." Raine thought to herself.

The lights flickered in the Central Library. A group of centaurs came in. They had been running outside. Sweat was pouring down one of them.

"Bisho!" Tessia said.

"Wasn't expecting me back so soon were you?" Bisho asked.

"Is my story complete? Are we ready to print it."

Tessia handed him the papers she had typed.

"It's *our* history, I've waited to tell it. It's something you needed to know."

"They've locked you in here until you could finish it, didn't they?" Raine asked her.

"Don't worry. It wasn't as bad as it looks. It was the only way I could finish the book." Tessia pleaded.

"What is in it that you had to be the one to write it."

"I was once like them. The centaurs, Raine. When we are done with our work

here, maybe then you will know.”

Raine remembered the book with her mother's picture. *Pater Familias*.

“*Mom must be famous in the world of centaurs,*” she thought to herself.

“Are you done?” Bisho asked her.

He was gravel voiced and had white hair on his sides.

“I've been waiting a long time.”

She nodded her head. He waved his hand at a centaur guarding the door and he opened it.

Years later, Raine remembered what happened that faithful night her father saved them.

My father was on the other side. He had been waiting there. He wasn't allowed in. The centaurs were packing up and leaving.

The return of the Himaloths made it a place that they wouldn't be able to live inconspicuously. They shared what they could with the rest of the world for as long as they could. When my father broke the Gates of Han, he opened a new way of living. And most of the centaurs didn't see it a great thing.

They saw Urumqi as a place of inconsistency and changes. They wanted to return to the prairie. There time here ended.

The work that had happened while they lived here improved Urumqi for the rest of its existence. People wandered in and noticed how different humans acted even without centaur legs.

I could never say it. It was unspoken and could only be read. It was in the language typed on that secret typewriter inside the Central Library. My mom put her pages in Bisho's hands. It was a pile of papers about the length of a foot. She gave him everything she had written under the floorboards and walked out of the library with Father and I. Walked us toward the ship. The Himaloths surrounded the building. Lasers targets were at our heads.”

“Please. They've gone. Leave them alone,” my father shouted into the lasers lights that night.

They had cleared the entire city and Bisho was the last one to leave. He got the pages. And that was the last we were ever suppose to see of them.

Centaurs do exist. I read about it in her book. She was one of them, when they were in green pastures. My father raised his hand up to give them the all clear.

But then, they shot him. Right before we boarded his auto-rickshaw. His chest pulled back and forward when the bullet entered his body. His neck was like jelly as he head fell into his body and his legs buckled.

One of the Himaloths shouted orders, "There's still one more...Tessia. Turn around."

They loaded their weapons to empty their last rounds into her body. But she picked me up and ran before they could shoot us. Her legs formed into four as she became a centaur again.

Bisho sat around the corner of the hill on the other side of Tianshan. By the time we stopped running, he had gathered the remaining centaurs. Mom was as sweaty as a stallion and collided into the other centaurs. They had run to the other side.

The other side of Tianshan is where our new pastures were. Since then, we haven't seen him. My father blocked the bullets that were for the last centaur. The books had her picture. The last thing I remember was Jabi Pando pulling his body over his shoulders, carrying him into the Ghost Ship. My mother galloped away with me, she had no choice. It was all of our lives.

When I read my mother's book, I read her account of meeting my father for the first time:

I believe that the existence of love is magic. Hence to fall for a centaur is to fall in love. So the answer is, do you have love in your heart. It's not something you can weigh or put a value on. Olo just had a heart as light as a feather.