

The signs posted all around the orchard in English and five other human languages were unambiguous: Do not eat the mushrooms!

"It's nonsense," Janaynie said when David pointed out the warning. "*Calda* is perfectly safe for humans in doses like this. You'd have to eat at least twelve mushrooms to have problems. Besides, if you want to ask the Jinji for something, the only way you can talk to them in the Maze is if you've taken *Calda*. And you want to see Jill, don't you? Those signs are for wimps."

She had only a vague notion of what the word 'wimp' meant to humans, other than that it was an insult having to do with a lack of assertiveness. Apparently males were especially sensitive to being called wimps, so Janaynie challenged David with it, adding the reminder about wanting to see Jill for good measure. It worked.

Janaynie had already eaten her six mushrooms, so David squared his shoulders and popped the first one into his mouth as nonchalantly as possible. It was crumbly and easy to chew but tasted vile. It was hard to keep from gagging as he choked all six down, and Janaynie handed him the red wine from her pack to kill the bitter flavor. "No pain, no gain. Isn't that what humans say?"

"No. It's what fitness trainers say, and fitness trainers aren't human."

Janaynie didn't know what a 'fitness trainer' was either, but she guessed he'd made some kind of joke and laughed politely.

It took about twenty minutes for him to start feeling sick, and his one consolation was that Janaynie wasn't doing any better. He could see why she wouldn't let him have that third *hollyath* because the two he'd eaten tasted a lot better going down than they did coming back up. "I think I'm poisoned," he groaned. "How long does this go on?"

"You're not poisoned," she said. "The worst is over less than half an hour after it begins." Then she turned and vomited into the grass.

David kept on retching long after the contents of his stomach were gone, till his gut ached and his throat and nose burned with bile. He tried to remember when he'd last felt this sick and lay down a couple of feet away from her, groaning.

Janaynie sat by him and pulled a clay jug out of her pack. "Here, stop feeling sorry for yourself and drink some water." The water was earthy tasting and cool, and soothed his throat a bit.

"So now what?" David said, handing the jug back. "We just wait?" He was growing restless and suddenly itching all over, making him scratch furiously at his neck and face.

Janaynie shrugged. "Well, we could sit here, but the effects will start a little sooner if we walk and get our blood moving ... And *stop* doing that! The itching won't last long, but scratching will only make it worse."

David laughed, and when she asked why, he said, "Because you just reminded me of my mother."

Again, she felt unsure how to react. Was reminding a human male of his mother a good or bad thing? He'd laughed instead of becoming angry, so maybe he was pleased. Should she rock David in her arms or nurse him to remind him even more of his mother, or would that be a mistake? She had no idea, so she just let it go. Really, the way these humans thought was impossible to fathom.

They got up and began a leisurely stroll deeper into the orchard, but David's face felt hot and swollen. He was obviously having an allergic reaction to the *Calda*, but as Janaynie predicted, the itching soon began to ease. Still, nothing so far instilled him with confidence about what was to come.

Janaynie said they might as well start for the Maze now, since it was a long hike, but soon David had to throw up again, and when he was done, she handed him the water jug. "Relax," she said as he wiped his mouth with his hand. "It's about to get a lot better."

David guessed it had been nearly an hour since they'd eaten the mushrooms. The nausea was mostly gone, but he wasn't feeling anything except for a little light-headedness. "Are you sure *Calda* works on humans?" he said. "Nothing seems to be happening."

"Patience," Janaynie said. "It works perfectly on humans."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth when David became aware of a strange buzzing sound and realized he'd been hearing it unconsciously for several minutes. It had begun very softly but was now rising in volume. "What the hell is that?" he said. "It sounds like hornets."

He looked around for the swarm, preparing to run, but saw nothing. When he put his fingers in his ears, the noise grew louder, which was when he realized the buzzing was coming from inside his head. He closed his eyes, hoping to stop the droning that way, but was instantly overwhelmed by a kaleidoscope of shifting colored patterns—greens, reds, purples and yellows, all wheeling out from a central point of white, so brilliant it felt as if his retinas were on fire. "What's happening to me?" he said, quickly opening his eyes.

"It's the *Calda*, David," Janaynie said. "It's starting to take us."

Her voice was strangely distant, and it was fluttering weirdly: "*Et ... sa ... tha ... Cal... a ... duh ... David ... Et ... sa ... star ... ting ta ... tay ... kus.*" He had to focus to

understand her, and watching Janaynie's lips didn't help because her mouth wasn't moving in time with her words. She was like an out-of-sync video.

David could see waves of energy crawling beneath the skin on Janaynie's face, and the muscles in her arms seemed to be rippling. Part of him understood the *Calda* was making him hallucinate, but another part felt like a veil was lifting before his eyes, and he was seeing Janaynie as she really was for the first time: She was Artemis, terrifying and beautiful, and she was holding a bow and arrow pointed straight at his heart. Startled, he jumped back a step. Then he blinked and she was just Janaynie again.

She was giving him a curious look, and he tried to explain what he'd seen, but he couldn't seem to form the words because so many things were going on around him. The whole orchard had started breathing and sighing like some massive animal. "Woosh ... ah ... woosh ... unnh ... swoosh ... ah .... swoosh ... unnh." His thoughts seemed to be falling apart before he could complete them, and he fought down a wave of panic.

Janaynie was saying something, but all David heard was a series of clicks and pops: *putt kit oop click pop*. She laughed as she dropped her pack, shook off her *looba*, and began to dance naked around the little clearing they'd stopped in, pirouetting on her toes like a ballet dancer. A moment later, wings sprouted from her back, and she became an angel with sparks erupting from her fingers like roman candles. She leapt into the air, flew around the clearing, and came down three feet in front of him in a perfect arabesque. David laughed and applauded, and Janaynie gave a mock curtsy. Then she put her *looba* back on, shouldered her pack, and they started on their way again.

Like an infant just learning to walk, David was astonished at what his legs could suddenly do, though it took a lot of concentration to keep going in a straight line without collapsing in a fit of giggles. Every sight, sound and smell now demanded his full attention. A hummingbird hovered in front of his eyes, saluted David with a tip of its head, then darted off. A *peloon*, dropping from a branch above, left a trail of sparkling white afterimages as it floated slowly to the ground, and the rustle of leaves was full of profound meaning.

He understood life deeply, without knowing what it was he understood. There was no David and never had been. His identity was slipping away, and yet it was lovely not having a self. In fact, it was a blessed relief, like air-conditioning on a hot and humid day. He took Janaynie's hand, laughed and hugged her, and she hugged him back eagerly, her breath warm on his neck.

Pleased with how things were going, she was sure they would have sex tonight, for the first time since he'd so stubbornly begun refusing her. She would make him give her *thallalana* with that brilliant tongue of his, and he would believe he was delighting his beloved Jill—but first things first.

After a while, David had to pee, so they stopped again. He turned, parted his *looba*, took his penis out, and aimed for a spot about a foot away. But it was like he'd completely forgotten how to urinate. He stood there for what seemed like an eternity, just holding his cock and laughing at the absurdity of having such a strange object between his legs. Finally he gave up the attempt, pulled the *looba* closed, and turned back to Janaynie with an abashed grin.

His smile vanished in an instant and he gaped, trying to understand what he was seeing. Janaynie's eyes were huge, bulbous and solid black, her head massive and misshapen. Her lips were mandibles, and in place of hands, she had a couple of nasty-looking pincers. While his back was turned, she'd turned into a giant insect. And she was making those clicking sounds again.

Terrified, he tried to run, but she was on him in a flash, pulling him back with incredible strength, a pincer cutting off his circulation and threatening to sever his arm. He screamed.

"David!" she said. "Snap out of it! Whatever you think you see isn't real." And once again she was just Janaynie—a tall, beautiful Meliai. *Calda* was the most potent drug he'd ever taken, and the distinction between 'real' and 'imaginary' had become totally meaningless.

They drank some more water from the jug and started walking again, as David kept his eyes on the trail to avoid tripping over the rocks that littered it. His whole body was turning to jelly as Janaynie spoke to him, but again he couldn't make sense of her words, which now sounded like a series of chirps and whistles.